



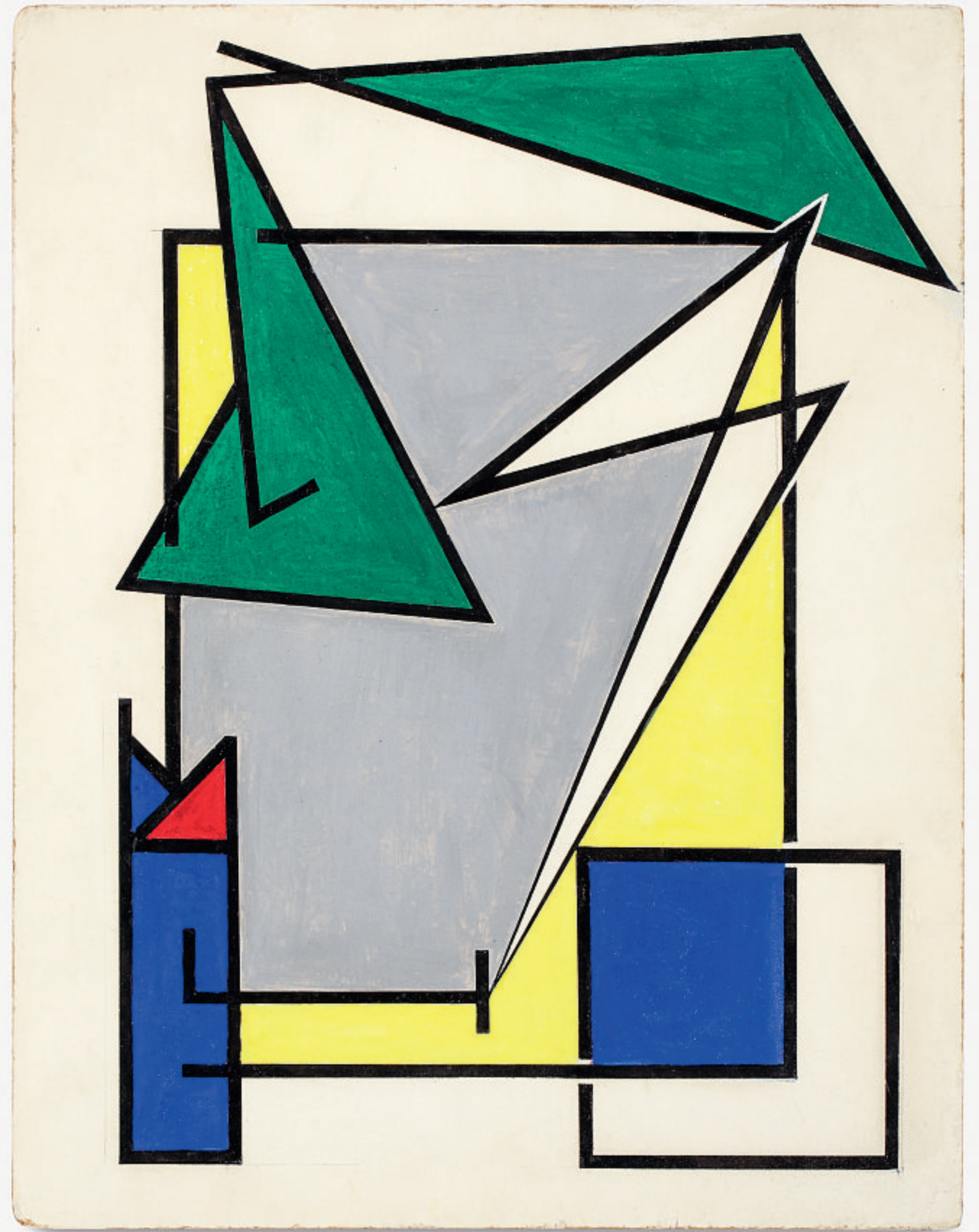
Soto: Vibrations 1950–1960

# Soto: Vibrations 1950–1960

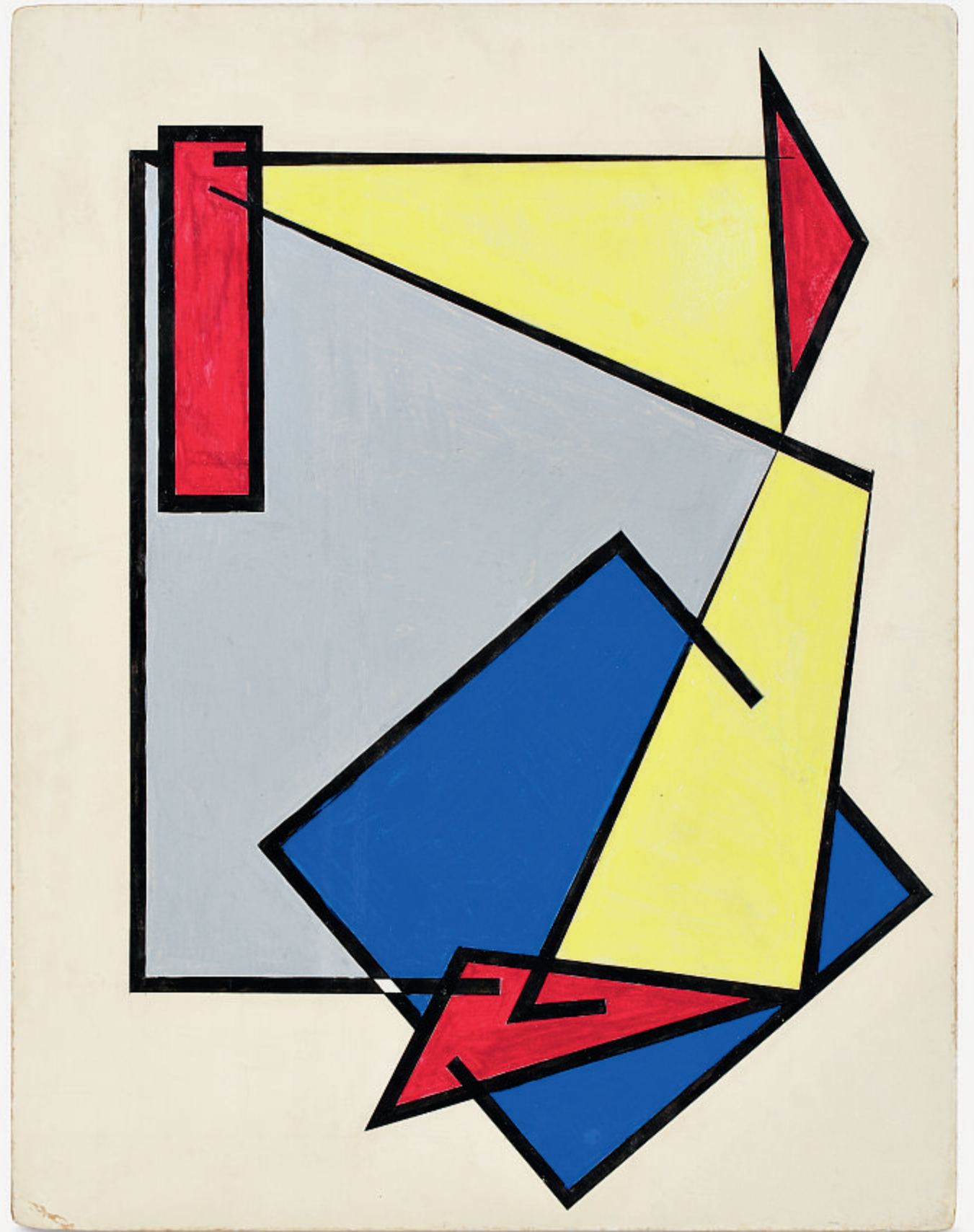
with text by Jean-Paul Ameline

Hauser & Wirth Publishers

*Untitled*, 1950  
Oil on Masonite  
13 3/4 x 10 5/8 in. (35 x 27 cm)



*Untitled*, 1950  
Oil on Masonite  
13 3/4 x 10 5/8 in. (35 x 27 cm)



*Untitled (Composition dynamique)*, 1951  
Oil on canvas  
32 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 26 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (83 × 67 × 2 cm)



# Soto Step by Step

## Jean-Paul Ameline

Soto often favored interviews with art critics in order to explain the creative process that led him from his first abstract works inspired by Mondrian (1951) to his first kinetic works (1955) and then to his first *Penetrables* (1967).<sup>1</sup> These conversations, which are vital for understanding the artist's development, represent a key resource for an analysis of Soto's oeuvre<sup>2</sup> that focuses on the 1950s as a decisive period during which, to use his own words, he moves on from an "optical" to a "kinetic" conception of his work.<sup>3</sup> In these exchanges, Soto retraces, step by step, the outline of a life story that begins with two essential stages: the time of his training in Venezuela (1942–47), followed by his first years in Paris (1950–55), during which he transitions from an abstract art still grounded in the classical rules of composition to a new plastic approach that relinquishes them, while at the same time using industrial materials that allow him to pursue the history of abstraction by new means. In retrospect, however, it seems that the linear way in which the artist presents the development of his oeuvre does not always allow the art historian to discern the sometimes complex links between the various phases of Soto's research or the contradictions inherent to it.

To go beyond abstract art or to prolong it; to consider the history of painting finished, and even so to claim it for oneself; to maintain form or to destroy it; to affirm space and, simultaneously, its ambiguity; to introduce found objects and materials in the work, but only to better make them disappear through what the artist calls their "dematerialization" by way of vibration: these are some of the many paradoxes intrinsic to Soto's investigations—the very ones that constitute, in fact, the real ferment of his unrelenting quest, its headways and dead ends, its qualitative leaps and its backtrackings. In this respect, an analysis of the artworks' facture can only bring us to a finer perception of the

Soto titled his work in many different languages—primarily French and Spanish, the languages in which he lived. Works are referred to throughout this book by the precise titles Soto used; in this essay, English translations of work titles are also provided.

1. See "Dialogue: J. R. Soto & Guy Brett," *Signals Newsbulletin* 1, no. 10 (November–December 1965): 13; Jean Clay, *Visages de l'art moderne* (Lausanne: Rencontre, 1969), 265–317; Claude-Louis Renard, "Excerpts from an interview with Soto," *Soto: A Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1974), 8–21; André Parinaud, *Conversations avec des hommes remarquables sur l'art et les idées d'un siècle* (Paris: Michel de Maule, 2004), 149–55; Ariel Jimenez, *Conversaciones con Jesús Soto*, bilingual Spanish-English text (Caracas: Fundación Cisneros, 2005), 137–79 for the English translation.
2. See Arnaud Pierre, "L'immatériel de Soto et la peinture du continuum," *Soto* (Paris: Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1997), 17–30; Estrellita B. Brodsky, "Relocating the Dislocated," *Soto: Paris and Beyond, 1950–1970* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2012), 11–43; Matthieu Poirier, "A Penetrating Gaze," *Jesus Rafael Soto* (Paris: Galerie Perrotin, 2014), 4–15.

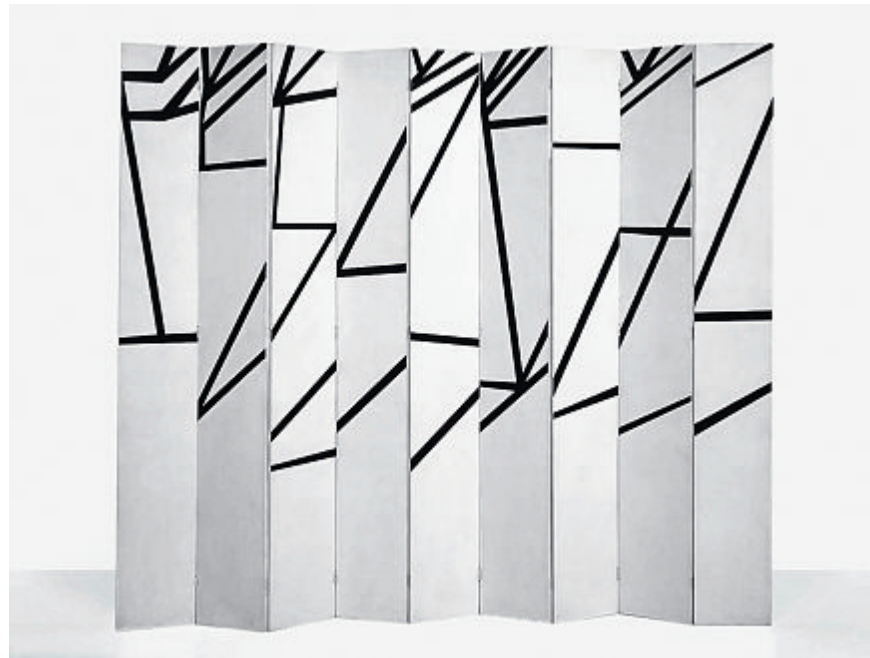


fig. 1: Ellsworth Kelly, *La Combe II* (The dove II), 1950–51. Oil on wood, folding screen of nine hinged panels, 39¼ × 44½ × 2½ in. (100 × 113 × 7 cm). Courtesy Ellsworth Kelly Archives

artist's approach. Soto's desire to tangibly test his aesthetic hypotheses leads him, early on, to grapple with solutions and materials that are unconventional in the history of painting: Plexiglas as early as 1953, wire after 1957, and next, until 1961, scrap metal, found wood and objects, fabrics, putty, and plaster. These new implements give shape to a *body* of work that one cannot properly designate in terms of abstraction. Moreover, they allow Soto to eschew an all-too-narrow classification of his work that rests on the well-known dichotomies of the canonical oppositions between geometric painting and gestural painting, optical and kinetic, realist and informal—categories that young generations of artists have contested time and again since the 1940s, both in Europe and in Latin America.

Soto discovers Cubism and the paintings of Mondrian through reproductions in art journals during his years of academic training in Venezuela. However, he is confronted soon after—both in his own country and, as of October 1950, in Paris—with a Latin-American artistic milieu in which the formal order of abstraction inherited from its founders has already lost its relevance. The works of the Argentinean group *Madí* (including Gyula Kosice, Carmelo Arden Quin, and Rhod Rothfuss, among others) and of the Venezuelan group *Los Disidentes* (especially Narciso Debourg, Rubén Nuñez, and Péran Erminy), which are shown in Paris between 1948 and 1956 in that high temple of abstraction, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (Salon of New Realities), are already driven by formal principles that break with the inherited orthodoxy

3. "I do not make optical art. I made this kind of art between 1950 and 1954. Afterward, I outgrew these investigations and engaged on the path of kineticism. I understand kineticism as an art that draws on real movement—be it that of the viewer or that of the artwork itself." ("Je ne fais pas d'art optique. J'en ai fait entre 1950 et 1954. Puis j'ai dépassé ces recherches pour m'engager dans la voie du cinétisme. J'entends par cinétisme un art qui fait appel au mouvement réel—soit du spectateur, soit de l'œuvre.") (Soto, undated manuscript, Soto Archives, Paris.)
4. May 1950, while the *Madí* artists exhibit their works at the Colette Allendy Gallery, the group's manifesto, circulated by Carmelo Arden Quin, states: "[...] we want plurality, we seek transparency. Light does nothing else but enlarge space [...]. Our painting will liberate colours! All is moving! There is no doubt that movement, through the revolving door of *Madí*, is already invading all art like a prodigious electric river." ("[...] nous voulons la pluralité, nous cherchons la transparence. La lumière ne fait pas autre chose qu'élargir l'espace [...]. Notre peinture mettra en liberté les couleurs! Tout bouge! Sans aucun doute le mouvement, par la porte tournante de *Madí*, envahit déjà tout l'art, tel un fleuve prodigieux électrique.") (quoted in Agnès de Maistre, "Les groupes Arte Concreto-Invencción et *Madí*," *Art d'Amérique latine*, [Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1992], 346.)

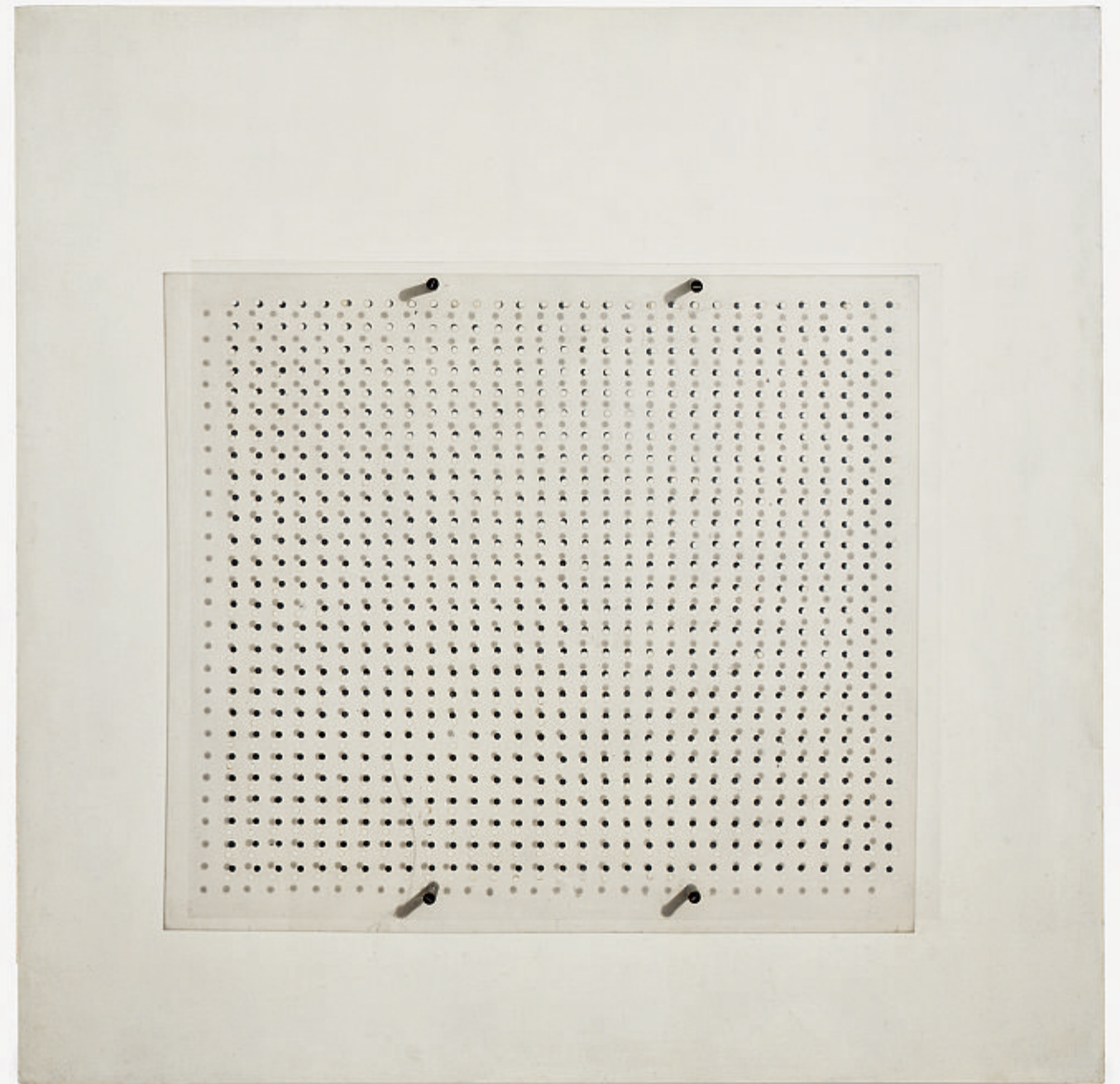


fig. 2: *Muro óptico* (Optical wall), 1951. Paint on wood, 47¼ × 141¾ in. (120 × 360 cm)

of Neoplasticism: non-rectangular paintings, rotating sculptures, jointed reliefs, and artworks that can be manipulated.<sup>4</sup> When Soto himself exhibits at the Réalités Nouvelles in the summer of 1951, he shows new works made since his arrival in October of the previous year: four compositions titled *Busquedas dinámicas* (also known as *Compositions dynamiques* [Dynamic compositions]; pp. 13–23) that prove his desire “to make Mondrian dynamic,” as he will later recollect.<sup>5</sup> These works demonstrate a will to subvert the strictly orthogonal structure of the Dutch master's paintings in order to replace it with a flurry of tumultuous curves and incomplete grids that liberate planes of pure color. It is here, at the Salon of 1951, that Soto encounters *La Combe II* (fig. 1), a surprising abstract screen made of nine panels, joined together according to the laws of chance, by an American who is well-known on the Parisian scene: Ellsworth Kelly. This complete break from Neoplasticism—also visible in Paris, at the time, in the line compositions of Charles Maussion and the dot constellations of Georges Koskas—is a true revelation for the artist. It shows that it is possible to oppose to the *diktat* of a skillfully elaborated composition—symbolized by either symmetry or asymmetry—works founded on other criteria: chance, rhythm, or the deployment of structures unfettered by any trace of subjectivity and free to develop their own qualities. The following year, at the Réalités Nouvelles of 1952, the latest *Composition* by Soto (measuring 145½ inches [370 centimeters] in length and later titled *Muro óptico* [Optical wall]) tests, like Kelly's *La Combe II*, the possibility of constructing a painting by randomly arranging alternating green, black, and white diagonals that appear to break against each other illogically (fig. 2). More daringly still, the five paintings collectively titled *Relations*, which Soto makes from 1952 to 1953 and exhibits at the Salon of 1953, are all grounded in the transition to a new conception of pictorial creation that is based on the strict application of a rule of distribution of forms and colors

5. “Then I began studying the problem of abstraction, starting from the artist who, in my opinion, had moved the farthest along that road: Piet Mondrian. The first thing I tried was to make his work dynamic, to take it out of bi-dimensionality.” (Soto quoted in Jimenez, *Conversaciones con Jesús Soto*, 153.) Note that Soto creates the series *Busquedas dinámicas* shortly after he and his companion Rubén Nuñez travel to Holland to see the Mondrians at the museums in Otterlo and Amsterdam.
6. “When I understood serial music, I found a fabulous world where sound was not used as a function of taste; the way to assemble sound values was perfectly codified. Every musical value was like a number, and using parameters whose measures did not correspond to the traditional ones, a totally different music could be produced. Following this example, I decided to codify pictorial elements and restrict myself to the use of eight colors. Every color had its corresponding number. I wanted to eliminate any subjectivity linked to personal taste, even mine. [...] After codifying them, I decided to do a permutation, as is done with notes in serial music. I didn't permute colors but very simple numerical series: 4, 3, 4, 2, 1, 4, etc.” (Soto quoted in Jimenez, *Conversaciones con Jesús Soto*, 159.)

*Points blancs sur points noirs*, 1954  
Paint on panel and Plexiglas  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 4 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (100 x 100 x 12 cm)





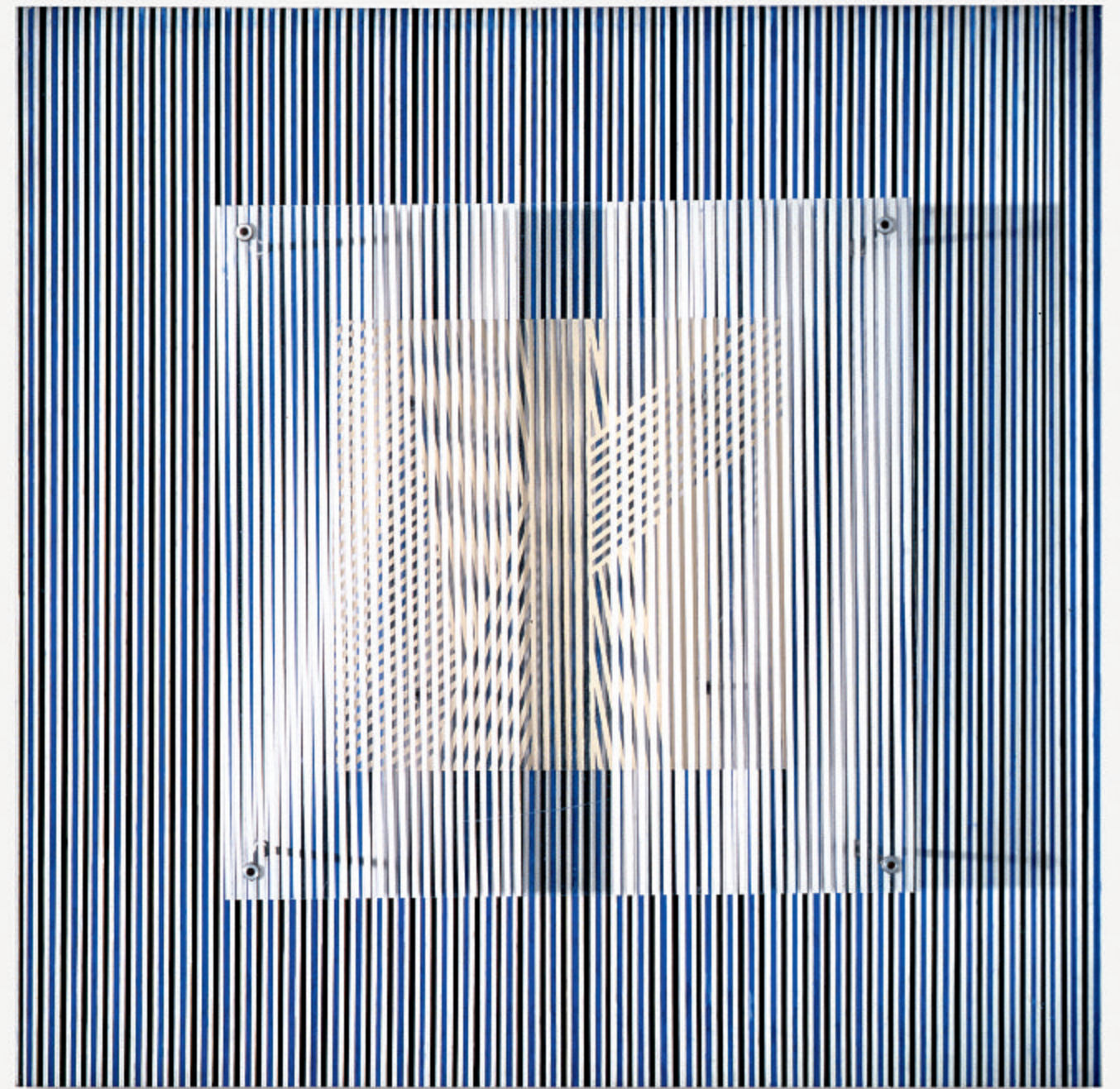
*Composición en cubo*, 1955  
Paint on panel and Plexiglas  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 3 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (100 x 100 x 8 cm)



*Espiral con rojo*, 1955  
Paint on panel and Plexiglas  
19 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (50 x 50 cm)



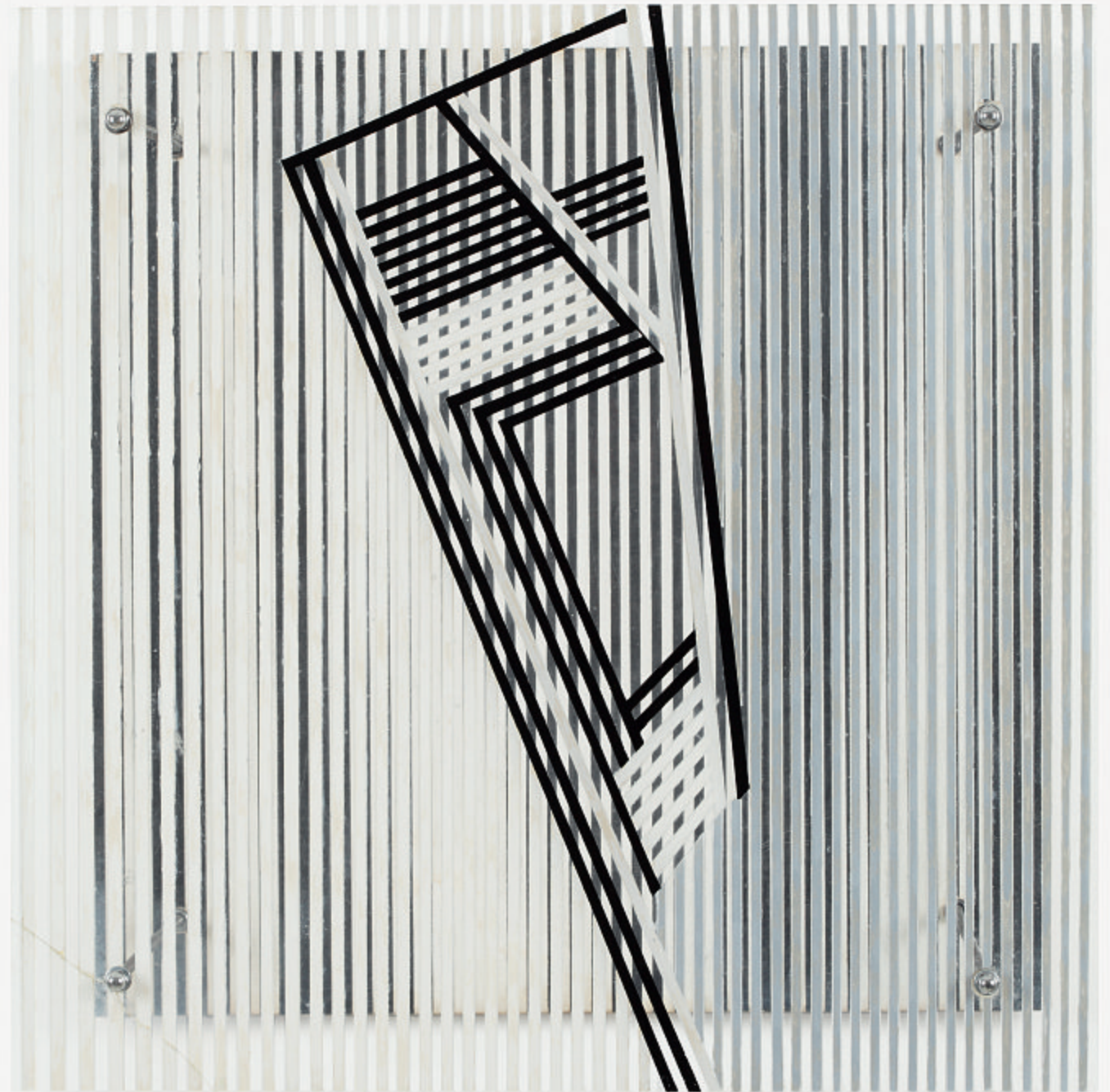
*Luz plata*, 1956  
Paint on Plexiglas and wood  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (100 x 100 x 35 cm)

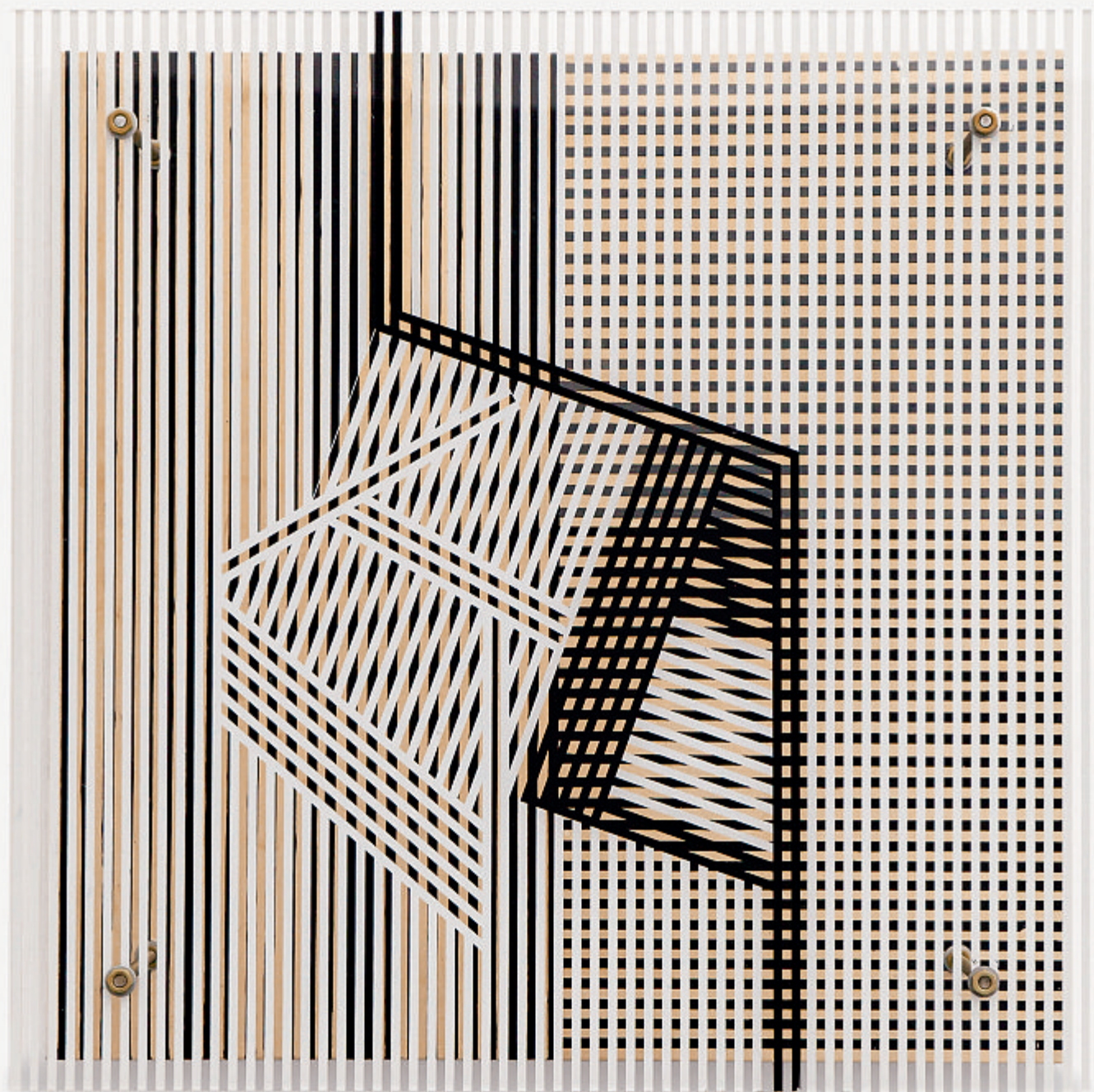




*La boîte*, 1955/1967  
Paint on Plexiglas. Ed. 26/100  
13 3/4 x 13 3/4 x 3 7/8 in. (35 x 35 x 10 cm)  
Opposite, reverse view

*Untitled*, 1956  
Paint on Plexiglas and wood  
19 5/8 x 19 5/8 x 13 3/8 in. (50 x 50 x 34 cm)





*Untitled (Pour Maguy et Moamer)*, 1958  
Paint on Plexiglas and wood  
23 5/8 x 23 5/8 x 9 1/2 in. (60 x 60 x 24 cm)





*Harmonie transformable / Armonía transformable*, 1956  
Paint on Plexiglas and wood  
31 ½ x 15 ¾ x 39 ¾ in. (80 x 40 x 100 cm)

*Vibración blanca*, 1960  
Wire and synthetic paint on fabric on wood  
39¼ x 28 x 5½ in. (101 x 71 x 14 cm)

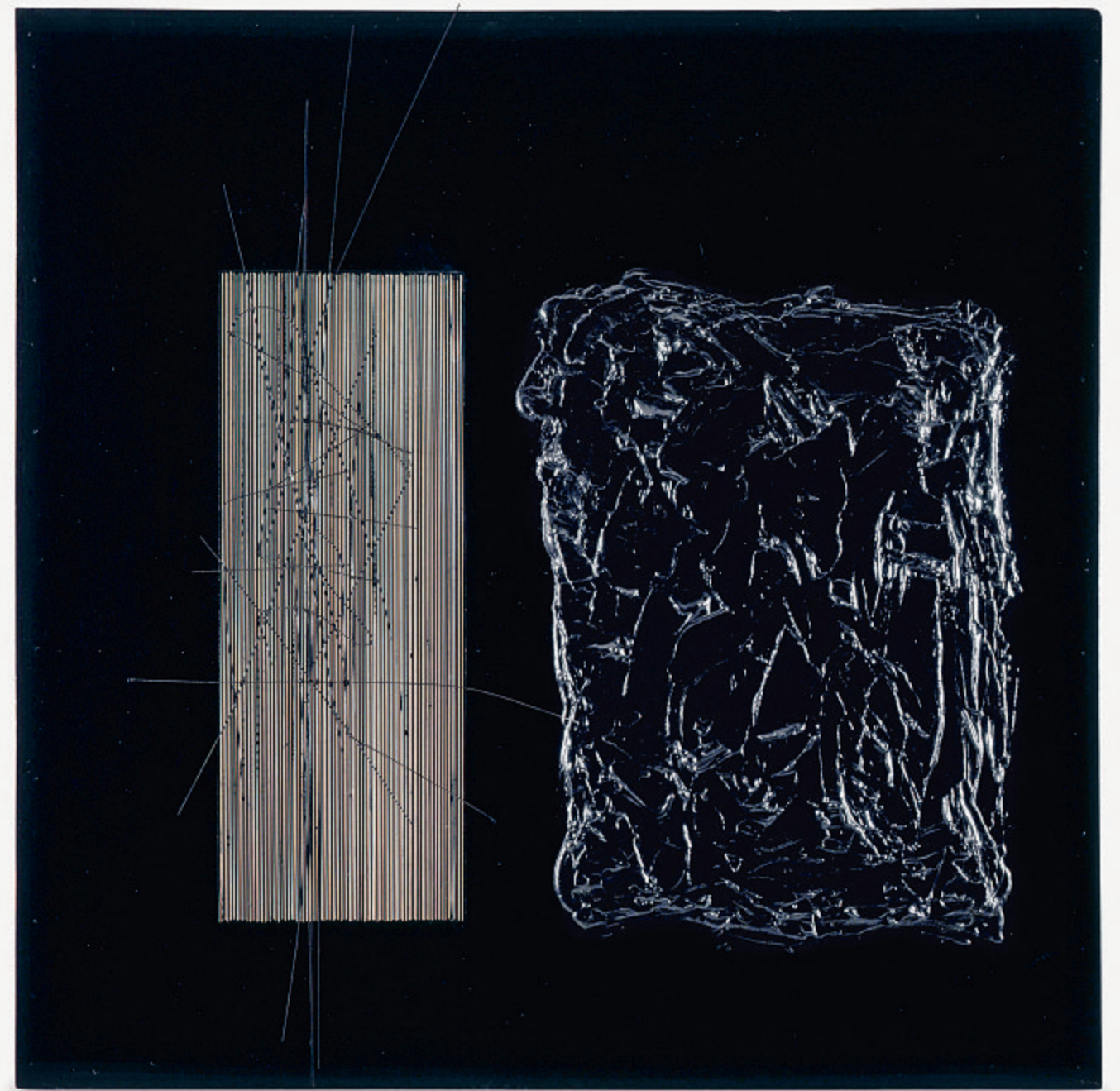




*Untitled (Alambres circulares)*, 1960  
Mixed media on canvas  
14 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 12 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 3 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (37 x 32 x 10 cm)



*Untitled (Para Alain)*, 1960  
Acrylic on wood and metal  
40 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 5 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (102 x 102 x 15 cm)



*Untitled*, 1961  
Wood, acrylic paint, iron, and wire  
29½ x 8¼ x 11 in. (75 x 21 x 28 cm)





*Untitled*, 1961  
Mixed media on canvas  
23<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 23<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (60 × 60 × 11 cm)

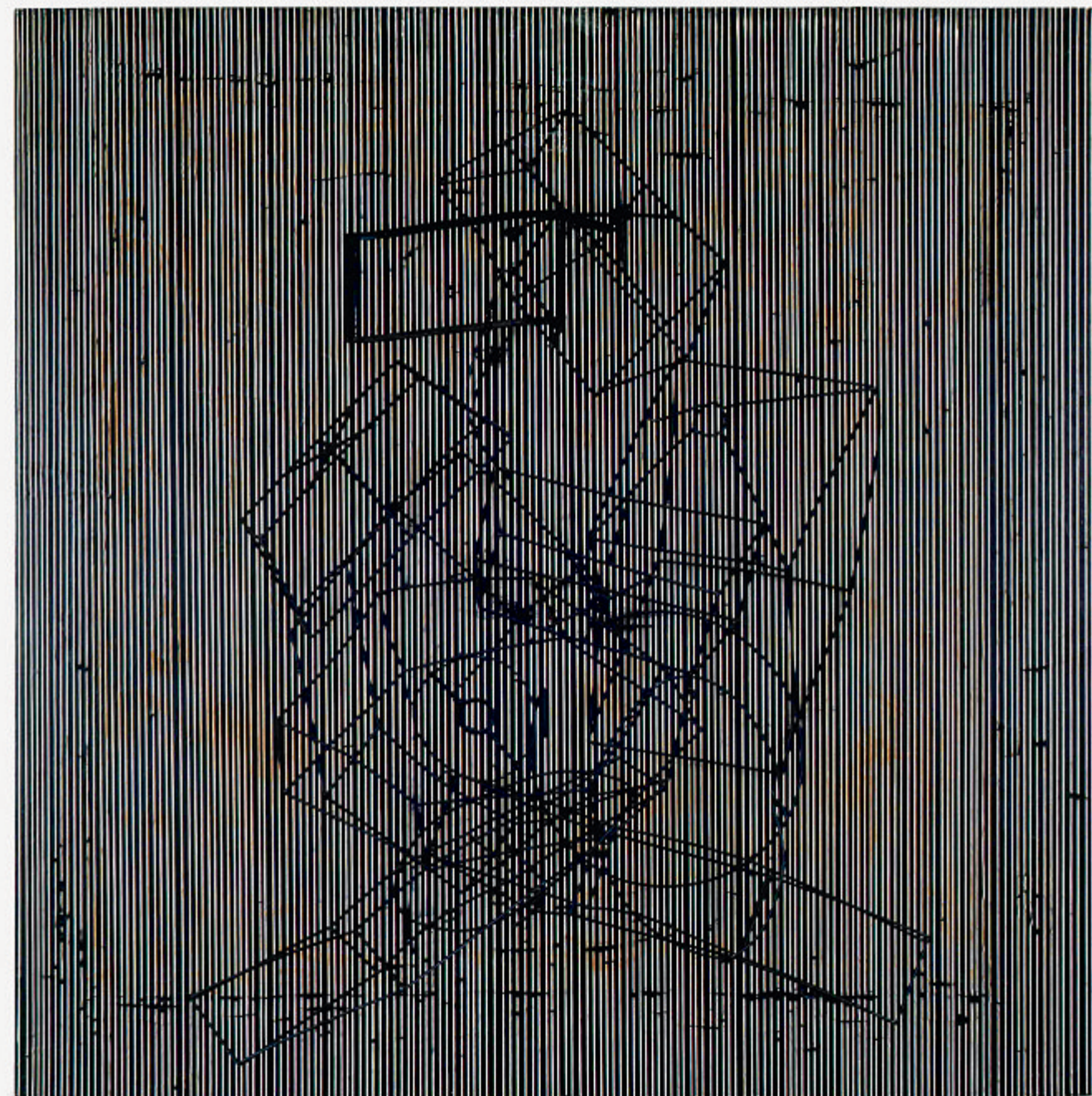


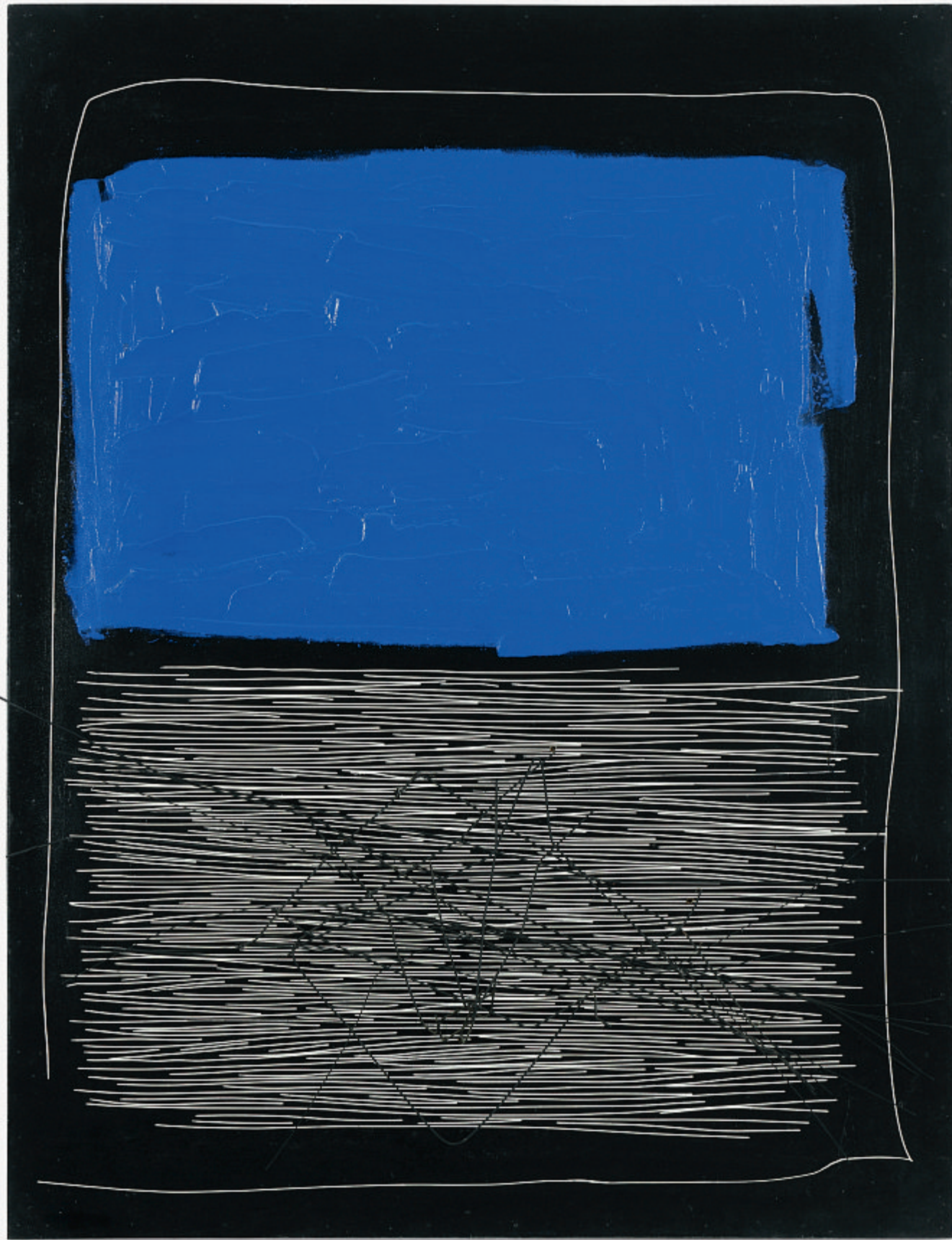


*Materia y grafismo*, 1961  
Mixed media on panel  
44 1/8 x 44 1/8 x 1 5/8 in. (112 x 112 x 4 cm)



*Untitled (Cubos ambiguos)*, 1961  
Mixed media on panel  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (100 x 100 x 27 cm)





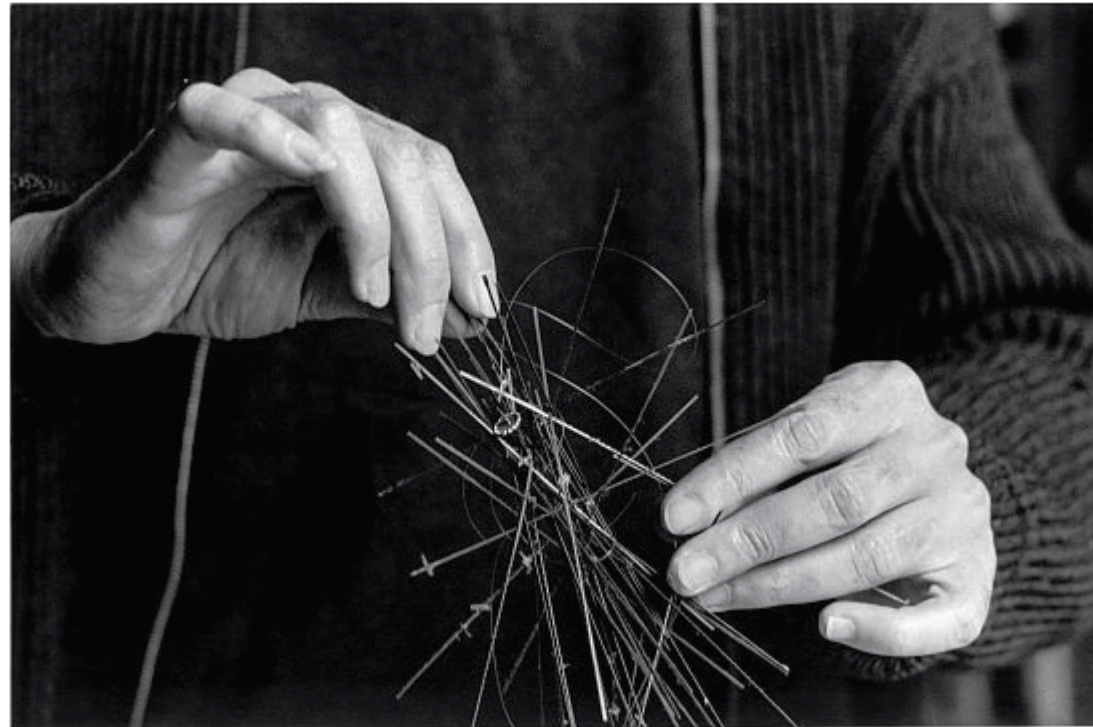
*Untitled*, ca. 1961  
Mixed media on panel  
51 1/8 x 39 3/8 x 11 3/4 in. (130 x 100 x 30 cm)



*Untitled (Barroco negro)*, 1961  
Mixed media on panel  
37½ x 62½ x 6 in. (95.3 x 158.8 x 15.2 cm)



# Chronology



Soto in his workshop, ca. 1960. Photo by Denise Colomb

1923

Soto is born in Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela, on the banks of the Orinoco River, to Emma Soto and Luis García Parra, a violin player. He is the eldest of five children.

1939

Soto begins painting posters for movie theaters. He befriends a group of surrealist students who write for the local press and inspire him to take his art seriously.

1942

Soto receives a scholarship to study at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Artes Aplicadas, Caracas. While there, he forms friendships with fellow students Omar Carreño, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Mercedes Pardo, Alejandro Otero, and others.

1943

Influenced by Cézanne's cubism, Soto becomes invested in the constructive aspects of painting and begins to paint the Venezuelan landscape using this approach.

That year, he also exhibits works at the Venezuelan Art Salon, Caracas.

1950

In September, he travels to Paris by ship on a six-month scholarship. He lives at the Hôtel de la Paix, a residence frequented by other Venezuelan immigrants including some of his former classmates and the poet José Lira Sosa.

1951

At the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Soto shows five works: four *Busquedas dinámicas* (also known as *Compositions dynamiques* [Dynamic compositions]) (1950–51) and *Problema No. 716* (1951), a painting in the Neoplastic spirit. This launches him into conversations with artists such as Albert Bitran, Horia Damian, Nicolas Ionesco, Georges Koskas, and Charles Maussion, as well as other South American artists working in Paris.

To support himself after his scholarship ends, Soto plays guitar in bars, something he will do for the next ten years.

Taking inspiration from serial and dodecaphonic music, he produces his first *Repetition* and *Progression* paintings.

1952

Soto marries Hélène de Robert in April. In the years to come, the couple has four children: Isabelle, Christophe, Anne, and Florence.

1953–54

Inspired by László Moholy-Nagy's book *Vision in Motion*, Soto explores the possibility of harmony and resonance through superimposition. His friend, writer Fernande Schulmann-Métraux, translates Moholy-Nagy's text for him. Soto begins working with Plexiglas and creates *Deux carrés dans l'espace* (Two squares in space) (1953) and *Evolution* (1953).

1955

Soto exhibits his Plexiglas reliefs in *Le Mouvement* at Denise René Gallery, Paris, alongside artists such as Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp, and others. This pivotal body of work situates Soto within the Kinetic and Optical Art movements, although he never officially aligns with these or any groups.

1956

Denise René Gallery hosts a solo exhibition of Soto's work. Eleven *Structures cinétiques* (Kinetic structures) (a series spanning 1955 to 1967) are displayed against a background of black paper.

1957

Soto has his first retrospective at Museo de Bellas Artes (Fine Art Museum), Caracas, titled *Soto. Estructuras cinéticas*.