

The Radical Experience

Ferreira Gullar (2000)

Some aspects of modern sculpture may not yet have been properly explained by critics and one of them is the exchange of volume by a flat surface, of mass by level. I do not intend to discuss this matter, much less here, when I am writing only a brief appreciation of Amilcar de Castro's work. Nevertheless, it is precisely because I revisit the reflection on his works that this dilemma arises. The work of Amilcar, by its exemplarity, is at the very center of the discussion of modern sculpture. Let me explain. The neo concrete art movement, of which Amilcar was one of the protagonists, radicalized the questioning of contemporary art as no other movement had done until that time, in Brazil. And for that reason, it placed the essential issues which dealt with neo-plasticism, suprematism, constructivism and, in the 1950s, the School of Ulm. Meaning, what art to do after the rupture with nature? This rupture implied in the abandonment of the figure and consequently of all the pictorial and sculptural language of the past. As far as sculptures are concerned, Amilcar is the one who goes deeper in this quest. Until the beginning of the 20th century the matter of sculpture had been the volume, the mass. With Pevsner, Gabo, Max Bill, among others, the mass evaporates leaving in its place the empty space. Amilcar understands that it was up to the sculptor, then, to reinvent the sculpture from the flat surface, which is the opposite of the volume. In fact, other sculptors have dealt with this same issue, but the specific thing about the *Amilcarian* experience lies in the radicalism with which he has taken on the challenge: from the plane (from the flat surface) the new sculpture will be born without any pretense, without appeal to any feature strange to the nature of the flat surface itself. It's a new start again, from scratch. In the early fifties I followed up the search he carried out, his perplexities and

attempts before the defenseless surface that was his only legacy. Then one day he found the answer: he cut a rectangular plate in the middle and moved one part down and the other up. With that simple movement, the two-dimensional plate had become three-dimensional - volume! Thus begins the Amilcar de Castro sculpture. One cut and one gesture. The plate, invincibly quiet and motionless, finally cheers and speaks. A speech that refers to its own origin and returns incessantly to it, because, in fact, all the works that Amilcar produced, from that remote moment (1958? / 1959?) are variations of that first piece. The plate changes shape - square, circular, parallelogram -, changes in proportion, changes in thickness, but it is a consequence of the same expressive resource: cutting and folding. It is true that this procedure has been enriched over the years with new elements which, however, do not alter its nature, but rather accentuate it, such as the use of a thick, large-format plate which, being thick and large, values both the cutting and the folding. As it turns out, it is the surface that speaks according to its material qualities, if less or greater, if thicker or thinner. There was, however, a moment when Amilcar sought a new way of creating his sculpture. It was when he produced the series of works in which he used the cut, but not the fold, that is, he gave up on the creation of the virtual volume. At this stage, the plate is so thick that it can no longer be called a plate, but a block. They are iron plates, of small size and rectangular or square shape. The cut is significant by itself and not as a means to enable the fold: it is made to allow the penetration of the space in the compact block of iron or to allow the insertion of one block in another. It is an experience reminiscent of Lygia Clark's "organic line," but that is not a copy, but a rediscovery. Amilcar thus resumed the problem of sculpture as a mass, as if to settle old issues of the past. The current phase is a continuation of the language of cutting and folding, but now exploring new possibilities of this procedure. This happened

because the current works were made with a special type of steel that allows the use of thinner plates, which, in turn, allows for different ways of folding them.