Fighting Stereotypes: The Industrialist Aesthetic in María Freire's Concrete Production

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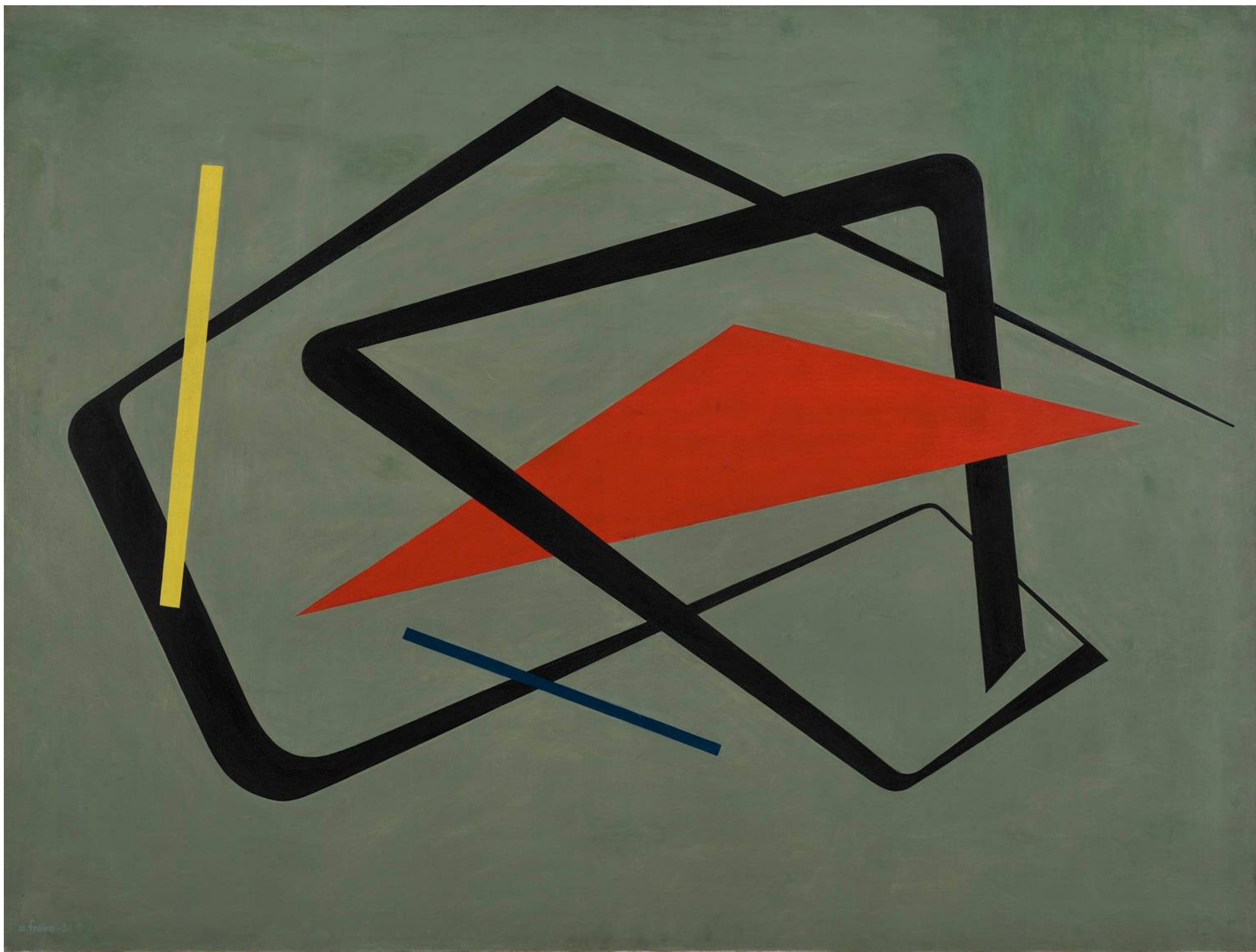

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From 1952 to 1955, Uruguayan artist María Freire (1917–2015) presented to viewers in Montevideo abstract sculptures produced in industrial materials and using industrial techniques (figs. 16, 17). Freire's proposal was a genuine revolution in Uruguayan art: these were the first works in Concrete language in the strictest sense. They introduced an industrialist aesthetic previously unexplored in Uruguay. Furthermore, because they were by a woman artist, they defied, even shattered, stereotypes of women in Uruguay in the postwar period.

Though Freire's contribution to geometric abstraction in Uruguay is indisputable, her name, work, and legacy are largely unknown outside highly specialized circles. Indeed, the contributions of women artists to the history of Latin American abstraction, and geometric abstraction in particular, have mostly been ignored,[1] and they remain unstudied, with the exception of figures such as Brazilian artists Lygia Clark (1920–1988) and Lygia Pape (1927–2004), Venezuelan artist Gego (1912–1994), and—to a lesser degree—Argentine artist Lidy Prati (1921–2008).[2] My aim here is to provide a detailed examination of Freire's contribution to the history of geometric abstraction in Uruguay, and in Latin America as a whole, with a focus on how her works from 1950 to 1957 adopted and transformed Concrete language. But a broader aim underlies this project: to analyze in depth the hidden histories of women artists in Latin America in order to recognize the heterogeneity and multiplicity of abstract practices in the region and to give these women artists agency—that is, to see them as the engines of those practices that they were.

My aim, then, is twofold: First, to salvage from oblivion Freire's name and work for the history of Concretism in the Southern Cone and to urge her inclusion in the existing canon. Second, and following feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, to "look for signs of difference" in art produced by an artist who identifies as a woman.[3] My reading, then, is "differentiated" from the canon insofar as it registers the voices of subjects recognized as women and the implications that their gender has for their art. In that sense, this essay accepts, but does not attempt to resolve, "the apparent conflict between feminist theory (largely skeptical of monographic treatments) and the need many historians feel to provide women artists with the visibility and status that a monograph can confer."[4]

In this essay, I will reconstruct the history of Freire's life and work, specifically her trajectory in the 1950s, in the context of Concrete art in Uruguay. I will also examine what Pollock terms "signs of difference" in Freire's early work. To that end, I will focus on Freire's use of industrial techniques and materials in her Concretist work and its implications in the context of postwar Uruguay. The core of my argument is that the "industrialist aesthetic"[5] Freire adopted implies a differentiated notion of gender. At stake is a rejection of stereotypes of femininity in order to embody a new ideal of womanhood in Uruguay—the ideal of a woman who inhabits the new spaces of modernity (that is, industry) beyond the domestic sphere.

This essay is divided into five sections. The first introduces the artist Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949) as a dominant point of reference in geometric abstraction in Uruguay, and describes briefly the process by which he was "canonized" at the cost of invisibilizing Freire's art. The second section presents and examines Freire's career and her place in burgeoning Concrete art in Uruguay and as part of the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo (Nonfigurative Art Group) in particular (she was a member of that group in the early fifties). This section will also address her romantic relationship with José Pedro Costigliolo (1902–1985), another key figure in geometric abstraction in Uruguay, and how he too contributed to her invisibilization. The third section will provide a detailed analysis of Freire's abstract work from 1950 to 1957. It will address her connection at that time to the European Concrete and Constructivist work from which she drew inspiration; her fellow artists in the Madí group; and the Brazilian Concrete artists, whose work Freire was very familiar with. I will then examine Freire's production in the context of the industrialization underway in Uruguay in the late forties and early fifties. The final section explores the signs of difference in Freire's Concrete language and industrialist aesthetic, proposing that her work from the fifties rejects the stereotype of the feminine and embodies the ideal of the new woman.

Beyond the Torres-García Legacy

Recent Latin American art historiography has focused overwhelmingly on the development of geometric abstraction in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela. These studies analyze in detail the strategies deployed by artists from those countries to adopt, manipulate, and transform the languages of European Constructivism and Concretism.[6] They also reexamine the relationships and exchanges between the region's artists,[7] and look

Fig 1. Exhibition of the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo, Young Men's Christian Association, Montevideo, 1952. Uncatalogued photograph. María Freire Archive, Museo Jauan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay. Courtesy of María Freire's family

Fig 2. María Freire, *Máscara (Mask)*, 1948. Bronze, 20 cm. tall. Courtesy of María Freire's family

at those artists' proposals within the social, political, and economic contexts in which they operated. Though Montevideo, and Uruguay in general, is a focal point in these studies, María Freire's role is largely overlooked in that research and in related exhibitions.[8] Uruguayan geometric abstraction has been identified solely with Joaquín Torres-García and his legacy—despite the diversity of the abstract geometric art being produced in the country. Indeed, from the outset, the group of artists with whom Freire was associated opposed the approach to geometric abstraction embraced by Torres-García and his followers.

Torres-García's influence on Uruguayan art coincides with his return to Montevideo in 1934. After a long period in Europe and a few years in the United States,[9] he brought back to his native city Constructive Universalism, a new form of art and his greatest contribution to Uruguayan and Latin American art. The first versions of his Constructive Universalism were formulated between 1928 and 1932 while he was in Paris, where he was part of the group of artists who instigated the Constructivist and Concretist movements that would later germinate across the Atlantic.[10] When Torres-García returned to Montevideo, Constructive Universalism gained ground, and he would deliberately and rigorously go on to expand it to include the legacies of pre-Hispanic cultures.[11]

Back in Uruguay, Torres-García began teaching intensively in order to introduce and create an art rooted in Latin America, eventually founding the Escuela del Sur (School of the South).[12] He engaged in a number of activities: he created two art schools in Montevideo—the Asociación de Arte Constructivo (Constructive Art Association) in 1935 and the Taller Torres-García (Torres-García Workshop) in 1943; he published important books including *Estructura* (1935), *Metafísica de la Prehistoria Indoamericana* (1939), and *Universalismo Constructivo* (1944); and he gave numerous lectures. Indeed, it was thanks to these efforts that he left a legacy without rival in the Southern Cone. Unquestionably, and as María Amalia García asserts, "Torres-García became a point of reference for artists on both sides of the river [de la Plata], on account not only of his experience of the European avant-garde but also his activities upon his return to Uruguay."[13]

The weight of the Torres-García legacy is such that Latin American art historiography has identified geometric abstraction in Uruguay with his name and none other. Almost without exception, in the last twenty years, all of the shows and exhibition catalogues on geometric abstraction in South America have considered Uruguay and Montevideo crucial to the development of that language in the region. Indeed, Torres-García's work and legacy are virtually all that has been presented and studied. Some examples of shows that focused on this artist to the exclusion of all others are *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2004; *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University in 2007; *América fría. La abstracción geométrica en Latinoamérica (1934–1973)* at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid in 2011; and *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, organized by the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2014.[14]

While Freire's work was included in *América fría* and *Radical Geometry*, as well as in *Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift* (2019–20), a more recent exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, it was not crucial to the research or curatorial visions at play in either of them. Nor does the name Freire or her work figure centrally—or even secondarily, for that matter—in recent academic studies of Concrete art in Latin America, such as María Amalia García's *Abstract Crossings: Cultural Exchange between Argentina and Brazil* (2019) and Alexander Alberro's *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (2017). Indeed, neither book even makes mention of Freire,[15] furthering the invisibilization and marginalization of her contribution to the history of Concretism and Constructivism in Uruguay and the Southern Cone.[16] New studies are necessary to begin to include her voice in the dominant and canonical discourses of that history for the sake of a more nuanced, heterogenous, and complete vision of abstract art and its development in the region after World War II. At stake is displacing and shaking up the canon that has formed around the figure of Torres-García to propose "a polylogue: the interplay of many voices, a kind of creative 'barbarism' that would disrupt the monological, colonizing, centric drives of 'civilization.'"[17]

Freire and the Nonfigurative Art Group

In 1951, a group of Uruguayan artists gathered at the Universidad de la República School of Architecture in Montevideo to discuss an

Fig. 3. Joaquín Torres-García, *Máscara con ojos de corcho (Mask with Cork Eyes)*, 1930. Wood, cork, tacks, and oil. Museo Torres-García, Montevideo. Courtesy of the Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

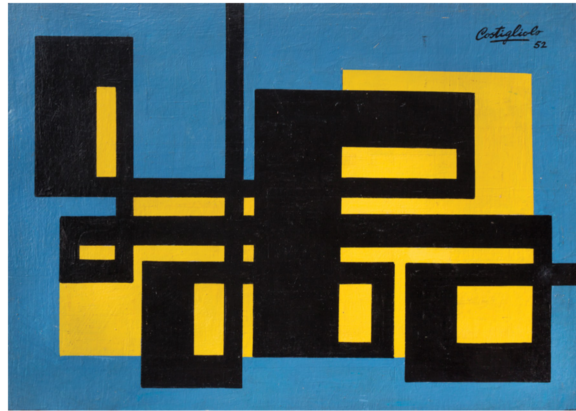

Fig. 4. José Pedro Costigliolo, *Sin titulo* (*Untitled*), 1952. Acrylic on plywood, 32 × 45 cm. Courtesy of the Fundación Pablo Atchurragy (Manantiales, Uruguay)

incipient strain of art not bound to the dogmatisms of Torres-García's Constructive Universalism. In September of the following year, the group's first show was held at the Young Men's Christian Association. That show marked the beginning of a brief but intense period of experimentation in abstract art in Uruguay about which very little is known (Fig. 1). One of the group's central figures—and its sole woman—was María Freire.

The Grupo de Artistas No Figurativos de Montevideo, as they called themselves, opposed the spiritualist and esoteric vision of abstraction upheld by the "carpenters or metaphysical lads,"[18] as Torres-García and his disciples were known. These young Uruguayan artists envisioned an art more in keeping with the modern reality of postwar industrialism. Their colder, more impersonal, and mechanical abstraction was closer to that of their fellow artists on the other side of La Plata River (Figs. 4, 5). With her use of industrial techniques and materials, Freire would be one of the figures most ardent in the exploration of the new realities of industrialism that were in stark contrast to Torres-García's artisanal abstract aesthetic.

In the late thirties and early forties, Freire studied art, first at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas (School of Visual Arts) of the Universidad del Trabajo and then at the Escuela del Círculo de Bellas Artes (Circle of Fine Arts), both in Montevideo.[19] From the beginning, she pursued sculpture. As cultural journalist Miguel Carbajal, who visited Freire a number of times, describes, her attitude toward academic training was contrarian. "A rebellious student, she is never satisfied with what she is taught. She learns how to formulate a sculpture—they give her the technical elements she needs—but she knows intuitively that the essence of art lies elsewhere."[20] In those years, academic circles were debating the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French sculptors; Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), Aristide Maillol (1861–1944), and Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929) were the most modern points of reference offered to students. But Freire would soon discover more radical paths, and these would lead to her Concretist experimentations of the early fifties.

In pursuit of more avant-garde ideas, Freire visited the Taller Torres-García in 1944. The visit to the great master—a sort of artistic pilgrimage—attests to her radical inclinations. In her case, unlike that of many others, contact with the Taller Torres-García did not lead her to adhere to Constructive Universalism. Years later, she recalled, "In 1944, I visited painter Torres-García. Though I admired his Constructivist art, I could not accept what was demanded to become a student at the workshop."[21] Indeed, it seems that Freire's visit was not a pleasant one. She recalled on many occasions that Torres-García had been harshly critical of her for not having read his book *Universalismo Constructivo*, which had recently been published in Buenos Aires. Freire explained:

> [Torres-García] was the vainest person I had ever met. He asked me whom I had studied with. When I told him with Pena and Laborde [. . .], he said, "You don't know a thing because you haven't studied with me." And he handed me his book *Universalismo Constructivo*. He told me I had to read it, I had to buy it because it is the "Bible of art." I left. The book cost fourteen pesos. Where was I going to get fourteen pesos? I could afford it now [. . .] but I left there really disgusted and never went back. I am not saying Torres is bad. He was a very good artist. But he wanted to be the only teacher in Uruguay, the only one who taught.[22]

Freire's ambivalence about Torres-García—she admired him, yet kept her distance—was typical of young Concrete artists on both sides of La Plata River. The Argentines clustered around the magazine *Arturo*, which came out that same year (1944), and though they absorbed the Uruguayan's ideas about structure and abstraction, they rejected his spiritualist vision and use of pictograms[23]—as did María Freire and her fellow members of the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo in the early fifties.

Also in 1944, Freire moved to the city of Colonia, near Montevideo, where she took a job as a drawing teacher. Her decision to leave the capital city was motivated by the need to help support her family, but also—undoubtedly—by her desire to cast off their yoke and to live more freely. In Colonia, Freire decided to live alone in a hotel, a bold move for a single woman at that time. During her years there, Freire formed part of a group of poets and intellectuals, "a sort of bohemia far from home" (she was known to that group as "Inte").[24] These "small" acts of rebellion dating back to her student days were meaningful: they foretold what would be Freire's later combative stance and nonconformist attitudes toward female stereotypes in Uruguayan society.

During this period, Freire embarked on her own artistic explorations, nourished by the European art magazines she was able to get her hands on through the boyfriend of one of her sisters (he was living in Europe at the time).[25] Freire herself explained that her practice took

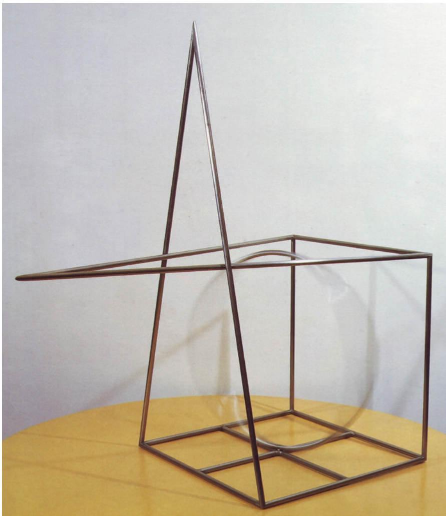

Fig. 5. María Freire, *Construcción en hierro cromado (móvil en forma parcial) [Chrome Iron Construction (Mobile in Partial Form)]*, 1a951-52. Chrome iron. Daros Collection, Zurich, 100 × 53 × 50 cm. Courtesy of María Freire's family

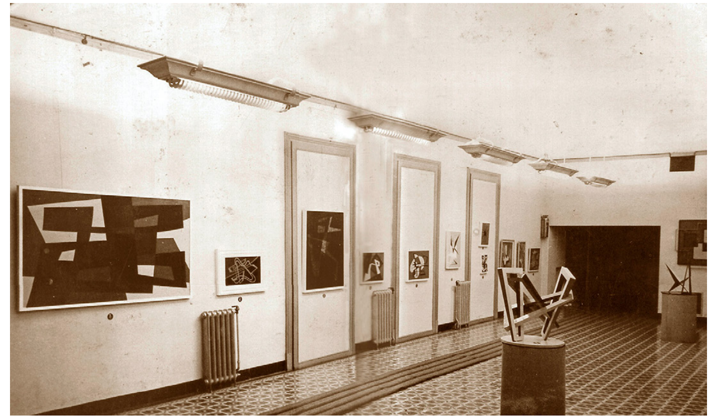

Fig. 6. *Arte No Figurativo* exhibition. Young Men's Christian Association, Montevideo, October 13 to 27, 1953. María Freire Archive, Museo Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay. Courtesy of María Freire's family

a more personal turn at this juncture, and that that shift led her to the early twentieth-century French avant-gardes, Cubism in particular, and from there to "Black Art from Africa and Oceania. Primitive art was what gave me my first lesson in modernism."[26] Her "primitivist" masks and sculptures (Fig. 2) attest to the impact of these sources and her inclination toward modern languages.[27]

Indeed, the masks Freire produced from approximately 1945 to 1950 are relevant for two reasons. First, the visual discourse of "primitivism" connects her to Torres-García. He himself produced a series of "primitivist" wooden masks that offers an interesting comparison with Freire's (Fig. 3). Notwithstanding, it is difficult to argue that Torres-García exercised a direct influence on Freire: his "Africanist" pieces are from his Paris years, in the early thirties; by the time Freire met him, American sources—the Indigenous traditions of the Andes in particular—were the basis for his art. Both artists' interest in the "primitivism" of the early European avant-gardes—and in Cubism in particular—better explains why each produced masks.

Second, Freire's decision to venture into the aesthetic of "primitivism" entails a combative attitude toward the stereotypes of the woman artist. "Primitivism" was little explored by women artists in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, it was an intensely masculine phenomenon with problematic visions of the feminine: the "primitive" was identified with the natural and that, in turn, with women.[28] Perhaps that is why few avant-garde women artists explored non-Western sources,[29] while so many avant-garde male artists—from Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) to the Fauvists and Cubists, by way of German Expressionists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, to name just a few—looked to regions and cultures seen, from the European perspective, as "other." Freire's choice, in Uruguay in the forties, of a "primitivist" aesthetic is one more indication of how she challenged and rejected conventions—not only the conventions of academic art prevalent in her context, but also the stereotypes of the woman artist who was expected to make portraits, still lifes, images of flowers, and little else.[30]

Freire's "primitivist" period in Colonia was brief but significant since it ushered her into the universe of modernism. Her Concrete period, which can also be traced back to her time in Colonia, proved more long lasting; Concretism was beginning to gain ground in Buenos Aires when she moved there. Uruguayan artist Rhod Rothfuss (1920–1969) was pivotal to introducing her to the groups and movements taking shape in Argentina after World War II. Rothfuss was central to the revolution sparked by the editorial team of *Arturo*. By the time he and Freire met, in 1951, he and others had formed the Madí group. It was through him that Freire became familiar with the language of Concretism and adopted a rigorous aesthetic rooted in geometric abstraction.

Through her close friendship with Rothfuss, through witnessing his practice and conversing with him, Freire had direct access to the Concretist and Inventionist aesthetic of Argentine artists. No less important, however, was the magazine *Nueva Visión*, which was edited by Tomás Maldonado (1922–2018), the theorist behind the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención (Concrete-Invention Art Association), another Concrete group active in Buenos Aires at the time. The magazine regularly published articles on Concrete art as well as essays by, among other leading European Concretist, Swiss artist Max Bill. Freire, then, joined the long list of South American artists whose contact with Bill's work and theories in the forties and fifties led to an interest in Concretism.[31]

In 1951, at the invitation of Rothfuss, Freire attended the first gathering of nonfigurative artists in Uruguay. It was held in the studio of Professor Dufau, who taught at the Universidad de la República School of Architecture in Montevideo. Although Freire stated explicitly that the group was meeting to "evidence the existence in Uruguay of an art different from the art practiced at the Taller Torres-García,"[32] Torres-García's disciples were invited to attend. After all, "[the organizers] wanted to bring together people working in art that made no reference whatsoever to Nature."[33] Torres-García's son Augusto Torres (1913–1992) nonetheless refused to go. In addition to Rothfuss and Freire, participants included Guiscardo Améndola (1906–1972), José Pedro Costigliolo (1902–1985), Antonio Llorens (1920–1995), Oscar García Reino (1910–1993), Julio Verdié (1900–1988), and Juan Ventayol (1915–1971). According to Miguel Carbajal, Gyula Kosice (1924–2016)—the other leading figure, besides Rothfuss, in the Madí group—traveled from Buenos Aires to Montevideo expressly for the event.[34]

After that initial encounter, the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo, now a full-fledged organization, presented its artistic proposals to Uruguayan viewers for the first time at a show at the Young Men's Christian Association of Montevideo in September 1952 (fig. 1). With their solid planes of color laid out in grids and clear geometric shapes,

Fig. 7. Flyer for the exhibition *Pintura y Escultura: Costigliolo, Freire, Llorens*. Galería Salamanca, Montevideo, July 16 to 31, 1954. María Freire Archive, Museo Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay. Courtesy of María Freire's family

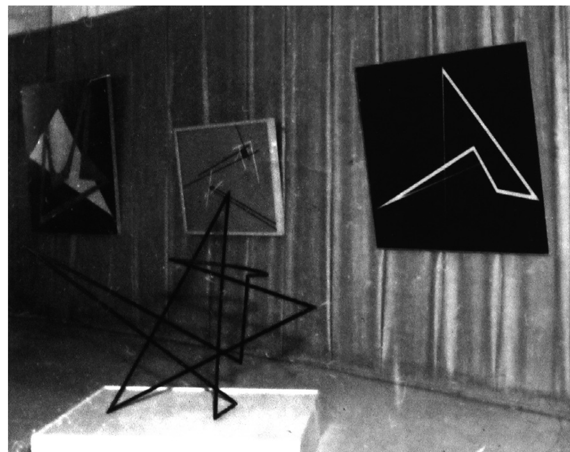
Fig. 8. View of the exhibition *19 artistas de hoy* with sculptures by Freire in the front and back, Subte Municipal, Montevideo, 1955. Uncatalogued photograph. María Freire Archive, Museo Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay. Courtesy of María Freire's family

the pictorial compositions exhibited were patently Concretist (fig. 4). Freire exhibited geometric sculptures with moving parts produced in industrial materials (fig. 5). The show shook up Montevideo art circles and the Uruguayan public in general with radical proposals wholly at odds with any strain of figuration or academic convention. But the work on display was also different from Torres-García's abstraction—at that time the most radical and modern artistic proposal the country had seen. Rather than manual compositions akin to the constructions of a carpenter, the works by these nonfigurative artists looked as if they had been made by machine. Their paintings and sculptures contained no figurative references or symbols whatsoever; rather, they consisted of simple geometric shapes (figs. 1, 4, 5).

As the nonfigurative Uruguayan artists explain in the brochure that accompanied the show, their aim was "to offer a vernacular overview of one of the tendencies of universal visual art defined as 'nonfigurative art.' [. . .] The patent absence of representation is due to a conscious intention to create and nothing else."[35] The group's choice of the term "nonfigurative," rather than the more generic "abstract" or more specific "Concrete," is telling. The term "nonfigurative" is less vague than "abstract," insofar as it clearly refers to practices that in no way draw on the figurative world. It is curious that they did not choose the word "Concrete," since that was the manifest orientation of their works, which were akin to the works of Argentine artists who had adopted that term.[36] In this first show, however, the aim was to encompass all nonobjective tendencies, regardless of inclination.

For their second exhibition, however, they made their ties to the languages of Concretism more explicit. The introductory text to the brochure produced for the event held in 1953, also at the Young Men's Christian Association (fig. 6), quotes French artist Auguste Herbin (1882–1960). A central figure in the geometric-abstraction movement in Paris, Herbin was cofounder of the Abstraction-Création group and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. The quote on the brochure reads:

If the artist sets out only to represent the "object," he expresses nothing at all and the work is illusory. If, however, he turns entirely away from that representation, he can make a work where forms, colors, relations constitute a true creation of man. That work is, then *concrete in and of itself* and *not concrete through imitation*, representation, or the interpretation of objects outside it.[37]

With that statement, the group laid out its adherence to the principles of Concretism in no uncertain terms, though this was evident in the works they were producing in those years: their strict geometric language eschewed any imitation of the natural world.

Though that 1953 exhibition was the last one the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo would hold under that name, in the years that followed, its members would participate in a number of shows in Montevideo together—and Freire was a central figure in them. In July 1954, she, along with Costigliolo and Llorens, participated in an exhibition at the Galería Salamanca (fig. 7). For this show's text, the artists chose a quote from Theo van Doesburg—who, like Herbin, was an eminent proponent of the language of geometric abstraction. In his statement, the Dutch artist affirms that "modern art had arrived at the abstract and the universal by foregoing the external and the individual—and that was fruit of a collective conception and style."[38] Freire and her peers confirmed their adherence to the principles of Concrete art and joined the ranks of the Latin American artists who re-signified that movement.

In 1955, Freire also participated in the exhibition *19 artistas de hoy* at the Subte Municipal (fig. 8). This show is considered a watershed in Uruguayan modern art since it consolidated what had been taking shape in the sphere of abstraction. As Gabriel Peluffo Linari explains in his *Historia de la pintura uruguaya*, the exhibition "summed up, eclectically but also resoundingly, the different versions of abstraction being produced by Uruguayan painters and sculptors."[39] Given the character of what had been the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo, that eclecticism and diversity comes as no surprise. None of the members of that group ever had a radical stance in any of the organizations of which they were part; they did not formulate agendas or issue manifestos, but instead embraced a range of tendencies. Throughout her entire career, Freire had that open and receptive attitude, even though her own artistic project clearly adhered to the rigorous aesthetic of Concretism from 1951 to 1957.

Freire was not only an active participant in the Montevideo art world of the fifties, but also a regular presence in Brazilian art circles thanks to her participation in the São Paulo Biennial from 1953 to 1957. Through her visits to that Brazilian city, her knowledge of Concretism and European art grew. She came into contact with emerging Concrete artists (the Grupo Ruptura based in São Paulo and the

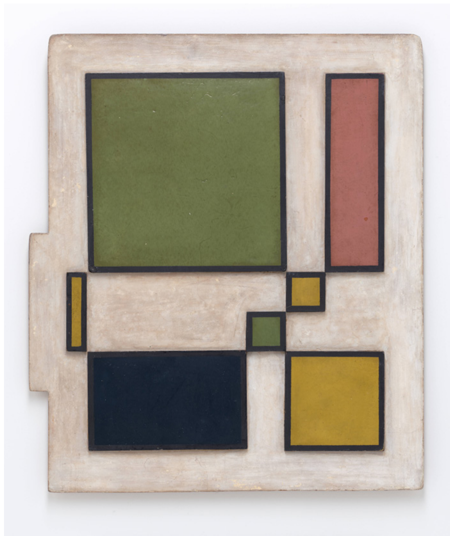

Fig. 9 Rhod Rothfuss. *Cuadrilátero amarillo (Yellow Quadrilateral)*, 1955. Painting on wood, 33 × 33 cm. The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro

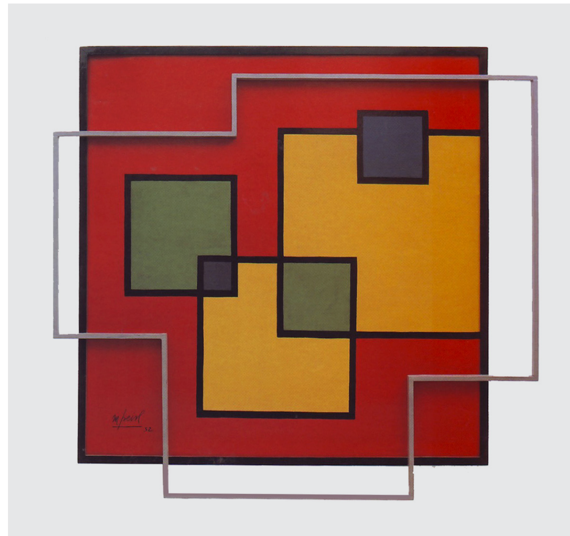

Fig. 10. María Freire, *Composición (Composition)*, 1952. Enamel on fiber and wood rod. 110 × 120 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of María Freire's family

Grupo Frente based in Rio de Janeiro), but also had the opportunity to see in person the work of European masters of abstraction, such as Alexander Calder (1898–1976), Henry Moore (1898–1986), Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and others.[40] As we will see later in the detailed analysis of her work, that experience in Brazil deepened and furthered her engagement with Concrete art and geometric abstraction.

Freire was in Brazil for more than its biennials. She exhibited work at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo and the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro in 1956 and 1957, respectively, both times with José Pedro Costigliolo, a fellow member of the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo. Freire and Costigliolo had a professional and romantic relationship from the time they met in 1951. Indeed, the fact that both artists were exhibiting work at the most prestigious modern art museums in Latin America at that time was important. It confirms their centrality as avant-garde artists using cutting-edge Concrete language—a sort of lingua franca in the region during the industrialist postwar period.[41]

Freire and Costigliolo's relationship was particularly important to Freire's career as an artist. The two met in 1951 at the gatherings of the Asociación de Arte No Figurativo, and the exhibitions that followed strengthened their tie. Costigliolo was fifteen years older than Freire, and by the time they met, his practice was fully formed. Starting in the late twenties, he had experimented with languages close to abstraction in proto-Cubist and purist compositions. By the early fifties, Costigliolo, thanks in part to his contact with Rothfuss and his frequent trips to Buenos Aires, had fully embraced the language of Concretism and abstraction.[42]

Carbajal explains that Freire and Costigliolo grew closer when Freire asked Costigliolo for "help unsticking a work she had made on a piece of wood and was having trouble getting off. That was the beginning of a lifelong alliance."[43] Very soon after that encounter, which probably occurred in 1952, Freire and Costigliolo decided to share a studio, show together, and formalize their relationship. They got married before traveling to Europe together in 1957,[44] evidently in response to family pressure. It appears that Freire's mother insisted that they get married since, at that time, a woman living with a man out of wedlock was frowned upon.[45] These anecdotes tell us something about both Freire's character and the feminine stereotypes of the time. That she approached Costigliolo shows her defiant attitude toward those stereotypes, while the fact that she ultimately did get married attests to the pressure they exerted on her and how hard it was not to conform.

This tension persisted throughout Freire's life, as she vacillated between rejecting and accepting feminine stereotypes. As a number of articles in the press indicate, after Freire's marriage to Costigliolo and their return to Montevideo in 1959, she kept making art, but relegated her practice, prioritizing her husband's career over her own. In one of his articles, Carbajal speaks of how Freire's work was obscured. During his visits to Costigliolo and Freire's shared studio, Carbajal remarks that "María would veer the conversation to work by Costi [as José Pedro Costigliolo was known], not her own in a generous act of admiration."[46] Carbajal makes reference to another Uruguayan art critic, Hugo Longa (1934–1990), who "never forgave María for yielding too much to her husband, for having remained expressly under his protective but also castrating shadow—even having delighted in being there—for having suddenly ceased to be what she was."[47] Longa is speaking of the fact that in the mid-fifties, Freire stopped making sculpture so as "not to bother" Costigliolo in the studio. As Malena Rodríguez reports in a journalistic article on Freire, "In [1955] she stopped making sculpture because her husband would listen to classical music while painting and she didn't want to break the harmony with the blows of her hammer."[48] At that point, she began painting. It was only after Costigliolo's death, in 1985, that she resumed making sculpture in earnest.

Indeed, according to Freire's niece Laura Zavala, Freire did not like to be spoken of as an artist. She did not consider herself a professional artist. "She made paintings, but not art. Her husband, Costi, was the artist."[49] Here, then, Freire's combative resistance to stereotypes vanished, at least in theory. In practice, she was still making *art*, exhibiting in museums and galleries, winning awards at juried shows and competitions: she was still an artist. But a process of self-invisibilization gradually set in and, after her marriage to Costigliolo, it appears that she placed herself in the background.

How Freire's romantic tie to Costigliolo determined her identity as an artist can be seen as a product of patriarchal structures and social expectations of women. To triumph as an artist might mean failing in marriage, for instance, which in Freire's time, was the same as failing as a woman.[50] Patriarchal structures made it natural for the man to receive recognition, and that led Freire to decide to place her

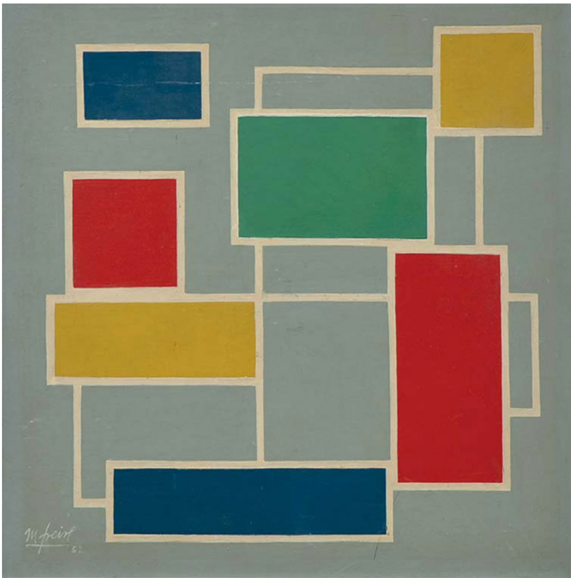

Fig. 11. María Freire, *Composición (Composition)*, 1952. Acrylic on cardboard. Courtesy of María Freire's family

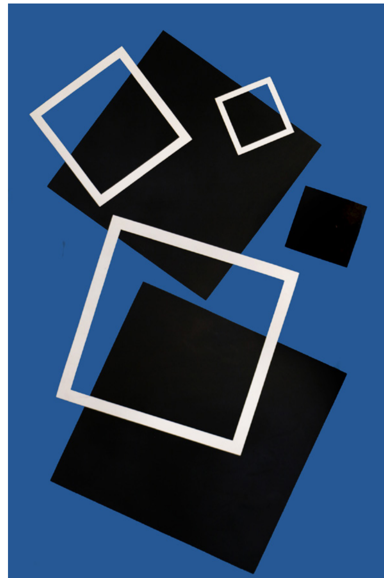

Fig. 12. María Freire, *ABN*, 1957. Pyroxylin lacquer. Banco Central del Uruguay Collection. Courtesy of María Freire's family

husband, rather than herself, in the spotlight. An interesting point of comparison is Brazilian artist María Leontina (1917–1984), who was married to fellow artist Milton da Costa (1915–1988). As art critic and historian Aracy Amaral has recently described, Leontina "kept her role as an artist separate from her role as the wife of an artist she respected."[51] In Amaral's view, that stance provides "a portrait of an era."[52] Freire's situation seems similar—and it is indeed "a portrait of an era": a product of the stereotypes and social expectations operative at that time.[53]

In the early fifties, however, before that process of invisibilization set in, Freire was one of the most radical artists in the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo. As we will see shortly, her rigorous strain of Concretism challenged reigning artistic conventions, and her industrialist aesthetic confronted stereotypes of women in postwar Uruguay. Though the artist herself never spoke out as a feminist, her work formed part of the feminist struggle by suggesting a new ideal of womanhood, one connected to her incursion into the industrial world. Freire herself visited the Kraft-Imesa plant and worked alongside engineers on the production of her sculptural pieces. She thus entered the sphere of industry and, in so doing, rejected the idea that a woman's sole realm of action is the home.[54]

María Freire's Concretism

After producing the series of "primitivist" sculptures discussed above (fig. 2), Freire delved into geometric abstraction. Between 1951 and 1957, when she and Costigliolo went to Europe, she investigated and explored Concretism and Constructivism—the languages of her practice. Her work from these years closely adheres to a system of geometric forms and color planes. In both her paintings and sculptures, she used industrial materials, such as enameled sheet metal and acrylic, and techniques, such as pyroxylin applied with an air gun, which she learned with Costigliolo.

Freire's first explorations of geometric abstraction were informed by her personal contact with Rothfuss and the ideas of the Madí group, formed in Buenos Aires in 1946.[55] As pointed out above, Rothfuss was a figure decisive to the development of the new Argentine avant-gardes of the forties. His essay "El marco: un problema de la plástica actual" ("The Frame: A Problem in Art Today"), published in *Arturo* in 1944, lays out the theoretical bases for those movements—and for the Madí group in particular. In it, Rothfuss explains the idea behind the cutout frame, namely allowing the composition itself to determine the edges of the pictorial surface. As the artist writes, "A painting with regular frame produces a sense of continuity that only vanishes when the frame is rigorously structured according to the painting's composition."[56] In *Yellow Quadrilateral* (*Cuadrilátero Amarillo*, 1955, fig. 9), Rothfuss put that theory into practice. In this work, the format of the pictorial plane is determined by the geometric composition, specifically in the case of the yellow quadrilateral on the left side, which creates a protuberance of the same shape in the wooden support.

Freire's *Composición* (*Composition*, 1952, fig. 10) reflects her interest in the ideas of the cutout frame advocated by Rothfuss and the Argentine avant-garde. This work is dominated by squares of different sizes in solid colors (yellow, green, and blue) on a solid red background that is itself a square. It is reminiscent of the aesthetic of Dutch Neo-Plasticism and unquestionably tied to the work of Argentine artists and Rothfuss. But its interest lies in Freire's free interpretation of the cutout frame. Rather than cut out the pictorial plane so that it corresponds to the composition, Freire assembled a frame of rods and placed it on top of the support. That superimposed frame furthers the painting's pattern, that is, its shape is determined by the edges of the painting's square structure. Hence, Freire made use of the aesthetic principles of the Argentine avant-garde in her strict adherence to geometric composition, but she transformed those principles in her free adoption of the cutout frame. That decision can be understood as an extension of Freire's sculptural practice; she questioned the limits between painting and sculpture, and proposed an alternative status for the work of art, now more like an artifact or object.[57]

In her sculpture *Chrome Iron Construction (Mobile in Partial Form)* (*Construcción en hierro cromado (móvil en forma parcial)*, 1951–52, fig. 5), Freire incorporates movement—another element central to the Madí aesthetic. The work's structure consists of chrome iron bars that form shapes (squares, triangles, and circles). The sculpture engages the idea of instability and change in perception. The base is a square that seems to extend upward to form a cube, but one of its sides and its upper section end in a triangle. Inserted in the middle of this odd cube is a mobile circle, which reinforces the sense of shifting perception: the circle splits into two or three when it is in motion, which means the sculpture never congeals as a determined

Fig. 13. María Freire and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Ulm, Germany, 1959. Uncatalogued photograph. María Freire Archive, Museo Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay. Courtesy of María Freire's family

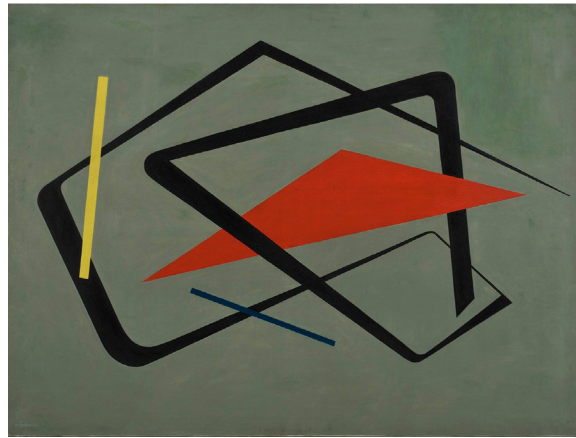

Fig. 14. María Freire, *Sin titulo (Untitled)*, 1954. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Gabriel Pérez Barreiro.

or set structure—resistance to stable structures is also central to the Madí's interests and aesthetic. As Inés Katzenstein and María Amalia García explain, "We can detect an important new sensibility in the artists of the Madí group [. . .] the notion that the apparently rational language of geometry could incorporate fiction, humor, the unstable and the unexpected."[58] This sculpture by Freire, then, partakes of that new Madí sensibility by bringing the unexpected and unstable into a structure seemingly based on geometric rationality.

Despite this engagement with some Madí principles, Freire never belonged to that group. As curator Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro states, "It would be unfair to apply that term to her, since the Madí group was highly individualistic, while Freire concentrated on the purity and refinement of the works themselves, works that bear hardly a trace of the author."[59] For Pérez-Barreiro, "[these works] were isolated experiments that she would soon give up in favor of a more classic and balanced style"[60]—and to that end, her contact with European and Brazilian Concrete art was fundamental. Works like *Composition* (*Composición*, 1953, fig. 11) and *ABN* (1957, fig. 12) attest to the impact of these movements.

In *Composition*, for example, Freire made use of a classic Neo-Plasticist resource: the grid. This work recalls compositions by the Dutch artists insofar as it combines primary colors with white lines and a gray background. The green quadrilateral, however, breaks up the Neo-Plasticist orthodoxy, giving the work a lyricism not found in the more ascetic production of artists like Mondrian and Van Doesburg. It is more akin, in that sense, to the appropriation of Neo-Plasticist principles by Brazilian artists in Rio de Janeiro. This work in particular offers an interesting point of comparison with early works by Lygia Clark. At stake in both is a very personal experimentation with the grid, color planes, and geometric composition. This appropriation and adaptation of the grid is also akin to the interpretation of Concretism reflected in the work of German artist Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. Freire greatly admired Vordemberge-Gildewart, whom she had met in Europe in the late fifties (fig. 13).[61]

ABN (fig. 12) reveals an artist more self-assured and aware of the language of Concretism and industrial media. The mechanical and industrial character of its image is more evident than in *Composition*, due to the composition itself and to the materials and techniques used (pyroxylin applied with an air gun) to make it. The composition is dominated by the repetition of a square shape: three black squares of different sizes float on a blue background; they are echoed in three white squares, each one the same size as one of the black squares. In this piece, Freire engaged the notions of progression and repetition in relation to a geometric shape, both of which are key to the Concrete work of Van Doesburg and the Brazilian artists in Grupo Ruptura, with whom Freire was in contact at the time. In Van Doesburg's *Arithmetic Composition* (1930), for instance, we see the systematic progression of the black square; *Diagonal Function* (*Función diagonal*, 1952) by Geraldo de Barros (1923–1998) is constructed on the basis of the golden ratio. But Freire's application of these geometric and mathematical principles was not as rigorous. In *ABN*, the squares float freely on the pictorial plane rather than following a precise rule. The example of the Suprematist work of Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) is important here. The composition seems to fluctuate, shaking up the viewer's expectations of order.

Untitled (*Sin título*, 1954, fig. 14) is another example of how Freire adopted and transformed the principles of Concrete art. Here, three geometric figures—a red triangle and two rectangular bars in yellow and blue—dominate the center of the composition. These shapes are interconnected by a thick black line that moves between the figures in a sort of spiral with right angles—a shape reminiscent of some of the linear sculptures Freire was making at the time, among them *Heuristic Construction* (*Construcción heurística*, 1954, fig. 15). These sculptures, in turn, are connected to sculptures by Argentine Concrete artists such as Enio Iommi (1926–2013) and Claudio Girola (1923–1994) and to early Russian Constructivist works. This untitled work evidences how Freire moved freely between pictorial and sculptural compositions during this period. These paintings reveal, in a sense, a sculptor exploring a new medium to expand her artistic interests.

Freire's most radical and interesting works from these years are, however, her sculptures in metal and acrylic. These attest to the industrial nature of her practice as well as to her desire to go beyond the limits of the artistic in an attempt to expand the idea of what art is. *Construction in Acrylic* (*Construcción en acrílico*) and *Construction in Acrylic and Bronze* (*Construcción en acrílico y bronce*), both from 1953, are, arguably, more like design or industrial objects than traditional works of art. Here once again, Freire challenged the status of these pieces as art by using industrial materials and techniques. In *Construction in Acrylic* (fig. 16), three acrylic-sheet

Fig. 15. María Freire, *Construcción heurística (Heuristic Construction)*, 1954. Iron. Daros Collection. Courtesy of María Freire's family

triangles are joined in a strange configuration. The base consists of two hollow triangles that intersect in one of its two sides; the third triangle crosses the other two horizontally; unlike the others, this one is solid, not hollow. *Construction in Acrylic and Bronze* (fig. 17) is a more complex structure dominated by curves: a bronze rod is bent into an intricate form and crossed by two transparent acrylic sheets that are themselves bent in opposite directions. In both works, Freire engaged the empty space of the sculpture and the transparency of the material as central to the work. In other words, the material and its properties are fundamental.

These works clearly evidence the impact of Constructivism, in the most general sense, on Freire's practice in the early fifties, particularly in the industrial, quasi-technological nature of her production. A Christina Lodder explains, "The terms 'Constructivist' or 'Constructivism' are often used fairly loosely to describe an art that is characteristically geometric and abstract, in which the precision of the forms and their mathematical qualities evoke associations with engineering and technology and with progressive social and scientific values."[62] Paradigmatic examples of that Constructivism include works in Perspex by Russian artist Naum Gabo (1890–1977) and kinetic structures in bronze and acrylic by Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). Both formed part of the expanded phenomenon of Constructivism in Europe in the twenties and thirties. Evident in the work of both artists is an interest in the material's primordial qualities—they respected and preserved those particular qualities—and in evidencing the industrial handling those materials require. The same is true of Freire's sculptures. Furthermore, like the Constructivists, the Uruguayan artist produced her works in the context of industry, venturing into the sphere of engineering to make them. As we will see shortly, these pieces were produced in specialized factories, with engineers facilitating her use of industrial machinery—and that gives Freire's work a double meaning: it is a product and reflection of the industrialist boom in Uruguay in the early fifties, but also—and more importantly—a symbol of the new woman, a woman who rejects the stereotypes of the era to venture into the world of industry and factories, which was largely the terrain of men.

Freire's Industrialist Aesthetic in Postwar Uruguay

The history of the relationship between Concretism and the processes of modernization and industrialization that ensued in different Latin American nations after World War II is well-known.[63] In the forties, fifties, and sixties, a number of governments in Latin America pursued progressive agendas and modernizing impulses through social, economic, and political reforms, but mostly by bolstering the growth of the industrial sector. Geometric abstraction was seen, in the cultural field, as the perfect complement to these impulses. In its use of a rational, structured, and seemingly mechanical aesthetic, the languages of Concretism and Constructivism embodied the principles of the industrial product. Concrete art, then, became a tool for the visual education of the new modern and industrialized nations of Latin America. Indeed, that language was a symbol and reflection of those nations' modernizing tendencies, clearly marking the path to follow. As Aleca Le Blanc explains, "For the artists and critics of this generation, Concrete art was far more than a formal style—it provided the road map to the new materials and techniques that would populate the future."[64]

Freire's industrialist aesthetic fits perfectly into this context. The principles of Concretism provide its framework, but more important is its use of industrial materials and techniques. For her paintings, Freire used pyroxylin paint—a commercial enamel used for airplanes and cars—which she applied with an air gun, giving the work an impersonal and mechanical feel without a trace of the artist's hand (fig. 12). For her sculptures, she made use of acrylic and plated iron, materials of industrial origin (figs. 16, 17). To produce these pieces, Freire took her models to the Kraft-Imesa plant, where engineers helped her to make the final versions in enameled sheet metal and acrylic.[65] Kraft-Imesa specialized in the manufacture of kitchenware, but in 1952, began producing refrigerators that contained enameled sheet metal and acrylic. It was, apparently, one of the most respected factories in Uruguay in the fifties, with cutting-edge technology, and its engineers specialized in the use of the aforementioned materials.[66] Freire recalled in particular her work with an engineer by the name of Echaniz, with whom she would discuss the designs of sculptures to be produced using the factory's machinery.[67] Thanks to her work at Kraft-Imesa, Freire was able to turn out pieces that have an industrial aesthetic in two senses: the paintings and sculptures she made from 1950 to 1957 are, arguably, the product of the Uruguayan industrial boom, and related to this, her Concretism can be read as "the road map to the materials and techniques of the future."[68]

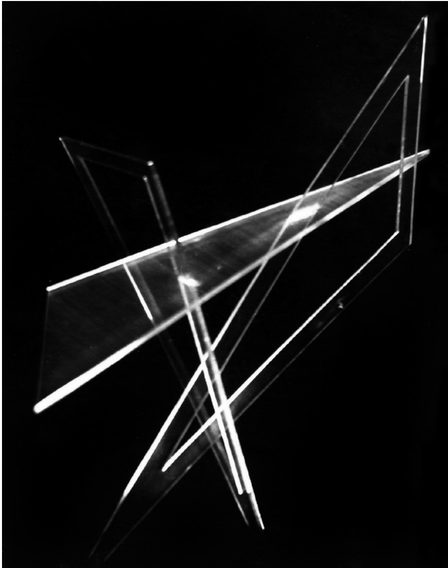

Fig. 16. María Freire, *Construcción en acrílico (Construction in Acrylic)*, 1953. Private collection.
Courtesy of María Freire's family

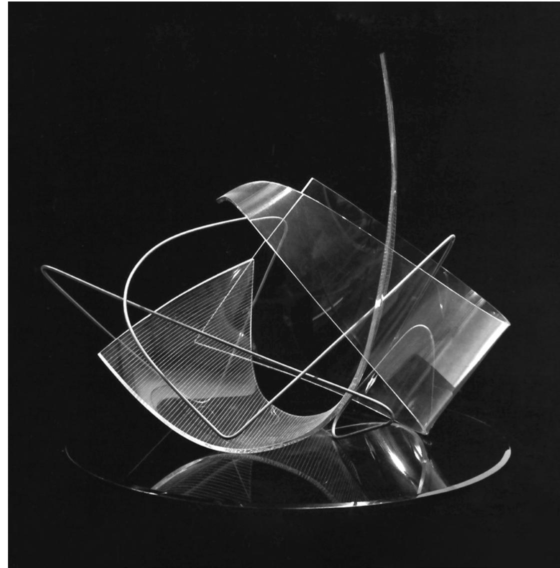

Fig. 17. María Freire, *Construcción en acrílico y bronce (Construction in Acrylic and Bronze)*, 1953. Ricardo Esteves Collection. Courtesy of María Freire's family

It is not by chance that it was in the fifties that Freire ventured into the industrialist aesthetic: the years from 1945 to 1956 have been called the golden age of industrialization in Uruguay.[69] The period after World War II witnessed intense industrial growth and the consolidation of nontraditional industries. According to Silvana Maubrigades, "One indicator of the rise in nontraditional industries in the national economy [of Uruguay] is the increase in the proportion of the workforce dedicated to the metallurgical sector (15 percent of workers in 1946)."[70] From 1944 to 1954, the proportion of industrial workers rose by 73 percent and the GDP by 131 percent.[71] The incorporation of new technologies also played a major role in this period of intense industrial development. Freire's Concretism and her industrialist aesthetic are both outgrowths and reflections of the industrialization underway in the fifties. Her paintings and sculptures from 1950 to 1957 were made possible by industrial development and the growth of the metallurgical industry in particular, but they also attest to that development and the transformation it brought. Freire's work, then, is part of the larger Concretist project in which her male peers in Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil also participated. The fact that she was a woman artist working in industrial materials and techniques complicates that reading to reveal substantial *differences*. By adopting an industrialist aesthetic, Freire—it could be argued—challenged stereotypes of femininity that placed women far from the sphere of industrial work. Though later in her life, particularly after her marriage to Costigliolo in the late fifties, she was more bound by those stereotypes, from 1950 to 1957, Freire's Concretism was tied to an ideological feminist struggle. It suggests another possible ideal of womanhood and, in so doing, fractures the patriarchal hegemony of Concretist language and gives it a new meaning.

Combating Feminine Stereotypes

Freire never identified as a feminist artist. Indeed, her art does not explore themes associated with womanhood, the feminine, or feminism. Yet, as Andrea Giunta notes, "As art historians we can analyze the works of all artists from a gender perspective and find in them visions connected to feminist agendas."[72] In relation to Argentine artist Lidy Prati—like Freire, a representative of Concretism in the Southern Cone—Giunta points out that in opting for the undifferentiated aesthetic of geometric abstraction, Freire "designed [her] own model of *positive action*. [. . .] [She] acted in the space that configured power using the language of [her] male peers."[73]

Furthermore, Freire acted in those spaces where the symbolic and masculine power of modernism was configured, namely the sphere of industry. Freire's work, then, takes on a specific character and meaning in relation to feminist agendas that subvert and question feminine stereotypes and women's place in society.

By the fifties, women had gained access to political life in Uruguay; they had the right to vote and be elected to public office. Indeed, a law passed in 1932 made Uruguay one of the first countries in the region to grant women suffrage.[74] A military coup in 1933 delayed the law's implementation, however, and women did not vote for the first time until 1938. In the next elections, held in 1942, the first women legislators in the history of Uruguay were elected and, thanks in part to their efforts, the Women's Civil Rights Law was passed in 1946.[75] Those early advances led to the widespread idea that there was "perfect equality between men and women in Uruguay in the fifties."[76] As feminist writer Graciela Sapriza explains, that supposed equality of the sexes is a myth. The 1946 law, she argues, "brought a certain stage to a close. But from that moment on, the myth of equality between men and women in Uruguay was established, as was another myth, namely the myth of the country as a 'happy Arcady,' an 'exception' in the Latin American context—a myth that the manifest crisis that set in in the sixties began to dismantle."[77]

The truth is that in the fifties, women's participation in public life in Uruguay was still minimal: until 1973, only 3 percent of parliamentary positions were held by women.[78] Though in the seventies more and more women began working outside the home, their efforts were often frustrated and questioned. As Asunción Lavrin points out, "Ambivalence towards women's working was fed by deeply rooted cultural attitudes that defined the home as the preferred space for women. [. . .] Labor in factories could erode women's morale and health and ultimately threaten the family and the nation by causing a decline in fertility."[79] This scant female participation in politics and the workforce evidences the persistence of feminine stereotypes: the home as the privileged realm of women and the role of caretaker as her primordial social function. In her studies of women's participation in the Uruguayan Communist Party, Ana Laura de Giorgi points out that "women workers were largely the ones who, in the context of industrialization, had 'abandoned the home,' giving up employment as domestic workers—a classically feminine post—to become *fabriqueras*,"[80] a pejorative term for women industrial workers. Generally speaking, women were not seen as having entered the

world of work, let alone industrial labor, “legitimately.”[81] According to de Giorgi, after the 1946 elections and into the fifties, “woman as a social category [. . .] mostly referred to mother and wife rather than to citizen or activist,”[82] or even worker.

These are the very stereotypes Freire was fighting in her works from the fifties. With an industrialist aesthetic, she broke with, undermined, and questioned the expectations of women and the feminine. The use of industrial materials and techniques in her paintings and sculptures symbolizes women’s entry into a sphere traditionally codified as masculine, namely the factory and industrial work. Indeed, Freire actually visited the Kraft-Imesa plant and worked with engineers there, literally inhabiting the spaces of industry and defying the roles traditionally assigned women: she left her house not as a *fabriquera*, but instead as an artist-engineer who designed her works as engineers design industrial products.[83] In that sense, Freire’s industrialist aesthetic embodies the ideals of a new woman, a woman not limited to the sphere of the home but who, rather, modifies and expands the spaces she can occupy. This woman is an agent, not a mere viewer or consumer, of the transformation of modern life represented here by the industrial product. Unlike the traditional woman who consumes industrial products (the refrigerator, the vacuum cleaner), she produces and creates something new with the materials and techniques of the appliance industry, thus actively participating in the configuration of a new realm of feminine modernity.

Freire, then, enacts a different sort of radicalism in her works. Though in her Concretist and industrial language the artist did not formulate a political or feminist agenda, she did insert herself “in the space that configured power”: she inhabited and created within industrial spaces codified as masculine. At stake here is not the radicalness signaled by Andrea Giunta and Cecilia Fajardo-Hill in their emblematic exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, which centered on the “political body” as a place where Latin American women artists “proposed a different body, a researched and rediscovered body deeply bound to the political situation in much of the continent at the time.”[84] The radicalness of Freire’s works lies not in the presentation of the female body as a symbolic or literal stage of political struggles,

Endnotes

1 I would like to thank the Cisneros Institute at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, for funding this research, and Inés Katzenstein and María del Carmen Carrión for the conversations and suggestions at the beginning of the project. Special thanks to Laura Zavala, who generously shared memories, stories, and impressions of her aunt María Freire. I would like to thank Elisa Pérez Buchelli of the Museo Blanes in Montevideo, who facilitated access to the still-uncatalogued material in the María Freire Archive. Thanks to Georgina Gluzman, with whom I had the opportunity to share and discuss this work's initial hypothesis and whose recommendations regarding the bibliography and feminist theory proved fundamental. Thanks to Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro and Gabriel Peluffo Linari, whose works on María Freire provided the groundwork for my research. They kindly shared with me their knowledge of the artist. Lastly, I would like to thank Andrea Giunta, who read a draft of this work; her generous recommendations improved and bolstered my ideas and arguments.

A number of recent exhibitions have attempted to reinsert women artists into the history of abstraction, among them: *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, Denver Museum of Art (2016); *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2017); and *Women in Abstraction*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2021). The exhibition at MoMA included a number of works by Latin American artists, among them María Freire.

2 Major museum shows of these artists have been held in the last two decades: *Lygia Clark: The Art of Abandonment, 1948–1988*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); *Lygia Pape: A Multitude of Forms*, Met Breuer, New York (2017); *Gego: A Linha Emancipada*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo (2019); and *Yente—Prati*, Malba Fundación Costantini (2009). The treatment of Lidy Prati and her work in the catalogue accompanying the last exhibition is telling in that it exemplifies visions still dominated by patriarchal models that this essay seeks to challenge. In speaking of that show, Andrea Giunta writes, "The segment of Argentine art history that did attempt to give this woman artist the place she deserved in the heroic narrative of abstraction drew on patriarchal materials to do so. In the catalogue to the show of work by Prati and Yente (Eugenia Crenovich), another largely unrecognized abstract artist, held at Malba, the dominant model is reproduced, as if it were impossible to contest the centrality of the masculine. Before getting to Prati and Yente's work, there are pages and pages of images of works by the local (male) abstract canon, as if to suggest that without those fathers to authorize it, their work would make no sense and have no worth." Andrea Giunta, *Feminismo y arte latinoaméricano: Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2018), chap. 1, Kindle.

3 See Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

4 Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds., introduction to *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 200

5 By "industrialist aesthetic," I mean the conscious use of materials and techniques usually associated with industrial production in the creation of works of art, and the appearance yielded by it. Such works are closely bound to objects produced industrially and to industrial and graphic design. Practices associated with this aesthetic were very common among early avant-garde artists close to Russian Constructivism and the Bauhaus. This aesthetic was developed and expanded by Swiss artist Max Bill (1908–1994); it resonated with Latin American artists involved in Concretism in the postwar period, when a number of nations in the region were undergoing intense and rapid industrialization. See Aleca Le Blanc, "The Material of Form: How Concrete Artists Responded to the Second Industrial Revolution in Latin America," in *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, eds. Pia Gottschaller et al., exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute; Getty Research Institute, 2017).

6 Such studies include Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, ed., *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy Books, 2014); Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, ed., *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exh. cat. (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, 2007); Pia Gottschaller et al., eds., *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute; Getty Research Institute, 2017); Inés Katzenstein and María Amalia García, eds., *Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction–The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019); Mary Kate O'Hare, ed., *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s–50s*, exh. cat. (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum, 2010); and Osbel Suárez, *América fría: La abstracción geométrica en Latinoamérica, 1934–1973*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2011).

7 One eminent example of studies of this sort is María Amalia García, *Abstract Crossings: Cultural Exchange between Argentina and Brazil*, trans. Jane Brodie (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). On the Concrete and Constructivist networks in the Southern Cone, see also Cristina Rossi, "De *Círculo y Cuadrado* a *Rectángulo*: Intercambios chileno-rioplatenses alrededor del arte constructivo," in *Abstracción Sur*, ed. Ramón Castillo (Santiago de Chile: Publisher, forthcoming); and Cristina Rossi, "Redes latinoamericanas de arte constructivo," *Cuaderno del Centro de Estudios de Diseño y Comunicación*, no. 60 (October 2016): 103–25, https://doi.org/10.18682/cdc.vi60.

8 Freire's work has been included in the exhibitions and catalogues to *América fría: La abstracción geométrica en Latinoamérica (1934–1973)*, organized by the Fundación Juan March in Madrid in 2011; *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, organized by the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2014; and *Verboamérica*, organized by MALBA (Museo de Arte Latinoaméricano de Buenos Aires) in 2016. It was also featured in two exhibitions at MoMA: *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction* (2017), and *Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift* (2019–20).

9 For a complete chronology of Torres-García's life and work, see Cecilia de Torres et al., "Chronology," in *Joaquín Torres-García Catalogue Raisonné*, http://torresgarcia.com/chronology.

10 During these years, Torres-García was close to Dutch Neo-Plasticist artists Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), as well as to Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart (1899–1962), Michel Seuphor (1901–1999), and others. Those artists formed the Art Concret and Cercle et Carré groups which, during the 1930s, advocated for geometric abstraction and Concretism. Along with Seuphor, Torres-García was the leader of the Cercle et Carré, and as such, played a fundamental role in the reconfiguration of the languages of geometric abstraction in Paris between the wars. See Ana M. Franco, "Joaquín Torres-García," in *Superposiciones: Arte latinoaméricano en colecciones mexicanas*, ed. James Oles, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáno, 2015), 178–91; and "Joaquín Torres-García's Constructive Universalism," *Revista Ensayos*: *Historia y Teoría del Arte*, no. 10 (2005): 102–41.

11 On Torres-García in Montevideo, see Cecilia de Torres, "The School of the South: The Asociación del Arte Constructivo, 1934–1942" and Juan Flo, "Torres-García in (and from) Montevideo," in *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy*, eds. Mari Carmen Ramirez and Cecilia Buzio de Torres (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 7–24, 25–44.

12 In 1935, Torres-García stated, "I have called this 'The School of the South' because in reality, *our North is the South*. There should be no North for us, except in opposition to our South." Joaquín Torres-García, "Escuela del Sur," in ibid., 70. Emphasis original.

13 Cristina Rossi reconstructs and analyzes in detail the impact and influence of Torres-García's teachings on young artists from Montevideo and Buenos Aires. See Rossi, "De *Círculo y Cuadrado* a *Rectángulo*"; and Rossi, "Redes latinoaméricanas de arte constructive."

14 A more complete list of these shows includes *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s–70s*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2004); *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, and Grey Art Gallery, New York University (2007); *The Sites of Latin American Abstraction: Selections of the Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection*, CIFO Art Space, Miam (2006–7); *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s–50s*, Newark Museum of Art (2010); *América fría. La abstracción geométrica en Latinoamérica (1934–1973)*, Fundación Juan March, Madrid (2011); *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2014); *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, J. Paul Getty Museum (2017); and *Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2019–20). None of these shows or the research associated with them has addressed Freire's work as key to Concretism in the Southern Cone.

15 See García, *Abstract Crossings*; and Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

16 Significantly, despite this invisibilization of María Freire, two major studies of her work and trajectory have been done—indeed, they form the basis for this project: Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, *María Freire* (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2001); and Gabriel Peluffo Linari, *María Freire: Vida y deriva de las formas* (Montevideo: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura; Museo de Bellas Artes Juan Manuel Blanes, 2017). Both examine Freire's trajectory from its beginnings through the very early twenty-first century, and closely analyze her production throughout her lifetime.

17 Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 6.

18 María Amalia García, "Cities of Abstract Art: Urban Journeys through South America," in Pérez-Barreiro, *Radical Geometry*, 39.

19 See "Cronología," in Peluffo Linari, *María Freire*, 123–43.

20 Miguel Carbajal, "María Freire enfrenta el espejo. Una señora que dará de que hablar," *El País de los Domingos* (February 18, 1990). Uncatalogued newspaper clipping, María Freire Archive, Museo de Bellas Artes Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay.

21 María Freire, "Notas biográficas" (1996), quoted in Peluffo Linari, *María Freire*, 28.

22 Malena Rodríguez, "La vida en un universo de líneas y color," *Galería*, January 2006. Unidentified and uncatalogued newspaper clipping, María Freire Archive, Museo de Bellas Artes Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay.

23 Rossi studies in depth the relationship between these young Argentine artists and the Uruguayan master. See Rossi, "De *Círculo y Cuadrado* a *Rectángulo*"; and Rossi, "Redes latinoamericanas de arte constructivo." On *Arturo* magazine, see Cristina Rossi, *La revista* Arturo *en su tiempo inaugural* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2018), https://www.academia.edu/43585226/La_revista_Arturo_en_su_tiempo_inaugural; and María Amalia García, "La revista *Arturo* y la potencia múltiple de la vanguardia," in *Edición facsimilar de la revista Arturo*, ed. María Amalia García (Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2018), 7–20.

24 Carbajal, "María Freire enfrenta el espejo."

25 Chilean poet Humberto Díaz Casanueva. See Miguel Carbajal, *Las vanguardias irrumpen en los cincuenta: María Freire y José Pedro Costigliolo* (Punta del Este: GTLART Gallery, 2006), 10.

26 María Freire, "Declaración de la artista," in *María Freire* (Montevideo: Goethe-Institut, 1992).

27 The use in the 19th and 20th centuries of the term "primitive" to refer to early cultural production from Africa and Oceania, as well as to prehistoric European art and pre-Columbian art

from the three Americas, is now highly problematic. It is intimately bound to the history of European colonialism, racism, and the economic inequalities between what have been called the first and third worlds. In this text, I do use the word "primitive," but in a historical sense—that is, in the same way it was used by the artists, critics, and researchers from the postwar period studied here. In this context, the term "primitivism" is understood to refer to the widespread interest of artists and intellectuals from that period in what they judged to be "primitive." "Primitivist," meanwhile, refers to styles of modern production that contain references and allusions to what was deemed "primitive." See Jack D. Flam and Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the 'Modern,'" in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, by Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1993), 8–82; and Susan Hiller, *The Myth of Primitivism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2005). For a discussion of the phenomenon of primitivism in geometric abstraction from Latin America, see Ana M. Franco, *Neoclásicos: Edgar Negret y Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar entre París, Nueva York y Bogotá, 1944–1964* (Bogota: Ediciones Uniandes, 2019).

28 See Perry, "Primitivism and the 'Modern'"; and Hiller, *The Myth of Primitivism*.

29 Hannah Höch (1889–1978), a German artist close to Dadaism in Berlin, is an interesting exception. Her 1926 series of photomontages titled From an Ethnographic Museum (1924–34) makes use of fragments of photographs of masks from Oceania and Africa to critique the objectification of women and women's spaces. There is a need for further study of women`s relationships to primitivism and its ideological implications.

30 This is evident in the work of the Uruguayan women artists who came before Freire, among them Petrona Viera (1895–1960), who mostly made images of children and portraits. That said, there were, starting in the 19th century, cases of women artists who explored themes that exceeded the space of the feminine in the social imaginary. For a broader study of this phenomenon in the case of Argentine women artists, see Georgina Gluzman, *Trazos invisibles: Mujeres artistas en Buenos Aires (1890–1923)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2016); and Georgina Gluzman, "Argentine Women Artists at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Their Careers and Critical Fortunes," *Art Journal* 78, no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 10–28.

31 On the relationship between Max Bill and Argentine Inventionism and Brazilian Concrete Art, see García, *Abstract Crossings*, 107–47.

32 María Freire, quoted in José Pedro Costigliolo et. al., *Costigliolo: La vida de las formas* (Miami: Fundación Pablo Atchugarry, 2018), 26.

33 María Freire, quoted in Carbajal, *Las vanguardias irrumpen en los cincuenta*, 9.

34 Ibid., 9–10.

35 Exhibition brochure accompanying *Grupo de Arte No Figurativo* (1952), quoted in Costiglioli et al., *Costigliolo: La vida de las formas*, 24.

36 The history of the terms "Concrete art" and "Concretism" is long and complicated. Their origins lie in the debates of European artists from the 1920s and '30s. In 1930, Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg published *Art Concret*. The manifesto of the same name that appears on the pages of this single-issue magazine emphatically explains the difference between abstract art and Concrete art. The starting point for the former was the natural world, which the latter eschews entirely. Concrete art was grounded solely in the material elements of artistic creation (lines, planes, and colors). That meaning of Concrete art was adopted by Swiss artist Max Bill, and later by the Argentine artists clustered around *Arturo*. For them, Concrete art was in no way tied to nature; it had no metaphysical or metaphorical meaning. It is in that sense that the proposals of the artists in the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo of Montevideo can be seen as Concrete as well. For a wider discussion of the term "Concrete art" in Europe and Latin America, see Alexander Alberro, "Concrete Art and Invention," chap. 1 in *Abstraction in Reverse*.

37 Auguste Herbin, quoted in Costigliolo et al., *Costigliolo: La vida de las formas*, 24. Emphasis mine.

38 Elizabeth Catola Varela, "Las múltiples caras de la geometría: La obra de Costigliolo," in ibid., 26.

39 Gabriel Peluffo Linari, *Historia de la pintura uruguaya*, vol. 2, *Entre localismo y universalismo: Representaciones de la modernidad (1930–1960)* (Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1999), 105.

40 See *II Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo: Catálogo geral* ([São Paulo]: EDIAM, Ediçoes americanas de arte e arquitetura, 1953), http://bienal.org.br/publicacoes/4391; *III Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo: Catálogo geral* ([São Paulo]: EDIAM, Ediçoes americanas de arte e arquitetura, 1955), http://bienal.org.br/publicacoes/4392; and *IV Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo: Catálogo geral* ([São Paulo]: [Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo], 1957), http://bienal.org.br/publicacoes/4393.

41 As we will see later, this is evident in Freire's art, in her use of industrial materials and techniques to produce sculptures and paintings. There are a number of studies of the relationship between Concretism/geometric abstraction and industrialism. For the case of Argentina and Brazil, see, for instance, Le Blanc, "The Material of Form," 1–23. Lisa Blackmore has studied in depth the relationships between Venezuelan kinetic art and the processes of modernization under the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in the fifties. See Lisa Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948–1958* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). See also my essay "The Politics of Abstraction in Colombian Art During the Cold War," in which I examine the political implications of geometric abstraction in Colombia in light of projects of modernization and industrialization in the early sixties: Ana M. Franco, "The Politics of Abstraction in Colombian Art During the Cold War," chap. 9 in *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, eds. Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

42 For more information on Costigliolo, see Costigliolo et al., *Costigliolo: La vida de las formas*.

43 Carbajal, "Las vanguardias irrumpen en los cincuenta," 23.

44 Freire and Costigliolo were in Europe from 1957 to 1959 thanks to a fellowship awarded to Freire. While there, they established ties with European artists, visited museums, and expanded their artistic repertoire in general. See Peluffo Linari, *María Freire*, 123–43.

45 The exact date that Freire and Costigliolo were married is not known. According to Freire's niece Laura Zavala, who was very close to the artist, they got married at the insistence of Freire's mother before the 1957 trip to Europe. Zavala explains that marriage was not important to the artist herself. Conversation between the author and Laura Zavala, March 9, 2020, Montevideo.

46 Carbajal, "Las vanguardias irrumpen en los cincuenta," 23.

47 Miguel Carbajal, "Mucho más que la viuda de un Maestro," *El País de los Domingos* (November 29, 1987). Uncatalogued newspaper clipping, María Freire Archive, Museo de Bellas Artes Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo, Uruguay.

48 Rodríguez, "La vida en un universo de líneas y color."

49 Zavala in conversation with the author, March 9, 2020, Montevideo.

50 I would like to thank Andrea Giunta for drawing my attention to this point.

51 Aracy Amaral, interview by María Hirszman, *Arte!Brasileiros* website, December 21, 2020, https://artebrasileiros.com.br/category/arte/entrevista/. To illustrate this point, Amaral recounts the following anecdote: "In the 1970s, a director of the Guggenheim came here and I took him to meet a number of artists. I really would have liked him to see María Leontina's work, and I called her to set up an appointment. She told me, 'Aracy, be straight with me. Does he want to see my work or Milton's?' I told her he wanted to see her work. And she replied, 'I am really sorry, but I would rather not see him.' The case is outdated, but telling. It is a portrait of an era." My translation.

52 Ibid.

53 One could cite numerous examples of women artists and their life partners: Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Jo Nivison Hopper and Edward Hopper, Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy, Anni and Josef Albers, and many others. Recently, a number of researchers have studied the ways romantic relationships have affected the identity and production of women artists. They have also critically examined the traditional teacher/pupil relationship—the terms in which those partnerships tend to be read—and tried to demonstrate the active participation of women artists in the professional lives of their male companions. Examples of this recent research include Whitney Chadwick, *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnership*, ed. Isabelle De Courtivron (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993); Joan Marter, ed., *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, exh. cat. (Denver: Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2016); and Emma Lavigne, ed., *Couples modernes, 1900–1950: Dictionnaire des couples d'artistes de la fin du XIXè à la première moitié du XXè siècle* (Paris: Gallimard; Metz: Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2018). Here, I analyze only one aspect of the relationship between Freire and Costigliolo, namely the one that connects their marriage to the invisibilization her work has endured in the histories of 20th-century Uruguayan art and Concretism from the Southern Cone. There are many other aspects to be examined, however—among them, the intense relationship between Freire and Costigliolo's productions. That would require a meticulous comparison of their oeuvres and the critical and institutional receptions each has received.

54 I will discuss this in detail in this essay's closing section.

55 On Madí, see Gabriel Pérez Barreiro, "The Negation of All Melancholy: Arte Madí/Arte Concreto-Invención, 1944–1950," in *Art from Argentina, 1920–1994*, ed. David Elliott, exh. cat. (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1994), 54–65.

56 Rhod Rothfuss, "El marco: Un problema de plástica actual," *Arturo* (Summer 1944), facsimile ed. (Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2018), n.p., https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/

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