

# Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata

Buenos Aires and Montevideo  
1933-1953

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# Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata

Buenos Aires and Montevideo  
1933–1953

*Curated by*  
Mario H. Gradowczyk and Nelly Perazzo

The Americas Society, 2001

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# Contents

|     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| 7   | Acknowledgments  | Thomas E. McNamara                     |
| 9   | Sponsor Foreword   | Fondo Nacional de las Artes, Argentina |
| 11  | Picturing the Abstract:<br>Notes on Some Visual Strategies                       | Edward J. Sullivan                     |
| 15  | Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata:<br>Buenos Aires and Montevideo, 1933–1953 | Mario H. Gradowczyk and Nelly Perazzo  |
| 71  | Abstract Art Between Images and Words:<br>Vision and Division in a Single Gaze   | Lisa Block de Behar                    |
|     | Plates   |  |
| 89  | Juan Del Prete, Esteban Lisa, Joaquín Torres-García                              |  |
| 105 | Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención   |  |
| 125 | Arte Madí  |  |
| 143 | Perceptismo  |  |
| 147 | José Pedro Costigliolo, María Freire, Antonio Llorens,<br>Víctor Magariños D.    |  |
| 153 | Bibliography   |  |
| 157 | Checklist of Works in the Exhibition   |  |

## Acknowledgments

The Americas Society is proud to present *Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata: Buenos Aires and Montevideo, 1933-53*, the first exhibition in the United States to cover in such depth the origins of abstract art in the River Plate region. This exhibition continues our institutional commitment to present the cultural wealth of the Western Hemisphere to audiences in the United States. Since 1965, The Americas Society has excelled in promoting new scholarship on the art and cultures of Latin America, and many of our catalogues have become standard reference works for generations of scholars and art lovers.

This exhibition has received generous support from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., and from the Fondo Nacional de las Artes in Buenos Aires. At the Fondo Nacional de las Artes we thank Guillermo Alonso, Rosa Aiello, and in particular Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, President, and long-time friend of The Americas Society. Additional support was received from Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, and we are grateful to Rafael Romero, Director, and Guillermo Ovalle, Registrar, of the Fundación Cisneros. Generous gifts were also received from Barbara Duncan, and from the Banco de la Provincia de Buenos Aires and the Banco de Galicia y Buenos Aires S. A., New York Branch. We are grateful indeed to our supporters.

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At The Americas Society, I would like to underline the efforts and expertise of the Visual Arts Advisory Board and the Cultural Affairs Committee. Elizabeth Beim, Senior Director of Cultural Affairs oversaw the process of this exhibition with professionalism and skill. Yona Bäcker, former Director of Visual Arts, first presented this proposal, and oversaw its initial stages. The final stages of production were supervised by her successor Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro. The staff of the Visual Arts Department worked with dedication and commitment, and I would like to highlight the efforts of Regina Smith, Associate Director, Joseph R. Wolin, Curator, Victoria Sancho and Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, Exhibition Coordinators, and the many interns and volunteers who worked on this project. Daniel Shapiro, Director of Literature, and Maria Elena Tobón, Director of Music, provided stimulating programs to complement the exhibition.

Thomas E. McNamara  
*President, The Americas Society*



## Sponsor's Foreword

*Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata: Buenos Aires and Montevideo, 1933-1953* is a significant undertaking, both in its conception and in its realization. This exhibition, which examines the development of modernism by Argentine and Uruguayan artists in the region of the Río de la Plata, begins at the moment in 1933 in which Juan Del Prete exhibited non-figurative paintings and collages in Buenos Aires. This proved to be a watershed event, opening doors for many other innovative and challenging artists. From that moment, on either side of the River Plate, abstraction became an increasingly active concern; its proponents produced manifestos, theoretical writings, and exhibitions, all of which provided a welcome escape for artists fleeing the academic tradition.

The mission of the Fondo Nacional de las Artes is to support and promote the work of Argentine artists. We consider *Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata* a project of special importance, and we have collaborated with The Americas Society to produce the present catalogue. We are delighted to be able to contribute to the study of Argentine art, not only at home, but abroad. It is particularly appropriate that the exhibition take place at The Americas Society, as the avant-garde in the Río de la Plata were a touchstone and a critical turning point for the development of modern art in South America.

The Fondo Nacional de las Artes is pleased to support this event, and to reassert its commitment to the cultural bonds that tie nations together in the highest expressions of the human spirit.

Fondo Nacional de las Artes, Argentina

# Picturing the Abstract: Notes on Some Visual Strategies

Edward J. Sullivan

The modern art of Latin America is still disputed critical territory. For the past fifteen years or so a number of exhibitions, books, and articles have attempted, with greater or lesser success, to dispel myths and stereotypes surrounding the development of modernism in Latin America in the twentieth century. Indigenism, a movement that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as a response to an increased awareness of national identity in countries such as Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia, explored the daily lives of native peoples and expressed the results of cultural *mestizaje*, or mixing. In the hands of many distinguished artists this movement produced a body of works with pointed social messages. In the hands of others, it degenerated into a voyeuristic, neocolonialist mode of visual exploitation and, in the worst of scenarios, led to a proliferation of tourist-oriented kitsch. In the minds of many people, Latin American modern art still evokes color, inherent drama, and the exotic. Identity politics of recent years and the art that emerged in response to it, as well as the acceptance of multiculturalism in aesthetic criticism have actually done a great deal to strengthen the stereotypes of what Latin American and Latino art should look like.

The present volume, which accompanies an exhibition of the same title, is a significant achievement in that it presents an in-depth examination of an area of artistic development that defies prevailing notions of a "Latin American look." One of the most outstanding modes of

artistic vision prevalent in Latin America from the 1930s and well into the 1960s and beyond found roots in both free-form and geometric abstraction. Artists in such diverse countries as Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico produced original and inventive two- and three-dimensional work that was in consonance with that of their European contemporaries. In a pan-South American context, numerous aspects of the evolution of abstraction may be attributed directly to the pioneering—and, indeed, proselytizing—efforts of Joaquín Torres-García. Returning to Uruguay in 1934 from Europe, Torres-García brought with him a highly personal aesthetic vision based on his in-depth, firsthand association with the European artists of the Cubist, Neoplasticist, and Constructivist movements. Torres-García served as teacher and mentor to a generation of painters, sculptors, designers, and architects in Montevideo and Buenos Aires. The *Asociación de Arte Constructivo* (Association for Constructive Art, 1935) evolved around his charismatic personality as did the later artistic brotherhood the *Taller Torres-García* (Torres-García Workshop, 1944), which continued after his death in 1949, disbanding only in 1962. Also a great writer and philosopher, Torres-García advanced his aesthetic concepts in voluminous manifestos, reminiscences, and observations on artistic theory and practice. The legacy of his art, as well as that of his numerous followers, has been the subject of much serious research in recent times. The most notable has resulted



from the efforts of critic and historian Mari Carmen Ramírez, who organized a highly acclaimed exhibition and accompanying catalogue entitled *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy*.<sup>1</sup>

Other forms of abstract art (and the groups that espoused them) that arose in the area of the Río de la Plata region as a consequence of Torres-García's inspiration have been explored in several other major North American and European exhibitions and their catalogues.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, none of these exhibitions and publications has highlighted the breadth of achievement of these Argentine and Uruguayan abstract artists as does the present publication. This exhibition and book mark the first major effort to focus directly and exclusively on those artists who emerged as the chief proponents of a variety of abstract tendencies in Montevideo and Buenos Aires from 1933 to 1953.

In a comprehensive essay that recounts the problems and historical patterns of abstraction in the region, Mario H. Gradowczyk and Nelly Perazzo trace the genesis of nonobjective painting in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The innovative projects of several of the figures of the 1920s, such as the quasi-abstract works of Emilio Pettoruti or Alejandro Xul Solar, represented bold statements for their times but bore little fruit among their contemporaries. Gradowczyk and Perazzo focus on several other key figures whose careers began to flourish in the 1930s and 1940s who, parallel with Torres-García, were critical components in the early establishment of the vanguard. Gradowczyk and Perazzo underscore the tensions between a politically conservative society, bound by the oppressive nationalist governments of the 1930s and the military powers of the 1940s, and a growing desire among artists and intellectuals to participate within the international avant-garde. In Argentina, under the rule of General Juan Domingo Perón, even more than in Uruguay, the avant-garde evolved in spite of the conservative tenor of the times.

While Torres-García holds a preeminent position within the vanguardist panorama of the 1930s and 1940s, he was by no means the sole generative force in the establishment of a particular mode of artistic vision. In fact, many of his ideas failed to take root among younger artists in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. As Gradowczyk

and Perazzo observe, for example, in these countries containing few traces of pre-Hispanic pasts, his notions of the fusion of contemporary and pre-Columbian aesthetics and iconic symbols proved unsuccessful. Some found Torres-García dogmatic or even paternalistic, which had the effect of dampening the impact of his work on the younger generation of artists.

For a more nuanced view of the genesis of abstraction one should consider, as does this exhibition and its accompanying texts, the roles played by certain other paradigmatic founding fathers of nonobjectivity in the Río de la Plata region. Juan Del Prete was something of a protean figure, veering in his career between abstraction and figuration. While his paintings, sculptures, and collages in an abstract mode served as harbingers of the future. Yet Del Prete always remained committed to the tactile, sensual values inherent in painted surfaces. This interest in the medium itself was, as Gradowczyk and Perazzo suggest, at odds with the intellectual and aesthetic goals of the Concrete artists, who went in the direction of minimalism.

Esteban Lisa, one of the later "rediscoveries" in the history of Argentine art, was known almost exclusively as a teacher in his own day. His small-scale, intimate works call to mind a variety of parallels, from the "spiritual" abstractions of Wassily Kandinsky to the organic quality of Joan Miró's paintings and prints. Through several publications and exhibitions, his art has only recently been established as an integral factor in the panorama of South American abstraction.<sup>3</sup> Seeing Lisa's work in the context of such movements as those discussed here both adds a new dimension to his achievement and suggests his rightful place within the pantheon of key abstract artists.

One of the outstanding features of Río de la Plata abstraction is its periodic cohesiveness. There were numerous moments when true harmony between the participants appeared to have been achieved, only to be broken asunder after a brief time. The members of the often conflicting groups the Asociación de Arte Concreto-Inventiva (Association for Concrete-Invention Art, 1945-46) and the Movimiento Madí (Madí Movement, 1946) were all utopianists. From the pronouncements in the groundbreaking journal *Arturo* (of which only one issue was published) to the manifestos and articles that appeared in the many publications associated with the



groups, the artists reveal the depths of their concern for the social ramifications of universally comprehended forms of art. (It is not surprising that many of the artists were committed to the principles of Marxism and Socialism, and some belonged to the Communist party.) The notion that art could truly affect and even change lives was as strong in certain sectors of the artistic and cultural worlds of the Río de la Plata in the 1940s and 1950s as it had been among the idealistic participants in the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movements (initiated by William Morris and others), the artists involved in the experimentation of the early Soviet state, or the members of the Bauhaus. As in the case of those other artistic programs, the Buenos Aires and Montevideo abstract movements came under a sort of political and even aesthetic siege, having to function within the generally conservative and even repressive attitudes of the times.

By the mid-1950s the cohesiveness of the groups, as well as their artistic cohesion, had begun to unravel, or at least fragment. Tomás Maldonado had moved to Ulm in Germany to teach, while others had immigrated to Paris and elsewhere. With their work beginning to be shown in Paris and other European cities, this brought the movements into the international mainstream. In addition, other artistic centers of South America were becoming increasingly more aware of the abstract currents from the region.

Indeed, it can be said that the South American legacy of Río de la Plata abstraction represents, in the end, its most enduring achievement. From the 1950s and into later decades, Concrete, neoconcrete, geometric, and other nonfigurative painting, sculpture, graphic arts, and other art forms spread throughout the continent. Such important protagonists of modern art as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica in Brazil; Edgar Negret and Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar in Colombia; Alejandro Otero, Jesús Rafael Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Díez in Venezuela; and other Argentine artists, including Julio LeParc, Eduardo Mac Entyre, and Miguel Angel Vidal formulated highly diverse modes of expression. These paralleled the paths of artistic evolution that had emerged from the experiences of the movements in the Río de la Plata in the 1930s and 1940s.

The legacy of the Madís went beyond their own efforts in the visual arts and poetry to influence the fields of

architecture, graphic design, furniture design, and the editorial arena. The same could also be said of the other manifestations of abstract art from Buenos Aires and Montevideo from the 1930s to the 1960s. The members of the Asociación de Arte Concreto-Invención and the Taller Torres-García were also intimately involved with a variety of artistic and architectonic projects to which they applied the principles of their aesthetic tendencies. The concept of creating total environments in which virtually all aspects of artistic enterprise, from the decorative to the utilitarian, emerge from the common spiritual urge was fueled by the utopian nature of the abstract art movements in the Río de la Plata region. In her essay, Lisa Block de Behar problematizes issues related to the art under consideration here with a theoretical reading of the myriad definitions of the fundamental concepts of abstraction. Her study and this exhibition help to establish further paths of conceptualization and comprehension of these mid-twentieth-century artistic projects that have had such widespread consequences throughout the South American continent.

## Notes

- 1 Mari Carmen Ramírez, ed. *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).
- 2 See, for example, Dawn Ades, ed., *Latin American Art: The Modern Era, 1820–1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), and Waldo Rasmussen, ed., *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993).
- 3 For the most thorough study of Lisa's work see Nelly Perazzo and Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa, 1895–1983* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Esteban Lisa, 1997).



world. The experience of the Bauhaus—the famous German school that originated many of the dominant trends in abstract art, design, photography, and architecture between the two world wars—exemplified the radical change experienced by the aesthetic of modernity from the 1920s on. Cosmic vision was replaced with an aesthetic connected to industrial production.

The historical evolution of abstraction from the 1920s on alternates between deeply creative works and strictly formal statements. Neoplasticism, which had been spearheaded by the magazine *De Stijl* (The Style), was consolidated by the emblematic work of Piet Mondrian. From Paris, where he lived, Mondrian reaffirmed his determination to build a world of absolutes dominated by a strictly regulated geometry. Wassily Kandinsky abandoned gestural impulse to embrace a new rhetoric of the ruler and compass. Kazimir Malevich returned to representation with stylized forms, and even Frantisek Kupka created paintings with recognizable mechanical elements.

Paris became the center of avant-garde art between the two world wars. The city drew the largest concentration of abstract artists in search of new horizons. Most were foreign artists, and some among them were political refugees. The Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García played a decisive role in the spread of the ideas of abstraction and construction, which culminated with the founding of the group *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square) in Paris in early 1930.

After the demise of *Cercle et Carré*, the group Abstraction-Création was founded, attracting most of the nonfigurative artists who lived in Paris at the time. Although many French critics, gallery owners, and collectors opposed abstraction,<sup>4</sup> the movement spread to other European countries (Italy, Switzerland, Poland), the United States, and Argentina.

## The Pioneers of Abstraction

During the first decades of the twentieth century in the Río de la Plata region, young people who were passionate about art and wanted to expand their vision of the world felt thwarted by cultural structures opposed to innovation.

The affinities between Argentina and Uruguay, extending to the arena of arts and culture, had emerged

since colonial times, when both countries were part of the viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, established by Spain in 1776 to facilitate the government of its southernmost colonies and contain Portuguese expansion. While military victories freed the territories from Spanish colonial rule relatively quickly, the political consolidation of both nations was a vaster and much more difficult task, spanning many decades. It was finally completed by the end of the nineteenth century.

The political consolidation of the Río de la Plata region was completed by the end of the nineteenth century. The governments were controlled by “liberal” conservatives, for whom national development was linked to the influx of European immigrants and foreign capital. Free trade flourished, based on the export of meat and leather and the import of industrial products. Foreign capital was invested, mostly from Britain and France. A generous immigration policy led to a considerable increase in the population. Most of the immigrants were Italian and Spanish, thus creating an ethnic and cultural unity in the Río de la Plata region that has continued to the present.

President Domingo Faustino Sarmiento laid the foundations of the Argentine nation, emphasizing secular public education, commerce, agriculture, and communications. His bipolar model (“civilization or barbarism”), famously expressed in his 1845 novel *Facundo*, synthesized the dominant conflict of the civil wars. Civilization equaled positivism, liberalism, cities, education, culture; in other words, modernity. Barbarism was associated with rebel *caudillos*, nomadic gauchos, horses, spears, knives, ignorance, and the half-empty countryside; in other words, obscurantism. For the Argentine nation to develop and grow strong, it was necessary to populate and educate it and to guarantee its unity.

Uruguay developed along a very different path. While the governing Colorados (Reds), led by José Batlle y Ordoñez, also backed liberalism, education, progress, the city-port, modernity, and civilization, they shared something more than similar economic interests with their political adversaries, the Blancos (Whites)—who defended the interests of the landowners—in spite of their visible differences. National unity and education were perceived by all Uruguayans as a vital imperative, given the small



size of their country and its strategic placement between two large powers, Argentina and Brazil. Thus, the need for at least some degree of cooperation between the two competing parties was deeply rooted in the national consciousness. This commitment to national unity would uniquely shape the future development of Uruguay, making it quite unlike that of Argentina.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decade of the twentieth century, the image of the artist became that of a bohemian, individualist, European-trained creator of utopias. In science and technology, too, a European education became almost indispensable. While patrician families moved to Europe for long periods of time so that their children could be educated, less affluent professionals and artists received government scholarships or subsidized their own studies abroad. This enlarged the social range of the younger intelligentsia.<sup>5</sup>

Argentine society was shaken in the 1920s by the return of that European-educated generation, which fully intended to work in the language of modernity. The avant-garde, often known as the Florida group, after the elegant street around which they were based, felt the need to rework language, the system of visual representation, and architecture, and expressed themselves, although with different shades of opinion, in favor of participative democracy and against the oligarchy. That was the Buenos Aires of the magazine *Martín Fierro*,<sup>6</sup> geared to a mass audience [Figure 1]. Its sharply written editorials and articles humorously exposed the limitations of a culture that prized "local color" above all else. There was also a group of socialist and anarchist intellectuals, the Boedo group, who supported working-class demands.<sup>7</sup>

Uruguayan cultural life in the 1920s was less disturbed by political processes and ideological struggles.

There were no significant avant-garde groups, although some writers and poets collaborated with Argentine publications. As to the visual arts, according to the historian Walter E. Laroche, "in the history of national art we do not have periods that correspond to each of the movements mentioned [Cubism, Abstraction, Surrealism]."<sup>8</sup>

In September 1930, General José E. Uriburu deposed the president of Argentina. Under Uriburu, right-wing nationalism increased, and the administration persecuted segments of the opposition and of the activist Left. This policy continued under the presidency of General Agustín P. Justo. The "liberal" wing of conservatism, traditionally pro-British, engaged in a mock representative democracy, which allowed it to tightly control the main cultural institutions, the universities, and much of the press.

Uruguay was also shaken by a coup, led by President Gabriel Terra, who represented the most conservative segments of the Colorado Party, in 1933. President Terra arrested and deported his opponents. Such was the fate of the

Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. Government conservatism was expressed by the severing of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1935 and with the Spanish Republic in 1936.

This was the political and cultural atmosphere to which artists who had assimilated the European avant-garde returned. They faced a constellation of problems: how to reinsert themselves into their countries or origin, share their achievements, and pursue their development.

One option was to continue along the path already established. However, the European stance responded to specific social, political, and cultural conditions and for that reason was difficult to sustain in the then unresponsive environment of the Río de la Plata. That was, nevertheless, the option chosen by Emilio Pettoruti, whose



Figure 1. Cover of *Martín Fierro*, No. 4, May 1924, Buenos Aires



“European” works exhibited at the Witcomb gallery on his return to Buenos Aires in 1924 triggered a heated debate about Cubism and Futurism.

A second option was to achieve a synthesis between European modernism and the artist's own nationalistic inclinations. That is the direction taken by Alejandro Xul Solar, who participated in the excitement generated in Buenos Aires by the magazine *Martín Fierro*. In spite of their defiant attitudes, neither Xul Solar nor Pettoruti released manifestos nor headed new movements, perhaps due to their personalities or to a dearth of followers. Pettoruti found a safe niche as director of the Museum of Fine Arts in La Plata while developing an accomplished Cubism unrooted in the Argentine culture of the 1930s. Xul Solar devoted himself almost exclusively to research on new languages and astrology, and his activity as a painter diminished; he did not have a solo show between 1929 and 1944.

A third option was the one chosen by Antonio Berni, another Argentine who studied in Europe. Having created a unique Surrealist body of work, Berni aligned himself politically with the Left when he returned to Argentina in 1933. Influenced by the Mexican muralists, his painting depicted the poverty of the most oppressed segments of Argentine society with a monumental realism and a certain metaphysical stillness that connects him to the European movements of the 1920s and, in some ways, to the work of the Dutch artist Jan Torroop. Groups that struggled for social reforms and the opening of culture to the masses essentially perceived abstract art as a trend that estranged men and women from social engagement. The Argentine Socialist-oriented magazine *Babel* (which had relocated to Chile due to hostile political conditions in Argentina) reprinted a text by Percy Wyndham Lewis proclaiming the death of abstract art.<sup>9</sup> The Argentine painter Ramón Gómez Cornejo found an alternative to these three options. Upon his return from a long stay in France, Spain, and Italy, he destroyed almost all of his European-inspired works and devoted himself to painting, and painting very well, the people from his birthplace, Santiago del Estero, in the northwest of the country.

The Uruguayan process was shaped by the return of Joaquín Torres-García in 1934, after many years in Europe. Shortly after his arrival in Montevideo, the

artist launched an internationally oriented movement, which drew fire from both traditionalists and the Left. Torres-García's counterattack against his critics was no less harsh. A similar controversy erupted around that time between Berni and Pettoruti.<sup>10</sup> Beyond his extraordinary artistic output, what set Torres-García apart from his Argentine colleagues was his unyielding will and his ability to launch a utopian movement of unexpected scope.

*Juan Del Prete*

Born in 1897 in Vasto, Italy, to a poor family, Juan Del Prete immigrated to Argentina when he was very young. Recognizing his talent, Amigos del Arte (Friends of Art)<sup>17</sup> invited the young, self-taught artist to show his paintings at its gallery on Florida Street, the most sophisticated cultural district of Buenos Aires.

Del Prete's early landscapes were forcefully and audaciously expressive. Writing about a 1926 show by Del Prete in the magazine *Martín Fierro*, the architect Alberto

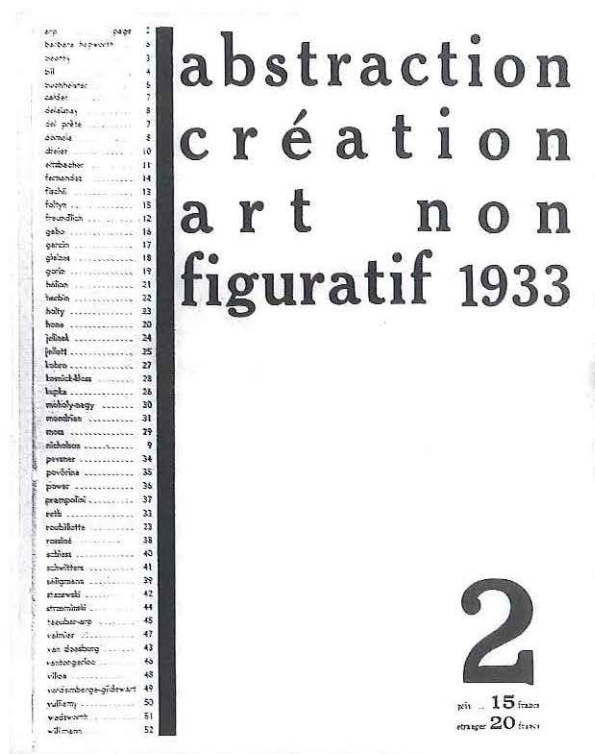


Figure 2. Cover of *Abstraction-Création*, Cahier No. 2, 1932, Paris



Prebisch recognized the artist's strong visual instinct, although he expressed reservations about his use of strident colors, a lack of restraint that he thought revealed "the superficial side of his art, which too frequently gives in to utterly disastrous orgies of color. And his excessive impatience overwhelms the power of the pictorial medium . . . . Without the discipline imposed by a strict subjection to the possibilities of the medium, we have an artist who is victim of his uncontrolled passion. However, what is a work of art but passion transformed by will into an enduring aesthetic object?"<sup>12</sup>

With the support of Amigos del Arte, Del Prete went to Paris in 1930. There he worked, exhibiting at the Zack and Vavin galleries and at the Salon des Surindépendants, and met Torres-García. Finally, he joined the abstract movement and participated in Abstraction-Création, as documented in the second publication by this group (*Cahier No. 2*) [Figure 2]. In 1933, Del Prete returned to Buenos Aires, where he immediately showed his abstract paintings and collages at the Amigos del Arte gallery. A year later, he exhibited his nonfigurative sculptures [Figure 3].

Del Prete confronted the Buenos Aires audience with a reaffirmation of modernity, not only in terms of form but also in his irreverent stance as an *artiste maudit* and his provocative work. Years later, Eugenia Crenovich (Del Prete's wife, who signed her artistic works as "Yente") wrote the following about Del Prete's two exhibits:

"From these two major exhibitions, he received only the silence of critics, the mocking laughter of the many,

and the indignation of a few. Some of the paintings were turned sideways; others were defaced with crude inscriptions. That lack of resonance and the cold atmosphere, even among many who had supported him before, isolated the artist in his struggle. Amigos del Arte still offered him access to its gallery in 1935, 1936, and 1937, but between that year and 1941 no gallery would exhibit his work. After that, the artist was forced to combine nonfigurative and figurative works whenever he exhibited. For years, however, he remained isolated in his studio, where his work continued to accumulate."<sup>13</sup>

In an unsigned review of Del Prete's 1933 exhibition published in the newspaper *La Prensa*, the critic, after emphasizing the artist's strength as a colorist, which he had demonstrated in his first showing at the 1925 Salón Nacional, asserted that he was "getting further and further away from himself, and letting himself be seduced by the work of certain famous Old World painters." Regarding his abstract paintings, the same critic noted that "his latest abstract works are sloppily done. It should be also noted how lamentable it is that an artist of such refined sensibility as a colorist would use devices as unpictorial and outdated as that of gluing paper on canvas, which often makes the canvases look dirty from glue."<sup>14</sup>

Del Prete, however, swept away by the Parisian enthusiasm for abstraction and searching for new expressive possibilities, let loose his impulses and experimented with the new forms. His early abstract oil paintings, generously

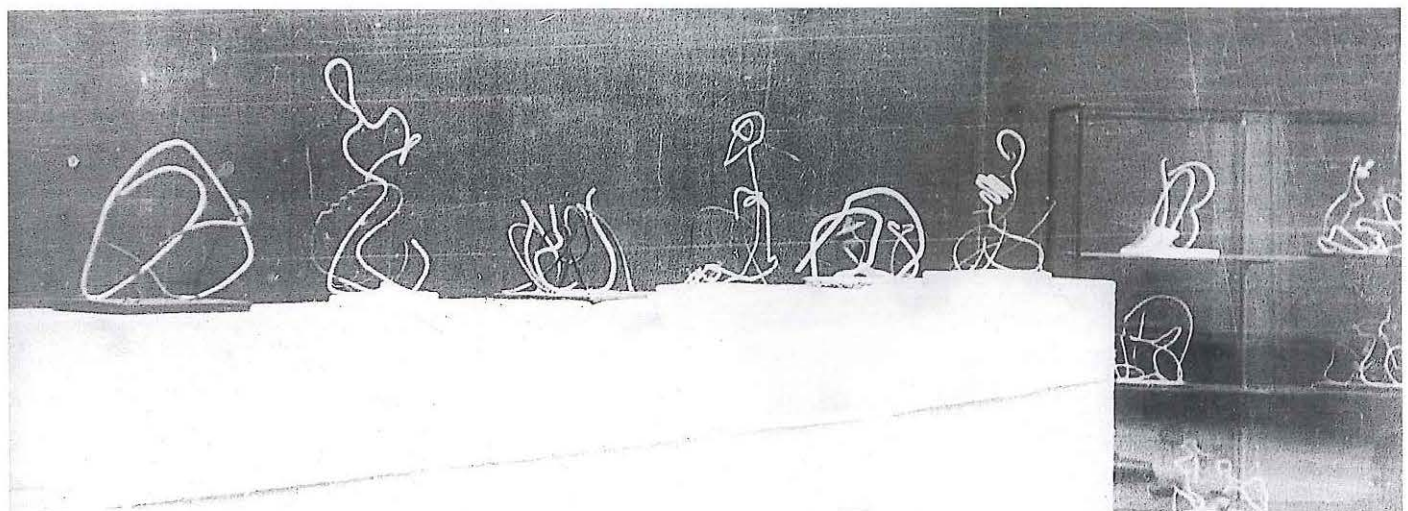


Figure 3. Juan Del Prete's sculpture exhibition at Amigos del Arte, Buenos Aires, 1934



sized, have wide, flat color fields that border well-defined forms with square or rounded edges, in the spirit of European abstract art. An analysis of one of his major works of that period [Plate 1] shows that the artist had temporarily abandoned the thick brushstrokes of his early work. The opposition between the straight and curved outlines of flat forms creates tension in the image, although the oblong elements that cut across the white and blue vertical shapes soften its visual impact.

In addition to painting, Del Prete experimented with collages, introducing twine, in the manner of Pablo Picasso and Enrico Prampolini.<sup>15</sup> Back in Buenos Aires, he used cardboard and smaller formats. He made sculptures both by carving forms directly in plaster and working with wire. His highly expressive *Estructura en alambre* (Wire Structure, 1933) [Plate 3] is related to Picasso's project for a monument to Guillaume Apollinaire.

Overwhelmed by the lack of response to his abstract work, Del Prete returned to a schematic representation of the human figure. In 1935 he exhibited a series of tempera works, in which the critic Rafael Squirru noticed an affinity with Alexander Calder's circus characters. Del Prete briefly attempted a personal version of Cubo-Futurism which he called "futu-cubismo," and, in this period, he also produced geometrically based abstract works.

Forced by lack of studio space, Del Prete periodically reviewed his works, and ended up destroying many of them. These are documented in *Obras destruidas de Del Prete* (Destroyed Works of Del Prete), a publication written by his wife and with photographs taken by the artist himself.<sup>16</sup>

When a generation of young abstract artists invaded the Buenos Aires art scene at the end of the 1940s, Del Prete returned to nonfigurative art, aligning himself with the Concrete artists. This return later became "something of a heretical joke," since the sensuous, expressive, almost lumpy impasto that "reveals this artist's characteristic pleasure in painting"<sup>17</sup> openly contradicted the aesthetic severity of Concrete art. Jorge Romero Brest, a leading critic, seeing these richly sensuous works as the expression of an instinctual attitude and lacking in conceptual strength, denied their relation to abstraction.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of the 1950s, a decade that saw the international spread of Informalism and Abstract Expressionism, Del Prete alternated between figurative and

abstract art. During a trip to Europe, in 1953, he was converted to Informalism. On his return, he exhibited new abstract paintings at the Krayd gallery. Enriched by a greater gestural freedom, they possessed a vigorous stylistic unity. Sincerity, sensibility, and playfulness on the one hand, and the articulation of geometries on the other: such was the varied, colorful, provocative world that this artist reflected and embraced.

From the beginning, Juan Del Prete had been faulted for his insufficient inner discipline and capacity for reflection. Romero Brest made the same point when he wrote that the artist was "lacking an essential thoughtfulness, not about his art, but about what he can or should express with his art,"<sup>19</sup> and again when he warned about the dangers of "the exacerbation of sensitive intuition to the detriment of a world-shaping vision."<sup>20</sup> Yet Del Prete compensated with the ferocity of a "Fauve" and with his vitality, exuberance, and lack of inhibitions, he contributed to Argentine art an audacity and self-sufficiency (that "repulsive color" mentioned by Jorge Gumier Maier underlines the artist's noncomplaisant character) not displayed by other artists of his generation.<sup>21</sup> This would bear fruit in the following decades.

### Esteban Lisa

The inclusion of the work of Esteban Lisa in this overview requires a special explanation, given his self-marginalization from the art world on the one hand and the excellent reception of recent posthumous exhibits of his work on the other. This raises a number of questions. Is there a place in the history of art for a body of work that is exhibited for the first time almost half a century after it was created? Is it valid to show today the production of an artist who, more than forty years ago, interacted only with a small group of people, distanced himself from the gallery circuit, did not take part in large group shows, and was totally ignored by the critics?<sup>22</sup> Lisa cut himself off from the Argentine art world and did not exhibit his work, not even in group exhibitions. Only after he had already founded his Escuela de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires in 1955, at the height of the South American and international abstract movement did the artist venture to include



two reproductions of his *Juegos con líneas y colores* (Play with Lines and Colors) and one of his drawings in a book he wrote, *Kant, Einstein y Picasso*.<sup>23</sup> This stands as the only exception to a self-imposed rule. Reviewing Lisa's work in 1998, the Argentine abstract artist César Paternosto lamented Lisa's isolation, then welcomed him as part of his country's aesthetic heritage, also suggesting that his instantly recognizable coloring has Río de la Plata connotations.<sup>24</sup> Paternosto wrote that Lisa's thoughtfulness would have been extremely useful for the generations of the 1940s and 1950s, who lacked role models and direct connections with the creators of abstraction. Instead, those artists had to look for answers abroad. Many found them in the purity of Piet Mondrian's canvases and the geometric rigor of Georges Vantongerloo; others were inspired by the symbolism of early Kandinsky, the Art Brut of Jean Dubuffet, or the expressive power of the CoBrA group.

Born in Spain in 1895, Lisa arrived in Buenos Aires as a child and was self-taught. His was not the case, however, of a hermit or outsider hiding in the underground Buenos Aires. On the contrary, he was regularly seen in bookstores and art exhibits, actively recruiting followers. Yet, aware of the difficulties and dangers of confronting the outside world, Lisa chose to preserve his purity with a ferocious tenacity worthy of his Castilian stock, regardless of the consequences. Instead of trying to gain public recognition for his own work, he focused his efforts on gathering a small coterie.<sup>25</sup> His educational approach was based mainly on Immanuel Kant's ethics, as succinctly articulated in the German philosopher's epitaph: "The starry heavens above me and moral law within me."<sup>26</sup> Lisa, like Xul Solar, never abandoned the hope that his work as a teacher and a painter would be recognized after his death, so he carefully preserved his art. His art was his way of praying or meditating.

Lisa's teachings went beyond the merely pictorial: his objective was not to train artists but to inculcate thoughtful beings. He valued philosophy, poetry, and ethics as much as drawing and painting. According to Isaac Zylberberg, when Lisa critiqued the work of his students, one could almost perceive the imaginary presence of a philosopher next to him.<sup>27</sup> Lisa lectured and organized exhibits of his students' work but never promoted his own.

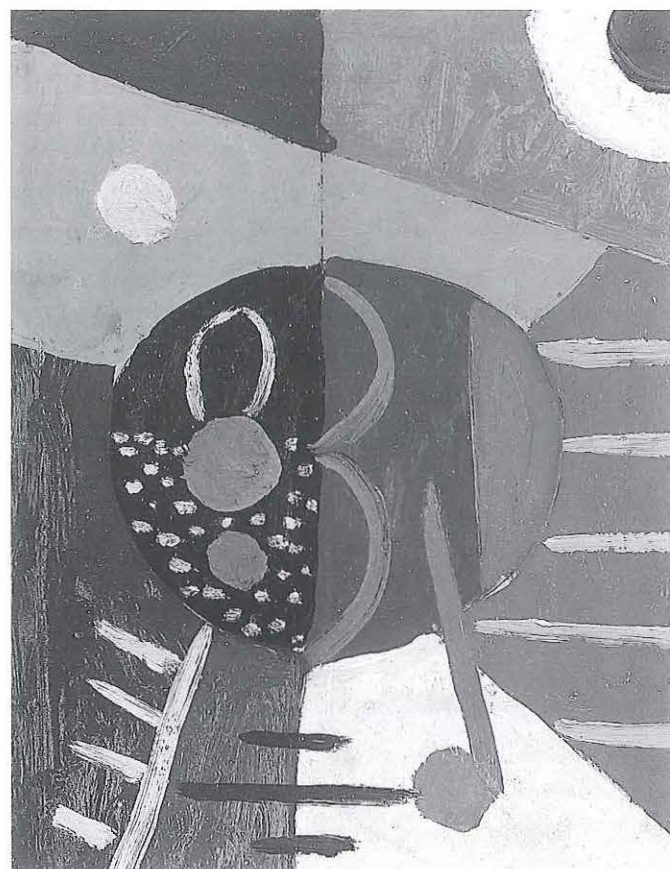


Figure 4. Esteban Lisa, *Composición* (Composition), c. 1941, oil on board, 11 7/8 x 9 1/8 inches, Collection of Frances Reynolds Marinho, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Lisa's published writings, unfortunately, neither reveal the content of his teaching nor give any clues regarding the development of his art. All that remain are recollections of his few students and what Lisa's own paintings reveal. An initial analysis shows a line of affinities with the art of Otto Freundlich, Nicolas de Staël, Arthur Dove, Serge Poliakoff, the Abstract Expressionists, and the CoBrA group, and the practitioners of Tachisme in the early 1970s. The successive changes in his painting are either in step with or ahead of international abstraction.

Lisa began with a metaphysical vision of reality and the inevitable Cubist apprenticeship, followed by his first abstract works. In some, he introduced pure geometric forms, such as cylinders and spheres, overlapping a group of planes, as in *Composición*, 1935 [Plate 5]. In others, his point of departure were planes rendered dynamic by an expressive interplay of rhythms, colors, and textures [Plate 6].



His experiments continued with paintings articulated by smaller geometric forms. While undeniably rooted in Cubism and Constructivism, these paintings, with their personal gestural and textural elements, such as long brushstrokes and the unexpected buildup of matter in small areas, also show the artist's desire to create his own language.<sup>28</sup> According to Juan Manuel Bonet, "To my eyes, part of what generates such a powerful irradiation in these small works—like magnets for the eyes—is precisely this technique."<sup>29</sup> After 1941, unsatisfied with simply energizing the pictorial plane with the tectonics of his paintings, Lisa incorporated rhythm into his compositions. By resolutely attacking the surface, he demolished their Constructivist remnants: overlapping the geometric elements with straight lines, countercurves, marks, streaks, and dotted lines traced with generous brushstrokes, he broke up a two dimensionality that threatened to become a new classicism [Plate 7, Figure 4].

Having anticipated Tachisme was not enough for Lisa. He felt that although he had gone beyond the Cubism that dominated geometric abstraction (a prevailing trend in postwar Parisian Salon des Réalités Nouvelles), it still kept him within the boundaries of a space covered by geometrically patterned lines and signs. Consequently, about 1945 he abandoned his rich—and luxuriant—impastos and returned to the asceticism of diluted paint applied in light layers, with vivid and tenuous shades. Between 1945 and 1952 Lisa devoted himself to experimenting with ways to express the multiplicity of cosmic space. He used throwaway materials; anything was valid, from pages torn from books to ravioli boxes and notebook covers. Restraint prevailed over gesture. These abrupt changes in styles led Edward Sullivan to describe Lisa as a "chameleon-like artist," adding, "Just when we think we understand his work, he introduces confounding changes or transformations."<sup>30</sup>

About 1953, Lisa began to work on larger formats, applying rich, stridently colored impastos and leaving large unpainted fields. This new work acquired a new identity, dominated by a spontaneous, almost violent, gesture, which he called *Juegos de líneas y colores* (Play of Lines and Colors): open and closed figures, shiftily drawn lines (straight, curved, multidirectional) that go through stains and dots, indifferent to outlines, with defined or

faded forms, like constellations [Plate 10]. This multiplicity of forms, some of which are recognizable, brings to mind what Jackson Pollock once said: "I'm not interested in Abstract Expressionism . . . It certainly is neither non-objective, nor non-representational. I'm very representational some of the time, and a little all of the time. But when you're painting out of your unconscious figures are bound to emerge."<sup>31</sup> In contrast with other modernists, who developed theories to justify their work, Lisa focused almost exclusively on philosophical discussions about individual and cosmic vision in his numerous publications. He also showed an almost boundless enthusiasm for the scientific and technological advances of the 1950s and 1960s. According to José Emilio Burucúa, not even his book, "the brief, extraordinarily coherent, and elegantly written *Kant, Einstein y Picasso*, which convincingly relates Einstein's space-time to the simultaneity of viewpoints in Picasso's,"<sup>32</sup> helps us to better understand Lisa's pictorial activity. According to his former students, the artist also did not bother to document the teaching methods he used in his classes. It was not just his exacerbated self-critical attitude that led him to keep his work from view but also, and perhaps more important, the fact that he considered the act of creation more important than the work itself.

Other aspects of this artist's personality confirm that he was as interested in European modernity as he was indifferent to Argentine and Latin American art, a fact confirmed by his library, dedicated to philosophical and religious speculation. An exception was a copy of the first edition of Torres-García's book *Estructura* (Structure). Burucúa concluded in his analysis that for Lisa, "the adventure of art is better served by the slow, systematic, silent learning about the self and the world," in contrast to those, like Antonio Berni, who tried to base their art on "psychological reflection and political struggle."<sup>33</sup>

#### Joaquín Torres-García

This artist occupies a unique place in the history of modern art. Not only did he produce an extensive and complex body of work—paintings, murals, drawings, reliefs, sculptures, and wooden toys—but he also paid special



attention to training younger artists. His activities, reflected in a vast collection of books, manifestos, lectures, and pamphlets where he developed his theory of Constructive Universalism, are virtually unparalleled within the modernist utopia.

Torres-García's autobiography<sup>34</sup> and correspondence reveal him as an exceptional, tenacious, and egocentric individual. Irascible and impatient, he dreamed fantastic ideas that reality obstinately impeded. He would find peace only in his work.

In Barcelona at the beginning of the twentieth century, Torres-García was one of the main proponents of Noucentisme, a movement that espoused Catalanian cultural independence, with its Greek and Latin roots, and openly opposed local modernism, rooted in Art Nouveau. Soon Torres-García understood that he had to incorporate contemporary society into his cosmic vision. He did not need to discover the symbolic and the mythical in antiquity; as they were timeless, he could find them in the present. This required a new way of seeing and representing. The dynamic of the modern city, asserted by the Futurists, became the subject of his new paintings. Along with Pablo Picasso and Julio González, Torres-García belonged to the first wave of Barcelona's avant-garde.

More concerned with reflecting the underlying structure than reality, Torres-García used for his first constructive experience an orthogonal grid as a prototype of frontal representation. After a two-year sojourn in New York, whose urban dynamic he reflected in a pictorial language based in the anti-rhetoric of Ultraismo,<sup>35</sup> Torres-García moved to Italy (to produce his toys on an industrial scale), where he experimented with Cubism. After a hiatus on the Côte d'Azur, where he reinvented his archaic world, Torres-García and his family settled in Paris. By the middle of 1928, his paintings show planes defined by intuitively traced vertical and horizontal lines on which the artist superimposed figures and urban landscape elements, drawn with a synthetic and strict frontality. There, faced with Surrealism's domination of the Parisian art scene, supported by the small Left Bank galleries, active collectors, and intellectuals of the Left, he felt it was time to take action. Torres-García organized a forum to discuss representation, abstraction, and symbolism and plunged himself, first with Theo van Doesburg and later with

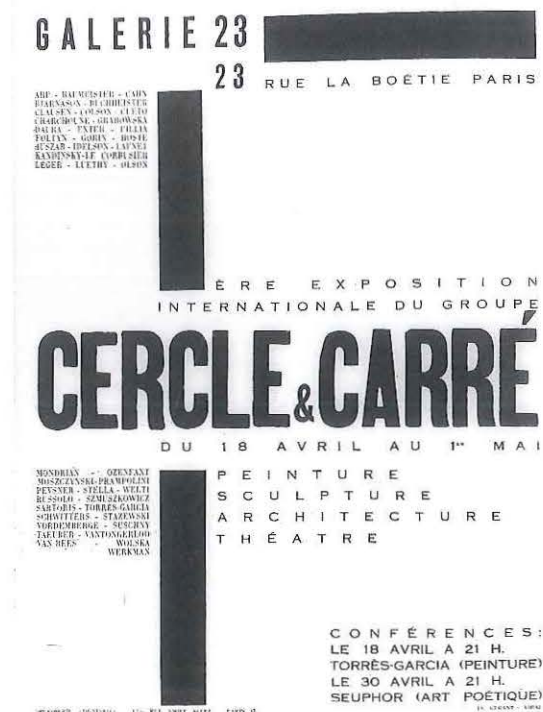


Figure 5. Poster of the international exhibition *Cercle et Carré* at Galerie 23, Paris

Michel Seuphor, Mondrian, and other friends, into the adventure of *Cercle et Carré*, the launching pad of abstraction in the 1930s [Figure 5].<sup>36</sup>

Subsequently, at a time when Positivism and the machine aesthetic reigned supreme, one can only imagine how surprising it must have been for the artists of *Cercle et Carré* to hear their Uruguayan colleague publicly acknowledge the creative power of the subconscious and propose an integration of Cubism and Neoplasticism with the intuitive and more profound aspects of Surrealism. In this phase of his evolution, Torres-García returned to the almost forgotten spiritual aspiration of the artist to fashion the archetypal human and thus reach cosmic unity through art.<sup>37</sup> He also proposed that the artist abandon his bohemian stance to become an artist-philosopher, a creator of a superior kind of art.

Torres-García explained why originality had become a paradigm of modernism. What is personal in each artist is something in the individual's consciousness that originates in the unknown, and it is not anything that someone





Figure 6. Installation of an early AAC Exhibition. On the left wall hangs a painting by H. Ragni; at the center, toys and a mask by Joaquín Torres-García; Joaquín Torres-García (right, front) and Manolita Piña (center)

else could consciously repeat. It remains an impenetrable mystery and generates a desire that acts on the unconscious, and this desire constitutes “the soul of the work.” In addition, the artist, with his craft, can never replace originality—a personal element—with an intellectual element. That is why he must avoid following other artists’ suggestions. Torres-García asserted that he was guided not by his conscious side but by an unconscious activity that, “unnoticed by us, will guide our hand.”<sup>38</sup>

For Torres-García it did not suffice to create a pure art that was the “direct visual expression of the universal,” as Mondrian had proposed.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, he pursued a personal art that explored the issues of representation without discarding the real world and the spiritual world. In other words, he wanted to find new ways to infuse content into forms so that they could be recognizable to viewers. He left the choice of motif as the sole responsibility of each individual in order to keep the artist’s freedom unlimited by dogmas: “The artist who relies on intuition is as able to create as the one who relies on purely intellectual ideas.” According to Torres-García, “every artist aspires, consciously or unconsciously, to create an aes-

thetic unity and, within that unity, has named the visual object: as a painting-object, a sculpture-object.”<sup>40</sup>

To reach that synthesis, Torres-García had to resolve two essential polarities: one between the two dimensionality of the background (the support) and the three dimensionality of the forms in nature, and another between the visual structure of the work and its contents, or, as he himself summed it up, between structure and symbolism. To this end, Torres-García practiced a kind of automatic drawing, schematic, geometric, and without perspective (applying the principle of frontality), rendering “the chosen objects: bottle, house, key, man, sun, etc., without thinking how they would be drawn.”<sup>41</sup> To this gestural automatism was added his interest in investigating the interaction between the physics of the support and the pictorial medium and the dialogues between the figurative and the abstract and the structural and the symbolic. All of this constituted a complex set of problems that the artist would resolve in his work in 1943 and 1944.

On his first contact with Uruguayan reality, Torres-García was confronted by a dilemma similar to the one experi-



enced in Buenos Aires by Pettoruti and Xul Solar: European-style avant-garde or local art? Torres-García immediately tried to create a movement based on universal and international models, on an equal footing with the European avant-garde, as he had attempted before in Madrid, which followed his sojourn in Paris.<sup>42</sup> To promote this new art, he lectured frequently, exhibited his work, and founded an art school that shook the prevailing traditionalist structures.

Torres-García insisted that the function of the work of art, whether music, painting, sculpture, architecture, or poetry, was not to describe or imitate but to create a unified set within a new aesthetic order, without any ideological discourse. He was attacked for his apolitical stance by Leftists, who, emulating the Mexican muralists,<sup>43</sup> wanted to develop an art with political and social connotations. In Uruguay, the spiritual content of Torres-García's Constructivism was labeled "utopian" and "voluntarist" by one of these artists, Norberto Berdía, unquestionably making him a reactionary who deserved to be dismissed according to the tenets of historical materialism.<sup>44</sup> In his response, published in September 1934 as *Manifiesto I*, Torres-García insisted on the total independence of art, calling Cubism a revolutionary event.<sup>45</sup> To underline the incongruity of Berdía's attack, Torres-García said in his manifesto that his views were "shared by many Communist artists working within this tendency, such as Lipchitz, Gorin, Bichier (Hélion), Doesburg, Cueto, Freundlich, etc. In other words: all of them."

The artist then organized his Estudio 1037 (Studio 1037),<sup>46</sup> which later became the Asociación de Arte Constructivo (Constructive Art Association)<sup>47</sup> [Figure 6]. The group's acronym, AAC, appeared on the works by the master and his followers as symbol of a new artistic and aesthetic reality. In the meantime, in New York, a group of artists excluded from Alfred Barr's exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at The Museum of Modern Art, organized American Abstract Artists, or AAA. Thus appeared in the Americas, almost simultaneously, two groups nourished by abstraction: one in the south guided by Torres-García, and one in the north, influenced by the European avant-garde and the writings of Mondrian.

When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Torres-García expressed his opposition to the art of the north, he defined himself as a man of the south, classical



Figure 7. Cover of *Círculo y Cuadrado*, No. 1, May 1936, Montevideo, Uruguay

and Mediterranean. Conversely, before traveling to New York, he proclaimed his internationalism and the need to go north ("to abandon the south").<sup>48</sup> On his return to Italy, he reopened the debate between Mediterranean classicism and Cubist romanticism,<sup>49</sup> which would come to fruition in his early Constructivism. When the economic crisis made his situation in Paris unbearable, he moved to Madrid, in late 1932, with almost unattainable expectations.

These fluctuations highlight the anxious polarity that Torres-García triggered whenever he put his utopian vision of the world before reality. What is extraordinary is that, like a demiurge, he found a way to escape the traps that he kept setting for himself, traps that challenged him to make audacious leaps. However, in the act of creation, when faced with the blank canvas, or paper, or cardboard, or wood panel, the eternal nonconformist would overcome his dogmas, theories, contradictions, and anxieties.

Despised by conservatives bent on defending the deeply rooted patterns of their country's traditional art,



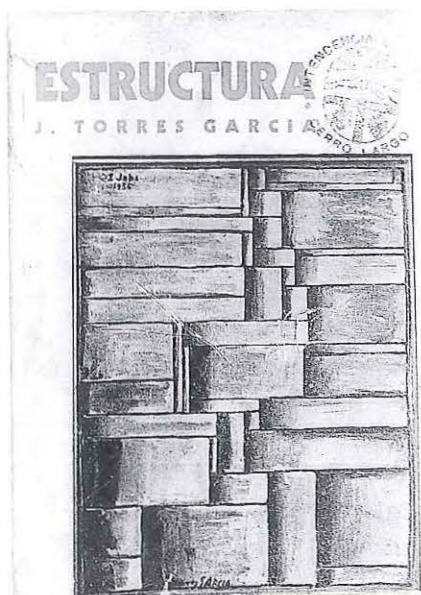


Figure 8. Cover of *Estructura*, 1935, which shows *Estructura tubular* (Tubular Structure) by Joaquín Torres-García [See Plate 13]

Figure 9. Advertisement for Joaquín Torres García's *Estructura* (Structure), 1935

Figure 10. Cover of *La Tradición del Hombre Abstracto* (Doctrina Constructivista) [The Tradition of Abstract Man (Constructivist Doctrine)], 1938

and attacked by the Left, Torres-García tried a new strategy to promote a new art in the Americas: the creation of the School of the South.<sup>50</sup> He publicly, and impudently, declared that this school should forget Europe: Where else but in the ancient cultures of the Americas could inspiring references be found? Since indigenous Uruguayan expressions did not suffice, artists should mine the myths and archetypes of Andean cultures.<sup>51</sup> Torres-García's aesthetic shift came at a moment when indigenous cultural content was being reclaimed all over Latin America.<sup>52</sup>

In May 1936, the AAC published the first issue of *Círculo y Cuadrado* (Circle and Square)<sup>53</sup> [Figure 7], which continued the work of *Cercle et Carré*. In his introduction, Torres-García explained both the reasons that had led him to found the French magazine and the goals of the new group. With its impeccable design, lavish illustrations of works by Torres-García and his followers, and photographs of exhibitions, the magazine matched the production quality of European publications. Among its highlights were the manifesto of the first exhibition of abstract art organized in Turin in 1935,<sup>54</sup> texts by AAC members, and also those by van Doesburg, Umberto Boccioni, Mondrian, Amédée Ozenfant, Vicente Huidobro, Vantongerloo, Jean Hélion, Gino Severini, Ángel Ferrant,

Alexis Carrel, Benjamín Palencia, and Luis Valcárcel, some of which were also translated into French.

Torres-García laid out his aesthetic credo in the book *Estructura* (Structure) of 1935 [Figures 8, 9], perhaps the text that best summarizes his ideas. His utopian thinking about man and humanity was expressed in *La tradición del hombre abstracto* (Doctrina constructivista) (The Tradition of Abstract Man: Constructivist Doctrine, 1938) [Figure 10]. In his *Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana* (Metaphysics of American Indian Prehistory), published in April 1939, the artist expanded on why the Inca culture should be used as the basis for unifying art in South America.

It is not easy to summarize Torres-García's pictorial activity in Montevideo. No catalogue raisonné of his work exists, and recent anthological exhibitions have not dealt with the artist's transgressive stance and stylistic diversity, often reflecting instead the personal positions of their curators.

A critical review of Torres-García's European Constructivist experiences show an incipient will to overcome the polarity between the grid built according to the golden section and the symbols within them, as seen in his so-called *constructivos generales lineales*.<sup>55</sup> His painting *Estructura con formas ensambladas* (Structure with



Assembled Forms, 1933) [Plate 12], for example, demonstrates his resolve to articulate an image through a continuous line generated by an uninterrupted movement of the hand navigating over the plane. This procedure, which was also used by Paul Klee,<sup>56</sup> might be related to zoomorphic and geometric forms of pre-Columbian ceramics, textiles, and painted cloth. It was not enough for Torres-García to lay orthogonal systems across the plane, engrave wood with the perfection and purity of a Zen master, or groove thick, fresh impastos with the back of his paintbrush; he also had to dominate the surface with a line that created utopias. An echo of this resounds in a text by Jorge Luis Borges: "A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face."<sup>57</sup>

In Montevideo Torres-García brought to fruition the process that began with his abstract wood constructions and his European abstract drawings. Perhaps having exhausted the possibilities of his lineal structures, he abandoned a system of symbols, anticipated in his series *Monumentos*, his abstract wooden works [Figure 11], his drawings and watercolors, and in *Structure with Assembled Forms* [Plate 12], that risked becoming allegorical.

Between 1935 and 1942, the artist did a series of tempera and oil abstractions painted on canvas and cardboard, many in a large format and most in a range of black and white, which he named *Estructuras* [Figure 12]. Some have structural forms created by the juxtaposition of tubular or conical elements; others have grids. In all of them, the symbols nested in the grid have been replaced by an empty space. For the cover of his book, *Estructura*, the artist chose one of his earliest abstract works [Plate 13]. What makes this series of paintings unique is its transformation of moral and metaphysical content into form. The art critic Robert Pincus-Witten noted that in these paintings

the surface is subdivided according to the demands of abstraction rather than of ideographic pressures, with a stylistic monumentality inherited from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes but rendered on the scale of an easel painting.

Clearly, he added, "Torres-García had made a major contribution to painting in the twentieth century, similar to Mondrian's and Klee's by the clarity of development and deeply pedagogical nature of his work."<sup>58</sup>

These abstract paintings have a generative characteristic that identifies them as "allover paintings."<sup>59</sup> The question is where to place them in art history. Are they a remake of Mondrian's reticulated structures? A re-creation of Inca walls? Or are they a new step forward in the creation of a system that integrates structures and symbols? To begin with, it is useless to classify Torres-García's Constructivism as some sort of epiphany derived from his encounter with Dutch Neoplasticism and pre-Columbian forms. For the Uruguayan artist, the absolute purity of the grid created by Mondrian in the 1920s left no room for an exploration of gesture and fantasy. This might explain why he broke with Neoplasticist tenets and gave volume to the grids of his constructions by shadowing them with loose and forceful brushstrokes, something that he would do again in his paintings from 1937 to 1942.

Second, as César Paternosto has suggested, it is possible to connect some of these paintings with Inca ornamentation, given Torres-García's interest in indigenous American sculpture and architecture.<sup>60</sup> However, any attempt to pigeonhole him there would also be contrived, given that Torres-García followed his impulses and never a strict logic. Furthermore, the artist did not experience his Latin American condition as unilateral alienation; he used it to reaffirm his condition as universal man, "Abstract Man," a man of all times, "the one who discovers Order in Nature."<sup>61</sup>



Figure 11. Joaquín Torres-García, *Objeto Construido* (Constructed Object), 1938, tempera on wood, 34 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches, Collection Alejandra, Aurelio and Claudio Torres. Courtesy Gallery Jan Krugier, Ditesheim & Cie., Geneva



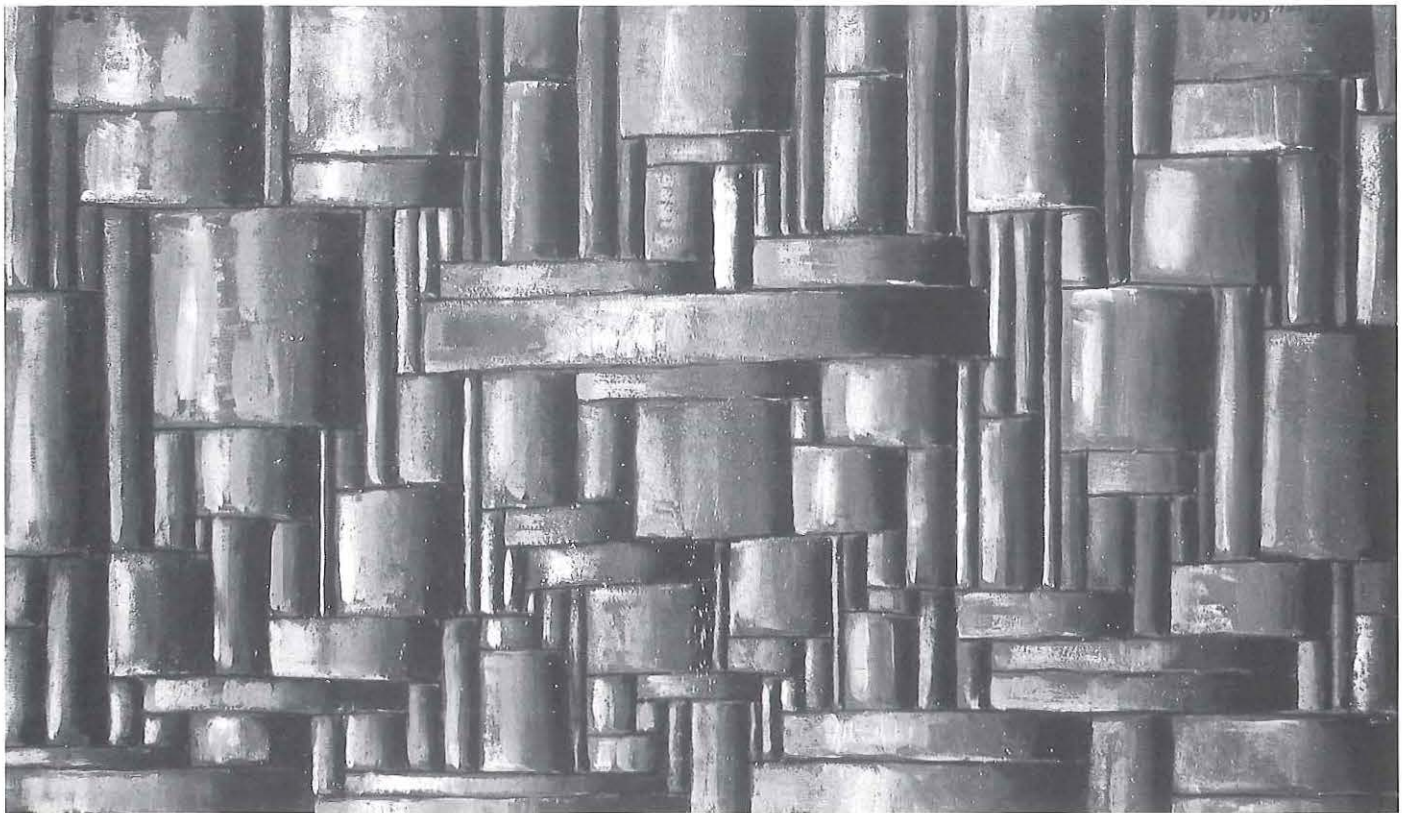


Figure 12. Joaquín Torres-García, *Estructura abstracta tubular* (Abstract Tubular Structure), 1937, tempera on canvas, 46 ½ x 78 ½ inches (118.1 x 200 cm), Collection of Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela

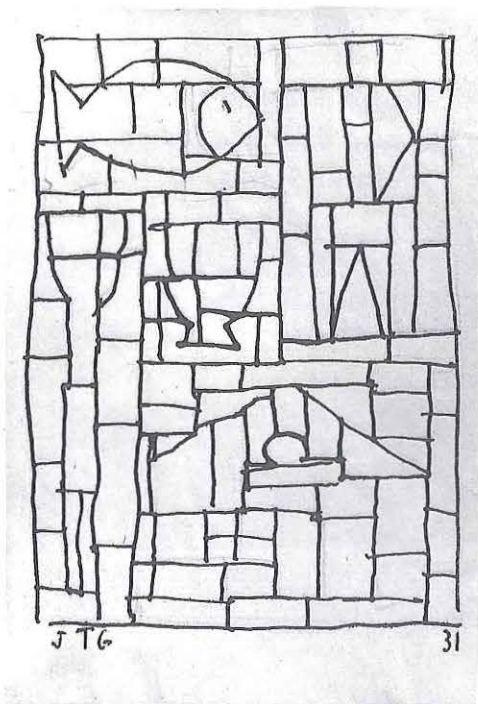


Figure 13. Joaquín Torres-García, *Dibujo* (Drawing), 1931, ink and pencil on paper, 4 ½ x 3 inches, Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Third, the rhythm of clashing elements lends a new metaphysical dimension to these works. The confrontation between empty and filled spaces, between flat areas and velvety volumes transcends the grid-symbol pattern that characterized his first (“canonical”) Constructivist period. The artist had now reached a higher level: the “Structure,” the Platonic level of the Absolute, of Ideal Beauty. Torres-García had transformed the orthogonal grid into a higher entity, where symbols disintegrate and are absorbed by the grid, thus multiplying the concrete (and generative) efficacy of the motif.

This level of abstraction occupied only a brief stage in Torres-García’s career: the artist alternated his *Estructuras tubulares* (Tubular Structures) with paintings of indigenous American symbols, portraits of famous men, cityscapes, and European landscapes painted from memory or from earlier sketches. His greatest aspiration was to create universal order (unity) through a synthesis between structure and symbol, as suggested in *Dibujo* (Drawing, 1931) [Figure 13]. With his murals for a hos-



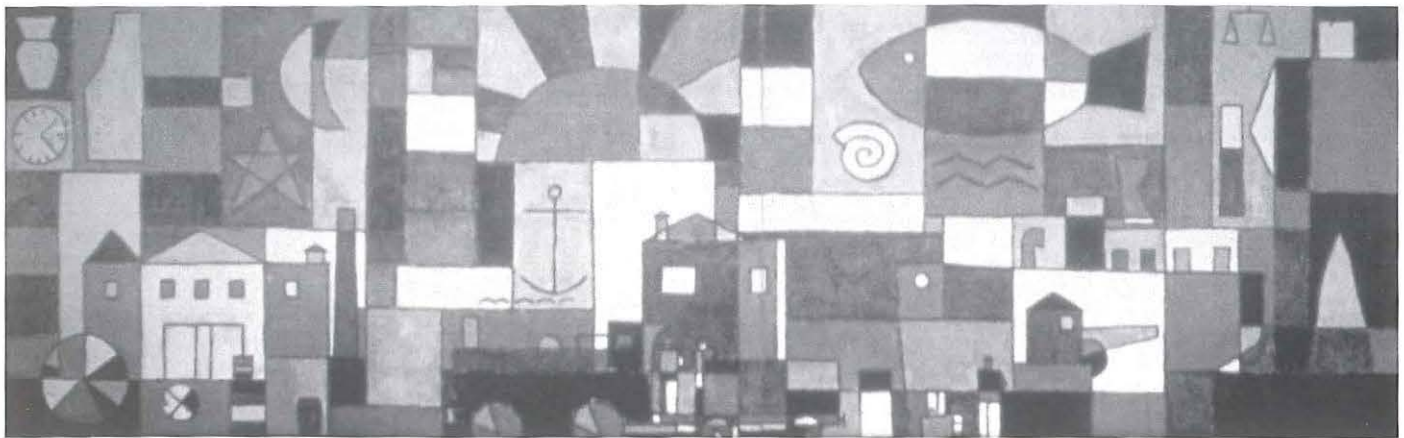


Figure 14. Joaquín Torres-García, *El Sol (The Sun)*, 1944, enamel and varnish on wall, 75 ½ x 261 inches (192.4 x 662.9 cm). Mural at the Hospital in the Colonia Saint Bois, Montevideo, now destroyed

pital in the Colonia Saint Bois, a suburb of Montevideo [Figure 14],<sup>62</sup> Torres-García not only accomplished the unity between architecture and decoration but found the synthesis for which he had long searched. In his own words, “Where structure takes the place of overlapping images there will cease to exist a duality between background and images, and the painting will recover its initial identity: unity.”<sup>63</sup> In those murals, the symbols intertwined with geometric forms blended with the background, and the polarity that had existed between grid and symbol disappeared. These new paintings expressed the vision of a modern, utopian, joyous world.

### Other Abstract Artists of the 1930s

In general, with the exception of Del Prete, Berni, and Raquel Forner, Argentine artists of the so-called Paris group reflected the orderly, methodical spirit that prevailed in certain Parisian workshops, such as André Lhote’s, with works that assimilated the advances of Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and 1920s Italian realism. Back in South America, these artists wanted to keep their innovative stance at a level acceptable to local codes, avoiding any decisive break. They exemplified different aspects of what the French critic Jean Clair called *renovatio*, as opposed to *innovatio*, or the aesthetic of rupture.

Another determining factor was the social and political situation, both local and international. The result was that the evolution of the abstract avant-garde in Buenos



Figure 15. Yente (Eugenia Crenovich), *Composición en relieve (Composition in Relief)*, 1945, oil on celotex, 29 ½ x 19 ½ inches (73.9 x 202.5 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires



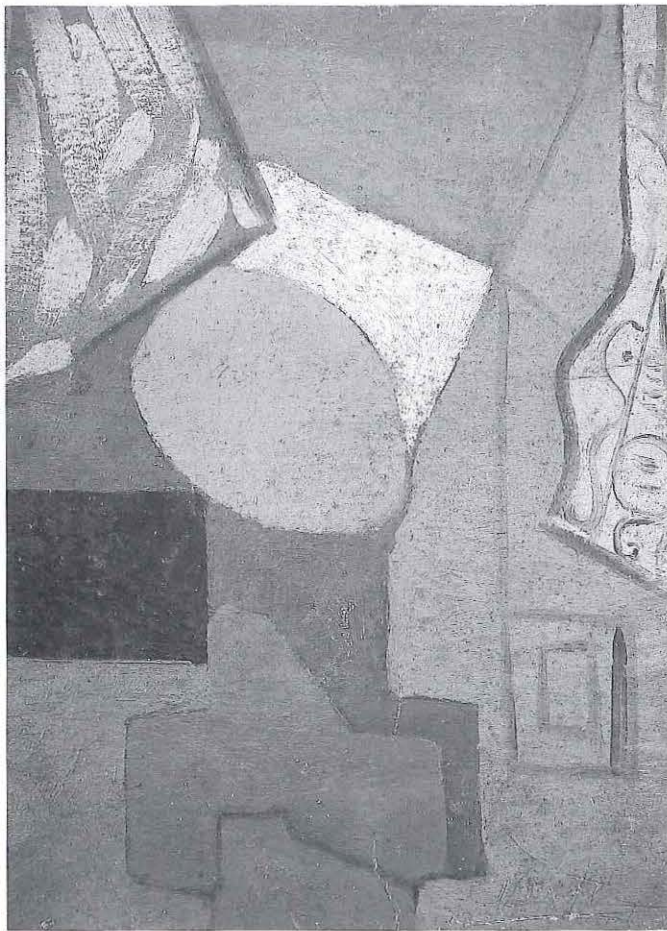


Figure 16. Alejandro Vainstein, *Pintura Abstracta* (Abstract Painting), 1939, oil on board, 13 x 9 1/2 inches (33 x 24 cm), Collection of the artist, Buenos Aires

Aires in the late 1930s could hardly have been more sluggish. Aside from Del Prete and Lisa, there was Yente (Del Prete's wife), who painted markedly lyrical abstractions [Figure 15], and Juan Bay, an Argentine artist then living in Italy, whose work was shown in an exhibition of Italian abstract art presented in December 1936 at the Galería Moody, reviewed by Atilio Rossi in *Sur*.<sup>64</sup> This short list should also include Alejandro Vainstein, whose small-scale, strikingly colored abstract works [Figure 16] show the influence of Esteban Lisa, his first teacher. After 1941, this artist chose to continue his training with Pettoruti and abandoned abstraction.

Another artist that should be mentioned is the Argentine Lucio Fontana, one of Italy's first abstract sculptors. In 1939, Fontana returned to Argentina, where he created figurative ceramics and plaster sculptures, some of which could be called neobaroque. They already show a procliv-

ity for expressionism, loud colors, and glossy enamels, all of which would reappear in the fragments that he would later attach to his abstract paintings. He also produced bronze sculptures with smooth forms, abbreviated modeling, and planes that meet on a single surface, in the style of Aristide Maillol or Gaston Lachaise.

According to Enrico Crispolti, Fontana felt that the Argentine environment was unfavorable and that he was just treading water.<sup>65</sup> However, according to Thomas Messer, Fontana was "bi-national and bilingual, and that challenge divided his stylistic vocabulary, allowing him to adjust his art to the diverse demands, circumstances, and environments in which he found himself."<sup>66</sup> Fontana taught at the Altamira Art School in Buenos Aires,<sup>67</sup> where he inspired the 1946 *Manifiesto Blanco* (White Manifesto), signed by his students. He later

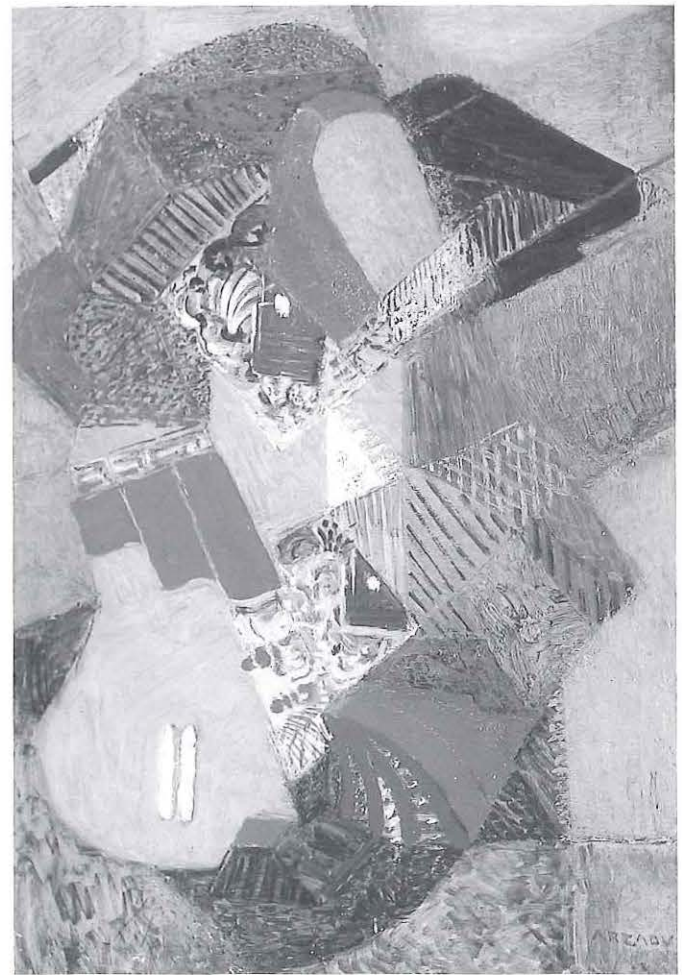


Figure 17. Carmelo de Arzadun, *Composición Abstracta* (Abstract Composition), 1936, oil on board, 39 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches (100 x 70 cm), Collection of Galería Latina, Montevideo



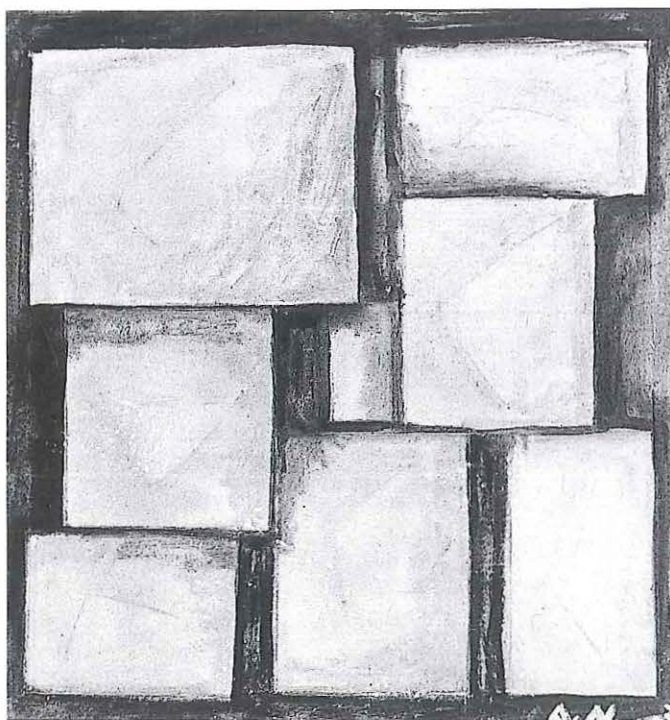


Figure 18. Amalia Nieto, *Untitled*, 1936. Whereabouts unknown

returned to Italy, where his work as painter and sculptor would reach its acme.

The *Manifiesto Blanco* proclaims the expansion of art to overcome the limits of the canvas and transform the physical medium. It also expounds a vague utopia of man in the cosmos aided by technology (which approaches ideas of some of the Madí artists) and refers to a vital force and the subconscious, ideas that were alien to Argentine Concrete artists (although not to Torres-García). Finally, by discussing the integration of painting and sculpture with architecture, the Manifesto reflects an ongoing discussion within the avant-garde at that time.

Tomás Maldonado described his personal relationship with Fontana in the following terms:

"In 1946 and 1947, in Buenos Aires, I came in close contact with Lucio Fontana. At that time, we did not share the same views. Fontana represented a rather conservative trend in Argentine art. Nevertheless, he followed our movement with great interest and understanding. We, in turn, felt very connected to an artist like him, who had earlier been part of the European Abstract movement, and chose to forget the neo-

baroque sculptures he was then making. In 1946, as a humorous provocation, he had his students at the Altamira Art School publish the 'White Manifesto'".<sup>68</sup>

Torres-García's evangelizing in Buenos Aires should also be mentioned. Soon after his arrival in Montevideo in 1934, the artist published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* an article entitled "Los pseudo valores del arte moderno" (The Pseudo Values of Modern Art),<sup>69</sup> attacking the traditionalism of André Lhote, highly regarded by the *porteños* (residents of Buenos Aires). Shortly thereafter he published in the same newspaper illuminating essays about Mondrian, Ozenfant, van Doesburg, Jean Arp, and the gallery owner Leóncio Rosenberg.

The situation in Montevideo was very different. As a result of Torres-García's initial work, some AAC artists, among them Carmelo de Arzadun [Figure 17], Héctor Ragni, Amalia Nieto [Figure 18], and Rosa Acle [Figure 19], ventured for a short period into nonfigurative art. However, in spite of their excellent craftsmanship, their work did not show a creative will to transcend the parameters set by their teacher and the European masters.



Figure 19. Cover of *Circulo y Cuadrado*, No. 2 (1936), with Rosa Acle's *Estructura* (Structure), 1936



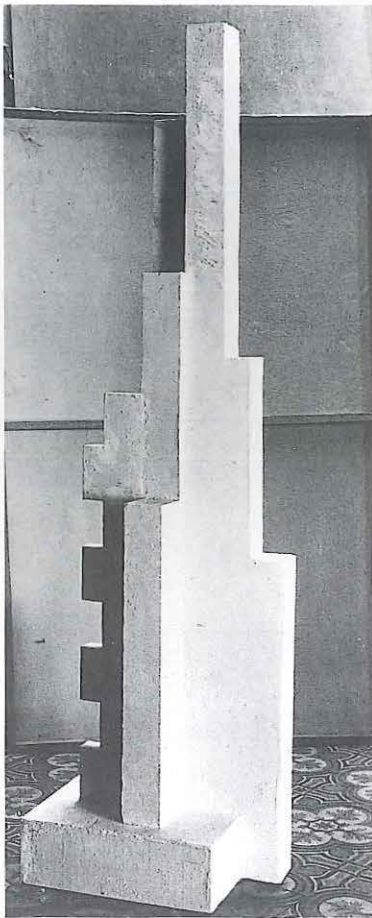


Figure 20. J. Álvarez Marques, *Estructura* (Structure), 1936, reproduced in *Círculo y Cuadrado*, No. 2, August 1936, Montevideo

Several abstract sculptures created by artists from this group, which have since been lost or destroyed, were reproduced in the magazine *Círculo y Cuadrado* [Figure 20]. These works, which share a Neoplasticist spirit, have their forerunners in the structures by Georges Vantongerloo and Jean Gorin (reproduced in the magazine *Cercle et Carré*) and in Malevich's architectural motifs. While remaining faithful to their Constructivist bent, Augusto and Horacio Torres also created nonfigurative works during this period [Figure 21].

Many figurative artists of that period, while they did not feel compelled to heed Torres-García's call to join the international avant-garde, created extremely original works. Among them were the painters José Cúneo Perinetti, who joined Uruguayan abstraction in the mid-1950s, Petrona Viera, Alfredo De Simone, and Carlos Alberto Castellanos and the sculptors Germán Cabrera and Antonio Pena. Within the historical perspective of

Río de la Plata art, these artists are part of a current of renewal that had much in common with many of the Argentine artists of the school of Paris.

## The Young Avant-Garde

The seeds sown by the pioneers of abstraction, nourished by the continued influence of the European avant-garde, finally found a response among numerous young artists during the 1940s. At first centered on the periodical *Arturo*, the abstract art movement splintered into several different groups.

It was not enough to invent a new art at the service of a new society; an information system to spread that art also had to be organized. Once established as autonomous movements, the Concrete artists, the Madís, and the Perceptists published their manifestoes. The desire of these artists to interact with their foreign colleagues in an international context was evident. For example, the Madí texts were translated into English and French, and the artists themselves traveled to European arts centers or sent their works to the *Réalités Nouvelles* exhibitions in Paris and to exhibitions in Montevideo, Caracas, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Amsterdam. Within Latin America, Concrete artists contributed greatly to the advancement of innovative interdisciplinary movements. Their influence was also felt in other South American countries, including Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela.<sup>70</sup>

The flowering of modernism took place in a repressive political and cultural environment. In June 1943, the Argentine military took power. When the Allied victory in World War II forced the military to seek a democratic solution, General Juan Domingo Perón was elected president in February 1946, after winning free elections with the support of segments of the working class, conservative politicians, and some sectors within the Radical Party. The Peronist movement, in general, perceived modernity as the Trojan horse of imperialism, opposed to national identity. During the first Perón administration (1946–52), religious and antiliberal forces took over the nation's educational and cultural structures, and many opponents of the new regime either left the country or withdrew into intellectual



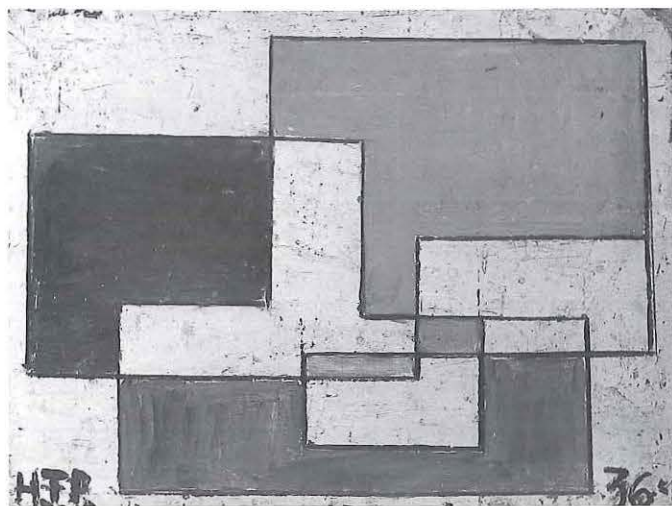


Figure 21. Horacio Torres, *Pintura* (Painting), 1936

coteries. Montevideo became an active center for Argentine political and intellectual refugees. While the end of World War II boosted the liberal wing of the Colorado Party, which supported the Argentine anti-Peronist refugees, it also contributed to an economic crisis that destabilized the country.

Given their idealistic goal of creating a new society and the political repression at home, many abstract artists turned to the Communist Party. However, their brief romance with Marxist politics was cut short by the Communist Party itself, which, like the Right, saw modernism as an inimical force. From this moment on, the modernists rejected all political affiliations.

Perón was deposed in 1955. By the time the political discourse of the Latin American avant-garde had reached its peak, between 1960 and 1970, the revolutionary stance of Concrete artists, Perceptists, and Madís had long vanished. Abstraction had become just another form of expression. Utopia had been left far behind.

### *The Taller Torres-García*

Torres-García's manifestos 2 and 3 of 1938 and 1940 [Figure 22],<sup>71</sup> reflect his dejection at the minimal impact made so far by his evangelizing. It was not easy for him to reverse this negative tide, given the historical context at the time: the consolidation of Fascism and Nazism, the Spanish Civil War, and the rise and fall of the French Popular Front. Only someone as obstinate as he could have

found the energy to promote such an ambitious program of action. This profile of the artist as a stubborn prophet and transgressor, alternately euphoric and depressed, helps explain what transpired next, and the artist's strategy to find a way out.

The experience of the Asociación de Arte Constructivo stumbled to a halt because the group did not have the cohesion to withstand the attacks from both traditionalists and the Marxist Left. Some members, like Carmelo de Arzadun, returned to figurative art. In addition, Torres-García's attempt to recover indigenous American themes did not yield significant results, perhaps because the Uruguayan national character, with its Spanish, Italian, and Central European roots, did not identify itself with the mythical components of pre-Columbian cultures, or, to put it in Jungian terms, because these archetypes were alien to the personal experience of Uruguayans and outside their cultural world. However, the emergence of the weekly journal *Marcha*, which gathered liberal and independent Left (opposed to Communist dogma) intellectuals, offered Torres-García a platform to relaunch his movement.<sup>72</sup>

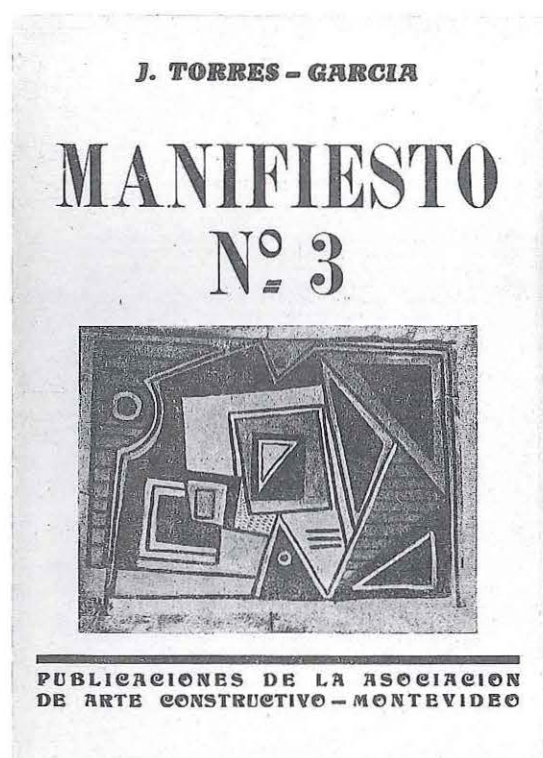


Figure 22. Joaquín Torres-García, cover of *Manifesto No. 3*, AAC, Montevideo, January 1940





Figure 23. Joaquín Torres-García and his students of the Taller Torres-García. Reproduced on the cover of *Remove-dor* (Paint Remover), No. 20, Oct/Nov. 1947, Montevideo. From left to right seated: unknown, Manuel Pailós, Joaquín Torres-García, Julio Alpuy, Rodolfo Visca. Standing: Horacio Torres, Augusto Torres, José Gurvich, Manuel Cúña, unknown, Guido Castillo, Jorge Visca, Francisco Matto, and Gonzalo Fonseca.

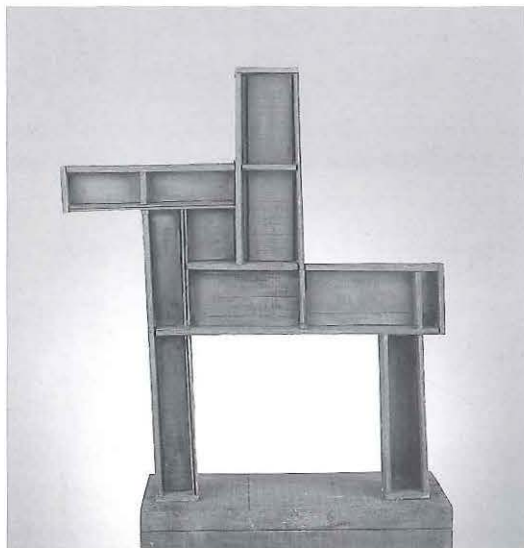


Figure 24. Francisco Matto, *Caballo de Troya* (Trojan Horse), n.d., wood, 31 ½ x 2 ¾ x 10 ¼ inches (80 x 6 x 26 cm)

Torres-García chose a conciliatory tactic. He exhibited his figurative works in 1939 at the AAC and proposed a return to academia, in the classical sense—to teaching, before anything else, the craft of painting. And who better than he, with his extensive European experience, to direct such an academy focused on teaching technique, which would “in any case, later give the artist the freedom to go in any direction”?<sup>73</sup>

His strategy was successful. In late 1942, a new generation approached the master, and by January 1943, they were part of the AAC's Taller Torres-García (TTG) [Figure 23]. Among these artists were Francisco Matto [Figure 24], Augusto Torres, Manuel Pailós, Alceu Ribeiro, Julio Alpuy, Elsa Andrada, Gonzalo Fonseca [Figure 25], Horacio Torres, and José Gurvich. *Remove-dor* (Paint Remover), the magazine of the Taller, was



launched in January 1945 [Figure 26], with Guido Castillo as its first editor. Unlike *Círculo y Cuadrado*, which followed the model of established European publications, *Removedor* was a large-format (15 by 11 ½ inches), mass-produced publication, printed on newsprint. Most of the writing was combative, leading Torres-García to state on several occasions that he was not responsible for the opinions published there by his students.<sup>74</sup>

The early work by the Taller artists shows a rigid adherence to Torres-García's stylistic and formal instruction. Nevertheless, this extensive group of artists, held together by the master's charisma, did produce significant works. In particular, they made very interesting contributions to the fields of applied design, furniture, ceramics, and textiles. The TTG aimed to reunify the arts, rejecting both the idea of the superiority of fine arts over crafts and the industrial archetypes driven by modern technology. Their products have the look of beautiful decorated objects, embedded with elementary symbols drawn from Constructivist paintings. This willingness to return to the handmade object rather than address the needs of industrial production reinforces the utopian character of the so-called *Escuela del Sur* (School of the South). The TTG continued in existence until 1962, long after Torres-García's death in 1949.

### *The Magazine Arturo*

Modernism introduced two distinctive elements in the history of art: the manifesto as a key element to demolish tradition and the introduction of philosophy into the heart of the artistic process. Each manifesto proclaimed the emergence of an innovative art and set paradigms for future action, promoted a new style, and turned it into the sole truth. As Arthur C. Danto said, "To accept the art as art meant accepting the philosophy that enfranchised it, where the philosophy itself consisted in a kind of stipulative definition of the truth of art, as well, often, as a slanted rereading of the history of art as the story of the discovery of that philosophical truth."<sup>75</sup> In other words, avant-garde art was accompanied by the modernist utopia's effort to disseminate, clarify, and justify itself.

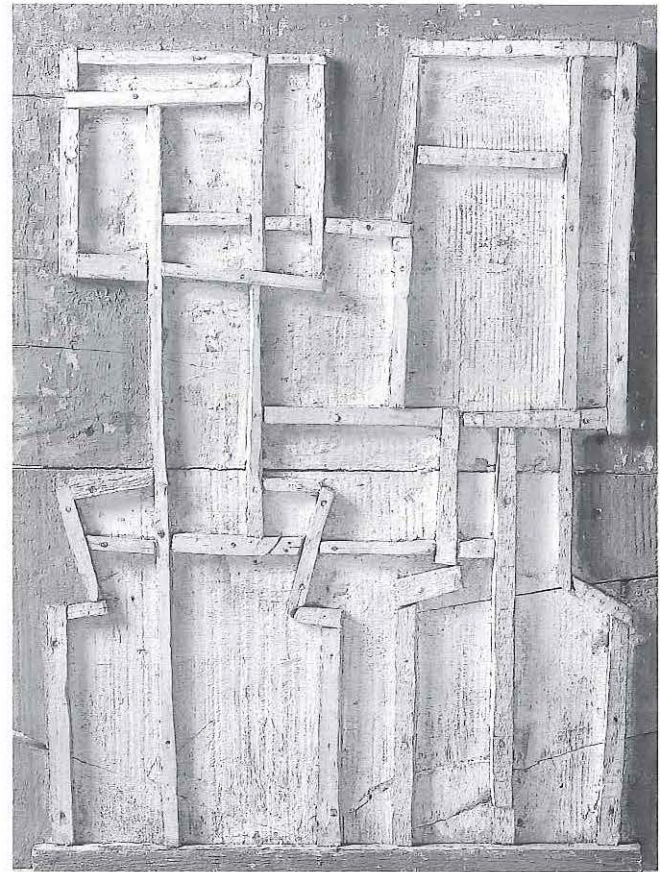


Figure 25. Gonzalo Fonseca, *Forma (Form)*, circa 1948, oil on wood, 20 ½ x 15 ½ inches (52 x 38.7 cm)

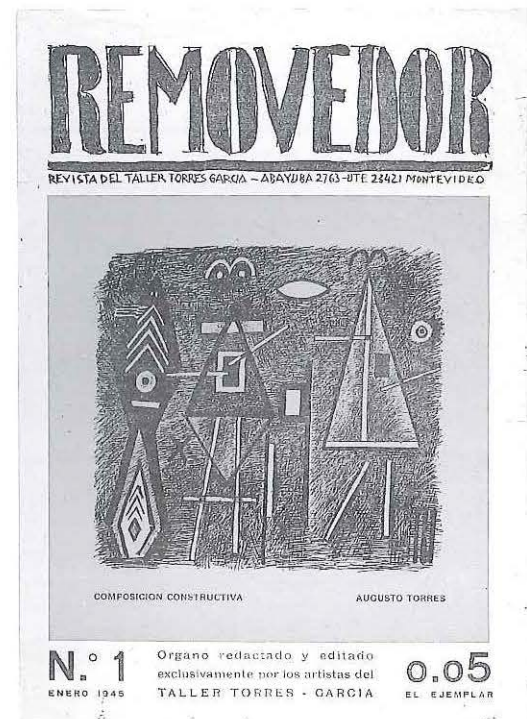


Figure 26. Cover of *Removedor* (Paint Remover), No. 1



In 1941, a handful of young students (three of them nineteen or younger) from the Buenos Aires Escuela de Bellas Artes, Jorge Brito, Claudio Girola, Alfredo Hlito, and Tomás Maldonado, published a manifesto in which they denounced "all the 'avant-garde' painters of the previous generation for having betrayed their early ideals, for having now complacently accepted academic professorates and chairmanships, for having strangled, in sum, the illusions of young people who had faith in them."<sup>76</sup> In the provincial environment of Buenos Aires, these young students and poets met painters, writers, poets, musicians, and scientists who had emigrated from a Europe in crisis, including Spanish intellectuals fleeing Franco, who quickly enriched Argentine culture. Among these editors,

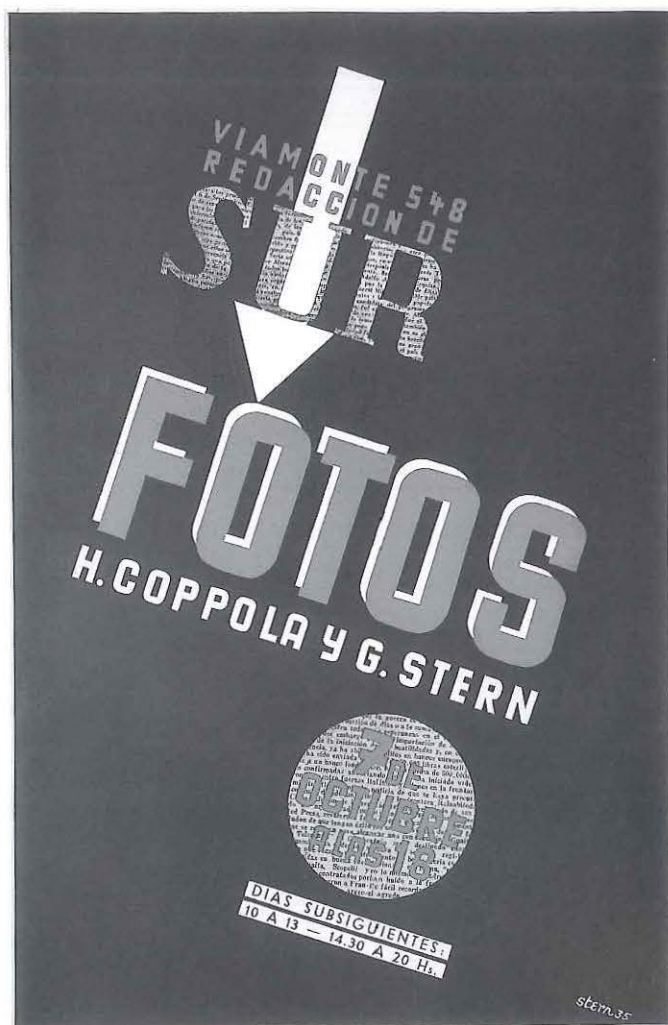


Figure 27. Advertisement of Horacio Cópola and Grete Stern's exhibition in the offices of *Sur*, Buenos Aires, 1936. Collection of Silvia Cópola, Buenos Aires

writers, professors, and artists were Gonzalo Losada, Joan Merli, Rafael Alberti, Guillermo de Torre, Manuel Laxeiro, Luis Seoane, Manuel Ángeles Ortiz, Maruja Mallo, and the psychoanalyst Ángel Garma. The rest of the exiles, victims of racial or political persecution and those unable to return to their countries due to the war, brought in the first reports on Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, abstract art, and modern architecture.<sup>77</sup> Among them were Grete Stern and Horacio Cópola, both photographers and graphic designers, who settled in Buenos Aires in 1936 [Figure 27].<sup>78</sup>

Torres-García's influence also reached Buenos Aires. In 1942, Torres-García had a solo show at the prestigious Galería Müller. He also lectured,<sup>79</sup> published his voluminous *Universalismo constructivo*, renewed his friendly contacts with Guillermo de Torre and with Julio Payró, who had been his student in Barcelona, and met Jorge Romero Brest. In the 1940s, the Uruguayan master served as a point of reference for the young Argentine and Uruguayan artists who gathered in the cafés of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Among them were Edgar Bayley and his brother Tomás Maldonado, Carmelo Arden Quin, Gyula Kosice, and Rhod Rothfuss,<sup>80</sup> who invited the cofounder of *Cercle et Carré* to publish work in the magazine that they planned to start.

Only one issue of that magazine, named *Arturo: Revista de Artes Abstractas* was published, at the end of the summer of 1944 [Figures 28, 29]. It contained texts and poems by Arden Quin, Bayley, Kosice, Torres-García, Vicente Huidobro, Murilo Mendes, and Rothfuss. The cover, a woodcut print by Maldonado, could be described as Abstract Expressionist. The first drawing, by the same artist, contained biomorphic references, while those by Lidy Prati used a geometric approach. Works by Rothfuss, Maria Helena Vieira Da Silva, Augusto Torres, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Torres-García were also reproduced in this single issue. The back cover of the magazine read:

TO INVENT: To find or to discover, through ingenuity or meditation, or by sheer chance, something new or unknown./ For a poet or an artist, to find, imagine, or create his work/

INVENTION: Action or effect of inventing. /Thing invented. /Discovery.

Invention against Automatism.



To understand the significance given to the word *invention*, we should look at the texts by Arden Quin and Bayley, who were philosophy classmates in Buenos Aires and participants in the gatherings at the Rubí café.<sup>81</sup> Arden Quin adopted some of the dialectical elements of historical materialism. He defined art as a superstructure based on the economic evolution of society, from primitivism to expressionism to symbolism. According to him, expressionism “in art has been the foundation of natural primitivism.” For him, invention was synonymous with pure creation, and its affirmation required a rejection of “expression (primitivism), representation (realism), and symbolism (decadence).”

In his article in *Arturo*, Bayley denied the validity of all representational images and claimed that artworks should be valued not for their similarity to reality but for their capacity for innovation: “Only image-invention is innovative today. All realism is false, all expressionism is false, all romanticism is false. Image-invention is the interpreter of the unknown; it accustoms man to freedom.” This text reflects the thinking of the group and its desire to articulate a different discourse, with the goal of promoting genuinely free creation. In addition to his statements about the autonomy of the pictorial image and the obsolescence of representational painting, Bayley recognized the ability of Dadaism and Surrealism to produce pure images, although he attacked Salvador Dalí. Kosice also referred to the purity of the image and the need to transcend reality: “Mankind will not be limited to Planet Earth.” He, like Arden Quin, was opposed to automatism and, consequently, to Surrealism, a position shared with Neoplasticists.<sup>82</sup> Torres-García’s text in *Arturo*, “Con respecto a una futura creación literaria” (About a Future Literary Creation), is equally applicable to the visual arts because it discussed the concept of construction using the harmonic law. The master incited young artists to search for a new rhythm and warned them about the dangers of falling under the influence of a school of thought. Finally, Rothfuss expounded on his theory of the irregular frame.

What was the importance of *Arturo*? Its texts launched a passionate defense of creativity as invention, brandishing arguments much in use since the Cubist era combined with elements of the Marxist utopia and illustrated with works by the European avant-garde and

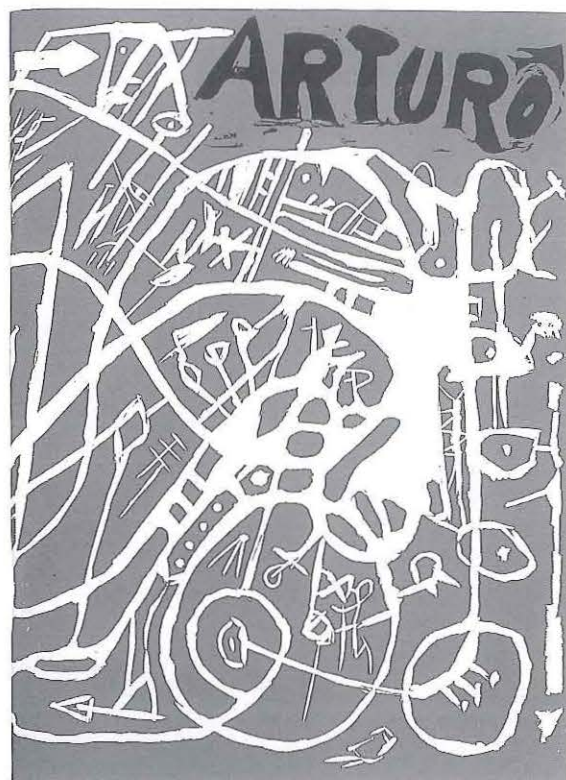


Figure 28. Cover of *Arturo*, 1944, Buenos Aires; facsimile edition of the 1944 original

Figure 29. Contents page of *Arturo*, 1944, Buenos Aires; facsimile edition of the 1944 original





Figure 30. Group photograph taken by Grete Stern during the exhibition *Art Concret Invention*, Pichón Riviere's home, Buenos Aires, October 8, 1945



Figure 31. Group photograph taken by Grete Stern during the exhibition organized by the *Movimiento de Arte Concreto-Invencción*, Grete Stern's home, Ramos Mejía, Buenos Aires, Argentina, December 2, 1945



members of the group. Formally, its main contribution was the novelty of the irregular frame and the irregular support.

Agnès de Maistre sees in *Arturo* a synthesis of Marxist convictions and the influence of Torres-García.<sup>83</sup> This is unlikely, however, because, in spite of their respect for the master, they initially rejected the expressive, the subconscious, and the symbolic, as well as automatism—all key elements in the theory and practice of Torres-García. What made *Arturo* an icon is its violent break with everything that preceded it, its thirst for innovation, its desire to confront the international avant-garde, the need of its artists to become the interpreters of their times by infusing their visual artwork with an ideological content that set it apart from that of the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Their approach was interdisciplinary, which would manifest itself later in the areas of architecture, literature, music, graphic design, and furniture design, and they displayed an interest in scientific and philosophical issues.

A year after the publication of *Arturo*, two exhibitions were organized in Buenos Aires. The first one, enti-

tled *Art Concret Invention* (Concrete Invention Art), took place on October 8, at the home of the psychoanalyst Enrique Pichón Rivièrè [Figure 30]. The second exhibition, organized by what was called the *Movimiento de Arte Concreto-Invencción* (Concrete Art-Invention Movement), took place on December 2 of the same year at the house of Grete Stern in Ramos Mejía (a suburb of Buenos Aires), which was an important example of the rationalist architecture of Vladimiro Acosta [Figure 31].

What is surprising, when one examines the photo taken at Pichón Rivièrè's home, are the works that appear: fragmented forms, irregular frames, and a sculpture with metallic bands, none of which fits the definition of Concrete art suggested by the title of the exhibition. The fact that the word movement was added to the title of the second exhibition, along with the absence of works by Maldonado, the Lozza brothers, and Hlito, may have been a sign of conflict among the founders of *Arturo*. Maldonado laid claim to the key words (art, concrete, invention) and founded in November 1945 the *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción* (Association for



Figure 32. Members of the *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción*, 1946. From left to right standing: Souza, Bayley, Landi, Caraduje, Espinosa, Mónaco, Hlito, Lozza, Maldonado, Contreras, Iommi; seated: Prati, Núñez, Molemborg, Girola



Concrete Art-Invention),<sup>84</sup> along with Alfredo Hlito, Manuel Espinosa, Lidy Prati, Caraduje, Enio Iommi, Jorge Souza, Alberto Molemborg, Simón Contreras,<sup>85</sup> Oscar Núñez, Raúl, Rafael, and Rembrandt V.D. Lozza, Primaldo Mónaco, and Matilde Werbin [Figure 32]. According to Juan Melé,<sup>86</sup> Maldonado and his friends exhibited his works that same month at the San José 1557 workshop; this was the first show of the new group. In turn, the artists of the so-called *Movimiento Arte Concreto-Invencción*, among them Gyula Kosice, Carmelo Arden Quin, Martín Blascko, and Rhod Rothfuss, set up what was initially called *Movimiento Madí* (Madí Movement). Both the *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción* and the Madí Movement would later spawn their own splinter groups.

The raucously combative young avant-garde was overflowing with tumultuous, somewhat disorganized ideas, an irresistible desire to invent, and a vision of a new world that would arrive with the triumph of Marxism. Each artist had his or her own deeply personal agenda, which made it very difficult to carry out any common programs. An example of these disagreements is a rebuttal by the *Boletín de la Asociación de Arte Concreto-Invencción*, no. 2, of an assertion published in the magazine *Cabalgata*, no. 6, that “‘Arte Concreto-Invencción’ was founded in 1940 by Arden Quin and Gyula Kosice.” The *Boletín* said that the founding in question occurred “in November 1945, unaided by those two gentlemen,” adding that Arden Quin’s first paintings dated from 1945<sup>87</sup> and that Kosice’s early poetic attempts were those published in *Arturo*.

In 1945, two booklets were published: *Invencción* by Kosice [Figure 33] and *Invencción 2* [Figure 34], which carried a text by Bayley entitled “La batalla por la invención” (The Battle for Invention). Bayley viewed Concrete Invention as replacing the fiction of figurative art, a product of individualism, with communication. Being closer to mankind, it conquered for itself the “untranslatable and irreplaceable” joy of creation. The “Inventionist” aesthetic promoted the abolition of fiction in all the arts, a fraternal communication with the world, and the need to invent new realities as a means of participation, that is, to “invent concrete objects that share the daily life of man and help in the



Figure 33. Cover of *Invencción*, No. 1, 1945, Buenos Aires; with *Röyi* by Gyula Kosice

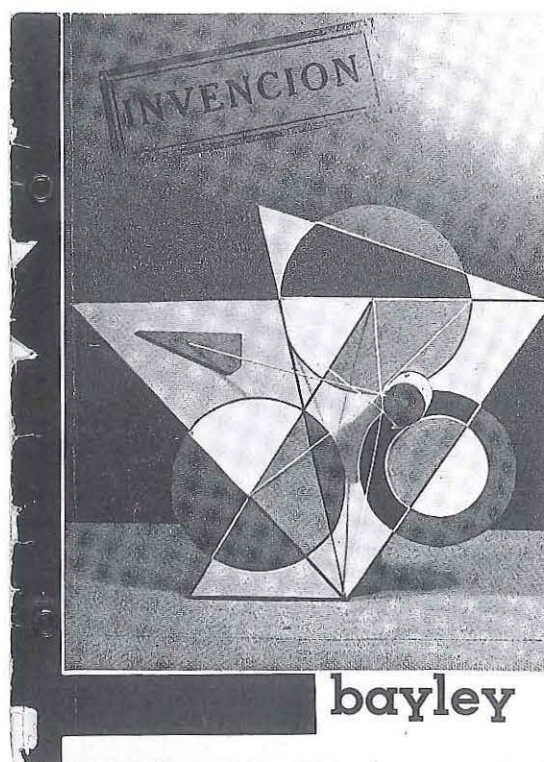


Figure 34. Cover of *Invencción*, No. 2, 1945, Buenos Aires; with *Objeto estetico* by Lidy Prati



task of establishing direct relations with the things that we want to change." In short, Bayley was talking about the need for a total art, one requiring a reconstruction of the world, a central theme of the early Argentine Concrete movement.

## Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención

The first exhibition of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención opened on March 18, 1946, at the Salón Peuser [Figure 35], coinciding with the publication of the *Manifiesto Invencionista* (Inventionist Manifesto).

To oppose a representational art based on the "illusion of space, the illusion of expression, the illusion of reality, and the illusion of movement," the *Manifiesto Invencionista* supported a Concrete art that would place men and women in the realm of real things and stimulate their will. It also advocated a rupture with figurative representation, emphasized the virtues of the concrete, exalted the purely optical aspect of representation, placed human beings at the center of all struggles, joyfully encouraged creation, and advocated an art at the service of a new world. Some of the ideas about abstraction and Concrete art in the Manifesto had already surfaced in Maldonado's answers to a questionnaire put together by the magazine *Contrapunto*.<sup>88</sup> Maldonado asserted that concrete art dialectically transcends abstraction; it does not abstract but, rather, invents new realities; it is the only realistic art because it is eminently presentational. In his own words: "Representation sacrifices the tangible on behalf of the illusory. To turn representational art into the realistic art par excellence has been an idealistic error. Beauty will be concrete or will not be. . . ."

Maldonado did not hesitate to proclaim that Concrete artists emerged from the most progressive trends of European and American art. The manifesto makes pronouncements "against the pernicious existentialist and romantic worm... against the subpoets of the tiny wound and the tiny intimate drama. Against all elitist art. For a collective art."<sup>89</sup> Like many of the European avant-garde, Argentine Concrete artists were preoccupied with issues related to the social function of art. It was not by chance

that most members of the association had close ties to the Communist Party<sup>90</sup> at a time in which liberals and the Left in Argentina faced nationalists and trade unions headed by Juan Domingo Perón, all supported by a military government.

As ideologicalist, Maldonado revealed a sharp intellect and proved a great strategist. In his *Manifiesto Invencionista*, Maldonado affirmed the validity of Concrete art

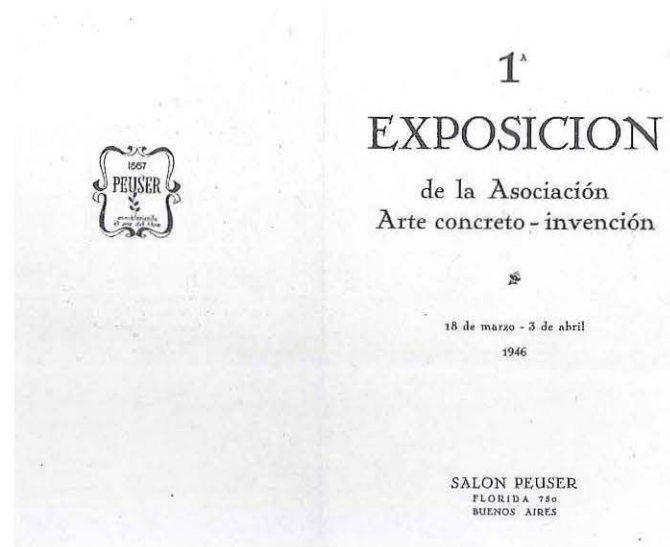


Figure 35. Catalogue of the first exhibition of the *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención*, Buenos Aires, 1946

as an art of action without using Marxist arguments. He summarized its position in the final phrase of the manifesto: "Neither search, nor find: invent," a twist on Picasso's famous quip, "I don't search: I find."

Maldonado articulated his personal aesthetic position in "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno" (The Abstract and the Concrete in Modern Art), published in *Arte Concreto-Invención*, no. 1 of 1946 [Figure 36], using information about the European avant-garde then available in Buenos Aires. He reviewed the debate on art based on the plane or in space, the incorporation of László Moholy-Nagy's concrete dynamics, and László Péri's break with the traditional shape of the painting, among other subjects. He also adamantly rejected the synthesis of non-representational art and Surrealism at the heart of Torres-García's Constructivism, also shared by Arp and Calder, and attacked the role of intuition and automatism in Kandinsky's art. Maldonado





Figure 36. Cover of *Arte Concreto-Invención No. 1*, 1946, Buenos Aires

concluded that nonrepresentational art faced, for the first time, the possibility of approaching space and movement, and he rebutted the more anarchic and playful conceptualization characteristic of the Madí's Dadaist poetics.

His editorials (unsigned), "Nuestra militancia" (Our Activism) and "Los amigos Del Pueblo" (The Friends of the People), summarized the Marxist stance of the association. In these, Maldonado stated, "Concrete art will be the socialist art of the future. . . and . . . is the only realistic, humanistic, and revolutionary art"—perhaps to convince his Communist comrades of the revolutionary content of Concrete art.

Thus, between March and August 1946, Maldonado emerged as the leader of a movement that had a significant influence on the cultural life of the country. He failed, however, to bring along the Communist Party, which remained identified with Socialist Realism, uncompromis-

ingly championed by Antonio Berni. Years later, referring to that situation, Maldonado wrote: "Our ambitions went far beyond art. We wanted above all to become the vehicle for an effort to renew culture, daily life, and society as a whole. How naive we were then."<sup>91</sup> His aesthetic ambitions were similarly thwarted, as he later acknowledged: "In those years, we were truly convinced that our contribution had signaled the end of 'the prehistory of the human spirit.' We could not then imagine that 'the old phantasmagorias' would continue to satisfy the aesthetic demands of the new man. Prehistory, in fact, continued."<sup>92</sup>

### Movimiento Madí

In August 1946, the artists who had exhibited at the homes of Pichón Rivière and Grete Stern, now organized as the Movimiento Madí, presented their first group show at the Galería Van Riel.<sup>93</sup> Their proselytizing had begun earlier, with the distribution of small and provocative flyers signed "Madí Movement Buenos Aires June 1946" [Figure 37]:

#### MADÍ PAINTING

By articulating color planes, strictly proportioned and combined, Madí projects Painting beyond the old formula  
that locked in the presumed planar nature  
of neoplasticism, nonobjectivism, constructivism and,  
in general,  
other schools of concrete art.

For a madistic invention  
Of objects in space  
Free of interventions alien to their essential properties  
MADÍ creates a new visual genre!

Participants in the Van Riel group show included the Uruguayan artists Rothfuss, Arden Quin, and Valdo Longo; the Argentine artists Kosice, Diyi Laañ, Ricardo Humbert, Alejandro Havas, and Paulina Ossona; the German artists Martín Blaszkowski, Elizabeth Steiner, and Esteban Eitler. Many of the works in the exhibition were shown under pseudonyms, including Dieudonné Costes, Raymundo Rasas Pét, and Sylwan Joffe-Lemme, which has made their subsequent study difficult.<sup>94</sup> Scheduled for the opening (August 3, 1946) were a lecture by Arden Quin, the oldest of the group, entitled "Introduction to



## LA PINTURA MADÍ

Al articular planos de color, estrictamente proporcionados y combinados, Madí proyecta la Pintura más allá de la fórmula antigua donde se encerraba el pretendido planismo del neo-plasticismo, no-objetivismo, constructivismo, y otras escuelas de arte concreto en general.

Movimiento MADÍ — Buenos Aires — Junio de 1946

● Nosotros madistas, tomando los elementos propios de cada arte, construimos; es decir, hacemos una invención REAL.

Con eso no expresamos nada, no representamos nada, no simbolizamos nada. Creamos la cosa en su sólo presencia, en su sólo inmanencia.

La cosa está en el espacio y está en el tiempo: EXISTE. Este es un acto trascendental, un acto maravilloso.

Nuestro arte es humano, profundamente humano, puesto que es la persona en toda su esencia la que CONSCIENTEMENTE crea, hace, construye, inventa realmente.

Movimiento MADÍ — Buenos Aires — Junio de 1946

**Forma articulada y marco irregular son la escultura y la pintura de INVENCION**  
**Nuestra composición es dinámica, de orden sagital**

## MADÍ destruye el TABU del CUADRO

al romper con el marco tradicional.

La invención madista del marco irregular viene a liberar la Pintura de las leyes de composición que la han estado asfixiando por siglos y que ni las más grandes revoluciones en la plástica, habían conseguido eliminar.

Movimiento MADÍ — Buenos Aires — Junio de 1946

**qué es el  
movimiento  
MADÍ?**

**qué es  
MADÍ?**

## Por un arte ESENCIAL

abolida toda figuración

romántico - naturalista

Por una invención REAL !

Movimiento MADÍ — Buenos Aires — Junio de 1946

Figure 37. Various Madí flyers, 1946

the Manifesto," and a music recital. The exhibition program also included a lecture by Kosice on "Areas of Contemporary Poetics," Madí dances by Ossona, and another concert. By means of such Dada-like soirées, the Madís sought to demonstrate that they were creating the art of the future [Figure 38].

The small catalogue, with texts written in Spanish, French, and English, declared that Madí was a universal movement that paralleled contemporary dialectical thinking and the aesthetic of industrial civilization. To attain these objectives, Madí works were called on to express, represent, or symbolize nothing, rather, existing in and of themselves, their value being only their very existence. It was the Madí intention to "[c]reate an art of a mathematical, cold, dynamic, cerebral, dialectic spirit, and to alert the senses and ready them for the harmo-

nious ordering of a new aesthetic structure that in no way is compromised with the prehistoric allegories of modern primitivism."

There are different stories explaining the origin of the name Madí. Arden Quin maintained that it was an acronym of his name: CarMelo Alves ArDen QuIn. Kosice said that it was a distortion of Madrid, a name that he had often heard on the street during the Spanish Civil War. Predictably, it was also said that Madí was created by joining the first two syllables of *materialismo dialéctico* (dialectical materialism). A Buenos Aires newspaper joked that it actually originated in the English word "mad."<sup>95</sup> The theories are as endless as they are futile. Regardless of its origin, the playful content of the word Madí, like the word Dada before, generated a poetics of unimagined consequences [Figure 39].



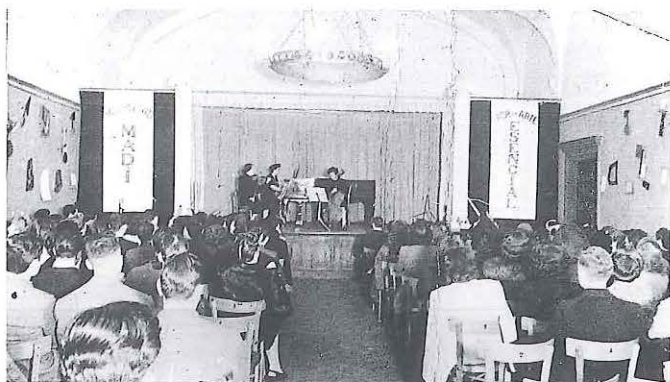


Figure 38. Installation view of the first Madí exhibition, Galería van Riel, Buenos Aires, 1946

The *Manifiesto Madí* (Madí Manifesto) disseminated the principles and paradigms on which their movement was based. It was published in Spanish and French in the inventively designed magazine *Arte Madí Universal*, no. (February–March 1947), edited by Kosice [Plate 44]. As it was unsigned, the manifesto should be considered a collective text by the three declared leaders of the movement, Arden Quin, Kosice, and Rothfuss.<sup>96</sup> It contained guidelines for the practice of Madí drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, drama, fiction, and



Figure 39. Grete Stern, *Untitled*, photomontage, 1946

dance in a context that emphasized the dynamic and the playful, rejecting what was expressive, representational, or meaningful. The Madí Movement rebelled against historicism, irrationality, academic technique, unilateral and static composition, nonessential work, and a mindset impervious to the renewal of technique and style. It advocated the invention and construction of objects within the absolute values of the eternal, “together with a humanity that struggles to build a classless society that liberates its energy.”

When the group splintered, Martín Blaszkowski allied himself with Arden Quin. At an afternoon event organized at the Ramos Mejía home of Dr. Elias Piterbarg, Arden Quin read a new text (in French, untitled, and dated March 23, 1948). A slightly revised version of that text was later published by the magazine *Robho*, no. 3, under the title “Manifiesto Madí.” This text, with its poetic sweep and abundant metaphors, was substantially different from the one that had appeared in the Madí magazine.

Kosice was joined by Rothfuss, Laań, Anibal Biedma, Juan Pedro Delmonte, Nelly Esquivel, Rodolfo Uricchio, and others. Kosice baptized his new group Madinensor, and the magazine *Arte Madí Universal* became the organ of the group. Shortly afterward, Kosice retitled his group simply Madí.

## Perceptismo

When the artists of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción returned to the flat, rectangular support, Raúl Lozza and his brothers left it and founded Perceptismo (Perceptism), joined by the theoretician Abraham Haber. The Perceptistas developed three essential principles, based on the association’s Concrete tenets: first, the replacement of the three-dimensional background with the concept of field (architectural wall); second, the mathematical assessment of the interaction between flat color fields, geometric forms, and their dimensions, which Lozza called *cualimetría* (qualimetry); and third, the establishment of an articulation of forms strictly governed by a referential system independent from the form that contains it.

The publication in 1948 of *Raúl Lozza y el Perceptismo* (Raúl Lozza and Perceptism) by Abraham Haber gave the group significant theoretical momentum. A



year later, they had their first group show at the Galería Van Riel, and issued the *Manifiesto Perceptista* (Perceptivist Manifesto). Among the main points: "*Perceptismo* overcomes the intuitive stage that still exists in abstract and concrete painting, and suppresses the dualism between color and form. . . . Form and content make a single entity, real and indivisible, created by the visible artistic matter in its very process of creation and invention. . . . Achieving for the first time the reality of plane-color requires a new concept of structure inseparable from the practical process of the visible means of creation and overcoming the contradictions between form and content."

Many of the ideas espoused by the Perceptists came from the Concrete group: the struggle against idealism or expression, which places emphasis on the subjective, against traditionalist art, against representational art; the reliance on a materialist ideological structure; the idea of the cognitive value of art; and the view that the artwork is a concrete object actively interrelated to its environment. In addition, the Perceptists explored the relationship between quantity (the size of the painted surface) and the quality of the form-color, or *cualimetría*, in an attempt to intensify the light value of color as plane. The architectural wall is the "field" (a concept borrowed from physics) on which the forms-colors play.

Launched in 1950, the magazine *Perceptismo: Teórico y polémico* (Perceptism: Theory and Debate) became a major advocate for nonfigurative art. Among the articles published, most of them written by Abraham Haber, Raúl Lozza, and Rembrandt Lozza, were "La nueva estructura" (The New Structure), "Espacio y tiempo" (Space and Time), and "Matemática y física en la nueva pintura" (Mathematics and Physics in the New Painting). These titles reveal the interest of the editors in disseminating new scientific paradigms and their desire to legitimize nontraditional art forms through interdisciplinary connections and an overabundant self-justifying theoretical discourse. The editors of *Perceptismo* had access to current information in the fields of architecture, painting, sculpture, aesthetics, psychology, and philosophy. The magazine's illustrations document works by European avant-gardists as well as by members of the group.<sup>97</sup> Raúl Lozza introduced color cali-

bration charts to aid in achieving a dynamic balance between architecture and painting and a formula to overcome the gap between abstract and concrete painting: "This allows form and its character [to be] the vehicle for the chromatic relationship" and, at the same time, it let "color manifest all its qualitative power, in its own two-dimensional form."<sup>98</sup> Another text talks about "resolving the crucial problem between the objective structure of the visual event and the physical space of the architectural wall in an integrated and homogeneous whole with the environment."<sup>99</sup>

For Perceptismo, architecture could offer painting only the flat wall on which pictorial forms can be placed. Hence, the wall is the limit of the architectural space that serves as background for the picture plane.<sup>100</sup> Its relationship with architecture consisted in integrating the pictorial object, the field, and the eye (the gaze of the observer), enlarging the imaginary space for contemplation and reflection. By intervening in and qualifying the spaces in which contemporary man moves, Perceptismo proposed integrating contemporary art with architecture.

## Torres-García and the Young Artists

The Taller Torres-García in Montevideo, Arte Concreto-Invencción in Buenos Aires, and the Madí groups with members in both cities vied for dominance, while the Montevideo Círculo de Bellas Artes began to attract young artists who were not interested in following the dictates of Torres-García.<sup>101</sup> Ideological and artistic clashes, generational conflicts, and personal feuds inevitably followed. Shortly after the Concrete and Madí movements took off, three articles published in the magazine *Removedor*<sup>102</sup> relaunched in the Río de la Plata a controversy whose roots could be traced to debates held before and during the creation of Cercle et Carré in Paris.

Guido Castillo, in his article "Torres-García y el arte moderno" (Torres-García and Modern Art), launched the first salvo against the Concrete artists, denying that Neoplasticism was art because, in his words, it was pure technique, a method designed to eliminate from art all that, by definition, did not pertain to art. In "Nuestro problema del arte de América" (Our Problem of an American Art)



Torres-García warned southern artists against the danger of being contaminated by the coldness characteristic of the countries of the north through Neoplasticism. Finally, Sarandy Cabrera, in "Originalidad e Invención" (Originality and Invention), criticized the Madí artists by pointing to the romanticism of the irregular frame, which he felt separated them from universal art, notwithstanding the fact that Torres-García's brand of Constructivism, with its redeeming and utopian stance, aimed at a synthesis between the classical and the romantic.<sup>103</sup>

These accounts confirm the ideological narrow-mindedness of *Removedor*, ready to battle anyone who challenged the agenda of the TTG. Its members had a blind faith in their master's teachings, glossing over glaring theoretical incongruities that could have been corrected had they been analyzed in the context of Torres-García's personal artistic work. With this "ecclesiastical attitude," as Juan Fló called it,<sup>104</sup> the members of the Taller brought to the arts arena a Manichaeian rigidity that proved an obstacle to the spread of the master's message and, in some cases, weakened their own early artistic development. Only an unfaltering desire for predominance could explain Torres-García's attack against the Argentine Concrete artists using the same anti-northern European arguments with which he had justified, at the beginning of the twentieth century, his Noucentiste foray. Just a few years earlier he had written, "I, a staunch believer, side with those like Mondrian, Braque, Klee, and Kandinsky, Arp and Freundlich, Vantongerloo and Gorin, modern architects, and the many others that, in different ways, begin and remain with abstraction."<sup>105</sup>

In response, Maldonado also resorted to militant arguments. The well-known enemies of Argentine nonfigurative art ("the reactionaries") have been joined by a new group, he wrote, pointing at Uruguayan Constructivism as a typical example of eclecticism as a historical conception. Using language that recalled Henry Miller's reaction to one of Torres-García's pictograms,<sup>106</sup> Maldonado wrote, "In Torres-García constructivist works we find Cubism (bad Cubism) and cheap symbolism (suns, pictographic dolls, little fishes)."<sup>107</sup> *Removedor* quickly counterattacked with a rebuttal by Cabrera.<sup>108</sup> The Madí artists did not react publicly to the TTG criticism, perhaps because of their personal connections to Torres-García. The result of all

this was to close off any possibility of collaboration between the TTG and the groups advocating abstraction.

This controversy was typical of those triggered by the emergence of nonfigurative art in the Río de la Plata. The fact that in one of his essays Maldonado ignored Torres-García's detailed analysis of the differences between the "abstract" and the "concrete" in his book *Universalismo Constructivo* illustrates that the Left was not immune to the ideological intransigence that dominated Argentine culture.<sup>109</sup>

More than fifty years after the publication of *Arturo*, it is appropriate to reassess the relationship between Torres-García and the artists aligned with the Asociación Arte Concreto Invención, Perceptismo, and Madí, and take into account their personal opinions, which were not documented at the time.<sup>110</sup> Most of these young artists saw Torres-García as an emblematic figure more in terms of his artistic development than in terms of their understanding of his aesthetic position. Hlito, like most of those interviewed, said that Torres-García was considered "impure":<sup>111</sup> "Conceptually, I didn't like him, because he wanted to encompass too much."<sup>112</sup>

bohemien club  
GALERIAS PACIFICO  
VIA MONTE 547  
BUENOS AIRES

Presenta

EXPOSICION FOTOGRAFICA DE  
32 ESCULTURAS Y POEMAS DE

GYULA KOSICE

ESTA 1a. MUESTRA INDIVIDUAL DE ARTE  
MADI ES AUSPICIADA POR EL MOVIMIENTO  
MADINEMSOR UNIVERSAL.

Permanecerá abierta desde el

1o. al 15 de Setiembre de 1947.

Figure 40. Cover of the catalogue of Gyula Kosice's exhibition at the Bohemien Club, Buenos Aires, 1947



It was confirmed that Arden Quin, who later called the master “a mystic, a prophet, truly a revelation,” was the bridge between these artists and Torres-García. Manuel Espinosa included himself on the list of those in personal contact with the master, along with Rothfuss and Maldonado.<sup>113</sup> Although Raúl Lozza acknowledged that he was touched by Torres-García’s visual power and by his ideas about art in general, he insisted that the Uruguayan master was not the point of departure of his movement, *Perceptismo*. Iommi saw Torres-García as an artist who never sold out, who stood by his principles and continued battling for them in South America. Prati has said that Torres-García was the only person in the Río de la Plata that Tomás Maldonado respected. According to her, Maldonado had approached Torres-García out of curiosity, in search of the new, adding that in March 1944 they both went to Montevideo to buy a painting from Torres-García.

The main lesson that Torres-García taught us, said Blaszkowski, was that “the artistic product is not simply the result of willpower and pure consciousness, but that the instinctual aspect, along with experience, can enrich the work of art.” The greatest lesson for an artist is always the work of another artist, he added: “Thus, Torres-García continues to teach.”

### Consolidation of the Groups: Buenos Aires, Paris, Montevideo

Once they had established their aesthetic and ideological parameters, the different groups set out to demonstrate their creative action through numerous collective and individual shows. The first solo show was by Kosice, who exhibited photographs of his sculptures, as well as poems, at the Bohemien Club in September 1947 [Figure 40].

The work of the Madís attracted the attention of European critics, and Robert del Marle planned a show of their work in Paris.<sup>114</sup> Due to organizational problems, the European debut of the Madís did not happen until 1948, at the third Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in Paris [Figure 41].<sup>115</sup> The French critic Pierre Descargues said about the group, “It is brutal, barbaric, insolent, absolutely new. . . . They are almost proud of their style. They are trying to emerge from ‘darkness’ and they furiously kick the rules of abstraction. Such youthfulness could take them far.”<sup>116</sup>

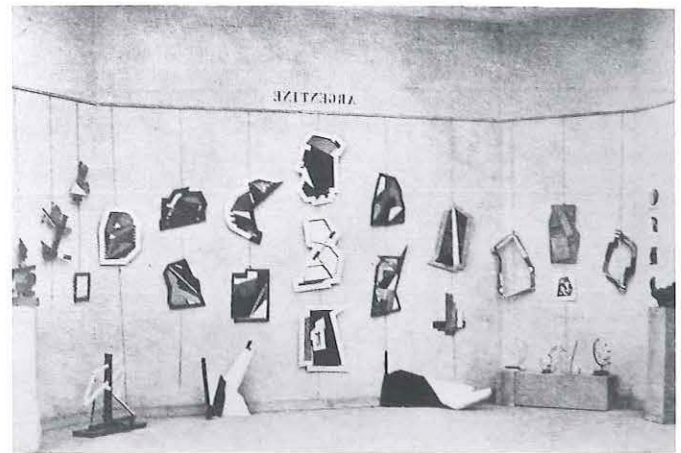


Figure 41. Installation view of the 3ème Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Paris, 1948

That same year, an exhibition of Argentine Concrete artists was organized in Caracas.<sup>117</sup> The interest of young Venezuelan artists in abstraction had been triggered, to a large extent, by the construction of the campus of the Universidad Central de Caracas, a significant avant-garde work, by the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva, who commissioned works from such artists as Arp, Calder, Kandinsky, Wifredo Lam, and Fernand Léger. Venezuela was becoming an important center for international abstraction, which would produce artists such as Alejandro Otero, Jesús Rafael Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Díez. The Caracas exhibition of Argentine abstract artists should be assessed within this context.

In September 1948, the Galería Van Riel presented the *Salón Nuevas Realidades: Arte abstracto, Concreto, No-figurativo* (New Realities Salon: Abstract, Concrete, Non-figurative Art). The critic Córdova Iturburu found much of artistic value in the work exhibited at the salon. He described the “inventions” and “constructions” as “creations structured with various material elements by inventive individuals undoubtedly endowed with fantasy and aesthetic sensibility.”<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, while praising the works exhibited at the salon by Maldonado, Hlito, Iommi, Espinosa, and Girola, Damián Bayón noted a general lack of self-criticism and lamented the absence of “many spatial elements that remain to be explored, many materials and textures. Let us hope that they evolve toward that ideal goal.”<sup>119</sup>

The *Salón Nuevas Realidades* marked a rapprochement between abstract painters and sculptors and architects.





Figure 42. Cover of *Nueva Visión* (New Vision), Vol. 1, 1951, Buenos Aires

Carlos Méndez Mosquera remembers the meetings between them at Maldonado's home,<sup>120</sup> which had become a veritable hothouse of modern thinking in Buenos Aires, and has called attention to the importance that this collaboration between Concrete artists, architects, and graphic designers has had for the development of design in Argentina. The Comte furniture workshop, headed by Ignacio Pirovano, for example, created the Centro de Diseño directed by Maldonado, in collaboration with Horacio Baliero and Juan M. Borthagaray.

In the Río de la Plata cultural tradition, Maldonado went to Europe in 1948 to meet artists and see their work. There, he became acquainted with the most representative figures of Concrete art: Max Bill, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Vantongerloo, Richard Lohse, Max Huber, and the Italian artist Bruno Munari. This marked a turn-

ing point for his work as a painter, and it affected his future career as a designer and theoretician. Juan Melé and Gregorio Vardánega also enlarged their horizons by coming in contact with the work and concerns of fellow Concrete artists living in Milan and Paris.

On June 12, 1949, the newspaper *La Nación* reported the arrival in Buenos Aires of Léon Dégand, a French critic invited by the Instituto de Arte Moderno to launch a series of courses on painting connected to the exhibition *Del arte figurativo al arte abstracto: El arte abstracto en Francia* (From Figurative to Abstract Art: Abstract Art in France). Shortly following, while inaugurating the thirty-ninth Salón Nacional, the Peronist minister of education, Dr. Oscar Ivanissevich, offered the most aggressive condemnation to date of abstract art. The second *Salón Nuevas Realidades* silently answered the minister by asserting the validity of Concrete and Madí artists.

In 1950, Hlito, Iommi, and Maldonado exhibited their paintings, sculptures, and drawings at the Instituto de Arte Moderno, which published a handsomely designed catalogue. In a review of the show, the critic Blanca Stábile analyzed the bases of the Concrete trend and concluded, "Accustomed to the themes and modes of figurative paintings, Concrete compositions surprise us by their excessive economy of means. The only means of expression is the relationship of colors and forms. To the extent that they are capable of rousing our imagination without any recourse whatsoever to figuration, we should accept their legitimacy. . . . What we should take into account is what this new art is trying to find expression for, including space, movement, sequence, time."<sup>121</sup>

In 1951, Maldonado launched the publication *Nueva Visión* (New Vision) [Figure 42].<sup>122</sup> Although the focus of the magazine was on both art and architecture, the latter was predominant in the last few issues, reflecting Maldonado's abandonment of painting. *Nueva Visión*, which defended and advocated an aesthetic of modernity, made significant contributions to architecture, design, and typography.

In 1952, the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (Modern Artists' Group of Argentina), with the support of Argentine art critic Aldo Pellegrini, a defender of Surrealism, was founded and held an exhibition at the Galería Viau. The new group included both recognized



Concrete artists (Maldonado, Hlito, Prati, Iommi, and Girola) and independent artists who embraced an expressive freedom that responded to an inner, emotional energy (Antonio Fernández Muro, Sarah Grilo, Miguel Ocampo, and Hans Aebi). This attempt to consolidate the abstract movement demonstrated Pellegrini's desire to find common ground between the rationality of Concrete art and the intuitive and emotional components of Abstract Expressionism, a movement whose increasing importance was then being documented by specialized magazines arriving from abroad.

The Argentine abstract movement was strengthened by the inclusion of new artists, among them the painters Rafael Onetto, Clorindo Testa, Eduardo Jonquières, Manuel Álvarez, Luis Tomasello, and Victor Magariños D. and the sculptors Julián Althabe, Magda Franck and Osvaldo Stimm. Solo and group shows multiplied. Finally, in 1953, abstraction achieved governmental recognition in Argentina with the selection of works by Althabe, Blascko, Kosice, Lozza, and members of the Grupo de Artistas Modernos for the second São Paulo Biennial. Whether this was simply a felicitous decision by the cultural affairs section of the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs or a deliberate effort to broaden cultural bases by the Peronist government is hard to ascertain. It is plausi-

ble, however, to assume that this selection was intended to turn Buenos Aires into an artistic pole in South America. That same year, a traveling exhibition of the Grupo de Artistas Modernos went first to the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro, where it had a significant impact on local abstract artists, and then to Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Clorindo Testa and Rafael Onetto, who still used some figurative components in their work, were included, along with the Concrete and lyrical abstractionist members of the group. Romero Brest wrote in the catalogue, "It should thus surprise no one that lines are precise in the paintings in this exhibition, that in these honest and pure tones even color has become precise, that space acquires here a precise sense in its infinity. Because there is also a precise sensibility, a precise emotionality, and a precise fantasy."

The Madí movement, meanwhile, had suffered a split, and Arden Quin subsequently visited France, where he arrived in October 1948. Arden Quin exhibited often in Europe, including at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles beginning with the fourth show in 1949, and he also intensified his proselytizing activities,<sup>123</sup> which led to the organization of the *Primera Muestra Internacional de Arte Abstracto* (First International Exhibition of Abstract Art) in Caracas. In addition to Arden Quin, Luis Guevara,



Figure 43. Exhibition pamphlet *Arte No Figurativo* (Non-Figurative Art), Montevideo, 1952





LLORENS



VERDIE



ZANONI

"Aunque el ARTE NO FIGURATIVO viene desarrollándose desde hace cuarenta años, es todavía considerado por muchos y aún por algunos críticos, como un medio de expresión fácil nacido de una moda extravagante. Es, en cambio, un movimiento espiritual muy serio y de mucho empeño, cuyo destino es abrir la perspectiva de un mundo nuevo".

André Blot

exposición

ARTE NO FIGURATIVO

OCTUBRE 1953  
**13 al 27**  
18 A 20 HORAS

ASOCIACION  
CRISTIANA  
DE JOVENES  
MONTEVIDEO

"Se le exige al artista plástico la representación, la anécdota. Se pretende que la representación es la única manera de llevar al público el conocimiento del arte. Esto es erróneo y puede constatar en presencia de obras sin representación.

El objeto representado distrae la atención del espectador y le impide apreciar el arte.

El objeto que se ve lleva a la comparación con el objeto que se ha visto, del que se tiene un recuerdo visual, y esta actividad por y para "lo visible" impide la misma actividad para "lo invisible".

Las leyes del arte, los secretos justamente utilizados por los artistas del pasado, permanecen invisibles para la gran masa de espectadores.

Importante para el perfeccionamiento humano es precisamente hacer invisibles esas leyes y esos secretos.

Es lo que se propone el artista que renuncia a la representación. Nada podrá distraer al espectador ni será necesario ningún esfuerzo para comprender la obra de arte.

Lo humano se halla siempre presente en toda obra del hombre. El arte No Figurativo es eminentemente humanista, pues es un modo de expresión del hombre.

Si el artista se propone únicamente representar "el objeto", no expresa nada y la obra es ilusoria.

Por el contrario, desprendiéndose completamente de esa representación le es posible realizar una obra donde las formas, los colores, las relaciones, constituyen enteramente una verdadera creación del hombre. La obra es, entonces, concreta en sí y no concreta por la imitación, la representación o la interpretación de objetos exteriores."

Extractado de "L'art non-figuratif non objetif"  
August Herbin

- ① berdía
- ② costigliolo
- ③ freire
- ④ llorens
- ⑤ verdié
- ⑥ zanoni



BERDIA



FREIRE



COSTIGLIOLO

El Consejo Cultural y la Comisión de Exposiciones tienen el honor de invitar a Vd. y familia a la Exposición de ARTE NO - FIGURATIVO que se realizará desde el martes 13 al martes 27 de Octubre.

Comisión de Exposiciones

Figure 44. Exhibition pamphlet *Arte No Figurativo* (Non-Figurative Art), Montevideo, 1953



and Rubén Núñez, participants included well-known figures such as Alejandro Otero and Jesús Soto. During this period, Kosice and Rothfuss carried on with their own agenda in Argentina and Uruguay, using the magazine *Arte Madí Universal* as their main vehicle. Kosice's solo show at the Galería Bonino and the Arte Madí group show at the Ateneo del Chaco, both in 1953, marked the consolidation of the local Madí group, which had been joined by Salvador Presta and Juan Bay.

And what was happening in Montevideo? Abstraction experienced a revival there due to the influence of the Madí, the opposition of some Uruguayan artists to the sectarianism of the Taller, the educational work carried out by Rothfuss as art teacher at the Universidad del Trabajo del Uruguay in Colonia del Sacramento, and the presence of Uricchio and Arden Quin. After the first International Exhibition of the Madí Group, organized in December 1946 at the Salón A.I.A.P.E. in Montevideo, an exhibition of abstract art was held at the School of Architecture in 1952 and two exhibitions by the Grupo de Arte No-figurativo (Non-Figurative Art Group). José Pedro Costigliolo, María Freire, Uricchio, and Antonio Llorens participated in the first one, at the Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes (YMCA) in 1952 [Figure 43]; the second one, in 1953 [Figure 44], showed no work by Uricchio but added that of Norberto Berdía.<sup>124</sup> This group revitalized the local visual arts scene, which drew such artists as Vicente Martín and Lincoln Presno to the abstract movement. The works exhibited by Uruguayan artists in the São Paulo Biennials of 1951, 1953, and 1955 showed the high level of accomplishment reached by some of these artists.

The epic that had begun with *Arturo* ended finally in the consolidation of the movements that reclaimed abstraction as a means of expression, although the utopian objectives proclaimed in their many manifestos had not been attained, as a more mature Maldonado pointed out. Although the Madís concentrated their activities mostly on the visual arts and poetry, the ideas of the Concrete artists spread to related fields such as architecture, graphic design, furniture design, and the editorial arena. The Concrete group practically disbanded when Hlito and Maldonado left for Europe, the latter invited by Max Bill to join the faculty of the Hochschule für Gestaltung (School of Design) in Ulm.

In 1954, Pellegrini and Arden Quin founded the Asociación Arte Nuevo (Association for New Art) in Buenos Aires, and abstraction rapidly spread. The Uruguayan avant-garde followed a similar path, as proved by the acclaim that greeted the exhibition *19 Artistas de Hoy* (19 Current Artists), reviewed by the magazine *Marcha*.<sup>125</sup>

## The Work

### *The Epic of the Irregular Frame*

The disagreements and fights triggered by *Arturo*, which reverberated long after the demise of the magazine, would be just another piece of art world trivia today had they not been reflected in a creative action that changed the history of art on both banks of the Río de la Plata.

Rhod Rothfuss, in his essay "El marco: Un problema de la plástica actual" (The Frame: A Problem of Visual Arts Today) in *Arturo*, objected to the rectangular frame because it interrupted the visual development of Cubist and nonfigurative works. After reviewing the evolution of art, from the representational fidelity of naturalism to Constructivism through Cézanne, Rothfuss outlined a defense of pure creation supported by the thought of Vicente Huidobro, the avant-garde Chilean poet and inventor of *creacionismo*. Huidobro, inspired by his friend Torres-García, had proposed investigating, not the appearance of nature but its deeper constructive laws.

Rothfuss criticized the use of traditional frames as a destroyer of forms. In his own words, "a traditional frame cuts off the visual development of the theme"; consequently, "the painting is inevitably reduced to a fragment." He continued, "A painting with a regular frame suggests a thematic continuity that only disappears when the frame is rigorously structured in accordance with the composition of the painting," thus abandoning naturalistic painting's idea of the rectangular window. In other words: the perimeter of the painting should be shaped in accordance with the composition, so that, for example, it does not come into conflict with the rhythms of the oblique lines of Cubist and nonfigurative painting. Rothfuss's Cubist-inspired *Arlequín*



(Harlequin) [Plate 41], is one of the first works he created following this premise.

It should be noted that the irregular edge had been used earlier by Giorgio de Chirico in his metaphysical paintings (the trapezoidal *Serenity of the Scholar* and triangular *Enigma of Fatality*, both of 1914) and, notably, by László Péri in reliefs. Other artists who had made that adjustment were Jean Arp, Christian Schad, Eric Buchholz, El Lissitzky, Joaquín Torres-García, Charles Green Shaw, and Balcomb Greene.

The irregular perimeter became a leitmotif for the younger artists. Rothfuss was joined in this by artists as diverse as Arden Quin, Blascko, Espinosa, Esquivel, Kosice, Laań, Lozza, Maldonado, Melé, Molemborg, and Prati, among others. This change added a new level of freedom and challenge to their artistic creation; no longer simply faced with an empty square, the artist also had to imagine the perimeter defined by the image.

While the irregularly shaped frame became popular, a great variety of artistic solutions developed from the initial idea. Among these, just to mention a few examples, were irregularly shaped canvases—with or without applied objects—bordered by a small wooden rod (Rothfuss, Maldonado, Lozza, Melé); irregular canvases mounted on cardboard and wood (Blascko); paintings on rigid supports with superimposed wooden rods—with or without a frame—that enclosed spatial reliefs (Rothfuss); paintings supported by large irregular frames made with flat moldings (Blascko, Arden Quin); arbitrary forms that enclosed an empty center (Laań); or two-dimensional structures with irregular shapes, occasionally breached by rods, in the style of Torres-García (Prati, Kosice, Molemborg, Llorens, Lozza, Melé). There were also “co-planar” structures, formed by distinct flat elements linked by articulated rods that allowed infinite variations (Arden Quin, Kosice, Laań).

The differences between Concrete and Madí artists in the use of the frame could already be seen in their early works. In an irregularly framed painting by Maldonado [Plate 23], the irregular shape creates a stress field that extends into the center of the work, opposing the energy radiating from the red and black elements mounted on the support. This clash between opposing energy fields, which disturbs the viewer’s field of vision, confers on the paint-

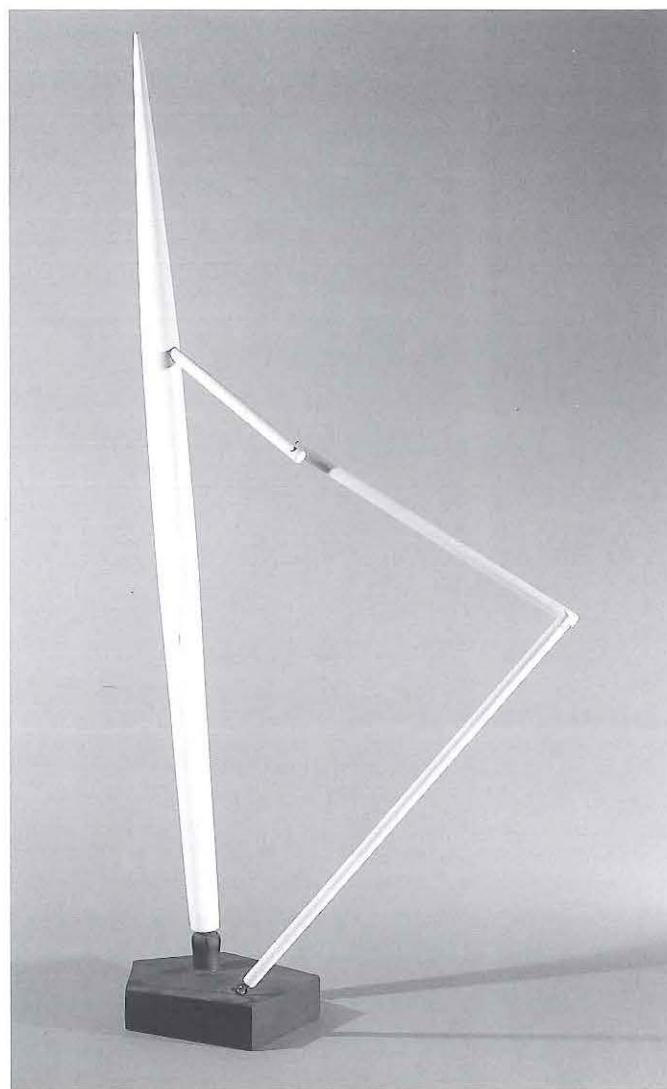


Figure 45. Rhod Rothfuss, *Escultura con movimientos rotativos* (Sculpture with Rotational Movements), 1947, Painted wood, 34 1/2 x 22 x 6 inches (88.2 x 57.4 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires

ing a dramatic aspect that contradicts the notion of “concrete beauty” expressed in the *Manifiesto Invencionista*.

Acknowledging this contradiction, Maldonado said that “the ‘irregular’ painting or frame, as we took to calling it, isolated the plane . . . so that it participated as one more element, aesthetically belligerent. . . . At this point, however, we realized that we were looking for a three-dimensional solution to a two-dimensional problem: we were repeating the same error. . . . So, we stopped, and started instead to give more importance to the intervening space than to the painting itself (Molemborg, Raúl Lozza, Nuñez). Thus, the painting, as a container, was abolished.”<sup>126</sup> For his part, Hlito recognized that “the walls to



which these paintings were affixed immediately recovered their original optical function, thus making the background reappear again.”<sup>127</sup> Hence, Maldonado, Prati, and Hlito gradually returned to the rectangular format. The power of the shape as a source of new forms, an illusionism that neutralizes the flatness of the support, was later developed by Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland at the end of the 1950s.<sup>128</sup>

### *The Work of the Madi*

Playfulness and pluralism generally characterized Madi art, in accordance with the antirhetorical concerns expressed in its manifesto. According to this document, painting was “color and the two-dimensional surface, an irregular frame, flat surface, and curved and concave surfaces. Planes defined with linear, rotational, or shifting movements.” Sculpture was “three-dimensional, without color. Overall form and solid shapes with a delimited range and motion (articulation, rotation, shifting, etc.). By joining strictly proportioned and combined, color planes, Madi propelled painting beyond the planar formula of Neoplasticism, nonobjectivism, Constructivism, and all other variants of Concrete art.” Blanca Stábile pointed out, however, that Madi artists were not always successful in their approach to color relationships, which “resulted, in most cases, in a mechanical sense of movement.”<sup>129</sup>

Initially, most artists complied strictly with these principles. Many Madi artists used a compass to determine the golden section ratio between two segments,<sup>130</sup> thus embracing the teachings of Torres-García. Rothfuss’s *Estructura en Madera* (Structure in Wood), reproduced in *Arturo*, was clearly influenced by Torres-García. The first Madi sculptures by Rothfuss [Figure 45], Kosice [Plate 39], and Urrichio [Plate 43] reflected the playful character of Torres-García’s toys, along the lines of works by artists like Alexander Rodchenko, Naum Gabo, Alexander Calder, Bruno Munari, and Jean Peyrissac, which displayed the impact of technology with two fundamental characteristics: movement and the use of new materials (wood, steel, glass, bronze, plastics).

The work of Arden Quin reveals the wide range of his experimentation: irregularly shaped paintings; wood, glass, and Bakelite sculptures, both fixed and mobile; flat,

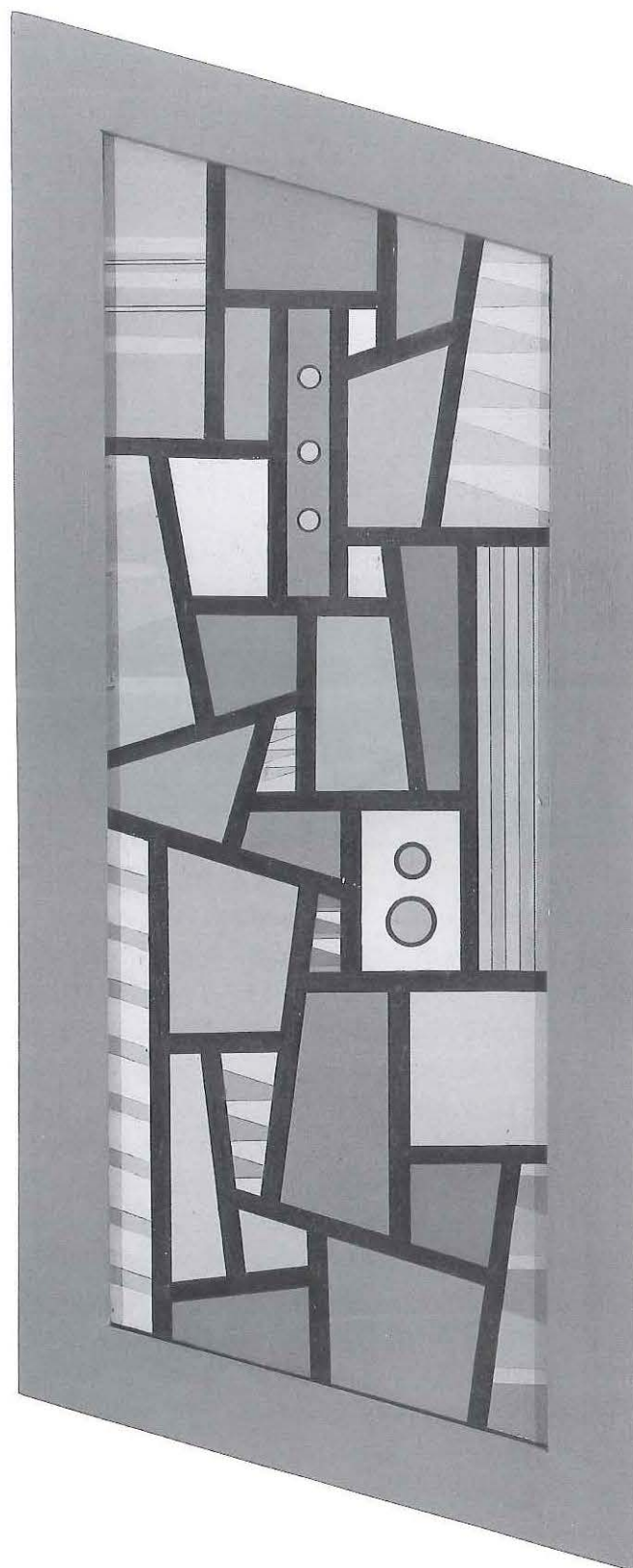


Figure 46. Carmelo Arden Quin, *Los Indios* (The Indians), 1948, oil on board and wood, 43 ½ x 18 ½ inches (110.3 x 46 cm), Collection Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini



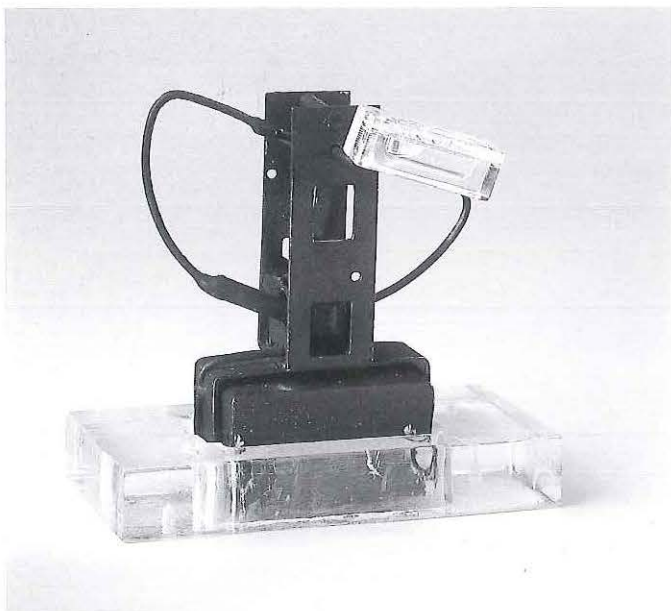


Figure 47. Gyula Kosice, *Una gota de agua acunada a toda velocidad* (A Drop of Water Rocked at High Speed), circa 1945, Iron, Plexiglass, battery, and water, 5 1/8 x 4 3/8 x 2 1/2 inches (13 x 11 x 7 cm). Courtesy of von Bartha Collection, Basel, Switzerland

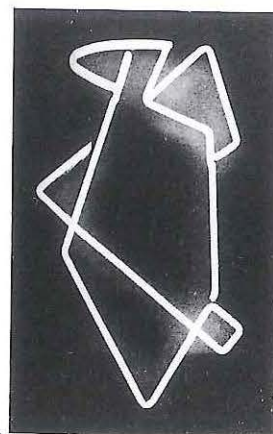
co-planar structures connected by thin rods that allow movement; painted three-dimensional forms; and hanging sculptures made of pieces of lathed wood. Arden Quin said that with his first “sagittal” compositions he intended to escape Mondrian’s right angles, or his strict orthogonality, by basing their structure on diagonal lines, an idea that had been advanced by van Doesburg in the 1920s.<sup>131</sup> The decorative possibilities of his gridlike divisions with thick black lines enclosing flat color fields reached their apogee in *Indios* (Indians, 1948) [Figure 46], with a composition employing the golden section (in the central yellow rectangle and the two blue circles within it).

After Arden Quin settled in Paris, his work went in a different direction towards a Concretist vision, in response to his discovery of Vantongerloo. His new paintings, which he called “white forms,” were made with successive layers of oil paint or enamel over a carefully prepared background, whose constellation of points and lines “evokes a remote Picasso,” according to one art critic<sup>132</sup> [Plate 36]. Arden Quin had left behind his virulent Madí assertions. In the 1953 Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Arden Quin showed his irregular forms and, together with the Venezuelan Oscar Núñez, his mobile

sculptures. Throughout the years, the work of Arden Quin has remained within the Concrete-Madí parameters, with literary and poetic activities complementing his ongoing visual discourse.

In terms of formal experimentation, Rhod Rothfuss might be called the most innovative figure of the Río de la Plata avant-garde. Although the abundant pictorial matter he used in his *Arlequín* (Harlequin, 1944) [Plate 41], a painting that still had a recognizable image,<sup>133</sup> responded to the roughness of the canvas he used, Rothfuss abandoned that early approach to paint with enamel on wood panels or irregularly shaped plywood, using an impersonal technique that obeyed the rules of Concrete art. These feature small compartments, framed with small black rods, arranged in conformity with the golden section and typically placed on a flat support, which has been

arte madí



kosice

galería bonino

maipú 962

t. e. 31-2527

buenos aires

septiembre 1953

nº 35

Figure 48. Gyula Kosice, *Estructura Lumínica Madí*, neon, 24 x 15 1/2 x 8 inches (60.9 x 40 x 20.3 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires, reproduced in the *Gyula Kosice* exhibition catalogue, Galería Bonino, Buenos Aires, 1953



painted white. The white perimeter around the compartments functions as a frame, as in *Composición Madí* (Madí Composition, 1946) [Plate 42]. To interrupt the rigidity of the perimeter, Rothfuss often repeated rectangular elements, or small-size squares, placed an equal distance apart or following a rhythm determined by the golden section, like metopes in a Doric frieze. He emphasized the differences within a periodic arrangement of decorative components (the smallest compartments subordinated to the larger, unifying elements) and created “centers of perceptive excitement” as a sensory field of heterogeneous stimulation.<sup>134</sup>

In 1950, Rothfuss began grappling again with the issue of the frame, introducing two ideas: the “marco recortado” (irregular or jagged frame) and the “marco estructurado” (structured frame). In the first case, the form is the product of an operation (cutting) performed on any flat form. In the second case, the procedure is reversed: the forms are composed starting from a center. In spite of his premature death and the uncertain fate of much of his work, Rothfuss, the most articulate theorist of the Madí movement, “helped bring enlightenment, collectively and individually, to both banks of the Río de la Plata, without facile imitators,” according to Mario Sagradini.<sup>135</sup>

The recognition accorded the Madí movement owes much to the efforts of Gyula Kosice, one of its most enthusiastic proponents. Although he created some irregular-frame paintings and co-planar constructions, it was as a sculptor that he secured critical success. In his sculptures, he used such diverse materials as wood, cork, Plexiglas, neon-filled glass tubes, bronze strips, aluminum, bronze, iron casts, and, finally, water [Figure 47].

Approaching sculpture as an expressive, transparent spatial element that interacts with surrounding space was one of the earliest objectives of the modernist avant-garde. First came Cubist sculpture, then Constructivist works that freed sculpture from its traditional support on the floor. Kosice wanted to endow his sculptures with a potential for motion, so that they could form various and unique arrangements. His *Röyi* was the first example of this spatial dynamics [Plate 39], followed by other works done in wood and cork. As in the initial sculptures and co-planar work of other Madí artists, the intervention of

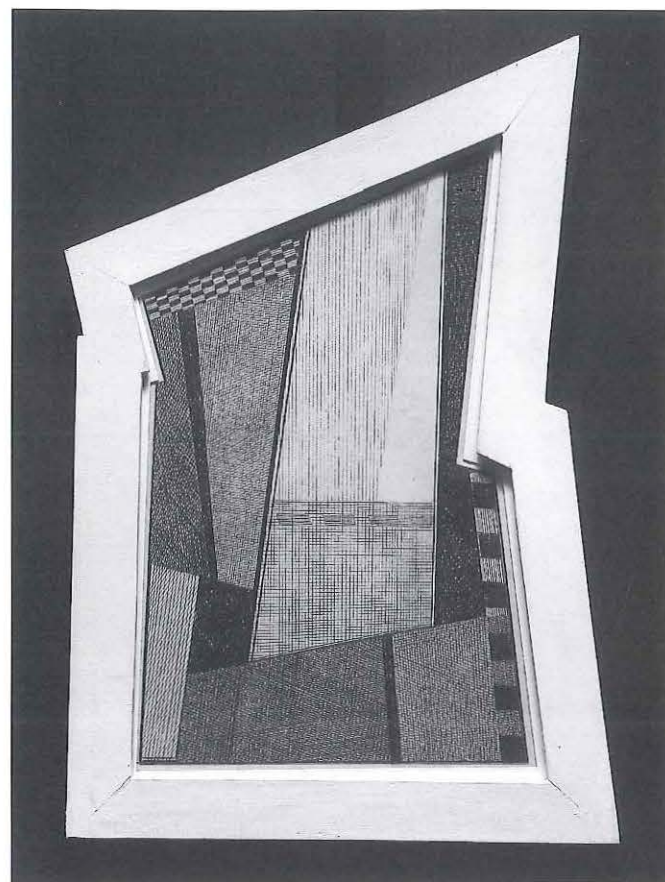


Figure 49. Martín Blaszkó, *Estructura Madí* (Madí Structure), 1946, ink on paper, 24 1/2 x 17 1/8 inches (63 x 43.5 cm), Collection of Ricardo Esteves, Buenos Aires

human or natural forces is required to select a new position of equilibrium, just as wind is a necessary component of Alexander Calder’s mobiles.

Several years later, in a show held at the Galería Bonino, Kosice displayed light structures made of neon tubes [Figure 48], along the lines pioneered by the Hungarian Moholy-Nagy and the Czech Zdeněk Pěšánek between the 1920s and 1930s.

Kosice’s poetry should not be forgotten. When he began the publication of his magazine *Arte Madí Universal*, he described his movement with the word “Madinem-sor,” explaining that if Nemsor “is the revealing of aesthetic time in space,” Madinem-sor must then be the “synthesis of beauty, constituted by the least restrictive ideas.”<sup>136</sup> Kosice’s early work displays his impulse for free invention; later, his fantasy flowed into the titles of his creations: *Röyi* was his first mobile sculpture and *Golse-se* his first book of poems.



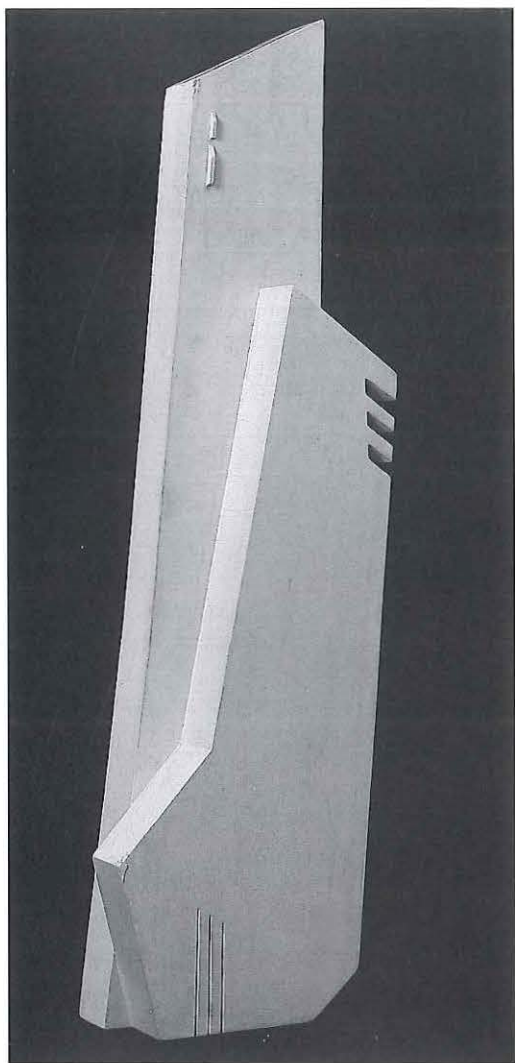


Figure 50. Martín Blaszkó, *Columna Madí* (Madí Column), 1947, painted wood, 29 ½ x 8 ½ x 3 ⅝ inches (75 x 21 x 9.3 cm), Collection Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini

Although Blaszkó is better known as a sculptor, his paintings also have an enduring value. His works with irregular frames show a textural quality and sense of color that sets him apart from his peers, even if they all essentially shared the same formal viewpoint (Blaszkó was a self-acknowledged disciple of Arden Quin). *El gran ritmo* (The Great Rhythm, 1949) [Plate 38] is a good example of his sensibility, which is also displayed in his magnificent ink drawings [Figure 49], a product of his early European training before his immigration to Buenos Aires. His first sculptures were massive, totemic works, such as *Columna Madí* (Madí Column, 1947) [Figure 50] and *Monumento al prisionero político desconocido*



Figure 51. Martín Blaszkó, *Monumento al prisionero político desconocido* (Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner), 1952, bronze, 30 ½ x 9 ½ x 11 ½ inches (78.1 x 24.1 x 29.2 cm), Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina

(Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner, 1952) [Figure 51]. The mystical character of the ascending energy field suggested by the vertical forms has little to do with the Madí aesthetic.

Rodolfo Uricchio also investigated the possibilities of mobile sculptures. Although he did not use self-propelling elements in them, his work constituted an important step forward for Madí sculpture. For example, any manual pressure on the outermost elements of his sculpture *Máquina inútil* (Useless Machine, 1948/1993) [Plate 43]<sup>37</sup>, surprisingly sets it into motion until the effect of the friction of the spring restores it to its original position.



## The Experience of Concrete and Perceptist Artists

Different pictorial styles coexisted within the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención, reflecting various influences. Tomás Maldonado's article "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," published in the first issue of *Arte Concreto-Invención* (1946), reflected their detailed knowledge of European abstract art and its related concerns, culled from the publications then available. Hlito pointed out that Concrete artists considered "that Neoplasticism was not an effective solution to the problem of space."<sup>138</sup> They must have arrived at this conclusion after giving the issue a great deal of thought, because initially Arden Quin, Souza, Prati, Espinosa, Raúl Lozza, Melé, and others used grids drawn with thick black lines to separate the fields of color.

The Concrete artists favored a subtle interplay of dynamic tensions, created by simple elements applied to flat, neutral backgrounds. The internal structures of form and color responded to a system of objective relations; the artists sought to eliminate subjectivity in their compositions, cultivating instead visual purity. They tried to achieve technical perfection, believing that only through rigorous and impersonal execution could the message be faithfully transmitted.

A few years later, in his introduction to the exhibition of the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina, Aldo Pellegrini wrote that "although for Concrete artists the individual imprint—meaning the unconscious, the irrational—is totally banned," the personality of these artists is revealed in the organization of lines and forms, in the selection of colors, and in the details.<sup>139</sup>

In his first paintings, Tomás Maldonado created areas of activity, with parallels, tangents, and crisscrosses of extremely refined form and color, on monochrome backgrounds. It was a rigorous, geometric art of smooth, polished surfaces and neutral brushstrokes that are almost invisible. His *Tres zonas y dos circulares* (Three Zones and Two Circulares, 1953) [Plate 26] belongs to a group of works in which the complementary accord between the lateral and central color planes reinforces a symmetry slightly disturbed by subtle circular elements.

In order to widen the scope of his endeavors and make an impression on a society in need of material elements to

improve its condition, Maldonado worked to spread Concrete theory to "productive" activities such as architecture and design. He intensified his contact with the Department of Architecture of the University of Buenos Aires, culminating in the creation of *Nueva Visión*, a magazine and publishing house. In 1954, when he began teaching at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm, Maldonado gave up painting altogether, which he considered regressive and limited, in order to work for the transformation of the totality of the physical environment of mankind. In 1949 he wrote, "In the future, art will cease to find constant inspiration in itself and will abandon once and for all the sterilizing groove to which it is confined today, because that way, and only that way, by freeing itself from these shackles, could it recover its social function."<sup>140</sup> As chancellor of the HfG, Maldonado promoted the relationship between science, technology, and design, raising environmental issues for the first time.

Maldonado deserves a special place in contemporary thought for his courage in continually reassessing his own ideas, the scope of the contemporary problems he tackled, his need to mark out his field, the proliferation of areas he explored, his rejection of all closed systems, and his dedication to a critical rationality at the service of the project of human emancipation.

The pictorial sensibility of Lidy Prati, which was praised by Max Bill, according to Romero Brest, set her apart from her Concrete artist peers.<sup>141</sup> In her *Composición serial* (Serial Composition, 1948) [Figure 52], she combined, as in a Minimalist exercise, different regular elements: rectangles or squares, empty or filled, systematically placed according to a virtual grid, almost as a recomposition of Mondrian's seminal *Compositie in Lijn* (Composition in Lijn, 1916/1917; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo). In her later work, Prati introduced curved elements that interplay with the linear fields. Unfortunately, she did not continue working as an artist.

One of the most lucid artists of the Concrete group was Alfredo Hlito. Mari Carmen Ramírez underlines the importance of his first known works, a series of Constructivist paintings created in 1945.<sup>142</sup> *Estructura* (Structure, 1945) [Plate 18] confirms the impact of Torres-García on the young artist, although it extended only to the compositional structure and the use of abundant pictorial matter,



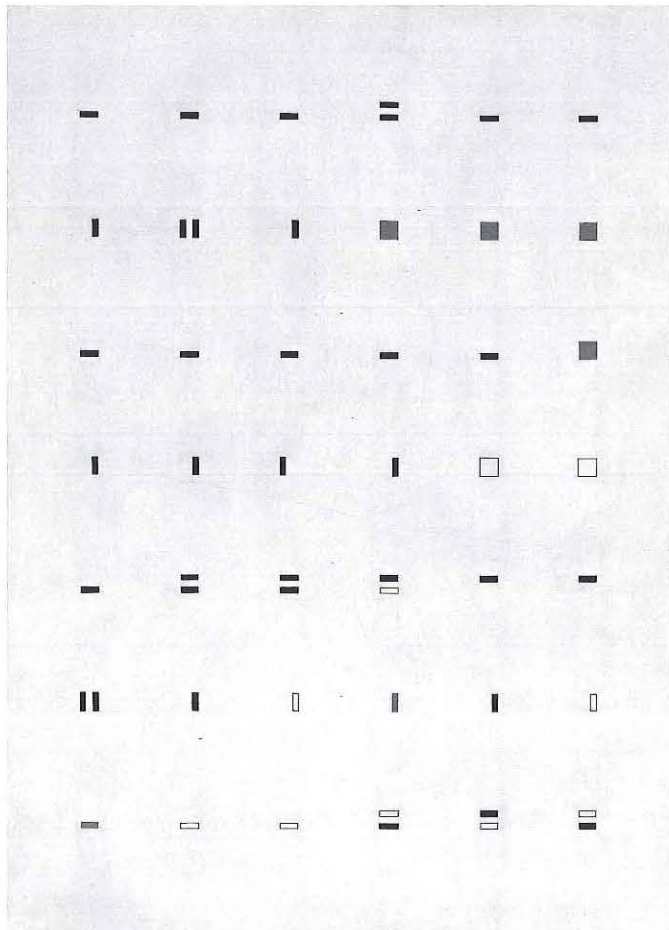


Figure 52. Lidy Prati, *Composición Serial* (Serial Composition), 1946-48, oil on board, 29 1/2 x 21 3/8 inches (75.5 x 55.8 cm), Collection Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini

stopping short at the older artist's symbolic connotations. Hlito's adherence to Concrete orthodoxy is evident in his series *Ritmos cromáticos II* (Chromatic Rhythms II, 1947) [Plate 19], might could be related to the series *Concrétion* (Concretion) by the Swiss artist Richard Lohse.<sup>143</sup> Speaking about his early work, Hlito acknowledged the influence of the European masters.<sup>144</sup> As the connection between lines, bands, and color planes became more suggestive, their rigid orthogonal arrangement on a white background was replaced by slanted components, which give more dynamic impetus to the composition.

Hlito's firsthand knowledge of modern painting, acquired during a trip to Europe in 1953, where he learned about Mondrian and visited Frantisek Kupka, led him to revise his previous works. By the mid-1950s, Hlito's expressivity would prevail over Concrete orthodoxy. Divisionist brushstrokes gave greater expressive

force and a wonderful sense of color to his new work. In later works, like the series *Efigies* (Effigies) and *Iconostasis*, echoes of the teachings of Torres-García can be discerned.

Alberto Molemborg's co-planar structure entitled *Función blanca* (White Function, 1946), composed of three irregular elements with synthetic paint on plywood connected by small wooden rods, received a great deal of attention. It was exhibited on the rotunda of the Galerías Pacífico in July and August 1946, and it was reproduced in the first issue of *Arte Concreto-Invencción*. The Argentine Concrete sculptors Iommi, Girola, Vardánega, and Villalba drew on the accomplishments of contemporary sculptors like Moholy-Nagy, Gabo, Vantongerloo, and Max Bill. In his early sculptures, Iommi used glass and acrylic plates, rods, and steel sections [Plate 21, Figures 53, 54]. A series of works he created used aluminum sheets as a basic element, then a new material for local sculptors. He cut out closed geometric shapes on the aluminum sheets, creating variously shaped empty spaces, and then turned the incised sheet into a three-dimensional, transparent, and light spatial form.

## Raúl Lozza and Perceptismo

Concrete artists adopted Max Bill's concept of transformation, by which each work can be approached as a set of variations on the same theme. For the Perceptists, however, any change in the structure or size of one of the elements to be joined together (form, color, wall) triggered a qualitative change, explained by their theory of color.<sup>145</sup> [Figure 55]. In addition, restricting the work to a predetermined composition allowed it to be repeated. Painstakingly, with utmost care, by applying enamel on wood with a brush, Raúl Lozza created polished surfaces that seemed lacquered [Plate 45]. This technique suppressed individual expression and any other subjective manifestation that could distract the viewer from the presence of the work itself. He also thoroughly codified the elements and colors that he used in his works. This led Jorge López Anaya to conclude that the artist "deconstructed the painting, rejected the myth of the unique, one-of-a-kind piece; he shifted the position of the





Figure 53. Enio Iommi, *Direcciones opuestas (Opposite Directions)*, 1945, painted steel, 35 x 27 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches (88.9 x 69.8 x 64.7 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires

‘author’ in relation to the work. . . . He seems, no doubt, to refer to the melancholy extinction of the aura foreseen by Benjamin.”<sup>146</sup>

Abraham Haber explained that Lozza’s paintings were made for a specific wall. To exhibit them, “chunks of wall” would have to be framed. The support and the frame of these works were rectangular because what was being “framed is not the painting, but the piece of wall” itself.<sup>147</sup> The practical need to mount the co-planar forms led Lozza to adopt a rectangular support, generally a canvas or any other smooth surface painted to simulate a wall. Yet making the work a portable object, independent of the wall, Lozza contradicted his own theory. Referring to Lozza’s work, Stábile identified a new problem created by independent forms on a neutral background: because they have a thickness, they project shadows that disturb the opacity of the background.<sup>148</sup>

Ultimately, the theoretical ideas of *Perceptismo* should be contrasted with the aesthetic contribution of artists like László Péri, who, along with Buchholz and Lisitzky, evolved from painting on a plane to creating relief forms. Péri achieved a synthesis between visual work and architecture (long sought by Neoplasticists and Constructivists) and between the constructive and the gestural that is lacking in the work of the Perceptists. By using cement for his irregular reliefs, which he called spatial constructions, he selected a material with a rough, irregular surface in harmony with the wall.

In the 1950s, Víctor Margariños D. set off on a unique path within Argentine nonfigurative art. To begin with, he made collages in a subtly Cubist, analytical vein. His work of all periods shows a refined use of color planes, and his straight and curved lines rhythmically pierce the space in centered perspectives or create ambiguous and asymmetrical, yet balanced, spaces. Large color surfaces clash against these graphic statements, tipping the compositional balance [Plate 49]. Conceptually, Magariños relied on the theoretical work of Vantongerloo, whom he greatly admired. Creating Concrete forms by joining very thick lines later became one of his main concerns, which relates him to the experiments of artists such as Wladyslaw Strzeminski. During this time, Magariños D. was very interested in studies of the cosmos, nuclear physics, new mathematics, cybernetics, and genetic engineering. Like Lisa, Lozza, and Maldonado, he thought that the creative artist had the obligation to imagine a metaphysics that expressed the scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic issues occupying contemporary thinkers.

### Three Examples of a New Sensibility: Antonio Fernández Muro, Sarah Grilo, and Miguel Ocampo

In his defense of the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina, Aldo Pellegrini explained that his interest in Antonio Fernández Muro was founded in the atmosphere of freedom exuded by his work and the delight engendered by the artist’s handling of color, his sensitive use of materials, the way he places formal elements, and his use of texture.<sup>149</sup> These qualities are balanced by a certain austerity and a precise sense of composition.



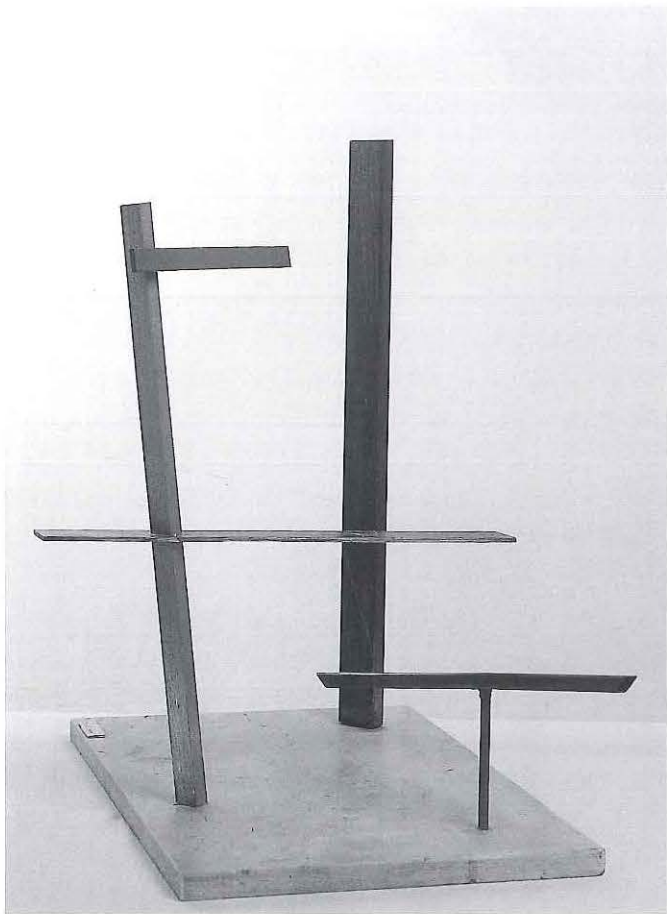


Figure 54. Enio Iommi, *Construcción (Construction)*, 1945, painted iron and marble, height: 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (57 cm), Courtesy of von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland

According to Leopoldo Castedo, all of Fernández Muro's work was characterized by an economy of means, the culmination of a long process of purification, and by an attempt to erase any possible connotations elicited by the painting.<sup>150</sup>

In the 1950s, Sarah Grilo joined the abstract painting movement. She stood out among the *Artistas Modernos* for her handling of color before she turned to the graphics, inscriptions, and hieroglyphics that characterized her work in the 1960s. In 1942, Miguel Ocampo abandoned a poetic, abstract-leaning figurative style to try his hand at a geometry of precise forms supported by exquisite contrasts and harmonies of colors. During this period, the artist achieved a personal style in which rigorous composition was muted by an unusual use of color, the subtle dynamic of ambiguous perspectives, superpositions, and different areas of sustained movement, which reveal his

admiration for Vordemberge-Gildewart. The underlying lyricism of his work at this stage seemed to suggest the free abstraction that would follow.

### Three Uruguayan Abstract Artists: José Pedro Costigliolo, María Freire, and Antonio Llorens

Beyond the work of the *Madí* artists, the emergence of abstraction in Uruguay followed a much less acrimonious process than in Argentina. Abstraction began with Torres-García and later developed as the expression of a new generation that rejected the intransigence of the Taller Torres-García. The early work of Antonio Llorens reflected the aesthetic of the irregular frame. By the beginning of the 1950s it had become nonfigurative, following the precepts of Concrete art, as can be seen in his *Composición* (Composition) [Plate 48]. Llorens's evolution paralleled that of Costigliolo, an older artist, whose paintings of this period also met Concrete standards [Plate 46]. María Freire followed a similar trajectory, spurred by her personal contact with Rothfuss during his stay in Colonia del Sacramento. Her sculptures, whether built with acrylic resin, steel rods, or painted wood [Plate 47], reveal a strong personality. In the early 1950s, Freire also painted abstract works.

### Epilogue

Half a century later, an assessment of the Río de la Plata avant-garde can elucidate, among other things, its place within the history of abstraction, now that multiculturalism has permitted the multinational contribution to Modernism to surface from obscurity.

The retrospective of geometric abstract art organized in 1985 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York did not acknowledge abstract artists from the Río de la Plata or other areas of Latin America.<sup>151</sup> A more recent exhibition of abstraction at the Guggenheim Museum included only Roberto Matta and Lucio Fontana.<sup>152</sup> Are these omissions another instance of ethnocentrism, or are the contributions of Latin American abstract artists considered too insubstantial to warrant inclusion in these shows?



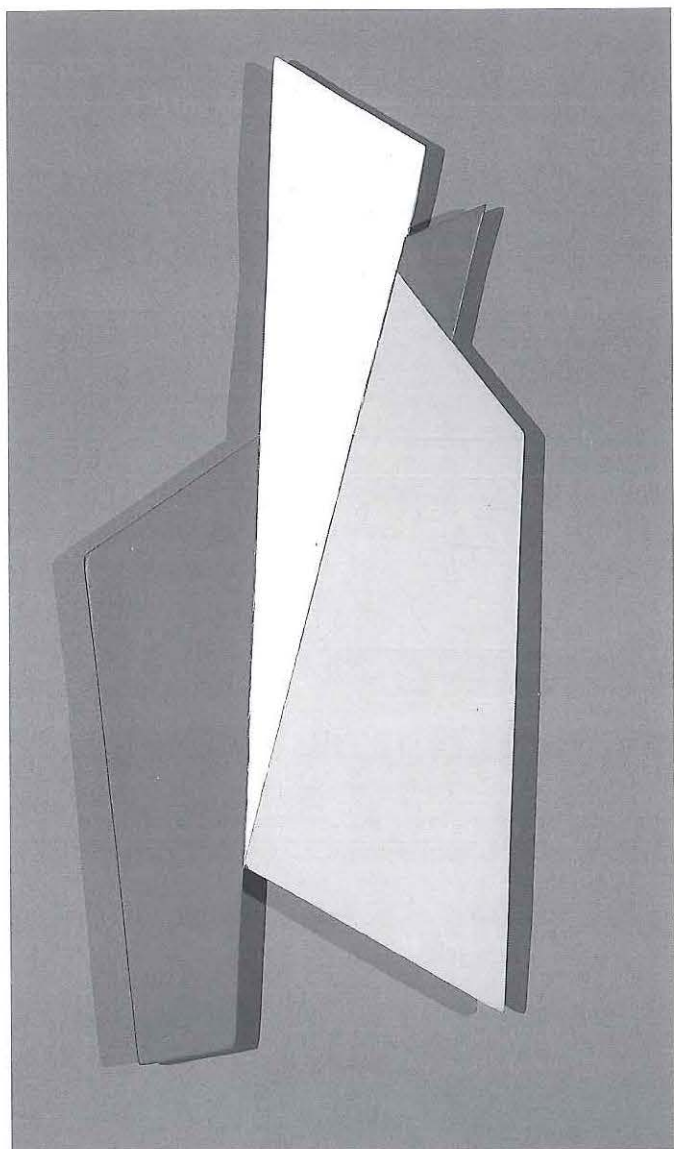


Figure 55. Rembrandt van Dyck Lozza, *Objecto estético* (Aesthetic Object), 1945, oil on wood, 23 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches (59.6 x 29.8 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires

A trip back in time to the birth of the prevailing version of the history of modernism may begin to yield some answers. On a wall of the Museum of Modern Art's library, duly framed and covered by glass, hangs a copy of the catalogue cover of the influential 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. On the cover is Alfred J. Barr's outline, which attempted to synthesize the evolution of modern art from the late nineteenth century to the two major currents of abstraction.<sup>153</sup> The first of these currents, which Barr thought the most important, had an intellectual, structural, and architectural ground-

ing. The second was rooted in the intuitive and the emotional; it was "Romantic, rather than classical."<sup>154</sup> Meyer Schapiro would reveal the antihistorical character of Barr's outline, which ignores the historical, social, and psychic elements that contribute to the production of a work of art.<sup>155</sup>

Barr's scheme and the writings of Clement Greenberg, published in the 1940s and 1950s, have been recognized as the paradigms of modernism. Their dissemination entrenched the ethnocentrism that dominates much of the arts scene of the Northern Hemisphere, including the great museums, megaexhibits, and important art collectors and art galleries, despite the opposition of major figures of the New York school, such as Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb, to European abstract formalism and Greenberg's preaching.<sup>156</sup> Mention should be made here of Torres-García's efforts to synthesize the structural or formal with the symbolic, which paralleled those of Newman and others,<sup>157</sup> as Michael Leja has observed.<sup>158</sup>

Agnès de Maistre, who dismissed the artists of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención for not building on the formal innovations of the Grupo Madí and for leaning instead toward a praxis that she considered "too Europeanized" and therefore "negligible," ignored the broad-minded attitude of the Concrete artists, who were also interested in architecture and industrial and graphic design.<sup>159</sup> Their theoretical thinking went beyond the arts arena to include contemporary culture as a whole, with its intricate network of relationships. This is how Maldonado described the aspirations of these artists: "It is impossible to articulate today a coherent discourse on modernity without confronting all the implications of the subject, particularly those related to modernity as a project to change the social and cultural structure."<sup>160</sup>

On the other hand, today there is a more complex vision of Latin American modernity, as articulated by Néstor García Canclini, for whom that dichotomy was unhelpful because it was based on an idealization of the development of modernity in Europe.<sup>161</sup> We agree with his remark that in Latin American societies, modernism is not the result of a mimetic adoption of imported models, nor of the search for purely formal solutions. Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano also recognized that in the



"countries of the periphery" the entire field functions as a translating matrix, and that "however precarious its existence, that field functions as a re-visioning stage, as a structure to reorganize external models,"<sup>162</sup> which very often produced original work.

With their formal and absolutist ideas, Concrete artists created an enriched space for debate that fueled the Latin American abstract art scene. Among those artists, to mention just a few, were the Brazilians Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and Mira Schendel, the Venezuelans Alejandro Otero, Jesús Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Díez, and the Argentines Julio Le Parc, Rogelio Polesello, and Luis Tomasello. The radical stance of the Madís was well received in Paris; according to Dominique Viéville, distinctive elements of the Madí aesthetic influenced the work of Pol Bury and Iacov Agam.<sup>163</sup>

The pressure to correct omissions, like those mentioned before, will mount as efforts increase to articulate an intellectually rigorous history of modernism that takes into account the multiplicity of artistic developments in the countries of the periphery, as well as the needs and conditions that made them possible. A recent exhibition about the development of abstraction in the second post-war period organized at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum in Germany, which included both the Concrete and Madí artists, was a step in the right direction.<sup>164</sup>



## Notes

- 1 *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont*, translated by Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), p. 57.
- 2 For example, the abstract work done around 1914–1916 by the Argentine painter Emilio Pettoruti, then residing in Italy, who frequented the Futurist groups and who renewed his investigations in 1953, in Buenos Aires, and the relief *Crepúsculo* (Twilight) (1926), by the Argentine sculptor Antonio Sibellino; the non-figurative work by the Brazilian Vicente Rego de Monteiro, created while he lived in Paris (*Abstract Composition*, 1922, oil on canvas), and the inclusion of abstract elements in the decorative work of Lasar Segall, Antonio Gomide, Regina Gomide Graz, John Graz, and some of Ismael Nery's drawings; and the experiments of Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (*Ejercicio óptico*, 1934 lacquer on formica). The authors thank Ricardo Esteves for some of this information. Although most scholars find the term *abstract art*, which we use in this essay, unsatisfactory, a good replacement has not been found. The negativity of other terms suggested in the literature on the subject—nonfigurative art, non-representational art, nonobjective art—contributes little to a convincing description of the metaphysics of abstraction. On the other hand, the term *concrete art*, popularized by (but not, as generally assumed, invented by) Theo van Doesburg, which accurately describes the real and objective character of abstract works, is commonly used to categorize a specific kind of abstract art from the 1920s and 1930s that was connected to Neoplasticism. On the origin of the term concrete art, see: Willi Rotzler, *Constructive Concepts* (Zurich: ABC, 1977), p. 118.
- 3 The influence of mystics such as Helena Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, and Annie Besant is visible in texts published by these artists to explain the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of their artistic production.
- 4 Abstraction was opposed by segments of both the French Right and Left, and even by gallery owners as astute as Daniel Kahnweiler, the promoter of Cubism. The fact that there were only seven French artists (15 percent) among the forty-seven shown in the international exhibit organized by Cercle et Carré at Galerie 23 in Paris did not help, given the increasing influence of the xenophobic French far right. There were only 13 (14 percent) French artists among the ninety-six participants in the exhibits organized by Abstraction-Création.
- 5 Among the beneficiaries were the Argentine painter Emilio Pettoruti, who traveled in 1912 with a government scholarship and lived in Italy, France, and Germany, and Alfredo Guttero, who remained in Europe from 1904 to 1927. The Uruguayan Rafael Barradas went to Italy and France in 1913 and returned to Montevideo in 1928. Alejandro Xul Solar, traveled on his own in 1912 and settled in Italy, with long stays in London, Paris, Florence, and Munich. Both Xul Solar and Pettoruti returned to Buenos Aires in 1924.
- 6 *Martín Fierro* (1924–1927) was edited by Evar Méndez. Among its most notable contributors were Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Ricardo Güiraldes, Xul Solar, Pettoruti, Norah Borges, and Alberto Prebisch, all members of the so-called Florida group.
- 7 Boedo is a working-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires. Among the members of the group were the writers Álvaro Yunque, Leónidas Barletta, and Elías Castelnuevo, and the visual artists Guillermo Facio Hebecquer (1889–1935), Adolfo Bellocq (b. 1899), and José Arato (1893–1929), who gathered around the magazine *Los Pensadores* (1922–26) and its successor, *Claridad* (1926–41). Another magazine was *Nosotros* (1907–43), whose anti-avant-garde posture reveals the aesthetic limitations of vast sectors of the Argentine Left.
- 8 Walter E. Laroche, "Presencia del Arte Plástico en el Uruguay," *Plásticos Uruguayos* (Montevideo: La Biblioteca, 1975), p. 19.
- 9 Wyndham Lewis, "La muerte del arte abstracto," *Babel*, no. 11 (May 1940). Wyndham Lewis was one of the founders of the English art movement Vorticism.
- 10 When Berni published "Nuevo Realismo," *Forma*, no. 1 (August 1936), a manifesto in favor of art with social content, he was criticized by Pettoruti, who in *Forma*, no. 5 (January 1938) defended the right of the artist to express his own perception of the world rather than a crude photographic rendering of reality.
- 11 Amigos del Arte, a private institution founded in 1924, had the goal of promoting cultural activities like concerts, art exhibitions, and recitals. The institution, which existed until the early 1940s, had a gallery on Florida Street, where the Van Riel gallery and the Instituto de Arte Moderno were also located. See Nelly Perazzo, *Historia general del arte en la Argentina, la pintura en la Argentina (1915–1945)*, vol. 8 (Buenos Aires: Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1999), p. 395.
- 12 Alberto Prebisch, "Últimas exposiciones de Amigos del Arte," *Martín Fierro*, no. 37 (January 20, 1927), p. 5.
- 13 Yente, *Obras destruidas de Del Prete* (N.p.: Buenos Aires, 1971), p. 9. The precise date of Del Prete's 1934 exhibition at Amigos del Arte does not appear in his bibliography and further research has not been able, so far, to verify it.
- 14 *La Prensa*, May 15, 1933, p. 20.
- 15 Enrico Prampolini was an Italian Futurist who later joined the abstract movement. He lived in Paris between 1925 and 1937 and participated in Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création.
- 16 Yente, *Obras destruidas*.
- 17 Nelly Perazzo, *El Arte Concreto en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983), p. 39.
- 18 Jorge Romero Brest, *Correo Literario*, August 1, 1944.
- 19 Jorge Romero Brest, *Argentina Libre*, September 11, 1941.
- 20 Romero Brest, *Correo Literario*, August 1, 1944.
- 21 Jorge Gumier Maier, "Para descubrir al maestro Del Prete," *Nuevo Sur*, June 23, 1989.
- 22 Prior to 1997, the only published reference to Esteban Lisa in Argentine literature was in Córdova Iturburu's book *80 años de pintura argentina: Del Pre-impresionismo a la novísima figuración* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Librería la Ciudad, 1978), where he is mentioned as Alejandro Vainstein's teacher (p. 129).
- 23 Esteban Lisa, *Kant, Einstein y Picasso* (Buenos Aires: Escuela de Arte Moderno, 1956).
- 24 César Paternosto, "Mi encuentro con Esteban Lisa," in *Esteban*



- Lisa*, exh. cat., Guillermo de Osma Galería, Madrid, 1998, p. 14.
- 25 Mario H. Gadowczyk had a revealing experience while visiting Lisa's home in the 1950s, which sheds some light on the artist's attitude toward the exhibition of his work. When asked to show his work, the artist opened a closet, pulled out one of his cardboards (carefully stored on a wooden shelf), and showed it. Then, without a word, he put it back in its place: the exhibition was over.
  - 26 See Mario H. Gadowczyk "Entrevista a Isaac Zylberberg," in *Esteban Lisa*, p. 46.
  - 27 Ibid.
  - 28 In *Esteban Lisa* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Esteban Lisa, 1997), Perazzo and Gadowczyk assumed that Lisa's Cubist-inspired works were dated from 1940 and 1941. However, further research has shown that Alejandro Vainstein, one of Lisa's first students, created some abstract works signed and dated 1939, that reflect the spirit of the paintings by his teacher. This indicates that these paintings may have been made before that.
  - 29 Juan Manuel Bonet, "A Quest for Lisa," in *Esteban Lisa*, exh. cat., Guillermo de Osma Galería, Madrid, 1998, p. 11.
  - 30 Edward J. Sullivan, "Esteban Lisa: A View from Abroad," *Esteban Lisa*, exh. cat., Museo Torres-García, Montevideo, 1998, p. 16.
  - 31 Jackson Pollock, interview with Selden Rodman, (in *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Air, 1957), p. 82), quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998).
  - 32 José Emilio Burucúa, "La biblioteca de Esteban Lisa, los libros y las ideas de un pintor," in *Esteban Lisa* (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1999), pp. 46–58.
  - 33 Ibid.
  - 34 Joaquín Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1939).
  - 35 Regarding Torres-García's work in New York, see, for example, Nelly Perazzo, "Constructivism and Geometric Abstraction," in *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920–1970* (New York: Bronx Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 1989), pp. 106–151.
  - 36 See Dora Vallier, *L'art abstrait* (Paris: Pluriel, 1980), p. 195.
  - 37 See Torres-García's manuscript with drawings, "Del esoterismo en el arte," dated October 23, 1932, in the archives of the Fundación Torres-García. For a review of this text, see Adolfo M. Maslach, "On the Esoteric in the Art of Joaquín Torres-García," in *Cross-currents of Modernism: Four Latin American Pioneers*, ed. Valerie Fletcher (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1985).
  - 38 In 1917 and 1918, Torres-García began to develop his ideas about the interrelation between object and structure and the acknowledgment of the role of the unconscious in the creative process. He mentioned for the first time "superreality" as that particular state of consciousness that allowed him to attain a transcendent plasticism. Joaquín Torres-García, "L'art en relació amb l'home etern," in *Escritos* (Montevideo: Arca, 1974), p. 222.
  - 39 Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917), in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. Harry Holzman and Martin S. James (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 42.
  - 40 Joaquín Torres-García, "Vouloir construire," *Cercle et Carré*, no. 1 (April 1930). This article was edited for publication by Michel Seuphor.
  - 41 Joaquín Torres-García, *Estructura* (Montevideo: Biblioteca Alfaro, 1935), p. 27.
  - 42 In an unpublished letter sent to his friend Armando Vasseur on May 14, 1935, an enthusiastic Torres-García reported how well he had been received in his own country and how he lamented having wasted a year and a half in Madrid. He also wrote, "I'm neutral here and will try to preserve my centrist position—only that way, I think, can I do some good. Scasso says that I am like a lightning rod." Courtesy of Eduardo Grüneisen, Buenos Aires.
  - 43 The arrival of the Mexican muralist David Álfaro Siqueiros in the Río de la Plata in 1932 reinforced the cause of artists who espoused a socially engaged art: Norberto Berdía in Montevideo and Juan Carlos Castagnino, Antonio Berni, and Demetrio Urruchúa in Buenos Aires. In Argentina, Siqueiros painted a mural for the country house of Natalio Botana, the editor of the newspaper *Crítica*.
  - 44 Norberto Berdía, "El arte de Torres-García," *Movimiento*, no. 7 (June–July, 1934).
  - 45 Joaquín Torres-García, *Manifiesto 1, Contestando a N. B. de la C.T.I.U.* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, September 1934).
  - 46 Estudio 1037, located on 1037 Uruguay Street, Montevideo, exhibited works by Germán Cueto, Eduardo Díaz Yepes, Jean Gorin, Jean Hélion, Theo van Doesburg, Torres-García, and the Uruguayan artists Carmelo de Arzadun, Zoma Baitler, Gilberto Bellini, Luis Castellanos, José Cúneo, Amalia Nieto, Héctor Ragni, and Petrona Viera, among others.
  - 47 See the well-researched text on the AAC by Cecilia Buzio de Torres, "The School of the South: The Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1934–1942," in *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 7–24. The volume also includes a chronology compiled by Buzio de Torres and Ana Rank.
  - 48 Letter no. 21, November 29, 1919, in *Joaquín Torres-García i Rafael Barradas: Un diàleg escrit, 1918–1928*, ed. P. García-Cedas (Barcelona: Biblioteca Serra d'Or, 1994), p. 143.
  - 49 Letter no. 62, April 12, 1926, in *ibid.*, p. 185.
  - 50 Torres-García, *Estructura*, p. 105.
  - 51 Joaquín Torres-García, *Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana* (Montevideo: Publicaciones de la Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1939), p. 15.
  - 52 A precedent had already been set by the Brazilian critic and philosopher Oswald de Andrade, who in his 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago* (Anthropophagical Manifesto) said that the goal of Latin American artists should be to swallow or transform ("cannibalize") what was interesting in foreign cultures and use it to trigger the creation of new forms related to the native.
  - 53 *Círculo y Cuadrado (segunda época)* was the magazine of the Asociación de Arte Constructivo. The first issue appeared in May 1936. On the special issue Nos. 8–10, dated December 1943, the AAC was not listed as publisher.



- 54 Lucio Fontana was among those who signed. The exhibition took place in March 1935 at the studio of Felice Casorati and Enrico Paulucci. See Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant, eds., *Italian Art 1900–1945* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 695.
- 55 Torres-García's Constructivist compositions have been classified according to the shape of the grid and the way the placement and drawing of the symbols is articulated. A first category are the constructivos generales lineales (general lineal constructions), where each symbol occupies a cell delimited by the sides of a grid or by lines that articulate partial secondary spaces within the cell itself, occupied by different symbols. When the cells are rectangular and there is only one symbol inside them, they have been called constructivos canónicos (canonical constructions), to stress the univocal correspondence between cell and symbol. Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Joaquín Torres-García* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985), p. 45.
- 56 "We construct and construct incessantly, but intuition continues to be something good." Paul Klee's observation, expressed while he was at the Bauhaus, connects the two central aspects highlighted by Torres-García: construction and intuition. Later, the Uruguayan artist emphasized in Montevideo the connections between some of Klee's works and preColumbian textiles and painted fabric, although he did not include Klee in his book *Universalismo Constructivo* (Buenos Aires: Poseidón, 1944) perhaps because his knowledge of Klee's work and theoretical work was insufficient. (At that time, Klee's texts had only been published in German, a language unfamiliar to the Uruguayan artist.)
- 57 Jorge Luis Borges, afterword to "The Maker," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Press, 1998), p. 327.
- 58 Robert Pincus-Witten, *Artforum* 7, (summer 1969), pp. 91–92.
- 59 Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of Easel Painting" (1948), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 2, p. 223. A revised version of this article was published in Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1961).
- 60 César Paternosto, *Piedra abstracta: La escultura inca; Una visión contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989). An expanded version has been published in English as *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art*, trans. Esther Allen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
- 61 J. Torres-García, *La tradición del hombre abstracto (doctrina constructivista)* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1938).
- 62 The seven murals created by Torres-García for the hospital were destroyed in a fire at the Museu de Arte Moderna of Rio de Janeiro on July 8, 1978, along with fifty-two paintings, six wood sculptures, six sets of toys, and two sculptures. All these works are reproduced in *Torres-García: Obras destruidas en el incendio del Museo de Arte Moderno de Río de Janeiro* (Montevideo: Fundación Torres-García, 1981).
- 63 Torres-García, "Vouloir construire," op. cit.
- 64 Córdova Iturburu (80 años de pintura argentina [Buenos Aires: Atlántida, 1958], p. 145) believed that this exhibition had taken place in 1937, whereas Emilio Pettoruti (*Un pintor ante el espejo* [Buenos Aires: Solar/Hachette, 1968], p. 256) thought that the exhibition, presented by Pedro Blake, a gallery director who was also a contributor to Martín Fierro, took place between December 2 and 18, 1936.
- 65 Enrico Crispolti, *Centenario di L. Fontana* (Milan: Charta, 1999): "lasciaba andare."
- 66 Thomas Messer, in Nelly Perazzo's introduction to *Lucio Fontana: Profeta del espacio*, exh. cat., Centro Cultural Borges, Buenos Aires, March 1999.
- 67 Altamira was a nonacademic visual arts school in Buenos Aires. Lucio Fontana, Emilio Pettoruti, and Jorge Romero Brest were among the teachers.
- 68 Tomás Maldonado, *Vanguardia y racionalidad*, p. 31.
- 69 Joaquín Torres-García, "Los pseudo valores del arte moderno," *La Nación*, September 30, 1934.
- 70 Aracy de Amaral, "Abstract Constructivist Trends in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia," in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Waldo Rasmussen (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), pp. 86–99.
- 71 J. Torres-García, *Manifiesto 2 Constructivo 100%* (Montevideo: AAC, December 1938) and *Manifiesto No. 3* (Montevideo: AAC, January 1940).
- 72 Between 1939 and 1940, Torres-García published a long series of articles in *Marcha*. Its editor-in-chief, Juan Carlos Onetti, interviewed him three times. See Joaquín Torres-García, *Testamento artístico* (Montevideo: Biblioteca de Marcha, 1974).
- 73 Torres-García, *Manifiesto no. 3*, n.p.
- 74 Some friends of the artist, themselves artists from an earlier generation, like Héctor Ragni, objected to the provocative nature of the criticism published in *Removedor* and distanced themselves from the group, although they continued to revere the master. See Ragni, Carta a Torres-García, March 5, 1947, J. Ragni archive, Montevideo.
- 75 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 305.
- 76 *Manifiesto de cuatro jóvenes* (Manifiesto of Four Young Men) (Buenos Aires, 1941).
- 77 Giacinto de Pietrantonio, "Entrevista a T. Maldonado," *Flash Art*, no. 151 (summer 1989), reprinted in *Tomás Maldonado: Escritos Preulmianos*, ed. Carlos Méndez Mosquera and Nelly Perazzo (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Infinito, 1997), pp. 117–127.
- 78 Grete Stern was a German-Argentine photographer. In 1929, in Berlin, she and her colleague Ellen Auerbach opened the graphic design and photography studio rigl+pit. She also studied photography at the Bauhaus with Walter Peterhans. With the rise of Nazism, she emigrated to London in 1933. In 1935, Stern and her husband, the Argentine photographer Horacio Coppola, who had also studied at the Bauhaus, had a joint show of their photographs at the offices of the magazine *Sur*. A year later, they settled definitively in Buenos Aires, where they opened a photography and advertising studio.
- 79 Joaquín Torres-García, *Revalorización del concepto de pintura* (Buenos Aires: Boletín del Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores), December 1942. The Colegio Libre was a prestigious independent institution founded in 1930 by liberal intellectuals, among them



- Juan José Castro, Alejandro Korn, Julio Payró, Aníbal Ponce, Luis Reissig, and Francisco Romero. On May 17, 1936, Torres-García had already given a lecture about the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz at the Sociedad Hebrea Argentina.
- 80 Carmelo Arden Quin is the artistic pseudonym of Carmelo Heriberto Alves, born in 1913 in Sant'Anna do Livramento, Brazil. Gyula Kosice is the pseudonym of Fernando Fallick, born in 1924 in Kosice, Hungary, who arrived in Argentina as a child and became a naturalized citizen. Rhod Rothfuss was born Carlos María Rothfuss in Montevideo in 1920.
  - 81 According to the magazine *Leoplán* (January 1, 1947), Bayley and Arden Quin first met in Río de Janeiro. In 1942 and 1943, Kosice, Arden Quin, Bayley, Maldonado, and others used to gather at the Rubí café, in the Once neighborhood.
  - 82 For example, Theo van Doesburg thought that the Surrealists had "found a way to infiltrate the audience, infecting it with pseudo-occult images." Theo van Doesburg to Joaquín Torres-García, c. November 1929, in *The Antagonistic Link: Joaquín Torres-García-Theo van Doesburg* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991), p. 32.
  - 83 Agnès de Maistre, *Carmelo Arden Quin* (Nice: Demaistre, 1996), p. 18.
  - 84 The date of formation is taken from *Boletín de la Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención*, no. 2, December 1946. This fact was confirmed by Salvador Presta in *Arte argentino actual* (Buenos Aires: Lacio, 1960) and by a letter from Maldonado (*Ver y Estimar*, 2d ser., no. 8 [June 1955], pp. 12-13). After Blanca Stáble published a chronology ("Para una historia del arte concreto en la Argentina: Cronología 1944-1952," *Ver y Estimar*, 2d ser., no. 2 [December 1954]), Kosice, Enio Iommi, and Maldonado exchanged letters with her. The last wrote the following from Ulm: "The split within the original group happened not after, but before, the private exhibition at the home of Dr. Pichón Rivière which, in fact, was the first of the group that would later be called Madí. Lidy Prati and Maldonado were obviously not included in that show."
  - 85 Simón Contreras was the literary name sometimes used by the Argentine poet Juan Carlos Lamadrid.
  - 86 Juan Melé, *La vanguardia del 40: Memorias de un artista concreto* (Buenos Aires: Editorial 5, 1999). Aside from Maldonado, the artists Prati, Iommi, Girola, and Hlito participated in that exhibition.
  - 87 The correct dates of the works by Arden Quin have triggered controversies that are far from being solved. Nothing has been found to justify dating any of these works to the 1930s. The statement made in *Boletín de la Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención* should be assumed to be true.
  - 88 T. Maldonado, "¿A dónde va la pintura?" *Contrapunto*, year 1, no. 5 (April 1945), reprinted in *Tomás Maldonado: Escritos Preulmianos*, pp. 35-36.
  - 89 Years later, Maldonado said that to put together the manifesto he followed closely the texts published by Arden Quin and Bayley in *Arturo* and *Invención* 2.
  - 90 Maldonado, Bayley, Espinosa, Hlito, and Aldo Prior officially joined the Communist Party, according to de Maistre, *Carmelo Arden Quin*, n. 30. See *Orientación*, official organ of the Communist Party, September 19, 1945.
  - 91 Tomás Maldonado quoted in Pietrantonio, "Entrevista a T. Maldonado," in *Tomás Maldonado: Escritos Preulmianos*, p. 117.
  - 92 T. Maldonado, "Comentario de T. Maldonado al Manifiesto Invencionista de 1946," in *Vanguardia y racionalidad: Artículos, ensayos y otros escritos: 1946-1974* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gilli, 1977), p. 29.
  - 93 Some bibliographies mistakenly place the exhibition at the Instituto Francés de Estudios Superiores. The show was sponsored by the Instituto Francés, but took place at the Galería Van Riel. This gallery played a key role in the development of the Río de la Plata avant-garde. It was located at 659 Florida, the main gallery area (major galleries such as Witcomb, Müller, Wildenstein, and Plástica were also located there.) Many artists, among them Alejandro Xul Solar, exhibited in its legendary Sala V.
  - 94 These names were pseudonyms for several Madí artists, the use of aliases being almost a constant among this group. Raymundo Rasas Pét was probably Kosice and Sylwan Joffe-Lemme and Dieudonné Costes may have been Arden Quin.
  - 95 Nelly Perazzo, *Arte Concreto Invención, Arte Madí, Perceptismo* (Buenos Aires: Museo Municipal Sívori, 1980).
  - 96 On the back cover of the 1946 Van Riel exhibition catalogue, Arden Quin, Kosice, and Rothfuss are identified as the leaders of Madí. The attribution of the authorship of the Manifiesto has generated a controversy that, in reality, is far less important than its participants believe. Kosice, who at the time of the 1946 exhibition was twenty-one years old and stood out for his playful and poetic talent, claimed that he made up the name Madí and wrote the group's manifesto. (G. Kosice, *Arte Madí* [Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglionone, 1982], p. 11. On p. 32 there is a facsimile of the French translation of the manifesto published in *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 0, with the name "Gyula Kosice" added in a different typeface). The other main , Arden Quin, who was thirtythree at the time, already mature and experienced, asserted that the text of the lecture he gave at the Galería Van Riel constituted the true manifesto. He announced its publication in full in 1983, but following a different sequence from the one published in *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 0. More recent accounts simply reflect the contradictory opinions of those interviewed.
  - 97 Works reproduced were by Max Bill, Moholy-Nagy, Calder, Félix Del Marle, Gorin, Le Corbusier, Kandinsky, Klee, Arp, Richard Lohse, Kupka, Robert Delaunay, Giacomo Balla, Vantongerloo, van Doesburg, Albert Gleizes, Torres-García, Alberto Magnelli, Sophie Taeuber, Auguste Herbin, Piero Dorazio, and Achille Perilli.
  - 98 Raúl Lozza, "La nueva estructura de la pintura perceptista," part 2, *Perceptismo*, no. 5 (July-August 1952).
  - 99 Rembrandt V.D. Lozza, "El arte y el hombre," *Perceptismo*, no. 1 (October 1950).
  - 100 Abraham Haber, "Pintura y arquitectura," *Perceptismo*, no. 2 (August 1951).
  - 101 Among others, José Pedro Costigliolo, Washington Barcala, Rhod Rothfuss, María Freire, and Julio D. Verdié studied at the Círculo Fomento de Bellas Artes, also known as Círculo de Bellas Artes, in Montevideo.
  - 102 Guido Castillo, "Torres-García y el arte moderno"; J. Torres-García, "Nuestro problema del arte de América"; and Sarandy



- Cabrera, "Originalidad e Invención," *Removedor*, year 2, no. 14 (August-October 1946).
- 103 Regarding this subject, see Torres-García's letter No. 38, March 7, 1926, in *Joaquín Torres-García i Rafael Barradas* (Barcelona: Biblioteca Serra d'Or, 1994, p. 171).
- 104 Juan Fló, "Joaquín Torres-García en (y desde) Montevideo," a seminar on Torres-García organized in Santiago, Chile, April 1996. This was the original version of "Torres-García desde Montevideo," an offprint of the catalogue *La Escuela del Sur: El Taller de Torres-García y su legado*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1991). According to Fló, his text was edited in such a way that its original meaning was totally changed. Fló considers "acceptable" the English translation published by the University of Texas in Austin, *El Taller Torres-García*.
- 105 J. Torres-García, "Lección 92: Como disciplina, debe pasarse por la abstracción total (junio de 1937)," in *Universalismo Constructivo*, p. 633.
- 106 Henry Miller wrote, "In the little garden adjoining the Eglise St. Germain are a few dismounted gargoyles, monsters that jut forward with a terrible plunge. On the benches other monsters—old people, idiots, cripples, epileptics. Snoozing there quietly, waiting for the dinner bell to ring. At the Galerie Zak across the way some imbecile has made a picture of the cosmos—on the flat. A painter's cosmos! Full of odds and ends, bric-a-brac. In the lower left hand corner, however, there is an anchor—and a dinner bell. Salute! Salute! O Cosmos!" *Tropic of Cancer* (1934; reprint, Frogmore: Panther Books, 1974), p. 45. The description of the painting, the date, and the fact that Torres-García exhibited at this gallery leaves no doubt that Miller was referring to a Constructivist work by the Uruguayan artist. This reference was communicated by Cecilia B. de Torres.
- 107 Tomás Maldonado, "Torres-García contra el arte moderno," *Boletín de la Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención* (December 1946), reprinted in *Escritos Preulmianos*, pp. 51–54.
- 108 Sarandy Cabrera, *Removedor*, year 2, no. 16, January–February 1947, pp. 2–5.
- 109 T. Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," *Arte Concreto-Invención*, no. 1 (1946).
- 110 These statements were obtained by Nelly Perazzo in 1995 and 1996.
- 111 Martín Blaszkó, Manuel Espinosa, Enio Iommi, and Raúl Lozza made similar comments during their interviews.
- 112 Carmelo Arden Quin, quoted in J. Donguy, "Arden Quin, la forme réinventée," *Canal*, no. 3 (May 1977), quoted in Agnès de Maistre, *Carmelo Arden Quin*, p. 13.
- 113 The painter Manuel Espinosa was very moved by his visit to the artist in Montevideo. He remembered that Torres-García gave him several issues of *Círculo y Cuadrado* and his book *La ciudad sin nombre*.
- 114 Robert del Marle was the secretary-general of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, and he invited Kosice to organize a Madí exhibition in Paris. Del Marle to Kosice, July 5, 1947, Kosice archives.
- 115 The catalogue of this exhibition lists, on pp. 27–28, the artists that participated as an Argentine group (Biedma, María Bresler, Del monte, Diyi Laañ, Kosice, Jacqueline Lorin-Kaldor, Rasás Pet) and the Uruguayans Rothfuss, Ricardo Pereyra, and Uricchio. The surviving photographs show only Madí works. In a publication issued by the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles titled *Réalités Nouvelles Salon No. 2*, works by the following artists were reproduced: Espinosa, Hlito, Iommi, Kosice, Molemborg, Melé, Laañ, Kaldor, Maldonado, Rothfuss, Prati, Vardánega, Souza, Stern, Uricchio, Rasas Pét, Del Prete, and Villalba.
- 116 Pierre Descargues, "Le groupe d'avant-garde Madí," *Arts*, (July 23, 1948), p. 6.
- 117 The exhibition Mimó Mena y los Concretos, which included work by Melé, Prati, Hlito, Souza, N. de Souza, and Del Prete, opened on October 24, 1948, at the Salón Mercaderes, in Caracas. José Mimó Mena was a Venezuelan artist interested in Concrete art. During a six-month stay in Buenos Aires in 1948, he exhibited at the *Salón Nuevas Realidades* at the Galería Van Riel.
- 118 C. Córdova Iturburu, *Diario Clarín*, September 1948.
- 119 Damián Bayón, "Arte abstracto-concreto-no figurativo," *Ver y Estimar*, no. 6 (September 1948), p. 66–62.
- 120 See Carlos A. Méndez Mosquera, "Veinte años de diseño gráfico en la Argentina," *Revista Summa*, no. 15 (February 1969), quoted in Nelly Perazzo, *Arte Concreto en la Argentina en la década del 40*, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983), p. 98. According to Méndez Mosquera, these meetings were attended, among others, by the architects J. M. Borthagaray, J. Grisetti, Jorge Goldenberg, P. Sivori, and Marcos Winograd, and by students of the School of Architecture as well as by Maldonado, Hlito, Iommi, Prati, Girola, and Bayley.
- 121 Blanca Stábile, "A propósito de la exposición 'Arte Concreto. Pintura, Esculturas, Dibujos. A. Hlito, E. Iommi, T. Maldonado' en el Instituto de Arte Moderno," *Ver y Estimar*, nos. 21–22 (May 1951).
- 122 Maldonado initiated the publication of *Nueva Visión*. Its design, by Hlito and Méndez Mosquera was improved in the second issue by Maldonado, who introduced a standard cover design, with vertical lines and black-and-white letters arranged in a balanced, sober, and refined manner. Nine issues appeared through 1957. In addition to articles, they included a current national and international bibliographical section and reviews of foreign architectural magazines. A number of established Argentine and foreign artists were featured. Max Bill, Mario Pedrosa, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Enrico Tedeschi, Pietro Maria Bardi, and Ernesto Rogers were among the foreign writers. Among the Argentine writers, Maldonado, Hlito, and Bayley wrote about the visual arts, Juan Carlos Paz about music, Rafael Iglesia about film, and Francisco Bullrich about design. *Nueva Visión*, a publishing house headed by Jorge Grisetti, was founded in 1953. With the mathematician Manuel Sadosky and the architect Jorge Goldemberg as editorial consultants, *Nueva Visión* went on to publish a series of books by authors essential to modern thought. Maldonado's book, *Max Bill*, was the first published.
- 123 At the request of the Uruguayan artist Volf Roitman, the Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones Madí (Madí Study and Research Center) was created at Arden Quin's studio, with the participation of the Venezuelan artists Luis Guevara and Rubén Núñez and the



- French artists Pierre Alexandre, Georges Sallaz, and Roger Neyrat.
- 124 Norberto Berdía had been one of the main promoters of art with political content in the 1930s. He attacked Torres-García on his arrival in Montevideo.
  - 125 Fernando García Esteban, *Marcha*, August 19, 1955.
  - 126 Tomás Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," *Arte Concreto Invención*, no. 1 (1946).
  - 127 Alfredo Hlito, "El tema del espacio en la pintura actual," *Nueva Visión*, no. 8 (1955).
  - 128 See Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," *Artforum* 5 (November 1966), pp. 18–27, reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 79.
  - 129 Blanca Stábile, "Artistas no-figurativos," *Ver y Estimar*, nos. 14–15 (November 1949).
  - 130 The golden section or golden mean is the division of a line so that the whole is to the greater part as that part is to the smaller part. In other words, line AB is divided into two parts, one longer (AC) and one shorter (CB), in such a way that the ratio of the longer part to the whole is the same as the ratio of the shorter part to the longer part:  $AC/AB=CB/AC$ .
  - 131 Van Doesburg developed the use of a slanted (45 degrees) orthogonal grid, a technique he called Elementarism, which was questioned by Mondrian.
  - 132 Review in *L'actualité artistique internationale*, no. 1 (January 17, 1952), quoted in de Maistre, *Carmelo Arden Quin*, p. 48.
  - 133 In the background of a photo of the exhibition organized at the home of Dr. Pichón-Rivière in 1945 is a painting with a key, which is generally recognized to be by Rothfuss.
  - 134 R. Rothfuss, "A propósito del marco," *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 4 (October 1950), n.p.
  - 135 Mario Sagradini, "Rhod Rothfuss: Un fantasma recorre Madí," in *Arte Madí* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1997), p. 74.
  - 136 G. Kosice, *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 2 (1948), n.p.
  - 137 This is a 1993 version of the work exhibited at the third Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. See *Uricchio y Troncone*, exh. cat., Museo Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, April 1994.
  - 138 Hlito, "El tema del espacio." pp. 10–13.
  - 139 Aldo Pellegrini, introduction to *Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina: Pinturas, Esculturas, Dibujos*, exh. cat., Vial Galería de Arte, Buenos Aires, June 1952.
  - 140 Maldonado, *Tomás Maldonado: Estudios Preulmianos*, p. 65. In *Vanguardia y racionalidad*, Maldonado said that during his period as a Constructivist artist and political activist, he considered the "artistic" as an expression of the arbitrariness of bourgeois culture.
  - 141 J. Romero Brest, *El arte en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1969).
  - 142 Ramírez, *La escuela del Sur*.
  - 143 Richard Lohse, *Concrétion I* (1945–46) and *Concrétion III* (1947). See R. P. Lohse, exh. cat., Galerie Denise René, Paris, 1967.
  - 144 See *Alfredo Hlito: Obra pictórica 1945–1985* (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1987), p. 86.
  - 145 A summary of Raúl Lozza's unpublished 1947 essay on the relationship between form and color was published in *Perceptismo*, no. 1 (1950). In his article "La nueva estructura de la pintura perceptista," *Perceptismo*, no. 5 (1952), Lozza presents four colors in a quantitative spatial extension, according to the tenets of Perceptismo, as examples of the space-color relationship. The colors were indicated in writing, because the magazine had no color illustrations.
  - 146 Jorge López Anaya, "Raúl Lozza: El fin de la ficción pictórica," *Raúl Lozza: Pintura y Arte Concreto 1945–1955* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Banco Patricios, 1993), n.p.
  - 147 Abraham Haber, *Raúl Lozza: Cuarenta años con el arte concreto (sesenta con la pintura)* (Buenos Aires: Fundación San Telmo, 1985), n.p.
  - 148 Stábile, "Artistas no-figurativos."
  - 149 Aldo Pellegrini, *Panorama de la pintura argentina contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Paidós, 1967), p. 70.
  - 150 Leopoldo Castedo, in *Fernández Muro 1979–1958*, exh. cat., Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo, Madrid, May–June 1985.
  - 151 *Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art 1910–1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985. This exhibition, curated by Magdalena Dabrowski and organized following the Barr model, later traveled throughout Latin America. The traveling show included Latin American artists who had not been featured in the original version.
  - 152 *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996, curated by Mark Rosenthal.
  - 153 Alfred J. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1936). Barr was the first director of the museum. The framed outline shows corrections in pencil that could have been made by Barr himself.
  - 154 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
  - 155 Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (January 1937), pp. 77–98. Schapiro was the first to point out the essentially antihistorical nature of Barr's outline. Schapiro's controversial essay, published in 1937, was largely forgotten until the last two decades, when the ideas of Barr and Greenberg began to be revised.
  - 156 Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb, letter to the *New York Times*, June 7, 1943, cited by Dore Ashton, *American Art since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 26. Greenberg's role in the history of Modernism has been much debated recently. Two aspects of the work of this great critic are worth highlighting: his farsighted analysis of modern art, on one hand, and the political and ideological role he played in enthroning American art after World War II, on the other. An example of this debate is Kirk Varnedoe's recent assertion that Greenberg's "formalist" outline acquired a "posthumous" importance that was out of proportion to its marginal relevance regarding the concepts that generated modern art. Kirk Varnedoe, "Comet: Jackson Pollock's Life and Work," in *Jackson Pollock* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1998), p. 46.
  - 157 Torres-García was not unknown to the New York art scene. In



1921, he exhibited at the Whitney Club Studio with Stuart Davis and the sculptor Stanislaw Szukalski, and Katherine Dreier bought some of his work for the "Société Anonyme" collection. His Constructivist paintings and wood "constructions" were part of the Gallatin collection, exhibited in New York before it was moved to Philadelphia. Torres-García's paintings were exhibited in New York at the Sidney Janis gallery and at Rose Fried's La Pinacotheca. They could be found in the permanent collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum, and in the private collections of Sidney Janis, Richard S. Ziesler, and Dr. and Mrs. Malbin, as well as in the Kaplan collection. Regarding the much remarked relationship between the works of Gottlieb and Torres-García, Alfred Barr was perhaps the first to articulate that connection when he reproduced Gottlieb's painting *Voyager's Return* (1946) face to face with the Uruguayan artist's *Composición* (1931) in a Museum of Modern Art catalogue, *Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art* of 1948 (p. 226.) Other critics have also recognized the connection, among them, Robert Pincus-Witten (*Artforum*), Barbara Duncan, *The Catalogue of the Joaquín Torres-García Family Collection* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), pp. 132-133, and Mary Davis MacNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: Arts Publisher, 1981), p. 35. Gottlieb admitted that he had seen a painting by Torres-García in the Gallatin collection, and that this may have had an "unconscious" impact on his own work (in Mary Davis MacNaughton). As to Barnett Newman, gallery owner Sydney Janis, who organized the first solo show of the Uruguayan artist in New York in April 1950, recalls that Newman would visit the Torres-García exhibit every day and would "read" the paintings, which were actually pictograms, to the gallery audience, using themes from mythology, history, and other sources (Les Levine, "A Portrait of Sidney Janis on the Occasion of His 25th Anniversary as an Art Dealer," *Arts Magazine*, November 1973). The relationship between Newman and Torres-García has been analyzed in more detail in M. H. Gradowczyk, "Simetría y simbolismo: Torres-García, Xul Solar y Barnett Newman," *Estudios Ibero-Americanos*, PUCRS 23, no. 2, (December 1997), pp. 47-70.

- 158 Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 90-91. In his detailed analysis of Abstract Expressionism, Michael Leja wonders if the omission of Torres-García perpetuated by Newman in his article in *Revista Belga* was due only to a lack of opportunity or because the similarity between the work of the Uruguayan artist and that of his friend Gottlieb was too obvious.
- 159 Agnès De Maistre, "Le Mouvement Madi," in *Art d'Amérique Latine, 1911-1968* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992), p. 341.
- 160 Tomás Maldonado, *Il futuro della modernità* (Feltrinelli: Milan, 1987).
- 161 Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1992).
- 162 Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano, in *ibid.*
- 163 Dominique Viéville, "Vous avez dit géométrique? Le Salon des Réalités Nouvelles 1946-1957," in *Paris 1937-Paris 1957* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981), p. 28.
- 164 *Kunst im Aufbruch: Abstraktion zwischen 1945 und 1959*, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 1999, and Hatje, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1998, curated by Richard W. Gassen.



# Abstract Art Between Images and Words: Vision and Division in a Single Gaze

Lisa Block de Behar

*Now, we must make a painting without name.*

Joaquín Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura*, 1947<sup>1</sup>

*Above all, do not begin by defining.*

Tomás Maldonado, *Actualidad y porvenir del arte concreto*, 1951<sup>2</sup>

*The indefinable consists of making definition invisible.*

Raymundo Rasas Pét, *Madigrafías*,<sup>3</sup>

What shall we call this art? Abstract? Conceptual? Concrete? Nonfigurative? Nonobjective? Constructivist? Constructive Universalism? Madi? “*Un art autre?*”<sup>4</sup> Something else entirely? The aesthetic range and philosophical disparity between these terms brings up more than a question of names. Perhaps the issue has to do with taxonomy—paradoxically, one based not on similarities but on dissimilarities. As Edgar Bayley wrote about the movement in 1945, “Being different is what is most valuable.”<sup>5</sup>

Listing all these names is not a simple indulgence in the game of enumeration but an appeal to the freedom that comes of legitimizing diversity. This license is a reaction against the conventional rules imposed by representation, when “representation” is understood to mean the imitation of, or conformity to, a given reality. There is in these movements a will to be liberated from naturalism’s mimesis, to embrace a poetics that poses intransitivity as transcendence in order to strengthen the will for emancipation. As expressed in 1951 by Tomás Maldonado, “To elaborate further runs the risk of undermining the anti-dogmatic essence of this art. We must remember that concrete art is not a dogma but, rather, a method, the best method for achieving an authentic, demythified art.”<sup>6</sup>

This variety of names encompasses a diffuse spectrum, implicating practices and theories as diverse as the names used to describe them. The justification for this range can perhaps be found in the conjecture that no art can escape the process of abstraction. Whether artists pro-

ceed through images or through thoughts, through the most visible of similarities or through the most secret of coincidences, it is inconceivable for them to suspend this process of abstraction: that would be tantamount to suspending thought. At the same time, if *art itself* is so elusive as to make that elusiveness its own contradictory definition, this gives rise to other considerations: that this definition hints at a lack of definition; that as such it is a limitless concept; and that it validates the dispersion or dissolution of the fabric of logic, which flows in several directions simultaneously. Once again, we must wonder how it is possible to find terms to enclose what cannot be enclosed, and how we can arrive at a constantly shifting finishing line. Joaquín Torres-García addressed this problem in 1947:

“What I mean by the term *constructive art* includes all art. All true art is constructive. What I mean by the term *abstract art* includes all art. All true art is abstract. . . . That is why *painter* and *constructor* should be understood to mean the same thing: a painter is a constructor of paintings. There are also music constructors, poetry constructors, architecture constructors, and sculptor constructors. And all of these artist-constructors work with abstraction.”<sup>7</sup>

A few years later, Tomás Maldonado asserted the following:

“We must understand once and for all—even against prevailing opinion—that this art is not abstract, but



concrete. We say it is not abstract because it makes no attempt to reflect the illusion of nature on a surface, a process that is totally and intrinsically abstract. We say rather that it is concrete because it aims to invent objective beauty through equally objective means."<sup>8</sup>

Torres-García's and Maldonado's positions are essentially the same. Through radically different terms, they allude to the same notions, pointing to ambiguities in an artistic current that finds antithesis valid. They use language to speculate about a reality questioned from within language, beyond denomination and opposition of terms, thus accounting for the labile relativism of a referential crisis, which continues to this day. Their speculations show that competing theories of intertextuality are not confined to literature, history, or philosophy. Hence their interest in abstract painting, a kind of painting that opposed what they considered a dubious reality limited to codes and laws, images and ideas, units and structures, and words themselves.

Edgar Bayley called attention to this fact: "Because the innovative power and, therefore aesthetic value, of Figurative work was exhausted by the beginning of the century, the so-called Abstract Art or, better-named Concrete Art, has had to wage the battle for *invention*."<sup>9</sup>

That this phenomenon had a variety of names suggests an unusual, if not conflictive, relationship with language. Since these painters were reacting against the traditional notion that image and discourse exist in opposition, it is not surprising that they used words as one more element to be developed in their pictorial practice. Nor is it surprising that they published manifestos and incited debates; after all, their times were rife with disputes, declarations, and slogans. As Jorge Luis Borges recalled in 1938, "Twenty years ago, the air was teeming with manifestos."<sup>10</sup> But when Borges wrote this, things had not changed much, nor would they in the near future. As Gyula Kosice recalled in his book *Arte Madí*, "Madí burst on the scene, propelled by the vital and somewhat unusual drive of its manifestos, statements, flyers, and broadsheets, all of which fought against *representation*. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

The Madí artists made forays into a transgressive literature in order to embrace the whole visual and poetic spectrum by inventing "a fiction sliced through by the real. . . ."<sup>12</sup> However, their attempt to aestheticize lan-

guage and revise the hierarchy of polemical discourse does not indicate a literary disposition or an interest in becoming involved in the poets' small world. For their part, the poets kept a discreet distance from the artists and their activities.<sup>13</sup> This is odd. The visual artists published magazines in which they expounded on their artistic theories and practices; they wrote critical reviews in the catalogues of their exhibitions; they published poems. In spite of all this, connections with literary circles were neither frequent nor satisfactory. A case in point is Edgar Bayley, who, like his brother Tomás Maldonado, proved to be a talented essayist and poet. He invented "inventionism" (making him an inventor twice over).<sup>14</sup> His poetic credo—"no expression, no representation, no meaning"<sup>15</sup>—was embodied in verses in which *pala* (shovel, in Spanish) could be found in *una palabra* (meaning "one word"), thus approaching what Bayley termed the "body of silence."<sup>16</sup> Bayley's aesthetic concerns were akin to those of the visual artists who were his contemporaries following World War II; his poetic corpus, in search of a different logic, aimed to liberate undisclosed meanings and to subvert semantic expectations. His work supports the assertion that the artistic movements of the twentieth century were promoted mostly by poets.

Torres-García published books, in addition to hundreds of his own lectures. In 1930, while he was living in Paris, he founded the magazine *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square), with Michel Seuphor, the avant-garde poet, artist, and critic. In 1934, he moved his publishing ventures to Montevideo. Following the European model, he used these publications to defend his paintings, expounding on the intellectual basis of his artistic work. Nevertheless, despite common publications and principles, the attempts at establishing connections between the visual arts and literature remained weak and discontinuous on both sides.

## A Visual/Verbal Threshold

If we accept that discourse remains outside visual composition, the aesthetic procedure that gives birth to abstract art—if not all art—consolidates the indivisible conjunction of the verbal and the visual within the art object. The alliance between painting and poetry is not



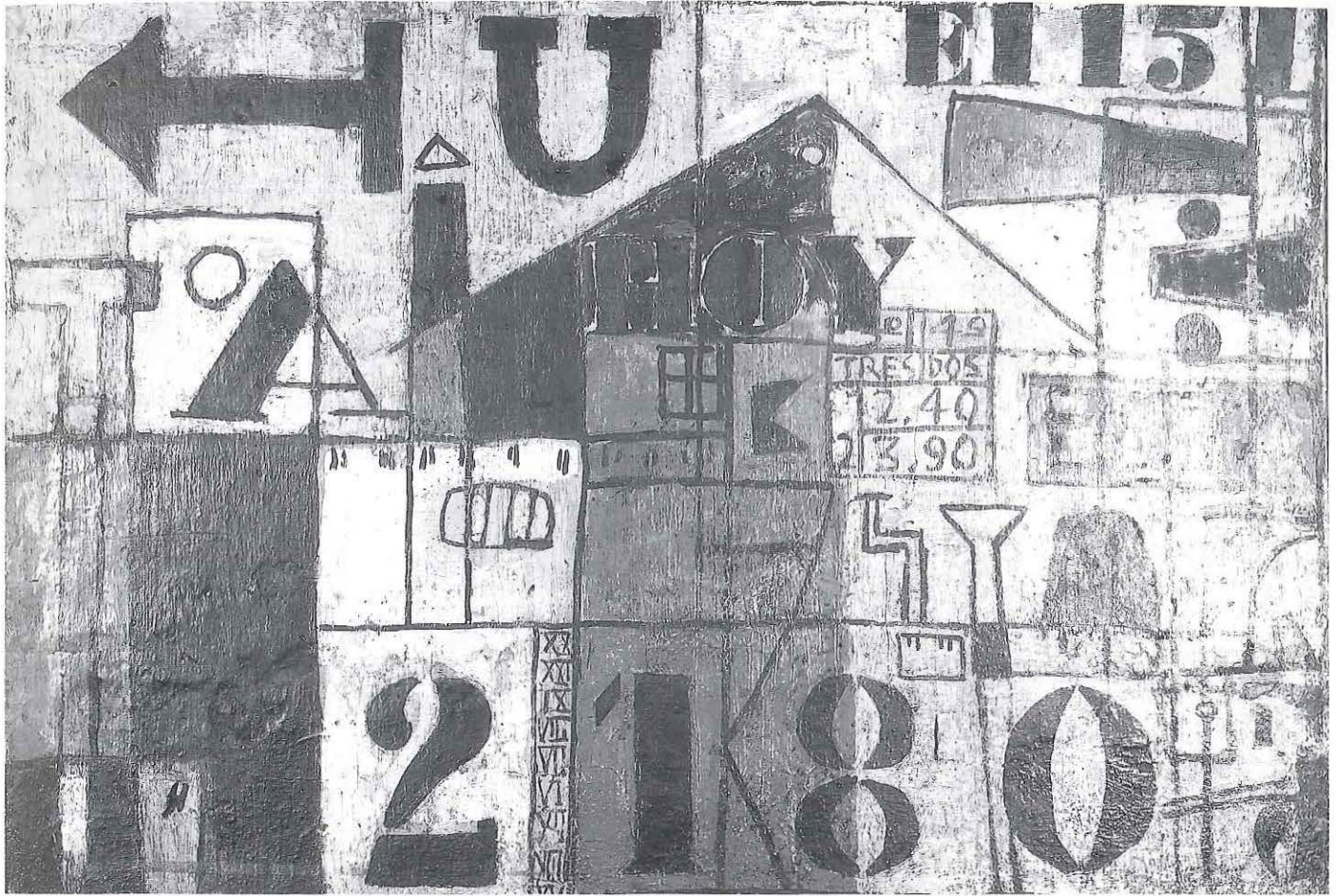


Figure 1. Gonzalo Fonseca, *Mural* (Mural), 1945, enamel on plaster mounted on canvas, 29 1/2 x 42 3/4 inches (52.8 x 64 cm), Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Eduardo Irisarri, Montevideo

recent; it is as old as the relationship between word and image. Only recently, however, has this fusion become at once strikingly prominent (due to the media and technology) and paradoxically unnoticed, due to familiarity and abuse.

In abstract art, the presence of language is twofold: it says and it is seen. Torres-García and his disciples tended to make words visible. Gonzalo Fonseca [Figure 1], Augusto Torres, Horacio Torres, José Gurvich, Julio Alpuy, Francisco Matto, Manuel Otero, Manuel Pailós, and Héctor Ragni<sup>17</sup> all insert, between images, verbal signs that become icons; they combine words with other icons that stem from the same visual inventory. These are traces of a verbal invention that reticulates the movement between different strokes, between two media that become assimilated in one and the same vision. Yet they do not stop speaking.

Although they may sound strident, the voices of *Poésure et Peinture*,<sup>18</sup> these lexical gargoyles both allow for and exhibit the intersection of *poésie* (poetry) and *peinture* (painting). They constitute a *hapax* (perhaps two), which names a cross-aesthetic inclination, an aesthetic hybrid born of a desire (akin to that of Stéphane Mallarmé) to articulate space as one articulated silence.

Torres-García configured an emblematic cartography—AMÉRICA, SUR (south), URUGUAY, MONTEVIDEO—and contrasted it with a category of universals—UNIVERSO (universe), ETERNIDAD (eternity), HOMBRE (man), ALMA (soul), RAZÓN (reason), ESTRUCTURA (structure), LEY (law), REGLA (rule)—which begin with writing (THOT, an invocation to the Egyptian god who invented writing).<sup>19</sup> The words are closer to signal than to sign; although they signify, they also indicate. More gesture than declaration, a single, isolated word signals and



appeals to the viewer from the canvas. It forsakes context within the space of the work, which becomes a place of passage, both a limit and symbol of that limit. The precision of the inscriptions is an attempt to cross the threshold that might separate them, to soften the oppositions between *reading/seeing* and *showing/telling*; it is another means of access to the plenitude of the Whole.

The past is rich in examples of an affinity that can be traced back to the quasiproverbial variations of *ut pictura poesis*. The letters that form the sacred Hebrew verses are a paradoxically iconic solution to the prohibition against images. This calligraphic advance against mimesis, the emphatic rejection of the world of objects, might just be a kind of abstraction *avant la lettre*. As Michel Butor said, in painting, words count; for the Surrealists, titles were so important that they enlisted poets to write them, in order to endow their paintings with linguistic properties.<sup>20</sup> Gazing, for example, at the calligraphy of Paul Klee's titles does not exclude the process of reading; neither does reading cease where contemplation begins. Verbal rules make the image familiar: vision or division—in both cases, the strokes are there to see.

For an exhibition, for the contemplation and the analysis of a work, the name of the artist and some key dates are relevant, even if these were not included in the work by the artists themselves. At the same time, it is necessary to go beyond the attraction of writing when it occurs in painting, otherwise, we risk an automatic response to the work, a sort of "reader reflex" in our gaze. *Homo legens*—the man who reads—is prey to the *anxiety to understand*, and this tends to predominate over a purely visual engagement with lettering. To a different extent, with different objectives, this flight of the gaze toward writing occurs with an illustrated text, as in illuminated codices, manuscripts, and books, which attract the reader's attention as emblems. The means change: a metamorphosis of images into the letters that describe them, or of letters becoming the images referred to by the writing itself, creates a magic of images, anticipating the most recent techniques of "infography," which reveal the pleasure of doing. A handmade book by Torres-García bears the title *Ce que je sais, et ce que je fais par moi-même* (What I know, and do, by myself).<sup>21</sup> In another of those craftsmanlike books (made of a rough ocher paper

anticipating the severity of today's recycled papers) he writes—or draws—at the bottom of a page, as though to split the page, the Spanish syllable HOM (from *hombre*, man) in irregular, unevenly matched, enormous capital letters. These continue on the back of the page in the form of a constructivist drawing of the final syllables: BRE-UNIVER-SO (Man Universe)<sup>22</sup> [Figure 2].

The visible words in traditional painting, as well as the images of illustrated texts and the incorporation of written fragments—newspapers, books, music scores, advertisements, texts of different origins—created the kind of juxtaposed coherence that Cubism worked through. Other means of approximation between images and words can be found in the critical writings of a number of poets, particularly Charles Baudelaire. Literary references to paintings, exercises of *ekphrasis*—the art of seeing and describing what is seen—form a subject, which, since antiquity, has been approached like any other literary theme, even from deep within the poetic universe.

Despite the geographic limitations of the Río de la Plata area and the common literary identity of which Borges wrote,<sup>23</sup> it is difficult to say whether there existed a regional uniformity in the visual arts between 1933 and 1953. There was enough diversity to support Torres-García's claim that "there is no true art unless the artist liberates himself from his immediate surroundings, and enters into the universality of all things."<sup>24</sup> In his case, that determination to search for a true essence led him to an abstract art that encouraged action and expression; his quest took different directions but was animated by an unswervingly intelligent, almost theological, or evangelical, will.

## The Idea in the Image: The Risks of a Universalist Adventure

The integration of names and numbers in works of art arises from a desire for universality, a wish to seek, in words and in the regularities of a transcendent geometry, a repertoire of universals, of simple icons. At once emblematic and schematic, these icons abstract an elemental uniformity from the diverse particularities of sensorial experience. In the works of Torres-García, words, rectangles, squares, circles, triangles, a small man and



LO VITAL Y LO ABS-  
TRACTO SE IDENTI-  
FICAN. EL DESCUBRI-  
MIENTO DE TAL  
NEXO  
ES EL CONOCIMIEN-  
TO DE LO REAL PRO-  
FUNDO: VIDA Y GEO-  
METRÍA. HOM-

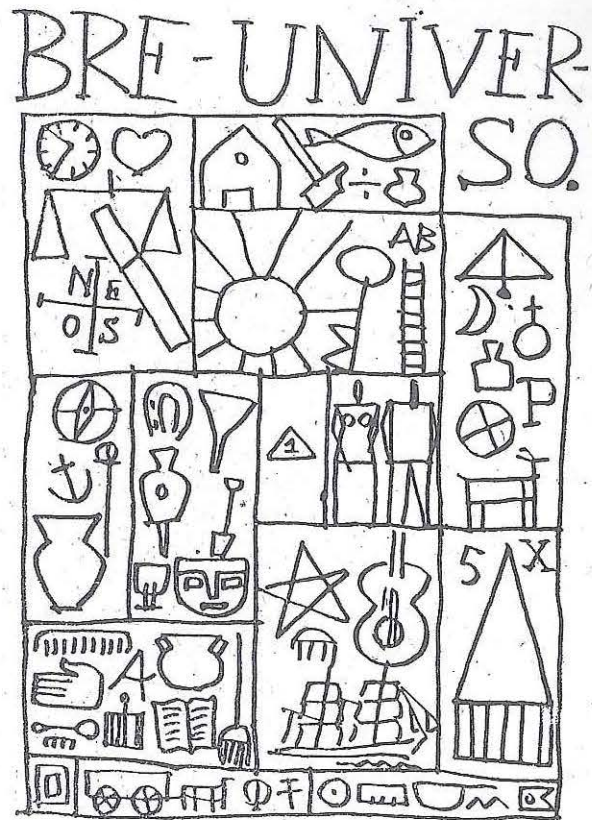


Figure 2. Two pages of *Tradición del hombre abstracto* (Tradition of the Abstract Man) by Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo, 1938.

woman, a sun, a moon, a fish, a boat, a clock, a scale, a hammer, an anchor, an arrow appear, as if the artist were exhuming the primary symbols of a universal man, who is sketched by the painter with rough inscriptions, almost like those found in cave paintings. This juxtaposition of word and image is not intended as a form of illustration. In fact, the verbal and visual together tend not to make a comfortable whole; there is neither completion nor refutation nor confirmation. Sometimes word and image are redundant. While this use of repetition is aimed at achieving the effect of an archinscription, it carries the risk of producing not an archetype but a stereotype.

Framed within small rectangles of varying sizes, these illustrations both recall the fragmented composition of stained-glass windows and anticipate the computer icons of today, those transidiomatic, global, ubiquitous signals that direct electronic traffic through a world at once regulated and in constant flux. The painting, a board, constitutes a ludic space: images and words are repeated, as

if they were movable pieces going from one canvas (or game board) to the other. It does not seem forced to see here a preoccupation with language and figures, with their representation or "figuration," through writing. These are devices that determine the formal bases of a visual aesthetics, incorporated as part of the material substance to be elaborated by a total art, without leaving aside its verbal substance.

In his "Aforística figurativa" (Figurative Aphoristic), José Bergamín traces the development of modern abstraction. "Before, during, and after Cubism, Picasso is a pure painter: a formal inventor, an abstract constructor, a poetic architect; an absolute creator."<sup>25</sup> He begins with Wassily Kandinsky, who discovered the mystery of his own painting when he abandoned the thematic, allowing himself to see only forms and colors; moving to Klee, who affirmed that through simple forms he had reached an inaccessible inner realm; and arrives at Kazimir Malevich, who restrained his imagination to a black square, or



a white-on-white square—in other words, to a basic geometric form, to a color that is not a color, or is a mix of all colors—thus daring to take his painting to the limit, abandoning the subject to a world without object(s). In the process, painting freed itself from the accidental, searching, through Piet Mondrian's geometric abstraction, for the archetype, the permanent, the universal.

In Torres-García, and his quasireligious evangelizing, and Esteban Lisa, and his "silence of the artist,"<sup>26</sup> the procedures of abstract appropriation show, or do not show, a world removed from the accidents of space, in favor of a time that transcends the illusion of a great Beyond. Carmelo Arden Quin and Gyula Kosice, in inventing the outrageously verbal Madí art, promoted this new artistic move toward the abolition of the figure and a total repudiation of all forms of imitating reality. All of these artists—sooner or later, to a greater or lesser degree— invented ways to challenge through diversity the validity of representation. Torres-García aimed to transform the figure. Without disfiguring it, he succeeded in altering it according to the parameters of a geometry that, in its almost missionary detachment, separates the image from its situation, from its contingencies. Aiming to rescue traces of totality from memory, he scrupulously banned accidental order. As Torres-García wrote in "La liberación del artista" (The Liberation of the Artist) in 1934, "Man's total presence must appear before us, manifesting the mysterious balance implicit in such an *idea*, but not through *description* or *representation*, but *symbolically*, as befits art. . . . It is impossible to attain universality via naturalism."<sup>27</sup>

Here, as in other cultural processes, the signs start out as icons which gradually de-imitate reality and lose the analogical charge that degraded them into superfluous visions, if not caricatures, of reality. The desire to attain a stripped-down purity, the inclination toward geometric abstraction

and the need to express it concretely, has been a constant force in art from the great cultures of the most remote past to the dominant movements of the twentieth century. These artists also aspired to "humanize the geometric by geometrizing the human." That is why they invented processes that radically rejected all allusions to sensorial reality; they deplored the simulacrum of reproduction for being counterfeit, a disruption, a disorientation of the necessary movement toward the universal. They sought to banish mimesis, which, by aspiring to duplicate what already existed, merely became redundant.

The recursiveness of the creative imagination and the attraction of cultural extremes link the first artistic representa-

tions, primordial or primitive, with those of more advanced stages. In the latter, timeworn conventional methods and formulae give way to the artists' desire to achieve a more personal originality, which, in some cases, refers them to mythical beginnings, where they glimpse originality in the origin. Torres-García insisted, "A work of art, as I have said so many times, is determined by its foundation; and its foundation is the artist. So whatever the artist may do, whatever theory he may adopt, his work will always be in harmony with him, it will always be a living work, his own, fitting and logical, and always *original*."<sup>28</sup>

Torres-García's "constructive universalism" was based on the coherent and substantial appreciation of the value of origins, in opposition to the numerous transgressive

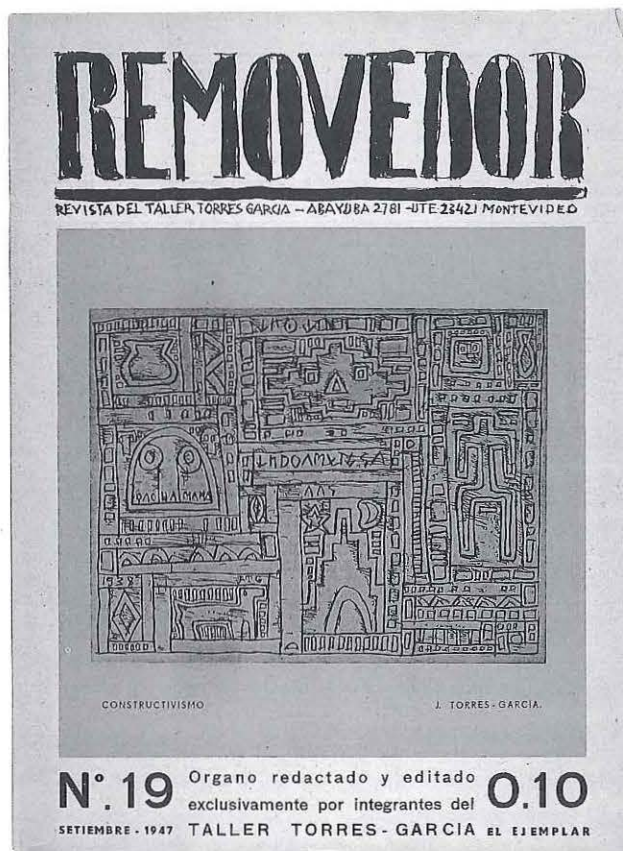


Figure 3. Cover of *Removedor*, No. 19, 1947



European cultural currents: "All that is already over. We are called by the voice of America," he declared, condemning Impressionism, Cézanne, Cubism, superrealism, Neoplasticism, and photographic naturalism. The cover of his voluminous book *Universalismo Constructivo* (Constructive Universalism) was inscribed with the subtitle *Contribution to the Unification of the Art and Culture of the Americas*. Announcing the work's American essence and the urgent need to solve "the problem of the art of America,"<sup>29</sup> it promised the exploration of an art he considered to be unrecognized. He urged reflection on the following questions: "What have we done? What are we doing, where do we come from? Where are we going? Who are we? In which time do we live?"<sup>30</sup> In these questions, he makes a distinction between the nation—which attends to the affairs of the state—and the earth, which connects the cosmic with the continent's most ancient cultures.

In *La ciudad sin nombre* (City without Name), Torres-García links art and the sacred with the sun:

"And all this was the art of that small South American republic? . . . 'The existence of the art you see here, he said, is due to two entirely different factors, without which the art could not be explained. The first, a historical factor, is the cult of the sun, which has been practiced since time immemorial all over the Americas. Something of those past eras is palpable; all of us South Americans feel it, consciously or unconsciously. The sun—Inti, as it was called in prehistoric times—is the common father of the peoples of this hemisphere, the main god of our theogony. Center of our system, regulator of order, source of life, creator of beauty, it is the symbol of our existence, as it traces its apparent curve between dawn and dusk.'"<sup>31</sup>

Torres-García's pre-Columbian vision was as remote and exotic in the Río de la Plata as his earlier European avant-gardism had been. INTI, INDOAMÉRICA, PACHA MAMA are words or talismans he inscribed in his paintings, foundational passwords relating to a timeless past [Figure 3]. Torres-García consecrated his lay devotion to this past, an integral part of his quest for a harmony beyond the time and space of the present. Its nomenclature presented a new option. Renouncing his earlier convictions, he now exhibited these archaic rites and rhythms as a brand-new coat of arms. Once he had

adopted these new-old emblems, this reverence for a different archaeology, Europe seemed, more than left behind, subsumed. The syncretic tendency in Torres-García's oeuvre integrates numerous and varied elements in its conception. It responds less to a desire to recover the past than to a need to invent one: being Indo-American it feels alien to, and distant from, the Río de la Plata. This sort of invention can be seen as one of the outstanding characteristics of the Latin American mind, which sporadically suffers the malaise arising from scattered genealogies. It can also be seen as a ritual, being imposed, cannot always be shared.

## Invention

Some of Torres-García's contemporaries took a very different path. While they had similar goals for their continent, they were tempted into extravagant posturing and eccentric provocations, particularly evident in the unexpected insolence of their invented words. First came Arte Concreto-Invención (Concrete Art-Invention); then, almost simultaneously, Invencionismo (Inventionism); finally, and more widespread, Madí.<sup>32</sup> This last term, disconcerting from the very beginning, always referred to a typically *Ríoplatense* artistic movement; it is still the object of an array of semantic speculations with rather unstable foundations. It has been argued, unconvincingly, that Madí was a contraction of Madrid, or perhaps an anagram of Carmelo Arden Quin's name—M from his first name, A and D from his middle name, and I from his last. According to other hypotheses, it is a neologism derived from the English word mad, the unexpected acronym of *materialismo dialéctico* (dialectical materialism),<sup>33</sup> or perhaps just a nonsense word. In any case, for Nelson Di Maggio, Madí was the "detonator of Uruguayan modernity which, until then, had been diffuse and erratic."<sup>34</sup>

"Each page of *Madinemisor* is a surprise and a joy," wrote an anonymous reviewer<sup>35</sup> about the magazine *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 0, in which Madí art, or "Nemisorism," is defined as "the organization of the distinct elements of each art form in a universal continuum." In its attempt to be universal, Madí leaped over the limits of



Spanish, its own language, by resorting to nonsense words, gratuitous eccentricity, and homophones from other languages, as well as precarious new nomenclatures, obscure lexicons, unpronounceable combinations, and transposed phonological and semiological arrangements that produced a delirious semantic: "Madism considers invention an internal 'method,' and creation an immutable whole. Therefore, Madí invents and creates," noted Kosice, who, in his "Diccionario portátil Madí" (Portable Madí Dictionary), offered an alphabetical list of outlandish words that defy logic, including *Eche-Echel*, *Harpir*, *Llihst*, *Llojeño*, *Nacichud*, *Rodyi*, *Sadña*, *Wior-Eil*, *Yerbrell*, *Zasz*. Occasionally a known name appears ("Kosice: Read A B C D, what?")<sup>36</sup> or, with unexpected coherence, the name of another Madí artist: "*Rothfuss*: Why are flags rectangular?" In this movement, sensuality is not possible in images, nor intelligibility in implausible words: these are authors who invent terms, definitions, hybrid pseudonyms, even their own proper names.<sup>37</sup>

Part image, part idea, forms become symbols of the adventure of movement, of displacement; this very transference becomes its own literal *metaphor*. However, in the 1940s, in the decade that split the century, Madí artists assumed both the heroic postures of the (inherently ephemeral) avant-garde and the mission of a crusade against aberrant nationalisms. Madí declarations and works showed a poetic logic that eschewed all doctrinaire biases as arising from the restrictive argumentations of rational discourse. Unobstructed, painting flows within words, and words within painting. Hence years later, referring to the conceptual work and research of Joseph Kosuth, which explored issues taken up by semiology and linguistics, Roland Barthes—who himself delighted in creating montages of texts and images—would say that art had become a "chatterbox" (*bavard*), the excesses of its loquaciousness meant to counteract the lack of eroticism it protested.<sup>38</sup>

The Madí artists were animated by an overwhelming energy: "Take down all paintings,"<sup>39</sup> they cried. They sought to go beyond the limits of the work by abolishing regular edges, altering forms, breaking and refashioning the frame, transgressing the space reserved for painting in order to inaugurate or invade the surrounding exterior space. There is no separation of the work from its own

excess: "Madí," they declared in a 1946 broadsheet, "has invented the cut-out, irregular frame, breaking forever with the taboo of the painting."

Although only one issue was published (with a cover designed by Tomás Maldonado), *Arturo* is considered the "cornerstone of the modernist ideology of the Argentine avant-gardes."<sup>40</sup> It provided the cultural setting for the foundation of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Inventción (Concrete Art-Invention Association)<sup>41</sup> and of Madí itself. Like the metaphysicians of Tlön, who, according to Jorge Luis Borges, invented an imaginary region, these artists searched not for truth, nor even verisimilitude, but "to astonish." Their most common techniques—explosions of indecipherable neologisms, extravagant vocabulary, and difficult teratology—were suitable to an unintelligible preaching, to mysteries ciphered in a cryptic clause: "Who invented Tlön?" The enigma facing the narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is, at the very least, twofold: "The Moon rose above the river" has become "Hlör U Fang Axaxaxas Mlō," or "Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned."<sup>42</sup>

When mechanical precision takes charge of reality and replicates it, when reality, subsumed by these meticulous replicas, denies itself, there is a predictable aesthetic flight toward forms that cannot be exposed by or subjected to the comparative questioning inherent in analogy. The disappearance of limits implies the disappearance of representation, a revolt stronger than the constant quarrel about images, a dispute that cannot be resolved by the ever more perfect technologies that rival, and displace, reality. "The 'framed painting' should no longer exist," the movement declared in a text called "Pro Madí". Why should there be a frame, or a framed painting? The frame underscores a boundary, opposes reality to fiction, and marks a difference that these artists refute. For the members of Madí, framed paintings were "at best, a backward carpentry industry," set as much on joining areas as on dividing them; this made them a favorite target of invective and insult.

These contentions, announced in works by artists who struggled against the stereotypes that both shape and question reality, gave rise to new conventions that laid waste the prevailing ones and were, in turn, themselves destroyed. Hence the need to elevate the work above the



secular and temporal expedients of history, using intuition to draw closer to the Whole, to a Totality beyond the intelligible and the material. It was an effort to catch a glimpse of the Eternal and Universal—the constant that, ultimately, is the reality of things, or of their ghosts.

## An Urban Painting

Due to shared circumstances—the Río de la Plata, the capital cities on both banks, the common chronology of the decades that articulated the mid-twentieth century—the perspectives adopted by these artists confined thought within a limited time and space. Uruguay has been described as “a country of proximities.”<sup>43</sup> Montevideo’s geographic nearness to Buenos Aires has compensated for its smaller size, giving it access to, and a vantage on, the greater cosmopolitan energy of the Argentine capital.

Both cities, and there are other, less visible ones,<sup>44</sup> constitute the topos for creation, as manifested in painting, sculpture, reliefs, and architecture. According to Torres-García, architecture kept the visual arts unified through a process of urban development that defined “urbanity” as deriving from an ethic of restraint, pure lines, and contained rapture. The name does not matter: the city itself is the site of the artwork, its recurrent theme, its point of departure, point of return. One speaks of the civic landscape as one would speak of the citizens of a country, and although the city does not monopolize the civic condition, civic identity is inextricably bound up with the city.

This relic of the *polis* excludes a large portion of the country—namely, the nonurban citizens. In *La ciudad sin nombre*, Torres-García gives form to his philosophical concerns in a kind of narration alternating with illustrations [Figure 4]. He summarizes his points in a brief foreword, at the end of which he declares, “I have tried here to depict nothing but the endless struggle between Man and the Individual, which lies at the very essence of the Cosmos.”<sup>45</sup> The grandiloquent, doctrinaire tone—found in many of his texts and speeches—contrasts with the handmade quality of the book. A curiously crafted volume, *La ciudad sin nombre* is composed of irregular, handwritten characters, disparate writings riddled with spelling errors, unnumbered pages with more drawings

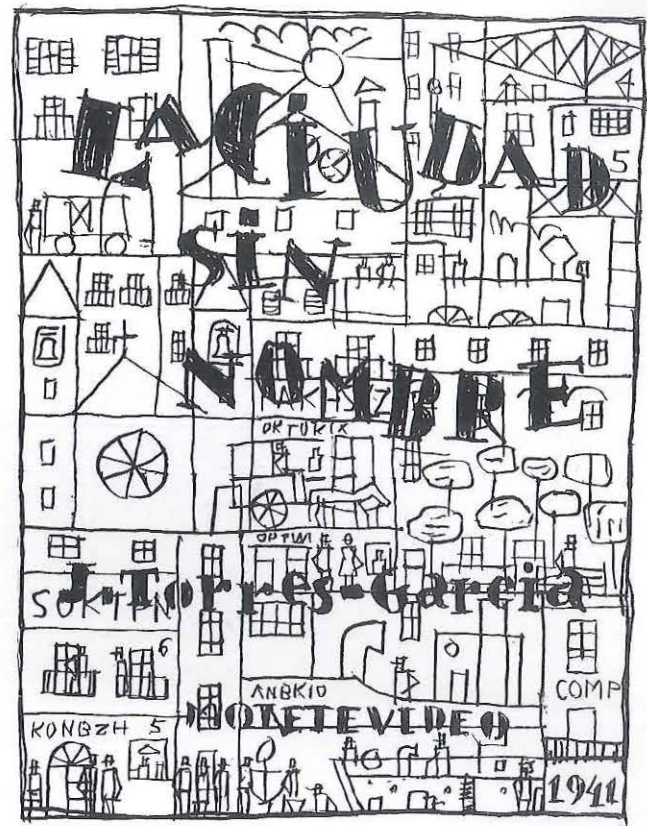


Figure 4. Cover of *La ciudad sin nombre* (*The City Without Name*), Montevideo, 1941

than writing, fragments of renderings, incomplete figures, small icons, sketches of monuments, undifferentiated individuals, facades, symbolic keys, slices of harbor views, letters taken from advertisements, and street signs. As the artist himself declared in this volume, he was attracted to “industrial products by the thousands, in boxes, cans, and packages; and letters, more letters, and numbers. Organization, Machine-ism. Telegraph, Telephone, abbreviation, clock, electric button, signs, numbers, and letters.” In these objects, Torres-García located the heraldry of the modern city, elements that neither distinguish one capital from all the others nor blend it together with all the rest. The emblematic Palacio Salvo (Salvo Palace) may thus be seen as a symbol for the pretensions of any city, and not merely as the center of Montevideo [Figure 5].

For Torres-García, “What each artist has to give us is, precisely, his own *newness*, his own *originality*; that which he himself does not know; that which emerges from



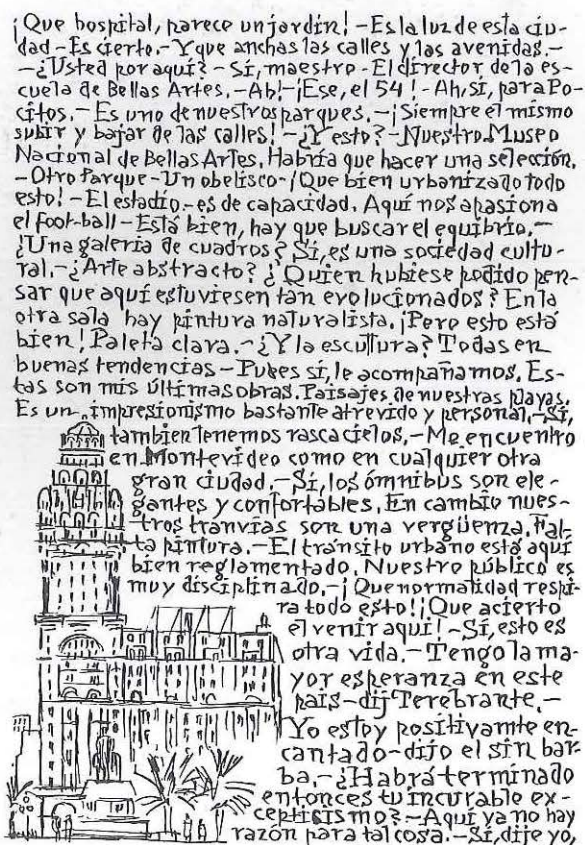


Figure 5. Joaquín Torres-García, *Palacio Salvo*, reproduced in *La ciudad sin nombre* (The City Without Name), Montevideo, 1941

the depths of his being (as I have said many times before); the unnamable, *which is all spirit*. It goes back to what I have said earlier: *a way of painting without name*.<sup>46</sup> The city is present in the thinking of these artists, and their way of seeing, their invention, is almost paradoxically present in the city itself, and in its citizens. Those who sought to avoid all imitation of their surroundings are now commonly imitated. Today, these artists' materials, colors, subjects, and symbols belong to a national vision. They have become part of an urban landscape, influencing clothing, decorative objects, facades, billboards. Their creations have been coined and have literally gained currency among Uruguayans: a five-peso bill has just been issued with a portrait of Torres-García on one side and a somewhat coarse reproduction of one of his constructions on the other. Censured yet inevitable, imitation always happens after the fact, a representation against the grain.

In spite of all the allegations and insults levied against it, such representation is part of the consecration of the work, after it is revealed to and embraced by collective preferences or taste.

The rectangular lines in the work of these artists, which schematically represent the highest buildings and houses, the edges of structures, or the reflection of their distorted outlines on glass, show the illusion of a city—a *trompe l'oeil*, as it were. The geometric urban reality lays out a constructive aesthetic, justifying the impression that the regularity of the streets of New York City and the interminable grids of windows were inspirations for Mondrian. The preference for a basic color scheme, for a visible tectonic reference, returns the primary geology to the *image* of the city without attenuating that urban thrust.

"What an extraordinary vision, this colossal harbor! It is a Cubist-Futurist reality: geometry, red, black, air, smoke, cables, letters, chimneys, sirens, flags, signals and the gigantic static transatlantic ship, solid as an island. A thousand different languages, expressed in letters; tar, coal tar, a thousand smoking chimneys."<sup>47</sup>

These are artists who, like Esteban Lisa in his *Paisaje urbano* (Urban Landscape) [Figure 6], were concerned with the lines of a world fragmented by its own dynamics, blurred by its own intersecting planes and by the dislocation of juxtaposed urban elements. The resulting abstraction is a kaleidoscopic vision in which time moves in numerous directions, simultaneously.<sup>48</sup>

Constructivism appears as a kind of urban cause—albeit one that does not bow to technology or to mechanical progress—or as another Humanism. In a word, Constructivism is humanistic. Closer to craft than to mechanics, more aligned with the manual arts than with High Art, man uses his skill to make objects, which he introduces into reality, stratifying the world, extending it toward new dimensions. The earth, its colors, the lines of the horizon are all present in his measurements and proportions. They are filtered by an elucidation that will necessarily segment the inapprehensible variations of a continuum that escapes systematization; they are filtered through variable models, relatively flexible patterns, and more or less irregular grids.



## An Ordered Freedom

"There is no art without freedom. In other words, unless the artist liberates himself from his immediate surroundings in order to enter the realm of universality, there can be no true art". (Joaquín Torres-García, "Del desconcierto actual del arte," 1946).<sup>49</sup>

On the one hand, the strict application of rules; on the other, the exaltation of freedom. Torres-García was not indifferent to the reactions that his eloquence and teachings produced in an environment dominated by the remains of a culture given to naturalism, and to a "disorder that Romanticism transformed into the mad signature of its aesthetic."<sup>50</sup> Yet the devotion of the faithful, the

ambiguities and contradictions of his verbal discourse, and the picturesque quality of the icons he employed undermined Torres-García's arguments.

There is no point in resolving the debates triggered in their time by the exhibitions of abstract art, nor in reversing the adverse public reaction that caused Juan Del Prete to abandon his convictions and return to a naturalism in which he can hardly have believed. Similar causes produced a different kind of denial in Esteban Lisa, "a marginal and secret creator"<sup>51</sup> who opted to take refuge in discretion and withdrawal. Although Lisa's self-imposed isolation has been attributed to "the cannibalism of Argentine culture" and to the mystical expectation of a revelation,<sup>52</sup> it was also an act of severe self-criticism. At the same time it was the willful expression of privileging



Figure 6. Esteban Lisa, *Paisaje Urbano* (Urban Landscape), c. 1938, oil on board, 9 1/8 x 12 1/2 inches (23 x 31 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires



the act of creation over and above its consequences, and of his desire to adhere to the philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic principles found in his assiduous philosophical and aesthetic readings, which ranged from Plato to Werner Heisenberg.<sup>53</sup> His brief book, *Kant, Einstein y Picasso: La filosofía y las "cuatro dimensiones" en la estética moderna* (Kant, Einstein, and Picasso: Philosophy and the "Four Dimensions" in Modern Aesthetic Science),<sup>54</sup> summarizes the philosophical relations that formed the structure of his aesthetic and artistic practice.

By 1945, Montevideo had a fabled circle of young thinkers, politicians, and art and literary critics, all brought together by the weekly magazine *Marcha*. Founded in 1939 by Carlos Quijano, *Marcha* and its concentration of distinguished, powerful, and influential intellectuals spawned editorial, literary, and cultural projects that would define the country's intellectual course and creative horizons over the next three decades. As the eminent critic, and *Marcha* contributor, Emir Rodríguez Monegal recalled:

"A sense of intellectual community was one of the defining characteristics of the team that took over *Marcha* toward 1945. Although there was great diversity of interests and even specializations . . . there was a sense of community in the journalistic work of this first group of the Generation of 1945, a respect for the objective critical work, a mistrust of the emotional premises of artistic creation, a scrupulous use of language, avoidance of sentimentality, and a reluctance to see themselves as writers. The word *cronista*<sup>55</sup> was much used to define the limits, and utter lack of pretension, of journalism and its willing practitioners."<sup>56</sup>

Although solid links between Uruguayan art and literary circles might be presumed, this was not, in fact, the case. The existing written and oral testimonies point to a continued separation between the two groups.

On the other side of the Río de la Plata, similar events surrounded the "generation of 1945." Again we turn to Rodríguez Monegal:

"In Argentina, a new literary generation emerged around 1945. Unlike its Uruguayan counterpart, this Argentine generation did not immediately achieve a high profile, nor did it have its own editorial identity.

The Argentine literary mainstream was still controlled by the Generation of 1925, the so-called *Martinfierristas*, who—aside from some vaguely registered, condescending sympathy, or a certain well-bred annoyance—hardly noticed the new arrivals."<sup>57</sup>

Several art and literary magazines, bearing some resemblances, were published in Argentina in those years. Publications like *Ver y Estimar*, *Contemporánea*, *Ciclo*, *Boletín 2*, and *Nueva Visión* often shared the same writers and covered similar subjects. In the main, however, contemporary writers and artists remained apart, on parallel tracks. There were a few rhapsodic encounters,<sup>58</sup> but little else that left a trace. That the magazine *Entregas de la licorne* featured an article about the Taller Torres-García in the first issue of its second period might have been interpreted as an auspicious sign. However, the article was surprisingly brief and superficial, despite having been written by the editor of *Removedor*—the magazine of the Taller Torres-García—who could have done a more in-depth analysis given the space, and despite the importance that Susana Soca, the editor of *Entregas*, gave to contemporary international art.<sup>59</sup> Conversely, a posthumous appreciation of Torres-García by the Uruguayan author Francisco Espínola was the only substantial literary text ever to appear in *Removedor*,<sup>60</sup> which published twenty-eight issues between 1945 and 1950.

On the other hand, the novelist Juan Carlos Onetti (under a pseudonym) wrote a piece in 1941 for *Marcha* about the Asociación de Arte Constructivo, focusing on the five-hundredth lecture that Torres-García gave in Montevideo. Considering the intermittent attention that the literary world paid to artists, and that the novelist was acting here as a journalist, it is worth excerpting from Onetti's piece. The passage is especially notable for its description of the resistance artists faced at the time:

"This lecture, as educational as are all of Torres-García's talks over the last six years, is of particular interest. It is the history of an experiment and, naturally, of a disillusionment. The text booklet, barely forty pages long, deserves to be carefully preserved. In time, it will be a definitive document on the terrible sobriety of our national culture in these years. Unfortunately, by then, we will have left life on earth. Still, we nurse the hope



that in the future there will be many who will enjoy knowing about the adventures of Torres-García with the *crème de la crème* of the Uruguayan arts and intellectual establishments between 1936 and 1940. By then, there will be no reason for indignation, and the sadness that might contaminate the honorable failure of our compatriot painter will have been much attenuated. After all, come what may, Torres-García has a destiny to fulfill; and the foolishness of our times is, if we pause to consider, just one more element helping him to realize that destiny.”<sup>61</sup>

At the end of the twentieth century, no one would dream of interpreting the excessive freedom artists claim as a consequence of a decadence that predicted the destruction, even the disappearance, of art. The manifestations of this art movement in the Río de la Plata are not without contradictions: there is an adherence to rules and to an established order, as well as an equivocal attitude that, at first sight, appears both to consecrate freedom and to constrain it within normative regulations. Hence, abstraction came to be identified with a search for archetypes that legitimized, as *classical*, the exaggerations of the avant-garde. If “Cosmos is Beauty,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed,<sup>62</sup> this beauty is more than tautological, because *kosmos* refers to the good order that rules the universe. Those are the rules that the artist must discover, or invent, in order to distance his work from apparent reality and from those imitations separated, by more than a few degrees, from truth. This is a Platonic aspiration that neither Torres-García nor Esteban Lisa would have rejected.

In the words of Torres-García:

“Naturalism abhors order. It wants only to take into account the *representation* of things as similes, or reflections, of reality, and after that—in a setting that simulates reality as closely as possible—the sentimental, poetic, or dramatic expression of any landscape or event. It would seem that by wanting to remain within the *natural order*, [naturalism] repudiates *aesthetic order*. [Naturalistic] works, therefore, lack ordering at the level where it is needed.”<sup>63</sup>

Order, rules, measurements, moderation, expression, all these are contained by self-sustaining laws. Through norms, the artist tries to establish a Universal Rule of Art

that will enable him to escape the contingencies and which would circumstantially alter his quest for an absolute. The ruler, then, is consecrated as the best instrument for achieving authenticity. Torres-García resorts to rules in order to create his works; the “metaregular” dimension is recurrent in his writings and drawings. We see the flat sobriety of the rule, the Cabalistic abbreviation of the capital R, redundant over the rectangle or next to the motif that, in a fleeting contradiction, represents it: The R of “rectangle” calls up the R of “RAZÓN” (reason), and so takes on an emblematic quality that both confirms and disarms it. The grids that characterize his paintings, drawings, and constructions in different materials find shelter in these rules. Rules that remain blank, that delimit the space and define the slots, are the consequence of a lapidary imagination imposing its own order on a world that does not hide its propensity toward diversion and confusion.

These concepts are crystallized in an essay by Carlos Real de Azúa:

“Torres-García’s almost Comtean aspiration was to embrace man, his work, and the entire world within the fabric of an intellectual formulation. His universe was organic, intelligible, ordered by the *rule*, measured by the *number*, arranged according to *proportion* and *structure*, regulated by *norm*, moved by *rhythm*. These notions are for him more than ideal patterns, working hypotheses, or instrumental ideas: they respond to the very nature of the cosmos and allow everyone and everything to be identified with the essentials that, for Torres-García, are *Universe*, *Rule*, *Number*, and *Structure*.”<sup>64</sup>

“The rule must be followed,” insisted Torres-García.<sup>65</sup> Even the most enlightened of his contemporaries failed to grasp the affinity between profundity, substance, essence, and simplification, as they also failed to see that naming runs contrary to universality, that a concession to particularity flattens and reduces what cannot be said and should therefore remain unspoken. This necessary silence, when invoked, becomes more seal than secrecy (although originally these were congruent). By condescending to the “representation” of archetypes, even a stripped-down discourse admits a rhetoric that, for all its austerity, is still



rhetorical. The project was to elude the irrelevance of the transitory, to block out the noise of time that is history. But these stated goals in turn gave rise to professions of an ordered faith, of beliefs and doctrines, slogans and schisms; all of this had a cultist ceremonial quality that came dangerously close to ritualization, to the choral echoes of adepts who had finally achieved their long-sought effacement. In one of the drawings in *Universalismo constructivo*, where he once more opposed "HOMBRE UNIVERSAL" (universal man) to "HOMBRE INDIVIDUAL" (individual man), Torres-García inscribed, under a box labeled "CONSTRUCCIÓN" (construction), "ARTE ES SABER CONSTRUIR CON REGLAS" (art is knowing how to build with rules). There is a rendering of the letter S, an unfinished stroke, an incomplete *order* intended to stand for the *whole* that he seeks to embrace from within the mystical space of a universal, transcendent geometry, removed from binary polarizations and from the positivist oppositions of a doctrine with only a superficial understanding of the notion of structure.

"There has been so much talk of structure," wrote Torres-García, "but the concept was so vague!"<sup>66</sup> He did not fail to acknowledge that structure was the fundamental idea. Although in some works, the inscription of the rule is not visible as a word, letter, or emblem, its symbolic properties are far from absent. Like the implicit nature of the code, the better rooted, the less noticed. Here we turn to the poet Esther de Cáceres, a kindred spirit for whom Torres-García designed the cover of *Cruz y éxtasis de la Pasión* (Cross and Ecstasy of the Passion), a collection of poems.<sup>67</sup> We can see in his design their common aspiration to asceticism, to a mystically experienced communion, to a "religious, that is to say, universal, spirit."<sup>68</sup> As de Cáceres reflected:

"Perhaps we have at times locked ourselves too much within the boundaries of total abstraction: in other words, rejected all relation with the formal world, or, to be more precise, stopped paying attention to the forms of the real, physical world. There has been a tendency at times to exclude the images of things, and groups of things, from our works. As discipline, I think this has been beneficial; and I further think that to continue on this path would not be detrimental to our art. But we do not all have the same temperament, and there may

be some among us who feel a need to introduce into their work elements taken from reality. My feeling is: All the better. Because this can never *signify the abandonment of the rule*. What makes a visual form is not its relationship to a real or imagined form, but the fact that it exists within a geometric plan, *and that, consequently, it can interact with other forms within that same plane*, such that it cannot be an imitative form."<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, with the visual form freed from the binds that iconically determine representation as such, adherence to *the rule* can take various forms, can be expressed in a host of voices. This expansion favors multiplicity, permitting unlimited versions of a vision divided by the particularity of events. However, it does not validate works that are but epigones of those of their predecessors. Torres-García warned that "the artist must safeguard himself as much as possible, in order to escape the suggestions and contamination of other artists."<sup>70</sup> If this is so, why is it less naturalistic to represent a word that is itself a "figure," or representation? For Torres-García, words like SOL (sun), TIERRA (earth), HOMBRE (man), MUJER (woman), UNIVERSO (universe), REGLA (rule), RAZÓN (reason), ALMA (soul), ESTRUCTURA (structure), are the elements of his periodic table, the dynamic building blocks of his imagination. Written in capitals across his canvas, the unmistakable, intelligible word hardly blasphemes mimesis. The arbitrariness of the sign (the particular word) would invalidate an analogy not supported by the sounds or letters of which it is composed.

From her literary vantage point, de Cáceres observes that the virtues of geometrization are to be found in its effort to extract the essential articulations of contingency without resorting to a cubism that, even though it relied on geometry, de-composed the complexity of objects, reducing them to an odd repertoire of elements with no intrinsic unity, stripping them of what Torres-García called "their profound, substantial truth."<sup>71</sup> The artist further elaborated, "In a Cubist composition, the object disappears. Mutilated, it loses its unity, its essence; the object no longer exists. . . because the Cubist painter looks only at the subjective. He does not perceive the world objectively. He may achieve an aesthetic value, but he has broken absolutely with the world."<sup>72</sup>

We return to Juan Carlos Onetti, who sides with



painters who avoid telluric figuration, received subject matter, and the transactions of a wornout literature he himself found deplorable. (Earlier in his essay, he excoriates the intransigence of the public, whose incomprehension, he argues, allowed it to assimilate Adolf Hitler.) On the subject of Torres-García, Onetti wrote, "[His] work and his personality are already acting invisibly on us. And sooner or later, this will be the point of departure for painting without sentimentality, without literature, without the peasants' little straw huts, without the blond cherubs, without the loving, big-bosomed mothers. [It will be the point of departure] for *painting*, period."<sup>73</sup>

## When the End Draws Near

The abstract artists of the Río de la Plata set themselves against both Cubism and the various schools of realism. Cubism faced the eye with the broken mirror of an inner world equally fractured, reflecting the figuration that the turning of the century had torn to shreds. Realism, on the other hand, was fraught with inconsistencies, as changeable and uncontrollable as the spontaneity of dreams. And they found less oneiric forms of realism equally sinister and repressive.

Girded by the certainty of their declarations, these abstract artists believed in the spare distillation of a reality that hides its profundity behind appearances. They believed in an increasingly elusive universal truth, which when fleetingly captured by technological exactitude loses verisimilitude. For various reasons, they doubted that history would last, and they foresaw the holes through which illusion would sink into tragedy, or the ideological folds that concealed them; they affirmed the fatal impact these fractures would have on poetry; they bruited their complaints about theory, doctrine, political regimes, and territorial and jurisdictional expansions. They glimpsed the pitfall of an Aesthetic of Extinction—precipitated, as it came to pass, by the events of the century.

Living in the southern tip of the Western Hemisphere, these artists yet were mindful of the annihilations that had devastated other latitudes. Their works tried to leap over borders, to abolish boundaries; to question words by fixing them in images; to refute definitions and

the validity of definition itself—all through sheer invention. They attempted to aestheticize a way of thinking removed from the insistent pressure of representation—indeed, defied it—in order to foster the unlimited revision of an open imagination.

## Notes

- 1 Joaquín Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1947), p. 9.
- 2 Tomás Maldonado, "Actualidad y porvenir del arte concreto," *Nueva Visión* 1 (December 1951).
- 3 Gyula Kosice [Raymundo Rasas Pét, pseud.], *Arte Madí* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983), p. 113. (The pseudonym R. Rasas Pét has been attributed to Gyula Kosice, although it has also been claimed by artists of the Madí group.)
- 4 This was the title of a 1952 Paris exhibition, which presented both figurative and abstract works.
- 5 Edgar Bayley, "La batalla por la invención," *Invenición* 2 (1945), n.p.
- 6 Maldonado, "Actualidad y porvenir."
- 7 Torres-García, in *Mística de la pintura*, p. 7.
- 8 Maldonado, "Actualidad y porvenir," p. 27.
- 9 Bayley, "La batalla."
- 10 Jorge Luis Borges, "Un caudaloso manifiesto de Breton," *El Hogar*, December 2, 1938. Diego Rivera is mentioned in this and one other essay Borges published that year: a brief review of two books about Spanish painting, entitled "Dos libros sobre pintura española."
- 11 Kosice, *Arte Madí*, p. 14.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 At that time in the Río de la Plata, painters either read little, or did not reflect in their work what they read. Nor did writers reflect in their literary work an interest in art, even though they must have gone to art exhibition and workshops. (Nelson Di Maggio, personal communication.)
- 14 Edgar Bayley's *Obras*, an anthology of important poetic and critical texts, was published in 1999 (Buenos Aires: Grijalbo Mondadori). Bayley wrote for the magazines *Arturo*, *Cabalgata*, *Caballo de Fuego*, *Ciclo*, *Reunión*, *Nueva Visión*, *Cinedrama*, *Contemporánea*, and *Poesía Buenos Aires*. He was editor of *Conjugación de Buenos Aires*.
- 15 Rodolfo Alonso, foreword to Bayley, *Obras*.
- 16 Bayley, *Obras*. References are to the poems "Estado de las cosas," "La mano tendida," and "El horizonte," from *En común* (1944–1949).
- 17 Nelson Di Maggio, "La visión del Taller Torres-García," in *Unidad y pluralidad en la Escuela del Sur*, exh. cat., (Punta del Este: Exposición 11 Maestros del Taller Torres-García, summer 1999).
- 18 *Poésure et Peintrie: D'un art, l'autre* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998). This is a compilation of materials from the exhibition of the same name organized in Marseilles, February 12–May 23, 1993.



- 19 Joaquín Torres-García, *Dibujo: Tinta sobre papel* (1945), in Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Joaquín Torres-García* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985).
- 20 Michel Butor, "Les mots dans la peinture," in *Répertoire IV* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, Collection Critique, 1974).
- 21 This is the title of one of Torres-García's handmade books.
- 22 Torres-García, *La tradición del Hombre Abstracto: Doctrina constructivista*. (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1938).
- 23 Jorge Luis Borges, "Los escritores argentinos y Buenos Aires," *El Hogar*, February 12, 1937.
- 24 Joaquín Torres-García, "Del desconcierto actual del arte," in *Removedor* 2, no. 13 (June–July 1946). *Removedor* was the magazine of the Taller Torres-García.
- 25 José Bergamín, "Aforística figurativa," *Martín Fierro*, period 2, year 3, no. 36 (December 12, 1926), p. 4.
- 26 Elena Olivera, "El silencio Del Pintor," in *Esteban Lisa* (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1999).
- 27 Joaquín Torres-García, "La liberación del artista," in *Universalismo constructivo* (Buenos Aires: Poseidón, 1944), Lesson 1.
- 28 Joaquín Torres-García, "No hubo remedio..." *Removedor* 3, no. 19 (September 1947).
- 29 Torres-García, "El arte de América," in *Universalismo constructivo*, pp. 841–849.
- 30 Ibid., p. 848.
- 31 Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Comisión de Homenajes a Torres-García, Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), n. p. This is a facsimile of the original 1941 edition commemorating the centenary of the artist's birth.
- 32 Nelson Di Maggio, "Con Arden Quin en París: El pintor uruguayo que inventó el Arte Madí," *La República*, July 22, 1992, p. 39.
- 33 "I was looking for a name like Dada. . . . It was awesome: after I made up the name, I realized that it alluded to dialectical materialism." María Ester Gilio, interview with Carmelo Arden Quin, *Brecha*, February 4, 2000.
- 34 Nelson Di Maggio, "Artistas olvidados de la vanguardia uruguaya," *La República*, January 23, 1995.
- 35 "La mar en coche," *Marcha* 10, no. 433, June 18, 1948.
- 36 Gyula Kosice, "Suplemento para el diccionario Madí," in *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 2 (October 1948), n. p.
- 37 The name Rhod is also a pseudonym; Rothfuss's given name was Carlos María.
- 38 Roland Barthes, "L'art conceptuel," in *Le texte et l'image* (Paris: Pavillon des Arts, 1986), p. 63.
- 39 Gyula Kosice, "Hacia Madí," *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 6 (October 1952).
- 40 Nelly Perazzo and Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa, 1895–1983* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Esteban Lisa, 1997), p. 61.
- 41 The first exhibition of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención took place at the Salón Peuser on Florida Street, Buenos Aires, March 18–April 3, 1946.
- 42 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Press, 1998), p. 73. In the Spanish original: "Surgió la luna sobre el río se dice Hlör U Fang Axaxaxas Mlō o sea en su orden: hacia arriba (upward) detrás duradero-fluir luneció. Xul Solar traduce con brevedad: upa tras perfluyue lunó. Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned."
- 43 Carlos Real de Azúa, *El impulso y su freno* (Montevideo: Editorial Banda Oriental, 1964).
- 44 Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo*, p. 61.
- 45 Torres-García, forward to *La ciudad sin nombre*, n. p.
- 46 Torres-García, in *Mística de la pintura*, p. 11.
- 47 Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre*, n. p.
- 48 Perazzo and Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa*, p. 20.
- 49 Torres-García, "Del desconcierto actual del arte."
- 50 Esther de Cáceres, "Torres-García contra la vorágine materialista de la época," *El País*, October 10, 1957.
- 51 José Emilio Burucúa, "La biblioteca de Esteban Lisa: Los libros y las ideas de un pintor," in *Esteban Lisa*, p. 50.
- 52 M. H. Gradowczyk, "Esteban Lisa: El espacio simultáneo," in *Esteban Lisa*, p. 30.
- 53 Burucúa, "La biblioteca de Esteban Lisa." The author searched through and analyzed the painter's library to discover how Lisa's readings related to his artwork and to his reclusive habits. See also Perazzo and Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa*, pp. 46–58.
- 54 Esteban Lisa, *Kant, Einstein y Picasso* (Buenos Aires: Escuela de Arte Moderno, 1956).
- 55 Literally, chronicler, but generally applied to newspaper reporters, feature writers, or columnists.
- 56 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Literatura uruguaya del medio siglo* (Montevideo: Ediciones ALFA, 1966), p. 23. The entire introductory chapter, "Introducción: Una generación polémica," pp. 13–109, is devoted to an extraordinarily well-informed, lucid description and analysis of the period by a critic who, beyond being an exceptional witness and a "militant critic, an actor in the events hereby presented" (foreword, p. 10), was one of the main shapers of that reality.
- 57 Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio de los parricidas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Deucalión, 1956).
- 58 For example, Torres-García was part of the group of intellectuals who helped finance the publication of Felisberto Hernández's first book, *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling* (Montevideo: González Panizza Hermanos, 1942).
- 59 Guido Castillo, "El Taller Torres-García," *Entregas de la Licorne* period 2, year 1, no. 1 (1953), pp. 161–164.
- 60 Francisco Espínola, "Conferencia pronunciada en la última exposición del Maestro J. Torres-García," *Removedor* 6, no. 27 (December 1950). The article was based on a lecture given at Amigos del Arte in August 1949.
- 61 Juan Carlos Onetti [Periquito el Aguador, pseud.], "La Asociación del Arte Constructivo," *Marcha* 3, no. 81 (January 1941).
- 62 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), chap. 3, p. 14.
- 63 Torres-García, "La liberación del artista," *Universalismo constructivo*, p. 29.
- 64 Carlos Real de Azúa, "Joaquín Torres-García," in *Antología del ensayo uruguayo contemporáneo*, vol. 1 (Montevideo: Departamento de Publicaciones, Universidad de la República, 1964), p. 95.
- 65 Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo*, Lesson 53, p. 277.
- 66 Ibid., p. 370.



- 67 Esther de Cáceres, *Cruz y éxtasis de la Pasión: Cantata* (La Plata: Ediciones M. Fingarit, 1937).
- 68 Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura*, p. 16.
- 69 Esther de Cáceres, "Alma y creación de Joaquín Torres-García," lecture given at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Montevideo, (mimeographed, n. d.).
- 70 Torres-García, "La liberación del artista," p. 31.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Onetti, "La Asociación del Arte Constructivo."







*Plate 1*

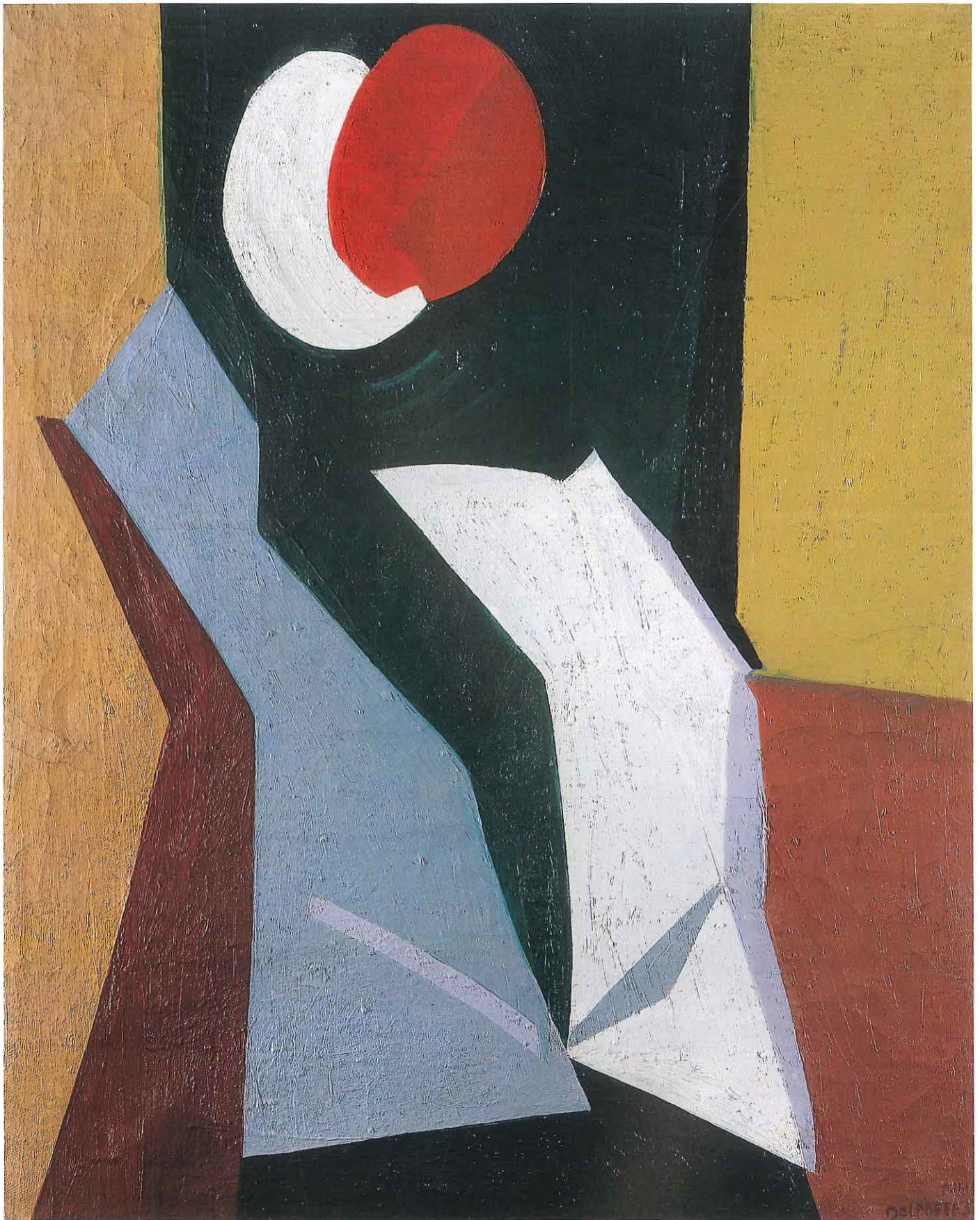
Juan Del Prete

*Abstracción* (Abstraction), 1932

Oil on canvas, 56 x 44  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (142 x 114 cm)

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires







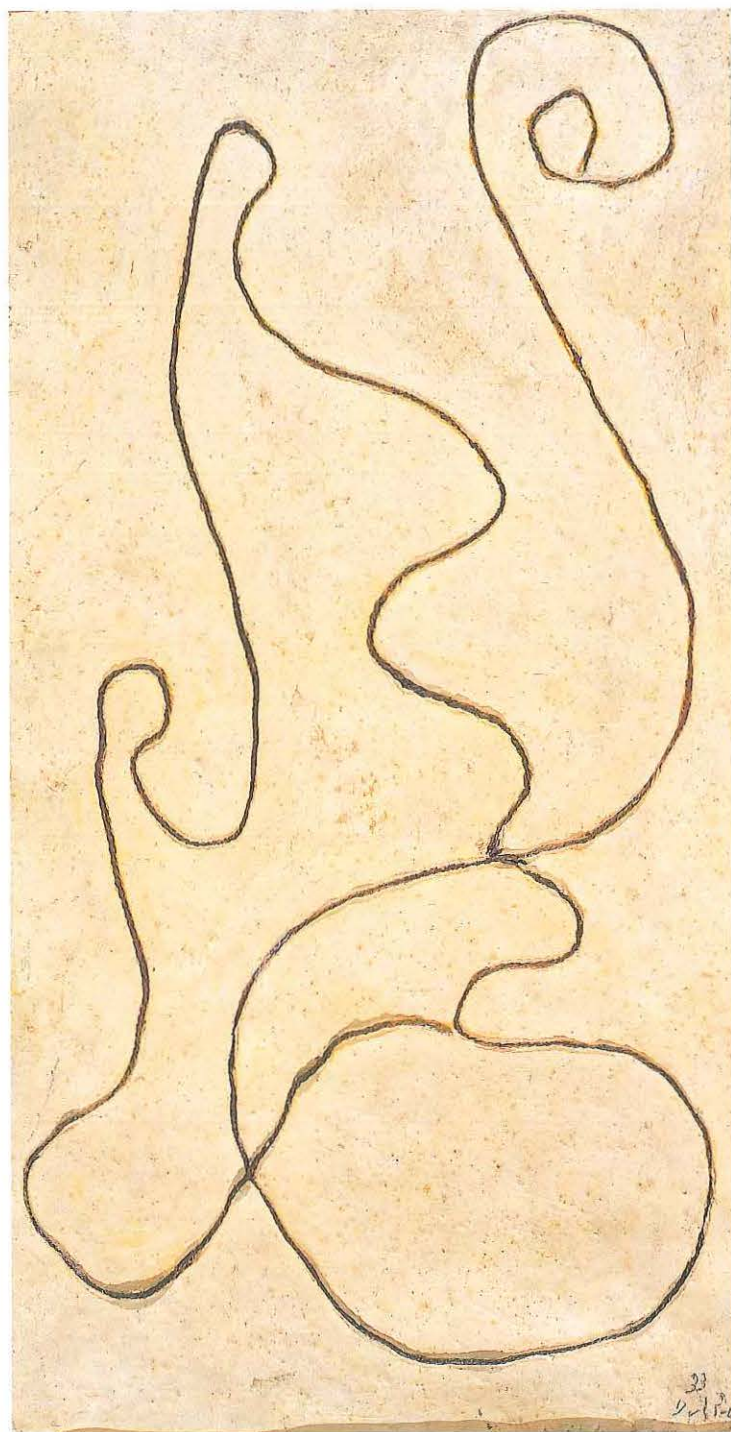


Plate 2

Juan Del Prete

*Composición con piolín* (Composition with String), 1933

Collage with cord, 31 7/8 x 15 3/8 inches (76 x 39 cm)

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto de la República Argentina



Juan Del Prete

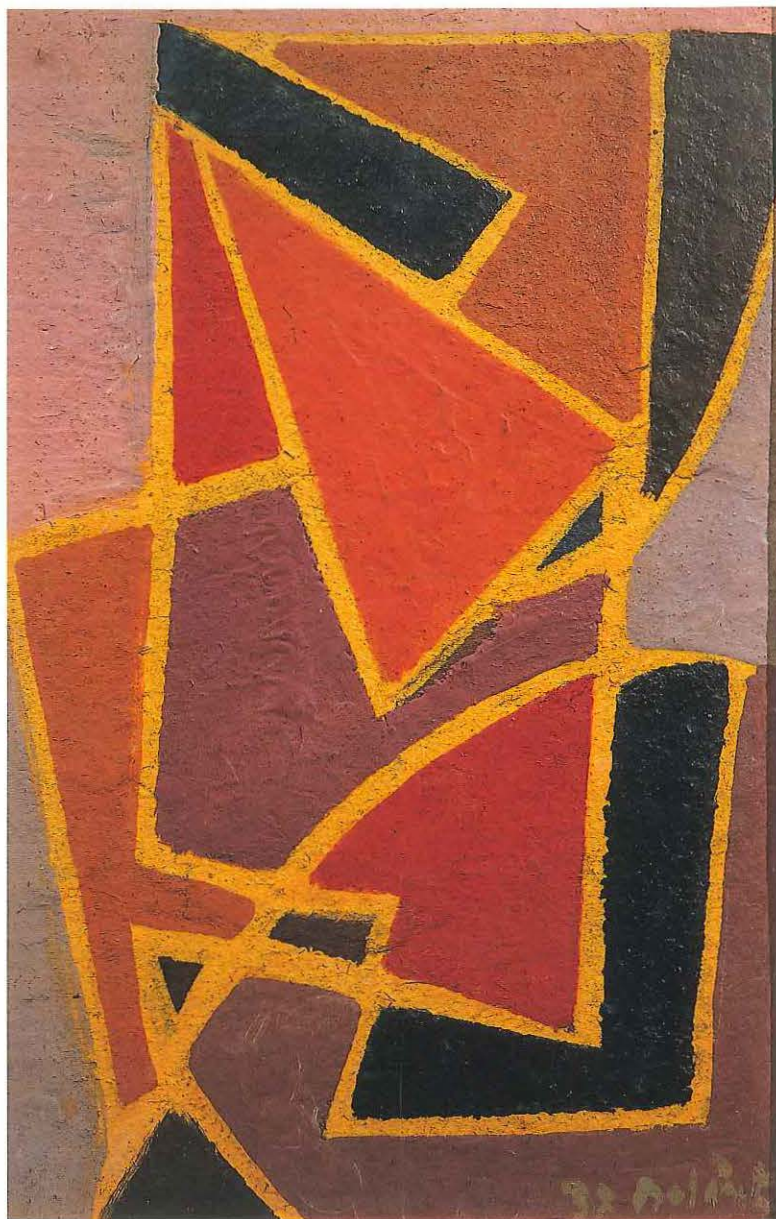
*Estructura en alambre* (Structure in Wire), 1933

Umbrella steel rods, 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (68 x 62 x 39 cm)

Collection of Liliana Crenovich, Buenos Aires







*Plate 4*

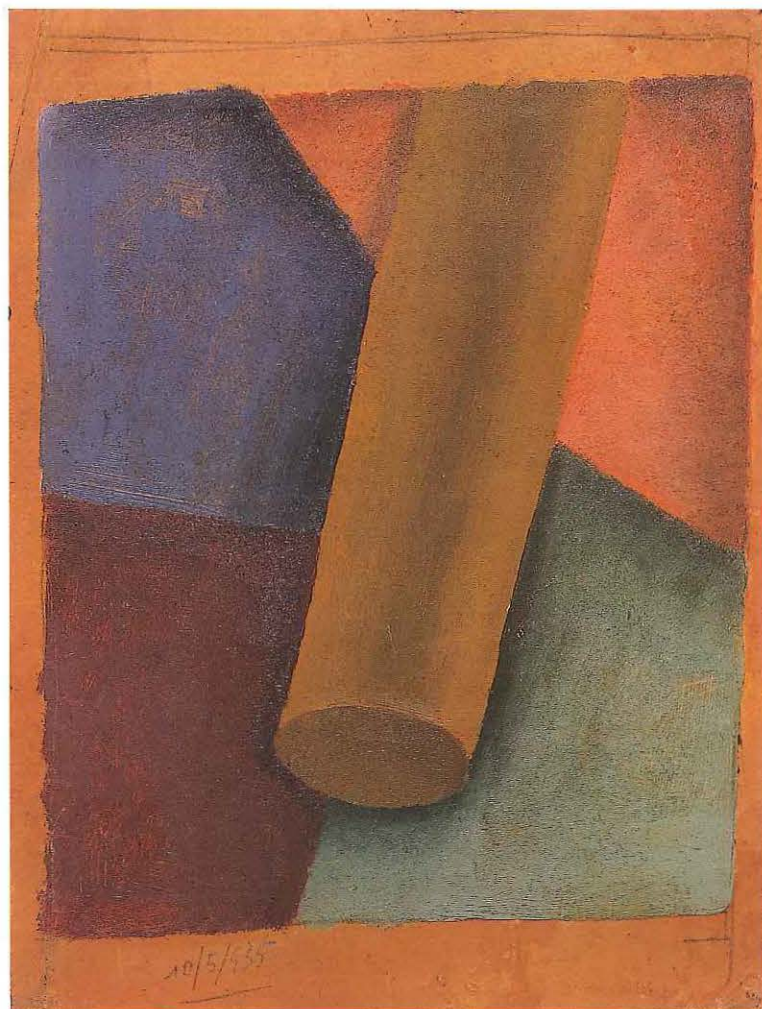
Juan Del Prete

*Composición* (Composition), 1937

Oil on board, 13 x 8 1/4 inches (33 x 20.8 cm)

Collection of Josefina Durini, Buenos Aires



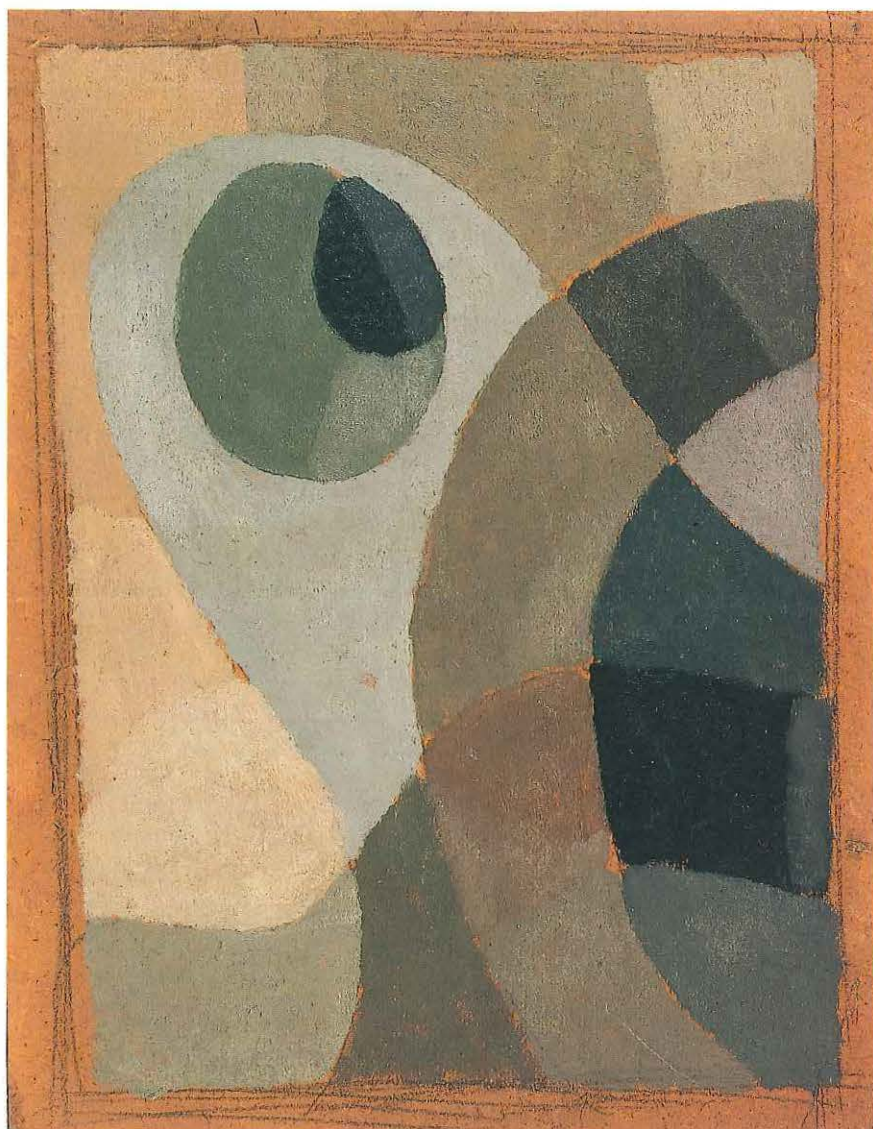


*Plate 5*

Esteban Lisa

*Cilindros y planos* (Cylinders and Planes), 1935  
Oil on board, 10 ½ x 8 ½ inches (27 x 21 cm)  
Private Collection, New York





*Plate 6*

Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), circa 1935

Oil on board, 11  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 9  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (30 x 23 cm)

Private Collection, New York



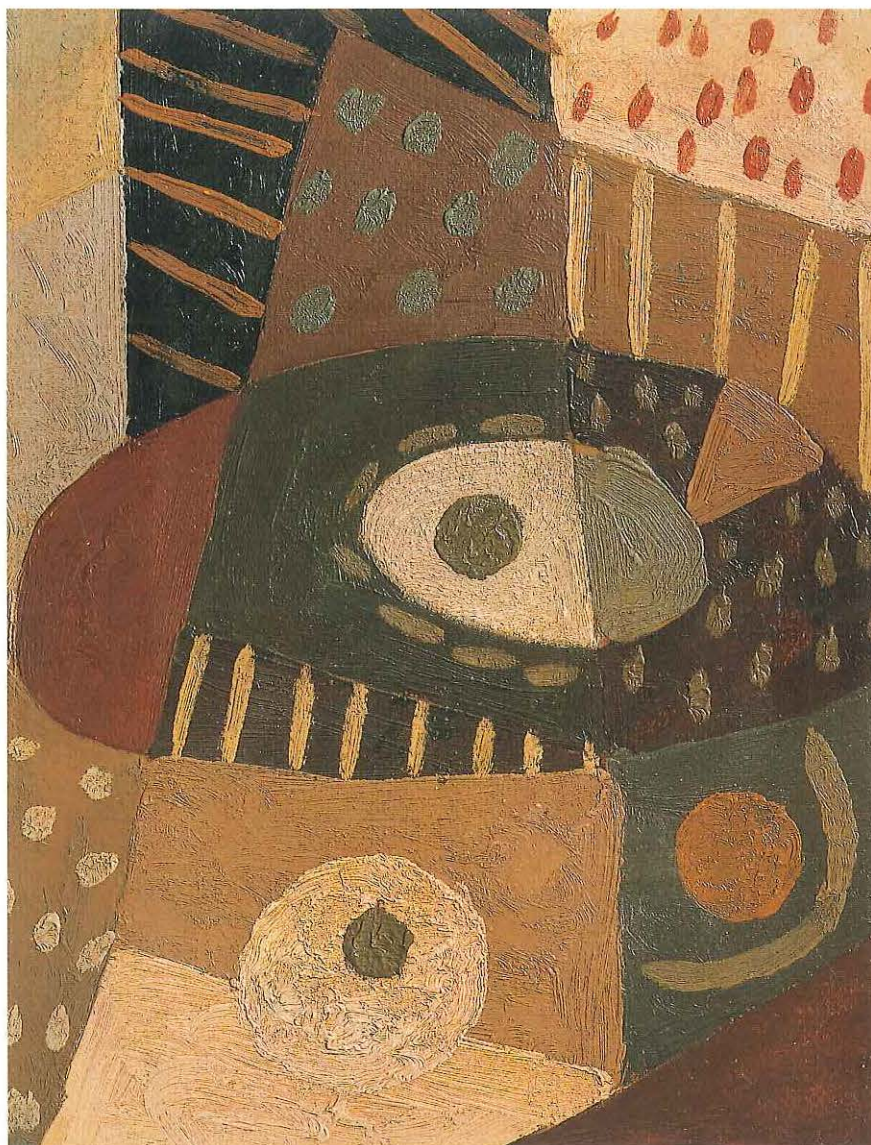


Plate 7

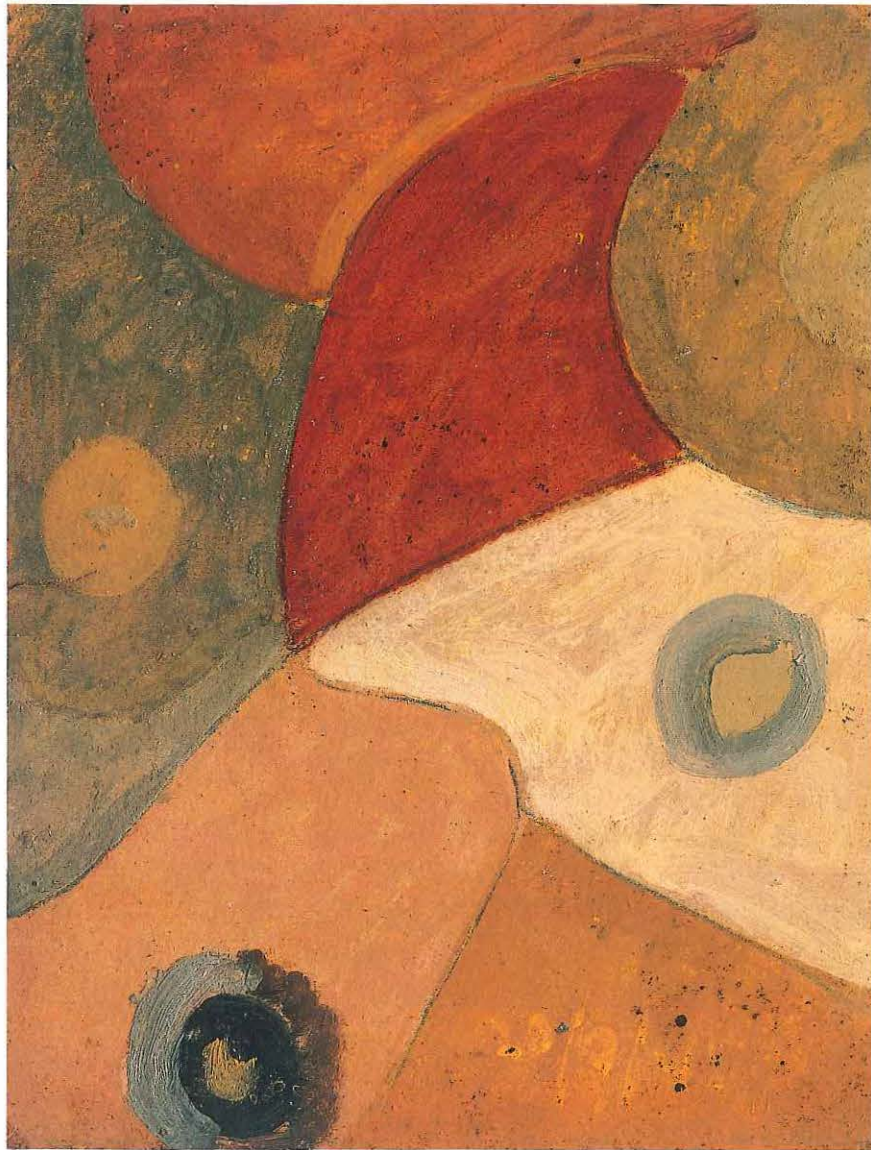
Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), circa 1941

Oil on board, 11 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (29.7 x 23 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires





*Plate 8*

Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), 1945

Oil on board, 13 ¼ x 8 ⅞ inches (33.5 x 22.5 cm)

Collection of Marcelo Argüelles, Buenos Aires



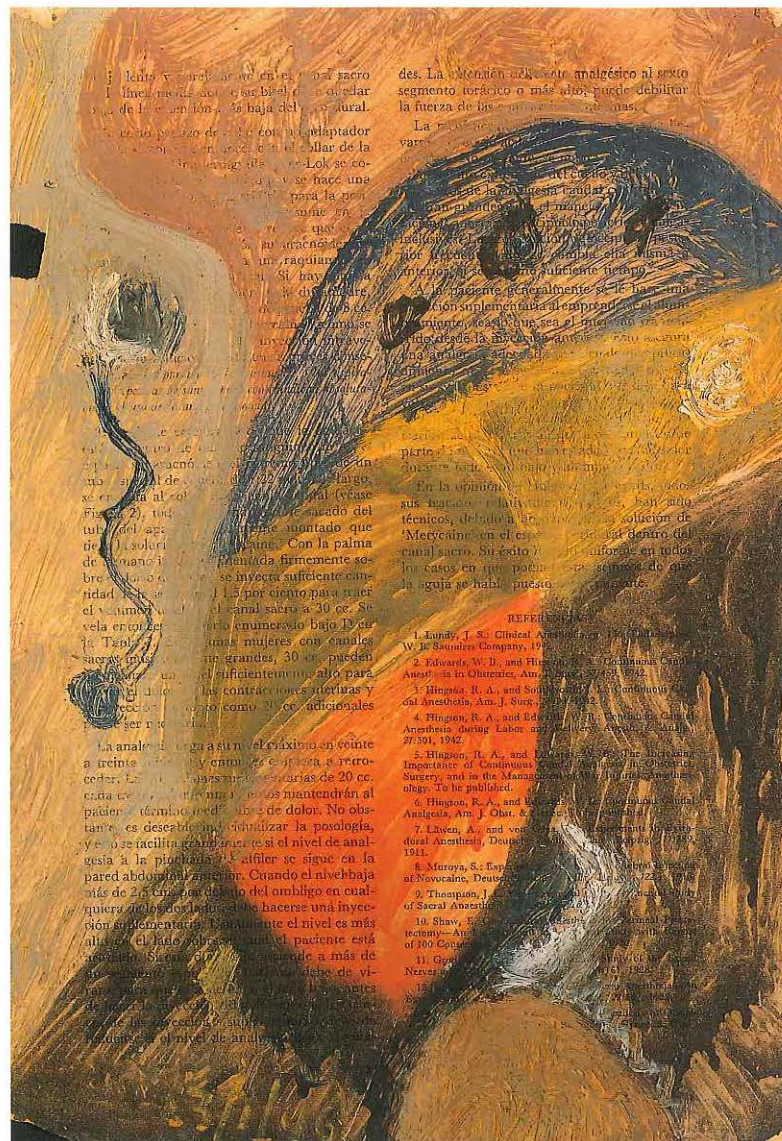


Plate 9

Esteban Lisa

Composición (Composition), 1946

Oil on paper, 10 x 6 3/4 inches (25.4 x 17.3 cm)

Collection of Fernando and Marcela Sánchez Zinny, Buenos Aires





*Plate 10*

Esteban Lisa

*Juego de líneas y colores* (Play of Lines and Colors), 1953

Oil on board, 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 13 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (50 x 35 cm)

Private Collection, New York



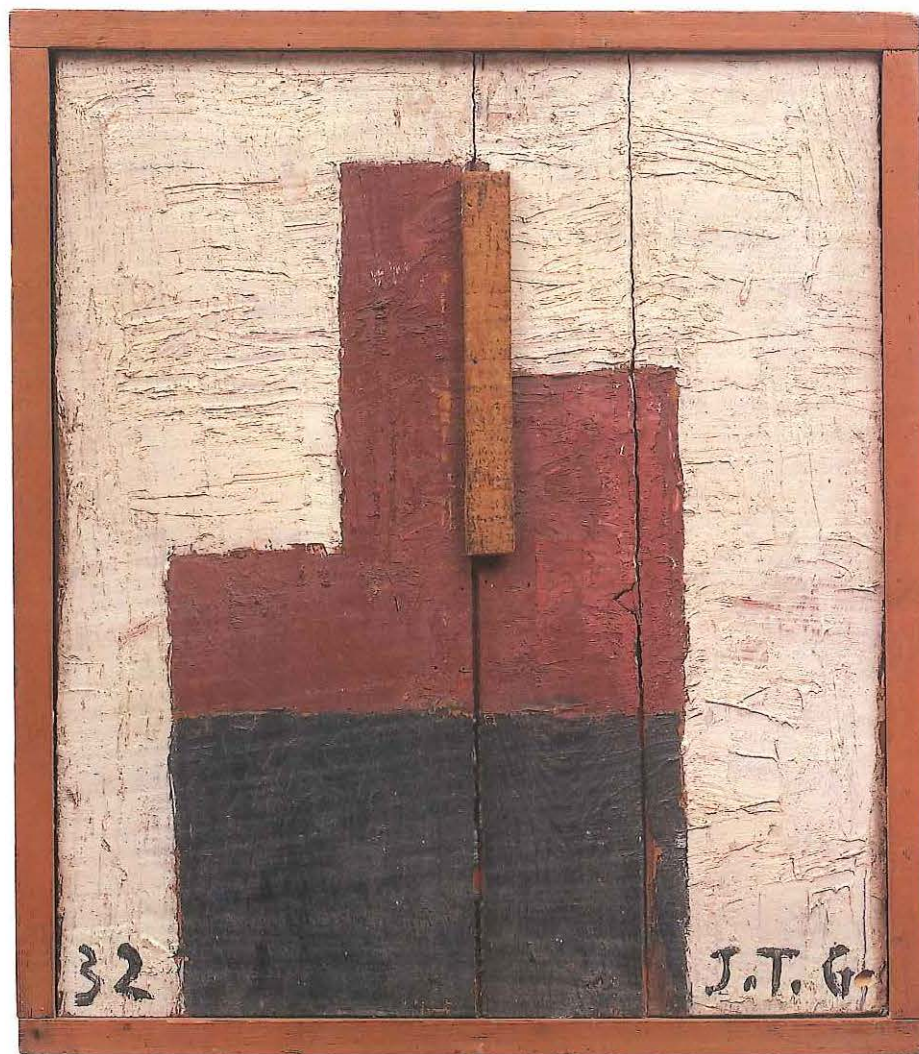


Plate 11

Joaquín Torres-García  
*Forma en tierra, siena, y negro* (Form in Earth, Siena, and Black), 1932  
Oil on wood, 16  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 13 inches (43 x 33 cm)  
Private Collection, New York





Plate 12

Joaquín Torres-García

*Estructura con formas ensambladas* (Structure with Assembled Forms), 1933

Tempera on board, 29 1/2 x 20 5/8 inches (75 x 52.3 cm)

Collection of Jeffrey Steiner, New York

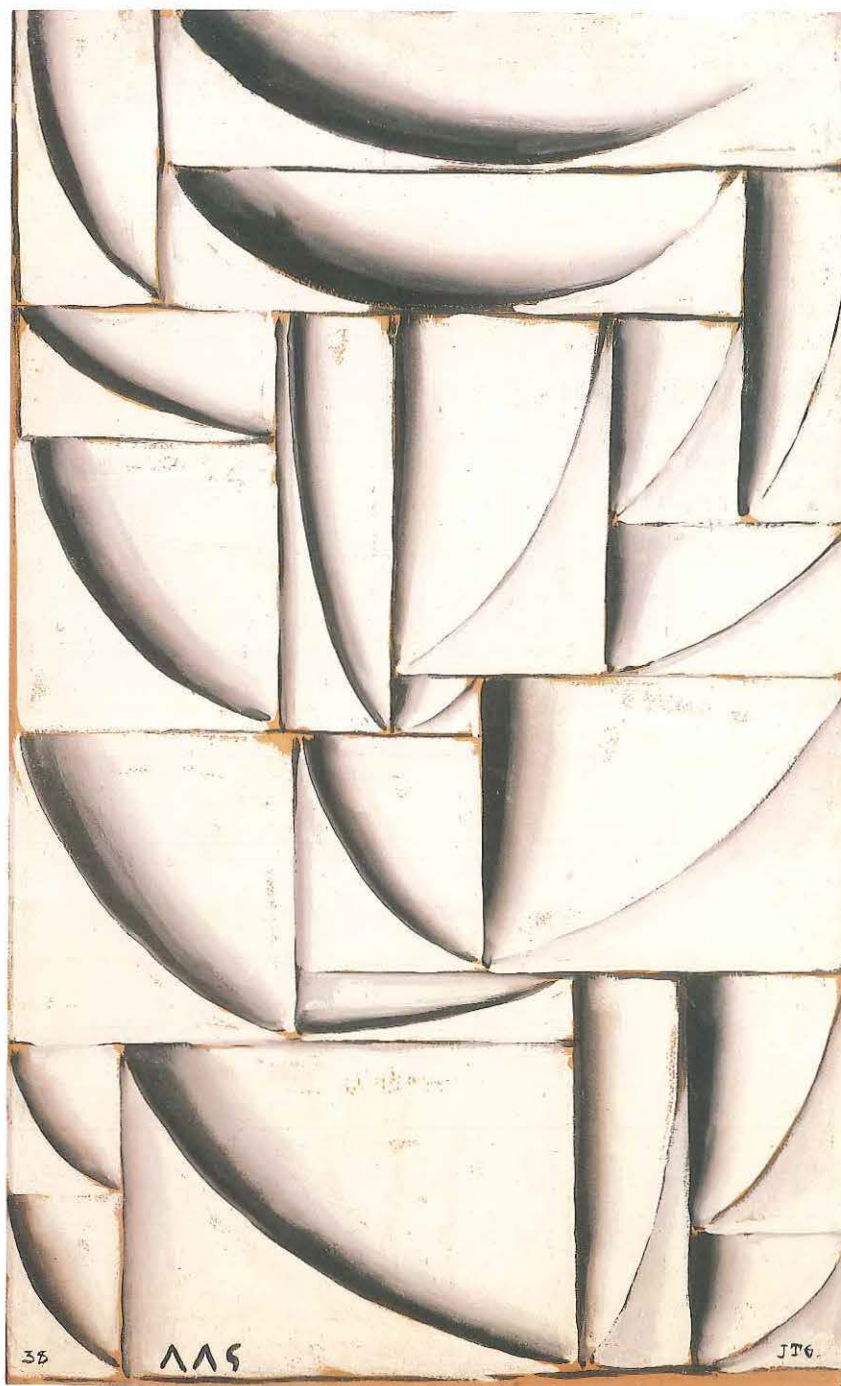




Plate 13

Joaquín Torres-García  
 Estructura (Structure), 1935  
 Oil on board, 30  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 24  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches (78.5 x 62.4 cm)  
 Private Collection, Montevideo





*Plate 14*

Joaquín Torres-García

*Constructivist Painting No. 8, 1938*

Gouache on paperboard, 31  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (80.3 x 49.5 cm)

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Purchased through the aid of a gift of Willard Durham







*Plate 15*

Manuel Espinosa

*Pintura* (Painting), 1945

Oil on wood, 34  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 18  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (88 x 47 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires









Plate 16

Claudio Girola

*Triángulos* (Triangles), 1948

Wood, 14  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 22  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (36 x 58 x 10.3 cm)

Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini



Plate 17

Claudio Girola

*Volumen comprendido en una estructura* (Volume Contained in a Structure), 1951

Steel rod, height: 21 ¾ inches (40 cm)

Collection of Josefina Durini, Buenos Aires





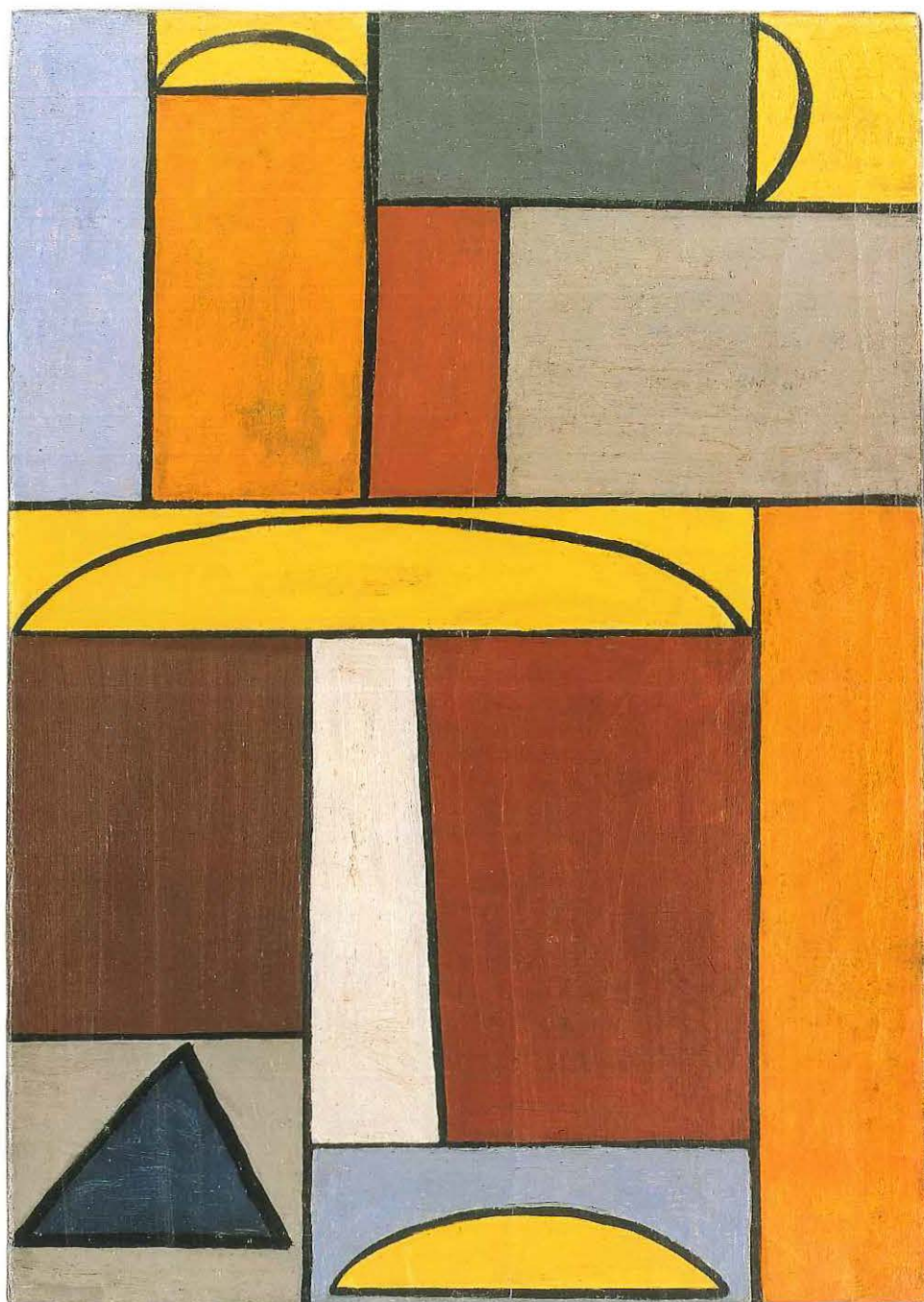


Plate 18

Alfredo Hlito

*Estructura* (Structure), 1945

Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 19 3/4 inches (70 x 50 cm)

Collection of Ricardo A. Grüneisen, Buenos Aires



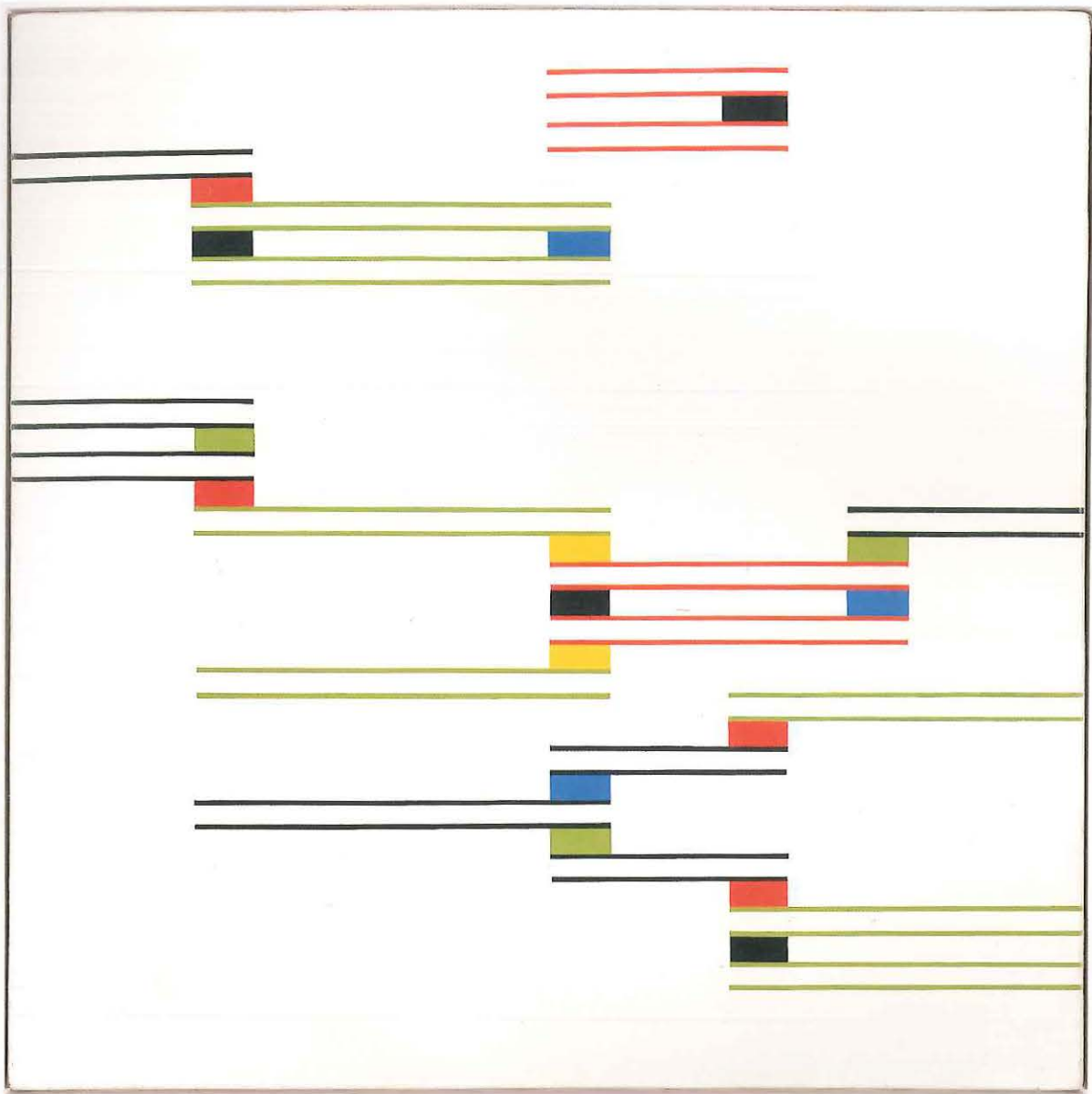


Plate 19

Alfredo Hlito

*Ritmos cromáticos II* (Chromatic Rhythms II), 1947

Oil on canvas, 27  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 27  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (69.9 x 70.2 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

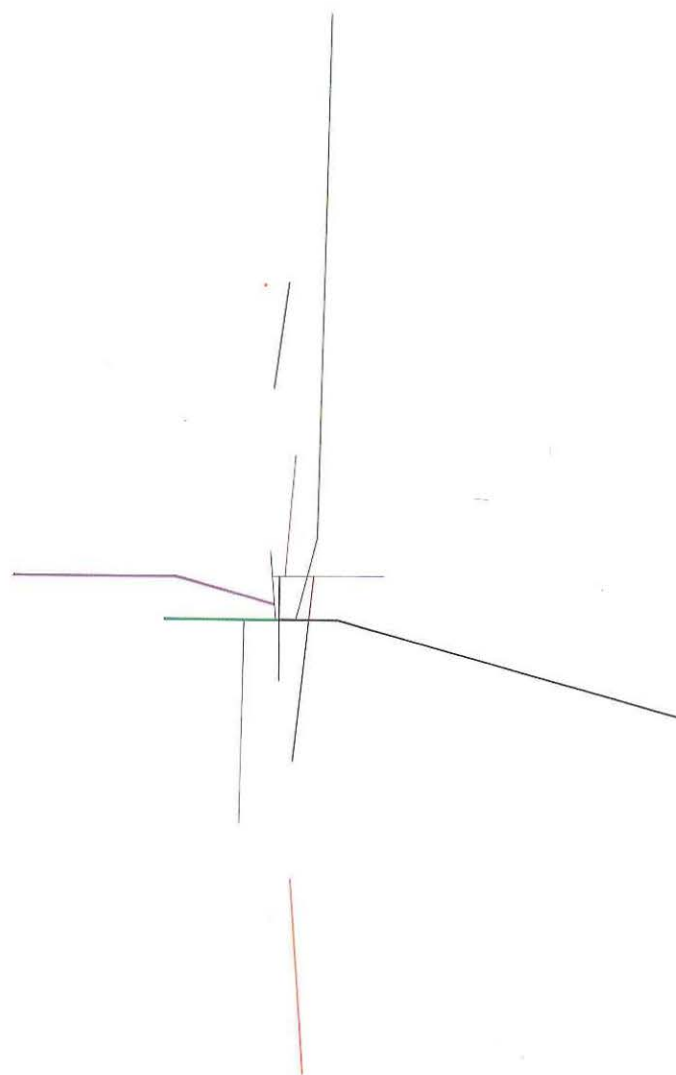


Plate 20

Alfredo Hlito

*Estructura Lineal* (Lineal Structure), 1952

Oil on canvas, 39  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 27  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (100 x 70 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



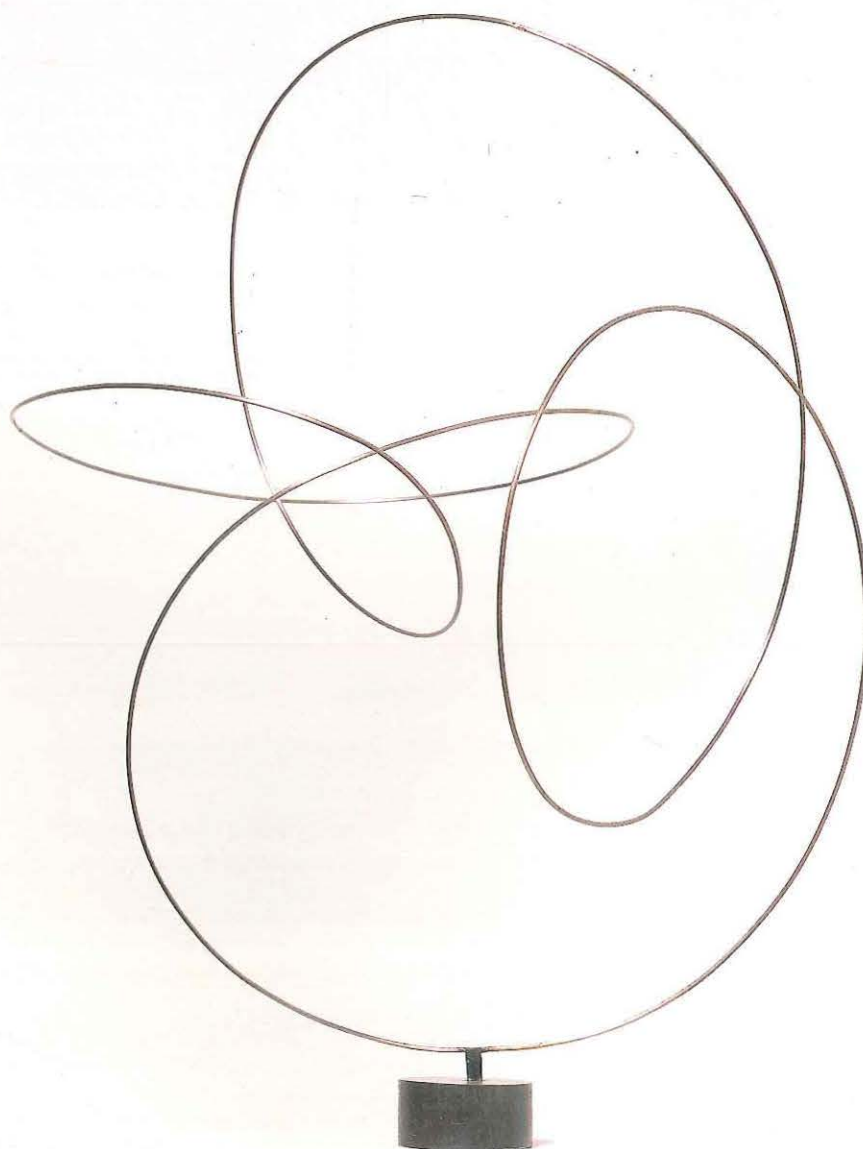
Plate 21

Enio Iommi

*Continuidad lineal* (Lineal Continuity), 1948

Steel rod, 51 1/8 x 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches (130 x 80 x 80 cm)

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires



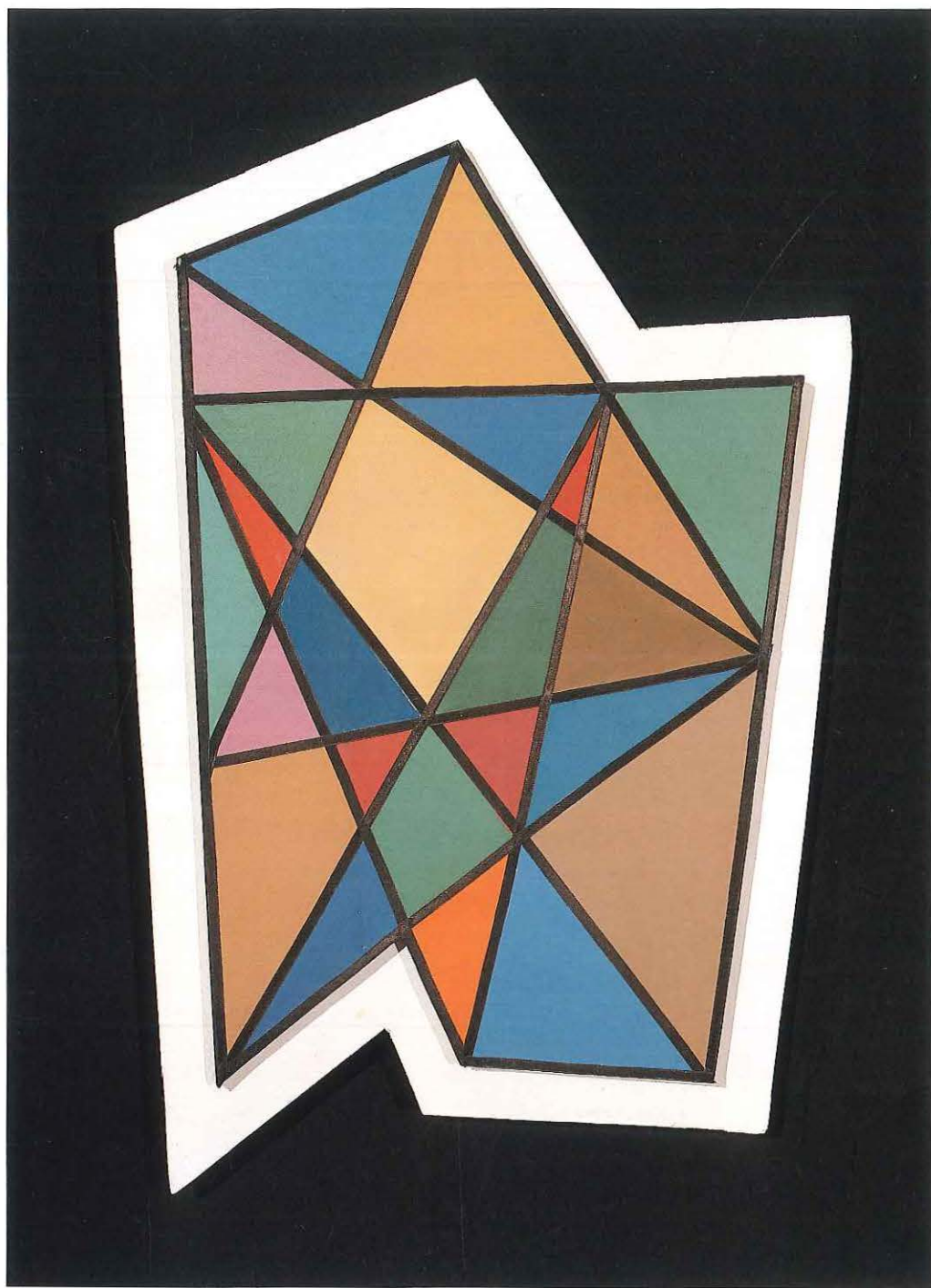


Plate 22

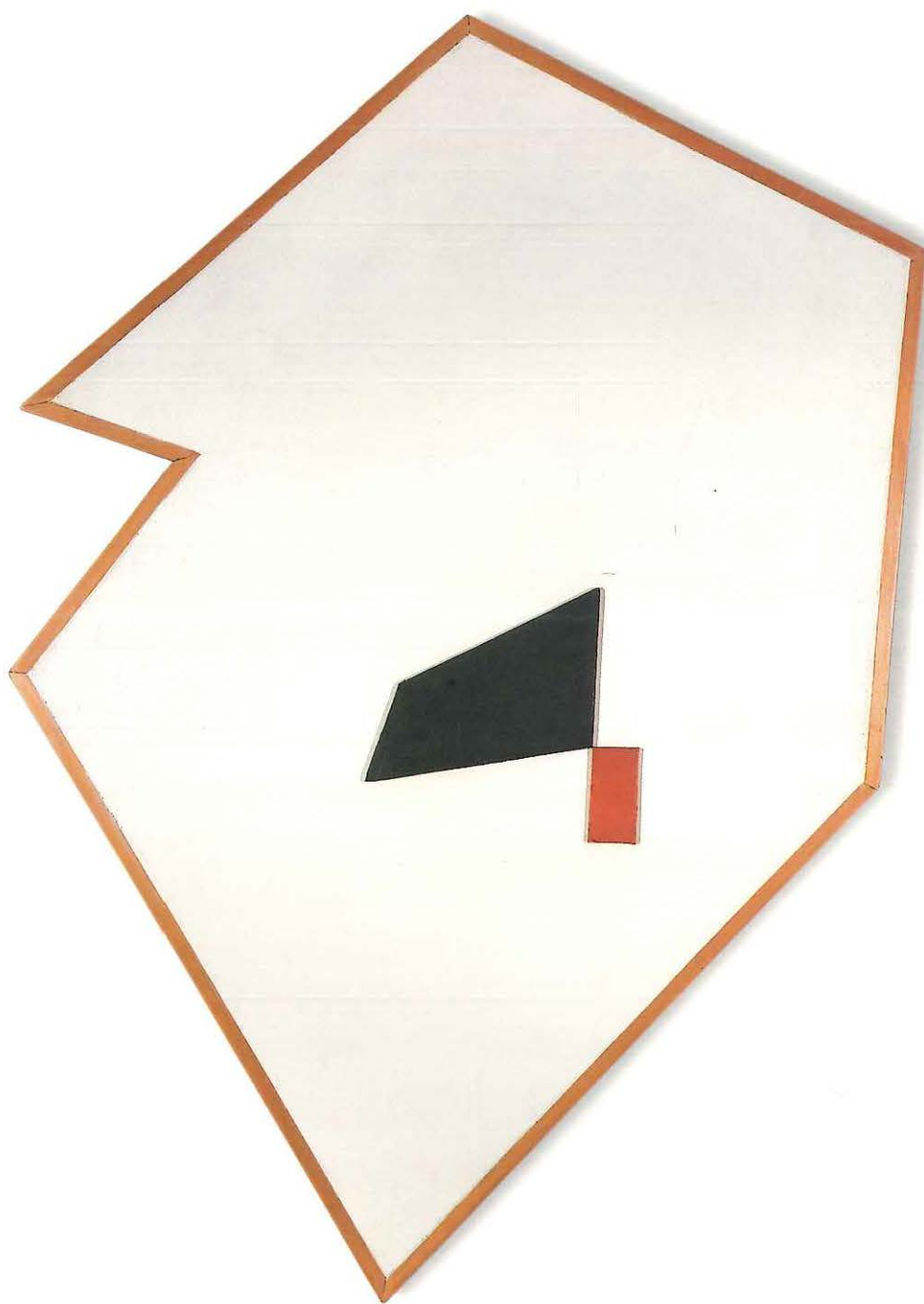
Raúl Lozza

*Composición* (Composition), 1945

Oil and black silk ribbon on panel, 21 1/2 x 14 3/8 inches (54.5 x 36.5 cm)

Collection of Josefina Durini, Buenos Aires





*Plate 23*

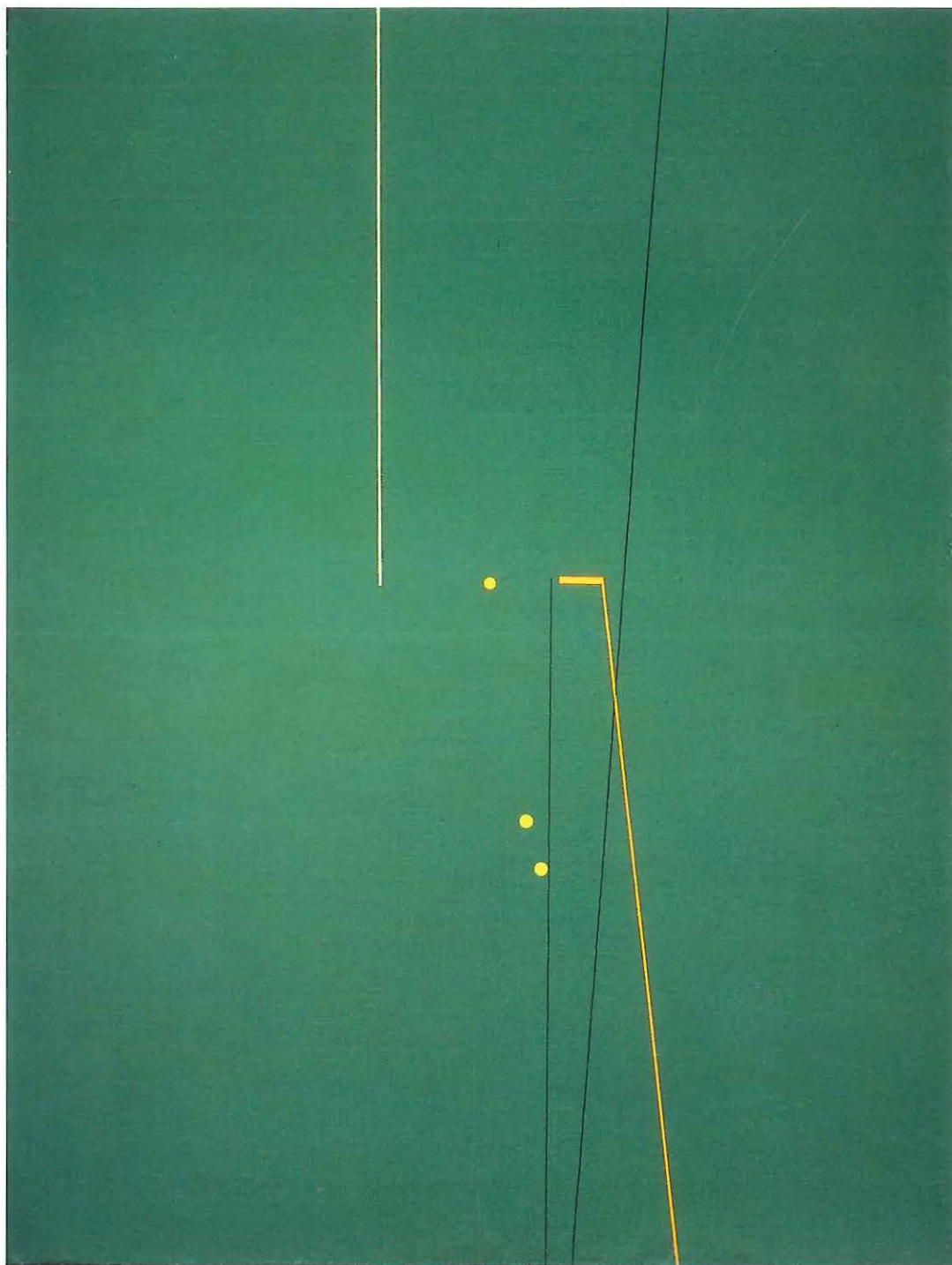
Tomás Maldonado

Sin título (Untitled), 1945

Tempera on board attached to enamel on cardboard,

31 1/8 x 23 5/8 inches (79 x 60 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires



*Plate 24*

Tomás Maldonado

Sin título (Untitled), circa 1946

Oil on canvas, 33 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches (85.1 x 64.8 cm)

Private Collection, Courtesy of Rachel Adler Fine Art, New York



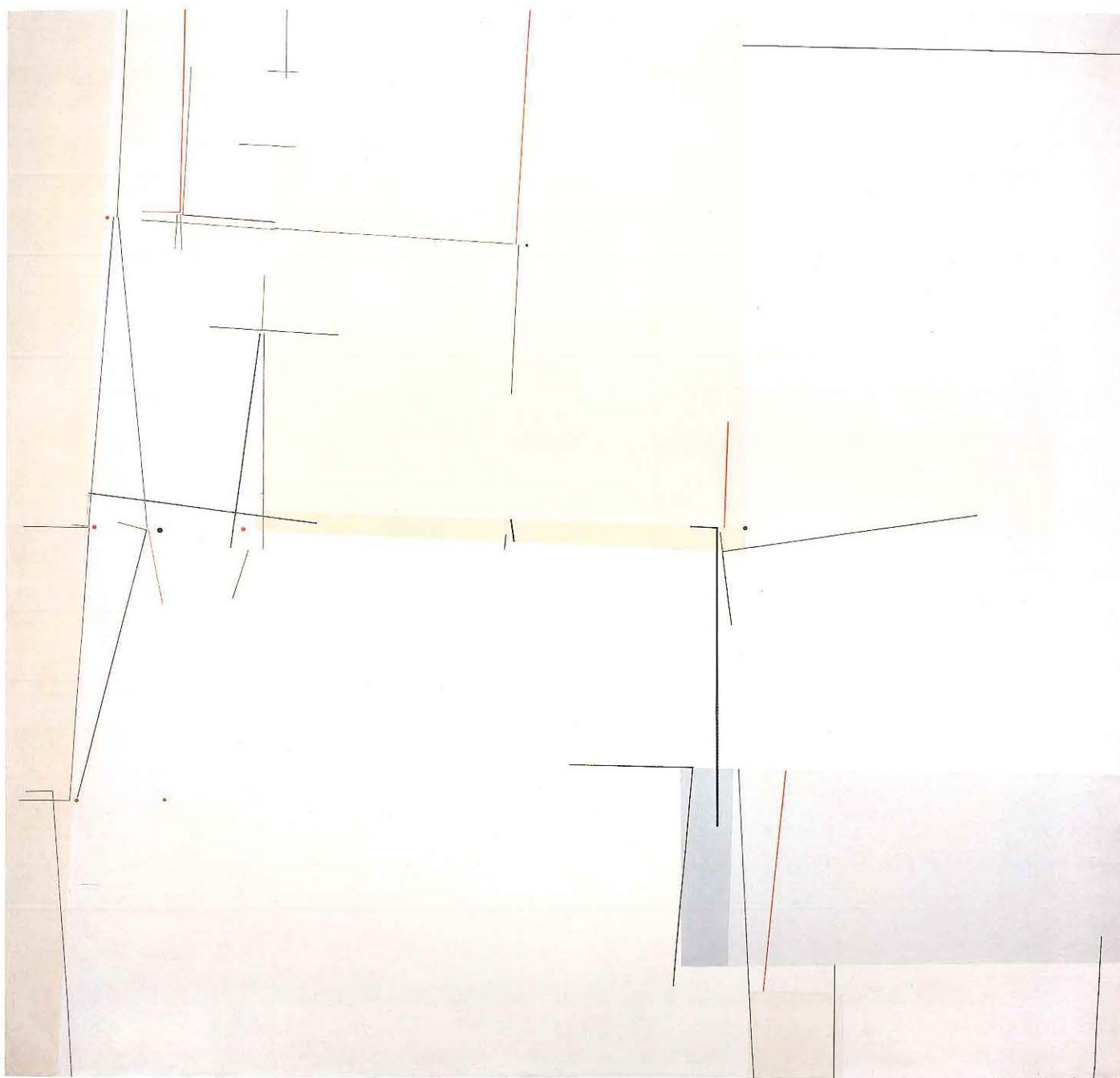


Plate 25

Tomás Maldonado  
*Desarrollo de 14 Temas* (Development of 14 Themes), circa 1947  
Oil on canvas, 78  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 82  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (200 x 210 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



Plate 26

Tomás Maldonado

*Tres zonas y dos circulares* (Three Zones and Two Circulares), 1953

Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches (80 x 80 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



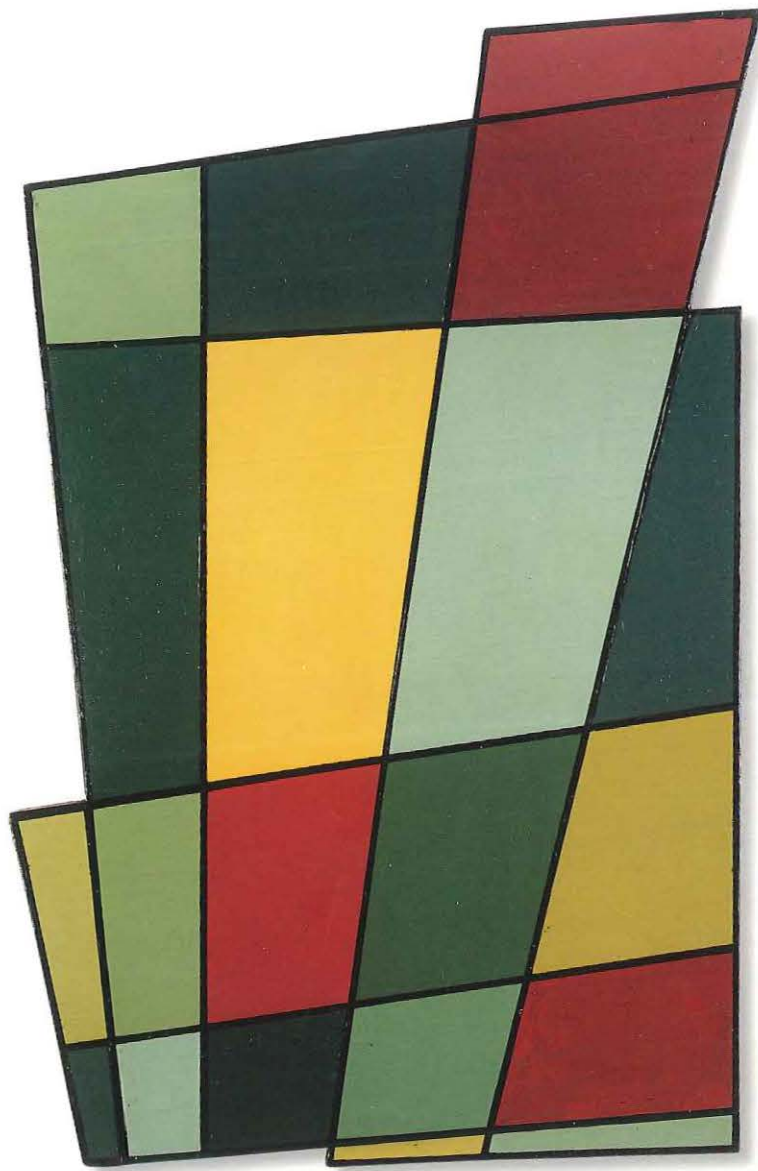
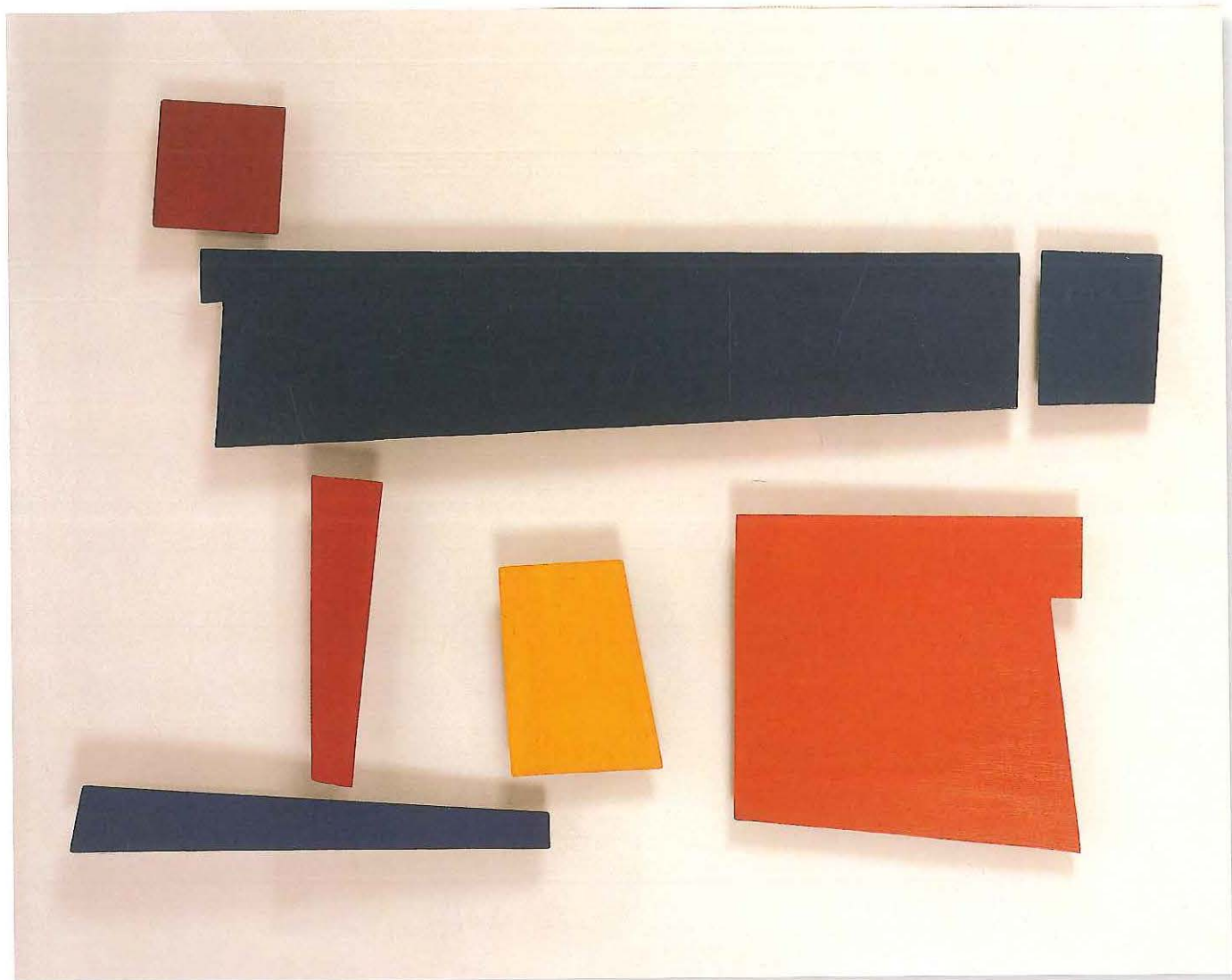


Plate 27  
Juan Melé  
*Marco recortado No. 2* (Structured Frame No. 2), 1946  
Oil on panel, 28 x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (71.1 x 50.2 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



*Plate 28*

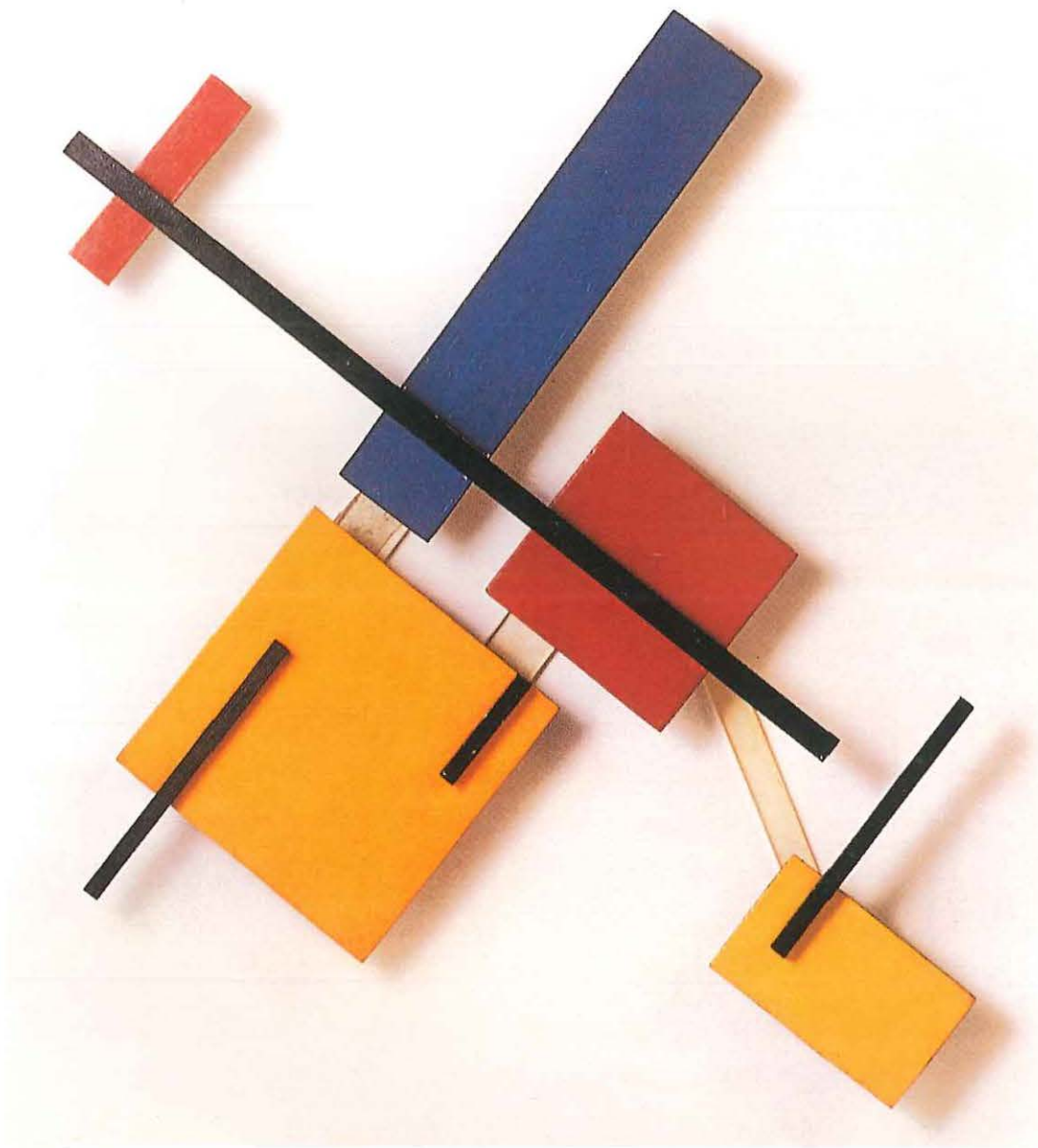
Juan Melé

*Coplanal* (Co-plane), 1947

Oil on board mounted on Plexiglas, 34  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 43  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (87 x 110 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas





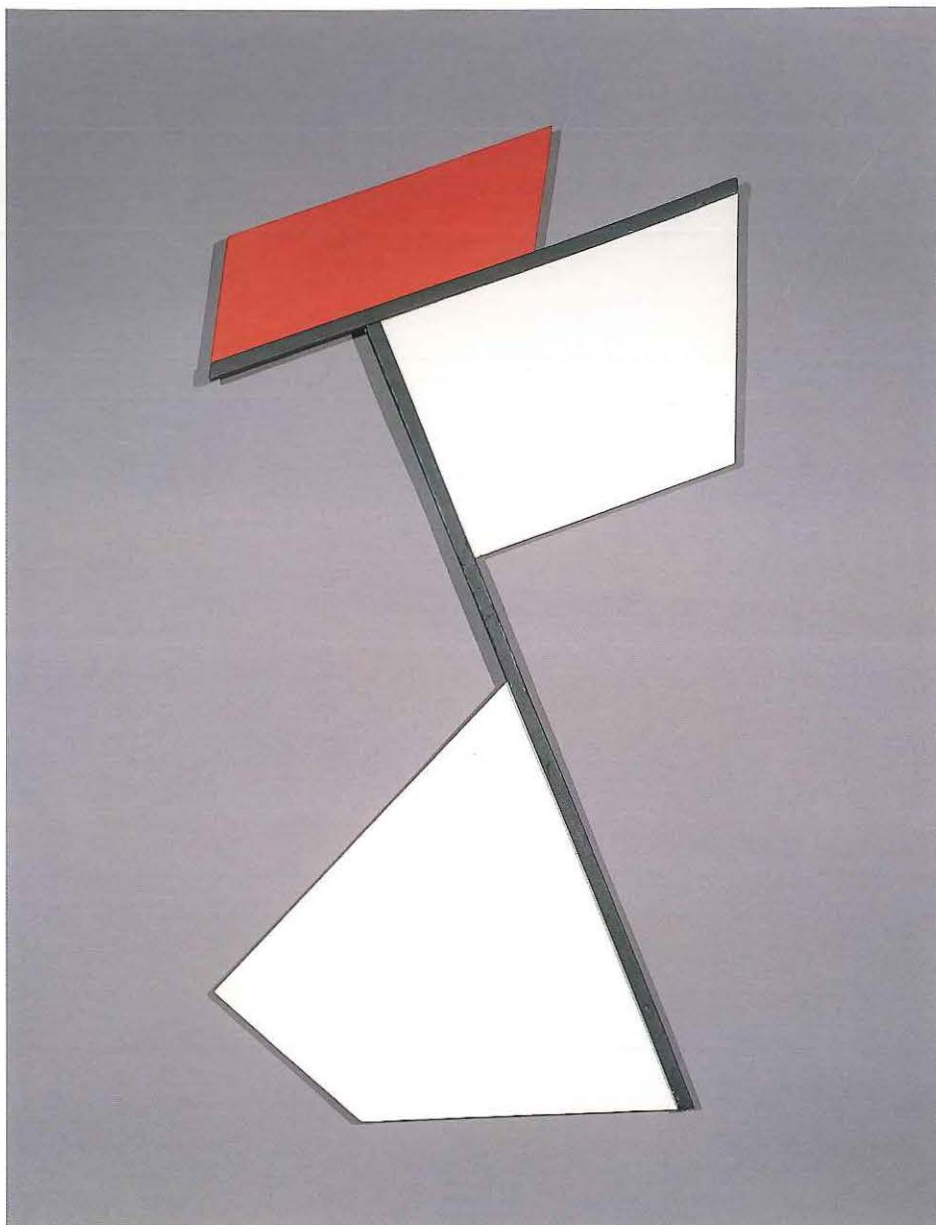
*Plate 29*

Juan Melé

*Relieve No. 53 (Relief No. 53), 1950*

Oil on panel and Plexiglas construction, 27  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 33  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (70 x 84 cm)

Collection of Guillermo de Osma, Madrid



*Plate 30*

Lidy Prati

*Concreto* (Concrete), 1945

Oil on board, 24  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 18  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (62 x 48 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires



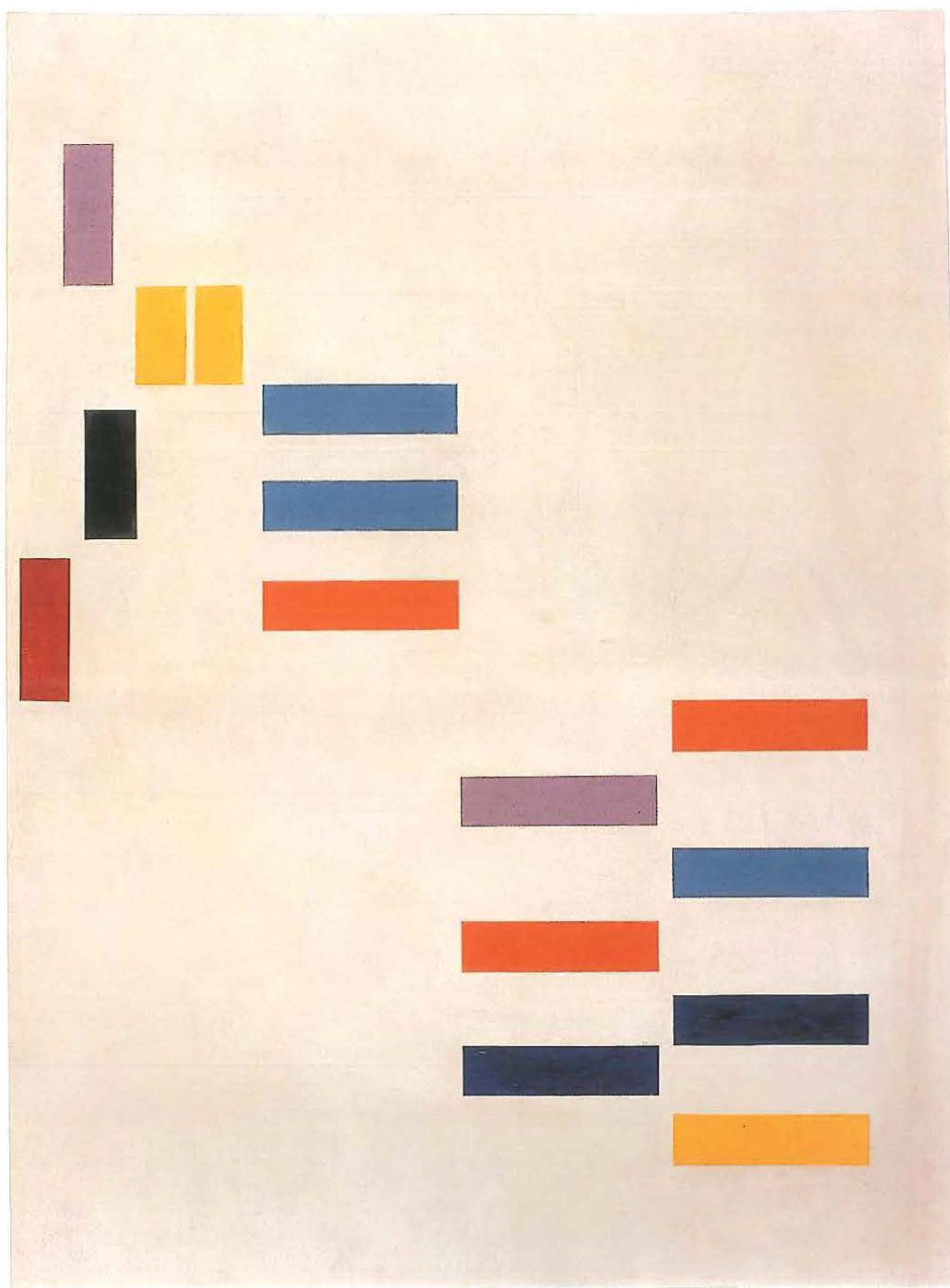


Plate 31

Lidy Prati

*Concret A4*, 1948

Oil on hardboard, 33 x 23 7/8 inches (84 x 60 cm)

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto de la República Argentina

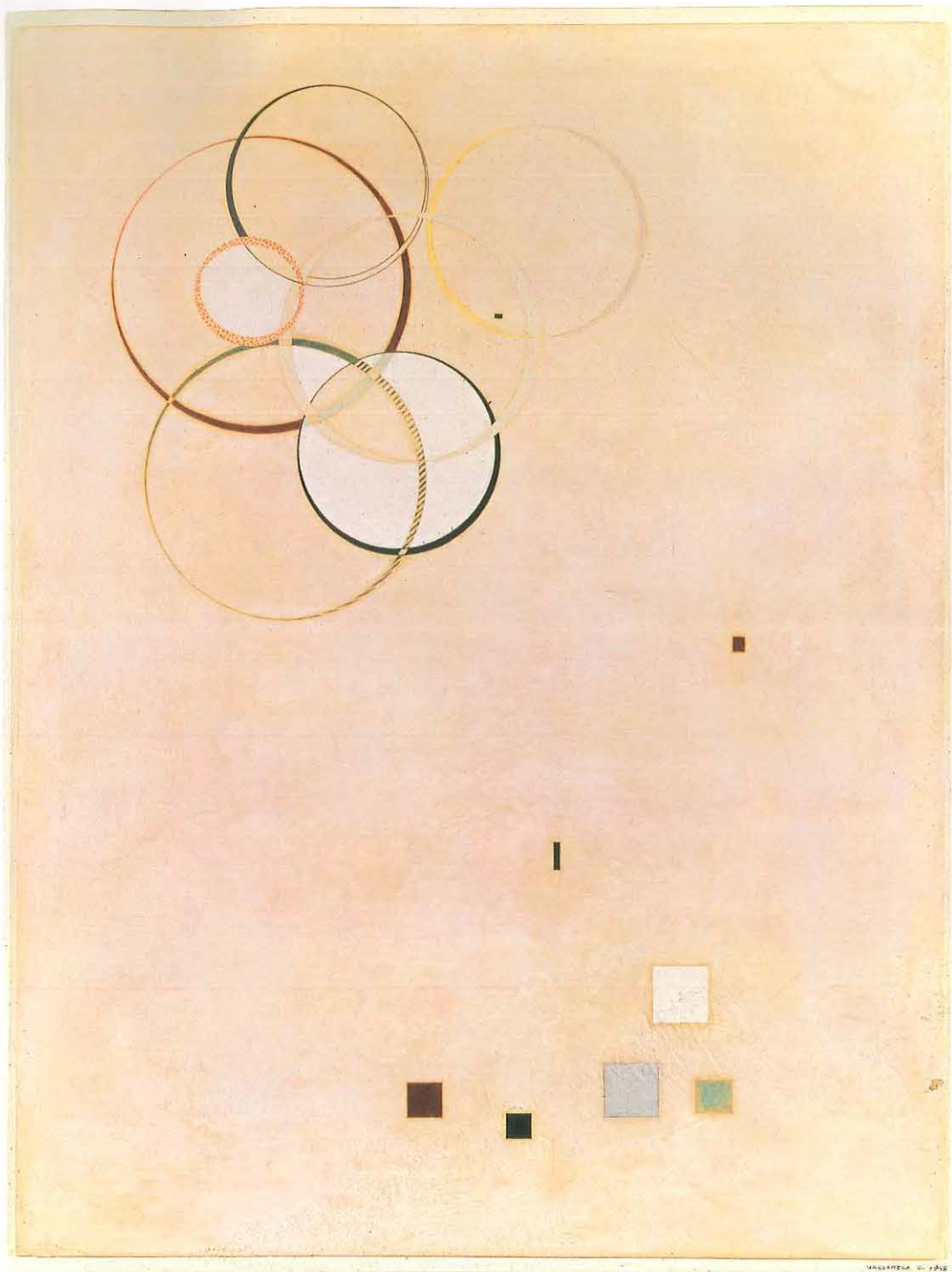


Plate 32

Gregorio Vardánega

*Composición* (Composition), 1950

Oil on gesso on composition board, 32 1/2 x 24 7/8 inches (82.5 x 63 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas





*Plate 33*

Carmelo Arden Quin

*Plan vert* (Green Plane), 1945

Gouache on card, 16  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 11  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (41 x 28.9 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



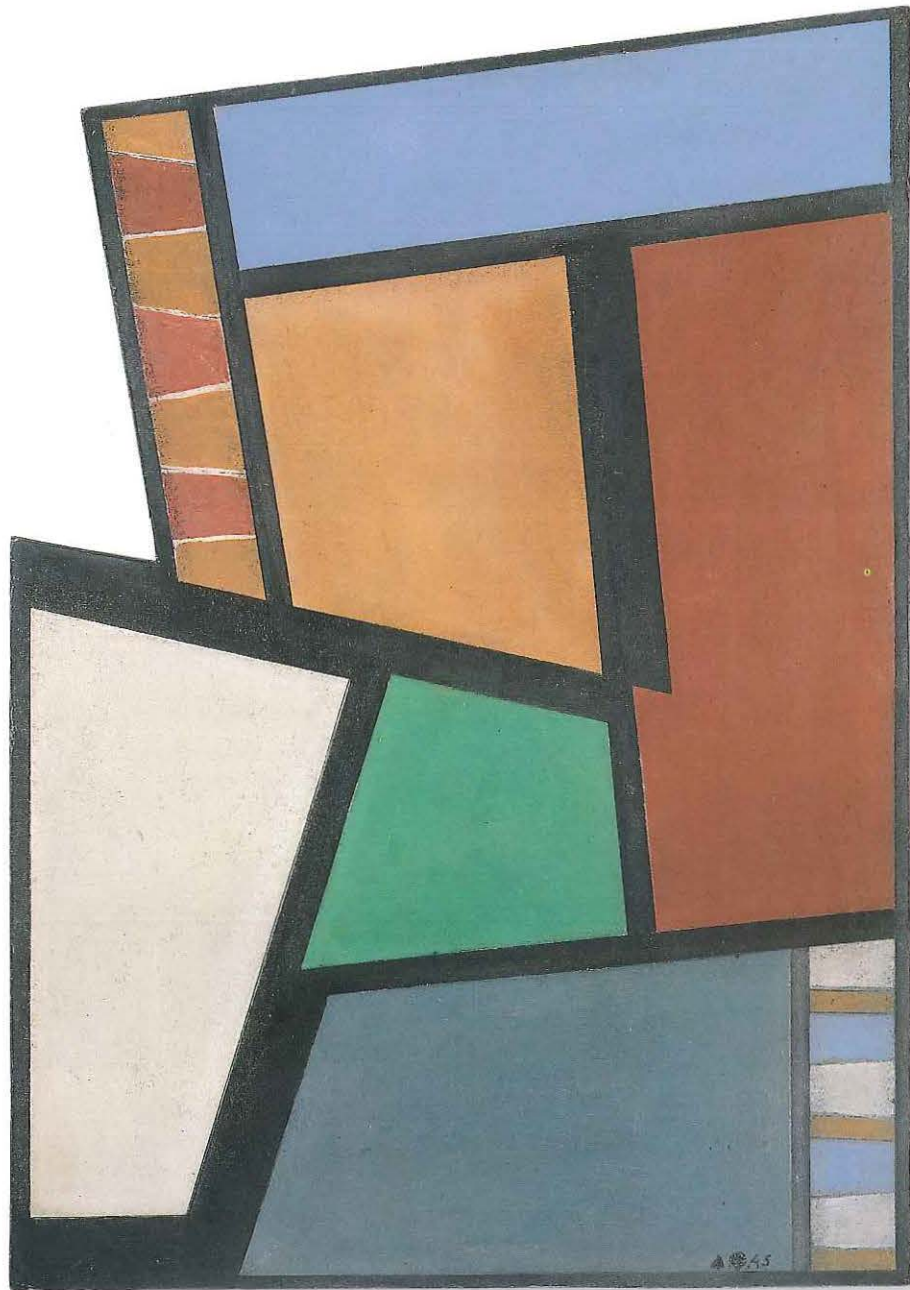




Plate 34

Carmelo Arden Quin

*De la serie estructuras extensas o Esculturas blancas transformables*

(From the Series of Extensive Structures or Transformable White Sculptures), 1946

Painted wood, glass, and Bakelite,  $17 \frac{7}{8} \times 8 \frac{1}{4} \times 4 \frac{1}{8}$  inches (45.2 x 21 x 16.3 cm)

Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini



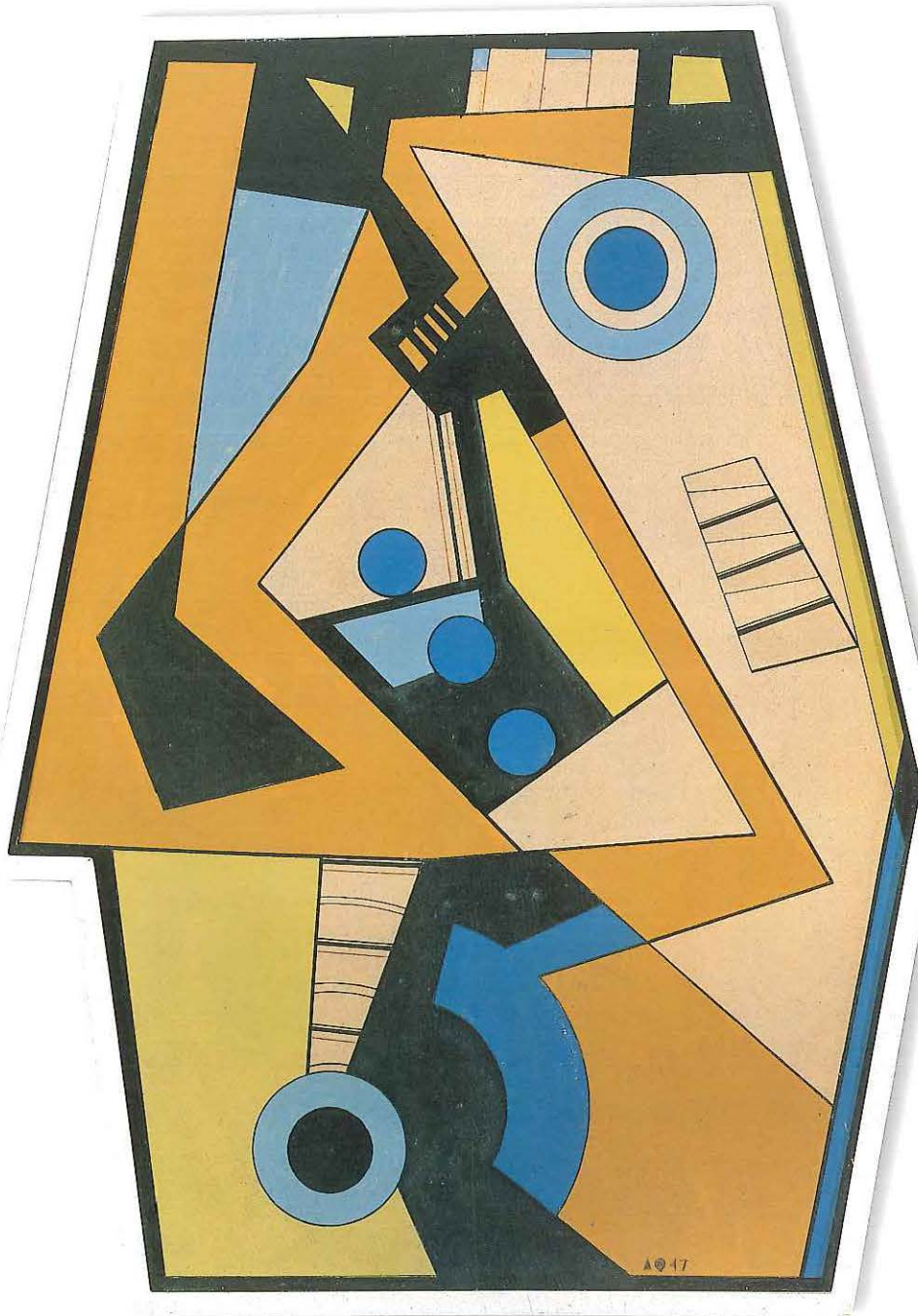


Plate 35

Carmelo Arden Quin

*Mécanique* (Mechanical), 1947

Lacquer on cardboard, 21  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 16  $\frac{1}{8}$  (55 x 41 cm)

Collection of Ricardo A. Grüneisen, Buenos Aires

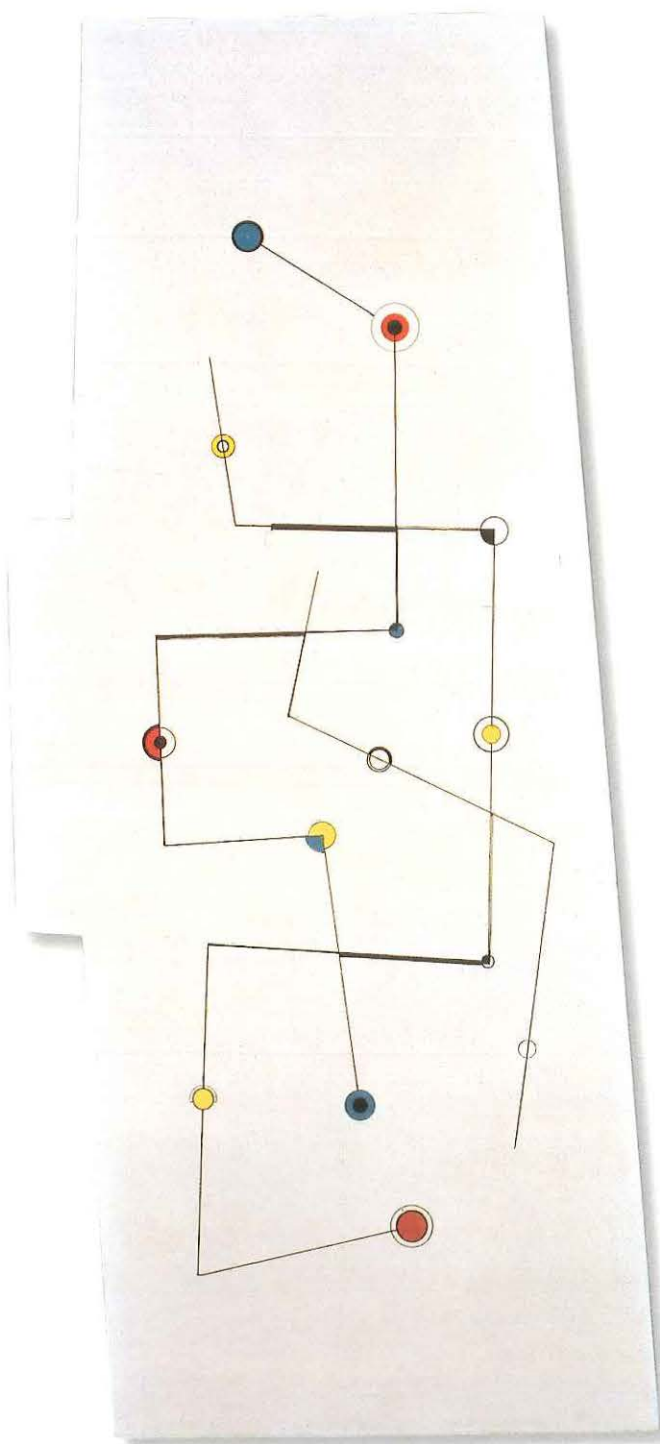


Plate 36

Carmelo Arden Quin

*Lignes et points* (Lines and Points), 1950

Painted panel, 35 1/2 x 15 x 1 inches (90 x 38 x 2.5 cm)

Courtesy Rachel Adler Fine Art, New York and Galerie von Bartha, Basel





Plate 37

Martín Blaszczo

*Ritmos verticales* (Vertical Rhythms), 1947

Oil on wood, 36  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 17  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (93 x 44 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

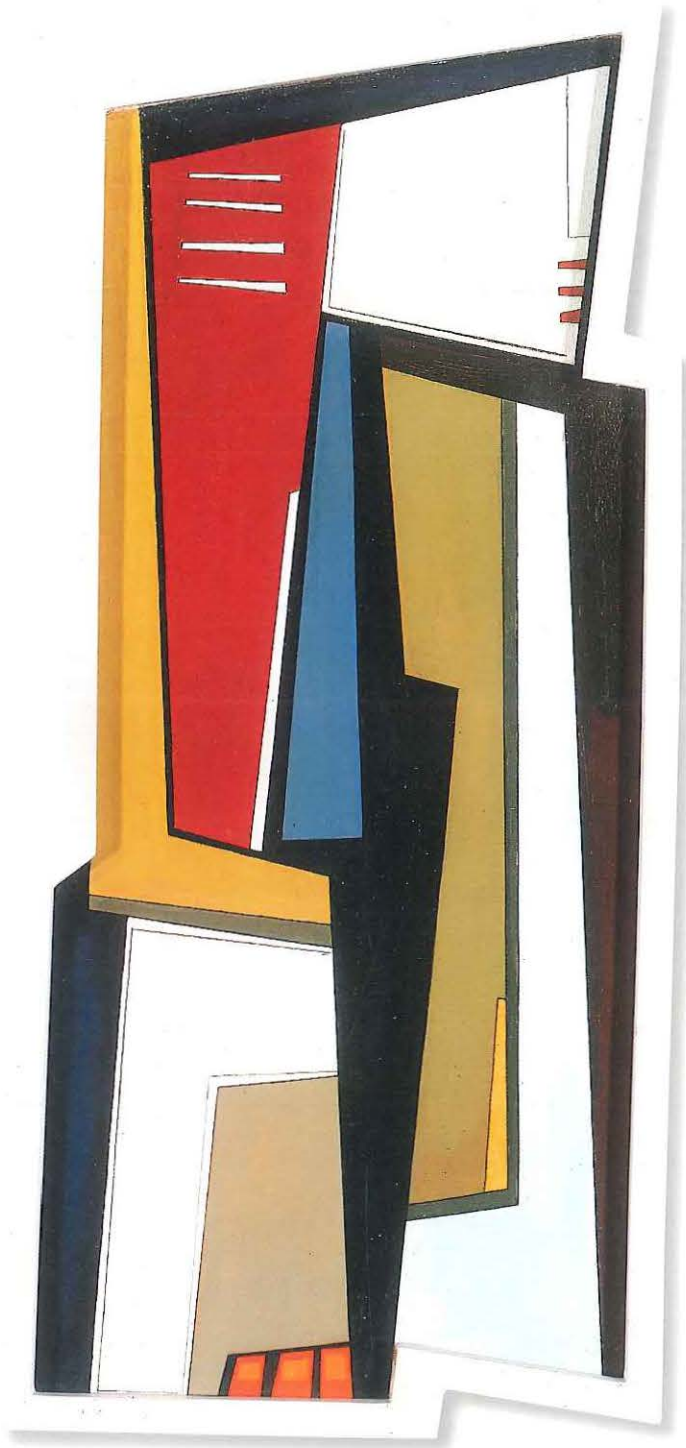


Plate 38

Martín Blaszczo

*El gran ritmo* (The Great Rhythm), 1949

Oil on panel, 36  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (93 x 43 cm)

Collection of Ricardo A. Grüneisen, Buenos Aires



Plate 39

Gyula Kosice

*Röyi*, 1944

Articulated wood,

39 x 31 1/2 x 5 3/4 inches (99 x 80 x 15 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires



Plate 40

Gyula Kosice

*Serie Espacio Objetivo* (Objective Space Series), 1950

Plexiglas, 28  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (73 x 21 x 46 cm)

Collection of Fernando Sabsay, Buenos Aires







Plate 41

Rhod Rothfuss

*Arlequin* (Harlequin), circa 1944

Oil on canvas, 66 1/2 x 33 7/8 inches (174 x 86 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

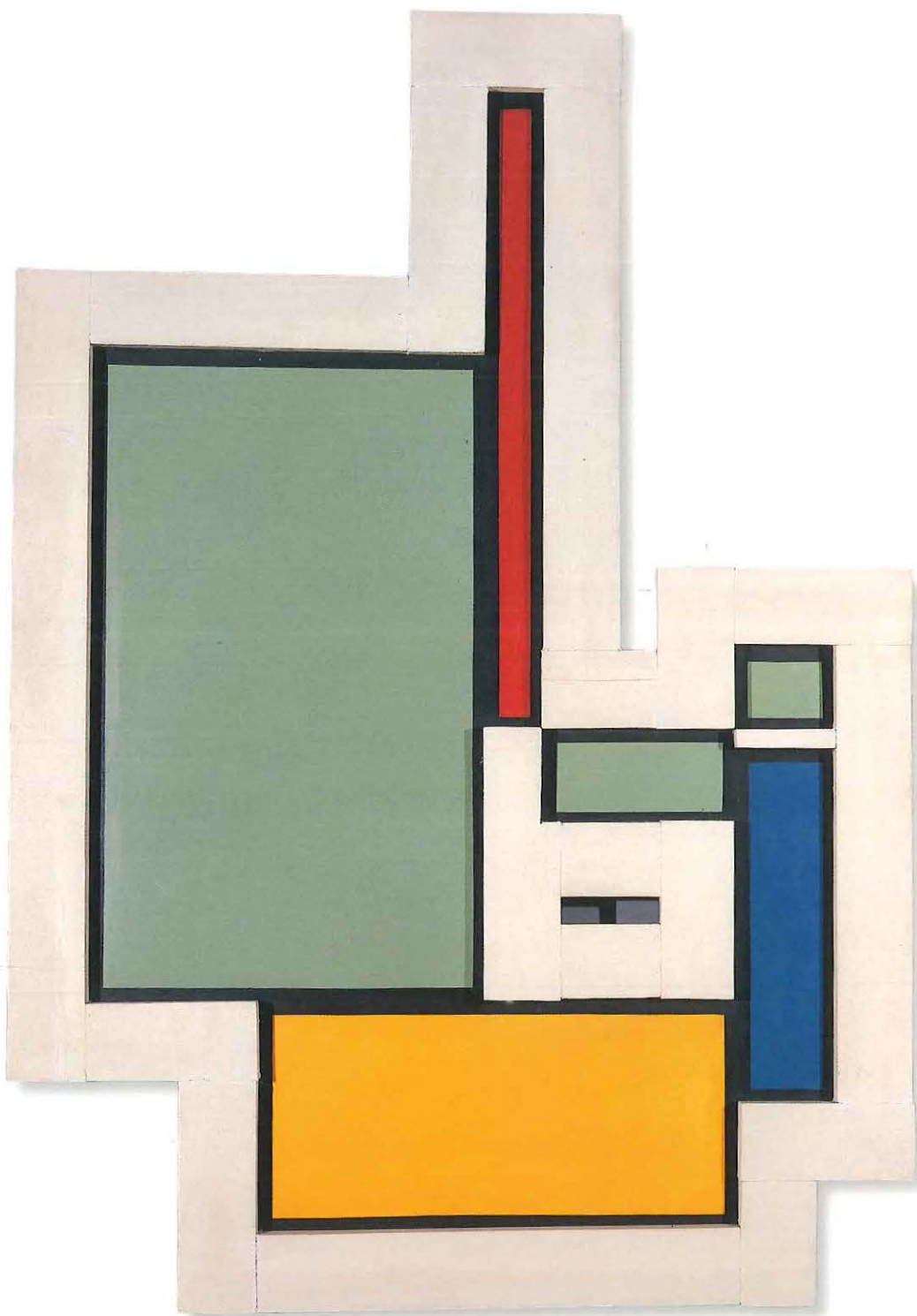


Plate 42

Rhod Rothfuss

*Composición Madi* (Madi Composition), 1946

Enamel on hardboard/canvas, 48  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 33  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 1  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (123 x 86 x 3.5 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires



Rodolfo Ian Uricchio

*Máquina inútil* (Useless Machine), 1993

version of the work presented in *Réalités Nouvelles* in Paris in 1948

Painted wood with hinges and spring, 23  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 5  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (60 x 40 x 15 cm)

Collection of the artist, Montevideo



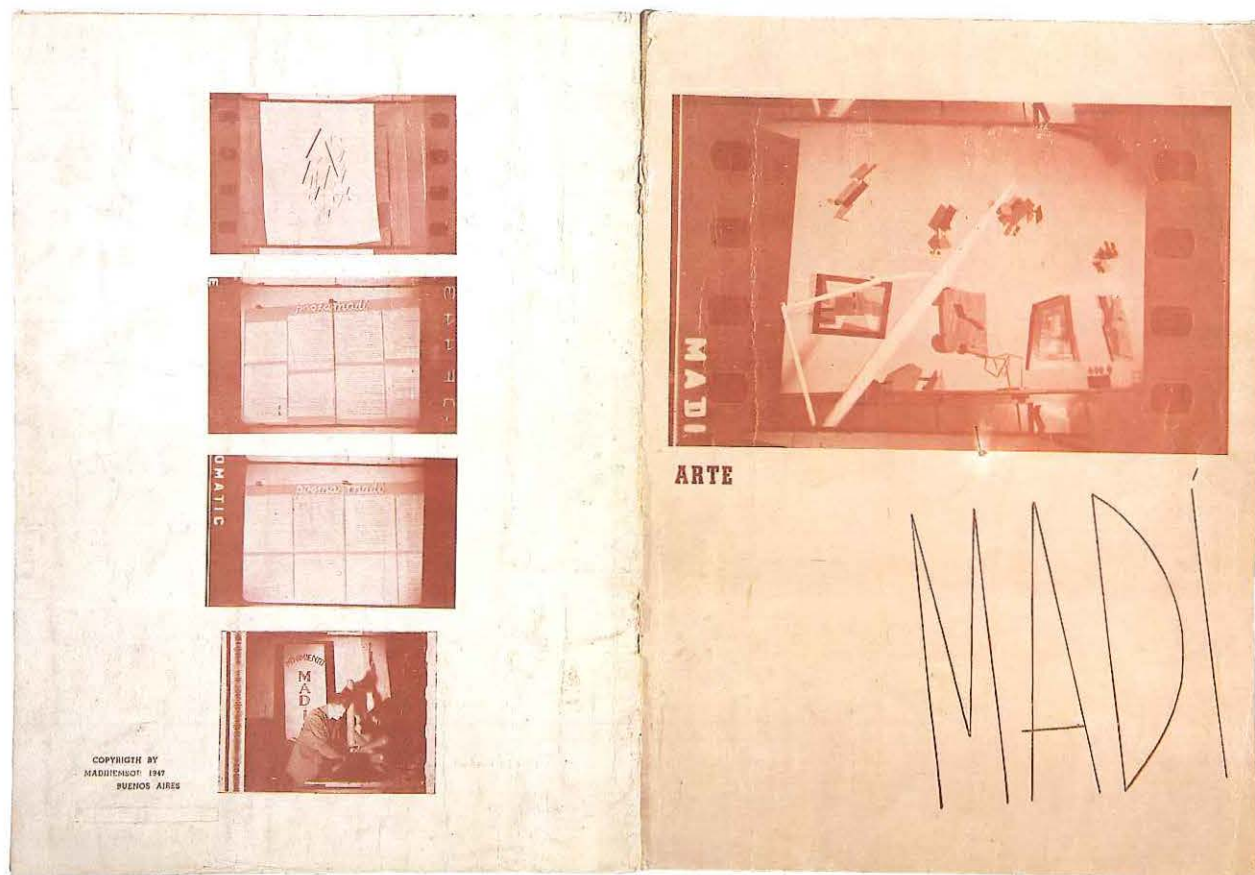
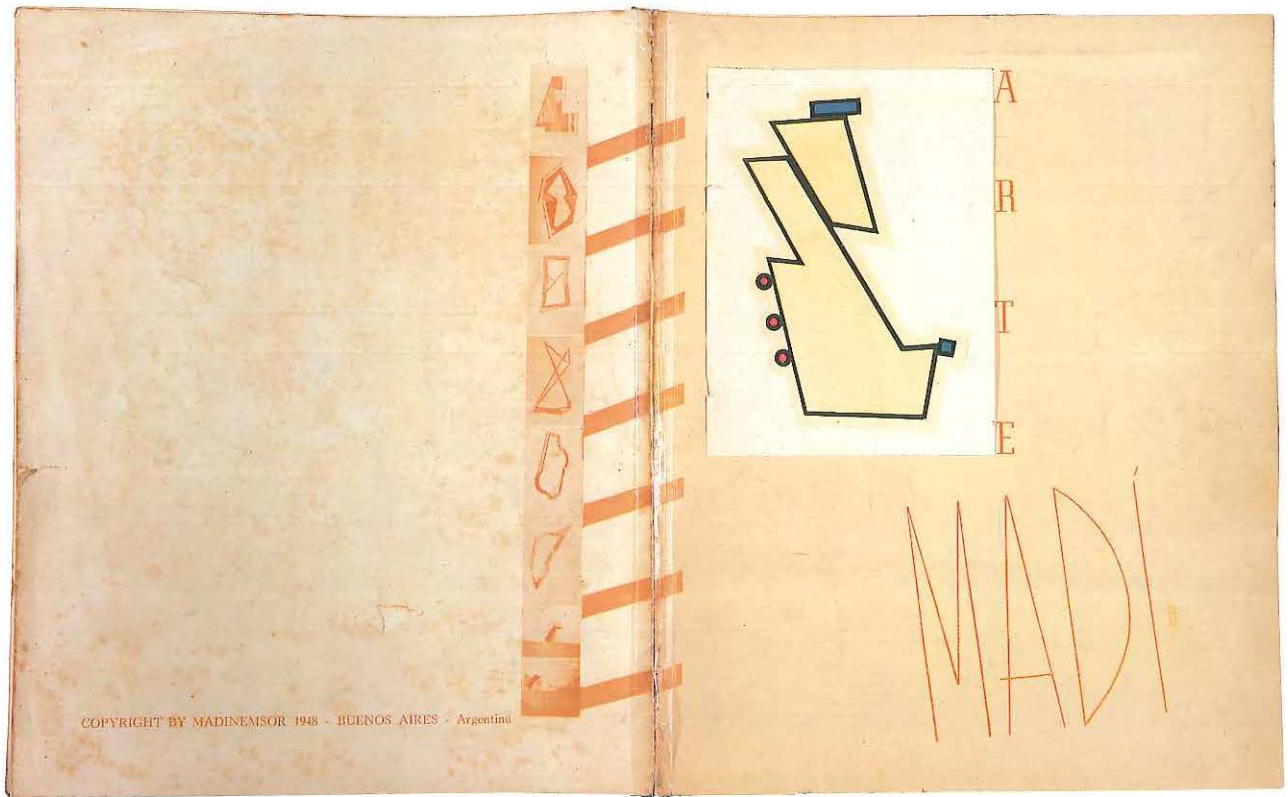


Plate 44

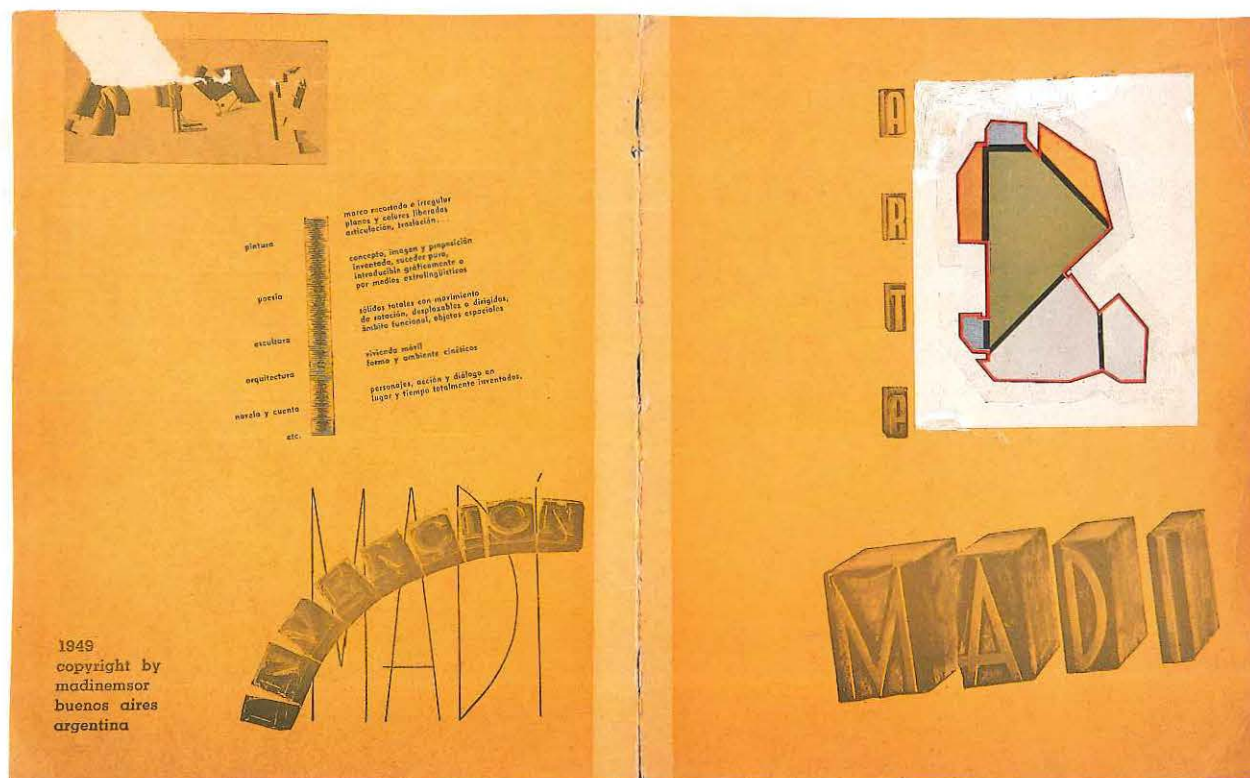
Covers of *Arte Madí Universal*, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Collection of Gyula Kosice

- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 0 (No. 1), 1947
- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 2, 1948
- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 3, 1949
- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 4, 1950
- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 5, 1951
- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 6, 1952
- Arte Madí Universal*, No. 7/8, 1954

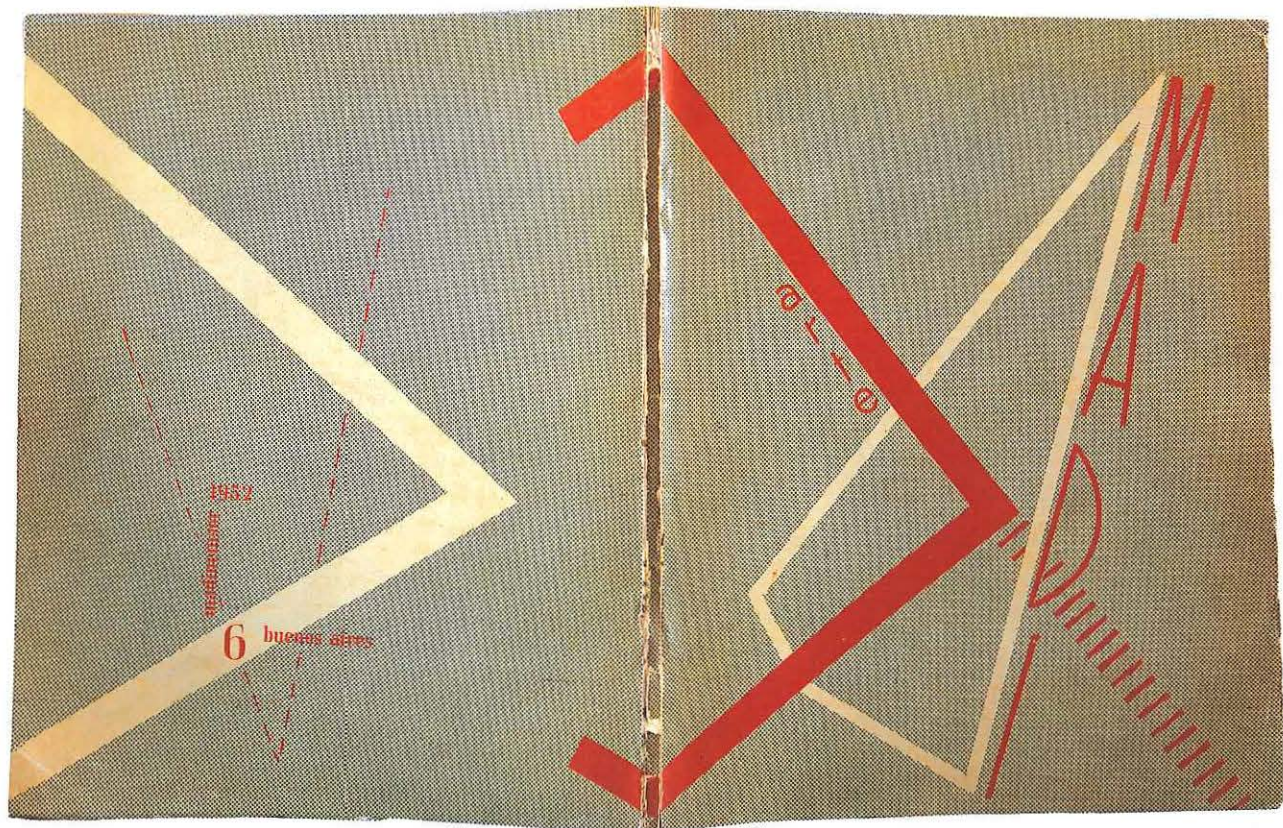
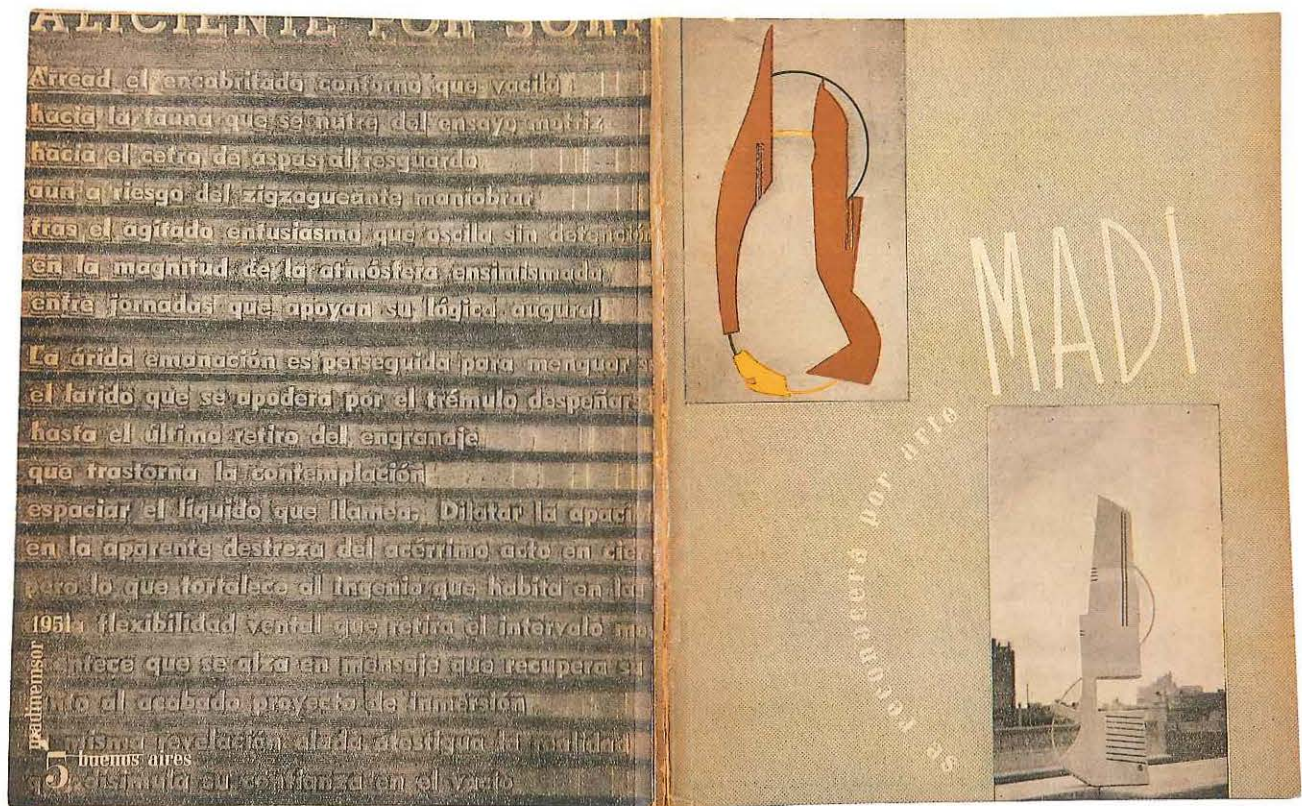




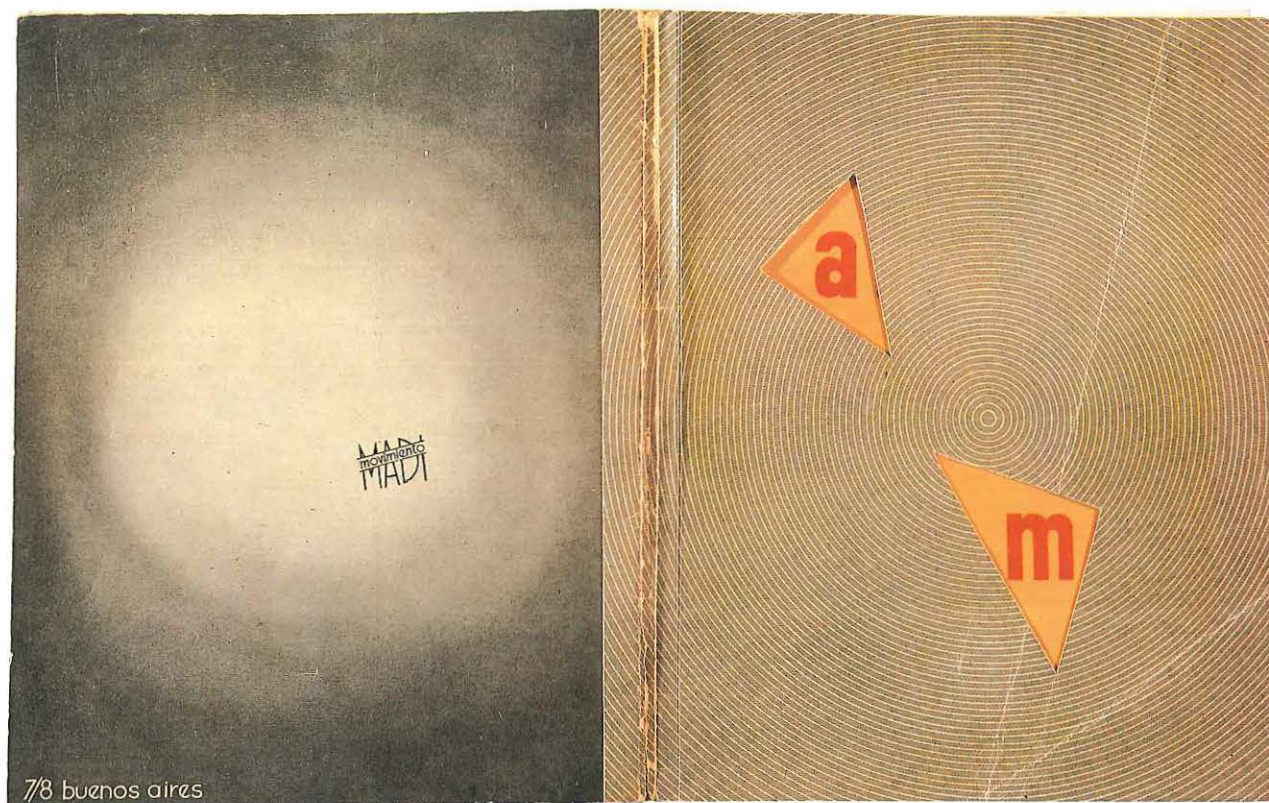
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7/8 buenos aires





*Plate 45*

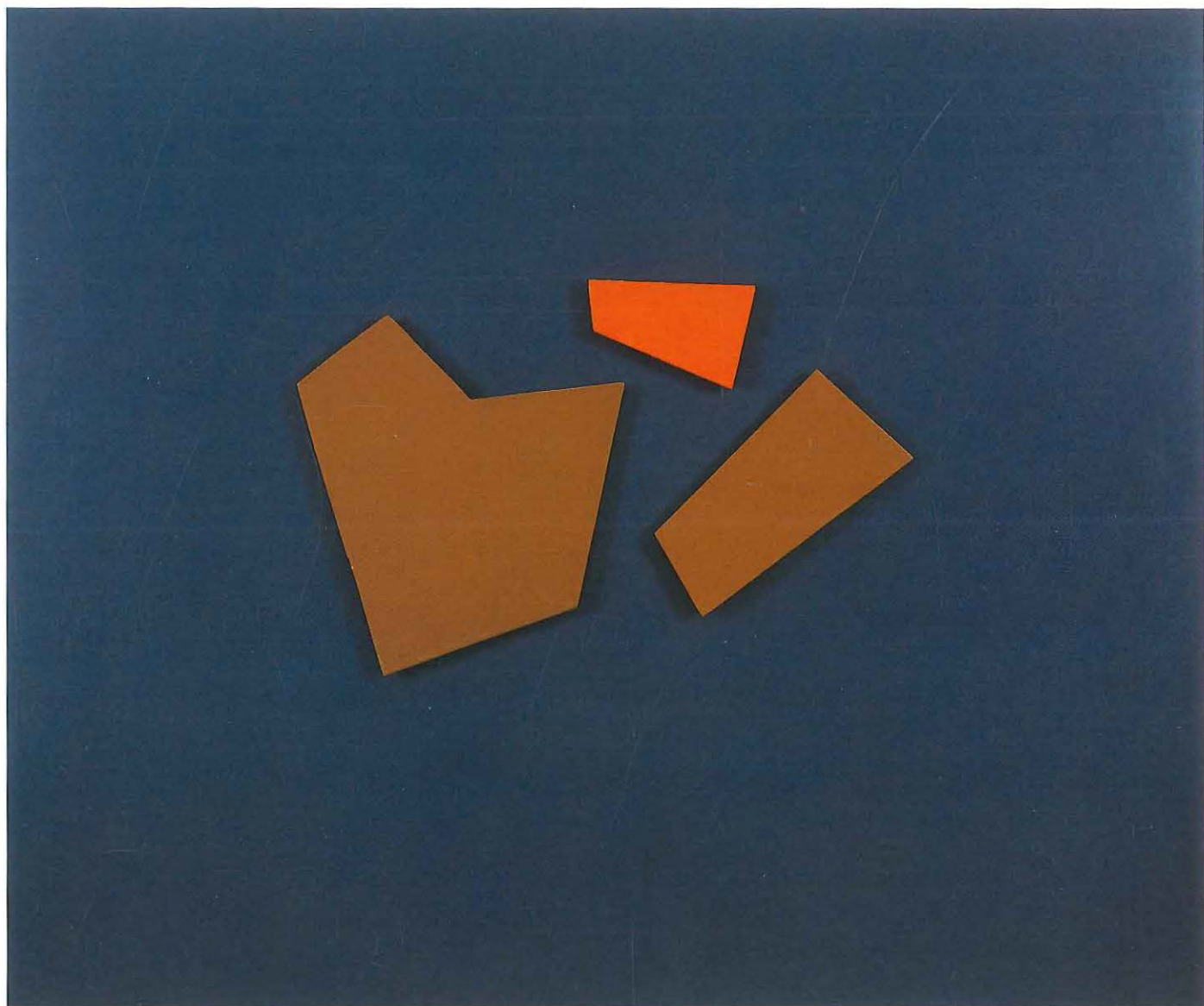
Raúl Lozza

*Invencción No. 150* (Invention No. 150), 1948

Enamel on board, 36 ½ x 43 ½ inches (92.7 x 110.5 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas





José Pedro Costigliolo  
María Freire  
Antonio Llorens  
Victor Magariños D.



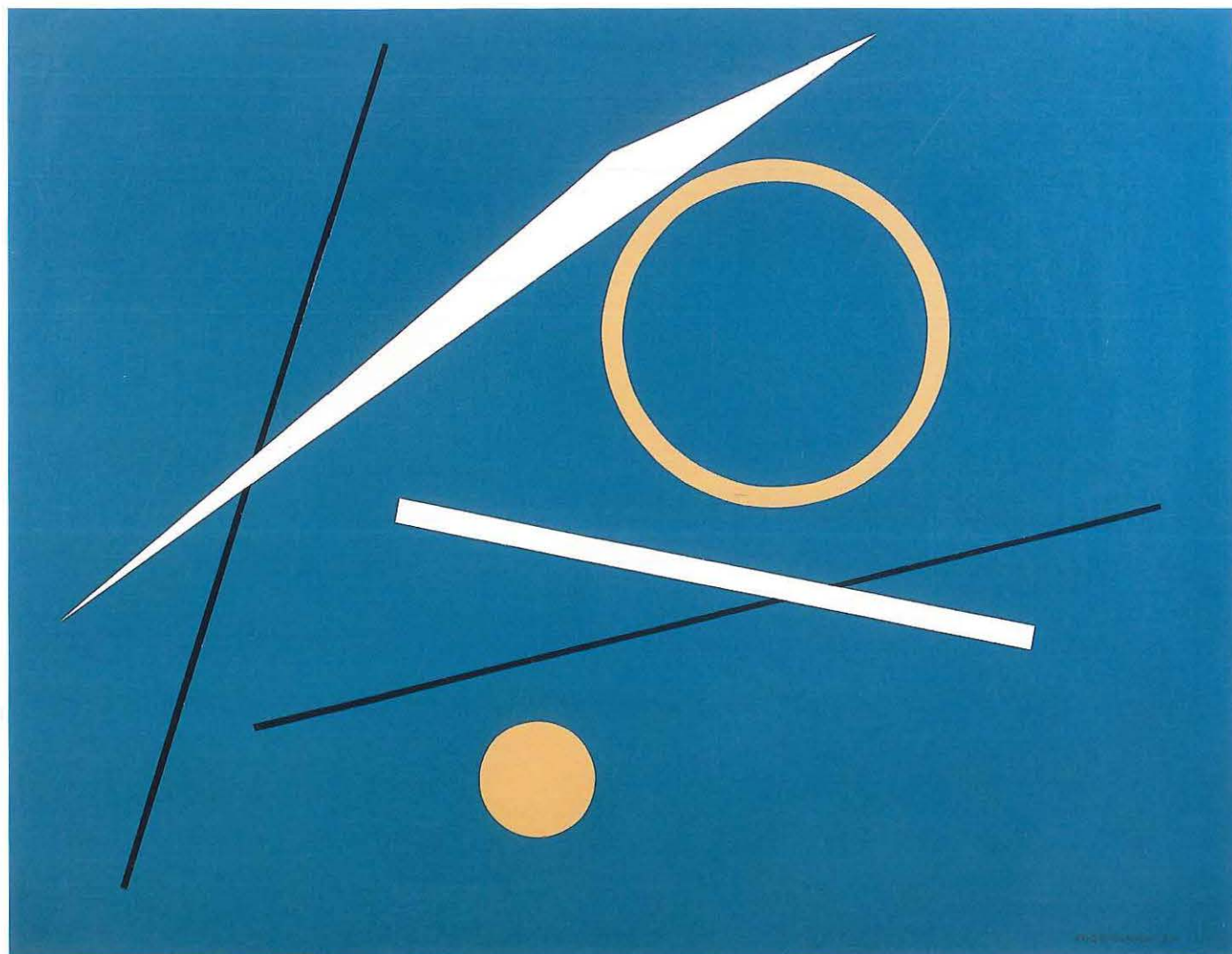
*Plate 46*

José Pedro Costigliolo

*Composición* (Composition), 1953

Enamel on metal, 27 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 36 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches (70 x 92 cm)

Collection of María Freire, Montevideo





*Plate 47*

María Freire

*Escultura* (Sculpture), 1953

Painted wood, 29  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 33  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26 inches (74 x 85 x 66 cm)

Collection of the artist, Montevideo



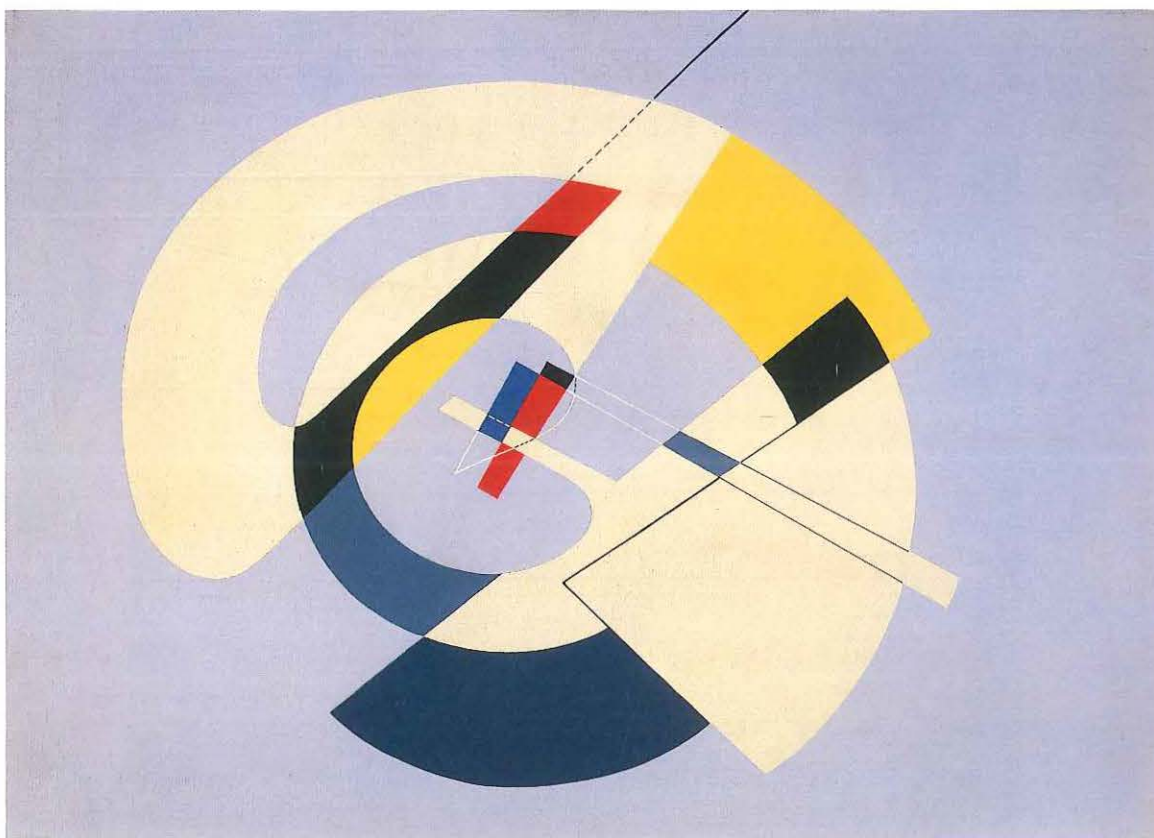


Plate 48

Antonio Llorens

*Composición* (Composition), circa 1952  
Oil on board, 36  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 22  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (93 x 58 cm)  
Private Collection, Montevideo





*Plate 49*

Victor Magariños D.

Sin título (Untitled), 1950

Oil on board, 17  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (45 x 63 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires

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## Checklist of Works in the Exhibition

Carmelo Arden Quin

*Plan vert* (Green Plane), 1945

Gouache on card, 16  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 11  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (41 x 28.9 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Carmelo Arden Quin

*De la serie estructuras extensas o Esculturas blancas transformables* (From the Series of Extensive Structures or Transformable White Sculptures), 1946

Painted wood, glass, and Bakelite,

17  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (45.2 x 21 x 16.3 cm)

Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini

Carmelo Arden Quin

*Mécanique* (Mechanical), 1947

Lacquer on cardboard, 21  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{1}{8}$  (55 x 41 cm)

Collection of Ricardo A. Grüneisen, Buenos Aires

Carmelo Arden Quin

*Lignes et points* (Lines and Points), 1950

Painted panel, 35  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 15 x 1 inches (90 x 38 x 2.5 cm)

Courtesy Rachel Adler Fine Art, New York and

Galerie von Bartha, Basel

Martín Blaszkó

*Ritmos verticales* (Vertical Rhythms), 1947

Oil on wood, 36  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 17  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (93 x 44 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Martín Blaszkó

*El gran ritmo* (The Great Rhythm), 1949

Oil on panel, 36  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (93 x 43 cm)

Collection of Ricardo A. Grüneisen, Buenos Aires

José Pedro Costigliolo

*Composición* (Composition), 1953

Enamel on metal, 27  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 36  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (70 x 92 cm)

Collection of María Freire, Montevideo

Juan Del Prete

*Abstracción* (Abstraction), 1932

Oil on canvas, 56 x 44  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (142 x 114 cm)

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires

Juan Del Prete

*Composición con piolín* (Composition with String), 1933

Collage with cord, 31  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (76 x 39 cm)

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto de la República Argentina

Juan Del Prete

*Estructura en alambre* (Structure in Wire), 1933

Umbrella steel rods, 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

(68 x 62 x 39 cm)

Collection of Liliana Crenovich, Buenos Aires

Juan Del Prete

*Composición* (Composition), 1937

Oil on board, 13 x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (33 x 20.8 cm)

Collection of Josefina Durini, Buenos Aires

Manuel Espinosa

*Pintura* (Painting), 1945

Oil on wood, 34  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 18  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (88 x 47 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires

María Freire

*Escultura* (Sculpture), 1953

Painted wood, 29  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 33  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26 inches

(74 x 85 x 66 cm)

Collection of the artist, Montevideo

Claudio Girola

*Triángulos* (Triangles), 1948

Wood, 14  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 22  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

(36 x 58 x 10.3 cm)

Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini

Claudio Girola

*Volumen comprendido en una estructura*  
(Volume Contained in a Structure), 1951  
Steel rod, height: 21 ¾ inches (40 cm)  
Collection of Josefina Durini, Buenos Aires

Alfredo Hlito

*Estructura* (Structure), 1945  
Oil on canvas, 27 ½ x 19 ¾ inches (70 x 50 cm)  
Collection of Ricardo A. Grüneisen, Buenos Aires

Alfredo Hlito

*Ritmos cromáticos II* (Chromatic Rhythms II), 1947  
Oil on canvas, 27 ⅝ x 27 ⅝ inches  
(69.9 x 70.2 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Alfredo Hlito

*Estructura Lineal* (Lineal Structure), 1952  
Oil on canvas, 39 ⅜ x 27 ½ inches (100 x 70 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Enio Iommi

*Continuidad lineal* (Lineal Continuity), 1948  
Steel rod, 51 ⅞ x 31 ½ x 31 ½ inches  
(130 x 80 x 80 cm)  
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires

Gyula Kosice

*Röyi*, 1944  
Articulated wood, 39 x 31 ½ x 5 ⅞ inches  
(99 x 80 x 15 cm)  
Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Gyula Kosice

*Serie Espacio Objetivo* (Objective Space Series), 1950  
Plexiglas, 28 ¾ x 8 ¼ x 18 ⅞ inches  
(73 x 21 x 46 cm)  
Collection of Fernando Sabsay, Buenos Aires

Esteban Lisa

*Cilindros y planos* (Cylinders and Planes), 1935  
Oil on board, 10 ½ x 8 ½ inches (27 x 21 cm)  
Private Collection, New York

Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), circa 1935  
Oil on board, 11 ⅞ x 9 ⅞ inches (30 x 23 cm)  
Private Collection, New York

Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), circa 1941  
Oil on board, 11 ⅞ x 9 ⅞ inches (29.7 x 23 cm)  
Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), 1945  
Oil on board, 13 ¼ x 8 ⅞ inches (33.5 x 22.5 cm)  
Collection of Marcelo Argüelles, Buenos Aires

Esteban Lisa

*Composición* (Composition), 1946  
Oil on paper, 10 x 6 ¾ inches (25.4 x 17.3 cm)  
Collection of Fernando and Marcela Sánchez Zinny,  
Buenos Aires

Esteban Lisa

*Juego de líneas y colores* (Play of Lines and Colors), 1953  
Oil on board, 19 ¾ x 13 ⅞ inches (50 x 35 cm)  
Private Collection, New York

Antonio Llorens

*Composición* (Composition), circa 1952  
Oil on board, 36 ⅝ x 22 ⅞ inches (93 x 58 cm)  
Private Collection, Montevideo

Raúl Lozza

*Composición* (Composition), 1945  
Oil and black silk ribbon on panel, 21 ½ x 14 ⅞ inches  
(54.5 x 36.5 cm)  
Collection of Josefina Durini, Buenos Aires

Raúl Lozza

*Invencción No. 150* (Invention No. 150), 1948  
Enamel on board, 36 ½ x 43 ½ inches (92.7 x 110.5 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Victor Magariños D.

*Sin título* (Untitled), 1950  
Oil on board, 17 ¾ x 24 ⅞ inches (45 x 63 cm)  
Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Tomás Maldonado

*Sin título* (Untitled), 1945  
Tempera on board attached to enamel on cardboard,  
31 ⅞ x 23 ⅞ inches (79 x 60 cm)  
Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Tomás Maldonado

*Sin título* (Untitled), circa 1946  
Oil on canvas, 33 ½ x 25 ½ inches (85.1 x 64.8 cm)  
Private Collection, Courtesy of Rachel Adler Fine Art,  
New York

Tomás Maldonado

*Desarrollo de 14 Temas* (Development of 14 Themes),  
circa 1947  
Oil on canvas, 78 ¾ x 82 ¾ inches (200 x 210 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Tomás Maldonado

*Tres zonas y dos circulares*  
(Three Zones and Two Circulares), 1953  
Oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 31 ½ inches (80 x 80 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Juan Melé

*Marco recortado No. 2* (Structured Frame No. 2), 1946  
Oil on panel, 28 x 19 ¾ inches (71.1 x 50.2 cm)  
Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



Juan Melé

*Coplanal* (Co-plane), 1947

Oil on board mounted on Plexiglas,

34  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 43  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (87 x 110 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Juan Melé

*Relieve No. 53* (Relief No. 53), 1950

Oil on panel and Plexiglas construction,

27  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 33  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (70 x 84 cm)

Collection of Guillermo de Osma, Madrid

Lidy Prati

*Concreto* (Concrete), 1945

Oil on board, 24  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 18  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (62 x 48 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Lidy Prati

*Concret A4*, 1948

Oil on hardboard, 33 x 23  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches (84 x 60 cm)

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional  
y Culto de la República Argentina

Rhod Rothfuss

*Arlequín* (Harlequin), circa 1944

Oil on canvas, 66  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 33  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (174 x 86 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas

Rhod Rothfuss

*Composición Madi* (Madi Composition), 1946

Enamel on hardboard/canvas, 48  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 33  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 1  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (123  
x 86 x 3.5 cm)

Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Joaquín Torres-García

*Forma en tierra, siena, y negro*

(Form in Earth, Siena, and Black), 1932

Oil on wood, 16  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 13 inches (43 x 33 cm)

Private Collection, New York

Joaquín Torres-García

*Estructura con formas ensambladas*

(Structure with Assembled Forms), 1933

Tempera on board, 29  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 20  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

(75 x 52.3 cm)

Collection of Jeffrey Steiner, New York

Joaquín Torres-García

*Estructura* (Structure), 1935

Oil on board, 30  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 24  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

(78.5 x 62.4 cm)

Private Collection, Montevideo

Joaquín Torres-García

*Constructivist Painting No. 8*, 1938

Gouache on paperboard, 31  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (80.3 x 49.5 cm)

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Purchased through the aid of a gift of Willard Durham

Rodolfo Ian Uricchio

*Máquina inútil* (Useless Machine), 1993 version of the work  
presented in *Réalités Nouvelles* in Paris in 1948

Painted wood with hinges and spring,

23  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 5  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (60 x 40 x 15 cm)

Collection of the artist, Montevideo

Gregorio Vardánega

*Composición* (Composition), 1950

Oil on gesso on composition board,

32  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 24  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (82.5 x 63 cm)

Collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas



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