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*Luis Pérez-Oramas*

**Joaquín Torres-García**  
**The Arcadian Modern**

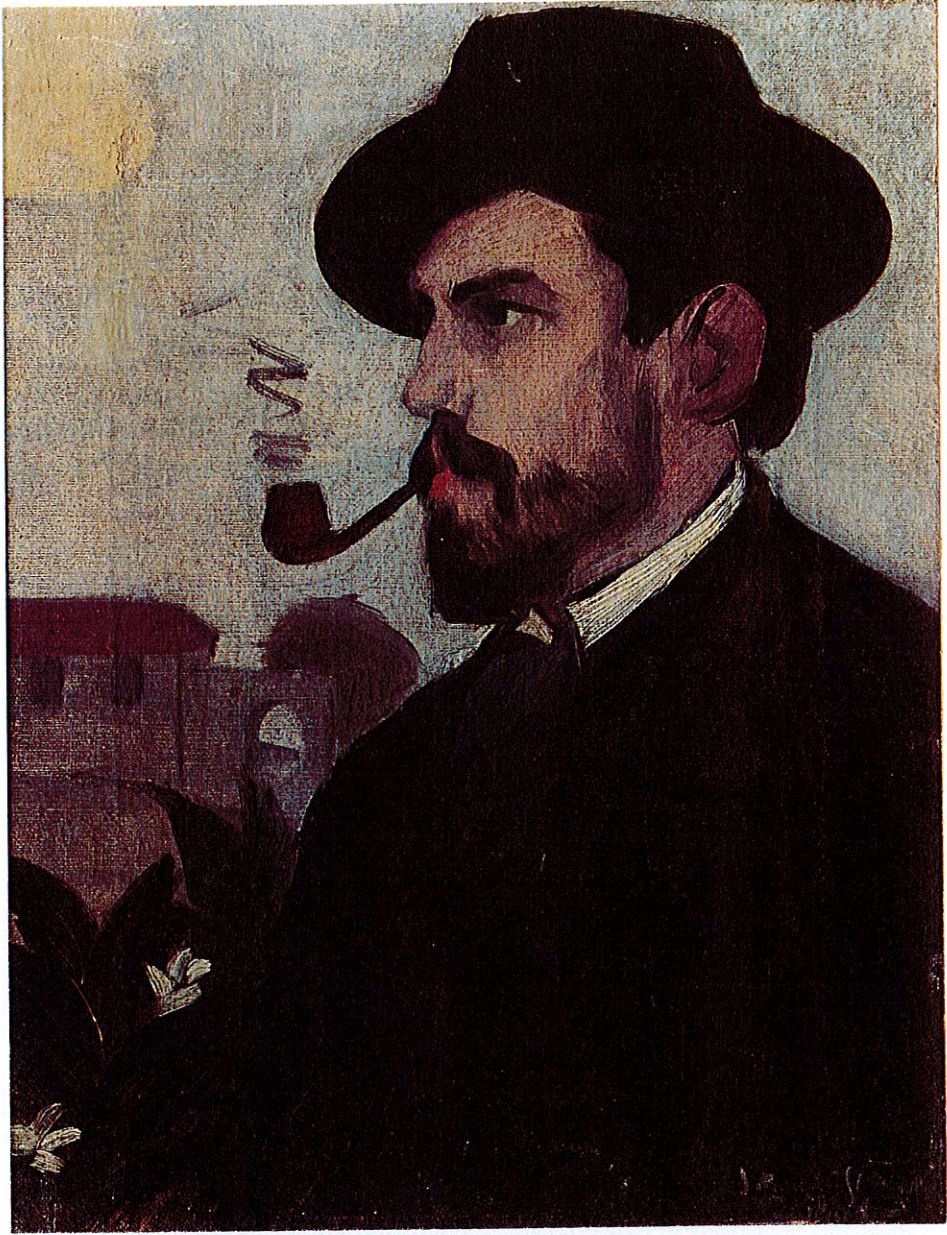
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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



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## TO FIND, TO CREATE, TO REVEAL:

Torres-García and the Models of Invention  
in Mid-1940s Río de la Plata



1. Joaquín Torres-García, "Con respecto a una Futura Creación Literaria," *Arturo: Revista de artes abstractas* (Buenos Aires) 1 (1944):n.p. The text was first published a year earlier, in *Apex* (Montevideo) 2 (February 1943):11–17.

2. It is not "the thing" that is most important, writes Torres-García, but "the structure on which [that thing] is based." "The house, the sun, the tree exist as elements before us like bricks that make up a wall. We are more interested in the wall that we have made, the overall construction, than in the individual things and events that used to concern us." *Ibid.*, n.p. Torres-García also published two very long poems in *Arturo*: "Divertimento" (Amusement) and "Divertimento II."

3. According to Torres-García, "Intuition should be the hand's guide when tracing the structure of an object." Quoted in Jorge López Anaya, *Ritos de Fin de Siglo: Arte Argentino y la vanguardia internacional* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2003), p. 83. On Torres-García's career see Cecilia Buzio de Torres and Mari Carmen Ramírez, eds., *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy*, exh. cat. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

4. As Mario H. Grawdowczyk and Nelly Perazzo explain in *Abstract Art from the Río de*

*la Plata: Buenos Aires and Montevideo, 1933–1953*, exh. cat. (New York: The Americas Society, 2001), p. 47, the generation of young artists in the early 1940s saw Torres-García "as an artist who never sold out, who stood by his principles and continued battling for them in South America."

5. See, for instance, Alejandro Crispiani, "Las raíces latinoamericanas del invencionismo," *Objetos para transformar el mundo: Trayectorias del arte concreto-inventivo, Argentina y Chile, 1940–1970* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2011), p. 43.

6. *Ibid.* Torres-García made these comments in his lecture "De la invención en la pintura," which would later be published in his book *Universalismo Constructivo* (Buenos Aires: Poseidón, 1944).

7. Torres-García wrote in an early text, "Inventar no es crear. La etimología de esta gran palabra nos dice que es encontrar. Crear ya es otra cosa. Hallazgo y creación suelen ir ligados por la obra del espíritu del verdadero artista." Torres-García, "Naturaleza y arte," 1918, in J. Schwartz, *Las vanguardias latinoamericanas. Textos programáticos y críticos* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1991), as quoted in Crispiani, *Objetos para transformar el mundo*, p. 44.

8. *Arturo*, n.p. Caps in original.

JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA WENT RIGHT TO THE POINT in his manifesto-like text "*Con respecto a una Futura Creación Literaria*": "Only that artist who has been able to find a novel, personal rhythm will be able to render accurately what he feels and perceives."<sup>1</sup> For Torres-García this "personal rhythm" was the force of invention, and it was invention that artists should pursue above all else.<sup>2</sup> With these words, published in April 1944 in *Arturo: Revista de artes abstractas* (*Arturo: Magazine of abstract art*), a new journal edited by a group of ambitious young artists and poets, Torres-García set out to encourage the cultural generation coming together in Buenos Aires and Montevideo to set their own direction. He knew that his own trajectory, especially in his earlier abstract paintings and his role in the founding of the critical journal *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and square) in Paris in 1930, had been an important impetus for these artists, and the paternal tone of his text warned them about the dangers of adhering too methodically to the influence of precursors.<sup>3</sup>

Torres-García's association with the historical avant-gardes made him an obvious artistic mentor, as did his desire to develop a Latin American art—an *Escuela del Sur* (School of the South)—with its own unifying characteristics, free of European dominance in the relatively parochial setting of the Río de la Plata (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> So his advocacy of invention resonated profoundly.<sup>5</sup> He had already pronounced in 1936 that "in painting, invention is everything."<sup>6</sup> His notion of invention was coupled with the act of discovery—"to find a novel, personal rhythm"—distinct from that of creation. To create was to come up with something entirely new out of whole cloth; to invent was closer to discovery.<sup>7</sup> For Torres-García, invention was essential to a definition of art practice different from those that defined art solely in terms of its imitative or manifest (and sensual) properties, such as those that asserted a relationship between mimeticism and expressionism—between the artwork and the artist's perception and feelings. Instead, Torres-García started from the belief that what generates aesthetic experience is a fusion of emphatic and nonsensual properties, a fusion performed in order to find essential concepts and experiences. From this belief he developed an idealist interpretation of art that included an important sensuous dimension.

Invention was certainly the rallying concept for the artists who put together the first (and only) issue of *Arturo*, which featured several dictionary definitions of the word printed in large letters inside the front cover (fig. 2). The definitions they chose were consonant with Torres-García's sense of the term: "TO INVENT: to find or discover using skill or mediation, or by mere chance, a new or previously unknown thing. To find, imagine, or create the work of a poet or an artist. INVENTION: The action or effect of inventing. The invented thing. Finding. INVENTION versus AUTOMATISM."<sup>8</sup> The last line was at once a critique of the manifest aesthetics of Surrealism, which was associated with the automatist practice of irrationally generated graphic inscription, and an avowal of an art that

9. Since the contents of *Circulo y Cuadrado* were primarily Uruguayan, the links the journal established with the historical avant-garde were more symbolic through the title than anything else.

10. Torres-García, *Manifiesto 2: Constructivo 100%* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1938), trans. in Cecilia de Torres and Ramírez, eds., *El Taller Torres-García*, p. 67.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 68. Torres-García founded the Asociación de Arte Constructivo in 1935. It operated in Montevideo until

1939, when it was converted into a study institution.

12. Torres-García, *Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1939), trans. in Cecilia de Torres and Ramírez, eds., *El Taller Torres-García*, p. 70.

13. Torres-García, *Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana*, p. 46, as quoted in Juan Fló, "Torres-García in (and from) Montevideo," in Cecilia de Torres and Ramírez, eds., *El Taller Torres-García*, p. 36.

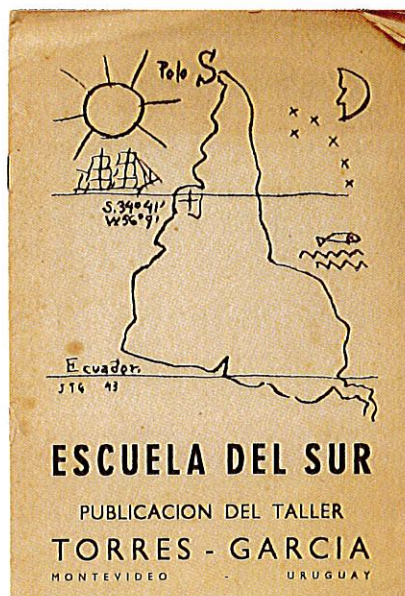
pivoted on nonmanifest properties—that is, rational and theoretical properties, or properties relating to the conceptual framework of art objects. In a dramatic reversal of the dominant aesthetic programs and philosophies of the time, the young artists following Torres-García's lead rendered matters of taste, beauty, and expression marginal to the definition of art. It was primarily the invention of forms that concerned them; it was the discovery of something new.

Ironically, *Arturo* came together immediately after Torres-García published the last issue of the review *Circulo y Cuadrado* (Circle and square), which, as his re-creation in Uruguay of *Cercle et Carré*, was one of his few remaining links with the historical avant-gardes of which he had been a part in the 1920s and early '30s.<sup>9</sup> In his publication *Manifiesto 2: Constructivo 100%* (1938), he proclaimed the end of avant-garde constructivism, calling it a "thing of the past" that had "come to an end."<sup>10</sup> The Asociación de Arte Constructivo, which he had founded after returning from Europe to Uruguay in 1934, would no longer function as "the headquarters of a movement, but rather a place for study and dissemination of the constructive idea, in any culture, but preferably the Indo-American."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, by the 1940s Torres-García had mediated his previous abstract aesthetic by refining it through the concept of indigenism, which took pre-Incan culture as a "guiding star."<sup>12</sup> The new art fused art of the past with that of the present. It mixed figuration and abstract design, as well as rational and intuitive ideas, in a manner that referred back to and drew on the art of indigenous cultures in South America. Torres-García identified the result as a new ideology, "with its myths, symbols, and legends."<sup>13</sup>

In pre-Columbian art Torres-García discovered elements and forms with extra-aesthetic meanings not bound to imitative representation. He found in this art a perfect synthesis of structure and figuration, a balance of geometrical planes, colors, and references to nature, together expressing a metaphysical wholeness with the universe. The notion of modernism that he had developed in Europe turned against itself as it tracked the extra-aesthetic aspects of indigenous traditions into the present, reconciling natural and universal symbols. The result awkwardly linked European modern-art practices, such as abstraction, to an indigenous artistic legacy, with the aim of creating a sense of timelessness and universality. It also advanced an alternative historical trajectory that

1. Cover of *Escuela del Sur*. Publicación del Taller Torres-García (Montevideo) no. 1 (October 1958). 9 5/8 x 6 1/2 in. (24.5 X 16.5 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo

2. Cover (verso) of *Arturo: Revista de artes abstractas* (Buenos Aires) no. 1 (1944). Facsimile ed. Aberdeen: Centre for the Study of the Hispanic Avant-Garde, University of Aberdeen, 1994. 10 11/16 x 7 7/8 in. (27.2 x 20 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library



**INVENTAR:** Hallar o descubrir a fuerza de ingenio o meditación, o por mero acaso, una cosa nueva o no conocida. /Hallar, imaginar, crear su obra el poeta o el artista/

**INVENCION:** Acción y efecto de inventar. /Cosa inventada. /HALLAZGO/

**INVENCION**  
contra  
**AUTOMATISMO**

14. Ramírez, "Re-positioning the South: The Legacy of El Taller Torres-García in Contemporary Latin American Art," in Cecilia de Torres and Ramírez, eds., *El Taller Torres-García*, pp. 257–58. Ramírez, one of the foremost scholars on Torres-García, has more recently observed that the artist "rarely used the Spanish equivalent of 'constructivism' (*constructivismo*); rather, he almost

always used the related term 'constructive' (*constructivo*)." See "Editor's Note," in Ramírez, ed., *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*, exh. cat. (Houston: The Menil Collection, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 13.

15. Fló, "Torres-García in (and from) Montevideo," p. 29.

posited the art of Latin America as a precedent to the constructive abstraction of modernism. The implication was that the modern Latin American artist, practicing a form of what the curator Mari Carmen Ramírez has called "indigenous constructivism," "was not copying foreign models but continuing the long tradition of pre-Hispanic art, based on the rational principles of geometry, that had been obscured by centuries of colonial domination and the imposition of foreign styles."<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, the mimetic and representational techniques that had come to predominate in Latin American sculpture and painting were symptoms of European subordination.

A synthesis of different cultures across history was not itself new to Torres-García. For him, all truly innovative art was constructive at its core, bringing together a number of different elements, and he carefully researched the underpinnings of various forms of geometric art of the past. His efforts to recast the classical into the modern in the early moment of the Cercle et Carré group, which he had cofounded in Paris with the Belgian writer Michel Seuphor, had resulted in theoretical disagreements and controversial debates with his collaborators. But in the late 1930s and '40s, his classicism took the form of pictographs, drawn from various international traditions, that tempered the strict geometry of his geometric grid constructions based on the golden section. For Torres-García, pictographs fused concepts and forms in a purely iconic way, devoid of anecdote and with minimal description or representation. Many of the archaic symbols he drew on originated from Andean artifacts whose origins he traced back to an ancient past. As he incorporated what he considered to be the essential plastic values and elements of indigenous pre-Columbian art into the basic principles of constructivism and geometric abstraction, he at once reclaimed that history and emphasized that the geometrical abstraction of the modernist avant-gardes had a precedent in the patterns found on ancient textiles and pottery in the Americas. Thus, for Torres-García, the non-objective geometric art that he made could inhabit two different spaces of meaning: it was a symbol of both modernity and Latin American tradition.

Torres-García's invocation of regionalism, his foundationalist concept of identity, and especially his desire to give his objects a metaphysical harmony with the universe, to imbue them with the magical power attributed to the pre-Inca objects they drew on, inevitably raise questions about the relationship between art and ritual. Writing on the theoretical underpinnings of Torres-García's aesthetic, the philosopher Juan Fló observes that for this artist "the sense of order and unity of the cosmos should be celebrated as a social collective expression by means of an art that has returned to its ritual origins."<sup>15</sup> At stake in Torres-García's indigenous constructivism was an attempt to invest modernist art with ritualistic experience and power—and this in a contemporary context in which, for many, ritualistic, transcendental, religious, and magical dimensions of aesthetic experience were no longer achievable. This return to ritual, coupled with a return to pre-Columbian

16. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

17. Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (Autumn 1985):45–70.

18. The curator and art historian Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro observes that "the influence of Huidobro's poetic style can be seen in all the poems in *Arturo*." Pérez-Barreiro, "The Argentine Avant-Garde, 1944–1950," PhD diss., University of Essex, 1996, p. 67. Also see Vicente Huidobro, "El creacionismo," in Oscar Collazos, *Los Vanguardismos en la América Latina* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1977), pp. 125–32, and Crispiani, "Frutos de la invención," in Gadowczyk, ed., *Tomás*

*Maldonado: Un moderno en acción* (Buenos Aires: Edutref, 2008), pp. 49–55.

19. See Agnès de Maistre, *Carmelo Arden Quin* (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 1996), p. 12. This claim is repeated in Shelley Goodman, *Carmelo Arden Quin: When Art Jumped Out of Its Cage* (Dallas: Madi, 2004), pp. 45–47. Note that to date the literature on Carmelo Arden Quin is exceedingly dependent on the artist's own recollection of past events. As such, the exact dates of some meetings and artworks remain in question. I owe this insight and many others in this essay to conversations with Pérez-Barreiro.

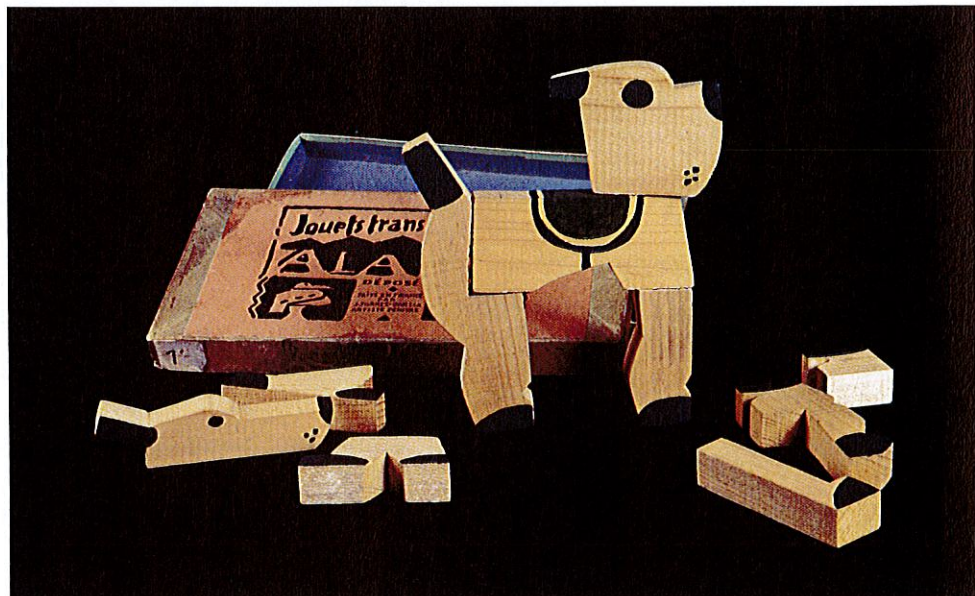
culture, was in Fló's view a typical primitivist turn, occurring precisely "at a moment in which [Torres-García] felt that his project was not going to succeed, so that he appealed to indigenous tradition as a collaborative instrument of persuasion."<sup>16</sup> In a good deal of modern art, primitivism has functioned as a counterpoint to modernity and an integral element of modern culture. The art historian Hal Foster has argued that it operated as a model of rounding identity, or of laying new foundations for an identity whose existence has come under growing pressure.<sup>17</sup> The primary motivation of the primitivist turn is to rally back to forms of experience capable of reconstituting a centered identity. Torres-García's primitivism adds a crucial dimension to Foster's account, betraying the fact that what is also feared to be threatened is the traditional function of artistic representation to partake in ritualistic experience.

At least at first, though, the artists who put together *Arturo* seem to have ignored the archaic and metaphysical aspects of the Uruguayan master's recent trajectory, and his growing lack of interest in representing modern experience. They were only too happy to include him as a mentor along with the likes of the great Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, whose *Creacionismo* also championed invention over mimesis, leaving the syntactically open poem as a fragmented sequence of allusions without reference to nature.<sup>18</sup> Writings and poems by these young artists were complemented by illustrations of the work of two of the most influential abstract painters of the early twentieth century, Vasily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, to construct a context for the emergence of their work.

#### THE ABSTRACT LEGACY OF TORRES-GARCÍA

Who initially asked Torres-García to contribute a text to the new review remains in question. The artist Carmelo Arden Quin claims to have met him in the mid-1930s in Montevideo.<sup>19</sup> After relocating to the Uruguayan capital in 1934, Torres-García gave a number of public talks there in 1935, lecturing on European abstract artists including Kandinsky, Mondrian, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Georges Vantongerloo, and other members of the Cercle et Carré group. Arden Quin recalls attending these talks, and also contends that he read everything by Torres-García he could find, and listened regularly to the elder artist's weekly radio broadcasts in the late 1930s. An introduction to

3. Joaquín Torres-García. *Jouets transformables Aladin* (Aladdin transformable toys). c. 1930. Boxed set of toys, cardboard, painted wood, dimensions variable, case: 5 1/2 x 11 x 1 3/16 in. (14 x 28 x 3 cm). Guillermo de Osma, Madrid



20. Goodman, *Carmelo Arden Quin*, p. 47.

21. Arden Quin, "Corta reseña histórica referente a la influencia de Torres García en la formación del arte abstracto en Uruguay, Argentina y Brasil," Savigny-sur-Orge, France, December 1989, unpublished, ms. in the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery Archives, University of Texas at Austin, as cited in Ramírez, "Re-positioning the South," p. 286 n. 35.

22. See Arden Quin, "El Móvil," 1945, repr. in Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), p. 142. Cecilia de Torres makes the same observation in "From Man in the Street to Universal Man: The Human Figure in Torres-García's *Maderas*," in Ramírez, ed., *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*, p. 88.

23. Again, this account relies exclusively on Arden Quin's recollection. There seems to be no evidence that Arden Quin made visual art before 1944, which may explain why no illustrations of his work appear in *Arturo*.

24. According to Torres-García's detailed agenda books, Rhod Rothfuss first visited the studio on March 17, 1943. I thank Cecilia de Torres for sharing with me her transcription of the original diaries, which are stored in the Archivo Museo Torres García, Montevideo.

25. According to Cecilia de Torres, Rothfuss's *Plástica en Madera* makes "a direct reference to the wood sculptures that Torres-García had installed in his Montevideo

garden with titles taken from the Amerindian deities Pachamama and Inti." Cecilia de Torres, "From Man in the Street to Universal Man," p. 91 n. 19.

26. Tomás Maldonado accompanied Rothfuss to Torres-García's studio on March 17, 1944. Once again, I thank Cecilia de Torres for sharing with me her transcription of Torres-García's agenda books. In "Las raíces latinoamericanas del invencionismo," *Objetos para transformar el mundo*, p. 43, Crispiani claims that Maldonado visited Torres-García's studio as early as 1941, but there is no mention of these visits in Torres-García's agenda books.

27. As Maldonado recalls, "In January (or February) of 1943, I traveled to Montevideo to visit the Uruguayan artist Torres García. . . . On that occasion, Torres García gave me books, pamphlets and manifestos that pertained to what he referred to as "Constructive Universalism." . . . I have to admit that I found his figurative work (for instance, his drawings after the great artists of the past) of great interest." In Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, "Entrevista a Tomás Maldonado," in Marcelo Pacheco and Enrico Crispolti, eds., *Arte Abstracto Argentino*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2002), p. 63.

28. See Patricia M. Artundo, "Otros Papeles de Trabajo: Pettoruti y el Arte Abstracto," *Pettoruti y el Arte Abstracto: 1914–1949*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: MALBA–Fundación Constantini, 2011), p. 12.

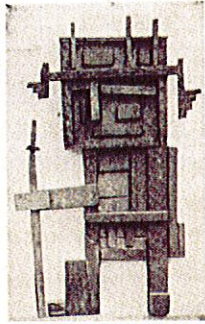
29. See Gradowczyk and Perazzo, *Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata*, pp. 17–20.

Torres-García after a lecture in early 1935, he says, led to an invitation to the artist's studio.<sup>20</sup> Apparently the discussions were generative, and Arden Quin was invited back on a number of occasions, even after he had moved to Buenos Aires. On one of these visits he showed Torres-García the objects he was making with movable rectangular shapes. According to Arden Quin, Torres-García immediately "went away and returned with his famous *Fish* and his articulated toys, in which I saw one more reason to continue with my purpose [fig. 3]. Torres-García literally told me, "There is a road there."<sup>21</sup> Arden Quin would go on to cite the transformable children's toys that he saw in Torres-García's studio as crucial to his development of what would soon come to be called *Madí* art.<sup>22</sup> Torres-García's ludic or whimsical objects, which the spectator could manipulate into dramatically different forms, would have an enormous impact on Arden Quin's subsequent work.<sup>23</sup>

Torres-García's meticulous agenda books make no mention of Arden Quin's visits in the 1930s. Instead they cite fairly regular visits from another young Uruguayan artist, Rhod Rothfuss, which began in March 1943.<sup>24</sup> Rothfuss was at the time making irregularly shaped wood relief paintings that broke with the classical tradition of the orthogonal frame. He would include an illustration of one of these in *Arturo*, as well as an illustration of a sculpture titled *Plástica en Madera* (Sculptural form in wood, 1944; fig. 4): fabricated from elemental forms and materials and evocative of the type of pre-Columbian art that Torres-García was actively promoting, *Plástica en Madera* resembles compositions by Torres-García such as *Pachamama* and *Padre Inti* (both c. 1944).<sup>25</sup> Rothfuss was evidently enthusiastic about these works and began to introduce Torres-García to his friends. One of these was Tomás Maldonado, another young artist whose work would appear in *Arturo*. Maldonado traveled with Rothfuss to Torres-García's studio in March 1944.<sup>26</sup> He was evidently impressed by Torres-García's fusion of art and craft, and by his promotion of the principles of modern art through an active program of exhibitions, publications, and public lectures.<sup>27</sup>

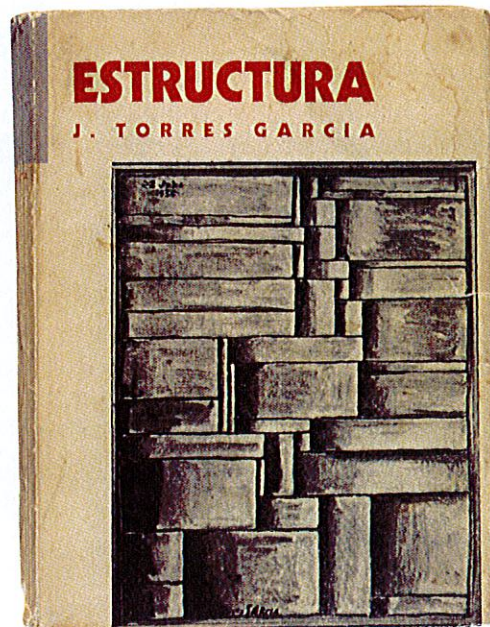
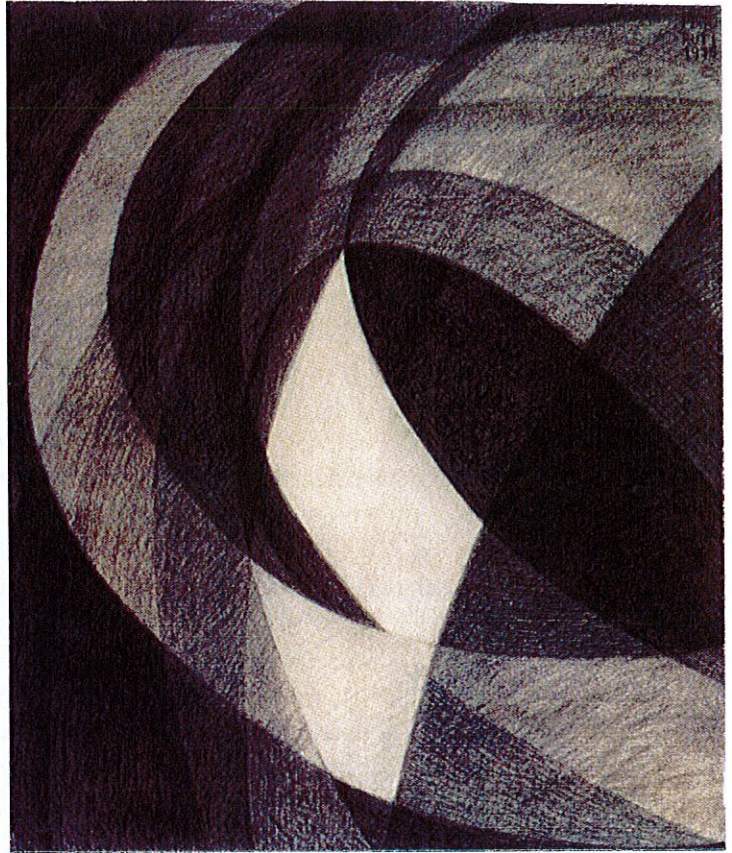
Abstraction in the Río de la Plata region is now generally understood to track back to an exhibition of the work of Emilio Pettoruti held at the Witcomb Gallery, Buenos Aires, in 1924 (fig. 5). Pettoruti's abstract paintings and drawings scandalized some, though scholars have noted that the controversy was more a matter of incomprehension than of disdain, since there was as yet no language with which to discuss abstract art in that part of the world.<sup>28</sup> Another candidate for the beginning of abstraction in the region has been the first exhibition of the abstract paintings of Juan Del Prete, in 1933 (fig. 6).<sup>29</sup> Rothfuss cites Pettoruti in the essay he wrote for the first issue of *Arturo*, and Maldonado visited Del Prete upon the publication of that issue to personally hand him a copy of it. Del Prete and his wife, Yente Del Prete, also exhibited along with the young artists in 1946 and again in 1949. But of all the possible Latin American predecessors, it was the abstract legacy of Torres-García that had the greatest impact on the young artists of the Río de la Plata. His





*Plástica en Madeira*

R H O D R O T H F U S S



30. "The material conditions of society condition the ideological superstructure. Art, an ideological superstructure, is born in and develops on the economic

movements of society. For a proper interpretation of art, in its historical function, a dialectical order must be established." Arden Quin, untitled, *Arturo*, n.p.

journal *Círculo y Cuadrado* (1936–43) was widely known and read in artistic circles, and his treatises and books *Estructura* (Structure, 1935; fig. 7) and *Universalismo constructivo* (Constructive universalism, 1944) had a significant reception in Montevideo and Buenos Aires. In *Estructura*, Torres-García maintained that geometrical abstraction invents its own form of unity by relating the individual parts of the composition to the overall whole. In this sense the artist uses the rules and measurements of mathematics to align his or her artistic production with a universal order. Invention is thereby defined as the action of coming upon or finding a harmonic whole, a universal language. Rather than seeking to devise something new, Torres-García aimed to develop classical forms based on concepts such as geometrical shape, proportion, and color variation.

#### ARTURO'S "INVENTION"

Though a mere forty pages long and with a print run of only 250 copies, *Arturo* (p. 106) is nothing short of a milestone in the history of art in the Río de la Plata. An abstract lithograph by Maldonado, in maroon, black, and white and strongly reminiscent of Kandinsky's woodcuts, illustrates the front and back covers of the journal, and nineteen illustrations of works by Torres-García, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Augusto Torres, and others are presented in between. The six essays featured in the volume were written by Torres-García, Arden Quin, Rothfuss, Edgar Bayley, and Gyula Kosice, and the sixteen poems were penned by an array of figures from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.

Arden Quin set out the aesthetic and political agenda of *Arturo* in the untitled opening essay. Paradoxically, the model of invention he mobilized in this text differs from the definition articulated by Torres-García and included on the journal's inside cover: rather than coupling invention with finding or discovering, processes at the core of Torres-García's notion of the concept, Arden Quin aligns it with pure creativity, and calls for the apotheosis of invention over all forms of representation or expression. He also makes reference to primitive art, an interest in which he follows Torres-García, yet which does not lead him, as it did the latter, into an analysis of the affinities between pre-Columbian art and twentieth-century constructivism. Rather, Arden Quin adds to Torres-García's inquiry a political, Marxist interpretation. For him, invention was not merely aesthetic in function and process—it was primarily social. He was an avowed dialectical materialist, and in the first sentences of his essay he makes clear the socio-economic structure that he believed underpinned cultural forms, presenting art as wholly ideological in the classical Marxist sense: an integral part of society's superstructure and deterministically related to the material and economic base of society. He casts artistic and cultural developments as mirroring shifts in that economic foundation.<sup>30</sup>

Later in the essay Arden Quin suggests that the emergence and development of modern art are symptomatic of artists' attempts to destroy the capitalist order and to

4. (top left) Page from *Arturo: Revista de artes abstractas* (Buenos Aires) no. 1 (1944), showing Rhod Rothfuss (Uruguayan, 1920–1969), *Plástica en Madera* (Sculptural form in wood), 1944. Facsimile ed. Aberdeen: Centre for the Study of the Hispanic Avant-Garde, University of Aberdeen, 1994. 10 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (27.2 x 20 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library

5. (top right) Emilio Pettoruti (Argentine, 1892–1971). *Luci nel Paesaggio* (Light in the landscape). 1915. Charcoal on paper, 21 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 18 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (54.6 x 46 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with funds provided by Nelly Arrieta de Blaquier and by the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Edward Sullivan

6. (bottom left) Juan Del Prete (Argentine, born Italy, 1897–1987). *Pequeña composición* (Small composition). 1937. Oil on cardboard, 9 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 6 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> in. (24 x 17 cm). Courtesy Liliana Crenovich

7. (bottom right) Cover of Joaquín Torres-García. *Estructura*. Montevideo: Biblioteca Alfar, 1935. 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 6 in. (20 x 15.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library

31. Ibid.

32. Edgar Bayley, "Untitled," *Arturo*, n.p. The journal also includes three poems by Bayley: "Estreno Escurre," "Primer Poema en Cion," and "Segundo Poema en Cion," all dated 1944.

33. Rothfuss, "El marco: Un problema de plástica actual," *Arturo*, n.p. This

important text has been widely reprinted. For an English translation see Rothfuss, "The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art," in Ramírez and Héctor Olea, eds., *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, exh. cat. (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 490–91.

create "a new society under socialist forms of production." Their central tool in this goal, he maintains, is "invention," which is capable of providing a glimpse of that which lies beyond the contradictions of the ideological superstructure of capitalism.<sup>31</sup> Invention is thus understood not as the operation of finding the essential in what already exists (its role for Torres-García) but as the act of devising an object or idea by exercise of the intellect or imagination, which is mobilized to generate a revealing flash, to contrive something that opens up new horizons. This singular transgression mediates between object and subject, between that which is and that which sees or thinks. The emphasis is on the origination of something previously unknown. The task is to break with fixed perceptions and reified thought, and to restore fluidity to the action of contriving and creating.

Bayley's imposing essay in *Arturo*, also left untitled, couples the prospects of invention and creativity with another important criterion: the presentation of literal objects. Bayley announces that for the young artists of the Río de la Plata, aesthetic value is not dependent on a representation's relationship to objects in nature; rather, it is located in the degree to which the artwork, as a new kind of image (which he calls *imagen-invencción*, an image in the making), addresses its own pure plastic properties. He writes, "It is not incumbent on aesthetic value to be in accord with any reality other than on the condition of the image proper [*la condición de la propia imagen*]. . . . An image acquires a new sense when relieved of the need to refer to objects that already exist in the world."<sup>32</sup> This "derealization" of the image, by which Bayley evidently means the negation of figural or anecdotal representation and spatial illusion, leads to new creative possibilities. To release the artwork as image from its traditional role of referring representationally to the natural world, and to emphasize its inventive qualities instead, is to collapse the distinction between the literal and the figural in favor of a transparency of meaning. This development would allow significantly greater freedom to the structure of the artwork's composition and bring an end to the traditional fiction of the figural in favor of an emphasis on the presence of pure plastic components.

A poem by Huidobro, an editorial by Kosice, and poetic compositions by an array of writers follow Bayley's essay. But it is Rothfuss's article at the end of the issue, "*El marco: Un problema de plástica actual*" (The frame: a problem of contemporary art), that best encapsulates the concept of invention upheld by the artists who put together *Arturo*.<sup>33</sup> Rothfuss sums up the needs that made the classical orthogonal frame standard in the first place, understanding it as originating in an attempt to create an illusionistic pictorial box within which all visual elements are placed. Going on to describe the severe limits that the convention imposes on formal composition, he is particularly critical of the manner in which the rectangular frame anchors the painting's illusion of separateness from the world. This leads him to propose the *irregular* frame as a first step in a theoretical and material questioning of the structure of painting itself. By breaking with the

34. There were a number of antecedents for the idea of the irregular frame, from Giorgio de Chirico's trapezoidal *Serenity of the Scholar* and triangular *Enigma and Fatality* (both 1914), to the new object types that characterize Jean Arp's *Portrait of Tristan Tzara* and *Forest* (both 1917), to László Péri's irregular reliefs of the early 1920s, a departure point for artists in the context of *Arturo*. See Gradowczyk and

Perazzo, *Abstract Art from the Río de la Plata*, p. 52.

35. Many Argentine and Uruguayan artists produced paintings with irregular frames in the following several years. Some, such as Arden Quin, continued to do so into the twenty-first century. The concept of the broken frame also applied to sculpture by liberating it from its function as a closed volume.

traditional format of the quadrilateral frame, he writes, artists can disrupt the established terms in which traces of depth are built illusionistically, and instead can emphasize the physicality of the painting.<sup>34</sup>

Rothfuss's polemical essay stresses the material objectness of painting over painting's representational and pictorial potential. Invention, from this perspective, begins with the obliteration of the rectangular "window" of the picture plane, a move that makes compositions more dynamic and enables them to interact with their milieu in new ways. Rothfuss thus opens the possibility of integrating the spatial environment into the logic of the work. The new abstract art that he announces is dialectical in nature, generating an unlikely coupling between the purely autonomous artwork and its physical and architectural context.<sup>35</sup> Here Rothfuss differs in an important way from Torres-García, for whom the integrity of the art object, its delimited totality, was fundamental. This was the case even with works such as the *Madera planos de color* (Wooden color planes; p. 73), constructions in wood that often broke with the orthogonal orientation of painting.

Taken as a whole, then, Rothfuss's essay acknowledges and draws on the modernist legacy of Torres-García while at the same time daring to suggest that he has solved problems in the paintings of his great predecessor. This bold notion of simultaneously embracing but developing further the modernist legacy of Torres-García reveals much about the confidence of Rothfuss and his cohort in the mid-1940s. These artists' relationship with abstract art was complex: many adopted abstraction as a working method but also set out, like Rothfuss, to transform it, a trope that came to characterize some of the period's most consequential art.

#### ARTE CONCRETO-INVENCION

The publication of *Arturo* was immediately followed by a number of group exhibitions, with the young artists rallying around the central concepts of concrete art and invention, to the point where they identified their movement as Arte Concreto-Invención. As opposed to the word "abstraction," which implies a form of negation, for these artists the term "concrete art" assumed that reality eludes adequate representation and therefore must be constructed. One of the group shows took place at the Galería Comte in Buenos Aires in late 1944, and included an informal display of paintings and sculptures by Arden Quin, Maldonado, Rothfuss, Lidy Prati, and others. Larger and better-attended events were held at the respective homes of the psychiatrist Enrique Pichón-Rivière, president of the Asociación Argentina de Psicoanálisis (the Argentine psychoanalytic society), in October 1945, and of the Bauhaus-trained photographer Grete Stern in December of that year. These two shows, subsequently referred to as the first and second Arte Concreto-Invención exhibitions, were visited not only by prominent members of the Argentine psychoanalytical community but by a wide-ranging array of the cultural intelligentsia of the

36. For a good overview of these two exhibitions see Pérez-Barreiro, "The Argentine Avant-Garde, 1944–1950," pp. 107–11, 119–25.

37. The invitation brochure announces, "Concrete Elementary Theory, Purposes, Music, Painting, Sculpture and Poems. Ramón Melgar, Juan C. Paz, Rhod Rothfuss, Esteban Eitler, Gyula Kosice, Valdo Wellington and Arden Quin."

38. Arden Quin, "El Móvil," p. 142. Although this text has now been republished on numerous occasions, the exact relation between it and the notes that Arden Quin read at the opening of the show at Enrique Pichón-Rivière's apartment remains in question.

39. "We know the history of mobility in art. We acknowledge and salute our predecessors, and thank them for their example and teachings. It is in that spirit of gratitude that we work. In our particular case, we will first cite futurism and its contribution of the concept of movement and its dynamic creations, and then eminent artists such as [László] Moholy-Nagy and [Alexander] Calder, among others. We consider ourselves to be their followers, even though they were unable to transmit to us fundamental data, such as the concept of polygonality in painting, because of their lack of 'awareness' of that idea." *Ibid.*, p. 144.

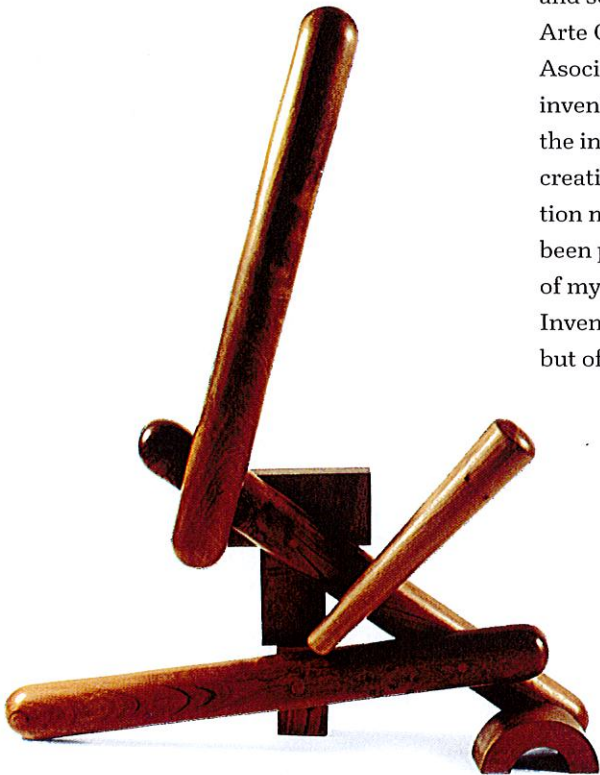
40. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

41. *Ibid.*

Río de la Plata.<sup>36</sup> The events have since come to be seen as the first Madí exhibitions.

The paintings on display at Pichón-Rivière's apartment featured many variations on the non-quadrilateral frame, including irregularly shaped canvases mounted on wood as well as an assortment of multipanel paintings without an overarching frame and held together by wooden rods. Arranged throughout the rooms were also a number of mobile sculptures recalling Torres-García's ingeniously transformable children's toys (fig. 8). The opening was supplemented by a series of poetry readings and a concert of experimental music.<sup>37</sup> Arden Quin commenced the proceedings by reading from notes that he would subsequently publish as "*El Móvil*" (The mobile). This rambling speech identified some of the main aspects of the new art and its precedents. Not surprisingly, it emphasized invention and the irregular frame: "The use of polygons . . . is what separates us," he maintains, "what gives us originality. By abandoning the four classic orthogonal angles—the square and rectangle—as a basis for composition, we have increased the possibilities for invention of all kinds."<sup>38</sup> But Arden Quin sets the artists in his circle in direct line not with the abstract movements of the early twentieth century but with an avant-garde phenomenon that developed parallel to abstraction: namely, kinetic art.<sup>39</sup> Taking a cue from these precedents, as well as some of their affected theatricality, Arden Quin goes on to insist, in Dada-like fashion, that all of the arts should be made mobile: "Let us make painting mobile, sculpture mobile, architecture mobile, the poem mobile, and thought dialectical."<sup>40</sup>

The Arte Concreto-Invencción group did not cohere for long. In this same speech at the Pichón-Rivière opening, Arden Quin noted that rifts were already beginning to develop in the young movement. Identifying the artists clustered around Maldonado as the central culprits, he reported to the room full of guests that "our movement, which is barely in the founding stage, is already divided, precisely because of a lack of polygonal 'awareness,' and the tendency of a part of our group to return to the ancient rectangular order, which we cannot accept under any circumstances."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, less than a month after the Pichón-Rivière exhibition, Maldonado, his wife (Lidy Prati), his brother (Bayley), and several others announced the establishment of a splinter group, the Asociación de Arte Concreto-Invencción (AACI), a name that made obvious reference to Torres-García's Asociación de Arte Constructivo. Yet the new group developed still another model of invention, different from both Torres-García's notion of discovering or finding order and the initial Arte Concreto-Invencción circle's idea of an atemporal flash of inspiration, a creation *ex nihilo* in which something occurs. For Maldonado and his new group, invention meant uncovering for the first time the underlying materiality of art. This had always been possible, they believed, but had never been achieved because of the proliferation of myth—as in Torres-García's proposal, for example, that art mirror the cosmic order. Invention was thus conceived as a form not of creative discovery or clever contrivance but of candid recognition. According to the AACI, the realization of the true artwork had



42. See María Amalia García, *El arte abstracto. Intercambios culturales entre Argentina y Brasil* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2011), p. 58.

43. The Manifiesto *Inventorista, Arte Concreto-Inventorista* 1 (1946):8, is dated March 1946 and signed by all of the members of the AACI: Bayley, Maldonado, Antonio Caraduje, Simón Contreras, Manuel Espinosa, Claudio Girola, Alfredo Hlito, Enio Iommi, Raul

Lozza and his brothers Rafael and Rembrandt, Alberto Molenberg, Primaldo Mónaco, Oscar Núñez, Lidy Prati, and Jorge Souza.

44. V. de L.T., "Modernos y pasatistas," *El Mundo* (Buenos Aires), April 6, 1946.

45. Bayley et al., *Manifiesto Inventorista*, p. 8.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

always been possible but had never been accomplished because the historical conditions had never been right. Underpinning their work, then, was an ethical and moral imperative to arrive at truth. From this perspective, Torres-García's invocations of myth and ritual were completely unacceptable, and his increasing incorporation of "signs" or pictograms was dismissed as positively antimodern.

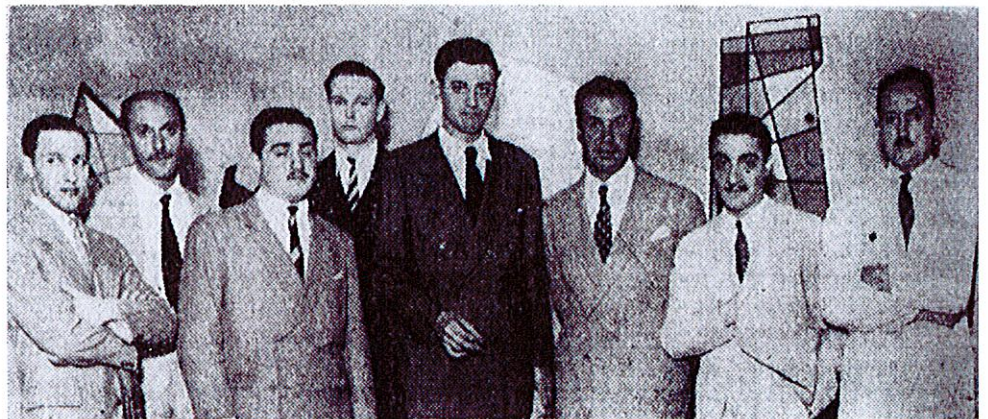
Established in November 1945, the AACI staged an early exhibition at Maldonado's studio on calle San José in Buenos Aires,<sup>42</sup> but its more public introduction took place in March 1946 at the Salón Peuser Buenos Aires, where the group's manifesto, the *Manifiesto Inventorista* (Inventionist manifesto), was distributed as a small pamphlet.<sup>43</sup> Most of the works visible in photographs documenting the show appear to be low-relief sculptures suspended from the walls (fig. 9). Their concrete objectness is emphasized, as is their equation with natural objects, and they tend to concentrate on their own sphere of materials and meaning. Accordingly, they efface their status as signs. As one contemporary critic put it, "The abstract art on display is bold, consisting of open forms and structures that have no reference points."<sup>44</sup> The evident formal similarities among these works point to the attempt to advance a collective practice, a goal announced in the *Manifiesto Inventorista*.<sup>45</sup>

The manifesto is a glittering mosaic of allusions. Against "an art of representation" that trades in fictions and "dims the cognitive energy" of the spectator, the text proposes "a presentation art" that is not regulated according to a regime of truth but firmly places the spectator as an active participant conscious of her own cognitive energy in the material world.<sup>46</sup> This requires shaking off the debris of past convention, setting aside all forms of figural representation that seek to produce an illusion of space, expression, reality, and movement, and that function in classical ideological fashion to instance an imaginary relation to real conditions of existence. These aesthetic illusions weaken the human subject, making him or her a passive observer of aesthetic fictions. Invention in this context is the realization of a concrete, material art that "surround[s] humans with real things and not ghosts" and thereby leads to a productive discovery of the differences between fiction and reality.<sup>47</sup>

The core strategy of the AACI summons a form of materialist aesthetics in which spectators perceive objects in the world the way they appear "to the eye and not to the mind."<sup>48</sup> This is a form of vision without illusionism or a necessary reference to the artist's purpose. By turning perception and signification back to the material substrate of the artwork, all reference returns to the real limits imposed by the materials themselves. Accordingly, the AACI's model of invention ends up in a formal matter-of-factness that

8 (opposite). Gyula Kosice (Argentine, born Czechoslovakia [now Slovakia] 1924). *Röyi* No. 2. 1944–93. Wood, dimensions variable, c. 27 3/4 x 32 x 6 in. (70.5 x 81 x 15.5 cm). MALBA/Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires

9. Group photo at the 1<sup>st</sup> Exposición de la Asociación Arte Concreto Inventorista, Salon Peuser, Buenos Aires, March 18, 1946. Published in *Diario El Mundo* (Buenos Aires), March 19, 1946. Hemeroteca de la Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina



49. Ibid. Importantly, the sentence also invokes Picasso's statement, "I do not seek, I find." Picasso's statement has been widely cited. See, for instance, Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 7. I am grateful to James Meyer for reminding me of this reference.

50. The show at the Centro de Profesores Diplomados de Enseñanza Secundaria, introduced on a poster that advertised it as the "third" exhibition of the work of

the AACI, was preceded by the Salón Peuser show and by a show at the Pacífico Gallery, Buenos Aires, in July 1946. The show at the Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos opened on October 11, 1946, and the group's fourth exhibition was held at the Ateneo Popular de La Boca, Buenos Aires, between October 18 and 25, 1946. For lists of the participants in each show, see reproductions of the invitations in Laura Escot, *Tomás Maldonado: itinerario de un intelectual técnico* (Buenos Aires: Patricia Rizzo, 2007), pp. 42, 48, 49.

runs counter to all of the values and characteristics of aesthetic experience emphasized by Torres-García. Rather than rely on willful designs or emotional charge, the art of the AACI emphasizes what it objectively presents. It uncovers the underlying materiality of the artwork, cutting through fiction and myth to locate the real. Perceptual phenomena turn into material events that highlight perception's grounding in a mechanism that shapes what is perceived. The final sentence of the manifesto, in full caps, at once epitomizes this logic and trumps Torres-García's definition of invention as the act of discovery: "NEITHER SEEK NOR FIND: INVENT."<sup>49</sup>

#### FROM TORRES-GARCÍA TO MONDRIAN

A series of exhibitions of the work of the AACI artists followed one after another in Buenos Aires in 1946. In September, a show was staged at the Centro de Profesores Diplomados de Enseñanza Secundaria (Center of High School Graduate Teachers); two more were held in October, one at the Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos (Argentine society of plastic artists), one at the new Ateneo Popular de La Boca (Boca popular atheneum).<sup>50</sup> The group also grew in number. Contrary to Arden Quin's claim that these artists had returned to "the ancient rectangular order," many of the artists in the Asociación now worked with irregularly shaped frames. Some, like Manuel Espinosa, Juan Melé, and Jorge Souza, subdivided their geometric compositions with black lines in the manner of leaded glass, an approach also used by Torres-García. Others juxtaposed differently shaped and colored planes. Prati's *Concreto* (1945–46; fig. 10) is a case in point. This impressive oil painting on wood board features three geometric planes, the two larger ones in titanium white and the third, top plane in cadmium orange. Two thin wooden strips running along the edges of the forms hold the three oblong planes together. The strips are painted black and connected at the top to form a slightly tilted "T" shape with a strong diagonal accent. Each structural element contributes to the overall composition with equal weight, as in the painting of Mondrian. Dynamism and stasis coincide, with neither sense dominating the other; the surface planes are unbounded and yet finite.

The differences between the young artists of the AACI and Torres-García and his followers in Montevideo soon came rushing to the surface. Several articles published in *Removedor* (the official organ of the Taller Torres-García, founded in 1944) belittled both the AACI and the Madí artists gathered around Arden Quin (fig. 11). At first the critiques were indirect, focusing on the young artists' growing fascination with the legacy of Mondrian. In the fall of 1946, Guido Castillo, the editor of the journal, dismissed Neo-Plasticism as lacking artistic relevance: Neo-Plasticism "is not art," he wrote, because "it is almost pure technique, a manner designed to eliminate from art all that, by definition, does not pertain to it." He continued, "Like all negative methods that have been turned into systems, [Neo-Plasticism] has eliminated everything without achieving anything

51. Guido Castillo, "Torres-García y el arte moderno," *Removedor* no. 14 (August–September–October 1946):1.

52. Torres-García, "Nuestro problema de arte en América," *Removedor* no. 14 (August–September–October 1946):6.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

54. This position seems to have led to some of Torres-García's problems not only with the members of the European Constructivist avant-garde with whom he had been affiliated in the late 1920s and 1930s but also with members of the Escuela Taller de Artes Plásticas attending his lectures in Montevideo soon after his return there in 1934. See Cecilia de Torres, "The School of the South: The Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1934–1942," in Cecilia de Torres and Ramírez, eds., *El Taller Torres-García*, p. 10.

55. Sarandy Cabrera, "Originalidad e invención," *Removedor*, no. 14 (August–September–October 1946):8. Scholars have often noted Torres-García's insistence that he had little to do with the editorial

decisions of *Removedor*. See Fló, "Torres-García in (and from) Montevideo," p. 38. Pérez-Barreiro has observed the degree to which the artists of the AACI (he mentions Hlito, Maldonado, and Prati in particular) misread Mondrian's paintings as "flat and pure," with no evidence of brush-stroke, because their knowledge of those paintings was exclusively based on reproductions in books and magazines. See Pérez-Barreiro, "Invention and Reinvention: The Transatlantic Dialogue in Geometric Abstraction," *Cold America: Geometric Abstraction in Latin America (1934–1973)*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2011), p. 74.

56. Cabrera, "Originalidad e invención," p. 8. In "En defensa de la pintura, de un artista y del arte moderno: con motivo de un artículo aparecido en la revista—Arte Concreto Invención—B.A.," *Removedor* no. 16 (January–February 1947):2, 5, Cabrera again took up the issue of the irregular frame, this time implying that it was the result of immature artists: "The irregular frame . . . is, as its name makes clear, something irregular."

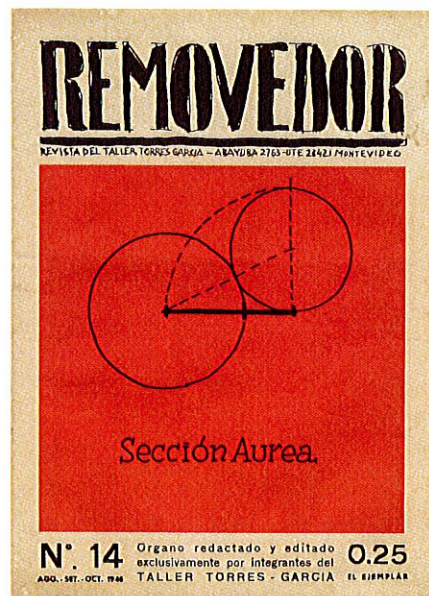
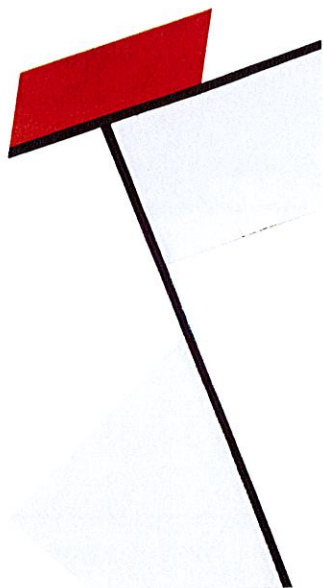
more than the platitude of almost nothing."<sup>51</sup> In the same issue of *Removedor*, Torres-García for his part published an article titled "Nuestro problema de arte en América" (Our problem with art in the Americas), warning Latin American artists of the danger lurking beneath the rationalism of Mondrian. "Mondrian's theory" of non-representational art, he wrote, "has been sterile, and means the very end for art and painting."<sup>52</sup> Falling back on his notion of a regional art with its own inherent traditions, he argued that Neo-Plasticism "belongs to colder regions," its coldness being "a product of the absence of feelings and emotion," while Latin American art was essentially sensuous, full of warmth, luminescent color, and humanistic feeling.<sup>53</sup> An unstated undercurrent to Torres-García's and his circle's dismissal of the younger artists may have involved the AACI's growing affiliation with the Argentine Communist Party. Torres-García insisted that the function of the work of art was to create a unified set or whole within an aesthetic order free of ideological discourse. He believed that art should be independent of politics or any other social cause.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, the artists of the AACI made no secret of their Marxist affinities and of their attempts to ground abstract art in the laws of dialectical materialism.

In that same fall 1946 issue of *Removedor*, Sarandy Cabrera, one of the most outspoken students in the Taller Torres-García, went even further than his mentor in denouncing the Madí and AACI artists. In his essay "Originalidad e invención" (Originality and invention) Cabrera attacked what he saw as the puerile romanticism of the irregular frame—naïve, he thought, in artists who imagined they were working *against* romanticism—and reproached them for their evident lack of interest in achieving the type of universal art championed by Torres-García.<sup>55</sup> He too faulted the young artists' devotion to Mondrian, whose work he claimed had reached a dead end, an impasse ("al callejón sin salida"). He also scorned their "desperate search" for "invention," which, he wrote, "is undoubtedly *one* of the elements in art, but not the *only* one." For Cabrera, the obstinate pursuit of inventive discovery had limited the scope of the new art; it had led the artists to miss the importance of intuition, which acknowledges the important role of the past in the production of aesthetic objects and in the development of anything new.<sup>56</sup>

Maldonado responded to the critiques from Torres-García and his circle with an essay titled "Torres-García contra el arte moderno" (Torres-García against modern art),

10. Lidy Prati (Argentine, 1921–2008). *Concreto*. 1945. Oil on plywood, 24 7/16 x 18 13/16 in. (62 x 48 cm). Private collection

11. Cover of *Removedor* no. 14 (August–October 1946). 13 x 9 5/8 in. (33 x 24.5 cm). Archivo Lafuente





57. Maldonado, "Torres-García contra el arte moderno," *Boletín de la Asociación de Arte Concreto Invención* (1946):n.p., repr. in Pacheco and Crispolti, eds., *Arte Abstracto Argentino*, pp. 174–75.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
59. Cabrera, "Originalidad e invención," p. 8.

which appeared on the front page of the second issue of the AACI journal, *Boletín de la Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención*, in December 1946. Making a pointed distinction between the constructivism of the Taller de Torres-García and the concrete art of the Río de la Plata region, Maldonado rejects the constructivist synthesis of Torres-García's paintings and the Uruguayan's dogged efforts to turn the medium of painting's hard-nosed objectivity against itself.<sup>57</sup> Torres-García's skill with surface and framing, and his persistent reliance on intuition (which ultimately draws on the reservoir of tradition in the culture), are dismissed as wrong-way detours from the heroic pursuit of an aesthetic of pure form. Maldonado hones in on Torres-García's "eclectic exploitation" (*aprovechamiento ecléctico*) of existing artistic styles, and especially on his retrograde turn to indigenous sources: "The real problem is that Torres-García, stuck in the narrowness of his colonialist spirit, in the dusty archaism of 'American curiosities' and indigenist 'pastiche,' is incapable of appreciating the deep and emotive sense that is found in a white washable and lacquered surface."<sup>58</sup> Arden Quin and the artists affiliated with him were relatively more open to organizing their work around the legacy of the Uruguayan constructivist, accepting the recent shifts in the latter's aesthetic as a satisfactory expression of dialectical thought. But this was certainly not the case for the artists of the AACI.

In their denunciations of the Madí and AACI artists, Torres-García and his circle were obviously unaware of the rift that had developed within the young group, as well as of the considerably different understandings of invention elaborated by the various factions. Indeed, Cabrera identified them all as Madí:

*From Buenos Aires we now receive the theory of MADÍ painting. . . . Madí's basic principles precede its artworks and the movement champions invention as the unique generator of its art. . . . The importance Madí theorists give to their project is nothing less than total. However, Madí painting, in its single-minded pursuit of invention, highlights its geometrical appearance, albeit without any visible artistic function or concern for harmony. This way it gets lost in decorative simplicity, underestimating all difficulty, and fails to attend to that which truly matters: order and measure. . . . In painting, the Madí artists pretend to be the fathers of many things even though they have hardly earned the right to do so. . . . They also pretend to found a cold dynamic art, one with a mathematical, intellectually inclined spirit.<sup>59</sup>*

In "Torres-García contra el arte moderno," understandably incensed by these spurious attacks and uninformed conflation, Maldonado utterly dismissed the previously undisputed patriach of Río de la Plata modernism and his immediate legacy:

*Torres-García is really a bluff. It is quite good that this "dear master" and his ignorant disciples . . . have decided on their own to cut off bonds with abstract art. . . . It seems that*

60. Maldonado, "Torres-García contra el arte moderno," p. 174.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 176.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 175. Maldonado would later recall this series of articles as follows: "In 1946, Torres García published an article stating that non-figurative art, which he referred to as neo-plasticism, was typical of 'cold' people, and, as such, inadequate to the 'warmer' people

of America. My response . . . was unprecedentedly violent. Surely overstated and inhumane. But it was a time of youthful passion and excessive reliance on certainties." In Di Pietrantonio, "Entrevista a Tomás Maldonado," p. 63.

64. The final sentence of Maldonado's essay pronounces, "The battle of authentic modern art is, no doubt, the battle for invention." Maldonado, "Torres-García contra el arte moderno," p. 176.

*not only here [in Buenos Aires] but also on the other side of the river [in Montevideo], our appearance has forced many demagogues of reality to disclose their true nature.*<sup>60</sup>

The parochialness of the self-identified leader of the School of the South was at once highlighted and disdained. Maldonado continues in a tone that is as disrespectful as his words are disparaging: "[Torres-García's] works are the most absurd, immoral medley one can imagine. . . . Then he falls into the most defining aberration of all decadences: eclecticism." But not even a sincere form of eclecticism: "On the one hand, the 'master' admits the local, binding nature of a 'painting,' whereas on the other he describes 'constructive art' as universal. This type of pseudo-modern art is, in practice, naturalistic (bombastic and sentimental), meant to win awards and the high regard of the bourgeoisie, and to present the artist in all his glory."<sup>61</sup>

Maldonado's rebuttal of Torres-García and his followers articulates the central aspects of the emerging AACI, of which he was a key member. One of these was the understanding of abstract art. For Maldonado the main issue of nonrepresentational art was not that it refused figuration but that it rejected the possibility of representing space: "what is essential to abolish from painting is the law that mandates that two tints or two values determine the representation of a space."<sup>62</sup> Torres-García's compositions ostensibly shunned perspective and the illusion of the third dimension, but in Maldonado's eyes his use of chiaroscuro, and the residual dynamic of figure and ground in his paintings, continue to render space. Another aspect of AACI work singled out by Maldonado was its championing of principles discerned in the art of Mondrian: "For us," he wrote, "Mondrian's systematizing spirit, consequent and incorruptible, as well as his unflinching optimism and absolute modesty, make him the highest model of artistic dignity."<sup>63</sup>

The most consequential aspect of Maldonado's essay killing off the father of the School of the South, however, was the development of a notion of invention that broke with Torres-García's version of the concept as much as it did with existing artistic practice in the Río de la Plata. As Maldonado wrote, "invention" implies not only the presupposition of numerous conventions necessary to make something at all, but also, as is evident in the work of Mondrian, the transgression of those presuppositions.<sup>64</sup> In the end, then, he and the others in the AACI only half observed Torres-García's counsel in the first issue of *Arturo* that young artists should not allow the influence of precursor artists to hinder their creative process. Having broken with the example of Torres-García, their original mentor, they went on to develop an analogous relationship with another artist: Mondrian.