

The geometry of liquids and the dream of the solid

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When Ascânio came to ask me about the possibility of contributing to a book he wanted to publish, he suggested a piece on the angular ribbons, about which I had written already. What seemed obvious to him, and was indeed obvious, did not appear so to me. I told him I would not write the chapter he wanted, but was willing to do one on the curve series. He asked me some time in order to solve a number of practical problems, and finally accepted my offer. As I worked on the text, the reason why I had proposed this particular subject became increasingly clear to me. The immediate reason was sensuality. Doubtlessly what I have always found appealing in these works is their sensuous nature. Sensuousness here should be taken in its widest possible sense: calm and lightness as ways to find shelter in the world. I am reminded of Matisse's *Luxe, calme, et volupté* and Italo Calvino's proposal of lightness in one his Six Proposals for the Next Millennium, which is our present millennium.

Meanwhile, in one of the various time frames we live in simultaneously, I read the letters of Clarice Lispector, and I found it very difficult to begin writing this text. It was perhaps a sort of self-boycott, as if I were sparing myself the pleasure of writing about lightness and sensuousness. I have become sparing with my dreams, and I know that it is in my dreams that I find my ideas. But the whiteness and the luxuriousness of Ascânio's winding forms brought to my consciousness a childhood nightmare. And it was this nightmare, which I will proceed to describe, that gave me the provisional title of this text, which may turn out to be the definitive one: "The geometry of liquids and the dream of the solid." What seemed curious to me was the fact that I was overtaken by a psychoanalytic urge when facing such a rigorous — more precisely, such a calculatedly rational — oeuvre. For the origin of my reading of Ascânio's work is, after all, a nightmare, and this nightmare is the point of departure from which I intend to arrive at lightness and sensuality. Here is an apparent paradox. But what makes art interesting is the fact that the history of art is the history of paradoxes. Art exists where paradox persists.

Here is the nightmare.

It is one of those recurrent dreams; in fact, it took me a long time to make up my mind whether it was an actual memory or the memory of a dream. I decided to stop worrying about this and to classify it as a dream, though in my heart of hearts I still feel it must have been a real-life experience. It is a dream about a stone, a pebble found in a river, large and rounded. It was perfect in its shape, covered with moss, not so large that a six-year-old child could not lift it. It was irresistibly attractive. I felt compelled to pick it up. Suddenly what had seemed to be the perfect image of rest, a silent stone in the splendor of its shape, turned into a vision of horror: under the pebble hundreds of white maggots squirmed and crawled. The contrast between the tranquility of the motionless stone and the teeming frenzy of countless maggots in a damp place, struggling for existence, was a terrible sight. This was my first image of time, birth and death. It was an image of a lifetime as a segment between two voids that extend beyond birth and death, an image of time in its frenetic, competitive activity, all struggling against the predatory action of time, eventually returning on a definitive basis to the mineral motionlessness of stone.

The white, curvilinear image of Ascânio's works had the effect of activating a memory of time as tranquility and receptiveness and at the same time tension and repulsion. This duality mirrors my ambivalent perception of Ascânio's work, oscillating between its rational dimension and its sensuous innuendoes. This led me to the perception that the hidden text of his work is time. And this temporal drive may be perceived on the surface of his works, in the image of they create of fluidity, sensuousness and lightness, as well as in their interior, in the structure of their construction, which is rational. Ascânio conserves in his work two faces of time: the divided time of chronological rationality and the harmonic time of the shelter of sensuousness. This is the point from which his work sets out on a unique tack, which indicates his historical placement: the point of contact between Neo-Concretism and modernist architecture in Brazil.

Ascânio started out in the late 1960s. He studied at Universidade do Brasil's National School of Fine Arts from 1963 to 1964; then, from 1965 to 1969, he was a student in the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, where he graduated. During his formative years, Brazilian art was under the direct influence of the immediately previous period, marked by the construction of Brasília and the affirmation of the Constructivist idiom in Concretism and Neo-Concretism. The expressive need for order and balance that accompanied President Juscelino Kubitschek's developmental policies had a profound impact on the aesthetic choices made by Ascânio and the other artists in his generation. This self-confident moment of construction of a new reality for Brazil called for an emphasis on the forms of reason as a translation of a policy committed to hope and the future. Armed with a ruler and a compass, artists would implement change in a country that was, according to both Mário Pedrosa and Mário de Andrade, fated to modernity.

However, it should be stressed that both Niemeyer's architecture and the Neo-Concretist movement were characterized by a "softening of the rigidity of classical geometric form." This means that, on the one hand, the sense of restraint and order implied by geometry was the necessary counterweight, in a perverse socioeconomic structure, that preserved (as an imaginary projection) the equilibrium of the social chaos generated by the injustice of the situation; on the other hand, there was an insidious suggestion — a sort of inverted contamination — in which social forces imposed themselves, bringing about what I have identified as the "softening of the rigidity of form." In other words, the harshness must be attenuated because this is the survival strategy adopted by the Brazilian people, who have always been able to live on adversity, as Hélio Oiticica liked to say. Too much rigidity paralyzes inventiveness, puts an end to the imbalance and immobilizes form in its strictly spatial dimension.

Oscar Niemeyer introduced a sensuous, organic architecture, in which the lines in a woman's figure appear side by side with the angles and straight lines of Modernism; this has become the hallmark of his work. Neo-Concretism broke the constructive rigidity of geometric form by using the concept of the artist's body as an agent of time and consequently of expression, destabilizing the self-contained discourse that a geometric grammar inevitably imposes.

Both procedures deal with the body and time. In Niemeyer's architecture there is a direct transposition of the lines in a female body to the form of the buildings. The sensuousness of the line makes for a smoothness similar to the fluidity of a continuum allowed by the notion of harmonic time. To Neo-Concretism, in contrast, time is the constitutive element of the work. Seeing geometry as radically subjected to form, Neo-Concretism explicitly presents form as a locus where time is expressed. This is the major insight of the movement. It is as though one were working on the enemy's camp. The geometric figure places the reality of form on a field of numerical abstractions, removing its measurable aspects, as if it were a synthesis of space. But the ultimate reality of form is that there is form only where there is time. There can be no form without time. It is time that generates the change of a given form into another. And what geometry does is to camouflage time in form, underscoring its measurable aspects, limiting it to its spatial dimension. Neo-Concretism achieves the apparent paradox of reinvesting the geometric figure with its temporal dimension. This can be done only on the basis of the view of the artist's body and the spectator's body as agents of time. This issue came to have important consequences in the work of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Barrio, Antonio Manuel and others who carried the proposal to extremes, to the point of erasing the boundary between life and art. But this would require a lengthy discussion that would be out of place here.

The point is that what is historically unique about Brazilian art is its apprehension of time and the body. A bit of background will perhaps make this clearer. Time was of fundamental importance to Kubitschek's rhetoric and action; his slogan was "Fifty years in five." The sense of urgency in Brazilians' attempts to reflect on their own condition, even as their country has always lagged behind in history, as if it were necessary to make up for lost time, is a constant problem in our everyday lives, with consequences in Brazilian cultural life. Similarly, our culture's relationship with the body oscillates between celebration and destruction: one thinks of the slaves' submissive bodies, the tortured bodies of dissidents imprisoned by the military dictatorship, the suffering and abandoned bodies of the miserably poor, and of the body in

celebration during Carnival, through an image of sensuality which is, together with soccer and its vitality, one of our national mystifications.

Time and the body make up the locus where Brazilian culture identifies with itself, and also we are perceived from the outside. That is why the 1950s and 1960s are of such cultural importance: it was then that a synthesis was reached of the issues that feed and reinforce aspects of our identity, no longer from a folkloric viewpoint but as inner expressions of our differences, which determine a discursive consistency. That is, the body and time began to be perceived from a positive angle, as the elements that could make the potency and the act of Brazilian culture converge.

Ascânio's work gained visibility against the backdrop of the 1950s and 1960s. His training as an architect leaves no doubt as to the origin of his works. They arise out of the scale models of urban planning, which he saw not as plans but as abstract objects. The modular aspect and the idea of a repeating unit, unfolding itself in space, make up a constant in his career. Repetition in Ascânio's work has a constitutive nature beyond formal play. It is not just space that is repeated, but also — and more importantly — the movement in time determined by the kinematic characteristic that interruption can create. Specifically this applies to the white series, in which the plane is broken up by means of the angle so as to create a shifting sensation, through the rich play of light and shadow that it produces.

Interruption is the device that creates difference and the modulations of form in Ascânio's works. Form is differentiated by the introduction of an interruption. Interruption is a formal element in spatial questions, made possible only because it is warranted by time, which allows change, for change is the expression of difference. In other words, form provides access to time, not to space. Only geometric form sets up a direct, close connection with space to the extent that it is restricted to its measurable aspects. But form belongs to time, because it is time's container. It is thanks to the plastic character of form — that is, its ability to change — that we perceive the existence of time. This is the subtle boundary where art operates. The self-inflicted impasse of international Constructivism is a consequence of the movement's disregard for the fact that it imprisoned form in its numerical dimension. This problem began to be solved only when Brazilian artists proposed the "softening of the rigidity of geometric form."

Ascânio's oeuvre is the direct result of the Neo-Concretist proposal, combined with the plastic values of the tradition of modernity that came from the movement's involvement with architecture. What he did was to effect a change based on reduction of form to its minimal unit — the plane — and its activation by interrupting the plane with the use of angles. Its action might be summed up as: Surface / Break / Depth = Plane / Angle = Light / Shadow. This is the internal logic of the works in the curve series. But the rigidity of the process is at the service of an extremely sensuous and light form that unfolds in space like a fan. This passage from a structure of rigorous mathematical logic to a delicate, sensuous and light form can readily be adapted to Brazilian artists' project of softening the rigidity of geometric form, mentioned above.

The passage is possible because the artist has an affective perception of form, which takes place when we realize that time is difference and difference is time. Only what is differentiated belongs to the order of time such as we experience it among the living. The time of the living is a time divided between before and after — before birth and after death, just as the present moment is poised between the immediately previous and the immediately following moment. Life takes place in this interval. The constructive principle of Ascânio's work also takes place in this sequential space between before and after. When I mentioned the interruption of the plane by means of the angle, what I meant was that it is at this moment that Ascânio produces difference. The angle appears in order to constitute depth, to cause an interruption of the uniform mass of the undifferentiated plane, so as to create movements in space. This is the inner structure of his work, which in fact, though it responds to the immediate logic of the material, wooden laths and metal profiles — repetition of the same — has the objective and metaphorical function of reproducing the logic of what is differentiated. That is why these works are painted white. White is the uncontrollable flow of time (fully lighted field) constantly on the move, and the angles are there in order to break the whiteness by producing fields of

light and shadow.

What makes the curve series potent is its tremendous allusive charge. It is open to countless possibilities in the history of Brazilian and world art. In it, one should not neglect the presence of the baroque or the delicacy of Brazilian colonial architecture. Mention should also be made of modern architecture, Constructivism, Minimalism and kinetic art. But what is strongest and most unique in it is its affective dimension. Its ability to affect us is concentrated in the fact that it is pure production of difference. By this I mean that when Ascânio breaks the plane with the edges of the angles of the wooden laths or metal profiles he produces interruptions in a uniform and undifferentiated sameness. It is only when there is an interruption of the same, as in birth, for instance, that the Other is created; it is only when the chain of sameness is broken that affect is possible. Real affect exists only where the Other exists. The Self needs the Other so that the flow of affect may take place. The same is true of time, only it is the other way around: we perceive the passage of time solely when we connect the present moment to before and after and create the past, the future and the everyday. But to do this we must give up the continuous time of affect, which is able to disregard the fragmented order of the chronological time of production and allows us to experiment the wholeness of being, which is pure time, or rather the present moment in its purity, access to which is made possible by the pleasure of the senses.

The curve series is the plastic materialization or the search for the creation of the material presence of a perception of the world from the viewpoint of difference, which is the force that generates the time of affect, constituted in and by sensuality. The series brings out the richness of these fields of ambivalence: the Self and the Other, the One and the Many.

The series also creates a superimposition of procedures in which the implicit logic of the rationality of the construction of works is at the service of explicitly sensible perceptions, just as the hidden motivation — time — generates the constructive logic we perceive in the surface of the work.

The curve series may be read from the angle of Gestalt figure-and-ground shifting, in which at times the field of reason is the ground and the affective field is the figure, and at other times we perceive the affective field as ground and the field of reason as figure.

My dream reproduces the same structure of alternation and ambivalence found in Ascânio's works. That is why it gave me access to his oeuvre. Before the stone, silent and whole, tranquility; before the seething maggots of diversity, horror. The stone lies beyond the disorder of multiplicity. It is the singularity that brings peace. The maggots are the present moment, the convulsive chaos of undifferentiated multiplicity, which is constantly moving us away from ourselves. Art is the possible ordering that aims at the absolutely unique, absolute difference (the eternal Other). This is the subject of the curve series; this silent, white search in which we can find difference repeating itself in order to reach the deeper unity, as the eternal time of sexual intercourse. Therein lies its sensuousness, because it directs us to the unity that saves us from chaos and directs us toward difference. Geometry of the liquids: an underground excavation that directs the necessary flow of waters towards the Other. The dream of the solid: the desire to approach the silent language of stones, which is the same as the language of art — the art of presence, which will not let go of the time of the forever-present that lies before and beyond us.