

“Our Thoughts on Lionello Venturi” and the 2nd National Art Critics Congress

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The art historian and critic Lionello Venturi died just days before he was to leave for São Paulo, where he had agreed to sit on the jury for the 6th Bienal de São Paulo, in 1961. To mark his passing, the 2nd National Art Critics Congress, held between December 12 and 15 that year in São Paulo, on the theme “The issue of contemporary art”, paid tribute to Venturi at a special session.

The first edition of the National Art Critics Congress had taken place during the 1st Bienal de São Paulo, in 1951, extending the scope of the exhibition’s debate on art and leaving behind an unprecedented record of the discussions, the gathering of critics fostered on themes to some degree raised by the Bienal itself.

The speakers at the session at which the posthumous tribute to Lionello Venturi was made included some of the foremost critics of the day. Antonio Bento, Mário Pedrosa and Lourival Gomes Machado were chosen to say some words about the Italian critic’s life and work. Their tributes, delivered in informal tone, expressed a deep admiration for a man they considered a mentor, an intellectual who had always made himself available to younger critics—not so young anymore, by that stage—and who was highly esteemed for his erudition and sagacity.

Antonio Bento and the Gruppo degli Otto

Bento and Pedrosa spoke in laid-back fashion about their encounters with Venturi and the aspects of his critical thought that had left a mark on them. Bento was president of the Brazilian Art Critics Association and was chairing the congress. He had a column on the arts in the *Diário Carioca* newspaper at the time. Writing since the 1920s—when he lived in São Paulo, in close contact with Mário de Andrade—, by the late 1950s Bento had started defending an informalist brand of abstraction. He saw the expressive tendency as the true avant-garde art in Brazil, in the face of the number of abstractions spawned by constructivism¹.

1 The groups of artists associated with constructivism in Brazil had a lot of space in the press, especially through articles written by their own members or by sympathetic critics. Ruptura was a case in point. The informalists and lyrical abstractionists did not form into groups, given the very nature of their expressive poetics, and so ended up having much less impact, as they were analyzed individually. In Europe, however, critics like Michel Tapié made an effort to group these artists together, thus creating a more compact subject for analysis, even though the identification of common traits was largely forced and tenuous and frequently failed to lend any definite shape to this production.

In the light of Bento's position, who understood informalism as a return to the true elements of painting and as opposing the "constructions", "closed forms" and "large architectonic plates" that inhabited geometrical abstractionism, we can comprehend his mentioning Venturi's understanding of abstract art². During his address, Bento admitted having revised his own position on the "limitations of abstract art" after hearing Venturi declare that, "for me, all I need in a painting is to have one tonality set alongside another. From the aesthetic perspective, a simple, well-established chromatic relationship is enough to justify the very existence of the work of art"³.

It was Bento who made the first references to Venturi's thought, underscoring the theory of pure visibility while stressing the Italian critic's primacy over the German formalists. In this sense, for Bento, Venturi's thought belonged to a historical/philological tradition of Italian criticism that gave him "surety in his value judgments, which never display any of the essentially technical dryness of the formalism of an interpreter like Wölfflin. They are always stirred by a warm breath of life, they derive from millennia of experience, from the impassioned artistic contemplation of his people"⁴.

The formal quality of Venturi's critical reading is clearly in synch with Bento's understanding of the interpretation of artistic production:

*For the adepts of this school [of pure visibility], the work of art imposes itself first and foremost through its visible qualities. These qualities reside in form, or rather in the mass, lines and colors. In other words, for the critic, visible symbols and signs should be the only legitimate principles from which to formulate an objective judgment about the value of a work of art.*⁵

Finally, Bento observed that Venturi was alert to contemporary manifestations, contemplating everything from impressionist painting to post-war expressive abstraction with the same sensibility. And yet, curiously enough, Bento did not go into further detail on Venturi's interest in the Gruppo degli Otto, formed under the Italian critic's tutelage in 1952⁶, a subject that should have been foremost in Bento's thoughts, seeing as it was close to his own interests.

The work of these artists —Afro Basaldella, Renato Birolli, Antonio Corpori, Mattia Moreni, Ennio Morlotti, Giuseppe Santomaso, Giulio Turcato and Emilio

2 On the critical work of Antonio Bento, see: SILVA, Ana Paula França Carneiro da. "Antônio Bento e a vanguarda artística brasileira no final da década de 1950", *Arte e Ensaio*, 2008, v. 16, pp. 44-53.

3 *Anais do II Congresso Nacional de Críticos de Arte*. Rio de Janeiro: Gráfica Tupy, 1961, p.9.

4 *Ibid.*, p.8.

5 *Ibid.*

6 As the Gruppo degli Otto had won awards at editions of the Bienal de São Paulo, their works featured in MAC USP. These works included *Protesta per Condannati di Siviglia* [Protesto por Condenados de Sevilha], 1952, by Emilio Vedova; *Alba sul Falci* [Amanhecer sobre foices], 1953, by Giuseppe Santomaso (prize winner at the 2nd Bienal de São Paulo, 1953); *Il terzo sparo della batteria* [O Terceiro Disparo da Bateria], 1951, by Afro Basaldella (prize winner at the 1st Bienal de São Paulo); and *Donna Bretona* [Mulher Bretã], 1950, by Renato Birolli (prize winner at the 1st Bienal de São Paulo), among others.

Vedova—displays geometric forms and Cubist derivations⁷, an interest in expressionism and futurism, as well as an initial attempt to reconcile figuration and abstraction, despite gradual leanings toward individual abstract poetics with a lyrical or informal bent over the course of the 1950s. Venturi coined the phrase “abstract-concrete” to “designate an alternative to the formal rigor of certain abstract painting and to the didactic descriptiveness of Neorealism, serving as a common denominator for an often wildly different range of results”⁸.

Pedrosa: sensibility and organization of ideas as a critical method

While Bento failed to mention this fundamental aspect of Venturi’s contemporary art criticism, that is, his interest in this Italian abstract-expressive painting—a subject that should have interested him, given his own views on the abstractionism developed in Brazil during those years—Mário Pedrosa recalled that Venturi had been researching the work of Ennio Morlotti before his death.

For Pedrosa, what was interesting was not to ascribe greater importance to Morlotti — an artist who was “regional”, but important nonetheless, according to him — but to underline the dedication and commitment with which Venturi combed the archives of the Biennale di Venezia in search of information—“artistic, pictorial and biographical”— so he could write a book about an artist whose work, according to Pedrosa, “no matter how much one might wish, simply did not have the universal quality one expects from a great artist”⁹.

Pedrosa, who was director of MAM and of the Bienal de São Paulo, reaffirmed just how essential the Italian critic had been to the way art was considered at the time, as, for Pedrosa, Venturi understood that the work of art carries within itself “the whole universe and all history in an isolated form”. Furthermore, the Brazilian critic praised the way Venturi handled the analysis of individual poetics, always taking into account the personality of the artists who participated historically in his time¹⁰.

Pedrosa sums up Venturi’s critical approach as a balance between sensibility—essential to critical practice, though insufficient in itself as a means of objective assessment—and organized ideas:

Ideas that become too clear and distinct risk transforming criticism into a list of laws and rules. At the same time, sensibility can surpass those ideas in order to call for the formation of new ideas, and in this dialectic there is a continuous and endless rhythm that governs critical judgment.

7 The interest the Italian artists had in Picasso during and immediately after World War II can be seen from the 24th Biennale di Venezia, when the Spanish artist’s work was shown to the Italian public for the first time. Renato Guttuso, who wrote the catalogue for the exhibition, praised the young Italian artists who had turned to Picasso as a model, especially as an ethical model (TERRAROLI, Valério [org.]. *The Birth of Contemporary Art. Art of the Twentieth Century*. Milan, 2007).

8 Ibid, p.162.

9 *Anais do II Congresso Nacional de Criticos de Arte*, op. cit. p.13.

10 Ibid, p.11.

When the critic reaches maturity, when this dialectic between sensibility and ideas achieves balance, fear of the contingent, of the ephemeral, of the purely sensible, can signal the death of criticism or the death of art, because it codifies works of art and critical judgment, but the opposite is also true. If the contingent dominates the eternal, the sense of reality is lost, the work becomes chaos, and criticism transforms into an extreme subjectivity¹¹.

So, according to Pedrosa, for Venturi, critical judgment requires a mix of sensitive disposition and organized reflection; the absence of one or the other results in a criticism that is either normative (all organization, no sensibility) or overly subjective (no organization).

Pedrosa also notes that formal interpretation, allied with an observation of one's surroundings, results in a criticism that is concerned with defining the overriding meaning of a work of art "because, for [Venturi], all art criticism is life experience" ¹². Thanks to this "life experience", which Pedrosa also calls "Venturi's human behavior", the Italian critic's work reveals a fundamentally ethical dimension.

This agreement between Venturi's critical vision and Pedrosa's own approach can be seen from many of the Brazilian critic's declarations, such as when he said that art has to achieve sensibility through the "dynamism of its forms"¹³ or that art should occur "within its own specific field" and in accordance with "its own rules". So, while Pedrosa's position might suggest a strictly formalist approach to the artistic phenomenon, the result is actually a *tempered* formalism, that is, a formalist view according to which the work of art contains subjective meanings that connect it to the world, beyond the relationships between forms, colors and lines.

A clearer notion of how Pedrosa blends this interest in form with a broader sense of the work, one that factors in the communicative function of art, can be gleaned from an article on Alexander Calder:

It is the attitude of one whom, disdaining the present day, so somber does it seem to us, spies, from where he stands, the far-off horizons of Utopia, that Utopia eternally sketching itself out before us. This is not, however, a means of spiritual escape, allowing the artist to cut himself off from society, with no vital contact therewith, entirely abandoned to the expression of his own, extreme and hermetic subjectivism, with no faith in its communicability. As for communication, he communicates all the more with future generations, as these will perhaps have the energy required to integrate art and life¹⁴.

At certain points in his speech, Pedrosa edged in Bento's direction, and, adopting the same testimonial tone, reproduced a dialogue he and Venturi had engaged in when the Italian asked Pedrosa about his "philosophical ground-

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid. p.12.

13 ARANTES, Otilia Beatriz Fiori. *Mário Pedrosa: itinerário crítico*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2004, p.64.

14 ARANTES, Otilia Beatriz Fiori. *Mário Pedrosa: Modernidade Cá e Lá (vol. 4)*. São Paulo: Edusp, 1995, p.90.

work". Pedrosa's answer to Venturi was that he could not revise his general ideas, because he had formed them in his youth. Illustrating his debt to Venturi's work—and going a little overboard in his praise—Pedrosa declared:

Master, yours is the most harmonious, most complete philosophical and critical edifice in international criticism; it would be absurd of us to alter the structure of that edifice, as it is the point from which we embark on our investigations of the experiences of modern art.

At the end of his speech, Pedrosa recalled a visit Venturi made to Rio de Janeiro, keen to see some "Brazilian painting". But, underscoring the precarious nature of the country's museums at the time, the Brazilian critic noted that it was hard to find any "Brazilian painting" between editions of the Bienal, so he had had to turn to artists, studios, galleries and collectors in order to meet Venturi's request.

Lourival Gomes Machado, Venturi's taste and abstract art

Lourival Gomes Machado, former director of MAM and of the first and fifth editions of the Bienal de São Paulo, a professor of Politics and Art History at USP, began his speech by saying that his words would follow the same lines as Pedrosa's—that Venturi was the parameter for their critical thought.

It gives me great intellectual pleasure, not only that of agreeing with Pedrosa, which is always a huge pleasure, to be able to see in living color how the lesson of a master can be the same for one and all. So, without the slightest hesitation, I shall read my account of what I can now say is not just my appraisal—synthetic, where Pedrosa was analytical; generic, where Pedrosa was more detailed—but our thoughts on Lionello Venturi¹⁵.

Though the proceedings to the Congress do not contain a copy of Gomes Machado's speech, because the text was not submitted to the secretary for inclusion, the critic's thoughts on the Italian historian's legacy to contemporary criticism can be found in an article published a few days later¹⁶. On Venturi's place within the critical panorama of the day, Gomes Machado writes:

Of the critic today, and for no good reason, what is asked is nothing less than a complete and pitiless judgment day on contemporary production, exactly as it is—more profuse and contradictory than anything that went before it—and that he draft, out of divining foresight, the precise directives for all future creation, near or distant. (...) it was in the face of these extreme demands and limited effective possibilities that Lionello Venturi's critical thought arose and consolidated¹⁷.

Gomes Machado draws our attention to the demand for a critical output that can

15 *Anais do II Congresso Nacional de Críticos de Arte*, op. cit. p.14.

16 MACHADO, Lourival Gomes. "A herança de Lionello Venturi", *Suplemento Literário, O Estado de São Paulo*, Dec. 23, 1961.

17 *Ibid.*

serve as a sentry for art despite the diversity of contemporary poetics and concludes that Venturi occupies a singular position within this newly-configured art scene.

Following the same line as the presentations delivered by Bento and Pedrosa, Gomes Machado also undertook to comment on Venturi's theoretical references, identifying the errors the Italian critic, undoubtedly indebted to past thinkers, saw in the interpretations of Hegel, Kant and Benedetto Croce:

In fact, Croce preceded him in showing that any judgment of a work of art substantially depends on its own constitutive elements and so cannot stand outside its historical context, but that it also essentially depends on its being evaluated in itself, without consideration for any order of implication, but regarded only in terms of the new beauty it brings. Understanding the parts through the whole and the whole through its parts would be the Hegelian solution to the Kantian antinomy: historical interpretation and aesthetic criticism therefore become one. However, what Croce did not properly assess was the effective importance of taste in the near-constant thwarting of this dialectical solution—so much so that he often lost sight of it. Lionello Venturi transformed his intellectual life into a long and fruitful study of these evasions and errors, so numerous and repeated that, as he saw it, they constituted a veritable tradition of flight in the history of criticism.

What interests us most here is the Brazilian critic's understanding of Venturi's work as that of a thinker expanding upon the solutions of his predecessors—all philosophers and therefore concerned with the generalizing aspects of the artistic phenomenon—whilst adding the fundamental element of taste to his analysis of the work of art¹⁸.

Gomes Machado mentions the absolute importance of the notion of taste to Venturi's thought, something which he saw as setting him apart rather radically from other thinkers, especially Croce.

That is why, even after his death, his basic affirmations remain valid. Valid are his negative statements, his warnings: "To convert taste into a theory is always an error and an obstacle to understanding those same works of art that appeal to that taste". And valid are his positive statements, his recommendations: "As a concept of art can only come from a philosophy of art, the scholars flee from philosophy; and because it is easier to find the feeling of art in the layman than in the expert, the erudite drive all feeling out of art. That is why they fail to see that the understanding of a work is based in art as in taste—taste is all that interests them"¹⁹.

It also reveals Venturi's intelligence and specificity, working as both an art historian and as a critic attuned to contemporary output:

So, although apparently connected to his idealist predecessors, and coeval with

¹⁸ It is important to remember that Venturi understood taste as "the set of preferences of the art world, of an artist or group of artists (...) taste is shared by the artists of the same historical period, the same school or even the same tendency, whatever you wish to call it, and it is the only way we have of understanding the art of these artists". (PONENTE, Nello. "Prefácio" In: VENTURI, Lionello. *História da Crítica de Arte*. Lisbon, 1998, p.10).

¹⁹ MACHADO, op. cit..

Croce, he was effectively a century removed from them—though perhaps without wholly realizing it. For this reason, and unlike so many heirs of the same legacy, he prepared himself to keep the pace with the art of his time, with perfect sensible acuity and adequate historical analysis. Moreover, he prepared himself to denounce, correctly and justly, the deviations of contemporary critics, in a veritable and legitimate criticism of the critics.

If we bear in mind Pedrosa's observation that the key point in Venturi's criticism was his search for "the human contribution a painting offers us, its suggestions concerning our way of feeling and our imagination", we can see the echo of the Italian critic's thought in Gomes Machado's ideas on abstract art:

In the new 'general line' currently consolidating, abstract language, even representing the field of discourse, does not impose itself as a rigid rule, as, very often, and in some of the best cases, the new do not reject this or that previously unseen sign or symbol just because it happens to coincide with pre-existing natural forms. What seems to dominate their intentions and guide their creation is an obstinate fervor to convey the human message²⁰.

What Gomes Machado identifies and appreciates in Venturi's work is what they share in their approach to their field. In terms of abstraction, Gomes Machado defended the confrontation between the critic and the work over and above the development of theories that straitjacketed artistic output within the fixed characteristics of analysis. The subjectivity of expressive abstraction, an "irrational and ungovernable" art, should distance itself from doctrinarian dispositions.

Its value lies precisely in not exalting dogmas or conclusions, which are historically always transitory, but rather in establishing the fundamental need for an attitude of spirit. This rule of research born of the nature of the subject of that research, this precept of intelligent action drawn from that action, this natural moral for the art scholar, all of this is the legacy Lionello Venturi leaves²¹.

Final considerations

This introductory panorama of the interpretations of Lionello Venturi's thought made by renowned Brazilian critics active during the 1950s and 60s does not presume to exhaust the complexities these conceptual encounters and critical positions established, but merely to identify possible meanings that might serve as threads with which to unravel a whole bundle of themes these discussions could contain.

As we have seen, some reflection on Venturi's thought presented by a handful of Brazilian critics at a once-off event is enough to give us some insight into the intersections between the ideas of critics who supposedly occupied very different spaces and so blurs the boundaries between those who defended

20 Ibid. "Bienal: a significação do novo", Suplemento Literário, *O Estado de São Paulo*, Oct. 17, 1959.

21 Ibid. "A herança de Lionello Venturi", Suplemento Literário, *O Estado de São Paulo*, Dec. 23, 1961.

concrete art or geometric abstraction, and those who defended informalism as the most adequate formulation for mid-20th-century Brazilian art. In other words, it shows us how nuanced their theoretical positions were and the degree to which they shared the same theoretical templates.

The proceedings to the 2nd Congress²² provide a good example of these subtleties. In a debate between Pedrosa and Waldemar Cordeiro we find an intriguing passage in which the critic explains to the artist what he means by the “intuitive” meaning of art and how concretism dealt—or should have dealt—with that issue:

All art is intuitive at the level of creation, it belongs to intuitive thought, and the problem with concretism is its difficulty in reconciling the impulse, nature, the essence of intuitive creation, which is the preserve of art, with that of scientific relations. I admire the concretists' efforts to stand outside that weft of thoughts and intuitive feelings in art and analyze them, confer upon them some of the discipline of scientific order, capable, as a whole, of formulating true rules for the creation of the work of art.

As we can see, here is Pedrosa, concerned with subjectivity, trying to draw Cordeiro's attention to the wider meaning of the artistic research the concretists were conducting, a line of investigation that went beyond the domain of perceptive relations established in the works, endowing it with the mantle of art-criticism, governed by scientific procedures but applied to the realm of non-rationality. In the early 1950s, Cordeiro was the leader of the Grupo Ruptura which, as the name suggests, wanted to overhaul the prevailing forms of producing art by introducing a mix of principles borrowed from *Gestalt* and some ideas drawn from the theory of pure visibility, which would enable them, theoretically at least, to create art with little or no room for subjectivity.

As a counterweight to Pedrosa's argument, Gomes Machado, in another article, contested this positive meaning attributed to the formulation of norms for creation as developed by the concrete artists: “(...) spasmodic movements that purport to ‘objectify’ art, even though, thus far, the results they have yielded have been sparse or heretical to the exacting doctrine of their prophets”²³.

It is as if Venturi's method, which identifies the history of art as the history of art criticism (in which, it should be remembered, the narrative of the work as told by its contemporaries and the writings of the artists themselves are valid contributions to the analysis of the work), as presented in his famous *Storia della Critica d'Arte*, were being borne out right there, at the National Art Critics Congress, when Bento, Pedrosa and Gomes Machado, in their tribute to Venturi, espoused their own convictions that, recorded in the proceedings, constitute

22 The National Art Critics Congresses remain a little-known and only partially-analyzed aspect of the history of art in Brazil. Despite that, it is obvious that the analysis of just one of its many sessions can raise a range of themes for discussion and roll out an unlimited number of subjects. This would be impossible were it not for the fact that the Brazilian art scene at the time boasted a number of critics who were prepared, interested and active enough to propose the discussion of contemporary themes that not only concerned issues directly related to the work and history of art during the period—figuration and abstraction, the characteristics of national versus internationalization of art—, but also those involving artistic output in general, with special emphasis on the milieu and role of the critic and the institutions.

23 Ibid. “No silêncio das paixões”, Suplemento Literário, *O Estado de São Paulo*, May 3, 1958.

today a record not only of the issues up for discussion, but the many shades that ran through them.

By way of conclusion, below is a quotation that encapsulates Venturi's point of view and, therefore, sheds some light on the positions of the Brazilian critics paying tribute to him:

Art depends on revelation, criticism does not. So if criticism wants to understand the phenomenon of revelation, it cannot abandon itself to it, but must rather adopt its proper means, which are, after all, those of reason. In fact, only reason can discover the error of a rational invasion of a non-rational phenomenon and, to achieve this, there is no other method than to trace the history of that error, to consign its consequences to dialect, identify its declarations of independence, its attempts at liberation and the commitments that went with them²⁴.

"Our" Venturi, that is, the debate that grew up around him in Brazil, was highly instructive for the Brazilian critics of the day and the debate on modern art then steering the course of the local art world—figuration or abstraction, concrete or informal art—especially by showing where and how these overlapped and therefore relativizing readings that proposed a radical antinomy between supposedly antagonistic pairs.

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24 VENTURI *apud* PONENTE, op. cit. 1998, p.11.

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