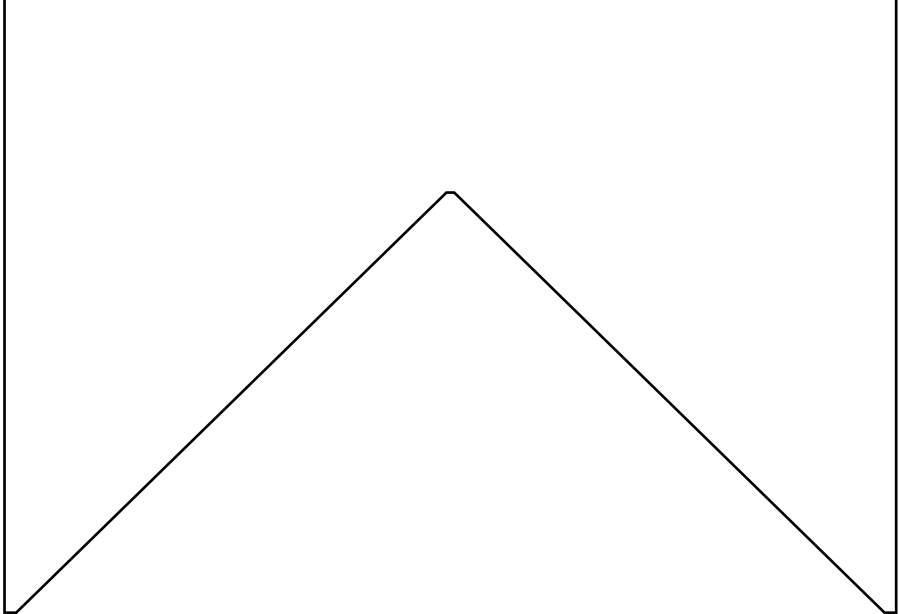


Selected Press and Texts

**Rubem Valentim**



Mendes  
Wood  
DM

*My plastic-visual-signographic language is linked to the profound mystic values of Afro-Brazilian culture (mestizo-animist-fetishist). With the weight of Bahia on my shoulders — a lived culture; with Black blood coursing through my veins — atavism; with eyes wide open, observing what happens in the world — the contemporary; creating my sign-symbols, I seek to turn an enchanted, magic, mystical world that continuously flows inside me into a visual language. The substrate comes from the earth (...) Plastic-verbal-visual-sound language. Multi-sensorial language. The Brazilian feel.*

Rubem Valentim, Manifesto ainda que Tardio, 1976

In the 1960s, Rubem Valentim set up the basis for his 'signograms': an alphabet made of fifteen sign-symbols centered on Oxalá's holy grail, which contains the key to the artist's poetics. It consists of a symbolism founded on objects used by orishas, Candomblé entities, such as 'abebês [hand fans with Oxum and Iemanjá mirrors], paxorós [Oxalá's cane], oxés [Xangô's axe], and ofás [Oxóssi's arch]...' The discipline of the invention reflects a desire to establish a 'Brazilian line-marking' [in Portuguese riscadura]: a term Valentim uses in his manifesto to replace the widely-used Anglicized word 'design', and that is essential to understanding his body of work.

The artist began his career under the blessings of Lady Mother from terreiro [Candomblé house] Axé Opô Afonjá, where he played an active role as obá. Brazilian popular culture was the basis of his poetics. However, geometry was the foundation of his aesthetic choices. It was in the pendulum of rationalization and transcendence (he used to say that his geometry was of a sensible nature) that Valentim developed his work: between the study of constructive modernity and tradition passed on from generation to generation via people's knowledge. Therefore, there is no single movement that can be attached to Valentim's production. He navigated his time experimenting with what was on offer but, at the same time, he remained faithful to his theme, his vocabulary, his personal alphabet. From a mystical point of view, drawing on his African heritage, he investigated several schools of transcendental thought around the world to come up with a structural intersection that fed his primordial source as a language that crossed cultures.

His career led him to leave Bahia for Rio de Janeiro, which was a necessary step for artists of his generation. He then lived in Italy, place of the great renaissance artists. From there, he moved to Brasília — the modernist city — that absorbed and nurtured his work. His desire was to occupy the public space<sup>1</sup> (... 'my art seeks the Space: the street, the road, the square — architectural-urban complexes. I'm still for the synthesis in art: the path to the humanization of communities'). However, the open-air museum-city almost did not benefit from such possibility. There are, of course, two large-scale works. One was produced shortly after his arrival: the mural at the Novacap building (the company charged with the city's construction); and the second, a large relief mural, white on white, at Palácio do Itamaraty [Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs], which is part of his Oxalá Temple, created for the 16th São Paulo Biennial (however, the installation with totems was only set up once, in the 1990s, by artist, curator and researcher Bené Fonteles, Valentim's friend and one of the greatest proponents of his work). Another example of a major occupation of public space is located at Praça da Sé, in São Paulo: an enormous reinforced-concrete totem titled Marco Sincretico da Cultura Afro-Brasileira [Syncretic Landmark of Afro-Brazilian Culture] that was incorporated into

the landscape. Bahia only experienced Valentim's large-scale artworks after his death with an installation located at the Museu de Arte Moderna Sculpture Park.

Even though the artist was a rigorous and prolific painter and illustrator, his poetics seem to have forced him to escape to three-dimensionality, with reliefs and altar-objects in which the artist played with light and shadow and color effects on pristine white surfaces ('I seek clarity, the light of light'). In a number of these works, the mechanisms that operate the displacement of some sections enrich the play between form and the possibility of their interpretation. The sculptural totems were created for the enjoyment of those that must move around them. They bridge the basis of his personal alphabet and dialogue with his paintings and prints as an invitation to read his production as a whole.

According to critic and curator Paulo Herkenhoff, 'Valentim's theogony appears not in the anthropomorphic representation of orishas but in the form of writing and through the comprehension of its symbolic structure'<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, his trajectory diverges from the most figurative strand of artists in Brazil and elsewhere in the Black Americas. However, this does not mean he is easily inscribed in the Brazilian concrete and neo-concrete genealogy. We can think of his work as a project looking for a method to approach the unapproachable: not by using images to translate but through geometric symbols that can put us in touch with the sacred.

Perhaps this is the most illuminating and pleasurable way of looking at his work. As a group of artworks, an exhibition can become a sentence, a visual text. A solo flight in search of a suggestive language: an act of revelation.

## Frameworks of Inquiry

A 1969 photograph of Valentim's sculpture *Objeto Emblemático 9* [Emblematic Object 9] [Fig. 1] allows for a consideration of his significance and inscrutability as an artist, introducing his proclivity for eclectic references and an iconic personal style. His artistic career coincided with a politically turbulent, yet culturally vibrant, time amidst the development of a modern national cultural framework and a network of competing aesthetic discourses, both devised domestically and adopted from abroad. Aptly labeled an "emblematic object," this acrylic-painted wood sculpture sits in the photograph's foreground on a field of grass, its object-ness laid bare, demonstrating an unmistakable verticality and a visual affinity to the religious altars that it is meant to invoke. Its symbolic references are at once readily apparent and objectively elusive.

Given the identifiable context of this setting as the newly built capital of Brasília, the unique conditions of this city as a utopian project are called into question. Brasília embodies a constructivist, or built, identity and the remoteness, the absurdity even, of its ambitious urban dream are as palpable as are its symbolization and literal projection of modernity onto the terra nova of the central plateau. A passenger jet not only appears in the background of this photograph like an unambiguous beacon of the industrial progress and physical remoteness of the aptly named "capital of hope," which is itself designed to appear like an airplane when seen from above, but seems also to occupy a substantial portion of the compositional space. Valentim's Brasília phase – the longest of his career – marks a spatial reconsideration referred to by the influential Brazilian critic Frederico Moraes as a "semantic leap" to three-dimensional production.<sup>1</sup> He contends that this shift could only have happened in Brasília, a plateau city where the urban space is unique in its total perceptibility.<sup>2</sup> The unknown photographer – perhaps Valentim himself – appears to have internalized the deeper connotations of the artist's conceptual project and sought to make them visually explicit by rendering the national context and international reach of his and Brazil's own rationalist, utopian constructive project. Its postcolonial racial connotations are as clear to the informed viewer as the sunlight that illuminates this spiritual object.

The archetypal motivation behind Valentim's body of work was his deep spiritual involvement with the Afro-Brazilian animist religion of Candomblé and his free-associative expression of its abstract visual forms, both in the actual shapes of its liturgical implements and through a reconceptualization of its symbolism. The significance of Valentim's deeply guiding, lifelong spiritual faith, while almost always invoked in discussions of his art, is rarely examined in any depth aside from being a token, if prodigious, source of his creative motivation. He was a *pai-de-santo*, or priest, of Salvador's famed *Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá terreiro*, the all-encompassing campus of worship, as well as a son (initiated follower) of *Omulu*, said to be the protector *orixá* (spirit god)<sup>3</sup> of the poor and oppressed.<sup>4</sup> Valentim's personal commitment to Afro-Brazilian popular religion, especially in conjunction with the transformations that these various faiths took, is key to understanding his artwork within its various contexts and demands scrutiny. By historicizing the particular social, political and cultural developments of and related to Valentim's career and religious conviction, we can reconcile the disparities inherent in the multiple realms in which he operated and draw conclusions about how and why he acted to combine them into one lifelong artistic project.

In order to elucidate Valentim's significance within, in-between and beyond the numerous schools of art and philosophy in which he simultaneously operated, the normative binaries between them must be reconsidered. Central dichotomies of inquiry include the distinction between so-called "Fine" and "Folk" Art, the division of abstract and figural (representational) art, the idea of a clear Brazilian, Afro-Brazilian or Latin American artistic style as opposed to that in which content is universal or explicitly international and, finally, the bifurcation of religious art with a specific dogma and that imbued with personal, indefinite spiritual subjectivity. His oeuvre represents an amalgamation of, rather than a stylistic or formal struggle between, the concepts of art as a universalist experiment in form and as a deeply spiritual endeavor with a clear racial and national cultural self-awareness.

### Artistic Beginnings

Valentim was born in 1922 in the city of Salvador, capital of the northeastern province of Bahia.<sup>5</sup> As the receiver of the greatest number of Brazil's slave population, it became the center of Afro-Brazilian culture.<sup>6</sup> From a young age, Valentim began using crude homemade paints to create figurative and landscape works on paper and cardboard, taking after the regionalist style of his friend and early mentor, the local wall-painter Artur "Come Só."<sup>7</sup> His first encounter with contemporary art was at the *Exposição de Artistas Nacionais e Estrangeiros* [Exhibition of National and Foreign Artists] organized by the Rio-based writer and journalist

Marques Rebelo at the public library in Salvador.<sup>8</sup> The show included works by, among others, Lasar Segall, Cândido Portinari, Emiliano di Cavalcanti and Aldo Bonadei. Brazilian masters of the first Modernist generation, they dealt prominently and positively for the first time with black Brazilian subjects. Valentim began to devote himself to the arts only in 1948, at 26 years of age.<sup>9</sup> While working towards a bachelor's degree in Journalism earned in 1953 from the University of Bahia, he became deeply enthralled with art history, poetry, the humanities and, most importantly, black culture and the folk art of Bahia and the Brazilian northeast.<sup>10</sup> He participated in the arts renewal movement initiated in Bahia in 1946 by the pioneers of Modern art in the state, including artists such as Carlos Bastos, Mário Cravo Júnior and Jenner Augusto, who shared a commitment to the visual expression of a modern Bahia inspired by traditional folklore.

In his childhood, Valentim painted nativity scenes and produced *ex-votos*, the carved wooden objects donated as votive offerings in abundance at churches throughout the northeast [Fig. 2]. Taking the form of the body parts they are meant to bestow miraculous cures upon, these objects are plainly figurative and demonstrate that, from a young age, Valentim's conception of art was explicitly religious. Valentim's earliest paintings demonstrate a clear resemblance to the sort of international 'naïve' technique to which, justly, he is so rarely compared in his later stylistic maturity.

The control and critical self-awareness Valentim soon possessed is presented as early as 1951, in *Casal Popular* [Popular Couple] [Fig. 3]. With a certain flatness and paring down of forms into simple, square fields of color, two illustrative tendencies are apparent and prove significant to the development of his iconic later style. The painting's bucolic, figural subject matter codifies

it as ‘popular’ under typical notions of folk art, with the simple women of the land involved in everyday affairs. A distinctive spatial approach can be identified, however, with his compositional innovation apparent in the unmistakably geometric background that is almost uncomfortably shallow to the point of confronting the viewer with a perspectival foreshortening and a near total effacement of the real world space on which this everyday scene is predicated.

According to José Guilherme Merquior, Valentim would later complete his path from canvas to relief and then to the third-dimensional plane of sculpture. Making the connection to Candomblé explicit, Merquior says that he arrived at the “emblematic object” as a sort of substitutive sculpture for the Nagô (Yoruba) altar,<sup>12</sup> from which Afro-Brazilian examples are derived and often blended with Catholic icons, indicative of the process of syncretism pervasive to Afro-Brazilian religious practice at large [Fig. 4]. Many spiritually motivated Afro-Brazilian artists make visual reference to such structures. They represent one strain of the alternative Afro-Brazilian artistic tradition to which Valentim has a deep conceptual relation, but remains critically and formally self-separated from in his rationalist constructivism.

Ronaldo Rego (b. 1935), for example, shares with Valentim the characteristic archetypal abstraction of forms from the iconography and instruments of the cults of Afro-Brazilian religions. Rego’s diorama-like sculptures embrace a symbolic three-tone color scheme, with black meant to represent the potency of life, white signifying the act of life arising from this potency and red indicating life itself in all its fullness.<sup>13</sup> The resulting “tableaux-objects” like *Oratório* [Oratory] [Fig. 5], with a clear reference to actual Afro-Brazilian oratories [Fig. 4] embrace the inherent geometric forms of Afro-Brazilian faiths that can be identified in the semi-circular shapes and especially the totemic, triangular handles of the shrine, in a manner similar to that of Valentim’s works. Rego’s project diverges notably from Valentim’s high-Modernist brand of geometric abstraction, which relies upon a self-awareness of the figure-ground relationship that is negated by Rego’s more three-dimensional altars and the informality of their postmodern assemblage aesthetic.

This notion of assemblage is, in fact, embodied in the ritual shrines of Afro-Brazilian religions to which Valentim’s abstracted images make explicit visual allusions. The *Gongá* (also *Congá*) shrine of Umbanda demonstrates itself as a direct visual source in the geometric, totemic and symbolically colored arrangements it demonstrates through diagrammatic symbols and innately geometric wrought-iron implements. A *gongá* for Exu shows this clearly in its many trident forms [Fig. 6]. The *Candomblé peji*,<sup>14</sup> a similarly used communal altar, such this example devoted to Xangô, the ruler of fire, thunder and male virility [Fig. 7], demonstrates the geometric double axe form representative of this orixá, a prominent sign in many of Valentim’s works.

Valentim’s body of work must be understood as an intricate and interconnected part of the broader regional and national recapitulation of the deep phenomenological divide between the realms of “folk” art and international Modernism. This break with tradition and staunch shift towards international trends of non-objectivity was epitomized by the Concrete movement, the dominant abstract school in 1950s in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, which remained, by declaration, free of any and all external representational associations. Referred to by Moraes as the first abstract painter in Bahia, Valentim’s operation within or at least in close relation

o the Concrete trends of mathematical rationality and the absolute denial of reference to the natural world present cause for concern, given his ‘folk’ origins and animist beliefs under the auspices of Candomblé, which posited an inherent spiritual essence in all things.

Ferreira Gullar notes that for the Brazilian Concrete artists, the reduction of representational symbols to the purity of their own material not only perpetuated the problem of representation, but exacerbated it.<sup>15</sup> Their forms, despite a total lack of external figural or symbolic allusion, remained on a background of representation and thus continued to play the role of the figure.<sup>16</sup> For the Neo-Concrete artists, mobilized by Gullar’s 1959 Neo-Concrete Manifesto that called for a break from the excessive rationalism of the Concrete movement, this ambivalence towards the “object” would eventually lead to conceptual non-object-based experiments in the attempt to discover true non-representational art.<sup>17</sup> Similarly for Valentim, this spatial dilemma was an experimental and phenomenological blessing in disguise, which would later motivate his experiments in relief and three-dimensional sculptural form, distancing him from the conceptual and performance-based Neo-Concrete movement that embraced the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which emphasized the body as the primary place of knowing the world.

Speaking to this notion of depth, Morais noted that before his return to painting, after focusing on reliefs and objects (sculptures) for most of the 1970s, the early 1980s represented a clear distinction in Valentim’s work between background and surface.<sup>18</sup> Morais notes the use of bold and flat colors and a sense of the figures having been cut and placed onto the canvas. This is clearly visible in such examples as *Emblema Carvanvático* [Carnaval Emblem] (1980) [Fig. 8]. It is a carefully delineated and brightly colored multipart composition with distinct planar divisions in which the circular, emblem-like shapes and red trident (of Exu) appear to rest atop the yellow mid-ground, which itself floats atop a receding black background.

I suggest that this figure-ground relationship can even be identified in its incipient stages in *Casal Popular*. The rectangular red, blue and black color patterns express the background upon which the figures (literal in their anthropomorphism) are placed. In the denial of a flattened, prototypical constructivist spatial conception in which there is to be no distinction between foreground and background, Valentim’s painterly style was, from its earliest period, at odds with the conceptual basis of Concrete art, but worked through the same perspectival paradox in its constructivism. Moreover, it can be situated as contemporaneous with that of his informal-abstract predecessors of the Concrete movement like Alfredo Volpi, whose 1950 *Ampulheta* [Hourglass] series demonstrates a similar dualism in his commitment to a folkloric northeastern symbolism and a geometric abstract style that expressed the same paradox [Fig. 9]. This affinity was accentuated by the symmetry and verticality of many of Valentim’s compositions.

It is known that Valentim was aware of Gestalt theory.<sup>19</sup> He seems to embrace its psychological effects in *Emblema Carvanvático* and other works. Gestalt refers to the form-generating capability of our senses, by which all appearances of color are legitimate, because we always experience perceptual wholes rather than isolated parts; we never see figures (or swatches of color) alone, but rather dynamic “figure-ground” relationships.<sup>20</sup> Due to its emphasis on flat abstract patterns, structural economy and implicitness, Gestalt theory became associated with

the modernist tendency toward “aestheticism,” the belief that all art is essentially abstract design.<sup>21</sup> This notion is echoed in Valentim’s devotion to the geometric aesthetic, which spans his body of work, but is qualified in its ascetic absolutism by his spiritual content.

Although it is a figurative scene, *Casal Popular* is a work approaching abstraction in its planar binary and demonstrates this tendency as intrinsic to Valentim, an autodidact with little or no exposure to such conceptual and philosophical tendencies, which were then only barely emergent in Brazil.<sup>22</sup> The figures in *Casal Popular* appear to be without feet and the dog in the center of the foreground blocks from our view the base of a large pole, which bears the likeness of a rooster. Similarly pared down in anatomy and almost geometrically divided, the picture offers an nascent model for, or even codified early instance of the feetless birds that appear in the *ferramentas*,<sup>23</sup> or ritual ‘tools’ [Fig. 10], used in to invoke the spiritual presence of Osanyin, the Candomblé orixá (spirit deity) of herbal medicine. This motif is represented on occasion in Valentim’s work. A notable example of this uniquely figural form is the *Marco Cultura Afro-Brasileira* [Mark of Afro-Brazilian Culture] (1979), a massive public sculpture in São Paulo’s Praça da Sé sculpture garden, commissioned by the city, atop which likenesses of birds rest as they often do on *ferramentas* [Fig. 11, Fig. 10].<sup>24</sup>

### Being Folk and Becoming Modern

Valentim transitioned wholeheartedly into geometric abstraction without identifying his motivation for doing so, aside from recalling that he had experimented with painting on top of the wood grain of plywood boards, in which he discovered a natural beauty.<sup>25</sup> He exhibited one abstract work at the first Fine Arts Salon of Bahia in 1949 and operated in abstract style for the rest of his career, proving his devotion to this mode of representation as the sole means of expressing his artistic vision.<sup>26</sup>

In 1970, the art critic Flávio de Aquino wrote that Valentim had arrived at a means of ‘recounting the beauty and the secret of folklore, without being folkloric.’<sup>27</sup> Aquino appears to have believed that Valentim had conceived of a means by which to express a powerful folk tradition, without exploiting it as primitive. In recounting the “beauty and secret of folklore,” however, it seems inevitable that Valentim ran the dual risk of corrupting the constructivist tradition he had adopted and the accessibility of the popular customs that informed it. Moraes asserted that in his adoption of geometric abstraction, Valentim had chosen to “disarticulate the local artistic feudalism which explored folklore for its own interests.”<sup>28</sup> His statement echoes de Aquino’s sentiment and serves as a point of departure to further explore the particular aspects of this religious folk tradition and the conceptual possibilities of abstract art that reached an apex during Valentim’s career. This is especially in the tumultuous debate that had raged since the inception of abstraction on what authenticated its non-objectivity.

The question may be asked if Valentim’s works are even truly abstract, considering the persistence of their external references. To complicate the matter, the references made by Valentim are themselves elusive in their visual embodiment of spiritual beliefs. Dilson Rodrigues Midlej, for example, asserts the ‘inappropriation’ of classifying Valentim as an abstract artist. In particular, she cites Roberto Pontual’s simultaneous identification of Valentim as an artist acting in typical abstract fashion to reduce the divinities of his religious conviction to more simple



o more simple elements of geometry, while in the same text also reinforcing the “figuration” present in his ubiquitous ‘recasting’ of the exterior world.<sup>29</sup> Through Gullar’s idea that Valentim was acting to ‘reset the problem of expression’ in artistic production,<sup>30</sup> however, we can attempt to partially reconcile this anomaly, identifying his simultaneous commitment to both efforts while negating their supposed philosophical essentialism.

### Abstraction and the 1950s Brazilian Avant-Garde

The First São Paulo Biennial, held in 1951, became a turning point in the ongoing debate between figuration and abstraction, shifting in favor of abstraction with the awarding of the grand prize for sculpture to Swiss artist Max Bill’s *Dreiteilige Einheit* [Tripartite Unity] (1948-49) [Fig. 12].<sup>31</sup> Bill’s stainless steel object was based on the principle of the continuous Möbius strip, an idea that embodied his theoretical dismissal of artistic subjectivity and intuition in favor of geometric abstraction based on rationality, mathematics and systematic constructions.<sup>32</sup> It expressed his proposal that the material aspect of a work of art was simply a form used to articulate both the object’s function and its beauty.<sup>33, 34</sup> Bill’s watershed work and its success at the biennial marked a major turning point in Brazilian art, which greatly influenced the widespread eagerness to break free from regionalism and local themes to experiment with a universal, objective language of the visual arts that embraced the globalism of nonobjective art.<sup>35</sup> By adopting the designation of a concrete art, Bill sought to delimit the field of experiences in contradiction with the eclectic manifestations of abstraction, which, in his point of view and soon that of many Brazilian avant-garde painters, not only lacked a necessary critical objectivity, but also needed to strip any subjective adherence from the forms of art.<sup>36</sup> To counteract the individualistic and allegedly nihilistic tendencies of contemporary art, concrete art was to instead be rooted directly in the immediate qualities of the materials themselves, reflecting the order of the modern industrial society out of which it was borne.<sup>37</sup>

Waldemar Cordeiro, the Italian-born ‘theoretician’ of the Concrete movement in Brazil and founder of the São Paulo-based Grupo Ruptura,<sup>38, 39</sup> had similarly suggested the need to “understand the canvas as a single plane, as a specific space, where a composition is proof of dependencies.”<sup>40</sup> At this moment, Valentim was still in the formative stages of his artistic career, as were the members of Ruptura, founded in São Paulo in 1952 by the painter and photographer Geraldo de Barros, and the more polemical Grupo Frente, initiated by Ivan Serpa in Rio de Janeiro that same year. A primary characteristic of concrete art hinged on the problem of the two-dimensionality of pictorial space.<sup>41</sup> By 1956 the mechanical propensities of the two groups would lead to the formation of the Concrete Art movement, marked in its increasing exposure and institutional acceptance by the staging of the I *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta* [First National Exhibition of Concrete Art] at the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo. Transferred to Rio de Janeiro’s Ministry of Education and Culture in January of 1957, the year of Valentim’s arrival there, it caused great excitement and was the subject of much critical debate in the newspapers for months.<sup>42, 43</sup> Notably, Valentim was not a part of either group, but circulated around and, to an extent, between the axioms of both. In favor of their rational art based on clear and universal principles, the Grupo Ruptura, in fact, dismissed ‘informal abstraction’ – of the sort to which Valentim’s might have been compared – as being problematically romantic and emotional.<sup>44</sup> Newly arrived in Rio, amidst the burgeoning of geometric abstraction, an increasingly trans-regional arts scene and a milieu of heated theoret-

ical debate on the intent and nature of art, Valentim was both an outsider, arriving just a few years late to the scene and a knowledgeable and albeit interconnected innovator of one of Brazil's most prominent and long-lived domestic art movements.

The uniqueness of Valentim's racial and autodidactic identity and their bearing on these debates is manifested especially in Cordeiro's belief that culture must create a unity of thinking between the masses and intellectuals.<sup>45, 46</sup> In suggesting the integration of intellectuals with workers, of which many of the Concrete artists were, Cordeiro's conception of geometric abstraction was partially at odds with that of Gullar and the Rio camp. Gullar argued that artists needed to show the working class appropriate forms of art and lead it to an awareness of its own oppression.<sup>47</sup> Surely Valentim's efforts embody Gullar's faith in the political opportunities for self-awareness and socio-economic enlightenment by means of an erudite art, as he personally embraced such practices of constructivist non-objectivity. However, he seems to simultaneously promote the idealism of Cordeiro's somewhat alternate conception of integrating intellectuals with the working class through the direct universal accessibility of art itself. We know of Valentim's strong belief in the potential social benefits of a full integration of the arts and a blurring of the boundaries between art and life. He would later work towards such goals in a number of public projects and had, in fact, imagined that his emblematic objects could be situated in Brasília's green spaces as habitable sculptures.<sup>48</sup> In this politicized aesthetic atmosphere, Valentim can be identified as a critical bridge between both groups' interrelated social principles, while remaining ideologically separated from their aesthetic austerity.

### Public Candomblé, Private Art World

By recognizing Valentim's nuanced navigations of public and private space, we can better understand the subtlety with which, quickly in his career, he made significant contributions to an evolving discourse on the social role of art in Brazil. In his study of the considerable transitions that Candomblé underwent in the modern era, Paul Christopher Johnson substantially expands the meaning of secretism within the faith, which at least until the 1970s was both self-perpetuating and legally enforced. Before the 1970s, terreiros were required to register with the police before performing ceremonies.<sup>49</sup> Johnson historicizes this secrecy as a transitional process both discursive and inherent in the faith's bodily practices, which resist notation.

The complexity of navigations of public and private space amidst this shifting paradigm of permissibility are germane to Valentim's own transgressions of the boundaries he literally and symbolically confronted, especially within the art world. "The public indicates a physical space where one cannot choose, control, or predict who will be encountered or what will be exchanged," Johnson writes, "and it also denotes a semiotic space, the available shared code of what is speakable, legible, and fitting, which both guides and constrains social exchanges in such a public space."<sup>51</sup> In revealing the symbols of a faith that was, during his lifetime, highly enigmatic to non-initiates, Valentim was subjecting its beliefs to a public and, more importantly, to a symbolic space where a knowledge of what these symbols meant would have been largely unknown. Valentim's dissemination of the signs of Candomblé's visual signifiers, under the auspices of constructivist art, not only embodied the socio-political validation undergone during this period, but may well have played a role in facilitating their shifting reception.

## Geometric Divinity, Umbanda and the Spiritual Nature of Abstraction

Based on testaments to his fervent belief in the divine spiritual force of geometry, it appears that Valentim associated abstraction with a level of universal accessibility or an erasure of the artist's own hand and, in turn, the potential for bias.<sup>52</sup> The internal struggle he speaks of having battled, to avoid being 'corrupted by his own ego,'<sup>53</sup> is indeed the same trouble contemporary viewers may identify in his symbolic references to race and religion in the wake of more than two decades of socio-political development since his death. Van Doesburg's original Concrete manifesto of 1930 had, in fact, declared as its first item, "Art is universal," a notion which Valentim appears to have embraced.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, it concluded with a call for absolute clarity,<sup>55a</sup> a stipulation not antithetical to but certainly at odds with Valentim's use of esoteric symbolism and the relative obfuscation inherent in the abstracted forms he employed and scarcely if ever identified.

Prior to his arrival in Rio de Janeiro, which proved to be a professional and stylistic turning point in his career, Valentim's body of work demonstrates a strong attention to line and a multiplicity of forms to which he would never fully return. Works like *Composição* [Composition] (1955) [Fig. 13], invoke a high level of detail, perhaps even a level of automatism – especially in relation to his much more minimalist and meticulously calculated later work. They call to mind a horror vacui-like filling of the whole canvas with forms and are thus distinguishable from later compositions, which typically demonstrate great clarity of form and precisely delineated symbols. The lateral movement in Valentim's work away from earlier organic, informal abstraction and towards a more minimalist approach to filling a distinctly framed space, demonstrates a shift that expresses his commitment to the rigors of the geometric tradition in tandem with his increased involvement in Afro-Brazilian religious practice.

Works from his period of transition into this mode, like *Untitled* (1956) [Fig. 14], in which we can identify at center a shape that may evoke a bow and arrow (the symbol of Oxossi, the hunter spirit), demonstrate a maze-like proliferation of lines and organic shapes that stylistically demonstrates their predating his encounter in Rio with the *pontos riscados* of Umbanda [Fig. 15]. *Pontos Riscados* are sigils, or occult seal-like devices, taking the form of circular glyphs specific to each aspect of the *orixás* and drawn in chalk on the ground to invite deities into the place of worship in Umbanda, the variable religious faith that is a diverse, but typically 'de-Africanized' relative of Candomblé and likely has its roots in 1920s Rio de Janeiro.<sup>56, 57</sup> It is a belief system that has been more fully integrated Christian and other European beliefs and customs into its practices.<sup>58</sup> Its features are a varied and eclectic blend of Catholic belief and practice, Kardecism,<sup>59</sup> Afro-Brazilian and indigenous spiritual practices and aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other currents of mysticism.<sup>60</sup>

Testifying to his frequent visits to the Umbanda meeting houses in Rio's outskirts and his extensive reading about the subject,<sup>61</sup> Valentim noted the means by which these circles 'harken back' to the "archetypal effort to organize and overcome inner chaos."<sup>62</sup> This was a primary goal of his creative, personal spiritual efforts. In the 1970s, he began to refer directly in his work to the almost endless array of circular symbols represented in Umbanda. From this point on, the prominence of circular forms that resemble these naturally abstract symbols appear with increasing frequency for the rest of his career and become especially apparent in 1978 with the advent of his transparently named emblemas (emblems) [Fig. 16], which were especially prevalent from 1980 onwards and also included emblemáticos, or 'magic emblems.' As emblems, they are intended to be concrete symbols or representations of the abstract ideas embodied in his spiritual conviction and are figuratively emblematic of the spiritual forces they invoke. The simplified, linear geometric forms which come to isolate themselves as individual and combinative symbols in his work – three-pronged forks, arrows, squares, circles, crescents, the double-sided axe, triangles, parallelograms and so on – are regularly fit within or in relation to prominent circular emblems and recreate the representative symbols of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon of gods with great artistic license.

Critic and poet Ronaldo Brito writes, "By fact and by right, the age of maturity for Brazilian modernity begins with the comprehension of geometric languages, counterposed to regionalist figurativism and its celebrated false syncretisms."<sup>63</sup> He concludes, "Ultimately, those only served to reinforce the folkloric, paternalistic image that colonizing nations insisted in cultivating about us."<sup>64</sup> Brito is right to note the pitfalls of such 'colonized' images and his insistence on the correlation between geometric abstraction and modernity speaks to the dominant spirit of the 1950s in which the universality of constructivism was directly correlated to artistic modernity and social progress. For Valentim, however, comprehension of the modern possibilities of geometric language was not antithetical to regionalist folklore and the pre-modern internationality of African-derived religion. It could, in fact, be used to reclaim the paternalistic images lamented by Brito and create a system of figurative-abstract syncretism that was not only false, or colonially enforced, but instead expanded the possibilities of both modalities on its own terms.

The propensity for paring down his signs into clear and cogent symbols and the continued interest in the circular form at this time are demonstrated in a series of commemorative silver and bronze medallions designed by Valentim and minted by the Brazilian government under the Casa da Moeda in 1979 [Fig. 17]. This project added a new public dimension to his work, as well as demonstrating an obvious instance of his official insertion into the national cultural sphere, even as it may represent a certain tokenism of racial inclusion on behalf of the state.<sup>65</sup>

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**Candomblé and the Cultural Feedback Loop** As discussed by anthropologist Diana Brown, the participation of Umbanda practitioners from the urban middle class in the late-twentieth century transformed Afro-Brazilian religious practices previously centered in the lower sectors into a more sedate, bureaucratic, nationalistic and, above all, a de-Africanized form of religious practice.<sup>66</sup> As a result, we can reframe a more traditionalizing understanding of Valentim's artistic involvement with Umbanda symbolism at a time when it began to represent a new set of issues for an evermore racially diverse and cosmopolitan Brazilian populous and, in turn, garnered a broader public for his work.<sup>67</sup> For many, Umbanda has come to represent a

a religion more open and public than Candomblé, a phenomenon that may well have made it appealing to Valentim's ostensible project of laying bare the spiritual teachings of African-derived religion. It has come to be referred to as the first truly Brazilian religion, uniting the Amerindian, the African and the European.<sup>68</sup> Valentim was said to have imagined building an ecumenical temple open to all religions.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps the welcoming nature or open-ended ritual possibilities of Umbanda were for him more appropriate than Candomblé, or offered a more appropriate and already abstracted image database for the production of his art in the use of pontos riscados. While his emblemas maintain a nearly total esotericism in their direct associative properties regarding the specific orixás they are meant to invoke, their codification, aided especially well by the uniformity of their circular shape, is perhaps easier to identify as a marker or cipher of a particular visual aspect of the faith.

Valentim's project both reflected and seems to have driven this transmutation of Candomblé in which the detachment of its semiotics from the terreiros, where the signs were produced, shifted especially during the 1970s towards widespread circulation in popular culture. This led to a new and necessary process, identified by Johnson, in which a more public Candomblé affects traditional practice through a feedback loop, wherein "it both expresses and attempts to redress the loss of its locative identity as a secret religion closed, contained and in place, by re-burying the unseen foundations in the domain of discourse."<sup>70</sup> The process reflects Valentim's own artistic efforts, by which he uses the discourse of aesthetic non-objectivity to remedy the impenetrability of his own religious identity, while also exposing its rites to a broad public.

The more than one hundred symbols that had been identified by Morais in Valentim's work before 1975 represent only a small fraction of the almost infinite combinations imbued in his work.<sup>71</sup> In the 1980s, Valentim formalized the lexicon of his symbols in a visual alphabet called the Alfabeto Kitônico [Kitônic Alphabet] [Fig. 18]. The first iteration contained fifteen forms – all of which with a subjective but definable abstracted connection to the ferramentas and pontos riscados of the orixás, from which he had long constructed his compositions. As a sort of key used to deconstruct the language he had built up throughout his career, Valentim believed in the reduced forms of this "alphabet" as representative of a transcendental exercise in discerning the elements that made up the energy of the Earth, which he labeled "Kitônico" and from which it took its name.<sup>72</sup>

While the majority of issues regarding authentic representational forms postdate Valentim's career, it is clear that active engagement with the media on behalf of those practitioners of Candomblé whose voices are in turn often "crowded to the margins,"<sup>73</sup> as cultural anthropologist Stephen Selka writes, have, since Valentim's death, exerted a significant influence on popular conceptions of his work. This is especially the case in Bahia where the severity of contentious issues regarding Candomblé's codification within the public and increasingly international sphere is considerable. In the face of a new hyper-exposure of Candomblé imagery, largely as a result of touristic marketability, there is no neat separation between "degenerated" public forms of Candomblé and "a pure inner life of the temples," however much this may still be desired by the faithful.<sup>74</sup> As a direct and identifiable manifestation of the visual imagery of Candomblé and its recapitulation in the public sphere, Valentim's art is implicit in this transformation itself. Through its symbolic obscurity, however, his body of work is disloyal to a one-dimensional demystification or secularization of the symbolic ritual forms in ques-

tion. Indeed, he incorporates them always under a framework of abstraction in which their air of concealment and true meanings are left intact, even as their exposure is certain. *Emblema Relevo-Pintura 3* [Relief Painting Emblem 3] (1967) [Fig. 19] to use one example, does not and cannot truly impart us with a likeness of the orixá it is meant to evoke, even as it seems to make direct symbolic reference to the traditional blue and white colors, semi-circular ferramentas and the triangle, cross and arrow signs from the pontos riscados used to represent Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea.

### Rome: Afro-Brazilian Culture on the World Stage

Awarded the Prize for Foreign Travel at the National Modern Art Salon in Rio, Valentim traveled to Europe in 1962 and visited England, France, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Portugal, before settling in Rome, where he remained until 1966. This European sojourn has been extensively discussed in the literature on his work. Such attention to his travels seems to demonstrate the duality both thrust upon, but also cultivated by Valentim himself, as a self-taught, economically and racially marginalized artist who had on his own accord become conversant in the language of high Modernism. In Rome, Valentim began to employ tempera instead of oil, to the effect as Morais states, of ‘sensualizing’ the pictorial material; later he would give up both in favor of the brightness of acrylic.<sup>75</sup> The attention paid to such a shift and its finality denote a lifelong obsession with color, reaching its (oxymoronic) apex in his use of monochrome white in the *Templo de Oxalá* [Temple of Oxalá] series of 1977, in which there emerges a spiritual quietude of pure abstraction [Fig. 20].

“The chromaticism is enriched,” in Rome, writes Morais, identifying the dullish tones, ochres, blues and mauves of Valentim’s palette coming into contrast with the bright colors placed at strategic points on the composition; the colors are introverted and embody a solemn, sacred atmosphere.<sup>76</sup> Rather than simply conforming to the Euclidian geometrics of his earlier work, during this phase especially, Valentim was indeed using overlapping, ambiguous and to an extent placated or compromised forms to enact some of the most direct mimicking of Candomblé’s visual icons anywhere in his body of work. This is visible in each of the works depicted in a 1965 photo of his studio [Fig. 21]. Their complexity and clear use of repeated stippled motifs, or dot patterns, appears to resemble the cultivated disorder inherent in the multi-day, trance-based Candomblé initiation ritual,<sup>77</sup> during the third day of which participants are literally covered in white chalk dots to evoke the creator of mankind, Oxalá [Fig. 22]. This process appears to be directly reflected in Valentim’s busy Roman compositions especially. There is a similar and increased use of symbolic compartmentalization, a proliferation of visual allusions to the distinctive multitudinous shapes of the ferramentas and the presence of this stippling technique central to the initiation, shown particularly by such works as the bottommost, central painting in the studio image.<sup>78</sup> Strong parallels can be drawn between Valentim’s artistic project and the highly improvisational and length-indeterminate rituals of Candomblé itself, not only in the free-associative, but by all accounts meticulous means through which he arrived at his iconic symbols.

Perhaps in this international context, he was particularly eager to distance himself further from the staunch international constructivism of the time. He may have sought, in a sense, to visually initiate his foreign audience into the spiritual realm of his faith. Instead, he appears to amplify his own references to a mythic geometry of Afro-Brazilian religions that fit back into its own constructive rationality.<sup>79</sup> Here, he returns to the eclecticism of his earliest abstract efforts, asserting the complexities of his invented symbolic language to a foreign, and perhaps more theoretically savvy or visually cognizant viewership that was also largely or entirely unaware of the Brazilian religions upon which his symbolism was based. As the scholar of Afro-Brazilian art Roberto Conduru noted of the Roman-period designs, as well, these paintings are not directly illustrative, their colors are not necessarily natural and they do not correspond strictly to color codes of the nations of Candomblé.<sup>80</sup> This trend would continue throughout his career, especially in its final phase, during 1980s, in which many of his works such as *Emblema 85* [Emblem 85] (1985) [Fig. 23] adopted vibrant color schemes and more innovative compositional arrangements. They demonstrate a near total breakdown of the visual conventions of their original referents, yet they do maintain a staunch conformity to the tenets of geometric constructivism.

Writing about the improvisational Candomblé trance possession ritual *xirê*,<sup>81</sup> anthropologist Mattijs Van de Port speaks to this question of validity, noting that in a world where authenticity is in high demand, phenomena that seem to be positioned beyond received ways of knowing and understanding become increasingly attractive.<sup>82</sup> As embodiments of the ritual practices of Candomblé itself, Valentim's artworks – like the possession phenomenon they seem to mimic – escape all attempts at signification and appear immune to the “slippings and slidings” of meaning.<sup>83</sup> As Van de Port declares of such rituals, “whether you say a million words about [them] or nothing at all, you are not going to grasp [their] essence,” because, as he reminds us, all symbolic constructions are lacking, in that they fail to capture lived experience in its entirety.<sup>84</sup> Embodying the innate elusiveness of ritual, Valentim never intended for a neat one-to-one referential relationship between his symbols and their religious signifiers and his artwork must be identified as similarly in a perpetual state of elusion.

Significantly, Valentim's project was also a part of the broader cultural nationalism that took place from the late 1930s onwards, in which Candomblé became a “symbol bank” for many groups in Bahian society, who inserted the faith's religious symbols and its practices, aesthetics and music into their own projects as a part of a new cultural pride exemplified by renewed interest in Afro-Brazilian heritage.<sup>85</sup> The postcolonial ramifications of Valentim's project became clear early in his career and perhaps the exposure he gained from his time in Rome, as well as the contact he had with the innovations of postwar European art and the critical distance gained from his time abroad allowed for this.<sup>86</sup> Before returning to Brazil to accept an invitation to teach at the Central Art Institute of the University of Brasília, he exhibited paintings made in Rome at the First World Black Art Festival in Dakar, Senegal in 1966, where his work was greatly appreciated by the nation's president Léopold Sédar Senghor.<sup>87</sup> Senghor was one of three founders of the international Négritude movement.<sup>88</sup> Such approval of Valentim's work illustrates the international efficacy of his project to incorporate African cultural traditions into the Modernist narrative.



## Afro-Brazilian Culture and *Brasilidade*

As Conduru asserts, while Valentim's art was decidedly univocal in its Constructivist style, his religious universe was multiple; his frequenting of different cults, nations (sects, divided according to the ethnic origins preserved in their respective rites)<sup>89</sup> and *terreiros* – more or less sporadically – allow us to see how he lived since childhood with the diverse and extraordinary plasticity of African cultures.<sup>90</sup> As he himself noted was a typical phenomenon in Bahia, from time to time in his youth, his Catholic family would go to see Candomblé celebrations.<sup>91</sup> Conduru asserts that Valentim knew how to adapt to more diverse social and cultural means to survive in other environments that were not his own,<sup>92</sup> a skill I affirm as identifiable in his artistic approach itself. Such instinctive duality is expressed by the French anthropologist Roger Bastide, who commented on the ability of Brazilian slaves during the colonial period to live simultaneously and without conflict in the two very different worlds of work, slavery and misery and in the 'black world' they kept alive primarily through the practice of Candomblé.<sup>93</sup> Valentim's own artistic practice seems to embrace this binary in its conscious straddling of the spiritual realm and the real, rational world of modern art's flat, material surface. There is no mistaking the code switching inherent in the multiplicity of his efforts, at the center of which his spirituality persists.

As such, we can confirm Wagner Barja's assertion that Valentim's "aesthetic-poetic creations fulminate against the border that separates popular from high culture."<sup>94</sup> In so doing, they are evocative of a particular generation in which the newfound aims of long-marginalized groups became one and the same following the 1964 Brazilian military coup d'état, which would dominate the national conversation even beyond the restoration of democracy in 1985. The 1970s saw the construction of a positive identity on the part of Afro-Brazilians who sought to recover their history and to establish their belonging in Brazilian society and its universal national characteristics, referred to at least since the 1930s as *Brasilidade*, or *Brazilianness*.<sup>95, 96</sup> Valentim was part of a generation of Afro-Brazilians that had witnessed a growing black middle class represented, for example, by access to public university for the first time.<sup>97</sup> Brito contested that Concrete art in São Paulo "represses the class struggle" and "appears ludicrous in its crude (although ambiguous) submission to dominant social standards, in its fetishizing of technology, and in its ingenuous project of overcoming underdevelopment in this way."<sup>98</sup> "There is something obviously colonized in its mimesis of Swiss rational formalism," he concluded.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, out of such sentiments came the distinctly domestic Neo-Concrete movement and, in turn, some of the most politically engaged – and often racially cognizant – conceptual and performative art of the time, which at first still held tight to the geometric tradition as *Brasilidade* came to incorporate and largely be defined through the essentialism of Modernist narratives.

No doubt, the visual affinities between the Concrete artists and Valentim are unmistakable. Two examples that bear striking resemblance are an untitled 1957-58 gouache and graphite work by Willys de Castro [Fig. 24], a founding member of the São Paulo Ruptura group, and Valentim's *Composição 1* [Composition 1] (1959) [Fig. 25]. The triangular geometric shapes and sparse compositional verticality make the two nearly indistinguishable, but Valentim's work had by this point already moved beyond the pure opticality of constructivism to include semicircular and totemic forms in allusion to Candomblé symbolism.<sup>100</sup> Made between 1959 and 1963, de Castro's later "active objects" embraced the new-objectivity of the Neo-Concrete movement and intended to merge the color of painting with the spatial relief of sculpture [Fig. 26]. By demanding the movement of the viewer around small rectangular painted canvases to be viewed in

their entirety, these works required recollection of the visual content of each side in a temporal encounter with all three parts. In their challenge of the basic principles of painterly space, they deeply reflect Valentim's own efforts beginning in the 1960s with emblematic reliefs and sculpture, around which viewers are made to circumnavigate the object in deducing the forms and multiple colors present.

Nonetheless, Valentim emphatically stated, "I was never Concrete."<sup>101</sup> He claims that he soon realized the final objective of this type of work was optical games, something that did not interest him.<sup>102</sup> His curiosity regarding the sacred and symbolic possibilities of color were antithetical to the Concretists' infamous lack of concern for it, wherein they argued that one could completely change a painting's colors and not alter anything significant in the work itself.<sup>103</sup> The poet and psychoanalyst Theon Spanudis, who had signed Gullar's manifesto, nonetheless praised Valentim's art as "numinous," meaning that it is divine or spiritual in its own right.<sup>104</sup> In turn, he implied that instances of external reference in abstraction could be a positive aspect when internalized within broader questions of perception, as were Valentim's spiritual objects.<sup>105</sup> The divinity of Valentim's work is neither contained solely in its artistic forms, nor within its religious inflections, that is, but finds strength in the confluence of both. Telling of his self-awareness of this phenomenon is his own powerful statement, "I am a non-verbal theologian."<sup>106</sup> His existence on the fringes of each camp may have helped propel the Brazilian avant-garde from one movement to the next.<sup>107</sup>

### Brasília as Symbolic Space

In 1969, two years after arriving in Brasília, Valentim began expanding his practice into the realm of sculpture through a gradual process of developing his *Objetos Emblemáticos* or 'Emblematic Objects.' They had progressed out of the "emblematic reliefs" he had been making since his arrival in the new capital, which embodied the national constructive dream in which he was so enveloped.<sup>108</sup> This shift in his work marks a crucial point of what may well be his own reconceptualization of the spatial interrelations of surface and background that later progressed into his erasure of these distinctions altogether through such exercises as the *Alfabeto Kitônico* and the breakthrough 1977 series *Templo de Oxalá*. In its total whiteness and multi-tiered shafts evoking a staff of authority called the *opaxoro*, the latter series explicitly connotes the presence of the titular lord of creation.<sup>109</sup> Oxalá is said to be the divine artist who shapes all existence and the creator of material culture.<sup>110</sup> His essence is symbolically captured visibly in the strong, stable forms and monochromatic whiteness of the series, whose limitless symbolic combinations demonstrate the many configurations Valentim conceptualized in reference to each and every *orixá*.

Works like *Objeto emblemático 8* [Emblematic Object 8] (1969) [Fig. 27] expanded the possibilities of Valentim's visual symbolism with moveable parts and place sculpted iconographic objects within the literal framework of a closeable box. There is a clear religious reverberation, especially given the elevating pedestal incorporated into the sculpture, which serves to elevate the exaltation of the internal symbolic object to an

uncanny relation with Christian relics and the ornate reliquaries that housed them [Fig. 28]. The objectivity and the nature of this object's physical manipulability in the vein of the Neo-Concrete artists still retain an aestheticism and ascetical codification that is essential to Valentim's work.

### A Conscious Binary

Writing about the folk art sculptor from Bahia known as Louco in his *Genius in the Backlands: Popular Artists of Brazil* (1977), the folk art advocate Seldon Rodman recounts Pierre Apraxine's meditations on Haitian art as a means of navigating the paradox of folklore and religious sentiment in Modern art. Apraxine contended that for worshippers of Vodou,<sup>111</sup> "nothing is invisible" and that, in turn, nothing is in need of representation.<sup>112</sup> "There is no supernatural world," Apraxine wrote, "because all worlds – the immediate and the beyond – are simultaneously present, natural and accessible to the eye."<sup>113</sup> Edmund Wilson had similarly observed that for the Haitian "the immediate thing was the supernatural world...and what we call the real world no more than a symbolization of events in the world of religious myth."<sup>114</sup> In applying such a consideration to Valentim's spiritual belief system, perhaps we can better understand how the dichotomy inherent in his simultaneous operation within both the folk and constructivist realms is an extension of the simultaneity inherent in his religious conviction.

As Merquior said in 1974, Valentim's works are oriented towards the street, destined for squares and gardens, for public spaces and which, in turn, call for re-socializing the aesthetic experience.<sup>115</sup> Valentim went so far as to confirm this democratizing trope, declaring his work "as much poetic in struggling against violence as it is an exercise in liberty against repressive forces. The true creator is a being who lives dialectically between repression and liberty."<sup>116, 117</sup> Three years earlier, at the beginning of this political phase, Morais was writing about Valentim as a 'hungry and poor' artist operating in a culturally consumptive manner in the vein of Oswaldian anthropophagy.<sup>118, 119</sup> Referring to Oswald de Andrade's "Cannibalist Manifesto" (1928), in which he argued that "cannibalizing" other cultures was Brazil's greatest strength and a way for the nation to assert itself against European dominance in the postcolonial era, Morais ostensibly suggests that Valentim adopted – or consumed – an abstract style unnatural to him. The effect of which asserted his Afro-Brazilian religious cultural identity against the hegemony of foreign and normative domestic aesthetic traditions. Invoking the national context of de Andrade's proposal, Morais insisted upon Valentim's cultural identity as distinctly Brazilian.

Valentim's own regional-national conception of what he called *riscadura brasileira*, or "Brazilian graphics" is similarly outlined in his 1976 *Manifesto Ainda Que Tardio* [Manifesto Even if Too Late]. He writes adamantly about having the weight of Bahia upon him and refers to the black blood in his veins.<sup>120</sup> He attests to the "grand collective synthesis that translates into the fusion of ethnic elements and cultures of European, African and Amerindian origins" in Bahia, stating that from personal and regional 'data,' he has traced on a "focused path towards a profound cultural reality of Brazil – towards its roots."<sup>121</sup> Expanding on Conduru's postcolonial consideration of why Valentim was able to operate without fault between so many categories, Paulo Herkenhoff posits that Valentim led Brazilian art to "a new symbolic level and a new ethical plane," in his evocation Xangô's double axe.<sup>122</sup> In the act of cutting from both sides, the axe serves as a metaphor for an art conceived within Western constructivist modernity that genuinely incorporates Brazil's African roots.<sup>123</sup>

Works like *Emblemático 78* (1978) [Fig. 29] have a clear ocular directionality and, in this case, a central point which in the case of this particularly calculated work is surrounded by four lines forming a vanishing three-point perspective with arrows directing the viewer's line of vision towards it. The effect is a direct and literal instance of classical compositional depth placed prominently within his work. The composition's central red trident is a sign likely meant to indicate the presence of Exu, the god of the land, protector of travelers and the personification of death, whose symbolic representation demonstrates the ability maintained by Valentim throughout his career to play intricately with the push and pull of the various aesthetic and conceptual methods through which he navigated. Here, his negation of normative compositional perspective is embodied not only in the content of the work itself, but inculcated in the very symbol – Exu's trident – of his spiritual motivation.

## Conclusions

A brief understanding of the complex changes Candomblé underwent in Valentim's lifetime allow us to more clearly see how his devotion to the incorporation of its symbols into geometric constructivist art serves not as an act of subversive resistance to a normative, dominant Brazilian culture of which he was not a part, but rather as a universal cultural weight he bore on behalf of a shifting concept of *Brasildade*.<sup>124</sup> Scholar of Afro-Brazilian religion, Reginaldo Prandi asserts, "It is inconceivable to imagine any synthesis of Brazilian contemporary popular culture without considering the devotion to the orishas as one of its fundamental elements."<sup>125</sup> Keeping this assertion in mind and examining the intricacies of Valentim's work, rather than merely his potential for anthropological or aesthetic inquiry, especially from an international perspective and some two decades after his prolific career came to an end, I have attempted to better conceptualize and clarify his placement within and between multiple spheres of artistic influence. While the transformative and innately geometric nature of Afro-Brazilian religious symbolism is paramount in Valentim's work, as I have shown, it is but one of a number of diverse influences that informed his work. Especially with an oeuvre like Valentim's, which operates perpetually across and outside of normative classificatory understandings of art historical schools of thought, it is appropriate that the categories in discussion themselves begin to fade, allowing for a deeper understanding of the spiritual interconnectivity that Valentim himself strived to express. After all, little of the spiritual power imbued onto each of his works – religious objects in their own right – would be lost in the wake of such a recontextualization. His work is expressive of and integral to a Brazilian national cultural self-definition for which he was a direct and essential catalyst.