

"FROM SURFACE TO SPACE":

MAX BILL AND CONCRETE SCULPTURE IN BUENOS AIRES

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Francesca Ferrari

Man's relationship to his environment, and thus to space, has undergone a profound transformation in our century. This is most evident in art. Indeed, this new change in art may be what has revealed man's new relationship to space.
—Max Bill, “From Surface to Space”¹

In a 1951 essay titled “From Surface to Space,” the Swiss artist Max Bill traced the role of concrete art in what he perceived as a fundamental shift in the way that human beings relate to space. This transformation, Bill argued, was brought about by artworks that no longer summoned “the perspective of the viewer stationed directly in front of them,” but that rather “influence the space where they hang in new and different ways.”² Bill believed that artists should shape objects that act upon the context in which they sit. These objects could be paintings that generate spatial rhythms through chromatic contrasts or sculptures that encompass and occupy actual space. Bill associated this realization with the need to recognize and embrace the viewer's mobility. In his words, “human beings—as moving, dynamic elements whose spatial relationship to the picture is constantly changing—must be regarded as a much more important factor than before.”³ Thus, Bill presented artworks as material objects that simultaneously activate their surroundings and underscore the animation of the embodied subjects experiencing them. In so doing, he expanded his previous definitions of concrete art, which were grounded in notions of clarity, harmony, and rationality. In the 1930s, Bill had cast works of concrete art as “abstract ideas which previously only existed in the mind [that] are made visible in a concrete form,” but in 1951 he combined these principles with the unpredictable and ephemeral sensorial relationships triggered by the viewer's physical encounter with the artwork.⁴

This nuance in Bill's discourse unfolded against the backdrop of his intense dialogue with Latin American artists and intellectuals, whose projects reflected a similar concern for the experiential dimension of artistic encounters. Most strikingly, Bill's essay seems to hint at the *marcos recortados* (irregular or “broken” frames) through which various Argentine artists had been projecting paintings into real space since 1944, transcending the rectangular format that historically equated painting with a window open onto an illusionistic realm.⁵ Despite their rivalries and ideological rifts, these artists shared a drive to assert the materiality and spatiality of artworks, largely anticipating Bill's rhetoric in “From Surface to Space.” Recent art historical narratives have focused on painterly interventions of this kind, especially examining the non-orthogonal canvases of members of the competing Buenos Aires groups Asociación Arte Concreto–Invención (AACI) and *Madí*.⁶ Surprisingly, the sculptural counterparts to these canvases have received less critical attention, despite the fact that they more explicitly explore the potential of artworks to inhabit and incorporate three-dimensional space and the forces acting

within it. Artists such as Carmelo Arden Quin, Claudio Girola, Enio Iommi, and Gyula Kosice, among others, created sculptures that emphasize the artwork's existence as a material presence rather than a representation. I propose that these sculptures invoke visual, tactile, and synesthetic responses in the viewers that are meant to look at and move around them, concretizing Bill's ambition to propel a practice for which "space is not considered as something outside of the artistic relationship, but as a basic component of artistic expression."⁷ The experiments of Bill's Argentine peers greatly informed his understanding of space as an apparatus through which to renew the function of art in society in the deeply politicized years that overlapped with and followed the Second World War.⁸ Thus, Bill's relation with the Buenos Aires avant-garde should not be framed merely as that of a European model to which the Argentine artists reacted but also as that of a theorist who reoriented his characterization of concrete art upon encountering alternative interpretations of this idiom.

It is indeed as a sculptor that Bill became renowned in Latin America. The same year that he penned "From Surface to Space," his *Dreiteilige Einheit* (Tripartite Unity) famously won the sculpture prize at the first Bienal de São Paulo (**Fig. 1**).⁹ The prize gave Bill's work greater visibility in the region, even though, as María Amalia García has compellingly demonstrated, he had long been on the radar of cultural impresarios in the hubs of São Paulo and Buenos Aires.¹⁰ For instance, he had been in contact with Pietro Maria Bardi, who organized the exhibition *As obras de Max Bill*, which opened in March 1951 at the Museo de Arte de São Paulo (MASP).¹¹ Moreover, in the first issue of the AACI's *Revista Arte Concreto Invención*, the artist and writer Tomás Maldonado mentioned Bill in his essay "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno."¹² Maldonado later visited Bill in Zurich, establishing a collaboration that would last years.¹³ Bill also began corresponding with the Buenos Aires-based critic Jorge Romero Brest, who would become a great promoter of Bill's work in the Argentine and international art scenes.¹⁴ Bill embraced these connections, including the work of Madí artists in the *Salon des réalités nouvelles* exhibition in Paris and those of artists associated with the AACI in the related publication *Cahier des Réalités Nouvelles*.¹⁵ Still, Bill did not travel to or exhibit in Buenos Aires, and so his presence there remained limited to his inclusion in publications. These publications emphasized his three-dimensional endeavors: his sculptural production and architectural theories. In December 1951, Maldonado graced the cover of his new journal *Nueva Visión: Revista de cultura visual* with a photograph portraying Bill alongside the architects Henry van de Velde and Alvar Aalto. The publication also featured an article dedicated to *Dreiteilige Einheit* that cemented Bill's reputation in the Southern Cone in terms of his spatial operations.

These operations, which Bill discussed in "From Surface to Space," powerfully resonated with Buenos Aires's experimental sculptors, who were mostly associated with Madí or the AACI and occasionally exhibited together, notably at the *Salón argentino de arte no figurativo* held at the Galería Van Riel in October 1949. Building upon the formal and ideological legacy of the Russian avant-garde, these concrete artists strove to integrate the spaces of art and life by conferring on their works a relational quality that reflected their leftist politics, however nuanced.¹⁶

Even if they did not invest their artworks with specific social functions as their constructivist predecessors did, the Argentine sculptors produced works that would activate the viewer through their recalcitrance toward passive contemplation.¹⁷ They did so by endowing their sculptures with geometric structures that require apprehension from multiple points of view, negative volumes that bridge the works and the atmosphere enveloping them, mobile components, transparent or reflective surfaces that visually connect the object and its surroundings, and textural effects that invite touch, rather than sight, as the primary sensory mode. In this way, these sculptures exemplify the reshaping of the artwork's "aesthetic field," which Alexander Alberro has identified as a defining feature of Latin American concrete art at large, whereby the artwork and its discursive context produce "artistic signification according to the interrelations of subject and object," hence propelling a model of spectatorship that engages "a new kind of attentiveness and tactile encounter."¹⁸

For the *Madí* artists Arden Quin and Kosice, this mutual animation of viewer and artwork significantly relied on the work's kinetic potential. In a brochure dated February 1948, Arden Quin presented mobility as the defining feature of *Madí* sculpture, identifying "static sculpture" as one of the main targets for the movement's "incessant action" of artistic renewal.¹⁹ Kosice similarly rallied "against the immobility of concrete art" and called for an embrace of the axiom "distance – speed – movement" in his essay "Escultura Madinensor," which he published in the second issue of the magazine *Madí*.²⁰ More specifically, the pamphlet *Madinensor*, published in French, equated *Madí* sculpture with "three dimensions, without color, with movements of rotation, translation, etc."²¹ These characteristics manifest in Kosice's 1944 articulated wooden sculpture *Röyi*, whose components can move under the pressure of gravity and the viewer's manipulation. Similarly, Arden Quin's 1948 *Mobile* is susceptible to the action of atmospheric effects by virtue of its lightness and suspension (**Fig. 2**). The work echoes Arden Quin's claim that *Madí* embodied the culmination of an avant-garde genealogy of kinetic artists ranging from the Italian Futurists to László Moholy-Nagy to Alexander Calder, whose shifting metallic constructions served as an important model for *Mobile*.²² Yet the *Madí* sculptors also experimented with rich textures and crafted surfaces that set them apart from the mechanical tone of these artists' works. The smooth wooden components of both *Röyi* and *Mobile* evoke the tactile dimension associated with artisanal labor, in turn summoning the viewer's touch. This interest in organic surfaces and interaction is visible in Kosice's 1950 plaster sculpture *Madí* (**Fig. 3**). The work's vaguely anthropomorphic appearance and porous skin instill a connection between the work and the viewer's body, invoking a tactile encounter even in a composition devoid of kinetic elements.

The brothers Iommi and Girola, who were affiliated with the AACI until its dissolution in 1947, combined comparable surface effects with an innovative approach to sculptural volume. Consider Iommi's 1948 *Volumen espacial* (Spatial Volume), where the artist threaded a chrysalis-like bronze cluster onto a filiform wire structure resting on a bulky marble pedestal, or his 1945 sculpture of the same title, which combines a wire skeleton with a black wooden beam (**Figs. 4 and 5**).



Fig. 1

Max Bill, *Dreiteilige Einheit* (Tripartite Unity), 1947, in the Swiss section of the first Bienal de São Paulo, 1951. © and courtesy Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.

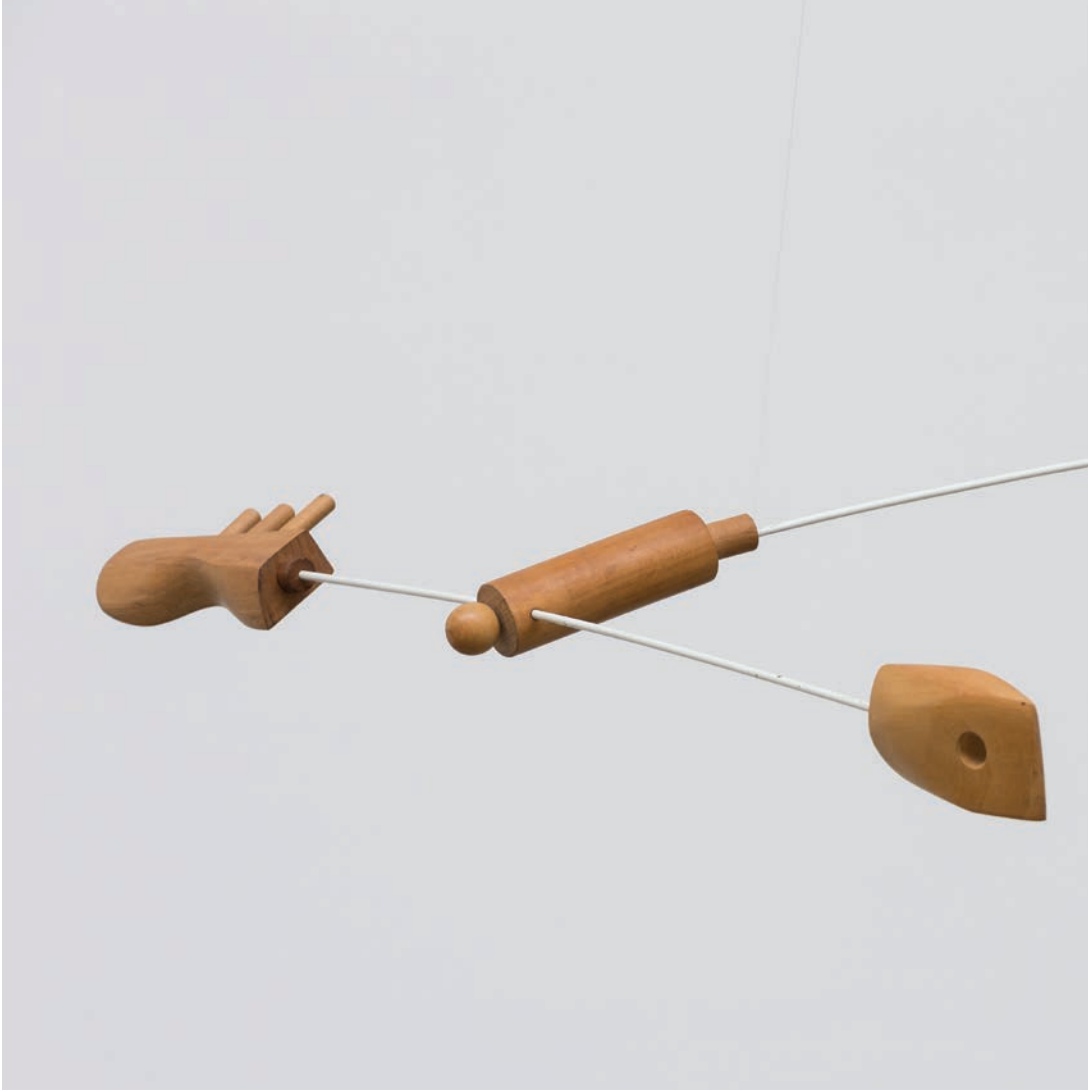


Fig. 2

Carmelo Arden Quin, *Mobile*, 1948. © the artist.

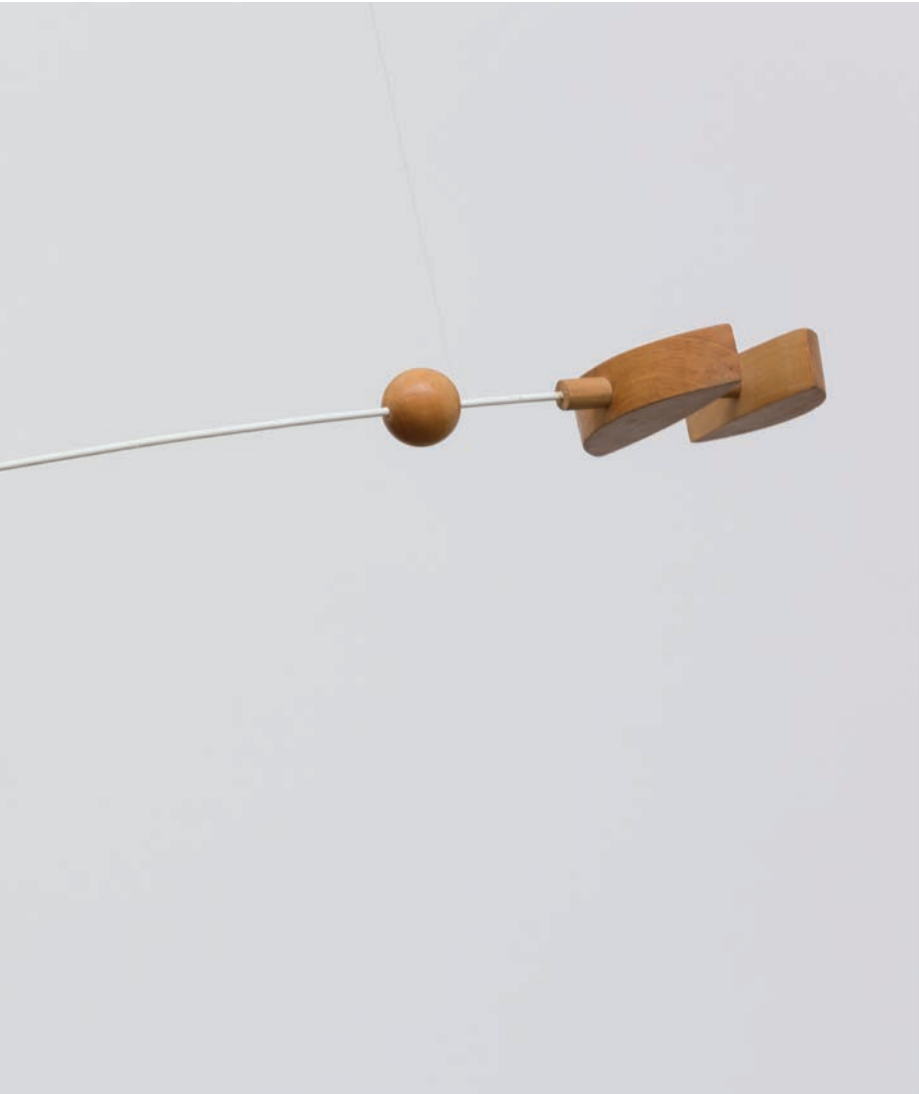




Fig. 3

Gyula Kosice, *Madí*, 1950. © Fundación Kosice, Buenos Aires. Photo: Arturo Sanchez.



Fig. 4

Enio Iommi, *Volumen espacial* (Spatial Volume), 1948. © the artist.



Fig. 5

Enio Iommi, *Volumen espacial* (Spatial Volume), 1945. © the artist.

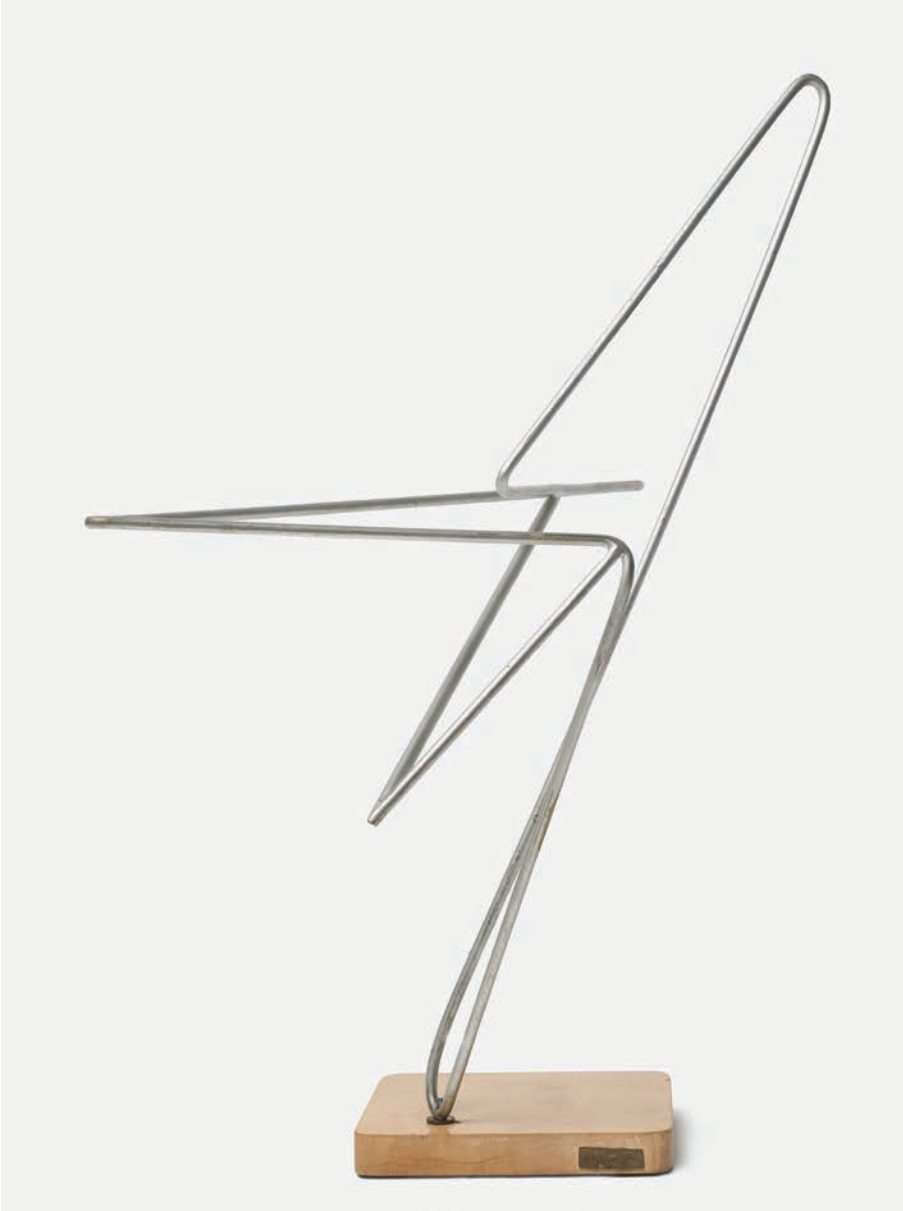


Fig. 6

Claudio Girola, *Triángulos espaciales* (Spatial Triangles), 1948. © the artist.



Fig. 7

Enio Iommi, *Elevación del triángulo* (Triangle Elevation), 1956. © the artist. Photos: Arturo Sanchez.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Max Bill, *Unendliche Fläche in Form einer Säule* (Endless Surface in Form of a Column), 1953.
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Figs. 10, 11, 12, 13

All works: Lidy Prati, *Untitled*, n.d. © Familia Polastri Prati.

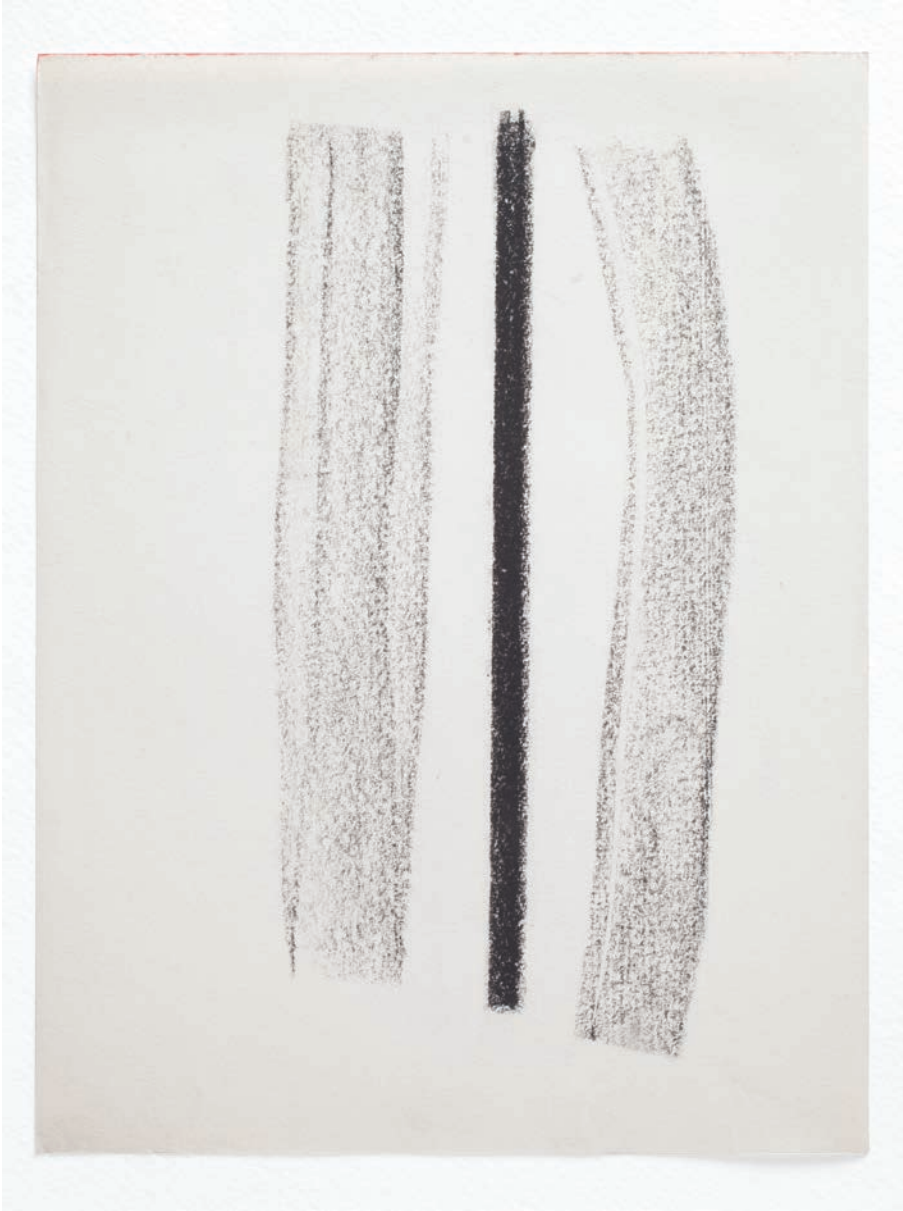


Fig. 14

Lidy Prati, *Untitled*, n.d. © Familia Polastri Prati.

The works juxtapose rich textures, heavy volumes, and the airy negative space circumscribed by the wire. These areas look as dense and substantial as the metal, marble, and wooden elements, suggesting that the seemingly empty space folded into the composition in fact consists of vibrant physical matter. This employment of unmarked three-dimensional space as a sculptural means is also visible in Girola's *Triángulos espaciales* (Spatial Triangles), from the same year (**Fig. 6**). Here, a continuous aluminum bar bends to form an angular configuration that partitions the surrounding environment into triangles of various sizes and orientations. These shapes seem to morph and contract as the viewer moves around the object, highlighting the interdependence of form and space, line and volume. Thus, Iommi and Girola presented the artwork and the area that envelops it as interpenetrating and mutually defining. Their incorporation of transparent or reflective materials intensifies this phenomenon, as it generates visual continuities between the artwork's surface and its surroundings. Iommi's 1956 *Elevación del triángulo* (Triangle Elevation), for example, simultaneously pierces through and refracts the environment it inhabits (**Figs. 7 and 8**). Its flexible metallic structure is interwoven with slices of negative space and captures light in a way that breaks up its simple geometry. Vaguely reminiscent of Bill's *Dreiteilige Einheit*, this sculpture clearly emerges as an extension of the space inhabited by the viewer, rather than as a self-sufficient, unitary construction.²³ In this sense, it echoes Bill's experiments with freer structures, such as the column-like *Unendliche Fläche in Form einer Säule* (Endless Surface in Form of a Column, 1953) (**Fig. 9**), which Maldonado reproduced in his 1955 monograph on the Swiss artist. Rather than form a sturdy classical pillar, this work reveals a surface that splits as it is thrust into space, allowing a slice of atmosphere to enter its shining body.

These artists' sculptural experiments echoed and surpassed Bill's proposal in "From Surface to Space." In particular, their works give life to Bill's idea that sculpture could generate non-Euclidean spatial relations by operating as a "drawing in space," unfolding through the viewer's dynamic action.²⁴ In parallel to her peers' sculptural endeavors, the former AACI member Lidy Prati reversed this intermedial analogy through a series of untitled drawings that produce dynamic spatial experiences in two dimensions (**Figs. 10–14**).²⁵ If Bill ruminated on sculpture's ability to behave as drawing in space, Prati employed drawing to explore the way negative space and mystifying visual effects can contribute to the viewer's activation. In these works, created before she distanced herself from her artistic career in the mid-1950s, Prati traced linear structures reminiscent of her colleagues' wiry sculptures by unevenly dragging charcoal on sheets of white paper. Despite their simplicity, these formally rigorous drawings feature rich textural effects that conjure conflicting suggestions of density and weightlessness and convey an ambiguous dimensionality. The contrasts between the works' impressions of transparency and opacity produce equivocal spatial relations, as do the forms' seeming overlapping with and mirroring of one another. These unsettling impressions derive from Prati's haptic interaction with the charcoal, since she modulated her pressure to alternate dark, ashy marks and ethereal, translucent streaks. The rough materiality of these forms makes clear that they dwell on the paper's surface, as if they were dusty accumulations of pigment susceptible to

reconfiguring with the slightest breeze. Still, the textured lines animate the flat sheets with a sensuous dimension, casting them as atmospheric fields that shift according to physical events. Much like the sculptures by Arden Quin, Kosice, Iommi, and Girola, Prati's linear forms call attention to the corporeality of the environment and evoke a complex array of visual, tactile, and kinesthetic encounters.

By acknowledging the viewer as a subject whose cognitive reactions to artworks encompass much more than static contemplation, Bill's Buenos Aires interlocutors—including the artists discussed above—grounded artworks, and especially sculptures, in the here and now of lived experience. It is likely that with these or similar works in mind, Bill penned his reflections on concrete sculpture's potential to connect objects, viewers, and their surroundings. Indeed, his openness to consider the role of the viewer's embodied reactions to geometric forms and structures must have ensued from his growing awareness and appreciation of the direction that concrete art had taken in Latin American cultural centers such as Buenos Aires.²⁶ Sculpture was central to Bill's dialogue with his Argentine counterparts, who radically projected the artwork into a multifaceted three-dimensional space. To be sure, it played a vital role in blurring the mind-body opposition that informed Bill's earlier definitions of concrete art. If the Swiss artist maintained his focus on art's resonance with intellectual principles throughout his career, on the eve of his encounters with the exploits of Latin American concrete artists he emphatically called for a model of artistic experience that would involve perceptual and bodily relations.²⁷ Thus, Bill's dialogue with these artists left important marks on his theoretical production. His prominent inclusion of works of Latin American concrete artists, such as sculptures by Kosice and Iommi in the 1960 exhibition *Konkrete Kunst: 50 Jahre Entwicklung* at the Helmhaus in Zurich, appears as a tribute to these and other artists who fostered sensorial and interactive encounters between artworks and viewers to integrate the spaces of art and life.²⁸

NOTES

1

Max Bill, "Vom flächigen zum räumlichen," undated text first published in French as "De la surface à l'espace," *XXème Siècle* 2 (1951): 59–65. Reproduced and translated into English as "From Surface to Space" in Manuel Fontán del Junco and María Toledo, eds., *Max Bill* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2015), 282. The English title is used throughout this text for clarity. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

2

Bill, 1951.

3

Bill, 1951.

4

Bill derived this definition from his article "Konkrete Gestaltung" in *Zeitprobleme in der schweizer Malerei und Plastik* (Zurich: Kunsthaus, 1936). He reworked this definition in multiple publications to apply it to concrete art. This quote survives from the 1936 formulation into an untitled introduction in *Zürcher Konkrete Kunst* (Stuttgart, Munich, and Braunschweig: Galerie Lutz und Meyer, Moderne Galerie Otto Stangl, and Galerie Otto Rolf, 1949). Reproduced and translated into English in Fontán del Junco and Toledo, eds., *Max Bill*, 269.

5

In the first issue of the publication *Arturo*, the artist Rhod Rothfuss criticized the limitations that the orthogonal frame put on avant-garde artists who otherwise transcended

traditional notions of pictorial space, such as the Cubists and the Futurists. See Rhod Rothfuss, "El marco: un problema de plástica actual," *Arturo* 1 (1944). Argentine artists who experimented with *marcos recortados* include Carmelo Arden Quin, Raúl Lozza, Gyula Kosice, Tomás Maldonado, Juan Melé, Lidy Prati, and Rothfuss himself, among others.

6

See, for example, Inés Katzenstein and María Amalia García, eds., *Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019); Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Pia Gottschaller, Aleca Le Blanc, Zanna Gilbert, Tom Learner, and Andrew Perchuck, eds.,

Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and Getty Research Institute, 2017); and Mónica Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944–1969* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

7

Bill, "From Surface to Space," 282–83.

8

For a study on the politics of the Argentine avant-garde during this period, see Daniela Lucena, *Contaminación artística: vanguardia concreta, comunismo y peronismo en los años 40* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2015). Erich Schmidt compellingly explored Bill's politics in the documentary *Max Bill – das absolute Augenmass* (Montreux: Accent Films, 2008).

9

Bill participated in the biennial as an independent artist and not, like several of his compatriots, as part of the Swiss national delegation.

10

In what follows, I rely on the excellent reconstruction of Bill's interaction with cultural agents in Brazil and Argentina in María Amalia García, *Abstract Crossings: Cultural Exchange Between Argentina and Brazil* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). A helpful summary of this aspect of the book also appears in García, "Max Bill in Argentina and Brazil: South American Episodes in Concrete Art," in *Max Bill*, 242–50.

11

According to García, Bill and María Bardi had been in contact since 1945. Bardi had been trying to organize Bill's exhibition at MASP since 1949. The initial idea that the exhibition would travel to other cities in the Southern Cone such as Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Santiago de Chile was later abandoned. See García, "Max Bill in Argentina and Brazil," 246–47.

12

Tomás Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," *Revista Arte Concreto Invención* (August 1946): 5–7.

13

On Maldonado's relationship with Bill, see Verónica Devalle, "Tomás Maldonado, 1944–1957: From Arte Concreto to nueva visión," *Journal of Design History* 32, no. 1 (2019): 17–34, and Alejandro Gabriel Crispiani, "The Total Artist: Max Bill according to Tomás Maldonado," *Docomomo* 42 (Summer 2010): 100–109.

14

Maldonado travelled to Zurich in 1948; Bill met Brest early the following year. See García, *Abstract Crossings*, 118–19.

15

Cahier des Realités Nouvelles 2 (1948). See García, *Abstract Crossings*, 115, note 1.

16

While most of the artists associated with Madí and the AACI were staunch Marxists, the latter were more committed to aligning their work with the principles of dialectical materialism and were active members of the Partido Comunista Argentino, while artists such as Kosice, Arden Quin, and Rothfuss preferred to keep their artistic experiments independent from specific ideologies. On the nuances of the Argentine avant-garde's leftist politics and their relation to other politicized modernist groups, see Daniela Lucena, "Arte y comunismo en Argentina en la primera mitad del siglo XX," *Sztuka Ameryki Lacińskiej* 7 (2017): 57–77.

17

On the Russian avant-garde's approach to objects as animating forces, see, for example, Christina Kiaer, "Rodchenko in Paris," *October* 75 (Winter 1996): 3–35.

18

Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse*, 2.

19

Carmelo Arden Quin, "Madí reafirma," *Madí en el estudio Blaszkó* (February 1948).

20

Gyula Kosice, "Escultura Madinemsor," *Madí* 2 (October 1948).

21

Madinemsor (Toulon: Grupo Madí, n.d.).

22

Carmelo Arden Quin, "El móvil," reproduced in Bois et al., *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art*

from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), 142. Also cited in Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse*, 34. On the connection between the Argentine avant-garde and their European predecessors, see Megan Anita Sullivan, "Locating Abstraction: The South American Coordinates of the Avant-Garde, 1945–1959" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013).

23

Tomás Maldonado, *Max Bill* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nueva Visión, 1955), 99.

24

Bill, "From Surface to Space," 283. Here, Bill relates this notion to the Brazilian artist Mary Vieira's drawings, which formally connect with Lidy Prati's experiments in charcoal.

25

On Prati's role in the Argentine avant-garde vis-à-vis her male colleagues and her relationship with Bill, see María Amalia García, "Lidy Prati y su instancia diferencial en la unidad del arte concreto," in *Yente/Prati* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, 2009), 86–99.

26

Already in 1949, Bill enthusiastically saw his Argentine colleagues' experiments as embodiments of his notion of concrete art, writing to Maldonado in a subtly patronizing tone: "I think you have all made great progress and it pleases me to know that there is a movement with such clarity over there." See letter from Max Bill to Tomás Maldonado (Zurich, January 25, 1949). Cited in García, *Abstract Crossings*, 126.

27

As Heloisa Espada has shown, even as Bill proclaimed the centrality of logical processes borrowed from mathematics and science to concrete art, his definition of order, regularity, and rationality were capacious, to the point that some did not consider him a rigorous thinker. See Heloisa Espada, "Além da ordem e da razão: a participação suíça na 1a Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo," *Modos: Revista de História da Arte* 5, no. 1 (2021): 179–97.

28

Max Bill, *Konkrete Kunst: 50 Jahre Entwicklung* (Zurich: Helmhaus, 1960).

CHECKLIST

Carmelo Arden Quin

Mobile, 1948

Wood and metal

31 7/16 × 32 1/2 × 1 1/4 in. (79.8 × 82.6 × 3.2 cm)

Max Bill

Unendliche Fläche in Form einer Säule (Endless Surface in Form of a Column), 1953

Brass and wood

28 × 4 × 4 in. (71.3 × 10.2 × 10.2 cm)

Claudio Girola

Triángulos espaciales (Spatial Triangles), 1948

Aluminum and wood

21 1/2 × 14 3/4 × 6 1/8 in. (54.6 × 37.5 × 15.6 cm)

Enio Iommi

Volumen espacial (Spatial Volume), 1945

Iron, wood, and synthetic enamel

35 13/16 × 26 1/2 × 30 1/2 in. (90.9 × 67.3 × 77.5 cm)

Construcción sobre el espacio (Construction in Space), 1945

Wood, Plexiglas, and metal

24 1/2 × 29 1/4 × 17 in. (62.2 × 74.3 × 43.2 cm)

Volumen espacial (Spatial Volume), 1948

Bronze, steel, and marble

29 1/8 × 13 × 10 in. (74 × 33 × 25.4 cm)

Elevación del triángulo (Triangle Elevation), 1956

Aluminum and wood

25 9/16 × 17 11/16 × 13 3/4 in. (65 × 45 × 34.9 cm)

Sketch for Volumen espacial (1945), 2009

Marker on paper

24 3/4 × 17 3/4 in. (62.9 × 45.1 cm)

Gyula Kosice

Madi, 1950

Wood and plaster

19 5/8 × 3 1/2 × 3 1/2 in. (49.8 × 8.9 × 8.9 cm)

Lidy Prati

Untitled, n.d.

Charcoal on paper

8 1/4 × 6 1/4 in. (21 × 15.9 cm)

Untitled, n.d.

Charcoal on paper

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