

MAKING ART CONCRETE: WORKS FROM ARGENTINA AND
BRAZIL IN THE COLECCIÓN PATRICIA PHELPS DE CISNEROS

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During the Northern autumn of 2017, the Getty Foundation's "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA" oversaw eighty exhibitions in Southern California that easily comprised the largest-ever initiative dedicated to Latin American and "Latinx" art in the United States. Of these myriad shows, the Hammer's *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* was among the best received, becoming PST's feminist triumph in the season of #metoo.² Yet in its impressive marshalling of resources and research, it was the Getty Center's *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros* that perhaps best emblemized the ambitions and implications of "PST: LA / LA." While not as gargantuan in scale as many of its companion shows, *Making Art Concrete* achieved a *forensic* intervention at one foundation of the Latin American modernist canon: postwar Argentinean and Brazilian abstraction.

Curated by Tom Learner, Andrew Perchuk, Pia Gottschaller, Aleca Le Blanc and Zanna Gilbert, *Making Art Concrete* utilized just three modest galleries at the Richard Meier-designed museum, far less space than the other two PST shows there: a sweeping survey of Argentine photography, and *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas*, a dazzling showcase of mostly pre-Colombian artifacts in gold, quetzal feathers, jadeite, and other precious materials. *Making Art Concrete* presented (and indeed produced) a very different sort of value by placing concrete works from the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, arguably the most important collection of Latin American modernism outside of the region, under the microscope—literally. The show was a joint collaboration between the Getty Research Institute, or GRI, and the Getty Conservation Institute, which boasts an array of cutting-edge technologies: visible light photomicrography and raking

1 School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

2 The exhibition featured in multiple best-of lists for 2017, including those of *The New York Times*, *The L.A. Times* and *Hyperallergic*, among others. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/arts/design/the-best-art-of-2017.html>, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-year-end-knight-top-10-20171217-htmistory.html>

light illumination, infrared and ultraviolet photography, x-rays, and scanning electron microscopy of paint samples, which yields both the specific chemical makeup of pigments and binding materials as well as cross-section images of paint layers that resemble geological strata. The curators presented their findings alongside the works in displays akin to a science museum, with clearly articulated themes such as “Looking through Paint Layers” and “Between the Handmade and the Industrial: Paints and Paint Surfaces.” It is likely that viewers less versed in modern Latin American art might have wondered why the museum went to such trouble to empirically study objects with which they were more likely than not unfamiliar—but this seemed to be part of the point. The Getty’s authority and scientific capabilities retroactively lent importance, and interest, to the works on hand, allowing the show to operate on both ultra-specialized and layperson registers.

Argentina was represented by members of Asociación Arte Concreto-Inventiva (AACI), Movimiento Madí, and Perceptismo, whose signature strategies of the *marco recortado* and *disposición coplanar* were enriched with close observations about process. Asociación Arte Concreto-Inventiva artists, for example, carefully reduced the evidence of handmade gesture via the use of straight-edge rulers (Juan Melé, *Marco recortado no. 2*, 1946) and marking pens (Alfredo Hlito, *Ritmos cromáticos III*, 1949). One artist receiving welcome attention was Raúl Lozza, founder of Perceptismo, whose *Relieve no. 30*, 1946, provides one of the clearest articulations of the “coplanar” use of the exhibiting wall as a ground for colored shapes networked by metal wire (Lozza and Melé also used “portable walls”: monochromes on hardboard on which other shapes and lines were mounted). The curators emphasized Lozza’s habit of using found wood for these works and his complex preparatory drawings, several of which were on display in a nearby gallery. Far from supplements, these sketches offer tantalizing insight into the possibility that Lozza’s was thinking in terms of invisible Gestalts, or larger shapes, of which his linked fragments were merely visible manifestations or possible iterations among others. Yet these are not logical Gestalts that a viewer could surmise from the final product of the work itself; rather, they suggest *irrational* geometries that perhaps betray the milieu’s origins in Surrealist automatism. Lozza additionally polished his paintings to *matar el brillo*, or “kill the shine,” of the alkyd and oil paints that he used, to a matte sheen, attempting to reconcile the substrate’s found nature with concrete art’s signature “industrial” look.

The Brazilian examples compared São Paulo’s Grupo Ruptura with Rio de Janeiro’s Grupo Frente and Grupo Neoconcretismo, reprising perhaps the best-known transition in Latin American abstraction, in

which *cariocas* such as Willys de Castro, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica (the latter two members of both groups) gradually shifted the *paulistas'* easel paintings off the wall into participatory objects and situations in the early 1960s. What *Making Art Concrete's* close looking made clear was that forays into three-dimensional space were already underway with Ruptura, as is apparent in evaluating the reverse of Judith Lauand's *Concreto 61*, 1957, which features a deep wooden hanging device that produces the sensation that the hardboard painting is "floating" off the wall. The Getty also impressively de- and re-constructed de Castro's *Objeto ativo*, 1962, explaining, in one of a series of elegantly crafted videos, how he glued a single piece of pre-primed canvas onto a wooden box "to reduce the number of seams to an absolute minimum".³

The Getty's empirical research confirmed that concrete artists in both countries experimented with new industrial house paints, with binders such as oleoresin, nitrocellulose, alkyd, and polyvinyl acetate, alongside their use of traditional oils. Coupled with the Bauhaus- and Constructivism-inspired reduction of gesture across much of the work, and, in Brazil, the use of masking tape to produce the straightest possible lines, one finds a consistent embrace of the newest products and technologies. Art historians have previously linked these procedures to the concurrent modernization process in both countries that is evident in transformations in design, architecture and infrastructure, and indeed to "developmentalism," the politico-economic ethos that prevailed under Juscelino Kubitschek in Brazil (1956-61) and Arturo Frondizi in Argentina (1958-1962). The exhibition and accompanying catalogue certainly double down on this claim. Le Blanc writes in the catalogue,

In their rapid transition from agricultural economies to industrialized ones, these young artists and designers represented the first generation in a new societal order. ...They were no longer the plantation workers engaged in repetitive manual labor. They were now the generators of new ideas and systems, optimistic about their process of research and development, with the imagined ends of making their modern cities appealing and efficient places to live and work.⁴

This curiously teleological statement warrants closer attention, beyond the fact that modern artists prior to the concretists were hardly "plantation workers". The dates are an awkward fit, however. It is

3 See Getty Center. "Breaking the Frame," exhibition video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL05VSGSCLQ>.

4 Aleca Le Blanc. "The Material of Form: How Concrete Artists Responded to the Second Industrial Revolution in Latin America", in Pia Gottschaller et al. (eds.): *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*. Exh. cat. Los Angeles, Getty Trust Publications, 2017, p. 19.

no coincidence that Le Blanc's essay begins in 1956, when Tomás Maldonado, leader of Arte Concreto-Invencción, was already working at Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm and visiting Brazil as an *exponent* of geometric abstraction—yet concrete art in Argentina originally appeared under Peronism. Likewise, the first years of Ruptura overlapped with the last years of Getúlio Vargas. Mónica Amor, among others, has noted how the Marxist ambitions of the concretists was in fact out of step with the extraordinarily persuasive populism unfolding in the political sphere around them.⁵ The materialist emphasis of this exhibition sets up an unexplored avenue of inquiry that Irene V. Small has touched on in her work on Hélio Oiticica: the significance of the protectionist policies of the Perón and Vargas regimes for the fortunes of painting in this era, versus the economic “openings” of their developmentalist successors.⁶ While one would certainly not have wanted the curators to wallow in stereotypes of Latin American failure or under-development, the show left an unanswered and rather un-scientific question: in what ways could these brilliant achievements also persist as monuments to old-fashioned intellectual alienation?

For all of the Getty's technological wizardry on display in *Making Art Concrete*, one of the exhibition's most important gestures was to remind viewers that the avant-gardes in question were not exclusively devoted to painting, in a section titled “In Search of the Concrete in Painting, Poetry and Design” that was dedicated to little magazines and graphic design by many of the same artists. Here, a copy of Joaquín Torres-García's 1932 book *Raison et nature*, published while he was still in Europe working with abstraction groups, was a scant reminder of his central role in connecting Montevideo and Buenos Aires artists, which led to the one-off little magazine *Arturo* and ultimately Arte Concreto-Invencción and Madí. The latter's insistently interdisciplinary character was encapsulated in the group's playful graphic design, embodied in a series of June 1946 postcards trumpeting the group's invention of a “new plastic genre!” Concrete poetry was represented here as well, primarily in the form of Haroldo de Campos' delightful “Lygia Fingers”, 1953, with text in different colors dialoguing with the painting counterparts in the next room. The Grupo Noigandres poets were close associates with the members of Ruptura, and while the presence of this example (complete with sound accompaniment and headphones) was a cheerful sight, one

5 Mónica Amor. *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944-1969*. Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2016, p. 58.

6 See Irene V. Small. “*Pigment Pur* and the *Corpo da Côr*: Post-Painterly Practice and Transmodernity”, October, N° 152, Spring, 2015, pp. 82-102.

also felt a certain institutional strain to include such non-traditional media in an exhibition whose primary goal was to show off the Getty's elite capacity for researching art objects. Finally, there was a gem, easy to miss, at the very end: Aluísio Carvão's *Superfície farfalhante V*, 1960, a complete departure for the sensuous monochromatic painted sculptures for which he is best known. In a recognizably modernist grid, a set of aluminum discs are nailed to a grey canvas, instantiating not only the found object, but also the possibility for sound and motion in the field of what was previously the province of painting games. Separated by a hallway, this section differed so radically from its empirical counterpart that one could be forgiven for thinking they were two different exhibitions, linked only by the term "concrete".

The Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros featured prominently in *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968*, Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez's influential survey of Latin American modernism at the start of this century.⁷ It has also been the exclusive source for multiple abstraction shows, among them Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro's *The Geometry of Hope* and *Radical Geometry* and Matilda Olof-Ors' *Concrete Matters*, which closes at Moderna Museet in May.⁸ The Colección's partnership with MoMA in New York has supported curatorships for Latin American art as well as retrospectives for Armando Reverón, Lygia Clark, Joaquín Torres-García and others, and since 2016 has resulted in gifts of nearly 200 works of modern and contemporary Latin American art.⁹ *Making Art Concrete's* unique level of attention to the material qualities of masterworks in this collection undoubtedly contributed to this unparalleled legacy of dominance in the field, which inevitably raises the question of what it means for so much of the Latin American canon to permanently reside outside of the region. These perennial concerns aside, one should not overlook the significance of these objects receiving the sort of forensic attention previously reserved for Raphael, Picasso or Pollock. I would argue that it is one of the surest signs that Latin American modernism, once a mere fad for major institutions, is here to stay. Happily, the artists and work in question

7 See Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea (eds.), *Heterotopías. medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918-1968*. Exh. cat. Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000.

8 See Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro (ed.), *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*. Exh. cat. Blanton Museum and Grey Gallery, New York, DAP, 2007, and *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*. Exh. cat. London, Royal Academy of Arts, 2014, and Matilda Olof-Ors and Maria Amalia García (eds.), *Concrete Matters*. Exh. cat. Moderna Museet. London & Köln, Koenig Books, 2018.

9 See <http://press.moma.org/2016/10/cisneros/> and <http://press.moma.org/2018/01/momacisneroscontemporarygift/>.

rewards this close attention, providing new avenues for a rising generation of art historians looking to expand on our knowledge of these histories. As Gottschaller affirms in the catalogue, “Their struggle to realize utopian concepts using earthbound means is inscribed into the surfaces of their artworks”.¹⁰

¹⁰ Pia Gottschaller. “Making Concrete Art”, *Making Art Concrete* 29.