

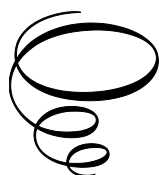
New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism

New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism

By

Renato Rodrigues da Silva

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism

By Renato Rodrigues da Silva

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2021 by Renato Rodrigues da Silva

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-7184-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7184-6

I dedicate this book to
Tami Helena Pestana Bogéa,
Isabel Bogéa-Silva and Sarah Bogéa-Silva—
with love!

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	viii
Preface	xi
Chapter One.....	1
The <i>Fotoformas</i> of Geraldo de Barros: Photographic Experimentalism and the Abstract Art Debate	
Chapter Two	19
The (Neo)Concrete Sculptures of Franz Weissmann: Between Heaven and Earth	
Chapter Three	54
Ferreira Gullar's Art Criticism and the Debates of Concretism	
Chapter Four	83
Neoconcretism: Interdisciplinarity and Participation in Contemporary Brazilian Art	
Chapter Five	99
Ferreira Gullar's Non-Object or How Neoconcrete Poetry Became One with the World	
Chapter Six	129
Rediscovering Interdisciplinarity in Contemporary Brazilian Art: The Work of Willys de Castro	
Chapter Seven.....	151
Hélio Oiticica's <i>Parangolé</i> or the Art of Transgression	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book *New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism* is indebted to many people and institutions, which I herewith gratefully recognize as true partners in my academic effort. Whether during the writing of the original publications or in their adaptations to this volume, they supported my work in many ways. The photographs of Chapter One “The *Fotoformas* of Geraldo de Barros: Photographic Experimentalism and the Abstract Art Debate” were originally published with the support of Lenora de Barros and Fabiana de Barros, who generously released the copyright of Geraldo de Barros’s *Fotoformas*; the current publication is also indebted to Instituto Moreira Salles (IMS), which was represented by Thaiane Koppe and Vera Lúcia F. Silva Nascimento, who charged only half of the regular fees for the copyright release of Barros’s photographs.

As regards Chapter Two “The (Neo)concrete Sculptures of Franz Weissmann: Between Heaven and Earth,” I am indebted to Waltraud Weissmann who promptly released the copyright of the images of his sculptures for the current publication. I would like to thank Ronaldo Rodrigues da Silva, who helped me understand the geometric implications of Weissmann’s sculpture, and the anonymous readers of the magazines *World Art* and *Ars*, since their comments and suggestions on my article were very relevant to my finding its final form.

Regarding Chapter Three “Ferreira Gullar’s Art Criticism and the Debates of Concretism,” I would like to thank Ana Paula Marques (Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo—Fundação Bienal de São Paulo) and Valter Sacilotto for releasing the copyright of photographs of the São Paulo Biennial and of the works of Luiz Sacilotto, respectively. I am also thankful to Márcio Affonso (Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação do Jornal do Brasil) and Alvaro Edwards Clark (Associação Cultural “O Mundo de Lygia Clark”), since they charged reduced fees for the publication of the images of *Jornal do Brasil* and of Lygia Clark’s works in this book. I again appreciate the comments and suggestions of the reviewers of *World Art*—in particular, those of Claus Klüver and Michael Asbury—and of Isabel Bogéa-Silva, who helped me shape a better paper. This chapter is dedicated to the poet Ferreira Gullar, who passed away at the age of eighty-six while I was writing this article—with his unmatched generosity, he always opened his house to me, to my questions and to my admiration.

In writing Chapter Four “Neoconcretism: Interdisciplinarity and Participation in Contemporary Brazilian Art,” I again appreciated the generosity of Ana Paula Marques, Márcio Affonso and Alvaro Edwards Clark for releasing the images of their correlative institutions. When I was writing the first version of this article, Kristina Lee Podesva, then executive editor of *Fillip*, was very helpful with the revision and organization of my text. In addition, Jeff Khonsary, Artistic Director of this magazine, promptly released the copyright of the original article for the current publication.

As regards Chapter Five, “Ferreira Gullar’s Non-object, or How Neoconcrete Poetry Became One with the World,” I would like to thank Ferreira Gullar for allowing me to use the images of his poems and experimental works in the publication of *Word & Image*, and Alexandre Dawson, then Director of the Latin American Studies Program of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, for academic support and for allowing me to present an early version of this article in the “SFU—UBC Latin American Studies Working Papers Series,” on October 13, 2011. For the present publication, I am again thankful to Márcio Affonso and to Aline Siqueira (Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro), who allowed me to reproduce the cover of the catalogue of the 1st Neoconcrete Exhibition”.

Portuguese-language versions of Chapters Three and Five were also published in *Prometheus, Filosofia em Revista*. Thus, I would like to thank the editor of this magazine, Aldo Dinucci, for the revision of my articles, for the enlightening conversation about Gullar’s literary works, and for the friendly support during my academic stay at the Universidade Federal do Sergipe, in 2013 and 2014.

Finally, in Chapters Six and Seven, “Rediscovering Interdisciplinary in Contemporary Brazilian Art: the Work of Willys de Castro” and “Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolé or the Art of Transgression,” I counted on the support of Walter de Castro and Aline Siqueira (Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro) for respectively releasing the photographs of Willys de Castro’s works, including the one on the cover of this book, and of the exhibition of Ben Nicholson at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1958. These two chapters were originally written for my doctoral dissertation, which was presented at the Department of Art History of the University of Texas at Austin, in 2001. I am thankful to my advisors Richard Shiff and Jacqueline Bartz, who provided me with the necessary peace of mind to successfully conclude my work. In addition, I am particularly thankful to Richard Shiff for his continuous support throughout all these years. Without his support—and the inevitable encouragement that goes along with it—I would have probably given up working in the field since I finished my doctorate.

This work has been supported by institutions and universities since the very beginning. I was awarded a doctoral scholarship from the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq, Brazil) and an M. K. Hage Endowed Scholarship in Fine Arts from the Department of Art History of the University of Texas at Austin, which also waived my tuitions in 2000 and 2001. The Faculty-Sponsored Dissertation Research Grant of this University allowed me to complete field research in Brazil and the United States. The Universidade Federal Fluminense allowed me four years of license to realize my doctoral dissertation. These institutions provided me with the material support to conclude my dissertation, including Chapters Six and Seven of this book.

Throughout the realization of this book, I researched in various libraries, museums and archives, including the Biblioteca Nacional of Rio de Janeiro, Library of FUNARTE (Rio de Janeiro), the Library of the Museu de Arte Moderna of Rio de Janeiro, the Library of the Universidade Federal Fluminense, the Library of Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), the Archive of the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação do *Jornal do Brasil*, the Library of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Biblioteca Mário de Andrade of São Paulo, the Library of the Department of Art History of the University of Texas at Austin, the Public Library of New York, the Library of the University of British Columbia Okanagan, and the Library of Simon Fraser University (Vancouver), to name but a few. I am thus very grateful for the work of the librarians of these institutions who made my academic investigation possible.

Numerous people encouraged the development of this work, even though they were not directly connected to it. Particularly, I am thankful to Bruno Melo Monteiro, whose interest in my academic investigation was always a stimulus to its continuity. In addition, I appreciated the support of Nicolau Maluf Jr, who helped me realize the meaning of my academic effort throughout the years.

Finally, my family has always supported my work, even when conditions were not favorable. I would never be able to conclude this book without the support and partnership of my wife, Tami Helena Pestana Bogéa, who helped me go through the difficult moments of its development. I also enjoyed the lively presence of our daughters Isabel Bogéa-Silva and Sarah Bogéa-Silva throughout this work—their noises and happy agitation were reminders that life is much more than I could find in libraries. I therefore dedicate the book *New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism* to my family with love and heartfelt thanks.

PREFACE

New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism focuses on the works and ideas of artists, critics and poets who were active in Brazil during the developmentalist period. In its seven chapters, I analyze their participation in the so-called “Constructivist Brazilian Project” [Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro],¹ which is composed of modernist and avant-garde movements that mainly took place in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in the 1950s and early 1960s. In particular, they participated in Concretism and Neoconcretism, a pair of interconnected constructivist movements that transformed the visual arts, industrial and graphic design, photography, architecture and poetry, producing a rigorously abstract, geometric and reductionist art, which created patterns that intended to guide the industrial and urban development of the country. In addition, the poets refused discourse and syntax, displaying loose words on the page as a way of emphasizing the viscosity of the poem.

The context of these movements reveals the modernization of Brazil after World War II, which happened from 1945 to 1964; they blossomed when the country went through an accelerated process of industrialization guided by President Juscelino Kubitschek’s developmentalist policy, which, among other actions, built the new federal capital of Brazil, Brasília, in just five years. Indeed, artistic constructivism and Brasília are two sides of the same coin, indicating that Brazilians wanted to overcome their colonial past forever. During that period, the country also consolidated a system of museums of modern art and created the São Paulo Biennial, which aimed to put São Paulo at the centre of the international art circuit, competing with New York and Paris. Given this background, Concretism and Neoconcretism represented the emergence of the avant-garde in a context of internationalization and deepening of capitalist relationships in the field of culture, being characterized by a generous, if naïve, attempt to democratize the advances of developmentalism. They therefore appealed to reason, to the universality of judgement and to the objectivity of artistic experience.

¹ See Aracy Amaral, ed., *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro nas Artes, 1950-1962* (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo: MEC, FUNARTE, MAMRJ and Secretaria de Ciência e Tecnologia de São Paulo, 1977).

Constructivism originally resulted from Pablo Picasso's "constructions" and Vladimir Tatlin's series of *Counter-Relieves* of the mid-1910s. Either as organized movements or based on individual trajectories, it soon spread throughout Europe and North America, forming one of the most dominant trends in the first half of the twentieth century. The end of World War II renewed the hopes of a rational expression, since artists were called to participate in the efforts towards the reconstruction of Europe. Then, constructivism arrived in Latin America, particularly influencing the art circuits of Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela and Brazil; in each one of these countries, this ideology was twisted to adjust to local requirements and necessities. In this book, therefore, I try to understand how the Brazilian avant-garde transformed international constructivism into original expressions in the 1950s and early 1960s, showing how Concretism and Neoconcretism overcame their European sources to engage with the cultural conditions of Brazil as a way of supporting the promises of development of the post-war period.

Recent scholarship analyses Concretism and Neoconcretism, concentrating on their fundamental moments, but mostly fails to consider their origins and does not pay much attention to the various ways that these movements adapted imported artistic ideas and practices. Neither does the scholarship systematically focus on the contribution of Brazilians to contemporary art. Therefore, the objectives of this book are two-fold: 1- to analyze the work of some of their main players, who adjusted international constructivism to the conditions of the country; and 2- to reveal how the intense experimentation of Neoconcretism founded early contemporary art, sometimes prior to the United States and Europe. This book shows that the historical significance of concrete and neoconcrete art goes beyond national borders, since these movements created early versions of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary art, participatory art, process art, visual poetry, performance, installation art, dematerialization art, institutional critique, body art and environmental art.

In Chapter One, I analyze Geraldo de Barros's *Fotoformas* series, which consists of photographic experiments that pioneered abstractionism in Brazil. Since the mid-1990s, this series has been presented in various retrospective exhibitions and publications. The predominant critical interpretation of the work, however, has linked it to concrete art, downplaying Barros's participation in the Bandeirante Photographic and Cinema Club (FCCB), an amateur association. This chapter rethinks his engagement in both circuits, demonstrating that the artist created the *Fotoformas* in dialogue with this photo club. I also analyze Barros's experimental approach, which is based on the inscription of indexical marks

on the images to deny the constraints of the camera, with the emphasis on process and interdisciplinary artistic practice. In this sense, he created an alternative to Brazilian abstractionism which mostly focused on formal aspects.

In Chapter Two, I focus on Franz Weissmann's early constructivist sculptures. For international audiences, his work and approach are not very well-known and have been generally considered part of the concrete movement, although Brazilian art criticism understands his work mainly as neoconcrete. His development and artistic trajectory during the late 1950s, when these approaches and categories became established, have not been given much consideration or contextualization. Consequently, this chapter moves beyond current appreciations of his output as concrete and offers an alternative "close reading." Here I detail some of his signal and most influential works, including *Cubo Vazado*, *Coluna Concreta*, *Modelo Neoconcreto*, *Três Pontos*, *Ponte*, *Torre* and *Terra*, to highlight the artworks' formal and expressive qualities. This investigation of Weissmann's sculpture finds a divergent sensibility, which influenced the Brazilian avant-garde more than is recognized today.

In general, the scholarship on the Constructivist Brazilian Project fails to consider the origins of Neoconcretism and the debates between the avant-gardes of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 1957 and 1958. Despite this shortcoming, scholars recognize the decisive participation of the poet and critic Ferreira Gullar in these debates. Thus, Chapter Three focuses on his early art criticism, which was mainly published in *Jornal do Brasil*, considering Mário Pedrosa's influence on his ideas; the defence of artistic autonomy; the concrete debate over the notion of the symbol; his collaboration with Lygia Clark; and, finally, the deconstruction of the easel painting. It tackles uncharted historical events, since recent research in the archives of that newspaper allowed the republication of his articles and reviews, which still demand detailed investigation. Indeed, this Chapter examines Gullar's art criticism to demonstrate that he slowly but decisively separated the group of artists of Rio de Janeiro from Paulista² Concretism. After addressing the events in a historical narrative, I concluded that his ideas not only gave an original contribution to Brazilian constructivism, but that they also opened the door for the organization of a new movement.

The launching of Neoconcretism at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in March 1959 signalled the moment Brazilian constructivism became conscious both about its history, and about the ways it could diverge

² The term "Paulista" means a person who was born or lives in São Paulo, and "Carioca" a person who was born or lives in Rio de Janeiro.

through a new collective formulation. Gullar wrote the manifesto of the new movement, which was co-signed by Amílcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Reynaldo Jardim and Theon Spanudis. Its developments, with the adhesion of new participants, including Hélio Oiticica and Willys de Castro, eventually changed the very nature of the constructivist movement, opening it up to new artistic and poetic formulations. In Chapter Four, I analyze the internal tensions of Neoconcretism, which was torn between the use of five-centuries-old artistic categories (painting, sculpture, engraving, poetry, etc.) and the revolutionary possibilities opened up by their transformations into new proposals. In particular, I concentrate the analysis on the neoconcrete practices of interdisciplinarity and participation, which subsumed these transformations.

Ferreira Gullar was fundamental to Neoconcretism, although his participation in this movement has not been fully analyzed yet. This fact results from the incipient knowledge of his neoconcrete phase, since the academic organization of the fields of literary studies and art history in Brazil does not allow for the understanding of his interdisciplinary approach to poetry. Whereas literary critics focus on his more traditional poetic production, art historians consider the criticism independently, neglecting that he remained a poet through and through. In Chapter Five, therefore, I conduct an integrated analysis of Gullar's works, considering the relationship between his art writing and his experimental poetry, which intended to overcome conventional media to materialize a pure expression. I examine the non-object, as well as Gullar's poetic output, which consists of the concrete and neoconcrete poems, the *Livros Poemas* and *Poemas Espaciais* series, and the installation *Poema Enterrado*.

In Chapter Six, I study Willys de Castro's series of *Objetos Ativos*, which was his contribution to Neoconcretism, reinforcing the experimentalist trend that characterized the last moments of this movement. A typical *Objeto Ativo* is composed of a wooden structure covered with a painted canvas that is hung on the wall like a regular painting—but the evident tridimensionality of the object purposefully contrasts with the flatness of its frontal surface. Accordingly, the artist addressed the potential conflict between painting and sculpture to the benefit of a fruitful interdisciplinary practice. The reception of these works, nonetheless, is still based on Brazilian formalist theory of the late 1950s, and does not consider Castro's linguistic concerns, which informed the series. Based on poststructuralist theory, I analyze his works, attempting to understand their rather complex regimes of signification.

Chapter Seven focuses on Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolé*, the most important version of which is composed of a cape made of multicolored fabrics that one wears when moving or dancing. Given its multiple versions and contexts, however, this proposition suggests various contradictory meanings, engendering a polysemy that almost makes interpretation impracticable. Avoiding the interpretative trap of the *Parangolé*, I have used Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject that allowed for the understanding of the artist's intensive relationship with Lygia Clark in the 1960s. This approach also provides a good vantage point from which to investigate Oiticica's performances realized in contexts as disparate as the Favela da Mangueira and the opening of the exhibition "Opinião 65" at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro. Eventually, this investigation reveals that, more than a proposition created at a particular juncture of history, the *Parangolé* is still open for new iterations, even decades after of the death of the artist.

This book presents new perspectives on the Constructivist Brazilian Project, not only because it diverges from the analyses of some works of this period in the bibliography, but also because the seven chapters suggest an alternative history of the subject, particularly with regards to Neoconcretism. I would like to exemplify the first mode of divergence: Chapter Six shows that Willys de Castro's *Objetos Ativos* generate a semiotic interface between painting and sculpture, unveiling how these media traditionally produce signification. My analysis disagrees with that of Brazilian critics who unconsciously argue that his works are still based on Ferreira Gullar's ideas of the late 1950s—as a neoconcrete leader, he believed that the non-object only generated deterritorialized spatial and temporal experiences. Inadvertently, these ideas are followed to this day, demanding additional considerations.

According to this reading, the *Objetos Ativos* display precise and unequivocal visual formulations that only require our perceptual engagement for a fruitful reception. Still according to this view, Chapter Six of this book mistakenly investigates the artist's works through their supposed "illusionism." However, those critics would fail to answer the following question: if the *Objetos Ativos* are based on "unequivocal" declarations, how do their diagonal perspectives suggest semiotic dialogues between painting and sculpture? In reality, what they repudiate as illusionism points out the deconstruction of traditional regimes of signification. Finally, it should be remembered that Willys de Castro's participation in Neoconcretism did not make him a neoconcrete artist, and that his works—in the interplays between different media—are akin to the interdisciplinary proposal of Concretism.

Regarding the history of Concretism and Neoconcretism, it is important to note that no art historian or critic has made a systematic effort to put together the works, ideas and events of that period in a temporal narrative, constituting a problem for our circuit, which, however, recognizes the enormous impact of these movements in contemporary Brazilian art. Nowadays, there is a growing bibliography on this subject, of which Aracy Amaral's catalogue mentioned above and Ronaldo Brito's essay³ are the most relevant. Unfortunately, both works delineate partial views: whereas the former reference is a collection of articles and documents of constructivist Brazilian art, without a critical analysis that manages to understand the artistic proposals in their constitutive complexities, the latter focuses on Neoconcretism through a critical perspective, but with limited documental concerns. In this sense, the book *New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism* works to change this situation a little.

The chapters of this book are independent, but present analyses that communicate across each other, allowing the reader to glimpse the history of Neoconcretism. Here are some examples of this conversation: Weissmann's sculptures materialized the emergence of an alternative sensibility to that of Concretism (Chapter Two), following the path first paved by Lygia Clark; Gullar perceived the artistic revolution promoted by her works (Chapter Three), organizing and launching Neoconcretism (Chapter Four). Seven months after this launch, the artist showed a new experiment at the neoconcrete exhibition in Salvador (Bahia), making evident that there was a qualitative leap in her output. Then, Gullar grasped the opportunity to write his "Theory of the non-object," introducing an avant-garde proposal into the movement that changed the course of events (Chapter Five). Finally, Hélio Oiticica radicalized Gullar's proposal, opening room for the emergence of contemporary art (Chapter Seven). It should be noted that I did these analyses at different points in time, but, together, they formulate an alternative view of the historical and esthetical transformations of Brazilian arts during that period.

To write this book, I researched articles, art reviews, interviews, exhibition catalogs and books in various libraries, archives, museums and newspapers in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, New York, Austin (Texas), and Vancouver (Canada), among other cities. In particular, I conducted extensive research in the archives of *Jornal do Brasil* between 2010 and 2015, which also resulted in the co-edition of the book *Ferreira Gullar*,

³ See Ronaldo Brito, *Neoconcretismo, Vértice e Ruptura do Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE, 1985).

Antologia Crítica do Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil,⁴ which has the merit of putting one hundred and three articles by the critic in circulation again. Through this investigation, I had the opportunity to recreate the artistic, poetic, and critical circumstances that determined the emergence of the neoconcrete movement. Therefore, Chapters Three and Five present the two debates that transformed Concretism, which would produce the new movement: the first debate followed the so-called “rock’n’roll of poetry,” separating concrete poetry into two groups, in June 1957, and the second thematized the notion of space in contemporary art, in October 1958. These two circumstances gave Carioca artists and poets their own identity, preparing for the organization of Neoconcretism months later.

In this book, I questioned the publications in the field, even systematically taking advantage of the works of my predecessors. In some moments, I simply rectified the scholarship on a specific topic, as in Chapter One, since the bibliography on Geraldo de Barros defines his *Fotoformas* as concrete, when the photographer was freely experimenting with the medium. In others, I made intricate negotiations between different points of view. I noticed, for example, that Weissmann's critical fortune is symptomatically divided between international critics who understand his 1950s sculpture as concrete, and those who conceive it as neoconcrete. Altogether, these analyses unconsciously follow the characteristics of the movements, which described plastic elements, on the one hand, and emphasized the expressive effects, on the other. Consequently, I endeavored to unite these two sides in Chapter Two, employing the plastic elements to grasp the expressive effects of Weissmann's sculptures; concomitantly, I carried out contextual analyses.

Therefore, if I had not questioned these two interpretative hypotheses of Weissmann's sculpture, I would not have reached a satisfactory result. In several chapters, I sought to investigate current ideas about the subjects, verifying their critical limits, in order to produce knowledge. As the examples above suggest, the book *New Perspectives on Brazilian Constructivism* results from this effort, whose methodology I have developed for years, considering that Chapters Six and Seven (respectively on Willys de Castro's *Objetos Ativos* and Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*) had their first versions in my doctoral dissertation presented to the University of

⁴ See Ferreira Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar, Antologia Crítica: Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*, eds. Renato Rodrigues da Silva and Bruno Melo Monteiro (Rio de Janeiro: Contra Capa, 2015)

Texas at Austin (United States).⁵ One should also notice that the chapters were not revised to fit the set, and some contradictions and localized repetitions may be found from one chapter to the next. I indeed preferred to leave the individual texts the way they were first written rather than to revise them according to some general ideas, perhaps because they reflect their original moments. In reality, it was a long journey, which was not obviously planned as such, but whose results I am extremely pleased to present to the reader in the form of this book.

⁵ See Renato Rodrigues da Silva, *The Institutional Debate: a Comparative Study between Neoconcretism and Minimalism*, Doctoral dissertation presented at the University of Texas at Austin, 2001.

CHAPTER ONE

THE *FOTOFORMAS* OF GERALDO DE BARROS: PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENTALISM AND THE ABSTRACT ART DEBATE¹

After an apprenticeship as a figurative painter, Brazilian artist Geraldo de Barros (1923-98) became a prominent photographer and one of the first abstractionists of this country. Soon he fell under the influence of constructivism, which grew in importance in Brazil after World War II. Following its industrialist logic of constructivism, the artist also created advertising posters and founded successful companies as a way of supporting his activities as designer. In the late 1960s, Barros accepted the vocabulary of Pop Art, inaugurating—along with artist Nelson Leirner—the short-lived but relevant Rex Gallery and Sons, which promoted neo-avant-garde experiments, such as happenings and performances. Finally, he returned to the earlier geometric style, remaining faithful to this approach until the end of his life, when he experimented with photography once again.

Truly a multi-media artist before the term was ever used, Barros worked with painting, photography, engraving, collage, graphic and industrial design, among other means. He began working with photography in the late 1940s, realizing an interdisciplinary artistic practice for the first time—a practice that remains to be fully understood today. In reality, he created two series of photographic works in his career: the first was the *Fotoformas* (1948-51) and the second was the *Sobras* (1996-98). Both revealed a highly experimental approach to the medium, suggesting that the interdisciplinary crossing of diverse artistic practices was a lifelong concern.

Barros's *Fotoformas* consist of a set of mix-media works that deconstructed the traditional photographic process, pushing the limits of this medium to produce a form of experimentation that went beyond what was seen in the

¹ This article was first published in *Leonardo Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2 (April 2011) pp. 152-160.

circuit; the series helped to establish abstractionism in Brazil. These images were first shown at the “*Fotoforma* exhibition” held at the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP) in January 1951; it was a national event, traveling to the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador afterwards. The exhibition was a breakthrough in other aspects as well. Not only did the artist curate the show, but also designed the supports and experimented with the exhibition display, revealing his awareness of the site of installation (Photo 1).



Photo 1: Overview of Geraldo de Barros’s *Fotoforma* exhibition at the Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) January 1951. Photograph: Collection of the Institute Moreira Salles.

In *Sobras*, Barros reworked the “leftovers” of the *Fotoformas* and old family photographs, unexpectedly continuing on from his earlier experiments with the medium. Perhaps as a way of looking back at his own life, he added the dimension of memory to a series that seems to highlight formal concerns.² In the last analysis, however, both bodies of work come to reveal an uncompromising artist who altered the meaning of photography according to an evolving multi-media practice. Since the mid-1990s, the *Fotoformas* have been subjected to various retrospective exhibitions and publications that discuss his contribution to Brazilian photography.³

The scholarship on the *Fotoformas*, however, is split between two different approaches, pointing out contradictory historical origins. The predominant trend links this series with Concretism, an international avant-garde movement that dominated Brazilian art during the 1950s, downplaying Barros’s participation in the Bandeirante Photographic and Cinema Club [Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante (FCCB)]. In general, critics do not take this activity into account, since this amateur organization (founded in São Paulo, in 1939) defended the status of photography as art, its members practicing it as a weekend hobby, even though some of its participants began developing modernist experiments in the mid-1940s.⁴

This article focuses on Barros’s *Fotoformas*, reevaluating his involvement both with the FCCB and the avant-garde. The idea is to highlight the contributions of both environments to his artistic background, showing how they influenced the creation of the series. In the second part of this article, I analyse the works, aiming at understanding his experimental approach, which ultimately reveals that Barros’s was an independent artist who defined a new direction for Brazilian avant-garde.

² On the *Sobras*, see Geraldo de Barros, *Sobras: Geraldo de Barros*, ed. Rubens Fernandes Junior (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2006). Barros was then seriously ill and was assisted by photographer Ana Moraes.

³ On the reception of the *Fotoformas*, see Geraldo de Barros, *Fotoformas* (São Paulo: Raízes, 1994); *Geraldo de Barros 1923-1998. Fotoformas*, ed. Reinhold Misselbeck (Munich and São Paulo: Prestel Verlag Munich and SESC of São Paulo, 1999); *Fotoformas: Geraldo de Barros* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2006); and, finally, Heloisa Espada Rodrigues de Lima, *Fotoformas: a Máquina Lúdica de Geraldo de Barros*, Master of Arts thesis presented at the University of São Paulo, 2006.

⁴ On modern photography in Brazil, see Renato Rodrigues da Silva and Helouise Costa, *A Fotografia Moderna no Brasil* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004).

The Context of the *Fotoformas*

Barros was originally a painter who worked with photography for short periods of time. His friend Athaíde de Barros taught him photography in 1946, and he built his own camera following a handbook of instructions so that he could take pictures of popular soccer matches on the outskirts of São Paulo as a way of making an extra income. A couple of years later, the two friends organized a laboratory of photography in a collective studio in downtown São Paulo. Then Barros purchased a professional camera, being admitted to the FCCB to develop his skills the following year. The artist participated in various exhibitions, published articles in *Boletim Foto Cine* (the FCCB's monthly magazine), discussed his photographs at internal seminars, networked to promote the FCCB photography in the competitive Brazilian artworld and made friends among those members who were developing modernist experiments.⁵

The year 1949 was decisive for Barros, since the Director of the MASP, Pietro Maria Bardi, invited him to organize a photography laboratory. This invitation was extended to another FCCB member, Thomaz Farkas, and the two friends worked towards the inclusion of photography within the fine arts.⁶ In the same year, the artist also met Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa, who lived in Rio de Janeiro and was concluding his groundbreaking thesis "On the affective nature of form in the work of art," using Gestalt theory to analyse artistic expression. It is possible that Pedrosa talked about his work to the young artist, but not as a form of proselytism.⁷ In any case, Barros would only accept the tenets of Gestalt Theory around 1952; by then he had already lived in Paris for one year and was participating in the Rupture Group, a movement that launched Concretism in Brazil.

Barros's innate leadership skills allowed him to befriend people from different social circles, building long-lasting relationships with FCCB

⁵ On Barros's participation in the FCCB, see Renato Rodrigues da Silva and Helouise Costa, *idem*, pp. 7, 37, 43-45, 47, 57, 62, 83-84, 89-90, 92-93 and 95. On Barros admission to the FCCB in April 1949, see Editor, "Lista de inscrição," *Boletim Foto Cine*, no. 7 (May 1949) p. 16.

⁶ Along with Barros and Farkas, another member of the FCCB, German Lorca, was also invited to participate in the activities of the MASP, working as instructor of photography.

⁷ See Mário Pedrosa, *Arte, Forma e Personalidade* (São Paulo: Editora Kairós, 1979). Pedrosa did not proselytize his ideas on Gestalt theory, since he "was against all types of proselytism in art." See Otilia Beatriz Fiori Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário Crítico* (São Paulo: Edições Página Aberta, 1991) p. 44.

members and avant-garde artists alike—and he took advantage of this flexibility. Thus, when Bardi invited him to organize an exhibition of his photographs at the MASP, he chose the works with relative independence. The opening of the exhibition was a cultural event that brought together both circuits, simultaneously guaranteeing his place amongst Brazilian advanced artists. In the exhibition brochure, nevertheless, Bardi did not mention Barros's affiliation with the FCCB, in order to underscore the identity of the MASP with his modernism.⁸

Throughout the years Barro's experimentalism has baffled commentators who, in general, analyse his production according to known visual parameters. Brazilian critic Paulo Herkenhoff wrote

Geraldo de Barros's first major photographic work *Fotoformas* represented his search for abstract forms, which the artist said was the result of his interest in Klee. One can note that there has always a Swiss influence in Geraldo de Barros's constructivist work with both Klee and Max Bill.⁹

His experimentalism was also systematically connected to concrete art, expressionism, Jean Dubuffet (and art brut), cubism, Russian constructivism, and Brazilian neoconcrete art in references that do not take his specific research into consideration. As regards photography, linkages to other works also abound: Lázlo Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Brassai, etc. Whereas the importance of concrete art to the *Fotoformas* is drawn from his biography, most analyses uncover a persistent formalism that has dominated Brazilian art since the 1950s.

The strategy of Brazilian formalist critics is indeed simple: it identifies some of the formal features of Barros's *Fotoformas* with known paradigms of advanced art as a way of disengaging these works from past photographic productions. In other words, to demonstrate that the artist was innovating during this time, these critics point out the existence of modernist and avant-garde elements in this series as a way of validating its originality. For example, Barros's use of geometric elements is hastily connected to constructivism, while it resulted from a different approach. What is lost in these analyses, therefore, is Barros's experimentalism, which did indeed create an alternative for Brazilian art.

The formalist strategy, however, comes full-circle, since it ironically replicates pictorial photography, which attempted to give artistic status to

⁸ See Pietro Maria Bardi, *Fotoforma* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte of São Paulo, 1950).

⁹ Paulo Herkenhoff, "Geraldo de Barros—a renovação e a constância," in: Barros, *Fotoformas: Geraldo de Barros*, p. 156.

the medium through the emulation of the visual arts.¹⁰ Perhaps as a defence mechanism, the dominating reading downgrades the artist's participation in the photo-club movement, which was historically associated with pictorialism, constructing for Barros an exclusivist avant-garde identity. Even recognizing that the FCCB renovated Brazilian photography, critic Adon Peres wrote: "In spite of the group's innovative and liberal spirit, the daring of Geraldo de Barros's works did not receive the support of his colleagues. His unique and energetic attitude set him apart".¹¹

This formalist reading, nonetheless, does not consider the transformations that occurred in the photo-club movement, which had different moments in Brazil. This movement was initially dominated by the Photo Club of Rio de Janeiro, which was founded in 1910 and promoted pictorialism. According to art historian Maria Teresa Bandeira de Mello, there were three trends within the national production, however. The first was characterized by the use of manual interventions in the photographic copies, the second was opposed to all forms of intervention, and the third, which was denominated "pictorialism of form," took the first steps towards the overcoming of pictorial aesthetics through non-conventional framing and the emphasis on the geometrization of motifs. Eventually, this production circulated in exhibitions and magazines, publicizing its contribution to a larger audience.¹²

The FCCB gave continuity to the third trend, initially emphasizing the geometry of architectural elements and the contrast of black-and-white photographic tonalities. Whereas the club still supported pictorialism, a group of its associates transformed Brazilian photography, generating modernist experiments after 1945. Along with photographers José Yalenti, Thomaz Farkas and German Lorca, Barros founded the "Paulista school of photography"—which eventually became a general trend inside the club,

¹⁰ On pictorialism, see Marc Mélon, "Beyond reality: art photography," in: *A History of Photography, Social and Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Jean-Claude Lemagny and André Rouillé, (Cambridge, Mass. and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) pp. 82-101 and 278. To avoid unexpected references to past art, one should acknowledge the subtle continuities of pictorial photography and modernism, which are revealed in the common rebellion against reality and their use of technical procedures to escape the determinations of the camera.

¹¹ Adon Peres, "Formas de luz," in: Barros, *Fotoformas: Geraldo de Barros*, p. 165.

¹² See Maria Teresa Bandeira de Mello, *Arte e Fotografia: o Movimento Pictorialista no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE, 1998).

engendering a new form of photographic approach to reality.¹³ The *Fotoforma* exhibition caused a great impact in the Brazilian avant-garde art, but was not well received in the FCCB. Even though it was going through a process of transformation, the *Boletim Foto Cine* did not mention the exhibition, showing that his experimentalism was tolerated but not promoted.

The resistance of most FCCB associates to Barros's experiments is quite understandable. First, he was experimenting with photography in an environment that would predominantly support straight photography, which was based on the specificity of the medium¹⁴ Since the *Fotoformas* were questioning (and eventually denying) this specificity, the artist touched a sensitive nerve in the club. Second, he was addressing the complex problem of abstractionism in photography, and this fact was complicated by the debate of abstract art in the Brazilian artworld, which was not fully prepared to understand his experiments. Because Barros was stepping into unknown artistic territory, he skilfully involved members of both the FCCB and the artworld in his exhibition as a way of bypassing their ideologies.¹⁵ This strategy enabled him to formulate questions that would only be tackled years later.

Barros experimented with photography from 1948 to 1951, and most of the *Fotoformas* were made between 1949 and 1950, when he was an active member of this association. After the *Fotoforma* exhibition, in reality, several members of the FCCB followed his steps, implementing photographic experimentalism, which became another option in its liberal (even eclectic) ideology. The work of Ademar Manarini and José Oiticica Filho were developed after Barros's experiments, demonstrating the continuity of this trend inside the Paulista school of photography.¹⁶ Thus, even while he was challenging the conservative segment of the club, Barros's *Fotoformas* were created in dialogue with this environment.

¹³ On the Paulista School of Photography, see Renato Rodrigues da Silva and Helouise Costa, *A Fotografia Moderna no Brasil*, pp. 13, 35, 48, 63-64, 66-67, 69, 73-74, 89-91, 93, 106-107 and 113.

¹⁴ The President of the FCCB, Eduardo Salvatore, supported straight photography, believing that photography was a pure medium. He soon became one of the leaders of the Paulista school of photography, creating an identity between the club and the modernist movement.

¹⁵ The fact that Barros worked with FCCB members at the laboratory of the MASP and that the director of this institution wrote the presentation of the *Fotoforma* exhibition are evidence of Barros's political skills.

¹⁶ On the works of Ademar Manarini and José Oiticica Filho, see Renato Rodrigues da Silva and Helouise Costa, *A Fotografia Moderna no Brasil*, pp. 50, 56-57, 62 and 85; and pp. 7, 10, 70 and 89-90, respectively.

Barros's relationship with the FCCB did not finish when he resumed painting in 1951 but continued through his participations in its exhibitions of 1952, 1953 and 1954. It is not by chance that he networked for the inclusion of the FCCB photography in the 2nd São Paulo Biennial in 1953. On this subject, the artist declared:

As a matter of truth, one thing should be noted: many people believe that it was Aldemir [Martins] and we who got this room in the Biennial for the FCCB. This room was obtained due to the quality of the photographic collection, quality that subdued oppositional arguments, conquered passionate partisans, and convinced all.¹⁷

In the same article, he also commented on the favourable reviews of the Bandeirante photography by Henri Moore, Max Bill, Walter Gropius and Mário Pedrosa. It is worth remembering that, by 1954, Barros had already organized his solo exhibition at the MASP, spent a year in Paris (when he was a *Boletim Foto Cine* correspondent),¹⁸ and joined concrete art movement, withdrawing from the FCCB. Thus, his proposal to include the Bandeirante photography in the Biennial resulted from his positive judgment about the modernist production of the club.

The *Fotoformas* and the Call for Abstraction

Barros took part in the concrete art movement, but its relation to the *Fotoformas* seems not only historically imprecise but also detrimental to the critical understanding of the series.¹⁹ The artist himself affirmed that he did not know this movement at that time.²⁰ This information is also corroborated by Max Bill, who came to Brazil for the organization of his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, in 1950: "I was immediately seduced by his creative energy and very impressed by his

¹⁷ Barros, "A Sala de fotografia," *Boletim Foto Cine*, no. 87 (February-March 1954) pp. 12-15.

¹⁸ The 1951 issues of the *Boletim Foto Cine* announced that Barros was a correspondent in Europe.

¹⁹ Along with Anatol Wladyslaw, Leopold Haar, Lothar Charoux, Kasmer Féjer, Luiz Sacilotto, and Waldemar Cordeiro, Barros co-signed the "Rupture Manifesto," launching concrete art in Brazil, in 1952. See Waldemar Cordeiro *et al.* "Manifesto Ruptura," in: *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro nas Artes, 1950-1962*, ed., Aracy Amaral (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo: MEC, FUNARTE, MAMRJ and Secretaria de Ciência e Tecnologia de São Paulo, 1977) p. 69.

²⁰ Barros quoted by Wilson Coutinho, "Um retorno à utopia," *Folha de São Paulo*, 22 May 1986.

photographic investigation, which he made in parallel to his painting. In a country that was still isolated from the great international trends, he was innovating”.²¹ In addition to this chronological impossibility, Concretism defended a formalist approach to art (rooted in Gestalt theory) that would have precluded Barros’s experimentation in the field of photography.

Pedrosa did not proselytize on Gestalt theory but had defended the idea of abstract art since the end of World War II. In 1945, the critic arrived in Brazil from the United States, enjoying the freedom of the new political moment brought about by the end of Getúlio Vargas’s dictatorial regime. As critic of the *Correio da Manhã* newspaper, he then confronted most intellectuals and artists, such as Cândido Portinari and Di Cavalcanti, who still supported a figurative painting that was ideally based on the research of our cultural identity as defined by the second wave of modernism in the 1930s. However, Pedrosa was not alone, since the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro, the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, Nelson Rockefeller (representing the Museum of Modern Art of New York), and the São Paulo Biennial strongly supported abstractionism as a new trend.²²

In 1948, Barros was still painting in an expressionist style, developing a loose but energetic brushwork in bright colours that still relied upon the figure. He was a member of the “Group of XV,” an association of artists who defended a diluted version of modernism.²³ After he fell under Pedrosa’s influence, however, this pictorial practice seemed outmoded. The choice of photography, then, must have resulted from several factors. The artist probably attempted to avoid self-contradiction by choosing a new expressive medium. In this sense, the modernist approach to photography already implemented by some members of the FCCB suggested a new field of investigation.²⁴ Additionally, the organization of the MASP laboratory of photography provided the opportunity for his new

²¹ Max Bill, “Declaração,” in: *Fotoformas: Geraldo de Barros*, p. 15.

²² On Pedrosa’s defence of abstract art after 1945, see Otília Beatriz Fiori Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário Crítico*, pp. 31-77. On the beginnings of abstract art in Brazil, see Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto, *Por uma Vanguarda Nacional, A Crítica Brasileira em Busca de Uma Identidade Artística (1940-1960)* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2004) pp. 38-56.

²³ Besides Barros, painters Athaide de Barros, Antônio Carelli, Yoshia Takaoka and Flávio Shiró, among others, participated in the Grupo dos XV. Its activities were over by 1949, probably due to the change of parameters of Brazilian modernism.

²⁴ In the FCCB, José Yalenti and Thomaz Farkas began developing the new modernist approach to photography soon after 1945. Thus, when Barros started experimenting with photography, he was not alone, even though the direction he gave to his practice was unique.

investigation. Through this museum, therefore, his *Fotoformas* became a manifesto of experimentalism, a *tour-de-force* that put him in the forefront of the local avant-garde.

In 1949, Barros embraced abstractionism—but he applied his own twist to this practice as it was currently implemented in Brazil. The first thing one notices in the *Fotoformas* is the alteration of the photographic practice based on the circuit *photographer–camera–the real*. As was generally predicated by abstractionism, the artist also wanted to promote a freer vision of reality, violently undermining the realist determinations of the camera to deny its mediatory functions.²⁵ In fact, the camera relies upon perspective as a symbolic form of spatial organization, even though its material connection to reality is defined by the indexical incidence of light upon the photographic film.²⁶ Thus, when Barros challenged the former characteristic of the medium, he ended up by emphasizing the latter, disclosing a material reality that has been systematically repressed in the history of photography.

Barros's *Fotoformas* feature a variety of physical interventions—such as drawings with China-ink and dry-point on the negatives, which sometimes were also perforated and scratched, and modifications of the orthogonal format of the photographic paper through cut-outs—to draw attention to the indexical reality of photography. The artist was indeed denying the symbolic space of perspective to liberate this repressed side of the medium. I should remember that “photo-form” means form created by light, suggesting the unmediated incidence of light over a sensitive surface without the mediation of the camera.²⁷ Given this background, it is possible to grasp why the artist worked with the technique of photogram.

²⁵ In a FCCB seminar of photography, the artist expressed his ideas clearly, displeasing the audience: “Every artist has to be completely free, just compromising with himself.” Barros, “IV seminário de arte fotográfica,” *Boletim Foto Cine*, no. 43 (November 1949) pp. 17-18.

²⁶ On perspective and photography, see Arlindo Machado, *A Ilusão Especular* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1984). Since the 1980s, Rosalind Krauss has defined the status of photography as indexical: “But the photogram only forces, or makes explicit, what is the case in *all* photography. Every photograph is the result of the physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.” Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986) p. 203.

²⁷ The German photographer Otto Steinert created the term “photo-form,” in 1950. Through the intense exchange promoted by the photo-club movement, it is possible that Barros got in touch with his work in Brazil. It is rather doubtful, however, that this contact resulted in any substantial influence.

In *Fotoforma* (1949), through the technic of the photogram, he used what seems to be a punched card to produce geometric patterns, creating an image that does not bear any similarity with the real (Photo 2)—as it will be seen below, this image gives a radical meaning to the notion of construction.

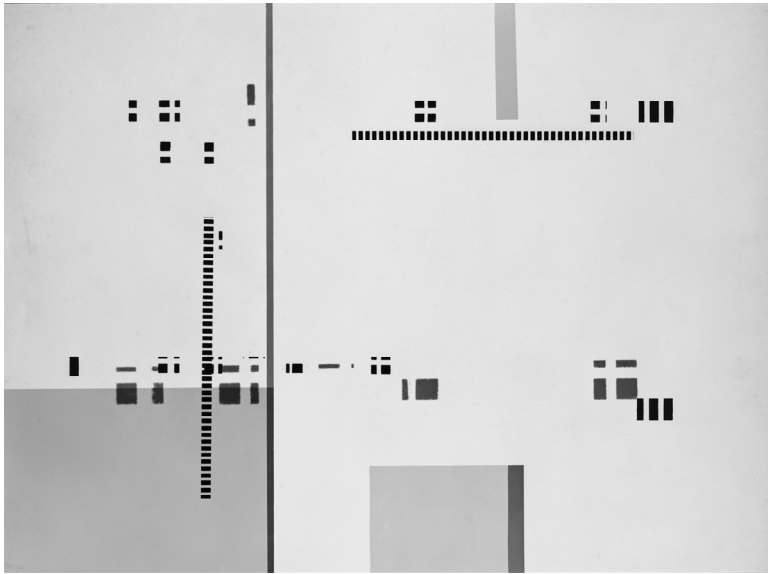


Photo 2: Geraldo de Barros, *Fotoforma*, photogram, 1949. Photograph: Collection of the Institute Moreira Salles.

The photogram, however, represented a limit in Barros's research, since the *Fotoformas* were essentially based on the deconstruction of the traditional photographic process. He took advantage of its representational links with reality to underline the interventions, which were generated by his aggressive gestures against the constraints of the medium. The artist worked with a 1939 Rolleiflex camera that required square-negative rolls and allowed for multiple-exposures. In *Abstrato* (1949), he took various shots of a metallic roof on the same negative, constructing a complex, abstract image. The beholder recognizes details of the object but is frustrated in the attempt to recompose the original scene (Photo 3). In this sense, the incongruences and discontinuities of the disrupted representational code stress the creative process instead of the referent, subverting the reception of the photographic image.

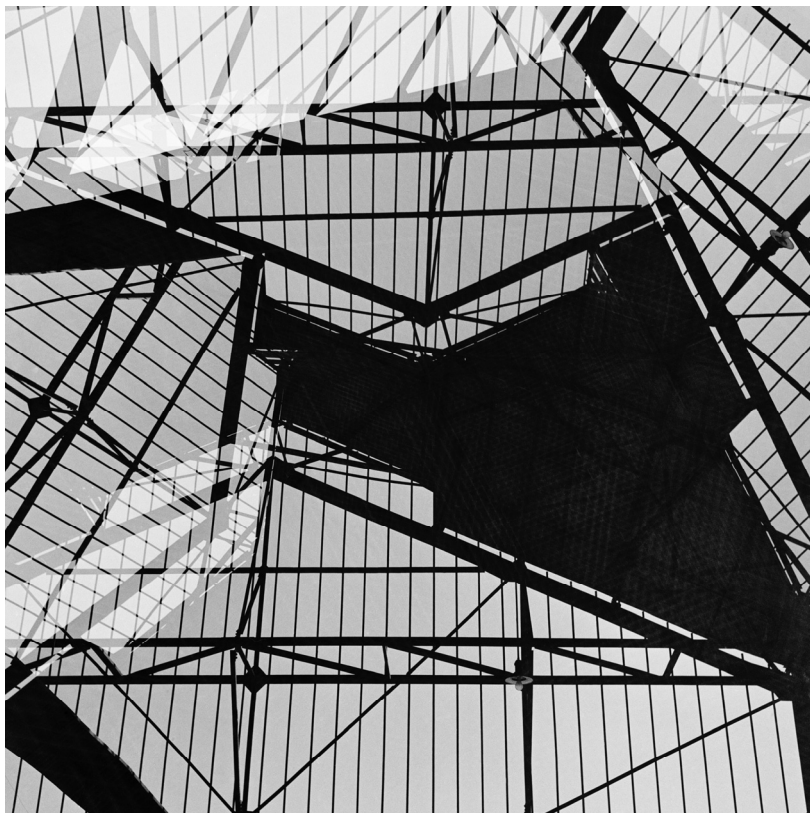


Photo 3: Geraldo de Barros, *Abstrato*, photography (multiple exposures of the negative) 1949. Photograph: Collection of the Institute Moreira Salles.

In addition to multiple-exposures, Barros also experimented with solarizations, unexpected view-positions, long-time exposures and clippings of negatives that were recombined to form new matrices. In the *Fotoformas*, therefore, he added a second layer of indexical marks to the physical interventions described above, sometimes creating complex semiotic systems. In *Fotoforma* (1950), the artist cut and remounted a multi-exposed negative in between glass plates with the objective of establishing a broken rhythm within the fabric of the image—a rhythm that eventually disrupts the grid set by elements of the referent (Photo 4). Again, the attempt to recompose the original scene is useless, since the