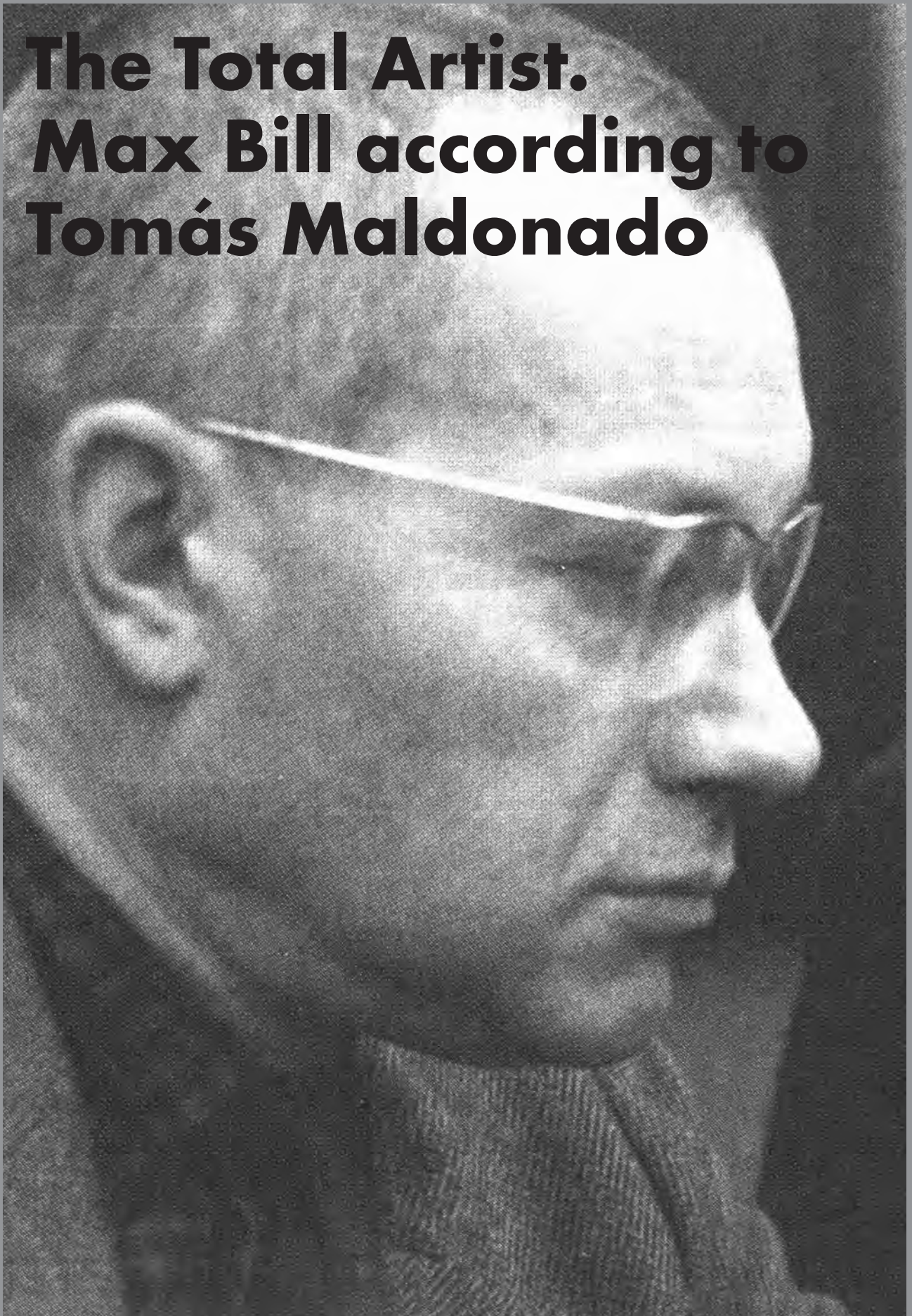


The Total Artist. Max Bill according to Tomás Maldonado



Max Bill was an important reference in the field of art and architecture in Latin America. Unlike the synthesis of the arts, Max Bill was proposing a program based on “concrete art” and the idea of gute form, which sought to provide a common principle to the built environment that would guarantee its formal quality and harmony. This point was central to the reception of his ideas in Argentina. It was largely Tomás Maldonado who introduced these ideas. He presented Max Bill as a “total artist”, a sort of premonition of the “man of the future”, endowed with a capacity of coherence that would allow the synthesis not of the arts, but that of the artistic product with mass production.

By Alejandro Gabriel Crispiani

MAX BILL was by all means a key reference for Latin American art and architecture, particularly for the South American scene of the second post-war. Bill represented a different type of modern culture, at least as to that considered and spread amongst countries such as Chile, Argentina or Uruguay since the late 1930s. Far from resembling the cutting edge and provocative character of Vicente Huidobro, or the messianic figure of Joaquín Torres García, Max Bill would stand as an artist that, while deeply rooted with the avant-garde – by means of a work that clearly outstood its limits – at the same time embodied a more mature and constructive way of dealing with concrete reality. This was a fairly critical position to have towards the processes of mass culture already manifested in those years, but also confident of a capacity to address and transform these processes throughout an enlightening and inspiring practice. Thus the Academy and its conservative counterparts in art and culture ceased to be a problem to Max Bill: this was no longer the powerful opponent to fight against to as shown in the founding texts of Le Corbusier, which interestingly were still read and considered as diagnosis of the present in the 1940s and 1950s.

The ugliness and ultimately the immorality that threatens the world today actually finds its origin on that same technique exalted back in the early 1920s by avant-garde groups. Consequently, Max Bill considered this mechanization and modernization to be threatened of being completely torn apart from its nature.¹ The war on consumption, as already seen in the nineteenth century, would overtake on form as one of its premises. From then on it ceased to be a question of historical style, but, on the contrary, nourishing in its own particular way from the genealogies of form created by avant-garde groups. Finally, these forms had stemmed with the process of accelerated and universal technological progress that undoubtedly preceded all purchase goods, at the cost of it becoming stale and losing its authenticity. The battlefield of art and architecture was located elsewhere then, and

the Swiss *Werkbund* was quite aware of this. Therefore it was crucial to cut back to this original stream of modern forms, not yet exhausted nor stopped while still flowing throughout the modern world but that at the same time demanded to be recognized and nurtured. This was not at all about a call to arms or a revival of heroic agendas, but establishing a direction with bold clarity and also a deeper reflection upon these matters, without false expectations nor falling in the trap of a revolutionary horizon that would come to resolve all matters yet unsolved on various portions of knowledge and the know how that converges on the built environment: art, design in its multiple versions, architecture and urbanism. All things considered, it was clear that a sole modern drive was not enough to confront these fields.

This position and way of understanding the situation is clearly explicit in one of the most important theoretical works of Max Bill, *Form. A Balance Sheet of Trends in mid-Century Design*² published in 1952. The book (in his own words: “primarily a picture book laying no claim of completeness”³) is a sort of compendium of the images used in the exhibition “*Die Gute Form*” organized by Bill for the Swiss *Werkbund* in 1949, plus some extra material. Some of his texts complement these photographs. The book illustrates a certain quality, a quality of form. Form is always considered “good”, not being held to a specific epoch nor found exclusively on human made objects. This is related to an idea of perfection, of adjustment and simplicity exposed to sight perception. It can be found on all that is visible and does not depend on any production system. It is found on all scales: on pyrite crystals or in a city project. Most notably, on Bill’s book a very large number of designers and architects can be found, but he is the only artist. In fact, it is precisely Bill’s work which traces the narrative path of the book. As the book wanders throughout the many design fields it addresses, Bill’s work emerges in between. Therefore, his production stays immersed in a broader and collective body of work, but hardly or never anonymous. His paintings and sculptures

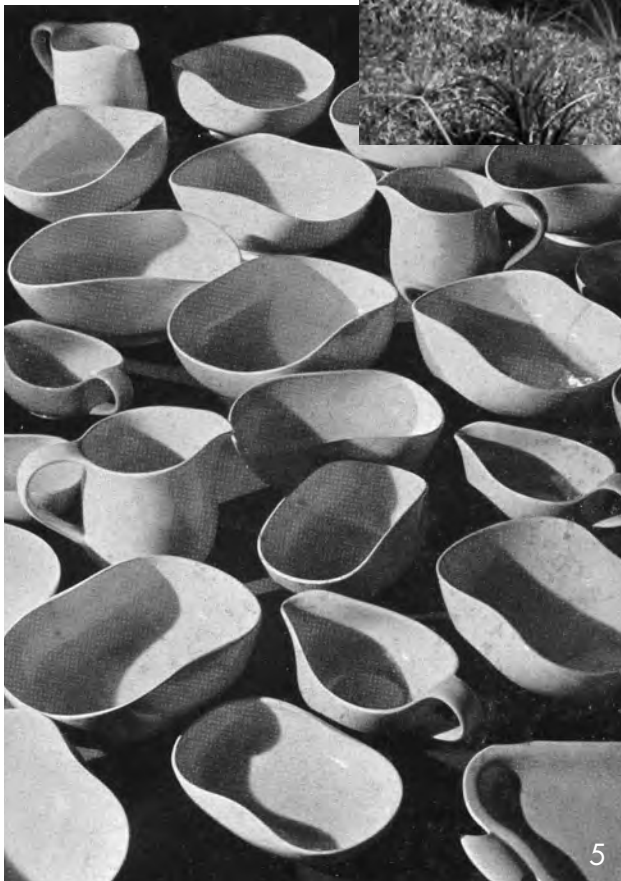
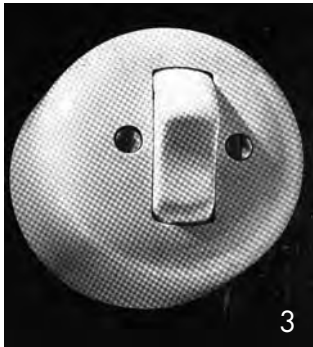
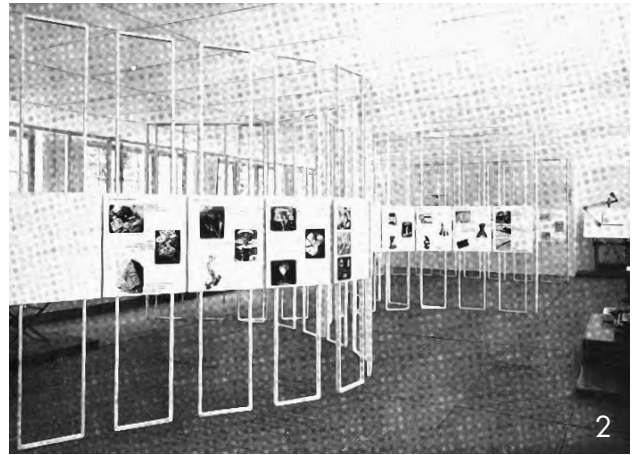
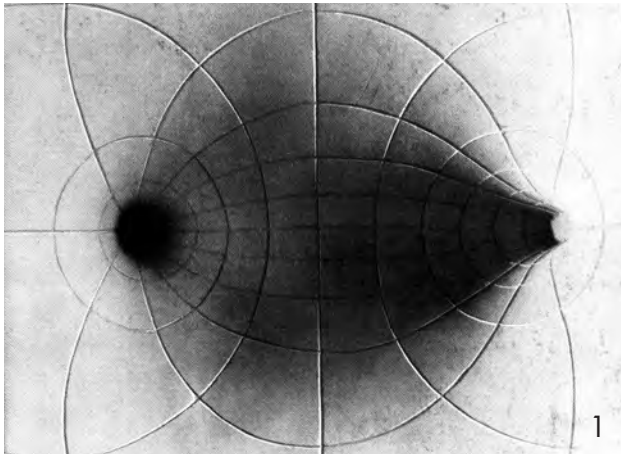


Figure 1. Model of a mathematical formula
Photo from E.A. Einiger, Zürich; from Max Bill, *Form*.
A Balance Sheet of mid-Twentieth Century Trend in Design
(Basel: Verlag Karl Werner, 1952), 25.

Figure 2. **Max Bill** Pavilion for the Exhibition "Die Gute Form",
Basel, 1949.

Photo by Ernst Scheidegger, Zürich; from Tomás Maldonado,
Max Bill (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1955), 110.

Figure 3. **Adolf Feller**, Light switch
Photo Hugo Herdeg; from Bill, *Form*, 43.

Figure 4. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Corner of a garden.
Photo by Marcel Gautherot; from Bill, *Form*, 110.

Figure 5. **Wilhem Käge** (AB Gustavsbergs Fabriker),
Household crockery. From Bill, *Form*, 59.

follow this lead alongside multiple images of nature that also appear in the book.

Amongst the huge variety of objects on display, there is a clear intention to show that this quality of form allows infinite ways to materialize itself and as such it is not predictable. It involves a deep understanding of the meaning of the object (whether a work of art or a utilitarian object) as well as an economic principle of maximum efficiency with the lowest means. Whereas technification would have opened up new ways to reach these forms, there is no guarantee of accomplishment given the possibility of distortion. Both art and modern architecture can also get lost, for this is not about ascribing to a particular program or another, but to point out an accurate location of this course of form towards the half of the twentieth century.

It is in the early 1950s when Max Bill travels to Brazil and a small fraction of this visit is portrayed in *Form*: an image of the gardens of Burle Marx and a photograph of the Ministry of Education building in Rio. But perhaps the most interesting thing to note is that *Form* is surely the background from which Bill constructs criticism of the Brazilian modernism he personally encountered at that time. To address this, the book does not speak of “isms” or schools or movements. Instead, it shows particular works from all fields of human production and individual authors. Bill is not interested in the Brazilian modernism but in the particular works of architecture that he criticizes in his discourse. Even if exceptionally having a better regard for some cases, like Reidy’s Pedregulho housing unit, what finally resonates is a quite negative perception of several of the emblematic works that belonged to the Brazilian group in those years, such as Oscar Niemeyer’s Pampulha projects or the Guinle buildings of Lúcio Costa. Precisely what Pampulha is criticized for is its “love of form for the sake of form itself,”⁴ which in the case of architecture is not only unjustifiable but also a simplification, even though those forms fed a certain saga that belonged to modernist ideology. This corresponds with Niemeyer’s “exaggerated individualism”⁵ one that seems to correspond to another era: the Portinari murals on several of his works and particularly the Ministry of Education of Rio, expose a relationship between architecture and painting belonging to a distant past. In the era of mass production the painting needs not to be confused with a wall nor the arts needs to use architecture in order to influence and intervene the immediate built environment.

This critique and the subsequent controversy with Costa does not stem so much from Bill’s role as mentor of the *Gute Form* but from his status of an iconic modern artist, a position to which Brazilian institutions themselves had taken part on. Indeed, the meta-European projection of Max Bill was largely on behalf of the São Paulo Biennial

of 1950, when his work “Tripartite Unity” received one of the major awards. The solo exhibition devoted to Bill’s work in the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo in 1951 and his visit to Brazil at the time, established his relevance in the visual arts across the continent. Certainly, this has become the best-known and studied episode of Bill’s link with South America, among a much more complex and diversified chain of events that covered many different aspects of his activity, both as a theorist and as an artist. Basically it could be said that Max Bill emerged as the first painter and sculptor – within his relations towards the artistic milieu of Brazil – that promoted an art that contained a form of science, and this was *concrete art* (Giulio Carlo Argan referred years later to Max Bill as “the last representative of art as a European science”⁶). Bill aspired to reach, such as science itself, the whole human environment and thus allowed to perform critique and judgment regarding architecture. In this context and on that particular debate, Max Bill *the designer* either of graphic artwork or industrial objects did not meet these ends with the same amount of strength as Max Bill *the artist*. That part of his work and thought – intended to be directly measured against the forces of massive technology – failed to fully emerge even if doubtlessly characterized him as a personality within the field of art.

Max Bill was also an important reference in the 1940s and 1950s in Argentina. There, the reception of his ideas and works followed a quite particular route. By 1947 four groups whose intentions revolved around concrete art had already established in Buenos Aires. At first, these groups were attached in one movement created in 1944 but over the years it ripped into several separate ones. These groups were the Concrete Art Invention Association (Asociación Arte Concreto Invención) to which Tomás Maldonado and other artists belonged; the *Madi* group, led by Carmelo Arden Quin; the *Madínemisor* group, headed by Gyula Kósice; and Perceptism (*Perceptismo*), whose leading figure was Raúl Lozza. At that time the intention of the four groups was not to make *concrete art* but fully and finally overcoming it on the basis of a new category: *invention*, which was explored by all four groups in their work and their theoretical formulations. The *inventionism* that all these groups professed one way or another would consist on improving concrete art in their own terms. This would come to pass by removing those elements that, according to the militant Marxism that lied at the very foundation of *inventionism*, would be regarded as contradictions. For example, in the case of painting, the main found contradiction was to maintain the traditional frame, orthogonal in most cases. Breaking away from the picture frame meant the end of the illusory idea of painting as a window, supposing a reinvention

by fixing the attention on the piece which regulates the relations between what happens inside the canvas and the reality that surrounds it concretely. As such, it was expected that this would allow new plastic forms to trace a completely different system of relations towards the other objects that populate the reality of the human environment.

The revolution of modern art was, in fact, incomplete: it had to go beyond concrete art and invent a way of painting or artwork tuned freely with technical objects. Also, the political dimension bared upon any work of art should be clarified and made explicit from its form. For their alleged ability to release or to promote the creative capacity of those who get in touch with them, inventionist works were somewhat designed as revolutionary instruments that, if properly used, would provide for the struggle for a classless society, without work divisions. They were also regarded as the result of rigorous intellectual work, verifiable and imaginative at the same time; just as science was, it was to be a collective work of elucidation, subject to the development of clearly stated problems from each of the different areas of art. As in science, the resolution of a plastic problem in painting for example, would necessarily imply the emergence of new problems, so that the evolution chain would render as endless. Therefore each individual work would not possibly be understood by itself, and instead, without exception, as belonging within a larger series of work.

The first experiments focused around the *trimmed picture frame*, in which the shape of the frame should correspond to the internal motif portrayed in the canvas. In later experiments within the Concrete Art Invention Association, this reached an expression called "coplanar", in which forms had been released from the canvas into space, building a unit both from a certain underlying grid and harmonizing colors according to a principle of apparently measurable equivalence derived from mathematical formulas.

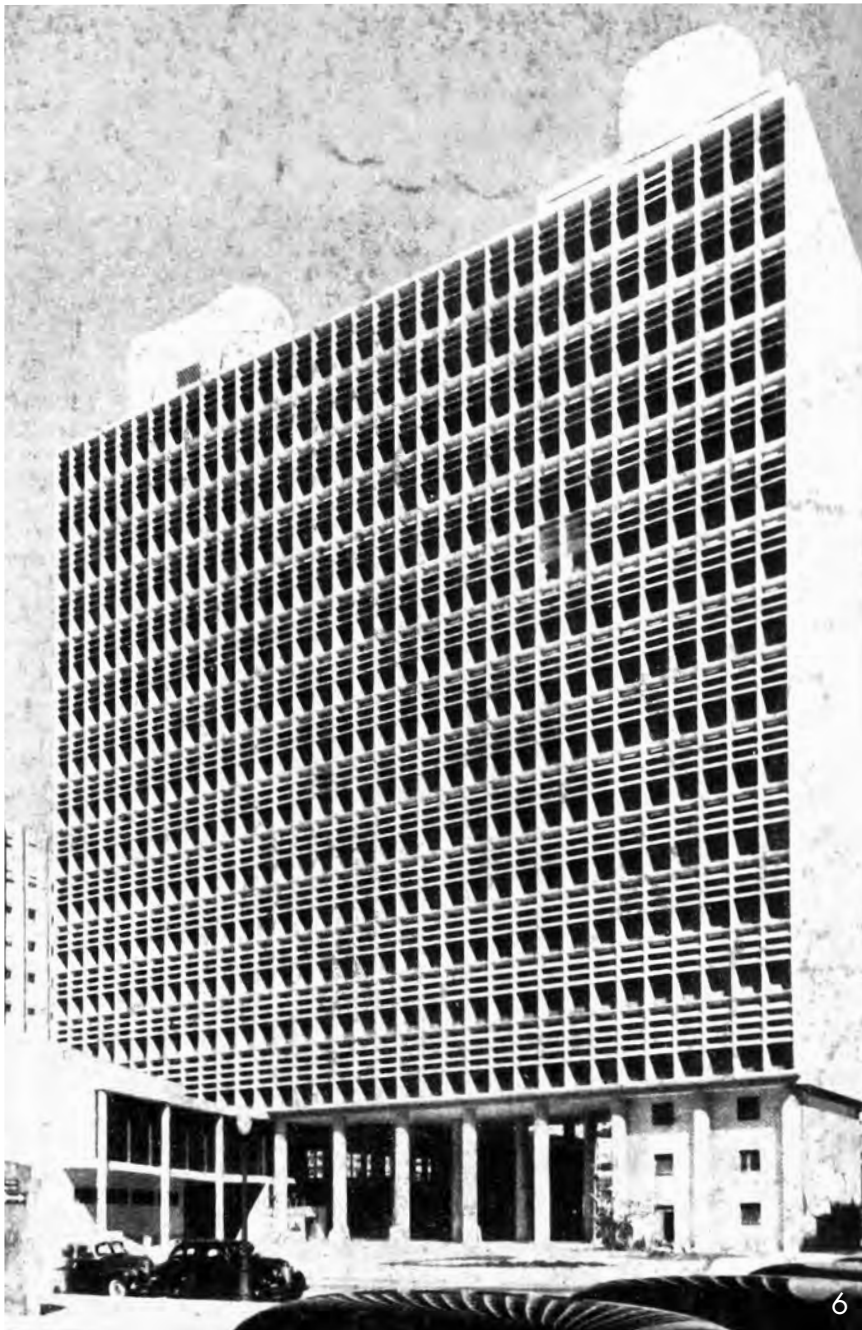
This is how *inventionism* appears in many ways as an exacerbation, sometimes quite extreme, of many of the tenets of concrete art. This was joined by an aggressive avant-garde attitude, provocative and frontal, as perhaps not known before in Argentina. On the other hand, there was a profound and unusual interplay between Marxist philosophy and visual abstraction. But the lifespan of the group was short, for towards the end of 1947 and coinciding with their virtual expulsion of the Argentine Communist Party, the artists of Concrete Art Invention Association (Tomás Maldonado among them), began to retreat from the inventionist experience, considering it exhausted, abandoning their previous *discoveries* and returning to the traditional picture. In other words, re-entering the concrete art scene and specifically becoming

more interested in the Swiss group, although certainly this was not their only reference.

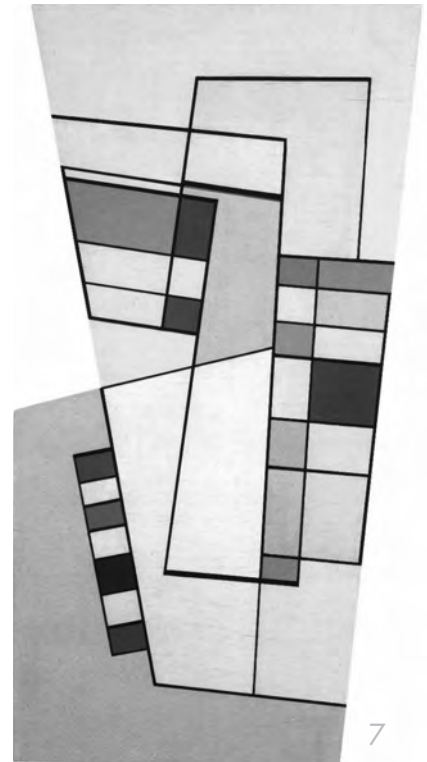
In between this upheaval is when Tomás Maldonado travels to Europe in 1948, as so many Argentine artists did once the war came to an end. It is there where he meets Max Bill, among many other artists, due to the recommendation by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, who was living in Argentina in those years. This contact with Swiss artists and particularly the direct knowledge and contact with the complete works of Bill – not only as an artist but also as an industrial and graphic designer – somehow confirms the direction already taken by Maldonado and his companions when abandoning the avant-garde position. From there, it also appeared a search for a more mature and effective link between art and technology, without giving all up to Marxist convictions, which acquired a different tone in writings among these years, becoming much less evident.

Unsurprisingly, Tomás Maldonado is generally considered to be the first to refer to and theorize systematically about modern design in Argentina. Indeed, from 1948 until his departure to the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm on the year 1954, industrial design was considered by Maldonado as the necessary counterpart of the arts, the area where its true meaning is embodied and concrete art would then be the only instance to ensure an organic relationship with it. According to his own words "the artist of the future must reach for new horizons of creation, entering the world of mass production of objects, objects of everyday and popular use, that in short, constitute the most immediate reality of modern man."⁷ This is the way Maldonado typically addresses the problem of form of the technical object, taking art as standpoint. Even if retreated from these bold convictions in later years, the thought of industrial design as a mandatory field of action for artists, allowed Maldonado to renew his commitment towards abstraction without contradicting its original transformative nature. If art should be judged by its ability to access the technical form, no other approach would ensure this as effectively as concrete art, considered by Maldonado the more consistent expression of geometric abstraction. But if art must transform and acquire its meaning from industrial objects, these in turn would be also transformed by art, and consequently would raise their status beyond mere commodity. Thereby the industry actually validates concrete art and vice versa.

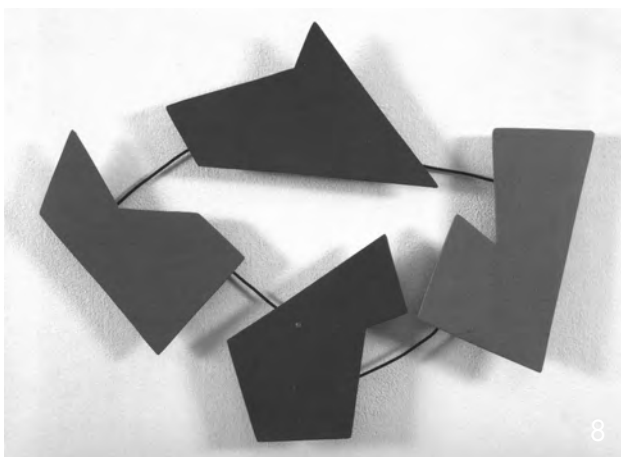
But this was supposed to be only the most significant segment of a major renovation; that would require reconfiguring all relationships between the disciplines of form. It would be necessary to reestablish new relationships between objects, now driven by mass production. This would have no relation to either the integration of the arts



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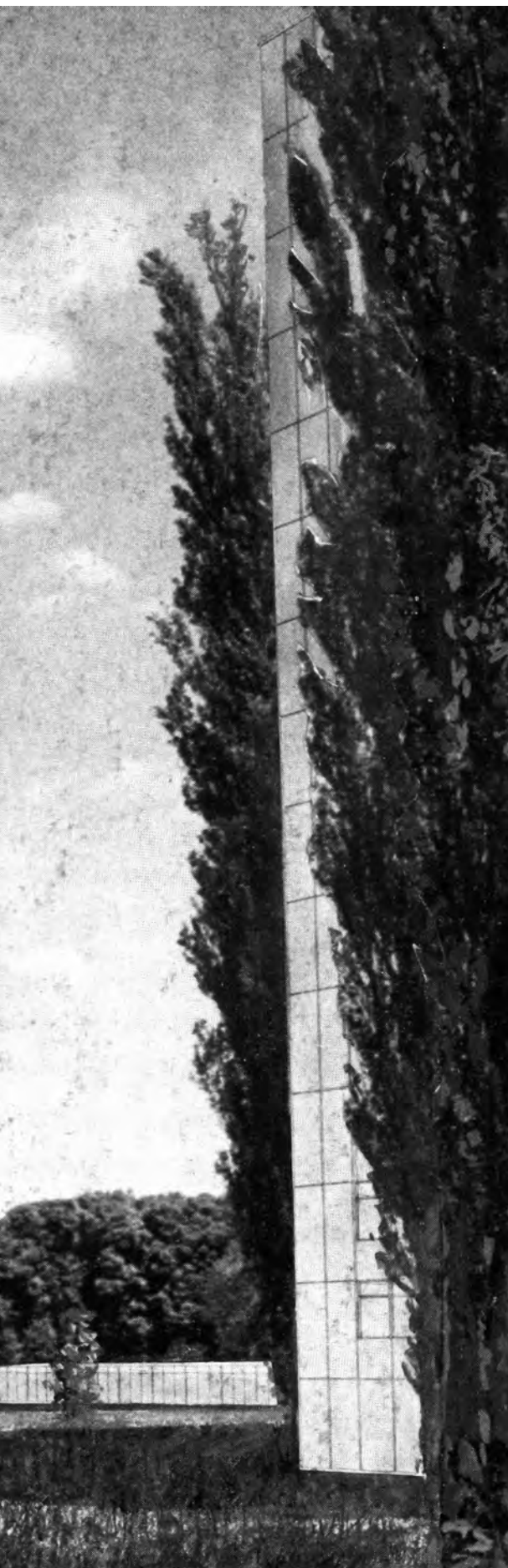
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Figure 6. **Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy, Carlos Leão, Jorge Moreira, Le Corbusier,** Brazilian Ministry of Public Health and Education. Photo by G.E. Kidder Smith, New York; from Bill, *Form*, 145.

Figure 7. **Carmelo Arden Quinn, Trío 2**, 1951. Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection.

Figure 8. **Raúl Lozza, Relief**, 1945. Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection.

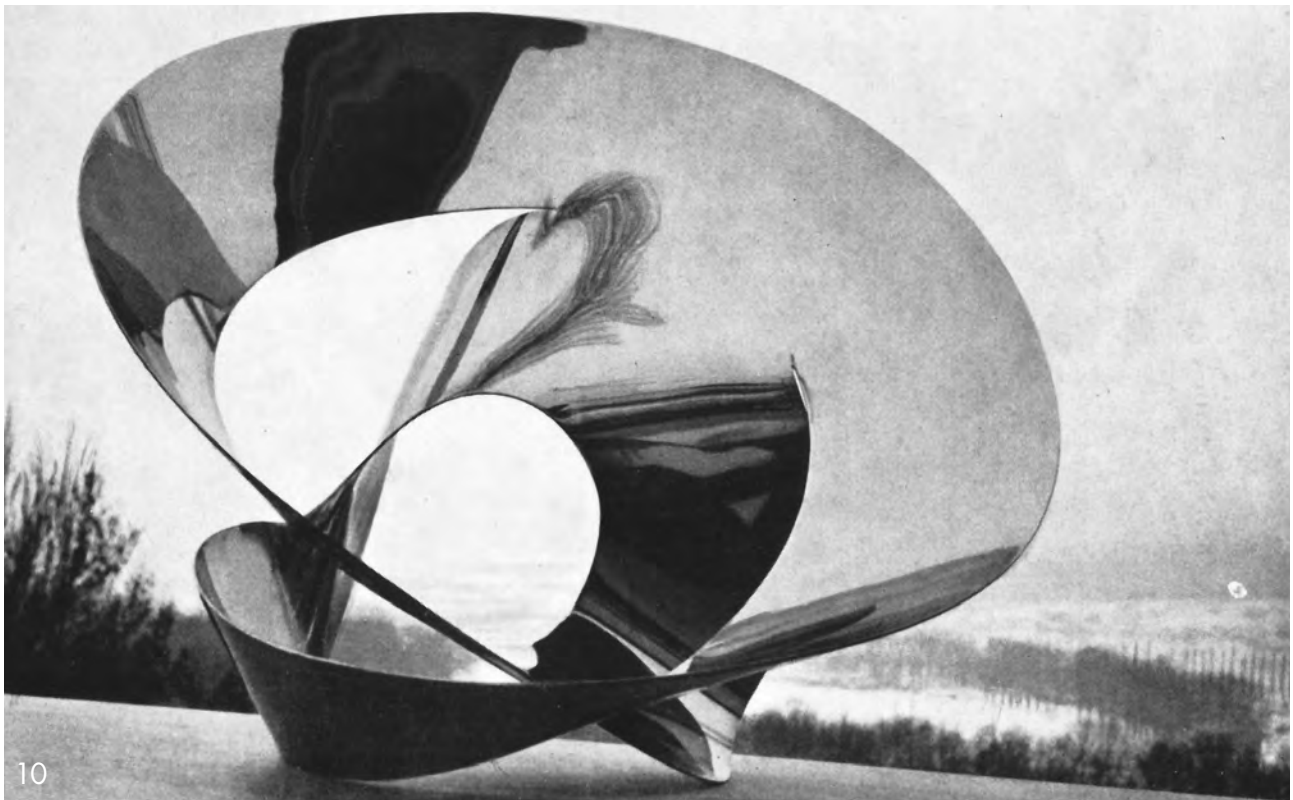




(such as the case in the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas around that time), nor the artistic synthesis (in the manner of *De Stijl*) and much less with the idea of total artwork. The kind of architecture that meets this agenda would be one that is recognizably built upon those objects of mass production and thus acting accordingly. This is not to be confused with the idea that architecture should submit to these objects. According to Maldonado, one should think in the terms of a new totality, not aiming mainly to the building or its construction such as the in case of the *Bauhaus*. Other than that, this new totality would comprise a complexity that cannot be reached by one single project or individual object. For Maldonado, this was embodied in a concrete person: "painter, sculptor, architect and graphic designer, Max Bill is the modern type of *total artist*, and anticipation of the *total man* we must still seek to conquer."⁸

True to a certain Marxism of humanist approach, Maldonado attributed to Max Bill the same feature he ascribed to his own inventionist paintings: the ability to ultimately prefigure a possible future with no labor division in which the people's creative capacity would not be restricted by the barriers that it allegedly imposes: a time when according to Marx's famous quote, "there would be no painters, but people who paint" among many other activities. The modern total artist that provides glimpses to this future has surpassed the old triad of Fine Arts, painting, sculpture and architecture, to enter the field of mass production. These old artistic activities would not disappear, but instead reloaded with new meaning, its divisions still regarded as important. The appearance of the object of mass production and circulation does not obliterate them, but rather consists in a deep regeneration. For example, it has allowed the arts to sweep off all relics regarding false representation and naturalism, providing a focus on the specific elements and issues of the tools of the discipline itself (such as the relationship between colors, planes and surfaces in the case of painting). So, as mentioned before, these arts would return to the technologically processed object that would ensemble, for the first time, a virtuous circle in the built realm of humankind. However, according to the interpretation of Maldonado, this convergence should not be looked after in the physical world, but in people. Perhaps it actually should be sought first in the individual person, Max Bill or *the modern artist*, the ultimate embodiment of the generic individual of the future. The visual and design arts converge on the creative capacity of humankind, yet the modern world continues to mutilate it. Therefore if this world appears as chaotic and

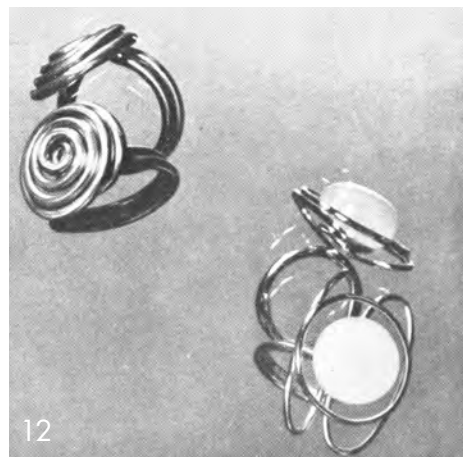
Figure 9. Max Bill, Project for a Housing Unit, 1949. From Maldonado, *Max Bill* 100



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Figure 10. **Max Bill**, Extensible Table, 1949-1950.
Photo by Hans Fisler, Zürich; from Tomás Maldonado, *Max Bill* (Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 1955), 126.

Figure 11. **Max Bill**, Construction based on two circular rings, 1947-1948.
Photo by Max Bill and Binia Bill; from Maldonado, *Max Bill*, 93.

Figure 12. **Max Bill**, Rings, 1936-1944.
Photo by Max Bill and Binia Bill; from Maldonado, *Max Bill*, 131.



Max Bill and Tomás Maldonado,
Hochschule für Gestaltung, Ulm, December 1956.
Photo by Hans Conrad; from René Spitz, *Hfg Ulm. The View Behind the Foreground*, (Stuttgart, London: Axel Menges, 2002), 200.

hectic as it is, this is definitely due to its lack of creativity, not to excess.

Tomás Maldonado is the author of the first monograph devoted to *Max Bill*, a book simply entitled *Max Bill* and was published by Nueva Visión in 1955. The book consists of several essays, but above all it is a collection of images that illustrate the production of *Max Bill*. In countless ways, from the square format and choice of typography, to its conception as a whole, the book is obviously inspired in *Form*. Moreover, it is actually targeted on *Form*, based on individuation: the form sequences are not based on a chosen family of forms, but rather on the person that originates them, obviously *Max Bill*. In the book of Maldonado converges the designer of rings, lamps, posters, or typewriters, with the architect, the sculptor and the painter. There are no obvious formal features to link one activity to another. Tomás Maldonado speaks of a “will of consistency” in relation to *Bill*, which refers of course to the “will to form” of Alois Riegl.⁹ The “will of

coherence”, contrary to the “will to form” lies not in a determinate group or time span, but rather a personal will. One might think that it is the reflection of a new individuality. Or else that the mutual feedback of the visual arts and industrial objects proposed by Maldonado might have produced a new idea of individual artist, committed to all areas regarding the problem and foreseeing a collective future. This is quite the opposite of the old individualism, that “exaggerated individualism” in which *Max Bill* portrays Oscar Niemeyer. The *Max Bill* Tomás Maldonado builds in his book stands in opposition to this image: the artist no longer belongs to a restricted area of action, but to all and this means a commitment to all. The artist is then committed to all objects and as such with all people. Unlike the great genius artist, an old expression of individualism, bearer of mysterious a gift or knowledge, the new total artist is no less individual or no less genius, but involves the transmission of its knowledge to everyone and everybody in every way.

Notes

1. As seen among other texts of *Max Bill*: “Form and art”, in *Form. Eine Bilanz über Formentwicklung um die Mitte des XX Jahrhunderts* (Basel: Verlag Karl Werner, 1952), 7.
2. *Bill, Form. Eine Bilanz*.
3. *Bill, Form. Eine Bilanz*, 5.
4. *Max Bill's interview in Tribuna da empresa* (Rio de Janeiro, June 16, 1953). As recorded in *Nuestra Arquitectura* 294 (January 1954): 6–7.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Giulio Carlo Argan, *El arte moderno* (Madrid: Akal, 1992), 45.
7. Tomás Maldonado, “Diseño industrial y sociedad”, *Boletín del Centro de Estudiantes de Arquitectura* 2 (Buenos Aires: October–November 1949).
8. Tomás Maldonado, “*Max Bill*”, in *Max Bill* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nueva Visión, 1955), 7.
9. Maldonado, *Max Bill*.

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