CHAPTER 9

Art against the Grain

Change of Ground

The critical restructuring of the Neo-Concrete idea of *participation*,¹ which conveyed strongly sensory aspects and implied the observer’s bodily activity, reached a new level when Antonio Dias, already living abroad, distanced himself from the expressive or ‘passional’² character of his work. Nevertheless, though colder, Dias’s work did not lose its sharp violence. In fact, in a foreign country and having less immediate access to themes and materials of the general sensibility, the work reduced its *front* against Pop art, turning his edge and irony towards new targets.

Dias’s work situation had in fact changed in many ways. However, before mapping out his new setting, let us consider the collective and dramatic background of his work situation. In Brazil, the political situation had become very serious. After mass protests against the dictatorship in 1968, the toughening of the regime resulted in successive arrests, removal of rights and widespread violence. Heads previously spared were cut off. There were forced exiles, mass expulsions of teachers and students from universities, widespread censorship of the media and spectacles, etc. As a consequence, a decisive part of Brazilian intellectual life – which was vivid, original, and intensely focused on opposition to the dictatorship between 1964 and 1968 –³ moved abroad. Paris became one of the new centres. After receiving a grant to travel there at the end of 1967, Dias settled in Milan the following year.⁴ A work as attentive to historical

¹ For the discussion of the neo-concrete notion of *participation* and of its significant changes since the crisis of geometric abstraction, due to the civil-military coup in 1964, see Chapter 4 in this volume.


⁴ Upon his return from London, after having participated in the events of May in Paris, Dias
circumstances as his would not go through such changes unchallenged. The regime of observer participation acquired new coordinates and became one of the aspects of Dias’s work that signalled changes in perspective.  

Painting-Rerouting

Settled in the European circuit, Dias’s work targeted signs of the circuit of art exchanges and contemplative practices. Dias also took up new weapons, developing new poetic structures appropriated or ‘detournées’ (rerouted, as the Situationist movement then in vogue in Paris used to say). Dias quickly hijacked practices or operational procedures from Minimalist and Conceptual art – predominant currents in the Anglo-Saxon art world at that time. Thus, Dias’s works became pictorial structures, at first sight, with analytical purposes. In effect, the Minimalist and Conceptual movements were related to the analytical philosophy of language, very widespread at that time in North American universities. In the new key, Dias’s paintings consisted of panels or large tile-paintings: that is, cold and distant pictorial surfaces, presented as if they were samples. In sum, such paintings were less sentimental and sensorial than those rerouted by Pop Art, previously used in New Figuration.

Maps of Exile, Cells of the Self

A series of works from the period dealt with exile issues. They contained allusions to loss and unfamiliarity, but also included graphs, diagrams and samples, in front of which problems were discussed as if in a laboratory.

The new pictorial treatment, ostensibly cold and objectivist, was purged of all expressiveness. It displayed distance and irony before its own pain and in relation to painting – thus parodying the Conceptual device and Minimalist art. Only the title-caption denoted some emotion, albeit in a very synthetic and encrypted way. However, this emotion only became apparent at a second moment, provided by the montage and, effectively, for those who knew the

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5 For the detailed discussion of one of Dias’s works that is illustrative of his evolution with regard to the idea of participation, see the last topic of Chapter 4 in this volume.