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Art and Language in Vilém Flusser’s Brazil:
Concrete Art and Poetry

In his correspondence with friends and colleagues, Vilém Flusser often complained that he felt exiled to the periphery of culture and intellectual life after migrating from Europe to Brazil in 1940. Paradoxically, however, he was arriving at a center of innovation that would shape his thinking. Concrete art and poetry flourished in Brazil in the fifties, and Flusser, who had decided that his primary focus would be language, was introduced to these new vernaculars. In particular, the formal layout of Concrete art and poetry, with their rigorous approaches to space, color, and typography, would impact Flusser. “The Gestalt,” he wrote, and “the visual character of writing” in “Concretist experiments are rupturing discursive thought and endowing it with a second dimension of ‘ideas’ which discursive thought cannot supply.”¹ These methods served as proto-interfaces or screens, predicting the digital revolution, and offering what poet and theorist Haroldo de Campos called a “new dialogical relationship” with “imperial” languages, since Concrete art was an international language and Concrete poetry took very little vocabulary to interpret and understand.² This paper looks at Flusser’s personal engagement with these phenomena and how they informed his concept of “superficial” reading, non-linear “post-historical” thinking, and the idea that philosophy itself would eventually be practiced in images rather than written words.

Art in Brazil

Brazil was becoming a vital center for visual art in the forties. The Modern Art Week (Semana de Arte Moderna) in São Paulo in February 1922, with a flurry of exhibitions, lectures, poetry readings, and concerts is often seen as a seminal moment for the advent of modern art in Brazil, analogous to the Armory Show in 1913, which introduced European modernism to New York. (Also important is the emergence a few years later of the concept of Antropofagia, or Anthropophagy, in which European and

colonial artistic influences would be “cannibalized” and digested.) After World War II, however, Brazil witnessed a surge of activity: the opening of the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo in 1948 and the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro in 1949; the establishment of a commercial art market; and the inauguration of the São Paulo Biennal in 1951, modeled after the Venice Biennale. The Brazilian government and wealthier classes saw the efficacy of using art as a platform, embracing abstraction in particular as a shorthand for the advanced modern state at a moment when Brazil was attempting to achieve warp-speed industrial development and gain visibility on the world stage.

Concrete art was an important component in this project. A geometric form of abstraction, devoid of figurative elements and symbolic meaning and detached from observed reality, Concrete art was developed by the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg, the founder of De Stijl, and laid out in in a manifesto titled “The Basis of Concrete Art” published in the single of issue of Art Concret in April 1930. The movement argued for painting constructed from pure plastic elements – planes and colors – and avoiding nature, lyricism and sentiment. After van Doesburg’s death in 1931, Max Bill, a Swiss artist, designer, and architect who studied at the Bauhaus and later co-founded the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (HfG Ulm, or Ulm School of Design) became a primary proponent. Bill extended Concrete art into ideas of “good form” generated by mathematical operations, and “good design” – “honest” and not merely popular or fashionable – and which would clearly influence Flusser’s later writings in which art and design were conflated.

Although not a critical figure in Europe, Bill found his audience in South America. He first visited Brazil in 1941 and met with artists traveling in Europe, like Argentinians Tomás Maldonado and Juan Melé, and a retrospective of Bill’s work was mounted at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) in 1951, the same year he won the international prize for sculpture at the first São Paulo Biennal.

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5 Theo van Doesburg, “Base de la peinture concrete,” Art Concret 1 (April-May 1930): 1. See also Gladys Fabre and Doris Wintgens Hôte, eds., Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde: Constructing a New World (London: Tate Publishing, 2010). The manifesto was also signed by Otto G. Carlsund, Jean Hélion, and Leon Tutundjian.
Biennial. (He served as a jury member for the second edition of the Biennial in 1953.) 8 Swiss-derived Concrete art conveyed rigor and rationality, contradicting the stereotype of Latin American art devoted to protesting workers or peasants and tropical flora and fauna. 9 Ronaldo Brito wrote that, “to a certain degree, in the case of Brazilian artists, adhesion to constructive tendencies was a messianic project that involved a series of efforts to overcome underdevelopment.” 10 Geometric abstraction was seen as a mode of cultural transformation in postwar Latin America, a unifying international style capable of giving rise to a new world order that would eradicate language differences (Brazilian Portuguese surrounded by nations speaking Spanish) and geopolitical borders. Its easily readable and reproducible vernacular ultimately extended into everything from painting and sculpture to posters, murals, dresses, and tablecloths. 11 And the Brazilian Concretists had ambitious aims. In 1956, Waldemar Cordeiro, the Italian-born Concrete painter and later cybernetic artist whom Flusser recommended for the 1973 São Paulo Biennial wrote: “Art differs from pure thought insofar as it is material and from ordinary things insofar as it is thought. Art is not an expression of intellectual, ideological, or religious thinking. Nor is it the expression of hedonism. Art is, in other words, not expression but product. The concept of productive art is a fatal blow to idealism; it releases art from the secondary status to which it had been reduced.” 12

Flusser was aware of this development. A section The History of the Devil dedicated to painting reveals Flusser’s view of visual art as a paradigmatic form: “painters of concrete art are of a fundamental importance for an interpretation of current times . . . They are, effectively the advanced posts of the natural sciences. Our scientists are still at the state of representational painting.” 13 Although Flusser

8 Ivan Serpa won the top prize for National Painter at the same 1951 São Paulo Biennial with Formas (1951), a geometric abstract painting. Serpa would go on to teach many artists associated with the Neo-Concrete movement.
9 Key figures were Tarsila do Amaral, Candido Portinari, Lasar Segall, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, and José Pancetti, artists searching for a national identity, or a term Flusser also used: brasilidade (Brazilianness). Moreover: “In Brazilian Concretist production we can easily perceive an anxiety about overcoming technological backwardness and the irrationalism caused by underdevelopment. This is why it reacted against regionalist realism, which was supported by the country’s official Left in particular. This art consisted of a hodgepodge of archaic and folkloric references, extraordinarily diverse from a formal point of view, which were put to ideological use (recall, for example, the mixture of rustic and Renaissance traditions that characterized Mexican Muralism). Until the 1960s, the Brazilian constructive avant-garde was the most important alternative to the dominance of this regionalist tendency, which managed to seduce even a middle class little attuned to leftist politics.” Ronaldo Brito, “Neo-concretism, Apex and Rupture of the Brazilian Constructive Project” [1975], October 161 (2017): 116.
10 Ronaldo Brito, “Neo-concretism, Apex and Rupture of the Brazilian Constructive Project,” 117.
had decided that language would be his primary concern as a philosopher, visual art increasingly penetrated this investigation.

Concrete Poetry

The concerns of visual art often overlapped with Concrete poetry, which emerged in the early 1950s in Brazil, Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria – outside the European capitals afflicted by World War II. Concrete poetry was concerned with the physical aspects of language – spatial syntax, typography, color, design, sound, translation, and the poem as an object. Its roots were in many places: Stéphane Mallarmé’s Symbolist poetry; the syncopated concision of Emily Dickinson’s verse; Walt Whitman’s object-lists; the Dinggedicht (thing-poem) of Rainer Maria Rilke; and the experimental modernism of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce. In art, Mondrian’s Broadway Boogie Woogie paintings – and the idea of a universal vision in the plastic arts – Bill’s Concrete art, and Josef Albers’ approach to color and composition were cited as important sources—as well as Optical Art, which was reacting against the subjective expressionism of much U.S. and European abstract art. The time-space experiments of composers like Webern, Boulez, and Stockhausen, and other concrete and electronic music served as further sources.

Most important for Flusser was the Noigandres group, formed in São Paulo in 1952 by brothers Augusto de Campos and Haroldo, along with Décio Pignatari, and named after a line in Ezra


Pound’s Canto XX. The term “concrete,” for the Noigandres, took inspiration from modern architectural developments in Brazil, which attacked the colonial-Baroque architecture: their manifesto was inspired by Lúcio Costa’s architectural “Pilot Plan for Brasília” and the architectural rhetoric of architects like Le Corbusier, who first visited Brazil in 1929, and Richard Neutra. The Noigandres devoted themselves to developing a universal poem-object that would unite visual, verbal, and spoken elements of language. They also described the Concrete poem as a form of “metacommunication” that “deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication,” and based in cybernetics: “the poem as a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back. Faster communication.”

Flusser had been lucky in his friendships – and particularly his association with the esteemed literary author João Guimarães Rosa. However, in Guimarães Rosa’s writing, Flusser – clearly absorbing the impact of Concrete poetry – could see the “crisis” in the literary novel, since it “presupposes a universe where the author is omniscient and manipulates events – a universe that is unacceptable today.” Instead, Flusser cites the visual impact of Guimarães Rosa’s work as its primary contribution: “In one’s [his] opinion, any phenomenology of language must start from a spoken rhythm and the visual Gestalt of written language. For Guimarães Rosa (who was never really a writer but a storyteller – vate), the visual Gestalt was secondary and the melody of the spoken language fascinated him. Curiously, however, as Guimarães Rosa’s œuvre progressed, he became a revolutionary of the Brazilian Gestalt, and the Concretists and other practitioners emerged from his groundwork.”

The Gestalt of a poem or a Concrete painting was an idea championed by art critic Mario Pedrosa, who had met Gestalt psychologists in Berlin in the late twenties and written a dissertation based on Kurt Koffka’s ideas and led to Concrete poetry being read in a non-linear fashion, its meaning lying

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17 The Noigandres also cited Lewis Carroll, Ernest Fenollosa, Oswald de Andrade, e.e. cummings, Guillaume Apollinaire, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Sergei Eisenstein as progenitors. The lawyer, journalist, and film critic José Lino Grunewald also joined the Noigandres group in 1958. The three Paulista Noigandres poets were later joined by three Cariocas: Wlademir Dias Pino, Ronaldo Azeredo, and Ferreira Gullar, who would be central in the theorization around Neo-Concrete art.
18 Fahlstöm, on the other hand, was more concerned with the importance of words such as “capitalism,” “alienation,” and “exploitation” which signified actual conditions and could be concretized in language—and poetry. See A.S. Bessa, “Architecture Versus Sound in Concrete Poetry” (1997) on UbuWeb Papers, http://www.ubu.com/papers/bessa.html.
19 The “verbivocovisual” was a term coined by James Joyce in Finnegans Wake, which gave the aural, visual, and signified equal weight: “Up to this eircrsewbind an admirable verbivocovisual presentment of the worldrenowned Caerholme Event has been being given by The Irish Race and World. The huddled and aliven stablercrasers have shared fleetfooted enthusiasm with the paddocks dare and ditches tare while the mews was combing ground.” James Joyce, Finnegans Wake (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), 341.
21 Flusser, Groundless, 171.
22 Flusser, Groundless, 178.
on the surface in the same way Flusser would argue technical images called for “superficial” reading.  

Flusser’s argument that technical images signaled the end of linear writing (and thinking) is presaged in Concrete art and poetry’s interest in non-linear writing and composition.  

In his essay “The Open Work of Art” (1955), which preceded Umberto Eco’s The Open Work (1962), Haroldo de Campos described poetry arranged in a “circular organization,” inspired in part by James Joyce, whose “universe evolved from a linear development of time toward space-time,” and Finnegans Wake “retains the properties of a circle, of the equidistance of all points on it from the center. The work is porous to the reader, accessible from any of the places one chooses to approach it.” Likewise, Décío Pignatari in “The Contiguity Illusion” (1978) argued that traditional philosophy, spelled out in language with one letter placed next to another, elevated the “logical illusion” or “contiguity illusion”: Aristotelian logic and linear thinking, carried forward in thinkers like Hume or Peirce, which got smuggled into modern linguistics and semiotics.

Concrete poetry’s spatial syntax, resulted in a perceptual rather than conceptual approach, which is significant when one thinks of Flusser’s writing in what would be called his “phenomenological seventies.” The Noigandres’s “Pilot Plan” called for using “graphic space as a structural agent” and following a “space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporistical development” and with a “direct-analogical, not logical-discursive juxtaposition of elements,” perceived rather than merely read, the way Flusser would later argue technical images are scanned.

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24 In the opening statement of the AD exhibition edition in 1956, Déció Pignatari wrote, “Verse having been abolished, Concrete poetry confronts many problems of space and time (movement) that both the visual arts and architecture have in common, not to speak of the most advanced (electronic) music. Moreover, the ideogram, for example, can perfectly well function on a wall, internal or external.” AD 20 (1956), np. Cited in Claus Clüver, “The Noigandres Poets and Concrete Art.”
Concrete poetry’s relationship with technology is also notable. The concrete poem’s visual and spatial layout has been cited recently as a precursor to the computer screen, interfaces, and multimedia, and several concrete poets took their work into the digital realm, with video poems created by Lenora de Barros and Augusto de Campos. In much the same way Borges’s short story “The Garden of the Forking Paths” has been seen as a fictional diagramming of the internet, avant la lettre, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith has stated that: “everything [Décio Pignatari] was saying seemed to predict the mechanics of the internet … delivery, content, interface, distribution, multi-media, just to name a few. Suddenly it made sense: like de Kooning’s famous statement: ‘History doesn’t influence me. I influence it,’ it’s taken the web to make us see just how prescient concrete poetics was in predicting its own lively reception half a century later.”

Similarly, in an interview from the nineties, Augusto de Campos reflected that Concrete poetry “signals the future”: “Without intending, in any way, to fetishize the new powers of technology, I believe that a great part of the future of poetry will be affected by them. Some current experiences that are now just incipient, such as computer graphics, videotext, holography, and recording techniques, demonstrate that CP is at the base of a viable language for these media. … Moreover, automation, which frightens humanists so much, might perhaps be humanized through poetry and, enriching itself conceptually, attain the dignity that the mere games of electronic entertainment cannot confer on it.”

These ideas overlap profoundly with Flusser’s questioning in the eighties about the future of writing, technology, and automation. In The History of the Devil, however, Flusser cites concrete poetry and music as forms of language and considers mathematics as a “meta-language,” predicting his later stance, that writing would disappear into binary code and images. Moreover, the “transcreation” of poetry between languages and the “transposition” between mediums like language and painting in Concrete poetry signals an early instance of what was later deemed a “post-medium condition” in which medium specificity, the tidy lines between processes, practices, materials, and contexts was either eroded or ceased to exist. In The History of the Devil, Flusser wrote that concrete poetry is “pictorial

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31 Augusto de Campos in Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview with Augusto de Campos.”
language” which refuses to be “dragged” into discourse, arresting language at its roots and insisting “on the aistheton, on the immediate experience of the word.”\textsuperscript{33} In the same way that he always looked for the high stakes in any practice or format, Flusser wrote: “Every web of language pulls the intellect down through the mountainside of poetry. Concrete poetry seeks to offer the intellect a support so that it can hold onto the summit. Concrete poetry is, therefore, a weapon of the Will against illusion, which seeks to prevent abstraction and to keep concreteness. This is a new weapon and its efficacy has not yet been put to the test. It is, however, a potentially dangerous weapon. The emergence of this attempt in Brazil is proof that this civilization is ready to overcome gluttony and envy through pride.”\textsuperscript{34}

Poetry and Painting

The affinities between Concrete art and poetry are profound, suggesting ideas that would become central for Flusser in later years around the non-linear and non-hierarchical; the optical over the discursive; universal language; and the merging of art, design, and mass communication. Claus Clüver and Gonzalo Aguilar argue that Concrete poetry looked well beyond the poetic both for inspiration and legitimation: Gestalt psychology, phenomenology, information theory, the Einsteinian space-time continuum, as well as Russian Formalism, Ezra Pound, and Mallarmé.\textsuperscript{35} Augusto de Campos’s 1953 poetamenos were published in color and Haroldo de Campos created works either in response or homage to the abstract paintings of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich.\textsuperscript{36} For instance, his Concrete poem “branco” (white) from noigandres no. 4 (1958), Clüver calls an “intermedial transposition of a painting into a poem,” in this case Malevich’s Suprematist monochrome White on White (1918).\textsuperscript{37} Augusto de

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\textsuperscript{33} Flusser, The History of the Devil, 162.

\textsuperscript{34} Flusser, The History of the Devil, 163.

\textsuperscript{35} Clüver writes that the poets “found that in developing their art could learn just as much from painters and composers as they had from their literary models.” Claus Clüver, “Klangfarbenmelodie in Polychromatic Poems: A. von Webern and A. de Campos,” Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (September 1981): 386. See also Gonzalo Aguilar, Poesía concreta brasileña: Las vanguardias en la encrucijada modernista (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2003).


Campos was committed to using color in his work: words and syllables in his polychromatic *poetamenos* were color-coded to designate multiple speakers, but also respond to Anton von Webern’s whose *Klangfarbenmelodie*, which designated “color tones” of specific musical instruments, and recall Josef Albers’ *Homage to the Square* series, which explored the interaction of color. This foreshadows Flusser’s involvement in the eighties with the *Casa da Cor* (House of Color), a project inspired by Goethe’s color theories in which color was coded and served as a universal language akin to Esperanto.

The São Paulo-based Ruptura artists and the Noigandres poets were closely associated – at least, at first. Their images and texts appeared together in the single 1949 issue of *Revista de Novíssimos*, and the 1952 *Ruptura* manifesto, whose layout looks like a Concrete poem. In their writings, published in newspapers in the fifties, the Noigandres poets referred to earlier art – Malevich, Mondrian’s *Boogie-Woogie* series, Max Bill, and Josef Albers – and Déci Pignatari and Cordeiro traveled to Chile together in 1953 to participate in the Continental Culture Congress financed by the Brazilian Communist Party. The painter and designer Geraldo de Barros encouraged Augusto de Campos’ to produce his multi-colored *poetamenos* using typewritten copies with colored carbon paper.

An important moment came in 1955, when Pignatari traveled to visit Brazilian artists studying at the HfG Ulm and met Eugen Gomringer, then serving as secretary for Max Bill and they discovered that both of them were creating non-linear poems. The next year, *I exposição nacional de arte concreta*...
(1956) opened in São Paulo, traveling to Rio de Janeiro the next year, and showcasing both visual artists and Concrete poets.\(^{42}\) An issue of *AD: Arquitetura e Decoração* functioned as the catalogue for that exhibition, and included statements, poems, and reproductions of art works and a cover based on a painting by Hermelindo Fiaminghi, *Triângulos com movimento em diagonal* (Triangles with Diagonal Movement) (1956) later owned by the poet Ronaldo Azeredo.\(^{43}\)

One can see in both poems and paintings the same interest in structural procedures and interplay – the interdependence of visual elements on the canvas, disrupted grids, interlocking geometries, and conceptual, non-linear arrangements which force the eye to move in different trajectories. In both paintings and poems, straight lines, squares and triangles, either of text or flat, solid color, traverse the surface, which needn’t always be read from left to right. Concrete poets and artists both approached the grid—a traditional modernist structure and metaphor for progress and order—from a new angle, attempting to warp and bend its composition and meaning, as one can see in Augusto de Campos’s “terremoto” (1956).\(^{44}\)

Some of the Concrete paintings and poems show remarkable structural similarities - for instance, in the interlocking designs of Augusto de Campos’s “uma vez, uma vala” and “ovo novo” and Waldemar Cordeiro’s *Movimento* (Movement) from 1951; Haroldo de Campos’ “nascemorre” in *Noigandres* 4, 1958 and Luis Sacilotto’s *Concreção 6048* (1960); or Augusto de Campos’s “terremoto”
that is, the version published in Mary Ellen Solt’s compendium of Concrete poetry – and the Gestalt inspired canvases of Judith Lauand, the only woman in Grupo Ruptura.

Mathematics was a theoretical touchstone for both poets and painters, from Max Bill’s “Mathematical Approach in Contemporary Art” to Haroldo de Campos’ “From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematics of composition” (1957), which treated the poem as a kind of equation. Concrete poetry’s embrace of mathematics, particularly in terms of permutations and the relationship between elements – exhausting all the semantic possibilities of a word or phrase – and meaning related to the poem as a “system” and its overlap with Information Aesthetics, should also be factored into thinking about Concrete poetry and its impact on Flusser, who touched on mathematics frequently throughout this writings, in its relationship to abstraction, music, and the universe of technical images.

Both the paintings and poems, then, were theoretical objects. However, they opened into a much larger field. As Décio Pignatari wrote in that 1956 issue of AD: “Thanks to concretism’s critical stance, it can absorb the concerns of other artistic trends in an attempt to overcome them through the coherent, objective formulation of certain problems. It is interested in all forms of visual expression, from an unwitting discovery on the façade of a commonplace laundry mat or street sign to the remarkable pictorial knowledge of a Volpi, Mallarmé’s greatest poem, or the door handles designed by Max Bill at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm.”

This is striking, in the way it foresees Flusser’s phenomenology but also his cross-disciplinary approach in which, ultimately, functional objects would undergo a utopian transformation and art and design would merge. Flusser’s succinct summary of Concrete poetry’s importance is worth noting, then, since the effects of Concrete poetry’s project extended into Flusser’s writing and thought to the end of his life. He wrote: “Among the most important results, the “Concretist” experiments raised awareness in relation to the Gestalt of writing, or the visual character of letters; the possibility of combining letters and non-letters; problems of pagination; and inserting pages into new contexts. This new awareness infiltrated not only the general press and book design

field but also, perhaps more significantly, poster design and subsequently urban space. This meant a reformulation of clogged up channels (from Gutenberg’s galaxies) in order to transmit new types of messages. Concretist experiments are rupturing discursive thought and endowing it with a second dimension of “ideas” which discursive thought cannot supply.”

**Translation and the Neo-Concrete**

Concrete art and poetry caught the attention of Max Bense, a physicist, mathematician, and philosopher at the Technical University in Stuttgart best known as a founder of Information Aesthetics. Through Pignatari and Gomringer, Bense met with Haroldo de Campos in 1959, forging a connection between Brazil and Germany that, while not fraught, was fruitful. Bense eventually visited Brazil several times in the early sixties, culminating in the book *Brasilianische Intelligenz. Eine cartesianische Reflexion* (Brazilian Thought: A Cartesian Reflection) published in 1965, which included images of sculpture by Lygia Clark and Bruno Giorgi, the architecture of Brasilia, and a section devoted to concrete poetry, and particularly the Noigandres group. Bense did not distinguish between art and science: he organized over ninety exhibitions at the Study Gallery at the Technical University in Stuttgart, including Concrete poetry, early computer-generated drawings – made by computer scientists – and the work of Flusser’s friend Mira Schendel.

The relationship was even closer, however: Flusser and Haroldo de Campos published essays in the same issue if *Cavalo Azul* (1965) and Flusser wrote “Concreto – abstrato,” a 1964 article published in *O Estado de São Paulo* in which he considered the “radical” aspects of Concrete poetry and named Haroldo de Campos as one of its primary practitioners. Moreover, the same year, Flusser was included in a Spanish journal devoted to important thinkers in Brazil that included Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, as well as João Guimarães Rosa. Flusser also translated a fragment of Haroldo de

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50 In addition to Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, Bense lists Ronaldo Azeredo, José Lino Grünewald, Pedro Xisto, Mário da Silva Brito, L.C. Vinholes, Wladimir Dias Pino, Edgard Braga, Cassiano Ricardo, and Alfonso Avila as “more or less” to the Noigandres and publish in the interdisciplinary journal *invenção*. See Max Bense, *Brasilianische Intelligenz. Eine cartesianische Reflexion* (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1965), 61.
52 See *Revista de Cultura Brasileira* 11 (December 1964).
Campos’s epic *Galáxias* (1963-76) for Bense and Elisabeth Walther’s experimental journal *rot* 25 (1966). Flusser credits his friend Milton Vargas for bringing Max Bense (as well as Concrete poetry) to his attention, and Bense would serve as an important model for Flusser: a thinker who merged information theory with aesthetic concerns and considered contemporary visual art and poetry as advanced realms for thinking. Written in 50 fragments, *Galáxias* follows a Ulysses-like narrator voyaging in Brazil. “Circuladô de fulô” (Circulation of Soot) the fifteenth text in *Galáxias* was inspired by a song that Campos heard in a state fair, possibly in the outskirts of Recife. The canto-like fragment – later turned into a song by the Tropicalista singer Caetano Veloso, was written between February 21 and 24, 1965. The section that Flusser translated (another one in the small booklet is translated by Anatol Rosenfeld) comes from a manuscript by Haroldo de Campos, still in the Flusser Archive. Flusser and de Campos clashed on the translation and Flusser used the section dedicated to de Campos in his autobiography, *Groundless*, to jab back at Campos’s stance as an engagé poet; he later wrote, “I felt admiration, but also a deep divergence, for engineers in poetry such as Haroldo de Campos. I had lost myself.”

Flusser ultimately ended up closer to other Concrete poets like Theon Spanudis, an art collector and champion of Mira Schendel’s work, who also contributed to Dora Ferreira da Silva’s *Cavalo Azul*. (He also wrote about poets like Mario Chamie, who created the “praxis-poem” which deviated from Concrete poetry by putting the emphasis on, among other things, sound.) At the same time, Concrete art and poetry experienced serious push-back in Brazil in the late fifties, which would also

54 Flusser, “In Search of Meaning,” *Writings*, 204.
56 Flusser, *Writings*, 205.
have implications for Flusser’s work. In 1957, *Jornal do Brasil* published essays by two competing factions: São Paulo-based Haroldo de Campos “Da Fenomenologia da Composição à Matemática da Composição” (“From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematics of Composition”), which argued an objective poetry based in formal methods of construction and “Poesia Concreta: Experiência Intuitiva” (“Concrete Poetry: An Intuitive Experience”), signed by *carioca* (Rio de Janeiro-based) poets which shifted the emphasis from the poem and poet to the experience of the reader. A 1959 Neo-Concrete manifesto written by the art critic Ferreira Gullar and signed by Amilcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Reynaldo Jardim, and Flusser’s friend Theon Spanusdis was published in the Sunday supplement of *Jornal do Brasil.*

Inspired by cybernetics, Gestalt psychology and optical experiments by artists like Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely, the Neo-concretists decried the “dangerously acute rationalism” of Concrete art and poetry: “We do not conceive of a work of art as a “machine” or “object” but as a “quasi-corpus,” that is, a being whose reality is not exhausted by the external relationships of its elements; a being that can be deconstructed into parts for analysis but can be fully understood only through a direct, phenomenological approach.”

The Neo-Concrete break signaled a shift amplified in the sixties and moving toward direct experience with art, championing the affective, sensorial, and subjective encounter with art over objectivity – but also circling back to the utopian constructivism of Mondrian, Pevsner, and Malevich. It was also a critique of the earlier Concrete embrace of *Gestalt,* which many felt was too reductive and simplistic: Gullar and Hélio Oiticica, who joined the Neo-concretists after the manifesto was published, were heavily steeped in the Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology – which critiqued earlier Gestalt theory – and argued that Concrete art saw “man” as a social and economic being rather than a

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61. Gullar, “Manifesto Neoconcreto.”

more holistic *being-in-the-world*. This foreshadows Flusser, who made heavy use of the word *Gestalt* in his writings – but increasingly embraced the phenomenological idea of *being-in-the-world*, thread through the philosophies of Heidegger and Husserl. The call to eradicate the gap between art and life would also be felt in in Gullar’s urging to move art from individual “contemplation” to “action” and *participation* and, a key element of Flusser’s proposal for the 1973 edition of the São Paulo Biennial, based on a communications model, and which argued for the exhibition as “laboratory” rather than the display of discrete aesthetic objects.

Ultimately, Flusser’s closest affiliations were with artists such as Samson Flexor (1907-1971), who was included in *Do figurativismo ao abstracionismo* (1949), the inaugural exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo, and who founded the first abstract painting workshop in Brazil, and Mira Schendel (1919-1988), who created an idiosyncratic body of work that rigorously engaged both abstraction and language. (Schendel was friendly with Haroldo de Campos, who wrote a poem for one of her exhibitions and recommended her to Max Bense, who exhibited her work several times in Stuttgart and dedicated an issue of *rot* to her graphic works.) Nonetheless, Concrete art and poetry impacted Flusser in inestimable ways, laying the groundwork for ideas that would appear in later writings. Beyond spoken and written language, these experimental forms of visual art and poetry informed what would become, in Flusser’s universe, the “superficial” reading of technical images, the eclipse of text by images, images-as-philosophy, and, finally, the era of non-linear post-history.

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63 Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical perspective proposed “a new frame of reference involving intentionality and structures of behavior in problem solving as well as learning, objections to naive realism in Gestalt Psychology, and some new categories for a descriptive, reflective, and sometimes analytic point of view. For that point of view, gestaltist descriptions are not about the contents of minds conditioned by real but unobservable objects but instead are about the real things which we perceive about us, ourselves and others included.” Lester Embree, “Merleau-Ponty’s Examination of Gestalt Psychology,” *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 10 (1980): 117. Gullar had read Merleau-Ponty’s *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), and “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945) by the time he wrote the Neo-Concrete manifesto. See Ariel Jiménez, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with Ariel Jiménez* (New York and Caracas: Fundación Cisneros/Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, 2012), 69-70.


65 A monograph devoted to Flexor’s work would also use this title. See Alice Brill, ed., *Samson Flexor do figurativismo ao abstracionismo* (Exhibition catalogue, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1990).

References


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