

Her Abstractions: Expanded Modernisms

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

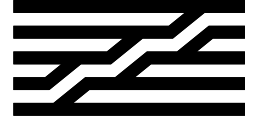
Symposium Proceeding *Women in Abstraction. Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century.*

Organized by the Centre Pompidou in partnership with AWARE.

19.05.2021 — 21.05.2021

This essay proposes to disidentify¹ from the idea of abstraction as genderless and centered on canonical modernism with geometric abstraction as its protagonist, by focusing on Latin American women artists working with abstract vocabularies in dialogue with Pre-Hispanic and indigenous aesthetic, and African culture, as well as centering on the body, gender, and spectator participation and collaboration, bridging abstraction with conceptual art and performance. These artists displace the centrality of Euro-American art referents, as well as the Cartesian division of body and mind, which favors a disembodied materiality, especially when it concerns women artists. It is important to clarify that in this essay the term “woman” does not stand for a fixed category in opposition to other genders, occupying a given societal and art historical place of subalternity. María Lugones – an Argentine/Latinx feminist philosopher and activist – argues: “Gender, in my understanding, is both a mark of the modern conception of the human and a colonial imposition. Gender marks what the colonized are not.”² The designation of the role “woman” and the definition of gender as always pointing to an “other” to the male, is a colonial construct. In decolonial feminist writings³, there is an insistence on resisting binary thinking, and thus abstraction by Latin American women cannot be seen in a binary dialectic of center and periphery (Western art centers, female subalternity versus male protagonism, etc.), or thinking of abstraction in absolute terms, or of its temporality as progressive, or its materiality as devoid of relationality, or as disembodied. As Lugones explains, there are “many colonial differences, but one logic of oppression,” thus “multiplicity is never reduced.”⁴ Here lies the notion of difference and diversity at the heart of this essay, in that women in abstraction cannot be reduced to a dichotomy or a categorical logic, either artistic or gendered.

Abstract traditions that were born hundreds of years before Europe and the US, are not considered part of the history of abstraction, simply because they are not an end result in the progressive cosmopolitan perspective of the West. Because abstraction found in tunics, hats, ceramics, architecture, etc., by Inca and Mayan cultures predating the colonial invasion in the Americas, was rooted on daily existence, social and political structures, and ritual, and thus does not share the West’s traditional separation of life and art, or between art



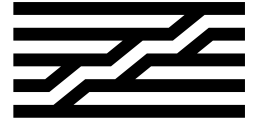
and the utilitarian, and is not part of a relevant art historiography. The “radical” departure between realism and abstraction that was inaugurated by the European Avant-Garde in the early 20th century, is based on the duality or binarism which is the foundation of the Cartesian and Christian split between body and mind/soul, where rationality is favored above all, countering “non-modern” subjectivities and world views which are not based on duality. Abstractions that engage with the body or with cultural traditions entangled with utilitarian or non-modern forms of existence and art, should be thought of as viable forms of abstract art. Nevertheless, the sole fact that these abstractions are made by women in dialogue with non-modern cultures or collectivities, or their bodies, is profoundly paradoxical in the context of a patriarchal and cultural hierarchical value system, and therefore they are the subjects of double or triple marginalization. It is the aim of this paper to demonstrate that abstraction by women that places the body and the collective at the center, and/or that is rooted in Indigenous or African culture, expands a limited and modernist definition of abstraction and creates radical and imaginative forms of abstract art.

Intercultural abstractions⁵

Silvia Rivera Cisicanqui, a Bolivian feminist, sociologist, historian and decolonial theorist who draws upon Quechua and Aymara philosophies, has elaborated on the term *chi'ixi*⁶ to embody contradiction as a way of moving between two worlds, or being and not being, or existing in differentiated worlds. The notion of in-betweenness and the mediation of opposites by *chi'ixi* is important in order to understand how the ancestral and the modern may come together, as well as the body and abstraction, and how material culture may be embedded in art with its references to utilitarian and symbolic values.

If an artist such as Cecilia Vicuña (Santiago, Chile, 1948) produces her work in dialogue with Indigenous ancient cultures and expansive notions of femininity in the Southern Cone, her work cannot be perceived as participating in and creating the history of abstraction. María Lugones counters the oppressive logic of colonial modernity with its use of hierarchical dichotomies and categorical labels that are homogeneous and separable. Thus, for example, intersecting race and gender, i.e. being a brown as opposed to a white woman, already exceeds the category of modernity. How could then someone such as Vicuña be part of modernity or the contemporary if her points of reference are non-modern, non-Western, non-Colonial, and she is not a “white” woman? Could it be that instead of trying to force an artist such as Vicuña into the canonical progressive narratives of modern art, we may interpret her work as a profoundly decolonial alternative (to) modernity, given her active resistance to coloniality, both historical and contemporary?

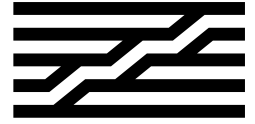
Cecilia Vicuña conceptualized her first *Quipu*, knot in Quechua, in 1966. According to the artist, her *Quipu that remembers nothing* was also her first *Precarious*, embodying two art forms that the artist has continued to create to this day. Quipus were knotted cords from Andean South America, beginning around 3000 BC, which contained numeric and other forms of information such as poetry depending on the position of the knots on the string. Still to this date the quipus have not been entirely deciphered. The information in the quipus was activated as



an embodied form of memory by touching the knots.⁷ Vicuña writes: “In the Andes people did not write, they wove meaning into textiles and knotted cords. Five thousand years ago they created the quipu (knot), a poem in space, a way to remember, involving the body and the cosmos at once. (...) Quipus were burnt, but the vision of interconnectivity, a poetic resistance endures underground.”⁸ As Julia Bryan-Wilson argues, because the first quipu was never realized, it is a “conceptual evocation of the quipu (...) and) the work exists, paradoxically, as a thought about material”⁹. Both the ancient Andean quipu, and Vicuña’s own, are visually abstract forms. The illegibility of the ancient quipu, and the semiotic opacity embedded in Vicuña’s performative materiality, are “abstract,” although not in the ways that we understand Western abstraction as opposition to the recognizable and signifying, but because their very form resists the colonial logic of Western thought. Her *Quipus* are not modern, as modernity would imply their nonexistence; their contemporaneity is embedded in the actualization of a past in the present, of symbolic and aesthetic values that should have been destroyed but that survived.

Her *London Quipu* (1974) constitutes a form of embodied materiality that subscribes not to a Western but to an indigenous sensibility. A wooden horizontal strip frames a vertical rectangular structure open on the lower section, fashioning a kind of ephemeral architecture. Colored woolen threads hang from the horizontal strip, coming together as an organic geometry of irregularly knotted vertical lines. One piece of white animal fur balances the lightness of the threads and knots. Vicuña made this Quipu in London during a time of hardship, by picking discarded materials from the garment industry, such as animal skins, fabric, threads, and ropes.¹⁰ The irregular knots end up being a kind of unruly flowering of the lines that disobey a rational order but answer instead to an internal order, both personal and ancient, that embodies ruptures and continuities, in the history of colonization as well as in Vicuña’s de-rooting because of her exile during the Pinochet regime. Her series of *Quipus* represent not only a connection to Precolonial Indigenous forms of knowledge, but also to the embodiment of visual poetry – Vicuña is both a poet and an artist – via a textile tradition that is mysterious, resistant, and profoundly decolonial. The *Quipus* constitute a way of embodying both ancient, present, and future memories.

Niobe Xandó (Brazil, 1919-2010) was a self-taught multidisciplinary artist who in 1978 declared: “I am a primitive of the soul”.¹¹ Some of her earliest work, a series of striking *Fantastic Heads* from 1948, were monkey skulls the artist painted (the work is lost), that have a ritualistic appearance. In 1964 she started creating her mask series, characterized by a synthesis of imaginary plant motifs (from her earlier phase of fantastic flowers), a form of hieroglyphic markings, and the symbol of the mask, in an abstract visual vocabulary. According to Antonio Carlos Abdalla, Xandó’s incursion into the masks was inspired by Afro Brazilian syncretic spiritual practices, specifically concerning the, *orixás* higher beings of nature.¹² Vilém Flüsser in 1971¹³ describes how Xandó achieves a synthesis between African and Western elements, which may be thought of as characteristic of Brazilian people and life, and is embedded in Afro Brazilian forms of ritual and magic. What Flüsser distinguishes as unique to her vision is that her masks bring to the fore the tension between the ritualism and magic of a Brazilian Africa and the modern world, placing blackness at the center of beauty and equilibrium. *Mascaras V* (1967) is one of the most abstract paintings of the series and is profoundly enigmatic and imaginative with its different degrees



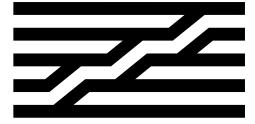
of associative qualities. Each one of the eight vertical rectangles contains an abstract shape, and the masks are inferred from the presence of one or two circles standing for the eyes, suggesting their visionary nature. The masks are made in different colors with arabesques, circular motifs, zigzags, and unpredictable shapes over flat colored backgrounds, suggesting energy and impulse, and functioning as a unity, a community of seers and diviners that bridge modernity and Afro Brazilian ritual both ancient and contemporary, in a singular form of abstraction.

Embodied abstraction and collectivity¹⁴

The opposition between representation and abstraction is profoundly challenged when body and gender are intertwined with the will to abstract both as a conceptual and aesthetic strategy, since abstracting visual codes does not imply necessarily the disappearance of meaning, of the body, or of reality, or of the desire to communicate. The artists in this section celebrate the centrality of the body as the phenomenological locus of the artistic and abstract experience. Since abstraction is neither generic, nor genderless, some of the artists in this section permeate abstraction with aspects related to gender, the personal and intimate. All the works in embodied abstraction involve the body, while directly inviting the spectator or co-creator to participate in the production of the work or its meaning in ways that propitiate an embodied experience and collectivity. The performative, the alive in transformation, and the ephemeral are all profoundly embedded in the works, and many pieces/situations are dialogical in order to involve forms of affectivity. Embodied abstraction ranges from simple gestures and the precarious to large scale installations, conceptual pieces, sculpture, and performative situations. I have divided this section of the text into two sub themes: “gendered abstractions” and “collective abstractions.”

Gendered Abstractions

As I have already asserted, art and thus abstraction is not a generic, genderless, neutral language, but a specific one, and therefore it should be no surprise that some artists have embedded personal issues or addressed gender in their abstraction. An important number of women artists in Latin America embody gender and the body directly, even if they do not define themselves as feminist. This is the case of Zilia Sánchez (Cuba, 1928), who in the mid 1960s started a series titled *Topologías eróticas* [Erotic Topologies], thinking of the works as bodies and the stretched canvas as skins. These are highly sensual paintings and sculptures of stretched canvas with protrusions forming corporeal shapes that suggest breasts and other female body parts such as the pubic area. For example *Las Amazonas* [The Amazons] (1968) is a sculptural rectangular painting composed by vertical segments that intertwine the shapes of breasts. In the center, a vertical narrow rectangle in fleshy pink suggests a vulva. These works entangle abstraction not only with the eroticism of the female body but with the landscape. Many of these pieces were photographed on the beach in Puerto Rico, where she settled in 1972 and where they coexisted as topologies of the body and the land. The titles of many of these abstract works were dedicated



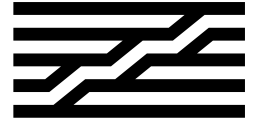
to mythical women such as the Amazons, or the Trojans, further infusing her abstraction with a feminine and feminist ethos.

Another example that alludes to the erotic in abstraction is found in Marta Minujín's (Argentina, 1943) *Eróticos en Technicolor* [Technicolor Erotics] (1964). These are sculptures made with false mattresses that the artist sewed and painted in bright and fluorescent strips of color such as fuchsia, red, green, blue, and yellow. Victoria Noorthoorn describes this series as at the crossroads of two dominant trends of the time: Nouveau Realism and Pop art, as the semiotic element of the mattress stands for domestic and daily life, reconceptualized as a sign for the new society of spectacle.¹⁵ The psychedelic ethos of the works turns the geometric pattern of the sculptures into unruliness, and the amorphous padded shapes suggest parts of bodies, or the traces of bodies on a soft surface. Minujín also created installations with the bright striped false mattresses that could be entered. The first one, titled *La chambre d'amour* [Room of Love] (1963-1964) was created in Paris with Mark Brusse, a second one, titled *¡Revuelquese y viva!* [Wallow and live!], was made in Buenos Aires in 1964. The Spanish title possesses the double entendre of making love lewdly, and as the titles of all these works suggest, these are pieces that are excessive and erotic in nature, their bodily and sensual character countering the rationality of geometric abstraction. They are saturated and provocative works that invite spectators to free themselves, either their body or their imagination, while using an abstract vocabulary that eludes classification.

Collective Abstractions

María Lugones has written meaningfully about community: "The coloniality of gender is centrally tied to the destruction or attempt at destruction of community. In my understanding of decolonial feminism, the communal is central, with communal intentionality and complex communality constituting the human."¹⁶ This is the point of departure of this section, understanding as Lugones points out, that "(o)ur possibilities lie in community rather than subordination," and that "communities rather than individuals enable the doing."¹⁷ This section includes works by artists that create art in community in ways that are profoundly radical and freeing, furthering non-hierarchical social networks that nurture affectivity and co-creation.

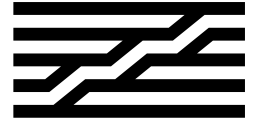
Starting in 1960 with the creation of the *Bichos* [Critters or Creatures] Lygia Clark (Brazil, 1920-1988) defied not only the very concept of abstraction's autonomy by entangling it with the idea of an animal that came to life when activated, but she introduced the participation of the audience in a process that was both unpredictable and infinite. As André Lepecki explains, Clark's work does not fit the conventional definition of performance, nor the role of participant, because it involves a transformational "communal commitment to an unending process of always experimental, always renewed and renewable, always inter-subjective exercises mediated by the quotidian, cheap, precarious materials (...)."¹⁸



Collective works such as *Estructuras Vivas* [Living Structures] (1969), involved several participants connected by thin rubber bands that crisscrossed between them to create a complex web of threads that emerged from what Lepecki describes as an “affective geometry” stemming from a “deep collective participation.”¹⁹ Clark herself declared: “There is geometry in all fantastic creations, which are continuous intersubjective exchange.”²⁰ It is this affective intersubjective geometry that eludes the division between object and subject, between self and others, between creation and participation, between form and non-form, between past, present and future, that is at the basis of an expanded and radical idea of abstraction. The lines connecting the participants in *Estructuras Vivas* form a geometry, a web of lines that in a dialogical relation with bodies, creates an open grid that is containing, affective and relational and has nothing to do with the ordering and often autistic modernist grid.

Martha Araújo (Brazil, 1943) studied pedagogy and turned to art in the early 1980s. Much of her work involves the notion of collectivity, as in *Roupa Coletiva* [Collective Clothing], from her series *Hábito/Habitante* (1985), which counters the notion of individual clothes, fashion and differentiation, in order to promote a situation of collective movement, as individual bodies need to collaborate to move together. In *Para Um Corpo Nas Suas Impossibilidades* [For a Body in its Impossibilities], conceived in 1985, she added thick black lines to individual suits. Vertical lines mark the legs and torso, and horizontal lines trace the arms, with three horizontal lines also marking the torso. This work is both an installation and a performative work. The suits of the performers included the [hoop] rough, hard side of Velcro, also described as the male, for the purpose of interacting with a stretch of wall that was covered with its [loop] soft, fuzzy, female side. This covered wall stretched onto the floor, creating the effect of a continuous rounded wall, thus countering the verticality and rationality of the architectural space, turning it organic. What suggests the body in its impossibilities is the tension between the geometric lines and the organicity of the body, since the geometric becomes misshapen when the performers lose control of their movement as their suits attach to the Velcro wall and hang from it. The performers are thus suspended between the verticality of the body and the inertia of the uncontrolled chance positions, while in their performative purposeful abandonment, the divisions between rationality and subjectivity, between the feminine and the masculine, between abstraction and the body, and between subject and object are collapsed.

The last work I will discuss is *Os amassadinhos* [Kneaded Little Things] (1990)²¹, a late work by Celeida Tostes (Brazil, 1929-1995), an artist active since the mid 1950s. In 1959 she interned with Tewa Native American Maria Montoya Martinez²², San Idelfonso Pueblo, New Mexico, 1887-1980), who was key to her turning to clay. Martinez was a renowned potter, who dedicated her life to preserving the ceramic traditions of the Pueblo people, and taught Tostes how to work in clay, combining adobe and indigenous ceramic techniques. Tostes explored feminine iconographies and ancient cultures, such as early Paleolithic sculpture and Indigenous art. Her work embodies not only the archaic but the notion of fecundity and creative energy, and practices repetition in shapes such as eggs, balls, balls with cracks, wheels, prehistoric tools, ceramic stamps with Pre-Columbian and totemic symbols, and Venuses. A crucial aspect of her activity was teaching and

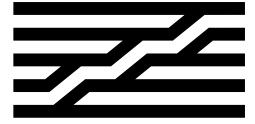


collaborative work, which began with children. Importantly, she also integrated her work with marginalized communities such as women and men in penitentiaries (1978), and communities in the favelas, particularly Morro de Chapéu Mangueira in Rio de Janeiro, starting in 1980. The *Amassadinhos*, were described by the artist as the “archaic gesture,” the reflex act of one’s hand around any form,²³ and in this work, the trace of the hand pressing soft clay. For her participation in the 1991 Sao Paulo Biennale, Tostes included 20.000 *Ammassadinhos*, covering three large walls floor to ceiling and made by a large collectivity of people: visitors, children, collaborators from Chapéu Magueira, Parque Lage, prostitutes from Vila Rosali, homeless of all ages, graduate professors, inmates from Frei Caneca Penitentiary, artists, and untrained workers. As Daniela Nave writes, this piece created a communion with a large community, many of them anonymous people of all social classes and ages, erasing any social hierarchy, including her own role as artist, as well as divesting from the notion of high art. Nave states: “She mingles with hundreds of people and dilutes herself in these anonymous gestures so that her own work be reborn as well, multiplying potencies. (...) With the amassadinhos, Celeida integrated, in a single sculptural gesture, the possibilities of fullness and emptiness, of space and its negative.”²⁴

The works I have analyzed promote community, interactivity, exchange, empathy, and dialogical positioning vis a vis ‘the other,’ i.e. cultures such as Indigenous and Afro Brazilian that are normally seen as other, though in reality they are embedded in our cultural DNA. Many of these works are meaningfully gendered too. Their art embodies the in-betweenness, of the ancestral and the modern, the body and the abstract, the collective and the singular. These works are both abstraction and not, or abstract and beyond abstraction, embodying *chi’ixi*.

Notes

1. This term comes from José Esteban Muñoz concept of disidentification from the status quo (colonial, racist, patriarchal, classist) as the third mode for dealing with dominant ideology. José Esteban Muñoz, “Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics”, in *Cultural Studies of the Americas*, Volume 2, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7.
2. María Lugones, “Decolonial” in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (eds.), (New York: NYU Press. Kindle Edition, 2017).
3. Some of the key exponents of decolonial feminisms are: Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Emma Pérez, Sylvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Chela Sandoval.
4. María Lugones “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010), 742–59 (here 755). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40928654>.
5. For my presentation at the symposium *Women in Abstraction: Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century* in May 2019, which is the basis for this essay, in the section on intercultural abstraction I also introduced the work of Regina Aprijaskis, María Freire, Gego, Myra Landau, and Tereza D’Amico, for their investigations of non-Western cultural referents. Given the extension and scope of this essay, I cannot include them, but they are equally deserving of study.
6. Silvia Rivera, *Cusicanqui Chi’ixinakax utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonization* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020, translated from Spanish by M.Geidel), 45-70.
7. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 110.



8. Cecilia Vicuña, about *Quipus*, <http://www.ceciliavicuna.com/quipus/2016/4/3/quipus-quipus>
9. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Ibid.*
10. Correspondence of the author with the artist, November 7, 2021.
11. Our own translation, based on a quote by Laymert Garcia dos Santos, “Niobe Xandó e a passage da imagen” in “Niobe Xandó: A arte de subverter a ordem das coisas”, exh. cat. (Sao Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de Sao Paulo, 2007), 11.
12. Antonio Carlos Abdalla, “Cronologia” in *Niobe Xandó: A arte de subverter a ordem das coisas*, 242.
13. Vilém Flusser, “O preto é belo” [The Black is beautiful], in literary supplement of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, April 18, 1971; article reproduced in Laymert Garcia dos Santos, “Niobe Xandó e a passage da imagen”, op. cit., 259-261.
14. For my presentation at the symposium *Women in Abstraction: Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century* in May 2019, I introduced a large number of artists within the notion of embodied abstraction: Mary Brandt, Feliza Bursztyn, Vera Chaves Barcellos, Analívia Cordeiro, Helen Escobedo, Gego, Mercedes Elena González, Carmela Gross, Magali Lara, Anna Maria Maiolino Sara Modiano, Tomie Ohtake, Margarita Paksa, Marta Palau, Mira Schendel, Amelia Toledo, and Beatriz Zamora. I cannot include them in this essay, but they could be interchangeably/equally explored.
15. Victoria Noorthoorn, *Marta Minujín: Obras 1959-1989*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2010), 23
16. María Lugones, “Decolonial” in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, op. cit.
17. María Lugones “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.”, op. cit., 752, 754.
18. André Lepecki, “Affective Geometry, Immanent Acts: Lygia Clark and Performance,” in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*, Cornelia H. Butler and Luis Pérez-Oramas, eds. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 281.
19. *Ibid.*, 282.
20. Lygia Clark, translated and quoted *Ibidem.*
21. It is unclear when the artist started making *Amassadinhos*, as the first time she exhibited 1000 *Amassadinhos* was in 1990 at Parque Lage School of Visual Arts (EVA), in Rio de Janeiro, although in the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM) of the city there is group of *Amassadinhos* dated 1980.
22. Maria Montoya Martinez (also known as Po-Ve-Ka – “Water Lily” – in the Tewa language) was born in the village of San Idelfonso, New Mexico).
23. Daniela Nave “From Mud to Chaos, From Chaos to Mud” in *Celeida Tostes*, Marcus de Lontra Costa and Raquel Silva, eds. (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano editora, Memória Visual, 2014), 295.
24. *Ibid.*, 296.