

Serge Guilbaut

**Professor, Fine Arts
UBC Vancouver
Canada**

Léon Degand's Ship of Fools:
The Cargo-Cult phenomenon of Geometric Abstraction in Brazil 1947

“Here, we import everything. Laws, ideas, philosophies, theories, subjects of conversation, aesthetics, sciences, style, industries, fashions, mannerisms, jokes, everything comes in boxes on the boat. Civilization is very expensive, what with the customs dues: and it's all secondhand, it wasn't made for us, it's short in the sleeves.”

Joao da Ega in Eca de Queiros The Maias.

Between 1946 and 1948, two cargos passed each other in the Atlantic. One bound for France was carrying André Breton's bounty of native North West coast artifacts, the other, leaving the French west coast with a cargo of modern abstract paintings gathered by a Belgian art critic, Léon Degand, was en route to Brazil to create the Sao Paulo Museum of Modern Art. This virtual historical crossroads marks for the imagination the travel across the Atlantic of two sets of antagonistic ideas about what constitutes art. Antagonistic ideas, but ones, which were similar in the dream they both encapsulated. These crossings, travels and displacements were, on the one hand, supposed to revamp an old and exhausted western visual system with the invigorating input of the new world, and on the other, find a more hospitable (and, it was thought, needy) site for the development of the latest new expression of modernity.

In 1946 André Breton left his wartime exile in New York for Paris where he hoped to continue his esthetic and political battles for the liberation of the mind. With him though, he was not only carrying a new way of thinking and a new set of theories,

including the reappraisal of “primitive” cultures he encountered in North America -I am talking about his interest, following Engels, in recuperating the aboriginal concept of matriarchy as a replacement for the deadly and destructive western patriarchal system¹- but was also hauling trunks full of artifacts, sculptures, masks, and constructions from North West Coast aboriginal, Zuni, Hopi and Pueblo cultures. In Breton’s subversive way of thinking, these formerly invisible objects could act as a new liberating invasion into the French psyche. His discovery was bound to play an important role, he thought, in the reconstruction of the French soul corrupted by so many years of imperialism and fascism. These complex esthetic and meaningful objects, were for him, a kind of powerful “revenge of the primitives” in their ability to provide the French left with new aesthetic and symbolic weapons to wage war against the ever present and abject Bourgeoisie. The return of the long oppressed or repressed was understood as a weapon against a French culture still attached in the early post-war world to old Cartesian and colonial stereotypes. Breton was literally carrying the spiritual renewal in his suitcases. This healing trip across the ocean from America to Europe, this flight of aesthetic objects from one continent to another, was similar to the other Atlantic crossing made by Léon Degand, but in reverse.

The Belgian art critic who had been working in Paris left for Brazil in 1947 carrying with him several crates stuffed with modern paintings made in Paris, mainly geometric Abstraction, in order to introduce a specifically optimistic form of abstract art to the new continent and to disseminate, so the hope was, a new contemporary language to a fast growing country in the process of modernization. It is to the hopes and

¹ See André Breton, Arcane 17, published in 1944 Brentano’s New York.

frustrations as well as the arrogance of this transatlantic cultural passage that this paper is dedicated.

If André Breton was trying to teach to Europe, through the native “new continent” esthetic productions, the folly of former reactionary ideas, Léon Degand was trying to bring, I suppose, in an involuntary ironic way, the “modern” from the old world to the new. This old world, as it had done in 1492, was sending “the good word” across the ocean. This time though it was a specific form of spirituality, it was the religion of abstraction. Indeed, in 1948, God’s name and salvation was now found in geometric abstraction. Without doubt, this is a story of utopia, naiveté and arrogance, but also one of misunderstanding and resistance, of hegemony and pride, of the northern cold modernist grid unable to control the vitality and resistance of the tropical exuberance and difference: all of it inscribed in the complex construction of the personal stories of Léon Degand and Francisco Matarazzo. This is the labyrinthine fable of a battle of clichés surrounding the shenanigans of a *menage à trois* involving elite in Paris, Sao Paulo and New York, all in love with modern art.

This story, recalling Lautreamont’s dictum, is about the chance encounter of a rich Brazilian entrepreneur of Italian descent, lover of contemporary art, and a Belgian art critic working in Paris, specialist of abstraction, at a café table in Paris in 1947. This might seem an innocuous enough affair, or rather a surrealistic one, as this coffee pause was fraught with anxiety, fear and instability. In fact, from that terrace, the world, while the French capital was at that moment gripped by a horrendous series of strikes orchestrated by a very combative Communist Party, seemed to be fast disintegrating into

a Cold War. Under the innocence of preparing an exhibition while sipping espresso loomed an entire world of cold war intrigues, political machinations and covert actions. What then was this encounter about? What was this very rich Brazilian, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, who owned a series of factories across Brazil, apparently producing 75% of the totality of the canning business in South America, doing sipping coffee with a modernist art critic in Paris? What kind of business, art or any other was he involved in there and for what reason? And similarly, why was a well-known art critic writing for the leftist cultural newspaper, Les Lettres Françaises, making deals with Latin American “gentry” with such great anticipation? The answer is a complicated one which involves, not only the politics of modernism, the seductiveness of abstraction, the dream of universalism and the power of money, but also the battle for world-wide cultural supremacy in which Brazil and Argentina seemed to be at the time among the most coveted prizes. This race had multiple intricate subplots including well-known multi-leveled New York interests in Latin America, cultural competition between France and the U.S. and internal strife for cultural hegemony in Brazil itself. My aim is not to re-write the history of Brazilian modern art, but rather to investigate the ramifications and entanglements surrounding the creation of the first Museum of modern Art in Brazil. By doing so I will try to unravel the complex series of connections which made the notion of “modern” and “abstract” so compelling and so crucial for international politics at the beginning of the Cold War. My contention will be that the creation of such a museum in Sao Paulo was at the core of a series of discourses, which had to do with international politics and national power struggles. I will take Léon Degand’s experience as a lead into a thick history which, without being in control, he managed to trigger a

cascade of events and reactions which participated in the activation of Cold War politics. It is through this experience that I will attempt to analyze and highlight the dreams of progress and liberation nurtured in Degand's fantasy coupled with the dreams of international elegance of Matarazzo and the reality of inter-American power accumulated in the hands of Nelson Rockefeller at the beginning of the Cold War. In this high stakes cultural ballet, the sincere engagement of art critics and artists in support of certain styles often sounded naive. Degand, for example, could seriously believe that he could become the high priest of this new "modern cult", while in fact he merely became one of its unsuccessful traveling salesmen.

The MOMA discovers Brazil.

Two days after Christmas 1944, Renee d'Harnoncourt left the Museum of Modern art in New York with the benediction of the board of trustees for a trip of information to Latin America which lasted until March 1945.² He traveled to Mexico City, Lima, Santiago, Chile, Buenos Aires, Mar del Plata, Rosario, Rio, Sao Paulo, Belem, and Port au Prince to initiate a membership campaign for the museum and to survey the field for the sale of books and reproductions, the holding of traveling exhibitions and the establishment of a circuit for the distribution of motion pictures from the film library of the MOMA. The modern image of an energetic USA was seen by the museum as crucial in the reorganization of the West as the war was closing towards a still uncertain future. Everywhere d'Harnoncourt went, he received enthusiastic responses from socialites avidly interested in modern issues, in particular architects and art collectors. But simultaneously it very quickly became clear to him that the Latin American elite were

² See the fascinating 4 pages report from Rene d'Harnoncourt in the Rockefeller Archives Center dated April 9 1945. (Collection MOMA, Record Group III 4L, Box 135, Folder 1325.)

already under the important cultural influence of well established French and British traditions. As described in a State Department document, the US specifically focused on Brazil for the penetration of modern culture because it was the only country using another language than Spanish, the only state then not being involved in inter-American arguments and squabbles. Brazil- this potential economic giant- thus became the prime target, the plum prize of a cultural race during a period of global re-organization of the west. This redrawing of cultural boundaries was not only a one way street, serving only specifically American interests, the notion of modernity was definitively also a crucial factor for a section of Brazilian high society and intelligentsia.

On the eve of a world reorganization after World War II, the Brazilian entrepreneurial class wanted, like in the rest of western societies, to mark their progressive identity through the development of private cultural institutions and in particular, as it had been the case in New York in the late 1930's, in the realm of modern art. The Brazilian art historian Aracy Amaral has followed and analyzed the progressive development of modern museums in Sao Paulo and Rio and has mentioned the close connections between Nelson Rockefeller's Museum of Modern Art and Sergio Milliet, the director of the municipal library of Sao Paulo through their shared love of modern culture and art. All through 1946, Milliet, in his correspondence to Nelson Rockefeller, describes in detail his effort to organize an association for the promulgation of modern art and to publicize for the Brazilian public the importance of the latest evolution of art production in the advanced world. For Milliet, Modern art was of utmost importance in the development of an active liberal and urban culture in Brazil. Crucial, as this culture was entering into a decisive moment in the political and cultural struggle unfolding in Brazil between a

traditional conservative rural society and a progressive urban one. This dichotomy was a complex construction, but what one can at least say is that since 1943, a genuine social and technical revolution was unfolding following the introduction of the Volta Redonda steel plant which was the first of this type, not only in Latin America, but in the entire under-developed world.³ This new industrialization and this shift (under Getúlio Vargas), in particular in Sao Paulo, offered a totally new and hopeful ground on which to redefine the identity of the country in which modern art had an important role to play. One can see now how faith in progress, traditionally lodged in modernist ideology, was of importance for the new developing industrial leadership, but also how difficult it became to convince a public at loss with the seemingly obscure connection between this modernization and artistic abstraction. By 1946 the elite aesthetic canon in Brazil was still Realism and Impressionism despite some inroads made by an attractive reconfiguration of modernism through the “Antropofagia” and “Cercle et Carré” movements. What was the most impressive though, was the speed with which Avant-Garde strategies and modernist art were now embraced by a progressist bourgeoisie. This celebration of modern art, at least some parts of its language and meaning became as we know, the driving force behind the quasi religious faith of the MOMA in New York. Indeed a form of missionary fervor was at the heart of MOMA’s push of Modern Art after the second World War. But in order to achieve this, to co-opt it for the freedom crusade, it had to be emptied of most of its virulence and subversive tendencies. The insistence by the Avant Garde on notions of individualism and freedom made

³ Despite the fact that the US government did not consider Latin America as a crucial area, it helped, through the Export-Import bank to construct the Volta Redonda Steel complex. But what has to be said also is that after the war the US government looks towards Europe rather than Latin America. Nelson Rockefeller and his private interest is a unique feature.

“Contemporary art”, that is modern art, an extremely valuable element in the construction of a contemporary liberalism in constant opposition to communism. This is why this activity was clashing with the traditional mythology surrounding modernism and avant gardism. Modern art, in order to function, said many practitioners, had to be subversive, had to shake established certitude, had to be able to produce a disjunctive discourse resulting in the carving of real dissenting positions. That’s one of the many reasons why Picasso refused to support Alfred Barr and the museum of modern art in New York in it’s fight against right wing demagogues who in 1948 were trying to reject modern art as dangerous..⁴ For the Spaniard, the enemies of modern art were in fact right, because as he saw it, the main role of modern artists was to be against powerful institutions-to be subversive. Its calling was to fight, subvert the status-quo, constantly trying to avoid the transformation of the criticality of Modern art into pretty toys for the rich. In fact, Modern art, according to Picasso, was not a toy but a serious weapon. The MOMA, did not see it that way at all, but on the contrary saw it as a cement between different people interested in a liberal anti-authoritarian society. Some art critics in New York (only a few by then)⁴ and the museum itself of course, were involved in the whole sale of modern art to a slow growing interested public. Due to the lack of artistic education and modernist tradition on the part of the U.S. public, a tremendous effort was made by the MOMA during and after the war to educate them into the pleasures of individualism lodged at the heart of modern art. This is also why MOMA’s version of modernism was exported abroad with passion, expanding its operation to South America as so many franchised outlets where fierce anti-communism was, after 1946, replacing anti-fascism. This kind

⁴ See my “Post-war Painting Games: the Rough and the Slick”, in Serge Guilbaut ed:Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New-York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge,1990, pp 30-84.

of missionary zeal was not an easy task and not always successful, as the failure of the (un)famous exhibition “Advancing American Art” attests,⁵ but it was nevertheless considered as an essential element in the ideological reconfiguration of post-war western world.⁶

This crusade for the protection and development of modern art was important in the late 1940's as modern art became, not only the sign for modernity, progress, freedom and individuality, but also the reverse image of the dreaded social realism, community oriented art, propaganda and manipulation symbolized by both authoritarian regimes: Nazi Germany and communist Russia. That is one of the reasons why Nelson Rockefeller since the end of the war was encouraging Brazil to open up to modern values and to develop into a liberal-democracy and why he was prepared to actively help those who were supportive of such ventures.

In November 1946 Nelson was busy preparing an important trip to Brazil in order to extol the values of the American way of life and culture. Two days before leaving as a kind of after thought, he had an idea which would have important consequences.

Rockefeller asked his secretary and Dorothy Miller of the MOMA, during the week end before his departure, to indulge in a painting buying spree around modern galleries in New York so as to arrive in Brazil with the latest modern productions from the American

⁵ This exhibition was supposed to show Europe how advanced and modern American art was. Instead, due to attacks from right wing forces in Congress, senate and the press, the exhibition prepared by the State Department had to be repatriated from Poland and the works bought by the State sold at auction. See Taylor D. Littleton and Maltby Sykes Advancing American Art: Painting, Politics, and Cultural Confrontation at Mid-Century. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1989.

⁶ By 1946, in an all out modern offensive, MoMA pushed the educational idea by creating in it's basement, a Museum of Modern Art for children, where young visitors could touch modern sculptures, see modern paintings in order, for a whole new generation, to grow with this new language without fear, nor prejudice. This was one of the first program trying to convince (educate) children of the importance for one's education of modern art. That modern art was good for you, that one had to accept it. It was like a new

capital. The plan was to donate these collected pictures by young artists in their 30's (Calder was the oldest at 48), to the country as gifts, or rather as an enticement, through example, for Brazilian collectors to follow and to initiate a drive to buy modern and contemporary art, while by the same token buying the entire modernist ideology of progress, youth and "freedom". Ten pictures were taken by plane to Brazil by Nelson Rockefeller himself. They were, it was emphasized, all (including those made by Europeans) made in the U.S., so as to emphasize the creative power of the American soil: Jacob Lawrence, Alexander Calder, Byron Browne, Max Ernst, Robert Gwatway, Morris Grave, George Grosz, Fernand Leger, Andre Masson, Arthur Osver, Everett Spruce, Yves Tanguy and Marc Chagall (only European Picture).⁷

In a letter of November 1946, the Museum of Modern art even suggested to Kneese de Mello that MOMA would envision the lending of a show ready for exportation, prepared by Alfred Barr, called "What is Modern Painting?"⁸, designed to "advertise" modern art. This was no doubt a reference to Alfred Barr's very successful booklet of the same name, published in 1943 and reprinted for the third time in 1946 (45 000 copies sold by then). The didactic nature of the book and the expected effect of the show for dissemination of liberal values cannot be overestimated as Barr's text makes this crusade abundantly clear. What the defense of modern art- even the most radical- meant in global terms was, in Rockefeller's mind, the liberation of the progressive spirit. This was what Rockefeller described, trying to convince the philistine Henry Luce of Life Magazine in 1949 to lend

Sunday school idea, a sort of catechism for modernism. Interesting idea if this was not imposed as faith but as an historical debate.

⁷ All this is dutifully recorded in a letter of November 13 1946, Rockefeller Archives (III4L, Box 148).

⁸ Alfred Barr, introduction of What is Modern Painting?, 1943, revised 1945, 46, 49, 52, 56

his support to modern art, as truly “Free enterprise painting”.⁹ One should not overly dwell on these signs of concerted effort on the part of the MOMA and Nelson Rockefeller to support modern art, for fear of giving the impression that a conspiracy was at work, but one should not refrain either from remembering that there was a confluence of events and interests which might explain the burgeoning, with a little help from some well placed friends in New York, of a Latin American interest for modern art. This help was going hand in hand with Nelson Rockefeller’s desire and need to wipe out leftist unions and communist parties all over Latin America. Peter Collier and David Horowitz in their book The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty, mention that by 1944, a Serafino Romualdi, a friend of Nelson’s, was busy creating non-communist unions all over Latin America.¹⁰ Nor should one forget that the strong showing of the Communist Party in Brazilian elections of December 1945, by then with 180 000 members, the largest communist party in Latin America, sent a chill down the offices of the State Department in Washington: “Hardly a town...of over 1 000 inhabitants...does not have a communist office openly displaying the hammer and sickle...(and) actively engaged in trying to poison the minds of the peasants and workers against the United States principally and the Brazilian government to a lesser degree,”¹¹ said Ambassador William Bentley from Rio in 1946. It is also interesting to note that at the precise time when the idea of a Museum of Modern Art, supported by Nelson Rockefeller is developed in Sao Paulo, long and ferocious strikes were disrupting the Brazilian economy and could find 100 %

⁹ Letter Nelson Rockefeller to Henri Luce, March 24 1949, Alfred Barr’s papers, Archives of American art, Washington D.C. Roll 2171.

¹⁰ See Collier and Horowitz, p. 263.

¹¹ Top secret document sent by Ambassador William D. Pawley from Rio to Washington D.C. August 16th 1946, RG 59/832.00B/8-1646, cited by Leslie Bethell in Latin America Between The Second World War

support among Sao Paulo metallurgical and textile factories in February-March 1946. No doubt that Matarazzo's metallurgical conglomerate was concerned and looked for varied solutions.

Between 1947 and 1948, things changed considerably in Brazil as the PCB was finally outlawed and all their elected representatives barred from power in January 1948. The anti-communist wave was particularly swift in Sao Paulo and Rio where communist union organizations were traditionally fairly strong. They were replaced by an AFL-sponsored Confederacion Interamerican de Trabajadores in opposition to the communist one (CTAL). This tactic of cleaning up labor unions was also under way in the majority of European countries, in particular, in Italy and France. All this is to pinpoint the fact that the rise of the modern art idea and in particular of contemporary abstraction happened on a large scale and was sanctified by major private institutions coinciding with the elimination of communist opposition just previous to the start of the Cold War. In this very dangerous political and economic mine field, Modern art was called to play a crucial part in the struggle by providing an antidote to the communist virus. Art and culture could be conscripted into this emerging battle. On December 26th 1946 for example, Lawrence Levy, writing to Nelson Rockefeller, proposed an interesting solution to the problems of workers unrest: he recommended "exhibiting entertainment films (16m/m loaned by the MOMA) to workers, films that [would] indirectly stress the democratic way of life and thus combat communism among the workers, which Mr. Byington states [was] rising."¹² As far as the promotion of modern art goes, what was being brought forth, after a clean up phase, was an art based on individualism, internationalism and

and *The Cold War, 1944-1948*, edited by Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, P. 61.

progressivism. The Modern art spirit was like the one nourishing Christopher Columbus before discovering America, a spirit of defiance and curiosity, the perfect entrepreneur, a pioneer! In other words, this telescoping of images provided the Modern with an aura constructed as freedom, liberty, openness, modernity and progress. Be modern and daring, was the message Barr was sending to contemporary viewers through his influential What is Modern Painting? Was he not writing in the Brazilian catalogue for the show: “Unless you can look at art with some spirit of adventure, the pioneer artists of our own day may suffer too. This might be your loss as well as theirs.” According to Alfred Barr, everybody could be a pioneer without any apprehension or question. These artists, being “the sensitive antennae of society”, were closely-even if difficult to perceive- connected to contemporary crucial issues: “modern artists have to do with the crucial problems of our civilization: war, the character of democracy and tyranny, the effects of industrialization, the exploration of the subconscious mind, the survival of religion, the liberty and restraint of the individual.”¹³ The booklet was obviously hitting several lively cold war issues with enthusiasm and devotion. The fact that today the tone of the pamphlet resembles the litanies of missionaries shows the urgency that was then perceived at the core of modern art.

But the fight for the recognition of modernity- due to its ideological importance- was going to be a hard one, a crucial one as it was becoming crystal clear that the post war world was rapidly becoming divided along two antagonistic lines represented by different cultural outlooks (Abstraction versus Realism). Seen from New York, western culture had two paths to choose from: modern art signifying the embattled individual thrusting

¹² Letter of Lawrence H. Levy to Nelson Rockefeller, Rockefeller Archives, Box 148, Folder 1464.

¹³ what is Modern Painting , P.5.

forward towards liberation in a fluid and open society and Realist art which represented pre-determined aesthetic patterns and propagandistic messages in support of a monolithic and closed socialist society. Of course things were a little bit more complicated than that. Indeed, geometric abstraction had in the past, as in the present, offered a specific utopian socialist future of a type that somebody like Rockefeller, for example, could not understand nor see. Only the individualistic component of the equation was perceived and publicized. The road for acceptance for such an art in Brazil was feared to be, according to Nelson Rockefeller, as arduous as it had been and still was in the U.S. Nelson was ready to help the important implantation in Brazil by presenting part of his collection in the two new thriving urban centers, Sao Paulo and Rio in order, as he wrote to Sergio Milliet, to “Accelerate a latent momentum”,¹⁴ a momentum being turbo-driven by the donation of those already discussed works collected in 1946, the hope being that these newly built Modern Museums would be designed and organized along the lines of the successful MOMA in New York.¹⁵ (Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre.)¹⁶ It is during these different tractations and declarations about Modern art that Matarazzo Sobrinho saw the modern light and decided to open a museum of Modern Art in Sao Paulo after many discussions with the intellectual and artist couple, Carlos and Moussia Pinto Alves in clear opposition to the taste of the other magnate, Assis Chateaubriand, who already had a museum of modern art, but of a more traditional quality (with Degas,

¹⁴ See letter of Nelson Rockefeller to Sergio Milliet published by Aracy Amaral in “A História de uma Coleção, in “Museu de Arte Contemporânea do Universidade de São Paulo- Perfil de um Acervo”, Sao Paulo, ed. Ex-Libris, 1988, p. 14.

¹⁵ Aracy Amaral in her important presentation of the correspondence between the MoMA and the Brazilian Modern Museums shows how important politically these attempts were. In a letter from MoMA’s Spargue Smith to Sergio Milliet, it is said that the future organization “is of paramount importance to the cultural development of the hemisphere”. (Aracy Amaral p. 15) No doubt that Rockefeller saw the individual modern artist being as important as in the US in his liberal fight against socialism.

Cezannes etc). The race was about the constitution of a new “Modern” esthetic. Already by late 1946, Rockefeller was aware that Matarazo’s project was daring, the one to scrutinize and encourage. According to Carleton Sprague Smith, “Chateaubriand could not be kept in line so the museum at the Diarios Associados [was] building a pot-pourri of various styles.”¹⁷ But despite this close relation, Rockefeller was quite surprised when he learned of the important collaboration developed between Matarazzo and Léon Degand leading to the opening of The Sao Paulo Museum of Modern Art in 1948. Degand’s sudden apparition on the scene was such a surprise to the MOMA administration because discussions about the creation of the Brazilian museum supposedly under the tutelage of the MOMA had been dragging on for a long time without specific resolution. Matarazzo, in fact, in a letter dated 1947 to Nelson which the MOMA seemed to have forgotten, mentioned his fascinating trip to Italy and his desire to organize a show about the new abstract art produced in New York, London and Paris. By February 48, René Drouin, the French art dealer who was in New York preparing the exhibition for Sao Paulo with Leo Castelli, tried without success to contact and discuss the project with Nelson at a dinner party before his departure for a business trip. Drouin still wanted to invite Alfred Barr to the opening of the show in Sao Paulo. The trip being apparently too expensive, (some incomprehensible stinginess of Nelson vis à vis Barr)

¹⁶ See Aracy Amaral, p. 49, fnt 4. Letter from Carlton Sprague Smith to Sergio Milliet on Nov.30, 1946 and to Eduardo Kneese de Mello on Nov. 28 1946.

¹⁷ Letter of Carleton Sprague Smith to Nelson Rockefeller, 1946, Rockefeller Archives Center. In the archive there is a report (Box 148, Folder 1464) which shows the close attention given to the potential growth of modern museums in Sao Paulo and Rio. After discussions through mail with Carlos Pinto Alves, Rino Levi, (Sao Paulo) Manuel Bandeira, Anibal Machado, Plinio Rocha, Flavio Regis do Nascimento and Rubens Borba de Moraes (Rio de Janeiro), it is clear that the MOMA is trying to bend the direction taken by “high society” towards a more general public oriented museum. “It seems that certain “granfino” elements (Mr Castro Maia) have been trying to start out the Museum on an “exclusive” basis, limiting memberships to the very top society crowd; letters were written to Mr. Moraes and Mr. Nascimento

Barr stayed in New York, but agreed to lend three abstract works for the inaugural show of the museum (Malevich, Lissitsky and Loren MacIver). All this flurry of activity forced Dorothy Miller by July 23 to refresh the memory of the MOMA staff about the important Brazilian show of 150 abstract works. The next day, D'Harnoncourt sent a telegram to Suzanne Cable at the MOMA asking nervously, "What's going on?". Nobody at the MOMA really knew, but it was quickly understood that the institution had been out maneuvered. So much so, that they had to refuse Matarazzo's offer to loan the exhibition prepared by Léon Degand and René Drouin to the MOMA (letter of 15 of September 1948).

Building Matarazzo's Dream from Léon Degand's World.

Once the decision to become a promoter of Modern painting rather than a simple collector of traditional Modern art was taken, Matarazzo, being of Neapolitan descent, contacted another Neapolitan/Brazilian friend, Aldo Magnelli, the half brother of the very important abstract painter in Paris, Alberto Magnelli, himself heavily involved and engaged in the defense in the French capital of the tradition of Geometric Abstraction. Abstraction, right after the liberation, had in Paris a certain currency, as many artists were looking for a new modern form, far from the dreaded backward looking realism of all sorts. Abstraction in progressive circles was constructed as humanistic, universal, pure and forward looking in its modernity. The latest production was in fact presented every year in a popular salon called "Salon des Réalités Nouvelles" which showed a large

pointing out the necessity for an "approximation" among the socialites, the artists and intellectuals and the public, for best results." The same situation was found in Sao Paulo.

panorama of international abstract works where contradicting tendencies often cohabited without too many problems. Utopian geometric paintings dialogued with pessimistic expressionism. Interestingly enough, abstract production was a fairly fluid and ecumenical affair at the time.

When Matarazzo arrived in Paris in 1947 on the lookout for paintings for his new museum, Magnelli naturally introduced him to his good friend, Léon Degand, the Belgian art critic defender of geometric abstraction, nevertheless still working for the communist newspaper Les Lettres Françaises . Both men realized immediately that they needed each other. Degand was looking for an alternative to his journalist career put in constant jeopardy by his keen interest in Abstraction, a type of art more and more decried by the Communist Party as a plot to destroy working class morale. Matarazzo for his part, needed an expert to help him gather the most advanced art of the day in order to show in Brazil that he, and the country, were fast moving into modernity, into a sophisticated urban society, worth the attention of industrialized nations in the process of re-organizing the western world. Modern art in its most advanced phase stood for this, was a powerful sign of post-war progress. Not only that, but the choice of art, this ultra modern, abstract geometric type of work with its universal construct was a signal that the social oriented art of realist artists like the famous Brazilian Candido Portinari was passé and relegated to a fast fading past of localized interests. Abstract art, in its pure form became a symbol of individual creativity, of a unique, separate and modern entity, free from everyday concerns, the philosophical expression of a modern, urban and rational world. This was in fact the discourse deployed by Degand in the catalogue produced for the opening of the museum in Sao Paulo. Degand repeatedly said what he had in fact been defending in

Europe since the end of the war, that abstract art was the visible end product of a traditional trend in modernist art towards autonomy from the outside world. Abstraction, he claimed, was a creation, rather than a representation, a free space where individual creativity and experimentation could express themselves in total independence. This type of image seemed to fit well the new development one could witness in Brazil. Indeed the country was putting in place, after a short spate of democratization after 1945, a very tightly controlled government, run by a healthy free economy. As Matarazzo was dazzled by the new abstract language that modern art could generate, so was Degand by the Brazilian urban rush towards modernity. They seemed to be programmed to meet, although Degand never understood the complicated symbolic, political and site specific implications connected with Brazilian modernity. He never fully grasped that the implantation of a modern museum in Sao Paulo was bound to reinforce a traditional and colonized littoral culture geared, since the arrival of the Portuguese, towards commerce and towards relationships with Europe. This specific look, sliding away from the interior, generated resentment about this apparent siding with an international, arrogant and outward looking business class. Degand, as director of an important new institution entered into this booby-trapped discourse about colonizing and colonized space, about old virulent debates in which his European voice- despite his belief to the contrary (for him high art was Civilization)-could not but fuel suspicion and resentment. Here is how Roland Corbisier described this coastal phenomenon in a conference in 1976: "This Portuguese and tropical America, with its littoral (coastal) civilization, which bases itself on the export of primary products and is solely concerned with foreign imports (and Ideas), this decentralized (coastal) area originated from European capitalism, cannot be

the forerunner of a nation, but only a disjointed aggregation still firmly attached to colonial mentality...this littoral civilization, which is a mere reflection and subproduct of European trends, can only create alienation and estrangement.” This is an important element to add to the cultural stew if one wants to understand the very specific problems that such a modernist project was encountering. The enlightenment project underlying the creation and support of modern abstract art was in many ways reactivating a mechanism of domination, when one’s freedom became the other’s authoritarian rule.

Degand was obviously very impressed by the visible vitality of Sao Paulo which had also so deeply impressed Claude Levi-Strauss: “a mega new burgeoning industrial city where tower buildings were everyday sprouting from the land at a phenomenal pace, producing countless visual and social clashes opposing old XIX century buildings and cultures with towering modern constructions and behaviors. All this was moving so fast, declared Claude Levi Strauss, that it was even impossible to produce reliable maps of the city, “Apparently, he said tongue in cheek, in “Tristes Tropiques”: if you take a taxi to an address that you fixed on several weeks ahead, you run the risk of getting there the day before the house has gone up.”¹⁸

This desire to become ultra modern at all cost was of course a sweet song to the ears of Léon Degand who had been struggling against a philistine public in Paris. He thought that the cultural virginity he perceived in Sao Paulo was his chance. He could finally work in a laboratory of modernity without the impediment of academicism and conservatism which was the lot of older countries like France. This was his chance to make a lie of the famous and cruel joke about the American continent, repeated by Levi

¹⁸ See Claude Lévy Strauss, Tristes Tropiques, Atheneum, New York, 1967, p.103.

Strauss in Tristes Tropiques, which said that America was the only place on earth which went from Barbarism to decadence without being civilized in the meantime. He'll show them what he could do on this new virgin and fertile ground, he was determined to graft a misunderstood European idea on this new world and see it bloom. It could be a real liberating move, away from the quick sands of French conservative intellectual life. Indeed, in Paris, Degand was fighting an important but depressing battle. He was confronting a well organized communist anti-abstraction offensive and a fast developing promotion of social realist art. This issue became central for Degand while he was negotiating with Matarazzo, as he was in the process of being replaced at the communist newspaper Les Lettres Françaises by another art critic more willing to tow the realist line: Georges Pillemmment. This was a real important change in strategy for the communist party who- with help from Moscow- decided to support exclusively social realism, and to relentlessly attack abstraction as a Bourgeois decadent plot designed to undermine the consciousness of the working class. The fact that the abstract salon called the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles had a large constituency of American abstract artists was an added excuse for the vitriolic campaign mounted by the communist party. Once jobless, Degand's frustration did not stop there, because, despite his relentless efforts, he was unable to promote his "universal" Geometric abstraction in the Parisian art world, confronted as he was with the power of a renewed School of Paris. Very visible art critics and art historians like Bernard Dorival, Pierre Francastel, Jean Cassou and Gaston Dhiel over emphasized the School of Paris quality and its humanism, rejecting total abstraction. Even at the First Congress of International art critics that Degand attended a few weeks before leaving for Brazil, he had to listen to several speeches extolling the greatness of

Parisian culture, albeit framed in discourses developed in order to gather consensus. Art- and in particular the one produced in Paris- was or should naturally be anti-nationalist, international and even in the mind of Jean Cassou, Universal. Jean Cassou, the newly appointed director of the re-opened Museum of Modern Art in Paris, confidently told an audience of art critics that “ art is a universal language and that French art since the XIX century has been universal. It represents an amazing spiritual adventure which needs the participation of every country. French art has always been the incarnation of humanism, and possesses a power of attraction and expansion.” This was the traditional Parisian line of defense on the eve of the upcoming Cold-War era. The Belgian Léon Degand had nevertheless, like the Italian critic Luzzato present at the gathering, some strong reservations about this vision. Guido Ludovico Luzzato actually confronted the “Cultural colonialism of Paris” during a session presided by Jean Cassou himself. Just like Tzvetan Todorov who wrote in 1989 that “the pretension to universalism has revealed itself to be, with time, only a mask which Ethnocentrism hides behind... Universalism is in fact imperialism.”, Luzzatto bluntly declared that all this talk of universalism was very nice but “one has to remark that this Congress does not place itself totally on the side of internationalism because the critical judgment which dominates here is the judgment of Paris”. Jean Cassou felt compelled to recall that Paris did not confuse Universalism and Imperialism as Paris was open to all the foreign influences. Obviously, for Cassou, the Aura of Paris was such that the fact that something valid or interesting could be produced elsewhere, was unthinkable. Paris was the most important and creative center, and a benevolent one at that, he assured his audience. If I have spent some time with this Art critic Congress it is because I want to emphasize the frustrations which motivated

Degand to look elsewhere for the implementation of his neo-modernist program, a vision which would separate him from the lame re-cooked recipes of the School of Paris promoted by Cassou and the French establishment as well as from communist rhetoric. Since 1946, a series of books by Bernard Dorival and Pierre Francastel defined the specific qualities of Parisian painting. They were the opposite of what German art was supposed to be: expressionist. French art was somewhat Cartesian, with flair, delicacy, and reasonable beauty, reconstructions deeply rooted in nationalistic convictions. This ideology saw man as part of nature but without the destabilizing effect of instincts: in man, nature is confused with reason because the nature of man is nothing else than instinct controlled by reason. Thus Dorival dismissed Mondrian and Kandinsky, preferring Leger's and Modigliani's elegant reserve. This is to a large degree what Léon Degand was trying to escape and why he thought the work of Mondrian and Kandinsky crucial for his demonstration and why he particularly loved Magnelly's oeuvre, an oeuvre which, by introducing fantasy and emotional formal elements, relaxed considerably the pure geometric grid. So, on the one hand, Degand despised the unsophisticated realist line- he even wrote against Portinari's show in Paris to the ire of André Fougeron the French communist Party social realist painter- and defended total abstraction; in his mind the most advanced cultural production of his day. But, and this is important, this was an abstraction not totally dependent on the "Cercle et Carre" definition, but an abstraction open to feeling, to intuition, a peinture/peinture akin to music. In Degand's definition, one needed to have a simplicity of mind as well as of heart in order to understand abstract painting, in order to be able to access the new language without preconceptions, without routinely wanting to read nature into it. In other words, it was a return to some sort of

fresh origin. In his mind, Brazil could offer such a fresh start. Degand in his search for the development of a new idiom to represent the new modern era, really felt that the work of his friend, the painter Alberto Magnelli was the epitome of modern painting. Magnelli was fond for example of explaining to Degand that the stain, at the core of the work of Schneider and Deyrolle was too romantic. “We need”, Magnelli used to say, ‘a classical form like abstract painting’. A clear classical form, at distance from those fashionable smudged “stains”. Magnelli used clean shapes, without exuberance but with humor, with oil but without the dreaded spilling. “Magnelli said Degand, speaks for himself, far from any kind of visual propaganda. This type of abstraction, classical but still intuitive without being wild, was the art of the “present” because it generated optimism without being enslaved to a pure geometry. “In abstraction Degand continues, one utilizes uselessness, the superfluous, like cigarettes, sleep and love”. Nevertheless abstract art is not irrational Degand argued with his marxist friend, the poet Paul Eluard in 1947, who despite a dose of confusion, was following the strict communist party line; not irrational because abstraction is intuitive like music but without the common boredom, manipulative and stupefying effect of pop music. For the communist Eluard, music, like abstract art, often brings people to the brink of being completely under its spell, of being manipulated without any contact with what was essential for a communist: **reality**, to which, in defense of abstraction, Degand responded quickly by cleverly asking Eluard, the poet of love: “But do we have necessarily to condemn what mesmerizes us? In the affirmative, do we have to reject, along with music and abstract painting, love?”¹⁹ He finally stressed the point that, contrary to what the party thought, abstraction was not

¹⁹ Léon Degand to Paul Eluard in a letter dated February 1947, Paris, archives Centre Pompidou, Paris.

intrinsically mystical, but could be, of course, imposed on by the spectator. That was uncontrollable.

But the nail in Degand' geometrical coffin was placed when the "Prix de la critique 1948" was given to two painters he felt were atrocious: Bernard Lorjou and Bernard Buffet. Even if the realist painters were chosen in order to counteract the controversial success of the Social Realist painter André Fougeron at the Salon d'Automne, this finally convinced Degand of the abyss in which French modern painting had finally crashed. By 1947, it seemed that all the vitality which the liberation had promised was stuck in an all too well known French quagmire and stagnation while the dreams of fast modernization of the country were fading fast. And to add to this decrepitude, as it's sign so to speak, Jean Cassou opened the Museum of Modern Art in 1947 without presenting surrealism nor abstraction, nor any kind of expressionists.²⁰ Degand saw this predicament being the result of government run institutions, unable to change, to evolve according to the times, in other words, unable to be modern, to go with the flow, structurally unable to grow again as past history had painfully shown. In this sense Degand was on the same wavelength as Nelson Rockefeller. In a letter sent to Matarazzo encouraging him to pursue his dream of creating a modern museum, Degand explained the importance of private activity in the field of art. He demonstrated that all the institutions in France, Louvre, Musée d'art Moderne were unable to gather the most active productions in their collections, "if there are any paintings of excellence, this is certainly not due to the choice

²⁰ See the exhibition of modern French art sent to the Whitney Museum New York in the spring 1947 where all the new generation of young Parisian artists were presented with an alarming result. Clement Greenberg wrote about the mediocrity of the show like several art critics in France (Charles Estienne and

of the Museum curators, but to private donations, such as Camondo, who bequeathed his tasteful collection to the state. The Museum of Modern Art of New York, one of the most beautiful of its kind worldwide, is also a private and not an official undertaking.

Therefore it is up to private individuals-because official powers have demonstrated their incapacity-to put together their own modern art collections and show them in museums”.

For Degand what was important was to be truly modern at all cost, to be able to start from scratch and be daring while at the same time, be able to teach an ignorant public of the beauty of modern freedom and individuality. The role of the rich enlighten individual was to guide the disoriented public towards modern knowledge: “ The public understands nothing of modern art. They must be educated in spite of themselves. In the present state of things it is the marksmen, that is the audacious private individuals, who must educate them. Therefore your role is well defined.”²¹

Alone with his friend Magnelli, surrounded by enemies, it is not surprising then that Degand jumped at the wonderful occasion offered by Matarazzo. For Degand, Paris was obviously too locked up in its past, arrogantly but also desperately transforming itself into an old and traditional provincial country. Degand, thought that every cultural and artistic space in the French capital was controlled and immobilized by politics. The new post-war world obviously needed more vistas, more spaces, demanded a new art based on intuition and invention and certainly not based on copies of a world already bankrupt. He still felt young, he went West!

Degand). This demonstration along with the disappointing Surrealist show of the same year triggered a series of questions from the critics about the survival of Paris as an hegemonic center.

²¹ Lettre de Degand a Matarazzo, Paris, July 9 1947, Archives from the Sao Paulo Biennial Foundation, published by Aracy Amaral, p. 18.

Léon Degand saw in Matarazzo's proposition to bring modern art works to Brazil, not only a new job, but also the possibility to overplay and maybe overshadow Paris, this old Paris incapable of opening the museum of modern art for the new age.

Caught in the middle of a web of contradictory battles in 1947 (dubbed the Terrible Year), modern art in Paris, was indeed suffocating, suffering from a terrible cold war syndrome. According to Matarazzo, Degand, would be able to open a new space where the history of abstraction in all its glory and optimism could be displayed, emphasizing the dazzling freedom of creativity which Modern art provided. And where else could it be better understood than in Sao Paulo, a place full of new wild vitality, on a new continent, where the weight of tradition and prejudices, Degand was certain, was absent. He saw himself as a new missionary, providing the new world with aesthetic tools capable of helping it, not only to unlock the charms of modernism but also the language of everyday modernity. This was not the time to reenact the past. Here was a real chance to start afresh, to literally invent a new world, to bring about, in a breathless shortcut, the symphony of abstraction to life: a new language for a new world. At least this was the thinking and the dream. This was a dream though, the traditional one of those Europeans imagining South America. For ages, Europeans have been fantasizing about the lush, tropical, free, undomesticated, slightly wild but bold and creative type of world characterized by Latin America. That's the mindset with which Degand arrived in Sao Paulo, ready to create freely, now that, contrary to Paris, the communist party as he rapidly found out was not in the position to interfere with his project as it had just been banned by the Brazilian government while the Marshall Plan was being put into place in Europe. Degand arrived, in fact, at a crucial moment in South America's relationship

with the U.S. Indeed, a new arrangement was being put into place due to the American financial commitment in Europe through the Marshall plan. That is what general Marshall was explaining at the Inter-American conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1947 : South America should now bank on private enterprise for their development rather than on help from the U.S. government as before. Altogether, Matarazzo's private project of a museum of modern art in an important industrial center was quite timely and exemplary of the new situation. Abstract art was signaling the passage into modernity of a country, symbolically led by an entrepreneur in a path cleared of communism.

Lets go back to 1947 when Degand meets Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, whom he liked to call, not without disdain, "a kind of little king of the tin can".²² From the beginning, the project of Matarazzo consisted- after an introductory exhibition, accompanied by a series of explanatory lectures, in opening a museum of modern art in Sao Paulo. It was for this reason that he had traveled to Italy in 1947 and extensively bought Italian modern paintings of a quality that Degand was quick to evaluate as not worth a penny. After all, why go to Italy for modern art when Paris had the best one in residence: the abstract Italian Painter, friend of Degand; Alberto Magnelli? Magnelli, Degand and the New-York dealer Nierendorf (specialist of abstract art) sat down together to draft a plan of action and a list of artists capable of presenting to the Brazilian public a show displaying the importance, history, quality and diversity of abstraction. This was the ground plan for the construction of an ideal museum of abstract art which would be the envy of New-York and Paris. In December 1947, Magnelli, Cicero Dias, a Brazilian modern artist living in Paris, and Degand met again to finalize the choice. Complications started from

²² See his "un critique d'art en Amérique du sud", texte manuscrit conservé aux archives du Centre Pompidou, Paris, p.4.

the beginning as Nierendorf died suddenly in New York while negotiating with dealers and critics about the Brazilian project. Degand became then totally in charge of the first exhibition as well as the editor of two books which were presenting, through texts from his friend the art critic Charles Estienne, a survey of all the different tendencies in abstraction since its creation. The exhibition plan was as follows: 1) An historical section showing reproductions of works pinpointing the development since Cezanne of the concept of abstraction 2) A section presenting the Masters of Abstraction: Mondrian, Kandinsky, Klee, Magnelli and finally two sections introducing the young abstract painters of the Ecole de Paris and the young abstract painters of New-York.²³

Sidney Janis and Marcel Duchamp, after meeting the French dealer René Drouin, became the selection committee for NY. Drouin received 5 000 US dollars from Matarazzo to organize the entire show. The involvement of New York, through the insistence of the German/American dealer Nierendorf and Louis Carré, becomes quite interesting when one knows that what was particularly at stake then, was post-war western cultural hegemony. The list sent from New York by Leo Castelli, already actively involved in the milieu, contained all the names of the future Abstract Expressionists. They were all ready for export by 1947-48. The list contained 32 works including De Kooning, Albers, Gorky, Gottlieb, Motherwell, Paalen, Pollock Rothko, Kay Sage etc... plus a list of abstract pioneers from the collection of the Museum of Modern art: El Lissitzky, Malevich-- an extraordinary regrouping of modern artists which takes on a particular

²³ The list shown in Sao Paulo is impressive and diversified: from Paris Arp, Atlan, Bazaine, Dewasne, Deyrolle, Domela, Flexor, Freundlich, Gonzales, Hartung, Herbin, Hosiasson, Idoux, Lopicque, Leger, Le Moal, Magnelli, Manessier, Miro, Nouveau, Piaubert, Picabia, Poliakoff, Prassinis, Raymond, Reth, Schneider, Servranckx, Singier, Soulages, Van Velde geer and Bram, Vasarely, Villon.

importance when one knows that in Paris as well as in New York this style was not yet recognized and even often ridiculed.

Tripping over the ocean.

During April 1948, while Paris was in the midst of a Communist party induced general strike, Degand managed with great difficulty, to gather the paintings from his artist friends, put them in crates and board them on a freighter on route to Brazil.²⁴

Lets pause a second and relish this image of a cargo full of abstract painting leaving a country assailed by communist propaganda, strikes and social realist paintings. The metaphor is, it seems to me, quite enticing. Old Europe through Léon Degand was escaping intransigence and immobility by leaping forward to a foreign place, a seemingly open space where frustrated interests were looking for a renewed lease on life. By the same token, the old continent also believed that it was bringing a new word to a virgin continent ready for modern experiences. What can be seen in this exercise is a complex and mixed metaphor. It seems that this trip plays the reenactment of the discovery of the continent by Europe. Degand acting as Pedro Alvares Cabral brings to the shore of the new world an esthetic lingua franca. Full of excitement and missionary zeal, Degand, carrying in his trunks the tablets of a new sign language which could represent, in its radicalism, the essence of the modern world, dreamed of establishing a powerful abstract empire ready, if needed be, to strike back the old continent. The artistic load transferred to South America represented the desire to give this new space an idiom that would give voice to a revirginized territory and articulate the dream that this could become an enticing example for the tired western world, a springboard for a future world domination

of abstract art. Degand and western art were arriving to those shores in order to give form and language to the new world, the way first conquerors did in America, as if the territory was indeed virgin, free of cultural (modern or other) traditions. The invasion by European modern art of this South American space was not totally understood by Degand who believed in the similarity between the “newness” of the continent and the vitality of abstraction, without understanding that Matarazzo in fact, in his search for power, unwittingly perhaps played the role of a kind of a Malincha in pants (the native mistress of Hernan Cortez), importing foreign cultural elements not always fitting the environment.

Léon Degand flew to Brazil July 12 1948 and met the painter Cicero Dias who was vacationing in Recife. There for a couple of days, Degand had the time to enjoy some of the European stereotypes about Brazil (cases de travailleurs négres dans les plantations de cannes á sucre) and admired naïve frescoes violently painted on the walls of the small city of Cabo before arriving in Sao Paulo the 15 of July. During the eight day, Matarazzo asks Degand to become the director of his new projected museum of modern art, and Degand accepted. His plans were straight forward, a large historical show of abstraction, preceded by a series of introductory conferences by Degand on Modern art: “Art and the public”, “Picasso without Literature” , “What is Figurative Painting?” and “What is Abstract Painting?”²⁵ in order to prepare the terrain for a major opening which was nevertheless slow in coming due to many bureaucratic problems. The museum was, as mentioned earlier, reflecting in many ways the organization of the MOMA in New York

²⁴ The list is too long to cite in extenso but it is interesting to note that Degand managed to gather an extraordinary group of diversified artists. Among them major figures like Kandinsky and Leger along with Kupka, Lopicque and Soulages.

²⁵ Degand’s papers Centre Pompidou, Paris.

despite some misgivings by Degand. He was in particular wary by the insistence on having departments and artistic commissions dealing with Architecture, cinema, folklore, photography, graphics and music alongside the department of painting and sculpture. Soon, as the plans for the museum and first exhibition were outlined, Degand began to understand that his position was an unstable one as he progressively realized that the project was difficult to negotiate due to the different understanding of the role of the museum among all the parties involved (Matarazzo, Staff, trustees, architects, press). While the busy Matarazzo was working at his many other enterprises, Degand was faced with many bureaucratic problems delaying the conclusion of the project (problems with trustees, financial difficulties, architects etc...). Degand saw in it only a series of stupid bureaucratic moves or simply a straight lack of “good taste” when in fact, it was an interesting type of delaying technique at the service of good old resistance on the part of many parties in Sao Paulo balking at this renewed European imposition.

From the start Degand was surprised by the location of his museum which was housed in one remodeled floor in a tall building in down town Sao-Paulo. The museum in fact was located, like any other corporate office, in a tall-glassed building. But this was not at all what he thought as he had of course envisaged a very specific and modernist gallery space. This should have consisted of a white cube with immaculate white walls, which could isolate the work visually and focus the gaze on the unique object/painting for contemplation. After some painful discussions, the architect agreed to follow Degand’s advice and blocked every window in the second exhibiting floor. He even went along with Degand to acquire chairs and arm chairs to rest the tired and contemplative bodies busy walking around the museum space. They of course had to match the seriousness of

the initiation walk: some were covered in black and others in white, to enhance the coolness of the intellectual effort produced there. After the trying efforts of these organizational days, Degand, the master of intellectual ceremony, left for a few days at the beach where he saw and enjoyed “popular” frescoes so fresh, so naïve and so specifically at ease in a village that they enhanced the importance of the division between the country and the city: Naïve frescoes for the peasants and abstract art for the new urban industrial society. All seemed to be clear and following “the order of things”. Upon his return though, his understanding of this duality was seriously put into question when he was confronted with a full flesh rebellion, a revenge of the cliché so to speak. The Brazilian luxurious and sensuous nature seemed to have turned against the cool northern Belgian apparatus of power. Indeed, while on vacation, the staff and architect decided to drastically transform the white modern space at hand by painting the walls with different colors. Some, as Degand described in his written account ²⁶were Prussian Blue, some Bloody red, violently clashing with strident yellows and banal and boring beiges, not to mention the deep red of the wooden floors. In a flash of anger Degand described the place to an upset Matarazzo as a “multicolored Arara Parrot”. To add to this tasteless injury, someone had transformed all the chairs and armchairs previously made of black and white leather, with colorful flowered covers, turning the intellectual white environment into a jungle of the senses, putting into catastrophe all the abstract statements carefully lined up on the walls. The battle was on and Degand, the old shrewd debater with communist party artists and critics was speechless in front of this torrent of sensuous colors and flowers. Degand was of course the prime target but so was

²⁶ Léon Degand manuscript written account called “Un critique d’art en Amérique du Sud”, Archives du Centre Pompidou.

Matarazzo and his seemingly subservient relation to Europe. In Matarazzo's mind, any industrial advance had to be signaled by an image of (European) modernity, at whatever symbolic cost for the local place. What was important in this new museum was that it was modern, as Nelson Rockefeller kept saying. This modernity was the sign of an alliance of modern countries against old fashion attitudes or reactionary thinking or at best of a conservative positioning. For Matarazzo, it was important to differentiate himself from the old traditional supporters of classical modern art, like the one still defended by newspaper's magnate Assis Chateaubriand, in a museum in Sao Paulo geared towards historical modernism. By dealing with the most advanced abstract experimentation of contemporary culture, Matarazzo's museum was more daring and trail blazing in a truly adventurous and entrepreneurial fashion. That's why Degand in many ways was the keystone of the entire edifice without really understanding it. For him, it was the defense of a type of art embodying the freedom of the individual and continuing the development of the history of modern art, the continuation through Mondrian and Magnelli of the line established by Cezanne. This Modern internationalism was also what made Matarazzo run. Optimism and faith in the future were the important factors in this dangerous conjuncture. That is why an alliance with and representation of U.S. and European modern culture was of such importance while so many forces were reluctant to look forward under the threat of a renewed east/west war and while nationalism was still a strong component of Brazilian politics. Modern art for a section of international intelligentsia was acting as a lifesaver not only of the soul but also of the notion of international liberal society itself.

Degand's failure then, seems to be the result of a series of unhappy circumstances which had to do with Matarrazzo's mishandling of the situation and with Degand's blind enthusiasm rather than the rejection of abstraction per se by the Brazilian public and intelligentsia. In fact the museum finally became a reality later on, in particular after the organization of the first Sao Paulo Biennial of 1959. After many transformations and cuts, the show was finally put on display, but on a much smaller scale, as the works from New York were never sent due to lack of funding and business misunderstanding. In addition and for similar reasons, desired abstract sculptures also stayed on the docks in Le Havre in France.

The new adventure of modern art in South America indeed was a sad one, nothing but a fizzled firecracker. After the initial show closed, and after more bureaucratic problems, Degand decided to go back to Paris.

On his way back though, he managed to have another show of the collection in Buenos Aires in July 1949 (82 pieces rather than 95) demonstrating, without knowing it, that his failure was in fact more interesting and more productive than the propagandistic effort made by the French government during these important years of national reconstruction. Indeed the French government was also trying to revamp its cultural image through a program of fairly mediocre artistic exhibitions presented around the world (in particular at the dreadful 1946 show at the Whitney museum in New York). This offensive was a general one but was more specifically oriented towards Latin America, in reaction to the perception that the U.S. were now becoming hegemonic in geographic area where France had traditionally been dominant since the turn of the century. France recognized that cultural hegemony, in education, literature, art and culture cinema etc... was also the key

to open commercial markets and so had to be protected.²⁷ The reception of Degand's private exhibition of abstraction was a case in point when one realizes the important popular impact and the resonance such a show had in the Argentinean context. France was hyperbolically hailed as the fountain of international cultural progress capable of showing developing countries the way towards the future. In the Cuadernos de critica artistica, of June 1949 for example, the editorial thanked profusely France through two exhibitions of art (From Manet to today, and the Degand show) for her greatness;" (Quien dice francés, en nuestro siglo, puede estar seguro de que se refiere a lo mas importante del arte universal....El publico ha correspondido a los esfuerzos. Lillares de espectadores de toda condición social y cultural han desfilado por las salas del piso alto del Museo Nacional, atraidos muchos sólo por el prestigio de Francia, y centenares de visitantes, atónidos la mayoría, han sentido tambien la atracción del mismo prestigio, acaso con signo diferente, en las salas del instituto. (Degand's show).²⁸) But in the introduction and under the heavy veneration was a similar critique as the one thrown by New York art critics at the French official Whitney show. Critics from Buenos Aires wanted more new art, wanted to see new trends, new directions rather than the old well traveled and somewhat wilted trails of past French glories. Here too, what was praised was Degand's show because of it's novelty and daringness: " Queremos a Francia y a su arte por encima de todo y de todos. Ningún hombre de cultura en América, especialmente en el Rio de la Plata, deja de alimentar hasta lo que podria denominarse una fanática admiración por la cultura francesa. Precisamente por eso, nos parece oportuno formular a

²⁷ See the important work by Mona Huerta, "La mise en place du dispositif français d'information scientifique et technique sur l'Amérique latine." Cahier des Amériques Latines, no 20, 1995, p.133-188.

²⁸ See Ver y Estimar. Cuadernos de Critica artistica. No 11-12, Buenos Ayres, June 1949, p. 6.

las autoridades encargadas de la propaganda en el exterior del gran país rector estas observaciones sobre el modo como organizan las exposiciones. Lo que necesitamos y queremos por tanto es vibrar al unisono con los espíritu nuevos, con los que abren caminos, aunque esta aspiration no significa que neguemos a los maestros del pasado. Somos pueblos nuevos y como tal nos hacen falta raices, bien es cierto, pero, tambien pretendemos que se nos ayude a brotar. No todo es semilla. Es menester que se riegue la tierra y que veamos cómo son las flores y los frutos en los países más adelantados que nos sirven de ejemplo.”²⁹ Léon Degand would have blushed if he could have access to this text, not only because as a Belgian, he was defending Parisian culture, but also because, he was actually doing the “good” propaganda work that French institutions were unable to do in their conservatism.

It is, nevertheless, a profoundly disappointed and dejected Degand who packed all the paintings again and put them into another freighter bound for France. What started as an impressive dream of cultural invasion, dreams of the production of something akin to a Cargo cult power, ended in a sad return to the Parisian base where disillusioned painters who, despite repeated attempts made by Degand in Brazil, did not make any sale in this adventure, were waiting for the critic in order to regroup and produce a new art magazine called *Art D’Aujourd’hui* dedicated exclusively to the defense of geometric abstraction. In this case as well, they were not very lucky as this style, full of optimism in organization and intellect rationalism, was not really able to compete with the new expressionist abstract tendencies whose goal was to articulate the mounting pessimism of

²⁹ Idem. P. 8-9. Thanks to Andrea Giuntia for this information.

the post-war culture. Degand faded into the background and died forgotten in 1958 after having published in 1956 a book called Abstraction-Figuration: Langage et signification de la peinture, in which he laid out his formal theory about abstract art, defending to the end a geometric abstraction totally overwhelmed by the success of abstract expressionism and Abstraction Lyrique.³⁰

Maybe he would have died happy if he had known that his cherished abstraction came back in a big way taking France by storm in the early 1960's, and from South America of all places. Cruz Diez, Soto, De Marco, and all the op art artists used geometric abstraction to enliven a boring art world. I am not sure that the playful quality of the work would have pleased Degand, but an invasion of Paris in reverse, almost on Degand's terms, a revenge of the New Continent would have made, I am sure, the Belgian, if not laugh, at least smile thinking that The Cargo-Cult of Abstraction after all did not sink in vain.

³⁰ Already in 1950, Charles Estienne had written a book called L'art abstrait est-il un académisme?, collection Le Cavalier d'Épée- Edition de Beaune, Paris.