

Introduction

In the midfifties, abstract art took hold of the Latin American art scene. It expanded until it became synonymous with modern art, and its growing hegemony even affected daily life, which took on a new appearance. The visual imaginary of the fifties came to consist of paintings with straight lines; posters, murals, and landscapes based on geometric structures; and dresses and tablecloths with patterns of squares, circles, and triangles.

This book analyzes the relationship between, on the one hand, the emergence of abstract visions among avant-garde groups and, on the other, the institutionalization and newfound hegemony of abstract poetics as part of the region's imaginary of modernization. I focus mainly on Argentina and Brazil because of the constant and abundant artistic-institutional exchange between the two countries, and because of the shared emphasis on abstraction, which a range of sectors in both countries viewed as an active force in the project of sociocultural transformation. Unlike earlier

studies of the growth of abstraction, which have addressed it in a single nation, I propose a regional approach for the sake of a broader analysis of how abstract poetics took shape in a number of South American cities.

Looking beyond national borders means drawing other maps on the continent by linking cultural scenes that may seem autonomous. A regional vision provides another dimension to our understanding of formulations and events previously studied separately; it sheds light on clusters of connections that have been largely ignored. My approach here has two aims: first, to reconstruct the networks of cultural contacts between regional and international communities tied to abstraction and, second, to provide a comparative analysis of the art scenes in which abstract projects emerged and that they formed part of. Although there were major differences in the circumstances of, and issues surrounding, how abstract art arose and later developed in Argentina and in Brazil, it shared a common basis in both countries, one that enables us to adopt a regional perspective.

In recent decades, abstract art has become a privileged focus in both Argentine and Brazilian art history. It is the object of academic study and the subject of a great many exhibitions at international cultural centers; abstract works have been acquired by public and private collections. This recognition evidences a valorization of abstract poetics, one that began in the seventies and that, since the nineties, has become more and more important on the art market. Indeed, because the contemporary art world has focused on avant-garde abstract works, they are now seen as epitomizing the modern tradition in Latin America.

Some art historical discourses have viewed the Latin American abstract avant-garde as derivative in relation to the European historical avant-garde. But in my view, the intensive development of abstraction in South America requires alternative explanations. The formulations of abstract art in Latin America did not merely repeat the trends that emerged in Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century; they were, rather, retroactive codifications, rereadings of the anticipatory and transformative power of those avant-gardes (Foster 2001). Indeed, it could even be argued that the full potential of the early European avant-gardes' agendas came to fruition in the recodifications enacted by abstract artists in Latin America. That perspective enables us to shake up the "myth of origin" and to rethink the antinomy of novelty/repetition, that is, to reformulate the question of who came first based on a heterogeneous vision of time (Didi-Huberman 2006, 18–25).

One of the ideas put forth in this book is that the notions of “abstraction” and “concrete art” served to codify the discourse on modern art in the forties and fifties.¹ Broadly speaking, both terms define a type of image that is devoid of figurative references and therefore focuses solely on the interrelations of visual elements. The search for autonomy is what allows us to understand the immanence of abstract images as reflexive and as concentrating on the artwork’s objective materiality (an analytical image). Abstraction, then, was seen as the inevitable consequence of modern art’s development, which began in the last decades of the nineteenth century—indeed, that was how it was understood by the artists themselves, who constructed the genealogies of that analytic image (Danto 2006; Wood et al. 1999; Frascina 1985; Menna 1977). Thus, while European points of reference may have reappeared in the agendas of Argentine and Brazilian concrete art, they were transformed and relocated.

With this rereading, old problems of terminology resurfaced. Although the terms *nonfigurative art*, *constructivism*, *abstract art*, *concrete art*, *Madi*, *perceptismo*, and *neoconcretism* all refer to art that does not look to figuration, they also demonstrate differing conceptions of artwork. Implicit in the word *abstract* is the negation of figurative representation; concrete art emphasized the reflexive aspects of artistic practices. Whereas the term *abstract art* indicated synthesis with the real, *concrete art* referred to creation based on art’s materiality and procedures without referring to the things of the world and their appearance. The image in a concrete work was premeditated and finely tuned; there was no room for artistic individualism because of the search for objectivity.

The tension between these terms, and their relative merits, was constant. At times, they indicated discrepancies and struggle; at others, classifications like “abstract art” and “concrete art” were more like vague conceptual receptacles. For that reason, I believe their meanings must be interrogated in relation to the specific circumstances in which they emerged and the different contexts in which their meanings took shape (Foucault [1969] 2004, 236–42).

Another of this book’s basic hypotheses is that the artists who advocated concrete art saw their projects as agents of cultural transformation in postwar Latin America. Central to their agendas was the transformation of the life of modern man.² They believed that their works would pave the way for new cognitive and sensory experiences; they envisioned their commitment to those new experiences as a question of political

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1. The term *abstraction* here encompasses a broad range of nonfigurative projects: abstract art, concrete art, constructivism, *Madi*, neoconcretism, *perceptismo*. The specificities of the terms will be laid out when pertinent to my analysis.
 2. We have chosen not to alter the use of masculine pronouns and nouns as generic (“modern man” here) because those were the terms used by the players themselves in their writings at the time.

consciousness. Indeed, the political radicalness of their images lay in their cognitive power. If this avant-garde saw its project as tied to the Marxist agenda, it was on the basis of a shared commitment to revolution (Buck-Morss 2004, 69).

The transformation that these artists envisioned went beyond the sphere of the arts. They understood anything visual as a means of bringing together human beings and their environment. Geometric rationality in industrial production seemed capable of giving rise to a new and harmonious social order. Concrete art groups in Argentina and Brazil worked in a range of disciplines—which shows how they extended the limits of art and that they were interested in directly intervening in daily life. They saw mass-produced objects and constructed environments as having the power to transform perception and to incite collective action.

Their belief in the transformative power of abstraction entailed an internationalist vision that, in turn, implied cultural contacts across the region and beyond. Indeed, doing away with geopolitical borders was one of the cornerstones of the concrete agenda. Artists' use of autonomous images—that is, with no local references whatsoever—and their adherence to cosmopolitan principles gave their projects a transnational dimension. For that reason, in part, journals and magazines were key spaces for debates on abstraction to be processed and reappropriated, and for the exchange and circulation of images.

Although abstract art developed in the framework of the avant-garde, it gradually gained ground in Argentine and Brazilian institutions in a process that implicated—in addition to the avant-garde and art criticism—national cultural policies. The contact between institutions in Argentina and Brazil was also crucial to the development of concrete art. The dialogues, exchanges, and disputes between the advocates of concrete art—not only artists but also art administrators and institutions—shed light on the relationship that developed between the avant-garde, modern art, economic development, and political power in the international order that took shape in the wake of World War II. In the early fifties, abstract art unified the regional scene. For that reason, focusing on abstraction was a factor in the fight for cultural supremacy in the framework of the political and diplomatic relations between Argentina and Brazil.

Starting in the late forties, with the opening of new museums, and then the launching of the São Paulo Biennial—an event that aspired to become eminent in the art world—Brazil deployed a complex machinery of cultural administration. Argentine diplomacy perceived this as an attempt to establish cultural hegemony, which led to a change in its cultural policy; the beginning of Juan Domingo Perón's administration was characterized by cultural choices that eschewed innovation. It was the connection to Brazil that

caused Argentine art institutions to reassess their position, eventually embracing abstraction for the sake of international recognition. Clearly, the fact that the Brazilian state and the bourgeoisie of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro had taken a risk and backed abstraction had an impact on the Argentine art scene, and the growing international importance of Brazil after the war threatened the cultural hegemony once enjoyed by Argentina.

One of the main ideas put forth in this book is that, if in the forties the abstract art scene was structured around the diverse genealogies of modern art, in the fifties that changed with the active intervention of Swiss artist Max Bill on the Argentine and Brazilian art circuits. His presence was crucial to the development and growth of concrete art.

The connections between Bill and certain Brazilian and Argentine artists, critics, and cultural administrators created opportunities for exchange and spaces of intervention. On the one hand, a number of artists and critics found in Bill's theory of concrete art a systematic model capable of addressing a wide range of concerns they were already pursuing. On the other hand, Bill found openness to his ideas in South America, whereas abstraction was losing ground in postwar Europe. Hence, focusing specifically on the development of concrete art and on Bill's role helps us understand the specificity of the Argentine-Brazilian scene.

Bill's concept, which looked to Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg, entailed rational reflection on and a planned approach to visual elements and the relationships between them. Concrete art was understood as going beyond abstraction, since it proposed a specific and objective method for creating images. Furthermore, it had a correlate in the fields of architecture and design, mainly the theory of good form (*gute Form*). Like concrete art, the theory of good form was an outgrowth of the avant-garde postulates of the first decades of the twentieth century. Good form tried to make an object intelligible in terms of use and technology while also understanding the beauty of form as inextricable from its functionality. As expressed in Bill's slogan, "Designing [everything], from the spoon to the city," he believed that concretism and good form were applicable to all visual phenomena.

In the late fifties, the consolidation of concretism fell into a crisis as two distinct sets of concerns arose within it: on the one hand, the focus on "project disciplines"—a term coined by Tomás Maldonado that brought together fields like urbanism, architecture, and industrial and graphic design under the umbrella concept of the project (Bonsiepe 2007); on the other, the transformation of art and its interests on the basis of problematics that were surfacing in the realm of the arts. The HfG in Ulm—a school that Bill founded as the continuation of Bauhaus—was a key space in the confrontation between the theory of

good form and research on the specificity of industrial design. The school represented an attempt to revitalize postwar constructivism by looking to design as a means of re-elaborating the avant-garde insistence on transforming the human environment. Furthermore, since Argentine and Brazilian artists and architects, among them Maldonado, formed part of the school as faculty members and as students, the institution itself, as well as the work produced at it, became models for emerging modern design in Latin America.

At the same time, new processes were underway on the region's art scene. In Argentina, starting in the second half of the fifties, abstract painting was part of a plural scene. In addition to a great deal of geometric work, informalism emerged with works in which the random and the precarious were constituent parts of the production process. In Brazil neoconcretism's reformulation incorporated the body as a perceptive and creative phenomenon; it invited what were viewers to become participants. Thus, concrete poetics took on new meanings; indeed, for some, it was vital to go beyond the logic of concrete art.

The period that this book covers spans from 1944 to 1960—years that, it can be argued, witnessed the formation and later development of concrete art. The first year, 1944, was when the journal *Arturo* was launched in Buenos Aires; the second, 1960, witnessed the *Konkrete Kunst: 50 Jahre Entwicklung* (Concrete art: 50 years of evolution), an exhibition organized by Bill at the Helmhaus in Zurich (artists from Argentina and Brazil participated in that show). These two years define a period in which a cultural process took place, one revolving around a set of problems central to the period's dynamic. The first year marked the launching of a journal in the heart of the avant-garde, while the second saw the consolidation of Latin American abstraction on the international scene. During those years concrete art was institutionalized, and it achieved cultural hegemony, a process that this book examines in depth.

Regarding methodology, I have looked to points of contact between cultures and to comparative approaches in order to go beyond national histories and to reconstruct a broader continental narrative. By points of cultural contact, I mean specific episodes in which different cultures came into contact through exiles, trips, publications, translations, and other interchanges, producing cultural networks that extended across a region or the continent (Clifford 1999; Pratt 1997; Romero 1988; Antelo 1982). I studied how publications circulated through Argentina and Brazil in order to trace the interactions between the region's avant-gardes, their rereadings of projects for aesthetic transformation, and the ramifications and influence of those rereadings on the greater South American scene. In this endeavor, comparative perspectives are key to developing a perspective

that relates different scenes according to their commonalities (Bloch 1999; Devoto 2004; Giunta 1996; Gorelik 2004). The comparative approach has allowed me to reflect on institutions and on art collecting on both sides of the border, and it has helped me grapple with the similarities and differences between the art fields in different cities during the period when abstract art was taking hold. A comparative perspective brought to bear on cultural contact has continued to be fruitful in the work I have done after finishing my dissertation and the publication of this book in Spanish; it has opened up a promising line of inquiry into modern art in Latin America (M. A. García 2016b). The questions posed in this book take up the sociology of culture (Bourdieu 1995; Williams [1977] 1997), social art history (e.g., Crow 2002; Guilbaut 1990), and theories of modernity and the avant-garde (e.g., Buchloh 2004; Bürger 1987; Foster 2001; Krauss 1996).

Although this book is organized diachronically, it does not follow a rigorous chronological sequence of events. Instead, I establish clusters of significant synchronous relations, that is, sets of concerns that are not based solely on time but that constitute a spatial relation. In other words, I analyze the events and interchanges between Argentina and Brazil through tangles and intersections that provide an understanding of a common field of exchange and debate.

The first chapter deals with the formation of the magazine *Arturo* as an avant-garde project grounded in the region where its contributors operated. The aim of the chapter is to reconstruct the journal's bold vision by considering the artistic traditions and cultural contacts that it revolved around. Thus, I will show the poetic and visual choices enacted in its pages and examine its place in the national, regional, and international contexts. An analysis of how Murilo Mendes and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva came to contribute to the *Arturo* project will provide a view of the cultural scene in Rio de Janeiro during World War II.

From the seed planted by *Arturo*, two other projects grew starting in 1945: the Madí group and the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención (Concrete-Invention Art Association, or AACI). The second chapter addresses the conditions in which the AACI developed, as well as its output and first exhibitions. The chapter also examines the group's works and manifestos in relation to Marxist rhetorical strategies and to the group's reworking of the research by Russian constructivists. The chapter also sheds light on the ties between the AACI and the Brazilian cultural scene. The AACI's ties to Carlos Drummond de Andrade and to the magazine *Joaquim*, based in the Brazilian city of Curitiba, attest to a network of relationships between Argentines and Brazilians, a circuit of ties geared to consolidating internationalist strategies around the idea of abstract art.

The third chapter deals with the agendas and actions of cultural agents and institutions that strove to define the “modern” for the region. In Brazil, the bourgeoisie and the state identified with and embraced modern art (which was by no means the case in Argentina). The launching of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951 was a key moment in the debate on modern art, not only because it became a new point of reference in the international geography of the arts, but also because the event legitimized abstraction by awarding, at its first edition, the first prize in sculpture to Bill.

An analysis of Bill’s connections to and interventions in the region draws a map of concrete art—and that is the topic of the fourth chapter. It addresses the status of abstraction in the international art scene after the war to contrast the fairly marginal place Bill occupied in Europe and the important role, in South America, of the concrete art he championed.

The fifth chapter deals with how South American approaches acted on, and sometimes clashed with, the paradigm of modern art and architecture. I discuss the *Nueva Visión* magazine, the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (Modern Art Group of Argentina, or GAMA), and the Grupo Ruptura—three organizations that advocated concrete art in Argentina and in Brazil. I also address Bill’s trip to Brazil in 1953 and his criticism of the modern architecture he found there. The repercussions of that trip are highly significant because they demonstrate the tensions between the European and South American visions of modern art.

The sixth chapter addresses Brazil as model of cultural administration. I show that, insofar as positions on the international art scene reflect political views, Brazil’s internationalist cultural stance in the postwar period threatened the regional cultural hegemony of Argentina and obliged Argentina to change its strategy of cultural diplomacy.

The final chapter discusses how concrete art was displaced as the focus of artistic debate in both countries. I consider two explanations for this: first, the transformations that took place within the art field itself and, second, concrete art’s new focus on design. By the late fifties, concrete art found itself cornered. Awareness of what it could not encompass meant that it had to redefine itself in order to take on other visual experiences.