Ferreira Gullar’s Non-Object, or How Neoconcrete Poetry Became One with the World

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Ferreira Gullar (b. 1930) was fundamental to Neoconcretism, which was an avant-garde movement that took place in Rio de Janeiro from 1959 to the mid-1960s.1 This movement is a landmark in the history of twentieth-century Brazilian art – in fact, it transformed discourses based on medium-specificity into early contemporary experiments, whose radicalism and innovation still surprise us. Gullar guided this movement through his poetry, art criticism and curatorial work. Besides him, artists Hércules Barsotti Aluisio Carvão, Amílcar de Castro, Willys de Castro, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Décio Vieira and Franz Weissmann, as well as poets Reynaldo Jardim and Theon Spanúdis, among others, renewed artistic parameters, and combined traditional media (such as painting and sculpture) with poetry, theater, architecture, dance, book making and graphic design, resulting in an interdisciplinary opening in the artistic field (Fig. 1).2

Gullar’s participation in Neoconcretism has not been fully analyzed yet. This is the consequence of our incipient knowledge of the experimental works, since the academic organization of the fields of literary studies and art history in Brazil does not permit the understanding of his interdisciplinary approach to poetry. Whereas Brazilian literary critics focus on his more traditional poetic production, art historians consider the criticism independently, neglecting that he remained a poet through and through. The objective of this article, therefore, is to conduct an integrated analysis of Gullar’s output, submitting his art writing to the parameters of a research that intended to overcome conventional media to materialize expression in its purest form.

To achieve this objective, I examine the critical writings on the non-object, as well as his experimental poetry. The methodology is necessarily inter-disciplinary, in the sense that I intend to demonstrate the decisive interference of the latter practice in the former, although respecting the inherent particularities of each field. The analytical problems placed by his neoconcrete output, nonetheless, go beyond the relationship between these two literary discourses, since his poetry resulted from the crossing of different media, from the improbable mixing of words with modified books, objects and, even, environments – without any doubt, these experiments were the true producers of signification in his oeuvre, and are analyzed in detail. My first task is to understand the parameters of his criticism, which guided the development of Neoconcretism since its onset.

Gullar’s Avant-garde Projection

During Neoconcretism, Gullar’s criticism appeared in Jornal do Brasil, which was the most important Brazilian newspaper then. Indeed, he was the editor of the arts section of its weekly cultural insert – named Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil (SDJB) –, which was produced between 1956 and 1961.3 In SDJB, he launched the manifestoes of Neoconcretism, advertised its exhibitions, publicized the experimental proposals, discussed with detractors, analyzed the politics of the art-circuit, and educated readers about avant-garde art.4 Through its pages, it is possible to follow the development of his critical thinking: initially, Gullar supported international Concretism, which was introduced in São Paulo, in 1952; then, he disengaged Carioca artists from the dogmatic aspects of this movement, in order to emphasize the expressive content of the work; later,
the critic published the inaugural manifesto of Neoconcretism, organizing the new group of artists; at last, he formulated the concept of the non-object, stretching the limits of the movement.

In this article, I focus on the last moments of his art criticism. In the beginning of 1959, Gullar wrote the ‘Neoconcrete Manifesto’, specifying the constructivist origins of the movement, the critical differences between Concretism and Neoconcretism and the theoretical bases of the new art. If the former movement succumbed to a ‘dangerous hypertrophy of rationalism’, the latter overcame the too-simplistic application of scientific theories (Gestalt psychology, in particular) through the emphasis on a phenomenological approach to art. For the critic, neoconcrete participants followed early European constructivists – such as Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevitch –, in their affirmation of expression and time. Gullar then hypostatized these aesthetic elements, ultimately understanding the work as a living organism. Despite the engagement, he was evaluating the advanced art produced in Rio de Janeiro, representing it in a way that was considered faithful by his new colleagues, who adhered to the movement and participated in the I Neoconcrete Exhibition.⁶

One week before launching this manifesto in SDJB, the critic published a short piece on Lygia Clark’s works, contemplating their technical aspects. He wrote: ‘differently from, for example, [Olle] Baertling, in whose pictures the forms try to jump swiftly beyond the frame, in Lygia Clark’s painting, it is the space that penetrates into the picture, requested by the forms created by the painting. There is no conflict anymore: the picture and the space are on the same level’.⁷ Gullar was here repeating the argument first advanced in the catalogue piece ‘Lygia Clark: a radical experience (1954-1958)’ – written on the occasion of her participation in a collective exhibition that took place at the Galeria de Arte das Folhas, São Paulo, in 1958 –, which was important for his understanding of advanced art, since he first considered a pictorial alternative to Concretism.⁸

In both articles, Gullar analyzed Clark’s late-1950s works, admiring the radical autonomy achieved by her paintings, which crowned the research of the ‘organic line’.⁹ For him, the works of the series Plans in Modulated Surfaces (Planos em Superfícies Moduladas, 1956-7), Modulated Spaces (Espaços Modulados, 1958-9) and Units (Unidades, 1958-9) have finally attained the stage of total presence or immanence, meaning that the declaration of the bi-dimensionality of the picture brought together its own space. He was indeed enraptured by her discoveries – a feeling that remained throughout the neoconcrete period. In the passage quoted above, however, Gullar compared Clark’s with Baertling’s works, whose sharp forms are projected beyond the frame, showing interest in the investigation of the institutional limits of painting.

Even grasped negatively, Baertling’s inventiveness must have impressed Gullar, lingering on his mind for some time. In a meeting of the neoconcrete group at Clark’s home six months later, he had the chance to evaluate these ideas once again. There, he had the following conversation with Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa:

Once we arrived, Lygia showed us a work that did not bear name. It was not a sculpture. I kept looking at it, Mário Pedrosa also. She said: ‘I do not know how to name it’. Mário Pedrosa said: ‘it is a type of relief’. I contended: ‘this is not it – there is no surface. If there is no surface, it is not relief’. He left, dinner was served – and I stayed there. I remember that I thought: ‘it is not painting, it is not sculpture; it is an object. But if I say that it is an object, now the table is an object, the chair is an object. Therefore, Lygia’s work is not an object’. I met the others and said: ‘I know the name. It is non-object’. Mário Pedrosa
contended: ‘Non-object does not exist. Object is object of knowledge’. I explained that he was philosophically right. ‘But the problem’ – I replied – ‘is that this is an object-no; it is not a work of art within the traditional categories, but continues to be an object’.10

Unfortunately, Clark’s work was never identified, but it was probably built along with the series Counter-Reliefs (Contra-Relevos, 1959) and Cocoons (Casulos, 1959), whose forms also intrude upon real space. In any case, it triggered the critic’s imagination, enabling him to see beyond the institutional limits of traditional categories. In a formula that would coincidently become famous in a quite different context – ‘it is not painting, it is not sculpture; it is an object’11 –, the critic gave a decisive step in his conceptual investigation.

Based on this conversation, Gullar formulated the ‘Theory of the Non-object’, which was published in SDJB in the end of 1959. The time was ripe for a new critical development, since Neoconcretism gained momentum during that year. In fact, the I Neoconcrete Exhibition had just been remounted in Salvador, Bahia State, and several new artists joined the show.12 Then, his intention was to write the second manifesto of the movement, but the article eventually became a personal and provocative statement dealing with the possibilities of artistic expression after the exhaustion of traditional categories. For him, whereas our surrounding objects are defined by their names and purposes, the neoconcrete artist creates the non-object, something that rejects conceptual understanding and functionality, referring only to itself. According to Gullar: ‘the non-object is not an anti-object, rather it is a special object in which one intends the synthesis of sensory and mental experiences: a body that is transparent to phenomenological knowledge, integrally perceivable, that gives itself to perception without surplus. It is a pure appearance’.13 To fulfill these conditions, therefore, the non-object should be completely autonomous.14

The Theory of the Non-object summarizes the history of the avant-garde art. After mentioning the dissolution of the object in impressionism, Gullar focused on cubism and Mondrian’s ‘destructive’ practices, which received great emphasis. In effect, he believed that if this painter lived longer, he would either restate the blank canvas, or – more importantly – abandon it altogether to construct the work in real space, following Malevitch’s similar course of action. At this point in history, he considered the appearance of two divergent trends: whereas Duchamp and the surrealists proposed the ready-made, which was more based on the social signification of the object than on its formal qualities, the Russian constructivists and their followers (Vontongerloo and Moholy-Nagy) rejected all artistic conventions, dealing with space directly.15 In this connection, the critic mentioned Lygia Clark and Amílcar de Castro – and Neoconcretism, for that matter – as continuing this trend.

Indeed, Gullar’s avant-garde narrative is based on the projection of the concept of non-object onto the past, the same way that Clement Greenberg did with the notion of flatness as regards cubism and European art, ten years earlier.16 Both critics defended the autonomy of the object; differently from the latter, however, Gullar believed that the artist could only engender a totally non-representational (i.e. abstract) work, which would found its own space, after overcoming painting and sculpture. He then declared that the non-object suppressed both the frame and the base, mentioning Malevich’s notion of desert as an earlier effort of liberation from culture. His discourse became unequivocally projective at this point: ‘it is possible to say that all works of art tend toward being non-objects, and that the term only applies with precision to those works produced outside the conventional limits of art, for which the necessity to remove limits is the fundamental purpose of their appearance’.17 What had initially begun as an interpretation of Clark’s experiment became an aesthetic requirement.
The content of Gullar’s avant-garde projection will be defined in this article later on. It is now important to stress that the Theory of the Non-object inaugurated a new phase in the history of Neoconcretism. The publication of this article in SDJB provoked a critical debate that lasted years. Overcoming the controversy over the differences between Concretism and Neoconcretism, the participants and sympathizers of the latter movement began discussing the characteristics of the non-object, which seemed to allow contradictory interpretations. Indeed, Gullar’s formulation revealed some theoretical complications, since the abstract qualities of this concept are difficult to associate with the representational character of the word. Consequently, neoconcrete artists accepted the non-object more easily, while poets debated over divergent interpretations.

To address the problems related to the concept of non-object, he published two articles in SDJB in the beginning of 1960, analyzing his new poetry in the first, and developing some conceptual aspects in the second. Thus, the critic wrote the second installment of his theory, which was entitled ‘Dialogue on the Non-object’. In this fictitious conversation, he reaffirmed that the non-object overcame traditional media, also emphasizing its autonomous, self-reflexive nature. After making some theoretical distinctions about this concept, Gullar reiterated the projective perspective: ‘what the artist seeks in painting and sculpture is primary experience of the world, but painting (or sculpture) is already a preconceived world that needs to be surpassed’ – in this passage, the verb ‘to need’ is an index of his aesthetics, which was then projected to the past as well. Yet, the last paragraphs of this article presented the novelties: the verbal non-object and the participation of the observer. I follow these addenda in detail, since they provide information about the origins of his avant-garde projection, also signaling the limits of the proposal.

To introduce the new aspects of his theory, the critic placed this question: ‘Is there a fusion of painting, relief, sculpture, and poetry [in the verbal non-object]?’ His answer was surprising:

I do not think so. Planes, forms, and colors are elements of reality prior to any belonging to artistic language. In the non-object, plastic elements are not used in the same way as in painting and sculpture. They are chosen according to a verbal intent, just as a traditional poet invites and repels words in producing the poem, the neoconcrete poet invites, not only words, but also forms, colors, and movements, on a level at which the verbal and the plastic languages interpenetrate. No-one ignores the fact that no experience is restricted to any of man’s five senses, since man perceives with a totality, and that the senses decipher one another in the ‘general symbolism of the body’ (M. Ponty).

This passage seems extemporaneous, unless it is considered that Gullar was developing the Spatial Poems, which were based on the inscription of words into wooden objects. He applied the concept of non-object to his own production, affirming that the same way the artist liberated color from painting; the poet freed the word from poetry. But the doubt still persists: if the neoconcrete poet dealt with plastic elements (planes, forms, colors, and movements), why is the verbal non-object not a ‘fusion’ of different media?

In effect, Gullar stated that the neoconcrete poet works ‘on a level at which the verbal and the plastic languages interpenetrate’, implying that his experiment should eventually be more integrative than a fusion of media, which reveals a problematic understanding of these languages. Under this perspective, the critic’s dismissal of a fusion – which was understood more as an addition of disparate parts, than as a process to reduce differences – seems reasonable, since he did not want to achieve the synthesis of the arts, but their complete rejection, which would happen in the
creation of a non-codified arrangement.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, what I must consider is whether there might exist such an interpenetration of the verbal and plastic elements that could efface their characteristics, or whether the neoconcrete poet necessarily deployed an interdisciplinary approach to expression.

Gullar based his argument on two theories of language. In the passage above, he makes a direct reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ‘general symbolism of the body’, a notion advanced in his \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} that points out the synaesthetic process through which the senses communicate or ‘symbolize’ their specific data to the unified system of the body. To assess Gullar’s proposal of the verbal non-object, therefore, I need to investigate how the word takes part in this process in comparison with natural perception. In the same paragraph in which the philosopher defined the symbolism of the body, he also analyzed the reception of the word ‘warm’. Although it anticipates sensory experience, it was also considered the following: ‘the warmth which I feel when I read the word “warm” is not an actual warmth. It is simple my body which prepares itself for heat and which, so to speak, roughs out its outline’.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, the reception of the word and the percept are ultimately kept apart, suggesting that the non-object could not efface their characteristics. In fact, Gullar could not accept Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the word as a ‘cultural object’, a condition that does not allow its interpenetration with plastic elements to the point of producing an autonomous work.

Moreover, Gullar supported the concept of verbal non-object on another theoretical source, to which he gave his personal interpretation as well. In fact, his using the notions of representation and presentation to explain the non-object – along with his mentioning abstract elements as directly belonging to reality – did not come from Merleau-Ponty. Whereas he was fundamental to the reception of the work, the differences between the visual and linguistic forms were culled from American philosopher Susanne K. Langer’s book \textit{Philosophy in a New Key}, which became exceptionally influential among neoconcrete participants. She asserted that language or discourse consisted of symbols (words) and syntax, differing from the presentational forms. According to her: ‘visual forms – lines, colors, proportions, etc. – are just as capable of articulation, i.e. of complex combinations, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language’.\textsuperscript{23} Despite this, Gullar disregarded the symbolic character of the word, since ‘the non-object is not a representation, but a presentation’.\textsuperscript{24}

Even influenced by these diverse theories, Gullar neither accepted the separation between word and natural elements, nor the distinction between word and presentational forms. Based on the \textit{Spatial Poems}, his reasoning should have been the following: if poetry could be printed in books, why would it not be in other objects? More to the point: given that he grasped the word as a natural phenomenon, since its meaning sprang along with those of other objects, why would the verbal experiment not be one with reality? Now, it is possible to understand why the neoconcrete poet did not produce a fusion of painting, relief, sculpture and poetry, since the relationship of these media was rather organic: the non-object ‘bursts from the inside out, from non-meaning towards meaning’. Indeed, ‘what matters is neither producing a poem nor even a non-object, but to reveal how much of the world is deposited in the word’.\textsuperscript{25} Eventually, Gullar’s idiosyncratic interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s and Langer’s philosophies were not dictated by analytical reasoning but by intuition, since the parameters of his new poetry were over-determining his critical thinking. In the Dialogue on the Non-object, the voice of the poet quieted the critic, suggesting that he was absorbing Clark’s discoveries in poetic terms.
Differently from this artist, however, he was not concerned with the production of objects. The poet understood the crisis of modern art as a formal impasse that could only be overcome by a pure, disembodied expression, something that would paradoxically break open before all cultural formations. To escape this impasse, he created another hallmark of Neoconcretism: the participation of the observer. The simple contemplation of the non-object would not be enough to produce meaning, since the observer must now move into action – and this involvement recreated the work completely. To avoid its transformation into a cultural phenomenon, Gullar emphasized participatory gestures, stressing the duration of the experiment. ‘The non-object is conceived in time: it is an immobility open to a mobility that is open to an open immobility. The contemplation leads to action, which in turn leads to further contemplation’.26

Eventually, the non-object underlined the moment of creation itself, since the aforesaid expression could not be transformed into art, which was already immersed in culture. This theory triggered a debate among neoconcrete poets and sympathizers over the limits of the movement that entered well into the 1960s. For an analyst: ‘there is a paradox between what must be and what can be expressed. Should the poet begin with the word or abandon it as a whole, look for a new symbolic-plastic medium or reintegrate the word into functions that go beyond the current ones? The Theory of the Non-object, although valid in aesthetic terms, presents, in practice, unpredictable difficulties’.27 Despite these uncertainties, the convergence between the roles of artist and participant liberated a creativity that redefined the work, which was then understood as an open proposition. Unable to fulfill his – otherwise unattainable – avant-garde project, but stimulated by its aesthetics, Gullar endorsed experimentalism,28 beginning contemporary art in Brazil.

**The Problem of Syntax**

Gullar’s non-object was decisive to the history of Neoconcretism, but this concept also signaled the second crisis of his then short career as a poet. Years before, with twenty-three years old, he published the impressive and polemic *The Corporal Fight* (A Luta Corporal, 1954), which compiled his early poetry. This book was based on various proposals that became historically available to Brazilian poets after the Generation of 45, experimenting with neo-symbolist elocution (based on Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry), free versification, poetic prose, colloquialism, free association in a surrealist-like style, and use of large spaces or even pages in the organization of poems.29 This experimentation is very rich, and its complete analysis goes beyond the scope of this article. To understand Gullar’s poetry, I focus on the notion of syntax, which traditionally means: ‘the relationship among words, phrases, and clauses forming sentences; sentence structure’.30 He finally readapted this notion, changing its traditional functions to meet the challenges of his avant-garde research.

Contradicting its apparent eclecticism, *The Corporal Fight* displays a precise plan. The poet carefully edited and designed the layout of the book to achieve his poetic goals: after the more composed *Seven Portuguese Poems* (Sete Poemas Portugueses, 1950), he undermined the poem, along with morphology and syntax. This gesture, indeed, was generated by his attempt to materialize the essence of language, which would paradoxically result from the destruction of his recently won poetic skills, in an early example of ‘deskilling’ in Brazilian poetry.31 In the poem *Roçzeiral*, he stretched the limits of language, destroying communication: ‘UILÁM/ UILÁM/ lavram z’olhares, flamas!/ CREPITAM GÂNGLES RÔ MASUF/ Rha’.32 It is easy to notice that he dropped all grammatical rules. After the book, the poet thought that his career was over.
The end of this crisis came when Gullar met Augusto de Campos in Rio de Janeiro, in 1955. After reading *The Corporal Fight*, the poets of the Noigandres Group tried to co-opt him for Concretism. Their ideas reassured him, since syntax had been abandoned, and the work gained a decisive visual organization instead. Similarly, he needed to construct the poem from scratch, redefining its elements anew. But Gullar could not agree with the extreme rationalism of his new colleagues, and the response came in *The Anthill* (*O Formigueiro*, 1954-5), a fifty-page long poem that negotiates the dichotomies between visual emphasis and discursiveness. Organized around the word ‘ant’ (*formiga*) – which is decomposed in its constitutive letters only to be reorganized in new words until they form nonsensical phrases –, it displays the processes of disintegration and reconstruction of discursive meanings according to the spatial placements of elements. Thus, he used an almost deconstructivist strategy, also underlining the gesture of turning the pages.

Gullar showed five pages of *The Anthill* in the I National Exhibition of Concrete Art, which took place at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, in 1956. This exhibition was a landmark of this movement in Brazil, showcasing the latest artistic and poetic advancements. But it also revealed the differences between the Carioca and Paulista approaches to Concretism. To underline these differences, poet Décio Pignatari declared that *The Anthill* was not a concrete poem, since it was still based on discursiveness. After that moment, Gullar faced severe criticisms from the participants of this movement, as well as from established critics and poets. The rupture finally happened in June 1957. Then, the editor of SDJB, published Haroldo de Campos’s ‘From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematics of Composition’, together with Gullar’s ‘Concrete Poetry: Intuitive Experience’ on the first page of the issue, clarifying the positions of both groups to the public.

In the next couple of years, Gullar developed new poetic experiments that were published in the book *Poems* (*Poemas*, 1958). Although the visual organization seemed similar to Concretism, this series created an alternative to its excessive focus on structure. Then, he experimented with the word: ‘I use repetition as repetition, that is, to disengage the word from its immediate connections (aderências imediatas), to clean it, and after that – or simultaneously – to insert a precise signification, which is immediate, concrete’. Avoiding mathematical repetitions, Gullar still used the procedure ‘to disengage the word from its immediate connections’. This is a subtle, even negative way of referring to its syntactical relationships, which were not completely abandoned. Indeed, the poet was seeking to employ the word according to its phenomenological characteristics.

In addition, Gullar realized that the concrete practice of repeating words taken from the dictionary would not be enough to construct the poem. Not only did he want to work with the ‘living word’ (*palavra viva*), but also became conscious about the impossibility of separating its material and semantic qualities – simultaneously, however, the poet noticed that repetition favored the sensorial values of the word at the expenses of its signification. He then counter-balanced this effect, inserting that ‘precise signification’ into the work to generate conflict and, therefore, poetic interest. In *Poems*, this conflict evolved between the exploration of the sound-visual characteristics of the word (through alliteration, reiteration, visual placement of elements, etc.) on the one hand, and the statement of its significations or qualifications on the other. This opposition defined the form and meaning of the new poem.

In his book, Gullar developed the series of poems *Green Weed* (*Verde Erva*, 1958). The most famous of them reads in English as follows:
It consists of twelve repetitions of the word ‘green’, forming a square, and the word ‘weed’ placed outside this figure. For Gullar, this poem evokes the central square of the city of Alcântara, Maranhão State, which he visited in 1950; then, the poet got the impression that the wild grass of its large central plaza grew up for no one’s enjoyment, perhaps because of the loneliness of the place.\(^{38}\) The poem is not an imitation of the plaza though – his was not a mimetic project. Although based on memory, he was actually expressing the persistence of a sensorial experience in order to explore its connections.

In fact, he inverted the traditional linguistic proposition, as characterized in the field of logics. The traditional proposition holds together the form of the subject (S) and the content of the attribute (A) through the verb to be, asserting the general formula ‘S is A’ in accordance with the notions of identity and verisimilitude.\(^{40}\) In this version of the poem, however, Gullar first affirmed a quality (green), which was emphatically repeated, and then identified its subject (weed). Indeed, ‘it is necessary to say green several times until you understand that it is really green. When you have understood this, the poem says weed and closes its field of signification’.\(^{41}\) Gullar grasped his poem likewise: ‘the repetition of the word green makes the word weed emerge from within’,\(^{42}\) creating a conflict between the sensorial presence of the former and the meaning of the latter.

Going beyond the inversion of traditional linguistics, the poet developed an organicism that would distinguish Neoconcretism in the near future.

After considering the result, Gullar was not satisfied. The placement of elements was based on a geometric figure, looking similar to concrete poetry. He then grew doubtful whether repetition could produce signification, since one did not feel compelled to read the poem until the end, only grasping its general form. Still using the procedure, he wrote the last version of this series:
In effect, Gullar still ascertained a basic poetic unity, i.e. green–weed, but subdued the perception of its repetitions through the interpolation of two empty lines, breaking the flow of reading to create pauses. This strategy requests the reader’s attention throughout the poem, suggesting that time was not mechanical anymore. Based on this experience, he concluded that ‘concrete poetry is temporal, not spatial’.  

In Poems, Gullar eventually grasped the sense of time as duration. He got to the point of composing the poem Red–To See (Vermelho Ver, 1958) on adjacent pages, establishing a conflict – but also a linkage – between the sheer duration of color and its perceptual or subjective reception. As a consequence, his emphasis on time reflected the connection of words – and this happened in such a way that all elements converged towards the production of an organic totality. While experimenting with repetition, therefore, Gullar assessed the notion of syntax, which was then reaffirmed. As early as 1955, he wrote a letter to Augusto de Campos, affirming: ‘I believe that the problem of syntax, which is the core element of discursive language, is the crux of this new poetry’. After the publication of his book, however, his research presented surprising results, featuring the Books-Poems, Spatial Poems and Buried Poem.

An Ever-expanding Poetic Expression

By and large Gullar’s participation in Neoconcretism is characterized by interdisciplinary experiments. His first contribution to the movement was the series Books-Poems (Livros-Poemas, 1958-9): he altered the traditional format of the book, cutting sections of its pages to allow the poetic accumulation of words over time. The first experiment is Our Bone (Osso Nosso 1958). The poet wrote the substantive ‘bone’ on the middle-left of the first page, leaving the adjacent one empty. When the reader turns this page, which is shortened by a vertical cut, he reads the pronoun ‘our’, establishing the final unity bone–our (Figs. 2 and 3). Gullar thus reinforced the phenomenological convergence between writing and reading, so that their virtual unity could materialize a pure expression. But the English translation of the poem is unfortunate, since it looses the alliteration that creates a conflict between the sensorial reception of these words and their somewhat existential denotation.

The next experiments are more complex, including oblique cuts in the pages, so that the reader only gets the definitive sequence of elements in the end of the poem, despite the order of appearance (Fig. 4). This was not the first time that the turning of pages was activated – in The Anthill, however, this gesture did not define the book. In fact, Gullar’s new experiments caused a two-fold effect: because the poem incorporates the pages into its visual structure, the reading now addresses the book as a whole, which becomes a vehicle of expression. The last poem of the series, Fruit (Fruta, 1959), consists of a square page superimposed by five others that were cut diagonally. With the turn of the pages, the reader proceeds as if he were ‘opening the fruit, unveiling its core until finally arriving at the word fruit on the last page’. It is difficult to recognize this book as poetry, since its visual ambiguity crossed barriers, influencing poets and artists alike (Fig. 5).

Despite this crossbreeding, Gullar maintained that his Books-Poems belonged to the field of poetry. As we saw above, he also played with the sensorial characteristics of words and their meanings, producing those conflicts that characterize his earlier works. But the remarkable difference is that this series transformed the poem in visual and semantic terms. Whereas in Green Weed, the words are linked from within, in Fruit, these linkages now incorporate the ‘object’, since nothing could be
more organic than ‘to materialize this sensation of a fruit that opens up revealing its clear centre’. In due course, his experiments transformed the book in function and form. The function was altered because the reading becomes the unfolding of the book in time, according to the Neoconcrete Manifesto. Also, the form changed because ‘there is total integration among space, page and word. The Book-Poem has no cover, just core (miolo). It is an object in space’.

In this series, Gullar finally gave syntax a new function, proposing unexpected parameters to his research. Instead of a set of rules that regulates the words in the clause, it now involves the heterogeneous relationship of words and things, which entirely re-dimensions its previous scope. According to critic Alcides Villaça’s insightful comment on Gullar’s experimental poetry, ‘syntax is the relationship between being and things, besides the relationship between words’. Indeed, the word syntax comes from the Greek ‘syntassein’, i.e. the combination of ‘syn’ (together) and ‘tassein’ (to arrange), meaning the act of putting together or giving order to the things around us – a meaning that is akin to the poet’s attempt to unite words and objects on the same semantic level, despite opposed evidence provided by philosophers of his time.

In late 1959, Gullar visited Clark, becoming acquainted with her new experiment. The insight about the meaning of this work resonated with the Books-Poems, strongly suggesting the dismissal of specific categories. Corroborating their researches, other neoconcrete participants were also experimenting with expressive media. Indeed, their experiments were clearly interdisciplinary during this period: various poets and artists developed new versions of the books-poems, which were shown in an exhibition at the Jornal do Brasil headquarters; Reynaldo Jardim and Lygia Pape staged the Neoconcrete Ballet (Ballet Neoconcreto, 1958-9) twice, crossing visual arts, dance and music; Pape created visual poems, which were based on the use of engraving; Jardim proposed the Integral Theater (Teatro integral, 1960), mixing theater, architecture and poetry; at last, Hélio Oiticica took his paintings to three-dimensional space, as a way of giving color tangible qualities.

Based on the development of Neoconcretism, Gullar formulated his hypothesis about the end of traditional categories, and what was an intuition eventually became a certainty that was projected onto current and past experimentations, reorganizing his critical thinking. In the course of a short but passionate period of investigation, he wrote the Theory of the Non-object. Yet, the poet could not clarify his theoretical standpoint thoroughly, since he analyzed many interdisciplinary practices that were not grasped as such. Moreover, he began a new series of poems, suggesting that his research was also influenced by Clark’s work, changing its parameters. In the Dialogue on the Non-object, which was published three months later, Gullar finally focused on the problematic relationship between words and visual elements, developing new aspects of the concept, which established a unique form of experimentalism.

In between both articles, he created the Spatial Poems (Poemas Espaciais, 1959-60), developing the series in few months. Gullar dismissed the book as support of the poem, inserting words directly into objects. His article ‘Non-object: Poetry’, also published in SDJB, introduced the new research to the public. Because of the crucial role performed by visual elements, he was afraid that the layman would associate his experiments with traditional media. ‘Indeed, these verbal non-objects keep an essential difference as regards those plastic means of expression. Not only are the choice and organization of these elements made according to a verbal intention, but also the presence of the word gives them a sense and an expression that change the pure visual expression, which belongs to the so-called plastic arts’. Despite the use of color and visual elements, Gullar’s
Spatial Poems should be recognized as belonging to what was once poetry. This is difficult to conceive today, since his interdisciplinary approach still characterizes contemporary Brazilian art.

In general, the Spatial Poems feature the inscription of words into well-crafted wooden objects, requiring the participation of the reader. These words mostly consist of substantives (bird, ball, flora, day, night), as well as adverbs (no, where) and verbs (to remember), although less frequently. The objects are based on geometric figures (square, circle, cube, pyramid), are usually painted with inflected primary colors (plus black and white) and present internal configurations, revealing hinged structures, drawers, and overlapping parts. Finally, the participant lifts geometric elements, turns hinged sections and moves pieces repeatedly, in an effort to uncover and read what is written underneath. Gullar stopped connecting words to one another, to highlight their linkages with objects instead. As a result, ‘our interest is refocused on expression in its broad sense, and we are not concerned whether this expression might be included into the limits of determined category’.

The work entitled No (Não, 1960) is the exemplary no-object. It is a compact black structure displaying a subtle vertical line that runs from top to bottom. Gullar’s homage to Clark’s organic line is manifest, as the participant manipulates two hinged flaps, opening them. Beneath these flaps, he finds a black squared piece that is loosely inserted into the support (Figs. 6 and 7). After raising it, he reads the word ‘no’ inscribed on a red surface, which disappears as soon as the square returns to its original position (Fig. 8). For the poet, the acts of handling the structure (made after ‘a verbal intent’) and reading (which gives ‘a sense and an expression’ to the elements) create the non-object, which finally overcomes the mere objectual condition. Therefore, the pure expression of that word informed the reception of the Spatial Poem, which might be represented neither by the word nor the object, since this expression presents their organic connection in an abstract form that goes beyond recognition. In No, the poet materialized that autonomous and self-reflexive experience defined in his texts on the non-object.

This Spatial Poem points out the limits of his research though. As an adverb of negation, no modifies the verb or sentence by contradicting it, suggesting a nihilistic immobility that cancels participation. In the article ‘Non-object: Poetry’, however, Gullar still insists with the continuation of this investigation, declaring his intention to bury the non-object into the ground, as a way of constructing a poetic environment – this was his last neoconcrete experiment. In hindsight, it is possible to describe the transformation of his poetry since the mid-1950s: ‘from the use of the page as time, as duration, field for the irradiation of the word, which was created for it and through it, we got to the Book-Poem, where it was already defined the necessity to absorb the book as support, to integrate it into the verbal expression totally’ – and from the ensuing Spatial Poems, he lastly imagined a poetic ambience. Thus, Gullar worked in a crescendo: from the word to the page, then to the book, later to the object, and, finally, to the environment. This sequence reveals the content of the avant-garde projection of the non-object, which was based on an ever-expanding poetic expression that would eventually impregnate the real.

Gullar’s Buried Poem (Poema Enterrado, 1960) consisted of a two-and-half by two-and-half meters room, which was built underground. This was the first installation of Brazilian art, and he constructed it in Oiticica’s house, Rio de Janeiro. Unfortunately, it did not last long enough, since tropical rain floodings destroyed the work before the opening ceremony, disappointing enthusiast neoconcrete visitors. Supposedly, the participant went down a flight of stairs, crossed a small vestibule and opened the door of the poem, going inside (Fig. 9). At the centre of the room, which was lit by fluorescent lights, he found a fifty centimeter-side red cube. After lifting it, he
discovered a thirty-centimeter green cube and, under it, the last one, which was painted white, each side measuring ten centimeters. On its bottom, he finally read the word ‘rejuvenate’. Besides, the poet installed a mirror on the floor, right beneath the smaller piece (Figs. 10 and 11).

The idea of burying the poem may seem strange, unless it is considered his strategy. Probably, to compensate the fact that the ‘material object in his latest experiment was burned up (consumido) in expression’, Gullar grounded his installation into the earth solidly. Doing this, he also created the possibility that poetry would become one with reality. Eventually, however, the poet was inviting the participant to bring this work to life: after descending the stairs, the latter entered into the cubic room, which was organized in layers of sensorial and intellectual experiences. To become the author of Buried Poem, he was suggested to explore the three cubes, and the lifting of the smaller unexpectedly reflected his image on the floor mirror. But the reading of the word rejuvenate finally sparked that convergence between poet and reader, igniting that ever-expanding poetic expression that impregnated the installation – and beyond.

Gullar’s installation represented his most audacious attempt to accomplish the non-object. But it was also a turning point in his poetic investigation. In effect, the image reflected on the mirror triggered new conceptual problems, underlining the presence of the participant as an alterity. While still holding the smaller cube in the hand, he must have been assaulted by a doubt: ‘am I the author of this poem, or someone else?’ – and this sustained doubt kept interrupting the pure fruition of work. In the Books-Poems and Spatial Poems, the convergence between author and participant founded the phenomenological experience of the poem; in the Buried Poem, however, the latter’s consciousness now disturbed the gaze, suggesting a conceptual exteriority that rejected the non-object. At that particular moment, Gullar overcame Neoconcretism.

Endnotes


2 International critics have mentioned Neoconcretism as a forerunner of the practice of interdisciplinarity worldwide, even though Brazilian critics barely acknowledged this fact, since most of them still subscribe to formalism. See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Art since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 627.

3 The supplement was eventually taken over by Neoconcretism. Reynaldo Jardim worked as the general editor, and sculptor Amílcar de Castro created its constructivist layout, which revolutionized Brazilian press.


6 Gullar, ‘Manifesto Neoconcreto’, SDJB, 22 March 1959. The manifesto was written by Gullar and co-signed by the participants of the I Neoconcrete Exhibition, which took place at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro.

7 Gullar, ‘Lygia Clark’, SDJB, 15 March 1959. Olle Baertling (1911-81) was a Swedish painter who participated in the concrete movement, showing his works in the V São Paulo Biennial in 1959. In this article, all English translations are mine.


9 The organic line has simultaneously visual and spatial (or material) characteristics. Through this line, the artist put concrete theory of pure vision into question for the first time.


12 See Gullar, ‘Exposição Neoconcreta na Bahia’, SDJB, 31 October 1959. In this article, the poet also described Clark’s new experiment, suggesting that the neoconcrete meeting must have happened in October, and that he probably spent two months writing the Theory of the Non-object.


14 Gullar wanted to avoid the intellectualist and institutional readings of the work, which are associated with artistic categorization: whereas the former reading emphasizes the conceptual understanding of the object, the latter stresses its social functions – and both preclude a phenomenological reception. Gullar’s theory draws from phenomenology, since ‘the object is made determinate as an identifiable being only through a whole open series of possible experiences, and exists only for a subject who carries out this identification’.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 212. In this article, the notion of autonomy belongs to the field of art history, and does not bear any relationship with the philosophical background of the non-object.

15 The critic suggested other historical connections, specifically mentioning synthetic cubism – based on its use of real materials – as the origin of tachisme.

16 Projection means ‘a prediction or advance estimate based on known data or observations; extrapolation’. Victoria Neufeldt and David B. Guralnik, eds, Webster’s New World College Dictionary (New York: Webster’s New World, Inc, 1995), p. 1075.


18 Gullar, ‘Diálogo sobre o Não-objeto’, 26 March 1960. Gullar’s avant-garde projection explains his skepticism about traditional media: ‘[Question] In other words, in your opinion, painting and sculpture are finished… [Answer] Or perhaps they have never really existed. At least in modern times, all artists work at the very limits of their art, trying to surpass it. It is always an anti-art’.

19 Gullar, ‘Diálogo sobre o Não-objeto’.
Gullar’s use of the words fusion, synthesis and interpenetration bear metaphorical meanings. In his argument, the fusion or synthesis of the arts eventually keeps their conventional characteristics, whereas the interpenetration reduces these characteristics to the point of non-recognition.

According to the critic, ‘the search for a non-synthetic but organic expression has always been the purpose of the poets who, in June 1957, created an independent, non-orthodox trend within concrete poetry’. Gullar, ‘Não-objeto: Poesia’, SDJB, 27 February 1960.

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 236. The philosopher defined the word as a ‘cultural object’ on p. 235.


Gullar, ‘Diálogo sobre o Não-objeto’.

Gullar, Ibid.

Gullar, Ibid.


For Gullar, ‘in face of this insuperable conflict, we should not conclude that artistic activity lacks sense. We should rather learn that art might be explained as a critical-creative activity, as a constant elaboration of our sensible experiences’. Gullar, ‘O Lugar da Obra’, SDJB, 11 February 1961. The above-mentioned conflict points out that art has a ‘living signification’, even though its ‘historic shell’ (casca histórica) is deposited in the museum.

The Generation of 45 was more concerned with precision of language, emotional containment and poetic aesthetization than with formal innovation.

Victoria Neufeldt, Webster’s New World College Dictionary, p. 1359.

I adapted the art critical notion of deskilling to the field of poetry. Here, it means the persistent effort to eliminate poetic technique (rhyme, versification, etc.) and virtuosity.


In 1952, Paulista poets Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos e Décio Pignatari founded the Noigandres Group, which published a magazine, launching concrete poetry in Brazil.


Gullar, Verde Erva, Toda Poesia, p. 102.


Gullar, *Vermelho Ver, Toda Poesia*, p. 106-107. Gullar doubled the conflict, since the repetition and alliteration of words, which stress their sound qualities, contrast with the sense of vision.


Gullar, Ibid, p. 37. The word object has two referents, pointing out the book and the fruit (an apple). It is important to realize that the poet mixed his description of the reception of the poem with that of opening a fruit, as if there were a common ground between both experiences.

‘The page in Neoconcrete poetry is the spatialization of verbal time: it is pause, silence, time’.


Gullar probably developed the *Spatial Poems* from October 1959 to February 1960. He designed various objects, but built only four during the neoconcrete period.

Gullar, ‘Não-objeto: Poesia’.

Gullar, Ibid.

Gullar, Ibid.


Gullar, ‘Não-objeto: Poesia’.

Figure 1: neoconcrete artists socializing in the gardens of the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro, circa 1960. From left to right: Ferreira Gullar, Lygia Pape, Theon Spanúdis, Lygia Clark, Reynaldo Jardim and his son. Photography © Ferreira Gullar.
Figure 4: reading diagram. Ferreira Gullar, *Book Poem* untitled, 1959. Diagram © Cosac Naify Edições.
Figure 5: reading diagrams. Ferreira Gullar, *Book Poem Fruta*, 1959. Diagram ©
Casac Naify Edições.
Figure 8: Ferreira Gullar, *Spatial Poem Não*, 1960, multimedia object, dimensions unknown. Ferreira Gullar, Rio de Janeiro, Photograph © Vicente de Mello.
Figure 9: installation design. Ferreira Gullar, *Buried Poem*, 1960, multimedia installation, main room: 8-1/5 x 8-1/5 x 8-1/5 feet (2,5 x 2,5 x 2,5 meters).

Drawing © Cosac Naify Edições.