

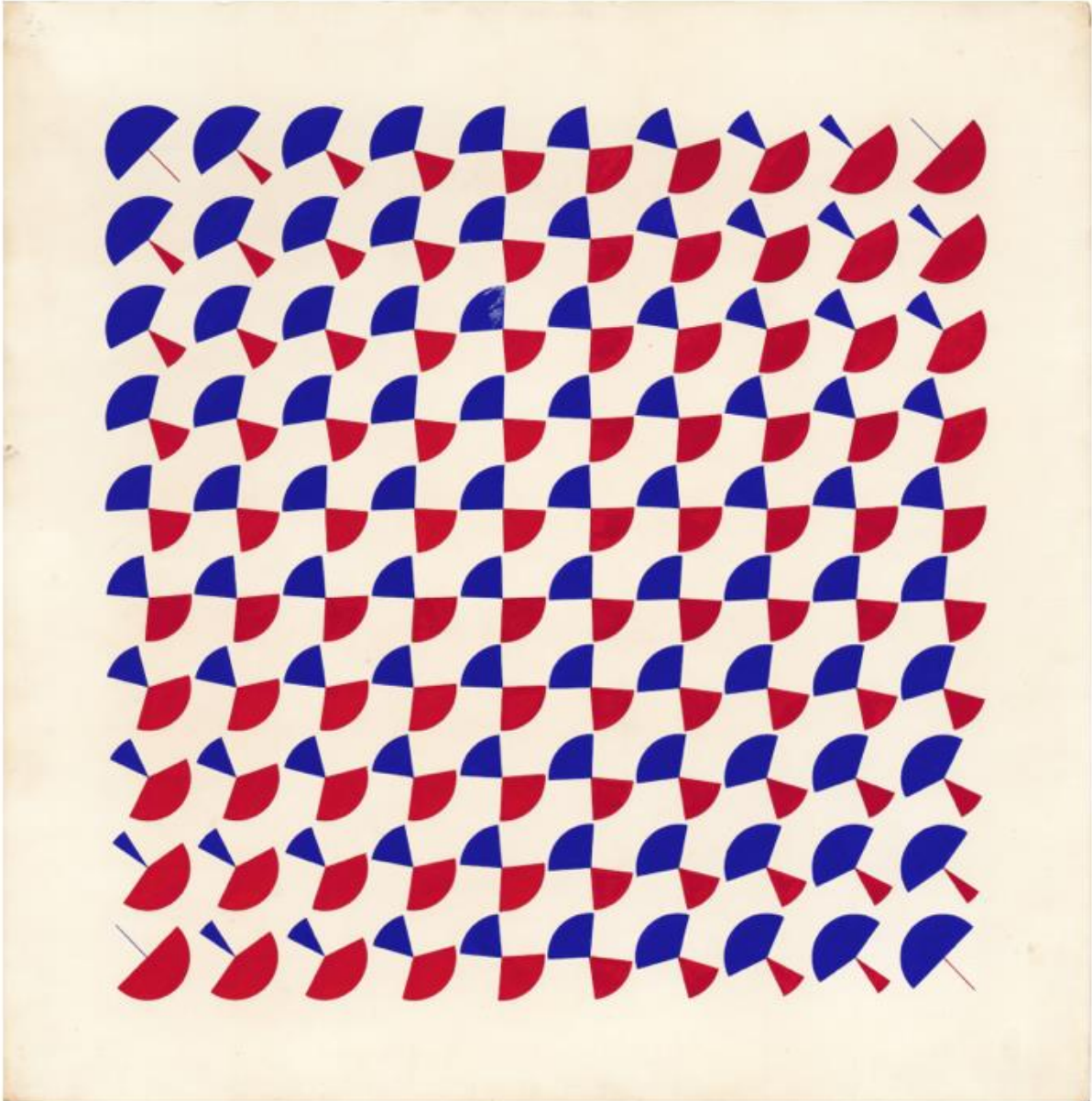
Art **Reviews**

Julio Le Parc's Brilliant Op Art Beginnings

The Argentinian modernist tried obsessively to bring order to chaos, even in the midst of unrelenting flux.



by Zachary Small
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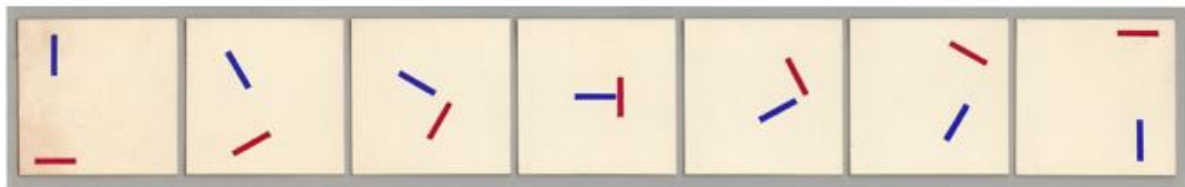


Julio Le Parc, "Mutation of Forms (Mutación de Formas)" (1959), gouache on cardboard (image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, © Julio Le Parc)

Forget the foibles of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's damned and dogged attempts to revise the modernist canon with *Epic Abstraction*, an epic fail.

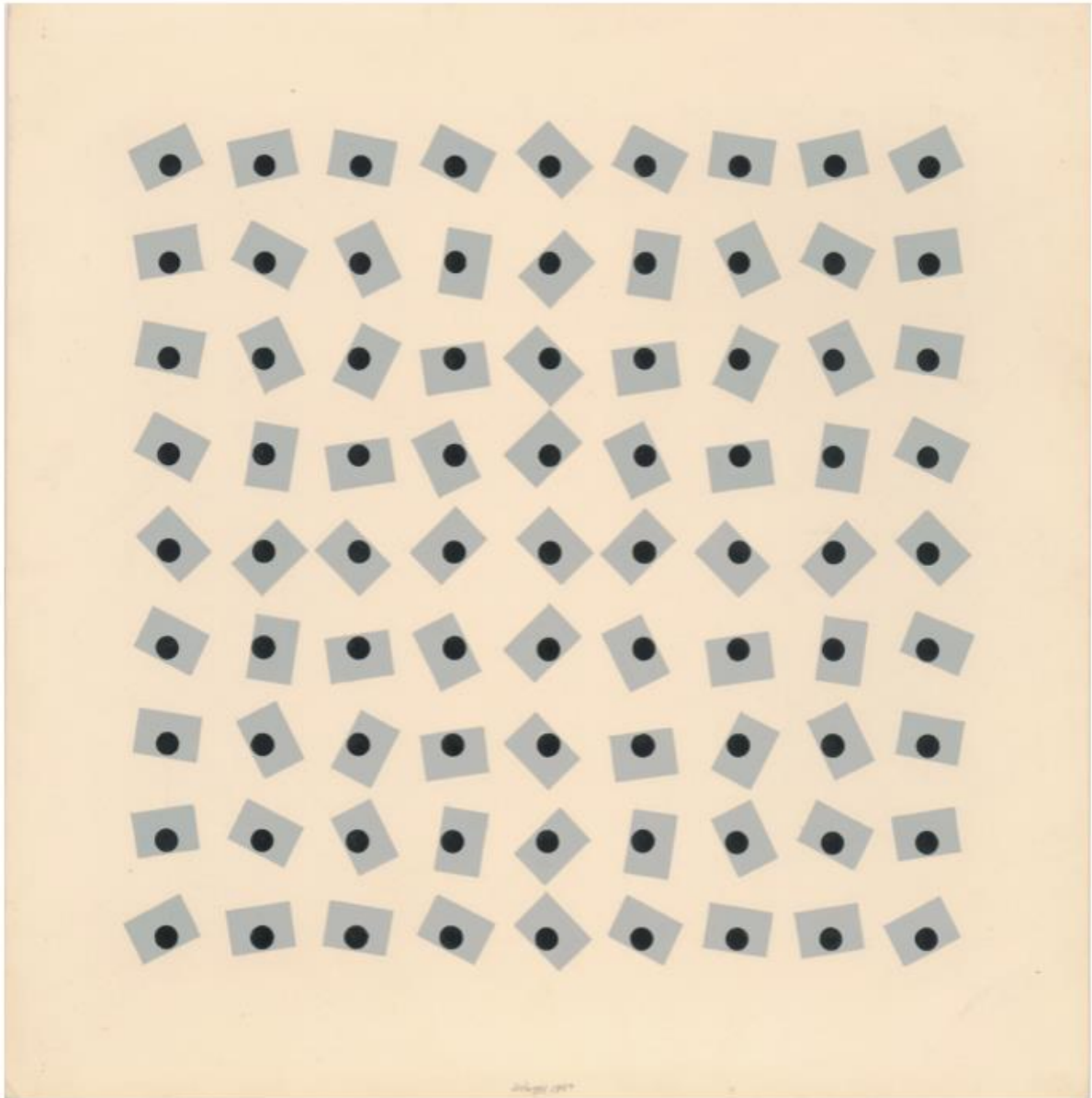
Instead, travel seven blocks south to the museum's sister site, the Met Breuer, where artist Julio Le Parc is schooling museum-goers in a criminally underrated corner of South American art. *Julio Le Parc 1959* is the Argentinian's first solo exhibition in a New York museum. It clarifies the artist's position in the firmament of aesthetic pioneers like Bridget Riley and Alexander Calder. Creative to the core, Le Parc helped inspire Op Art and Kinetic Art, two movements closely associated with Riley and Calder, respectively.

Arriving from Argentina to Paris in 1958, Le Parc became a minor character in a litany of European artist groups: Germany's Zero Group, Yugoslavia's Nouvelle Tendence, and Argentina's Tucumán Arde movement. The man got around. Arguably, his greatest influence on culture was through the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), which Le Parc cofounded in Paris alongside five other artists, including François Morellet and Francisco Sobrino. Active between 1960 and 1968, the group rejected the concept of a "solo" artist by favoring collectively devised labyrinthian structures that engulfed viewers in an aesthetic experience. Presaging interactive art forms that became popular in the 1990s, GRAV's installations integrated scientific and technical innovations into the artists' designs.



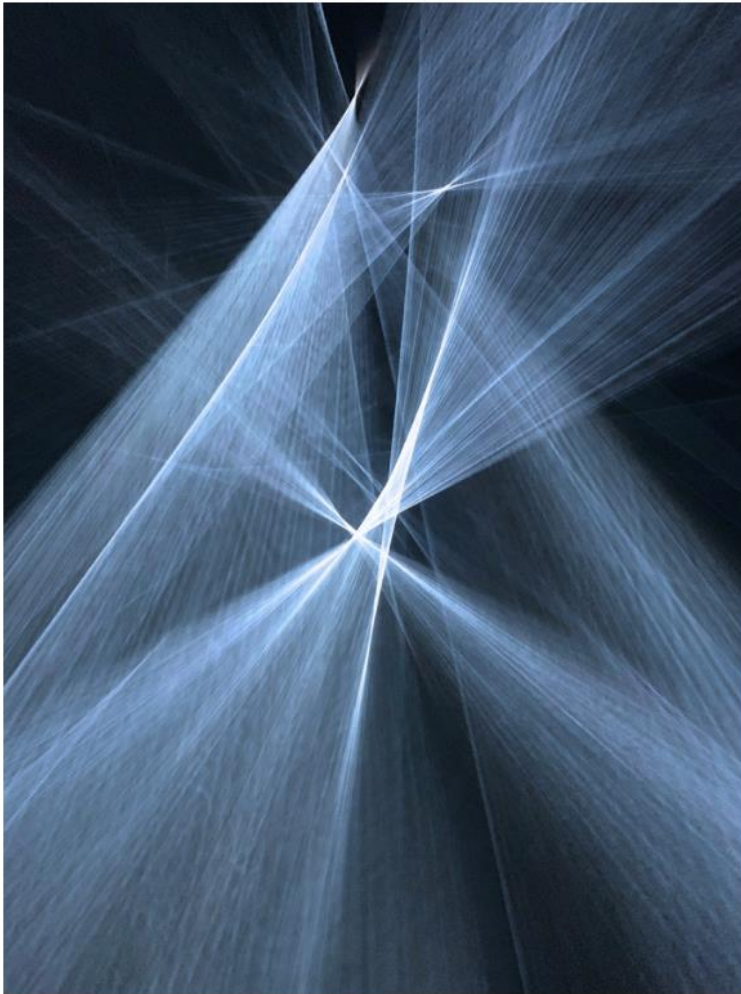
"Seven Sequences of the Movement of the Translational Motion of Red and Blue Segments (Siete secuencias del movimiento de translacion de los segmentos rojo y azul)" (1959), gouache on cardboard (image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, © Julio Le Parc)

Le Parc's rising profile in the art world undermined GRAV's collective ethos. In 1966, the artist won the Grand Prize in Painting at the 33rd Venice Biennale. Two years later, the group disbanded and Le Parc faded into the art world's periphery, reemerging 50 years later as a rediscovered and celebrated figure of the postwar milieu with exhibitions at Paris's Palais de Tokyo in 2013 and the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) in 2016.



"Translational Rotation (Rotación Translativa)" (1959), gouache on cardboard (image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, © Julio Le Parc)

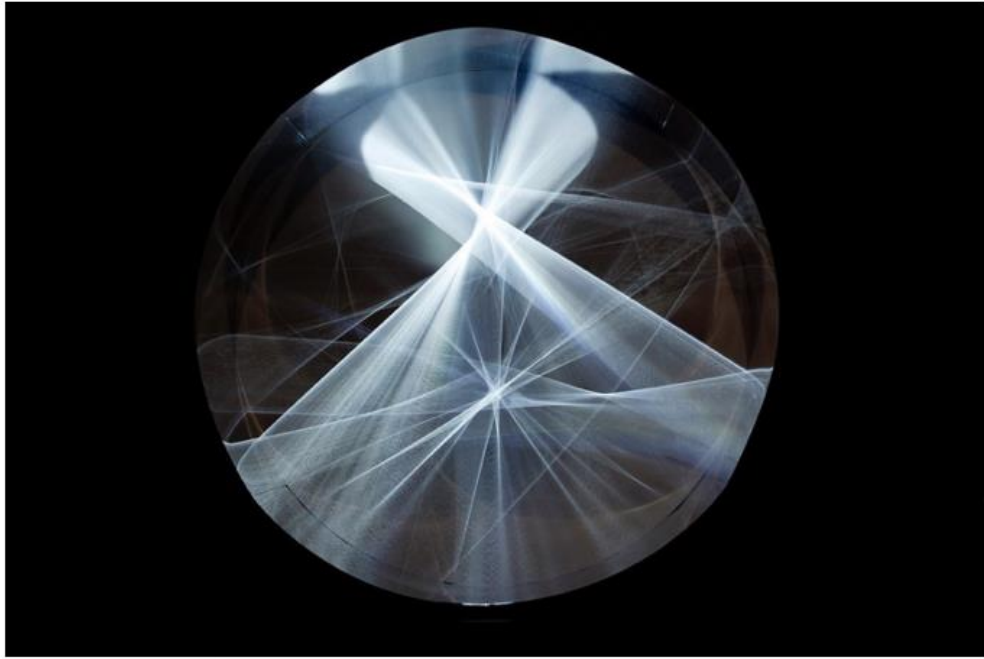
Staged years before his rise and fall, *Julio Le Parc 1959* is a narrow but focused examination of a critical year for the artist. Instead of treating visitors to the visual spectacles seen in the aforementioned exhibitions, curator Iria Candela has conducted a more scholarly investigation into the Argentine's early compositional studies.



Detail view of "Continual Light Cylinder (Continuel Lumière Cylindre)" (image by author)

There's something so beguiling about these first forays into optical illusion. Small pencil marks and graphite erasures accompany monochromatic and rainbow-like patterns that shift as the viewer approaches their frame. From far away, chimeras such as "In Rotation (En Rot-ation)" (1959) dance upon their cardboard canvases, changing form as the viewer approaches. Nose-deep in the patterns, the eye finds new forms and movement in the work's bluish-grey semi-circles. The same could be said of Le Parc's gouache works "Progressive Sequences (Séquences Progressives)" (1959) and "Translational Rotation (Rotación Translativa)" (1959), which involve monochromatic shapes that spin and wobble out of each others' orbits. The cumulative effect of these works is a sense of kinetic friction, a ruffling of the picture plane that allows Le Parc's two-dimensional shapes to seemingly take flight from their page.

Halfway through the exhibition, *Julio Le Parc 1959* offers a taste of the artist's more elaborate works from the 1960s. "Continual Light Cylinder (Continuel Lumière Cylindre)" (1962/2018), for example, evinces the artist's grander ambitions. In a dark room a light projection dances across a Plexiglas mirror. An angelic gauze appears within a circular Plexiglas frame, entrancing the viewer with its skeletal architecture. Like a faint breath, it appears and disappears. The darkness that floods in is tenuous, a temporary fright before the projector's light re-illuminates the space.



"Continual Light Cylinder (Continuel Lumière Cylindre)" (1962/2018), wood, Plexiglas mirror, projectors, and motor (image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, © Julio Le Parc)

More than an academic flight of fancy concerning composition and color, Le Parc's work evolved from the 1940s Buenos Aires avant-garde he knew as a student. Alongside his peers, he attempted to reinvigorate geometric abstraction according to the principles of Marxism's dialectical materialism. Ingrained within this work is an exploration of the vicissitudes between Argentina's booming postwar economy and its increasingly repressive Perónist regime. Even before he decamped to Paris, his home government was surveilling intellectuals and artists, forcing many to resign from their university positions.

Viewed within this convulsive and revolutionary snapshot of life, Le Parc's abstractions historically wedge themselves within a narrative of how Latin American artists responded to their region's growing pains during rapid modernization. *Le Parc 1959* quotes the artist as saying, in 1970, "My pleasure was to imagine all these variations happening over time, and my calculations of probability brought me to consider another situation: unlimited duration." This is an artist who tried obsessively to bring order to chaos, even in the midst of unrelenting flux.

Looking at Le Parc through this broader historical lens brings a new appreciation for works like "Sequences in Rotation of Color (Sequencias en Rotación Color)" (1959). Here, the viewer can find a great tension between the image's cheery rainbow colors and its percussive rectilinear pattern. The

tension between the two motifs produces a dizziness common to the artist's illusory oeuvre. Within the context of midcentury modernization, these unstable images relay a sense of unceasing and unstable progress.

Julio Le Parc 1959 continues at the Met Breuer (945 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through February 24.

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