

From Repetition Poem to “Envelopoemas”: Concrete Tautologies in Paulo Bruscky’s Political Poetics

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Abstract: This article examines key works by Brazilian contemporary poet and artist, Paulo Bruscky, including *Poema da repetição*, *Poesia viva*, his Mail Art and “envelopoemas.” It argues that throughout Bruscky’s practice, it is possible to identify a poetics with circuits of signification that refer back to the material signs that constitute the work itself. It considers how this strategy builds from techniques forwarded by concrete poetry, as well as how Bruscky’s work intersects with a range of internationally practiced contemporary arts. Rather than a myopic, inward looking practice, Bruscky’s poetics generates significant opportunities for political messaging, even at its most tautological.

Keywords: Conceptual art, contemporary art, mail art, politics and aesthetics, concrete poetry

Artist, poet, performer, archivist, advertiser, intervener, agitator, and all-around polymath, Paulo Bruscky was not a concrete poet. His varied and extensive catalogue of productions exceeds the domain of poetry—concrete or otherwise. Yet as his critics have pointed out, poetry and poetics are evident throughout Bruscky’s practice. Adolfo Montejo Navas describes poetics as “a thread, winding and insinuating, that seems to go through this whole universe of [Bruscky’s] dissimilar production” (89). Antonio Sergio Bessa underscores the importance of Bruscky’s early involvement with the post-concrete movement

known as *poema/processo* for Bruscky's work at large (Bessa, *Poesia viva*).¹ Like the adherents of *poema/processo* and concrete poetry, Bruscky emphasizes the visual, sonic, and material qualities of communication and language.

Though critics such as Cristina Freire argue that Bruscky can also be understood as a conceptual artist (220)—something I do not dispute—this essay will take a closer look at Bruscky's poetics. It will argue that throughout the poet/artist's oeuvre, Bruscky makes use of material signs and a tautological mode of signification in the service of political ends. Bruscky's material signs are sometimes language that, as with concrete poetry, calls attention to the visual or sonic features of the word. Other times, these signs are nonverbal and encompass, as the examples that follow show, human bodies, string, coffins, and envelopes, among other possibilities. These signs frequently refer back to themselves, such that the signifier is the signified. Yet, rather than an inward-looking art, Bruscky uses these apparently self-referential circuits of meaning to intervene in the political sphere. I understand this approach to be his poetics, and as something that builds on the theoretical and practical investigations of concrete poetry, even as Bruscky's work intersects with a range of other arts contemporary to his time.

Concepções

Paulo Bruscky was born in Recife in 1949 and continues to live and to work there. His career includes involvement with Fluxus, the international Mail Art movement, performance, film, artists' books, photography, Xerox and fax art, billboard design, experiments with cognition and drawing, and archival work as artistic practice. Though he is difficult to categorize at all, Bruscky is sometimes categorized as a conceptual artist. He often refers to his work on conceptual terms, noting, for example, that he is "concerned with the idea and not with the perfect refinement of things" (Silva and Ribeiro 16). And he frequently uses the word "conceptual" itself in reference his aesthetic "objects"—from his visual poems to experiential and event-based arts. Coming of age as an artist/poet during the 1960s, Bruscky's catalogue is situated in at least two domains. On the one hand, his poetics-inflected practice dates to the immediately post-concrete

¹ Bessa's book *Poesia viva* has no page numbers. I cite it by author/title throughout this essay.

moment in Brazil and is linked with *poema/processo*, and on the other, it coincides with the rise of conceptualism in the art world.

In the US, conceptual artists were, as Jamie Hilder describes, “eager to dissociate themselves from [concrete poetry’s] history while deploying some of its techniques” (153). This had to do, in part, with differing approaches to the role of language and materiality. As Pedro Erber writes, “conceptual artists’ attempt to distance themselves from materiality and their subsequent move towards a communicational model akin to that of verbal discourse existed in uneasy tension with the opposite tendency [on the part of concrete poetry] to bring written signification closer to its material constitution” (74). But these antagonisms were less pronounced in Brazil. There, poetry and art were in close contact and mutually influential. In Latin America more broadly, as Luis Camnitzer argues, conceptual-leaning artists “‘downgraded’ the material vehicle” but did not, like their North American counterparts, try to get rid of it (31). Bruscky’s work can be understood as sharing this lack of orthodoxy regarding dematerialization, in part because it simultaneously builds from a poetic tradition invested in emphasizing the material features of language.

In addition to overlapping with conceptualism and post-concrete visual poetry, Bruscky’s career also overlaps in large part with Brazil’s military dictatorship, which began in 1964 and lasted for 21 years. “Like many artists of the post-concrete generation,” Bessa writes, “it was only inevitable that Bruscky’s work would reflect the jarring new environment imposed by the military on civil society” (Bessa and Bruscky 123). Beyond inevitability, though, Bruscky demonstrated a persistently political orientation in his work, even after 1968’s AI-5 decree which tightened the regime’s control over governance and civil society and resulted in censorship, arrests, and torture. While some artists and poets of this generation left Brazil during these years, Bruscky remained in his home city of Recife. From there, and at great personal risk, his work leveled unmistakable critiques at the military regime.²

² In addition to aesthetic interventions, the manifestos of the *poema/processo* group also directly antagonized the military regime, and artists and poets of various factions, as well as students at the time, were, as Bessa notes, going beyond their roles as artists and educators by becoming “factory workers in order to educate the workers about their rights” (Bessa and Bruscky 126).

In an interview with Evan Moffit, Bruscky recounts one of his many political works, *Enterro aquático* (1972), in which “empty coffins were thrown into the rivers [and sea] to represent those ‘disappeared’ by the dictatorship” (Moffitt and Bruscky). Such urban interventions have to do with, as Britto writes, “a busca por lugares alternativos para experimentações artísticas,” something that she claims is “uma das características da arte contemporânea e suas linguagens” (“Intervenções”). While Bruscky’s *Enterro aquático* may be part of a broader trend indicative of its moment, I want to dwell for a moment on Britto’s point about “languages.” *Enterro aquático* offers a political critique of the military dictatorship, but it also uses a method identifiable in a great number of Bruscky’s works—a tautological mode of signification in which what is represented is also how it is represented. Here, the missing dead signify the missing dead.

It is not verbal signs that relay this critique, but material ones. Montejo Navas describes Bruscky’s work as demonstrating a “dedication to poetry that plays with signs and their materiality” (Navas and Bruscky 16). This is the case even for works that are not expressly, or exclusively, poetry, such as *Enterro aquático*, which could also be categorized as an event, action, or conceptual proposal. Here, as elsewhere, Bruscky’s work is allied with the semiotics of material language that was important for poema/processo, and differently, for concrete poetry. The Noigandres group of concrete poets understood and sought to exploit the meaningful potential of matter. For Bruscky, this includes understanding verbal language *as* matter, and recognizing the signifying features of nonverbal symbols and signs that take material form, as with *Enterro aquático*’s coffins.

Brazilian concrete poetry sought to disrupt *discursive* communication, but not language’s potential to relay meaning. As one post-concrete trajectory, Bruscky’s work shares this orientation and differs from other post-concretisms that sought to concentrate the materiality of language at the expense of its meaning. Such practices (occasionally referred to as “concrete poetry” in the broad sense of the term) would include the work of bpNichol and Steve McCaffery as the Toronto Research Group. They propose, for example, the post-semiotic poem in which “the lexical conversion of non-verbal code back into words is eliminated” (35). This approach is understood as a corrective to the semiotic poems outlined by Luis Ângelo Pinto and Décio Pignatari in their 1964 essay “Nova linguagem, nova poesia.” Nichol and McCaffery specifically cite this essay (33), and remark that one “weakness immediately apparent in this type

of poem is the necessary recourse to a lexical definition of the signs utilized” (34). The post-semiotic poem, as an alternative, moves away from lexis and semiosis in favor of poetic activity that operates on a “purely optical plane” (37).

Nathaniel Wolfson writes of German theorist Max Bense, whose reading of concrete poetry understood the form as “material surface,” meaning the concrete poem “signified nothing other than its ‘apophantic’ self-reference” and lacked, as a result, politics (88). This impression extends beyond Bense, even though the maintenance of the semiotic properties of the word are often what distinguish Brazilian concrete poetry from later allied forms, like post-semiotic poetry. Meaning is active in Brazilian concrete poetry and in Bruscky’s poetics. What is more, though Bruscky explicitly favors self-reference as a poetic technique, his work suggests this can be politically generative, as opposed to vacuous.

Pinto and Pignatari wrote their essay after concrete poetry’s more orthodox years, when, with the “participatory leap,” the group sought ways of integrating its approach with shifting demands in aesthetic and political arenas. Other post-concrete poets, such as neoconcretist Ferreira Gullar, had criticized them for an approach seen as “fora da história, do processo político brasileiro” (Gullar and Ridenti 8). The “leap” concrete poetry made during these years opened the form to greater participation and social critique. As one example, the semiotic poems produced by Pignatari invited readers to participate consciously in the basic processes of meaning-making by linking non-alphabetic symbols with verbal meaning.

In their essay, Pinto and Pignatari write that concrete poetry “propõe e consegue realmente a criação de uma nova sintaxe” in which graphic signs “representam diretamente o objeto independentemente do estágio fonético—linguagem não verbal” (161). In such poems, traditional syntax is disrupted, but the semiotic properties of material language remain exploited via the connection they establish between nonverbal symbols and natural language. Though semiotic poetry comes after orthodox concrete poetry, Pinto and Pignatari insist that it “não se desvincula—ao contrário—dos princípios básicos da poesia concreta” (161). From my perspective, the group’s emphasis on the semiotic properties of the word (alongside the material), is one such basic principle that unites the different eras of practice. As Pignatari and the Campos brothers first wrote in their “Pilot Plan,” concrete poetry sets out to create “uma área lingüística específica—“veribivocovisual”—que participa das vantagens da comunicação

não-verbal, sem abdicar das virtualidades da palavra” (157). This responsibility to the word’s “virtuality” has to do with its semiotic function and is a feature that sets the Brazilian concrete poets apart from the post-semiotic practices that adhered later within the broader movement of concrete or visual poetry.

Bruscky’s poetics follows from the semiotic investments of concrete poetry. He also draws from the poema/processo movement, which, as Tobi Maier writes, undertook “semiotic research and moved away from mere verbal, chronological and alphabetically structured” approaches. Even when Bruscky is not working explicitly with language, he is often playing with and exploiting the communicative potential of material signs. In *Enterro aquático*, these signs are physical objects such as coffins, natural objects such as rivers and seas, and virtual objects like those bodies signaled by the empty coffins. Like Pignatari and Pinto’s semiotic poetry, Bruscky’s signs do not follow the syntactic structures of speech, but their presence nevertheless facilitates (often politically charged) communication. As a conceptual work, the message in *Enterro aquático* is clear whether actual coffins are tossed into actual rivers. But materialized, the rivers and coffins, as well as the missing bodies all constitute syntactically-unreliable material signs that make substantial the political intervention of the work.

The material signs that compose *Enterro aquático* share evident relationships with what they signify. Perhaps most self-signifying are the missing bodies that do not, as the coffins do, stand for other such coffins but (im)materially constitute the very disappearances they represent. Concrete poetry was at times accused of political vacuity, owing to its reception as a tautological approach to poetry that foreclosed external reference. This is not an entirely accurate understanding of concrete poetry, but Bruscky’s work does take up this approach. And with it, he makes a sharp critique of the military dictatorship by way of the circular path of signification that connects coffins to coffins, disappeareds to disappeareds.

Repetições

A poetics in which the sign is the signified is operative throughout Bruscky’s divergent and multimedia catalog of practices. Examples include *Performance poema linguístico* (1988) which registers tongue imprints on a sheet of paper topped with the work’s title, and *Linha poética* (1977), also a sheet of paper, to which a length of red string is taped beneath the poem’s title. In each case, the

correspondence between title and content underscore the ways in which verbal language and nonverbal material signs share a function in Bruscky's poetics. As elsewhere, the "poetic line" refers to a line, and the "linguistic poem," punning on tongue-as-in-language and tongue-as-in-organ, refers to these two "línguas."

I want to underscore that the results of this seemingly insular approach to signification often facilitate, rather than impede, the works' ability to communicate. In part, this has to do with the way that Bruscky's very material signs—from string, to tongue imprints, to visually emphatic verbal language—function for the poet/artist as "conceptual proposals" that, as he notes "are really about the question of signifier/signified." In an interview, he gives the example of *Repetition Poem* (1978) as one such proposal.³ There, the title is repeated "as a mantra until exhausting the signified and dissociating its sense" (Bessa and Bruscky 129). As with *Performance poema linguístico* and *Linha poética*, *Repetition Poem* also uses signs that refer back to themselves, even if the result of such reference is here, as Bruscky suggests, dissociating.

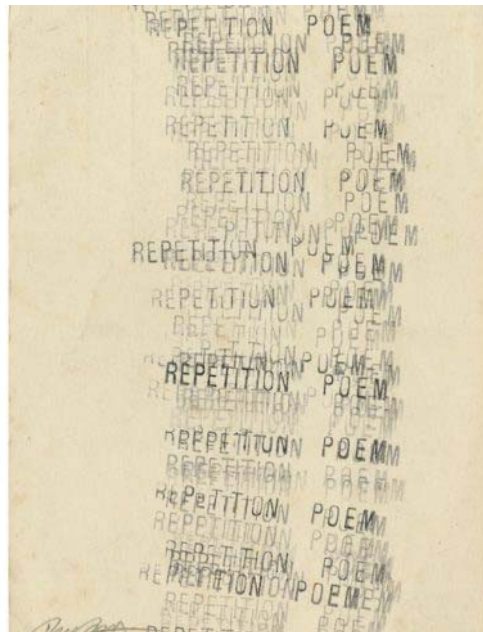


Fig. 1. *Repetition Poem*

³ I am grateful to Paulo Bruscky for permission to reproduce images of his work here.

Unlike *Enterro aquático*, *Repetition Poem* does not have an obvious political message to insinuate out the side of the poem's otherwise self-signifying circuit. And, following Bruscky's suggestion that the result of the poem's repetition is a (non)sensical dissociation, it might be understood as akin to some of the post-semiotic experiments of the Toronto Research Group. For example, we might consider Nichol's *Sharp Facts: Some Selections from Translating Translating Apollinaire*. In what Lori Emerson calls "dirty copier concrete" *Sharp Facts* repeatedly photocopies photocopies (on a Sharpfax copy machine) until the words of the original Apollinaire poem are no longer legible as semantic units (110). Emerson writes that

the term [dirty concrete] is commonly used to describe a deliberate attempt to move away from the clean lines and graphically neutral appearance of the concrete poetry from the 1950s and 1960s by Gomringer in Switzerland, the Noigandres in Brazil, and Ian Hamilton Finlay in England. Such cleanliness was thought to indicate a lack of political engagement broadly speaking and, more specifically, a lack of political engagement with language and representation. (109-10)

Repetition Poem is dirty in the sense that it departs from the clean appearance of earlier concrete poetry and is comparable to Nichol's *Sharp Facts* in its use of repetition. Likewise, both works' share a goal of upsetting the bond between words and representation, which can, as Emerson suggests, be understood as a political move. But, despite the effect that Bruscky describes—whereby the words' repetition scrambles the relationship between signified and signifier—the poem never actually cedes its meaning-making potential altogether.

Readers are in some ways estranged from the usual first priority of language—signification—thanks to the repetition, which refocuses attention on how the poem's words look. Such an emphasis on linguistic materiality might be even more pronounced in the sound version of the poem (1985), which repeats "poema da repetição," as Freire writes, "until the words lose their meaning and become incomprehensible" (239). Through the visual and sonic repetitions of the poem's title, each version allows for either the look, or the sound, of its words to

take precedence over the poem's meaningful features. Together, the two versions of Bruscky's poem represent "voco" or "visual" concentrations of the concrete approach. They also represent the two halves of what Saussure calls the "sound/image" of the signifier. But unlike early concrete poetry, Bruscky dirties his poems—through blurry or hard to read and overlapping stamps in the visual version, and through mispronunciation and slurring in the sound version. Each of these strategies contributes to preventing the reader or listener from easily peering through the poem's material form to arrive at the signified.

Despite the estrangement that follows from such strategies, the poem's meaning remains perceptible to listeners. This is due to its tautological circuit of signification, which allows the poem to keep returning its listeners or readers to its meaningful content, even as it disrupts the naturalness of the link between signifier and signified. Had *Repetition Poem* repeated words other than "repetition poem," perhaps it would be the case that signification was dissociated, as Bruscky claims, as a result of that repetition. For a poem containing the word "orange" over and over again, it would be more difficult to insist on the enduring importance of that word's relationship with the citrus fruit by the name. But given the words repeated in Bruscky's poem, no matter how estranged readers feel from the signified, they are nevertheless susceptible to the activity the poem represents. *Repetition Poem* enables this apparently contradictory functioning by being a performance of its very meaning, both as an individual (two-part) poem whose words repeat, and as a repeating series that reverberates across the mediatic spectrum between sight and sound and through English and Portuguese.

Repetition Poem offers another example of a conceptual proposal that, like *Enterro aquático*, requires its own materialization to carry out its function. It may provoke a reflection on the relationship of the signifier and signified. But the poem only works as a repetition poem when that repetition is materially realized as poetry. Here, then, is a further point of connection with the purportedly "clean" concretism of the Noigandres group, whose aims included creating and resolving problems with "linguagem sensível" (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 158). A similar function is identifiable in Bruscky's *Poema da repetição*. It creates a problem whereby the signifier and signified are dissociated through repetition, and it resolves that problem by setting up a tautological mode of signification in which *Poema da repetição* is itself a poem that repeats.

Bruscky is interested both in materializing language and in seeing what conceptual proposals (or problems) such language can generate. With its two versions—visual and vocal—*Poema da repetição/Repetition Poem* also offers an opportunity to recognize the ways in which Bruscky’s poetics carry forward the core verbivocovisual mission of concrete poetry. If the verbal portion of this term can be understood as related to signification, both of Bruscky’s “repetitions” are good examples of how such signification can reverberate as what the concrete poets refer to as the “virtualidades da palavra” (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 157). For the visual-vocal *Repetition Poem(s)*, the meaning of those words is the imperceptible third component that unites and animates the two versions. All told, the poem represents an isomorphism of structure(s) and content that is very much in line with the clean concretism that predated Bruscky’s practice, even when drawing on the “dirty” strategies of the concrete poetry that followed.

Cri-ações

Bruscky’s use of intensely auto-referential language is also a joke. And this feeds into a broader political project that arises from the artist-poet’s play with signification. While *Poema da repetição* does not convey an overt critique of repressive state politics, it can be read as poking fun precisely at the very “clean” relationship between sign and signified that it establishes (and dissociates). Bruscky’s critiques are delivered, as Lidice Matos writes, “com muito humor e ironia, mas sem cinismo ou ceticismo” (Matos 120). This is evident in 1984’s *Limpo e desinfetado*, a photograph showing Bruscky and collaborator Daniel Santiago posing with sashes imprinted with the title’s words in Portuguese and English. Leila Kiyomura comments that in this work “Bruscky satiriza a institucionalização da arte,” combating “a atitude pretensiosa da alta cultura, em sua ênfase absoluta no profissionalismo do artista” (Kiyomura). This message easily comes across, thanks to the clean artists who are both sign and signified. Though the work is autoreferential, it has no trouble communicating its indictment of white cube gallery politics, against which Bruscky’s career can be positioned.

Also notable about *Limpo e desinfetado*, like *Poema da repetição*, is the work’s multilingualism, which enables this message to communicate, at once, to a local audience in Brazil, and, beyond, to a wider international audience. This

sheds light on the fact that Bruscky's work—although it rejected institutional artworld globalism—often communicated with an eye toward the international. In this way, his practice is comparable with what Christopher Dunn calls the “export” ready features of concrete poetry (32). Brazilian concrete poetry, with its pared back, material language—that was not even always in Portuguese to begin with—was legible beyond Brazil and easily adaptable to other languages. As Dunn notes, this meant concrete poetry could “attract disciples from around the world” but it also opened the form to “trenchant critiques from critics at home who regarded it as overly formalistic and impervious to” Brazilian local culture and politics (32).

Bruscky's work, though, could hardly be accused of eschewing local politics. This is true even though his language often made multilingual appeals, and his works themselves traveled around the world thanks to his involvement with Mail Art. But Bruscky's internationalism is in part facilitator of a lengthy list of *local* meditations. In their conversation, Bessa, for instance, points out that while many Brazilian artists eventually moved to Rio or São Paulo, Bruscky stayed home and created numerous “works about Recife and its local reality” (Bessa and Bruscky 123). Many of these, as Bruscky acknowledges, are openly political interventions that draw from the history, geography, and characteristics of the city. *Enterro aquático*, for example, was made possible in part by the fact that Recife, as Bruscky describes, is “at sea level—bathed by the sea—and cut up by rivers” (Moffitt and Bruscky). The work thus draws its constitutive signs not just from the coffins Bruscky brought down to the rivers, but from the waters already coursing through the city in Pernambuco. As Bruscky notes, the very internationalization of his own art (net)works was also what permitted him to stay in Recife and retain the local in his practice. “Thanks to my correspondence with other artists,” Bruscky tells Bessa, “I felt that I didn't need to leave even more strongly than before” (Bessa and Bruscky 123).

A wide international network of correspondents is another feature Bruscky shares with the Noigandres group, particularly the Campos brothers, who were in touch with likeminded poets, thinkers, and practitioners around the world. But for Bruscky, collaboration was also a hallmark of his aesthetic practice at the level of the individual objects he created. One example is a work of “living poetry” he staged in collaboration with Unhandeijara Lisboa on March 14, 1977, the International Day of Poetry. *Poesia viva*, as it was called, was a participatory

poem/“happening” put together in honor of poema/processo’s ten-year anniversary and consisted of moving participants dressed in smocks, each emblazoned with a letter of the poem’s title.



Fig. 2. Poesia viva

The kind of participation on display in *Poesia viva* is another throughline of Bruscky’s eclectic output, something he shares with poema/processo, which positioned itself as an alternative to what it saw as the structure-emphasizing poetics of concrete poetry. While it’s fair to acknowledge poema/processo’s distinct character, it should also be noted that the concrete poets’ own “participatory leap” (as well as the participatory poetics of the neoconcrete movement in the late 1950s) in fact shared an orientation toward readerly involvement. Participatory art and poetry were, as Bessa suggests, “in keeping with the revolutionary thinking that informed most of the cultural and social projects conceived in Brazil” at the time (Bessa, *Poesia viva*). In poema/processo’s case, the movement sought “a truly socialized poetics” and in which the poem’s “ultimate making was up to the reader” (Bessa, *Poesia viva*). In an email to Montejo Navas, Bruscky comments that he “didn’t only do process-poems in the late 1960s/early 1970s” and that poema/processo has “always been and continues to be in process” (Navas and Bruscky 244). The emphasis on continuity that extends from the tenets of poema/processo to

Bruscky's long career, in general, is a feature of the poet-artist's version of post-concrete poetics. It is a poetics that endures and is open to rearticulation across a range of outputs, though one that I read as returning to the communicative potential of apparently self-referential signification. In this way *Poesia viva*, is also a good way of characterizing the ever-present, ever-in-flux understanding of poetry that Bruscky's work maintains. It is living.

A poem like *Poesia viva*, much like *Poema da repetição*, includes within itself a metacommentary on the very action catalyzed by the poem. The poem is literally its title—made, remade, and made alive by the participants whose bodies give flesh to language. This kind of tautology might again play with the relationship between signifier and signified, or a disruption of the poem's ability to represent something outside of itself. But, Bruscky's participatory poetics ultimately do produce a poetic message here, one that has strong political overtones. This message arises not necessarily from the language that constitutes the poem, but from the ways the poem constitutes itself *as* language (through collective, creative, action).

In a flyer that accompanied *Poesia viva*, Bruscky and Lisboa wrote that

este “acontecimento” que estamos realizando é uma homenagem, escrita em nosso corpo, falada em nossos gestos, amordaçada em nosso silêncio, percorrida em nosso cotidiano. Somos a própria obra, somos as letras móveis, somos o chão das páginas, somos os versos mal-ditos. Faça alguma coisa (o mínimo que estiver a seu alcance) para que a poesia não padeça nos cursos de letras nem venha a morrer nos suplementos literários. Viva através de você, a poesia viva no meio da rua...⁴

As Freire comments, Bruscky's experiments with participatory poetry built on the momentum in this area established by earlier poets including neoconcretistas like Ferreira Gullar (230). But Bruscky's participatory works, coming as they were during the dictatorial period, extended the political valence of such practices and were part of a broader set of strategies that put Bruscky at odds with the military government. Bruscky was arrested three times. First, in 1968,

⁴ A copy of the flyer is available in Bessa, *Poesia viva*.

then again in 1973 and 1976. He recalls: “I was doing public interventions. The first time they arrested me they said I had a leader’s spirit and was awakening something in people with my participatory works” (Bessa and Bruscky 125).

Poesia viva followed these three arrests and came just after the most repressive years of the regime from, 1969 until 1974. It can thus be read as a politically-charged articulation of the kind of endurance important to poema/processo and Bruscky’s work in general, as well as a statement of Bruscky’s own survival of the dictatorship’s worst years. He comments that after a period of hiding in Eastern Pernambuco, he found out he “was on a list of people who were to be killed” (Moffitt and Bruscky). So, the circulation of living poetry, embodied by Paulo Bruscky’s actual live body (among those of other collaborators) is a show of real-live resistance to the violent forces who might have had it otherwise. In some ways, this work parallels in the inverse *Enterro aquático*. The missing bodies of the dead and disappeared (not) present in the latter work are, in *Poesia viva*, living, substantial, and able to determine their own free movement.

The work is also a gesture of institutional critique, as the flyer for the event indicates. *Poesia* lives not between the pages of rarefied books or on dusty academic shelves, but is alive, in the streets, in viewers’ day-to-day experience. This mirrors the strategy behind many of the artist-poet’s public interventions. For example, Bruscky describes a ribbon-cutting event he staged in Recife in 1973, *Arte/Pare*:

I noticed that this bridge was in the center of all the traffic. Knowing that the bridge had been constructed in 1733, during the Dutch colonization of Recife, I thought of closing it down and re-inaugurating it in 1973. I spoke with some photographer friends and a group of sociologists at the Catholic University with whom I used to do my events, and we decided to do it. The action had to be very fast because if it wasn't I'd be thrown in jail. Of course everything had to be anonymous too. (Bessa and Bruscky 128)

This action took place in the literal street and, as Britto writes, “terminou por boicotar a suposta ‘ordem’ do cotidiano dos recifenses por cerca de 40 minutos” (“Intervenções”). It also mocked the conventions of public inaugurations, which, as Bruscky notes, were being constantly staged by Recife’s mayor at the time (Bessa and Bruscky 128).

For Bessa, *Arte/Pare* “alluded to a purely linguistic convention having to do with the ritualistic force of language in naming locations ” (Bessa and Bruscky 128). Such performative utterances were wrapped up with Brazil’s history of colonization, as well as with the then-current regime and its control over public (and private) discourse. The work’s title also represents a third option in the debate between “arte pura”—art-for-art’s-sake—and “arte para”—committed or engaged art. As an alternative to both of those options, *Arte/Pare* is neither a solely inward nor a solely outward looking art, but art that stops or interrupts quotidian commotion by being, effectively, itself.

Here again Bruscky plays with autoreferential material signs—a ribbon cutting is a ribbon cutting—and this time politics is enacted by getting, materially, in the way. The title, like others we have seen, is spare and literal. This is true of *Poesia viva*, too. Just ten capital letters comprise the poem and its vectors of signification also lead back to themselves. The poem does not represent an extrapoetic object. But while this might be seen as a limitation, Bruscky manages to craft what amount to manifest political statements by way of seemingly self-contained semiotic circuits. Montejo Navas describes Bruscky’s poetics as “more interested in creating *relationships* than visual *orders*” (Navas and Bruscky 21), and this was something that both depended on and facilitated collectivities capable of realizing political resistance. In the case of *Poesia viva*, the words themselves are auto-referential; however, the work as a whole functions to communicate the artist’s preference for and ability to catalyze participation and collective action on the part of broad publics.

By 1977, when *Poesia viva* was staged, Haroldo de Campos had written *Galáxias*—“a geographical-linguistic-mythical sea of classical proportions,” as K. David Jackson writes, that represents a prose-oriented application of the poet’s verbivocovisual preoccupations. Ferreira Gullar, who at the end of neoconcretism wondered about the sustainability of poetry written with so few words, turned back to verse line. In North America, concrete poets such as Ronald Johnson and Steve McCaffery, with *ARK* and *Carnival*, were each

producing different, but variously maximalist takes on concrete poetry in epic and display-panel forms. Some of these moves, like the move toward “dirty concrete,” had to do with the supposed political impotency of minimalist poetry. But Paulo Bruscky offers a model of post-concrete practice that maintains the minimal—as well as aspirations that poetry represent only itself—while inviting the political.

Circulações

In “Art After Philosophy” (1969) Joseph Kosuth writes: “a work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art” (20). While I have been focusing on a poetics of tautological signification operative throughout Bruscky’s work, Kosuth’s way of reading art’s tautology is also present in Bruscky’s thinking. And this represents another tie-in between the concrete and the conceptual in his practice.

Bruscky tells an anecdote about a time when he was arrested and one of his interrogators approached him with “really strange questions” including: “I know that the concept of art is very open. If I put a piece of the floor on the wall, is it art?” Bruscky responded “If you do it, no, but if I do it, yes, it is art” (Bessa and Bruscky 125). Here, it is evident that Bruscky’s understanding of art’s definition shares with Kosuth’s an emphasis on the artist’s intention. In Bruscky’s case, this also involves defining, first, who counts as an artist and is, as result, able to intend a definition of art in the first place. This might suggest that Bruscky reifies the privileged position of the artist, in whose sole power lies the opportunity for art-making. But Bruscky’s career would counter this reading, as it is replete with democratizing gestures and instances (and endurances) of collaborative authorship. Such gestures simply do not extend, as his anecdote would indicate, to the perpetrators of anti-democratic abuses.

Another important distinction between the conceptualism that we might attribute to Bruscky and conceptualism as understood in North America (and the UK) has to do with the way language comes to be tautological in each case. Anglophone conceptualists were more interested in the dematerialization of the art object than were those considered conceptualists in Latin America, something that has consequences in political and aesthetic realms. As Camnitzer writes,

“nonmaterial work seemed to have a smaller chance of staying in the historical record, so many artists [in the US and UK] felt the need to use their explanatory writing to make sure that they got registered” (34). Later in these locales, as Camnitzer goes on to say, “in an extreme tautology, the theory of the work of art became the work of art” (34). Such tautologies are not generally the ones taken up by Bruscky, who shares with other Latin American conceptualists a laxer attitude toward the material art object, and shares with concrete poetry an orientation toward material language. This, in turn, enables language to do something different—something more political—for Bruscky’s practice, even when it, too, represents a tautology.

The tautological mode of signification active in works like *Poesia viva* and others ultimately produces a political message, meaning Bruscky’s tautologies are not inward-looking generators of “arte pura” nor mere “presentation[s] of the artist’s intensions” as Kosuth suggests. Rather, they are clever semiotic circuits whose apparent self-sameness provides the artist with the opportunity to create and enact political interventions that extend far beyond the artist/poet or the work of art/poetry.

One way these extensions are made possible is through Bruscky’s penchant for collaboration, as is perhaps most evident in the artist/poet’s involvement in the Mail Art movement. Like his participatory “crea[c]tions,” Mail Art constitutes another example of his ability to generate and engage with an extended network of associates, frequently for political ends. Mail Art, while often political in content, also entails a collective and horizontalizing revision of the artist’s role. As Freire describes, in Mail Art “the set of works of art and artists is more important than each one individually and shared authorship is fundamental” (241). The practice involves sending one’s work abroad, receiving the work of others, modifying it, and sending it out again in an ongoing circulation of ideas and, materially, the mailed-artworks themselves.

Mail Art also represents a synthesis of method and means for Bruscky’s practice—where repetition and replication are both preoccupation and instrument. *Poema da repetição*, for example, can be re-read as a kind of artist’s statement on the importance of multiplication within a poetic oeuvre. At the same time, repetition and replication constitute important functions of Bruscky’s brushes, so to speak, as is evident in his use of the mimeograph, the Xerox, the fax machine, rubber stamps, photography, film, and so on. For Freire, a focus on

repetition (as both a mode of working and an outcome of Bruscky's work) constitutes what she calls a "poetics of the here-and-now." As she argues, "reproducibility and the consequent possibility of the wide and immediate circulation of art is an operating principle in the poetics of Paulo Bruscky" (241). This is manifest in Mail Art, which capitalized on the ease of communication made possible by the postal service and technologies like the Xerox.

Mail Art also afforded political opportunities. It enabled artists to circumvent official channels of censorship and control of the media and communication. And it provided a means for doing so outside of the capital-directed itineraries of international art. The mail was the safest place for this. Bruscky's first attempt at an exhibition "in 1975 in Recife's central post office" was, as Osthoff writes "closed by censors minutes after its opening." As Osthoff indicates, this was due to the fact that "many Latin American participants included messages denouncing state violence and censorship" (66). As opposed to the "clean and disinfected art" Bruscky elsewhere satirized, what Britto refers to as "uma preocupação política que ultrapassava seus ideais estéticos" was shared among Mail Art practitioners (208). This was what made it anathema to exhibition and the marketplace, at least in Brazil at the time.



Fig. 3. Envelopoema

Bruscky's contributions to Mail Art included his Xerox and fax art experiments, and highly decorated "envelopoemas" and postcards frequently printed with the phrase "hoje a arte é este comunicado" / "today art is this communicated." Bessa describes this phrase as "an invitation to live in the present of this flux" that characterizes Bruscky's long career (Bessa, *Poesia viva*). But the phrase can also be read as another instance of Bruscky's tautological poetics in which the signifying phrase "hoje a arte é este comunicado" is also the signified of the phrase. Something similar might be said of the punning "assim se fax arte" that accompanied Bruscky's fax machine art.

Like *Repetition Poem*, the phrase "today art is this communicated" is also communicated bilingually. Here, it is set within a multimodal environment that includes visual, verbal, and material components, and like concrete poetry, implicates the poetic support as a constitutive component (rather than a mere container) of the poem. Concrete poetry "usa a palavra (som, forma visual, cargas de conteúdo) como material de composição e não como veículo de interpretações do mundo objetivo" meaning that "sua estrutura é seu verdadeiro conteúdo" (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 73). This approach is evident in Bruscky's envelopoemas as well, in that, even beyond the phrase "hoje a arte é este comunicado" their content is effectively their form—envelopes—and what content there is in addition to the envelope itself is largely self-referential or (re)iterative of the postal channels through which the art traveled.

But while concrete poetry may have been exportable as a formalism that could be adapted to other linguistic situations, Mail Art was literally exported (and imported) in its full material condition. And its structure was also more malleable and open to flux than orthodox concrete poetry, as the envelopes themselves continued to be decorated, and dirtied, as they traveled through the post—by stamps and their cancellations, and by the usual marks of mail travel such as bends, tears, and stains. This openness to change and degradation registers in Bruscky's envelopoemas, which invite mutations as they travel through time and space, making them something of a new take on concrete poetry's ambition to be a form that operates "espácio-temporalmente" (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 72).

The auto-referential features of Bruscky's envelopoemas, and the phrase "hoje a arte é este comunicado," can also be understood in light of Kosuth's claim

that “art’s ‘art condition’ is a conceptual state” (20). The envelopepoemas are not distinct formally from other such envelopes that travel through the mail, though they are perhaps unusually decorated. Their status as art is, like Kosuth describes, a conceptual one that involves “saying that a particular work of art *is* art” (20). These works are thus tautological on both counts—as art that is art by saying so, and as art that employs signs whose signifieds are, in turn, themselves.

Yet, these works also manage to convey a political message out the side of these otherwise self-referential circuits, and this has to do with the extended, informal, and participatory network of collaborators with whom Bruscky engaged. By establishing dense networks of international contacts, Bruscky was able to both benefit from the protection of, and afford protection to, the other participating members of the collective during the repressive time in which he was working. He describes how, in the dictatorship era

there were international amnesty committees that had knowledge of what was happening in Latin America and the rest of the world. News traveled through the mail. If there was an exhibition of prints by exiled Chilean artists, for instance, the amnesty committees would send thousands of letters about it to various people, including the authorities. This was a type of accusation and a way to keep the artists alive, because the military knew that the whole world was aware of what was going on. This all helped a lot. Another curious thing was that the mail-art catalogues always contained the addresses of the participants in the various projects so the network could continue to grow. (Bessa and Bruscky 126)

During this era, then, the fact of Bruscky’s participation in the collectives engendered by Mail Art was itself a political message. A phrase like “hoje a arte é este comunicado” is a kind of tautological statement. However, the very fact *of* this communication also matters to the poetics of Mail Art. And it provides real material benefits to the lives of the artists and writers, who were also receivers and readers, embedded together in a collective project operating both under and outside of repressive politics at home.

A similar gesture is identifiable in works Bruscky made during his more acute experience with Brazil's military government. For example, *Nadaísmo* (1974), which consisted of an empty gallery and 50 artist participants, was intended as Bruscky recalls "to make it clear that, if I was killed, it would not have been an accident" (Moffitt and Bruscky). Here, there is no traditional "content" at all—only the network of collaborators itself as leverage against Bruscky's own disappearance. When Bruscky turned himself into the police after three months in hiding following the *Nadaíso* exhibit, he tells Moffitt: "I invited people to witness it and take photographs. It was important for them to see—both as proof of the injustice but also as a safeguard for my own life" (Moffitt and Bruscky). Here, as elsewhere in Bruscky's work, even conceptual events such as these are necessarily constituted by material signs—those of Bruscky's live body and those of his collaborators, whose real presence in the world/works assured his safety.

What Bruscky's poetics offers, then, is an opportunity to reconsider the political efficacy of poetic language that largely eschews its responsibility to represent something other than itself. While such an approach to signification can be read as myopic, what Bruscky suggests is that such myopias, when used in the right circumstances and with the right assembly of material signs, can signify politically. This is the case, his work shows, even as it defers from the usual model of poetic representation in which a word stands for some other extrapoetic thing. His work also shows that conceptual proposals, when they take material form, can intervene in a real political context, generating both risk and protection for the artists involved. In this essay, I hope to have shown not just that concrete techniques are visible in Bruscky's work—from process poems to conceptual works of art—but how Bruscky takes these up and submits them to the flux that animated his practice in a politically-oppressive environment in late twentieth-century Brazil.

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