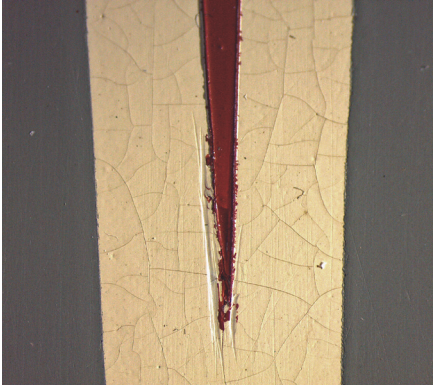


CONCRETE LIMITS

ABSTRACTION IN ARGENTINA AND BRAZIL



Left: *Alternado 2*, 1957, Hermelindo Fiaminghi. Alkyd on hardboard. Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. Promised gift to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Catalina Cisneros-Santiago

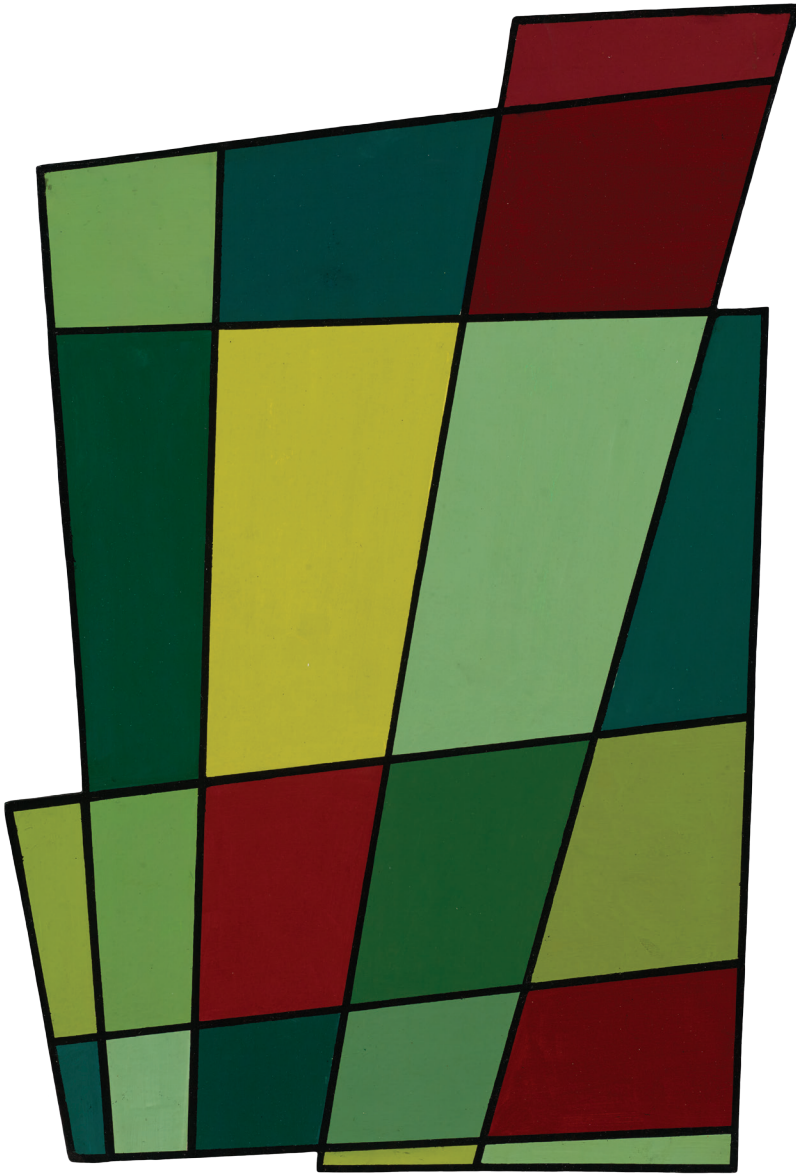
Above: Detail of *Alternado 2*. Photomicrographic detail of the glossy, sharp-ridged tip of a red lozenge, next to incised lines and paint bleed related to the use of self-adhesive tape. Selective polishing of the surface left minute scratches in the white background and grey lozenges.

The deep-red lozenges of Hermelindo Fiaminghi's *Alternado 2* (1957) were painted in several steps. First, the artist established each corner of the shapes with pinpoint holes and connected the points with incised lines. Next, he drew the outlines with an opaque, brownish red paint and a ruling pen. Finally, he painted the full shapes with a semi-transparent red house paint and self-adhesive tape.

Researchers at the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) and the Getty Research Institute (GRI) examined *Alternado 2* using scientific imaging and other techniques as part of a Concrete art project centered on a set of works from the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (CPPC). Forty-seven works have been lent to the Getty for the duration of the project, after which many of them will be donated to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Getty's partners—TAREA, at the Instituto de Investigaciones sobre el Patrimonio Cultural at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín in Buenos Aires, and the Laboratório de Ciência da Conservação (LACICOR) of the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte—have simultaneously examined Concrete art in public and private collections, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston has carried out scientific analysis on its own Latin American art collection from the period.

The Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA exhibition *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros* showcases what researchers have discovered about the nature of artists' materials, methods, and motivations. Their multifaceted approach included unprecedented scientific analysis of paints and pigments present in the representative works from the CPPC. "The exhibition draws on the GCI's technical know-how—the analytical methods used to identify different types of modern paint, knowledge of how to recognize various paint application techniques, and how to insert this novel information into broader technical art historical research," says GCI Head of Science Tom Learner. *Making Art Concrete* provides a close-up look at the multitude of decisions—from paint choices to techniques—made by Argentine and Brazilian artists. The works on display date from 1946 to 1962.

Preceding this research and resulting exhibition was work conducted by the GCI in collaboration with the J. Paul Getty Museum and the GRI between 2012 and 2014 on Jackson Pollock's large painting *Mural* (1943), owned by the University of Iowa. That work culminated in the exhibition *Jackson Pollock's Mural* at the Museum in the spring of 2014 and an accompanying book. The famous painting was a transitional moment in the evolution of Pollock's art and his painting technique, in that he had not yet begun splashing paints on a horizontal canvas. In *Mural*, he was mostly still painting in a relatively conventional way, brushing on quality oil paints and adding splatters of modified oil paint onto the upright canvas. Unconventionally, though, Pollock also used an inexpensive, water-based off-white house paint for a particular compositional purpose. Researchers discovered Pollock's paint and process in the making of *Mural* through a wide variety of analytical techniques.



Above: *Marco recortado N° 2 / Cutout Frame No. 2*, 1946, Juan Nicolás Melé. Oil on hardboard. Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. Promised gift to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund

Opposite: Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (seated) and Pia Gottschaller discussing Hermelindo Flaminghi's *Seccionado no. 1*, 1958, with (from left to right) Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Jim Cuno, and Gustavo Cisneros

The Getty's study of Latin American Concrete art, like its study of *Mural*, bridges art history and scientific study; and it focuses on a pivotal moment of the "Southern Cone" avant-garde. "The Concrete artists, divided into a number of groups across Argentina and Brazil, created paintings, sculptures, and works in hybrid categories such as 'non-objects,'" says Pia Gottschaller, senior research specialist at the GCI. "Collectively, their works might be characterized by a severely reduced, geometric vocabulary, the simplicity of which often belies the artists' painstaking approach to materials and technique." The study explores these artists' formal experimentations as well as the transformative role they hoped

their artworks would play in society. As a result of their ambitions, many artists broke from creating traditionally framed paintings and began making three-dimensional, irregularly shaped paintings and objects.

The shaped painting, or "marco recortado," was a momentous invention by a group of young Argentine and Uruguayan artists in the mid-1940s. This contradicts the commonly held belief that shaped paintings were invented in the 1960s in the United States. Rhod Rothfuss's essay "The Frame: A Problem in Contemporary Art," published in the sole issue of *Arturo* magazine in 1944, critiques the concept of the traditional frame, explaining that it "leads to a sense of continuity of the object beyond the margins of the painting. This situation only disappears when the frame is structured rigorously according to the composition of the painting." The resulting works eschewed any sense of illusionism: the works have irregularly shaped outlines in which the interior geometric composition defines the outer edges of the support.

While artists in Argentina experimented with shaped paintings, research shows that they were less inclined to experiment with house paints than their Brazilian peers. Artists in Buenos Aires, whose work in the collection dates from the mid-1940s and 1950s, typically used tube oil paints in their work, with the exceptions of Rhod Rothfuss and Raúl Lozza. In *Relieve no. 30*, Lozza layered house paints and oil paints so as to extensively polish the paint surfaces, something that the softer oil paint by itself would not have made possible. Aside from questions of availability of different kinds of paints in the period following World War II, the Argentine group might also have preferred traditional oil paints in part because of their schooling—many of them were educated at fine art academies, where they would have been trained in the tradition of painting in oil.

The Brazilian artists, on the other hand, embraced a wide variety of novel industrial paints. These inexpensive paints have the benefit of drying quickly. They also allow the formation of a smoother surface devoid of brushstrokes when they are combined with certain application techniques, such as the use of spray guns. In the course of studying the works with a high-powered microscope, it became clear that some of the artists went to great lengths to manipulate their paint surfaces. "Geraldo de Barros' *Função diagonal* has an incredibly smooth finish, produced using an innovative type of paint—a polyurethane-modified alkyd,"

Gottschaller says. “It was probably custom-mixed for him by Kazmer F  jer, an artist who had studied industrial chemistry and experimented with plastic substances. De Barros applied the white paint with a brush, the black paint with a spray gun, and at the end he also polished the black areas.”

Another strategy to avoid overly subjective elements such as brushwork in their paintings was the artists’ use of ruling pens and tape. Mastering the intricacies of a ruling pen required both patience and expertise. Traditionally used by architects and graphic designers in technical drawings, ruling pens are easiest to use with free-flowing ink. Oil paint must be thinned to exactly the right consistency to flow from the pen, which holds only a small amount between its metal tips due to capillary action. Painting long lines is painstaking, since only a few centimeters can be painted at once. Alfredo Hlito’s experience as a draftsman and designer likely contributed to his extraordinary facility with ruling pens.

The ruling pen was not the only tool of choice for the versatile artists in the study. Self-adhesive tape allows the creation of extremely sharp, almost mechanical edges of geometric forms, a quality particularly sought after by several artists in Brazil. Gottschaller notes, “While the Latin American artists in our study preferred transparent tape made from cellophane like Scotch tape, evidenced by the perfectly crisp edges of elements, the majority of contemporary European and North American artists used masking tape, which leaves a slightly ribbed edge.”

Both cellophane tape and house paints are industrial products, demonstrating the connection between the materiality of the work and the historical moment in which it was created. “The study details the connection between artists and the industrialization occurring in both countries in the postwar years,” says GRI Deputy Director Andrew Perchuk. GRI Research Specialist Zanna Gilbert adds, “While this connection



has been understood more broadly by scholars and historians, this is the first study that underlines more precisely the specific materials and techniques used by these artists. The study also underscores the differences between the approaches of the Concrete artists in Argentina and Brazil.”

At the GRI, Gilbert spent time looking into the printed ephemera in the library’s Special Collections. Magazines, exhibition invitations, and flyers, some of them found in the archive of the influential Uruguayan artist Joaqu  n Torres-Garc  a, shed further light on the period. “Through this archival research, we were able to learn more about the interdisciplinary aspirations of these artists,” says Gilbert. “If the artists’ painting practice intended to bridge the divide between art and everyday life by creating objects focused on physical materiality, this concern extended into building a broader movement in Concretism. In their magazines and leaflets, the artists addressed poetry, theater, and music, as well as architecture, furniture, and industrial design.” One of the rooms in *Making Art Concrete* is dedicated to this printed material, with a particular focus on poetry and design.

A catalogue featuring two essays by project researchers Pia Gottschaller and Aleca Le Blanc accompanies the exhibition. In November, scholars are invited to present their findings at a conference

at the Getty, and a second volume will follow. A third, bilingual publication will include interviews with Argentine Concrete artists conducted by Pino Monkes, painting conservator at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires.

The project has attracted significant interest from Latin America and around the world, indicating the willingness and perceived need to reassess the current placement of these artists in the canon of twentieth-century modern art. As collaborators study collections in Argentina and Brazil, the Getty project contributes to the improved understanding of Concrete art and how it might be conserved in decades to come.

“The Colecci  n Patricia Phelps de Cisneros found a perfect partner in the Getty,” says Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. “With up-to-the-minute scientific technology and conservation techniques, researchers from the Getty Conservation Institute and the Getty Research Institute joined forces to reveal the secrets of the materials and methods of Concrete artists from Latin America, and to re-contextualize their groundbreaking work from the mid-’40s to the early ’60s. These artists’ aims were social as well as aesthetic; they wanted to change the world with their art. They would have been astonished at the ways in which new scholarship about their contributions to culture has, with the evidences uncovered by the Getty, changed the art world.”