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 it formed the art world we know. Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s–1970s ably points out this fact, 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 159 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, Mikiš Peternik, 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...
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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