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FRAGMENTS OF MYSTERY

Paintings by Arden Quin from the *Aléatoires* Series
by María Cristina Rossi

I like to create very simple things. [...] I have a great belief in games, which are somehow a mirror of life, of struggle. In life, there is offense and defense. A game is a conflict, with someone else or with yourself.

—Carmelo Arden Quin, 1988 ⁽¹⁾

Carmelo Arden Quin's work alternatively resided in the visual arts and in literature. While living between Nice and Paris during the 1970s, he began a series of paintings on paper that draw upon both areas, which he called *Aléatoires* (Random).

Between Paris and Nice

Carmelo married Marcelle Saint-Omer in 1958 while he was based in Paris, and together they decided to acquire an apartment in Nice, which they managed to move into in 1960. Although that decade was an era of relative economic prosperity for France, it was also a time when society was permeated by demands with cultural repercussions: from norms imposed by the system to consumerism, the exigency of the market, or the events set into motion by the wars in Indochina and Algeria and even positioning with regard to the "cold war". These questions had an impact on the arts, which raised objections to traditional techniques by way of gestural, conceptual, minimal and Pop proposals, spontaneous actions and performance, with a tendency toward dissolving the boundaries between disciplines and putting the role of art in crisis.

Located some 1,000 kilometers from Paris, Nice offered a cultural life just in the midst of transformation in the 1960s, almost ready to dispute the capital's central role. A trend of renovation known as the *l'École de Nice* (Nice School) was being developed by artists from the Nouveaux Réalistes group (Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Arman and César), the Fluxus movement (Ben Vautier, Robert Filliou, George Brecht, Serge III, Erebo, Erik Dietman and Marcel Alocço) and others who preferred a critical turn in painting, in what was known as the *Supports-Surfaces* proposal, which also led to the formation of Groupe 70 in Nice. They all counted on support from several cultural magazines⁽²⁾, galleries⁽³⁾, the Fundación Maeght—which disseminated modern and contemporary art—from 1964 onward, and, with the creation of the Université Nice Sophia Antipolis

in 1965, not only were the city's demographics rejuvenated by its students, they also formed part of an emerging public engaged in the most radical debates.

Once they had moved into the seventh floor of the building at 4 *rue du Dr. Richelmi*, the couple began getting to know the most active artists on the local scene. For Carmelo, this period was one of change, given that he had to alternate his art production with the administration of the Saint-Omer family business in *boiserie* and *marquetry*, a responsibility that had fallen to him after Marcelle's father passed away. It was therefore a time when he dedicated a preponderant portion of his creative time to literature; in 1961 he published *Opplimos*, a book of aphorisms, with the Parisian publisher José Corti. Meanwhile, his visual MADI production, in accordance with his admiration for Francis Picabia's work, focused on works on paper, which generally made use of polygonal formats. On the one hand, there were some instances of decoupage-collage that combined traditional adhesion of papers with cut-out work carried out on the background paper in such a way that the pierced surface allowed seeing through the empty space or visualizing materials placed beneath. On the other hand, the collages were made with papers in flat colors or with decoration, at times with added textures in laminated or corrugated cardboard and eventually, ink drawings.

In the Tradition of Group Work

The relationship that Arden Quin had established with Joaquín Torres García in 1935 permitted him an early recognition of the value of working as a group and comprehension of the importance of exhibiting his aesthetic ideas and founding his own magazines in order to communicate them, just as the Uruguayan master had done, first with the *Asociación de Arte Constructivo* and later with the *Taller Torres García*.

In accordance with this interest in collective work, when he settled in Buenos Aires in 1938 he formed part of the editorial group that produced *Arturo*. *Revista de artes abstracta*⁽⁴⁾'s magazine, which in Summer of 1944 proposed invention art in opposition to Surrealism's automatism, Symbolism and figurative representation, where Rhod Rothfuss also postulated his idea of breaking away from the orthogonal painting support by employing "shaped canvases".

Toward the end of 1945, he was part of the *Movimiento de Arte Concreto Invención* (MACI), which exhibited the first paintings, sculptures, dance and music conceived in the framework of

the inventionist proposal, in two events organized in private homes⁽⁵⁾. He also participated when the Movimiento MADI presented its first exhibition in the halls of the Institut d'Études Supérieures de Arts⁽⁶⁾ in August of 1946. Although the movement split up in early 1947, Arden Quin regrouped with the Blaszkowski brothers and other young people from the studio on Cabrera Street, which they used to call Galerie Madiste⁽⁷⁾. Working on the basis of MADI aesthetics, he made paintings with shaped canvases, *galbées* (curved) and *coplanales* (coplanar works), reliefs and mobiles which generally included movement, the possibility of making changes and empty spaces by way of orifices in the support.

After settling in Paris in 1948, he began to think about re-founding the MADI group in France, an aim he achieved with the exhibition at the Colette Allendy gallery in 1950, where he presented along with French artist Roger Desserprit and Peruvians José Bresciani and Jorge Eielson. In 1951, he established the *Centre de Recherches et d'Études MADI*, conceived of as a platform for group study, work and exhibition⁽⁸⁾.

From Mobile Poems to the *Aléatoires* Series

From the late 1950s onward, his desire for collective work never ceased; while he was making collages within the area of literature, he created mobile poems and was part of the group responsible for founding *Ailleurs. Littérature, arts plastiques, anticipation, poésie* magazine, which circulated between 1963 and 1966. He was on the editorial board along with Jean Thiercelin, Roitman and Jacques Sélénier, while Julien Blaine joined them after the second issue⁽⁹⁾; the Director was Henri Tronquoy for all eight of the issues published. Verbal language and plastic language fused together in his mobile poems in a discourse that defies conventional readings because it depends—like a throw of the dice—on chance, derived from spontaneous action.

He also became progressively involved in the neo-avant garde that had emerged in Nice, and especially through his friendship with Marcel Alocco, he approached the INTERVENCION group, founded by Alocco and Raphaël Monticelli. In 1968, Arden Quin signed the "INTERVENTION A" manifesto with the group, which included painters, writers and academics who were active in it until 1973⁽¹⁰⁾. In this setting, his name embodied that of a mature artist (between 25 and 35 years older than the other members), a representative of South America's avant garde and an enthusiastic

defender of collective work. The history of *l'École* recognizes this role on Carmelo's part⁽¹¹⁾, just as Alocco himself expressed in a letter from 1994:

For "*l'École de Nice*", the majority of which I wrote, while directing the rest, important library work was involved. You appear in the section of "visitors", those who had an impact in Nice and a presence, without being part of its structure⁽¹²⁾.

Alocco had been active in the Fluxus movement, and in 1966 he joined Supports-Surfaces, a group focused on questioning painting's material aspects: the canvas, the stretcher, the brushes, the pigments, etc. Following this link between text and image, he produced his *Ideogrammario* series, and in 1973 he worked on the *Patchwork* series, with bed sheets painted using brushes, imprints, rollers or aerosol, cut into squares and randomly joined in compositions with irregular format, presented in some cases with loose fragments situated like satellites of the larger work.

At the outset of the 1970s, when Arden Quin returned to painting, not only had he already left behind the palette associated with Torres García, he had also distanced himself from the luminous painting incorporated when he met Georges Vantongerloo in the early 1950s. Therefore, when the period of his *Aléatoires* began, instead of dedicating time to the process of drying and polishing various layers of oil paint, as the *plastique blanche* in the manner of Vantongerloo demanded, he adopted acrylic paints sprayed in aerosol, which offered him shorter drying times, very adequate for working on the basis of spontaneous invention.

In fact, at that time street graffiti, the provocative texts by Fluxus and the critique of pictorial tradition by *Support-Surface* were all employing cellulose paint applied in spray, like Alocco's *Patchwork*. Carried out using stencils and a pulverization technique that allows paint to be applied gradually until the surface is saturated for uniform planes of color, or in a light spray to achieve transparencies or gradations between pigments, in the compositions from the *Aléatoires* series, layers of color are added or taken away through the superimposition of the templates.

A survey of the *Aléatoires* series enables the identification of a group of templates with forms that appear repeatedly in the compositions, and in other cases, recognition of industrially manufactured elements that were applied, such as wire mesh or washers, even though the resulting arrangements are always diverse.

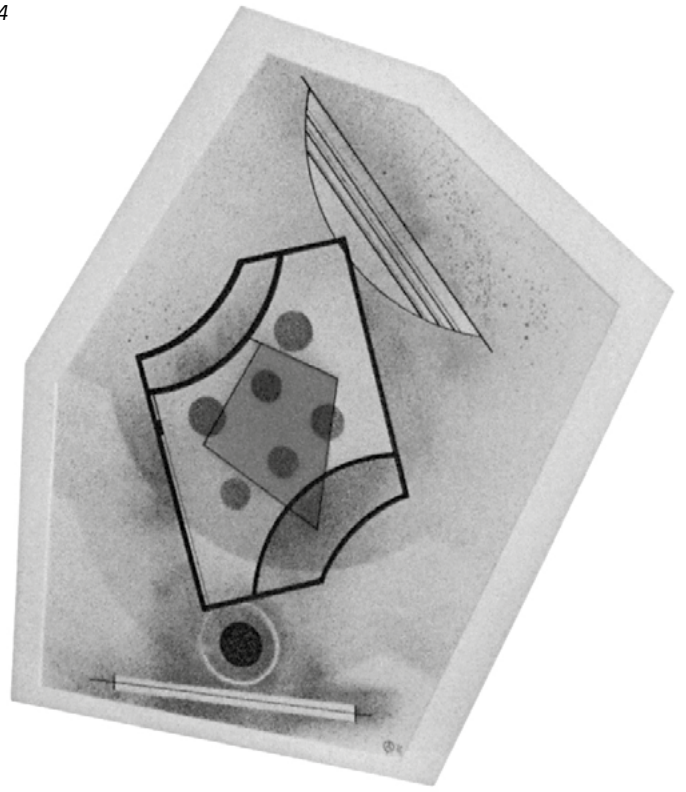
Arden Quin produced this series on large sheets of paper (approximately 60 or 70 x 40 cm), sometimes on paper that was reutilized. The series began during the 1970s and continued until the 1980s, painted in both Nice and Paris. A first group is numbered and signed in Nice, 1972; whereas in another group, dated 1976, many of the paintings were done on the back side of the poster for the play *La Palata*, by Michel Calonne, staged at the Café-Théâtre in Neuilly in November of 1974. These same theater-cafes had also been part of the theatrical avant garde of the 1960s, because their intimate format proposed a renovation of the genre, where comic pieces, improvisations, short works, poetry and songs that could be presented in the reduced space of a cafe, with few actors, came into direct contact with the a public who would attend the event while having coffee or a drink. At times Arden Quin preferred to present some of these works in a polygonal format, so he would accordingly cut the paper sheets and mount them on stretchers with irregular contours in order to avoid the stillness of classic orthogonal structures, in accordance with his MADI proposition. Painted using aerosol and stencils with infinite possibilities for variations, the works from this series restrain the time required for their production, the site of the creative act—via the least conventional route, by introducing the notion of chance—and in doing so reveal a new object. Literature from this era was also venturing into experimental narrative that eluded conventional paths; even Julio Cortázar was offering alternative directions in reading in *Rayuela*, permitting the expected order to be disrupted, and allowing the fragmentation of an apparent whole to be perceived.

For Arden Quin, creation was an occurrence, an experience in which he would establish a dialog with the material somewhere between rigor and a playful experience⁽¹³⁾. The random forms in this series, the compositions, their hidden subtleties and their highlights and shadows, are the consolidation of his spontaneous creative action, from which an unexpected invention emerges, one that is not exhausted along one single path of deciphering because at that moment of play—in accordance with his idea—creation manages to capture fragments of mystery.

NOTES

- (1) See: Marie-Odile Andrade. "Arden Quin. La Poétique et la Rigueur", in *Artension*, n.º 6, Rouen, October 1988.
- (2) Outstanding among his editorial projects are the magazines: *Profil littéraire de la France*, *Abordages*, *Septembre*, *Espaces du Club des jeunes*, *les Rencontres Poétiques de Provence*, *Identités*, *Open*, *Le Spirographe*, *Lolita*, *les Cahiers de l'atelier*, *Des Viscères et des abats*, *Vice de forme*, *Poésie d'ici*, *Le Guép'art*, *Poésie de la photocopie*, *L'Antiégoûttoir*, *Contre*, *Reg'art*, *Cahiers de travail du Lieu 5*, etc.
- (3) The principal galleries were: Alexandre de la Salle, founded in 1960 in Vence (later in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, a space that played a major role in the dissemination of Arden Quin's work), Jacques Matarasso's gallery-bookstore and the photographer Ferrero's gallery, along with Chave, run by Vence and Issert in Saint-Paul-de-Vence or the galleries in Nice: Muratore, Hervieu, Sapone, Anne Roger, Boudin and Lieu 5, a space founded by Martin Miguel, Max Charvolen and Raphaël Monticelli, also connected with Arden Quin's work.
- (4) Joining Carmelo Arden Quin on the magazine's editorial board were Edgar Bayley, Gyula Kosice and Rhod Rothfuss; Tomás Maldonado was in charge of the cover, and the vignettes were done by Lidy Prati.
- (5) The first one took place at the Aberastury-Pichón Rivière residence, and the group consisted of: Klaus Erhardt and Daniel Devoto, dancer Renata Schotelius, and visual artists Arden Quin, Rothfuss, Kosice, Diyi Laañ and Elisabeth Steiner; while for the event held at Grete Stern's house those presenting works were: Steiner, R. Rasas Pét, Arden Quin, Rothfuss, Erhardt, Kosice, Alexandre Havas, Ricardo Humbert, Grete Stern, Eitler Julio Roadzin, Silvia Cópola, Valdo Wellington, Dieudonné Costes and Sylwan-Joffe Lemme, with music by: Karel Hába, Karl Wiener, Paul Hindemith, Ruth Crawford, Rodolfo Arizaga, Eitler, Lily Saslavsky de Litvin, Darío Daniel Sorin, Martín Fuchs and Rodolfo Arizaga, German Erhardt, Simón Zlótnik, and Alejandro Barletta, along with dance by Renate Schottelius.
- (6) Comprising this MADI group were: Arden Quin, Gyula Kosice, Rhod Rothfuss, Diyi Laañ, Elisabeth Steiner or Esteban Eitler, Martín Blaszkó, Valdo W Longo, Ricardo Humbert, Alejandro Havas, Dieudonné Costes, Raymundo Rasas Pét, Sylwan Joffe Lemme and Paulina Ossona.
- (7) In March of 1948, they organized an exhibition with Esteban Eitler, Martín and Ignacio Blaszkó, Ed. Levin, Arden Quin, Esteban Fassio, S. Rojas, Peter Reiner and Sameer Macareus (sic), and in April of that year they held a Matinée Madiste chez Elías Piterbarg with Martín and Ignacio Blaszkó, Ed. Levin, Arden Quin and S. Rojas.
- (8) The stable members of the Centre included Uruguayan artists Arden Quin and Volf Roitman, Venezuelans Luis Guevara Moreno and Rubén Núñez and Europeans Saint-Omer, Roger Neyrat, Pierre Alexandre, Guy-Claude Lerein, Claude de Seynes and Georges Sallaz.
- (9) After issue number 4, Michel Unia was incorporated on the editorial board, and Jean Thiercelin departed. Regarding the mobile poems from the 1950s and the relationship between Arden Quin and Julien Blaine, see: Ornella Barisone, "Pluraleidoscopio de lo mínimo manipulable: los experimentos poéticos de Carmelo Arden Quin", in María Cristina Rossi (cur.), *Arden Quin en la trama del arte constructivo* [exh. cat.], Buenos Aires, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2022, pp. 157-185.
- (10) Signed by Arden Quin along with Alocco (1937), Monticelli (1948), Amanda, painters Patrick Saytour (1935), Claude Viallat (1936) and Noël Dolla (1945), sociologist Philippe Chartron (1948) and anthropologist Henri Giordan (1937).
- (11) See: Marcel Alocco, *L'École de Nice, Paris*, Demaistre, 1996; Raphaël Monticelli, "Le groupe INTERVENTION, 1968-1973", in *Colloque international l'Art Contemporain et la Côte d'Azur, Un territoire pour l'expérimentation*, 1951-2011, September 29 and 30, 2011, Nice, and R. Monticelli, *À propos du mouvement artistique niçois*, in *Patriote Côte d'Azur*, n.º 200-201, August 11 to 24, 2017.
- (12) Letter from Alocco to Arden Quin, Nice, December 27, 1994 (author's translation), Carmelo Arden Quin archive. The collected letters testify to a relationship that was active until the late 1990s.
- (13) See: Marie-Odile Andrade. "Arden Quin. La Poétique et la Rigueur", in *Artension*, n.º 6, Rouen, October 1988.

1. Event organized by the Movimiento Arte Concreto Invención at Grete Stern's home in Ramos Mejía, 1945. Ph: Grete Stern
2. Meeting at the *Centre de Recherche et d'Étude MAD* at the studio on rue Froidevaux, 1953. From left to right: Arden Quin, Roitman, Marzac, Sallaz, Alexandre, Núñez and Saint Omer. Ph: Archivo Carmelo Arden Quin
3. Arden Quin, Michel Butor, Marcel Alocco, Henri Maccheroni and Jean-François Dubreuil. Ph: Archivo Carmelo Arden Quin.



4. *Composición* [Composition], 1976.
Acrylic on paper
72 x 58 cm
5. Poster for the play *La Palata*,
by Michel Calonne at the Café-théâtre
in Neuilly, 1974.
6. *Aleatoire n° 2*, Nice, 1976.
Acrylic spray paint on paper
24.7 x 15.3 in

Quin was a poet and visual artist born on March 16, 1913 in Rivera (Uruguay). It was through a friend of the family, Catalanian writer Emilio Sans, that he first approached the visual arts. In 1935, he met Joaquín Torres García at a conference he was giving at the Sociedad Teosófica. After initially working along the lines of Cubism, he gradually turned toward his first non-orthogonal paintings, breaking away from the traditional limits of the rectangle.

In 1938, he moved to Buenos Aires (Argentina), joined avant-garde artists, and also took classes in Philosophy and Literature at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. He participated in *El Universitario*. *Voz estudiantil*, a bimonthly periodical in 1941, publishing his political and aesthetic ideas. He participated in the group that edited *Arturo*. *Revista de Artes Abstractas*, along with Gyula Kosice, Rhod Rothfuss, Edgar Bayley, Tomás Maldonado and Lidy Prati; the publication's only issue was produced in 1944, and it also included collaborations from Murilo Mendes, Vicente Huidobro and Torres García.

In 1945, he participated in the Movimiento de Arte Concreto Invención (MACI), which presented works at Aberastury-Pichón Rivière and Grete Stern private homes. He was part of the MADI movement in 1946, and participated in all the exhibitions that the group organized that year. At that time, he produced works with polygonal frames, mobile structures, *coplanales* (coplanar works), object paintings and curved works that he denominated *formes galbées*. In 1948, he moved to Paris (France), where he approached Georges Vantongerloo, Michel Seuphor, Marcelle Cahn, Auguste Herbin, Jean Arp and Francis Picabia, among other avant-garde artists.

In 1950, he organized the first exhibition of the MADI-France group, participated in the Salon des Realités Nouvelles and formed part of the *Centre de Recherche et d'Études MADI*. During this period, he introduced collage and decoupage in his work. In Buenos Aires, he undertook the initiative of promoting the Arte Nuevo group, an idea developed among artists working in different non-figurative tendencies, which presented its first exhibition at the Galería Van Riel in 1955. In Paris, he founded *Ailleurs* magazine, and during the 1960s, he further developed his work with mobile poems. After fifteen years, he returned to painting in 1971, and in 1984, he founded the MADI International group. He continued to work at his home in Savigny-sur-Orge until his death, which occurred on September 27, 2010.

Rossi has a PhD in Art History and Theory from the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) and a degree in the Arts from the same University. She is Associate Professor in *Historia de las Artes Visuales. América Latina y el Caribe siglos XIX y XXI* (UBA) and Full Professor in *Relatos Curatoriales II* at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF). She directs group research projects at both institutions and has participated on research teams at the ICAA-Museum of Fine Arts Houston and on various projects receiving support from the Getty Foundation.

She is an independent curator of exhibitions involving Argentinean and Latin American artists, which include: Carmelo Arden Quin, Alberto Delmonte, Pedro Tyler, Anselmo Piccoli, Antonio Pezzino, Miguel Ángel Vidal, Eduardo Mac Entyre, Alejandro Puente, José Gurvich, Víctor Magariños, Julio Le Parc, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Manuel Espinosa, among others.

She is currently a member of the Editorial Board of Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture, University of California Press, a member of the *Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte* and of the *Asociación Argentina e Internacional de Críticos de Arte*. She dictates seminars and conferences and publishes articles and books, including: *Grupo Joven, arte nuevo de los años 50* (2021); *La revista Arturo en su tiempo inaugural* (2018), *Carmelo Arden Quin* (2018), *Nikolai Kasak. Confluentia Physical Art & MADI* (2016), *Manuel Aguiar. Memoria y vigencia* (2015); *La abstracción en la Argentina siglos XX y XXI* (2011); *Antonio Berni. Lecturas en tiempo presente* (2010) and *Arte Argentino y Latinoamericano del siglo XX, sus interrelaciones* (2004), among others.