Angels with Guns: A Memoir on Guy Brett (and David Medalla)

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In the mind of anyone who knew them and their work, the British art critic and curator Guy Brett and the Filipino mixed-media and performance artist David Medalla formed a pair. Which is why, though it might sound awful, I was not overly surprised by the news that Guy had died (February 2, 2021) just over a month after David (December 28, 2020). It was as if the former had waited for permission to die from the latter. Guy had been diagnosed with Parkinson's at the end of 2013, and the deterioration of his health had accelerated in the last months of his life. As for David, it was Guy who had informed me of his stroke in his letter of April 25, 2018. He added: "I was profoundly shaken up by the whole event. I felt the vulnerability of David who I had all always thought was invincible."

Although they had been living far from each other for some years, as David had returned to his native Philippines, they were somehow inseparable. I often met them together, and whenever I saw them separately, each would inevitably give me elaborate news of the other. If their mode of elocution was strikingly different—Guy spoke slowly and economically, while David was voluble and prone to deliciously curlicued digressions—both were mesmerizing raconteurs, with a sensuous attention to detail and a stupendous memory. There was something so similar in the vividness of their curiosity, in their availability, that it was impossible not to think of the other when hearing one of them speak. In the letter in which Guy told me about his own fatal ailment, no doubt to dampen the shock, he quipped:

> Incidentally, James Parkinson was a remarkable man, an English doctor and geologist in the late 18th and early 19th century living at no 1 Hoxton Square in the east end of London. He was the first to study what was then called 'the shaking palsy' and wrote an essay on it. It was later re-named Parkinson's Disease by the great French doctor Charcot in admiration. Besides his doctoring Parkinson took part in many liberal and progressive causes. I felt kind of honored to be so-to-speak his patient . . . (May 10, 2014).

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This is exactly the kind of utterance that could have come out of David's mouth at any time during one of the innumerable long conversations we had over the years. In many ways, Guy and David were similar—united by the same internationalism, the same disdain for the parochialism of the art world, particularly the British one. And yet so different in personality, with such contrasting backgrounds.

Guy was both candid and discreet about his upbringing. He admitted to me early on that he came from the British aristocracy—when I asked him the meaning of the mention "The Hon." that I had seen affixed to his name somewhere—but he immediately added that this was a world he had left with childhood, and without any regret. The world in question: a vast estate in Oxfordshire, large eighteenth-century manor, etc., most of which would be given by his father to the National Trust, and the rest, in true upper-class fashion, inherited by Guy's older brother, along with the peerage. Guy liked to allude to his father, but only as an architect and urbanist (it is only incidentally, and probably from David, that I learned of Brett Sr.'s title after wondering who the Viscount and Viscountess Esher—listed as patrons of *Signals,* the news bulletin of Signals Gallery, which David edited—were).[1] In other words, Guy had an extraordinarily privileged youth, but nothing of that showed in the way he lived and thought—the only remaining sign of it when I met him (in 1974, I think) was perhaps his job as the art critic of the *Times* of London*,* a position he had obtained in his early twenties and from which he was about to be sacked (but I suspect the assumption that his appointment had been due to family or class connections to be wrong).[2]

As for David, he regaled me with stories of the large household of his youth in Manila, always filled with guests who were often roped in for improvised musical or

1. Although both Guy and David were among the founders of Signals Gallery (and its precursor, the Center for Advanced Creative Study), together with Paul Keeler, Gustav Metzger, and Marcello Salvadori, I will not expand on the remarkable experiment the space represented in the stiff London art world of the 1960s, given that I only learned about it after it had ended—and above all from Guy's and David's direct accounts and from the gallery's bulletin. Guy wrote extensively about it, notably in his monograph on David, and the latter published a short memoir about it (simply titled "Signals") in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, the catalog of an exhibition curated by Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1989. This text (supplemented in the same catalog by Guy's "Internationalism among Artists in the 60s and 70s") is probably the first instance in which an institution (a museum) acknowledges the existence of this bustling hub, whose commercial activity was minimal. The literature is still scant; the most consequential contribution is the elegant and hefty book by Eleanor Crabtree, *Signals* (2018)*,* which functioned as the catalog of an exhibition at the Sotheby'sowned gallery S/2 in London. Also to be consulted is Paul Overy's essay "Other Stories," in *Art History* 20, no. 3 (September 1997), pp. 493–501, offered as a review of Guy's monograph on David and of the facsimile reprint of the complete run of the Signals bulletin that appeared in 1995 (published by the Institute of International Visual Arts); and the second chapter of Pamela M. Lee's *Chromophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 2004), particularly pp. 125–33. Signals remains largely marginalized in the history books (even in books on "the margins": It is quite telling that in Thomas Crow's recent publication *The Hidden Mod in Modern Art: London 1957–1969* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2020)*,* neither it nor David is even mentioned.

2. Before he became the art critic of the London *Times* (from 1964 to 1974), Guy had regularly written for the *Guardian* in 1963–64 and, according to his younger brother Sebastian, for the *Yorkshire Post.* His firing from the *Times* at the end of 1974 was lambasted by Michael McNay, arts editor of the *Guardian*, in that publication (February 21, 1975, p. 10).

theatrical and dance performances, his highly educated family, his early fame as a child poet, his stay in New York in 1954 during his teens (recommended by Mark van Doren, he was admitted to Columbia as a special student at age sixteen), and his encounters in bars of the Village with a who's who of AbEx (inserting here and there, to spice up the narrative, allusions to romantic affairs, including one with the actor James Dean). The name-dropping was a bit off-putting at first, and it tested my credulity, but I eventually came to realize that the luminaries punctuating his discourse functioned as markers, as gateways to many other possible outgrowths in his labyrinthine storytelling. I also learned—but only much later, in Guy's meticulously researched 1995 monograph *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla,* for which I wrote a postface (see below)—that many of David's tales were perfectly documented.[3]

When immediately after their death I was tasked with writing a double obituary, I found myself unable to summon the mandatory distance, and I resolved instead to write a memoir of my relationship with both men. But that led to another conundrum: Although Guy and David have been very important in my life (in different ways), the account of our friendships could only be lopsided. I saw a lot of them for about a decade, but my connection with David loosened after I left for the United States (he did write me occasionally, until the end of the '90s, but his letters were of a professional nature—to inform me of a performance he was to give in a festival somewhere, of a show he was mounting, of his various peregrinations around the world, and, more often than not, to enlist my support for talks, to obtain a visa, to recommend him for this or that, etc.; in his mind, I had become part of the academic establishment, no longer the youth he sought to enthrall and seduce). With Guy, the situation was very different. Our bond grew, we never ceased to learn from each other,

3. On David's name-dropping as part of storytelling, see Guy's *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla* (London: Kala Press, 1995), pp. 18–19.

and our correspondence of fifty years (with several interruptions) turned out to be, upon rereading it, a treasure trove ready to be mined. This is exactly what I'll do in the pages that follow, part diary, part scrapbook.

But where to start? With my first encounter with these two men? Or, several years before that, with my first encounter with their respective work? Instead, I opt to zoom in on their first meeting, in the summer of 1960, as told by Guy in his book on David, because it sets the tone and reveals much, in just a paragraph (the first of the initial chapter, titled "A Certain Way of Life"), of who they were:

> I have always thought the circumstances of my first meeting with David Medalla were both amusingly incongruous and strangely prophetic. I was seventeen and had been invited with my younger brother Sebastian to a dance at the village hall in Rotherfield Greys, near Henley-onThames in Oxfordshire. The party was in honor of the Yale University rowing team who were competing in the Henley Regatta, and was given by a family of near neighbors of ours, the Goyders. It so happened that David and Dan Goyder both attended a scholarship camp in the USA (Camp Rising Sun at Rhinebeck, New York, to be exact), and, since apart from a handful of relatives, he knew few people in England, having arrived only weeks previously from the Philippines, via East Africa, Egypt and France, decided to look him up. The Goyder family brought David to the dance. He gave a performance at the party, but

> what I remember best about the evening was his scintillating conversation about English poetry. I was attempting to produce poems at the time. His knowledge of all my favorites—Blake, Keats, Shelley, Crabbe, Hopkins, Eliot—astonished me. It is a very particular pleasure when someone from the other side of the world talks warmly and insightfully about your own culture. Only later I discovered he knew as much about French culture, and many others, as he did about English, and as much about art, music, dance and theatre as he did about literature.[4]

Like Guy, I was immediately struck by David's extraordinarily broad (and totally idiosyncratic) culture the first time I met him. Indeed, he did know French poetry remarkably well (we did not have the exact same taste: He worshipped Louis Aragon, whom I have always loathed, but we had Mallarmé in common), and it was impossible to spend any time with David without learning of his nomadic existence. Nothing about him surprised me in this account—the confidence with which he immediately blended into a public event (no matter how foreign the context was to him) and appropriated the stage for an impromptu performance, the lack of reserve with strangers, the willingness to meet them on their own terrain . . . But what this brief passage made clear to me in retrospect was, first, how much Guy's celebrated globalism owed to his early chance encounter with

4. Ibid., p. 13.

David and, second, that his own roots were in poetry, particularly in British Romanticism and its yearning for what has been called a "cosmic consciousness."[5]

I met David before I met Guy—and through the same person, Lygia Clark—sometime in the late summer or early fall of 1970 (when I returned to France after being an exchange student in the States) or the late spring or early summer of 1971. He was living with his American boyfriend, John Dugger, at the time, on a houseboat (which David had christened the *Mayflower II*!) moored at the Quai des Tuileries on the Seine, next to the garden of the same name. I knew about his work through Guy's 1968 book, *Kinetic Art,* and *Robho,* the journal edited by Jean Clay, which had published David's beautiful tribute to Lygia (one passage in particular—in which he compared a work of hers in rubber to the foreskin of an

5. I have a recollection—too vague, alas—of a specific conversation with David and Guy, David speaking about Walt Whitman, Guy about William Blake, during which this concept was invoked. It would have been characteristic of both, but particularly of David, to have brought out the name of its Canadian coiner, a close friend of Whitman's named Richard Maurice Burke, who published a book about it in 1901.

uncircumcised penis—had fascinated me but also made me blush as a repressed sixteen-year-old unprepared to accept his homosexuality).[6] Lygia had urged me to go see him; she was amused by his floating abode and felt this was the ideal circumstance for me to make his acquaintance. (Fairly soon after, she would no longer be amused: David had used her name, without her knowledge, as a guarantor for the boat's rental or mortgage—which he failed to pay. Her enormous respect for him as an artist never ebbed, but she never forgave him for the legal troubles his reckless behavior created for her and forever banned him from her place.)

Although I have a perfect memory of the unusual setting, I do not remember our initial conversation—only that it was not as fluid as it would become, perhaps because of Dugger's presence and what I sensed of his proprietary attitude with regard to David. It also must have been brief, as I had to take the train back home to southwest France that very evening: I would later find out how important duration was for any interaction with David. I was invited back to the boat as soon as possible, but this never happened, as he had already left when I moved to Paris in the fall of 1971. The next time I saw him was four or five years later, when he came to visit me with Guy, whom I had befriended in the meantime.

As for the latter, I had been longing to meet him for some time before it happened at Lygia's apartment-studio on the Boulevard Brune. I had already learned so much about him that we easily skipped the first tentative steps in establishing our intimate friendship: bromance at first sight. Most of the information I had about him had come from Lygia. I have written on several occasions about my very close relationship with her, but I don't think I ever indicated how often and lovingly she spoke of Guy (the only other person about whom I ever heard her speak so effusively was Hélio Oiticica, although her relationship with him was punctuated by terrible rows). It was probably Lygia who had showed me Guy's *Kinetic Art* soon after its publication (in a letter he wrote me in January 1977, apologizing for not having responded to a missive of mine, he recalled that our correspondence had begun with a similar failure on his part, when he had neglected to answer the "long and very friendly letter" I had written him when the book had appeared). Guy's book, short and modest in format, had been a total surprise: Its treatment of the

subject had absolutely nothing to do with what one might have expected at the time—there is virtually no discussion of the titillating Op gadgets that had been invading the galleries and were soon to be relegated to the footnotes of art history, but there are lengthy analyses (and many photographs) of David's and Lygia's work as well as that of Oiticica, Mira Schendel, Sergio de

6. See Medalla, "Participe présent: L'art de Lygia Clark," *Robho* 4 (1968), pp. 16–17. Having no access to David's original manuscript, which is probably lost, I retranslate from the French: "The first time I touched a work made with rubber by Lygia Clark, I was struck by its resemblance to the foreskin of an uncircumcised penis. Lygia's rubber sculpture resembled, for me, the foreskin of an uncircumcised penis not for its form, or its size, but due to its elasticity and reversibility, its wonderful aptitude to develop and to fold onto itself as it is touched by the participant."

Camargo, and Takis, artists Guy defended his whole life and all of whom, except for Oiticica, had been exhibited at Signals. As a matter of fact, the other publication of Guy's with which I was already familiar was the catalog he authored and designed of Oiticica's exhibition for which he secured the Whitechapel Gallery in 1969, three years after Signals had abruptly closed in the middle of a Schendel show, just as a large shipment of Oiticica's works was landing on the doorstep of the gallery, in which they had been scheduled to be installed in the next few weeks (for a long time most of the gallery's inventory was stored in care of Guy, some of it *Cover of* Kinetic Art, *by Guy Brett, 1968.* packed away in his parents' house in the countryside, the rest filling a room to the brim in his sparsely furnished apartment at Ormonde Mansions, a stone's throw from the British Museum).[7]

By the time we met and clicked, the Signals adventure was probably ancient history for Guy—I learned more about it a few months later when I first visited him in London and he showed me his collection of *Signals* bulletins. Leafing through them, I was amazed by the importance of science and the history of science in its pages, especially in its first issues (John Newell, a well-known science journalist, was a regular contributor, and texts by the likes of Werner Heisenberg and Hermann von Helmholtz were featured).[8] I was intrigued, since one of the novel aspects of Guy's *Kinetic Art* book had been the picture it gave of the movement as utterly disconnected from the techno-scientist bric-a-brac with which it had unfortunately been almost exclusively associated. He responded with the same

7. Signals was forced to close after its backer, a wealthy American manufacturer of optical instruments (and the father of Paul Keeler, the director of the gallery), was scandalized by David's publication, in the eighth issue of its bulletin (June–July 1965), of two texts: Lewis Mumford's address to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a letter from Robert Lowell to President Johnson declining an invitation to the White House, both in protest of the Vietnam War. (Naum Gabo had provided a copy of the texts.) According to Guy, the abrupt closing occurred midway through the Schendel show, in October 1966, but in various publications (notably in Eleanor Crabtree's *Signals* and in the catalog of the 1993 Takis retrospective at the Galeries du Jeu de Paume in Paris), an exhibition of the Greek artist is listed as having taken place at the gallery in December 1966.

8. There was also some pseudoscience, mostly on the part of artists, particularly Marcello Salvadori, but he disappeared from view after the fourth issue.

Cover of Hélio Oiticica, *by Guy Brett, 1969.*

historical and contextual answer that he offered in various essays: that "after the Second World War, kineticism was one powerful focus for the aspirations felt by young artists from colonized, 'developing' or marginalized countries to be 'absolutely modern.' It was the means of catching up and then surpassing the development of modernism in Europe, and of assuming the right to speak in visionary, utopian, even cosmic terms."[9] David's early dream of a collaboration between art and science, which he had been calling for in the *Signals* bulletin, and which Guy had shared, was very much a part of that.

This dream notwithstanding, at the time of my visit Guy was more inclined to speak about the recent political turn his work had taken after a long trip throughout South America. The first sign I have of this is a clipping that he gave or sent me of a column he had published in the *Times* on June 19, 1974 (titled "Out of Africa"), about David's series of drawings that took as its subject the "liberation movements against Portuguese colonialism in Angola, Mozambique and GuineaBissau." In the article three points were stressed: These works were shown outside

9. Brett, *Exploding Galaxies,* p. 40.

the context of galleries and museums, "at festivals of dance and poetry at community centers in several English cities"; almost childlike in style, they eschewed the rhetoric of propaganda through their devotion to particulars ("the aspect which is emphasized in all the drawings is the environment, the jungle, which provides shelter and camouflage and is also the symbol of the richness of the land"); and they deliberately ignored the diktats of the art market that constrain the artist to his or her own niche ("They seem miles away from the preoccupation of the avantgarde," to which the artist belonged—a sentence followed by a quick summary of David's avant-garde credentials, with an insistence on his multimedia approach and deliberate refusal of stylistic consistency).[10] Those themes preoccupied Guy all his life.

The second piece of evidence concerning his “political turn” is the first letter I still have from him, dated September 25, 1974, in which he recounts how busy he is preparing the Arts Festival for Chilean Resistance, a fundraiser for the families

10. The drawing illustrating Guy’s text in the *Times*, bearing the inscription “Frelimo Freedom Fighters Crossing a River in Mozambique,” was later reproduced in *Exploding Galaxies* (p. 88), along with four others from the same series.

David Medalla. Frelimo Freedom Fighters Crossing a River in Mozambique. *1974.*

of the “disappeared” in Chile, to open shortly at the Royal College of Art (whose director at the time was his father, as I learned a bit later!); asks me to remind Lygia of her promise to send films about her recent work to be projected there; and informs me that David is working nonstop. The situation in Chile would become a recurrent topic of our conversation, especially since it was the home country of his wife, Alejandra, whom he met at the festival—and it led me, two years later, to introduce Guy to the *arpilleras* (small figurative patchworks) produced by mothers and wives of political prisoners or the “disappeared” in Chile, one of the very rare occasions when our roles were inverted with regard to introducing the other to works of art.[11] But the most significant passage of this short letter is this, in response no doubt to a question of mine: “About China there’s so much to say; there’s a kind of transformation at the most everyday level. Contemporary

focal-points like the factory, the school, which in the West are wrapped in frustrations and boredom, seem to be filled with humor and creativity. It's a wonderful thing to feel. I'll tell you more about it when I see you."

And tell me about it he did over the next two years, when we visited each other frequently (he came to Paris more often than I went to London, and several times he stayed with David at my place). I don't know exactly under what circumstances Guy had gone to China while the Cultural Revolution was still raging or how he had become a fellow traveler. He never turned into a full-fledged Maoist, unlike David, who was relentlessly trying to bring me into the fold. I kept telling David that the Red Guards would make mincemeat of him as soon as they heard him talk about free love, and that homosexuality was most certainly severely repressed in Red China. At one point he dragged me to the opening of an exhibition of Hans Richter's Dada works at the Galerie Denise René Rive Droite, where I had not gone in years, and the venerable pioneer greeted him like an old acquaintance—which led me, on the subway trip back to my flat, to try one more time to tell him that all his interests, in life as in art, were incompatible with his Maoism— but none of this made a dent. He would switch to a discussion of ancient Chinese art or of porcelain production in Ming China (of which he knew an enormous amount), as if this transhistoric essentializing of China could in any way change my views (it only consolidated them). Digression was part and parcel of David's mode of elocution, but in our jousts about Mao it had become his most efficient defense strategy, since his asides were always captivating, themselves branching

11. In a letter dated July 10, 1976, Guy writes: "It's interesting what you say about the Chile patch-works your father has. Can you tell me more about them? Any photos? Are they an example where culture is used as a form of resistance? It could be an idea to try to exhibit them here in London. I'd be in quite a good position to do that." At that time my father was head of CIMADE, a French NGO founded in 1939 to help political refugees (and, during the war, to hide Jews or help them leave Nazioccupied France). It was involved in all kinds of actions in support of the resistance to the Pinochet regime, including the distribution of *arpilleras.* On April 2, 1977, Guy confirmed that he was working on an exhibition of those, adding that it was "gradually coming together, but very slowly. The Arts Council won't support it officially. I'm now looking around for other possibilities." The show actually opened in Scotland later that year, at the end of October, under the aegis of Oxfam, with the title "'We Want People to Know the Truth': Patchwork Pictures from Chile," accompanied by a modest catalog with detailed captions for each of the fifty-two works on display and an essay by Guy, which he later revised and augmented as the first chapter of his 1986 book *Through Our Own Eyes.*

into further asides. (During the crash course he gave me about Chinese blue-andwhite porcelain production, he alluded to the subtle use the craftsmen made of symmetry, which led to a discussion of symmetry in general, a topic that greatly interested me at the time, with David acquainting me with something else yet: Hermann Weyl's 1952 book *Symmetry,* which he promised to bring me from London on his next visit—a promise he astonishingly kept.)[12]

But sometimes all his digressive talent would not do the trick, and in such cases he just dug in his heels. I had been horrified when I saw photographs of the *People's Participation Pavilion* at Documenta 5 in 1972, where he and Dugger had proudly hung a banner with the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin—yes,

Stalin!—and Mao, stitched above the slogan SOCIALIST ART THROUGH SOCIALIST REVOLUTION! He would not budge when I told him how I felt about it. Incidentally, I was relieved to read a text from 2011, titled "A Rectification," which David wrote after stumbling across the same photographs reproduced in a publication about Harald Szeemann, the famous curator of that Documenta vintage. In conclusion, it reads: "After a passage of thirty-nine years, I have arrived at this new resolution: errors of my youth must now be corrected, errors that were the results of a passionate but ill-informed belief," followed by an amended list of names (Marx, Darwin, Whitman, Rimbaud, Freud, and Einstein) for those on the banner. Of the original ones, only Marx survives. This public apology was very unlike David, but better late than never.[13]

My own political background was a mix of anarcho-Marxism (since high school I had been a reader of both Marx and Bakunin, often siding with the latter in his struggle against the former), socialism (of the kind represented by the PSU, a French party to the left of Mitterand's Parti Socialiste that had attracted many of the intellectuals I admired and to which my father belonged), and the Internationale Situationiste (I should probably have named that first, as my father subscribed to its journal, the first political publication I ever perused). Everything
I had read about Mao's authoritarianism and the madness of the Cultural

12. Being a dud at math, I could not follow the numerous demonstrations that punctuate Weyl's book and wondered if David was able to (in his short memoir on Signals, he claims that he "had the good fortune to attend [the famous mathematician's] lectures on symmetry at Princeton University when [he] was a boy" (p. 118). As was often the case with David, I was somewhat skeptical at first, for several reasons—Weyl was not at Princeton University at the time but at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), and he was retired and living half the year in Zurich. But David's statement seems to be perfectly genuine. It works for both Weyl's and David's calendar. According to Purissima BenitezJohannot, David flew from Manila to New York on July 7, 1954, and returned home in March 1955 (*The Life and Art of David Medalla* [Quezon City, Philippines: Vibal Foundation, 2012], pp. 247–48). He attended classes at Columbia in the fall of 1954 and the beginning of the spring term. As for Weyl, not only was he in the States during exactly the same period but he gave a series of lectures at the IAS in the fall and, more important, delivered a famous address ("Knowledge as Unity") at the fifth of Columbia's Bicentennial Conferences (on the theme of "The Unity of Knowledge"), which took place from October 27 to October 30, 1954, a talk at which David might very well have been present. (My thanks to Caitlin Rizzo, Jocelyn Wilk, and Juliette Kennedy for helping me sort this out.) As serendipity would have it, I was appointed to the IAS faculty in 2015.

13. David Medalla, "A Rectification," in Purissima Benitez-Johannot, *The Life and Art of David Medalla,* pp. 207–08.

Revolution repelled me.[14] It is hard today to fathom the Sinophile or rather Maophile frenzy that took hold among a large part of the French intelligentsia at the time, including artists, who turned a blind eye to the barbarity of the Red Guards despite the growing accumulation of hair-raising testimonies.[15] I had already struggled with this aberration during the revolt of May 1968 and immediately after, while I was in high school, so I was well poised to resist David's continual proselytizing; but Guy's position was much more nuanced. In China his interest had been piqued by a strange phenomenon: the pictorial production of a group of farmers, all based in the district of Huxian, which had begun in the 1950s but had greatly expanded and become popular all over the country (the works circulated in poster-size reproductions) even though (and perhaps because) they owed

nothing to the official socialist-realist style directly imported from Stalinist Russia or to traditional Chinese painting. He brought me a book about the peasantpainters, long lost, published by the official propaganda machine in Beijing, as well as an article he had written about these works, and realizing that I was not indifferent, he urged me to write about them—which I eventually did![16]

Venturing to look again at this text for the first time in more than four decades, I am struck by how much it owes to Guy despite the distance I kept from his collectivist ethos. As a good student of Marxism, I tackled the topic from what seemed to me the most interesting theoretical angle: What are we to make of an enormous artistic production by nonprofessional, untrained, part-time "artists" (all of whom declared their pride in working principally in the fields) and exclusively intended for a mass audience? The text proper began with the famous quote from *The German Ideology* in which Marx and Engels state that the very existence of artists

14. The Situationists were notoriously anti-Maoist. Some of their attacks were humorous, using their well-known device of *détournement*. I specifically remember two films, one in the kung-fu genre, the other a Japanese porno, whose subtitles had been transformed into political jousts (the title of the first was *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*, the other, *The Girls of Kamare,* both the work of René Vienet, a French sinologist who had gone to China and come back utterly disillusioned). Most of the time the Situationist critique of Mao's China was frontal. It was Vienet, for example, who engineered the publication of Simon Leys's pamphlet *Les habits neufs du president Mao,* perhaps the first denunciation of the Cultural Revolution from a leftist point of view. "Simon Leys" was the pseudonym of Pierre Ryckmans, a renowned specialist of Chinese painting whom I met on several occasions around the same time that David was trying to convert me (we made some plans to publish Ryckmans's translation of a Chinese treatise on painting in *Macula,* but with the sudden fame of his "Simon Leys" investigative journalism he was far too busy).

15. The most perturbing was probably the loud support for the Cultural Revolution by the *Tel Quel* group, controlled by Philippe Sollers, which in 1971 published Maria-Antonietta Macciochi's *De la Chine,* one of the most grotesque hackworks of propaganda ever, in its otherwise reputable publication series (which includes almost all the books by Roland Barthes, from his 1966 *Critique et vérité* onward, as well as Jacques Derrida's 1967 *L'écriture et la différence* and *La dissémination* in 1972). Another grotesque effect of *Tel Quel*'s sycophantism was the full embrace of its Maophile position by the artists of the Supports/Surfaces group, closely allied to Sollers's clique, in its own journal, *Peinture, Cahiers Théoriques,* in issue after issue.

16. Yve-Alain Bois, "La peinture des paysans chinois d'aujourd'hui," *Critique* 337 (June 1975), pp. 615–23.

is a consequence of the division of labor, and it ends with a comparison between the situation of the Chinese peasant-painters and that of the (professional) Productivist artists in the Soviet Russia of the 1920s, who dreamed—but could only dream—of the abolition of art as a specialized, autonomous human activity. Two features of this text were clearly imported from Guy: its epigraph, taken from Christopher Caudwell, a young Marxist writer who died in the Spanish Civil War, and the idea that in these works—which borrow many tropes from folk traditions—decoration, or rather "the decorative" (near allover patterns, rejection of a central figure, etc.), is used as a visual metaphor of abundance.

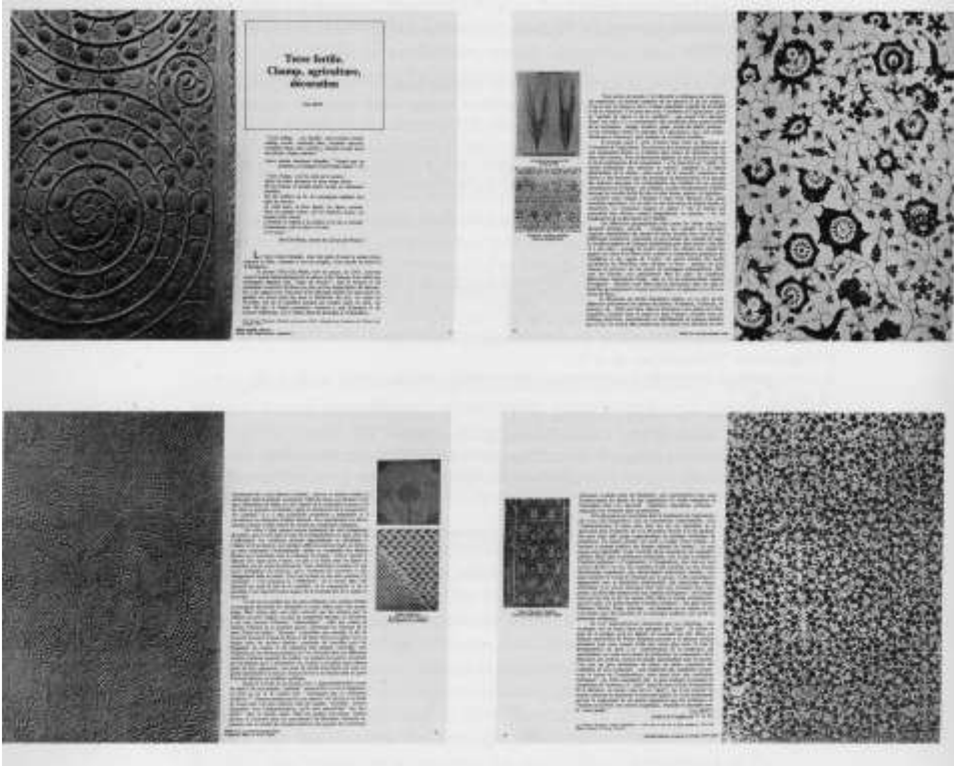
This last theme had actually been expanded by Guy in a text I probably had not read when I published my piece, although he must have mentioned its central argument during one of his visits, in which case it would have substantially eased my entry into the peasant-

painters' work.[17] Guy had been very tentative when he sent me this short essay, titled "Agriculture, Field, Decoration": "I would like to know if you think this approach is valid, or far-fetched and amateurish." The text knocked me out. With its sweeping hypothesis that the birth of decoration, or of the decorative impulse, had coincided with the birth of agriculture, his piece was completely foreign to what I was then accustomed to reading, save for its one reference to Walter Benjamin. At the time Jean Clay and I were already planning the first issue of *Macula*, the journal we edited from 1976 to 1979 (four issues, one per year), and I proposed to translate this text for it; I also invited Guy to be part of our minuscule editorial team.[18] For me, "Agriculture, Field, Decoration" remains a quintessential example of his prose and what I consider its poetic tone. And in a way, Guy himself thought of it in a similar manner: As late as March 28, 1999, when writing to me about his concept for the extraordinary exhibition *Force Fields* that he would curate in Barcelona (more on this below), he noted: "I want to do something rather similar to the essay on decoration that you printed in *Macula*— something speculative, intuitive, which brings out a chain of relationships which perhaps have not been noticed." And five years after that, out of hundreds of articles, he selected the essay for inclusion in his first collection of selected writings, *Carnival of Perception* (more on this below as well), where it appeared for the first time in English. He had been particularly pleased by the way we had followed his indications for its layout in *Macula*—something to which he was always particularly attentive—with a combination of marginal illustrations and full-page bleeds, and he reduced the four spreads of the original *Macula* design to fit a single page in his book as the frontispiece to this essay.

By the time Guy sent me his decoration and agriculture text, we had already established a relationship as each other's first readers and two-person fan club.

17. He sent me a first version of the essay on April 12, 1975, and my article appeared in June 1975 in a special issue of *Critique* on China. The editorial pace of this journal was not swift, especially in the case of special issues, so I had probably submitted my text before receiving Guy's.

18. The text was published as "Terre fertile. Champ, agriculture, décoration" in the first issue of *Macula* (1976, pp. 50–57), perhaps the first writing of Guy's to appear in French.



Spreads from Macula *no. 1, 1976.*

(He liked very much an essay on the art market I had left with him on my first visit to his place in London, for example, in January 1975—I was no doubt proud of what I thought was the strict Marxist stance of the text—and he campaigned, unsuccessfully, to have it published in *Studio International*.)[19] But more important, we shared our enthusiasms about things we read—sometimes with a typical *esprit de l'escalier*: We would ask each other for the reference or even a copy of a text that had been mentioned during our encounters in person (at the end of May 1975, for instance, a month during which he had stayed for a few days twice at my place with David, he asked me in a letter to send him a copy of the small text by Bertolt Brecht on Chinese painting—then and perhaps still not translated into English— that I had read aloud to him). And we regularly brought books and photocopies to each other when visiting. He loved the now-famous text by Meyer Schapiro "Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," which I copied for him, but also Leroi-Gourhan's *Le geste et la parole* and Henri Focillon's *Éloge de la main*; and aside from Caudwell (the first text he sent of his was a very strange essay on love), he led me to discover Lu Hsun, a longtime favorite of Guy's, as well the literary critic and political activist José Carlos Mariátegui (he sent me two short texts by the Peruvian writer dating from the 1920s, both on Futurism). When we were together, either in Paris or London, one of our greatest pleasures was to

browse bookshops and occasionally buy the same books, about which we would later comment by mail. I suppose we were exhilarated to find at once something that was exciting for the both of us (the most memorable of those occasions concerns several issues of the journal *Screen* each of us acquired at a socialist bookshop in Soho containing a vast quantity of texts from and about various writers of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s, including the so-called formalist literary critics of the journal *LEF*—we devoured them). For the most part, however, our exchanges of authors kept confirming how utterly different our cultural baggage was—and how much we enjoyed being each other's guide to unknown territories. He introduced me to Adrian Stokes, for example, whom, I now vaguely remember, he had met through his father (urging me to read not only *Stones of Rimini* but also *Inside Out: An Essay in the Psychology and Aesthetic Appeal of Space,* of which he gave me the exquisitely printed original edition). It is also thanks to his father's connections that in 1979, as I was attempting to interview everyone still living who had known Mondrian, he brought me to the country house of Myfanwy Evans and John Piper, members of the (soft) British avant-garde of the 1930s and '40s, who had befriended the Dutch painter while he was living in London.[20]

19. He sent it to *Studio*'s editor, Richard Cork, who liked it as well and had it translated, but who then stalled and eventually dropped it. I am not sure that the essay could really qualify as Marxist, but it is certainly an earnest period piece. It was eventually published in French as an appendix of *Le phénomène Beaubourg*, a book written almost entirely by Jean Clay under the pseudonym of Marie Leroy (Paris: Éditions Syros, 1977).

20. In 1937 Evans published *The Painter's Object,* an anthology of texts and reproductions by artists of the international avant-garde (Moholy-Nagy, Max Ernst, Calder), established modern masters (Picasso, Léger, Kandinsky), and British artists (Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, John Piper). Mondrian does not figure in it, so I would not have been aware of her friendship with him if Guy had not alerted me to it.

The most incongruous introduction of the sort occurred in a query embedded in a long letter from April 1977: "Did you read Max Raphael's essay on the struggle to understand art?" The format of the book in which the essay in question was published, *The Demands of Art,* whose existence I knew nothing about, was too large for xeroxing, so it was the first thing I acquired during my next visit to London a few months later. Despite the heavy philosophizing, I found several essays in it very rewarding, particularly the text on Cézanne, filled with extraordinarily rich and perceptive formal analyses, but I could not make heads or tails of "The Struggle to Understand Art." It is only recently, while revisiting it after having reread so many of Guy's essays and letters, that I grasped what attraction this dense and grand attempt at a universal theory of art could have held for him, given his usual aversion to philosophical abstraction: He shared with Raphael a conception of the work of art as both an interpretant (of the world, of nature, of life) and a reserve of energy that needs to be released and activated by the viewer.[21]

In 1975, in addition to preparing the first issue of *Macula,* I had been commissioned to write at top speed (two months from start to finish) a short book on Picabia, to be published in time for the retrospective of the artist at the Grand Palais opening in January of the following year. I had taken the job for purely financial reasons (my first taste of "typing for dollars"), even though my feelings about Picabia's oeuvre, especially his post-

Dada work, were ambiguous at best. Only a couple months after the book came out, his daughter threatened the publisher with a libel lawsuit for my mere mention of the fact that the artist's four-month imprisonment after the Liberation had been due to his anti-Semitic and Pétainist stance during the war. The publisher panicked, even though all my sources were public (including a scrapbook Picabia's last wife had just issued), and any judge would have dismissed the charge as frivolous. Not only did the publisher have all the copies recalled and pulped, she even threatened to sue me if I were to publish anything about this sordid affair (I consulted a lawyer, who told me to go ahead, which I did in *Macula*).[22] Guy was incensed by the whole thing, which he called pure censorship, and wrote a piece about it for the *Guardian,* which his friend Caroline Tisdall, then the lead art critic of the newspaper, promised to publish. (I don't think this ever ran, but I still have Guy's manuscript of it.)

Soon after this episode, I visited Guy, who had just moved to a small house in Brixton, one of the most ethnically diverse areas of southwest London. Together we went to Artists for Democracy (AFD), a squatter community of young artists

21. The following sentences from Raphael's essay could very well have been written by Guy: "Every work of art contains within it spiritual energies, the release of which can increase our own productive capacity," and "The creative theory of art . . . requires that the spiritual energies released by the work of art be used to further the viewer's own creative powers" (*The Demands of Art* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968], pp. 189 and 199).

22. My short rebuttal of the claims made by Picabia's daughter, which I published in the first issue of *Macula* (1976), was translated into English and appeared in *October* 30 (Fall 1984) under the title "Francis Picabia: From Dada to Pétain" (pp. 121–27).

and performers that had become David's fiefdom. Unfortunately there was a temporary lull at this beehive of activity (there had been some conflicts between members of the group, it seems, and Guy had distanced himself from them), but David was as lively as usual, teeming with projects. It must have been on this occasion that he described to me the "participation-production-propulsion" piece he was planning for the space several months down the line, called *Eskimo Carver* (1977). By all accounts, and Guy's in particular, this would turn out to be one of the most successful events at AFD (it was also its last).[23] I missed it, unable to come back to London for the occasion, busy as I was both with *Macula* and finishing, in dreadful haste, my dissertation (a condition *sine qua non* of the job I was applying for, my first, at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique). I made the deadline and got the position, but David long begrudged my absence. As happened countless times, in order to expose to me his Eskimo project, he had shown me a notebook filled with drawings and diagrams as well as quotes and references jotted down in preparation, all in his amazingly reader-friendly handwriting. He always carried a notebook with him, and what inevitably fascinated me whenever he opened it and started rhapsodizing is how complexly sedimented all his projects already were at this embryonic level. There were always at least three or four historical and cultural narratives, both local and global, intertwined in any single project, always several possible points of entry, always multiple levels of potential interpretation. In some ways David was a hoarder, which in itself was incompatible with his perpetual wandering—so he had learned to collect not objects but ideas and information. I was always worried that these notebooks,

which over the years had become for me the essence of his work, would somehow be lost during his endless peregrinations (he shared my apprehension and, to reassure me, said that he planned to leave them with Guy for safekeeping).

In late May 1976, Guy sent me the rough draft of a text he had written on the autobiography of the Dutch documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens, which he wanted, once edited, to offer *Macula* (Ivens's many films on China were shown in Paris at the time—particularly the assemblage of twelve one-hour films, co-authored with his wife Marceline Loridan, called *How Yukong Moves the Mountain*, which had just come out and which he wanted to come and see). The essay had been long in the making, and Guy was particularly insecure about it, critical of what he called his hero-worshipping tendencies. I thought the piece needed quite a lot of work and told him so while encouraging him to pursue it, but Jean, alas, did not like it at all and did not want to publish it (Ivens's unrepentant Stalinism and the propaganda rhetoric suffusing the recent films did not help). Guy had to cancel a stay in Paris, where he could have discussed the matter with Jean and myself, because he was hastily preparing a second trip to China, this time as a guest of the Society of Anglo-Chinese Understanding (SACU), an invitation he gladly accepted in order to deepen his knowledge of the peasant-painters movement. He had been taking his role of fellow traveler ever more seriously since I had met him, and had even

23. See Brett, *Exploding Galaxies,* pp. 103–17.

been persuaded by Joseph Needham to write several pieces for SACU's notoriously pro-Mao journal, *China Now*—but rereading his letters now, I notice that after this second and last tour (three weeks in July 1976), they no longer contain the slightest allusion to China. He did not even respond to my questions about it. In fact, he did not write me for several months. At the time I felt he was hurt by Jean's take on his Ivens piece (which I had dutifully but diplomatically conveyed to him), especially since he did comment on it in the first letter I received from him after his return from China, in January 1977, but in hindsight I think that the trip had led to a somewhat traumatic disillusionment.[24]

Guy's letter of April 2, 1977, which includes his suggestion that I read Max Raphael, also expresses his negative reaction to the second issue of *Macula.* The only thing he seemed to like in it is my edition of letters to the artist Jean Gorin, written in the 1920s and '30s by fellow artists such as Vantongerloo, Torres-Garcia, Mondrian, and Otto Freundlich. "Why don't you do a book," he suggested, "where the whole drama of the pioneer modern artists, their whole social situation with its freedoms and its restrictions, is revealed through their letters. I think that this would say so much more—with linking passages, of course—than conventional art history." He is particularly acerbic about Jean's difficult essay on the painter Martin Barré. In a long postscript, probably written a day after the letter proper, he spelled out his revulsion:

> I shouldn't speak about Macula 2 without really studying it, but I can't help feeling it's turning back towards "art for art's sake" in many parts. It's on a high level of scholarship, but what is this scholarship being used for? I know my level of scholarship is low but I feel I can't wait until it is higher before attempting a kind of *popularization*. Why can't Macula develop a popular

style? (I don't mean a "populist" style. I mean e.g. the style of Lu Hsun in his essays, in which you feel his need to communicate with non-specialist people who he could stimulate to act, to produce, to realize the best in themselves.) I can't take the philistinism of the specialist with his little in-jokes and snoberries, and language that is basically constipated. How can we be simple and clear without vulgarizing and without demagoguery? It's a very difficult problem. Marx was not easy to understand, was he? Once again, on cultural matters, Brecht is a model, isn't he? Brecht was not a vulgarizer, but he was so beautifully economical and clear with words; he wrote as a thinker, but one who is involved in everything that goes on, who does not blot out from his

24. Guy published several essays in *China Now,* including one about Mao's views on art in an issue of the journal published just after the death of the Great Helmsman ("A Challenge to Artists," *China Now* 65 [October 1976], pp. 11–13), which is the only truly embarrassing piece of writing I have read by him. Much more interesting and informative is "Lu Xun and the Woodcut Movement," published in the February 1976 issue of the journal (no. 59), pp. 9–12. As far as I know, he published only two other texts in *China Now* after his second trip to the country. The first was about the Huhsien peasant-painters (December 1976), the other an interview of Ivens and Loridan (March 1977), both of which had been commissioned in advance of that final visit.

communications a consciousness of the most basic, most naive questions (what is theater? Theater is to give pleasure, etc, etc). He didn't place himself above people. I know you know what I mean.

I have no recollection of how I reacted at the time, but it must not have been very easy—I was straddling my loyalty to two friends, one (Guy) ten years older than I, the other (Jean) eighteen. Even though Guy's name still figured on the editorial masthead of *Macula* until the third annual issue in 1978, he obviously no longer felt a connection with the journal. We continued to correspond (he would send me news about David or discuss the exhibition of *arpilleras* he was organizing) and to visit each other whenever possible (he tempted me with a Lissitzky exhibition that was opening at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art). One of the oddest slivers of the past I retrieved from our letters of the period is Guy's apology for having left his guitar at my place—that image, of Guy playing a guitar, had left no trace whatsoever in my memory.

Our extant correspondence in the early 1980s is sparse; no doubt many letters were lost, as I moved a few times within Paris and then definitively to the United States. We saw each other a couple times, kept in touch, but not assiduously. The intense exchanges of our beginnings resumed only in the fall of 1986, after Guy came to stay with me for a few days in the French countryside during the summer. It is telling that with his first letter of this new round, dated September 1, 1986, in response to one of mine, he sent me something he had published on David in a Philippine art magazine ("a rather disjointed patchwork from the text on him I'm still hoping to make into a book"), as I often nudged him about this plan.[25] The bulk of this long letter is devoted to his trip to Mexico, from which he had just returned. Even though he had been there previously, he was predictably marveling at the Mayan sites and shocked by "one's enforced passivity and detachment as a tourist when confronted by the outrageous class system and poverty," which made him think of the

“bitter-ironic little prose-poem by Baudelaire, *Assommons les pauvres!*” What enchanted him most, as it had done before, was “this vernacular culture of toys, and little objects of all kinds, which people are continually making, to load up a basket or box with them, and hawk them around. There are many traditional forms, but also many absurd hybrids made of modern materials like plastic, foam-rubber and polystyrene. Of these, you hardly ever see the same thing twice. But I think they all have one thing in common (in the way they are made, and presented): a kind of animation, an incredible ingenuity to simulate life.” (It is impossible when reading this description not to think of David, of what kindred spirits he and Guy really were.)

With the next letter (November 1, 1986), Guy sent me the draft of an essay on “primitivism” that he was having a hard time writing for a book being compiled

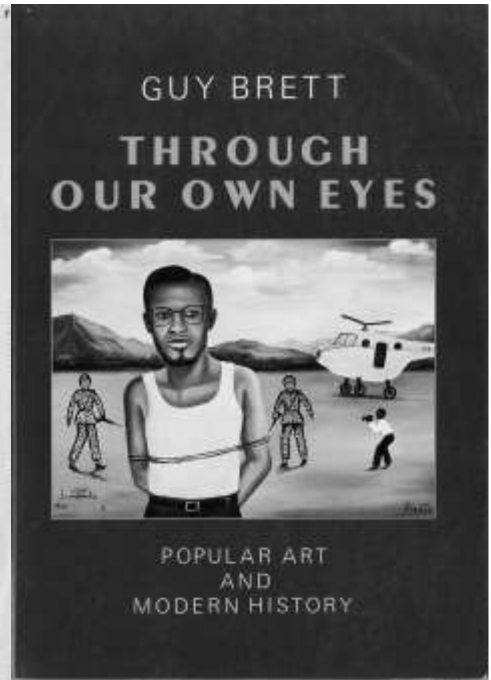
25. Guy Brett, “David Medalla,” *San Juan (The Liberated Bimonthly Magazine of Art),* December 1985, pp. 10–17. This issue of the journal also contains the facsimile of a handwritten and illustrated account by David of his encounters with Louis Aragon and a letter he sent to *San Juan*’s editor, Michael A. P. Adams. One half of the issue, in fact, was dedicated to David.

by his friend Susan Hiller (to whose work he had introduced me), no doubt including it because I had mentioned I was writing a text on Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Picasso, and African art, which I had roughly outlined in a talk a year earlier at the symposium MoMA organized around its “Primitivism” show.[26] More important, he informed me of the publication of his small book *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History*. The following letter, dated November 10, reads almost like a manifesto. Together with several recent essays of mine I had sent the draft of a lecture whose English he had taken it upon himself to improve, in which I was grappling with the opposition, established by Hal Foster, between two kinds of “postmodernism,” a neoconservative and a post-structuralist one.[27]

Guy returned my manuscript with his handwritten edits, some of them explained

26. Guy’s essay, “Unofficial Versions,” is published in *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art,* ed. Susan Hiller (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 113–36. With his *San Juan* essay on David included in his letter from September 1, 1986, Guy had also sent his review of a show by Hiller at the Gimpel Fils Gallery in London (October–November 1985), in which he stresses her conception of art as “something *efficacious*, something that works, not simply aesthetic” (Guy Brett, “Home Truths: New Works by Susan Hiller,” *Studio International* 199, no. 1012 [March 1986], pp. 60–61).

27. This lecture was published in French a year later in *Les cahiers du musée national d’art moderne* 22 (December 1987), pp. 57–69.



Cover of San Juan *with image by David Medalla, December 1985.*

Cover of Through Our Own Eyes, *by Guy Brett, 1986.*

in the letter, but it is his general comments that impressed me most and that are worth quoting in full:

> I must say that I was stirred by the last few pages of your essay (from about p16 to the end): all that you say about citation and the levelization of all things, and your exposure of Rosenblum, Picabia, Shiff, Schnabel etc. Plus the way you suggest an alternative in the work of Haacke and "feminist" artists. These pages are so well-aimed and combative that I wondered why you did not take these distinctions as a starting-point or as a guiding theme for the essay and refer to early modernism from the basis of them. Perhaps this had to do with the particular context you were speaking in, where there were particular underlying assumptions about modernism. I mean, is it being in America which means you have to give Greenberg such importance, and say that his writings form the "second moment" of crystallization of modernist theory? Are you, for example, using the term "modernist" in a much narrower way in relation to Greenberg than you do in relation to the early modern, or "abstract" artists?

I'll try to say what I mean in another way, really as a question, or questions. Who are the successors of the early modernists? You say the Greenberg "second moment" was vastly different from the abstract "first moment," that Mondrian's, Malevich's (etc) ideas about science, technology, progress, social justice and the "dissolution of art into life" were transformed into mysticism by the Greenbergian artists. Conditions after the war (Germano-soviet pact, collapse of the myth of progress, Cold War etc) lay behind this change. But couldn't there be a different interpretation if one took a wider historical view than the European–North American axis, and a wider artistic view open to experimentation in its many forms?

It's at least party true, surely, that the concerns of the early avant-garde, the social ideas and the practice of experimentation, passed after the war to certain centers in what is now called the Third World, eg Brazil with its early Sao Paulo Biennales, where all the early modernists (Mondrian, Malevich, Duchamp, Klee etc) were shown very much as social and cultural activists, rather than as stars of the art market as they were later to be in the West. This cultural transfusion is one of the bases for Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica's work I think, and I still consider them very important artists. I think in the West, the idea that something interesting could be happening in the "third world" was deliberately suppressed after the war (eg in official histories of modernism like Herbert Read's Concise History of Modern Painting (the first book on modern art I bought) in which (I mention this in the Primitivism essay) he deliberately omits modern Mexican painting. Greenberg's formalism seems to me a product of ignorance of these wider issues, (actually, modern Mexican painting was a great influence on Pollock etc, so Greenberg's position must be a product of the coldwar ethos (am I historically accurate here?)).

I do think the work of the early modernists, the work of "third world" artists produced in contestation of, an opposition to, Western colonialism, and the radical artists you refer to at the end of your piece, does tie up in vital ways. Jean Fisher puts this very well I think: ". . . We are all, to a great or lesser extent, a part of neocolonial heterogeneous populations subjected to or spoken for by corporate and media-based hegemonies." The ramifications of this interpretation could be huge.

Also I think that, for example, Hans Haacke's opposition to neo-conservative tendencies can be traced further back than the present situation. Significant for him I think, as for others, was the transformation of his kinetic into his political work. His kinetic work—with its emphasis on process, change, non-authorial ideas, experimental media etc—was as opposed to the Greenbergian dogma as his political work is to the "functioning of the artistic network in late capitalism." There is another history.

> I also do believe there is another practice of quoting from the "boundless universe of visual languages and symbols," which does not imply the levelization of all things, in fact the opposite, in the work of some "feminist" artists and also in David Medalla's work as I want to try to show in my text on him: Work that does do what Benjamin asks for in your quotation, to grasp "the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."

Around that time we tried to organize a trip for Guy in the United States (to be financed by lectures), but for various reasons this did not work out until the spring of 1988. Instead, he went to Brazil, his first visit there in twenty years, where he met several old friends, foremost among them Lygia Clark, who had returned from Paris in 1976. In an undated letter (but datable from the beginning of 1987), he described at length her current situation, as well as his visit to Projeto Oiticica:

> I've much to tell you about Brazil. I was so happy to see Lygia (and also Sergio Camargo), but I found her not too well. The whole psychotherapy adventure (which she stopped anyway more than a year ago) has left her physically damaged. She is prone to all kinds of ailments (in her ears, her legs, her head, etc) and doesn't go out much—apart from a daily visit to the bar on the corner of the Av. Prado Junior, now a completely notorious part of Rio, where she eats an ice-cream among the prostitutes. She seems to have taken into herself physically the problems of her psychotic "clients" who she treated with her method based on use of the air-bags, cushions, mattresses etc which derive from her works. Nevertheless we had some wonderful conversations—rather like in the Boulevard Brune. I met a young man there with the strange name of Lulu Wanderlay, a young psychotherapist who has used Lygia's methods actually in a mental hospital, and whom she admires greatly. She asked me about you many times very warmly and likes you very much as I'm sure you know. I'm more than ever fascinated by her work and ideas, her evolution. She is very well known in Brazil, but still incredibly isolated. Very fierce. She often shows the door to reporters sent to interview her for the cultural sections of the newspapers, and so on. I'm once again trying to organize an exhibition here of her work and bring out a publication. I want to write something about the idea of efficacy (ie, in a way a medical concept—remember those books on pharmacy and art you gave me once?) in relation to art in her work.
>
> All of Helio's work is now stored in a flat and looked after by a group of his family and friends, and called the Projecto HO. I was taken there. I stayed only a short time and hardly touched or looked at anything. I couldn't stay there and start behaving like an art historian or critic, having known Helio so well when he lived in London. But again I'm going to write something more about his work for a big book they plan to bring out in Brazil. His actual exhibition in Rio was a slightly sad affair without his presence, and made me realize that the show he did at the Whitechapel in London was his largest and most daring.

In my (delayed) response I announced that I was reviewing his book for *Art in America* and suggested that he write another book, this one on Lygia, Oiticica, and David

(he replied that he had been thinking about it himself but saw it rather as three separate essays plus an introduction).

We were both very busy that spring, so our correspondence slackened again somewhat. On July 15, 1987, he wrote that he liked my review (the draft of which I had sent him) but was otherwise untypically discouraged about the text on Lygia that he had had enormous difficulty writing for *Third Text* over the previous two months. The journal's editor, he wrote, hated it despite multiple revisions, calling it "intellectually weak, timid, opaque, lacking critical distance, and various other pejoratives":

> I actually can't take a critical distance on Lygia's work since I identify with it so strongly, and want at this stage just to present or explicate it. [. . .] I can't discuss Lygia's work with reference to psychoanalytic theory, representation theory, theories of sexuality and so on. Either the piece does have some other quality (I think it has a speculative, thought-provoking, poetic quality [. . .]). Or else it's theoretically naive and simplistic, in which case it's damaging to Lygia's work. I don't know, I can't see it clearly any more.[28]

I sympathized, of course, having experienced a similarly paralyzing "lack of distance" with regard to Lygia's work—but I was glad that Guy was at last owning the poetic stance I had always admired in his critical discourse.

This fit of blues would last longer than usual; we kept exchanging pieces we were writing, but by his own account Guy was not very prolific for several months. His enthusiasm was rekindled, as so often, by a collaboration with David (he had

28. No matter how gloomy his letters could be at times, Guy always included a codicil about some pleasure he had felt. This paragraph was followed by one such account: "My only break (from what in other ways was a Latour of love) was to go to Germany for Documenta (I'm reviewing it for *Studio*). Oh God! All your feelings about the state of the art world came back to me going round this enormous and stupid show. Luckily I was able to get away to Wurzburg and see the marvelous Tiepolo ceiling there (the card I'm sending you, Tiepolo's self-portrait, comes from one corner and shows him looking, with an indefinable expression, towards the allegory of 'Europe' he has created on one side to complement the allegory of India, Africa and America on the other three sides). I was amazed by the dialectic in Tiepolo (which I hadn't realized before) between the ethereal/allegorical and the earthy/realistic."

taken photos with him—which means he was the cameraman—and planned to "do a piece about his 'photo-works,'" which would be baptized *Medalla's Impromptus*).[29] The commercial success of *Through Our Own Eyes* in the United States was also a boost, and he exuded gratitude when my review was finally published in the October 1987 issue of *Art in America*:

> At first glance, the ambiguity of Guy Brett's title is irritating (to whom does that "our" refer?); and even after his title is deciphered ("our" equals "their," and refers to the amateur artists whose works are discussed and reproduced), it is still annoying because of the spate of good intentions that it appears to summon forth. However, those ambiguities and irritations themselves reveal the difficulty of Brett's self-assigned task: without trying to hide his own role in selecting the diverse genres of popular art he describes, he wishes to analyze that work from the point of view of its creators. This predicament is the scourge of ethnographers, with

whom Brett's project has something in common; indeed, it's no accident that in the single case where he could not himself carry out an in-the-field inquiry (the Shaba painting of Zaire), Brett, who is a former art critic for the London Times, drew on the work of two anthropologists for his source material.

Brett's approach is as far from the humanism that has sustained the recent wave of interest in "primitive" art (exacerbated by the encyclopedic exhibition at MoMA two years ago) as from the formulaic incantations of political discourse. For example, Brett shows how the vision of Africa as a land with neither history nor modernity is a product of colonialism; but he also shows how the popular art created in Africa today presents a more accurate picture of the complex transformations undergone by that continent than either the image found in the media or the one that emerges from the slogans brandished by Western anti-colonialists. Profoundly dialectical, Brett's book provides a lesson in tact: the author doesn't speak for others; instead, he tells us what the art of others has taught him about the very conditions of its creation. Without imposing our own formal categories on these works, he attempts to see them as they themselves wish to be seen—namely as documents which in their own way constitute a truthful discourse. When Moriaki Kawamura, chairperson of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, told Brett that he should "use these pictures with the utmost care so as not to wound [the] susceptibilities [of their makers]," he couldn't have addressed anyone more scrupulous in his respect for the intentions of others.

Brett's book consists of a general introduction, followed by five chapters, each of which deals with a specific artistic production that has, or has recently had, a significant impact, even if that production is generally unknown within the confines of the art world. The bodies of work treated include: the *arpilleras* (patchwork pictures) that Chilean women began to embroider soon after the coup that brought Pinochet to power; the paintings done by Chinese peasants of Huxian during the time of the Cultural Revolution; the movement of popular painting that erupted in Zaire after that country's indepen dence from Belgium

29. Guy's essay, "Impromptus: David Medalla," appeared in the November 1989 issue of *Art in America*, pp. 157–63 and 211.

was declared in 1960; the visual records that the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki began to draw 30 years after the fact; and the agglomeration of objects and images on the perimeter fence of England's Greenham Common, the proposed site for an Anglo-American nuclear missile base (in December 1982 the fence was transformed by 30,000 women into an arena for protest). Nothing, a priori, stylistically links any one of these productions to another. The "naive" charm of the *arpilleras* (which effectively contrasts with the brutality of the events they

represent) stands at a great remove from the hallucinatory precision found in the visual recollections of the survivors of the Bomb. And despite the similarity of their messages (condemnation of the use of nuclear arms), the latter drawings have nothing obvious in common with the vast collage of dolls, clothes, postcards, photographs, drawings or other personal belongings attached to the nine miles of fence encircling a wasteland destined to receive 96 Ameri can missiles.

Although the label "naive art" could serve to define the common characteristics of a painting by a Chinese peasant and another by an amateur Zairean artist, Brett nevertheless insists upon the danger of this kind of non-discriminating assimilation. He is not only concerned about the risks of setting an art market onto works whose distribution methods have, until now, for the most part protected them from the market's greedy grasp (and, indeed, that isolation has contributed a certain power to these works). What distinguishes the images he discusses from those of, say, the Douanier Rousseau is the specific manner in which they recount particular events: rather than attempting to encode the atemporal essence of a tree or a tiger, these pictures depict a swarm of flies pullulating around the only toilet in a Santiago shantytown (or the line formed in front of the region's only water faucet); or they focus on the shoes of Chinese peasants, who have left them near a gas lantern while they water their fields; or they show the passivity of a white colonialist, who is present at the whipping of a prisoner by a black policeman; or they reveal the hair standing on end and the tattered skin of a victim of the Bomb.

Picturesque detail has always been essential to the success of so-called "naive art," but here such detail consistently refers to a specific historical experience whose distinctive feature is its collectivity; if the photographs of loved ones are among the most recurrent elements of the Greenham Common collage ("I am here for these, my 6 grand-children" reads one poster on the fence), it's because individual lives give meaning to this protest movement through their collective impact. "Making society the concrete and the individual the abstraction," such is one of the common features, according to Brett, of the diverse artistic enterprises he describes.

The corpus of Brett's study is strictly defined: it deals with the work of "self-taught or untaught artists expressing and forming the experience of whole groups of people . . . in the midst of profound historical changes." In each case, this art is the fruit of necessity. It was the mothers of "the disappeared," along with the wives of unemployed shantytown men, for example, who launched the *arpilleras* movement. For both of these troubled groups, their regular meetings for sewing and embroidery—among the few permissible crafts for working-class women in Chile's macho society—functioned at once as group therapy and as gatherings for political self-initiation. The *arpilleras* humorously recycle consumer society scraps

to make politically incisive statements about life in Chile; but because of their childlike and coded style (and their distribution by the church), these patch-work pictures have been able to effectively defy government censorship.

Each case discussed by Brett reinforces the main argument of his book—that the relationship between the *global* and the *local* has prof oundly changed in today's world: it's because the art of the avant-garde seeks more often than not to be universal that it no longer has much connection with the actual conflicts of our society; on the other hand, it's because they are integral parts of microcultures or of specific political struggles that the works analyzed by Brett directly concern every one of us. It's exactly because it took place in an out-of-the-way corner of the English countryside that the happening-collage of Greenham Common could focus attention on the planetary threat of nuclear arms. And it's because they are so personal ("What I saw at Kyobashi-mashi . . ." is the caption of one work) that the accounts of the survivors of the Bomb are able to collectively fight against a general amnesia.

Another argument of Brett's book is that the media lies, that photography captures action from a distance (a refutation of Walter Benjamin's utopian view of the liberating status of mechanical reproduction), and that professional artists embellish or create pathos; conversely, Brett sees the works in his book as bearing witness "from the inside": to him they are a battle over the issue of representation, a popular reappropriation of the capacity for expression that, as a result of capitalism's division of labor, has been restricted to a small minority of artists. Only a peasant knows the priorities of the world of agriculture—the importance of diversity in repetition; the authoritative role of ordered containment in the human mastery of nature; amazement at the abundance that new technologies engender. The decorative sensibility in the paintings of Chinese peasants, which emphasize the group and gesture more than psychology or physiognomy, reveals more about their way of life and their aspirations than those "social-realist" murals created at the same time, in which peasants are depicted as sympathetic heroes. But this accuracy of expression derives from the non-hierarchical production mode of all the genres of art that Brett describes: whether anonymous (Chile) or signed (Zaire and China), the works in hand are constantly rectified by the community whose sufferings or dreams they illuminate; whether for sale (Chile, Zaire) or not (Japan, England, China), they acquire their meaning only by strengthening the identity of that community.

A good deal more could be said about Brett's beautiful and moving work. One should note that the author in no way seeks to establish the artistic practices that he has inventoried as a prescriptive model; more than anyone else, he would be saddened if today's postmodernists, under the guise of pluralist ideology, were to

exploit the "oddities of figuration" of these artists in order to add one more frisson to their cynical strategies. The primary purpose of Brett's study is to acknowledge the vitality of a certain type of popular culture, a visual practice that attempts to break the wall of silence. And his report, in spite of the hardening of political struggles at this century's end, is in itself an optimistic gesture.[30]

Contrary to what we had both expected, I went to see Guy in London (during Christmas break) before he could take his long-planned trip to the United States and visit me in Baltimore (in April 1988), then fly to Caracas and from there again to Brazil (in preparation for the famous exhibition *Art in Latin America*, curated by Dawn Ades at the Hayward Gallery, for which he had somewhat reluctantly agreed to organize the section on kinetic art). The long letter he wrote me on his return to London, on July 22, 1988, is very emotional: He had learned of Lygia's death while at the Caracas airport, arriving in Rio just in time for her funeral (of which he provides a horrifying description à la Daumier—"I had an insight into the sort of milieu which Lygia had broken away from," he adds).

In the same breath, he announced that he had just submitted a piece on Oiticica to *Art in America* ("It's been a big stimulus to write something for somewhere far away from London"); provided comments on my essay "Perceiving Newman"; sent me a 1972 interview of James Baldwin by John Hall in the African journal *Transition* (in response to remarks I had sent him about this writer, in whose work I was engrossed at the time);[31] asked me what I thought of a request he'd received from *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* to "write something for the issue they will bring out at the time of the Centre Pompidou's awful sounding *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition next year"; and informed me that David had told him rather unceremoniously that he wanted me, and not him, to write on a piece he was preparing for a show curated by Chris Dercon at the Clocktower in New York. ("Well, he's the second one in a week who's told me he's tired of reading Guy Brett on David Medalla. Certainly I would love to read what you would say on such a body of work.")

This was not to happen (as far as I recall, there was no publication), and eight more years would pass before I would write something on David. During this interval, my correspondence with Guy (and his with me) remained spotty, partly because we had begun to phone each other, partly because we managed to see each other several times on either side of the Atlantic, but mainly because we both had too many things on our plate. We kept sending each other our texts, Guy almost always laudatory about mine but often stricken by doubts about his and,

30. Yve-Alain Bois, "Popular Culture," *Art in America,* October 1987, pp. 25–27.

31. See John Hall and James Baldwin, "James Baldwin: A Transition Interview," *Transition* 41 (1972), pp. 21–24, https://doi.org/10.2307/2935113. On the history of *Transition,* which folded in 1976 and was brought back to life by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 1991, see the website of the journal, https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/transition.

Cover of Transcontinental, *edited by Guy Brett, 1990.*

indeed, about our role as critics. He had been exhilarated to curate the exhibition *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* ("it was in Birmingham and Manchester simultaneously [March 24–April 28, 1990] and all nine artists came over to install their work and even make parts of it"), and rightly so, as the book/catalog he wrote for it represents perhaps the first serious discussion of the issue of globalization in contemporary art (it was certainly conceived as a response to *Les magiciens de la terre*), but the string of invitations that kept coming his way to do more of the same was weighing on him. A letter he sent me on January 31, 1992, mentioning the (crucial) supporting role he played in the touring Oiticica retrospective of 1992–94, provides a good aperçu of his frame of mind:[32]

> I've been given all these opportunities recently to write on the work of people formerly marginal to the art world—Brazilians, Chileans—but I'm beset with doubts: I'm only helping to "sell" them as new products in the bloody art world which hasn't changed and will only absorb them on its terms (writing which one thought was elucidatory, precise,

32. The exhibition *Hélio Oiticica* was at the Witte de Wit Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (Feb.–Apr. 1992); Jeu de Paume, Paris (June–Aug. 1992); Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (Oct.–Dec. 1992); Centro de Arte Moderna da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon (Jan.–March 1993); and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (Oct. 1993–Feb. 1994).

> "resisting," begins to look like very subtle advertising copy). I've been constantly in doubt about my involvement with this Oiticica exhibition. Is it a betrayal? how can one re-present his position—non-commercial, non-consumerist, participatory—in the conditions of 1992? And yet I can't accept an amnesia about the position he/we took.

Despite these serious concerns, passages of this sort were usually followed by lighter touches, such as the line following this paragraph, with which he concludes his letter: "Your Lygia Clark piece reminded me of a 'cell' out of which we both grew, and the feeling of friendship warms at the thought of visiting you."[33]

I am not sure what he meant by my "Lygia Clark piece" (it seems too early for it to have been the all-too-brief introduction I wrote for the anthology of her texts that I published in the Summer 1994 issue of *October,* but it is not impossible, given the pace of the journal's editorial process). In any case, this casual remark prompted us to envision co-authoring a book on Lygia—we were dismayed by the way her work, to which people were finally paying attention, was linked to many art labels ("body art," "performance art," "feminist art") to which we knew she was fiercely opposed.[34] This was a project we would discuss for many years, envisioning all kinds of ways we could stay for a few months in Rio and do research together, but in the end we were too discouraged by the internal disputes of the estate, as well as all sorts of conflicts between supporters of her work in Brazil, of which we wanted no part.

33. Another warming-up tidbit from the same letter, in response to my complaint about the tendency of graduate students to write papers much longer than needed, is a quote from Auden about the courage it requires to be brief:

> In the eyes of every author, I fancy, his own past work falls into four classes. First, the pure rubbish which he regrets ever having conceived; second—for him the most painful—the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much; third, the pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance; these must necessarily form the bulk of any collection since, were he to limit it to the fourth class alone, to those poems for which he is honestly grateful, his volume would be too depressingly slim.

34. This dismay around the appropriation of Lygia's work recurred in our exchanges. On November 23, 1999, Guy asked for my advice on a letter he had received from Stephen Melville: "He wanted help in tracking down works by Lygia for a show he's doing at the Wexner Center. I doubt if Lygia would want to be included in a show which 'argues a view, or explores the situation, of painting in a broadly post-minimalist context.' Or to be associated with painters like Hantai, Buren, Parmentier, Supports-Surfaces, Degottex, etc. Do you think I should collaborate on this (I haven't replied yet)? I don't want to aid Lygia's insertion into beaux-arts or mainstream contexts she emphatically rejected." Despite my sympathy for this project, which was undertaken by Melville, Philip Armstrong, and Laura Lisbon at the Wexner (their 2001 exhibition *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, in which French artists I defended, such as Martin Barré—to whom Lygia had introduced me!—and Christian Bonnefoi, would be prominently displayed), I responded on January 16, 2000, that I agreed that Lygia's work would be utterly out of place in this context. I added: "There is something comic in observing the artworld retrospectively projecting onto her its own fantasies. A few days ago she was named by the *New York Times,* in a review article on Valie Export, as a pioneering woman artist dealing with the body, along with Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper, Niki de Saint Phalle, among others: can you imagine? Lygia would have puked."

The one project of his to which I was able to lend a modest contribution in the form of a postface was his monograph on David. Guy had long hesitated to ask me (for months I had been completely absorbed by the preparations for and catalog of the Mondrian retrospective that would open in December 1994 in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague before traveling to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and to MoMA), but David had continued to bug him, and in hearing Guy shyly make this request over the phone, I could not but give in. He immediately sent me a note of thanks (on September 28, 1994), with specifications about what he expected:

> Please feel absolutely free to say what you like. It could simply be your response to the book. Or it could be a reminiscence. Some who have read the

book find it very "romantic." I don't know about David, but I suppose I am romantic. I expect you will immediately have a sense of the dilemmas, conundrums and unanswered questions which underlie an attempt to make an "art in life." I imagine a length of c. 500 words— but more or less if you like.

I think certain passages will make you smile. Read the book as a leisure activity. Creleisure?? But, as you read, en passant, please tell me of anything which jars with you. David's things are often on the edge of absurdity. Or, like a joke, if they are not told well, they fall.

It was perfect timing in a way—the Mondrian catalog was done and I was in the very preliminary stages of the exhibition *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi* that I was to curate with Rosalind Krauss at the Centre Pompidou, and in which I wanted to include some of David's early works.[35] But if the timing was right, the amount of time I was given to produce the piece was not. Guy negotiated an extension for me, but only of a few weeks. Even though it was a short text, I found it hard to write and discarded many drafts until I jotted it all down in a single sitting one morning in early December. I sent it off to Guy on December 8, 1994, with some trepidation. He responded by fax the next day:

> I don't think your piece is horrible at all. I am extremely intrigued by it. [. . .] You have tried to be honest and what is intriguing is that, in interpreting David as a story-teller, you have made your own, or a further, story, or fiction.
>
> I think our two different texts are in interesting counter-point. In fact the three texts, including Dore Ashton's that is, are in counterpoint

35. Two year earlier, in June 1992, we had converged briefly on Paris (Guy from London, I from Barcelona) in order to meet Rosalind and together show material on David to her. I do not remember why (maybe I had the idea that a dossier could be published in *October*?). In any event this helped me later to convince her that his work should have a place in our *Informe* show.

> and represent three different stories—three different literary constructs or conceits almost—about the nature of imagination which David's "work" has made us think about, and our different understanding of what you call the "virtual" aspect of his work. Ashton, for example, refers to him as a "luftmensch," or impractical dreamer, and her tone is celebratory. You call him "the only real conceptual artist." I think I based myself as much as possible on the material evidence and diversity—I couldn't see it as virtual without this material component— but even I ignored a great deal of David's actual physical production.[36]

Just a week later I was in London for a lecture I had to give at the Courtauld on Mondrian (on my way to the opening in The Hague), and as usual I stayed at Guy's. That is where I realized that the entire beginning of my text on David had to be scrapped: I had cast myself as a doubting Thomas over the many "performances" of which I thought the only existing traces were David's own fantastical descriptions or scenarios scribbled in his

notebook, only to find out, perusing Guy's vast photographic documentation, that many had actually taken place! (In retrospect, it is surprising that David never protested about my initial take, claiming all along that he liked my short essay. I think that it was during that same trip to Europe that I stayed for a night with him in a sumptuous apartment that a friend of his had lent him on the posh Place Vendôme—the last time we had a long one-on-one conversation—during which he raved about this first version.) Guy kindly helped me with the surgical editing, and the text that follows was promptly sent to the publisher.

Virtual

Though I've known David Medalla for years (we met fairly regularly during the Seventies—each time he came to Paris or I went to London), I've actually seen only a handful of his works. And nothing major at that—a few drawings from his militant period (when he was trying, or pretended to be trying, to lure me into the Maoist faith); a not-so-good sketch of myself in my early twenties (I still have it somewhere, one of the rare evidences that I once had a beard); and then the fragile paper masks, cut out of magazines, that Guy Brett pulled out of his travel bag to show to me and Rosalind Krauss, two or three years ago, in a quaint Britishlooking tea house near La Madeleine in Paris. Of course I'd seen many photographs over the years—from the bubble machines of the early Sixties up to fairly recent performances—but photographs don't say much about his work (photography can't say much about flux, duration, exchange—the stuff of David's art). Furthermore, these photographs only concerned a limited proportion of his output, indeed a far smaller proportion than I thought before reading the present book.

36. Dore Ashton wrote a foreword for *Exploding Galaxies*, "An Impromptu for David Medalla and Guy Brett," pp. 8–11.

And yet, contrary to my habit of never writing on anything I have not experienced directly and scrutinized inside out, I would not find it particularly immoral to do so on David's work. This does not mean that I would feel very competent—though, among many other qualities, Guy Brett's study enormously raises the level of my putative competence by the sheer quantity of information it contains. It just means that, in David's case, not having actually seen much of his work does not seem to constitute a confounding handicap, should I have to write about it—and this, for me, despite years of Conceptual Art, is a first.

Before reading Guy Brett's book I had often wondered if David's work, notably his performances, had ever really taken place. But I had concluded that it did not matter much, that language was the true medium of David, that his real performances were his narrations, that it was in relating them, always existing fully in his mind, always replete with multiple layers of allegory, that he performed them. David-Sheherazade: the way he knits his elaborate descriptions, unfolding one

after the other the various semantic realms that are intertwined in any of his works, the rhapsodic structure of the tale. This always mesmerized me, as it did others.

In the Seventies David often carried with him a notebook, all scribbled up, filled with the script of one or another of his performances, and would read from it eventually, more often than not extrapolating from it, but always telling about events—past or would-be ones, without distinction. The quintessential oral poet, the storyteller, the seducer.

Guy Brett's study both contradicts such an impression and confirms it at what, for me, is a deeper and more paradoxical level. The book abounds with evidence that testifies to the reality of Medalla's work. Something has existed, and still does, though it is in some way intangible. To be sure, objects have been made (and have been remade, occasionally, if the original was destroyed), performances and intricate participatory pieces have taken place. One of the functions of this book is to attest this, providing a unique eye-witness account.

Yet at the same time, Brett's tale does not diminish, even enhances, Medalla's predilection for fantasy and imaginative projection. Alluding to the ephemeral status of performance as an art form, Brett notes that "even the inventory of over 150 of Medalla's performances evokes something that cannot exactly be verified." The virtual aspect of Medalla's work is underscored everywhere in this book, with numerous examples of unrealized (though not always necessarily unrealizable) proposals dating from the early Sixties to the present:
David, the only real conceptual artist, for whom it is enough to think of a project.

One of the structures of Medalla's poetics so perceptively described by Guy Brett is that of the "meeting." Accounting for its open-endedness, the sense of infinite unfolding that it entails (the "and then, and then" of David's narration), Brett also speaks of David's work as vastly metaphoric. But metaphors are usually not open-ended: something stands for something else, something is as something else, yet for a metaphor to work and be recognized as such, the circularity of exchange has to be arrested at some point, the chain of signification has to be broken. Medalla's work, on the contrary, proposes an endless story, that of a perpetuum mobile, a universe where particles rebound *ad vitam aeternam*.

In other words, Medalla builds indeed on metaphors, vast amounts of them, but I would say that it is in order to destroy metaphor per se—by excess. It is to annihilate any metaphoric centre by the sheer vastness of possibility. The 'and then, and then' is designed never to stop. Which is why Medalla's participatory pieces are so cogent, why they work—unlike so many other works based on the "spectator's" participation in the Sixties and Seventies. Which is also why his work, contrary to appearances and, no doubt, to the claims that have been or will be made about it, does not provide an apologetic discourse about identity (national,

racial, sexual, social or otherwise). "There is no place for static identities. . . . Everything is in constant flux," Medalla is quoted as saying. In order to cancel any identity, one has to cancel as well the structure of oppositions on which metaphors are grounded: David's strategy is that of superabundance.

This dissolution by excess is perhaps more easily explored in art than in writing, for the infinity of language is daunting once its economical rule is broken loose. David is not the only artist to have engaged in it (one can find traces of such a radical poetic in Duchamp, or in Cage or in Fluxus for example), but to my mind he is certainly the one who carried it further and constantly remained faithful to its liberating principle: his deliberate defaulting of the laws of the art market, his nomadic refusal to remain any bit more than a fleeting moment in any place he might be assigned to by the artistic institution, in sum the casual and (somewhat heroic) detachment with which he managed his career—those were the weapons by which he consciously insured the success of his undermining enterprise.

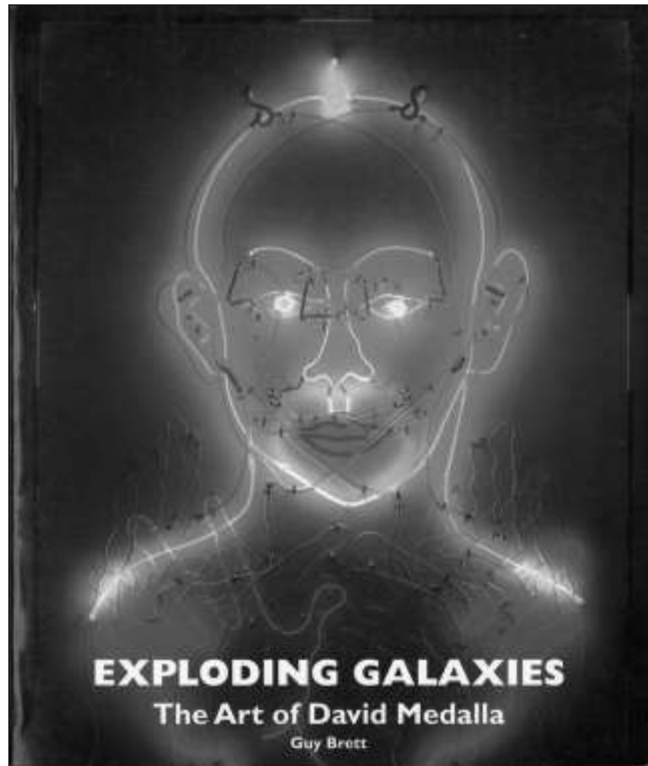
Nothing was ever allowed to freeze, even if a lack of public recognition was the price to pay for adhering to this axiom.

Medalla invented, for me, the practice of virtuality.[37]

37. *Exploding Galaxies,* pp. 212–14.

Alas, the printing was delayed multiple times, and it would be another full year before *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla* finally came out. (I was none too happy about having been forced to concoct something at top speed when I could have taken my leisurely time authoring something a bit more consistent—in any event, this was not Guy's fault.)

Our exchange of ideas concerning David (and Lygia, for that matter) continued unabated. A great deal had to do with the *Informe* show—I was desperately trying to find a way to include one of David's *Bubble Machines* in the exhibition, but the only extant one was in Auckland and was too expensive to ship on our modest budget. Instead, one had to be fabricated for the occasion (neither I nor the artist was ecstatic with the result; on top of looking too slick, this version turned out to be extremely high-maintenance). I also sought Guy's advice about how to display Lygia's work from the late '60s and '70s in the show, knowing full well that the solution that she had come up with in the only retrospective she'd accepted during her lifetime would not do in Paris. (In that exhibition, a joint Oiticica/Clark retrospective curated by Luciano Figueirêdo and Glória Ferreira in Rio and São Paulo, original objects—or rather non-objects—were displayed together with vintage photos of their manipulation. Scattered on tables next to these exhibits were



Cover of Exploding Galaxies, *by Guy Brett, 1995.*

not only duplicates to be handled but also, for the simplest of them, material from which to fabricate copies, so that one could get, if desired, a sensual experience approximating that of their early handlers.)[37] Guy was tackling the same issue as a consultant for Paul Schimmel's *Out of Actions* show for LA MOCA (it opened in February 1998), and he was as pessimistic as I was, for my own show, about any possible outcome. An interesting moment in our dialogue, counterbalancing Guy's gushy comments on my essay for the Mondrian retrospective, which he saw at MoMA after visiting me in Cambridge, was his January 22, 1996, criticism (softpedaled but nevertheless very acute in its specificity) of my take on David's early work in the draft of the relevant entry in the *Informe* catalog:

> I think your description of David's Bubble Machine itself is pretty accurate (especially its slowness, and the bursting and replacement of bubbles) but I think there's only a slight connection with [Pol] Bury. The Medalla is not intermittent, there's really a sort of continuity at various levels of speed. In other words, while one part is barely stirring, another is moving more quickly. Yes, there is occasionally a sudden movement as a section of foam becomes detached and falls to the ground, or falls softly on top of another part, or even floats off semi-sideways in an air-current caused by a draught, or by somebody passing. The great difference with Bury is that Bury's movement, however slow, imperceptible and intermittent, is mechanically produced (limited to mechanical effect, or agency) whereas Medalla's responds to the environment

> and the spectator—wind, atmospheric pressure, gravity, etc—and you are free to plunge your hands in the foam or scoop a piece off, etc. It really behaves differently on different days and in different places: this is its organic analogy, to a degree of considerable subtlety—eg, being lethargic or patchy on one day, and copious or beautifully rounded on another. There is a dialectic between mechanical repetitiveness and the random.
>
> David definitely aimed for a "peaceful" movement, in contrast to what he called the "frenetic" quality of much kinetic art, and he had a rationale for this derived from comparing the Western Baroque concept of movement with the Indian and Chinese (see my book page 61). I am sending you a copy of a short text written by the artist Gustav Metzger (the inventor of "auto-destructive art"), written when he first saw David's Bubble Machines in 1964. I have only a very faint copy and I hope it will come through the fax. Also, a short statement David made

37. The double exhibition *Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica* took place at the Paco Imperial in Rio de Janeiro in November–December 1986, and in São Paulo exactly a year later. The catalog, probably printed between the two venues, contains many photographs of the setup (raw material on tables out of which people fabricate Lygia's props and then use them, copies of her various *Sensorial Masks* being tried on, etc.).

> for an exhibition of kinetic art I organized in 1966. (I can give you precise references if you need them). I hope these might be useful.

The text by Metzger was, alas, illegible, but not David's, which I cannot prevent myself from quoting, as it encapsulates best, I think, the reason Guy had been so immediately taken by his work:

> My sculptures breathe and perspire, grow and decay. They correspond to my view of external and internal reality. Naturally I do not see any demarcation between internal and external "reality." For me, interior space and exterior space are mutually interchangeable, in Lygia Clark's words "inside is outside"—and access from this one to the other is made possible through rhythm . . . the continuous, tangible phases of duration. I am interested in the possibilities of spontaneous growth. Like Takis, I sculpt energy. I use the elements—through the elements I wish to express the dynamism of atomic forces. I seek to find, through these forces, continuous "melodic structures," which could arouse tenderness and love in the brutalized soul of man today.

I did take Guy's remarks into account when revising the text, but he would not be able to find that out right away, as the copy of the catalog that I gave him in Paris when he came to see the show was snatched up by David—and predictably lost, just as he had done with the copy sent to him. (Guy's tolerance when it came to our friend's antics was phenomenal: "David is excited these days and overflowing with ideas but his cavalier behavior is impossible sometimes" was his mild reaction.) I have no recollection of Guy's response to the *Informe* show, which we undoubtedly saw together, and there is no extant

letter in which he would, as usual, offer his detailed comments on the catalog. But the remarks he sent me, also in the letter of January 22, give at least some idea of his reserve. He was responding to a position paper that I had published on formalism (or on my own version of it) in the *Art Bulletin,* and in which I briefly alluded to Rosalind Krauss's analysis of a willful debasement of Pollock's legacy in the production of many artists of the '60s and '70s—an analysis that we had illustrated and extended with our show:[38]

> I was amused to read your self-defence-by-attack in the art history journal. I see what it means to be ambushed in the overheated academic corridors and have to fight your way out. I think you convincingly demonstrated how Greenberg failed in his attention to form, and I very much like your sentence "Failing to address the interrogation raised by Picasso's papiers collés on the very nature of the sign and its function of communication, and wanting to make of them the equivalent of 19th century history paintings, are sure ways of remaining blind to their historical specificity." But for me the whole thing is full of ironies, which is why I think we need positions of fluidity rather than antagonistic

38. Yve-Alain Bois, "Whose Formalism," *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (March 1996), pp. 9–12.

> antithesis. I mean, as I see it, Twombly may have read in Pollock's work "antihumanism, antisublimation and debasement," but Twombly went on to produce very precious, very aesthetic things, not lacking in humanist allusions, and far removed from nonsubjective or cosmic forces! You probably won't agree with that! But I think that Pollock's links to extra-pictorial developments like David's bubble machines or Oiticica's "acting fields" are actually more interesting than links with Twombly or Warhol.

During Guy's short stay in Paris that early summer of 1996, what we did most of the time was talk about our never-to-be project of co-writing a book on Lygia, especially since Manuel Borja-Villel had invited us both to contribute to the ambitious retrospective exhibition of her work that he was planning at the Fundació Tàpies in Barcelona, where he had previously mounted one dedicated to Oiticica. Guy quickly overcame his reluctance (though he was tired of always being asked to write on the same artists), but I was simply too exhausted from nearly three years of curating (Mondrian and then *Informe* immediately after) while simultaneously teaching, and I bowed out.

We both admired Borja-Villel (or Manolo, as we soon called him), and our admiration never ceased to grow as he later moved on to be the director of MACBA (still in Barcelona) and then of the Reina Sofia in Madrid—a true pioneer, with an exhibition program consistently years ahead of those of his American or European counterparts. (The only miss I am aware of is an exhibition of David's work— Borja-Villel had been very warm to the idea when Guy and I had spoken with him independently about it around the time of the *Informe* show, so the difficulties must have come from David's side.) At this juncture, however, we were very curious as to how he would solve the problem of showing Lygia's participatory works (from the *Bichos* on), not to mention her later post-object "propositions," to use her word. That issue, and how to prevent the commodification as

well as academicization of her work, never ceased to obsess us, and for the next two years they were the topics we most consistently discussed in our correspondence (besides our plans for the book on the artist and various attempts at enticing a museum into a show of David's work). The following summer, for example, shortly after visiting Guy in his new house (he had moved to Chalk Farm, in North London, a much quieter area than Brixton), I went to see Documenta 10 in Kassel and wrote him about how disgusted I was by the way Lygia's work was displayed. Going there himself a couple months later, he shared my sentiment, to the point of writing a furious letter to the curator. "The only good thing one could say, perhaps," he wrote me on August 22, 1997, "is that Lygia's section gave Borja-Villel a sharp negative lesson and made him determined to attempt something better. We'll see."

Three months later, he was relieved to report that Manolo's show was as good as it could be "in an institution" and that it held its own in comparison with the 1986 retrospective in Rio and São Paulo mentioned above. Viewing again Lygia's rare *Casulos* [Cocoons] (reliefs from 1958 to 1965) next to videos documenting the use of what she called "relational objects" in the therapeutic practice in which she engaged at the end of her life, Guy had "suddenly felt that all Lygia's transitions or leaps had contained a certain sadness at leaving something behind: here leaving behind the Pictorial—where, in fact, there was still much she could have done" (November 5, 1997).

Guy tried to rope me into a series of symposia on Lygia that he was asked to organize in Barcelona, then in Marseille (the show's second venue), but it was absolutely impossible for me, as I was in the throes of curating a Matisse/Picasso exhibition for the Kimbell Art Museum and writing its catalog. I finally managed to attend the third and final round in Brussels, where I went for a quick trip in September 1998, I think (I remember my frustration at not being able to linger at leisure in the exhibition with Guy and David and instead having to rush back to my hotel room in order to correct the final galleys of my Matisse/Picasso book). I did find the time to review the exhibition for *Artforum*, though, but was not terribly satisfied with my piece. (Guy's comment was diplomatic: "I did see your Lygia review. It was good but I think that you have not yet had the opportunity to write about Lygia as you would really want to.")[39]

It is in the same long letter (March 28, 1999) that Guy first laid out the project of an exhibition he had only alluded to when we met in Brussels and that he was now proposing to Manolo, who had just moved to MACBA: "The show is on a theme which has always intrigued me: a thread of 'cosmic speculation' running through 20th-century art, art works as 'models of the universe'. (Language like this is too poetic for Manolo, and he is always pressing me, probably rightly, to ground the selection of works in a logic which has historical validity)." After jotting down a sentence (quoted earlier) about his text on agriculture and decoration for *Macula* as being akin to what he had in mind for this exhibition, Guy turned slightly more specific:

> The nucleus of the show is two bodies of work: Calder's very early mobiles, before he went naturalistic, when he was inspired by astronomy; and Vantongerloo's post 1945 painting and sculptures (the atomic bursts and the little nucleuses and universes). Neither body of work is over familiar. Then it will branch out with a re-evaluation of the best in kinetic art: 1960s Takis,

> Tinguely, Soto, Medalla, etc (ie, the "moment of discovery"). Actual movement will be intricately related to a large collection of static works, mainly drawings: eg Michaux's mescaline drawings, certain Wols "plasma" etchings, Matta-Clark's "arrow" and "force-field" drawings, Gego, Fontana, Schendel and others: all transcriptions of energy in very direct but very different forms.

39. My review was published in the January 1999 issue. As usual with this publication, I was never consulted about the title of the piece (it was billed as "Lygia Clark: Palais des Beaux-Arts, Paris"). I never received any complaint about this, but I imagine that the curator of the Brussels venue was not too pleased with it.

> The paradox is that the more you enter into the cosmos the more you enter into your own mind: a conundrum for today's physics. I think that Ad Reinhardt was very aware of this and I would like to include his Black paintings (although Manolo will need persuading). You probably remember something very brilliant which Reinhardt said about Chinese art: "The Eastern perspective begins with an awareness of the 'immeasurable vastness' and 'endlessness of things' out there, as things get smaller they get closer, the viewer ends up by losing (finding?) himself in his own mind." (1954)
>
> I think the core of the idea is good. The problem is setting limits. This is what I'm grappling with at the moment. I'd be extraordinarily interested to know of any thoughts, positive or negative, that this subject prompts in you, or any artists who I might have forgotten.

I responded enthusiastically, telling him how much I had always been fascinated by those late Vantongerloos, which I knew mostly from reproduction, but warned him about the difficulty of obtaining loans from the estate. I added:

> As far as missing artists are concerned, I thought of Len Lye (is that the way it's spelled?). I remember visiting him and he had tons of interesting little films), perhaps of early Hans Haacke, and Gutaï. You probably should have one Pollock, since he did talk about cosmic energy. I'm sure there are other things (one problem is Yves Klein, hard to avoid but also hard to include because of his mystical/rightwing shit). In any case, I'll keep thinking about it. Who is Gego?

As usual, Guy had gently nudged me to write for the catalog and I said I was interested but could not make any promises. In retrospect, I am stupefied by my question about Gego: I am baffled by the fact that as late as 1999 I still did not know who she was.

Guy's follow-up letter—the first to arrive by email, on April 20 (we would not be true e-correspondents for another six months or so)—is to be quoted almost in full:

> Your letter cheered me greatly. It was very gratifying to know that you liked the idea of the show I'm doing. I'd only outlined it sketchily, so I was delighted that the artists you suggested—Len Lye, early Hans Haacke—are already on my list (Manolo Borja remade two very large early Haacke's, a floor-level piece of wind-blown cloth, and a large layout of branching capillary tubes, for

a previous show at Fondacion Tapies). I'd wrestled with the idea of Pollock, and even decided there should be one! Of Yves Klein, I'm thinking of including a group of "fire-paintings" (really, scorched surfaces, but elegantly so) because they are both "cosmic" and not nearly so well-known as the blue monochromes. Gego, incidentally, was a Venezuelan artist, a German *immigré* (contemporary of Soto). Her work is uneven but she did some beautiful metal net-work constructions she called Reticulareas (late 60s, early 70s). All the pieces are joined by a simple articulated joint she invented. But it's her drawings I'm particularly keen on for this show. It's marvellous that you might consider writing an essay. Manolo, too, is very keen on the idea. Let me tell you a bit more about the idea for the show—so you can gauge if you find it sympathetic enough. First, I'll give an alphabetical list of the artists (not completely complete yet): Brancusi, Bury, Calder, Camargo, Clark, Denes, Duchamp, Fontana, Gabo, Gego, von Graevenitz, Gysin, Haacke, Hoenich, Houedard, Klein, Le Parc, Lewitt, Li Yuan-chia, Lye, Malevich, Manzoni, Matta-Clark, Medalla, Michaux, Moholy,
Mondrian (?), Morellet, Pollock, Réquichot, Schendel, Soto, Takis, Tinguely, Tobey, Vantongerloo, Wols. There will probably be another curator to organize a film-program.

The first thing to say is that it's highly selective within the work of these artists. I'm choosing certain works by some artists whose remaining work I often don't like.

The second thing is that I want to bring together artists who have always been considered poles apart, opposites, as a paradoxical way of exploring this theme of the "universe," and energy. Take, for example, Morellet and Michaux. For this, I want to have 3 or 4 of Morellet's Trames paintings of 1958–60—those square canvases in which he simply applied a system of straight lines crossing one another to produce a field of visual energy, and a group of Michaux's Mescalin drawings of the mid-50s, which are also extraordinary transcriptions of energy, but coming from a sort of hallucinogenic/psychosomatic abandon or automatism to set against the supposedly fully-conscious rationalism of the Morellet.

I'm hoping these juxtapositions would perform a kind of conjuring trick . . . to avoid the boring aspects of both "concret" and "informel," and change both into something else. The amazing, and rather weird, thing is that opposites keep colliding: for example there is an element of "automatism" in the method of Morellet, since he is working with a system which has "a very large variety of configurations . . . to such a point that it would not always be possible to know what the result would be beforehand." Vantongerloo is a guiding figure because in those late works there is a sort of personal intuition of the equivalence of biological and electromagnetic energies, which of course you

> also find, in different ways, in Fontana (pierced paintings around 1960, and drawings), Takis, von Graevenitz, Manzoni (*Achromes* with little polystyrene balls), Schendel, etc. Scale I'm also mixing up, from a vast machine like Len Lye's Universe to a tiny microcosmic Wols (I'm choosing only Wols's abstract pen doodles of "plasma"). Also the tiny Wols is very comparable to the vast Pollock (as Oiticica pointed out in the early 60s). Etc, etc.
>
> I don't know if you will think these ideas have "historical purchase" (that's a phrase I took from you, from your review of Supports/Surfaces when you spoke of "strange stylistic amalgams that have little historical purchase").[40] But perhaps you would find it interesting to look in a fresh way at the history, to look with a certain ironic detachment (but with specific documentary detail) at the polemics that divided tendencies, and rescue perhaps something larger which has been obscured by every kind of vested interest.

For several months Lygia and David took a back seat in our exchanges. However, we did have to get involved, often by phone, as facilitators in negotiations between various institutions and the Clark estate (Guy on August 12, 1999: "It has only gradually hit me that we've entered another era with the phenomenon called 'Lygia Clark,' full of almost tragic ironies"), and Guy kept me informed about David's activities. (During one of our phone calls over the summer he briefly mentioned David's ironic new project of a "London Biennale." At my request he sent me more information, which I forwarded to an editor at *Artforum* who ended up commissioning a piece from him about it for the journal.)[41] Most of what we discussed until the opening on April 18, 2000, and even beyond was Guy's show, which at some point had acquired the title *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, and in which both Lygia's and David's early works were of course included.

Since Guy wanted me to write for the catalog, he kept sending me material— notably about artists whose work I told him I did not know very well (if at all). His enthusiasm as a scout always fascinated me—and this until the end of his life (I experienced it once again during the last visit I paid to him, a little more than a year before his death). Every time I came to visit him he showed me works of young artists I had never heard of. On January 1, 2003, for example, speaking about an artist Guy had written about in a recent exhibition catalog but whose name I did not remember, I noted: "I liked this drawing you showed me—as a matter of fact I don't remember not liking the work of an artist you had found. I always admired your scouting flair, it presupposes a kind of optimism that I seem

40. Guy is referring to my review of the exhibition *Les Années Supports/Surfaces dans les collections du Centre Georges Pompidou* at the Jeu de Paume, which appeared in the December 1998 issue of *Artforum.*

41. Guy's piece, "The London Biennale," appeared in the February 2000 issue.

to have lost, which is why I became a historian." He wrote back two weeks later with a brief memo about the artist and his show,[42] adding:

> I've been thinking about what you wrote (and you've often said this too) about me being an optimist and you a pessimist (or, maybe not pessimist, but not

> able to feel optimistic). These words are a typical case of opposites that slide into each other. I'm actually very pessimistic, about the whole world situation, but the only way I can deal with my pessimism is to be optimistic, to look for, to crave, hopeful signs (they could be a very brilliant text or just a gesture somebody made on the bus). If I find an artist whose work I like I feel they are a kindred spirit, dealing with the same dilemmas I'm dealing with, and they become an inspiration. Also, I remember once reading something somebody said about Kropotkin—that he had a "lust for praising." I think I have that in a way too.

Charmed by one of his messages about *Force Fields*—particularly this sentence: "it is partly a re-assessment of early kinetic art but it sets it in a much wider context, and the irony is that it brings together tendencies which themselves were often convinced they were in violent opposition to one another" (August 31, 1999)—I gave in and agreed to write for the catalog. But alas, I sheepishly had to renege, and my contribution to this venture consisted mainly in my attempts, some successful, some not, in helping Guy and Manolo secure loans. I made amends, in a way, by going to see the exhibition (in the ghastly MACBA building by Richard Meier) and reviewing it in *Artforum*:

Kinetic art suffered the unhappy fate of a flash in the pan. Drawing crowds and saturating the art market for a brief moment in the mid-'60s (at least in Europe), it faded from sight as rapidly as it had burst on the scene. Behind the quick demise was the confusion with Op art in the mind of the public, fueled by exhibitions such as *The Responsive Eye* (MoMA, 1965). Because kinetic art was (wrongly) perceived as an art based almost entirely on easy optical tricks, it would soon be trashed as utter kitsch, on a par with such risible by-products as the Courrèges dress and the lava lamp. The kiss of death was the awarding of the Grand Prize for painting at the 1966 Venice Biennale to Argentinean artist Julio Le Parc, followed two years later by Nicolas Schöffer winning the prize for

42. "The artist whose drawing you liked is Boris Gerrets. He's half Bulgarian and half Dutch and lives in Amsterdam (where few people have heard of him) and has had an interesting history as an artist. He never got into a career mode with a dealer but has done all sorts of things, from performance to sculpture and drawing to documentary film-making. The show (it was small) was in Helsinki and the director of the Museum, Maaretta Jaukkuri, one of the best museum people I've met, liked it a lot. There is a catalogue (more a parallel publication which Boris and I worked on together) and it gives me much pleasure to send you one (by mail, soon—I'm waiting for more copies to arrive)" (January 15, 2003).

Cover of Force Fields, *by Guy Brett, 2000.*

sculpture: Through the official success of these two mediocre artists (though it should be said that Le Parc did produce some interesting work at the very beginning of his career), kineticism came to be seen as an art of gadgetry.

Guy Brett stands out among the very few critics who never lost faith, in great part because he had done his homework. In *Kinetic Art: The Language of Movement* (1968) he completely dissociated its topic from the discotheque bedazzlement offered by Op. Unfortunately, Brett's slender volume appeared too late in the game for anyone to notice. The main protagonists in his story were Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and David Medalla (Brett, more than any other critic, has helped further the reputation of these three artists); Pol Bury, Sergio de Camargo, Gianni Colombo, Liliane Lijn, Mira Schendel, Takis, and Jean Tinguely were the supporting cast. The same names show up in *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, the superb exhibition Brett recently curated for the Museu d'Arte Contemporani de Barcelona, where I saw it, and for the Hayward Gallery in London, but many others have been added, forming a wholly unexpected constellation. The result is revelatory: At least bad timing will not prevent Brett's voice from being heard.

It should be noted here that what's at stake for Brett is less "movement" per se than "energy"—the specific desire of a tremendous number of artists in the twentieth century to materialize energy, to give form to something that is eminently nonvisual. Movement, in this account, is only one of several formal possibilities in this quest, but a particularly efficient solution; no matter how concrete, movement

can always be expressed as an equation, like energy itself. The qualities that define movement (slow/fast; continuous/discontinuous; regular/irregular; accelerating/decelerating; etc.) are shared by every object or being that produces and expends energy. This very universality, which is an abstract quality, makes of movement an ideal metaphoric switchboard: Every work exhibited in “Force Fields” alludes to either the organic, the mechanic, or the cosmic—in all cases concepts of energy that we, as human beings, have learned to apply in our daily life without a second thought. One of the premises of the exhibition, writes Brett, is that “artists, no less than scientists, make ‘models of the universe.’” Some of these “models” are dinky, others grand, but their vast stylistic range underlines all the more how serious and steady such a metaphoric impulse has been.

The visitor to “Force Fields” enters the exhibition by moving through Jesús Rafael Soto’s *Penetrable*, thousands of thin plastic tubes hung from the ceiling (a re-creation, in fact, of the artist’s great invention of the late ’60s): The room’s atmosphere becomes vibratile, and one is transformed into a passerby from Boccioni’s *States of Mind: Those Who Stay*, walking through solidified rain. On each side of Soto’s piece replicas outdo their originals: The viewer can at last see Duchamp’s 1920 *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)* at work (the fragile original, at the Yale University Art Gallery, is only on rare occasions set in motion), and László Moholy-Nagy’s *Licht-Raum Modulator (Light-space modulator)*, 1922–30, is exhibited according to its author’s intentions (at least to one version of his specifications)—that is, rather than being enthroned, inert, in the middle of an evenly lit museum space, as it is in the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard, it is a prop projecting its multiple cast shadows on the surrounding walls of a large room (the fact that the room is circular in Barcelona, accentuating the distortion of shadows, significantly helps deflect our expectations). One feels grateful that these two famous automata have had some of their disquieting goofiness restored. But there is more: On exiting Moholy-Nagy’s circular room, one immediately stumbles upon an extraordinary series of colored Plexiglas and wire objects, as well as several paintings, realized by Georges Vantongerloo after World War II. Rarely exhibited, these garlands of prisms and translucent loops—not to mention one of the few figurative works in the show, *The Comet*, 1962—remind us that the Paris-based Belgian artist developed a deliberately childlike vein after his De Stijl years that makes him the Douanier Rousseau of the Space Race era. Though three neighboring early ’30s Calder mobiles are in no way insignificant, the Vantongerloo ensemble steals the show and sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition.

After this debut, chronology is not the major issue, though Brett’s foray is tinged with nostalgia, particularly for work from the ’50s and ’60s. It is clear that he endeavored to rescue from oblivion a whole array of artworks (though his lifeboat

was not directed toward the artists themselves, as some of the show's heroes didn't produce much of interest after the period). Brett succeeded with utmost brio, and I can foresee the pile of dissertations that will stem from the exhibition. His strategy was simple: Instead of overkill, he selected the best works and, through startling juxtapositions, electrified them. For example, the slo-mo of the early Burys—particularly *Ponctuation (points blancs)*, 1964, in which the movement of one among tens of thousands of tiny white dots, always unforeseeable, mercilessly teases the viewer—is set against the jazzy effect of Francois Morellet's 1958–60 grids. The latter are in turn compared, in a magnificently eye-opening move, to Henri Michaux's obsessive drawings, realized under the influence of mescaline roughly around the same time as the Morellet pieces. Not far from this, the psychedelic, ever-changing mandala of James Whitney's animated films (*Yantra*, 1950–57; *Lapis*, 1963–66), projected on a large screen, echoes the silent, almost bucolic perpetuum mobile of the three *Liquid Reflections* by Liliane Lijn nearby (in which one or two balls slide on a large rotating Plexiglas plate sprinkled with water; spotlighted in an otherwise dark space, the high-tech water lily floats). In another room, four Soto reliefs, dating from 1959–61, are on display; the works combine an *informel* look (heavy impasto, brushwork, a tangle of mesh wire) with the parallel striations to which the artist owes his trademark moire effect. Brett reminds us that Soto was once as inventive as Piero Manzoni (most prominently represented by several polystyrene-pellet *Achrome*s) and Lucio Fontana (the dark, punctured, glitter and sand *Concetto spaziale* is one of the best I've seen), who in fact greatly admired the Venezuelan. As for Tinguely, his *Meta-Matic* and *Baluba* sculptures, on view in the exhibition, make us forget the artist's vacuous production after his selfdestructive *Homage to New York* in 1960 (documented here by a video).

Brett's staged confrontations work because they are never dogmatic—and never marred by pseudomorphism. He could have chosen, for example, to hang Gordon Matta-Clark's cartoonlike doodles of fighting arrows alongside Fontana's touchingly clumsy cosmic diagrams on paper or Vantongerloo's swirling spirals on canvas. Instead they adorn the antechamber of a room where Hans Haacke's *Sphere in Oblique Air-Jet*, 1967, conspicuously defies gravity and Takis's *Signals*, 1964, blinks at us as if trying to convey a message in Morse code sent from God knows where.

Sometimes an artist is given a whole room: Takis, whose magnetic fields pulse in an astounding variety of ways (producing sound, making balls bounce, asynchronically jolting the needles of compasses on a sci-fi dashboard), is an example; another is Gego, whose metallic spiderwebs, spanning the immaculate white cube, make consenting prey of us. In some other cases, a single work, by virtue of its sheer size, dominates a whole space, such as Haacke's mesmerizing

Circulation, 1969, in which water courses through a complex circuit of plastic tubing sprawled across the floor; the liquid, like some colorless blood, is endlessly propelled at enormous speed by a mechanical heart. But such isolates are rare. Even when large pieces are grouped because of obvious space limitations, Brett points to a link between them by adding a smaller work: Haacke's oceanic *Narrow White Flow*, 1967–68, for example, a huge piece of white fabric whose animal-like undulation (one thinks of the bloated abdomen of a termite queen) is produced by a powerful blower, is found a few yards away from Len Lye's orgasmic *Blade*, 1967–76, a pendulum that gradually escapes inertia every ten minutes, accelerating the rhythms of its oscillations to reach a furious, noisy climax before retreating to its quiet existence as a dull geometric sculpture perched on a pedestal. In both works, the conversion of the strictly mechanical into the sexual or at least the bodily is obvious, but their humor might have been lost on the spectator if Brett had not offset their somewhat overstated metaphors with David Medalla's modest, funky *Sand Machine*, 1964, whose deliberately lumpish movement underscores the absurdly grotesque bombast of the neighboring machines.

Not only was this show by far the best I've seen this year, but it reopened a chapter in the history of postwar art that was too promptly closed and forgotten. It did so with exquisite taste and rare intelligence, and without the now common pretense of the curator-as-artist-as-entrepreneur. Brett visibly loves the objects he has unearthed. One can only hope that he has future exhibitions in mind.[43]

That review appeared in November 2000, unfortunately after the close of the last venue of the show, at the Hayward Gallery in London, where it had been a

43. Yve-Alain Bois, "'Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic,' Museu d'art contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)," *Artforum,* November 2000, pp. 145–47.

huge success. (The only sour point was a public row with David at the opening—I had witnessed several disputes between them before, quickly followed by a reconciliation, but this one took a long time to heal. "It was horrible and the evening was hell. I remember the way Helio used to sometimes complain vehemently to me about Lygia. He said she was a great artist but sometimes did not behave towards him in an ethical way, and it pained him. This is how I feel," Guy wrote me a few days afterward, on July 17, 2000. This is the only time I ever heard him utter anything negative about Lygia—and that at a moment when he was once again advising institutions, the Generali Foundation in Vienna, among others, on how to deal with her work. I took this sudden reminiscence of something he had, if not repressed, at least never mentioned to me as a sign that the clash with David had been really upsetting.)

He was very busy, thankfully, and soon forgetting all the troubles he had gone through to obtain loans for *Force Fields,* he went on to organize at the Camden Arts Center

an exhibition of Li Yuan-chia, a little-known Chinese artist. (Spotted by David in 1965, Li Yuan-chia had shown his work at Signals, but after that he had deliberately kept his distance from the London art world, moving to a small town in England's Cumbria County and transforming an old farmhouse into an interactive museum.) "The work approaches the viewer with great delicacy: it's maybe a reminder of what artists were looking for before the advertising values of immediate impact took over," Guy wrote me on February 3, 2001, a few days after the opening. And then there was the whole episode of his invitation to a symposium on Latin American art at Harvard in March, his delight at discussions with students, soon followed by my visit to London in the early summer, where he introduced me to his friend the actress and performance artist Rose English, on whom he had decided to write a book even though he knew little about theater ("I really enjoy discovering things about a subject I don't know," he wrote on October 2, 2001—in our private idiom we called this the pleasure of having "a vertical learning curve"). He kept me regularly informed about the slow progress of this book, which took him more than ten years to complete.[44] It might have been during my week-long stay at his house in summer 2001 that we went to see the other Rose among his multimedia and performance-artist friends, Rose Finn-Kelcey, on whom he would also write a book.[45] (I might be wrong about the timing, though, because I vaguely remember that David was with us for this visit, in which case it would rather date from the following summer, after he and Guy had reconciled, and at the time of one of David's hilarious London Biennales, which, if I recall right, took place on even years.)

44. *Abstract Vaudeville: The Work of Rose English* was superbly published in 2014 by Ridinghouse.

45. This other book gave him less trouble; he began working on it long after he had started writing the monograph on English and finished it before. The main text is by him, but there are also two shorter contributions by other authors, which probably sped up Guy's writing process. *Rose Finn-Kelcey* appeared in 2013, also published by Ridinghouse; the artist, suffering from a degenerative disease, died a few months later, in 2014.

After 9/11, there was a year's gap in our correspondence, which began again in January 2003 with a belated thank-you note I wrote after another trip of mine to London in late fall. A great deal of our written (and phone) ex changes that year have to do with my plan to have him invited by Harvard for a term (I succeeded, but for various reasons his appointment would not take place until the spring term of 2005, my last semester at the school), as well as discussions of the dreadful political situation in the United States, the demonstrations everywhere against the Iraq invasion, etc. On October 6, Guy asked me if I would write a preface for a selection of his essays that he wanted to publish as *Carnival of Perception*. Sending me the table of contents, he noted*:* "It was hard to make a selection because it meant excluding a lot. Apart from those on Lygia and Hélio I've left out all my other writings on Brazilian artists (I'm preparing another book, specifically on Brazilian artists, for a publisher in Rio)."[46] Welcoming the prospect of having many of his texts gathered into one volume—the existence of quite a few of which I discovered on this occasion— I accepted immediately (provided that the deadline was not imminent), even though I let Guy know that I didn't see why he thought a preface was necessary. His counterargument was persuasive—from any other pen than Guy's I would have dismissed it as flattery: "I like the idea of a preface because then the book comes into the world not entirely on its own but is midwifed so to speak. Then, also, the book appears along with its first reader, who is a delightfully different person to the writer, and in your case hyper-discerning. I remember many many years ago, in an early letter you wrote me, you said you liked the 'tone' of my writing. I don't know if you will still like the tone of this book, but 'tone' is something only the reader can describe" (October 8, 2003). We had a chance to discuss the project at some length just a week later as I went to London for a symposium on Hubert Damisch at the Tate (Guy was sorry to have to miss my talk: at exactly the same time he was to give one himself, in some other part of the Tate vessel, on Ronald Moody, "a Jamaican sculptor who lived most of his life in London from the 1930s to 80s, and recently gained a measure of recognition"; looking later at images of Moody's work, which I found absolutely hideous, I too regretted having missed this, curious as I was as to what Guy could possibly have said of it). Owing to my teaching schedule this stay was more rushed than my last, but we still found the time to go see a splendid exhibition on British Gothic art at the Victoria and Albert, with a long detour by

Cover of Brasil Experimental, *by Guy Brett, 2005.*

46. Guy Brett, *Brasil Experimental: Arte/vida: proposições e paradoxos,* ed. Katia Maciel (Rio de Janeiro: Contra Capa Livraria, 2005).

the Persian-carpets room—a kind of pilgrimage of ours—and Guy inevitably showed me works of artists I did not know, notably of those to be included in his book in progress. At the time, he had not yet decided on the eventual title of *Carnival of Perception.* He disclosed it to me on December 2, 2003, with this "gloss" (his word): "it implies a multitude of individual visions, senses of beauty, methods, investigations, strategies, devices, media, poetics, amounting to the perception of a collective reality expressed in a play of wit and spirit, full of paradox and reversal." I sent my preface a month later, and even though the book was delayed by the defection of the designer (Guy himself had to step in as a replacement), it appeared on July 15, 2004 (a miraculously smooth and fast process, if one compares it to the slog of the monograph on David):

Angel with a Gun

Perhaps the text that epitomizes best for me Guy Brett's inimitable tone, which is also what I would call his method, is his discussion about the recurrent images of angels in post-conquest Latin American art, particularly the deeply

Cover of Carnival of Perception, *by Guy Brett, 2004.*

troubling and ambiguous image of the angel with a gun—an image which, were I the present book's editor, I would have suggested as a frontispiece. Entitled "Being Drawn to an Image," this essay begins with the question that lies at the core of all of Brett's writings: "Why do certain images matter to one, and why is the desire to answer this question as involuntary as the response itself? Why does it seem

important that the answer should have some 'objective' quality about it, an insight into history, society, knowledge, rather than point to a merely personal obsession?"

In several passages of the book (notably in the Introduction and in "The Limits of Imperviousness," where he responds to the challenge put before him of speaking about his own "cultural identity"), Brett mentions his reluctance to "impose his vision," his longing for "self-effacement": "I have always wished to position myself as an open-minded observer, rather like the ingenuous adventurers in picaresque novels who encounter situations along the way and respond to them as they can, or will." The image of the traveler carries some historical weight. In "New Measures," Brett notes in passing that "much early art writing was a branch of travel writing: fewer objects were collected in museums and were seen therefore as part of a whole exposure to another land, another culture," and in "Dust Clouds: Eugenio Dittborn," while writing on the precarious transit of the Chilean artist's *Airmail Paintings*, he refers to Goethe's detailed geological survey of each place where he stopped during his journeys. But— despite the fact that Brett did travel a lot, and still does, and that most of his essays concern artists that do not belong to the rarefied art world of his country nor to the international institutions that recently welcomed it (or they did not belong to it at the time of Brett's writing)—his picaresque gaze is not lured by exoticism. Rather, his wish "to be an expert at not being an expert" (Rose English) leads him not only to be "a doubter" (which is what I meant when I wrote that his tone was also his method) but also to look for fellow doubters, for artists or art practices that reveal paradoxes and celebrate ambiguity.

Paradoxes and ambiguity are Brett's "personal obsession"—the dialectical struggle of opposites and their collusion/collision in one object is the leitmotif of these essays (there is no text in this volume that is not exploring this logic). How appropriate that he should ask himself what drew him to the enigmatic figure of the angel with a gun ("both official and coercive, and unofficial and subversive") and ponder about its popularity in the Andes during the eighteenth century! One thinks of another dialectical angel, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) as dreamt by Walter Benjamin in his famous 1940 "Thesis on the Philosophy of History." There are two fundamental differences, of course: the first is that, unlike Benjamin, Brett pays superb attention to the objects he involves (Benjamin's description is both perfunctory and inadequate); the second is that Brett's discourse is neither melancholic nor messianic. But the similarity in purpose and strategy is striking: to identify the indissoluble link, in a single object (event, artwork, text, etc.) of two contradictory themes, and rather than attempting to find a synthesis, a solution to the contradiction (à la Hegel), they both magnify the shock of this impact so that a situation which the comfortable certainties of dualistic thought was freezing can unlock. For Benjamin, allegory was the vehicle that conveyed best such "dialectical

images"; for Brett (and there is something surprisingly refreshing about it after several decades of "postmodernist" deconstruction), it is metaphor. Every work of art on which he amorously lingers is the metaphoric translation of at least two opposite concepts, each having the capacity to morph into the other thanks to the spark created by their brutal or at least unexpected conjunction. It is this capacity of the work of art that provides for him a direct insight into history.

Neither melancholic nor messianic—but that is not to say that Brett's mode is indifference. "Is it possible to combine the reconciliation of opposites with the celebration of difference?," he asks himself in an essay on the ChileanAustralian artist Juan Davila. The answer is yes, but only if maintaining an attitude that he calls (borrowing the term from Hélio Oiticica) "critical ambivalence": "only by this means could one remain aware of the apparently unavoidable process by which things turn into their opposites, and once-emancipatory ideas become new sources of oppression." This dark turn of the dialectical process that governs our modernity is not ignored by Brett, who is particularly attentive to its effect on the institutionalization of art and thought and their ever-growing transformation into spectacle. But rather than lament, he looks for means of escaping from this encroachment. One solution is the constant invention of new genres (which Brett optimistically heeds), even though the liberation that such an invention provides can never be more than temporary given the rapaciousness of the art market, of which we are reminded every day.

It is not by chance that this book begins with essays on Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and David Medalla, whom Brett was the first to support in Europe, and to whom he often refers. What these three artists have in common is a refusal to fossilize at all costs (thus their constant recourse to the ephemeral as a kamikaze attack on institutions), and a deep desire to question the stable identities of the author, the object, and the spectator so as to change the transaction between these three terms of the aesthetic equation. Brett's early encounter with, and passionate defence of, their work led him to two intertwined convictions. Firstly, even though marginality is only a provisional heaven, it is a condition that needs to be cherished for only it can guarantee a position of critical ambivalence, of productive doubt. Secondly, the reception of a work of art is always an interactive operation, not only in the sense that the object's meaning can radically change according to the context (and this book is full of anecdotes recording such transformations, and of questions concerning the threshold of perceptibility in a work, or its condition of recognizability), but also in that it alters its various contexts. A work's radicality (and Brett would say "universality") is defined, then, as its potential to bring this transformative capacity to the consciousness of its receptor and thus change him or her as well in the process.

Brett heralds the necessity of such an awakening in some of his titles ("Being Drawn to an Image," already mentioned, but also "To Be Joao Penalva's Public" or "Notes of a Spectator: Mona Hatoum"). He also pays tribute to the marginality advocated by his three mentors in his persistent references to authors that do not belong to the standard academic discourse (such unusual references constitute one of the most refreshing pleasures afforded by his writing). Finally, he celebrates their carnivalesque strategies by adopting one of them, the sudden linking of the present (even the most technologically advanced present) to the most archaic past—a strategy which, in turns, he delights in uncovering in the work of younger artists. Goya, that other great admirer of the carnival, looms large in Brett's pantheon.

I do not know exactly how and when Brett discovered Bakhtin, one of the few heroes of the current literary canon to which he refers, but I imagine this to have been a moment of intellectual elation. There is no better entry into the artistic practices analyzed in this book than the Russian writer's concept of the dialogic, in its emphasis both on the polyphonic structure of any discourse and on the fact that any utterance has an addressee (in any rate, Brett's intimate knowledge of the work of Oiticica, Clark and Medalla must have been a powerful stimulation on this score). I would not point to this aspect of Brett's intellectual apparatus if it did not bring us back to Benjamin's angel as well as to the angel with a gun—for Bakhtin too promoted a dialectical critique of dichotomies that would not result in any synthetical third term; for him, too, ambivalence was the figure of hope in a world doomed by an ever-growing reification.

Brett concludes "Being Drawn to an Image" in invoking the Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha on the revolutionary potential of dream ("the dream is the only right which cannot be forbidden"). Bakhtin subscribed to this idea, though he probably would not have used the word revolutionary, Revolution signifying more often than not—and it became utterly clear during his lifetime—the mere substitution of one form of tyrannical power for another. Dreams are carnivalesque, irreverent—they welcome contradictions, they invert or collapse high and low as well as all hierarchical opposites; by nature they pervert any monologistic discourse, they cast doubt on all affirmations. Guy Brett tells us that certain "dialectical images" can perform the same function—provided, that is, that someone is curious or patient enough to interrogate them. Thinking of the angel with a gun, I would like to conclude in turn with another invocation of dreams—Benjamin's definition of ambiguity in his 1935 essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century": "Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image therefore a dream image."[47]

Meanwhile, as planned, Guy had applied for a fellowship under the Visiting Scholars and Fellows Program at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard and sent as requested an extraordinarily detailed research proposal dealing with three separate subjects, all focused on a period roughly between 1950 and 1980. In a brief abstract (I had coached him about this mandatory and offensive practice of America academia), he summarized them as such:

> 1) Differences in the origins of conceptual art in Latin America, the United States and Europe as regards formal and socio-political concerns.
>
> 2) The role played by the box-format and the book-format in Brazilian avant-garde art from 1960. Why were these forms so popular and intensively pursued?
>
> 3) The notion of the "void" in the work of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Mira Schendel, Antonio Manuel and other Brazilian and Latin American artists. Void as philosophical-cosmological concept and sociopolitical strategy.

He was at first slightly panicked when I told him on the phone that he'd gotten the fellowship ("I was having an attack of nerves, a sort of Jean Clay reclusive attitude of fearing to leave home. I must get over such faint-heartedness!" he wrote on March 29, 2004). I had to coax him during a trip to London, as the hurdles created by both the Bush administration and the Harvard bureaucracy were very dis-

47. Yve-Alain Bois, in Guy Brett, *Carnival of Perception* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004), pp. 8–11.

suasive, but in the end he was delighted to confirm his acceptance. Another thing we discussed that summer and fall, aside from all the preparations required for his gig at Harvard, was the ambitious project by Suely Rolnik, an old friend from Lygia's time in Paris (she had been among the regulars in the Boulevard Brune studio), to video-interview everyone who had been a familiar of the artist. For budgetary reasons Suely had to scale down her plan (she had hoped to interview close to seventy people), but she still managed to record and edit twenty testimonies (I was filmed in New York in June 2004, David and Guy a month later in Paris, and I would be filmed again in São Paulo in October 2006). I could not go to the launch of Guy's book, though this might have been for the best as his father died at that very moment (I would have been in the way, both physically and mentally). Rereading what he wrote me after the funeral, at which his father had asked him long in advance to speak, I could not but think of what I felt at the time of his own death: "It's strange the way someone's death draws intense attention to them, their uniqueness is suddenly articulated on all sides, things are said which are just latent during their life, and they themselves can never know it" (August 2, 2004).

Guy arrived in Cambridge in early February 2005, and since we saw each other at least weekly there is no written trace of our dialogue then—except for later allusions in our correspondence, once Guy was back to England, interspersed with harrowing discussions

about the horrific terrorist attacks that plagued London (and the murder of an innocent young Brazilian man by the police in a subway station). One of the things Guy mentioned, besides our visit to Louis Kahn's library in Exeter, is the works I had shown him as he was testing out ideas he had for a show on drawing (I loved his motto, which I gleaned from a parenthetical remark in a text on Gego he sent me the following year while I was trying to write one on her myself: "nobody ever claimed the 'end of drawing,' as they did of painting"). Of these works, he was particularly impressed by Daumier's very gestural sketches, Louise Bourgeois's *Insomnia Drawings* (of which I had a beautiful facsimile publication), and Matisse's book *Thèmes et Variations.* Alas, Guy never succeeded in interesting a museum in this project, but it regularly came up until the end of his life. I am not sure which topic among the three he submitted he chose to work on while at Harvard, but the second of them would become an absolutely stunning exhibition that he curated and installed in 2012 at the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, *Aberto Fechado: Caixa E Livro Na Arte Brasileira* (*The Enclosed Openness: Box and Book in Brazilian Art*), which I had the good fortune to see.

In March 2006 he passed through New York, where we met. He was unusually subdued, as his mother had died two weeks earlier. What he wrote me about the strange feeling he was having as his parents' house and their belongings were being dispersed is typical of him: "Every item in their house, in all the cupboards, was in some way held together and given meaning by their presence. When they've gone it suddenly loses its meaning and looks forlorn. But I continue to cherish some nooks from their (separate) libraries, and if things are re-contextualized and cherished they seem to stay alive . . ." (April 7, 2006). Just a month later I was visiting him in London, where again we pursued the discussion we had started regarding our respective takes on Gego. (I had liked and learned a lot from his text on the artist but criticized the fact that he was undiscriminating in his praise, while my view was that her extraordinary *Reticulárias* were in some ways her own attack against her earlier boring works in the good old Max Bill/Bauhaus tradition of geometric abstract art and design. He actually agreed with my critique, blaming again his own Kropotkinian "lust for praise," but he in turn corrected some ambiguity in my prose that could have led the reader to believe that I disliked both the works that preceded the *Reticulárias* and those, such as the *Chorros*, that came after. What I remember best about this trip was our visit to the remarkable exhibition curated by Dawn Ades at the Hayward Gallery, *Underground Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, as well as wandering the London streets looking for impromptu exhibits of artists participating in David's Biennale.

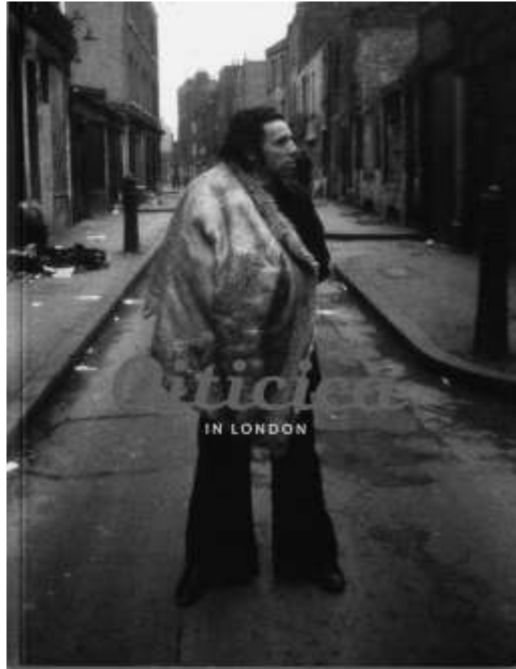
Speaking of Biennales, we both went in the fall to the much more official one in São Paulo but were unable to find a way to be there at the same time. We nevertheless had ample occasion to compare notes in person, as I went to London three times that same fall, in September and October, for a project organized jointly by the Tate Gallery and Angelica Rudenstine at the Mellon Foundation, and in November for a lecture I gave at the Whitechapel about noncomposition in twentieth-century art. I had discussed the latter topic on numerous occasions with Guy, but I think this was the first time he heard me publicly talk about it. As for the workshop, the official title of which was "Inherent Vice: The Replica and Its Implications in Modern Sculpture," its impetus was a specific problem

encountered by the Tate conservators: how to deal with the suddenly deteriorating Plexiglas models that Naum Gabo had made for his sculptures and that his estate had bequeathed to the museum (the issue was: What to do with these objects, which were literally turning to dust while oddly emitting a vinegary smell? Exhibit duplicates of them along with photos of the originals?). Some of the models dated from the 1930s and early '40s and were infinitely more interesting than the geometric, "rationalist"-looking, often symmetrical sculptures Gabo was known for (and which, thanks to a gross misinterpretation of this movement by Alfred Barr, had long passed as the pinnacle of Russian Constructivism). I warmed to those miserably crumbling objects (empathy!) and was at last able to understand Guy's fondness for Gabo—and, taking advantage of my softening, he brought me to Annely Juda's gallery, where we were shown, removed from storage, several of Gabo's small stone sculptures, which I had only seen in dull reproductions—that truly did the trick. Besides informing each other of our current work (he was coediting *Oiticica in London* with Luciano Figueiredo for the Tate, a publication documenting the historical exhibition he had curated in 1969, as well as beginning to think about the Cildo Meireles show the same museum had invited him to mount), we also greatly enjoyed spending some time in a Cézanne exhibition at the National Gallery.

I ended up going several times again to London in the following months (in part thanks to the replication workshop), notably in February 2007, when I saw the extremely disturbing and very courageous installation by Mark Wallinger at Tate Britain.[48] My most memorable visit was the fourth, at the end of May and the beginning of June. I had been asked by the organizers to take part in a symposium on Oiticica at the Tate (which was importing the beautiful retrospective exhibition curated by Mari Carmen Ramirez that I had seen in Houston), and after months of their (and Guy's) persistent rebuttal of my arguments for declining (basically that I did not know Oiticica's work well enough), I finally gave in when told that I would not have to give a paper, just participate in a roundtable. This was stupid of me—I should have trusted my intuition—as my performance was subpar. Fortunately, no one really noticed, as everyone's attention was gripped by the vicious shouting match between various members of the Oiticica estate, to the great chagrin of the Tate's team. Most astonishing of all was the behavior of David, who suddenly emerged as the Great Conciliator! Another high point of that visit was the interview that Julian Stallabrass, Margaret Iversen, Guy, and I did with Wallinger at Guy's place.[49]

48. My review appeared in the April 2007 issue of *Artforum* as "Piece Movement" (title provided by the editors), pp. 248–51.

49. This interview was published in *October* 123 (Winter 2008), pp. 185–204.



Cover of Oiticica in London, *by Guy Brett and Luciano Figueiredo, 2007.*

There were other visits, and other missed occasions as well (we kept failing to find ourselves in Brazil at the same time), and our correspondence slackened again (I was curating a large Picasso show in Rome, he was preparing his Meireles exhibition at the Tate). It picked up in the summer of 2008. I had asked him if I could reprint his text on Gabriel Orozco in the little anthology of essays on the artist I was editing for the *October File* series published by MIT Press, and he responded immediately with a long and joyful letter (June 26, 2008) recalling his recent trip in New Zealand, on which his wife joined him:

> I'm picturing you, emerging from your library and sitting on your porch with birds around. How delicious. Birds could be the link with my time in New Zealand, where, before the Maori arrived in AD 800, birds ruled. There were no predators, birds flourished without fear and many didn't need to fly. They just walked around, including the giant Moa, 9 feet tall with a tiny head and huge body. The Maori basically ate all the Moas and they became extinct. But for millions of years before humans arrived New Zealand developed in its own way. When Joseph Banks, on one of Cook's voyages, put into Queen Charlotte Sound in 1770, he put it like this:
>
> "This morn I was awaked by the singing of the birds ashore from whence we are distant not a quarter of a mile, the numbers of them were certainly very great who seemed to strain their throats with emulation. . . . [Their] voices were certainly the most melodious wild musick I have ever heard, almost imitating small bells but with the most tuneable silver sound imaginable."
>
> I can't resist quoting that for you! Thousands of years of singing. I had a great time in New Zealand: six weeks in late summer with a little flat provided overlooking Wellington harbor. A few lectures to give, otherwise freedom. I love visiting new cities, with time to find one's way around and assess the character of the place, the way of life, as a flâneur I suppose. Alejandra came for two weeks in the middle and we roamed over the South Island. The population of NZ is only 4 million. Not knowing anything when I arrived I

> read quite a lot in NZ history and became very interested in the whole saga of European/Maori relations. A typical colonial situation in one way, but Maori survived the onslaught, leading to a complex process of twin development of two opposed cultures, etc.

There was also troubling news concerning his health (a false alarm, it turned out), but the most consequential part of this letter was the announcement that he had accepted the offer to curate a Vantongerloo show for Manolo (who by that time had moved to the Reina Sofia), with the inevitable invitation for me to contribute to the catalog. This project was at the center of our exchanges almost until the opening of that show in November 2009. A lot happened by telephone, as my intervention was often urgently required in complex negotiations with lenders— several of whom we had already had to deal with for the *Force Fields* show—and Guy also came to spend a few days with me in April 2009 (a visit to the Barnes was the only distraction to our Vantongerloo business). Not that there was the slightest disagreement between us. On the contrary, I was in awe of Guy's highly original point of view on the subject—I only wanted to know more about it so that the text I had agreed to write (and this time there would be no rescinded promise) would not duplicate what he himself would say.

The synopsis he had written for Manolo (and forwarded to me) soon after his New Zealand birds letter was brilliant, and perfectly in keeping with what I would call Guy's curating philosophy.[50] His Vantongerloo envy had been stimulated by a circulating retrospective of the artist that had begun in the Musée Matisse (!) at the Cateau-Cambrésis but which he had seen in its Oostende venue. He had been terribly disappointed by the conventional conception of the show and by its installation, which he found very flat ("in such a way as to make nothing of the spatial qualities of Vantongerloo's late works, but rendered them inert"). This surprised me, as the French curator of the show, Jean-Etienne Grislain, whom I knew from Hubert Damisch's seminar in the early '70s, had sent me the catalog, in which the late works were quite forcefully highlighted (they were well reproduced, in far greater quantity than the paintings and sculptures from the much betterknown De Stijl period, and accompanied by interviews with friends of the artist in his later years). Guy in fact made use of one of these testimonies in his pitch to Manolo (quoting François Morellet's reminiscence of his first visit to the old Belgian artist: seeing "all these pieces in Plexiglas, those constructions in wire, they were completely baffling, outside anything one could imagine coming from someone who was considered one of the great inventors of concrete, geometric art").[51] But in his mind the flaws of the show began with its subtitle ("A Pioneer of Modern Sculpture"):

> To locate GV's work within a history of "sculpture" misses its essential drive and originality. Media were separated: for example, the late drawings—wonderful things, most of which I'd never seen before—that could have been closely integrated with the display of objects, were kept in a category of "drawing." The installation was conventional too, following the academic discourse, giving equal emphasis to all periods

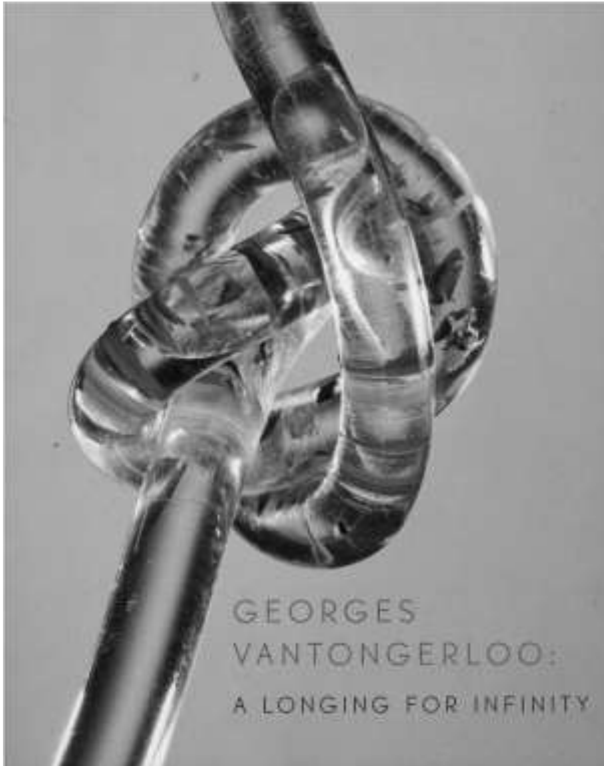
50. On this, see Guy's "Elasticity of Exhibition," published in *Tate Papers,* the Tate Gallery's online research journal, issue no. 12, Fall 2009.

51. See Jean-Etienne Grislain, “Entretien avec François Morellet,” in *Georges Vantongerloo 1886– 1965: Un pionnier de la sculpture moderne,* ed. Jean-Etienne Grislain (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 241. I am quoting from Guy’s own translation. He used it in the synopsis joined to his letter of August 3, 2008, but also in the catalog of the show (in fact, Morellet’s quote is the first sentence of Guy’s introductory text in *Georges Vantongerloo: A Longing for Infinity* [Madrid: Reina Sofia, 2009], pp. 16–31).

> and completely failing [. . .] to convey the poetry, even the oddness of GV’s late work and their relationship to space and energy.

Guy’s plan was draconian: He would include a strict minimum of Vantongerloo works from his De Stijl period, and only in order to give a sense of his trajectory—of the rebellion that his largely forgotten “Curve” paintings of the late ’30s were already fomenting against the geometric dogma, a rebellion that came into full view with the late works at the core of the show, with their “reconciliation of the physical and the biological in plasma-like fluxes” (or, in Vantongerloo’s word that Guy appropriated, their “incommensurability”).

I teased Guy a bit about his insistence on the “cosmic,” wondering if he was not simply returning to the somewhat naive faith in the marriage of art and science that had been one of the tenets of Signals at its beginning, and he responded with a truckload of texts by Vantongerloo about cosmology (which he reprinted in the catalog), many containing autobiographical inflections, in which a certain type of innocence, that of the child and its unschooled perception of space, was validated (to help me get the point, Guy reminded me of similar autobiographical frag-



Cover of Georges Vantongerloo, *by Guy Brett, 2010.*

ments by Malevich, at which we had marveled decades earlier). He agreed with my contention that in some of his late works Vantongerloo contradicted his highfalutin principles concerning abstraction (derived from mathematics) and flirted with a traditional form of iconology (comets, planets, etc.), but he urged me to admit that none of this toned down the off-script playfulness and almost rococo weirdness of these objects in colored Plexiglas of which I was so fond. I met him halfway, still underlining Vantongerloo's contradictions in my essay, but to my surprise he was more complimentary than ever about it (providing me with its title, "Unknowable"). He was also unusually self-complimentary about the installation of the show (but he knew that I knew his compliment was also addressing Manolo's infallible knack at hanging exhibitions): "I have to say it does look really beautiful—and unfamiliar. It's a special terrain all of its own: transparent, molecular, endless" (November 7, 2009).

Once again I had to miss the opening, but this time, what was much worse, I missed the show altogether. I had planned to take a day trip to Madrid from Montpellier, where I spent several months taking care of my father, who was dying of leukemia, but in the end this proved impossible. Guy was his wonderfully empathetic self during this very painful period of my life; he loved the clip of Desmond Tutu telling a joke about the Virgin Mary's pregnancy, a favorite of my father that I sent to friends in remembrance and homage to him (he died at Christmas).[52] Things went on. The letter in which Guy rejoices about the Vantongerloo opening is also filled with his reaction to the warehouse fire that destroyed all the works in the Oiticica estate, that is, the vast majority of his production: "I suppose the destruction of objects will give Hélio's presence a virtual character: his notes, writings, workbooks, photos, letters, etc were digitized and therefore survive." I was somewhat shocked by the detached tone, given the important role that Hélio and his work had played in Guy's life—but would soon reckon that this reserve was a remnant of his aristocratic upbringing. Guy delegated his sorrow by forwarding me a beautiful letter sent to him just

after the catastrophe by Antonio Manuel, one of the many artists whose work he had introduced me to.

Along with Manuel's elegy was also a reminder of something Guy had persuaded me to do, which I had completely forgotten as I was dealing with my father's illness: a three-way conversation with Susan Hiller, to be published in the catalog of her retrospective exhibition at the Tate. This project, the last one on which we collaborated, would occupy us for most of 2010. Guy prepared a batch of questions for Susan, to which I added suggestions—to no avail, in any event, as she found them all "too abstract." After several frustrating exchanges to and fro, the Tate organized a trip for me to London, and Guy and I found ourselves in Susan's studio for a long afternoon in mid-May, tape recorder in hand. Things did not go

52. There was some technical problem in the transmission of the clip, so I had to send it a couple times. While waiting for it to work, Guy wrote me (January 9, 2010): "I have never met your father but it was from him, through you, that I first heard about the Chilean patchworks that I made an exhibition of in the mid-70s."

well; Susan being "strangely on the defensive, cutting things short not to have to discuss this or that, which did not make it easy for us to be pertinent," as I wrote to him after reading the full transcript, sent to me at the end of June. Despite Guy's dedication to shorten and transform this rambling mess into something worth reading (Susan's fitful interventions during this agonizing editing process were not helping), the emulsion never did take. Somehow, oddly enough, the Tate liked the result, and Susan apparently did too, and it was published, but Guy agreed with me that it was a failure ("I know that something somehow hindered the discussion from really taking off, despite our efforts" [October 1, 2010]). For various reasons I was unable, once again, to see the show (and I had to decline participating in a symposium on it in spring 2011, to Guy's disappointment).

In September of that year we (finally!) found ourselves together in Brazil, as Suely had invited us both to a conference on Lygia at the launch of the DVD box set with her archival interviews.[53] It was rushed, alas, with Guy having to run around for the preparation of his forthcoming "boxes and books" show (we did manage to go to several artists' studios—I remember in particular our visit to Anna Maria Maiolino). Not quite fulfilling the grand hopes we had nourished for years of a prolonged stay in Rio working together on Lygia, but still . . . Back in London he sent me a text he had written on "the other Lygia" (Lygia Pape), whom I never met and about whom Lygia Clark had always observed an eloquently conspicuous silence. He was reassured by my positive comments, as he had felt his "writing lacked lustre" lately, and in that particular case that he could not compete with the "knowledge of the cultural and intellectual vicissitudes in Brazil," from which other authors in the Pape catalog benefited. "But I give a foreigner's view I suppose," he conceded in response to my praise, adding: "On the whole, Brazilian critics write only on Brazilian artists, which is rather limiting"—a sentence that brought me back to our discussions with David forty years earlier, and to Guy's deliberately anti-nationalist stance in his art criticism right from the beginning. In the same letter he also announced that he was beginning to work on a small Wols exhibition for Manolo. This had to be postponed slightly, as a major retrospective of the artist was planned at the Kunsthalle Bremen and the Menil Collection in Houston for 2013–14—Guy worried his project would be canceled,

but Manolo knew full well that it would have little in common with the massive GermanoTexan show. *Wols: Cosmos and Street*, which opened in Madrid in February 2014, was a typical Guy affair: mainly drawings and prints (all tiny), some photographs, only six canvases (he had insisted on a low number), and a catalog in which the expected (e.g., a reprint of Sartre's famous essay on the artist) brushed against the utterly unexpected (a text in which Oiticica compares Wols and Mondrian).

53. There are actually two editions of this set of DVDs. One was published in 2010 in Paris (with French subtitles where necessary) by Carta Blanca, with the title *Archive pour une oeuvre-événement* ; the other one, which includes a booklet with essays by Rolnik, was published in São Paulo by SESC Press. Each contains the same twenty interviews, but the Brazilian edition lists an additional forty-five interviews already taped and in need of proper formatting.

Having put this show on hold, Guy spent the better part of 2012 working on the "boxes and books" one. He was delighted to learn that I would be able to see it, having been invited to take part in a symposium on Picasso organized in São Paulo that November by our common friend Sônia Salzstein: "I will be so interested to know what you think of the show (you are my ideal viewer) and if you think the tack I've taken makes sense. I have a secret desire to push Brazilian art towards the poetic and away from academic dissertation which has rather captured that art in recent times" (March 12, 2012). (For anyone who saw the show, that desire would no longer be a secret.) There were other topics in our exchanges throughout the year, of course, including his positive response (on March 14) to a text I wrote on John Baldessari's work from the 1960s and early '70s[54]—a letter I quote here less for the compliment than for what it says of our interaction:

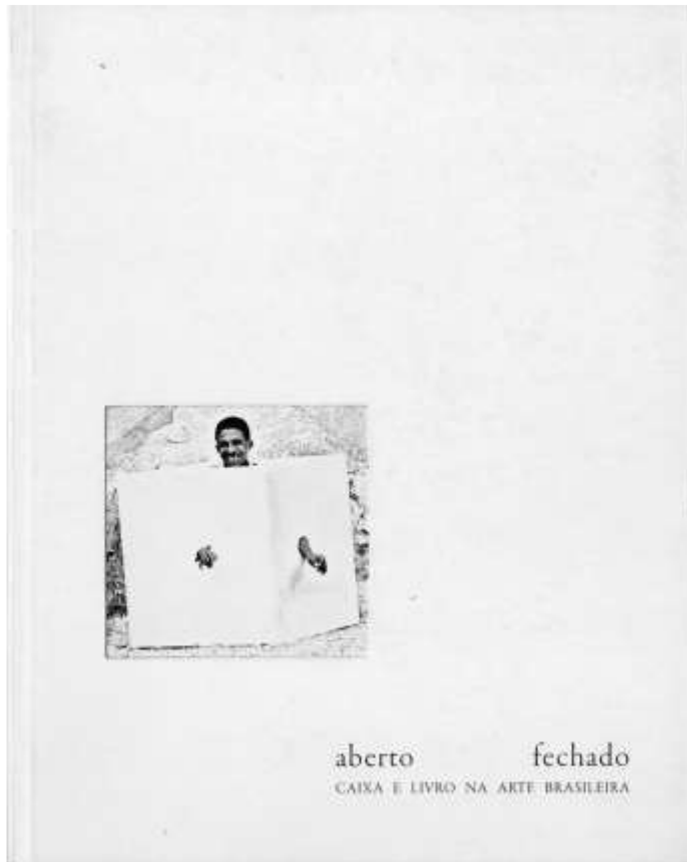
> It didn't matter that I didn't know the work because I read your piece as an essay on humor and this was a pleasure. I'm always amazed by your ability to find quotes—how did you remember the Sherlock Holmes story well enough to get such a pertinent quote? Somehow I didn't imagine you had Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in your library! The Paul Valéry passage was equally to the point. This doesn't mean of course that I enjoyed the quotes more than your writing. Not at all! I loved your path of thoughts. I remember you always liked cartoons and jokes (like New Yorker jokes and French equivalents). Have you ever thought of writing about how you see that liking in relation to your art historical work. Perhaps it kills it to write about it.

There is a gap in our email correspondence, at least in what I can retrieve from the innards of my computer, so I do not know how he reacted to my enthusiasm for *Box and Book in Brazilian Art* and its stunning installation in the Pinacoteca building (fantastically gutted and renovated by Paulo Mendes da Rocha), and maybe all this was just conveyed over the phone as we got into the habit of calling each other more often once the Internet had made that free. I know he was relieved, as he had been more anxious about this enterprise than I had ever sensed him being when curating an exhibition.

Curating—how often we spoke about it, and how much one learns from it! In the same long letter (May 10, 2014) in which he announced to me his Parkinson's diagnosis, he sent me this amazing yet typical paragraph:

It seemed to take years to organize the Wols show even though it was quite small. But I did learn some things about curating. For example: I had been very anxious about the frames of Wols's drawings and watercolors, which I knew would have been done at the whim of the owners and be all different and not changeable. In fact the frames were a huge

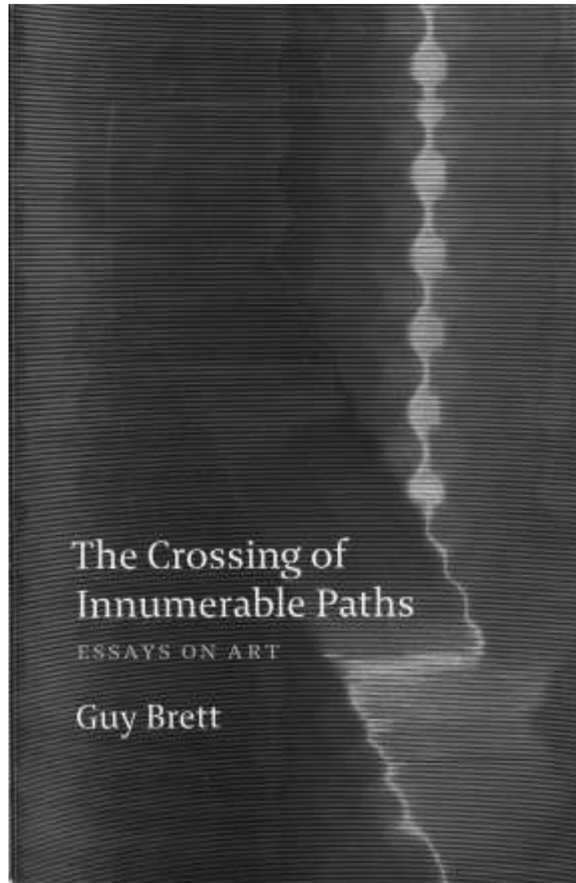
54. My essay "Is It Impossible to Underline in a Thermometer?" appeared as the preface to *John Baldessari: Catalogue Raisonné,* vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1–11.



Cover of The Enclosed Openness: Box and Book in Brazilian Art*, by Guy Brett, 2013.*

asset. In their variety they were much more interesting than a row of "neutral" museum frames would have been. Also, my dream of a kind of cosmos with pictures floating in clusters in the space was really unworkable and was replaced by an absolutely traditional layout of works in a line from beginning to end. With Wols's book etchings in the only vitrine. And it worked! The works became jewels with the vast barrel-vault of the Reina Sofia's old

galleries above them. Unfortunately this is not possible to see in the catalogue. Even with the best printing something is missing in Wols reproductions. In a way the conventionallooking exhibition one sees on entering the room is a kind of mask, disguise, for the realm of extraordinary richness and delicacy which is revealed by proximity.



Cover of The Crossing of Innumerable Paths, *by Guy Brett, 2019.*

That letter also contained the news of Finn-Kelcey's death and at least one piece of hopeful information: that Guy would come to New York to see Lygia's retrospective at MoMA during the summer and then would spend some time with me in rural New Jersey, where I live. Alas, this joyful plan had to be canceled. The pretext Guy gave was the printing of his book on Rose English, which he wanted to supervise (the publisher wanted it to appear in September of that year so as to coincide with an exhibition of the artist in Denmark), but in hindsight I think the real reason was that his illness was beginning to take its toll.

It was obvious that his vigor was dwindling, that writing required from him much effort—even video calls became taxing. I did not want to deplete his energy, especially since in spite of all his ailments (direct or indirect effects of Parkinson's, such as falls and broken bones) he had embarked on new projects. One of them was a new collection of essays, the other a retrospective at the Tate of the Greek artist Takis, whom he had championed ever since the Signals years. In June 2018, I jumped at the invitation to a conference provided by the Camberwell College of Arts in London, and arriving at his place I found him toying with miniature versions of Takis's works in the cardboard model of the galleries where the show would be installed. He was physically diminished and very frail—climbing the steep stairs to the office in his tiny but multistory house was exhausting—but his mind was all there; only his days were much shorter than during my previous visits. That trip miraculously coincided with not just one but two exhibitions devoted to Signals, which were a pleasure to see in his company—a memory lane for him,

which summoned again so many anecdotes about the artists whose works were on display.[55] We also spent two hours, he in a wheelchair pushed by Alejandra, in a wonderfully focused exhibition devoted to Picasso's production in 1932, curated by his friend Achim Borchardt-Hume at the Tate—he had insisted on that, specifically waiting for my visit to see it and making plans in advance (he had been very sorry to miss my Matisse and Picasso show at the Kimbell twenty years earlier and felt this could count as a worthy substitute). On my way out he made me promise to come to the opening of his Takis show in July 2019.

As so often in the past, I failed at that, but in September I made a special trip to London just to see it—and to see him, above all, with the sad presentiment that it would be the last time. We went to the show together, the beautiful expression on his face when looking at artworks he admired unchanged, but his elocution was more difficult. Along with the catalog he gave me his brand-new collection of essays, *The Crossing of Innumerable Paths,* many of those, as usual, on artists he had led me to discover as well as others I had yet to hear of. Back in the States I thought about ways to stave off my dreary premonition. But then the pandemic struck, and coincidentally the downturn of his health gathered speed. Direct communication became impossible. Alejandra, always so attentive, kept me informed as best she could. It was she as well who told me of David's passing, barely four hours after the fact, adding that she had not yet communicated the news to Guy. She was so right to be anxious about that.

Speaking of the essays gathered in *The Crossing of Innumerable Paths*, on a postcard inserted in the copy he gave me, Guy wrote: "It is the relationships produced by bringing them together, while revealing their diversity, that really interested me." I feel the same about the heterogeneous bits gathered in this collage of a memoir.

55. One of the exhibitions was at S/2, the art gallery of Sotheby's in London (April 27 to July 13, 2018), and it is on this occasion that the book/catalog *Signals,* mentioned in note 1, was published; the other was organized by José Kuri, the director of Kurimanzutto in Mexico City, and held at Thomas Dane Gallery (June 8 to July 21, 2018). While Guy and I were looking at these twin shows, we were joined by my friend John Tain, from Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, with whom we spoke at great length about David.