

Halos and Echoes

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Manuel Espinosa (1912-2006) and Luis Tomasello¹ (1915-2014) are being presented for the first time in a dialogue at Sicardi | Ayers | Bacino. And, at the same time, with a double geographical perspective in which South America intersects with the vibrant post-war Parisian scene. The two artists can be considered as essential representatives – alongside Bruno Munari and Carmelo Arden-Quin – of an intermediate generation. Both chronologically and aesthetically, they represent a continuation of the avant-gardes of geometric art, with Piet Mondrian, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Josef Albers, while at the same time paving the way for the Kinetic and Op Art tendency represented by Jesús Rafael Soto, Carlos Cruz-Diez and Julio Le Parc, which enjoyed great success in the 1960s. But this transitional role serves merely to introduce the true singularity of Tomasello and Espinosa's work, which goes to the heart of esthetic issues that are as essential as they are (often) misunderstood.

First of all, it is important to understand that the audience for their own artistic influences – the Avant-gardes: Constructivism, Suprematism, Bauhaus and Concrete art – was incredibly limited at the time, and especially so in Argentina, where the situation was clearly more favorable to realism, impressionism, surrealism or post-cubism. More than ten years after his death in New York in 1944, there still had not been a single retrospective of Mondrian's work. Similarly, to take an interest in fundamental aspects of the emerging perceptualism of Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson was an even bolder step. In the strictly artistic context, for example, let us consider the rejection of polychromy and composition, the systematic radicalization of Mondrian's modernist frontality and Pollock's all-over, the emergence of an aesthetics organized around the spectator, the infiltration of

¹ I refer here to my more in-depth study of Luis Tomasello's work, published on the occasion of his monographic exhibition at the Sicardi Gallery (Houston TX, 2007).

information theory and the phenomenology of perception, and, more generally, the development within certain practices of a form of dynamogenics – based on the intrinsically kinetic properties of an object capable of eliciting a motor reaction in the observer.²

Like the handful of artists working to renew the language of geometric abstraction and extend its sensory scope, Tomasello and Espinosa drew on these little-known sources, then rigorously pursued their own paths, painting and sculpting as they breathed, while evincing a certain reluctance to engage with the logics of production, distribution and, basically, of professional networking that Victor Vasarely, to name but one, exemplified to an extreme degree. It follows that the geometric, essentialist simplicity of the works we get to see, and particularly in the images reproducing them and accompanying this text, is misleading: it tells us nothing about the subtle and troubling sensory experience they offer, which can be felt only in the real time and space of physical observation. Nor does it say anything about the sense of detail that is part of the experience: these reliefs and paintings were all painted with a brush and by hand. The ghost of Malevich is not far away. Neither Tomasello nor Espinosa were interested in the anonymous industrial style that was in vogue among the members of GRAV at the time, and both were deeply attached to working alone in the studio, to subtle and precise application of acrylic paint by brush. Something incredibly discreet, almost intimate, like a whisper, is at play in their works, which refuse any kind of spectacle. It is vital to give them an extra degree of attention – to “strain our eyes,” just as we sometimes strain our ears. Otherwise, we might miss them.

At the end of the 1950s, both artists carried out numerous experiments relating in particular to the works of Piet Mondrian, as we have seen above, and of Georges Vantongerloo. This was a period in which the language of the two Argentineans grew more concentrated and distinct,

² I set out to define this trend of perceptual art in my PhD thesis “Phénoménologie et seuils de la vision dans l’art optique et cinétique depuis 1913” (Phenomenology and Thresholds of Vision in Optical and Kinetic Art since 1913) and my Master’s courses at the Sorbonne in Paris, and then as curator of the exhibition “DYNAMO. A Century of Light and Motion in Art. 1913-2013,” at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in Paris in 2013, which brought together the works of 143 artists over nearly 5,000 square meters.

mainly in reaction to the formalist and colorful chatter characteristic of the spirit of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in Paris, where most of the artists linked to abstraction exhibited at the time. The refusal of the said Salon to include Yves Klein's first monochromes in 1955 is significant in this respect: abstract art was becoming a new formalism. Klein said he was "delighted not to be an abstract painter." Aware of this new territory to be explored, at the end of the 1950s Luis Tomasello began making his first trademark reliefs, which he soon started calling "Chromoplastic Atmospheres." In these, natural or electric light bounces off the brightly painted undersides of polyhedra that are arranged in a regular grid and in high relief, that is, with more than half their volume protruding, across the support. This color is immediately projected onto the spotless plane of the ground.

It should be noted that similar developments were taking place around this time in the work of Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani, as they sought to get beyond the flatness of the painting in order to explore the intermediate category between painting and sculpture, namely the *relief*. Luis Espinosa, too, had long been involved in the rethinking of pictorial abstraction, notably as co-founder in 1945 of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención in Buenos Aires. Like Bridget Riley, he chose to respect the strictly "pictorial" constraint of the painting, a surface covered with a flat layer of paint, most often acrylic, but in order to transform this field from within, to make it a trigger for dynamic and spatial effects. This orientation was consolidated through personal encounters made during a first trip to Europe in 1951–52 with artists such as Georges Vantongerloo, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart and Max Bill.

Moving within the same intellectual nebula, Espinosa and Tomasello had a new, shared objective that was phenomenological in nature, integrating light and movement as flux – or halo – and not as images. This objective meant attacking stable form via the dematerialization and multiplication of geometric structures in a mode that was now spatialized, luminous and retinal. It followed of course that for these two artists the artwork no longer belonged to the world of perspective and figurative illusion, but it was just as distinct from the mathematical-

materialist world of Swiss concrete art. Their pieces unfolded – and took on their full meaning – in the mysterious workings of the brain, now seen as a new territory for exploration and aesthetic conquest. Note that these elements were long neglected in the joint history of modernism and kinetic abstraction, despite eloquent proclamations made at the time, like Bridget Riley’s statement in 1965, that “perception is the medium.” And there another victim of this work of deconstruction carried out by the two Argentinians that needs to be recorded: the single form as the central and unified subject of observation, itself static and passive.

It is the viewer who, by actively moving and changing their viewpoint, is the real driving force behind the work here, as distinct, notably from the works of Alexander Calder or Jean Tinguely, which are animated either by air currents or electrical current. This perceptual factor allows the work to unfold in real time and space, despite being static. It was in this spirit that in 1968, as part of a group exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Espinosa presented a set of eighteen large-format square paintings that he arranged regularly on the walls and floors of the institution. The variation of the chromatic scale, in which each shape generated its own echo, was perceptible not only within each painting, but also and above all as visitors moved through the real space, from one painting to another. As a result of the installation’s dynamogenic property, the architecture as a space of movement and the viewer’s body, active and mobile, were now an integral part of the work. The reality of the paintings was twofold: material (a painted canvas on a stretcher) and perceptual (a halo, i.e. a pure undulatory, luminous phenomenon).

It was around 1958–59 that the first outlines appeared of the formal logic that characterizes the mature work of both these artists whose works are on display today in Houston. It was then that they voluntarily limited themselves to the “good forms” of the Gestalt that are immediately accessible to perception, namely, the circle and the square. But it was a significant change: the flat surfaces and strict contours of concrete art are still there, but deployed and dissolved, one might say, in a distributed set of modules that answer each other in

countless lumino-chromatic echoes. These question nothing less than the phenomenological and semantic limits of the work. The overlays and delays are amplified by the way the bright, dense colors fade into softer, dull or translucent values. Such a system creates a specific depth of field, distinct from the illusionist gradations of the Renaissance (one thinks for example of the treatment of mountainous landscapes used as backgrounds). To be more precise, we are dealing here with a kinetic, spatialized and temporalized posterity of the “thin space” or the “flat depth” that was analyzed in the paintings of Mondrian and Pollock. The fading echoes that we are dealing with here, whether of form (circles and squares in Espinosa’s work; regular polyhedra and their shadows in Tomasello’s³) or color, allow us to see the work of the two Argentineans as constituting a singular pictorial precedent for Robert Irwin’s famous mural relief (*Untitled*, 1967-68, Musée National d’Art Moderne-Centre Pompidou). Comprising a convex disc – a lens – in Plexiglas painted with acrylic lacquer, firmly fixed to the wall like a painting or a relief, the object is surrounded by multiples of itself cast on the wall by four spotlights. This work accomplishes the synthesis of the issues raised by our two protagonists in the form of an installation. A particular tension is key to the work of these two artists: while its medium remains materially static, the consciousness of immobile elements can prove to be intrinsically kinetic. This was noted by Rudolf Arnheim as early as 1957, when he emphasized that the viewer “receives [...] the visual image of the surface shapes, which acquire their dynamic character as the image is processed by the observer’s nervous system.”⁴ Phenomenological awareness was very much in the air and, two years earlier, during the exhibition “Le mouvement” at Galerie Denise René, the critic Roger Bordier responded to the painted wooden reliefs of Jesús-Rafael Soto and those in silk-screened glass by Victor Vasarely by defining “optical movement” not as a mobility of the

³ Tomasello even expresses his wish to allow the viewer to “put his head behind the cubes” and thus literally project himself into the atmosphere of the relief (Luis Tomasello, quoted by Patrick d’Elme, “La lumière de Tomasello,” *Cimaise*, no. 98, September–October 1970, p. 53).

⁴ . Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form* (lecture, 1957), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1977, p. 212.

work itself but as a transformation, effected by the movement of the viewer and the modification of his field of vision⁵.

Steeped in such principles, Espinosa and Tomasello were therefore emphatically in line with the kinetic tendency, even though they rejected the use of new materials,⁶ the physical mobility of the object and the reference to a cybernetic model. Theirs was a kineticism that grew out of post-constructivism. Thus Tomasello's polyhedra painted on their underside, although subordinate to the plane of their support (a wooden panel or picture wall, as in the present exhibition in Houston), and Espinosa's paintings, devoid of relief or electrical artifice, plunge the observer into the mysteries of a subtle optical layering in which the retina wavers and becomes unseated, losing its assurance. The mechanics of our spatio-visual perception are then revealed to the consciousness, and these are nothing less than the central pivot of our sensory relation to the world. Such a way of thinking, which for these artists was deeply didactic, is more topical than ever today, when the hypnotic illusions of our screens are, in an obviously harmful and dangerous way, edging us towards disembodiment and insularization.

⁵ Roger Bordier, "Propositions nouvelles: le mouvement, l'œuvre transformable," *Aujourd'hui, Art et Architecture*, no. 2, March-April 1955, p. 15.

⁶ With the exception of the chemical pigments they used for their luminosity.