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Diagonais

By Tiago Mesquita

At the beginning of the 20th century, when abstraction did not even have a name, the diagonal was a frequent topic of discussion amongst those who were keen to eliminate the representation of the visible world from the canvas. Different artists pondered the role of such a line orientation in a “non-objective” art of the future. In his *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), Wassily Kandinsky theorized about the diagonal as a type of straight line, a possible way of representing movement, something between the ascending vertical line and the resting horizontal line. In 1924, the controversy around the use of diagonals divided long-standing friends Piet Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg. The dispute would implode the De Stijl group and neoplasticism.

In this exhibition, we see a display of tangential lines that try to establish possible relations between different artworks that have a morphological element in common: the diagonal.

Sonia Delaunay, who features in the show, is one of the pioneers of non-representative art. She conceived the diagonal as an axis able to avoid the naturalistic representation of gravity, whilst also thinking about the relationship between colors and their orbiting contrasts. Delaunay came up with a spherical spatiality, of simultaneous contrasts, where her vibrant colors are neither figure nor background. It was her way of establishing multiple relations without setting a fixed point of view.

In the last few years, the diagonal section of the plane has been a recurring presence in the paintings of Beatriz Milhazes. Her formulations clearly echo some of the modernist issues raised at the beginning of the 20th century. The artist brings together distinct, and often antithetical, elements. *Memórias do Futuro II* [Memories of the Future] (2023) is a new painting created for the exhibition. Diagonals here function mainly as cuts. They cross the surface of the painting, imprinting movement on the circles, textures and patterns that permeate the plane. The forms seem to be rotating, evoking the skirt of a dancer or a samba circle, in spatial organizations that recall the radicalism of geometric abstraction and choreographic orders of a typically Brazilian repertoire, elements revisited throughout all of Milhazes' practice. It is a complex composition, made of dissonant harmonies and discontinuous rhythms, combining disparate terms.

Relevo Branco [White Relief] (2010), a work by Emanuel Araújo, also deals with diagonal lines on a surface split into non-identical but similar halves. Drawing on the formal repertoire of geometric constructivist art, his relief is made of several corners: alternated sharp strips and pointy triangles that evoke the practice of Yoruba artists. The elements intersect and often clash tensely, in skewed trails from one margin to the other via mismatches, tangents and overlaying.

Since the 20th century avant-gardes, several artists have been exploring the use of oblique lines to investigate non-conventional spaces. In *Untitled* (1058), Judith Lauand adds scarlet lines to a dark background, like a nocturnal abstraction. The traces suggest a space wider than the space imposed by the monochromatic superficiality of the canvas. The space seems to get wider when we link one straight line to the other, as if light revealed new dimensions. This spatiality amplifies the perceptive utopia of art at the time, when finding a new spatiality also meant to deal with the promises that the world seemed to offer. In this context, the diagonal represents a space to be discovered in a moment of great expectations.

Looking at the use that Wanda Pimentel makes of the diagonal perspective in the painting *Untitled* (1968), from the series *Envolvimentos* [Involvements], we notice a very different approach to the work of Lauand. The image's depth is fixed by a white strip, perhaps a skirting board, which crosses the work from left to right, up to a quadrilateral marked with an x. The strip does not amplify the space but marks a small and claustrophobic field, mostly when compared with the feet that we see above and below. The painting is from 1968, a particularly tense year in Brazil, a time of increased violence perpetrated by the civil-military dictatorship, after all the optimism from the previous decade had faded.

Works such as *Diagonais* [Diagonals] (2023) by Jac Leirner, *Pró Labore* (2013) by Iran do Espírito Santo and *Gibi* [Comic] (1968) by Raymundo Colares also look at the technical and formal modernist repertoire with a certain critical distance

and pop humor. Stemming from different urban contexts, such as Rio de Janeiro at the end of the 1960s and São Paulo in the 21st century, these artists draw on languages inherited from the avant-gardes but without the same aspirations that were present at the beginning of the last century.

Despite the different approaches, all three artists use straight shapes, such as trapezoids, rectangles and crossed lines. However, in contrast to constructivists, their subject is no longer the abstract project but the re-processing of everyday things, rescued from commercial circulation. Jac Leirner intersects two metal beams covered in colorful stickers from different contexts, reminiscent of Malevich or Rodchenko. Here, there is no metaphysics; it is painting by other means, where the remains of mass culture are collected and re-signified.

Whilst Leirner works with the leftovers of consumption, Iran do Espírito Santo makes use of signs of labor, folding constructivist shapes with carbon paper pay-slips. The work is infused with a sense of unfolding, a movement required to survive on low wages, but also with the relationship between production and labor in a bureaucratic society. Raymundo Colares brings together the rhythms of geometric abstraction and the graphics and meanings of comics. In this process, the heroic tone of the avant-gardes is understood via critical operations.

M.C. (Pink Panther) (2017), a tapestry by Rivane Neuenschwander, also departs from a pop repertoire: the ludicrous traps that often appear in cartoons. The artist creates a pyramidal geometric scheme from a zenithal perspective. Placed on the floor, the textile surface leads our gaze to the black square in the center. However, in an exhibition room, the perspective changes. The illusion does not happen, and the perspective becomes an ironic trap. The artist appropriates both a canonical spatial structure and its cartoon-like interpretation.

In other exhibited works, the diagonal is the result of obliquely inclining parts of the sculptures so they may stand upright. In the relief *Untitled* (2017) by Carlos Fajardo, a glass sheet is overlaid with felt. The result is a delicate balance between a rigid and transparent material and a soft and opaque fabric. Both are supported between the wall and the floor. As such, we cannot see one without the other, whilst it is impossible not to see the reflection of the surroundings spreading over the glass pane. The work is made of these unstable and indirect pile-ups.

The sculpture *Untitled* (2002) by Ivens Machado is also tense. The stretched diagonal defines the shape of the iron between the two concrete ends. In fact, the furrowed ends insinuates fleshy bodily relationships in the cold material. As if something were pulling from one edge to the other. Here, there is something akin to a muscular stretch. The same carnal dimension also appears in the geometric structure *Plátano power bottom* [Plantain Power Bottom] (2017) by Engel Leonardo. The supported triangular wooden bars adopt the likeness of the male body when connected to a bunch of bananas at the bottom of them. Even though the artist is working with structural elements, he is also giving us an erotic wink.

Finally, in the works of Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe and Hércules Barsotti, the diagonal occupation of the surface is rhythmic. In *Expansão Gradua* [Gradual Expansion] (1973), Barsotti uses the shape of the canvas to suggest an optic volume through the chromatic variation of similar elements. In turn, Sheroanawe's *Hi i hipe amakuripe* (2021) uses the effect of a luminous and colorful trail that wraps round the trunk of a tree. The zigzag defines blueish triangles alternated on an axis. The colors turn the representation of nature into a musical phenomenon, as if the description had been turned into metrics to be presented in verse or song. The sense of formal reiteration is structural and metaphorical. Representation would find a different mode of perceiving phenomena.

Currently, the discussion around the spatial and formal issues of art, given justified reservations, has lost its centrality. Nonetheless, I believe that the discussion around the persistence of art's rudimentary elements and their variations allow us to understand how images continue to bring new meanings to our experiences.