

Issues & Debates

Purity Is a Myth

**The Materiality of Concrete Art
from Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay**

Edited by
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Front cover: Judith Lauand (Brazilian, b. 1922). *Untitled*, 1954, detail.

See p. 93, fig. 2.

Back cover: Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguayan, 1874–1949). *Monumento*, 1944. See p. 19, fig. 7.

Frontispiece: Rhod Rothfuss (Uruguayan, 1920–69). *Cuadrilongo amarillo*, 1955, detail. See p. 31, fig. 2.

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PART II

GENERATIVE PROCESSES IN CONCRETE ART

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Irene V. Small

Cut, Fuse, Fissure: Planarity circa 1954

"All this research of mine began when I discovered the line that appears when two flat surfaces of the same color are laid touching." So commences *Livro-obra* (Book-work), the artist's book Lygia Clark began in 1964 and issued in 1983 to rehearse the path of her work from plane into space. This "discovery of the organic line" in 1954 is the first and most pivotal episode in this trajectory, and her description is accompanied by two interactive demonstrations. In the first, the reader manipulates one of two black tabs on the page's white surface to reveal the appearance and disappearance of the organic line at their juncture. In the second, the reader lifts a cardstock frame that shows how this line of space is activated within a pictorial composition, resulting in both the integration of the frame within the picture and the veritable rupture of the frame itself (fig. 1). Clark derived this *Livro-obra* composition from her 1954 painting *Quebra da moldura, composição no. 5* (Breaking the frame, composition no. 5), a work that has come to be seen as a point of origin for Clark's progression from concretism into neo-concretism (fig. 2). The book's schematization of the painting elegantly elucidates the core of the neo-concrete difference, namely, the interpenetration of work and space.

Yet *Quebra da moldura, composição no. 5* is more complex and equivocal than its graphic condensation in *Livro-obra*. Whereas the book relies on the opposition of black and white to convey the action of the organic line, the painting is rendered in gray, green, black, and rust. Moreover, these colors are applied by means of markedly distinct techniques, ranging from paint brushed on by hand (either mixed or directly from the tube) to paint diffused onto the surface by means of a spray gun.¹ In terms of geometric composition, the painted black line in the lower left of the canvas strikes a vertical and horizontal just shy of the frame's corresponding gray L, orchestrating the slightest compaction toward the

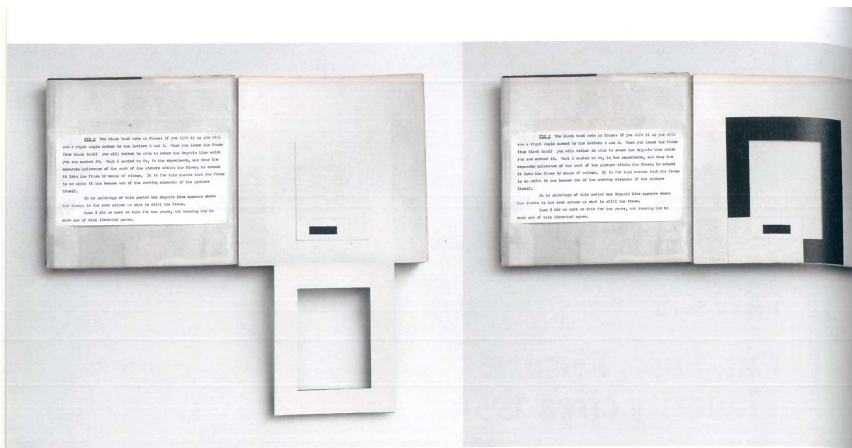
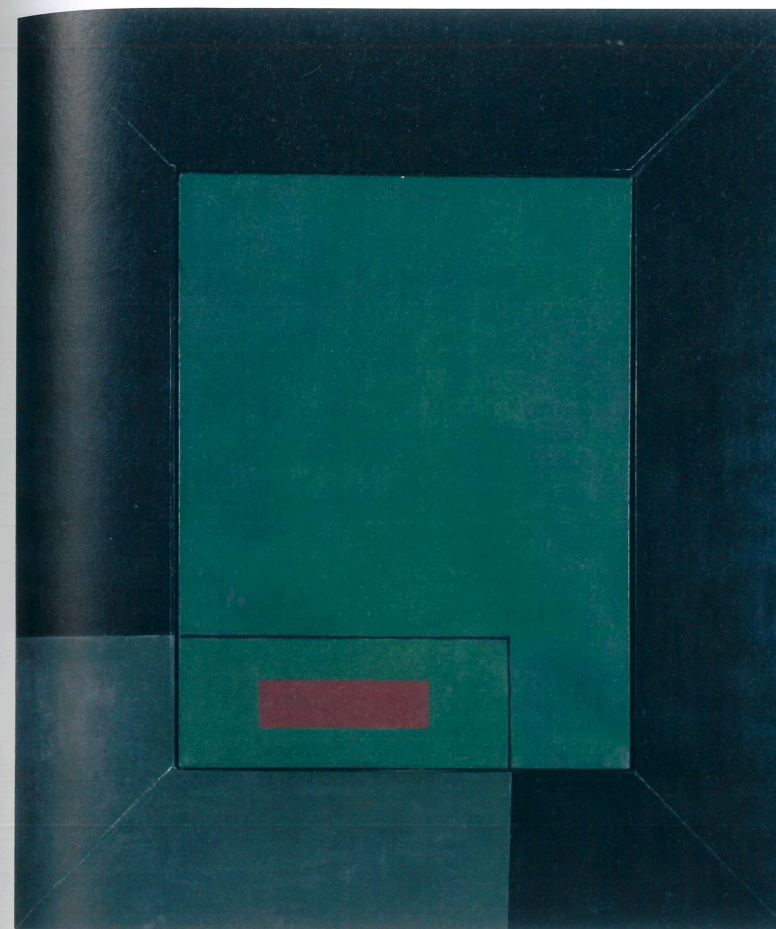


Fig. 1. Lygia Clark (Brazilian, 1920–88).
Livro-obra, original maquette, 1964–65, mixed media on paper, overall 21.9 × 21.9 × 3.8 cm. New York, Private collection.

Fig. 2. Lygia Clark (Brazilian, 1920–88).
Quebra da moldura (Breaking the Frame), *composição no. 5*, 1954, oil and oleoresin on canvas and wood, 106.5 × 91 × 2 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund.

painting's interior; a ghost of green haunts the sides of the work's frame at its top-right corner, where technical analysis by Pia Gottschaller has revealed that another green L shape lingers beneath the final coat of black paint.² As this analysis indicates, the intense layering of this same green paint beneath the gray L of the work's lower left corner suggests that Clark worked out and revised pictorial elements as she painted, rather than following a composition established in advance, as would become a central tenet in the burgeoning discourse of Brazilian concretism. Indeed, although *Quebra da moldura, composição no. 5* is frequently harnessed to illustrate the action of the organic line, in 1954 Clark had not yet named the operation and would not elaborate its ramifications for another two years.

In 1954 Clark exhibited *Quebra da moldura, composição no. 5* alongside four other works as part of the Brazilian representation at the Venice biennial (fig. 3). The paintings were titled generically as compositions 1 through 5; the descriptive title *Quebra da moldura* appears to have been appended at a later date to *Composição no. 4* and *Composição no. 5*, with the numbers themselves likely a holdover from the Venice grouping. Compositions 1 through 3 of the group, which appear second, third, and fifth from the doorway in the installation photograph, display a modular gridded structure inflected by multicolor bands that either project as figures or are absorbed as ground, depending on the color and subdivision of the interacting segments.³ The proportions of the black tabs on the top left and lower right of the painting known as *Quebra da moldura no. 4* (first from the doorway) indicate that Clark may have structured her canvas according to a similar such grid. But in this painting, her interest was no longer confined to the pictorial nature of figure–ground relations, but the





| Fig. 3. Brazilian representation, 27th Venice biennial, 1954, showing Lygia Clark's works to right of doorway. São Paulo Bienal Archives.

corresponding materiality of field, mark, and the new factor of a line of space between painting and frame. In this fourth work, the pictorial composition expands from the canvas onto the wooden frame on the lower right side. But it is only with the fifth painting in the Venice grouping—*Quebra da moldura, composição no. 5* (fourth from the doorway)—that the chromatic proximity between the green canvas and the gray of the framing L allows the channel of space to emerge as a pictorial element as such. This phenomenon is absorbed within the work's composition, yielding the black outline of a rectangle as the junctural outgrowth of real and depicted delineation.

In this chapter, I am concerned with the organic line in the liminal period around 1954, in which the phenomenon was still an imminent, rather than articulated, concept. The Venice biennial is a key site of examination, for it was here that Clark first displayed works that incorporated the device. This biennial also served as a meeting ground, if not for the artists themselves then for a constellation of experiments by Clark, Lucio Fontana, Ivan Serpa, and Jean (Hans) Arp, all concerning the dimensionality of the plane. Interrogating this constellation allows us to

comprehend the distinctiveness and direction of Clark's own investigations as they played out in the next two years. Yet apart from Serpa, who was likewise part of the Brazilian representation, the links between Clark and these artists remain symptomatically weak. Unlike Roberto Burle Marx or Piet Mondrian, whom Clark acknowledged as direct influences, or Max Bill, whose programmatic statements regarding concrete art were highly visible in Brazil, Fontana and Arp relate to Clark through a deep but nebulous reticulum of aesthetic and intellectual exchange.

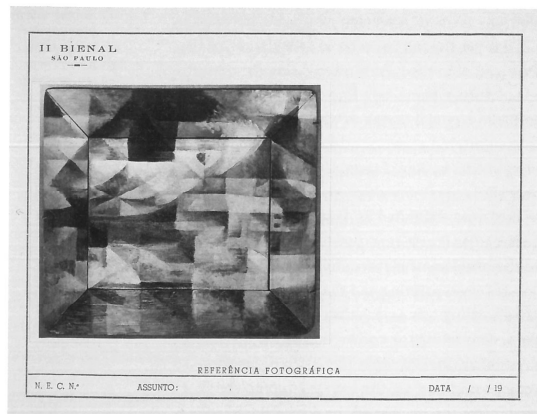
As with any historiographic intervention, excavating links within this reticulum results in new cartographies, thickening certain nexuses while leaving others aside. As a method, however, attending to weak links is different in kind to the charting of genealogies, anxieties of influence, strong misreadings, and the like. Weak links convey the existence of missed connections, fragmented networks, and artistic utterances unheard because they are separated by space. They do not establish chains of causality so much as horizons of possibility. Moreover, if we simply attempt to strengthen weak links, we lose the ability to think seriously about the geopolitical, socioeconomic, and historiographic fissures that structure the singularity of these connections—or missed connections—in the first place. Such fissures are part and parcel of the geopolitics of modernity, understood in its most devastatingly expansive sense as an apparatus for the unequal distribution and circulation of power. Precisely for this reason, however, such fissures also form possible lines of flight. In what follows, then, I move between both robust and fragile connections, navigating the intensities of their dormant, latent, and probable potentialities, remembering all the while that Clark's organic line is nothing if not a weak link: a void, a caesura that conjugates by virtue of its own lack.

In retrospect, three exhibitions seemed to precipitate Clark's arrival at the material expression, if not yet the full conceptual articulation, of the organic line at the Venice biennial in 1954. Each offered singular opportunities to formulate what a picture, a plane, or a format might be.

At the second São Paulo biennial (1953), in which she participated, Clark would have encountered a special exhibition of Mondrian's work; irregular frame experiments by Raúl Lozza, Gyula Kosice, and Martín Blazsko; and Robert Delaunay's *Simultaneous Windows onto the City (1st Part, 2nd Motif, 1st Replica)*, 1912, exhibited as *As janelas* (The windows). Delaunay's work and the irregular frame experiments of the Argentine group directly addressed the problem of picture and structure, specifically the traditional association between painting and the pictorial illusion of the window. Rather than battling this association, Delaunay made the two entirely coincident, converting the convention of the window into a site of perceptual, painterly investigation (fig. 4). In *As janelas*, Delaunay stretched his composition across the canvas to completely cover the frame. In several instances, he aligned the pictorial grid with

Fig. 4. Robert Delaunay (French, 1885–1941). Exhibition record for *Simultaneous Windows onto the City* (1st part, 2nd Motif, 1st Replica), 1912, exhibited as *As janelas* in the second São Paulo biennial, 1953. São Paulo Biennial Archives.

Fig. 5. Argentine representation at the second São Paulo biennial, 1953, including works by Raúl Lozza and Martín Blaszkó, from *Arte Madi universal* 7/8 (1954), 31.

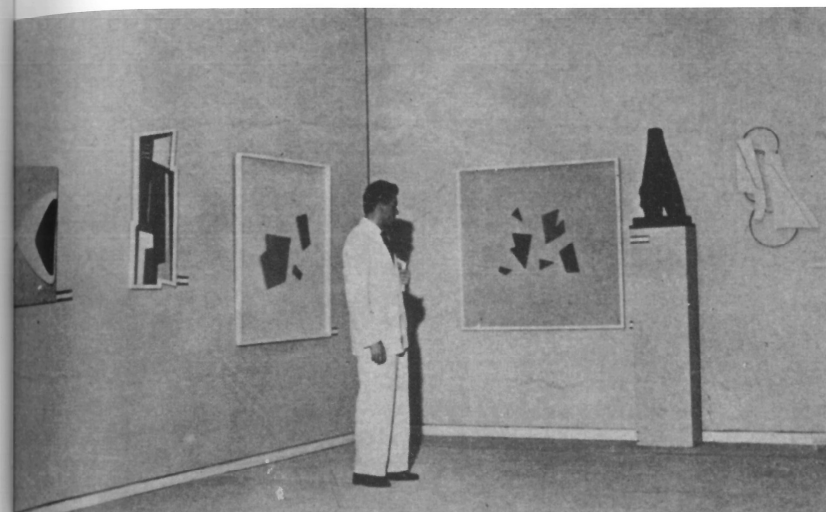


the architecture of the frame, but in others, he disregarded it, extending a swatch of blue over a diagonal miter, for instance, or elongating shapes so they spanned the gap between painting and frame. Such microadjustments both reinforce and dissolve the frame, frustrating assumptions of how we look through a window or onto a surface.⁴ Delaunay's beveled frame intensifies this contradiction, as it recedes from the canvas toward the wall, rather than the reverse. This convexity refuses spatial recession and representational fragmentation inscribed within the Western tradition of the framed picture. And yet the parceled surface that flows across canvas and frame also flattens this materiality. The frame's beveling is all but impossible to detect in reproduction, and for several observers (including possibly Delaunay himself, who did not pursue either the format or the line of space), this chromatic faceting surmounted the work's physicality altogether. As Jorge Romero Brest noted of the painting in 1952, "every plane acquires its physiognomy by means of color, and not by line-limit that disappears along the gradient."⁵

That Brest would comprehend the "line-limit" of space in Delaunay's work as disappearing, rather than appearing, as Clark would soon observe in relation to her own work, is significant. But perhaps it is not surprising, since responses to the problem of pictorial illusion had arrived at such different conclusions in the Río de la Plata region of Brest's native Argentina and Uruguay. As María Amalia García and others have extensively analyzed, in the wake of the single-issue publication *Arturo* in Buenos Aires in 1944, groups such as Asociación Arte Concreto-Inventiva (AACI) and Arte Madi explored irregular, cut-out, or shaped frames as a way of dispensing with the residues of pictorial illusion that accompanied what the painter and theorist Tomás Maldonado called

the "containing organism" of the traditional orthogonal canvas.⁶ By 1953 many of these protagonists had reached the conclusion that the figure-ground opposition that anchored pictorial illusion was inevitable, and they had already returned to the orthogonal frame. The examples on display in São Paulo in 1953 are therefore not representative of the apex of experimentation around the irregular frame.

But this very illegibility or irresolution may well have been productive, too. Lozza, for example, contributed two co-planals, that is, constellations of flat, colored shapes fully permeated by space, which, at least theoretically, abolished the old picture plane by installing forms directly against the wall. Yet in order both to control the chromatic



relation between these forms and the wall and to allow their compositions to physically circulate, Lozza and others resorted to a portable mural format. As an installation photograph from the São Paulo biennial suggests, however, this format reinstated not only the ground plane of the picture but also another version of the orthogonal frame (fig. 5). Thus, if Clark encountered these works in São Paulo in 1953, she most likely would have attended not to the shape of their ostensible formats but to the space that flowed within them.

The difference is worth bearing in mind, for in May the following year, when invited to participate in the III Salão da Arte Moderna, Clark contributed a *Quadro objeto*, consisting of two empty frames mounted

on the wall (fig. 6).⁷ This particular salon was known as the *Salão preto e branco* (Black and white salon) because artists submitted works deprived of color in protest of the high tariffs the government had recently imposed on imported artists' paints. While most artists rendered compositions typical of their own style in black-and-white, Clark simply laid bare the apparatus of art itself. Her provocation was thus an explicit statement of the actuality of artists' materials. As I have elaborated elsewhere, this was nothing less than an intervention within the Brazilian developmentalist project and the unequal mapping of the geopolitics of modernization.⁸ In revealing the nuts and bolts of both making and presentation, Clark's contribution was also a radical intervention within a modernist genealogy that investigated the pictoriality of the plane vis-à-vis its material architecture. For this reason, the lost protest of *Quadro objeto* is perhaps the single most important precursor to Clark's concept of breaking the frame.⁹

A photograph of the installation shows that Clark attached a thin white frame to a larger and thicker black frame, shifting the smaller frame off center. As a result, the white frame overlaps with the black frame along portions of its bottom and right sides, but cuts into the empty white of the wall as if a compositional element. Two rectangular tabs, possibly delineated with white and black tape, likewise appear appended to the black frame and within the space enclosed by the white frame. The piece thus operates at three, if not four, physical levels, and includes the slice of space beneath the white frame, where it hovers above the interior segment of the wall. Here, in short, was an idiosyncratic picture-object in which planarity itself must be conceived in terms of both matter and space.

In order to comprehend the implications of such a conception, it is helpful to return to the 1953 São Paulo biennial, this time to Mondrian, who had a profound impact on Clark (fig. 7). In 1959, the same year as the "Manifesto Neoconcreto," Clark wrote a letter to the critic Luiz Almeida Cunha describing various phases of the Dutch artist's work, from the nucleic expansion of his compositions of the teens to his final process of the *despojamento* ("stripping down" or "laying bare") of the painterly surface along horizontal and vertical axes. Clark also distinguished her recent experiments from the later phases of Mondrian's work. Rather than resorting to "repetition," as Mondrian did, Clark wrote, "I 'virtually' invert the surface itself, working with its limit, which I call the 'thread of space.'" Here it appears that Clark understands Mondrian's introduction of doubled and colored lines as intensifying the "lines of construction" from which a surface is built up or destroyed. The model of the plane in Mondrian's later work, in other words, is something like a virtual textile made of overlapping horizontal and vertical filaments. Rather than approaching this resulting surface pictorially and atomizing it via repetition, Clark suggests, she treats it materially, thereby revealing the thickness of the line's edge in space, and, conversely, the thickness of space



Fig. 6. "Salão Preto e Branco" from *Correio da Manhã*, 2 June 1954, showing *Quadro objeto* by Lygia Clark, at right.

Fig. 7. The Mondrian room at the second São Paulo biennial, 1953.



as a line. Further, whereas Mondrian “subdivides” the surface beginning from its “very border,” Clark wrote, “I add these elements [surface and border] and obtain the inverse: ‘modulated space’ is born from this sum and the surface is the logical consequence of the sum of the units.”¹⁰ In other words, if Mondrian commenced from the totality of the surface and subdivides it from edge to edge, Clark arrived at the surface as the additive result of multiple surfaces and edges. In short, the surface is the composite unity of heterogeneous units: a space “modulated” according to its material topography.

Clark’s insights pivot on the character of the plane, namely, her works’ capacity to materialize a quality of modulation—the weaving together of segments of matter and space—that remained virtual in Mondrian. This term *modulated* would become key to Clark’s works a few years later (as in her *Superfícies moduladas* and *Planos em superfície modulada* series). As we can already see, the term signals a period of discourse of the module, that is, a standardized geometric unit that, through repetition and addition, forms a larger assembly or structure. But it also entails a principle of variation or adjustment that implies a continuity between differences as much as the recurrence of a fixed entity. Here the paradigm of a cloth or textile is key. In his classic treatise *De pictura*, Leon Battista Alberti, like Clark, describes a surface as an amalgamate rather than continuous entity: “If more lines stick together like close threads in a cloth, they will make a surface.”¹¹ But whereas Alberti’s formulation expresses the minimal condition for a surface in terms of the proximity and quantity of threads, Clark forgoes the notion that surface would necessarily consist of positive matter. Her interest was not that threads form a surface but that threads and space form a surface, and that the very quality of line once synonymous with thread might apply to space itself.

In July 1954 the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro held an exhibition of the French tapestry artist Jean Lurçat. Clark retained an article about the exhibition in her personal papers and appears to have shared with Lurçat a certain language about the collaborative nature of art and architecture that hinged on the expressive potential of surface.¹² But perhaps most interesting is the possibility that, in the wake of Clark’s firsthand exposure to Mondrian, textiles might have become a model for thinking through her burgeoning concept of the organic line. Indeed, in 1956, in her first public exposition on the phenomenon, Clark referred to the seams of clothing as an instance of how one might mobilize the organic line, repeating the example in an interview in 1958.¹³ To this end, the organic line emerged as a means for comprehending the porosity of a surface (like a tapestry, it is woven and thus penetrated by space), as well as its extensibility, since the organic line, conceived as a seam, allows discrete segments to be bound together, thereby modulating the whole. As architect and critic Gottfried Semper wrote, the seam is “a prime axiom for artistic practice” in that it allows for the aesthetic acknowledgment of

the fact that composite entities are necessarily joined.¹⁴ The binding and linking quality of the seam thus inheres in the pure mechanics of technics and the primal symbolism of art alike. It is precisely the irreducible otherness of the interstice, in short, that allows for the reflexive enactment of material embodiment.

All of this, then, is the implicit backdrop to Clark’s participation in the 1954 Venice biennial, where the organic line made its first appearance, unannounced and unnamed. No known documents indicate that Clark traveled to Venice, but at the very least she saw the catalog, and the rich variety of propositions about what a plane or surface might be or do concatenated there and in the exhibition offer critical foils for Clark’s concept of the organic line as it solidified over the next two years.

Alongside Clark in the Brazilian representation, for example, was a series of collages made by the influential art educator Ivan Serpa, who would exhibit them again with Clark as part of the Grupo Frente exhibition of 1955 (fig. 8). Serpa worked as a restorer of rare books and manuscripts at the Biblioteca Nacional and, starting in 1953, began using a press at the library to make collages in which up to ten layers of thin Japanese paper were bound together with heat-activated cellulose acetate.¹⁵ Rather than laminating a document between acetate layers (a technique common among library conservators at the time), Serpa layered the acetate between contiguous layers of paper, titling the works after the process, *Colagens sob calor e pressão*. A contemporary catalog notes that this technique made the resulting configuration more stable and resistant to

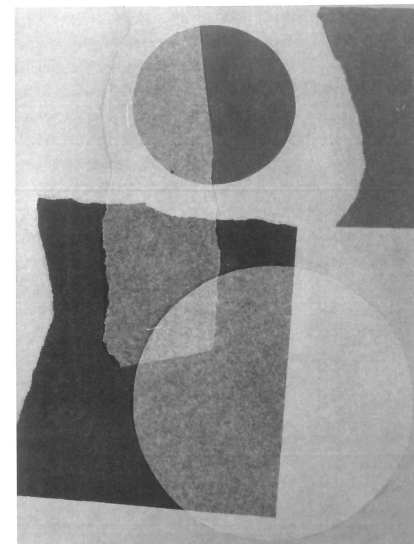
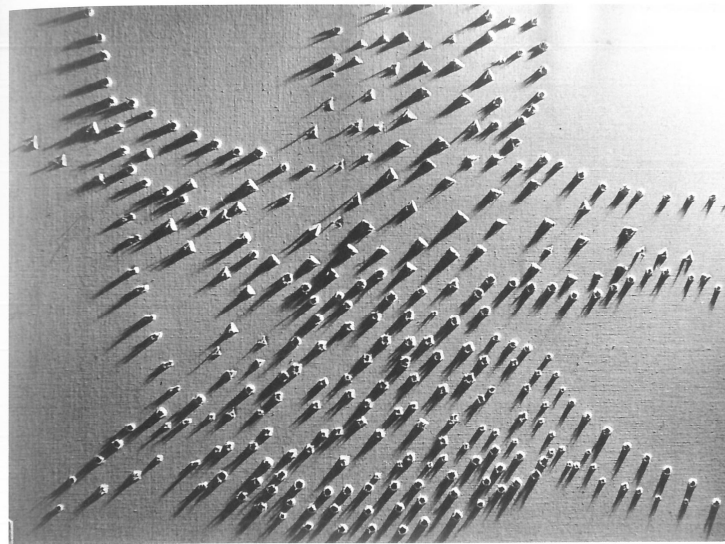


Fig. 8. Ivan Serpa (Brazilian, 1923–73). *Colagem sob calor e pressão*, 1954, shown in the 27th Venice biennial, 1954. Archives of Venice Biennale.

environmental changes such as humidity or temperature.¹⁶ At a material level, the collages eliminated spatial intervals through the bonding action of the melted cellulose. Aesthetically, the resulting compositions of floating, overlapping shapes often make it impossible to discern which layer lies on top of another, despite their varying textures. We know there is a material multiplicity to the plane, but the fusion of layers renders them so that they are experienced as one. In contrast to the material heterogeneity and bas-relief of a usual collage, Serpa's method merged separate elements into a single ultra-flat plane.

To the degree that the translucency of the papers further dematerialized this plane, Serpa's collages approximate the evanescence of a veil of colored light. The critic Mário Pedrosa described this effect as "spectral filmic color" unfolding within a "purely imaginary space."¹⁷ This insubstantiality—even idealization—is likewise borne by Serpa's method, which involved mocking up a composition twice (the second time from memory) in order to distill the essence of a given arrangement. If we recall that Serpa's process has origins in a conservation technique—the isolation of individual documents by means of the binding action of an exterior protective layer—his collages convert the interiority of the ostensible document into a combinatory and infinitely connective exterior surface. In short, his collages imagine the seamless integration of informational units; those units are now conceived within the pure aesthetic value of color, texture, and shape.

Nothing could be further from Fontana's *Concetti spaziali*, exhibited as part of the Italian representation at Venice.¹⁸ These belonged to the *Buchi* (Holes) series Fontana had begun in 1949, in which the artist punctured the paper or canvas support from the recto and sometimes verso of the plane, resulting in a constellation of lesions that singularize and dimensionalize an otherwise neutral surface. This effect is particularly pronounced in raking light photographs such as the one included in the Venice catalog (fig. 9). In these images, the perforations throw long shadows onto the support, making visible the real rather than the representational action of their sculptural irruptions. But they have another effect as well, namely to reveal the canvas "as a membrane, as a surface permeable from both sides," as Gottschaller has put it.¹⁹ Not only does this lay waste to the presumption that aesthetic space is solely coincident with the plane, it opens up a view onto the actual space behind it. For Fontana, this visual access, minimal with the *Buchi* but intensified with the slashing cuts of the *Tagli* (Cuts) he began in 1958, provided entry to an "infinite dimension" beyond the painting.²⁰ To this degree, this space was not literal but cosmic, metaphoric. Perhaps this is why the Brazilian critic Ferreira Gullar, after seeing the *Tagli* at the São Paulo biennial of 1959, wrote that they were "curious, bizarre, and extravagant objects," amounting to a bold, though ultimately "naïve" and "retardaire attempt to destroy the fictitious character of pictorial space through the introduction within



of a real cut."²¹ Not only was the "infinite space" behind the cut still fictitious, Gullar concluded, but the work failed to transcend the objectness at its base. This throws into relief the distinctiveness of Serpa's collages. For if Fontana conceived of space as metaphorically infinite, Serpa's interest was in the infinite linkage and fusion of matter.

That Fontana's works equivocated about the relations between metaphoric and actual space is particularly fascinating in light of the artist's patchy relation to the Río de la Plata artists. Born in Argentina and raised in Italy, Fontana was based in Buenos Aires and was close friends with Maldonado and other proponents of vanguard abstraction between 1945 and 1947, precisely those years in which the irregular frame—its concrete character, ability to stave off representation, and radical aesthetic and social potential—were most hotly debated.²² Recent scholarship has indicated that while Fontana did not join any of the groups associated with the irregular frame, the force of their debates impelled his own turn toward spatial and material experimentation.²³ Madí artists held their second exhibition in October 1946 at the Escuela Altamira, the short-lived school that Fontana co-founded earlier that year, and in 1953, writing to Kosice from Italy, he commented that the Madí movement "is for me the best in the world. . . . [It] is the most advanced in everything."²⁴ Several commentators have suggested that the *Manifiesto Blanco*, which Fontana

Fig. 9. Lucio Fontana (Italian, 1899–1968). *Concetto spaziale*, 1952, illustrated in the catalog of the 27th Venice biennial, 1954. Archives of Venice Biennale.

and his students launched the month after the *Madí* exhibition in 1946, responded rhetorically to vanguardism established by such artists, and may even reference elements of their programs.²⁵ This manifesto, in turn, appears to have catalyzed Fontana's subsequent Spatialist manifestos, as well as the appearance of the *Buchi*, the spatial ruptures of which were otherwise unprecedented in his work.²⁶

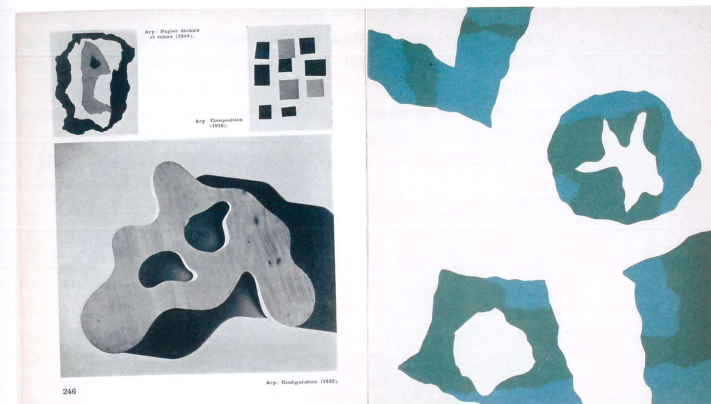
While Clark was not privy to such details, at stake, nevertheless, were the questions of, first, how one orchestrates an irruption of actual space within and beyond the plane and, second, how one conceives of this space's character upon its emergence. Fontana remained wholly committed to the authorial mark of puncturing, incising, and lacerating the plane, gestures Giampiero Giani noted in the 1954 biennial catalog.²⁷ For Clark, by contrast, the organic line was a found phenomenon—a line devoid of mark—and her practice between 1954 and 1956 entailed exploring the implications of this authorial withdrawal. Thus, whereas Giani described Fontana's void as “the deprivation of form,” Clark's fissure is a space deprived not of form but of mark, thereby disrupting the dualistic register of life/death, figure/ground, form/void upon which Giani's interpretation unfolds.²⁸ Likewise, whereas the varying strands of concrete art that both Fontana and Clark may have encountered all sought to abolish metaphoric space, Fontana remained dedicated to a delirious, if vague, register of the infinite, an ethos pictorially reiterated on the very surfaces of his canvases, with their constellations of holes and gaping black cavities.²⁹ For her part, Clark's developing notion of the organic conformed neither to this abstract spatial topos nor the relentless factuality espoused by figures such as Bill in the early to mid-1950s.

Here Arp emerges as a fruitful counterpoint, providing an intriguing alternative to conventional genealogies of Brazilian concretism.³⁰ Clark's personal documents indicate that Arp expressed interest in her solo exhibition in Paris in 1952, held after the Brazilian artist's two-year sojourn in that city, and at some point acquired one or more works by her as well.³¹ Indeed, having missed both Bill's 1950 solo exhibition at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the highly remarked prize at the first São Paulo biennial of 1951 due to this Parisian sojourn, it is likely that Clark's initial point of reference for the idea of a concrete art would have followed from Michel Seuphor's well-known 1949–50 catalog of his exhibition *L'art abstrait: Ses origines, ses premiers maîtres* (fig. 10). In the catalog, Seuphor reproduced a section from Theo van Doesburg's 1930 formulations of *Art Concret*, in which the Dutch artist noted that both the attempt to abstract art from nature and the idea of distinct “artistic” and “natural” forms were obsolete.³² But Seuphor also noted Arp's distinct formulation: “I find a painting or a sculpture that doesn't take an object for its model as concrete and sensual as a leaf or a stone.”³³

That Arp would make recourse to the organic and mineralogical in order to explicate the concrete already indicates his distinction from the

quasi-rationalistic formulations Bill would proselytize in Brazil. Already predisposed to the vital quality of the plane as a result of her studies with the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, Clark would have found ample support in Arp, who wrote, “We want to produce like a plant produces fruit, and not reproduce. We want to produce directly and not by way of an intermediary. Since this art doesn't have the slightest trace of abstraction, we name it: concrete art.”³⁴ Arp's formulation echoes those of his friend and one-time collaborator, the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, who wrote in 1917 that the poet should “make a poem as nature makes a tree.”³⁵ Huidobro was likewise an inspiration for the Uruguayan painter Rhod Rothfuss when he first formulated the necessity of the irreg-

Fig. 10. Hans Arp (French, 1886–1966). Works illustrated in Michel Seuphor, *L'art abstrait: Ses origines, ses premiers maîtres* (Paris: Maeght, 1950), 246–47.

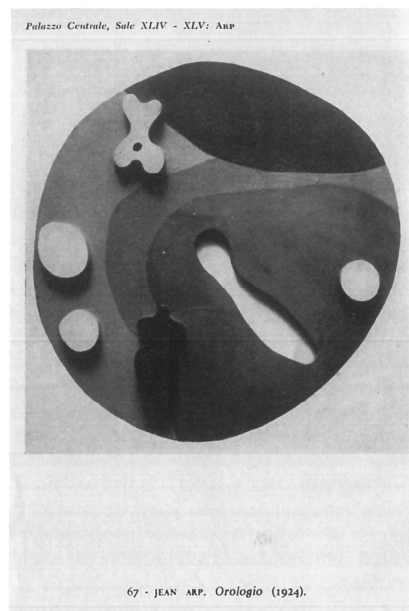


ular frame in *Arturo: Revista de artes abstractas* in 1944. Yet the appeal to the natural or biological and the imperative to establish a wholly autonomous work of art were strikingly unresolved in the Río de la Plata discourse around the irregular frame. While Huidobro argued that art should not imitate nature's outer “appearances” but act according to its “constructive laws,” Maldonado initially rejected the traditional frame because it functioned as what he called a “containing organism.”³⁶ Yet didn't an organism's containment offer the very self-sufficiency the artists desired?

The cut-out wooden reliefs Arp exhibited in Venice offer fortuitous insight here. For if Rothfuss and Maldonado had each objected to the work of art as a “fragment” of a presumed continuity, Arp looked precisely to the fragment in order to formulate a concept of edge. After all, what were these reliefs, their globular-shaped edges carefully calibrated to secure chromatic continuity from one section to the next, if not precisely “containing organisms,” as Maldonado had once termed the problem

Fig. 11. Hans Arp
(French, 1886–1966).
Orologio (Clock),
1924, illustrated in
the catalog of the 27th
Venice biennial, 1954.

of the frame? In this sense, the “perfection of an organic form,” as Michel Seuphor described Arp’s works in the Venice catalog, refers not so much to the undulating character of a given relief’s contours as to its ability to maintain its integrity as something like a body, despite its permeability to the space around, and sometimes within, the work itself.³⁷ Consider Arp’s *Orologio*, which won the prize for sculpture in Venice in 1954 and was illustrated in the exhibition catalog (fig. 11).³⁸ Here the circular form of the work’s titular reference is delicately misshapen, its surface studded with painted wooden nodules that rise in relief, their placement toward the edges of the tondo seemingly propelled by veils of flat color, in turn driven by a tubular void which opens through to the wall. This void functions as the memory of the clock’s hand, and it both roots the relief’s action and directs it transversely, from the thickness of the relief’s interior edge to the shadows it projects on the wall. Thus, unlike the empty, infinite space to which Fontana’s punctures and slashes allude, the space admitted into Arp’s relief is metaphoric not in its quality as space but in its pictorial action within the economy of the artwork as a whole. The degree to which the relief’s tubular void appears to motivate this economy, moreover, suggests that this action, while metaphoric, nevertheless has real effects.



Arp wrote of frames and pedestals as “useless crutches” because his works asserted sufficient autonomy, or concreteness, on their own.³⁹ Thus, while the thick sedimentation of vertical slabs in his reliefs enacts an opposing model to Serpa’s orchestration of a super flat, horizontal plane, both practices remained deeply invested in the integrative capacity of the work of art. For Arp, the cut and its resulting edge brought the plane or figure into actualized dimensionality, allowing it to join other such surfaces in order to articulate a body that might “suffice unto itself.” Serpa’s achievement in flattening out the infrathin space interleaved between his sheets of paper, meanwhile, was a material plane so paradoxically dematerialized that its colored elements, as Pedrosa put it, were “freed of their immemorial association with objects”⁴⁰—an autonomy of material form, in Arp’s case, and formal content, in Serpa’s. Fontana’s lacerations of the plane are wholly distinct in both respects, for his interest was in breaching the self-sufficiency of the work of art as a material and aesthetic construct. And if Fontana’s accompanying formulation of space was inadequately theorized—on the one hand, actualized and material, on the other, metaphoric and ultimately pictorial—this space nevertheless troubled the very conceit of an art object bound by an internally cohesive system.

A work of art’s frame signals the possibility of a coherent aesthetic system by securing its vulnerabilities and contradictions therein. Thus it is not surprising that Clark’s exploration of the organic line began with the frame, or more accurately, at the frame’s internal margins, where a liminal space that was neither infinite, pictorial, nor self-evident was propelled into action and view. Like the tubular void in Arp’s *Orologio*, Clark’s organic line participates within a larger compositional economy, extending graphic elements with nothing more than a spatial abyss. Yet whereas Arp’s void is fully integrated within his work’s pictorial logic, the organic line’s inextricability from the frame renders it by turns active and latent, surfacing as an operative element of the composition in selected areas but also retreating into an unrecognized and often unseen fixture in others. A literal shifter, it is a spatial void that refuses to consistently signal either rupture, like Fontana, or integration, like Arp or Serpa. If for Arp the cut was a means to draw the plane into a dimensional, quasi-corporeal materiality, Clark’s imperative, by contrast, was to render thick the ostensible emptiness of space. Indeed, whereas Serpa sought to fuse discrete elements into a single field, the organic line in *Quebra da moldura* no. 4 and *Quebra da moldura, composição* no. 5 decouples the heterogeneous units of an ostensibly singular plane, exposing the multiplicities of surface as well as structure, such that the plane can no longer be isolated from either its supporting or presenting apparatus. The infrathin space pressed out of Serpa’s collages thus thickens along the edges of Clark’s planes, dilating and contracting according to the material variability of canvas and frame along each point of their mutual articulation. The organic line

is a real-time effect of contiguous material elements, not unlike the shadows thrown by Fontana's *Buchi* or Arp's reliefs.⁴¹ Unlike these instances, however, Clark prioritized this collateral effect—parasitic, dependent, neither mark nor made—as the primary site of conceptual and aesthetic investigation.

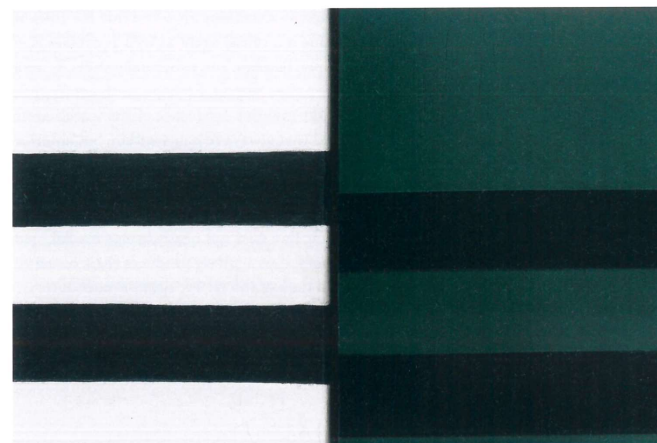
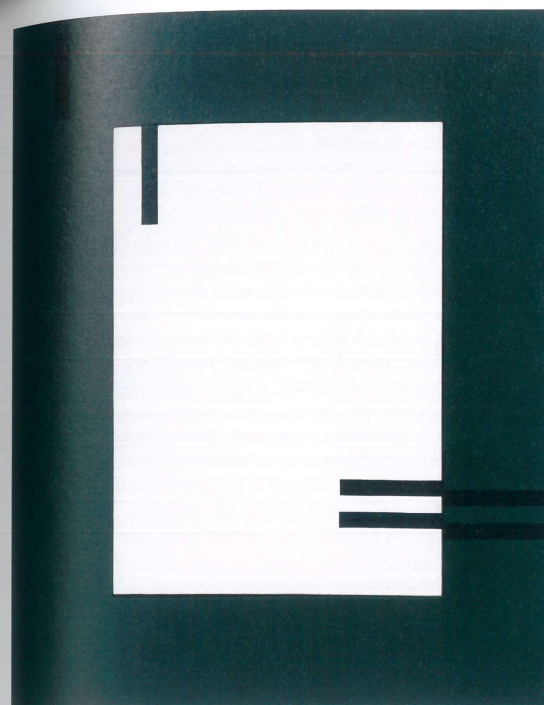
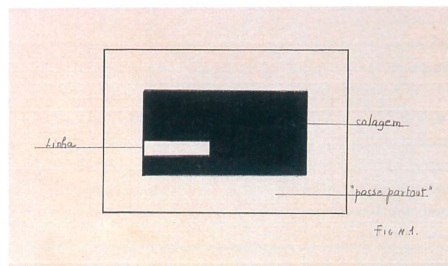
David Summers has observed that an entire epistemology of self-evidence is embedded within the metaphor of the plane, as witnessed in such concepts as explanation, explication, and display.⁴² To thicken and disrupt the continuity of the plane—to actualize it as a singular, embodied, and irregular entity—is to refuse this self-evidence. Commencing with the works Clark exhibited in Venice, the very agent of this disruption in Clark's work is the paradoxical thickness of space: a fugitive entity that must be sought again and again within the particular conditions of each work and its temporalized encounter. The ontology of the organic line inheres in this doubly negative status: a line that is not a line, whose very emergence entails an unraveling of the *a priori* existence of the plane.

When Clark began to publicly narrate her discovery of the organic line, she described it as emerging from the physical shifting of collage elements within a material field, which is to say during a temporal period in which the entity we might call "the work" is in process itself. The paintings now known as *Quebra da moldura* that followed from this collage experiment are thus complex articulations, as they attempt to both record an experimental process and enact its resulting phenomenon.⁴³ In a 1959 newspaper article recounting her artistic research, Clark included a diagram in which a white collage element placed on an otherwise black ground abuts the white border of the *passe-partout*, revealing the fissure of the organic line between them (fig. 12). The designation *p(reto) × b(lanco)* (b[lack] × w[hite]) of the painting *Quebra da moldura (p × b) versão 1* recalls this binary relation, even as the painting itself is composed of black, white, and green (figs. 13, 14). In the painting, black tabs recall Clark's original collage element and retain, in their doubling and misalignment, a memory of the physical movement by which the organic

Fig. 12. Diagram illustrating appearance of the organic line, from "Lygia Clark e o espaço concreto expressional: Depoimento concedido a Edelweiss Sarmento," *Jornal do Brasil*, Suplemento dominical, 11 July 1959, 1.

Fig. 13. Lygia Clark (Brazilian, 1920–88). *Quebra da moldura (p × b) versão 1*, 1954, enamel on wood, 110 × 88 cm. São Paulo, Collection Jones Bergamin.

Fig. 14. Lygia Clark (Brazilian, 1920–88). *Quebra da moldura (p × b) versão 1*, 1954 (detail from right), enamel on wood, 110 × 88 cm. São Paulo, Collection Jones Bergamin.



line was initially revealed. In the painting, however, these strips cluster not only at the interior edge of the canvas but along the interior and exterior edges of the surrounding frame in order to signal the torquing of the work-frame relation. It is impossible to separate the two elements; indeed, the elongated strips on the canvas are nothing less than pictorial transfers of the measure of the frame itself.

The action of the organic line within this painting is at first opaque. For unlike Clark's diagram of her collage, the tabs do not generate the optical appearance of a line as an interruption of a chromatic field. Rather, they simply direct our attention to the void that lies between the canvas and frame. Here, in this caesura, the physicality of both elements comes into view, as both the black tabs and the base color of white or green turn the corner of the surfaces, showing the dimensionality of their corresponding planes. But if edge is continuous with surface, it also links recto to verso, the face of a painting with its hidden back. Unlike in the strangely autonomous bodies of Arp's reliefs, however, Clark's edges refuse closure. For while we can imagine the black tabs wrapping around the canvas from front to back, much like string around a package, this circularity does not account for the migration of the tabs to the frame, where they similarly wrap from front to back only to reappear, dislocated, on the painting's face. Clark's model of surface is thus not the looped enclosure of skin but a recursively generated topology that turns upon the void of the organic line.

In each painting of the *Quebra da moldura* series, the natural dilation, contraction, and swelling of wood and canvas result in clefts of space that are widely variable, squeezed to a sliver in some places and widened to a yawning gap in others. This reveals the innate contingency of the organic line: it is a phenomenon that is entirely dependent on adjoining matter to gain shape. But Clark's rendering of the black tabs of *Quebra da moldura* (*p×b*) versão 1—their doubling, displacement, and topological dimension—signals something else, too: that the thickness and plasticity of the organic line is a causal agent as well. It presses elements out of alignment, holds open fissures, and continually shifts its action and visibility as it literally passes *partout*. Perhaps most significantly, the organic line disrupts the putative coherence of the work's aesthetic content with a spatial void that always remains within, but anterior to, its form. The organic line is the willful, negative by-product of making. It is thus deeply appropriate that the concept emerges from a transmedial territory marked by the concatenated materialities of painting, paper, wood, and collage. For the organic line does not neatly bridge medial, spatial, or compositional differences; it recursively produces their constitutive misregistration in the real time of the viewer's spatial encounter.

Notes

I am grateful to Pia Gottschaller and Zanna Gilbert for many generous discussions about the work of Lygia Clark and others over the course of several visits to the Getty Research Institute in 2016 and 2017. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

1 See Pia Gottschaller, "Examination Record," Lygia Clark, *Composição no. 5* (from the *Quebra da moldura* series), *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, unpublished document.

2 Gottschaller, "Examination Record." See also Gottschaller, "Making Concrete Art," in Pia Gottschaller et al., eds., *Making Art Concrete: Brazilian and Argentine Art from the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and Getty Research Institute, 2017), 25–59.

3 These three other paintings are currently known as *Composição 1* (1954), *Composição 2* (1954), and *Untitled* (1952).

4 Gordon Hughes, *Resisting Abstraction: Robert Delaunay and Vision in the Face of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 51.

5 Jorge Romero Brest, *La pintura europea contemporánea 1900–1950* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1952), 154.

6 Tomás Maldonado, "Lo abstracto y lo concreto en el arte moderno," *Arte Concreto-Invencción 1* (August 1946): 5–7. See María Amalia García, *Abstract Crossings: Cultural Exchange between Argentina and Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); Mónica Amor, *Theories of the Non-Object: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela 1944–1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); and Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

7 The catalog lists her contribution as: "Ligia Clark—118 Quadro Objeto. Ministério da Educação e Cultura, III Salão Nacional de Arte Moderna, Catálogo, Serviço de Documentação, Rio de Janeiro—1954." On the strike, see *A Arte e Seus Materiais, Salão Preto e Branco: 3º Salão Nacional de Arte Moderna, 1954* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1985).

8 See my discussion of the salon in "Ready Constructible Color" in Hélio Oiticica: *Folding the Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

9 It is significant to note that the debate about artistic materials that catalyzed the protest lasted well past the actual exhibition, thus encompassing the period in which Clark would have conceivably constructed her *Quebra da moldura* works and sent them to the Venice Biennale. See for example "Os artistas marcham para a unidade," *Forma 3* (October 1954): n.p., which notes that a Brazilian delegate participated in the Primeiro Congresso Internacional de Artistas Plásticas, organized by an international advocacy group, in Venice in September that year.

10 Lygia Clark, "Carta a Luiz Almeida Cunha" [1959]. Rio de Janeiro, Archives, Associação "O Mundo de Lygia Clark" IV Documentos, A Diários, Diário 2.

11 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. Rocco Sinisgall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23.

12 "Tapeçaria, Arte Mural," *Forma 2* (August 1954): n.p.

13 Clark's 1956 lecture in Belo Horizonte was published in "Pintora mineira (Ligia Clark) descobre novas linhas orgânicas nas artes plásticas," *Diário de Minas*, 27 January 1957, n.p. See also "Lygia Clark busca pintura a expressão próprio espaço," *Folha da noite*, 22 September 1958.

14 Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004), 154.

- 15 On Serpa's work at the Biblioteca Nacional, see Hélio Márcio Dias Ferreira, ed., *Ivan Serpa* (Rio de Janeiro: Funartes, 2004). Mário Pedrosa notes that Serpa experimented for eight months before arriving at the technique; "Ivan Serpa expõe em Washington, E.U.A.," *Forma* 3 (October 1954): n.p.
- 16 *Ivan Serpa: Collage and Painting, August 17 to September 16, 1954*, exh. cat., Pan American Union, Washington, DC, n.p.
- 17 Mário Pedrosa, "Ivan Serpa expõe em Washington, E.U.A.," n.p. See also Pedrosa, "Serpa, mostra-despedida," *Jornal do Brasil*, 8 April 1958, reprinted in Otilia Arantes, ed., *Mário Pedrosa: Texto escolhidos*, vol. 3, *Academicos e modernos* (São Paulo: EdUSP, 1998) and "Grupo Frente" [1955], trans. and rpt. in Paulo Herkenhoff and Gloria Ferrera, eds., *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 269–72.
- 18 The works on display ranged in date from 1949 to 1952.
- 19 Pia Gottschaller, *Lucio Fontana: The Artist's Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012), 28.
- 20 Lucio Fontana, quoted in Enrico Crispolti, *Lucio Fontana, catalogo generale* (Milan: Electa, 1986), 19.
- 21 Ferreira Gullar, "Theory of the Non-Object," trans. Michael Asbury in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 172, translation modified.
- 22 Tomás Maldonado, interviewed by Gianceso Pietrantonio, in *Arte Abstracto Argentino: Arte Concreto-Invenção, Madi, Perceptismo* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2003), 23–24.
- 23 See Iria Candela, "Fontana's Odyssey," and Andrea Giunta, "The War Years: Fontana in Argentina," in *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), 15–27 and 41–49.
- 24 Lucio Fontana to Gyula Kosice, 3 February 1953, cited in Paulo Herkenhoff, *Lucio Fontana: A ótica do invisível*, exh. cat. (Milan: Charta, 2001), 145.
- 25 See, for example, Maldonado, interviewed by Pietrantonio in *Arte Abstracto Argentino*, 24.
- 26 See Fontana's *Primo manifesto dello Spazialismo*, released in 1947 and cosigned by Benjamin Joppolo, Giorgio Kaiserlian, and Milena Milani, and *Secondo manifesto dello Spazialismo* of 1948, cosigned with Gianni Dova, Benjamin Joppolo, Kaiserlian, and Antonio Tullier; see Enrico Crispolti, ed., *Fontana: Catalogo generale* (Milan: Electa, 1986), 133–36. See also Fontana's *Proposta per un regolamento* of 1951: Enrico Crispolti, ed., *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 1998), 172.
- 27 Giampiero Giani, "Lucio Fontana," in *La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Lombroso, 1954), 115.
- 28 Giani, "Lucio Fontana," 115.
- 29 Giani, "Lucio Fontana," 115.
- 30 On this possibility, see Heloisa Espada, "'Cher Maître': Lygia Clark and Hans Arp's Concept of Concrete Art," in Jana Teuscher and Loretta Württemberg, eds., *The Art of Hans Arp after 1945* (Berlin: Stiftung Arp e. V. Papers, 2017), 80–87.
- 31 Lygia Clark, "Biografia currículo português." Rio de Janeiro, Archives, Associação "O Mundo de Lygia Clark" V Documentos A. This document, which dates to around 1965, would seem to imply that the work(s) were acquired around the time of the 1952 exhibition. However, it is possible that they only entered Arp's personal collection in 1964, when the two artists met in Paris. As Espada notes, Clark sent Arp a copy of a 1963 exhibition catalog upon her return to Rio that year, along with a note that mentions that it was accompanied by one of her *Bicho* sculptures, in which he had expressed interest.

- 32 Michel Seuphor, *L'art abstrait: Ses origines, ses premiers maîtres* (Paris: Maeght, 1949), 13.
- 33 Seuphor, *L'art abstrait*, 13.
- 34 See Hans Arp, "Concrete Art" in *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Viking, 1972), 139. See also Hans Arp, "I Became More and More Removed from Aesthetics," 237–38, in the same volume. Notably, at least one of Arp's stone sculptures was on display in a collection exhibition at the temporary headquarters of the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro in 1953, on the occasion of the institution's one-year anniversary. See "Artes Plásticas," *Correio de manhã*, 22 January 1953, caderno 1, 11, which includes a quote from Arp expressing his interest in the generative capacity of the fragment.
- 35 Vicente Huidobro, "Prologue," *Horizon carré* [1917], Vicente Huidobro, *Square Horizon: Horizon carré, Poems*, trans. Tony Frazer (Bristol: Shearsman, 2019), 14.
- 36 As Huidobro wrote, "Nunca el hombre ha estado más cerca de la naturaleza, que ahora que no trata de imitarla en sus apariencias, sino haciendo como ella, imitándola en lo profundo de sus leyes constructivas, en la relación de un todo dentro del mecanismo de la producción de formas nuevas." Cited in Rhod Rothfuss, "El marco: Un problema de plástica actual," *Arturo: Revista de artes abstractas*, 1944, n.p.
- 37 Michel Seuphor, "Jean Arp," in *La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Lombroso, 1954), 228. On Arp's reliefs, see Tessa Paneth-Pollak's excellent study, "Definite Means: Arp's Cut-Outs, 1911–1930," PhD diss., Princeton University, 2015.
- 38 This was reported in the Brazilian newspapers; see for example "Prêmios da Bienal de Veneza," *Correio da manhã*, 22 June 1954, caderno 1, 11.
- 39 Arp, "I Became More and More Removed from Aesthetics," 237. Arp was writing under the pseudonym Alexandre Partens.
- 40 Mário Pedrosa, in *Ivan Serpa: Collage and Painting*, n.p.
- 41 In fact, Fontana eventually did not like the shadows thrown by these punctures, as they conferred a spatiality to the surface of the canvas rather than beyond it, as he wished. See Gottschaller, *Lucio Fontana: The Artist's Materials*, 29.
- 42 David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 349–50.
- 43 Indeed, while the paintings are usually translated as *Breaking the Frame* to emphasize their insurgent, transformational quality, the Portuguese is more equivocal, conveying as well the more straightforward description, *Break of the Frame*, and possibly the same phrase's imperative form.