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BRAZILIAN CONCRETE: PAINTING, POETRY, TIME, AND SPACE

Claus Clüver (Bloomington)

Ill. 44-49

The "National Exhibition of Concrete Art" which was shown in December 1956 in São Paulo and two months later in Rio de Janeiro was the first exhibition of its kind not only in Brazil, but apparently anywhere, for the term "concrete art" covered both the paintings and sculptures on display and a number of visual poems shown side by side with them. The event caused a heated debate in newspapers and magazines, which was to continue for months and leave an indelible imprint on the country's cultural scene; ultimately, its echoes were heard in Europe, in the United States, and even as far away as Japan.

For Brazil, the show and its aftermath may have been of similar significance as the "Semana da Arte Moderna" of 1922, when artists used the centennial celebration of national independence to proclaim, finally, Brazil's cultural emancipation as well. Breaking with the academic European models of the past, they called for the creation of a truly Brazilian art by the total assimilation of the languages of the European avant-garde: of Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism. Evoking the customs of his indigenous forefathers, Oswald de Andrade successfully recommended the practice of cultural anthropophagy. The expression of a genuinely Brazilian experience in idioms derived from these new models resulted in literary and plastic works which, though remaining little known abroad, could hold their own when compared with their European and North American counterparts. Heitor Villalobos' eclectic musical oeuvre even achieved a place in the international repertoire. But it was in architecture that Brazil was first to develop models which would have an impact abroad. The construction of Brasília (1956-60), designed by Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, made a world-wide public aware that over the preceding twenty years Brazilian architects had developed a vocabulary which pointed the way beyond the "international style".

In literature, it was through the work of the young poets who showed their poster-poems in the unusual exhibit of 1956 that, for the first time, Brazil assumed an influential voice in the international avantgarde. They, too, had found their inspiration in foreign models: in Mallarmé's "Un Coup de dés", in the idea of Apollinaire's *calligrammes*, in e. e. cummings' later poems, in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. From Ezra Pound they had derived their name, "Noigandres", the concept of the poem as ideogram, and their goal of being "inventors". Equally important had been the thinking and practice of non-literary artists. The six multi-colored *poetamenos* poems which Augusto de Campos wrote in 1953 transposed Anton Webern's concept of *Klangfarbenmelodie* into the structure of a text whose spatial arrangement relies largely on a visual syntax. The employment of the primary and secondary colors made possible not only multi-vocal, but also polyphonic and multi-directional readings. In one of the texts, "lygia", he drew his word material from five different languages and exploited fragmentation, word analysis by color, and visual syntax for the creation of multi-lingual Joycean portmanteau words. The erotic "eis os amantes", less complex and clearer in its design, already represents a full-fledged ideogram. While it is only in this text that the visual structure provides as much information as the semantic (and surely more than the auditory) elements, it dictates the oral performance in all six poems and ultimately also controls the verbal context.

As the Noigandres poets, Décio Pignatari and the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, simplified and clarified their materials and structures over the following years, effective visual organization became an even more pressing concern. It is in this phase that the models offered by Russian Suprematism and by de Stijl and Bauhaus concepts had their strongest impact on their thinking. No wonder, therefore, that the young poets should associate with a group of painters and designers who, mostly their seniors by a few years, had begun in the late 'forties and early 'fifties to explore constructivist ideas in non-representational work. Their models, too, had been largely European and largely the same that interested the poets. Another strong impulse had been received from Argentina. It was the Swiss Max Bill, however, whose precepts and example gave the greatest encouragement. In 1950, a retrospective of Bill's work was shown in São Paulo; in the following year, his sculpture *Unidade Tripartita (Dreiteilige Einheit)* received the first prize at that city's First International Biennial.

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That exhibition, for which Antonio Maluf designed the poster, had already included contributions by Brazilian constructivists: by Maluf, Almir Mavignier, and Ivan Serpa, whose *Formas* won a first prize. In 1952, as the Noigandres poets published their first magazine, likeminded artists in São Paulo formed the group "Ruptura" while in Rio de Janeiro a counterpart was founded which called itself "Frente". Members of both groups, altogether twenty artists, participated in the exhibition of 1956/57, along with the Noigandres group and two poets from Rio. *and concretismo* was the label by which the work of these poets and visual artists was subsequently to be known.

For painting and sculpture, that label had already been established — first, apparently, by Theo van Doesburg. It is now known that the term "concrete poetry" had also been used earlier. But it received international currency in consequence of a visit which Décio Pignatari made to the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm in 1955, where he learned that Max Bill's secretary, Eugen Gomringer, had been writing poems which were similar in conception to the Noigandres ideograms. Gomringer called his texts "constellations", but agreed in 1956 to use the term "concrete poetry" which the Brazilians had begun to employ. Since then, it has appeared in the titles of numerous international anthologies.

The Brazilians, always equally aware of the affinity of their creations to musical as well as plastic structures, had been encouraged to speak of their texts as "concrete" just as much by recent developments in music. But what interests here is the basis of features and concerns they shared with the visual artists with whom they had joined forces in the exhibition. Both poets and painters accompanied their production with a series of manifestoes and essays, and it would be possible to examine the shared basis simply by referring to these statements; but what ultimately counts is the evidence of the works themselves.

Fiaminghi's *Circles with Alternating Movements* (1953) (Ill. 44) presents an upright off-white rectangle traversed at regular intervals by coupled horizontal bands of red and grey arranged in an alternating sequence which reverses over the horizontal axis. Superimposed on this structure is a series of half-circles whose diameter equals the width of the painting. In the lower half, their curve points toward the bottom, in the upper half toward the top. Their presence is, however, only suggested: a curved contour eliminates the central portion of one band while cutting off the extreme ends of the adjacent one as well as of the like-colored band above or below. This simple design, more complex in the verbal description than it is to the eye, creates a dynamic pattern of visual ambiguities. There is first the question of figure and ground: if the implied circles are the figures, then the white appears at times as part of the figure, at others as part of the ground; at still others, an undifferentiated white seems to divide nevertheless into figure and ground as the eye carries the implied contour from one color band to the next. Then there is the interplay of the alternating horizontal bands with the rhythm of the implied circles. And, simultaneously, there is the interaction of red and grey, colors of carefully balanced value but unequal intensity: since the design treats both of them alike, the grey tends to recede and the red to come forward, adding to the ambiguity of the spatial relationships. This is made more complex by the problem of connecting concave and convex contours: the rigidly maintained system prevents them from combining into full circles. Where they meet in the center, the two implied shapes overlap, so that the psychological effect aroused in the perceiver is the desire to push them apart in order to obtain a perfect circle; but since the affinity of color leads the viewer to associate the upper semicircle in red with either of the two red semicircles below, he will inevitably want to pull them together to make them meet. A stable geometric design employing minimal means results in the suggestion of multidirectional movement and thus not only organizes pictorial space but also implies a temporal dimension.

The use of straight lines inscribed in a square achieves a rotating effect in *Spiral Triangle* (1956) (Ill. 45) by Maurício Nogueira Lima. Two sets of straight lines, one in red, the other in black, placed so asymmetrically that they hardly invade the left half of the white square, define the space in a painting by Waldemar Cordeiro, the major spokesman for the visual artists of São Paulo who had concluded the "Ruptura" manifesto with the slogan: "A work of art does not contain an idea, it is itself an idea." *Visible Idea* (Ill. 46) is consequently the title of this work of 1957 in which the black lines function as it were in counterpoint to the mechanically regular progression of the identical angular lines in red. Yet the effect on the perception and visual imagination is not mechanical at all. Here, too, spatial relationships become ambivalent, and a major characteristic is its rhythmic dynamism.

Essentially simpler still is a painting by Luis Sacilotto owned by Augusto de Campos (Ill. 47). Mathematical where Mondrian was intuitive, reducing his palette to black and white, Sacilotto has divided a horizontal rectangle into four equal columns, creating a perfect symmetry over both axes with a negative-positive effect. The outer columns are filled by a white field over a black field on the right and the reverse on the left. The inner columns consist of a succession of alternating, equally wide bands, the left one beginning with black at the top, the right one with white. Simplistic as it may appear, the design is nevertheless (and more emphatically than any work of Mondrian's) alive with pull and counterpull, and where the inner columns meet at the vertical axis, its effect is almost dazzling.

The exhibition was graced by the participation of Alfredo Volpi, an older master who, in the fifties, was drawn onto the path of the constructivists. This fine colorist never gave up his free-hand technique. While his *White and Red Checkers* (1956) (Ill. 48) impressed in the show, his *Composition* of 1958 (Ill. 49) certainly one of the boldest works to come out of the Brazilian concrete effort. But his proposition, based more on intuition and a carefully trained sense of spatial relationships and color effect than on mathematical calculation, is ultimately still too personal and thus not truly representative.

As this brief sampling has shown, impersonality is one of the characteristics of concrete art. The work was no longer conceived of as a means for self-communication, as the expression of a personal vision of reality, or as the evocation of an "inner sound"; rather, it was presented as an object in which the pure materials of painting — line, shape, color — were made to interact in pictorial space according to strictly devised and executed patterns. Simplification and reduction of the means are in keeping with Josef Albers' definition of the "ratio of effort to effect" as "the measure of art". Associations of the geometric images and mechanical designs with forms and processes of the technological age are intentional; some of these processes and industrial materials are, in fact, used to create the images. If there is one major concern evident in practically every work, it is a preoccupation with rhythm, with movement, with the simultaneous expression of space and time. Here we encounter one of the closest affinities to the work of the concrete poets at that stage: in the issue of the magazine *ad* which served as their program, Augusto de Campos defined concrete poetry as "tension of word-things in space-time".

I have time only for the analysis of one representative example. As a visual object, Haroldo de Campos' text "nascemorre"⁵ presents a configuration of two pairs of right triangles displaying all the possible positions in which the long side of the right

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angle can run parallel with the horizontal axis of the picture plane. The first pair is joined at the most acute angles, the second at the right angles; both formations evoke a sense of movement, an implied revolution around the vertical axis passing through the point of junction. Moreover, the uppermost and the lowest triangles, which are also the smallest, appear as mirror images of each other over the horizontal axis, as do the other two, likewise near-identical in size; this is the strongest visual tie between the two figures which are otherwise contrary in structure. But even the strictly visual information is here inseparably tied in with the verbal nature of the material. Each triangle is formed of four lines of words arranged in all instances but the last, in three columns. Consequently, the figures will inevitably be read from left to right, beginning at the top. Two semantically antithetical five-letter words, both active verbs in the third person singular, provide the nucleus of all verbal material: "nasce" — "he, she or it is born" and "morre" — "he, she or it dies". The final syllable of "nasce" is a homophone of "se" — "if", which constitutes the first line and is followed in the next by "nasce", aligned on the left with "se" and thus pushing out to the right. The third line states with "morre" the inevitable final conclusion, "if it is born, it dies", but the force of the nascent triangular shape requires a continuation of the process of generation. Only in the fourth line does the completion of the triangular shape coincide with the completion of the verbal statement. But the last syllable of "morre" is a homophone of the prefix signifying a repetition or return, and the "renasce" which has been heard since line three takes on individual shape and initiates the construction of a new triangle according to the system established in the first, but in reverse. It must end with "re". This renewed call for reversal is taken both "literally" and "figuratively". A new prefix turns "nasce" into its opposite, with a neologism, "desmorre" ("it undies"), as its counterpart. The direction of birth and rebirth having been "naturally" to the right, it is appropriate that the triangle of unbirth, positioned precisely under the nuclear column, pushes to the left. Thus, the development of the figure runs counter to the direction of the reading. Consequently, the final reversal, which returns us to the normal cycle of "stirb und werde", seems to accelerate the process, which is visually (and therefore aurally as well) accentuated by running the words together. The system requires that in the vertical columns of each triangle no word appear more than twice. The "se" which accordingly concludes the text refers us back to its beginning, as does the shape of its triangle as well as the visual system: the next statement of the triangle must take the position of the first.

Instead of merely telling about the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the text embodies in its very structure the reality signified by its verbal material and thus forms a true ideogram. Its real interest, however, lies not in its verbal message but in the structure itself: in the manner in which the semantic and phonic possibilities inherent in the "nasce-morre" nucleus have been exploited to set up a "verbi-voco-visual"⁶ system for a seemingly self-generating text-object in space-time. The visual arrangement permits us to see the verbal sequence as existing simultaneously in space; the verbal nature of the visual signs gives direction to our reading of the configuration and makes us perceive each triangle as being composed in time; the circularity, finally, established both visually and semantically, counteracts the sense of a linear time flow inherent in traditional discursive language, which had already been challenged by the positional change of the triangles. Thus the poem achieves the new goal which its author proclaimed in a programmatic essay at the time of the exhibition: "to create a form, to create with its own materials a world parallel to the world of things, a world which was now conceived in terms of non-Euclidian geometry and Einsteinian physics."⁷

It is here that the endeavors of the painters and poets exhibiting their works together in 1956/57 most fully coincide. Haroldo de Campos' text is, like the paintings we have seen, an impersonal object constructed of minimal materials according to a rigid system employing geometric shapes. The most significant parallel, however, is the creation of structures involving both temporal and spatial dimensions. While the painters strove to arrange their materials in pictorial space in such a way as to suggest some form of development in time, the poets created a spatial syntax often necessitating multi-directional readings which abolished the linear progression of conventional texts. Neither painters nor poets were primarily concerned with the direct representation of external reality; instead, the spatio-temporal structures of their works sought to offer isomorphic parallels to the space-time continuum conceived by post-Newtonian science.

The experience communicated in these works is both essentially suprapersonal and supranational; only a careful and subtle analysis would show that they, too, possess certain qualities which reflect their Brazilian background and thus differentiate them from concrete work done elsewhere. This may be one of the reasons why the Noigandres poets were soon recognized as belonging among the leading figures of an important post-Modernist literary movement. The concrete painters of Brazil, however, whose work often antedates comparable European and North American creations, have shared the lot of many visual artists from the Third World: unless they made their career in Europe, like Mayr Vieira or Almir Mavignier, they have remained unknown abroad.

NOTES

1 See the bibliography of the Noigandres poets and the chronological synopsis of the concrete poetry movement in Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1975). The exhibition was shown in the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (Dec. 1956) and in the Ministério da Educação e Cultura in Rio de Janeiro (Feb. 1957). In commemoration of the "Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta" of 1956/57 the director of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Aracy A. Amaral, organized an exhibition in 1977 which was subsequently shown in the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro. Entitled "Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte (1950-1962)", it again included concrete texts (this time also in taped aural versions) and was accompanied by a volume of documents edited by Professor Amaral and by a catalogue prepared by Lygia Pape. Both publications are valuable sources, although they are not wholly reliable and have been justly attacked by the painters and poets of São Paulo as unbalanced and partial to the artists from Rio.

2 The Noigandres group had meanwhile been enlarged by Ronaldo Azeredo; the poets from Rio were Wladimir Dias-Pino and Ferreira Gullar (who was soon to break away and create an ill-defined "neo-concretismo" - the first of a number of splinter groups hostile to the "founding fathers").

3 "Das Maß der Kunst: Die Proportion von Aufwand und Wirkung." J. Albers, "Was ist Kunst?", in Eugen Gomringer, *Josef Albers* (Starnberg: Josef Keller, 1968), p. [7.]

4 "POESIA CONCRETA: TENSÃO DE PALAVRAS-COISAS NO ESPAÇO-TEMPO." A. de Campos, "poesia concreta", *ad - arquitetura e decoração* (São Paulo), 20 (Nov.-Dec. 1956); repr. in *Teoria*, pp. 44-45.

5 First published as a poster-poem in *Noigandres 4* (1958), a portfolio edition; a typographically corrected version appeared in *Teoria*, p. [57].

6 Borrowed from Joyce, the term "verbi-viso-visual" appears in the first theoretical essay by Augusto de Campos, "Pontos - Periferia - Poesia Concreta", of 1955, repr. in *Teoria*, pp. 17-25, and figures significantly in the "plano-piloto para poesia concreta" issued by Pignatari and the Campos brothers in *Noigandres 4* (an English translation by the authors of their "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" was published in *Artes Hispanicas*, 1, 3-4, Winter-Spring 1968, 71-72, preceded by the original text; the volume, which also contains a number of Brazilian concrete poems including "nascenorre", was republished as *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

7 Haroldo de Campos, "Poesia Concreta - Linguagem - Comunicação", in *Teoria*, pp. 70-85; originally published in the *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro), 28 April and 5 May 1957, and reprinted twice that year in different locations: the whole sentence quoted in the original: "Então uma linguagem feita a comunicar o mais rápida, clara e eficazmente o mundo das coisas, trocando-o por sistemas de sinais estruturalmente isomórficos, coloca, por uma súbita mudança de campo de operação, seu arsenal de virtualidades em função de uma nova empresa: criar uma forma, criar, com seus próprios materiais, um mundo paralelo ao mundo das coisas - o poema" (*Teoria*, p. 72).

ILLUSTRATIONS

- llb Ill. 44: Hermelindo Fiaminghi. "Circles with Alternating Movement." 12 x 24 in. Enamel on eucatex. 1952. São Paulo, Collection of the artist.
- llc Ill. 45: Maurício Nogueira Lima. "Spiral Triangle." 24 x 24 in. Eucatex. 1956.
- llc Ill. 46: Waldemar Cordeiro. "Visible Idea." Tempera on canvas, 40 x 40 in. 1957. São Paulo, Collection Helena Cordeiro.
- llc Ill. 47: Lutz Seifert, after. "No Title." Oil on canvas, São Paulo, Collection Augusto de Campos.
- llc Ill. 48: Alfredo Volpi. "Red and White Clockers." 40 x 21 in. Tempera on canvas. 1956. São Paulo, Collection João Marigo.
- llc Ill. 49: Alfredo Volpi. "Composition." 27 x 28 in. Tempera on Canvas. Ca. 1958. São Paulo, Coll. Adolfo Leirner.

H' Concreção 750: 29 x 16 in. Enamel on wood. 1954/74.