

Lygia Pape

Magnetized Space

In the 1950s, Brazil underwent a whirlwind process of modernization that found energetic and constructively determined expression in architecture, city planning, art and literature. Initiatives like the construction of Brasilia, the urban development of Rio de Janeiro, the opening of museums of modern art in São Paulo and Rio and the inauguration of the São Paulo Biennial were among the landmarks of that exceptionally luminous decade, when the country felt modern for the first time.

The transformative impulse of the Ruptura and Frente groups in São Paulo and Rio triggered an unprecedented spirit of renewal that consolidated the foundations of concrete art. While abstract expressionism and informalism were gaining unconditional support in the international arena, the Rio school of concrete art incorporated an active and subjective dimension within the art work that led it in 1959 to embark on a subsequent development known by the name of neoconcretism. This variant of constructivism encouraged increasingly active spectator participation in the work, a decisive step toward the integration of art and life.

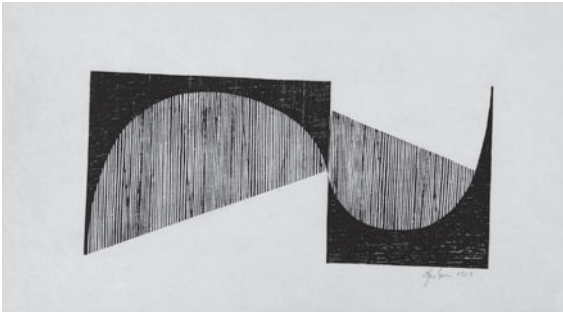
This exhibition reviews the prominent and highly influential role of Lygia Pape (Nova Friburgo, 1927–Rio de Janeiro, 2004) in the key transformation experienced at that time by Brazilian art. Presenting a significant set of works that range across the entire gamut of the avant-garde, the show traces the artist's first steps as a member of the Grupo Frente, and includes works that contributed decisively to the formalization of the principles of neoconcretism, dwelling in turn on her sensory and collective actions, on her film production – never before shown in its entirety – and on one of the masterpieces of her late period, a work which weaves constructive pattern and the search for a synthesis between the visual and the poetic into a network of unusual intensity that is seen to run through her whole career, from the earliest *Tecelares* to the *Ttéias*.

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For Pape, the book is a fabric whose reader becomes entwined in the threads joining different works, leading to the creation of what the artist calls a “magnetized space”. The guiding threads of this exhibition, therefore, are magnetization as poetic articulation, and the book, in Mallarmé’s sense of the term, as printed paper (*Tecelares*), architecture (*Livro da arquitetura* and *Livro do tempo*) and poetic space (*Téias* and the films).

Four canvases by Lygia Pape in an abstract style with organic tendencies take us back to her beginnings, making way next for a series of paintings and reliefs that were seldom brought to public attention at the time. Entitled *Jogos vectorais*, the paintings set dynamic processes in motion upon a ground that is clearly differentiated from the form, a feature recurring in the reliefs, or *Jogos matemáticos*, where maps of relations are modulated by repetition.



Untitled. *Tecelar*,
1958.
Xilography on
japanese paper,
30 x 54 cm
Projeto Lygia Pape

In 1953, Pape started to experiment with xylography, a medium that has her alone to thank for having become the field of exploration and testing ground for the most advanced postulates of the time. The exceptional series known by the name of *Tecelares* marks the beginning of her mature phase, evolving in spatial and technical complexity until it

forms a solid corpus reworked constantly throughout her career. Pape presented her *Tecelares* at the Grupo Frente’s four exhibitions and at the historic *I Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta* (MAM São Paulo, 1956, and MAM Rio de Janeiro, 1957). The light *Tecelares*, made by the subtle incision of lines in the wood, precede the black ones, which allow a glimpse of the qualities of the material: “From the source, from the wood, there emerge features, eyes, geometries, Pythagorean flowers.”¹ The *Tecelares* represent her first satisfactory attempt to identify form and ground, a determining factor in the creation of a space that is “doubled up, twisted, inverted, ambiguous, ambivalent.”² Space-time, the visual and semantic element that mediates matter, incorporates

- 1 Lygia Pape. *Lygia Pape. Série Arte Contemporânea Brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1983, p. 44.
- 2 Lygia Pape. “Depoimento”. In: *Lygia Pape. Obras 1976*. Catalogue of the exhibition “Eat me: a Gula ou a Luxúria”. Rio de Janeiro: Galeria Arte Global, 1976, p. 7.

narrativity as a requisite demanded by the processual. Like levity, space-time attains an uneven degree of presence and silence in these abstractions, and this is prolonged in the *Desenhos*, especially those where the pattern spreads over the whole surface to project negative or slightly displaced geometries.

The neoconcrete exhibition took place in 1959, supported by a manifesto and by Ferreira Gullar's theory of the non-object. The possibilities of the sensory exploration of space intuited by Gullar, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the concept of duration formulated by Henri Bergson helped to define experience as perception of memory and subjective signification, questions which had a formidable impact on the artists of the Grupo Frente. The art work came now to be considered an open, organic and permeable proposition that was transferable to the social arena of everyday life.

It was in this context that the *Balés neoconcretos I* and *II* (1958 and 1959), the fruit of Pape's collaboration with the poet Reynaldo Jardim and the dancer Gilberto Motta, were given their first performances. The body served as the motor for an abstract choreography which staged the occurrence of light in time. The first ballet was the *mise-en-scène* of a poem through the movement of geometrical shapes impelled by the action of dancers hidden inside them, while the use of two frontally disposed planes in the second ballet achieved maximum ambivalence between figure and ground. Mário Pedrosa was quick to recognize that "the ballets represented the clearest expression of the incorporation of subjective time into the work of art."³ This key aspect of neoconcretism already presaged spectators' participation which, according to Pedrosa, was to reveal itself more and more clearly as a revolutionary concept, almost like a specific trace of the sensibility of our epoch, counteracting the "psychic distance" which had prevented the work of art from intermingling with life.

One of Pape's last statements sums up her whole practice: "I want to work with a poetic state, intensely. I'm in search of the poem."⁴ The origins of this quest go back to the *Poemas luz* (1956-57) and the series of *Poemas objeto* (1957), which are the direct precursors of the *Livro da criação* (1959), one of the seminal works of the neoconcrete period. According to Pape, this book makes reference both to the creation of the world and

3 Mário Pedrosa. *Mundo, Homem, Arte em Crise*. Org. Aracy Amaral. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2007. p. 164.

4 Lygia Pape. "Lygia por Lygia". In: Denise Mattar. *Lygia Pape*. Perfis do Rio. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2003, p. 101.

to the creative act, since its interactive qualities endow the viewer with the ability to engage simultaneously with its assembly of structures and stories on the basis of his or her own experiences and readings: “Non-verbal language would determine a verbal narrative: the story that emerges from its own structure is what the book relates.”⁵ The *Livro da arquitetura* (1959-60) once more addresses performativity in its exploration of the potential of architectural forms. It is followed by the *Livro do tempo* (1961-63), a great geometrical canvas made up of 365 units corresponding to the days of the year. Pape shares references and procedures with the principal poets and theoreticians of concretism, but her efforts to construct a visual and narrative language have no parallel in other artists of her generation.

The dissolution of the Grupo Frente in 1963 marked a watershed in Pape’s career, for it was then that she began collaborating with the Cinema Novo. In 1964, a military dictatorship took the reins of power and held them for the next twenty years. An increasingly gloomy present determined the Tropicalist cultural project, collective and multidisciplinary in scope. The urgency of a new aesthetic channeled

a desire for denunciation and cultural emancipation championed by both the *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibal Manifesto) of Oswald de Andrade (1928) and the vitality of popular culture.

Nova Objetividade Brasileira (1967) marked Pape’s return to the plastic arts. Besides criticizing the stale art of the museums, her *Caixa de baratas* and *Caixa de formigas* lay bare the marginalization of the population,

the claustrophobia of the time and the voracity of the dictatorship. A carefully selected collection of dead cockroaches acts as a counterpoint to the agitation of the ants as they swarm back and forth across a piece of raw meat. The anthropophagous theme is here directed toward the insatiability and eroticism of the flesh, a reference made explicit in the words “*a gula ou a luxuria*” (“gluttony or lust”) written on the bottom of the box. In these works, the artist quite clearly gives primacy to the sensory, “epidermic” and political approach over any formal discourse.

Pape’s activity intensified between 1967-68, evincing a shift towards sensory and participatory experimentation in consonance with



Divisor, 1968
Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, 1990
Color photograph
12.4 x 18.5 cm
Projeto Lygia Pape

5 *Palavra do artista: Lygia Pape*. Interview with Lúcia Carneiro and Ileana Pradilla. Rio de Janeiro: Lacerda Editores, 1998, p. 31.



Eat me, 1975
16 mm/35 mm,
color, sound, 6'41"
Projeto Lygia Pape

the work of other artists. In *Ovos*, three individuals tear open the membranes/shells of three cubes and emerge from inside them in a gesture that is at once transgressive and liberating. Also dating from that period is *Divisor*, her first collective experiment, whose choral and poetic dimension made it one of the most significant pieces of the period. The heads of the participants appear through the holes in a vast sheet of cloth that links them together while separating them from their bodies. The ludic nature of the experiment, open to the vagaries of casuistry, transforms the individual motor force into a pretext for collective mobilization. *Roda dos prazeres* meanwhile incites awareness of the senses on the pretext of dyeing the tongue in the different colors it tastes.

Espaços imantados (1968) comprises a detailed photographic record of everyday actions capable of arousing spontaneous social interaction. Pape's cinema also reflects the congregational potential of space in *Carnival in Rio* (1974), while the spirit of the Cinema Novo impregnates the contemporary films *Wampirou* and *Arenas calientes* and also *Catiti-Catiti* (1978), three anthropophagous fictions notable for their refreshing irony. The manipulation of images first seen in *La nouvelle création* (1967) reappears later in *Our Parents* (1974), a collage of portraits of the indigenous population taken from postcards. Popular creativity, the erotic dimension associated with consumerism (*Eat me*, 1975) and the ambiguity of the internal and the external are some of the transversal themes reflecting the artist's versatile command of different media.

The works grouped under the name of *Ttéias* were subject to various formalizations between 1977 and 2000. The first dates back to the *Ttéias-Redes* project, carried out with her students in Lage Park. With their distinctive filaments, the pieces in the series admit variants in accordance with the space, light, material and structure chosen from among those foreseen by the artist. At the root of these works is the key to Pape's gradual progression toward the total abstraction of poetic space, trapped since the *Tecelares* in a "net where the spiders weave planes of life or death," and rendered intangible in the *Ttéias*.

**Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina Sofía**

Sabatini building

Santa Isabel, 52
28012 Madrid

Tel. 91 774 10 00
Fax 91 774 10 56

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