Playing their Game: France, Latin America, and the Transformation of Geometric Abstraction in Postwar Paris

by

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ABSTRACT

This study considers a specific form of geometric abstraction initiated by a group of Latin American artists – including the Argentineans Julio Le Parc and Martha Boto, and the Venezuelans Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto – who were active in Paris during the early 1960s. The work of these artists, which was by no means cohesive, was rooted in a tradition of European and Latin American geometric abstraction, yet with a modern edge. The work played with a recognizable formal vocabulary, but offered a participatory model of engagement distinct from the emotional detachment of early 20th century geometric abstraction and the gestural tendencies of abstract expressionism. Optical and kinetic art, as it came to be called, offered the early 1960’s viewer in Paris a kind of unique artistic experience which mediated both the pressing postwar needs of France and Latin America and the technological optimism of a hyper-consumerist era. Utilizing new artistic materials (i.e. plastic) and technological devices that made reference to the world of advertising and design, these artists became unwittingly connected to the international economic and political aspirations of France at what was an uncertain historical moment.

Launched by the seminal exhibition Le Mouvement, held at Galerie Denise René in April 1955, optical and kinetic art enjoyed significant attention and public success in Paris for a decade, yet this prominence has yet to be critically examined. With its focus on interaction and play, optical and kinetic art led some serious-minded critics in the 1950’s and 60’s to dismiss this work as whimsical and light-hearted, a condition which still plagues the critical reception of this work. This thesis addresses this gap in scholarship by
situating this particular version of optical and kinetic art within its historical moment and local context. More specifically, I consider what made this work so appealing to a French public, as tensions regarding France’s global identity under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle were being worked out.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................... ii

Table of Contents............................................................................................. iv

List of Illustrations......................................................................................... vi

Acknowledgments............................................................................................. xii

CHAPTER ONE: Readying the Playing Field: Latin American Abstract Art in Postwar France ................................................................. 1
  i. Background context and theoretical precursors........................................ 7
  ii. Consumer culture and the technological future..................................... 15
  iii. Optico-kinetic art and the changing Parisian art scene....................... 18
  iv. Charles de Gaulle, Latinité, and Latin America.................................. 22

CHAPTER TWO: The Currents of Geometric Abstraction: from the Margins (Latin America) to the Major League (France) ......................... 30
  i. The myth of Paris................................................................................. 31
  ii. A trans-Atlantic exchange: France’s myths of Latin America............. 39
  iii. Modernity, abstraction, universalism: geometric abstraction in Latin America................................................................. 50
  iv. Latin America reinvigorates France..................................................... 67
  v. Crossing over...................................................................................... 73

CHAPTER THREE: Redefining Geometric Abstraction in Postwar France: the Denise René Gallery, 1944-1955............................................... 77
  i. “Le Mouvement”: optical and kinetic art in 1955.................................. 77
  ii. Postwar alternatives........................................................................... 85
  iii. Geometric abstraction: the fraught history....................................... 91
  iv. Denise René: securing an avant-garde position................................... 93
  v. Kineticism and Opticality: the new task for art................................ 103
  vi. Art, publics, and the integration of the viewer................................... 109
  vii. Conclusion...................................................................................... 119

CHAPTER FOUR: Optico-kinetic Art, Technology, and the Everyday ........... 122
  i. France and new anxieties during the Cold War.................................. 122
  ii. De Gaulle, technology, and redefining a “new” France...................... 124
  iii. The new consumerism..................................................................... 128
  iv. The critique of technology and consumerism................................ 133
  v. Technology, science and the subversive qualities of the “ludique”: Latin American expatriates in Paris................................. 138
  vi. The reception of optico-kinetic art and the challenge to
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter One


Chapter Two

fig. 3. “Sur les pavés de la Revolution.” Mass publication. Café brochure from *Havanita Café*, Paris, rue de Lappe.........................................................................................................................31


**Chapter Three**


Chapter Four


fig. 38. Nicolas Schöffer, Cysp I, avec le Ballet Maurice Béjart, sur le toit de la Cité radieuse de Le Corbusier à Marseille, premier Festival de l’art d’avant-garde (1956). In


fig. 44. Jesús Rafael Soto, First Vibration (1957). Industrial paint on wood and metal wire. 23 2/3 x 23 2/3 x 6 in. Private Collection. In Jesús Rafael Soto (Paris: Editions du Jeu de Paume/Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997), 71


fig. 46. GRAV, Vue du labyrinthe/Vue des colonnes (1963). In Stratégies de Participation: GRAV-Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel, 1960-1968 (Grenoble: Centre national d’art contemporain de Grenoble, 1998), 120


**Conclusion**


fig. 57. "L’"OP ART” très en vogue aux Etats-Unis c’est le cinétisme né à Paris il y a 10 ans," article by Sabine Marchand from *Le Figaro* (23 septembre 1965). In *Denise René, l'intrépide* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2001), 137.................................182

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Chapter 1: Readying the Playing Field: Latin American Abstract Art in Postwar France

The complexity and diversity of what was a rapidly changing art scene is what has made the period in France following the Second World War such a prime target for art historical examination and retrospective exhibitions. As numerous historical studies of this period have demonstrated, the end of the war brought new worries and problems to a devastated France, which was seeking to reconstruct itself both physically and emotionally after the trauma of the Occupation. While various sectors of the political body promoted their particular visions for a unified France, given the broad-based government that included, among others, the Socialists, Communists and the Christian Democratic Mouvement républicain populaire (MRP), the art world was similarly disjointed with no clear consensus on how to respond to the contemporary crisis. The different artistic factions, ranging from social realism to geometric abstraction to the various modes of abstract expressionism (l'art informel, tachisme, and abstraction lyrique), vied for dominance at a moment when artistic debates and political ideology were closely intertwined, as attested to by art critics who “writing from politicized newspapers, were defending and trying to impose different aesthetics according to their political vision.”

competing movements that dominated the French art world in the years following WWII, with abstract expressionism often presented as the dominant artistic style. It is tempting to attribute the contemporary scholarly focus on lyrical abstraction to its introspective associations and expressive palette, a mode which was deemed best suited to the needs of a society that had undergone the destruction of war, the shame of the Occupation, and the poverty of the postwar years, evidence of which was the lack of everyday goods and proper nutrition. But while lyrical abstraction may have been uniquely positioned as the leading artistic movement in mid-century France, it was not by far the only one that enjoyed critical success and popularity amongst the intelligentsia and larger French public during that period. Lesser known groups and movements were active participants in the artistic debates that characterized this volatile period in the history of French art.4

Using the state of contemporary scholarship as a point of departure, this study attempts to address this bias toward lyrical abstraction. Using the April 1955 seminal exhibition *Le Mouvement* held at Galerie Denise René in Paris as a crux, my thesis considers the advent of optical and kinetic art produced by a group of Latin American artists active in Paris during the late 1950s and 1960s. These artists included, but were not limited to, the Venezuelans Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto, and the Argentineans Julio Le Parc (one of the founding members of the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel or GRAV, a collective that formed in 1960 and prioritized spectator participation) and Martha Boto.

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4 The exhibition organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona, and co-curated by Serge Guilbaut and Manuel Borjas-Villel entitled *Be-Bomb: Transatlantic War of Images and all that Jazz, 1945-1956* (October 2007-January 2008), reassessed the immediate postwar period by taking another look at artists and movements that have been traditionally neglected from art historical scholarship.
As the exhibition that launched kinetic art, the 1955 show introduced an innovative and interactive art mode to a French public more accustomed to the intellectual and introspective palette of lyrical abstraction. The term “kinetic” had already been used by the Russian Constructivists Naom Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, and the Hungarian artist and Bauhaus professor László Moholy-Nagy in the 1920s, as they began to experiment with sculptures that resembled machines. But in the 1950s and 60s the term came to embody a particular strain of art because of its emphasis on optical illusion, color perception and public participation. Like new modes of design at this time and the advertising gimmicks that were part of a new consumer culture in Charles de Gaulle’s France, the work produced by the optico-kinetic artists used new materials such as plastic and steel (largely created or revised for the war effort), and also exploited motion and new technological devices. The op and kinetic abstraction that these artists produced, which built on a legacy of geometric abstraction dominant in France in the first few decades of the 20th century, enjoyed critical attention and popular success in Paris.

Writing in the 1960s, art critic Guy Brett noted how these artists were concerned with “inventing games: games for disorienting the spectator, games for deforming the surface, games for demonstrating velocity, vibration, reflection, etc.” Thus it was through play, perceptual tricks, disorienting phenomena, that the Latin American artists of this study

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6 The term “op” first came into parlance in 1964 by the New York press in order to describe the type of work art critic and curator William C. Seitz was gathering for his show 1965 show The Responsive Eye, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See Jon Borzynski, “Op Art: Pictures that Attack the Eye,” Time, vol. 84, no. 17 (October 23, 1964), 78-79. The following month Life magazine published “Op Art,” and used Bridget Riley’s painting Current which was used on the cover of The Responsive Eye catalogue. This article helped define Op to the public, as well as positioned Riley in center stage of the movement. Op replaced the term “new tendency” which had been introduced in Paris in January 1963 by artists of several countries who felt they shared a common interest in the perceptual effects of art. They adopted the title “Nouvelle Tendance, recherche continuelle” (NTrc). See George Rickey, “The New Tendency (Nouvelle Tendance – Recherche Continue),” Art Journal, vol. 23, no. 4 (Summer 1964), 272-279.
attempted to decenter the post-WWII French public, eager for some sort of seemingly light-hearted distraction from the harsh realities of the post-war years.

Optical and kinetic art thrived during approximately ten-years, yet it is rare to find an art historical account that discusses this success. Rather, due to the art’s seemingly whimsical and playful allure, and its subsequent absorption into fashion and pop culture, optical and kinetic art’s initial political and social potential has been typically disregarded. All this is despite the fact that as an innovative twist to an established geometric abstract tradition, optico-kinetic art embodied, to a certain degree, some of the utopian and socialist aspirations of its predecessors, the Russian Constructivists and the Dutch group De Stijl. Conventional histories of the art of this period note that while gestural abstraction reached its apogee during the 1950s, its dominance was ultimately challenged in the early 1960s by movements such as Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme, both of which sought a more direct engagement with everyday life. What such histories leave out is that even before these groups entered the scene, the exhibition Le Mouvement (which premiered this new type of geometric and participatory art) and its aftermath

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broke the stranglehold of gestural abstraction. To fully understand the complexity of the 1950s French art scene, the history of the Latin American optico-kinetic artists has to be integrated.

A case in point is the retrospective exhibition *Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art 1910-1980*, which took place in 1985 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and which ignored the work of the optico-kinetic artists.\(^{10}\) Citing the work of cubist-inspired artists such as Auguste Herbin, Joost Baljeu, Jean Gorin, Mary Martin, and Sonia Delaunay-Terk, art historian Magdalena Dabrowski, the curator of the show, briefly mentioned that:

> [New] modes of artistic expression led away from direct continuation of the geometric tradition toward a diversity of experiments related to concepts that had preoccupied the pioneers, such as light and motion. This can be exemplified by the “spatial art” of Fontana in Italy...But essentially, in the post-World War II decades, European geometric abstraction was past its creative phase.\(^{11}\)

For Dabrowski, kinetic and optical art is not even a footnote in the trajectory of postwar art. However, she notes that it was through the reformulation of the geometric style that artists were led to explore the possibilities hinted at by the artists at the turn of the century, namely movement and light. A more recent exhibition, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, which opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2004, considered the emergence and development of avant-garde art in Latin America from 1920-1970. Bringing to the forefront artists considered pioneers in the Latin American avant-garde in the earlier part of the twentieth century, as well as those artists

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., 34.
of the post-WWII years who sought to express their independence from European and American artistic movements, this exhibition offered one of the first comprehensive examinations of this rich period. But with its focus on Latin America, it fell short of analyzing the international scale of geometric abstraction produced by Latin American artists, and in particular how their work fits into a larger modern art historical trajectory. More specifically, there is no analysis that tries to position the exchange between Latin America and France as part of a larger utopian ideal. Thus, a reconsideration of this idiom will offer another point of view of the period by focusing on a group of artists traditionally marginalized in contemporary art historical literature.

This study argues that far from being defunct as Dabrowski claimed, the geometric abstraction developed by Latin American artists was intended to provide a positive, technologically oriented outlook for a public steeped in the malaise of the post-WWII period. Simultaneously, these artists proposed a socially directed form of production, in line with the “old” geometric abstraction, with a key difference: the optico-kinetic art of the 1950s and 1960s emphasized to a greater degree the ludique or playful side of the work infusing it with everyday life, elements of chance, time, and motion, at a time of social and political unrest when disillusionment and chaos prevailed. In a period marked by the tensions caused by the Algerian War, a loss of faith in Soviet Communism, and the

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12 With an emphasis on the flatness of the picture plane, color, and the removal of any references to nature, geometric abstraction itself was associated with a universality of meaning. This style, according to its proponents, would bind all of the arts together in order to represent a unified society. See Michael White, De Stijl and Dutch Modernism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

13 Ludic derives from the Latin ludus, meaning “play.” It literally means “playful”, and refers to any philosophy where play is the prime purpose of life. It is often confused with “luddite”, since both are anti-structure and anti-bureaucracy, but ludic is not necessarily anti-technology, whereas luddite movements are. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s seminal work Homo Ludens (1938) discusses the influence of play on European culture.
political instability of the Fourth Republic, optical and kinetic art which was rooted in geometric abstraction, offered the Parisian public a glimpse into an optimistic future, where technology, art, and life converged in utopian promise. In short, it provided a site in which the uncertainty of the present could temporarily be put on hold.

My thesis seeks to explore, then, a set of social and historical events that surrounded the production of optical and kinetic art in the 1950’s and 60’s, so that a more complicated and layered art scene in mid-twentieth century France can be brought to light. In particular I am interested in asking an interrelated set of questions. First, why was France such a fertile ground for optico-kinetic art and particularly that produced by expatriate Latin American artists in the 1950’s and 60’s? Second, what did such abstract art offer up for the French viewer in the mid-1950’s through the 60’s, as technological change and new consumer lifestyles were transforming everyday life? And thirdly, what did Latin America symbolize for the French, particularly at a historical moment when France was positioning itself internationally as distinct from both the United States and the USSR? These questions guide my exploration of both the production and transformation of geometric abstract art in the 1950’s and 60’s.

i. Background context and theoretical precursors

In the years following WWII, France found itself in a precarious position, caught both materially and psychologically between the vestiges of a devastating war and the hope of the future, full of the promise of spectacle culture and consumer goods. While August 25, 1944, marked the end of the Occupation in France, it also signaled the beginning of a new
set of concerns centered on the reconstruction of a nation that had been gravely physically battered, its morale nearly destroyed. Considered the center of advanced cultural production before the war, France’s position was now threatened by the rise of the New York School Painting in the United States. Art historian Serge Guilbaut addresses these issues, and others, in his book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. He writes: “When New York, through its spokesman Clement Greenberg, declared that it had at last achieved international status as a cultural center and even replaced Paris as the cultural symbol of the Western world, the French capital was not strong enough, either economically or politically, to protest.”\(^\text{14}\) The two decades that followed, however, were characterized by an increased sense of optimism shaped in part by the advent of technology and American-style consumerism, and this despite France’s waning status as a colonial power and the increasing pressures as a result of the Algerian War. Within such a climate, France struggled to craft an identity that would reassert domestic stability at home by creating a clear path to reconstruction, and assure a dominant presence abroad in order to stay the tide of what was then considered American imperialism. To this end, a variety of political and cultural strategies were brought into play.

As historians Nicholas Hewitt and Pascal Ory have explained, much of the struggle during the Occupation and Resistance was played out in the French cultural and literary spheres:

> With the French lacking, until the very end of the Occupation,

\(^{14}\) Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5. Guilbaut continues: “In the immediate postwar period, Paris refused to see the radical changes that were affecting economic and artistic relations between Europe and the United States...France, which had lost nearly everything in the war – some said even her honor – set about holding on to what the entire world had for centuries recognized as hers: cultural hegemony.”
very much in terms of concrete political or military power, the realm of ideas and expression achieved an almost disproportionate importance. For the German occupying forces, it was essential to immediately convey to the French a sense of continuity and normality, and one key feature of this operation was the importance accorded to writers, journalists, dramatists, artists and film-makers as the guarantors of a certain continuity in French culture.\footnote{Nicholas Hewitt, “Les Lettres Françaises and the Failure of the French Postwar ‘Renaissance’,” The Culture of Reconstruction: European Literature, Thought and Film, 1945-50, ed. Nicholas Hewitt (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 120. Hewitt credits Pascal Ory and his work Les Collaborateurs (Paris: Seuil, coll. ‘Points’, 1976) for this idea.}

Culture, then, became a primary vehicle for working through larger social trauma, almost a form of cathartic release. This shift, manifested in the art being produced at the time, was increasingly apparent in the philosophical and political debates circulating in France, and in particular existentialism, the most popular postwar philosophical movement, exemplified by the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre.\footnote{See Jean-Paul Sartre, L’Etre et le Néant: essai d’ontologie phénoménologique (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1943), trans. Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1956).} Like Sartre’s existentialism, \textit{l’art informel} emphasized the tragedy of the human subject in a chaotic and anguished social world. In 1952, French critic and artist Michel Tapié published the book \textit{Un Art Autre} (\textit{Art of Another Kind}), and organized an exhibition of the same name which included artists such as Karen Appel, Alberto Burri, Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, Willem de Kooning, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Wols.\footnote{Michel Tapié, \textit{Un art autre où il s’agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel} (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et fils, 1952).} In his book, Tapié described this postwar European tendency in painting that seemed to break away from traditional notions of order and composition in favor of more spontaneous, gestural and expressive form, while rejecting both figurative and geometric modes of representation. He used the term \textit{art informel} from the French \textit{informe}, meaning unformed or formless, to define this new
tendency. L’art informel and existentialism both prioritized the postwar alienated individual’s (and artist’s) place in the world and the subject’s complex and tragically conflicting identity in the face of uncertainty and uncontrollable events.

In his study Camus and Sartre: the story of a friendship and the quarrel that ended, historian Ronald Aronson points out how Sartre’s and fellow existentialist Albert Camus’s ideas gave a voice to the postwar frame of mind of a younger generation who had lived through the war and its devastation.19 Given their traumatic experiences, this generation was open to the ideas of intellectuals like Sartre and Camus who crafted a philosophical position based in action20: “Given to struggle, and even sometimes to hope, they [the younger generation] were leftist in temperament but in a way that was fiercely independent and skeptical. The experience of the last few years had made these young people receptive to outlooks based on a sense of the world’s absurdity.”21 As the philosophy that came to define the postwar era, existentialism’s focus on action, freedom and decision-making was embraced by a French public trying to come to terms with widespread feelings of despair and alienation.

By the mid-1950s, however, there were those who attempted to trouble this philosophy by emphasizing the social and political components that could account for the weight of history on the individual, something many felt was not taken into account with Sartre’s

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20 Ibid., 45.
21 Ibid.
form of existentialism.\textsuperscript{22} For Sartre, the concept of freedom was fundamental, a freedom based on personal responsibility and individual action within a hostile and indifferent universe. Within Sartre’s existentialism, the individual is ultimately responsible for his or her actions, and through his or her choices and their consequences, they create meaning for their lives. Freedom, as will become clear throughout the rest of this study, became a catchword of sorts during the fifties and sixties, as both France and the United States interpreted it differently. But freedom also became a significant characteristic of optical and kinetic art, as works of art that liberated the individual from more traditional relationships, such as the one between viewer and art object. Here, work by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is particularly significant, given his emphasis on embodied experience as a way to come to terms with human existence, distancing his definition of existentialism from that of Sartre, which focused more on radical freedom and anguished responsibility.\textsuperscript{23}

Sartre strove to reconcile his existential understanding with Marxism during the 1950s, after having experienced years of intellectual warfare with the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) which believed his theory to be incompatible with Marxist ideology.\textsuperscript{24} It was Merleau-Ponty, a colleague of Sartre’s at Les Temps Modernes, a left-wing journal edited by Sartre, who strove to “revise” existentialism in order to introduce to it a social consciousness, in a way carving out a middle ground, or the “space in between the self

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} See Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology}, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosphic Library, 1956).
\end{itemize}
and the world."  

In trying to clarify the position of the subject located in an intersubjective world, Merleau-Ponty presented the self as an active participant in society, but one subjected to and molded by its various forces. As he argued in *Sense and Non-Sense*, first published in 1948, "We must analyze involvement, the moment when the subjective conditions of history become bound together, how class exists before becoming aware of itself – in short, the status of the social and the phenomenon of co-existence."  

It is this "co-existence" or reciprocity that makes it distinct from Sartre’s position, and key in considering the social potential inherent in the kinetic art that permeated French society in the late fifties and sixties. In other words, similar to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body-subject that allowed for an understanding of the individual as inextricably intertwined with the world and events surrounding her, optical and kinetic art depended on the reciprocal gesture between viewer and work of art for any sort of dialogue and potential transformation to occur.

With a focus on the subject as one that is “embodied, performative, and intersubjective,” art historian Amelia Jones has further clarified the difference between Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s positions:

Merleau-Ponty’s antiempiricism and his insistence on the fully embodied nature of intersubjectivity enables him to conceptualize intersubjectivity as imbricated rather than oppositional (as in Sartre's existential model), as intersubjective and embedded rather than simplistically staged in a discreet social environment. While Sartre sustains in his phenomenological work a

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25 Ibid., 147.
more strictly Hegelian view of self/other relations as structured by conflict, Merleau-Ponty posits the self/other as reciprocal.28

This interconnectedness between the subject and the rest of the world had political as well as cultural implications. In the art world, in fact, the long-held opposition between art object and beholder was undergoing a major overhaul. Denise René’s exhibition held in 1955, *Le Mouvement*, featured a new kind of artwork that asked the viewer to engage and interact with optical and kinetic objects. René’s exhibit and its significance are discussed more fully at a later point in this thesis, but what is important here is that René’s gallery provided a center for expatriate Latin American artists who transformed the familiar language of geometric abstraction into works that moved, enticed, made sounds, and responded to and echoed viewers’ movements through the gallery, effectively reconfiguring viewer’s relationships with both the art and the world it referenced (fig. 1 & 2).

While Latin America expatriate artists are key to this study, it is important to note that they do not represent a cohesive movement or group, and in fact there are differences among their individual art production.29 Yet each of these artists, who coalesced around Denise René’s gallery in Paris, uniquely challenged accepted artistic norms of the post-WWII period and in particular the individualistic and angst-ridden production of postwar gestural abstraction and *l’art informel*. This study, then, is not solely about a group of Latin American artists working abroad. Rather, its focus is a cross-cultural exchange and

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28 Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 44.

29 Even though this study focuses on Latin American artists, there were other artists who worked in an optical and kinetic vein, such as the Hungarians Viktor Vasarely and Nicolas Schöffer, the Israeli Yaacov Agam, the Frenchmen François Morellet and Joël Stein, and the Chinese artist Wen-Ying Tsai.
transformation that takes place during the late 1950s and 1960s in Paris and involves migration, the perception of the French public and the politics of the art world, at a time when both France and Latin America were seeking to reconfigure their international identity.

Thus, when on April 6, 1955, Le Mouvement opened at Galerie Denise René, displaying a unique kind of geometric abstract art, full of interactive gadgets and participatory possibilities, there were important political implications at stake. The immediate popular success of the show demonstrates that Le Mouvement filled some pressing social and cultural needs latent in France at this time. The ideas of amusement, play and the ludique were integral to defining not only Denise René’s show, but also the larger movement of geometric abstraction and kinetic art that would predominate in her gallery over the next decade. The intersection of Denise René’s gallery with the Latin American artists who worked with new forms of geometric abstraction fostered a promising situation for the various participants: for Denise René, her gallery became a venue for avant-garde art; for the Latin Americans, the gallery was not only the central hub where they could engage with each other’s work, but it also became the portal through which their art production was promoted and became internationally known. The expatriate artists that had made Paris their home found legitimacy for their work not available in their own countries. As well, for many of these artists, Paris became the site where an articulation of their socialist aspirations seemed possible.

30 The final grouping for Le Mouvement brought together a series of well-established artists (Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder, Robert Jacobsen) and a number of emerging ones (Yaacov Agam, Jean Tinguely, Jesús Rafael Soto, Pol Bury, and Vasarely). The overall criterion for inclusion was that all artists introduce motion, either by incorporating actual movement or time within the work, or through virtual movement, that is work based on optical illusion whereby perception is never completely fixed.
As this thesis will explore, success in Paris for the Argentineans and Venezuelans meant that they were no longer on the periphery of the action, but right in the middle of what was considered to be the most advanced center of artistic production. France was able to maintain an avant-garde tradition by exploiting its ties with Latin America (which some might term a soft form of colonialism). Most importantly, the Latin American artists appeared to offer France, however fleetingly, a seemingly viable alternative to the predominant aesthetics of the United States and the USSR, promoting conceptual, physical, and potentially political engagement while crafting, through the optical and kinetic, an image of modernity associated with technological progress.

ii. Consumer culture and the technological future

The interactive and seemingly playful works produced by the optico-kinetic artists appeared to tap into a new-found excitement regarding the influx of consumerism. In her memoirs, *Leçons Particulières*, journalist and writer Françoise Giroud reminisced about how she and the cofounder of *Elle* magazine, Hélène Lazareff, had envisaged the ideal reader of their new magazine in the 1950s: "We came up with the ideal reader of *Elle*: she would be from Angoulême. Why Angoulême, I forget. Perhaps because of Rastignac. In any case, our reader would live in Angoulême, she would be between twenty and thirty-five years old, and, after five years of war, she’d want to live a little…"\(^{31}\) [Translation mine]. Indeed, after the austerity during the wartime years, children and adolescents were not the only ones in need of frivolity and play. Soon after the war France was to accelerate into modernity, a period most easily identified by the consumer

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culture that developed in the fifties, and the prosperous economic boom that marked the thirty years, *les trente glorieuses*, following the end of the war.

Mirroring the swiftness with which France was being modernized, other aspects of culture witnessed dramatic changes. The rationing and regulation that had been common during and after the war had finally given way to an abundance of consumer goods. Recalling the years just after the war, Giroud wrote in her memoir *I give you my word*:

"And anyone who wasn’t in France in those days cannot understand what it means to be hungry for consumer goods, from nylon stockings to refrigerators, from records to automobiles – to buy a car back then you had to get a purchase permit and then wait a year...It’s very simple: in 1946 in France there was literally nothing." This hunger for the latest novelties represented a new-found freedom of sorts, a freedom from war, an openness that was characterized not only by domestic modernization (for example, by 1957, one out of ten French households owned a refrigerator), but by the readiness with which French society adopted these new symbols of progress and prosperity. If restraint had been the operative word immediately after the war, freedom to experience modern life in a new way seemed to categorize the decade of the 1950s.

This new "space-time" revolution had everything to do with the transformations taking place in the private space of the home and the public due to the country’s push towards modernization. A reconfiguration of the rural and urban landscape, accounted for the

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32 The term was coined by French economist Jean Fourastié.
35 Freedom, and its link to play, becomes an important concept when discussing the work of the Latin American optico-kinetic artists.
growth in population which transformed France during these years. In fact, six times more people moved to the cities between 1954 and 1957 than between 1945 and 1949.\textsuperscript{36} Ross notes that postwar modernization in France was not a progressive development. Instead, after the war there seemed to be a rushed panic to be up-to-date, and in this case, it meant acquiring the latest goods. As Ross explains:

> The speed with which French society was transformed after the war from a rural, empire-oriented, Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized, and urban one meant that the things modernization needed – educated middle managers, for instance, or affordable automobiles and other “mature” consumer durables... – burst onto a society that still cherished prewar outlooks with all of the force, excitement, disruption, and horror of the genuinely new.\textsuperscript{37}

And with its changes in working and living patterns new consumer needs needed to be met.

> [B]ecause of the increased distance between the place of work and the new urban housing programmes of the early 1950s, introduced to tackle the appalling problems of slums and homelessness (in 1953 100,000 HLMs [Habitation à Loyer Modéré] were built; by 1959 this had risen to 300,000), meant that there was a growing need for articles for the home. This was made greater by the media’s emphasis on home comforts. The phenomenon of clocking-in, the division of the day according to defined shifts or timetables... put a new accent on time-saving. Hence the appearance of an increasing diversity of household gadgets and time-saving devices.\textsuperscript{38}

Thus, by 1955, when René’s exhibition Le Mouvement opened its doors, it greeted a public vastly transformed by material consumption and technological optimism, an audience interested in fun, play, and everyday engagements, rather than in existential commitment and direct political ideology.

\textsuperscript{38} The Condition of Women in France: 1945 to the Present, 28.
iii. Optico-kinetic art and the changing Parisian art scene

In an effort to revive a long tradition of European and Latin American geometric abstraction, and to put Paris back on the map of contemporary art, the work of the kinetic and optical artists—while full of contradictions and differences—also provided its French public with an unprecedented form of participatory engagement, at a time when a growing middle class was interested in questioning the distance between art and everyday life. These artists' potential success in Paris also had important consequences for their art production, the most important being a legitimization of their work in what was still a major art center of the world. Exploring the phenomenon of human perception through color, opticality, and motion, these Latin American artists opened up a space for the viewer's sensorial and physical experience, often allowing the viewer to intervene and directly participate in the work of art. In short, these artists broke down the traditional distance between the art object and its viewer, a distance increasingly seen as elite and exclusionary, making art an immediate and rejuvenating experience based in empirical knowledge and individual consciousness.

During this period of economic recovery in France, a number of other groups arose in response to the societal and cultural developments, most notably the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, the *Situationist International*, and the *Décollagistes*. All these groups responded to the advent of consumer culture and burgeoning capitalism that were quickly transforming French society. Favoring materials taken from everyday life, the *Nouveaux Réalistes* also reacted to the predominant aesthetic of lyrical abstraction which emphasized the individual. Their embrace of popular culture foreshadowed American Pop art of the
1960s, making the art production of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* akin to the neo-dada work of artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, particularly in its use of common materials and found objects, and its incorporation of chance and spontaneity. Often linked to the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, the Décollagistes took as their material layered street posters and billboards that had been damaged by passers-by. Ripping sections of the damaged advertisements to expose other posters or “messages” hidden underneath, artists such as François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, and Jacques de la Villeglé often scraped, tore and re-glued the various sections in order to create new compositions that reflected the sociopolitical events of the day. While the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, like the optico-kinetic artists, adopted a somewhat favorable stance vis-à-vis consumer culture, the *Situationist International*, formed in 1957, had more concrete social and political transformations in mind reconciling political and aesthetic thought and practice. Deeming that everyday life had been “colonized” by the commodity, thus making social life a sort of “spectacle” leading to alienation, Guy Debord and other members of the *Situationist International* called for a re-evaluation of society through revolution. They employed critical strategies, such as détournerment (reusing well-known media or artistic elements for something other than their original purpose) and dérive (concept of drifting or walking aimlessly through urban spaces) in order to re-experience the city and break the everyday monotony they attributed to passive consumer society.

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39 The French art critic Pierre Restany wrote up the original *Nouveau Réaliste* manifesto, signed on October 27, 1960, by the original members of the group. These included: Arman, François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and Jacques de la Villeglé. For more on *Nouveau Réalisme*, see *Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Susanne Neuburger (Nürnberg, Germany: Verlag Für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2006).

40 For more on the Décollagistes, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “From Detail to Fragment: Décollage Affichiste,” *October* 56 (Spring 1991), 98-110.

Even though these groups differed in their objectives and artistic practice, what they all held in common with the optico-kinetic artists was an interest in a new awareness of the everyday, one that simultaneously competed with the individualistic and introspective art production of abstract expressionism/lyrical abstraction which prioritized the self, and also responded to the arrival of American-style consumer culture. But the question remains, how did the work of the optical and kinetic Latin American artists appeal to the French public of the 1950’s and 60’s, and how was their work a viable alternative to the other artistic modes of the day?

The work of Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre is important when considering the postwar years since it serves to underscore and pinpoint larger social transformations that took place in France in the period following the end of WWII. In his foreword to the second edition of *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, Lefebvre described the changes that shaped the years following 1945, and highlighted an increased interest in the notion of the everyday:

Problems of everyday life and studies of everyday life have become increasingly important in the minds of historians, ethnographers, philosophers, sociologists, as well as of writers, artists and journalists. Our very best informed and most ‘modern’ publications – daily and weekly newspapers, reviews – have started columns dealing with everyday life. There has been a proliferation of books about everyday life, and bit by bit a method to confront everyday life with ideas apparently far removed from it, such as myths, ceremonies, works of art, is being developed.

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43 Lefebvre, 7.
Lefebvre pointed out that the modernization that characterized this period, and the various forms it took – kitchen equipment such as electronic ovens, swimming pools, and all sorts of "household gadgets" – permeated the "way everyday life is organized." Though there were negative implications to this technological advancement, notably a new type of alienation – to use leftist Greek-French philosopher and economist Cornelius Castoriadis' phrase "a crisis of socialization" – my thesis proposes that it was within this climate that the work of the optical and kinetic artists flourished. That is, the focus on the private sphere – the new couple, the family home, and all the various gadgets and other commodities that came to represent this period – fostered a "crisis" in French society. As Kristen Ross has asserted, "Privatization, or losing oneself in the repetitions and routine of "keeping house," meant an increasing density in individual use of commodities and a notable impoverishment of interpersonal relations." It is within this context that kinetic and optical art was most successful: as I will argue it attempted to reinvigorate, through communal engagement, the traditionally passive relationship between viewer and work of art implying in turn that one's actions could have a larger transformative effect. Through this re-empowerment of the viewer, the work of the optico-kinetic artists strove to rethink their relationship with the world. In the words of Argentinean artist Julio Le Parc, recalling the kinetic and optical work of the 1960's:

If a viewer realizes that he is taken into consideration by the works on display, that they give him something, perhaps he might be able to say afterwards: 'Why don't I get this elsewhere?' and start to wonder whether there are people who function like him, or join groups that try to analyze

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Ibid., 8.
46 Ross, 108.
the general situation of a society, of the behavior of the government, of the political parties.47

iv. Charles de Gaulle, *Latinité*, and Latin America

To assess both kinetic and optical art that emerged in France in the 1950's and the role of Latin American artists within this development requires a consideration of the ascendancy of Charles de Gaulle in 1958. The year was a key moment in France given the volatile years of the preceding Fourth Republic, which had left the country on the brink of civil war. With France’s ultimate demise as a colonial power, epitomized by the 1954-1962 Algerian War, the aspirations of General Charles de Gaulle and his Minister of Culture, André Malraux (France’s first, 1960-1969) were to reinforce and maintain the nation’s cultural hegemony. Historian Herman Lebovics has described the situation in the following terms: "Malraux and the Foreign Ministry shaped French international cultural policy after decolonization to reclaim French influence by cultural means, venturing France’s abundant cultural capital when its political capital had run out."48 But it was not only through culture that General de Gaulle hoped to restore France’s international image. Technology became key in promoting France’s progress as a new modern nation, one that was no longer defined by its numerous colonies but by its status as an independent nation that could survive in the face of adversity, without seeking help from the United States, the USSR or even NATO. State-run technological projects, therefore, became a way to attain a particular kind of national freedom and independence.

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Looking to bring Latin America closer to France, as a way to combat Americanization and the impending demise of the French way of life, de Gaulle made two visits to Latin America, the first to Mexico in March 1964, where in the main square of Mexico City he pronounced the famous “marchemos la mano en la mano! (let us walk hand in hand!).” A few months later (20 September - 16 October), he took up the same themes of cooperation in the ten other states of South America. I propose that despite the war being fought in Algeria, and the eventual consequences in immigration policies still felt to this day, an embrace of the Latin American “other” helped to buttress France’s image as a country that welcomed people of all nations. Indeed, the influx and success of Latin American artists during this period proved that France was still the “center” of the art world and able to attract international artists, despite signs that New York was quickly gaining ground in this respect.  

The presence of Latin American artists in Paris in the 1950’s and 1960’s was not without historical precedence as countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Brazil had a history of contact (and influence) with European artists and tendencies well before the 1950s resulting in a dialogue of sorts with international modernism. As art critic and historian Aracy Amaral has argued, “In postwar Latin America, Constructivism, Concrete art, neo-Concretism, kinetic art, and other forms of geometric abstraction emerged in

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49 One has only to think back to the violent clashes between hundreds of youths and the French police in the Paris banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois which began on October 27, 2005 and continued for more than seventeen consecutive nights. The initial riots were triggered by the electrocution deaths of two teenagers who were apparently attempting to hide from police in an electricity substation. In particular, what these events brought to the surface was the fact that many of the youth living in Clichy-sous-Bois and involved in the riots were of Algerian descent, causing many people of them to accuse the French police of racial discrimination and intolerance.

regions (of Latin America) that were receptive to modern art linked with advanced European trends.\footnote{Aramy Amaral, "Abstract Constructivist trends in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia," \textit{Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century} (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 86. What Amaral means by "advanced European trends" needs to be unpacked, since she does not qualify the phrase.} Amaral goes on to note that these movements flourished in those countries "that lacked strong national pictorial traditions or substantial pre-Columbian influence", the most notable example of the latter being Mexico's muralist movement.\footnote{Ibid.} While there is no doubt that European Constructivism influenced the various manifestations of geometric art that developed in South America after WWII,\footnote{See, for example, the exhibition catalogues \textit{Inverted Utopias: avant-garde art in Latin America} and \textit{Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s-70s}.} what remains to be adequately analyzed, however, are the reasons why these artists, in particular those from Argentina, Venezuela and Brazil, adopted a geometric vocabulary with roots in Russian Constructivism and Dutch De Stijl. What was it about geometric abstraction that proved to be such a timely artistic mode for the burgeoning Latin American avant-garde?

Certainly, the climate of change and rapid modernization in the postwar period was marked by a faith in technological advancement in many Latin American countries. For example, by 1945, Argentina and Venezuela were significantly urbanized and industrialized. Due in part to the impact of European immigration, as well as migrants from the surrounding countryside, a population boom resulted in the development of an urban working class that by the mid-twentieth century had already achieved salary levels comparable to those earned by their European counterparts.\footnote{Tulio Halperin Donghi, \textit{The Contemporary History of Latin America}, ed. and trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 262.} In 1945, the fact that most of Europe had been devastated by the war meant that international trade would be
reestablished, a promising outlook for Latin America since they would now be able to provide what Europe most needed in terms of food and raw materials. Historian Tulio Halperín Donghi notes concerning the industrial growth of Latin America during the war years:

The economic crisis of the 1930s and the conflict that followed had stimulated in many Latin American countries a process of rapid industrial expansion. Isolated by the collapse of international trade and then by wartime limitations, these industries had enjoyed de facto protection from outside competition and had therefore prospered in spite of their low level of technological development. Many believed that the moment had arrived to push the process forward, creating further foundations for further industrial growth.\(^55\)

Unfortunately, even though further industrialization at the end of the war along with technical modernization seemed to be on Latin America’s list of priorities, carrying all of this out would prove difficult. As Halperín Donghi asserts, even though the reconstruction of Europe did increase the demand for Latin America’s exports, it also consumed a huge share of capital goods on the world market, thus making it difficult for Latin America to make the most of its accumulated credit. So by the end of the 1940s, Latin America found itself in a precarious position, “struggling to assure the survival of their still-inefficient industrial producers,” manipulating the exchange rate and doing everything necessary to maintain, unsuccessfully, favorable conditions in the primary-export sector. In the decade following the war, then, the postwar export boom ended, and rising inflation and a deterioration in the balance of trade turned the sentiment of hope felt in 1945 to one of general unease.\(^56\) This was where Latin America found itself,

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 248.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 250.
economically and industrially speaking, after the end of the Second World War; it was a period marked by high hopes for industrialization and liberal democracy.

Thus in the aftermath of WWII both France and Latin American countries like Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, shared similar goals with France. Just as Charles de Gaulle would look to redefine a “modern” France through a particular emphasis on technology, countries such as Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina, through culture and modernization, sought to craft an image of progress that would potentially alter their status as third-world states. In order to do that, both France and Latin America realized that culture, and in particular the visual arts, could go a long way in projecting an image of progress and technical advancement. It was, indeed, during this time that geometric abstraction, with its visual language associated with the “universal” as opposed to the regional or the historical, became the mode of choice by many artists working in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil. This choice demonstrated that Latin American geometric abstractionists were aware of the latest European artistic trends, but more importantly, geometric abstraction served to link these artists to the tradition of the historical avant-garde, in which France had played a pre-eminent role.

To take up the topic of the success of expatriate Latin American artists in Paris and the significance of optical and kinetic art in the 1960’s, my use of the term “Latin America” needs to be addressed. Throughout the thesis I refer to “Latin America”, employing a somewhat problematic term that has been the focus of much debate and scholarly writing
since the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{57} It needs to be acknowledged that the term “Latin America” homogenizes an otherwise ethnically, economically and historically diverse region comprised of twenty countries and numerous territories or dependencies.\textsuperscript{58} The numerous differences, cultural and political, of each entity within this vast region are important as cultural historian Nelly Richard makes clear:

[The] unevenness of Latin America’s own internal matrices, which integrate unequal historical-cultural processes in each country: Peru, Chile and Argentina do not share the same antecedents of modernity, modernization or modernism. The unfolding of cultural tendencies has not been uniform, and the mixture of myth and history, ritual and progress, tradition and market, has taken root unequally among them.\textsuperscript{59}

The rich and distinctive history of each region and country in South America makes it a unique entity within the larger Latin American whole. But for the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to keep the term Latin America because of the way it was used and perceived in the post-WWII years and through the 1960s. The continent of South America itself embodied certain ideals for the French imagination, and as a result, the myriad differences and nuances among and within the different regions and nations were glossed over and asserted through a conception of Latin America that had both cachet and currency in the period under study.

In laying the groundwork for the Latin American kinetic and optical artists’ success in Paris in the 1960s, my thesis first considers the legacy of France in Latin America. Since the nineteenth century, France has symbolized the epitome of advancement, political and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{57} See the collection of essays in \textit{Boundary} 2, Vol. 20 no. 3 “The Postmodernism debate in Latin America,” (Autumn 1993).
\textsuperscript{58} These include the French dependencies of Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Saint Martin, Saint Barthélémy; Netherlands dependencies of Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao; and the United States dependency of Puerto Rico.
cultural, for many countries in Latin America, and I highlight how many of these countries tried to emulate different aspects of the French nation. This part also situates the turn to geometric abstraction in the middle of the twentieth century by artists in major Latin American cities such as Caracas, Buenos Aires and São Paulo within specific political and cultural contexts. In this first section of the thesis, I offer what I believe are not only fundamental reasons for the advent of geometric abstraction in Latin America, but also suggest why a young generation who would become expatriates in France would transform geometric abstraction to address concerns specific to the postwar era.

My thesis then moves from Latin America to France. In this section, French artistic debates raging during the fifties are considered as a way to frame the 1955 exhibition Le Mouvement at Denise René’s gallery, which launched optical and kinetic art. To assess the impact of the new optical and kinetic art which enjoyed great success both critically and publicly, I compare the contraptions, gadgets and imagery created by optico-kinetic artists to works produced within the dominant mode of l’art informel and works produced by an earlier generation of geometric abstractionists. At stake were new modes of interaction and intervention that challenged traditional concepts of the art work as an object affixed to the wall and new roles for viewers and consumers of art.

The last part of my thesis situates optico-kinetic art within the political context of the Fifth Republic and the arrival of American-style consumer culture. Once Charles de Gaulle was appointed head of state in 1958, the major concern became how to craft a new identity for France at a moment when decolonization and the Cold War were at their
peak. Here, technology, consumerism and the everyday come together in order to work out the aspirations of the new French Fifth Republic, which consequently welcomed the work of the Latin American optico-kinetic artists. The main issue at stake in this final chapter and in the thesis as a whole is how and why did this new mode of representation fulfill a specific need for the French nation and the public at large, caught between the numbing effects of consumerism and a desire to restore the country's position on the world stage.
Chapter 2: The Currents of Geometric Abstraction: from the Margins (Latin America) to the Major League (France)

As this study considers the work of a select group of primarily Venezuelan and Argentinean artists whose mode of representation developed in an innovative way in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, it is necessary to understand the impetus behind this trans-Atlantic relocation. Latin America’s high regard of Paris was not new, as the examples in the following pages will demonstrate, and this, I argue, influenced these artists’ decision to move to the French capital. A trans-Atlantic “love affair” with Paris, evident throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and coupled with the fact that Paris had been home to some of the major avant-garde artistic developments at the turn of the century, made the city the ideal setting for this particular set of emergent Latin American artists to make their mark internationally. Paris, as the imaginary other, became for many of these artists a site of limitless possibilities. Most importantly, one of the driving forces behind the adoption of a geometric idiom by Latin American artists of the post-WWII years was its perceived association with modernity – and in the mid-twentieth century, modernity was indelibly linked to technological progress and innovations – attributes which for them were synonymous with Paris.

What makes this exchange particularly interesting is that while Paris represented the epitome of culture, modernity and sophistication to many in Latin America, for Paris, the continent of South America symbolized a land of opportunity and freedom. These associations were drawn from numerous travelers’ accounts and political and cultural events – and here one can think of Claude Lévy-Strauss’ 1955 memoir *Tristes Tropiques*.
where he documented his travels and anthropological work during this period, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and the advent of Brazilian *bossa nova* in the late 1950s – that marked Latin America not only as a land of revolution, but also as a region where carnival, dance and festival could ameliorate the anxieties of the everyday. This thesis considers then how both France and Latin America became culturally dependent on one another at a volatile moment in history, and how this relationship created favorable circumstances for new forms of optical and kinetic art that served the French as well as Latin Americans practitioners. Indeed, both cultural entities held their own myths vis-à-vis the other, and at stake was the way in which these two issues around identity played out in terms of representation. Stated broadly, culture became the site where political and social tensions, specific to both France and Latin America during this period, were worked out.

i. The myth of Paris

There are a plethora of anecdotes and accounts that historically illustrate Latin America’s admiration of the French capital. Ruben Darío, the Nicaraguan poet and writer considered to be one of the major figures of Latin American modernism, described the life of the late 19th century writer Pedro Balmaceda Toro in *A. de Gilbert. Biografía de*

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60 This stereotype is still at play today. At a popular café restaurant in the Bastille area of Paris, the *Havanita Café*, a pamphlet displayed at the entrance describing the history of the Bastille and that of the café boasts a cover drawing of a black couple dancing with two bongo players in the background (fig. 3). The voluptuous woman wears a tank top that reveals her breasts, a miniskirt with her underwear peeking through, and is depicted lighting her partner’s cigar. The scene is clearly meant to evoke a stereotypically Cuban couple dancing to the beat of the Afro-Cuban rhythms being played in the background. Just below the scene, it reads “Sur les pavés de la Révolution,” an interesting allusion to both the 1789 French Revolution and the 1959 Cuban one, as if the two were intertwined.

61 His actual name was Félix Rubén García Sarmiento (1867-1916).
Pedro Balmaceda. Toro, in a column he wrote under the pseudonym A. De Gilbert for the Chilean daily *La Epoca*, celebrated Parisian artistic and intellectual life with accounts of the latest fashions, salons and exhibitions. While he wrote as if he were an actual participant in Parisian life, running in the same circles as the Parisian intelligentsia, Toro had never set foot in the city. Rather he crafted his elaborate descriptions and accounts of cultural life in the French capital from second-hand sources. As historian Marcy E. Schwartz states, "de Gilbert’s column provided an avenue for an impostor *flâneur* in an invented Paris."64

The *flâneur* or observer located at a distance who Schwartz calls up serves as an introduction to Paris’s reputation in the Latin American cultural imaginary, a position the French capital continued to hold from the middle of the nineteenth century on.65 Darío himself wrote an idyllic description of Paris in his 1915 autobiography:

> Yo soñaba con París desde niño, a punto de que cuando hacía mis oraciones rogaba a Dios que no me dejase morir sin conocer París. París era para mí como un paraíso en donde se respirase la esencia de la felicidad sobre tierra. Era la ciudad del Arte, de la Belleza y de la Gloria; y, sobre todo, era la capital del Amor, el reino del Ensueño.66

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63 For a list of articles and columns about Paris in Latin American journalism, see Amos Segala, "Introducción del Coordinador." *Miguel Angel Asturias: Paris 1924-1933 Periodismo y creación literaria* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas; Paris: ALLCA XXe, 1988).
65 *Flâneur* comes from the French *flâner*, which means to stroll. The nineteenth century-term was developed by Charles Baudelaire in his 1863 essay *The Painter of Modern Life*. Because the expression originally referred to Parisians, the *flâneur* is typically associated with Paris. For a discussion of what Paris symbolized for modernist writers in Latin America, see Cristóbal Pera, *Modernistas en París: el mito de París en la prosa modernista Hispanoamericana* (Bern and Berlin: Peter Lang, 1997); Jean-Claude Villegas, *Paris, capitale littéraire de l’Amérique latine* (Dijon, France: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2007).
66 Rubén Darío, *Autobiografía*, Volumen XV de las Obras Completas (Madrid: Mundo Latino, 1915), 113. "I dreamed about Paris ever since I was a child, to the point that in my prayers I always asked God to not let me die without having visited Paris. To me, Paris was like paradise, where one could literally breathe in
Accounts such as Darío’s that romanticize and aggrandize Paris are varied and numerous. Historically, this imaginary fantasy of Paris has permeated the writings of many Latin American writers and artists, serving at once as inspiration and muse, as well as object of desire. Fulfilling a need for “exotic otherness and affirming familiarity,” historian Schwartz points out that, “Latin American urban culture has designated Paris as an idealized, hegemonic cultural center that serves as a model for European modernity...summon[ing] such diverse images as bohemian lifestyles, social prestige, sensuous Parisian streets, and revolutionary politics.” Thus in 1917, despite the difference in language, there seemed to be enough cultural similarities between Paris and Latin America for Francisco García Calderón, Peruvian political figure, diplomat and one-time president of Peru to have claimed that France for Latin Americans was, in essence, a second “home”:

Nos habéis dado una capital, Paris, que atrae sin cesar a nuestros artistas, a nuestros escritores, a nuestros hombres de Estado. No somos extranjeros en Francia. Es esta la ciudad del espíritu que nuestra raza ha escogido hace cien años para enriquecer su pensamiento y embellecer su vida...Hemos encontrado la segunda patria del corazón.

the essence of joy on earth. It was the city of Art, of Beauty and Glory, and above all, it was the capital of Love, the kingdom of reverie.” Translation mine.

Not all accounts of Paris are favorable. See, for example, Peruvian writer Sebastián Salazar Bondy’s book, Pobre Gente de París/Poor People of Paris (Lima, Peru: Librería-Editorial Juan Mejía Baca, 1958). This work recounts the rise and fall of Latin American expectations about life in Paris, and that the hardships the characters encountered were a harsh reality compared to their idealized image of the city.

These include Rubén Darío, the Peruvian novelist Manuel Scorza, Argentinean Julio Cortázar, Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga, Mexican Octavio Paz, Guatemalan writer and diplomat Miguel Ángel Asturias, to name only a few.

Francisco García Calderón, discourse by Calderón at the Segunda Semana de América Latina (1917). Quoted in Esther Aillón Soria, “La política cultural de Francia en la génesis y difusión del concepto l'Amérique Latine, 1860-1930,” Construcción de las identidades latinoamericanas: Ensayos de historia intelectual (siglos XIX y XX), eds. Aimer Granados García y Carlos Marichal (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2004), 98. “You have given us a capital, Paris, that consistently attracts our artists, our writers, and our statesmen. We are not foreigners in France. This is the spiritual city that our race elected over 100 years ago in order to enrich its thoughts and to improve/embellish its life... We have found our second home.” Translation mine.
This symbolic choice of “second home,” as if the speaker had a legitimate right of access to the economic, social, and cultural advantages of the city, was strategic. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Paris represented the essence of modernism and progress to a continent that, while searching to distance itself from its colonial past with Spain and Portugal, nonetheless sought cultural identification with and legitimization from modern European powers.\(^1\) In a 1975 essay entitled *Notas sobre las relaciones entre cultura Latinoamericana y cultura Europea*, historian Alberto Filippi contended that such association was expected, given Latin America’s desire to be coupled with modernity and its refusal to be tied to its colonial past. In this account Filippi argued, “Alienados frente a una cultura colonial (la cultura hispánica) en la cual eran colonizados, los latinoamericanos tendrán que compararse muy pronto con otra cultura (la cultura burguesa europea en general).”\(^2\) Indeed as Schwartz notes by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Spain and Portugal were no longer associated with the modern because “many of the European modernization advances in the eighteenth century bypassed Iberia due to its cultural conservatism that maintained an agrarian economy.”\(^3\)

France stood out within European nations. As Latin American historian Esther Aillón Soria has noted “las guerras de Independencia en América tuvieron como una de sus consecuencias la aspiración a una modernidad renovada, que se expresó en la búsqueda de una nueva identidad subcontinental que se plasmó a mediados del siglo XIX con la

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\(^1\) For an in-depth analysis of this idea, see Schwartz and Pera.

\(^2\) Alberto Filippi. “Notas sobre las relaciones entre cultura Latinoamericana y cultura Europea.” *Cultura y Dependencia: ocho ensayos latinoamericanos* (Caracas, Venezuela: Monte Ávila Editores C.A., 1975), 151. “Alienated from a colonial culture (the Hispanic one) under which they had been colonized, the Latin Americans will very soon have to compare themselves to another culture (the European bourgeois one).”

\(^3\) Schwartz, 4.
génesis del concepto América Latina.” Soria goes on to argue that France gained the admiration - or as she qualifies it, “francophilia” - of the Latin American elites who developed the concept of Latin America while residing in Paris in 1856, participating in the French cultural, historical and political events of the time. And as Jason Weiss has argued, Latin America’s struggle for independence from Spain and Portugal made France, in all of its perceived economic and technological successes, the most likely touchpoint in Europe for Latin America’s aspirations, especially given France’s Latin character through language, education, and religion.

Regarded as an artistic and intellectual hub, Paris was also the city that had fought to establish democratic ideals through the French Revolution of 1789. Many Latin American countries aspired to the ideas set forth during the Enlightenment and the principles put in place by the French Revolution, and their countries’ relatively recent

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74 Soria, 100. “One of the outcomes of the wars of Independence in the Americas was to desire a renewed modernity, which was made manifest through the search of a new subcontinental identity which took shape in the mid-nineteenth century with the genesis of the concept of Latin America.”

75 On the development of the term ‘América Latina’ see Mónica Quijada, “Sobre el origen y difusión del nombre América Latina (o una variación heterodoxa en torno al tema de la construcción social de la verdad),” Revista de Indias LVIII n. 214 (1998), 595-615. Among these Latin Americans living in Paris were the Colombian José María Torres Caicedo and the Chilean Francisco Bilbao. According to Quijada, the earliest mention of the term dates from 1851. “Durante la primera mitad de esa década gente como el dominicano Francisco Muñoz del Monte y el chileno Santiago Arcos hicieron esa asociación para describir los movimientos expansionistas de los Estados Unidos en el continente americano como una agresión de la ‘raza anglosajona’ hacia la ‘raza Latina’.” p. 604 (“During the first half of the fifties people such as the Dominican Francisco Muñoz del Monte and the Chilean Santiago Arcos made this association in order to describe the expansionist movements of the United States in the American continent as an aggression on the part of the ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ against the ‘Latin race’.” Translation mine.) It is interesting to note that the term arose from within the Latin American community in an attempt to mark out their international position and to redefine their identity.


struggles for independence made them even more receptive to such principles. In the mid-twentieth century, after the Second World War, this connection reverberated strongly as well. When Argentineans, Uruguayan and others took to the streets in celebration of the Liberation of Paris in August 1944, this response had in great part to do with the camaraderie and historic ties that linked France with Latin America. The countries of Latin America could identify with a France that had been oppressed and occupied during the Vichy years and liberation in 1944 resonated with each region’s own history of struggle and emancipation.

However, Paris stood for more than just another option to colonial domination, or as a model for political ideology, since it also embodied specific cultural attributes that Latin America strove to emulate. Of particular import to this study is that the French capital could stand as the embodiment of modernity in the years following the Second World War. This is key, since countries such as Argentina and Venezuela, following the post-WWII boom, sought to project an image of technologically advanced nations that were on par with their northern and trans-Atlantic counterparts. Paris’s urban makeover during the second half of the nineteenth century under the direction of Napoleon III and his prefect Haussmann had set a standard for modernization which made Paris itself a widely

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78 Latin American independence began to occur in 1808 after the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars, which overthrew European monarchies and weakened colonial authority beyond European borders. For more on Latin America and the French Revolution, see *Construcción de las identidades latinoamericanas: Ensayos de historia intelectual (siglos XIX y XX)*, eds. Aimer Granados García y Carlos Marichal (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2004); Denis Rolland, *La crise du modèle français. Marianne et l’Amérique Latine : culture, politique et identité* (France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000).

79 *Esprir: Le voyage du Général de Gaulle en Amérique Latine*, No. 114 (Janvier 1998). In this issue of the journal published by the Fondation/Institut Charles de Gaulle, several pictures depict Emmanuel Lancial, representative of General de Gaulle in Buenos Aires and Montevideo during the 1940s. The images show Lancial lifted up by the crowds in the streets of Montevideo as Uruguayans reacted to the news of the Liberation on August 23, 1944. (fig. 4)
emulated model in terms of urban development as a sign of cultural progress. Despite numerous critiques of the revamped Paris, the city became internationally renowned for both its renovation and the cultural developments that were associated with the modern city. These included the *Expositions Universelles*, the rise of high fashion, the development of photography, and the rich artistic and literary life that the capital of France engendered. Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes summed up the nineteenth-century fascination with Paris on the part of Latin Americans:

France, in the nineteenth century, came to represent the equilibrium we needed in our stormy tug-of-war between allegiance to Spain and allegiance to the United States. Paris gave us culture without strings and a sense, furthermore, of elegance, disinterestedness, wholeness, aristocracy, and links to the culture of the classics, sorely lacking in the vagabond, unrooted, homogenizing pioneer culture of the United States or in the monastic, far-too-rooted, isolated culture of Spain.

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80 While the city was altered in theory to make room for the changing lifestyles and new leisure activities, the creation of wide avenues and destruction of winding streets were also done in order to control public uprisings. This modernization also had its downside: alienation was a subject taken up by the Impressionists, the disconnect associated with the modern city. The Situationist International (SI), a group of artistic and political agitators active throughout the 1960s, with roots in Marxism and the European avant-garde, also critiqued Baron Haussmann’s transformation of Paris, deeming urbanism to be an inherently capitalist science: “The concern to have open spaces allowing for the rapid circulation of troops and the use of artillery against insurrections was at the origin of the urban renewal plan adopted by the Second Empire. But from any standpoint other than that of police control, Haussmann’s Paris is a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” SI also claimed that Haussmann separated leisure areas from work places. Guy Debord, “Introduction to a critique of urban geography” from Les Lèvres Nues #6 (September 1955), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 5.


82 Carlos Fuentes, prologue to José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel* (Austin : University of Texas Press, 1988), 16-17. In accordance with this view, historian Noel Salomon agrees: “A fines del siglo XIX, las élites [latinoamericanas] consideran el afrancesamiento como el modelo civilizador que todo incluye: la literatura, la música, la poesía pero también las fábricas, los grandes almacenes, las modas y el arte del buen vivir.” (“At the end of the 19th century, the Latin American elite consider ‘afrancesamiento’ — the act of becoming French — the civilizing model which includes everything: literature, music, poetry, but also factories, department stores, fashion and the art of good living.” Translation mine.) Quoted in Soria, 89, citation 74. While I will address more fully the significance of the United States at this time and its supremacy on a world stage, it is important to note that for Latin America the U.S. was politically problematic, almost too close for comfort as its economic and political dominance often came at the expense of Latin American countries. Historian Tulio Halperin Donghi explains that by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “one Latin American country after another slipped out of the exclusive orbit of Great Britain and gravitated economically toward rising international powers like the United States... The United States emerged dominant despite repeated challenges from its European adversaries,
In emulating Haussmann’s urban design Latin American centers hoped to align themselves with the signs of progress and reform of first-world countries. In Planning Latin America’s Capital Cities, 1850-1950, urban planner Arturo Almandoz reminds the reader that Latin American cities aspired to be perceived as advanced through their: *almost total imitation of Europe in terms of social customs, political ideas and literary trends...the piecemeal implementation of the ‘Haussmannic example’ not only responded to the need to expand the Latin capitals, but also to the bourgeoisie’s longing to appropriate the metropolitan myth coming from industrializing Europe. For the Frenchified elites of these cities, the invocation of Second-Empire Paris was thereby supposed to make possible their magic transformation from post-colonial city into real metropolis.*

Almandoz continues, “as happened in other emerging areas of the nineteenth-century world, such as the United States and Japan, the urban importation from Europe was part of Latin American countries’ search for national identity and modernization.”

Almandoz asserts that even though Latin America’s Europeanism was somewhat undermined by the growing presence of the United States in political affairs at the turn of the twentieth-century, France had had a considerable cultural impact on the various nations.

As well as being a leader in social change and philosophical thought, France also became the paradigm of fine arts and civilization, refinement and urbanity for the young republics...Fascinated by the European prestige of France as the main representative of the classical tradition, from early republican times Latin America had also turned to French
artistic canons. By the conspicuous imitation of European manners in general, Second-Empire Paris became the archetype of urban modernity and refinement for the Latin American elites throughout the second part of the nineteenth century.  

This association between Paris and urban planning would be of central importance for the artists of this study. While the Reconstruction strove to revamp post-WWII Paris more than just physically, many of the optical and kinetic artists promoted an art that was part of the social fabric, and not dissociated from the everyday. In this way, they shared the belief of the Parisian art journal *Art d’Aujourd’hui* that art in all of its forms should be integrated in architecture and in the city layout in general, making it a fundamental component of urban development while allowing for the greatest public access possible.

ii. A trans-Atlantic exchange: France’s myths of Latin America

Latin America was not the only one looking across the Atlantic, since France also had vested interests in its Latin cousins from the New World. “France represents one alternative, European and Latin, to American domination.” In these ten words, in his preface to Jacques Chonchol’s and Guy Martinière’s book, *L'Amérique Latine et le Latino-Américanisme en France*, Antoine Blanca, a Spanish-born writer and diplomat, summed up one of the major forces underlying Franco-Latin American relations during the twentieth-century. Beginning with a summary of the emergence of Latin American organizations in postwar France, Blanca then proceeds to outline the origins, or “scientific invention,” of the concept of Latinity and to show how it had served both as a  

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86 Ibid., 17-18.
unifying force for French endeavors at home and abroad for over a century, and as a way of distinguishing France from the overbearing presence of the United States.

The long-held notion that France's interest in Latin America was initially motivated by economic expansion was first put forth by the historian John Leddy Phelan. In his seminal work “Pan-Latinism, French Intervention in Mexico (1861-1867) and the Genesis of the Idea of Latin America,” Phelan outlined the impetus and supposed origin behind the concept of “Latin America.” As the first study of this subject, Phelan describes how the term was developed in France in the 1860s as a way to justify Napoleon III's expansionist project into Mexico, noting that it was only after 1861 that Latin Americans themselves began using the term. Since Phelan's publication in 1968 numerous scholars, in particular Mónica Quijada and Paul Estrada, have dissected his argument and attempted to clarify the genesis of the term by offering other histories.

For even though Napoleon III and his advisor, Michel Chevalier, promoted an idea of pan-Latinism in order to justify their invasion of Mexico, the term “Latin America” was in fact created by Latin American scholars living in Paris in the 1850s. As Soria explains, it was the Chilean intellectual Francisco Bilbao Barquín (1823-1865) who apparently used the name for the first time in an 1856 conference in Paris. In this context, the


89 The French intervention in Mexico was an invasion by the Second French Empire. Led by Napoleon III of France, and supported by Britain and Spain, the invasion was the culminating event triggered by President Benito Juárez’s suspension of payments of interest on loans to foreign countries made by previous governments. The Spanish and British soon realized that the French had hopes of conquering Mexico and thus withdrew their forces.

90 Mónica Quijada, “Sobre el origen y difusión del nombre ‘América Latina’ (o una variación heterodoxa en torno al tema de la construcción social de la verdad,” Revista de Indias, LVIII: 214 (1998), 595-616; see Estrade. Soria (p. 74) is careful to point out, however, that “the debate surrounding the origin on the term Latin America has not yet come to an end.”
expression “Latin America” was used in reference to the danger of “latent inferiority” in the face of the powerful American North. In his address, Bilbao called for a union of the republics of South America: “Pero la América vive, *la América Latina*…al individualismo materialista de los Estados Unidos y a la barbarie absolutista de Rusia.”

Already by 1856, then, the imperious presence of the United States was strong enough to foster a sense of union among states in South America. The fact that Paris was the city where this call to arms took place is especially interesting given that a century later France, in the 1960s, and in particular during the time that General Charles de Gaulle was head of state, used a similar tactic to unite the “southern” nations of Latin descent in order to combat the authority of the United States. While Phelan’s theories have been revised, there are several issues which most scholars agree upon: most notably, the idea that France and Napoleon III in particular saw in the New World a potential ally which, united through a common culture, one based in Latin roots, could battle an increasingly powerful Anglo-Saxon north.

In looking to foster and strengthen this relationship, beginning in the early twentieth-century, institutions were set up both in France and Latin America to promote each other’s cultures. While the French language was made a priority in schools in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, anthropological excursions by French researchers took place in the Amazon, and higher learning institutions in several Latin American capitals were

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91 Francisco Bilbao Barquin, quoted in Soria, 74.
92 In 1954, the Unión Latina was created, an international organization bound together by Romance languages. A treaty, the *Convenio Constitutivo de la Unión Latina*, was signed in Madrid on May 15, 1954, with its main goal being protecting, promoting and projecting the common heritage of the Latin world.
founded. This academic and cultural collaboration continued after WWI. In France, journals were launched to advocate cross-cultural exchange and awareness, such as the Revue de l'Amérique Latine (1921), previously the Bulletin de l'Amérique Latine.

According to its editors, the goal of the journal was to “publish texts by French, Hispano-American, and Brazilian writers, thinkers and political figures, on Franco-Latin American relations...” In 1929, the Institut des Études Hispaniques was inaugurated, tied to the Centre d'études hispaniques de l'Université de Paris. In Brazil, the Comité de Intercambio de Profesores de Francia y Brasil (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, 1928) and the Unión Franco-Paulista were founded. In the 1930s, the Institut des Universités Argentines was set up in Paris, in collaboration with the Universidad de Buenos Aires. As well, in 1936 in Mexico, the Instituto Francés para América Latina (IFAL) was established, the Institut Français de Buenos Aires was created in the 1940s, and in 1948 the Institut Franco-Brésilien was set up in São Paulo. Argentinean literature was fortunate enough to have sociologist Roger Caillois as its ambassador in France, since he had lived out the years of WWII in the South American country. In 1954, Caillois began La Croix du Sud, a collection of Latin American literature in translation published by Gallimard until 1968.

93 Looking to implement and promote scientific methods internationally, within the framework of French influence in Latin America, the Groupement des Universités et grandes Écoles de France pour les relations avec l'Amérique Latine was launched in 1908 by French academics who hoped to “help in the development of sister nations.” Soria, 90.

94 Ibid., 91.

95 For an extensive list of the various institutions that were created in France and in Latin America to promote cross-cultural awareness and teachings, see Chonchol and Martinière.


97 Among the many authors published, these included: Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sábato, Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Mario Vargas Llosa, José María Arguedas, Rosario Castellanos, Graciliano Ramos, among many others.
Beginning in the 1920s, the exchange of university professors and researchers became a common practice, the most well-known of these being the delegation of French intellectuals who traveled to São Paulo in 1934 for the inauguration of Brazil’s university. These included the historian Fernand Braudel, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the sociologist Roger Bastide. One of the most renowned chronicles by a Frenchman about the people of the New World, in particular Brazil, is social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ book *Tristes Tropiques*, a sort of memoir account based on his experiences and travels during his time there. Published in 1955, Lévi-Strauss candidly described his initial image of Brazil, before ever setting foot in the country: “In my imagination, I associated Brazil with clumps of twisted palm trees concealing bizarrely designed kiosks and pavilions, and I assumed the atmosphere to be permeated with the smell of burning perfumes…” This impression eventually gave way to a less exoticized one, but once he spent time at the University of São Paulo, his sense of Brazilian students was that while they were enthusiastic, their training was clearly lacking: “My colleagues and I, who were the products of a stringent system of academic training, often felt embarrassed. We had been taught to respect only fully matured ideas, and we found ourselves exposed to attacks by students who, while

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completely ignorant of the past, were always a few months ahead of us with the latest information.\textsuperscript{102}

Though formal education may have left something to be desired, that certainly was not the case in terms of urban development. According to the anthropologist, a bustling center such as São Paulo was in constant renewal: "The town is developing so fast that it is impossible to obtain a map of it; a new edition would be required of it every week. It has been said that if you take a taxi to an appointment made several weeks ahead, you are in danger of arriving before the builders have finished."\textsuperscript{103} What \textit{Tristes Tropiques} illustrated was that, far from being a one-way mission, where the educated Frenchmen arrived to show the inexperienced Brazilians how to set up a university, there was in fact an equal exchange. That is, for France, Brazil offered a new exciting opportunity for research and study, while for Brazil, as a young developing country, France was the embodiment of a tradition of intellectual progress and culture. These exchanges, based mostly on stereotypes, would work to set the stage for the reception of Latin American artists working with kinetic and optical art in France in the 1950’s and 60’s. In other words, while the kinetic and optical artists offered works that challenged the artistic norms of the post-WWII period, their success was similarly tied to the French public’s preconceived notions of what Latin America and its people embodied. In short, it was as much about the imaginary, as it was about any sort of real connection and exchange.

\textsuperscript{102} Lévi-Strauss, 103.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 96.
A similar set of exchanges was in play in the realm of the visual arts, with artists from both sides of the Atlantic traveling across the ocean to engage in reciprocal dialogue and share ideas. Paris, with its reputation as the major artistic center in the world, appealed to artists and intellectuals of all backgrounds, such as the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who spent the years during the Mexican Revolution and World War I in Spain and France. Brazilian avant-garde artist Tarsila do Amaral lived in Paris during the 1920s and studied with French painters Albert Gleizes, André Lhote, and Fernand Léger. Argentinean Pablo Curatella-Manes, on his second trip to Europe in 1917, studied at the Académie Ranson with Aristide Maillol, Maurice Denis and Paul Sérusier, while the surrealist Xul Solar spent time in France before heading to Italy and then Germany, where he remained between 1921 and 1924.¹⁰⁴

French artists and intellectuals in turn traveled to countries in Latin America. The architect Le Corbusier, long a proponent of geometric abstraction and who along with Amédée Ozenfant founded Purism,¹⁰⁵ took part in lecture tours in Argentina and Brazil in 1929 and 1936.¹⁰⁶ In 1936, the French playwright and former member of the Surrealist group Antonin Artaud traveled to Mexico where he remained for almost a year, spending time with the Tarahumaras Indians and recording his experiences which were later released in a volume entitled Les Tarahumaras.¹⁰⁷ In Venezuela, the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva invited, among others, artists Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, Alexander

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed list of Latin American artists who traveled to Europe to study and work, see Jacqueline Barnitz, Twentieth Century Art of Latin America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).
¹⁰⁵ Purism, a French movement in painting and architecture, was initiated around 1918 as a reaction to Cubism. With a particular emphasis on the beauty and purity of the form of the machine, Purism was characterized by a focus on simplicity, geometry, proportion and harmony of these objects.
Calder, and Viktor Vasarely, who was centered in Paris, to design work for the new University City of Caracas in the years between 1948-57 (fig. 5-7). Surrealist André Breton, who visited Mexico for the first time in 1938, met the exiled Bolshevik revolutionary Léon Trotsky. Together they wrote a manifesto entitled *Pour un art révolutionnaire independent* (*Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*). Published in 1938 under the names of Breton and Diego Rivera, it called for the “complete liberation of art,” while condemning Hitler and fascism, Stalin and the social repression of the Soviet Union, and capitalist “decadence.” While earlier than the abstract geometric movements that would develop in Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina, this appeal for a “complete liberation of art” would be echoed in certain manifestos and declarations written up by members of groups, such as *Asociación Arte-Concreto Invención* and *Grupo Madi*, that sprung up in Argentina and Venezuela in the 1940s. If Paris represented a cultural haven for Latin Americans, Latin America symbolized a land of uncharted potential and limitless possibilities for the French, or more specifically for the French imagination.

Such potentials however did have their limits, and while cross-cultural travel and exchange between Latin America and France became more frequent, not every excursion was deemed a success. This was particularly the case with the Belgian art critic Léon

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108 Breton pronounced Mexico the “surrealist country par excellence,” projecting a Eurocentric view of a country that seemingly fulfilled his idea of an exotic and untarnished land and culture.


110 For example, the *Madi Manifesto* (Gyula Kosice, Buenos Aires, 1946) and the *Inventionist Manifesto*, published at the occasion of *Asociación Arte-Concreto Invención*’s first exhibition, held in the Salon Peuser, Buenos Aires, March 1946.
Degand, who traveled to Brazil in 1948 with the hopes of introducing the country, which was in the middle of an economic boom, to geometric abstraction. Degand met the Brazilian entrepreneur Francisco Matarazzo in Paris in 1947. Matarazzo owned numerous canning factories throughout Brazil, and was looking to found a modern art museum in São Paulo. Both men realized they could collaborate on a project that would meet both their needs. Matarazzo had gone to Paris in search of possible artworks for his latest business enterprise and Degand seemed to be an ideal candidate. The choice of artworks needed to be strategic, since in creating the first modern art center in Brazil, the objects it contained needed to reflect the move towards modernity that the country was undergoing. The museum could become a potential symbol of Brazil’s fast track into the future, showing that “the economic and industrial development of Brazil was so impressive that the country was actually moving into the small group of advanced urban societies of the world.” With its embrace of the latest in modern art, the museum would become a vehicle through which Brazil could be represented as advanced as Paris. Geometric art, with its abstract associations with the visual expression of a “modern, urban and rational world,” fit the needs of both Matarazzo and Degand. The opportunity of promoting geometric abstraction was an important one for Degand. As an art critic writing for the communist newspaper *Les Lettres Françaises*, Degand had been

111 Léon Degand was a Belgian art critic based in Paris who was an avid promoter of geometric abstraction. He worked for the communist newspaper *Les Lettres Françaises* and later on was a main contributor of the journal *Art d’Aujourd’hui*.


113 His full name was Francisco Antonio Paulo Matarazzo Sobrinho, better known as Ciccillo Matarazzo.

114 Guilbaut, 808.

115 Matarazzo founded the Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo, in 1948, one of the first centers of modern art production in Brazil. The first Biennale of São Paulo, which took place in 1951, was due in great part to his efforts as well.

116 Guilbaut, 808.

117 Ibid., 809.
unable to foster similar enthusiasm for geometric abstraction from within the postwar Paris art scene, as the Communist party, as I will show in Chapter 2, was backing social realism. And even though geometric art had resurfaced in Paris with the creation of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in 1946, it was still far from becoming one of the main modes of representation in the postwar period. Degand’s utopic hopes to promote a modern universal aesthetic needed to be developed elsewhere, and Brazil, a country witnessing rapid economic growth and undergoing ambitious modernization projects, seemed to fit the bill.

Degand returned to France after serving as the first director of the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo and organizing the opening exhibition Do figurativismo au abstracionismo in 1949. But Degand’s eager attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, mostly due to his lack of knowledge of the existing local abstract tradition in Brazil, which was also prevalent in Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay. He was not, as he believed, and as will be made clear shortly, treading on “virgin territory” in terms of geometric abstraction, and he arrived unaware of the artistic traditions that had been cultivated in Brazil since the early part of the century. As art historian Guilbaut has

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118 Ibid., 810. Guilbaut explains that abstraction was attacked by the communist party as “a bourgeois decadent plot designed to undermine the consciousness of the working class.” Furthermore, Degand was “unable to promote his universal geometric abstraction in the Parisian art world, confronted as he was with a renewed School of Paris and national pride.”

119 In the years following WWII, major cultural institutions were founded. The Museu de Arte de São Paolo was founded in 1947, followed by the opening in 1948 of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. The São Paolo Bienal was inaugurated in 1951.

120 As Guilbaut describes, the exhibition was a far cry from Degand’s original idea: the show was much smaller, due to many works which were never sent due to lack of funding, and the museum space itself was a disappointment compared to what Degand had imagined a museum of modern art should be. See Guilbaut, 815.

121 Guilbaut, 814. Guilbaut writes: “Degand and western artists were arriving to those shores in order to give from and language to the new world...But more important and ludicrous is that this abstract language was not being set on virgin territory as Degand perceived, but was laid over an old local tradition, the way Christians did when they were busy naming lands already designated and known by natives.”
pointed out: “What started as an impressive dream of cultural invasion...ended in a sad return to the Parisian base where disillusioned painters were waiting for Degand in order to regroup and produce a new art magazine called Art d’Aujourd’hui dedicated to the defense of geometric abstraction.”

The ultimate failure of Degand’s venture is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, it serves to highlight misconceptions current in France vis-à-vis the state of artistic developments in Latin America in general, and Brazil in particular. These misunderstandings foreshadow as well the impression of Latin America in the French imaginary at mid-century.

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122 Ibid., 816. Art d’Aujourd’hui was founded in 1949 by the sculptor and architect André Bloc and the painter Edgard Pillet, in order to promote geometric abstraction and the synthesis of the arts. Attracting a number of prominent art critics, such as Charles Estienne, Léon Degand and Michel Seuphor, the publication became a key advocate in the promotion of this revamped geometric style. The editors also took part in various projects, such as the Atelier d’Art Abstrait that was established to provide a meeting place for young geometeris to exchange ideas and exhibit works.

123 These countries in Latin America were undergoing a cultural and social transformation. As I will show, by adapting a constructivist artistic language, the associations inherent in that choice also implied utopian, perhaps even revolutionary, developments that harked back to the Russian Constructivists and their vision of new possibilities for societal change through the visual arts. This was not necessarily the belief of all Russian Constructivists. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh has described the fissure within the Constructivist movement, contrasting certain artists like Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko who wanted to participate in the needs and values of a new Socialist society through their art production, with the “increasingly aestheticized Constructivist practices” of others, namely Gabo and Pevsner. See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Cold War Constructivism,” in Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1990), 85-110. In the case of Brazil, Matarazzo’s wish to transform his country into the embodiment of modernity could be compared to the utopian aspirations of post-revolutionary Russia and the avant-garde artists’ desire to partake in their new society’s socialist transformation. See Victor Margolin, The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Maria Gough, The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005). That is, much as Rodchenko, Lissitzky and others hoped to promote the goals of their new society through their avant-garde art production, Matarazzo and the Latin American geometric abstract artists of the postwar period wished to similarly contribute to the development of their respective homelands through a visual idiom that would declare their advanced position to the rest of the world. This revamped utopia as adapted by the Latin American artists did have its differences since not only was there a desire to break with the past, but this need was also loaded with more complex issues surrounding identity (how to break away from colonial associations yet still be tied to Europe) and the definition of modernity (their position vis-à-vis the rest of the first-world). In selecting constructivism, the new vein of geometric abstractionists sought to connect their practice to a utopian moment that still had viable socialist aspirations.
iii. Modernity, abstraction, universalism: geometric abstraction in Latin America

In the 1950's and 1960's the Latin American optical and kinetic artists – in particular the Venezuelans Jesús-Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez, and the Argentineans Martha Boto, and Julio Le Parc (who spearheaded the collective Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel in 1960, composed of artists from Argentina, Spain and France)— developed their artistic practice in Paris. However, the several developments in their respective countries of origin during the late 1930’s and 40’s helped forge the foundation for geometric abstraction as an art that could successfully embody a new generation’s aspirations and desires. As their countries embraced the varied effects of modernization, these artists were shaped in milieus where geometric abstraction was viewed as a form that was able to communicate the concerns of a new technological age, while taking part in the transformation of contemporary reality.124

Geometric abstraction was not new to Latin America.125 European constructivism, for example, had been introduced initially in Latin America by the Uruguayan artist and theorist Joaquín Torres-García.126 Returning from Europe to his native country in 1934, after having spent forty-three years abroad, Torres-García promoted his philosophy of “constructive universalism” to Uruguay (which later spread to other major Latin American cities via lectures and documents), a visual language uniting European

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124 Argentinean scholar Nelly Perazzo has noted that in Argentina, for example, geometric art benefited from “the atmosphere of reconstruction of a new world upon the preceding chaos.” Nelly Perazzo, El Arte Concreto en la Argentina en la década del 40 (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983), 84.
modernism with pre-Columbian art. This new idiom synthesized a number of movements of the period, such as cubism, neoplasticism and surrealism, while adding Torres-García’s own twist, that of the addition of pictographs and pre-Columbian symbols (fig. 8 & 9).  

Through the founding in May of 1935 of the Asociación de Arte Constructivo, or AAC (Association of Constructivist Art), a group composed of over thirty artists, some of Torres-García’s ideas were spread throughout the country via exhibitions, lectures and publications. Having spent time in Europe, notably Spain and France, his contact with artists such as Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and Michel Seuphor, with whom he founded the group Cercle et Carré in Paris, helped fuel his belief in the social responsibility of the artist in contemporary society. Torres-García’s ideas were

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127 Cecilia Buzio de Torres, “The School of the South: the Asociación de Arte Constructivo 1934-1942,” El Taller Torres-García: the School of the South and its Legacy, ed. Cecilia Buzio de Torres, a leading scholar of the art of Torres-García, described Torres-García’s interest in symbols: “For Torres, the symbol was a way of synthesizing idea and form while bypassing narrative, which would interfere with the unity of the works. He called this conjunction of idea and form the nexus between the vital (or living) and the abstract. By inserting a symbol representing humanistic values into the antithetical rational structure of neoplasticism, Torres-García succeeded in creating a style that constituted a major contribution to modern art. He called it constructive universalism.” Coincidentally, the use of pictographs may call to mind Abstract Expressionist artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, who incorporated such symbols in their work. But as art historian Fiona Barber points out, the significance of pictographs and mythological symbols for the Abstract Expressionists was associated with a particular interest in Jungian psychology and theories of the unconscious. See Fiona Barber, “Abstract Expressionism and Masculinity,” in Varieties of Modernism, ed. Paul Wood (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2004), 158.

128 De Torres, 13. The Uruguayan group decided to continue the publication Círculo y Cuadrado, in the spirit of the French Cercle et Carré, appearing for the first time in May 1936. This journal established a dialogue between the Latin American and European artists, publishing texts in both French and Spanish. De Torres explains that Círculo y Cuadrado promoted the “twin goals of introducing Uruguayans to European geometric abstract art and presenting the novel aspects and potentialities that this art had manifested in South America to the Europeans.” Furthermore, Mondrian, who subscribed to the journal and whose works and writings often appeared in it, wrote to Torres-García in August 1936 “expressing his pleasure at seeing Cercle et Carré reborn in Círculo y Cuadrado and knowing that Torres would have this opportunity to introduce abstract art to a new audience.”

129 Theo van Doesburg, founder of the Dutch group De Stijl, was instrumental in calling for an art that was implicated in the contemporary historical moment. The ideals set forth in the journal of the same name called for a new consciousness to represent the spirit of the times, an art that was timely and not trapped in the “timeless” ideals that characterized academic art and remained dissociated from the moment.
espoused in his first Latin American manifesto from 1935 entitled *La Escuela del Sur* (The School of the South) (fig. 10). Included in this manifesto is a now well-known image of an inverted South American continent accompanied by a text which declared: “A great School of Art ought to arise here in our country...I have said School of the South because in reality, our North is the South. There should be no North for us, except in opposition to our South...This is a necessary rectification; so that now we know where we are.”

Torres-García’s declaration called for what he deemed a uniquely Latin American style, one that positioned it within a European tradition yet maintained its Latin American roots. Torres-García outlined these aims in a text from 1942, *El Nuevo arte de América* (New Art of America):

> The artist of today has understood that art cannot be separated from the human problem. Therefore, he should select what each epoch requires, but in my opinion, only what it requires in a universal sense, meaning that which can unite men rather than separate them...So thought, geometric thought, should dominate our art and our life... It is undeniable that we can come even closer to our tradition through figuration; but that is just what we should avoid. In the first place, because none, or very few, of those representations can suit us; but above all because that will bring us nearer to plagiarism or imitation of that art and its particular stylization. Let us be content to be within the geometric style, which is what links us to that remote art.

These ideas would come to typify the geometric art produced by Latin American artists.

The text begins by stating that “artists of today” cannot disassociate themselves from society; they have, in fact, a certain social responsibility to critically and self-consciously engage in contemporary problems and debates. This would again serve to associate the kinetic and optical artists living in Paris with the journal *Art d’Aujourd’hui* that called

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132 The journal first appeared in June 1949 and ran for 36 issues.
for similar aims. The Parisian journal was a staunch supporter of the geometric idiom and promoted a synthesis of the arts, as well as the integration of the arts in architecture and urban planning, and in everyday life, in such a way that a vast majority of the public would have access to it. Similarly, according to Torres-García, a geometric visual language is universal, making it accessible to everyone. But the universal also meant that it reached beyond geographic borders, linking up with the European historical avant-garde. In doing so, geometric abstraction also helped redefine Latin American identity in that it no longer defined itself as inextricably linked to a colonial past and instead looked to renew its ties to pre-Columbian culture as a marker of authenticity.¹³³ Moreover, the Latin American artists working in a geometric vein shunned movements like Surrealism and lyrical abstraction in favor of a visual mode that did not attempt to mask reality or couch it in psychological allusions and personal interpretation. Keeping in line with the “universal,” they also rejected the ideology of the individual as linked to Abstract Expressionism in the United States.¹³⁴ In looking to the past, they still needed a visual language that expressed their country’s forward leap into the future, and one that also aligned Latin America with advanced first-world art production. By looking to the constructivist mode, these artists associated themselves with an avant-garde art production that was revolutionary and socialist in spirit, and also one that connected them to a European tradition. Tomás Maldonado, an Argentinean artist and member of the

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¹³³ For Torres-García, a geometric idiom intertwined with pre-Columbian symbols simultaneously referred to Uruguay’s (and Latin America’s) historic past, and created an art that was relevant to the present. “Because the Indian was a geometer. And that means culture. Because that is a manifestation of Universal Man.” From “New Art of America.” Reprinted in El Taller Torres-García, 80.

concrete art group *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención*, described their decision to pursue a geometric idiom:

We concrete artists come from the most progressive tendencies of European and American art... And because we develop from these tendencies, we are against all forms that imply some sort of regression. As such, we are against the mental cowardice and technique of the neorealists... against the lyricists of the withered carnation and of the interior worlds, who pretend to reedit, in our moment of reconstruction and struggle, an internal romanticism. [Translation mine]

Aligning themselves straightaway with European art movements, Maldonado’s declaration clearly positions their work as forward-looking and future-oriented. Similar to Brazilian entrepreneur Matarazzo’s desire to promote a modern and technologically advanced Brazil through the new modern art museum he founded, these artists—specifically the optical and kinetic ones—were invested in developing an art that reflected, to certain degree, their nation’s quick development and embrace of modernism, with all of its technological promise. And to do so, their choice of a visual vocabulary, one that would have international implications, was of utmost importance. As critic Guy Brett has made clear, the optical and kinetic artists that settled in Paris, and to an extent their predecessors in Argentina, Venezuela and Brazil, looked not to artists that were in vogue at the moment, but “took from Europe what corresponded to their own needs.”

However, this was not a wholesale adoption of a past, European tradition, but a selective...

135 Quoted in Andrea Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política: Arte argentino en los años sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), 56. “Los artistas concretos provenimos de las tendencias más progresistas del arte europeo y Americano... Y porque provenimos de esas tendencias estamos contra todas las formas que impliquen una regression. Así, estamos contra la cobardía mental y técnica de los neorealistas... contra los líricos del clavel marchito y de los mundos interiores, que pretenden reeditar, en nuestro tiempo de reconstrucción y de lucha, un romanticismo para interiores.”
136 Guy Brett, “A Radical Leap,” *Art in Latin America*, ed. Dawn Ades (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 254. Brett writes in reference to these artists’ relationship with Paris: “This can’t be described as one of provincial imitation of the latest fashion, since the artists they sought out were not fashionable in the Europe of the 1950s. Otero and Soto made special trips to Holland to see Mondrian’s work. ‘At that time [1950] no one in France was talking about Mondrian, still less might one see any of his wrok’, Otero said. Camargo visited Brancusi. Many Latin Americans called on Vantongerloo...at a time when Vantongerloo was completely ignored in France and was living in Paris in poverty.”
borrowing that could allow a reworking of geometric abstraction with its socially conscious, collective aspirations in light of the specificities of 1950s international politics.

Torres-García’s ideas circulated throughout Latin America, via publications as well as public lectures and radio shows in which he participated. His writings were dispersed in particular through two journals that he published: Circulo y Cuadrado, named after the Paris group Cercle et Carré, lasting from 1936-1943, and Removedor (Paint Remover), 1945-1951. It did not take long for Torres-García disciples to disperse and spread the word. In the summer of 1944 in Buenos Aires, two students, Rhod Rothfuss and Carmelo Arden Quin, who had studied under the Uruguayan artist along with a number of other artists, published the first and only issue of Arturo (fig. 11), a journal featuring poems and texts on constructivist art, as well as illustrations and vignettes by local and international artists. Though it only ran for a single issue, Arturo had long-lasting implications for the Argentinean constructivist movements that would arise shortly thereafter. In one of the essays in Arturo, the artist Carmelo Arden Quin proclaimed: “Ni

137 De Torres, 12. De Torres describes how Torres-García supplemented his classes at the Asociación de Arte Constructivo with “a program of radio lectures on such stations as Radio Oficial SODRE, Radio Espectador, and Radio Westinghouse and in institutions like the Amigos del Arte, the School of Architecture, the Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes, the Centro GAlego, the ETAP, the Ateneo de Montevideo, the Círculo de Bellas Artes, and the Instituto Normal de Señoritas. He also frequently published articles in Montevidean newspapers and wrote a series for the Buenos Aires newspaper La Razón…”

138 These included Tomás Maldonado, who designed the cover, Lidy Prati Maldonado, Marie Hélène Vieira da Silva, Augusto Torres, Vasily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Joaquín Torres-García.
expresión (Primitivismo), ni representación (Realismo), ni simbolismo (decadencia).

INVENCION.”139

Similar to the claims put forth by Torres-García,140 Arturo artists demanded a break from past traditions, invoking a new beginning, a typical avant-garde strategy. This split with previous practices pointed to specific movements which these new groups shunned. As outlined in Arturo, one of the European movements they denounced in particular was Surrealism, deeming its emphasis on individuality and the unconscious as antithetical to geometric abstraction’s goal to make an art for the people, something Torres-García had argued for in a 1939 text:

[Our] aspiration would be to make our Constructive art the art of all South America. And it is no surprise that it will take everyone’s cooperation to bring that about. We must make an art that belongs to everyone: an almost anonymous art, like that of the great periods. And that must happen despite the fact that, on the other hand, on the level of art, each one must have an individual way of expression.141

As outlined in one of the opening texts to Arturo, their critique of Surrealism was scathing: “[This] pure oneirism [Surrealism] will lead to even greater idiocy, given that its sole source will be a constant systematic escapism which, when analyzed, will become

140 Torres-Garcia encountered much animosity in his own country as well as other Latin American countries, especially in Argentina. Art historian Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro explains: “Contrary to what is generally stated, there was no love lost between the Argentine artists of 1944 and the school of Joaquín Torres-García. Many Argentine artists who placed Mondrian, Van Doesburg and Malevich as their idols were disappointed at Torres’s abandoning of a purist aesthetic in favor of his own particular brand of Americanism, mixing figurative and non-figurative elements loosely based on a re-interpretation of primitive cultures.” Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, “The Negation of all Melancholy,” Argentina 1920-1994 (exh.cat.), ed. David Elliott (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 63.
a closed intimacy, the fossilization of the personality.\textsuperscript{142} The implication was that
Surrealism provoked escapism, a sort of distraction from reality, instead of dealing with
the concerns of the moment. Renouncing both gesture and symbolic content, and by
consequence, emotional subject matter that prioritized the individual, the artists who took
part in \textit{Arturo} proclaimed the “afirmación de la imagen pura sin ningún determinismo ni
justificación,” in other words, an art that would reference only itself, in its pure geometric
form.\textsuperscript{143} Art historian Andrea Giunta emphasizes that, despite the “regressive” aspect of
geometric abstraction in Paris during these years, it was nonetheless the visual idiom that
Argentineans associated with a certain trans-nationalism. The key to geometric
abstraction was its opposition to illusion: “its objective was not to ‘abstract out’ but to
invent, present new realities.”\textsuperscript{144}

The publication of \textit{Arturo} symbolized the beginning of a new set of concerns on the part
of the Argentinean artists and their complex relationship with European artistic trends.
These changes coincided with a major shift in the Argentinean political arena, and as art
historian Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro has explained: “In as much as \textit{Arturo} symbolizes a break
with existing notions of cultural centrality, the generation of 1944, with all its
contradictions, forceful personalities and disputes, is an accurate reflection of the political
crisis of modern Argentina.”\textsuperscript{145} After a number of years of government instability, Juan

\textsuperscript{142} “What \textit{Arturo} stands for,” reprinted in Ades, 328-329.
without any determining factor or justification.”
\textsuperscript{144} Giunta, 57. “Lo central en el arte concreto era la oposición a toda forma de ilusión. Su objetivo no era
“abstraer”, sino “inventar”, presentar realidades nuevas, lo cual no implicaba, en modo alguno, mantenese
al margen de la realidad.”
Domingo Perón was elected president on February 24, 1946. Pérez-Barreiro has pointed out that there was under Perón hostility to specific forms of modern art, citing Dr. Ivanissevich, Minister of Education under Perón, in a speech given in 1949: “Morbid art, abstract art, has no place amongst us in this country flowering in its youth...Peronists have no time for Fauvists, less for Cubists, abstracts and surrealists. A Peronist is a person of defined sex who admires beauty in all its senses.” This quote highlights the position abstraction held in Argentina of the 1940s, that is, a style that was politically oppositional to the type of art that was sanctioned at the time.

While Arturo did not last, the artists that took part in the journal broke into two groups which continued to develop the publication’s original ideals: Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención and Grupo Madi. Both groups adopted the term “concrete art,” a name coined by the Dutch painter and architect Theo van Doesburg in 1930, indicating their alliance with non-figurative artists of the European avant-garde who had chosen the term “concrete” over “abstract.” The implication was that while “abstract” involved a point of departure from the physical world, “concrete art” had no point of reference other than the

146 Appealing to the working class for electoral support, Perón secured his rapid rise to power by pursuing social policies aimed at empowering the working class. He greatly expanded the number of labor unions and gave a hard push to the country’s industrialization. “Peronism” became a central influence in Argentinean political parties. But Perón was not without his detractors. Many criticized the strong authoritarian centralized government he established, which had strict control over opposition forces.


148 The Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención was organized by Maldonado, along with Alfredo Hlito, Raúl Lozza, Oscar Nuñez, and Juan Melé, among others. The Grupo Madi included Kosice, Arden Quin, Martín Blaszko, and Diyi Laañ. The origins of the term “Madi” have been greatly disputed. Some believe that the name evolved from “Movimiento de Arte de Invención”, others hold that the letters MADI stand for MArxismo or MAterialisme Dialectique, or that the name is simply nonsense, like Dada. See Dawn Ades, “Arte Madi/Arte Concreto-Invención,” Art of Latin America: The Modern Era: 1820-1980. (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1989), 244-245.
formal elements within the work itself. Doesburg defined concrete art in a manifesto entitled *The Basis of Concrete Art*, which appeared in the journal *Art Concret*. In it Van Doesburg stated, “The picture must be constructed from purely plastic elements, that is, planes and colours. A pictorial element has no other significance than itself and consequently the painting possesses no other significance than ‘itself’ and thus the picture has no other meaning than ‘itself’...” After Van Doesburg’s death, the term was taken up and elaborated by Max Bill, Swiss architect and sculptor, in the catalogue for the exhibition *Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik (Current Problems in Swiss Painting and Sculpture)* (Zurich, Kunsthaus, 1936). In his reworking of the term, Bill asserted that:

Concrete Art is autonomous in its specificity. It is the expression of the human spirit...and should possess that clarity and that perfection which one expects from works of the human spirit. It is by means of concrete painting and sculpture that those achievements which permit visual perception materialize. The instruments of this realization are color, space, light, movement. [Italics mine]

Bill would make his name in Latin America in the early 50s through a solo exhibition at the *Museu de Arte de São Paulo* in 1950, and by winning the sculpture prize for his stainless steel sculpture *Tripartite Unity* (fig. 12) at the First São Paulo Biennial. Based

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149 Ades, 245.
150 The journal, like *Arturo*, ran for a single issue in April 1930.
152 *Max Bill* (exh.cat.), (Buffalo, NY: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery: 1974), 47. Max Bill elaborated on Theo van Doesburg’s original definition of Concrete art and it is translated in the Buffalo catalogue: “We call “Concrete Art” works of art which are created according to a technique and laws which are entirely appropriate to them, without taking external support from experiential nature or from its transformation, that is to say, without the intervention of a process of abstraction...The instruments of this realization are color, space, light, movement. In giving form to these elements, one creates new realities. Abstract ideas which previously existed only in the mind are made visible in a concrete form...” (1936-1949)
153 Max Bill, “Concrete Art,” in *Max Bill*, 47. The Latin American kinetic and optical artists prioritized in their work that which Bill already had highlighted in his redefinition of the term concrete art.
on the Möbius strip, a continuous ribbon-like geometric shape that, while it twists and turns, has only one side and one edge, *Tripartite Unity*, composed of steel, made reference to Bill’s belief that art should be based in logic and reason. While advocating geometric art and its ties to advances in science and industry, Bill’s prize at the São Paulo Biennial secured his influence on the Brazilian art scene as well as on artists in other parts of Latin America who shared his convictions of geometric abstraction and technological advancements.

But it was Bill’s emphasis on the formal aspects of color, space, light and movement that would be the main focus of the groups that formed throughout the postwar years in Argentina and Venezuela. Picking up where Arturo had left off, both the *Grupo Madi*[^154] and Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención prioritized “invention,” stating their aims clearly in manifestos and other published documents. The *Manifesto Invencionista* (*Inventionist Manifesto*) was published in 1946, in the first issue of *Arte Concreto-Invención*’s bulletin, while Kosice published a pamphlet entitled *Invención* in 1945[^155].

Both groups shared with Torres-García the idea of the work of art as integral to the total environment, and in doing so, they encouraged the destruction or elimination of the picture frame in order to allow for a more free and irregular format. In other words, the work of art would “blend in” more naturally into its immediate surroundings by not being

[^154]: For a detailed account of the formation of and relationships between Grupo Madi and Arte Concreto-Invención, see Pérez-Barreiro.

[^155]: Ades, 246. See Appendix 11.4 for the complete English translation of the Inventionist Manifesto, which ends with: “‘Kill the optical,’ say the Surrealists, the last Mohicans of representation. ‘Exalt the Optical,’ we say. The key to everything: surround people with real things not with ghosts. Concrete art makes people relate directly to real things not to fabrications...Don’t search or find: Invent.” *Revista Arte Concreto-Invención* (Buenos Aires), no. 1 (1 August 1946).
confined to the frame. This idea was first outlined by Rhod Rothfuss in an essay entitled
*The frame: a problem of contemporary art* which was published in *Arturo.*\(^{156}\) In
explaining the traditional precedents concerning the frame, Rothfuss pointed out that “a
painting with a regular frame suggests a continuity of theme, which disappears only when
the frame is rigorously structured according to the painting’s composition.”\(^{157}\) By
breaking free of the frame, the work of art was thus “liberated from its representational
function” and could be better integrated into its environment.\(^{158}\) An example of this is
*Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención* artist Raúl Lozza’s *Relief* from 1945 (fig. 13). A
classic *coplanal*\(^ {159}\) composed of painted wooden shapes held together in space by wire,
the individual forms “relate to one another across the empty space,” without the confining
element of a frame.\(^ {160}\) The geometric shapes appear to dance on the wall and according to
the artists of *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención*, with the physical separation of these
unique structures in space, they were able to avoid visual illusion. They were clear about
their objectives in 1945: “The separation of the elements in space, organized as a
coplanal, is what defines a concrete plastic structure.”\(^ {161}\)

These groups’ use of manifestos to espouse their ideas, as was also the case in Venezuela,
points to the political commitment inherent in their proposals. Adopting a strategy

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\(^{157}\) Ibid.
\(^{158}\) Bamitz, 136.
\(^{159}\) The word “coplanal” is made up of the words cooperation and plan, alluding to the fact that these
objects have been arranged freely, without a definite frame.
\(^{160}\) Pérez-Barreiro, *The Geometry of Hope* (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at
Austin, 2007), 97.
\(^{161}\) Raúl Lozza, *Exposición Arte Concreto Invención*, Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos, Buenos
initially taken up by the historical avant-garde,⁶² the manifesto implies a political
Martin Puchner explains how a manifesto constitutes a complex mixture of politics and
art, and how in its presentation, reception and language, it is situated between political
oratory and theatrical performance.⁶³ Often extreme in their rhetoric, manifestos are
intended to achieve a revolutionary effect, as in its original form, Karl Marx’s *The
Communist Manifesto* (1848). Puchner emphasizes the unavoidable connection between
the art manifesto and the political manifesto, often times because artists aligned
themselves with political groups. While the artists of *Madi* and *Arte Concreto-Invención*
may not have overtly allied themselves with specific political parties, their manifestos
called for a subversion, and at times even destruction, of the preceding artistic forms
which included all forms of figurative art, “from Cubism to Surrealism,”⁶⁴ as part of a
challenge to art and society, searching for a more collective and socialist art form.⁶⁵

While both groups incorporated music and poetry, *Madi* went further by including in
their manifesto theatre, dance and architecture. Along with the dissolution of the frame,
movement also became central to both *Madi* and *Arte Concreto-Invención*. As art
historian Dawn Ades has pointed out, artists such as Argentinean Diyi Laān (fig. 14),
Carmelo Arden Quin and Gyula Kosice (fig. 15) made sculptures with movable parts,
calling to mind the “transformable toys of Torres-García, Russian Constructivism,

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⁶² The Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists all disseminated their ideas through manifestos.
⁶⁵ This would not have been possible in the United States during the forties and fifties, the period of
McCarthyism characterized by intense anti-communism and which called for an age of conformity.
Futurism and Arp’s dada objects – the early wood reliefs like *Eggboard*, or *Clock*, in which the idea of movement is humorously but not literally present."¹⁶⁶ This sense of play, a certain irresolution inherent in their art production, was a major component of the *Madi* group’s oeuvre, something which was to be taken up and further developed by the Latin Americans in Paris, while the *Arte Concreto-Invención* continued along a “more rigorously formal direction,” with an affinity to Mondrian and Max Bill.¹⁶⁷

Despite their differences,¹⁶⁸ however, both *Madi* and *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención* deemed concrete art a visual language that was more in tune with their contemporary reality. To quote *Arte Concreto-Invención* leader Tomás Maldonado:

>To invent concrete objects which participate in men’s everyday life, which cooperate in the task of establishing direct relationships with the things we wish to modify... It is necessary to rebuild the world. The artist does not have a kingdom apart from ordinary reality. The New Art is born from a desire to participate in the world...¹⁶⁹

Maldonado’s words would later resonate in the art produced by Soto, Cruz-Diez and others. But what this illustrates is that by the mid-1940s, abstract artists of Latin America were calling for an integration of art and life, for more direct communication between the public and their work. The kinetic and optical artists in Paris would build on this desire to “participate in the world,” extending it in full force to the general public in ways that the works of their precursors had only hinted at.

¹⁶⁶ Ades, 248.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 250.
¹⁶⁸ The relationship between *Madi* and *Arte Concreto-Invención* is complex, with many nuanced differences. I have only outlined a couple of the main defining characteristics of the two movements which are relevant to the present study. For further information on each group, please see Nelly Perazzo, *El arte concreto en la Argentina en la década del 40* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983); Pérez-Barreiro, “The Negation of all Melancholy,” 54-65; *Arte Abstracto Argentino* (exh. cat.), (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2002).
¹⁶⁹ Tomás Maldonado. Quoted in Perazzo, 70.
While Torres-García may have officially introduced geometric abstraction to Uruguay and its surrounding countries, he was by no means the only advocate of the form. Kinetic artists such as Julio Le Parc credited the artist Lucio Fontana as an influence, in particular Fontana’s “White Manifesto” from 1946. In it, Fontana proclaimed the need for a new art that was compatible with modern-day society:

> We are living in the era of mechanics... A change is demanded in the very essence and in the form. It is further demanded that painting, sculpture, poetry and music be superseded. An art is needed which is more coherent with the exigencies of the new spirit... Modern art finds itself now in a situation of transition that imposes a rupture with previous art, with the aim of opening the road to new conceptions.

Questioning the traditional reliance on canvas and other flat supports, Fontana declared that the time had come for artists to move beyond those confines, and to work in three or four dimensions (with the addition of time).

The ancient immobile images no longer satisfy the new man formed by the necessity of action and by the cohabitation with mechanics, which impose on him a constant dynamism... We conceive of this synthesis as an addition of physical elements: colour, sound, movement, time, space, integrating a physical-psychical unity. Colour (the element of space), sound (the element of time) and motion (that develops in time and space) are the fundamental forms of the new art which comprehends the four dimensions of existence, time and space.

With an emphasis on scientific progress and an endorsement towards an art that moved beyond the traditional flat picture-plane, it is clear that Fontana’s claims reverberated

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170 Le Parc Lumière: obras cinéticas de Julio Le Parc/Kinetic works by Julio Le Parc (Daros-Latinamerica AG: Zurich, Switzerland, 2005), 21. When asked how he got involved with kinetic art, Le Parc answered: “In the Escuela de Bellas Artes, in Argentina, when I was a very young student, there was the Concrete Art movement. At the same time there was Fontana, who was our teacher in the Escuela Preparatoria de Bellas Artes (Preparatory School of Fine Arts) with his ideas on Spatialism, he encouraged us with the realization of the Manifiesto Blanco (White Manifesto).”


172 Ibid., 334.
with young pupils in Buenos Aires such as Le Parc who would later develop kinetic art in Paris.  

This break with previous trends and search for something new was not unique to Uruguay and Argentina. Much was happening, both culturally and politically, in Venezuela around the same time. A series of conflicts and protests broke out at the end of 1945 at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas (formerly the Academia de Bellas Artes). Students demanded changes to what they considered to be outmoded styles, particularly the school’s emphasis on Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, as well as Cubism and Cézanne. These strikes had been in part prompted by a growing interest in socially committed art, fed by a number of artists who had traveled to Mexico to study mural painting in the late thirties. However, it was the political circumstances around that time that initially paved the way for changes in the Venezuelan art scene. The years following the 1935 death of Juan Vicente Gómez, president from 1908 until his death, witnessed a period of rapid growth politically, economically and culturally. Venezuela, having spent twenty-seven years under the rule of Gómez, and isolated from contact with foreign cultures, hoped to catch up with the modernization that came to define the country in the years just

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173 Fontana’s declarations in his *White Manifesto* would also be echoed shortly after by Viktor Vasarely who would play a prominent role in forwarding optical and kinetic art as Chapter 2 elaborates.

174 Jacqueline Barnitz has suggested that geometric art in part flourished in Latin American countries in opposition to Mexican muralism. See Barnitz, 127.

175 Rina Carvajal, “Venezuela,” *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 143. As Carvajal points out, artists such as Pedro León Castro, César Rengifo, Gabriel Bracho and Héctor Poleo “played an active role in the social and ideological questioning which emerged from the political ferment of the post-Gómez years.”

176 President Gómez was a controversial figure. Historian Tulio Halperín Donghi characterized his presidency as an “‘ideal type’ of early twentieth century Latin American dictatorship. It lacked nothing: ferocious repression of dissidents, iron discipline of labor, ingratiating deference to foreign powers and investors, and an obsession with ‘progress’ in the form of public works.” Halperín Donghi, 201.
before and after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{177} It was during this time that the first reforms to the Academy took place. Contact with Mexican mural painting, as well as contact with foreign artistic traditions through travel and via art magazines and journals, prompted the younger generation of Venezuelan artists to break with tradition and search for a new visual language that was indicative of the changing times and their country's embrace of modernization. These desires culminated in the strikes of 1945, which resulted in a number of students being expelled, some of whom subsequently left to Mexico and Paris to work and study, with the aid, in some cases, of government grants.\textsuperscript{178} While many artists had contact with the Mexican muralists and studied this mode of representation, the social realist language it employed, based in a traditional Marxist ideology, did not offer this new generation of artists an appropriate visual language to promote their respective country's embrace of modernity.

The volatile political climate in Venezuela would continue, with a series of transitional presidents before the dictator General Marcos Pérez Jiménez claimed power in 1948 and ruled until 1958.\textsuperscript{179} Some of the artists who had been expelled from the Escuela but remained in Venezuela formed the \textit{Taller Libre de Arte (Free Art Studio or Free Workshop)} in 1948, an association meant to challenge and question the conservative art

\begin{footnotes}
\item[177] Carvajal, 143. Curator and critic Rina Carvajal explained that after the death of Gómez in 1935, "The political-intellectual elite and the public at large were unanimous in their desire to modernize Venezuelan government and society. After 1936, the slowness that had characterized the Gómez era was replaced by a state of accelerated activity."
\item[178] Among the artists that left for a period of time to Paris were Alejandro Otero, considered one of the leading artists of his generation, and one of the big three kinetic artists of Venezuela, along with Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz Diez. Otero returned from Paris in 1949 and caused an uproar with his painting series \textit{Cafeteras}.
\item[179] For an account of the artistic situation under the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, see Marguerite K. Mayhall, "The Dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez." \textit{The Dissolution of Utopia: Art, Politics, and the City of Caracas in the 1960s} (Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2001).
\end{footnotes}
establishment.\textsuperscript{180} The Taller served as a workshop and an exhibition space, presenting a show in 1948 of the work of the Argentinean group \textit{Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención}.

\textbf{iv. Latin America reinvigorates France}

Even though the situation in each of these Latin American countries was unique, there are some similarities to draw out. First, geometric abstraction had a difficult time making its mark in the mainstream art establishment in most of the aforementioned countries. In turn, the manifestos and texts published by groups from \textit{Arturo} to \textit{Arte Concreto-Invención} asserted the new art of the era called for a socially committed production. As a result, France, removed from both the United States and the former sites of colonial rule Spain and Portugal, offered a more promising venue for these artists to develop an art that was both uniquely Latin American, yet within an international abstract tradition.

In light of all of these artistic developments in Latin America, French based Degand's Brazilian escapade which attempted to establish European forms of geometric abstraction appears even more naïve and perhaps arrogant. While his paternal efforts to introduce geometric abstraction to Brazil may have fallen short of success, it would in fact be Latin American geometric artists who reinvigorated an old and staid tradition in France, in their own way re-introducing a visual language that had had its heyday in the earlier part of the century.

\textsuperscript{180} The artists who formed the Taller included Mateo Manaure, Adela Rico, Narciso Debourg, Alirio Oramas, Rubén Núñez, Perán Erminy, among others. See \textit{Diccionario Biográfico de las artes plásticas en Venezuela, siglos XIX y XX} (Caracas: Prensas de Gráficas Armitano, C.A., 1973), 286.
It was in 1950 that a number of Venezuelan artists also made their way to Paris, among them Jesús Rafael Soto. Spurred on by the disturbances in the Caracas art world, some of the artists who traveled to Paris including Soto and Alejandro Otero formed a group known as *Los Disidentes* in 1950, making their voices heard in both the French capital as well as in Caracas through a publication of the same name. Lasting only five issues, the journal *Los Disidentes* consisted of essays and editorials written mostly by members of the group critiquing what they considered the “backwardness” of Venezuelan artistic culture, in particular the teachings at the Academy. They targeted specifically the teachers of landscape painting in Caracas, and the conservatism of the official Salons and the *Museo de Bellas Artes*. Art historian Béllica Rodríguez has written that the journal served not so much as a forum for the group’s ideas as a medium of protest: “Esos cinco números [de *Los Disidentes*] no van a server sino de vehículo de agresiones a la Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Caracas y a sus maestros y profesores...Los artículos no fueron sino panfletos...para escandalizar.” According to *Los Disidentes*, it was the provincialism inherent in the art teachings in Venezuela that impeded artistic progress. Proclaiming a split with the past in order to usher in a promising future for Venezuela, the first issue was published in Paris in March 1950. Guillent Perez’s plea is unambiguous: “Nuestro ayer fue demasiado grande, nuestro hoy demasiado pequeño. No hay nada más pernicioso que la idolatría del pasado. El pasado solo es verdadero pasado cuando está al servicio de

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181 The first of these artists was Alejandro Otero, who went to Paris in 1945.
182 The term “Los Disidentes” was coined by the French art critic Gaston Diehl.
183 Initial members included the artists Pascual Navarro, Alejandro Otero, Mateo Manaure, Luis Guevara Moreno, Carlos González Bogen, Narciso Debourg, Perán Erminy, Rubén Nufiez, Dona Hersen, Aimée Battistini, and the philosopher J. R. Guillent Pérez.
184 “The five issues [of *Los Disidentes*] would serve as a vehicle to express their hostility towards the Academy of Caracas and its teachers and professors...The articles were meant to scandalize.” Béllica Rodríguez, *La Pintura Abstracta en Venezuela, 1945-1965* (Venezuela: s.n., Litografía Tecnocolor, 1980), 18.
In their final issue they articulated their reasons for re-locating to Paris, included in their *Manifiesto NO*:

Nosotros no vinimos a París a seguir cursos de diplomacia, ni a adquirir una "cultura" con fines de comodidad personal. Vinimos a enfrentarnos con los problemas, a luchar con ellos, a aprender a llamar las cosas por su nombre, y por ello mismo no podemos mantenernos indiferentes ante el clima de falsedad que constituye la realidad cultural de Venezuela. A su mejoramiento creemos contribuir atacando sus defectos con la mayor crudeza, haciendo recaer las culpas sobre los verdaderos responsables o quienes les apoyan... “NO” es la tradición que queremos instaurar. “NO” a los falsos Salones de Arte Oficial. “NO” a ese anacrónico archivo de anacronismos que se llama Museo de Bellas Artes. “NO” a la Escuela de Artes Plásticas y sus promociones de falsos impresionistas.

The *Manifiesto NO* was the official public declaration of *Los Disidentes*’ artistic principles, and in this they promoted abstraction while condemning the archaic academism of their Venezuelan institutions. Attacking anyone associated with “official culture”, *Los Disidentes* declared that as Venezuelans they needed to draw attention to what they deemed “false”, such as the outmoded European traditions that the Academy insisted on as the basis of their curriculum. Though the group was active for barely a year, the effects of this intervention were long-lasting, since many of the artists such as Pascual Navarro Velazquez, Alejandro Otero, and Mateo Manaure, returned to Venezuela

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185 “Our yesterday was too great, our today too small. There is nothing as pernicious as idolatry of the past. The past is only truly the past when it is at the service of the present.” J.R. Guillent Pérez, “La Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Frente y de Perfil,” *Los Disidentes* no. 1 (Marzo 1950): 15. Reproduced in *La Pintura Abstracta en Venezuela, 1945-1965*.

186 “We did not come to Paris seeking classes in diplomacy, nor to acquire a certain ‘culture’ with personal gains in mind. We came to confront our problems, to struggle with them, to learn to call things by their name, and by the same token, we cannot remain indifferent to the climate of falsehood that constitutes the cultural reality of Venezuela. We believe we are contributing to its improvement by condemning its defects in the crassest way possible, blaming the real culprits and those who support them... ‘NO’ is the tradition we would like to establish. ‘NO’ to the false Salons of Official Art. ‘NO’ to that anachronistic archive of anachronisms called the Museum of Art. ‘NO’ to the Academy and its endorsement of false impressionists...” [Translation mine.] Reproduced in Béllica Rodríguez, *La Pintura Abstracta en Venezuela, 1945-1965* (Venezuela: s.n., Litografía Tecnocolor, 1980).
where they helped consolidate the geometric abstract movement. Soto remained in Paris where he continued to develop kinetic structures and optical paintings.

The Venezuelan artists’ return to their country of origin, and their promotion of a geometric aesthetic,\textsuperscript{187} coincided with a number of events in Brazil that stimulated that country’s ongoing interest in geometric abstraction. Following a 1950 exhibition of the Swiss architect and sculptor Max Bill at the \textit{Museu de Arte de São Paulo}, Bill was the recipient of the international grand prize for sculpture at the first São Paulo Bienal held in 1951. In 1953, he proceeded to travel and give lectures in both São Paulo and Río de Janeiro. Also, the well-known Argentinean art critic and historian Jorge Romero Brest traveled to Brazil in 1948 to give a series of six lectures at the \textit{Museu de Arte de São Paulo} in which he positioned architecture as the main art of the era.\textsuperscript{188} This interest in melding architecture and design would have fundamental consequences for the geometric abstract movements in Brazil, as was made manifest by the design of Brasilia, the new capital of Brazil.\textsuperscript{189} This interest in the integration of the arts also echoed the postwar aspirations of the journal \textit{Art d’Aujourd’hui} in Paris, already setting up important parallels between the geometric abstract tendencies in France and in Latin America.\textsuperscript{190}


\textsuperscript{188} Amaral, 89.

\textsuperscript{189} The building of Brasilia began in 1956 with Lucio Costa as the main urban planner and Oscar Niemeyer as the principal architect. The idea was to move the federal capital of the country from the coast to the Midwestern interior of the country. Inaugurated in 1960, the government hoped that the move to the central interior would help populate that area of the country.

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Art d’Aujourd’hui} made the synthesis of the arts their central theme, as outlined in their first volume: “D’autre part se pose, plus que jamais, le grand problème de la synthèse des arts. Malgré l’accord plastique qui s’affirme de plus en plus entre l’Architecture, la Peinture et la Sculpture, aucune occasion n’est donnée à cette synthèse de s’affirmer sur des exemples concrets. Afin de pallier à ces différentes lacunes,
Following Bill’s description from the 1930s and Fontana’s assertion from his *White Manifesto* that “color, space, time and movement”\(^{191}\) were the key to developing an art of the present, the present being a key signifier of modernity, technological advancement, and social possibilities, the *Grupo Ruptura* formed in 1952 in São Paulo led by Waldemar Cordeiro.\(^{192}\) The *Grupo Ruptura* outlined their goals in a manifesto entitled *Manifiesto Ruptura*: “Hoy lo nuevo puede ser diferenciado precisamente de lo viejo, al romper con lo viejo por eso afirmamos...lo nuevo [son] todas las experiencias que tienden a la renovación de los valores esenciales del arte visual (espacio-tiempo, moviemiento y material).”\(^{193}\) Signaling a break with past styles, with *Grupo Ruptura* condemning “naturalism, surrealism, and non-figurative hedonism,” among other “old” traditions, the Brazilian group’s call for a fresh start echoed those of *Arturo* from the mid-forties in Argentina, as well Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención, *Grupo Madi*, and the Venezuelans who from Paris as *Los Disidentes* had challenged their traditional academic standards. Prioritizing rationality over expression, *Grupo Ruptura* promoted the use of industrial materials such as aluminum and enamel, instead of particleboard, oil paint and easel painting. An example is Luís Sacilotto’s *Concretion 5629* from 1956 (fig. 16). The work, made of enamel on aluminum, uses the repetitive form of an equilateral triangle, alternating black and white, arranged in eight horizontal rows. The result is optically challenging, with the shapes appearing to move and at times even blend together.

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\(^{191}\) See notes 90 and 108.

\(^{192}\) Members included Geraldo de Barros, Luís Sacilotto, Lothar Charoux, Kazmer Féjer, Leopold Haar, Anatole Wladysslaw, and Mauricio Nogueira Lima. The group was also multidisciplinary, and included painting, poetry, advertising, music and graphic arts.

\(^{193}\) “Today the new stands apart clearly from the old, and it is in breaking from the old that we affirm...the new as all experiences that look to the renovation of the essential values of visual art (space-time, movement and materials).” Spanish translation of original Brazilian text reprinted in *Heterotopias. Medio siglo sin-lugar: 1918-1968*, (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2000), 503-504.
Concretion 5629 exemplifies some of the main goals of Grupo Ruptura, prioritizing rationality over expression.\textsuperscript{194}

Soon after Grupo Ruptura formed, Grupo Frente materialized in Río de Janeiro. Led by Ivan Serpa, the group\textsuperscript{195} endorsed similar ideals to those of the São Paulo group.

According to Lygia Clark, an artist associated with the movement, the artists of Grupo Frente looked to the writings of geometric abstract artists Max Bill, Vantongerloo and Mondrian, and made issues of space and perception integral to their art.\textsuperscript{196} While there was initial exchange between the two groups, it was not long before differences arose between them, with Grupo Ruptura criticizing Grupo Frente’s emphasis on experience over theory which they claimed “compromised its objectivity and concreteness.”\textsuperscript{197} The stress placed on physical experience would eventually set apart the Río artists, and in particular the later work of Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica, from the other Brazilian Concretists.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{194} See Manifesto Ruptura, 1952, reproduced in Heterotopías, 503.
\textsuperscript{195} Among its adherents were Abraham Palatnik, Aluíso Carvão, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Helio Oiticica.
\textsuperscript{198} Poet and art critic Ferreira Gullar wrote the “Neo-Concretist Manifesto” in 1959, one of a number of texts that appeared in the Río newspaper Jornal do Brasil, and which defined the artistic movements of the city as “neo-concrete.” In opposition to Concretism, Neo-Concretist artists were critical of the purely rational qualities of the geometric form and sought to incorporate organic forms into their work. As laid out in the opening of the Manifesto Neoconcreto: “El término neoconcreto indica una toma de posición frente al arte no-figurativo “geométrico” (Neoplasticismo, Constructivismo, Suprematismo, Escuela de Ulm) y particularmente ante el arte concreto llevado hasta una peligrosa exacerbación racionalista.” (“The term neoconcrete denotes a position opposite of non-figurative “geometric” art…and particularly in opposition to concrete art taken to a dangerously exacerbated rationalism.”) Spanish translation of original Brazilian text reprinted in Heterotopías, 508-509.
**v. Crossing Over**

The climate of artistic change and transformation that characterized the postwar years in Latin America had important consequences there and also eventually in France, due to the number of Latin American artists traveling to Paris in the 50s, subsequently making the city their home. For this generation of artists, challenging the artistic traditions of their homelands as old-fashioned, provincial and colonial, was essential in order to make room for an art that could claim to be representative of the changing times, one that gave form to Latin America’s new position in the world. If abstraction could lay claim to an international language, one that devoid of figurative associations could argue for a universal significance, the work of the Latin American artists could make them important participants within a larger European and international movement.

The arrival of the Latin Americans in Paris in the 1950’s was a fortuitous one both for these transplanted artists and for the Parisian art scene. Even though the late 1940’s had been a dismal decade for a geometric revival, as attested to by Degand’s move to Brazil in 1948, the 1950’s in contrast marked a watershed moment, one that heralded the great

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199 Rodriguez, 51. Béllica Rodriguez characterized it as such: “Como los artistas europeos, los venezolanos van a encontrar en la abstracción la expresión más adecuada de una moderna visión del mundo, concluyendo que…serán los que contribuirán, con su trabajo creador, a la incorporación de nuestro país a una corriente universal del arte y los que inyectarán, de manera definitiva, un espíritu de contemporaneidad a un medio en el que, la tradicional escuela del paisaje se había asentado.” (“Like European artists, the Venezuelans found in abstraction the most appropriate expression of a vision of the modern world, concluding that …they’d be the ones, with their creative work, to contribute to a universal aesthetic and the ones who would inject, in a clear manner, a spirit of contemporaneity to the staid tradition of landscape painting.”)

comeback of geometric abstraction. While the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles initially opened in 1946 as a space for non-figurative art, the dominant aesthetic quickly became geometric. In turn by 1950, the journal Art d’Aujourd’hui had secured its reputation as the major endorser of this return. Edgar Pillet, artist and one of editors of the journal, seized the moment along with fellow artist Jean Dewasne to found the Académie in Montparnasse in 1950 that promoted abstraction, and which was enthusiastically publicized in Art d’Aujourd’hui. With few signs to the contrary, it appeared that geometric abstraction was poised to help France overcome its post WWII cultural malaise.

These were the conditions that welcomed Jesús Rafael Soto, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Martha Boto, and Julio Le Parc to Paris. In seeking a more fruitful milieu, the Latin American artists contributed to the success of the postwar geometric revitalization already under way in Paris by bringing with them a belief in the social commitment of art, a conviction clearly laid out in the writings and texts of the postwar geometric groups that developed in Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela. In turn, and as Chapter 2 will demonstrate, the 1955 exhibition Le Mouvement helped launch this new wave of geometric abstraction, under the guise of kinetic and optical art. With the Galerie Denise René as the new movement’s nucleus, artists met with others who shared similar ideas concerning the communitarian and populist function of art, one that should be accessible to the public. Viktor Vasarély, the Hungarian artist whose work came to epitomize optical art and who was instrumental, along with Denise René, in organizing the exhibition Le Mouvement, declared that geometric art resonated with the new atomic age; that it threw off the romantic nostalgia
for the past to assert the geometric forms that were at the heart of the new biochemistry, wave mechanics and astrophysics. His statement, not surprisingly, appeared in the pages of *Art d’Aujourd’hui*:

> L’âge atomique se dessine avec la nouvelle cité géométrique polychrome et solaire. L’art plastique y sera cinétique, multi-dimensionnel et communautaire. Abstrait à coup sûr et rapproché des sciences…Dénonçons les nostalgies du passé; aimons notre époque, qui sera aussi une “haute époque” un jour. Finissons-en avec la “Nature” romantique; notre Nature à nous c’est la Biochimie, l’Astrophysique et la Mécanique ondulatoire. Affirmons, que toute creation de l’homme est formelle et géométrique comme la structure secrète de l’Univers.201

The similarities between Vasarely’s call to arms reiterated some of Torres-García’s ideas laid out more than a decade earlier.202 At a time when artists, especially the Abstract Expressionists in the United States, were prioritizing individuality, Vasarely called for an art that was *communautaire*, emphasizing a socialist component to the art that should represent the present era. Paris was ready for a change, and it was not abovecolonizing the imaginary Latin America, especially when it came in the guise of a renewed geometric abstraction. The utopian potential of geometric abstraction, balked at and subsequently repressed during the immediate postwar years,203 returned with a vengeance through the work of the Latin American optical and kinetic artists. Initially prompted by a need to “go modern,” the artists of Venezuela and Argentina, and eventually Brazil, went to Paris in search of the latest modern art had to offer. A collision of interests, theirs and

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201 Viktor Vasarely, “L’Artiste et l’Ethique,” *Art d’Aujourd’hui* no. 7 (Novembre 1954): 16. “The atomic age is characterized by the new geometric polychrome and solar development/city. Art will be kinetic, multi-dimensional and for the common people. Abstract and close to science…Let us denounce the nostalgia with the past; let us embrace our era, which will eventually become a ‘grand era.’ Let us do away with romantic ‘Nature’; our nature is Biochemistry, astrophysics and wave mechanics.” Translation mine.

202 See note 58.

203 Geometric abstraction seemed like a poor choice to represent the state of affairs in France after the war. With its clean shapes and rigid forms, it quickly lost steam to *art informel* and *tachisme*, deemed more adequate at expressing the despair and angst still alive in the late forties. This is discussed in the previous chapter.
France’s, made for an ideal match. The utopian dream of progress and success for Latin America was not that different from France’s postwar Reconstruction aims – both needed each other to acquire something: for the Latin American artists, it was gaining artistic legitimacy from the major artistic art center. For France, in particular during the de Gaulle Regime, it was moving beyond the staleness of the postwar years, the uncertainty of the Fourth Republic, and regaining their prewar status through their enthusiastic embrace of technology and the welcoming of their Latin brothers. Even the public had something to gain: a new kind of viewing experience that required their active participation and attention. Interestingly, kinetic art, which was full of aesthetic contradictions and socialist allusions, was about to heed its call, publicizing its democratic nature through what became the movement’s official organ, the Galerie Denise René.
Chapter 3: Re-Defining Geometric Abstraction in Postwar France: The Denise René Gallery, 1944-1955

i. Le Mouvement: optical and kinetic art in 1955

On April 6, 1955, the exhibition Le Mouvement opened at the Denise René Gallery in Paris, an event that despite the seemingly capricious and ostensibly light-humored nature of the work on view had serious implications for the contemporary art scene. Intrigued by an innovative kind of geometric abstract art, interactive gadgets, optical sensations, and kinetic movement, the public flocked to this small gallery on the Right Bank enthralled with the new aesthetic possibilities and engagement it offered (fig. 17 & 18). As one reviewer put it, even the mailman was drawn in by the exhibition: “Le facteur, en passant par la galerie, a déclaré qu’il n’avait jamais vu une exposition aussi amusante.”204 This idea of amusement and play was integral to defining not only Denise René’s show, but also the larger movement of geometric abstraction and kinetic art that dominated her gallery for the next decade.205

Le Mouvement brought together well-established artists – Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder, and Robert Jacobsen – and a number of emerging ones – the Israeli Yaacov

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205 For example, in 1958, Denise René showed: the Argentinean group Arte Madí Internacional (February 18-28), Agam. Tableaux en movement, tableaux transformables (April 15-May 9), and Nicolas Schöffer, Sculptures spatiodynamiques, projections luminodynamiques (November 21-December 21). At the end of 1959, she exhibited Vasarely, tableauxcinétiques (opened on November 20). In 1960: Kosice. Sculptures hydrauliques, reliefs, sculptures (April 5-30). In 1961: Propositions sur le Mouvement. Groupe de Recherche d’art visuel (May). In 1962: Agam (November). In 1963: Vasarely (December). In 1964/65: Mouvement 2 (December 15-February 28). These are only a few of the shows she organized around optico-kinetic art. This partial list does not include the multitude of exhibitions concerning concrete art that René held in her gallery and abroad. For a full survey of her activities as gallery owner, see Denise René l’intrépide une galerie dans l’aventure de l’art abstrait, 1944-1978 (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2001).
Agam, Swiss artist Jean Tinguely, Belgian Pol Bury, Hungarian-born Viktor Vasarely, and one Latin American artist, Venezuelan Jesús Rafael Soto (fig. 19-21). The overall criterion for inclusion was that all artists introduce motion, either by incorporating actual movement or time within the work, or through virtual movement, that is, work based on optical illusion wherein perception is never completely fixed. By bringing together both well-known and less recognized artists, René, with the assistance of Viktor Vasarely, attempted to legitimize and chart a lineage for kinetic abstraction, one which linked it to earlier avant-garde movements. Vasarely, who had written extensively on the notion of kinetics in art, and whose one-man exhibition was the first to open the Galerie Denise René in November 1944, was eager to bring together works involving movement, geometric abstraction, and optical and perceptual possibilities. In fact, these concerns were a fundamental part of his artistic practice; Vasarely had advocated on several occasions the need for abstract art to surpass the canvas format, to push out from its limitations, and to move into three-dimensions. Speaking to this goal, in a discussion with abstract artist Jean Dewasne in 1951, Vasarely declared:

Easel painting is not outmoded in the negative sense of the word. But there is a transition from the individual to the collective which in our age is appearing in a genuinely new guise because of the evolution of technology. I believe that the plastic arts are ripe for a vast synthesis of painting, sculpture, architecture, and urban planning... the new techniques and their marriage are opening limitless horizons to us.²⁰⁶

Working in tandem with one another and imagining a lucrative professional relationship in which both parties would have something to gain, Vasarely and René conceived of an exhibition with works that proposed new forms of pictorial and sculptural engagement,

²⁰⁶ Gaston Diehl, Vasarely (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.), 33. Diehl quotes Vasarely in a discussion with Dewasne from 1951. Technology, what it symbolized, and how it was exploited in France during the de Gaulle years as a means to remake the French nation, is discussed in the following chapter.
and together planned and organized *Le Mouvement*. Because funds were low, instead of a costly catalogue, Vasarely and René published a small yellow handout that became known as the *Yellow Manifesto* (fig. 22). Included in this pamphlet was an outline by Vasarely defining kinetic and optical art, an essay on the theory of kinetic art and a chronological survey of its history by Swedish art critic and curator Pontus Hulten, and an essay by art critic Roger Bordier on the *transformable* work of art and on film. Because of the newness of this work and its emphasis on technological innovations, all of the contributors realized the stakes were high in promoting kinetic art, an art that seemingly lacked any real aesthetic predecessor. To hint at the artistic and even radical potential it might contain, Bordier explained:

> It might very well be that movement...will become what neither the abstraction of the past ten years, often admirable but prematurely frozen in doctrines and undermined by a scholastic pretension, nor the trivial *tachiste* venture succeeded in becoming: the revolution in the second half of the twentieth century, exactly as cubism was the revolution of the first half.\(^{210}\)

In other words kinetic art, an art literally based in time, was perceived by the organizers and contributors to *Le Mouvement* as a serious and ultimately transformative artistic intervention that could rupture tired models of both lyrical and geometric abstraction with

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\(^{207}\) Their relationship was not only professional. By this point they had already begun an affair that was to last many years.

\(^{208}\) This idea of charting a “family tree” of sorts permeated every aspect of the show. In the *Yellow Manifesto*, Hulten’s contribution included a chronology of the concept of movement in art from its earliest conception in 1911 by the Futurists and the Cubists, culminating with the 1955 show *Le Mouvement*. In the middle, one finds the quintessential avant-garde artists, the Russian Constructivists, as well as Marcel Duchamp, furthering the notion of movement in art in the early decades of the 20\(^{th}\) century. While this appears to link together disparate art groups interested in movement in art, it glosses over the distinct and varied political and aesthetic goals of each, something to be discussed further a bit later.

\(^{209}\) The notion that a work of art could be literally transformed takes on a symbolic meaning as well. This is a key issue because it gives viewers the choice to change and alter compositions, something that was unheard of previously.

their promise of alteration and change. This, in turn, also provided a different look at the world, a world that was in constant motion.

At the heart of this intervention was motion itself. Vasarely, who would become one of the pioneers of optical art in postwar France, argued in his essay for *Le Mouvement* that motion "is as great an innovation in art as was the rise of perspective in the fifteenth century, which fixed figures in space. More than even Cubism or Futurism, the artists brought together here [*Le Mouvement*] have broken totally with perspective. This is what makes this show so fascinating." In short, Vasarely saw this preoccupation with movement as a means of liberating art from its conventions and traditions, such as an emphasis on one point perspective, which had been the dominant model for composing pictorial space until the early twentieth century.

Adopting a strategic avant-garde position based in opposition and change in which speed, dynamism, and movement are metaphors for pushing both art and society forward, Vasarely hinged an emphasis on motion with larger political and social ideals. Quoting the art critic Pontus Hulten who also wrote about the exhibition, Vasarely continued: "A work with a kinetic rhythm that is never repeated is one of the freest beings one can imagine, a creation that, escaping from all systems, lives on beauty." Within this

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212 I rely on Peter Bürger’s definition of the avant-garde as highly critical of the institution of art and the idea of art’s autonomy, arguing instead for the integration of art and life. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 47-54. The emphasis on speed, movement and dynamism on the surface calls to mind the objectives of Futurism, which emphasized a rejection of the Italian cultural tradition in favor of a modern aesthetic based on speed and industry. But this is where the similarities end, since the Futurists also extolled the virtues of destruction and war as a way to rid society of the past and generate change.
213 Vasarely, *Yellow Manifesto*. 
model, the incorporation of movement and time in the work of art became for Vasarely a way to signal an art of the future, one with infinite possibilities not only for the imagination, but also for society itself.²¹⁴

Denise René’s gallery and the promotion of optico-kinetic art in *Le Mouvement* would have profound significance for Latin American artists who came to Paris. The exhibition in April 1955 featured a novel type of art production liberated from introspection and postwar alienation.²¹⁵ Taking the relationship between the art object and its viewer as a starting point, the abstract art represented in *Le Mouvement* called up the active involvement of the spectator. This new brand of abstraction literally re-oriented the playing field for all participants by asking its audience to enter the gallery space and physically engage with the works on view.

Interestingly enough, it was exactly this notion of works being accessible to people of all ages and levels of artistic awareness, the idea that works literally come down off the walls to greet viewers in interactive and even playful and irreverent ways, which supporters of the *Le Mouvement* celebrated. As the art critic Louis-Paul Favre explained in the journal *Combat* in 1955:

²¹⁴ *Le Mouvement* symbolized the myth of progress, of the future, the idea that “tomorrow will be great.” This idea, of course, is challenged, and more so ridiculed, by the *Situationist Internationale* and their critique of society and consumer culture. But the belief that the future will be bright is also the promise of Charles de Gaulle when he comes to power in 1958. This will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

²¹⁵ Before opening her own gallery, Denise René, born Denise Bleibtreu, worked as director of a fashion atelier, having been influenced by her father who was head of a silk factory in Lyon. In the spring of 1939, Denise Bleibtreu and her sister Renée-Lucienne opened up their 3-room atelier (with 10 employees) which they named *Société Denise René*. Situated at 124, rue Boétie, later to become the Galerie Denise René, the *atelier de mode* was located in one of the major centers for Parisian luxury goods, near the Champs-Elysées. The transformation from *atelier de mode* to gallery is highlighted in the exhibition catalogue, *Denise René, l'intrépide*, 13-19.
Cette exposition est non seulement la justification d’un destin artistique mais encore elle est preuve de courage. A pouvoir contempler des magiciens et manoeuvres du Surnaturel nous pouvons en ressortir joyeux, si tels des êtres jeunes nous avons su faire abstraction de toute formalisme et redevenant entusiasmes comme l’enfant, nous savons jouer des couleurs et des éléments et construire selon notre fantaisie. Combien sont loin les tests de nos psychologues. Ici il faut aller plus avant que nos quiètes habitudes; c’est le dépassement de nos gestes habituels vers la magie du Mouvement.216 [italics mine]

And that is exactly what Le Mouvement did: it asked viewers to take a step forward and grab the works on view, engaging with the possibilities set up by the artists. Instead of more traditional forms of viewership, bound up with formalist and modernist models in which the spectator observes the work optically from afar, the work of Soto and his peers asked for direct physical involvement. No longer something to be contemplated on a gallery wall, this work beckoned the viewer physically to engage and interact. Thus, instead of warning the public to stand back, signs strategically placed around the exhibition urged spectators to touch the surfaces of the objects, to push buttons and peruse the various contraptions protruding from what were seen as these weirdly crafted canvases and strange interactive forms of art production. Israeli artist Yaacov Agam’s Relief+Forme+Mobilité (fig. 23) stands as an example. The work consists of a plane with a punctured surface and a number of tack-like objects that fit into the holes. The tack-heads are composed of geometric shapes, such as circles, rhombuses, triangles and squares, which viewers can arrange for themselves in numerous ways given that the hole

216 Louis-Paul Favre, “Le Mouvement,” Combat (mai 1955), 6. “This exhibit is not only the justification of an artistic destiny, it is also a proof of courage. We can rejoice in contemplating magicians and manipulators of the Supernatural if we are able, like youngsters, to set aside all formalism and with a child’s enthusiasm play with colors and elements, touching and setting the machines in motion, and building as suits your fancy. How far removed from the tests of our psychologists? Here we must discard our habits of quiescence, go beyond our habitual gestures and accede to the magic of movement.” Translation mine. There is an important distinction between the works of the optico-kinetic artists and that of art brut artist Jean Dubuffet. Even though both prioritized “child-like” qualities, Dubuffet’s work emphasized the importance of a pre-literate and “primitive” society.
to tack ratio is twenty to one. The possible arrangements are infinite, and as Agam stated in the catalogue of a retrospective for *Le Mouvement* in 1975:

The visual potentialities – the different aspects of the work – must be innumerable, at the level of the viewer, who will see each time a new work...These new values that I have introduced into my work have created a new revolutionary, liberating and creative visual language which has swept away the anachronism of a single plastic composition per work.  

This transformable work, with parts that could be moved and changed place and position on a panel, offered the viewer the possibility of creating a countless number of new abstract compositions.

Similar to Agam, Belgian artist Pol Bury exhibited transformable works whose elements could be moved around and rearranged on a peg-board. While Vasarely’s concerns remained for the most part in the realm of optical illusions, he became interested, as Soto and Agam were, in the transformative aspects of a work due to the spectator’s movement in front of it. As well, there was the movement of the object itself brought about through natural forms of energy such as wind, as witnessed in the works of Calder, or mechanical ones, exemplified by Tinguely’s artistic production. One of Tinguely’s works from *Le Mouvement*, a 1954 work entitled *Sculpture métamécanique* (fig. 24), is an example of a series of abstract spatial constructions equipped with moving mechanisms that could be put in motion by the spectator. Characterized by movement as the central element, this series of sculptures employed geometric shapes that rotated continuously but at varying speeds with the help of a spindle and pulley system. At times the titles paraphrased the

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218 *Art since 1900: modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, volume 2 (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc.), 382.
idioms of other artists, in this case, the *méta-méchanique* work has been subtitled *Méta-Herbin*, once again reinforcing the link between this new generation of artists taking up a geometric vocabulary and infusing it with movable parts, and an older, outmoded style of geometric art. And within this parody of the past, one also finds a sense of irony and derision, qualities that would become a hallmark of Tinguely’s œuvre, setting it apart from the optimistic collaboration of the works of Martha Boto, Jesús Rafael Soto, Carlos Cruz-Diez, and GRAV with technology. Shaking up a public too used to the viewer’s detached or disconnected stance, the works in this exhibition defied immediate explanation and activated an otherwise passive exchange between spectator and art object. A “sign of the times”, this exhibition pointed towards a new era, a new way of behaving that broke from the grim and somber past, and moved away from the centuries old notion of contemplation.219

But not everyone was so excited. While the public formed lines to visit *Le Mouvement*, art critics, eager to define and control the reception of this new production, battled it out.220 While some reviews took the form of optimistic accolades, others were not so generous, equating the work on view with mere children’s toys. The critic of *L’Observateur*, for example, wrote in a patronizing tone that they were “ingenious but amusing *little* works.” [Italics mine]221

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219 That *Le Mouvement* heralded the beginning of a lifestyle change will be discussed further in the next chapter. Coinciding with the advent of consumerism and technological progress, French society was being transformed in myriad ways.


ii. Postwar alternatives

*Le Mouvement* and the new form of geometric abstraction it featured was an important development for Denise René, especially as the promotion of geometric abstraction in the decade after World War II had faced important challenges. After August 1945, the predominant question facing both French politics and culture was how to craft a new identity for France after the anguish of a nation so fundamentally altered by war, collaboration, occupation, and the trauma of the Holocaust and atomic weapons. For not only had France lived through the years of the German occupation, but it was now faced with a divided France, the most obvious division being that between the Resistance fighters and those who had collaborated with the German enemy. As the historian Maurice Larkin highlights, one of the major issues at stake right after the Liberation was the promise of retribution to those who had actively collaborated with the pro-Nazi Vichy regime. Larkin argues that the “purges” of collaborators were a “quasi-sacramental necessity”, and going even further he quotes Edouard Herriot, President of the Chamber of Deputies, “who was normally wary of firebrands” as speaking “in the old Jacobin tradition of the Radicals” when he proclaimed: “C’est par un bain de sang que la France devra passer d’abord.”

At the same time, however, it was necessary during this volatile period to offer an image of a unified, if severely weakened, France to the rest of the world as a sign of both

petites oeuvres ingénieuses et amusantes, que je qualifierai plutôt de jouets que des oeuvres d’art.” The quote continues: “Ils se réclament, semble-t-il, de Calder [...]. Ces jouets, qui apparaissent beaucoup plus jolis dès qu’ils sont reconnus comme tels, me paraissent une transposition de ceux qui consistent en un échafaudage de barres où tourniquent les acrobates: le jouet, autrefois figuratif, est devenu abstrait. Il me paraît que la vraie question se pose ainsi: qu’en pensent les enfants?”


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economic and social recovery. One of the areas in which this was made most manifest was in the sphere of the arts.\textsuperscript{223} The problem was, however, how to come up with an art of reconstruction, one that would simultaneously unite France and provide a codified aesthetic mode that spoke directly to reworked notions of French identity.\textsuperscript{224} As Pierre Daix has pointed out, in the immediate postwar years there were two tendencies vying for prominence: Jean Fautrier and other abstract painters, some of whom were communists, and who believed theirs to be an art that was politically engagé, and the other more general group of l'École de Paris (the School of Paris), which included artists as varied as Picasso, Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger.\textsuperscript{225} For some, modern art became synonymous with the art of the Resistance, a connection strengthened by the fact that Picasso and other leading artists joined the Communist Party, turning the Parti...
Communiste Français (PCF) into a party of “avant-garde intellectuals” which endorsed what was considered avant-garde art.

Indeed, the Parti Communiste Français also championed a burgeoning social realist tendency. In attempting to create a lineage for French art, one with roots in the Middle Ages when art was made “for the people,” socialist realism was envisioned by many as an art that could bring the working class to power.226 In fact, the notion of a “socialist” art, an art that addressed the needs and concerns of the populace at large, was already at the heart of the French Communist Party’s endorsement of André Fougeron as “official artist” (peintre officiel). Having published in December of 1948, in the Marxist journal Nouvelle Critique227 a text attacking the deceptive quality inherent in abstract art, Fougeron argued “those who live are those who struggle” and “art is always on the side of life.”228 Fougeron’s 1948 painting Parisians in a Marketplace (fig. 25), addressing what he claimed to be the needs of the people, takes up these issues and stands as a useful touchpoint here. The image depicts several women at a fish stand in a public market. His use of contrasting colors, bright red, pink, yellow and green, is almost fauve-like in nature. This apparent gaiety stands out against the somber atmosphere of the scene where a group of women stare longingly at the fish on display. As one critic put it, the message

226 Ibid., 212. Bernard Ceysson makes the comparison between this new socialist art with that of French history painting at the beginning of the 19th century, including works by artists Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, and Gustave Courbet. It can also be compared to the Mexican Muralist movement, which in using a socialist realist language attempted to bring together a somewhat fractured society after the Mexican Agrarian Revolution (1910-1920).
228 Ibid.
was clear: "Life is expensive, too expensive for the working class..." Fougeron takes up in this painting a particular Parti Communiste Francais notion of economic hardship as a force to unite and mobilize the working class. It is no wonder, then, that the Communist Party considered Fougeron as emblematic of their own aims and aspirations. Jean Texcier, French art critic for Populaire Dimanche, wrote in 1949: "Our communists, who proclaim themselves the successors of the '89 Revolution [1789 French Revolution] and consider themselves true Jacobins, believe to have found their David in Fougeron..." The French Communist Party was fractured, with certain factions still of support of Soviet communism and others denouncing the atrocious treatment in their labor camps, held different positions. If Les Lettres Francaises was actively promoting Socialist Realism, others within the French Communist Party endorsed the work of the "late moderns," such as Picasso, Leger and Matisse, making it difficult to endorse a single style or movement as emblematic of the period.

Yet many critics were suspicious of socialist realism and its ties to a specifically Stalinist brand of communism, particularly after 1956 when Stalin's purges and corruption became internationally known. These critics looked to a very different type of art production to represent postwar Paris. For some, the answer came in the guise of lyrical  

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229 Ibid., Claude Roger-Marx writing in the Figaro litteraire.
230 Jean Texcier, "Le Parti Communiste et son peintre officiel", Populaire Dimanche (30 October 1949). Quoted in Paris Paris, 1937-1957, exh. cat. (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou/Editions Gallimard, 1992), 312. The quote in full reads: "J'ai l'impression que nos communsits, qui se proclament les continuateurs de la Revolution de '89 et se prennent si facilement pour des Jacobins, croient tenir en Fougeron leur David. Je me demande meme si le peintre officiel du Parti, serviteur de la peinture "engallee" ne se considere pas lui meme comme le successeur de celui qui...mit son pinceau au service de la gloire en attendant de celebrier avec le meme bonheur les fastes de l'Empire." In 1948 there was Jacques-Louis David's bicentennial retrospective in Paris, while two years later in 1950 Party celebrations of the 125th anniversary of his death were held.
231 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's disclosure about Stalin's practices and crimes were revealed 3 years after Stalin's death in a secret (but leaked) report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956.
abstraction or l'art informel,\textsuperscript{232} and works by artists such as Wols, Jean Fautrier, Hans Hartung, and Jean Dubuffet. The term l'art informel was first used by the French art critic Michel Tapié in his 1952 book \textit{Un Art Autre} to describe types of art which were seemingly based on improvisation and were often highly gestural and spontaneous.\textsuperscript{233} Addressing the lived tragedy and adversity that had characterized much of French experience in the previous years, the works of the l'art informel movement spoke to the contemporary needs of the French public, to come to terms with pervasive feelings of disbelief, disillusionment, and anxiety. The work of artists like Wols, Fautrier, and others emphasized the materiality of paint, expressive brushwork, and, oftentimes, a dark and somber palette was considered violent, brooding, and depressed. Though embodying a broad range of approaches to abstraction through its emphasis on gesture and spontaneity, and most importantly individual expression, the work of artists associated with l'art informel was somewhat akin to the work of their American counterparts, the abstract expressionists. Yet, despite such technical similarities l'art informel was consistently imbued with a specifically dark, raw, emotional edge. Focusing on immediacy of emotion, gestural abstraction represented an art that prioritized individualism, far removed from the collective emphasis geometric art called up.

Jean Fautrier's \textit{Otages} series, exhibited at the Galerie René Drouin in 1945, was the first manifestation of l'art informel, making him one of its main forerunners (fig. 26).\textsuperscript{234}

\textsuperscript{232} I will be using the terms l'art informel and lyrical abstraction (abstraction lyrique) interchangeably. Both refer more generally to the type of abstract painting prevalent during the 1940s and 1950s mainly in Europe.

\textsuperscript{233} Michel Tapié, \textit{Un art autre où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel} (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et fils, 1952).

\textsuperscript{234} Les Années 50, 211. Pierre Daix references the first of many exhibitions to take place illustrating this new abstraction, eventually coined abstraction lyrique by Pierre Restany.
Inseparable from the horrors that took place during the Occupation, the *Otages* series, paintings of half obliterated corpses, human faces, flesh and bones, is today emblematic of a resistance movement that attempted to make sense of the atrocities of war through an art production that, however grim, memorialized the fallen.²³⁵ It was precisely the innovative use of a thick impasto coupled with soft pastels to create images of violence that drew the public and many critics to the series.²³⁶ Marcel Arland, writing in *Vingtième Siècle* about the *Otages*, stated: “...[F]ew colors, and such austerity moved me. But I was most affected by the deafening violence, the rigorous and tragic lyricism that most of his works are a witness to.”²³⁷ It is this moody evocation of violence and tragedy that critics picked up on, not surprisingly given the state of affairs in France in the mid-1940s when the destruction and damage caused by the war was still pervasive and palpable. And while the loss of life in the course of the war may have been half that after WWI, that is just below one and a half million, one needs to consider other types of irreparable damage: the break-up of families and marriages, the problem of unemployment, the humiliation of Nazi occupation, the “dislocated economy.”²³⁸ Though liberated, Paris, as

²³⁵ Official figures put the number of casualties suffered in France alone, including military, civilian, and Holocaust deaths, anywhere between 600,000 and 810,000.
²³⁶ I refer here to Fautrier’s “harmonious” use of colors in portraying the most gruesome violence during the war. The use of soft and subtle colors is all the more jarring given the subject matter portrayed. As the French writer and poet Francis Ponge wrote describing the *Otages* series: “[Q]ue les visages des *Otages* soient si beaux, peints de couleurs si charmantes, si harmonieuses, si pareilles à la caravane rose, bleu, jaune, orange ou viride des fleurs, n’y nous-nous pas voir une sorte d’herofisme...et de divine, d’obstinée résistance, opposition à l’horreur par l’affirmation de la beauté.” Quoted in *Paris-Paris*, 181.
²³⁸ Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: Government and People, 1936-1996* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 117. “The tasks confronting government...were dominated by the need to re-create an economic base for the country’s material recovery...added to the bereavement of families and the long-term loss of these people to the labor force, there were the problems of repatriated labor-service conscripts and prisoners of war returning to France. Although 71,000 individuals had already escaped from captivity, the rest, emerging *en masse*, presented problems of employment in a dislocated economy. Moreover, it was claimed that 60 percent of married men returning from STO found their marriages had broken up, and a large majority of engagements had likewise fallen through... Less than half the rail network was
well as most of France, would not be allowed to forget the aftermath of the war, horrors that would be lodged in the collective memory of the nation. It was this context, full of private, as well as public humiliation and hardship that Fautrier’s work appeared to address. Driven by a desire for technical control over the medium, Fautrier was concerned with how color and texture could be used to evoke a significant and emotionally charged subject. Limiting himself to dark colors, and adding to them green, blue, grey and yellow, his works of the forties and fifties seemed to speak to the turmoil of the moment. Fautrier and other artists working in this vein were interested in an expressive and contemplative artistic exploration. Fautrier’s paintings, in this respect similar to Vasarely’s, ride the line between abstraction and figuration, presenting what seems simultaneously to be a mud-caked canvas and representations of decaying or burnt human flesh. Filling a need at this time to come to terms with the difficulties of the reconstruction period, this work quickly came to prominence.239

iii. Geometric abstraction: the fraught history

The new kind of geometric abstraction offered by Le Mouvement artists was not the only form evident in 1950s Paris, and was part of a larger debate about the future of French abstract art in the post-WWII period. In fact, in the years just after the war various attempts were made at reviving and continuing the geometric tradition that had been advocated by movements such as Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création much earlier

in the thirties. Indeed, the late 40s and early 50s witnessed a “sort of institutionalization of abstract art.” Geometric abstract artists had found their first interactive space in the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, created in 1946 by Frido Sidés, and which initially welcomed various sorts of abstraction, with an emphasis on the geometric mode. Four years later, in October of 1950, the *Atelier d’art abstrait* was founded in Montparnasse, directed by Jean Dewasne and Edgar Pillet.

This renewal of sorts garnered a number of ardent supporters, critics who jumped on the bandwagon and promoted a geometric aesthetic as the new style that would take France by storm while furthering the almost utopian ideals of a new society. Books surfaced that traced the lineage of contemporary geometric art back to movements following WWI, most notably the Russian Constructivists and the Dutch group, De Stijl. Michel Seuphor, a Belgian artist and critic, who had been the founder of *Cercle et Carré*, published *L’art abstrait, ses origines, ses premiers maîtres* in 1949, where he traced the origins of abstraction to Wassily Kandinsky, Robert Delaunay and Piet Mondrian. The

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240 *Cercle et Carré* was a movement founded in Paris in late 1929 by Belgian artist Michel Seuphor and the Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres García. It had no official manifesto, but was Constructivist in theory, comprised of artists from a variety of movements (Constructivists, Futurists, Dadaists, among others) and committed to creating an aesthetic opposed to the Surrealists. The movement came to an end in 1930, but a year later *Abstraction-Création*, founded by Auguste Herbin and Vantongerloo, regrouped many of the same artists. Lasting until 1936, the group had aims similar to *Cercle et Carré*, most importantly promoting and exhibiting abstract art. Though membership was in principle open to all abstract artists, the predominant tendency was geometric, advocated by Theo van Doesburg and other De Stijl artists.


242 This surge of academies and salons is curious given the history of conflict with academic training, especially in France. The second half of the 19th century witnessed numerous struggles between the conservative forces of the Academy and the ideas of those who became known as ‘avant-garde.’ This rise in ‘academie’, then, seems anachronistic at a moment when France is looking to move forward and leave the past behind. Charles Estienne’s 1950 essay, *L’Art abstrait est-il un académisme?*, was seen as a violent response to the situation.

243 Here I am referencing the utopic aspirations of groups such as De Stijl which aspired to universal harmony and order through the arts.
publication was followed in the same year by an exhibition entitled *Premiers Maîtres de l'art abstrait* at the Galerie Maeght, which included works by Kandinsky, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Malevitch, Tatlin, Magnelli and Mondrian, to name a few. For Seuphor, it seemed natural that given the firmly established roots of contemporary geometric abstraction, that the movement would continue to thrive by adapting to changing surroundings and circumstances. He also argued that geometric abstraction had a universal significance that transcended national boundaries by prefacing the final chapter of his study, *Les premiers maîtres de l'art abstrait* with the following: “On vera que, dès les débuts, l'art abstrait manifeste une grande diversité de styles et que son éclosion n’appartient en propre à aucun pays. C’est un phénomène universel, typiquement de notre siècle, dont on commence seulement à mesurer l’importance.”

**iv. Denise René: securing an avant-garde position**

In the years immediately after World War II, Paris’ search for an art that would symbolize a new beginning, brought about the emergence of a number of galleries in the

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244 Michel Seuphor, *L’Art Abstrait, ses origines, ses premiers maîtres* (Paris: Maeght, 1949), 183. “One will see that, since the beginning, abstract art manifests itself in a variety of different forms and does not have a country of origin. It is a universal phenomenon, typical of our century, and it is only now that we begin to understand its importance.” Translation mine. Geometric abstraction in France, however, was not uncontested. In 1950, the critic Charles Estienne published his seminal essay, *L’Art abstrait est-il un Académisme?* In it he lambasted geometric art as the new academic style, beginning “L’art abstrait est en danger” (“Abstract art is in danger”). He continued: “Les éléments de base du nouveau code plastique, les voici: C’est la forme géométrique et la couleur dite pure – pure, c’est-à dire pure de vitamines, impersonnelle au maximum, le plus dégagé possible des vibrations parasites de la modulation et de la matière. Bref, une esthétique picturale du plan coupé et de l’aplat...Et le tout ne fait pas un style ni même une mode, mais quelque chose de plus grave: une nouvelle routine, une nouvelle usure de l’œil et de l’esprit, bref un nouvel object, le nouvel object extérieur... Le nouvel Objet, c’est lui: l’ennuyeux, le mortel décor abstrait qu’on veut codifier et imposer en guise d’art.” Attacking the geometric tradition as a purely decorative one trying to pass as art. Estienne assesses geometric art as lacking individuality, a condition he claimed what made it not a new style or fashion, but “something far worse: a new routine.” As one of the foremost art critics of contemporary French art, and one who up until then had been a fervent supporter of abstraction, Estienne’s pamphlet dealt a hard blow to geometric abstraction, signaling a call for a new type of art more in touch with contemporary needs. Charles Estienne, *L’Art Abstrait est-il un Académisme?* (Paris: Éditions de Beaune, 1950), 10-12.
heart of the French capital. Each one strove to outdo the next one in the hopes of championing the avant-garde trend that would successfully mend the fractured art establishment and secure Paris’s place once again on the international art scene. In this newly liberated Paris, many salons and galleries picked up where they had left off before the war by continuing to promote modern art. For example, in 1945, the Galerie Carré exhibited works by Léger and Picasso, Maeght opened with Matisse, Drouin chose Wols and Fautrier, and Jeanne Bucher opted for Nicolas de Staël, while more recent establishments searched for a particular niche in a highly competitive market: the Galerie Lydia Conti on rue d’Argenson concentrated on lyrical abstraction, Galerie Colette Allendy on rue de l’Assomption focused on surrealism, and Salon des Réalités Nouvelles on rue des Pyramides was a stronghold of geometric abstraction (though this emphasis shifted in the mid-1950s to lyrical abstraction). It was amidst these competing tensions, that Denise René opened her first art gallery in 1944 dedicated to the promotion and defense of geometric abstraction, an interest sparked early on through her encounter with the works of De Stijl and the Russian Constructivists.

Soon after the Liberation of Paris René came into contact with Mondrian’s work and found in his “purity of form and rationality” an alternative to the prevalent styles of surrealism and the Ecole de Paris. As she argued retrospectively in her 1991 interview with the art critic Catherine Millet, René was not interested in galleries that promoted shows and artists from various movements and aesthetic preoccupations. Referring specifically to the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, which initially opened its doors in 1946 to all art that was non-figurative, she argued that “despite their emphasis on abstraction,
all camouflaged figurative art was accepted in order to bring in the crowds.”  

That is, by trying to please too many people at one and the same time, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles had compromised its aesthetic integrity, something René worked hard in her own gallery space to maintain.

Between 1946 and 1948, after her opening exhibition in 1944 featuring Vasarely’s work, René exhibited the works of Jean-Michel Atlan, Francis Picabia, Auguste Herbin, Toyen, César Domela and Serge Poliakoff. Precisely at this moment, while her gallery swayed between supporting either a surrealist revival or abstraction, René turned increasingly towards the latter soon after the reappearance of geometric abstract art at the exhibition Art Concret in 1945 at the Galerie Drouin. Organized by Nelly van Doesburg, this exhibition brought together for the first time in postwar Paris the major representatives of geometric art at that time. The title referred to the term coined by Theo van Doesburg fifteen years before in his Manifesto of Concrete Art. This renewed interest in geometric abstraction developed further when Fredo Sidès founded the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in 1946, and when in 1949 Michel Seuphor published L’Art abstrait, ses origines, ses premiers maîtres. Schooling herself in constructivism and the foundations

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246 In 1956, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles changes their name to Réalités Nouvelles-Nouvelles Réalités in an attempt to reinvigorate a passé salon system that was losing steam and support in great part due to the number of private galleries that were created during this time.

247 Theo van Doesburg introduced the term concrete art and defined it as different from abstract art in that concrete art is entirely autonomous and does not grow out (or is not abstracted out) of a physical reality. This idea gets further developed by Max Bill in 1936 and again by Wassily Kandinsky in 1938 in the revue XXe Siècle.

248 Max Bill, a Swiss architect, artist and designer had continued to develop van Doesburg’s original premise for concrete art and became the leader of a group of artists based in Zurich. Their influence was felt across much of postwar Europe, and resonated particularly in Paris where in 1946 Fredo Sidès founded the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, which for a few years remained the hub of geometric abstraction.

of abstract art in general, René looked increasingly to geometric abstract artists who
liberated themselves from the tutelage of the School of Paris, that ‘certain French
tradition’ established by the likes of Matisse, Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, and
Picasso.\textsuperscript{250} René was not interested in the “jeunes peintres de tradition française” such as
Bazaine, Lapicque, Estève, Manessier, Le Moal, and others, who transposed reality,
reconfigured landscapes and objects. Instead, she looked to artists who explored the
clarity of geometric abstraction as “a total creation, born from the mind of the artist” and
in no way dependent on the natural world. \textsuperscript{251}

Vasarely, with whom René had a close relationship, was a key figure in promoting the
new form of geometric abstraction with its international associations. A fervent supporter
of modern technology and the possibilities it offered to disseminate art traditionally
confined to the elite, Vasarely hoped that eventually works of art could be multiplied “in
order to put them within the reach of everyone.”\textsuperscript{252} Having studied at the Mühely (the
Workshop), a school of fine and applied arts in Budapest whose approach was similar to
that of the German Bauhaus, Vasarely was well-aware of the possible relationships
between design and technology and its potential for social advancement. For Vasarely, art
had to move beyond self-referentiality and weave itself into the very fabric of society,

\textsuperscript{250} Millet, 28. “...de se libérer de la tutelle des tout-puissants de l'époque: ceux de l’Ecole de Paris.”
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., Shortly after this in 1956, during a Jacobsen exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam,
René asked the director Willy Sandberg when he would exhibit Mondrian in France. Little did she know
that he had already proposed the exhibition to three different venues, all of which had refused him, on the
grounds that it was not an art for the French. Asking René if she would be interested, they made an
arrangement for a Mondrian exhibition to stop at her gallery in 1957 before continuing on to Italy for the
Venice Biennale.
\textsuperscript{252} Diehl, 41.
pushing for change and ultimately achieving utopian societal ideals. Hoping to combine "traditional" culture and technology in order to create functional and artistic products for the masses, the Mühely instilled in Vasarely an awareness of the artist's social responsibility to the community.

Due to his graphic design background, upon his arrival in Paris Vasarely was initially drawn to manipulating visual images, such as advertisements, in order to both "transform aspects of everyday life into clear visual signs", and simultaneously challenge the role of the artist as one whose production is not confined to the four walls of a gallery or museum. He spent the years between 1932 and 1942 on graphic research, specifically creating works based on their optical effects on viewers and mostly in black and white. For example, in his 1937 work *Zebras* (fig. 27), Vasarely focuses on the emergence of shapes merely through the use of lines. Taking a form found in nature, Vasarely

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253 Robert C. Morgan, *Vasarely* (Florida and New York: Naples Museum of Art and George Braziller, 2004), 21. The Mühely was founded by Sándor Bortnyik, a Hungarian Constructivist artist, who had lived in Weimar for two years before returning to Budapest in 1925. As Morgan points out, though Bortnyik had never enrolled at the Bauhaus, he engaged in discussions with numerous students and teachers at the Bauhaus, and was greatly influenced by the goals and ambitions of the school, as well as by the works of de Stijl, Piet Mondrian, and Theo van Doesburg. "He [Bortnyik] wanted to translate these ideals in a way that would be relevant to students in Hungary, inspiring them to think about art as a means for social change and to regard the artist as an advocate for the transformation of values. Bortnyik believed that art needed to move from archaic conventions to a more optimistic perspective on contemporary reality through a commitment to social change."

254 In this case, Vasarely hoped to remain true to the Bauhaus ideal, even though it is known that in reality the Bauhaus was ultimately a conservative enterprise tied to the elites.

255 There are a number of similarities between the Bauhaus and optico-kinetic artists. Both movements/schools were created soon after a major world war, with idealistic aspirations rooted in neoplastic and constructive art movements from the beginning of the twentieth century. Both wished to bridge the gap between high art and the masses by creating an art form that was of the moment, referencing the present. Similar to the optico-kinetic artists' focus on speed, movement and contemporary materials, Walter Gropius's words from a few decades before seem to resonate: "[W]e want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios, and fast motor cars, an architecture whose function is clearly recognizable in the relation of its form...[W]ith the increasing strength of the new materials – steel, concrete, glass – and with the new audacity of engineering, the ponderousness of the old methods of building is giving way to a new lightness and airiness." Quoted in H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004), 330.

256 Morgan, 22.
transposed the image into abstract elements in such a way that background and foreground appear interchangeable, and as one line of vision shifts, so do the corresponding shapes. This work, done entirely in black and white, beckons the viewer to connect with the image that is both easy to decipher and difficult to apprehend. Instead of promoting a passive engagement with the image, Vasarely set up a particular experience for the spectator forced to entertain the various figurative possibilities of a composition which refuses to remain fixed. In this way, Vasarely’s oeuvre fits into a larger discourse of the period which opposed art with a fixed meaning (as sectors of the *Parti Communiste Français* were endorsing) which was often connected with propaganda and communistic ideals.

It was from this interest in questioning traditional types of art production and the viewer’s relationship with it, coupled with his need to ‘spread art to the masses’, that led Vasarely to create his large-scale abstract works, which would eventually become known as optical art. As a specific aesthetic category, optical (or op) art is a type of visual production that manipulates the fallibility of the viewer’s eye through the use of optical illusions simulating movement, vibration or even the physical warping of the canvas. The idea of breaking down disciplinary boundaries in the arts specifically in the name of progress was not new to Vasarely, nor to the optico-kinetic artists who will explore this idea further in the decade to come. Earlier in the twentieth century, Piet Mondrian and the de Stijl group promoted painting as a site for testing principles that could be applied to all realms of art production including architecture and design, such as the notion that design should serve as a manifestation of an ethical view of society. For Mondrian, painting, and
in particular neo-plastic painting, could define the universal principles of harmony that would help guide human consciousness.\textsuperscript{257} This utopian aspiration, developed in neutral Holland while neighboring countries fought in WWI, hoped to unite the arts to create an ideal society. Vasarely pushed for a similar understanding of art in which the confines of traditional painting could be broken through the development of his larger than life-size canvases and multi-layered surfaces. Moreover, by creating work that exists somewhere between painting and sculpture, Vasarely, and eventually the South American optical and kinetic artists, sought to maximize art’s potential both visually and socially.\textsuperscript{258}

As for Mondrian, the grid for Vasarely was a defining element, a way to simultaneously hold together and distort a figure. In \textit{Sorata-T} of 1953 (fig. 28), a painted glass triptych composed of engraved tiles exhibited in \textit{Le Mouvement}, Vasarely played with the viewer’s perception of depth and space. A large work, measuring 6.5x15 feet, one could approach it either head-on or meander around it, since the individual panels were not joined together as in traditional painting practices, but positioned in a zig-zag or ‘z’ stance. Because of this strategic positioning, when looking at the piece from the front, it appears to move up and away from the spectator, as if it were on an upward incline, or receding into space rather than placed level on the ground. This simple perspectival exercise is further troubled by the painted Plexiglas which distorts our view by superimposing a series of black lines that morph into semicircles, triangles and rectangular shapes. Because of the transparency of the material, the second and third

\textsuperscript{257} For an in-depth examination of De Stijl and a contextual assessment of the contemporary debates surrounding abstraction in art and architecture, see Michael White, \textit{De Stijl and Dutch Modernism} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

panel are visible through the first producing a sort of “optical vibration”. This rhythmic construction distorts the viewer’s line of vision, making it unclear where each discrete plane resides and how they intersect. This fascination with creating a space that is based on visual phenomena rather than just physical space is at the heart of Vasarely’s work. As he explained to Jean-Louis Ferrier:

In tracing a very simple network on a sheet of plexiglass, and in coupling it with another network traced on another sheet, I quite quickly realized that I was building a space which no longer owed anything to Euclidian perspective, or to axonometric perspective, or to any other kind of perspective... Here, I was combining two spaces, and the transparency permitted me to inscribe the plane in real space and to translate real space into a plane. The very conditions of illusionism had been radically changed.

Vasarely’s aim, then, was to move beyond the Renaissance/Albertian notion of painting, a pictorial fantasy based in one-point perspective and calling up another place and time, to produce a different kind of illusion grounded in both the viewer’s perception and in an actual three-dimensional space. At the same time, Vasarely continued a belief in the spatial and utopian possibilities of geometric abstraction in the belief that art could act as a unifying and progressive force in the name of societ al development.

By the early-1950s, through a series of exhibitions and commissioned works Vasarely’s reputation was secured not only in Paris, but internationally as well. Having already established his own advertising agency in Paris in 1943, the year before he had his first

259 The Movement/Le Mouvement, 9.
260 Diehl, 55.
261 By integrating art into the landscape of the city, and making it accessible to the community at large, not just those inclined to enter a gallery or museum, Vasarely in effect was trying to continue a tradition already established in the early twentieth century by Mondrian, de Stijl, and even the Russian Constructivists and which had real social implications and political goals. I am not claiming here that the Dutch artists, the Russian Constructivists and Vasarely had the same goals. Both the Russian and Dutch groups were reacting to specific political (and world-changing) circumstances, even though all believed in the potential of art as a vehicle for social progress.
one-man exhibition at the Galerie Denise René, Vasarely was solicited in 1947 by the magazine *Art Présent* to write an article entitled “Optique, graphisme et publicité”, in which he outlined his studies of composition and lettering, of two and three-dimensions, and of technique and movement (which was to further develop in the years to come). This series of events were followed by others, including an exhibition in Stockholm organized by Denise René – *Klarform*\(^{262}\) – and the publication of Dewasne’s monograph on Vasarely in 1952.\(^{263}\) This was certainly a welcome publication, coming from an artist active in the French Communist Party, but one who had shunned the social realist aesthetics espoused by the Party in favor of abstraction.\(^{264}\) These exhibitions placed Vasarely at the forefront of the art scene, and along with the publicity came many admirers and supporters, including the Venezuelan cultural attaché in Paris, who in 1953 put him in contact with Carlos Raul Villanueva, the architect who had been commissioned to design the Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas.\(^{265}\) As noted in Chapter One, once Villanueva began construction of the University Housing Center, he called upon Vasarely, among other prominent European artists, to participate in the final design and

\(^{262}\) The importance of *Klarform* to René’s international reputation is elaborated at an earlier point in this chapter.


\(^{264}\) *L’Art en Europe: les années décisives, 1945-1953* (Geneva: Editions d’Art Albert Skira S.A, 1987), 83. In refusing the dogma of socialist realism and opting for an abstract vocabulary, as manifested by Dewasne’s 1951 painting *The Apotheosis of Marat*, which he painted as an homage to Jacques-Louis David, Dewasne maintained that there were other aesthetic possibilities available for politically engaged artists.

\(^{265}\) This University City, built under the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958), is deemed one of the most important architectural sites of twentieth century Venezuela. See Marguerite Mayhall’s “Modernist but not Exceptional: the Debate over Modern Art and National Identity in 1950s Venezuela.” In *Latin American Perspectives* 30, vol. 20, no. 10 (2005), n.p. Mayhall brings up the complicated collaboration between the artists who took part in University City and Pérez Jiménez, a union that has traditionally faulted Soto, Cruz-Diez and Otero as being “sell-outs.” As Mayhall points out, for Soto and others, abstraction signified a “synthesis of the Arts in which artists worked collectively to create works of art that functioned as social change...In the charged political climate of the dictatorship, the regime’s support of the project tainted the Venezuelans working on the university as sympathizers of the dictatorship. It is because of this misunderstanding, not because Pérez Jiménez preferred it, that geometric abstraction became known as the officially sanctioned artistic style of the government.”

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decorative program. Vasarely’s contributions secured his reputation in Latin America, his work was heralded by *Art d’Aujourd’hui* as daring and innovative.\(^{266}\)

Vasarely completed three major works for Villanueva’s Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas, all centrally placed in the university campus and visible to the public.\(^{267}\) These abstract geometric works which formed an integral part of the architecture quickly drew the attention of a number of Venezuelan artists and it was soon after Vasarely’s pieces were completed and installed in 1954 that Alejandro Otero began experimenting in 1957 with his “color-rhythm” series, that Jesús Rafael Soto, already in Paris since 1950, began his exploration of virtual space, and that Carlos Cruz-Diez began his investigation of the properties of color in 1957 with his Physicromies, to be discussed later in this thesis.\(^{268}\)

While I am not claiming that Otero’s, Cruz-Diez’s and Soto’s artistic explorations took these directions specifically because of Vasarely’s works on display in Caracas, they nonetheless served to continue and possibly even help revive a tradition of geometric abstraction that had a long legacy in South America since the 1930s.\(^{269}\) Vasarely’s

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\(^{266}\) See *Art d’Aujourd’hui*, no. 1 série 5 (février 1954).

\(^{267}\) The works include *Homage to Malevich*, *Sophia*, and *Positive-Negative*. The first, *Homage to Malevich*, strategically placed in the middle of a large, partially roofed square near the chancellor’s office, serves as a divide as well as a guide along a walkway that leads to the main hall of the Central University. Measuring 1,076 square feet and covered in black and yellow ceramic squares, the severity of its geometric motif counters the lushness of the tropical vegetation that is a part of the overall site. Malevich was a key figure for Vasarely since he was a pioneer of abstract art, most associated with the suprematist style, a severe geometric abstract form closely tied to constructivism. *Sophia*, situated across the university concert hall, consists of three panels that total 646 square feet, and crowns the top of a low building supported by short pillars, as a sort of quasi-classical frieze. In his third commission, *Positive-Negative*, Vasarely created a large-scale kinetic metal-relief that was placed in the small yard of the housing center. Here, while the viewer perambulates around the work, the vertical strips of aluminum reflect the ambient light which is contingent on the position of the sun, the sky, the movement of the clouds, and most of all, the changing perspective of the viewer.

\(^{268}\) Diehl, 36.

\(^{269}\) Joaquin Torres-Garcia is credited with introducing geometric abstraction to South America in the thirties when he returned to Uruguay from Europe where he had spent over four decades. It was in Uruguay that he founded the School of the South.
exhibitions throughout Europe not only pushed for a socialist\textsuperscript{270} type of art that engages the public at large, as well as all the senses, but the exhibition also endorsed an art diametrically opposed to the existential production dominating Paris during this time. This offered the Latin American artists a foot into the dominant artistic sphere by employing a visual vocabulary they were already familiar with in their respective countries of origin.\textsuperscript{271}

\textit{v. Kineticism and opticality: the new task for art}

Although Denise René had fostered connections with an international set of artists through the late 1940s, and especially in 1951 with the important traveling exhibition \textit{Klarform},\textsuperscript{272} 1955 marked a watershed moment in geometric abstraction’s comeback. The

\textsuperscript{270}This is a charged term in postwar France, given the volatile history of the \textit{Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière} (SFIO), and its failure to maintain a unified foundation. Though just after WWII, the SFIO joined the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Christian Democratic Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP), this alliance did not last long. Guy Mollet’s (then leader of the SFIO) policy toward the Algerian War as well as his support of Charles de Gaulle’s return in 1958 caused a split in the group.

\textsuperscript{271}The interest in Latin American art on the part of Europeans, and vice versa, is not something new. In the beginning of the twentieth century there were numerous Latin American artists and intellectuals that traveled to and spent time in Europe (the Brazilians Anita Malfatti and Tarsila do Amaral, the Mexican Diego Rivera, the Cuban Wilfredo Lam and the Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres-Garcia, to name only a few). Both the surrealist André Breton and the Belgian art critic Léon Degand traveled to Mexico and Brazil respectively. It is in particular through Degand that geometric abstraction got an important foothold in Brazil just after the war. See Serge Guilbaut, “Dripping on the Modernist Parade: the Failed Invasion of Abstract Art in Brazil, 1947-1948,” in \textit{Patrocino, colección y circulación de las artes. XX Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte}, ed. G. Curiel (Mexico: UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1997), 807-816. This trans-Atlantic exchange was already established by the time the optico-kinetic artists developed their work in Paris.

\textsuperscript{272}In December 1951 the exhibition \textit{Klarform} (Pure Form) traveled throughout Scandinavia beginning in Denmark and included the works of Arp, Bloc, Calder, Le Corbusier, Dewasne, Herbin, Magnelli, Mortensen, and Vasarely. The decision to mount this large show in Denmark had been influenced by the arrival of two Danish artists at Galerie Denise René, Robert Jacobsen and Richard Mortensen. With their help, Denise René had been able to organize her first show on foreign soil in April 1948 at the small cooperative gallery Tokanten in Copenhagen. The exhibition, which showcased artists of her gallery working in a geometric vein, met with unprecedented success. In 1948, the fact that the Scandinavian countries embraced geometric abstraction while Paris was caught up in postwar lyrical abstraction, encouraged René to continue to promote geometric abstraction in Paris. The seminal exhibition \textit{Klarform} in 1951 was the result and the journal \textit{Art d’Aujourd’hui}, an avid supporter of geometric art, dedicated a whole issue to René’s show. \textit{Klarform} not only served to make the Parisian avant-garde artists known
younger generation of geometric abstract artists featured in the show infused their mode of representation with literal movement, specifically new technological materials that signaled both the modern and progress. One of the works from *Le Mouvement* by the Venezuelan artist Jesús Rafael Soto, *White points on black points* from 1955 (fig. 29), stands as an example. Here, Soto overlaid two Perspex sheets approximately an inch apart, each painted with a regular grid of dots evenly spaced across its surface. The first layer of plastic, closest to the viewer, is covered with white dots, while the second layer is equally spotted with black. Standing directly in front of the work, the white dots take over. The spectator is confronted with a single image as the two surfaces appear to merge together in a perpendicular line of sight, visually eradicating the distance between the two layers. Within this stable and fixed model of perception, the various surfaces and elements of the work seem coherent, merged into one whole. Yet, as the viewer moves around the work, a strange perceptual experience is initiated. The dots break apart from each other creating bizarre illusionary optical effects. Here, not only is the Renaissance notion of a painting as a ‘picture onto the world’ challenged, but Soto deviates from traditional art materials by using plastic, an industrial material associated in 1955 with everything from the production of military equipment to home and kitchen appliances. By utilizing acrylic glass, Soto transformed a polymeric substance into a *matière noble*, worthy enough to create a work of art. Moreover, this use of plastic and its derivatives went hand in hand with a burgeoning consumer market, demonstrating plastic’s infinite

outside their national borders, but opened René up to an international artistic milieu while cementing her commitment to a geometric mode. See *Denise René, l’intépide*, 29.

versatility and epitomizing the phrase “[a] function for every plastic and a plastic for every function.”

In *White points on black points*, the translucent quality of the material allows the artist to manipulate the spectator’s sense of space. This spatial ambiguity, in turn, becomes a vehicle for an exploration of movement and time, as well as two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. This kind of playfulness that Soto and other artists involved in *Le Mouvement* offered, based in an experiential mode of viewership, was not available in more traditional forms of either geometric or lyrical abstraction, both of which claimed a more serious approach to art production, the latter deliberately referencing existential and social issues.

The way in which the new version of geometric abstraction that was featured in *Le Mouvement* electrified an otherwise staid abstract mode emerges through a comparison with the geometric abstract paintings of artists such as Alberto Magnelli and Auguste Herbin. Both Magnelli’s and Herbin’s styles were in line with a mainstream tradition of European geometric abstraction which prioritized flatness, form and color, and which was promoted by the groups *Cercle et Carré* and *Abstraction-Création*. While contesting the pessimism of gestural abstraction, however, the austerity of these works offered little that was new.

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275 Exceptions to more traditional forms of geometric abstraction also include artists Viktor Vasarely, considered one of the pioneers of optical art, and Auguste Herbin, who as early as the late 1910’s and early 1920s experimented with colored reliefs in geometric form on wood. Herbin’s work challenged the traditional: figure-ground relationship as well as contested the status of easel-painting.
Magnelli was a member of Abstraction-Création in the thirties, a group composed of artists who shared constructivist convictions\textsuperscript{276}, and he became a major player in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles upon its creation in 1946. While the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles initially promoted non-figurative art the space, under the vigilant eye of vice-president Herbin, eventually became a private club of sorts where any artist who dared to include any curvilinear forms in their work would be banned.\textsuperscript{277} Magnelli, having experimented with Fauvist and Cubist styles and a figurative language influenced by Futurism was drawn to the geometric ideals of constructivism in the early forties. Best known for his geometric abstractions featuring ambiguous spatial relationships of overlapping shapes and planes, Magnelli’s works focused on clarity and the “équilibre subtil des formes abstraites, généralement délimitées par le trace des contours.”\textsuperscript{278} An example of this is his 1956 oil painting Conversation à deux no. 2 (fig. 30). Two interlocking neutral-colored shapes outlined in red, orange and yellow, appear to dance before a background of black and violet. The geometric forms, which resemble wrench heads, seem to flutter in the foreground, while the background planes of black, violet and purple blur the distinction between foreground and background. In a 1949 review in Art d’Aujourd’hui, art critic Charles Estienne linked Magnelli’s work to the long line of early Italian Renaissance “masters.” Describing Magnelli’s œuvre as “difficile” and of an

\textsuperscript{276} In this case, the term “constructivist convictions” refers more specifically to the formalist aspects of painting and sculpture, and not so much the political engagement associated with certain members of the Russian Constructivists. At this point in France, and into the post-WWII years, the most well-known Russian Constructivists were the Gabo and Pevsner who practiced an increasingly aestheticized Constructivism, versus that of others such as Alexander Rodchenko. See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Cold War Constructivism,” In Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964, ed. Serge Guilbaut (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England, 1990), 85-110.


\textsuperscript{278} Andreas Franck, “L’Influence de Magnelli,” in Les Années 50, 144.
“exigeante pureté,” Estienne conceded that it was an “intellectual adventure.”

"[L’aventure] picturale de Magnelli, comme celle de Giotto et d’Uccello, est, le plus spontanément du monde, une aventure intellectuelle. Ce qui est à la fois, en ce moment critique du XXe siècle, toujours en quête d’une forme, d’une originalité anachronique et d’une actualité éclatante... Un tableau est né, sur le papier et dans l’esprit du peintre." 

This quote is interesting for two reasons. First, this praise of geometric abstraction comes merely a year before his infamous 1950 tirade against the style in L’Art abstrait est-il un académisme? (fig. 31) And second, what is striking in Estienne’s description of Magnelli’s work in 1949 is that it is described as “exceptionally timely” (d’une actualité éclatante) yet “anachronistic” in its association with the Italian art historical past.

According to Estienne, all of these attributes were what made this work a prime example of French art in the postwar years. Magnelli’s works, and in a similar way, the work of Herbin, provided a link with the historical avant-garde which also affirmed a continuation of tradition.

Similarly, Herbin, one of the founders of Abstraction-Création, also created works that adhered to a concrete, two-dimensional painting style with simple geometric forms and color. His 1950 painting, Dimanche (fig. 32), uses various tones of red and orange on a black background to create a series of squares, triangles and circles. Each series is interrupted by a white corresponding shape, slightly breaking the flow of color. More

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279 Charles Estienne, “Magnelli,” Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 2 (juillet-août 1949), 14. “Magnelli’s pictorial adventure, like that of Giotto and Uccello, is the most spontaneous of intellectual adventures. At this critical juncture in the twentieth century, which is always in search of a new form, Magnelli’s work is both anachronistically original and timely.”

280 Ibid.

rigid in form than Magnelli’s contoured shapes, Herbin’s works offer an austere flatness that contrasts with the simple colorful figures that inhabit the canvas. In a review of Herbin’s exhibition at the Galerie Denise René just a few months after *Le Mouvement*, art critic Claude-Hélène Sibert noted:

[Aux] titres qu’Herbin aime donner à ses tableaux, il attache un symbolisme poétique: *Midi* baigne dans une lumière pure, glorieuse, dans une atmosphère engourdie. *Minuit* est une toile rêveuse et sereine...[Herbin] n’a pu s’empêcher de laisser passer dans ses toiles une sensibilité et une emotion, qui permettent au spectateur de les aborder plus aisément.  

What becomes clear in Sibert’s review is that while Herbin’s canvases may look different to, say, Fougeron’s pictures that have been mentioned earlier, both artists’ works are approached in a similar fashion: the artist crafts a fixed image, albeit one imbued with “une sensibilité et une emotion,” that the viewer is supposed to acknowledge and accept. Herbin’s interest in form and colour takes precedence over the potential relationship between art object and viewer. Of primary concern to Herbin are the associations established within the canvas, between line and color. Léon Degand, another strong advocate of geometric abstraction, ended his review of Herbin’s exhibition held at the Galerie Denise René in 1952 with an accolade: “Elles [les toiles] résument une expérience, un savoir, un amour de la peinture. Elles rythment en des sens variés, de forme, de couleur, de composition, une pleine conformité de l’œuvre à son créateur, une magnifique sagesse plastiquement exprimée.”  

The emphasis here is on the artist and the relationship forged between him and his work. It was precisely this exchange that

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282 Claude-Hélène Sibert, “Herbin,” *Cimaise*, 2ème série, no. 8 (juillet 1955), 11. “Herbin gives a poetic symbolism to his works through the titles he gives them: *Midi* is showered with a glorious and pure light, in a subdued atmosphere. *Minuit* is dreamlike and serene...Herbin cannot pass up the chance to instill his canvases with emotion, a characteristic which makes them more easily approachable.” Translation mine.

283 Léon Degand, “L’exposition Herbin,” *Art d’Aujourd’hui* série 3, no. 3&4 (fév.-mars 1952), 59. “The works capture the experience, a knowledge and a love of art. The varied rhythms of form, color and composition go hand in hand with the creator, a magnificent wisdom expressed through painting.”
would be troubled by the work of the optico-kinetic artists through the emphasis that was given to spectator. What Degand makes clear in his review of Herbin, is that in his view painting is most successful when it becomes a *witness* of sorts to the emotional trajectory and struggles that its "creator" has endured. A champion of geometric abstraction, Degand's endorsement did not attempt to shake the art establishment or question long-held notions about the public's interaction with art. For such critics, the viewer remained first and foremost a passive spectator of a fixed image. The canvas provides a trace of the artist's experience, but does not activate the viewer in any sort of new or interactive way. This would be a key aspect that would distinguish Herbin's work from the new generation of geometric abstractionists.

vi. Art, publics, and the integration of the viewer

One of the striking aspects of René's *Le Mouvement* exhibition was that new technologies, motion and whimsy reconfigured the viewer's relationship to the art object. An artist like Jean Fautrier in the late 1940's had already tried his hand at creating an art for the public at large, albeit with different objectives in mind.\(^{284}\) That is, while the works of the optico-kinetic artists sought to empower the public by offering them the tools necessary to transform their lives, or at least to stimulate transformation,\(^{285}\) Fautrier's endeavor had been more of a business enterprise. In an effort to democratize the postwar art market, Fautrier, with the aid of his partner Jeanine Aeply, launched a series entitled

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\(^{284}\) See Rachel E. Perry, "The *Originaux multiples*," *Jean Fautrier, 1898-1964*. Perry points out that the *Originaux multiples* were first exhibited in the fall of 1950 at the Galerie Billiet-Caputo in Paris, though Fautrier had begun working on them in 1946.

\(^{285}\) The "transformation" I refer to has to do with a specific (public) awareness of how one's actions are affected and manipulated by societal forces. This is, of course, what poststructuralist theorists take on and develop in the 1960s.
*Originaux multiples.* Simultaneously original works, yet part of a series, these “hybrid print/paintings make use of a number of techniques to re-create the material effect of a painting, its facture and texture, while allowing for the reproducibility of a print.”286 As if paving the way, though ultimately commercially unsuccessful, for the optico-kinetic artists to come a decade later claiming similar aims of an art available to the masses,

Fautrier outlined his motivation behind the multiples project:

In any case, as long as the painter limits himself exclusively to an outdated technique, worn out by four centuries – oil painting – he will end up with an overrefined work whose magic no longer provokes the public – the unique work – with all that this implies, for us, of disgust in its sacred and ephemeral touch; a work which, by virtue of its rarity, stands against the forward thrust of an industrial civilization; by its very rarity leads to this kind of showplace – the museum – where it is exhibited in a vacuum.287

Historian Rachel E. Perry has noted that Fautrier’s objective in this series was three-fold. First, he argued that painting as a medium had exhausted its avant-garde possibilities hence it was necessary to try new forms and media. Second, he questioned the notion of ‘original work’ and the reverence paid to the artist’s hand. And finally, by creating works that were at the same time originals and copies, and making them available to the masses, Fautrier criticized the museum as an elitist institution locked in the past and unable to serve the contemporary public’s needs.288 Though the *originaux multiples* as a project to undermine the notion of the unique work of art was in the end unsuccessful, this desire to challenge the museum and the longstanding vision of art as an exceptional and unique cultural product to be held on a pedestal gained momentum during the late fifties in particular with the optico-kinetic artists. But while Fautrier and the artists who are the
focus of this study may have this point of commonality between them, both projects remain radically different in that Fautrier’s art production fit within a capitalist system of exchange, while the Latin Americans looked for a public art that was at everyone’s reach. And while Fautrier’s art fits into the art critic Harold’s Rosenberg’s notion that, “The lone artist did not want the world to be different, he wanted his canvas to be a world,” the world in this case being Fautrier’s own version of it, still the optico-kinetic artists offered the public a range of possibilities, none of which was contingent solely upon the creator.

Vasarely, who with René had orchestrated *Le Mouvement* in 1955 was also concerned with reconfiguring traditional easel painting and in redefining the public’s interaction with the art object. Writing in 1953, he complained:

> Pourquoi l’attachement des créateurs et acquéreurs à la “pièce unique à usage exclusif?” L’art s’échappera toujours du domaine privé. La peinture, dite “chevalet”, figurative et abstraite, envahit pour le moment les cimaises avec sa surproduction. Art d’assouvissement, il porte, par son objectif limité, et par sa qualité douteuse, tous les signes d’une existence éphémère...La nouvelle réalité n’est-elle pas en droit de nous demander un art à sa hauteur ? Dans cette perspective, la peinture dite de chevalet se rétrécit et, au point de vue technique, et au point de vue conceptuel, pour ne devenir qu’une modeste partie de la vaste synthèse des arts plastiques.

In other words, why should painting be confined to the two dimensional space of the canvas and be limited by those parameters? Going a bit further, Vasarely’s claims were

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290 Viktor Vasarely Retrospective 1947-1986, *Journal: Notes Brutes 1946-1967* (Arras: Centre Culturel Noroit, 1992), 9. “Why are artists and buyers so attached to the notion of ‘unique object for exclusive use?’ Art will always escape the private domain. Painting, more precisely figurative and abstract ‘easel’ painting, is everywhere. A satisfying type of art, it offers up, with its limited objective and questionable quality, all the signs of an ephemeral existence... Doesn’t today’s world require an art that is on par with this new reality? In that sense, easel painting becomes narrow in scope, in terms of technique and conceptually speaking as well, becoming only a small part of the vast synthesis of the plastic arts.” Translation mine.
also a challenge to individual ownership and bourgeois culture. If the French were finally ready to move beyond the aftermath of the war, embrace modernity in all its forms, then art had to catch up with the times as well and experiment with new materials, techniques and formats.

Two years later with René's *Le Mouvement*, the public registered a similar dissatisfaction with the static work of art designed for contemplation. *Le Mouvement* attracted a great deal of attention and differed radically to other exhibits presented in Paris galleries. As critic Pierre Restany noted, it was "the first time since the end of the war that a new medium, getting away from traditional painting and sculpture, had been put on show in Paris." Given the political and social climate of postwar angst, people more than ever embraced the idea of interactive and playful works of art. If up until then "many people...stopped in front of gallery windows to gaze inside, but never entered the gallery space", then *Le Mouvement* changed all of this. By literally shaking up the status quo when it came to a visitor's interaction with works in a museum or gallery space, these

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291 *Le Mouvement* unleashed a radical alternative to what was being presented in other galleries. For example, at the same time that *Le Mouvement* was on view, the Galerie Creuze held an exhibition of works by Fougeron, the leading French socialist realist painter whose work has been discussed at an earlier point in this chapter. Contrasting the mobile sculptures, motorized constructions and modifiable reliefs present in *Le Mouvement*, the exhibition at Galerie Creuze offered the viewer a more subdued and conventional experience, that is, one in which the viewer stood before the work of art and engaged with a highly recognizable representational content. With an emphasis on the tactility of the medium, or as Pierre Descargues called it Fougeron's "gout pour un belle et riche pâte", the exhibition included a number of Fougeron’s still lifes, a series of his Touraine landscapes, as well as several portraits. See Pierre Descargues, "André Fougeron,” *Les lettres françaises* 567 (5-12 mai 1955), 9. Another popular representational artist of the day was Bernard Buffet. In his exhibition at the Drouant-David and Visconti galleries in February of 1955, entitled *Horrors of War* (*Horreurs de la guerre*), Buffet’s work, ranging from enormous canvases to smaller watercolors, engaged the devastation of war by portraying emaciated bodies strewn on the ground and hanging from trees. With the war somewhat temporally displaced yet still present in the country’s collective psyche, Buffet chose to give his viewers one more glimpse of the terrifying consequences of battle.  

works offered a palpable experience, and engagement which contrasted sharply with the more autonomous forms of easel art. The reviewer for Elle, a popular young women’s fashion magazine, made the point: "Agam, Bury, Calder, Marcel Duchamp, Jacobsen, Soto, Tinguely, Vasarely présentent d’étranges constructions, de mystérieux tableaux qui se transforment ou viennent à vous comme un jouet fantastique. A noter cette instruction "Prière de toucher." On ne s’en prive pas." 294

Certainly the exhibit forced many critics to reassess their ideological views and artistic positions vis-à-vis the meaning and nature of abstraction in what was a growing divide between the hot tone of l’art informel and lyrical abstraction and the cool spark of a new brand of participatory art. 295 If appreciating a lyrical abstract work required a familiarity with the philosophical discourse or the arguments of the foremost formalist critics at the time, the works at Le Mouvement strategically pursued a different angle and relied on the sensorial and the immediate. While the reviews were numerous, with many critics extolling the virtues of interactive artworks while others were more skeptical and critical of the artistic potential of such an endeavor, what is of import is the choice of words used to describe Le Mouvement that appear again and again throughout the reviews: elaborate

294 René Barotte, “Vu pour Vous – Le Mouvement,” Elle, no. 491 (9 mai 1955), n.p. “Agam, Calder... Soto, and Vasarely present strange constructions, mysterious works that are transformable or reach out to you like a fantastic toy. One must follow the instructions: PLEASE TOUCH. And we do not hold back.”

295 See Willy Rotzler, “Abstraction Géométrique,” Les Années 50, 163. Rotzler points out that the two antagonistic tendencies of abstraction, that of lyrical (hot) and geometric (cold) abstraction, were most manifest in Paris in the first half of the 50s. The development of this rivalry is mirrored in the two major art journals of the period: Art d’aujourd’hui, under the direction of André Bloc between 1949 and 1954, defended the position of geometric art, whereas Cimaise, while open to all sorts of “non-figurative tendencies,” contributed to the “triumph of lyrical abstraction,” as Michel Ragon described it.
contraptions, gadgets, amusement, and references to speed and adventure. Such descriptors marked out *Le Mouvement* as not only innovative, but almost as a new world in transformation, one whose evolution was not only in the hands of the artists and critics, but in those of the public as a whole: “L’exposition de Denise René nous montre justement tous les enrechissements de l’Art venant révéler les magies cinématiques. Elle affirme non plus la puissance de l’homme en tant que démon créateur mais en magicien...”

While some critics and artists embraced the new art that *Le Mouvement* foregrounded, others regarded it as a menace. The critic Julien Alvard warned of the embrace of time and movement in the works in the exhibit: “La peinture va se trouver étroitement associée à la sculpture et à l’architecture et verra son indépendence dangereusement menacée.”

Alvard’s fear was a synthesis of the arts, something which many artists, especially the kinetic and optical ones, hoped to accomplish. Even Charles Estienne, who had viciously denounced geometric abstract art in *L’Art Abstrait est-il un académisme?* of 1950, recognized the need for an art that moved beyond the limitations of the traditional canvas.

In his 1955 text *Du créateur au spectateur*, Estienne lamented:

> Or, que voyons-nous? Et presque sans exception de la Renaissance à nos jours – et jusqu’aux toutes dernières saisons? que l’art, qu’il soit abstrait ou réaliste, moderne ou académique, d’avant-garde ou d’arrière-garde, n’entend concerner le spectateur qu’esthétiquement, sans chercher en rien à modifier sa vie, à déranger (à ordonner, ou à réordonner) son comportement quotidien. Abstrait ou

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296 Jean-Louis Favre opened his review with the following: “La vitesse est la caractéristique de notre siècle,” n.p. Some other references include: “[Un] véritable parc d’attractions...” (René Barotte, *Le Journal des Arts*); “[D]’étranges constructions...qui viennent à vous comme un jouet fantastique...” (Barotte, *Elle*).

297 Favre, n.p.

298 Julien Alvard, “L’art à la recherche du temps,” *Cimaise*, no. 1 (Sept-Oct 1954), 3. “Painting is going to find itself closely aligned with sculpture and architecture, and its independence will be gravely threatened.”

Figurative, une œuvre d’art d’aujourd’hui ne concerne qu’idéalement, ne touche que, fugitivement le spectateur.  

Referring to the works of an exhibition entitled *Comparaisons* held at the Palais de New York in 1955, Estienne reiterated: “Plus de huit cents exposants, tous abstraits – combien d’œuvres vont au-delà de l’agrément superficial, vous semblent capables de modifier, même à longue échéance, vos habitudes de vie et de pensée? Un nombre infime, hélas.”  

Estienne, looking to develop an art that engaged more than the visual, posed the question that other artists were already debating: how many of these works are able to make a difference in one’s everyday life and way of thinking?  

In response to Estienne’s question, a comparison can be drawn between the more “traditional” geometric works being shown in Paris versus the optico-kinetic ones – while both are abstract, how many force the viewer to move beyond the two-dimensional flat surface, to question one’s very actions? *Dibouk* (fig. 33), a transformable work by Israeli Yaacov Agam exhibited in *Le Mouvement*, can be seen as emblematic of the underlying goals that united the artists in the exhibit as well as the gallery owner, Denise René. The title of Agam’s was not chosen at random, since a loose translation of *dibouk* (or *dibbuk* in English) in European Jewish/Yiddish folklore, refers to the dislocated soul of a dead person who inhabits the soul of someone who is alive in order to fulfill a goal that it was  

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300 Estienne, “Du créateur au spectateur,” *France Observateur*, n. 270 (14 juillet 1955), 25-26. “What do we see? Almost without exception from the Renaissance to today – including last season? That art, whether realist or abstract, modern or academic, vanguard or rearguard, only involves the spectator aesthetically, without looking to make a difference in his/her life, without troubling the everyday behavior.”  

301 Ibid., “More than eight hundred participants, all abstract – how many works go beyond the superficial pleasure, how many seem capable of altering, even long-term, your everyday way of thinking and lifestyle? A tiny number, alas.” Translation mine.
not able to during its lifetime. Metaphorically, then, Agam’s new work like the exhibit as a whole breathed new life into the traditional stationary two-dimensional canvas.

*Dibouk* is composed of a black surface with colored wooden elements in various shapes tacked on to the canvas that can be manipulated by the viewer. The canvas morphs into different landscapes: for example, an arrangement resembling the Eiffel Tower or the view of a cityscape as seen from up above. The freedom to choose, led by the dynamic contact between viewer and the smooth “Lego blocks”, animated a work of art that was anything but static.

While the works in *Le Mouvement* broke away from the traditional gallery exhibitions of the time, they also simultaneously drew from past examples, particularly geometric abstraction of the historical avant-garde, making optico-kinetic art new yet vaguely familiar. And it was the use of an already established language, but reinterpreted in a fresh and innovative fashion, that made *Le Mouvement* a timely event. In other words, what made the art works in this show so extraordinary was that they one-upped the whole art establishment by offering the public the possibility of physically transforming the work on view, in essence becoming an extension of the work. And this had larger societal implications that went beyond the confines of the Denise René Gallery. When interacting with optico-kinetic works, the onus was placed on the participant to become aware of her actions, to be conscious of the consequences of her actions, and how all of this transformed the contemplative attitude between viewer and work of art into a

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302 Often dibbuk are considered to be malicious souls that will torment the body they inhabit. Dybbuk is derived from the Hebrew term for ‘attachment.’ According to Jewish belief, a soul that has not been able to fulfill its function in its lifetime is given another chance to do so in the form of a dibbuk, leaving once this goal has been accomplished. *The Dybbuk* is also a play by the Polish writer Sholem An-ski written in the late nineteenth century.
collaborative partnership. The group GRAV, founded in 1960 under the name Centre de Recherche d’Art Visuel (CRAV), and later Groupe de Recherche d’art Visuel (GRAV), is a case in point. GRAV was a collective co-founded by Argentinean Julio Le Parc with Argentinean Horacio Garcia Rossi; the Spaniard Francisco Sobrino; and French artists François Morellet, Joël Stein and Jean-Pierre Yvaral as members. GRAV based their collective enterprise on the notion of challenging the authority of the single artist and unique work of art, thus producing situations or happenings that GRAV took credit for as a group. The collective was particularly concerned with breaking the traditional exchange between viewer and work of art. To this end, they created works or situations in which spectators would have direct contact with the works, but also participate in a communal exchange with other spectators. Thus the group’s 1962 work Labyrinth, discussed further in Chapter Three, which set up a series of rooms with environmental challenges that either forced the viewer to engage with the works in question, or simply gave them the option of doing so, what GRAV termed “voluntary” or “involuntary” participation. As participants moved throughout the labyrinth, people became aware of others’ presence and how that could alter the space accordingly. Moving from the gallery space to the street, the 1966 Une Journée dans la Rue (A Day in the Street), which will be elaborated on in the next chapter, pushed these tactics further, as passers-by were confronted with unexpected situations ranging from walking on unsteady floor boards and receiving surprise gifts, to popping balloons with needles. While disconcerting to some, A Day in the Street attempted to do just that, disrupt and shake up a passive public who had become accustomed to everyday routine and was too comfortable within their well-known surroundings.\(^\text{303}\)

\(^{303}\) As described by art historian Frank Popper: “[The] Groupe de Recherche corresponded to the concerns
Moving beyond the purely "aesthetic" values attached to painting and sculpture, and which in the 1950s were bound up with the formalist rhetoric supported by the highly influential American critic Clement Greenberg, as well as French critics Léon Degand and Michel Seuphor, this physical engagement and perceptual play offered a distraction of sorts for the participants. This distraction was by no means an idle one, but rather an active diversion compelling people to take responsibility for their choices. In an age of rising consumerism and marketing, where advertisements outlined how one should think, act and be in reference to technological modernization, the gadgets offered by the optico-kinetic artists seemingly left the choice up to the consumer.\textsuperscript{304} Advertisements, and in their own way, the works of the optico-kinetic artists, attempted to ease society’s transition into modernity. Significantly, society in this case referred to the totality of the public, and not just those inclined to visit galleries and museums. With the focus away from the primacy of vision, and placed instead on all of the senses, this art challenged the traditional conventions of how to approach a work of art.\textsuperscript{305}


\textsuperscript{305} In discussing painting from the fifteenth century, art historian Michael Baxandall points out that since the majority of works commissioned and created were religious in nature, "[t]he painter was a professional visualizer of holy stories." With an emphasis on 'instruction', that is, offering a visual representation of stories of the Bible that would be accessible to the largest number of people, the "pictures existed to meet institutional ends, to help with specific intellectual and spiritual activities." Working with a pious public that was already rehearsed in spiritual exercises that required a high level of visualization of some of the major stories of the Old and New Testament, the artist had to negotiate his/her own imagery in such a way that offered a general enough representation to suit a varied public. As Baxandall explains: "When beholders might approach his painting with preconceived interior pictures of such detail, each person's different, the painter did not as a rule try to give detailed characterizations of people and places: it would have been an interference with the individual's private visualization if he had." In other words, the bare essentials were included in scenes that would nonetheless be unmistakable to the general public, regardless
vii. Conclusion

The exhibition *Le Mouvement* cemented René’s position as the sole gallery in Paris promoting a seemingly cold, rational, and hard-edge abstraction with a revolutionary addition, that of movement.\(^{306}\) Significantly while she embraced artists of varied nationalities, her gallery became the space where the Latin American geometric abstractionists converged throughout the 60s. Thus, while René was as engaged as Vasarely in defending geometric abstraction, her agenda needs to be contextualized within her larger goal of seeking a niche for her own gallery in this complicated milieu.

By promoting artists who were working in this tradition, among them many South American artists who flocked to Paris where geometric abstraction proved to be a burgeoning aesthetic, she was able to mark out her difference and create a certain kind of artistic market, an essential part of any successful gallery. And it was this focus on type of art with a socialist leaning that met the needs of a growing public interested in interactive artistic possibilities, and established her position as an avant-garde gallery in postwar France.

\(^{306}\) In order to understand Rene’s decision to focus exclusively on geometric abstraction, it is also important to consider the legacy of this style in Europe at this time. This was a continuation of a long tradition with roots firmly entrenched in the history of the 20\(^{th}\) C avant-garde. In the early decades of the twentieth century, and following on the heels of cubism, the Dutch group de Stijl and the Russian Constructivists respectively developed an art completely removed from mimetic reality. While De Stijl was committed to the utopian ideals of spiritual harmony and order and sought to express this through form and color after the physical and psychic trauma of WWI, the Russian Constructivists supported the Russian Revolution through art that was politically and technologically productive. They sought to create a visual language that embodied the social needs and values of the new Communist order. While both groups differed greatly in terms of their aims and convictions, members of the two movements looked to pure geometric shapes and forms to espouse their ideologies which were ultimately concerned with using art to transform everyday social, and even political, life.
Searching for a type of art that would simultaneously put her name on the map as well as offer the public a real alternative to the emotional anguish and psychological turmoil embodied in *l’art informel*, René made an attempt with this brand of geometric abstraction that moved and teased the viewer in order to offer the public something spontaneous, and turned technology into fun. In bringing together works that summoned the viewer to act and not passively gaze at the canvas, René offered a thoroughly new kind of art production albeit with rather dignified and historic avant-garde roots.

Counteracting the dense critic-driven discourse of *l’art informel*, an art production that looked back to the immediate postwar aftermath and all its devastation, *Le Mouvement* looked forward and offered the public imaginative and unusual art works that symbolically paralleled the rapid economic boom and rush of modernity that France was witnessing at this time. And this exhibition gave only a glimpse of what was to come. By including major figures such as Duchamp and Calder, René was astute enough to realize that in order to attract the largest number of viewers, big names went a long way. While the intention was not to present a comprehensive exhibition, René’s aim was to bring together a group of works by artists living in Paris who were interested in kinetics, a space-time continuum, and which ultimately questioned the individual’s perceptual processes.\(^{307}\) As René explained:

> If the idea of *movement* originated in the works of several artists in the nineteen twenties – Tatlin, Rodchenko, Gabo, Moholy-Nage – it was important to emphasize its consequences and developments at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century and in the studies of those who were in fact finding their way to a new space-time concept by different approaches.\(^{308}\)

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\(^{308}\) Ibid.
This was the climate that geometric abstraction found itself in by the mid-1950s. France offered a fertile ground for a new art with roots in the historical avant-garde and with socialist, even utopian, aspirations. 1955 was also the year in which it felt like France had moved beyond the immediate aftermath of the war, with material difficulties as well as restrictions and shortages finally a thing of the past. This was a time of new beginnings, as evidenced throughout the decade with the advent of the Nouvelle Vague in cinema, the Nouveau Roman in literature, and the Nouveaux Réalistes in art. With this rebirth of sorts, it seems only fitting that an overhauled geometric tradition made a comeback thanks to an influx of artists from the New World continent of South America.
Chapter 4: Optico-kinetic art, Technology, and the Everyday

i. France and new anxieties during the Cold War

In 1955, the same year that \textit{Le Mouvement} opened, journalist Louis Dalmas despaired in the March issue of the conservative Catholic journal \textit{La Nef}: “Bonne chère et douceur de vivre, tant vantées par les prospectus du tourisme, n’emblissent que des rides: sous le maquillage, la France est vieille. Dans ses veines coule la camomille des retraités; c’est autre chose que le sang des jacobins.”\textsuperscript{309} According to Dalmas, France had “aged,” it was no longer on the cutting edge of all things cultural and art-related, but was instead steeped in a tradition that no longer appeared “timeless” and was seemingly at odds with the rapid influx of modernization that was swiftly modifying French households and everyday life. And it was not only domestically that this view took hold, but also internationally, particularly in America, France’s chief rival on the cultural front. As American writer Elinor Rice plainly stated in an article in the magazine \textit{Holiday} in 1953, a couple of years before Dalmas: “The French intellectual is, all too often, like an old lady sitting in her ancient mansion, fingering the jewels and laces of a glorious past to which she is no longer capable of adding a glorious present.”\textsuperscript{310} France, in other words, appeared to be stuck in the past, divorced from the contemporary concerns of a society in the process of numerous technological advances and political transformations that were altering the traditional French way of life. Making matters worse, by the mid-1950s, France’s


\textsuperscript{310} Elinor Rice, “Vive la Culture!” \textit{Holiday} (November 1953), 147.
national identity was being challenged in other ways: the decolonization process was culminating in the trauma of the war in Algeria (France’s last colonial stronghold), and American-style consumerism had hit full-force, which some feared would have a negative impact on the French way of life. While these events added to an already unstable political situation, it was not until 1958, with the introduction of a reformed Republic and a new head of state that things would start to change, and France would begin to address questions affecting nation and identity.311

The Fifth Republic, introduced on October 5, 1958, replaced the parliamentary government of the French Fourth Republic with a semi-presidential system, giving new president Charles de Gaulle and his prime minister greater responsibility in the day-to-day administration of the state. Given the precarious state of affairs that had characterized the Fourth Republic, in particular the constant changing of prime ministers,312 General de Gaulle’s arrival on the political scene was especially welcomed during the heated years of the Algerian crisis. But more that just intervening in matters of decolonization, and trying to save France from spiraling into civil war, de Gaulle’s vision went well beyond France’s position as a former colonial power. Most importantly, de Gaulle arrived at a strategic moment: French society was in the process of being significantly altered by a

311 Aside from the colonial affairs that engaged France, particularly the wars in Indochina and Algeria, another major event that contributed to French political instability during the Fourth Republic was the Suez crisis, which began in October of 1956 after the Suez Canal (which linked the Mediterranean and Red Seas) was nationalized by the Egyptian government under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The canal had been managed by an international council until then, effectively run by Britain. Trying to regain control of the canal, Israel launched an attack on Egypt, and troops were sent from Britain and France. The United States opposed the attacks, and as a result, the three countries got no international backing, leading to much criticism, especially by the French and British public who deemed the affair another manifestation of imperial attitudes.
312 In 1948 alone, the Prime Ministers included André Marie (Radical Party, 26 July 1948), Robert Schuman (Mouvement Républicain Populaire or MRP, 5 September 1948) and Henri Queuille (Radical Party, 11 September 1948).
new consumerism and this had important implications for the future of French culture.

The process of decolonization and the technological advancements that characterized the fifties and sixties signaled a new modern French state, one that needed to reposition itself internationally. De Gaulle's renewed presence in the government as leader of the French nation would attempt to address this evolving crisis through the implementation of various state-run technologies, as well as innovative cultural projects, led by André Malraux, the first Minister of Cultural Affairs. In short, de Gaulle's main priority lay in securing France's identity as it evolved from a traditional empire to a modern nation.

ii. De Gaulle, technology and redefining a “new” France

Technology was a driving force behind many of France's societal transformations through the 1950's and 1960's, and it would come to play an important role in the reshaping of French identity during the early years of the Fifth Republic. In her book *The Radiance of France: nuclear power and national identity after World War II*, historian Gabrielle Hecht argues that it was through technology that France sought to re-establish itself and regain the grandeur that it had temporarily lost.313 “Industrial, scientific, and technological development would not only rebuild the nation’s economy but also restore France to its place as a world leader…technological prowess defined the nation.”314 Furthermore, Hecht makes a case that the “radiance of France”, a phrase which appeared regularly in postwar discourse along with de Gaulle's term “the grandeur of France,”

314 Ibid., 2.
served to link the nation’s postwar concern with technological skill to France’s past, from the glories of the reign of Louis XIV to the “civilizing mission” of centuries of empire.315

One of the major technological forces to have a key effect on the “new” France was nuclear power with its economic and military potential.316 By the end of the Fourth Republic, the Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique (Atomic Energy Commission), created in 1945, had begun to build the first experimental weapons. Once in power, de Gaulle continued to build on this nuclear legacy, and the first French atomic bomb exploded at Reganne in the Sahara on February 13, 1960.317 As one historian has noted, France’s “nuclear arsenal was more a symbol of grandeur than a means of achieving it.”318 Still, given the fact that France was much smaller in comparison to the United States and the USSR, such feats still provided the nation with the means to protect itself against external aggression without reliance on third parties such as NATO, which de Gaulle considered to be dominated by the United States. To this end, de Gaulle encouraged a number of grands projets, all of them meant to showcase how technologically advanced France was:

315 The cultural programs taken on by André Malraux were significant to France’s new civilizing mission. See Herman Lebovics, Mona Lisa’s Escort. André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

316 Hecht, 2. “In articles, lectures, and modernization plans, experts repeatedly linked technological achievement with French radiance. Industrial, scientific, and technological development would not only rebuild the nation’s economy but also restore France to its place as a world leader...The nuclear program epitomized the link between French radiance and technological prowess...After deadly explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear technology became a quintessential symbol of modernity and national power.” For further reading on nuclear technology and symbolic meaning see Paul Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Spencer Weart, Nuclear Fear: A History of Images (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).


the construction of the Concorde, the SECAM color television process, which began in 1956 and inaugurated in 1967, techniques for uranium enrichment, and the launch of the nuclear submarine *Le Redoutable*. By the late 1950's, France, along with Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union were thinking about developing supersonic transport. The cost was so great, that Britain had sought international cooperation on the project, and the only country to show real interest was France. Eventually a treaty was drafted and signed in November 1962, with the Concorde project a joint venture between British Aircraft Corporation and Aerospatiale.

The associations between technological achievement, modernity, and national greatness were continually reiterated in France through the years of the Cold War, with de Gaulle asserting that, “We are in the epoch of technology. A state does not count if it does not bring something to the world that contributes to technological progress.”319 In turn, economic and industrial development and new technologies were linked to the claim that France had an inherent duty to assume leadership position in the western world. In 1960, de Gaulle declared: “Being the French people, we must reach the rank of a great industrial state or resign ourselves to decline. Our choice is made. Our development is in progress.”320

The modernization of the French nation, however, did not boil down to just technological prowess and financial and economic success.321 This quest for the “new” France took a

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319 Charles de Gaulle, as quoted in Hecht, 93.
320 Charles de Gaulle (1960), Ibid.
321 A desire for change was not new to General de Gaulle. If France needed a make-over, it fit into his own agenda which included a re-evaluation of the traditional republican model of government. His constant
variety of tactics and incorporated multiple methods. France could not be politically, economically, and technologically advanced without being on the cutting edge of all things cultural as well. Under de Gaulle’s watch, France would attempt to achieve the whole package, as a thoroughly modern state and flourishing cultural life were crucial to securing an international leadership status. To this end, de Gaulle’s Minister of Culture, André Malraux, would play an integral role. As historian Berstein has emphasized, Malraux provided the “cultural equivalent” to de Gaulle’s policies for “achieving greatness” by restoring France’s “major monuments, opening maisons de la culture, and giving recognition to artists, writers and intellectuals…all gestures designed to make de

concern with the “greatness” or grandeur of France meant “a revision of institutions” and in particular an amendment or “improvement” of the past republics. The new Constitution, which was adopted by a referendum on September 28, 1958, incorporated some of the major changes that de Gaulle had been looking to implement: while it maintained a parliamentary regime, the head of state became the “institutional keystone” of the system. Hecht’s work on France and technology also points out how “postwar technocratic planners portrayed technological development as the ultimate embodiment of Frenchness and saw state-driven modernization as a means to unify, even homogenize, the French nation.” See Hecht, “Peasants, Engineers, and Atomic Cathedrals: Narrating Modernization in Postwar Provincial France,” French Historical Studies, vol. 20, no. 3 (Summer 1997), 381. And while this need to homogenize may have been a key impetus in unifying the nation following the disastrous consequences after WWII, by the late 1950s, France was once again dealing with the effects of a real war, being fought in Algeria, and a “cultural war,” characterized by the invasion of American goods into French society. As Berstein’s elaborates: “France, for [de Gaulle], was an almost mystical entity which could not be defined simply in terms of its national territory or its inhabitants. The struggle that de Gaulle led was in the service of this entity and of his particular conception of it: one full of greatness, beauty and generosity. Moreover, as he saw it, it was vital to use every means available to make France’s voice heard in the world, to defend its interests, to ensure that it was respected: in short, to ensure that it fulfilled its destiny, which was of far greater importance than that of any group or individual within it.” In order for de Gaulle and the new government to achieve the goals of making “France’s voice heard in the world, to defend its interests, to ensure that it was respected”, crucial decisions needed to be made, most pressingingly regarding the nation’s colonial predicament. The Algerian War “divided the nation, ruined its financial stability, provoked criticism of it at international level and prevented it from playing the leading world role it was destined for.” Determined to secure France’s position as an international leader, the Algerian crisis came to an end in March 1962, with de Gaulle pronouncing Algeria an independent country on July 3. The Algerian War finally came to an end in March 1962 after France and the Front de Libération National (FLN) signed the Evian Accords, or Evian Agreements. The Evian Accords promoted a formal cease-fire on March 19, 1962, and formalized the idea of cooperative exchange between the two countries. Among other things, the European French community in Algeria was guaranteed religious freedom and property rights as well as French citizenship with the option to choose between French and Algerian citizenship after three years. For more on the Algerian War, see: Alistair Home, A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962 (New York: NYRB Classics, 2006), and Jo Ann McCormack, Collective Memory: France and the Algerian War (Lanham, MD: Lexington Publishers, 2007). Once France had resolved its colonial problems, it had to secure its military, political and technological independence. All of these things combined would seemingly catapult France into a modern nation.

127
Gaulle’s presidency into one of the high points of French civilization.” If technology provided the military-industrial power for France to secure its independence and autonomy from the hands of NATO and other international organizations, then culture would be the “glue” that maintained “national unity and class harmony.” And culture for de Gaulle appeared to be as important as military prowess in crafting this new modern France.

iii. The new consumerism

The projects and developments spearheaded by the de Gaullist regime were not the only ones altering the French cultural and political landscape. American-style consumerism arrived full-force during this time. By the late 1950s, France had effectively entered into a new era – defined by, among other things, rapid economic growth and a continuous population increase. The latter demographic changes took place at a time of unprecedented economic expansion which was matched only by the rapid urbanization France experienced at this time. But it was in the rapid transformation of French

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324 Berstein. The Republic of de Gaulle, 125-127. Serge Berstein describes how the years during the Fifth Republic were characterized by economic growth as well as a continuous population increase. The latter was largely a result of uncontrolled immigration due to the decolonization process taking place between 1958 and 1962. As well, with the increase in births and decline in death rate during these years, the French population was significantly altered, with “shortages in the working population for most of the period of de Gaulle’s Republic; the quantitative and qualitative importance of youth in postwar French society; and the emergence of the phenomenon of the ‘third age’.” Statistics show that the average annual immigration jumped from 66,400 in the period from 1946 to 1955, and to 248,800 between 1956-1967. See James F. Hollifield, “Immigration and Modernization,” Searching for the New France, ed. James F. Hollifield and George Ross (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 113-150.
325 The urban and economic growth during the trente glorieuses has been well-documented and examined through various scholarly works. See Jean-Pierre Rioux, The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958, trans. Godfrey Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Serge Berstein; Richard F. Kuisel, Seducing the French: the Dilemma of Americanization. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Kristin Ross,
“everyday life” that these changes, along with the quick pace of modernization, became most evident.\textsuperscript{326}

Kristin Ross describes how in this period “French people, peasants and intellectuals alike, tended to describe the changes in their lives in terms of the abrupt transformations in home and transport: the coming of objects – large-scale consumer durables, cars and refrigerators – into their streets and homes, into their workplaces and their emplois du temps.\textsuperscript{327} Instead of a gradual and steady dispersion, the infiltration of such gadgets and appliances in war-ravaged French households was swift and all-consuming. Ross points out that the speed with which this modernization transformed France was at times problematic, given that it “burst onto a society that still cherished prewar outlooks.”\textsuperscript{328}

The increase in population coupled with the rise in purchasing power made it easy for the advertising industry to target distinct consumer groups, enticing each one with gadgets specific to their individual needs. “The car was billed as ‘l’amie de l’homme’... as a conjugal partner to what were commonly billed as ‘les amis de la femme’: household appliances.”\textsuperscript{329} As advertisements in \textit{Elle}, \textit{Marie-Claire}, and other magazines aimed at the female reader made clear, the home in particular was literally transformed into a fantasy space seemingly available to all strata of society. A French advertisement, for


\textsuperscript{326} The term “every life became a theoretical concept best associated with Henri Lefebvre.

\textsuperscript{327} Ross, 5.

\textsuperscript{328} Ibid., 4. French historian Richard Kuisel also describes how consumption and incomes grew rapidly between 1949 and 1958, gaining momentum in the years following. He writes: “Over this time span all wage earners experienced a sharp rise in purchasing power as incomes rose faster than the cost of living. Family strategies turned away from saving and investment, away from traditional values of building the family patrimony toward more present-minded enjoyment... More so than other Europeans, the French pursued consumption at the expense of investment or saving.” See Richard F. Kuisel, \textit{Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 104.

\textsuperscript{329} Kristin Ross, 90.
example, featuring a new Laden washing machine shows a couple about to embrace, with the caption linking conjugal bliss to the transformative power of the new appliance (fig. 34). Thus not only washing machines, but refrigerators, and other kitchen appliances were marketed as model gifts for wives, while epitomizing the latest in modern technology. However, the latest in consumer goods and technology were not only aimed at women. The population increase also made the number of youth made the younger generation a prime target for burgeoning businesses: [In] the 1960s...young people became the privileged target of business groups who saw the cultural innovations they embodied and the commercial possibilities they presented. Youth thus found itself directly appealed to – and in some respects conditioned – the resources of mass communication offering it means of expression specially tailored to a generation which enjoyed relative material prosperity.

The adolescent too became a major consumer, as “technological icons” such as scooters, transistor radios and television radically transformed their everyday life. If the generation gap had to do with the advent of a technological society unfamiliar to those who turned a nostalgic eye back to prewar France, then the question became how to make society as a whole believe that technology was ultimately the “basis and measure of the progress of society.”

36) that had been unheard of to those that had lived through the rations and shortages of the interwar years and WWII. In particular, progress in sectors such as petrochemistry led to the development of products which were instant commercial hits, such as “synthetic detergents, solvents and paints, antifreeze, synthetic rubbers, ethylene.” The plastics industry in turn witnessed a rapid growth of new materials that replaced outmoded ones: polystyrene took the place of bakelite, and vinyl became the material of choice for long-playing discs as well as floor coverings and paints. Of particular significance was the invention of polyethylene which completely transformed kitchenware, making lightweight yet sturdy household items. Indeed, the advances made in new materials permeated the very fabric of everyday life, with the appearance of synthetic textiles such as nylon, tergal and rilsan revolutionizing the clothing industry and making ironing a thing of the past. Plastic appeared everywhere – not only as a new material that attested to the achievements of new technologies, but also as a way of identifying oneself with progress and the latest innovations transforming the everyday. Even the art journal Cimaise wrote about the advent of these new materials. In a 1963 issue, a short article entitled La science fait des miracles pour les sols de nos maisons, the author praised science by writing: “Elle a créé de nouvelles matières; et ces matières ont servi à créer de nouveaux sols qui, de progrès en progrès, se sont adaptés à notre désir accru de confort et de vie facile.” The optical and kinetic artists, among them the Latin Americans,

335 Ibid., 325. “French homes were quickly invaded by a whole range of new products, many of which were to become household names – powders and liquids for cleaning and polishing, synthetic sponges, shampoos, new hard surfaces such as formica, cellophane wrapping, the inexpensive ball-point pen. Not without cause did Léo Ferré sing the charms of the ‘temps du plastique.’”
336 “La science fait des miracles pour les sols de nos maisons,” Cimaise (jan-fév. 1963), 113.
would take up such signs of the modern using the new materials like plastic and Plexiglas to underscore an identification with new technologies.

Despite such enthusiasm, however, the introduction of American consumer goods became the source of much debate during the 1950s, with many articles and publications dissecting the situation and weighing its pros and cons.\textsuperscript{337} Some supporters, such as the well known economist Jean Fourastié, who coined the phrase \textit{les trente glorieuses},\textsuperscript{338} referring to the thirty years of great economic prosperity that followed the end of WWII, promoted a technological future while embracing American developments.\textsuperscript{339} French author André Maurois, another enthusiastic advocate of America, wrote a number of accounts of the United States where he argued for the benefits of technology and “acknowledged that mass production entailed some uniformity but its benefits in liberating human beings from the meanest kind of work far outweighed its disadvantages.”\textsuperscript{340} But as historian Richard Kuisel points out, the negative readings of consumer society far outweighed the positive ones. The center-left magazine \textit{Esprit} characterized the United States as a materialist society. As literary critic for the journal Jean-Marie Domenach wrote: “This almost unlimited capacity to acquire and to consume

\textsuperscript{337} For an account of such texts, see Kuisel, 103-130. \textit{Le Monde} continued to convey its uneasiness about the new society across the Atlantic. \textit{Esprit} under the editorship of Albert Béguelin and then Jean-Marie Domenach was one of the most important reviews for the intelligentsia and continued its prewar Christian personalist assessment of America. The distinctive interpretation of \textit{américanisme} by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre appeared in \textit{Les Temps modernes}, while book-length studies of America were published by Claude Alphandéry, Cyrille Arnavon, André Maurois, Jacques Maritian, André Siegfried, and Claude Julien.”


is the fundamental characteristic of the American model." Reading between the lines, Domenach was perhaps alluding to a certain lack of cultivation of taste on the part of American society, one which did not discern among consumer goods, but rather focused on a crass excitement about the boundless resources the U.S. boasted. At the root of all of these discussions was the fear that Americanization would take over the French way of life and transform the country’s diverse culture into what many perceived was an overly homogenous American-style one.

iv. The critique of technology and consumerism

Since the late 1940’s and through the 1950’s critiques of Americanized culture and its associations with technology had been part of popular culture. One of the more entertaining and clever commentators and critics through the late 1940’s and 1950’s was the French filmmaker Jacques Tati. Several of his films, in particular *Jour de fête* (1947), *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953) and *Mon Oncle* (1958), foregrounded the impact that technology and mechanization had on postwar France. For example, in one of the opening scenes in *Les Vacances*, we encounter a train station, where families wait to depart on a much awaited vacation. Through the chatter of voices, an announcement is made through a loudspeaker regarding the status of the next train. Unfortunately, the message is inaudible, and passengers can only make out the platform number. Chaos ensues while people run to the new platform, only to hear the message repeated, again incomprehensible, giving a different platform number altogether. So much for technology in relation to labour and leisure. In another scene, the radio broadcast dictates the pace and routine of vacationers at a hotel. With little room for spontaneity and change, people

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eat according to schedule, and go to bed when the radio programs sign off. Writing about Jacques Tati’s postwar films, French historian Lee Hilliker explains of the film’s main character that “Hulot’s actions suggest and demonstrate alternative ways of interacting with and thinking about the everyday world and the new objects and technologies populating it...” Instead of rejecting technology, or reminiscing about the past, Tati, through Hulot, proposes an alternative to dealing with such a phenomenon. “Through a sense of spontaneity and play, he [Hulot] steps between the human and the technological and dismantles the latter, exposing it as subject to human reordering.”

By the 1960’s, however, more extensive and diversified analyses of the role played by new technologies in eroding familiar forms of social life would emerge. The French philosopher, sociologist, and theologian Jacques Ellul was a vocal detractor of technological advancements and wrote a number of books in which the central theme was the threat to human freedom created by modern technology. Coinciding with the arrival of consumerism, Ellul’s work, beginning with *La technique ou l’enjeu du siècle (The Technological Society)* attempts to expose the potential dangers inherent in a “technological society” or what is termed “technique” (the term refers to “all machines that tend to replace man...among these machines, one distinguishes: those that furnish energy, those that utilize energy, and those involved in information”). According to Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1980), 25. In the foreword to the English translation, Wilkinson notes what Ellul means by “technique”: “By technique, [Ellul] means far more than machine technology. Technique refers to any

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343 Ibid., 66.  
344 Ibid., 70.  
Ellul, the individual, subjected to the effects of technology, was slowly becoming a passive onlooker rather than an active agent in societal development. As Ellul explained:

In this decisive evolution, the human being does not play a part. Technical elements combine among themselves, and they do so more and more spontaneously. In the future, man will apparently be confined to the role of a recording device; he will note the effects of techniques upon one another, and register the results...Anything and everything which technique is able to produce is produced and accepted by the consumer. The belief that the human producer is still master of production is a dangerous illusion.347

Ellul’s deterministic position vis-à-vis technology removes the individual from any potential action. His concern is the conforming acceptance on the part of the individual in regards to the rapid changes that occur in everyday society, a feeling that one is submissive to the external forces of organized society, as a result becoming almost impotent in effecting change. And he is adamant about the way the individual loses agency within this system: “Technique is a means of apprehending reality, of acting on the world, which allows us to neglect all individual differences, all subjectivity. Technique alone is rigorously objective. It blots out all personal opinions. It effaces all individual, and even all collective, modes of expression.”348 It is as if, confronted with all these choices, there is no room for critical thought vis-à-vis the selection presented. Ellul’s prognosis is quite bleak, for not only does the individual lose the right to be heard or to even participate in society, but she loses her individuality.

Other critics would follow Ellul’s position and cite related concerns about technology and the new consumer culture. In an essay entitled The Crisis of Modern Society, published in complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result. Thus, it converts spontaneous and unreflective behavior into behavior that is deliberate and rationalized.”

347 Ibid., 79.
348 Ibid., 131.
1966, Cornelius Castoriadis, who had been a member of the French Communist Party before parting with the group in 1948 in order to help found a libertarian socialist group and the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, considered the alienating effects of modern society and the resulting apathy on the part of individuals.

There is a tremendous crisis of socialization. There is the phenomenon that we call privatization: people are, so to speak, withdrawing into themselves. There is practically no community life, ties become extremely disrupted, and so on. As a reaction to this there are new phenomena...that express the need for positive socialization. But socialization in the more general sense, that is, the feeling that what is going on at large is, after all, our own affair, that we do have to do something about it, that we ought to be responsible.  

According to Castoriadis, society had been undergoing profound changes, and while people may have benefited from technology and consumerism in numerous ways, the negative impact was made manifest by the impotence felt “before the enormous social machinery they have created that they no longer can understand or exert control over.”

In seeking to understand the relationship between individuals and social formations, Castoriadis underscored the alienating component of a new consumer society, and called for new forms of social interaction. Anticipating Ellul’s analysis of consumerism and technology, Castoriadis’ ideas, based on a Marxist critique of capitalist society, became prevalent during the late 1950s and 60s. In his text *Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne* (*Modern capitalism and revolution*) originally published in 1959, Castoriadis emphasized the lack of communal engagement in modern-day society, using “popular festivals” as an example of the inward turning of society.

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[Popular festivals] now survive only as *spectacle*, a physical conglomeration of individuals no longer positively communicating with each other, but merely coexisting through their anonymous and passive, juxtaposed relations...Each person is passive in relation to the community and no longer perceives the other as a possible subject of exchange, communication, and cooperation, but only as inert body limiting his own movements.\(^{351}\)

Castoriadis' solution lies in what he terms an "eruption" of class struggle. It is only in this way that "what is completely dead in instituted society can be revived, namely, a passion shared by people that becomes a source of action rather than passivity; emotions that do not send them back into isolation and a state of stupor, but rather toward a community that acts to transform what currently exists."\(^{352}\)

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard also pinpointed the negative effects of consumer culture. In *Le Système des Objets* (*The System of Objects*), a cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society published in 1968, the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard described the "latest" in home furnishings, such as "gadgets and robots", which represented the wave of the future. "Automatism is king...Consider merely our continual wishing for 'everything to work by itself', for every object to perform this miracle of minimum effort in the carrying out of its assigned function. For the user, automatism means a wondrous absence of activity..."\(^{353}\) Baudrillard is an important source here because he elucidates some of the ways in which society adopted these technological innovations, for better or worse. In other words, the notion that things work on their own – such as the kitchen appliances and other gadgets that seemingly reduced

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\(^{351}\) Ibid., 294.

\(^{352}\) Ibid., 295.

the everyday housewife’s work – had larger societal implications. Eradication of agency and initiative and a new passive citizen could lead to social alienation.

v. Technology, science, and the subversive qualities of the ludique: Latin American expatriates in Paris

The arrival and success of optical and kinetic art taken up by the Latin American artists in France coincided with the country’s influx of American-style consumerism and it is perhaps the similarities between the two – despite the warnings of Ellul and others – that made this type of art so popular at the time. Art historian and critic Sarah Rich compares optical art to the “passive-aggressive dynamic of consumer culture.”\(^{354}\) The same way that records and scooters beckoned the young consumers, or the way that kitchen appliances enticed the weary housewife, optico-kinetic art also seemed to “indulge viewer desire.” But this was nonetheless wrapped up in a certain manipulation of viewer experience. As Rich explains:

Compositions worked because of stimulus-response systems that circumvented the will of the onlooker. So Op’s illusions did not give one the sense of possessing what was pictured, so much as they possessed one through the picture. In the process, Op reproduces the deep structure of the consumer experience. Like any good sales pitch, it commands even as it panders. It claims to be all about your needs, your experiences, but its techniques ultimately rely upon mechanisms of control.\(^{355}\)

In this way, the appeal of kinetic and optical art was linked to the mechanisms of desire generated by the novelty and accessibility of the latest consumer goods. The manufacturing of desire produced by popular culture and mass media and advertisements had more serious implications than simple mindless entertainment, a criticism which has plagued optical and kinetic art. Consumer culture plays a role in shaping everyday life

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\(^{355}\) Ibid.
and an individual’s social behavior, and if one recognizes its impact on society, then one can be better aware of the ways in which mass media and popular culture influence culture and society. The kinetic and optical art of the Latin Americans, through similar tactics of engagement and seeming entertainment, as I will elaborate, held within it the potential for viewers and participants to become self-aware and more in tune with their actions and the way they could have profound implications in the everyday. But far from mere entertainment, which presupposes a passive viewer who takes in the diversion presented before her, play is an act that requires active participation.

The notion of play – but specifically a ludic conception of play – was central to artists in France. The work of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, in particular Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture, published in the mid-1950’s is of import here. Writing about play, Huizinga argued: “[Play] is a significant function – that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.”

One of the more fundamental characteristics of play, however, is that it is free, “it is in fact freedom.” In the context of a technological society, play seems to have helped artists indulge in technological advancements by being able to take what they wanted and reject other aspects of such “progress.” As art historian Larry Busbea notes, subversion is important here: “The requirement that play subvert the profit value of a given activity

357 Here I mean a productive concept of play.
359 Ibid., 1.
helped certain postwar avant-gardists to actively engage technology and capitalism by extracting its play elements, as opposed to simply rejecting it altogether. The strategies of artists like Boto, Cruz-Diez, Soto and Le Parc can be related to Busbea's notion that "play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex." While seemingly fun and entertaining, the kinetic works of these Latin American artists held within them a social potential that could be exploited by viewers. These artworks set in motion could call up the possibilities for change in a society that was constantly in flux – in turn empowering viewers by giving them agency to activate their environments outside of state and institutional control.

The Hungarian artist Nicolas Schöffer, a frequent exhibitor at the Denise René Gallery was a key figure in the aftermath of the 1955 Le Mouvement show in terms of asserting the ludic aspects of modern consumer goods. Schöffer sought interactivity through cybernetic sculptures, but while kinetic and optical artists looked to a reciprocal engagement with the artwork, his 1956 sculpture Cysp I (fig. 37) stood on its own, taking on "human-like characteristics." Considered the father of cybernetic art, Schöffer's Cysp I made use of electronic computations developed by the Philips Company, the title referencing the first letters of cybernetics and spatiodynamic. The sculpture is set on a cylindrical base mounted on four rollers, which contains the mechanism and the electronic brain and the sixteen plates are operated by small motors located under their

361 Huizinga, 1.
362 Founded by the theoretical and applied mathematician Norbert Weiner (1894-1964), cybernetics was defined as the study of control and communication in the animal and the machine, with implications for engineering, systems control, computer science, biology, philosophy and the organization of society.
axis. Photo-electric cells and a microphone built into the sculpture catch all the variations in the fields of color, light and sound intensity. And as a result, the sculpture reacts to changes in any of these sectors. As one reviewer wrote: “Cet être artificiel s’excite à la couleur bleue (avance ou recule rapidement), se calme au rouge (comme au bruit) et s’exalte au silence. Il se déchaine dans l’obscurité et s’apaise à la lumière intense.” 363

Much like the new toasters, refrigerators and dishwashers that replaced manual labor with the touch of a switch, Cysp I literally took the place of a human being (fig. 38). 364

The links between art and the new technologies was gaining momentum during this period. Art critic Pierre Guéguen proclaimed in a 1960 issue of Aujourd’hui, art et architecture that art and science were born of the same matter, with Guéguen promoting an art that signaled the present moment:

364 The rapid advances in technology influenced not only the visual arts, but music as well, as evidenced by musique concrète, a style of avant-garde music that relies on natural environmental sounds and other non-musical noises to create music. See Timothy Taylor, Strange Sounds: Music, Technology and Culture. (Routledge: New York, 2001). Paralleling kinetic art and its adoption of technological innovations to create original works of art, musique concrète was made possible by the developments of microphones and the commercial availability of the magnetic tape recorder (created in 1939). Pioneered by the Parisian electronic engineer and radio broadcaster Pierre Schaeffer, emphasis was placed on the importance of play (in his terms, jeu) in the creation of music. Carrying with it the same double meaning as the English verb play, to enjoy oneself by interacting with one’s surroundings, as well as to operate a musical instrument, this emphasis on the ludic aspect of music also serves to link it to the type of art the Latin American artists were practicing in Paris, which prioritized the playful intervention of the spectator. In 1949, Schaeffer met the composer Pierre Henry and the two founded the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète. By 1958, Henry had become more interested in techniques outside of the strict musique concrète that Schaeffer theorized, and broke away from the group in order to establish his own studio, the Studio Apsome. Linking the kinetic art movement even further with musique concrète, as early as 1956 kinetic artist Nicolas Schöffer collaborated in an avant-garde ballet choreographed by Maurice Béjart and accompanied by the music of Pierre Henri. Reviewed in Art d’Aujourd’hui, the critic described the ballet as follows: “Cette sculpture [CYS P 1] sera présentée pour la première fois dans un spectacle de ballet organisé par Maurice Béjart. Elle va exécuter un pas de deux avec Maurice Béjart lui-même sur un accompagnement sonore de Pierre Henry. La sculpture spatiodynamique et cybernétique sera la première réalisation qui permettra, dans un spectacle, de remplacer l’homme par une oeuvre d’art abstraite, agissant de sa propre initiative grâce à l’électronique.” “La sculpture spatiodynamique et cybernétique.” Art d’aujourd’hui, art et architecture, n. 6 (janvier 1956), 27.
Martha Boto, an Argentinean who settled in Paris in 1959, would like Schöffer, mesmerize the public with the intrusion of mechanization into the realm of art (fig. 39). Boto’s work attempted to distill time through mechanical and electrical means, a preoccupation that in certain ways reflected the fast pace of industrialization and technological progress. One of the only women working in this vein, particularly striking are her “lumino-kinetic boxes” for which she became known in 1964. She initially experimented with various types of materials, such as stainless steel, aluminum, and Plexiglas, but focused especially on their interaction with light. Boto’s desire to move beyond what the animated surface offered led her to incorporate electrical components into the works, multiplying the effects of light and its support.

Boto’s 1963 sculpture *Contraction et Expansion* (fig. 40) is composed of a box with a tarnished Plexiglas screen at one end onto which dozens of circular flashes of light are projected. These light flickers are in constant movement, dancing over one another, changing size, with some dimming and disappearing into others. As the spectator looks on, the images continuously change and transform the shape of the screen, and as one moves further away from or closer to the panel, the shadows that form on the screen make it come to life. In *Contraction et Expansion*, the interplay of circles and planes rely on rapid movement and intense luminous effects. Ironically, the playful and dancing interplay of light and movement, though, is produced through technology itself. Located

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behind the panel is a fixed light source, a lamp, which lights another sheet of Plexiglas which is in turn activated by an electrical motor. Attached to this sheet, which is in constant motion, are hollow Plexiglas tubes which act as conduits for the light that is subsequently reflected onto the original Plexiglas sheet that the viewer sees.\textsuperscript{366} In other words, the ephemeral dance of bopping lights is in fact the result of intricate mechanization.

Boto became preoccupied with the problem of spectator participation engaging with the audience through strategies of visual or physical displacement. Though she incorporated actual motors in her work, a technique distinct from the purely optical effects utilized by Cruz-Diez or Soto’s reliance on environmental factors that will be discussed at a later point in this chapter, Boto insisted the viewer physically feel and connect with an art constantly in motion. For example, working primarily with movement and light, Boto’s \textit{Labyrinthe Diagonal} from 1965 (fig. 41) uses the manipulation of continuous light sources to make the viewer aware of “the balance between the sensation of movement (its phenomenological aspects) and the idea of movement (the fact that we watch the contraction and expansion processes).”\textsuperscript{367} The outermost surface of the piece is composed of a diagonal pattern made out of aluminum. The depth of the aluminum (approximately 10 centimeters deep) creates a mirror-like surface on which the “ground” of the canvas is reflected. This ground is made up of a series of interconnected squares, which are punctuated by tiny dots, which allow the light source hidden in the back of the


work to shine through. These dots are then reflected on the aluminum creating strange square and chevron patterns that play with the viewer’s vision. No longer sure what is the actual light source and what is its reflection, the spectator is caught in a state of phenomenological confusion, unclear of what is “effect” and what is “real.”

This marrying of art and technology is at the heart of Boto’s oeuvre and as she explains, is absolutely necessary in embracing the future: “The involvement of Art with Technology has to do with the artist’s need to use electrical and mechanical means to depict dynamism. The mere fact that Art has incorporated light and movement through technology attests to the urban and architectural prospect of future society.”

Boto’s remark rejects a nostalgic view of the past, firmly calling for art, society and the sciences to be interrelated.

The utopia that Boto encouraged attempts to integrate technological advancements to characterize the transition from a society that only a few years earlier had been marked by the destruction of war and rationing of food and materials, to one that was constantly in motion, keeping up with the latest inventions that modern life had to offer. Others agreed. In a 1964 issue of Combat, Jean-Albert Cartier cited the arrival of an art of “movement” as what was needed in an era characterized by speed:

La recherche du dynamisme [est] devenue l’une des préoccupations majeures de l’art contemporain...Il eût été d’ailleurs étrange qu’une époque comme la notre entièrement placée sous le signe de la rapidité ne réclame pas un jour ou l’autre une peinture également animée.

368 Martha Boto, “Propos de Martha Boto,” Artist’s papers, n.d.
Cartier cited the works of Nicolas Schöffer, and Latin American artists Boto and her partner Gregorio Vardánega. The works of the latter two were presented at the *Maison des Beaux-Arts* in 1964 and Cartier wrote of the two Latin Americans: “Leur exposition attache, séduit, hallucine, nous transporte enfin dans un monde de fée réie, dans un espace indéterminé, au milieu d’astres encore inconnus.” Even though Cartier speaks about the seduction and indeterminate or dreamlike spaces the works of these artists evoke, his convictions concerning the responsibility of contemporary artists remains grounded in the social fabric of the community: “L’art a perdu de son intimité, il n’est plus delectation privée, il faut lui donner un autre sens social, le faire descendre dans la rue, que l’artiste soit le collaborateur de l’ingénieur ou de l’architecte.” For Cartier, contemporary artists needed to ground their work in the everyday societal developments that characterized the period. By linking artists to architects and engineers, Cartier implicated the practitioners of kinetic and optical art to the technological and urban transformations that distinguished 1950’s and 60’s France.

In contrast to Schöffer and Boto whose ingenious use of gadgetry fascinated the public, artists like Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto demanded a viewer who threw off their passive status. Informed by color theory and its possible effects on the viewer, Cruz-Diez’s work advocated an active interchange between the public and the work art. In his 1960 *Physichromie no. 126* (fig. 42), the viewer is beckoned in a way that recalls the works of Vasarely, particularly the latter’s black and white paintings of the 1950’s and early 1960’s discussed in Chapter 2. In those works, Vasarely gave the flat canvas a

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370 Ibid.
371 Ibid.
372 But it is an embodied eye that depends on movement, and not a static disembodied line of sight.
virtual third dimension by distorting the figure/ground relationship in such a way that the figure simultaneously emerges into and disappears from the spectator's line of vision, often with the help of a gridded base. Similarly, Cruz-Diez focused on the illusionistic interplay of foreground and background in order to jar the viewer's sense of space and to initiate an engaged, participatory experience with the work of art, setting it apart from the geometric abstraction of Herbin or Magnelli described in the previous chapter.

For example, Cruz-Diez divided *Physichromie no. 126* into four equal panels or squares. Seen from a considerable distance, these sections, predominantly filled with vertical black and white stripes, blend together and give the effect of various shades of grey. Yet, closer inspection reveals that zigzags interrupt this continuous repetition of vertical lines and initiate an optical illusion, apparently darkening or lightening sections within each square. As the viewer approaches the work, its tactile quality becomes apparent; the picture plane is not a smooth surface, but consists of thin strips of cardboard glued perpendicularly onto the support. Concerned with the effects of color and light on the retina of the beholder's eye, Cruz-Diez also incorporated a temporal dimension by initiating a perceptual and phenomenological dialogue based on the position of the viewer vis-à-vis the work. By treating color, or in this case black and white, as an active agent, Cruz-Diez transformed *Physichromie no. 126* into more than a static, two-dimensional object, making it an embodied sensorial experience.

This manipulation of the spectator is also present in Cruz-Diez's 1959 work *Additive Yellow* (fig. 43) which at first glance appears to be a black square divided by a thin line.

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373 Julio César Schara, *Carlos Cruz Diez y el arte cinético* (Mexico City: Arte e Imagen, 2001), 80.
that diagonally bisects the image into two halves. Closer inspection, however, further clarifies this intervention. Cruz-Diez composed the diagonal of two almost superimposed lines that form a compressed and elongated X. This seemingly indiscernible, yet critical color intrusion onto an otherwise austere black void plays with the spectator’s vision. When standing directly in front of and close to the work, these distinct colors, their overlap, and the interplay of the stripes are clear and unmistakable. But any shift in this stable viewing position also destabilizes this reading. When viewed at a distance, for example, the two narrow bands of color, one green and the other red, seem to blend together, and hints of yellow appear at the points of overlap. This interplay of colors creates the illusion of a third color without it ever being physically present in the work.

As Cruz-Diez has explained, “The juxtaposition of these two fragments, now transformed into ‘chromatic event modules,’ creates a third color, one that is constantly changing and dependent upon the distance and angle of vision of the spectator, as well as on the light source present at a particular moment in time.”[374] [Translation mine]

In *Additive Yellow*, as the title implies, Cruz-Diez employs additive color synthesis, a theory that deals with the color effects of varying light stimuli. While subtractive color synthesis explains the use of pigments and dyes to create colors, additive color synthesis deals primarily with the color effects of light, as in a cathode-ray TV monitor, which employs a combination of red, green, and blue phosphor dots. At a significant distance from the TV screen, the eye does not distinguish the individual dots but rather

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374 Ibid., 71. “La yuxtaposición de estas dos fragmentaciones transformadas en módulos de acontecimiento cromático es el origen de un tercer color cambiante, inestable y condicionado por la distancia, el ángulo de visión del espectador y las variaciones de la luz-ambiente.”
375 Subtractive color synthesis uses paints, inks, dyes and other natural colorants to create color by absorbing some wavelengths of light and reflecting others.
melds them together to create the final image. *Additive Yellow* functions in a similar fashion. That is, when viewed close-up, the image’s thin green and red stripes simply overlap without causing a third color to appear; but viewed from a distance, a third color emerges, a transient one that relies on an number of variables. Cruz-Diez’s interest in the properties of color demonstrates his belief that color is not fixed, but is instead something that changes depending on external circumstances such as the interaction of light and shadow, and the position of the spectator. Thus, it is not only the fleeting experience of a third color generated by the interplay of the red and green lines that is of importance here. Also significant is the experience of the viewer, whose particular stance, whether stationary before the work or meandering around it, destabilizes an otherwise stable work and creates new optical and sensorial effects.

Read in this way, the kind of viewership Cruz-Diez established can be linked to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of experience as embodied, rather than exclusively optically or empirically based. While there is no specific reference to Merleau-Ponty in the writings of or interviews with artists such as Cruz-Diez, Soto, or the other artists this study considers, it is quite likely that they were familiar with the debates surrounding the French philosopher. With articles appearing in popular journals of the time, such as *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the ideas that Merleau-Ponty had initially launched in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945, gained currency during the 1950s. Challenging binary oppositions, that of subject and object, self and the world, Merleau-Ponty emphasized the primacy of lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the body acts

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as a unique medium that determines one’s relationship to the rest of the world as much as it depends on the external forces acting upon it. Seen in this light, the work of the optico-kinetic artists challenged the primacy placed on visual perception and invited the public to embrace the other senses, and explore their liberatory potential, a freedom that was literally “set in motion” by the work of art.

Challenging the Renaissance notion of a painting functioning as a “window onto the world,” a fixed and eternal image, Cruz-Diez’s oeuvre instead engages both spectator and object in a perceptual dance that foregrounds the relationship between viewing subject and visual object. Having written extensively on his exploration of color theory, Cruz-Diez described these works as follows:

*Physichromies* are structures that reveal different responses to and other conditions of color. Their transformation relies on the quality of light and on the spectator, projecting color in space and creating an evolving situation. The accumulation of ‘chromatic event modules’ initiate different additive, reflective or subtractive color climates.377 [Translation mine.]

It is this continuous evolution of the image that makes Cruz-Diez’s works feel more like animated, even kinetic, surfaces rather than stable works of art, making spectators active participants in what was normally a passive viewing position. Instead of focusing on vision, reflection and meditation, the new art invited *holders to become actors. An image was no longer “forced” upon a public; rather, there was a new sensual freedom that broke with the past and demanded a reciprocal engagement between beholder and art work. In demystifying

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377 Schara, 73. “Las fisicromías son estructuras que revelan diferentes comportamientos y otras condiciones del color. Se modifican según el desplazamiento de la luz ambiente y del espectador, proyectando el color en el espacio y creando una situación evolutiva. La acumulación de módulos de acontecimiento cromático hace aparecer y desaparecer diversos “climas de color” aditivo, reflejo o sustractivo.”

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this relationship, the optico-kinetic artists promoted an art that was accessible to society as a whole.

Jesús Rafael Soto also challenged the passive modern subject. His 1957 *Première Vibration (First Vibration)* (fig. 44), exhibited at the Denise René Gallery consists of thin wire coils that appear to hover in space, suspended in front of a large square background of thin black stripes on a white ground. Soto’s piece, which uses both screen and wire to create an optical experience based on the vibration of the metal coils in front of the striped ground, encourages the physical interaction of the viewer. The movement of the coils in response to changing air currents and the viewer’s presence around the work instigate a participatory exchange between viewer and artwork. Through strategies of play, Soto not only manipulates the viewer’s sense of space, but also establishes a dialogue between the viewer and the work in which the body of the viewer triggers the movement or completion (one that is in continuous motion) of the work of art itself. By combining a two-dimensional ground of geometric patterning with three-dimensional items such as rods, wires and nylon twine, Soto incorporates kinetic elements into his production, adding elements of modern technology and industrial materials to the painting. At some moments, the aluminum coils distort the perfectly arranged striped background while at others the twisted spirals appear to melt into it. As one moves forward and backward and side to side in front of the work, the hanging elements take on a life of their own, challenging and questioning our visual acuity. Invariably linked to the presence of the spectator, *First Vibration/Première Vibration* produces an ambiguous
sense of space within the artwork itself, which in turn hinges on the actual distance between the work and the viewer.

vi. **The reception of optico-kinetic art and the challenge to tachisme and l’art informel**

While Soto’s work was initially introduced to the Parisian public through *Le Mouvement* in 1955, the years following the exhibition made the Venezuelan artist a major proponent of kinetic and optical art. This new, exciting, and imaginative style would come to typify the late 50s through the 60s in France, battling *tachisme* and *l’art informel* as the main defining movement of an (albeit brief) era. Work, such as *Première Vibration*, were being acclaimed by critics as early as 1956, and by unexpected sources. A 1956 show at the Galerie Denise René which included the works of three artists, among them Soto, received praise in the journal *Cimaise*, an advent supporter of *tachisme* and lyrical abstraction:

> Des trois jeunes artistes groupés à la Galerie Denise René, Soto et Agam se laissent guider, avant tout, par la curiosité d’expériences portant sur des matériaux et des procédés...Plus fascinantes sont les constructions en Plexiglas de Soto, faites dans un but d’illusions optiques qui apportent le trouble dans nos notions visuelles...Toute cette fluctuation est si alarmante qu’on ne supporterait guère ces oeuvres chez soi, si attirantes qu’elles soient dans cette exposition.378

The critic described the works of Soto as fascinating and the kinetic works in general as “appealing/attractive.” Yet the works of Soto and Agam, although critic Herta Wescher describes them as captivating, were too removed from a classical form of art and envisioning them in one’s home was nothing short of “alarming.”

378 Herta Wescher, “Abner, Agam, Soto,” *Cimaise* n. 7-8 (juin-août 1956), 46. “Out of three young artists showing at Galerie Denise René, Soto and Agam let themselves be guided by the curiosity of materials and process...More fascinating are Soto’s Plexiglas constructions, whose goal is to trouble our visual acuity through optical illusions...As attractive as these works are here, though, it would be impossible to have them at home, given the disturbing visual fluctuations.” Translation mine.
Transformable and movable works, often with the artist’s process underscored, were gaining critical acclaim. In June of 1956, *Aujourd’hui, art et architecture* published an article on the work of Israeli kinetic artist, Yaacov Agam, entitled *Une esthétique nouvelle: les œuvres transformables.* The critic emphasized that Agam’s transformable works offered more than just a “single adventure”, the most important one being, of course, the spectator’s ability to modify the work at will. And according to the critic, isn’t this what everyone has always dreamed of doing?

Quel amateur de peinture n’a rêvé devant un tableau de maître d’abaisser un bras levé depuis des siècles, d’écarter une branche, de déplacer une table, de changer un élément abstrait?... Crainte superstitieuse ou adoration, l’homme de jadis demeurait passif devant ce qui le dépassait et parfois l’écrasait. Il a pris aujourd’hui conscience de ses pouvoirs ; il entend en user ; il revendique son droit à agir sur les choses. 

Le Lionnais voiced what is seemingly every layperson’s fantasy when it comes to art, and more generally, when dealing with situations that are apparently out of our control. Typically art in a gallery or museum is at a distance from its audience, physically and often conceptually as well. By allowing the viewer more agency to participate in the work, to make an intervention, the art object becomes more immediately relevant and potentially engaged with the times. But the author even suggests such work is more interesting because of its political possibilities: “The man of the past remained passive in the face of that which he did not understand...he has today come to terms with what lies within his reach/his powers; he intends to use it, he asserts his right to act on things.” In other words, this new type of art, which empowers its audience, contains within it a trace of the utopian promise of previous generations, akin to that alive in post-revolutionary

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380 Ibid., “Who hasn’t dreamed of being able to move the arm of a figure in a painting, or remove a branch of a tree, shift the position of a table?” Translation mine.
USSR (though without its associated political parties and institutional infrastructure) or emerging in the theories of the Dutch De Stijl artists. As well, it seems to foreshadow the increased radicalism of the 1960s where the "personal becomes the political." Here, the viewer’s personal choices and experience become at first the means through which to radicalize or shake up the French art world. But the hope, for many of the artists producing optical and kinetic art, was that this empowering experience through which an audience is activated — an audience representative of the whole of society, not just those inclined to visit galleries and museums — would have implications beyond just the cultural realm.

Even though this was all being played out in *Aujourd'hui, art et architecture*, an obvious supporter of geometric abstraction, these reviews and the comparisons they evoked were becoming more and more prevalent. By September 1957, even Michel Ragon, a major advocate of *tachisme* described his disillusionment with that style: "Abstract art that we had known previously as an art ignored by the masses, scorned by the dealers and the main part of the critics...is now in the papers, in the novels, in the statistics and in the comic strips...Of course I still like it, but I preferred it when it was still fresh. It begins to smell badly."\(^{381}\) In other words, the art had become so accessible (to the public), that by 1957 it had lost its original edge. These words contrast starkly with his praise a year later of the "spatiodynamic" works of Nicolas Schöffer who exhibited with the kinetic and optical artists: "Dirons-nous qu’il est sculpteur, qu’il est peintre, qu’il est ingénieur, qu’il est mécano-électricien? Mieux, je pense, est de dire que Nicolas Schöffer est un homme

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\(^{381}\) Michel Ragon, “A little balance sheet for everyone’s use,” *Cimaise* n.1 (sept/oct 1957), 8.
These sentiments had been made clear as early as the mid-fifties as André Bloc, one of the founders of the former Art d’aujourd’hui, by then Aujourd’hui, art et architecture, proclaimed in a January 1956 issue that tachisme was passé, calling it a trend lacking any sort of staying power: “Nous assistons à un débordement de peinture dite ‘tachiste’...Ce déferlement n’engage plus une bataille, ne trace plus une voie, mais exprime plutôt le souci d’une mode très passagère...” With works of art like those of Boto and Schöffer, which embraced new materials and the latest in technological advancements, tachisme and lyrical abstraction appeared to be losing ground both among the artistic intelligentsia as well as the general public. Recalling Bloc’s remarks that tachisme had passed its prime, in another issue of Aujourd’hui, art et architecture in 1956, the art critic Guy Habasque had this to say:

Vouloir détacher l’artiste du monde réel qui l’entoure, de son environnement matériel et social, c’est le vouer à l’échec et à l’isolement. Les tachistes et leurs champions portent volontiers l’anathème sur les artistes constructeurs en les accusant de ne pas se dégager suffisamment du monde extérieur. Mais l’art tient par toutes ses racines au monde et à la civilisation qui l’entourent ; il en fait partie intégrante...Il devient de plus en plus évident que le tachisme représente une réaction de l’inconscient contre les formes organisées de la société technicienne actuelle et qu’il sert de refuge à des êtres incapables de s’adapter à la nouvelle

382 Ragon, “Schöffer,” Cimaise n. 1 (octobre-novembre 1958), 47. “Shall we say that he is a sculptor, a painter, an engineer or an electrician? Even better, I think, is to qualify Schöffer as an inventive individual, a passionate researcher...” Translation mine.
383 André Bloc, “La peinture est-elle dans une situation critique?” Aujourd’hui, art et architecture, n. 6 (janvier 1956), 5. “We are witnesses to an excess of ‘tachiste’ style painting...this surge is no longer engaged in a battle, no longer clears a path, but rather expresses the worries of a passing mode.” Translation mine.
As Habasque argued, tachisme tried to distance the artist from the world around him/her, a strategy which implies that the aesthetic experience was intended to be transcendent, meant to transport the viewer from the here and now of the gallery setting to a uniquely cerebral and interior space. While the tachistes criticized the constructivists for not being able to distance themselves enough from reality, according to Habasque this refusal to acknowledge one’s social moment is in fact reactionary in nature. It is a rejection of progress. Habasque’s argument was not new but is actually a question which plagued avant-garde production throughout the 20th century: “is art about transcendence or the everyday?”

The op and kinetic artists practicing in France during the 1950s, in a sense tried to have it both ways. They were interested in connecting to the purity, utopian aspirations, and intellectual rigor of a tradition of geometric abstraction, while at the same time engaging with the ways in which everyday life was besieged by consumer culture and new technologies.

While l’art informel and tachisme may have been overstayed its welcome (which is not to say that it still wasn’t going strong, with many galleries still showing the works of these artists, such as Soulages, Mathieu and others), kinetic and optical art started gaining ground, competing with “hot” abstraction. The reasons for this were multiple: not only

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384 Guy Habasque, “L’aventure de l’art abstrait,” *Aujourd’hui, art et architecture*, n. 8 (juin 1956). “In removing the artist from the real world, from his/her social and material environment, their success is doomed. The tachistes and their supporters accuse constructivists of being too involved with the real world. But art from its very roots is tied to the civilization that surrounds it, it is in fact an integral part of it...It is becoming more evident that tachisme represents a reaction from the unconscious against the advances put forth by the technical society of today and serves as a haven for those incapable of adapting to this new civilization...” Translation mine.

was it an art that was “socialistic” in that it beckoned all viewers regardless of status or prior artistic knowledge, but optico-kinetic art exuded a certain complicity with the technological innovations that defined the fifties and sixties. Instead of being nostalgic of the past, as Tati’s films often demonstrated, kinetic art professed a confident merger of art and technology for the benefit of society.

vii. Rethinking the everyday: GRAV and strategies of participation

Artists and intellectuals who called for renewed social engagement were in part responding to the emergent interest in “everyday life”. Initially theorized by Henri Lefebvre in his 1947 work Critique of Everyday life (Critique de la vie quotidienne I: Introduction), the everyday took on increased importance in the aftermath of WWII. While the end of the war brought about renewed joy and hope in a society that was quickly changing – in the words of Lefebvre, “In the enthusiasm of the Liberation, it was hoped that soon life would be changed and the world transformed,”386 – the return to daily routines quickly became the norm, clouding over this postwar “enthusiasm” and making the repetitiveness of the everyday more difficult to bear.387 But it was here that Lefebvre located the potential for transformation and creative energy: within the very monotony of routine lay the key to societal change, even revolution. In his 1958 foreword to the second edition of Critique of Everyday Life, Lefebvre outlined the numerous changes that had taken hold of France since the Liberation and since the first edition of

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his book, and more pointedly, how his study was only then receiving the attention it deserved.

During the last ten years the development of research in the social sciences has shown that the work was on target, that its point of view is well-founded. Problems of everyday life and studies of everyday life have become increasingly important in the minds of historians, ethnographers, philosophers, sociologists, as well as of writers, artists and journalists.\textsuperscript{388}

Of particular importance in the passage above is how Lefebvre cites artists and works of art as one of the new areas being developed vis-à-vis the everyday: “There has been a proliferation of books about everyday life, and bit by bit a method to confront everyday life with ideas apparently far removed from it, such as myths, ceremonies, works of art, is being developed.”\textsuperscript{389}

The “everyday” and art practices as sites of potential cultural and social change would be developed significantly by the \textit{Situationist International}, a group of cultural activists who came together in the mid-1950s, formed by members of various avant-garde groups like the \textit{International Lettrists}, the \textit{Society for an Imaginist Bauhaus}, and COBRA. Building on Lefebvre’s concept, the \textit{Situationist International} interpreted his notion of the everyday in a predominantly spatial way, devising a number of inventive strategies for exploring cities.\textsuperscript{390} They used \textit{psychogeography}, defined by Guy Debord, one of the founding members of the \textit{Situationist International}, as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the

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\item[388] Lefebvre, \textit{Critique of Everyday Life}, 7.
\item[389] Ibid., 7.
\item[390] Debord outlined the major points of psychogeography in “The theory of the \textit{derive},” from 1958: “In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there... But the dérive includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities.” \textit{Situationist International Anthology}, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995), 50.
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emotions and behavior of individuals." With their focus on urban space, the
Situationist International developed and practiced a critique of capitalist culture which
had a part in instigating the riots of May 1968. But years before this eruption, the
Situationist International had already developed a certain "phenomenology of urban
life." Echoing similar concerns as Ellul, Lefebvre and Castoriadis, concerning the
alienation inherent in modern-day capitalist society, the Situationist International
proposed "the conscious construction of "situations," or theatrical environments inside
the urban environment – acts of cultural sabotage or diversions that might strengthen the
growing bohemian culture." Lefebvre and the Situationist International shared a
similar view of consumer capitalism, that it was a "bedeviled world and an alienated
spectacle, but a world in which the possibility for an alternative social life has not yet
been foreclosed." And it was precisely in the everyday that the possibility for "an
alternative social life" would emerge. As Lefebvre highlighted in his 1968 work
Everyday Life in the Modern World (La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne): "Only
when considering the life of the working classes did it become clear that there was a
power concealed in everyday life's apparent banality, a depth beneath its triviality,

something extraordinary in its very ordinariness."
The work of *Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel* or GRAV—the acronym evoking the seriousness of the group's enterprise—testifies to the interest in the everyday on the part of this international collective co-founded by Argentinean Julio Le Parc. In April 1960, Georges Boudaille wondered about the future of *l'art informel* given the advent of kinetic and optical art:

> On en revient, cette année, à se demander si ce genre de peinture [l'abstraction géométrique] n'est pas en définitive, plus honnête. Il est ce qu'il est et ne s'en cache pas. Il ne prétend pas non plus signifier plus qu'il ne représente et je me demande si nous n'assistérons pas, un jour prochain, à un renouveau du constructivisme.396

Denise René was up to date with these currents, and continuing in her geometric vein, organized the first GRAV exhibition in May 1961. By taking this young group under her wing, critics were once again drawn to the Galerie Denise René, as attested to by favorable reviews by Michel Ragon, who defined GRAV as a group “qui part en guerre contre l'individualisme des artistes”397 and Pierre Restany, who stated that their work offered “un apport extrêmement intéressant pour l'analyse d'ensemble de la situation actuelle.”398 Seeking to eliminate the word “art,”399 GRAV looked to make their works as accessible as possible to the common people, with a belief that it was time to “modify the work of art-spectator relationship by asking the spectator for a different kind of participation.”400

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397 Michel Ragon, “Centre de recherche d'art visuel,” *Cimaise* no. 54 (juillet-août 1961), 90.
In their first collective work, presented at the third Paris Biennale of 1963, the collective GRAV with its Latin American component, proposed a work that broke away from the intimate contemplation Cartier claims was outmoded. With *Labyrinth* (fig. 45), the artists of GRAV created an interactive space, composed of twenty sections where different situations were presented, and which not only forced the viewers to engage willingly, and other times “unintentionally,” with their surroundings, but also promoted an active engagement among the people walking through the maze. Before entering the labyrinth, the viewer is already clued in that she is about to enter an “other” space through the positioning of movable columns (fig. 46) at the entrance to the piece. These moving units can camouflage some of the participants, while others may hide behind them, already setting the stage for a game-like experience (fig. 47).

The labyrinth is a rectangular space within the museum or gallery environment, at once setting it apart from the usual museum conventions yet simultaneously transforming the museum space from one of contemplation and observation to one of active participation. The first rooms of the labyrinth propose what GRAV termed “visual activation.” For example, in one of the sections was François Morellet’s *Répartition aléatoire de 40,000 carrés*, which produces a shimmering and visually vibrating effect in blue and red while the person walks through the room. The room itself is completely covered with small squares (the *40,000 carrés*), half in red and the rest in blue. Surrounded by these intense sparkling hues, the viewer is bombarded with color in such a way that the walls almost seem to move. Other rooms call up “unintentional active participation.” In space number five, the viewer is required to pass through it in order to get to the other side, and
traverses through a series of moving reflecting sheets with the walls covered in aluminum. As one walks through, one cannot help but bump into and nudge the metal sheets which are subsequently activated, increasing the number of reflected images, as well as making noise. In the final section of the GRAV labyrinth, the room with the cylinder with holes in it that, manipulated by the spectator, creates a series of unstable images, situations required “intentional active participation”. Even though some situations seem out of the participant’s/viewer’s control, such as those characterized by environmental and visual aggression, they serve to make the viewer more aware of and responsible for their modes of behavior, all the while knowing that she or he is free to withdraw from the piece at any time. *Labyrinth* and other works by GRAV put the onus on the participant to accept or reject the circumstances offered – and if accepted, one must decide which way to go. In other words, these works underscore the viewer’s/participants role in determining new and unforeseen circumstances. As they emphasized in their 1963 tract *Assez de mystifications II (An end to mystification II)*: “If present-day art embraces social concerns, it must also embrace that eminently real social phenomenon, the spectator. As far as it is possible, we want to free the spectator from the apathetic reliance which makes him passively accept not only what is forced upon him as art, but a whole system of life as well.”

It was through their 1966 project *Une journée dans la rue (A day in the Street)* that GRAV best exemplified Lefebvre’s and the *Situationist International*’s notion that the monotony of everyday life needed to be injected with a new vitality in order to make

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people active participants of society (fig. 48). The street, a site historically embodying French resistance, now took on a new role of purveyor of ludic participatory activities that could have serious political consequences. Unlike the role of the street in 19th century Paris, which served to facilitate public uprisings and served as a site of revolutionary activity against the government, GRAV appropriated the most public (and democratic) of spaces in order for their work to access the greatest number of individuals – targeting in particular those that did not frequent museums in general.

On a typical workday, starting at 8am and going until 11pm, GRAV presented the inhabitants of Paris with playful and at times perplexing situations, trying to disrupt and shake up their normally uneventful routine walk to work, compelling a different and new interaction with their otherwise banal surroundings (fig. 49 & 50). Labyrinths fashioned from impersonal industrial materials such as aluminum and Plexiglas were set up in subway entrances in central Paris. Wanting to “break the programmed habits of behavior” GRAV considered the urban setting as a key site to challenge the social and political norms: “The city, the street is enmeshed in a network of habits and acts taken up on a daily basis. We think that the sum total of these routine gestures can lead to a total passivity or create a general need for reaction.” Reiterating similar beliefs as Lefebvre and the Situationist International, in particular the need to create “situations” or “acts of cultural sabotage” as a way to reclaim everyday life from its modern state of alienation and passive acceptance on behalf of the public. GRAV’s aim, while focusing on breaking the barrier between viewer and art work, held within it the potential for repercussions in and change in people’s lives (fig. 51). Confronting the public with unusual and

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402 GRAV, Une journée dans la rue, leaflet (Paris 1964-66). In GRAV. Stratégies de participation, 43.
unexpected situations – small whistles were given out at one stop, surprise gifts at another, a cage made from a curtain of threads suspended from a grid into which someone could enter was placed somewhere else, and unstable floor slabs were placed at another subway entrance for those willing to walk over and test their balance (fig. 52)—GRAV took note of the spectator’s responses. As well, questionnaires were given out for participants to voice opinions about the value and function of art galleries, museums, other institutions, as well as GRAV’s own event (fig. 53 & 54). This more direct politicization of their work, a game of sorts based on unexpected and sometimes unnerving physical encounters, was intended to transform more than the art-viewing experience. In other words, by bringing art to the public in the street, GRAV tried to directly activate the viewer in all sorts of unexpected and unpredictable ways; in turn, the artist loses traditional authority.

But what exactly was GRAV offering its spectator? At least to some degree, GRAV was putting forth a participatory experience of free choice and empowerment. But when contextualized within theoretical concerns regarding consumerism, the ubiquitousness of American culture, and an increasing sense of alienation and disenfranchisement, questions are raised about GRAV’s political promise. In fact, a contested aspect of Americanization discussed in French society at the time was the widely held assumption that more variety meant more choice. While for many this may have seemed the case, others were not so convinced. As the comments of Swiss philosopher Jeanne Hersch emphasized:

The Americans make us uneasy because, without wishing us ill, they put things before us for our taking, things which are so ready to hand and so
convenient that we accept them, finding perhaps that they satisfy our fundamental temptations...Masses of American products are imposed upon us by artificial means, especially where films are concerned...Even when we can make a choice between products, we are influenced by a sort of force within ourselves, which we fear because it is indeterminate and indefinable.403

As Hersch demonstrates, freedom of choice, which became the defining characteristic of American-style consumerism was perhaps not as “free” as its advocates deemed it to be. In other words, while a variety of products may seemingly offer the consumer endless choices, it also creates a need on the part of the consumer that may not have existed previously. Influenced by economist John Kenneth Galbraith’s theories,404 Baudrillard continued his investigation on the societal effects of consumerism in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, published two years after *The System of Objects*.405 Here he argued that needs are created by the system of production and not by the consumer or the manufactured goods in question:

> Freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification pure and simple. This carefully sustained mystique of individual satisfaction and choice, which is the culmination of a whole civilization of ‘freedom’, is the very ideology of the industrial system, justifying its arbitrary power and all the collective nuisances it generates: dirt, pollution, deculturation. In fact, the consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where freedom of choice has been forced upon him.406

Reiterating Hersch’s view that there is much more to “freedom of choice” than meets the eye, Baudrillard concurs that “consumption is a powerful element of social control.”407

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404 In particular John Kenneth Galbraith’s book, *The Affluent Society* (1958), which sought to describe the ways in which post-WWII America was becoming richer in the public sector and poor in the public one, and the detrimental effects this had on society.
407 Ibid., 84.
The "freedom of choice that has been forced upon the consumer" is what ties, in a certain way, the advent of consumerism to that of kinetic and optical art in Paris. For Baudrillard, there is no freedom "not to choose"; that is, the illusion of choice is presented given the multitude of options presented before the consumer, yet, one is nonetheless compelled to choose something, with no room to "say no" or reject all options. While interactive optico-kinetic art which transformed geometric abstraction offered the viewer choice and a freedom unheard of with traditional type of artworks, it also required the participant to become aware of the repercussions of such actions, all the while implicitly coercing the viewer or participant into action. This freedom that is contained and delimited can be compared to that of the new postwar consumer.

viii. Reconstructing urban space

One of the main differences between consumerism, new technologies and the art practiced by Boto, Cruz-Diez, Soto and Le Parc and the artists of GRAV was the issue of accessibility. While automobiles, refrigerators, and the latest kitchen gadgets served as signifiers of wealth and societal position, kinetic and optical art sought to level the playing field and offer the public at large equal access to an engaging art form regardless of class status. This was part of a larger movement that other artists, theorists and architects were engaged in and that involved the imagined transformation of the city, the amalgamation of the arts and the positive integration of technology in everyday life. During the Reconstruction period just after WWII, the synthesis of the arts became a collective goal of certain artists and architects, in particular the ones involved with the journal *Art d'aujourd'hui, art et architecture*. Reminiscent of De Stijl in their goals and
aspirations, in particular the belief in the utopian ideal of harmony and order through pure abstraction as applied to art and architecture, artists such as André Bloc, architects like Le Corbusier, and critics including Michel Ragon advocated a futuristic city that embraced technology for societal and cultural advancement. As early as 1944 after the Liberation, Le Corbusier announced the beginning of a new era in architecture.\footnote{Le Corbusier, “Vers l'unité,” \textit{Volontés} (December 13, 1944), n.p.; reprinted in \textit{Le Corbusier, Oeuvre Complète}, vol. 4 (Zurich: Editions d'Architectures, 1946), 152-155.}

Despite what seemed like an overwhelming disagreement regarding the potential of American consumer products, the fifties and sixties in France witnessed several movements in art and architecture that promoted a societal transformation through an embrace of technological advancements. The sixties in France was a period characterized by movement, as art historian Larry Busbea has pointed out: “This was a decade of movement, the apex of the so-called \textit{trente glorieuses}: thirty years of unparalleled economic growth and technological development fueled by the Marshall Plan and historically bracketed by the liberation and the oil crisis on 1973.”\footnote{Busbea, 10.} In \textit{Topologies: the urban utopia if France, 1960-1970}, Busbea posits that urban planning and architecture in France during this time was primarily concerned with integrating all of these developments in a revised cityscape that allowed for a smooth flow of “people, things, currency, and information.” As a result, “urban space came to be seen not as a neutral container but as a conductive medium for the movements and exchanges of people, information, and objects.”\footnote{Ibid.} Busbea sets out to demonstrate how this “new culture of relational space” was a product of a society that was shifting and undergoing both spatial
and historical transformations due to the various advancements in technology and modernization.411 My point is that there were various manifestations of cultural projects, in both art and architecture, which sought to meld the urban space with the everyday experience of the public. Fitting with some of the theoretical and intellectual preoccupations of the time, regarding consumerism and everyday life, this desire to bring art to the streets, to invigorate a public outside of the sanctified gallery space, linked with a larger inquiry into the transformation of space and its political potential that took hold in France in the early 1960s, perhaps best exemplified by the writings of Lefebvre, but also the Situationist International. Both saw the need for a transformation of the urban city in order to fit the new demands of a growing society that was becoming more and more alienated. But while the Situationist International promoted a total system overthrow or revolution, GRAV and other optico-kinetic artists offered a seemingly lighthearted antidote to the heavy manipulation of consumerism, still politically engaged, but more interested in transforming the minds of their viewers, than in full-blown, even militant, revolt.

ix. Conclusion

The idea that modernist art is predominantly apprehended through “eyesight alone” gained particular currency through the writings of American art critic Clement Greenberg during the mid-twentieth century.412 But the idea of reducing artistic experience to the visual was challenged by the optico-kinetic artists who realized that vision can not be isolated and by working in tandem with the other senses, this type of art could encourage

411 Ibid, 14.
a more productive integration of the public in society.\textsuperscript{413} Intentionally subverting the concept that vision alone can be enough to make sense of one’s surroundings, these artists were part of a growing skepticism of the idea that “what you see is what you see”, and shared an increased awareness of how subjectivity is affected and manipulated by larger ideological forces in society.\textsuperscript{414} The exchange between viewer and art work, then, takes on a different dimension. This reciprocity between object and viewer, and subsequently between participant and spectator, recalls Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that we are both subject and object simultaneously. In \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, in a chapter entitled “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty compared the interdependency between vision and touch to one’s position in the world; that is, for Merleau-Ponty, as embodied and intersubjective beings, individuals maintain a reciprocal exchange with external forces.\textsuperscript{415} Informed by Merleau-Ponty, art historian Amelia Jones described this interchange between the self, the world and the other as “constituted through a \textit{reversibility} of seeing and being seen, perceiving and being perceived...The body/self is simultaneously both subject and object...”\textsuperscript{416} In this exchange (viewer watching participant who in turn is involved with the work, a work created by a third party), the individuals involved “are collaborators for each other in a consummate reciprocity.”

While the op and kinetic artists I am dealing with were not necessarily reading Merleau-

\textsuperscript{413} The effect of external forces in shaping one’s experience was already something that had been written about in the immediate postwar years, by intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But with the optico-kinetic artists, the public is introduced for the first time, to works that require physical manipulation, and that the visual, while an integral component, is something that is at times manipulated by the rest of the senses.


\textsuperscript{416} Amelia Jones. \textit{Body Art: Performing the Subject} (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41.
Ponty, they were investigating similar concerns regarding the agency and empowerment of the individual subject.

In the art scene, optico-kinetic seemed to be the answer for what many critics were calling for. In an article in Cimaise from 1960 entitled “La fin du tableau?” (“The end of easel painting?”), art critic François-Albert Viallet heralded these concerns:

We are far from the admiration and distant contemplation of other times. In this epoch of socialization, painting no longer plays the role of an aesthetic aside; it is not a diversion of the rich nor a metaphysics of the senses to which only the initiated are permitted access. The manner of integrating a painting with our existence has undergone a singular change. Its value...has become a functional one.417

With optical and kinetic art, the relationship between spectator and object became a collaborative association, and this in turn had other implications, particularly in the way the gallery space was manipulated. With optical and kinetic art, the usual “rules” of behavior adequate in a gallery setting were completely altered; that is, the normal contemplative stance between viewer and art work is turned on its head. What happens to the space when people are invited to touch and manipulate the objects on display? And more importantly, what are the political implications of this? When exhibiting works of this nature that challenge the traditional relationship of viewer and art work, I argue that there is a profound shift in the way the public operates within the gallery or museum setting. In his essay Space: Social Product and Use Value, Lefebvre wrote:

To change life-style,” “to change society,” these phrases mean nothing if there is no production of an appropriated space...Production in a socialist society is defined by Marx as production for social needs. These social

needs, in great part, concern space... Turning the world "back on its feet," according to Marx, implies overturning dominant spaces... 418

For Lefebvre, then, space itself is inherently political, and altering its traditional defining characteristics have larger social and political implications that move beyond the immediate confines of a gallery/museum. In his 1974 work, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre expanded on the transformative qualities of space. As he explains, a lived space does not have to adhere to its initial function, rather, it is subject to external forces that may dictate an alternative use for the area. Lefebvre elaborates further:

An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one. A recent and well-known case of this was the reappropriation of the *Halles Centrales*, Paris's former wholesale produce market, in 1969-71. For a brief period, the urban centre, designed to facilitate the distribution of food, was transformed into a gathering-place and a scene of permanent festival -- in short, into a centre of play rather than of work -- for the youth of Paris. 419

In a similar way to the transformation of *Les Halles* noted by Lefebvre, the gallery or museum space also can be temporarily altered. The passive visitor to a show like *Le Mouvement* in 1955 becomes an active collaborator, and the exchange that is usually characterized by implicit reverence on the part of the viewer towards *objet d'art* is intrinsically altered through the appropriation of a "sacred" place by everyday people. It is precisely this model of participatory viewship, one which is not neutral, that GRAV advocated in their first 1961 tract *Assez de mystifications!* (*An end to mystification!*).

Published on the occasion of the Paris Biennale in 1961, they sought to create a

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connection between their attempt to engage the “Human Eye” and their outspoken
denunciation of the elitism which they felt was inherent in traditional art. They appealed
to the public “that there must be a cessation of exclusive production for: the cultivated
eye, the perceptive eye, the intellectual eye, the aesthetic eye, the dilettante eye.” The
decision to publish the tract during the 1961 Biennale was strategic. The conception and
organization of the Biennale had been encouraged by Malraux as a venue to not only
support international and French artists under the age of thirty-five, but also served as
“part of Malraux’s project to make Paris, if not once more the capital, at least the
gatehouse of new art.” The problem arose in 1961 when the competing factions, which
included civil servants, politicians, and museum professionals, could not decide on the
amount of French figurative versus abstract art to be included in the show. Many
thought that too much figurative art was being showcased – more than half of the forty
canvases chosen for inclusion in the French group were clearly figurative in style – while
the more conservative members believed there was too poor a representation of the style.
While the selection of paintings was to represent French art of the moment, many felt it
was far from indicative of the best art being produced at the time. GRAV’s timely
declaration served as another voice of dissent to those dissatisfied with the state of the
Biennale.

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420 *Stratégies de Participation*, 72.
421 Lebovics, 167.
422 Members included officials of the city of Paris and of the Regional Council, higher civil servants
representing the state, and others connected with the arts: Raymond Cogniat and Pierre Lamy (both
inspecteurs gérés des Beaux Arts), Henri Seyrig (director of National Museums) and Jean Cassou (head
of the museum of modern art, Palais de Tokyo). As well, Raymond Janot, directeur général of the
Radiodiffusion Télévision Française and Jean Basdevant, head of the General Direction of Cultural and
Technical Affairs were also included. Lebovics, 167.
It was perhaps a fear of having a foreign influence, specifically coming from the United States, invade all aspects of French life, from film and television, to the automobile industry and supermarket goods, that helped lay the groundwork for the favorable reception of Latin Americans in Paris. During a crucial period of redefining French identity – after decolonization, as well as the country’s embrace of modernization and consumerism, and its attempt to reposition itself politically and culturally between the United States and the USSR – technology played a critical role in shaping decisions made by the government as well as influencing the public’s engagement with the everyday. While critics of technology, such as Ellul, cautioned of the alienation and passiveness brought on through consumer culture’s reliance on new gadgets by replacing social interaction, the work of the Latin American optico-kinetic artists offered a positive adaptation of technology with a potential for societal transformation. By asking the viewers to actively engage with works of art, or to take part in “cultural” situations set up by the artists in unusual venues, the work of GRAV, Boto and others compelled viewers to move beyond the contemplative exchange of conventional art works, and as a result, not only was the spectator’s position redefined, but the spaces where these interventions took place were rendered more complex and given new meaning.

The complicated circumstances that welcomed the Latin American optico-kinetic artists to Paris had as much to do with the desire on the part of Charles de Gaulle to foster France’s image as a modern nation and to preserve it as an avant-garde art center, than it did with the wishes of the artists themselves to be recognized in the city that they regarded as the core of international artistic and cultural development. As well, by
welcoming immigrants from third-world countries (albeit ones that were more easily assimilated due to historical ties between France and countries in Latin America) after the Algerian War and the negative press surrounding France’s oppressive actions towards the Algerians, France was able to demonstrate that it still attracted international figures. And even though Latin Americans were not the only immigrants welcomed and accepted into French society, they did serve another key purpose. France had a vested interest in continuing close ties with its Latin counterparts. Latin America was at this time heating up – and here, one must think of both the revolutionary politics associated with certain Latin American countries, such as Cuba, as well as the image of seduction and exoticism offered up by music and popular culture, such as the film *Orfeo Negro*. The region was also “up for grabs” as a potential ally for France during the years of the Cold War, as France looked to foster cultural and political ties with it at a moment when relations between the U.S. and Latin America were being questioned. With the “Caracas Declaration of Solidarity” signed on March 28, 1954, the Organization of American States (OAS), led by the United States, had had the support of the majority of the Latin American countries to fight communism. At a meeting of foreign ministers on August

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423 Filmed in Brazil by French director Marcel Camus, *Orfeo Negro* won the Palme d’Or at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival. It is based on the play *Orfeu da Conceição* by Vinicius de Moraes, which is an adaptation of the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, setting it in the modern context of Rio de Janeiro during the Carnaval. The film was an international co-production between production companies in Brazil, France and Italy. It is also best know for its soundtrack which launched *bossa nova* internationally.

424 The OAS is an international organization, with its headquarters in Washington, D.C., composed of the individual states of the Americas. The first International Conference of American States was held in 1889-1890. At the Fourth International Conference of American States (Buenos Aires, 1910), the name of the organization was changed to the “Union of American Republics.” The Ninth International Conference of American States was held in Bogotá, Columbia, between March and May 1948 and led by U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall, a meeting which led to a pledge by members to fight communism in the Americas. This marked the birth of the OAS as it stands today, with the signature by 21 American countries of the Charter of the Organization of American States on 30 April 1948 (in effect since December 1951).

425 The sole exceptions were Mexico and Argentina, which abstained from signing the treaty, and Guatemala, which voted against it. It was soon after this event that Operation PBSUCCESS was launched.
1960, however, the United States again sought support from the other members of the OAS, this time concerning Cuba, but unlike the meeting six years previous, most nations refused to comment on the status of Cuba, deeming the situation a “private quarrel” between Cuba and the United States.\(^2\) This marked an important moment for France, since it sensed a weak link in the Pan-American union, and for a brief time considered a Pan-Latin one instead. The linking of France with Latin America culminated in General de Gaulle’s trip to several countries in Latin America in 1964, where he spoke about the historical and cultural similarities, in particular their Latin heritage, one that bound the two cultural entities together.\(^3\)

At the center of all of this was the strategic positioning of culture and art as one of the means through which France could regain the grandeur it had lost during WWII and during the United States’ rise as a major artistic center. What was at stake was the world stage of international politics and within it France’s positioning in the post-WWII decades. In turn, Latin America became linked, through its art, associated with the modern, with freedom and with play, to a thriving first-world nation, and expatriate Latin

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\(^3\) See Armando Uribe, “Le Général de Gaulle et l’Amérique Latine,” in *De Gaulle et le Tiers Monde*, (Paris: Editions A. Pedone, 1983), 243-261. In a speech by de Gaulle to the government of Ecuador, given in October 1964 in Quito, he employed the term *latinité* for the first time: “Je dirais encore que nul, peut-être, mieux que celui qui a l’honneur de vous parler ne ressent, dans ce cadre, dans ce lieu et au milieu de vous, d’une manière plus nette et plus claire, le sentiment que nous sommes liés les uns et les autres, vous le latins d’Amérique, nous les latins de l’Europe, et en particulier les Français, par quelque chose qui nous dépasse tous, qui nous enveloppe, qui nous est commun, ce sont nos origines ; nos origines sont les mêmes : européennes pour vous, à travers l’Espagne d’abord, chrétiennes et latines.” (256) As Uribe points out, if France and South America had the same origins, it was for de Gaulle to begin to carve out a “troisième voie,” one in opposition to the United States and the USSR. (257)
American artists benefited from a kind of cultural legitimization which positioned them at the center of it all, far from the marginalized status of their homelands.
Conclusion: Op goes Pop

Denise René’s success, and by consequence the temporary victory of optico-kinetic art in France, was widely recognized by the mid-1960s. In a French Vogue article from 1966 entitled Qui sont ces dames de la peinture?, Jacques Damase referred to René as the “papesse de l’art abstrait”, commending René for her unswerving commitment to geometric abstraction throughout the years:

Denise René, “papesse de l’art abstrait”, a fait pour son art plus que quiconque. Vingt ans de travail et de perséverance avant d’arriver enfin à voir la consécration de ses idées, la récompense méritée. Contre vents et marées, malgré des moments des plus difficiles, Denise René a tenu bon, sans jamais se décourager. Elle y croyait.

This recognition of optico-kinetic art was not confined to France, as attested to by numerous positive reviews and exhibitions of optico-kinetic art in other parts of Europe.

In 1961, Hans Richter had already declared that “movement had become a movement.”

In a review of an exhibition organized by Pontus Hulten at the Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm, entitled “Movement in Action”, which included the works of Tinguely,

428 The fervor and enthusiasm that surrounded kinetic and optical art in 1960’s Paris is not surprising. Its greatest attraction was the fact that the public could interact, touch, manipulate and literally have a relationship with the work of art in question. And this is not historically-specific, as has been theorized by Huizinga and Caillois. Similar tactics today work in attracting the public. “Inside Apple Stores, a Certain Aura Enchants the Faithful” appeared in the December 27, 2007 issue of The New York Times, and analyzed the unique way Apple stores are able to attract a huge public. Technology reporter Katie Hafner described the phenomenon: “Not only has the company made many of its stores feel like gathering places, but the bright lights and equally bright acoustics create a buzz that makes customers feel more like they are at an event than a retail store.” The community feel of the Apple stores, which beg people to enter and linger, and encourages hands-on exploration of its products, all add to Apple’s welcoming appeal. As one general manager stated, “Everyone [at the Apple store] is free to use the Internet and do anything they want.” Similar to the optico-kinetic art exhibitions held in Paris throughout the 1960’s, Apple stores exploit the democratic aspect of opening the doors to all visitors, the objects on display begging to be touched and manipulated. See Katie Hafner, “Inside Apple Stores, a Certain Aura Enchants the Faithful,” The New York Times (December 27, 2007): http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/27/business/27apple.html


Calder, Nicki de Saint-Phalle, Schöffer, Vasarely, Agam, and Soto, Richter declared how important, and emblematic of its time, this type of work had become:

Cette exposition est d’une importance considérable. Elle sert l’art...elle contribue à l’art du XXe siècle en montrant que le Temps (sous toutes ses formes de mouvement, dynamisme, rythme, durée, répétition, développement, etc...) est en train d’être découvert émotionnellement – comme une quatrième dimension – au-dessus et parmi toutes les doctrines et les nations. Le mouvement est devenue un mouvement. 431

In the London-based *Art and Artists*, Grégoire Müller commended the August 1967 exhibition *Lumière et Mouvement* held at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Of the optico-kinetic artists’ work, Müller noted: “The glorification of a technical world, the demonstration of the power of the intellect over the world, and a ‘dynamic of the future’...this approach is the result of a continual dialogue with the modern, artificial universe, which these artists have re-endowed with its original beauty.”432 Optico-kinetic art had become a product of its time, according to Müller, a mode of representation that fit seamlessly within contemporary society, a suitable aesthetic for the progressive era of the 1960s, characterized by technological advances in all spheres of life. While his praise of the show was not without criticism, Müller nonetheless gave credit to the museum for organizing such a timely exhibition:

The Musée d’Art Moderne exhibition has made the mistake of paying attention to light and movement only as ‘media’ without attempting to demonstrate the different artistic approaches that they are able to express, but we should be glad of this official recognition of elements that have broken through the traditional barriers of two-dimensional art. Moreover, this provides an opportunity to point out the extent of research in this field now being carried out in Paris (especially at the Galerie Denise René) which is increasingly becoming the world center of Kinetic art.433

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431 Ibid., 55.
433 Ibid.
Thus, as such reviews demonstrate, by 1965-66 optico-kinetic art had become quite the international phenomenon.

When considering the reception of optical and kinetic art in the U.S., it was the Museum of Modern Art’s *The Responsive Eye*, the seminal exhibition of optical art organized by William C. Seitz, curator of painting and sculpture, which made it a household name (fig. 55). While initially Seitz envisioned this show as a historical retrospective, the final grouping featured 123 works by 106 artists from fifteen countries, and brought together a varied array of artists as diverse as Albers, Larry Poons, Agam, Cruz-Diez, Le Parc, François Morellet, Gego, Noland, Richard Anuszkiewicz. The works exhibited varied widely, from the minimalism of Frank Stella, to the physiopsychological illusions offered up by British artist Bridget Riley, who would become one of the icons of Op in the United States and Britain. Seitz looked to Denise René for her collaboration on the project, as attested to in the catalogue’s acknowledgements: “Madame Denise René, whose gallery in Paris was a fortress of geometric art during its lean years, gave her cooperation and expert advice.”

Focusing specifically on the perceptual aspect of art – that is, works that played with and challenged viewer’s acuity through various visual techniques – the show was an instant success with the public, though less so with the critics, calling up *Le Mouvement’s*

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434 Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: on Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press, 2004), 160. Seitz juxtaposed artists that were not considered op – such as Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and Paul Feeley – with those working in a purely optical vein. Also the works of artists such as Le Parc, Morellet, Horacio Garcia Rossi, and Agam, were technically kinetic. See Jon Borgzinner, “Op Art: Pictures that Attack the Eye,” *Time*, vol. 84, no. 17 (October 23, 1964), 78-79.

reception in Paris a decade before. The modernist critic Rosalind Krauss declared in a June 1965 review of the show that, "Op Art...really operates from behind a single basic concept: the *trompe l'oeil*. Further, it must be seen that in mining their single vein of retinal excitement Op artists have nothing to do with opticality as it has emerged in the most important modernist painting of our time. The conceptual groundwork for Op Art and that of *optical* painting are in fact very far apart." Here, Krauss distinguishes the optical emphasis of this kinetic based art from high modernist painting, particularly as defined by Clement Greenberg. Within Greenberg's model of high modernist experience, painting is self-referential and reduced to its essence, in particular the flatness of the two dimensional support and the quality of paint on its surface. Within this understanding of painting, opticality, as evident at this time in the work of Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland, emphasizes the visual possibilities of a space that maintains an integrity with the picture plane that emphasizes flatness. Unlike the optical and kinetic art of the day, modernist painting does not rely on perceptual phenomena and a sustained duration to convince its viewer of its quality. Rather, as Greenberg describes it, opticality is a pictorial convention, available to the viewer in an instant. As art historian Caroline Jones reminds us, within this understanding of modern painting "eyesight alone" as a sensory experience was all that was needed to judge the value of an aesthetic object. As Greenberg describes it:

You are summoned and gathered into one point in the continuum of duration. The picture does this to you, willy-nilly, regardless of whatever else is on your mind; a mere glance at it creates the

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attitude required for its appreciation, like a stimulus that elicits an automatic response. You become all attention...  

Other critics writing about *The Responsive Eye* voiced what they believed was the inconsequential effect of optical art within the larger sphere of art. Writing in *Art Forum International*, Barbara Rose noted that, "Op art... goes Pop art one better by being considerably more mindless." And art critic Lucy Lippard described it as fashionable "pseudo-scientism" possessing "no lasting interest for serious artists." Despite the negative criticism, *The Responsive Eye* drew a huge public, due in great part to what was perceived as its democratic appeal (possibly as a reaction to the apparent exclusivity of Greenberg's model). *New York Times* critic John Canaday celebrated Op's ability to attract a such a large audience: "This is a very satisfying thing for a public that has been puzzled and offended by a long series of modernisms. Optical art has a combination of virtues new to modern art: it fascinates, even if for different reasons, both the esthete and the layman. What more, for the time being, could you ask?" Thomas Hess, the editor of *Art News*, wrote, "In Op they [the public] sense that art, at long last, is not only meeting [them] half-way [but] will actually come down off the walls and shake your hand." *The Responsive Eye* caused unprecedented public interest, with the museum attracting the highest number of visitors in its thirty-six year history before the exhibition took off on a year-long national tour which received as welcome a reception as it had in

440 Lucy Lippard, "Perverse Perspectives," *Art International* II (March 1967), 28.
442 Thomas B. Hess, "You Can Hang It in the Hall," *Art News*, vol. 64, no. 2 (April 1965), 49.

180
Following on the heels of *The Responsive Eye*’s success, a number of exhibitions centered around movement and opticality were launched the same year, bearing witness to the style’s international cultural resonance: in Glasgow (*Art and Movement*), Brussels (*Lumière, Mouvement et Optique*), Bern (*Licht und Bewegung*), Tel Aviv (*Art et Mouvement: Art Optique et Cinétique*), and London (*Arte Programmata*). But even though by the mid-1960s optical and kinetic art had become an international phenomenon, its success was ultimately short-lived. For example, as is evidenced by any fashion magazine of the day, the potential radicality of geometric abstraction was co-opted by the late 1960s, its playful and innovative patterns inspiring textile and fashion design at the expense of its early avant-garde potential. As artists had moved their production out of the gallery and museum space, and into the city streets, optico-kinetic art moved beyond the confines of art itself. Designers, for example, jumped on the popularity of Op, and quickly adapted the motifs into eye-catching patterns for dresses and even home goods such as lamps and wallpaper. In 1965, *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue* (fig. 56) included numerous photos of Op-art dresses. A week before the opening of *The Responsive Eye*, *The New York Times* declared that the new Op fashion was “being paraded this week in the Seventh Avenue showroom of *Young Elegante* in dresses that will sell for $60 to $110 (considerably lower than an opt art painting, where the price tag can run in four figures.”

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444 Ibid., 74.
restaurants, Op beachware and Op girdles." As art historian Pamela Lee described it: "In record time Op became something of a media spectacle." The United States had seemingly transformed the kinetic gadgets of the previous decade in France, full of the promise of a new world transformed by technology, into purely optical games advertised as consumer goods, as the September 23, 1965 article in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* noted (fig. 57): "'L'OP ART' très en vogue aux Etats-Unis c'est le cinétisme né à Paris il y a 10 ans." But not even France was immune to the latest Op fashion frenzy. In Paris, Yves Saint Laurent introduced his famous *Mondrian Dress* in his Paris winter line (fig. 58). And other haute couture designers such as Paco Rabanne began exploiting new materials and illusionistic designs to inspire and transform the fashion industry, but at what expense to the revolutionary potential of optical and kinetic art? As one reviewer in the French newspaper *Le Monde* wrote:

Parcourez les journaux féminins, regardez les vitrines sur les boulevards: robes op, boucles d'oreilles op, boîtes de confiseries op... À Londres, maquillages et coiffures op. À Rome, à Madrid, ou dans les villes allemandes, les mouchoirs, les torchons de cuisines ou les imperméables, comme aux U.S.A., les maillots de bains, les lunettes de soleil ou le papier d'emballage reproduisent les tableaux des peintres de ce qu'une vaste opération publicitaire a appelé l'art optique.

As optico-kinetic art was gaining popular appeal, being appropriated by the media and advertising industry as the latest fashion of the day, it was to the detriment of its original socio-political potential, as had been outlined by Argentinean artist Julio Le Parc and his collective GRAV in their many manifestos.

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446 Lee, 169.
447 Ibid.
Furthermore, if optical and kinetic art had lost its edge due to its descent into fashion and everyday popular culture, the Latin American optico-kinetic artists had been further marginalized by the mid-1960s while the presence of American and British Op artists took center stage. As witnessed by *The Responsive Eye*, and the press surrounding the show, the works of the Latin American kinetic artists, such as Le Parc, Cruz-Diez and others were seamlessly incorporated into Seitz’s exhibition, without much consideration of their place within the historical trajectory of the movement nor the specificities, cultural and aesthetic, of their art production. Since then this work has been largely excluded from scholarship on this phenomenon. As this thesis demonstrates, it is only by considering the social and political pressures in France that framed this type of artistic production that one can begin to reassess the complexity of optico-kinetic art at its emergent historical moment. While by 1967 the political purchase of this work was stretched thin, at its inception, the Latin American optical and kinetic artists, full of socialist aspirations and utopian visions, saw their work as fitting within a political rubric of a participatory politics based on individual engagement and personal empowerment.

Another factor that led to the demise of op and kinetic art was the political reality in France of the late 1960s. By 1968, the year that a real “revolution” led by students rocked France, GRAV decided to put an end to their collective project, a decision which called into question their previous belief in technological optimism, and the liberatory

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450 See Pamela Lee.
451 Even though recent exhibitions, such as *Inverted Utopias* (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), *Beyond Geometry* (Los Angeles Museum of Art), and *Optic Nerve* (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio), have foregrounded the work of Latin American optical and kinetic artists, their oeuvre still remains somewhat disengaged from the specific politics and social circumstances that shaped the movement’s development and subsequent success in France.
possibilities of fun, humor, and play. Optico-kinetic art no longer fit the needs of the French public that was becoming more and more disillusioned by unemployment, what many considered the conservative government of Charles de Gaulle, and opposition to the Vietnam War.\footnote{See Kristin Ross, \textit{May '68 and Its Afterlives} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).} Challenging past traditions and reconfiguring the viewers' relationship with the art object, the Latin American optico-kinetic artists were far removed from the underground developments that arose in Paris full-force by the late 1960's and which called for a complete overthrow of the political system in its entirety, as evidenced by the writings and works of the \textit{Situationist International}, and which culminated in the May 1968 walkouts, demonstrations, and student riots.\footnote{See Tom McDonough, \textit{The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968} (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).} If the work of Julio Le Parc and GRAV, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesús Rafael Soto and Martha Boto had momentarily offered the French public the illusion of societal transformation, circumstances by 1968 called for more than just play as a liberatory tactic. Optical and kinetic art was by the end of the 1960s bankrupt, its gimmicky gadgets and bizarre technological apparatuses had lost the potential to offer the French public an antidote to the heavy manipulation of consumer-culture, having itself become one of its by-products.
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fig. 28. Viktor Vasarely, Sorata-T (1953). Painted glass triptych. 78 x 180 in.
In *Le Mouvement/The Movement, Paris Avril 1955* (Paris, New York,
Düsseldorf: Editions Denise René, 1975), 42.
fig. 32. Auguste Herbin, *Dimanche* (1950). Oil on canvas. 21 2/3 x 18 in.
Pompidou, 1998), 159.
and motor. 25 1/3 x 25 1/3 x 15 1/5 in. Atelier Martha Boto, Paris. In *Homage
fig. 57. "L’"OP ART" très en vogue aux États-Unis c’est le cinétisme né à Paris il y a 10 ans," article by Sabine Marchand from Le Figaro (23 septembre 1965). In Denise René, l'intrépide (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2001), 137.