

Between space and matter¹

Fernando Cocchiarale

The meaning of Ascânio MMM's aluminum reliefs and sculptures cannot be dissociated from the overall meaning of his oeuvre, with its beginnings in the latter half of the 1960s. In the presentation text of the artist's first one-man show, at the Galeria Celina, Rio de Janeiro, in 1969, Frederico Morais wrote: Constructive art = element + principle. If we take Mondrian as an example, we see that the elements in his paintings are the three pure colors and vertical and horizontal lines, and the principle is the asymmetrical and dynamic balance of these very elements, that is, their neoplastics.

In Ascânio MMM's work the (single) element is the lath, and the principle is the accomplishment of certain virtovisual rhythms that change according to the play of light and shadow.

This text is illuminating. By correctly associating Ascânio's early work with Constructivist art, Morais related it to issues that were still quite familiar to the fledgling artist, although most young Brazilian artists of the period were already concerned with the issues of the New Figuration, which implied moving away from the tenets of Constructivism.

To a certain extent, then, Ascânio's work followed a path of its own. This becomes particularly evident when we consider his uniqueness in relation to other Brazilian artists of his generation. However, as Morais was keen enough to observe, he preserved — and still does — a genealogical commitment to Constructivism and some of its developments.

Ever since the 1920s, traditional sculpture, which cannot be dissociated from a solid block of matter hewn, chiseled, molded or cast, had seemed out of sync with the new methods and techniques of engineering and the new concepts of architecture. By introducing iron as a structural element in civil construction, for the first time in history engineering was able to dissociate volume from mass, since it was now possible to design buildings, bridges and other structures on the basis of prefabricated units in iron and steel (an example of which is the Eiffel Tower). A product of the industrial revolution, this technological innovation came to have fundamental importance for some sectors of the historical avant-garde movements concerned with the modernization of sculpture that led to Russian Constructivism, formulated by Vladimir Tatlin circa 1914. Influenced by Picasso's assemblages, which he had seen on a visit to Paris, Tatlin made his own Painterly reliefs, Relief constructions and Corner reliefs, pioneering examples of Constructivist art.

Around the 1920s, the brothers Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner provided precise definitions for the method, technique and materials (including such unconventional items as tinfoil, glass and wood) of Constructivism, associating them with those of engineering. The new artists no longer made sculptures; instead, they raised their works in space by putting together (gluing, soldering or fitting) pre-existing parts, a process of construction.

From this angle, all of Ascânio MMM's may be seen as deriving from Constructivist methods and techniques. But his work would be backward-looking if it were limited to the repertoire and the strict expectations of historical Constructivism.

It began in the 1960s as a junction between different moments in the Constructivist tradition and Brazilian architecture and other traditions that had less to do with industry than with craftsmanship, such as Brazilian baroque art, alluded to in the shape of the ascending helicoids in his sculptures in white aluminum and wood. This hybrid nature, presented with the economy and rigor of Constructivism and U.S. Minimalism, is responsible for the uniqueness of Ascânio's oeuvre.

However, although his work may be seen as the product of the combination of these two strands, it should be distinguished from its immediate historical predecessors in Brazilian art — Concretism and Neo-Concretism.

Ascânio MMM's use of the modular element — that is, a single element the repetition of which makes up the work — is a significant departure from the Russian Constructivist

tradition (though there is an evident similarity of methods and techniques) and, conspicuously, from that of Brazilian Constructivism. Unlike Ascânio, the artists associated with these traditions never investigated the poetic possibilities of serial modulation in a systematic way.

Tatlin, Gabo and Pevsner built their spatial works by putting together (gluing, soldering, fitting, etc.) elements that, although geometric (laths, shapes of different sizes and materials), strictly speaking were not modular, for they belonged to different formal sources and had different functions in the structure of the work.

On the other hand, Concretism and Neo-Concretism, the most important tendencies in Brazilian Constructivism, apparently had no direct influence — technical, formal or spatial — on Ascânio's work. If one compares the serial logic of many Concretist painters (Sacilotto, for instance) with Ascânio's, one readily comes to the conclusion that what is involved is a coincidence rather than actual influence. The same goes for Lygia Clark's planes with a modulated surface, the spatial and poetic nature of which makes them quite different from Ascânio's modules, because they are planar and differentiated one from the other.

Modulation in Ascânio's work possibly derives from his training as an architect; he has used it ever since his earliest works in 1968. Back then, it was a resource exploited by such artists as Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt (modular structures), all associated with the Minimalist movement, then in its infancy. But the meaning of seriation for these U.S. artists was almost the opposite of what it came to mean for MMM. Combined with the use of raw materials produced for industrial use, Minimalistic seriation aimed to downplay the frenzied subjectivity of the Abstract Expressionism of the previous decade. Thus it expressed, although in precisely the opposite way, the same indifference to the subjective that characterized Pop Art.

Although MMM also used — and still uses — modules and industrial materials, he never intended to minimize the role of subjectivity; indeed, his aim is quite different.

Elements of the objective world of industrial seriation, the constructive method and modulation were imported into art by the more rationalistic tendencies of modern art not only with the intention of making it more objective, presenting the work of art as a product, but also to criticize the emphasis on the role of subjectivity in aesthetic production: instead of expression, which comes from the artist's inner life, what counted was the intellectually conceived project.

However, the extreme simplification of the elements in Ascânio's sculptures do not directly meet the aesthetic and ideological expectations of historical Constructivism and Minimalism; the idea was rather to facilitate the free play of craftsmanship. Here, as in the putting together of parts in a model kit, the direct intervention of the artist in every phase of the work is indispensable and fundamental. This is a rationality regulated by actual practice, and therefore opposed to pure thought.

MMM's constructive work, rife with doubts, impasses and solutions, contains both concept and execution. Nevertheless, there is no intention of replacing reason with empiricism. The intellectual origin of geometric forms remains and reverberates in his works, even if overdetermined by the artist's creative process. Only a systematically physical, sensible and intellectual involvement could produce such a unique Constructivist poetics, which appropriates methods and techniques from the impersonal world of industry in order to subjectivize them in a specific visual poetics.

Few Brazilian sculptors have as many works displayed in public spaces as Ascânio. Ever since the 1970s, when he conceived a project especially for Praça da Sé, the central square of São Paulo, a number of his works have been placed in urban sites in Brazil and abroad. This aspect of his work could not have been developed if Ascânio had continued to restrict himself to the use of such materials as wood, which has little resistance to weathering. So that his sculptures could be placed outdoors, he began to resort to materials that were more resistant than wood but that would not rust, a serious problem in Rio de Janeiro, where the

climate is very humid.

Anodized aluminum solved this technical problem. Used by Ascânio since 1972, the new material began to replace wood in his sculptures made for public spaces in 1979. Narrow strips of anodized aluminum painted white were hard to distinguish visually from wooden laths. But in works such as Ascânio's, materials cannot play simply a structural function that can be disguised by some sort of finish, like paint. The logic behind his sculptures and reliefs, as we have seen, is quite similar to what David Batchelor says about minimalism: "What do these works have in common?... In most of them, a unit, or regular basic module, is repeated — from two to 120 times — in order to make up a regular total form... Simple forms are not complicated by dynamic or unstable arrangements, nor is any ornament added. They are resolutely abstract. And quite literal: the materials are not disguised or manipulated so that they seem to be other than they are."

Like the other materials used by Ascânio — painted wooden laths and raw wood — anodized aluminum has come to play a fundamental role in the diversification of the different strands in his output of reliefs and sculptures. To MMM, materials play a fundamental poetic role on the strength of their plastic and chromatic properties, their lightness or density.

The exploration of the aesthetic potency of the specific qualities of materials began when Ascânio stopped painting his works white, in function of the inner logic of his process of creation and invention. Until then, his use of paint was essential in order to achieve the visual neutralization of the parts that made up his sculptures (modules) and thus ensure the unity of the whole. Without the paint, the knots and different coloring of the wood would certainly have disturbed the undulating rhythm of the helicoid forms that predominated in his works of the period. But when curves were replaced by straight lines, the neutralization of modulation with paint no longer made sense, and it now became possible to face the tension between matter and form.

In Ascânio's angular ribbons and in his first few wooden pyramidals, modular organization rises to the surface of the sculptures by means of the different shades and the grain of the wood. In contrast, the lightness of the works in aluminum allows the construction of large structures that are screwed together, where the modules make up solid and empty parts that create, as the viewer moves around them, opaque or transparent planes (pyramidals), as well as the pyramidal structures and the wall structures.

His sculptures in aluminum profiles cut from rectangular tubes are primarily meant to be seen. Only the eye can perceive the alternation of solidity and lightness as one moves around the work. Before these pieces one can see retrospectively that Ascânio's work as a sculptor began with the exploration of the surface of forms, in the painted helicoid structures; then he went beyond the skin in his works of raw wood; and he finally penetrated their entrails in the aluminum pyramidals.

His most recent pyramidals, produced since 1998, differ from earlier ones in that the decision to paint one of the sides of the work a solid color (blue, red, white, black, and so on) causes a certain semantic reverberation generated by the contrast between colored areas and those in which the rectangular profiles of anodized aluminum appear in their metallic and modular purity, inseparable from the pyramidals. At the same time, the use of paint introduces in the very core of MMM's three-dimensional work a planar sense that is fully actualized in the wall pyramidals.

The modules are formed when the rectangular aluminum tubes are sectioned at a certain angle. They have four solid and two hollowed sides. These characteristics of the module — the angle and the existence of positive and negative sides — make for fundamentally diversified sculptures, some of their sides being impenetrable to the eye, others partly hollowed and yet others almost transparent. Shadow, light, opacity and transparency, essential elements of painting, are singularizing features of Ascânio's three-dimensional pyramidals.²

The exploration of the potency of positive and negative spaces in three-dimensional works is clearly a Constructivist concern. This is made evident in Brazil by the sculptures of Amílcar de Castro and Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark's bichos and many of Luís Sacilotto's concretions. However, differently from the works of these artists, who exploit the simultaneous perception of negative and positive spaces, Ascânio's modular system creates a relationship of alternating perception of these spaces. As the viewer moves around them, they are seen sometimes as hollowed surfaces, sometimes as continuous, monochromatic stretches, in this way further emphasizing their opacity in opposition to the more translucent views of the pyramidals. In this way, color allows not only the consistent unfolding of real space onto the wall but also the surprising possibility of seeing through a volume without mass (just as Naum Gabo had observed in connection with Constructivism), depending, of course, on where the viewer is.

A similar process of perceptual alternation occurs with the wall pyramidals. The thickness of the modules, which has the effect of giving the solid side of the sculptures the look of steps on a staircase, makes it impossible to call them paintings. They are in fact reliefs that deal with the same visual elements of sculptures, transparency and opacity, the difference being that here only a frontal view is possible.

Produced on the basis of a single element, Ascânio MMM's pyramidals demonstrate that inventiveness can be enriched and flourish under the strictest limitations, relative not only to the objective configuration of the works but also to the play of light, shadow and color, which are at the root of any visual experience.

1 I have dealt with many of the issues discussed in this text in a number of previous articles published in catalogs of Ascânio MMM's exhibitions at Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, in 1994 and 1999–2000.

2 The artist evokes the cultural distinction between painting and sculpture; the transitivity and indefiniteness of these media in contemporary art; the difference, according to Heinrich Wölfflin, between sight rectified by tactile experience (Renaissance) and sight isolated in its own physical premises, the perception of light and shadow (baroque, Impressionism, photography etc.).

References

- BATCHELOR, David. *Minimalismo*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 1999.
CHILVERS, Ian. *Dicionário Oxford de Arte*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.
COCCHIARALE, Fernando & geiger, Anna Bella (eds.). *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: a vanguarda brasileira dos anos 50*. Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1987.
READ, Herbert (ed.). *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Arts and Artists*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.
STANGOS, Nikos (org.). *Conceitos da arte moderna*. Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar Editor, 2000.

Catalogues

- Ascânio MMM. Rio de Janeiro: Galeria Celina, 1969.
Ascânio MMM. Rio de Janeiro: Galeria do Grupo B, 1972.
Ascânio MMM. Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1976.
Ascânio MMM. Rio de Janeiro: Galeria Paulo Klabin, 1981.
Ascânio MMM. Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1994.
Ascânio MMM. Rio de Janeiro: Paço Imperial (Atelier FINEP), 1996.
Ascânio MMM – piramidais IV. Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1999-2000.