

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Decentering Mid-century Latin American Abstraction

Ayelen Pagnanelli 

Centro de Estudios en Arte y Patrimonio (Center for Art and Heritage Studies), Universidad Nacional de San Martín and CONICET, San Martín, Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina
Email: apagnanelli@unsam.edu.ar

This essay reviews the following books:

New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America. Edited by Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco. New York: Routledge, 2018. Pp. 268. \$48.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780367787004.

Dematerialization: Art and Design in Latin America. By Karen Benezra. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 256. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780520307063.

Learning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art. By Kaira M. Cabañas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. 240. \$45.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780226556284.

Crossings: Cultural Exchange between Argentina and Brazil. By Maria Amalia García, translated by Jane Brodie. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 320. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780520302198.

Contra el canon: El arte contemporáneo en un mundo sin centro. By Andrea Giunta. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2020. Pp. 234. \$9.99 Kindle. ASIN: B08599RSVV.

Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift. By Inés Katzenstein and Maria Amalia García, et al. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019. Pp. 240. \$60.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781633450707.

Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat. By Adriano Pedrosa, José Esparza Chong Cuy, Julieta González, and Tomás Toledo. São Paulo: MASP, 2019. Pp. 352. \$60.00 paperback. ISBN: 9788531000669.

Hemispheric Integration: Materiality, Mobility, and the Making of Latin American Art. By Niko Vicario. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. Pp. x + 312. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780520310025.

Abstract art remains perceived and studied as a European invention stemming from artists such as Picasso, Cezanne, or Kandinsky. Thus Latin American twentieth-century art can only be an imitation, never an original cultural production. As opposed to figurative art, abstract art moves away from representing the world as we see it or does not represent the physical world at all—this being called concrete, nonobjective or nonrepresentational art—sometimes by focusing on line, shape, and color; other times through the use

of organic marks to create artworks. Recent scholarship on mid-twentieth-century Latin American abstract art considering connections beyond North America and Europe reshapes our perception of how cultural producers in Latin America interacted. Rather than fixating on Paris as a center of cultural production, they look at their local histories, native communities, vernacular practices, Latin American neighbors, and African roots to expose the theoretical and visual complexity to many of the past century's artistic proposals.

These recently published books' contribution to the field of Latin American art is their decentering of Latin American abstract art histories by exploding ideas of unidirectional cultural exchange. Unlike canonical readings, they bring forward an understanding of Latin American abstraction as a breadth of unique phenomena informed by local discussions and regional exchanges, rather than only (or at least predominantly) by the European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. They focus on the originality of these artistic proposals instead of using European art as the measure against which to compare other productions. The scope of these studies goes across most of the last century and throughout the Americas, reconsidering crucial relations with Africa and Asia and opening conversations on these seldom-explored connections via migration or diasporas. They analyze abstraction in its multiple forms, ranging from the Argentine artist Xul Solar's early works to the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García's *universalismo constructivo*, art movements such as 1940s inventionism from Rio de La Plata, Brazilian neoconcretism and Lina Bo Bardi's projects, Bogota's 1960s installations, gestural abstractions and informalisms, Venezuelan geometrical abstraction and architecture, and industrial design in 1970s Chile. The approaches vary, including comparative studies, case studies, approaches centered on critical theory, and museum exhibitions, with many resting on extensive archival research.

Decentering by looking within

With the opening of its new building, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City hosted its first ever exhibition titled in Spanish: *Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction*. Its catalog brings together essays by the experts Irene Small, Mónica Amor, and María Amalia García. García was the consulting curator along with Inés Katzenstein, current curator of Latin American art at MoMA. The catalog contains interviews with the collector Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and with one of the Cisneros collection's former curators and MoMA's former curator of Latin American art, Luis Pérez-Oramas. While the exhibition bridged design and visual arts, contributing to a more honest display of the ways industrial design and modern Latin American art coexisted, the catalog privileged an understanding of the ways local and regional exchanges shaped South American abstract art.

Sur Moderno's curatorial strategies and García's essay "Persistent Forms: Connections between Inventionist and Neo-concrete Art" reveal how artists involved with geometric abstraction made use of a variety of local cultural practices and traditions in their art making. A well-known example of this is the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica's famous *Parangolés* series. Oiticica created wearable pieces after his interactions with Rio de Janeiro's carnival and the inhabitants of Mangueira, a favela in Rio. The other example included in both the exhibition and García's essay comes from the Uruguayan, Buenos Aires-based artist Rhod Rothfuss. In an extensively cited essay published in 1944 in the sole issue of the mythical *Arturo* magazine, Rothfuss posited that paintings should no longer be made in rectangular canvases as this created the traditional illusion of a painting as a window into the world, and that artists should explore other, irregular options. Rothfuss was essential in the theoretical developments behind the use of the cutout frame,¹ an object between painting and

¹ The expression Rothfuss used was *marco recortado*, which has been subsequently translated as "irregular shaped canvas," "irregular frames," "cutout frames," "irregular cut frame," and other similar terms.

sculpture in which the geometric shapes its composition depicts dictate the nonorthogonal shape of the canvas. His theory was central to artistic experimentations of 1940's inventionism (the particular expression of nonfigurative abstraction from the Rio de La Plata region in the mid-1940s) but Rothfuss's figure remained enigmatic and overlooked. Through detailed archival work of Rothfuss's activities in Montevideo, García suggests that the artist came up with the basis for the cutout frame from his experiences working in the Montevideo carnival. This carnival is much more modest than other, more famous ones in Latin America. Nonetheless, many artists such as Rothfuss worked in making the carnival floats. This type of archive-based inquiry into local practices offers new readings for the artists and movements that developed abstract art in Latin America and that have been extensively studied in the past thirty years.

Latin American artists looked into the vernacular and found an array of items from native abstract visual cultures. In *Sur Moderno*, Katzenstein and García exhibit the ways in which objects made by native communities became sources of visual and political inspiration for some of these artists. Alongside midcentury abstractions, they exhibited pieces such as a woven *waha* basket from the Guahibo/Hiwi communities (who live in the Colombian-Venezuelan border area) with an abstract pattern. The vibrating woven colored strips of the basket resonate with Venezuelan kinetic art (abstract artworks that engaged with movement). Instead of simply aestheticizing the basket, including it within the exhibition allowed for a larger conversation about how artists actually engaged with this type of production. Artists like Joaquín Torres-García—whose influential book on this topic was on display—were contemplating pre-Hispanic objects and politically resignifying them as the local roots of Latin American art. *Sur Moderno* intended to make such artists' uses of the vernacular visible in their pieces.

María Amalia García and especially Andrea Giunta's scholarship partly owes a debt to the "17th Coloquio Internacional del Arte," which took place in 1993 in Zacatecas, Mexico, and later developed into "Los estudios de Arte desde América Latina (1996–2003)," an international seminar where an international and intergenerational group of art historians met and discussed methodological approaches. Led by Rita Eder, these venues gave scholars the opportunity to reflect on ways to write art histories promoting case studies and archive analysis with the aim of avoiding general histories.² The debates and networks that emerged from these events have hugely influenced the region's scholarship since the 1990s.³ One of its conclusions was that when scholars deal with local specificities, they expose modernity's multiple meanings in Latin America. Part of the seminal Zacatecas colloquium herself, Giunta's books are a continuation of this historiographic shift.

Giunta, an eminent scholar in the field of Latin American art, argued in *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties (Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política: Arte argentino en los años sesenta*, 2008) that art experimentations during that decade happened in parallel at several locations in the world. The author includes cities like Buenos Aires in that global landscape after the detailed analysis of this South American art scene. More recently, in the 2014 book *¿Cuándo empieza el arte contemporáneo?*, Giunta explicitly posits the concept of simultaneous avant-gardes for mid-twentieth-century art, disrupting the idea that the original avant-gardes are only those from Europe and North America. In *Contra el canon*, Giunta furthers her attempts to erode the Euro-American canon of art by thinking of art worlds without a center through a compilation of essays that predominantly deal with mid-twentieth-century South American art.

² See "México y Latinoamérica. Arte y teoría. Entrevista de Caiana a Rita Eder," *Caiana: Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)* 6 (2015).

³ See María Amalia García, "Hacia una historia del arte regional: Reflexiones en torno al comparativismo para el estudio de procesos culturales en Sudamérica," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 38, no. 109 (2016); and Florencia Suarez Guerrini and Berenice Gustavino, "La puesta en escena del arte latinoamericano: Relatos, representaciones y modos de producción," *Arte e Investigación* 11 (2015).

Half of the essays inspect abstract art, from Nasreen Mohamedi's 1960s artworks to 1940s abstraction in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico; artists' readings of pre-Hispanic art; and Joan Miro's donation to Salvador Allende's Chile in 1972. The second half drifts toward the 1960s, looking at Antonio Berni's art, Jean-Luc Godard's films, happenings, mail art, and mass media art. This volume illuminates how Latin American artists dealt with the changing politics of the postwar (art) world. Building on her previous works, Giunta consolidates her argument that studying the contact between Latin America with Europe alone is not enough in order to analyze the poetics of art practices; situated and specific knowledge are required. In this work, Giunta disarticulates the notion that only from the global centers of knowledge production can twentieth-century Latin American abstract art be understood.

Contra el canon's crucial opening essay "Adiós a la periferia: La multiplicación de los centros en el arte de posguerra" was first published in a catalog in Spain. In it, Giunta begins with the usual frustration, noting how her European and North American colleagues repeatedly compare Latin American abstract art to that by the artists from their region. The author pointedly reconsiders the aftermath of World War II from the perspective of Latin America. With Europe in ruins, inventionist artists such as Tomás Maldonado, Lidy Prati, and Gyula Kosice were confident that they would create the next big development in the teleological narrative of modern art. Moreover, Giunta recalls the German artist Mathias Goeritz's plan to open a new Bauhaus school in Guadalajara, Mexico, in the late 1940s. One of this essay's achievements lies in placing the reader at a time when Western Europeans were seeking shelter in the Americas and could no longer imagine Europe as a place where one could make art.⁴ Hence, any city, even one in Latin America, could keep the flame of culture alive. It successfully positions us in that postwar context so that we come to understand that these artists envisioned a utopian future that for them was still absolutely possible. Only now we know that that did not happen. For Giunta, this confidence in the never-ending succession of art movements sparked the development of a global art scene.

Exploring the pre-Hispanic roots of twentieth-century abstract art in Latin America occupies the second chapter. Giunta challenges the Eurocentric canon of art when tracking how Latin American artists took into account pre-Columbian objects. In the essay "Indigenismo abstracto: Citas prehispánicas y metáforas de enraizamiento; un archivo visual de las vanguardias y las neovanguardias," Giunta unfolds, albeit through a broad lens, some of the entangled dialogues artists from this region had when reaching for that pre-Columbian past. From Xul Solar's inquiry into Mesoamerican codices, observations made by Torres-García in the 1930s concerning pre-Hispanic ceramics and their incorporation into his "universalismo constructivo," and the Indigenous Peruvian Martín Chambí's photographs, Giunta continues this thread onto readings of pre-Hispanic objects in the work of contemporary artists, such as the Argentines César Paternosto and Alejandro Puente. Artists were more aware of pre-Columbian production than scholarship has credited. The relations between art produced in Latin America or by Latin American artists, and pre-Hispanic art or art made by native communities in the present, continues to be fairly unexplored.

A game changer for the histories of Latin American abstraction, *Abstract Crossings* is a translation of María Amalia García's book based on her 2008 PhD dissertation. Since its publication, *El arte abstracto: Intercambios culturales entre Argentina y Brasil* has become required reading for students and anyone trying to understand the abstract art movements that emerged in late 1940s Buenos Aires, because of the depth of its contextual analysis and its transnational approach. Scholars often fail to engage sufficiently with work not published in English, so it is a matter of celebration that *El arte abstracto* will now be able to reach this wider, English-speaking audience. *Abstract Crossings* sheds light on the regional

⁴ See also Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

connections between artists in South America. García broke away from nation-centered art history to work comparatively, focusing on Argentine and Brazilian abstract artists. Through comprehensive archival work in both countries that numerous subsequent studies have relied on, García revisits key figures and moments of South American abstract art, opening up a network of social relations previously ignored.

García traces the actions of several artists such as Edgar Bayley, Lidy Prati, Tomás Maldonado, Waldemar Cordeiro, and particularly Max Bill. The Swiss-born Bill found in Brazil and Argentina a welcoming scene for his artistic proposals. In *Abstract Crossings*, García analyzes *Arturo* magazine and the inventionist project's links with Uruguay and Brazil; she brings Brazilian abstraction into dialogue with that which emerged in Buenos Aires, and considers the trips these abstract artists made within South America. The author also inquires into the political tensions between Buenos Aires and São Paulo, the exhibitions that took place during the period, and the creation of new art institutions and the role played by national governments in shaping them, such as the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MASP) and the São Paulo Biennial. *Abstract Crossings* shows how scholars have shifted away from a fixed, Eurocentric view toward regional narratives to account for the history of abstract art.

The Italian-Brazilian architect, designer, writer, editor, and curator Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992) was a crucial figure in modernism due to her interventions with the vernacular in the Brazilian cultural scene. The Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Museo Jumex, Mexico, recently dedicated an exhibition and catalog to the recognition of the complex and multifaceted work of this remarkable woman. This rich, 300-plus-page catalog in Portuguese (an English edition is available as well) contains a selection of Bo Bardi's main texts, many originally published in *Habitat* magazine; it includes extensive documentation, drawings, and photographs of her radical architectural and curatorial projects (many of which were never built, hence the importance of the documentation), and a number of essays by various scholars. *Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat* received the 2021 Alfred H. Barr Jr. Award for Smaller Museums, Libraries, Collections, and Exhibitions, awarded by the College Art Association. In the introduction, the co-curators Julieta González, José Esparza Chong Cuy, and Tomás Toledo establish their intention of positioning Bo Bardi as a cultural thinker of her time who critically unlearned her Western perspective through her travels to the Northeastern region of Brazil. In so doing, Bo Bardi pushed the limits of modern architecture and curating by incorporating popular, Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian knowledge and objects into her enterprises. The essays of the catalog continue exploring the many facets of Bo Bardi's trajectory across Europe and particularly within Brazil, exposing how she was a force shaping abstract art from South America.

The concept of habitat, both the name of the influential magazine Bo Bardi edited in the 1950s and the exhibition's axis, was used to delve into Bo Bardi's thinking and praxis. Her attention to both the environment and social and economic inequalities blended into her architectural design and curatorial works. Jane Hall's essay reads *Habitat* as a political project in which Bo Bardi was critically rethinking the relationship between European modernity and Brazilian culture. Habitat was a central concept in Bo Bardi's thought. As Esther da Costa Meyer states in her essay "Tornando-se Lina Bo Bardi: Uma odisséia ideológica," Bo Bardi went from being an Italian architect who mingled with the Paulista economic and cultural elite and held condescending views of Brazilian architecture to championing the merging of so-called high art with popular arts. Her time in Salvador de Bahia, where her projects began to cater to the ethnically diverse makeup of the city, transformed her. Da Costa Meyer points to that city as the place where Bo Bardi found a creative, minimalist, and sustainable approach to objects through using recycled materials, which motivated her to confront middle-class European modern architecture. This critique of modernism was thoroughly based on Bo Bardi's recognition of the vernacular and the Brazilian context.

When shown in Brazil, the exhibition was held in MASP's building, which Bo Bardi designed and where her most groundbreaking projects took place. The exhibition and catalog place Bo Bardi as a leading figure in modernism in an all too often male-centered history. This reframing is the subject of two essays, by Luis M. Castañeda and by Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wingley. In the latter, the authors revisit Bo Bardi's contributions to architectural theory in both Italy and Brazil and make visible the many attempts to erase and marginalize her within histories of Italian architecture, which favored her male peers. The essay points to the mechanisms that contributed to the erasure of women in art history.

Bo Bardi's interest in the popular arts redefined approaches to architecture and museum displays. José Esparza Chong Cuy's essay considers the Casa de Vidrio, Bo Bardi's home and first architectural project, as an extension of her cutting-edge curatorial ideas in which the glass-lined house was placed in the midst of the vegetation without disturbing it, anticipating a more environmentally conscious architecture. Tomás Toledo takes a closer look into Bo Bardi's radical museology, where her projects had at their root the popular rather than the elite and a more inclusive and accessible museum. Julieta Gonzalez's essay examines Bo Bardi's curatorial, museological, and deeply political ventures. The curators even reconstructed one of Bo Bardi's most subversive curatorial projects: *A mão do povo brasileiro*. Not only was this exhibit of crafts at an arts museum a vindication of native and Afro-Brazilian communities' crafts across time, and a destabilization of the notion of modernity and the art canon, it was also an intervention on the discourses of *desarrollismo*—the theory that economic development would bring a better quality of life to the inhabitants of developing countries—as many of the objects exhibited were creative solutions rising out of the conditions of extreme poverty of their makers.

Adriano Pedrosa reflects on the concepts and discussions brought by the exhibition *A mão do povo brasileiro*, such as “primitive art,” “naïf,” “outsider art,” or “popular art,” and Bo Bardi's favorite: *trabalho* (work). Pedrosa inserts the exhibition within curatorial experiences in the Global North since the 1980s, such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at MoMA, *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris, and the more recent *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* at the 55th Venice Biennial. Dealing with these same questions, Antonio Risério's essay is perhaps the most critical in the catalog. Risério points out that Bo Bardi's approach to craft making from the Northeastern region of Brazil somewhat hindered the region's actual ethnic and cultural diversity. In a sophisticated analysis of her writings, Risério detects some of the romanticization with which Bo Bardi imbued these objects (and the people who made them) against the increasing role of mass culture. Altogether, *Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat* represents a considerable contribution to the role of local practices in modern art and to the construction of the modern itself.

In *Dematerialization: Art and Design in Latin America*, Karen Benezra sets out to use and problematize the concept of dematerialization in the cusp of the crisis of art as a medium and industrial design in the 1960s. Relying on literary analysis, Benezra unravels the theoretical contributions of the Argentine critic Oscar Masotta—who originally coined the term *dematerialization*, referring to how art became increasingly immaterial and conceptual—and those of the Mexican writer Octavio Paz. This transnational volume provides a complex reading of cultural practices ranging from essays to design projects cemented on critical theory, rather than an art historical approach. *Dematerialization* contributes with its serious appreciation of the aesthetic theorizations of these Latin American writers on art practices.

Benezra analyzes art objects, design applications, and discourses, moving from one to another with ease and inserting them within their sociopolitical implications. The first chapter is dedicated to Masotta's thinking, while chapter 2 interrogates Paz's writings on aesthetics and Marcel Duchamp's oeuvre. Benezra recovers the Mexican author's complex questioning of art and design's relationship to capitalism. Then, the book turns to two

experiences, one in Mexico and another in Chile. In chapter 3, Benzra examines 1970s and 1980s Mexican art groups' notion of collective labor exemplified by artists Alberto Híjar Serrano and Felipe Ehrenberg. In the following chapter, the author investigates the attempt to create a cybernetic system for factory labor management in Allende's Chile. Gui Bonsiepe, a former member of the now-closed German art and design school and heir to the Bauhaus, Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm, carried out this industrial design project informed by exchanges with HfG Ulm's director, artist Tomás Maldonado. *Dematerialization* holds social relations, history, politics, and the ontological status of art at its heart while recovering rich historical reflections on modernity from twentieth-century thinkers from Latin America.

Decentering while looking outside

Kaira Cabañas's *Learning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art* interrogates the intersection of modern art and madness. Examining the histories of artistic pieces made by psychiatric patients in Brazil, it uncovers how these practices have shaped Brazilian modern art and in turn reveals the implied ideas of European modernism as rational. The book engages critically with two areas that are seldom considered together: the clinical and the art historical. In an important historiographical contribution, Cabañas charts the interest of Brazilian art critics such as Mário Pedrosa in the art made by patients, and how it molded his aesthetic ideals, as well as the pursuit of art as therapy by the psychiatrists Nise da Silveira and Osório César, the latter of whom was simultaneously a doctor and an art critic.

By placing her attention on the Brazilian art world's adoption of patients' art as constitutive of their notion of modern art, Cabañas compellingly exposes how European modern art was framed as intrinsically different from forms of art made by so-called others, be they patients, children, or people from other parts of the world, making this book necessary reading for scholars of European modernity as well. *Learning from Madness* unearths dialogues between Brazil, the United States, France, and Germany, putting pressure on the idea of a universal understanding of either patient's art or modern art. Cabañas's sophisticated insights into Brazilians' conceptualization of modern art sheds light on the underlying theoretical assumptions of European modern art and challenges canonical readings of Latin American abstract art as a purely rational endeavor derived from European artists. This perspective of looking at both locations concurrently reveals a piece of modern art's history in Brazil and decenters the European canon, while opening up discussions on the relations of art and therapy.

Similarly, Niko Vicario tells a story of art and artists at the juncture of figuration and abstraction, the local and the global, craft and the mechanic through the lens of material and economic exchange. In *Hemispheric Integration: Materiality, Mobility and the Making of Latin American Art*, Vicario rigorously studies the trade of art, goods, and raw materials between 1933 and 1945, suggesting that it was at that moment that the field of Latin American art appeared. Vicario rethinks artists' experiences, projects, and artworks, placing his focus on the United States in a process he designates "hemispheric integration." By this, Vicario refers to US dependency on Latin American raw materials, which led to the creation of close artistic networks that US institutions actively financed. The book's strength lies in how it incorporates artworks into the flux of capital, discourses, and institutions that flowed throughout the Americas in the 1930s and 1940s, which Vicario tracks in captivating prose. *Hemispheric Integration* will appeal to scholars of all disciplines of this period in Latin America as it advances our understanding of Latin American abstract art as a piece in a larger history of economic and cultural exchanges.

Vicario considers artworks by three male artists and their strategies (female artists remain secondary figures in *Hemispheric Integration*): Mexican muralist David Alfaro

Siqueiros (chapter 1), Joaquín Torres-García (chapter 2), and Cuban painter Mario Carreño (chapter 4). For Siqueiros, Vicario argues, “Duco muralism”—referring both to the process and the industrial Duco paint he used to make his mural paintings—was this artist’s strategy toward unifying the Western hemisphere through what he deemed to be a revolutionary medium. Next, Vicario contrasts this project with Torres-García’s, which, though founded on abstraction, combined pre-Columbian sources with the modern grid. Vicario calls it “morphological constructivism” in a play on words with “universal constructivism,” the name Torres-García gave to his practice.

The third chapter poignantly disentangles the emergence of the field of Latin American art as we know it in the United States. Through a series of characters and institutions such as the Rockefeller family, MoMA’s curatorial and collecting practices, and the Office of Inter-American Affairs, Vicario traces the notion of Latin American art and exposes its politics and power dimensions. Chapter 4 centers on Mario Carreño, an artist who traveled outside Cuba and moved between figuration and abstraction. Carreño went from working on figuration and using Duco paint with a politically charged color palette to an abstraction that incorporated Afrocubanismo and wrestled with issues of identity. The discussion of Carreño’s shifts in his bodies of work effectively illustrates this artist’s adaptations to changing discourses on art from the region and eloquently presents Vicario’s perspective on US-Latin American relations through the art he closely reads, such as Carreño’s *Sugar Cane Cutters*, a painting from 1943.

New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America, composed of thirteen essays from researchers working on Latin American abstract art (only four of the thirteen scholars work at Latin American institutions) contributes to a careful reconsideration of the links between this region and the United States and Europe. In the introduction, the editors Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco present their intention to push against canonical understandings of Latin American abstract art as an acritical appropriation of European art. They state that “many of the authors in this volume address this transatlantic and transnational relationship, demonstrating the deep entanglements across borders, including the frequency with which artists and artworks were moving, forming, and contributing to international networks. Artists negotiated their ‘anxiety of influence’ and often spoke back to the West, producing their own local hybrid forms that shifted back and forth across time” (2). The essays center on the multiple ways in which Latin American artists engaged with abstract visual languages, ways that did not necessarily relate to European avant-gardes.

One of the case studies deals with the unique political uses of informalism (a more organic and gestural form of abstract painting) in Venezuela. Sean Nesselrod’s essay “The Painting Devoured: El Techo de la Ballena and the Destruction of Venezuelan Informalism” suggests that artists from the El Techo de la Ballena collective, active in the 1960s, politically used the discourse of informalism as a reaction against the Venezuelan government. They saw geometric abstraction as a visual language complicit with both the regime and the oil industry. In this manner, their works mixed artistic experimentation with left-wing activism. Nesselrod explores the local and often political intricacies of the uses of abstract languages in Latin America.

A blind spot in the compilation is its lack of attention to gender, with just one of the essays undertaking this issue. In “Antagonistic Environments: Gendered Spaces and the Kinetic Installations of Colombian Artists Feliza Bursztyn, Jacqueline Nova, and Julia Acuña,” Gina McDaniel Tarver spotlights works by these three artists. The essay analyzes their production after they were in contact with artists from the Parisian scene but also from the Instituto Di Tella, a multidisciplinary and experimental art institution active in the mid-1960s in Buenos Aires. In the later part of that decade, they exhibited installations and environments in the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogota, Colombia, an institution led by Marta Traba, an influential Argentine art critic. The essay makes a timid attempt at

intersectionality, barely mentioning Nova's identification as a lesbian at the very end instead of meaningfully engaging with questions of sexuality. Gender, understood not only as a synonym of women, and issues of sexuality require further research for a more comprehensive understanding of how they shaped Latin American abstract art.

New Geographies explicitly counterbalances the recurring accounts of Latin American abstract art as a phenomenon that only took place in certain countries. The compilation successfully accomplishes its main aim to expand outside the borders of Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela. The essays it includes are interested in areas often disregarded within larger studies of Latin America, such as Costa Rica, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. The volume achieves this expansion across a huge range of territories, even exploring how diasporic communities employed abstract art, moving the discussion of Latin American art away from a few cities that dominate scholarship, thus further decentering histories of abstract art.

Such is the case with Mariola Alvarez's essay "Calligraphic Abstraction and Postwar Brazilian Informalist Painting," in which the author pursues a decolonial perspective on Brazilian abstraction. Alvarez evaluates the works produced by a group of Japanese-Brazilian artists living in São Paulo, mainly Tomie Ohtake, Manabu Mabe, and Flavio Shiró. They incorporated calligraphy, a practice with origins in East Asia's traditions of art making. Alvarez breaks ground in complicating canonical histories of Latin American abstraction by incorporating artists whose artworks and biographies intertwined the histories of Asia and South America.

In the essay "Fighting for the Abstract: Manuel de la Cruz González and Geometric Abstraction in Costa Rica," Luran Bonilla-Merchav analyzes the works of the Central American artist Manuel de la Cruz González. He was part of a significant exhibition in 1958, along with artists Lola Fernandez and Rafael Angel García. The author traces various regional connections such as Gonzalez's time living in Venezuela, which prompted him to begin working in abstraction, and discusses his failure to overcome the disinterest in abstraction within his local setting, the city of San Jose. Art students and collectors in San Jose did not embrace abstraction as had happened in some other Latin American cities. The essay establishes artists' dissimilar experiences with abstraction in Central America, a region too often neglected in Latin American art histories.

Though Mexico sustains a constant presence in the field of Latin American studies, this is not the case in the histories of abstract art. Daniel Garza Usabiaga's essay "Beyond Abstraction: The Work of Vicente Rojo, Kazuya Sakai, and Manuel Felguérez during the 1970s" deals with a body of work from a decade and a country not associated with abstract painting. Nevertheless, he posits that these three male artists were engaging with conceptual and "non-objectual" art (122), interdisciplinarity, and social critique. Through an evaluation of works by Rojo, Sakai, and Felguérez, Garza Usabiaga inserts Mexico's *geometrismo* (geometric abstraction) within the histories of Latin American abstraction and these artists' use of contemporary art practices.

Ana M. Franco explores artworks by two Colombian artists, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar and Guillermo Wiedemann, with the objective of placing them within their social and political context. In "The Politics of Abstraction in Colombian Art during the Cold War," Franco contrasts these two artists' works by arguing that Ramírez Villamizar's symbolized modernization and US support, whereas Wiedemann's resisted that ideology. At the time, Colombia was the exemplary Latin American nation in the US-funded Alliance for Progress programs. Franco argues that while Ramírez Villamizar's *El Dorado*, a public commission at a bank in Colombia's first skyscraper, represented modernity and economic development, Wiedemann's assemblage mural, opened in the same year with a rough aesthetic, opposed it. The inclusion of garbage and other nonartistic materials in Wiedemann's piece embraced a critique of the status quo and ideals of economic progress and modernity by foregrounding poverty. Thus Franco proposes a reading on

abstraction that politicizes these works, attending to the Colombian context as well as its broader geopolitical implications.

Likewise, the essay “Andean Abstraction as Displayed at the Organization of American States” by Michele Greet regards art and politics. Greet examines abstract art made in the Andean countries of Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador during the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, the essay focuses on sponsorship by US institutions like the Pan American Union, the Organization of American States, and its associated Cuban art critic José Gómez Sicre. His rhetoric involved a reconsideration of pre-Columbian abstract visual culture rather than an incorporation of the Indigenist themes that had dominated Andean artists’ works in the 1930s. Greet looks at some of the artists that Gómez Sicre exhibited: Peruvians Fernando de Szyszlo and Armando Villegas; Bolivians Alfredo da Silva and Oscar Pantoja; and Ecuadorians Aníbal Villacís, Enrique Tábara, and Estuardo Maldonado. Greet posits that Gomez Sicre’s discourse was rooted in the desire to create a depoliticized vision of abstract Andean art for the OAS audience. Gomez Sicre’s homogenizing vision, Greet argues, erased the differences among these artists’ works and poetics. The essay, while concentrated on the Organization of American States and its decisive role as gatekeeper, presents a view of abstract art from Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

Abigail Lapin Dardashti’s essay, titled “Negotiating Afro-Brazilian Abstraction: Rubem Valentim in Rio, Rome, and Dakar, 1957–1966,” inquires into the work of this Brazilian artist. Valentim, whose work is included in *Sur Moderno*, has recently gained critical interest as art historians immerse themselves in the intersections between race and art making in Latin America. Lapin Dardashti suggests that Valentim’s uses of Afro-Brazilian culture in his artworks have mainly gone unnoticed. The essay considers the role of this artist’s travels during the 1960s to Rio de Janeiro, Rome, and Dakar, as well as his uses of Torres-García’s universal constructivism. Lapin Dardashti posits that through his travel experiences Valentim began to think of himself as part of the African diaspora, and this profoundly affected his art practice. The recognition of the role of Valentim’s time in Senegal constitutes a clear move toward thinking of alternative geographies with regard to Latin American abstract art.

Similarly, in *Contra el canon*, Giunta forgoes a conversation fixated on Latin America’s relation to Europe to think beyond the North Atlantic. In “Abstracciones simultáneas: Nasreen Mohamedi y la abstracción brasileña: Lecturas modernas, decoloniales y comparativas,” Giunta expands the canonical readings of abstraction as a European and North American phenomenon and considers this Pakistani artist’s works. Mohamedi produced her abstract, nonfigurative works of art in India, between the cities of Mumbai, New Delhi, and Baroda during the 1960s. While scholarship on abstraction in Latin America has been fairly dominated by links with Europe, and subsequently the United States, Giunta ventures into the connections between productions from other parts of the world as further examples of the multiple engagements with abstraction.

These recent scholarly works delve into overlooked cases and practices in the histories of abstraction, encountering marginalized artists and thinkers’ diverse productions and experiences, and placing them at the center of their research. In the face of canonical approaches, these authors dare to revisit main figures and institutions through careful archival work and new perspectives. While their scope explores beyond national boundaries and into the regional and the transcontinental, they also attend to the local, the vernacular, and the sociopolitical context in the making of abstraction. In order to expand the field of Latin American abstract art history, these books bring to light issues of European modernity, the status of the work of art, appropriation, rationality, geopolitics, and economic inequality.

This stimulating scholarship establishes novel ways of considering abstract art that critically examine its relations to the US and Europe. The challenges to ideas of abstraction centered on Europe and North America come from case studies and rigorous research in

Latin America rather than grandiose theories. These books not only expose much-needed nuances in the histories of Latin American art of the twentieth century, but they also introduce new perspectives on how to think about the ways in which cultural producers were interacting with each other, their local scenes, regional projects, and other disregarded areas of the world. Questioning assumptions on how modern art was conceived, they decenter canonical narratives on abstract art from Latin America so as to multiply and enrich its histories.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to Javier Auyero, Anabel Yahuitl-García, Jacob Turner, William Rees Hofmann, and the LARR team for their suggestions.

Ayelen Pagnanelli is a doctoral fellow at Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) and a PhD candidate examining gender and sexuality in the abstract art scenes in Buenos Aires from 1937 to 1963 at the Centro de Investigaciones en Arte y Patrimonio, Universidad Nacional de San Martín. Pagnanelli holds an MA in Argentine and Latin American Art History from Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales and a BA in Gender Studies and Studio Art from Skidmore College. She was awarded a Princeton University Libraries Grant for the year 2020–2021.