

Introduction: Concrete Monuments and Beautiful Science

NATHANIEL WOLFSON
University of California, Berkeley

This special issue presents new essays and interviews on some of the legacies of global post-war concrete aesthetics, focusing on Brazil and passing through Germany and the United Kingdom. The notion of legacy in the context of Brazilian concrete aesthetics is often limited to the historical partition of concretism and neo-concretism. Brazilian critic Ronaldo Brito's seminal 1985 *Neoconcretismo: vértice e ruptura do projeto construtivo* remains one of the key references for the narrative of rupture. As a polemic, this division has spurred ongoing debate on the status of concrete art and poetry as leading post-war aesthetic movements. However, what happens when the subject matter called "the concrete" is removed from histories of post-war Brazilian aesthetics? That was the originating question of this volume: isolating and momentarily removing the repeated narratives associated with "the concrete," the leftovers might point to a related set of arts and artifacts, possibly reconfiguring the fundamentally non-static condition of Brazilian post-war aesthetics. The texts included in this dossier rarely mention "the concrete" as a point of departure. I hope this is productive: to distance the legacies of concrete aesthetics from the dominant narratives and referents of this history.

At the same time, the desire to bracket "the concrete" does not necessarily mean taking on an aggressive position against the movements' "founders." It might instead mean recognizing when concrete traditions became self-critical and even self-negating over time. "The concrete is the other," Augusto de Campos once wrote in a poetic response to poet João Cabral de Melo Neto's dedication of his 1985 *Agrestes* to the younger poet and to his poem "A Augusto de Campos," enclosed in that volume. An epistolary exchange between the two poets sheds light on Augusto's reply. Almost three decades earlier, in 1957, the young poet had written to the more established Cabral—who had expressed his

interest in Augusto's work—imploping him to identify his writing more closely with the Noigandres group.¹ An audacious Augusto declared, “mas nós gostaríamos de vê-lo, cabral, ‘mais’ concreto, mais engenheiro...mesmo com esquadro e tudo, acho que v corre o perigo do maneirismo, e de uma certa facilidade...” [but we would like to see you, cabral, ‘more’ concrete, more engineer...even with set square and all, I think you run the risk of a certain mannerism, and of a certain safeness...] (Augusto de Campos and João Cabral de Melo Neto Correspondence).² In suggesting that Cabral further emphasize the *already* concrete quality of his poetry, Augusto put on full display the neurotic energy of the group in its most “militant” phase, when it had only just a year earlier printed its manifestos in the *Jornal do Brasil*. Though in many ways a concrete poet, João Cabral wasn't *concrete* enough.

Three decades later, Cabral, still only a sympathetic “reader” of concrete poetry, responded with his “A Augusto de Campos” by making light of the tone of Augusto's earlier letter: “Envio-o ao leitor contra,/ envio-o ao leitor malgrado/ e intolerante, o que Pound/ diz de todos o mais grato” [I send it to the counter reader/ I send it to the bad-faith reader/ and intolerant, that which Pound/ said of all the best] (517-518).” Augusto's poem-response, “João/Agreste” (1985), in turn pivoted away from his earlier impassioned letter. In the shape of a Cabralian building block—a quatrain, but rotated ninety degrees on its side—he rebutted the older poet's accusation of his “intolerance”: “o/ concreto/ é/ o/ outro/ e/ não/ encontro/ nem/ palavras/ para/ o/ abraço/ senão/ as/ do/ aprendiz” [the/ concrete/ is/ the/ other/ and/ I/ do/ not/ find/ the words/ to/ embrace/ you/ except/ those/ of/ an/ apprentice] (*Despoesia* 76-77). This deference-turned-silence—“encontro nem palavras”—was more than a gracious gesture. Flora Sussekind has described Augusto's “muted” poetry of this era as a “série de impasses que se distinguem tanto do ‘roer’ recorrente nos primeiros livros de Augusto de Campos... quantos das tensões entre cor e som, entre ‘com som’ e ‘sem som,’ da sua fase concreta” [series of impasses that are as distinct from the recurrent ‘gnawing’ of Augusto de Campos's first books as from the tensions between color and sound, between

¹ In a series of letters from the 1960s, Haroldo de Campos tried to convince Cabral to publish in *Invenção* magazine an essay the latter had mentioned writing on Max Bill's “leis da forma” [laws of form] that were said to have helped engender post-war concrete art. Neither the essay nor the contribution to the magazine ever materialized (Haroldo de Campos and João Cabral de Melo Neto Correspondence).

² English translations of Portuguese are mine throughout unless cited otherwise.

‘with sound’ and ‘without sound’ of his concrete phase] (111). Augusto’s poetic response is however not a full capitulation. He could never be *that* kind of *aprendiz*. Indeed, when read vertically, Augusto’s “João/Agrestes” is hardly legible; it is emptied of syntax and denuded of meaning. Not even Cabral would pursue such a program. If Augusto was not willing to fully capitulate to the teachings of the Cabralian *pedra*³ or denounce his earlier audacity, in this poem he gifted future readers with the suggestive phrase “the concrete is the other.”

The contributions to this special issue address two main question that continue to weigh upon the legacy of concrete art and poetry: Did the latter aspire to monumentality? Did it go too far in foregrounding extra-aesthetic technological and scientific languages? In this volume, Odile Cisnero’s paper “Augusto de Campos’s *Outro*: The Limits of Authorship and the Limits of Legibility” turns to the first question. Concerned with how Augusto, in his 2015 *Outro*, questions the legitimacy of his *auteur*-status, Cisneros’s article focuses on how graphic design and translation work in tandem to produce a dialectic of authorial presence and absence. If the paratextual design of this work “present[s], indeed, affirm[s] Augusto’s authorship” throughout, Cisneros claims that the collection’s “translations, appropriations, and manipulations of work by other poets” make concrete poetry’s legacy itself “illegible.”

While Cisneros is concerned here with how this late work draws upon multiple techniques to both “affirm and negate” authorship, it could be argued that already by the 1980s Augusto was focused on this question. Readers may recall the typographically experimental and self-consciously irreverent poem “Pós-tudo,” published in 1985 in the cultural supplement of the *Folha de S. Paulo*; how it earned the polemic response of literary critic Roberto Schwarz. The latter’s “Marco histórico,” published in the same venue, claimed that Augusto’s poem “aspira ao monumento e à inscrição na pedra” [aspires to a monument and to inscription in stone] (*Que horas* 58). Schwarz would later go on to further develop his critique of the *concretistas*, “always concerned to organize Brazilian and world literature so that it culminated in them, a tendency which sets up a confusion between theory and self-advertisement (*Master* 191-195). According to Gonzalo Aguilar, Schwarz’s critique was based, at least in

³ See João Cabral de Melo Neto’s *Educação pela pedra* (1965), his major work on the relationship of pedagogy and poetry.

part, on the poem's graphic design, its "op-art" look, its "dissimulating" characters whose "vibrating" font contradicted the historical specificity of the poem's claim (250). But must Augusto's poetry-design be characterized as motivated by the desire to "self-advertise?" Cisneros suggests the contrary in her examination of *Outro*.

As Cisneros considers how Augusto's late work destabilizes the footing of his legacy, Mario Cámara's contribution, in turn, shows the younger Paulo Leminski pathetically bearing the weight of that literary history. Cámara traces how poetic experience is shaped in Leminski's poetry, specifically in what he calls Leminski's "post-haiku" work, first emerging in poems published in the *Invenção* magazine in the mid-1960s and culminating in his *Caprichos & relaxos* from 1983. The post-haiku, like Leminski's work in general, displays discipline, evoking literature as an intellectual, laboratory-activity, typical of concretism, as well as hazards an idea of poetry as experience. Turning to Leminski's correspondence with the poet Régis Bonvicino, Cámara shows Leminski embracing that tension: "Sem abdicar dos rigores de linguagem/ Precisamos meter paixão em nossas constelações/ Paixão/ PAIXÃO." Cámara notes that brevity provides the medium of expressiveness in these post-haiku, but this brevity is not that of the "minute poems" made famous by Oswald de Andrade and reinterpreted by the "marginal" *carioca* poets. Leminski's parsimony doesn't strictly abide by the haiku's compositional principle, but nevertheless provides evidence of synthesis and montage, often carrying poetic quotes or references to the concrete tradition. There is, moreover, in Leminski's work an underlying urgency to question the literary institution by persisting in the state of being "nothing or almost an art."

Tobi Maier's contribution takes the topic of critique in a different direction: a conversation with the artists Lydia Okumura (1948) and Genilson Soares (1940), vanguards of institutional critique in Brazilian art, who along with Francisco Iñarra (1947-2009), formed the collectives Equipe 3 and Arte/Ação. Maier's introduction provides a rich overview of the groups' various "actions," among them, *Ênfase à Escultura* (1977), a witty appropriation of a sculpture in MAC-USP's collection, produced in close dialogue with curator Walter Zanini. While Maier's questions do not directly reference any inheritance in (neo)concrete traditions, the reader may draw her own connections between certain works and experiments on consumption and participation from the period.

Restaurarte, for example, similar to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Food* restaurant, also from 1971, recalls Wladimir Dias-Pino's "poemas comestíveis" [edible poems], performed at the Recife Art Fair the previous year (Price 188). However, *Restaurarte* served works of art rather than food: hanging from walls and ceilings, the works alluded to fruits that could be harvested and consumed.

The salient narrative of rupture in the history of concrete aesthetics has meant that concrete artists are frequently thought of as uncritical observers of technological change and enthusiastic consumers of all things modern. Three of the contributions included in this volume are concerned with the reception of technological theories of perception and communication in concrete poetics. Together they offer new articulations of the use and translation of these theories in a global context. On the one hand, post-war sciences offered artists and poets new concepts to account for innovative formal experiments, including analytics of order, redundancy and entropy. On the other hand, they provided the basis for reflection on the politics of mass media and communication. Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s saw artists experimenting with media technologies and the politics of consumption through mail art, xerox art, videotext, etc. But even earlier, beginning in the late 1950s, the languages of cybernetics and information entered into aesthetic discourse via concrete artists' articulations of emerging global cybernetic research and pedagogies of industrial design.

In his three-part essay "Especulações estéticas: forma e informação," published in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* in 1967, critic Mario Pedrosa described a historical shift in which information theory and cybernetics began replacing Gestalt psychology as a central theoretical focus of Brazilian avant-garde art. Pedrosa's article discusses the regional importance of the particularly linguistic aspect of information theory, glossing Peirce, Charles Morris, Wittgenstein, Russell, etc. Art historians have only recently begun to question how these post-war materialist theories of communication impacted concrete art, following Pedrosa's indication of an "antagonismo que fica entre as hipóteses gestaltianas fenomênicas onde se aninha a população do reino das grandes ambigüidades humanas e as verificações quantitativas estabelecidas no domínio da percepção pela própria Teoria da Informação" (121) [antagonism that remains between the phenomenal Gestaltian hypotheses where the population of the kingdom of great human ambiguities is nestled and the quantitative verifications established in the domain of perception by the Information Theory itself]." For a

leading thinker of abstract art in Brazil to have made this claim is significant: Pedrosa effectively upended the oft-repeated association of concrete art with Gestalt theories of isomorphism,⁴ through which, according to Irene Small, concrete artists saw their work as “metaphorically” reproducing “a social contract between individual and the nation” (29). The reception of cybernetics and information theory tell a different story, one that suggests a non-metaphorical relationship between the artwork and its extra-aesthetic milieu.

I would argue that the aesthetic questions engendered from the mid-century’s cybernetic turn in language included, among others: the validity or nonvalidity of 1. Mathematics as literary analogy or instrument; 2. Scientific models of human perception, from gestalt to the psycho-physiological; 3. Theories of communication as measure and model of the relationships between means of production and consumption. One of the central characters in the history of reception of these theories in aesthetics was philosopher, publisher, and professor Max Bense, who first made contact with Brazilian concrete poetry through Décio Pignatari, who visited the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm, where Bense taught, in 1956. Kurt Beals’s contribution to this volume focuses on the intersections between concrete poetics and post-war scientific and technical research by focusing on Max Bense, his importance for concrete poetry, and his relevance for German and Portuguese language poets. Beals’s contribution complicates, on the one hand, the tendency to read concrete poetry—Brazilian and German, in particular—as uncritically receptive to theory, and on the other, to read theory as providing aesthetics with a model of communication in which value is always equated with efficiency, predictability and rationalization. Providing an account of the trajectory of Bense’s intellectual output, from his 1946 essay “Der geistige Mensch und die Technik” [The Intellectual and Technology] to his later writings on information theory aesthetics in his *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik* [Introduction to Information-Theoretical Aesthetics], from 1969, Beals accounts for certain incongruities between the theories of information developed by engineers and

⁴ In the second part of the essay, he further elaborates on this difference: “os teóricos da Informação vêm para fazer essa outra abordagem bem mais concreta, e suscetível de medição e controle, concentrando a atenção sobre a mensagem em si, o estudo de sua transmissão e recepção” (125). [Information theorists come to make this other approach much more concrete, and susceptible to measurement and control, focusing their attention on the message itself, the study of its transmission and reception].

mathematicians such as Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener and the literary works to which Bense and others attempted to apply them. For example, Bense faced the challenge of accommodating a science opposed to the “redundancy of information” to works of authors such as Stein, as well as numerous Concrete poets, in which repetition plays a fundamental role.

Also interested in the application of information theory and cybernetics in aesthetics, but focused on how in Brazil during the military dictatorship these theories morphed into something explicitly political, Rebecca Kosick’s article “From *Repetition Poem* to ‘Envelopoemas’: Concrete Tautologies in Paulo Bruscky’s Political Poetics” examines the work of Recife-born and based artist Paulo Bruscky, most famous for his mail art: texts and images stamped onto envelopes and disseminated through the postal service. Kosick’s article explores the political dimensions of semiotics and communication for Bruscky, arguing that he makes use of a “tautological mode of signification in the service of political ends.” Showing how many of Bruscky’s works refer to themselves in a circular semiotic loop, Kosick argues that despite these works’ apparent redundancy and defiance of clear logic, they refuse to emphasize “the materiality of language at the expense of its meaning.” Kosick reads Bruscky in a larger context of visual poetry in Brazil beginning in the mid-1960s, drawing helpful connections between his poetic works and Luis Ângelo Pinto and Décio Pignatari’s 1964 essay “Nova linguagem, nova poesia,” in which the two upheld the semantic dimension of the purely visual semiotic poem. Kosick argues that Bruscky too envisioned non-syntactic structures of language that “nevertheless facilitate (often politically charged) communication.” To make this argument Kosick explores a trajectory of Bruscky’s production, from his “Envelopoemas” to his *Enterro aquático*, in which empty coffins were made into the signs of absent bodies and also tautological symbols of the dictatorship’s disappeared.

If Kosick shows how Bruscky’s artworks articulate the theoretical limits of post-war materialist theories of communication, Greg Thomas suggests that Ian Hamilton Finlay’s late work investigates a turn away from technicized poetics. Thomas’s “Ian Hamilton Finlay, Albert Speer, and the Ideology of the Aesthetic at Little Sparta and Spandau” explores Ian Hamilton Finlay’s unpublished—until 2019—book, *A Walled Garden: A History of the Spandau Garden in the Time of the Architect Albert Speer*. A collaboration with painter Ian Gardner on Nazi architect Albert Speer’s garden in the grounds of the Spandau prison, *A Walled*

Garden offers a view of Finlay's late work: a step away from his earlier concrete poems and pivot towards what Thomas calls a more "traditional mode...akin to the mutual illumination of image and epithet in Renaissance emblem books." The book was to be composed of Gardner's watercolors depicting the Spandau garden as presented in Speer's photographs, and Finlay's text based on *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*, Speer's account of his 20-year sentence in Spandau Prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as his correspondence with Speer mainly concerning the gardening work he had undertaken on the prison grounds. Thomas sees Finlay's Speer project as an expression of his new sense, by the late 1970s, of the inevitably ideological quality of aesthetic judgement, a supposition which led him to speculate, Thomas argues, on the potential complicity of art and poetry with the kind of expression of violence epitomized by the Nazi regime. Thomas reads Finlay's late work as a comment on the fate of poetry after its scientific transformations: "aesthetic ideology" is only as irrational as the most rational artworks.

Pedro Erber's conversation with the artist duo Angela Detanico and Rafael Lain, as well as art critic and theorist Federico Nicolao, originated in a public dialogue on the occasion of Detanico and Lain's 2017 exhibition at the Brazilian Embassy in Tokyo. The conversation explores Detanico and Lain's work across multiple media and techniques, combining digital and video art with sculpture, drawing, and traditional techniques such as Japanese gold leaf painting. For Erber, their work is fundamentally a speculative journey through translation—between the non-human and human, natural languages and code, and ultimately between poetic practices and contemporary art. The interview especially focuses on one experience of translation in Detanico and Lain's work: mathematics and art. At one point in the conversation Erber recalls Ferreira Gullar's break with concrete poetry upon Gullar's resistance to Haroldo and Augusto de Campos's proposed mathematical poetry. "[Gullar] claimed that his initial break with the group of concrete poets of São Paulo came from his disagreement with their project of applying mathematical rules to poetry...Each time I thought of this controversy I wondered what those mathematical poems could have looked like, and what Décio Pignatari and the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos were seeking in this rapprochement between poetry and mathematics that, if Gullar is to be believed, they never carried out." For Erber, Detanico and Lain entertains the beautiful fiction of a truly mathematical poem. Erber describes this dream

both as “never simply scientific” and as the “the always-evasive object of both our science and our poetry.” One encounters a possible glimpse of what this mathematical poetry may look like in the duo’s works *Vague* (2010) and *White Square* (2017).

By interrogating translation as a speculative practice, Detanico and Lain engage the inherited languages of concrete poetry from Haroldo de Campos to Kitasono Katue. However, in their pursuit of a beautiful science, Detanico and Lain seem to push back against Haroldo, who often theoretically grounded his translation theory as pragmatic exercises of literary historical creation. It seems then that their work articulates an alternative to Haroldo’s delimiting of the speculative or mystical aspects of translation as displayed in his theoretical writings on Walter Benjamin throughout the 1980s.⁵ During those years, when Haroldo was still immersed in the science of semiology, he defined his own work as amending Benjamin’s more hermetic approach to translation by enacting a pragmatic activity.

But what was it about Benjamin’s “metaphysics of translation” that caused concern for Haroldo? We recall that Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” begins with a radical pronouncement on reception and its total inadmissibility from the act of translation. Doing so, Benjamin dismisses any notion of poetry as being oriented, in any sense, toward an audience or a reader.⁶ The task of translation then is only to point to pure language (*reine Sprache*) as such; Haroldo writes that “Benjamin confere à tradução um encargo ou missão ‘angélica’; a tradução anuncia para o original a possibilidade da reconciliação na língua pura,

⁵ Haroldo praised Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” writing that it had “desmitificado a norma da transparência do sentido e o dogma da fidelidade e da servilidade da teoria tradicional da tradução” (*Da transcrição* 98) [demystified the norm of transparency of meaning and the dogma of fidelity and servitude in the traditional theory of translation]. At the same time, in the mid-1980s, he began publishing texts that offered a more distanced regard to Benjamin by posing an opposition between mysticism and pragmatism in translation theory. See his “Para além do princípio da saudade: a teoria benjaminiana da tradução” (*Da transcrição* 63-75) from 1984, “Tradução e reconfiguração do imaginário: o tradutor como transfigidor” (*Da transcrição* 47-63) from 1989, and his “O que é mais importante: a escrita ou o escrito?” (*Da transcrição* 91-107) from 1992.

⁶ The very beginning of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” is a pronouncement concerning reception: “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an ‘ideal’ receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (78).

na *língua da verdade*” (*Da transcrição* 100-101) [Benjamin gives to translation an ‘angelic’ order or mission; translation announces to the original the possibility of reconciliation in the pure language, in the *language of truth*]. In contrast to Benjamin, Haroldo’s translation theory understood itself as heretical: by removing the Messianism inherent in Benjamin’s translation theory, he transformed the latter’s “metaphysics of translation” into a “physics.”

His pragmatics of translation, already active in the 1960s, involved on the one hand a sustained application of the science of semiology to the study of “transcreation”—first evidenced in his “Da tradução como criação e como crítica,” from 1962—and on the other, a series of publishing efforts that aimed to re-write the history of Brazilian (and world) literature according to the idea of structural affinities between works at the level of the material sign. Inspired by Roman Jakobson’s “Linguistics and Poetics” from 1960, which posited the synchronicity of literary history according to shared semiotic attributes of works across time and space, Haroldo and Augusto’s *Revisão de Sousaândrade* of 1964—the first of a series of publications that aimed to forge a concrete literary history of the present—reprinted the nearly-forgotten 19th century poet Joaquim de Sousa Andrade’s *A guesa errante*. This publication and the others that followed have forever shaped Brazil’s literary constellations; at the same time, and for that very reason, the de Campos brothers have been assailed by some for making concrete poetry the code by which all other literary works are assembled (“Brazilian literature’s moment of absolute synchrony” (*Novas* 169)). Here we may once again return to the polemics against concrete poetry: whether their desire and actions to rewrite the canon of Brazilian literature was in essence monumentalizing remains an open question.

Haroldo would suggest that his literary historical activities amounted to “a radical change in the dialogic register. Instead of the old question of influences, in terms of authors and works, a new process opened up” (170). The 1980s saw Haroldo —and Augusto, as we saw in his poem “Pós-tudo”—reflect anew on their historical practices. His turn to reception theory at this time—via Hans Robert Jauss in particular—would serve to produce a distance between his semiological notion of literary history beginning in the 1960s and a “new process” of historical thinking “opened up” and spun into galactic motion. Curiously, during this period, he rarely mentioned *concrete aesthetics*, distant as it was then from the dominant narratives and referents of its history.

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