



**Sarah Grilo and
José Antonio
Fernández-Muro**

Vistas

Vistas 6

**Sarah Grilo and
José Antonio Fernández-Muro**

**Edited by
Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano**

Argentinean painters Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro were essential to the development of international postwar abstraction. Through their use of matter, language, and signs and symbols of city life (including graffiti, typography from advertisements, and street numbers), both artists developed distinct conceptual languages. Currently on loan at ISLAA from the Estate of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro, the artists' archive constitutes the most comprehensive body of information on their lives and careers. The archive contains items that pertain to the couple's life in Buenos Aires, New York, Paris, and Madrid from the 1950s to the 1980s, including references to their participation in the artist collectives Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA) and Grupo de Los Cinco. The unique array of vintage materials contained in the archive includes negatives by photographers such as Lisl Steiner; original photographs by Grete Stern and Henry Grossman, among other photographers; slides; international press clippings; and exhibition catalogues in several languages. This collection of objects is testimony to the artists' experimentation with different painting styles—such as figurative art, geometric abstraction, and morphological abstraction—and the ways in which they engaged with their urban surroundings.

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The Postwar Years of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro

Andrea Carolina Zambrano, Damasia Lacroze,
Emireth Herrera, and Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar

Introduction

Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano

The sixth issue of *Vistas* is devoted to Argentine artists Sarah Grilo (1919–2007) and José Antonio Fernández-Muro (1920–2014), their legacies, and their contributions to international postwar abstraction.

This issue was made possible thanks to the Estate of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro, which generously loaned their archive to the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA). ISLAA's team catalogued and digitized these materials, making them available to the authors who contributed to this issue and facilitating new investigations by emerging scholars and curators. This volume of *Vistas* is the result of this joint institutional effort to expand the accessibility of the archive for future academic research. We are delighted to see the culmination of this project in the incisive texts that follow, which are also testament to ISLAA's academic programs.

The archive provides a vivid account of the artists' life in Buenos Aires, New York, Paris, and Madrid from the 1950s to the 1980s. The archive's contents track the couple's artistic developments and experimentation with a range of painting styles, including figurative art, geometric abstraction, and morphological abstraction. The expansive media represented in the archive include photographs (including some by notable photographers Hans Namuth, Grete Stern, and Henry Grossman), press clippings from a range of international publications, exhibition catalogues, vintage negatives, and the artists' handwritten artwork inventories. This issue's contributors dived into this trove of personal and professional ephemera, furthering scholarship on the artists with a hands-on and object-based perspective.

Megan Kincaid made an inventory of the archive while it was on loan to ISLAA. This prodigious undertaking informs her moving essay on the entwinement of Grilo and Fernández-Muro's travels

and family life with the development of their painting practices. Kincaid's essay is a result of her participation in ISLAA's first Writer in Residence Program, marking an outstanding start to this initiative that aims to be a catalyst for new research on the art of Latin America.

Karen Grimson's essay contextualizes Grilo's use of linguistic, numeric, and calligraphic elements in her painting in light of the artist's relocation to New York City. Grilo drew references from the abundant graffiti and advertising in her new metropolis and from the momentous labor strike by newspaper workers in 1962–63. Supported by an ISLAA Travel Grant, Grimson traveled to Madrid in the summer of 2019 to conduct her research. There, she met the artists' family, interviewed members of the Estate, and visited Grilo and Fernández-Muro's studio, which allowed her to obtain important firsthand testimonies and produce insightful art-historical analyses based on primary sources.

Inspired by a 1967 radio discussion between Chilean artist Nemesio Antúnez and Fernández-Muro, Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar interviewed Fernández-Muro's grandson Mateo Fernández-Muro, who also represents the Estate. The conversation with Antúnez first aired on Antúnez's groundbreaking radio show, *Arte desde Nueva York*, which documented the city's Latin American avant-garde scene, where Fernández-Muro found his milieu. Mateo Fernández-Muro shares personal memories of his grandfather, while Ramírez Bolívar leads an illuminating discussion of the artist's understanding of identity, his relation to international art discourse, and the development of his practice within distinct urban contexts.

In addition to this issue of *Vistas*, ISLAA has supported both scholarly and curatorial projects that focus on the life and work of the two artists, including the 2019 exhibition *Grilo/Fernández-Muro: 1962–1984* at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. This presentation of artworks and archival material inaugurated the Duke House Exhibition Series, a program dedicated to showcasing the work of Latin American artists. ISLAA proudly supports this initiative, which provides graduate students with the opportunity to realize their curatorial ambitions and enrich their study of art history. The exhibition's curators—Emireth

Herrera, Damasia Lacroze, Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar, and Andrea Carolina Zambrano—have contributed a cowritten text to this issue of *Vistas* in which they discuss the artists' involvement with the Argentine collectives Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina and Grupo de Los Cinco. They also reflect on the evolution of the artists' work during their years in the United States.

Working with these young scholars and our partnering institutions has been an enriching experience. On behalf of the team at ISLAA, I would like to extend our gratitude to the Estate of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro for entrusting us with this singular collection. It is our privilege to pay tribute to these two distinguished artists—Sarah and Toño, as they called each other.

An Almost Inescapable Complement: The Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro

Megan Kincaid

“The company of his wife, Sarah Grilo, is an almost inescapable complement to his work.”¹ So wrote the art critic José Gómez-Sicre in a 1963 article of the relationship between the Spanish-born artist José Antonio Fernández-Muro and his wife, the Argentine painter Sarah Grilo. A year before Gómez-Sicre’s article appeared in *Américas*, a transnational periodical that promoted Latin American artists working in the United States, the married couple had relocated to New York City from Buenos Aires, where they had already established prominence within the city’s vibrant artistic community. The impetus for their move was Grilo’s award of a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, which enabled her to “devote herself to creative painting”² in a new cultural context. It is precisely the weight of this move from their established home base to New York’s unknown, labyrinthine metropolis for the betterment of Grilo’s career that exemplifies Grilo and Fernández-Muro’s deep commitment to each other’s work—each an “almost inescapable complement” to the other, as Gómez-Sicre so acutely perceived.

The archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro, currently on loan to the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art, evidences decades of synergistic artistic exchange between the two artists, establishing the complex interconnectedness of their practices while also pronouncing differences therein. Married in 1944 and inseparable for sixty-three years until Grilo’s passing in 2007, Grilo and Fernández-Muro built a reciprocal structure of support and inspiration. Their story of collaboration includes a broad cohort of interlocutors, from fellow painters and photographers to gallerists and dedicated critics.

Accumulating the photographs, exhibition catalogues, exhibition reviews, letters, and notebooks that accompanied their myriad exhibitions and awards throughout their careers, Grilo and Fernández-Muro gave birth to their archive, both inadvertently and intentionally. This continually evolving capsule of professional and personal trajectories spans more than two thousand items,

ranging from clippings of newspaper reviews to hundreds of negative film rolls registering their studio activity and exhibitions. The archive is maintained by their descendants, who continue to add documentation and findings to its expanding corpus. This essay emerges from the first concerted attempt outside the artists' family to both meticulously catalogue the contents of the archive and seek more nuanced understandings of these key figures of Argentine modernism.

Recovering latent connotations or those lost to the historical record, the archive is a vital instrument for reappraising the historiographic treatment of Grilo and Fernández-Muro, who with their international stature and through experimental practices intervened in the canons of Latin American art and modernism more broadly. While the elisions and splinters between these two discourses have obscured the full breadth of Grilo and Fernández-Muro's artistic production, the narrative of their archive provides a way around, between, and outside these discursive quibbles. In the photographs of the artists in their shared studios, on cultural vacations with their family, and attending tinsel celebrations at exhibition openings resides an expanded view of Grilo and Fernández-Muro's artistic lives.

The earliest items in the archive reveal the couple's rapid rise to fame in the vanguard of the Argentine art scene of the 1940s. The young artists met as students under the tutelage of the master painter Vicente Puig, who taught studio art classes in Buenos Aires. With Puig's guidance, they began painting in the figurative tradition—executing portraits of friends, urban landscapes, and still lifes of mundane domesticity. Fernández-Muro established a highly stylized mode of figuration characterized by distorted and solemn visages. These characters are best represented by *El matrimonio genovés* (1945) (fig. 1), a portrait of a wife and husband gazing in opposite directions with forlorn if not expressly dissatisfied facial expressions. Grilo, for her part, evinced an early penchant for geometric abstraction even in her representational work. Her portraits often emphasize underlying geometric structures, and her series of paintings of decorated plates play with geometric harmony, further affirming the artist's interest in planes and shapes.

Primarily shown in Argentina, where they were exhibited at galleries in Buenos Aires like Galería Witcomb and Galería Viau, these often-neglected paintings are important precursors to the

artists' turn to abstraction. In addition to numerous studio photographs of these early works, captured by the Russian-born photographer Anatole Saderman (1904–93), the archive also contains dozens of exhibition reviews from the period. Appearing in major newspapers like *La Nación*, *La Razón*, and *Argentina Libre*, these critiques acknowledged the tremendous promise of both artists.

As early as 1943, Fernández-Muro presented in international exhibitions in European and other Latin American cities as an emissary of Argentine modernism. A particularly incisive article published in the Uruguayan newspaper *La Mañana* on a 1943 group exhibition of Argentine painting seized on Fernández-Muro's psychological acuity: "El muy joven José Antonio Fernández-Muro . . . sobresale por su espíritu observador y su psicología del tedio y de los confines de la miseria" ["The very young José Antonio Fernández-Muro . . . excels in his observational spirit and his psychology of boredom and the confines of misery"].³ This insight captures the artist's exploration of the human condition and his sympathetic depiction of those suffering, whether emotionally or economically. Examining the larger interpretive schemas in Fernández-Muro's oeuvre in conjunction with the emphatic humanism of his early painting makes clear the vital social urgency at the core of his work.

The archive's revelation of social-historical themes brushes against the grain of the predominantly formal approach to Grilo and Fernández-Muro, enlivening new methodological approaches to their work. Indeed, in a comical yet earnest inscription on the back of a portrait of Grilo from 1950 in her first studio on Calle Cabello, the artist's husband complained that the studio was "lleno de ratas"—full of rats.⁴ Located on a commercial street with clusters of busy bars and restaurants, with a brothel downstairs, it is likely the rodents found their way into Grilo's studio on at least one occasion.⁵ Indicating Grilo's immersion in a distinctly urban psychogeography, the inscription converges with the content and tone of her early work. The unsanitized visions of urban life and discontented metropolitan denizens encapsulated by these paintings communicate Grilo's unwavering humanist ethos. However, a deserved focus on Grilo's technical facility and signature visual language has often occluded such resonances. Social and class commentary nevertheless lurk in the paintings

for which Grilo is best known. Yet even formidable voices like the *New York Times* art critic John Canaday requested Grilo put aside what he saw as her distracting social commentary in a review of her solo exhibition at Byron Gallery: “But these pleasant panels are asked to carry a burden of social commentary (under such titles as ‘What the World Needs Now,’ ‘Mr. President’ and ‘The City of Man’) that is too heavy for them. These messages are in no way articulated with the aesthetic character of the painting, which is graceful and fluent. Take the painting, let the message go.”⁶ Grilo cut this article out of the May 13, 1967, issue of the *New York Times* and circled in red pencil the portion of the review that focused on her work (fig. 2). Yet Canaday’s injunction to “take the painting, let the message go” is an all-too-common high modernist dictum. From this perspective, the subject of painting—its adaptability, internal coherence, and autonomous logic—was meaty enough to consume the artist. Extra-artistic concerns, like national politics or the moral quandaries of St. Augustine, which Grilo probed in her painting *The City of Man*, fell outside the purview of avant-garde painting. Central to a revisionist study of Grilo and Fernández-Muro, who, like his wife, expressed political sentiments in his formally minded compositions, is a serious consideration of the validity and verve of their political stakes detected in early reviews of their work by Latin American critics.

In the early 1950s, as Grilo and Fernández-Muro grew in international stature and shifted to abstraction, the ephemeral materials the couple saved began to accelerate as well. At the turn of the new decade, the couple joined a generation of artists testing the boundaries of geometric abstraction and providing their own inflections to this style, infusing its notorious orthodoxy with informalism and expressionism. Grilo and Fernández-Muro were members of two epochal groups: Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina, or GAMA (Group of Modern Artists of Argentina), established in 1952, and Grupo de Los Cinco (Group of Five), formed in 1960. Exhibitions at Buenos Aires’s major museums, first the Museo de Arte Moderno and later the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, grouped artists who were independently exploring a set of related dynamics to propose coherent trends in Argentine abstraction. Though these collectives were institutional devices—that is to say, formations of curators rather than organic ensembles of artists unified by a theoretical vision—numerous

photographs in the archive document the scaffolding of support and influence they created. Indeed, their exhibitions precipitated intense moments of collaboration, such as the commercial project “Buen diseño para la industria,” which sought to translate high modernist concepts into textile design.⁷

Yet, as underscored by the extensive number of reviews of the *Cinco pintores* exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, the members of Grupo de Los Cinco did not possess a unified grammar. Fernández-Muro, the architect and artist Clorindo Testa, and Kazuya Sakai offered a hard-edged approach to geometric abstraction characterized by a rigid structural interplay, while Grilo and Miguel Ocampo proposed a lyrical translation of the idiom that allowed a greater degree of compositional freedom. The group’s eclecticism was exemplified by the widening aesthetic gulf between Grilo and her husband, who by 1960 had developed increasingly divergent strategies of abstraction, with Grilo investing geometric abstraction with gestural spontaneity, whereas Fernández-Muro continued to contemplate structural interrelations between abstracted elements. While each member of Grupo de Los Cinco provided their own distinctive approach to the stringent visual codes of Concretism, the group’s aesthetic diffusion did not hinder their friendships. Sakai in particular became a close friend of the artists and was a fixture at exhibition openings at Galería Bonino in New York throughout the couple’s years in the city.

Galería Bonino, which began showing Fernández-Muro’s work in 1951 in Buenos Aires, was founded by the charismatic art dealer Alfredo Bonino. Responsible for producing a hub for Latin American artists in the United States, Bonino provided a foothold for established artists from Argentina to enter New York’s artistic interchange. Fernández-Muro’s solo exhibitions in 1965 and 1967 were sold-out shows. His final presentation with the gallery was attended by art world luminaries including the art critic Lawrence Alloway, the curator Kynaston McShine (then acting director of the Jewish Museum and formerly a prominent curator at the Museum of Modern Art), and the artists Andy Warhol and Marisol. Warhol, who prided himself on attending all the important happenings in the New York art scene, was captured with his typically quixotic expression in the background of a photograph of Fernández-Muro and Grilo’s son, Juan Antonio, at the opening reception (fig. 3).

While Grilo and Fernández-Muro were well at ease in this milieu, the kernels of their community in Argentina remained influential. Prior to moving to New York, Grilo and Fernández-Muro participated in Buenos Aires's flourishing cultural scene, which gathered creatives like the poet Julio Llinás, the book designer Eduardo Desein, and artists of various persuasions, including the conceptualist forebear Alberto Greco. The versos of numerous photographs from the opening of *Cinco pintores* contain inscriptions in Fernández-Muro's cursive handwriting, noting these prominent attendees. The archive also holds hundreds of undeveloped negatives, transparencies, and photographic prints taken by a cohort of women photographers—Diana Levillier, Katy Knopfler, Lisl Steiner, and Grete Stern—that document the *mélange* of artists, poets, and intellectuals that sustained Grilo and Fernández-Muro.

Enveloped in this stimulating world, the couple remained dedicated to family and adhered to a credo of mutual support while committed to their artistic development. At the beginning of their careers, with less access to the institutional infrastructure of galleries than they would later enjoy, the couple assisted each other with taking studio photographs of their recently completed paintings. In a set of photographs from the emergent years in Buenos Aires, circa 1955, Grilo holds her husband's paintings steady as he operates the camera. This intimate yet collegial assistance allowed the artists to work side by side in studios in Buenos Aires; New York; Marbella, Spain; Paris; and finally, Madrid. During sessions with the Galería Bonino photographer Lisl Steiner, the couple's children, Verónica and Juan Antonio, are also protagonists of this social history, transforming the seemingly hermetic environs of the studio into musical venues and makeshift salons. Photographs from an afternoon in Fernández-Muro's studio show Juan Antonio strumming his guitar as Verónica dries her hair using a home hair dryer and animatedly converses with her father and brother (fig. 4). These sentimental memories reconstruct the lived dimension of Grilo and Fernández-Muro's artistic enterprises. From the fibers of their marital bond sprouted lifelong relationships and inspiration from family and friends.

Though Grilo and Fernández-Muro's style branched from geometric abstraction into singular mature idioms, the archive evidences continuing parallels between their work. Direct

instances of visual crossover include the emergence of the X mark in Grilo's work in 1963, when it became an enduring feature of Fernández-Muro's paintings. Moreover, the artists were both influenced by ambient life outside the studio. The visual rhetoric of New York streets, with their signs, billboards, torn posters, and craggy sidewalks, provided both with human-made geometries and plastic possibilities.

On moving to New York, Fernández-Muro began impressing aluminum foil against New York streets and inking large sheets of paper to transfer the texture of their surfaces, a procedure akin to Surrealist frottage, developed in New York by Sari Dienes and later deployed by Robert Rauschenberg. By 1963, manhole covers, sewer grates, and other surfaces that combined texture, geometry, and the written word became the centerpieces of Fernández-Muro's paintings. Heretofore unpublished photographs in the archive begin to illuminate the mechanics of Fernández-Muro's multistep process. One strip of negatives shows Fernández-Muro arranging and adhering large sheets of impressed tinfoil into a single composition; working in fragments allowed him to create large-scale transfers that would otherwise be cumbersome to execute and transport back to his studio (fig. 5). Other frames document the artist painting individual figurines that would later be collaged into larger compositions (fig. 6). Fernández-Muro's paintings from 1965 to 1966 that incorporated these elements represent the last gust of figuration for the artist, who committed himself to pure abstraction for the remainder of his career. During Fernández-Muro's time in New York, a profusion of signs, symbols, and urban markers entered his visual repertoire. And while influenced by the use of rubbings of city surfaces in the advanced arts, the artist had already begun experimenting with surface transfers in Buenos Aires in paintings like *Círculo azul* (1960) (fig. 7). Evolving from geometric abstractions that emphasized overlapping and conjoined forms, during this intermediary stage Fernández-Muro used perforated surfaces to create textured and graphic markings akin to Roy Lichtenstein's Ben-Day dots.

Fernández-Muro's insistence on technical quality unites the many phases of his practice. A 1962 interview titled "Artists among Skyscrapers" (a clipping of which is preserved in the archive), by the Cuban art critic Luis Lastra Almeida, published in *Américas*, centered on the couple's adjustment to New York.

In the interview, Fernández-Muro averred that while the city brimmed with visual possibility, he lamented its apathy toward technical proficiency: “[T]he painters may be disregarding certain aspects, particularly in technique. I have always tried to maintain intact the high values of painting. We must fight against false ‘popcorn’ culture.”⁸ Despite taking a clear swing at Pop art, which had reached a dizzying height with the first Pop exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1962, Fernández-Muro’s work still intersected with its content and concerns. The connection between his multimedia transfer painting *Bonjour Mr. Campbell* (1963) and the archetype of Pop art—Warhol’s soup cans—is unavoidable.

On the other hand, the same question elicited a very different response from Grilo, full of praise for the visual stimuli of the city: “Here I find everything I need for my painting. Things are constantly happening that can be incorporated as abstractions; all you have to do is to look out the window or walk down the street.”⁹ New York’s physical character had a decided impact on Grilo’s stylistic evolution. In her last years in Buenos Aires, she embarked on a series of expressionist geometric paintings. With loaded brushstrokes and blustery gestures, she transformed strict geometric compositions into impassioned statements. During her first year in New York, this style continued to occupy Grilo, but by 1963 she underwent a significant transformation. Her new visual vocabulary drew on graffiti, signs, and print media. Incorporating fragments of text, stencils, and her own cursive script, Grilo developed densely packed signboards. While sampling texts sourced from different registers like newspaper headlines and commercial advertisements, the paintings were also covert messengers. Paintings from the period such as *Our Heroes* (1965) (fig. 8) cloak political and social messages as well as personal testimony, offering a surfeit of information of political relevance and aesthetic intrigue. In this way, her artwork possesses a sentient capacity to communicate with or beguile the viewer with an especially captivating message. *Our Heroes* includes a snippet of a pressingly topical headline, which reads “was the Warren Report a whitewash.” Like so many other artists of the time, Grilo was responding to the world-shaking assassination of President John F. Kennedy and to the reports by government official Harold Weisberg revealing that the Warren Commission concealed and distorted evidence in its

investigation of the murder.¹⁰ Another textual fragment includes the surname of the prominent Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who had been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature two years earlier for his poetic indictment of the massacre of 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar by the Germans in 1941.¹¹ Grilo's use of text from news media exceeds mere interest in its visual forms and reflects instead a fervent commitment to human rights and political engagement.

Despite the stylistic, theoretical, and political transformations that New York incited in the artists, it was but a stop along their journey. In 1970, the family left New York for Marbella, where Grilo and their son, Juan Antonio, had designed a sprawling home that would become the backdrop for many of his experiments with photography. Their departure coincided with a change in New York's artistic taste: painting had fallen out of favor, while sculpture, performance, and "anti-formal" practices were becoming dominant.

In Europe, Grilo increasingly examined the structural logic of painting with a series of drawings and paintings in which she focused on the edges of the support. Over time, she developed a loose, graphic style, prioritizing her own hand over external text. Fernández-Muro continued to interrogate the surface of painting, while similarly expunging his work of external referents. During their final decades in Europe (in 1980 the couple bought a studio in Paris, and by 1989 they had settled in Madrid), the couple solidified their dedication to form and stylistic maturation. While the contents of the archive slim down after their departure from New York, there is a profusion of photographs documenting family travel, seaside leisure in Marbella, and their growing personal collection of African artifacts. At the same time, the artists continued to enjoy a steady stream of museum and gallery presentations, including concurrent solo exhibitions at the Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo in 1985 (now the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía) and shows in Spain's leading commercial venues, Galería Juana Mordó and Galería Iolas-Velasco.

Yet Fernández-Muro's dogged dedication to his work did not cease. He lamented the impact of his isolation in Spain on his institutional and commercial success in a letter to his close friend and the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Thomas M. Messer, on November 23, 1987. He confided that "the happy

sixties, where there still were donors and sponsors of Latin American painting,” had come to an end, and expressed his desire for more recent work “to be present in the Guggenheim collection with one of my later paintings, which, in my view (and you know that I am very severe with my own work), are some of my best.”¹² Fernández-Muro transcribed his letter to Messer by hand, preserving it in the archive for posterity. This earnest disclosure describes the weightless orbit the artist found himself in, despite having reached new technical and aesthetic heights, after the cord that once attached him to the center of advanced artistic production had been cut.

Despite Fernández-Muro’s dissatisfaction with his waning institutional attention, he became increasingly preoccupied with his continuing legacy. The artist continued to fastidiously inventory his completed works in journals, a practice he began during his time in New York. Listing the title, year, dimensions, and place of creation, his inventory conforms with any standard artist log. However, in 1963 he also began drawing small diagrams of each work in ink, which he traded for colored markers in later years (fig. 9). These drawings record key compositional forms and small details of the works. An especially useful tool for identifying obscure paintings, the journals demonstrate Fernández-Muro’s futurological gaze: a gift for art historians who would turn to these records for insight and revelation. Grilo also kept ledgers of her studio output, but with varying consistency over time.

Through its profusion of data, dates, and descriptions, the archive also suggests new methodological approaches to the work of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro. Whereas both artists are widely recognized for their aesthetic accomplishments, the contents of the archive also prompt intensified consideration of their political and ideological valences, provide a robust catalogue of understudied paintings, lend insight into their processual factures, and weave a social tapestry across continents. More tenderly, the archive transmits a story of lives shared—of the fortitude found in inescapable complements.

1. José Gómez-Sicre, "Meeting in Madrid: Joint Exhibit of Spanish and New World Artists," *Américas* 15, no. 9 (September 1963): 37.
2. John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Award letter from J. Kellum Smith Jr. to Sarah Grilo, May 15, 1962, from the Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro.
3. "Notas de arte: arte argentino del pasado y del presente. Pintura autónoma," *La Mañana*, July 27, 1943. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.
4. Inscription by José Antonio Fernández-Muro on the back of a portrait of Sarah Grilo in her Buenos Aires studio, 1950, from the Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro.
5. The artists' daughter, Verónica, recalled the hazards of the studio in an email to the author, recounting: "Downstairs there was a brothel, and where they painted it was full of rats. I was 2 years old and the rat poison was on the ground. It was green and I was forbidden to touch it. They gave me a large sheet of cardboard and temperas and I would scribble."
6. John Canaday, "Art: 'Snapshots' by Robert Harvey," *New York Times*, May 13, 1967.
7. In 1954 Grilo and Fernández-Muro, along with artists Miguel Ocampo and Alfredo Hlito, were commissioned by the entrepreneur Jacopo Soifer to produce various pattern designs. This project exemplifies the early critical crossover between industry and the avant-garde that shaped the visual language of the 1950s in Argentina and abroad.
8. José Antonio Fernández-Muro, quoted in Luis Lastra Almeida, "Artists among Skyscrapers," *Américas* 15, no. 1 (January 1963): 28.
9. Sarah Grilo, quoted in Lastra Almeida, "Artists among Skyscrapers," 28.
10. For a full discussion of the charges against the Warren Commission, see Harold Weisberg, *Whitewash II: The FBI-Secret Service Cover-Up* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).
11. "'Babi Yar' Work Receives Award," *New York Times*, September 29, 1963.
12. Handwritten transcription of letter from José Antonio Fernández-Muro to Thomas M. Messer, November 23, 1987, from the Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro.

Figures



Figure 1

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *El matrimonio genovés*, 1945.

Oil on hardboard, 52 × 30 1/2 in. (132 × 77 cm).

Photograph by Anatole Saderman.



Figure 2

Clipping of John Canaday's review of Grilo's solo exhibition in a New York Times art column, May 13, 1967.



Figure 3

Grilo, her son, Juan Antonio Fernández-Muro, and Ruth Kresge, the mother-in-law of Grilo's daughter, with Andy Warhol in the background at the opening of Fernández-Muro's solo exhibition at Galería Bonino, New York, 1965.

Photograph by Lisl Steiner.



Figure 4

Verónica Fernández-Muro drying her hair in her father's New York studio, ca. 1965.
Photograph by Lisl Steiner.



Figure 5

Fernández-Muro at work in his New York studio, ca. 1965.
Photograph by Lisl Steiner.



Figure 6

Fernández-Muro at work in his New York studio, ca. 1965–66.
Photograph by Lisl Steiner.

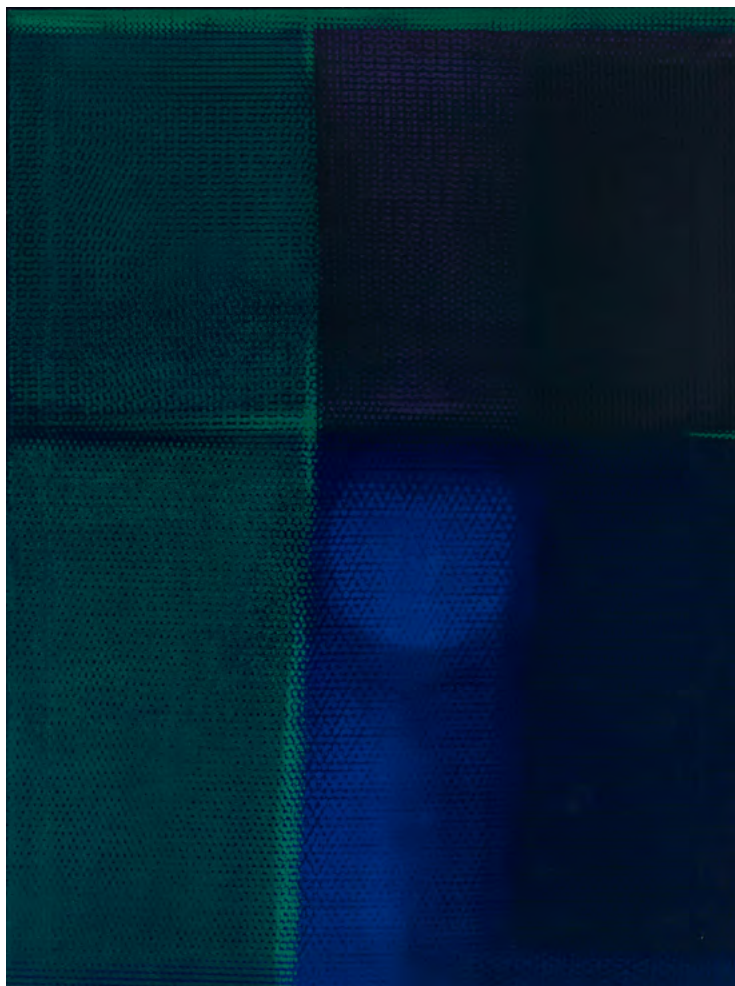


Figure 7

José Antonio Fernández Muro, *Círculo azul*, 1960.
Oil on canvas, 51 × 38 ½ in. (129.5 × 96.8 cm).



Figure 8

Sarah Grilo, *Our Heroes*, 1966.
Oil on canvas, 52 × 46 in. (132 × 116.8 cm).
Photograph by O. E. Nelson.

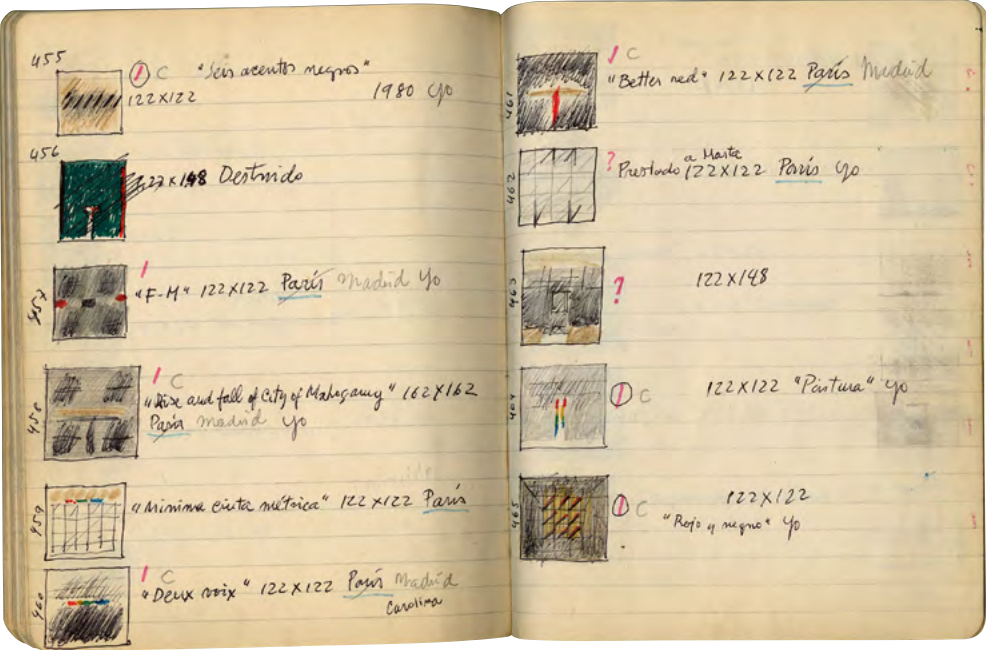


Figure 9

Pages from Fernández-Muro's painting inventory journal.

Sarah Grilo and the Emergence of Script

Karen Grimson

In the early months of 1962, Sarah Grilo prepared to leave her native Buenos Aires for what would be an almost decade-long stay in New York City and eventually become an unforeseen, permanent expatriation. Inventorying her personal belongings prior to the move, Grilo wrote in one of her notebooks: “Three or four small paintings are staying in Buenos Aires in storage.”¹ Along with those works—small in scale but significant enough for the painter to have kept track of—Grilo was leaving behind a cultivated local art scene. Her mid-career trajectory had been boosted by an early affiliation with Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA),² followed by an involvement with the short-lived design collective Buen Diseño para la Industria and her noted participation in the 1960 exhibition *Cinco pintores* (see p. 30) at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires. The small paintings Grilo was leaving behind in Buenos Aires were likely examples of her chromatic investigations from the late 1950s (fig. 1), a language she had stylistically outgrown by the turn of the decade. As the programmatic verve of Argentine Concrete art movements of the previous decade slowly lost momentum, Grilo walked away from a now-dated style, shedding her previous production. After three decades of close involvement with Argentina’s most avant-garde artists, Grilo—then in her early forties—was looking for new horizons, and the possibility of a residency in what was at the time the greatest art capital of the world surely presented itself as a galvanizing opportunity. Leaving Buenos Aires’s *manzana loca*³ for the Big Apple, Grilo and her husband, the artist José Antonio Fernández-Muro, together with their children, Verónica and Juan Antonio, ages seventeen and fifteen, boarded the ship *Río Tunuyán* for a sixteen-day voyage on the Atlantic.

The family arrived in New York in May 1962 and eventually settled on East 50th Street, in a penthouse with vast windows that provided ample natural light, which became a shared studio space for the couple and a home to the entire family. Grilo had



Clockwise from left: Clorindo Testa, Miguel Ocampo, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Kazuya Sakai, and Sarah Grilo, subjects of the exhibition *Cinco pintores* at Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, 1960. Photograph by Diana Levillier.

been awarded a fellowship by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation that would cover the costs of her living expenses in New York for a year, allowing her to devote herself entirely to painting.⁴ Her arrival in New York was in no way her introduction to the North American art scene. Five years earlier, she and her husband had had a two-person show at the Pan American Union Building in Washington, DC, which was later on view at Roland de Aenlle Gallery in midtown Manhattan. In those shows, Grilo exhibited works representative of her experiments in lyrical abstraction. By the turn of the decade, she was looking to update her practice through a sustained and direct confrontation with the work of other contemporary artists from Europe and North America, an opportunity that she found to be only rarely available in Buenos Aires, where, as she said, international “contemporary art movements [could] only be experienced through the disfigured appearance imposed by the partiality of books and magazines.”⁵ Once settled in New York, she would soon exhibit her work on the East Coast again: she had two consecutive solo exhibitions in 1963, first at Obelisk Gallery, in Washington, DC, and then at Bianchini Gallery, in New York. In interviews with the press at the time, Grilo explained how her New York residency instilled in her “an increased desire to work.”⁶ She described finding inspiration all around her: “The streets, looking in the windows, visiting museums, going to the shows—even the bad shows are stimulating because you see what you mustn’t do.” This new relationship with the outside world, which allegedly made her “paint . . . with such enthusiasm as I never had before”⁷ and intensified her “craving for painting,”⁸ sparked an entirely new approach to the medium, one that was at odds with her previous experimentations in post-Concrete abstraction. In previous decades, the canvas had been a surface on which to project intuitive formal and chromatic explorations, animated by the artist’s internal subjectivity. Now the restless bustle of New York was finding its way into her work. Permeable to the outside world, painting became a space in which to collect linguistic signs, as letters and numbers began to appear systematically on her canvases (fig. 2). This incorporation of language into her work represented the artist’s embrace of the quotidian, welcoming anecdotal and calligraphic elements that began to resonate loudly across her canvases.

Writing about the years that preceded Grilo's departure from Buenos Aires, in 1969 Jorge Aníbal Romero Brest, former director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, said that "toward 1960, Sarah Grilo was a strange post-Cubist painter"⁹—indicating an inability to inscribe the artist's production in a definitively autonomous vein. Although Grilo had long been challenging the orthodoxy of illusionistic representation in her painting, her work of the early 1960s was, by the end of the decade, still perceived as a belated, almost amusing but still deferred, expression of the experimentation first carried out by the historical avant-garde. A less anachronistic and more prevailing line of interpretation explains Grilo's deployment of linguistic symbols as a consequence of witnessing graffiti on the walls of New York City,¹⁰ an idea that the artist herself did not contest during her lifetime. However, a broader, and long overdue, contextualization of her production at that hinge moment should take into account her contemporaneity to neo-avant-garde movements and consider other local factors as possible catalysts, for example, the labor struggle that affected New York's newspaper industry during her initial time in New York.

Completed in the early weeks of 1965, *Charts Are Dull* (fig. 3) is one of the most commanding paintings by Grilo to notably feature language. Using templates of block letters and magazine clippings to transfer print onto the canvas, Grilo scattered the words "I am," "Sara," "Now," "Everyone," "Truth," and "Be" across the surface of the work. These inscriptions, imbued with resonance of the artist's presence, recall what artist Robert Rauschenberg identified as a kind of "self-assertion"¹¹ in the language of abstraction, wherein painting was defined through its merit as an index of the artist's creative ego. This idea was a driving principle for the previous generation of Abstract Expressionist artists, whose dominance over the North American art scene was still felt at the time of Grilo's arrival. Whereas Abstract Expressionists had conveyed this assertion of the self through an eccentric use of the medium and materials of painting, Grilo expressed it in a more literal and explicit fashion. In the upper-left corner of the work, the word "Vogue" is stenciled in block letters reminiscent of the characteristic typeface of the popular magazine in a commanding and undisguised reference to the contemporary press. Easily recognizable signs coexist with other defacements of the

painted surface, barely legible calligraphic gestures overlapping on a field of white, gray, ocher, and mauve paint.

More emphatically linked to the experience of contemporary life, Grilo's 1965 painting *Information (Braque at Macy's)* (fig. 4) incorporates a depiction of an ad for a sales event that took place at the popular department store in New York that same year: limited editions of signed prints by Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Paul Cézanne, and other modern masters were offered at cut-rate prices by Macy's art department.¹² A timely commentary on the commercialization of art, Grilo's *Information* is a work uniquely of its time that offers what art critic and curator Robert Rosenblum called, in an article about Pop art published that year, a total coincidence of style and subject.¹³ In her painting, Grilo represents the ad for the print sale using block letters—the basic units of the visual vocabulary of advertisements, billboards, and mass print production. The presence of a clock in the upper-right corner indicates an awareness of temporality, further underscoring the idea of this painting being quintessentially of its moment.

Of course, there is a robust history of linguistic references in modern painting, dating back to works by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso in the early 1910s, in what came to be called Analytic Cubism. In works such as *Le portugais (L'émigrant)* and *Homage to J. S. Bach* (see p. 34), both painted between 1911 and 1912, Braque introduced the practice of stenciling letters directly onto the canvas. Similar to the signs that would emerge decades later in Grilo's work, words in Cubist compositions appear fragmented, cut short as truncated expressions that merely hint at the significance behind their symbolic nature.

If Romero Brest's interpretation of Grilo's relationship to Cubism positioned her work as a belated expression of the heritage of the historical avant-gardes, a more comprehensive perspective might examine Grilo's work within the larger retrospective consideration of avant-garde strategies (such as collage, assemblage, readymades, and monochrome painting) taking place at that time, and the revival of these strategies carried out by artists identified as being part of the neo-avant-garde.¹⁴ In fact, the decade starting in 1962 (coinciding with Grilo's stay in New York) is considered to be the moment of the neo-avant-garde's development in the United States,¹⁵ with artists such as Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Allan Kaprow



Georges Braque, *Homage to J. S. Bach*, 1911–12.
Oil on canvas, 21 ¼ × 28 ¾ in. (54 × 73 cm).

revisiting the strategies deployed in the Dada movement. Meanwhile, in her native Argentina, a contemporary generation of artists was exploring the linguistic dimension of the visual arts, with figures such as Alberto Greco and Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos welcoming script, graphology, and lettering into their works, which fervently adopted a conversational format.¹⁶

In 1963, writing began to play an increasingly commanding role in Grilo's work. She transferred and stenciled headlines from newspaper and magazine clippings, using block letters and cursive calligraphy to transcribe portions of sentences. These interrupted expressions can be seen as errant signs, metaphorical refugees, fugitive inscriptions of the contemporary world that Grilo introduced in the realm of painting at a time when their native context in printed journalism had become a site of dispute. At that time, New York saw "the last of the great American newspaper strikes,"¹⁷ a landmark episode of protest in recent history that lasted 114 days. In December 1963, unionized workers staged a massive walkout to express their discontent at the

implementation of modern technology that threatened their craft-based jobs—the linotype-based technique that was, until then, at the heart of the daily printed journalism industry was to be replaced by automated printers. Workers at the *New York Times* went on strike and every other major newspaper in the city followed suit. The striking workers shared a common artisanal trade and were united under the International Typographical Union (ITU), also known as the “Big Six.” Over the course of the next four months, a total of seven newspapers—including the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Daily News*, *New York Daily Mirror*, *New York Post*, *New York Journal-American*, and *New York World-Telegram and Sun*—would remain inactive while their printers marched in picket lines outside the newspapers’ offices. Throughout the duration of this strike, an estimated total of six hundred million newspapers went unprinted.¹⁸ For a city famous for its production and consumption of news through journalistic print—whose inhabitants at that time proudly described themselves as having “a serious newspaper habit”¹⁹—this prolonged shutdown of journalism constituted a vacuum in the print world. As an informational network suddenly went silent, words that went unspoken and unprinted found asylum in the paintings of Sarah Grilo.

Perhaps the lack of a significant monographic analysis of Grilo’s body of work is due to the unclassifiable nature of her practice within existing historiography. She remained independent even when associated with others,²⁰ too lyrical to be considered Concrete,²¹ too intuitive to be considered programmatic, too late for Abstract Expressionism, too painterly for Informalism. In this impossibility of classification lies a potentially fruitful challenge. The specific conditions of production under which Grilo was working in the 1960s can shed light on, and complicate, the understanding of her shift toward language, through which the artist became a discursive subject. Awaiting its enunciation, this body of work is ripe for art-historical reexamination.

1. Sarah Grilo, untitled notebook, 1957-1971, n.p., translation mine. Courtesy the Fernández-Muro family, New York. Research conducted for this project in Madrid was supported by a fellowship from ISLAA.
2. Aldo Pellegrini, *Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina. Pinturas, esculturas, dibujos* (Buenos Aires: Galería Viau, 1952). The group brought together some of the country's most fervent proponents of Concrete art with other "independent abstract artists" whose intuitive approach to painting made them less inclined toward the rigorous mathematical constructions of the former. GAMA also played a key role in the internationalization of the Argentine arts scene in the early 1950s. See María Amalia García, "Informalism between Surrealism and Concrete Art," in *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, eds. Mariola V. Álvarez and Ana M. Franco (New York: Routledge, 2019), 11-24.
3. *Manzana loca* (crazy block) referred to the downtown area of Buenos Aires where avant-garde artists gathered. Grilo's work had been exhibited there at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (1961) and Galería Bonino (1958 and 1961).
4. Following this first fellowship, the artist petitioned for an extension and received a second Guggenheim Fellowship in 1963.
5. Sarah Grilo, "Plan de estudios," 1961, translation mine. Archives of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, New York.
6. Sarah Grilo, quoted in Amelia Young, "Enthusiasm Is Her New Gift," *The Evening Star*, April 8, 1963.
7. Young, "Enthusiasm Is Her New Gift."
8. Sarah Grilo, quoted in Luis Lastra Almeida, "Artistas entre rascacielos," *Américas* 15, no. 2 (February 1963): 28.
9. Jorge Aníbal Romero Brest, *Arte en la Argentina: últimas décadas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1969), 40, translation mine.
10. This interpretation of her work dates to Damián Bayón's article "Cuatro pintores argentinos de Nueva York," published on December 6, 1964, in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación*, and was perpetuated by, among others, Manuel Mujica Láinez (1969), culminating in the exhibition *Aesthetics of Graffiti* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1978, which legitimized this line of thought.
11. Robert Rauschenberg, as quoted in Dorothy Seckler, "Oral History Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," December 21, 1965, n.p., Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-rauschenberg-12870>.
12. Virginia Lee Warren, "Rembrandts by Mail and Cut-Rate Picassos Prove Art Is Good Business," *New York Times*, July 9, 1965, 18.
13. Robert Rosenblum, "Pop Art and Non-Pop Art," *Art and Literature* 5 (Summer 1965): 80-93.
14. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
15. Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, and Charles Harrison, *La modernidad a debate: el arte desde los cuarenta* (Madrid: Akal, 1999), 200-12.
16. See Inés Katzenstein, "Verborragia e imaginación discursiva en la escena pública: Alberto Greco, Jorge Bonino y Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos," in *Caiana: revista de historia del arte y cultura visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)* 4, http://caiana.caia.org.ar/template/caiana.php?pag=articles/article_2.php&obj=150&vol=4.

17. Scott Sherman, "The Long Good-Bye," *Vanity Fair*, November 30, 2012, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/11/1963-newspaper-strike-bertram-powers>.
18. Sherman, "The Long Good-Bye."
19. Sherman, "The Long Good-Bye."
20. Pellegrini, *Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina*, n.p.
21. Grilo herself confessed that during the prosperous years of Argentine Concrete art, her contemporaries reproached her for being "excessively lyrical." Quoted in José María Moreno Galván, "Sarah Grilo en la Galería Juana Mordo," *Triunfo*, November 25, 1972, 63.

Figures



Figure 1

Sarah Grilo, *Pintura (en rojos)*, 1958.
Oil on canvas, 37 ¼ × 37 ¼ in. (94.5 × 94.5 cm).



Figure 2

Sarah Grilo, *Oh!*, 1963.
Oil on canvas, 14 $\frac{15}{16}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (38 x 46 cm).



Figure 3

Sarah Grilo, *Charts Are Dull*, 1965.
Oil on canvas, 72 × 73 in. (183 × 185 cm).



Figure 4

Sarah Grilo, *Information (Braque at Macy's)*, 1965.
Oil on canvas, 47 x 35 in. (120 x 90 cm).

Interview with Mateo Fernández-Muro

by Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar

In 1967, the Chilean artist Nemesio Antúnez interviewed José Antonio Fernández-Muro on his radio program, *Arte desde Nueva York: al aire con Nemesio Antúnez*. In this conversation, the two artists discussed several aspects of Fernández-Muro's career and artistic practice, creating what would become a magnificent source for art historical research. As a tribute to this Spanish Argentinean artist and to consider his legacy within Latin American art of the 1960s, PhD student Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar spoke with Mateo Fernández-Muro, grandson of the artist and coexecutor of his estate.¹

Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar: Good morning, Mateo. To start this conversation, I would like to ask you about the relationship between Nemesio Antúnez and José Antonio Fernández-Muro. Some initial details to highlight about the radio show *Arte desde Nueva York* are that it was on air between February 1967 and June 1968 and it included fifty-three broadcasts, which have recently been published online by the Centro Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo Cerrillos.² *Arte desde Nueva York* presented an exciting network of Latin American writers, critics, and artists, and it included thorough and insightful discussions that Antúnez himself developed in fruitful conversations with other artists. What can you tell us about this program? What do you consider important to underline about it?

Mateo Fernández-Muro: Hi, Juan. Thank you for having me. The interview was part of the first broadcast of *Arte desde Nueva York*. The program aired when Antúnez was the cultural attaché in New York for the Chilean government of Eduardo Frei Montalva. The primary purpose of the radio program was to feature the life and work of key Latin American artists living in the city during those years. Listening to the episode focused on Toño [José Antonio Fernández-Muro], I started recognizing many names I used to hear at home during my childhood, like Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, Roberto

Matta, Pepe Donoso, and Tom Messer—former director of the Guggenheim Museum—among others.³ Those names were part of a network that Antúnez was trying to promote and strengthen among Latin American artists and people interested in Latin American Art during those years. There were also interviews with art critics like Leopoldo Castedo or Stanton Loomis Catlin,⁴ whom I learned about while researching Fernández-Muro and Sarah Grilo's archive. On the other hand, Nemesio Antúnez was not just a diplomat and a communicator. He was an artist himself. He studied architecture and developed both careers during his lifetime. He was mainly interested in spreading the word of Latin American culture. In fact, after his time in New York, he went back to Chile and started another radio program and a TV show with the same purpose.

JGRB: In his program he also talked about Latin American art exhibitions made at the time. Some of the shows he discussed are *Art of Latin America since Independence*, from 1964, and *The Emergent Decade: Latin American Painters and Painting in the 1960s*, displayed in 1966.⁵ With that background in mind, I want to ask you: When you listen to the conversation between these two artists, what do you think are some of the crucial fragments? What do you think is essential to highlight? Moreover, how can this conversation help us understand Fernández-Muro's artistic path and practice?

MF-M: There were many things that came up in the interview that I did not know before, but it was also great to see how the things I did know were already taking shape in Fernández-Muro's mind in the sixties. For instance, I did not know he did not consider himself a Spanish artist. That was a surprise to me. I knew he considered himself a Latin American artist, but it was astonishing how he firmly rejected this "Spanish artist" label while openly accepting the strong influence Spanish artists like José Gutiérrez Solana or Diego Velázquez had on his work. Not surprisingly, although he was trained as an artist in Buenos Aires, his main teacher was Vicente Puig, a Spanish artist from Catalunya. Puig was very academic, but he was the one who sparked Fernández-Muro's passion for art. Fernández-Muro's earlier paintings from the forties, like *La vecina* and *El matrimonio genovés* (both 1945), exhibited for the first time in 1946 in Galería Witcomb, Buenos Aires, clearly show that Solanesque input and influence, and one example of this is his use of chiaroscuro (fig. 1).

JGRB: The conversation between Antúnez and Fernández-Muro shows us the complexity of Fernández-Muro's own identity. The fact that he was born in Spain, traveled to Argentina in 1938, studied in Buenos Aires and Paris during the 1940s, and then moved to New York in 1962, creates a multiplicity of discourses about his identity. Those migrations have meaning, and we must look at that process carefully to understand how to situate him within the group of artists from Latin America living in New York during the 1960s.

MF-M: It is interesting, what you are saying. In fact, in the interview, Fernández-Muro labels himself a Latin American artist, but at the same time he places himself at the same level as Roy Lichtenstein. When he talks about his use of screens and the kind of language he was exploring at the time, he mentions it was the same kind of technique that Lichtenstein would use some years later. He did not mean he was a precursor, but he was claiming that he practiced it much earlier than an international pop artist like Lichtenstein did. He implicitly placed himself within an international circle of artists.

JGRB: The fact that he was continually traveling led him to see himself as part of a broader context, as part of the international avant-garde. That is part of his process of self-reflection. He realized that he was taking part in these broader networks.

MF-M: Exactly, and I do not think it is just he who defined his practice this way. For instance, the Cuban art critic Luis Lastra Almeida said in an interview that he was very interested in how Fernández-Muro's art is a mixture, a conjunction between North American sensitivity and the filtering of European culture.⁶ So, it wasn't just a self-reading by Fernández-Muro. He was kind of a melting pot of different visual idioms from Europe, North America, Latin America. I think this is what is pleasing about Toño's art.

JGRB: What can you tell us about his artistic process? He makes figurative art in the 1940s and transitions to a more abstract style in the fifties and sixties. He also moves from geometric abstraction to more informal abstraction. What can you tell us about that?

MF-M: Indeed, Fernández-Muro incorporated a figurative language during the forties, and he abandoned it after his trip to Europe in 1947, when he started being more involved with geometric abstraction. Throughout the late forties and the fifties, he became part of the Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina, in Buenos Aires, under the guidance of Aldo Pellegrini. During that period, he was focused on a geometric language. In the fifties and early sixties, right before going to New York, he started experimenting with patterns and screens in a very primitive, but still very geometric, form of optical art (fig. 2). He abandoned this phase once he got to New York in 1962. The differences between these periods are very evident. You can see them clearly when examining the progression of his artworks. When he got to New York, he became more romantic, more anecdotal somehow, as he explains in the interview. That was surprising to me because I had never heard him talking about that in such a clear way. He was still using screens, in addition to patterns, and crafty, primitive, optical illusions. But at the same time, he introduced into his work figurative elements like manhole covers and other textures and features from the streets of New York. Toward the end of the sixties, however, he abandoned these motifs once again to go back to something more related to what he had been doing before moving to New York. There is an evident stylistic period between 1962 and 1968 (fig. 3).

JGRB: The radio program is exciting because it leads us to the question of how traveling to New York leads Fernández-Muro to a change in his practice, and how we can analyze that change. Antúnez comments on the sensuality, the romanticism of his artworks from that period. How do you think the trip to New York impacted the artistic practice of Grilo and Fernández-Muro? Can you speak a little more about the incorporation of street fragments into their artwork?

MF-M: I think New York was crucial for them, both on a professional level and on a personal level. It was a very intense experience that they always remembered with nostalgia, especially because of the way their art, and Latin American art in general, was appreciated during those years. Despite having traveled to New York on earlier occasions, the moment when Sarah Grilo obtained the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation

fellowship in 1962 was an inflection point. Although they had been thinking of staying for one or two years, they ended up staying for a whole decade, and that changed their practice in an obvious way. In Toño you can see a more gradual line of evolution, while in Sarah you can see an evident change as soon as she gets to New York. In 1962 and 1963 her works changed drastically. After that period, Fernández-Muro retraced his steps to find another path. But he did not abandon everything he did in New York. He went back to the geometry and the coldness of his last years in Buenos Aires while conserving the idea of texture and Art Informel (*pintura matérica*) in a very romantic way.⁷ Antoni Tàpies, for instance, was doing the same at that time. In those years, Toño kept playing with matter, with materials, in an exciting way.

JGRB: In other interviews, Fernández-Muro talks about his relationship with matter painting and informal art. We know that he also had an exhibition with Tàpies in Argentina.⁸ The whole process shows us how his practice changed thanks to the multiple voices that came into his life. But of course, when he arrived in New York, he took the street as inspiration. Even if his abstraction becomes less geometric at that time, it keeps a structure, which appears in the use of materials. One of the main characteristics of his work during the sixties was his use of aluminum sheets to record the textures of the streets and later bring them to the canvas through a specific transfer technique. This is what Antúnez labeled as “romantic,” the idea of taking an artifact from the street and putting it into an artwork. Fernández-Muro used to place manhole cover shapes on specific parts of the canvas. The constant repetition of this motif in several paintings of that period created a sense of series. We can see this evolution in some artworks like *Vicious Circle* (1963) or *Rojo (Leaden Gate)* (1964) (figs. 4 and 5),⁹ but especially in *Al gran pueblo argentino* (1964), where the structural use of a sewer cover conveys different meanings, such as Argentinean national identity (fig. 6).

MF-M: Yes, absolutely; that is a significant artwork. Like most of his canvases, it has a clear compositional structure and uses compositional elements. Fernández-Muro had a highly compositional mind, and he analyzed and composed his canvases before he began working on them. He used to draw a little diagram of each of his paintings in his notebooks, because his language

allowed him to do that. Sarah's artworks, on the other hand, were more expressionistic, and therefore more difficult to represent with a tiny icon in a diary. That is why there are almost no drawings in Sarah's journals, and that is a fascinating difference. On the other hand, I think Toño started to use these manhole covers as an excuse. He was very much interested in the circle as a shape, and he began using circles at very different scales within his canvases. This happened early on, starting in Buenos Aires in the 1950s. He then continued using circles, but instead of making them vague, abstract, or nonrepresentational, he used manhole covers as an excuse to represent them. In *Al gran pueblo argentino*, he uses the manhole cover—the circle—as the sun of the Argentinean flag.

JGRB: *Al gran pueblo argentino* shows Fernández-Muro's interest in the emotional meaning of the artwork, as he mentions in the interview with Nemesio Antúnez. It would be fantastic if you could tell us about the four versions of this painting.

MF-M: There might be more versions, but in the research I have done so far, I have found only four. They are different versions of the same concept, which is a reinterpretation of the Argentinean flag. In the middle of it, instead of a sun, there is a sewer cover from the streets of New York. Two of these versions are in Toño's studio in Madrid. Another one is in Texas, at the Blanton Museum of Art. I believe this one was part of *The Emergent Decade* exhibition, held at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966. Below the flag, there is an inscription with the word "salud," which means "cheers." Well, it literally means "health," but it could also mean "greetings." I think it is a way to express his feelings of nostalgia for the Argentinean people, and it is also an homage to them, in a very abstract way. In the interview, he speaks of it more like a fraternal tribute. A bit ironic somehow, but not a joke.¹⁰

JGRB: Moving from Argentina to New York inspired in him different thoughts about his country and the time he spent there. Somehow, the presence of these elements in his artworks might be related to a reflection about his own identity, his relation to the country, and the bigger context of Latin American artists living in the city.

MF-M: He missed Argentina so much. His mother and sister stayed there. All his nieces were there as well. For this reason, he had a secure connection with Argentina and Latin America. I think his nostalgia and love for it stayed within the family for generations. We still have a connection with our Argentinean family. They even have artworks by Toño and Sarah from the 1950s in their houses in Buenos Aires.

JGRB: I want to ask you about Fernández-Muro's encounter with the Austrian American photographer Lisl Steiner. What documentation related to Steiner did you find in Fernández-Muro's archive? Can her photographs lead us to understand his artistic process in a better way?

MF-M: I must admit that I thought everyone who was related to my grandparents during the New York years was already gone. But fortunately, she is still alive, and she remembers everything from those years. I had the chance to visit her and talk with her at length. It was amazing to get to know her. She was the official photographer for Galería Bonino, a space that marked a significant milestone in my grandfather's career. Alfredo Bonino was a key figure in the gallery circuit during the fifties and sixties, not only in Argentina but also in New York and Rio de Janeiro. He had a fascinating view of the art market early on. Bonino was able to situate Latin American art in a very international conversation. As I was saying, Lisl Steiner was the photographer for his gallery, and she was a close friend of both of my grandparents. I kept hearing her name throughout my childhood. I remember my father was always talking about Lisl Steiner. Almost every photograph we have of New York in the sixties was taken by her. She was always there. She would frequently join my grandfather to transfer the texture of sewer covers from the streets of downtown Manhattan into the aluminum sheets (see p. 51). Steiner has beautiful pictures of those moments, and she has not only the photographs but also beautiful memories. Without them, I could not have understood how Toño was making those paintings. It is exciting to be able to see him laying aluminum foil on the street, transferring the texture from the manhole cover on the sidewalk, and bringing those textures and those patterns to his canvases. I think all those photographs represent some vital research material. I thank Lisl Steiner for taking them.

JGRB: Many of those photographs are part of the archive of the Estate of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro, currently on loan at the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA). Some of these images were presented at the exhibition *Grilo/Fernández-Muro: 1962–1984*, displayed at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, showing a clear relation to the artworks exhibited. Indeed, she provided us with key documents to understand his practice.

MF-M: Those are valuable documents that are going to be important for understanding the role of Fernández-Muro’s practice at that time. They are going to become relevant material through which to study his art, which no one has researched in depth until now. It is time to consider Fernández-Muro’s art comprehensively, and I believe there are enough archive materials to do it, such as Lisl Steiner’s photographs and letters between her and Toño.

JGRB: I have two last questions for this interview. I would like to ask you about the label of “Latin American artist” during the decades of the 1960s and 1980s. How do you think the artistic practice of Fernández-Muro was related to that label? Where do you think he situated himself in relation to the concept of Latin American Art?

MF-M: I never talked to my grandfather directly or explicitly about these issues. What I am about to say is based on what I heard in conversations with friends, with my father, and with Sarah. However, some of my impressions have been confirmed or informed by what I found through researching the archive materials. I think Toño considered himself Latin American, but Latin American in a much more expansive and international way. For instance, the way Latin America was seen during the 1960s—studied and understood within a Pan-American vision—was more international and global than during the 1980s. I think he felt comfortable within that discourse, as long as it was internationalist and not localist. If that was the case, both Sarah and Toño were happy to be tagged within that category. The conclusion I have reached from what I have read and what I have seen is that he was nostalgic for those years. There is a letter he sent to Thomas Messer in the 1980s in which he



Lisl Steiner, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, 1965.
Gelatin silver print, 9 3/4 x 7 1/8 in. (24.7 x 20.2 cm).

explicitly says that he misses the years in which there was interest in Latin American art from museums, art critics, foundations, and galleries. In the 1960s, Latin American artists were deemed to be at the same level as other North American artists, like Abstract Expressionists, for instance—or at least understood at the same level.

JGRB: To finish this interview, I would like to ask you how you think an academic study of José Antonio Fernández-Muro could inform research on Latin American art during the second half of the twentieth century. How do you think this study might help researchers gain an understanding of that period?

MF-M: After researching all the archive materials—paintings, letters, reviews, catalogues — I was surprised by how important they both were during the fifties in Buenos Aires, and later during the sixties in New York. As soon as they went back to Spain, all of that was somehow missing and gone. Or at least diluted, like dust in the air. I think it is time to go back in time and start that analysis of Fernández-Muro's work. For example, there are very strong connections, language-wise and aesthetics-wise, between the optical art that Rogelio Polesello and Fernández-Muro were doing in the late fifties and early sixties. There is a connection between the two of them, which I think should be studied. There is, as well, an exciting connection between the art of Sarah Grilo and Alberto Greco that I think is worth researching. It would be very valuable to study all these links, which I think have been missing for an integrated study of Latin American and Argentinean art. I believe we are taking some first steps by studying Fernández-Muro's and Grilo's art in depth. A considerable part of what we have found in Sarah and Toño's studio in Madrid has been lent temporarily to the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art in New York. This way, many researchers, academics, and students can have access to the archive. It is comprehensive material that would be fundamental to study.

1. While the conversation between Nemesio Antúnez and José Antonio Fernández-Muro of 1961 was conducted in Spanish, the interview between Mateo Fernández-Muro and Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar presented in this text was conducted in English and edited for length and clarity.
2. All broadcasts from *Arte desde Nueva York: al aire con Nemesio Antúnez* are available through the Centro Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo Cerrillos, <http://centronacionaldearte.cl/noticias/arte-desde-nueva-york-al-aire-con-nemesio-antunez-2/>.
3. Leopoldo Torre Nilson was an Argentine film director, producer, and screenwriter. Roberto Matta was a Chilean artist who was a central figure in the development of Abstract Expressionist and Surrealist art in Latin America. José Donoso Yáñez was a Chilean writer who contributed to the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s and 1970s. Thomas Maria Messer was director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York between 1961 and 1988.
4. Leopoldo Castedo was a Spanish Chilean historian and art historian. Stanton Loomis Catlin was an American art historian specializing in Latin American Art and curator of the landmark exhibition *Art of Latin America since Independence* (1964).
5. *Art of Latin America since Independence* was an exhibition curated by Catlin and presented at the Yale University Art Gallery and the University of Texas Art Museum between January and May 1964. *The Emergent Decade: Latin American Painters and Painting in the 1960s* was curated by Thomas M. Messer and organized by Cornell University and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and it was exhibited at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas and the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1966.
6. Luis Lastra Almeida, "Artistas entre rascacielos," *Americas* 15, no. 2 (1963): 29–31.
7. In several interviews with José Antonio Fernández-Muro, he refers to the movement of Art Informel, as "arte matérico."
8. In 1961 the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella published a catalogue of four exhibitions organized at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires. Among the shows illustrated therein are solo exhibitions by Tàpies and Fernández-Muro. Both artists also presented artworks at the exhibition *4 evidencias de un mundo joven en el arte actual* in 1961. For more information about the shows, see Instituto Torcuato Di Tella and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (Argentina), *4 evidencias de un mundo joven en el arte actual: exposición Instituto Torcuato Di Tella: Colección (s. XX), Premio 1961, Tàpies, Fernández Muro: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Agosto de 1961* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1961).
9. *Rojo* is the original title of the painting incorrectly presented as *Leaden Gates* in the exhibition *Grilo/Fernández-Muro: 1962–1984*, displayed at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, between February 12 and May 24, 2019. Mateo Fernández-Muro, who consulted the artist's personal notebooks and a color slide of Galería Bonino in New York during his research, not only highlighted the real title of the artwork, but also discovered the correct way to display the work itself. Because of the confusion throughout the years, the Estate has renamed the work as *Rojo (Leaden Gate)*.
10. "Al gran pueblo argentino, ¡salud!" is the last phrase in the chorus of the Argentinean national anthem: "Ya su trono dignísimo abrieron / las Provincias Unidas del Sud, / y los libres del mundo responden: / ¡Al gran pueblo argentino, ¡salud!"

Figures



Figure 1

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *La vecina*, 1945.
Oil on canvas. 35 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (90 x 70 cm).

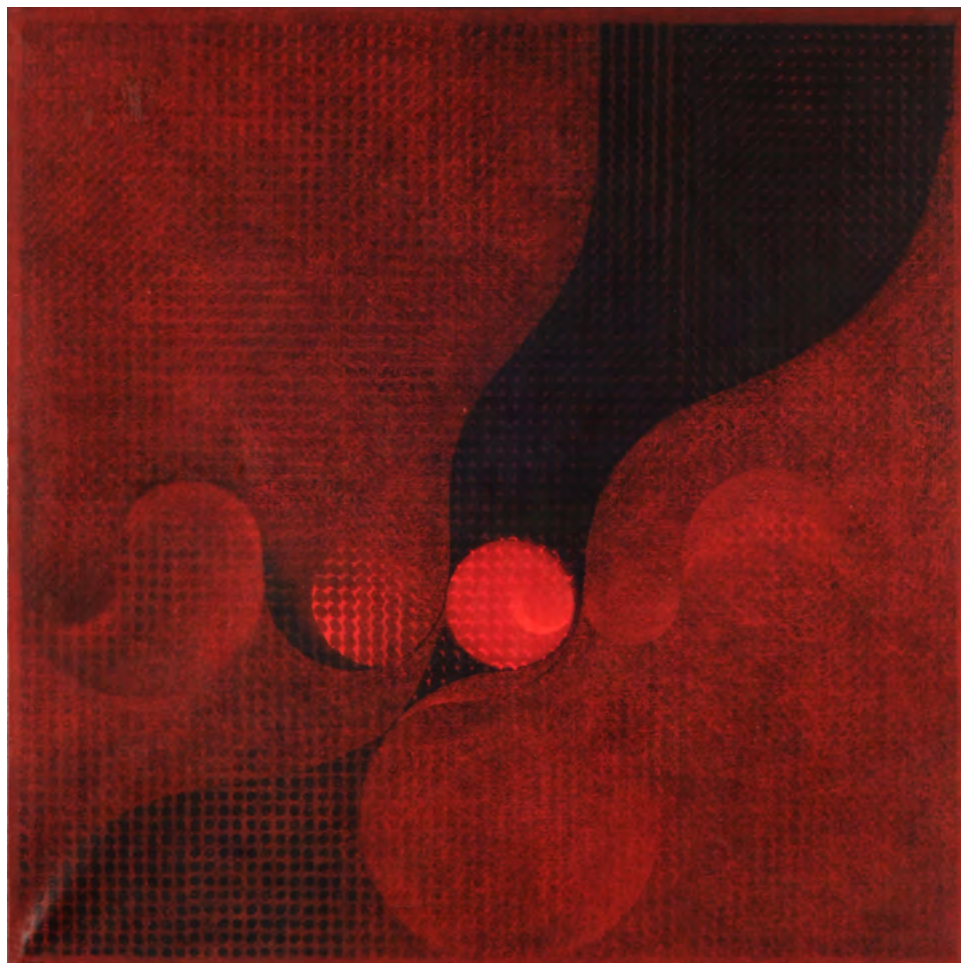


Figure 2

José Antonio Fernández Muro, *En rojos*, 1959.
Oil on canvas, 45 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 45 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (116 x 116 cm).

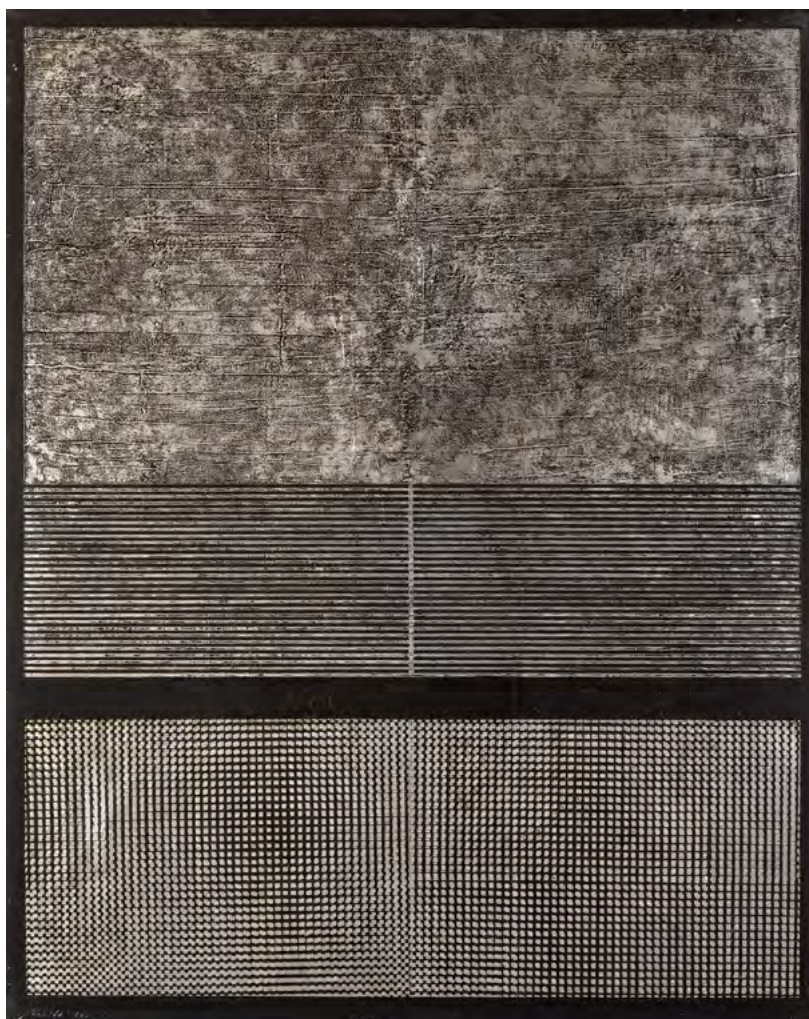


Figure 3

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *Silver Surface*, 1966.
Oil on paper over masonite with wood, 60 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 48 $\frac{13}{16}$ in. (154 x 124 cm).



Figure 4

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *Rojo (Leaden Gate)*, 1964.
Mixed media on canvas, 40 × 36 in. (101 × 91.44 cm).



Figure 5

View of Galería Bonino (n.d.) with *Rojo (Leaden Gate)* displayed correctly, at right.



Figure 6

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *Al gran pueblo argentino*, 1964.
Acrylic wash over aluminum foil gilt construction on canvas,
69 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 57 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (176 x 145 cm).

The Postwar Years of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro

Andrea Carolina Zambrano, Damasia Lacroze,
Emireth Herrera, and Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar

In the 1950s, in the aftermath of World War II, many Latin American artists sought, through extreme experimentation, to reject the forms of representation that were then in vogue. Challenging the limits of the concrete and geometric art of the time, artists began to transition to an expressionist and lyrical mode of painting, incorporating atypical materials—such as sand, aluminum foil, and spray paint—into the canvas and reconsidering the use of the figure. The intuitive and abstract sensitivity developed in postwar Argentina evolved into a new artistic language that entered into dialogue with the art of Europe and of the United States. This contentious era in Argentina featured the electoral triumph of Peronism, followed by a succession of military dictatorships as well as a large influx of Spanish immigrants to several countries in Latin America after the Spanish Civil War.

The years of World War II continued to prove just as fraught with upheaval. Argentina had close ties with Germany until 1945, despite the fact that France and Britain declared war on Germany in 1939. In the middle of this context of war and rapid industrialization, new modes of artistic practice arose with a more random and gestural use of abstract language. These changes had consequences for the evolution of the artists Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro, who were among the most prominent Latin American artists of the period. Deeply involved in various artistic movements during these decades, they moved between Buenos Aires, Paris, New York, and Marbella from the 1950s through the 1970s and shifted away from restrictive methods of geometrical painting in search of greater expressive freedom.

Grilo and Fernández-Muro met in Buenos Aires in the 1940s, as students of the figurative Catalan artist Vicente Puig. During this decade, their relationship grew, and they rapidly began to develop their respective characteristic styles and subject matter. In the early 1950s, they became involved in the influential Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (Group



Participants of the exhibition Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA) at Galería Viau, Buenos Aires, 1955. Clockwise from left: Miguel Ocampo, Hans Aebi, Sarah Grilo, Alfredo Hlito, Enio Iommi, Claudio Girola, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Tomás Maldonado. Photograph by A. Migone.

of Modern Artists of Argentina, or GAMA), founded in 1952 by art critic Aldo Pellegrini. Other members of the group included Tomás Maldonado, Alfredo Hlito, Lidy Prati, Enio Iommi, Claudio Girola, Miguel Ocampo, and Hans Aebi (see p. 62). Their first exhibition took place in June 1952 at Galería Viau in Buenos Aires, followed by another one at Galería Krayd in 1954, and at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, along with guest artists Clorindo Testa and Rafael Onetto. In the introduction to the catalogue of the group's first exhibition, Jorge Aníbal Romero Brest, a prominent Argentine art professor, critic, and curator, discussed the group's work as a critical tool for the diffusion of Argentine Concrete art. That same year, the group exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and in 1955 they had their last exhibition, once more at Galería Viau. The work produced by these artists while collectively participating in GAMA—and even in earlier years—displayed the shared sensibility envisioned by Pellegrini, who succeeded in pushing the boundaries of abstraction from structured and geometric forms into more automatist and poetic gestures. These ideas primarily manifested in their paintings and sculptures, which relied on simple geometric shapes and solid colors to create nonrepresentative imagery.

In 1960, several years after GAMA's activities came to an end, Grilo and Fernández-Muro were invited by Romero Brest to be part of a group show titled *Cinco pintores*. This exhibition took place at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires and served as the first show for what came to be known as Grupo de Los Cinco (Group of Five), formed by Grilo and Fernández-Muro along with Clorindo Testa, Miguel Ocampo, and Kazuya Sakai. Somewhat similarly to GAMA, Grupo de Los Cinco (fig. 1) experimented with new modes of artmaking, often collaborating with other international artists. The collective oeuvre of Grupo de Los Cinco embodied a new sense of freedom of expression, using unexpected materials and expressive gestures while rejecting both artistic control and traditional conceptions of order, elements that would later define the Informalist movement in Argentina.

In analyzing the work of Grupo de Los Cinco, it is apparent that each member deviated from geometric abstraction to pursue greater expressive qualities. These interdependent relationships between form, color, and space departed from the strict rationalist order of geometry. Most of their work rejected the

use of definite shapes and lines, as seen in Testa's *Blanco sobre blanco* (1963) and Fernández-Muro's *Yarkand* (1960). Incorporating instinctual brush strokes and lyrical and textured surfaces, where spontaneity of the gesture, composition, and chance appeared as new and innovative methods of creation, works such as Sakai's *Painting N° 63* (1960) and Ocampo's *Untitled* (1960) also represent the manifestation of more liberating methods of creation.

The group's second and final exhibition took place in spring 1964. Grupo de Los Cinco participated in the large group show *New Art of Argentina*, first opening at the gallery of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires and later moving to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The exhibition was curated by Jan van der Marck along with Romero Brest, former director of the Visual Arts Center at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, and art critic and curator Samuel Paz. The exhibition later traveled to the Akron Art Institute, the Atlanta Art Association, and the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery at the University of Texas. The show's catalogue summarized the curators' ideas behind the organization of the show and expressed regret that it had not been possible to exhibit all the artworks first seen in Argentina in the United States because of transportation problems.

As the trajectory of Grupo de Los Cinco came to an end, all five artists moved on, and their artistic production continued to shift throughout the end of the decade. The group was considered not only a significant part of the foundations of the Latin American Informalist movement but also an integral component of the new Argentinean avant-garde in the postwar era. Beyond Grilo and Fernández-Muro's participation in Grupo de Los Cinco, the artists exhibited independently and continued to gain significant support, institutional distinctions, and accolades. This growing presence of Argentinean artists on the international stage emerged from a consolidation of various awards, scholarships, and grants promoted in the city of Buenos Aires. Examples included the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella award, the Braque Prize, the Fondo Nacional de las Artes (National Endowment for the Arts), and the prestigious Ver y Estimar (To See and Ponder) Honor Prize—a critical publishing project founded and directed by Romero Brest with the aim of galvanizing modern artistic practices—which allowed artists to travel and participate in art scenes overseas.

In 1960, Fernández-Muro received a Guggenheim International Award. His work was exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from November of that year until January 1961. Two years later, Buenos Aires-based Galería Bonino opened a New York location (in collaboration with the Andrew Morris Gallery), featuring the work of Fernández-Muro alongside other Latin American and US American Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell in its inaugural exhibition. The show also included painters such as abstract surrealist Rufino Tamayo and sculptor of kinetic art Alexander Calder. Similarly, Grilo had solo exhibitions at the Obelisk Gallery in Washington, DC, and the Paul Bianchini Gallery in New York in 1963.

Throughout the rest of the 1960s, Grilo and Fernández-Muro continued to exhibit frequently. Some of their most outstanding shows include *New Departures*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in 1961; *Magnet—New York: A Selection of Paintings by Latin American Artists Living in New York*, at the Galería Bonino in 1964; and *The Emergent Decade: Latin American Painters and Painting in the 1960s*, at the Guggenheim in New York and at the Andrew D. White Museum of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 1966, curated by the museum's director, Thomas M. Messer. In addition to participating in these US shows, the two artists were also included in the 1965 exhibition *Argentina en el mundo* (Argentina in the World), organized at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. This exhibition featured more than five hundred Argentinean artists who had gained international recognition and were considered part of the newly forming global avant-garde. Such exhibitions indicated that the work of Grilo and Fernández-Muro was gradually gaining recognition as well as national and international press coverage. Some of the couple's most enthusiastic supporters included Argentinean writers Romero Brest, Pellegrini, Manuel Mújica Láinez, and Damián Bayón. In 1964, an *Art in America* essay discussed the growing diversity of New York's art galleries, citing the work of Fernández-Muro and Grilo as an example of the city's greater internationalism.

Between 1960 and 1962, Grilo's style started evolving from a rigid geometric aesthetic to more expressive, vigorous brushstrokes. Rather than depicting recognizable shapes, Grilo instead opted to paint expressively, with no calculation regarding

composition. In *Untitled* (1962) (fig. 2), the artist presents several planes of color with no explicit barriers, leaving aside any indication of form. Grilo manipulated the paint by adding thin layers that built up the surface, bleeding through gradients of varying hues and intensities. The work of both artists took a drastic turn when they arrived in New York in 1962 thanks to Grilo's Guggenheim fellowship. Although Grilo later adopted oil painting as her primary medium, the artist began to engage with mixed media, utilizing pencil, charcoal, and stamps on canvas, as seen in *Days* (1964) (figs. 3 and 4). Placing instinctual markings on her canvas, along with ephemera from her daily urban experience, the artist created overlapping shapes that suggest the tensions between foreground and background. She also incorporated layers of graffiti-like markings, stenciled text, and torn paper, building mesmerizing compositions that seem to parallel the urban landscape, evoking the work of Cubist painters, who were a source of inspiration for Grilo. Adopting methods of representing objects and abstracted memories, she utilized neutral grays, browns, and diluted whites. Defined by rhythmic contrasts, the color planes emerge and recede into energetic surfaces of intersecting and overlapping shapes, forms, and writings, representing a modern approach to the styles she had developed during her years in Buenos Aires and her first year in New York.

Navigating the New York art scene also inspired Fernández-Muro to experiment more in his practice, as can be seen in artworks such as *Vicious Circle* (1963) (fig. 5) and *Rojo* (Leaden Gate) (1964, see p. 57). Both paintings contain reminiscences of the streets that the artist encountered during his sojourn in the city. In *Vicious Circle*, Fernández-Muro shows his admiration for the industrial aesthetic of the city streets as he creates his version of the iconic New York sewer hole cover. With his frottage technique, the artist transferred patterns from these sewer hole covers, as well as the words "New York City," which usually appear at the bottom of the utility hole cover, onto aluminum sheets. He then applied a layer of oil paint over the aluminum sheet with the pattern already transferred and subtracted oil from different areas of the surface, allowing him to create more complex textures. While the materials he used were few and simple, Fernández-Muro created a symbiotic and dynamic relationship between his media.

With *Rojo (Leaden Gate)*, Fernández-Muro continued to explore further and push the boundaries of his abstract matter paintings, which incorporated Informalist and Pop elements. While still paying homage to the urban patterns of the city, *Rojo (Leaden Gate)* utilizes another rubbing of a city utility hole. The use of layering is more calculated in this work—centered on the lower half of the canvas is a rubbing of four symmetrical tile-like patterns on aluminum, unpainted, while the rubbing directly above it is painted entirely, along with the rest of the canvas. The metallic gray of the aluminum on the lower rubbing starkly contrasts with the muted red of the layered sewer cover above it and the bright, saturated crimson that covers the rest of the canvas. In 1966, while traveling across Europe, the artist described the stages of his artistic practice during an interview with the Madrid newspaper *El Pueblo*:

I understand that in it [his artistic practice], there are three fundamental stages: a figurative one, which goes from 1943 to 1948; then comes an abstract, constructive geometrical period, and then a free abstract “matter” painting, which is what I am doing at this moment.

The interview is one example of Fernández-Muro’s profound reflection on his practice and the changes it experienced over time. This self-reflective process allowed him to understand what his practice meant within the broader context of Latin American artists living and working in New York City (fig. 6). The cityscape became a source of inspiration for Grilo and in some manner for Fernández-Muro, as evidenced by the paintings described above. Abstract depictions of urban spaces appeared in some of the paintings that Grilo developed in the 1970s. These experimentations in their practice are examples of the role they occupied in this transnational and dynamic context of artistic creation in the 1960s. Both artists gained recognition in Latin America, Europe, and the United States. While navigating the scenes of the new artistic trends and movements of the time, such as Informalism and Pop art, they managed to position themselves firmly in a transnational postwar art scene. Committed to exploring the boundaries of painting, they experimented with a wide variety of media and techniques over

the course of their artistic careers, and their paintings changed in significant ways during their lifetimes. Beyond the artists' relationship with Latin American identity, Grilo and Fernández-Muro modified their practice in a way that ultimately helped them adapt to an emerging globalized narrative. As a result, they became integral parts of both the New York and Argentine art scenes.

Starting in the mid-forties, Grilo and Fernández-Muro created a consistent body of work that pushed the boundaries of their ever-evolving abstraction with the use of unorthodox materials. Their artistic practice, which started in Argentina, evolved through their contact with a vast array of abstract art movements that appeared in Europe and the United States, making them part of an international network of artists. Amid the political constraints caused by the Vietnam War, Grilo and Fernández-Muro left New York and moved to Marbella and then Paris, finally settling in Madrid, where they spent the rest of their lives. The two painters continued to work until their deaths, in 2007 and 2014, respectively. Their contributions within the postwar art scene remain a central resource for future research, as evidenced by the essays in this issue of *Vistas*.

1. Jorge Aníbal Romero Brest, *Grupo de Artistas Modernos* (Bueno Aires: Galería Viau, 1955).
2. Romero Brest, *Grupo de Artistas Modernos*.
3. Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco, eds., *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
4. Jorge Aníbal Romero Brest, foreword to *F-Muro, Grilo, Ocampo, Sakai, Testa* (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1960).
5. Founded in 1958 by Guido and Torcuato Di Tella, the institute, and particularly its Visual Arts Center, directed by Romero Brest from 1963 to 1969, played an important role in promoting Buenos Aires's avant-garde artistic practices. Many have written extensively on the influence of the institute since its foundation. See John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Gaglianone, 1985).
6. Jorge Aníbal Romero Brest, *New Art of Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1964).
7. Such was the case for artists Alicia Penalba, Marino di Teana, and Julio Le Parc. Romero Brest, *New Art of Argentina*, 2.
8. *Ver y Estimar* (To See and Ponder) was a publishing project founded and directed by Romero Brest. The publication, which lasted from 1948 until 1955, stimulated critical thought and the renewal of artistic languages from the modernizing perspective held by its director.
9. For an extensive account of the variety of activities undertaken in Buenos Aires by private and public entities to support artists, see Andrea Giunta and Inés Katzenstein, eds., *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004); King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*; and Rodrigo Alonso, Andrea Giunta, Serge Guilbaut, and Harold Rosenberg, *Imán: Nueva York—arte argentino de los años 60* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2010), <https://www.proa.org/esp/exhibition-iman-nueva-york-textos.php>.
10. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, press release, October 19, 1960.
11. Alonso, Giunta, Guilbaut, and Rosenberg, *Imán: Nueva York*.
12. Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
13. See Jorge Mara, "Grilo, Sarah, 1920," in *Sarah Grilo, José A. Fernández-Muro: obras sobre papel* (Buenos Aires: Galería Jorge Mara-La Ruche, 2007), 9, https://issuu.com/jorgemalaruche/docs/interior_sarah_grilo.
14. Nan Rosenthal, "New York: Around the World in 20 Galleries," *Art in America*, October 1964.
15. *Rojo* is the original title of the painting presented as *Leaden Gates* in the exhibition *Grilo/Fernández-Muro: 1962–1984*, which took place at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, between February 12 and May 24, 2019. Mateo Fernández-Muro's research highlighted the original name of the artwork, which we are featuring in this essay.
16. Julio Trenchas, "Fernández-Muro y la pintura 'matérica,'" *El Pueblo*, no. 33, 1966. From the original text, in Spanish: "Entiendo que en ella hay tres etapas fundamentales: una figurativa, que va del 43 al 48; viene luego una época abstracta, geométrica constructiva, y después, una abstracta libre 'matérica', que es la que estoy haciendo en este momento." Translated by the authors.

Figures



Figure 1

Grupo de Los Cinco, Buenos Aires, 1960. From left to right:
José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Kazuya Sakai, Sarah Grilo, Miguel Ocampo,
and Clorindo Testa. Photograph by Diana Levillier.



Figure 2

Sarah Grilo, *Untitled*, ca. 1962.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 in. (127 x 127 cm).



Figure 3

Sarah Grilo, *Days*, 1964.
Oil on canvas, 14 ½ x 17 in. (36.8 x 43.2 cm).



Figure 4

Sarah Grilo, *Azul*, 1984.

Oil on canvas, 51 × 63 ¾ in. (129.5 × 161.9 cm).

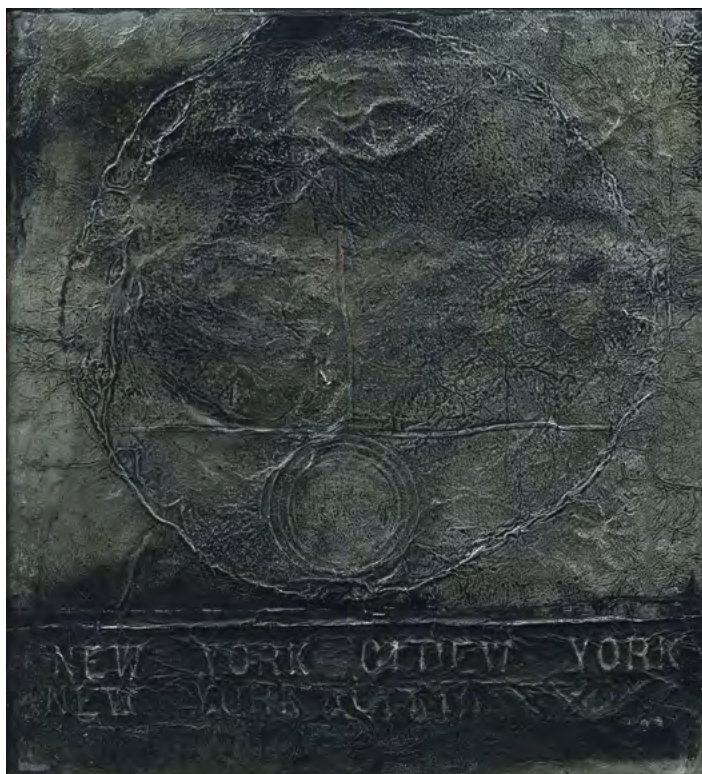


Figure 5

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *Vicious Circle*, 1963.
Oil on aluminum foil over canvas, 19 ⁷/₈ x 18 in. (50.5 x 45.7 cm).

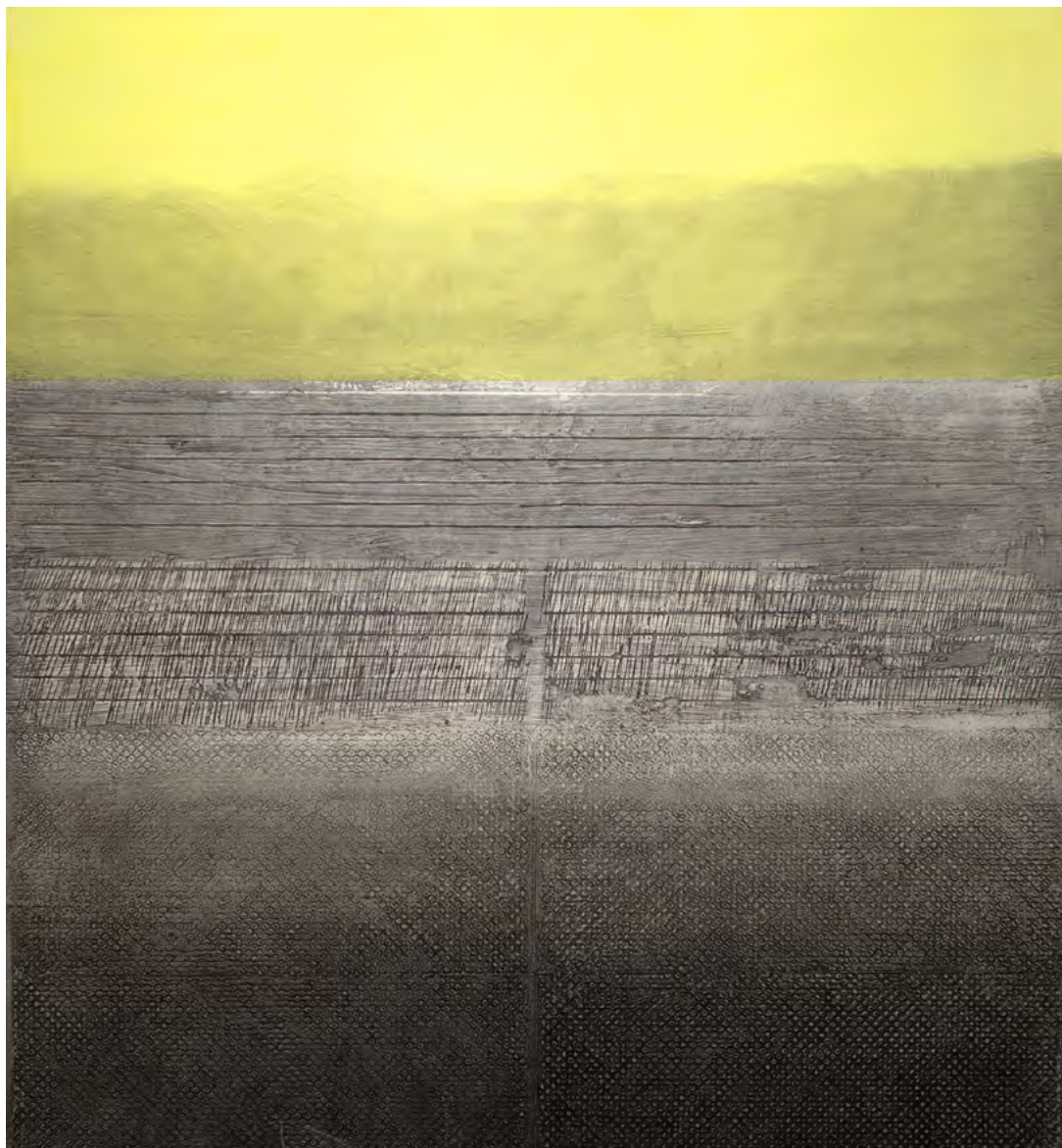


Figure 6

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *Amarillo sobre gris*, 1984.
Mixed media on wood, 60 × 55 ½ in. (152.4 × 140.97 cm).

Contributors

Megan Kincaid

is an art historian and curator of modern and contemporary art. She is currently an adjunct instructor at New York University and a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU. She holds a BA in art history from Columbia University, summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa. Kincaid co-curated the exhibitions *Cauleen Smith, H-E-L-L-O: To Do All at Once* (Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, 2021) and *Fanny Sanín's New York: The Critical Decade, 1971–1981* (Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, 2020–21), and assisted with the curation of *Charles White: A Retrospective* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018–19). The Museum of Modern Art and NYU, among others, have published her writing. At present, she is organizing an exhibition of José Antonio Fernández-Muro at ISLAA and publishing an exhibition catalogue on Daniel Lind-Ramos.

Karen Grimson

is an art historian specializing in Latin American abstraction. She holds a degree in history of art from Universidad de Buenos Aires, and a master's degree from The Courtauld Institute, London. Between 2011 and 2020, she worked for the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), developing acquisitions and exhibitions of art from Latin America, such as *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*, *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, and *Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift*, among others. She has contributed articles to the MoMA publications *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*, *Being Modern*, *MoMA Highlights*, and *Joaquín Torres-García*, and has published articles on MoMA's online platforms Magazine and Post. In 2018, she curated the exhibition *Pablo Gómez Uribe: All That Is Solid* at Proxycy Gallery, New York, and co-curated the survey of Colombian contemporary art *Archipiélago Medellín* at Sala Suramericana.

Mateo Fernández-Muro

is the grandson and coexecutor of the Estate of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro. He has contributed extensively to the Estate, aiming to preserve and advance a global understanding of the legacy of the artists' life and artwork.

Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar

is a PhD student in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He focuses on modern Latin American art and artistic exchanges between Latin America and Europe. At the Institute, he participates in the organization of events related to Latin American Art, such as South and About, The Latin American Forum, and the Annual Symposium of Latin American Art.

Andrea Carolina Zambrano

is a recent MA graduate of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, concentrating on late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American art and curatorial studies. Her master's thesis examines the feminist themes of the murals of Fanny Rabel, Regina Raull, and Valetta Swann at the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

Damasia Lacroze

is a US and Argentine art historian and researcher currently based in New York, specializing in modern and contemporary Latin American and Latinx art. She recently completed her MA at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, where she worked on her master's thesis titled "Party and Revolt: The Early Work of Liliana Maresca in Post-Dictatorship Argentina." Prior to pursuing her master's degree, she held positions at various cultural institutions in both New York and Buenos Aires, including MoMA PS1, Fundación Proa, David Zwirner, and Hauser & Wirth.

Emireth Herrera

is a recent MA graduate of art history and archaeology at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Her focus is on Latin American art and curatorial studies.

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Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro

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