The book cover features a dark green background with abstract geometric elements. A thin white vertical line is positioned on the left side. A thin black diagonal line runs from the top right towards the bottom center. A yellow line starts from a horizontal segment, then descends diagonally to the bottom right. Three yellow dots are placed vertically in the center-right area. The title and subtitle are printed in white text in the upper right quadrant.

Abstract Art
from the Río de la Plata

Buenos Aires and Montevideo
1933-1953

The Americas Society

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Abstract Art Between Images and Words: Vision and Division in a Single Gaze

Lisa Block de Behar

Now, we must make a painting without name.
Joaquín Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura*, 1947¹

Above all, do not begin by defining.
Tomás Maldonado, *Actualidad y porvenir del arte concreto*, 1951²

The indefinable consists of making definition invisible.
Raymundo Rasas Pét, *Madigrafías*,³

What shall we call this art? Abstract? Conceptual? Concrete? Nonfigurative? Nonobjective? Constructivist? Constructive Universalism? Madí? “*Un art autre?*”⁴ Something else entirely? The aesthetic range and philosophical disparity between these terms brings up more than a question of names. Perhaps the issue has to do with taxonomy—paradoxically, one based not on similarities but on dissimilarities. As Edgar Bayley wrote about the movement in 1945, “Being different is what is most valuable.”⁵

Listing all these names is not a simple indulgence in the game of enumeration but an appeal to the freedom that comes of legitimizing diversity. This license is a reaction against the conventional rules imposed by representation, when “representation” is understood to mean the imitation of, or conformity to, a given reality. There is in these movements a will to be liberated from naturalism’s mimesis, to embrace a poetics that poses intransitivity as transcendence in order to strengthen the will for emancipation. As expressed in 1951 by Tomás Maldonado, “To elaborate further runs the risk of undermining the antidogmatic essence of this art. We must remember that concrete art is not a dogma but, rather, a method, the best method for achieving an authentic, demythified art.”⁶

This variety of names encompasses a diffuse spectrum, implicating practices and theories as diverse as the names used to describe them. The justification for this range can perhaps be found in the conjecture that no art can escape the process of abstraction. Whether artists pro-

ceed through images or through thoughts, through the most visible of similarities or through the most secret of coincidences, it is inconceivable for them to suspend this process of abstraction: that would be tantamount to suspending thought. At the same time, if *art itself* is so elusive as to make that elusiveness its own contradictory definition, this gives rise to other considerations: that this definition hints at a lack of definition; that as such it is a limitless concept; and that it validates the dispersion or dissolution of the fabric of logic, which flows in several directions simultaneously. Once again, we must wonder how it is possible to find terms to enclose what cannot be enclosed, and how we can arrive at a constantly shifting finishing line. Joaquín Torres-García addressed this problem in 1947:

“What I mean by the term *constructive art* includes all art. All true art is constructive. What I mean by the term *abstract art* includes all art. All true art is abstract. . . . That is why *painter* and *constructor* should be understood to mean the same thing: a painter is a constructor of paintings. There are also music constructors, poetry constructors, architecture constructors, and sculptor constructors. And all of these artist-constructors work with abstraction.”⁷

A few years later, Tomás Maldonado asserted the following:

“We must understand once and for all—even against prevailing opinion—that this art is not abstract, but

concrete. We say it is not abstract because it makes no attempt to reflect the illusion of nature on a surface, a process that is totally and intrinsically abstract. We say rather that it is concrete because it aims to invent objective beauty through equally objective means."⁸

Torres-García's and Maldonado's positions are essentially the same. Through radically different terms, they allude to the same notions, pointing to ambiguities in an artistic current that finds antithesis valid. They use language to speculate about a reality questioned from within language, beyond denomination and opposition of terms, thus accounting for the labile relativism of a referential crisis, which continues to this day. Their speculations show that competing theories of intertextuality are not confined to literature, history, or philosophy. Hence their interest in abstract painting, a kind of painting that opposed what they considered a dubious reality limited to codes and laws, images and ideas, units and structures, and words themselves.

Edgar Bayley called attention to this fact: "Because the innovative power and, therefore aesthetic value, of Figurative work was exhausted by the beginning of the century, the so-called Abstract Art or, better-named Concrete Art, has had to wage the battle for *invention*."⁹

That this phenomenon had a variety of names suggests an unusual, if not conflictive, relationship with language. Since these painters were reacting against the traditional notion that image and discourse exist in opposition, it is not surprising that they used words as one more element to be developed in their pictorial practice. Nor is it surprising that they published manifestos and incited debates; after all, their times were rife with disputes, declarations, and slogans. As Jorge Luis Borges recalled in 1938, "Twenty years ago, the air was teeming with manifestos."¹⁰ But when Borges wrote this, things had not changed much, nor would they in the near future. As Gyula Kosice recalled in his book *Arte Madí*, "Madí burst on the scene, propelled by the vital and somewhat unusual drive of its manifestos, statements, flyers, and broadsheets, all of which fought against *representation*. . . ."¹¹

The Madí artists made forays into a transgressive literature in order to embrace the whole visual and poetic spectrum by inventing "a fiction sliced through by the real. . . ."¹² However, their attempt to aestheticize lan-

guage and revise the hierarchy of polemical discourse does not indicate a literary disposition or an interest in becoming involved in the poets' small world. For their part, the poets kept a discreet distance from the artists and their activities.¹³ This is odd. The visual artists published magazines in which they expounded on their artistic theories and practices; they wrote critical reviews in the catalogues of their exhibitions; they published poems. In spite of all this, connections with literary circles were neither frequent nor satisfactory. A case in point is Edgar Bayley, who, like his brother Tomás Maldonado, proved to be a talented essayist and poet. He invented "inventionism" (making him an inventor twice over).¹⁴ His poetic credo—"no expression, no representation, no meaning"¹⁵—was embodied in verses in which *pala* (shovel, in Spanish) could be found in *una palabra* (meaning "one word"), thus approaching what Bayley termed the "body of silence."¹⁶ Bayley's aesthetic concerns were akin to those of the visual artists who were his contemporaries following World War II; his poetic corpus, in search of a different logic, aimed to liberate undisclosed meanings and to subvert semantic expectations. His work supports the assertion that the artistic movements of the twentieth century were promoted mostly by poets.

Torres-García published books, in addition to hundreds of his own lectures. In 1930, while he was living in Paris, he founded the magazine *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square), with Michel Seuphor, the avant-garde poet, artist, and critic. In 1934, he moved his publishing ventures to Montevideo. Following the European model, he used these publications to defend his paintings, expounding on the intellectual basis of his artistic work. Nevertheless, despite common publications and principles, the attempts at establishing connections between the visual arts and literature remained weak and discontinuous on both sides.

A Visual/Verbal Threshold

If we accept that discourse remains outside visual composition, the aesthetic procedure that gives birth to abstract art—if not all art—consolidates the indivisible conjunction of the verbal and the visual within the art object. The alliance between painting and poetry is not

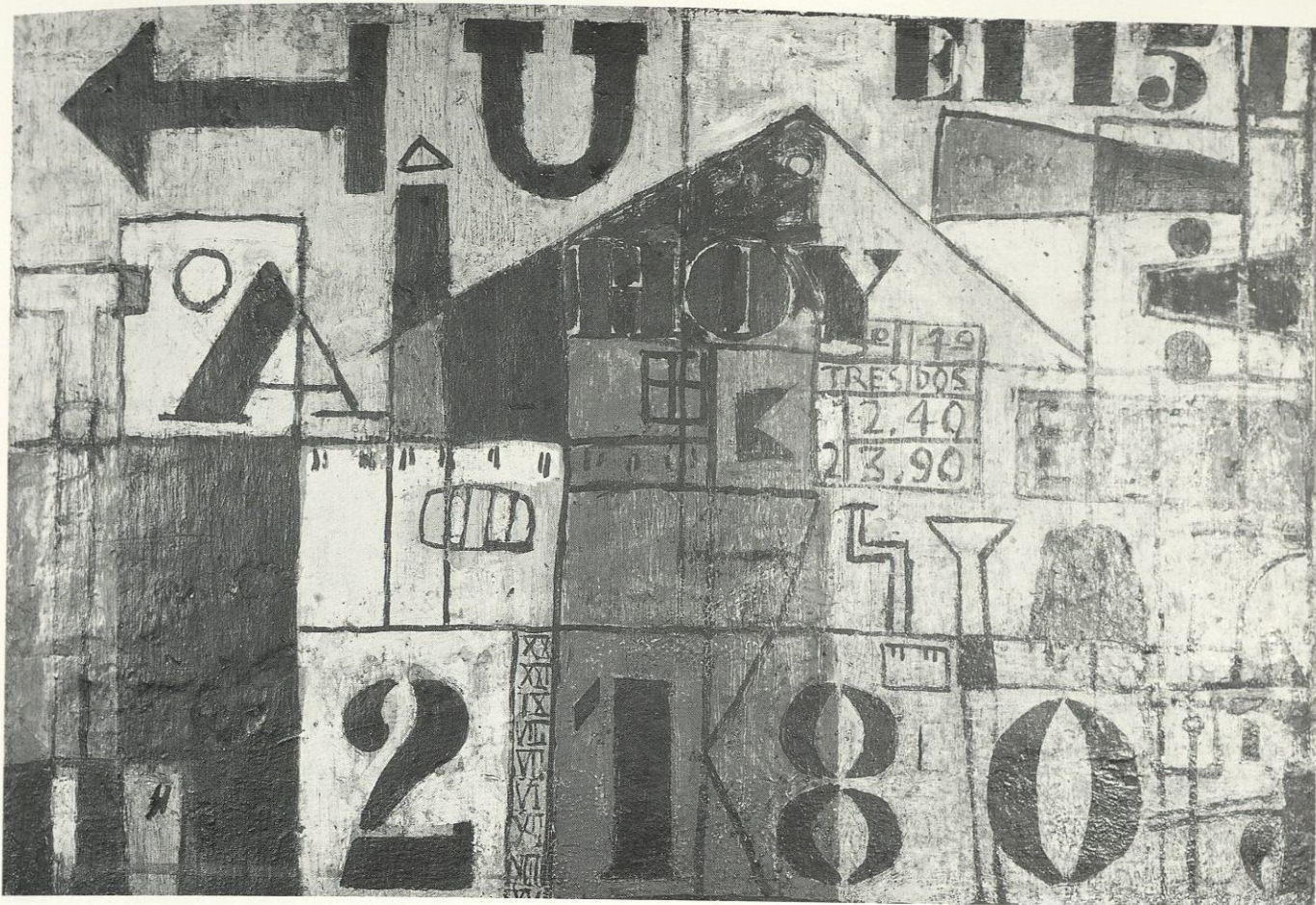


Figure 1. Gonzalo Fonseca, *Mural (Mural)*, 1945, enamel on plaster mounted on canvas, 29 1/2 x 42 5/8 inches (52.8 x 64 cm), Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Eduardo Irisarri, Montevideo

recent; it is as old as the relationship between word and image. Only recently, however, has this fusion become at once strikingly prominent (due to the media and technology) and paradoxically unnoticed, due to familiarity and abuse.

In abstract art, the presence of language is twofold: it says and it is seen. Torres-García and his disciples tended to make words visible. Gonzalo Fonseca [Figure 1], Augusto Torres, Horacio Torres, José Gurvich, Julio Alpuy, Francisco Matto, Manuel Otero, Manuel Pailós, and Héctor Ragni¹⁷ all insert, between images, verbal signs that become icons; they combine words with other icons that stem from the same visual inventory. These are traces of a verbal invention that reticulates the movement between different strokes, between two media that become assimilated in one and the same vision. Yet they do not stop speaking.

Although they may sound strident, the voices of *Poésure et Peintrie*,¹⁸ these lexical gargoyles both allow for and exhibit the intersection of *poésie* (poetry) and *peinture* (painting). They constitute a *hapax* (perhaps two), which names a cross-aesthetic inclination, an aesthetic hybrid born of a desire (akin to that of Stéphane Mallarmé) to articulate space as one articulated silence.

Torres-García configured an emblematic cartography—AMÉRICA, SUR (south), URUGUAY, MONTEVIDEO—and contrasted it with a category of universals—UNIVERSO (universe), ETERNIDAD (eternity), HOMBRE (man), ALMA (soul), RAZÓN (reason), ESTRUCTURA (structure), LEY (law), REGLA (rule)—which begin with writing (THOT, an invocation to the Egyptian god who invented writing).¹⁹ The words are closer to signal than to sign; although they signify, they also indicate. More gesture than declaration, a single, isolated word signals and

appeals to the viewer from the canvas. It forsakes context within the space of the work, which becomes a place of passage, both a limit and symbol of that limit. The precision of the inscriptions is an attempt to cross the threshold that might separate them, to soften the oppositions between *reading/seeing* and *showing/telling*; it is another means of access to the plenitude of the Whole.

The past is rich in examples of an affinity that can be traced back to the quasiproverbial variations of *ut pictura poesis*. The letters that form the sacred Hebrew verses are a paradoxically iconic solution to the prohibition against images. This calligraphic advance against mimesis, the emphatic rejection of the world of objects, might just be a kind of abstraction *avant la lettre*. As Michel Butor said, in painting, words count; for the Surrealists, titles were so important that they enlisted poets to write them, in order to endow their paintings with linguistic properties.²⁰ Gazing, for example, at the calligraphy of Paul Klee's titles does not exclude the process of reading; neither does reading cease where contemplation begins. Verbal rules make the image familiar: vision or division—in both cases, the strokes are there to see.

For an exhibition, for the contemplation and the analysis of a work, the name of the artist and some key dates are relevant, even if these were not included in the work by the artists themselves. At the same time, it is necessary to go beyond the attraction of writing when it occurs in painting, otherwise, we risk an automatic response to the work, a sort of "reader reflex" in our gaze. *Homo legens*—the man who reads—is prey to the *anxiety to understand*, and this tends to predominate over a purely visual engagement with lettering. To a different extent, with different objectives, this flight of the gaze toward writing occurs with an illustrated text, as in illuminated codices, manuscripts, and books, which attract the reader's attention as emblems. The means change: a metamorphosis of images into the letters that describe them, or of letters becoming the images referred to by the writing itself, creates a magic of images, anticipating the most recent techniques of "infography," which reveal the pleasure of doing. A handmade book by Torres-García bears the title *Ce que je sais, et ce que je fais par moi-même* (What I know, and do, by myself).²¹ In another of those craftsmanlike books (made of a rough ocher paper

anticipating the severity of today's recycled papers) he writes—or draws—at the bottom of a page, as though to split the page, the Spanish syllable HOM (from *hombre*, man) in irregular, unevenly matched, enormous capital letters. These continue on the back of the page in the form of a constructivist drawing of the final syllables: BRE-UNIVER-SO (Man Universe)²² [Figure 2].

The visible words in traditional painting, as well as the images of illustrated texts and the incorporation of written fragments—newspapers, books, music scores, advertisements, texts of different origins—created the kind of juxtaposed coherence that Cubism worked through. Other means of approximation between images and words can be found in the critical writings of a number of poets, particularly Charles Baudelaire. Literary references to paintings, exercises of *ekphrasis*—the art of seeing and describing what is seen—form a subject, which, since antiquity, has been approached like any other literary theme, even from deep within the poetic universe.

Despite the geographic limitations of the Río de la Plata area and the common literary identity of which Borges wrote,²³ it is difficult to say whether there existed a regional uniformity in the visual arts between 1933 and 1953. There was enough diversity to support Torres-García's claim that "there is no true art unless the artist liberates himself from his immediate surroundings, and enters into the universality of all things."²⁴ In his case, that determination to search for a true essence led him to an abstract art that encouraged action and expression; his quest took different directions but was animated by an unswervingly intelligent, almost theological, or evangelical, will.

The Idea in the Image: The Risks of a Universalist Adventure

The integration of names and numbers in works of art arises from a desire for universality, a wish to seek, in words and in the regularities of a transcendent geometry, a repertoire of universals, of simple icons. At once emblematic and schematic, these icons abstract an elemental uniformity from the diverse particularities of sensorial experience. In the works of Torres-García, words, rectangles, squares, circles, triangles, a small man and

LO VITAL Y LO ABS-
 TRACTO SE IDENTIFI-
 FICAN. EL DESCUBRI-
 MIENTO DE TAL
 NEXO
 ES EL CONOCIMIEN-
 TO DE LO REAL PRO-
 FUNDO: VIDA Y GEO-
 METRÍA. HOM-

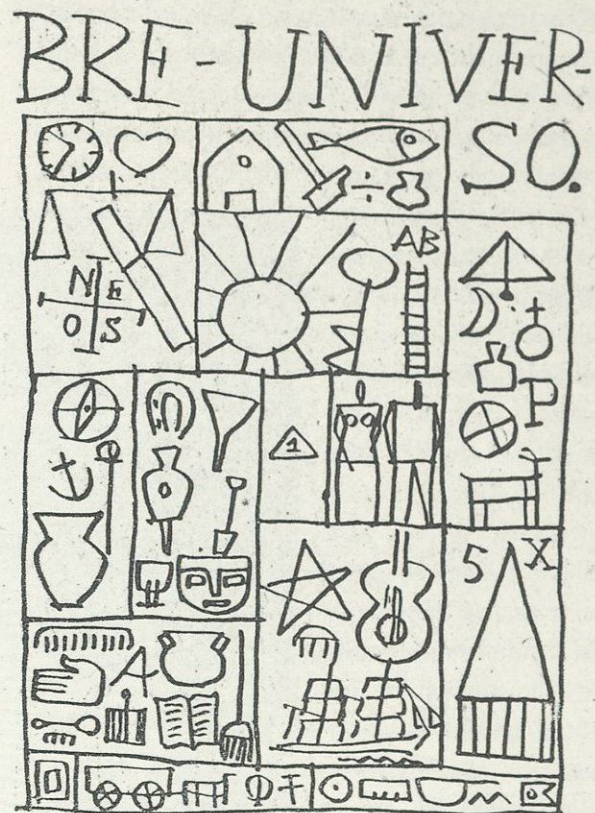


Figure 2. Two pages of *Tradicón del hombre abstracto* (Tradition of the Abstract Man) by Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo, 1938.

woman, a sun, a moon, a fish, a boat, a clock, a scale, a hammer, an anchor, an arrow appear, as if the artist were exhuming the primary symbols of a universal man, who is sketched by the painter with rough inscriptions, almost like those found in cave paintings. This juxtaposition of word and image is not intended as a form of illustration. In fact, the verbal and visual together tend not to make a comfortable whole; there is neither completion nor refutation nor confirmation. Sometimes word and image are redundant. While this use of repetition is aimed at achieving the effect of an archinscription, it carries the risk of producing not an archetype but a stereotype.

Framed within small rectangles of varying sizes, these illustrations both recall the fragmented composition of stained-glass windows and anticipate the computer icons of today, those transidiomatic, global, ubiquitous signals that direct electronic traffic through a world at once regulated and in constant flux. The painting, a board, constitutes a ludic space: images and words are repeated, as

if they were movable pieces going from one canvas (or game board) to the other. It does not seem forced to see here a preoccupation with language and figures, with their representation or "figuration," through writing. These are devices that determine the formal bases of a visual aesthetics, incorporated as part of the material substance to be elaborated by a total art, without leaving aside its verbal substance.

In his "Aforística figurativa" (Figurative Aphoristic), José Bergamín traces the development of modern abstraction. "Before, during, and after Cubism, Picasso is a pure painter: a formal inventor, an abstract constructor, a poetic architect; an absolute creator."²⁵ He begins with Wassily Kandinsky, who discovered the mystery of his own painting when he abandoned the thematic, allowing himself to see only forms and colors; moving to Klee, who affirmed that through simple forms he had reached an inaccessible inner realm; and arrives at Kazimir Malevich, who restrained his imagination to a black square, or

a white-on-white square—in other words, to a basic geometric form, to a color that is not a color, or is a mix of all colors—thus daring to take his painting to the limit, abandoning the subject to a world without object(s). In the process, painting freed itself from the accidental, searching, through Piet Mondrian's geometric abstraction, for the archetype, the permanent, the universal.

In Torres-García, and his quasireligious evangelizing, and Esteban Lisa, and his “silence of the artist,”²⁶ the procedures of abstract appropriation show, or do not show, a world removed from the accidents of space, in favor of a time that transcends the illusion of a great Beyond. Carmelo Arden Quin and Gyula Kosice, in inventing the outrageously verbal Madí art, promoted this new artistic move toward the abolition of the figure and a total repudiation of all forms of imitating reality. All of these artists—sooner or later, to a greater or lesser degree— invented ways to challenge through diversity the validity of representation. Torres-García aimed to transform the figure. Without disfiguring it, he succeeded in altering it according to the parameters of a geometry that, in its almost missionary detachment, separates the image from its situation, from its contingencies. Aiming to rescue traces of totality from memory, he scrupulously banned accidental order. As Torres-García wrote in “La liberación del artista” (The Liberation of the Artist) in 1934, “Man’s total presence must appear before us, manifesting the mysterious balance implicit in such an *idea*, but not through *description* or *representation*, but *symbolically*, as befits art. . . . It is impossible to attain universality via naturalism.”²⁷

Here, as in other cultural processes, the signs start out as icons which gradually de-imitate reality and lose the analogical charge that degraded them into superfluous visions, if not caricatures, of reality. The desire to attain a stripped-down purity, the inclination toward geometric abstraction and the need to express it concretely, has been a constant force in art from the great cultures of the most remote past to the dominant movements of the twentieth century. These artists also aspired to “humanize the geometric by geometrizing the human.” That is why they invented processes that radically rejected all allusions to sensorial reality; they deplored the simulacrum of reproduction for being counterfeit, a disruption, a disorientation of the necessary movement toward the universal. They sought to banish mimesis, which, by aspiring to duplicate what already existed, merely became redundant.

The recursiveness of the creative imagination and the attraction of cultural extremes link the first artistic representations, primordial or primitive, with those of more advanced stages. In the latter, timeworn conventional methods and formulae give way to the artists’ desire to achieve a more personal originality, which, in some cases, refers them to mythical beginnings, where they glimpse originality in the origin. Torres-García insisted, “A work of art, as I have said so many times, is determined by its foundation; and its foundation is the artist. So whatever the artist may do, whatever theory he may adopt, his work will always be in harmony with him, it will always be a living work, his own, fitting and logical, and always *original*.”²⁸

Torres-García’s “constructive universalism” was based on the coherent and substantial appreciation of the value of origins, in opposition to the numerous transgressive



Figure 3. Cover of *Removedor*, No. 19, 1947

European cultural currents: "All that is already over. We are called by the voice of America," he declared, condemning Impressionism, Cézanne, Cubism, superrealism, Neoplasticism, and photographic naturalism. The cover of his voluminous book *Universalismo Constructivo* (Constructive Universalism) was inscribed with the subtitle *Contribution to the Unification of the Art and Culture of the Americas*. Announcing the work's American essence and the urgent need to solve "the problem of the art of America,"²⁹ it promised the exploration of an art he considered to be unrecognized. He urged reflection on the following questions: "What have we done? What are we doing, where do we come from? Where are we going? Who are we? In which time do we live?"³⁰ In these questions, he makes a distinction between the nation—which attends to the affairs of the state—and the earth, which connects the cosmic with the continent's most ancient cultures.

In *La ciudad sin nombre* (City without Name), Torres-García links art and the sacred with the sun:

"And all this was the art of that small South American republic? . . . 'The existence of the art you see here, he said, is due to two entirely different factors, without which the art could not be explained. The first, a historical factor, is the cult of the sun, which has been practiced since time immemorial all over the Americas. Something of those past eras is palpable; all of us South Americans feel it, consciously or unconsciously. The sun—Inti, as it was called in prehistoric times—is the common father of the peoples of this hemisphere, the main god of our theogony. Center of our system, regulator of order, source of life, creator of beauty, it is the symbol of our existence, as it traces its apparent curve between dawn and dusk.'"³¹

Torres-García's pre-Columbian vision was as remote and exotic in the Río de la Plata as his earlier European avant-gardism had been. INTI, INDOAMÉRICA, PACHA MAMA are words or talismans he inscribed in his paintings, foundational passwords relating to a timeless past [Figure 3]. Torres-García consecrated his lay devotion to this past, an integral part of his quest for a harmony beyond the time and space of the present. Its nomenclature presented a new option. Renouncing his earlier convictions, he now exhibited these archaic rites and rhythms as a brand-new coat of arms. Once he had

adopted these new-old emblems, this reverence for a different archaeology, Europe seemed, more than left behind, subsumed. The syncretic tendency in Torres-García's oeuvre integrates numerous and varied elements in its conception. It responds less to a desire to recover the past than to a need to invent one: being Indo-American it feels alien to, and distant from, the Río de la Plata. This sort of invention can be seen as one of the outstanding characteristics of the Latin American mind, which sporadically suffers the malaise arising from scattered genealogies. It can also be seen as a ritual, being imposed, cannot always be shared.

Invention

Some of Torres-García's contemporaries took a very different path. While they had similar goals for their continent, they were tempted into extravagant posturing and eccentric provocations, particularly evident in the unexpected insolence of their invented words. First came *Arte Concreto-Invención* (Concrete Art-Invention); then, almost simultaneously, *Invencionismo* (Inventionism); finally, and more widespread, *Madí*.³² This last term, disconcerting from the very beginning, always referred to a typically *Ríoplatense* artistic movement; it is still the object of an array of semantic speculations with rather unstable foundations. It has been argued, unconvincingly, that *Madí* was a contraction of Madrid, or perhaps an anagram of Carmelo Arden Quin's name—M from his first name, A and D from his middle name, and I from his last. According to other hypotheses, it is a neologism derived from the English word mad, the unexpected acronym of *materialismo dialéctico* (dialectical materialism),³³ or perhaps just a nonsense word. In any case, for Nelson Di Maggio, *Madí* was the "detonator of Uruguayan modernity which, until then, had been diffuse and erratic."³⁴

"Each page of *Madinemisor* is a surprise and a joy," wrote an anonymous reviewer³⁵ about the magazine *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 0, in which *Madí* art, or "Nemisorism," is defined as "the organization of the distinct elements of each art form in a universal continuum." In its attempt to be universal, *Madí* leaped over the limits of

Spanish, its own language, by resorting to nonsense words, gratuitous eccentricity, and homophones from other languages, as well as precarious new nomenclatures, obscure lexicons, unpronounceable combinations, and transposed phonological and semiological arrangements that produced a delirious semantic: "Madism considers invention an internal 'method,' and creation an immutable whole. Therefore, Madí invents and creates," noted Kosice, who, in his "Diccionario portátil Madí" (Portable Madí Dictionary), offered an alphabetical list of outlandish words that defy logic, including *Eche-Echel*, *Harpir*, *Lliht*, *Llojeño*, *Nacichud*, *Rodyi*, *Sadña*, *Wior-Eil*, *Yerbrell*, *Zasz*. Occasionally a known name appears ("Kosice: Read A B C D, what?")³⁶ or, with unexpected coherence, the name of another Madí artist: "*Rothfuss*: Why are flags rectangular?" In this movement, sensuality is not possible in images, nor intelligibility in implausible words: these are authors who invent terms, definitions, hybrid pseudonyms, even their own proper names.³⁷

Part image, part idea, forms become symbols of the adventure of movement, of displacement; this very transference becomes its own literal *metaphor*. However, in the 1940s, in the decade that split the century, Madí artists assumed both the heroic postures of the (inherently ephemeral) avant-garde and the mission of a crusade against aberrant nationalisms. Madí declarations and works showed a poetic logic that eschewed all doctrinaire biases as arising from the restrictive argumentations of rational discourse. Unobstructed, painting flows within words, and words within painting. Hence years later, referring to the conceptual work and research of Joseph Kosuth, which explored issues taken up by semiology and linguistics, Roland Barthes—who himself delighted in creating montages of texts and images—would say that art had become a "chatterbox" (*bavard*), the excesses of its loquaciousness meant to counteract the lack of eroticism it protested.³⁸

The Madí artists were animated by an overwhelming energy: "Take down all paintings,"³⁹ they cried. They sought to go beyond the limits of the work by abolishing regular edges, altering forms, breaking and refashioning the frame, transgressing the space reserved for painting in order to inaugurate or invade the surrounding exterior space. There is no separation of the work from its own

excess: "Madí," they declared in a 1946 broadsheet, "has invented the cut-out, irregular frame, breaking forever with the taboo of the painting."

Although only one issue was published (with a cover designed by Tomás Maldonado), *Arturo* is considered the "cornerstone of the modernist ideology of the Argentine avant-gardes."⁴⁰ It provided the cultural setting for the foundation of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción (Concrete Art-Invention Association)⁴¹ and of Madí itself. Like the metaphysicians of Tlön, who, according to Jorge Luis Borges, invented an imaginary region, these artists searched not for truth, nor even verisimilitude, but "to astonish." Their most common techniques—explosions of indecipherable neologisms, extravagant vocabulary, and difficult teratology—were suitable to an unintelligible preaching, to mysteries ciphered in a cryptic clause: "Who invented Tlön?" The enigma facing the narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is, at the very least, twofold: "The Moon rose above the river" has become "Hlör U Fang Axaxaxas Mlō," or "Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned."⁴²

When mechanical precision takes charge of reality and replicates it, when reality, subsumed by these meticulous replicas, denies itself, there is a predictable aesthetic flight toward forms that cannot be exposed by or subjected to the comparative questioning inherent in analogy. The disappearance of limits implies the disappearance of representation, a revolt stronger than the constant quarrel about images, a dispute that cannot be resolved by the ever more perfect technologies that rival, and displace, reality. "The 'framed painting' should no longer exist," the movement declared in a text called "Pro Madí". Why should there be a frame, or a framed painting? The frame underscores a boundary, opposes reality to fiction, and marks a difference that these artists refute. For the members of Madí, framed paintings were "at best, a backward carpentry industry," set as much on joining areas as on dividing them; this made them a favorite target of invective and insult.

These contentions, announced in works by artists who struggled against the stereotypes that both shape and question reality, gave rise to new conventions that laid waste the prevailing ones and were, in turn, themselves destroyed. Hence the need to elevate the work above the

secular and temporal expedients of history, using intuition to draw closer to the Whole, to a Totality beyond the intelligible and the material. It was an effort to catch a glimpse of the Eternal and Universal—the constant that, ultimately, is the reality of things, or of their ghosts.

An Urban Painting

Due to shared circumstances—the Río de la Plata, the capital cities on both banks, the common chronology of the decades that articulated the mid-twentieth century—the perspectives adopted by these artists confined thought within a limited time and space. Uruguay has been described as “a country of proximities.”⁴³ Montevideo’s geographic nearness to Buenos Aires has compensated for its smaller size, giving it access to, and a vantage on, the greater cosmopolitan energy of the Argentine capital.

Both cities, and there are other, less visible ones,⁴⁴ constitute the topos for creation, as manifested in painting, sculpture, reliefs, and architecture. According to Torres-García, architecture kept the visual arts unified through a process of urban development that defined “urbanity” as deriving from an ethic of restraint, pure lines, and contained rapture. The name does not matter: the city itself is the site of the artwork, its recurrent theme, its point of departure, point of return. One speaks of the civic landscape as one would speak of the citizens of a country, and although the city does not monopolize the civic condition, civic identity is inextricably bound up with the city.

This relic of the *polis* excludes a large portion of the country—namely, the nonurban citizens. In *La ciudad sin nombre*, Torres-García gives form to his philosophical concerns in a kind of narration alternating with illustrations [Figure 4]. He summarizes his points in a brief foreword, at the end of which he declares, “I have tried here to depict nothing but the endless struggle between Man and the Individual, which lies at the very essence of the Cosmos.”⁴⁵ The grandiloquent, doctrinaire tone—found in many of his texts and speeches—contrasts with the handmade quality of the book. A curiously crafted volume, *La ciudad sin nombre* is composed of irregular, handwritten characters, disparate writings riddled with spelling errors, unnumbered pages with more drawings

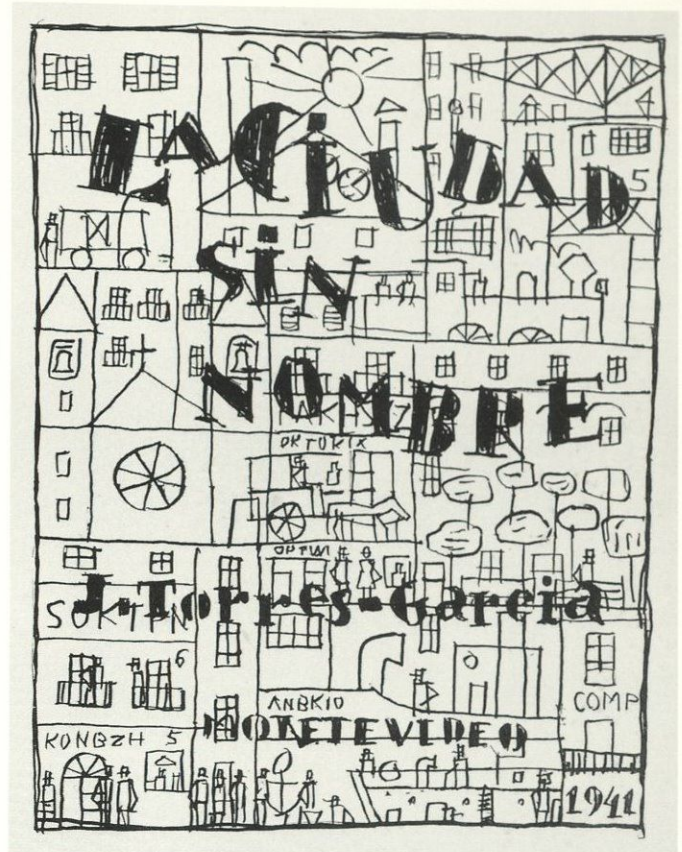


Figure 4. Cover of *La ciudad sin nombre* (*The City Without Name*), Montevideo, 1941

than writing, fragments of renderings, incomplete figures, small icons, sketches of monuments, undifferentiated individuals, facades, symbolic keys, slices of harbor views, letters taken from advertisements, and street signs. As the artist himself declared in this volume, he was attracted to “industrial products by the thousands, in boxes, cans, and packages; and letters, more letters, and numbers. Organization, Machine-ism. Telegraph, Telephone, abbreviation, clock, electric button, signs, numbers, and letters.” In these objects, Torres-García located the heraldry of the modern city, elements that neither distinguish one capital from all the others nor blend it together with all the rest. The emblematic Palacio Salvo (Salvo Palace) may thus be seen as a symbol for the pretensions of any city, and not merely as the center of Montevideo [Figure 5].

For Torres-García, “What each artist has to give us is, precisely, his own *newness*, his own *originality*; that which he himself does not know; that which emerges from

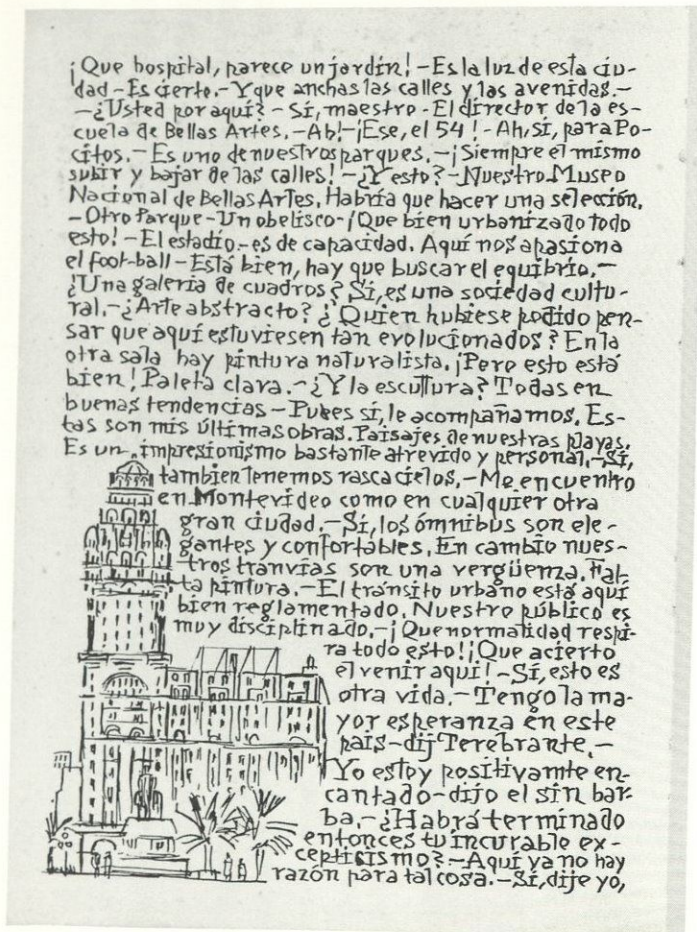


Figure 5. Joaquín Torres-García, *Palacio Salvo*, reproduced in *La ciudad sin nombre* (*The City Without Name*), Montevideo, 1941

the depths of his being (as I have said many times before); the unnamable, *which is all spirit*. It goes back to what I have said earlier: *a way of painting without name*.⁴⁶ The city is present in the thinking of these artists, and their way of seeing, their invention, is almost paradoxically present in the city itself, and in its citizens. Those who sought to avoid all imitation of their surroundings are now commonly imitated. Today, these artists' materials, colors, subjects, and symbols belong to a national vision. They have become part of an urban landscape, influencing clothing, decorative objects, facades, billboards. Their creations have been coined and have literally gained currency among Uruguayans: a five-peso bill has just been issued with a portrait of Torres-García on one side and a somewhat coarse reproduction of one of his constructions on the other. Censured yet inevitable, imitation always happens after the fact, a representation against the grain.

In spite of all the allegations and insults levied against it, such representation is part of the consecration of the work, after it is revealed to and embraced by collective preferences or taste.

The rectangular lines in the work of these artists, which schematically represent the highest buildings and houses, the edges of structures, or the reflection of their distorted outlines on glass, show the illusion of a city—a trompe l'oeil, as it were. The geometric urban reality lays out a constructive aesthetic, justifying the impression that the regularity of the streets of New York City and the interminable grids of windows were inspirations for Mondrian. The preference for a basic color scheme, for a visible tectonic reference, returns the primary geology to the *image* of the city without attenuating that urban thrust.

“What an extraordinary vision, this colossal harbor! It is a Cubist-Futurist reality: geometry, red, black, air, smoke, cables, letters, chimneys, sirens, flags, signals and the gigantic static transatlantic ship, solid as an island. A thousand different languages, expressed in letters; tar, coal tar, a thousand smoking chimneys.”⁴⁷

These are artists who, like Esteban Lisa in his *Paisaje urbano* (*Urban Landscape*) [Figure 6], were concerned with the lines of a world fragmented by its own dynamics, blurred by its own intersecting planes and by the dislocation of juxtaposed urban elements. The resulting abstraction is a kaleidoscopic vision in which time moves in numerous directions, simultaneously.⁴⁸

Constructivism appears as a kind of urban cause—albeit one that does not bow to technology or to mechanical progress—or as another Humanism. In a word, Constructivism is humanistic. Closer to craft than to mechanics, more aligned with the manual arts than with High Art, man uses his skill to make objects, which he introduces into reality, stratifying the world, extending it toward new dimensions. The earth, its colors, the lines of the horizon are all present in his measurements and proportions. They are filtered by an elucidation that will necessarily segment the inapprehensible variations of a continuum that escapes systematization; they are filtered through variable models, relatively flexible patterns, and more or less irregular grids.

An Ordered Freedom

“There is no art without freedom. In other words, unless the artist liberates himself from his immediate surroundings in order to enter the realm of universality, there can be no true art”. (Joaquín Torres-García, “Del desconcierto actual del arte,” 1946).⁴⁹

On the one hand, the strict application of rules; on the other, the exaltation of freedom. Torres-García was not indifferent to the reactions that his eloquence and teachings produced in an environment dominated by the remains of a culture given to naturalism, and to a “disorder that Romanticism transformed into the mad signature of its aesthetic.”⁵⁰ Yet the devotion of the faithful, the

ambiguities and contradictions of his verbal discourse, and the picturesque quality of the icons he employed undermined Torres-García’s arguments.

There is no point in resolving the debates triggered in their time by the exhibitions of abstract art, nor in reversing the adverse public reaction that caused Juan Del Prete to abandon his convictions and return to a naturalism in which he can hardly have believed. Similar causes produced a different kind of denial in Esteban Lisa, “a marginal and secret creator”⁵¹ who opted to take refuge in discretion and withdrawal. Although Lisa’s self-imposed isolation has been attributed to “the cannibalism of Argentine culture” and to the mystical expectation of a revelation,⁵² it was also an act of severe self-criticism. At the same time it was the willful expression of privileging



Figure 6. Esteban Lisa, *Paisaje Urbano* (Urban Landscape), c.1938, oil on board, 9 1/8 x 12 1/2 inches (23 x 31 cm), Private Collection, Buenos Aires

the act of creation over and above its consequences, and of his desire to adhere to the philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic principles found in his assiduous philosophical and aesthetic readings, which ranged from Plato to Werner Heisenberg.⁵³ His brief book, *Kant, Einstein y Picasso: La filosofía y las "cuatro dimensiones" en la estética moderna* (Kant, Einstein, and Picasso: Philosophy and the "Four Dimensions" in Modern Aesthetic Science),⁵⁴ summarizes the philosophical relations that formed the structure of his aesthetic and artistic practice.

By 1945, Montevideo had a fabled circle of young thinkers, politicians, and art and literary critics, all brought together by the weekly magazine *Marcha*. Founded in 1939 by Carlos Quijano, *Marcha* and its concentration of distinguished, powerful, and influential intellectuals spawned editorial, literary, and cultural projects that would define the country's intellectual course and creative horizons over the next three decades. As the eminent critic, and *Marcha* contributor, Emir Rodríguez Monegal recalled:

"A sense of intellectual community was one of the defining characteristics of the team that took over *Marcha* toward 1945. Although there was great diversity of interests and even specializations . . . there was a sense of community in the journalistic work of this first group of the Generation of 1945, a respect for the objective critical work, a mistrust of the emotional premises of artistic creation, a scrupulous use of language, avoidance of sentimentality, and a reluctance to see themselves as writers. The word *cronista*⁵⁵ was much used to define the limits, and utter lack of pretension, of journalism and its willing practitioners."⁵⁶

Although solid links between Uruguayan art and literary circles might be presumed, this was not, in fact, the case. The existing written and oral testimonies point to a continued separation between the two groups.

On the other side of the Río de la Plata, similar events surrounded the "generation of 1945." Again we turn to Rodríguez Monegal:

"In Argentina, a new literary generation emerged around 1945. Unlike its Uruguayan counterpart, this Argentine generation did not immediately achieve a high profile, nor did it have its own editorial identity.

The Argentine literary mainstream was still controlled by the Generation of 1925, the so-called *Martinfierristas*, who—aside from some vaguely registered, condescending sympathy, or a certain well-bred annoyance—hardly noticed the new arrivals."⁵⁷

Several art and literary magazines, bearing some resemblances, were published in Argentina in those years. Publications like *Ver y Estimar*, *Contemporánea*, *Ciclo*, *Boletín 2*, and *Nueva Visión* often shared the same writers and covered similar subjects. In the main, however, contemporary writers and artists remained apart, on parallel tracks. There were a few rhapsodic encounters,⁵⁸ but little else that left a trace. That the magazine *Entregas de la licorne* featured an article about the Taller Torres-García in the first issue of its second period might have been interpreted as an auspicious sign. However, the article was surprisingly brief and superficial, despite having been written by the editor of *Removedor*—the magazine of the Taller Torres-García—who could have done a more in-depth analysis given the space, and despite the importance that Susana Soca, the editor of *Entregas*, gave to contemporary international art.⁵⁹ Conversely, a posthumous appreciation of Torres-García by the Uruguayan author Francisco Espínola was the only substantial literary text ever to appear in *Removedor*,⁶⁰ which published twenty-eight issues between 1945 and 1950.

On the other hand, the novelist Juan Carlos Onetti (under a pseudonym) wrote a piece in 1941 for *Marcha* about the Asociación de Arte Constructivo, focusing on the five-hundredth lecture that Torres-García gave in Montevideo. Considering the intermittent attention that the literary world paid to artists, and that the novelist was acting here as a journalist, it is worth excerpting from Onetti's piece. The passage is especially notable for its description of the resistance artists faced at the time:

"This lecture, as educational as are all of Torres-García's talks over the last six years, is of particular interest. It is the history of an experiment and, naturally, of a disillusionment. The text booklet, barely forty pages long, deserves to be carefully preserved. In time, it will be a definitive document on the terrible sobriety of our national culture in these years. Unfortunately, by then, we will have left life on earth. Still, we nurse the hope

that in the future there will be many who will enjoy knowing about the adventures of Torres-García with the *crème de la crème* of the Uruguayan arts and intellectual establishments between 1936 and 1940. By then, there will be no reason for indignation, and the sadness that might contaminate the honorable failure of our compatriot painter will have been much attenuated. After all, come what may, Torres-García has a destiny to fulfill; and the foolishness of our times is, if we pause to consider, just one more element helping him to realize that destiny.”⁶¹

At the end of the twentieth century, no one would dream of interpreting the excessive freedom artists claim as a consequence of a decadence that predicted the destruction, even the disappearance, of art. The manifestations of this art movement in the Río de la Plata are not without contradictions: there is an adherence to rules and to an established order, as well as an equivocal attitude that, at first sight, appears both to consecrate freedom and to constrain it within normative regulations. Hence, abstraction came to be identified with a search for archetypes that legitimized, as *classical*, the exaggerations of the avant-garde. If “Cosmos is Beauty,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed,⁶² this beauty is more than tautological, because *kosmos* refers to the good order that rules the universe. Those are the rules that the artist must discover, or invent, in order to distance his work from apparent reality and from those imitations separated, by more than a few degrees, from truth. This is a Platonic aspiration that neither Torres-García nor Esteban Lisa would have rejected.

In the words of Torres-García:

“Naturalism abhors order. It wants only to take into account the *representation* of things as similes, or reflections, of reality, and after that—in a setting that simulates reality as closely as possible—the sentimental, poetic, or dramatic expression of any landscape or event. It would seem that by wanting to remain within the *natural order*, [naturalism] repudiates *aesthetic order*. [Naturalistic] works, therefore, lack ordering at the level where it is needed.”⁶³

Order, rules, measurements, moderation, expression, all these are contained by self-sustaining laws. Through norms, the artist tries to establish a Universal Rule of Art

that will enable him to escape the contingencies and which would circumstantially alter his quest for an absolute. The ruler, then, is consecrated as the best instrument for achieving authenticity. Torres-García resorts to rules in order to create his works; the “metaregular” dimension is recurrent in his writings and drawings. We see the flat sobriety of the rule, the Cabalistic abbreviation of the capital R, redundant over the rectangle or next to the motif that, in a fleeting contradiction, represents it: The R of “rectangle” calls up the R of “RAZÓN” (reason), and so takes on an emblematic quality that both confirms and disarms it. The grids that characterize his paintings, drawings, and constructions in different materials find shelter in these rules. Rules that remain blank, that delimit the space and define the slots, are the consequence of a lapidary imagination imposing its own order on a world that does not hide its propensity toward diversion and confusion.

These concepts are crystallized in an essay by Carlos Real de Azúa:

“Torres-García’s almost Comtean aspiration was to embrace man, his work, and the entire world within the fabric of an intellectual formulation. His universe was organic, intelligible, ordered by the *rule*, measured by the *number*, arranged according to *proportion* and *structure*, regulated by *norm*, moved by *rhythm*. These notions are for him more than ideal patterns, working hypotheses, or instrumental ideas: they respond to the very nature of the cosmos and allow everyone and everything to be identified with the essentials that, for Torres-García, are *Universe*, *Rule*, *Number*, and *Structure*.”⁶⁴

“The rule must be followed,” insisted Torres-García.⁶⁵ Even the most enlightened of his contemporaries failed to grasp the affinity between profundity, substance, essence, and simplification, as they also failed to see that naming runs contrary to universality, that a concession to particularity flattens and reduces what cannot be said and should therefore remain unspoken. This necessary silence, when invoked, becomes more seal than secrecy (although originally these were congruent). By condescending to the “representation” of archetypes, even a stripped-down discourse admits a rhetoric that, for all its austerity, is still

rhetorical. The project was to elude the irrelevance of the transitory, to block out the noise of time that is history. But these stated goals in turn gave rise to professions of an ordered faith, of beliefs and doctrines, slogans and schisms; all of this had a cultist ceremonial quality that came dangerously close to ritualization, to the choral echoes of adepts who had finally achieved their long-sought effacement. In one of the drawings in *Universalismo constructivo*, where he once more opposed “HOMBRE UNIVERSAL” (universal man) to “HOMBRE INDIVIDUAL” (individual man), Torres-García inscribed, under a box labeled “CONSTRUCCIÓN” (construction), “ARTE ES SABER CONSTRUIR CON REGLAS” (art is knowing how to build with rules). There is a rendering of the letter S, an unfinished stroke, an incomplete *order* intended to stand for the *whole* that he seeks to embrace from within the mystical space of a universal, transcendent geometry, removed from binary polarizations and from the positivist oppositions of a doctrine with only a superficial understanding of the notion of structure.

“There has been so much talk of structure,” wrote Torres-García, “but the concept was so vague!”⁶⁶ He did not fail to acknowledge that structure was the fundamental idea. Although in some works, the inscription of the rule is not visible as a word, letter, or emblem, its symbolic properties are far from absent. Like the implicit nature of the code, the better rooted, the less noticed. Here we turn to the poet Esther de Cáceres, a kindred spirit for whom Torres-García designed the cover of *Cruz y éxtasis de la Pasión* (Cross and Ecstasy of the Passion), a collection of poems.⁶⁷ We can see in his design their common aspiration to asceticism, to a mystically experienced communion, to a “religious, that is to say, universal, spirit.”⁶⁸ As de Cáceres reflected:

“Perhaps we have at times locked ourselves too much within the boundaries of total abstraction: in other words, rejected all relation with the formal world, or, to be more precise, stopped paying attention to the forms of the real, physical world. There has been a tendency at times to exclude the images of things, and groups of things, from our works. As discipline, I think this has been beneficial; and I further think that to continue on this path would not be detrimental to our art. But we do not all have the same temperament, and there may

be some among us who feel a need to introduce into their work elements taken from reality. My feeling is: All the better. Because this can never *signify the abandonment of the rule*. What makes a visual form is not its relationship to a real or imagined form, but the fact that it exists within a geometric plan, *and that, consequently, it can interact with other forms within that same plane*, such that it cannot be an imitative form.”⁶⁹

On the other hand, with the visual form freed from the binds that iconically determine representation as such, adherence to *the rule* can take various forms, can be expressed in a host of voices. This expansion favors multiplicity, permitting unlimited versions of a vision divided by the particularity of events. However, it does not validate works that are but epigones of those of their predecessors. Torres-García warned that “the artist must safeguard himself as much as possible, in order to escape the suggestions and contamination of other artists.”⁷⁰ If this is so, why is it less naturalistic to represent a word that is itself a “figure,” or representation? For Torres-García, words like SOL (sun), TIERRA (earth), HOMBRE (man), MUJER (woman), UNIVERSO (universe), REGLA (rule), RAZÓN (reason), ALMA (soul), ESTRUCTURA (structure), are the elements of his periodic table, the dynamic building blocks of his imagination. Written in capitals across his canvas, the unmistakable, intelligible word hardly blasphemes mimesis. The arbitrariness of the sign (the particular word) would invalidate an analogy not supported by the sounds or letters of which it is composed.

From her literary vantage point, de Cáceres observes that the virtues of geometrization are to be found in its effort to extract the essential articulations of contingency without resorting to a cubism that, even though it relied on geometry, de-composed the complexity of objects, reducing them to an odd repertoire of elements with no intrinsic unity, stripping them of what Torres-García called “their profound, substantial truth.”⁷¹ The artist further elaborated, “In a Cubist composition, the object disappears. Mutilated, it loses its unity, its essence; the object no longer exists. . . because the Cubist painter looks only at the subjective. He does not perceive the world objectively. He may achieve an aesthetic value, but he has broken absolutely with the world.”⁷²

We return to Juan Carlos Onetti, who sides with

painters who avoid telluric figuration, received subject matter, and the transactions of a wornout literature he himself found deplorable. (Earlier in his essay, he excoriates the intransigence of the public, whose incomprehension, he argues, allowed it to assimilate Adolf Hitler.) On the subject of Torres-García, Onetti wrote, “[His] work and his personality are already acting invisibly on us. And sooner or later, this will be the point of departure for painting without sentimentality, without literature, without the peasants’ little straw huts, without the blond cherubs, without the loving, big-bosomed mothers. [It will be the point of departure] for *painting*, period.”⁷³

When the End Draws Near

The abstract artists of the Río de la Plata set themselves against both Cubism and the various schools of realism. Cubism faced the eye with the broken mirror of an inner world equally fractured, reflecting the figuration that the turning of the century had torn to shreds. Realism, on the other hand, was fraught with inconsistencies, as changeable and uncontrollable as the spontaneity of dreams. And they found less oneiric forms of realism equally sinister and repressive.

Girded by the certainty of their declarations, these abstract artists believed in the spare distillation of a reality that hides its profundity behind appearances. They believed in an increasingly elusive universal truth, which when fleetingly captured by technological exactitude loses verisimilitude. For various reasons, they doubted that history would last, and they foresaw the holes through which illusion would sink into tragedy, or the ideological folds that concealed them; they affirmed the fatal impact these fractures would have on poetry; they bruited their complaints about theory, doctrine, political regimes, and territorial and jurisdictional expansions. They glimpsed the pitfall of an Aesthetic of Extinction—precipitated, as it came to pass, by the events of the century.

Living in the southern tip of the Western Hemisphere, these artists yet were mindful of the annihilations that had devastated other latitudes. Their works tried to leap over borders, to abolish boundaries; to question words by fixing them in images; to refute definitions and

the validity of definition itself—all through sheer invention. They attempted to aestheticize a way of thinking removed from the insistent pressure of representation—indeed, defied it—in order to foster the unlimited revision of an open imagination.

Notes

- 1 Joaquín Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1947), p. 9.
- 2 Tomás Maldonado, “Actualidad y porvenir del arte concreto,” *Nueva Visión* 1 (December 1951).
- 3 Gyula Kosice [Raymundo Rasas Pét, pseud.], *Arte Madí* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983), p. 113. (The pseudonym R. Rasas Pét has been attributed to Gyula Kosice, although it has also been claimed by artists of the Madí group.)
- 4 This was the title of a 1952 Paris exhibition, which presented both figurative and abstract works.
- 5 Edgar Bayley, “La batalla por la invención,” *Invencción* 2 (1945), n.p.
- 6 Maldonado, “Actualidad y porvenir.”
- 7 Torres-García, in *Mística de la pintura*, p. 7.
- 8 Maldonado, “Actualidad y porvenir,” p. 27.
- 9 Bayley, “La batalla.”
- 10 Jorge Luis Borges, “Un caudaloso manifiesto de Breton,” *El Hogar*, December 2, 1938. Diego Rivera is mentioned in this and one other essay Borges published that year: a brief review of two books about Spanish painting, entitled “Dos libros sobre pintura española.”
- 11 Kosice, *Arte Madí*, p. 14.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 At that time in the Río de la Plata, painters either read little, or did not reflect in their work what they read. Nor did writers reflect in their literary work an interest in art, even though they must have gone to art exhibition and workshops. (Nelson Di Maggio, personal communication.)
- 14 Edgar Bayley’s *Obras*, an anthology of important poetic and critical texts, was published in 1999 (Buenos Aires: Grijalbo Mondadori). Bayley wrote for the magazines *Arturo*, *Cabalgata*, *Caballo de Fuego*, *Ciclo*, *Reunión*, *Nueva Visión*, *Cinedrama*, *Contemporánea*, and *Poesía Buenos Aires*. He was editor of *Conjugación de Buenos Aires*.
- 15 Rodolfo Alonso, foreword to Bayley, *Obras*.
- 16 Bayley, *Obras*. References are to the poems “Estado de las cosas,” “La mano tendida,” and “El horizonte,” from *En común* (1944–1949).
- 17 Nelson Di Maggio, “La visión del Taller Torres-García,” in *Unidad y pluralidad en la Escuela del Sur*, exh. cat., (Punta del Este: Exposición 11 Maestros del Taller Torres-García, summer 1999).
- 18 *Poesure et Peintrie: D’un art, l’autre* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998). This is a compilation of materials from the exhibition of the same name organized in Marseilles, February 12–May 23, 1993.

- 19 Joaquín Torres-García, *Dibujo: Tinta sobre papel* (1945), in Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Joaquín Torres-García* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985).
- 20 Michel Butor, "Les mots dans la peinture," in *Répertoire IV* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, Collection Critique, 1974).
- 21 This is the title of one of Torres-García's handmade books.
- 22 Torres-García, *La tradición del Hombre Abstracto: Doctrina constructivista*. (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1938).
- 23 Jorge Luis Borges, "Los escritores argentinos y Buenos Aires," *El Hogar*, February 12, 1937.
- 24 Joaquín Torres-García, "Del desconcierto actual del arte," in *Removedor* 2, no. 13 (June-July 1946). *Removedor* was the magazine of the Taller Torres-García.
- 25 José Bergamín, "Aforística figurativa," *Martín Fierro*, period 2, year 3, no. 36 (December 12, 1926), p. 4.
- 26 Elena Olivera, "El silencio Del Pintor," in *Esteban Lisa* (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1999).
- 27 Joaquín Torres-García, "La liberación del artista," in *Universalismo constructivo* (Buenos Aires: Poseidón, 1944), Lesson 1.
- 28 Joaquín Torres-García, "No hubo remedio..." *Removedor* 3, no. 19 (September 1947).
- 29 Torres-García, "El arte de América," in *Universalismo constructivo*, pp. 841-849.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 848.
- 31 Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Comisión de Homenajes a Torres-García, Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), n. p. This is a facsimile of the original 1941 edition commemorating the centenary of the artist's birth.
- 32 Nelson Di Maggio, "Con Arden Quin en París: El pintor uruguayo que inventó el Arte Madí," *La República*, July 22, 1992, p. 39.
- 33 "I was looking for a name like Dada. . . . It was awesome: after I made up the name, I realized that it alluded to dialectical materialism." María Ester Gilio, interview with Carmelo Arden Quin, *Brecha*, February 4, 2000.
- 34 Nelson Di Maggio, "Artistas olvidados de la vanguardia uruguaya," *La República*, January 23, 1995.
- 35 "La mar en coche," *Marcha* 10, no. 433, June 18, 1948.
- 36 Gyula Kosice, "Suplemento para el diccionario Madí," in *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 2 (October 1948), n. p.
- 37 The name Rhod is also a pseudonym; Rothfuss's given name was Carlos María.
- 38 Roland Barthes, "L'art conceptuel," in *Le texte et l'image* (Paris: Pavillon des Arts, 1986), p. 63.
- 39 Gyula Kosice, "Hacia Madí," *Arte Madí Universal*, no. 6 (October 1952).
- 40 Nelly Perazzo and Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa, 1895-1983* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Esteban Lisa, 1997), p. 61.
- 41 The first exhibition of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción took place at the Salón Peuser on Florida Street, Buenos Aires, March 18-April 3, 1946.
- 42 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Press, 1998), p. 73. In the Spanish original: "Surgió la luna sobre el río se dice Hlör U Fang Axaxaxas Mlō o sea en su orden: hacia arriba (*upward*) detrás duradero-fluir luneció. Xul Solar traduce con brevedad: upa tras perfluyue lunó. *Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned.*"
- 43 Carlos Real de Azúa, *El impulso y su freno* (Montevideo: Editorial Banda Oriental, 1964).
- 44 Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo*, p. 61.
- 45 Torres-García, forward to *La ciudad sin nombre*, n. p.
- 46 Torres-García, in *Mística de la pintura*, p. 11.
- 47 Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre*, n. p.
- 48 Perazzo and Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa*, p. 20.
- 49 Torres-García, "Del desconcierto actual del arte."
- 50 Esther de Cáceres, "Torres-García contra la vorágine materialista de la época," *El País*, October 10, 1957.
- 51 José Emilio Burucúa, "La biblioteca de Esteban Lisa: Los libros y las ideas de un pintor," in *Esteban Lisa*, p. 50.
- 52 M. H. Gradowczyk, "Esteban Lisa: El espacio simultáneo," in *Esteban Lisa*, p. 30.
- 53 Burucúa, "La biblioteca de Esteban Lisa." The author searched through and analyzed the painter's library to discover how Lisa's readings related to his artwork and to his reclusive habits. See also Perazzo and Gradowyczck, *Esteban Lisa*, pp. 46-58.
- 54 Esteban Lisa, *Kant, Einstein y Picasso* (Buenos Aires: Escuela de Arte Moderno, 1956).
- 55 Literally, chronicler, but generally applied to newspaper reporters, feature writers, or columnists.
- 56 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Literatura uruguaya del medio siglo* (Montevideo: Ediciones ALFA, 1966), p. 23. The entire introductory chapter, "Introducción: Una generación polémica," pp. 13-109, is devoted to an extraordinarily well-informed, lucid description and analysis of the period by a critic who, beyond being an exceptional witness and a "militant critic, an actor in the events hereby presented" (foreword, p. 10), was one of the main shapers of that reality.
- 57 Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio de los parricidas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Deucalión, 1956).
- 58 For example, Torres-García was part of the group of intellectuals who helped finance the publication of Felisberto Hernández's first book, *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling* (Montevideo: González Panizza Hermanos, 1942).
- 59 Guido Castillo, "El Taller Torres-García," *Entregas de la Licorne* period 2, year 1, no. 1 (1953), pp. 161-164.
- 60 Francisco Espínola, "Conferencia pronunciada en la última exposición del Maestro J. Torres-García," *Removedor* 6, no. 27 (December 1950). The article was based on a lecture given at Amigos del Arte in August 1949.
- 61 Juan Carlos Onetti [Periquito el Aguador, pseud.], "La Asociación del Arte Constructivo," *Marcha* 3, no. 81 (January 1941).
- 62 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), chap. 3, p. 14.
- 63 Torres-García, "La liberación del artista," *Universalismo constructivo*, p. 29.
- 64 Carlos Real de Azúa, "Joaquín Torres-García," in *Antología del ensayo uruguayo contemporáneo*, vol. 1 (Montevideo: Departamento de Publicaciones, Universidad de la República, 1964), p. 95.
- 65 Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo*, Lesson 53, p. 277.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

- 67 Esther de Cáceres, *Cruz y éxtasis de la Pasión: Cantata* (La Plata: Ediciones M. Fingarit, 1937).
- 68 Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura*, p. 16.
- 69 Esther de Cáceres, "Alma y creación de Joaquín Torres-García," lecture given at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Montevideo, (mimeographed, n. d.).
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- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid.
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