“The Pulp of Color”: Toward a Notion of Expenditure in Ferreira Gullar’s Neo-concrete Writings

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At some point in 1960—the heyday of Neo-concretism—Aluíso Carvão coated a cement cube roughly the size of a volleyball with a deep-reddish mixture of paint and cement. The resulting work was equivocal: The cube was large enough to seem weighty, but the velvety coating lent it a delicate, tactile physicality, as something to be stroked rather than held and lifted. One could even say that it enticed the viewer to touch its surface, to confirm that it was in fact solid, for its matte texture made it paradoxically intangible, as if it were nothing more than a dense agglomeration of pigment. The perceptual stability of the cube as a three-dimensional shape was challenged by its porous surfaces and round contours; indeed, it seemed on the verge of being eaten up by its sheer chromatic intensity. Such is the conundrum set up by Cubocor and so vividly evoked in poet Ferreira Gullar’s claim that Carvão’s Neo-concrete work leads viewers to overcome the “object’s resistance” and reach “the pulp of color.”

As a matter of fact, Cubocor was not meant to be touched, and it is ironic that it became the masterwork of an artist whose production, even at that very moment, was composed almost exclusively of paintings. But Carvão was not alone in probing the gray area between painting and sculpture; that same year, for example, his Neo-concrete fellow Lygia Clark started her famous series Bichos. It was this kind of work that prompted Gullar to develop the theoretical backbone of Neo-concretism, the theory of the non-object. His operation was twofold. First, the poet mobilized his readings of philosophy (chiefly of the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) in order to describe artworks that involved the subject in either actual or projective participation, thus breaking with a subject-object dichotomy he associated with contemplation. Second, he posited such works as the end

point of a teleological account of modern art formed by the quest to overcome the barriers—frame and base—that separated the space of painting and sculpture from that of the world. The prefix in the term non-object was intended to signal that the rejection of medium-specificity did not mean artworks should be reduced to the same perceptual level and category as everyday objects. Gullar was insistent that, unlike everyday objects, non-objects are not determined by our linguistic and instrumental familiarity with things we know. Non-objects are defined by a double negation: They reject both the metaphorical space of painting and sculpture and the space of ordinary things. Through the experience of this new form that interwove subject and object, the poet expected non-objects to enable viewers to transcend their customary mode of relating to ordinary objects.

This transformative phenomenology was the core of Neo-concretism’s utopianism. Unlike the Concretist emphasis on the social dissemination of well-ordered forms through the exemplary power of artworks and the pedagogic mediation of applied arts, Neo-concretism sought to transform the subject in ways that were not so much pedagogic as transferential, in the psychoanalytic sense of a work that lures and ensnares the subject. Color acted—above all in the work of Carvão and Hélio Oiticica—as one of the catalysts of this process precisely by clashing with the superficial stability of geometric forms. In this article, I approach Gullar’s understanding of color not only through his Neo-concrete writings but also by tracing the genesis of his theoretical stance back to his poetry of the early 1950s, in particular A Luta Corporal (written between 1950 and 1953 and published in 1954), arguing that Gullar’s take on Neo-concrete color relates to his early meditations on the limits of language and to his shifting ontological stances throughout the 1950s. Bluntly put, the utopianism implicit in Gullar’s insistence on color as a force that dismantles the “object’s resistance” is, I argue, significantly, and perhaps, surprisingly indebted to the tragic existentialism of his early poetry that informed his poetic descriptions of self-expenditure (most pointedly in the form of rotting fruit). This debt is far

5. See chapter 2 in my Constructing an Avant-Garde for a discussion of Oiticica’s experiments with color.
from straightforward, and reconstructing it will necessarily involve other crucial aspects of the theory of the non-object, such as its take on temporality and duration, and also on contemplation. Furthermore, it must be said that the subtle slippages and conceptual overlaps in Gullar’s poetry and theory will not easily yield a system; rather than attempt to construct one, I will track these notions and concepts as they dialectically unfold.

Language and Contemplation

A Luta Corporal is an extraordinary book. Literary critic João Luiz Lafetá, for one, hails it as a major break with the then-hegemonic “Generation of ’45,” whose aestheticizing, neo-symbolist diction had mostly suppressed the irreverent colloquialism that marked the 1920s modernism of Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. This was no small feat for a young poet recently settled in Rio de Janeiro and publishing his first mature work of poetry.

As Lafetá points out, this break is made particularly forceful by virtue of the book’s structure as “a walk in a straight line.” A Luta Corporal opens with “Sete Poemas Portugueses” (Seven Portuguese poems), an ensemble that would seem to share the incantatory and fluid tenor practiced by the Generation of ’45 were it not for occasional bits and pieces of a more corrosive vocabulary that constantly threaten to disrupt the flow of words and suggest an alternative, mirror-like structure based on sharp oppositions. Once the more conventional meter of the opening poems is left behind, Gullar proceeds in a step-by-step manner, foregrounding themes that were initially latent, such as the discordant temporality of subject and object, the alienation of his poetic persona before the things he contemplates, and the anxious presentiment of death. As the “walk” goes on, language itself is gradually but implacably transformed so as to shed all traces of mystifying overtones and to confront the opaque resistance of the objects it evokes. In “Galo gallo” (Rooster rooster), as Lafetá puts it, “the obscure accent of the ‘Portuguese poems’ is replaced by a clear-cut and concise vision that looks as if it had been drawn in pen and ink” (“Rooster: feathers that/spring from the silent flesh/and the hard beak and the nails and the eye/without love. Grave/solidity/On what does such an architec-

6. My reading of A Luta Corporal is deeply indebted to Miguel Conde’s interpretation of the book in an unpublished manuscript, “Os fundos e a margem,” and to personal conversations with him. There has been little dialogue between the disciplines of art history and literary criticism in their respective approaches regarding Gullar’s oeuvre; this essay is an attempt to bridge that gap.


8. A Luta Corporal is actually Gullar’s second book; his first, Um pouco acima do chão, from 1949, was written and published while he lived in his provincial hometown, São Luiz do Maranhão, where he had virtually no contact with modern poetry.


10. Ibid., pp. 129–33.


ture/prop itself?”). Every new poetic solution the book introduces ultimately crumbles under a renewed and ever-sharper awareness of the insufficiency of language as a means of gaining objective knowledge of things. In one of the book’s final poems, “Róçzeiral,” words themselves get pulverized into a profusion of scattered (and virtually untranslatable) syllables, letters, and noises: “MU/LUISNADO/VU/GRESLE RRA/Rra Rra/GRESLE RRA/I ZUS FRUTO DU DUZO FOGUAREO/DOS OSSOS DUS/DIURNO/RRRA.”12

Lafetá’s reading of *A Luta Corporal* as an inexorable march toward the breakdown of language is shared by Gullar’s most prolific commentator—the poet himself—and his chief intellectual adversaries, the São Paulo–based Concrete poets Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, who formed the core of the Noigandres group, as well as their followers.13 Both camps agree that by the end of the book readers find themselves adrift amid the flotsam of language. Their divergence lies in the evaluation of such a state: Rather than praise the book for its radicalness, poet and theoretician Philadelpho Menezes, for example, would echo the Noigandres poets in reproaching Gullar for behaving like a “sharpshooter who seems more interested in destroying a language than in planning new compositional organizations.”14 Gullar himself would reevaluate his own production in 1963 and conclude that *A Luta Corporal* had arrived at an insurmountable “contradiction between the interiority [intimidade] of man and the exteriority of the word” that laid bare the futility of poetry itself.15

The breakdown of language is certainly a major motif of *A Luta Corporal*, but it has become too official an interpretation. Gullar’s own penchant for neat, teleological narratives has tended to render the book a closed chapter within his trajectory. Alternative interpretive routes, however, have shed light on overlooked links between *A Luta Corporal* and the poet’s Neo-concrete writings. As critic Miguel

11. Ibid, p. 138. For the poem, see Ferreira Gullar, *Poesia Completa e Prosa* (Rio de Janeiro: Lacerda, 2008), p. 12. In the original: “Galo: as penas que/florescem da carne silenciosa/e o duro bico e as unhas e olho/sem amor. Grave/solidez./Em que se apóia/tais arquitetura?” All translations are mine unless stated otherwise. For the sake of the argument’s clarity, my translations of Gullar’s poems are as literal as possible. Original versions are kept in the main text whenever the actual phonic dimension of the poem is at stake.

12. The very title, “Róçzeiral,” flirts with meaninglessness. It evokes *roseiral* (a large rose garden) and the verb *roçar* (to graze or to scuff). Indeed, Gullar says that he first conceived the poem after passing by a small, barren urban garden and imagining the flowers growing there once again. Ferreira Gullar and Ariel Jiménez, *Ferreira Gullar conversa com Ariel Jiménez* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2013), p. 98.

13. The Noigandres group is named after the eponymous magazine they edited from 1952 to 1962.


15. Ferreira Gullar, *Cultura posta em questão* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1965), p. 21. In *Cultura posta em questão*, Gullar was writing from a newly acquired Marxist perspective that led him to attribute this deadlock not to his lack of constructive commitment—as we will see, his experiences with Concrete and Neo-concrete poetry were attempts to circumvent this very impasse—but to the social alienation of the avant-garde as a whole. It is as if his trajectory had exposed the decadence of modernism itself, thereby calling for the commitment to the communicative possibilities afforded by popular poetry as a form of stirring social and political consciousness.
Conde argues, for example, the book’s pervasive emphasis on the disjuncture between language and things is first felt in “the description of the static image, in the guise of contemplation.”

The following fragment of the prose poem “Um programa de Homicídio” (A homicide program) is a case in point:

Your being there, crimson and quiet, like mine, that makes itself and unmakes the air of these walls—is a fall.

Apple? I use this name as a means not to touch you, thing, beast, red and sudden object.

Yes, not to touch you as that which you are not: this form and color, and something else that the body alone knows.

Language can be utilized—“I use this name”—and yet is unable to touch the thing it designates. Words are merely “our acrobatics, our poor game,” and cannot tell us anything about our being: “What we are is dark, closed, and is always facedown. We speak, gesticulate, and sob childishly around it—it neither hears nor knows us.”

This scene, in which contemplation is placed on a par with alienation, is unmistakably existentialist, and Gullar’s apple is strongly reminiscent of the root of Roquentin’s famous chestnut tree in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*.

This Sartrean model would reappear—now overtly—at the height of Neo-concretism, as Gullar attempted to flesh out “Theory of the Non-Object.” Take, for example, this fragment of “A Dialogue on the Non-Object,” in which the poet discusses how our experience of ordinary objects is inescapably mediated by language:

A—But objects are not exhausted in those [verbal] references either: under the name pear, we have a pear with all the material density of a thing.

B—Yes, when we peel back the cultural order of the words we see objects without names—and we come upon the opacity of the thing.

. . . [S]tripped of its name, the object becomes an absurd, opaque presence against which perception founders; without its name, the thing is impenetrable, unapproachable, clearly and insupportably exterior to the subject…. The object is thus a hybrid of a name and a thing, like two layers superposed upon each other of which only one surrenders to man—the name.

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17. Gullar, *Poesia Com pleta*, p. 24. In the original: “. . . Tanto o seu estar, rubro e quieto, quanto o meu que se faz/e desfaz o ar/destas paredes—é queda. . . ./Maçã? Sirvo-me deste nome como dum caminho para/não te tocar, cousa, fera, objeto vermelho e súbito . . ./Sim, para não te tocar no que não és: forma e cor aqui, e algo mais que/o corpo unicamente sabe . . .”

18. Ibid., p. 25. “Estas palavras como a tua cor, fruta, são as nossas acrobacias, o nosso pobre jogo. O que somos é escuro, fechado, e está sempre de borco. Falamos, gesticulamos, soluçamos, puerilmente, em torno dele—que não nos ouve nem nos conhece.”

The fruit may have changed, but the drama remains the same: Apple and pear are just names that cannot overcome the opacity of the thing in order to reach its essence. A few lines below, Gullar reexamines the problem of the nameless object “in terms of Sartrean existential philosophy: while the subject exists for itself, the object, the thing, exists in itself.” The consequence, he adds, is “man’s perplexity at seeing himself exiled in the midst of such things.”

Despite this recurrence of Sartrean motifs, a fundamental shift occurred in Gullar’s thought between 1954 and 1959. *A Luta Corporal* was a tragic, albeit virtuoso, feat of acrobatics, in which the poet recast his voice again and again in a relentless but ultimately ill-fated search for reconciliation between language and the world before finally letting it peter out into a meaningless din of buzzes and grunts. So complete was his dismantling of language that in the aftermath of the book’s publication Gullar reportedly felt that his brief poetic trajectory had reached a dead end. Five years later, however, the tragic existentialism that informed his take on subject-object relations was tempered by a more reconciling outlook drawn from his recent engagement with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. His newfound concept of the non-object finally seemed to provide that once-elusive instance of reconciliation: “The non-object . . . is one, whole, straightforward. Its relationship with the subject dispenses with all intermediaries [intermediário]. It has a meaning too, but this meaning is immanent to its form, which is pure meaning.” The intermediary Gullar refers to is language, which restricts our access to objects to matters of “utility and verbal designation.” As we have seen, this restricted access is the crux of the subject’s alienation from things. Because its meaning is, for Gullar, “immanent to its form,” the non-object has the power to instantiate space and time anew in every encounter with the subject; this ever-renewed experience, which would also amount to a renewal of the subject’s own perceptual grounds, is what he calls “pure meaning.”

The friction between Sartrean and Merleau-Pontian ontological outlooks partly explains why contemplation becomes such a central issue in the theory of

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. According to Gullar, he began reading Merleau-Ponty’s writings around 1957–1958, after the *National Exhibition of Concrete Art*. Gullar and Jiménez, p. 117. However, it should be noted that, unlike Gullar, Merleau-Ponty himself did not endorse the perspective of a full subject-object reconciliation; in fact, he voiced his reservations on this matter towards the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*. For a discussion of this topic vis-à-vis the work of Gullar and Lygia Clark, see chapter 3 of *Amor*, *Theories of the Non-Object*.
25. Ibid. Translation altered by the author.
26. For my discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the non-object’s claim to an experience of non-determination vis-à-vis its construction of a teleological history of modern art, see chapter 1, *Constructing an Avant-Garde*. 
the non-object. Even in the “Dialogue,” Gullar continued to regard the contemplative scene as the stage of the subject’s alienation, where language remains a necessary—albeit tragically insufficient—intermediary between the subject and the world. But as another poem from A Luta Corporal demonstrates, the subject-object rapprochement that would mark the non-object never quite takes place in these early works. In “O Anjo” (The Angel), Gullar stages the poetic persona’s encounter with a stone angel, an encounter that animates both subject (“So entirely do I lose myself in him/that the roots of the world/break asunder from me;/so great/is the violence of his body/against mine”) and object (“that its neutral existence/is broken/and the stony eyes/light up”; “the soft breeze/moves his/stone tunic”). However, this mood of “phenomenological imbrication,” as Conde puts it, of subject and object, suddenly comes to a halt in the poem’s last stanza:

The angel is grave
now.
I start waiting for death.

The stanza is sliced, as it were, by a single strong temporal marker—“now” (agora)—followed by a full stop. The acrobatics fall flat with a sudden thump, and anxiety creeps over the subject once more.

Were it not for the last stanza, “O Anjo” would have mostly anticipated the reconciliatory thrust of the non-object. Unlike the angel, however, the non-object never reverts to a solemn and inert state: The overcoming of contemplation becomes the ultimate ground of aesthetic experience.

Mere contemplation is not enough to reveal the sense of the work—the reader/viewer must move from contemplation to action. However, the product of this action is the work itself, because this use, which is foreseen in the structure of the work, is absorbed by it, revealing it and becoming part of its meaning. The non-object is conceived in time: it is an immobility open to mobility that is open to an open immobility. . . . The viewer/reader acts, but the time of this action does not flow, does not transcend the work, does not get lost somewhere beyond it: it incorporates itself within it, it lasts.

29. Gullar, Poesia Completa, p. 11.
Time and Expenditure

Time is obviously at the crux of the issue. And not only of this particular issue: It was also one of the apples of discord between Gullar and the São Paulo Concretists. His well-known response to Haroldo de Campos after the National Exhibition of Concrete Art (ENAC) in 1957 anticipates the passage above, especially when Gullar attempts to distinguish his own view of Concrete poetry from an orthodox one in which poetry is akin to advertisement:

The poem begins when the reading ends. . . . As such, the Concrete poem brings the reader into contact with a durable object and pits the poem against the advertisement and advertising processes in general, in which language is employed solely to trigger a reaction in the reader, not to create an object for him.31

It is not simply a matter of moving from contemplation to action, but of distinguishing between action qua mechanical response (as in the “advertising processes” that Gullar likens to orthodox Concretism) and action qua subject-object imbrication, that is, action that “incorporates itself” into the non-object and whose temporality is experienced as duration. Gullar’s talk of advertising is aimed as a critique of the Concretist emphasis on industrial and graphic design as means of mediating between art as an exemplary practice and its expected utopian effects over the social sphere. The poet suspected the mechanism implicit in this process, fearing that it would render reception processes such as reading as predetermined effects of rationally determined series of formal decisions. (Gullar’s critique is strikingly similar to Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Gestalt psychology, one of the theoretical tenets of Concretism, for its mechanist account of perception.32) Instead Gullar proposed an alternative account that placed the subject not simply in a reciprocal relation vis-à-vis the object (reciprocity per se does not rule out mechanism, as Merleau-Ponty also noted) but rather reconfigured the very temporal texture of subject-object relations.33

Such a move was made possible only by the peculiarity of Gullar’s brief engagement with Concrete poetry. Concretism was for him a way out of the impasse he experienced after publishing A Luta Corporal; it offered him a truce, as it were, with his nihilistic lyricism and its destructive effects on language. More visual than musical, Concrete poetry allowed Gullar to reexamine some of his favorite motifs as verbal objects without the unbearable pressure to reflect on the existential drama of his poetic persona.34 Concretism came imbued with a utopian promise

34. See Lafetá, pp. 159–63. For the critic, in Gullar’s Concrete period “[t]he earlier motifs—the blaze of fruits, the alienation between beings, the dissipation of poetry—find one more possibility of becoming form” (p. 163).
that guaranteed a minimum ground of meaningfulness to poetic practice, thus shielding it from existential anxiety (in the Neo-concrete period, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology would fulfill a similar role; the same applies to the revolutionary ideals Gullar would espouse during his militant years in the student movement of the 1960s).35

And yet even Gullar’s Concrete poetry betrayed signs of fascination with the unstable temporality that stems from the bodily dimension inescapably attached to reading. “O Formigueiro” (The Anthill, 1954–55), the poem he showcased at the ENAC, is clearly at odds with the Concretist take on one of the gods of their pantheon: Stéphane Mallarmé. Looking back at Mallarmé’s masterpiece, “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard,” the São Paulo poets set out to reclaim the graphic arrangement of signs on the blank page and what the French poet termed “prismatic subdivisions of the idea,” that is, the poem’s multidirectional but still hierarchical unfolding in clauses that forked away from the main verse.36 The use of different colors as a graphic device that indicates reading threads in Augusto de Campos’s series Poetamenos (1953) is perhaps the clearest example of their stance. “O Formigueiro,” on the other hand, emphasized the book form itself and took blankness not as a graphic sign but as a token of silence.37 Presented at the ENAC as a series of selected pages enlarged into posters (a Concretist compromise), the dif-

35. After leaving Neo-concretism and forsaking the avant-garde, Gullar joined the Popular Centers of Culture (CPC) and devoted himself to a brand of pedagogic cultural activism that aimed to stir revolutionary consciousness in the masses. For accounts of his abandonment of the avant-garde that consider the homology between avant-garde and revolutionary utopianism in this thought, see my Constructing an Avant-Garde, chapter 3, and Irene V. Small. “Exit and Impasse: Ferreira Gullar and the ‘New History’ of the Last Avant-Garde,” Third Text 26, 1 (January 2012), pp. 91–101.


37. Gullar claims that he only read “Un coup de dés” after writing “O Formigueiro.” See Gullar, “A trégua,” p. 36. My point here is not to ascertain whether he engaged intentionally with Mallarmé but to highlight the ways in which his conception of the relation between word and support diverged from that of the São Paulo Concretists.
ferences were somewhat obfuscated, but when it was finally published as a book, in 1991, Gullar’s point became clear: At every turn of the page, readers face a sparsely printed sheet opposed by a fully blank one. “Everything here comes to pass in silence,” the poet observed in an accompanying text that was reportedly included in the National Exhibition, implying that he was interested neither in syntactical flow (the poem has a main verse, much like Mallarmé’s, but each time they turn a page readers are forced to engage anew by assembling a word from a set of scattered letters) nor in Concrete phonetic play (blank pages separate each soon-to-be word, thus eschewing any hint of vocal counterpoint; the main sentence—“a formiga trabalha na treva a terra cega traça o mapa do ouro maldita urbe”—is alliterative, but it can only be uttered from memory, after the laborious effort of reading it word by word is over, which brings it closer to the “durable object” Gullar would theorize in the 1957 text I cited in the beginning of this section than to the “verbivocovisual” compositional criteria advocated by the São Paulo group). His investigations of the book form in “O Formigueiro” and in book-poems such as Fruta would be critical to his mobilization of a bodily sense of time.

There is an anecdote recounted by the poet in countless interviews about his discontent with the Concretist paradigm of graphically oriented, single-paged poems. It concerns his poem “Verde erva” (Green grass):

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verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde verde erva
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Gullar expected the alliterative effect of reading verde verde verde a few times in a row to dictate a different tempo—verd/e verd/e verd/e—from which the word erva would spring. The voice was meant to act as an unruly object that would burst into the act of enunciation and consequently derail the supposedly steady flow of repetition, while the chromatic association between green and grass would prevent meaning from straying too far. However, Gullar recalls that a friend he shared the poem with could not read it in this way: His perception spontaneously grasped the word verde repeated over and over, rather than reading the word repeatedly. Taking meaning for granted, the reader did not linger with the poem word by word, a precondition for the eventual emergence of another meaning. Gullar makes much of this episode when
discussing his reservations regarding the aesthetics of Concrete poetry, but it also succinctly reveals how his failed expectations for “Verde erva” are evidence that even his Concretist phase was haunted by the temporality of A Luta Corporal.41

As we have noted, A Luta Corporal turned to the descriptive contemplation of static images in order to counter the incantatory flow of its opening verses (a stance that would persist in the “Neoconcrete Manifesto,” where Gullar declared that in Neo-concrete poetry “language does not flow [escorre], but lasts [dura]”).42 But time was not so much shunned in the book as revealed anew, as a mystery that the subject could contemplate, but from which he also felt irrevocably alienated. The poem “As peras” (The pears) is emblematic in this regard:

The pears, on the plate,
rot.
The clock, over them,
measures
their death?

... Oh the pears grew tired
of their forms and of
their sweetness! The pears,
concluded, spend themselves
in the blaze of being ready
for nothing.
...
The day of the pears
is their rotting... .43

As Lafetá has pointed out, “As peras” is akin to a still life; it presents a “frozen picture” in which every element—the pears, the clock, the poetic voice—is paradoxically caught in a time and a place of its own.44 The temporal gulf between them is

41. In a recent article, Mariola V. Alvarez argues that Gullar’s Concrete poetry anticipates rather than opposes his Neo-concrete work. She also pinpoints the word as the core of his poetry, especially from 1957 onward. Yet while this is correct at face value, I would contend that Gullar’s avowed conflation of word and meaning is only one part of the story: The word serves as a foil to the work of expenditure as it returns, albeit veiled, in much of his Concrete and Neo-concrete production. To acknowledge this kind of return is to challenge the poet’s own periodization of his work; indeed, the very attempt of delimiting Gullar’s Concretism is methodologically questionable, especially if Concrete poetry is taken as a stable “genre.” See Mariola V. Alvarez, “The Anti-Dictionary: Ferreira Gullar’s Non-Object Poems,” in Nonsite.org 9 (2013), http://nonsite.org/feature/the-anti-dictionary-ferreira-gullars-non-object-poems#foot_src_16_5685).
43. Gullar, Poesia Completa, pp. 17–18. In the original: “As peras, no prato,/apodrecem ./O  relógio,
sobre elas,/mede/a sua morte? . . ./Oh as peras cansaram-se/de suas formas e de/sua doçura! As
peras,/concluídas, gastam-se no/fulgor de estarem prontas/para nada. . . ./O dia das peras/é o seu apo-
drecimento... .”
44. Lafetá, A Dimensão da Noite, p. 145.
the poem’s tragic content. In “Verde erva,” Gullar attempted to evade this deadlock by enacting a kind of movement that, while immanent to the object (in this case, the verbal object _verde_), aimed to transcend itself and open onto a new meaning. It was an aim he would only accomplish (or so he believed) with the non-object.

Apples, pears: The motif of fruit insistently recurs throughout Gullar’s sinuous theoretical and poetic trajectory of the 1950s. *A Luta Corporal* is rife with fruits that rot, burn, expend themselves, and expire, and that do so without fuss. (“Is it peaceful, the day of the pears? They don’t scream, like/the rooster.”) They are the emblems, in Gullar’s poetry, of “the expenditure of things in themselves” that Conde singles out perceptively as the “devouring force” that animates the book.45 The pears’ obliviousness to their own doom—they are no subject, after all—turns them into a particularly troubling kind of object: The poetic persona’s failure to share their peacefulness is tantamount to the growing realization that what he actually perceives as he contemplates them is nothing but his own anxiety.

Do these pears relate in any relevant way to the one that makes a cameo appearance in “A Dialogue on the Non-Object”? It would seem that the latter pear has no special ontological interest in itself: The dialogue opens with the respondent enumerating it as yet another ordinary object (“an eraser, a pen, a pear, a shoe”).46 Gullar does proceed to single it out in the passage I quoted above, but then again, could he not have picked a pencil, eraser, or shoe, to the same effect? After all, the self-expenditure of the pear no longer pointed to the subject’s alienation from a world of things whose temporality and essence remain irrevocably other: The point of the non-object was precisely to revoke this otherness by offering the subject a way to bypass the instrumentality of language and fully to partake in the temporality of the artwork. Duration is in this context the conceptual opposite of expenditure: Both are taken to lie beyond the pale of language, but the former installs itself by incorporating the subject’s actions while the latter points to an incomensurably diverse temporal register. In short, the alienating dead end of expenditure is no longer an issue.

_The Pulp of Color_

Or is it? Can it be that Gullar pictured the pear as the chief example of the ordinary object simply out of habit, without the sense of expenditure that was previously attached to it coming back to haunt Neo-concretism like an aftertaste? Perhaps not: While it is true that the non-object displaced the self-spending object as the focal point of the poet’s ontological outlook, I believe that expenditure remained operative within Neo-concrete discourse. More to the point, my argument is not simply that expenditure was dissociated from its foremost avatar, the fruit, but that this process is analogous to the psychoanalytic mechanism of repression, in which a signifier is detached from the unpleasant signified that first

45. Conde, “Os fundos e a margem.”
caused the I to reject it. Freud often employs the metaphor of a guardian or watchman over a door in order to describe repression. The role of this agent—hired, so to speak, by the I—would be precisely to prevent the entrance of an unwelcome guest (namely, the repressed “representative” of the drive and its “mental derivatives”—i.e., signifiers). In repression, the I targets the signified (the displeasure caused by the intolerable drive) but only manages to hit—and thus to repress—the signifier. If, as I am suggesting, expenditure operates as a kind of drive pressing its way back into the “consciousness” of Neo-concrete discourse, then it is simply a matter of the repressed signifier slipping into the guise of a tolerable one in order to return. In the context of Neo-concretism, and more specifically of Gullar’s Neo-concrete theory, this signifier is color.

Color, of course, had staged its own return in the Neo-concrete painting of Carvão. In an article from 1960 entitled “Color and Color-Structure,” Gullar recounts that after coming into contact with the geometric rigor of the São Paulo Concrete painters at the ENAC in 1957, the painter temporarily refrained from the tonal play of chromatic lines that characterized his earlier Grupo Frente works in favor of rhythmic paintings that intertwined form and ground. But already in some of the rhythmic paintings, the poet says, Carvão turned away from serial composition and privileged “the duration of form” over “its exterior dynamics”; that is, he turned away from the typically Concretist treatment of time as a mechanical relation between discrete pictorial elements arranged serially. The work Gullar has in mind is Centripetal-Centrifugal Rhythm (1958), which he later owned, and which lies midway in Carvão’s move from arranging clusters of colored geometric elements against a clear background, as in Untitled (1957), to dividing the whole surface into two, chromatically differentiated geometric patterns, such as Clarovermelho (1959). As in “Dialogue on the Non-Object,” Gullar pits “form” against a language of sorts (not verbal language,

47. Repression only works as long as this “mental derivative” or signifier remains minimally recognizable as the content to be repressed. Since unconscious signifiers keep undergoing processes of displacement, it so happens that the drive that was initially meant to be repressed often reattaches itself to a signifier that is not blacklisted by the guardian, thus becoming able to bypass the doorman. This is precisely what psychoanalysis denominates the “return of the repressed.” See Freud, “Repression,” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), vol. 14, pp. 143–58; for a more sustained use of the “guardian” metaphor, see Sigmund Freud, “Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis,” in Strachey, Standard Edition, vol. 11, pp. 9–58.

48. Grupo Frente was an eclectic group of artists who gravitated around painter Ivan Serpa’s workshop at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, which operated roughly between 1954 and 1957. It was mostly but not strictly a geometric-abstraction group, and included several would-be Neo-concrete artists such as Carvão, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica, among others. Compared to the São Paulo Ruptura group, led by Waldemar Cordeiro, Grupo Frente’s take on Concretism was highly unorthodox; tensions mounted when the two groups finally decided to exhibit together in ENAC, in 1956–57.


50. Ibid.
in this case, but a Concretist syntax of geometric elements); the fact that it is imbued with “duration” means that its temporal effect upon the subject is distinct from the linear temporality that underscores syntax. Finally, paintings like Clarovermelho mark the return of color. “And yet this is no mere return,” Gullar goes on to argue,

but a rediscovery, since color reappears free from any figurative or demarcative function so as to become a fundamental significative element of the work. . . . Color in Carvão’s recent works (1959–1960) is at once clear and dense; it neither exposes itself entirely to perception nor takes refuge in tricks and dissimulations. It lasts [ela dura] before us. Vision penetrates [color], but never to the point of totally deciphering [it], as if it lodged itself at the core [cerne] of color, at the pulp of color, there where perception no longer meets the object’s resistance and where everything is just time to perceive.51

In this passage—the same I quoted from at the beginning of this essay—the critique of “exterior dynamics” turns into the overcoming of “the object’s resistance” itself. But that would require color to break free from “any figurative or demarcative function,” that is, from being used as yet another pictorial means

51. Ibid.
of sharpening linear, geometric forms (just like language had to break free from being “used” in naming and describing things in A Luta Corporal). “In those paintings by Carvão,” Gullar writes, thinking probably of the Cromática series, “there is no longer a composition over a ground, but just zones of color that seem to come from outside the canvas and [only to] to find themselves juxtaposed in there.”52 In other words, the relation between the colors is determined not by their arrangement on a plane but by the sheer fact of their being there for the subject to encounter them; rather than determining this encounter, the canvas is determined (as a perceptual entity) by it. The return of color in Carvão’s Neo-concrete work is therefore a dialectical reversal: Local (and linear) deployments of tonal color first gave way to form/ground exercises that implicated the plane as a whole, and then it was just a matter of time—or, rather, of mobilizing duration—until color was to return and displace the plane’s metaphysical primacy.
altogether, finally propelling Carvão’s work into non-objecthood. Color is that
which erodes all sorts of resistances: the line’s, the form’s, the plane’s, and
finally the object’s. In a 1961 interview, Carvão himself expressed his unrelent-
ing concern with freeing color zones from the constraints of “rigid, delineated
areas,” working so that “the brush didn’t have to stop at a clear limit,” in a state-
ment reminiscent of Baudelaire’s observation that the colorist’s “bold touch
always swallows up line.”

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the Neo-concrete emphasis on
duration is not wholly benign; on the contrary, it is shot through with a subtle
but still crucial sense of expenditure. I would go as far as to suggest that this is
what enables color to act as catalyst of non-objecthood. It is not only that Neo-
concrete color opposes the seriality and relationality of Concrete color, but also
that it does so by invoking a temporality of its own, a temporality that is closely
linked to the way it swallows up line and form. This much is evident in the way
one of Carvão’s early Neo-concrete paintings—again, probably one of the
Cromáticas—is described by Mário Pedrosa, a critic close to Gullar but much
less committed to the concept of the non-object, and thus also to its reconcil-
ing rhetoric:

A closely bound ocher zone advances as a triangular wedge over the
adjacent pink area. . . . From that point onwards those areas are no
longer delimited with geometric rigor, but through the meeting of
chromatic zones that wilt in their extremities, as if by energetic
exhaustion.

In Pedrosa’s lively description, linear delimitation breaks down just as chromatic zones “wilt” as a result of “energetic exhaustion.” The undoing of delineation
(i.e., “geometric rigor”) is inextricable from the self-expenditure of color.
From the standpoint of the historical development of Neo-concrete discourse,
this also sheds a light on the slippage, in Gullar’s poetic and theoretical works,
from fruit to color—a slippage epitomized in that striking image conjured by
the poet apropos of Carvão’s work, and to which I finally want to turn: “the
pulp of color.”

This slippage has a history. Gullar has recently located the source of his

53. Carvão adds that “concretism is not a synonym of geometric.” See Aluíso Carvão, cited in Vera
Martins, “Carvão: Abandonei as Formas Definidas,” Suplemento Domingin do Jornal do Brasil, April 8,
1961, p. 3; and Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846,” in Colour, ed. David Batchelor (Cambridge,
54. Mário Pedrosa, Dos M urais de Portinari aos E spaços de Brasília (São P aulo: P erspectiva, 1981),
p. 180. In many ways Pedrosa was Gullar’s mentor in art criticism, although Gullar was often eager to
assert his critical independence; Neo-concretism and “Theory of the Non-Object” are important land-
marks in this respect. I discuss Pedrosa and Gullar’s complex relationship in chapter 1 of my
Constructing an Avant-Garde.
book-poem *Fruta* (1958) in a passage from *A Luta Corporal*, which, he adds, was implicitly based on the contemplation of an apple:

> Clear core, open
> thing;
> in the peace of the afternoon, sets,
> white,
> its fire.\(^55\)

In this fragment, “core” is unmistakably analogous to the Neo-concrete “pulp”: It is the object of a direct, unmediated encounter. Its revelation in *A Luta Corporal* sparks the white fire that spreads uncontrollably and finally burns language down (“To give us the flames of an/exact/VOCABULAR/vacuum”), while the book-poem, incorpo-


\(^{56}\) Ibid. In Portuguese: “Nos dar as chamas dum/exato/vácuo/VOCABULAR.” In the following page, we finally reach the full-fledged implosion of “Roçzeiral.”
words, the work of duration is allowed to erode delineation, but never gets to the point, as the rotting fruits in A Luta Corporal do, of doom ing the contemplative alienation; on the contrary, duration—the “time to perceive”—is what allows the form of the non-object to incorporate the subject’s actions.

This logic is closely linked to the Neo-concrete tendency to enlist geometry more as a repository of simple forms than as a tool for devising complex visual patterns. By virtue of their perceptual simplicity, squares, cubes, and circles were often used as a snare for vision and as a kind of benchmark against which the work of duration could be more palpably discerned. For Lygia Clark, for example, the square plane acted as a mirror onto which the subject could project a “rational and false” sense of balance, but this also meant that the artist who devised ways of transforming the square could aim to subvert the subject’s self-image. This, of course, is the role of the “light-line” that tilts the symmetry of her Modulated Spaces and Unities. Hélio Oiticica and Carvão would use color, rather than line, to a similar end. The former’s Inventions lured viewers with quasi-monochromatic square surfaces that shifted with time, as the eye got used to the superficial layer of color and began to glimpse fleeting hues of the underlying layers. In Cubocor (1960)—Carvão’s non-object if ever there was one—color mixes with the matte texture of cement, resulting in the paradoxical feeling that its deep-redish tone becomes highly tactile just as the cube’s surface gets almost impalpable. In short, line and form are swallowed up by color.

It may be surprising to learn that Gullar’s narrative of vision overcoming the “object’s resistance” and getting “lodged” in the “the pulp of color” was probably written before he became aware of Cubocor. But this does not change the fact that these terms evoke a sense of expenditure embodied by Carvão’s work, and it should be noted that the latter had been already concocting intensely matte paint mixtures, which play an important role both in the poet’s account of his paintings and in Cubocor’s overall effect. A few years later, in 1963, Oiticica would begin to explore the same vein by filling geometric drawers and jars with powdered pigment; as their title implies, the Bólides—a word meaning fireball or projectile—harness the tension between inside and outside, as if the chromatic intensity contained in those vessels were on the verge of exploding. The metaphor is recurring: Gullar himself claims to have proposed a last Neo-concrete exhibition that would have ended with all works being blown up. Whether this is true is beside the point: The poet’s anecdote reminds us of an ethos shared by those artists, an ethos best encapsulated, as one of their heroes would have put it, in work that is “as destructive as it is constructive.”

58. See chapter 2, Constructing an Avant-Garde.
59. I thank critic and curator Luiz Camillo Osório, who worked with Carvão in a late retrospective, for the information that he added pigment to paint in order to achieve intense, matte hues.