INTRODUCTION

With colleagues at the Art Museum of the Americas (AMA), Organization of American States, in Washington, D.C., I request funding for the expansion of a curatorial project, Constellations: Constructivism, Internationalism & the Inter-American Avant-Garde, and the development of related curricular and academic programming. Constellations opened in June 2012 at AMA, where for almost nine months it drew an international community of students, visitors, and scholars to the museum for tours, educational workshops, and academic conversation. I designed Constellations for AMA as an invitation to consider diachronic and transnational directions within the development of geometric abstraction across the Americas. Inasmuch as the institutional history of the OAS shaped AMA’s collection of abstract art, Constellations suggests a multifaceted visual history of these artworks that both complements and supersedes their ideological associations.

The current version of Constellations was limited by constraints of time and cost, but it marked the beginning of what AMA plans to become regular exhibitions of its permanent collection. In creating an archival, online version of the exhibition, we hope not only to preserve the exhibition as a curatorial and pedagogical model but also to directly connect it to new projects related to AMA’s collection. We apply to Ford-LASA Special Projects for funds to support the following: 1) educational programming for public, museum, and academic communities; and 2) a related symposium to be held in September 2013. AMA has no other source of funding to support research and scholarship on its collection, and we hope that in continuing the work of Constellations we can generate new interest in AMA’s institutional history and collection. Funds from Ford-LASA Special Projects will allow us to develop new educational workshops geared toward local and international communities in the greater Washington area and to bring a more diverse audience to the museum. In addition, the grant will support a symposium featuring an international slate of speakers who will address the paradigmatic place of abstraction in AMA’s collection and its relationship to the founding vision of the museum and its history within the OAS. We plan to publish an edited volume of selected symposium papers, either in a special, guest-edited issue of a journal or as part of AMA’s work to update the catalogue of its permanent collection.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

A) CURATORIAL PROPOSAL

Drawn from the permanent collection of the Art Museum of the Americas, Constellations surveys the dynamic, inter-American history of geometric abstraction across the twentieth century. The works on display illustrate the rich cultural and visual history of geometric abstraction as it evolved into a range of expressive and divergent practices across the region.
The universal and timeless structures of geometric forms and colors took on specific local meanings, and Constellations suggests the different values – modern, utopian, collective, transformative – that abstraction embodied at critical junctures across the Americas. In line with the broader mission of AMA and the Organization of American States, Constellations recognizes the socially constructive role that the arts played in fostering democracy and freedom of expression at intense historical moments of social and political change.

Taking its cue from the paradigmatic work of Joaquín Torres-García, the Uruguayan constructivist who pioneered abstraction in the Southern Cone, Constellations shows the evolution of the geometric impulse through four complementary movements. These interrelated “constellations” – Constructivist Americas, Figuring Geometry, Constructive Geometries, and Geometry in Motion – explore the visual and ideological versatility of abstraction from the 1930s through the 1950s and ‘60s. The four constellations resist linear chronologies and national paradigms, instead describing a history of synergies and encounters across time and space. From the Taller Torres-García and the Argentine Madi group to Colombian Constructivism, Cuban Concretismo, and Venezuelan Kineticism, abstraction encompassed optics and technology, political activism and dissent, and inter-American dialogue and exchange. The artworks featured in Constellations suggest the multifaceted aspirations and motivations of avant-gardes across the Americas and the vitality of geometry as a structural and social metaphor.

Constructivist Americas: In 1943, the year in which he painted AMA’s iconic Constructivist Composition, Torres-García founded the Taller Torres García in Montevideo. A prolific teaching workshop, the Taller became a creative nexus of abstraction in the Americas, disseminating Torres-García’s theory of Universal Constructivism through pedagogy and print media. An integral aesthetic rooted in the union of pre-Hispanic (“universal”) motifs and plastic geometries, Universal Constructivism defined American abstraction in both avant-garde and indigenous terms. This gallery suggests the range of this earliest constructivist thread through the work of Torres-García and members of the Taller (Manuel Pailós, José Gurvich), its later reprise in work by the Grupo de Arte No Figurativo (María Freire, José Pedro Costigliolo), and its North American parallels (Gunther Gerzso, Carlos Mérida).

Figuring Geometry: Abstraction and figuration were not always mutually exclusive practices, and the artists in this constellation engage a figural, or somatic, presence vis-à-vis geometric form. Elder-generation artists like Mario Carreño and René Portocarrero found their way to abstraction through a gradual distillation of earlier, representative forms, here suggestively imaged through totemic outlines and structuring blocks of color. Their younger contemporaries were more apt to begin with the precepts of geometry and then intimate bodily and often erotic associations – seen here in works by Agustín Fernández, Gaston Garreaud, and Miguel Ocampo. Tomie Ohtake and Venancio Shinki moved between geometric and gestural modes of abstraction, and the veiled expressionism of their work imparts an existential and metaphysical dimension to otherwise coolly rational and non-objective forms.

Constructive Geometries: Co-founded by Gyula Kosice, Argentina’s groundbreaking Madi movement ranks among Latin America’s most innovative, interdisciplinary and international expressions of geometric abstraction. The euphoric, postwar utopianism of the Madi artists stands in contrast to the comparative sobriety and spartan feeling of constructivism in Colombia.
Working through a time of civil conflict known as La Violencia, Edgar Negret, Eduardo Ramirez Villamizar and Omar Rayo plied elemental, planar geometries in works that explore stark contrasts of color and spatial relief. Overlooked and all but unknown during this time, women artists – Loló Soldevilla in Paris and Havana; Fanny Sanín in Bogotá, London, and Monterrey – simultaneously experimented with the constructive vocabularies, and possibilities, of geometric form.

Geometry in Motion: Among the highlights of AMA’s collection are classic examples of geometric and optical art from Venezuela and Argentina. Alejandro Otero and others embraced the universality of geometric forms as a means of transcending nativist nationalism, and the optical vibrations of his Colorritmos, Jesús Rafael Soto’s Escrituras, and Carlos Cruz-Diez’s Fisicromías invite sensorial experience and viewer participation through essences of color, space, and light. Argentine kineticism evolved out of the concrete and Madi movements of the 1940s, seeking to destabilize vision (Rogelio Polesello). Formed in 1968, the Arte Generativo group sought a return to questions of aesthetics, and its members – Eduardo MacEntyre, Miguel Angel Vidal, and Ary Brizzi – contemplated the cosmic energies and visual dynamism of lines and color in motion.

B) Symposium

We have begun to organize an academic symposium around the transnational themes of Constellations and the historical significance of AMA, tentatively scheduled for September 13-14, 2013 at AMA. We have a short list of possible keynote speakers and plan to circulate a Call for Papers in April 2013. We hope to assemble a group of speakers with experience working on Latin American art across the United States and Latin America and expect to draw participants at both junior and senior ranks. With support from Ford-LASA Special Projects, we should be able to subsidize travel costs for speakers traveling from outside of the United States.

C) Educational Programming

In conjunction with Constellations, AMA has developed three, 45-minute gallery talks in which guests explore different elements of the exhibition. Universal Constructivism examines the work of Torres-García and his Taller; Look to the Madi Movement is based on the work of Kosice and considers his impact on later Argentine art; and Kinetic Art in Venezuela: A Look to Democratic Art explores Op art (Otero, Cruz-Diez, Soto) as a tool to promote democratic values. AMA has also developed a family workshop, Playing with Geometry, in which children learn some of the tools that the artists featured in Constellations used to create their works (e.g., compasses, rulers, spirographs). We plan to formalize these gallery talks and workshop into discrete, curricular guides and to supplement with new outreach efforts, particularly with an eye toward cultivating student and community interests in Mexico and Central America.

As part of our work to archive Constellations online and with technological support from the OAS, we plan to commission a series of podcasts and other audio/video features that highlight the most iconic works from the exhibition in a way that is accessible to general audiences and to children. Led by Goldman, we will involve undergraduate and graduate students in the Washington area in the formation of this digital archive and include their voices alongside those of academics and specialists. We hope that this kind of work will continue beyond the objects
exhibited in *Constellations*, but the seed grant provided by Ford-LASA Special Projects will allow us to pilot these important interactive features on AMA’s webpage.

D) **Publication (Photography)**

AMA is committed to publishing the proceedings of the Symposium, and McEwen is willing to assist as needed in overseeing the editorial process in the next year. New photography of almost all of the works included in *Constellations* is a pre-condition for publication in both digital and print mediums. A small allocation from the Ford-LASA Special Projects grant will allow us to commission this photography both for permanent use in web-based features and publications and for forthcoming print editions.

**Schedule of Work**

The Symposium is presently in planning stages, with a Call for Papers scheduled to circulate in April. We plan to finalize our selection of speakers over June-July 2013 in anticipation of a two-day meeting in September at AMA. We expect to establish a work schedule for planned educational programming by May 2013; the writing, filming/recording, and digitization of these features are planned for the summer and should be complete before the start of the Symposium. We look forward to presenting our work in progress at the 2013 LASA Congress in Washington, D.C.

**Participants**

A) **Curatorial and Education**

**Jonathan Goldman**

Goldman began taking Chinese classes at Sidwell Friends and spent a year of high school as an exchange student in Beijing. He then spent four years interning with ImaginAsia at the Sackler Gallery and ten years studying Chinese language and culture. After another stint in Beijing, he received a B.A. in Chinese Studies from Occidental College and a B.F.A. in Advertising, Art Direction, and Design for Social Impact from Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. Currently, he is pursuing an M.A. in Exhibition Design at the Corcoran College of Design. He now works as the designer for AMA, where his responsibilities include everything from working on marketing materials to making the website to designing exhibitions.

**Abigail McEwen**

An historian of modern art, McEwen has focused her scholarship around the practices of Latin American avant-gardes over the twentieth century. Her current book project, *Revolutionary Horizons: Art and Polemics in 1950s Cuba*, describes the visual strategies and political purchase of the rising *vanguardia* in pre-Revolutionary Cuba. New projects include work on the Puerto Rican artist Olga Albizu and a book-length study of the Cuban artist Amelia Peláez. McEwen received her Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts (New York University) and is currently Assistant Professor of Latin American Art at the University of Maryland, College Park.
Andrés Navia

Andrés Navia is the head of the OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas. At AMA, Navia has tried to revitalize the museum’s programming by targeting younger populations and engaging in youth violence prevention through the arts in Central America and the Caribbean. Before joining the OAS, he worked for seven years at the Inter-American Development Bank in archaeological restoration, training and infrastructure projects in the Maya region and youth violence prevention programs in Central America. Mr. Navia is a graduate of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, Washington, DC, where he obtained his M.A. and from the Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, where he obtained a B.A. in Political Science, which included a year at Boston University. Andrés is also a professionally trained actor from the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre of New York City.

Adriana Ospina

Adriana Ospina is a Colombian-born art historian who is currently pursuing an M.A. in Art History at George Mason University and working as the Permanent Collection Registrar and Education Coordinator. She holds a Bachelor's degree in History from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. At AMA, she has developed exhibition-related educational programs that focus on art as a medium through which to study aesthetics, history, language, and social politics. She regularly coordinates tours, workshops for schools and families, gallery talks, and symposia; she recently worked on AMA’s bi-national project for at-risk youth between El Salvador and Washington, D.C.

B)  POSSIBLE COLLABORATORS / SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS

Alejandro Anreus

Born in Havana, Cuba, Anreus received his B.A. in art history from Kean College (1984) and completed his M.A. (1995) and Ph.D. (1997) in art history at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Currently a professor at William Paterson University, Anreus was a curator at the Montclair Art Museum (1986-93) and the Jersey City Museum (1993-2001) as well as a critic in residence at the Latino Center for Art and Culture, Rutgers University (1999-2000). His most recent publications are Ben Shahn and The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti (2001), Orozco in Gringoland: The Years in New York (2001), and The Social and The Real; Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere (2006), which he co-edited with Diana L. Linden and Jonathan Weinberg. He is currently writing a monograph on the Cuban-American painter Luis Cruz Azaceta.

Ana Franco

Maria Gaztambide

Gaztambide directs the *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art* project at the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). For nearly seven years, she has actively collaborated on research, publication, and long-term exhibition initiatives at the MFAH. Previously, María was at Tulane University, where she taught courses on Latin American art and culture and pursued an M.A. in art history and an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Latin American studies.

E. Carmen Ramos

Ramos is associate curator for Latino art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Previously, she was assistant curator for cultural engagement at the Newark Museum in New Jersey and an independent curator. At the Newark Museum, Dr. Ramos organized the exhibitions *The Caribbean Abroad: Latino Artists and Migration* (2003), *America’s Pastime: Portraits of the Dominican Dream, Works by Freddy Rodríguez* (2005), and *A Mexican Museum of Modern Art: A Project by Franco Mondini-Ruiz* (2007), among others.

**Publication**

We plan to make use of AMA’s webpage to publish a range of work – scholarly papers, curatorial analysis, educational programming – related to *Constellations*. Certainly, we intend to publish, possibly in both print and digital form, the proceedings of the symposium. In addition, educational programming related to this exhibition may be adapted at AMA and at other OAS venues across the Americas to accompany future exhibitions of the artworks included in *Constellations*.

**Budget**

**Educational Programming**

- Curricular development: $1,000
- Webpage features: $2,000

**Symposium**

- Travel subsidies: $2,500
- Reception/expenses/fees: $1,250
- Keynote speaker: $1,000
- Marketing/poster/brochure: $750

**Publication (Photography)**

- $1,500