
Book Review: *Forming Abstraction*

Forming Abstraction: Art and Institutions in Postwar Brazil, by Adele Nelson. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. 392 pages. Hardcover \$50.00, ebook \$50.00.

For all the coverage abstract art in postwar Brazil has received, there have been surprisingly few in-depth, scholarly examinations of it outside of the many texts accompanying exhibitions. Adele Nelson's *Forming Abstraction: Art and Institutions in Postwar Brazil* is a rare, detailed scholarly analysis of the dominance of nonobjective abstraction in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro from the 1940s to the late 1950s. In her book, Nelson meticulously investigates the historical circumstances and artistic stakes of the different institutions, exhibitions, and artists that were central to the shift toward abstraction. Incorporating a broad range of sources, including analysis of newsreel footage, installation photographs, and mainstream press, Nelson addresses the conflicting accounts surrounding abstract work. One walks away with the understanding that neither geometric abstraction nor concrete art were rigidly adhered-to dogmas in postwar Brazilian art, but rather came to occupy a critical role in the service of national, institutional, and even personal interests.

Forming Abstraction is a substantial volume, organized around six ample chapters that carefully chart the institutions, exhibitions, and thinkers (sometimes the artists themselves) who were central to the evolution of nonobjective abstraction, which the author also refers to as geometric abstraction and nonmimetic art. Maintaining a balance between the personal, national, and institutional stakes is no easy feat, but Nelson achieves it. Each chapter offers the political, economic, and historical background buttressing artistic and institutional developments, as well as the many debates and theoretical tensions, both in Brazil and elsewhere, that are missing from previous accounts.

The postwar period was marked by a number of significant events, including the ousting of dictator Getúlio Vargas and the establishment of institutions dedicated to the collecting, exhibiting, and teaching of modern art in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Chapter 1 focuses on the

founding of São Paulo's Museum of Modern Art, devoted to a permanent collection, and the São Paulo Biennial, both led by the entrepreneur and art patron Francisco "Ciccillo" Matarazzo Sobrinho. Despite competing federal, private, and intellectual interests girding the creation of these institutions, there was a shared commitment to positioning São Paulo as a vital international art center and to cultivating connections between Brazilian modern art and that of other prominent art centers such as New York and Paris.

Within the language developed around abstraction, the term *forma* became extensively deployed. Chapter 2 focuses on the many invocations of *forma* in the work of São Paulo artists Geraldo de Barros and Waldemar Cordeiro along with Rio-based art critic Mário Pedrosa and artist Ivan Serpa, who "sought to create artworks, conceived as physical objects, that disrupted habits of seeing and experiencing the world" (81). Nelson clarifies that the proliferation of concepts such as form-idea and form-object were a way to "make the forming of form visible" even if the experience of these forms is one of "fragmentation, multiplicity, and mutability, not resolution" (87). Though somewhat of an outlier in the book's organization around institutions and exhibitions, this chapter's focus on the stakes of the language of formal experimentation is an original contribution to the scholarship on Brazilian Concretism.

The first São Paulo Biennial sought, in the words of its artistic director, Lourival Gomes Machado, to "place modern art of Brazil not simply in proximity to, but in active contact with the art of the rest of the world" (109). Chapter 3 narrates the history of this biennial, which concurrently featured works prioritizing heroic representations of the Brazilian nation, such as those by the social realist painter Cândido Portinari, alongside Brazilian abstract works. The reception of abstraction, however, was widely criticized and the biennial model itself decried

as “predicated on the indiscriminating importation of foreign art, the facile adoption of trends by local artists, and the elision of local traditions and histories” (129). Here, Nelson’s analysis of the press’s representation of the female biennial viewer as a “vapid but savvy Europeanized elite woman consuming novel, geometricized art” is particularly astute (131).

Key exhibitions of abstract art such as *Ruptura* in São Paulo in 1952 and *Exposição nacional de arte abstrata* in Petrópolis, just outside of Rio, in 1953 were organized as a platform for greater visibility of artist collectives. In chapter 4, Nelson writes thoughtfully about the works included in these shows, describing their materiality and placement in detail while pointing to how specific juxtapositions shaped the viewers’ experiences. In her consideration of gender, a line of inquiry she pursues throughout the book, Nelson highlights the decidedly different reception of women artists in art criticism of the time. For example, in art critic Jayme Maurício’s account of his studio visit with Lygia Clark, he “commented at length on the artist’s beauty, outfit, and mannerisms” before addressing her talent (157).

The second and most ambitious São Paulo Biennial, the topic of chapter 5, was held in the new modernist complex of buildings in Parque Ibirapuera designed by Oscar Niemeyer, who “imagined that collaboration with the states of Brazil, the American Hemisphere, and the world would bring about the economic and political ascent of the city of São Paulo and the nation of Brazil as a whole” (191). While eleven European and numerous Latin American countries were included, Brazil, the United States, France, and Italy were strategically allotted the most space. Just as in the earlier iteration, the prominence of geometric abstraction from the Americas prompted critics to denounce the “geometrization” of art for lacking “specific geographic, cultural, or historic traits” (197) or as the product of outside influences.

The Rio-based abstract artist collective Grupo Frente featured a roster of the most well-known names from the period, including three prominent women artists: Lygia Clark, Maria Martins, and Lygia Pape. Led by Serpa and

supported by critics and poets such as Pedrosa and Ferreira Gullar, the group grew significantly from 1954 to 1955. Both the newly founded Museum of Modern Art (MAM Rio) and Grupo Frente garnered widespread coverage in the mainstream press, and the group’s work was described as “a youthful avant-garde” that promoted artistic freedom and non-conformism (216), concepts cultivated by Serpa in his role leading MAM Rio’s art school and by Gullar in his essays from the fifties. The chapter closes with a gendered interpretation of Clark’s embrace of materials and industrial processes as challenging widely held conceptions regarding feminine labor, a compelling reading that deserves even further elaboration.

The conclusion details how the *National Exhibition of Concrete Art*, held in both São Paulo and Rio in 1956–57, signaled a shift in the position of Brazilian concrete artists, “from upstarts to accepted, esteemed figures in the country’s story of modernism” (267). Despite a brief moment of unity between groups in the two cities, disagreements about Concretism quickly emerged and led to now long-held convictions that the Rio artists were overly lyrical and expressive and the Paulistas excessively rational. While this well-rehearsed rupture has dominated discussions of this period, the author minimizes the importance of this rift by relegating it to the conclusion.

As Nelson’s compelling account of this period makes clear, “nonobjective abstraction was not a denial of the national in favor of the international. Rather, region, nation, and world functioned as complementary, as well as oppositional, terms in nonmimetic artworks and their displays” (256). *Forming Abstraction* fills in many gaps and inconsistencies about this period and as such is a welcome addition to extant scholarship and especially to the classroom, where Nelson’s clear and engaging prose will undoubtedly be appreciated. More importantly, the author’s unique insight paves the way for new possibilities in addressing postwar art in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America, including further research into the racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions of abstract art.

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