

Amilcar de Castro:

effective and affective dialogues with the world
Tadeu Chiarelli, 2003.

The most distinguishing characteristic of Amilcar deCastro's oeuvre is the anonymous two-dimensional shapes, closed in on themselves (rectangle or circle, for example) that he transforms through action. Overcoming the inertia of an original shape, this action confers tridimensionality on it, thus transforming it as well as the surrounding space.

Through the action of gesture on the material, Castro's sculptures remain virtually identical, except that absolutely different from one another. Each piece is unique, yet it fundamentally represents all others.

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In the painting *Operários* [Workers], by Tarsila do Amaral, the oval shapes that render the concept of anonymous crowd were each deeply transformed by the artist's need to make them unique, as well as to confer gender, color and race on each shape.

Something along these lines applies to some of Alfredo Volpi's works. All too often, the São Paulo artist took a same drawing structure to create two or more paintings. These repetitions, however, were made different from one another through light and color combinations that the artist masterfully applied on the original piece.

Amilcar de Castro's typical action can be perfectly related to other artistic experiences, particularly in the realm of painting. However, in the field of sculpture it is not easy to draw similar connections.

Actually, Castro's work occupies a significant place in the sculptural world of the last hundred years—a place that is better defined by what it is not (or what it does not want to be) than by what it is.

First and foremost, it should be noted that notwithstanding the historical affiliation of the artist's sculpture to constructive watersheds of art, this affiliation could be substantially problematized.

Constructive sculpture is ordinarily characterized by its power to come forth from the concept of assembly. This type of sculpture is defined, so to speak, by the juxtaposition of materials and shapes. As it seems, sculptures by Rodchenko, Tatlin, Moholy-Nagy and even Naum Gabo were never absolute parameters for Amilcar de Castro. Likewise,

neither were the sculptures by the second and third generations of constructive artists such as Calder, David Smith, Caro, Max Bill, Franz Weissmann, or even minimalist artists.

In fact, unlike the latter, Amilcar de Castro never viewed his production as resulting from the juxtaposition of modular elements at regular intervals and/or in a sequence. As I have mentioned, each of this artist's pieces is unique, yet it fundamentally represents all others. What is more, the positioning of these pieces in the context of his overall production was never a critical issue for him. A sculpture by Amilcar de Castro can be installed anywhere (hypothetically, at least).

In contrast with the work of the other artists mentioned above, Amilcar de Castro's seasoned sculptural production hardly ever sprang from fitted pieces or articulated modules. Theoretically, his sculptures could never be separated into parts.

In this sense, his work could be regarded as the denial par excellence of constructive logic: each of the artist's works is unique and indivisible; it is practically anonymous, given their basic geometric shapes (square, rectangle, and circle).

Should we be required to determine an affiliation for Castro's oeuvre, we could say that among the sources derived from Cubism, his work tends towards the purism of Ozenfant and Jeanneret, even if partially or totally unconsciously. After all, the way in which the Minas Gerais artist dealt with plain geometric shapes such as the square and the circle seemingly aspired to the "classic." Purism was also concerned with indivisible form as well as with balance and stability—all of them concepts that directly counter the fragmentary nature, the dynamic trait and the instability of experimental art that were to characterize the most publicized constructive movements.

However, this anonymous and structural classicism is apparently jeopardized by the incisions or slits that characterize Amilcar de Castro's sculptures and that impel the two-dimensional, pure and solemn shapes to achieve tridimensionality and make the world, so to speak.

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The verb "to slit" denotes a dramatic action that interrupts the inertia of geometric shapes based on which Castro developed his work. On the basis of this denotation, one could even think that the expressive character of the artist's oeuvre is rendered along these lines.

On the other hand, the decisive incision into the sculptural material, which effectively makes it dynamic, cannot be regarded as an unequivocal index of expressivity - the same index found in the work of artists who turn subjective issues into the staple of their work (in principle, any impetuous action on the material would be regarded as an important manifestation of this characteristic).

In principle, an attempted association between Castro's production and the entire sculptural tradition of the post-World War II period that tried to deal with materials in expressive manner was even legitimate. After all, the moment the Brazilian artist introduced incisions to his pieces, Expressionist abstract sculpture was in its heyday, particularly in Europe.

However, Amilcar de Castro's sculpture—with its dramatic slits—cannot be at all associated to productions of artists such as the Italian brothers Arnaldo and Giò Pomodoro, for example. Despite adopting incisions into geometric shapes (cylinders and spheres) as a strategy, Arnaldo Pomodoro confers a strong ornamental appeal on this act. As a result, his sculpture replete with aestheticizing effects is far from the dry and solid character of Castro's incisions.

The same could be said in relation to works by Giò Pomodoro. Despite conferring on his pieces a sensuality that is apparently more genuine than that discernible in his brother's work, the undulations (rather than slits) that Giò impresses on the material also seem quite dissimilar to Castro's formal repertoire.

No matter how many connections we try to establish between Amilcar de Castro's sculptural creations and those by his abstract Expressionist contemporaries, the fact is that in the former's oeuvre the incision is not an expression – at least, it is not a sign of subjectivity added to the work's structure. On the contrary, the incision in these sculptures is a means to configure the final form, which the work assumes the moment it shifts from two-dimensionality to tridimensionality.

In Amilcar de Castro, the incision is a structural element, not an adornment.

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The expression “dry and solid” I used above for incisions was meant to set the difference between Castro's sculptures and those by abstract Expressionist sculptors, so as to prevent anyone from drawing approximations between their productions.

Possibly the Brazilian artist opted for the sternness of a simple incision to counter a potentially excessive search for sensuality in the medium

used for this type of sculpture: an exacting incision free of regret and followed by equally resolute bends. Hence the slits being dry and solid; hence their producing works that can still be viewed as “classic”, though still retaining a certain sensuality, or at least a disposition for amore effective and affective dialogue with the world. Ultimately, this disposition is precisely what sets the work of Amilcar de Castro, in equally definitive manner, from the oeuvre of U.S. artist Richard Serra, one of the most prominent sculptors in the realm of world art of the second half of the 20th century.

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Not with standing the profound differences that set apart the works of these two artists (different generations, different training, different contexts), a less attentive observer might find that they hold a certain similarity: both use thick iron sheets, their works are sound and exacting, and so on.

However, the same inclination to dialogue detected in Amilcar de Castro’s work is not discernible in the sculptural production of the U.S. artist. Serra’s out putt ends to be closed in on itself; it refuses to relate to viewers, except when it comes forth deliberately as obstruction and/or threat.

As to the sculptural renditions by Amilcar de Castro—of which the one installed at Praça da Sé, in downtown São Paulo, is probably the most emblematic—, when jutting out from the plane into tridimensional space, they tend to create an airy and bright passage open to people’s fruition.

In a society subjected to aggression in so many ways, the artist takes a sheet of iron and a resolute incision to engage in dialogue rather than threat, and to welcome rather than obstruct. As it seems, this disposition for a welcoming and powerful dialogue with the observer as well as with the environment (without ever dissolving into it, or even depending on it), is perhaps Amilcar de Castro’s best contribution to sculpture produced in the last 50 years in Brazil.

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Finally, I find it opportune to highlight a few points.

Perhaps it was not by mere chance that the Brazilian artistic context yielded a singular poetics such as that of Amilcar de Castro. In addition to its straightforward generosity, his oeuvre seems to exude something else that results from its having developed in Brazil.

In a culture where the preexisting traditions never had enough strength and visibility to set parameters meant to be overcome (these traditions include not only the “academic” sculpture of Rodolfo Bernardelli and

others, but also the modernist sculpture of Victor Brecheret and Bruno Giorgi, as well as colonial sculpture), it was up to a two-dimensional artistic representation—namely, drawing—to point out to Amilcar de Castro a course to take in the realm of tridimensionality. (For this reason his interlocutors were not sculptors, but painters, designers and printers that included Tarsila do Amaral, Alfredo Volpi, Alberto da Veiga Guignard, Mira Schendel, among others).

This situation ultimately demonstrates that the inexistence of a tradition (or the fact of not having an opposition) is not always detrimental to the appearance of something new or, at least, something absolutely singular.

Tadeu Chiarelli – 2003