In the Name of Geography

The Conceptual Maps of Anna Bella Geiger from O Novo Atlas

Lindsey Herkommer

12/1/2009
The marbled black and white cover of this humble artist book, titled *O Novo Atlas* [The New Atlas] (1977), evokes nostalgia for classroom-lessons learned in youth (Fig. 1). Though, instead of the traditional vertical journal format beckoning to be filled with notes, doodles, and homework assignments, *O Novo Atlas* sits horizontally and presents new lessons for the reader to learn. The black, plastic comb binding signals the inexpensive quality of the book while simultaneously reinforcing the economic ease of its reproduction. The white, horizontal rectangle situated slightly higher than center is an integrated label space - a generic receptacle awaiting an identifier (Fig. 2). Within the clean edges and rounded corners of this label space, the title has been printed in, again, a humanly off-center position. Ample space remains on all sides of the Helvetica 18 point font; it is a modest announcement in a space that is already modest to begin with. By using this high Modernist font frequently seen in advertisements, titles, logos, and labels, *O Novo Atlas* boasts visual elements so mundane to our eyes that the overstated banality either peaks our curiosity or passes unnoticed. Yet, as the title suggests, geographic paradigms have shifted and it is time for a re-learning of our world. For Brazilian artist Anna Bella Geiger, responsible for the creation of this book and the lessons within, this is most certainly the case.

Living and working during the 1970’s in Rio de Janeiro, she and her fellow artist produced work during a difficult time for freedom – intellectually and politically. The country of Brazil suffered under a military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. 

1 During this time, the government “not only abolished the rights and privileges of democracy but also

institutionalized torture, repression, and censorship”\(^2\). In 1974, Brazil’s fourth military
president, General Ernesto Giesel, was put into power.\(^3\) Though his administration marked the
end of, what is historically know as the ‘anos do chumbo’ [Heavy Years], Giesel was still a highly
authoritarian dictator that continued to rule under Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5). Though it was
put into action on December 13, 1968 with no expiration in sight, AI-5 was ultimately revoked
exactly ten years later to the date\(^4\). This act indefinitely recessed Congress giving the once
president, now dictator, the power to suspend the political rights of any citizen, cancel mandates,
fire or forcible retire any elected or appointed public officials, permanently suspended *habeas*
corpus, and delegated censorship of all media to the military courts.\(^5\) After AI-5 was put into
effect, the executive and military control over the government grew exponentially with public
officials, journalists from the news media, and university professors being ousted from their
positions.\(^6\)

Along with these purges, the government launched what it considered a positive measure,
a new curricular device for promoting patriotism. In early 1969 a decree-law established
a compulsory curriculum in *Educação moral e Cívica* (Moral and Civic Education). Henceforth,
every student would have to take, every year, a course – with approved instructor and approved course material . . . The plan had been developed by a working
group at the *Escola Superior de Guerra* as their answer to the need to reshape the
mentality of the upcoming generations.\(^7\)

The dangerous combination of government created/ government endorsed education system
offers a pointed impetus to the aesthetic decisions and academic tenor of Geiger’s artist books.

---

\(^2\) Beverly Adams, "The Subject of Torture: The Art of Camnitzer, Nuñez, Parra, and Romero " (University of Texas at Austin, 1992), 21-38.


\(^4\) Ibid., 212.


\(^7\) Ibid., 83.
The curiously plain *O Novo Atlas* belongs to a series of eight artist books Geiger produced between 1975 and 1977. Each book was made with the same schoolhouse black and white marbled cover, comb binding, and white label space incorporate in the cover design to hold the title. Every book in the series contains a small compilation of images, majority are reproduced on a Xerox machine. In *O Novo Atlas*, there are eight photocopied pages, including a title page, with one image per leaf. Xerox photocopying, which entered Brazil during the 1970’s, offered artists a new method of image reproduction that was fast, inexpensive, and held new aesthetic and conceptual possibilities.8

As a medium, the new technology provided innovative methods of disseminating information to a wider, and perhaps, more discrete audience. Formally, the photocopied image is reproduced as a black and white copy offering a capacity for alterations in tone and contrast. The manipulation of images is a process of layering and masking creating any possibility of visual combinations, “abrupt juxtapositions, ruptures, and sutures while . . . stress[ing] iconographic and pictorial possibilities”.9 For Brazilian artists and intellectuals, the Xeroxed page carried a democratizing power by placing information in directly the hands of the people. The low cost and quick reproducibility of the photocopy generated new paths of circulation for art and information as well as an experimental and viable medium for the traditional art circuit. Geiger utilizes the connotations of democracy in the medium of the Xerox and amplifies it in her artist books that carry her classroom lessons to the reader.

The series of books undertakes two main themes: first, the visual critique of contemporary politics and, the second, an analysis of the artistic circuit and networks of power. Though these themes are distinguishable from one another, they do offer considerable overlap and should not be read as mutually exclusive. As we will see, _O Novo Atlas_ belongs more to the taxonomy of the second than the first. This work, and the two year series on the whole, participates in, what has been defined by Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz as, “ideological conceptualism.” _Ideological conceptualism_ is conceptual art that is distinctly political in nature. Marchán Fiz’s model recognizes Latin American conceptualism’s external referencing signifieds – generally addressing social and /or political issues – thus, it resists postures such as Joseph Kosuth’s ‘art-as-idea-as-idea’ and the tautological, self-reflexive object. Instead Marchán Fiz proposes a “hybrid version of Conceptualism” that allows for a possible exit from the self-referential feedback loop.

In the essay _Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America_, Latin American art historian Mari Carmen Ramírez takes Marchán Fiz’s concept, of which he originally based only on Argentina and Spain, and expands it to the rest of Latin America – specifically those countries under dictatorships. Ramírez posits that,

The appeal Conceptual art held for these artists rested on two factors: first, its equation of art with knowledge that transcends the aesthetic realm, which enabled them to explore problems and issues linked to concrete social and political situations; second, its critique of the traditional institutions and agents of art, which opened the way for an

---

10 Jaremtchuk, Anna Bella Geiger: Passagens Conceituais, 9
elaboration of a form of art suited to the political and economic precariousness of Latin America.  

For Luis Camnitzer, award-winning artist, critic, and author of *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, the purposeful message theoretically embedded in the art object that escapes the primacy of formalism and process-oriented tautology is a signature component of Latin American conceptualism. Camnitzer submits that “[t]he merger of politics and art not only gave identity and purpose to the role of art in society but also served as a strategy to effect change. It is primarily on this level where didactics entered conceptualist art in Latin America”.  

This entrance of “didactics” has, as he argues, subsequently relegated the conceptual art of Latin America to the periphery of the international stage. The word itself evoked notions of authoritarian propaganda and totalitarianism. When used, the effect was practically tantamount to Greenberg’s “kitsch”; with a single utterance from the right individual, backs are instantly turned with noses high in the air. “This snobbery, however, hides the fact that didactic qualities are unavoidable when one deals with any form of purposeful communication”.  

In this paper, I will demonstrate that *O Novo Atlas* is a politically engaged work that fits snugly in the vein of ideological conceptualism and grapples with the issues of marginalization on the international stage. Using image, text, and text as image, Geiger’s is a conceptual work that seeks out “networks of power” in an attempt to put a chink in the armor of authoritarian

---

13 Ibid., 553.  
15 Ibid.
solidarity. An analysis of selected images will utilize Michel Foucault’s *Panopticon* and Michel de Certeau’s chapter “Walking the City” from *The Practices of Everyday Life*. These theoretic writings will aid in the investigation of power dynamics, surveillance, and the authoritarian “view-from-above”. A discussion of Concrete poetry issues will conclude the paper and will bring to light important aspects of the artist book as medium and a favorable venue for poetic texts – as posited by Brazilian concrete poet, Wlademir Dias-Pino, with his culminating notion of the “book-object”. The poetic construction of *O Novo Atlas* reinforces Geiger’s political and conceptual tenacity which betrays her book’s hyper-understated pedagogical aesthetics. Yet, as Luis Camnitzer asserts: “The political implications of conceptualism were even more pointed in so far as conceptualism in Latin America intended to educate the public. With this in mind, one can insert conceptualism into the long tradition of revolt that higher education has produced in the twentieth century”.¹⁶

In the first image of *O Novo Atlas*, a world map is covered with text that reads *correntes culturais* dependentes/*correntes culturais* dominentes (dependent cultural currents/ dominant cultural currents) (Fig. 3). These words blanket the ocean waters creating a visual pun with the word “currents”. The vertical stacking of the words crates columns that are formatted to the edges of the ovular map. The typewriter font, which dedicates equal space on all sides of the letter¹⁷, increases the structural austerity of the high contrast image. Each word aligns with its exact copy so that “correntes” makes a single column, “culturais” another, and “dominentes”, and “dependents” alternate one after the other. A negative space resides between each column in the flow from North to South poles. These negative spaces are the only vertical linear

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.
component of the map that resembles cartographic longitude lines, even if they ricochet between continents. The distorted allusion to longitudinal lines references a significant moment of Colonial history for Brazil and the non-Christian world.

In 1494, Spain and Portugal signed the Treaty of Tordesillas which divided South America from North to South despite the fact that the treaty drew borders on land that no European had touched.\(^{18}\) “The line drawn at Tordesillias . . . proved to have, in point of fact, little importance. The Portuguese violated it in Brazil and . . . and no one could calculate longitude accurately yet, anyway”.\(^{19}\) In this light, the presence of distorted longitudinal lines of negative space indicates that the cartographic lines are but thoughts projected onto the world. Formally, Geiger has maintained the continents' topographic integrity free of political borders and cartographic lines that dissect the land. This interruption of the cartographic lines by the material weight of the landmasses distinguishes the political and conceptual from the concrete.

However, this is not to argue that the distinguishable lacuna which exists between the conceptual and concrete prevents interactions between the two. Geiger, in the same gesture which makes this discrepancy evident, simultaneously closes the gap. By masking, physically layering with the paper the terrain on top of the metaphysical concepts (text, lines) in order to make the Xerox, the two entities face each other at point-blank range. A similar proximity occurs in the horizontal disruption of negative space that exists in the text bisecting the map into artificial Northern and Southern hemispheres. The artificiality of this divide is heightened

---


\(^{19}\) Ibid.
by visible lines of the cartographically correct Tropic of Cancer, Equator, and Tropic of Capricorn.

These navigational lines artificially divided the planet. This double semiotic layering of artificiality in the Northern hemisphere and Southern hemisphere conceptually illustrates a long-standing issue of geographical double-standards for Latin America residing within the Western hemisphere, but marginalized by the Western powers. “Latin America” (understood as referencing Central America, South America, and the Caribbean) geographically resides in the Western hemisphere, and, yet, not considered part of the “West” (understood as referencing the United States and Western Europe, even though the continent of Europe is in the Eastern hemisphere). The Colonial carry-over of these macro-scale labels causes a misalignment between international identifiers and the geographic locations.

This North-South struggle has deep roots in Latin American Modernism, exemplified by Joaquín Torres-García’s America Invertada [Inverted America] from 1943 (Fig. 4). His inverted map proposes a way to cope with the Latin American international exclusion from the Western avant-garde. His inversion “reverses the cultural polarity of ‘South’ and ‘North’ that has persistently subordinated Latin America to Europe and North America”. In America invertada, instead of looking North, to the “Western” states, Torres-Garcia’s map promotes a self-reflexive gaze to find South American artistic identity at home and not abroad. Though this is not specifically the message of Geiger’s map, she calls attention to the position of the Latin American artist by highlighting the artificial divide and marginalization by Western powers.

---

20 Ramírez, "Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America."
Geiger allows the reader to take in the entire world and examine the international relationships. Latin American art historian Jacqueline Barnitz states in her essay *Conceptual Art in Latin America: A Natural Alliance*: “Geography, in the sense of vulnerability to border transgressions or awareness of one’s relative position in the Southern Hemisphere, has played an important role in the work of . . . the printmaker Anna Bella Geiger. [She] has used map art to reformulate the relative position of Brazil in the Western Hemisphere”. Geiger actively culls this Modernist tension to the forefront of this initial image and sets up this over arching theme within *O Novo Atlas*.

This world maps created by Geiger is not based on older maps, but come from the newest technological mapping feats of NASA. She went to the U.S. Consulate’s Press Department and selected “the photos considered not perfect for publication, whose transmission of the image did not have an absolute clearness”. From these images, she created a number of metal etchings between 1972 and 1973. From a 2004 interview, Geiger discloses, "I considered the open land, the emptiness of the earth, space as the only basis, support for art. All as a kind of metaphor of space, propitiating proposals of a more archetypal, symbolic character". Her *tabla rasa* approach to the Earth as "open" and "empty" is an aesthetically possibility through NASA’s ultimate view-from-above where even the largest cities are visually subsumed into the land (Fig. 5 and 6).

23 Ibid.
The dissemination of these new Earth images marks an historic moment as the perception of the Earth shifted from globe to planet. In this fecund moment of shifting relations to the Earth (perhaps a partial impetus for the creation O Novo Atlas), Geiger takes advantage of the theoretic implications of this global out-of-body experience. As a conceptual work, this newly obtained perspective of the Earth has vast implications for issues of identity and power. Having been purchased from a first-world government institution, these images carry authoritarian connotations even when incorporated with Geiger's artistic techniques. The scope of these images produces slippages in tiers of identity from the individual to global population. The global image addresses all humans (and life) on Earth with no visible trace of human life present. This entire scope is signified through the landmass as the individual viewer gazes down upon the page. This incredible scope in tandem with implications of power via satellite imaging is similar to Foucault’s Panopticon - the constant surveillance from an unseen, but constantly watching surveyor. Indeed, this unseen, menacing environment of surveillance was a reality for the Brazilian artists living under the military regime.

This climate, all too familiar to the producers of intellectual and artistic works, is present in Foucault’s discussion of J. Bethham’s architectural marvel the Panopticon. From the central observation tower, the person of authority (supervisor) invisibly observes the always-visible subject who has been restricted to an individualized space. Regardless the character of the subject, for it is ultimately irrelevant, the relentless visibility is a device of control psychologically inflicted more so than physically administer by the supervisor. This discrete

24 Barnitz, "Conceptual Art in Latin America: A Natural Alliance," 36.
psychological control is the key to the *Panopticon’s* success as a method of authoritarian domination of a population.

Each individual, in his place is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; . . . he is seen, but he does not see; *he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.* The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the division of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. *And this invisibility is a guarantee of order.* If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at a collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen, there is no risk of committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if there are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions . . . Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the *automatic* functioning of power [my emphasis].

Foucault's airtight theory of control is contingent upon the invisibility of the authoritarian supervisor, yet the subjects are aware that they are being watched - hence the impetus to "behave" under the eye of the superiors. Foucault's presents the supervisors as a singular entity of authority - an authority gained though unexplained means, be it medical school or government appointed educator - and the subjects are placed in the Panopticon by way of some other systematic power structure (justice system, education system, medical system) negating any semblances of volition. All agency is weight in favor of those in power.

This closed circuit of control presents methods employed by the Brazilian military regime; invisible surveillance, aggressive censorship, and maintenance of a pervasive and menacing presence. Yet, Foucault’s model does not account for the agency of the subject. His linear cause-effect model does not hold up in practical terms. The notion of being watched indeed triggers mental distress and will cause the subjects, *on the whole*, to act accordingly in

---

26 Ibid., 361.
order to avoid trouble with the powers that be. However, as the Conceptual art of Latin America and Geiger’s *O Novo Atlas* demonstrate, subjects will simply begin to code their behavior in order to be *perceived* as behaving properly. Their intentionally coded actions are subversive and critical towards the collective entity of supervision and undermine its authority while remaining in plain sight.

In *The Practice of Every Day Life*, Michel de Certeau presents a model that elucidates this aspect left unattended to by Foucault. Though Certeau can be read as an inversion of Foucault’s panoptics, I posit that Geiger’s work embodies both concurrently. Certeau’s view of authority is conducted from on top of the World Trade Center, yet anyone may occupy this privileged position. Certeau states:

> When one goes up there [summit of the World Trade Center], he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. . . His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a view point and nothing more.\(^{27}\)

As Certeau’s asserts, the view from above is voyeuristic and god-like in nature, but is also unaware in certain respects. He contends that knowledge from this position holds a relation with lust, thus creating the "fiction of knowledge". In essence, he is describing an authoritarian arrogance of knowledge exemplified by Foucault’s watch-and-people-behave scenario. Certeau accounts for a level of ignorance in the view from above. The gain in altitude does not equate

to a total increase of knowledge. The shift in perspective privileges certain information while placing other information further out of range. Sets of knowledge shift from each point of view (street level vs. roof level) which inherently carries new blind spots. “Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible”\textsuperscript{28}. Within the surface of the "everyday", Certeau recognizes a space that escapes the panoptic view.

In the second image of the book of \textit{O Novo Atlas} (Fig. 7), the continents are placed against the text. Geiger’s maps are concerned with the surface appearance of the Earth while the text is interested in “escaping the totalizations” fabricated by the view from above. On this page, the black and white marbling from the cover encroaches upon the map. Surrounding the ovular form, this instructive pattern pervades into the image, masking the continents. The topographic representation of the land is merely echoed in the crackling black and white pattern. The longitudinal lines are lost, but a stronger horizontal break in the text reinforcing the artificial North-South divide. It is as if a pedagogical “blind-spot” has been placed upon the map, clearing the ground for the new lessons.

A new text marches horizontally across the waters, only interrupted by the landmasses of the Earth and the contour edges of the oval map. Hand-typed by a typewriter on the page (just as the previous images), Geiger selected texts by Caio Prado, Carlos Zílio, Paulo Herkenhoff, and herself from a 1977 seminar called \textit{O Espacio Social da Arte} [Social Space of Art] and \textit{A Querela Do Brasila} [The Quarrel of Brazil] from January issue of \textit{Malasartes} [Bad

\textsuperscript{28} de Certeau, Michel.\textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, 93.
Arts] magazine. The passage, written in Portuguese, signals Geiger’s decision to tailor the issue to a local, Brazilian audience. Artists who care to address or be included in the international art market tend to incorporate English as the language of choice. The preference to keep the text of the entire book in Portuguese raises "the issue of priorities in regard to local versus external audiences".

A dialectic is created between the decidedly local text and the global image. Or, in Certeau’s vision, Geiger is bringing to the surface the “strangeness” of the everyday, i.e. the local issues of the Brazilian artist, in tandem with the totalizing view of the “voyeur-god” eye. These oppositional forces of local and global should, perhaps, not be seen as fracturing the image (aesthetically or conceptually), but serve as a completion of one another, creating a balanced whole, generating more harmony than rupture. This notion of merging local/global, text/image, and land/water is confirmed by the following image.

On the next page (Fig. 8), the marbled masking has been removed, revealing the missing fragments of text. The statements now run cohesively across the land and the sea regarding only the ovular boarders as truncating boundaries. This is a two page image (Fig. 9). A sheet of transparent paper holding the text on the water and the ovular boarders rests on top of the page of continents. The landmasses stand alone on the page and are solely constructed by

---

29 At the end of the text, Geiger includes a bibliography citing these two sources. See Figure 7.
31 Ibid.
words and fragments of text. In this composite image, the continents remain visible as contour line that holds the outlining shape of the land separate from the water (Fig. 10).

The text, same as the previous page, retains the horizontal divided that now cuts across the land (in the previous images, the land interrupted structure of the text). Geiger constructed continents out of words and letters within their geographical shape, thus they retain the artificially constructed North-South divide. The text, on the whole, \(^{33}\) does not continuously wrap around form one sentence to the next. Each line is a fragment of a statement which, when reading continuously, creates the syntax of poetry. The first ten lines read:

To speak of
social text and . . . historical
in which any . . . work of art or
tradition evolves
differentiate between . . . economy and politics
prevailed . . . place is the tradition
or the intellectuals that develop themselves; institutions structure
to assume authority over individuals and their activities in private
any subjective meaning that they can connect to their situation and . . . ; legitim . . .
ideological society and legitimate institutional order explaining from above

These fragments, selected for their content, provide the most biting critiques and demonstrate the mutually supportive nature between text and image. Addressed within these first ten lines are the issues of economy, politics, and the authoritarian view from above. Though the “ideological society” and “legitimate institutional order” seems to be directly speaking to the military regime, the target of critique is also the Western powers. “Modern cartography is

\(^{33}\) In my translation of the entire text, I have found that some statements continue from one line to the next via a single, fragmented word. That is, the first half of a word will end one line and the other half of the word will begin the following line. Though the text can be read continuously with moments of thematic and syntactic cohesion, only these particular lines offer concrete evidence of “wrap-around” text and are mostly found in the “Southern” body of text running 2-3 lines at most.
inseparable from the need of the European Enlightenment to find and describe new lands for conquest and trade. While apparently neutral in their scientific description, maps are also tools for control and dominance: the birds-eye view creating a vision of power, detachment, and also surveillance".  

Moreover, the military regime and the Western powers, specifically the United States, were not necessarily viewed by Brazilian citizens as two completely separate ideological entities.

In 1964, the year of that kicked-off the military coup, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson put Operation Brother Sam into action after a CIA briefing that warned of the imminent military revolt. When advised that, ‘The revolution will not be decided rapidly and will be bloody,’ President Johnson placed support behind the coup in order to have Brazilian President Goulart over-thrown because of his ‘anti-Yankee banner’ under which he rallied support. Just hours after the coup was initiated, “a fleet lead by the aircraft Forrestal, transporting more than 100 tons of arms and ammunition and including four tankers with half a million barrels of fuel” was poised for action if the military takeover failed.  

Ultimately, the arms were not needed as the coup was successful and Operation Brother Sam was de-activated.

Though the U.S. government did not take action in the end, there is a complex layering behind the signifier of the authoritarian figure, accurately blurring precisely which “legitimate institutional order” is being addressed in Geiger’s text. This, in turn, reveals the conceptual framework is not substantive, but relational in nature. In the way that correntes culturais depedentes/correntes culturais dominentes (dependent cultural currents/ dominant cultural

---

35 Bethell, ed. Brazil since 1930, 162.
currents) (Fig. 2) is a mapping of relational space in between countries, Geiger’s subsequent pages continue to investigate the relationships between image/text, global/local, land/water, Foucault’s observer/subject, Certeau’s above/below, and, in the semiotic terms of Ferdinand de Saussure langue and parole.

As Terence Hawkes, from his book *Structuralism and Semiotics*, explains in terms of Saussure’s own correlation:

>[T]he distinction [is] between the abstract set of rules and conventions called ‘chess’, and the actual concrete games of chess played by people in the real world. The rules of chess can be said to exist *above and beyond* each individual game, and yet they only ever acquire concrete form *in the relationships* that develop between the pieces in individual games. *So with language*. The nature of the *langue* lies beyond, and determines, the nature of each manifestation of *parole*, yet it has no concrete existence of its own, except in the piecemeal manifestations that speech affords [my emphasis].

This passage captures the Foucauldian authority within the rules of the chess existing above each game while noting the inherent disadvantage of *langue* to exist independently - an observation similar to Certeau’s “fiction of knowledge” from the position of the “solar Eye”.

Saussure’s study of language builds upon this relational model, viewing the *langue* and *parole* as components of a cohesive whole.

Geiger’s two-page map physically and aesthetically separates the image into two layers, and, in a Saussurean manner, forms a mutually dependent and relational composite image. The transparent page outlines the present absence of the landmasses. This haunting, ghostly absence arrests the relational model and displays the *langue*’s ineffectual nature without the *parole*. The large mass of water and text (*langue*) without the continents (*parole*) reads with

---

the same poetic piecemeal fragments as before. If the *parole* is to be understood as the upper portion of an iceberg that floats above the water supported by the larger mass beneath it, the *langue*, the second page reflects the absence of a structural support leaving the text isolated without its counterpart. These word-built continents stand alone, visually floating on the page without the framework of the *langue*.

Upon the investigation of the page of continents (Fig. 11), it becomes clear that the chosen statements were selected for their visual placement as well. On the continents are key words that can be read as synecdoches for national and international identities. Most prominent is the phrase across North America that reads “O mundo da arte [the art world]” (Fig. 12). Key words running across South America, such as “Brasilidade [Brazilian-ness]”, “a frente [forward]”, and the fragmented phrase “evolução da arte [evolution of art]”, reference buzz words of the military regime while addressing the concerns of the Brazilian art circuit (Fig. 13).

This page is a paradigm of the artist book as a poetic text. The influence of Brazilian concrete poetry on the conceptual feats of *O Novo Atlas* is most evident here. These words and phrases as linguistic signs can be understood “in terms of the relationship . . . between its dual aspects of ‘concept’ and of ‘sound-image’ — or to use the terms which Saussure’s work has made famous — *signified (signifié) and signifier (significant)*”. Saussure provided a foundational model for “reading” visual art. In regard to the Brazilian conceptual arts, the use

---

37 Ibid., 10.
of the written word occupied a substantial presence as consequence of Saussurean theory and the theoretic writings of Concrete poets.

In the “Pilot-Plan for Concrete Poetry”, a manifesto of Concrete poetry writing by Brazilian poets Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatai, and Haroldo de Campos in 1958, the authors state that a

Concrete poem communicates its own structure: structure-content. . . . With the concrete poem occurs the phenomenon of metacommunication: coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication; only – it must be noted – it deals with a communication of forms of a structure-content, not with the usual message of communication.  

Geiger’s word continents constructed can be precisely understood in these terms; both the content and the visual structure as complex signifiers for larger issues in the vein of ideological conceptualism. Further, this manifesto outlines the ‘verbovocovisual’ totality of the visual-plastic structure, verbal tradition, and the importance of phonetics within concrete poetics.

In the verbovocovisual model, the images of O Novo Altas utilize a semantic component as an avenue for word play in a verbal and visual format (e.i. the use of correntes [currents] on the ocean waters). The height of the visuality is embodied by the continents of the two-page image. In the fourth and final image that utilizes this world map, Geiger has fully merged the image with text and land with water (Fig. 14). This is the image that most easily lends itself to the phonetic element of this conceptual structure as it is the most “readable”. “Concrete poets have engaged with books as a conceptual space, one which by its form and finitude, its

---

structural specificity and visual restraints, has offered a unique means of realizing particular works.”

For Brazilian poet Wladimir Dias-Pino, concrete poetry was to be something functional - an ‘object of daily use’. He theorized an ethical and political potential for concrete poetry by ridding the form of traditional content, syntax, and historical literary traditions. He stated, ‘concrete poetry has as its goal the liquidation of discursive literature, this tremendous force that the capitalist bourgeoisie used to liquidate feudalism . . . Today, the great cinematic contents, the plots of tragedies – psychological filth – and even purely individual cases of love have become weapons for the bourgeoisie to confuse the spirit of the masses.’ This is the dilemma posited by Dias-Pino in his endeavor to utilize the concrete poetry and artistic production towards political and social ends. The paradigm *means* of such a goal is the book-object. The notion of the book-object is a culmination of Dias-Pino’s theoretic and moral intentions and, by far, his most long-lived contributions in which “space functionalized a physical reference by the substitution of visual signs for the word.”

The artist book offers itself as a medium for such poetics. Art Historian Johanna Drucker asserts that, “ultimately an artist’s book has to have some conviction, some soul, some reason to be and to be a book in order to succeed [original emphasis].” Anna Bella Geiger’s *O Novo Atlas* upholds Drucker’s assertion. Geiger re-presents the world to the reader as a shifting and changing location, where the local view becomes world view (Fig. 3, 7, 8, 14). Geiger addresses

45 Wladimir Dias-Pino in *Processo: Linguagem e comunicação*, n.p. quoted in Ibid.
46 Ibid., 54-55.
Brazil’s local issues, perhaps specific to the urban centers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, while maintaining an internationally political scope. These forces are brought to bear upon the artistic community and circuits, affecting the artistic and intellectual communities of Brazil. The narrative and poetic quality of the four map sequence legitimizes the reason such a work was manifest in the form of a book. *O Novo Atlas’s* existence and banal appearance fits well into Dias-Pino’s book-object employed as everyday object and the *ideological conceptualism* of Latin America conceptual art of the 1970’s. The low-profile pedagogical nature *O Novo Atlas* allowed it to travel in hushed circuits. Subversive, critical, and playful, Geiger’s *O Novo Atlas* succeeds in surveying the cultural landscape, tracing networks of power, and mapping global perceptions, all in the name of geography.
Work Cited


