

Is the message in the media? Object-based learning and Brazilian constructive art

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Introduction

- In 2018 the MFAH, International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) and the University of Houston (UH) signed a memorandum of understanding to create and teach a graduate and upper level undergraduate course on Latin American Art through object based learning and Socratic dialog
- The class was centered around the art and documents made by Brazilian Constructive artists represented in the MFAH's Adolpho Leirner Collection, including Lygia Clark, Alfredo Volpi, Hélio Oiticica, and Geraldo de Barros, and complimented by consideration of contemporaneous Argentinean artists Gyula Kosice and Rhod Rothfuss
- Students are primarily art historians with some visual artists, all with minimal scientific background and some who are science-phobic
- Faculty include art historians, conservators and a conservation scientist
- Art historians are trained to parse an artwork's subject matter, the artist's style, and the social milieu in which they worked, but the potential importance of material choices is often neglected
- Many of the artists and movements deliberate chose and used materials to convey a sociopolitical statement.
 - The problem then becomes how to best introduce students to the importance of materials analysis and to engage them in the synergism that occurs when different specialists parse an artwork together

Learning Outcomes

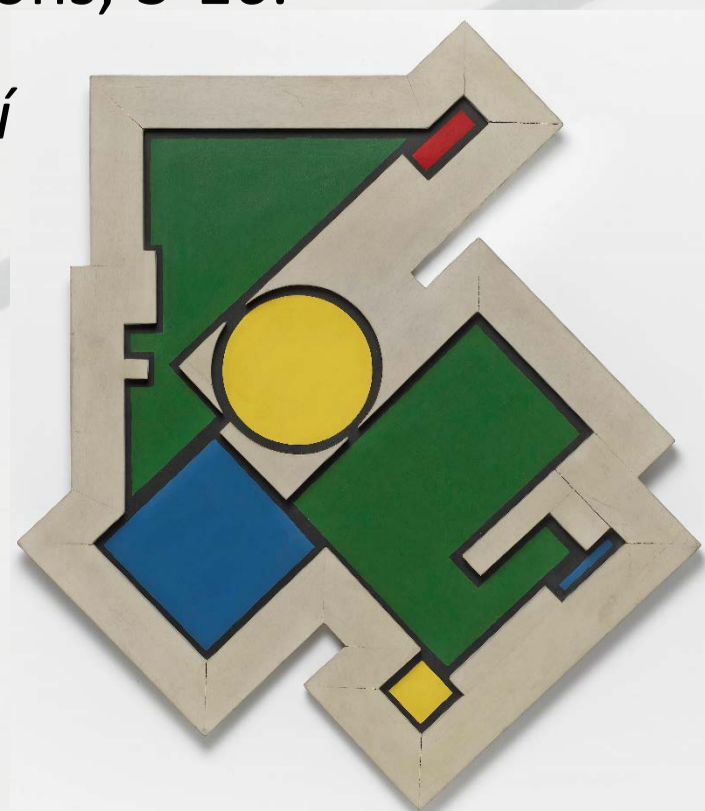
The goal of this course is to introduce the student to the close analysis of objects and how such analysis can help us write a richer history of Latin American art. Upon completion of this course, they should be able to identify the major observational techniques and analytical strategies used to thickly describe and analyze an object.

Methodology

- Provide students with the art historical framework- what were the artists trying to achieve?
 - Primary documents (artists' manifestos, essays, journals)
 - Secondary documents (essays, criticism, catalogues)
- Guide students through a Socratic dialog with an artwork where they are asked to parse its appearance
 - support material
 - glossy or matte paint surface
 - brush or spray applied paint
- Introduce basic information about paint technology and history
 - types of media and their properties
 - drying time
 - leveling
 - gloss
- How does the appearance relates to an artist's aims?
 - This contextualization leads them to an appreciation of the importance of technical research and how parsing the materiality of an artwork leads to a greater understanding of an artist's message

Example 1. Dating

- Required reading: T Learner, 2007. "Modern Paints: Uncovering the Choices," in *Modern Paints Uncovered*, : Getty Publications, 3-16.
- The students are asked to examine *Composición Madi* (1948, enamel on wood) by Rhod Rothfuss (1920–69)
- Condition and appearance of paint suggest a more recent creation date and that the media is not oil
- Scientific reports documenting the media as p(n-BA:MMA) are shared and students asked to draw conclusions about the authenticity of the work
- Students then asked to discuss the implications of research that suggests that Gyula Kosice, a friend of Rothfuss, made this work from a Rothfuss design



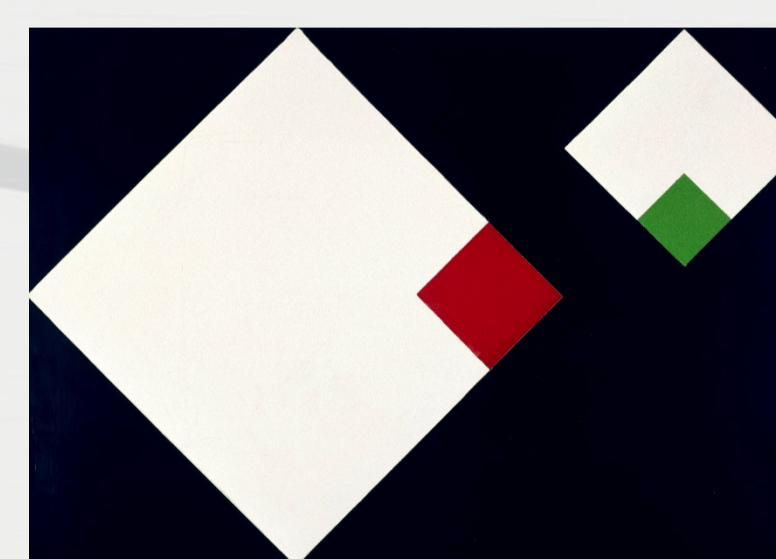
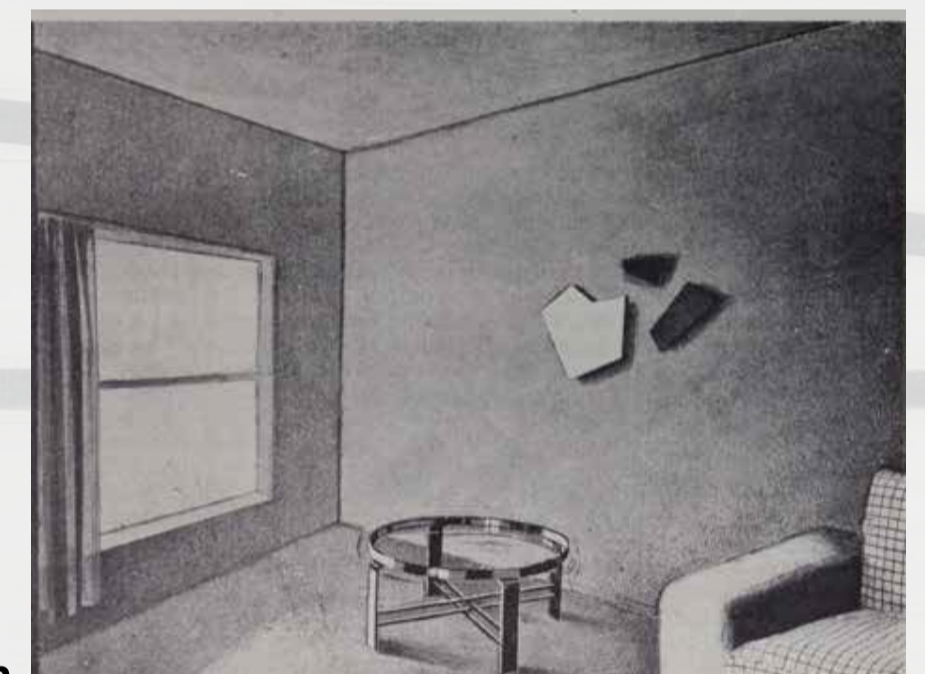
Example 2. Misinterpretation

- *Calavera 4* (2009, 194.9 × 194.9 × 7 cm) by Grupo Mondongo is a plasticine on wood relief sculpture
- The collective sources its plasticine from an Argentinian manufacturer
- One batch of plasticine had a mistake in Formulation, with too much antioxidant, 3,5-di-tert-butyl-4- hydroxytoluene (BHT) added
- The BHT oxidation product, 3,5-di-tert-butyl-4-hydroxybenzaldehyde actively migrates and effloresces on the work's surface forming glittery plate-like crystals
- When examining the work of art, students often comment on the decorative effect of the crystals and discuss where and why the artists may have applied them
- This misinterpretation facilitates a discussion surrounding the importance of expert knowledge and its role in helping differentiate between artistic intent and post-creation alterations



Example 3. Messages in the media

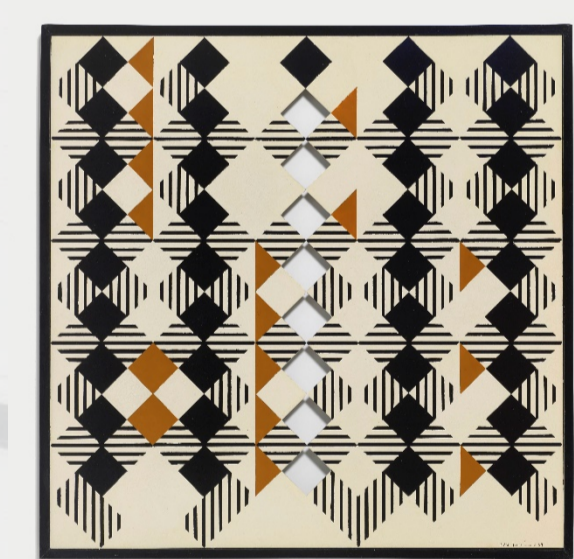
- Many artists working in Brazil and Argentina in the mid-1900s were actively seeking to disrupt the idea of art as an elite European endeavor.
- They utilized non-traditional supports, retail trade paints, and published designs so that Individuals could produce their own versions of artworks
- Required reading: 1) P Gottschaller, 2017. "Making Art Concrete," in *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Collection Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, GCI and GRI, 25-59. 2) MC Ramírez, CE Rogge. 2021. "Looking to the past to paint the future," In *Purity is a Myth: The Materiality of Concrete Art from Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay*, Getty Publications, 147-165.
- Students are asked to estimate the media and support of works by Lygia Clark, Alfredo Volpi, Judith Lauand and Geraldo de Barros.
- Scientific results are then presented and the students asked to contextualize findings into the art historical framework
 - Why was Clark using spray applied automotive paints?
 - What are the implications of Volpi's use of a traditional egg tempera paint in terms of the manifestos of the Brazilian Concrete milieu
 - The works by Lauand and de Barros have similarly glossy surfaces but very different media. Kazmer Fejér, an artist and industrial chemist, was a close friend of de Barros. What information would we miss if we thought de Barros was using traditional materials?



Geraldo de Barros
Concreto (Função Diagonal), 1952-3, oil and nitrocellulose modified alkyd on hardboard



Lygia Clark,
Espaço modulado no. 2, 1950, nitrocellulose modified alkyd on hardboard



Judith Lauand,
Variação de quadrados, 1957, oil on hardboard



Alfredo Volpi, *Bandeiras*, 1960, tempera on canvas

Reflections/Assessment

- Small class size and low student to teacher ratio key to facilitating learning. Even shy or intimidated students have opportunities for side-bar conversations
- Weekly journal entries show increasing grasp of concepts and the value of scientific information. 2-3 encounters with technical information were necessary to fully develop appreciation
- Student reviews highly positive- students have won awards for their final essays, received fellowships and gone on to Ph.D. programs
- LatinX student enrollment is high in this course, which encourages diversity in field of art history