

## Relational Abstractions: The Legacies of Op and Kinetic Art in U.S. Latinx Art Rocío Aranda-Alvarado

What happens when geometry begins to move? The purest form of modernist ideals—geometric shapes, planar forms—these are the foundation of abstraction. When these shapes move or seem to move due to our perception of them, a new relationship is formed or perhaps an old one is deepened. A generation of artists following in the well-defined lines of the historic movements of geometric abstraction, Op art and kinetic remains active in New York City and beyond. This essay explores the continued relevance of these historic movements to the contemporary work of a small selection of artists. Harbingers of these historic styles in a new environment, these artists adapt powerful signs that prevailed in the visual culture of the 1950s and 1960s for their own works. Movement, color relationships, and geometric forms are all filtered through new ways of thinking about the purpose of art.

In the catalog that accompanied the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 *The Responsive Eye* exhibition Curator William Seitz described the work as "perceptual abstraction," underscoring the significance of "seeing" as an active part of comprehending the work. In perceptual abstraction, the seeing is act, understanding, and subject matter all at once. Although the show presented many works from this period, it included surprisingly few by artists from the rest of the Americas, which is incomprehensible considering that it was one of the favored forms of artistic expression during this period in countries like Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.

Of the works to be explored here, the fundamental characteristics they share include simplicity of form, some level of participation (sometimes involuntary) by the viewer, the creation of a new kind of illusionism for the surface of the canvas or the sculpture, one that is created by raising parts of the surface of the canvas, adding moveable elements to a sculpture, or making the viewing plane into an endless motion of color and form. Could we call it "relational abstraction"? Nicolas Bourriaud has noted that the project of artists working in the aftermath of postmodernity seemed to be about "learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution."<sup>1</sup> We see, in the brief quotes that follow and throughout, that artists of today continue in the tradition of those working in the 1960s, to use research and anthropological types of observation in order to find new ways to relate to the public and to cultivate the sense of an environment or even a direct relationship with the art object. Geometric abstraction, optical art and kinetic art were experimental rest stops along the route to the total art experience—forms, perhaps, of relational abstractions.

In 1967 Hélio Oiticia wrote his essay "Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial," in which he addressed a new role for the art object, wondering whether it might be a new category or a new mode of aesthetic proposition.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, he described a profoundly new characteristic that he observed was emerging among artists of his generation:

...The most important proposition of the object of the makers of objects, in my view, would be that of a **new perceptual behavior**, created through increasing spectator participation, eventually overcoming the object as the end of aesthetic expression....for me, the object was a passage to experiences increasingly engaged with the individual behavior of each spectator....<sup>3</sup>

Because both Oiticia and Lygia Clark were key figures in the translation of geometric abstraction into a language of the body, they make an excellent starting point for a discussion of art that is indebted to geometric abstraction but is dependent upon the enactment of a (viewing) body in some way. The works shown in *The Responsive Eye* were perhaps art objects that Oitica and Clark might have thought of as transitional works between the traditional object and its complete annihilation, those that responded to or were enacted in some form by the viewer's sight or actions. Their Parisian colleagues of the Research Group for Visual Art/GRAV were writing similarly about the search for a relationship between art and the spectator and seeking new areas of investigation. In 1968 they wrote in "Taking a New Position":

In 1966-1967 we created game rooms, walking tours, street experiences. Our labyrinths are opened; they ceased to be ingenious tours in which the work is concealed to instead become a totality in which experiences and spectators are inseparable.<sup>4</sup>

This coveted relationship between object and viewer is at the heart of optical art, kinetic art and even some forms of geometric abstraction, particularly in these works that were developed in the transition between object and experience. In their "Notes for a Manifesto," another collective from the period, the Madrid-based Equipo 57 stated: "Physical geometry linking man directly with the living law of the cosmos is opposed to the construction of a geometry of the mental kind."<sup>5</sup> That is, a tangible geometric presence connected to the organic (human) world—a relational geometry—would prevail. Equipo 57 described this as "Interactividad en el Espacio Plastico," (Interactivity in the Plastic Space) an activity that would be developed through A. discussion, B. research on the problem posed; C. development; and D. performance.<sup>6</sup>

Many contemporary artists present a strong affinity with these historic moments, using research and social observation as resources for work that blurs boundaries between body, experience, and geometry. One example of this kind of art is explored in the performance work of Rossana Martinez (b. 1969, San Juan, Puerto Rico), an abstract painter who has come to join her commitment to geometric abstraction with performance art in a series she calls *Body Geometry*. Donning garments of solid colors and using lengths of fabric in contrasting bright, solid colors, the artist uses her own clothing, limbs and the fabrics to create geometric shapes in space. In a different version,

she and another performer don identical garments that, when spread out across the width of arms and legs, look like triangles. Dressed in opposing colors, the forms they create act as bodily versions of paintings by Carmen Herrera or Elsworth Kelly. In a more recent enactment from the series, the artist wears a long black gown and performs with a triangular shaped portion of a mountain, cementing the connection between body, environment and geometry and underscoring the relational aspects of her work.

The artist underscores her interest in creating a dialogue between the body and ordinary materials. The process and result, she notes, are raw and unedited, highlighting her interest in the nexus between “conceptual abstraction” and performance art. Ultimately, she hopes “viewers will feel empowered to interpret and question the work according to their expectations about what it is and it and how it should appear.”<sup>7</sup> This questioning of the object, its definition and interpretation mirrors movements of the 1960s that also invited audiences to question the meanings and objects of art.

Martinez’s corporeal project bears a similarity to the work of Claudia Vieira (b. 1964, Porto Alegre, Brazil), who also uses her body to apply tightly drawn linear forms to the surfaces of built structures. The artist notes that her series *Architectural Topographies* “records the lived experience of time and space...examining the relationship of individuals to our environment through a series of site-specific spatial mediations that integrate drawing, architecture, video and performance.” Drawing a single continuous black line over white surfaces until she has covered an entire space including ceiling and floors, the artist literally inscribes the passage of time and the motion of her body onto various architectural surfaces. She further comments:

This particular conception of drawing is essentially a record of lived time. This continually drawn single line ends up encompassing the entire place, opening a space for the viewers to experience their sense of perspective; scale, interior and exterior collapse into a full moment of self-awareness. Although linear evidence of the concentrated lived experience accumulates in the space in graphic extremes of black and white, it paradoxically blurs assumed boundaries between origin and destination, inside and outside and ultimately, self and other.<sup>8</sup>

The self and other dialectic is an important one, underscoring an action or line that passes between two points, two figures, two beings. The linear tracing that occurs in the space marks the limitations of her body (her arm and hand with the marking implement) as they are confronted by the boundaries of the built environment. Long black lines cover white painted surfaces (always uneven and imperfect) and create the sense that the space, inconceivably, is moving, warping, bending, meandering. Among her sources of study, she cites landscapes, geography, and online satellite imagery, which she notes

she studies closely in order to explore various aspects of space and its appearance.

Satellite imagery has also formed the basis of inspiration for another artist in this grouping. The large-scale works of Vargas Suarez Universal (b. 1970, Mexico City, Mexico) rely upon the immaculate regularity of his hand-drawn lines and hand-painted sections to create motion, often across large sections of built environments. Stacks, blocks, endless paths, linear forms build upon one another, nearly enveloping the spectator. As a mass of forms, they recall the organized entanglement of star systems, distant galaxies and those fuzzy clumps of light that we are told represent other universes. This is all deeply relevant to the artist, who studied astronomy instead of visual art. His thinking about these distant forms is embedded in his imagery that, improvisationally, is released through the artist's hand to the point of a permanent marker onto a primed wall or from a ballpoint pen onto paper. The end result is a series of lines and planes of generally monochromatic color in which it is unclear if the wall visible beneath the drawing is positive or negative space—a perfect example of what Seitz framed as “perceptual ambiguity.” In some instances, the artist has studied satellite maps of specific areas of interest in order to be inspired by the landscape's forms as seen from miles above the earth. He describes his version of relational abstraction:

I am trying to expand upon the definitions of what I know into new definitions and operating in territories that I don't know. Manifesting these urges by way of mark making, I'm joining the 50,000 year old human effort of creating images that represent our own existence in this time and in this space.<sup>9</sup>

Colorful forms cut from Plexiglas and hinged together form the works of the sculptor Marta Chilindron (b. 1952, Buenos Aires, Argentina). It would be impossible to discuss Chilindron's work properly without again recalling the *Bichos* of Lygia Clark. Clark's smallish, multi-paneled, hinged sculptures were originally intended to be manipulated by the viewer, moving towards the vision that Oiticica described as a new perceptual (and, we could add, experiential) behavior. Oiticica also discussed Clark's *Bichos* and how with these she “transformed and finished with sculpture, she made the most daring creative propositions.” The *Bichos* movable, re-shapable, filled with endless possibilities that could exist only through the will of the viewer, are alluded to in Chilindron's colorful, moveable Plexiglas sculptures. For Chilindron, the works are more specifically an exploration of perception and how humans process change.<sup>10</sup> She notes:

In my case, I am investigating the dialectic of perception and how we process change. I explore the ideas of sequencing, beginning and end, making objects that are complex networks with no definite shape and that exist between the second and third dimension with infinite possible configurations.<sup>11</sup>

Chilindron also underscores the idea that movement is central to the work because it “implies instability and illustrates the continuous change in our realities.” She underscores this relational aspect by highlighting the role of the viewer in the integrity of the work: “the public is the viewer and often also the performer,” in what she calls a “dual involvement.” Though the artist has emphasized her interest in the movable sculpture as a perceptual rather than a social object, her recounting the idea of a “dual involvement” between person and object (and perhaps two people in the case of larger works) is also relevant. The manipulated object becomes a social one as soon as human hands and consciousness are involved.

The artist has played with scale, creating some objects that fill an entire gallery, such as her colossal *Cube 48* (2014). Others, like her *Mobius* (2013), reflect her interest in the basic tenets of the neo-concrete movement, expanding these into her color-filled works in which primary colors can potentially be manipulated so that they become layered over one another and their secondary nature becomes readily apparent. The form, seen here in three different configurations, is large enough to discourage the kind of hands-on touching that Clark’s works employed. This Mobius strip furthers the interaction between color, motion, and form as the object changes according to the movement of colored shapes. The viewer instead imagines this progress, a cerebral exercise in understanding infinite motion.

A related surface manipulation is the methodology favored by painter Cristina Camacho (b. 1987, Bogotá, Colombia). Treating her works as excavations and organic body-memories, the artist describes:

In my paintings I reimagine the materiality of the canvas. I push its logic to transform it into three-dimensional anthropomorphic and zoomorphic entities, personal narratives, architectural spaces and musical illustrations. As I cut the canvas, I create a duality between pictorial space and real space, where gravity, shadows, and color reflections evoke a physical and tactile experience.<sup>12</sup>

Camacho’s paintings are cut in perfect, symmetrical forms, long strips of canvas cut to reveal perfectly shaped stripes of color and additional colors beneath. As the viewer moves in front of the works, new forms are slowly and regularly revealed. Like the surface motion caused by variously raised strips of colored materials on a canvas—as in works by Cruz Diez—the strips of painted surface seem to move across the works. In some cases, they are woven together to allude to traditional works of the Colombian past, to the act of weaving as knowledge that is passed through female familial lines.

Finally, animated, moving geometry is powerfully present in the video work of both Lionel Cruet (b. 1989, San Juan, Puerto Rico) and Monika Bravo (b. 1964, Bogota, Colombia). As our eyes adjust to the dark, we see a video that flickers with large squares of color, mostly monochromatic, but subtly

different. They appear to be oversized pixels, each square as a gigantic piece of a much larger image that we will never see. There is movement among the squares, as though technology has overtaken color and form. Cruet describes his process, noting that “collaboration and research are part of the work in the interest of discussing the complexities of technological, geo-political, and natural effects that transform our understanding of reality.”<sup>13</sup> The artist’s interest in the intersection of technology with physical and political landscapes is marked throughout his work, where boundaries are blurred both literally and conceptually. In a video titled *Mirage* (2013), rectangles of portions of a scene are laid over the same image so that a beach is broken up into a grid of shapes that turn into greyer versions of themselves. One minute later, a pink petunia is similarly broken into smaller rigid forms as geometry takes over the organic sensuality of the floral forms and the final scene features a rising sun against a fragment of Caribbean sky. Time and space are collapsed in a grid onto the surface of each image, rendering them always incomplete, fragmented.

Monika Bravo’s video installation *URUMU [WEAVING \_ TIME]* (2014) is a work in which the viewer becomes enveloped in a textile that eventually reveals details of a landscape. It is what curator Beatríz López describes as “an exercise of the loom where the core of Bravo’s practice interweaves and explodes tensions over time, space and tradition when it meets with technology.”<sup>14</sup> Colorful lines that move up, down and across three walls simultaneously create virtual versions of warp and weft threads. They form a design that is reminiscent of ancient textile and pottery designs from the Andean region. In fact, the designs are more specific to indigenous people from the Arhuaco (Ika) nation on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, in the Sierra Madre mountain range. Artisan women from the group weave backpacks that are coveted by Colombians and tourists alike. Bravo’s work specifically focuses on the urumu (snail) design, the spiral-like shape that represents a protective form in which the entire universe of the Arhuaco people is believed to be contained. Spirals and versions of spirals make appearances throughout the iconography of ancient groups indigenous to the Caribbean region, as well as on the canvases and in the sculptures of artists interested in optical effects. In Bravo’s video, their manipulation of space ends as the geometric design is slowly rendered transparent (another manipulation of the eyes) and reveals details of a natural landscape that are also vaguely geometric. Upright reeds are paired with bare branches that also grow almost entirely vertically. Twin palm fronds wave gently in the wind with two different rhythms from differing vantage points, as the artist offers us multiple simultaneous views. The patterns are slow to disappear so that the baroque surfaces of sky, water or wildflower live in tandem with geometry for extended moments.

We are persuaded to see these works as pathways towards what Oiticia eventually ordained as “suprasensorial.” These he described as increasingly open-ended propositions that may or may not involve a palpable object, what Lucy Lippard discussed as the dematerialization of the object. These works

would seem to recall the transitional works between the traditional object and a more nebulous “art experience.” They are multi-sensorial, we might say. Though Oiticica makes it clear that the stimulus-reaction process of Op Art is not “suprasensorial,” the relationship of viewer and surface and the engagement between the two remains relevant. The spectator’s increased participation in the “enactment” of the visual force of the art becomes an element that serves to signify, to signal a new perceptual behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, excerpt from *Relational Aesthetics*, 1998 Web Sept. 3, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial,” in Guy Brett et al. *Hélio Oiticica* Rotterdam: Witte de With; Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1992, 127.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> GRAV, “Nueva toma de posición,” April 1968; (julioleparc.org)

<sup>5</sup> Equipo 57, “Notes for a Manifesto,” reproduced in Joe Houston, *The Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960s* (New York: Merrell/Columbus Museum of Art, 2007): 167.

<sup>6</sup> Equipo 57, “Text for the Thorvaldses Museum,” reproduced in Joe Houston, *The Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960s* (New York: Merrell/Columbus Museum of Art, 2007): 167.

<sup>7</sup> Rossana Martinez, untitled statement; Web Sept. 3, 2015; (abstractioninaction.com)

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Vieira, Artist Statement, Claudia Vieira, Web Sept. 3, 2015; (claudiavieira.net)

<sup>9</sup> Rafael Vargas Suarez/Vargas-Suarez Universal, Correspondence with the author, August 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Marta Chilindron, “Artist statement,” correspondence with the author September 4, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Selene Preciado, Exhibition brochure, Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, California; Correspondence with author, Sept. 4, 2015

<sup>12</sup> Cristina Camacho, Correspondence with the author, August 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Lionel Cruet, “artist statement,” accessed July 7, 2015; [http://www.lionelcruet.com/artist\\_statement.html](http://www.lionelcruet.com/artist_statement.html)

<sup>14</sup> Beatriz López, “A Tour of the Universe,” interview with Monika Bravo; Web Sept. 2, 2015; [http://www.monikabravo.com/URUMU\\_E\\_TEXT](http://www.monikabravo.com/URUMU_E_TEXT)