

Manuel Espinosa in Europe

**Josef Albers
Max Bill
Piero Dorazio
Manuel Espinosa
Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart**

Frieze Masters 2019 - Stand E7

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Manuel Espinosa and his European Grand Tour

Dr. Flavia Frigeri

Once upon a time, it was fashionable among young members of the British and northern European upper classes to embark on what came to be known as the Grand Tour. A rite of passage of sorts, the Grand Tour was predicated on the exploration of classical antiquity and Renaissance masterpieces encountered on a pilgrimage extending from France all the way to Greece. Underpinning this journey of discovery was a sense of cultural elevation, which in turn fostered a revival of classical ideals and gave birth to an international network of artists and thinkers. The Grand Tour reached its apex in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after which interest in the great classical beauties of France, Italy and Greece slowly waned.¹

Fast-forward to 1951, the year in which the Argentine artist Manuel Espinosa left his native Buenos Aires to embark on his own Grand Tour of Europe. Unlike his cultural forefathers, Espinosa was not lured by



Fig. 1 Founding members of the Concrete-Invention Art Association pictured in 1946. Espinosa is third from the right, back row. Photo: Saderman.

the qualities of classical and Renaissance Europe, but what propelled him to cross an ocean and spend an extended period of time away from home was the need to establish a dialogue with his abstract-concrete European peers. With the help of Tomás Maldonado, his long-time friend and co-founder of the group *Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención* (Concrete-Invention Art Association) [Fig. 1], who first visited Europe in 1948, Espinosa outlined an itinerary for his Grand Tour that took him to Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Holland. During his travels he made contact with leading figures of post-war geometrical abstraction, including Max Bill, Piero Dorazio, Georges Vantongerloo and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, among many others.² The journey, as much as the encounters, proved revelatory in shaping Espinosa's ideas around art for many years to come. The cultural exchange engendered by his Grand Tour is the central concern of this essay, which maps the networks established by Espinosa through his travels and the impact that these encounters had on the development of his own artistic vocabulary.

Where is Painting Headed?

In 1945, Espinosa was one of a number of artists taking part in a survey considering the future of painting.³ When asked the quintessentially loaded question ‘Where is Painting Headed?’, the artist resolutely stated that painting had to give way to all figurative references and take a sharp turn towards abstraction. Indeed, Espinosa had embraced this quest in his own work, having bid farewell to figuration in the same year.⁴ *Pintura* (Painting, 1945) [Fig. 2], the work reproduced alongside his firm response in *Contrápunto*, made this resolution most explicit. An irregularly shaped canvas, based on intersecting lines and asymmetrical planes, *Pintura* denied illusionistic models of representation, while also declaring the death of the picture frame. For Espinosa painting was, therefore, headed in the direction of flat planes, simple geometrical forms and rhythmical sequences of colour, modulating the canvas and seducing the viewer’s gaze.

In Espinosa’s rethinking of painting’s contemporary condition, the visit he paid to the painter Joaquín Torres García in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1943 was a momentous occasion.⁵ Between 1924 and 1932, Torres García lived in Paris, there he discovered constructivism and neo-plasticism and was the co-founder (together with Michel Seuphor) of the legendary Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square, 1929), group and magazine. By engaging with the work of a diverse range of abstract artists – including Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Hans Arp, Vantongerloo and Le Corbusier – Cercle et Carré established the parameters for an abstract lexicon that would soon be absorbed by the Abstraction-Création group founded by Theo van Doesburg in 1931. On leaving Paris in 1932, Torres García carried with him the constructivist ideals set forth by Cercle et Carré and would revisit them in the journal *Círculo y Cuadrado*, which played an important role in the evolution of geometric abstraction in Latin America. Most significantly, Torres García was instrumental in reorienting the avant-garde discourse in Latin American art by rejecting South America’s perceived cultural and political subordination in his famous ‘La Escuela del Sur’ (The School of the South, 1935) lecture.⁶

Given the primacy placed by Torres García on constructivism, and abstraction more generally, it comes as no surprise that Espinosa’s visit to Montevideo played a crucial role in the artist’s development of a new artistic lexicon. Many of his peers were, like him, greatly influenced by



Fig. 2

Torres García's ideas, and the magazine *Arturo* (1944) can be seen as a by-product of the language of abstraction pioneered by the Uruguayan artist. Rhod Rothfuss, one of the founders of *Arturo*, contributed a text, 'El Marco: Un problema de plástica actual' (The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art), which resonated with Espinosa's contemporary formal concerns, as expressed by *Painting*.⁷ This work can, in fact, be read as a double attack: on the one hand, it rejects traditional figurative painting by adopting a distinctly non-figurative register; on the other hand – in line with Rothfuss's predicament – it neglects, as Monica Amor notes, "orthogonal painting as the foundation of post-Renaissance illusionistic space through the strategy of the irregularly shaped cutout frame (*marco recortado*)."⁸

While *Arturo* was short-lived, its ideas fed into the creation of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención (AACI), a group and a magazine co-founded in November 1945 by Espinosa, Maldonado, and others. Ambitious in its ideals and remit, AACI took as a starting point Van Doesburg's notion of concrete art, formulated in the wake of his departure from *Cercle et Carré* in 1930. Colour, line and plane were central tenets of Van Doesburg's call for the autonomy of

painting through plasticity. AACI expanded this formal definition of concrete art by attaching to it a greater sense of political commitment.⁹ Espinosa's contribution to a document co-authored by members of AACI elucidates his understanding of the movement:

Painting, liberated by the mechanical inventions of the need to copy, is today in the best conditions ever to attend to its own values. This is the purpose of non-representational art in general, which is not an estrangement from mankind or disinterest from their essential problems, but, on the contrary, an affirmation of their mental and technical power.¹⁰

Espinosa reasserts here the primacy of painting. Concurrently he emphasizes how non-naturalistic representation made painting concrete. In other words, rather than being aloof AACI works aspired to break out of the bourgeois mould of elitist art and enter the wider arena of mankind. By rejecting existential or romantic values, AACI members were eager to familiarize "man with a direct relation to things, and not with the fiction of things."¹¹ Despite its aspirational nature, AACI came to a halt in 1949 when the association disbanded and affiliates went on to pursue their independent artistic paths.

Europe: 1951-1952

Certainly, the rupture of AACI's artistic project acted as a catalyst for Espinosa's decision to travel to Europe, and by 1951 the groundwork had been laid for him to set off on his Grand Tour. In fact, starting in 1947, artists affiliated with AACI had shown an increasing yearning towards European geometric abstraction, especially Swiss concrete art and Italian MAC (Movimento Arte Concreta/Movement of Concrete Art). As Maldonado recalled:

In the year 1948 our *splendid isolation* ends because we start to travel... I come to Europe that year. In Italy I meet Max Huber, Bruno Munari, Piero Dorazio, Achille Perilli, Gianni Dova, Gillo Dorfles. In Zurich I establish contact with the main representatives of Swiss concretism: Max Bill, Richard P. Lohse, Camille Graeser, and Verena Loewensberg. In Paris, with Georges Vantongerloo. Back in Buenos Aires my artistic activity, and not only mine, begins to be influenced mainly by the Swiss concretists, Vantongerloo, and, in an indirect way, Vordemberge-Gildewart.¹²

In just a few sentences Maldonado highlights here the existence of a global concretist network of artists operating beyond national borders and establishing a shared platform for research. The invitation received by Argentine concrete artists – including Espinosa – to exhibit photographs of their works at Libreria Salto in Milan in 1949 is testament to this interconnectedness between members of the expanded concretist network. Libreria Salto acted, in fact, as a hub for the development of MAC, a concretist movement founded by Dorfles, Gianni Monnet, Munari and Atanasio Soldati, embracing a broad range of abstract idioms.¹³ MAC's first exhibition was held at Libreria Salto, just a year before that of their Argentine peers, signalling a formal connection between the two movements. Thus, Espinosa's arrival to Europe had been preceded by the introduction of his work to a Milanese audience of like-minded artists, who he would meet in person during his stay.

In December 1951, Espinosa set sail for Europe. He arrived in Genoa and from there he travelled to Rome, where he was welcomed by the ebullient spirit engendered by the post-war reconstruction spree spreading across Italy. Dorazio, an abstract artist formally associated with Forma (Form) the group that had famously declared "we are interested in the form of the lemon, and not the lemon", became one of Espinosa's main referents during his Italian stay.¹⁴ Significantly, Dorazio had taken part in MAC's first exhibition and was closely involved in the organisation of 'Arte astratta e concreta in Italia' (Abstract and concrete art in Italy, 1951), an exhibition mapping the status of abstract and concrete art in Italy at the time. The show, held at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, closed a few months before Espinosa's arrival. However, it seems likely that he would have been acquainted with its contents thanks to the exhibition catalogue. From the perspective of this discussion it is important to note how this exhibition had made apparent, to both its participants and viewers, the existence of many abstractions and concretisms. Ostensibly, this line of thinking went on to inform Espinosa's approach to the many concrete and non-concrete examples of abstract art that he encountered on his European trip.

By this stage Espinosa had forsaken the shaped canvases of his early concrete days and was starting to develop a vocabulary based on simple geometrical forms. The primacy of the picture plane as a self-contained entity was reasserted, and with it came a growing attention to colour and form as conduits for a harmonious opposition of forces. The many formal stimuli that Espinosa absorbed during his European stay found an outlet in the drawings and paintings that he made while travelling. Significantly, however, he held them back for a few years after his return to Argentina and only showed them in 1959 in a solo



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

exhibition at Galería Van Riel in Buenos Aires. Two works, both titled *Untitled* (c. 1958) [Fig. 3, 4], are exemplary of Espinosa's post-European production. Compositionally akin, the paintings reveal Espinosa's exploration of signs in space as subtle shapes caress the colour-block backgrounds. Colour takes on a hegemonic force, here submitting to its aegis the curving lines.

Like Espinosa, Dorazio was also preoccupied with the syntax of colour, which brings us back to the Argentine artist's Grand Tour. It is, in fact, useful to consider what kind of formal devices and concerns underpinned his journey of concrete – no pun intended – discovery. Colour had long been a central concern for Dorazio, who once stated: "I personally dream of a 'method' to 'use colour' where technique and poetry could be woven together by a combination of levels of 'colour experience'."¹⁵ Dorazio conceived of colour in programmatic terms and located in it a powerful instrument that could at once unite conceptual and formal levels of experience. This is perhaps best expressed in *Preziosa* (1965) [Fig. 6, overleaf], in which the grid-like pattern is



Fig. 5

entrenched in a luminous web of criss-crossing brushstrokes. The weave dominating the compositional structure of *Preziosa* is undone in the almost contemporary work *Gagliarda* (1965) [Fig. 5] which bears a resonance with Espinosa's *Untitled* works of 1958. Both artists seem to be testing the curving and incomplete lines by subjugating them to the dictates of colour. While Dorazio probed colour throughout his oeuvre, Espinosa went on to explore a range of other formal issues.

After Rome, Espinosa's Grand Tour took him to Florence, Milan and then Zürich, where he met one of concrete art's leading figures: the architect, sculptor, painter, industrial designer, graphic designer and writer Bill. In 1932 Bill had joined the Abstraction-Création artists' association in Paris and in 1936 he revisited Van Doesburg's original concept of concrete art, claiming that "concrete painting and sculpture are the arrangement of the optically perceptible. their means of arrangement are colours, space, light and movement. the forming of these elements results in new realities. abstract ideas that

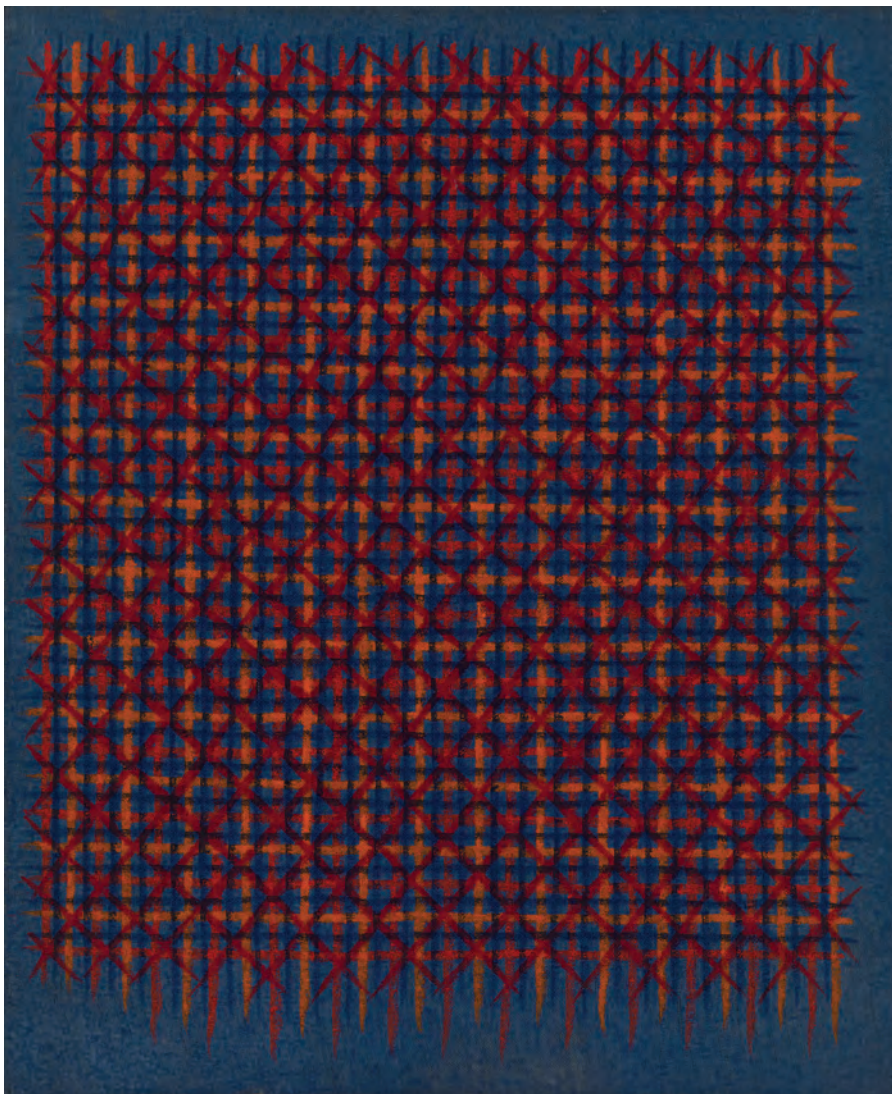


Fig. 6

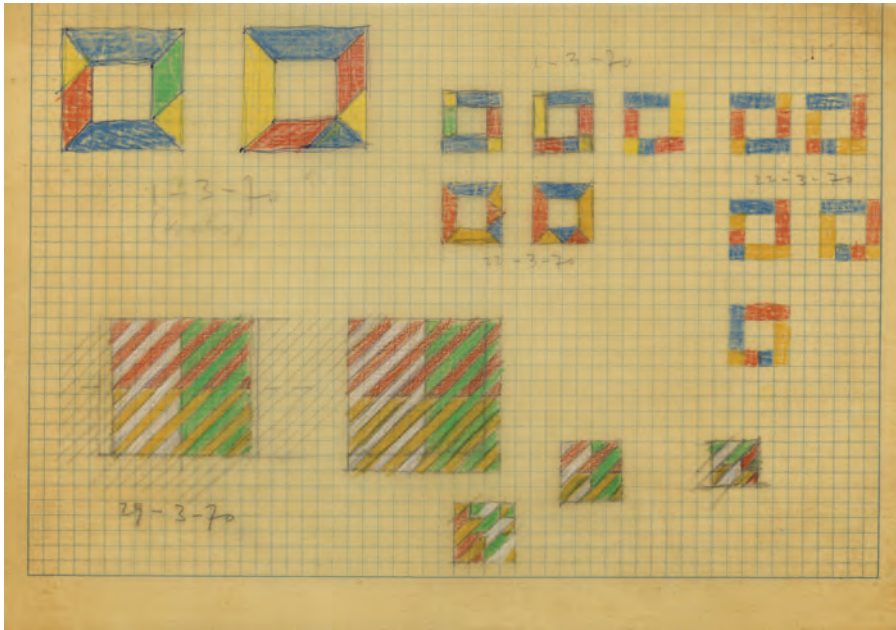


Fig. 7

previously only existed in the imagination become visible in a concrete form.”¹⁶ Essentially, concrete art held the power to make abstract ideas tangible, a notion that Bill extended to architecture and other realms of creative production. In addition, the Swiss artist played an instrumental role in the global dissemination of concrete values through his theoretical writings and the organisation of seminal exhibitions, including ‘Concrete Art’ at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1944 and ‘Allianz’ at Kunsthaus Zürich in 1947. Bill had joined the Allianz Association of Modern Swiss Artists in 1937 and in 1941 he founded the Allianz publishing house in Zürich, which in the late 1940s distributed its publications at Libreria Salto in Milan, reasserting the existence of a strong international network of concretist relations.

At the time of Espinosa’s visit in 1952, Bill was at the helm of one of his most ambitious projects to date, namely the HfG Ulm School of Design, which he had co-founded the previous year. Like Maldonado before him, Espinosa recognised

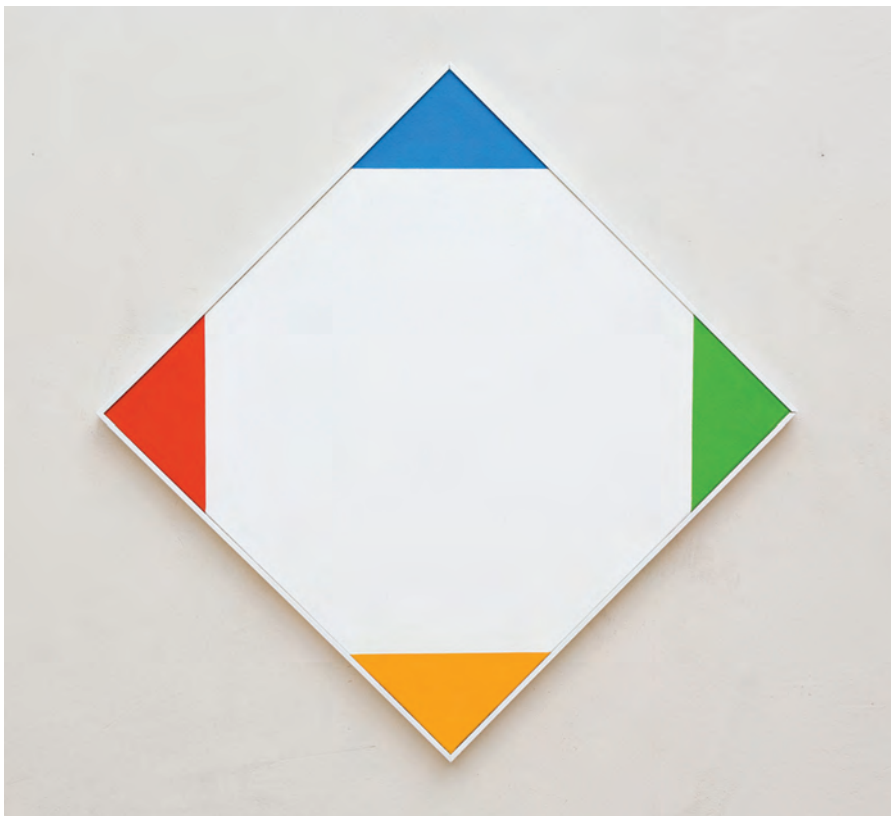


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

in Bill's formal and theoretical approach to concrete art an important precedent. Specifically Bill's views on arithmetical and geometrical progressions and the correspondences he sought between colour and music had an impact on Espinosa's work. A work on paper like *Untitled* (1970) [Fig. 7, prior page] elucidates Bill's systemic approach to painting. Variations on the same theme are spelled out here as the artist trials different configurations. In *Vier Akzente aus dem Quadrat*, (1970) [Fig. 8, opposite] we can appreciate the carefully studied interactions between form and colour pursued by Bill. The sculpture *Viereckfläche mit gleich langen Begrenzungen* (1952) [Fig. 9] is similarly concerned with form as a carefully regulated entity. But perhaps most interestingly, *Simultaneous Construction of 2 Progressive Systems* (1945-1951) [Fig. 10, overleaf], posits the co-existence of two distinct and yet equally progressive systems. Straight lines of varying thicknesses and squares of different sizes share the same plane on equal terms. The apex is reached as the rectilinear lines penetrate the field of squares, lending the composition an escalating rhythmical feeling.



Fig. 10





Fig. 11



Fig. 12

For his part, Espinosa became increasingly interested in dissonant rhythmical progression, as demonstrated by works like *Untitled* (c. 1959) [Fig. 15, overleaf] and two works *Untitled* (1961) [Fig. 11, 12]. The latter two are especially relevant in relation to Bill's experimentation with multiple configurations around the same form. In both cases, Espinosa takes one basic unit, which he reassesses through different colour combinations. The alignment of the tilted squares is, in fact, regulated by irregularity, which in turn enhances the rhythmical progression of the composition. The lead image for Espinosa's show at Van Riel [Fig. 16, overleaf], is similarly based on one module, the half circle, which like a gradient scale ascends and descends in varying degrees of intensity. Underpinning this and other related works is a rhythmical feel, which calls to mind variations on a musical score. As Bill had posited, colour and rhythm were intrinsically connected: in his words "the sounds and the physics in music approximately correspond to what we have in the material, in colour."¹⁷ By proposing the conflation of colour and music, Bill was notionally lending

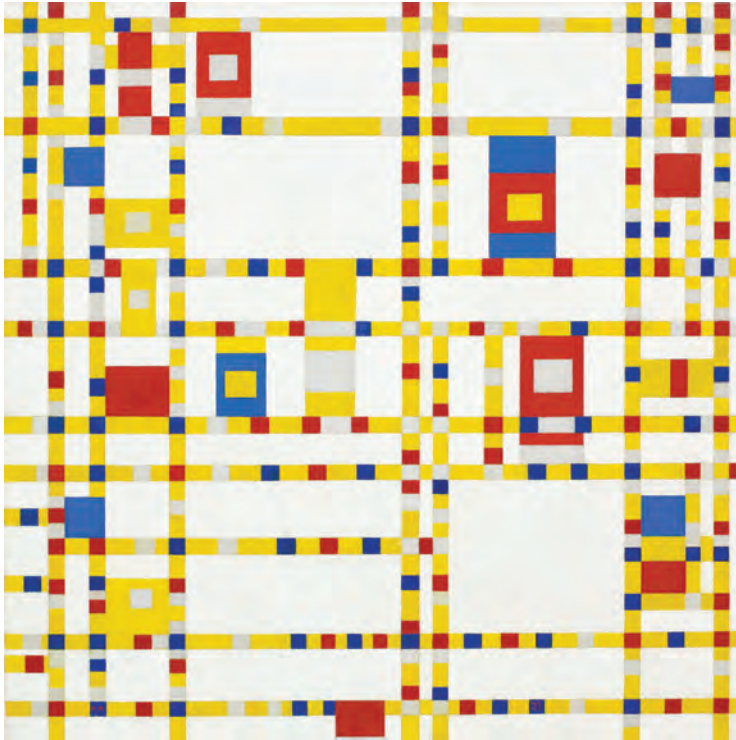


Fig. 13

rhythm to art and colour to music. Espinosa's work, with its spiralling forms and interlocking systems, subscribed to the same musical principles. He made this most explicit by rendering homage to Erik Satie in a series of works made in the 1970s. At the time he stated: "If I could manage to enunciate in my painting what Satie expresses in his *Trois gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, I would consider myself happy."¹⁸ (Espinosa's *TRES GYMNOPEDIES* (1979) [Fig. 17, overleaf]).

Naturally, the influence of Piet Mondrian permeates both Bill's and Espinosa's work. For one, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-1943) [Fig. 13] was premised on the transliteration of Jazz's syncopated beat into an abstract composition, showing how the two could go hand in hand. The journalist and artist Charmion Von Wiegand, who regularly visited Mondrian, stated: "They [sic] rhythm is so strange, so dissonant so extraordinary in its vivacity, without being dramatic, or lyrical or monumental – completely plastic in its expression."¹⁹ Von Wiegand emphasises here the work's plasticity as its core value, an aspect which again would have struck a chord with Espinosa. Mondrian was an artist who Espinosa



Fig. 15

en bon pouvoir de notre passage
à Sunderell, V-G, Kröller-Müller et etc

à Espinosa / K. Müller 18-4-52 .

*"en bon souvenir de votre passage
à ausstellen, V-G, Kröller-Müller"*

*"as a memento to your visit to the
exhibition, V-G, Kröller-Müller"*
(Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, The Netherlands)

- dedication by Vordemberge-
Gildewart to Espinosa, April 1952

Fig. 14

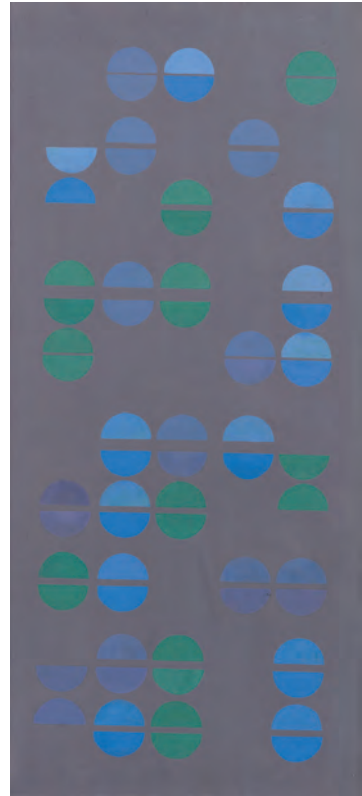


Fig. 15

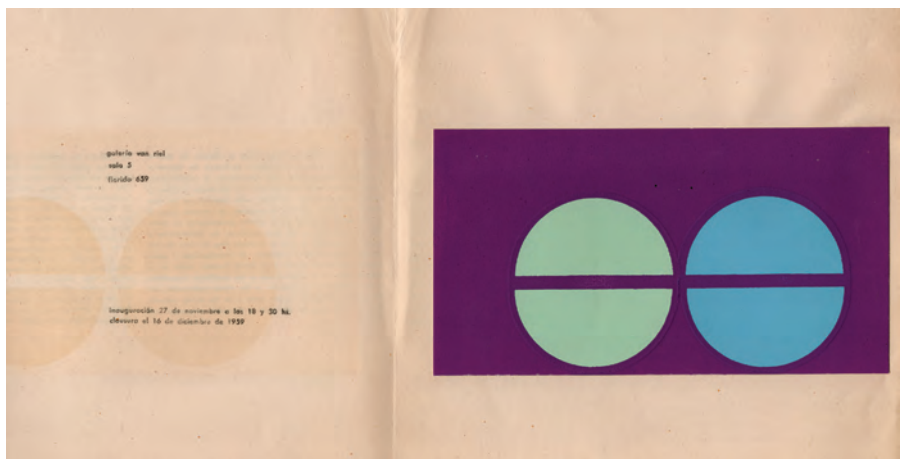


Fig. 16 Exhibition catalogue, *Manuel Espinosa*, Galería van Riel, Buenos Aires, 1959.

had long admired for his highly disciplined geometrical arrangements. And even more so for his ability to establish a dynamic tension between the works' various coloured areas; a feat which Espinosa was also undertaking with the *Untitled* works in 1961. Once again, it was thanks to the Grand Tour that Espinosa had the opportunity to appreciate Mondrian's works, as well as Kazimir Malevich's, whom he also greatly admired, in the flesh. The memory of this experience added to the repertoire of techniques collected by Espinosa at this time. In 1972, he would make his admiration for Mondrian manifest by taking part in '1972: Año centenario del nacimiento de Mondrian', a tribute exhibition to the Dutch artist held at Galería Lirio in Buenos Aires.

Espinosa's Grand Tour comprised two other key encounters, both of which were in all likelihood facilitated by Bill. The Swiss artist had offered introductions to his long-time friends and peers Vantongerloo and Vordemberge-Gildewart, based in Paris and Amsterdam respectively. In both instances, Espinosa was adamant wanting to make contact with the two artists, who had both been associated with De Stijl and whose paintings contained geometrical constructions full of juxtapositions and tensions. The admiration was mutual and testament to this are two catalogues with handwritten notes by Vantongerloo and Vordemberge-Gildewart found in Espinosa's library [Fig. 14, prior page].

Espinosa paid a visit to Vantongerloo in Impasse du Rouet in Paris, which, as Perazzo noted, was of fundamental influence to Espinosa's "initial experiments into unlimited space."²⁰ Vantongerloo's works from the late 1930s specifically, like *Fonction – courbes brun – verdâtre* (Function – curves brown – greenish, 1938), offered an important precedent for the conceptualisation of line in space as expressed by Espinosa's works on paper from the late 1950s. The visit to Vantongerloo was significant and Espinosa moved on to Amsterdam where he connected with Vordemberge-Gildewart.

Speaking of Vordemberge-Gildewart's compositions from 1948 onwards – like *Composition No. 194* (1953) [Fig. 18, overleaf] – Dietrich Helms explains that "[he] was starting to knit together the field of the painting: it was not sufficient simply to place isolated colours in relationships with one another, creating harmony between them. Imaginary connections can be made by the viewer using suggestions by the artist, enabling an interrelation to be created between the coloured forms. The chromatic

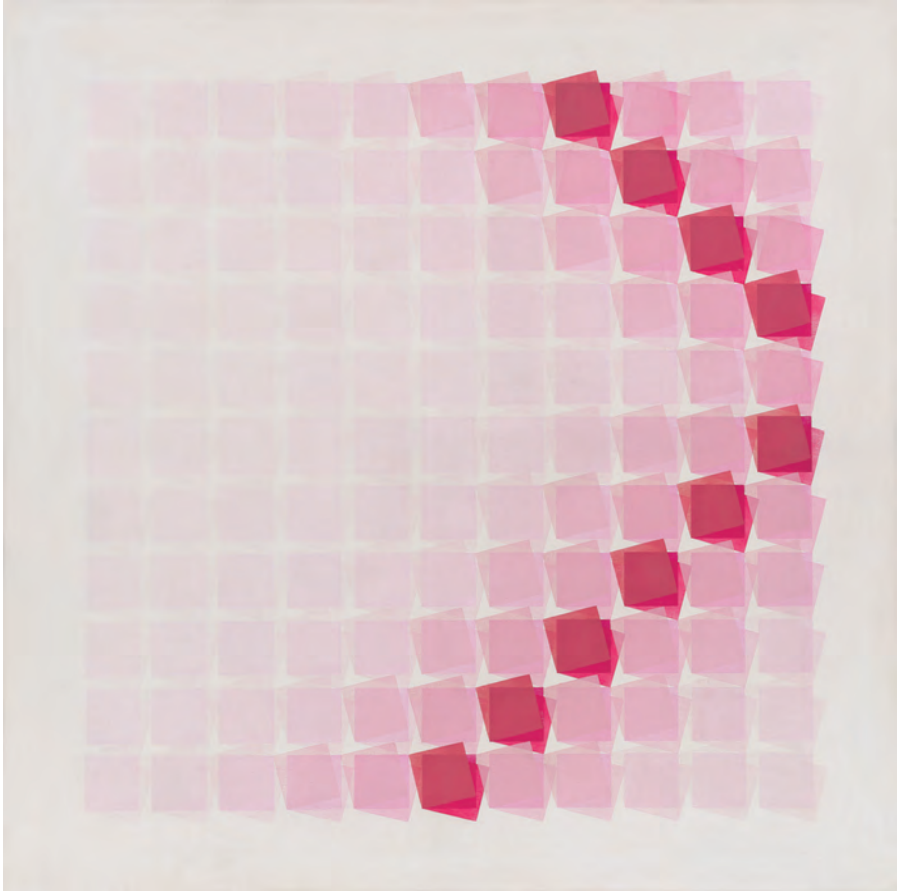


Fig. 17

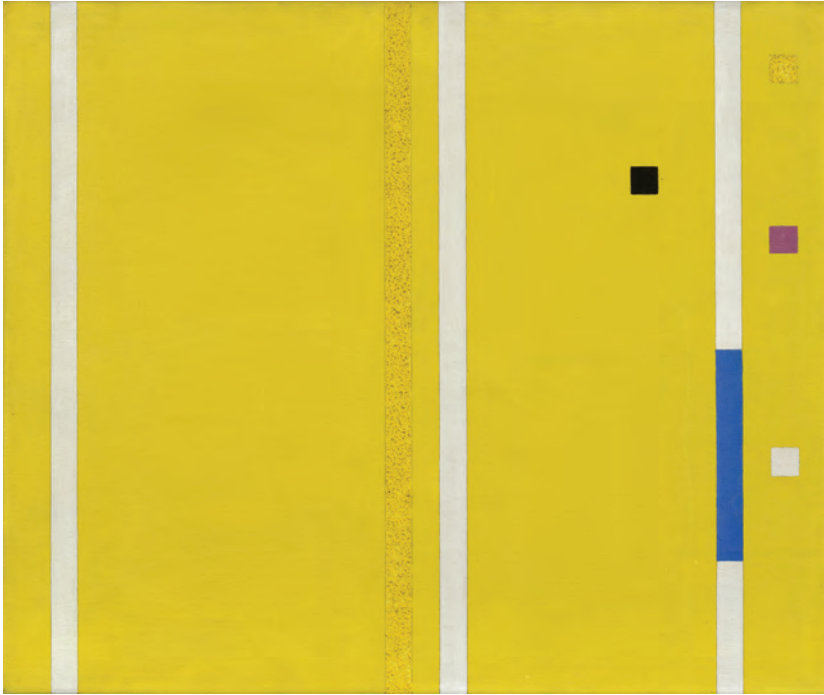


Fig. 18

relationship has a constructed basis.”²¹ Espinosa was particularly receptive to this idea of a “constructed basis” as a formal and conceptual device. Operating within the remits of a construction was a constant concern for him. For example, in one of his *Untitled* (1961) [Fig. 19] works he overlays multiple compositional registers: as his base layer he takes the square format of the canvas and within its perimeter he lays out five rows containing five squares each. Like building blocks, the squares are there to be manipulated, and despite the overall clarity of the structure there is a strong sense of instability. Change seems imminent and the variably coloured squares enforce this impression. In 1924, Vordemberge-Gildewart had suggested that ‘Material is Energy’ and Espinosa made this visible by enforcing the push and pull between the composition’s constituent parts.²²

When speaking of squares, Josef Albers’s extensive engagement with the square immediately comes to mind. It is uncertain whether the two artists crossed paths, however, the presence of a volume on Albers in Espinosa’s library confirms the latter’s interest in the work of the German artist.

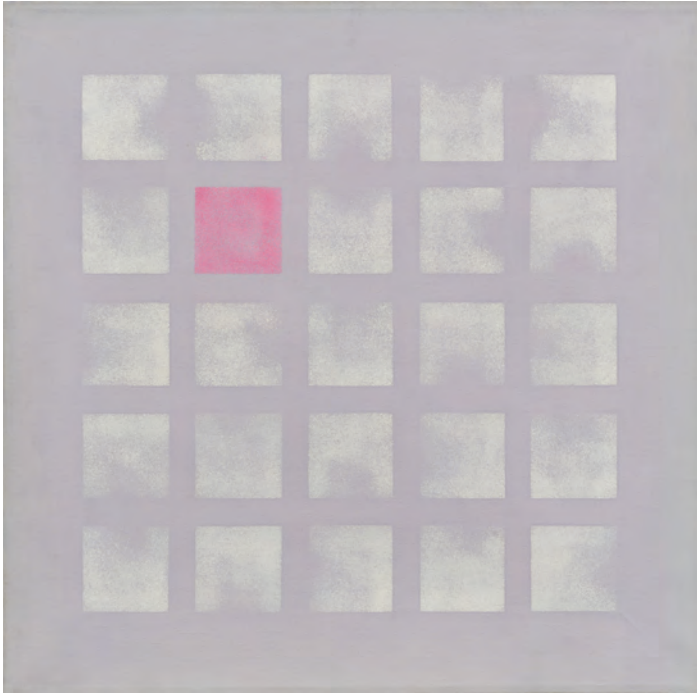


Fig. 19

Starting in 1950, Albers probed the relationship between colour and geometry in his *Homage to the Square* series [Fig. 20, 21, overleaf]. Stable and contained pictures, the *Homage to the Square* works with their fixed configuration of nested squares were treated by Albers as a platform for the exploration of colour. In a way, the *Homages to the Square* should be read as Albers's desire to control colour, which to him represented the most relative medium in art. Colour, as discussed above, was one of Espinosa's constant preoccupations. The control over colour and its effects was, in fact, something he pondered extensively throughout his entire oeuvre. Perhaps, though, the works he made in the 1960s make the need to be in control of colour and not be controlled by colour most apparent. In *Variación Cromática* (1966) [Fig. 22, overleaf], for instance, colour combinations are carefully distilled so as to lend a sense of optical vibrancy to the work. Contrast here is represented by the assimilation of a black canvas with a white one. At the same time, the reversal of the colour scheme and its interaction with the paintings' varying backgrounds resonate with Albers's consideration that by sheer juxtaposition carefully studied colour combinations could "cause the most boring gray to dance".²³

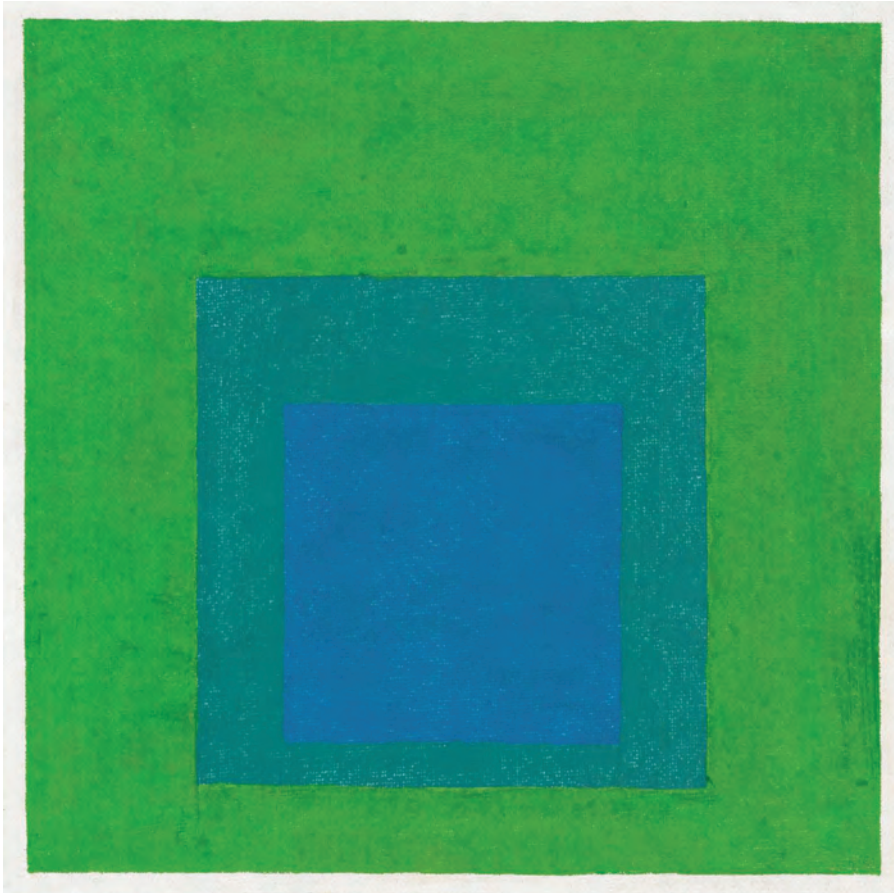


Fig. 20

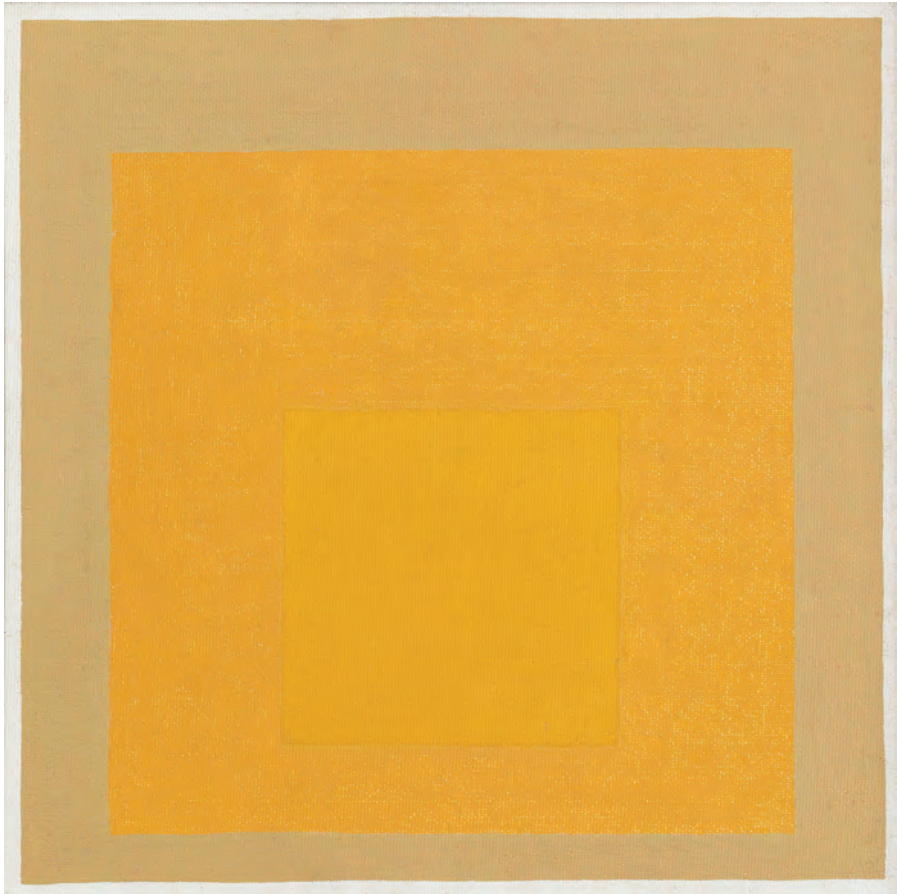


Fig. 21

Europe: 1960s

In the early 1960s Espinosa set off on another Grand Tour of Europe. On this occasion, his time was evenly split between Italy and Spain. The artistic landscape had substantially shifted since his first European visit ten years earlier. Kinetic, pop and minimalist tendencies were coming to the fore, while concrete abstraction and the ever-so-powerful Informel were slowly losing ground. Nevertheless, Espinosa was able to bridge the gap between his earlier concretist leaning and the emerging kinetic movement. Like concrete art, kineticism was also slated to become a far-reaching tendency, with branches extending across many different countries, where Milan and Paris represented two important hubs for its emergence. Through his acquaintance with Bruno Munari, Espinosa was most certainly exposed to the creation and development of *Arte programmata*, a movement championed by Munari that emphasised optical perception and theatricality through the manipulation of light sources and geometrical forms. One of *Arte programmata*'s ambitions was to undermine the hegemonic role of individual artists, while also challenging the art system and its conventions by subscribing to the logic of the multiple. While Espinosa never explored the multiple as an artistic possibility, he did veer away from the more traditional painting by taking part in a textile design competition in 1967, for which he was awarded the first prize as well as several honourable mentions.

Another significant development in the history of kinetic art was the founding of Group de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV, Visual Arts Research Group) in Paris in 1960. Like *Arte programmata*, GRAV aspired to undermine the romantic notion of the solitary genius and reinforce the importance of collective activity instead. Like *Arte programmata*, GRAV artists experimented with a wide spectrum of kinetic and optical effects, and, in addition, spectators were invited to actively participate, lending to the works and the environments a decidedly interactive slant. The Argentine artist Julio Le Parc, who had left Argentina for Paris in 1958, was one of the founders and leaders of GRAV. He returned to his native country in 1964, when invited to participate along with other GRAV members in the International Prize at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, one of Buenos Aires' most ambitious and experimentally inclined institutions and exhibition spaces. As part of their contribution, Julio Le Parc, with GRAV, revised the first version of their manifesto 'No More Mystifications!' A programmatic statement, emphasising the importance of opening "the current circuit of

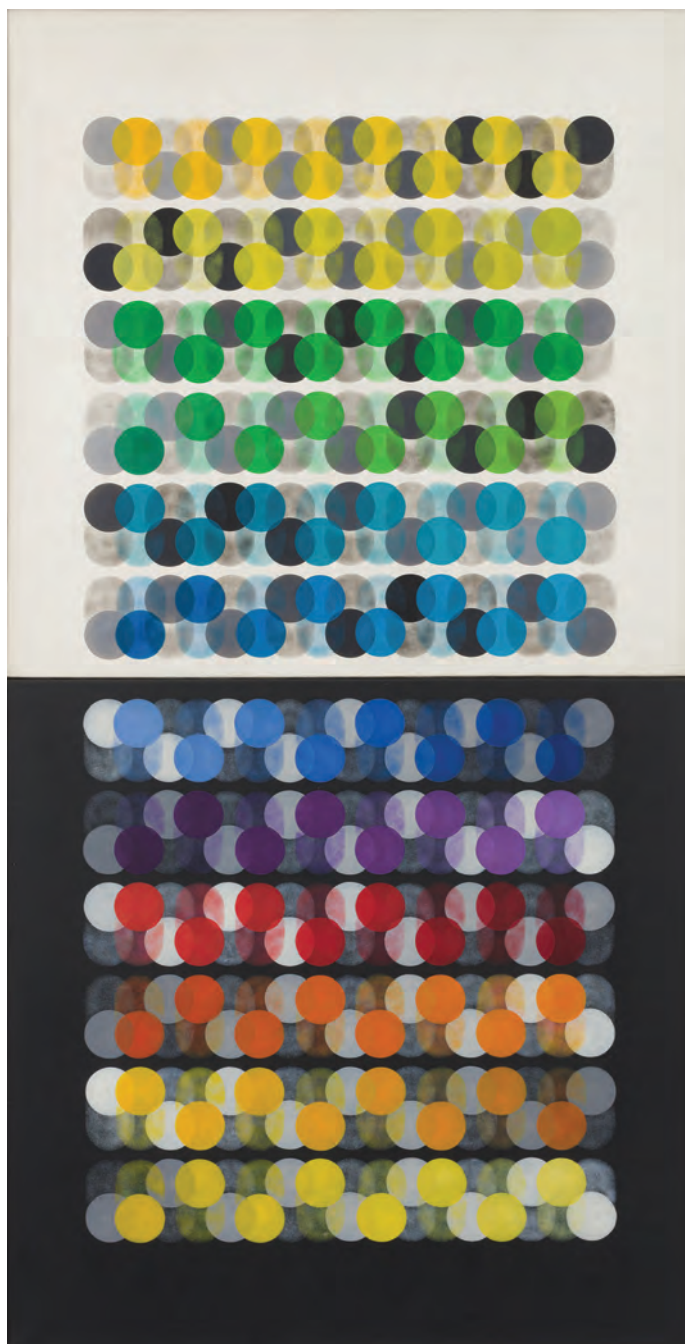


Fig. 22

art” to the public, GRAV’s and consequently Le Parc’s concern was singlehandedly geared at spectators.²⁴ As their slogan proclaimed: “It is forbidden not to participate. It is forbidden not to touch. It is forbidden not to break.”²⁵ Such a call to arms unleashed the potential for art to actively engage its audiences, an aspect that Espinosa was also keen on. Moreover, the commitment shown by GRAV and other kinetic movements towards optical-sensorial experience struck a chord with Espinosa’s contemporary research interests. In the 1960s the artist had, in fact, developed an interest in optical effects achieved through the modulation of light and colour to the point that the famous Colombian art critic Marta Traba referred to him as a “pioneer of kinetic investigations”.²⁶

Buenos Aires: 1968

By the end of the 1960s, Espinosa had spent two extended periods of time in Europe, his art had gone through several transitions and the shaped canvases of his early concretist days were a distant memory. The yearning to make art more accessible to a wider audience, which he had made manifest in his contribution to the ‘Manifiesto invencionista’, found an outlet in the ambitious display structure that Espinosa masterminded for his participation in the ‘Nuevo ensamble’ (New Ensemble) show held at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in 1968. The installation, which extended from the wall down to the floor, consisted of eighteen canvases measuring 125 x 125 cm each. Poignantly titled *18 variaciones sobre un mismo tema: disminuyendo and crescendo in blue* (18 Variations on a single theme: decreasing and increasing in blue), the installation [Fig. 24, overleaf] produced an optical effect through the reverberations triggered by the colour permutations spreading across the surface of the eighteen canvases. The response in the eye of the viewer was an important aspect in the existence of these works, making the audience an active participant rather than a passive recipient in the formation of the work’s meaning. Thus, returning to the opening question – ‘Where is Painting Headed?’ – one could assume that by 1968 painting was in Espinosa’s mind a multi-dimensional entity endowed with the potential for constant change: no longer a static object, painting was headed in the direction of optical immersion.



Fig. 23

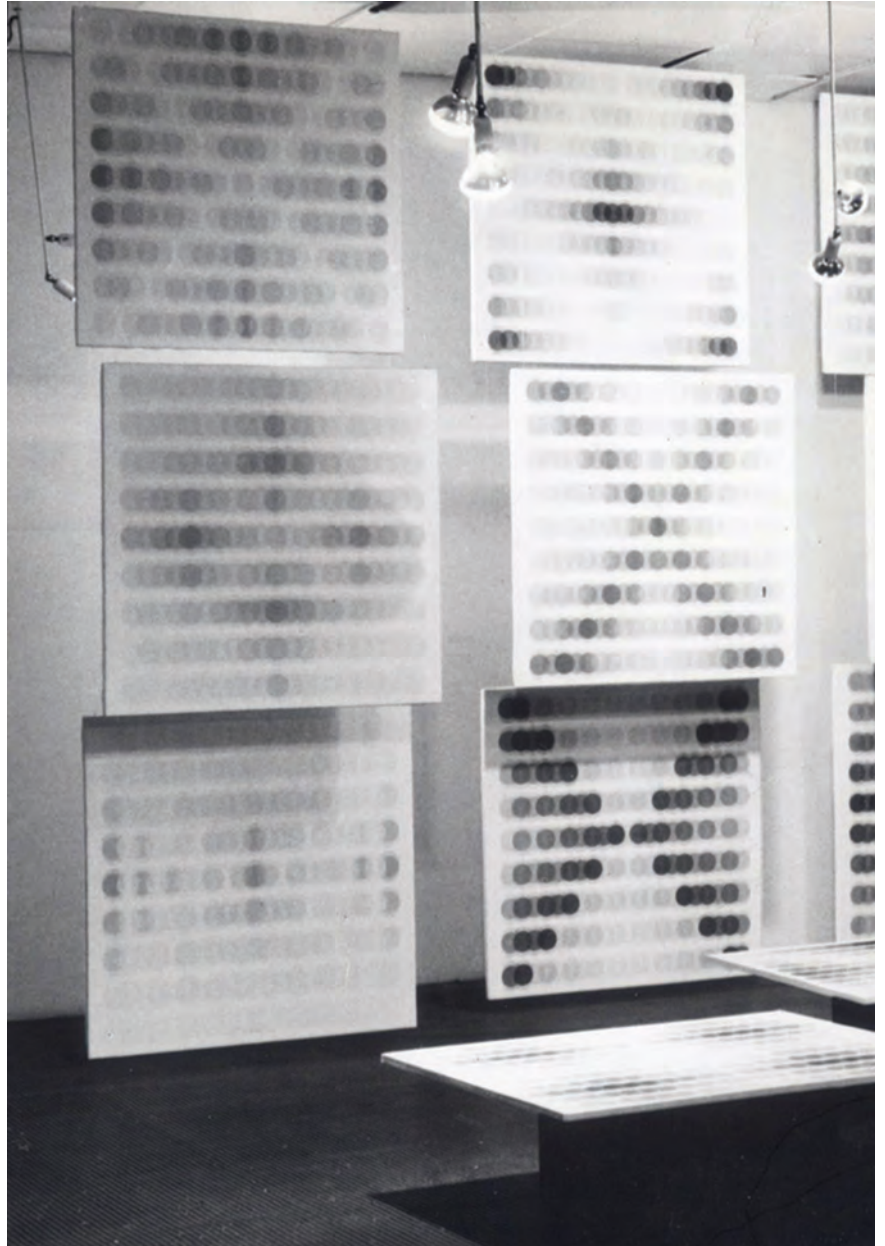
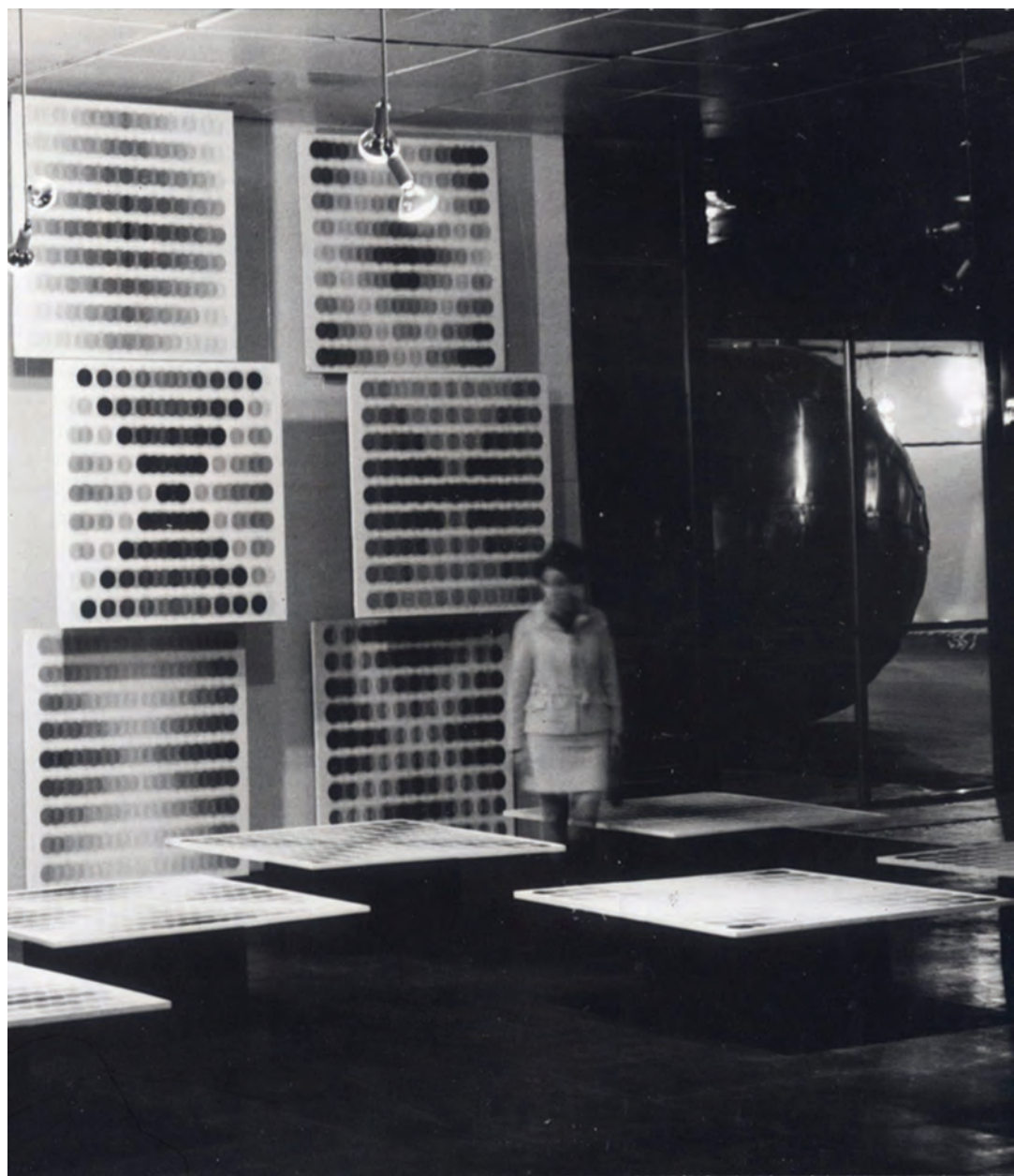


Fig. 24 Installation, 'Nuevo ensamble' (New Ensemble), Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1968. Photo: Facio Damico.

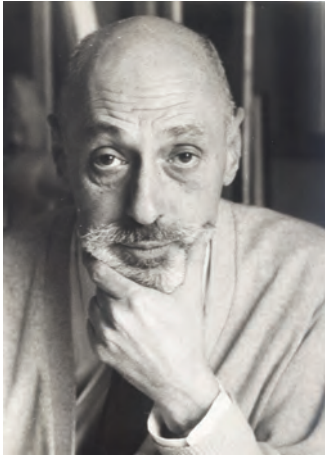


Endnotes:

- 1 For a comprehensive history of the Grand Tour see Andrew Wilton and Ilaria Bignamini (eds.) *Grand Tour: the lure of Italy in the eighteenth century* (London: Tate Gallery, 1996).
- 2 According to Nelly Perazzo, 'The existence of catalogues from that time in Manuel Espinosa's archive shows us that he knew, visited and studied various artists of Constructivist abstraction – Richard Lohse, V. Loewensberg, C. Graeser, Hans Fischli, Heinrich Eichmann, Albers and Arp', in her text 'Reality that Wondering', in *Manuel Espinosa* (Buenos Aires: Colección Manuel Espinosa, 2012) p. 242.
- 3 'Adónde va la pintura?', in *Contrapunto*, Vol 1, No. 5, August 1945.
- 4 According to Nelly Perazzo, *Mujer peinándose* (1944) is Espinosa's last figurative painting. See Perazzo, 'Reality, that Fantasy', in *Manuel Espinosa*, p. 234.
- 5 For a comprehensive overview of Espinosa's biography and survey of his oeuvre, I refer the reader to Nelly Perazzo's contributions to *Manuel Espinosa*.
- 6 Joaquín Torres-García, 'The School of the South', in *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, by Yve-Alain Bois et al (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2001) pp. 133-136.
- 7 Rhod Rothfuss, 'The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art', in *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, pp. 139-140.
- 8 Mónica Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944-1969* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016) p. 17.
- 9 For an in-depth discussion of AACI and politics see Amor, *op. cit.*
- 10 Manuel Espinosa in Perazzo, 'Reality, that Utopia', in *Manuel Espinosa*, p. 237.
- 11 Edgar Bayley et al, 'Manifiesto Invencionista', quoted in Amor, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- 12 Tomás Maldonado in Amor, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 13 For a history of MAC, see Luciano Berni Canani and Giorgio Di Genova (eds.) *MAC/Espace: arte concreta in Italia e Francia, 1948-1958* (Bologna: Bora, 1999); and Luciano Caramel (ed.) *M.A.C.: movimento arte concreta*, (Milano: Electa, 1984).

- 14 'Manifesto del gruppo di Forma' (Manifesto of the Forma group), in *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, edited by Germano Celant (New York, NY: Guggenheim Publications, 1994) p. 712.
- 15 Piero Dorazio in Francis M. Naumann, 'Readable and Reversible from Beginning to End', in *Piero Dorazio: Paintings of the Fifties* (New York: Achim Moeller Fine Art, 2000) p. 8.
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- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Manuel Espinosa in Elena Oliveras, 'Manuel Espinosa (1912-2006): The Singularity of a Universal Artist', in *Manuel Espinosa* (Buenos Aires: Colección Manuel Espinosa, 2012) p. 96.
- 19 Charmion Von Wiegand in Nancy J. Troy, *The afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago, IL/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- 20 Perazzo, 'Reality, that Wondering', in *Manuel Espinosa*, p. 243.
- 21 Dietrich Helms, 'Stages in the development of V-G's work', in *Vordemberge-Gildewart: The complete works*, edited by Dietrich Helms and Arta Valstar-Verhoff (Munich: Prestel, 1990) p. 243.
- 22 Antje von Graevenitz, 'V-G's striving for the Absolute in Art', in *Vordemberge-Gildewart: The complete works*, p. 209.
- 23 Josef Albers in Heinz Liesbrock (ed.) *Josef Albers: interaction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018) p. 107.
- 24 'No More Mystifications!' by Julio Le Parc / GRAV – Group de Recherche d'Art Visuel, in *Listen here now! Argentine art of the 1960s: writings of the avant-garde*, edited by Inés Katzenstein (New York, NY/London: Museum of Modern Art/Thames & Hudson, 2004) p. 56.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Marta Traba in Oliveras, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Manuel Espinosa



Manuel Espinosa was born in 1912 in Buenos Aires, Argentina and died in 2006.

Manuel Espinosa is known for his participation in the Asociación de Arte Concreto-Invencción, established in Buenos Aires in 1943. He was one of the forefathers of geometric art in Argentina. As part of the Asociación de Arte Concreto-Invencción, he produced work in line with their push to move away from traditional painting, to a radical exclusively non-figurative alternative.

In the 1950s Espinosa travelled to Europe and made contact with some of the leading constructive artists of the time including Max Bill, Georges Vantongerloo and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildeward. Influenced by these artists, Espinosa embraced the idea that creating variations upon a theme could offer a systematic and precise understanding of a particular form. Following this, Espinosa focused on constructing paintings primarily from geometric elements, characterised by a rigorous system of order. The arranged squares and circles in serial patterns investigate the subtle effects of space and colour, exploring optical sensations of depth and movement. Espinosa employed transparencies and juxtapositions that generate an optical play of mesmerising effect.

In 2018 Stephen Friedman Gallery presented 'Black and White: Works on Paper from the 1970s' to coincide with the launch of a new publication on

Manuel Espinosa's works on paper (produced by La Colección Espinosa). In 2019 Espinosa has a two-person exhibition with Luis Tomasello 'Tomasello and Espinosa. Around the Square' at Museum of Contemporary Art of Buenos Aires (MACBA), Argentina.

Recent solo exhibitions include: 'Manuel Espinosa', Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (2018); 'Manuel Espinosa - Light, colour and movement', Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Salta, Argentina; toured to Museo Emilio Caraffa, Córdoba, Argentina (2015); 'Manuel Espinosa', Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, England (2014); 'Manuel Espinosa: Geometría en Movimiento', Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2013); 'Manuel Espinosa: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1960s and 1970s', Sicardi Gallery, Houston, Texas, USA (2013); 'Manuel Espinosa: Drawings and Paintings, 1950s - 1970s', Sicardi Gallery, Houston, Texas, USA (2010); 'Espinosa', Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Neuquén, Argentina (2009); 'Manuel Espinosa. Anthology on Paper', Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2003) and 'Manuel Espinosa. Rosario Prize 2001', Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes, Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina (2001).

Notable group exhibitions include: 'The Illusive Eye', El Museo del Barrio, New York, USA (2016); 'Seeing Around Corners', Turner Contemporary, Margate, England (2016); 'Real/Virtual, Arte Cinético argentino de los años sesenta', Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2012); '50 Years of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención', Instituto Cultural Iberoamericano, Buenos Aires, Argentina (1995); 'Abstraction in the XX Century', Museo de Arte Moderno Buenos Aires, Argentina (1985); 'Vanguards of the 1940s', Arte Concreto-Invención, Arte Madí, Perceptismo, Museo Eduardo Sívori, Buenos Aires, Argentina (1980); 'Two Trends: Geometry—Surrealism', Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina (1975); 'Manuel O. Espinosa--Tomás Maldonado', Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos, Buenos Aires, Argentina (1947); and 'First Exhibition of the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención', Salon Peuser, Argentina (1946).

Espinosa's works are included in prominent collections internationally, including the Fondo Nacional de los Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, USA; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas Sofía Imber, Caracas, Venezuela; Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, USA; Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection, New York, USA.

Josef Albers

Josef Albers was born in 1888 in Bottrop, Germany and died in 1976 in Connecticut, USA.

Albers is best known for his 'Homage to the Square' paintings. With a concise compositional simplicity, this series is an austere and profound examination of colour.

Albers became a student at the Bauhaus in 1920 and joined the faculty in 1922. Pressure from the Nazis forced the school to close and in 1933 Josef and Anni Albers emigrated to North Carolina, USA, where they founded the art department at Black Mountain College. In 1950 Albers was invited to direct a newly formed department of design at Yale University School of Art, Connecticut.

'Josef Albers: Homage to the Square' opened in Caracas, Venezuela in 1964 and travelled to 22 venues across the United States and Latin America. In 1971 Albers became the first living artist to be awarded a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Recent exhibitions include The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2016); Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (2018) and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2018).

Max Bill

Max Bill was born in 1908 in Winterthur, Switzerland and died in 1994 in Berlin, Germany.

Bill was a great polymath: an artist, architect, industrial and graphic designer, teacher and politician. He studied at the Bauhaus under Josef Albers, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Oskar Schlemmer between 1927-29. Using mathematics as a structuring method or process, Bill sought to create a precise and universal visual language capable of capturing the rhythms of the twentieth century. His innovative use of geometric abstraction defined the conventions of Swiss design for decades to come and his influence spread as far as Latin America, where his work is celebrated as a seminal figure in Concrete Art.

Recent exhibitions include Fundación Juan March, Madrid (2018) and Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Winterthur (2019).

Piero Dorazio

Piero Dorazio was born Piero D'Orazio in 1927 in Rome, Italy and died in 2005 in Todi, Italy.

Dorazio's work explores colour field painting, lyrical abstraction and other forms of abstract art. He studied architecture at the University of Rome from 1945 to 1951, joining the Arte Sociale group and co-founding the group Forma 1. Dorazio later travelled to the United States, where he met Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko and Clement Greenberg. In 1957 he had his first solo exhibition at Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome. From 1960 to 1969 he taught at the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania and went on to hold many academic positions in the United States.

He exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1960, 1966 and 1988. During the following years he was commissioned to create a series of mosaics in the subway stations of Rome. Notable exhibitions include Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1979); Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (1979) and Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome (1983).

Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart

Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart was born in 1899 in Osnabrück, Germany and died in 1962 in Ulm, Germany.

Vordemberge-Gildewart was a painter, typographer and teacher. He was one of the first artists to work throughout his career in an abstract style. In 1919 he moved to Hannover to study architecture and sculpture at the School of Arts and Crafts and the Polytechnic and began to paint that same year. Vordemberge-Gildewart joined the De Stijl group in 1924 and produced geometrical abstract pictures, frequently with a diagonal emphasis. In 1927 he founded the avant-garde group Die Abstrakten Hannover with Kurt Schwitters, Hans Nitzschke and Carl Buchheister and in 1929 he had his first solo exhibition at Galerie Povolozky, Paris. He moved to Berlin in 1936, seeking refuge from the cultural censure of the Nazi regime. He later fled to Switzerland and thereafter to Amsterdam where he remained.

Notable group exhibitions include Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1938) and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1939). A major retrospective exhibition travelled from IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, Valencia to Museum Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden (1996–97).

Artwork figures:

Titlepage artwork

Manuel Espinosa

Untitled, 1967

Oil on canvas

120 x 50cm (47 ¼ x 19 ¾in)

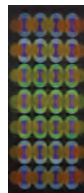


Fig. 2

Manuel Espinosa

Pintura, 1945

Oil on hardboard

88 x 47cm (34 ⅝ x 18 ½in)

Courtesy Private Collection.

Photo: José Cristelli.



Fig. 3

Manuel Espinosa

Untitled, c. 1958

Tempera on paper

73 x 37cm (28 ¾ x 14 ⅝in)



Fig. 4

Manuel Espinosa

Untitled, c. 1958

Oil on canvas

60 x 40cm (23 ⅝ x 15 ¾in)



Fig. 5

Piero Dorazio

Gagliarda, 1965

Oil on canvas

73 x 55cm (28 ¾ x 21 ⅝in)



Fig. 6

Piero Dorazio

Preziosa, 1965

Oil on canvas

46 x 38cm (18 ⅛ x 15in)

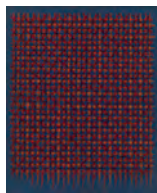


Fig. 7
 Max Bill
Untitled, 1970
 Pencil and crayon on graph tracing paper
 21 x 30cm (8 ¼ x 11 ¾in)



Fig. 8
 Max Bill
Vier Akzente aus dem Quadrat, 1970
 Oil on canvas
 88 x 88cm (34 ⅝ x 34 ⅝in)



Fig. 9
 Max Bill
Viereckfläche mit gleich langen Begrenzungen, 1952
 Chrome plated brass, oak wood
 33.5 x 42.5 x 5.5cm (13 ¼ x 16 ¾ x 2 ⅛in)

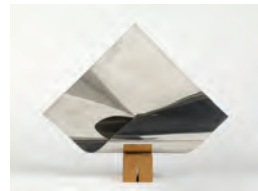


Fig. 10
 Max Bill
Simultaneous Construction of 2 Progressive Systems, 1945-1951
 Oil on canvas
 146 x 202cm (49 ½ x 79 ½in)
 Courtesy Private Collection.



Fig. 11
 Manuel Espinosa
Untitled, 1961
 Oil on canvas
 80.3 x 35cm (31 ⅝ x 13 ¾in)

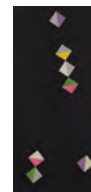


Fig. 12
 Manuel Espinosa
Untitled, 1961
 Oil on canvas
 80 x 35cm (31 ½ x 13 ¾in)

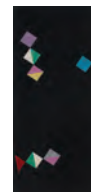


Fig. 13
 Piet Mondrian
Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1942-1943
 Oil on canvas
 127 x 127cm (50 x 50in)
 © 2019. Digital image, The Museum of Modern
 Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

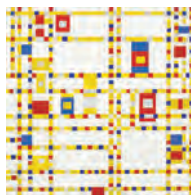


Fig. 15
 Manuel Espinosa
Untitled, c.1959
 Tempera on paper
 78 x 34.5cm (30 3/4 x 13 5/8in)



Fig. 17
 Manuel Espinosa
TRES GYMNOPIEDIES, 1979
 Acrylic on canvas
 100 x 100cm (39 3/8 x 39 3/8in)

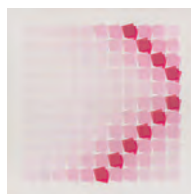


Fig. 18
 Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart
Composition No. 194, 1953
 Oil on canvas
 50 x 60cm (19 3/4 x 23 5/8in)



Fig. 19
 Manuel Espinosa
Untitled, 1961
 Oil on canvas
 50.5 x 50.7cm (19 7/8 x 20in)



Fig. 20
 Josef Albers
*Squares: Blue and Cobalt Green in Cadmium
 Green*, 1958
 Oil on Masonite
 40.5 x 40.5cm (16 x 16in)



Fig. 21

Josef Albers

Study for Homage to the Square: Orange Scent,
1961

Oil on Masonite

45.7 x 45.7cm (18 x 18in)



Fig. 22

Manuel Espinosa

Variación Cromática, 1966

Oil on canvas

240 x 120cm (94 ½ x 47 ¼in)

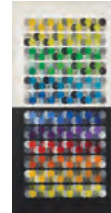


Fig. 23

Manuel Espinosa

18 Variaciones sobre un mismo tema, 1968

Oil on canvas

125 x 125cm (49 ¼ x 49 ¼in)



Fig. 25

Manuel Espinosa

Untitled, c.1978

Graphite on paper

33 x 46cm (13 x 18 ½in)

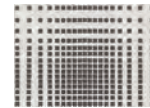


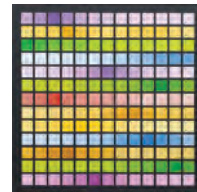
Fig. 26

Manuel Espinosa

Los ciclopes, la taberna de Barney Kiernan,
1977

Acrylic on canvas

100 x 100cm (39 ½ x 39 ½in)



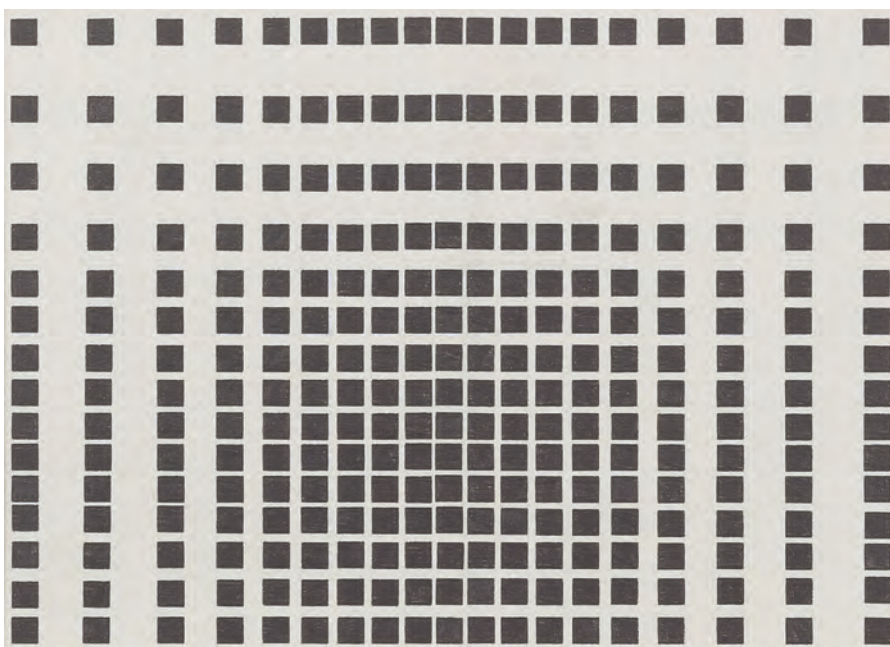


Fig. 25

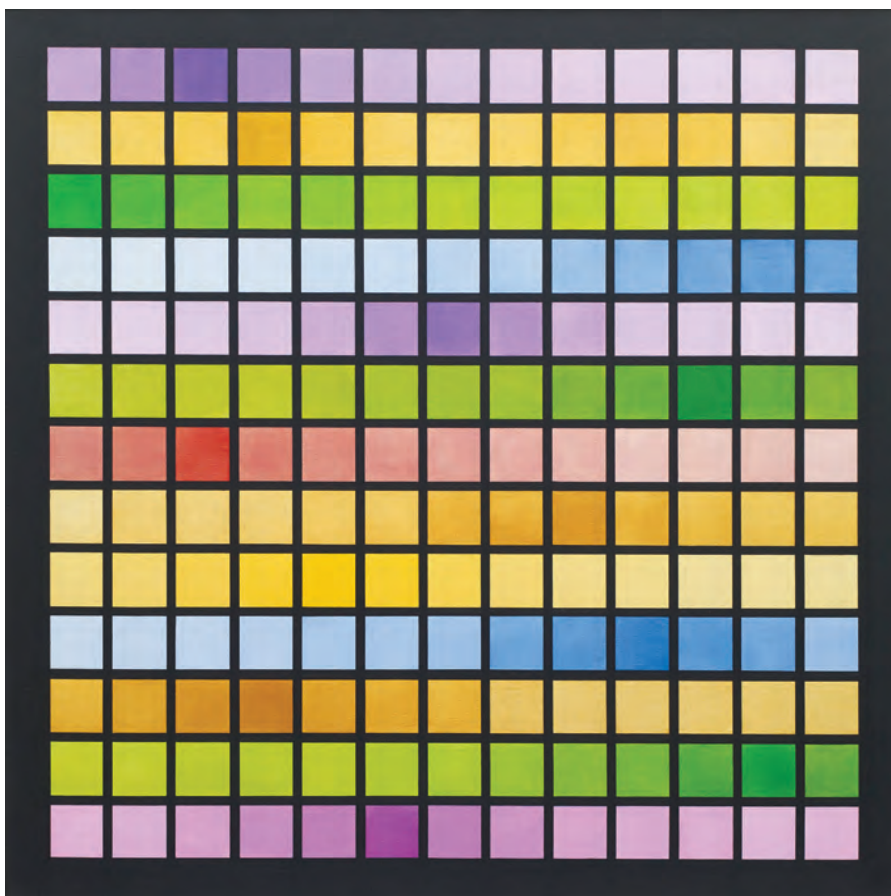


Fig. 26

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