

## Julio Le Parc: to investigate experimenting

In 1981, in a commentary on Juan Acha's Presentation for the *Visual Arts and Identity in Latin America* meeting, organized by the Contemporary Art Forum in Mexico City, Julio Le Parc, while questioning the premises of Acha, regarding the tension between "high art" and "popular art", established his position regarding the place that art should occupy in relation to mass and consumer culture, the form that an active spectator should assume and non-contemplative in relation to art and above all, the way in which works acquire value.

For Le Parc, the value of a work is not immutable, much less natural, but must be produced in relation to a new form of distribution and artistic judgment. By rethinking the way in which value is assigned, which would always be in relation to different artistic agents, but primarily considering the viewer, said value would be imposed hierarchically neither by criticism nor by history but rather by the interactions themselves. This would generate a localized and contextualized validation operation that would provoke a collective consciousness in relation to Latin American realities. In addition, he reconsidered a new form of cosmopolitanism based on open dialogue that would generate new forms of international interrelationships.

Le Parc said at that time that

*The relativity of a work of art and its social function is something known, to the point that the same work in certain circumstances can be used to support the relationship and in others to form part of the revolutionary heritage. [...] Rather than imputing to some of the parties the causes of all the evils that afflict our plastic arts, whether, in the behavior of the artistic producer, or the exclusive valorization of art criticism, etc., it is above all to subvert the cultural system.*

What Le Parc says in that paper is complex because it articulates different questions at the same time and each one of them must be treated in detail. The thing is that this 1981 text is going to synthesize some of the approaches that Le Parc had been developing since the early 1960s and until 1968 when he was part of the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), and then as an individual artist during the 1970s. Precisely one of the fundamental premises that drives all his approaches has to do with the idea of experimentation and artistic research, which is what allows him to speak of a type of art that is absolutely unstable, unclassifiable and that could generate the relationships to which I referred above.

The purpose of Le Parc is then to break down a series of assumptions based on the articulation of relationships between art agents and institutions based on contemporary reality: a transformation that depends on an awareness caused by art, which allows locating interests and debates in which society actively participates. This awareness that is related to the way in which value is assigned to the works, but also to the local reality, is based on the relationship between experimentation and research, which is one of the fundamental aspects of his work and is what will guide all the determining aspects of his work.

The exhibition *Julio Le Parc: Visual Encounters* that is exhibited at the RGR Gallery in Mexico City in September 2022 shows this insistence on the artist's experimentation through two-dimensional and three-dimensional mobile works, focused on three important moments in his career (1959-1972- 1988/2022). Focused on the visual and bodily effects that the works can produce, the exhibition is also a search for and at the same time an affirmation of the technological conditions in art. Thus, it is shown that experimentation has concrete and localized visual, social, and technological dimensions that must be interrogated.

## **Experimentation-research**

It is very important to note that, historically speaking, much of the criticism and art history that has referred to the work of Julio Le Parc (and GRAV) treats his work as kinetic, geometric, abstract and Latin American, thus generating some categories with which it would be classified later. However, these classifications are useless because they only superficially describe the artist's work and subject it to a certain formalism, style or trend: it is true that the figures in Le Parc's works, both three-dimensional and two-dimensional, are geometric; It is also true that some of them are moved by technological mechanisms; and of course they are abstract in the sense that they are not realistic representations. But that is only an absolutely reductionist reading of the artist's proposal, whose center is experimentation and research.

In this sense, what should be understood by research and experimentation? On the one hand, research allows Julio Le Parc to establish relationships between different types of experiences and phenomena that may seem antagonistic, but are actually polarities in which his work moves. These relationships are, however, often contradictory as he himself has recognized. For example, one of the most important premises of his work has to do with the possibility of generating specific experiences in viewers from an interaction with them. The goal is then to provoke a reaction in him, which depends on his sensitivity and his presence, and not an interpretation or a form of rhetoric. In this sense, the work is not found in the materiality of the object nor in the viewer, but rather in the relationship established between one thing and the other.

What is sought is a posture of the spectator (in a literal but also figurative sense) in front of what he sees. Thus, the geometric figures and the movement are only the pre-text that allows the viewer to act in front of what he sees. Research has to do with that interstitial space, but experimentation -and that is what allows many works to be generated in this regard- is the way in which the proposal can be configured in different ways. Or even the way in which the work changes due to the movement of light and motors. Despite the formal simplicity of many of his works, the combinations and

reconfigurations of each of its elements in turn produce different types of experiences. It is in this sense that research and experimentation are correlative and are part of the same proposal. Thus, the work of art should not be qualified in aesthetic terms, one of the premises of the quote referred to above. The work of art creates a value, not to the extent that it can be "only" appreciated, but rather it is the enabler of multiple relationships in which the viewer is the protagonist.

On the one hand, the case of the *Surface-couleur* series (1959) is significant because, based on a recombination of dots, squares and colored lines in grids, Le Parc can visualize which composition is best suited to generate different visual effects. Indeed, serial work is fundamental because it is what allows variations to be generated in relation to the effect that the artist wishes to produce. Experimentation is then the possibility of having different effects based on different compositions. In these works there is nothing definitive because the colors are susceptible to being recombined, thus generating an infinity of possible experiences. It is a game of trial and error that deeply questions the auratic conditions of the work by pointing out the variations in each of the versions at the same time it is not a mass-produced art nor is it made for immediate consumption.

On the other hand, mobile works and works that use motors always imply a displacement of both the viewer because they must adjust their gaze as the work proposes a path, also affecting the position of the body. For example, in *Continuel lumière mobile carré alvéolés* (1960-2007), square mirrors that are suspended from the ceiling move while two lamps illuminate them from below. Of course, for the effect to occur, the viewer has to enter a dark room. What is seen, in addition to the movement of the mirrors, is the light that is reflected in each one of them. What is sought here is that the viewer becomes aware of his environment and the relationships between reflections and objects that are present. Experimentation in this sense has to do with the incidence of materials and technology in an environment that the artist proposes, and in which the viewer participates: it is not a mere visuality but the awareness of corporality and spatiality.

In the same way, in the proposals of the Argentine artist there is also a tension between the collective and the individual on the one hand; and between the open space of the city and the closed space of the gallery or museum. For example, one of the objectives of GRAV was to demystify the idea of individual authorship and begin to work in a community that would not specifically identify to whom the work belonged. The purpose, moreover, was to question authorship in relation to the art market and the fetishization of objects. For this reason, Le Parc often produced series of works. However, although he belongs to GRAV, the artist continues to work individually and is invited to participate in the Argentine Pavilion at the 1966 Venice Biennale, in which he received the Grand International Prize for Painting.

Precisely, that same year, he participated in one of the iconic GRAV exhibitions, *Une journée dans la rue* in the city of Paris. This work, intended for the public to participate in a kind of moments scattered around the city, was made with the purpose of a collective interaction with the work: a collective that collectivized his works. Each of the moments or "stations" of the proposal was drawn on a map that Le Parc itself had made, in which the activities and schedules of each of them were indicated. For example, at ten o'clock in the morning at the corner of Champs Élysées avenue and rue La Boétie, halfway between Place de la Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe, people were proposed to disassemble and assemble a "permutational structure" with square plates of transparent plexiglass 40 centimeters on each side designed by Francisco Sobrino (one of the group members) that, thanks to some grooves in their corners, could be easily assembled.

However, it is worth asking, how is it possible that the artist can participate in two apparently antagonistic events, one collectively and in the city, the other in a closed space, in a biennial? One in which nationality cannot be identified and another in which it represents a nationality, Argentina? The key is to think about the way in which a work of art can be individual and collective at the same time and this has to do with the

experience and the number of possible relationships that are proposed. There is, however, no necessary correlation between one thing and the other.

For both Le Parc and GRAV, a work of art is not made to be interpreted but rather to provoke multiple experiences. These experiences can be of a different nature, but the important thing is that the viewer is always challenged by them. The way in which a relationship is generated between the social space in which the proposal is carried out and the individual space that generates a kind of private experience is fundamental. If the proposal is from an individual artist and is exhibited in the gallery space, it produces effects on the viewer that are related to that space and that creative singularity. If the work is made by the collective to be exhibited in the street, it singles out the individual experience, but this time in that social space. The important thing is to generate different types of experience in relation to different subjectivities and different spatialities. It is what Octavio Paz called a form of criticism, by collectively linking art and life. Indeed, one of the purposes of Le Parc had to do with the utopia of a social transformation (of social reality) through art.

It was Paz, perhaps the only Mexican critic of the moment who was able to see the operations of the GRAV in the second half of the sixties. For the critic, objects in that decade had become interchangeable and no longer represented the foundation of meaning as language. However, there are still some artistic manifestations that operate a social and art critique such as GRAV, by questioning the premises of modern art: they return to teamwork; they replace the workshop with the laboratory; they replace craft production with research; they transform the idea of the patron teacher into that of an artists' association and put imagination at the center of their concerns. All this causes, according to Paz, "the work dissolves in life but life is resolved in the party (...) It is about finding, through machines, a collective way of consuming and consummating time."

Thus, the relationship between art and life, mediated by imagination and experience, seeks a multiplicity of relationships that update the proposals of some of the

first avant-gardes, such as Suprematism and concrete art, and contextualizes them in another time. In that sense, they are a kind of neo-avant-garde.

Now, there are many other relationships in tension in the work of Le Parc. For example, it is easy to point out those of cosmopolitan-parish, center-periphery, painting-sculpture, singular-multiple, stability-instability, circulation-presence, static-dynamic, and activity-contemplation. These polarities mean that it is not possible to describe his work definitively: what should be done, from my perspective, would be to describe each of the specific operations that move between these polarities, framed in specific contexts, something that for reasons of space I will not have the opportunity to do. However, I would like to focus on another of the tensions evident in Le Parc's work: the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy in art.

In 2006, regarding his exhibition at the Alameda Art Laboratory in Mexico City, Le Parc answered Mónica Benítez in an interview:

*I was never interested in using new technology or interacting with big industries to do my work, as some artists of my time did. I have always used very simple technology such as motors, cranks, and lamps, all the elements are very simple. For me, it is very important not to use overly complicated technological means, since the result may be the risk of obtaining a technological exhibition and not an artistic one. There are works that use very simple elements with really poetic results and that is what I want to achieve. The less technology I use, the more I have to strive for a good artistic result. These simple elements have always provided me with solutions to the aesthetic problems that I have wanted to solve. My interest has never focused on the means used but on the result.*

The tension between heteronomy and autonomy of art is very important here because it makes it possible to think that the utopia of social transformation must occur from art and not from, for example, technology or the mass media. The "poetics" described in this passage is nothing more than a new way of seeing, based on the

experience with the works. Unlike a "technological" exhibition, an art exhibition allows a novel interaction because it does not refer to the "use" of the thing but focuses on the possible relationships between subject spaces and objects. The machine is what makes possible the relationship between the work and the social space. It is a kind of hinge between poetry and, what we could call, politics. Or better, between the autonomous element and the heteronomous element of art. Thus, the possible relationships are not directed only by the machine but it depends on the viewer to be something more than that: an acting agent. The transfer of movement from the mobile to the viewer is fundamental because it is what generates the social relationship proposed by the work. But this would not be achieved if the work is not considered as a type of technology, not as technologized art.

### **Technology as an artistic act**

Between 1988 and 2022 Julio Le Parc developed a series called *Alchimie*. In it, you can see different configurations made with colored dots on a black background. Each of these works shows how the dots, depending on their saturation and their disposition, generate new forms. All the dots are made with the 14 colors that Le Parc has used throughout his career as an artist. From my perspective, these works are not mere visual games but establish a double dialogue: first with the history of art, making reference to other artists who used the same technique (such as the pointillists) but also to their own because they fully recall the works of 59; secondly towards screen technology that allows different images to be configured from pixels. In this sense, the work of Le Parc is a permanent reflection on technology because it allows us to think about how it is that this constitutes contemporary images. Although we cannot see them clearly unless the screen is very large, pixels and colored dots are always in front of us when we look at our cell phones or computers. What Le Parc does is magnify and play with possible configurations of these points, showing that the contemporary image is also the product of physiology, of a way of seeing and perceiving.



In this sense, Le Parc's work is not simply kinetic art. It is rather the consideration of art as a form of technology, as a device. Le Parc's goal was never to make just mobiles, and color games, nor is it just an applied communication theory. It is, rather, the awareness that there cannot be a relationship between the human being and the world without technology or images, anticipating by far the way in which the circulation of current images is understood in contemporary devices. Thus, technology is not outside of art, nor is it an accessory to human behavior, but it is a fundamental part of its constitution because it is what allows a specific social interaction in a given time and space. Here the word technology must be understood in a broad sense, not as a technique without more, but rather as a need of man as a social being. In this way, if art is considered as technology and not only as a fetish object that is offered for passive contemplation, one can think about the social relations that imply it. Understood in this way, technology is the product of specific socializations, but it also produces new forms of socialization. That is the complexity of the matter because it can change the perception of the world to the extent that a human being is always in interaction with the said world through creations and uses of technology.

In fact, many of the Le Parc texts from the early 1960s address this problem by relating (and even redefining) art based on a new status of the artist and the viewer and in relation to the social transformation of that moment. In a text written in 1960 (when he was part of the GRAV) called *Eliminar la palabra arte* (Eliminate the word art), he points out that there will always be relativism in relation to art because there can be no artistic value without considering the present and its "social connotation." In addition, he is clear that all artistic activity is contradictory due to the way it is taught and learned, due to the historical conventions that it entails, and, above all, due to the way in which it is socially inscribed. The artistic exercise would then be one of demystification: a human activity focused on "the visual phenomenon and not on the abrupt illuminations that we can receive from our inspiration or our moods." In this sense, the expressive value of art is not given per se but is "the product of a deep and intangible identity of the man-painter with his time and with the aspirations of the human being."

This text is very important because it anticipates the approaches of many of the North American artists of minimal art by generating an awareness between space, time, mobility, and the viewer's vision and, above all, its presence as a constitutive part of the work. The work of art is not in the viewer or in the object but in the relationship between one and the other. But what is interesting is the assumption that the viewer changes thanks to the visual appreciation of the "plastic object". In this sense, the work is superficial, because what matters is its formal configuration and not, for example, its expressiveness.

The change to which Le Parc refers is the appearance of a historical and social conscience through the simultaneous presence of the work-spectator. Thus, he is aware that the work of art, while belonging to its time, can only be so to the extent that a viewer sees it because that relationship produces the awareness of the emergence of a contemporary subject. The work would link the subject with his real space with his social space, rethinking the conditions in which the phenomena are organized but also the way in which the subjects relate to them. Or as he himself says "the place we give to the existence of the plastic fact is neither in the emotional suspicion preconceived in being, nor in the technical realization of the work of art itself, but in the conjugation of being and object in an equidistant visual plane. It is a work that fully thinks about its social effects from art and not from an ideological preconception.

Thus, the work of art has an unstable behavior but it necessarily depends on its consideration as technology. The motors and movement that he introduces in his work are a contribution to the condition of the presence of the work as a "constitutive part of the visual phenomenon." As he said, it is not "kinetic" without more, but the establishment of the correlation of the image with the ways of seeing of the subject. Or better, the awareness of the way of seeing by the subject. Those ways of seeing, as well as visual phenomena, are the ones that must be investigated and that is why his art is always about experimentation with the visual in relation to technology.

## **There is no Latin American art but one of resistance**

In 2017, Alexander Alberro, in a book called *Abstraction in reverse. The reconfigured spectator in mid-twentieth-century Latin American art* affirmed

*My thesis, in short, is that by breaking in various ways with the main dictates of Concrete art, mid-twentieth-century Latin American artists reimagined the relationship of art with its public and produced works that challenged prevailing notions of the interconnectedness between subject and world, perceiver and perceived, objective reality and subjective experience. In this new conceptualization, art was no longer seen as totally autonomous and internally coherent, but as relationally dynamic, eliciting imaginative engagement from the viewer and producing meaning through this very relationality.*

It is clear that Alberro is right when he affirms the interrelation that some artists of that time, such as Julio Le Parc, proposed. However, two categories that are working in this text should be explored. The first is that of a Latin American artist; the second is that of meaning. Just as his works are not "kinetic" without more, they are not Latin American nor do they have "meaning". The relationship that Julio Le Parc had with the so-called "Latin American art" is very ambivalent because he recognized the specificity of the context in relation to the sense (not the meaning) that a work of art can have locally. Just as he pointed out above, Latin America is only specific if it is understood in relation to the hegemonic centers of artistic enunciation. For Le Parc, what is Latin American is not an essential issue but rather a way of responding to a reality that deregulates the value of works of art, both critically and historically, and places it in the function of a specific public. This de-essentialization of "what is Latin American" is consistent with all the other ideas of Le Parc because what he is looking for is a self-determined art that also involves the public and is not subject to North American hegemony.

Once again, an art that is aware of its social condition and of certain localized social operations that are always in dialogue with the global conditions of production. There is obviously no political representation in his theme but rather the awareness that art can have a social impact in relation to a context, allowing the viewer freedom in relation to his own visual conditions and his own history. What is generated in this way is a kind of institutional critique based on a social resistance that deregulates hierarchical art and gives power to the immediate viewer. The objective is to generate a social relationship from art not only "with" art but with a social sphere in a general sense.

Working with geometric figures, motors, lights, and colors not only makes it difficult to identify where the work is from because, obviously, all the stereotypes and folklorizations of Latin American art are avoided. But it also goes against the images of advertising, propaganda, and consumption that circulate in the mass media. Art is a way to counteract the visual hegemony that is made explicit in the mass media and that tells the rest of the world, on the one hand, how to behave and, on the other, assigns a value to works outside of their context: Le Parc was and is aware that the different forms of hegemony occur in relation to the predetermination of the behavior of subalterns through culture and visual consumption. In this sense, the art produced in Latin America, by recognizing its local reality and reconfiguring what could be called the artistic field, can counteract colonial hegemony.

This reconfiguration is primarily social and artistic because it starts from the awareness that a structural change is possible. Once again, the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy becomes clear: the autonomy of art allows proposals to be separated from their commercial use, at least partially, and this would prevent the spread of any ideology; on the other hand, considering that art has social effects and that it is at the same time socially affected, that is, considering it as a device, it can be an important part of the configuration of Latin American societies that would no longer be forced to use imposed criteria to judge and value its production but would

incorporate the international experience to be able to think and act in local realities: a cosmopolitan art.

Julio Le Parc's proposal establishes complex relationships between aesthetics and politics, but it always begins in the visual experience and in the bodily interaction between subjects and works. Considering that art can have effects on subjects beyond contemplation and interpretation is the true engine of his work. And it is in this sense that much of the historiography must be questioned.

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