

Minimalism and Neoconcretism

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Introduction

This paper starts with two stories, stories of what I like to call a ‘what the heck is this?’ moment in the history of art.

New York, 1962: Puzzled, Donald Judd looks at one of his first free-standing pieces, which he describes as ‘a right angle of wood placed directly on the floor.’¹ He is thinking: ‘The work is not lying flat upon the floor, therefore it isn’t a low relief on the floor. But on the other hand, it isn’t heaped upon the floor either, so it isn’t a high relief either.’ Years later, Judd would look back onto this moment and conclude: ‘Before the right angle and its predecessor, nothing had ever been placed directly on the floor. [...] My work on the floor was a new form, creating space amply and strongly.’² As Judd sought, in 1964, to define a new type of three-dimensional work in his key text on ‘Specific Objects’, he may have cast himself back to this initial moment of puzzlement and excitement. Although he emphasised that this text was not about his own work, it is difficult not to read ‘Specific Objects’ as a kind of verbal equivalent of this right-angled object standing on the floor: a corner unexpectedly discovered at the end of an impasse, a departure from past forms of art, a turning point in time.

Rio de Janeiro, 1959: Artist Lygia Clark invites her friends to dinner at her house. Some of them are artists and poets who have recently come together, with Clark, to form the Neoconcrete group, and their first exhibition has taken place earlier that year. As they arrive, she shows them a new work of hers, a painted object lying on the floor. The two critics associated with the group stop and look. ‘I don’t know what to call this,’ she says to them. ‘It’s a kind of relief,’ suggests art historian Mário Pedrosa. But Ferreira Gullar, a poet and the author of the Neoconcrete Manifesto,

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¹ Donald Judd, “Some Aspects of Colour in General and Red and Black in Particular” (1993), rep. Nicholas Serota (ed.), *Donald Judd*, exh. cat., London, Tate Modern, 2004, p. 148.

² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

disagrees: 'it can't be a relief – it has no surface.' So Gullar starts thinking: 'It's not painting, it's not sculpture, it's an object. But, look, a table is an object, a chair is an object. So this work by Lygia is not an object.' Joining the others at the dinner table, Gullar proudly announces: 'I have found a name: it's a non-object.'³ Shortly after he would start writing his 'Theory of the Non-Object', which would be published in the Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* in 1959; his 'Dialogue about the Non-Object' would follow in 1960.⁴

Now, you may be wondering why I am not showing you at this point an image of this crucial work by Lygia Clark. The simple reason for this is that this work was either lost or destroyed by the artist, and I have been unable to find any reference to it apart from Gullar's retrospective descriptions.⁵ Instead, I can show you one of Clark's 1959 'Casulos or Cocoons', which is a kind of painted wall relief, and an example from a series of works which she went on to make in 1960, the 'Bichos' ('Animals' or 'Beasts') which are hinged metal objects placed directly onto the floor. The piece

³ This story has been told by Gullar in different contexts, cf. for example, Ferreira Gullar, "Entrevista," in *Cadernos de literatura brasileira*, no. 6, September 1998, p. 36; Ferreira Gullar, "Frente Group and the Neo-Concrete Reaction," in Aracy Amaral (ed.), *Arte construtiva no Brasil: coleção Adolpho Leirner*, São Paulo, Dorea Books and Art, 1998, pp. 157-58; Ferreira Gullar, conversation with the author, Rio de Janeiro, Copacabana, 18 April 2001; Ferreira Gullar, "Interview with Katia Maciel," in Katia Maciel (dir.), *Neoconcretismo*, video, 2001.

⁴ Ferreira Gullar, "Teoria do não-objeto," Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 19-20 December 1959, rep. in Luciano Figueiredo (ed.), *Projeto Arte Brasileira 1: Concretismo e Neoconcretismo*, Rio de Janeiro, Funarte, 1987, pp. 14-17 ; "Diálogo sobre o não-objeto," Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 26 March 1960, rep. in Aracy Amaral (ed.), *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte (1950-1962)*, exh. cat., Rio de Janeiro, Museu de Arte Moderna, 1977, pp. 90-94.

The term 'non-object' becomes widespread from 1960 onwards. Cf. for example, Ferreira Gullar, "Cor e estrutura-cor," Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 26 November 1960, rep. in *Etapas da arte contemporânea: do Cubismo ao Neoconcretismo*, São Paulo, Nobel, 1985, pp. 254-257; Hélio Oiticica, "Cor, tempo e estrutura," Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 26 November 1960, rep. in Guy Brett (et al.), *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat., Paris, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1992, pp. 34-37.

Lygia Clark recalls the debates within the group about the term. Cf. Lygia Clark's two 1960 unpublished texts on this subject in Guy Brett (et al.), *Lygia Clark*, exh. cat., Marseilles, MAC, galeries contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, 1998, pp. 139-141 and 141-142.

⁵ Neither Lygia Clark nor other Neoconcrete artists have ever referred to this specific work that Gullar remembers so vividly. To my knowledge, Gullar himself only started to describe the work relatively recently.

recalled by Gullar was most probably made at some point between these two works, around the moment when, as Clark would recount, the ‘Cocoons’ slid from the wall onto the floor and became the ‘Bichos’.⁶

In his ‘Theory of the Non-Object’ Gullar extended his discussion of Clark’s object to other works produced by Neoconcrete artists (and I am showing you on the right a spatial relief by Hélio Oiticica). Discussing the similarities between the paintings and sculptures produced by artists within the group, he concluded that: ‘Painting and sculpture now are converging towards a common point. They become special objects – non-objects – for which the terms of painting and sculpture are no longer appropriate.’⁷

This will no doubt sound familiar to readers of Judd’s writings, and one need not look further than the opening sentence of ‘Specific Objects’ to discover why. ‘Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture.’⁸ Like Gullar, Judd shifts away from a discussion of the intermediate form of the sculptural relief to pose the problem in relation to painting and sculpture. You may also have picked up on Gullar’s use of the term ‘special object’ as a synonym for the ‘non-object.’ While Gullar is not using the Portuguese word for ‘specific’, I cannot help noting the common etymology to the terms ‘specific’ and ‘special’. Thierry de Duve ascribed the use of the word ‘specific’ to Judd’s desire to ‘establish a “family resemblance” among those works making up the new breed’ – Gullar was undoubtedly trying to describe a similarly new ‘species’ of objects.⁹ Though he used the word ‘special’, he generally preferred to call them ‘non-objects’.

⁶ “Ela costuma dizer que seus atuais ‘bichos’ caíram, como se dá os casulos de verdade, da parede no chão.” Mário Pedrosa, “Significação de Lygia Clark,” Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 22-23 October 1960, rep. in Aracy Amaral (ed.), *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte (1950-1962)*, op. cit., pp. 249-50. All translations are mine.

⁷ “Tornam-se objetos especiais— não-objetos— para os quais as denominações de pintura e escultura já talvez não tenham muita propriedade.” Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto,” op. cit., p. 17.

⁸ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook*, 8, 1965, rep. in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York, Nova Scotia Press, 1975, p. 181.

⁹ Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas,” in Serge Guibault (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal, 1945-1964*, London and Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1990, p. 269.

Now, I am not the first person to note points of intersection between the works and theories produced by Neoconcretist artists in Rio de Janeiro and the artists working in New York who became known as Minimalists. Paulo Herkenhoff, for example, has explored some of the relations between these two ‘divergent parallels’ as he called them, highlighting that ‘the relation between them is not a clear case of influence.’¹⁰ Indeed, neither group seems to even have known of each other’s existence in the early 1960s, and the contexts in which each was working were not only geographically, but also in many ways socially and ideologically remote from each other. In his recent comparison of the two groups, Michael Asbury for his part has sought to bring out the specificities of Neoconcretism in order to address two distinct problems.¹¹ The first relates to recurrent misreadings of Neoconcretism through the lens of the later works of some of its leading figures (a current example of this phenomenon is the inclusion of Neoconcrete works by Ferreira Gullar and Lygia Pape in the *Tropicalia* show at the Barbican Art Gallery, which poses them as precursors for the late 1960s works of Pape, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica; while there is no doubt that Neoconcretism was a starting point for these artists, this inclusion occludes the very significant break that occurred in their works after the end of Neoconcretism in 1961). The second issue addressed by Asbury relates to what he terms ‘the canonical provincialism’ of Western art history. Understanding Neoconcretism, according to Asbury, can help us challenge the wider assumptions underlying analyses of Minimalism by North American art historians (Hal Foster is his main target, and he gets a rough ride, let me tell you).

In this paper, I will not attempt to survey the whole range of similarities and differences between Neoconcretism and Minimalism and the socio-political contexts in which they emerged. Nor will I repeat Asbury’s arguments about art history’s provincialism and ignorance of art movements outside Europe and North America.

¹⁰ Cf. Paulo Herkenhoff, “Divergent Parallels: Toward a Comparative Study of Neoconcretism and Minimalism,” in Yve-Alain Bois (et al.), *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exh. cat., Cambridge, Mass., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 2001, p. 106.

¹¹ Michael Asbury, ‘Neoconcretism and Minimalism: Cosmopolitanism at a Local Level and a Canonical Provincialism,’ in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005, pp. 174-189.

Rather, I will focus on the ways in which a comparison between Minimalism and Neoconcretism can shed light on the works and writings emerging from *both* groups of artists, bringing out their specificities and allowing us to read the one through the other, without entering debates concerning influences and canonisation. Following my introductory tales of discovery, I will first focus on the ways in which Judd and Gullar attempted to theorise these surprising, puzzling, ‘special’ or ‘specific’ objects which emerged in these two different cities only a few years apart from each other. Some of the key issues in Judd’s and Gullar’s writings will be studied in relation to specific artworks. In the second part of this paper, I will bring in another key text in definitions of Minimalism – Robert Morris’s ‘Notes on Sculpture’ – in order to explore a theme central to both movements: the role of the spectator faced with this new breed of objects. The Brazilians’ pioneering role in this field will help us to critically evaluate the works and claims of their better-known American counterparts.

Real Space

‘I’m not saying what the non-object must be like, but rather I am defining what already exists, what has been made.’¹² This statement by Gullar in the ‘Dialogue about the Non-Object’ reveals that his theory, like Judd’s, was a response to an existing situation rather than a prescriptive set of guidelines for artists. Although more unified than the bewilderingly wide range of objects illustrated in Judd’s text, the body of works produced by Neoconcrete artists by 1960 was undoubtedly varied. While Franz Weissmann was pursuing his work as a sculptor, Gullar started to produce works coming out of his experiments with poetry. In this ‘Poem-Object’ by Gullar, the reader is invited to lift a small cube painted blue from a white rectangular slab in order to reveal the Portuguese word *lembra* (‘remember’). As with Oiticica, Aluisio Carvão’s main focus was the exploration of colour; after creating monochromes he went on to produce three-dimensional objects such as this 1960 ‘Cubo-cor’ or ‘Colour-cube’, a sixteen by sixteen centimetres cube made of smooth porous cement and covered in bright vermilion paint. Lygia Pape, for her part, created in 1960 her ‘Livro da Criação’ or ‘Book of Creation’, in which each page or unit is a painted cardboard panel thirty centimetres square which can be taken out of a box and

¹² “*não digo como deve ser o não-objeto, mas apenas defino o que já existe, o que está feito.*” Ferreira Gullar, “Diálogo sobre o não-objeto,” op. cit., p. 94.

viewed individually. Although there are no words or given order, each unit evokes a stage of the creation of the world – from light to the discovery of fire.

Despite this variety of media, Gullar, like Judd, privileged painting as the term of reference for his theorisation of the non-object – indeed, Gullar explicitly addressed the question of the ‘death of painting’ in the very first section of his ‘Theory of the Non-Object’. Both Judd and Gullar set up a clear opposition between the ‘illusionistic’ space of painting and the ‘real space’ involved in the new works. Gullar argued that even the most radical twentieth-century abstract artists, such as Mondrian and Malevich, could not rid their works from the opposition between geometric shapes and their background, an opposition which inevitably evoked what Gullar described as ‘the metaphoric space of representation.’¹³ Similarly, Judd defined the main problem of painting as lying in the fact that ‘anything placed in a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, [...] which suggests an object or figure in its space.’¹⁴ The solution was to be found in what they both called ‘real space’: the space of three-dimensional specific objects, which ‘gets rid of the problem of illusionism’ according to Judd is none other than the non-metaphorical space which acts as a background against which, according to Gullar, the non-object is perceived. (I am showing you here on the left Malevich’s 1917 ‘Airplane Flying’ and on the right Oiticica’s ‘Bilaterals’, painted and suspended shapes, which seem to have quite literally flown out of Malevich’s suprematist composition.)

In the same way as Judd’s retrospective remarks about his 1962 piece emphasised the work’s absence of pedestal, Gullar was very clear that non-objects possess neither frames nor bases which would define them as cultural artefacts. Without these boundaries, both non-objects and specific objects are to be encountered directly in real space. Moreover, Gullar emphasised that works such as Clark’s ‘Bichos’ or Amilcar de Castro’s sculptures have no privileged viewing position, no given front, side or back. Similarly, in Judd’s ‘specific objects’, the use of non-hierarchical forms is meant to destabilise any fixed axis of viewing.

When Judd highlighted that ‘in new work, shape, image, colour and surface are single, not partial and scattered’, he meant not that there could not be more than one shape or colour involved but rather that all elements need to be structurally

¹³ “*um fundo metafórico, de representação.*” Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁴ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” op. cit., p. 182.

unified.¹⁵ Similarly, Gullar stated in the Neoconcrete Manifesto that in an artwork, ‘notions of time, space, form and colour are so integrated [...] that it is impossible to discuss as isolated terms.’¹⁶ In this way, it becomes clear that what matters in Clark’s ‘Bichos’, for example, is not how many parts they possess but how they are arranged. Looking at a diagram of a ‘Bicho’ reveals that its geometric structure is very simple. This 1960 ‘Bicho’ is made out of two superimposed equal squares each containing an inscribed square to be folded or cut along their diagonals. Each metal plate is connected to at least one other by a hinge, so that the two squares are joined seamlessly, making it impossible to tell where one stops and the other starts. Just as in a sculpture such as this untitled piece by Judd the viewer’s perception oscillates between the single, general shape, and the repeated units and their relations to each other, in a ‘Bicho’ the points of view, which occur one after another within the viewer’s experience, are always present within the structure of the piece, ready to be revealed as the ‘Bicho’ is transformed.

‘Planes, forms and colours are elements of reality before being elements of an artistic language.’¹⁷ Gullar’s statement echoes Judd’s references to colour, space and geometrical shapes as materials which, he claimed, were as objective and obdurate as steel or plywood. Comparing Judd’s early painted pieces with Oiticica’s ‘Spatial Reliefs’ reveals a shared preoccupation with colour applied to three-dimensional objects – Oiticica, who started to explore colour through the monochrome, would no doubt have agreed with Judd’s idea that ‘colour to continue had to occur in space.’¹⁸ In Judd’s box-like object and Oiticica’s hanging relief, colour serves to articulate internal elements within the whole (the receding semi-circle in the former, the folds and corners in the latter) while also defining the general form of the work against the background of real space. We can see both from a distance before coming close and looking around, in and into these objects offered to our perception. In a 1960 text,

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 187.

¹⁶ “as noções de tempo, espaço, forma, cor, estão de tal modo integradas [...] que seria impossível falar delas como de termos decomponíveis.” Ferreira Gullar (et al.), “Manifesto neoconcreto,” in Aracy Amaral (ed.), *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte (1950-1962)*, p. 274.

¹⁷ Ferreira Gullar, “Diálogo sobre o não-objeto,” op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁸ Donald Judd, “Some Aspects of Colour in General and Red and Black in Particular,” op. cit., p. 157.

Oiticica explained that ‘colour and structure are inseparable,’¹⁹ and developed a very Juddian discussion of the specific properties of the colour he used. Yellow, for example, ‘possesses a strong optical pulsation and tends towards real space, it tends to detach itself from its material structure and to expand.’

The viewer’s ability to read the most minimal of formal elements in different ways was highlighted by Judd when he wrote about Frank Stella’s stripe paintings, which are, you will no doubt agree, strikingly similar to Lygia Pape’s Neoconcrete woodcuts. Richard Schiff has pointed to the ambiguities which Judd explored in Stella’s later works, but I would like to suggest that the artist’s comments in his 1962 review could also apply to this earlier 1959 piece by Stella.²⁰ The optical effects created by the parallel lines in Stella’s painting led Judd to conclude that ‘it is both objective, like geometric work, and truculently subjective, unlike that.’²¹ Pape’s woodcuts explore these very tensions, as the rigorous geometric composition is contradicted by the porosity of the wood which affects the precision of the lines, giving the impression that the lines were traced by a trembling hand. According to the artist, the ‘small vibration [...] arose from the materials themselves.’²² Paradoxically, this fragile vibration, or breath, coming from the materials is what conveys the most subjective dimension of the work.

In fact, Pape and Stella arrived at a similar point from two opposed directions. While Stella’s restrained subjectivity can easily be read as a reaction to the subjective outpourings of Abstract Expressionism, Pape and the Neoconcrete artists were, in contrast, taking a stance against the rigidly rigorous geometric abstraction of the Concrete artists of São Paulo. The issue of ‘expression’ was a recurrent term in this debate, and Gullar summarised the project of Neoconcrete art in Rio as a desire to ‘turn the geometric vocabulary of Concrete art into something expressive.’ For the Neoconcretists, ‘expression’ was closely linked to the way in which a form can suggest a living form without representing anything living. In the Neoconcrete Manifesto, Gullar explained: ‘If we must look for an equivalent for the work of art,

¹⁹ “a estrutura e a cor são inseparáveis.” Hélio Oiticica, “Cor, tempo e estrutura,” op. cit., p. 34.

²⁰ Richard Schiff, “Donald Judd, Safe from the Birds,” in Nicholas Serota (ed.), *Donald Judd*, op. cit., pp. 42-44.

²¹ Donald Judd, “In the Galleries: Frank Stella” (1962), quoted by Schiff, *ibid.*, p. 42.

we would be able to find it neither in the machine nor in the object perceived objectively, but rather, as Langer [...] did, in living organisms.’²³ This ‘living’ quality of the work was sought by Neoconcrete artists through various means. The ‘small vibration’ (*pequena vibração*) in Pape’s prints is similar to Hélio Oiticica’s idea that an ‘interior breath’ (*um sopro interior*) emerged from the tension between form and colour.²⁴ Aluísio Carvão also conceived colour as ‘living matter’ (*matéria viva*),²⁵ and Amílcar de Castro’s sculptures, according to Gullar, possess an ‘explosive vitality’ (*vitalidade explosiva*),²⁶ because they seem to be capturing a moment in the growth of forms, between a point of origin and its final realisation. Thus vitality, vibrations and pulsations all seem to be closely associated with notions of transformability and mobility.

Lygia Clark’s reading of Jackson Pollock’s work also points to the Neoconcretists’ distinct interpretation of the notion of expression.²⁷ Clark explained that she was sympathetic to the American artist’s embrace (*corpo-a-corpo*) of the canvas, as he participated with his whole body in the creation of the work, but argued that his innovations remained limited because his use of the framed illusionistic space of traditional painting fixed his expressive gestures in a past tense forever unattainable by the viewer. Clark concluded that Neoconcrete art was able to integrate what she called the ‘expressive gesture’ visible in Pollock’s work not through gestural abstraction but in the dialogue itself between the work and the spectator. The *corpo-a-corpo* with the canvas in Pollock’s work becomes the *corpo-a-corpo* of the viewer manipulating the ‘Bicho’.

²² “uma pequena vibração... surgia do próprio material.” Lygia Pape, “Os Tecelares,” in Lygia Pape (et al.), *Lygia Pape*, Rio de Janeiro, Funarte, 1983, p. 44.

²³ “Se tivéssemos que buscar um símile para a obra de arte não poderíamos encontrar, portanto, nem na máquina nem no objeto tomados objetivamente, mas, como S. Langer [...], nos organismos vivos.” Ferreira Gullar (et al.), “Manifesto neoconcreto,” op. cit., p. 273.

²⁴ Hélio Oiticica, “6 de setembro de 1960,” in Guy Brett (et al.), *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat., Paris, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1992, p. 32.

²⁵ Aluísio Carvão, “Interview with Katia Maciel,” in Katia Maciel (dir.), *Neoconcretismo*, video, Rio de Janeiro, N-Imagem, 2001.

²⁶ Ferreira Gullar, “Do que se chama escultura,” Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 5 November 1960, rep. in *Etapas da arte contemporânea: do Cubismo ao Neoconcretismo*, op. cit., p. 262.

²⁷ Lygia Clark, “Do ritual” (1960), in Guy Brett (et al.), *Lygia Clark*, op. cit., pp. 122-123.

The Neoconcrete discourse of ‘expression’ and ‘living organisms’ may seem very remote from Judd’s emphasis on terms such as ‘power’ and ‘interest’ and his laconic writing style. As Alex Potts has pointed out, however, the essay ‘Specific Objects’ betrays a striking ‘fascination for bodily affect’, mobilising a vocabulary of feelings.²⁸ For example, Judd speaks of Claes Oldenburg’s and Lee Bontecou’s work in terms of ‘emotive’ images or forms.²⁹ What links Judd’s specific objects with the Neoconcrete objects is the fact that these bodily and affective references are not related to representation or anthropomorphism. Oldenburg’s *Hamburger* is an emotive form because of its materials and shape, not because we are affected by the image of a hamburger; this is why it is comparable to works such as Judd’s, with preclude any such associations with existing images. Indeed, Michael Fried’s own emotive response to Minimalism in his famous 1967 essay on ‘Art and Objecthood’ suggests that specific objects could indeed provoke psychological disquiet.

Like the Neoconcrete non-object, the specific object operates in the space between perception and interpretation, between subject and object. How exactly they negotiate this in-between space is what I shall now turn to.

Look, Touch and Think

In his drawings for the exhibition catalogue for the 1960 *II Neoconcrete Exhibition*, Brazilian cartoonist Fortuna presented a kind of light-hearted summary of Gullar’s theory of the non-object. For example, in what seems like a caricature of Gullar’s definitions and clarifications of the non-object, a theoretician with a raised finger proclaims to a bemused viewer: ‘I am sorry, I did not say that this *was not* an object. I said that it was a *non-object*.’ In the lower right-hand corner, the traditional still-life painter fiercely defends his right to paint an object, answering back with his own raised finger while holding a paintbrush in his other hand. The centre of the page presents two opposed signs: ‘do not touch the objects’/ ‘please touch the “non-objects”.’ By setting up this opposition, Fortuna effectively highlighted what now seems to have been the most important innovation of Neoconcretism: its appeal to spectator participation. This dimension of the non-object was discussed by Gullar in

²⁸ Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 273.

²⁹ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” op. cit., pp. 188, 189.

the last paragraphs of his 'Dialogue about the non-object', in a passage which reads more like an afterthought than a conclusion. Noting that 'the majority of existing non-objects involve movement on the part of the viewer or the reader', Gullar goes on to emphasise that contemplation is now complemented by direct action.³⁰ Almost in passing, Gullar asks: 'can we still speak of a spectator?'

Participation in the Neoconcrete non-object took different forms. Oiticica, for example, extended the idea of corners and folds to be peered into by the viewer in hanging works such as his 'Spatial Reliefs' or the 1960 'Nucleus' by using a box format in his later 'Box Bólides' (translatable as 'Box Fireballs'), painted wooden boxes with varying numbers of hinged doors, internal partitions or drawers. In these works, viewers are invited to open and close the hinged doors, handle the boxes, look into corners and sometimes through holes. The 1964 'Box Bólide 9' contains panels and drawers which can be slid horizontally, one of them containing bright yellow pigment, contrasting with the painted orange box. According to Guy Brett, the *Bólides* 'ways of opening are puzzling, and their insides are remote like the insides of caves.'³¹ Moreover, in works such as 'Box Bólide 9', the 'presence of a natural element loose in the kind of space [where] we normally keep small possessions is quite bewitching.' More surprisingly perhaps, Yve-Alain Bois remembers that when confronted with Judd's works he 'couldn't shake off the titillating impression that his boxes harboured some kind of "secret."³² Puzzling, bewitching and titillating, both Judd's and Oiticica's boxes seem to invite an intimate relationship in which viewers can establish a close connection between their bodies and these special objects; their boxes allow viewers to access the empty cores of their shell-like forms, appealing to the viewer's curiosity and staging experiences of anticipation and surprise. Hilton Kramer's humorous description of Judd as a 'closet hedonist' not only emphasises the sensual dimension of his work: the image of the closet situates the pleasure involved

³⁰ "A maioria dos não-objetos existentes implicam, de uma forma ou de outra, no movimento sobre ele do espectador ou do leitor." Ferreira Gullar, "Diálogo sobre o não-objeto," op. cit., p. 94.

³¹ Guy Brett, [Untitled Text], in *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat., London, Whitechapel Gallery, 1969, n. p.

³² Yve-Alain Bois, "The Inflection," in *Donald Judd: New Sculpture*, exh. cat., New York, Pace Gallery, 1991, n. p.

in viewing these objects at the threshold between inside and outside, hidden and visible, private and public.³³

Secrecy and mystery were also associated with Clark's 'Bichos' in early descriptions – one critic even called them 'diabolical', because the discovery of their secret geometric structure is usually frustrated by their spatial complexity.³⁴ Gullar stated that Clark's 'Bichos' exist like 'mirages' rather than images,³⁵ and Bois has also spoken of the 'mirages' in Judd's works, as light and reflections often play disorienting tricks with our perceptions. This aspect of Judd's work has often been seen as contradicting his emphasis on clarity – as Rosalind Krauss explained in 1966, 'the strength of the sculpture derives from the fact that grasping the works by means of a list of their physical properties, no matter how complete, is both possible and impossible.'³⁶ For Krauss, this discrepancy is precisely what characterises the phenomenological perception of the object described by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: a perception in which the gaze does not grasp the object through an intellectual act, but rather through an embodied, changeable, temporal, inexhaustible process. That Merleau-Ponty's 1945 'Phenomenology of Perception' was a key reference for Gullar and the Neoconcretists explains why they too were interested in what they called 'the eye-body' – an experience of objects contingent on a lived space and time.

Judd's works clearly differ, however, from Oiticica's 'Bolides' or Clark's 'Bichos' in one crucial sense: the sensory pleasures which they invite are not, in fact, tactile. 'You look and think, and look and think, until it makes sense, becomes

³³ Hilton Kramer, "Display of Judd defines an attitude," in *New York Times*, 14 May 1971, p. 48, cited by William Agee, "Donald Judd and the Endless Possibilities of Color," in Dietmar Elger (ed.), *Donald Judd Colorist*, exh. cat., Hanover, Sprengel Museum, 2000, p. 33.

³⁴ The architect Lionelle Venturi is reported by Gullar as saying that there was "something diabolical" about Clark's *Bichos*. Ferreira Gullar, "Venturi: Lygia Clark encontrou uma solução extraordinariamente nova," Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 16 October 1960 [Rio de Janeiro, Museu de Arte Moderna, Lygia Clark archives, MFN 357].

³⁵ "rejeitam a condição de imagem para serem miragem" Ferreira Gullar, "Diversificação da experiência neoconcreta," Sunday Supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 3-4 December 1960, p. 1.

³⁶ Rosalind Krauss, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," *Artforum*, vol. 4, no. 9, May 1966, p. 24.

interesting.’³⁷ Judd’s words do not apply to the Neoconcrete artists: for them, you need to look, *touch* and think. Although the number of hand marks found on Judd’s works in museums across the world testify to the viewers’ sometimes irrepressible desire to touch them, this urge is generally frustrated by the knowledge that finger prints will actually spoil the perfect shine of the industrial colours and cold materials, whose dullness or reflectivity plays such an important part in our visual pleasure. Briony Fer has interpreted this simultaneous invitation and frustration as an embodiment of an anxiety lying deep at the heart of Judd’s sensual works.³⁸

In his 1966 ‘Notes on Sculpture’ Robert Morris implicitly criticised Judd’s emphasis on visual pleasure and dialectics between parts and whole, promoting instead his unified grey plywood shapes in which no such detail could distract the viewer’s attention from a unified *gestalt*. Whatever the differences between Judd and Morris’s analyses, however, I would like to argue that they share a common anxiety when it comes to the relation between the viewer and the object. Judd’s anxiety about touch seems to be made explicit by Morris as he distinguished between a ‘quality of intimacy’ and a ‘quality of publicness,’ triggered by small and large objects respectively.³⁹ Both types of objects require different modes of viewing. ‘[T]he intimate mode’ for example ‘is essentially closed, spaceless, compressed and exclusive,’ while ‘[i]t is necessary literally to keep one’s distance from large objects in order to take the whole of any one view into one’s field of vision.’⁴⁰ Morris established the latter as the preferred mode of viewing Minimalist works because ‘[e]very intimate relationship [...] reduces the public, external quality of the object and tends to eliminate the viewer to the degree that these details pull him into an intimate reaction with the work and out of the space in which the object exists.’⁴¹ Only by creating large works can the viewer’s encounter with the object occur as a public, spatial activity.

Neoconcrete works, as it turns out, happen to require precisely the very ‘closed, spaceless, compressed and exclusive’ mode of viewing which Morris

³⁷ “Donald Judd in discussion with Angeli Jahnsen” (1990), cited by Richard Schiff, “Donald Judd, Safe from the Birds,” op. cit., p. 40.

³⁸ Cf. Briony Fer, “Judd’s Specific Objects,” in *On Abstract Art*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997 pp. 130-151.

³⁹ Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” op. cit., p. 230.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

rejected. They were all distinctly smaller than Minimalist works. (The comparison of installation shots of the *Third Neoconcrete Exhibition* at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo in 1961, and of the 1966 *Primary Structures* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, is revealing.) Like Pape's 'Book of Creation', most Neoconcrete 'Poem-objects' remain closer to the format of a large book. The largest of Amilcar de Castro or Franz Weissmann's Neoconcrete metal sculptures are usually smaller than life-size. In terms of scale, neither Clark's 'Bichos' nor Oiticica's suspended non-objects are monumental because they are displayed physically close to the viewer: while Oiticica's light structures are generally hung low, at eye level, the 'Bichos' are usually either placed directly on the floor or on a horizontal pedestal which makes them easily accessible to the hand. Indeed, the dialogue between non-object and poem-objects in Neoconcretism encouraged comparisons between the 'Bichos' and what Gullar saw as 'the mobility of a book, that is, the possibility of being handled.'⁴²

Although Michael Fried's and Morris's essays on Minimalism are usually set up as opposite polarities, I would like to argue that a comparison with Neoconcretism highlights that both authors shared, in fact, a common fear of an 'intimate' encounter described in strongly affective terms. To demonstrate this, I would like to quote at some length from an essay on Anthony Caro by Michael Fried in which he also distinguishes modes of distant and intimate viewing:

[In Caro's work] [w]e step back, see how it looks [...] – above all we put it at arm's length: this is what composing, seeing it in compositional terms, means. We distance it. And our inclination to do this amounts in effect to a desire to escape the work, to break its grip on us, to destroy the intimacy it threatens to create, to pull out. And one doesn't step back or pull out just a little, or more or less (the relevant comparison is with human relationships here). One is either in or out: and if one steps back, whatever the grip of the things was or may have been is broken or forestalled, and whatever the relationship was or

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 232-233.

⁴² "a mobilidade do livro, quer dizer, de ser manuseado." Ferreira Gullar, "Depoimento a Glória Ferreira e Luiza Interlenghi," in Paul Sergio Duarte (ed.), *Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica: Sala especial do 9º Salão Nacional de artes plásticas*, exh. cat., Rio de Janeiro, Paço Imperial, 1986, p. 58.

may have been is ended or aborted. There is even a sense in which it is only then that one begins to see: that one becomes a spectator.⁴³

Fried may have regarded Minimalist sculptures as lacking the ‘distance’ required by Caro’s works, but it could be argued that Morris too chose to ‘step back’, and position sculptures ‘at arm’s length’. Like Judd’s seductive works, Morris’s sculptures are stuck in a double-bind: it is difficult to view them from a distance for any extended period of time since they lack the kind of composition presented by Caro’s elegant painted forms, but at the same time they forbid any intimate relation.

Unlike Fried’s or Morris’s conception of the relationship with the other as a confrontation and a source of anxiety, the Neoconcretists thought of it as a dialogue. Whereas for Fried one is ‘either in or out’ of the ‘grip’ of a sculpture, as in ‘human relationships’, for the Neoconcretists, one can be both. Extending the comparison with human relationships suggested by Fried, it seems that rather than the kind of passionate embrace which Fried saw as a ‘threat’ to sculpture, Neoconcrete works are closer to the familiarity of friendship. The viewers’ movements in Clark’s ‘Bichos’, or Oiticica’s ‘Box Bólides’, are made in order to reveal the aesthetic aspects of the work, whether the former’s multifarious forms or the latter’s nuances of colours. In this dialogue, the viewer acts, and then receives a response, or not, from the works, which either reveal a new hidden dimension or actually resist the viewer’s gesture.

The Neoconcrete artists’ attempt to involve the spectator in a dialogue with the artwork was one of the means to create a non-object that would be ‘transparent to phenomenological knowledge’, according to Ferreira Gullar.⁴⁴ The non-object’s transparency is contrasted with objects in general which are opaque, obscure and threatening according to Gullar. Referring to Jean-Paul Sartre’s distinction between the subject, who exists for himself (*pour soi*), and the object, which exists in itself (*en soi*), Gullar claimed that ‘[m]an feels exiled amongst things.’⁴⁵ He added that ‘the

⁴³ Michael Fried, “New Work by Anthony Caro,” *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 6, February 1967, quoted by Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, op. cit., p. 184.

⁴⁴ “um corpo transparente ao conhecimento fenomenológico.” Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto,” op. cit., p. 14.

⁴⁵ “homem se sente exilado entre as coisas.” Ferreira Gullar, “Diálogo sobre o não-objeto,” op. cit., p. 91.

fight to overcome the subject-object contradiction lies at the centre of all human knowledge and particularly in the creation of artworks’.

The reason that David Raskin has questioned the validity of phenomenological interpretations of Judd’s work lies precisely in the artist’s interpretation of our relations to things. Raskin points out that Judd’s philosophical background was behaviourism, rather a phenomenology, and that ‘the behaviourist holds that the real world exists in a meaningful manner outside of our engagement with it.’⁴⁶ In contrast, Merleau-Ponty claimed that ‘the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence.’⁴⁷ Following a behaviourist belief in the fundamental separation between the subject and the object of perception, Judd’s works affirm their condition as objects, while Neoconcrete works privilege a more intimate relation to the world.

David Underwood has highlighted the links between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Brazilian modernism – including Neoconcretism – and the kind of baroque sensibility characterising Brazilian culture from the colonial period onwards.⁴⁸ The main theme running through these heterogeneous fields according to Underwood lies in the desire to regard ‘body and soul’ as in-dissociable entities, linked to each other in a dynamic process of folding and unfolding. Underwood quotes a passage from Merleau-Ponty’s ‘Le Visible et l’invisible’: ‘Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh [...] [since] visible things are the secret folds of our flesh?’⁴⁹ In Neoconcretism, this dynamic of the fold is embodied in Lygia Clark’s ‘Bichos’, which come to life through the folding and unfolding gestures of the viewer. In baroque culture, this folding process is a metaphor for the union between the human and the divine. Gilles Deleuze’s

⁴⁶ David Raskin, “Judd’s Moral Art,” in Nicholas Serota (ed.), *Donald Judd*, op. cit., note 30, p. 84.

⁴⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences” (1946), cited in David Raskin, *ibidem*.

⁴⁸ David K. Underwood, “Toward a Phenomenology of Brazil’s Baroque Modernism,” in Edward J. Sullivan (ed.), *Brazil: Body and Soul*, exh. cat., New York, Guggenheim Museum, 2001, pp. 526-538.

⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, quoted by David K. Underwood, *ibid.*, p. 526.

discussion of Leibniz's philosophy and the baroque similarly focuses on the fold as 'a connection between two labyrinths: the folds of matter and the folds of the soul.'⁵⁰

This intimacy between the human and the divine was discussed by Brazilian cultural historian Sergio Buarque de Holanda as early as 1936, who gave as an example the festival of Senhor Bom Jesus de Pirapora in São Paulo which involves 'the story of how Christ stepped down from the altar and started dancing the samba with the people.'⁵¹ For Buarque de Holanda, this transformation of the Catholic religion into a more joyous and informal cult reflected a general characteristic of Brazilian culture, which he summarised in his concept of the '*homem cordial*'. Brazilian '*cordialidade*', he explained, resists social forms and conventions, and privileges the private, intimate and familiar sphere. It is reflected in many Brazilian customs and attitudes, whether it is the constant use of diminutives, the use of first names rather than surnames, and the general preference for informal relations over rules and codes. The image of the statue of Christ stepping down from his pedestal, thus abandoning its status as an icon to be adored in order to participate directly in the celebrations, seems to me to mirror the way in which Neoconcrete works left the isolated space reserved for traditional artworks to be contemplated, and slipped into the real space of the viewers and into a more intimate relationship with the participant.

Conclusion

Rather than encouraging exotic stereotypes, I hope that these cultural references to the Brazilian baroque and to the *homem cordial* may suggest additional reasons for the Neoconcretists' attraction to phenomenology, and their exploration of a more intimate relation between viewer and the artwork. Similarly, Judd's debt to pragmatic philosophy can help us understand some of the issues at stake in his definitions of the specific object. Other historical, social and economic factors could no doubt be brought in to develop these comparisons – this account can only be fragmentary. The

⁵⁰ Paulo Herkenhoff, "Brazil: The Paradoxes of an Alternative Baroque," in Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (eds.), *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art*, exh. cat., San Diego, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, p. 132. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli : Leibniz et le baroque*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1988.

⁵¹ "a história do Cristo que desce do altar para sambar com o povo." Sergio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio Editora, 1936, fifth edition 1969, p. 110. My thanks to Paulo Venâncio Filho for discussing with me the Brazilian concept of "proximity."

brief but significant story of the emergence of the non-object in Brazil suggests another trajectory for three-dimensional geometry hesitating between painting and sculpture in the 1960s. A focus on the characteristics of the non-object, I have suggested, can shed light on the specificities of Judd's specific objects, and some themes in Minimalism in general. The history of the Neoconcrete movement and its aftermath remains another story to be told – I can only invite you to catch some glimpses of those later narratives in the exhibition upstairs.