

Sarfatti and Venturi, Two Italian Art Critics in the Threads of Modern Argentinian Art

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Introduction

Margherita Sarfatti and Lionello Venturi were two Italian critics who had an important role in the Argentinian art context by mid-20th Century. Venturi was only two years younger than Sarfatti and both died in 1961. In Italy, both of them promoted groups of modern artists, even though their aesthetic poetics were divergent, such as their opinions towards the official Mussolini's politics.

Our job will seek to redraw their action within the tension of the artistic field regarding the notion proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, i.e., taking into consideration the complex structure as a system of relations in a permanent state of dispute¹. However, this paper will not review the performance of Sarfatti and Venturi towards the cultural policies in Italy, but its proposal is to reintegrate their figures – and their aesthetical and political positions – within the interplay of forces in the Argentinian rich cultural fabric, bearing in mind the strategies that were implemented by the local agents with those who they interacted with.

Sarfatti and Venturi in Mussolini's political environment

Born into a Jewish Venetian family in 1883, Margherita Grassini got married to the lawyer Cesare Sarfatti and in 1909 moved to Milan, where she started her career as an art critic. Convinced that Milan could achieve a central role in the Italian culture – together with the Jewish gallerist Lino Pesaro – in 1922 Sarfatti promoted the group *Novecento*. The grouping – composed by Leonardo Dudreville, Achille Funi, Anselmo Bucci, Piero Marussig, Ubaldo Oppi, Mario Sironi and Emilio Malerba – aimed to restore the Italian glories of the past to express its support to the fascist rhetoric. The study accomplished by Sileno Salvagnini points out that its mentor considered that they should always exhibit together, although in 1924 Oppi already participated in an individual form at the Biennale di Venezia, and soon other artists left².

Even though it was a fleeting experience, it would allow Sarfatti to demonstrate

1 BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Las reglas del arte*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996.

2 SALVAGNINI, Sileno. *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919-1943*. Bologna: Minerva, 2000, p. 48.

that she could contribute with the political and cultural legitimization of the fascist nation, in anticipation of Mussolini himself, once right in 1925 she appreciated the contribution of the culture to organize the Congress of the Fascist Intellectuals. Anyway, in 1926 Margherita gave birth to the group again, presenting it under the name of Novecento Italiano hundreds of artists amongst who were Adolf Wildt, Arturo Martini, Carlo Carrà, Felice Casorati and Massimo Campigli.

The studies of Simona Urso analysed Sarfatti's formative phase: her Jewish origin and her unresolved conflict of belonging; the dialogue with the catholic intellectual world; her closeness to Fogazzaro, the pre-rafaelism, Carlyle and Ruskin through Antonio Fradeletto, and the interest for the *Risorgimento* awaken by Pietro Orsi. Based on this formation, the author sustains that she linked art and beauty to the idea of morality – a morality close to the experience of pain – with a pedagogical function³.

Salvagnini points out that the tragic loss of her young son Roberto in the World War I pushed her to dedicate herself completely to a militant art critique, reasons that allow her to explain her different actions along the decade. Thus, he notes that whereas her discourse at the first half of the decade appreciated the tradition moral reasons, at the second half it gradually lost the subtleties in order to adopt an emphatic way to defend “a group simulacrum”⁴.

Nonetheless – and despite of the personal relationship she had maintained with Mussolini – in 1938 she was not successful in escaping the anti-Semitic rules and needed to exile herself. In this sense, Urso concludes that Sarfatti had early understood that the new fascist regime image required the politicization of the aesthetic, but had not understood that the same regime required an organizational structure that would not include a figure such as hers⁵.

Venturi, instead, started his job as a professor at the University of Turin in 1915. He was the consultant of modern art of the industrial Riccardo Gualino's collection and became close to the *Gruppo dei Sei*, composed by Carlo Levi, Gigi Chessa, Nicola Galante, Jessie Boswell, Enrico Paulucci and Francesco Menzio, whose proposal competed with the *novecentismo*. This group not only preferred working on color, developing a space through the chromatic relations and seeking for the synthesis between form and color, but instead of noticing the “Italian values” denied participating of some public and group activities determined by the fascism. Venturi also had not accepted to sign the loyalty record that Mussolini's regime imposed to the university teachers and decided to emigrate to France until 1939 and soon moved to the United States.

Tensions in Argentinian scene in the 1930s

Sarfatti arrived in the cultural Argentinian scene during the highest moment

3 URSO, Simona. *Margherita Sarfatti. Dal mito del Dux al mito americano*. Venice: Marsilio, 2003, p.148.

4 SALVAGNINI, op. cit. pp. 49-55.

5 URSO, op. cit., p. 185.

of the Novecento Italiano dissemination abroad, where she arrived carrying more than two hundred artworks which were exhibited in the rooms of the Amigos del Arte de Buenos Aires in September 1930. Emilio Pettoruti described in his memories that Margherita asked him to be in charge of the exhibition, to which he accepted “under the condition that no one, not even her, would step on the room” until it had been set up. On the day of the *vernissage*, she was invited to walk through the rooms at midday, and when she found out that Mussolini’s bust by Wildt – the regime favorite sculptor – had not been included, she started to exclaim: “*Il Duce, il mio Duce!*”⁶.

The exhibition had a great impact in the press although, as pointed out by Diana B. Wechsler, the local critics yielded its space to the Italian voices who neutralized her relation with the fascism. In that sense, a Buenos Aires newspaper, with massive reach such as *La Prensa* transcribed Arduino Colasanti’s discourse, in which he affirmed that it was a non-political artistic group which only corresponded to few fascists statements⁷. In any case, some headlines published on *Risorgimento* highlighted the matter of the fascist penetration, even though the dissemination of this newspaper was restricted, once it circulated preferably amongst the Italy-Argentine of non-fascist tendency⁸.

Three years later, a left-wing cultural publication such as *Contra* rekindles the rumors about Sarfatti and the Duce. Even though the article had promised a complete development of an index made by Marco Galli and M. Martínez de Arroyo, during the first and the second part revealed the admiration and aspirations of Sarfatti towards the socialist leader Felipe Turati and soon dedicated themselves to her affair with Mussolini⁹. Nevertheless, they did not achieve to reveal the third deliver which included the subtitle “Sarfatti’s diabolical plan”, because the magazine stopped its publication.

Later, the book was sold complete through a coupons swapping system that were in the evening paper *Última Hora*, under the title: M. Martínez de Arroyo, “Las amantes de Mussolini”¹⁰. In that it was attributed to Sarfatti the idea of creating the fascist party “squadre”. Even though that story would not match perfectly with the reality, the circulation of those rumors seriously compromised Sarfatti’s profile since her arrival. In fact, a Pettoruti’s letter addressed to the Uruguayan Luis E. Pombo at that time allows confirming this image, once when he asked him to help his friend, he said

6 PETTORUTI, Emilio. *Un pintor ante el espejo*. Buenos Aires: Solar-Hachette, 1968, p. 224.

7 WECHSLER, Diana B. “De una estética del silencio a una silenciosa declamación. Encuentros y apropiaciones de una tradición en las metrópolis del Río de la Plata” In CHIARELLI, Tadeu & WECHSLER, Diana (orgs). *Cat. Exp. Novecento Sudamericano. Relazioni artistiche tra Italia e Argentina, Brasile, Uruguay*. Milano: Skira, 2003 (catálogo de exposición), pp. 27-35.

8 It is interesting to bear in mind that already in July 1929, Mussolini had communicated her that he energetically disapproved the link between the *Novecento* with his name and the fascist artistic position. Nevertheless, Sarfatti kept her task and, in January 1932, the *Duce* considered necessary to notify her that she was excluded from the *Commissione per le Mostre all’Estero* (SALVAGNINI, op. cit., pp.54-5).

9 GALLI, Marco & MARTÍNEZ DE ARROYO, M. “Lo que no se ha dicho sobre Mussolini y el Fascio”, *Contra. Revista de los francotiradores*, Buenos Aires, a 1, n 2, 1933, p. 15 y a 1, n 3. 1933, p. 15.

10 MARTÍNEZ DE ARROYO M. “Las amantes de Mussolini”, *Última Hora*, Buenos Aires, s/d.

Two days ago a letter from MRS Margherita arrived. She asks me to help her. [...] It seems that she fell into disgrace with the first black shirt after everything she did for him, not only her, but also her husband, the great lawyer Sarfatti. [...] Unfortunately I cannot do anything. My relations with the magnate Botana are bad, in a way that not in "Critica", or in "El Sol" [...]. I have seen other people, but, due to this blessed fascism, the thing is certainly difficult. In "El Hogar" [...] (I know very well) I will be told: she is the greatest fascist... Before finishing these lines I will answer back to the nice friend, MRS Margherita, and I will tell her that the lady Victoria Ocampo is a nice comrade¹¹.

As a consequence, even though when she took refuge in Latin America at the end of the 1930s, her personal relationship with the Duce had changed so much that her Jewish condition forced her to abandon Italy. Her figure would be still controversial, especially within the circles of the left wing artists dedicated to a figuration of social nature (which Antonio Berni had defined as "new realism") slope which, on the other hand, was more active in the polemics between figuration and abstraction that agitated the artistic Argentinian context in 1945, due to the early emergence of concrete art. In any case, it is interesting to notice that even in this context of objections, Sarfatti succeeded to establish important contacts with the Latin-American intellectuals¹².

Sarfatti, her exile in Argentina

In Buenos Aires, amongst other activities, she succeeded to write in the anti-fascist newspaper *Argentina Libre* and in the cultural magazine *Nosotros*. In the first years of the 1940s, Victoria Ocampo invited her to join in the debates organized by the literary magazine *Sur*, and, in 1944, Poseidón publisher launched her book *Giorgione: el pintor misterio*. However it was after Mussolini's execution that Sarfatti sought to rebuild her own history narrating the details of her relationship with the Duce, by means of fourteen headlines published every day¹³ during two weeks in the newspaper *Critica*¹⁴.

Having the feather/laurels of the greatest novelist since the first deliver she occupied herself to place the marriage Sarfatti close to the one of Felipe Turati

11 Cf. Letter from E. Pettoruti to L. Pombo, undated, Archivo Fundación Pettoruti.

12 ANTELO, Raúl. "Modernismo reactivo y abstracción" In: GIUNTA, Andrea & MALOSETTI COSTA, Laura (orgs). *Arte de posguerra. Jorge Romero Brest y la revista Ver y Estimar*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2005, pp. 37-49; ROSSI, M. Cristina, "Una pulseada por la abstracción. Jorge Romero Brest entre Margherita Sarfatti y Lionello Venturi" In: GIUNTA, Andrea & MALOSETTI COSTA, L. op. cit., pp. 51-69; and MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves. "Uma nova luz sobre o acervo modernista do MAC-USP", *Revista USP*, São Paulo, n. 90, junio/agosto 2011, pp. 200-216; among others.

13 SARFATTI, Margherita, "Mussolini: Cómo lo conocí", *Critica*, Buenos Aires, I-XIV, 18 de junio-3 de julio de 1945.

14 The themes developed were: I. The devil said if I give the power that I did not know how to preserve; II. The Duce was terrified by the old age and hated every possible successor; III Even Lenin believed in Mussolini as the man of the revolution; IV. Matteotti was killed to plunge fascism said the Duce; V. The Duce's family comes in; Italy gathers the Axis; VI. The Duce's home, Signora Raquel and other things for the style; VII. Duce's home and women in his life; why was he concerned in marrying Edda; VIII. Claretta Petacci, Duce's last love, was a Nazi spy; IX. The Duce was a sullen man with no friends, who escaped the crowd (Sullen and with no friends, the Duce was a man who escaped from the human tenderness); X. Count Ciano's tragedy, the puppet that wanted to be a man; XI. At the beginning, the Duce mocked Hitler and gave him some pieces of advice; XII. Mussolini rubbed off his most fateful mistake: to spurn the United States; XIII. In exchange for Austria, Hitler allowed Duce to take over Ethiopia; and XIV. My guilt and my scape, why I remained quiet, Mussolini betrayed the revolution.

and his companion Ana Kuliscioff, after which she started to spell out the details of the quick escalation of a still unknown Mussolini towards the direction of *Avanti!*. Soon in the pages of that newspaper he dared to accuse the army of having acted “as a brutal henchman of the bourgeoisie”, and due to that he was prosecuted. Margherita not only told that he left immune thanks to the intervention of lawyer Sarfatti, but also pointed out that the same Mussolini had defended the argument when it comes to the freedom of opinion because “an Italy with thirty-six millions of citizens who all think the same way would be the kingdom of boredom and imbecility”.

While remembering from a distance, she would comprehend that those words were prophetic to a person who ended up converting Italy into the kingdom of imbecility, because he never allowed to be submitted to the same opposition freedom that he had demanded on his defense. Sarfatti also remembered that she soon had warned that Mussolini sought to be surrounded by inferior types so he would not feel overcome; however, when analyzing the political situation in Italy, she kept supporting that in the moment when Duce came to power, there was no other statesman of his importance, and affirmed that¹⁵:

Long before coming to power, Lenin addressed to the socialist and communist from Italy, with the following reproach: “How come have you allowed to loose Mussolini from his ranch? He was the only man capable of leading you”. And Trotzky said the same to a friend of mine: “He was the only triumph card you had.”

After some articles regarding the family circle, she listed some aspects of the relationship between Mussolini and the Führer, and detailed the letter Duce sent to warn him about the conflicts that his Anti-Semitic measures could bring about, she described Hitler’s visit to Venice in June 1934, the impressions concerning this meeting that Mussolini told her when they met in Rome, and also commented the lack of interest that he showed in front of the news she brought from her tour in North America and the contact she had established with Roosevelt.

Thus, between the domestic environment and the reflections of a strategist in the power Summit, Sarfatti kept explaining the reasons of her exile – in 1936 she had already warned that her power had collapsed like a house of cards – and referred the reasons of her silence by writing¹⁶:

[...] the black days of Munich, in September 1938, had not find me unprepared [...] Thus, I did my anti-dramatic scape. [...]. I crossed the Chiasso border calm and quietly to enter Switzerland in November 1938. [...] Almost all my possessions remained in Italy [...] and what was truly serious to me, my kids [...] Mussolini moved heaven and earth in order to have me returned [...] Abounded in promises, in which I did not believe, did not mince to do some veiled threats, which only served to justify myself even more in my decision of being kept away.

15 SARFATTI, (III), 1945, op. cit.

16 SARFATTI, (XIV), 1945, op. cit.

But he had my people as hostage and knew that my affections tied me up with chains heavier than iron. Nonetheless, the sheet was double-edged: I also had things related to him, so he would not bother my family with persecutions or retaliation, while I remained abroad and officially silent towards fascism. That was I had to do.

Aesthetic-Political repositioning in the postwar

Before returning to Italy, Margherita delivered the lecture “Las siete lámparas de tinieblas de la pintura moderna” at the Escuela Libre de Artes Plásticas Altamira – endeavor which had as collaborators Lucio Fontana and the Argentinian critic Jorge Romero Brest. In november 1946, this presentation anticipated one of the chapters of *Espejo de la pintura actual*, published by Editorial Argos in 1947. The publishing label –directed by José Luis Romero, Luis M. Baudizzone and Romero Brest – presented it with few words from the last one which praised the author, pointing out that it was the continuation of *Storia della Pittura Moderna*¹⁷ and also highlighted that she was “enriched by the vital experience, even though it was certainly a painful one”.

These modifications derived from her “vital and painful experience” can be observed by comparing with the publications that were circulating in Argentina: since *Segni, colori e luci* – headed by Mussolini’s bust by Wildt¹⁸– and her famous biography *Dux* and also the same *Storia della Pittura Moderna*, Sarfatti’s theoretical production had kept a clear pro-fascist positioning. However, the publication of 1947, *Espejo...*, started with a reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica*.

In both *Storia...* and *Espejo...* Sarfatti commented Novecento’s origins as an initiative born amongst friends gathered in the social events at her milanese house in 1920, when they believed that it was beginning a new century of the Italian painting reign. In *Storia...* one could read¹⁹:

It was an act of pride. Certainly, it was an act of faith in those first greys and dark days in the postwar. Because of that, the young avant-garde artists liked best, a lot of them had been soldiers and in fascism they kept being Italy’s militiamen. [...] In fact, those artists only wanted to proclaim themselves Italians, traditionalists, moderns. They proudly affirmed that they wanted to apprehend in time a new aspect of the tradition. The first “Exhibition of the Novecento Italiano” opened in 1926 in Milan with a memorable speech by Mussolini addressed to artists, highlights a date and a decisive period of this renaissance.

She also wrote long paragraphs dedicated to the aesthetical questions related to the will of greatness, the vigorous imagination and the heroic reconstruction. In *Espejo...*, instead, not only the emphatic tone had been lost but also the brief and aseptic description did not contain references to Mussolini. However, with a historical distance, she took advantage to emphasize her partic-

17 SARFATTI, Margherita. *Storia della Pittura Moderna*, Roma: P. Cremonese, 1930.

18 SARFATTI, Margherita. *Segni, colori e luci: note d'arte*, Bologna: Zanichelli, 1925.

19 SARFATTI, 1930, op. cit., pp. 125-6.

ipation in the art history pointing out that the artistic French movements of reaction, such as the *Rétour au réel*, at a great extent came up from the example offered by “the first one in historical and artistic date of those reactions, the *Novecento italiano*”²⁰.

Venturi’s exile, in turn – even if it was voluntary- would take him to the United States, where he developed an important scholarly job in different study centers, becoming one of the references regarding modern art, who was acting as a counselor or jury with Herbert Read – as integrant of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) – or as a lecturer in different international debates or symposiums.

Andrea Giunta studied his relationship with Torcuato Di Tella, who was based in Argentina since 1905 and not only had developed a manufacturing empire, with offices in London, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, but also in 1942 established his corporation in New York. Venturi advised this industrial who adhered – and economically supported – the anti-fascist groups which were part of the *Italia Libre* movement. As a consequence, the connections dated back the World War II times, in which they shared the proximity to the Socialist Party and the opposition to communism²¹.

Indeed, the correspondence between Torcuato Di Tella and Venturi demonstrated his concern regarding the entrance of some amnesty fascists in Argentina. He also was making reference to the situation of the *Unità Socialista*. In 1946, the *Blocco del Popolo* postulated Venturi’s candidacy as a Rome’s intendant and in 1948 (even though he was defeated again) kept his trust in that party, such as expressed in his letters to Di Tella²²:

I hope in five years the Unità Socialista become the strongest party of all [...]. We have wind behind the sail, it is necessary to raise the sail in the right direction. To sum up surely we cannot be happy, but we have reasons to wait and that is already a lot.

Regarding the circulation of Venturi’s theoretical production, it is important to notice that in 1949 Poseidón Publisher launched in Buenos Aires the *Historia de la crítica de arte*, which he had written in 1936, with a translation by the Argentinian critic Julio E. Payró. It was a complete historical panorama of the critic accompanied by a section dedicated to the “La crítica de arte en la actualidad”, where it encompasses the task of the critic as a dialectical process amongst the historical conditions and the creative imagination of each personality. He also considered that it was not possible to conceive a passion towards art that had not had as an object the contemporary art, affirming that²³:

20 SARFATTI, 1930, op. cit., p. 69.

21 GIUNTA, Andrea, “La escena del ‘arte nuevo’” In: *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política. Arte argentino en los años sesenta*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001, pp.129-161.

22 Cf. Letters dated 24-10-46; 30-12-46 and 28-4-48 between Venturi and Di Tella, General Correspondence Guido Di Tella, 1943/54, CAV, Box nº 22. I am grateful to Andrea Giunta for having allowed me to the access to these sources. Also Romero Brest had embraced the socialist ideology in 1946, but soon suspended his membership without developing an active militancy.

23 VENTURI, Lionello. *Historia de la Crítica de Arte*. Buenos Aires: Poseidón, 1949, p. 260.

if the critic thinks that everything that is produced around him only is art whenever it looks like the art of the past, this critic confuses imitation with creation [...] It is the art made today that teaches to see the art of the past.

According to these ideas, also in the pages of the Argentinian magazine *9 Artes*, Venturi gave his opinion regarding the mistakes committed by the critique of his country. As analyzing the interwar period, he highlighted that the Italian critics must have needed to create for themselves on their own account a base for their judgment and had appealed to the unquestioned glory of the Renaissance art. For the Italians, the reunion with their own tradition meant to put themselves again at the head of the civilization, the foundation of a new Renaissance, even if some warned – he said – the difference between classicism and neo-classicism (permeated with abstract intellectualism). Due to that reason his article was finished sentencing²⁴:

While the current language is not studied and not comprehended, works of archeology will be developed and not art ones. The renovation of an artistic tradition should not have done due to a return to the past, but to a start from the today needs towards the unknown future. The art critic is very guilty of the Italian art's faith. [...] Due to the fake nationalism, to the lazy classicism or to the arrogant doctrine, it has been speaking about the past with the ideas of the past, without a living experience of the current art, and because of that could not accomplish its task.

Margherita and Lionello, correspondants of Ver y Estimar

In 1945, Venturi came back to Italy and towards the end of 1947, so did Sarfatti. Deprived of his official post for the dismissals imposed by Perón's government, in 1948, Romero Brest began the editorial project of *Ver y Estimar*, which worked as a platform from which he established a net of intellectual contacts that included the two Italian critics.

Already in the first issue Damián Bayón commented the recent publication of Margherita's *Espejo de la pintura actual*, in June 1948. Romero Brest disseminated a letter in which Sarfatti referred to the Quadriennale di Roma and to a retrospective of the Futurist group²⁵ and, in November 1949 arrived her first collaboration under the headline "El sonriente y paciente Bellini", published in the same number in which there was a welcome to this Venetian known amongst the public for her "vigorous and tireless combative spirit", according to the director of the magazine²⁶.

Due to the interest that the Biennale di Venezia brought about, the following letter by Sarfatti advanced that, mainly, she was questioning the place that

24 VENTURI, Lionello. "Algunas consideraciones inactuales sobre la crítica de arte en Italia", *9 Artes*, Buenos Aires, n 4, abril de 1949, p. 34 and 42.

25 Cf "Misceláneas", *Ver y Estimar*, Buenos Aires, n 3, vol I, June 1948, pp. 53-56.

26 SARFATTI, Margherita. "El sonriente y paciente Bellini", *Ver y Estimar*, Buenos Aires, n 14/15, vol III, noviembre de 1949, pp. 3-18.

should be allocated to the abstract art in this international meeting²⁷. There is no doubt that the opinion forecast the approach that would guide her way of looking while visiting that 1950 Biennale di Venezia. Indeed, after making a tour, on her next contribution disappointed she asked herself: "Where are the new Picasso, Braque and Matisse, where in Italy are the Boccioni, Modigliani, Sironi and Carrà, to sum up, the new chiefs of the nowadays generation?"²⁸. Although the retrospectives of some celebrated artists provided a sparkle of enthusiasm, in general made clear her dissatisfaction regarding the new direction.

When the 1950s started the scenarios of international art were changing and Romero Brest started to move the direction of his interests (especially after his first trip to New York). From this perspective, words assume greater meaning with which, in October 1949, he received the other Italian collaborator²⁹:

With satisfaction and honor we publish this first collaboration of Lionello Venturi, who by doing so demonstrates his sympathy for this magazine. We just need to make the readers notice the huge importance of the defense of abstract art which is discussed in this article, once he is a historian with a great experience with the artworks from the past.

Precisely, Venturi's inaugural article discussed the relation Nature/ Art from an updated position and permeable to modifications. Venturi had already written in the magazine *Biennale* that a painting "all nature" as a painting "all calculation" would be unthinkable³⁰:

It is possible to add – he said – that once the art theory as the imitation of the nature does not belong to the world of culture anymore, the concrete which is considered as an essential demand of the artwork is the artist way of feeling. In other words, the modern aesthetic has brought to the interior of the creator subject that nature that was previously empirically considered as houses, rivers and mountains.

This line of thought offered some supporting aspects for the arguments that Romero Brest was maturing and, on that context, the connection between them became more intense. At that time Venturi was promoting some abstract artists, especially those who integrated the *Gruppo degli Otto*, which in general terms, were those who proposed a kind of abstraction that renounced the neo-cubist formalism but was not free from a certain "impressionist" touch³¹. Romero Brest met the group production at the Biennale di Venezia in 1952 and wrote about some of them in *Ver y Estimar*.

27 Sarfatti's letter is dated Rome, April 1950 and was published in *Ver y Estimar*, n 19, vol V, September 1950, pp. 35-45.

28 SARFATTI, Margherita. "Escribe desde Roma Margarita Sarfatti", *Ver y Estimar*, Buenos Aires, n 21/22, vol III, marzo de 1951, pp 45-48.

29 VENTURI, Lionello. "Naturaleza y Arte", *Ver y Estimar*, Buenos Aires, n 13, vol III, octubre-de 1949, pp. 5-9.

30 VENTURI, Lionello, "astratta-concreto", *La Biennale de Venezia*, Venezia, n 1, julio 1950, p. II.

31 The *Gruppo degli Otto* was composed by Renato Birolli, Antonio Corpora, Ennio Morlotti, Giuseppe Santomaso, Giulio Turcato, Emilio Vedova, Afro Basaldella and Mattia Moreni.

New alliances in a renewed artistic field

When it comes to the insertions of the figures of Sarfatti and Venturi in the Rio de la Plata artistic field of the post war, it is necessary to bear in mind the impact brought about by the early irruption of the concrete avant-garde. After the summer of 1944, the artists of the Rio de la Plata who were gathered around the ideas expressed in *Arturo. Revista de artes abstractas* started to develop a concrete art program which came up with artworks that “depicted” simple forms painted with flat colors, paintings cropping frame, movable objects or directional sculptures. They postulated “invention” above “representation” and believed it was possible to articulate their proposal with a communist militancy, sustaining their aesthetic program as an alternative to the Soviet realism which demanded the prevailing Stalinist pattern. Since 1945, this disruptive impulse initiated strong polemics faced by the young avant-garde with the consecrated artists who produced figurative art, many of them within a realism compromised with the same left-wing ideology they subscribed.

At the “heroic period” (1945/48) the concrete artists did not count on the critic support and not even with the official one, once the speeches by the Minister of Education and Justice qualified the abstract art as pathologic, morbid and perverse. However, by the end of the decade, and considering that not only concrete art but abstraction variants, had already gained positions, the art critique demonstrated to be more interested in disseminating and debating. Whereas in São Paulo’s artistic field the collections that were being put together would be the basis of the new institutions that emerged under the influence of the private sector, in the area of the Rio de la Plata the tensions were more concentrated in the collapse of the plastic language rather than the institutional transformations.

São Paulo’s enhancement boosted by important representatives of the Italian community turned Sarfatti into a key figure, such as pointed out by the studies of Magalhães, who has succeeded in reconstructing the complex net of contacts which explains the provenance of the artworks of the collection Francisco (Ciccillo) Matarazzo Sobrinho and Yolanda Penteadó³². The Argentinian institutional context, instead, maintained the state pre-eminence with a light sign of the private incidence, such as the case of the Instituto de Arte Moderno created in 1949, by the initiative of Marcelo De Ridder. The Instituto de Arte Moderno received the inaugural exhibition of former MAM, *Do Figurativismo ao Abstracionismo*, and soon, Ignacio Pirovano (De Ridder’s friend and Director of the Museo de Arte Decorativo) became an important link for the relations with São Paulo’s context. However, to Pirovano’s aesthetical horizon in that moment modern art of abstract slope would be imposed, once towards 1950 he received the advices from Tomás Maldonado.

Although Romero Brest had not approached the concrete artists in the imme-

32 MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves. Cat. Exp. *Classicismo, realismo, vanguarda. Pintura Italiana no Entreguerras* São Paulo: MAC USP, pp. 7-26.

diate postwar³³ he began to get involved in the end of 1940s. As the 1950s started – strengthened by his participation in the Jury of the I Bienal de São Paulo – he chose Sarfatti to debate abstraction openly answering a letter in which some paragraphs by Margherita discredited the abstract art (even though not rejecting it completely). The Argentinian critic refuted her statements and with a kind but uncompromising tone, reproached her for being too much “attached to past, as precisely shown by the Novecento movement, formed by artists of personal value, indeed, but who does not contribute with the language of our time”³⁴.

No doubt that with this epilogue, Romero Brest returned Sarfatti to the past, showing that he selected a picture of his “friend” which kept the mark of the aesthetical conception of the Mussolini’s period; irreconcilable with the crusade for the abstract art that he was committed to by then, and for which Venturi’s profile became more suitable. Of course there was the importance of the aesthetic and ideological interests.

Apart the affinities that we highlighted, the Argentinian critic and the Italian one shared other experiences: while Romero Brest had presented Venturi’s book noticing that not only he was a “renowned” historian but also a professor who writes from the chair at the Università di Roma, that is, in the academic environment that he had recovered when returned to his country, in the mid-1950s, Lionello greeted Romero Brest when – after the fall of Juan D. Perón’s government – was designated Director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. In his letter he said: “Infinite joy for your success and Argentina’s. We are now doubly friends because we have rebelled against the tyrant and because we have had the recognition after his fall”³⁵.

On the other hand, Di Tella not only integrated an affluent Italian family who lived in Argentina, but also on the basis of the collection which Venturi had advised it was founded the ITDT. From 1960 on, Romero Brest advised ITDT and between 1963 and 1969 was the director of its Centro de Artes Visuales, which sheltered many avant-garde manifestations at the time. In this new scenario Venturi worked as an international jury and had an active participation up to his death in 1961.

In short, the returning to Italy concluded the phase of exile for both Sarfatti and Venturi, and that conclusion also allowed making a balance. After returning, Sarfatti lost the halo of an exile which had distanced her from fascism, but at the same time, which had demanded from her a struggle between the stigma of being “Mussolini’s mistress” and the need to build an image that self-represented her, as shown on her confessions in *Crítica*. To Venturi, instead, the

33 ROSSI, M. Cristina, “Los nuevos de entonces. El crítico Romero Brest y la abstracción argentina y brasileña”, *Concinnitas: Revista do Instituto de Artes do UERJ y la Universidad do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*, a. 6, n. 7, diciembre de 2004, pp 7-31. Available at: <http://concinnitas.kinghost.net/index.cfm?edicao=7>.

34 SARFATTI, Margherita. “Polémica sobre el Arte Abstracto. Carta de Margarita G. de Sarfatti”, *Ver y Estimar*, Buenos Aires, n 27, vol VII, abril-de 1952, pp. 6-15; ROMERO BREST, Jorge. “Polémica sobre el Arte Abstracto. Respuesta de Jorge Romero Brest”, *Ver y Estimar*, Buenos Aires, n 27, vol VII, abril-de 1952, pp. 15-24; ROSSI, M. Cristina, “Una pulseada por la abstracción. Jorge Romero Brest entre Margheria Sarfatti y Lionello Venturi” In GIUNTA, Andrea & MALOSETTI COSTA, Laura, op. cit., pp. 51-69.

35 Letter from L. Venturi to J. Romero Brest, on April 3rd 1956, in Archivos JRB, UBA, Correspondence, n 568.

balance was advantageous not only because his exile had permitted him to continue the development of a flourishing career, to open spaces of interlocution and gain prestige in New York, which in that moment, began to dispute with Paris the dominance of the modern art.

On the one hand, during the times of the cold war and the measures by Truman's administration, Latin American countries tended re-channel their international bonds. In this context, it is possible to comprehend the publication of Sarfatti-Romero Brest's polemic as a strategy oriented to clearly mark a watershed not only regarding the abstraction language, but also regarding the pro-fascist expressions. On the other hand, in the mid-1950s the modernization plans post-Peron demanded renovation of the alliances within the artistic field. Soon, the Di Tella's initiatives demonstrated an ideal scenario to interact with Venturi, who had the triumph cards earned during the exile, a scenario that would not be squandered by some people – such as Romero Brest – who desired to turn Buenos Aires into a new international center of art. To sum up, for that moment, Margherita and Lionello not only demonstrated a profile designed by the time of the exile, but also were significant pieces in the interplay of forces that existed in the context of the Argentinian modern art.

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