

Mário Pedrosa, debate between International informalism versus Latin American constructivism (1950-1965)

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Abstract

In 1959 and 1960, during the inauguration of Brasília, Brazil, various initiatives were taken to discuss the meaning and impact of Brazilian constructive art in the world. This was a period when Brazil seemed to offer an alternative to Abstract Expressionism and subjectivist tendencies of international contemporary art, under New York increasing influence rather than Paris. The initiatives which accompanied the advertising of the construction of Brasilia abroad were the realization of the extraordinary Congress of AICA in Brazil to discuss the founding of the new Capital and the organization of an exhibition with the Museum of Modern art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ) contemporary art collection. It was the first time that, after World War II, an exhibition of Brazilian artists took place in Europe. After having passed through Vienna and Munich, in Leverkusen, the exhibition named 'Brasilianische kunst der gegenwart', occurred in the Museum Schloss Morsbroich between November 27, 1959 and January 10, 1960. The debate between Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa and the European critics happened because the Brazilian exhibition was received with surprise.

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Mário Pedrosa's writings highlighted the revolutionary importance of the aesthetic dimension in constructive art. If the proximity between art and mass production seemed to fulfill democratic and socialist aspirations in the modern world, the aesthetic dimension was capable of offering the amplitude of social transformation that was being processed to the future. In this sphere happened the confrontation between Pedrosa and international art critics. Although Pedrosa had always in mind the final process of synthesis between art and social revolution, he changed his position. This derived not from his deliberate withdrawal from political world in order to devote exclusively to his role as an art critic, but from a necessary adjustment to connect art with politics in another way, so that the prospects for the artistic field might be achieved.

The development of a constructive tendency in Brazilian art was possible because of the reassurance of a profound will of organization and planning – of which Mário Pedrosa addresses in many of his articles – against the subjectivist tendencies of 'retrograde character' (Amaral, 1977, p. 80),

between them, Magic Realism, Dada and Surrealism. The eminent quality of Modern art as 'a desire of order' appears in substitution to the objective world, expressed in the relation between work of art - nature, by a new relationship based on the mental structure of the image as basic characteristic of the constructive tendency.

Brazilian art pretended to affirm its utopic quality, therefore optimistic, in search of a social transformation and the construction of a new country. This was the goal of cultural affirmation and complete entrance of the country into Modernity, sometimes misunderstood by the international art critics of that time (Fritz Nemitz, Marianne Pich, for example) that considered geometric abstraction a thing from the past and expected the art of a tropical country to be an illustration of what the best we had, our natural exuberance, our "macaws and exotic landscape", said Pedrosa:

"None, however, never stopped to inquire the cause of this paradox of modern art in Brazil. Mr. Lampe did it: 'Most impressive, even for viewers who, as the author of these comments, move away from geometric

constructions, whose authors dominate this exhibition.' (...) "And the visitor, before this fact, sees himself compelled to formulate the following question: how can such a tendency to grow to dominate the artistic production of a people living a subtropical environment, where the nature of threat (...)". (Pedrosa, 1998, p. 318)

Mário Pedrosa saw in a well-conducted Jorg Lampe critic, about the Brazilian artists exhibition in Vienna in 1959, a discernment of the context of art in our country that lacked the majority of the international critic. In the exhibition was evident the cohesive character of artists and their filiation to geometric abstraction, consolidated in Brazil and Latin America in the 1950's. The persistence of the constructive tendency in Brazilian art caused discomfort to the international critic, except to Jorg Lampe that knew how to see in the constructive tendency of Modrian's orthogonal lines, that cannot be found in nature, a 'profound will' of Brazilian art and not only the result of a 'calculated formalism', reason why the reference and parallelism to Brazilian modern architecture could not be avoided. This Brazilian artists' enterprise was part of an attempt to build a new country.

The profound will of construction mentioned is product of a singular moment in Brazil or in Mário Pedrosa's words the result of its own cultural dialectic:

"This change (in Brazilian art) is translated into an imperative need to oppose to the supposedly national tradition of accommodation to the existing, to conformism, to romanticism with visible paternalistic features (...) in social relations (...). This adds up to enormous and continuous pressure of untamed tropical nature that is accomplice with the conservation of social misery that the large properties and the international capitalism unceasingly produce." (Pedrosa, 1986, p. 291)

Pedrosa relied on the emancipatory aspects of art that approximated to mass production. Art and Labor Society identified themselves to each other. We begin from the consideration that it was not about a particular reality from the tropics, the necessity of Brazil social and economic development, but a critical

intervention over the synthesis between Art and Labor Society in a worldwide dimension.

From mid-1940's and during 1950's decades, Pedrosa's writings emphasized the revolutionary importance of the aesthetic dimension. If the resumption between art and mass production fulfilled democratic and socializing aspirations of the modern world, the aesthetic dimension was able to offer significance and the proper extent of the processing social transformation. Since Constructivism until the most renewed manifestations of the constructive tendency – between them, the Concrete Art of São Paulo and the Neo-Concretism of Rio de Janeiro with their own differences – aimed to objectify the artist work, introducing it in the collective and emancipatory activity of society based on rationality and planning of production and demystifying the notion of creative geniality, to insert the artist in the social production sphere. This was the great contribution of constructive art tendency.

Both the realization of the new art and modern architecture, therefore in their necessary integration, was the implementation of the Brazilian constructive project. The organizer and commentator of Mário Pedrosa's writings in Brazil, Otília Arantes asserts:

"Mário Pedrosa completed (...) that was precisely (the propensity of Brazilian architects to the dogmatism of a self-imposed discipline) that enabled them to successfully complete your 'role of militants.' (...) In fact, after striking discipline and doctrinal own disciples, (Pedrosa) explains that such dogmatism (of Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer) rested, however, a truly modern sense, 'faith in the virtues of democratic mass production'". (Arantes, 2004, p. 112-113)

The Constructive artists wanted to act on the reorganization of the sensoriality and understanding of reality. This was the contract assumed by the leading art critics in the post-war period, such as Clement Greenberg and Mário Pedrosa. The American critic represented then the retaking of international avant-garde art based no longer in Paris but in New York. Although, Pedrosa have lived in the United States, his predilection for geometric art would mark a difference from the American critic Clement Greenberg. We must stress that the option for Abstract Expressionism made by Greenberg in the United States and Pedrosa's for

constructive art in Brazil were dictated by very different historical and social circumstances.

Pedrosa distinguished two tendencies in Modern art, namely, the expressionist and the constructivist. While the first one evidenced the revolt of the subject faced to reality escaping from it, the second had a collective spirit and participated of the construction of the new society. The general tendency of abstract art in the United States was expressionist. Just there, where technique had achieved unparalleled and never before seen results, artists choose to express the crisis of the subject and not a collective solution. Against some American artists' nihilism, Pedrosa indicated the constructivist way. In Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning cases the nihilist message of their abstract expressionist works seemed to indicate these artists consented with cultural politics of United States in the Cold War.

Although Mário Pedrosa believed that American abstract art – denomination used to unite even opposing currents – had not been that most identified with the social motivations that he addressed, if compared to European movements and artists like Theo van Doesburg and Max Bill, there was more authenticity and avant-garde impetus than in Realism. This was conservative and mainly represented by Socialist realism. Pedrosa comments:

“(The potential of American abstract art) is the variety and especially in the extreme freedom of research of its artists, who work not only destitute of government, as under such hostility. But even so it is an art of subversion, of nonconformity, of active participation in American life that is truly expressive. If the United States was a country in which the state was already master of everything and everyone, the 'official doctrine' of his art would be that now prevails in Russia. (...) The truth is that the conservative art is represented by so-called 'Socialist Realism'. It is the result of ideological counter-revolution that came to processing in Russia since the national isolation of the revolution, when the progressive forces of Europe were gradually crushed by the Wagnerian triumph of Hitler.” (Pedrosa, 2000, P. 181)

If on the one hand, Clement Greenberg's position had been compromised with the preservation of the autonomy of the art

aesthetic dimension, on the other hand the conservative meaning represented by abstract art in the United States revealed itself in the use of advanced culture as propaganda of the western capitalism, as carrier and defender of the most refined values of culture against the USSR action. Moreover, by defending the Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg affirmed the traditional values of American culture centered in the individual, in the self-made man illusion. Meanwhile, the constructivist tendency defense was Mário Pedrosa bet in the opposite pole of this individual-society relationship where art would enable the emergence of a cohesive aesthetic and social dimension.

The comprehension of this difference of contexts between Brazilian constructive art and the Abstract Expressionism is clarified by the analysis of Mário Pedrosa and other important critics in 1950's critic texts. In the article for the *Tribuna da Imprensa*, newspaper published in November 03 1951, Pedrosa presented the current tendencies of modern art and answered to Fernando Pedreira's accusations that it was an empty formalism. It was the peak of the debate between abstraction *versus* realism in Brazil and Pedreira published, in *Fundamentos* magazine, a critic essay over Pedrosa's 'Trotskyist vision' (sic) of the art. In fact, the dispute between left wing visions was significant to the artistic choices made during the 1950's.

Pedrosa's bet on the constructivist tendency surely went back to the Russian avant-garde experiments. He explained that far from being an amusement to the wealthy classes or a research field only to initiates, the new art was connected to the world of labor and thus with the solid base of modern society. In the same way as Russian Constructivism, the resurgence of abstract art, and mainly the Concrete Art, was the expression of the 'New Technique' era that was being inaugurated:

“Whatever the view on modern art, in its boldest expressions - and we refer especially to fans of 'abstraction' or Concrete Art - it must be said that, these artists do not suggest a world view that wants to be up to date and that anticipate our emotional and mental habits of today, a projection of the future. Indeed, these researchers of pure plastic are against the escapism. For them, art is not a world apart, a refuge from the 'ivory tower'. Instead, they put both feet firmly stuck in the possibilities

of today. (His art is intended to be) the crystallization of the state of culture and civilization to which man has reached potentially." (Pedrosa, 2000, p. 179)

Mário Pedrosa reaffirmed the close connection between the communist revolution of Lenin's and Trotsky's times and the modern art, particularly Constructivism. The Russian avant-garde had established as a goal creating an art that was part of the efforts of the construction of the modern future and the social relations based on collectivity and common and fraternal feeling. Its main objective was the synthesis between Aesthetic dimension and Social production.

Based on the idea of organization and planning of society, Rodchenko, Kandinsky and Malevich did not spare any efforts for them to contemplate the common ideals of the Russian revolution, via an inside revolution. They defended their art and communism, because both of them seemed to walk together to a final and definitive synthesis where work would be a free activity and art the constitutive part of all human activities. This was the objective of the extraordinary efforts of those that worked for, during its initial phase, the Russian Revolution. Pedrosa reports:

"Under stimulus a Lunatcharsky and a Bogdanov, Moscow was the scene in the early years of the revolution, the greatest artistic experiences in all areas, from theater and film to music, painting and sculpture. The modern constructivism was born there with Malevich, Kandinsky as director of the Arts in Moscow, trying to globalize, a policy truly revolutionary, not only with social but technical and aesthetical dimension, all artistic activities." (Pedrosa, 2000, p. 182)

About the USSR, Pedrosa demonstrated that art could not transform people alone and their revolutionary experiences were interrupted. The emergence of a counter-revolutionary movement in politics was followed by repression in art:

"The departure of Malevich, the Kandinsky's departure that more or less coincided with the suicide of Mayakovsky, did not happen by chance. It was a reaction against the glorification of Stalin. The Nationalistic style

in architecture and returns to the imitation of immediate reality in painting are marks of that Stalinist period. The officials of Stalin enthroned, in the country of Lenin, a frankly reactionary aesthetics, once created by the bourgeoisie, in their days of social, cultural and political careerism. Under the pretext of fighting the construction of socialism, the so-called Socialist realism is just the glorification of the ruling bureaucracy of the Soviet state. (...) The machine (Pedrosa refers to the camera) does not idealize, but the art, even the most realistic, is the greatest tool of idealization of reality. Russian artists idealize it according the taste of the high dignitaries of power. In Russia today everything is idealized, the supreme leader in the highest place and the workers and peasant down there." (Pedrosa, 2000, p. 182-184)

Pedrosa believed that the constructivist tendency of modern art, namely, the resumption proposed by Abstract and Concrete Art with the plastic experiences interrupted with the Russian Constructivism, aimed the consummation of social desires deposited, and not concluded, in the Russian Revolution. The constructivist tendency performed immediately in art, something that was essential to be processed in the political field. It was not any longer about recovering the documentary function of art, since photography and cinema better fulfilled it, but to approximate the artistic creation to modern technology that created new materials and objects, liberated colours from the objective form, insinuated new forms and opened new perspectives to imagination and human vision.

Just as this art connected to social production, understood as a necessary mean to satisfy the needs and peoples' plain realization, it distanced from external functions to its more generous objectives. In his analysis of Alexander Calder's mobiles, Pedrosa showed how the artist disengaged from practical and external coercions to concentrate only on his work:

"With these industrial materials, Calder didn't become the slave of the functionalism, to treat them, with the impulses of his own fantasy; he twisted the forms and with them the utilitarian and conventional destiny. He knows, to highlight the dramatic plastic, as violence to the proper functioning of the material. He made a mechanical device in the service of

nothing for the dream and speculation - not to move anything, not to make money.” (Pedrosa, 2000, p. 77-78)

It is precisely from Calder’s work that Pedrosa sees the possibility to present an alternative both to realism and to other social tendencies that required an answer to prevailing utilitarianism in the post-war world from art. The constructivist tendencies would be the synthesis

alternatives between the aesthetics and the social in a more profound way. They did not present themselves as a specific image of Brazil, but they had a formal dimension connected to the main international movements of this tendency and reflected an art specific process of formation that operated in Brazilian reality with effectiveness.

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Biographical note

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