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Ex-Centricity: A Conversation with César Paternosto

The Argentine artist discusses the aesthetic and political implications of “emptying the front surface” of a painting.

Madeline Murphy Turner, César Paternosto Apr 26, 2021

The Hidden Order (1972) is a painting that requires the viewer to reorient their point of view, both physically and psychologically. Leaving its front surface blank, Argentine artist César Paternosto applied strips of color only to the edges of the canvas to encourage what he has called a “lateral or oblique way of looking.”

I recently spoke to Paternosto about the genesis of his conception of painting, his formative experience working in 1970s New York City, and being a witness to the emergence of language-based Conceptual art.

This conversation is part of Thinking Abstraction, a series of interviews with Latin American artists whose work raises questions about the transition between abstraction and the emergence of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s.



Installation view of César Paternosto's one-person show at the Galerie Denise René, New York, January, 1973. This is the first time that *The Hidden Order* is exhibited.

In a recent video for Cecilia de Torres Gallery, you said that with this body of work, you painted only on the sides of the canvas to create a silence that “runs against the visual noise of consumer society.” Could you please expand on this idea? How does *The Hidden Order* engage with a political critique of consumerism?

Consumerism is the late stage of industrial (capitalist) society. Its main aims—to convince people to consume things they don't actually need (Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* was an eye opener during my early days in New York)—are the arch-sophisticated forms of visual advertising. Their apex is the omnipresent, intrusive TV commercial—perhaps today's art form; forget about video art, it doesn't have by any stretch of imagination the global reach of the commercial. Moreover, I see today's art as barely differentiated from consumerism. It is what I call the “supermarketization” of art: offerings for just about any conceivable bourgeois taste.

In my view, therefore, a painting reduced to a white front surface and a minimum of pictorial notations implies a pointed critique of the deafening visual noise created by late industrial society. Or, as I wrote back then, “... painting appears as a silent, restricted territory where a qualitative denial of the mainstream discourse can take place.” In fact, it is silent but not mute, as [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty would say.



César Paternosto. *Duino*. 1966

You have cited a wide range of artistic influences on your work, that include Max Bill, Madí Art, Neo-Concrete art, Frank Stella, and Richard Smith. Were you also looking at Willys de Castro's *Active Objects*?

Perhaps a most enduring influence in my work, beginning in the early '60s, was my study of Paul Klee's graded color bands from his Bauhaus years. To this day I tend to organize color in banded formats. Of the names you mention, my awareness of Madí's "irregular frame" and the Stellas and Richard Smith I saw in Buenos Aires at the Di Tella Prize exhibitions in the '60s prompted the shaped canvases that I developed in Argentina, and I later exhibited in my 1968 New York debut with Abe Sachs (see, for example, *Duino*, 1966).

Later, Mondrian's Centennial Exhibition at the Guggenheim was also revealing: I learned that he occasionally prolonged either the black bars or the color areas around the stretchers. Not only that, but with his centrifugal arrangement of the color accents, I realized that he had come to the verge of what I had done: pushing color to the edges of the canvas and leaving the front blank. Up until that point I had felt I was a trailblazer of sorts, but then I discovered that there was a prestigious precedent.

De Castro, whose work I greatly admire, was unknown outside Brazil until the 1990s, thanks to the exhibitions like *Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, and others. In fact, the Argentine artist Nicolás Guagnini came up with an idea for a comparative show with de Castro's work and mine: *Literally Lateral* was its catchy title, but unfortunately it never came to fruition.

In addition to your visual art practice, you are also highly engaged with art history and criticism, which is clear in your comments on your own visual practice. You have called yourself a New York artist, and I'm wondering how you think your work disrupts the canonical narrative of New York art of the late 1960s and early '70s?

I came to full maturity in New York in active exchange with all of the challenging issues floated during the seminal, unrepeatable '60s and '70s.

But works such as *The Hidden Order* did not disrupt the canonical narrative of New York art. Very much so, in spite of my fervent attempts. It may have resonated among colleagues and friends, and made me a sort of "painter's painter." And I never forgot what [critic] Lucy Lippard told me once: "But your work is invisibly successful."

Your approach to abstraction also incorporated procedures or strategies usually connected with Conceptual art. For you, what are the relationships and connections between the tradition of abstraction and conceptual practices?



In New York, I witnessed the birth of Conceptual art in its foundational, hard-core version: language replacing the (art) object, for example at the Language shows at Dwan Gallery around 1968. Though this was impossible for me to digest, I took it as a serious theoretical challenge. In a nutshell: Joseph Kosuth wrote—following to the letter the British logical positivist philosopher A. J. Ayer—that works of art are analytic propositions, and that they are not factual but linguistic. This position also led him to reject what the British called "Continental Philosophy" (Anglo-Saxon insularity at its peak?). This position definitely clashed with my intellectual upbringing: readings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Walter Benjamin, or Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, and not in the very least, the semantic or symbolic resonance of the ancient Andean art object, which not only served as a substitute for writing, but was also so richly visual. I find more convivial the Conceptual artwork in which, though language remains the main signifier, some form of visual information (photography, video) and/or the object (found or manufactured) are present. However, as far as I am concerned, it is still another form of imagistic or representational art—the most sophisticated form, I grant, of an art that after the 1980s has returned with a vengeance.

César Paternosto working in his 248 Lafayette Street studio. New York, c. 1971