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A Great Anti-Hero of Modern Art History

Juan Aebi in Buenos Aires

Laura Bohnenblust

This article focuses on the network the Swiss artist Hans Aebi – or Juan Aebi, as he called himself in Spanish – developed in the ‘arrival city’ of Buenos Aires in the middle of the 20th century. A photograph of the opening of the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina’s (GAMA’s) exhibition of June 1952 (fig.1) serves as a starting point for analysing Aebi’s position within the already existing structures of the local art scene. When the photograph was taken, Aebi was 28 years old. He had arrived in the port city about three years earlier, in December 1948, trying to make a name for himself as an artist. In contrast to that of most immigrant artists of that period, Aebi’s emigration was not directly war-related. The exact reasons for his departure are unclear. What is almost certain, however, is that those reasons were of a private nature and probably entailed an escape from certain social circumstances and obligations in his home town (Kieser 2018).

Fig. 1: Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA), June 1952, Galería Viau, Buenos Aires. F.l.t.r.: Alfredo Hlito, Claudio Girola, Sarah Grilo, Miguel Ocampo, Tomás Maldonado, Hans Aebi, Enio Iommi, Aldo Pellegrini (Jóvenes y Modernos de los años 50: En diálogo con la colección Ignacio Pirovano 2012, 21).
Laura Bohnenblust

Juan Aebi’s oeuvre cannot be categorised as belonging to one particular stylistic direction. In different periods he worked both figuratively and abstractly, produced oil or acrylic paintings, aquarelles, drawings and serigraphs as well as wall paintings. Nowadays, his name has almost been forgotten, in both Argentina and Switzerland. As the exhibition photograph proves, however, he played an active part in the modern art scene of 20th-century Buenos Aires. This and other material in the historical archive in the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMBA), in the Swiss Art Archives in Zurich as well as in his private estate detail his career in Argentina. Based on correspondence and documents including journal articles, invitation cards and exhibition catalogues, in the following I will examine Aebi’s professional network, his collaborations and the reception his work received, as well as the possibilities and difficulties he faced when connecting with the Argentinian art scene. Apart from Aebi’s successful integration into 1950s’ artist circles in Buenos Aires, he never really carved out a career and his position in the art world was not considered important enough to affect the history of modern art in any significant way. After his death nobody was interested in his work. For more than 30 years, his widow Renate Kieser kept a large number of his paintings and all his belongings in a rented basement space in the Swiss shoe factory Bally, where Aebi had been employed as a print worker after his return to Switzerland in 1963 and until his death in 1985 (ibid.).

Juan Aebi’s life as an artist can be summed up as that of an anti-hero. One might ask why an investigation of his oeuvre is worth pursuing. I argue that a story about failure such as Aebi’s can provide fertile ground for discussing the parameters of the art world, its specific localisation – in this case in the urban space of Buenos Aires – as well as its global connectivities and dependencies. Rather than evaluating Aebi’s work or mining it for talent, this article examines the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within the art scene of Buenos Aires in order to expand and revise the history of modern art, and to critically question the processes of modern art historiography.

In her outstanding article, “When Greatness is a Box of Wheaties”, the art historian Carol Duncan (1975) poses crucial questions about the notion of artistic quality and value and the canonisation of ‘great artists’. Although Duncan’s critique is situated in 1970s’ feminist art theory, it is still relevant today and constitutes an important reference when it comes to an artist who cannot be assigned to the canon of modern art and who has never been described as ‘great’ – even if, or precisely because, he was male. In her article Duncan criticises the way we often fail to understand how quality or genius is attributed, and states that such attributions are always “conditioned by historical or educational experience” (1993, 122). Moreover, she interrogates “the authority of those notions of achievement” and argues that
criteria of value originate from an outdated, established and conservative art historiography which is based on patriarchal structures (ibid., 123).

Processes of Inclusion: Group Exhibitions and the Biennial

Instead of trying to identify ‘greatness’, another approach could consist of exploring the extent to which migrant artists were incorporated into already existing cultural structures in their respective arrival cities. What were the strategies and procedures used to gain a foothold, to finance one’s life and to gain access to the art scene? Which people and institutions played an active role in the processes of artist integration?

Before migrating to Argentina, Aebi studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel and at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in the Montparnasse neighbourhood of Paris, where he might have already come into contact with Argentinian artists who studied there, too. His emigration to Argentina in December 1948 must have happened relatively abruptly and without his announcing it to many of his friends. The first evidence of his preparations to leave Switzerland can be found in Aebi’s correspondence with Pierre Jaquillard, a Swiss diplomat and art historian who had formerly worked as cultural attaché of the Swiss Embassy in Buenos Aires. In a letter to Aebi in June 1948 Jaquillard disclosed the address of the Bureau argentine d’immigration and provided a first link to the art scene in Buenos Aires by mentioning the name of the artist Juan Batlle Planas: “un peintre abstracto-surrealiste de Buenos Aires […] fort sympatique”. A few months after Aebi’s arrival Jaquillard forwarded to him the address of Señor F.R. Torralba, secretary of the Editorial Atlántida.

The first evidence that Aebi seemed to be gradually gaining a foothold in the art scene of Buenos Aires can be found in an exhibition brochure for the well-known Galería Van Riel, most probably from October 1949, where – according to the exhibition catalogue – Aebi showed two of his paintings. Galería Van Riel ran an exhibition programme called Consorcio de Artistas (Artists’ Consortium); this is of particular interest because, as the brochure’s introduction outlines, it was dedicated specifically to immigrant artists:

Based on their own countries’ cultures, these artists strive to become involved with their new home by offering up their expertise and artistic efforts. They will always be fighting for the great goals of art, which are the same all over the world. Such a
worthwhile and honest expression of art can only be constructive. The artists united in the above-mentioned consortium will always strive in that sense – by their spirit and in their art.

In fact, this support programme for immigrant artists must have had a very positive effect on Aebi’s further integration. The same building which housed the Galería Van Riel also accommodated the Instituto de Arte Moderno (IAM), which operated from 1949 until 1952. This privately run institution was dedicated to all kinds of modern art, ranging from painting to dance and theatre. Its programme focused on international trends. Thus, the _Arte abstracto: Del arte figurativo al arte abstracto_ exhibition, organised by the Belgian art critic Léon Degand in 1949, featured works by Wassily Kandinsky, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Sonia and Robert Delaunay and Georges Vantongerloo, exhibited for the first time in Buenos Aires.

Under the patronage of the architect and patron Marcelo de Ridder, it was this institution that planned Argentinian participation in the first Biennial in São Paulo in 1951. Juan Aebi’s integration into the art scene of Buenos Aires seemed to have been so successful that he was selected along with 32 other artists to represent Argentina in the biggest international exhibition in Latin America (fig. 2). The fact that Aebi was actually Swiss and not Argentinian does not appear to have played a role in the selection.

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**Fig. 2:** Cover of the _I. Bienal do Museu de arte moderna de São Paulo_, and a part of the list of Argentina’s participation, 1951, p. 191 (Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo).
However, luck was not on Aebi’s side, as can be read in a letter from Pierre Jaquillard:
“I hope that you will be able to do the planned exhibitions; I’m very sorry that your participation in São Paulo was not possible, that's very sad […]”
Socio-political adversities under Perón and financial problems prevented the Instituto de Arte Moderno from sending the works to São Paulo, and Argentina was consequently not represented at the first Biennial in Brazil (García 2011, 94ff.). The second edition of the Biennial's exhibition catalogue no longer lists Argentina. What today is seen as a significant milestone in an artist’s career – the presentation of one's work at an international biennial – Juan Aebi could have achieved within three years of migrating to Buenos Aires. Due to organisational problems, however, this never translated into reality.

Nevertheless, in April 1952 Aebi had his first solo exhibition in Galería Van Riel's Sala V. At this point in time, his work was characterised by paintings which, although composed in an abstract way, allude to figurative elements. A large number of his artworks show, for example, surrealistic-looking imaginary landscapes or figures which emerge from an abstract segmentation of coloured shapes. The specific use of distinct colour contrasts gives the paintings a spatial depth and must be understood as an essential element of the compositions.

The Argentinian art critic and poet Aldo Pellegrini wrote the text in the exhibition brochure, describing Aebi's work as “imaginación libre [free imagination]” (Aebi 1952, n.p.). Pellegrini, who introduced Surrealism to Argentina in the 1920s, was a driving force in the artistic scene of Buenos Aires in the middle of the 20th century. The art historian María Amalia García argues convincingly that Pellegrini's approach to Surrealism and Concrete Art shows both positions as much more closely related than has been described in the historiography of modern art: “Pellegrini suggested new interpretations outside the canon of modern art acting as a great conciliator of those apparently irreconcilable opposites” (García 2017, 11). Pellegrini’s interpretation of Aebi’s work is therefore especially interesting to read, because he saw aspects of Surrealism and Concrete Art united in his art (Aebi 1952, n.p.).

Juan Aebi and Aldo Pellegrini must have been in close contact, since Aebi’s papers contain the programme for Pellegrini’s courses on Surrealism, and a letter from Aebi’s mother testifies that during his trip to Europe Pellegrini visited Aebi’s parents as well as Max Huggler, then director of the Art Museum, in Bern.

It was also Aldo Pellegrini who founded the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA) and who organised its first exhibition at the Galería Viau in June 1952 (fig. 1). Pellegrini described the group's configuration as an amalgamation of two tendencies in contemporary art: concrete artists and independent artists with a poetic approach. From the 1940s on, concrete art
had become very prevalent in Buenos Aires. Characteristic of this art movement dedicated to geometric abstraction was a break with figurative representation and in some cases experimentation with shaped canvases. During the 1940s, a variety of associations and subgroups were writing manifestos and publishing magazines that reflected their political ideologies. In 1944, together with other artists, Tomás Maldonado, Lidy Prati, Alfredo Hlito and Enio Iommi published the first and only edition of one such magazine, *Arturo: Revista de Artes Abstractas*. This constitutes an important event in Argentinian art history (cf. García et al. 2018; García 2018, 76). Interestingly, concrete artists from Switzerland served as vital points of reference for modern art in Latin America – of special note here was the active involvement of Max Bill in the Argentinian and Brazilian artistic circuits (García 2011).

In the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA)’s exhibition of 1952 the concrete art movement was represented by Maldonado, Prati, Hlito, Iommi and Claudio Girola. The so-called “independent artists” – Hans Aebi, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Sarah Grilo and Miguel Ocampo – were dedicated to abstract experimentation vis-à-vis a “poetic or emotional” approach (Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina 1952, n.p.). Just like in his solo show, Aebi’s works were positioned at the threshold between figuration and abstraction. The exhibition catalogue contains an introduction by Pellegrini and a double page for each artist with a brief biographical text, records of some works and a portrait. In Aebi’s case, he is depicted seated in front of his own paintings (fig. 3): four aquarelles can be identified in the background. The two larger ones in vertical format show surrealistic appearing figures, composed of abstract fields that cross or adjoin or are divided into each other. The two smaller non-representational works combine an array of coloured shapes intertwined in perspective. The accompanying biography in the exhibition catalogue emphasises Aebi’s education in Paris and in Basel with Walter Bodmer (1903–1973), an abstract artist, who represented Switzerland at the first Biennial in São Paulo in 1951.

The Argentinian art magazine *Ver y Estimar*, edited by the influential Argentinian art critic Jorge Romero Brest, dedicated an article to GAMAs first exhibition. Blanca Stábile, who was an art historian and a student of Romero Brest at the time, describes how abstraction and geometric forms invade painting and sculpture, displacing representations of objective reality (Stábile 1952, 106–117). Discussing Aebi’s work, Stábile emphasised the connection between approaches of free imagination and geometric analysis, just as Pellegrini did (ibid., 108). The illustrations in *Ver y Estimar’s* 11-page report feature works by Alfredo Hlitos, Enio Iommi, Tomas Maldonado and Miguel Ocampo, artists who belonged to the concrete group. The magazine *Nueva Visión*, which was founded by group
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member Tomás Maldonado in 1951, also reported on the exhibition and – as Maldonado himself wrote the text – praised it exceedingly. Individual artistic positions, however, are not discussed in detail. In one photograph a painting by Aebi is visible, but here, too, the focus is clearly on the geometric-abstract works of the other artists.

**Mechanisms of Exclusion: Neglecting Figurative Artists**

During his first years in Buenos Aires, Juan Aebi integrated well into the local art scene, relying on already-existing venues and collaborating with different protagonists. However, when it came to presenting ‘Argentinian art’ abroad, Aebi’s role became subject to question. In 1953, GAMA held two international exhibitions: at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro in August and at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in October, with a show entitled _acht argentijnse abstracten_. Aebi was not represented in either exhibition. As a letter in Aebi’s private estate, dated September 1953, proves, he was no longer part of the group:

> What I don’t quite understand is what you mean by writing that you were kicked out from the association. From which artists’ association? Do you mean those petty opportunists who imagine being kissed by the muse and walking in the footsteps of Gris and Klee?²⁹

What were the reasons for Aebi’s expulsion and subsequent exclusion? How did these exclusion mechanisms function and how were they related to micropolitical power hierarchies within the art scene? According to María Amalia García, the exhibitions in Brazil and Amsterdam were “significant for the consecration of the development of abstraction in Argentina” (2017, 12). As documents in the archive of the Stedelijk Museum prove, these travelling exhibitions were first developed for Amsterdam. Jan van As, director of the Dutch information office for Latin America in Buenos Aires, initiated contact in July 1952, just one month after GAMA’s exhibition opened in Buenos Aires.²⁰ A few months later, the director of the Stedelijk Museum, Willem Sandberg, wrote to the influential Argentinian art critic Jorge Romero Brest and asked him for his expert opinion on the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina.²¹

Romero Brest, a member of the International Association of Art Critics and a juror of the first São Paulo Biennial, answered as follows (fig. 4):
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**Fig. 4: Letter from Jorge Romero Brest (Buenos Aires) to Willem Sandberg (Amsterdam), 25 March 1953 (Unpublished correspondence, Archiv Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam).**
I found an exhibition almost entirely made, the paintings already chosen and ready for packaging, with the participation of some painters that I do not think are interesting, nor would you.

That’s why I propose two solutions:

1. That the exhibition will be done with the already chosen painters, without any intervention on my part.

2. That the exhibition will be organised by me. In this case, I will ask you to write to Mr. Van Has [sic], saying that the painters chosen by you are the following, because they are non-figurative: Maldonado, Hlito, Prati, Fernández Muro, Grilo, Ocampo, Testa y Magariños. I believe that in this way we can still organise the exhibition well without offending the excluded […].

Romero Brest, who – as García points out (2011, 98f.) – claimed to define which line of modern art resonated with the contemporary world, thus called on Sandberg to present the selection of artists as his own, on the grounds that only non-figurative artists were to be featured. Aebi, whose artistic approach was dedicated to abstraction but also infused with figurative elements, was consequently excluded. In the preface to the exhibition catalogue *achten argentijnse abstracten* (fig. 5), Romero Brest argues:

Among all of them, the ones I present with fervour stand out, not only for the quality of their works, not only for the combativeness they demonstrate, but also for their determination to obtain forms that configure a *universal language*. This empowerment connects them with the most progressive movements in the Occident and justifies the exhibition.

‘Universal language’ clearly meant non-figurative abstraction. As Andrea Giunta has stated in various publications (2001; 2005), Jorge Romero Brest was probably the most powerful advocate of Argentinian art in an international context. He was aware of how to achieve international recognition and obtain support, acting according to unwritten rules defined by hegemonial art centres such as New York, which themselves were guided by political interests in connection with the Cold War. Giunta’s arguments concerning the “Internationalization of Argentinian Art”
in the 1960s (2005, 145–161) can equally be applied to Romero Brest’s intervention at the beginning of the 1950s – at least in connection with the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de Argentina.

Tomás Maldonado’s report in *Nueva Visión* No. 5 about the exhibitions in Rio de Janeiro and Amsterdam makes the directional change to abstraction clear: “[t]his international recognition, the significance of which we certainly do not intend to exaggerate, proves the maturity reached in our country by the most innovative tendencies of contemporary art, in particular by the abstract and concrete ones.” Aebi with his abstract-figurative works simply did not fit in. In addition, as number nine of the *acht argentijnse abstracten* (eight abstract Argentinians, fig.5) the Swiss artist would have been a questionable representative of Argentina’s “exportable proposal” (García 2017).

**Canon Formation in Buenos Aires**

Aebi’s exclusion can be read as paradigmatic of the canonisation processes of modern art historiography. As 20th-century art history shows, exhibitions in established institutions were crucial for canon formations. In their investigation of the canonisation processes of modern art, Miriam Oesterreich and Kristian Handberg convincingly describe the global dominance of MoMA founding director Alfred Barr Jr.’s well-known diagram of the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1936 New York (2018, 2ff.). The diagram shows various currents in modern art which culminate in only two distinct categories: non-geometrical abstract art and geometrical abstract art (ibid.). With his selection of Argentinian artists, Jorge Romero Brest refers, though not literally, to this diagram: the “universal language” of each selected artist fits into either one category or the other. Romero Brest applied the ideology of development in modern art – evolving from figuration to abstraction – to the production of art in Argentina. He thereby tried to prove that artists abroad could legitimately be
positioned within “universal” advancements and evolutions of modern art. In this exclusionary ‘either/or logic’ of modern canon formation there was no space for positions such as those described by Pellegrini as “free imagination” (1952, n.p.), or for artists such as Juan Aebi.

According to Oesterreich and Handberg, the canonisation process of “Western” modernism in the 20th century was a European and North American phenomenon and did not reflect Latin American positions (2018, 1–20). The impact of the *acht argentijnse abstracten* in Amsterdam was indeed limited and the attempt to show the exhibition in other European museums proved to be unsuccessful, the reasoning being that the pictures were uninteresting because they did not convey ‘Argentinian’ peculiarity. For the canonisation of abstract positions within the Argentinian art scene, however, the exhibition abroad was decisive. Andrea Giunta posits that this process of internationally-oriented national canon formation was exemplified by the *Argentina en el mundo* (Argentina in the world) exhibition, curated by Romero Brest in 1965, which featured precisely those stances that had received recognition abroad (2005, 145–161).

Ironically, current exhibitions which aim to break down the “Western canon” in the context of global art history often feature artists who had entered the so-called “minor canon” of national art histories (Oesterreich/Handberg 2018, 19) years before, due to participating in international exhibitions. In this respect, artists like Juan Aebi have missed out twice. They have been unable to find a place in either of the two “worlds”.

After Aebi’s exclusion from the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina, he continued to paint and create lithographs, and he still featured in a few exhibitions of the so-called *arte nuevo*, also initiated by Aldo Pellegrini. However, he was never internationally recognised and never had a breakthrough. With the political shifts in Argentina in the mid-1950s – the overthrow of President Juan Perón by the self-proclaimed Revolución Libertadora – major changes in the cultural landscape became apparent. In 1955, Jorge Romero Brest was appointed director of the Museo de Bellas Artes (the public museum for fine arts in Buenos Aires), which made him even more influential in the Argentinian art scene. From 1961 onwards he was in charge of the newly-founded Centro de Artes Visuales at the Torcuato di Tella Institute, which functioned as the leading institution of contemporary art in Argentina. Tomás Maldonado emigrated to Europe in 1955 and became a lecturer for Max Bill and later director at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. The cultural-political changes in Argentina were accompanied by the establishment of new institutions, such as the Museo de Arte Moderno which was founded in 1956 on the initiative of Rafael Squirru. Although Squirru had different curatorial views from Romero Brest and included the works of figurative artists in his first
the name Hans or Juan Aebi no longer played a significant role in the art scene of Buenos Aires. As Aebi’s financial situation and health grew worse, he returned to Switzerland in 1963 (fig. 6).

If, in Duncan’s words, “the primary needs of all great artists are fame and prestige” (Duncan 1993, 125), Juan Aebi was undoubtedly never a ‘great artist’. But fortunately, the discipline of art history is not limited to discovering only ‘great artists’ or continuing to entrench old tropes yet more deeply. Because history is always constructed, our discipline may take the liberty of recounting the stories of anti-heroes.

Notes

1 An anti-hero is defined as “the antithesis of a hero of the old-fashioned kind who was capable of heroic deeds, who was dashing, strong, brave and resourceful. […] The anti-hero is the man who is given the vocation of failure” (“Antihero”). I am referring here to Katharina Helm et al.’s anthology Künstlerhelden? Heroisierung und mediale Inszenierung von Malern, Bildhauern und Architekten (2015), which examines the way hero figures are constructed and how art historical canons emerge. This of course can also be applied to the reverse figure of the anti-hero.
The art historian Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, for example, has productively reformulated Kris and Kurz's arguments concerning the constructed character of the artist and the cult of genius (Schmidt-Linsenhoff 2004, 191–202).

Founded in 1902 by the Swiss painter Martha Stettler, the Baltic painter Alice Dannenberg and the Spanish painter Claudio Castelucho, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière was one of the best-known art academies in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century.

In a letter from January 1949 a friend wonders about Aebi's return address, because he thought he still lived in Paris. Letter from 'Hermann' to Aebi (unpublished correspondence, Private estate of Juan Aebi/Renate Kieser, 2 January 1949).

Juan Batlle Planas was one of the most important representatives of Surrealism in Argentina. Letter from Jaquillard to Aebi (unpublished correspondence, Private estate of Juan Aebi/Renate Kieser, 22 June 1948).

Editorial Atlántida is a publishing house and one of the biggest magazine publishers and distributors in Argentina, founded in 1912. Letter from Jaquillard to Aebi (unpublished correspondence, Private estate of Juan Aebi/Renate Kieser, 5 March 1949).

Frans van Riel (1879), a painter and printmaker who emigrated from Rome to Argentina in 1910, inaugurated the Galería Van Riel art gallery in 1915. In 1924, the Asociación Amigos del Arte began to operate on its premises. It was followed by Ver y Estimar, the Instituto de Arte Moderno and the first independent theatre in Buenos Aires.

The exact date of the exhibition is unclear but it must have taken place in 1949. Aebi's work Avenida de Mayo, which was shown there, was bought by Father Wildli, who published an article in the magazine Helvetia in 1949. Wildli writes that he had recently acquired the work and that it was now hanging in his house: clipped newspaper article (Helvetia, Private estate of Juan Aebi/Renate Kieser, 1949).


Letter from Jaquillard to Aebi (unpublished correspondence, Private estate of Juan Aebi/Renate Kieser, 2 February 1952).


For more information on Concrete Art in Argentina, see García 2011; García 2018.

In his introduction to the exhibition Pellegrini refers to Cubism and how it has undoubtedly led to abstract art as it exists today. Nevertheless, other schools such as Expressionism, Fauvism and especially Surrealism should not be forgotten as “precurors of today’s situation” (Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina 1952, n.p.).

The magazine Ver y Estimar, published between 1948 and 1955, was led by the influential Argentinian art critic Jorge Romero Brest. According to Andrea Giunta and Laura Malosetti Costa, the magazine served as a platform for international exchange and debates on new aesthetic values, negotiating problems and ideas of abstraction, social realism, modern art museums, prizes and international biennials, Argentinian and Latin American art (Giunta/Malosetti Costa 2005).

The magazine Nueva Visión was conceived as a discussion and distribution platform for concrete art, focusing on Latin American cultural urban centres such as Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, as well as on art events in European cities such as Zurich, Milan and Paris (García 2018; García 2017). For more information about Tomás Maldonado, see Gradowczyk 2008.


Letter from Dr. Jan van As (Oficina de Información Holandesa para América Latina = Dutch Information Office for Latin America) to H.F. Eschauzier (Hoofd Directie Voorlichting Buitenland, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken = Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Subject: planned exhibition of modern Argentinian art in the Netherlands (unpublished correspondence, Archiv Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 31 July 1952).


In the end, the following artists were listed in the exhibition catalogue: Miguel Ocampo, Alfredo Hlito, Tomas Maldonado, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Lidy Prati, Sarah Grilo, Rafael Onetto, Clorindo Testa. The sculptors Hlito and Iommi were not represented because the exhibition showed only paintings for
organisational reasons. Onetto and Testa were invited as new exponents, see Sandberg 1953.


25 My translation of: “Este reconocimiento internacional, cuya significación, por cierto, no pretendemos exagerar, prueba la madurez alcanzada en nuestro país por las tendencias más renovadoras del arte actual, en particular, por las abstractas y concretas, que son las dominantes en el grupo.” (Maldonado 1954, 36).

26 How rigorously the exhibition was planned and coordinated can be seen when examining the catalogue which features the letter as an alliterative symbol referring to the exhibition’s title (fig. 5).


31 To demonstrate this line of argument, I paradigmatically quote – and translate – the rejection of Hildebrand Gurlitt (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf): “What we need in Germany, I believe, is not less testimony to the fact that abstract art is gaining ground all over the world, but only the sources and stages of development that were never to be seen in our country.” Letter from Hildebrand Gurlitt to Willem Sandberg (unpublished correspondence, Archiv Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 16 October 1953).


