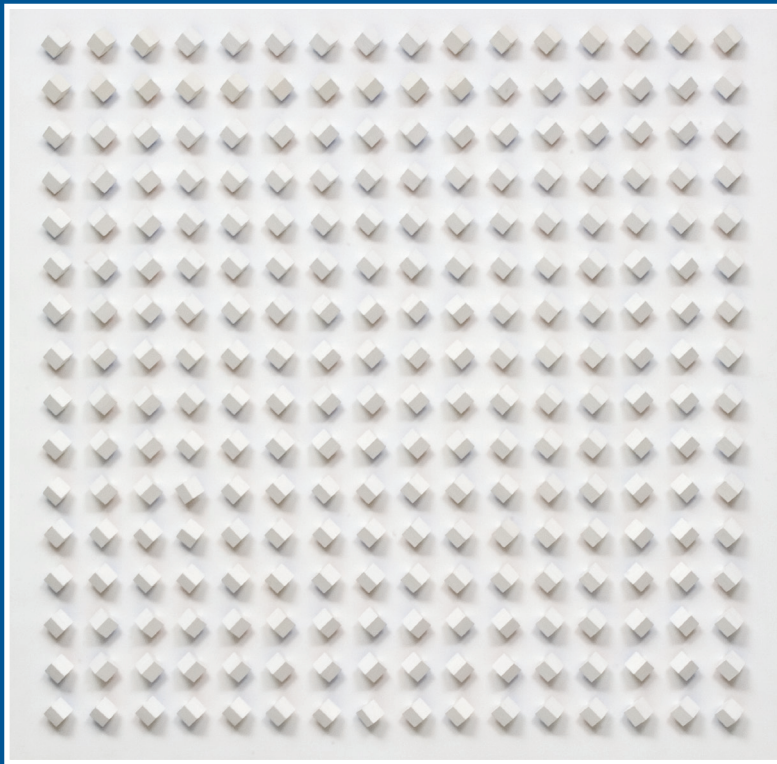


Front cover (detail) and opposite: Luis Tomasello, *Atmosphere chromoplastique no. 154*, 1966. © the artist's estate



VIBRATION, VIBRAÇÃO, VIBRACIÓN

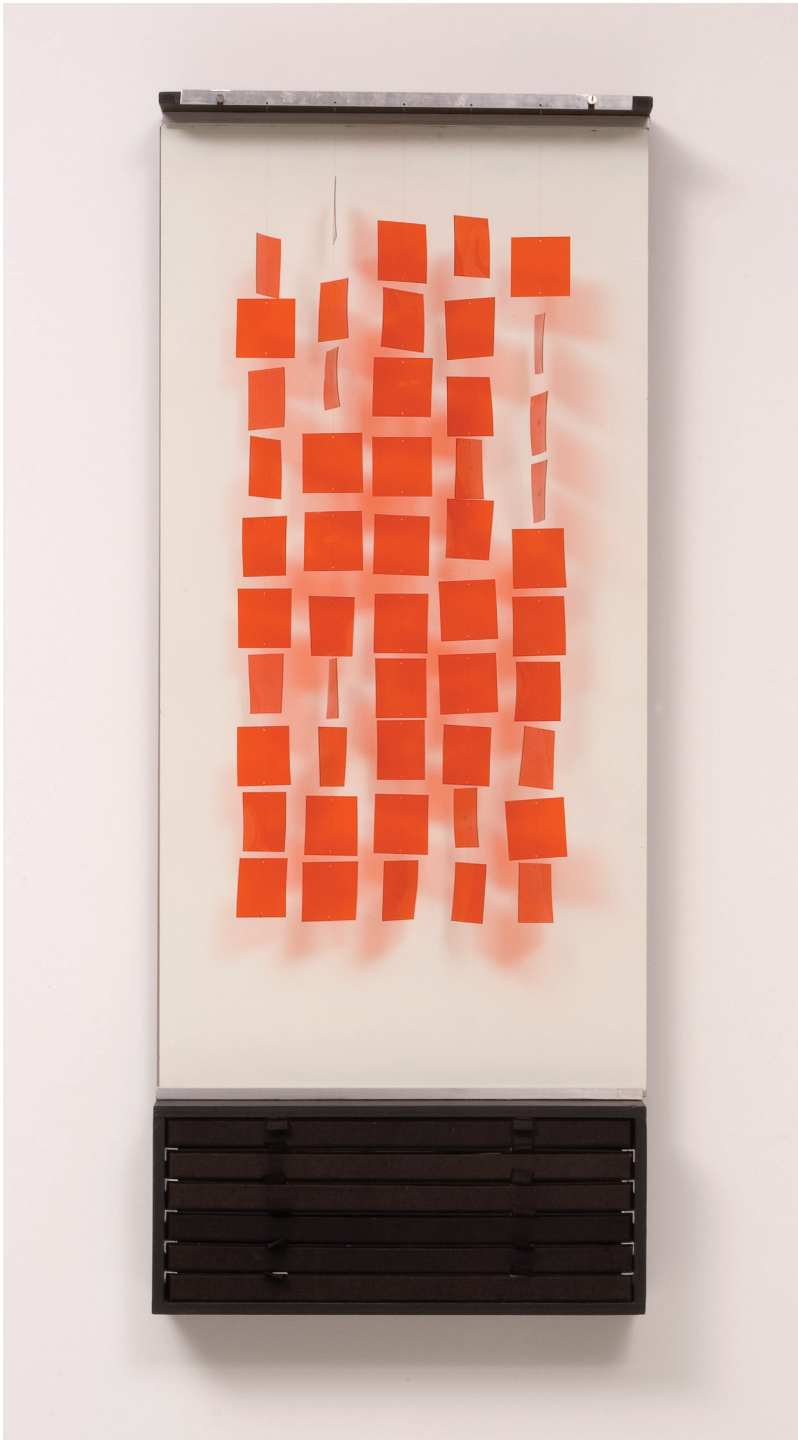
LATIN AMERICAN KINETIC ART OF THE 1960s AND '70s

CURATED BY SUSAN BEST

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY



THE SECOND OF FOUR EXHIBITIONS CELEBRATING THE
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE JW POWER BEQUEST



VIBRATION, VIBRAÇÃO, VIBRACIÓN LATIN AMERICAN KINETIC ART OF THE 1960s AND '70s IN THE POWER COLLECTION

SUSAN BEST

"I wanted to eliminate all subjectivity that was linked to personal taste, including my own."
— Jesus Rafael Soto¹

"We have established the artistic act, on a strictly visual plane, far removed from its formal content and its expressive poles. We have set out to eliminate personal expression ..."
— Julio Le Parc²

"... as he fuses within the collective, the artist loses his singularity, his expressive power. He is contented with proposing the others to be themselves, and to achieve the singular state of art without art." — Lygia Clark³

The title of this exhibition, 'vibration', is a term used by Jesús Rafael Soto, Alejandro Otero, Gertrud Goldschmidt (Gego) and Carlos Cruz-Diez to describe the kinds of pictorial and sculptural effects they aimed to create. For these Venezuelan artists, vibration brings virtual movement to the picture plane and to sculptural form. In addition, vibration's etymological cousin, 'vibrancy,' can describe the sense of movement and liveliness introduced into the language of geometric abstraction by Brazilian artists such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica. These Brazilian artists begin by enlivening abstract painting, but by the early 1960s they have moved beyond the confines of the picture plane and are making their participatory works in real space and time. Movement in their actions and propositions is actual, directly involving the body of the beholder. For these works, we might need other terms that suggest biological rhythms, like pulse, throb, quiver or shudder, to sit alongside the more mechanical form of repetition suggested by vibration, flicker and oscillation.

Kinetic art brings together all of these different kinds of movement, sometimes literal and at others times more virtual or optical. Indeed, the English curator and critic Guy Brett cautions against interpreting movement too literally when considering this genre of art. He argues that a static work can just as easily intensify our experience of time, space and energy while a work with moving parts can be "stultified and stale in its formal conception."⁴ Naturally it is the works that quicken the heart and intensify experience that Brett investigates.

Brett's work is largely responsible for the introduction of an expansive definition of kinetic art that underpins this exhibition. In his books and catalogues, he includes all manner of representations of energy and movement in this genre of art.⁵ Shifting kinetic art away from the typical (and more gimmicky) association with gadgets and things with motors, enables the exploration of what he calls a whole "language of movement" in twentieth-century art history, a history that he describes as ignored and largely unknown.⁶ The reason he gives for this oversight is the common misperception that kinetic art is a kind of sideshow or type of entertainment. His aim in his groundbreaking exhibition *Force Fields*:

Opposite: Julio Le Parc *Continuel mobile (Continual mobile)* 1966 (detail) © Julio le Parc. ADAGP/Licensed by Viscopy, 2012

Phases of the Kinetic was to shift this view by showing how artists no less than scientists make “models of the universe” and that this “cosmic speculation” is a key feature of kinetic art.⁷

Brett provides a striking example of this kind of cosmic speculation from Venezuelan artist Jesús Soto. In 1965 Soto described his work as seeking to discover in the dissolution of material in vibration the relationship between: “the principle which governs the picture and a general law of the universe which governs everything.”⁸ The idea of painting as a model for the world is of course a crucial dimension of the work of Piet Mondrian. Yve-Alain Bois, who credits Lygia Clark with opening his eyes to a vision of Mondrian as an anti-formalist destructor,⁹ demonstrates that the ultimate disappearance or destruction of art conceived by Mondrian was counterbalanced by the idea of painting as a means to quicken that end, providing a microcosm for the macrocosm of the world.¹⁰

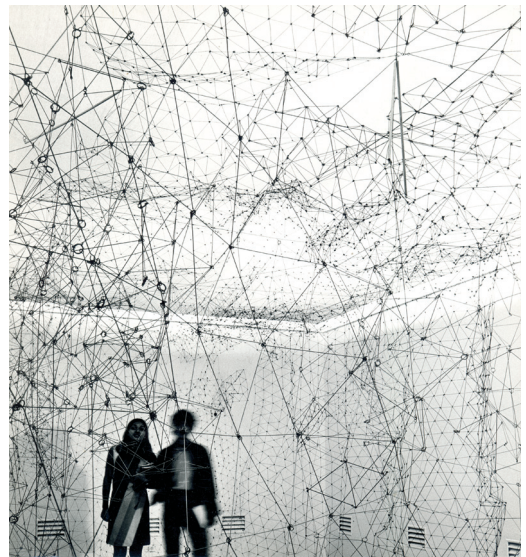
It is highly significant, then, that Soto was initially influenced by Mondrian, and saw the vibration or visual dazzle of intersecting lines that Mondrian wanted to overcome as pointing to the need to go beyond two dimensions.¹¹ He describes his work in similar very ambitious cosmological terms:

I was trying to find through repetition a vibratory state... Simultaneously, I was trying to break with the essential rules of figurative art. For this reason I wanted to put an end to the notions of composition and balance, two of the great classical rules of art. Among the things I tried are the first repetitions...In them, the idea of composition had already ceased to exist, because they're about an order than can be repeated to infinity, and each fragment is equal to the whole. The work was just a fragment of an infinite reality.¹²

The cosmological account of kinetic art fits well with Soto and the other Venezuelan artists, such as his compatriot Gego. In Venezuela, kinetic art provided a vision of modernity and the future that was officially recognized and financially supported as such by the Venezuelan governments of the 1960s and 70s. Despite this State support, Otero left for Paris in 1945, followed by Soto in 1950. Cruz-Díez also went to Paris, but temporarily returned to Venezuela in 1957. He remains an

expatriate, he has lived in Paris since 1960, where he continues to experiment with complex colour interactions; he is represented in this exhibition by an exquisite and delicate work, *Physichromie* (1967). The expatriate situation in South America parallels Australia and New Zealand where ambitious young artists usually went overseas for training and recognition. In contrast, Gertrud Goldschmidt, the artist known as Gego, comes to Venezuela fleeing Nazi Germany.

Her extraordinary works range from early sculptures in the late 1950s that use overlapping black lines to create a moiré effect, to her masterpiece, *Reticulárea* (1969) which is now permanently on display in the Galería de Arte Nacional in Caracas, Venezuela. The film of her work on show in this exhibition, *Movement and Vibration in Space, Sculpture by Gego*, by fellow artist Cruz-Díez, shows her early work up until 1959. From the vibration of her early work, she moves to the kind of vibrancy that characterises the work of the best Brazilian artists of this period. *Reticulárea* is like a field of relations suggestive of growth and interconnection. This environmental construction is comprised of a net-like structure of wire that is like a huge enclosing drawing in



Gertrud Goldschmidt (Gego) *Reticulárea* (setting) 1969
Stainless steel wire and aluminum tubes, dimensions variable
Collection of National Museums Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Caracas Photo: Paolo Gasparini © Fundación Gego



Lygia Clark *Arquiteturas biológicas II* Hôtel d'Aumont, Paris, France, 1969 © the artist's estate; image © Alécio de Andrade, ADAGP, Paris

space. According to Mónica Amor, there are individual components within the installation of mesh and net, described as “columns,” “screens” and “appliqués.”¹³ The smaller appliqués, which are attached to the walls or the ceiling, are very poetically described by Venezuelan poet Hanni Ossott as like “clouds” or “beehives.”¹⁴

Reticulárea is suggestive of a model of the universe, thus adhering to Guy Brett’s interpretation of kinetic art. The liveliness of her early vibration works, are translated in *Reticulárea* to the infinitely expanding universe. This cosmological model is not opposed to the model of the nest, hive or the house, and this coalescence of different scales is indicative of the extraordinary power of this work: that it can offer shelter and a sense of infinite expanse, a daytime vision of a vast universe of constellations. The sense of life she conjures up is at once cosmological and yet also biological. In this regard, her scale is very different to that of Lygia Clark, who stays closely with the life and scale of the body. Gego’s reach is much further, but her organic line also catches up the viewer in its oniric net.

The film of Lygia Clark’s work, *O Mundo de Lygia Clark* (1973) directed by her son Eduardo Clark, which is also included in this exhibition, shows how the body is a vital support for her experiments with sensation, form and substance.

The works of Gego and Clark represent the most radical departures from the received languages of abstraction that Brett argues are illuminated anew by kinetic art.¹⁵

Experimentation with the languages of abstraction is indeed fundamental to all of the artists in this exhibition. These artists from Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina created what Luis Pérez-Oramas has called “alter-forms” of European constructivism.¹⁶ He uses this term, ‘alter-form’ as a synonym for the survival or afterlife [nachleben] of visual forms that was a preoccupation of the early twentieth-century German art historian, Aby Warburg. Warburg was particularly interested in the language of movement and the transmission of Classical modes of depicting movement to the Renaissance.¹⁷ The transmission of constructivism to South America, and its ‘altered’ after life there,

is a similarly intriguing phenomenon to the survival of *Pathosformel* [form evoking pathos] so central to Warburg's *Atlas* project. New comparative research is now underway to determine the extent to which Latin American artists were aware of the work of their continental neighbours.¹⁸

Constructivist alter-forms take hold in those South American countries that Argentinean-born critic Marta Traba has described as "open-door" countries in the 1950s which she contrasts with the more "closed-door" South American Andean countries with strong indigenous traditions.¹⁹ According to Traba, in the years from 1920-1950, the Andean countries and the Caribbean were relatively unreceptive to new ideas of European origin, whereas countries with waves of immigrants prided themselves on being European and universal.²⁰ The open countries include Argentina and Brazil, and the less populated countries of Uruguay and Chile.

While Brett is ecumenical in his approach to the kinetic arts of energy and movement, Traba is more critical of the scientism of some kinetic art. In particular, she characterises in less than glowing terms the efforts of the Argentine expatriate artists who participated in the Visual Art Research Group (GRAV) and who clustered around the Denise René Gallery in Paris (Julio Le Parc, Luis Tomasello, Martha Boto, Gregorio Vardanega, Hugo Demarco). Most of the works in this exhibition were acquired for the Power Collection from the Denise René Gallery in 1967 by the curator at the time Gordon Thomson.

Traba was very enthusiastic about Gego, but not these GRAV artists. She describes them, while damning the artists with faint praise, as "solid experimenters," who worked out their compositions "mechanically, rather than derived from sudden flashes of inspiration."²¹ In the case of the machine-works of Boto, Vardanega and Demarco this is perhaps a fair assessment. These works are captive to a mechanical aesthetic: their motors harnessed to showing or manipulating perceptual and optical effects. Unlike the humorous exploration of different rhythms, sequences and tempos of movement that informs the work of New Zealand Len Lye and which gives his works different characters or temperaments, there is a deadpan use of the motor in these Argentinean artworks. They are perhaps too much

like a demonstration or a scientific experiment to be truly engaging. Tomasello's soft hovering clouds of colour are no doubt forged with a similar sensibility, but the retention of the picture plane enables a tension between the gridded geometric composition and the strange power of colour to float and diffuse into the atmosphere like smoke.

Of the Argentine expatriates, only Le Parc and Fontana are widely known. The adherence to scientific principles certainly informs the early writing of Fontana such as the *White Manifesto*, (1946) which was written while he was living in Argentina. It promised a far more technological and scientific form of art that his better-known *tagli* (cut) and *buchi* (hole) paintings would suggest. With typical avant-garde flourish the manifesto embraces speed, motion, change and novelty; Fontana's interest in liberating the image into space leads him to advocate that we "leave behind all known art-forms, and commence the development of an art based on the union of time and space."²² He envisages art that is: "The construction of voluminous, changing shapes from a moving malleable substance."²³ His modest *Spatial Construction* (1968), on show in this exhibition, is an intriguing small work that uses the modern material of Perspex to float the serigraphed image in space. Fontana's experiments with neon and modern plastics show his technological bent more clearly. They also strongly suggest the influence of the highly innovative Madí artist, Gyula Kusicse, who Traba singles out for more generous praise.²⁴

Le Parc's mobiles more successfully release the image, its reflections and its shadows, into space. His use of fluttering square leaves of metal material is very low-tech when compared to the fully-fledged machines, but the presentation of motion as something constantly present and active in the atmosphere is an interesting variant to the privileging of speed and machine motion that is such a strong feature of modern culture.

In the artworks that Traba would see as scientific, as well as the more organic kinetic works, there is another interesting survival from the historical avant-garde. It is the explicit rejection by the artists of traditional concepts of artistic expression and composition, examples of which I used to open this essay. This is an approach to modern art that Yve-Alain Bois has recently described as an "impersonal urge," a phrase that perfectly captures the peculiar

drive-like quality of this recurring impulse.²⁵ Bois coins this particular expression while discussing various strategies for the self-effacement of the artist employed in twentieth-century art. His lecture, "The Difficult Task of Erasing Oneself: Non-composition in Twentieth-Century Art," as the title suggests focuses on a recurring strategy he calls "non-composition," that is, the refusal of the purposeful language of artistic composition. He begins the lecture with a long quotation from the French artist François Morellet, who was associated with Visual Arts Research Group, which outlines how Morellet wanted to minimise choice and thereby also minimise his presence in the work. Avoiding composition is intended to eliminate, or at least minimise, the artist's personal touch or taste from the work of art.

Bois initially presented this idea of a radical rejection of composition in his work on the Polish constructivists, Wladyslaw Strzeminski and Katarzyna Kobro, where he compares their rejection of expression and composition to the work of American minimalists.²⁶ Maria Gough also takes up Bois' idea of non-composition in her reading of both the original debates of the Russian constructivists and the survival or recurrence of this idea in minimalism.²⁷

There are, then, South American alter-forms of not just constructivism, but also the ideas about impersonality and non-composition that underpinned it. The survival or revival of this idea across a vast continent like America is intriguing. What desire did this eclipse of artistic intention serve in this new context? And why is the 1960s the time when these ideas receive this extraordinary amplification? Impersonality can be interpreted in psychological terms as a disembedding of the self that works against our fundamental narcissism, propelling our interest and concerns outwards. The disaggregation of artist and expression certainly enables the work of art to assume more worldly dimensions; rather than seeking the artist's thoughts or feelings, the works seek to teach us about the structure of the universe, the nature of reflection, the importance of the motile body, or the perception of colour. Expression and composition are, of course, not so easily eradicated, but the recurrent desire for a kind of degree zero of form, is a surprisingly productive motor for art.

Notes

1. Jesús Rafael Soto, "Fragment of an Infinite Reality," in *Mari Carmen Ramirez and Hector Olea, Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press and Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2004) 510.
2. Julio Le Parc, "Rough Notes," in *Inverted Utopias*, 521.
3. Lygia Clark, "On the Magic of the Object," *Lygia Clark*, ed. Manuel Borja-Villel, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1998) 154.
4. Guy Brett, *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery and Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani, 2000) 10.
5. See Guy Brett, *Kinetic Art: The Language of Movement* (London: Studio Vista, 1968).
6. Brett, *Force Fields*, 9.
7. *Ibid.*, 10.
8. Soto cited in Brett, *Force Fields*, 10-11
9. Yve-Alain Bois and Jane de Almeida, "Ideologias da forma: Entravista com Yve-Alain Bois," *Novos Estudos CEBRAP* 76 (Novembro 2006): 237-249. English translation available at: www.janedalmeida.com/yve_alain_bois.pdf
10. Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," *Piet Mondrian 1972-1944*, ed. J. Joosten, A. Z. Rudenstine and H. Janssen (Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1994) 348.
11. Soto, "Fragment of an Infinite Reality," 509.
12. *Ibid.*, 509.
13. Mónica Amor, "Another Geometry: Gego's Reticulárea, 1969-1982," *October* 113 (Summer 2005) 107.
14. Ossott cited in Amor, "Another Geometry," 108.
15. Brett, *Force Fields*, 10
16. Luis Pérez-Oramas, "Caracas: A Constructive Stage," *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Paricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exh. cat. (Blanton Museum of Art and Fundación Cisneros, 2007) 76.
17. See Phillipe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 2004).
18. While Mari Carmen Ramirez had suggested there was not a great deal of knowledge on the part of artists about parallel constructivist groups across the continent, according to Mary Kate O'Hare this is now disputed by new research. See Mary Kate O'Hare, Introduction, *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-50s*, exh. cat. (Newark: Newark Museum and Pomgranate Press, 2010) 5 fn 21.
19. Marta Traba, *Art of Latin America 1900-1980*, trans. Ralph Edward Dimmick (n.p.: Inter-American Development Bank, 1994) 108.
20. *Ibid.*, 53.
21. *Ibid.*, 101.
22. Lucio Fontana, "The White Manifesto," (1946) reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990 An Anthology of Changing Ideas* ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992) 645.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Traba, *Art of Latin America*, 101.
25. Yve-Alain Bois, "The Difficult Task of Erasing Oneself: Non-composition in Twentieth-Century Art," Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton University, 7th March 2007. <http://video.ias.edu/The-Difficult-Task-of-Erasing-Oneself> accessed April 2012
26. Yve-Alain Bois, "Strzeminski and Kobro: In Search of Motivation," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT P, 1990) 138, 154.
27. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005) 21-59. Maria Gough, "Frank Stella is a Constructivist," *October* (Winter 2007): 94-120.

LIST OF WORKS

Unless otherwise stated all works are from the JW Power Collection, The University of Sydney, managed by the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Martha Boto

Labyrinthe Diagonale 1965
wood and metal, 65 x 65 x 40 cm
PW1967.2

Carlos Cruz-Diez

Physichromie No. 339 1967
painted wood and laminated plexi-glass,
61 x 61 cm
PW1967.4

Hugo Demarco

Images Variables 1964
painted wood, 114 x 114 x 20 cm
PW 1967.8

Hugo Demarco

Metamorphose 1963
wood, metal and plastic, 35.5 x 35 x 17 cm
PW1967.9

Lucio Fontana

Concetto spaziale 1968
serigraph and perforated acrylic,
48.5 x 68.9 cm
PW1968.16

Julio Le Parc

Continual Mobile 1966
synthetic polymer paint on aluminium
sheet and wood, synthetic fabric on
cardboard, nylon monofilament, acrylic
sheet and aluminium, 98 x 40 x 8 cm
PW1967.18.a-p

Jesús Raphael Soto

Untitled 6 1971
screenprint and etching, 94 x 94 cm
PW1972.58

Jesús Raphael Soto

Vibrations (Yellow square and semi-circle) 1970
screenprint on cardboard, 43.8 x 43.8 cm
PW1970.40.1

Jesús Raphael Soto

Vibrations (Blue, black and grey) 1970
screenprint on cardboard, 41 x 40.8 cm
PW1970.40.2

Luis Tomasello

Atmosphère Chromoplastique No. 154
1966, painted wood, 100 x 100 cm
PW1967.26

Gregorio Vardanega

Cercles Chromatiques 1967
wooden box, 65 x 65 x 40 cm
PW1967.27

O Mundo de Lygia Clark (The World of Lygia Clark) 1973
Directed by Eduardo Clark
duration 27mins
courtesy of the artist's estate

Movement and Vibration in Space: Sculpture by Gego 1959
Directed by Carlos Cruz-Diez
duration 10mins
courtesy of the artist's estate

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An exhibition, like all intellectual work, is a team effort. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the fabulous team who have made this exhibition possible. In the first instance, I'd like to thank Ann Stephen for inviting me to explore the Power Collection and to think about curating an exhibition of Latin American art for the University Art Gallery. Her persuasiveness is legendary, as is her unstinting support. In the early stages of the project, Hannah Kothe was a fabulous assistant curator and in her stead, Nicole Kluk has continued that fine tradition of shepherding and support. Special thanks are also due to Mariana Bertelli Pagotto for securing the Brazilian loans, and to the team at University Museums, especially Luke Parker. Peter Thorn has done a sterling job in creating the wonderful designs for catalogue, banners and invitation. Particular thanks are due to the estates of Gego and Lygia Clark for lending the films on the work of these two artists. These films have to some degree enabled us to redress the underrepresentation of leading women artists in the Power Latin American collection.

Susan Best teaches art history at the University of New South Wales. She is the author of *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde* (London & New York: I B Tauris, 2011).

PUBLIC PROGRAM

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