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The Wondrous Realities of Xul Solar
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Xul Solar, *Untitled*. Catalogue Raisonné #234, p. 107, c. 1919. Watercolor on paper, 6 × 6 in.

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The Wondrous Realities of Xul Solar

I. The polyglot library

Argentine artist Xul Solar carried a significant number of books that he carefully gathered during a twelve-year nomadic sojourn in Europe. His polyglot yet condensed library, which included literature, history, science, philosophy, and the history of religions, was praised by writers, intellectuals, and fellow artists who found fresh sources of knowledge that encouraged them to expand the boundaries of the philosophical Western canon. As a systematic astrologist, occultist, and advanced practitioner of magic close to Aleister Crowley as well as an accomplished translator, Xul began to write his visions in Neo-Criollo, an artificial language that he invented in the 1920s. Despite Neo-Criollo becoming more abstruse with time, it was the language that he chose for merging his musings about cosmic journeys with his dedicated practice of painting in watercolor and gouache. Moreover, his writings called *San Signos* unlocked an imaginary dimension that draws a subtle line of correspondence between the limits of language, art, and his visions represented through fantastic creatures and extraordinary landscapes and cityscapes as well as the glow of nocturnal light. Like Antonin Artaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Georges Bataille, Xul Solar explored cruelty, which he projected to the unfathomable spiritual territories of the dwellers of the underworlds as an unfiltered and raw dimension of civilization that escaped the rules of morality and society.

Part of Xul's library caught fire after the artist's death in 1963, destroying several books and papers. Nonetheless, his writings in notebooks and typed manuscripts are preserved in his archive to attest what the occultist and poetry scholar Aleister Crowley's advised him: "a vision should have a definite artistic form, like a poem."

II. The creation of a new world

Despite Xul moving constantly from one city or town to another, from Italy to Germany, England, and France, he spent a lot of time in Paris where radical aesthetic ideas arose in tandem with societal agitation. There he met members of the international avant-garde including Crowley and artists Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani. Accounts of fellow Argentine artists who witnessed Xul's social interactions in the French capital described him as an

eccentric cosmopolitan who felt at ease among the greatest figures of modern art while maintaining his idiosyncratic identity as a Latin American visitor.

Xul returned to Argentina in 1924, not long after the war and the devastating cycle of death from the Spanish flu, which took the lives of millions of people including artists Guillaume Apollinaire, Gustav Klimt, and Egon Schiele. He returned to his southern motherland by ship the very year Surrealism was founded in France by André Breton, Philippe Soupault, and Louis Aragon, writers who aimed for a creation of a new image of the world after the catastrophic period. That year also marked the founding of *Martín Fierro* magazine in Argentina. In parallel, Xul and his fellow friend and artist Emilio Pettoruti, who lived in Italy, planned to go back to South America to refound mankind from its ashes in the land of the future. Xul's foundational program pointed to the recovery of autochthonous sources of knowledge that started with the original languages of America (Tupí-Guaraní, Quechua, Nahuatl, and Maya) and their concomitant systems of belief and devotional practices. Shortly after he absorbed all the possibilities offered for an avant-garde artist in Buenos Aires, he began to translate texts to Neo-Criollo, teach astrology, and participate at a congress of the Tupí-Guaraní language. According to Jorge Luis Borges, Xul invented twelve religions in one morning.

III. The (re)invention of Buenos Aires

If Breton and Aragon's Surrealist poetics acknowledged the tactical importance of remapping the city after the war and the pandemic through the creation of new urban mythologies (established in *Nadja* and *Paris Peasant*), the national avant-garde movement that began in Argentina in the 1920s also put the center of its gravity in Buenos Aires. It is known that, between 1918 and 1919, Marcel Duchamp resided in the Argentine capital, a few years before the irruption of *Martín Fierro* magazine. According to the ten letters sent by Duchamp to friends, he left the southern capital prompted by the city's bigotry, lack of vibrancy, and insular provincialism. He stated that Buenos Aires did not exist. However, following Duchamp, other notable members of the Surrealist avant-garde such as ethnographer Alfred Métraux, actress Renée Jeanne Falconetti, and sociologist Roger Caillois established themselves in Buenos Aires during a period when psychoanalysis became the Argentine secular religion.

In contrast to Surrealism, the Argentine avant-garde movement picked the name of a gaucho from the Pampas as a rubric for a publication that blended the creative efforts of artists, intellectuals, and writers whose debates, according to Beatriz Sarlo, were shaped by nationalism, cultural heritage, and the local artistic and literary production in relation to the Western canon, and explored new formal approaches to the aesthetic of realism and socialism. Within this context, Xul, who was a member of the *Martín Fierro* group and magazine until its dissolution in 1927, years later was the model used by Leopoldo Marechal in his novel *Adán Buenosayres* to navigate metaphorically the labyrinthic city. A satire of Buenos Aires and its nationalist avant-garde, Marechal's novel depicts Xul as Schultze, an as-

trologer who appears as a Virgilian figure who descends to the hell of Cacodelphia and creates an artificial language. Despite the acerbic sarcasm about Xul's experimental vocation, he was an artist central to the 1967 Surrealist exhibition organized at the Centro de Artes Visuales del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella by Aldo Pellegrini. For Pellegrini, the plastic movement in Argentina started with Xul, a precursor and independent creator whose imaginative visions nurtured by ancient myths are the core of the purest forms of poetry and humor. Along with his close friend Jorge Luis Borges, Xul is perhaps the artist who makes most visible the mysterious charms of Buenos Aires.

Gabriela Rangel

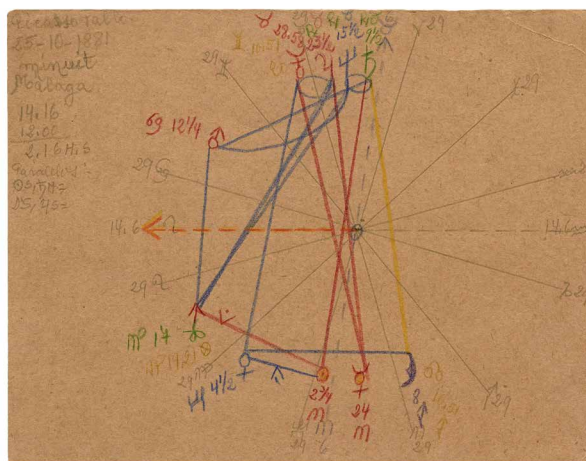
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Xul Solar, *Intentos de equilibrio*. Catalogue Raisonné #883a, p. 399, 1950. Watercolor and ink on paper, 12 × 8 in.



Xul Solar, *Paisaje*. Catalogue Raisonné #897, p. 405, 1951. Watercolor on paper mounted on cardboard, 10 7/8 × 12 in.



Xul Solar, *Astral chart for Pablo Picasso*. Paper, 4 1/2 × 5 3/4 in.



Xul Solar, *Bichos*. Catalogue Raisonné #762, p. 328, 1935.
Color pencil on paper, 6 1/2 × 8 5/8 in.



Xul Solar, *Sierpes*. Catalogue Raisonné #766, p. 330, 1935.
Color pencil on paper, mounted on cardboard, 7 1/4 × 9 1/8 in.