

## ART FOR PARTISAN LIFE: NONOBJECTIVITY TRANSLATED TO BUENOS AIRES, 1944–48

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### Introduction: Memory and Reformulation

Upon viewing Tomás Maldonado's *Sin título* [Untitled] (fig. 1), c. 1945, the first image that comes to mind, prior even to that of the work itself, is Kazimir Malevich's 1915 *Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack—Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*. It is almost impossible to overlook the similarities: Maldonado reiterates the composition of the well-known canvas, organizing black and red quadrilaterals in a roughly diagonal relationship against a white ground. A self-conscious evocation of a painting renowned not only in Maldonado's native Argentina but also internationally as an art historical milestone in the development of nonobjective painting, *Sin título* proposes a genealogy in which Malevich's project culminates in a different hemisphere three decades after its initial creation.

Maldonado has acknowledged this work's dialogue with *Painterly Realism*,<sup>1</sup> yet the formal differences between the two reveal a rethinking rather than a repetition of Malevich's painting. The irregular black trapezoid begins to imply movement in space, a slight recession counteracted by the resolute orthogonality of the contiguous red rectangle.<sup>2</sup> This tension between spatiality and flatness is literalized by the material properties of the work itself: the black and red forms are rendered in tempera on cardboard and affixed in shallow relief to the cardboard backing, painted in white enamel. The interplay of media that results from this collage, as well as the projection of forms into actual space, confers upon the quadrilaterals a degree of autonomy from their implied ground.

The term *implied* is deliberately used to describe the ground, as the most obvious and consequential difference between these two paintings lies in Maldonado's use of the shaped canvas.<sup>3</sup> Forming an irregular heptagon, it refutes the entire tradition of the rectangular frame that defines the painting as a bounded window. Instead, the ground becomes a figure itself, a dynamic component of the composition that places the seeming autonomy of the quadrilaterals into tension. Maldonado has noted "the red-black structure ... was compositionally linked, by way of a complex connective network, with the perimeter of the 'irregular frame.'"<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the forms participate within a set of internal pressures and forces, a "network" that pits the flatness of the "self-contained organism" against its capacity for dynamism.<sup>5</sup> As Omar Calabrese assesses, Maldonado resurrects the "memory" of Malevich's geometry only to "reformulate" it according to an entirely new enterprise.<sup>6</sup> Maldonado subtly invokes conventions of figuration, namely the figure-ground relationship and the suggestion of spatial depth, only to interrogate them by reaffirming the material flatness and formal self-sufficiency of the object itself.

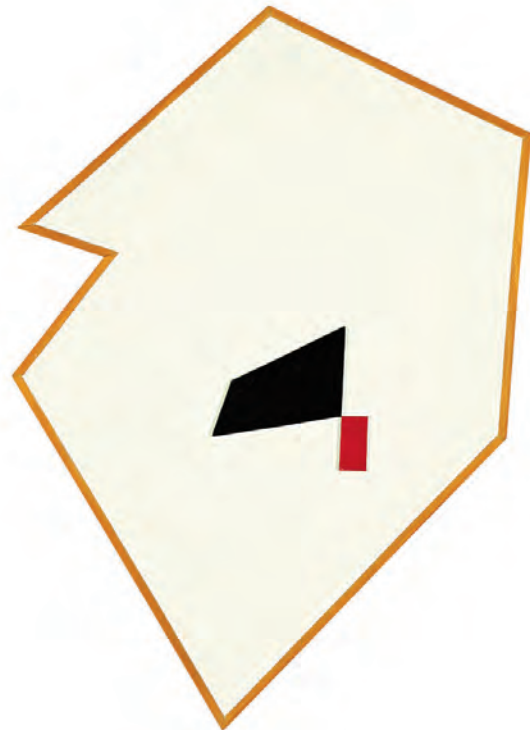


Fig. 1 Tomás Maldonado, *Sin título*, c. 1945, tempera on board, 79 x 60 cm, private collection, Buenos Aires.

The introduction of nonobjectivity and the invention of the shaped canvas in Argentina during the 1940s have received a fair amount of attention,<sup>7</sup> and indeed the works produced during this time by the loosely defined *Arte Concreto–Invención* [Concrete Art–Invention] group certainly reveal a formal artistic program that is markedly different than those of their European forerunners. Less understood, however, are the motivations behind these developments: why did Maldonado and his artistic contemporaries dialogue with European figures such as Malevich, and precisely what conditions—artistic and ideological—enabled such a memory and reformulation to occur in the first place? These questions can begin to be answered by considering contemporaneous texts by the artists, who often doubled as theorists and political activists. While many of these have been previously published in translated or excerpted forms, the ICAA Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art digital archive has made available in one location a wealth of writings in their original, complete format. Access to these documents allows for a more thorough understanding of *Arte Concreto–Invención*'s formal and ideological ambitions, as well as its complex relationship with European Modernism.

An interpretation of modern European art history as a progressive march toward complete nonobjectivity characterized *Arte Concreto–Invención*, which was inaugurated in 1944 with the first and only publication of *Arturo* magazine, and of which Maldonado

was a founding member. Internal disagreements would result in the group's splitting into two factions in 1946: the more rigorous, collective program of pure nonobjective painting of Maldonado's Asociación Arte Concreto–Invención [Association of Concrete Art–Invention] differed from its arguably more celebrated Madí counterpart, which undertook interdisciplinary public actions that were more ludic in nature.<sup>8</sup> The formation of Arte Concreto–Invención may thus be considered the beginning of a trajectory of Argentine art that sought to rid painting of all traces of figuration, a project that was furthered by the Asociación.

A sense of radical rupture distinguishes *Arturo*, which famously opens with the “Inventar” [To Invent] manifesto:

TO INVENT: To find or discover by force of ingenuity or meditation, or by mere chance, something new or unknown. / The artist must find, imagine, or create his or her work / INVENTION: The action and effect of inventing. / Something invented. / FINDING INVENTION AGAINST AUTOMATISM.<sup>9</sup>

From the outset the artists put forth a theory of invention that necessarily seeks to do away with representation. Yet in spite of the group's firm stance against “automatism,” the means by which invention may be undertaken remain open: less important than a rigorous style or technique is the proposition that the work be fully autonomous and divorced from the natural world, by any means necessary.

This flexibility would initially produce a degree of heterogeneity evident in the diversity of approaches in *Arturo*—Maldonado's woodcut print for the cover reveals an interest in figurative abstraction that, surprisingly, evokes the automatism that the “Inventar” manifesto so explicitly opposes (fig. 2). Very quickly, however, Maldonado and the later Asociación would link “invention” with an aesthetic program of the “concrete,” indebted to European terminology and yoked with a distinctly Marxist materialist ideology. For this reason, this flank of younger Argentine artists may be termed *concreto-invencionistas* [concrete-inventionists].<sup>10</sup> Such a designation not only foregrounds the continued self-identification with “Arte Concreto–Invención,” but it also identifies “invention” and “concrete” as the two terminological cornerstones of the 1940s Argentine avant-garde.<sup>11</sup> Whereas “invention” privileges the process by which a work of art may be created, “concrete” designates the aesthetic and ultimately ontological properties of an invented work of art: modifying Theo van Doesburg's initial conception of *Art Concret*, the Argentine iteration of “concrete” espouses absolute nonfiguration, to the extent that the work becomes a self-sufficient, fundamentally material object.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, then, process and product are linked in a theoretical framework intended to enter, and ultimately supersede, an art historical narrative of abstraction originating in Europe.



Fig. 2. Tomás Maldonado, cover design for *Arturo: Revista de arte abstracto* (Buenos Aires), no. 1 (Summer 1944), woodcut, Archivo Raúl Naón, Buenos Aires.

Within this narrative, the prospect of doing away with figuration comes rather late, as abstract and nonobjective art had developed in Europe more than three decades prior to their introduction to Argentina. From an Argentine (and broader Latin American) perspective, however, the radical nature of the ideas published in *Arturo* cannot be overstated: until the summer of 1944 the most “vanguard” artistic statements, to use the *concreto-invencionistas*' criteria, consisted of the quasi-cubistic figurative work of Emilio Pettoruti and Lucio Fontana. The lag time in the transatlantic migration of nonfiguration to South America merits consideration, as the Argentines responded to their European predecessors but did so in a manner that pushed “concrete” art in an entirely new direction.

In considering this translation it is less fruitful to parse the distinctions between the individual *concreto-invencionistas* than it is to understand the oft-indirect manners in which a history of European Modernism was received, largely after-the-fact, and adapted to suit an entirely new context. The concepts of “invention” and “concrete” art derived from European attempts in the 1930s to consolidate abstraction and nonobjectivity against figuration, especially Surrealism, but the consequent deracination of nonfiguration enabled the *concreto-invencionistas* to reformulate it along Marxist lines. Their most groundbreaking formal innovation, the shaped canvas, was the means by which they pursued a rigorous program of materialist nonobjectivity. It is this development that characterizes the so-called *época heroica* [Heroic Era] of the Argentine avant-garde, a period that began with the 1944 publication of *Arturo* and terminated with Maldonado's first trip to Europe in the summer of 1948. Spanning only four years, the *época heroica* saw a young generation of artists espousing a version of nonfiguration that was as political as it was aesthetic—a utopian endeavor that sought to confirm the social utility of art by means of materializing it as a physical, and deeply partisan, object.

### Nonfiguration Consolidated and Disseminated

*Arturo* is canonically taken as the seminal publication that announces the arrival of Arte Concreto–Invención, heralding a complete departure from the figuration and academicism that had preceded it.<sup>13</sup> Though unprecedented, it appeared neither spontaneously nor theoretically fully formed, as evident in the well-documented discrepancy between the texts and the illustrations, which collectively do not amount to a coherent whole.<sup>14</sup> The journal proclaims a desire to realize a break with the past, but the parameters of such a break were largely undefined.

Some have argued that the contradictory nature of *Arturo* reflects some of the ambiguities and instability of the Argentine sociopolitical climate in the early part of the decade, which was marked by a military coup d'état that installed a military junta and resulted in the rise to power of Juan Domingo Perón.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, Maldonado stated that his automatist woodcut is evidence of “a brief, transitory lapse into abstract expressionism.”<sup>16</sup> Neither of these assertions, however, fully explains *Arturo*'s inconsistencies. More revealing is Maldonado's comment that the journal articulated “the voice of the many tensions, intentions, and expectations shared by the young Latin American intellectuals in those years.”<sup>17</sup> The pluralism at work within *Arturo*, as well as the stated opposition to Surrealism, aligns the Argentines with a series of groups that formed in Europe during the 1930s to counter the dominance of Surrealism: Cercle et Carré [Circle and Square (1930)], Art Concret [Concrete Art (1930)], and Abstraction-Création [Abstraction-Creation (1931–36)].<sup>18</sup>

Thus, these contradictions may be read as evidence not of disagreement, despite the eventual splitting of the group, but rather of an initial eclecticism. Considered in this light, *Arturo* exists as an outgrowth of the varied approaches to abstraction and nonobjectivity that had developed in Paris during the 1930s.<sup>19</sup> To understand the development of Argentine concreto-inventorismo, then, it is first necessary to consider at some length its prehistory—the project undertaken by Cercle et Carré, Art Concret, and Abstraction-Création. The Argentines were deeply informed by the coalescing of abstract and nonobjective art under a single rubric, which resulted in a retrospective approach to nonfiguration that proved ripe for interpretation.

Founded by the Belgian artist Michel Seuphor and the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García, Cercle et Carré responded to the precarious situation of nonfiguration in 1929: in the face of global economic crisis and an unsympathetic art market, Seuphor and Torres-García sought to assert the social relevance of abstract and nonobjective art by forming a united front.<sup>20</sup> Yet if Cercle et Carré sought to combat the forces that threatened the survival of nonfiguration (Surrealism in particular), it did so in a largely defensive manner, defining itself against figuration with a pluralism akin to that which would be seen fifteen years later in *Arturo*. Cercle et Carré published three issues of an eponymous journal in an effort to group these various strains into a broadly defined program.<sup>21</sup> What is most telling about the journal is its nonspecific approach to not only style but also ideology. As out-

lined by Gladys Fabre, the members of Cercle et Carré spanned the political gamut from communist to conservative factions, a mix tolerated by a generalized rhetoric of “constructing a modern world.”<sup>22</sup> What was at stake was not any specific ideological implication of nonfiguration, but whether nonfiguration could even possess ideological implications at all.

The leniency of Cercle et Carré was opposed by the strictures of Art Concret. The same month as Cercle et Carré's group exhibition in Paris, Theo van Doesburg published a volume that espoused a much more severe program of a universalized art based on mathematics and science.<sup>23</sup> A list of rules that leaves no room for any possibility of figuration, his manifesto declares that painting “must receive nothing from nature's given forms, or from sensuality, or sentimentality... [and have] no other meaning than ‘itself.’”<sup>24</sup> Art Concret advanced the furthest incursion into nonobjectivity, opposing not only figuration but also all traces of abstraction based on the natural world.<sup>25</sup> Van Doesburg's formal dogmatism attracted only four other artists, who all signed the Art Concret manifesto and whose nonobjective works were reproduced in the journal.<sup>26</sup> It also made Art Concret as similarly short-lived as Cercle et Carré. Art Concret did not survive past the end of 1930, but the notion of the “concrete” would have staying power: Max Bill would later adopt the term, in a relatively decontextualized manner, as a means of describing a wholly nonobjective art.<sup>27</sup>

Abstraction-Création, assembled in 1931 from the remnants of Cercle et Carré and Art Concret, was once again characterized by a holistic approach to nonfiguration:

Abstraction, because certain artists have come to the conception of non-figuration through the progressive abstraction of Nature's forms.

Creation, because other artists have come to non-figuration directly through a geometrical conception or through the sole use of so-called abstract elements such as circles, planes, bars, lines, and the like.<sup>28</sup>

Abstraction and creation (a term analogous to “concrete” art) are thus reconciled as two strategies to the same end, and indeed Abstraction-Création was the most fully realized grouping of artists, publishing five cahiers and exhibiting periodically before giving way to the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in 1939.<sup>29</sup>

In considering Abstraction-Création and its antecedents, what becomes evident is a move toward the categorization of nonfiguration as a single, albeit multivalent, category of art. The deracination of abstraction thus divests its constituent elements—be they Cubism, Suprematism, or Neo-Plasticism—of ideological specificity. The strategy of reproduction and consolidation present in the groups' cahiers thus amounts to a retrospective inventory. Embattled by the threat of its potential (and aesthetic) irrelevance, nonfiguration in the 1930s asserted its viability by summing up its accomplishments to that point and reaffirming its social utility, but only in the

vaguest of terms: as Abstraction-Création declared in the preface to its second cahier, its only orthodoxy was lack thereof, a “total opposition to all forms of oppression of any kind.”<sup>30</sup> The very act of narrativization necessitated the distillation and formalization of a contentious history into a succession of discrete aesthetic movements, which were embodied by a pantheon of figures whose writings and works of art were reproduced within the pages of these journals.<sup>31</sup>

This hagiography, and the consequent emptying of ideological specificity, was by no means restricted to these three artist groups, nor to Paris. The five issues of the journal *Plastique*, founded by Sophie Taeuber-Arp in 1937, circulated internationally on both sides of the Atlantic;<sup>32</sup> *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* served largely the same purpose in London.<sup>33</sup> In New York, the history of Modernism was most famously codified in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*.<sup>34</sup> The notorious genealogical chart published in the accompanying catalogue interpreted the first decades of the twentieth century as an uninterrupted progression toward “abstract art,” a revision that deliberately elided both the overlaps and dissonances between the presumed progenitors.

Maldonado has cited not only the catalogue of *Cubism and Abstract Art*, but also the cahiers of Abstraction-Création, as particularly formative.<sup>35</sup> The history of nonfiguration that emerges from the 1930s becomes the history printed in the exhibition catalogues and art journals that circulated widely in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires.<sup>36</sup> If Maldonado refers to 1944–1948 as the years of “splendid isolation,”<sup>37</sup> this isolation was purely physical. He and his colleagues were keenly aware of goings-on abroad, and even if they lacked the opportunity to see works such as Malevich’s *Painterly Realism* in person, they were privy to a narrative that they would read as a series of systematic attempts to realize an elusive, but inevitable, triumph over representation.

Maldonado also lists the 1944 publication of *Universalismo Constructivo* [Constructive Universalism] as formative to his work.<sup>38</sup> Consisting of several hundred texts by Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo* puts forth a metaphysical concept of a universal art, which reconciles pre-Hispanic motifs with European nonfiguration. The result, as exhibited in the *Construcciones* by Torres-García and his followers, was an abstracted pictorial language characterized by grids and simplified, pictographic signs.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, there was no more important conduit between Europe and Latin America than Torres-García, whose return to the Río de la Plata region in 1934 constituted one of the loudest transliterations of abstraction to the hemisphere. Torres-García’s many lectures and exhibitions were well attended by concreto-inventoristas such as Arden Quin and Alfredo Hlito.<sup>40</sup> The first paintings produced by the latter, such as *Estructura* [Structure], bear the stamp of Torres-García not only in their titles but also by means of their subdivision of the canvas into separate quadrants and semi-pictographic forms. Even Maldonado, who conceded only that Torres-García exerted a “modest” influence on the concreto-inventoristas, visited his atelier in January 1943.<sup>41</sup>

Most important, however, was Torres-García’s continuation of *Cercle et Carré* by means of the journal *Círculo y cuadrado* [Circle and Square]. A direct translation of its French namesake, the first issue of *Círculo y cuadrado* in May 1936 introduced itself as the “second era of *Cercle et Carré*, founded in Paris.”<sup>42</sup> Not only does the statement lend the journal a European pedigree, but it also frames *Círculo y cuadrado* as an uninterrupted continuation of its Parisian counterpart. Immediately beneath this assertion, however, is the notification that the journal acts “for the modern constructivist movement,” which realigns the consolidating efforts of *Cercle et Carré* with Torres-García’s *Universalismo constructivo*.<sup>43</sup> The South American iteration of the journal ultimately serves as a mouthpiece for an entirely different group, Torres-García’s Asociación de Arte Constructivo [Association of Constructive Art].<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the journal communicated news from Europe that, although filtered through Torres-García’s sensibilities, further exposed younger Argentine artists to abstract and nonobjective painting.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, when Arte Concreto-Inventión announced its arrival in 1944, its initially pluralistic stance toward nonfiguration stemmed from a long process of amalgamation that had been translated indirectly, and imprecisely, across the Atlantic. The evacuation of a specified political ideology enabled the Argentines to apply a largely undefined notion of “invention” to the general concept of nonfiguration. It also, soon after the publication of *Arturo*, allowed the concreto-inventoristas to reinvest nonobjectivity with a declared Marxist ideology, a move that would push nonfigurative painting toward entirely new, materialist directions.

### Art for Partisan Life

If the eclecticism of *Arturo* may be understood as analogous to that of *Abstraction-Création*, the development of a strict aesthetic and ideological program by Maldonado and the concreto-inventoristas might then be likened to the dogmatism of *Art Concret*. As Maldonado described, the época heroica was defined by “relations with the European vanguard [that] were not at all passive ... [but] markedly critical: we wanted to go beyond them, and we were determined to take them to extremes, even to the destruction or denial of all artistic paradigms.”<sup>46</sup> The means by which this occurred was the shaped canvas, first theorized by Rhod Rothfuss in *Arturo*. To be fair, the shaped canvas did enjoy a history prior to its embrace by the Argentines, but the concreto-inventoristas departed from the formalism of Laszlo Peri’s *Raumkonstruktionen* [Spatial Constructions] and Charles Shaw’s architectonic *Plastic Polygons* in their attempt to produce a theory that infused the aesthetic with the ideological.<sup>47</sup> In his article, Rothfuss exalts the shaped canvas as a means of integrating the painted forms with their perimeter. After reviewing a familiar history of art originating with Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin, he argues that nonfigurative painting remains:

stuck to the *window-shape* concept of naturalistic pictures ... the edge of the canvas plays and must always be made to play an active role in the artistic creation. A painting must meet no interruptions, beginning and ending on its own.<sup>48</sup>

It is worth noting that such a statement is a dramatic rereading of European Modernism. Rothfuss reorients van Doesburg's premise that the work of art have "no other meaning than 'itself'" from the realm of the pictorial into that of the material. No longer may painting be nonfigurative in terms of its depicted forms, but it must also deny the very *possibility* of representation by transforming the work into a physical, self-contained object.

The Asociación would push this idea of the shaped canvas by interpreting it as a strategy for undoing the entire figure-ground dialectic, a problem that Maldonado explicitly identified as central to the prospect of "invention." In 1946, the year the Asociación was founded, he would insist that "AS LONG AS THERE IS A FIGURE ON A GROUND, EXHIBITED IN AN ILLUSORY MANNER, THERE WILL BE REPRESENTATION."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, illusionism was the stated enemy of the Asociación. Its "Manifiesto invencionista" [Inventionist Manifesto], published the same year in conjunction with its first public exhibition at Peuser Hall, denounced various illusions—of space, expression, reality, and movement.<sup>50</sup> Shaped canvases such as Maldonado's *Sin título* (c. 1945) thus figure the ground as a means of inventing an "aesthetically belligerent" object integrated with but not representative of the natural world.<sup>51</sup> Even the *concreto*-*invencionistas*' preferred term for the shaped canvas, the *marco recortado* [cut-out canvas], implies an autonomous figure literally cut away from its ground.<sup>52</sup>

While the manifesto espouses a wholesale eradication of illusionism, the actual paintings produced by the *concreto*-*invencionistas* demonstrate a subtler, much more profound interrogation of pictorial figuration. The shaped canvas was developed as early as 1945, a dating confirmed by its presence in photographs from the only two exhibitions held by Arte Concreto-Invencción. The difficulty in identifying the works exhibited, however, necessitates a consideration of those reproduced in the publications of the later Asociación, several of which are dated prior to that group's formation.<sup>53</sup> Two works by Manuel Espinosa and Raúl Lozza, reproduced in the first and only issue of the journal *Arte concreto* in August 1946,<sup>54</sup> simultaneously hint at and undercut figural elements in their use of the shaped canvas.

While Maldonado's *Sin título* presents a network of geometric relationships that remained embedded in its formal composition, Espinosa's *Pintura* from the same year makes those relationships explicit (fig. 3). Consisting of what appears to be a parallelogram superimposed upon a trapezoid, *Pintura* functions as a kind of doubled composition. The vertical lateral edges of both quadrilaterals, the horizontal bar defining the upper edge of the smaller trapezoid, and the generally cruciform structure of the work all establish an orthogonal picture plane. The dodecagon that results from the superimposition of these shapes, however, is an irregular form that refutes any notion of the painting as "window." The grid formation deriving from the overarching structure of *Pintura* similarly creates a tension between potential space and the resolute flatness of the grid itself. Not only does the central triangle hint at an inverted perspectival system, but the unbroken, intersecting black lines invite the viewer to visualize a panoply of quadrilaterals, triangles, and irregular poly-



Fig. 3. Manuel Espinosa, *Pintura*, 1945, oil on masonite, private collection, 33 x 20.8 cm, Buenos Aires. Reproduced with permission of Colección Espinosa, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

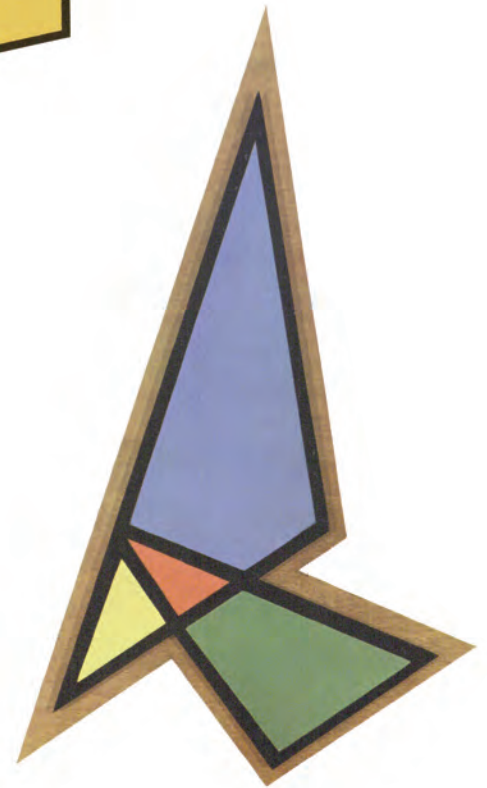


Fig. 4. Raúl Lozza, *Pintura no. 72*, c. 1945, paint on enamel, 60 x 37 cm, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Sívori, Buenos Aires.

gons. The effect is that of a shuffling overlap of forms, an establishment of space that consists of superimposed planes rather than continuous recession—a space that is snapped back to the two-dimensional picture plane by virtue of the overriding grid structure.

The distinction between figure and ground is similarly challenged by Raúl Lozza's *Pintura no. 72*, also c. 1945 (fig. 4). Lozza more clearly combines shapes to produce an overlapping point that, again, invites new formal configurations. The central red triangle may be read as a singular form against an irregular ground, but this is quickly negated

by the contiguity and coloring of the discrete shapes that would compose such an implied ground; ultimately, there is potentially no ground present. Like Espinosa's work, *Pintura no. 72* suggests overlapping depth while reaffirming flatness, questioning the distinctions between the figure and the ground by presenting an almost impenetrable matrix of intersecting lines. Both determined and determined by the shaped canvas, these lines imply internal networks that affect the very structure of the work itself. The shaped canvases may read as autonomous figures divorced from a ground, but these figures are subject to further subdivision.

Despite his prominence in Arte Concreto–Invención and the Asociación, Maldonado created relatively few works during the época heroica. An early *Pintura* from 1944 uses a similar strategy of contiguous shapes determined by the shaped canvas. Instead of black lines traversing the entirety of the composition in grid formation, the polygons are arranged into small clusters that seem to group into four general quadrants (fig. 5). The discrete forms may thus function as independent entities or as the building blocks of a larger system—a modular understanding of composition that is literalized by a photomontage Maldonado created in 1947 for the newspaper *Orientación*, the official (and, under Perón, illegal) organ of the Partido Comunista de Argentina [Communist Party of Argentina (PCA)] (fig. 6). Illustrating an article on “problemas para la vida partidaria” [problems for partisan life], the photomontage proves significant with respect to the treatment of the constituent forms of its shaped canvas structure. The modules established by the network of black lines consist of separate photographs of Party leaders, save for a single image of a political rally that connects the three leftmost modules in a vertical column.<sup>55</sup>

Also revealing is the manner in which the montage imagines the distinctive shaped canvas composition as literally filled with communist political imagery. The concreto-inventoristas made no secret of their Marxist affiliations, going so far as to declare publicly their allegiance to the PCA in the pages of *Orientación* in 1945.<sup>56</sup> Despite the outlawing of such leftist positions under *peronismo*,<sup>57</sup> they proved their leftist credentials not only by contributing to *Orientación*, but also through an embrace of Marxist rhetoric that extended to their artistic theory. This is most explicitly at work in Hlito's “Notas para una estética materialista” [Notes for a Materialist Aesthetic], which applies the theory of dialectical materialism to a received history of art, culminating in “invention” as defined by the Asociación (fig. 7).<sup>58</sup> Hlito links the creative process with the aesthetic object—a connection between labor and product, in Marxist terms—to promote an art that is more honest, more relevant to Argentine life, and ultimately revelatory of the systems that underpin society.<sup>59</sup> As the “Manifiesto inventorista” states, “Concrete art will accustom humanity to a direct relationship with things, not with the fiction of things.”<sup>60</sup>

Maldonado's montage about “partisan life” was actually the second he produced for *Orientación*; the first, in commemoration of the October Revolution, was much more appropriately Soviet in sensibility, juxtaposing jagged fragments alongside one another in varying



Fig. 5. Tomás Maldonado, *Pintura*, 1944, paint on wood, 38 x 51 cm, Colección del Infinito Arte, Buenos Aires.



Fig. 6. Tomás Maldonado, photomontage for Juan José Real, “Tres problemas de la vida partidaria” [Three Problems for Partisan Life], *Orientación: órgano central del Partido Comunista* (Buenos Aires), January 8, 1947.

scale.<sup>61</sup> The later montage, however, proves more informative in that it does not look back retrospectively but is instead grounded in the present thematically and, in concreto-inventorista terms, stylistically. It is also much more indicative of how the shaped canvas and accompanying modular geometry work as a visualization of structural systems, alluding to the conventions of figuration as a means of exposing and overcoming them.<sup>62</sup> Paradoxically, then, this montage may serve as the most illuminating visual example of the concreto-inventoristas' merging of art and ideology. The shaped canvas does more than divorce the figure from the ground or materialize the

## Notas para una estética materialista

1. — El materialismo dialéctico concibe el arte como la práctica estética del hombre.
2. — Al mismo tiempo, considera las diversas formas que ha adoptado el arte, en el curso de la historia, e interpreta su movimiento como producto de las contradicciones que se suscitan en el proceso de la práctica social.
3. — La historia de la evolución del arte moderno, desde los impresionistas hasta el arte llamado "abstracto", constituye un ejemplo en donde aquellas contradicciones internas, derivadas de la práctica misma, encuentran a conclusiones parciales. El antagonismo surge, cuando las diversas revoluciones parciales —que en la práctica estética pasan a ser otros tantos elementos concretos— actúan en contradicción con las viejas luchas del arte.
4. — El materialismo dialéctico aplicado a la interpretación de la práctica artística, comienza por establecer una distinción entre el proceso y su producto: el objeto material con propiedades estéticas. Diferente, por lo tanto, esencialmente, de las diversas interpretaciones idealistas, las que, por no concebir el arte y la actividad sensible como práctica, no tienen en cuenta la distinción.
5. — En efecto, ellas parten de supuestos incondicionados. Como la pretendida "fidelidad representativa del sentido interno"; de formas pre-establecidas de la sensibilidad, que determinan a su vez las características del juicio, etc. El arte idealista comienza, pues, en considerar los juicios y los sentimientos estéticos, como algo ya dado, en el sentido de intuiciones o estereotipos formales.
6. — Los sistemas metafísicos se han distinguido, entre otras cosas, por no separar en la diferencia que media entre el mundo físico e idealizado y el mundo de la representación. Esto equivale, en estética, a no considerar la naturaleza histórica y práctica del arte, y, en consecuencia, a confundir, en la especulación sobre lo bello o sobre los elementos del juicio, las propiedades del objeto natural con las del estético.
7. — Como hemos dicho, para el materialismo el proceso estético constituye una práctica condicionada. Pero esta concepción materialista del arte como práctica no ha sido, en modo alguno, resultado de una crítica formal, ha surgido, cuando las contradicciones internas de la obra de arte exigen la verificación del procedimiento que le daba origen.
8. — A la antigua estética idealista no le importaba la realidad del objeto, ya que se conformaba con su representación intuitiva; para la estética materialista, no cambia, es indudable que el objeto está realmente. O sea: mientras, para la estética idealista, el objeto aparece instituido en el proceso de la práctica

artística como mera "intuición sensible", para la concepción materialista el objeto es definido y obra, realidad en el proceso. Lo que equivale a decir que, en la primera, el proceso termina en una representación, que, por supuesto, no se resuelve dialécticamente en el objeto; mientras que, en la segunda, el proceso consiste en la invención y el objeto es su resultado.

8. — Para la concepción formalista clásica, era el espíritu, el que proponía el orden, la forma, mientras el mundo sensible aportaba la materia, "el contenido". De esta manera, eran separadas metafísicamente las cualidades de las cosas de las cosas mismas.

Hegel definió esta actitud "ideológica" como un momento en el cual "el sujeto libre, determinándose a sí mismo, encuentra en su propia esencia la forma exterior que la convence". Pero pronto se advierte que esa forma constituye una limitación: es finita y tiende, entonces, a integrarse en el espíritu puro. Ni en la forma romántica, y la estética romántica a debatirse infructuosamente en la teoría de los "contenidos". El proceso artístico se resuelve en la intuición pura y en la contemplación; el sujeto no propone nada, mente la forma, sino que el "contenido" mismo de la realidad se da por sí.

En este sistema de las representaciones, en que el sujeto y objeto constituyen "contenidos implícitos", confundidos en el abstrato de la "propiedad sentimental", todo se vuelve imposible de concretarse en fenómeno estético, mientras encierra una necesidad específica de la naturaleza humana.

9. — Para la estética materialista, el objeto se agota en sus propiedades. Esta parte de la invención, como del único medio posible para concretar un arte en consonancia con la concepción materialista del conocimiento.

10. — Al no separar el objeto de sus cualidades, determina que la propiedad estética reside en la concreta materialidad de la obra de arte.

11. — El arte, como toda actividad que en su proceso "va cambiando constantemente de la forma de la acción, a la forma del ser", se verifica concretamente en el objeto. En el proceso de la invención estética, la práctica se manifiesta en la organización y con ella deben relacionarse las nuevas propiedades" (Sollata. Cit. por J. Lora).

12. — La nueva propiedad determina el nuevo contenido, el nuevo "ser". "El trabajo ha sido incorporado a la materia de trabajo. Lo que en el objeto aparece como movimiento, en el producto en reposo aparece como ser en lugar de "proceso de ser" (C. Marx).

ALFREDO HLITO



Fig. 7. Alfredo Hlito, "Notas para una estética materialista," *Arte concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946): 12, ICAA Record ID: 731423. Reproduced with permission of Sonia Henríquez Ureña de Hlito, Buenos Aires, Argentina for ICAA Digital Project.

painting. It also, as utilized in concreto-inventonismo, engenders a system of modular organization that exposes the underlying structure of the composition. This process of acknowledging the "internal structures of form and color," as articulated by Mario H. Gradowczyk and Nelly Perrazo, speaks to a worldview that understands history and society as fundamentally structural, logical, and most importantly comprehensible.<sup>63</sup>

The notion of nonfiguration as a demystified, and demystifying, art was articulated by Edgar Bayley in "Sobre arte concreto" [On Concrete Art], published in *Orientación* in February 1946. Bayley calls for "an art consistent with the material life of a society" that "no longer can be based on representational forms that have been the common denominator of all past artistic schools and styles, because representation in art is the spiritual reflection of classist social organizations."<sup>64</sup> Couched in a revolutionary rhetoric of class struggle and social liberation, the aesthetic severity of Argentine nonfiguration is explicitly framed as a distinctly sociopolitical program. Seven months after publishing "Sobre arte concreto," Bayley would continue to defend concreto-inventonismo against potential accusations of incomprehensibility and elitism. His "Introducción al arte

concreto" [Introduction to Concrete Art], structured in a question-and-answer format, points to an understanding of painting that educates and enlightens the viewer:

Q: Concrete art is incomprehensible.

A: Is it necessary to deduce the nonexistence of light by the blindness of the blind?

Q: Concrete art is anti-democratic: it is reserved for the initiated.

A: Is the French language anti-democratic since one must learn it to understand it?<sup>65</sup>

The inelegance of Bayley's analogies notwithstanding, his assertions reveal a deep investment in the painting as a tool for effecting real change in the world. The system of interrogation and revelation in works such as Juan Melé's 1946 *Marco recortado no. 2* [Cut-out Canvas no. 2] thus acquires political dimension. In his painting Melé presents an irregular grid that appears to recede into space while simultaneously reaffirming its own strict planarity—a rehearsal and denial of illusionism that accordingly exposes it as an operational system itself (fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Juan Melé, *Marco recortado no. 2*, 1946, oil on masonite, 71 x 46 cm, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.

The initiative to politicize art takes on particular urgency when considered in light of the hostile sociopolitical climate of Argentina in the 1940s. Maldonado's montage and the texts by Hlito and Bayley were all created shortly after Perón was elected president, thanks to the support of a nationalized union coalition. The very proletariat that Marxism (and, by extension, nonfiguration) sought to address was thus, in the eyes of the political left, co-opted for the purposes of

a staunchly pro-business, fascist regime.<sup>66</sup> The precise relationship between peronismo and concreto-inventonismo remains somewhat ambiguous. Certainly the rigorous interrogation of figuration may be read as a response to the ubiquitous *peronista* propaganda, which trafficked in sentimentalized images of the archetypical *descamisado* worker, the Argentine nuclear family, and of Juan, and especially Eva, Perón.<sup>67</sup> Perazzo looks to the rhetoric of Minister of Culture Oscar Ivanissevich, who publicly pathologized abstract and nonobjective art as degenerate and mentally deficient, as evidence of an antagonism.<sup>68</sup> This assertion is corroborated by Maldonado's rare comment that directly refers to the policies of the government and "the anguished, fat men of the Ministry of Culture ... that hate our art for being joyful, clear, and constructive."<sup>69</sup> Andrea Giunta counters by acknowledging that regardless of their political convictions, the concreto-inventonistas remained largely "on the margins" of the government's focus, their political stance being located outside the dominant discourse.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly the illegal nature of leftist publications like *Orientación* necessarily positioned the concreto-inventonistas as politically antagonistic to peronismo, but overtly anti-government statements like that of Maldonado remain scarce. Rather, it was primarily through their art that they attempted to ignite a dialogue absent from the figurative, largely academic work that populated the galleries of Buenos Aires and the Salones Nacionales during this period.<sup>71</sup> More than a stylistic alternative, the concreto-inventonistas sought an ideological one as well: "Our works have a revolutionary mission; their goal is to help transform daily reality through the effective intervention of every reader or spectator of the aesthetic experience...."<sup>72</sup> This political reality begins to explain the theoretical and formal rigor of concreto-inventonismo, which was circumscribed by a rhetoric of militancy that denied any possibility for the eclecticism that had defined *Arturo*. No better example of this can be found in Maldonado's public accusation of Torres-García as "eclectic"—a slur attributed not to Torres-García's dialogue with European sources but rather by his perceived unwillingness to engage them beyond an aesthetic level.<sup>73</sup>

The aesthetic and ideological functions of the shaped canvas are most clearly laid out in Maldonado's "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno" [The Abstract and the Concrete in Modern Art]. Maldonado relates a trajectory of art history that by 1946 had become authoritative: the initial abstraction of Cubism, which here is read as revelatory of the "abstract mechanism" of representation itself, progresses through a series of distinct movements to the more "concrete" work of Neoplasticism, which most fully but unsatisfactorily distances itself from represented form.<sup>74</sup> Concreto-inventonismo, Maldonado argues, develops the shaped canvas as a means of pushing nonfiguration to its next stage, "materializing" figures and "spatializing" the plane as a means of firmly situating the work of art as an agent in the world. The Argentine avant-garde ultimately attempts to outdo its European antecedents, but it does so by means of a willful misreading made possible only by temporal, geographic, and ultimately theoretical distance.

## Conclusion: The Problem of Limits

"Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno" marks a turning point that hastened the end of the *época heroica*, as Maldonado alludes to a new structure that modifies the shaped canvas: the *coplanar*. Where the marco recortado cuts the figure away from the ground, the coplanar—a constellation of discrete forms arranged against a wall—literalizes the process of physical separation. The Raúl Lozza piece that illustrates the article features components connected together with rods (fig. 9), but occasionally the coplanares consist of individual shapes wholly independent of one another: in either iteration, these works shift the focus of the shaped canvas from internal tension to external spatial relationships. Each constituent form is painted a different color and achieves a sense of self-sufficiency, which suggests that the coplanares dissociate the shaped canvas into its component modules. The centrifugal force of their unbounded compositions threatens to separate these fragmented modules from one another, and indeed the possibility of this motion in space inadvertently serves to undercut the structural principles at work in the shaped canvases.



Fig. 9. Tomás Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," *Arte concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946) 6, ICAA Record ID: 731507. Reproduced with permission of Tomás Maldonado, Milano, Italia for ICAA Digital Project.



If the coplanares most fully materialize nonobjectivity as a system of interrelationships, this apotheosis inadvertently exposes an inherent vice present in the shaped canvas: once placed against a wall, they inevitably read as figures against a ground, a reiteration of the figuration that the concreto-inventoristas so adamantly rejected.<sup>75</sup> Photographs of the coplanares attest to this phenomenon: their placement against a white ground call to mind nothing so much as Maldonado's *Sin título*, the red and black forms of which he would dismiss as "too autonomous."<sup>76</sup> A limit had been reached, and figuration, it seemed, had become unavoidable.

Realizing that the project of the Asociación had reached an impasse, in 1948 Maldonado traveled to Italy, Zurich, and Paris, where he met with a number of artists, most prominently Georges Vantongerloo and Max Bill, who by this point had formulated his own theory of "concrete" art.<sup>77</sup> In Zurich Maldonado would write "El arte concreto y el problema de lo ilimitado" [Concrete Art and the Problem of the Unlimited], a text in which he once again traces art historical attempts to resolve the figure-ground problem and ultimately concedes the failure of the shaped canvases in doing so.<sup>78</sup> Dismissing the shaped canvas as "a three-dimensional solution to a two-dimensional problem,"<sup>79</sup> Maldonado and the concreto-inventoristas returned to the orthogonal frame, ushering in a new period defined by hard-edged forms and evanescent lines against flat, unmodulated grounds. This turn was also marked by a divestment of ideology from painting, as the concreto-inventoristas either left or were finally expelled from the PCA.<sup>80</sup> The moment of "splendid isolation" had passed.

Although the concreto-inventoristas ultimately designated the shaped canvas an unfulfilled project, its revolutionary reformulation of nonfiguration constitutes a significant development in not only Argentine but also European painting. Exposed to publications such as the cahiers of *Abstraction-Création*, *Círculo y cuadrado*, and *Cubism and Abstract Art*, the Argentines imbued a consolidated, linear, and primarily formalistic history of art with radical politics that responded, however obliquely, to their current sociopolitical context. Concreto-inventorismo thus repurposes recognizable artistic forms—such as Malevich's Suprematist shapes, Mondrian's grids, or Lissitzky's axonometric configurations—and reconfigures their ideological coordinates. Nonfiguration does not simply seek to evacuate representation but rather serves a didactic purpose, visualizing and thereby reifying a Marxist ideology grounded in a structural understanding of the world. Concreto-inventorismo thus acts as a kind of blueprint, a systematic mapping of systems meant to reaffirm the social vitality of nonfiguration and provoke social transformation.

Somewhat poetically, the abandonment of this project occurred precisely as the Argentine avant-garde began to garner official recognition both at home and abroad. In 1947, a series of exhibitions exhibited the Asociación and the Madí together as a "new art," culminating the following year with the *Salón de nuevas realidades* [Salon of New Realities] at the Galería Van Riel.<sup>81</sup> If the *Salón* intended to replicate the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* in Buenos Aires, however, this was a slightly redundant enterprise: in 1948 both the Asociación and the Madí contributed

to the Parisian exhibition, signaling the official legitimization of South American nonfiguration as part of an international art historical tendency.<sup>82</sup> It also marked a certain repetition of history. If concreto-inventorismo was born from the coalescence and formalization of abstraction and nonobjectivity in the 1930s, it reenacted this process through the reconciliation of the various strains of the Argentine avant-garde and their consequent depoliticization. The rectilinear canvas would return to prominence; nonfiguration would be dealt with in primarily aesthetic terms; and the pursuit of a materialized, partisan geometry would be discontinued. It may be argued, with a tinge of irony, that it was ultimately in this forsaking of a politicized, objectified art that the concreto-inventoristas most fully followed the art historical trajectory that they had worked so ardently to enter.

## NOTES

- 1 María Amalia García, *Tomás Maldonado in Conversation with / en Conversación con María Amalia García* (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2010), 29.
- 2 Ana Pozzi-Harris reads the forms as thwarting notions of receding space or representation. "Marginal Disruptions: Concrete and Madí Art in Argentina, 1940–1955" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 135–37.
- 3 The term "shaped canvas" will be used to refer to a structure in which the orthogonality of the traditional frame is disrupted or done away with altogether, rather than to the material specificity of canvas itself.
- 4 Maldonado, quoted in García, 32.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 6 Omar Calabrese, "Tomás Maldonado: The Arts and Culture as a Totality," in *Tomás Maldonado* (Milan: Triennale Design Museum, 2009), 20.
- 7 See for example Nelly Perazzo, *El arte concreto en la Argentina en la década del 40* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983), 62–63; Dawn Ades, "Arte Madí/Arte Concreto–Inventorismo," in *Art in Latin America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 241–52; Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, "Buenos Aires: Breaking the Frame," in *The Geometry of Hope* (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin; New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University: 2007), 28–37.
- 8 The Asociación would come to include Edgar Bayley, Antonio Caraduje, Simón Contreras, Manuel Espinosa, Claudio Girola, Alfredo Hlito, Enio Iommi, Rafael and Raúl Lozza, Juan Melé, Alberto Molenberg, Primaldo Mónaco, Oscar Núñez, Lidý Prati, Jorge Souza, and Matilde Werbin. Madí, meanwhile, was founded by Carmelo Arden Quin and Gyula Kosice, originally consisting of Martín Blaszkó, Esteban Eitler, Diyi Laañ, Valdo W. Longo, Rhod Rothfuss, and Elizabeth Steiner. See Pozzi-Harris, 36–37.
- 9 "Inventar," *Arturo: Revista de arte abstracto*, no. 1 (Summer 1944): n.p. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- 10 The matter of assigning a name to refer to these artists is problematic, as these various groups were quite porous. Pérez-Barreiro refers to these artists as "inventorista" artists, as the term "invention" predates "concrete," while Pozzi-Harris's use of the term "Concrete" highlights their affinities for European nonfiguration as well as Marxist thought. Pérez-Barreiro, 28–37; Pozzi-Harris, 38–40.
- 11 Gyula Kosice has stated that the emphasis on "invention" and the "concrete" lies outside the practices of the Madí, an assertion that will be followed in this consideration of "concrete" art in Argentina. Perazzo, 62–63.
- 12 Pozzi-Harris has done work regarding the genealogy of these terms in concreto-inventorista literature, noting that "inventorismo" appears initially in *Arturo*, while "concrete" is a term adopted most forcefully by the Asociación, beginning with the first issue of its *Revista de Arte Concreto* in August 1946. Pozzi-Harris, 38, note 51. For further discussion on the development of these terms, see Perazzo, 55; Alejandro G. Crispiani, "Frutos de la inventorismo," in *Tomás Maldonado, un moderno en acción: Ensayos sobre su obra*, ed. Mario H. Gradowczyk (Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, 2008), 49–53.

- <sup>13</sup> See Ades, 241; Perazzo, 55–57; Pozzi-Harris, 6–7; Gabriela Siracusan, “Punto y línea sobre el campo,” in *Desde la otra vereda: momentos del debate por un arte moderno en la argentina (1880–1960)* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Jilguero, 1998), 179–83; Mario H. Gadowczyk and Nelly Perrazo, *Abstract Art from the Rio de la Plata: Buenos Aires and Montevideo, 1933–1953* (New York: Americas Society, 2001), 39.
- <sup>14</sup> The most obvious of these contradictions lies in the coexistence Maldonado’s woodcut, his earliest known artistic output, and the stated reproach of Surrealism with its sinuous lines and figural forms that begin to suggest legibility as signs. The woodcut seems wildly inappropriate given the essays by Arden Quin, Kosice, and Bayley that theorize invention as a means of doing away with irrationality, automatism, or the subconscious. Even the “Inventar” manifesto allows for strategies of chance in addition to “force of ingenuity or meditation,” an invitation to less methodical modes of creation that sits uneasily alongside the call for “INVENTION against AUTOMATISM” and Bayley’s later attack against Dalí and Surrealism. Edgar Bayley, “Durante mucho tiempo el criterio...,” *Arturo: Revista de arte abstracto*, no. 1 (Summer 1944): n.p. [ICAA Record ID: 730241](#). See also Pérez-Barreiro, 32.
- <sup>15</sup> Pérez-Barreiro, 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Tomás Maldonado, quoted in Giacinto di Pietrantonio, “Entrevista a Tomás Maldonado,” in *Arte Abstracto Argentino*, ed. Marcelo Pacheco and Enrico Crispolti (Buenos Aires: Fundación PROA, 2002), 62–63, reprinted in *Argentine Abstract Art*, accompanying English-language text, trans. Javier Barreiro Cavestany et al., 25.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on “concrete” art positions the concreto-inventoristas as the inheritors of the legacy of Theo van Doesburg’s Art Concret. Their two exhibitions under the banner of Arte Concreto–Inención further stressed this connection through their titles: *Art Concret Invention* [Concrete Art Invention] was held at the home of the psychoanalyst Enrique Pichón-Rivière in October 1945, while *Movimiento Arte Concreto–Inención* [Concrete Art–Invention Movement] took place at the home of photographer Grete Stern in November the same year. These exhibitions were held in the homes of well-known figures of the Buenos Aires intellectual elite, partly due to the unfavorable artistic and political climate in 1945. Maldonado, Hlito, and Raúl Lozza did not participate in the second exhibition, portending the splitting of Arte Concreto–Inención into the Asociación and the Madí. See Perazzo, 62.
- <sup>19</sup> Paris served as the point of reference for most Argentine artists, not only because the city experienced a resurgence of cultural import resulting from the arrival of legions of émigrés fleeing the encroachment of fascism, but also because Buenos Aires, like Paris, was a cosmopolitan, multinational metropolis. *Abstraction Création 1931–1936* (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1978), 5. For additional studies of these groups and the general artistic atmosphere in 1930s Paris, see also Gladys C. Fabre, *Arte Abstracto, Arte Concreto: Cercle et Carré, Paris, 1930* (Seville: Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, 1990); Robert S. Lubar, “Abstract Polemics in Paris,” unpublished manuscript, 2012.
- <sup>20</sup> See Gladys Fabre, “Cercle et Carré 1930,” in *Arte Abstracto, Arte Concreto* 29–34.
- <sup>21</sup> In the first issue Torres-García defines construction as the abandonment of mimesis and the presentation of “the idea of a thing” rather than the thing itself. Seuphor similarly discusses “architecture,” the idea of form as structural scaffolding that can only be discovered through abstraction: “Abstraction of the real world, of its mathematical and architectonic secret, becomes the substantial nourishment of our cerebral world.” Joaquin Torres-García, “Vouloir Construire,” *Cercle et Carré*, no. 1 (March 15, 1930): n.p.; Michel Seuphor, “Pour la Défense d’une Architecture,” *Cercle et Carré*, no. 1 (March 15, 1930): n.p. See also *Abstraction Création 1931–36*, 15–17; Gladys Fabre, “Cercle et Carré 1930,” 29–34.
- <sup>22</sup> Fabre, “Cercle et Carré 1930,” 33–34.
- <sup>23</sup> Van Doesburg was initially invited to join Cercle et Carré but declined because of the group’s tolerance of figuration. See Doris Wintgens Hötte, “Van Doesburg Tackles the Continent: Passion, Drive, and Calculation,” in *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde: Constructing a New World*, ed. Gladys Fabre and Doris Wintgens Hötte (London: Tate, 2009), 10–19; Stephen Bann, “The Basis of Concrete Painting,” in *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 191.
- <sup>24</sup> Theo van Doesburg, “Art Concret,” *Art Concret* (April 1930): 1.
- <sup>25</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of Art Concret and van Doesburg’s thoughts on nonfiguration, see Fabre, “Art Concret 1930,” in *Arte Abstracto, Arte Concreto*, 61–68.
- <sup>26</sup> These were Otto-Gustaf Carlsund, Jean Hélon, Léon Arthur Tutundjian, and Marcel Wantz.
- <sup>27</sup> Though he is one of the most prominent figures in the translation of “concrete” art to South America, Max Bill would not play a critical role in the Argentine avant-garde until 1948, when Maldonado first met him in Europe. His approach to “concrete” art, similar to but even more formalistic than that of van Doesburg, will thus not be dealt with at length. For further information see Max Bill, “Konkrete Kunst,” *Zürcher konkrete Kunst* (Zürich: n.p., 1949), reprinted in *Max Bill*, trans. Eduard Hüttinger (New York: Rizzoli, 1978): 61–67.
- <sup>28</sup> *Abstraction-création: Art non-figuratif 1* (1932): 1.
- <sup>29</sup> The diversity of approaches afforded by the general definition (or lack thereof) of Abstraction-Création is manifest in the list of artists who contributed to the cahier. The first issue alone boasted writings and reproductions by Jean (Hans) Arp, Willi Baumeister, Istvan Beothy, Carl Buchheister, Alexander Calder, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Katherine Sophie Dreier, William Einstein, Frantisek Foltyn, Otto Freundlich, Naum Gabo, Laure Garcin, Albert Gleizes, Jean Gorin, Jean Hélon, Auguste Herbin, Evie Hone, Mainie Jellett, František Kupka, László Moholy-Nagy, Piet Mondrian, Majorie Moss, Anton Pevsner, John W. Power, Enrico Prampolini, Léonce Roseberg, Kurt Séligmann, Michel Seuphor, Hans Schiess, Kurt Schwitters, Henri Strazewski, Wladyslaw Strzemieski, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Léon Tutundjian, Georges Valmier, Theo van Doesburg, Georges Vantongerloo, Paul Vienny, Jacques Villon, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, and Edward Wadsworth. *Abstraction-création: Art non-figuratif 1* (1932): 1–48.
- <sup>30</sup> *Abstraction-création: Art non-figuratif 2* (1933): 1. Perazzo identifies that several general topics discussed in the writings of the Abstraction-Création cahiers are the social relevance of art, its reception by the public, the legibility of abstraction, the question of technological development, and notions of the collective. “Concrete Art in Europe,” 19.
- <sup>31</sup> These strategies have not been immune from critique, as some have interpreted consolidation as a move that defangs nonfiguration, yielding “facile, decorative work.” Hal Foster et al., “1937: Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson, and Leslie Martin publish *Circle* in London, solidifying the institutionalization of geometric abstraction,” in *Art Since 1900*, vol. 1 (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 2004), 288.
- <sup>32</sup> *Plastique* covered a wide array of subjects in German, English, and French. Its first issues centered on Suprematism, German art, and United States abstraction before shifting its focus to poetry. *Plastique* nos. 1–5 (1937–39), reprinted in *Plastique. Numbers 1–5 (1937–1939)* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).
- <sup>33</sup> The publication was founded by Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson, and Leslie Martin. *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).
- <sup>34</sup> A lengthier analysis of the impact of Cercle et Carré, Art Concret, and Abstraction-Création can be found in Fabre, “Internacionalización del arte abstracto-concreto,” in *Arte Abstracto, Arte Concreto*, 289–310.
- <sup>35</sup> Di Pietrantonio, 62–63, reprinted and translated in *Argentine Abstract Art*, 25.
- <sup>36</sup> Pérez-Barreiro, 31.
- <sup>37</sup> Maldonado, quoted in Di Pietrantonio, 59 (original quote in English).
- <sup>38</sup> Maldonado, quoted in Di Pietrantonio, 59.
- <sup>39</sup> The appropriation of the terms “constructive” and “construction” serves as another example of the emptying of politics from abstraction (in this case the adamantly communist project of Russian Constructivism).
- <sup>40</sup> The links between Torres-García and Arte Concreto–Inención are further explicated in Cristina Rossi, “Torres García en el Buenos Aires de los primeros cuarenta. Acerca de la circulación de la obra *torresgarciana* antes de la aparición de la revista *Arturo*,” *Latin American Studies Association* (2004): 1–19. See also Jacqueline Barnitz, “Torres-García’s Constructive Universalism and the Abstract Legacy,” in *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 127–42. Additionally, Torres-García has been credited with introducing the term “invention” to Latin America, though in a definition that relates to singular formal innovation than a general process of art making. Torres-García, “Lección 50: De la invención en la pintura,” *Universalismo Constructivo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984), 308–11.
- <sup>41</sup> Di Pietrantonio, 63, reprinted and translated in *Argentine Abstract Art*, 25.
- <sup>42</sup> *Círculo y cuadrado 1* (May 1936): n.p.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>44</sup> See Mari Carmen Ramírez, *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).
- <sup>45</sup> The first issue of *Círculo y cuadrado*, for example, contains a letter from Paris by Jean Hélon that describes the continued dominance of Surrealism and recommends the British journal *Axis: Quarterly Review of Abstract Painting and Sculpture*, another example of a retrospective publication about European nonfiguration. Jean Hélon, "Carta de Paris," *Círculo y cuadrado* 1 (May 1936): n.p.
- <sup>46</sup> Maldonado, quoted in Di Pietrantonio, 59.
- <sup>47</sup> Maldonado asserts that despite the development of the shaped canvas by these artists, they "did not properly systematize or draw any conclusion pertaining to the structure." "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," *Arte concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946): 6. [ICAA Record ID: 731507](#). See also García, 34.
- <sup>48</sup> Rhod Rothfuss, "El marco: un problema de plástica actual," *Arturo: Revista de arte abstracto*, no. 1 (Summer 1944): n.p. [ICAA Record ID: 729833](#)
- <sup>49</sup> Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto," 5.
- <sup>50</sup> Asociación Arte Concreto–Inventción, "Manifiesto invencionista," *Arte concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946): 1.
- <sup>51</sup> Maldonado, quoted in Gradowczyk and Perrazo, 52.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–34.
- <sup>53</sup> In considering the shaped canvases, it must also be noted that many of the works still extant have been back-dated, repainted, or wholly reconstructed. See Pérez-Barreiro, 35.
- <sup>54</sup> In December of the same year *Arte concreto* was followed by the *Boletín de la Asociación de Arte Concreto Inventción*, which too numbered only one issue.
- <sup>55</sup> Juan José Real, "Tres problemas para la vida partidaria," *Orientación: órgano central del Partido Comunista* (Buenos Aires), January 8, 1947. See also Ana Longoni and Daniela Luca, "De cómo el 'júbilo creador' se trastocó en 'desfachatez'" El pasaje de Maldonado y los concretos por el Partido Comunista. 1945–1948," in *Tomás Maldonado, un moderno en acción*, 59–61; Carlos A. Molinari, *El arte en la era de la máquina: conexiones entre tecnología y obras de arte pictórico, 1900–1950* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Teseo, 2011), 130–31; Daniela Lucena, "Arte y revolución: Sobre los fotomontajes de Tomás Maldonado," *Izquierdas* 13 (August 2012): 18–28.
- <sup>56</sup> "Artistas adhieren al comunismo," *Orientación: órgano central del Partido Comunista* (Buenos Aires), September 19, 1945.
- <sup>57</sup> See José Gabriel Vazeilles, *La izquierda argentina que no fue: Estudios de historia ideológica* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2003); Miguel Murmis and Juan Carlos Portantiero, *Estudios sobre los orígenes del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2004); Loris Zanatta, *Breve historia del peronismo clásico*, trans. Carlos Catroppi (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamérica, 2008).
- <sup>58</sup> Alfredo Hlito, "Notas para una estética materialista," *Arte concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946): 12. [ICAA Record ID: 731423](#)
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> Asociación Arte Concreto–Inventción, "Manifiesto invencionista," 1.
- <sup>61</sup> Rodolfo Ghioldi, "La Unión Soviética, líder de la paz," *Orientación: órgano central del Partido Comunista* (Buenos Aires), November 6, 1946.
- <sup>62</sup> See Crispiani, "Una definición plástica del marxismo," in *Objetos para transformar el mundo*, 83–140.
- <sup>63</sup> Gradowczyk and Perazzo, 57.
- <sup>64</sup> Bayley, "Sobre arte concreto," *Orientación: órgano central del Partido Comunista* (Buenos Aires), February 20, 1946.
- <sup>65</sup> Edgar Bayley, "Introducción al arte concreto," *Boletín de la Asociación de Arte Concreto–Inventción*, no. 2 (December 1946): n.p. [ICAA Record ID: 729894](#)
- <sup>66</sup> With its contradictory stances and shifts in political allegiance, peronismo is notoriously difficult to define, but a history of its relationship with unions may be found in Álvaro Abós, *La columna vertebral: sindicatos y peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1983). See also David Tamarin, *The Argentine Labor Movement, 1930–1945: A Study in the Origins of Peronism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).
- <sup>67</sup> Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina*, trans. Keith Zahniser (Wilmington, Del.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Marcela Gené, *Un mundo feliz: Imágenes de los trabajadores en el primero peronismo 1946–1955* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, S. A., 2005); Guillermo E. D'Arino Aringoli, *La propaganda peronista (1943–1955)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Maipue, 2006).
- <sup>68</sup> Perazzo, 122. Iwanishevich's tastes were far more academic, and he infamously condemned "degenerate art" such as Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism in a speech marking the opening of the Salón Nacional in 1948. Excerpts from the speech were reprinted in "Inauguróse ayer el XXXIX Salón de Artes Plásticas," *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), September 22, 1949. [ICAA Record ID: 824394](#). See also "El XXXIX Salón de Bellas Artes será abierto esta tarde," *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), September 21, 1949. [ICAA Record ID: 824360](#)
- <sup>69</sup> Tomás Maldonado, "Los artistas concretos, el 'realismo' y 'la realidad,'" *Arte Concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946): 10. [ICAA Record ID: 731518](#)
- <sup>70</sup> Andrea Giunta, "El arte moderno en los márgenes del peronismo," in *Vanguardia, internacionalismo, y política: arte argentino en los años sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), 45–83.
- <sup>71</sup> See Giunta, "Nacionales y Populares: los salones nacionales del peronismo," in *Tras los pasos de la norma: Salones Nacionales de Bellas Artes (1911–1989)*, ed. Marta Penhos and Diana Wechsler (Buenos Aires: Editorial del Jilguero, 1999), 153–90.
- <sup>72</sup> Asociación de Arte Concreto–Inventción, "Nuestra militancia," *Arte Concreto*, no. 1 (August 1946): 8. [ICAA Record ID: 731530](#)
- <sup>73</sup> Maldonado writes, "in the 'constructivist' works by Torres-García we can find cubism (a bad one), impressionism ... and some cheap symbolism (suns, pictographic puppets, fish)." "Torres-García contra el arte moderno," *Boletín de la Asociación de Arte Concreto–Inventción*, no. 2 (December 1946): n.p.
- <sup>74</sup> Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto," 5–7.
- <sup>75</sup> Hlito would comment that "the walls to which those paintings [the *coplanares*] were fixed immediately assumed the optical function that the canvas had fulfilled before, so that the background reappeared again..." Hlito, "El tema del espacio de la pintura actual," *Nueva visión*, no. 8 (1955): 11. [ICAA Record ID: 730755](#)
- <sup>76</sup> Maldonado, quoted in García, 29.
- <sup>77</sup> In Italy he met Max Huber, Bruno Munari, Piero Dorazio, Achille Perilli, Gianni Dova, Diego Peverelli, and Gillo Dorfles; in Zurich he met Bill, Richard P. Lohse, Camille Graeser, and Verena Loewensberg; and in Paris Vantongerloo. Di Pietrantonio, 59.
- <sup>78</sup> Maldonado, *El arte concreto y el problema de lo ilimitado: notas para un estudio teórico*, unpublished manuscript (1948) (Buenos Aires: Ramona, 2003).
- <sup>79</sup> Maldonado, quoted in Gradowczyk and Perrazo, 52.
- <sup>80</sup> Crispiani, "Las raíces latinoamericanas del invencionismo," 71; Calabrese, 18.
- <sup>81</sup> See Edgar Bayley, "Nuevas realidades," *Ciclo: arte, literatura, pensamiento modernos* (Buenos Aires), November–December 1948, 88–90. [ICAA Record ID: 730488](#). Other exhibitions from 1947 were *Arte nuevo* at Salón Kraft and another exhibition of the same title at Galería Payer. See Perazzo, 93–95.
- <sup>82</sup> Participants included Aníbal Biedma, María Bresler, Juan Del Prete, Juan Delmonte, Manuel Espinosa, Lucio Fontana, Alfredo Hlito, Enio Iommi, Gyula Kosice, Jacqueline Lorin-Kaldor, Diyi Laaí, Alberto Molenberg, Tomás Maldonado, Lidy Prati, Rhod Rothfuss, Jorge Souza, and Rodolfo Uricchio. *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, no. 2 (Paris: 1948): n.p. See also Pierre Descargues, "Réalités Nouvelles," *Arts* (Paris), July 23, 1948.