

## On Vertices and Ruptures

Canon Making in Cold War Brazil

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In 1977 the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo opened the exhibition *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte (1950–1962)* (hereafter *Projeto construtivo*). A sweeping survey, it was the first to retrospectively establish a definitive chronology and roster for postwar Brazilian Concrete and Neoconcrete art. The project traced its roots to 1976, when the Rio de Janeiro-based critic Ronaldo Brito published his article “Neoconcretismo” in the magazine *Malasartes*, the first iteration of his now foundational publication *Neoconcretismo: vértice e ruptura do Projeto construtivo brasileiro*, which was released in 1985.<sup>1</sup> Brito’s timing was apposite, coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the watershed *Exposição nacional de arte concreta*, which showcased, for the first time, the work of artists and poets from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro then exploring the possibilities of Concrete art, and which was also the first to disclose diverging regional approaches to this visual language. After the publication of Brito’s essay, it seemed fitting to coordinate an exhibition between two institutions in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, respectively, that similarly anthologized these practices. Aracy Amaral, then the director of the Pinacoteca, led the organizational effort in São Paulo, while the artist Lygia Pape headed the corresponding effort at the second venue, the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ).<sup>2</sup> As Amaral

would point out in 2015, certain conditions for such a large undertaking also turned out to be opportune: many of the artists still lived locally or were beginning to return from exile, and most of their works from the fifties and early sixties, by then deemed as retrograde or obsolete, remained in their possession.<sup>3</sup>

Featuring over 150 objects—including paintings, sculptures, posters, maquettes, and poems—the exhibition was meant to verify the implantation of constructivist ideas in Brazil in the early fifties and their ensuing local inflections.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it would materialize those vibrant debates that took place between 1956 and 1957 on the aesthetic and social possibilities of geometric abstraction, from the historical vantage point of 1977.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition therefore included an average of three to six works by each artist, as to conclusively present their contribution to either Concretism or Neoconcretism. The optical play of Geraldo de Barros’s *Movimento contra movimento* (1952), for instance, contrasted with Lygia Clark’s interactive *Bicho* (undated), while the single, sleek Plexiglas surface of Waldemar Cordeiro’s *Idéia visível* (1957)

“Debate sobre *Projeto construtivo brasileiro*,” audio recording, CEDOC, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, DC\_013\_000004.

3. Piccoli et al., “Debate sobre *Projeto construtivo brasileiro*.” Artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark had left Brazil in exile in the late sixties.

4. Amaral, “Apresentação,” 9–11. The artists included were Alberto Aliberti, Ronaldo Azeredo, Geraldo de Barros, Hércules Barsotti, Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, Aluísio Carvão, Amílcar de Castro, Willys de Castro, Lothar Charoux, Lygia Clark, Waldemar Cordeiro, João José Costa, Milton Dacosta, Wladimir Dias-Pino, Osmar Dillon, Kazmer Féjer, Hermelindo Fiaminghi, José Lino Grünewald, Ferreira Gullar, Leopoldo Haar, Reynaldo Jardim, Heinz Kühn, Judith Lauand, Rubem Ludolf, Antônio Maluf, Almir da Silva Mavignier, Maurício Nogueira Lima, Hélio Oiticica, Abraham Palatnik, Lygia Pape, Décio Pignatari, Luiz Sacilotto, Dionísio del Santo, Ivan Serpa, Theon Spanudis, Pedro Xisto, Rubem Valentim, Décio Vieira, Mary Vieira, Alfredo Volpi, Franz Weissmann, Anatol Władysław, and Alexandre Wollner.

5. Amaral, “A exposição do *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte*,” 12.

1. Ronaldo Brito, “Neoconcretismo,” *Malasartes* (Rio de Janeiro) 3 (April–June 1976): 9–13; Ronaldo Brito, *Neoconcretismo: vértice e ruptura do Projeto construtivo brasileiro* (1999; repr., São Paulo: Cosac & Naify Edições, 2007); Ronaldo Brito, “Neo-Concretism, Apex and Rupture of the Brazilian Constructive Project,” trans. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro and Irene V. Small, *October* 161 (2017): 89–142.

2. The exhibition opened at the Pinacoteca on June 14, 1977, and at the MAM-RJ on July 14, 1977. See Aracy Amaral, “Apresentação,” in *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte* (São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo; Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 1977), 9. See also Aracy Amaral, “A exposição do *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte*,” supplement to the facsimile edition of *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte* (São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2015), 11. Ronaldo Brito was originally to be the exhibition’s cocurator, but he withdrew from the project. See Valéria Piccoli, Aracy Amaral, Ivo Mesquita, Heloisa Espada, Regina Teixeira de Barros, and Ana Maria Belluzzo,

countered the angled and textured planes of Hélio Oiticica's *Núcleos* (c. 1959).<sup>6</sup>

Yet the exhibition, as Amaral later assessed, quickly managed to "upset everyone."<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, those associated with *paulista* Concretism accused Amaral and Pape of modifying the exhibition to favor the formal and conceptual innovations of the Carioca (Rio de Janeiro-based) Neoconcretists; on the other, those associated with Neoconcretism, including Pape herself, objected to what they perceived was Amaral's strong emphasis on the Concretists' importation of German and Swiss constructivist models.<sup>8</sup> Décio Pignatari and Ferreira Gullar, pivotal figures of Concretism and Neoconcretism, respectively, publicly sparred over the exhibition in the pages of the magazine *Arte hoje*, further proving that the stakes were high for defining the movement's decisive narrative, even if its works had been cast aside for more than a decade.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, of most lasting impact was perhaps the catalog published in tandem with the exhibition, a project spearheaded by Amaral and designed by the artist Amílcar de Castro to follow the structured aesthetic of constructivist graphic design. Groundbreaking for the time in terms of depth and length, this compendium of more than three hundred pages includes translated primary texts by European constructivists such as Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and Theo Van Doesburg, as well as by the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García and the Argentine groups Asociación Arte Concreto Invención and Madí. It also includes Brazilian Concrete and Neoconcrete manifestos, individual profiles for artists associated with each group, contemporary analytical texts (including a reprint of Brito's *Malasartes* article), and a detailed bibliography. In keeping with the exhibition's title, which placed visual practices within the broader phenomenon of the "Brazilian Constructivist Project," a thorough chronology also contextualizes Brazilian geometric abstraction

within national and international developments in art and design, as well as in culture and politics. Placing these various primary and secondary sources together for the first time, the catalog was designed to reintroduce audiences to Brazilian constructivism and thus to stand as the authoritative reference on what was then a somewhat forgotten chapter.<sup>10</sup> In this sense both the exhibition and the catalog succeeded, canonizing a historical narrative that would remain largely unchallenged for several decades.<sup>11</sup>

The intricacies of the debates that resurfaced as a result of the exhibition, regarding the affinities and divergences between Brazilian Concrete and Neoconcrete art, are outside the scope of this article. My interest here is to examine the institutional impetus to perform such a reassessment within the pivotal context of late seventies' Brazil. Certainly, the twentieth anniversary of the *Exposição nacional de arte concreta* made it a fitting occasion. And in terms of the chosen venues, the appropriateness of each was clear: MAM-RJ had been central to the development of Concrete and Neoconcrete art and, beginning in 1975, the Pinacoteca had been under the directorship of Amaral, whose research since the sixties had centered on historicizing the origins of Brazilian modern art.<sup>12</sup> (Amaral also credited the timeliness of the exhibition to the logistical advantages of her participating with Brito in the MAM-RJ's Comissão de Planejamento Cultural at the time.<sup>13</sup>)

10. Piccoli et al., "Debate sobre *Projeto construtivo brasileiro*."

11. Ivo Mesquita acknowledges the impact of the exhibition and catalog in his introduction to the facsimile edition of the catalog: "Foi um episódio fundante no processo de difusão e institucionalização dessa produção no Brasil e no exterior . . . É a partir desse momento que começam a se suceder pesquisas, publicações e mostras articuladas em torno das produções e dos programas dos artistas concretos e neoconcretos, percebendo-os como esteio para as gerações posteriores." ("It was a foundational episode in the process of dissemination and institutionalization of this [artistic] production in Brazil and abroad. . . . It was from that moment onwards that research, publications, and exhibitions emerged on the Concrete and Neoconcrete artists and their work, positioning them as the buttress for subsequent generations.") Ivo Mesquita, "Apresentação," supplement to facsimile edition of *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte*, 5. All translations are by the author.

12. In the early seventies, Amaral published various volumes on Brazilian modernism. See Aracy A. Amaral, *Artes plásticas na Semana de 22: subsídios para uma história da renovação das artes no Brasil* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1970); *Blaise Cendrars no Brasil e os modernistas* (São Paulo: Martins, 1970; rev. ed. Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, 1997); and *Tarsila – sua obra e seu tempo* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1975).

13. This partnership, in turn, helped facilitate state funding for the exhibition from the federal agency FUNARTE and from São Paulo's

6. The exhibition included three *Núcleos*, all from 1959. See the full checklist in "Catálogo," *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte*, Acervo Associação Cultural Lygia Clark, 1977, <https://portal.lygiaclark.org.br/acervo/9220/projeto-construtivo-brasileiro-na-arte-1950-1962>.

7. Piccoli et al., "Debate sobre *Projeto construtivo brasileiro*."

8. Amaral, "A exposição do *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte*," 12. The fallout between Amaral and Pape was so great that Amaral didn't attend the exhibition opening in Rio. Piccoli et al., "Debate sobre *Projeto construtivo brasileiro*."

9. Décio Pignatari, "A vingança de Aracy Pape" and Ferreira Gullar, "A razão de uma zanga," *Arte hoje* 1, no. 2 (August 1977): 10–12. Reproduced in Glória Ferreira and Agnaldo Farias, *Crítica de arte no Brasil: temáticas contemporâneas* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 2006), 89–95.

The circumstances were indeed fortuitous for the *Projeto construtivo* to initiate the institutionalization of Brazilian Concrete and Neoconcrete art. But returning to 1977 also reveals the exhibition to be within a crux in critical discourse on the state of artistic vanguardism in Brazil, set against a regional repositioning of intellectual and curatorial strategies in response to the ongoing Cold War. “Cold War” specifically refers here to two interrelated geopolitical processes in the region: the United States’s post-1959 political and economic expansionism in Latin America as part of its doctrine of containment and the rise of military regimes like Brazil’s, which relied on the rhetoric of communist containment to justify their seizure of power and ensuing repressive methods.<sup>14</sup> Returning to 1977, therefore, reveals as much about the current political context of Brazil and Latin America during this period as it does about the institutionalization of the now canonical narrative of Brazilian modern art. In short, the cementing of the arc of Brazilian modernism that took place during this period responded to but also contradicted the surge in Latin Americanism then occurring in response to the region’s charged political context. A historiographical consequence of this discursive positioning, I argue, was also the ensuing neglect of conceptual practices that emerged in the wake of geometric abstraction, manifesting as collective, and collectivist, expressions of a shared regional precarity.

#### “POR QUE O TEMOR PELO LATINO-AMERICANISMO?” (WHY FEAR LATIN AMERICANISM?)

In chronological terms, the organizing efforts behind *Projeto construtivo* paralleled the start of Brazil’s process of *abertura* (opening) to democratic rule. Officially set in motion in 1974 by the military president Ernesto Geisel, *abertura* came to represent various political and economic policies meant to signal the country’s decisive reentry onto the world stage following the period of isolationism instituted by previous generals. This previous period had been known as the *anos de chumbo*—the “leaden years”—

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Ministry of Culture, Science, and Technology. Piccoli et al., “Debate sobre *Projeto construtivo brasileiro*.”

14. Gilbert M. Joseph, “What We Now Know and Should Know: Bringing Latin America More Meaningfully into Cold War Studies,” in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In from the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5, 24–27. See also Hal Brands, *Latin America’s Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–8.

marked by intense, if erratic, censorship, as well as by brutal repression. In fact, in 1968 the regime’s second president, Artur da Costa e Silva, enacted the constitutional amendment known as the Ato Institucional #5 (AI-5, Institutional Act #5). Surveillance and persecution of civilians had already figured in the military’s arsenal since 1964, but the AI-5 sanctioned exceptional violations of political and civil rights. It authorized the president to execute orders by decree, enabled the discretionary dismissal of public employees, officially instituted censorship, suspended habeas corpus, ratified torture, and reinstated the death penalty. The devastating effects of the AI-5 were vast and immediate, resulting in the imprisonment of hundreds of students, activists, artists, and public intellectuals in the weeks following its enactment. Over the coming years, the regime would also wield the amendment to raid universities, censor and shutter newspapers, detain thousands, and execute and disappear hundreds.

The AI-5 defined a generation and influenced public discourse long after Ernesto Geisel revoked it in 1978. And though President Geisel also demoted the role of censorship agencies and the secret police, in actuality the *abertura* period that became the backdrop for *Projeto construtivo* merely offered the illusion of democratization. Censorship, persecution, and torture continued well into his administration, all while the regime moved to tacitly control through exploitative neoliberal policies and a series of intensified mass propaganda campaigns. Official propaganda doubled during this period, spread via print advertisements, radio spots, and, overwhelmingly, through the new formats of *cinejornais* (newsreels shown in theaters before films) and *filmetes* (short films broadcast on television).<sup>15</sup> The regime’s pharaonic infrastructure projects also reached their apotheosis under Geisel, who directed, among several initiatives, the construction of colossal hydroelectric dams on Indigenous lands—including the Itaipu Dam on the Paraná River, the greatest in energy production in the world for the following three decades. Such lavish spending can be largely attributed to the so-called economic miracle of exceptional growth attained during those “leaden years” of the dictatorship—tempered, of course, by the 1973 international oil crisis—which spurred the construction thereafter of such immense dams.

15. Nina Schneider, *Brazilian Propaganda: Legitimizing an Authoritarian Regime* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), 27–30.

This economic growth overwhelmingly favored Brazil's upper and middle class, stimulating an unprecedented boom in the art market, particularly in São Paulo. There, fifty-seven commercial galleries operated in the city in 1977, twenty-two of which had opened within the previous three years.<sup>16</sup> As artworks became yet another form of capital investment following the boom of the Brazilian stock market in 1970, emerging artists increasingly came under great pressure to professionalize their practice and produce approachable, salable work to meet the voracious demand of a newly minted upper middle class. That much was proven by a 1978 survey devised by the artists Regina Silveira and Julio Plaza, the results of which they published in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. With responses from 169 individuals—fifty-four artists, thirteen art critics, thirteen gallery owners, four museum administrators, and eighty-five members of the general public—the survey portrays a scene in which conservative, figurative works were resolutely favored and experimentation as well as cultural and social engagement were generally shunned by institutions in favor of commercial interests.<sup>17</sup>

The *abertura* period was languid and often beset by disputes within the military itself, as officers sought to overcome the paradox at the core of its purported objective: to begin reinstating democratic institutions while also stemming political opposition, not least the perceived threat of communism. Ultimately, the period would prepare the country to enter the neoliberal world stage by aestheticizing the violence the regime used to compel collective acceptance of Brazil's political status quo. In short, the policies of the *abertura* projected the opening of Brazil—to new sources for capitalist extraction.

In this context, the *Projeto construtivo* exhibition proved to be pragmatic yet hopeful. As a retrospective assessment, it implied the foreclosure of the utopian aspirations of the Brazilian Constructivist Project, yet its emphasis on the cosmopolitanism of this visual language also signaled the possibility of imagining open, transnational visual alliances anew. Indeed, the exhibition's disinterring of Constructivist works in the context of the *abertura*—as the regime recalibrated its repressive methods but new legislation also allowed exiled artists and critics to return home—served to emphasize not only the

political subversiveness of creativity but also its vulnerability against the varied guises of fascism.

In the midst of the Cold War, the exhibition's plumbing of the homegrown aesthetic program of Constructivism also insisted on the potential resistance of Latin American localisms against the enduring cultural and political hegemony of the United States and Western Europe, especially due to those countries' entanglement in the proliferation of military dictatorships in the region. This was in keeping with Ronaldo Brito's analysis, set forth in *Neoconcretismo: vértice e ruptura do Projeto construtivo brasileiro*, which insisted on situating Neoconcretism within its specific economic and sociopolitical conditions to offer a political reading of its artists' seemingly apolitical experimentation. Indeed, one could position the exhibition's obliquely political emphasis on the local inflections of Constructivism as tangential to the historical materialist thrust of Brito's criticism for *Mala-sartes*, and of the magazine at large. Forgoing purely stylistic analyses, Brito, and the magazine as a whole, sought to reveal the logic of Brazil's art world as a circuit that interconnected the outsize force of the art market with the dictatorship's dual policies of economic liberalism and repression.<sup>18</sup> To foreground a homegrown geometrically abstract visual language would therefore be a slight to US incursions, and to a domestic market which grew meteorically under the dictatorship and overwhelmingly favored figurative art.

In 1977 Brazil was therefore a fulcrum for the then seemingly separate, though intertwined regional discourses on the state of the "communist threat," on economic liberalism, on the growth of the art market, and on the vitality of a Latin American artistic vanguardism. For this reason, *Projeto construtivo* must also be considered alongside the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo as well as the surge in Latin Americanism in the visual arts during the late seventies. In fact, in 1977 the Bienal found itself in a state of crisis, sullied and isolated for almost a decade following the international boycott of 1969 in protest of the military dictatorship. The boycott brought far-reaching attention to the military's persecution of artists and critics, many of whom soon left the country in exile—yet as a result, during the seventies, outside critical discourse disregarded the subsequent five editions of the Bienal and, most importantly, the myriad artistic practices

16. "Pesquisa: Galerias de Arte de São Paulo," 1977, 0589AP | TP0048, Arquivo Multimeios, Centro Cultural São Paulo, 47–48.

17. "Perfil do sistema da arte," *Folha de São Paulo*, December 3, 1978.

18. See Irene V. Small, "Insertions into Historiographic Circuits," *October* 161 (Summer 2017): 69–88.

that emerged in Brazil throughout the decade.<sup>19</sup> To decisively establish the chronology of Brazilian Constructivism through the *Projeto construtivo* exhibition was therefore to rebut the broader art world's protracted disregard for contemporary Brazilian artistic expression more broadly.

But local detractors too railed against the Bienal's lingering ambition to place Brazilian modern art alongside the European and American avant-gardes, an intent that not only evinced the institution's Eurocentric foundations but also abetted an imperialist framework of regional cultural dominance.<sup>20</sup> As the critic Frederico Morais would assert in 1978, "The history of relations between the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo and Latin America has been characterized by omissions, frustrations, submissions (to Euro-American interests) and, above all, by the absence of any project or program or, in a broader sense, of any policy that tends to defend Latin American art, even Brazilian art."<sup>21</sup> The *Projeto construtivo* could be seen to be aligned with Morais's line of attack. By positioning Brazilian Concretism and Neoconcretism as a homegrown avant-garde, the exhibition mounted a counteroffensive to this internal, geopolitical misalignment of the Bienal, with its patent dismissal of local political and cultural realities.

Morais's lambasting of the Bienal, however, underscored the dearth of curatorial endeavors emerging from the Global South that supported transnational dialogue among artistic practices across the region. Amaral had voiced the same concern a few years before, in 1975, at the symposium *Speak-Out! Charla! Bate-Papo!: Contemporary Art and Literature in Latin America* held at the University of Texas at Austin, when she called for a complete restructuring of the event to realign it away from Europe and toward Latin America.<sup>22</sup> (Though the

immediate postwar era had seen a rise in debates on the notion of a distinctly Latin American aesthetic, the Austin symposium marked a pivotal point in terms of bringing together the leading critics of the region expressly to discuss this concern.<sup>23</sup>) The stakes were high for giving a public platform to the discussion over the distinctiveness of Latin American visual expression, chiefly because this remained a political imperative for this vast battleground of the Cold War.

The restructuring proposed by the likes of Morais and Amaral became the motivation for the creation of the parallel Bienal Latino-americana de São Paulo, launched in November of 1978. Yet the venture, headed by the Conselho de Arte e Cultura with the inaugural theme of "Myths and Magic," was a misfire and drew fierce criticism for its exoticist orientation as well as for its ultimate failure to address the complexities of Latin American artistic practices. In Morais's words, "the failures with respect to representing current production in the various countries are so alarming that, in fact, it cannot be said that we had, in São Paulo, a Latin American Biennial."<sup>24</sup> Many shared Morais's reproof, specifically considering the "golden opportunity," as the critic Roberto Pontual noted, of the "unbridled Latin Americanism" of 1978.<sup>25</sup> A salve, it could be said, came in the form of the event's accompanying symposium, coordinated by the Peruvian critic Juan Acha and featuring prominent critics from across the region—many of whom had participated in the 1975 Austin symposium—to discuss the themes of

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centers of Europe. And I think it is unacceptable that I continue to hold this position." Amaral as cited in Damián Bayón, *América Latina en sus artes* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1974), 90.

23. See "IV.4.1–IV.4.3 Speak-Out! Charla! Bate-Papo!: Contemporary Art and Literature in Latin America, A Symposium at the University of Texas at Austin, October 1975," in Mari Carmen Ramírez, Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, and Héctor Olea, eds., *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 740–52.

24. Frederico Morais, "Apêndice: I Bienal Latino-americana de São Paulo," in *Artes plásticas na América Latina: do transe ao transitório* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1979), 62–65; Juan Acha, "Las bienales en América Latina de hoy," *Revista del arte y la arquitectura en América Latina de hoy* 2, no. 6 (1981): 14–16. <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/1079465#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1116%2Co%2C3930%2C2199>.

25. Roberto Pontual, "I Bienal Latino-americana de São Paulo: mitos disseminados, mágia destruída," in Izabela Pucu and Jacqueline Medeiros, eds., *Roberto Pontual: obra crítica* (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue Editorial, 2013), 515. First published as "The First Latin American Bienal of São Paulo: Scattered Myths, Shattered Magic," *Review* 24 (1979).

19. Mari Rodríguez Binnie, "The São Paulo Neo-Avant-Garde: Art, Collaboration, and Print Media, 1970–1985" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2017), 33–34; Isobel Whitelegg, "The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone (1969–1981)," *Afterall* 22, Autumn/Winter 2009,

20. Miguel A. López, "El giro discursivo de las exposiciones desde una perspectiva del Sur: São Paulo (1978) y Medellín (1981)," in *Robar la historia: contrarrelatos y prácticas artísticas de oposición* (Santiago: Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2017), 91.

21. Frederico Morais, as cited in López, "El giro discursivo," 92.

22. The Bienal "is a structure that corresponds to what it was in the fifties, and the world has changed. . . . Latin America in these twenty-five years has changed, and São Paulo, after all, is a city located in South America, in Latin America; the São Paulo Biennial continues, more or less, connected as it did from its founding, with Europe and with the critical

“Myth and Magic in Latin American Art” and “General Issues in Latin American Art.”<sup>26</sup>

Because of the fallout however, the Bienal Latino-americana would only be held once. A vote of thirty Latin American critics convened by the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo in October 1980 overwhelmingly approved the elimination of the event in favor of maintaining the Bienal Internacional, as long as it kept an emphasis on Latin America.<sup>27</sup> Both Amaral and Morais voted against this plan, with Amaral publicly declaring that canceling the Bienal Latino-americana after one, even if maligned, edition was to essentially shoot from the hip—to her, this revealed a chronic lack of confidence in the validity of the notion of Latin American art, as well as a continued dependency on Anglo-European discourse and legitimization. It would appear that Amaral’s fears were borne out, as the Bienal Latino-americana would never be relaunched, withering away into the appendices of the Bienal Internacional.

Yet it would also appear, amid the swell of critical Latin Americanism and in the lead-up to the Bienal Latino-americana de São Paulo, that Amaral’s efforts for the 1977 *Projeto construtivo* would evince a transnational purview from, and for, the Global South. Against this backdrop, the exhibition is confounding. Shunning, for instance, connections with Argentine Concrete art (save for including their manifestos in the catalog alongside the historical texts by European Constructivists), it defended a form of geometric abstraction particular to Brazil, thereby sustaining a nationalist position while also betraying a lingering orientation toward the European avant-gardes. The apparent contradiction of this nationalist internationalism, angled toward the Western canon, was in fact part and parcel of the institutionalization of Brazilian—and even more specifically, a *paulista*—modernism during the postwar era. Certainly, the

26. The symposium participants were Juan Acha, Silvia Ambrosini, Adalice M. de Araújo, Eli Bartra, Oreste Bruneto e Carmen Lariño, Galaor Carbonell, Rita Eder, Carlos Espartaco, Maria Heloisa Fénelon Costa, Néstor García Canclini, Jorge Glusberg, Lélia Coelho Frota, Donald Goodall, Jacob Klintonowitz, Mirko Lauer, Raul Lody, Jorge Alberto Manrique, Romanita Martins, Clyde Morgan, Fernando Mourão, Bengt Oldenburg, Oscar Olea, Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira, Israel Pedrosa, Mario Pedrosa, Darcy Ribeiro, Jorge Romero Brest, Ernesto Sabato, Carlos Silva, Marianne de Tolentino, Marta Traba, Guillermo Whitelaw, and Alba Maria Zaluar. See Fabrícia Jordão, ed., *I Bienal Latino-americana de São Paulo – 40 anos depois* (São Paulo: Centro Cultural São Paulo, 2019).

27. Aracy Amaral, “Críticos de América Latina votan contra una bienal de arte latinoamericano,” *Revista del arte y la arquitectura en América Latina de hoy* 2, no. 6 (1981): 36.

institutionalization of Brazilian *modernismo* of the twenties had begun in earnest in the late forties through dedicated exhibitions at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM SP), the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), and the Bienal.<sup>28</sup> But it was the decade of the seventies that saw the cementing of its triumphant narrative—a historicist progression that took Anita Malfatti’s 1917 solo exhibition as its origin point, then intensified with the Semana de Arte Moderna of 1922 (Modern Art Week of 1922) and its ensuing reverberations, and later reached a crescendo with the inauguration of the MAM, the MASP and, finally, the Bienal as the country’s main platforms for domestic and international modern art. Of decisive impact was the 1976 publication of a revised and expanded edition of critic Paulo Mendes de Almeida’s *De Anita ao museu*, which argued for the centrality of São Paulo to Brazilian modernism by establishing this very connection between the city’s intellectual and artistic climate of the twenties and the eventual creation of such internationalist institutions as the MAM SP and the Bienal.<sup>29</sup> However, it was the long string of retrospective exhibitions organized in São Paulo’s main museums throughout the decade that gave the most visibility to this reassessment.<sup>30</sup> Each dedicated to a single *modernista* artist, together they provided the historiographical scaffolding for the progression from post-Impressionist and post-Cubist experimentation to geometric abstraction.

28. During this period, retrospectives on Ernesto de Fiori (1947), Anita Malfatti (1949), and Lasar Segall (1951) opened at MASP, and on Tarsila do Amaral (1950) at MAM SP. Meanwhile, the 1951 Bienal included dedicated galleries to Victor Brecheret, Emiliano di Cavalcanti, Oswaldo Goeldi, Lívio Abramo, Cândido Portinari, Bruno Giorgi, and Lasar Segall. The 1953 Bienal included a retrospective of Elyseu Visconti and gave awards to Di Cavalcanti and Alfredo Volpi. Special exhibitions dedicated to Portinari were included in the 1955 and 1959 editions of the Bienal, and to Brecheret in the 1957 edition.

29. Paulo Mendes de Almeida, *De Anita ao museu* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva S.A., 1976).

30. During this period, the MAM SP organized retrospectives on di Cavalcanti (1971), Volpi (1975), Carlos Prado (1976), and Aldo Bonadei (1978); MASP on Segall (1971) and Ismael Nery (1974); and the Museu de Arte Brasileira of the Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado on Brecheret (1969), John Graz (1970), and Ismael Nery (1970). The new Museu de Arte Contemporânea of the Universidade de São Paulo, formed from Cicillo Matarazzo’s personal collection, organized retrospectives on Antônio Gomide (1968), Tarsila do Amaral (1969), Vicente do Rego Monteiro (1971), Malfatti (1973 and 1977), and Mário Zanini (1976). See Tadeu Chiarelli, “Art in São Paulo and the Modernist Segment of the Collection,” in *Coleção Nemirovsky*, ed. Maria Alice Milliet (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2003), 82; Adele Nelson, *Forming Abstraction: Art and Institutions in Postwar Brazil* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 108–18.

For one, this lineage largely elided the reality of the Brazilian artistic scene of the fifties, which *Projeto construtivo* purported to reveal but also glossed over: a field electrified by rivaling aesthetics, with social realist, informalist, as well as various geometrically abstract strains pulsating alongside and against each other as they each vied to encompass both what was “local” and what was “modern.”<sup>31</sup> Symbolically capping this string of exhibitions, the *Projeto construtivo* proclaimed São Paulo as fertile soil for vanguardism and a metonym for Brazil as cultural exporter on par with hegemonic centers of Western modern art. This positioning—which extended Ronaldo Brito’s postulations—had long-standing reverberations that the scholarship has only relatively recently begun to contest, not least its implied, categorical split between the Constructivist variants of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, or even the alleged cohesiveness of Neoconcretism itself as a movement.<sup>32</sup> Herein lies a compelling paradox: the exhibition lay the groundwork for the great international marketability of Brazilian Concrete and Neoconcrete art that followed the 1999 rerelease of Brito’s essay as an illustrated book, even though his essay had laid bare and objected to the entanglement of art history and socioeconomic forces.<sup>33</sup>

A counterpoint proves useful here, of a different exhibition of geometric abstract art that was organized in Rio de Janeiro the following year, which endeavored to bypass such nationalist assessments in favor of delineating and positioning certain visual strategies as manifestations of a coherent regional identity. *América Latina: geometria sensível* opened at the MAM-RJ in June 1978 as part of the museum’s *Arte agora* series. The title, with its regional and thematic emphases, already gestures toward the exhibition’s aim to postulate a collectivism present in particular approaches to geometric abstraction, born out of the sedimentation of a colonial past and precarious present. Organized by Pontual, the exhibition was installed alongside a historic retrospective of Joaquín Torres-García’s work, first organized by the Paris Museum of Modern

Art in 1975.<sup>34</sup> As Pontual points out in his catalog essay, the decision to pair these stemmed from Torres-García then being virtually unknown in Brazil, as well as from growing debates on the category of “Latin American art” as indicated by the launch of the Bienal Latino-americana, the symposium in Austin, and concurrent international debates in Mexico City and Caracas.<sup>35</sup> Pontual goes on to indicate that *Geometria sensível* took its title from the term first coined by the Argentines Damián Bayón and Aldo Pellegrini as a way to differentiate the affective positioning of Latin American geometric abstraction from the “programmed” forms of Anglo-European counterparts. Contrasting notions such as “intuition” versus “calculus,” “openness” versus “closure,” and “plurisensorialism” versus “strict visuality,” Pontual draws from Bayón and Pellegrini to designate “sensible” as the more compatible qualifier able to speak to the spectrum of geometrically abstract languages that had emerged in the region.<sup>36</sup> The exhibition included twenty-six artists from seven countries, each asked to participate with an average of five recent works with the intent of presenting stylistic amplex and contemporaneity to the term *geometria sensível*.<sup>37</sup> The result, then, were dual exhibitions that visualized a span of fifty years, with Torres-García positioned as the key antecedent to an ongoing, regional reinvention of an affective form of geometric abstraction.

*Geometria sensível*’s “warm”<sup>38</sup> characterization of Latin American visual expression may have been trite, and it did

34. The exhibition was titled *Torres-García, construção e símbolos*. See Roberto Pontual, “Do mundo, a América Latina entre as geometrias, a sensível,” in *América Latina: geometria sensível*, ed. Roberto Pontual, (Rio de Janeiro: MAM-RJ, 1978), 8.

35. Regarding the latter, Pontual points to the significant presence of Latin American artists at the 1977 Paris Biennial, the 1978 Primera Bienal Latinoamericana de Pintura in Mexico City, and the 1978 *Primer Encuentro Iberoamericano de Críticos de Arte y Artistas Plásticos* in Caracas.

36. Pontual, “Do mundo,” 8–9.

37. Pontual, 8–9. The participating artists were Wilson Alves (Brazil), Washington Barcala (Uruguay), Jacques Bedel (Argentina), Marcelo Bonevardi (Argentina), Enrique Carbajal (Mexico), Orlando Condeso (Peru), Adriano d’Aquino (Brazil), Amílcar de Castro (Brazil), Antonio Dias (Brazil), Mercedes Estes (Argentina), Ana Mercedes Hoyos (Colombia), Arcangelo Ianelli (Brazil), Paulo Roberto Leal (Brazil), Avatar Moraes (Brazil), Edgar Negret (Colombia), Alejandro Otero (Venezuela), Nelson Ramos (Uruguay), Omar Rayo (Colombia), Vicente Rojo (Mexico), Mira Schendel (Brazil), Jesús Rafael Soto (Venezuela), Eduardo Sued (Brazil), Rubem Valentim (Brazil), and Alfredo Volpi (Brazil).

38. Pontual does not use this particular adjective in his essay, opting instead for qualifiers such as *intuitive* and *organic*, though we can see affinities between his formulation and Morais’s in his essay, which follows Pontual’s. First outlining affinities between Latin American and European Constructivist “vocations,” Morais then asserts the “vitalist and organic

31. Heloísa Espada, “Mário Pedrosa and Geometrical Abstraction in Brazil: Towards a Non-dogmatic Constructivism,” *Critique d’art* 47 (Fall/Winter 2016), <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/23251#quotation>.

32. Michael Asbury, “Neoconcretism and Minimalism: On Ferreira Gullar’s Theory of the Non-object,” in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2005), 168–89. See also Small, “Insertions into Historiographic Circuits,” 87–88 and note 55.

33. Small, 87–88.

foreground artists from Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela—countries which continue to dominate the region’s cultural arena—though it also included an artist from Peru. But its synthetic approach opened interpretive possibilities. For instance, the work of Brazilian artists usually partitioned off by rigid stylistic demarcations fruitfully shared the gallery space, with the Afrocentric symbols of Rubem Valentim’s paintings alongside Mira Schendel’s delicately textural geometries, Antônio Dias’s fragile structures, and Amílcar de Castro’s sculptural incisions. Moreover, in pairing its survey of contemporary work with the retrospective of Torres-García’s constructivist phase, *Geometria sensível* insisted not just on linking the past with the present but on deviating from the historical closure suggested by *Projeto construtivo*’s anthological approach. In fact, Pontual’s second essay in the catalog traces and analyzes geometric abstraction in Brazil before and beyond Concretism and Neoconcretism.<sup>39</sup> Even so, as this already hints, the exhibition fell into a familiar trap: the catalog, with contributions by the most influential critics of the region at the time, is made up of separate analyses of abstraction as it developed in each represented country.<sup>40</sup>

We know the impact that exhibition catalogs can have long after the works come down from the walls. But a tragic turn of events would poignantly prove this. Exactly a month after the opening of *Geometria sensível*—and almost a year to the day after the opening, in those very galleries, of *Projeto construtivo*—the MAM-RJ suffered a devastating fire that consumed the vast majority of its permanent collection, the entirety of its library, and every work in both *Geometria sensível* and the Torres-García retrospective.<sup>41</sup> A chilling precursor of the demise of Rio’s Museu Nacional four decades later, the fire at the MAM-RJ revealed the fragility of Brazil’s cultural

sense” of Latin American geometric forms and cites as an example the Argentine Leopoldo Torres-Agüero’s term *geometria caliente*. Frederico Morais, “A vocação construtiva da arte latino-americana (mas o caos permanece),” in Pontual, *América Latina*, 17.

39. Roberto Pontual, “Brasil: as positivas geometrias,” in Pontual, *América Latina*, 51–77.

40. The catalog features essays by Frederico Morais, Angel Kalenberg, Jorge Alberto Manrique, Marta Traba, Eduardo Serrano, and Damián Bayón. For a contextual analysis of its essays in relation to these critics’ positions in the field of Latin American art, see Camila Maroja, “*Vontade Construtiva*: Latin America’s Geometric Abstract Identity,” in *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, ed. Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco (London: Routledge, 2019), 228–32.

41. “Incêndio destrói 90% do acervo do MAM,” *O Globo*, July 9, 1978; “Most Art Destroyed in Rio Fire,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1978.

infrastructure. (As Pontual pointed out at the time, the MAM-RJ “died of sickness, not the fire.”<sup>42</sup>) In the aftermath, Pontual’s trailblazing curatorial effort of tracing transnational visual parallels and connections—an approach that anticipated Walter Zanini’s much-celebrated thematic schema for the Bienal in 1981 and the transnational turn in contemporary curatorial practices more broadly—was historiographically supplanted by the conventional organization bound by national borders of the exhibition’s catalog.

It is worth turning here to a polemic that unfolded on the pages of two of Brazil’s major newspapers, revealing significant fault lines within the burgeoning Latin Americanist debate. Just a few months following the MAM-RJ fire, and in anticipation of the 1978 Bienal Latino-americana, Aracy Amaral published an article in the Suplemento Cultural of the *Estado de São Paulo* with an agitating title: “The regional and the universal in art: why fear Latin Americanism?”<sup>43</sup> Citing the impending event and taking on a forceful, urgent tone, Amaral objected to what she saw were two serious claims levied against the surge in Latin Americanist initiatives: that Latin Americanism presented a dangerously chauvinist positioning vis-à-vis the rest of the Western world, and this positioning, ultimately, evinced a certainty in the belief that the international avant-garde had died out. Amaral speedily dismissed the former—as leveled by the critic Jacob Klintowitz in São Paulo’s *Jornal da Tarde* the previous month—by underlining how such initiatives were the shared reassessment of the effects of colonialism and imperialism in the region and of the persistent subservience of Latin America to the hegemonic “metropolises” in its economics, politics, and culture.<sup>44</sup>

The rest of the article was then a rebuke to the second claim, which she took to be most prominently leveled by Morais in “Latin America and the Crisis of the Avant-Garde,” an article from his column for Rio de Janeiro’s *O Globo*.<sup>45</sup> He had given a reproving glance at what he

42. Cited in Irene Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 121.

43. Aracy Amaral, “O regional e o universal na arte: por que o temor pelo latino-americanismo?” *O Estado de S. Paulo: Suplemento Cultural*, October 8, 1978: 3–4, <https://icaa.mfah.org/en/item/776533#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-2001%2C-263%2C6551%2C3666>.

44. Jacob Klintowitz, “Na Bienal Latino-americana, os riscos do nacionalismo xenófobo,” *Jornal da Tarde São Paulo* (September 9, 1978).

45. Frederico Morais, “América Latina e a crise da vanguarda,” *O Globo*, September 1, 1978, <https://acervo.oglobo.globo.com/consulta-a-acervo/?navegacaoPorData=197019780901>.



perceived as the newfound critical and institutional appreciation of Latin American artistic practices, including awarding the top prize to Buenos Aires's Grupo de los Trece, the first Latin American participant to win this top award, at the 1977 Bienal. Morais situated this "fashionable" interest in Latin America alongside recent declarations, on the part of leading critics of the region (explicitly naming Marta Traba, Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, Ferreira Gullar, and Mário Pedrosa), about the decay of vanguardism at large: "the rediscovery of Latin America, mainly by critics of different generations and points of view, coincides with the slowdown in the activity of the avant-garde at the international level."<sup>46</sup> This particular observation would become Amaral's target, citing it in her rebuttal a few weeks later. Amaral developed two implications from this diagnosis by Morais. First, she took Morais's dismissal of the "fashionability" of Latin American art to be an inaccurate representation of such initiatives, as ones driven by interests outside the region. "In the end," Amaral contested, "those interested in Latin America in the last few years are Latin Americans themselves, not the Europeans . . . nor the Americans."<sup>47</sup> Second, she understood Morais's coupling of Latin Americanism and the shared belief in the retreat of vanguardism to presuppose a binary between "Latin American" and "universal" modes of expression. She disputed this in two maneuvers: by shrewdly revealing the long-standing imposition of Anglo-European aesthetics as "universal" and by defending the artistic cultivation of Latin America's distinctive mestizo and popular cultures. "Only from the particular, from the local," she argued, "can we reach the universal." Doing so "expresses our reality with conviction," an expression that is "a formative particle of the whole." It is this reflexive turn inward, Amaral concluded, that will allow us "to see ourselves with realism" and "project our own tomorrow based on our own situation. . . . It may be a dangerous road, but it is crucial to the affirmation of our condition as a third-world, developing nation, as a culture in formation."<sup>48</sup>

46. Original: "A redescoberta da América Latina principalmente pelos críticos de diferentes gerações e pontos de vista coincide com o arrefecimento que se nota na atividade da vanguarda no plano internacional." Morais, "América Latina e a crise da vanguarda."

47. "Afiml, os interessados na América Latina no curso dos últimos anos são os próprios latino-americanos e não os europeus . . . nem tampouco os americanos . . ." Amaral, "O regional e o universal na arte," 3.

48. "Pois somente a partir do particular, do local, se pode alcançar a universalidade. Expressa a nossa realidade com convicção [. . .] essa expressão tem um lugar no concerto de todos posto que é uma partícula

It was a rousing call that demanded attention, not simply due to the upcoming Bienal Latino-americana but due to the political subtext of the region during the Cold War. Yet it is important to emphasize that Amaral's argument was based on only a portion of that of Morais. Indeed, she took Morais's pairing of critics' simultaneous embrace of Latin Americanism and their heralding of the death of vanguardism to be a causality he believed in too. Morais did diagnose one as causal of the other but did it to warn of their effect: "the risk in linking the rediscovery of Latin America with the crisis of the avant-garde is the *in limine* condemnation of every avant-garde, even historical ones . . . and the defense of conservative or outdated trends in art from our continent."<sup>49</sup> Even more lamentable, Morais continued, was the market's ready embrace of this critical turn.<sup>50</sup> Amaral's choice of images to illustrate her article inadvertently proved Morais's point. Tarsila do Amaral's *Cartão-postal* (*Postcard*, 1929) graces the cover of the Suplemento Cultural, which also serves as the cover for the article, along with the same artist's *A feira II* (*The Fair II*, 1925), sharing the article's layout with paintings by Rufino Tamayo and Pedro Figari, captioned as *Homenagem à raça* (*Homage to the Race*, 1952) and *Barracks Women* (1922), respectively. The four paintings, all roughly from the first half of the century, present strands of modernist experimentations with figuration that evaded the "yoke," as Marta Traba derided, of Mexican muralism.<sup>51</sup> It would therefore seem that, to Amaral, these works advanced Latin Americanism precisely from their respective expressions of the "particular" and the "local," unlike works that shared an aesthetic born of the postrevolutionary Mexican nationalist project. Yet, set against the Brazilian context, these four works together also echoed the historiographical rescue during that decade of Brazilian modernist figuration through exhibitions and publications, not least Amaral's own books on

formativa do todo [. . .] poderemos, no decorrer do processo, nos ver com realismo, nos assumirmos, em consequência, e projetar nosso amanhã a partir de nossa situação real [. . .] Um caminho que pode ter seus perigos, mas crucial na afirmação de nossa condição terceiro-mundista em desenvolvimento, de uma cultura em plena gestação." Amaral, 4.

49. "O risco que se corre ao vincular a redescoberta da América latina e a crise da vanguarda, é a condenação in limine de toda vanguarda, inclusive aquela, já histórica, e cuja contrapartida é a defesa de tendências conservadoras ou superadas da arte em nosso continente . . ." Morais, "América Latina e a crise da vanguarda."

50. Morais.

51. Marta Traba, "América: viraje hacia afuera," *Revista estampa* (1961). [www.scribd.com/document/86595669/América-viraje-hacia-afuera](http://www.scribd.com/document/86595669/América-viraje-hacia-afuera).

the *paulista* modernists and the Modern Art Week of 1922, as well as her 1975 monograph on Tarsila do Amaral. The growing art market, as Morais signaled, was quick to respond to this institutionalization.

Even so, Amaral's choice of illustrations is also curious for the absence of Concrete or Neoconcrete works, especially with the *Projeto construtivo* exhibition having taken place several months prior. Perhaps their geometries were superficially incongruous with her championing of an aesthetics rooted in the region's mestizo population and its popular traditions. Perhaps such works would readily show the exceptionality of geometric abstraction in the region, as the aesthetic and its institutionalization remained limited to its wealthiest countries. Once again, this is a discordance reconciled instead in the historiography of Brazilian modernism, wherein the agitations of figurative experimentation during the twenties laid the groundwork for the eruption of geometric abstraction.

Ultimately, these parallel maneuvers—of foregrounding the figurative works by do Amaral, Tamayo, and Figari in such a rousing call for Latin Americanism, and of the granular historicization of Constructivism in Brazil through *Projeto construtivo*—also speak to Amaral's foreclosing of the possibilities for a shared regional perspective to be expressed through new media or dematerialized practices. This observation was, in fact, the basis for the rest of Morais's argument in "Latin America and the Crisis of the Avant-Garde," which Amaral refused to respond to.<sup>52</sup> The second half of Morais's article accuses the leading critics of the region of failing to recognize the grounds on which current Latin American vanguardism embraced "Dadaist" and conceptual practices: "The absence of . . . isms, schools, or trends does not necessarily denote a crisis. Perhaps the crisis lies in the inability of critics to keep up with these changes."<sup>53</sup> To Morais, the altered sociopolitical context of the region during the seventies influenced artists' turn toward such reflexive and critical practices. Explicitly countering critics like Traba and Prampolini for reductively characterizing these as "irrational" and "individualist," Morais rescued the

52. Morais addresses this lapse in his response to Amaral and points to her ongoing justification for the centrality of São Paulo. See Frederico Morais, "América Latina não pertence a São Paulo, Aracy," *O Globo*, October 13, 1978.

53. "Ausência de novidades . . . não significa necessariamente crise. E quem sabe, a crise está na incapacidade dos críticos de acompanharem estas mudanças de comportamento." Morais, "América Latina e a crise da vanguarda."

Dadaist positioning as a most incisive, creative exploration, with cultural and political implications, in its own historical context as well as in contemporary Latin America. The onus, then, was on the region's art critics to be willing to follow such searing "analyses of reality."

We could say that the polemic between these two towering critics stemmed from the same sense of urgency, as they both sought to foreground an artistic and critical praxis that spoke to the specificity of the Latin American cultural expressions amid the Cold War. Yet Amaral's piercing question, "why fear Latin Americanism?" could be edited in light of Morais's elucidation of conceptual practices devised to challenge the metastasis of severe political repression. Why fear the different facets of Latin Americanism? Or better yet, why turn away from practices that conceptually and formally dwelled on the region's defining precarity?

#### SCATTERED MYTHS

In examining the tensions between the swell of Latin Americanism and the cumulative, institutional impetus to reconsider Brazilian modernism during the seventies, it is imperative to also consider the local context, where emerging artists revitalized questions regarding the audience, accessibility, and political potential for art, but through conceptual practices. Indeed, even artists central to Concrete and Neoconcrete Art—including Waldemar Cordeiro, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Lygia Pape—were steeped in this conceptual turn, with Oiticica and Pape also participating in a large happening organized alongside the Bienal Latino-americana de São Paulo. *Mitos vadios* (Idle, Stray Myths) comprised more than twenty artists whose actions and performances took over an empty parking lot on São Paulo's Rua Augusta on the Sunday following the inauguration of the Bienal.<sup>54</sup> The event was organized in part in reaction to the Bienal Latino-americana, modulating the latter's title of "Myths and Magic" to underscore the strategic aimlessness of the actions staged throughout the day. The *Mitos vadios*

54. The advertised participating artists were Artur Barrio, Gabriel Borba, Antônio Dias, Mauricio Fridman, Genilson (Soares), Rubens Gerchman, Ivald Granato, Gretta, (Francisco) Iñarra, Olney Krüse, Lfer (Luis Fernando), Ibáñez Ma, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Ruy Pereira, Alfredo Portillos, Sérgio Régis, Ubirajara Ribeiro, Claudio Tozzi, and Regina Vater. Others, including Anna Maria Maiolino and the Argentines Alfredo Portillos and Marta Minujín, participated in the event, though they were not advertised on promotional materials. Isobel Whitelegg, "Brazil, Latin America: The World," *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (2012): 134.

participants echoed the critical pandering of the Bienal Latino-americana's chosen theme but also took aim at how its structure belied its progressivist and Latin Americanist objectives. As emblazoned in a manifesto authored by participants Artur Barrio, Dinah Guimarães, and Lauro Cavalcanti, "We consider the first Bienal Latino-americana as a top-down manifestation—[in terms of] theme, jury, place, behavior, and predetermined participation. . . . The main function of *Mitos vadios* would not be to oppose the biennial that is now taking place, since it has already died."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the participating artists considered *Mitos vadios* an anti-institutional declaration in itself by giving an alternative platform to free experimentation with ephemeral actions and found materials—practices that posed a stark contrast to the works exhibited not just at the Bienal Latino-americana but also in the mainstream institutions of Rio and São Paulo.

*Mitos vadios* was a delirious gathering of performances, installations, and participatory proposals. Ivald Granato, the event's main organizer, inaugurated the happening dressed up as Bienal founder Ciccillo Matarazzo, complete with a pinstriped suit and matching hat. Marching alongside friends who chanted mock pleas to feature their loved ones' work in upcoming biennials, Granato imperiously repeated, in English, "I'm not Ciccillo Matarazzo." A jeering take on Matarazzo's, and the Bienal's, internationalist ambitions, the character also deadpanned a recent development. He could not possibly be Ciccillo Matarazzo; no one could be, for he had died just eight months before. On Granato's arm was Lygia Pape in character as "Aracy Pape," a Carioca stereotypically eager to get to know the cosmopolitan "sophistication" of São Paulo, effectively rehearsing the discursive centrality of the latter in the narrative of Brazilian modernism. Her character's name, in turn, directly referred to the title of Décio Pignatari's faintly sexist, metonymic censure of Amaral and Pape in his disparaging of *Projeto construtivo* on the pages

55. "Consideramos a primeira Bienal Latino-americana como uma manifestação de cima para baixo—tema, júri, local, comportamento e participação pré-determinados . . . A principal função dos 'mitos vadios' não seria colocar-se em oposição à bienal que agora se realiza, já que a mesma morreu." Artur Barrio, Dinah Guimaraens, and Lauro Cavalcanti, "Mitos vadios," April 14, 1978, <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/1110494#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-419%2C-1%2C3037%2C1700>. See also Arethusa Almeida de Paula, "Mitos vadios – uma experiência da arte de ação no Brasil" (master's thesis, Universidade de São Paulo, 2008), 64–68, <https://www.livrosgratis.com.br/ler-livro-online-125239/mitos-vadios-uma-experiencia-da-arte-de-acao-no-brasil>.

of *Arte hoje*.<sup>56</sup> In the same, irreverently antiestablishment vein, the artist Genilson Soares staged a performance where he satirically promoted himself using the language and imagery of political advertisements, jabbing at the merchandising rhetoric employed by both the regime and the art market.

Other artists turned to domestic materials for their actions. Regina Vater gave audience participants a printed work with the purchase of one of her homemade merinques, in a strikingly simple and clear questioning of the value of labor with respect to women artists. Anna Maria Maiolino staged an ephemeral "monument to hunger" by solemnly tying together a sack of rice and a sack of beans with a black ribbon, in observance of Brazil's deep inequality and the multitudes lacking even this simple form of sustenance. José Roberto Aguilar and Nelson Jacobine interacted with prop weapons improvised from discarded materials, a seemingly infantile romp that caustically recalled guerrilla conflicts throughout the region. Oiticica, meanwhile, enacted the meaning of the event's title through his performance, *Delirium ambulatorium*. Wandering idly around the empty lot dressed in a *sunga*, Rolling Stones T-shirt, and silver wig and shoes, Oiticica the artist-vagabond performed the collective search of *Mitos vadios* for spaces for open expression, free of moralism as well as taste.<sup>57</sup>

Writing soon after the event, the art historian Sônia Salzstein praised *Mitos vadios* for its "cheap replica of the vernissage," adding, "it is impossible to want to understand the works in isolation—it was a fête, a fair, but always lucid in its frontal opposition to the bureaucratized rituals of art."<sup>58</sup> Because of its anti-institutional stance and multifarious poetics, critical coverage of the event was predictably polarized, from bashing it and its participants for their alleged opportunism to celebrations of its

56. Pignatari, "A vingança de Aracy Pape."

57. Moacir dos Anjos has analyzed *Delirium ambulatorium*, and Oiticica's subsequent meditations on the work, as the most radical expression of the *Parangolé*, in its objective to remove all barriers between artist's studio and street, between artist and public, and between art and life. Moacir dos Anjos, "As ruas e as bobagens: anotações sobre o *Delirium ambulatorium* de Hélio Oiticica," *Arts* 10, no. 20 (November 2012): 40–42.

58. "Mitos Vadios é a réplica vagabunda do vernissage. É impossível querer compreender os trabalhos isoladamente—aquilo era uma quermesse, uma feira, mas sempre lúcida quanto ao fato de ser contraposição frontal aos rituais burocratizados da arte." Sônia Salzstein, "Apontamentos para uma avaliação de arte experimental em São Paulo, na década de 70: A propósito de 'Mitos vadios' ou 'My name is not Ciccillo Matarazzo,'" 0556AP | DT1834, Arquivo Multimeios, Centro Cultural São Paulo.

temporary exercise in free experimentation.<sup>59</sup> Pontual emphasized *Mitos vadios* in a footnote to his scathing critique of the Bienal Latino-americana for the New York magazine *Review*, praising its participants for their open condemnation of the Bienal's limited vision of Latin American art.<sup>60</sup> That such praise came in the form of a footnote, however, in turn highlights how the participants envisioned *Mitos vadios*, in contrast with the historiographical prism that the event became. It was a manifestation meant to be most visible in the moment but also, ultimately, ephemeral—one of many anti-institutional artistic actions then proliferating in the region's artistic centers. Yet the event has since itself become mythologized, in part because of the retroactive rescuing of the contributions of those participants with the most symbolic capital—but also in part because of Amaral's own retroactive marshalling of *Mitos vadios* as a foil. In "Aspectos do não-objetualismo no Brasil," a text she delivered at the 1981 international Coloquio de Arte No-objetual in Medellín, Amaral revealed a new appreciation for dematerialized practices as she made her own initial attempt at taking stock of "non-objectual" art in Brazil.<sup>61</sup> To Amaral, the thrust of such works lay in their fusing of the creative and the political; as such, she highlighted Oiticica, Barrio, Antônio Manuel, and Cildo Meireles, whose works since the late sixties demonstrated a clear political message. As a point of contrast, Amaral considered *Mitos vadios* a cumulation of spastic attacks:

A demonstration, in my view, that aimed to caricature an event—the Bienal Latino-americana—hinging on dated absurdism, in a street demonstration to show "opposition" to the biennial system, or to the art market. This demonstration seemed rather insensible to the political debates that took place in those days in the Brazilian panorama—a time of tension that inaugurated the so-called "opening" of the country—as well as total indifference to the importance of the meaning of

59. See, for instance, Francisco Bittencourt, "Dos Mitos e magia aos Mitos vadios," *Tribuna da imprensa*, November 2, 1978; Sheila Leirner, "A arte convencional sob o prisma da ridicularização," *O Estado de São Paulo*, n.d.; Jacob Klintonowitz, "Como foi a contestação à Bienal," *Jornal da tarde*, n.d.

60. Pontual, "I Bienal Latino-americana," 513.

61. Aracy Amaral, "Aspectos do não-objetualismo no Brasil," May 1981, <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/1111221#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1334%2C-22%2C4367%2C2444>.

Latin American cultural solidarity. Oblivious to the events in Latin America, these artists seemed to us attentive only to their own irrational gestures and, consequently, to reactionary individualism.<sup>62</sup>

It is a bit amusing that this description withholds the fact that artists she otherwise praised in the text, such as Barrio, Oiticica, Pape, and even Granato, were central to the event. But of importance here is her congealing of the actions of *Mitos vadios* in order to validate the contention that political engagement could materialize only in the message conveyed by a conceptual work, rather than also in its dematerialized form.

My objective here is not to retrospectively monumentalize *Mitos vadios* (for one, this would counter its ethos). Rather, I cite it as but one example of the radical practices then proliferating in both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, which were born out of a renewed spirit of resistance but faulted by leading Latin American critics for what they alleged was these artists' trafficking in the "alienated" materiality of conceptual and new media languages. Indeed, in their manifesto for *Mitos vadios*, Barrio, Guimarães, and Cavalcanti specifically objected to the Trabian logic of resistance that argued for the "non-alienated" media of painting and sculpture. Intentionally misspelling Marta Traba's name to emphasize the literal meaning, in Portuguese, of *trava* (lock), the artists raised what they saw as the aporia of a Latin American artistic resistance mounted via the very media originally imposed in the region by European academicist colonialism, which also readily served the growing art market.<sup>63</sup> We can extrapolate from this position to also account for these artists' proposal that open, "aimless" experimentation and collaboration are ancillary, if not a precondition, to the revitalization of the social potential for artistic practice during this fraught political period. That critics who fulminated against muralism's prescriptive approach to both

62. "Manifestação, a meu ver, que visava caricaturizar um evento – a Bienal Latino-americana – a partir do 'absurdo' envelhecido em manifestação de rua para demonstrar 'oposição' ao sistema de bienais, ou ao mercado de arte. Essa manifestação pareceu antes de total insensibilidade diante dos debates políticos que ocorriam naqueles dias no panorama brasileiro, época de tensão que inaugurava a chamada 'abertura' no País, bem como de indiferença total a importância do sentido da solidariedade cultural latino-americana. Alheios aos acontecimentos na América Latina, esses artistas pareceram-nos antes atentos, tão somente, a seus próprios gestos irracionais e, em consequência, de reacionário individualismo." Amaral, "Aspectos do não-objetualismo no Brasil," 13–14.

63. Barrio et al., "Mitos vadios." See also Whitelegg, "Brazil, Latin America," 135.

politics and aesthetics faulted emerging artists for renewing this very battle cry remains a fascinating paradox.

I should emphasize that, in the context of São Paulo, only one institution supported these experimental practices through the late seventies: the marginal Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP), under the directorship of Walter Zanini.<sup>64</sup> The Pinacoteca would only begin to showcase conceptual and new media work under the directorship of Fábio Magalhães following Amaral's departure in 1979. It is also worth noting that these experimental works did tend to circulate outside established exhibition spaces, precisely because these artists resolutely challenged Brazil's surging art market as well as the political entanglements of cultural institutions with the military regime. But when they did enter these institutions, it was through open-ended exhibitions that elicited participation and dialogue. The reconfiguration of the gallery space as a "laboratory," as its proponents often chose to describe it, found prominent champions in the region in Juan Acha, Jorge Glusberg, and Walter Zanini. Zanini prominently put it into practice for the 1981 Bienal, taking advantage of the event's thirty-year anniversary to do away with national pavilions and reorient its curatorial scope toward the horizontalizing practices of happenings, mail art, artist's books, and video art, then the purview of marginal artists in the region as well as in the hegemonic centers. That edition further emphasized the ongoing physical transformation of the gallery space—an extension of the spirit of experimentation in a laboratory—by featuring a Mail Art Nucleus that grew as works continued to arrive during the run of the Bienal. Acha, for his part, made it the basis for the sprawling and multifarious event that was the 1981 Coloquio de Arte No-objetual, activating ephemerality and precariousness as necessarily "unpopular" artistic maneuvers able to resist market forces and enunciate a localized, decolonial artistic language.<sup>65</sup> Glusberg's

64. See Mari Rodríguez Binnie, "Prospectiva 74 & Poéticas Visuais: The International Horizon of 'Anartistic' Print Experimentation" / "Prospectiva 74 & Poéticas Visuais: El horizonte internacional de la experimentación 'anartística' con métodos de impresión," *Caiana: revista de historia del arte y cultura visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte CALA II* (December 2017): 110–16.

65. "Es difícil, pues, que el público aceptase que el no-objetualismo constituye un fenómeno histórico cuya razón de ser está en contraponerse a un objetualismo maledo y en completa degeneración y fetichización. Contraponerse, no con el fin de sustituirlo, sino de recuperar la importancia de las acciones humanas ante el objeto." ("It is difficult, therefore, for the public to accept that non-objectualism constitutes

vision, admittedly, straddled the other end of the spectrum. Although the interdisciplinary artistic proposals that came to encompass what he termed *arte de sistemas* hinged on the viewer's cognitive engagement, he envisioned his Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) as hosting such collective thought experiments through a space made hermetic from the outside world.<sup>66</sup> The tension arising from such differing conceptions regarding the notion of the gallery as a laboratory in a way prefaced the aforementioned controversy regarding the CAyC's Grupo de los Trece winning the Itamaraty Prize at the 1977 Bienal. What to some signaled the triumph of Latin America was to others the prevailing of Glusberg's professionalizing approach, internationalist ambitions, and ample funding.<sup>67</sup>

In his postmortem on the Bienal Latino-americana—which, incidentally, included the Grupo de los Trece among its participants—Pontual diagnosed a deeper affliction within the Brazilian cultural milieu: "it seems that the idea of an exhibition, in the sense of exhibiting works in a given space, remains so deeply ingrained in us that we can hardly imagine any other way to stimulate . . . artistic creation." Conventional exhibitions, with their "abundance of space, spectacle, works, shine, and wealth," could not possibly speak to the "realities and demands of our precarious situation, especially here in Latin America."<sup>68</sup> Pontual saw this failure as most evident in

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a historical phenomenon whose reason for being is to oppose a corrupted objectualism that is in complete degeneration and fetishization. To oppose, not with the aim of replacing the object, but to recover the importance of human actions when faced with the object.") Juan Acha, "El Coloquio," *Revista de arte y arquitectura* 2, no. 7 (1981): 27.

66. "Trabajar en cerrado, sin acceso de público, en forma agresivamente sectaria, como grupo de discusión para dialogar colectivamente sobre proyectos individuales y grupales, para pensar en el futuro, para pasar del pensamiento a la acción, sin interés por el momento en los medios de comunicación, en el prestigio fácil de los apoyos oficiales o del falso poder administrativo de la cultura." ("Working indoors, without the public, in an aggressively sectarian manner, as a discussion group to collectively discuss individual and group projects, to think about the future, to move from thought to action, without interest, for the moment, in mass media, or in the easy prestige of official support or the false administrative power of culture.") Letter from Jorge Glusberg to Juan Carlos Romero, December 1, 1971. Cited in María José Herrera, "Hacia un perfil del *arte de sistemas*," in *Arte de sistemas: el CAyC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional*, ed. María José Herrera and Mariana Marchesi (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2013), 31.

67. Whitelegg, "Brazil, Latin America," 137.

68. "Sim, parece que a ideia de uma exposição—no sentido de exibir obras em um determinado espaço—continua tão profundamente arraigado em nós que mal podemos imaginar outro meio para estimular . . . [a] criação artística . . . A Bienal apostou alto e acabou perdendo—por falta de coragem ou, pior ainda, para evitar as realidades e as demandas da nossa

the Bienal Latino-americana, though he considered it to be a chronic condition that *Mitos vadios*, for instance, had clearly laid bare. The pageantry of the biennials, but also of the programming at most of the country's mainstream museums, revealed a lingering institutional reliance on Anglo-European rubrics of taste and a correlated preoccupation with exporting local visual production, according to Pontual. Latin American art would remain subservient to the hegemonic centers, he argued, as long as exhibitions and criticism remained centered, in essence, on canonization. He felt it was crucially important to instead galvanize current artistic production. Citing the Peruvian critic Mirko Lauer, he challenged: "does stimulating creation and incentivizing interconnections between artists not matter at all?"

The subtitle of Pontual's article—"Scattered Myths, Shattered Magic"—modified the theme of the Bienal Latino-americana to anticipate his despondent rumination on the state of Latin American-centric exhibitions. But as we look back toward this crucial period for culture and politics and for the historiography of Latin American art, it becomes ever more tempting to redirect Pontual's words to have them speak to what is at stake as we look upon art now. For it is true that the seventies threw the failures of that euphoric belief in modernism into stark relief. But it is also worth dwelling on the weight of personal investments and institutional imperatives in the exercise of mythmaking that is a national art history. Returning to these crucial years allows us to account for the impetus, but also the contradictions, behind the process of canonization of Brazilian modern art vis-à-vis Latin Americanist notions of resistance. Key initiatives, in the form of exhibitions from and for the Global South, proposed transnational and transmedia models by which to reconsider aesthetic value systems as Anglo-European dominance grew more menacing by becoming ever more widespread. *América Latina: geometria sensível*, the I Coloquio de Arte No-objetual, and the MAC-USP's activities under Zanini, for instance, presented such possibilities.

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situação precária, especialmente aqui na América Latina. O fato é que uma exposição convencional—com sua abundância de espaço, espetáculo, obras, brilho e riqueza—prova ser cada vez menos interessante para os países da América Latina, inclusive no Brasil." Pontual, "I Bienal Latino-americana," 516.

Even as recent scholarship has increasingly shed light on these, that they remain but historiographical glimmers shows there is work left to be done. Just as important is to underline the democratizing motivation, amid a generalized state of political, economic, and cultural precarity in the region, behind the collective turn to conceptual practices—a driving force, one could argue, that was parallel to the enthusiastic embrace of geometric abstraction decades before.

Reassessing the debates that came to a head in late seventies' Brazil on the state of artistic vanguardism alongside the contemporaneous process of national canon making exposes the great political stakes for artistic production and its historicization during this fraught period. It also foregrounds how these developments were foundational to our current understanding of the categories of Brazilian art and Latin American art—as well as the need to now revisit the genealogies and imaginaries that consolidated around both at this time. Given how Brazil has come to dominate Anglophone narratives of modern and contemporary Latin American art, it is all the more pressing to reconsider this inflection point in its local art history in light of not only important transnational affinities and connections but also the frictions that emerged in between.

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