

Constructing an Avant-Garde : Art in Brazil, 1949-1979

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To anyone unfamiliar with the interventions made by avant-garde artists into the art world and occasionally wider society during the middle of the 20th Century, this volume delivers a very readable account. The artists, the objects they made and the discussions they generated are selected here in relation to the particular practices and contexts emergent in Brazil following the chaos of World War Two (from which the country remained neutral). In keeping with a historiographical approach – rather than an art historical account - the author introduces an initial group of Brazilian artists attracted to ideas concerned with the nature of the object in art, and the abstraction of space and time in two and three dimensions.

The mathematics, proportion and design with which an earlier group of artists were concerned was tempered later by philosophies generated by artists such as Duchamp and Mondrian, and Brazilian writers such as Duarte and the poets Gullar and de Campos. From these convergences the author sets out to “..construct a viewpoint that will enable a more productive appreciation of the highly original set of artistic concerns...”

This can be characterised through the title of a manifesto of the

time: 'From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematics of Composition'. The *concrete* tradition in Brazilian visual art and poetry, a dynamic version of the more formal European constructivist movements, culminated in *Tropicalia* a major show in 1956 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition and associated events mapped not only differences between artists in Sao Paulo and Rio but also precipitated delineations between 'constructivity' in art and architecture, and social activism movements who were responding to increasingly oppressive government.

This was a time when the world knew of Brazil through the dramatic shapes — a development of the abstraction traditions — being built in the Amazonian jungles and becoming the national capital Brasilia. In Sao Paulo, the second city, a Biennale was instituted to bring the world to the party designed to celebrate Brazil's new maturity. Ferreira Gullar would condemn the direction the arts were taking and identify instead with the Popular Center of Culture (CPC), by engaging more positively with left-wing symbolic activism on the one hand, and through the support of a group of younger artists developing the rhetorical strategies of conceptualism. In part this was brought on by the difficulties of living beneath the generals' military coup of the mid-60s and chapter four vividly describes this 'brand' of conceptualism being used as a political tool.

The final chapter completes the 'snapshot' of this period of Brazil's avant-garde with a discussion of a “humiliminimalist” work, *Southern Cross*, a cubic centimetre of spliced pine and oak, displayed in an extremely large space. The metaphor refers to “..the encounter between Jesuit missionaries and Tupi natives”; the fire created by rubbing the two timbers “..was a form of evocation of the divinity” of the native peoples corrupted by the

colonisers. In common with much contemporary art today, meanings are not hidden but require individual research to extract intention from amongst material presence and the immaterial.

A cited champion of contemporary Brazilian art for many years from outside the country is Guy Brett, a curator and writer based in London, which is where the thesis on which the book is based was supervised. The author has restricted the discussion to a dozen or so main artists enabling the new reader to the field to follow the arguments deployed; this is not a narrative of development but a description of ideas and spatiality.

The illustrations and design are excellent; there is no bibliography but copious and carefully edited footnotes, from which sources in several languages can be traced.

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