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# Manuscription in *La ciudad sin nombre* by Joaquín Torres-García

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1 – Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1.

2 – *Ibid.*, p. 1.

3 – In Cecilia Buzio de Torres, ‘The School of the South: The Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1934–1942’, *El taller Torres-García. The School of the South and its Legacy*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 7.

4 – In the classes he gave at the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences in Montevideo in 1947 (published in two issues under the title *Lo aparente y lo concreto en el arte*, Montevideo: AAC, 1947, Vols. 1 and 2), Torres-García criticized Cubism for a lack of internal unity in the works and for not having reached a cosmic or universal plane (Vol. 2, p. 35). He nevertheless acknowledged that in Cubism the pulling apart of the object such that the normalcy of the objective world disappeared was new and ingenious (Vol. 2, p. 40).

Torres-García also revealed doubts about Neoplasticism, despite the fact that this had been perhaps the only group to which he had actually belonged (during his stay in Paris). In fact, with the Belgian artist Michel Seuphor, Torres-García managed to create both a review *Cercle et carré* (*Circle and Square*) in 1930, which folded after a few issues, and mount an exposition. In 1936 he re-founded the review in a bilingual version (French-Spanish) as *Círculo y cuadrado* (*Circle and Square*), which was intended to provide a bridge between Europe and Latin America. Nevertheless, given that Torres-García never rejected completely the form of objects, he remained unconvinced by the complete lack of ‘things’ that Piet Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg championed in their art. Torres-García’s Constructivism had little in common with the Russian movement of the same name nor did it have affinities with the notion of the engineer-artist of utilitarian architecture and art designed to serve propagandistic ends. Rather, the ideas of the Suprematists, whose new concept of space included a view of art as a superior intuition that sought a route to a cosmic consciousness, found echoes in Torres-García’s pages. See Susan Compton, *The World Backwards. Russian Futurist Books 1912–16* (London: The British Library, 1978), pp. 100–2. In his writings Torres-García does not acknowledge any debt to Malevich, Kruchenykh or Matyushin.

5 – Joaquín Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo I y II* (Madrid: Alianza Forma, 1984), p. 822.

6 – *Ibid.*, p. 833, my emphasis.

Henri-Jean Martin begins his study on the history and power of writing with two images: vertigo and myopia; both deserve to be applied to anyone ‘imprudent’ enough to risk ‘studying the chronology of writing’.<sup>1</sup> *Homo scribens* has existed for only 5000 years — ‘five lines’ in the annals of humanity — if one bears in mind the 10 000 years since the Neolithic revolution, and the invention of the printing press, which took place only a little over 500 years ago.<sup>2</sup> I wish to make use of these two metaphors here in order to approach the writing practices of the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), an artist whose aesthetics were *sui generis*, as he himself was fond of saying, and who, upon returning to Uruguay in 1934, at the age of 60 and after a 43-year absence, announced that he was the bearer of a new universal, ‘constructive’ art. That same year, at a press conference, Torres-García declared that his return had as its objective ‘to develop a wide range of activities: to lecture, to teach courses, to achieve . . . on walls what I have already achieved on canvas, . . . [and] to create in Montevideo a movement that will surpass the art of Paris’.<sup>3</sup> To this end he founded the Asociación de Arte Constructivo (AAC) in 1935 to be followed later by the Taller-Escuela del Sur (School of the South). Although the constructivist beliefs were an accumulation of concepts similar to the Avant-garde proclamations that had long nourished Torres-García they also constituted a new departure. His Constructivism was all-encompassing and included the geometric aspects of Cubism: the Neoplasticism of a frontal and orthogonal plane, individual expression within a cosmic and universal order, the re-use of objects, an evolution within a classical tradition, and the anti-mimetic and abstract icons typical of American Pre-Columbian art.<sup>4</sup> ‘The Indian was geometric’ is how Torres-García put it in his *Universalismo constructivo*.<sup>5</sup>

By 1943 Torres-García had defined his art as a leap that was both heady and of limited scope: ‘Hemos dejado, pues, todos los *ismos* . . . sin caer en el folklore ni en la arqueología. Porque queremos estar en lo profundo: en las leyes y no en las cosas . . . Nuestro universalismo puede perfectamente juntarnos al *prehistórico*’ [We have left behind, then, all the ‘isms’. . . without falling into either folklore or archaeology. Because we want to sound the depths: in laws and not in things. . . . Our universalism can perfectly well join us to the *prehistoric*].<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting here the double force that marked Torres-García’s imaginary and *La ciudad sin nombre* (*The City without Name*) in particular. On the one hand, there is a leap forward in which his Constructivist art is cast as exceeding the Avant-garde which, in turn, is portrayed as *passé*. The Avant-garde’s rupture with the past was seen by Torres-García as part of a continuum while it also, paradoxically, carried the germ of the new: ‘Ahora hay que

hacer la pintura sin nombre. Hay que ir a la fuente. Hay que dar con lo inédito' [Today we must make paintings without names. We must go straight to the source. We need to encounter what has not been done before], he declared in 1947 in *La mística de la pintura*.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, there is a regression to a pre-modern moment in which Torres-García tried to recover the pre-historical condition of native culture, which is equated with human wholeness. For Torres-García the Indian is a superior being because he possesses a pantheistic 'attitude of faith'.<sup>8</sup> Jorge Schwartz puts this well when he notes that for Torres-García, 'lo nuevo [. . .] significa la indiferenciación' [the new . . . signifies indifferenciation]<sup>9</sup>, and from that comes the totalizing vision of Torres-García's aesthetics in which novelty is placed within the American tradition.

Among his many theoretical projects, works of Constructivist art, and hundreds of lectures after his return to Uruguay, Torres-García wrote and published in 1941 *La ciudad sin nombre* (*The City without Name*), a work of fiction that consists of 106 unnumbered pages in which letters and drawings are jumbled together (in the materiality of the ink and the corporeality of the hand-drawn line).<sup>10</sup> Torres-García made a symbolic leap, rewriting himself into the *Homo scribens* tradition that dated back to man's first pictograms, while fully aware nevertheless that any return to the past inevitably incorporates and absorbs the present in which it participates. In this retrospective voyage, Torres-García not only avoided the printing press but also the typewriter which, like the photographic camera, necessarily modified modes of representation due to its imposition of mechanization, standardization and serialization. He made *hand-writing* (quite literally, 'manu-scripture') into an art, a craft/penmanship.

Indeed, *La ciudad sin nombre*, because of its handwritten nature, seems at first glance a regressive gesture that harks back to a time prior to the Gutenberg revolution of 500 years earlier. Even though the printed text did not immediately provide the sort of transparent window for conceptual thought that some critics such as Lanham have argued for,<sup>11</sup> new, more streamlined typefaces seemed to wish away 'style'. In addition, the evolution of this new technology gradually made for a democratization of texts and for increased alphabetization as the aesthetics of Gothic letters came to be seen as an impediment to civilizing tendencies. On the other hand, the drawings inserted into almost every page of *La ciudad sin nombre*, whose book cover is itself an excellent example of Torres-García's use of frontal and orthogonal plane (figure 1) — a standard trait of his painting since 1928 — reject the use of perspective and therefore of the metaphor championed by Alberti in fifteenth-century Italy of painting as an 'open window'. Torres-García did away with this window and proposed to replace it with a Constructivism that existed, he said, at the bottom of things.<sup>12</sup> In a universalism of sorts, art and poetry were fused together with life, which, for Torres-García, was also 'constructive'.<sup>13</sup>

In its beginnings, writing was associated with drawing and with the visual arts in general. Until phonetization (or linearization) transformed writing into a representation of the spoken word and made it subordinate to speech, writing had only a loose relationship to the spoken word.<sup>14</sup> Everything that resisted linearization, according to André

7 – Joaquín Torres-García, *Mística de la pintura* (Montevideo: AAC, 1947), p. 9.

8 – Joaquín Torres-García, *Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana* (Montevideo: AAC, 1939), p. 28.

9 – Jorge Schwartz, 'Un flâneur en Montevideo: *La ciudad sin nombre* de Joaquín Torres-García', *Cuadernos Hispánicos*, 589–90 (1999), pp. 216–7.

10 – Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: AAC, 1941, and Montevideo: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974, facsimile edition). As well as being a painter, Torres-García was a teacher, muralist, toymaker and inventor of a cryptic alphabet. In 1939, with almost 1000 public lectures to his credit, he wrote an autobiography, *Historia de mi vida* in the third person and some 25 books on aesthetics, of which only seven were reproduced. These are similar to *La ciudad sin nombre* in that drawings and writing compete with each other in the surface of the page. I am grateful to Odile Cisneros who put at my disposal many of Torres-García's essays in their first editions.

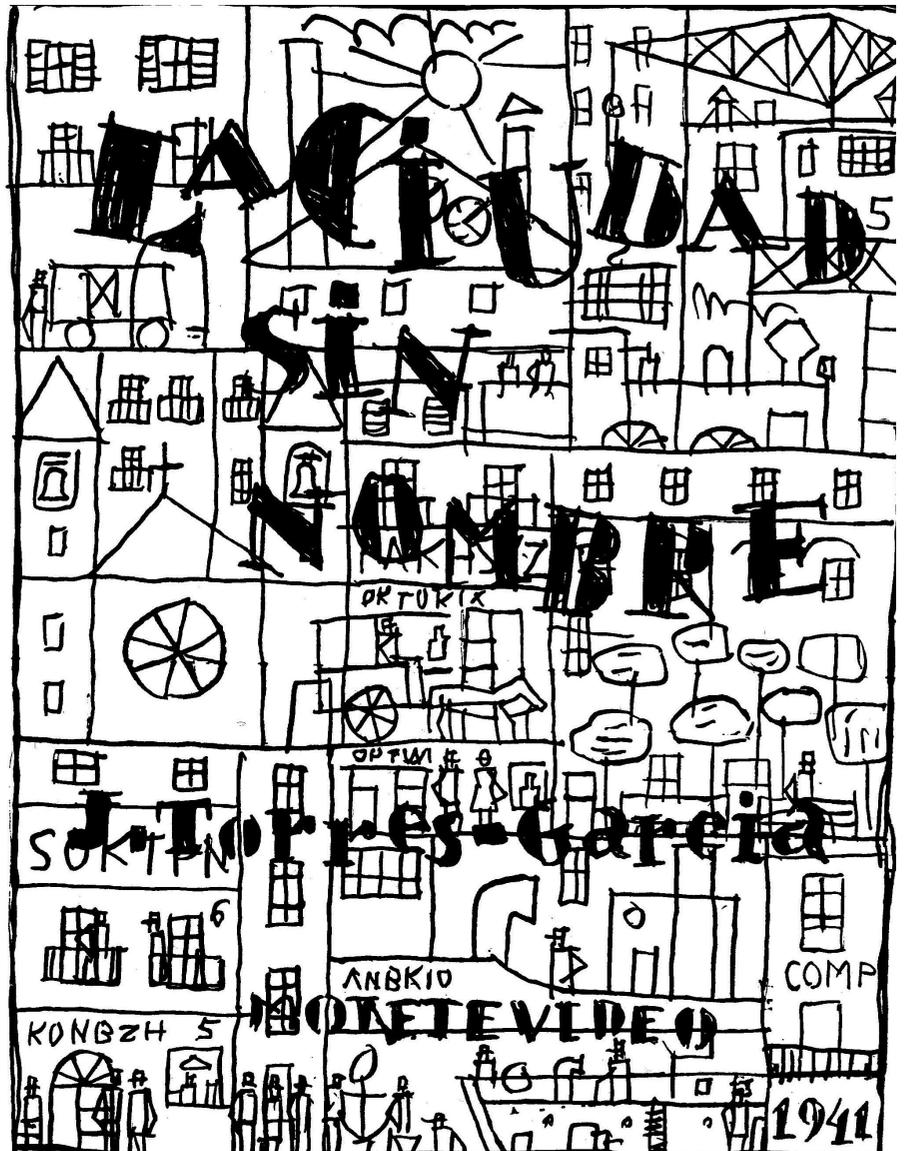
11 – Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word. Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1993), p. 4.

12 – Joaquín Torres-García, *Manifiesto 2. Constructivo 100%* (Montevideo: AAC, 1938), p. 14.

13 – *Ibid.*, p. 12.

14 – Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology. Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 8.

Figure 1. *La ciudad sin nombre*, cover. By permission of the Museo Torres-García, Montevideo.



15 – In Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 86.

16 – *Ibid.*, p. 85.

17 – *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Leroi-Gourhan, was suppressed during the 4000 years of linear writing.<sup>15</sup> This repression negated the pluri-dimensionality of such symbolic thought as the ‘mythogram’. In this writing, argues Jacques Derrida, ‘meaning is not subjected to successivity, to the order of a logical time, or to the irreversible temporality of sound’.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the meditation on writing and the deconstruction of the history of philosophy become inseparable,<sup>17</sup> from which arises Derrida’s questioning of both Western metaphysics in terms of the aleatory place of writing and of the central position of the *logos* as the synonym of truth and authenticity. For her part, Johanna Drucker, in her study of typographic experience, complements Derrida’s arguments by incorporating as well the concept of the materiality of signifiers in the production and dissemination of signification. To do this Drucker proposes a hybrid theoretical model

of materiality, one that combines both the presence of substance and the absence of difference.<sup>18</sup> Like writing itself, typography, Drucker argues, evinces attributes that are clearly physical and whose specificity can only be understood in relation to the historical conditions of production. The material form of the line, as well as the corporal visual aspect of letters, words and inscriptions, is evidence of rules of linguistic use and of mechanical means that a culture has at its disposition, and the form itself can also have the capacity to signify as part of a cultural code.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Torres-García followed in the line of René Magritte, who argued in his visual essays ‘Les Mots et les images’ that in a painting words and images partake of the same substance.<sup>20</sup>

Given its visual doubleness as both writing and drawing *La ciudad sin nombre* undoes the great illusionist machine that Western culture has experienced as natural and which has been a foundation of its most cherished signs. What we are given is a ‘pure fiction’ (pura ficción), as the preface to the novel puts it, which refuses to construct any story. There are chance meetings, indeterminate spaces, a lack of causal or temporal connections, a replacing of characters’ proper names with numbers or letters such that the characters become actants more than lifelike human beings (e.g. Dr. X.D.5, personal secretary of XC<sub>4</sub>, the merchant BPNTIOH). In his preface Torres-García calls his characters puppets. The anonymity of the modern city corresponds to a space in which the official aesthetic consists of art that is decorative, literary, theatrical and realist. The fantastic disrupts this aesthetics: the use of prosopopœia, for example, enables the trees and an old house to protest against artists who have caused them to suffer by portraying them in a realistic style. City life is presented as lacking meaning and as absurd, and its ‘museum aesthetics’ are depicted as outdated. Statues wobble and buildings crumble for lack of aesthetic harmony. In many respects *La ciudad sin nombre* resembles another contemporary text, *Museo de la novela de la eterna* [1925–1941] by the Argentine Macedonio Fernández.<sup>21</sup> Both works are novels without plots, and both contain juxtaposed scenes with no relations of cause and effect. Each presents arbitrariness as a constant in the workings of life and sets forth an overtly meta-artistic discourse in which characters actively seek an aesthetic goal (the conquest of beauty in Buenos Aires in the case of Fernández and the foundation of the Institute of Constructive Art in Montevideo in the case of Torres-García).

Rupturing the mimetic contract in *La ciudad sin nombre* undermines any Coleridgean ‘suspension of disbelief’ and plunges us into a discursive confusion and a space that is at once incredible and impossible. This is a ‘texte de jouissance’ in the full Barthean sense: a text that unsettles the reader and his historical, cultural and psychological groundings, as well as his tastes and values, throwing into crisis his relation to language.<sup>22</sup> This anti-realist tendency reiterates the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and the un-naturalness of the alphabet in its relation to what it designates. In Torres-García’s *Historia de mi vida* the narrator debates and discusses his aesthetics and proposes a double abstraction: ‘. . . a lo abstracto, debe siempre corresponder, como idea de cosa, algo también abstracto. ¿Qué puede ser esto? Tendrá que ser, para ser figurado gráficamente, o bien el nombre escrito de la cosa, o una imagen esquemática lo menos aparentemente real posible: tal como un signo’ [. . . to an abstraction something

18 – Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word. Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 44.

19 – Ibid., p. 44.

20 – René Magritte, ‘Les Mots et les images’, *La Révolution surréaliste*, 12 (15 décembre 1929), p. 32. For a lucid study on this work, see Lisa K. Lipinski, ‘When the trees of language are shaken by rhizomes, in René Magritte’s “Les mots et les images”’, *Word & Image*, 11, no. 3 (July–September 1995), pp. 216–24.

21 – Macedonio Fernández, *Museo de la novela de la Eterna. Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1990).

22 – Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 25–26.

23 – Joaquín Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1990), p. 210.

24 – Ibid., ‘Les Mots et les images’, p. 33.

25 – Even though Torres-García didn’t theorize about the novel or writing *qua* writing, he proposed in *La ciudad sin nombre* what a decade and a half later was articulated by the writers of the French *nouveau roman*. One finds in Torres-García’s novel an attack on the features of traditional fiction that Alain Robbe-Grillet labelled as obsolete. See Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *For a New Novel, Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Co., 1984), above all the chapter ‘On Several Obsolete Notions’.

abstract should always correspond as well. What could this be? To be figured in graphic terms it will have to be either the written name of the thing or a schematic image that is clearly as far from realistic as possible: something like a sign].<sup>23</sup> Torres-García described this early, abstract work from the late 1920s in Paris in terms similar to those of the aforementioned essays by Magritte in which he argued that an image could take the place of a word in a sentence, just as a word could replace an object in the real world.<sup>24</sup> In his autobiography, Torres-García added that he ‘. . . puso . . . en sus nichos respectivos, una Casa (como esas que dibujan los niños) un Barco, una Ancora (sic), la letra B, un Hombre, un Pez . . .’ [. . . put. . . in their respective niches a House — like those children draw — a Boat, an Anchor, the letter B, a Man, a Fish. . . .]. The analogical value that all figuration carries would be lost in these abstractions. As a result the figures are transformed into icons from which the setting or the actual event is absent, such that they act more like members of an alphabet.

Let us consider an example. Three brief, consecutive scenes from *La ciudad sin nombre* (figure 2) inform us about the disfiguring process that is put forth at the same time as a new, constructivist aesthetics. In the middle of a digression regarding art and nature, the command ‘Be Constructivists!’ is illustrated by a set of boxes in which icons, letters, numbers and the invented initials (ΛΛϜ) that stand for the Asociación de Arte Constructiva respond to a reading that privileges neither a particular mode nor meaning. Just beside these boxes is a composition whose figures violate the rules of verisimilitude: a fish is superimposed on the sun, a key floats over a temple and in the centre appears a human figure, the eternal and universal archetype. Moreover, a second scene intrudes with no causal or justifying transition and which consists of a brief dialogue between two new characters, no. 1 and no. 2, who introduce a space called eternity from which one of them is coming and to which the other is going. In a parodic, self-reflexive twist, Torres-García’s narrator comments on the ephemeral and ever-changing aspects of his characters, for which reason there is no urgency for the author to continue writing. This rupture of verisimilitude and the lack of any logic of cause and effect in this narrative sequence lend an air of abstraction that is reinforced by the absence of identity on the part of the characters.<sup>25</sup> One could therefore speak of a double disfiguring: at the graphic level and at the level of writing in which the identical material substance reinforces the sign-quality of the image and the word. This is the abstraction that Torres-García saw in Pre-Columbian art and that was a central concept of his metaphysical Constructivism. A second dialog takes place immediately afterwards between the author who meets character no. 4 just around the corner. In an absurd but significant incident, given the double force already mentioned between the new/unknown (‘inédito’) and the primitive, a match is struck to produce fire; the event arouses the admiration of the author who calls no. 4 a ‘prodigious magician’. In the author’s estimation, fire has been *invented* which he takes as proof of a new culture.

In his theoretical essay ‘La recuperación del objeto’ (‘The Recovery of the object’) Torres-García defined his practices as follows: ‘Yo parto del término abstracto; botella, hombre, casa, pero en vez de escribirlo con letras, lo escribo con figuras sin realismo alguno; esquemas geométricos. Aquí yo no veo más que una variación en la escritura, y tal concepto es la idea, la palabra, como su figuración gráfica. Todo es abstracto’. [I work from an abstract term: bottle,

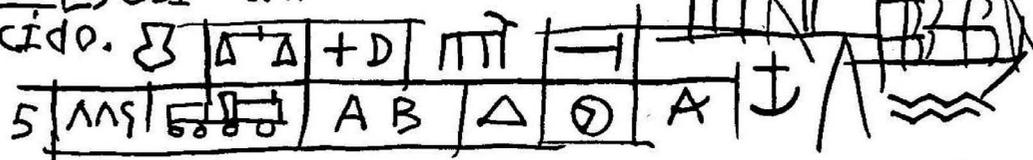
otro sitio, o de otro tiempo; pues eso está en la eternidad.

— ¿Y la naturaleza?

Basta una flor, un insecto, un guijarro inerte, Pero además tenemos el SOL. Pónganse a compás de todo eso. Entren en ese ritmo. ¡Sean constructivos!

— Entonces — dijo el de la barba — diga: ¿la crítica que pusimos en todo aquello, no es nuestro dolor?

— Es así — contestó el desconocido.



El personaje nº 1 se encuentra en la calle con el personaje nº 2

— ¿De dónde vienes? — dice el primero

— De la eternidad — contesta el segundo,

— Pues yo voy hacia ella — dice el otro.

Y ambos desaparecen.

Pero, personajes así efímeros, se encuentran a montones. Por esto el autor de esta historia no se apura; y así, sin mucho buscar, da en la primer esquina con el personaje nº 4. El 3, era tan inconsistente, que se volatilizó a su primer gesto.

Entonces, abordándole, le dice:

— ¿Lleva usted fósforos?

El otro miró algo extrañado.

— Se trata de encender un cigarrillo.

Buscó en su bolsillo, y sacó una cajita de cartón, en la cual, había escrito, sobre fondo azul fuerte, la palabra TZPQ; y otras letras. Tiró, salió de adentro otra cajita, la cual, por un secreto ingenio, se abrió, mostrando lo que había adentro:

Figure 2. *La ciudad sin nombre*. No pagination. By permission of the Museo Torres-García, Montevideo.

26 – In Miguel Battegazzore, Joaquín Torres-García. *La trama y los signos* (Montevideo: Gordon, 1999), p. 158.

man, house, but instead of writing it with letters, I write it with figures, with no realism whatsoever: just geometric outlines. In this I don't see anything more than a variation of writing and this concept is the idea, the word, just like its graphic figuration].<sup>26</sup>

The tendency toward abstraction, as much in the broken discursive logic as in the contamination of the letter as a sign, the figure that we find in the pages of the manuscript book would seek to recover the matrix common to both writing and the plastic arts and which linearity erased thousands of

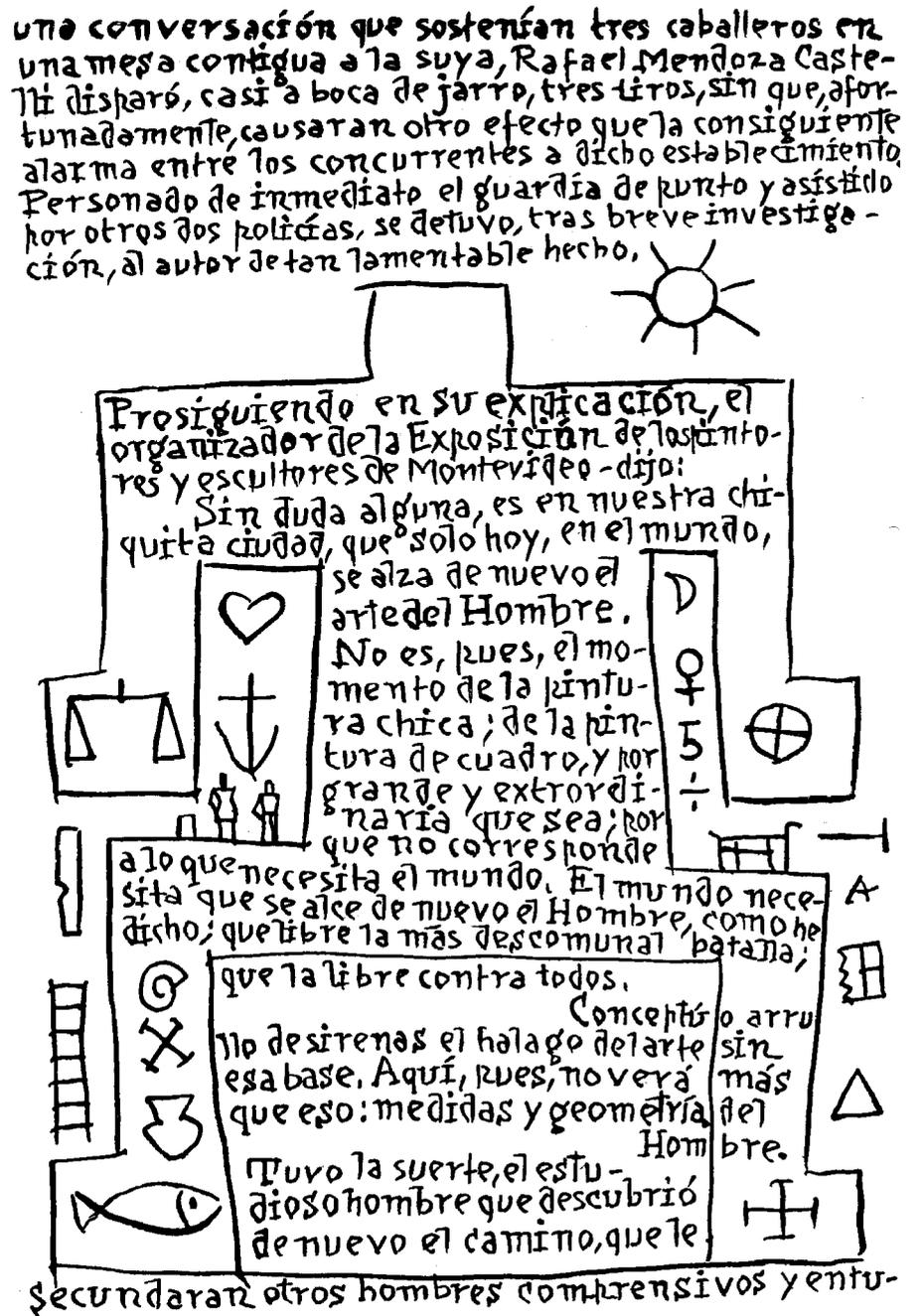


Figure 3. *La ciudad sin nombre*. No pagination. By permission of the Museo Torres-García, Montevideo.

years ago. The mega-sign MAN/COSMOS (figure 3), whose body is pure writing, is another excellent example of Torres-García's scriptural synthesis from *La ciudad sin nombre*.<sup>27</sup> In MAN/COSMOS, the anchor, the fish, the sun, the scale, the jug, the ladder, the man and the woman are ideographs that transcend the materiality of things. But as Lisa Block de Behar has shown, Torres-García sought (to create) an archi-inscription that in its repetition risked imposing yet another stereotype in place of an archetype (2001).<sup>28</sup> For Torres-García, however, these schematic signifiers are related to the 'ideas of things' and not to their representation. Quite apart from his Neo-Platonism, Torres-García insisted on the demands of the object itself, not as a material reality but rather as an affirmation of what it was not, or, to put it in other words, of the aesthetic value of the object in its own right.<sup>29</sup> In his ontology of the object, Torres-García would have concurred with Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the image. The truth of the image, according to Nancy, is 'to affirm that a thing presents itself: I am this thing. The image is the non-linguistic saying or the showing of the thing in its sameness: but this sameness is not only not said, or "said" otherwise, it is an *other sameness* than that of language and the concept, a sameness that does not belong to identification or signification, but that is supported only by itself in the image and as an image.'<sup>30</sup>

Torres-García's abstractions make possible an amalgamation between the linguistic sign and the visual image, between the arbitrary value of the sign and the referential value of the image, as a kind of *rebus*. In fact, he did not differentiate between them when arguing that a 'simple diseño gráfico sobre una superficie unida (una verdadera escritura) tendrá que ser el *arte universal*' [simple graphic design on a unified surface [a true writing] will have to be a *universal art*].<sup>31</sup> Other critics such as Joan Sureda and Ana María Guasch have described abstract art as one that abandons appearances in order to arrive at essences. In contrast to individual things, they argue, abstract art is universal; instead of contingent, abstract art is essential; it places the concept before the material and to be understood it does not require knowledge of empirical reality.<sup>32</sup> Using this definition, the same critics have wondered whether perhaps Neolithic or Romanesque painting was also abstract. Torres-García would of course have answered with a resounding yes. In 1938, he wrote, 'Tradición del hombre abstracto: tradición de construcción. El hombre de todos los tiempos: junto al prehistórico, junto al primitivo, junto al azteca y el inca, junto al egipcio y el griego . . . Pasando: de la caverna a la Arquitectura, de la superstición a la Filosofía . . . Tradición del saber, incrustada en la piedra, oculta en el símbolo, verdad ayer y hoy, como el Sol' [The tradition of abstract man: a tradition of construction. Man of all times: joined to the prehistoric, to the primitive, to the Aztec and Inca, to the Egyptian and the Greek. . . . Passing: from the cave to Architecture, from superstition to Philosophy . . . . The tradition of knowledge, carved in stone, dissimulates in the symbol, the truth yesterday and today, like the Sun].<sup>33</sup> If we return to *La ciudad sin nombre*, the nominal disfiguring subscribes to a typology whose subtext should be read as referring to any Western city — a generic city, in other words. Nevertheless, the possibility of a new civilization whose forms might be ruled by the abstract law fully integrated into the cosmos

27 – In keeping with his view of the artist as a constructor, Torres-García wore worker's overalls on which he had painted motifs. Just like the man wearing a publicity 'sandwich' with whom the narrator establishes a dialogue upon arriving at the port of *La ciudad sin nombre*, Torres-García quite literally personified his theories. The megasign 'Man/Cosmos' would thus have its correlative in life itself by being itself constructive, according to Torres-García (in a passage already cited). Juan José Lahuerta in his study 'Disfráz, Madera', in *Torres-García* (Barcelona: AUSA & Institut de Cultura de Barcelona, 2003), p. 185, sees in this worker's garb an urban gesture and a reminiscence of the universal man of the humanist Renaissance, as for example of Francesco de Giorgio, who depicted the good governance of a city as a human body.

28 – Lisa Block de Behar, 'Visión y división de una misma mirada: sobre una poética de la escritura en las imágenes de Joaquín Torres-García', reproduced in [www.liccom.edu.uy](http://www.liccom.edu.uy), 15 July 2007.

29 – Ibid., *Mística de la pintura*, pp. 33–35.

30 – Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 8–9.

31 – Ibid., *Lo aparente y lo concreto en el arte*, Vol. 2, p. 45, emphasis in original.

32 – Joan Sureda and A.M. Guasch, *La trama de lo moderno* (Madrid: Akal, 1987), p. 26.

33 – Joaquín Torres-García, *La tradición del hombre abstracto (doctrina constructivista)* (Montevideo, AAC, 1938), n/p.

34 – Completed in 1925 by the Italian architect Mario Palanti, the Palacio Salvo building is located at the corner of the Avenida 18 de Julio and Independencia square. Palanti was also the creator of another skyscraper, the Palacio Barolo, in Buenos Aires, thus making him a rival to himself, given that the Palacio Salvo is taller than the Barolo which, in 1923, was the tallest building in Latin America. The Italian's vision was to construct twin buildings, one in each bank of the Río de la Plata (he called them the columns of Hercules) so that they could communicate with each other by means of their lighthouses. Although Torres García didn't judge the aesthetic quality of Palacio Salvo in *La ciudad sin nombre*, he was blatantly against it when in his 1935 conference 'The School of the South' he claimed that 'Montevideo is unique . . . It is apparent when you see the Cerro; and then its port; and it is perfectly fulfilled in the plazas, Independencia and Matriz. It's a shame that a few moles disfigure it!' (In *El taller Torres-García. The School of the South and its Legacy*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 53.

35 – In 'Des Espaces autres', [1967] *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, Vol. IV, eds. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, with the collaboration of Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 752–62; Michel Foucault defines heterotopia as a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. In his approach to spaces and sites in culture, he defines heterotopia according to six principles which include cemeteries, brothels, gardens, museums, fairgrounds and ultimately, the boat, the heterotopia *par excellence*. I believe heterotopia to be a mobile concept, flexible enough to cover a range of sites and real spaces that are constituted by heterogeneous elements that realize human being's desires.

36 – Juan Fló, 'Torres-García in (and from) Montevideo', in *El taller Torres García. The School of the South and its Legacy*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 30.

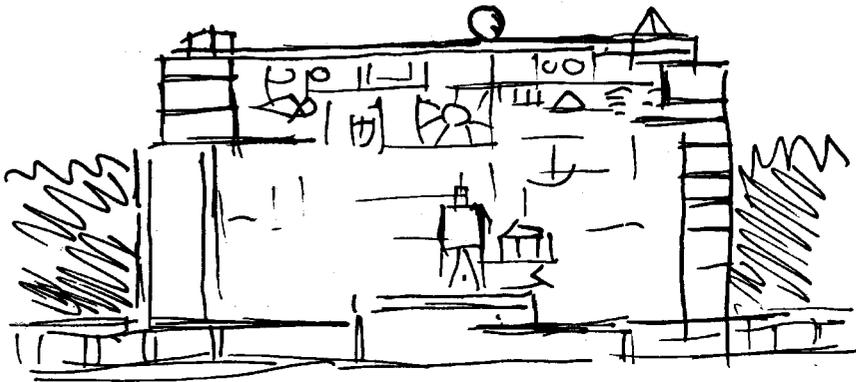
contains Montevideo as an alternate space. Four of the characters disembark in this 'little southern city' in search of a new destiny and an aesthetic cause. In a turn that is either ironic or paradoxical, considering the original project, the final four pages of the novel are surprisingly realistic in terms both of the novelistic discourse and the graphics. From the indeterminate space of an anonymous city, we pass into the named city of 'Montevideo', with its river, its *mate*, the Pocitos neighbourhood, and an illustration of the Palacio Salvo. The Salvo is evoked in the narrative by its height ('Sí, también tenemos rascacielos' [Yes, we also have skyscrapers]), but it is the eloquent drawing that substitutes for the name, such that the drawing, taken together with the writing, functions as a *rebus*, as I have already mentioned above.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the final scene opens with a vision of the future in which the young organizer's Cosmoplastic aesthetics is allied with those of the old character's Institute of Constructive Art. To celebrate this 'new classicism' a constructive monument of the Republic will be erected. The book closes with a drawing of the project that is in fact a real work only recently created (figure 4). The future is already the past, and the utopian ideal dissolves in a heterotopia, the sort of alternative but real space that Michel Foucault formulated according to six principles.<sup>35</sup>

On the grounds of the National Museum of Visual Arts, built in 1911, and forming an integral part of the Rodó Park in Montevideo, along with fairs, attractions, an artificial lake and artistic exhibitions, is the 'Monumento Cósmico' [Cosmic Monument] created by Torres-García and the Association of Constructive Art in 1938 (figure 5). This 'Monumento' was the starting point for various public projects by the AAC. It consists of a wall of rose-coloured granite (inspired by the Temple of the Sun Ollantaytambo in Perú) in which the repertory of Torres-García's signs is carved in orthogonal structures and in which is evident the central role of the sun whose cult the artists of the AAC admired for its echo of earlier times. But this adherence did not result in another version of folklorism nor of nativism/'indigenismo', a tendency that Torres-García rejected as *pastiche* and a betrayal of Indian culture. The permanence that the stone provides, the large ladder with sign-figures carved by hand, the placement in a public space and the collective nature of the wall's production all combine to shape an 'other' space that, as the name indicates, is monumental.

As in his other works, the 'Monumento' corresponds to the abstract Constructivism as both 'unknown' (inédito) and 'universal'. According to the critic Juan Fló, in returning to Montevideo, Torres-García 'added another, stronger meaning to his thesis of an art with a celebratory, ritual function, identified with the universal order, in proposing to restore art to its archaic condition in Uruguay and in all Latin America'.<sup>36</sup> A return to its ritual origins meant to incorporate the extra-aesthetic aspects of primitive art — such as the multisensorial status of the object and the social collective expression — into contemporary art: a new language that would erase the distinction between fine and applied arts, among other issues. The 'Monumento' was in fact an attempt at such an exercise. The inscription of writing — of both the Latin alphabet and Torres-García's personal one — and of graphic symbols can be regarded as an effort to recover the inclusive *gestalt* of the ideogram or the pictogram. On the

aquí la Cosmoplastia tendrá andamio. — Yo creo que debería fusionarse a nuestro Instituto de Arte Constructivo — dijo el viejo organizador. — Me parece justo — dijo el joven organizador — puesto que ambas teorías se fundan en lo universal y tienden a crear un nuevo clasicismo. — Otra persona que estaba allí — de aire tranquilo, color sano en la cara y atención desierta, de mediana edad y así mismo de estatura y de complexión, y usando lentes, dijo: Pues séllese tal alianza frente al primer monumento constructivo de la República. — ¿Que sería tal monumento? — dijo Terebrante. — Una obra en granito, erigida en uno de nuestros parques — dijo el viejo organizador.

Figure 4. *La ciudad sin nombre*. No pagination. By permission of the Museo Torres-García, Montevideo.



J. Torres-GARCÍA,

Montevideo 16 de Diciembre de 1941.

ΛΛΣ.

other hand, buried in the foundations of the monument is a metal box that contains a text — a message to the future and evidence of the AAC's ideas — with the signatures of the artists involved in the production of the mural, a modern twist on the anonymity of art in ancient times.

Without a doubt Torres-García's most eloquent image regarding the position Latin American art should hold is the popular 'Map of South America with the South as North' from 1935. While this consisted of a cartographic inversion, or the substitution of one convention for another, the artist was fully conscious of the meridian lines by which Western art and culture passed. This utopian gesture thus sought to transfer the periphery to the centre and place Torres-García's constructive

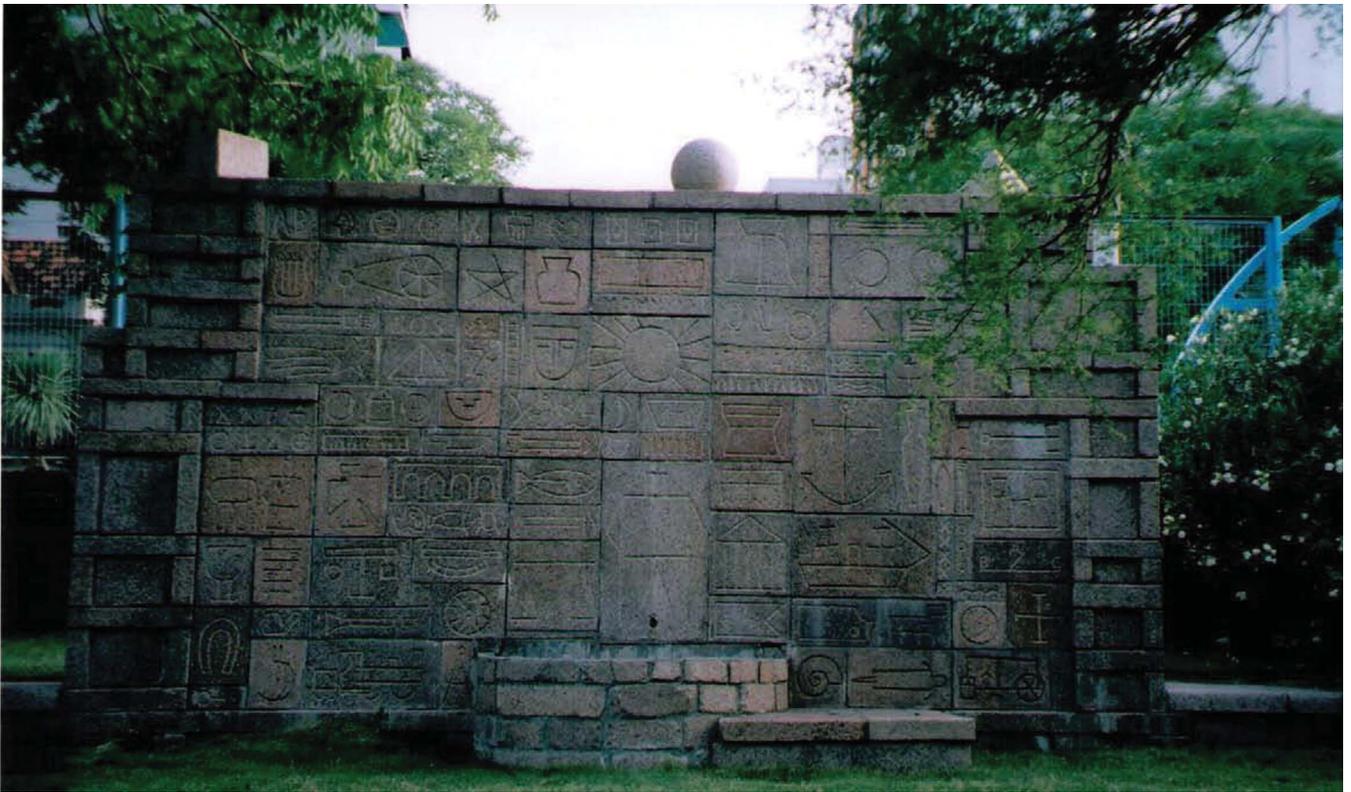


Figure 5. Monumento cósmico, Montevideo, Uruguay. By permission of the Museo Torres-García, Montevideo.



Figure 6. Monumento cósmico (fragment), Montevideo, Uruguay. By permission of the Museo Torres-García, Montevideo.

universalism on the same level as the movements in vogue in major urban centres. A similar idea is put forth by one of the side walls of the 'Monumento' (figure 6). Here, the names of Montevideo and Buenos Aires (metonymies of the Argentine and Uruguayan nations) are faced off against the continental mass of Europe. The use of capital letters imitates Roman lapidary inscriptions whose monumental character was designed to transcend materiality in pursuit of the collective memory. Yet the monument is also linked to cave art that marks the line of tradition in which Constructivism would be but the final link in a universal chain of art. This re-mapping of the cultural/artistic spaces can also be seen in *La ciudad sin nombre*. Since in Spanish one's purpose (or goal) can be referred to as one's 'North' — e.g. 'To lose one's north' is to be disoriented — Torres-García puns and subverts the expression as his characters constantly wander through the streets of the generic and anonymous city trying to find their purpose . . . by travelling to the South.

In the desire to recover the 'prehistoric' — that is, the archaic — and join it to a new art of the present and future, Torres-García's project combines myopia and vertigo and courts a consequent risk of a failure. The lack of an indigenous tradition or civilization in Uruguay and in Argentina, due both to the nomad nature of the tribes that were in the region when the Spanish arrived and to a planned extermination carried out by the governments in the last third of the nineteenth century, pushed Torres-García to import and use Pre-Columbian cultures from neighbouring regions and even to invent a new 'Pre-Columbian' culture that justified his art.<sup>37</sup> In this sense the 'Monumento' constitutes a heterotopia that is both illusory and compensatory according to Foucault's sixth proposal. Foucault's principle includes heterotopias that can create a space of illusion that exposes every real space — all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned — as still more illusory, as for instance the 'Monumento' in its universal value. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is another real space, a perfect and meticulous one in order to compensate for our messy, ill-constructed and jumbled one — e.g. the 'Monumento' whose Constructivism is the substitute for the lack of indigenous artistic tradition in Uruguay.<sup>38</sup> But, if there is no ancestral memory to recover, what could this 'Monumento' remind us of? For the reader of *La ciudad sin nombre* in 1941, the sketch of the 'Monumento' in the last page represented nostalgia for the irrecoverable. In November 1940, Torres-García announced the end of the AAC as a collective movement and its conversion into a research centre.<sup>39</sup> Due to a lack of financial support as well as a lack of comprehension on the part of other artist-members of his theories, Torres-García declared that 'Ni mi lenguaje de pintor, ni mi lenguaje de hombre, ni mi sentir, ni ver, ni pensar corresponde aquí. Y al fin reintegrado a mi patria me encuentro extranjero' [Neither my language as painter nor my language as a man, nor what I feel, see, or think has a place here. Finally reintegrated into my native land I find myself a stranger].<sup>40</sup> Given this context and the realism that closes *La ciudad sin nombre*, one could read the last four pages as fundamentally ironic for the fact that the futuristic project failed. A year after its construction the

37 – Regarding the need for the popular imagery of Uruguayans in founding genealogies, the well-known writer Juan Carlos Onetti said with a pinch of humour: 'Here, if a woman throws into the garbage a broken pot of geraniums, some years later a curious man will discover it as an old piece of clay. He will then publish an article, an essay, or a book on the artistic culture of the Charrúa aboriginals'. Onetti once suggested to Torres-García that he move to Perú or México where native cultures were closer to his aesthetic ideal. But the artist responded that barbarism had already caused those cultures to disappear, while Uruguay interested him precisely for its lack of indigenous civilization. In fact, Onetti captured the paradoxical aesthetics of his countryman, who wanted to create a new art from nothing, despite being part of a long tradition. Constructivism, Onetti claimed, was Torres-García's true God with Torres-García himself as its prophet. See Juan Carlos Onetti, 'Infidencias de Torres-García', *Mundo Hispánico*, 326 (mayo 1975), p. 12.

38 – Fló rightly asserts, 'In a society lacking an old artistic tradition and also representative works from the long history of painting, Torres-García's teaching, his works, and his workshop provided us with the best possible substitute for the tradition, and the museum, that we do not possess' (Ibid., p. 41).

39 – Despite putting an end to the activities of the AAC, Torres-García continued to teach and founded the Workshop-School of the South in 1943, along with the magazine *Removedor*, a publication that lasted for 28 issues. The School had an international reputation and was visited by Maruja Mallo, Guillermo de Torre (both residents in Buenos Aires), José Bergamín, León Felipe, Jorge Amado and Vicente Huidobro, among other Hispanic poets and artists.

40 – In Cecilia Buzio de Torres, 'La Escuela del Sur: El taller Torres-García, 1943–1962', in *La Escuela del Sur. El taller Torres-García y su legado* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1991), pp. 67–91.

41 – Buzio de Torres states that ‘Analyzing the reasons for his failure to establish a new art based on the ancestral Indo-American tradition, Torres concluded that this was due to the fact that, unlike Europe, where there was a cultural coherence reaching back to prehistory, the American culture had been subjected to a violent and relatively recent disruption by the European conquest. [...] In actuality, pre-Columbian art seemed unfamiliar and foreign to the Uruguayan of the 1930s. Torres found that he did not understand who the Uruguayan — the creole — was and that he himself was out of place in his native country’ (Ibid., 1992, p. 20). According to Fló, ‘His studies of pre-Columbian art were [...] an attempt to strengthen his argument; [...] a closer acquaintance with the theme led him years later to acknowledge that the Inca culture he had earlier exalted was, in fact, in decline’ (Ibid., p. 37).

42 – Mihai Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive. Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 51.

43 – The invention of personal alphabets can be understood as an alternative writing that perceives contemporary communication as poor and insufficient. These alphabets elaborate collective imageries but with the awareness that they have a limited artistic use. Xul Solar, for example, used his ‘neociollo’ in his correspondence with a circle of relatives and friends. Moreover, Thomas More’s alphabet in *Utopia* (1516) is foundational given that it resulted from a nascent awareness of the New World. See Thomas More, *Utopia*, eds. George Logan and Robert Adams (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). During the subsequent conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés, Europeans first came into contact with Mesoamerican pictographic textuality, an encounter which provoked both fascination and violent rejection, given that New World texts were not based on the alphabetic letter — the *sine qua non* of a civilized culture in the European mind.

44 – Guillaume Apollinaire, *Meditaciones estéticas. Los pintores cubistas*, trans. Lydia Vázquez (Madrid: Visor, 1994), p. 21.

45 – Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacre et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

‘Monumento’ preserved the brief memory of a dissolved collective art and stood as a testament to an artistic movement that was not to be.<sup>41</sup> Thus it was in 1941 that Torres-García could resurrect it under the guise of a utopia thanks to the recourses of fiction — that liminal space that Mihai Spariosu sees between the real and the imaginary.<sup>42</sup>

In *La ciudad sin nombre* the ‘dibujo escritura’ [drawing-writing] (a term Torres-García used for a child’s natural faculty) is changed into an ‘idea gráfica’ [graphic idea] by the construction of a syntax in which the letters of his invented alphabet intervene. When this alphabet that fuses Etruscan, Greek and Semitic signs is intersected by a Pre-Columbian type of geometry, a hybrid language arises which corresponds to the ‘deep tradition’ Torres-García was looking for in order to create a new aesthetic consciousness. Much like the ‘neo-Creole’ or pan-language of Torres-García’s contemporary in Argentina, Xul Solar, this alphabet fashioned an artificial language that corresponded in part to the cultural mosaic and linguistic contamination that both Buenos Aires and Montevideo possessed as a result of waves of immigration. At the same time, it constituted a meditation on writing itself.<sup>43</sup> In their departure from the Roman alphabet and from normative Spanish, both artists emphasized the material and sensual condition of writing and in so doing moved toward a recovery of the pictogram’s original unity. If Guillaume Apollinaire in his meditations on aesthetics considered that geometry was for the artist what grammar was for the writer,<sup>44</sup> *La ciudad sin nombre* constructs a liminal space in which both, grammar and geometry, are fused in the letter that draws and the image that names. The line of calligraphy and that of the figures are nurtured by the same ink in which the subjectivity of the artist is expressed. The corporal participation — ambidextrous in the case of Torres-García, who drew with the left hand but wrote with the right — is the definitive trait of an autograph manuscript that contrasts with the abstraction to which we have alluded. Individuality is joined to a sense of presence which in turn is evinced by the irregularity of the letters that separate, grow larger and undulate. To the complication that the imperfections in the writing make for the reading process are added various spelling errors and ungrammaticalities. On the other hand, the authority of the signature on the last page of the novel corroborates the *status* of the artist/writer. This manuscript, like others by Torres-García, corresponds to an economy of meagre material recourses. Artisan and artist, scribe and writer, promoter of art that is anonymous and collective as well as individual, Torres-García prefigured the mixture of high and low culture, erudite and popular that we now call the postmodern.

From the standpoint of Jean Baudrillard,<sup>45</sup> one might conclude that Torres-García dissimulated and feigned, by means of his manuscript, that he had never had modern technology at his disposal (I do not refer here to the printing press but to photo-duplication whose ability to reproduce ensures that any aura of authenticity and uniqueness disappear from the work at the same time that it permits its democratization). What we have then is a vertiginous leap in time. While refusing the standardization of printed letters, *La ciudad sin nombre* has been reproduced by an even more advanced technology. Even in a limited edition, *La ciudad sin nombre* corresponded to a ‘xerox

degree' (to paraphrase Baudrillard) of culture.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the doctrine of the autochthonous universality of Torres-García's Constructivism is a simulation, since it pretended to bring forth a Pre-Columbian culture that Montevideo never possessed. To do this, Torres-García invented a 'zero degree' of civilization, a monumental heterotopia, an alphabet and a repertoire of signs that filled a vacuum at once both historical and aesthetic. If dissimulation marks a presence, simulation, as Baudrillard would say, is constructed in absence.<sup>47</sup> *La ciudad sin nombre* is therefore pure simulacrum. Pretending to recover an archaic Uruguayan culture and wishing away, in its 'hand-writing', the modern technologies that make mass reproduction possible, the novel's culminating moment/monument purports to recover a past — but it is a past that never existed.

46 – The exact number of copies the 1941 edition had cannot be confirmed. In 1974, on the 100th anniversary of Torres-García's birth, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Uruguay edited a facsimile with 1060 copies, but in a format larger than that of the original. Regarding this edition of *La ciudad sin nombre* I am using Baudrillard's term 'xerox degree' in a manner more literal than Baudrillard ever did, since he applied the term to the zero degree of art, to the *vanishing point* of art, and to absolute simulation. See his *La ilusión y la desilusión estéticas* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1998).

47 – Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, 1981.