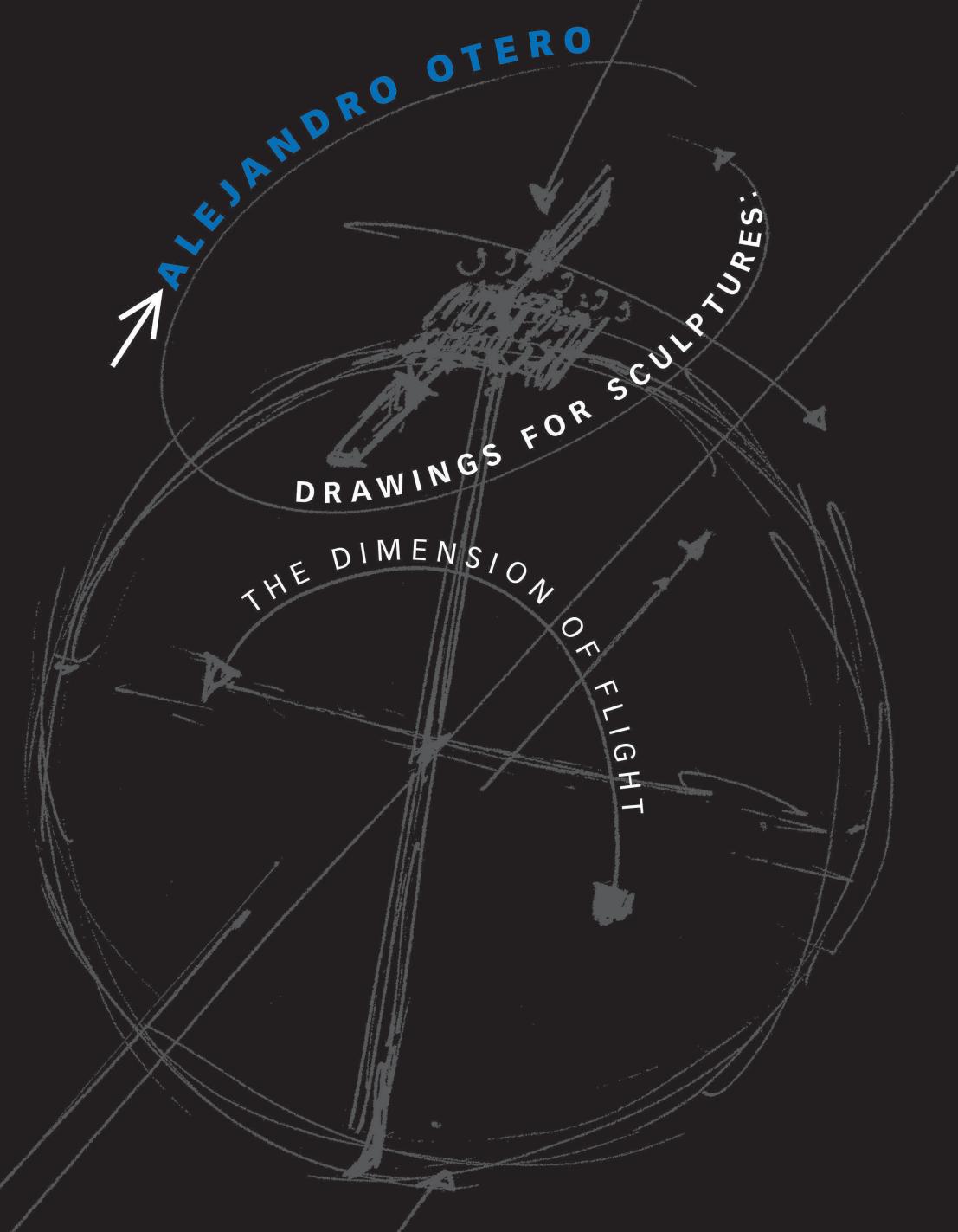


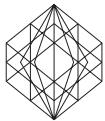
ALEJANDRO OTERO

DRAWINGS FOR SCULPTURES:

THE DIMENSION OF FLIGHT



→ **ALEJANDRO OTERO**
DRAWINGS FOR SCULPTURES:
THE DIMENSION OF FLIGHT



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→ PRESENTATION ARTESANOGROUP FOUNDATION

The ArtesanoGroup Foundation is celebrating its 21 years of editorial production with the publication of Alejandro Otero, Drawings for Sculptures: The Dimension of Flight..., developed in alliance with the Otero-Pardo Foundation. It took us nine years of joint work, efforts, and commitment to bring to a happy end the first project undertaken by our two institutions.

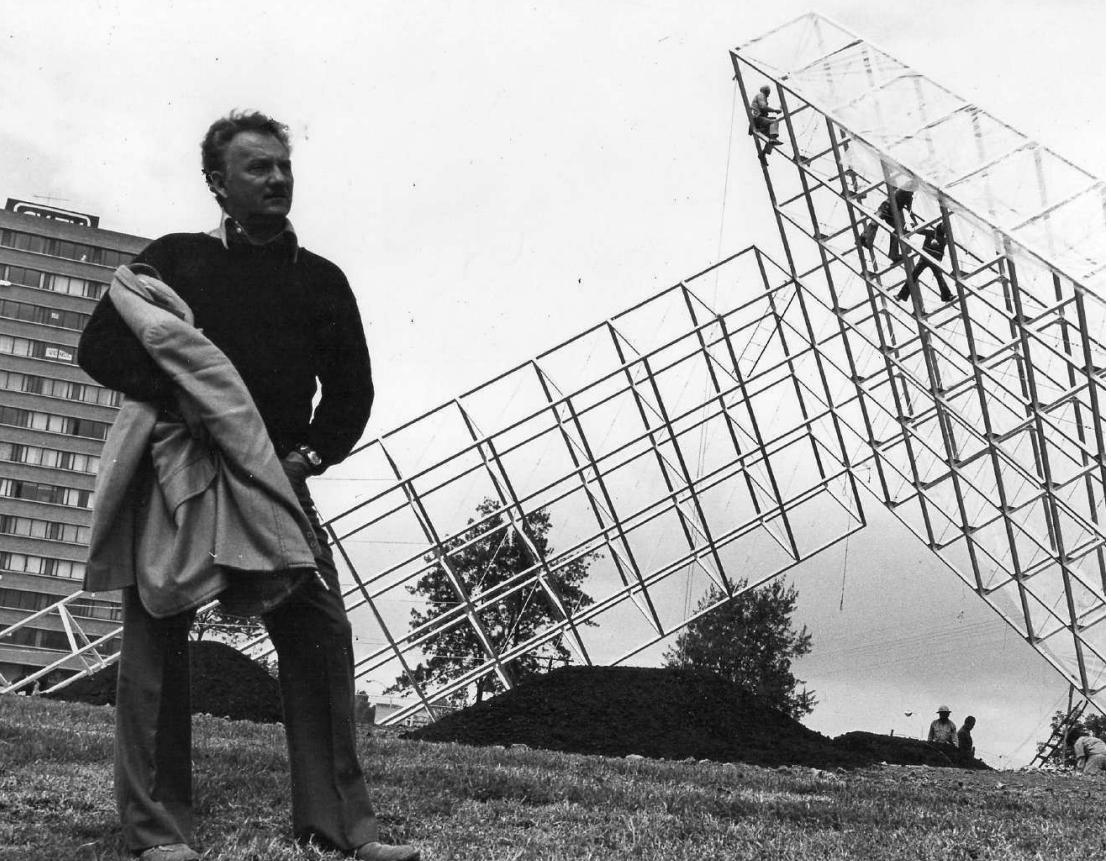
Such a goal would not have been possible to attain without the valuable and enthusiastic guardianship from a group of prestigious art specialists. The sum of their wills played a decisive role in the coordination of the professional team that participated in the publication.

The result is an unprecedented investigation, which offers the registration, study, and interpretation of a good part of the vast production of works on paper developed by Otero during the decades of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Among them, of particular interest are the sketches and projects for sculptures made during the artist's creative period while staying at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

This is the third title, so far, by which ArtesanoGroup delves in different but complementary themes related to the legacy of Alejandro Otero, a great Venezuelan artist. It is therefore a source of great satisfaction to put this book in the hands of both researchers and art-loving public in general, as a way to enhance the approach to Otero's work, in this case, from a more intimate perspective.

For our Foundation, it is an honor to make a new contribution aiming at disseminating the knowledge of Alejandro Otero's work, thus reaffirming our vocation to promote the most transcendent cultural and artistic values from Venezuela.

ArtesanoGroup Foundation



→ FOREWORD

Amongst the many tasks -perhaps too many and difficult- that I have assigned to myself in my life, is that of playing the role of the daughter of Alejandro Otero and Mercedes Pardo. I say task, because of the way I understand and assume this role. I feel partially responsible for the disclosure of a legacy, not only as a custodian of some of the works from their extensive artistic production, but also because of the significance of having witnessed these deeply shared lives, as well as their daily creative practice. The support, severe critic, admiration, and profound respect they both felt for the life and work of each other, are part of the *raison d'être* of this book.

From the very moment in which this set of drawings came into our hands, right after my father's physical disappearance, my mother longed to carry out this project. She pleaded to conserve the drawings together for a publication. She was very aware of their intrinsic beauty, and of what they reveal about the the creative process of my father, and about the way he worked and thought. And, consequently of course, because of what the spreading of these drawings would imply for the study and research of his work. Mom used to call them lovingly «The Codices», recalling those of Leonardo da Vinci's, so beautiful, revealing, and so much loved by both of them.

Many years have passed by. Every one of us -mom included- were distracted by our demanding lives and art work, and finally, it is now that we succeed to make this book. My role has been that of an intermediary: to convene interests, efforts, and certainly lots of love, with a highly qualified team, to make Mercedes Pardo's dream come true.

My deepest gratitude to all the persons who have made this possible.

Carolina Otero Pardo, September 2006

ALEJANDRO OTERO DURING
THE INSTALLATION OF
THE **ALA SOLAR** SCULPTURE,
BOGOTA, 1975



→ PRELUDE

In presenting this work, I am bound by the desire to share, out of affect and memory, reminiscences I treasure as a testimonial witness of the creations of Alejandro Otero, my father. I carry with me vivid images of marvelous inventive machines made familiar in our daily life in our San Antonio de Los Altos home. Described on paper: tracings, lines, swarming scribbles intertwining projects, inquiries suspended in the air about the arrested movements of the fleeting gestures of metallic forms, maybe aquatic ones or aeolic ones, definitely telluric ones.

Are they perhaps evocations of the torrential magnetism of his childhood in Guayana, of the terrifying majesty of the Caroni River? Of the artist's recurrent fascination with the dance between wind and water? Maybe remembrances of that exuberant vegetation, of that land's reddish cracks, or of the unparalleled an unparalleled sky over his native land?

He works on the dining room table, the epicenter of circulation and family routine. All kinds of people stop by or stay to visit, to pierce the intimate talk of the artist with himself, his tending bridges between his imaginary 's emerging thoughts and the graphic expression of that bubbling spring within. Stravinsky, Bola de Nieve, Vivaldi, Armstrong, Debussy, Amalia Rodrigues, Bach, Ali Primera is heard throughout... anything and everything out of the broad soundscape permeating us, the homebound.

The selection of drawings collected here spans two decades of work realized in San Antonio de Los Altos, Boston, and New York. Alejandro develops, resumes or leaves aside an idea in order to deal with it later on. Sometimes he corrects a drawing using white out «tippex». A photocopy brings back a clean result. On occasions, he works over the same image, seeking variations, more precision, new developments. He keeps all the drawings, maybe as a vivarium for future findings, or in the sense of what Maria Elena Ramos calls *drawings/drawings, drawings for drawing's sake*. Signature and date act as period punctuations on loose leafs.

ABRA SOLAR (DETAIL) IN THE
SANTA HELENA GARDENS,
XL VENICE BIENNALE, 1982

Among those little definitive things he planted in our conscience, my father insisted that a line drawn by Picasso, or Cezanne, or Klee, no matter how simple, the line is and would be forever

an incontestable truth; just as a single note played by Pablo Casals or a single word written by the hand of a Poet strike us with overwhelming veracity. Understandably, while some of these drawings are not conclusive, visually they are resolved: they state their «truth». As stated by Verlaine: «a poem is never finished, it is abandoned» .

I welcomed with joy the challenge of making models out of my father's chosen drawings. To cut little pieces of wood, glue them, hold them in unlikely pirouettes until they became stable, was a joy. We would climb the mountain to photograph the models and make them look real. He himself took the pictures from different angles, against different landscapes, under changing lights.

The drawings that evolved into models, the *drawings for something else*, as Maria Elena defines them, are prophesies translating into technical drawings, or a challenge- or vice versa- for Mikel Arbeloa, the mechanical engineer. Through that process some sculptures materialized in an urban scale, built in some place, emancipated, each one breathing on its own, almost estranged, tempered by the weather and released to the effects of wind, light, rain, people.... The first one to get marveled, surprised, shaken by them, was him, Alejandro.

Solar Structure (1977) built by Olivetti for its headquarters in Ivrea, Italy, was exhibited for a while in the Castello Sforzesco's Cortile, in Milan. An impoverished indigent passing by, changed his course to enter the courtyard. I imagine that attracted by that uncanny luminous and moving object; he got as close as he was permitted access, stopped for an instant and knelt in front of it. With the same sort of amazement by the viewers of his three-dimensional works Alejandro was stirred in the same measure. He thought it necessary to take art to the people rather than to cloister them in museums, as dictated by pressing contemporary trends.

Mercedes Pardo, the enlightened, loving guardian of these sculptural portraits, reweaved the common thread of hundreds of drawings, as if assembling, organizing, preparing for an unveiling this singular collection of works that remind her of Leonardo's Codex. Codex, in the sense of a compendium of notes, vocabulary, graphic grammar or pre-dictionary, so that maybe one day, they would be unraveled in their possible dimensions. They are not a workbook or a note book but loose papers. However, as they were enumerated, they let us follow Alejandro's prolific imagination, his fluid questioning, the unleashing of a play between opaque matter and transparency, between space, light and rhythm, between signifiers and their meanings.

Carolina Otero resumes her role and hands over the baton, inviting Ernesto Guevara to follow the mine's path in order to register and digitalize each drawing. Between one chapter and another, years went by. The idea matured, the drawings took the form they demanded until the venturesome coming together of wills by which ArtesanoGroup joined the deep vision of María Elena Ramos with the paths traced by Alejandro, and by those of us who followed those trails: Carolina Otero, Carmen Julieta Centeno, Rafael Romero, Gloria Urdaneta, Rafael Santana... An extraordinary working team is formed to outline the editorial project. Hours of observation, reflection, contributions, dedication and care gave birth to this collective work. María Elena Ramos, wise, respectful, courageous and revealing writer, conducts us through infinite interpretations, unimaginable to me until then.

I have not wanted to call this a «book», instead, it is a sort of arc of infinities, since the former presupposes a pre-established order. Similar to their «raison d'être»- Alejandro Otero's drawings for sculptures- this compendium opens doors to an aleatory journey, an a-temporal, dynamic weaving through several flanks of entwined utopias. Its rules, extrapolated in this work about the work itself, seduced those who have given it a possible body. So it is, then, an object-book, a vessel or instrument or binnacle to discover, enjoy, study, investigate a proposal that wants to embody a vision of the XXI century –or hope- to the limits of the imagination.

Mercedes Otero

Translation: Surpik Zarikian



→ALEJANDRO OTERO. DRAWINGS FOR SCULPTURES

Maria Elena Ramos

INTRODUCTION

When in 1967 Alejandro Otero began to make the group of drawings that inspired and comprise the main body of this book, he was already a well-established artist and a tireless experimenter. In this sense, the drawings published here have a before and after, and the aim of this introduction is thus to put them in context within Otero's development as an artist.

Otero's work is built on multiple foundations, ranging from small-format, figurative drawings to large, abstract sculptures designed for urban spaces; or from his masterful paintings to his enthusiastic exploration of cybernetics that he carried out towards the end of his life.

His talent for research became clear even when he was a student (1939/1945), when he received encouragement by Antonio Edmundo Monsanto, who was the director of the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Aplicadas in Caracas and considered a renowned modern master by several generations of artists. While living in Paris between 1945 and 1948, Otero became involved with avant-garde groups and created the series of paintings entitled *Cafeteras* (*Coffee pots*). In order to make them, the young artist had studied domestic utensils typically found in an ordinary home, such as pitchers, coffee pots, cups, candelabras and lamps, which he considered to be important figures in daily life. In 1949, when he exhibited the works at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas, the *Cafeteras* shifted the Venezuelan art scene toward a growing expression of modernity. As Mariana Figarella remarked about the period: «Venezuelan art was never the same again after those works».¹ From that point on, Otero's work became a key referent in Latin American abstract art.

The process of creating the *Cafeteras* involved Otero's sharp skills of observation. The artist would hone in on aspects of reality, in the same way he did when studying, to capture faces, bodies and landscapes through figurative drawing or painting. However, in contrast to his figurative works, in *Cafeteras*, *Cacerolas (Saucepans)* or *Potes (Pots)* Otero went beyond the task of simply representing the objects, while also avoiding placing distinct objects in the center of the canvas against a complementary background. There were no longer any supporting roles in his paintings, as all elements took on a predominant role, including brushstrokes and lines, the precise forms and ruptured forms, a progressive fragmentation of solid objects and of the very idea of *naturalist forms*.

Given his passion about certain modern ways of seeing, Cézanne and Mondrian's work informed Otero's inquiries into space and dynamic links between figure and background.

CAFETERA ROSA
OIL ON CANVAS
65,4 X 54,9 CM. 1948

1 Mariana Figarella. *Las Cafeteras* in the catalog *Alejandro Otero: las estructuras de la realidad*. Museo de Arte Moderno Jesús Soto, Ciudad Bolívar. Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1990. P.50

Picasso was also an inspiration in Otero's analytical approach to forms and his pared down images. However, from early on he interpreted the guidance provided by those modern masters freely and began to invent his own aesthetic practice, which was guided in equal parts by his passionate intuition and his constructive rationality. Moreover, Otero was also very aware of the need to be contemporary that so marked his time.

A lucid thinker on topics relating to art and culture, Otero left an important legacy of press articles, manifestos and essays,² in which his process of reflection ran parallel to his artistic production. Although he was harsh and confrontational in his ideas, he did not only question the art of previous generations, as often occurs, but struck out against any form of art that he considered had been emptied of life and meaning. Despite his almost militant adherence to abstract art, in no way did his ideas imply rigidity or determinism. As an admirer of some classic forms of painting, like Titian or Leonardo, and as an artist who dominated both figurative and abstract art, Otero's emphasis on abstraction in modern art did not mean he scorned the notion that genuine creation can take a range of different forms. «Imagine if I had criticized Cézanne for painting an apple. God help me!», he said in 1988. Otero is considered an eminent artist, both by virtue of his empathetic perspective and his ability to see beyond movements and currents.

Together with Mateo Manaure, Carlos González Bogen, Pascual Navarro, Perán Ermíny, Rubén Núñez, Narciso Debourg, Dora Hersen, J.R. Guillent Pérez and others, Otero published the 1950 magazine *Los Disidentes*. This eponymous group of artists, who were living in Paris at the time, took a staunchly critical posture against what they considered a decadent and officially sponsored form of Venezuelan art by publishing manifestos. Otero's impassioned debates, such as his dispute with writer Mario Briceño Iragorry in 1952 and with Miguel Otero Silva in 1957, have gone down in history. The same can be said of the discussion he himself referred to as «the row with Marta Traba» in 1965. These public exchanges of opinion about abstract art and modern thinking breathed fresh air into the cultural scene of his time, while leaving traces of these ideas that endure to today.

The fifties was a period of significant development for the artist. In 1951, he made his *Composiciones Ortogonales* (*Orthogonal Compositions*), otherwise known as *Collages Ortogonales* (*Orthogonal Collages*). The progressive paring down of referents that occurred in these works became more Constructivist in nature than in the *Cafeteras*, or in the later and more refined *Líneas coloreadas sobre fondo blanco* (*Colored lines on white background*, also known as the *Líneas inclinadas*, or *Sloping lines*, in English). While the influence of Picasso and his object-based art, or Cézanne and the gentle erasure of naturalist forms from the Santa Victoria mountain, or the influence of Mondrian who pared down trees and seas to their increasingly abstract forms, provided the focus of discussion about his early periods. In the new stage of Otero's *Collages Ortogonales* the artist himself admitted that he admired

² Many of them are published in the book: *Memoria crítica. Alejandro Otero*. Primera edición: Monte Ávila Editores & Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas 1993. Second edition: Artesanogroup Editores, Caracas 2008. Compiled and selected by Douglas Monroy and Luisa Pérez Gil.

Mondrian's more radical works, such as the *Boogie-Woogie* works that he later acknowledged were triggers for what would happen afterwards.

After 1952 he worked on architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva's project for the integration of the arts in the Universidad Central de Venezuela and commissioned works by Alexander Calder, Jean Arp, Fernand Léger, Victor Vasarely, Pascual Navarro, Baltasar Lobo, Antoine Pevsner, Omar Carreño, and Mateo Manaure, among others.³

Over those years, Otero became increasingly interested in the city. He made works to be integrated into architecture or set apart as urban sculptures. From 1955 until 1960 he created a significant series of *Coloritmos* (*Color rhythms*), a new painting project that both adds to and is enriched by the urban sculptures. Referring to the five panels that he made for the Anfiteatro José Ángel Lamas in 1953, Otero remarked that: «Two of those panels contain the initial diagrams for the *Coloritmos*».⁴



His shift from figurative to abstract art with the *Cafeteras*, and his latter research into color and vibratory planes in the collages or *Composiciones Ortogonales*, would, with the *Coloritmos*, become part of a dynamic use of space in which color, plane and line came together on the same pictorial surface to suggest different perspectives, open directions, different rhythms and areas in apparent movement. Throughout this period Otero consolidated an aspect that would appear constantly in his work: the co-existence of abstract rational thought and a passionate capacity to intuit, feel and make us feel different harmonious or shifting rhythms, as is the case with the continual beat of the rhythms of the world. However, beyond the rhythm of the beings and things that inhabit the world, Otero focused mainly on what we might term *rhythm itself*, which is one of the predominant abstract values in his work.

The *Coloritmos* depict the process of bringing together essential elements on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. While as paintings the *Coloritmos* were closed works, they simultaneously projected outwards, thus signaling the open works that would follow later. Looking back over the artist's career, the *Coloritmos* present a threshold that meshed and deepened his previous artistic experiences and would, in turn, mark a fitting transition to move onto the works he made over the following years, in which he emerged from the compositional plane in an increasingly radical way, spurred on by the desire to engage with more encompassing areas, such as the three-dimensionality of urban spaces that were real and *inhabited* or *transited* by his fellow inhabitants.

Between 1960 and 1964, while living in Paris, Otero created his series of *Telas blancas* (*White canvases*). He had stopped making his *Coloritmos* and had begun to experiment with slight

COLORITMO 14.
DUCO PAINT ON WOOD.
195,2 X 52,1 CM. 1956

3 The Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas is the only university campus in Latin America to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site (2000).

4 Alejandro Otero. In José Balza, *Alejandro Otero*. Olivetti. Caracas-Milan, 1977. P. 54

three-dimensional forms: monochrome reliefs, object-based collages that assembled by placing medium-sized elements on a single surface. It is where he integrated a range of materials, from the flat fragility of letters and envelopes to the medium-volume key chains, padlocks, nests, pliers, saws or spatulas, screws and hinges, fine metal sheets, translucent metal fabrics, or the blue kitchen glove that belonged to his wife, Mercedes Pardo, who went on to become an important figure in modern painting in Venezuela. An expressionist and even an Informalist dimension have been attributed to this period of Otero's work. However, despite their freedom and hints of the Informalist aesthetic, these compositions are true to the artist's obsession with spatial tension, rhythm, the relationship between the painted figure and the background, and the general force of structure that characterizes the main body of his works.

In 1967 (the date of the first drawings in this book) Otero began working on a project that he developed continually throughout his career: designing structures for public spaces, such as squares. He was highly committed to inventing metaphors relating to the issue of outer space, which would become so important for humankind during the sixties, when aerospace technology was being developed (and whose impact on Otero's work I will deal with in the main text in this book).

His *Civic Sculptures* thus embraced the movement and rhythm of the wind in squares and parks across different cities over the extensive period of time that will be analyzed through the drawings in this study. Some of these drawings served as blueprints for the abovementioned works, while others did not become physical sculptures, but are nevertheless valuable records in themselves, since they constitute *projects* and *paper-based artworks* that are fragile in material sense, but strong in terms of aesthetic quality and potential for meaning.

Among the works that did come to fruition and were either temporarily or permanently exhibited in urban spaces, one might recall *Rotor* (*Rotor*), *Vertical Vibrante Oro y Plata* (*Vibrating Gold Work* and *Silver Vertical Work*), *Noria Hidrocromática* or *Torre Acuática* (*Hydrochromatic Noria* or *Aquatic Tower*), which were projects created for the Zona Feérica in the El Conde area of Caracas, 1967, and were later erected in the Galería de Arte Nacional, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas and the I.N.O.S., respectively. Other works that stand out are *Estructura Vertical Vibrante* (*Vibrating Vertical Structure*), Maracay, in 1968; *Integral Vibrante* (*Vibrant Wholes*), the same year in Ciudad Guayana. *Espejo Solar* (*Solar Mirror*), at the Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas, in 1974; *Ala Solar* (*Solar Wing*), in Bogota, in 1975; *Delta Solar* (*Solar Delta*), erected in the garden outside the Air and Space Museum, in Washington, D.C., 1977; *Estructura Solar* (*Solar Structure*), in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, 1977 (in 1980 the work was moved permanently to the Palazzo Olivetti in Ivrea). In 1982, *Abra* and *Aguja Solar* (*Solar Fissure* and *Solar Needle*) represented Venezuela at the XL Biennale di Venezia and were later relocated to Plaza Venezuela in Caracas, and Ciudad Guayana respectively, while in 1986 Otero made *Torre Solar* (*Solar Tower*), measuring 50 meters in height, for the Raúl Leoni Dam in Guri.



**LÍNEAS INCLINADAS
SOBRE FONDO BLANCO.**
OIL ON CANVAS
64 X 54 CM. 1951

EL ABRELATAS ROJO.
ASSEMBLAGE OF VARIOUS
MATERIALS ON WOOD.
44,5 X 24,5 CM. 1962





The period covered by the drawings in this study covers a time spanning from 1967 until 1987. In 1971 Otero was awarded the Guggenheim Grant and continued his studies at the Massachusetts Center for Advanced Visual Studies, M.I.T., and from that point on, and armed with new knowledge, Otero intensified his inquiry into civic sculptures.

A further stage followed the ones mentioned above, when in 1987 the artist began to work as a visiting researcher at IBM's Science Center in Venezuela. Under the guidance of physicist Claudio Mendoza, and assisted by Ana Margarita Blanco, who was studying architecture at the Universidad Simón Bolívar, Otero used the 5080/CADAM graphics system and began to focus his characteristic curiosity on this new form of media. He used the machine to further his inquiry into the relationship between drawing, sculpture and urban space that had interested him since the sixties. Some of the images made during his research were published in the book *Saludo al Siglo XXI*, which paid homage to Leon Battista Alberti, a humanist from the fifteenth century.⁵ The end of the eighties was now approaching, and Alejandro's life was drawing to a close (1921-1990). Despite being so inspired by the *future* and gesturing toward it so enthusiastically in the book mentioned above, Otero did not make it to new millennium.

Some of the designs he created using cybernetics were preparatory studies -like the drawings he had made previously on paper- that gave hints of how projects might become future sculptures. One of the roles the machine fulfilled was to help Otero to *continue inventing while looking to the future*. In this sense, one might think that when the artist walked into IBM, he had begun to exchange paper for the screen, charcoal for keyboard. However, the computer also provided Otero with a possibility to look back at things that satisfied another of his needs: to analyze his own previous civic works. And in this sense the computer enabled him to *inquire retrospectively*, looking closely at his earlier production. He could thus *penetrate* the immense structures as if inside them, or fly over them, and thus focus virtually and from different perspectives on his sculptures-structures that had been installed some time before in urban contexts. The computer thus encouraged new fictions: it was as if the eye could see the sculpture from inside and from every angle; or, as if that large structure could make movements that were previously impossible.

There was a third reason that Otero was interested in using the graphics machine: it allowed him to study the screen's polychromatic modes in order to find translations and links between painting and cybernetics, in the shift from color-pigment to color-light. Along with his initial intentions to create new projects using the machine, or the possibility of studying his previous civic sculptures in greater detail than he discovered during his research, the machine also offered him the specific features of this new form of media. However, his exploration of polychromatic modes was left incomplete, since by this point the artist was reaching the end of his life.

TORRE SOLAR,
LOCATED AT THE GURI DAM,
BOLÍVAR STATE, VENEZUELA
50 METERS HIGH,
53 METERS DIAMETER, 1986
PHOTOGRAPHY: DOMINGO ÁLVAREZ

⁵ Alejandro Otero. *Saludo al Siglo XXI*. IBM, Venezuela. Caracas, 1989.

If there is one defining feature of Alejandro Otero's career as an artist is has to be his passion for space itself, to *enclose it* and understand it, and the quest to create in harmony or in tension with space, beyond any desire to represent it. The other, complementary, obsession that was constantly present was his creation of structures. The paintings Otero made of mountains and landscapes in what he calls his school stage already contained the elements that would increasingly take on the role of the aesthetic and conceptual problems that he dealt with in his *Cafeteras*, *Líneas Coloreadas*, *Colorítmos*, *Collages ortogonales* (*Coffee Pots*, *Colored Lines*, *Colorhythms* and *Orthogonal Collages*, respectively), and monumental sculptures. Note, for example, the outline of a *Cafetera* or *Pote*, a *Cántaro* or *Lámpara* from the forties and compare it to an *Ala* or *Delta Solar* (*Solar Wing* or *Delta*) –in its entirety and in its parts: windmills, blades, rhomboidal open sections–, and it becomes clear that although these small paintings and huge sculptures are ostensibly very different and in spite of the fact they were made at such different times, they are actually related on a perceptual level because of the way space is constructed, the different facets of the planes, and the *open* nature of the works, in the sense that the paintings are virtually *open* while the three-dimensional structures are literally open.

Throughout his career, the artist moved increasingly away from objects and towards pure form. And as we well know, he developed this process towards abstraction, and the way he vehemently defended it, took place over a period of several decades. However, in 1988 –two years before he passed away–, he confessed to me that his work was *returning* to the realm of the real when he told me: «While the abstract nature of these sculptures⁶ is even purer, my work had actually never been more of an *object*, a *thing*. That sculpture is just as much a *thing* as a mango tree is. It's an object that in itself has meaning and constitutes its own reality. It has its own life, its own way of being. It exists. It has found and made its own place in the world of things. And there it is».⁷

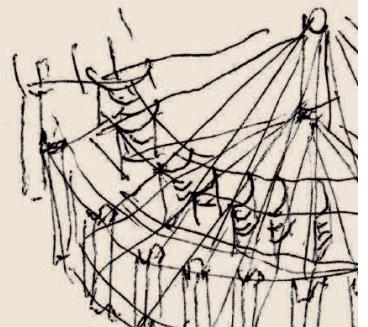
The aim of this book is to explore how Alejandro Otero created drawings that were ideal projections for urban space, and how he made tangible realities that created such a masterful harmony between the physical world and the no-place of utopia.

6 He was referring to his Civic Sculptures.

7 Alejandro Otero. Conversation with María Elena Ramos and Susana Benko. Preparatory material for the group exhibition *La imaginación de la transparencia*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1988.



ABRA SOLAR (DETAIL)
WHEN LOCATED AT THE
SANTA HELENA GARDENS,
XL VENICE BIENNALE, 1982



→ ALEJANDRO OTERO, DRAWINGS FOR SCULPTURES

This book deals with a group of seven hundred images made by Alejandro Otero. The shapes in these drawings set in motion subtlety and intimacy, while as sculptural projects they broaden in scope, reaching urban dimensions and cosmic utopias.

This revision has been organized into four areas:

- Language: vocabulary.
- Space, time, and movement.
- Art forms in dialogue with natural elements [air, water, diamonds].
- Polarities.

→ 1 THE AREA OF LANGUAGE

Why does Alejandro Otero make these drawings? Does he envisage different futures for the different groups?

Looking back over these little pieces of paper in the light of the urban sculptures Otero created might enable us to identify nuances that would distinguish the motivations and futures of these images:

- the preparatory drawing for...
- the preparatory drawing which turns into a sculpture,
- the drawing designed *a priori*, before the sculpture,
- the *a posteriori* drawing made when the sculpture already exists,
- the drawing that never becomes a sculpture, but whose status as an intense, self-contained [*contenida*] image makes it valuable in its own right.^{1*}

¹ → contained [*contenida*] image makes it valuable in its own right.*

This body of works contains drawings for a something else that transcends them, and drawings in themselves. In the *drawings for something else*, a dual vocation can be sensed:

² → that of being drawings and wanting to become sculptures.² It should be pointed out that the drawings in this book are not a painter's drawings, drawings-for-painting, but are more specifically drawings-for-sculptures.

What is more, we could refer to the drawings previously identified as *drawings in themselves*, as drawing-drawings, either on the basis of the «positive» reason of the artistic excellence Otero achieved on paper, or the «negative» reason that many of these images were not later developed into sculptures.

In any case, many factors are brought into play in this remaining-as-drawings. One factor –and not the least important one– is the enjoyment and dedication the draughtsman displays in inventing forms. Here we see how the artist, as an essentially aesthetic being, fine-tunes different types and densities of lines, creating his own shapes and ultimately deploying his own vernacular.

Other reasons and processes also traverse this *remaining-as-drawings*, such as the fact that a naturally gifted draughtsman like Otero could easily produce multiple images with his charcoal, crayon or graphite on paper or card in a single day. On the other hand, however, if faced with the construction of a sculpture –and to a greater extent if it was on a civic or monumental scale– Otero required different conceptions of space and of the work needed to build the sculpture. The artist necessarily found himself in a sort of funnel between the broad part of the process of invention –that his vast creativity made possible– and the narrowest and most difficult part of the unpredictable process of creating monumental structures, which are always besieged by unforeseen factors.

One thing is clear: the drawing already existed as an image on paper, even though its transformation into a physical sculpture came later and only if a series of challenges could be overcome: challenges presented by space, technique, indispensable funding, and the different types of obstacles the world sets in its path. While the drawing on paper is now a tangible reality that our hands and eyes can verify in the present, when it was produced as a *drawing-for-sculpture* that same image was nothing but a design (a projection, a dream) of what could be created in the future.

The body of images that this publication makes available to us today spans those two forces, and is thus framed by them. On one hand resides the force of the «self-content/contained» drawing, drawn into the realm of the gaze, of sheets of paper, of folders and of the silent family archives shared with the reader today. And on the other hand is the force of drawing that managed to escape the flatness of the page to enter the real world of cities, coexisting amid people's comings and goings, and gaining a place in the three-dimensional world.

Let us pause for a moment to recall that there is no culture of art without an artwork; there is no artwork without language; and there is no language without matter to comprise it. I am referring here to *matter* in three senses: mental, spiritual and physical (the primary material of the oil paints, pencils, papers and cloths, the burins, woods and metals. An artwork cannot come into existence without that essential moment of realization, and without the object itself being realized.³ As Kant said, artistic genius only achieves its status when it has the *plus* of materialization. This genius is thus both highly creative and productive.

The artist thus shifts from imagination and thought to projection. From there, he moves to materialization, where having the drawing already down on paper step is the first accomplishment given that many of the small images that this master draughtsman recorded on paper were important realizations in themselves. In fact, we must emphasize that not everything that is imagined, thought up, or projected by an artist manages to be turned into a good work of art just like that.

But if we also consider that these drawings emerged as a quest for something else and with the potential to open themselves up from the trace left by the hand towards the
4 → world of cities and involuntary publics [that this artist was so attracted to]⁴, we can also understand them as intermediary realizations, formations that are mid-way between the most immaterial idea and the most material realization.

If the first stage of *making* requires only the artist's talent, his hand, and the plus of producing a drawing, the overall realization of a civic scale structure would require other knowledge and conditions pertaining to engineers, construction workers, and even the sensibilities of citizens and those in power to then know how to admire, enjoy, and look after the works over the following decades, accompanying them in their perdurability and, to a greater extent, helping them to be perdurable.

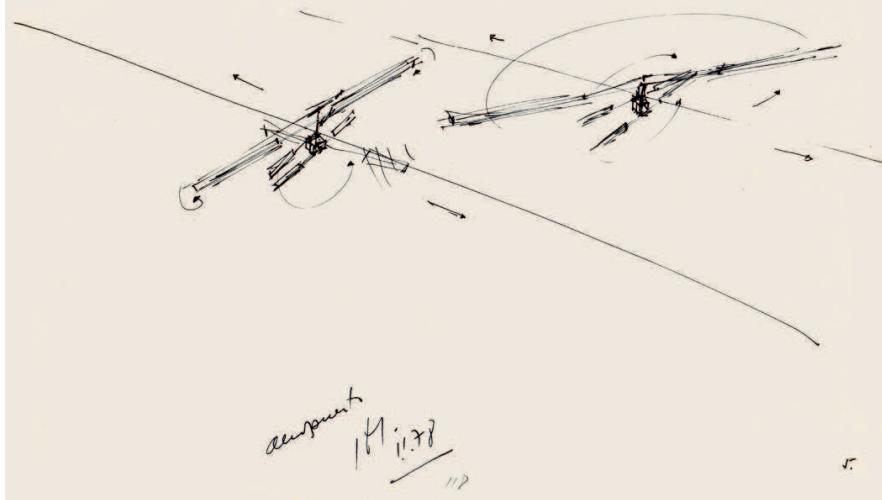
VOCABULARY

Otero develops a repertoire of lines in these drawings. There are simple lines, double or triple lines, parallel lines, soft or harsh diagonals, dotted lines, elongated Xs or straight lines that are split to create hinges. There are long lines cut by other short ones, long sinuous lines that recall corrugated plates and abundant parallel lines situated close together that can signal the concentrated density of a plane.

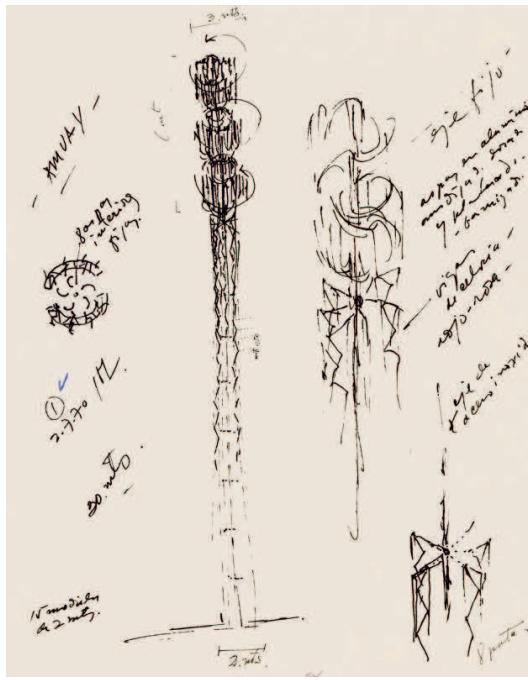
When looking at the images that make up this book, there is a sense that the lines in these drawings *want to tell us* about specific aspects of the sculpture that is being planned there...

- A long line can thus signify a rod, very fine lines can represent *threads*, lines situated in
1 ← strategic counterpoints can be equivalent to *tensors* 1, diamond-like forms can signify
2 ← *propellers* and the helicoidal lines can show that the shaft needs to be *sinuous* 2.
Alternatively, the artist might design a flat spiral on a piece of paper, as if seeking to create a
3 ← sort of labyrinth of metal sheets in concentric circles in the real sculpture 3.

Thus, in response to the question of how a flat and fixed drawing can give us a sense of the wind-powered sculpture, a hint of its palpitating and vibrant being and of the way it reflects the environment's natural light, we could say that it does so by using a repertoire of shapes (and, more specifically, lineal shapes) that link the drawing to the sculptural project.



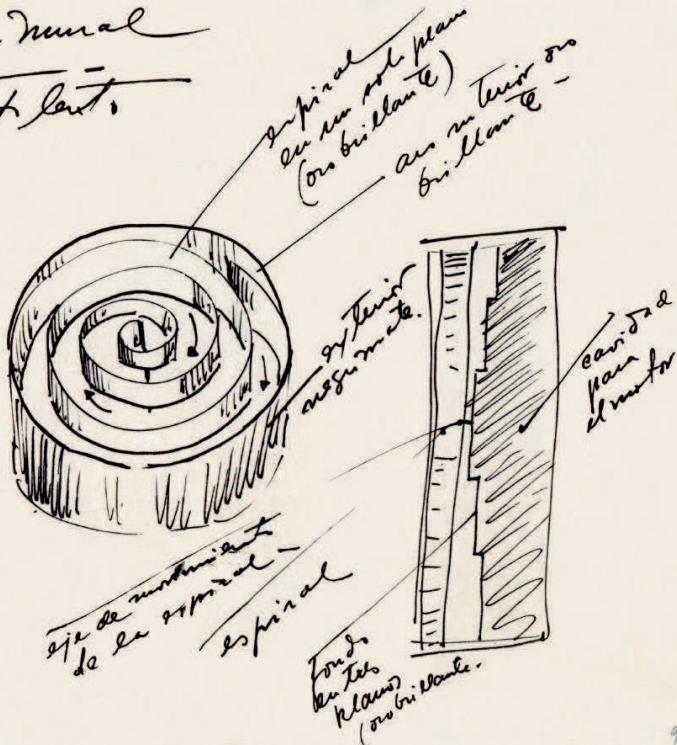
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Escultura mural
Caja para
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161.
⑨. 28.2.70



4 ← Sometimes a single drawing contains different ways of «being-lines». In this sense, in 4 the artist goes from little unstructured lines to show the light that falls onto a sheet of aluminum, to more concentrated lines that indicate the solidity of the form and the density of the box which serves as its base. Other heavy, straight lines, marked in black, determine the main axes of a structure. Long lines are repeated on parallels and perpendiculares, suggesting the varied concentration of networks, while dotted lines might suggest intervals, tremulous brightness, or imaginary movements.

Otero devises these different marks on the paper to create a sense of the different metals their ductility, hardness, and reflectiveness. In some drawings different «views» co-exist: from the ground, side on, face on, as if the artist were seeking to use his lines to approach a possible sculpture.

In a general sense, it is worth signaling an intensity that emerges precisely from the technical and linguistic relations that the artist establishes between the drawing he is making and the sculpture that his projections tend toward. We thus see how he produces drawings for heavier, densely-contoured sculptures or lighter sculptures, which in a broad sense could be compared to the «shaded lines» that characterize the most classical tradition of figurative drawing. In any case, what is present here is the draughtsman's power to use lines to translate volumetric entities belonging to the real world into images on paper. Otero thus achieves a new corporality by virtue of the lines he emphasizes or minimizes to create *tonal values*, which in turn provide a better representation of three-dimensional bodies on what remains the entirely two-dimensional surface of his piece of paper. These are lines that accentuate the idea of volume, as if pulsating from the flat sheets of the draughtsman's sketchbook through his projections, with their curves and shapes, their depths and recesses.

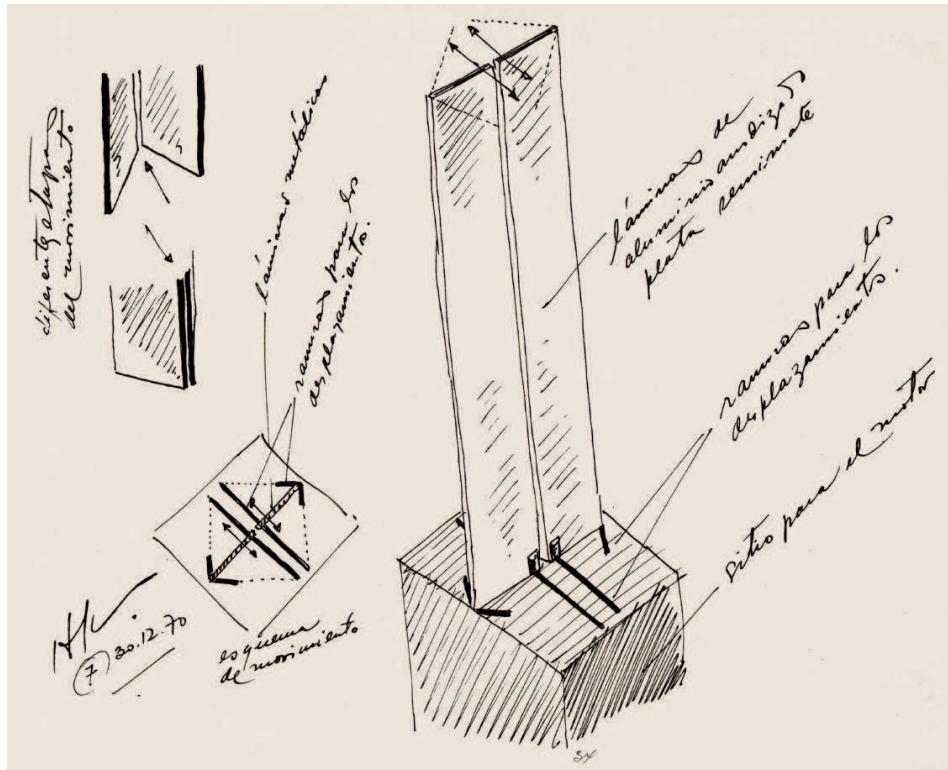
The abovementioned ideas are as applicable to the design for an urban sculpture (that peculiar urban «body») as they are to a drawing of man's body. The comparison, in any case, is not an arbitrary one if we recall that Otero himself demonstrated, throughout his entire artistic life –and alongside to his strength as a draughtsman of abstract structures– finesse as a figurative draughtsman, while managing to transpose the human body into the body of art in his volumetric drawings.⁵

WORDS THAT EXPRESS MATERIALS.

WORDS AS A CONCEPT THAT ACCOMPANIES DRAWINGS.

THE WORD THAT IS DRAWING

One element becomes indispensable in the drawings: the written vocabulary on the pages that help the viewer to gauge the image. In this sense, we can see that the drawings communicate through the language of visual forms as well as through written concepts.



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