

Abstraction, Chronicity and Time

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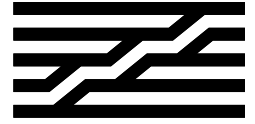
Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951,
49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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There's little doubt that from the start the history of geometric abstraction was preoccupied with its own origins. So much so that it has been hard, apparently, to move beyond this obsession with beginnings. Especially now abstract art is well over a hundred years old, it seems more urgent to speculate on the forms of abstraction that emerge in Europe over the first few decades of the 20th century in terms other than those supported by a few origin-stories that themselves rely entirely on the trope of the artist as "pioneer" of uncharted territories – that are, surely, more symptomatic than they are explanatory. Current attempts to push back the beginnings of abstract art to still earlier "pioneers" run the risk of duplicating the very same discursive structure that in this paper, I would like to get away from in favour of thinking about abstraction's inter-generational and transnational resilience. Surely, what it means *now* to continue to work with a lexicon of geometric forms is a more pressing question. That is, I'm more interested in thinking here about how it that a language of geometric forms has remained so tenacious over such a long period of time, and so productive for a number of women artists who have been responsible for transforming it in the light of new contexts.

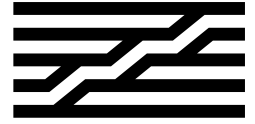
There is a photograph of Sophie Taeuber-Arp in her office at the Aubette in Strasbourg in 1927 surrounded by drawings. To her left are several plans that relate to the project she was working on in collaboration with Theo van Doesburg and Hans Arp for a modern café, including drawings for areas like the "Five O'Clock" tearoom and bars she designed.¹ These drawings and sketches casually pinned to the wall also relate to the experimental forms of the paintings and textiles she had been making alongside her design projects. They are part of her formal lexicon and as such can be rooted in that particular moment in Taeuber-Arp's trajectory. As much as they belong that specific design, the wall of drawings also suggests the larger project of abstraction which has its own complex history and to which the artist was also subject. This is not to say the forms are part of a "universal" language that is presumed to be based in timeless essences and absolutes. On the contrary, I shall argue, it is *timeful* and invites us to think about art's relationship to multiple temporal registers.



The ultimate dream of the utopian avant-garde project has been seen to have long since failed. Yet, its formal language has not necessarily succumbed to the same fate and has turned out to be surprisingly durable; or rather, we are left with the problem of how to account for the fact that abstraction has proven itself stubborn and doesn't look likely to politely retire any time soon. It is striking, then, to see the wall of Carmen Herrera's studio on Union Square in New York, no less than 100 years later. The arc linking these two women suggests not an essential language of form, necessarily, but a series of translations across time and place for which we only have a fairly rudimentary critical language of description. Although there have clearly been important studies of transnational movements within Constructivism, there seems very little thinking on what I shall call abstraction's chronicity and its relation to time.² By chronicity, I mean an ongoing state and a propensity for recurrence. The association with chronic illness is intentional, not because art is unhealthy but because I think the connection to the body is helpful. It suggests a kind of time that isn't measured rationally by the clock.

In order to think across these different moments within abstraction's history, I shall draw on what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called the "chronotope". Best known of course for his work on the dialogic imagination and the carnivalesque, Bakhtin introduced the term chronotope – literally space-time – in an essay entitled "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: An Essay on Historical Poetics" (1937-8).³ Writing in the late 1930s, under great pressure of from a totalitarian regime, he identified the chronotope as an ancient as well as a potentially radical device. Bakhtin's work has recently inspired Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson in their thinking on the *afrotrope* and their important discussion of the recurrence of key motifs within an African-American aesthetic.⁴ In relation to this discussion of abstraction, I'd like to extend the sense of the timeliness of the term by stripping Bakhtin's concept back a little from the iconographic motif to restore the force of a motivating formal device to the chronotopic drive.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *Composition dada (Tête au plat)* [Untitled (Flathead)] was an early iteration of the possibilities of painting as hybrid medium. As well as pronouncing itself as a manifesto painting for Dada abstraction, the prominent "1920" embeds the date within the composition and poses the question: how does time enter the artwork? It's not just a record of the date it was painted then, or an adjunct to the artist's signature, but scaled up to count as a formal element or device-in-itself. As such, it's an almost extravagant intrusion into the supposedly "pure" and "timeless" language of abstract painting. So is the idea of a "flat head", demonstrated in the painting as an ironed-out pattern template of Taeuber-Arp's three-dimensional *Tête Dada* [Dada Head] from the same year, and of which it is also a picture.⁵ In the "flat" painting, it's as if the shapes painted on the turned wooden head has been peeled away into separate segments – like the coloured sections of the tapestries and woven textiles that the artist was also making at the same time. These are small elements in the picture, but they show vividly how far Taeuber-Arp was already putting abstraction to the test: an apparently hermetic and self-sealed formal language is, in her hands, porous to its outside and to other materialities – like, for example, a painted wooden head. She exposes the artwork to the many contingencies of life, which crucially includes the temporal marker of the year "1920".



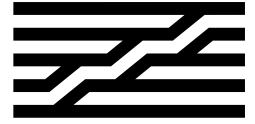
The relationship between chronicity and the contingent and circumstantial is by definition more random and harder to pin down than we might like. I'm using the words "contingent" and "circumstantial" rather than "specific" and "local" because they seem to me to be more agile to think with. Rather than place the work in its moment of origin it permits us to think about the way it moves around in time, exactly like the unstable signifier "1920", which once recorded its "nowness" but immediately afterwards receded into the past. Belief in a universal language that could transcend the immediate present fuelled many early abstract artists. Although at the start of this paper I distanced myself from prevalent assumptions underpinning a timeless universalism, I also think it's equally problematic to opt instead for the exclusively local, as if the meanings of art cannot move beyond its site of production. Perhaps we should be a little more circumspect about throwing out any sense of abstraction's extensive and projective *scope*, by which I mean its capacity to be actualised in conditions other than those under which it was made. My point is not to jettison that all-important sense of scope, but to redescribe it in the perspective of time, and therefore recover its radical contingency.

One way to think about the temporal aspect of abstraction is to think of the artwork as a kind of receptacle for time. From this point of view all art, and not just the moving image, is time-based or captures time in some way. For example, Taeuber-Arp's all white wooden tondo (*Relief en bois*, 1937, Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin / Rolandswerth) can be seen as an exercise in the circumstantial and the contingent. It's a monochrome relief that is also intensely susceptible to conditions of light and dark. The cut-out and recessed parts look different, shallower or deeper, the shadows more or less sharply defined, depending on the lighting. The sense of the artwork as a material object in the world could not be stronger, not only because it is a three-dimensional relief that juts out of the wall in real space, but because it is responsive to its environment. No need for the entanglement of words or dates now: the relief itself has become a kind of temporal index.

Having previously studied in architecture in Havana, Carmen Herrera spent time in Paris at the end of the 1940s where she established her own form of geometric abstraction. Already she began to use the tondo-shape (*Iberic*, 1949, courtesy Lisson Gallery) and introduce a basic vocabulary of forms in chromatic patterns. She was already using acrylic on board and would carry on doing so throughout her career in increasingly spare compositions consisting of simple geometric forms – exemplified by the range and permutations seen in the sketches on graph paper on her studio wall over half a century later.

While I am not underestimating the significance of her fellow Cuban artists, such as Amelia Peláez, for Herrera, the point I want to stress here is how she successfully integrates multiple ways of faceting the pictorial surface. The specificities are Herrera's, but like Taeuber-Arp, she plays on references to woven textiles, in the process collapsing the opposition between the geometric and organic. The title "Iberic" also situates the work in a space of translation between Cuban and European cultures. The painting shows Herrera reflecting on how abstraction is able to absorb difference and double meanings rather than suppress or obliterate them.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp died tragically in an accident in 1943. She was in her early 50s. Of course, it is useless to speculate what she might have gone on to do later, had she lived. But still, I am suggesting that what she left

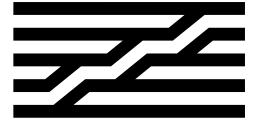


is an unfinished project, a project that still continues and a form of abstraction that is rhythmic, bodily and temporal. Carmen Herrera was not necessarily influenced by Taeuber-Arp, directly or indirectly, although she would move and exhibit alongside the same group that included Han Arp, Theo van Doesburg and Max Bill. Rather, I want to say that Taeuber-Arp provides us with a way of rethinking some of the received wisdom of abstract art – and allows us to trace new trajectories in which different artists become more rather than less significant players – like Herrera, and like many of the Latin American artists who powerfully redefined the constructive as a matrix of embodiment from the 1950s on.

A global infrastructure of modern art – the conduits of communication, the institutional networks, the pipelines of international modernism – provide us with part of an explanation for the vastly expanded geography of a European Constructivism over the course of the 20th century. After her death, there were several important posthumous exhibitions of Sophie Taeuber-Arp's work – especially in Brazil, where her work was shown in both the first and second São Paulo Biennial, held in 1951 and 1955 respectively.⁶ While it is certain her role in the transnational mappings of Constructivism has yet to be fully recognised, my focus here is different. I'm interested in the transmutation and morphing of serial form that is enacted in her painting in particular, for example in her series of *Échellonnements* [Echellonnements], one of which was shown in the Swiss Pavilion in São Paulo in 1951. In any serial form, repetition is set in train in order to seek out variants – in a process of differentiation rather than sameness unfolds through time and becomes their fundamental rule.

An artist who uses the language of geometric abstraction to dramatize precisely that temporal aspect is the Brazilian Neo-Concretist Lygia Pape. Her reliefs of the early 1950s already demonstrate her interests in staccato rhythms using the barest means. But it is her ambitious works *Livro do Tempo* [The Book of Time] (196-1963) and its subset *Noite e Dia* [Night and Day] (1963) that reveal the working of the serial chronotope most clearly. The two works, one in colour, one in black, grey and white, are already differentiated chromatically from each other. But within *Noite e Dia* the gradations of the grey scale become a way of measuring the gradations of time, each small square relief casting its own shadows on the white wall. The folding and unfolding of the spatial elements, changing in each, offers an alternative to the regulation of clock-time. In its articulation of formal components on the white wall, *Noite e Dia* feels at times closer to Louise Bourgeois's *Insomnia* drawings than it does to more rationalist interpretations of Constructivism.

Bakhtin makes a nice point about the literary work that every work, he writes, faces outward away from itself. A simple but important point because it suggests the work always already anticipates possible reactions to itself from a viewer; is already, as it were in a conversation with itself that is susceptible to time and its vicissitudes. Pape's multiple wall reliefs act out the circumstantial reflex of constantly shifting planes and colours. Rather than hermetically sealed off from the world, the work cannot but be pervious to the world. As Bakhtin puts it "We might even speak of the creative chronotope inside which this exchange between work and life occurs, and which constitutes *the distinctive life of the work*".⁷



Diverse chronotopes can coexist, then, and interact with one another, or come to replace or give way to others, as new versions emerge. The reactions between them are dialogical, of course, for Bakhtin – that is to say active and transformative. Given the work exists in time and time is always evolving, that temporal field of action is never entirely stable – and often very *unstable* and volatile. As work touches world as a kind of touchpaper for new connections. To slightly adapt Bakhtin, but only slightly for our present condition, art, like any organism, when it is torn out of its own environment it dies, but as long as it is allowed to live in some kind of resistant *and* yet at the same time reciprocal exchange with its environment, it thrives. We forget this, I think, at our peril.

In a time of pandemic and planetary crisis a case for abstraction like the one I have been trying to make may seem like small fry. But I want to suggest that the sheer scale and horror of the current crisis, not to say the sensory privations and challenges to mental health that it has wrought, only sharpens the need to think about chronicity. Of course, many of us cannot see works of art at the moment, but that sense of their sensual living presence lingers in the imagination – as a longing in anticipation. The intricate interplay of chronotopes offers new ways to think connections of work and world, in time; but in thinking about their intricacies and the often disjunctive and discontinuous forms of attention at stake here, we might also pause to think of art itself as a complex holding pattern – comprising multiple chronotopes – in an entanglement in which we are caught but in which we are also held. This being-held is always precarious but no less vital for that.

Notes

1. See also the axonometric drawings for Taeuber-Arp's "Five O'Clock" tearoom at the Aubette in Anne Umland and Walburga Krupp *Sophie Taeuber-Arp Living Abstraction Museum of Modern Art New York and Kunstmuseum Basel, 2020, 138-39*
2. This is part of a larger book project that I am preparing on art, chronicity and the chronotope. See also my essay on "Chrono-technics: Richter's Family Pictures" in Sheena Wagstaff and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter Painting After All*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2020.
3. Mikhail Bakhtin "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel". A conclusion was added by Bakhtin in 1973. See *The Dialogic Imagination University, Texas Press 2020, 84-259*
4. See: Leah Dickerman, David Joselit and Mignon Nixon "Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson", *October 162*, Fall 2017, 3-18.
5. Sophie Taeuber-Arp, *Tete Dada*, 1920, oil and metallic paint on wood, is also in the Collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris.
6. In 1955 a retrospective of 42 works by Sophie Taeuber-Arp was held in the Swiss section, representing a wide range of her work.
7. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel", op.cit. 254.