

## **HOMAGE: GEOMETRIA SENSÍVEL - 25 YEARS LATER, SENSITIVE GEOMETRY RECALLED**

At daybreak on July 8, 1978, a devastating fire reduced the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro to ashes. It was the worst catastrophe suffered by a museum since World War II. Twenty-five years later, there are several things worth recalling about this sad event, not least that it could have been avoided, as the Museum had been alerted by the International Council of Museums that it lacked the basic equipment to extinguish a fire.

Although the origin of the fire was never conclusively established, it is believed that it began in the auditorium after a performance earlier that night. The show had ended late and the watchmen closed the premises just before they left. A hastily extinguished cigarette or a short circuit were listed as possible causes. Someone driving by the Museum alerted the fire department. The first units to arrive were helpless to act, as the Museum's main water supply was shut off because somewhere in the building there was a leaky faucet. When the firefighters finally succeeded in getting the water flowing, it was too late to salvage anything. The fire had rapidly spread through the flammable partitions and the ventilation ducts. The New York Times of July 9 reported the blaze on its front page, describing how hours later, the building's concrete shell was still smoking, littered with piles of dirty gray sludge and broken glass.

It is believed that over one thousand works of art were destroyed, although the exact number will never be known because the archives were incinerated along with the museum. Works in the permanent collection by Picasso, Dalí, Miró, Marx Ernst, and Magritte were lost, along with a comprehensive collection of Brazilian art. Also, there were two temporary exhibitions on view: América Latina: Geometria Sensível, a survey of Latin American abstraction which included more than a hundred works by 26 contemporary artists and Torres-García, Construção e Símbolos. The Torres-García exhibition of murals, paintings, and wood objects originated at the Museum of Visual Arts in Montevideo and in 1975 opened at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

After the exhibition closed in Paris, the works remained stored in the Musée's basement for three years because the "Commissaire Artistique" in Montevideo did not secure the funds for the return of the exhibition. In arranging for the Rio Museum of Modern Art to bring back the works from Paris, new loan forms were not sent to the owners and tragically, without the lenders' knowledge, the works by Torres-García were not insured.

The Museum of Visual Arts in Montevideo lost seven murals recently removed from the walls of the Montevideo hospital where they were originally painted in 1944, and ten other important paintings. The rest of the works belonged to private collectors in Brazil and Montevideo; the family of the artist suffered the greatest loss. Mr. Jean Boghici, a Brazilian collector who lost six works by Torres-García was quoted in the New York Times as saying: "The only thing you can do now is to be furious."

The exhibition América Latina: Geometria Sensível, curated by the late Roberto Pontual was the first conscious effort to

define the differences between Latin America's geometric abstract art and its European counterpart. Latin America's constructivist vocation, he stated, had its roots in Amerindian and tribal art. The catalog, in fact, included a bark painting from the Alto Xingú Amazon tribe. Pontual wrote that the Argentine critics Aldo Pellegrini and Damian Bayón coined the term "Geometría Sensível" (Sensitive Geometry); although Torres-García had years earlier expressed his preference for an "intuitive and spiritual kind of geometry," instead of a traditional geometry "based on rule and compass."

The two concepts are apparently a contradiction, as geometry implies rigor, calculation, and the exercise of reason, and sensitive suggests intuition, impromptu action and feeling. The junction of these opposites - inspiration vs. program, intuition vs. calculation, open vs. closed, multi-sensorial vs. the strictly visual - indicates a split in geometric abstraction. Sensitive geometry stands on one side and programmed geometry on the other.

Pontual, while acknowledging that opposites are never neatly defined in any artwork, and without judging one type of geometric art as superior to the other, believed that Latin Americans were more inclined towards the "sensível." The critic Federico Morais wrote that most geometric groups in Latin America had emerged in reaction against expressionism, surrealism, Mexican muralism and tachism. Morais indicated that in "Geometría Sensível" there is an organic and vital character, which he boldly called "caliente."

Pontual exhibited Torres-García's Constructivist works from the 1920s to the 1940s simultaneously with geometric works by contemporary artists, illuminating Constructivism's continuity through the decades, as well as paying homage to Torres-García's fundamental contribution. Additionally he hoped to enhance the understanding of Latin America's manifest constructivist inclination.

The exhibition catalog featured essays by prominent Latin American critics who explored the different directions which geometric abstraction took in the so-called open countries: Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela, as well as its recent emergence in Colombia and Mexico.

The Argentine critic Marta Traba remarked in her essay, "The Formation of Hegemonic Art in Venezuela," that modern artists in Venezuela were eager to adopt the projects of the elite that promoted fast modernization, consumerism and disinterest in tradition. As she wrote, the architect Carlos Raul Villanueva was key to the development of modern art in Venezuela; his commissioning of the decoration for the University campus he designed in the 1950s to Arp, Calder, Leger, Pevsner, Vasarely, and several Venezuelan artists had wide impact.

Cruz Diez, Otero and Soto (whose work is included in our exhibition), all of whom have roots in "Concrete Art," have in common as well the creation of large pieces for public spaces. In 1974, for Soto's retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, a huge Penetrable installation occupied the whole open core of the building. Cruz-Diez's, 1965 Cromosaturación, three rooms lit with red, green and blue fluorescent tubes, was a precursor to James Turrell's work with light. Otero created large-scale wind or water propelled constructions made of stainless steel and aluminum, such as the 1977 Delta Solar for the Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

On the other hand, Damian Bayon wrote that Argentine artists were motivated by a non-conformist attitude opposed to French art. As the School of Paris had been the model for a country with such "good taste" as Argentina, the Madi and the Neo-Concrete groups of the 1940s were more interested in the Dutch modern masters, De Stijl, Max Bill and the Bauhaus. In

fact, one of the Concrete artists, Tomás Maldonado, went on to direct the Ulm Bauhaus from 1964 to 1966. Furthermore, geometric abstraction in the Rio de la Plata region was based on theoretical and intellectual discourse. Bayon remarked that Argentine artists had little official or private support, which stunted the impetus of the abstract movement. Among many others, César Paternosto and Marcelo Bonevardi (who are included in our exhibition), both Argentineans and recipients of Guggenheim scholarships, moved to New York in the 1960s.

For the critic Jorge Alberto Manrique, geometric art was a late arrival in Mexico, where it became a useful medium to contain and deliver a romantic element. According to him, geometric art in Mexico was plagued by "impurities," to the point that it should be referred to as an art that is geometrically inclined rather than as really constructivist. In Manrique's view, it was more a geometry by coincidence than by an explicit program, created individually, without an established association driven by a common perspective. These conceptual defects of the Mexican movement are also its virtues - what makes it atypical and unique.

In his essay "Brazil, Possible Geometries," Roberto Pontual concluded that there was a Brazilian type of construction, and that it obeyed specific laws, which resulted in a balance between reason and emotion. At its base, reason dictates the norms, consolidates the structure and establishes the parameters, although its reach doesn't extend beyond the substance or the language where its forms originated. In this work emotion prevails, it is an opening up or perhaps a predisposition to allow lines, planes, colors, materials and ideas to let in feeling. More than symbolic, as in Torres-García's case, here we have an affective constructivism, a sensitive geometry.

According to Eduardo Serrano in his catalog essay, "Geometry in Contemporary Colombian Art," the sculptor Ramírez Villamizar (1923) was the key modernist figure in his country. His 1954 exhibition of abstract sculpture established a new art direction in a country more inclined to genre painting. His Architectonic Labyrinth built of concrete in 1973 on a hill overlooking Bogotá, established a dialogue with the natural environment. Ana Mercedes Hoyos (another artist represented in our show) started from figuration, painting windows that framed a landscape. Gradually, the landscape gave way to white incandescent light. The painting blends with the wall where it hangs, so that subtle hues of blue, barely perceived, create the illusion of an atmosphere.

Latin American art will be forever impoverished as a result of the 1978 fire. The seven Constructivist mural paintings by Torres-García will never again demonstrate the importance and reach that Constructivism achieved in this part of the world. The Museum of Modern Art in Rio, although rebuilt, never fully recovered. Some of the few items that escaped the fire, a 1920 bronze head by Brancusi, and Number 16, a 1950 canvas by Jackson Pollock, attest to the great quality of the Museum's lost collection. After the fire, the economic crisis in Brazil and escalating art market prices made new acquisitions difficult.

The exhibition presented at Cecilia de Torres Ltd., curated by Henrique Faría, pays homage to the great art the fire consumed a quarter century ago. Presented here are works of the period by Bonevardi, Cordeiro, Cruz Diez, Gego, Hoyos, Otero, Paternosto, Ramírez Villamizar, Rojas and Soto, artists who participated in *América Latina: Geometría Sensível* or whose work was discussed in the catalog; and one painting by Torres-García, the 1943 *Arte Constructivo*. It was one of the few works in the Paris exhibition that wasn't lost; its owner had refused to lend it to the Rio Museum. It is a symbolic reminder of the other 73 constructivist works that were destroyed.

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