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Paulo Herkenhoff

IN ORDER TO BETTER SEE ATHOS BULCÃO

To be better seen, Athos Bulcão requires that his many faces are heard. Not that these works are not autonomous in relation to the artist's history, but because this history reveals a man of sensibility. These works compose the multiplicity of Athos's skills. That's why knowing the author's history will bring the acquisition of new hypothesis and pleasure, expanding one's inner ability to increase the meanings of a work of art.

Photomontage

In the beginning of the 1950's, Brazil witnesses effervescence in the field of photography. In the magazines *O Cruzeiro* and *Manchete*, photojournalism would find its apex. The virtuous photographs of the photo clubs reaches its summit in the exploration of themes and fixation of canons, such as the *contre-jour*, composition, cuts, contrasts, lab work.

The root of an abstract photography grew slowly inside the photo clubs, as a production at the margin of mainstream standards. Several mechanisms were used to take out from the photographic image any reference from reality: closeness and detail (the whole notion of the object was lost), texture, architectural details, light and mirror projections, movement capturing (as a remission to Balla and Bragaglia).

During this period is worthwhile to notice the pioneerism of Geraldo de Barros, with his Photoforms creating spatial rhythm and modulation. It seems that the greatest investigator of the period was José Oiticica Filho, producing a constructive photography, involving the creation of a plastic form and the notion of time, condensed in the photographic process. Oiticica interfered the whole time, creating the form to be photographed, which was altered in the process of revelation and copy with negative/positive plays, inversions, repetitions, enlargement and reduction, etc.

In the experimental field, in parallel to these abstract and concrete experiences, and overcoming the several types of documentation photography (photojournalism, photopictorialism, photo club photography, domestic photography, etc), the photomontage is affirmed. Bulcão will be a major artist of this other kind of photography.

In the whole world photomontage, with the partnership of photocollage, was presente in several moments of art, specially Dadaism, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism. It was a practice of El Lissitsky, Grosz, Heartfield, Hausmann, Rodchenko, Max Ernst and many others.

In 1943 the poet Jorge de Lima edits a photomontage album: “A pintura em pânico” (“The painting in panic”). In the preface, Murilo Mendes suggests a broader relation of these works by Jorge de Lima. “This alliance between painting and photography allows and facilitates the meeting between daily life and myth, the particular and the universal. Panic is often necessary for the emergence of organization (...)”

In the beginning of the 1950’s, in parallel to the experiments carried out by Geraldo de Barros, Oiticica and Yoshida, Athos Bulcão creates dozens of photomontages.

This production by Athos Bulcão is better referred to the universal history of photomontage than if restricted to an inheritance from Jorge de Lima.

Athos’ works attempt to keep a relation with photography and its logic. The photomontage formed with fragments of photos was once again photographed for a new printing. With this, a unity of surface and treatment was obtained, reiterating the photographic code. Jorge de Lima, by employing in his works typographic vignettes and illustrations, abandons the idea of operating within the scope of photography and its logic. In this sense, Jorge de Lima’s photomontages are closely related to the Max Ernst’s works.

Athos Bulcão’s photography seeks to operate within the scope of photography, to keep the appearance of its reading code, not breaking it, in order to surprise the reading through the subverted logic of the elements. Murilo Mendes’ preface for “A pintura em pânico” seems to be better suited to Athos (whom he met in Vieira da Silva’s circle): “There is a combination of the unexpected with logic”.

This organizational result ensures the inversion of a play of meanings. Athos precisely understands photomontage: proportion of the fragments, tonalities of the photographs, light sources, logical relation between the parts (to later subvert them). The careful integration of decisive details and the re-photographed image for a new relation are phases for the production of the photomontage in its final state. This certain and logic process of making brings Athos’ production near to the photo collages of the American artist Joseph Cornell. Athos Bulcão knows the codes of photography, as much as the “color” in a black and white work, as Wittgenstein tells us.

The photo seems “normal” (surface, light, tonalities, proportions), except that... the head doesn’t go with the body, there is a pachyderm in the ball. Athos no longer offers the certitude of an image of reality. Surprise, criticism and humor compose a new “pathos” for the old commonness of the banal photos in daily communication. The discourse was set in a surface logic that, perversely, succumbs in the discovery that the rational senses are naked. The real (including the royal king) is naked.

Tile

In the 1940’s, the tile is revived in Brazil under two very significant trends. The Portuguese inheritance finds new meanings and an actual sense that reaffirms history and composes our modernity. During the war, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Arpad Szènes gather around them a group of artists, journalists, poets and musicians, among them Ruben Navarra, Cecília Meirelles, Murilo Mendes, Arnaldo Estrela, Carlos Scliar e Athos Bulcão.

A fragmented world, desegregation and articulation, finds in Vieira da Silva’s work the apparent theme of the space of the play of cards, of the chess game, of the library. “One day, the painter of abstract tiles would no longer think of keeping the torment of her daily

imagination to herself” (Ruben Navarra). The story is mentioned in the reference to Ucello. Memory, real or imaginary, is revived in Portuguese tile work, which the artist re-composes as if recomposing the world itself.

In the building of the Ministry of Education, Portinari’s tiles are installed. Such was Le Corbusier’s suggestion so the place would gain visual lightness and historical reference. Portinari skillfully creates marine themes (blue like the Colonial tiles) in plays of arabesque and rhythms.

Athos Bulcão’s wisdom will be cultivated from these two historical marks. One day the artist understands that tile work is not a drawing that leaves naked the checkered pattern of the initial project, since he is unable to totally erase it. It’s no longer a support to be neutralized.

Athos understands tile as module, as a constitutive element of an architectural space, with its individual area, its own matter, its light and surface, at once rule and game. Here Athos Bulcão establishes a releasing of freedom, as a potential for creation.

Athos creates the modular drawing of the tile and delegates the panel’s composition to the workers that fixate the pieces. A valuation of all making, of the whole work. The artist frees himself from the rules of rhythm and placement, by freeing the worker from the combinatory rules. There is no composition to be mechanically recomposed, as if it was a puzzle. The worker’s body is freed from the artist’s “soul” (the composition) from the perspective of Michel Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish”. The concept of norm is subverted; the regard is freed from the mesh. Employing different procedures, the Portuguese artist Julio Pomar reaches similar libertarian results in the tile panel he created for Brasilia. The same way that in the 1940’s tile is a field of action for Portinari and Vieira da Silva, two artists with explicit political concerns, even if manifested in different manners.

This stance for freedom has a meaning in its inscription in Brasilia’s walls, a city where the social and urbanistic utopia is perverted into norms of citizen control in the time of the dictatorship. Both artists are reaffirming in practice, and not only metaphorically, Brasilia’s utopian destiny, recomposing the believe in the constructive vocation of the city as a space of experience and freedom.

Art and architecture

Athos Bulcão had the privilege of inscribing his art in some of the main buildings of modern Brazilian architecture. He was the most correct and appropriate of all Oscar Niemeyer’s partners, for he was able to grant to the relation between art and architecture the exact measure that form the dignity of each one of the two elements and the greatness of the totality.

Athos Bulcão does not decorate wedding cakes with pseudo-modern candies. He is not a dermatologist who recovers the skin of a building. He does not place earrings or other trinkets or plumes. Athos Bulcão does not add or fill the emptiness, he does not veils nudity, he simply makes his part in the wholeness of the architectural phenomenon.

His employment of tiles is a profound notion of history. It is not only the mark of the basic references of the 20th Century in Vieira da Silva and Portinari of the Palace of Culture. These tiles are white and blue, a basic pattern of colonial Brazil. It’s a historical tradition, remade in the present, remitting to the immediate sources of Portugal and Holland, but also referring to the most remote roots of a Brazil that begins in China and the Islam. It’s the covering of the

space of the sacred extended to the profane of the Samba Parade. It's the inscription of the tile, as architecture's module and signal. It's matter in atmosphere. It's color integrated in the building's light. All this because his relation of art and architecture is the relation of seeing and living.

With the secure feeling of those who truly know, Athos proposes his work as totally integrated to the whole. He knows how to avoid to over stressing the work, to contrast it with the building. Athos knows how to avoid turning a building into a mere support for a mural, as if they were a painting with a construction behind it. Athos, nevertheless, knows how to become necessary in the right measurement. And, for this very reason, he is absolutely necessary to architecture. What would be of the Brasilia National Theater without Athos Bulcão's reliefs? The answer is in the generosity of Oscar Niemeyer, who projected a totality opened to the participation of the Other.

The spaces of modern architecture expose pseudo-modern works of art, showing their academic traces. The imbalance may not come from the artist, but from the architect who chose him.

Athos understands the philosophical dimension of modern architecture. Rationalism and functionalism are architectural concepts that Athos kept as references while developing his art and architecture projects. If not in alignment with this ideological and conceptual scope, the artist would have created an inconsistent relation between art and architecture. Athos is notable, therefore, for being the first artist in Brazil who better understood the range of implications of the correct relation between art and architecture in the 20th century.

Painting

In the last years Athos Bulcão's paintings unfolded in multiple paths. The artist condensates experiences, travels through his own history and renews himself in inventions. Athos Bulcão transforms his certitudes in new risks. He is himself and he is another. The synthesis is a refinement of color, elegance in the treatment of space, lightness of matter and a fine humor.

In a given moment, Athos Bulcão makes masks and animals. They are ambivalent beings. Like paintings on a tri-dimensional support. Or reliefs and pictorial volumes.

The painter acts with a wish to sculpt. The mass is modeled with sensuality, witnessing the hand work in the emergence of the sculpture. Color is applied as incarnation. No longer verisimilitude, but the painting of a body as a new phase of the work's sensuality. There is liberation of joy in sparks, reflections, and color combinations.

Working on these sculptures, the painter does not abandon the pleasures of his profession. Nevertheless, Athos Bulcão opens his unknown path towards a form with no background, a tile without a wall, placed directly in the world, with no support.

In Athos Bulcão's most recent canvases, space is always worked in a complex way. There are no mechanic solutions that completely dominate the whole. If in a work the surface follows a square pattern, the spatial geometry will be subverted by painting. Color will not obey the rules.

Athos Bulcão always defines how he wants the space to be divided. It's a logical tile work. It is a complex play of triangles and squares, atonal music, like in the work "The mountain", a title that understands the volume (of land) as a (geographic) accident. It is a mise-en-abîme, the canvas(es) inside the canvas. It is rigor. Or movement "Near the Clouds".

In the triptych “The Pyramid”, the artist establishes a tense relation between symmetry and asymmetry in the colored squares. There is only a rigid formation of yellow pyramid, but without the artist’s wisdom we could imagine an almost random appliance of the remaining colored areas. From this tension between risk and freedom, a mad mason establishes the work’s poetics: a dissonant tile work. Athos Bulcão is complete. He witness his primordial roots in Vieira da Silva’s “Bahia Imaginée” or Libraries or in his cooperation with Niemeyer and João Filgueiras. The use of history in the work of Athos Bulcão is neither quotation nor influence. It’s the result of his own process.

This other construction – sweet and tender – owes its order in Brazil from the almost whole Volpi of certain façades and flags, from Maria Leontina’s landscapes and time of the 1950’s, from the most recent Aluisio Carvão of the games, from Ione Saldanha’s unfoldment of the space of color, from Athos Bulcão’s poetic forms of dissimilitude. This family could never abdicate Vieira da Silva’s exile, lived here and exiled from us in Paris for four decades.

The planes are articulated by the mesh, or – if it doesn’t exist – by its dance in space. The choreography of these dancing areas is not the rhythm of an angled and straight movement. Its time is complex: in some works, the rectangular areas circumnavigate the space, like in the cosmic rhythm of Kupka (The First Step, 1909) or Mondrian (Black and White Composition, 1917). The planes are articulated by the presence of color, which can be here or there. It’s in areas of different dimensions. In distinct tonalities. In color formation. In Athos Bulcão, color has an intrinsic temporal dimension in its formation. And color also is time of the other color. Such diversified “here and there” established a dissynchrony.

Color in Athos Bulcão is low-key. There is no anxiety in screaming “here I am!”. His perception doesn’t take place in the urgent and brief immediate instant. The initial paleness gains its substance in the time of an attentive perception. The first appearance reveals its formative process and color logics. On time this work will reveal itself with a full range of colors, differentiated by opposition, contrast and harmony. The inexistent optical shock is unfolded into knowledge of the real.

In “Old Carnival” there is a complex intercrossing of levels. Each plane/module receives a different treatment: decoration, arabesque, printing, confetti and serpentine, mask. In the carnival battle, line and plane are born – in Kandinsky’s perspective of point and line, confetti and serpentine of this pictorial carnival. The rigid construction is transformed in an informality that is masked in figuration in this carnival where color gives the rhythm of the painting’s dance. Under the Old Carnival of the differences and the struggles of the past aesthetic trends, the issue of the space is permeated, visible at first glance. In the deepest level, as if it was its inner identity, the work is structured as color relation, contaminating that which is separated. It transforms everything in a whole and places itself as main issue.

These paintings are proposed as such, but they also talk about drawing (serpentine and arabesques) and refer to sculpturing (the masks). These are reflections proposed by Athos Bulcão on the field of art. Arpad Szènes said, about drawing “For me, in the origin of the world, there is drawing”. Athos Bulcão’s paintings, or his experience with tile works, keep this sense of drawing as the origin of the world of painting, as an initial structure. An artist like Athos Bulcão, who was always in relationship with architecture, now brings the mask as discussion of space, in his transit between painting and sculpture.

The silent and tender Athos Bulcão brings from himself these qualities of his work. In this silence, everything dialogues: the present, memory, history, the theme, the tasks and techniques, the weight of the brush shaping matter, forming color and defining the nature of space. Such silence is eloquent and of a variety of meanings. Athos Bulcão’s silence demand a keenness of regard.

