

## THE ABSTRACT AND THE CONCRETE IN MODERN ART

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No problem of painting could ever be raised without considering the practical problem that the perception of space and time poses to every human being. What's more, in all epochs painting sought to be a graphic definition of those two properties of objective reality.

In the past, the essence of painting's procedure of creation lay in establishing an aesthetic and anecdotal relation between figures represented in a space that was likewise represented. The idea was to make figures count as forms, and that which in the canvas was absent of figures, as ground; "empty" surfaces—those without graphic anecdotes—were considered concrete spatial areas, veritable profundities, even though in all actuality they were only simulacra of forms and spaces on a two-dimensional surface. But since the beginning of the century, this traditional view of artistic practice—one that the modern psychology of structure might explain but that our senses do not verify—has been subject to a radical revision. The fundamental battle that is being fought by the genuinely revolutionary art of our time has revolved around the concretizing of space and forms: the advancement of a new aesthetic

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practice absolutely freed from all subjection to what is abstract and illusory. It should be said, moreover, that this battle is the last step toward the overcoming of the millenarian contradiction, within the realm of art, between the imitative (document, symbol, sign, totem) and the inventive (the artistic); this is because, in all actuality, the question of space and time in painting is inseparable from and dependent on that contradiction to which it is connected in virtue of the gnoseology implicit in all inquiries into the represented and the concrete.

The Cubists, taking to its final conclusion what Cézanne and Seurat had only insinuated, revealed the abstract mechanism behind all representation. But the will to abstraction and purity—as demonstrated by Langevin in the realm of the new atomic physics—can lead, via a dialectical process that is perfectly explainable, to a will to objectivation. In spite of its most evident characteristic—its abstract procedure—Cubism was no doubt the first step in our time toward the objectivation of painting, toward exalting its objective elements (colors, forms, materials, etc.) rather than figurative fictions. Let's not forget that a graphically represented apple is an abstraction of a real apple, whether it appears in a picture by Chardin or Braque; there is, however, an essential difference between an apple by Chardin and one by Braque: in the case of the former, it is imitation that prevails, while in the latter, it is invention. The preeminence that the Cubists accorded to invention over imitation brought them into the vicinity (only into the vicinity, it must be stressed) of the concrete. It is important to note, however, that when the Cubists made some progress in the direction of the concrete, the school's original doctrine began to wane—its fundamental principles came to be negated. In fact, the introduction of “collage” into the Cubist practice, a genuine concrete addition, marked the end of Cubism as such; this was similarly the case, though from a different point of view, with the “objects with a symbolic function,” a concrete development of Surrealism, which years later would give an unexpected turn to the supposed oneiric gnoseology of Breton and his friends.

The critiques raised against these abstract aspects of Cubism, as well as the desire to overcome them, were of great importance in the evolution of art that would follow. The Futurists rebelled against the Cubist exaltation of the static; but since the representation of the static is itself a mode of abstraction, these critiques indeed applied to abstract art in general. In practical terms, however, the Futurists could only offer

an abstract solution to the problem of movement. Instead of concretizing movement in space, they opted, once again, for representing it.

Following Cubism and Futurism—all forms of abstraction and representation already having been exhausted—the need for concretizing space, time, and movement became the central preoccupation of all the painters that, from their own explorations, strove to achieve a radical transformation of art. Thus in Russia, as a reaction against the merely abstract experiments of Larionov, who had reduced the problem to the imitation of luminous rays (“Rayonism,” 1910), Malevich and Rodchenko, in 1913, endeavored to find a more subtle approach to the objectivation of painting.<sup>1</sup> Nonrepresentation, in a general sense, was taken for granted; what was at issue, now, was fighting those remnants that allowed for the fictitious appearance of things the representation of which was not intended—things that emerged by themselves in the eyes of the spectator. Malevich and Rodchenko realized that, in spite of working with geometric elements, space and time continued to be represented in their canvases, as well as things of a geometric kind—decidedly uncommon things, but things in the end. It is precisely at this point that the problem to which we referred above began to be posed: SO LONG AS THERE IS A FIGURE AGAINST A GROUND, ILLUSORILY EXHIBITED, THERE WILL BE REPRESENTATION. But, how could this problem be solved? Malevich attempted a tonal solution: “white on white.” Upon encountering a surface both monochromatic and monotonal, he discovered the plane’s high aesthetic and concrete value, thereby inaugurating the era of its exaltation. In the Netherlands, during World War I, Mondrian, Vantongerloo, and Van Doesburg, and later, the Soviet Gorin,<sup>2</sup> [Marjorie Jewel] Moss, and [William] Einstein, advocated painting “flat on the plane,” which they termed “abstract real.” But the problem had not yet been solved; the plane’s concrete value had only just been revealed—its aesthetic effectiveness in realms other than the strictly two-dimensional was still to be verified.

The Russians Gabo, Pevsner, Tatlin, Miturich, the men at the Obmokhu workshop, Medunetsky, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko himself,

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1 Here Maldonado likely refers to Malevich’s *Black Square*, the earliest version of which was arguably painted in 1913. That date, however, is quite early in Rodchenko’s career, so it is not clear to what work or works Maldonado would be referring in this case. My thanks are due to the editors for this observation.

2 While the artist Jean Gorin had spent some time in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, he was actually French.

having lived the great experience of the proletarian revolution, took the first steps in that direction and formulated, around 1920, a realist-constructive aesthetic. “The fundamental bases of art,” said the first two of those artists in a manifesto published in the USSR in 1920, “must rest on a resistant ground: real life. If it wants to understand life, art must be based on space and time.”<sup>3</sup> The members of this school made objects in glass, iron, steel, and other materials. They used the plane as a spatial element. Nevertheless these early experiments could not yet achieve their purported goal: time and again, the constructive realists stumbled over the still-unsolved problem of the plane, on the one hand, and the absence of a method for spatial composition, on the other. It was thus necessary that both Malevich’s argument with regard to the plane and the various searches for a truly nonrepresentational composition fulfilled—or were aimed at fulfilling—all their stages of development and crisis. The plane, before being thrown into any kind of spatial adventure, had to progressively lose its orthogonal modality, rid itself of all forms of stasis, and learn how to assert its value as direction—as trajectory in space. Likewise, classic composition, which was eminently dispositional, scenographic, put to the service of the theme and its representation, could no longer serve this new art—an art that had nothing to arrange since its purpose was to compose: to relate aesthetically, but also concretely, the pictorial elements. Before thinking of spatial structures, a nonrepresentational composition in two dimensions had to be attempted; before furthering composition, its fundamentals had to be redefined. There was something, however, that these artists failed to see; namely, that the problem of the objective exaltation of the plane and that of plastic structure are inseparable. This is true to the extent that the history of nonrepresentational two-dimensional art can be synthesized as follows: on one side, efforts to assert the surface of the canvas as such; on the other, efforts to achieve a nonrepresentational structure. Thus, in 1923, the Hungarian [László] Péri, pursuing from a nonrepresentational point of view what [Olga] Rosanova had done in Russia as a Cubist (1916) and H. Arp and K. Schwitters in Zurich as Dadaists, broke the picture’s traditional form, endeavoring to separate its constitutive elements. Péri, however, did not systematize appropri-

3 Here Maldonado is alluding to “The Realistic Manifesto” (1920), written by Naum Gabo with Antoine Pevsner and first published in poster form on the occasion of an exhibition in Moscow. He seems to be quoting loosely from the extracts that were reproduced in English in the first issue of the magazine *G* in 1923.

ately this discovery, nor did he draw from it any conclusions about structure. [Carl] Buchheister, [Henryk] Stażewski, and [Władysław] Strzemiński tried again to exalt the plane via the tonal solution, though less successfully than Malevich and also without touching upon the problem of a new composition. By contrast, the Neoplasticists embarked upon the task of achieving a nonrepresentational composition, which they assumed to be based on the orthogonal function, and granted little importance to the question of the plane, to which they gave a provisional solution: they dissolved the “grounds” by means of linear complications until they were elevated to the same optical level as the figures (Mondrian, Moss, Gorin, etc.). None of them, however, achieved a satisfactory solution. Illusory space had not been abolished, and composition continued to be of a classic, dispositional kind. Neither Péri nor the Neoplasticists dared to relativize the picture itself—to question its traditional function as a “container” (*organismo continente*), a surface within which, by necessity, an event has to develop. That was their fundamental mistake.

It is at this point that the necessity of returning to the original Constructivist proposition of an art of space as the only possible solution began to be discussed. Thus the English Ben Nicholson, in reaction to Malevich’s “white figures on white ground,” proposed his white forms on white ground, realizing bas-reliefs and high reliefs, while [César] Domela, with his polychromatic reliefs, completed this return to space. The problem of two-dimensionality thus set aside until further notice, the path was paved for furthering the spatial formulations of the early Constructivists. In 1920, the Constructivists had opted to favor direction over mass in the arts of space; taking up this idea, the Hungarian Moholy-Nagy and the Swiss Max Bill, at the Bauhaus Dessau, studied the problems inherent to constructing directions in space and the relations of different materials, but without paying much attention, of course, to the problems of aesthetic structure. Indeed, composition was not the main problem addressed by these spatial experiments, much as it had not been in the case of their Constructivist predecessors; given the desire to verify and discover new relations and elements, it was logical that the problem of aesthetic arrangement was permanently postponed.

It did not take long for these new Constructivists to realize that dynamism is the key to achieving the concrete plenitude of space-time; the production of objects of that kind thus emerged as their main con-

cern. It is true that the brothers Gabo and Pevsner—who also took part in this new phase of inquiry—and Rodchenko himself had already created dynamic objects; but the restricted nature of their kinetic repertoires—most often circular or pendular movements—prevented those objects from emerging as manifestations of an artistic genre at its zenith. Aware of that, Moholy-Nagy began to construct objects based on a broader repertoire of movements, speeds, and materials.

In all truthfulness, the incorporation of concrete dynamics into nonrepresentational art was a most valuable conquest; but since the problems of two-dimensional composition and their related effects on three-dimensional composition had not been previously solved, they began to resurface. Unexpected coincidences arose following this merely automatic rediscovery of space.

In effect, Giacometti's "L'Heure des traces," one of the first Surrealist "objects with a symbolic function," being simultaneously objective and dynamic, revealed the disturbing possibility that nonrepresentational art could be capitalized upon by Surrealism or, even worse, that an absurd synthesis of both could be achieved. Such a synthesis was pursued by the American Calder—originally a noteworthy member of "Abstraction-Création-Art non figuratif," a united front of nonrepresentational artists (1931–1940)—whose admiration for the painter Joan Miró led him, first, to adopt a condescending attitude toward Surrealist painting and, later, to produce works driven by a notorious expressionist-*oneiric* purpose. Even so, Calder's "mobiles" were evidently a step toward liberating the aesthetic object from the baroquism to which it had been brought by Moholy-Nagy in his quest to broaden and refine the *prima materia* of this new artistic genre. But insofar as structure is concerned, Calder repeated the nefarious mistake of failing to invent a dynamic internal structure; instead, he subordinated his efforts to the arrangement imposed by the engine or source of energy. It is in this structural insufficiency—one that is fundamentally not inventive—shared by all manifestations of nonrepresentational art that we can find the explanation, not only for Calder's deviations, but for all possible convergences between nonrepresentational art and Surrealism and Expressionism. It is evident that when the will to structure is relinquished, the field of invention is irremissibly abandoned: one enters an uncontrolled "no man's land" that, in the final analysis, is the land of dreams, the subconscious, pure intuition, agoraphobia, delirious expressions—of all possible varieties of illusion and representation.

The same problems could be observed in the realm of two-dimensional painting: Kandinsky and [Rudolf] Bauer, the far right of European nonrepresentational art, who always defended a radical skepticism with regard to composition and exalted the role of intuition and geometric automatism (“abstract expressionism”), found devotees in the United States. The North American non-objectivists, following in the footsteps of Kandinsky and Bauer, returned to both the picture (*cuadro*) and the aesthetic anecdote. That anecdote, broadly speaking, consists of a chromatic accent (with musical allusions), an arrow (sign), or a zigzag (descriptive event); we are sent back to the central theme of classic composition. Before, it was the “Virgin of the Rocks” (Virgin, first moment of perception—represented time); now it is Kandinsky’s “Yellow Accent” (Yellow accent, first moment of perception—represented time).

It is precisely against all these manifestations that tend to alienate nonrepresentational art from its true destiny—the conquest of the concrete—that we, the militants of Argentina’s Concretist movement, began our work of research and invention some years ago, attempting to solve the fundamental problems of nonrepresentational art and keep it away from the quagmire of Expressionism, Surrealism, and all other idealist and representational forms. Armed with dialectical materialism—the living philosophy of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin that validated and validates our inquiries—we succeeded in formulating a materialist or concrete aesthetic. Our first steps were directed toward reformulating all the problems of nonrepresentational art from Malevich to our day, though evidently looking for more accurate and exhaustive solutions. We understood from the outset that the major insufficiencies of nonrepresentational art had their origins in the failure both to achieve a new composition and abolish illusion definitively. For this reason, we began by breaking the picture’s traditional form (Rothfuss, Maldonado, Arden Quin, Prati, Espinosa, and later, Hlito, Mónaco, and Souza). But we did not stop there (that was Péri’s mistake); we tried to understand both the value and real transcendence of this conquest. At this point we realized that the “cut-out frame,” as we came to call it, spatialized the plane; we could not be indifferent to the fact that we had opened the gates and that space penetrated the picture, functioning as yet another element—an aesthetically belligerent object. At the same time, we repeated Nicholson’s and Domela’s experiments; we materialized figures, we turned them into forms (Maldonado, Prati, Raúl Lozza, Antonio Caraduje). But at this point we found ourselves

searching for a three-dimensional solution to the two-dimensional problem: we were repeating the mistake. . . . So we stopped. We took the firm stance that, if we were going to move out into space, it would be only after coming up with a solution—never as a detour in the face of an obstacle in the realm of the two-dimensional. We reengaged in profundity with the problem of the “cut-out frame.” We began by granting more importance to the penetrating space than to the picture itself (Molenberg, Raúl Lozza, Núñez). And following this route, we made the paramount discovery of our movement: a picture whose constitutive elements are separated in space but nonetheless retain their coplanarity (Molenberg, Raúl Lozza). In this manner, the picture as “container” was abolished. After struggling for so many years, the concrete had been achieved, and only from that point on could nonrepresentational composition become a reality—it was, indeed, already a reality.

For the first time ever, nonrepresentational art now faces the possibility of addressing space and movement from an entirely concrete perspective.