

**artworks as
artifacts,
artworks as
manifestos**

cuts and folds

The works in these galleries have been cut, folded, or extended into three dimensions. When first exhibited, some of them lacked the frames and pedestals that usually separate art from everyday objects, and viewers could manipulate them. In some cases, artists deliberately brought attention to the volume of the works by painting their edges. These artists radically reconfigured the relationship viewers have to art by staging an increasingly corporeal and interactive encounter.

Most of the works in this section were produced by Brazilian Neo-Concrete artists, who wanted their art to appeal to the mind as well as the senses. In this, they were reacting against the tradition of Concrete art, in which geometry was used to construct images that followed a strictly visual and conceptual logic.

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unsteady optics

The artworks gathered here appear to vibrate or change colors as the viewer moves in front of them. Leading Venezuelan and Brazilian artists of the 1950s explored scientific methodologies to create these fleeting optical effects: they experimented with transparent materials, superimposed patterns, and lenticular constructions. The artist Jesús Rafael Soto recounted, “I discovered a phenomenon that left me floating on air for almost a week: when I superimposed plots [of dots], luminous nuclei appeared, rotating and moving whenever I shifted position in front of them.” Other artists created works suggestive of movement by studying the mechanics of human vision as well as its recognition of patterns and forms.

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a revolution of limits

A constellation of artists working in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the mid-1940s made a daring proposal to abandon one of painting's most enduring conventions: the rectangular frame. Rhod Rothfuss, the Uruguayan artist who first wrote about this idea, argued that the internal composition of a painting should determine the shape of its borders. He wrote, "A painting should be something that begins and ends in itself," and called the resulting irregular canvases *marcos recortados*, or "cut-out frames."

These artists—most of whom aligned themselves with the Communist Party—believed that their artistic innovations could transform social consciousness by opposing traditional (or bourgeois) art forms.

modern as
abstract

a modern worldview

This section of the exhibition displays artworks alongside examples of furniture, textile, and graphic design that demonstrate the ways in which, starting in the mid-1950s, the language of abstraction became synonymous with modernity in South America, spilling over from artworks into the everyday—to tablecloths, chairs, and even cities.

At this time, artists, designers, and architects in the region recognized one another as allies sharing not just a visual language but ideals as well. This so-called “synthesis of the arts” was a project of cross-disciplinary integration that crystallized in two paradigmatic projects, the Ciudad Universitaria, in Caracas, and Brazil’s new capital, Brasília.

modern as
abstract

shaking up the grid

Many South American artists used the image of the grid—a long-standing metaphor for progress, stability, and order—only to make it elastic, messy, and fragile. By doing so, they explored its contradictions and even questioned the benefits of modernization. Thinking about the use of the grid in his art of the 1970s, the Venezuelan artist Eugenio Espinoza wrote, “I saw the grid everywhere. Order is an interesting social imposition. I didn’t want to control my impulses, my anxiety. My work has been determined by a historical order and an emotional chaos.”