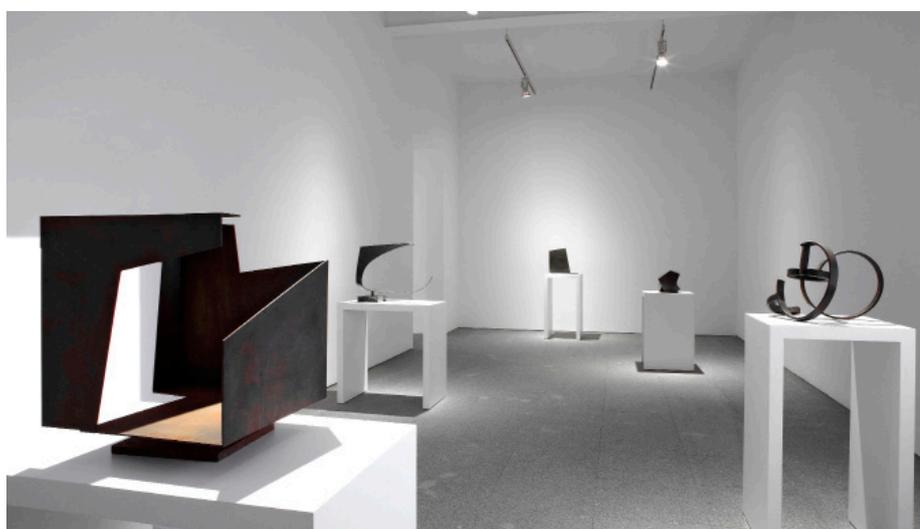


# Oteiza and the *Experimental Proposition*

The prize awarded to Jorge Oteiza at the 4th São Paulo Biennial in 1957 rewarded a hitherto unknown Spanish artist whose oeuvre had elements in common with the Brazilian Concrete artists who worked with planes and structures, like Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape or Franz Weissmann. Oteiza presented his sculpture as an 'experimental proposition' based on the idea of emptying space and conceived as an 'objective aesthetics.'



The essence of the abstract sculpture produced by Jorge Oteiza (Orío, Guipúzcoa, 1908 - San Sebastian, 2003) was forged in the fifties around small maquettes which led to his *Laboratorio experimental* (Experimental Laboratory) and it was first given concrete form in an international exhibition of his work in stone and steel, *Experimental Proposition*, that represented Spain at the 4th São Paulo Biennial in 1957.

This ensemble and later sculptures entitled 'Obras conclusivas' (Conclusive Works) constituted Oteiza's chief contribution to the sculptural work he himself considered concluded in 1959. The latter included some pieces in the museum's permanent collection, such as the 'Construcciones vacías' (Empty Constructions): the complex structure *Homenaje a Mallarmé* (Homage to Mallarmé) made in 1958, or *Caja vacía* (Empty Box) of the same year, a combination of positive and negative planes, and the 'Units', made of dihedrals or trihedrals, that configured works such as *Homenaje al estilema vacío del cubismo* (Homage to the Empty Styleme of Cubism) of 1959.

Oteiza considered that art 'was man's existential support.' The sculptor regarded himself as a 'metaphysical worker,' positioned his work at the end of avant-garde art and in a desire for universalism and truth declared that 'the history of sculpture is written by a single sculptor whose name changes.' Oteiza strove to create a 'statue,' in his own words, 'of an experimental nature, objective, cold, impersonal, free of all desire for spectacle, of all superficial intention, of an original and surprising appearance,' a sculpture that would be 'the spiritual imagination of our age,' and an oeuvre he completed in 'the Nothing that is Everything,' showing the mythical and therefore original aspect underlying his sculpture.

The São Paulo sculpture and the catalogue essay on which it was based were incomparable achievements in their time because of their radical constructive abstraction,

their genuine experimental character and their spiritual dimension. His desire to explore shapes was absolutely modern and linked to the idea of the avant-garde. This was a time when abstract research was also being carried out in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, even if it were seeking a phenomenological explanation of the world, while Oteiza's original vision was essentially idealistic.

## **Experimental Proposition**

In the early fifties Jorge Oteiza began to redirect his research from the statue as a mass to the statue as energy, in his own words, as an 'active emptying of space.' He conceived static works like the 'hyperboloids' and the 'light condensers,' the former in search of the liberation of energy through the emptying of form and the latter making light an intrinsic attribute of matter rather than something external to it. Oteiza worked on the study of movement and dynamics based on lines of force that led to the São Paulo sculpture, *Par móvil* (Mobile Pair) of 1956 in which motion was a structural part of the work and of the empty sphere. Another important discovery was the *Malevich Units*, described in the São Paulo catalogue as 'a small surface, the light, dynamic, unstable, floating nature of which should be understood in its full scope.' This trapezoidal figure created from a square or a rectangle that has lost two of its right angles and therefore has one stable element (the right angle) and one moving element (the diagonal) was employed by Oteiza in pla-

nes and curves, full and empty areas, and regenerated his sculpture.

### The 4th São Paulo Biennial

The São Paulo Biennial was first held in 1951, four years before the documenta in Kassel, Germany. At its fourth edition in 1957, curated by Ciccillo Matarazzo, Jorge Oteiza was awarded a prize as best foreign sculptor. Oteiza had been working on his 'Experimental Project' in Madrid's Nuevos Ministerios district for about a year before having accepted to take part in the project in January 1957. From that moment on he intensified his work on small maquettes by means of drawings, some of which were assembled in his *Operación Urgente* (Operation Urgent) notebook, maquettes for the final works and ground plans of the exhibition hall for a consignment he took seven months to prepare and which eventually not only consisted of the ten works requested but of twenty-eight pieces grouped in ten families that, in turn, belonged to four sets of sculptures.

The first set was defined as *Open Formal Units and Fusion Mechanics*, and the pieces either derived from the flat *Malevich Unit* subjected to the action of a curved space, remaining complete though curved, or else from the *Malevich plane* with a curved cut. The lines of force in *Homenaje a Malevich* (Homage to Malevich) made in 1956 (a work on loan from the Jorge Oteiza Foundation in Alzuza) and *Ordenación de un espacio definido. Control hiperespacial* (Ordering of a Defined Space. Hyperspatial Control) made in 1957 (in the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía) transcend the material volume of the sculptures, illustrating the dynamics and energy captured by Oteiza.

The second set of works, grouped under the heading *Fusion of Open Polyhedrons. Empty Internal and External Configurations. Permeability*, included sculptures such as *Teorema de la desocupación cúbica* (Theorem of Cubic Disoccupation) of 1956, and *Fusión de dos sólidos abiertos* (Fusion of Two Open Solids) o *Macla con dos cuboides de apertura curva distinta* (Macle with Two Cuboids of Different Curved Openings), made the following year. In

both works the polyhedrons were opened by curved empty spaces, heightened in the former by the presence of two colours and in the latter by the fusion of two cuboids with Malevichian matrices to create what Oteiza called *macla*—a mineralogical term for twin crystals, i.e., indissoluble union.

Two works in the Reina Sofía collection, *Apertura o desocupación del cilindro* (Opening or Disoccupation of the Cylinder) and *De la serie de desocupación de la esfera* (From the Series on Disoccupation of the Sphere), both of which were made in 1957, belong to the series entitled 'Dinámica de la flotación y aplicación en arquitectura' (Dynamics of Flotation and Application in Architecture) and follow the emptying process conceived that same year for *Par móvil*. The former was based on two curved trapezoidal planes (Malevich) with an internal cut defining the circular peaceful shape of the central emptiness, while the latter has the unitary complexity of the centrifugal movement that activates space.

Finally, the set of works entitled *The Funerary Stela* also comprises sculptures made in 1957, such as *Homenaje a Jean Couzinet* (Homage to Jean Couzinet), in the Reina Sofía collection, and *Estela al Padre Lete* (A Funerary Stela for Father Lete) kept in the Oteiza Museum. The former is a light curved shape that seems to leave space itself in suspension, and the latter is a metal 'light condenser.' Both works enabled Oteiza to consolidate the spiritual aspect of his art, which he defined in the following words: 'My abstract sculpture is religious art. I do not turn to this concept of the statue in search of what we have but of what we lack. I drift from the religious to the funerary stela. It is not a minute of silence; it is the religious image of the civil absence of contemporary man.'

### Bibliography

Margarit, Rowell; Badiola, Txomin. *Oteiza propósito experimental*. Madrid: Fundación Caja de Pensiones, 1988.

Rowell, Margit [ed.]. *Oteiza mito y modernidad*. Museo Guggenheim, Bilbao. Madrid: SEACEX, 2005.

Bados, Ángel. *Oteiza. Laboratorio experimental*. Alzuza, Navarra: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2008.

Echeverría Plazaola, Jon. *La finalidad del arte. La obra y el pensamiento de Jorge Oteiza: arte, estética y religión*. Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2008.

Manzanos, Javier [ed.]. *IV Bienal del Museo de Arte Moderno, 1957, São Paulo, Brasil*. Alzuza, Navarra: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2007.

### Links

[www.museoteiza.org](http://www.museoteiza.org)

[www.tesisenxarxa.net/TDX-0213109-125216/index.html](http://www.tesisenxarxa.net/TDX-0213109-125216/index.html)