

**Women Sculptors Awarded at the First Bienais de São Paulo  
and the Building of Artistic Recognition. The Cases of Maria  
Martins and Mary Vieira**  
**Marina Mazze Cerchiaro**

**Abstract**

This article analyses the awards granted to female sculptors during the first Bienais de São Paulo (1951-1965), with a focus on the participation of Maria Martins and Mary Vieira, two Brazilian sculptors who won awards despite their very different trajectories and artistic styles. This text aims to demonstrate the importance of biennials in building the artistic recognition of Maria Martins and Mary Vieira. Biennials are understood here as legitimising spheres and social networks that bring together people, objects, and institutions.

**Keywords**

Women artists, Awards and Artistic recognition, Sculpture, Bienal de São Paulo, Maria Martins, Mary Vieira.

# Women Sculptors Awarded at the First Bienais de São Paulo and the Building of Artistic Recognition. The Cases of Maria Martins and Mary Vieira<sup>1</sup>

Marina Mazze Cerchiaro

## The Awarding of Women Sculptors at the Bienais de São Paulo (1951-1965)

In the early exhibitions of the Bienais de São Paulo, the press and art critics emphasised the presence of women artists. They frequently discussed the visibility of women artists at the biennials, thus implying that there would be a balanced representation of the sexes, particularly in the case of the Brazilian participants.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the data reveals that the number of women awarded in foreign delegations in the first iterations (1951-1965) was very low: they won only nine out of the 109 awards (8.3%).<sup>3</sup> With respect to the awards given to the Brazilian delegation, the number of women awarded was more significant: 30 out of a total of 81, which is equivalent to 37%.

Although painting predominated in international awards (with 52 winners), it was in sculpture, the second most awarded category, that women gained more prominence, winning six of the 23 awards granted (26.1%).<sup>4</sup> In fact, of the nine international artists awarded, six were women sculptors: Germaine Richier, Barbara Hepworth, Alicia Penalba, Marta Colvin, Josefina Plá, and Jeanne Spiteris-Veropoulou, representing, respectively, the delegations from France, Great Britain, Argen-

---

1

Translated from the Portuguese by Marco Alexandre de Oliveira.

2

*Contribuição da Mulher às Artes Plásticas no País*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1960): 15.

3

For an in-depth, quantitative survey of women's awards at the early São Paulo Biennials (1951-1965) see: Cerchiaro, "Escultoras e Bienais" (Sculptors and Biennials). Since there are no organised and reliable databases on the Bienais de São Paulo, the research was limited to the analysis of the awards themselves. Collecting data on artist participation by delegation would involve building a database and a large team of researchers, something that began to be undertaken by the Artl@s team, from the École Normale Supérieure de Paris and collaborators, under the coordination of the professor Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Ana Paula Cavalcanti Simioni, but it was not completed due to technical problems and reduced human resources. The initial results of this effort can be consulted on the website: <https://artlas.huma-num.fr/map/#/result?collection=2&value=&type=exhibition&page=1>.

4

There was only one woman (Prunella Clough) among the twenty-one awarded in engraving (4.8%) and only two (Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Martha Peluffo) among the fifty-two who achieved distinction in painting (3.58%). The thirteen drawing winners were all men.

tina, Chile, and Paraguay. As for the awards granted to the women of the Brazilian delegations, although the distribution across different categories was more equal than internationally, they were also more prominent in sculpture. Six women sculptors – Maria Martins, Felícia Leirner, Mary Vieira, Zélia Salgado, Lygia Clark, and Liuba Wolf – won eight of the 18 awards in this category (44.4%).<sup>5</sup> It is worth recalling that, unlike the international awards, the Brazilian ones often rewarded the same artist in various iterations, both in the same artistic category and in different categories.

This significant presence of women who received awards for sculpture at the São Paulo Biennials is associated with a greater visibility of women in this field in the 1950s and 1960s. This art, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was considered predominantly male due to the physical effort demanded in general, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to be increasingly exercised by women, which led the French art historian Marie-Jo Bonnet to state that “sculpture is the great achievement of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>6</sup> Women sculptors showed themselves to be capable of not only mastering the *métier* but also of rethinking and transgressing it, by making use of material experiments that led to the expansion of the very notion of sculpture.<sup>7</sup> The observation that, in the 1950s and 1960s, women occupied a relevant space in the field of sculpture, which is present in the current bibliography on women sculptors and is strongly impacted by feminist reflections in the history of art, also appears in the writings of the time, as can be noted in Michel Ragon’s comments about Alicia Penalba’s award at the Bienal de São Paulo in 1961:

Interestingly enough, the two award winners are women artists. A simple coincidence without a doubt, but it still draws attention to the increasingly important contribution of women artists, notably in the area of sculpture. From Germaine Richier and Marta Pan to Barbara Hepworth and Louise Nevelson, the number of world-class women sculptors does not stop increasing.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Brazilian modernist sculpture, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was also a significant increase in the number of active women artists who gained visibility when compared to the previous two decades.<sup>9</sup>

In focusing on the careers of the women artists awarded in sculpture at the first Bienais de São Paulo in both the Brazilian and international delegations, one sees that they were awarded later in life than the men. While most of them (71%) were awarded after the age of forty-five, more than half of the men (61%) received the award before that age, being that, in the thirty-five years old or younger age group, there were ten men awarded and only one woman. Most of these women sculptors exhibited for the first time in their twenties and were awarded at the peak or maturity of their careers. Nonetheless, four of them – Maria Martins, Felícia Leirner, Lygia Clark, and Marta Colvin – entered the art world late, after the age of thirty-one, due to having spent their youth married and raising children. Therefore, in their case, the late award was also related to gender issues.

Despite this great gender disparity in the Bienais de São Paulo, it is essential to highlight that the awarding of women sculptors at the event not only gave

---

5

The winners in the Brazilian delegation achieved twelve out of twenty-nine in painting (41.4%), seven out of 17 in engraving (41.2%), and three out of seventeen in drawing (17.6%).

6

Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Les femmes artistes dans les avant-gardes* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), 79.

7

See Paul Schimmel and Jenny Sorkin. *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947 – 2016*. (Los Angeles: Hauser & Wirth, 2016) and Musée des années 30, *Sculpture’Elles: les sculpteurs femmes du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours* (Boulogne-Billancourt: Editions Somogy, 2011).

8

Ragon. “Lauréats de la Biennale de São Paulo. Vieira da Silva et Penalba: une double fascination magique” (September 1961), apud Jimena Ferreiro. “Apuntes biográficos de una artista moderna”, In Victoria Giraud, *Alicia Penalba, escultora* (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2016).

9

Cerchiaro, “Escultoras e Bienais”.

visibility to the artists considered but also impacted the building of their recognition in different ways. For example, it was important in boosting the careers of newcomers, as shown by the acquisition awards granted to Mary Vieira and Felicia Leirner in the 1953 and 1955 exhibitions, six and two years after the first exhibition in their careers, respectively. The Bienais also contributed to the first phase of recognition for those who had made a name for themselves, such as Jeanne Spiteris-Veropoulou, Maria Martins, and Lygia Clark. The first, born in Turkey, was married to the Greek critic and art historian Tony Spiteris, who was a member of the international jury at the 1963 Bienal de São Paulo, in which she was awarded. In this period, the artist was enjoying significant recognition and internationalisation, since she had participated in group exhibitions in several Italian cities, in addition to Athens, New York, and Paris, and held solo exhibitions between 1960 and 1963 in Thessaloniki, Greece, Milan, Venice (where she resided), and Florence. In 1963, she was also awarded at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in Paris.<sup>10</sup> Maria Martins, as we will see later, participated in the Bienais when she had already achieved recognition in New York and Paris and was trying to enter the Brazilian scene by holding solo exhibitions in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the early 1950s. Meanwhile, the granting of the regular award to Lygia Clark in 1961 for *Bichos* (Critters) marked a moment of simultaneously consolidating her recognition in the country and building international visibility.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the Bienais de São Paulo helped in the international projection of foreign sculptors and even in their process of consecration, as demonstrated by the case of Barbara Hepworth, who had a retrospective in the 1959 exhibition, the same year in which she won the Biennial's grand prize. She and Henry Moore were the main sculptors promoted by the influential art critic Herbert Read. Hepworth had already held two retrospectives of great importance at the Venice Biennale, in 1950, and at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, in 1954. She had also participated in the International Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture at the Musée Rodin in Paris, in 1956, and received two public commissions from the British Art Council, in 1951, for the execution of *Contrapuntal Forms* and *Turning Forms*. She was already becoming internationally known, having held exhibitions in the United States, Canada, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Italy. Her retrospective and award at the Bienal de São Paulo reflect the process of building and consolidating her recognition in South America, which was accompanied by her exhibition tour in Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Caracas, between 1959 and 1960.

To have a more in-depth understanding of how these processes of recognition took place, we have chosen two Brazilian sculptors from Minas Gerais with very different trajectories and works: Maria Martins, who won the acquisition and regular awards in 1953 and in 1955, respectively, when she was fifty-nine and sixty-one years old; and Mary Vieira, who received the acquisition award in 1953, when she was twenty-six years old. The former's production was often associated with surrealism, which was a marginal aesthetic movement in the Brazilian context of the 1950s and 1960s<sup>12</sup>; and the latter, with concretism and neo-concretism, which, on the contrary, were strongly promoted during this period.

In the early 1950s, the two women sculptors followed opposite paths. While the former returned to Brazil after more than two decades abroad, the latter left the country to learn and build a career in Europe. Next, we will draw a parallel between these two trajectories that will allow us to better understand how the Bienais de São Paulo helped Maria Martins – who was already recognised by her peers in France and the United States – to build success in Brazil, and Mary Vieira to promote herself both abroad and in Brazil.

---

10

Anne Rivière, "Jeanne Spiteris-Veropoulou", In *Dictionnaire des sculptrices en France* (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2017).

11

An example of this is the participation of Lygia Clark at the Venice Biennale, in the following year, and the award in São Paulo, in which she presented six *Bichos* (Critters).

12

On the difficulties faced by surrealism when attempting to penetrate the Brazilian art world and on a few dialogues between Brazilian modernism of the 1930s and 1940s and this aesthetic tendency, see: Thiago Gil Virava, *Uma Brecha para o Surrealismo* (São Paulo: Editora Alameda, 2014).

### From Recognition in the United States to Awards at the Bienais de São Paulo: New Strategies Behind the Success of Maria Martins

In 1950, Maria Martins returned to Brazil once and for all due to the retirement of her husband, the Brazilian diplomat Carlos Martins, after twenty-six years spent living abroad. She was already a professional sculptor, having built her career in the United States and France throughout the 1940s. At that time, she took classes in New York with the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz and met exiled French surrealist artists, including André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. She presented her works in a series of exhibitions that aimed to strengthen cultural relations between Brazil and the United States. A few of these works were acquired by American museums. She also held solo exhibitions at the Valentine and Julien Levy galleries in New York. In 1947, she participated in the *International Surrealist Exhibition*, organised by André Breton in Paris, and in the following year, she held her first solo show in the French capital, at the Galerie René Drouin. Her exhibitions were accompanied by texts by important critics, such as André Breton, Michel Tapié, and Clement Greenberg, many of them filled with praise.<sup>13</sup>

This previous experience and recognition led, in 1950, to her first two solo exhibitions in Brazil, at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP) and at the Brazilian Press Association (ABI) in Rio de Janeiro, in which she presented thirty-six sculptures, many of which had already been exhibited in New York and Paris. Thanks to the good relations that the sculptor maintained with key players at the Bienal de São Paulo, the ten years of intense productivity in the United States, and the good critical reception achieved in the New York and Parisian circuits, in 1951 the artist was granted jury exemption and an individual room at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. In it, she presented works produced largely in the 1940s, in the United States, many previously exhibited in her solo exhibition *Statues Magiques de Maria* (Maria's Magic Statues), in Paris, in April 1949. Among the fifteen pieces were sculptures that reflected her strong dialogue with surrealism, such as *The Impossible* (1945), *Chanson en Suspens* (Song in Suspense, c. 1945), *Huitième Voile* (Eighth Veil, 1949), *However* (1947), *Cobra Grande* (Big Snake, 1943), *Uirapuru* (1943), *La Femme a Perdu son Ombre* (The Woman Who Lost Her Shadow, 1947), and *Le Chemin; L'ombre; Trop Long; Trop Étroit* (The Path; The Shadow; Too Long; Too Narrow, 1946).<sup>14</sup> Despite international recognition, the exhibitions of Maria Martins went unnoticed by the São Paulo press and her works received a negative review by Flávio de Aquino, published in the *Diário de Notícias* of Rio de Janeiro, as indicated by the author's considerations on *Huitième Voile* (1949):

[...] stripped of literature, it is a poor, lifeless mannequin. Otherwise look, in this figure, at the ankles, the thighs, the belly, the breasts, the arms; see how the light that passes through it is expression less and cold. Beneath those dead forms, copies of nature, the flesh does not live, life does not exist, there subsists only a graceful attitude and the brutal shock of the head, which is very little.<sup>15</sup>

What Aquino rejects in the work of Maria Martins is the power of surrealism itself: the game between coldness, eroticism, and perverse seduction that marks *Huitième Voile*. The impossibility of desire is also present in the work *Impossible*, perhaps the best known of the artist's works, which features two biomorphic bodies facing each other. By presenting latent and violent desire, Maria Martins transgresses tradition-

---

13

On the trajectory of Maria Martins see: Ana Arruda Callado, *Maria Martins: uma biografia* (Rio de Janeiro: Gryphus, 2004); Roberto Mitsuaki Kumagai, "Maria Martins: uma Trajetória Artística" (Master's Thesis, São Paulo, University of São Paulo, 2006); Graça Ramos, *Maria Martins: Escultora dos Trópicos* (Rio de Janeiro: Artviva, 2009).

14

Museu de Arte Moderna, *Catálogo da I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1953).

15

Flávio de Aquino, "Maria Martins", *Diário de Notícias*, June 25, 1950, 5<sup>th</sup> section.

al assumptions about gender. Ramos<sup>16</sup> argues that this transgression occurs even more forcefully in sculptures in which she destabilises the view of the feminine and the masculine, as in *Uirapuru*, which mixes phallic structures and holes (allusions to male and female sexual organs), thus blurring and confusing gender boundaries, even making them chaotic. In *Chanson en Suspens*, we see the rooster, as a possible symbol of masculinity, in a structure that resembles the vagina. Biomorphism, therefore, goes beyond the fusion of man and nature, by refusing the separation between the masculine and the feminine. [fig. 1]

fig. 1  
Room dedicated to Maria Martins at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, where the works *Impossible* (1945), *Huitième Voile* (1949), and *La Femme a Perdu son Ombre* (1947) appear. Photograph by Peter Scheier, 1951, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo , 01BSP\_AMPLI\_00013\_p01.



A few of the works exhibited by Maria Martins at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal also deal with women's freedom, the difficulties of achieving it, and its limits, such as *Le Chemin*; *L'ombre*; *Trop Long*; *Trop Étroit*, which features a female figure, in gilded bronze, walking. She is followed by another figure, attached to her feet, which we deduce is her shadow. From the latter, snakes emerge and go towards the golden sculpture. About it, Maria Martins wrote: "we are followed by all of our pre-conceived opinions, by everything that we wish to do and have not done: that is what stops us from being truly free".<sup>17</sup> The work could be considered a *Gradi-va*, a mythical figure explored by the surrealists from the 1930s onwards. It recalls the book *Gradi-va: A Pompeian Fantasy* by the German writer Wilhelm Jensen, from 1903, which reached the surrealists in the early 1930s through the writings of Freud. In the novel, *Gradi-va* is a classical bas-relief of a woman walking, with which an archaeologist falls in love. In his delirium, the latter believes that he encounters this woman in the flesh, in Pompeii, but she is actually Zoe, his repressed childhood love, who tries to help him heal.<sup>18</sup> As an image of *Gradi-va*, the sculpture can be interpreted as the process of liberating the unconscious, in which the figure entangled by its own snakes would represent repressed desires. It could also be a metaphor for artistic action itself, which is capable of helping to free the individual from repressive social rules.

---

16

Ramos, *Maria Martins*.

17

Maria Martins. Message. In: René Drouin. *Les statues magiques de Maria*. Paris : René Drouin, 1948 (exhibition catalogue), p.8.

18

On the metaphor of *Gradi-va* and its uses by surrealism, see: Briony Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis," in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, ed. David Batchelor, Briony Fer, and Paul Wood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

Such works were in line with those championed in the New York art world. Strongly popularised by the press, advertising, and exhibitions, the surrealism of Salvador Dalí and Giorgio de Chirico had been well established in the United States since 1920. As of 1936, Americans began to come into contact with French surrealism through publications that could be accessed not only in French but also in English. Between 1939 and 1942, profound changes occurred in the expansion of the movement in the United States, since the country began to receive exiled European surrealists. In this period, Yves Tanguy, Roberto Matta, and André Breton arrived in the country with their respective companions Sage, Anne Clark, and Jacqueline Lamba, in addition to Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, the collector Peggy Guggenheim (who was returning to her homeland after a stay in Europe), and British artists Stanley William Hayter, Helen Phillips, and Leonora Carrington.<sup>19</sup> It is in contact with this context that Maria Martins produces the works exhibited at the first Biennial.

Between 1943 and 1944, women came to attract attention by exhibiting individually in galleries and collectively in the exhibition *31 Women*, at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery. This heterogeneous group exhibition, curated by Marcel Duchamp, presented mainly works by surrealist artists (Leonor Fini, Valentine Hugo, Meret Oppenheim, Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning, Louise Nevelson, and Leonora Carrington) and abstract painters (Irene Rice Pereira, Hedda Sterne, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp). Only two months later, Maria Martins would hold her solo show *Amazonia by Maria* at the Valentine Gallery, in New York, exhibiting eight bronze works with the theme of Amazonian legends, the first in which she displays her surrealist production.

In Brazil, however, the situation was quite distinct. As Thiago Virava asserts, between the 1920s and 1940s there was no group in the country organised around surrealist ideas that could develop group activities and build networks of mutual support. What did exist, according to Virava, was a "surrealist opening",<sup>20</sup> a surrealist attitude diluted in the production of certain artists, such as Cícero Dias, Tarsila do Amaral, Ismael Nery, Flávio de Carvalho, and Jorge de Lima. The author argues that, in the visual arts, this approach to the movement occurred both in terms of technique and ideas, but it was less transgressive than in France, particularly due to issues attending the Brazilian artistic context. Thus, the penetration of surrealism in the country was subtle and restricted almost entirely to painting and literature. As Aquino's review demonstrates, surrealism in sculpture was something that Brazilian critics were not apt to discuss. The same becomes clear in a review of Maria Martins's works written by Murilo Mendes, a Brazilian surrealist poet. Of a didactic nature, the text sought to explain to the public the challenge of addressing, through sculpture, philosophical and visual problems of a surrealist nature:

I am far from asserting that all the solutions found by Maria fully satisfy me, but I do not hesitate to praise her courage, her force of attack, her obstinacy in undertaking a work that has a strong initial disadvantage – the difference in speed between the brain and the hand that struggles with rough materials. The difference in level is all the more accentuated when, in the present case, it concerns applying the rapid technique of automation to stone, wood, and metal. Because the surrealist atmosphere is what Maria is interested in establishing.<sup>21</sup>

---

19

Ilene Susan Fort, "Au pays de la réinvention: les États-Unis", In Tere Arcq, Ilene Susan Fort, Terri Geis (eds.), *Au Pays des Merveilles: les aventures surréalistes des femmes artistes au Mexique et aux États-Unis* (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art; Munich: DeMonico Books: Prestel, 2012).

20

Thiago Gil Virava, "Uma brecha para o surrealismo: percepções do movimento surrealista no Brasil entre as décadas de 1920 e 1940" (Master's Thesis, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 2012).

21

Murilo Mendes, "[Untitled]", in Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, *Maria* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 1956), 7.

Perhaps it was the negative reviews and lack of resonance between the New York surrealist production of Maria Martins and Brazilian national sculpture which led the artist to exhibit only five works at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, all of them produced in Brazil - *A Tue-tête* (At the Top of One's Lungs, 1950), *Cheia de Graça* (Full of Grace, 1953); *Orpheus* (1952), *Calendário da Eternidade* (Calendar of Eternity, 1953) - and an untitled two-dimensional panel. In these works, the dialogue with surrealism is attenuated, for the impact of the movement appears clearly only in *A Tue-tête*. Of great formal simplicity, the work presents a human head and neck with an open mouth. Its title evokes the French expression for 'screaming at the top of your lungs'. Formally, *A Tue-tête* may also have had as a reference sculptures by Max Ernst, such as the head from *The King Playing with the Queen* (1944) and *Tête Double: Oedipus* (Double Head: Oedipus, 1935), and Brancusi, such as *Tête d'Enfant* (Child's Head, 1917), both of whom were friends of Maria Martins. [fig. 2]

fig. 2  
Works by Maria Martins exhibited at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. On the left, *Orpheus* (1952) and *A Tue-tête* (1950) and, on the right, *Cheia de Graça* (1953). Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 02BSP\_AMPLI\_00034\_p01.



Brancusian simplification gains more prominence in the sculpture *Cheia de Graça*, which particularly reminds us of the work *Princess X* by the Romanian sculptor. It presents two human figures in plaster, quite simplified, with their heads bowed in a gesture of reverence. One is kneeling and has no arms. The other has structures on its back that resemble wings. The figures allude to the theme of the Annunciation of the birth of Christ, one frequently addressed in the history of art. *Orpheus*, on the other hand, is a more abstract development, it not being possible to clearly distinguish human from mythological or vegetal figures. In a confusing tangle, the shapes converse with the surroundings, creating hollow spaces. At the same time, they expand, giving the idea of motion. The work recalls the idea of the formless,<sup>22</sup> as does the two-dimensional panel (1946) - which presents elongated structures with a few hollow spaces expanding from a centre.

With *Calendário da Eternidade*,<sup>23</sup> the artist won the acquisition award from the Federal Savings Bank (CEF) at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, a prize was worth fifty thousand *cruzeiros*. The work, which was incorporated into the MAM-SP collection that today belongs to the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo,

22

For Rosalind Krauss and Alain Bois, the formless is a set of operations, more than a theme or concept, which can be useful for understanding works that deviate from Greenberg's modernist paradigm. Guided by the preponderance of vision, Greenberg's visual representation of the tactile aimed at instant visualisation and presupposed an upright viewer. Against this paradigm, the authors defend four operations that for them are associated with the formless: horizontality, pulse, base materialism, and entropy. See: Yve-Alain Bois e Rosalind e Krauss, *Formless: a User's Guide* (New York; Zone Books, 1997).

23

The image of the work is available in the virtual collection of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and can be consulted at this link: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/17339>.



consists of a circular shape that houses an amorphous structure. The solidity of the mass contrasts with the hollow spaces, which are incorporated into the sculpture. Thus, the space becomes as important as the matter that surrounds it. By producing an external circular structure that encloses another internal form and space, Maria Martins approaches the formal experimentation that sculptors such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were engaging in the 1940s and early 1950s, such as in *Oval Sculpture No. 2* (1943) and *Elegy* (1952), by Hepworth, and *Internal and External Forms*, by Moore (1952-1953). The latter was also presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, when the artist received the regular award for foreign sculpture, being acclaimed by Brazilian critics. As Ana Magalhães points out, the British sculptors Moore and Hepworth enjoyed strong recognition in Brazil both due to having been awarded at the bienais and receiving positive reviews from critics.<sup>24</sup>

At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, the competition for the best Brazilian sculptor award was between Bruno Giorgi and Maria Martins, sculptors whose works were sometimes associated with Moore's production and English vitalism more broadly. According to the press: "[...] in sculpture, Bruno Giorgi only managed to overcome his strongest competitor, Maria Martins, after five somewhat hectic votes".<sup>25</sup> We thus see that already in this iteration the sculptor was one of the favourites, her competition with the eventual winner Bruno Giorgi having been quite close. Despite losing out to Giorgi in the more prestigious category, Maria Martins was granted the acquisition award. Needless to say, the perception of Martins's had changed significantly. In a review of the woman sculptor's solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, Jayme Maurício points out that Martins explored both spatial and material problems in sculpture as well as psychological issues and symbolism linked to femininity:

Although problems in sculpture such as Space, Motion, Construction, Material, etc. are well resolved in many of her pieces, her constant is not only good craftsmanship or refined technique, but a burning desire to interpret life, through a praiseworthy eagerness to create new forms, with their own, authentic plastic language. In her sculpture there is a place of honour for psychological associative factors: round shapes in the women, recalling fertility, the characteristics of the female physique.<sup>26</sup>

His analysis differs even further from that of other critics for not associating the production of Maria Martins with surrealism, but with vitalism:

Moore himself, in São Paulo, asserts to us that he is the organic humanistic element of great importance in sculpture, lending vitality to it. In Maria, each carving, each curve, each element takes on a human or vegetal character, which is well or poorly resolved. Hence, possibly, its fervent vitality.<sup>27</sup>

The term "vitalism" was coined by the English critic Herbert Read based on the works of the British sculptor Henry Moore. By this conception, sculpture is seen as volume, weight, and mass occupying space; it must be apprehended by means of the senses, especially touch. Forms are sculpted and organic, and should take into ac-

---

24

Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, "Barbara Hepworth in Brazil", *British Art Studies*, vol. 3 (2016): 12 <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/agmagalhaes>, accessed March 2023.

25

Flávio de Aquino, "Na Segunda Bienal de São Paulo o Grande Júri Premiou os Favoritos", *Revista Manchete* (January 9, 1954): 32. Brazilian Digital Newspapers and Periodicals Library.

26

Jayme Maurício, "A Angústia, a Vitalidade e o Áspero Sensualismo das Esculturas de Maria", *Correio da Manhã*, May 10, 1956. Brazilian Digital Newspapers and Periodicals Library.

27

Maurício, "A Angústia, a Vitalidade"

count the integrity of the material.<sup>28</sup> At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, Read was the British commissioner and served on the awards jury. Eight years after Maurício's review, Read, in his book *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture*,<sup>29</sup> included Maria Martins and Bruno Giorgi among the artists who, for him, represented the pinnacle of contemporary sculpture in the section titled "Vitalism".

It is noticeable, therefore, that, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, Maria Martins's work is informed by the different forms of abstractionism with which she had come into contact in France and Brazil: Brancusi, informalism, and vitalism. Such a dialogue was fundamental to the process of her recognition in the country, since it is precisely due to one of her abstract sculptures that she received the acquisition award. The good reception from the jury must have encouraged her to continue experimenting within abstractionism, since in the third iteration of the Bienal de São Paulo, the relation between space and matter gains even more strength in the works she exhibited. This time around, Maria Martins was identified by critics and artists alike as the favourite for the award for best national sculptor. In an article in *Manchete* magazine, Aquino states: "Maria Martins is competing with the most serious works ever presented by her in any exhibition. There are those who are betting on her",<sup>30</sup> which indicates a preference for more spatial and abstract works compared with the figurative and strongly surrealist ones presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal.

In this 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal (1955) Martins exhibited five works: *O Implacável* (The Implacable, 1947), *Ishwara* (1952), *O Canto do Mar* (Sea Song, 1953), *Insônia Infinita da Terra* (Infinite Insomnia of the Earth, 1954), and *A Soma de Nossos Dias* (The Sum of Our Days, 1954-1955).<sup>31</sup> Yet although there are five works in the event photo, *O Implacável* is not among them. It appears that Maria Martins must have presented two versions of *Canto do Mar* instead. These both appear in the photo, on the right and left side of the sculpture *A Soma de Nossos Dias* respectively. [fig. 3]

The other four works exhibited around *A Soma de Nossos Dias* display formless structures that, in different ways, compose games between hollow spaces. The two versions of *Canto do Mar* – in sermolite and in bronze – present an almost two-dimensional structure, one which is abstract, undefined and perforated with holes. There are two more works, which appear later in [fig. 3], whose names could not be specified due to discrepancies in the sources consulted. The one on the right is solid and voluminous, with hollow spaces and pointed structures at the top. That on the left has a structure built from a tangle of lianas. Although Maria Martins used interwoven lianas in various works in the 1940s, there was always a figure present, albeit a stylised one, as in *Le Grand Sacre* (The Great Consecration, DATE) or *J'ai Crus Avoir Longtemps Rêvé Que J'étais Libre* (I Believe I Dreamt for a Long Time I Was Free, 1946). In the work exhibited at the Bienal, however, the shuffling of lines recalls only the idea of formlessness, without alluding to representation, and builds its own three-dimensional spatiality by combining twisted structures and voids.

Finally, *A Soma de Nossos Dias*<sup>32</sup> bears similarities to *Brouillard le Noir* (Dark Fog), a work by Martins from 1949, which was exhibited at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. Both evidence the sculptor's dialogue with surrealism by evoking the

---

28

On Read's defense of touch as the core sense for understanding modern sculpture, see: David J. Getsy, "Tactility and Opticality, Henry Moore or David Smith: Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg on The Art of Sculpture, 1956", in Rebecca Peabody (ed.), *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), [https://www.getty.edu/museum/symposia/pdf\\_stark/stark\\_getsy.pdf](https://www.getty.edu/museum/symposia/pdf_stark/stark_getsy.pdf), accessed March 2023.

29

Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968).

30

Flávio de Aquino, "Cinco Quilômetros de Quadros e Esculturas", *Manchete* (June, 1955): 58.

31

Museu de Arte Moderna, *3 Bienal, catalogo geral* (São Paulo: Ediam, 1955).

32

The image of the work is available in the virtual collection of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and can be consulted at this link: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/17340>

fig. 3  
Sculptures by Maria Martins  
exhibited at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal  
de São Paulo. Wanda Svevo  
Historical Archive, Fundação  
Bienal de São Paulo, 03BSP\_  
AMPLI\_00009\_p01.



idea of the totem, which refers to the universe of the fantastic and the “primitive”.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the work exhibited at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal is three metres high, which grants it monumentality and involves it further in a dialogue with the surrounding space. It is also more harmonious and geometric than the earlier work. Instead of the chicken feet, which serve as the base for *Brouillard le Noir*, it features a hollow circle and two lateral pointed structures that turn upwards and to the sides. They harmonise with those that hang from the top, in the shape of wings, which appear wider and are hollow on the inside. The upper part of the skeleton’s central column, which is formless and almost two-dimensional in the 1949 work, becomes clearer and more diamond-shaped in the 1954 version, thus granting greater monumentality to the whole. While in *Brouillard le Noir* the predominant impression is that of estrangement, which is quite characteristic of surrealist objects, in *A Soma de Nossos Dias*, despite the enigmatic aspect, the idea of a landmark that this great totem produces becomes prominent. In sermolite, the work is the result of the search by Maria Martins for new materials that would allow her to make technical innovations.

At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal the sculptor Barbara Hepworth was awarded alongside Maria Martins. Ana Magalhães, analysing Hepworth’s award, draws a parallel between Martins’s *A Soma de Nossos Dias* and *Cantate Domino* by the British sculptor:

Both titles suggest the fragility of human life on earth and the tense relations with nature; both works also suggest a narrative dimension, in which the idea of time is integral to their poetics; and both were the fruits of the artists’ experiments with new materials”.<sup>34</sup>

She recalls that both works were used by Herbert Read in his book to illustrate the idea of ‘vitality’, which as we have seen was related by the latter to the way that certain artists work with subjective, formal, and spiritual elements.

---

33

Within the surrealist imaginary, so-called “primitive” people were one of the representations of otherness. Since their productions and rituals were interpreted as closer to the unconscious, they raised concerns with respect to the European social order, which was seen as repressive from both a social and a psychic point of view. See Briony Fer, “Surrealism, Myth, and Psychoanalysis”, in David Batchelor, Briony Fer, and Paul Wood (eds.) *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

34

Magalhães, “Barbara Hepworth in Brazil”, 7.

Therefore, it becomes possible to suggest that the changes in the practice of Maria Martins – who presented more abstract works in the second and third iterations of the Bienal that emphasised formal and spatial relations and research with new materials – have made it possible to interpret her works in the framework of English vitalism, which was legitimised by the awards bestowed in these exhibitions. Exoticism, erotic violence, questioning of gender roles and questions about freedom and female subjectivity, which marked her surrealist output in the United States, almost disappear in the works exhibited in these two editions of the Bienal de São Paulo, in which the sculptor was awarded. Instead, there appears to be a turn towards the informalism that was already appearing in her American works and weaving new dialogues that brought her closer to abstraction. Therefore, if on the one hand the process of building the recognition of Maria Martins in Brazil involved changes in the artist's production, as indicated by the works exhibited at the Bienais de São Paulo and her awards, on the other hand her role as a 'cultural intermediary', enhanced her visibility by activating national and international sociability networks that were linked to both politics and the arts, some of them established in the United States and France and which continued to be nurtured and mobilised after her return to Brazil.

"Cultural intermediaries" can be defined as individuals and organisations that act *between* artistic creation and public consumption, thus playing a central role in the process of recognising artists. More broadly, they participate in the processes of building and converting symbolic capital, by aiming to create or develop symbolic and commercial value, in order to promote both the artist in question and themselves.<sup>35</sup> Nuria Peist demonstrates that intermediation activities can help certain artists achieve recognition. This is undoubtedly the case for Maria Martins, because her inclusion in transnational sociability networks made her better known. Between December 1952 and April 1953, Martins traveled to Paris, the United States, Canada, Cuba, Mexico, and Guatemala to ensure the participation of delegations from these countries in the Bienal de São Paulo and to organise the Pablo Picasso retrospective. In Paris, she negotiated with different agents in the art world. She contacted two patrons linked to Picasso's circle: Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, one of the most important French art dealers, and Marie Cuttoli, the wife of art collector Paul Cuttoli, a close friend of the fellow collector Paul Guillaume. For his part, Cuttoli established a potent collection of Cubist works, one which was donated in 1969 to the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. To curate the exhibitions, Martins called upon art historians, such as Maurice Jardot and Bernard Dorival, the latter also a *conservateur* at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. At the same time, to enable the French participation, she contacted agents related to the political world, such as Jacques de Bourbon-Busset, a French diplomat and director general of international cultural relations between 1952 and 1956.<sup>36</sup>

On January 29, 1953, Maria Martins left France and went to the United States. There she also coordinated a wide network of contacts that involved everyone from diplomatic agents – such as Maury Gurgel Valente, then Brazilian ambassador to the United States, Walther Moreira Salles, and employees of the Brazilian division and the Cultural Department – to important names related to the art world connected to the Museum of Modern Art – MoMA, including Nelson Rockefeller, the president of the institution, with whom she had maintained a friendly relationship since the early 1940s, when she was Brazil's ambassador to the United States. Another personality contacted by Martins during her stay in the US was José Gómez Sicre, the head of the Visual Arts Unit of the Organization of American States in Washington between 1948 and 1976. A Cuban art critic, Gómez Sicre was responsi-

---

35

Wenceslas Lizé, Delphine Naudier et Séverine Sofio, "Introduction", in *Les stratèges de la notoriété. Intermédiaires et consécration dans les univers artistiques* (Paris: Archives Contemporaines, 2014); Nuria Peist, *El Éxito en el Arte Moderno: Trayectorias Artísticas y Procesos de Reconocimiento* (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2012).

36

Maria Martins, "Carta a Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho", 28 de janeiro de 1953, 02BSP\_00029\_DOCUM\_p01-02BSP\_00029\_DOCUM\_p03, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation, <https://guernica.museoreinasofia.es/en/document/letter-maria-martins-francisco-matarazzo-sobrinho>.

ble for the Pan-American Union delegation at the Biennial, which brought together Latin American countries that lacked representation of their own.<sup>37</sup> The network coordinated by Gómez Sicre and his knowledge of modern artists helped the event organisers to make contacts and enable, even financially, the participation of Latin American delegations, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Venezuela, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>38</sup> In a letter sent on February 11, 1953, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho instructs Maria Martins to look for Sicre:

in Washington D.C. (Pan American Union) because he has good ideas, relationships, and prestige in Pan-American countries. He will be able to suggest names to us that we should request from Central and South American countries. [...] It will be necessary to make him understand that only his intervention with the Pan-American countries (especially the small ones) will solve the administrative problems. [...] Gomez Sicre will be able to help you obtain Maya pieces from Guatemala for that art and culture exhibition in the continent.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note that, in her travels as an emissary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, Maria Martins also made artistic decisions, thus contributing towards the event in curatorial terms. This is what occurred on her trip to Canada. Keeping in mind that at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal the country's representation was considered weak by the event's organising committee, the sculptor herself went to the studios of Canadian artists and pointed out some possible names to choose from.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, since MoMA did not appear to have very concrete ideas for the American representation in architecture at the Bienal, Maria Martins suggested that the museum send the American architecture exhibition held by Phillip Johnson, which was on display at that time.<sup>41</sup> 'Curating' the Bienais de São Paulo was, in a way, a joint task. It was up to the artistic director of the Bienal to provide the guidelines and to the commissioners of the delegations and intermediaries, such as Maria Martins, to make them operational according to their own criteria, conveniences, and possibilities of implementation.

Thus, if on the one hand the Bienais de São Paulo were a possible space to help Maria Martins obtain artistic recognition in Brazil, on the other, the artist's social prestige among cultural agents abroad contributed to the process of consolidation and recognition of the events themselves and consequently the various agents connected to them.

### **The neophyte Mary Vieira and the challenges of exhibiting at the Bienais de Sao Paulo**

At the beginning of 1952, Mary Vieira was leaving Brazil to live in Switzerland. Although she was at the beginning of her career, the young artist from Minas Gerais had already finished her studies, which began in 1944 at the School of Fine Arts in Belo Horizonte under the direction by Alberto da Veiga Guignard,<sup>42</sup> where she had

---

37

Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, "A Bienal de São Paulo, o debate artístico dos anos 1950 e a constituição do primeiro museu de arte moderna do Brasil", *Museologia & interdisciplinaridade* 1, no. 7,(2015): 124.

38

Information taken from the contact report of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal written by Arturo Profili (January 16, 1953), secretary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, *Archive of the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo*, referred as AFBSP now onwards.

39

Letter from Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho to Maria Martins (February 11, 1953) AFBSP.

40

Martins, "Carta a Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho", Letter to Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho], March 1, 1953, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation.

41

Martins, "Carta a Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho"

42

Alberto da Veiga Guignard (1896-1962) was a painter and teacher born in the State of Rio de Janeiro. He lived in Europe between 1907 and 1929, having studied painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. In 1923, he came to reside in Florence and directed his production in a modernist vein. In

learned to sculpt by working with colleagues such as Franz Weissmann and Amilcar de Castro.<sup>43</sup> She left for Europe with her own money – the result of exhibition projects for trade and industry fairs and of monuments completed in cities in Minas Gerais (Belo Horizonte, Poços de Caldas, and Araxá) –, taking a few of her works with her. She also counted on the support of important contacts, who would help her to enter the Swiss art world professionally, such as the sculptor Max Bill, with whom she had been exchanging correspondence since 1950, when she had visited his exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP). Her abstract production, already in the 1940s, was directed both towards the use of industrial materials and plastic research that had motion as its core. In this direction, engineers from the Belgian steel company in the city of Sabará, Minas Gerais, who were friends of the artist, collaborated on the technical execution of her first works with monumental characteristics, including *Perfuração Virtual – forma espirálica* (Virtual Perforation – Spiral Form, 1948), which was composed of metal blades moved by means of a motor, thus allowing the artist to claim for herself a pioneering role in Brazilian kinetic art. In this period, Mary Vieira had also exhibited in Salvador, at Estúdio Cravo, and in Rio de Janeiro, at the studio of Edith Behring.<sup>44</sup>

In Switzerland, Vieira maintained dialogues and exchanges with Georges Vantongerloo, who was considered the co-founder of the De Stijl group, and on her visits to Paris, with Pevsner and Constantin Brancusi. In 1953, she joined the first class of students at the school of design and industrial creation in Ulm, Germany, where she remained for a short time. In that same year, she exhibited at an important international event for the first time: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. She participated with five sculptures: *Coluna Centripetal* (Centripetal Column, 1953),<sup>45</sup> *Cubos em Espaços Abertos* (Cubes in Open Spaces, 1952), *Equilíbrio* (Equilibrium, 1952-1953), *Tensão e Expansão* (Tension and Expansion, 1953), and *Ponto de Encontro* (Meeting Point, 1952-1953).

The first two works were incorporated into the MAM Rio collection – *Cubos em Espaços Abertos*, which was chosen by the critic Mário Pedrosa for an acquisition award, and *Coluna Centripetal*, which was donated by the sculptor to the museum as a form of retribution on the part of the artist because MAM Rio had paid the transportation expenses for the works to be exhibited at the Bienal. In a letter from Max Bill dated February 23, 1954, he advised Mary Vieira to make the donation in recognition of the efforts made.<sup>46</sup> According to him, the architects Carmen Portinho and Affonso Reidy had suggested that *Coluna Centripetal* would be a very beautiful work for the museum's future garden and had talked to him and Mário Pedrosa about it.<sup>47</sup> On the works by Mary Vieira exhibited at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal, Mário Pedrosa writes:

---

1929, he returned to Brazil, participating in group exhibitions and working as a teacher. He is widely recognised in the history of Brazilian art for his landscape and portrait paintings. Mary Vieira used to say that he had been her only master. Guignard was the director of the School of Fine Arts from 1943, the year of its creation, until 1962, the year of the painter's death. It operated on the basis of open courses in which students and teachers shared work.

43

Franz Weissmann (1911-2005) and Amilcar de Castro (1920-2002) were sculptors active in Brazil whose works were associated with constructivism. Both signed the Neo-Concrete Manifesto in 1959 and exhibited at the Bienais de São Paulo, the former winning the regular award for sculpture in the fourth iteration of the event.

44

See Denise Mattar, *Mary Vieira: o tempo do movimento* (São Paulo: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2005).

45

In the catalogue of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, the work is titled "Centrimental." We believe that this is a catalogue error since, in the document in which Mary Vieira explains how her works should be assembled at the Biennial, the work is titled "Centripetal Column," a nomenclature used in other versions of this work exhibited later.

46

Unfortunately, the two works are no longer in the MAM Rio collection; there are only photographs of them. The first was destroyed in the museum fire, in 1978, and the second is listed in the archives as missing.

47

Max Bill, "Trechos de cartas sobre a doação de uma escultura de Mary Vieira – Coluna" [Excerpts of Letters About the Donation of a Sculpture by Mary Vieira – Column], [n.d.], Mary Vieira Dossier, archive at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro.

In 1953, she presented herself at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial with a few works (including the beautiful centripetal column acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in Rio), all rigorously in accordance with the concretist canons and in which Max Bill's influence can be felt, which already reveal, however, a few of their own qualities that the artist will develop later, such as the crystalline clarity of solutions, and well-worked craftsmanship and ideas: the science of spatial coordination. The classical formal inclination, the monumentality.<sup>48</sup>

According to Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto<sup>49</sup> concrete art was understood in the 1950s as the fruit of intellectual thinking and as a means of attaining knowledge. It was scientific, technical and based on mathematical concepts. In its different variations, it impacted several artists and critics from South American countries in the post-war period. In Brazil, abstract art was criticised by figurative artists for being dissociated from life and incomprehensible to the working classes. Defenders of concrete art opposed such criticism, arguing that, although abstract, it had a social function and revolutionary character. They proposed that the artist played an active role in building a modern society, integrating art and industry, and breaking with the notion of a work of art as a unique and original object, thus defending the execution of works conceived in series which would provide the public with accessibility on a large scale, outside the museum space. Such ideals encountered fertile ground in Latin America, where developmentalist political projects that aimed to project the region on the world stage were germinating.

Thus, Mary Vieira presents works at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal that were connected to a concrete aesthetics which was beginning to emerge and become legitimised in Brazil. It is worth recalling that, at the previous Bienal, Max Bill had won the award for best foreign sculptor and his *Tripartite Unity* (1948-1949), having been acquired by MAM-SP, had generated wide debate in the press and amongst art critics.

Of the works exhibited by the Brazilian sculptor, *Cubos em Espaços Abertos* is the one that comes closest to *Tripartite Unity* by building relations between geometric forms and space. It features three hollow rectangular structures that fit together, one being in a vertical position, another in a horizontal one, and the smaller third one at the base, supporting the others. The concretist work evokes harmony and proportionality and has a monumental and architectural intention.<sup>50</sup> [fig. 4, fig. 5, fig. 6, fig. 7]

*Coluna Centripetal*, meanwhile, is a tripartite cylindrical sculpture, with which the sculptor sought to explore phases of spiral motion in a three-dimensional way, something which she had already been doing in the two-dimensional plane in the lithographs *Tempos de um Desenho* (Times of a Drawing, 1952) and with which she would continue to experiment in later works, as we will see. The works *Equilíbrio* and *Tensão e Expansão* also evoke and render three-dimensional drawings by Mary Vieira. Without a base, they are formed by circular or semicircular structures that repeat and balance each other. The volume of the works is given by the space itself. In a letter to Arthur Profili, Mary Vieira explains how they should be placed: in the case of the former, "the straight lines should be in a position parallel to the base; the latter should be placed in such a way as to create a balance with the

---

48

Mário Pedrosa, "A Bienal de cá pra lá", in *Mário Pedrosa Arte – Ensaios*, org. Lorenzo Mammi (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2015), 485.

49

Fatima Morethy Couto, *Por uma vanguarda nacional. A crítica brasileira em busca de uma identidade artística (1940 – 1960)*, (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2004).

50

Another version of this work, completed in the same year, in stainless steel and with larger dimensions, can be found in the Isisuf collection, in the Belloli-Vieira archive, in Milan. Later, in 1981, the sculpture was transformed into a monument, titled *Monovolume: Liberdade e Equilíbrio* (Monovolume: Freedom and Balance), which was installed in Belo Horizonte.

51

The original quotes in Portuguese read: "as retas deveriam ficar em posição paralela à base"; "...em balanço sobre as duas espirais maiores." Mary Vieira, "Carta a Arthur Profili" [Letter to Arthur Profili], May 18, 1955, Mary Vieira Dossier, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation.

fig. 4

Mary Vieira, *Cubo em Espaços Abertos*, 1952, white lacquered metal and wooden base. 15x25x45 cm. MAM-RJ collection (destroyed in a fire). MAM-RJ archive photograph, Mary Vieira dossier.

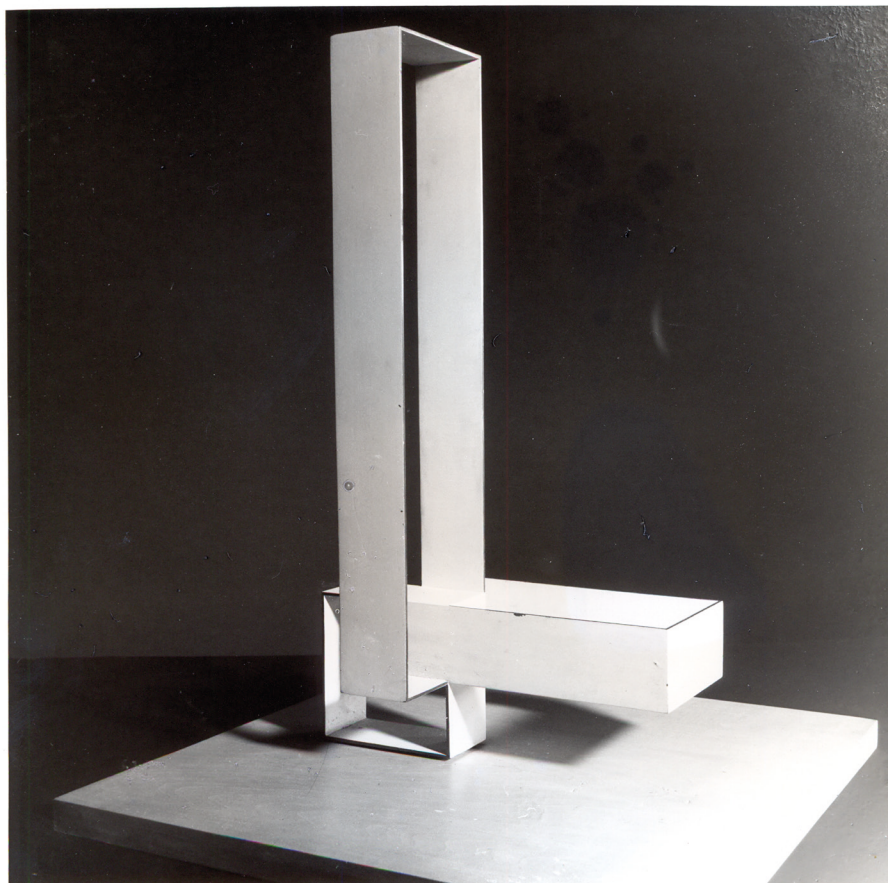


fig. 5

Mary Vieira, *Coluna Centripetal*, 1953, chromed steel, 200x45 cm. MAM-RJ Collection (disappeared). MAM-RJ archive photograph, Mary Vieira dossier.

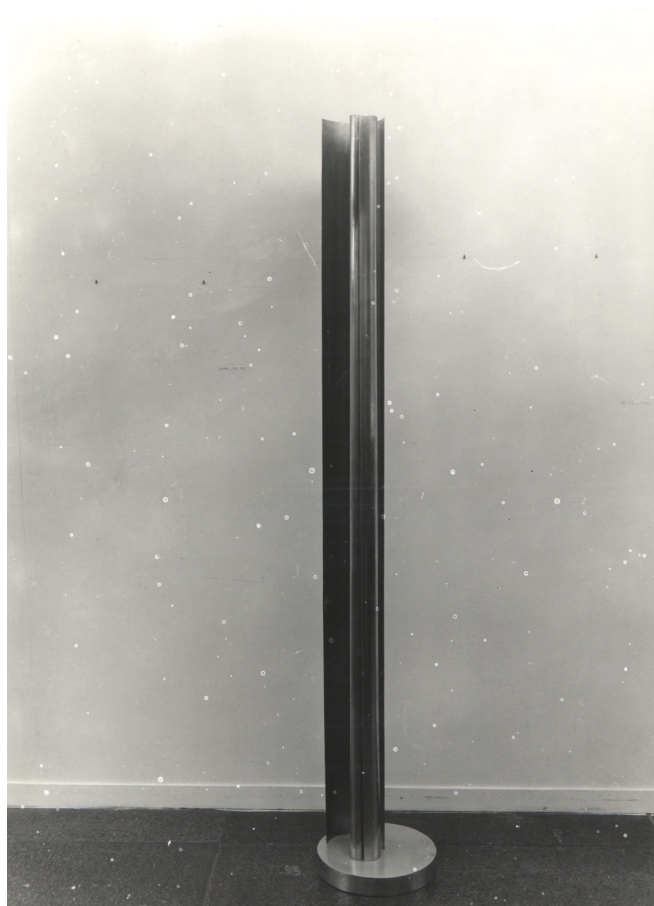




fig. 6  
Mary Vieira, *Tensão e expansão*,  
1952/1953, nickel silver,  
25x25x15 cm. Isisuf Collection,  
Belloli-Vieira archive, Milan.

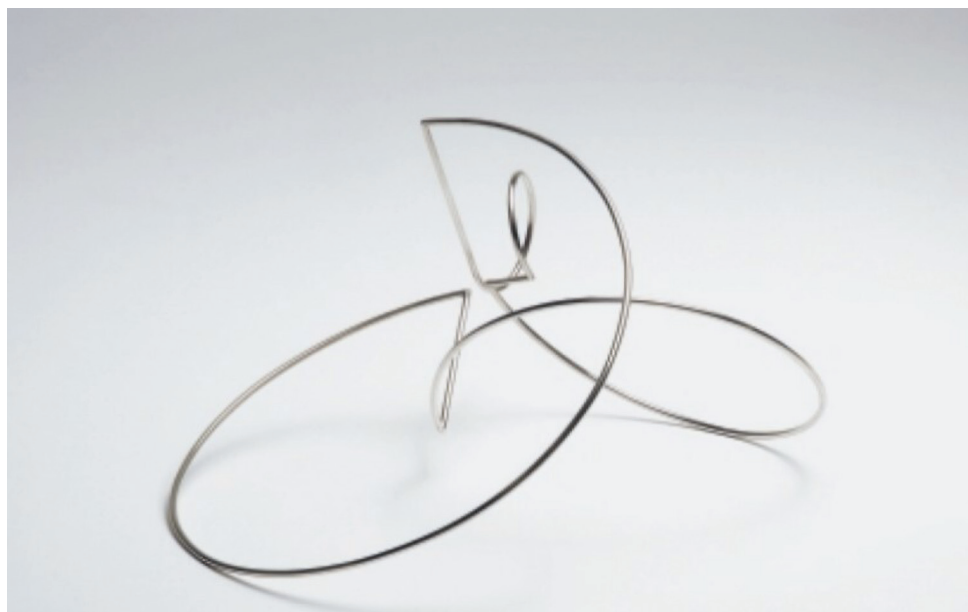
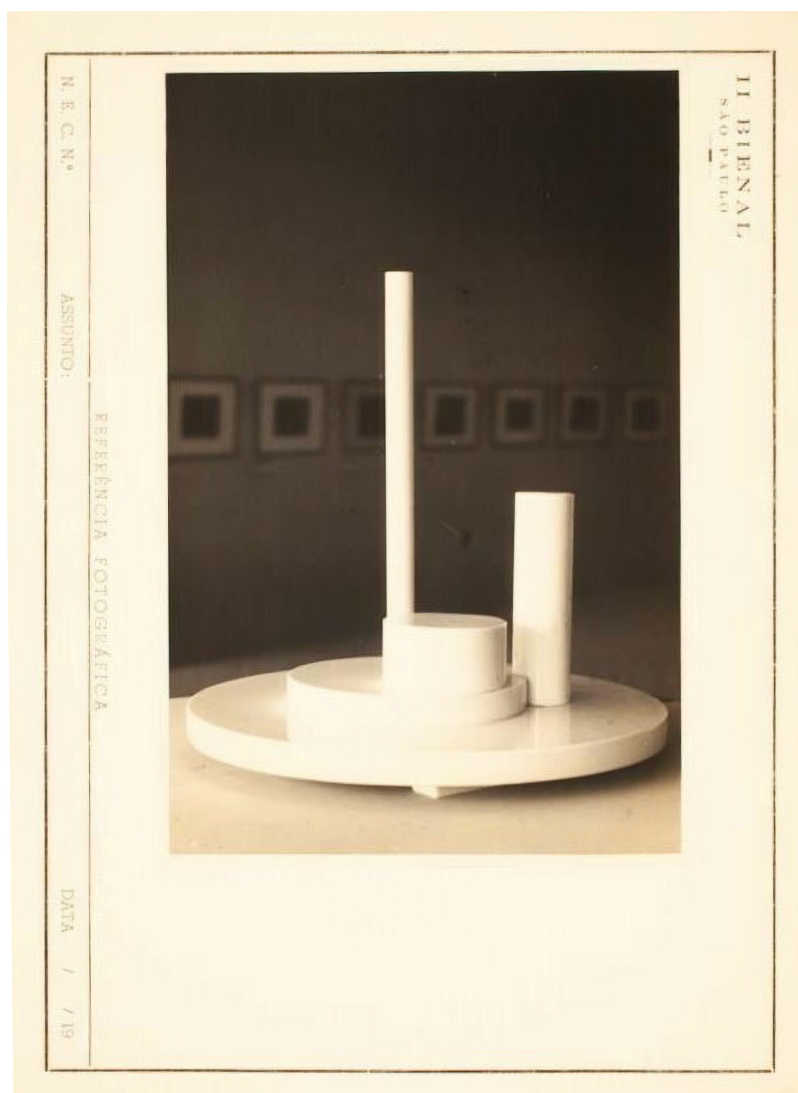


fig. 7  
Mary Vieira, *Ponto de Encontro*,  
1952/1953, marble. Photograph  
from the Wanda Svevo  
Historical Archive, São Paulo  
Biennial Foundation, 02BSP\_  
AMPLI\_00324\_p01.



two larger spirals”.<sup>51</sup> In the work *Ponto de Encontro*, circular and cylindrical structures demonstrate a fundamental principle behind Mary Vieira’s artistic ideas: the structuring of space as a product of the form that arises from the different durations of motion.<sup>52</sup>

In 1961, Mary Vieira was the representative of the sculpture category in the Brazilian delegation at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Paris Biennale, presenting two larger versions of *Coluna Centripetal* and *Tensão e Expansão* in brass and aluminium respectively.<sup>53</sup> The latter work had also been exhibited by Vieira in the Swiss section of the 5<sup>th</sup> Sculpture Biennale in the city of Antwerp, Belgium at Parc Middelheim,, in 1959.<sup>54</sup> The sculptor also designed a monumental version of *Coluna Centripetal* for the Three Powers Plaza in Brasília, which would have been twelve metres high, but it ended up not being completed.

Despite the economic difficulties faced in order to exhibit at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, Mary Vieira also participated in its third iteration, in 1955, encouraged by Sérgio Milliet and Max Bill. In a letter to Milliet,<sup>55</sup> she reports that her financial condition had prevented her from undertaking the new projects that she would like to present at the event and, for that reason, she had not registered. She goes on to say that, nonetheless, Milliet’s letter reminding her to register had lifted her spirits. She then asks him to advise her whether she should present works in the sculpture or engraving section, with her two books of lithographs titled *Tempos de um Desenho*. She explains that in Switzerland they considered the books as one of her best works and that she would only like to send them if she had a chance of winning the award in the category, something that would depend on the jury and not the inherent quality of the work. She also says that she would send the books to Milliet, for she also wanted the critic’s opinion on this work. In his reply, Milliet insists that she register for the category that she prefers, but that she should do so urgently. He also affirms that the jury had not even been determined; therefore, it was difficult to assess whether it would be possible to win an award.<sup>56</sup> The artist ended up opting to exhibit sculptures and, according to the correspondence, the shipment of the pieces, which were to arrive in São Paulo by the end of April, would be under the responsibility of Itamaraty through the intermediation of Wladimir Murtinho, the Brazilian diplomat in Switzerland. Nevertheless, in May, Mary Vieira wrote to Profili saying that Murtinho still had not received a response from Itamaraty for the dispatch of the works. Faced with the proximity of the event and fearing that the works would not arrive on time, she paid the insurance herself and shipped them with freight payable, thus trusting in the “private friendship of Ciccilo Matarazzo and Yolanda”. To reduce costs, she decided to send only four works, and not the five planned, risking “[...] sending them without boxes, because it would be too expensive – maternally I wrapped them in cardboard and follow them with a restless heart, hoping that they arrive in perfect condition, just like I packed them”. The artist also reinforced the importance of her participation when writing that “Max Bill was very excited about the set that I sent and advised me not to miss this Biennial”. She concluded the letter by explaining how the works should be assembled and ask-

---

52

A version of this work, in anodized aluminum, is found in the Isisuf collection. See Mattar, *Mary Vieira: o tempo do movimento*.

53

The artists replicated and renamed the sculptures *Coluna Centripetal, segunda variação* (Centripetal Column, Second Variation, 1957) in brass (300x50 cm) and *Ritmo no Espaço nº 2, Tensão-expansão* (Rhythm in Space No. 2, Tension-Expansion, 1951-1959) in aluminum (1.60x2.50x2.50 m) respectively.

54

Small versions of these two works, in stainless steel and nickel silver respectively, are found in the Isisuf collection.

55

Mary Vieira, “Carta a Sérgio Milliet” [Letter to Sérgio Milliet], February 22, 1955, Mary Vieira Dossier, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation.

56

Sérgio Milliet, “Carta a Mary Vieira” (Letter to Mary Vieira), March 3, 1955, Mary Vieira Dossier, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation.

57

“Carta a Arthur Profili” [Letter to Arthur Profili], May 18, 1955.

ing Profili himself to take care of it.<sup>57</sup> Itamaraty ended up not bearing the costs and Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho took responsibility for the air freight, thus leaving the artist indebted to him.<sup>58</sup>

The four works by Mary Vieira exhibited at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo followed the same direction as the plastic research that the artist had already been employing. Completed in 1953, *Harmonia entre Seis Volumes* (Harmony Between Six Volumes), is composed of parallelepipeds, cubes, and rectangles. The work exists in dialogue with *Ponto de Encontro*, which was exhibited in the previous edition, exploring the structuring of space through horizontal and vertical axes like the earlier work.

*Luz-metal 1* and *Luz-metal 2* (Light-Metal 1) and (Light-Metal 2, 1954-1955) consist of aluminum plates of approximately two metres arranged on twenty-four-centimetre square wooden bases, in which slits allow light to pass through, thus forming drawings of motion in curves and straight lines. These drawings are the same as the two series of eight lithographs *Tempos de um Desenho*, which the artist had completed between 1952 and 1953 and published by Spiral, an important Swiss concretist publisher.<sup>59</sup> In these works, Mary Vieira developed another foundation of her plastic project: that motion is a visible mark in time. These drawings are present in several of her works, such as in *Coluna Centripetal*, as previously mentioned, and later in *Polivolume: Ponto de Encontro* (Polyvolume: Meeting Point, 1970). *Luz-metal 1* and *2* dialogue directly with *Luz-espaco: Tempo de um movimento* (Light-Space: Time of a Motion, 1953-1955),<sup>60</sup> a square metal plate placed diagonally under a wooden support, perforated so that the light forms a curved drawing.

Finally, *Grupos de Colunas* (Groups of Columns, 1953) features five small symmetrically opposed rods representing ascending and descending motion, which are arranged in a spiral shape and screwed onto a circular base. The work gives continuity to the artist's research related to motion, thus emphasising the idea of rhythm. In a letter to Profili, Mary Vieira says that the public should be asked "not to touch, but to limit themselves to seeing with their eyes".<sup>61</sup> This sculpture was also part of the exhibitions: *Brasilien Baut* – in Zurich and at the Mosbroich museum, in Germany, both in 1954 – and *Konkrete Kunst*, held in August 1960 in Zurich, which featured works by several concrete artists of different nationalities, among them the Brazilians Franz Weissmann, Amilcar de Castro, Lygia Clark, and Willys de Castro and the Swiss Max Bill and Vantongerloo, as well as artists considered pioneers in plastic research on motion, such as Giacomo Balla, Kazimir Malevich, and Wassily Kandinsky.

The artist was hoping for the quick return of her works exhibited at the Bienal, since, in Switzerland, two important collectors had expressed an interest in them. We do not have data on whether these sales actually occurred, but three of the works exhibited at the event are in private collections in Basel: *Luz-metal 1*, *Luz-metal 2*, and *Grupo de Colunas*, later respectively titled *Tempos de um Movimento: luz-espaco a + b* (Times of a Motion: Light-Space A+B) and *Grupo rítmico de colunas: ascendente – descendente* (Rhythmic Group of Columns: Ascending-Descending).<sup>62</sup>

For Mary Vieira, it was precisely the idea of motion, a predominant characteristic of the works presented at the 1955 Biennial, that distanced her production from Swiss concretism and brought it closer to Brazilian constructivism:

---

58

Mary Vieira, "Carta a Arthur Profili" [Letter to Arthur Profili], n.d., Mary Vieira Dossier, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation.

59

Vieira even considered presenting and selling the books at the Biennial, but she abandoned the idea, since the low value of the Brazilian currency compared to the Swiss franc would make sales difficult.

60

The photograph of this work can be accessed at: <https://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/obra24704/luz-espaco-tempo-de-um-movimento>

61

Vieira, "Carta a Arthur Profili" (Letter to Arthur Profili), May 18, 1955.

62

Mattar, *Mary Vieira: o tempo do movimento*.

I soon found good acceptance in Switzerland, [...]I was never interested in using the concretist label for myself. My constructivism had been born here, in Brazil, and was immediately different from theirs, which was static, due to the constant presence of an idea of motion, of sensibility united with reason.<sup>63</sup>

In this quote, she seems to incorporate her own form of neo-concretist discourse, perhaps as a way of legitimising herself, since these ideas were being well accepted and disseminated in Brazil.<sup>64</sup> However, the artist did not see the separation between concretism and neo-concretism as significant, as is clear in the interview she gave to Ferreira Gullar in 1959, the same year as the publication of the Neo-Concrete Manifesto in the *Jornal do Brasil*, which was signed by Ferreira Gullar, along with Reynaldo Jardim, Theon Spanudius, Amílcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, and Lygia Pape:

“Is concrete art dead?”

“It depends on what is meant by concrete art. If concrete art is conceived as a way for a person to realize what they are intimately, it is not dead. Dead are the false concepts of concrete art.”

“For you, what is concrete art?”

“It is the realisation of an idea that did not exist before in the material world. A non-deductive expression that is for this very reason realised directly outside the artist. Concrete art does not allude to any reality outside of man but to his interior. Nor can it be restricted to optical effects.”

“What about Tachisme?”

[...]“It is the opposite of concrete art as I understand it – and which is close to what you call ‘neo-concrete’ – because this art, in the moment that it seeks an inner order, proposes a new reality, a new world. I believe that we can only escape the chaos in which we find ourselves internally, and this is essential because it is not mankind’s destiny to live in chaos. If we artists do not contribute to giving inner satisfaction to mankind, we have failed in our mission. In this sense, I believe in the social function of the artist and I see art as the seed of social renewal”.<sup>65</sup>

In defining concrete art, Mary Vieira reconsiders the conceptualisation of Max Bill from 1936, based on the ideas of Theo van Doesburg, that concrete art does not start from the real, refining it until it reaches abstraction, but from pure forms themselves, of colour, line, surface, and plane. In saying that concrete art cannot be reduced to optical effects alone, Mary Vieira seems to want to distance herself from the kinetic art movement, which was beginning to emerge in Europe with works marked by optical games, such as those of Vasarely and Julio Le Parc. Finally, by criticising Tachisme, the sculptor adheres to the dominant discourses, formulated by the constructivist movement, that art should not mirror chaotic reality, but be purposeful and have an ordering animus.

In conclusion, although the artist was at the beginning of her career, the works exhibited at the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo already presented fundamental concepts of her aesthetic project and corroborated her recognition. The importance of these works for Mary Vieira’s career is evident due to some of them having later been executed by the artist in other materials and sizes; appreciated by

---

63

Roberto Pontual, “O nascer da forma”, *Jornal do Brasil*, August 27, 1977.

64

It is important to highlight that this discourse was constructed by her ‘a posteriori’, at the end of the 1960s, in interviews with the Brazilian press.

65

Mary Vieira, “Arte é semente de Renovação Social”, interview given to Ferreira Gullar, *Jornal do Brasil*, Literary Supplement, October 17, 1959, 10 MAM Rio de Janeiro Archive, Mary Vieira Archive.

renowned agents in the Brazilian art world, such as Mário Pedrosa, Max Bill, Sérgio Milliet, Carmen Portinho, and Reidy; exhibited in other international exhibitions; included in collections; disseminated in the press and in exhibition catalogues (*Tensão e Expansão* was even published on postcards); and in one case, *Cubos em Espaços Abertos*, being transformed into a monument.

Nonetheless, exhibiting in Brazil while in Switzerland was not an easy task, especially for a young sculptor who did not have many resources at her disposal. Sculpture is a particularly onerous art, mainly with respect to transportation costs. The artist's correspondence with Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho and Arthur Profili exposes these difficulties and demonstrates that her participation took place thanks to an extensive support network, which involved agents linked to both MAM São Paulo and MAM Rio de Janeiro. Such contacts also endorsed her work in the Brazilian art scene. Participation in the Bienais de São Paulo, exhibiting production aligned with concretist aspects, proved to be fundamental for promoting and building Mary Vieira's artistic recognition, in addition to constituting a means for the artist to maintain connections with Brazil.

### Final Considerations

The central aim of this article was, through the first São Paulo Biennials (1951-1965), to reflect on the building of recognition for award-winning women sculptors, by focusing on the cases of the Brazilian Maria Martins and Mary Vieira. In the first part, I argued that although there were few women awarded at the São Paulo Biennials if compared to men, the awards played an important role in the recognition processes of the women sculptors, thus helping their projection at different moments in their careers.

In the second part, I analysed the participation of Maria Martins and Mary Vieira in the first São Paulo Biennials. I discuss the works presented, showing how they deployed different strategies for building recognition that were aligned to certain contexts and that could change due to the journeys made by the artists. I sought to demonstrate that artistic recognition occurred in distinct ways in different locations and was built based on the coordination of networks of agents at the local and international levels.

The São Paulo Biennial represented for Maria Martins and Mary Vieira a privileged place for building prestige. This is because, in addition to the visibility given by the awards, the events also helped the sculptors to build and maintain international contact networks, which connected people and institutions and circulated ideas and works. Thus, both the awards and the sociability networks constituted and activated in the context of the event operated as important instances of recognition, by constructing judgments that may or may not have been in line with local art criticism. Such judgments are permeated by gender dynamics that are combined, among other factors, with differences in race, class, capacity for internationalisation, presence in certain contact networks, and aesthetic movements. Finally, if on the one hand the São Paulo Biennials, as an event, legitimising sphere, and social network, played a central role in the recognition of the artists, Maria Martins and Mary Vieira also helped the event and the country to project itself on the international arts map, by expanding sociability networks and intermediating contacts between Brazil, the United States, and European countries.

### Author's Biography

Marina Mazze Cerchiaro is a postdoctoral fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (USP). She holds a PhD in Art History (USP, 2020) and a Mphil in Brazilian Studies (USP, 2016). Marina's research focuses on Brazilian women's sculptors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her Phd thesis was

awarded by the Brazilian's Committee of Art History in 2022. Her latest publications include "Felicía Leirner, Pola Rezende et Liuba Wolf: des transferts entre la France et le Brésil au xxe siècle" (2023) and "Maria Martins: between the Bienal de São Paulo and the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro" (2022).