

# ATHOS BULCÃO

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A masterpiece by Athos Bulcão: the large relief applied on the lateral façade of the National Theater, in Brasília, evokes Le Corbusier's legendary authoritative reminder to architects that begins with "Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light" (Towards an Architecture, 1922). The crisp and downright clear luminosity of Brasília reaches across the dry atmosphere of the central tablelands without ever wasting into refractions and reflections, as there is hardly any fog or mist to deflect it, or getting caught in the subtle concavities of the terrain created by valleys and gentle depressions, only to fray away in the distant horizon. The luminosity of Brasília resounds in the rhythmic play of cubes and blocks covering from top to bottom the inclined plane of the lateral façade that Oscar Niemeyer designed for the theater, thus showing not only how complex the notion of space can be – a notion that is not applicable to interior elements only –, but also how it can be altered by interventions of color, texture, matter, or volume.

Those Brasília dwellers who drive past this work everyday and heedlessly glimpse it out of their car windows, and those who approach it on foot for a closer observation – be it out of curiosity, or out of having nothing better to do –, they all have certainly become fascinated with the incredible pyramidal wall rising in a tilted manner, as if the ground had been suspended at one end. And this surface provides the support for a set of outcropping solids, variations on a same quadrangle apparently arranged at random. They are solids such as parallelepipeds and cubes of identical height, set alternately in such manner that their sides form strictly vertical lines. These lines interrupted here and there form a design that changes in kaleidoscope-like manner as the observer moves along, like the view of a city seen from the air changes constantly as the viewing angle of the passenger onboard a landing airplane also changes.

Even those people who have only seen photos of this master work – and, thus, have no idea of either the effects of sunlight shining on the white solids, or the varying proportions of the polygons of shade cast on the wall surface in the course of the day – will certainly be equally charmed. For example, there are beautiful photos of children climbing these outcrops, perching on them, carefully stepping from one to the next like clumsy giants at play in a city made of limestone and India ink.

They are only children, not cultivated readers of art books like this one – books written by art critics like me, whose job entails the obsessive disembowelment of works of art; critics whose analytical reading aims at disclosing the hidden mechanism of artworks, just like children seek to discover the internal mechanism of a fascinating toy – and, in so doing, lose naiveté to gain awareness. These Brasilia children simply play in perfect harmony with the work of art, whereas our scrutinizing gaze – mine and the reader's –

seeks to take us to the core of the enigma and to unrelenting interrogation: What impact does a work of art make on individuals? How to assess it? What residue of this work do individuals retain as an unexpected gift?

Going back to this façade by Athos Bulcão and these photographs, what impression has this creation made on those and all other children who have played and will play on this work?

Notwithstanding our capability to vindicate for our lifetime the artwork as a stronghold of life and freedom, we are incapable to answer this question and the endless succession of queries that stem from a work of art. What is more, if this is a generic and vague question, why bring it up now?

The reason I dare addressing once again this unsettling interrogation is Athos Bulcão's lifetime artistic career devoted to the general public – not the population of museum-goers who are either familiar with the realm of art, or willing to become acquainted with it, but the people that incidentally come across his work: the pedestrians, ordinary passersby who are unaware of artworks, not only because art does not belong in their cultural repertoire, but also because they are usually oblivious of everything other than their immediate and practical objectives. To the average citizen, streets and sidewalks are but cityscape elements, public ways that take them straight to their destinations, in the fastest and simplest way possible.

My remarks on the relief of the National Theater façade and on the photos of children using it as a playground apply to the majority of works by Athos Bulcão and the people who enjoy them. They hold particularly true to the works installed in Brasília, which were designed to coexist with the city's population. Athos Bulcão is the Brasília artist par excellence because he has created an unparalleled number of quality works that bear, in their essence, the artist's appreciation for the city and its inhabitants. Throughout his career, Bulcão established a relationship with Brasília that no other 20th-century artist managed to establish with a city in this country.

Brasília stands for the spatial representation of a dream of equality. It was conceived to promote new forms of socialization, beginning with the ordinary citizen's easy access to public property, political practice, leisure, health, education, and culture. This ideal was to be ensured by the cityscape, its layout, and the aesthetic order selected for its buildings, plazas and monuments – an aesthetic order seen as capable to advance this exercise.

As to its inauguration in 1960, Brasília – a city of virtues and faults, like any other – came forth as the best rendition of a utopia born remotely in time and space: in the rubble of post-war Europe in the twenties, which European intellectuals were set on reconstructing – the continent as well as the world – on new foundations. The inauguration of Brasília may be regarded as both the ultimate materialization of this dream and its turning point before decline. Whichever the case, its surprising condition brings to mind the words of Russian poet Joseph Brodsky. When praising the grandiose

work of Derek Walcott, a West Indian poet from St. Lucia, he said that the margins are not the place where the world ends, but where it is unraveled. (1)

The utopia to which I refer is that of modern intellectuals and artists who chose to impart a broader social content to their works, thus introducing them in the goods manufacturing industry as well as in the realm of architecture and urban environment. Intellectuals and artists carried this objective like a flag, as attested by the starting phrase of the manifesto that German architect Walter Gropius formulated at the creation of the Bauhaus, in 1919: “The final goal of all artistic activity is architecture.” Strictly speaking, the constructive strain of the modern vanguards that included the Bauhaus group, Dutch Neo-Plasticist artists, and Russian Constructive artists, among others, was set on reestablishing the connection between art and life. They reacted against the framework of modern society, where each sphere of human activity – production, religion, politics, and culture – is independent from all others and develops independently. In this sense, like the Dadaists, the modern Constructive vanguards arrived at the negative version of this same thought, by rejecting in good-humored manner the sophisticated environment of museums and galleries, and turned to an audience that did not attend art spaces and, consequently, did not benefit from the contact with art. This option was definitely risky, because it jeopardized not only the concept of artist, but also the concept of art. By the way, was it not art’s death that Soviet Constructivists heralded?

Time passed and, beginning in the 1960s, it has become obvious to us that the great majority of artists have given up boldness and commitment to ethics, to favor the convenience of the market, the ego trips promoted by the media, the spectacular charm of the mega exhibitions. Only a few artists resisted these appeals. Athos Bulcão is one of them.

## **ART, ARCHITECTURE, AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT**

Athos Bulcão’s artistic career took an irreversible turn in the mid 1940s, when he worked as Cândido Portinari’s assistant in the creation of a mural for the church of St. Francis of Assisi, at Pampulha Park, in Belo Horizonte. Up until that time, Bulcão was a talented artist with a sound cultural background nurtured since his childhood through ample exposure to opera, classical music, and theater performances. Notwithstanding, he was undecided about trading medical school for painting. After a while, however, the frequent exposure to a throbbing cultural environment led him to patronize painting. In 1939, at age 21, Bulcão met famous Brazilian landscape architect, garden designer, and painter Roberto Burle-Marx, who was to become his lifetime friend and in whose studio he practiced painting. In 1942, after setting eyes on one of his gouache pictures, [architect] Oscar Niemeyer decided it could be used in the tile mural he was specifying for the façade of the Municipal Theater, of Belo Horizonte, commissioned by mayor Juscelino Kubitschek.

The façade ended up not being created, and Bulcão carried on the work he showed in his first solo exhibition at the Brazilian Institute of Architects (IAB) building, in 1944. This

work also garnered awards at the Modern Art Division of the Fine Arts Salon in 1940, 1941 and 1945. In 1945, the artist joined Cândido Portinari's team for 45 days in the execution of a mural for the Pampulha Church at the namesake complex in Belo Horizonte – a church that turned out to be Oscar Niemeyer's first architectural masterpiece. It was precisely the sensual shapes of this church design that placed Niemeyer in the limelight as the first stern critic of the formal monotony of a modern architecture that became known as International Style. (2).

Niemeyer's taste for tile murals was not circumstantial; it was part of the program of modern architects, to the point that he specified one for the façade of the seminal Ministry of Education and Health building, in Rio de Janeiro. Fresco and tile murals as well as sculptures were some of the "extracurricular" interventions that the architect viewed as fitting for architecture as a crossroads of artistic expressions. Niemeyer clearly rendered this notion in the Ministry building with the installation of a magnificent tile mural by Portinari and creations by Celso Antonio, Bruno Giorgi, and Jacques Lipchitz.

As to tile, Lucio Costa, patriarch and leading theoretician of Brazilian modern architecture, justified its use by praising its aesthetic-functional attributes and relationship with the Brazilian Constructive tradition (3). As regards the former aspect, at the same time that it was more suitable for tropical climates than painting because of its refractory and weather-resistant properties, tile provided a pictorial support that "disguises" the wall on which it was applied, in such a way as to make it look like an enclosing element rather than part of the building structure. Insofar as this understanding was endorsed, the structural function would be left for the load-bearing pillars, or "pilotis", that constituted one of the "five fundamental points" of modern architecture in the words of Le Corbusier, its leading performer and great publicizer.

This argument remains in effect to the letter. Recently, João Filgueiras Lima, a.k.a. Lelé, a first-rate architect and Athos Bulcão's all-time collaborator stated: "The main characteristic of the tile work that Athos so masterfully explored in modern architecture was precisely in its capacity to establish this contrast with the building structure. You take the solid structural element and apply to it a gentle tilework that completely frees the framework, thus effacing the wall. In other words, a wall that is actually not regarded as such." (4)

Another argument for justifying the use of tile in modern architecture is its close association to the Brazilian constructive tradition, a legacy to be partially renewed and incorporated as an example of a formal lexicon, foreign to Brazilian specificities. In this sense, architecture simply developed along the double vector that systematized Brazilian modernism through its avowed effort to set the national aesthetic clock with the inventory and restoration of our roots.

Athos Bulcão's inaugural experience with this expressive support was to remain single for a long while. In 1945, after his return to Rio de Janeiro, the artist lived at Portinari's home from May through December. During this period, he benefited from the fertile art lessons and the contact with the large group of intellectuals who frequently called at the

house. For example, there were weekly luncheons with poet Manuel Bandeira, and the heated discussions that then fueled the cultural environment. At these meetings, Portinari's strong personality stood out. He was the self-appointed "general", always the first to tease his peers, as for instance the great painter and former seaman Pancetti, whom Portinari nicknamed "sergeant."

Notwithstanding the influence, Bulcão did not embrace the social realism rendered by the master from Brodósqui, MG. His close contact with a couple of artists, Arpad Szènes and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, and a two-year sojourn in Paris, in the late forties, were even more informative for his career in terms of indicating the options available for his imagery renditions. In 1948 and 1949, thanks to letters of recommendation signed by Cândido Portinari, Alceu Amoroso Lima and D. Marcos Barbosa, Athos Bulcão received a scholarship from the French government that sponsored his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts, and his attendance at the Louvre museum for three consecutive months.

In the fifties and back in Brazil, Athos Bulcão plunged in the world of the applied arts, where he was active as set and costume designer, having also produced interior designs and, particularly, graphic art jobs for the Ministry of Education and Culture's documentation department. Finally, his life experience in Rio de Janeiro, in the midst of the bustling political and aesthetic debate polarized into figurativism and abstraction – and, within the latter, between informalism and geometric abstraction or Concrete ideas – was to round out his training as an artist keenly aware of the candent contemporary issues. In the mid fifties, more than ten years after creating the Pampulha mural, Bulcão executed two designs in association with architecture: a mural for Hospital Sul América, designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Helio Uchoa, and a photomontage for the restaurant at the Engineering Club, designed by Carlos Ferreira.

These two works indicated the two-way path through which Bulcão's fantastic creation potential was to flow. From the Hospital Sul América mural, a unique artist developed whose main concern was with veering his elaborate work to the social realm – from icons to abstract compositions, and intricate formal puzzles, from an entire manufacturing system to standardized industrial language, from mural to the creation of architectural elements. In turn, the photomontages take us to the studio artist, the author of intimist works: numerous paintings of heads that betray his interest for expressionism; paintings of mysterious characters with a slight Surrealist tone inherited from Bulcão's love of theater; amazing photomontages that reveal a powerful and piercing gaze, capable of preposterous amalgamations of images appropriated from daily newspapers and magazines; and, finally, canvases that double as labs for experimenting with colors, the depuration of which earned him repute as an accomplished colorist. Bulcão is an author of an instigating and multifaceted mass of work who must be studied in depth before we can clearly establish the links between his diverse means of artistic expression.

## **BULCÃO IN BRASILIA**

Athos Bulcão was given a job position at Novacap – Companhia Urbanizadora da Nova Capital (the company commissioned with building the urban infrastructure for the new

capital of Brazil) in 1957. The following year, he moved to Brasilia, possibly still unaware of both the opportunities in store for him and the extent of his talent. The first design commission he received was a tile mural for the Church of Our Lady of Fátima, which still appears in Belo Horizonte post-card pictures to date. On the blue background of this mural, two patterns – a white stylized dove and a Star of Bethlehem – are applied, the movements of which – vertical and irradiating, respectively – turn out a fascinating combination.

Bulcão's first experience with a figurative mural for Brasilia was virtually his last. The numerous murals, panels, reliefs, and architectural elements that he created later as collaborative interventions in the designs of several architects (particularly Oscar Niemeyer and João Filgueiras Lima) were geometric abstract in style. This fact alone would suffice to place the artist in the forefront of Brazil's constructive artists – both Concrete and Neo-Concrete –, with the added advantage that his sophisticated creations were adopted in the goods manufacturing industry and distributed in a way that the majority of those artists could only hope for.

Much vituperation has been uttered against Brasilia's monumental scale and the predictability of its building designs – invariably orthogonal and obsessively organized into regular patterns and heights. To counter the apathy of the barren tableland expanses and the strictness of the rationalist city pattern, Oscar Niemeyer prescribed buildings endowed with curvilinear forms. They were memorable sculptures capable of lifting the passerby's gaze, interrupting its skewed view of the telluric edge along the line of the horizon. Niemeyer is the duly celebrated author of column designs for the Palácio da Alvorada (the official residence of the president of Brazil) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building; he is the inventor of two new ways to render the vertical line that connects earth and sky – a metaphor of the same relation that human beings, “peripatetic columns” in themselves, establish as they continually move about our planet.

## **MURALISM ACCORDING TO BULCÃO**

That which Oscar Niemeyer executes in monumental scale in a macro context, Athos Bulcão renders in small scale and micro context, from building to building wall, from volume to planar surface.

Weary of order and symmetry – the visual guidelines established by the constructive vanguards as antidotes to irrationality –, the Brasilia dweller thrives, even though inadvertently, on Athos Bulcão's murals and artistic interventions scattered throughout the city. To offset the excessively placid residential complexes designed as regular solids, our artist engendered unsettling visual games in which amusement deceives logic. The rule of these games is ingeniously simple, as plain as the nose on one's face, and the result, a revelation. Let us take, for example, the mural he created for the Classe 407/408 North School that Milton Ramos designed in 1965. This commonplace modular pattern consists of three 15 cm x 15 cm tiles: one white, one black, and the third, two thirds white and one third black. Its application as well as that of Bulcão's murals is always left

to the installer's discretion – a criterion that the artist views as “uneducated,” i.e., lacking a taste for balance or even the neat disorder taught at art schools. Thus, each module is applied next to the previous one, producing a random whole with a syncopated design, the sequence of which observers cannot distinguish offhand.

Instead of creating the geometric murals we see everyday – murals made up by modules arranged in such a way as to form a coherent whole –, Athos Bulcão intuitively turns the module around in ways that make it always look different. The pulsating effect produced by the saturation of the viewer's retina may derive from coherent whole figures; complex and colorful polygons that strive to stand out against the white tile; polygons as dense and concise as a letter or logo, with linear, circular, or streaked forms; and lines that run off the edges of the square, extending beyond them. In all these cases, the artist may resort to the use of color, in fact a prodigal use of color, given that in this respect Bulcão is, as we have mentioned, an accomplished artisan.

Therefore, when it comes to applying the modules on the wall, the artist aims at rendering a premeditated disordering of the set rather than a stable result capable of reiterating the geometry of its constituent modules. Before a wall clad by Athos Bulcão, one's unfocused eye wanders about its surface. The wall becomes an activated plane that shatters before the viewer's gaze at varying speeds, from slow to vertiginous.

## **THINKING ARCHITECTURE**

As we have mentioned, although the 20th-century witnessed art's motion towards becoming tangled in the life of cities – be it through the advent of design, be it as sculpture, painting, relief, or mural installed in public plazas and on thoroughfares, façades, outside lateral walls and interiors of buildings –, the fact is that, by and large, the so-called public art has nearly always been summoned to meet a need of architectural design or urban plan, and to qualify them aesthetically whenever necessary. The particular characteristic of modern paintings and sculptures used to this end is that they never lost their autonomy, i.e., a sculpture by Picasso or Calder installed in a plaza features the same formal traits of other sculptures by the same artists rendered in reduced scale for indoor environments such as the living room of a collector's home, for example. Likewise, the vocation of a mural painting was to efface or conceal the wall it used as support; it treated the wall as a fixed easel of extraordinary dimensions. These works were, therefore, irreducible to architecture and to urban space; they could enhance environments, but only through addition, without ever becoming one with them.

Whereas the principle on which Athos Bulcão propped his tile murals advances this debate in a different sense than that described above, the reach of his other works is unquestionably greater. Indeed, the works he creates for architectural interiors – reliefs, dividing walls, doors, pivoting walls, outside walls, etc. – may be said to remain attuned to the architecture to which they are added and that, what is more, fully understands them, falls in love with them, and boosts their potential. Hence the reason why the

comments I have offered this far do not fill in for the need for a more detailed review of these works.

Let us take, for example, Bulcão's intervention in the entrance hall of the National Congress building, concluded in 1960. In this hall, the ceiling height makes the two majestic pillars of circular cross-section, planted symmetrically to the right and to the left of visitors entering the building, seem even more monumental. At the rear, an enormous white-marble wall is flanked by stairways on either side: one leading to the Senate, and the other, to the House of Representatives. Given the elements of the problem, for the artist the issue was how to approach this space of monumental scale. Athos Bulcão opted for the creation of four axes of black rock inlaid vertically in the white marble. Each of these axes was made up by five parts of strictly identical length, and variable width and alignment. As visitors/users move across the hall, they double as vertical axes topped with a set of eyes that, like handheld movie camera lens, capture from the environment anything that is offered by this movement – a movement somewhat disrupted by the slight vertical oscillations that result from the varying viewpoints of the person in motion. In brief, the human body in motion doubles as a mobile vertical axis; it describes a movement that replicates the intervention on the back wall, as if the latter were a diagram of the former.

The artist's knowledge of the body-space relation is constantly surprising and demonstrates his technical mastery of other expressive means than art, as for example film and the performing arts. Now, let us look at the bas-relief that Bulcão created for the main hall of Palácio Itamaraty (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building), in 1965. Niemeyer's commission involved a design meant to offset the ostensible amplitude of the great entrance hall, connected by a beautiful spiral stairway to the upper level – where diplomatic officials gather to sign treaties, cooperation agreements, and other covenants. The vastness of the hall visually rendered the ceiling height even lower, an effect that was to prompt the visitor's eye to run along the extensive, blind sidewalls toward the lighting sources at either end of the room. According to Bulcão, the stairway contained the key. When climbing it, visitors would be compelled to rotate on their own axes, while describing a translational motion in relation to the stairway axis – a motion that is also intermittent. Why intermittent? Because in the act of climbing a set of stairs, one moves his/her body forward and upward, above and slightly beyond the next step, before nearly halting and receding a little, to set the ascending foot on the step surface. As a keen reader of the movements that shapes, colors, and projected spaces impose on the human body and eyes, Athos Bulcão resorted in this case to the combination of two motions – rotation and translation – that force visitors to see the entire hall, on the walls of which he excavated, side by side, a series of trapezoids with more or less sharp angles. In so doing, he created a tempo as syncopated as that of a human body climbing stairs: a merry-go-round of pointed shapes that competently jeopardizes the monotonous consistency of the horizontal lines formed at the wall intersections with floor and ceiling.

## **ATHOS BULCÃO AND JOÃO FILGUEIRAS LIMA**



Yet, besides tiles and reliefs, the public vein of Athos Bulcão comprises elements adopted by Brazilian modern architecture, such as architectural furnishings – dividing walls, screens, doors, outside walls – and the free use of colors, apart from white and the gray of exposed concrete. To attend this order of commissions, in 1962 Bulcão established a collaborative partnership with João Filgueiras Lima, a.k.a. Lelé. This partnership was to grow more solid as of the construction of the Sarah Kubitschek hospital system headquarters, in 1980.

Lelé's option for the development of an architectural design founded on industrialized elements and aimed at meeting the extraordinary demand for works of urban infrastructure in Brazil – not to mention public buildings such as schools, hospitals and other organizations – warranted, until a short while ago, a lack of interest on the part of a media that is keener on the more “glamorous” designs of upper bourgeoisie homes, banking headquarters and offices, and shopping malls. After decades of modern architectural design, not to mention the insistence of its heirs on nurturing the relationship between architecture and the manufacturing industry – an imperative combination in a country such as ours –, Lelé's work, if not unique, is certainly the best. The singularity of this architect's mass of work derives from the highly aesthetical content of his creations – an aspect he has never neglected, even when pressed by the need to render a low-cost product in industrial scale. When faced with this challenge, less-endowed designers ordinarily produce a lesser architecture. In his designs, from catwalks and drainage systems to hospital complexes and Court of Accounts buildings, Lelé puts into practice the lessons he learned from Niemeyer, Costa, and Finnish architect and furniture designer Alvar Aalto: he is equally careful with formal refinement when designing a structure inspired in large Brazilian Indian tents, and with the details when designing a hollowed pillar that is also used to drain rainwater. His repertoire spans from state-of-the-art technology to references to Brazilian cultural traditions.

Lelé's relationship with Athos Bulcão is all but bound by conventions that have the architect designing and developing a building in which the artist will introduce his/her “ornament” at a later stage. On this subject, Lelé stated recently: “Athos was my partner in nearly all designs. His role was never supplementary. His works have always interfered in my architecture.” (5)

Especially remarkable in each of Bulcão's pieces, whether they be installed indoors or outdoors, is the artist's skills in dealing with the particularities of the planned architectural space. These particularities also include the relations that said space establishes with sun lighting and the natural environment.

As regards the colors used in wards, hallways, lounges etc., Sarah Kubitschek hospitals double as a compendium on how to avoid the coolness of white in favor of warm and vibrant decorations. One needs not be a chromotherapy wizard to anticipate the effect of these solutions on the recovery of patients, given that colorful sights stimulate their retinas and somewhat promotes the their contact with nature and its varied turn of events. For example, the dividing walls built with wood panels of irregular formats, cutout into one or two patterns that suggest organic shapes such as flowers and fish, painted in

coordinated colors, and arranged into a discontinued line, break the monotony of passageways, to which they impart a formal and aesthetic quality.

Each environment, then, is a subject that Athos Bulcão seeks to enrich by underscoring the architectural design, at the same time that it ensures visibility to its elements. Hence, the wall across from the elevators is a privileged site as the home of a soaring winged fish sculpture; the two curved surfaces that constitute the roofing of the immense warehouse where the sessions of body therapy are conducted favor the view of the round paintings hung on the two high walls situated at both ends of the building, respectively (Support Center for People with Disabilities – Sarah Lago Norte CTRS, 1995); the sheds, not by chance painted yellow, were added for the controlled filtering of sunlight; the function of the elegant and bold-looking metal roofings at building entrances is emphatically indicated by their red coloring; the blind volumes comprising stairwells are visually detached from the main building by their painting in vivid colors; scattered volumes jut out from the monochrome lateral walls of the auditoriums... There are countless examples of how architecture is renovated when it is viewed as art, rather than having art as its extrinsic element. Regardless of the formal and functional nature of the environment posed before the artist, it always offers him a pretext to draw the viewers's attention and divert their otherwise automatic paths and inattentive gaze.

To end this discussion, let us examine the walls composed by pivoting, movable panels. Here, the walls originally devised for the purpose to enclose individuals, thus sheltering them from the environment, are attributed another vocation: according to Athos Bulcão, they are fun pieces with geometric color designs, great domino-like modules that when closed provide fascinating combinations, and when pivoted open up the interior space to the outside world.

More than anyone else, Athos Bulcão expertly plays with the scale of viewers/users, the way in which their bodies move in space, and the magnetic attraction that certain colors exert on the human gaze. He knows that the external physical references guarantee our physical and psychological integrity – they are concrete guidelines of mental maps that we trace in the course of an ordinary day. He also knows that there is no reason, safe for the incompetence of space experts, to keep the constructed cityscape from being a subtle food for the spirit, capable of enrapturing our minds, unleashing them from the stingy horizon of daily rites, and stimulating our body, bringing to our attention the sense of funneling and convergence that a hallway conveys to us, the richness of vantage points that a stairway affords us, and the latent rhythm and musicality contained in a huge room. Finally, he knows that a wall is not merely a wall, but a device that individuals created to keep them from dissolving in the vast universe – the same universe to which doors allow passage, and windows, contemplation.

At night, streetlights dimly illuminate the silhouettes of buildings that Oscar Niemeyer designed for the Ministry Esplanade, in Brasilia. At the opposite end from the National Congress complex, the large flat volume that houses the shopping mall also vanishes in darkness. In its place, as one more of Athos Bulcão's unexpected performances, countless neon store signs light up, all of them regular variations of rectangular formats similar to

the white outcrops that cover from top to bottom the National Theater façade, except that coloring the night darkness with a profusion of lettering and logos, dazzlingly-lit signs indicating the throbbing activity of people meeting and trading in their dreams and desires.

Be it quantitatively or qualitatively, Athos Bulcão's works destined for public spaces – which are scattered throughout Brasília and with a marking presence in the national scene as well as in foreign countries such as France, Italy, and Algeria – have only a few counterparts worldwide. The fact that Bulcão has not met with the same acknowledgment as Brazil's leading artists is a natural consequence of his aesthetical-political option. After all, his works that mingle with public buildings and the city ultimately end up – on account of their attributes – as anonymous as the neon signs on the façade of the Brazilian shopping mall.

It was Athos Bulcão's option for the production of a mass of work detached from gallery walls and installed in both the Brasilia landscape and cityscape – a production that promoted interesting and surprising fraternal relations with stairways and pillars, trees and the skyline – that ultimately caused people's lack of familiarity with him. Most certainly, he is known by a large portion of Brasilia dwellers that praise him as their foremost artist. If for no other reason, the emphatic presence of the National Theater relief – among numerous other works – claims or demands that its author's name be disclosed. But, do these city dwellers know that Bulcão has authored the tiles that clad all the walls of bus stop booths in the gigantic City Park?

In fact, given that we still view art as the exhibits on display at museums and galleries, we hardly look at pieces that have been displaced from these venues. Furthermore, how to qualify output such as the relief of the National Theater, of Brasilia, the murals at Rio de Janeiro's "Sambadrome" and at Memorial da América Latina cultural center in São Paulo, and the hundreds of works installed in residential and business buildings that, despite being non-architectural pieces, become one with architecture, be it because they redress it or because they offer new perceptions of space? How to qualify something extrinsic to the landscape that still appears to become one with it, requalifying it and detaching it from the roster of commonplace things?

Because of their proximity with architecture and the city, and their familiarity imposed by everyday viewing, the mostly large-format works by Athos Bulcão have their exceptional condition and derivation from a sophisticated plastic thought eclipsed. His work is so real, so close to us, that it no longer looks like a work of art. Witnesses to this fact, Brasilia dwellers are lucky to have their gaze, their steps, their erratic strolls or automatic routes to workplaces and homes guided, modulated, touched by the artist's works scattered throughout the city. As previously stated, the authorship of these works is unknown to many people – an irrelevant datum, however, given that after being impregnated with these works, individuals now own them.

In the course of his long and prolific career, Athos Bulcão has accomplished something that few artists hope to achieve: that his work no longer belongs to him, in the same way

that a poet's verse is appropriated as a popular saying, such as for example "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," "No man is an island," "Let sleeping dogs lie," or "To be or not to be, that is the question." His mass of work heads to anonymity as it is incorporated in the popular imagery and converted into source of expression for the people he loves and to whose well-being he has been devoted throughout his life.

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#### *NOTES*

1- Joseph Brodsky, "The Sound of the Tide", in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1987, pp. 164-75.

2- "My intent (...) was to position myself in relation to the problem of form in architectural design – an issue that I view as a regrettable mistake further aggravated by functionalism, which is used by small groups of followers to date. I feel perfectly at ease to take such stand. I have explored this problem throughout my career. In 1940 I addressed directly in my designs for the Pampulha complex, in Belo Horizonte". Oscar Niemeyer, in *A forma na arquitetura*. Rio de Janeiro: Avenir, 1978, p. 9, translated.

3- Lucio Costa, "Oportunidade perdida." In *Sobre Arquitetura*. Porto Alegre, Centro dos Estudantes Universitários de Arquitetura, 1962, p. 257.

4- João Filgueiras Lima – "A integração absoluta ao Projeto." Lecture presented at a seminar of the 6th Brasília Visual Arts Forum "Athos Bulcão – Integração Arte e Arquitetura". Brasília, Palácio Itamaraty auditorium, November 6-7, 1997, translated.

5- João Filgueiras Lima, In *João Filgueiras Lima, Lelé*. São Paulo/Lisbon: Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi/Blau, 2000, p. 27, translated.