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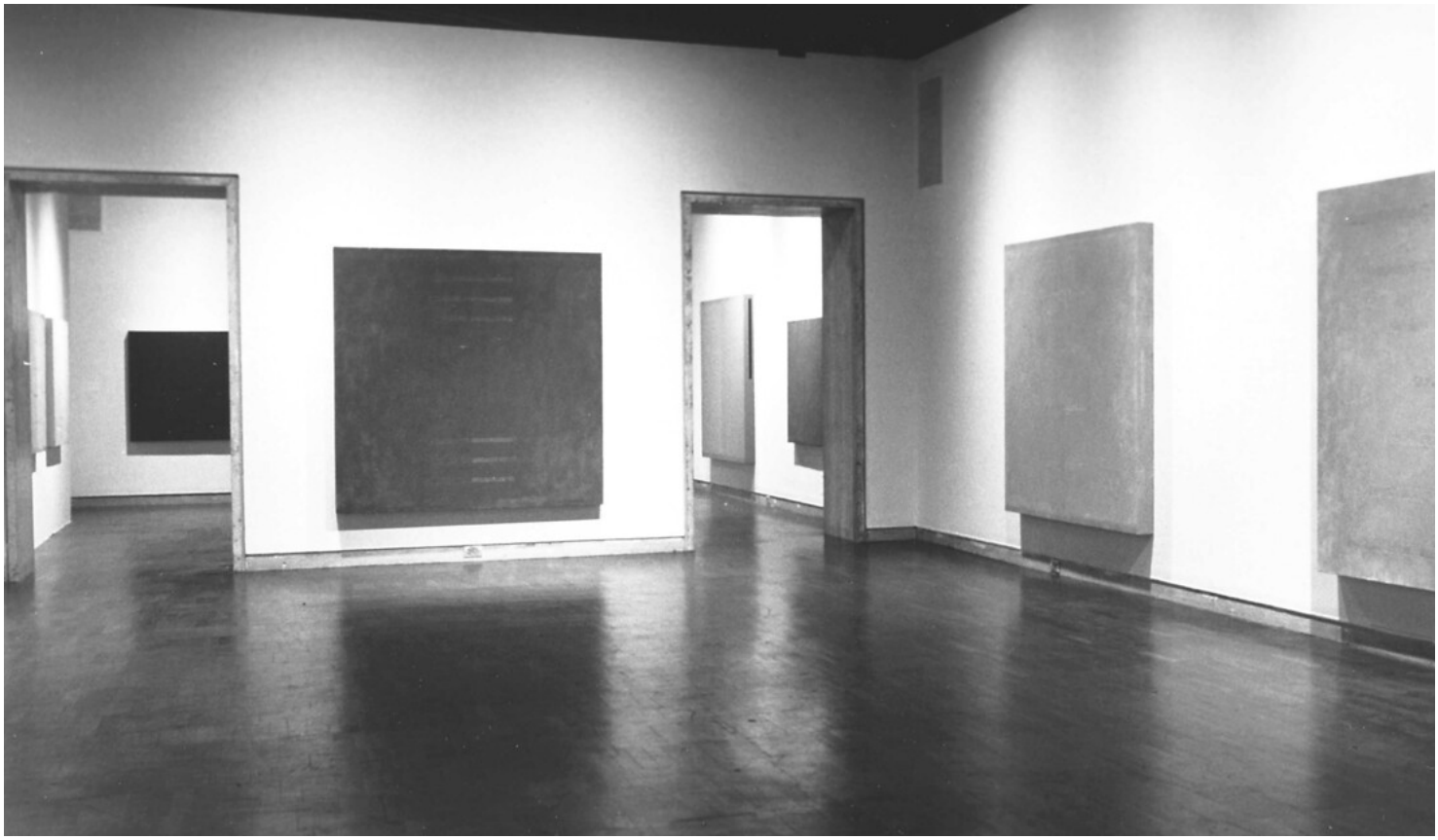


Ex-Centricity: A Conversation with César Paternosto

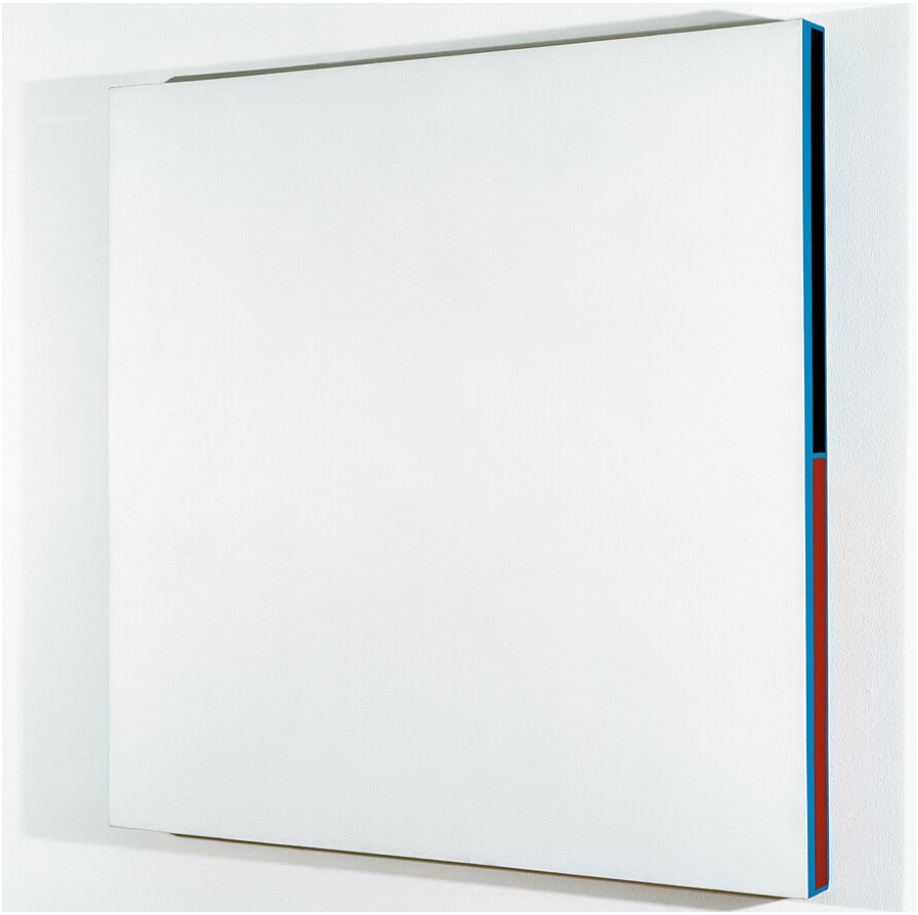
The Argentine artist discusses the aesthetic and political implications of "emptying the front surface" of a painting.

Madeline Murphy Turner, César Paternosto Apr 26, 2021

The Hidden Order (1972) is a painting that requires the viewer to reorient their point of view, both physically and psychologically. Leaving its front surface blank, Argentine artist César Paternosto applied strips of color only to the edges of the canvas to encourage what he has called a "lateral or oblique way of looking."

I recently spoke to Paternosto about the genesis of his conception of painting, his formative experience working in 1970s New York City, and being a witness to the emergence of language-based Conceptual art.

This conversation is part of Thinking Abstraction, a series of interviews with Latin American artists whose work raises questions about the transition between abstraction and the emergence of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s.



César Paternosto. *The Hidden Order*. 1972

Madeline Murphy Turner: César, I'm wondering how you would contextualize the work *The Hidden Order* (1972) within your larger series of monochromes with painted sides, which you began working on in 1969.

César Paternosto: In the first place I have to say that, in my view, the "monochrome" was a result of emptying the front surface of the painting (which, it seems to me, the whole of Western painting had relied on?), thus inviting the viewer to read it while moving (not unlike a sculpture): looking first at one side, then at the empty front, and finishing with the other side. It was an unconventional approach to painting, to easel painting, actually—that exclusive Western cultural artifact that had engendered the dominant conception of the "fine arts." Apparently this approach was also insulting, to the point where more than once these works were vandalized. Yet I am aware that today—50 years later and in the midst of a numbing avalanche of "art"—it has lost the impact it had back then.

Anyway, I think that *The Hidden Order* was, in many ways, the summit of this approach. In 1971, I began a close study of [Piet] Mondrian's oeuvre at his Centennial exhibition at the Guggenheim. There, I became aware that beyond their apparent emptiness, my white fronts were the cohesive spaces between the pictorial elements on the side edges. They were the liaison that solidified the unit. Just like the white spaces in a Mondrian. You know, when you are in uncharted territory, it takes a while to figure out what you want.

You have described this body of work as implementing a "lateral" or "oblique" vision of painting. In this sense, it plays with the viewer's peripheral vision. In recent decades, scholars of Latin American art have critiqued the neo-colonialist narrative of Latin America as an art-historical "periphery." Do you see any links between *The Hidden Order* and this discussion?

A city where you lived for 37 years, from 1967 to 2004…

To be truthful, at the time when I painted *The Hidden Order*, for me these issues of center and periphery were not directly involved in the act of painting. I was more concerned with the "formal" or "aesthetic" repercussions I expected the work might have. And talking about repercussions, let me relate a bit of history, very much to the point: the tale of an artist from the South American periphery at the center of the art world—New York.

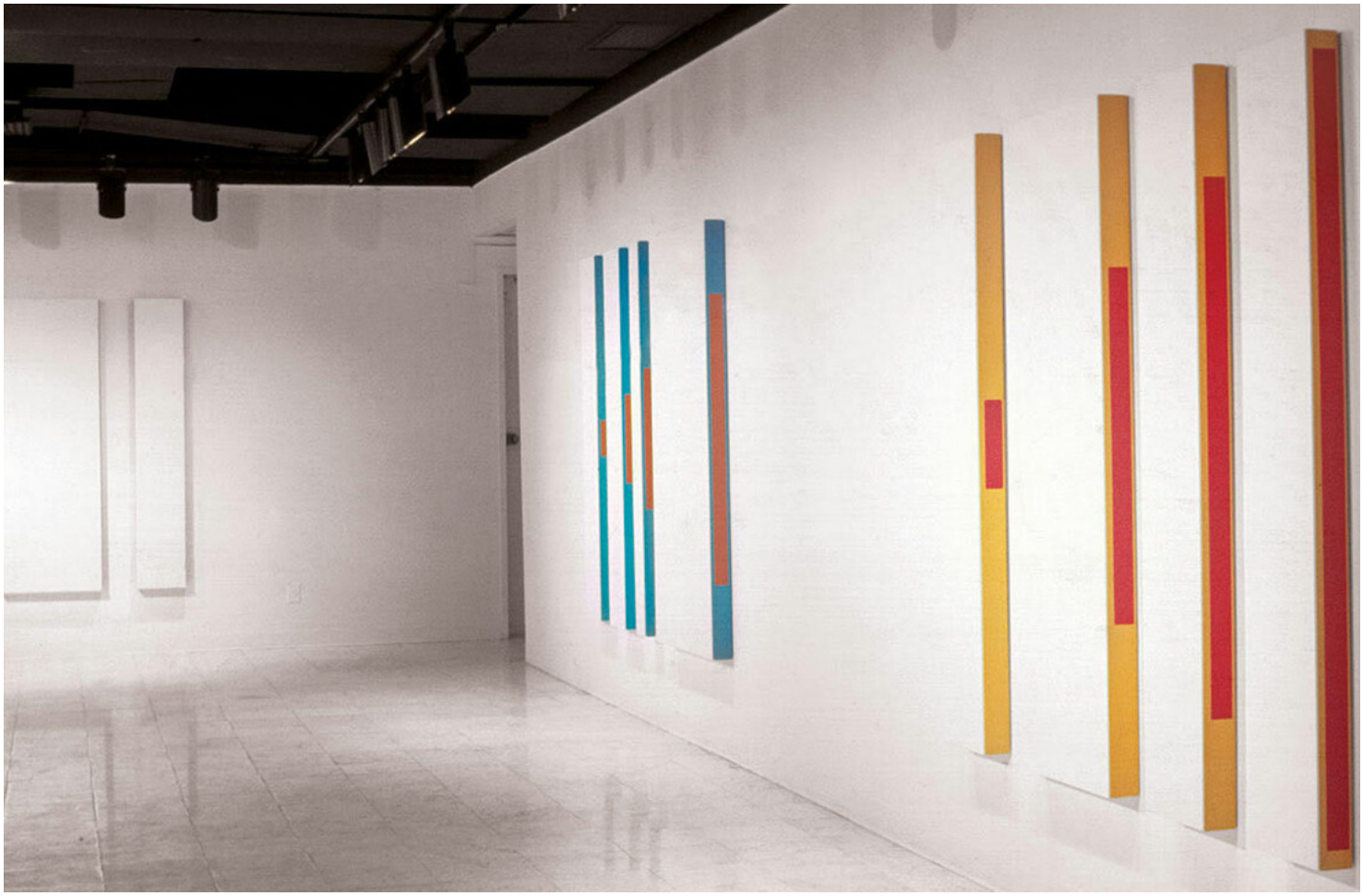
Exactly. In January 1970, I introduced my "lateral" paintings in an exhibition titled *The Oblique Vision* at the AM Sachs Gallery on 57th Street. One day, just by chance, I was in the gallery talking to the owner Abe Sachs and I saw the critic Emily Wasserman of *Artforum* coming to see the show. She didn't spend more than 10 seconds there. Two months later, *Artforum* published Wasserman's review of Jo Baer's show at Noah Goldowsky, an Upper East Side gallery. Along with the review there was a photo, through which I learned of Baer's "wrap around" paintings (up until that point I only knew about Baer's previous work, the black band and its adjacent thin color line that followed the perimeter of the canvas's front surface). Yet, there was no mention whatsoever of my show, not even in a footnote. I'd already had inklings: in those days, no one expected the work of a South American artist who dared to be on the same footing as an American cutting-edge artist to be acknowledged. Non-American artists were unwanted intrusions in an airtight history of art, an attitude largely fashioned after Artforum's editorial policies of the 1960s and 1970s. To the point that, much later, when the 2006–08 show High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975, curated by Katy Siegel and advised by David Reed, was in its preparatory stages, my name came up thanks to the Argentine artist Fabián Marcaccio: effectively, I was a desaparecido from that history. It took all that time to get this modicum of recognition.

Back to the '70s, Carter Ratcliff did review my *Oblique Vision* show in his "New York Letter" in the March 1970 issue of *Art International*, and while he connected it to his review of Baer's show at Noah Goldowsky, he savaged it, calling it "eccentric," "bland," and "fruitless" in my (supposedly) "transition from painting to sculpture," unable to perceive that he was looking at paintings. Yet the term "eccentric"—the first time I saw my work linked to that adjective—was prescient. Because that oblique or lateral (you could say peripheral, maybe) vision today is being read as the beginning of my ex-centricity, that is to say, my distancing from the physical center: the front surface of all Western painting with its inevitable hegemonic connotations. A distancing that was later materialized in my affirmation and recovery of the forgotten (or peripheral) arts of ancient America.

Your interest in pre-Columbian art, which led to your book *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art* and exhibition *The Amerindian Paradigm*, first developed when you visited the collection of the Museum of Natural Sciences in your native city, La Plata, in 1961. This exploration was later reignited when you traveled to northern Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru in 1977. Were these ideas about pre-Columbian sensibilities on your mind when you made *The Hidden Order*?

César Paternosto at the opening of *The Oblique Vision* at AM Sachs Gallery, January 1970

No, definitively not. There was nothing further from my mind than pre-Columbian art at that time. It definitely was the response to, or the result of, the high-voltage climate of experimental art practices in late-'60s and '70s New York. It was my trip to the Andean region in 1977, that, as you put so nicely, re-ignited my interest in the ancient American arts. Which, in the end, really amounted to an epiphany: it has led me so far as to write about a re-foundation of abstraction, which I now see was first created ages ago in the hands and minds of the women weavers. In other words, the archaic textile grid is the degree zero of an abstract geometric or tectonic art that long preceded the modern Western version.



Installation view of César Paternosto's one-person show at the Galerie Denise René. New York, January, 1973. This is the first time that *The Hidden Order* is exhibited.

In a recent video for Cecilia de Torres Gallery, you said that with this body of work, you painted only on the sides of the canvas to create a silence that "runs against the visual noise of consumer society." Could you please expand on this idea? How does *The Hidden Order* engage with a political critique of consumerism?

Consumerism is the late stage of industrial (capitalist) society. Its main aims—to convince people to consume things they don't actually need (Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* was an eye opener during my early days in New York)—are the arch-sophisticated forms of visual advertising. Their apex is the omnipresent, intrusive TV commercial—perhaps today's art form; forget about video art, it doesn't have by any stretch of imagination the global reach of the commercial. Moreover, I see today's art as barely differentiated from consumerism. It is what I call the "supermarketization" of art: offerings for just about any conceivable bourgeois taste.

In my view, therefore, a painting reduced to a white front surface and a minimum of pictorial notations implies a pointed critique of the deafening visual noise created by late industrial society. Or, as I wrote back then, "… painting appears as a silent, restricted territory where a qualitative denial of the mainstream discourse can take place." In fact, it is silent but not mute, as [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty would say.

César Paternosto. *Duino*. 1966

You have cited a wide range of artistic influences on your work, that include Max Bill, Madí Art, Neo-Concrete art, Frank Stella, and Richard Smith. Were you also looking at Willys de Castro's *Active Objects*?

Perhaps a most enduring influence in my work, beginning in the early '60s, was my study of Paul Klee's graded color bands from his Bauhaus years. To this day I tend to organize color in banded formats. Of the names you mention, my awareness of Madí's "irregular frame" and the Stellas and Richard Smith I saw in Buenos Aires at the Di Tella Prize exhibitions in the '60s prompted the shaped canvases that I developed in Argentina, and I later exhibited in my 1968 New York debut with Abe Sachs (see, for example, *Duino*, 1966).

Later, Mondrian's Centennial Exhibition at the Guggenheim was also revealing: I learned that he occasionally prolonged either the black bars or the color areas around the stretchers. Not only that, but with his centrifugal arrangement of the color accents, I realized that he had come to the verge of what I had done: pushing color to the edges of the canvas and leaving the front blank. Up until that point I had felt I was a trailblazer of sorts, but then I discovered that there was a prestigious precedent.

De Castro, whose work I greatly admire, was unknown outside Brazil until the 1990s, thanks to the exhibitions like *Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, and others. In fact, the Argentine artist Nicolás Guagnini came up with an idea for a comparative show with de Castro's work and mine: *Literally Lateral* was its catchy title, but unfortunately it never came to fruition.

In addition to your visual art practice, you are also highly engaged with art history and criticism, which is clear in your comments on your own visual practice. You have called yourself a New York artist, and I'm wondering how you think your work disrupts the canonical narrative of New York art of the late 1960s and early '70s?

I came to full maturity in New York in active exchange with all of the challenging issues floated during the seminal, unrepeatable '60s and '70s.

But works such as *The Hidden Order* did not disrupt the canonical narrative of New York art. Very much so, in spite of my fervent attempts. It may have resonated among colleagues and friends, and made me a sort of "painter's painter." And I never forgot what [critic] Lucy Lippard told me once: "But your work is invisibly successful."

Your approach to abstraction also incorporated procedures or strategies usually connected with Conceptual art. For you, what are the relationships and connections between the tradition of abstraction and conceptual practices?

César Paternosto working in his 248 Lafayette Street studio. New York, c. 1971

In New York, I witnessed the birth of Conceptual art in its foundational, hard-core version: language replacing the (art) object, for example at the Language shows at Dwan Gallery around 1968. Though this was impossible for me to digest, I took it as a serious theoretical challenge. In a nutshell: Joseph Kosuth wrote—following to the letter the British logical positivist philosopher A. J. Ayer—that works of art are analytic propositions, and that they are not factual but linguistic. This position also led him to reject what the British called "Continental Philosophy" (Anglo-Saxon insularity at its peak?). This position definitely clashed with my intellectual upbringing: readings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Walter Benjamin, or Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, and not in the very least, the semantic or symbolic resonance of the ancient Andean art object, which not only served as a substitute for writing, but was also so richly visual. I find more convivial the Conceptual artwork in which, though language remains the main signifier, some form of visual information (photography, video) and/or the object (found or manufactured) are present. However, as far as I am concerned, it is still another form of imagistic or representational art—the most sophisticated form, I grant, of an art that after the 1980s has returned with a vengeance.