

## INTRODUCTION TO TOMÁS MALDONADO'S "THE ABSTRACT AND THE CONCRETE IN MODERN ART" AND ALFREDO HLITO'S "NOTES TOWARD A MATERIALIST AESTHETICS"

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The two texts presented here in translation are key documents in the history of the Argentine avant-garde. Originally published in August 1946 in the first issue of *Arte Concreto-Invencción*, they are arguably the most representative pieces of writing of the eponymous association, along with the collectively authored "Inventionist Manifesto." During its short lifetime (1945–47), the Association of Concrete Art-Invention

(Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción, or AACI) promoted a radically materialist understanding of painting that aimed to reveal the concrete foundations of abstraction.

This approach was novel in many important respects. For one, it entailed an overtly formal and rationalistic take on the notion of "invention," which until that point had served as an umbrella for a



Cover of *Arte Concreto-Invencción*, 1946. Image courtesy of the University of Chicago Library.

loosely confederated group of Rioplatense artists.<sup>1</sup> Taken at its most general, this notion proclaimed that art ought to create new realities; for the AACI, however, it demanded the expulsion of all vestiges of illusion from painting.<sup>2</sup> But just as these artists diverged from other “Inventionist” groups in Argentina and Uruguay, they likewise developed a program for concrete art that had little to do with contemporary European theories of Concretism. If in the 1930s Theo van Doesburg and Max Bill advanced definitions that focused on concretizing ideas via painting, the AACI instead characterized Concretism as the pursuit of the very materiality of painting. Nevertheless, the group was not seeking to offer an Argentine, Latin American, or non-Western alternative to European practices of modernist painting; in a decidedly universalistic vein, the AACI artists considered their project to be the culmination of the historical avant-garde, as is attested to by their landmark strategy, the so-called *coplanar*.

The *coplanar* is a structure composed of a variable number of irregularly shaped boards, each one monochrome, that maintain a relation of coplanarity: attached to the wall and aligned with one other by means of wire or sticks, these polygons coexist on the same geometric plane. It is by virtue of this coplanarity that the resulting structure, although evidently three-dimensional, retains the two-dimensional logic of the picture plane. No longer contained by the frame or any preexisting support, the individual form-objects come to interact directly with and within architectural space. Yet this relation is by no means analogous to the one that takes place between a sculpture and real space: even though the forms of painting have materialized three-dimensionally, the *coplanar* continues to function as a painting. Rather than fully embracing

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- 1 On the history of these groups and their rivalries, the most exhaustive source is Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, “The Argentine Avant-Garde: 1944–1950” (PhD diss., University of Essex, 1996). For more synoptic accounts that posit these artists as precursors of a distinct lineage of South American concretism, see Mónica Amor, *Theories of the Non-Object: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944–1969* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); and Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
  - 2 For the manifold iterations of the concept of invention in South America, see Alexander Alberro, “To Find, to Create, to Reveal: Torres-García and the Models of Invention in Mid-1940s Río de la Plata,” in *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*, ed. Luis Pérez-Oramas (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), exhibition catalog, 106–21; and Alejandro Crispiani, *Objetos para transformar el mundo: trayectorias del arte concreto-inventión, Argentina y Chile, 1940–1970* (Bernal, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2011), 41–82.

# Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno

Ningún problema de la pintura pudo darse nunca al margen del problema práctico que plantea a toda ser humano la percepción del espacio y del tiempo. Es más, en todas las épocas la pintura trató de ser una definición gráfica de estas dos apreciadas de la realidad objetiva.

Relacionar estética y anécdoticamente figuras representadas en un espacio igualmente representado; no sólo lo esencial del procedimiento creador de la pintura del pasado. Se pretendía hacer valer las figuras como formas, y lo que en la tela estaba ausente de figuras, como fondo; a las superficies "vacías", sin anécdota gráfica: se las consideraba ámbitos espaciales concretos, verdaderas profundidades, cuando en realidad eran sólo simulacros de formas y espacios sobre una superficie de dos dimensiones. Sin embargo, esta concepción tradicional del hacer artístico, que la moderna psicología de la estructura podría explicar, pero que los sentidos no verifican, es motivo, desde principios de siglo, de una radical revisión. La batalla fundamental librada por el arte modernista en la revolución de nuestros días ha estado enterizada a concretar el espacio y las formas, a promover una nueva práctica estética eximida en absoluto de métodos de abstracción y figuración. Esta batalla, por lo demás, es el último paso en el sentido de superar la milenaria contradicción, en el seno del arte, entre lo imitativo (documentos, símbolo, signo, totem) y lo inventivo (artístico), porque, en rigor de verdad, el problema del espacio y del tiempo en la pintura es inseparable y dependiente de esa contradicción a la cual se vincula de hecho, a través de la geneología implícita en toda pregunta sobre lo representado y lo concreto.

Los cubistas, llevando hasta sus últimas consecuencias lo que Cézanne y Seurat solo habían sugerido, pusieron al desnudo el método de abstracción de toda representación. Pero la voluntad de abstracción y puridad—Langevin lo ha demostrado palmariamente en el terreno de las nuevas físicas atómicas—puede desembocar, por un proceso dialéctico perfectamente explicable, en voluntad de objetivación. El cubismo, aún cuando lo que más informa sobre él sea su procedimiento abstracto, es indudablemente el primer paso en la época contemporánea por objetivar la pintura, por exaltar en ella sus elementos objetivos (colores, formas, materiales, etc.) y no las ficciones figurativas. No hay que olvidar que una manzana gráficamente representada es una abstracción de una manzana real, aparece ella en un cuadro de Chardin o de Braque; empero, la similitud esencial entre una manzana de Chardin y una de Braque, reside en que en la primera es el elemento imitativo el que predomina, mientras que en la segunda, es el inventivo. Y ha sido precisamente esta predominancia de la invención sobre la imitación lo que lleva a los cubistas a una vecindad sólo a una vecindad entendiéndose bien, con lo concreto. Cabe afirmar, no obstante, que cuando ellos comienzan a lograr ciertas conquistas en este sentido concreto, la primitiva doctrina de la escuela entra a perder su vigencia, a ser negada en sus principios fundamentales. En efecto, la introducción en la práctica cubista del "collage", verdadera apreciación concreta, señala ya el fin del cubismo propiamente dicho; así como años más tarde, desde otro punto de vista, los "objetos de funcionamiento simbólico" derivación concreta del surrealismo, darán un mentis inspirado a la pretendida geneología crítica de Breton y sus amigos.

Sin embargo, las críticas a estos aspectos abstractos del cubismo y el anhelo de superar sus insuficiencias en este sentido, fuerzan una importancia primordial en la evolución posterior del arte. Los futuristas se rebelaron contra la exaltación cubista de lo estático; más como la representación de lo estático, sí, sin embargo, un modo de abstracción, estas críticas se extendían, en verdad, al arte abstracto en general. No obstante, en la práctica, los futuristas no pudieron dar al problema del movimiento otra solución que no fuese abstracta. En lugar de concretarlo en el espacio se limitaron, una vez más, a representarlo.

Ahora bien: después del cubismo y del futurismo, agotadas ya todas las formas de abstracción y de representación, la necesidad de concretar el espacio, el tiempo y el movimiento, era la inquietud más sentida por todos los pintores que, cesó sus respectivos caminos breves por una transformación radical del arte. Así, en Rusia, como reacción a las experiencias meramente



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abstractas de Larionov, que reduce el problema a la imitación de rayos luminosos ("rayonismo", 1910), Malévitch y Rodchenko, en 1913, se esfuerzan por tornar más sutil la lucha por la objetivación de la pintura. La no representación, en un sentido general, se da por sobreentendida; de lo que se trata ahora es de combatir los residuos que facilitan la aparición ficticia de cosas, que, aunque no se habrán buscado representadas, emergen por sí solas a los ojos del espectador. Malévitch y Rodchenko reparan que, al bien se trabaja con elementos geométricos, el espacio y el tiempo siguen representados sobre sus telas y, por ende, también las cosas, cosas menos casuales, de naturaleza geométrica, pero cosas al fin. Es precisamente aquí cuando comienza a plantearse el problema a que hemos hecho referencia más arriba. MIENTRAS HAYA UNA FIGURA SOBRE UN FONDO, ILUSTRATIVAMENTE EXHIBIDA, HABRÁ REPRESENTACIÓN. Pero ¿cómo resolver este problema? Malévitch plantea la solución tonal: "blanco sobre blanco". Y al encontrarse con una superficie monocroma y monotonal descubre el alto valor estético y concreto del plano, iniciando la era de su exaltación. En Holanda, durante la primera guerra, Mondrian, Vantongerloo, Van Doesburg, y más tarde, el soviético Gorin, Mass y Einstein presionan una pintura "plana en el plano", que ellos denominan "abstracto real". Pero el problema no está todavía resuelto; recién ha quedado revelado el valor concreto del plano, resta verificar su efectividad estética en campos ajenos al estrictamente bidimensional.

Los rusos Gabo, Pevsner, Tattin, Miturich, los hombres del taller "Obmuchi", Medunetzki, Lesizki y el mismo Rodchenko, ya vividos los ínteros experiencias de la revolución proletaria, dan los primeros pasos en este sentido y formulan alrededor de 1920, una estética realista-construktiva. "Las bases fundamentales del arte—dicen los dos primeros en un manifiesto publicado en la URSS en 1920—deben reposar sobre un terreno realista: la vida real. El arte si quiere comprender la vida debe basarse en el espacio y en el tiempo". Los participantes de esta escuela realizan objetos de vidrio, hierro, acero, y otros materiales. El plano es usado por ellos como elemento espacial. No obstante, estas primeras experiencias no logran su finalidad: los realistas constructivos tropiezan a cada instante, por un lado, con el problema del plano, todavía no resuelto; por otro lado, con la necesidad de una composición espacial. De ahí que fuese necesario que tanto el "entramado hecho por Malévitch en lo referente al plano como las búsquedas de una composición verdaderamente no-representativa, cumplidas, o no resueltas, fueran superadas, todas sus etapas de desarrollo y crisis. El plano, antes de ser lanzado a establecer tipo de "entramado" espacial, tenía sus merced, progresivamente, su multifacetedad irregular, despojarse de todo estatismo y aprender a valer como dirección, como trayectoria en el espacio. De igual modo, la com-

Tomás Maldonado. "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," with a "coplanar" piece by Juan Alberto Molenberg pictured. *Arte Concreto-Inventivo*, 1946. Image courtesy of the University of Chicago Library.

three-dimensionality, this strategy activates a dialectic in which the space of painting is effectively transposed into real space, while real space is simultaneously absorbed into the plane of painting.

Both the rationale and the historical significance of the coplanar are extensively discussed in Tomás Maldonado's "The Abstract and the Concrete in Modern Art" (1946). The text starts with the general proposition that painting, in all epochs, has sought to provide a "graphic defi-

inition” of the human experience of space and time. In the past, Maldonado argues, that definition had been pursued by representational means; thus, painting was committed to producing renditions of a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface—a foundational contradiction that had trapped it within the realm of falsehood and illusion. During the first decades of the 20th century, however, modern art, increasingly aware of that contradiction, launched a critique of representation that began with Cubism and acquired more definite contours with Russian Constructivism, Neoplasticism, and Concretism. The latter endeavors sought to clarify the most pressing question that modern art faced: how to achieve a form of painting that could simultaneously address the dual problems of spatial integration and composition.

In Maldonado’s view, that was exactly what the coplanar accomplished. For him, Malevich’s “discovery” of the plane via the monochrome had not solved the two-dimensional problem of figure-ground relations: the exaltation of the plane, in and of itself, could not mark the end of representation, because it failed to address the question of the relations between the forms of painting. The fundamental mistake made by the Russian Constructivists, and by others who followed, was to assume that through simply asserting the surface of the canvas, they no longer needed to address the question of structure. In contrast, Maldonado argues, the AACI artists had developed a strategy that addressed *both* the question of the plane and the problem of composition. Building upon the monochrome, the coplanar did indeed release the forms of painting into space, but those forms—now three-dimensional objects—were still rigorously structured. Moreover, thanks both to the dynamism of its constitutive forms and to its strict adherence to the logic of the plane, the coplanar was capable of structuring space itself. In other words, it did not merely occupy space, but rather shaped it.<sup>3</sup>

What Maldonado offers in this text, then, is both a genealogy of the AACI and a succinct account of what he understands to be the history of modernism—one that happens to find its culmination in the coplanar. This fact might in principle suggest that Maldonado’s reconstruction is a biased one, yet he would have vigorously objected to that claim. The proper analysis of the history of art, he believed, required the interpreter

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3 For a more extended discussion of Maldonado’s ideas about the possibilities of the plane, see Megan A. Sullivan, *Radical Form: Modernist Abstraction in South America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), chap. 2.

to address the problems faced by individual artists and movements as symptoms of a fundamental contradiction that could only be identified as such with hindsight. He would therefore have contended that the point of his article was not to project the AACI's concerns onto previous modernist endeavors, but to advance a historical explanation founded on both empirical analysis and dialectical reasoning. But just as a dialectical notion of historical causality plays an important part in this argument, so too does a conception of art as a problem-solving activity. For Maldonado, artistic progress was not simply about adding new strategies or techniques—formal development was necessarily driven by the desire to produce better solutions to problems whose historical significance oftentimes escaped the judgment of individual artists.

In this context, Alfredo Hlito's "Notes toward a Materialist Aesthetics" emerges as an important theoretical supplement to Maldonado's historical-formal reconstruction. An exercise in synthetic writing, the text is composed of eleven theses—an obvious nod to Marx's well-known "Eleven Theses on Feuerbach"—and punctuated by several digressions that make for particularly difficult reading. Hlito's sketch of a materialist aesthetics, notably, is not founded on Marx's materialist conception of history, but rather on the Marxist theory of knowledge expounded in treatises such as Engels's *Anti-Düring* and Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The view of Marxism that is at play here is one in which Marxist politics, ethics, and aesthetics are all grounded in dialectical materialism, which is in turn conceived of as a materialist alternative to Hegel's idealist dialectics. Hlito's aesthetics therefore grants primacy to Marxist epistemology and method. For all his repeated allusions to history and social practice, he does not address art as a social or historical phenomenon: categories such as base and superstructure, economic interest, or even class struggle are wholly absent from his account. Like Maldonado, Hlito is adamant that art functions and evolves according to its own logic. He defends an evolutionary approach to art history in which artistic practice, at every stage of its development, is burdened with contradictions, the partial resolutions of which eventually demonstrate the obsolescence of earlier forms. But parallel to this runs his belief that if art is to move forward, it is imperative to debunk the old frameworks that have provided its theoretical foundation, like idealism in the case of representational art.

Although Hlito's argument against idealism is not clearly stated, it can be understood to take issue with the allegedly Kantian notion that

the physical world only provides the senses with stimuli that the intellect organizes according to its own logic. For Hlito, this view is untenable: it asks us to accept that the object of the subject's cognition is the subject itself, which ultimately means that the aesthetic object is irrelevant to aesthetic experience. By contrast, he claims, a materialist aesthetics asserts that reality possesses a rational structure in and of itself—a structure that exists independently from the mind. Hlito thus rejects the notion that it is the subject that “shapes” empirical reality by projecting onto it the formal categories of the intellect. At the same time, however, he argues that the second mistake of idealist aesthetics is to ignore that the art object results from a process through which the artist (i.e., the subject) endows a natural object (i.e., a raw material) with aesthetic properties.

These two propositions might seem antithetical, as Hlito appears to be simultaneously arguing that the subject both shapes and does not shape reality. In view of this, it is essential to note that Hlito is not denying that the subject can effectively transform the physical world through their actions (that is, indeed, the point that he wants to make); what he is rejecting is the idealist notion that the objects of cognition lack objective reality. While he maintains that the aesthetic object is qualitatively different from the natural object, its newly added properties are undoubtedly objective, in that they can be verified by the senses. Now, the basic trouble with idealism lies in the notion that the aesthetic object ultimately exists as a function of the subject's consciousness. For a materialist aesthetic, on the contrary, “the object is exhausted in its properties.” This means that the art object, in spite of bearing properties that are not “natural,” is still objective inasmuch as those properties can be empirically verified.

This emphasis on the empirical verifiability of aesthetic properties speaks to what can be called a “naturalized” aesthetics: one in which the mind is not granted a privileged status in relation to the physical world. If taken as a paradigm of artistic practice, this aesthetics calls for an artwork that attests to the process that brought it into material existence. It can be argued, in this sense, that although Hlito's theses do not discuss the coplanar in an explicit manner, they nevertheless furnish it with a theoretical justification that goes beyond mere objecthood. Seen under the light of Hlito's remarks, the coplanar not only asserts its own materiality but also emerges as an aesthetic object that results from a process that undoes the fiction of objectivity on which representational painting

rests: its newly added aesthetic properties directly challenge whatever may count as “aesthetic” from an idealist perspective, since they do not point in the direction of the subject’s consciousness. Moreover, insofar as it stresses both the materiality and the processuality of the art object, the coplanar ultimately seems to illustrate, as Alejandro Crispiani has remarked, the core principles of dialectical materialism as understood by the AACI artists.<sup>4</sup>

There are several important points of intersection between Maldonado’s and Hlito’s texts. Despite their obvious thematic differences, they both expound the fundamentals of a concrete art that revolves around the materiality of the artwork. They both stand against expressionism, understood either as the rejection of structure in painting or, more broadly, as the notion that aesthetic phenomena are those that fulfill the expressive needs of the subject. Both writers are also formalists, in that they ascribe to art a domain of its own, either as an object of historical interpretation or as a social practice.

What they offer, however, is not simply a work of art that insists on the materiality of the picture plane, but one that is also understood to be absolutely self-referential in the sense of bearing witness to the process that led to its existence. That process is how both Maldonado and Hlito interpreted “invention.” For them, this category was not intended to assert the powers of creation over a formless reality; to invent was to reveal the epistemological foundations of reality—that is, to enlighten our understanding of reality by dispelling the superstitions and mystifications that pre- or nonscientific aesthetics had projected onto it. It is this highly intellectualized definition of process that sets the AACI’s project apart from other modernist approaches to the materiality of the

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4 Crispiani, *Objetos*, 121. The radicality of this materialist approach to art might in principle suggest that the Argentine Communist Party (PCA), of which both Maldonado and Hlito were members, saw the AACI’s endeavors sympathetically. That was not the case: the PCA demanded social realism. For the party, the social function of art amounted to little more than propaganda. Both Maldonado and Hlito were contributors to *Orientación*—the official organ of the PCA—yet it was their theoretical acumen, rather than their art, that the party valued most. As conflicts accrued, the bulk of the AACI artists would be expelled from the PCA in 1948. On the AACI’s uneasy relation with the Communist Party, see Ana Longoni and Daniela Lucena, “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*, ed. Mario Gradowczyk (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero, 2008), 56–70; Daniela Lucena, *Contaminación artística: vanguardia concreta, comunismo y peronismo en los años 40* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2015), 101–26; and Adriana Petra, *Intelectuales y cultura comunista: itinerarios, problemas y debates en la Argentina de posguerra* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2017), 76–86, III–31.

artwork. The centrality that Russian Constructivism accorded to techniques and materials, for example, is largely missing in the AACI's coplanar. And even though the group's concerted erasure of brushstrokes might suggest an interest in asserting the superiority of machine production over the hand of the artist—as was the case with Van Doesburg—here, neither the mark of the tool nor the mark of the hand was of importance to these artists. What interested the AACI was not the indexes of making but those of a rational process leading to what Hlito calls an object “exhausted in its properties” (thesis 9).

Not long after the publication of these texts, both Maldonado and Hlito would abandon the coplanar. As early as 1948, Maldonado observed that “the opposition between figure and ground remained in place, but from being illusory it became concrete. . . . The dissolution of the ground led to an exaggerated sculptural exaltation of the figure. Once again, Renaissance ‘form’—the anecdote—took over.”<sup>5</sup> Not only did Maldonado come to believe that the coplanar repeated the same mistake for which he had earlier indicted the Constructivists, he also came to the conclusion that spatial experiments in general offered a false solution to the question of representation. In the years that followed the dissolution of the AACI, both Maldonado and Hlito would pursue the notion of invention through other avenues, most notably those offered by Max Bill's version of Concretism: rather than seeking to dismantle the medium, they would aspire to work through it by retaining the contradiction of figure and ground.

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5 Tomás Maldonado, *El arte concreto y el problema de lo ilimitado: Notas para un estudio teórico. Zurich 1948* (Buenos Aires: ramona, 2003), 11–12. My translation.