

El arte moderno desde las "sombras" del peronismo

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El arte moderno en los márgenes del peronismo

En sus notas del 23 de agosto de 1944, publicadas por la revista *Sur*, Jorge Luis Borges describía las impresiones que le habían dejado los festejos de la liberación de París en Buenos Aires: "Esa jornada populosa me deparó tres heterogéneos asombros: el grado físico de mi felicidad cuando me dijeron la liberación de París; el descubrimiento de que una emoción colectiva puede no ser innoble; el enigmático y notorio entusiasmo de muchos partidarios de Hitler". En unas pocas páginas, Borges deslizaba la descripción sugerente de una realidad conflictiva, cargada de contradicciones políticas, ideológicas y culturales, que se alzaba como un relato desfasado, imponiendo en la Argentina un orden del que el mundo parecía desembarazarse. Un orden que, por otra parte, no era posible catalogar con los mismos parámetros con los que se ordenaba la escena internacional. Lo cierto es que las cosas no eran muy claras y que la historia de esos años muchas veces fue escrita como si lo fueran, tanto desde los discursos gestados por el peronismo como por el antiperonismo.

Los movimientos abstractos geométricos, protagonizados por los grupos Madí, Arte Concreto Invención y Perceptista, gestados y desarrollados durante el peronismo, han sido estudiados en un tiempo despojado de historia, dejando de lado las relaciones cambiantes que el peronismo tuvo con

el arte y con la cultura en los diez primeros años de su gobierno. Todas las tensiones y las formas de negociación entre los artistas y el gobierno quedaron congeladas en la caricaturesca oposición al arte abstracto protagonizada por el Ministro de Cultura Oscar Ivanissevich durante el gobierno peronista.

Analizadas desde una perspectiva que restituya otras tramas de esa historia, es posible considerar las contradicciones, las disputas y las transacciones que en esos años pautaron enfrentamientos que no sólo fueron estéticos sino también políticos. Durante el peronismo se articuló un programa artístico opuesto a aquél que, pese a no haber sido enunciado, podía reconocerse en la escena oficial. Este proyecto se vinculó, de diversas maneras, con el que se elaboraba desde otros espacios de la cultura entre los que se destacaba, sobre todo, aquél definido por el círculo en torno a la revista *Sur* y, en el específico campo artístico, por la revista *Ver y Estimar*, dirigida por Jorge Romero Brest. ¿Cuáles fueron los programas estéticos que, desde los márgenes de la escena y de las instituciones oficiales, de las que habían sido ostensiblemente expulsados, elaboraron estos sectores? ¿Cómo fueron las relaciones entre estas formaciones y el mundo internacional del arte y de la cultura en un momento en el que, pese a la avanzada de los Estados Unidos, las elites intelectuales aún se identificaban plenamente con Europa y, muy especialmente, con Francia?

Indagar en el oscurecido período del peronismo nos permitirá considerar en qué sentidos las confrontaciones de esos años actuaron como una fuerza que activó poderosamente el conjunto de iniciativas que cuajaron en los inmediatos tiempos del posperonismo: para algunos sectores, los tiempos de una revancha histórica.

Crónica de postGuerra

En septiembre de 1945, mientras los titulares de los diarios difundían, día a día, las alternativas de la definitiva victoria aliada sobre las fuerzas del eje, surgía en la Argentina una situación que, de alguna manera, trasladaría las tensiones del conflicto mundial al espacio

nacional. La nueva coyuntura internacional hacía evidente la imposibilidad de sostener la experiencia filo-fascista iniciada por los coroneles argentinos en 1943 y volcaba a amplios sectores de la ciudadanía a las calles para exigir la urgente normalización institucional y el fin del aislamiento diplomático. A pesar de los intentos de reorientación política del gobierno, su colapso era inminente. Éste, sin embargo, no se produjo solo. Desde abril los sectores medios comienzan a organizar un frente público con una serie ininterrumpida de actos y manifestaciones que culminan en la multitudinaria marcha de la Constitución y la Libertad realizada en la Plaza Congreso el 19 de septiembre de 1945, bajo la convocatoria de un amplio frente político que reunía a radicales, socialistas, comunistas, demoprogresistas, conservadores e, incluso, a sectores militares.

Dos días antes, en el mismo clima de posiciones públicas y proclamas que sacudían al país, el Salón Independiente abrió sus puertas en una sala de la calle Florida (gentilmente cedida por la Sociedad Rural Argentina), en clara oposición al Salón Nacional que, al menos en esta hora trascendente, pasó a ser sinónimo de adhesión al oficialismo, a la dictadura y a todas aquellas fuerzas que se querían erradicar. Todas las explicaciones públicas que daban cuenta de su impostergable necesidad apuntaban a un mismo sentido convocante. Los artistas habían decidido asumir su responsabilidad ciudadana y reclamar el retorno de la democracia:

Las obras que aquí se exponen estaban destinadas al Salón Nacional de este año. Los artistas que las firman realizan esta muestra en adhesión a los anhelos democráticos manifestados por los intelectuales del país. Con esta actitud los expositores quieren significar que no son indiferentes a los problemas que afectan a su desenvolvimiento de artistas y de ciudadanos.

Este posicionamiento público, en uno de los momentos más críticos y convulsionados de la historia argentina, es sintomático del clima de conflictos que marcó la relación entre el campo

artístico y el peronismo hasta 1955.

Pese a los esfuerzos por trasladar el destino de Europa al territorio nacional, aceleradamente crecían las evidencias de una nueva situación que algunos sectores culturales identificaron con las fuerzas y las ideologías aniquiladas. La historia de la Argentina se tejía aceleradamente a contrapelo del curso que marcaba el nuevo orden mundial, y una parte de la sociedad anudaba sus esfuerzos para desbaratar los obstáculos que separaban al país del bando de los vencedores. La tapa del diario *La Prensa* del 18 de septiembre sintetizaba toda la angustia y urgencia que marcaba esta necesidad: junto a las declaraciones de MacArthur informando sobre la rápida ocupación de Japón y las denuncias sobre doscientas mil muertes en el campamento de Auschwitz, anunciaba las adhesiones a la marcha de la Constitución y de la Libertad y la inauguración del Salón Independiente. Intelectuales, artistas, sectores políticos y militares conformaban así un frente transitorio decidido a actuar y confiado en el poder de sus armas. Y entre éstas no eran despreciables las imágenes que el arte podía ofrecer.

El Salón no era, tal como señaló la prensa escrita, una confrontación de artistas disputando el espacio de la vanguardia. La necesidad convocante no pasaba por el desacuerdo con la estética dominante; se trataba de un conjunto "ecléctico y equilibrado" al que concurrían "nombres prestigiosos de la plástica nacional, con obras de positiva responsabilidad". Fueron en gran parte estas presencias prestigiosas las que permitieron al pintor Antonio Berni sostener la trascendencia del Salón y equipararlo en importancia a la referida Marcha de la Constitución y de la Libertad. Pero al mismo tiempo, a Berni el Salón le servía magníficamente para defender su oposición al esteticismo; esto era, en sus palabras, lo que hacía de esta iniciativa colectiva una apuesta trascendente:

Lo extraordinario es que contra todos los atajos puestos durante años a los artistas para mantenerlos dentro de las inoperantes y estrechas fronteras convencionales de un mundo purista o románticoide, éstos rompen colectivamente su propio cerco, y el ajeno,

para mezclarse, como corresponde, a la gran masa ciudadana que lucha por la causa de la democracia argentina sin cuyo imperio, ellos saben, no existe probidad espiritual ni clima propicio necesario a la libre expansión de la personalidad humana.

Pocas voces se alzaron contra esta concertada militancia del pincel. La invitación de la Asociación Estímulo a concurrir al Salón Nacional a fin de evitar que "esa superior expresión de la cultura del país" quedara atrapada en las trampas de la "baja política", apenas mereció una breve respuesta de los "artistas ciudadanos" sobre la necesidad de "expresar su opinión en concordancia con el sentir de los intelectuales democráticos de la República". Lo que este acuerdo ponía en evidencia era que el rechazo de toda instrumentación del arte, que se sostenía desde la defensa de la autonomía artística, caía ante esta situación que se evaluaba como de extrema urgencia.

"Libertad" era la palabra convocante y éste era el principio que los artistas sentían defender al enviar obras que temáticamente aludían al fin de la guerra y que por esto mismo, podían suponer, no serían del agrado de las autoridades oficiales, a las que se asimilaba con las fuerzas derrotadas en el conflicto mundial.

Al menos tres pinturas del Salón, de artistas muy representativos del medio artístico argentino, narraban las barbaries de la guerra: "Liberación" de Raquel Corner (fig. 1), "Objetivo estratégico" de Emilio Centurión y "1945" de Enrique Policastro. Estas imágenes, que denunciaban las aberraciones del conflicto, podían ser leídas como un desafío al poder establecido; eran, en cierto modo, "informes del frente" que hablaban del sufrimiento de una guerra ante la cual el gobierno argentino se había mantenido neutral hasta muy pocos meses antes de su fin. Un gobierno que, por otra parte, tampoco había dudado en dispersar con la policía montada a caballo a los manifestantes que el 24 de agosto festejaban en la Plaza Francia la liberación de París. Pintar la guerra, denunciar sus atrocidades podía leerse, en este contexto,

como una forma de manifiesto.

La misma necesidad de posicionarse que había llevado a Raquel Forner a plasmar el 23 de agosto del 1944 su homenaje a la liberación de París ("Homenaje a Francia", serie "El drama", pintado el día de la liberación de París, 23 de agosto de 1944), la urgió a pintar, al calor del avance aliado el cuadro "Liberación". A la manera de resumen, ella retomaba aquí gran parte de los temas que había elaborado en sus desgarradoras pinturas de la guerra: la mujer herida, el reiterado "ni ver, ni oír, ni hablar", Ícaro, el puente roto, la flor. Todos estos temas, que desarrollaba en las series de "España" (1936-39) y "El drama" (1940-45), le servían ahora para narrar la victoria. La misma mujer que ella había pintado, reiteradas veces, como el soporte de las barbaries y de los sufrimientos de la guerra, atravesaba ahora, como una columna, toda la composición; partía en dos la tierra, se sacudía el manto de la muerte, de las almas en pena y abría sus ojos ante el comienzo de un tiempo nuevo.

Víctima de la violencia, el cuerpo lacerado de la mujer se erige en esta pintura como el gran Juez de la historia, rodeado de una fusión iconográfica que condensa elementos del Juicio Final: la separación de la humanidad en dos grupos, el tormento de los condenados y el ascenso de los elegidos, la Verónica con el manto y las heridas. A esto se suman, en un libre reciclaje iconográfico, el *topos* "ni ver, ni oír, ni hablar", ahora debajo de la tierra, aludiendo en esta inversión del significado que el tema tenía en sus obras anteriores —en las que remitía a la necesidad de adormecer la sensibilidad para resistir el dolor de la guerra—, a la recuperación de los sentidos o a la latencia del peligro. En un ángulo, la hidra, animal serpentiforme, imagen de la proliferación del mal, es aplastada por la mano de la que brota una amapola roja, a la manera de sublimación del sufrimiento humano y como un homenaje a los muertos anónimos en pos de un ideal. El cuerpo herido de la mujer se convierte en un *medium*, en el soporte de un tránsito entre la destrucción y el renacimiento de la vida.

Todos estos elementos hicieron de la obra de

Forner una intervención efectiva, en tanto lograba condensar y leer los conflictos que, desde la coyuntura nacional, actualizaban la internacional. Esta pintura, destacada en todas las críticas periodísticas, se convirtió en el estandarte del salón, tanto por su tema, como por el hecho de haber desertado del salón oficial donde, todos coincidían, sin duda habría ganado el primer premio. La obra representaba una síntesis dentro de la producción de Forner, pero, al mismo tiempo, trastornaba su propia secuencia iconográfica proponiendo una lectura de la nueva coyuntura. Todos los elementos, tanto temáticos como formales, hacían de la obra un programa de intervención más fuerte y más contundente que la frase con la que los artistas presentaban el salón. Es esta calidad de programa pintado, de declaración de principios, en este caso más políticos que estéticos, lo que confiere a esta imagen características que permiten pensarla como una *imagen-manifiesto*: capaz de hacer una evaluación del presente y de expresar una posición frente al mismo y, a la vez, de provocar más adhesiones que si hubiese planteado su programa por escrito.

La necesidad era en este momento tan imperiosa, que los artistas no dudaban en renunciar a las consagraciones y en utilizar sus obras como instrumentos de la avanzada civilista. Esto es lo que había hecho Berni en el acto de homenaje a Domingo Faustino Sarmiento convocado por la Confederación de Maestros, al pintar un enorme retrato del prócer que presidía el escenario con la famosa frase: "Bárbaros, las ideas no se matan!". Un acto que, por otra parte, había sido extremadamente polémico si consideramos la "clamorosa ovación [que] partió de los cuatro costados del local cuando por los altavoces se anunció la llegada del embajador de los Estados Unidos Mr. Braden...". La acción que el embajador norteamericano desarrolló durante su estadía en el país marcó, desde un principio, el conflicto que atravesó las relaciones políticas, económicas y culturales entre los Estados Unidos y Argentina durante el gobierno de Perón.

Con esta exposición colectiva los artistas lograban reconciliarse con el mundo triunfante y con aquella parte de la sociedad con la que se

sentían identificados. Pero a pesar de todo este optimismo, hubo un factor que la oposición civil no evaluó en su justa medida: la acción que desarrollaron las organizaciones obreras, que durante los tres meses anteriores habían tratado de mantenerse al margen de la confrontación que se libraba entre la oposición y el gobierno. Después de la momentánea victoria lograda por la alianza entre la oposición y sectores militares que aleja a Perón del gobierno el 9 de octubre, éste recupera el poder, una semana más tarde, por la acción coactiva del movimiento obrero y de las masas que avanzaron por las calles de la ciudad. En esos días cruciales, dominados por una de las crisis políticas más decisivas de la historia argentina, cada error y cada acierto en las jugadas de los tres sectores implicados (militares, políticos y sindicales) fueron irreversibles. La agitada jornada del 17 de octubre que culminó con el discurso de Perón a las 11 de la noche ante las multitudes concentradas en Plaza de Mayo, abrió un nuevo período para la historia argentina y también para la cultura.

Disminuidas las tensiones de esta coyuntura tan crítica, los artistas disolvieron su frente. Desde febrero de 1946, considerando "que las recientes elecciones nacionales [señalaban] el retorno al imperio de la Constitución", la Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos resuelve levantar la abstención a concurrir a los salones, pero manteniendo "el compromiso irrenunciable de permanecer alerta". Los artistas volvieron así al salón oficial, a los premios y a todo aquello a lo que públicamente habían renunciado. El conflicto, sin embargo, no desapareció; el salón fue, durante estos años, un campo disputado entre el gobierno y los artistas.

La avanzada norteamericana.

Tan difíciles como los vínculos con los sectores que tradicionalmente habían detentado el poder, fueron las relaciones del gobierno de Perón con los Estados Unidos. Estas estuvieron marcadas no sólo por el ejemplar activismo que había desarrollado Braden durante 1945, sino también por el lanzamiento del *Libro Azul* y por los reiterados intentos de los Estados Unidos, a

fin de evitar que Argentina tomara parte en las reuniones interamericanas para discutir el nuevo orden mundial. El malestar y los resquemores afectaron en un primer tiempo las buenas relaciones. Aun así, Buenos Aires quedó incluida en la gira continental de la exposición *La acuarela - EE. UU.*, planeada en 1945 por la *Inter-American Office* y la *National Gallery of Art* de Washington, D. C. Esta alianza entre cultura y política, instrumentada en América latina durante los años cuarenta como una forma de combatir la expansión del nazismo por el continente, había tenido dos claras formas de visualización en las exhibiciones organizadas por la *Office of the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs* a iniciativas de Rockefeller, siempre obsesionado por cambiar la imagen de los Estados Unidos en Latinoamérica: en 1940 la Oficina organiza la gran exposición de arte mexicano en el Museo de Arte Moderno de Nueva York y, en 1941, envía la exhibición *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana* en una gira por el continente. Aunque, como señala Elizabeth Cobbs, Nelson Rockefeller tenía una auténtica pasión por la cultura hispánica y luso-brasilera, él mismo definió su posición como "guerra psicológica en el hemisferio".

La exposición *Acuarela - EE. UU.* incluía cuarenta y cinco obras que no traían demasiadas novedades en términos de "arte moderno". Sólo las obras de Feininger, Charles Demuth, Max Weber o Stuart Davis, podían vincularse a las transformaciones que, en el terreno de la abstracción, habían introducido las vanguardias históricas. Pese a todo, una profunda convicción atravesaba las páginas del texto del catálogo: en la genealogía de la acuarela norteamericana que en éstas se trazaba, se afirmaba que su desarrollo había sido paralelo, en sus hallazgos sobre la luz y el color, al impresionismo francés. Incluso -se sostenía- era posible que en estas acuarelas "la nueva libertad" hubiese encontrado por primera vez "su expresión genuina". Si los espectadores de Buenos Aires tomaban en cuenta afirmaciones como éstas, tendrían que tratar de descubrir entre estas pinceladas los orígenes del arte moderno, algo que, por cierto, venía a contradecir la

consolidada y difundida versión que ubicaba su lugar primigenio en la prestigiosa escuela de París. Pero lo que proponía el texto del catálogo no lo podían sostener las imágenes y los argumentos no sirvieron para que la exposición fuese recibida como una representación del arte moderno. Las políticas desde las que se diseñó la exposición, no lograron ser respaldadas por las pinturas enviadas.

Después de la crisis que en 1945 vinculó al arte con las demandas de la política, el proselitismo de la imagen no podía ser sostenido por los sectores ilustrados en la Argentina. Las elites no renunciaron, sin embargo, a su arbitraje del gusto, y entre sus criterios, el rechazo de toda contaminación ideológica fue un elemento central. Lo que resultaba prioritario en esos tiempos de tinieblas era mantener bien encendida la llama de la más elevada cultura, y para esto había que establecer con extrema claridad qué quedaba dentro y qué fuera del arte. Operó, en este sentido, un sistema de pertenencias y exclusiones que funcionó tanto en el ámbito de la plástica como en el de la literatura. La revista *Sur* fue, en ambos sentidos, un árbitro poderoso. Esta publicación, que había sido un activo órgano pro-aliado durante la guerra, actuó durante el peronismo desde una posición que coincidió, en varios puntos, con las ideas en las que se fundaba la política de los Estados Unidos hacia la Argentina. Como destaca John King, durante la guerra, *Sur* "se benefició directamente del deseo estadounidense de estimular el desarrollo de elites intelectuales modernas" en los países latinoamericanos a fin de consolidar una "utopía liberal" que se expandiera más allá de todas las fronteras. El nacionalismo tanto como el comunismo eran, para los Estados Unidos y también para *Sur*, los demonios a expurgar.

María Rosa Oliver, del grupo inicial de *Sur*, colaboró entre 1942 y 1945 con la Office of Coordination for Inter-American Affairs organizada por Nelson Rockefeller con el objeto de promover programas económicos y culturales en América latina. Ambos trabajaron contra las fuerzas que en Argentina se oponían al "frente americano" por la paz impulsado desde los Estados

Unidos. Ni aun la amarga experiencia que había desplazado a Nelson Rockefeller del gobierno después de la Conferencia de San Francisco lo haría declinar en sus objetivos. En este sentido le escribía a María Rosa Oliver en septiembre de 1945:

Si las cosas se hubiesen movido más rápido en Argentina, nosotros habríamos podido enfrentar los problemas de la paz con un frente sólido en las Américas. [...] De ninguna manera mi interés en nuestros problemas comunes disminuye con mi alejamiento del gobierno, y cuidaré en el futuro continuar las asociaciones que han tenido tan buenas intenciones hacia mí durante los pasados cinco años. Hay mucho que todavía deber realizarse —su sabiduría y juicio, su integridad y perspicacia son extremadamente necesarios.

Para *Sur*, tanto como para los Estados Unidos, la Argentina del peronismo no era más que un tiempo de espera; un tiempo que había que saltar y, en lo posible, eliminar.

Abstractos entre comunistas y liberales

En 1945, mientras los artistas del Salón Independiente se manifestaban públicamente en defensa de la libertad civil, otros formaban grupos menos estridentes que apartaban a su obra de la inmediatez de la política nacional. Quienes militaban en los grupos de la abstracción geométrica se oponían a toda forma de realismo, por más cívico que este fuera, escribían manifiestos, exponían entre amigos y se disputaban el puesto de precursores: buscaban instalarse desde el discurso de la verdad absoluta y del conocimiento acerca del único y legítimo sentido de la creación, del arte y de la historia. Sumarse al frente de la vanguardia era integrarse a la avanzada mundial y así lo destacaba Tomás Maldonado:

Los artistas concretos provenimos de las tendencias más progresistas del arte europeo y americano. Los partidarios del chovinismo cultural llaman a esto "vivir de reflejos europeos", aunque ellos continúen, sobre un

plano inferior, el adorable "biscuit" del francés Bouguereau. Y porque provenimos de esas tendencias estamos contra todas las formas que impliquen una regresión.

Así, estamos contra la cobardía mental y técnica de los neo-realistas, fotógrafos "a mano" de sus representaciones paralíticas y morbosas: contra los que se nutren del recetario del tráfuga Lothe; 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; y, finalmente, contra los superadores, falsos dialécticos, que hablan de la "abstracción" como un suceso artístico de hace 20 años, ignorando el desarrollo formidable del arte no-representativo en la última pre-guerra.

El arte moderno formaba en un frente único y éste era internacional. Un horizonte al que, de algún modo el arte argentino se incorporaba cuando, en 1948, el grupo abstracto argentino Madí participaba en el Salón Realités Nouvelles de París. Este espacio, que después de la guerra era casi regresivo en el medio artístico parisino, para los argentinos estaba pleno de conotaciones: significaba que la abstracción geométrica saltaba las fronteras nacionales y llegaba a aquella ciudad que todavía consideraban el centro del arte moderno. Sin embargo, en el medio artístico parisino, no era dominante la idea de que la abstracción geométrica fuese la mejor respuesta para los tiempos de posguerra. El éxito del realismo de André Fougueron (fervorosamente defendido por el poeta comunista Louis Aragon) en el Salón de Otoño de 1948, era una prueba de que la propuesta argentina no estaba entre aquellas que se entronizaban como portadoras del estilo legítimo para el orden de posguerra. La esperanza de participar en el debate del arte moderno que estos artistas podían abrigar al ver sus obras colgadas en paredes francesas también era, como pronto demostró la historia del arte moderno, una simple ilusión. En poco tiempo el arte norteamericano sería capaz de probar no ya que el arte moderno había surgido en los Estados Unidos, pero sí que ahora este país era el único capaz de

sostenerlo renovando sus propios presupuestos.

Lo cierto es que el ideal de *Sur* venía a coincidir, hasta cierto punto, con el de los artistas concretos. A diferencia de la oposición al fascismo que libraban desde el contenido iconográfico de la imagen artistas como Forner, Centurión o Policastro, los concretos representaban ese modelo de cultura incontaminada al que aspiraba la revista de Victoria Ocampo. Si bien la explícita defensa del materialismo dialéctico que hacían artistas como Hlito o Maldonado, e incluso la adhesión de Lozza al Partido Comunista, podían ser un obstáculo, al no dejar un rastro identificable en las imágenes, dejaban también de representar un problema.

Lo que era 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, mantenerse al margen de la realidad: "Que un poema o pintura no sirvan para justificar una renuncia a la acción, sino que, al contrario, contribuyan a situar al hombre en el mundo. Los artistas concretos, no estamos por encima de ninguna contienda. Estamos implicados en todas las contiendas. Y en primera línea". Toda esta especulación alrededor de este arte nuevo se definía a partir de la preocupación por establecer cuál era la expresión estética que correspondía al presente. Ellos sentían que su arte era una respuesta histórica, que las formas y estructuras que proponían eran las que correspondían a su tiempo, que en ellas se resolvían todas las contradicciones que el arte anterior planteaba y que conducían, en definitiva, a la conformación de un mundo mejor. Estos artistas asumían la realización de su obra como parte de un compromiso revolucionario que se materializaba en la transformación de la sensibilidad por medio de una obra revolucionaria en las formas. Y para ellos la revolución en el arte implicaba, necesariamente, la revolución en el mundo:

Nuestras obras tienen un cometido revolucionario; su finalidad es ayudar a transformar la realidad cotidiana, por la intervención efectiva de cada lector o

espectador en la experiencia estética. Es decir, que negamos, prácticamente, la "evasión" que la antigua técnica representativa establecía como una de las condiciones de la obra de arte.

En consecuencia, los artistas de nuestro movimiento no permanecen indiferentes ante el mundo de todos los días ni ante los problemas del hombre común. Los artistas concretos se solidarizan con todos los pueblos del mundo y con su gran aliado -la Unión Soviética- en sus esfuerzos por preservar la paz y detener los planes imperialistas para resucitar el fascismo.

No ven, por lo tanto, salida ni oportunidad para la invención que propugnan, dentro de los moldes que los imperialismos y la burguesía reaccionaria pretenden imponer a la humanidad.

Es destacable que los artistas de Buenos Aires enunciaran su solidaridad con la Unión Soviética dejando de lado la imposición del realismo socialista que, desde 1934, se había establecido en el Congreso de Escritores de Moscú, y había sido aceptado por los partidos comunistas de todos los países como normativa para todas las artes. Evidentemente, ante la nueva situación mundial que marcaba el comienzo de la guerra fría era más importante expresarse en contra del capitalismo imperialista norteamericano y de sus planes para emprender una guerra atómica (a los que Zhdanov se había referido en 1947, en la primera reunión del Cominform) que detenerse en discusiones estéticas. Sin embargo, y aún cuando no hicieran de su disidencia estética una cuestión pública, para ellos el compromiso con la realidad no podía, de ningún modo, radicar en la defensa del llamado "arte social". Aunque compartían sus propósitos más extremos de contribuir desde el arte a la revolución de su época, las maneras que proponían para lograrlo eran radicalmente distintas:

Difícilmente objetivan la voluntad del pueblo quienes se limitan a marchar, cómodamente, a su zaga; en arte, para estar con el pueblo, de un modo efectivo, es necesario caminar a la

vanguardia, sin contemplaciones pasatistas, en base a una conciencia del desarrollo de la sociedad y de las condiciones de su transformación. Nos resulta difícil, realmente, concebir a esos amigos del pueblo, empeñados en un fijismo estético, sordos a las proyecciones espirituales del progreso social y técnico, faltos de la audacia de imaginación suficiente para admitir, en un futuro próximo, la expansión popular de un nuevo arte. En el fondo, desconfían del pueblo, a quien suponen incapaz de toda empresa mental.

Como *Sur*, los artistas abstractos defendían el arte moderno y un modelo internacional de cultura. La revista no actuó, sin embargo, como una tribuna identificable en la defensa de los grupos de arte concreto. Más allá de la coyuntural participación de Maldonado en la encuesta que realiza esta publicación sobre el arte abstracto en 1952, tanto los artistas de Arte Concreto-Invención como los de Madí y luego los Perceptistas, organizaron revistas propias como espacios de difusión de sus ideas. Su propuesta era, por otra parte, mucho más radical y excluyente, en términos estéticos, que la que el grupo *Sur* podía sostener. Pero en lo que ambos podían incuestionablemente coincidir, es en la defensa de una estética opuesta a la retórica populista que el gobierno apoyaba desde los festivales de la cultura, con las carrozas que se diseñaban para el 10. de mayo o, aun más, con toda la ritualización que se tejió en torno a la imagen de Eva Perón. Todo esto, obviamente, no podía para estos sectores incluirse en el territorio de la cultura legítima.

4. Las tribunas de los desplazados

La acción que Romero Brest desarrolla durante los años del peronismo a fin de establecer el arte moderno en la Argentina, es crucial para comprender el conjunto abrumador de decisiones tomadas en el campo artístico después del 1956, en relación con el establecimiento de instituciones orientadas a la promoción de la vanguardia. Romero Brest fue, en este sentido, un engranaje central. Desde 1956, ubicado en el centro de la escena artística como director del

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Romero Brest va a encontrar en esta institución el espacio ideal para llevar adelante aquel proyecto que cuidadosamente delinea durante los tiempos de proscripción del peronismo.

Sus antecedentes respaldaban ampliamente la centralidad que tuvo su figura después de 1956. Desde 1940 Romero Brest forma parte del directorio del Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, una institución opositora al régimen de Perón que funcionó, durante esos años, como un espacio de formación de cuadros intelectuales que, después de la caída de Perón, actuaron en diversos circuitos oficiales (desde la universidad, hasta la política). En esta institución Romero Brest funda en 1941, junto a Julio E. Payró, la Cátedra de Investigación y Orientación Artística, cuyos objetivos eran, además de proveer cursos de interés general, estudiar con "métodos modernos" ("históricos, estéticos y sociológicos") la actividad artística, y considerar "la realidad argentina como fuente" para proponer una "orientación artística en el país".

Desde 1946, Romero Brest fue víctima del "exilio interior" que afectó a un amplio sector de las elites intelectuales. Como Profesor en la Universidad de la ciudad de La Plata, él se vinculaba a uno de los sectores que más visiblemente había actuado en la oposición al ascenso de Perón. En su reclamo de la normalización institucional, en agosto del 1945, la Universidad había suspendido clases, declarado huelgas y protestado por los profesores exonerados llegando, en septiembre, a tomar las universidades. La Plata, renuente a la normalización, terminó clausurada y fue parte del itinerario de los manifestantes del sindicato de la Industria de la Carne de Berisso, quienes el 17 octubre la atravesaron entonando cantos como "Alpargatas sí, libros no!". La furia de los obreros hacia la universidad creció durante esa jornada y culminó con el saqueo de la residencia del rector.

Las tensiones no decrecieron durante 1946. El decreto de intervención firmado por Farrell y el nombramiento del doctor Oscar Ivanissevich como delegado interventor poco antes de que Perón

asumiera la presidencia, en junio de 1946, no fueron más que el preámbulo de un año de cesantías de profesores, renunciadas solidarias de otros, suspensiones y expulsiones de alumnos a fin de lograr una universidad sin política, tal como la quería Perón. Después de la huelga de estudiantes a fines de 1946, especialmente firme en La Plata, las cesantías siguieron a comienzos de 1947, y entre los perjudicados estuvo Romero Brest. El peronismo en el poder forzó las decisiones más radicales que éste pudo asumir en cuanto a sus vinculaciones con la política, llevándolo a afiliarse al Partido Socialista y a concretar, de algún modo, su tibia conversión a la izquierda de la década del treinta.

Desde las páginas del diario socialista *La Vanguardia*, Romero Brest apostaba a la intervención directa desde el puesto de un militante orgánico:

Espero ser útil al Partido, en la medida de mis fuerzas y en el plano de mis posibilidades, ayudando a que los dirigentes realicen una gran tarea de capacitación cultural del pueblo, que me parece impostergable. Aún a riesgo de herir la modestia de Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, secretario de la Comisión de Cultura del Partido, le diré que tengo mi fe puesta en la acción que piensa desarrollar y que estoy dispuesto a trabajar al lado suyo, en la redacción de *El Iniciador*, en la organización de bibliotecas circulantes, transmisiones radiales, etc., Hasta que llegue el momento de que fundemos y llevemos a buen término la Universidad Obrera que es menester.

Si el Partido quiere utilizarme, además, como hombre de consejo en lo que se refiere a las actividades artísticas, que son las de mi especialidad, también me prestaré gustosamente.

Su programa de acción suponía, también, definiciones estéticas. En junio de 1946 Romero Brest pronuncia en varios centros socialistas la conferencia "Acerca del llamado 'Arte social'". En ésta retomaba un tema sobre el que existía un acuerdo entre los sectores que defendían la autonomía del arte y en los que, como vimos, se alineaba el equipo de *Sur*. En su conferencia,

después de revisar a Plejanov y a Kamenev, Romero Brest concluía: "El error fundamental es considerar el arte como *instrumento* de conocimiento y de lucha".

La definición del arte que él quiere establecer en estos territorios que todavía ve muy alejados de la modernidad, le impone la necesidad de definir posiciones claras respecto de aquello a lo que el verdadero artista debía aspirar:

Podría aceptarse la tesis de que el artista sirve a la sociedad y que el arte contribuye al desarrollo de la conciencia humana y al mejoramiento social (Plejanov) siempre que se entiendan estas frases en su sentido espiritual y no material.

No quiero decir con esto que no debemos propugnar con toda la fuerza de nuestra convicción y de nuestra acción el mejoramiento social y la conciencia de una mayor justicia, pero no es el arte, por lo menos no lo es en nuestros días, el instrumento eficaz de nuestra lucha. El arte sólo es un producto espiritual en el que se advierten indirectamente las conquistas habidas.

Romero Brest trabajaba para iluminar las conciencias, y en esta forma de acción se sumaba a la decisión del Partido Socialista de iniciar un programa cultural y político que se opusiera a la confusión en la que, para estos sectores, se vivía. Américo Ghioldi describe los términos de esta contienda en una solicitada que publica en *La Vanguardia*: "¿Cómo enfrentar la ingrata realidad sino trabajando en el sentido de producir el recambio de los estados de conciencia y de sentimiento, raíz y punto de partida de toda acción concreta?". En esta lucha, que describía como de "la hormiga contra el elefante", había una demorada tarea a desarrollar:

Cursos, conferencias, reuniones especializadas, agitaciones, prospectos, folletos, publicaciones varias, carteles, etc., etc., en fin, los renglones de la movilización cultural y social deben ser sostenidos por cuantos creen que la política nos compromete a todos y a

todos nos obliga un poco.

Para defender y sostener un mejor nivel de cultura y acción política reclamamos el aporte generoso de los amigos!

El camino era largo y difícil y no se podía flaquear. En todos los sentidos que enunciaba Ghioldi se desarrolló la acción de Romero Brest en los años del peronismo: como fundador y profesor de "Altamira. Escuela Libre de Artes Plásticas" junto a Lucio Fontana y Emilio Pettoruti en 1946, como co-fundador de la editorial Argos junto a Luis Miguel Baudizzone y José Luis Romero, también en 1946, como conferencista y cursillista en Buenos Aires y en América Latina, y como fundador y director, desde 1948, de la revista *Ver y Estimar*. La acción debía ser lo suficientemente diversificada y sostenida como para resistir el "oscurantismo" que, según sus propias palabras, se había instalado en la escena oficial.

5. La política oficial hacia el arte

En el terreno de las artes visuales, el primer espacio en el que el peronismo actuó decididamente fueron los Salones Nacionales. Desde 1946, el Reglamento introduce importantes modificaciones: el Gran Premio de Pintura y el de Escultura pasan a denominarse "Presidente de la Nación Argentina" y se crean, además, los premios ministeriales, destinados a proveer a los despachos oficiales de obras acordes a las funciones que en cada uno se desempeñaba, adjudicándose a pinturas y esculturas que versaran sobre temáticas previamente establecidas.

Aunque las sugerencias temáticas podían interpretarse, en cierto modo, como una normativa, no actuaron de un modo excluyente. El Salón, que todavía se consideraba el acontecimiento artístico del año, incorporó temas y estilos diversos. En 1946 incluyó a Berni, a Forner y a Fontana, artistas que habían formado parte del Salón Independiente, y también mezcló en sus salas obras abstractizantes (como las de Pettoruti, Salvador Presta o Curatella Manes), con otras realistas, entre las que solamente una aludía a los hechos recientes: la pintura "Los

descamisados" de Adolfo Montero.

Pese al uso de la imagen que hizo en su propaganda el gobierno, el territorio de la plástica prácticamente careció de adeptos que sacralizaran el régimen con sus obras o, en un sentido contrario, de exposiciones de corte político que implicaran descalificaciones o eliminaciones sistemáticas de obras y de artistas, como había sucedido en el caso de España y de Alemania. Si bien hubo un fuerte desarrollo de pinturas destinadas a santificar la imagen de Eva Perón, realizadas por el pintor de origen francés Numa Ayriñac (retratista también de la alta sociedad), la figura de este artista se diluyó tras la imagen de su retratada a tal punto que su pintura alcanzó una función protagónica en la retórica oficial, pero no logró competencia en el espacio del arte. Difícilmente podía ser reconocido como tal en un medio artístico que, en bloque, formaba en las filas de los sectores enfrentados al gobierno.

Entre los puntos más irritativos para la oposición estaban las buenas relaciones que mantenía el gobierno con España. En octubre de 1947, mientras todavía estaba fresco el recuerdo de las fotos de las cenas de Eva Perón con Franco, tomadas durante su gira europea, el gobierno español enviaba la *Exposición de arte español contemporáneo* presentada en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Aunque la exhibición ostentaba en su título la palabra "contemporáneo", dejaba afuera lo más destacado y reciente del arte español: Juan Gris, Maruja Mallo, Joan Miró, Picasso, Manolo Hugué. Si bien se incluían algunos renovadores vinculados a la Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte -entre ellos Angel Ferrant-, la exposición tenía olor a nacionalismo y a todo aquello que la oposición rabiosamente condenaba. Rechazada por Washington y por Londres por no incluir a Picasso y Miró, la exhibición fue duramente criticada por *Sur* en un artículo de Julio E. Payró. Si bien se había salvado del peligro más previsible -la "propaganda"- las 600 obras que en esta exposición se mostraban no lograban justificar su título: lo que se presentaba era arte "extemporáneo", que no iba más allá de la "internacional académica", algo que los sectores

que anhelaban restablecer relaciones con la internacional del arte moderno, no podían más que deplorar:

Decapitado el arte español -sin su gran cabeza imaginativa y creadora-, extirpados muchos músculos, vísceras, nervios, glándulas vitales, quedó tendido en el Museo su enorme cuerpo yerto [...]. En tales condiciones, la muestra del esfuerzo artístico "contemporáneo" de España era decepcionante, abrumadora. Nos recordaba los Salones oficiales europeos de hace cuarenta años.

Si éstos eran los contactos internacionales a los que se podía acceder, lo mejor que podía pasar, era perderlos. A las decepciones producidas por esta exposición o por los premios con tema introducidos en el Salón, vinieron a sumarse los conflictos en torno al arte abstracto, que tuvieron como figura protagónica al Ministro de Educación doctor Oscar Ivanissevich.

Por su antirreformismo, su antiliberalismo, su irracionalismo e incondicional admiración por el ejército, Ivanissevich era un personaje atractivo para Perón en un momento en que le era necesario enfrentar al bloque de la Unión Democrática. Pero junto a esto estaban sus gustos y preferencias en el terreno artístico -probablemente no tan relevantes para Perón-, que lo llevaron a pronunciar uno de sus discursos más fanáticos e incuestionablemente encuadrable dentro de una estética antimoderna. En arte, lo que irritaba al Ministro, era la abstracción. Su mayor inclinación frente a ésta, siguiendo sus instintos de médico cirujano, era la extirpación. Esta necesidad lo había llevado a irrumpir durante la deliberación del jurado del Salón Nacional de 1948, para exigir que "bajo su entera responsabilidad" se rechazase el cuadro de Pettoruti, "Sol en el ángulo", exigencia que el jurado -encabezado por Raúl Soldi y Cesáreo Bernaldo de Quirós- rechazó, aceptando el polémico envío.

Pero el ministro no perdió la oportunidad de hacer pública su valoración respecto de lo que consideraba arte "morboso" en la apertura del

Salón del año siguiente. El discurso que pronunció en esta oportunidad dio razones sobradas para establecer un paralelo múltiple entre el modelo artístico que favorecía el peronismo y aquél que impuso el nazismo. El diario *La Nación*, encarnecidamente antiperonista, no perdería palabra del mismo y lo transcribiría sin comentarios, dejando que las palabras "hablaran" por sí solas. Muchos eran los puntos de contacto entre sus valoraciones y las que se hacían, por ejemplo, en el texto de presentación de la exposición de *Arte Degenerado* realizada en varias ciudades de Alemania entre 1937 y 1938. Ivanissevich asumía en este discurso la "responsabilidad" de avanzar en la "ingrata tarea de clasificar ansiedades normales y anormales" y entre las últimas se encontraba el arte abstracto:

Ahora los que fracasan, los que tienen ansias de posteridad sin esfuerzo, sin estudio, sin condiciones y sin moral, tienen un refugio: el arte abstracto, el arte morboso, el arte perverso, la infamia en el arte. Son éstas etapas progresivas en la degradación del arte. Ellas muestran y documentan las aberraciones visuales, intelectuales y morales de un grupo, afortunadamente pequeño, de fracasados.

Fracasados definitivos e incorregibles que no se resignaron a guardar en el anónimo su dolorosa miseria, tal como si un leproso en el periodo más repugnante de su mal saliera a exhibirse haciendo gala de sus tumores ulcerosos supurantes.

En esta descripción el Ministro introducía un conjunto de metáforas médicas que concedían a su discurso peculiares marcas enunciativas. El arte abstracto permitía, desde su perspectiva, construir prácticamente un manual de patologías. Las clasificaciones y la preocupación por no defraudar al pueblo tenían su paralelo en el texto del catálogo alemán. También las marcas de nacionalismo que postulaban la existencia de un arte "argentino" que establecía con claridad qué quedaba dentro y qué afuera del arte "verdadero":

El arte morboso, el arte abstracto, no cabe

entre nosotros, en este país en plena juventud, en pleno florecimiento. No cabe en la Doctrina Peronista, porque es ésta una doctrina de amor, de perfección, de altruismo, con ambición de cielo sobre humano. No cabe en la Doctrina Peronista, porque ella nace en las virtudes innatas del pueblo y trata de mantenerlas, estimularlas, exaltarlas.

Sin embargo, pese a que en el discurso del Ministro había varios ecos del texto de la exposición de *Arte Degenerado*, sus apreciaciones eran más generales y carecían, entre otras cosas, del furioso y explícito antisemitismo de que hacía gala el catálogo alemán. Por otra parte, tampoco se produjeron durante el peronismo las quemaduras, exposiciones, proscripciones y ventas masivas que caracterizaron la política del nazismo hacia el arte. La política del peronismo dependió más de los intereses de coyunturales gestores que de un programa predeterminado; y así como Ivanissevich atacaba el arte abstracto, otros funcionarios como Ignacio Pirovano, director en ese momento del Museo de Arte Decorativo, lo defendía e incluso lo coleccionaba.

Ivanissevich quería, ante todo, prevenir al espectador para que no se sintiera avergonzado por no comprender lo que, desde sus postulados, era inadmisibles. El ministro tenía razones muy concretas para preocuparse, ya que había en ese momento dos exposiciones en Buenos Aires que podían sembrar peligrosas confusiones.

6. La avanzada de la pintura francesa

En 1949 el arte moderno europeo irrumpía en Buenos Aires de la mano de Francia. El 23 de junio se inauguraba la exposición de pintura francesa *De Manet a nuestros días* en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes y, al mes siguiente, el Instituto de Arte Moderno abría sus salas con la muestra *Arte Abstracto* organizada por el crítico belga residente en París, Léon Degand. Ambas reunían obras lo suficientemente abstractas como para indignar al ministro y también, aunque por diferentes razones, a la crítica especializada.

Desde las páginas de *Sur*, Julio E. Payró no pudo contener su irritación frente a la

exposición del Museo organizada por el estado (el "gran Estado") de Francia. Lo que enfurecía a Payró era que Francia hubiera subestimado a su público enviando piezas de segunda categoría, propias de *marchands*, entre las que apenas podían contarse 15 obras de museo sobre las 165 piezas presentadas. Sin el "magnífico" aporte de los coleccionistas argentinos (Antonio Santamarina, Wolf, Crespo, Williams, Helft, Wildenstein, Koenigsberg) que habían prestado obras de Braque, Cezanne, Forain, Guillaumin, Léger, Monet, Picasso, Rafaelli, Rouault, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh y Vuillard, la exposición habría naufragado en el más absoluto fracaso.

Molesto por el espíritu didáctico que podía verse tanto en el catálogo como en el montaje de la exposición -acompañados ambos por sofisticados cuadros sinópticos- (fig. 2), Payró se lanzaba a dar una serie de consejos y a exhibir sus extensos conocimientos sobre el arte francés. Después de elogiar a los maestros del impresionismo y de agrupar como decenios de "derrotismo estético" a las décadas de 1920 a 1940, concluía elogiando el retorno al "espléndido punto de partida" del arte del siglo XX: el esfuerzo combinado de fauves y cubistas, que podía deducirse, para él, de las obras de Atlan, Calmettes, Desnoyer, Gischia, Le Moal, Manessier, André Marchand, Patrice, Pignon, Schneider, Singier, Tal Coat, Van Velde (holandés), Vernard y Beaudin. Luego de una detallada fundamentación de las razones por las que destacaba a estos artistas, Payró los felicitaba por no haber caído en lo que representaba uno de los mayores peligros para el arte del momento: "Causa gran satisfacción advertir, entre otras cosas, que la prédica de los propiciadores del "arte comprometido" (nunca será otra cosa que pintura al servicio de una propaganda, pintura inferiorizada) ha fracasado estrepitosamente en Francia".

Pese a todo les lanzaba una advertencia: sus obras podían ser "valientes, entusiastas, vibrantes de color, ceñidas en la forma", pero carecían de "verdadera autoridad y de honda elocuencia". El arte francés estaba, después de esta evaluación, prácticamente listo para perder el cetro que había mantenido por tantos años y

que todavía sostenían con fuerza las elites porteñas.

Otra valoración merecería la exposición del Instituto de Arte Moderno -considerada "completamente inédita en nuestro ambiente"-, en la que Payró destacaba, especialmente, el hecho de que traía por primera vez a la Argentina obras de Delaunay, Herbin, Picabia, Vantongerloo, Domela o Kandinsky. Señalaba también en su crítica a los artistas que consideraba de dudosa calidad: Bruce, Magnelli, Lapicque, Kupka, Marie Raymond, González.

Es importante destacar que la confusión de los franceses acerca de cuál debía ser el rumbo del arte de posguerra era leída por Payró cuando comentaba las exposiciones que llegaban desde Francia. La exhibición enviada por el gobierno francés, daba cuenta de la dirección dubitativa e ineficaz que podían diseñar críticos como Jean Cassou que, como señala Serge Guilbaut, desconocían el arte emergente en la escena francesa y estaban lejos de representar las fuerzas vivas de ese momento. Si Cassou no podía dejar los modelos previos a la guerra, Léon Degand sabía que no era éste el camino para que Francia sostuviese su reinado: en lugar del vago humanismo racionalista mezclado con buenos sentimientos populistas y, por supuesto, con una buena factura, que predicaba Cassou, Degand concentraba todos sus esfuerzos en el arte abstracto. Y Payró podía entender con toda claridad la distancia que había entre la indefinición y la apuesta.

Sin embargo, pese al magnífico aporte que traía la exposición de Degand, había en ella una "confusión" que Payró no podía dejar pasar: su título, *Arte Abstracto* y ciertas "declaraciones contenidas en el catálogo" inducían a una insostenible equivocación, desde el momento en que la mayor parte de las piezas expuestas no pertenecían "a la categoría del arte abstracto sino a la del arte *no figurativo* o *no objetivo*". Payró introducía aquí la bizantina polémica que sostenían los críticos y los artistas abstractos de Buenos Aires y sobre la cual se trababan verdaderas batallas escritas, con tribunas ubicadas en distintos diarios y revistas.

Esta corrección de Payró permite ver que la

exposición de Degand no había arribado a un territorio vacío de abstracción, como hasta cierto punto había sucedido en Brasil, sino que se instalaba en un ambiente en el que los grupos se enfrentaban y asumían claras y diferenciadas posiciones respecto del arte abstracto. En este sentido, 1948 había sido un año de polémicas que las exposiciones del '49 no harían más que reavivar. El mismo título de la exposición realizada en la galería Van Riel en 1948 -*Salón "Nuevas Realidades". Arte abstracto-concreto-no figurativo-* ponía en la palestra la verdadera batalla de taxonomías y nominalismos de la que pronto se hizo eco la crítica.

7. Polémicas sobre el arte abstracto

En el octavo catálogo editado por el Instituto de Arte Moderno en 1951, Guillermo de Torre presentaba la exposición de Torres-García como una explícita respuesta a las correcciones que Payró había hecho a la exhibición de Degand.

Si había algo que Payró tenía, era un incansable espíritu didáctico. Desde la década del '20 él había hecho de la defensa del arte moderno una cruzada indeclinable y ahora se le presentaba la preciosa oportunidad de debatir públicamente sobre el arte abstracto con un interlocutor de "espíritu elegante" con quien, además, compartía una misma lucha por establecer el arte moderno.

Había, en principio, algo con lo que ambos coincidían: el comportamiento de Michel Seuphor al "escamotear falazmente" a Torres-García de las páginas de su libro *L'art abstrait* era sospechoso y debía ser puesto en evidencia. El mismo Seuphor dejaba deslizar la prueba de su felonía al mencionar en su propia autobiografía que era con Torres-García con quien había organizado la primera exposición internacional de arte abstracto en París, en 1930. Su acción tenía causas conocidas:

Interpretar cabalmente ese desdén -decía Guillermo de Torre- supondría internarse en una zona internacional fronteriza, llena de cepos peligrosos o, al menos, de vericuetos psicológicos. Apuntaré únicamente que ese incriminado desconocimiento u olvido, al igual

que otros advertibles cotidianamente, obedece en principio a una peculiar insuficiencia óptica parisina: al hecho de considerar sólo valedero y vigente aquello que les cae parroquialmente más cerca, sin esforzarse en traspasar ninguna frontera. Sistema centrípeto, en contraste con la generosa irradiación centrífuga que todos le prestan; curiosidad alicorta, visión de radio mínimo, ombliguismo: producto paradójico del cruce entre provincialismo y cosmopolitismo.

Como resultado de este "ombliguismo", Torres-García era un artista reconocido mientras estaba en París e ignorado desde su regreso a Montevideo. Pero por encima de este acuerdo, estaba la cuestión de las denominaciones que Payró no podía dejar pasar y a la que Guillermo de Torre aludía en su ensayo para discutir, sobre todo, la de "arte no objetivo" propuesta por Payró, y que, a su juicio, no tenía precedentes que la justificaran: "a manera de testimonio próximo -decía De Torre-, recordaré el caso de los grupos de nuevos pintores argentinos adictos a tal estética, surgidos últimamente. Llámense a sí mismos abstractos, concretos, 'madís', 'perceptistas', pero ninguno de ellos ha recabado el nombre de 'no objetivo'".

Payró discutía, punto por punto, las referencias históricas apuntadas por Guillermo de Torre. No voy a detenerme en el juego de erudición en torno a primeras ediciones, traducciones y genealogías que atraviesa estas pocas páginas. Me interesa sí destacar el valor normativo que Payró otorga a los críticos norteamericanos, en contraposición con los malentendidos a los que inducían, a su juicio, los franceses, y su insistencia en señalar que era precisamente en los Estados Unidos donde se había creado un museo de arte "no objetivo" (el de la colección Solomon R. Guggenheim), que legitimaba su propuesta. A pesar de su esfuerzo por resolver esta polémica, Payró no confía en poder incidir más allá de las fronteras nacionales: "...mucho dudo de que Vd. o yo, o ambos, desde esta ciudad de Buenos Aires, podamos influir en la adopción universal de un término apropiado para calificar al arte ¿abstracto?,

¿concreto?, ¿no objetivo?, ¿no figurativo?, ¿no representativo?, ¿antinaturalista?".

La cuestión se había tornado tan crucial para determinados sectores de la crítica que *Sur* publica al año siguiente los resultados de una encuesta que también abarcó la escena internacional. Es interesante notar que, aunque había sido el desacuerdo de Payró con Degand el que había desatado la polémica entre los críticos, los franceses no participan del debate. Además de los representantes del medio local (Córdova Iturburu, Tomás Maldonado, Gyula Kosice, Manuel Mujica Láinez), el resto de los encuestados pertenecían al círculo de la Escuela de Altamira y de Mathias Goeritz (Angel Ferrant, Ricardo Gullón, Hans Platschek). Pese al amor por Francia que todavía sentía Payró, lo cierto es que, a la hora de debatir el arte moderno, los contactos con esa avanzada del arte moderno en España eran mucho más concretos que los que se podían sostener con los críticos franceses. Pero más allá de estas contiendas verbales todos coincidían en que el futuro del arte estaba en la abstracción.

8. Transacciones entre peronismo y arte abstracto

Mientras los círculos ilustrados hacían correr la tinta y llenaban páginas y páginas para resolver la cuestión de las denominaciones, el gobierno se mostraba mucho más práctico y operativo al organizar dos exposiciones oficiales en las que todos los equipos de madís, perceptistas e invencionistas tomaron parte.

Después del fuerte enfrentamiento sostenido en los primeros años del peronismo con el arte moderno se establece un tácito acuerdo y los artistas abstractos llegarán a ocupar, en 1952, un lugar destacado en exposiciones oficiales. Una prueba en este sentido fue la mega exposición *La pintura y la escultura argentinas de este siglo* presentada entre octubre de 1952 y marzo de 1953 en las salas del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. En esta muestra, que era una revisión de cincuenta años de arte argentino, nada se dejó afuera: 519 obras de 271 artistas, pintores y escultores de las más diversas tendencias, inundaron las salas del museo y los jardines adyacentes. La exhibición, auspiciada por la

Dirección General de Cultura del Ministerio de Educación fue, tal como se la definió en la presentación del catálogo, "el hecho cultural del 2o. Plan Quinquenal".

El plan dejaba fijada una expresa voluntad de renovación y de apertura internacional, y la muestra no estuvo al margen de estas ideas. El pluralismo fue el eje rector de un recorrido ordenado por los estilos en el que se dedicaron varias salas y pedestales a las pinturas y esculturas abstractas. Los movimientos Madí y Perceptista, "aparecidos directamente en Buenos Aires" -como dejaba constancia en la presentación del catálogo el director del Museo, Juan Zocchi-, no podían ser excluidos de esta exposición que definía al nuevo "hombre argentino", capaz de crear no en uno, sino en múltiples estilos. La exposición era representativa de un desplazado posicionamiento que no dejaba sin embargo de lado la retórica oficial de la imagen: después del escudo justicialista en la fachada del museo, seguían los retratos de Perón y de Eva flanqueando el ingreso a la exposición. Pese a que esto último seguramente despertó las iras del grupo de *Sur*, Julio E. Payró no lo mencionó. Por otra parte, aunque su reseña crítica reconoció el pluralismo de la exposición, no llegó a mostrarse tan optimista como Zocchi: "No se presenta en el Museo un panorama ideal del arte argentino -un conjunto de obras maestras como el que desearíamos se mostrase algún día, para orgullo nuestro, en el extranjero- sino la realidad esencial del esfuerzo nacional con algunos de sus aciertos y mucho de sus inocultables fracasos".

En Payró el escepticismo era tan fuerte que negaba, incluso, el carácter vanguardista desde el que los concretos presentaban sus obras y lo derivaba, directamente, de "las sendas abiertas por los neoplasticistas hacia el año 1920".

Unos meses más tarde, el arte abstracto ganaría un lugar lindante a un uso político en el envío oficial a la Bienal de San Pablo de 1953 que incluyó, en forma dominante, la obra de los artistas abstractos. Para un país que buscaba abrir su economía, atraer capitales extranjeros y orientarse en el sentido que marcaban las nuevas fuerzas del progreso, no eran las representaciones de gauchos y planicies, tópicos

de un nacionalismo regionalista, los que podían servirle de estandarte. El arte abstracto era un instrumento político coyuntural que el gobierno utilizaba para su presentación en la escena internacional.

9. Ver y Estimar en las barricadas del arte moderno

Si bien en 1953 el arte abstracto se encontraba ya muy lejos de las iras oficiales, no se había llegado a este punto sin esfuerzo. La difícil y larga confrontación requirió de la implementación de varios frentes simultáneos y entre éstos fue central aquél que, en 1948, organizó Romero Brest desde las páginas de *Ver y Estimar*. En abril de ese año no había dudas de que, por el momento, los espacios oficiales estaban clausurados para el crítico; los foros que le ofrecía el partido socialista, por otra parte, no parecían los más efectivos para la empresa que habría que acometer cuando los tiempos del peronismo pasaran: la audiencia que las conferencias en los centros socialistas podían proporcionarle no era, precisamente, aquella capaz de llevar adelante una acción efectiva en el campo de las artes visuales. El espacio, por otra parte, estaba involucrado con la política y desde ese lugar era imposible contar con el apoyo de los sectores influyentes en el campo cultural -como *Sur*, principalmente-. Había, por lo tanto, que trabajar desde otra plataforma para el lanzamiento del arte del futuro, aislada de la política, y alimentada, exclusivamente, por el interés en el arte puro e incontaminado: casi un laboratorio.

La declaración de principios con la que se presentó la revista, aunque no aludía de una manera directa a lo que pasaba cultural y políticamente en el país, no por eso dejaba de señalar, con toda claridad, su posicionamiento, al describir un panorama en el que la única salida posible para la "minoría intelectual", parecía ser el refugio en el terreno seguro de las ideas puras, aisladas de las contingencias de lo inmediato. Estos sectores deberán estar "cada vez más desenraizados de la realidad [...], porque el horror que ella les produce, a causa de su barbarie y falta de sentido, los lleva a mirar

con exclusividad hacia las fuentes del pensamiento universalista". Ante un presente innombrable, las únicas posibilidades eran refugiarse en el pasado o proyectarse al futuro, y para Romero Brest la primera opción no contaba.

El programa, tal como lo explicitaba Romero Brest, se sintetizaba con claridad en el título de su revista: *Ver y Estimar* aspiraba al establecimiento de valores a partir de la teoría, la historia y la estética, sin dejar de lado, por supuesto, la sensibilidad. El objetivo era comprender el acto de creación: en su concepto, el equilibrio entre el acto individual (la "adivinación genial") y las "fuerzas colectivas" que lo habían originado.

La revista pretendía funcionar como un espacio en el que se establecieran valores; algo urgente ante el paupérrimo panorama nacional que se describía en esta publicación: sin culturas prehispánicas de importancia, sin registros coloniales (ni arquitectónicos, ni pictóricos, ni escultóricos) que merecieran alguna consideración, invadidos por "viajeros" aficionados, y bajo la influencia de lo más mediocre de la pintura española, no era mucho lo que se podía esperar. Después de esta visión desoladora, cualquier cosa que se hiciese, era equivalente a todo. Pero para poder llegar a la concreción de sus máximas aspiraciones - establecer en estas tierras desiertas el arte moderno y universal-, era necesario ir poco a poco: "Es necesario saber pintar como los naturalistas -afirmaba- para poder innovar como los modernos". Lo que había que evitar era que el arte moderno se impusiera como una "estructura ficticia e inerte de ideales ajenos". El paradigma, el ideal al que se soñaba con anhelo integrarse en 1948, era aquel internacionalismo sin fronteras cuyo modelo estaba, todavía, en Europa y, más exactamente, en la admirada París: "El arte europeo, en nuestro siglo, se ha transformado en arte universal; y si París ha ejercido el más alto magisterio que le haya sido asignado a ciudad alguna en la historia de la humanidad, es porque durante cincuenta años ha sido el crisol de las teorías estéticas universalistas".

Fuera de este medio lleno de adversidades,

que funciona en su plenitud como un oponente, *Ver y Estimar* no define contrincantes: no se presenta como un órgano que irrumpe en la escena para posicionarse marcando sus diferencias. El propósito que la mueve es fundante y para establecer esto con toda claridad, su estrategia pasa por borrar la existencia de todo otro discurso. Ante este vacío, no tiene enemigos identificables pero tampoco cuenta con colaboradores, por eso Romero Brest hace su publicación con la "colaboración de sus discípulos" quienes, puede suponerse, forman en las líneas de su pensamiento. A los verdaderos colaboradores, sus pares, Romero Brest los coloca fuera de las fronteras nacionales. El mundo internacional de la crítica de arte se vinculaba, de esta manera, a un proyecto cuyo punto facetado y estelar de confluencia se ubicaba dentro del territorio nacional, en la ciudad de Buenos Aires.

La lista de colaboradores es significativa. Define, en una lectura posible, una comunidad internacional de "resistentes". Muchos de ellos comparten el exilio provocado por el franquismo: tanto el interno, al que los expulsa el atraso de la política oficial (como sucede en el caso de Sabastián Gasch), como el externo (el que trajo a Buenos Aires a Rafael Alberti). Para ellos y también para José Luis Romero o Guillermo de Torre, Franco o Perón eran lo mismo. Pero también unía a sus colaboradores la militancia en las filas del arte moderno: este es el punto en el que se encuentran Max Bill, Mathias Goeritz y León Degand entre otros.

Más allá de las coincidencias ideológicas o estéticas que pueden encontrarse en este equipo editorial, lo cierto es que quien los articula, quien los forma en un mismo frente, es Romero Brest, desde las páginas de su revista. Este nucleamiento, que se define ante todo a partir de un vínculo personal y se sostiene a través de una correspondencia incesante, integra con su aporte el capital cultural de esa formación marginal que la revista recorta, en los márgenes de la escena oficial.

Desde las páginas de *Ver y Estimar*, Romero Brest armaba, un poco ficcionalmente, aquello que la realidad no le permitía realizar. Su propósito

era traer por medio de la palabra escrita aquellas imágenes que no podían verse en Buenos Aires a causa del aislamiento internacional en el que se encontraba el país. Esto se propone desde las secciones de crítica bibliográfica y de las "misceláneas" en las que informa sobre las exhibiciones y publicaciones internacionales. La idea no es sólo dar cuenta de lo que pasa en el exterior, sino también mostrar que, al menos desde sus colecciones de obras europeas, Buenos Aires integra el circuito del gran arte internacional. De ahí una sección recurrente, "Inventario", en la que realiza un relevamiento de las pinturas de artistas como Renoir, Goya o Gauguin, representados en las colecciones argentinas.

Pero por encima de este intento de rescate del patrimonio local, hay algo que la realidad definitivamente no ofrecía: la Argentina estaba al margen de los certámenes internacionales. Es esta ausencia la que hizo doblemente relevante el lugar que ocupó Romero Brest, convocado a actuar como jurado de la Bienal de San Pablo (1951), y del Concurso Internacional de Escultura "El Prisionero Político Desconocido" (1953), organizado por el Instituto de Artes Contemporáneas de Londres para "conmemorar todos aquellos hombres y mujeres desconocidos que en nuestros tiempos han dado sus vidas o sus libertades por la causa de la libertad humana". El hecho de que se invitara a Romero Brest, representante de un país sospechado de simpatías fascistas y de colaboración con las fuerzas del Eje durante la guerra, como jurado de esta celebración de la libertad, al mismo tiempo que lo separaba radicalmente de la Argentina de Perón, hacía recaer en su figura la misión de restablecer el prestigio nacional. A partir de este accionar él era todo lo que el país no era: moderno, internacional, abierto al mundo, defensor de la libertad.

Los valores sobre los que *Ver* y *Estimar* construye su legitimidad son, ante todo, los que para Romero Brest definen el terreno del auténtico arte: aquel que no se pliega a ningún tipo de servidumbre, ni a la de la política, ni a la de la realidad. Nada ajeno al lenguaje, a la especificidad de los medios de expresión

artística, podía servir para justificar el sentido o la función del arte. En el recorte y en la fundamentación de estas legitimidades, Romero Brest no estaba solo. Además de sus discípulos, que acompañaban su acción asumiendo la militancia del maestro con su permanente participación, también contaba la acción que desarrollaba en forma paralela, e incluso anticipada, Julio E. Payró. Pero a pesar su obstinada prédica, las metas todavía estaban demasiado lejos de ser alcanzadas. Como vimos, la descripción que en 1953 hacía Payró del panorama artístico nacional, estaba teñida del mismo tono de lacrimoso lamento que marcaba la presentación de la revista de Romero Brest.

Los afanes formativos engarzados en la tradición europea que mueven al director de esta publicación marcan con claridad su recorrido temático. Desde el segundo número se propone el modelo monográfico que comienza, de un modo previsible, con la obra de Picasso. Ésta le sirve magníficamente para explicar uno de sus valores centrales: la idea de invención:

Él es el hombre que no ha querido jugar del mismo modo que sus antecesores, y aun que la mayoría de sus contemporáneos; que ha entrevisto las nuevas maneras de vivir, estremecidas y contradictorias, y pretende darles forma plástica; que está creando el alfabeto de nuestro tiempo, dinámico y fáustico, basado en el ritmo y en el carácter, en la pasión de un ansia, tal vez desmedida, de ser universal.

Esta cuestión no es para Romero Brest menos central que otra para la que Picasso también le proporciona los mejores argumentos: de qué modo debe plantearse la relación entre el arte y la política. "Guernica" es el cuadro paradigmático que le sirve, a la vez, como modelo y como demostración. Frente a las formas de posible resolución de un tema tan dramático, Picasso "lejos de expresar sus sentimientos por los medios habituales de la representación, dotando a los objetos de una carga emocional", utilizó "sus formas desnudas para que ellas *aludieran* a los hechos, por medios alegóricos". Para esto Picasso

condensó las "esencias emotivas en las esencias formales, sin más apoyo material que el imprescindible". Ésta es, a su juicio, la "capacidad normativa del invento picassiano". El problema de la filiación política no es para Romero Brest -como sí lo será para muchos de los biógrafos de Picasso-, un problema, sobre todo porque él no se somete a preceptivas sino que, sostiene Romero Brest, convierte su posición política en forma:

Es claro que la guerra y la afiliación política han influido poderosamente en el arte de Picasso. ¿Cómo hubiera podido ocurrir lo contrario? Pero no es hombre de actuar por reflejo, sino por creación, de modo que esa influencia se manifiesta preponderantemente en ciertos acentos de su barroquismo, ahora más instintivo que nunca.

El ejemplo de Picasso y el cubismo adquieren, para Romero Brest, un carácter normativo. Si en 1950, en las páginas de *Ver y Estimar*, delegaba en otros la explicación de este movimiento, en 1953 asumirá él mismo esta tarea en su contribución para el primer número de *Imago Mundi*. Analizar "el valor de invención formal" que implica el cubismo era, desde su perspectiva, hacer entendible un momento fundacional para el arte de occidente y volverlo enseñanza. Es ahí donde puede verse el surgimiento de una "nueva lengua", cuya lógica puede establecerse con toda claridad a partir de una cadena evolutiva de las formas que pasa por Manet, Degas, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Lautrec, los *fauves* y llega a los expresionistas, definiendo un camino de transformaciones progresivas cuya culminación está en el estilo que definen Braque y Picasso: "...el cubismo no fue una humorada genial, sino una solución al problema que se venía planteando desde hacía casi cincuenta años". Su visión supone, al mismo tiempo, un modo de conceptualizar la historia: "En lugar de los cortes transversales, propugno pues los cortes longitudinales. Lo que debe interesar al historiador, en el caso de las artes plásticas como de cualquier otra actividad cultural, es el proceso de formación, culminación y descenso de

los sistemas formales".

Todo este legado de un desarrollo coherente de las puras formas que Romero Brest quiere apropiarse y trasladar rápidamente a estas tierras desiertas, no desautoriza, por el momento, las conquistas de un movimiento realista como el muralismo. Es por eso que la revista puede dedicar sus homenajes a José Clemente Orozco (núm.13) y a Cándido Portinari (núm. 4). Claro que en la alabanza que hace de este último va a destacar, justamente, el acierto de su "búsqueda" en la que sin renunciar a lo "contingente" lo encierra en la "forma necesaria": Portinari no "refleja", "construye".

Ver y Estimar quiere inscribirse con toda claridad en el terreno de la avanzada del arte moderno; por eso celebra la fundación del Instituto de Arte Moderno y entiende su voz lo suficientemente autorizada como para erigirse en custodio del cumplimiento del programa inaugural de esta institución. Es este mismo sentido, de vislumbrar el futuro señalando caminos, el que motiva que en sus páginas se realicen los primeros intentos de historiar un movimiento tan reciente como las expresiones locales del arte concreto.

En 1951 Romero Brest parece haber tomado una decisión sobre el futuro del arte. Si después de su tercer viaje a Europa, entre 1948-49 comprende "la importancia del movimiento iniciado por Kandinsky y Mondrian y al que ahora se llama concreto", después de su cuarta visita a Europa y de la primera a Nueva York (1950-51), se siente mucho más seguro sobre su programa. Al publicar una *summa* de más de diez años de críticas parece sentirse compelido a una redefinición: si en 1948, cuando escribe en el primer número de su revista pensaba en la necesidad de que los artistas argentinos "tornaran los ojos a la tierra" -o, más exactamente, hacia sus ciudades-, como un modo de contrarrestar la influencia europea, ahora se define por un radical cambio de rumbo:

[...] esa expresión nueva es la que viene surgiendo, probablemente más en Estados Unidos que en Europa, por la senda del llamado arte abstracto. No hago cuestión de nombres -

llámeselo arte concreto o no objetivo o no figurativo. Lo importante es comprenderlo. Por eso me vengo esforzando, en mis cursos y conferencias, pronto en un librito que publicará Fondo de Cultura Económica de México, titulado *Hacia el arte abstracto*, para que mis discípulos y amigos entiendan correctamente los postulados en que se basa. [...] Es un movimiento artístico que sin duda se adelanta en muchas decenas de años pero cuya vigencia no hará sino acrecentarse.

Romero Brest se siente en el umbral de un cambio, de una inminente metamorfosis que podría dar lugar al estilo de este siglo, y toda la responsabilidad en la representación desde el presente del futuro, recae para él en el arte abstracto.

En 1952 Romero Brest publica *La pintura europea (1900-1950)*, editado por el Fondo de Cultura Económica y ampliamente difundido por Latinoamérica. En este libro, después de revisar toda la historia del arte europeo del siglo XX, sin dejar de cuestionar las propuestas de cada una de las celebradas irrupciones de la vanguardia, Romero Brest redefine su apuesta en términos todavía más definitivos: un arte racional, matemático, que rechace las formas expresivas del pasado y que unifique en un lenguaje común las producciones de la pintura, la escultura y la arquitectura para que se encuadren dentro de un estilo que corresponda al presente y que se proyecte al futuro.

Los temas y las propuestas que ocupan las páginas de *Ver y Estimar* recortan los límites de su acción: trabajar desde las sombras en la definición de un modelo para el arte lo suficientemente sólido y articulado como para que, cuando llegasen los tiempos nuevos -los de la postergada "liberación"-, estuviese tan aceptado que solo fuese necesario ponerlo a funcionar.

El golpe militar que derroca a Perón en septiembre de 1955 coloca al crítico en el mejor espacio que podía soñar. En octubre de ese año, Romero Brest cierra definitivamente las páginas de *Ver y Estimar* para pasar a actuar en las instituciones oficiales y en alianza con el nuevo

Estado, como interventor del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Desde entonces, él va a demostrar, mejor que nadie, que las formas del arte no son puras formas, sino también un instrumento político.

1. MODERN ART ON THE MARGINS OF PERONISM

In his notes from August 23, 1944, published in the literary journal, *Sur*, Jorge Luis Borges described his impressions of the celebrations in Buenos Aires following the liberation of Paris: "That day of teeming masses, I was struck by three heterogeneous forms of amazement: by extreme physical joy when I was told that Paris had been liberated, by the discovery that collective emotion is not necessarily ignoble, and by the enigmatic and notorious enthusiasm of many of Hitler's supporters."¹ In a few short pages, Borges delivered a suggestive description of a conflicted reality, laden with political, ideological, and cultural contradictions, unfolding like an out-of-sync story in which an order was being imposed on Argentina from which the rest of the world appeared to be freeing itself. An order, in contrast, that was impossible to classify within the same parameters that prevailed in the international panorama. What is certain is that things were not very clear. Nonetheless, the history of those years was often written as if they had been clear, and this is apparent in the rhetoric of both the Peronists and the anti-Peronists.

The Geometric Abstract movements spearheaded by the artistic groups, *Madí*, *Arte Concreto* *Invención*, and *Perceptismo*, were formed and developed during the Peronist period. They have been studied as if they could be isolated from history, ignoring the changing relations that existed between Peronism, during its first ten years in power, and the worlds of art and culture.² All the tensions and forged agreements between artists and government were held in suspense in what became the characteristic posture of opposition to abstract art led by the Minister of Culture, Oscar Ivanissevich, on behalf of the Peronist administration.³

Analyzed from a perspective that considers various aspects of the period, there emerge contradictions, disputes, and negotiations that shaped those confrontational years, aesthetically as well as politically. During the Peronist regime an artistic agenda

took shape that was in opposition to what was recognized as the official position, despite its not having been stated explicitly. This agenda was linked in various ways to one being formulated in other cultural spaces, particularly that of the noteworthy literary circle that produced the magazine *Sur* and, in the art world, the magazine, *Ver y Estimar*, under the direction of Jorge Romero Brest. Ostensibly expelled from the art world and the official institutions, what aesthetic projects did these sectors develop from the margins? What was the nature of the relations between these artistic formations and the international art world and culture at a moment in which, despite the emerging avant-garde in the United States, the intellectual elite still identified with Europe and, particularly, with France?

Investigating this shadowy period of Peronism enables us to consider the ways in which confrontations during those years acted as a powerful force to activate initiatives suddenly taking shape in the post-Peronist period: a time, for some sectors, of historical revenge.

1. POSTWAR CHRONICLE

In September, 1945, as the daily headlines announced the possibilities for a definitive Allied victory over the Axis powers, in Argentina a situation was emerging that, in a certain way, transported the tensions of the world conflict to home soil. The new international situation made it clear that continuing the fascist experience initiated by the Argentine colonels in 1943 would be impossible. This led to an outpouring of citizens into the streets to demand the urgent normalization of institutions and an end to Argentina's diplomatic isolation. Despite attempts to politically redirect the government, its collapse was imminent.⁴ However, this did not take place all on its own. Beginning in April artistic and cultural sectors began organizing a publicity campaign that featured a series of uninterrupted rallies and demonstrations, culminating in the massively attended march for *La Constitución y la Libertad* (Constitution and Liberty) held in the Plaza Congreso on September 19, 1945. This demonstration was called forth by a broad political front that brought together radicals, socialists, communists, democratic progressives, conservatives, and even the military sectors.

Two days earlier, in this same climate of public action, with proclamations being delivered that shook the nation, the *Salón Independiente* (Independent Salon) opened its doors in a gallery space on Florida Street (provided by the aristocratic *Sociedad Rural Argentina*) in clear

opposition to the *Salón Nacional* (National Salon) which, at that transcendent moment in history, became synonymous with the government, the dictatorship, and all those forces the masses wanted to eradicate. All public statements addressed the urgent need for change and were directed at this singular, uniting objective. The artists had decided to assume civic responsibility and to call for a return to democracy: "The works on exhibit here were intended for the National Salon this year. The artists whose names appear on these works participate in this exhibit in solidarity with the democratic desires expressed by the intellectuals of this nation. With this attitude, the exhibitors wish to express that they are not indifferent to the problems affecting the activities of artists and citizens."⁵

This public position, at one of the most critical and turbulent moments in Argentine history, was symptomatic of the conflictive context that characterized the relationship between the art world and Peronism until 1955.

Despite efforts to transport Europe's fate to Argentine territory, evidence quickly came to light of a new situation that some cultural sectors identified with the defeated forces and ideologies of the war. The history of Argentina was rapidly being woven against the grain of the new world order, and one part of society was consolidating its efforts to break down the barriers that prevented the country from siding with the victors. The front page of the newspaper, *La Prensa*, on September 18, reflected this deep-seated anxiety and sense of urgency: alongside MacArthur's declarations regarding the rapid occupation of Japan and the reports of two hundred thousand deaths at Auschwitz, there appeared an article on the massive turnout for the march for the Constitution and Liberty and the inauguration of the Independent Salon. Intellectuals, artists, and some political and military sectors thus formed a transitory front determined to act, confident in the power of its weapons. And among them, the images to be offered by the art world were not to be underestimated.

The Independent Salon did not, as suggested in the printed media, represent a confrontation between artists disputing avant-garde space. The need to organize did not arise from a disagreement over the dominant aesthetic; it had more to do with an "eclectic and balanced" group to which belonged a number of "prestigious names in the national art scene, with constructive and responsible works."⁶ In large part, it was owing to the presence of these prestigious names that the painter, Antonio Berni, was able to uphold the importance of the Salon and raise it to a level equal to the significance of the march for the

Constitution and Liberty.⁷ At the same time, the Salon afforded Berni a magnificent opportunity to defend his opposition to aestheticism, which, in his words, was what made this collective initiative an important cause: "What is extraordinary is that against all the restrictions imposed on artists over the years to keep them within the unworkable and narrow conventional limits of a purist and romantic world, these artists have collectively broken out of their self-imposed isolation, as well as that imposed on them, in order to mix in with the mass of citizens (as well they should), fighting for the cause of Argentine democracy without which, they know, the necessary spiritual probity and opportune climate for the free expansion of human personality is impossible."⁸

Few voices were raised against this organized paintbrush militancy. The invitation to the artists from the *Asociación Estímulo* (Incentives Association) to attend the National Salon – so that "this superior expression of the country's culture" should not remain caught in the trap of "lowly politics" –merited only a short statement from the "citizen artists" regarding the necessity of "expressing their opinion in agreement with the feelings of the democratic intellectuals of the Republic."⁹ What this statement demonstrated was that the rejection of all manipulation of art, which was based on the defense of artistic autonomy, was collapsing in the face of this situation, now considered of the utmost urgency.

"Freedom" was the keyword. It represented the principle that the artists felt they were defending when they showed work that thematically referred to the end of the war and, for this very reason, they could be sure that their work was not going to please the authorities, who had associated themselves with the losers in the world conflict.

At least three paintings from the Salon, by artists who were very representative of the Argentine art scene, addressed the barbarity of war: *Liberación*, by Raquel Forner, *Objetivo estratégico*, by Emilio Centurion, and *1945*, by Enrique Policastro. These images, denouncing the aberrations of the conflict, could be seen as challenges to the established power structures. They were, in a certain sense, "reports from the front" that spoke to the suffering caused by a war in which the Argentine government had remained neutral until just a few months before the end. A government that, on the other hand, had not hesitated to send mounted police to disperse demonstrators celebrating the liberation of Paris in Buenos Aires. To paint the war, to denounce atrocities, could be seen in this context as a kind of manifesto.

The same need to take a position that had led Raquel Forner to express her tribute to the liberation of Paris on August 23, 1944, inspired her to paint *Liberación* in the heat of the allied advance. As a summary, she picked up many of the themes she had begun to develop in her heartrending paintings of the war: the wounded woman, the repetition of *ni ver, ni oír, ni hablar*, ("see no, hear no, speak no evil"), Icarus, the broken bridge, the flower. All these themes, which she developed in the series on Spain (1936-39) and Drama (1940-45), now aided her narration of victory. The same figure of a woman that Forner had painted many times as a medium for the barbarities and suffering of war,¹⁰ now stands like a pillar in the center of the composition; she raises the blanket of death and the souls in agony, and, splitting the earth in two, she opens her eyes to the beginning of a new age.

A victim of violence, the lacerated body of the woman rises up in this painting as the great Judge of all history, surrounded by an iconographic fusion that condenses elements of the Final Judgement: the separation of humanity into two groups, the torment of the condemned and the ascension of the chosen few, the Veronica with the shroud and the wounds. To this was added a kind of freeform recycling of iconography, the topos, *see no, hear no, speak no evil*, now placed beneath the earth, suggesting by this inversion of the significance of the theme in her previous works – in which she reverted to the need to lull the sensibility in order to resist the pain of the war – the recuperation of the senses or the latency of danger. In one corner, the hydra, a serpentine animal, the image of the proliferation of evil, is crushed by a hand from which a red poppy germinates, as if to represent the sublimation of human suffering and as a tribute to the anonymous dead in pursuit of an ideal. The wounded body of the woman becomes a medium, the embodiment of the voyage from the destruction to the rebirth of life.

All these elements combined to render Forner's work an effective intervention that successfully condensed and interpreted conflicts and brought the national and international situations squarely up to date with each other. This painting, acclaimed by all the art reviews, became the signature piece of the Independent Salon, as much for its thematic content as for the fact that it had been withdrawn from the National Salon where, everyone agreed, it would have undoubtedly won first prize. The work was a synthesis of Forner's work, but, at the same time, it upset its own iconographic sequence by proposing an interpretation of the new situation. All the elements,

thematic as well as formal, rendered the work an even more powerful and comprehensive program for intervention than the statement originally issued when the artists opened the Salon. It was this quality of being a painted program, a declaration of principles, in this case more political than aesthetic, that imbued it with characteristics of "image-manifesto," thus promoting an evaluation of the present situation, expressing an attitude towards it, and simultaneously attracting more followers than if the program had been expressed in written form.

The need at this time was so urgent that the artists did not hesitate to shun the official ceremonies and to utilize their works as instruments for social advance. This is what Berni had done at the tribute ceremony for Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, held by the Federation of Teachers, by painting an enormous portrait of the founding father to preside over the stage, with the famous exclamation: "Barbarians! Ideas can not be killed!" A ceremony that, on the other hand, had been extremely controversial considering the "uproarious ovation that rose up from all sides when the loudspeakers announced the arrival of the ambassador from the United States, Mr. Braden..."¹¹ From the moment the ambassador arrived in the country, his actions had an impact on the conflictive political, economic, and cultural relations between the United States and Argentina during the Perón administration.¹²

The collective exhibition at the Independent Salon enabled the artists to reconcile themselves to the war's victors and to that part of society with which they felt most identified. But in spite of all this optimism, there was a factor that the civilian opposition to Perón's surging power had not evaluated in due measure: the actions of the worker's organizations which, for the three previous months had tried to remain on the margins of the increasingly taut confrontation between the opposition and the government. Following the temporary victory achieved by the alliance between the opposition and the military sector that distanced Perón from the government on October 9, Perón managed to regain power a week later owing to the joint actions of the worker's movement and the masses that marched through the streets of the city.¹³ In those crucial days, dominated by one of the most decisive political crises in Argentine history, every mistake and every shrewd move by the three sectors involved (the military, political, and union actors) was irreversible. The tumultuous day of October 17, culminating in Perón's eleven o'clock speech at night to the masses gathered in the Plaza

de Mayo, opened a new period in Argentine history and culture.

Once the tensions of this critical situation had diminished, the artists dissolved their united front. After February 1946, considering "that the recent national elections indicated a return of the Constitution to the nation," the Argentine Visual Artists Association decided to discontinue its boycott of the National Salon, the awards competitions, and all those events they had previously renounced.¹⁴ The conflict, however, did not disappear. During those years the National Salon was a space that remained at the center of the dispute between the government and the artists.

2. THE NORTH AMERICAN INVASION

Relations between the Perón government and the United States were just as complicated as those between the government and sectors of the country that had traditionally held power. These relations were influenced not only by the exemplary activism of Braden, the United States ambassador who voiced his opposition to Perón in the elections of 1945, but also by the publication of *Libro Azul* and the repeated attempts by the United States to exclude Argentina from inter-American meetings and discussions on the new world order. Thus, good relations were at first affected by uneasiness and suspicion. Even so, Buenos Aires was still included in the continental tour by the exhibition *La acuarela - EE. UU.* (The Watercolor - USA) programmed in 1945 by the Inter-American Office and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. This alliance between culture and politics, implemented in Latin America during the 1940s as a way to combat Nazi expansion on the continent,¹⁵ had been clearly visualized at the exhibitions organized by the Office for the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs on the initiative of Nelson Rockefeller, forever obsessed with changing the image of the United States in Latin America. In 1941 he sent the exhibition, *La pintura contemporánea norteamericana* (Contemporary American Painting), on a tour of the entire continent.¹⁶ As indicated by Elizabeth Cobbs, even though Nelson Rockefeller had a true passion for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian cultures, he himself defined his activities as "psychological warfare in the Hemisphere."¹⁷

The exhibition, *La acuarela - EE. UU.*, included forty-five watercolors, representing nothing very new in terms of "modern art." Only the works by Feininger, Charles Demuth, Max Weber, and Stuart Davis could be linked to transformations that, in the language of abstraction, had

been introduced by the historical avant-gardists. Nonetheless, the text of the catalog affirmed that the discoveries regarding light and color to be found in these watercolors ran parallel to those found in French Impressionism. It was even possible, according to the catalog, that in these watercolors "the new freedom" had found "its genuine expression" for the first time.¹⁸ If Buenos Aires spectators had taken such statements seriously, they would have had to look hard to discover the origins of modern art among those brushstrokes, something that certainly contradicted the widely held and professed view that situated the birthplace of modern art at the Paris school. But the claims of the catalog could not be supported by the images, the arguments did not succeed in convincing the public to receive the exhibition as a representation of modern art. The policies that had guided the organization of the exhibition were not backed up by the paintings selected.

After the crisis in 1945 that linked art and the demands of politics, proselytism of the image came to an end. However, the intellectual elite did not withhold judgement in matters of taste, and among the criteria applied, the rejection of all ideological contamination was a central element. What seemed to be a priority in those dark times was to keep the flame of high culture burning, and to this end it was necessary to establish, with extreme clarity, what could and what could not be considered art. In this sense, a system of inclusion and exclusion was operated in both the art and literary worlds. The literary journal *Sur* was a powerful arbitrator, in both respects. This journal, which had been an active pro-ally organism during the war, had taken a position during the Peronist period that coincided in various ways with the ideas upon which United States policy towards Argentina was based. As emphasized by John King, during the war, *Sur* "benefited directly from the United States' desire to stimulate the development of modern intellectual élites" in Latin American countries in order to establish a "liberal Utopia" that would expand beyond all borders.¹⁹ Nationalism and communism, for the United States as well as for *Sur*, were evils to be eliminated.

Between 1942 and 1945, María Rosa Oliver, a founding member of the *Sur* magazine group, collaborated with the Office for the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs, organized by Nelson Rockefeller with the goal of promoting economic and cultural programs in Latin America. Both worked against the forces in Argentina that opposed the "American front" for peace coming from the United States.²⁰

Although Rockefeller had to resign his post as assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs, he did not renounce his objectives.²¹ In September 1945, he wrote to María Rosa Oliver: "If only things had moved more rapidly in Argentina, we could face the problems of the peace with a completely solid front in the Americas. [...] My interest in our mutual problems is in no way diminished as a result of my leaving the Government, and I look forward to the continuation of the associations which have meant so much to me during the past five years. There is still so much to be done -your wisdom and judgment, your integrity and insight are greatly needed." ²²

For *Sur*, as well as for the United States, Peronist Argentina was nothing more than a waiting period, a period to skip over and, if possible, to eliminate.

3. ABSTRACT ARTISTS BETWEEN COMMUNISTS AND LIBERALS

In 1945, while artists of the Independent Salon were publicly demonstrating in defense of civil liberties, other artists were forming less strident groups that left national politics out of their work. Active members of the groups of Geometric Abstraction were opposed to all forms of realism. They wrote manifestos, they spoke out among friends, and they debated the role of precursors, seeking to validate their movement through discussions on absolute truth and knowledge of the single legitimate meaning of creation, art, and history.²³ To form part of the avant-garde was to join with the advancing world, as emphasized by Tomás Maldonado:

As concrete artists, we trace our origins to the most progressive tendencies of European and American art. Members of cultural chauvinism call this "living on European reflections," even though on a lower level they perpetuate the adorable "biscuit" of the Frenchman, Bouguereau. And, because we derive from these tendencies, we are against all forms that imply a regression.

Thus, we are against the mental and technical cowardice of the neo-realists, photographers bound to their paralytic and morbid representations, against those who feed off of the recipes of the turncoat, Lothe, against the dreamers of wilted carnations and interior worlds, who try to reproduce in our times of reconstruction and of struggle, a romanticism for interiors, and, finally, we are against the up-and-comers, false dialecticals, who speak of "abstraction" as an artistic event of 20 years ago, ignoring the remarkable development of non-representational art in the pre-war period.²⁴

Modern art formed a single international front, a landscape into which the artists felt they had in some way succeeded in forming part when, in 1948, the Argentine Madí group was invited to participate in the *Salón des Réalités Nouvelles* in Paris. This space, which was almost regressive after the war in the Parisian art world, was full of connotations for the Argentines. It meant that Geometric Abstraction had crossed national borders and arrived in the city that, for Argentines, still represented the center of modern art. However, they were not all convinced that Geometric Abstraction offered the most suitable way to enter into the postwar Parisian art scene. The success of André Fougueron's realism (fervently defended by the communist poet, Louis Aragón) at the Salon d'Automne in 1948, demonstrated that the Argentine abstract movement did not necessarily point the way for the postwar order. The hope these artists entertained of participating in the modern art debate, upon seeing their works hanging on French walls was, as history would soon show, no more than an illusion. It was not long before North American art demonstrated that the United States was the only country capable of producing a rebirth of the modern art movement.²⁵

What is certain is that to some extent the ideal of *Sur* coincided with the ideal of the concrete artists. In contrast to the opposition to Fascism expressed by artists like Forner, Centurión, and Policastro, through the iconographic content of the image, the concrete artists represented the model of "uncontaminated" culture to which the magazine of Victoria Ocampo aspired.²⁶ Although the explicit defense of dialectical materialism by artists such as Hlito and Maldonado could have been an obstacle, not to mention the membership of Lozza to the Communist Party, this did not become a problem because they excluded any identifiable representation of it in their images.²⁷

What was central to concrete art was the opposition to all forms of illusion. The objective was not "to abstract," but rather "to invent," to present new realities, which did not in any way imply remaining on the margins of the world's problems: "That a poem or a painting should not serve to justify a rejection of action, but rather, on the contrary, to contribute to locating man in the world. As concrete artists, we are not above any conflict. We are involved in all conflicts. And we are on the front lines."²⁸ All this speculation on the new art form was defined through a concern for establishing what was the aesthetic expression appropriate to the present. They felt that their art was a historic response, that the forms and structures they were proposing were appropriate to their times, that

through them they could resolve all the contradictions revealed by previous art forms, and that this would lead to the definitive creation of a better world. The artists approached their work as part of a revolutionary commitment that could be materialized in the transformation of awareness through a revolutionary transformation of forms. And, for these artists, a revolution in art necessarily implied revolution in the world:

Our works have a revolutionary mission; their goal is to help transform daily reality through the effective intervention of every reader or spectator of the aesthetic experience. That is, we reject, for all practical purposes, the "evasion" that the old representational technique established as one of the conditions for the work of art.

Consequently, the artist of our movement will not remain indifferent before the everyday world nor before the problems of the common man. The concrete artists are united with all the peoples of the world and with their great ally – the Soviet Union – in its efforts to maintain the peace and to stop the imperialist intent to revive fascism.

These artists do not see, therefore, either a way out or an opportunity for the invention they are proposing within the forms that the imperialists and the reactionary bourgeoisie are trying to impose on humanity.²⁹

It should be noted that the artists of Buenos Aires declared their solidarity with the Soviet Union, while ignoring the imposition of socialist realism that had been established at the Writer's Congress of Moscow in 1934 and had been accepted by the communist parties of all countries as a rule for all the arts. Apparently, considering the new world situation and the beginning of the Cold War, it was more important to express opposition to North American imperialist capitalism and its plans for starting an atomic war (which Zhdanov had referred to in 1947 at the first meeting of Cominform) than to spend time engaged in aesthetic debates. Nonetheless, even at a time when they were not making their aesthetic dissent public, the artists' commitment to the situation could not, in any way, reside in the defense of so-called "social art." Although they had in common more extreme intentions of contributing to the revolution of the period through their art, the ways they went about achieving this goal were radically different: "It is difficult to represent the will of the

people by comfortably marching in the rear. In art, to effectively be with the people, it is necessary to march at the front, with a fixed gaze and complete awareness of how society develops and of the conditions necessary for its transformation. We find it difficult to consider as friends those who are immersed in a rigid aesthetic, deaf to spiritual projects for social and technical progress, and who lack a sufficiently audacious imagination to accept, in the near future, the popular expansion of a new art form. Deep down they distrust the people and consider them incapable of all mental enterprises."³⁰

Like *Sur*, the abstract artists defended modern art and an international model of culture. The magazine did not act, however, as an identifiable platform in defense of the concrete art groups. Aside from the brief participation of Maldonado in a survey conducted by the publication on abstract art in 1952, the artists of *Arte Concreto* *Invención* as well as of *Madí* and, later, *Perceptismo*, organized their own magazines as spaces for the dissemination of their ideas. Indeed, their intention was more radical and exclusive, in aesthetic terms, than *Sur* could have sustained.³¹ Nonetheless, they both unquestionably coincided in the defense of an aesthetic that was in direct opposition to the populist rhetoric of the government, its cultural festivals, floats designed for the May 1st celebrations, and, especially, all the ritualization engineered around the image of Eva Perón.³² All of this, for these sectors – for obvious reasons – could not be considered legitimate art.

4. THE PLATFORMS FOR THE DISPLACED

The actions taken by the art critic, Jorge Romero Brest, during the Peronist years in order to establish modern art in Argentina are crucial for understanding the vast number of decisions made in the art scene after 1956 with respect to establishing institutions oriented toward the promotion of the avant-garde. Romero Brest was, in this context, a central figure. After 1956, Romero Brest, who was now situated at the center of the art scene as director of the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires, MNBA), would discover that this institution was the ideal space for carrying forward the project he carefully delineated during the years under Peronism.

Romero Brest's background wholly justified his occupying a position of central importance after 1956. He had served on the board of directors of the *Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores* (Free School for Advanced Studies)

since 1940, an institution that opposed the Perón regime and functioned at that time as a space for the formation of intellectual groups that, after the fall of Perón, acted in various official settings (ranging from the university to the political sphere). At this institution in 1941, Romero Brest and Julio E. Payró founded the Department for Artistic Research and Orientation, whose objectives not only included offering courses of general interest, but also studying artistic activity with "modern methods" ("historic, aesthetic, and sociological"), and considering "the Argentine situation as a starting point" for proposing an "artistic orientation in the country."³³

In 1946 Romero Brest became a victim of the so-called "interior exile" which affected a broad sector of the intellectual elite.³⁴ As a professor at the University in the city of La Plata, he was involved with one of the sectors that had acted most visibly in opposing the rise of Perón. Calling for institutional normalization, in August 1945, the University had suspended classes, declared strikes, and protested on behalf of the laid-off professors who, arriving in September, occupied the university. The university in La Plata, having resisted normalization, ended up being closed and was a target of protestors from the Beef Industry workers union of Berisso who, on October 17, marched through the university chanting, "Shoes yes, books no!" The rage of the workers towards the university rose during the day and culminated with the sacking of the rector's home.³⁵

The tensions did not decrease in 1946. The intervention decree signed by Farrell and the appointment of Dr. Oscar Ivanissevich as administrator shortly before Perón took office as President in June 1946, were the prelude to a year of faculty layoffs, resignations by sympathetic professors, and suspensions and expulsions of students trying to free the university of political interference, which is exactly what Perón wanted.³⁶ Following the student strikes towards the end of 1946, particularly vociferous in La Plata, the layoffs continued into early 1947, and Romero Brest was among those affected.³⁷ With Peronism in power, he found himself forced to make radical decisions regarding his political affiliations, finally joining the Socialist party and, in so doing, confirming his lukewarm conversion to the left which had begun in the 1930s.³⁸

From the pages of the socialist newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, Romero Brest committed himself to direct involvement as a grassroots militant:

I hope to be useful to the Party, insofar as I have strength and to the fullest extent of my ability, by helping the leaders to carry out this great task of cultural education in our country, which I believe is of the utmost urgency. At the risk of wounding the modesty of Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, secretary of the Cultural Commission of the Party, I want him to know have faith in his plan of action and that I am fully inclined to work at his side, editing *El Iniciador*, organizing libraries, broadcasting radio programs, etc., until the time comes when we can establish and develop the Worker's University, which is absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, in case the Party wishes to make use of me as an advisor regarding artistic activities, which are my specialty, I enthusiastically offer my services.³⁹

His action program also included aesthetic definitions. In June 1946, Romero Brest delivered his lecture, "On the so-called 'Social Art'" in numerous socialist centers.⁴⁰ In this lecture he returned to a theme that had generated agreement among the sectors that defended the autonomy of art, among which the group *Sur* could be included. In his lecture, after reviewing Plekhanov and Kamenev, Romero Brest concluded, "The fundamental error is to consider art as an instrument of knowledge and struggle."⁴¹

The definition of art that he wanted to establish in a country that he felt was still distant from modernity, that is, in Argentina, required the definition of clear positions regarding what the true artist should aspire to: "One could accept that the artist serves society and that art contributes to the development of human consciousness and social improvement (Plekhanov) as long as one understands these ideas in their spiritual, rather than material, sense. I don't mean to say that we should not pursue social improvements and a consciousness of greater justice with all the force of our convictions and actions, but art is not the most effective instrument for this struggle, at least not at this time. Art is only a spiritual product through which we receive notice of past conquests."⁴²

Romero Brest worked to illuminate consciousness, and consequently he agreed with the decision of the Socialist Party to undertake a cultural and political program that opposed the state of confusion in which society appeared to be living. Américo Ghioldi described the terms of this

conflict in a statement published in *La Vanguardia*, "How can we confront this miserable situation other than by working in order to produce a change of states of consciousness and sentiment, the source and point of departure for all concrete action?"⁴³ In this struggle, which he described as "the ant against the elephant," there was a deferred task to be undertaken: "Courses, conferences, meetings, programs, demonstrations, pamphlets, leaflets, publications, posters, etc., etc., in short, the ranks of activists for cultural and social change must be maintained by all those who believe that politics threatens all of us and that all of us are, in some measure, obliged to be active in politics. To defend and maintain a better level of cultural and political action, we call for the generous contributions of our friends!"⁴⁴

The road was long and arduous but one could not lose heart. Romero Brest's actions during the Peronist years conformed to Ghioldi's stated instructions in every way: as founder and professor of the *Altamira. Escuela Libre de Artes Plásticas* (Altamira Free School for the Visual Arts), together with Lucio Fontana and Emilio Pettoruti in 1946,⁴⁵ as co-founder of *Argos* publishers, together with Luis Miguel Baudizzone and José Luis Romero (also in 1946), as lecturer and instructor in Buenos Aires and elsewhere in Latin America,⁴⁶ and as founder and director of the magazine, *Ver y Estimar*, in 1948. His actions had to be sufficiently diverse and constant so as to avoid falling into the "obscurantism" that, in his own words, had taken hold of the official art scene.

5. THE OFFICIAL POLICY TOWARD ART

In the visual arts field, the first space in which the Peronist government took definitive action was at the National Salon. In 1946 important modifications to the Regulations were introduced: the grand prizes for painting and for sculpture were renamed for the "President of the Argentine Nation" and, in addition, ministerial prizes were created in order to provide the offices of each official ministry with works of art that corresponded to their respective functions. Thus, paintings and sculptures would be judged on the basis of how they addressed prescribed themes.

Although the suggested topics could be interpreted to some degree as regulations, they were not altogether exclusive. The exhibition at the National Salon, which was still considered the artistic event of the year, featured diverse themes and styles. In 1946 artists such as Berni, Forner, and Fontana, who had previously formed part of the

Independent Salon, were included in the National Salon. Mixed in with the realist works, there were also works by abstract artists such as Pettoruti, Salvador Presta, and Curatella Manes. Only one, however, alluded to recent events – the painting, *Los descamisados*, by Adolfo Montero.

Despite the government's use of the images for its propaganda campaign, the visual arts were practically barren of artists who idolized the regime through their works or, conversely, of exhibitions with a political slant that might result in the systematic disqualification or elimination of works and artists, as happened in Spain and Germany.⁴⁷

Although there was much production of paintings intended to deify the image of Eva Perón by Numa Ayrinhac, an artist of French origin (and a portrait painter for the upper class), the artist himself was overshadowed by the subject of his paintings to the point that his work came to play a central role in the official government rhetoric but was not highly regarded in the art world. It was not considered of professional quality in the art world, which, overall, was aligned with sectors opposed to the government.

Among the issues that most irritated the opposition were the good relations maintained by the Argentine government with Spain. In October 1947, with images still fresh of Eva Perón having dinner with Franco during her tour of Europe, the Spanish government sent the *Exposición de Arte Español Contemporáneo* (Exhibition of Contemporary Spanish Art) to the MNBA.⁴⁸ Although the exhibition made a point of including the word "contemporary" in its title, it omitted the most outstanding and current of Spanish artists: Juan Gris, Maruja Mallo, Joan Miró, Picasso, Manolo Hugué.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, some innovators with connections to the *Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte* were included – Angel Ferrant, for example – but the exhibit reeked of nationalism and everything else that the opposition vehemently condemned. Refused by Washington and London for not including Picasso and Miró,⁵⁰ the exhibition was strongly criticized by *Sur* in an article by Julio E. Payró. Although they avoided the most predictable of dangers – that of "propaganda"⁵¹ – the 600 works included in the exhibit could not justify the title: what was presented was "extemporary" art. It did not reach beyond the "international academy," which was something that was deplored by the sectors that longed to rekindle relations with the international modern art world: "Decapitated, the enormous body of Spanish art lay spread out on the Museum floor, lacking its enormous imaginative and creative head, its many muscles, viscera, nerves, and vital organs

extirpated [...]. In such conditions, the exhibition of Spanish "contemporary" artistic production was disappointing, tiresome. It reminded us of the official European galleries of forty years ago."⁵²

If these were the only international contacts still accessible for Argentine art, the best thing that could happen would be to lose them. Added to the disappointment produced by this exhibition and the theme-oriented awards offered by the National Salon were the conflicts surrounding abstract art at the time, whose central figure was the Minister of Education, Dr. Oscar Ivanissevich.

Owing to his anti-reformism, anti-liberalism, irrationalism, and unconditional admiration of the military, Ivanissevich was greatly valued by Perón, for whom it was necessary to oppose the forces of the Democratic Union.⁵³ The Minister's artistic tastes and preferences, which probably were not very important to Perón, led him to deliver one of his most fanatical speeches, railing against the modernist aesthetic. What irritated the Minister most in art was abstraction and, acting upon his instincts as a surgeon, his first inclination was to extirpate it. This impulse led to his outburst during the jury deliberations of the National Salon in 1948, demanding that the painting by Pettoruti, *Sol en el ángulo*, be rejected, for which he "took full responsibility." His demand was refused by the jury, under the leadership of Raúl Soldi and Cesáreo Bernaldo de Quirós, and the controversial painting was accepted.⁵⁴

Still the Minister did not lose the opportunity to publicize his opinion of what he considered "morbid" art the following year at the opening of the National Salon. His speech on that occasion provided ample reason to form multiple parallels between the artistic model favoring Peronism and that imposed by Naziism. The daily newspaper, *La Nación*, ardently anti-Peronist, did not waste a word of it, publishing it in its entirety and without commentary, letting the words "speak" for themselves.⁵⁵ There were many points of contact between the views of the Minister and those expressed, for example, at the opening for the exhibition on Degenerate Art held in several German cities between 1937 and 1938.⁵⁶ In this speech Ivanissevich assumed "responsibility" for the "thankless task of classifying normal and abnormal anxieties." Among the latter he included abstract art: "Nowadays people who are failures, who have anxieties over the future, without making an effort, without studying, without talent and without morals, nonetheless have a refuge: abstract art, morbid art, perverse art, infamy in art. These are progressive

stages in the degradation of art. They show and document visual, intellectual, and moral aberrations of a group, fortunately small, of failed people. Definitively and incorrigibly failed people who refuse to keep their pitiful misery to themselves, just as if a leper at his most repugnant were to go out in public and make a show of his festering ulcerous tumors."⁵⁷

In this description the Minister employed a set of "medical" metaphors that imbued his speech with particular discursive characteristics. Abstract art, in his view, made it possible to construct a virtual manual of pathologies. These classifications, and his concern for popular taste, ran parallel to the text of the German catalog for the exhibition on Degenerate Art. Furthermore, elements of nationalism postulated the existence of an "Argentine" art and clearly established what could and could not be considered "true" art: "Morbid art, abstract art, does not fit in, there is no place for it here with us, in this youthful, blossoming country. It does not fit in with Peronist Doctrine because this is a doctrine of love, of perfection, of altruism, with heavenly ambitions for the people. It does not fit in with Peronist Doctrine because it is a doctrine born of the innate virtues of the people and is intended to maintain, stimulate, and exalt those virtues."⁵⁸

Nonetheless, even though the Minister's speech contained echoes of the text for the exhibition on Degenerate Art, his views were more general and lacked, among other things, the furious and explicit anti-Semitism that was so prominent in the German catalog. On the other hand, the burnings, exhibitions, prohibitions and massive sales that characterized Nazi policies towards art were absent during the Peronist period. Peronist policy depended more on the interests of specific agencies rather than on a predetermined program. Thus, while Ivanissevich was attacking abstract art, other officials, such as Ignacio Pirovano, the director of the *Museo de Arte Decorativo* (Museum of Decorative Art), were defending it and even collecting it.⁵⁹

Above all else, Ivanissevich wanted to forewarn spectators so they would not feel embarrassed when they did not understand what, according to his postulates, was inadmissible art. The Minister had good reason to worry inasmuch as there were two exhibitions at that very moment that could have given rise to dangerous confusion.⁶⁰

6. THE FRENCH INVASION

In 1949 European modern art burst upon the Buenos Aires art scene led by France. On June 23 the exhibition of French painting, *De Manet a nuestros días* (From Manet to the Present), opened at the MNBA and, the next month, the Institute of Modern Art opened its galleries with the show, *Abstract Art*, organized by the Belgian critic then residing in Paris, Léon Degand. Both exhibitions brought together works that were abstract enough to upset the Minister as well as the critics, though for different reasons.

In the pages of *Sur*, Julio E. Payró could not contain the irritation he felt as a result of the Museum's exhibition, organized by the state (the "great State") of France.⁶¹ What infuriated Payró was that France should have underestimated its audience by sending second-rate works belonging to art dealers, among which were included only 15 museum pieces out of a total of 165. Without the "magnificent" contribution of Argentine collectors (Santamarina, Wolf, Crespo, Williams, Helft, Wildenstein, and Koenigsberg) who had lent works by Braque, Cezanne, Forain, Guillaumin, Léger, Monet, Picasso, Rafaelli, Rouault, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, and Vuillard, the exhibition would have been a complete failure.

Annoyed by the didactic tone of the catalog, as well as the staging of the exhibition – both of which were accompanied by sophisticated synoptic charts – Payró offered his own suggestions and displayed his own extensive knowledge of French art. After praising the masters of Impressionism and classifying the decades of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s as periods of "aesthetic defeat," he concluded by praising the art of the twentieth century as a return to the "splendid point of departure": the combined forces of the Fauves and the Cubists which, for him, included the works of Atlan, Calmettes, Desnoyer, Gischia, Le Moal, Manessier, André Marchand, Patrice, Pignon, Schneider, Singier, Tal Coat, Van Velde (Dutch), Vernard, and Beaudin. After a detailed explanation of his reasons for identifying those artists as outstanding, Payró congratulated them for not falling into one of most dangerous traps of the moment in art: "It is greatly satisfying to see, among other things, that the sermons of the proselytizers of 'committed art' (for it will never be anything other than painting at the service of propaganda, inferior painting) have resoundingly failed in France."⁶² Nonetheless he sent them a warning: their works might be "valiant, enthusiastic, vibrant with color, and tightly formed," but they lacked "true authority and profound eloquence." In his estimation, French art was about to lose the scepter it had held for so

many years and that it still firmly held for the Buenos Aires elite.

However, Payró felt otherwise about the exhibition at the Institute of Modern Art. He considered the exhibit outstanding, especially for having brought to Argentina, for the first time, works by Delaunay, Herbin, Picabia, Vantongerloo, Domela, and Kandinsky. He also mentioned in his review those artists whose work he considered of dubious quality: Bruce, Magnelli, Lapicque, Kupka, Marie Raymond, and González.

It should be noted that the confusion of the French with respect to the appropriate direction for art in the postwar period was discussed by Payró as he reviewed the exhibitions that had arrived from France. The exhibition sent by France demonstrated that critics such as Jean Cassou were doubtful and ineffective when it came to perceiving what was innovative on the current French artistic scene. While Cassou was unable to free himself of prewar models, Léon Degand knew that they did not represent the way for France to retain its supremacy: instead of vague rationalist humanism mixed with positive populist sentiments and, of course, quality technique, as preached by Cassou, Degand concentrated all his attention on abstract art.⁶³ And Payró clearly understood the difference between lack of definition and purpose.

However, despite the magnificent contribution of the Degand exhibition, there was a certain element of "confusion" in it that Payró could not let pass by: its title, *Abstract Art*, and certain "declarations contained in the catalog" led to an untenable error: the majority of the works on display did not pertain "to the category of abstract art but rather to non-figurative or non-objective art."⁶⁴ Here Payró was bringing up the protracted and unresolved debate that had been raging between critics and abstract artists in Buenos Aires and that had played out in the forums of various newspapers and magazines.⁶⁵

Payró's "clarification" demonstrates that Degand's exhibition had not arrived in a land wholly void of abstraction, which had pretty much been the case in Brazil, but rather it had found a context in which various groups were at odds and had taken clear and differentiated positions with respect to abstract art.⁶⁶ In this sense, 1948 had been a year of controversies that the exhibitions of 1949 only served to revive. The same title for the exhibition held in the Van Riel gallery in 1948 — 'New Realities' Salon. Abstract-concrete-non-figurative art — brought the real battle over taxonomies and nominalisms into the arena, which would soon be echoed by the critics.

7. CONTROVERSIES ON ABSTRACT ART

In the eighth catalog published by the Institute of Modern Art in 1951, the critic and writer, Guillermo de Torre wrote the introduction to Torres-García's exhibition as a direct response to Payró's commentaries and clarifications of Degand's exhibition.⁶⁷

One of Payró's outstanding personal traits was his tirelessly didactic spirit. Ever since the 1920s he had made the defense of modern art a personal crusade and he was now offered the precious opportunity to engage in a public debate on abstract art with an interlocutor of "elegant spirit" with whom he also shared the same goal of gaining acceptance for modern art.⁶⁸

Fundamentally they both agreed on one thing: the misbehavior of Michel Seuphor in "deceitfully omitting" Torres-García from the pages of his book, *L'art abstrait*, was highly suspect and warranted attention. Seuphor himself let slip the proof of his offense by mentioning in his autobiography that it was with Torres-García that he had organized the first international exhibition of abstract art in Paris in 1930. The causes for his indiscretions were well-known:

To fully interpret that disdain – said Guillermo de Torre – would mean entering into an international border zone, laced with dangerous traps or, at the very least, with psychological convolutions. I will only point out that this incriminating ignorance or oversight, like others that can be observed daily, pertain to a peculiar Parisian attitude: that of only considering valid and current that which is parochially nearby, without making the slightest effort to cross borders. It is a centripetal system, in contrast to the generous outward exposure that everyone else contributes; it is shortsighted curiosity, limited peripheral vision, tunnel-vision: the paradoxical product of a cross between provincialism and cosmopolitanism.⁶⁹

As a result of this "tunnel-vision," Torres-García was a recognized artist so long as he remained in Paris, but he was ignored once he had returned to Montevideo.⁷⁰ However, apart from their agreement on the question of Torres-García, they seemed to disagree over a question of terminology, which Payró could not pass over and to which Guillermo de Torre alluded in his essay, specifically disputing the term, "Non-Objective art," proposed by Payró.

In Torre's opinion, the term lacked precedents and, thus, was unjustified: "as a local case in point" Torre explained, "I would recall the cases of the new Argentine groups of painters who have emerged recently, addicted to this aesthetic. They call themselves abstract artists, concrete artists, 'Madís,' 'Perceptistas,' but none of them have used the term 'non-objective.'" ⁷¹

Payró debated Guillermo de Torre's historical references point by point. However, this is not the place to enter into an academic discussion of the first coinages, translations, and genealogies of the terms employed in these pages. ⁷² Nonetheless, it is interesting to note the degree to which Payró valued the voices of North American critics, in contrast to his view of French misapprehensions, and to note his insistence on pointing out that it was precisely in the United States where a museum of "non-objective" art had been created (the Solomon R. Guggenheim collection) which validated his position. Despite his efforts to resolve this controversy, Payró did not believe that his opinions had much bearing beyond the national borders: "... I seriously doubt that either you or I, or both of us, from the city of Buenos Aires, could possibly have an influence on the universal acceptance of an appropriate term to qualify this art as, shall we say, abstract? Concrete? Non-figurative? Non-representational? Anti-naturalist?" ⁷³

The question had become so crucial for critics and certain sectors of the art scene that, the following year, *Sur* decided to publish the results of a survey that would include the international perspective. It is interesting to note that, although the disagreement between Payró and Degand had given rise to this controversy among the art critics of Buenos Aires, the French did not participate in the debate. In addition to members of the local media (Córdova Iturburu, Tomás Maldonado, Gyula Kosice, Manuel Mujica Láinez), other subjects of the survey pertained to the School of Altamira and of Mathias Goeritz (Angel Ferrant, Ricardo Gullón, Hans Platschek). In spite of the love he still felt for France, ⁷⁴ when it came to debating modern art, Payró's contacts with the modern art movement in Spain were much stronger than those he maintained with the French critics. ⁷⁵ But beyond all these verbal conflicts, everyone agreed that the future of art lay in abstraction.

8. BETWEEN PERONISM AND ABSTRACT ART: COMING TO TERMS

While the ink of the intellectual elite was filling page after page in an effort to resolve the question of terminology, the government appeared to be much more

practical and operational as it organized two official exhibitions in which the groups, Madí, Perceptismo, and Arte Concreto Invención were to take part.

Following the intense confrontations between the early Peronist government and the modern art world, a tacit agreement had now been established and, by 1952, the abstract artists had come to occupy a prominent place at the official exhibitions. One example of this was the mega-exhibition, *Argentine Painting and Sculpture in this Century*, held from October 1952 to March 1953 at the National Museum of Fine Arts. This exhibition, which was an overview of fifty years of Argentine art, left nothing out. The 519 works by 271 artists – painters and sculptors of the most diverse tendencies – filled the museum's galleries and overflowed into the adjoining gardens. The exhibition was sponsored by the General Offices for Culture of the Ministry of Education and, as described in the catalog, it was "the cultural event of the 2nd Quinquennial Plan."

The plan clearly expressed a desire for renewal and greater international openness, and the exhibition was in line with these ideas. Pluralism was the guiding principal of the exhibition, composed of an ordered progression of styles with several galleries and pedestals dedicated to abstract paintings and sculptures.⁷⁶ The Madí and Perceptismo movements, "springing directly from Buenos Aires" – as proclaimed in the introduction to the catalog by the Museum's director, Juan Zocchi – could not be omitted from this exhibition, which was intended to define the new "Argentine man," capable of creating not in one, but rather, many styles. The exhibition was representative of a repositioning of the government, which, however, did not neglect the rhetorical use of the image: alongside the Justicialist coat of arms on the museum's facade, portraits of Perón and Eva flanked the entrance to the exhibition. Although this tactic must surely have irked the members of *Sur*, Julio E. Payró made no mention of it. While his review recognized the pluralism of the exhibition, he was not nearly as optimistic as Zocchi. "The Museum does not present the ideal panorama for Argentine art – a collection of master works such as we would like to proudly display to the rest of the world some day – but rather the essential reality of the national effort with some of its successes and many of its undisguised failures."⁷⁷

Payró's skepticism was so strong that he even denied the avant-garde qualities of the works presented by the concrete artists, attributing them directly to "the ways opened by the Neo-Plastic artists prior to 1920."⁷⁸

A few months later, for political purposes, abstract art would form part of the official delegation to the 1953 Biennial in São Paulo, Brazil. Indeed, the works of abstract artists dominated the selection.⁷⁹ For a country that was trying to open up its economy, attract foreign capital, and orient itself in a way that would demonstrate new forces of progress at work, paintings of gauchos and flatlands – the usual topics of regionalist nationalism – would hardly have served as battle standard. Abstract art was a timely political instrument that the government employed to introduce itself onto the international scene.

9. VER Y ESTIMAR ON THE RAMPARTS OF MODERN ART

It might be said that by 1953 abstract art maintained a safe distance from official aggression, but this distance had not been won without a great deal of effort. The long and difficult confrontation had been fought on various fronts, and one of central importance was that organized in 1948 by Romero Brest from the pages of *Ver y Estimar*. In April of that year there was no doubt that, for the moment, official channels were closed to the critic. On the other hand, the forums offered to him by the Socialist Party did not appear to be the most effective for the task that lay before him once the Peronist period had ended. The audiences for his conferences at the socialist meeting centers were not necessarily the most appropriate for carrying forward effective action in the area of visual arts. It was a forum involved in politics and from such a vantage point it was impossible to depend on the support of influential sectors in the cultural milieu – such as *Sur*, which was perhaps the most important. Therefore, to launch the art of the future, it was necessary to work from some other platform, isolated from politics and sustained exclusively by a concern for art in its purest and most uncontaminated form: almost a laboratory.

The declaration of principles that accompanied the first issue of the magazine, although it did not allude directly to what was occurring culturally and politically in the country, did not fail to clearly indicate its position, describing a panorama from which the only way out for the "intellectual minority" was to take refuge in the safe territory of pure ideas, isolated from immediate eventualities.⁸⁰ Those sectors would have to be "increasingly removed from the situation [...], because the horror it produced, owing to its barbarity and senselessness, would only lead them to look toward sources of universalist thought."⁸¹ In the face of an unspeakable present, the only possibility was to take refuge in the

past or leap toward the future, and for Romero Brest the first option was out of the question.

The plan, as specified by Romero Brest, was clearly summarized in the very title of his magazine: *Ver y Estimar* (Observe and Judge) aspired to establish values through theory, history, and aesthetics, without neglecting sensitivity. The objective was to reach an understanding of the creative act. The concept was to achieve equilibrium between the individual act ("inspired genius") and the "collective forces" that gave rise to it.⁸²

The magazine was intended as a space for the construction of values, something considered urgent for a national condition that was described by this publication as impoverished: lacking important pre-Hispanic cultures, lacking colonial records (architectural, pictorial, or sculptural) that merited any consideration, invaded by avid "travelers," and under the influence of the most mediocre of Spanish painting, there was not much reason for hope. Faced with these bleak prospects, any action at all was better than no action. But to be able to achieve these lofty aspirations – to establish a modern and universal art form in these bereft lands – it was necessary to proceed step by step: "It was necessary to know how to paint like the naturalists," the magazine affirmed, "in order to innovate like the moderns." What had to be avoided was that modern art should be imposed like a "fictitious and inert structure of foreign ideals." In 1948 the paradigm, the ideal towards which the magazine was striving, was that internationalism without frontiers whose model was still in Europe and, more exactly, in Paris: "European art, in our century, has become universal art; and if Paris has achieved the greatest mastery ever recognized for any city in the history of humanity, it is because for fifty years it has been the melting pot of universalist aesthetic theories."⁸³

Outside of this milieu, replete with adversities, which in itself was a formidable opponent, *Ver y Estimar* did not admit rivals: it did not present itself as an organism emerging on the scene in order to set itself apart or different. Its purpose was to break new ground and, in order to accomplish this goal, its strategy was to eliminate the existence of all competing discourses. Then, faced with a void, it would have no enemies, but it would also have no collaborators. To achieve this, Romero Brest managed his publication with the "collaboration of his disciples" who, presumably, shared his point of view.⁸⁴ Romero Brest knew that his true collaborators, his peers, were in other countries.⁸⁵ Thus the international world of

art criticism could connect with a project whose multi-faceted focal point was located within the national borders, in the city of Buenos Aires.

The list of collaborators is significant. It is possible to view them as members of an international "resistance" community. Many of them shared a life in exile because of the Franco dictatorship in Spain: internal exile, because of delays in official policy (as in the case of Sebastián Gasch)⁸⁶, and external exile (which brought Rafael Alberti to Buenos Aires). For all of them, and for José Luis Romero and Guillermo de Torre, there was no difference between Franco and Perón.⁸⁷ Romero Brest's collaborators were also unified in the rank and file of those who supported modern art, such as Max Bill, Mathias Goeritz, Léon Degand, among others.

Beyond the ideological and aesthetic agreements among the members of this editorial team, the spokesperson bringing all these views together in one magazine, was undoubtedly Romero Brest. By bringing together this diverse group for his magazine, primarily based on his personal connections and constant correspondence with them, he was able to integrate their cultural capital and contributions into the margins of the official scene.

From the pages of *Ver y Estimar*, Romero Brest was able to put together, albeit somewhat fictionally, that which the national situation had made so difficult for him. His intention was to use the written word in order to bring to the country those images which could not be seen in Buenos Aires owing to the country's international isolation. This information was contained in the critical bibliography and "miscellaneous" sections, where international exhibitions and publications were listed. The idea was not only to provide information on events outside the country, but also to show that Buenos Aires formed part of the larger international art circuit, at least with respect to its collections of European art. Thus, another section, the "Inventory" section, offered a survey of paintings by such artists as Renoir, Goya, and Gauguin, which could be found in Argentine collections.

Besides this effort to reclaim local cultural heritage, there was something that the current situation definitely did not offer: a way to address Argentina's marginalization from international competitions. Argentine absence from such events made Romero Brest's position doubly important. He was invited to form part of the jury at the 1951 São Paulo Biennial,⁸⁸ and the 1953 International Sculpture Competition "The Unknown Political Prisoner," organized by the London Institute of Contemporary Art to

"commemorate all those unknown men and women in our time who have given their lives or liberty for the cause of human freedom."⁸⁹ The fact that Romero Brest, the representative of a country suspected of having fascist sympathies and of having collaborated with the axis forces during the war, had been invited to be a member of the jury at this celebration of freedom, at the same time as he was radically separated from the Argentina of Perón, seemed to saddle him with the mission of re-establishing national prestige. Through these activities, he had become everything that his country was not: modern, international, open to the world, a champion of freedom.

The values upon which *Ver y Estimar* based its legitimacy were, above all, those which defined for Romero Brest the domain of true art: a domain that would not bow down in servitude either to politics or to the realities of life. Nothing outside of language, outside of the specificity of the means for artistic expression, could serve to justify the meaning or function of art. In the defense and foundation of these positions, Romero Brest was not alone. In addition to the constant and militant participation of his disciples in support of his actions, Julio Payró was also active in a parallel, and even anticipatory, sense. However, despite his tireless advocacy, his goals were still too ambitious to be achieved. As seen above, Payró's description of the national artistic panorama in 1953 was tinged by the same tearful, regretful tone that ran through the introduction to Romero Brest's magazine.⁹⁰

The formative enthusiasm, entrenched in European tradition, that drove the director of *Ver y Estimar*, clearly left its mark on his thematic concerns. Already in the second issue of the magazine, the essayistic model was clear, beginning predictably with the work of Picasso.⁹¹ This served magnificently for the purpose of explaining one of his central values, the idea of invention: "He is the man who did not want to play the same way as his predecessors, or even as the majority of his contemporaries; who has glimpsed the new ways of living, shuddering and contradictory, and attempts to give them artistic form; who is creating the alphabet of our times, dynamic and Faustian, based in rhythm and character, in the passionate anxiety, perhaps disproportionately so, to be universal."⁹²

For Romero Brest, this question is no less central than the question of how the relation between art and politics should be approached. Again, Picasso provides the best arguments: *Guernica* is the paradigmatic work to which

Romero Brest could refer as both model and proof. Faced with the possible means of resolving such a dramatic problem, Picasso, "far from expressing his feelings through the usual means of representation by endowing the objects with an emotional charge," instead used "his bare forms so that they would allude to the facts by allegoric means." To this end, Picasso condensed "the emotional essences into the formal essences, without anymore support material than was necessary." In his opinion, this was "the normative capacity of Picassoesque invention." The problem of political affiliation was not a problem for Romero Brest – as it was for many of Picasso's biographers – primarily because he did not give in to precepts, but rather converted his political position into form. According to Romero Brest: "Clearly, the war and political affiliations strongly influenced Picasso's art. How could it have been otherwise? But he is not a man to act on reflex, but rather for the sake of creation, so that this influence was mostly manifested in certain aspects of his baroque styles, now more instinctive than ever."⁹³

For Romero Brest, the example of Picasso and cubism took on a normative character. Whereas in 1950, in *Ver y Estimar*, he had delegated to others the responsibility for explaining this movement, in 1953 he took the task upon himself for his contribution to the first issue of the magazine, *Imago Mundi*.⁹⁴ In his view, to analyze "the value of formal invention," which cubism entails, was to make a foundational moment in Western art comprehensible and possible to teach. Thus the emergence of a "new language" could be identified whose logic could be clearly established as an evolutionary chain of forms that passed through Manet, Degas, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Lautrec, the Fauves, and the Expressionists, defining a timeline of progressive transformations that culminated in the style of Braque and Picasso: "... cubism was not a brilliant stroke of madness, but rather a solution to a problem that had persisted for almost fifty years."⁹⁵ At the same time, his view proposed a way of conceptualizing history: "Instead of cross-sections, I propose longitudinal cuts. What should interest the historian, in the case of the visual arts as well as any other cultural activity, is the process of formation, culmination, and declination of the *formal systems*."⁹⁶

This whole legacy – the coherent evolution of pure forms that Romero Brest wanted to appropriate and quickly transfer to these deserted lands – did not disqualify, for the moment, the gains of realist movements such as the muralist movement. For this reason, the magazine also

featured tributes to José Clemente Orozco (issue 13) and Cándido Portinari (issue 4). Naturally, in praising Portinari a point was made of his wise "search" wherein, without renouncing what was perceived as "contingent," he captured the "necessary form": Portinari does not "reflect," he "constructs."⁹⁷

The idea behind *Ver y Estimar* was clearly to form part of the avant-garde in modern art; thus it celebrated the foundation of the Institute of Modern Art and understood that its voice was sufficiently authorized for it to take charge of the inaugural program for the institution.⁹⁸ It was this same motive – that of peering into the future and indicating the new directions in art – that spurred the magazine on to delineate the history of a movement as new as the local expressions of concrete art.⁹⁹

In 1951 Romero Brest seemed to have made a decision about the future of art. After his third trip to Europe, in 1948-49, he understood "the importance of the movement begun by Kandinsky and Mondrian, now called concrete," but after his fourth visit to Europe and his first to New York (1950-51), he felt much more secure about his program. Upon publishing a compilation of more than ten years of reviews, he seemed to feel obliged to redefine his program. In 1948, in the first issue of his magazine, he had written that he thought it was necessary for Argentine artists to "turn their eyes to the earth" – or, more exactly, to their cities – as a way of opposing European influence; but now he described a radical change of direction: "...this new form of expression is the one that is emerging, probably more in the United States than in Europe, along the path called abstract art. I don't question the terms – call it concrete art, or non-objective, or non-figurative. What is important is to understand it. That is why I have been making an effort, in my courses and lectures, and soon in a little book that is to be published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica de México, titled, *Hacia el arte abstracto* [Towards abstract art],¹⁰⁰ so that my friends and followers may correctly understand the postulates it is based on. [...] It is an artistic movement that will undoubtedly progress over many dozens of years, and whose validity will only increase."¹⁰¹

Romero Brest sensed that he was on the threshold of a change, of an imminent metamorphosis that could establish the "style" of the century, and all the present responsibility for representing the future, in his opinion, fell squarely to abstract art.

In 1952, *La pintura europea (1900-1950)*, by Romero Brest, was published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica,

with distribution all across Latin America.¹⁰² In this book, after reviewing all of twentieth century European art, without failing to question the projects of each and every one of the celebrated avant-garde upheavals, Romero Brest redefined his view in still more definite terms: it was a rational, mathematic art that reworked the expressive forms of the past and unified the production of painting, sculpture, and architecture in a common language so that they all converged in a style that corresponded to the present and projected into the future.

The themes and designs that occupied the pages of *Ver y Estimar* reflected the limits of his activities: to work from the shadows for a definition of a model for art that was sufficiently solid and clearly articulated that, with the advent of new periods – those of the deferred “liberation” – it would be so primed that it would only be necessary to set it in motion.

The coup d'état that overthrew Perón in September 1955 left the critic better positioned than he could have ever dreamed. In October of that year, Romero Brest closed the pages of *Ver y Estimar* forever in order to become active in the official institutions, allied with the new state, as director of the National Museum of Fine Arts. From that moment onward, he would demonstrate better than anyone else that art forms are not only forms, but also political instruments.

Chapter 1 – Notes

1 Borges, “Anotación del 23 de agosto de 1944,” *Sur*, no. 120, October 1944, 24.

2 The Argentine artists set out more radical and well-formulated programs for abstract art than those found in other Latin American countries at the time. After 1944, with the publication of the magazine, *Arturo*, groups were formed that, from the beginning, gave rise to intense debates over abstract-geometric art and launched various magazines and manifestos. Among the first such groups was one that was exhibited in the house of Dr. Enrique Pichon Riviêre on 8 October 1945, called *Art Concret Invention*, featuring music, painting, sculpture, and concrete-

elemental poems (Ramón Melgar, Juan C. Paz, Rhod Rothfuss, Esteban Eithler, Gyula Kosice, Pichon Rivière, Renate Schottelius, among others); shortly thereafter, the group that was exhibited in the house of the photographer, Grete Stern on 2 December called *Movimiento Arte Concreto Invención* (Arden Quin, Rod Rothfuss, Kosice, among others) and the *Asociación Arte Concreto Invención* which was formed in November 1945 after the split-up of the initial group and just before the Pichon Rivière exhibition. The latter group was first exhibited on 18 March 1946 in the Peuser Gallery and they published the *Manifiesto Invencionista*. After that time, there were two established groups: *Madí*, presided over by Kosice, and the *Asociación Arte Concreto Invención*, presided over by Maldonado. See Perazzo, *El arte concreto in la Argentina*. In various ways these groups influenced groups that emerged in Brazil in the early 1950s.

3 These tensions can be observed, for example, in the history of the *Salón Nacional* during those same years. Cf. Giunta, "Nacionales y populares: los salones del peronismo," 153-190. See also Perazzo.

4 Cf. Torre, "La CGT en el 17 de Octubre de 1945," 23-81.

5 Declaration of the artists in the catalogue of the *Salón Independiente*. The *Salón* exhibit took place 17-30 September 1945. 144 artists participated from the most diverse aesthetic orientations, such as Antonio Berni, Norah Borges, Juan Carlos Castagnino, Lucio Fontana, Raquel Forner, Alicia Penalba, Emilio Pettoruti, Lino Eneas Spilimbergo, Demetrio Urruchúa, Abraham Vigo, etc. The *Salón Nacional* was unable to compete with the *Independiente* in terms of the relevance of the artists exhibited.

6 "Será inaugurado hoy el primer salón de artistas independientes," *La Prensa*, 17 September 1945, 11.

7 Berni, "El Salon Independiente," *Antinazi*, 27 September 1945, 7.

8 Ibid.

9 "A numerous group of artists will not send their works to the Annual *Salón*," *La Prensa*, 23 August 1945, 10. The declaration was signed by, among others, Raquel Forner, Lucio Fontana, Antonio Berni, Enrique Policastro, Juan Carlos Castagnino, and Demetrio Urruchúa.

10 After the series, "Mujeres en el mundo" (1938), the woman in her work is the vehicle of suffering. In 1939, with "Ni ver, ni oír, ni hablar," the woman nullifies her feelings before the horrors of war. Cf. Burucúa and Malosetti Costa, "Iconografía de la mujer y lo femenino en la obra de Raquel Forner," 2.

11 "Actos de homenaje a Sarmiento en el Luna Park sugerido por la Confederación de maestros," *La Nación*, 12 September 1945, 1.

12 Braden was the main author of *Libro Azul o Consultation Among the American Republic with Respect to the Argentine Situation*, written after his opposition to Farrel and published before the elections which Perón won using the slogan, "Braden or Perón." Braden's book profoundly irritated Latin Americans. On post-war relations between the United States and Argentina, see Connell-Smith, *Los Estados Unidos y la América Latina*; Gil, *Latin American-United States Relations*; and Mario Rapoport and Claudio Spieguel, *Estados Unidos y el peronismo. La política norteamericana en la Argentina: 1949-1955*.

13 The unions and the CGT were not absent during those decisive days. Juan Carlos Torre demonstrates this through his use of the "Actas del Comité Central Confederal de la CGT" (The minutes of the Central Confederal Committee of the CGT). He also carefully analyzes how the relations of power were interwoven between military, political and labor union sectors. See Torre, "La CGT en el 17 de Octubre de 1945."

14 "XIV Salón de Arte de la Plata," *La Nación*, 15 April 1946, 6.

15 Coombs, "The Past and Future in Perspective," 142.

16 This exhibition circulated through museums in New York, Mexico, Havana, Caracas, Bogota, Quito, Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires.

17 Nelson A. Rockefeller to General George C. Marshall, 28 August 1942, 1, NA, R.G. 229, OIAA Department of Information, Content Planning Division, Box 1429, Folder: "Content Liaison." Cited in Cobbs, *The Rich Neighbor Policy*, 40.

18 "Preliminar," *Watercolors - United States, 1870-1946*, 13. The exhibition and the article were carried out under the direction of D. S. Defenbacher, Director of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Hermon More and Lloyd Goodrich of the Whitney Museum cooperated in the selection of paintings.

19 King, *Sur*. *Estudio de la revista argentina y de su papel en el desarrollo de una cultura, 1931-1970*, 123.

20 María Rosa Oliver was an active promoter of inter-Americanism on the tour, financed by this Office, which took place in August and September of 1944, in Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile. Her confidence in the brotherhood between Latin America and the United States was resisted in Mexico, as she comments in her "Confidential Report" of 4 October to Nelson Rockefeller. In this report, Oliver describes her activities, analyzes the political situation, and the general attitude of those countries toward the United States. She repeatedly compares the rejection of the United States that she encountered with the rejection of Argentines, and, repeatedly, the reasons are the same: economic power, cultural level, a feeling of superiority towards other nations. The report also emphasizes the place of Argentina in Latin American culture: "From Mexico City to Santiago de Chile three parts of the books in the book shops are published in Argentina. So are the magazines in the newspaper sta[tions]. A third of the films shown are Argentine." She referred to this presence as a way of comforting the sponsors who may have been concerned about the spread of fascism from: "Fortunately there is nothing to fear from this cultural expansion: it is essentially democratic and liberal. It represents the opposite of that for which the present Government stands. It is the Argentina of Sarmiento. The Argentina of Rosas cannot be sold, over the borders. It would be bad policy, in every sense, if U.S. publishers tried to prevent this cultural expansion. Via Buenos Aires the best U.S. literature is distributed in all Latin America in excellent translations. Other 'latinos' believe that the American books chosen by the European-minded Argentines must all be very good and not published for propaganda reasons." María Rosa Oliver, "Report Latin American Trip (Confidential)," October 9, 1944, folder 45, box 7, Countries series, RG III 4 E, Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers (NAR Papers), Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, North Tarrytown, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

21 Rockefeller offered his resignation to Truman as Assistant Secretary of State on 25 August and Spruille Braden was named in his place. The replacement is attributed to the unease generated by Rockefeller's support of Argentina's participation in the San Francisco Conference, contrary to the firm position of Secretary of State, Cordell Hull. The designation of Braden clearly confirmed the stiffening of relations with the United

States that characterized the first years of Peronism.
"Braden es nombrado en reemplazo de Rockefeller," *La Nación*, 26 August 1945, 1.

22 Rockefeller to Maria Rosa Oliver, 22 September 1945, folder 45, box 7, RG 4 (NAR Papers), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

23 See Note 2.

24 "Opini3n", *Asociaci3n de Arte Concreto-Invenci3n*, Buenos Aires, November 1945, in Maldonado, *Escritos Preulmianos*, 37.

25 Cf. Guilbaut, "Rideau d'art et rideau de fer," 92-115.

26 As indicated by John King, "Sur would always tear the literary competence from the hands of the committed and take it to a world of abstract, universal values." Cf. King, *Sur*. *Estudio de la revista argentina y de su papel en el desarrollo de una cultura, 1931-1970*, 84.

27 Lozza affirms that Hlito and Maldonado were also affiliated with the Communist Party. Ra3l Lozza, interview with the author, 1988.

28 "Manifiesto Invencionista," in *Arte Concreto Invenci3n*, no. 1, 1946, 8.

29 "Nuestra militancia," *Ibid.*, 2.

30 "Los Amigos del Pueblo," *Ibid.*, 2.

31 On this point Maldonado was firm in his disagreement with Torres-Garcia who, for his part, according to Hlito, had been a fundamental element in the formulation of his own aesthetic. See Hlito, *Escritos sobre arte*, 204. The debate between Arte Concreto Invenci3n and the Taller Torres-García can be examined in *Removedor*, nos. 14 and 16, 1946 (magazine of the TTG), and in *Arte Concreto Invenci3n*, no. 2, 1946. The lack of aesthetic radicalness of *Sur* can also be confirmed in the selections made by its director. As pointed out by Beatriz Sarlo, in the face of the extremist program of modern architecture, Victoria Ocampo chose modern *good taste*, although she adored Le Corbusier and disdained the Argentine architect, Bustillo, she nonetheless chose the latter to design her modern house. Cf. Sarlo, "Victoria Ocampo o el amor de la cita," 164-184.

32 Regarding these questions, see Giunta, "Eva Perón: imágenes y públicos," 177-184, and Gené, "Política y espectáculo. Los festivales del primer peronismo: el 17 de Octubre de 1950," 185-192.

33 Cited by Neiburg, *Los intelectuales y la invención del peronismo*, 161. Neiburg develops the history of this institution which, founded in 1930, was, until the end of Peronism, a parallel space to the university in which was active an important sector of intellectuals, politicians, economists, and even cultural directors (such as Romero Brest) who, during the *Libertadora*, occupied central positions on the scene: figures such as José Luis Romero, Risieri Frondizi, Gino Germani and the future president of the nation, Arturo Frondizi. The CLES was maintained by money originating from courses and from the support of patrons, among which was Torcuato Di Tella, who, as we will see below, had a central role in the industrial and cultural development of the country. In addition to Payró and Romero Brest, other founders of this department were Leopoldo Hurtado, Erwin Leuchter, and the painter, Atilio Rossi. The department published a Bulletin in which Romero Brest published numerous articles during the war years and collaborated with the anti-fascist periodical, *Argentina Libre*.

34 Provoked not only by expulsion from official circles, but also by limitations imposed by press controls, or, more directly, by the incarceration of many intellectuals, for example, that of Victoria Ocampo in early 1953. See King, *Sur*. *Estudio de la revista argentina y de su papel en el desarrollo de una cultura*, 170.

35 See James, "17 y 18 de Octubre de 1945: El peronismo, la protesta de masas y la clase obrera argentina," 117-118.

36 See Mangone and Warley, *Universidad y peronismo (1946-1955)*.

37 It was announced that he had been dismissed on 15 March "for reasons of professorial convenience" from the departments of the Colegio Nacional and, on 24 March, from the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes, both of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata. "Curriculum", Caja 1, Sobre 6, documento A, Archivo Jorge Romero Brest, Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte "Julio E. Payró", Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires (hereafter cited as: C1-S6-A, Archivo JRB, UBA).

38 Romero Brest is quoted as saying, "I don't know if it was as a neurotic or to demonstrate that the Law did not interest me, but at first in my youth I felt very distant from politics, remaining neutral during my years at the university (1926-1933), although the student struggles were already heated. I felt myself an aristocratic thinker and I did not want to sully the purity of my attitudes.

The situation changed because of the Revolution of 1930, which produced a conversion in me toward disdained politics – although it was only a personal attitude – and toward the left, leading me into feverish readings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, as well as anyone else who promoted their ideas. But I was never a communist, nor did I consider affiliating myself with any particular party.

I did so later (in 1945) joining the Socialist Party, in response to repeated urging from my friend, Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, when the struggle against Perón led me to think it was necessary. But my actions in the Party were practically insignificant and years later I took advantage of the Party's split to dissociate myself." Romero Brest, "A Damián Carlos Bayón, discípulo y amigo" C1-S6 Archivo JRB, UBA.

39 "El futuro reserva un papel rector al socialismo nos dice Jorge Romero Brest," *La Vanguardia*, 19 February 1946, 5.

40 He delivered this conference in socialist centers on 9, 11, and 16 June 1946; he repeated it in the Casa del Pueblo in Montevideo on 11 September 1948. See Romero Brest, "Acerca del llamado 'Arte social.'" C1-S6 Archivo JRB, UBA.

41 Ibid., 3-4. The emphasis appears in the original.

42 Ibid., 6. In subsequent pages, he returns to this point: "[...] the great paradox in art consists in the artist's having to submerge himself in reality in order to be able to extract from it, not the commonplace or fleeting, but rather the permanent and eternal. 'And the contemporary artist will see himself impeded from being inspired by the fair idea if he wants to defend the bourgeoisie in his struggle with the proletariat,' Plekhanov wrote. This is a mistake of Marxist theory: the contemporary artist does not defend either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, he is alienated from both; he only attempts to construct, perhaps on false foundations, I admit, a universal and absolute world, for which reason he flees from allegory." Ibid., 8.

43 Ghioldi, "Carta," *La Vanguardia*, 22 April 1947, 1.

44 Ibid.

45 *Altamira* functioned until the end of 1946. The word, "free," in the title implied taking a position on the current political situation. The group was formed on the initiative of Gonzalo Losada, a well-known publisher, Spanish republican, and president of the institution. The teaching was organized in workshops directed by various professors: in painting, Jorge Larco, Emilio Pettoruti, Attilio Rossi, and Raúl Soldi; in sculpture, Lucio Fontana; in history of art, Jorge Romero Brest.

46 Courses began in Chile and Uruguay in 1943. In Buenos Aires, when he was dismissed from his official positions, he began to teach privately, organizing the "Cursos de Estética e Historia del Arte" ("Courses in Aesthetics and History of Art") at the Fray Mocho bookstore, which was closed by the police in 1948. Subsequently, his courses and conferences in Latin America were discontinued.

47 For example, the exhibition, "Así eran los rojos," and "Retaguardia Roja," organized in June 1943 by the delegation from Madrid, an exhibition with a strong propaganda element, was presented as a "testimony" to the "atrocities" of the "red zone." There were also artists in Spain who were developing a theme related to the war and the Franco regime: Eduardo Lagarde, Mariano Bertuchi, Torre Isunza, who produced painted and sculpted representations of Franco. See Hernández, *Arte e ideología en el franquismo (1936-1951)*, 115-169. In the case of Germany, the sadly famous exhibition, *Degenerate Art*, held in 1937-38, might also be mentioned in this context.

48 Eva Perón was in Europe from 6 June to 23 August, and the exhibition at the National Museum of Fine Arts was held from 12 October to 30 November 1947.

49 Enrique Azcoaga emphasized these absences by comparing this exhibition with the one organized for Paris in February 1936. "La Exposición de Arte Español Contemporáneo en Buenos Aires" ("The Exhibition of Contemporary Spanish Art in Buenos Aires"), *Indice de las Artes*, no. 15, X-1947, cited in Hernández, *Arte e ideología en el franquismo (1936-1951)*, 126.

50 Ibid.

51 "We are pleased to disconnect art from political contingencies, to remember the sane liberal phrase. 'art has no frontiers.' Let it be understood that this refers to true art, art that is free by definition: it does not refer to certain type of pseudo-art that covers, without subtlety, propaganda in one way or another, and of which, it is worth mentioning, the Spanish did not send us any examples." Payró, "Exposición de arte español contemporáneo," 119.

52 Ibid., 121.

53 Ivanissevich was a doctor specialized in clinical surgery, administrator of the University of Buenos Aires from 1946 to 1949, Ambassador to the United States, Secretary of Education, and Minister of Education from 1948 to 1950. His prestige in the academic world earned him an image that was appropriate for the aspirations that Perón had for the scientific development of the country. For Ivanissevich, what was fundamental in culture was its spiritual content; he divided society between those who lived their country and those who were unpatriotic and, to highlight his position, he arrived at conferences wearing the Argentine flag. For someone who maintained that freedom "decreases the more we become civilized," the expressive freedom that modern art called for had to be, in itself, an "aberration," in the terminology the Minister was fond of using. Cf. Puiggrós, *Peronismo: Cultura política y educación (1945-1955)*, 121-127.

54 See Iturburu, *Pettoruti*, 100.

55 "Inauguróse ayer el XXXIX Salón de Artes Plásticas," *La Nación*, 22 September 1949, 4.

56 The exhibition was in November 1937 in Munich and opened in February 1938 in Berlin, subsequently touring various cities in Germany and Austria. The text, written by Fritz Kaiser, who had worked in the direction of the Reich's propaganda bureau since 1935, is reminiscent of the anti-modernist "Cleansing of the temple of art," published in 1937 by Wolfgang Willrich. The catalogue included reproductions of works by Nolde, Dix, Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner, Schwitters, Metzinger, etc. The works had been confiscated during the campaigns against degenerate art in 1937 when Goebbels issued Hitler's order to look for examples of degenerate art in the museums for an

exhibition. Cf. Baron, "Degenerate Art." *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*.

57 "Inauguróse ayer el XXXIX Salón de Artes Plásticas," *La Nación*, 22 September 1949, 4.

58 Ibid.

59 This explains that in 1950-51, for a bust of Eva Perón, Pirovano would choose Sesostris Vitullo, an abstract Argentine sculptor residing in Paris. Naturally, this did not produce the hoped for success: the functionaries of the embassy could accept the abstract sculptures that the artists exhibited at the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, but they could not permit that these sharp-edged forms, so alien to their model, should represent the face of they were elevating to the status of a "saint." When the bust of Eva Perón was unveiled at the Argentine Embassy in Paris, it was immediately removed and it disappeared from the scene until 1997 at which time it was exhibited for the first time in Buenos Aires.

60 He reflected on this in his speech: "A person said to me, while looking at a catalogue of so-called abstract art: this surprises me and makes me laugh, but I won't say anything because "many sophisticates" have recommended it to me. There is a lack of moral courage to say what one feels. But it is necessary to react and to make the nation react. It is no longer possible to repeat without flagrant falsehood: 'you don't like it because you don't understand it.'" *La Nación*, 22 September 1949, 4. We may suppose that the catalogue he was referring to was that of the exhibition, *Del arte figurativo al arte abstracto*, or, perhaps, that of *De Manet a nuestros días*, both held in Buenos Aires in 1949.

61 See Payró, *De Manet a nuestros días*, 82-86. The French Organizing Committee was composed of representatives from the museums of France: Jean Cassou and Bernard Dorival (from the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris), André Chamson (from the Museum of the Petit Palais in Paris), Philippe Erlanger (from the French Association of Artistic Action), Roger Seydoux (Chief of the Service for Cultural Exchange of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Gastón Diehl, as Commissary General.

62 Payró, "De Manet a nuestros días," 86. Things were not as simple as Payró had presented them. In 1948 the

Communist Party was very powerful in France and had a strong influence on artists. Naturally this exhibition did not include works by, for example, André Fougeron, who had converted to "new realism" and had become a "new star of the Communist Party," championed by Louis Aragon. On the debate between realism and abstraction in France, see the article by Serge Guilbaut, "Poder de la decrepitud y ruptura de compromisos en el París de la Segunda Posguerra mundial," 87-145.

63 Cf. Guilbaut, "Rideau d'art et rideau de fer: Perspectives de la critique d'art en 1948."

64 Payró, "Exposición en el Instituto de Arte Moderno," 86-87.

65 This was the case for the magazines published by the artists – Arte Concreto Invención, Perceptismo – as well as for the newspaper, *La Nación*, and the magazines, *Ver y Estimar* and *Sur*.

66 On the organization of this exhibition in Brazil, see Guilbaut, "Dripping on the Modernist Parade: the Failed Invasion of Abstract Art in Brazil 1947-1948," 807-816. Although there were many artists in Buenos Aires who were militantly in favor of abstraction, none of them participated in Degand's exhibition whereas such artists as Waldemar Cordeiro, Cícero Días and Samson Flexor did participate in São Paulo. Of these artists, only Cícero Días would participate in the Buenos Aires exhibit.

67 The exhibition was held from 24 April to 19 May 1951.

68 The attempts to incorporate all the novelties of modern art "from impressionism until the present day" were particularly intense and active during the 1920s and Payró was one of those most dedicated to its diffusion. In 1926, at the exhibition of "Modern French Painting" held in Belgium, where he was living, he wrote an article, published in the newspaper, *La Nación*, in which he outlined the entire genealogy of modern painting, from impressionism to fauvism and cubism. See Wechsler, "Recepción de un debate. Reconstrucción de la polémica en torno a la formación de una 'plástica moderna' en la prensa de Buenos Aires," 47-57. Payró would continue battling on behalf of modern art in following years: in 1941 he published in Buenos Aires, *Pintura Moderna* and in 1951, *Los héroes del color. Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Seurat*.

69 Torre, Joaquín Torres-García, 6.

70 The consequences of this situation were visible in subsequent interpretations of this artist's work. The most brilliant response in this regard is that of Juan Fló in his essay, "Torres García in (and from) Montevideo," 23-43.

71 Torre, *Joaquín Torres-García*, 11.

72 The problem of terminology was apparently something that obsessed both these men. Guillermo de Torre, after expressing his skepticism over the possibility of reaching an agreement in this regard, brought up a preceding debate in which they had both participated: "Remember what happened with the barbaric term, surrealism – I find no other adjective to describe that impossible word in our language. Even you – in a prefatory note to the catalogue of the Batlle Planas Exhibition, published by the Institute of Modern Art – and I, for my part, a short time before – in a page of my book on Apollinaire and the theories of cubism – have denounced the term, which only ignorance and laziness have sustained, and have proposed its proper form: *superrealism*." Torre, "Respuesta a Julio E. Payró," 95.

73 Payró, "¿Arte abstracto o arte no objetivo?. Carta abierta a Guillermo de Torre," 91.

74 Whereas in 1947 "French soil" seemed to have, for Payró, the power to provoke audacity and inspiration in foreign artists, by 1952 "the light of artistic genius" had been extinguished in his eyes. Upon assessing the artistic production of Buenos Aires, he found that it did not surpass in mediocrity what was being produced at that moment in Paris: "It is enough to see the latest Salón of Independent artists, in Paris, to recognize with relief that our painting, even in its worst manifestations, could not possibly surpass such a display of insignificance, grossness, and atrocity." It is apparent that Payró's loyalty to Paris was not unlimited. See Payró, "Los pintores franceses y el estilo del siglo XX," 393-403, and "Exposiciones recientes y tendencia profunda en el arte contemporáneo," 143-147.

75 It might be supposed that the "identification" factor played an important role here: like the Altamira circle in Spain, which was working in favor of modern art from the margins of the Franco regime, the sectors supporting *Sur* and *Ver y Estimar* had to operate from outside the official scene of Peronism. Coverage of the Parisian front was the

responsibility of Damián Bayón, who was residing in Paris at that time and was conducting a survey with Massimo Campligli and León Gischia, whose results were published by *Ver y Estimar*. See Bayón, "Encuesta sobre el arte abstracto," 45-53.

76 Gyula Kosice, Martín Blaszko, Yente, Ennio Iommi, Raúl Lozza, Fernández Muro, Tomás Maldonado, Curatella Manes, Miguel Ocampo, Anibal Biedma, Alfredo Hlito, etc. See the catalogue of the exhibition, *La pintura y la escultura argentinas de este siglo*, National Museum of Fine Arts, 1952-53. Here, the "didactic" sense of the exhibition echoed the spirit of the French exhibition, *De Manet a nuestros días*.

77 Payró, "Un panorama de la pintura argentina," 159.

78 Ibid., 162.

79 Among others, Martín Blaszko, Sarah Grilo, Alfredo Hlito, Gyula Kosice, Raul Lozza, Tomás Maldonado, Fernández Muro, Miguel Ocampo, Lidy Prati, Julian Althabe, Claudio Girola, Ennio Iommi. See the catalogue of the II Biennial of São Paulo of 1953, pp. 67-71. The submission, according to the catalogue, was organized by the Sub-Secretary of Diffusion of the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

80 Romero Brest, "El arte argentino y el arte universal," 12.

81 Ibid.

82 Editorial, "Punto de partida," *Ver y Estimar*, no. 1, April 1948, 3.

83 Romero Brest, "El arte argentino y el arte universal," *Ver y Estimar* 1, no. 1, April 1948, 11.

84 The list was published in issue number 10, May 1949: Damián Carlos Bayón, Angelia Beret, Raquel B. de Brané, Rodolfo G. Bruh, Lía Carrera, Angelina Camicia, Clara Diamant, Raquel Edelman, Isolina Grossi, Beatriz Huberman, Amalia Job, Samuel E. Oliver, Alfredo E. Roland, Blanca Stabile, Martha Traba.

85 The list appeared in the above-cited issue number 10 and was added to in successive issues. In issue number 24, the collaborators were: Rafael Alberti (Buenos Aires), José Pedro Argul (Montevideo), Francisco Ayala (Puerto Rico), Bernard Berenson (Florence), Max Bill (Zurich), Córdova Iturburu (Buenos Aires), Léon Degand (Paris), Robert L. Delevoy (Brussels), Bernard Dorival (Paris), Angel Ferrant (Madrid), Wend Fischer (Dusseldorf), Sebastián Gasch (Barcelona), Siegfried Giedion (Zurich), Mathias Goeritz (Mexico), Ricardo Gullón (Santander), René Huyghe (Paris), Diogo de Macedo (Lisbon), Sergio Milliet (São Paulo), Hans Platschek (Montevideo), Franz Roh (Munich), Antonio Romera

(Santiago de Chile), Francisco Romero (Buenos Aires), José Luis Romero (Buenos Aires), Guillermo de Torre (Buenos Aires), Margarita Sarfatti (Rome), Gino Severini (Paris), Vantongerloo (Paris), Lionello Venturi (Rome), Eduardo Westerdahl (Tenerife), Bruno Zevi (Rome).

86 It is worth noting the importance on the international map, as defined by the magazine, of Angel Ferrant, Mathias Goeritz and their Escuela de Altamira in Santillana del Mar and their contact with that tip of the iceberg. The magazine dedicated several articles to these artists and the Altamira conferences.

87 With José Luis Romero, he would join with the other resistance front which he formulated in his magazine, *Imago Mundi* (1953-1956), in an attempt to establish a Shadow University as defined by Romero himself. The magazine, on whose Editorial Board sat Romero Brest, had aspirations that were comparable to those that motivated *Ver y Estimar*. According to Oscar Terán's analysis, *Imago Mundi*, concerned about defending itself against the adverse conditions, set a general tone with a double meaning: an indeterminate time frame from which to confront Peronism, and an international republic of knowledge that defined its interlocutory space. See Terán, "Imago Mundi. De la universidad de las sombras a la universidad del relevo," 3-5. It is important to emphasize the degree to which these intellectuals organized a network of institutions for the formation of anti-Peronist ranks in various cultural spheres.

88 His participation, as he relates it, appears to have been crucial from the moment that he proposed granting first prize to Max Bill. See Amarante, *As Bienais de São Paulo, 1951-1987*, 24-25.

89 "Concurso Internacional de Escultura," *Ver y Estimar*, no. 27, April 1952, 42.

90 Payró, "Un panorama de la pintura argentina," *Sur*, nos. 219-220, January-February 1953.

91 For this multifocal view of the "great master" of modern art, a number of paintings were brought together for a formal analysis, "Inventario de Picasso en Buenos Aires" ("The Inventory of Picasso in Buenos Aires"), which surveyed his presence in Argentine collections and offered a tempestuous essay by Martha Traba, "Angulo Eluard-Picasso." See no. 2 of the magazine, *Ver y Estimar*, May 1948. Other issues presented medieval art (no. 5), Gauguin (nos. 7-8),

the sociology of art (no. 9), Angel Ferrant (no. 10), cubism and Mathias Goeritz (no. 20).

92 Romero Brest, "Picasso el inventor," *Ver y Estimar*, no. 2, May 1948, 4-5.

93 Ibid., 22.

94 Romero Brest, "Reflexiones sobre la historia del cubismo," *Imago Mundi*, no. 1, September 1953, 52-63.

95 Ibid., 58.

96 Ibid., 60.

97 Romero Brest, "Alabanza de Portinari," *Ver y Estimar*, no. 4, July 1948, 41.

98 *Ver y Estimar*, nos. 11-12, June 1949, 6.

99 In 1948, Damián Carlos Bayón did not appear to be very enthusiastic about the movement as reflected in his comments on the exhibition of the concrete artists at the Van Riel Gallery: "a heterogeneous group" in which there are "reminiscences of all the forerunners [Mondrian, Max Bill, Vantongerloo], but certainly not the same critical attitude. [...] In general, this group reveals immaturity, haste to exhibit their work, a lack of self-criticism." Carlos Bayón, "Arte abstracto, concreto, no figurativo," *Ver y Estimar*, no. 6, September 1948, 60-62. In issue no. 2 of the second series of the magazine, *Ver y Estimar*, December 1954, 15, Blanca Stabile published a chronology of the movement from 1944 to 1952, "Para una historia del arte concreto en la Argentina."

100 He published it in 1951 as, *Qué es el arte abstracto*, with the publisher, Columba de Buenos Aires.

101 Romero Brest, *Pintores y grabadores rioplatenses*, 9.

102 The first edition consisted of 10,000 copies. The importance of the book was that, rather than being a version of modern art translated from the French, it was a critical synthesis written by a Latin American in Spanish. On the other hand, it was an inexpensive edition, in small format, which facilitated its distribution.