

# The Early Critical Trajectory of Ferreira Gullar

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## Abstract

The early trajectory of critic and poet Ferreira Gullar is fundamental to understanding his role in the concretist and neoconcretist movements. After moving to Rio de Janeiro in the early 1950s, he soon became a dominant figure of the avant-garde circuit. During this period of youth, which began in São Luís and lasted until the last exhibition of Grupo Frente, in 1956, his apprenticeship as a critic was marked by the first response he gave to the Gestalt theory, as presented by Mário Pedrosa, by his ability to articulate diverse artistic and poetic contents, and by the search for leadership of the avant-garde group of Rio de Janeiro. From an early age, therefore, his work aimed to renew Brazilian visual arts and poetry, in line with what was happening in the major centers of Europe and the United States.

**Keywords:** Ferreira Gullar; Mário Pedrosa; Gestalt theory; modernism; Grupo Frente; visual arts.

## Origins

José Ribamar Ferreira's (1930-2016) career as an art critic began in 1956, when he was hired to work as a visual arts editor for the "Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil" (*SDJB*). At the age of 26, the opportunity arose for him to apply all the knowledge acquired in previous years. Although he did not write art criticism in the initial period, which began in the late 1940s and extended until the last exhibition of the Grupo Frente, his learning was quite rich, especially after he met Mário Pedrosa and the artists and poets from the concrete groups of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Through his personal effort and talent, the young man could develop the analytical skills that he would exercise with mastery during the neoconcrete movement, at the turn of the 1950s. Therefore, this article focuses on the critic's learning period, seeking to

describe the influences, reflections, and activities that would later allow him to exercise the leadership position of the Carioca avant-garde.<sup>1</sup>

Ferreira Gullar was born in São Luís, capital of Maranhão,<sup>2</sup> a city with a little more than one hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants, in 1950 (IBGE, 1952, p. 32). He was the son of a lower middle-class businessman called Newton Ferreira and a housewife, Alzira Ribeiro Goulart. The couple raised a large family with ten children, which was not uncommon at that time. They lived in a typical Brazilian house with a vegetable garden and backyard, where his brothers and sisters spent their childhood playing among chickens and domestic animals. His father owned a grocery store and sold rice, beans, vegetables, fruits and the like, so there was never a lack of food in difficult times. His father also worked as a peddler, traveling with Gullar, who then realized that the world was bigger than his hometown. There weren't many books in the house; He played in the street, committed mischief (such as stealing fruit from neighbors) and tried to play football at Sampaio Corrêa Futebol Clube, as his father had done. However, in the first match, an opponent kicked him so hard that the aspirant thought his back was broken – so he abandoned that dream.

After studying at São Luís Gonzaga School, which was the best private school in the city, his father enrolled Gullar in public education, opting for a technical school, in the hope that he would learn the trade of shoemaker, tailor or carpenter, to earn a living. At this school, he unexpectedly realized his talent for creative writing at the age of thirteen. The teacher asked the class to write an essay about Labor Day and awarded a prize for his composition, which was read aloud to his classmates. Despite the recognition, he did not receive full mark due to some spelling errors. In any case, Gullar embraced writing on that occasion, also realizing the need to study grammar. However, after failing the physical education course, he left school with the aim of self-educating himself, which he did over the next two years, a period in which he studied Portuguese and literature to the detriment of meeting friends.

The teenager broadened his horizons, developing an interest in painting as well; however, starting out in this field was difficult as there were no art schools in the city. After a few unsuccessful attempts, his father took him to an art studio run by a technical school student. Under this guidance, he painted some figurative works – and his mother was proud to hang one of these paintings in the living room. From that point on, visual arts would become part of his interests, but not professionally. In fact, his poetic talents were more evident and the guidance he received in this field was more solid, so that, after practicing painting a little,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a larger research project that focuses on various aspects of Ferreira Gullar's career, such as the neoconcrete manifesto, the concept of non-object, the debates between concretism and neoconcretism, his partnership with Lygia Clark, constructivist poetry, and his work at the *SDJB*, among others. The goal is to identify the lines of continuity and fracture between his art criticism, his poetic practice, and his participation in the Brazilian avant-garde.

<sup>2</sup> We have collected biographical information about Ferreira Gullar from several sources. We do not intend to write his biography, but to point out those life circumstances that became important for his career as an art critic and poet.

he reconsidered the results. At eighteen, Gullar also had practical concerns: he was hired as an announcer for radio Timbira do Maranhão and began writing for the literary supplement of the newspaper *Diário de São Luís*.

Beyond poetry, Gullar sought to satisfy his growing curiosity about visual arts and philosophy. His desire encountered difficulties, as specialized books were written in French. Undeterred, he studied the language on his own. Once again, his learning was extraordinary, as he strove to acquire a reasonable knowledge of the language and the disciplines. Two books received special attention in this process: the first was a bilingual anthology of French poetry, which was doubly instrumental, as it allowed comparisons between French and Portuguese, in addition to teaching him the evolution of modern poetry. The second book was a collection of texts by Maurice Denis, who also influenced him. In fact, the famous definition of painting by the French artist – “Remember that a painting – before being a warhorse, a naked woman, or any anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colors combined in a certain order” (Denis, 1988, p. 90) – would be remembered at important moments in the Brazilian critic’s career, particularly in his analysis of Lygia Clark’s work in the late 1950s.

Overall, this intellectual effort developed his knowledge of modern aesthetics. Gullar created an unconscious dialogue between poetry, plastic arts, and philosophy, involuntarily defining a path that few Brazilian writers had taken in the past. Finally, Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Brazilian modernism, European poetry, and visual arts provoked his change in sensibility. He then wrote his first masterpiece: “Galo, Galo”, in 1950, a poem that recounts his observation of a rooster in his backyard. The young poet not only identified himself with the animal but also used free verse and first-person phrases, placing the word “Anda” to the right of the usual alignment, to contemplate the result of the action portrayed (Gullar, 2000, pp. 11-12). He expressed concerns quite unexpected for a nineteen-year-old, reflecting on existence, destiny, memory, and oblivion. With this work, Gullar won the first poetry prize in a contest organized by *Jornal de Letras* of Rio de Janeiro, which was, at the time, the most important literary journal in the country.

### **Art circuit: Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo**

In 1951, the young poet was ready for new adventures far from his homeland. He saved money, sold his belongings, said goodbye to family and friends, and bought a plane ticket to the capital of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro. Lucy Teixeira – who was from São Luís – asked a friend to meet the newcomer at Santos Dumont Airport, taking him to a boarding house in the city center. Gullar remembered arriving on a Sunday when everything was quiet. The next day, however, the heavy traffic left him stunned, as he couldn’t cross the streets – he was quite impacted by the big city. A passerby noticed the embarrassing situation and helped him, pointing out the existence of traffic lights, which he didn’t know yet. The anecdote suggests the great challenge involved in

his move to Rio de Janeiro, even though he quickly found his way. With the help of friends from Maranhão, also living in the city, he soon met modernist writers and artists, starting to frequent the National Library, where he could study without noisy roommates.

Gullar's first impressions are understandable, and not just because of the inevitable comparison with São Luís. Located between the Serra do Mar and the Atlantic Ocean, Rio de Janeiro was, at the time, the most powerful urban center in the country. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it has expanded both inland (suburbs) and towards the coast, where the rich bathed on breathtakingly beautiful beaches that became world-famous. Its population also grew continuously, reaching two million and four hundred thousand inhabitants in 1950 (IBGE, 1952, p. 37). As the stage for national politics, the city was well-equipped, containing the senate and the chamber of deputies, government departments, cultural and artistic institutions, and bodies that administered the country's rapid growth after the Second World War. The city was the natural destination for young intellectuals – in fact, “Rio de Janeiro, as the administrative center, was the pole of attraction for Brazilian intellectuals by offering greater professional opportunities, facilitating access to official patronage recurrently developed by the State” (Arruda, 2006, p. 153).

Rio de Janeiro depended on federal money, leading the country until the founding of Brasília in 1960. However, its remarkable growth was not comparable to that of São Paulo, which received constant flows of migrants from Northeastern Brazil, Europe, and Japan since the 19th century. After the stock market crash of 1929, its entrepreneurs transferred the capital gained from coffee exports to the industrial sector. In 1950, this city had two million and two hundred thousand inhabitants, surpassing the federal capital in demographic and economic terms throughout that decade (IBGE, 1952, p. 39).<sup>3</sup> It specialized in services, while its metropolitan periphery (Osasco, ABC, Guarulhos, etc.) received heavy industries, whose owners sought cheaper locations, aiming for strategic transport networks to distribute their goods to the interior of the state, to other regions of the country, and abroad.

The powerful São Paulo businessmen sought political and symbolic validation: cultural patronage became an understandable option as they invested in the production and promotion of theater, cinema, and visual arts. In the latter field, they organized an impressive circuit. First, communication mogul and politician Assis Chateaubriand founded the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in 1947, donating important works he had acquired from bankrupt Europeans and compatriots through unconventional methods (Morais, 1994, pp. 479-493). Next, the industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho – who was a fierce competitor of Chateaubriand – opened the Museum of Modern Art (MAM-SP) in 1948, also donating his personal collection. Finally, he

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1950 census, the IBGE created an item for comparative analysis of the economies of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, indicating the intense competition between the two cities at that time.

created the São Paulo Biennial, organized by the MAM-SP<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, in the 1950s, “museums introduced a qualitatively diverse atmosphere, due to the organization of initiatives in multiple directions, allowing São Paulo and the country’s capital to align with the cultural rhythm of the world’s major centers” (Arruda, 2006, pp. 150-151).

In particular, the São Paulo Biennial changed the international art circuit, presenting Brazil as an unexpected but important player. In fact, Matarazzo realized that the Venice Biennale had faced difficulties in reopening in 1948, due to reconstruction in Italy. The industrialist took advantage of the opportunity – through the support of his wife, socialite Yolanda Penteado, and sculptor Maria Martins, who activated Brazilian diplomats and contacts in international networks – and convinced several countries to participate in the event (Sant’Anna, 2011). In the catalog of the first edition of the art fair, in 1951, the curator – then called artistic director – Lourival Gomes Machado wrote: “The Biennale should fulfill two main tasks: placing Brazilian modern art, not in simple confrontation, but in live contact with the art from the rest of the world, at the same time that São Paulo would seek to conquer the position of world artistic center” (Machado, 1951, p. 14).

The Biennial achieved these objectives, attracting the attention of the art world. If the first prize awarded to the sculpture *Tripartite Unity* (1948) by Max Bill represented the impact of concrete art on the local circuit, this prize also had significant repercussions in Europe, sending the message that Brazilians would openly promote new trends. Based on this success, the second edition of the international art fair was on par with similar events around the world: it was held in the Ibirapuera Pavilion, a modernist building by architect Oscar Niemeyer, which had been recently inaugurated in the southern part of the city. In addition to Brazilian art, the event exhibited Picasso’s famous *Güernica* (1937), alongside special rooms dedicated to Giorgio Morandi, Edvard Munch, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, Oscar Kokoschka, Ferdinand Hodler, Rufino Tamayo, Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, as well as Cubism, Futurism, and De Stijl (Milliet, 1953).<sup>5</sup>

The patronage of the arts was also on the rise in Rio de Janeiro: Raymundo Ottoni de Castro Maya and a group of local businessmen founded the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ) in 1948. The model for MAM-SP and MAM-RJ was the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). The president of this latter museum, Nelson Rockefeller, donated an initial collection of thirteen works to these institutions, helped organize their collections, and even made suggestions about architectural projects. He sought to organize a system of modern art museums in various cities across the country, spreading the cultural dominance of the United States; his goal was to disseminate Western artistic paradigms, creating a barrier against

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho also founded the Brazilian Theater of Comedy (1948) and the Vera Cruz Film Company (1949), which financed their respective activities on a business basis.

<sup>5</sup> Sérgio Milliet was the curator of the 2nd Biennial, organizing only two exhibitions of local art (on Elyseu Visconti and on the Brazilian landscape), suggesting the international focus of the event.

Socialist Realism, which was the communist ideology in the visual arts (Lourenço, 1999). Although this goal was achieved, each museum founded in Brazil followed an independent path. Sant'Anna (2011) highlights that the ideological independence of MAM-RJ and MAM-SP from MoMA can be seen in the fact that, while the latter supported Abstract Expressionism, the first institutions promoted Constructivism. This fact suggests that Brazilians accepted the proposal of abstract art but not the supremacy of the United States in the visual arts.

In addition to museums, a few but active private galleries operated in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, among which Domus Gallery, Petite Gallerie, and GEA Gallery stand out. These galleries were, in fact, small businesses focused on the commercialization of modern art in the country: they sold artworks along with furniture and decoration services, until they specialized in artistic objects by the late 1950s. At the same time, the Brazil–United States Institute (IBEU) organized a non-profit gallery to promote modernism. In general, this complex network of museums and galleries signified the “emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in Brazilian society” (Arruda, 2006, p. 154). Thus, the Brazilian circuit absorbed the international taste (founded on abstract art), formulating new narratives about modern art.

Gullar chose to live in Rio de Janeiro precisely because he wanted to take advantage of this modernized art circuit. For him,

This is one of the reasons that led me to leave São Luís, because my curiosity about painting and the arts in general found no satisfaction in the city's cultural activities. There were no exhibitions, galleries, or museums. All of this encouraged my move to Rio de Janeiro in 1951; at that time, Rio was the capital of the country and the most important cultural center (Gullar, 2013, p. 46).

In addition to the MAM-RJ, however, Rio de Janeiro promoted the country's official culture since the beginning of the 19th century, with the National Museum of Fine Arts, the National Library, and the Municipal Theater.

Given his interest in the visual arts, Gullar quickly realized that the local art scene was heavily influenced by the National School of Fine Arts. In 1816, the Portuguese Crown organized this institution following the model of the French academy, inviting a group of artists to live and work in Rio de Janeiro. Led by Joachim Lebreton, the “French Mission” introduced Neoclassicism to the country. However, a hundred years later, the National School of Fine Arts was promoting a deteriorated version of this aesthetic, known as academicism, which was superficially adapted to Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, etc. (Canongia, 1986).<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s, academics still held power, organizing the annual National Salon of Fine Arts, which was highly prestigious – in 1949, for example, this salon exhibited seven hundred and sixteen works of art, awarding thirty-seven artists (IBGE, 1952, p. 451).

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<sup>6</sup> When this institution began operating in 1826, it was named the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. With the Proclamation of the Republic, it became the National School of Fine Arts in 1889, and finally, the School of Fine Arts in 1971.

Brazilian modernism engaged in intense ideological battles against academicism, beginning with the Week of Modern Art in 1922 (Amaral, 1972). São Paulo did not have an official academy, which made things easier for the modernists, as, instead of academic teaching, artistic education in São Paulo depended on the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios, an institution that approached art from technical premises. In Rio de Janeiro, however, modernist artists felt the need to directly oppose the National School of Fine Arts, initially trying to transform it from within. In 1930, the government of Getúlio Vargas appointed Lúcio Costa to direct this institution, but the architect lost his job in less than a year after attempting to change the academic program (Bruand, 1974, pp. 71-74). But the winds of change were blowing from all sides. The Bernardelli Nucleus, for example, organized an independent program, advocating for freedom of expression and the renewal of the artist's profession in opposition to academic limitations.<sup>7</sup>

The typical leniency of the federal government in cultural administration made things even more difficult for the modernists. On December 19, 1951, Congressman Lopo Coelho presented Law No. 1512 to subsidize two exhibitions (Presidency of the Republic, 1951). In fact, the National School of Fine Arts was facing serious problems in organizing its annual exhibition, as the modernists had gained ground since 1940. Thus, politicians interfered in the artistic debate and decided that the government would separately fund the organization of the Salon of Fine Arts (held since the 19th century) and the Salon of Modern Art, which emerged at that time. The solution was bureaucratic and conciliatory, not allowing for the replacement of outdated academicism. As a result, Gullar felt the need to closely monitor its followers: from time to time, he interrupted his activities to question their political maneuvers, which threatened to destroy the advances of modern art. For the critic, this bill, which was carried out under the influence of academics, had “the sole purpose of blocking all avenues for true artists,” as it was the result of a ‘reactionary purpose’ (Gullar, 1957).

As a defender of modernism, Gullar criticized academicism whenever he felt that such a gesture was necessary. However, the field of modern art was not united during the 1950s, presenting two trends. While some artists advocated a form of modern figurativism (resulting from the stylization of Cubism and Expressionism), which sought to politically sensitize the viewer, others sought to defend abstractionism, asserting the autonomy of art in relation to any content. Ultimately, the differences between the paintings of Cândido Portinari and Di Cavalcanti (Zílio, 1977), on one side, and the new abstractionist experiences that modern art museums and the São Paulo Biennial were introducing in Brazil, on the other, represented this division within

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously, this group was named after the Bernardelli brothers, who had been professors at the School but ended up establishing independent studios.

modern art. Gullar reflected on these ideological disputes, deciding to support abstract and modernist art, even while recognizing the high level achieved by some artists of the first trend.

### The bases of Gullar's criticism

Gullar's defense of abstract art was not unique and was influenced by the critic Mário Pedrosa. The two met when Gullar arrived in Rio de Janeiro, becoming friends despite their age difference. In fact, Pedrosa changed the way Brazilians understood visual arts in that historical context. In 1945, he returned from exile in Europe and the United States. The Estado Novo dictatorship – which had just ended – persecuted and exiled the critic, who lived in Paris, then in Washington, D.C., and finally in New York, where he worked at MoMA. After returning to Brazil, Pedrosa participated in the fight for the country's re-democratization. During this period, he established himself as an art critic for *Correio da Manhã*, later working for *Tribuna da Imprensa* and *Jornal do Brasil*, among other newspapers. From this platform, he defended modernism, abstract art, and the autonomy of art against academicism and other artistic trends, such as Socialist Realism, for example (Arantes, 1991).

Two years before Gullar arrived in Rio de Janeiro, Pedrosa wrote a highly influential work entitled: "On the Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art" (Pedrosa, 1979, pp. 12-50): it was presented in a competition for the chair of art history and aesthetics at the National School of Architecture in Rio de Janeiro in 1949. The critic did not secure the position, but his thesis became a worldwide reference in the field.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Pedrosa's original insight revealed that the synthesis between the material and spiritual aspects of experience – which should be the object of the "ideal art of the future" – existed in nature; ultimately, this synthesis characterized the very structure of perception. Thus, Gestalt theory would be capable "of resolving the conflict between subjectivity and objectivity, form and expression, by providing a scientific (and even materialist) explanation for aesthetic perception" (Arantes, 1991, p. 55).

In his thesis, Pedrosa criticized both functional psychology and associationism: while the former projects utilitarian gestures onto perception, the latter relies on memory and experience to produce meaning – but both leave the problem of perception untouched. For him, "the particularity of our eyes, of our senses, is to segregate the objects that stimulate them according to a pattern, an immediate or mediated organization. The physiological process resulting from a set of excitations tends to organize itself spontaneously, according to certain structural laws." As a result, perception is regulated according to some constant traits, which also belong to the object, such as the proximity and similarity of perceptual elements, the differentiation between figure and ground, and the organization of "good form," because

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<sup>8</sup> Pedrosa's use of Gestalt theory to study the visual arts was second only to Kurt Koffka's lecture "Problems in the Psychology of Art," which was delivered at the Bryn Mawr College Symposium in 1939.



“balance and symmetry are perceptual characteristics of the visual world that will always manifest themselves whenever external conditions allow it” (Pedrosa, 1979, pp. 13 and 20). In this hypothesis, therefore, perception articulates only the essential characteristics of objects.

When Lucy Teixeira introduced Gullar to Pedrosa in Rio de Janeiro, they had the opportunity to personally discuss Gestalt theory. However, their debate had already begun earlier, as his friend had given him a copy of Pedrosa’s unpublished thesis while he was still living in São Luís in 1950. The young man read the work eagerly, and its ideas left a deep impression on him. Despite this, he disagreed with some aspects of the work and decided to write a letter to the critic. Recently, he recalled that incident as an “audacious” gesture on his part, but he felt empowered when Pedrosa discussed his conclusions with him as equals, a decision that stemmed from Pedrosa’s generous personality. Regarding the thesis, Gullar precisely grasped one of its central ideas, recalling that “each form possesses its own expression, independent of what it represents. All forms, even abstract ones, express something” (Gullar, 2013, p. 50).

For Gullar, however, the problem with Gestalt theory was the total independence of form. The young critic rejected one aspect of this theory: the concept of “good form”, emphasizing that the problem is that this concept privileges forms that transcend reality. For him,

No form exists independently of its context; none contains a value that can be determined a priori in an autonomous manner. A circle can be more or less expressive depending on its size, its color and texture, the forms that surround it, etc., in such a way that an autonomous form, without past or context, is an abstraction that does not exist (Gullar, 2013, p. 52)

Both arguments are obviously different: instead of Pedrosa’s belief in the recurrence of structural traits in both perception and its object, Gullar argued that visual elements depend on their contexts to produce meaning. Based on this reasoning, the new friends eventually concluded that the “expressiveness” of form is tied to the immediate conditions of its appearance. They discussed this topic several times until Pedrosa graciously accepted the reasoning of the young critic, which would be fundamental in his involvement with Concretism and Neoconcretism.

Despite this debate, Gullar remembers the following: “our theoretical discussions never came close to shaking our relationship. We were friends until the end of his life. I was his disciple, his friend, and Mário knew of the affection that united me to him” (Gullar, 2013, p. 52). Born in 1900, Pedrosa belonged to a previous generation. In the early 1950s, therefore, the critic guided the formation of his young friend, suggesting readings in the field of philosophy, lending art history books, teaching him how to interpret a visual work, and introducing him to the advanced artistic circles of Rio de Janeiro. Gullar, on the other hand, was eager to obtain reliable information about Brazilian art and curious about the local scene. The critic evidently

influenced Gullar in his understanding of the visual arts – but the latter’s instincts were strong, and he would be able to forge his own path.

In their frequent conversations, Pedrosa emphasized the importance of abstract, modernist, and avant-garde art. The two friends likely found common ground regarding constructivism, as they supported this trend throughout the decade – it is possible that Calder’s work influenced this ideological decision. Additionally, Pedrosa’s certainty about the autonomy of art allowed for the exploration of new concepts. He had completed his thesis on Gestalt theory a few years earlier, becoming a reference among the artists who would participate in the Brazilian avant-garde. At the same time, he also formulated the concept of “virgin art”, defending alienated artists, because “the visionary representation of the world, so vivid and deep in every primitive, in every child, in every artist, in every sensitive being like these, who, beyond being artists, are alienated” (Pedrosa, 1950).<sup>9</sup>

Pedrosa’s concept of virgin art was important for the circuit, validating the proposals of Dr. Nise da Silveira. Since the 1940s, this psychiatrist worked at the National Psychiatric Center, which at that time treated mental patients with lobotomy, electric shocks, and medications as usual procedures. She restructured the institution’s occupational therapy by introducing painting and modeling activities instead of just cleaning and maintenance. Dr. Nise was inspired by the idea that her patients could express themselves and thus organize their feelings and emotions, changing their lives. To lead the art workshops, she hired the artist Almir Mavignier, who worked at the Center from 1946 to 1951. After a few months, he set up an exhibition with the patients’ works, which was expanded and reassembled at the Ministry of Education and Health in 1947. Pedrosa then observed the high quality of the works, visiting the institute shortly thereafter, when he became interested in the occupational therapy workshops.

Dr. Nise’s occupational therapy workshops received visits from several avant-garde artists, following the example of Almir Mavignier: among them, we can mention Ivan Serpa, Abraham Palatnik, and Geraldo de Barros. Shortly after, Gullar also visited the institution.

When I arrived in Rio de Janeiro at the end of 1951 and met Mário Pedrosa, he told me about the work of Nise da Silveira and encouraged me to get to know the works of the artists from Engenho de Dentro. Shortly after, an exhibition of Emygdio de Barros’s works was held at IBEU in Botafogo. This exhibition was organized with the purpose of raising funds for Emygdio, who was leaving the Psychiatric Center and returning home. I was dazzled by Emygdio’s works, and this enchantment has never left me to this day. On the contrary, it only grew as I got to know the works of Raphael, Diniz, Carlos, Isaac... (Gullar, 1996, p. 25).

Gullar described his positive impression of Emygdio’s works and those of the inmates at the Center, which occurred precisely as he was formulating a notion of art. He visited the

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of virgin art was inspired by the “art brut” of the French painter Jean Dubuffet, who made a particular contribution to late surrealism.

National Psychiatric Center to get to know the “works of the artists,” suggesting that this notion was broad enough to incorporate the mental condition of the creators as circumstantial. Like Pedrosa, the young poet was interested in the aesthetic dimension of the phenomenon, typically modernist, while still being sympathetic to the existential drama.

In addition to the work developed at the National Psychiatric Center,<sup>10</sup> another phenomenon revealed the significant change that modernist ideas were causing in the art circuit. Indeed, children’s art was also on the rise, and two specialized schools were inaugurated in Rio de Janeiro: the Escola de Arte do Brasil and the art workshops of MAM-RJ. The printmaker Oswaldo Goeldi and art educator Augusto Rodrigues founded the first school in 1948. Ivan Serpa officially took over the direction of the latter in 1952 and trained a new generation of Rio de Janeiro artists, including Hélio Oiticica, Décio Vieira, Aluísio Carvão, João José da Costa, and Rubem Ludolf, among others (Lôbo, 1952a and 1952b). Just as with the art of the mentally ill, Gullar supported these modernist initiatives, even making the controversial statement: “I do not seek, I find – says Picasso, and in that, he intends to be, in creating, equal to a child” (Gullar, 1956a). Moreover, the artists trained at MAM-RJ were of the same generation as the critic, and together, they would participate in avant-garde movements in a few years.

In the visual arts, everything was changing rapidly at the beginning of the 1950s. Given the organization of an expanded art circuit, Mário Pedrosa’s efforts to renew the country’s visual arts, and the arrival of experimental proposals and theories through modern art museums and the São Paulo Biennial, it was expected that Brazilians would attempt to change their artistic culture as a whole – there were too many stimuli for there not to be local responses. Thus, after some pioneering abstract art exhibitions organized by MAM-SP and MAM-RJ – such as “Alexander Calder” in 1948, “From Figurativism to Abstractionism” in 1949, and concrete works by Max Bill in 1950 – and after the award given to this artist at the first São Paulo Biennial, the launch of avant-garde movements became a matter of time. In 1952, Waldemar Cordeiro and a group of predominantly European artists drafted the “Ruptura Manifesto” and organized an exhibition at MAM-SP, launching what was the country’s first avant-garde movement: concrete art (Cintrão and Nascimento, 2002).

The “Grupo Ruptura” was composed of Anatol Wladyslaw, Leopoldo Haar, Lothar Charoux, Kazmer Féjer, Geraldo de Barros, Luiz Sacilotto, and Waldemar Cordeiro, with the latter being the leader of the movement. In fact, Theo Van Doesburg originally created the term “concrete art” and published the manifesto “Base of Concrete Painting” in 1930. He declared that the artist must first create the artwork in spirit and then execute it; and also that abstract and concrete paintings are different, as the former is still very speculative, while the latter is

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<sup>10</sup> The art workshops at the National Psychiatric Center grew in size and importance, requiring the development of a new function, which was to store and preserve the patients’ artworks. Dr. Nise founded the Museum of Images of the Unconscious in 1952, an artistic institution that still exists today.

constructed with “purely plastic elements, that is, planes and colors. A pictorial element only signifies ‘itself’ and, consequently, the painting has no other meaning than itself”. For Doesburg, “painting is a means of optically realizing thought” (Doesburg, 1977, pp. 42-44).”

In general, São Paulo’s Concretism followed the principles described above. The Ruptura Manifesto emphasized that “all varieties and hybridizations of naturalism” are outdated, proposing instead “the renewal of the essential values of visual art (space-time, movement, and matter)”; moreover, the concretists perceived the artwork as “a means of knowledge deducible from concepts, placing it above opinion and requiring prior knowledge for its judgment” (Cordeiro et al., 1977, p. 69). In theory, we might imagine that Gullar would have difficulty accepting the dogmatic nature of this ideology, as his early critique of the central principles of Gestalt theory would make him resistant to the independence of forms suggested by the artists from São Paulo. But let’s take it slowly, because under the influence of Mário Pedrosa (who informally advocated for Concretism), the young critic was supportive of this movement in the early 1950s – at least, initially.”

### **Gullar and the Grupo Frente**

Compared to the vibrancy of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro had a slow start: the spread of modern art depended on the MAM-RJ (Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro), which operated in adapted buildings until it inaugurated its headquarters in Flamengo Park in 1963. The museum initially focused on education and organized its first exhibition, “Contemporary European Painting,” in 1949, showcasing works from the Paris School belonging to private collections: “a modest beginning when compared to the MAM in São Paulo, serving more as a launch to try to attract attention. This situation would change with the support of Niomar [Moniz Sodré], who had the backing and promotion of her husband Paulo Bittencourt’s newspaper, *Correio da Manhã*” (Lourenço, 1999, p. 136). Despite some progress, artists from both cities still struggled to establish abstractionism as a valid option in the early 1950s. In fact, the Brazilian representation at the 2nd São Paulo Biennial, in 1953, was predominantly figurative (Milliet, 1953).

To change this situation, artists from Rio de Janeiro and Petrópolis organized the “National Exhibition of Abstract Art,” which was promoted by the Petropolitano Association of Fine Arts and sponsored by the city of Petrópolis, with the support of the MAM-RJ. The event took place at the Quitandinha Hotel in February 1953. This hotel catered to the wealthy elite of the country and was in the Serra do Mar, about seventy kilometers from Rio de Janeiro. During the previous year, the organizers met several times in Petrópolis and at Ivan Serpa’s studio in the MAM-RJ: on these occasions, Décio Vieira and Lygia Pape (who still lived in Petrópolis) met that artist, as well as Aloísio Carvão and Mário Pedrosa. The MAM-RJ contributed with prize money and logistics. The exhibition featured the participation of Abraham

Palatnik, Antônio Bandeira, Décio Vieira, Lygia Clark, Pape, Carvão, Antônio Maluf, Anna Bella Geiger, Fayga Ostrower, Zélia Salgado, Serpa, among other artists (Moraes, 1984).

The curators (Edmundo Jorge and Décio Vieira) and the judging committee (Niomar Moniz Sodré, Mário Pedrosa, and Flávio de Aquino) of the National Exhibition of Abstract Art included works from different approaches, primarily favoring the constructive ones, but also “lyrical, expressive, baroque, and those of the Kandinsky tradition” (Jorge, 1953, unpaginated). However, Ivan Serpa’s strict constructivist orientation influenced the setup, “removing two canvases from the exhibition after they had been approved by the selection committee” (Maurício, 1953). Reinforcing this position, the judging committee awarded the MAM-RJ and Petrópolis city hall prizes to Décio Vieira and Lygia Clark, respectively. It is also worth noting that the opening ceremony was attended by the then governor of Minas Gerais, Juscelino Kubitschek – the future president of Brazil and the founder of Brasília openly supported modern art at the time.

With the National Exhibition of Abstract Art, Rio de Janeiro organized the first group of abstract artists in its history, seeking to counter São Paulo’s leadership in the visual arts field. Indeed, this exhibition marked the beginning of a vast renewal movement, but it was still in its early stages. It is worth noting that Gullar did not participate in the organization of the exhibition, and he possibly didn’t even visit it, either because he was too busy finishing his experimental poetry book *A Luta Corporal* or because of health problems. In fact, the young poet was undergoing treatment for tuberculosis – he was admitted to a sanatorium in Correias, a district of Petrópolis – during the exhibition, between December 1952 and March 1953 (Gullar, 1998, p. 10). Nonetheless, he would be at the forefront of the Rio de Janeiro arts scene in the coming decade.

In 1954, Ivan Serpa and a group of students from MAM-RJ (Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro) along with abstract art supporters came together to form the “Grupo Frente,” exhibiting their works at the IBEU Gallery. The exhibition intentionally highlighted the new artistic concepts circulating in Rio de Janeiro, showcasing pieces by Aluísio Carvão, Carlos Val, Décio Vieira, Ivan Serpa, João José da Silva Costa, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Vincent Ibberson. The name of the movement suggested a “front” against the traditional Brazilian art of the past, represented by artists like Portinari, Di Cavalcanti, Lasar Segall, and Tarsila do Amaral (Moraes, 1994). At this time, Pedrosa (1954) issued a sharp critique of Brazilian modernists. He argued that Segall had withdrawn from the contemporary scene due to pride and convenience, settling into a self-centered and materially comfortable isolation. Portinari’s works, according to him, were confusing in terms of form and color, calling them “empty.” He viewed Di Cavalcanti as outdated, focused only on fame and well-being, and believed Tarsila do Amaral had failed by repeating the works from her Pau-Brasil phase. Pedrosa saw Alfredo Volpi as the model artist, developing new solutions through a deeper exploration of pictorial problems.

Pedrosa’s stance defined the attitude of the Grupo Frente toward the previous generation of modernists and influenced Gullar, as we will see later. However, we should mention that the

term “frente” (front) might have had a more mundane origin. The critic himself recalls that Ivan Serpa saw this word on the cover of one of his informal poetry notebooks, indicating the front side of the object. The artist then took this inspiration and named the movement with that title, suggesting the beginning of an organized development. In this way, both companions avoided clichéd and expected terminologies, such as “avant-garde” and “renewal group.”

Overall, the Grupo Frente organized four exhibitions in the following years: the second at the MAM-RJ in 1955, and the third and fourth at the Country Club of Itatiaia and the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional in Volta Redonda (two cities located in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro), both in 1956. While the IBEU exhibition featured eight artists, the last one nearly doubled the number of participants. Gullar wrote the introduction for the first exhibition, declaring: “gathered around Ivan Serpa, as young as they are, these young men work patiently, seriously, on the invention of a new plastic language” (Gullar, 1954b). This statement supported the new artistic experiments in Rio de Janeiro, but it didn’t mean that the Grupo Frente exclusively promoted concrete art. In fact, the movement welcomed contributions from artists who were not even aligned with abstract art – the participation of Carlos Val exemplifies this pluralism.

Serpa was the leader of the movement: in addition to his strong personality, the artist held a strategic position to fulfill this role, as he had been the instructor for most of the movement’s participants. Lygia Pape “points out, however, that Ivan was not a theorist and that the intellectual leadership belonged to Mário Pedrosa, while Décio says Pedrosa’s influence was greater at the beginning, but that Ferreira Gullar also played a role. Gullar frequented Serpa’s house, and everyone visited Pedrosa’s home.” On another occasion, João José also confirmed that “Serpa was the group’s mentor, but Gullar was the theorist” (Morais, 1984, unpaginated). There were evident disputes for the leadership of the Grupo Frente: the cited passages indicate that Serpa was the undisputed leader, while Pedrosa was the movement’s mentor, eventually sharing this role with Gullar. Indeed, Pedrosa had the authority of belonging to the previous generation, but Gullar could establish a direct dialogue with his contemporaries.

The Grupo Frente exhibition at MAM-RJ brought together the concrete works of Ivan Serpa, Rubem Ludolf, Franz Weissmann, and João José, the experimental constructivism and furniture of Aluísio Carvão and Abraão Palatnik, the woodcuts and jewelry of Lygia Pape, the questioning of pictorial format and architectural models of Lygia Clark, the “plastic dramaticity” of Carlos Val, and the primitivism of Elisa Martins da Silveira, along with her notebooks containing texture exercises from various materials. Pedrosa (1955, unpaginated) wrote: “the group is not an exclusive clique, much less an academy where rules and recipes are taught and learned to create abstractionism, concretism, expressionism, futurism, cubism, realism, neo-realism, and other isms.” Despite their freedom, these artists have a “horror of eclecticism.” Overall, the aim to surpass the past, the growing number of artists, the diversification of experiences, and the exhibition spaces (cultural institutions, museums, social clubs, and steel

industry centers) reveal that the Grupo Frente promoted modern and avant-garde art in the state of Rio de Janeiro but was not dominated by any specific program.

The Grupo Frente supported various artistic experiments. Despite this, the artists of the movement experienced proselytism from Concretism, whether from the Grupo Ruptura or from Argentine concrete artists who had been visiting Rio de Janeiro since 1953. These artists exhibited at MAM-RJ, with Tomás Maldonado and Jorge Romero Brest giving lectures on this artistic ideology in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Finally, the group of artists who would later form Grupo Frente was also influenced by Max Bill, who visited the country in 1953. In an interview promoting the group's second exhibition, however, Ivan Serpa stated that each artist "seeks to express themselves in art through their own experiences, giving their work a personal, intimate, and spontaneous vision of things and events" (Serpa, 1955). More recently, Gullar also declared: "The group in Rio followed the thinking of Mário Pedrosa, who had a broad vision of the artistic phenomenon, to the point of advocating for Concretism while also defending the value of the art of the insane, the naive, and children" (Gullar, 2015, p. 51).<sup>11</sup>

Ivan Serpa and his companions presented practically the same works at the third and fourth exhibitions of Grupo Frente. In March 1956, the newspaper *Tribuna da Imprensa* promoted the exhibition in Itatiaia, covering the opening and interviewing the artists (Editor, 1956). In an article from this newspaper, Gullar clearly expressed the goal of overcoming the past, echoing ideas that were initially voiced by Pedrosa:

One cannot ignore the existence of isolated artists such as Milton Dacosta, Volpi, Lívio Abramo, Marcelo Grassmann, and others, who are truly valuable to Brazilian art and pave their own way. However, I say that Grupo Frente is the most important because it represents the liberation of Brazilian art from this kind of quagmire into which it had fallen, this stagnant thing, whose most notable representative is Mr. Cândido Portinari. If it weren't for Grupo Frente, Portinari would be alone in leading the great movement of returning Brazilian art to patriotic paintings of historical battles and portraits of generals, with or without mustaches (Gullar, 1956b).

We must highlight Gullar's seemingly contradictory gesture, as he not only praised well-known Brazilian modernists but also criticized Portinari, who was then considered the greatest representative of that trend. The young critic denounced what he interpreted as the painter's disguised adherence to academicism, further emphasizing that Grupo Frente was fulfilling the historical task of surpassing him.

Two days after Gullar's statements, the newspaper *Tribuna da Imprensa* interviewed Mário Pedrosa (1956), suggesting the existence of two intellectual leaders within the Grupo Frente. He highlighted positive aspects of the movement, noting that "an event like this shows

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<sup>11</sup> Gullar also wrote on another occasion: "The Grupo Frente, although mostly composed of artists with a concrete tendency, did not follow any rigid aesthetic code. For these artists, geometric language was not a final destination, but rather an open field for experimentation and inquiry" (Gullar, 1985, p. 228).

that, little by little, the artistic phenomenon is spreading throughout the country. Let us hope that it will contact unexplored and untapped spiritual forces that must be out there.” He emphasized the new research of Lygia Clark, who abandoned the individual artwork, seeking to integrate it into architecture: “she wants the work of art not on an isolated easel painting, not on a privileged mural, but in an entire house so that everything harmonizes within it in the same aesthetic and functional thought” – this insight into Clark’s work would also become very important for Gullar in the near future. Finally, Pedrosa also praised Franz Weissmann, Aluísio Carvão, Lygia Pape, and Ivan Serpa with analyses that sought to map the contributions of the new generation, without forgetting the masters of the past.

The fourth exhibition of the Grupo Frente took place at the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional, Volta Redonda, in July 1956, with the support of MAM-RJ and *Correio da Manhã*: it re-presented the third exhibition, receiving little criticism in the press; even so, the Argentine concretist Tomás Maldonado visited the exhibition at its closing, seeking to contact the artists of this movement who were then displaying their work (Maurício, 1956). Despite this, Serpa and his companions were more interested in articulating the creative energies of the circuit than in formulating a specific program. Gullar’s contribution to this process was positive, as he took advantage of the subtle critiques of the Grupo Frente. His participation as an intellectual leader of the movement required the development of a reasoning that was both flexible and rigorous: flexible because it incorporated the contributions of some masters of modernism, who defended the autonomy of art, and rigorous because it also responded to the strictest parameters of abstractionism and constructivism.

In October 1956, Gullar began working for *Jornal do Brasil*, taking on the role of art critic and editor of the *SDJB* arts section. During this period, he joined Concretism and supported the mounting of the “I National Exhibition of Concrete Art”, which had unexpected consequences, as it ended up separating the exhibiting artists into concrete groups in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Over time, the young Gullar’s doubts regarding the autonomy of forms – which were first expressed during the debate with Mário Pedrosa about Gestalt theory – guided his poetic and critical reflections. He eventually assumed the leadership position of the Rio de Janeiro vanguard, which would lead, within two years, to the organization of Neoconcretism – but that is another history.

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