

## Take away the Center and You Will Have the Universe

12:00 – 15:00

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Gregory Battcock opens his preface to *Minimal Art, a Critical Anthology*, 1968, by arguing that Mathias Goeritz, from Mexico, cannot be considered a minimalist. Battcock's book was the first major publication on minimalism.

Two nationalistic strategies have dominated the early literature on minimalism in the United States, as complementary approaches to a game of cultural hegemony. The first is the exclusion or downgrading of any possible precedent to minimalism outside of the United States.

Part of the responsibilities and burden of coming from a non-hegemonic culture like Brazil is to defend it against the geopolitical process of exclusion and hierarquization of culture. I speak from the point of view of one living in Brazil and from the curatorial experiences in Curitiba, the Biennale of São Paulo and MoMa. Anthropophagy is about incorporation of the Other, negotiation and exchange, metabolization of differences, acceptance. Thus the Biennale of São Paulo could not be a one-curator show like Documenta. It was a collective process.

It is irrelevant if Battcock understood Goeritz. He vomited him. Lévi-Strauss considers that societies can be metabolizing of differences like anthropophagic societies or they can refuse, vomit anthropoemic societies. This is not the case of the USA, but of that specific Battcock paragraph. His clear need is to exclude right from the beginning a non-US artist so as to define the American origin of Minimalism. Once this was safeguarded, the absurd is the inclusion of major artists from other contexts in the catch-all minimalist cage. Now the example: Kenneth Baker putting *arte povera* inside Minimalism out of circumstances and thus having to ignore the work of Fontana and Manzoni. Minimalism has been a tool of US cultural imperialism for manipulate differences and to expand its influence zone. Seeking the least common denominator, it reduces any achievements to a US standard, with the erasure of cultural context, specific programs and different histories.

This is ethnocentric art history that takes the culture of a given hegemonic economy as the universal rule. A factory of opacity, it applies biased values and inadequate methodology. It ignores the specificity of other movements, artists, and works. It denies both the differences and the possibility of other histories. It then invents models of quality as the ultimate truth.

The contemporary process of international exchange demands a development of strategies in order to rewrite history departing from margins and cultural differences, creating other ways of challenging the systems of hierarchies and centralization of contemporary history.. somehow that is the challenge of many of us who are here today.

### The Laws of Ethnocentric History

Let me describe you a performance by Lygia Pape: "The curtain parts. At center stage stand monochromatically painted rectangular and cylindrical columns, several feet high. Nothing else is on stage. For some time nothing happens; no one enters or leaves. Then, suddenly, the columns move".

To all appearances, the minimalist Robert Morris had not attended the *Ballet Neoconcreto* by Lygia Pape in Rio de Janeiro in 1958 before doing his *Columns* performance in 1961. Yet my narrative of Pape's work paraphrases Rosalind Krauss's description of Morris's performance "Mechanical Ballets: Light, Motion and Theater", 1977.<sup>68</sup> It required very little adaptation of Pape's ballet. In a short paper, I confronted a painting by Frank Stella of '59 *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* with a print by Lygia Pape of '58; they bear formal resemblance and issues of organic space.

I stressed in the Cisneros conference at Harvard in 2001, that in principle, since both Stella and Morris are North Americans, they should be beyond suspicion of succumbing to the influence of a South-American artist. Had the situation been reversed, Pape would have been considered derivative of the North American Minimalist artists. This is still prevailing law of modern art historicism.

There is a general need to reconsider the role of minimalism to find the value of its esthetics for itself but not as epitome of modernism that affects artists in every other postwar movement almost everywhere in the world. In the symposium *Structures and Systems: An Intercontinental Art World* at the Getty in 2004, Yve-Alain Bois made the same exercise I made here to demonstrate precedents in the French painters, like Morellet, to the work of Stella.

If we still think that Pape belongs to Neoconcretism which was consistently articulated in '58 while Minimalism was a more dispersed tendency that flourished mainly in the 1960s we could enter certain discussions, but this is not the case here. I do not think that Neoconcretism influenced Minimalists. Although the relationship between them is not a clear case of influence, the two movements are comparable, in part through the writings of their respective advocates and analysts.

Minimalism was reduced to a tool of American cultural imperialism. Pop art promoted freedom of expression and consumerism as promised by capitalism in the Cold War. Under globalization, Minimalism is the tentacular formalism that is both everything and nothing. It is the most adequate strategy for the post-Soviet era, offering the neutrality for the Pax Americana in a world that lacks alternative political thought. But this is a losing game for minimalism: to encompass everything, it has to give up its own cultural specificity.

### Cultural Dependence and Artistic Autonomy

In his Mexican period, Trotsky observed that in Latin America modernism was understood as a strategy designed to overcome the colonial past. For many artists, this modern effort towards autonomous language resulted in securing only a marginal place for themselves in the hegemonic history of art.

<sup>68</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Mechanical Ballets: Light, Motion and Theatre", in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 201.

Since the 1950s, Brazilian critics and artists struggled to escape from cultural dependence. The challenge proposed by Mário Pedrosa, Ferreira Gullar, poet Haroldo de Campos, Glauber Rocha, Helio Oiticica and Arthur Barrio resulted in the development of an autonomous artistic language within the established political and fragile economic conditions of the then called Third World.<sup>69</sup>

First Pedrosa, and later Gullar, introduced a new consciousness of art history as not the evolution of styles and movements or a set of images in an endless succession of models, but a legacy of visual problems to be taken up. Paradigms were not to be repeated in derivative ways; rather, but they were the point from which an artist should start to develop his or her own issues. The works of artists like Clark and Oiticica brought a fresh dynamic to the visual problems inherited from Mondrian and Malevich. From this perspective, it was clear that, despite the political dominance of cities such as Paris or New York in the international art world, and the impact of certain artistic movements, such as Pop art and Minimalism, the world could become centerless.

Pedrosa observed in 1966, “we are no longer operating within the parameters of the so-called modern art. I suggest we use the expression ‘post-modern art’ to signify the difference.”<sup>70</sup> He prematurely coined the notion of “post-modernity” when he understood that the original and unprecedented cultural experience of modernity “had been consummated”. Pedrosa also confronted the historical conditions of creative work in advanced capitalist economies with those of the Third World “pre-capitalist” countries and also with the Soviet economic system countries. He reviewed artistic output within the context of mass production, calling the attention for the way in which monopolist capitalism conditioned the artist’s work.

Haroldo de Campos argued with Marx and Engels against “the mechanist reduction and self-punishing fatalism” that thought that every economically derdeveloped country is bound to produce nothing but “underdeveloped” culture. He states that the “difference” is foundational in autonomous artistic language.<sup>71</sup>

Gullar made his contribution with his book *Avant-Garde and Development*, where he makes the crucial question: “Is there in the underdeveloped countries a specific angle from which one sees history?” This is Gullar’s crucial inquiry on the possibilities of inverting Eurocentric paradigms.

<sup>69</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Vicissitudes do artista soviético”, *Correio da Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro, August 28, 1966); Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda*; Haroldo de Campos, “Da razão antropofágica: diálogo e diferença na cultura brasileira” (1980) in *Metalinguagem & Outras Metas*. São Paulo, Editora Perspectiva, 1992, p. 255; Artur Barrio, untitled manifesto dated 1969 on traditional artistic materials as a negative factor for Third-World artists. See Herkenhoff, *Zero and Difference*, p. 55-63.

<sup>70</sup> “Crise do Condicionamento Artístico.” Rio de Janeiro, *Correio da Manhã*, 31 July, 1966.

<sup>71</sup> “Da razão antropofágica: diálogo e diferença na cultura brasileira” (1980) in *Metalinguagem & Outras Metas*. São Paulo, Editora Perspectiva, 1992, p. 246.

### The Place of Curators in the Comfortable Hammock of Ideology

Let's take the cliché object of the hammock, the perfect place for the indolent Latin American, according to a biased view. In the *Amazon Triptych*, José Alejandro Restrepo gives a critical perspective to a trivial fact: a man finds difficulty in getting out of a hammock. This is not about physical impairment or cultural maladjustment to hammocks. The man acts as if caught by the viscous spider web. The metaphor is the prison by the veil of ideology. The challenge is leaving the web without tearing it. This requires the use of knowledge.

The term "ideology" is more than a system of ideas. It comprises a system of power and the interests of dominant groups. For Gramsci, ideology is a system of subtleties, control and manipulation. Does this sound familiar in a discussion about art?

Gramsci accepted the Marxist analysis of capitalism. He argued that society was moved forward by the struggle between the ruling class and the subordinate working class.<sup>72</sup> The role of the intellectual is to create counter-hegemony states, Gramsci said. He understood that the idea that intellectuals are a distinct social category, both autonomous and independent in the class structure, was a myth. For him, "traditional intellectuals" might look autonomous and independent, yet they are only conservative allies of the ruling class.<sup>73</sup> The validity of Gramsci's posits is to allow the question: What are the alliances of an independent and autonomous curator? Which is his or her alliance in terms of the ruling groups in the art system? To be a real participant in practical life, as constructor, organizer and permanent persuader.

Collectors may have a role as organizers of history. Patricia Cisneros came to the conclusion that Latin American art deserved a firm recognition and set a plan to pursue this goal. The crucial step was forming a collection with severe discernment and precise sense of history. Her collection became a tool for temporary shows and open for extended loans to museums. The show at the Fogg Museum resulted in a book "Geometric Abstraction— Latin American Art from the Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection". Mrs. Cisneros, a trustee of MoMa, has donated strategic Latin American pieces, which are now in the permanent display in the museum. Her support to research, shows and publications is followed by grants for young curators. She created a fund for MoMa curators to travel to Latin America. Her certainty is sure that being in the region is enough to persuade curators of her own faith.

### Ideology of the New Missionaries

In the last 20 years, the dynamics of museums and exhibitions transformed into a positive factor for the introduction of artists unrecognized by the hegemonic international system. But a new type of curator has appeared: the contemporary missionaries. Artists, rescued from exclusion, become their *beaux sauvages*.

<sup>72</sup> Burke, Barry. (1999) "Antonio Gramsci and Informal Education" in *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*.

<sup>73</sup> Burke, Barry. (1999) "Antonio Gramsci and Informal Education" in *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*.

It is an illusion to believe that the mainstream mechanism of hierarchies does not repeat itself internally in countries of the economic periphery. This may impair the good curator to become a real agent of history.

The paternalizing missionaries seemed to be an innovative organic curator or critic in the international level for their good deeds against the mainstream international ideology, however they might be acting in reverse of the local native sense of the *beaux sauvages*. Missionaries might be picking from the local mainstream and reinforcing its internal hegemony. They become ideologically trapped within the local dominating structures.

Since the mid 1980s, this has been the danger lived by Guy Brett, who historically has been crucial for the recognition of Latin American modernism and artists outside the mainstream in Europe. Brett is failing to recognize his alliance with the powerful formalist Greenbergian circle that gravitated around Sergio Camargo in Brazil. Some of Brett's alliances in the 90s are firmly engaged in the deconstruction of meaning of Clark and Oiticica to Brazilian culture and Brett was the major international curator to recognize those two artists. Being the missionary and occasional visitor, he or she may unnoticeably become a conservative intellectual in local terms.

Pragmatic foreign curators might not perceive "internal colonialism" in Brazil. Since the 1990s, the country has fallen under the economic power of São Paulo and its hegemonic intentions. The show *Antropofagia* held at the Reina Sofía was totally organized under the voracious interest of São Paulo. It cannibalized Brazilian art history by distorting dates and facts to establish the international triumph of a paulista manifest destiny to modernity at the cost of distorting Brazil to the mere co adjutant role. Those curators took the symbolic task of providing the ideology for the São Paulo economic triumph, after international financial capital decide to concentrate their companies in the city.

### The Unfinished Task of Modernism and the End of History

I will borrow from Néstor García Canclini, to say that post-modernist debate might get exhausted before certain conditions of modernity are achieved in Latin America, like literacy or freedom of opinion of curators. Borrowing ideas from Habermas, one could say that modernism still has unfinished tasks in Latin America. What was presumed to be the end of history in art became a call for the invention of new historicity.

In the XXIV Biennale de São Paulo, the *Hommage cara-de-cavalo*, an object by Hélio Oiticica, was installed amongst the symbolic monochromes. Oiticica vinculated crime, social exclusion and revolt by articulating photos of a bandit killed by the police and red pigment. The piece initially shared room with the *Grande Antropofagie Bleue* by Yves Klein. His object literally traveled through the rooms in the Biennale, searching dialogues with Siqueiros's painting about racist lynching, Bacon's painterly/carnal relations, Bruce Nauman's dichotomies of pulsions of life and dead. The piece by Oiticica had a potential dialogue with Aleijadinho, Pedro Américo, and *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault or Louise Bourgeois' *The Death of the Father*. *Hommage a cara-de-cavalo* could contaminate and be contaminated with

meanings in its unexpected journey through the temporary territory of the exhibition. Curatorship provisory equalities the visibility of intrinsic meanings of art. The intellectual possession of art by critics, artists, or curators is not free from deturpations by personal or corporative interests. Curating is a discourse with the symbols of others, producing knowledge *with* the Art Work. Curators can be agents of provoking doubts, acting with the sense of interrogation, negotiation and decipherment specific of art.

Art historians and curators now know that their texts and shows are provisory truths, transitory conclusions or impermanent connotations. We need transversal histories of contamination and contact. However "definitive construction" (Spence) lost any sense in as we think there is not such a thing as only one history. "There exist images of the past proposed from several vantage points", writes Vattimo. An artist has said, "So many are the truths..." The artist was Leonilson.

The current exhibition process rejects monoglot curatorial channels. Some people see in globalization the chance for a new world, and others see the risk of an unprecedented oppression. Will the global world be uniform? Or will it be inventive and diverse, constructing new identities, imagining new mestizages? How "different" will be primordial differences? What differences are to be obliterated or forgotten?

### Collective Memory

It is impossible to forget, we may block, but it is impossible to forget. What is impossible to forget? It could be answered by the repressed or the return of the repressed. Freud says that the traumatizing experiences of childhood constitute the primal scene. Actual events are transformed through fantasy and fear into life-defining experiences. The child interprets an observation or imagination of the parents' coitus as a violent scene perpetrated by the father, which can generate a deep haunting anguish. But the self-defining primal scene may be generated by other kind of events as well.

In the work of Adriana Varejão and Kara Walker, the parameters of the primal scene are taken from history and involve subjectivity and identity plus ethnic origin. This is the anthropological war mentioned by Jacques Derrida. Varejão and Walker are agents of collective memory. In some works, Varejão reconstructs an imaginary scene of the origins of Brazil. She utilizes male portraits by nineteenth-century Jean Baptiste Debret to create scenes of the rape of two women, a native and a slave.

The work of Adriana Varejão articulates a fabric of partial histories: art history, history of knowledge, history of cultural exchanges, history of the colonial body. Facts, like rape in the ethnic process of formation of Brazil, that had been submerged into opacity of history now becomes visible. Her painting becomes a process of presentification of the past history a level of density of the present.

Walker creates the primal scene through a multitude of characters exposing the opaque history of violence against women and African-Americans. Walker calls them "an undetermined number of schizophrenic voices." The shifting logic among the personages recounts frictions of history and violence, the failures of progressivism and the brutality of the norm.

Walker and Varejão rescue “mysterious indexes” from history that moves the past towards an irreversible redemption. This process of illumination is parallel to the return of the repressed in Freud’s theory. They take the task of being agents of collective memory.

### When is History? History is now

It neither is nor about dead artists, distance in time, long condensation of qualities and importance. Serge Guilbaut has pointed the submission of the art world to media pressures, private interests and public tourist scenes. I would add to geopolitical interests of cities, the new substitute to nationalism in the globalization process.

How fast art becomes history? In the curatorial model of the exhibition *Tempo*, which opened MoMa Queens in June 2002, a post-September 11 2001 production should be involved. The fall of the Twin Towers was the most visible event in the history of mankind. The sole one to be simultaneously accompanied around the world. *Tempo*, to open on June 2002, was to respond to the unavoidable history. The challenge was to avoid opportunistic works or ordinary images. In a time of fast moving history, by 2002, the fall World Trade Center could be overexposed. The strategy was to displace the issue in time (to history prior to the historical event) and in space (Afghanistan).

Iñigo Maglano-Ovalle’s installation *Nocturne (tulipa obscura)*, commissioned for *Tempo*, was related to the then recent Afghanistan War. The artist used complex optical devices, such as military lens night vision, to bring into the light of discussion the “Darkness Visible”, a reference to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: from the flames of hell comes “no light, but rather darkness visible.” The tulip is the transience of flowers that soon become heroine, a major economic activity in Afghanistan. The artist brings visibility to what is hidden in games of power, mastering the knowledge of facts in the opaque and greenish conflation of news and history.

Nadine Robinson presented a sound installation, which uses the music of Texan black prison inmates who sing a work chant to bear their unbearable suffering under the yoke of heavy forced labor. In *Tower Hollers*, she brings out the collective fate of generations of African-Americans endlessly limited by past and present class and ethnic discrimination. The installation, which relates music and labor, was conceived during her work during a students’ program in 1999 at the World Trade Center. Originally, she was to deal with the unacceptable working conditions of African-Americans and Latinos immigrants in the 455 tenant firms that occupied the building at the time. Robinson reminds that in the seventeenth century Wall Street was built by African-American slaves. For *Tower Hollers* Robinson mixed two incompatible songs: *Go Down, ol’ Hannah*, a worker holler, and *Diane*, from the album *Music for Dining*, a Musak aimed at stimulating productivity in the working environment. For Robinson, art, like music, is not free from ideological appropriation. The record players in *Tower Hollers* are symbolic of the towers, which represented the social immobility and endless struggle of the working class in the world economy

prior to September 2001. *Tower Hollers* has one loudspeaker for each tenant-employer at the World Trade Center prior to September 11.

Robinson and Maglano-Ovalle did not deal mainly with the innocent victims of terrorism. Instead, they dealt with pre and post September-11 victims. Their dialectical position did not abandon the World Trade Center also as a symbol of the contradictions of capitalism and democracy. Therefore, the choice of the two works meant that the show *Tempo* was a necessary planned curatorial failure in the wake of the Bush era.

### Agent of History

"I stopped the war for a day!" Fernando Alvim has sensed that obtaining the loan of a military airplane for a day to film for his work *Blending emotions* (1997-1999) would stop the war momentarily in Angola. This power of the imaginary pervades art history, from Goya to Géricault. The African Diaspora, the process of decolonization, the post-colonial process and resistance to racism are interwoven by the Fanon paradigm. The struggle articulates the sons of the African Diaspora, including Alvim from Angola, Inka Shonibar in Great Britain, Rosana Paulino from Brazil, Ibrahim Miranda Ramos in Cuba, Fatimah Tuggar from Ghana, Marc Latamie from Martinique, or Melvin Edwards from the United States.

Felix Guattari rises that the function of the artistic practice is not to tell stories but to create devices through which history can be told. Those are artists acting as agents of history under a firm consciousness. They face the need of uttering the unutterable, making visible and transparent what was submerged in opacity, going beyond the difficulty to represent, to name.

From the condition of being an African-American, Glenn Ligon established an unrest in language, from an arch references that would dialogue with James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color*. As parts of the same struggle, Professor Cornel West made a call for Afro-American Philosophers to a crucial service for equality, which is: "to keep alive the idea of a revolutionary future, a better future different from the deplorable present, a state of affairs in which the multi-faceted oppression of Afro-Americans (and others) is, if not eliminated, alleviated."<sup>74</sup>

The 1964 dictatorship was a trauma that led Brazilian artists to incorporate political strategies in their work. Maiolino's drawings are topographically indefinite spaces—*Buracos Negros (Black Holes)*. Spaces of grief and imprisonment resulting from a "gravitational collapse" of language under censorship. *Black Holes* have dark areas on which the gaze focuses the void and the unutterable. Curators are to bring the political unspeakable into light.

<sup>74</sup> *Philosophy, Politics and Power: An Afro-American Perspective in African Philosophy. An Anthology*. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Editor). Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 116.



Cildo Meireles confronts the essential and the excessive. In *Missão/Missões (How to build Cathedrals)* articulated capital and ideological preparation of the colonial process by missionaries. His *Zero Cruzeiro* money bill are illustrated with the image of an Indian and a patient from a *psychiatric* hospital—two segments that are considered by Brazilian society as having no value. The label of his *Money Tree* states the pile contains 100 bills of one *cruzeiro* and defines the price of 200 *cruzeiros* for the piece. This reveals the value added by the artist's labor and irritates the public for exposing the imaginary constitution of the object as exchange value. The artist is an agent of history acting with the task of involving the viewer. Art, said Pedrosa, is the experimental exercise of freedom.

Arthur Omar works with the notion of "ecstatic gaze" as the encounter of the eyes of the object with his own eye through the lens. *Take away the center, and you will have the universe* is the title of the portrait of a blind black youngster by Arthur Omar. The boy is rewarded by the attention.

Rosana Palazyan deals with transgressive teen-agers. She operates within what Foucault would call the microphysics of power. Judicial institutions are one level of power in the larger process of social domination. These children have no place for hope. In a work, Palazyan installs the right not to forget. The inmates of a correctional school were invited to work on the idea of "a story that you have never forgotten..." History, in this case, is anti-heroic. From the failure of the social order, she values subjectivity. Palazyan departs from Walter Benjamin's "history of the defeated" to construct hypothesis about the survival of the youngster in the rigid class structure, social immobility and crime in Brazil, which has one of the worst levels on economic differences in the world. Palazyan deals with social cannibalism of the educational system and the public order institutions. From stories, Palazyan created a history of the abandoned common individuals. She is the agent for the rescue of their right to a future and past.

To finish, I will quote an artist from the United States: "the effort of an artist to fulfill his or her task as an agent of history finds a synthesis with David Hammons; I take the responsibility."