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Book Review: Constructing an Avant Garde: Art in Brazil, 1949-1979 by S. Martins

Abstract

To anyone unfamiliar with the interventions made by avant-garde artists into the art world and occasionally wider society during the middle of the 20th century, this volume delivers a very readable account. The artists, the objects they made and the discussions they generated are selected here in relation to the particular practices and contexts emergent in Brazil following the chaos of World War II (during which the country remained neutral). In keeping with a historiographical approach—rather than an art historical account—the author introduces an initial group of Brazilian artists attracted to ideas concerned with the nature of the object in art and the abstraction of space and time in two and three dimensions.

Keywords

avant, garde, art, brazil, 1949, 1979, martins, book, constructing, review

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Constructing an Avant Garde: Art in Brazil, 1949-1979 by Sérgio B. Martins (review)

Mike Leggett

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the inventory of what is actually happening in our atmosphere and, as its immediate consequence, on water fluxes. Since its first edition was issued in 2006, the information gathered in the *Atlas* has constituted an insightful guide to analyze the problem of climate, an issue that is climbing higher up the global agenda. The here considered 2011 edition is separated into eight parts. After the introduction, the *Atlas* goes on to discuss the signs of the changing climate (parts I and II). It then catalogues climate change's driving agents (Part III) and the expected consequences (Part IV). Then the *Atlas* provides possibilities of personal and collective actions (Part V), along with the international policies (Part VI) adopted to respond and, possibly, find solutions (Part VII) to the global challenge of climate. The authors also illustrate the latest developments in research to mitigate and adapt to changes under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The *Atlas* resumes general evidences and information resources in its last part (Part VIII) in the shape of tables offering easy-to-understand details on such data as total population, per capita income, human development index, greenhouse gas emissions and percentage of population at risk from sea-level rise on a country-by-country basis.

In addition to addressing the reduction of pollutant emissions and the need for adequate funding for climate change studies, inviting local and regional authorities to develop policies, and advocating the use of renewable energy sources, the *Atlas* also advocates conformist solutions to the issue, such as trading in carbon credits to share the burden of reducing emissions globally. But sections on health impacts, as well as those on agriculture and water security, are rather instructive and worrisome. The expectation in a warming world is an increased frequency of heat waves and greater moisture in the atmosphere leading to extreme precipitation events that

are both intense and frequent. Flooding is expected to be the greatest threat for the immediate future, but a large number of “unsettled themes” that apply to the consequences the wet weather will have on communities remain. These consequences are not straightforwardly quantifiable in terms of vulnerable populations, or health and economic impacts. Addressing these unsettled themes calls for increasing the capacity of nations to cope with climatic hazards, raising public awareness and building a more resilient and healthy infrastructure. In this way, this booklet can be a great resource for climatologists, researchers, post-graduate and undergraduate students, and for anyone interested about the issue. The *Atlas* provides the technical data and also interprets them in a broader perspective, explaining the scientific terminology and inviting thoughts and actions to mitigate the complex effects of the path of climate change, whose final destination is so far unforeseeable.

Reference

- 1 See, for example: Bill McKibben, “Too Hot Not to Notice? A Planet Connected by Wild Weather,” posted on the Tom Dispatch blog, 3 May 2012: <www.tomdispatch.com/post/175537/tomgram%3A_bill_mckibben_the_most_important_story_of_our_lives/>.

CONSTRUCTING AN AVANT GARDE: ART IN BRAZIL, 1949–1979

by Sérgio B. Martins. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2013. 232 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-2620-1926-2.

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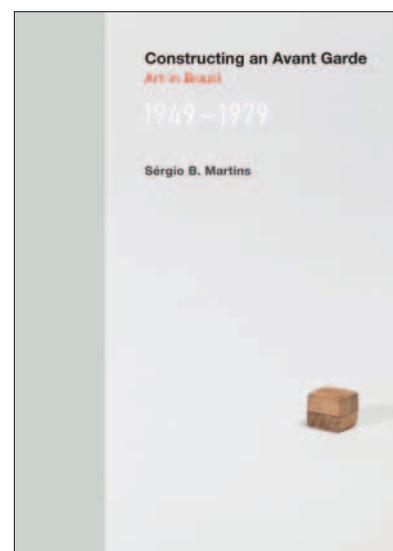
doi:10.1162/LEON_r_00942

To anyone unfamiliar with the interventions made by avant-garde artists into the art world and occasionally wider society during the middle of the 20th century, this volume delivers a very readable account. The artists, the objects they made and the dis-

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The mathematics, proportion and design with which an earlier group of artists were concerned was tempered later by philosophies generated by artists such as Duchamp and Mondrian, Brazilian writers such as Duarte, and the poets Ferreira Gullar and Augusto de Campos. From these convergences the author sets out to “construct a viewpoint that will enable a more productive appreciation of the highly original set of artistic concerns.”

This approach can be characterized through the title of a manifesto of the time: “From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematics of Composition.” The *concrete* tradition in Brazilian visual art and poetry, a dynamic version of the more formal European constructivist movements, culminated in *Tropicalia*, a major show in 1956 at the Museum of



Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition and associated events not only mapped differences between artists in São Paulo and Rio but also precipitated delineations between “constructivity” in art and architecture, and social activism movements that were responding to increasingly oppressive government.

This was a time when the world knew of Brazil through the dramatic shapes—a development of the abstraction traditions—being built in the Amazonian jungles and becoming the national capital Brasília. In São Paulo, the second city, a Biennale was instituted to bring the world to the party designed to celebrate Brazil’s new maturity. Gullar would condemn the direction the arts were taking and identify, instead, with the Popular Center of Culture (CPC) by engaging more positively with left-wing symbolic activism on the one hand and through the support of a group of younger artists developing the rhetorical strategies of conceptualism on the other. In part this response was brought on by the difficulties of living beneath the generals’ military coup of the mid-1960s. Chapter 4 vividly describes this “brand” of conceptualism being used as a political tool.

The final chapter completes the “snapshot” of this period of Brazil’s avant-garde with a discussion of a “humiliminimalist” work entitled *Southern Cross*, a cubic centimeter of spliced pine and oak, displayed in an extremely large space. The metaphor refers to “the encounter between Jesuit missionaries and Tupi natives”; “the fire created by rubbing the two timbers,” and a “form of evocation of the divinity” of the native peoples corrupted by the colonizers. As is the case with much of the contemporary art today, meanings are not hidden, but individual research is required to extract intention from amongst material presence and the immaterial.

A cited champion of contemporary Brazilian art for many years from outside the country is Guy Brett, a curator and writer based in London, which is where the thesis on which the book is based was supervised. The

author has restricted the discussion to a dozen or so main artists, thus enabling a new reader to the field to follow the arguments deployed. The book is not a narrative of development but a description of ideas and spatiality. The illustrations and design are excellent. There is no bibliography, but it does include copious and carefully edited footnotes from which sources in several languages can be traced.

THE SIXTH EXTINCTION

by Elizabeth Kolbert. Henry Holt and Co., New York, NY, U.S.A., 2014. 336 pp. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-8050-9299-8.

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By the end of this century somewhere between 20 and 50 percent of all species alive today will be gone. Nothing like this has happened since the dinosaurs disappeared some 66 million years ago. Many writers and scientists have raised warnings—Peter Matthiessen in *Wildlife in America*, E.O. Wilson in *The Future of Life* and Paul Shepard in *Nature and Madness* are notable examples—but the story needs to be retold because losses continue and above all because this time the asteroid is us.

In *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Kolbert lays out the evidence. Kolbert, who is a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, where she has done exemplary reporting on climate change, marshals facts from a multitude of sources and disciplines. She avoids generalities and abstractions and focuses, instead, on visits to bat caves, underwater CO₂ vents, and other places where forces driving mass extinction can be easily observed. This part of the book is masterful and so well written that it is something of a page-turner, in spite of the extraordinarily grim subject matter. Her description of the apocalypse that overwhelmed the dinosaurs is nothing less than spectacular—the best I have ever read of that fantastical event. At the same time she maintains a certain emotional distance. Up to

a point, this is reassuring. No need to freak out; her presentation seems to say we’re over here, and the event under examination is still somewhere over there.

This stance works for a while, but I doubt that anyone can consider mass extinction for long without emotion—denial and numbness included. Also questions intrude, urgent ones, such as: What am I to do? What is anyone to do? Is it too late? Scientists are not obliged to address questions like these, but popularizers can be. Kolbert avoids the questions and yet they become more and more pressing as the book proceeds, especially after she notes that some scientists think that we may be facing our own extinction. Most of us are adept at distancing ourselves from the extinction of other species, but our own is another matter.

With these concerns hovering over the narrative, Kolbert examines a few efforts to save endangered species. Among the projects are an attempt to artificially impregnate a Sumatran rhinoceros and the establishment of the Frozen Zoo, a cryogenics facility where samples of an extinct Hawaiian bird are stored in liquid nitrogen in the hope that someday the bird can be reconstituted. Kolbert’s descriptions are amusing and respectful, but at the same time she makes it clear that the projects are likely to fail. Even project leaders acknowledge that what they are doing is probably too little, too late.

Then why continue? Kolbert does not explore this question. The reader is left to wonder if participants persevere out of professional inertia. Are they like soldiers in *The Iliad*, battling under the sway of malignant and capricious gods? Could the scientists be bearing witness? Is *The Sixth Extinction* an act of witness? Is that our best option, too—to bear witness?

Despair is understandable. Anyone who thinks seriously about what is happening is almost certain to experience it. *The Sixth Extinction* is not a study of the psychology of extinction awareness and not a how-to book about saving the biosphere.