OBJECT, NON-OBJECT, TRANSOBJECT, RELATIONAL OBJECT: FROM POESIA CONCRETA TO A NOVA OBJETIVIDADE

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- ABSTRACT: This articles reexamines concrete poetics in tandem with neo-concrete and new objectivist poetry and art, arguing that a strong continuity exists between the projects, visible in an emphasis on negativity, the void, and immateriality.
- KEY WORDS: Brazilian concrete poetry. Neoconcretism. New objectivity.

As "new media" commands increasing scholarly interest, Concrete Poetry shows the signs of a minor renaissance in the Anglophone academy. For those steeped in the historical debates about post-war Brazilian poetics, such a revival may seem curious: the 1964 coup has been attributed the power of marking a variety of ongoing projects described variously as modernism, utopia, millenarianism, and Concrete Poetry.² According to this narrative, the coup signals the transition from modernism's grand narratives of development and structure to postmodernism's abdication of messianic teleologies and embrace of

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² For a more lengthy elaboration of these themes see, among others, Antônio Sergio Lima Mendonça (1970); Gonzalo Moises Aguilar (2003).

process—from concretude to a *nova objetividade*. For many, concretist aesthetics are interpreted either with recourse to positions elaborated by the Noigandres group's own extensive literature on the topic, or as a fairly unmediated and uncritical *expression* of the euphoric developmentalism characteristic of the Kubitschek era. Concretism's critics have long argued that its formalism marks it as apolitical, especially in light of more ostensibly committed period movements such as CPCs and popular theater.

But with the aging of such polemics and skepticism about CPC politics, a more measured reading of concretism is timely. With historical distance and the erosion of certain schisms, the line linking the concretes and the neo-concretes seems more continuous than discontinuous, the latter movement less a rupture with than a branch of the former (an innocent browser on the internet today would find that both Augusto de Campos and Ferreira Gullar include digital, interactive poems on their respective websites). In what follows, I wish to elucidate a central link between concrete and post-concrete concerns, using as a crucial point of departure a central aspect of Haroldo de Campos' "O Amago do omega": namely, the void (CAMPOS, 1992). This interest in negativity and absence marks an abiding concern in the concretist project and links it to its splinter successors the neoconcretes and nova objetividade, countering the linear logic of developmentalism.

In fact, Concrete Poetry always encompassed two opposing sensibilities, which could be termed materialist and immaterialist. The first is interested in poetry and language as thing, the latter in poetry and language as image, vibration, or digital, virtual representation (it is no coincidence that the Concretes would be among the first to create computer art, beginning with Waldemar Cordeiro's works from 1968.) *Musique concrète* had been an antecedent to concrete

poetry—a music interested in accidental sounds from the real world, the "concretion" having more to do with the quotidian than the material. Russian forbear El Lissitsky had called for an "electro-library" in 1923, foreshadowing an emphasis on language as simultaneously virtual and material. And a mid-1960s turn to information theory and emergent new media allowed the Concretes a way out of the subject/object standoff they otherwise perpetuated in early works. But how was this arrived at from a poetry that began with a concern with thingness?

From object to non-object

"The concrete poem", the Noigandres group famously wrote in the 1958 "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry", "[...] é um objeto em e por si mesmo, não um intérprete de objetos exteriores e/ou sensações mais ou menos subjetivas (CAMPOS; A.; CAMPOS, H.; PIGNATARI, 1965). Aiming to exorcise the residually romantic, subjective lyric, they called for the end of verse and for a scientific objectivism. But already in their manifesto's terms they evinced a certain ambiguity vis-a-vis the status of the term "object": on the one hand an object was a thing, an autonomous creation with a material and formal quality. This was the "object" of essays such as the "Jubilee of the Object," Haroldo de Campos's essay on Kurt Schwitters. On the other hand it was "objective," which is to say, mathematical, scientific and non-subjective. Yet, paradoxically, it was also *non*-objective—a 1930s term for non-representational art—to the extent that the concrete poem's noumenal qualities made it not representation but the thing itself³.

³ The positions marked by these equivocal terms had already plagued the Russian Constructivists and Productivists to whom the Concretes owed an avowed debt. See C. Kiaer (2005, p.13).

Soon after it began, and in the midst of its objectal jubilee, Concrete Poetry received an immanent critique from Ferreira Gullar (1960), whose seminal piece "Teoria do não-objeto" argued for a need to shift attention to poetry's reception and use by readers, to go beyond an obsession with objecthood per se. Gullar argued indeed for a new object that was not an object: "[...] um novo objeto que se distingue dos objetos por se concluir em puro aparecimento: o nãoobjeto" (GULLAR, 1985, p.139). Gullar and others associated with a "non-objective" poetics drew on phenomenology to emphasize the more subjective experience of encountering a poem. They cautioned that despite their emphasis on the materiality of the page, for them it marked a temporal, immaterial experience, a silence and absence (GULLAR, 1985).

Neo-Concrete art zeroed in on the Concrete ambivalence over the status of "object." The Neo-Concretes professed to explore the task of a properly non-representational art: "neoconcretos rejeitam qualquer formulação que considere a obra de arte como máquina ou como objeto, para aproximá-la antes de uma noção orgânica" (GULLAR, 1985, p.243). The Neo-Concretists detected in the *Noigandres* poets a naïve fidelity to a purported scientific objectivity that conflated anti-lyrical anti-expressionism with a fetishization of objecthood. Yet this ambivalence and contradiction between some of concrete poetry's professed ambitions and its practice offers insight into historical challenges. For instance, while the objectal nature of the poem was paramount for the Concrete Poets, they also espoused a desire for an "open work" that would, consonant with a society of increased mass media, dialogue with the public. Concrete poetry wanted both to be objectal—a closed, autonomous form—and to facilitate engagement and circulation.

How did concrete poetry negotiate these conflicting impulses between objecthood and non-objecthood,

concreteness and openness, materiality immateriality? And what do these tensions suggest about the pressures placed on the art by the charged moment? In an essay entitled "Art and Objecthood," US art critic and historian Michael Fried connects what he calls "literalist" (that is, minimalist) art with an "apparent hollowness." He linked this to "a fairly common type of American dream"—presumably, a hollow one (FRIED, 1998, p.156). Such an interest in hollowness organizes Augusto de Campos's 1960 poem Caracol, for example, which plays on interrelated sounds, phonemes and letters comprising "mascara," "caracol," etc.: as if the snail shell, a carapace like the poem itself, "masked" its hollowness, which is simultaneously the source of the deep sound emanating from within, as from a biblical shofar. As Haroldo de Campos put it in the 1957 essay Poesia Concreta—Linguagem-Comunicação, concrete language "Coloca, por uma súbita mudança de campo de operação, seu arsenal de virtualidades em função de uma nova empresa: criar uma forma, criar com seus próprios materiais, um mundo paralelo ao mundo das coisas—o poema." (CAMPOS, 1965, p.70). The arsenal of virtualities, like the hollowness within the shell or poem, the voice that emerges ex nihilo in Haroldo de Campos (1992) O Âmago do omega (see below) becomes the shell or form or mask—the thing—itself. The thing is virtual.

In a recent book entitled Utopian Generations, Nicholas Brown (2005) proposes that twentieth-century literature's interest in objects betrays an understanding that the thingly object indicates a certain "lack": it perversely represents "[...] metonymically the entire system of productive forces, the social totality. Or rather...stands in for the lack of any concept of it" (BROWN, 2005, p.18-19). An exemplary instance of this vacillation between an emphasis on objecthood and an emphasis on hollowness, an emphasis on

thingliness and on lack, can be found in Haroldo de Campos's 1956 poem O Âmago do Omega. "O Âmago...", a visually arresting poem of white words arranged on a black background, is also an ode to O, to O (zero), to the hollowness within finitude (Omega, the end of the alphabet). The heart of the O is a void, synonymous with the modern thing's Ding, as Lacan defined it: that which animates the power of thingliness but which, truly sublime, escapes it. The thing (the poem) contains a hollow or a bone (um osso).



Figure 1: Haroldo de Campos, O âmago do Ômega, 1956.

A hollowness or void is everywhere alluded to in the poem. The void can be thought of, for instance, as the zero that mathematical set theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, after it, posit as necessary for any creation—an internal *ex nihilo*, as the phrase appears incorporated into the poem. This creation "*ex nihilo*" is the space outside—but also internal—to the poet who,

according to the Concrete poets, must conceive the artwork objectively, not subjectively.⁴

In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan analyzes intersubjective communication in terms of the voice and the ear. He invokes the palpable sense of the ear cavity as a void (think caracol) to claim that voice resonates not so much within this physiological void but "in the void which is the void of the Other as such, ex nihilo." That is, the "ex nihilo" creation comes from the inscrutable emptiness that the Other represents. "The voice comes back to us through the loop of the Other" (DOLAR, 2006, p.160). By placing the onus of creation outside the subject, the Concretes acknowledged their responsibility to an audience, just as they took lessons from the external world of advertising and media. One valence of the hollowness preserved at the heart of Concrete Poetry is therefore the internalized public (other) space that animates the Concretes' desire to remake poetry as a viable contemporary form with a sizable public.

It might also be a more abstract internal Other necessary for reference at all. For Lacanian understandings of language and subjectivity, reference *itself* is considered to be the void created by language. Dismissing correspondence theories of language (where words equal things), Jacques Alain Miller argues for "a creation theory of language, the first creation being a lack, and in this sense it is a lack of all things...desire as lack has language as its condition. A void would be unthinkable in the real if not for signifiers. 'Creation'—first of the void by the signifier—is the key word, not 'correspondence'" (MILLER, 1991,p.32.) Curiously, it would be something approaching a correspondence theory of language that the Concretes would espouse in

⁴ See Jacques-Alain Miller's essay "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)" (MILLER, 1977-1978); see also Alain Badiou's work with the void and set theory (BADIOU, 2007).

their manifestos⁵. Yet their *poems* suggest otherwise, a contradiction that enriches, rather than discredits, their work.

The creation/void troped in *O Âmago...* thus refers at once to poetic creation, to language and to "a lack of all things": desire as lack itself. In the 1950s and '60s, this was closely tied to production and consumption of consumer goods: "a coisa da coisa da coisa." In *O Âmago* Campos addresses, among other things, the lack that is the other side of consumer objects massively produced during the golden era of developmentalism. It is the lack that fuels desire for commodities.

This internal tension between the object and the non-object, the thing and das Ding, was also present in the 1962 spatial version of Wlademir Dias Pino's 1956 poem "Sólida", an envelope/box with a series of loose papers within that played with the word Sólida. As the reader/maker of the poem rifles through the papers, the word "sólida" decomposes into others, yet as Clemente Padín has pointed out, the more the word "sólida" dissolves, the more the object (a poem about the word) or perhaps non-object comes into being (PADÍN, 2006). As in O Âmago do ômega, the central and centric role of the "O" of the word Sólida plays an important part as an organizing void

⁵ Haroldo de Campos' claim that "o poema concreto põe em xeque, desde logo, a estrutura lógica da linguagem discursiva tradicional, porque encontra nela uma barreira para o acesso ao mundo dos objetos" (CAMPOS, 1965, p.69) suggested the utopian desire to abolish the distance between word and thing, or, to put it in Lacanian terms, the symbolic and the real, which does find a parallel in developmentalism's desire to "leap" out of underdevelopment—indicated in the title of an article published in Revista de Cultura Vozes 64 (2), "O salto ao objeto" (MENDONÇA, 1970, p. 211). The Lacanian notion that linguistic "castration" cannot be overcome might then here have a corollary in the fact that structural iniquity cannot be made to disappear merely through the production of things. And yet, such deterministic "dependency theory" analysis brings with it its own foreclosures and schematic reductions.

in the poem. The "O" becomes something like Lacan's "point de capiton": a nexus about which the various transformations occur, while the poem itself as an object literalizes the void-like space by instantiating a container.

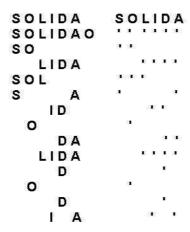


Figure 2: Wlademir Dias-Pino: *Solida*, 1956.

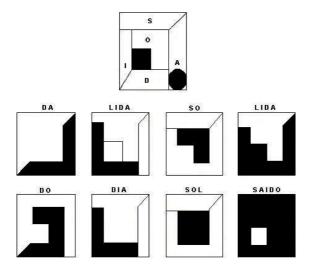


Figure 3: Wlademir Dias-Pino: Solida, spatial version, 1962.

In both the Dias Pino and de Campos poems negative space on the page—so important to the rival non-objectivists/neo-concretists—addresses the lack that fuels desire, both psychoanalytically and materially. The typographical recombinations work to corral lack, figured as "o"s and reordered or lodged in the heart (âmago) of a variety of other words/concepts. As Lacan noted in an unusual passage on scansion and poetry in Seminar IV, La relation d'objet, "[...] the smallest surge in writing [graphie] makes surge at the same time orthography [orthographie], that is to say, the possible control of a lack." (LACAN, 1994a, p.177).

Let me parse more carefully this relation between Concrete Poetry's meditations on lack and absence and its explorations of desire, since the connection is crucial to understanding concretism's vexed relation to developmentalist logic. In La relation d'objet, which, delivered in 1956, dates suggestively to the years of Concrete Poetry's heroic period, desire is defined as the difference between need and demand. For instance, a baby needs milk, demands with a cry, but in fact calls for something beyond mere milk or the arrival of the breast (it desires love). Beyond any concrete thing is a desire for an immaterial Thing (das Ding). This void, beyond language (the cry) or symbol of love (the breast) is the Lacanian Real. The Real is the site of plenitude, but it must also remain a void; it cannot be filled with this or that specific content. In the Real, nothing is lacking; however it must remain open, not overwritten with symbolic description. A central absence (O Âmago do ômega) is posited, which must remain contentless in order for desire to work.

Therefore at the heart of any thing designed to placate an individual, material desire is the truth that such things cannot satisfy the desire for some deeper, more social Thing, such as infinite love. In nursing, so this theory goes, the satisfaction of need is the compensation for the frustrations of love. The

value of the object (breast or bottle) is partially based on its function as an object of love with a symbolic charge. The actual object becomes part of a greater symbolic object, an object which can be "[...] also very well realized as a word". So words and other objects of consumption can become Things charged with desire and psychoanalytic objecthood. Amidst a boom of products, Haroldo de Campos points to the lack inherent in things, and the plenitude in Things.

Here it is worth recalling that Lacan's illustration of *das Ding* in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* involves a visit to poet Jacques Prévert's house (LACAN, 1992, p.118)⁷. There Lacan encounters not poetry but the void and *das Ding* in a series of empty match boxes, like "*Sólida*," or Neide de Sá's 1968 "*transparência*," a clear box covered with writing. Lacan reflected, seriously and humorously, that the *collection* of empty match boxes, the seriality of the single box-object, revealed the truth overlooked in daily life that a box of matches is "[...] not simply an object, but that, in the form of *Erscheinung*, as it appeared in its truly imposing multiplicity, it may be a Thing" (LACAN, 1992, p.114).

The episode illustrates the elevation "of an object to the dignity of the Thing" (LACAN, 1992, p.112). For Lacan, the Thing is differentiated from the thing or object: the Thing is that part of "being" that remains in a "beyond" as a result of the castration accompanying language use. It is desire, but not desire for any one thing. The object, which exists, representable, in the here-and-now, is what remains of *das Ding* after language enters the picture (LACAN, 1992, p.63). Concrete poetics appeal to a similar kind of dualism. Although the concretes were explicitly invested in their

⁶ "[...] también perfectamente materializado que es la palabra" (LACAN, 1994b,p.177).

⁷ I am grateful to Sianne Ngai's calling attention to this passage in her book Ugly Feelings (NGAI, 2005).

poems being objects, they were also, I am arguing, interested in making Things—non-objects. seriality of voids, matchboxes or repetitions of "O"s underscores not an object's thingness but Thingness. In a moment of explosive consumerism, they felt the need both to engage with the commodity fetish and to critique it, all within a meta-commentary on language. "O Âmago," "Sólida" or Décio Pignatari's "Beba Coca Cola," with their formal structure as "solid" things, nonetheless evoke, through their repetitions of "O"s and through their themes of void, nihilo, zero and core, an absence. Indeed, the repetition of "O"s invokes the larger strategy of repetition (poetry as mass-produced object) designed to undo lyric's singular, voice-based tradition and redeem contemporary poetry as a viable voice-piece for an era of industry, or post-industry.

Haroldo de Campos noted in an essay that while Walter Benjamin identifies a central "oco" in Baudelaire's analogies, "[...] não é Baudelaire, e sim Mallarmé aquele que se atreverá a contemplar esse oco e a converter essa contemplação do vazio na matéria de sua poesia" (CAMPOS, 1997, p.264). The void would become the material of Haroldo de Campos' poetry as well. Here one is reminded of Lacan's maxim that "[...] the notion of the creation *ex nihilo* is coextensive with the exact situation of the Thing as such" (LACAN, 1992, p.122). The hollowness becomes the material of poetry, just as the potter, for Lacan, creates a vase around emptiness, "[...] just like the mythical creator, ex nihilo, starting with a hole...the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical" (LACAN, 1992, p.121).

This recognition of the void marks the Concretists as closer to their splinter opponents the Neo-concretists, even if the ultimate goal of the non-objective Neo-Concretists was to *overcome* the division between subject and object, leading to the next iteration of avant-garde poetics, the poem/process, which would

seek to transform objects "no tempo de consumo social" (MENDONÇA, 1970, p.214).

Consume and process

The poema/processo emerged around 1967-1968, during the recrudescence of the authoritarian regime. It shunned what it saw as the elite international vocabularies and translations of the *Noigandres* group, though it retained from earlier avant-gardes a desire to rise above the national to a "universal" plane (CIRNE, 1975). Taking to the extreme an emphasis on visuality already strong within Concrete Poetry, the process/poem dispensed with the word while continuing to assert that this move ensured an absolute internationalism, a "linguagem universal, embora seja de origem brasileira, desprendida de qualquer regionalismo, pretendendo ser universal... pelo sentido da funcionalidade" (DIAS-PINO, 1971).

Meanwhile, consumption was taken to a literal level in a 1970 art fair in the Northeastern city of Recife where a huge loaf of bread was baked and then consumed as a process/poem⁸. (Here concretism's neobaroque side is apparent, recalling seventeenth century emblem poetry that had, in turn, evolved from sixteenth century apophoreta, or party favors, of motto-engraved, consumable sweets.) The direct consumption of the book united the "object" and "non-object" tendencies in concretism, as the everyday, material aspects of the objects—what could be more quotidian than daily bread?—are disappeared through consumption, turning them effectively into performance pieces or non-objects.

This emphasis on undoing the object would grow stronger in the work of Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, both influenced by Gullar. Oiticica and Clark borrowed

⁸ Thanks to Cristina Monteiro de Castro Pereira (2003).

from phenomenology and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular to propose an art-making process that would not re-inscribe a strict subject-object division. Returning to the anthropophagism of the 1920s modernists, consumption was thematized literallyan echo already seen in the giant bread poem/ performance. Clark, in her quest to elide the borders between inside and out, described her Máscaras abismo in 1968 by writing "[o]rganicity, the full void, all the concepts I proposed before in the object are now introverted in the interior of the person." (CLARK, 1998, p.23). Forcing the spectator to devour the art is consonant with, rather than breaks with, the Concretes' positing of the void as the spectator/ public. In addition to the oral and cannibalist motifs, another model, the mobius strip-introduced at the founding event of modernist concretism in the form of Max Bill's version of this figure—returns in Clark's work as a renewed figure for the indissociability of inside and out, beginning and end, subject and object. About the same time that this figure would become for Lacan iconic of the relation between unconscious and conscious it signaled, for Lygia Clark, an overcoming of subject and object in art-making and in life.

From the cheio-vazio to relational objects

The rejection of objectivism had begun with Gullar's manifestos and the theory of the non-object. Subsequently the status of the object was multiply reinvented, reincarnated in Oiticica's work as "entre-objetos," devised with respect to Clark's Bichos (OITICICA, 1986, p.79); "trans-objects" and "probjects," which were to foster participatory art in a process Celso Favoretto describes as "passing through the object" (BASUALDO, 2005, p.89). In "On the Act" Clark links the reconceptualization of temporality with a particular reworking of space: the void at the heart

of the *Bicho* that facilitated its ability to change, an echo of Haroldo de Campos' belief in the "ex nihilo" within "O Âmago."

Clark wrote that inside the structure was a *vazio*. which, when manipulated, gave the structure its new aspects. One night, she wrote, she perceived that "o absoluto era este 'cheio-vazio', esta totalidade do interior do exterior de que falo sempre. O 'cheio-vazio' contém todas as potencialidades. E o ato que lhe dá sentido" (CLARK, 1980, p.24) Like Lacan's "Real." which is both a site of plenitude and which must remain empty of signification, Clark's "full-void" is that which enables creation (that which enables the Bicho to assume new positions; that which Clark increasingly seems to attempt to build into her pieces, even as their processes become more complex and diffuse). Later, about her relational objects, she would write, "no momento em que o sujeito o manipula, criando relações de cheios e vazios, através de massas que fluem num processo incessante, a identidade com seu núcleo psicótico desencadeia-se na identidade processual" (CLARK, 1980, p. 49).

The "full-void" named in Clark's reflection on "Bichos" is a significant thread in a career that would become increasingly, if idiosyncractically, psychoanalytic. A decade earlier Clark had had a depressive "crisis," which she describes in her letters in allusive connection to the onset of the authoritarian regime. The crisis results in her own exploration of the matchbox/void, recalling Lacan's inspiration for his theory of the Thing. In the letter "Rio, 1964, Back from Paris", Clark writes

During my illness I began to play with matchboxes, thinking about wrapping up a whole house made up of boxes. A mausoleum would come of this, or rather two, which are the continuation of the problem of the metaphysics of the black phase of white

lines....I am beginning to make totemic boxes from the mausoleums, which charm me greatly. I am beginning to restore my sense of the poetics of the object and the simple things....it is fundamental for me at this moment to find myself again with this metaphysics of the boxes and therefore with the world (CLARK, 1998, p.174-176).

Clark choes uncannily Lacan's use of matchboxes to speak of sublime objects. In the matchboxes Clark found a 'poetics of the object," as had Lacan. That the matchbook was like a mausoleum, in turn like a poet's house, is evident if one compares Clark's 1964 "Estruturas de caixas de fósforos" and "casa da poeta" of the same year. Both exhibit the "full void," full of language (poetry) which she had suggested, again, was "introverted in the interior of the person" (CLARK, 1998, p. 23).

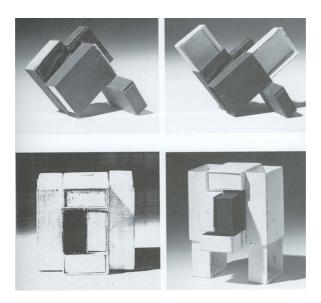


Figure 3: Estruturas de caixas de fósforos, 1964. Estructuras de cajas de cerillas / Matchbox structures Cajas de cerillas pintadas y pegadas / Painted and glued matchboxes.

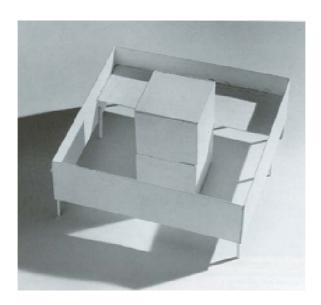


Figure 4: A casa do poeta (1964). La casa del poeta / The poet 's house.

Clark did not want them to be private memorials. She wrote that her " [...] tentativas arquiteturais" "queriam ser uma ligação com o mundo coletivo. Tratava-se de criar um espaço-tempo novo, concreto—não apenas para mim mas para os outros" (CLARK, 1980, p.26). They were inner voids exteriorized, made public.

Finally, Clark's last works—relational objects—would characterize a new era beyond marked distinctions between self and other, subject and object. They borrowed from British psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott's concept of "transitional objects." Clark's relational objects were designed to be destroyed but to "negate this destruction," just as Winnicott's transitional objects were designed to receive a child's aggression and prove that it could survive it (CLARK, 1980, p.50). For Winnicott, a transitional object is a child's first "not-me" object against whose alterity a child shapes her subjectivity. When one recalls that Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto antropófago"

had already declared "so me interessa o que não é meu..."; "only what is not mine interests me," Clark's relational objects seem but an iteration in a tradition of transition from Brazilian modernism through the voids and Things of concretism and towards a post-1960s globalized future after modernism.

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- **RESUMO**: Este artigo reexamina a poesia concreta junto com a poesia e arte neoconcretista e nova objetividade, argumentando que existe uma forte continuidade entre os distintos projetos, e visível numa ênfase sobre a negatividade, o vazio, e a imaterialidade.
- PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poesia concreta. Neoconcretismo. Nova objetividade.

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