
Maria de Fatima Morethy Couto Dr
UNICAMP, fmorethy@uol.com.br

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas
Part of the Contemporary Art Commons

Recommended Citation

Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto*  
*University of Campinas (UNICAMP)

Abstract

This paper calls attention to a network of artists, dealers, and critics from Europe and South America thanks to whom, from the 1950s to the early 1970s, Paris and London welcomed and fostered a certain form of South American avant-garde art. Accordingly, it discusses the European reception given to five South American artists active in Paris and London —Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Sérgio Camargo, Jesús Rafael Soto and Julio Le Parc—whose artistic practices were sometimes related to kineticism. It highlights the impact they had on the European art scene, as well as the role of several cultural agents who were their interlocutors by retracing the micro and mass circulation of their works through an analysis of contemporary publications, particularly art magazines.

Résumé


Why won’t you see my occidental side?
No need to be afraid,
No need to be shy,
Every day is a day to live
I am from South America
I know, you wouldn’t know
But I am a cowboy now,
I am gold, I am you all,
I am the world, I am Minas Gerais

For Lennon and McCartney
Milton Nascimento

Soy loco por ti América

This article relates to the research I developed in 2015 as a visiting academic at TrAIN/University of the Arts, London, with a grant from FAPESP, and at the INHA, Paris, as chercheur invité, and which had the main objective of retrieving indications and records of South American artists related to constructive/kinetic art spending time in London and Paris, between the 1950s and 1970s.¹

Focusing on the reception and presentation of their works by European critics and on the comments caused by the exhibitions in which they featured, I intended to assess their impact on this context and discuss the role of certain cultural agents who served as their interlocutors. Despite the fact that both the space occupied by these artists and the prominence of their work in those places at the time were relatively small, I would remind you that these comments and exhibitions are repeatedly cited in local narratives with the aim of confirming the precocious recognition of these artists on the international stage.

Although one cannot deny the existence or importance of cultural initiatives of an official nature, promoted by governmental institutions, embassies or consulates, with the objective of stimulating the political role that art can fulfil in diplomatically bringing South America and European countries closer together,² my research was not focused on retracing any two-way (Europe/South America) political or cultural strategies, driven by precise interests, which could also be found in that period. On the contrary, I was interested in investigating the reach of a network that was created predominantly from the mobility of artists and critics, and that was capable of affording exposure, albeit partial, to a daring and original art, without resorting to stereotypes, essentialist analyses or preconceived visions. I also sought to understand whether this network was built by chance or whether precise interests guided those involved in its development. As we shall see, the name of several of these artists was then related to kineticism, both by cultural agents wishing to quickly construct a history for the movement or truly interested in the work of the South Americans. At that time kinetic art was rapidly growing throughout Europe and the term kineticism was still under construction by different groups, which had a common interest in new forms of expression that went beyond painting and cut across the boundaries defining the visual arts.

This article is not an attempt to (re)construct a history about forgotten or misunderstood artists or to bring to light works that sought to challenge the pillars of European thought or to deal with issues related to our colonial past. The artists discussed here were part of a generation that broke away from the modernist doctrines, markedly nationalist and of a narrative, figurative nature, which were prevalent in South American countries until the late 1940s. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War different avant-garde circles of the continent sought to break away from the representative character of art and to adhere to an abstract language of constructive content and European origin, aimed at the autonomy of form and guided by the intention to grant art the power to transform social instances to build a new society. As pointed out by Ariel Jiménez, “those artists considered their oeuvres a response to problems raised by the painting of their time and, therefore, a genuine

¹ The post-doctoral research was conducted from October 2014 to September 2015, including a stay in Paris in June and July 2015.
² In February of 1965, for instance, the exhibition Brazilian Art Today opened in the Royal College of Art of London. It was one of the many official shows that could be seen in Europe which were organized in order to disseminate a celebratory view of the art made in South America.
On the other hand, new pressing questions were raised in the following decade in several countries of South America. Increased political tensions would affect the cultural world directly, motivating artists, critics, and intellectuals to reflect upon their social responsibility and the need to take on a more important and representative political role. The political discourse will then prevail over the prevalent modernization ideas of the 1950s, and many found themselves in a tight spot.

Whereas at that time these artists remained at the threshold of the international art scene, today most of them enjoy international recognition. I must acknowledge that this came about, primarily, due to reasons that are not related to the pioneering action of the critics and cultural agents studied here, but rather due to the growing interest of the international art market and hegemonic cultural institutions in art produced in culturally distant countries and in new and instigating products.

By expanding my pool of analysis to beyond Brazilian artists I sought to contribute toward a broader vision of this network of exchanges and interchanges, since there is still very little research done about the connections between Brazilian artists and their counterparts from other South American countries, who also lived and showed their work in Europe from the 1950s to the 1970s. Discussions about the exhibitions here mentioned, or reference to the interest in the work of these artists in Europe, are mostly seen in papers dedicated to each artist individually or to artists grouped by their origins (Brazilians, Venezuelans, Argentineans and so on).4

However, the idea that it is possible to think of Latin American art (or even South American art) as a coherent field, susceptible to one, unified interpretation, is no longer sustainable and has been questioned for some time. This notion has turned out to be a construction based on identity values that are founded on the desire to be different from the equally imaginary ‘other’, and it is not capable of covering, without subterfuge or simplifications, the complex and dynamic cultural production of artists who were born or reside in this region. Nevertheless, it has been repeatedly used, especially among curators of major museums, for a variety of reasons, not all critical in nature, as Daniel Quiles and other researchers have already demonstrated.5

As noted by Guy Brett, who was then one of the few European critics committed to showing the originality of the work of South American artists,

The images of Latin America as a whole generated in Europe or North American are influenced by distance, by the interests of different specialists, by the media, and by a romantic projection whose vision of Latin America seems to see-saw between paradise and hell. Despite changing emphases, these are relentlessly homogenizing images, which cover over the international distinctions of class and race, region and culture. The result is a polarization (here/there, we/they), rather than the kind of dynamic complexity which would set up comparisons with our own culture.6

Brett and some other critics sought to find a third way, which went beyond "homogenization and polarization" and were able to take an approach that was both generous and thorough when writing about works of art that they did not entirely comprehend. They found (or created) a

---

1 On this subject, see, for instance, Daniel R. Quiles, "Exhibition as Network, Network as Curator: Canonizing Art from ‘Latin America,” ART@S Bulletin 3, 1 (Spring 2014): 62-78. However, we should not forget that after the Cuban revolution, and especially in the 1970s, some artists explored a more critical perspective of identity and used the term Latin America in a different sense, of integration and resistance in face of the North American political domination. As Aimé Lukin points out, discussing the 1971 Manifesto book, Contrabienal, there were a network of Latin American artists living in New York at the time who saw themselves as a community and tried to offer “a different vision of ‘Latin American art’ than the one then prevalent in hegemonic institutions and international biennials, one linked to a new identity premised on shared political goals and ideals.” Aimé Iglesias Lukin, “Contrabienal: Latin American Art, Politics and Identity in New York, 1969-1971,” ART@S Bulletin 3, 2 (Fall 2014): 69-82.


3 As we shall see, there are some exceptions to this rule.

niche in certain avant-garde publications, which turned out to be experimental forums devoted to contemporary art and which should be equally highlighted for their importance in this context. There was, however, no programmatic intention aimed at promoting exclusively a South American or Latin American art that led the artists I have selected to put on solo exhibitions in London or Paris during that period.

Finally, I would like to underline that even though I write about South American artists who shared similar interests, I don’t see them (and, more importantly, they did not consider themselves) as a “community” or a homogeneous group. Thus, I sought to avoid an all-encompassing, continuous narrative, and attempted to demonstrate the differences not only between the artworks and proposals of the artists, but also between their professional trajectories and how these differences affected the reception of their work at the time.

“My time has come and I think yours has too”: Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica in Europe

“I think it’s long been time for you to come, for over there (Brazil) was great for giving us material for our training, but in terms of work or thinking, it’s the end of the world, a hole,” wrote Lygia Clark in Paris to her friend Hélio Oiticica on 14 November 1968. “In my opinion,” Clark continues, “it’s absolutely necessary for you to come in any way. An artist like yourself, with the work you have, will be quickly recognised and look, in my case, had I come later, it may not have been any use at all. My time has come, there's no doubt, and I think yours has too.”

Lygia Clark (1920-1988) had been in Paris since September. She had lived in Europe previously, most recently in 1964, when she had established contact with artists, critics and intellectuals who would play key roles in the recognition of her work on the European scene. She had exhibited in Stuttgart (Technische Hochschule) in February 1964, in an exhibition organised by philosopher Max Bense, and at the Signals gallery in London in May and June 1965. In those same years she had partaken in collective shows in France (Arras Museum and the Denise René gallery) and in the United Kingdom (Signals gallery, Royal Scottish Academy, in Edinburgh, and Kelvingrove Art Gallery, in Glasgow). These collective shows were predominantly dedicated to kinetic art, a movement with which her name was associated at the time in Europe.

In 1968, Clark’s work, especially her *Bichos* [Creatures], hinged aluminium plate structures, the shapes of which can be manipulated so as to resemble living organisms, had already attracted admirers and provoked reviews and commentaries in the international press. Her desire to encourage spectator participation, to grant spectators the power to act on the experience, to make them use their own energy do become aware of themselves and thus become co-authors of the work was praised by European critics, who considered this an original contribution. As well as the *Signals Newsbulletin* which had accompanied her 1965 solo exhibition, we should also highlight the 8-page dossier “Fusion généralisée,” in edition number 4 of the *Robho* magazine, in 1968, published in France by the critic Jean Clay and the poet Julien Blaine between 1967 and 1971. Both publications contain a series of photographs of Clark’s works, as well as texts she wrote and credible commentaries on her work. The *Signals Newsbulletin*, for example, published the translation of a long text by Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa, one of the early advocates of abstract art and the neoconcrete.

---


8 Philosopher with a background in physics and mathematics, greatly interested in semiotics and the arts, Bense made four trips to Brazil between 1961 and 1964, invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and established a rich exchange with the constructive artists working there, especially with the concrete poets (Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari). Professor at Stuttgart University, he organized different exhibitions of Brazilian artists in Germany (Almir Mavignier, Volpi, Lygia Clark, Mira Schendel, Noigandres group and others), and wrote a book about his experiences in Brazil, *Brasilianische Intelligenz. Eine kartesiansche Reflexion*, published originally in Germany in 1965.
movement in 1950s Brazil, entitled “The significance of Lygia Clark,” in which he highlights the constructive legacy of Clark's work and discusses “the revolutionary artistic experience” afforded by the *Bichos.* In Robho’s dossier, Jean Clay writes an elegant presentation of her work, based on the premise that it is ruled by the "necessity of a generalised fusion with the other (l’en face), by an obsession with synthesis, by a refusal of contradictions and categories." At the end, he concludes that as such, its experience is one of the most open to the future, one of the crossroads of current art.\(^9\)

Both these publications draw attention to the artist’s ideas and proposals: Clark is not portrayed in the position of the “other,” of the exotic artist and on the edge of the system; on the contrary, she is presented as an artist who speaks to and interferes in western tradition, as demonstrated in this comment by Paul Keeler, the owner of Signals:

In the past twelve months since I first saw her sculpture at Sérgio Camargo’s studio in Paris, I have been quietly astonished by Lygia Clark's ideas. My astonishment grows and grows paralleled in time by her constructions’ innate capacity for infinite change. Sociologically her works presage a future when the spectator ceases to be a mere passive agent before a work of art but instead becomes, with the artist, a co-creator. Aesthetically Lygia Clark has accomplished the difficult task of charging geometry with wit and visual poetry.\(^10\)

---

\(^9\) Mário Pedrosa was the first critic in Brazil to systematically defend abstract art (of a constructive tendency) since the 1940s, considering it one of the most powerful instruments for creating a new society. He acted as a mentor for the neoconcrete artists, who regularly gathered in his Rio de Janeiro apartment. He was also the interpreter and ambassador for the group, in Brazil and abroad, promoting their works, projects and ideas in articles, conferences and meetings. He saw the invitation for spectator participation as one of the main contributions of the investigations derived from neoconcretism.

\(^10\) Jean Clay was senior editor of the variety magazine *Realités,* published monthly in both French and English; a position he continued to hold even after the launch of *Robho.* He wrote several introductory texts for exhibitions held at the Denise René gallery and occasionally contributed texts to the magazine *Studio International.* He also wrote art history books, such as *De l'impressionisme à l'art moderne,* published in 1975 and taught art history at the University of Paris XIII. According to Cruz-Diez: “Jean Clay was a journalist with the magazine *Réalités,* for whom he wrote a series of pieces on the boom of Latin American artists in Paris. That was how we met and he started relating to us. He was the one who came up with the idea of starting the magazine *Robho,* along with the writer Alain Shifres, the poet Julien Blaine, and the journalist Christiane Duparc.” Ariel Jiménez, Carlos Cruz-Diez in conversation with Ariel Jiménez (Nova York: Fundación Cámara, 2010), 74. In 1976, together with Yve-Alain Bois, Clay would launch the art magazine *Ariel,* which would publish six editions. As we shall see, Clay was one of the great champions of a certain kind of kinetic art in France during the early 1960s and would become friends with Lygia Clark, helping her during her stay in France.

---

In the same issue, Signals’ readers could read Clark’s own words about the integration between subject and object and the significance of pure act in her work. On *Bicho,* for instance, she wrote that “each one is an organic entity completely revealed inside his inner time of expression. He is alive, and an essentially active work. A total, existential interaction can be established between you and him. And in this relationship there is no passivity, neither on your part nor on his.”\(^12\)

I should also mention an article that pays tribute to her in *Studio International’s* February 1967 edition, dedicated to kinetic art. The text, “Lygia Clark and spectator participation,” written by Cyril Barrett, author of studies into *Op art,* develops the discussion based on the artist’s 1965 exhibition at Signals, and weaves a series of observations on the relationship between her work and the kinetic propositions. In conclusion he compares Lygia’s work to the proposals of GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel), founded in Paris in 1960,
and states that “on the level of spectator participation Lygia Clark is the more solid achievement to date. Her objects give more scope for active and creative participation. With them the spectator doesn’t merely set a process, however brilliant and amusing, in motion, but follows it through and enters into it more deeply.”

It is also noteworthy that the artist featured prominently in the 1968 Venice Biennial, as part of the Brazilian delegation, organised that year by Brazilian critic Jayme Mauricio. Probably due to the success achieved by the Argentinean Julio Le Parc at the previous Biennial, Brazil seemed to put almost all its eggs in one basket, represented by Clark, and took 82 of her works in a retrospective of her 10-year oeuvre. The exhibition, presented in a separate room, brought together Superficies moduladas [Modulated Surfaces], two Ovos [Eggs], one Contra-relevo [Counter-relief], almost 30 Bichos and some Trepantes [Climbers], as well as relational objects, body-clothes (O eu e o tu and Cesariana), and environments, such as A casa é o corpo [The house is the body]. Therefore, although Clark still complained of financial difficulties, she no doubt enjoyed a foremost position in relation to other Brazilian artists and her contemporaries. And despite criticizing the provincialism of the art scene in Brazil, it must be highlighted that Clark was one of the protagonists of the neconcrete movement, created in 1959 to oppose the extreme rationalism of the Brazilian abstract avant-garde without relinquishing their relationship with constructivist ideas, with her work being intensively analysed and discussed in Brazil.\(^\text{13}\)

Oiticica (1937-1980), who also participated in the neconcrete movement, joining the group shortly after the launch of the Manifesto, was still an unknown name in the European circuit and was preparing to travel to London to put on a solo exhibition that was supposed to be held in the same Signals gallery in 1966. Following a strategy used by the publishers to spike some interest in artists who were to exhibit at the gallery, Signals Newsbulletin number 8 of June/July 1965 commented on some of his works, including Bólides n° 6, and highlighted his “desire to create an art of ambiential space, thereby surmounting the limitations of the conventional canvas support.” However, the abrupt closure of Signals, due to lack of funding, after two years of operation, meant that Oiticica was denied his exhibition on the scheduled date.\(^\text{14}\) Guy Brett, chief promoter of constructivist-leaning Brazilian art in London and contributor to Signals, managed to get the non-profit-making Whitechapel gallery to take on Oiticica’s exhibition, but the artist encountered a series of problems to complete it, from gallery director Bryan Robertson’s hesitation when faced with the daring audacity of the proposed exhibition design, to the lack of money to fund the project.\(^\text{15}\) Despite

\[^\text{13}\] Cyril Barrett, “Lygia Clark and spectator participation”, Studio International 886 (1967): 87. Barrett was a professor at the University of Warwick department of philosophy, in Coventry, and a specialist in Wittgenstein. In 1966 he had organised an exhibition about kinetic art at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, also in Coventry, which had featured works by Lygia Clark (Bichos) and Sergio Camargo (Reléveis abstratos). In 1970 Barrett published a book about Op Art by Studio Vista, the same publisher of Brett’s book on art.

\[^\text{14}\] Several books refer to a special Lygia Clark room at the Venice Biennial. It was actually a retrospective exhibition organized by the Brazilian delegation. Other members of the Brazilian delegation were sculptor Mary Vieira, with 10 Polyvolume, and the artists Farnese de Andrade, Anna Letycia Quadro and Ana Schendel, each with 12 or 13 artworks, including drawings, engravings and graphic objects.

\[^\text{15}\] The Neconcrete Manifesto, published in March 1959 in the jornal do Brazil, proposed “a new understanding of all so-called abstract art, of a geometrical nature, with the objective of eliminating scientific-like precepts that create[d] a barrier between that art and the public”. Its signatories intended to break away from the “dogmatism” of concrete art and its attachment to optical effects through focusing on the body, intuition and experimentation in artistic practice. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, they defended the notion that in art shapes love their...
the tense political situation of Brazil, following the military coup of 1964, the Ministry of External Relations (also known as Itamaraty) had promised to help the artist with his trip and with transporting the works, a promise it fulfilled. But in November 1968, when Clark wrote to Oiticica, Itamaraty requested exact details of the date of the exhibition to release the promised funds. A change in the Whitechapel gallery management at that very moment once more jeopardized the exhibition. Clark wrote to the artist to alert him of this change and advise him to “keep quiet, even if there is any doubt about the London exhibition” and to make the journey anyway.

Oiticica overcame all the practical obstacles and left for England early December 1968, just a few days before the Institutional Act 5 (AI-5), was passed in Brazil, granting the president the power to provisionally close Congress, intervene in the states and municipalities, revoke terms of office and suspend political rights. His exhibition, which deserves to be commented on here, would open in February 1969. Entitled The Whitechapel Experiment, it was designed as a “total environment,” the Eden Project, and not as a retrospective or succession of isolated works.

In my opinion it should be understood as an exhibition-manifesto, as it would demonstrate the artist’s rejection of "old forms of art" and his growing interest in "experiences that extended into the sensory field". Eden consisted of an integrated and completed occupation of the gallery space with old works – Nuclei, Penetrables (including Tropicália), Bólides and Parangolés – and new ones, such as Nests, “cells” to be inhabited. The exhibition would also include Snooker Room (Appropriation: Snooker Table, after Van Gogh’s “The Night Café”).

According to Guy Brett, who wrote the foreword for the exhibition catalogue:

Rather than a simple and mechanical form of behaviourism, Oiticica’s Eden was an invitation to play and reverie, whose ends were open and unconditioned. There were Bólides to be explored by hand, and sometimes by smell, cabins for solitary reverie and other, more communal spaces. There were Parangolés capes to be worn and dance in, and there were the Nestcells, a cluster of boxes each about a 2 metres by one, divided by veils, which the visitor was invited to make habitable with found materials of their own choosing and in their own way.¹⁹

---

In this space of shelter, experimentation and absorption, the participant, according to Oiticica, would construct “his world with the elements of his subjectivity,” based on the sensations aroused by the work, without conditioning or instruction. The artist is he who “proposes structures directly open to behaviour”, states Oiticica.20 “I had some ideas that I thought were too abstract, but suddenly they became real”, he wrote to Guy Brett when preparing his Eden Project. “Creativity is inherent to everyone, the artist would just inflame it, put fire, free people from their conditionement (sic) – the old way of looking at the artist as someone intangible is dead.”21

The Whitechapel Experience was of proven and great importance to Oiticica’s trajectory, for his program of future work. As the artist himself wrote, The Whitechapel Experience “confirmed many things for me, and knocked down many others, and leads me to the target of what to think and of where to go.”22 Of the neoconcrete group, Oiticica was one of the artists most concerned with ensuring his work carried a political dimension capable of interfering with the social makeup and of contributing to the creation of “a typically Brazilian culture, with its own characteristics and personality.” In his presentation text for the Nova Objetividade Brasileira [New Brazilian Objectivity] exhibition, held at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in April 1967, Oiticica defended the need for total participation of the artist, and the intellectual in general, in the events and problems of the country and the world.23 In his opinion, “aesthetics positions [had become] intolerable in our cultural panorama” and every artist must recognise their role in society.

Even so, as Michael Asbury notes,

London’s impact on Oiticica was profound. It brought an international dimension to his belief in non-institutional practices, but perhaps more importantly, readdressed his attempts at objectifying a Brazilian mythical character. Moreover, Oiticica experienced an ambivalent sense of identity in London. While totally engaged with Brazilian cultural dynamics, he suffered a common consequence of migration, the loss of belongingness.24

Indeed, his time in London represented the transition from the attempt to “create a synthetic face-Brazil”, by means of symbolically-loaded works, such as the Tropicália installation first presented at a 1967 exhibition (Nova objetividade brasileira) to a gamble on non-oriented experiences based on “unconditioned behaviour-situations” (using Oiticica’s own words). With the Eden Project, Oiticica gave shape to his concept of creleisure (a neologism that combines the senses of creativity, leisure and pleasure), with which he proposes the inversion of work (of art): leisure. Creleisure is a proposal of a suspended course of banal things, of modified behaviour in relation to art, of the removal of art from the field of the spectacle and consumption; for Oiticica it is about investing no longer in the execution of artworks, but rather in non-repressive, non-representative, creative leisure “which does not allow one to be bound by bourgeois values, does not subject one to mere fun, but seeks to free one from the human aspirations of the alienation of an oppressive world.”25 As Paula Braga points out:

Creleisure confirms Oiticica’s disgust with the ‘production of works’. (…) Concentration on leisure seems to be a strategy that Oiticica uses to take hold of time, without the oppression of fun-leisure which determines when, for how long and how to pause. (…) It is a proposition of dis-engagement, of transferring the behaviour in relation to art to an intransitive time, a strategy to try and insulate it from the spectacle and from consumption: to

---

20 Hélio Oiticica, A spirito ao grande labirinto (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1986), 120.
21 Letter from Hélio Oiticica to Guy Brett, dated 2 April 1968, written in English.
22 Archives of the Whitechapel Gallery.
23 Hélio Oiticica, Aspiri o grande labirinto, 114.
24 His text, “Esquema Geral da Nova Objetividade Brasileira” [General Scheme of the New Brazilian Objectivity], made history and became mandatory reference for any research on the period. In it, Oiticica profiles young Brazilian art, speaking of the "multiple experiences of the Brazilian avant-garde that could set it aside from the big dominant currents in the international realm (especially Optical and Pop Art). They were: a general will to constructive art; a refusal of the canvas and easel; an encouragement to the participation of observers [corporal, tactile, visual, semantic, etc.]; an urge to express opinions about political, social, and ethical problems; a tendency towards collective proposals, and a need to produce new concepts of anti-art. Oiticica, A spiri o grande labirinto, 84.
change the artwork into “the inventive leisure in art.”

The exhibition, however, split the English critics. In the written press, the exhibition was received with cool reticence. Most of the articles compared it negatively to others on show at the time and criticism was made of the artist’s ambitious objectives. Oiticica, on the other hand, was extremely satisfied with the results, not only in terms of the exhibition setup but also with the promotion and repercussion of his ideas in an environment that he himself considered more informed than Brazil. Bear in mind that the BBC made a small documentary about the show, which was broadcast on television. Furthermore, we should highlight the publication of Oiticica’s interview with Guy Brett in the March 1969 edition of Studio International, and the artist’s text “On the Discovery of Creleisure” in Art & Artists, in April the same year. In a letter to Brazilian artist Lygia Pape, Oiticica declares:

This is my first day off, as the gallery is closed. It has been three weeks of intense madness, especially after the opening, a week ago. Being with people has been even more exhausting than mounting the show. Total insanity. But I never dreamt that some of my ideas would be as well received as they were, nor that they would turn so well.

After London, Oiticica would spend three months in Brighton as a resident artist at the University of Sussex. He visited Lygia Clark in Paris, but failed to take an interest in the Paris scene, deeming it excessively competitive. Upon returning to England, he would comment in a letter to Clark that he “felt quite unhappy in Paris, and saw greatness in nothing.” In this letter he criticises the atmosphere of distrust and puerile competition he found in Paris, including on the part of his friend. He also mentions the conflicting relationship between other South American artists:

I have been thinking about things I believe are important to say here to clear all this up once and for all: this thing of always comparing my work to yours, trying to diminish the profound meaning of mine, annoys me and is really groundless: in my work I can establish relationships a posteriori or not with yours, but it owes nothing to your work, I owe nothing to anyone – I know what I do and think, which is why I have written [about his work] for years to make it all clear. (...) This competition bullshit, where you cite the case of Soto-Lo Parc, what I think is: it has no place in my world since I formulated the idea of Eden, and Creleisure: it’s an old thing, of the past, it belongs to the class of corrupt, oppressive thoughts which are the contradiction of what I want with Creleisure.

Seventeen years younger than Clark, Oiticica established a solid and fertile friendship with her, as shown by the countless letters they exchanged, but, as we can see, he defended the independence of his work and originality of his ideas. Thus, perhaps his rejection of the Parisian scene was also driven by his desire to escape from the shadow of his friend, who had already won over a small but faithful circle of fans and friends. Furthermore, Oiticica was fluent in English, but not in French, which also kept him in a position of less autonomy in France. In any case, as of late 1968 Clark began to work with Jean Clay on the organisation of a dossier about Oiticica in the magazine Robho. Oiticica even sent several of his texts to the French critic and anxiously awaited its publication that never happened.

Oiticica’s comments lead me to discuss here what the participation of both artists (Clark and Oiticica) in the European scene of the time meant to them. Upon leaving Brazil, they both had a solid, dense trajectory and believed in the potential of

---


27 Edwin Mullins, for instance, states in a Sunday Telegraph article on March 9th 1969, that “this may just be a sad case of Brazilian sensibilities brushing against Anglo-Saxon literalness; but I am afraid, Senhor Oiticica, that I would any day exchange your games for the ‘unplanned’ environment of a real beach, a real bed, real trees. To me your simulations echo the real thing as the National Boat Show echoes a summer day in the Solent”. Ian Dunlop, in his arts column of the Evening Standard, on March 3rd 1969, was less than enthusiastic: “To my mind Oiticica’s environments are suspect in theory – I do not believe this is the way to bridge the gap between art and life – and in practice they are only a partial success. For example, they come off poorly by comparison to some side shows at a funfair.”


---


30 In edition 5/6 of Robho, published in 1971, Oiticica’s work is commented on in a dossier dedicated to the body and the unity of the perceptible field (Unité du champ perceptif: interaction des corps: architectures vivantes: pivots humains: pratique tribale), together with the works of several other artists of various nationalities. This was the final edition of Robho.
their work and in the possibility of contributing to mainstream developments of contemporary art. Thus, unlike other South American artists committed to modernist doctrines who came to Europe throughout the 20th century in search of training or even inspiration, they left Brazil with the certainty that they would leave their mark in the European scene and expound new paths for other artists to follow. It was important to them, at that moment, to be in Europe in order to show their work and produce new ideas, but they were prepared to claim a central place in the contemporary art scene. At that time they failed to earn the recognition they sought, to the scale expected, despite having conquered admirers. Indeed, for a long time the works of both artists were left out of the main narratives of the history of western art; and would only recently be included, perhaps prompted by the retrospective exhibitions held at major European and North-American museums since the late 1990s. However, it should be underlined that this inclusion was by no means comprehensive and did not do justice to the vitality of Brazilian constructive art as a whole. In the compendium Art since 1900, edited by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, published in 2004, Clark is the only Brazilian artist to be given any distinction, in an entry that follows that for the Gutai group and which compares “the fate of the Japanese group with that of the neoconcretist movement.” Oiticica is mentioned in passing, as “the only major figure besides Clark to emerge from this movement,” which is not true. On the other hand, it should be noted that Clark’s and Oiticica’s ideas and actions led them to gradually distance themselves from the traditional art circuit and focus on other forms of engagement, which certainly contributed to this prolonged silence.

Later on, Oiticica would also expound criticisms of the London circuit and of England, a country which he deemed to be “much more conservative than is thought”. He returned to Brazil in January 1970, but did not want to “make any appearances or do anything public, for that would be to make a pact with the regime,” which had already become extremely repressive and made systematic use of torture and persecution of its opponents. He was then invited to participate in the Information exhibition, which would become a milestone in the history of experimental exhibitions, and so travelled to New York in July. There, Oiticica occupied a large room with new nests, which were bigger than those of Eden and more like those he constructed in collaboration with students during his residency at the University of Sussex. In the text he wrote for the catalogue, Oiticica makes it clear that he is not there “representing Brazil, (…)”

31 There is a long list of South American artists who left for the major European centres in the 20th century in search of “training” (understood here in broad sense). In many cases these artists wished to achieve some recognition for their work abroad with the aim of leveraging their career on home soil. We can cite, for instance, Brazilian modernist artist Tarsila do Amaral’s trips to Europe. Tarsila decides “to become modern” after meeting the group of modernists in Brazil who organized the Modern Art Week (Semana de Arte Moderna) in 1922. Yet, she goes to Paris with the intention of finding new masters who help her to broaden her artistic repertoire. There, she takes classes with Léger, Gleizes and Lhote, and realises the interest of the French avant-garde in primitive aesthetics. She therefore decides to focus on Brazilian themes and puts on her first two solo exhibitions in Paris (1926 and 1928) before presenting her modernist works to the Brazilian public in 1929. In April 1923 she writes from Paris to her parents: “I feel more and more Brazilian: I want to be a painter from my land […] Do not think that this Brazilian trend in art is looked down upon here. On the contrary, what people want here is for each one to bring some contribution from their own country. That explains the success of the Russian ballet, the Japanese engravings and black music. Paris is fed up with Parisian art.” Aracy Amaral, Tarsila. Sua obra e seu tempo (São Paulo: Edusp and Edições 34, 2003), 119.


33 Hal Foster et al., Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (Nova York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 375-378. Indeed, since then other foreign researchers have discussed more thoroughly the work of Brazilian constructive artists, but mostly in academic papers or in a few exhibitions catalogues.

34 One should bear in mind that Bois met Clark in Paris in the 1970s and wrote a brief piece about his relationship with the artist and the impact of her work for the magazine October 69 (1994) and Artforum International (January 1999), and also for the catalogue of the exhibition Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001).


36 The exhibition was curated by Kynaston McShine and took place from July to September 1970. It was one of the first exhibitions of contemporary art organized by a major Western museum, which included a number of artists form outside Europe or North America. In a letter to Lygia Clark, Oiticica writes that “he thought it important to participate in this, although there is no more sense in exhibiting in museums or galleries, but the idea of the exhibition is to inform about international things related to ambience, etc.” And he goes on: “they have given me a room (I was one of three to get a big room; the rest of the exhibition is made up of films and written information) and I thought it would be ridiculous and pretentious to refuse, as it is crazy to think that anyone in the States knows anything about me; you know how it is there, as long as you haven’t appeared there in loco you don’t exist; and there is no more central and essential place to appear than in the NY MOMA; [...] I think that it will be more important than Whitechapel”. Letter from Hélio Oiticica to Lygia Clark, dated 16 May 1970. In Figueiredo. Lygia Clark. Hélio Oiticica. Cartas, 145.
the country that simply doesn’t exist”, and take a clear political stance:

It is important that the ideas of environment, participation, sensorial experiments, etc., be not limited to objectal solutions: they should propose a development of life-acts, and not a representation more (...) - my work led me to use forms of accidental leisure as direct elements for this approach to a new opening (...) - of course these are still introductory propositions for a much wider aim: the total communal-cell activity - what happens is that these leisure-form propositions can concentrate immediately on individual situations, they are universal (wholly experimental) and this matters a lot concerning Brazilian activity (the country where all free wills seem to be repressed or castrated by one of the most brainwashed societies of all time), they can be exported and act intensely with different forces in Brazil and other places.37

A few months later Oiticica was awarded a fellowship grant by the Guggenheim Foundation. He moved to New York in November 1970, where he would live until 1978.38 His New York experience would be rich and intense; his work would once and for all overflow beyond the limits of artistic institutions, aimed at common living space, be that the street, or private shared space. In 1971, in a letter to poet Augusto de Campos, Oiticica would say that “Americans really are more intelligent and know more about our things, impossible to compare with England.”39

Clark, meanwhile, remained in Paris until 1976, but progressively moved away from the art scene and into a therapeutic activity, motivated by the collective experiences she developed with her students from the newly-created UFR d’Arts Plastiques et Sciences de l’Art de Paris 1 (known as Saint Charles), where she began lecturing from 1972, and also by her own personal experience with psychoanalysis, while under the therapy of Pierre Fédida. In letters to Oiticica, sent in the early 1970s, Clark continues to comment on her financial problems, on the sale of her works and on her project of producing multiple artworks in order to survive. Jean Clay would be of great help to the artist at this time, helping her sell a work to the Grenoble museum and “arranging for her to work in a clinic in Loire, which is the most advanced clinic of France, where [Françoise] Dolto works, as well as other interesting professionals who are working with the body.”40 In May 1970, Clark expresses disagreement with her friend’s stance, of being against galleries and museums. In her opinion, this position “will not lead to anything positive, apart from the creation of a new elite, and as I have always struggled against that I reject all pressure on me in that sense. (...) Personally I am up for anything. I do my propositions wherever I am invited, on the street, at home, and even in hell, if it were possible!”41

Kinetics, despite it all: South American artists and the language of movement

Another Brazilian artist who exhibited at Signals was the sculptor Sérgio Camargo (1930-1990). With a more classic oeuvre, compared to Clark or Oiticica, and working independently, Camargo sparked the attention of European critics in collective shows with his abstract reliefs, built on the juxtaposition of wooden cylinders cut in different ways. He had won the international sculpture prize at the Paris Biennial [Biennale des Jeunes] of 1963 and would be equally awarded at the 1965 São Paulo Biennial with the national sculpture prize. Between 1965 and 1967, Camargo would produce the first of a series of public works, Muro Estrutural [Structural Mural], a 25-metre, white concrete construction, composed of jagged, angular protrusions, for the auditorium of the

38 The Brazilian military regime came to an end only in 1985, but underwent a slow loosening process as from 1978, when President Ernesto Geisel revoked AI 5. Several exiled activists and émigrés then returned to Brazil under the promise of amnesty.
41 Letter from Lygia Clark to Hélio Oiticica, dated 20 May 1970. In Figueiredo. Lygia Clark. Hélio Oiticica. Caxias: 151-152. It should be noted that she would partake in some collective shows in Paris once in a while, such as the 1969 Salon des Réalités Nouvelles.
Palácio do Itamaraty, in Brasília. In addition to the quality of his work, I would like to underline the key role Camargo played in building this network of affinities and common interests that established several bridges for South American artists between Paris and London in the 1960s and 1970s. In various texts on this subject, Guy Brett cites the importance of a visit that he, Paul Keeler and the Filipino artist David Medalla, another of the driving forces behind the Signals gallery, paid to Sérgio Camargo in 1964 in Paris, where Camargo had lived since 1961. According to his account, it was Camargo that made them realise the "extraordinary group of artists that was emerging in Brazil in the 1950s":

Sérgio showed us the relevos brancos he was working on and, almost immediately, started talking about great Brazilian artists: Clark, Oiticica, and Mira Schendel, among others. It was a happy meeting in many aspects: not only because we discovered Camargo’s work, but also because of his knowledge and sensible interest for the work of other artists, without a trace of envy. (...) Paul Keeler immediately offered him a show in London. Sérgio crossed the Channel many times in the mid-1960s.

For the Brazilians, therefore, Camargo would serve as a joining link and facilitator of contacts and opportunities. He would exhibit at Signals from December 1964 to January 1965 and, as per usual, his work was reviewed with great prominence in a Signals Newsbulletin. As well as several pictures, the bulletin also included translations from French of articles by Denys Chevalier (Camargo’s art of lyrical light, previously published in the magazine Aujourd’hui) and Karl K. Ringstrom (Camargo’s wood reliefs, which discussed his participation in the Paris Biennial) and a long text about the artist by Guy Brett (signed under the pseudonym of Gerald Turner). In the latter, Brett/Turner meticulously analyses his work and touches on a point that deserves highlighting here: the attempt to group together the work of several South American contemporary artists under the title of kinetic art. According to him:

Although South America is divided into countries with all the differences in the world between them, Camargo forms part of a generation of artists drawn from all over that continent who are evidently in the process of leaving their mark on Western art. What artists like Otero, Cruz-Diez, Soto and Camargo have done, and are doing is to revitalise the surface, the ‘wall-work’, by acting with extraordinary precision and refinement in the gap between painting and sculpture.

The association of Camargo’s work with kinetic art causes strangeness, as in Brazil this connection was never accepted; on the contrary, it was heavily criticised. Ronaldo Brito, for example, will say that the attempt to translate Camargo’s rhythmic seriality according to kinetic clichés was a weak reading, which did not take into consideration that his work was “maniacally inward looking (...), did not follow previous programs or order a strict study sequence”. Brito makes a single exception, and it refers to “Brett’s theoretical effort to revitalise the avant-gardes” in his 1968 book on the subject, Kinetic Art: The Language of Movement. Indeed, there Brett refrains from

---

42 Camargo had lived in Paris from 1948 to 1954. In this period, he attended the philosophy course at the Sorbonne and had contact with the artworks of artists who would become a reference for him, such as Brancusi, Vantongerloo, Arp and Laurens. He would live in Paris again from 1961 to 1973.


45 Ronaldo Brito, Sérgio Camargo (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2000), 26. It must be highlighted that, in Brazil, everyone recognises the importance and pioneering achievements of Guy Brett’s work in spreading the work of Brazilians in Europe, which perhaps justifies Brito’s proviso.
proposing a strict definition for kinetic art, preferring, on the contrary, to freely address the work of 17 young artists from distinct origins, including Camargo, Clark, Oiticica and Mira Schendel (an artist of Swiss origin who lived in Brazil and had also exhibited at Signals) who held “a shared feeling for space (...) a space which can’t be detached from the time in which it is revealed”.46 In Brett’s opinion, though, there were “obvious similarities of language between Camargo’s work and that of other kinetic artists, particularly in his reliefs which are halfway between painting and sculpture”:

Camargo is a sculptor who uses the form of the relief to disintegrate volume, to shatter it with light. The strong sense of volume doesn’t disappear but it becomes vague, atomised, continually changing the weight of its physical presence in reaction to changes in the quality of the light falling on it.47

Nevertheless, if we compare Camargo’s reliefs to Soto’s vibrant murals, the differences are significant, as in the case of Venezuelan artist the work, which and only takes place by means of relations that produce optical ambiguity, seems to dematerialize. Furthermore, through repetition of the same element, Soto seeks to create a vibratory state for the artwork as a whole.

Not by chance, the others artists mentioned by Brett/Turner on the note about Camargo - Otero, Cruz-Diez and Soto - also exhibited at Signals between September 1965 and March 1966. The interest held by the Signals gallery in an art of a less subjective character was made clear in a statement in its first bulletin that “we hope to provide a forum for all those who believe passionately in the correlation to the arts and Art’s imaginative integration with technology, science, architecture, and our entire environment.”48 As Isobel Whitelleg maintained, “the term kinetic captured this focus and was viewed as both an expansive category and a provisional name for a movement, occasionally tempered by alternatives, such as elemental, perceptual or environmental art.”49

However, they were not only interested in South American artists, and did not even see themselves as founders or members of a “kinetic league”, as they declared in December 1964, in a note about the exhibition that Brett was preparing for the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh (Art and Movement: An International Exhibition):

contrary to the misconceptions of certain misconformed critics, kinetic art is not the product of a league; it is, rather, the increasing sum of multiple creative endeavours by individual artists all over the world who are interpreting modern life (fluid and unpredictable, ever-changing and dynamic, elemental and mechanised) in the light of new aesthetic concepts and by using revolutionary forms.50

Years later, Brett would state that:

We did feel that the artists who showed at Signals represented the most modern that you could be, the most audacious and contemporary. Kinetic art arose at the same time as Pop art, so there were these two versions of things going on. We knew about Pop art but we were much more attracted to Kinetic art. (...) We thought we were going beyond painting and sculpture. I think it also seemed more exciting than Minimalism. Kinetic art had the capacity at least to fuse itself in the environment and to perhaps transform the environment, in connection with architecture and so on. On the first trip I made to Brazil in 1965, I came back through Venezuela, through Caracas. I met Alejandro Otero and he took us around to see the new University City designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva, an amazing integration of art and architecture. (...) Villanueva’s Aula Magna auditorium with Calder’s acoustic ceiling is one of the most beautiful spaces I’ve ever visited.51

During its two years of operation, Signals organised solo exhibitions by Takis, Marcello Salvadori, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesús Rafael Soto,
Alejandro Otero and Gerhard Von Graevenitz, as well as of the Brazilians Sérgio Camargo, Lygia Clark and Mira Schendel, and collective shows. This was a differentiated and diversified agenda, which was bold for the London scene and demonstrated, as Whitelegg indicated, that

Signals unfolded (in its comparatively short duration) by fostering in England an openness, an interest in artistic praxis as a collaborative phenomenon not bounded by ideological, formal or geographical lines (...) The challenge Signals set itself was to develop an ability to accommodate flexibly the contradiction and paradox embodied by the art of its time, and to meet that art on its own mutually transformative terms.52

Kinetic art had been well received in Europe, especially in France, as from the late 1950s. One of its first striking exhibitions, about which we shall discuss further, was held in 1955 in Paris at the Denise René gallery: *Le mouvement*, which featured works by Agam, Bury, Calder, Duchamp, Jacobsen, Soto, Tinguely and Vasarely. In the folder that was published for the show and became known as *Manifeste jaune*, texts by Vasarely, Pontus Hulten and Roger Bordier reflected on “the integration of sculpture and the conquest of dimensions superior to the plane,” on “the transformable work” and on “the four dimensions of kinetic art.” Ten years later, kinetic propositions had already “invaded” museums, occupied the urban space and won over fans and defenders, including collectors, intellectuals, art critics and marchands, in different European art centres.

In the United Kingdom, the interest in kinetic art was not limited to Signals and its contributors. In September 1966, the recently-opened bookstore-gallery Indica held the first GRAV show in England. As mentioned above, the magazine *Studio International*, with widespread circulation, published a dossier about the movement in February 1967, with short accounts given by several artists and theoretical texts by Frank Popper (The luminous trend in kinetic art), Stephen Bann (environmental art) and George Rickey (Origins of kinetic art). The front cover of this edition was by Soto. Also published in 1966 was the book *Four essays on Kinetic art*, which compiled texts by Bann, Popper, Philip Steadman and Reg Gadney.

For many, kinetic art represented a new attitude in relation to the future, for different, not always coinciding, reasons. The most enthusiastic about the emancipatory potential of the relationship between art and technology exalted its parallels with science and other fields of knowledge, as well as its easy integration with architecture and the modern city; others, however, underlined the critical character of the kinetic proposals, its capacity to blur traditional artistic codes, to demystify the role of the artist, to break away from the notion of unique work and trigger new sensations in the spectator.53

Although one could not speak of a unified movement, with precise conceptual axes, exhibitions and texts of the time sought to construct its history and demonstrate its potential. The years of 1965-67 were perhaps the most influential in terms of Kineticism, before the protests of 1968 in Europe broadened and radicalised the debate on the role of art and of the artist in society.54 Significant awards in major international contests such as the Biennials of Venice and São Paulo honoured artists associated to the movement, while also stimulating debate on the true reach of its proposals. Two big exhibitions held in the said years caused extreme controversy in the press and in the artistic scene: *Responsive Eye*, organised by William Seitz at the New York MoMA in 1965, over-promoting optical art and focusing on two-dimensional works, mostly by US resident artists and made for the event, and *Lumière et Mouvement*, organised by Frank Popper in 1967 at the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art [Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris].

53 On the subject of Kinetic art, see the many articles published by Arnauld Pierre in the last years.
54 The dissolution of some groups connected to kinetic art and the choice of a more combative and political work on the part of some artists would alter the focus of the debate. Evidently, this does not mean the end of kineticism. An example of the continued interest in kinetic art can be found in Agam’s intervention in the antechamber of President Georges Pompidou’s private apartment in the Élysée Palace.
gathering numerous artists, with no refined selection criterion. Also dating from 1967 is the publication of Popper's book *Naissance de l'art cinétique*, the result of his doctorate research on the topic. There, Popper tracks the origin of kinetic art back to the impressionist generation's interest in the question of movement and exhaustively discusses its development up to that point.

Several South American artists were pioneers and leading figures in the movement, actively contributing to its formation and international acclaim, including the already mentioned Alejandro Otero, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Julio Le Parc and Jesús Rafael Soto. Thinkers like Frank Popper, in the said book, or Stephen Bann, in “Unity and Diversity in Kinetic Art,” even alluded to a “new South American school,” discussing the spread of kinetic art in Europe in the 1960s, thus acknowledging the importance of the South American contribution to Kineticism. In this context, equally worthy of mention are the work of Brazilians Sérulvo Esmeraldo, who also lived in Paris at the time, and Abraham Palatnik. Others, like Lygia Clark and Sérgio Camargo, as we have seen, had their names temporarily associated to the movement, by cultural agents who were genuinely interested in promoting their work.

In *Kinetic Art: The Language of Movement*, Brett would emphasise the originality of Clark’s and Oiticica's proposals as regards spectator participation, considering them “a specifically Brazilian contribution to art, a kind of kineticism of the body” and pointing out that “they have gone right to the heart of the spectator's activity in dialogue with the work (...)” In my work, it’s not participation for participation and it’s not saying, like Le Parc’s group, that art is a bourgeois problem. That would be simple and linear. Nothing profound has such simplicity and nothing true is linear.

Oiticica would thank Brett immensely for mentioning his name in his book, which reveals the importance of promotion strategies for many of those involved. Beyond the differences and contradictions, it should be stressed that the term kineticism was then applied in different contexts and in a broad sense, and served to encompass works that revolved around the observer, brought the spectator to the foreground, and were no longer self-exhausting. This opening facilitated the assimilation and contributed toward the reception of the work of the artists discussed here. Some of them, however, would secretly express their disapproval of superficial comparisons. Clark, in particular, would emphatically reject the association of her work with the proposals of other artists who in that same period also encouraged spectator participation, such as Julio Le Parc and the GRAV group. In the same letter she had sent to Oiticica, on 14 November 1968, she indicates that any comparison or likening should be made with great care, as it may conceal the many differences that exist between the proposals in question:

Regarding the idea of participation, there are weak artists who cannot really express themselves with thought and therefore illustrate the problem. (...) In my work, it’s not participation for participation and it’s not saying, like Le Parc’s group, that art is a bourgeois problem. That would be simple and linear. Nothing profound has such simplicity and nothing true is linear.

Paris as the ideal market?

Whereas London was considered by most, with rare exceptions like Oiticica (or even the musicians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, who chose London for their political exile), a city one passes through, Paris still attracted great interest despite it already losing its prominent position as the art world’s capital in a new post-war configuration of the international scenario. If in the 1970s New York would become the place where many of our artists would choose to live, in the 1960s there were a good number of South American avant-garde artists, intellectuals and writers who

---

55 Bann’s text, in which he discusses at length the GRAV proposals, was published in 1966 in the book *Four essays on Kinetic art*, mentioned above.


continued to be fascinated by the cultural diversity in the French capital.

Here is what Brazilian painter Antonio Bandeira had to say in regard to this topic in 1964:

Paris is the ideal market. From there we are taken to all parts of the world by the buyers. Even to New York, because Americans do not care about these talks of crisis, and continue to see in Paris a good place to spend their dollars. Say what you will, an artist who is known in Paris is successful internationally.58

The Venezuelan Carlos Cruz-Diez also comments on the importance of being in Paris at that time:

People always ask me the same question: why did I go to Paris and not New York? In the 1950s and 1960s, France was a place where it was possible to debate about ideas within a global context of thought without borders, without racial or nationalist prejudices. (...) I arrived in Paris at precisely the moment in history when an entire generation, from all over Europe and Latin America, also came to Paris seeking to exchange ideas. As often occurs, our ideas had one very critical thing in common: all of us thought that painting had run its course.59

Of the artists mentioned up to now, it should be highlighted that Cruz-Diez, Le Parc and Soto established themselves definitively in Paris, while others, like Clark, Camargo and Esmeralda lived there for many years.60 Not all of them were friends, but many visited and followed with interest the works of the others.61 This number would become even bigger as the several countries of South America succumbed to dictatorial governments in the 1960s and 1970s and many artists would leave their countries of origin, under diverse conditions, in search of a more stimulating and less repressive environment, and also looking for new working opportunities in cities where the art circles were better structured. According to Isabel Plante, author of an in-depth study about Argentinean artists in Paris, "whereas in 1946 there were around 3,800 Latin Americans living in France, by 1968 there were more than 9,800. The number would double in the wake of the coups d’état in Chile and Argentina."62 On the other hand, there was a growing interest in France in Latin American art due to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, which fascination encouraged and promoted the recognised boom in Latin American literature at that time.

For some of these artists, joining this scene which was far more cosmopolitan and important in the international market than London, was made possible due to the interest of some art dealers and gallery owners, such as Denise René, in art with a constructive tendency and/or kinetic character. Denise René’s commitment to geometric abstraction and kinetic art would become renowned and lead her to creating a very specific programme of exhibitions over the course of decades, often featuring the works of South American artists and employing the same critics to comment on their works (Jean Clay, for instance, would collaborate regularly with René, writing several forewords for her exhibitions). With this in mind, I highlight two collective shows that she organised: about the Madi group, in 1958, that would call attention to the pioneering work of the Argentinean group in the history of kineticism - as would the magazine Robho a while later - and the first exhibition by the group GRAV, in 1961.

---

58 Therеза C. Alvim, "Antonio Bandeira e a arte na França: para o artista, Paris é como a sua casa”, Última Hora, Rio de Janeiro, August 28, 1964. Bandeira lived in Paris in three different moments of his life: 1946-51, 1954-59 and 1965-67, and he passed away in that city because of an unsuccessful surgery. 59 Jiménez, Carlos Cruz-Diez in conversation with Ariel Jiménez, 62. 60 Various Brazilian artists, of different aesthetic leanings, resided in Paris at that time. Among others, I can cite: Antonio Bandeira, Arthur Luiz Piza and Flavio Shiró-Tanaka. 61 As we saw above, Clark and Oticica remarked in their letters on the lives and works of other South Americans in Europe, not always in a positive light. Of the artists mentioned up to now, Clark would always refer to Soto with respect. Witness, for example, her comment in a letter to Oticica from 1964 but with no exact date: “Denise Rene’s group of artists is beautiful, but weak individually. Agam, Soto are still the best. Others, like Shofer (sic), Le Parc etc. etc. are extremely empty. In Arras, where I was exhibiting, it was the same thing. Vanzurelli (sic) a real bore, Pilet, the same. Guzman very weak, Marta Pan ditto, Cruz Diez the same drivel, Blok, no comment, another Venezuelan much better, although mega旭idant. The best were Soto, Sergio [Camargo] and myself”. About other artists and groups, such as the new French realists, her remarks (written in the same year of 1964) are biting: “The art defended by Restany is dead art: it always gives me the feeling of the very death of the object, of the bric-a-brac full of obscure and disgusting experiences. The crisis is generalised and terrible. You see everyone looking for originality through originality... badly-smelling organic materials (almost) made without the slightest sense of synthesis or transposition. It is absolutely another kind of naturalism of the worst quality – it is not art at all”. Letter from Lygia Clark to Hélio Oticica, 1964. In Figueiredo, Lygia Clark. Hélio Oticica. Cartas, 26.
62 Plante refers to information from the article written by Denis Rolland and Marie-Hélène Touzalin, "Un miroir déformant? Les latino-américains à Paris depuis 1945”. In Isabel Plante, Argentinos de Paris. Arte y viajes culturales durante los años sesenta (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2013), 228. 63 The Denise René gallery is inaugurated in 1944 on rue de la Boétie. In 1966, the second site is opened, on the Boulevard Saint Germain (rive gauche). In 1977, following the creation of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Denise René moves the base from rue de la Boétie to the environs of the city centre, on rue Saint-Martin. Other sites were also opened abroad: in Krefeld and Düsseldorf, together with Hans Meyer, and in New York.
However, compared to Signals, the Denise René gallery had a less experimental and clearly more commercial characteristic.

One distinguished name in the gallery, and certainly an incontestable promoter of kinetic art, was Venezuelan Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005). His participation in the 1955 exhibition *Le mouvement* was of particular relevance. According to Denise René, the idea of this exhibition stemmed from Vasarely and Soto’s name came to mind in virtue of some of his paintings they had seen in 1951, in one of the first *Salon des réalités nouvelles*. Subsequently,

Soto was entirely a part of the gallery team (….), which was strongly involved in the funding and execution of its large-scale works, especially those that required important technical resources and the help of assistants. (…) To execute some of the metal works we had to seek and select highly specialised workshops...⁶⁴

Soto arrived in Paris in 1950, at the age of 27, with a six-month grant from the Venezuelan government and in search of artistic education. He lived there until his death in 2005. According to his account, he had left his hometown of Ciudad Bolívar with some knowledge of impressionism and cubism. In Paris he discovered the work of Mondrian and the potential of abstract art of constructive content. According to his own statements, he decided to begin where Mondrian had left off, to go beyond formalism in order to make abstraction dynamic and alive. His situation, therefore, differed from that of the Brazilians examined here (Clark, Oiticica and Camargo), as his artistic career was almost entirely played out in France, although he then went on to influence new generations of artists in his native country and is continually cited whenever Venezuela constructive art is discussed.

During his first years in Europe, Soto would survive playing guitar in bars. The support of Denise René, who organised his first solo exhibition in Europe, in 1956, and showed his *Penetrables* first hand in 1967, was therefore essential and constant. Soto, however, would not take long to achieve great recognition for his work and would be a hotly disputed artist on the international commercial circuit. Unlike Clark, Oiticica or Le Parc, Soto never displayed any interest in assuming a critical stance in relation to the art system and its instances of legitimisation, although, like the others, he was interested in stimulating spectator participation through works that were perceived through relations between time and movement. Between 1956 and 1967, as well as featuring in several collective exhibitions in France and elsewhere, mainly dedicated to kineticism, his work would be shown in various art galleries: Iris Clert (1959), Édouard Loeb (1962), Kootz Gallery, New York (1965) and Signals (1965). The Signals exhibition, the artist’s first in London, featured more than 50 works including two large vibrant murals that covered two of the exhibition walls. On the other hand, Soto would refuse to participate in the aforementioned *Responsive Eye* exhibition, as he disagreed with its curatorial line.

The edition of *Signals Newsbulletin* dedicated to Soto and published in November 1965 emphasises the retrospective character of the show and the artist’s extensive production: *The achievements of J. R. Soto: 15 years of vibrations*. Soto is presented as “one of the most purely lyrical artists working today: each of his works has the self-sufficiency of a piece of music.” But also as one of the most thorough: “as he sought to express this lyricism solely through plastic means, the creative act for Soto has meant in part a rigorous process of aesthetic pruning.”⁶⁵ The bulletin contained the translation of a long biographical study written by Jean Clay (who then worked, as we have mentioned, as an art critic for the magazine *Réalités*), which covered four entire pages in tabloid format, as well as texts by Umbro Apollonio, Guy Brett, Frank Popper and Karl K. Ringstrom. There was also the transcription of an interview with the artist, given to Brett, as well as, evidently, several photographs of Soto and his


⁶⁵ Guy Brett, “Pure Relations”, in *Signals Newsbulletin* 10 (November/December 1965), 15.
works. In his text, Brett cites Soto in the list of South American artists who still invested in the modern and sought to conjugate clarity and sensibility. As usual, he underlined the originality of their proposals and their importance in the context of the time:

Perhaps because of their natural reserve and dislike of sensationalism, recognition has so far done little more than hover about the modern South American artists. Yet, taken together, the work of Otero, Soto, Cruz-Diez and Mira Schendel, among painters and draughtsmen, and Camargo, Lygia Clark, Guzman and Oiticica, among sculptors, amounts to an exceptionally exciting achievement, and one rich in possibilities. The most impressive thing about them is their clarity; conscious of a process of evolution in modern art, they have been able to extend it, welcoming equally nature and the spectator without sentimentality.  

Of the artists discussed up to now, Soto was certainly the one who achieved recognition in Europe of the greatest scale and in the shortest space of time, followed perhaps by Le Parc. His acclaim in the old continent would be confirmed in the late 1960s by the production of a large, itinerant retrospective show of his work, held from 1968 to 1969 in the cities of Berlin, Hannover, Düsseldorf, Amsterdam, Brussels, and concluded in Paris, with an exhibition which presented one hundred works, including one large penetrable, measuring 400 m², occupying the forecourt of the Palais de Tokyo (Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris). The foreword of the Paris exhibition catalogue was also written by Jean Clay and describes in details the evolution of the artist’s work, which proposes “a critical reflection on geometric painting, a check of consciousness of the physical evidences of the modern world.”

Commenting on Soto’s transition from the two-dimensional plane to the real space and his interest in using the body (and no longer the eye) as the privileged means of perception, Clay touches on the affinities between his work and that of Clark and Oiticica, demonstrating once more the desire to weave webs that congregated this group of artists.

For the 33rd Venice Biennial in 1966, Soto covered one entire wall of the Venezuelan pavilion with a panoramic vibrant mural, catching the eye of the critics and of the public. But it was to be another South American, also supported by Denise René, who would win the coveted Grand Prize: the Argentine Julio Le Parc (1928-). This was an unprecedented achievement for a South American, although the Brazilians Aldemir Martins and Fayga Ostrower and Argentine Antonio Berni had already been awarded smaller prizes. Julio Le Parc, who had founded GRAV in 1960, together with Horacio Garcia, Francisco Sobrinho, François Morellet, Joël Stein and Jean-Pierre Yvaral, was 38 years old and had lived in France for six years when he was awarded in Venice. His choice surprised everyone. In the words of Denise René:

The jury could not reach an agreement about a winner. There were heated arguments and I think that there had been five votes when rumours began to spread that the prize had been won by an outsider, the representative of a new movement. (...) Around seven p.m., when I returned to St. Mark’s Square, I saw that everyone was celebrating. People hugged me. They had to show me a piece of

---

66 Brett, “Pure Relations”, 15.
Le Parc was the only artist to represent Argentina in that Biennial. His rooms, assembled in the Gardens official space were, according to the news of the time, some of the most visited of the whole show. They contained works that drew on optical and kinetic resources with the aim of promoting spectator participation, whether by placing them in environments with different stimuli, particularly luminous, or by inviting them to manipulate objects that changed their visual perception, such as the Anteojos para un mirar otro [Spectacles for another view]. The assembly exhibited resembled that which Le Parc and other members of the GRAV had presented in the two previous editions of the Paris Biennial (1963 and 1965), namely, their Labirintos [Mazes] and Sala de Jogos [Games Room]. It was a collective work that intended to instigate the spectator into action by creating spaces of leisure and engagement—games for disorienting the perception, for deforming the surface or the reflection of the objects, for demonstrating velocity and vibration, etc.—where the playful would help in the transformation of individual and social behaviour.

In April 1966, a few months before the Venice Biennial, the group carried out a concerted action, known as Une journée dans la rue [A day on the street] at strategic points of Paris, where they mounted participatory devices, distributed texts and pamphlets, asked questionnaires, among other activities.

The prize awarded to Le Parc at the Venice Biennial did not extend to the group, which stirred considerable controversy. In Denise René’s opinion, the award generated two distinct results, representing at once the legitimisation of kineticism and the beginning of the end of the GRAV collective project, which dissolved as a group in 1968. For her, “the other artists from GRAV either considered themselves equally acclaimed or deemed that the prize had created an unjustifiable hiatus between Le Parc and them; which was quite true. That was what began to ruin the unity of the group.”

Isabel Plante, in her book Argentinos de Paris, discussed at length the effects of Le Parc’s award, not only for certain Argentinean cultural agents, that since the late 1950s had endeavoured to project Argentinean modern and contemporary art beyond its borders, but also for some French critics, who were able to relate it to the retrieval of a space of international exposure (and honour) for French art, since the artist lived in Paris. In 1967, Le Parc would receive from André Malraux, Minister of Culture of France, the honour of Chevalier des Ordres et des Lettres, which reiterated the importance of this prize in the context of French culture at the time. Jean Clay would even state that Le Parc’s award represented Paris’ revenge:

“... So much was said about France being on the fringe of the great modern art movements that it was...”

---

69 Millet, Conversations avec Denise René, 102.

70 Millet, Conversations avec Denise René, 102.
surprising to see that kinetic art practically emerged here in its entirety, developed right here and that it's here, within our walls that fifty-odd artists from all corners of the world – Latin America, Switzerland, Belgium, Israel – reconstituted, albeit much to the almost complete indifference of the museums and collectors, a new Paris School, a kind of secret society that adheres to a single idea: adding time to the arts of space.71

It was not by chance, therefore, when the first edition of the Robho avant-garde magazine, which as we saw would be published by Jean Clay and Julien Blaine between 1967 and 1971 in Paris, brandished a front cover with photographs of Soto and Le Parc. At the same time that it celebrated the Soto retrospective at the Denise René gallery, the magazine also published an interview with Le Parc in which he was intensively questioned about the award in Venice and about the immediate consequences in his career. The questions focused on the fact that Le Parc was the member of a group, but had been awarded individually; or even on his ambiguous relationship with the system and art market: an artist who apparently contested the system but who produced multiple artworks to sell and was supported by a commercial gallery. Le Parc tried to dodge the questions, asserting his independence of the system but without completely scorning the award. Le Parc and Jean Clay were friends and the Argentinean artist would continue to contribute to the magazine: in its third edition, the Robho editorial reproduced his text “Guerilha Cultural?” [Cultural Guerrilla], in which Le Parc summons every artist to take action. In the following years, his practice would indeed take on a firmer political outlook. In May 1968, at the height of the revolutionary events, Le Parc would become involved with the Atelier Populaire, a workshop that printed protest posters, which would lead him to be temporarily expelled from France. In the 1970s, already back in the country, he would organise a series of exhibitions with the intention of denouncing the repressive political conditions of several South American countries. And in 1971, together with two other artists (Gérard Fromanger and Merri Jolivet), he would write an open letter to Robho, criticising the bourgeois, pacified character that the magazine had adopted.

Robho was one of several avant-garde magazines that were published in France in the period in question, such as Opus International, Macula, Peinture. Cahiers Théoriques, Chroniques de l’art vivant, Art press, and became an important experimental forum devoted to contemporary art. In its own way, it played an active role in defending a certain kind of kineticism, of a social and participative nature, at least until 1969, when its editors sought to assume a more radical position. In its six editions, of 1.000 to 1.500 numbers each, it published texts about several contemporary artists and artistic groups (Hans Haacke, Piero Manzoni, Dossier Madi. Arden Quin, Mathias Goeritz, Yoko Ono) as well as about

71 Plante, Argentinos de Paris, 141.
experimental poetry, standing out a vast dossier on art in Argentina, with focus on the Tucumán arde action [Dossier Argentine. Les fils de Marx et Mondrian. Tucuman Brûle]. It was also a very central vehicle in divulging the work of the South Americans in Paris, although, as Plante observes, it was never a magazine exclusively geared toward South American art. Its daring graphic design in tabloid format, in which each issue was printed in different colour ink, was under the charge of Carlos Cruz-Diez and is strikingly reminiscent of the bold, dynamic layout of the Signals NewsBulletins, which were edited by David Medalla.\(^{72}\) Arnauld Pierre, in an article about Lygia Clark’s work, even likens Robho to Signals NewsBulletin and compares the two groups involved in the two projects, which indeed makes sense, seeing as Blaine and Clay had texts translated in the Signals NewsBulletin and, as we have seen, shared the same interests as the group working on the other side of the English Channel.\(^{73}\)

These common interests built a network of exchanges and interchanges, of understanding, admiration and respect, which was informally woven but capable of, at least temporarily, blurring the boundaries between the so-called central and peripheral cultures. At that time, thanks to Signals and to the work of critics like Guy Brett, London became an important part of the international circuit, both promising and stimulating, for South American artists committed to the doctrine of constructive art. In some cases, London showed what was, until that moment, the most important exhibitions some those artists had had out of their own countries, since Signals and Whitechapel galleries gave them a bigger possibility of experimenting and showing their work in a way they could not have done in Paris at the time. But this network, or this mapping of personal meetings, was only possible due to contacts with artists and marchands who were trying to achieve a foothold in the disputed Parisian art market without succumbing to the prevalent trends of the time (such as lyrical or informal abstraction, in the 1950s, or the pop art and its developments, in the 1960s). The term kinetic, as we have seen, was broadly used and served to “shelter” distinct proposals aimed at spectator participation. It also served to group together artists whose works, in other contexts, would perhaps not be so easily associated with each other.

---

\(^{72}\) According to Cruz-Diez, “the idea [to launch the magazine Robho] came up during a meeting at my house, and since all those avant-garde experiences happened with very little money, each of us contributed what we could: I contribute by designing the magazine. Each issue of Robho sparked controversy because it was so radical. In addition, its format and open design gave way to a whole spate of magazines based on the same principles”. Jiménez, Carlos Cruz-Diez in conversation with Ariel Jiménez, \(^{74}\).