

The Color of Experience: Postwar Chromatic Abstraction in Venezuela and Brazil

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Where color provides the contours, objects are not reduced to things but are constituted by an order consisting of an infinite range of nuances.

—Walter Benjamin¹

Color [appears] free from any figurative or demarcative function so as to become a fundamental significative element of the work. . . . The core of color [is] . . . where perception no longer meets the object's resistance and where everything is just time to perceive.

—Ferreira Gullar²

From 1914 to 1917, Walter Benjamin penned a series of analyses on color and its potential to incite a profoundly liberatory human experience. Against the dominant view of color as “something superimposed on matter,” merely “a deceptive cloak for individual objects existing in time and space,” Benjamin posited a quasi-phenomenological experience of color that operated outside both formulaic categories of time and space and the tyranny of form.³ Color, in Benjamin’s

1. Walter Benjamin, “A Child’s View of Color” (1914–15), in *Selected Writings, Volume I: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 50. Benjamin’s writings on color were published only posthumously.

2. Ferreira Gullar, *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea: Do Cubismo à Arte Neoconcreta* (Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 1999), p. 258. Translated by Sérgio Martins; emphasis in original.

3. Benjamin, “A Child’s View of Color,” p. 50. See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998) (from whom I take my title), and Martin Jay, “Chromophilia: Der Blaue Reiter, Walter Benjamin and the Emancipation of Color,” paper delivered at the MIT School of Architecture & Planning—SMArchS Colloquium (October 24, 2013), available online at: <http://techtv.mit.edu/videos/26346-martin-jay-chromophilia-der-blaue-reiter-walter-benjamin-and-the-emancipation-of-color>. Caygill argues that Benjamin’s color essays were part of an early articulation of his challenge to the Kantian model of experience that sought to transform Kant’s transcendental categories of space and time as a priori frameworks for objects and experiences, opening them to a “discontinuous experience of the absolute” (p. xiii) and thus a speculative, rather than absolute, philosophy of experience. Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles discuss Benjamin’s efforts to theorize “more speculative phe-

model, prompted an emancipated, “paradisiacal” vision capable of engaging with the material world outside of, and prior to, rationalist constructions as a means of overcoming what he perceived as the distortions imposed by overly scientific Kantian concepts of experience.⁴ Four decades later and half a world away, a strikingly similar attention to color as a principal means of emancipation reappears in the work of vanguard artists and theoreticians in Brazil and Venezuela. Resisting an entrenched postwar suspicion of color’s expressive qualities that elsewhere resulted in color being repositioned as readymade or purged outright, prominent critics such as Ferreira Gullar and Mário Pedrosa, along with artists from Alejandro Otero and Carlos Cruz-Diez to Hélio Oiticica and Aluísio Carvão, produced a range of responses to the problem of color that sought to use it as the key to a liberation from the crisis of the art object and the related crisis of modernity. In Gullar’s equation of color with perception itself, Otero’s identification of chromatic abstraction with nature brought into the service of a rapidly modernizing oil nation, and Oiticica’s conceptualization of color as a “field of development” through which the act of *making* could be expanded structurally beyond the artist to encompass the viewer, chromaticity functioned as an experiential conduit to social emancipation, even as those trajectories took divergent conceptual and historical routes.

What is at stake in this resurgence, in 1950s and ’60s South American abstraction, of color as a central problem of perceptual experience and subject construction? The essays collected here raise three major points.⁵ First, in all cases, color is conceptualized in relation to material experience, as a corporealization (whether individual or collective) that repositions us as subjects. In this regard, Megan Sullivan tracks Otero’s monumental equations of color with the “natural body” of the modern Venezuelan nation, in which color became a strategy for uniting the country’s oil resources with an incipient modernization. While Otero seems to sever ties between color and nature in favor of an industrialization of color in his Duco-based *Coloritmos*, his gridded polychrome for Caracas’s modernist University City suggests a more complex relation, converting the “experience of tropical nature” into an “optical spectacle” that signaled the country’s reliance on its natural landscape—rather than its own citizens—as the generator of its rapid economic development.⁶ Whereas Otero strove to envision

nomenological possibilities of experience” against the Kantian model. Osborne and Charles, “Walter Benjamin,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/benjamin/> (accessed July 27, 2014).

4. Benjamin, “A Child’s View of Color,” p. 51. Benjamin understood color as a means of addressing what he would later term “the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral” and sought to integrate it with Kant’s epistemological address to “the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting.” Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), in Bullock and Jennings, *Selected Writings, Volume I*, p. 100, cited in Osborne and Charles, “Walter Benjamin.”

5. Although my co-editor, Megan Sullivan, and I commissioned essays on South American geometric abstraction from our colleagues, the fact that all these essays focus on color was not planned.

6. Megan Sullivan, “Locating Abstraction: The South American Coordinates of the Avant-garde” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2013), p. 153.

color's transcendent ability to represent the material promise of modernity to a nation caught on the periphery of the international capitalist market system, Oiticica associated color not with an idealizing impetus but with a "chromatic materialism" that could "evoke an entire phenomenological bodily experience."⁷ Irene Small analyzes Oiticica's well-known "body of color" model, enacted at the level of the individual subject, as a chromatic experience we inhabit corporeally. She identifies in the Brazilian artist's use of color a counterdrive to pictorial structure, such that the chromatic becomes a "materiality oriented explicitly towards the viewer's perception."

Oiticica's refusal either to dematerialize or to industrialize color resonates with the Neo-concretist efforts in Rio de Janeiro of both Gullar and Carvão to elaborate a model of color free "from any demarcative function"—a model that would refute the technocratic rationalism (but not the anti-humanism) of São Paulo Concretism in order to link perception to a pre-rational bodily experience and thus shift attention from the artwork's production to its reception. Against a conventional association of color with industrialization in Concretist painting—and the contingent repression of expressive color in favor of form—Gullar theorized chromaticity, understood as a carrier for the more deeply repressed drive of expenditure, as opening a direct, unmediated encounter between subject and object, individual and material experience. As Sérgio Martins demonstrates, Gullar used Carvão's chromatic abstraction to theorize color's capacity to erode the object's intransigent thingness—its material resistance to apprehension by a subject—through its relationship to time and expenditure. This "relentless temporal decay of things" (in Martins's apt phrase) functioned not as a means of opening the unruliness of the object to the rule of the commodity, but rather as a means of combating what Gullar saw as the "dangerous hypertrophy of rationalism" that could easily lead to totalitarianism.⁸ In this respect, Gullar's turn from language to color as a vehicle for unmediated material experience resonates closely with Benjamin's model of color as a form of "absolute experience" superior to the limitations of the "languages of man" whose culturally and semiotically circumscribed vocabularies can never fully differentiate among the infinite range of chromatic hues.⁹

7. Briony Fer, untitled paper delivered at the symposium "Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour," Tate Modern (June 2, 2007), <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/h%C3%A9lio-oiticica-the-body-of-colour-symposium-video-recordings> (accessed July 19, 2014).

8. Ferreira Gullar, et al., "Neoconcrete Manifesto," in Lygia Clark and Yve-Alain Bois, "Nostalgia for the Body," *October* 69 (Summer 1994), p. 91. Originally published in *Jornal do Brasil, Suplemento Domínical* (Rio de Janeiro), March 22, 1959. Brazil had already experienced the quasi-fascist authoritarianism of President Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo (1937–1945) and would soon experience a more brutal military dictatorship (1964–1985). Mário Pedrosa also warned of the authoritarian excesses of technocratic rationalism, exemplified in Concretism and its enthusiasm for bureaucratic centralized state planning. See Pedrosa, "Apresentação," in *Grupo Frente: Segunda Mostra Coletiva, Julho 1955* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1955) and "Reflexões em torno da Nova Capital," *Brasil, Arquitetura Contemporânea* 10 (1957).

9. Walter Benjamin, "On Perception" and "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," in Bullock and Jennings, *Selected Writings, Volume I*, pp. 96, 73.

Second, color in each case became the basis for a complex negotiation that laid claim to chromatic abstraction as a *universal* project through its *localized* articulation within the developmentalist contexts of postwar South America.¹⁰ In all cases, a teleology of color was posited as a means of renovating the universalizing aspirations of the historical avant-garde (as I describe below) and, in tandem, of provoking comprehensive social progress. As such, mediations between the universal aesthetic project of abstraction and its specific manifestations in these nations experiencing the throes of rapid modernization provide insight into broader contemporary debates about Latin America's position vis-à-vis both a new postwar world order and the question of what it might mean to be both "modern" and "Latin American."¹¹ Yet the dramatically differing rates, histories, and contexts of economic modernization, not only of these developing nations versus their fully industrialized counterparts of Europe and the US, but also of Venezuela versus Brazil, produced sharply distinct aesthetic and ideological outcomes. Otero, for example, conceived of color in explicitly national terms, as a means of entering Venezuela into a universal history from which it had hitherto been ostracized. His gridded polychrome relies paradoxically on its status as a quasi-indexical sign of the local color of the Caracas sky in order to express Venezuela's ability to engage in the "universal time" of modern progress exemplified by the West.¹² The Neo-concretists, by contrast, resolutely avoided the concept of the nation, instead projecting the phenomenological interaction between viewer and aesthetic object as a universal (in the sense of general or comprehensive or, in the case of Oiticica, cosmic) space articulated purely within the individual subject-object relationship.

These divergent strategies in turn opened onto differing addresses to the distinct temporal experiences of modernization. In Brazil, Oiticica, Gullar, and Carvão were working at the moment of the astoundingly rapid construction of Brasília (1956–60), the modernist city that would, in President Juscelino Kubitschek's words, produce "fifty years of progress in five" for the entire Brazilian nation.¹³ This gave rise to an ethos of time-space compression, in which rapid modernization would prompt a spatial integration of Brazil's immense territories (through a new national highway system) and hence a social integration that would leapfrog over class and race antagonisms towards a promised future. But whereas the Concretists, working in the all-important automobile-manufactur-

10. The period at issue here runs from World War II to the Cuban Revolution, when import-substitution industrialization became a principal economic strategy for many Latin American states. See Joseph Love, "The Rise and Decline of Economic Structuralism in Latin America: New Dimensions," *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005), pp. 100–25.

11. On this point, see Sullivan, "Locating Abstraction."

12. Pascual Navarro, "Los disidentes y sus críticos," *Los Disidentes* 5 (September 1950), p. 11.

13. Kubitschek imagined Brasília as both a sign for modernity and literally a generator of industrialization across a number of interrelated industries through the so-called Targets Program—not the single-product economy that Venezuela became. See Kathryn Sikkink, "Developmentalism in Brazil, 1954–1961," in *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 122–70.

ing center of São Paulo, took this leap into modernity as a mandate for art's merging with industry, the Neo-concretists remained dubious about artistic collaboration with a centralized state that had a history of authoritarianism. As Small demonstrates, it is in this context, for example, that Oiticica's *Bóldes* recast painting's alignment with Brazil's developmentalist discourse to privilege the commodity not as the culmination of a progressive industrial process but as a marker of the spatio-temporal asymmetries induced by the country's peripheral modernization within the world market system. Oiticica, Gullar, and Carvão thus sought, argue Small and Martins, to sever the notion of time from the hegemonic concept of a technocratic forward march towards full collective modernization in order to elaborate a perceptual dialectic of temporal duration in relation to color (what Oiticica would call "color-time") that had the potential to construct new perceptions of time and space.¹⁴ As Martins contends elsewhere, this was no mere rhetorical flourish but an ethical and political project aimed at re-founding Brazilian culture as an egalitarian endeavor, a re-founding whose definition and implementation became increasingly urgent as the 1950s national euphoria of industrialization and modernization embodied in Brasília gave way in the '60s to rising economic and political tensions, culminating in the 1964 coup d'état.¹⁵ In Venezuela, by contrast, Otero was working in the context of a nonindustrialized nation dependent on a single material export commodity—oil—whose subterranean invisibility (in both natural and social terms) continually threatened to throw the nation back into long-standing debates over the "barbarism" associated with untamed, atemporal nature versus the "civilization" associated with history, urban modernization, and the West.¹⁶ Otero sought to allay these anxieties by favorably linking the non-time of nature to the "now" of a universal (that is, Western) contemporaneity. In this respect, the University City project, and Otero's participation in it, functioned less as an economic engine of *production* (as did Brasília) than as a symbol of the *consumption* of Venezuela's state-managed oil resources by a citizenry relegated to the status of passive spectators of the material achievements of the nation. As such, history itself was not to be *produced* but *imported* in exchange for oil, in the form of its "end products"—capitalist commodities.¹⁷

Third, all of these artists and writers contextualize their aesthetic maneuvers in relation to Europe, positioning their work as a resuscitation of the historical avant-garde's utopian aspirations in the wake of the latter's failure in the after-

14. Hélio Oiticica, "Cor, tempo and estrutura" (1960), cited in Sérgio Bruno Martins, "Hélio Oiticica: Mapping the Constructive," *Third Text* 24, no. 4 (2010), p. 411.

15. Martins, "Hélio Oiticica: Mapping the Constructive," p. 412.

16. In Latin America, these debates trace back to the early nineteenth century and are most famously elaborated in Argentine president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's 1845 book, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*.

17. Sullivan, "Locating Abstraction," p. 153. This is not to undercut Otero's preeminent status as a public intellectual and ideologue of Venezuela's modernization, but rather to explicate the circumstances in which he succeeded in radically recasting Venezuela's national ethos by reshaping its foundational cultural institutions.

math of World War II. A Benjaminian association of color with an emancipatory material experience thus resurfaces within the wider context of a shifting postwar world order and from a geopolitical perspective on modernity substantively different from, if indelibly linked to, those of Europe and the United States. On the one hand, Latin America, relatively untouched by the destruction of the Second World War and the consequent crises of the Left in Europe and the US, could be perceived as a territory where the torch of modernism's unfinished social-aesthetic project could be taken up and carried forward.¹⁸ South American artists could therefore read the utopianism of figures such as Mondrian and Malevich not as incarnations of the intrinsic failures of abstract painting's social program, but as the precursor and launching pad for their own aesthetic experimentation.

In presenting abstraction as a singular, universal project, however, these artists were well aware that they risked trading one powerful but insufficient paradigm—that of Latin America as “intractable other” to Europe and the US—for another, a “paradigm of similitude” that emphasized continuities with Western civilization that often threatened to tilt over into a naïve belief in the rhetoric of modernization (this was Pedrosa's fear when he uttered his famous dictum that “Brazil is a country condemned to the modern”).¹⁹ Yet as the essays here demonstrate, the most productive cultural moments happen precisely in the schism between the promise of modernity and actual historical conditions. These cultural producers operated consciously in that schism, positing a story not about unidirectional influence and assimilation but about a radical break from that logic, one that opened onto a structural view of why and how those schisms were actively produced.

And finally, it is worth reminding ourselves that all of this obliges us, furthermore, to reassess the role of color elsewhere in postwar art and, in turn, to rethink what are by now familiar concerns regarding the effects of the commercialization of human imagination and memory, the pervasiveness of culture-industry spectacle, and the corrosion of subjectivity imposed by industrial capital. Otero's claims for chromatic abstraction's continued connections to social experience, for example, give us a vantage point from which to reassess his colleague Ellsworth Kelly's opposing claim to embody the “evacuation of sociality,” and thereby to historicize their industrialization of color as embodying *both* postwar capitalism's increasing impetus towards a fully global leverage *and* the necessarily asymmetrical effects

18. See Sullivan, “Locating Abstraction.” José Falconi also enlarges on this complex issue with regard to the region's unique “insider/outsider position . . . rooted in a very particular marginal position only afforded to Latin Americans.” See his forthcoming essay in Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, Megan Sullivan, eds., *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latino Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

19. Falconi, in Anreus, Greeley, and Sullivan, *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latino Art*. Mário Pedrosa, “A Cidade Nova Obra de Arte. Introdução ao tema inaugural do Congresso Internacional Extraordinário de Críticos de Arte. A cidade nova—Síntese das artes,” *Revista Habitat* 57 (November 1959), pp. 11–13. For a brief sketch of the historical construction of these opposing paradigms rooted in the nineteenth century, see Falconi, and Idelber Avelar, “Toward a Genealogy of Latin Americanism,” *Dispositio/n* 22, no. 49 (1997 [2000]), pp. 121–33.

and experiences engendered by this process.²⁰ Oiticica's rearticulation of the readymade occasions a reassessment of Duchamp in relation to Mondrian, as taken up by postwar artists on both sides of the Atlantic, and of the conditions under which, according to Small, a post-painterly practice might reveal "the *structure* of the readymade object" such that it could "act not as a hermetic or fixed entity, but as a matrix open for resignification." Or we might find that Gullar's model of chromaticity and expenditure, exemplified in the work of Carvão's non-objects, gives us not simply a reassessment of the friction between the metaphysics of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, but also a new route by which to return to Benjamin's early writings on color and, through them, to a consciously speculative philosophy of unmediated subject-object relations: "an order consisting of an infinite range of nuances" leading us to that "interrelated totality" that is "the world of the imagination."²¹

20. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Kelly's Matrix: Administering Abstraction, Industrializing Color," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Matrix* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1998), p. 26.

21. Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," pp. 50, 51.