

BEYOND GEOMETRY: EXPERIMENTS IN FORM, 1940s–1970s

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As we enter the 21st century, it is strange to think that the highly experimental work of the mid-20th century is now historical. Many of these projects remind us of the distance between our accelerated, wired lives and the quite animated, perceptually exciting work of the last century. Yet, what is often lost when we look at this history is how much of it formed the art world we know. *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s–1970s* ably points this out, demonstrating that we can discern more similarities throughout the globe in the 20th century than is often thought to be the case.

Showcasing the work of artists on three continents, this book (actually a catalogue for an exhibition of the same name at the Los Angeles County Art Museum) abundantly demonstrates how artists in Europe, South America and the United States explored comparable forms despite their minimal awareness of similar aesthetic developments elsewhere. Integrating 200 works by 139 artists, the survey's geographic and stylistic reach is impressive. No doubt all readers will discover treasures previously unknown to them tucked in these pages, while also delighting in

this book's ability to convey the worldwide connectivity that was emerging in the second half of the 20th century. One of the stronger points of the book is the way the research translates the regional trends of the mid-1940s into an environment that was setting the stage for the international art world of the 1960s to take form. In effect, the local communities gave way to a global vision, due, in part, to inexpensive air travel, the proliferation of copying technologies and the growing ease of linking with others through long distance telecommunication devices.

Authored by six writers (Lynn Zelevansky, Ines Katzenstein, Valerie Hillings, Miklós Peternák, Peter Frank and Brandon LaBelle), each chapter of this book is filled with an abundance of examples. These range from European and Latin American concrete art, Argentine Arte Madi, Brazilian Neo-Concretism, Kinetic and Op Art, Minimalism and various forms of Post-Minimalism, including systematic forms of process and conceptual art. Topical themes delineate the book's scope and offer a sense of the survey: "The Forties and Fifties," as the name suggests, introduces influential modes of abstraction employed during the first decade and a half after World War II. "The Object and the Body" examines the move from two to three dimensions. "Light and Movement" is not confined to projects made with light; it also extends to perceptual aspects of Kinetic and Op Art. "Repetition and Seriality" is an examination of projects that eliminated the need for traditional composition. "The Object Redefined" examines works that undermined the traditional art object and constituted a breaking down of barriers that was commensurate with the social mores of the late 1960s and 1970s. Finally, "The Problem of Painting" reminds us of the perennial question whether painting is dead. Although the authors of the six chapters are guilty of some repetition from essay to essay, this overlap also served to underscore the degree to which the visions included in *Beyond Geometry* defy classification. Indeed, since many of the artists and, by extension, a great deal of the research are outside the boilerplate chronology, the repetitive portions

aid the organizational structure in the effort to present basic themes. These, in turn, allow us more easily to place the recent art history of Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Venezuela, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in relation to that of the West.

The range of artists is equally impressive. Included are (among others) Josef Albers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Max Bill, Lucio Fontana, Eva Hesse, On Kawara, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Hélio Oiticica, Blinky Palermo, Bridget Riley, Jesus Rafael Soto, Frank Stella, Jean Tinguely, and Victor Vasarely. Among the noteworthy contributions are the sections integrating significant artists. For example, I was particularly taken with Max Bill's influence and compositions. No doubt others were as well, for Bill's name comes up often throughout the book. Born in Switzerland in 1908, he trained at the Bauhaus with Josef Albers before

adopting theories of concrete art associated with the Dutch modernist Theo van Doesburg. These theories were based on mathematics, which Bill believed "enable[d] certain problems to be solved without compromise, in a world that is full of compromises and failed speculations." One who was influenced by his work was the self-taught French painter François Morellet, who encountered Bill's work in 1951 on a visit to Brazil.

Despite all its positive attributes, serious readers should note that this book falls short as a research work. For example, when Peternák compares François Morellet's *Random Distribution of 40,000 Squares Using the Odd and Even Numbers of a Telephone Directory, 1960* with Béla Julesz's *Random Dot Stereogram (RDS)*, he demonstrates that he does not know the difference between Julesz's *RDS* and the autostereogram, which was invented in 1979 by Christopher Tyler. There are also perceptual limitations that speak more to the failure of translating the varieties of art into a book than a failure on the part of anyone involved in the project. Finally, this survey repeatedly brings to mind the value in engaging with the artistic imagination in real time and on its own terms.

Many of the small images are hard to decipher due to the book's organization. Caption details accentuate this problem. They are inconsistent throughout, often not including information about the size or medium of the depicted work. This casual treatment left me thinking that this book is not a publication that reaches out to grab us. From the text it is clear that many of the works are freestanding, and it is unfortunate that the production team did not include full descriptive information for each reproduction. This approach would have aided us in trying to envisage what the art might actually look like. More to the point, since many of the motifs at first glance appear as if they could be paintings, sculptures, installations, or hybrids I would have liked to have seen a more reader-sensitive layout, particularly since many of us cannot visit the exhibition in person.

As a first step, however, *Beyond Geometry* does an excellent job in expanding our knowledge of minimalism and various forms of post-minimalism. This expansive and comprehensive survey reminds us that the rebellion against the mathematical purity of earlier geometric modernism and what many

saw as the emotional excesses of abstract expressionism was not a uniform expression. All in all, the different authors successfully place the work discussed in the context of art history and the aesthetic and social issues of the time. Still, the limitations within this book's format and design remind the reader that a catalogue can add to an exhibition, but in order to appreciate the words a first-hand exposure to the works is unbeatable.

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