

Vicente Rojo, a Geometric Deluge

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JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2022
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ABSTRACT

The exhibition *Vicente Rojo: la destrucción del orden* (*Vicente Rojo: the destruction of order*) at the Modern Art Museum's exhibition (MAM, Museo de Arte Moderno) is a tribute to the artist's trajectory. The exhibition presents his work systems throughout six decades in the world of art within the dimensions of images, sculptures, books and action. One highlight of the exhibition is presenting his work in series, which underlines his way of creating by proposing a geometric substructure that allows a knowledge within the multiple sides of this great artist.

KEY WORDS

Vicente Rojo, Modern Art Museum, tribute, diagonal, tool, system, structure, rain

Drenching rain fell for months at the Modern Art Museum (Museo de Arte Moderno; MAM): between August 2022 till February 2023. One, two, thousands of diagonal raindrops. Geometric rain pours down, lattice accumulation of successive triangles that flooded the museum. It's because Vicente Rojo was there, teaching us how to rain (Figure 1).

That gallery flooded with triangles intended to gather the explosive exhibition *Vicente Rojo: the destruction of order*. On its curved walls we found the thousand and one voices that Rojo uttered throughout his very long and prolific career. More than six

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FIGURE 1. View of the exhibition *Vicente Rojo: La destrucción del orden* (Vicente Rojo: *The destruction of order*) Museum of Modern Art (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).



decades of work, craft, hands finding tools: brushes, rulers, pencils, stencils, carts, strainers, circles, wheels, tacks, clay, paper, cardboard, frames, patterns that are later turned into letters, landscapes, memories, rains and self-portraits.

The gallery on the second floor of the MAM, that architectural meeting of two circles, housed the many Vicentes Rojos, in all their dimensions and in the endless possibilities between painting, sculpture, engraving and books. The exhibition was a dialogue between Rojo and himself through time and space. A never-ending journey between Barcelona and Mexico, and a journey through the history of art throughout the second half of the 20th century. A dialogue, too —of friendship, admiration and confidence—, with other artists, writers and poets.

It is a necessary exhibition, with a flavor of homage and anthology that does the great effort to gather as many Rojos as possible. After the death of the artist, in March 2021, the exhibition —which he himself had conceived and worked with the curator Pilar García— became a posthumous retrospective. In this sense, the exhibition, which begins with one project and ends with another, postponed due to the pandemic, sees the great master leave. This is how, although it is full of his work, it contains an infinite void. It is in this silent negotiation that the exhibition is placed, paradoxically, because Vicente Rojo is there and not there at the same time (Figure 2).

According to a review by *La Jornada* (a newspaper designed by Vicente Rojo), Marcelo Uribe, current director of the ERA publishing house (founded by Vicente Rojo), once said about Vicente Rojo: “if he had not existed, all the books and all the newspapers and all the magazines in this country would be ugly” (Chio, 2021, para-

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FIGURE 2. First geometries in the work of Vicente Rojo (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).



graph 3). For Uribe, Rojo is a King Midas of sorts, one who turns everything into beauty. This exhibition illustrates it. When visiting, it is impossible not to think that Mexico without Rojo would be much less beautiful. Thus, the exhibition, while lamenting the departure of a giant, is also presented as a tribute to the path that the artist outlined from his first works, and seeks to trace diagonal paths between series, motifs and patterns that are repeated over and over again. Rojo's career wraps up as his future unfolds (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. Central area of the exhibition *Vicente Rojo: La destrucción del orden* (*Vicente Rojo: The destruction of order*) (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).

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The images that the exhibition brings together attend a meeting between traditions, times, techniques and media. The works speak the language of modern abstraction from the American Abstract Expressionism; at the same time, the graphic design language of an object-book, and the popular language of a sack of flour. Vicente Rojo demonstrates in this meeting that everything can be said with images, that everything is visual matter, from his childhood on the streets of Barcelona to a volcano that does not stop erupting, going through the outbreaks of a war and the meeting of two rains in the middle of the landscape (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Central area of the exhibition
Vicente Rojo: La destrucción del orden (Vicente Rojo: The destruction of order) (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).



The spatial distribution of the work outlined by Pilar García follows a set of rules of the game. Divided into sections based on different series that were the axis of Vicente Rojo's career, the spatial codes are structured as follows: the pictorial work on the vertical walls, the sculptures on the horizontal floor, the books on diagonal tables accompanied by videos of hands that manipulate them. Around the columns, petals of lattice-shaped walls open to display graphic work, sketches and other smaller pictorial sequences. In the center, a backbone with models, diagrams and sketches for monumental works in outdoor spaces. The rhythm of the exhibit is set by the visual routine of the twinned paintings for each of the series that surround the entire space from the side walls.

Vicente Rojo worked in series, painting the same idea and its variations at the same time. The exhibition is titled and opens from the exploration of the sixties, present in *Destrucción (Destruction)*, in dialogue with *Geometrías (Geometries)*, series in which the canvas becomes a witness of actions, such as tears, erasures and

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FIGURE 5.
Negaciones (Denials, in English) Series, Vicente Rojo, in the central latticework at the Museum (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).



In his series *Negaciones (Negations)* (1970-1975), Rojo discovered in a synthetic and balanced way that, from the alphabet, the letter T in capital letters was the one that brought together the vertical and the horizontal in perfect balance. The H, the I and the L could be other letters that in upper case are built by the meeting of the horizontal and the vertical, depending on the typeface, with or without serifs, that is considered. The T, however, does not arouse any doubt: it always has a balanced central composition. Obsessed by this geometric observation in the typographic world, Rojo demonstrates with his sequence that this letter is a formal event: the meeting of the vertical and horizontal lines. In this central meeting possibility, a meeting point is created that forms a square, which, in this case, allows, in turn, the diagonal (Figure 6 and 7).

The group label that accompanies this set explains to the public what I have pointed out: that Rojo worked in series, in accordance with a “general theory of systems” in which the unitary parts form a whole and are interrelated. In this way, when viewing one of the works in these series, we would also be viewing all the others. It can be proposed to expand this idea and say that this exhibition becomes a larger system in which each of these series is a unitary part, so that one cannot see one of the pieces without seeing the others.

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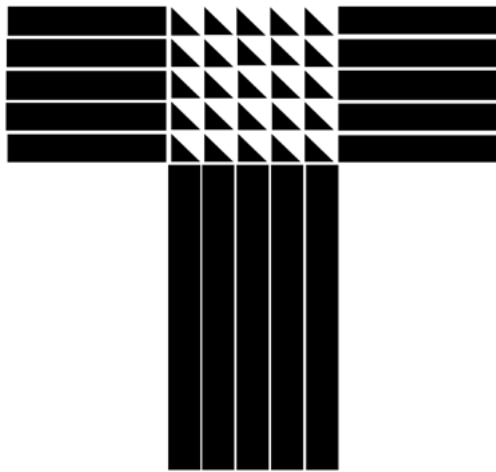


FIGURE 6. Digital drawing based on the work of Vicente Rojo (Drawing: Carolina Magis Weinberg, 2023).

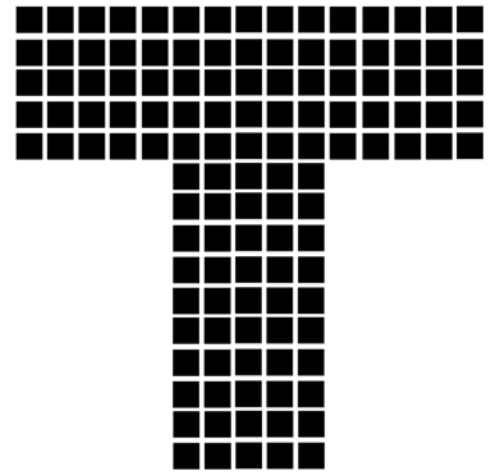


FIGURE 7. Digital drawing based on the work of Vicente Rojo (Drawing: Carolina Magis Weinberg, 2023).

What is revealed by the “destruction of order” is not the lack of rigor and indiscipline of the form, but a structuring dimension behind the work in the continuous production of Vicente Rojo (Figura 8).

FIGURE 8.
Negaciones
(*Denials, in English*)
Series, Vicente
Rojo (Photograph:
Gerardo Díaz
Sandoval; courtesy:
Museum of Modern
Art, Mexico).



The series of self-portraits, one of the most recent in the exhibition, gives space to a masterful piece that becomes a transversal reading index. A frame surrounds a collection of objects: watercolors, scissors, tin soldiers, toy airplanes, rubber stamps, stencils that outline the word “ROJO”, glasses, a blackboard, acrylic paints, oils, inks, compasses, pencils, crayons, spirals, brushes, rules, rules and more rules. The idea behind this painting refers to

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the *Libro maleta* (*Suitcase Book*) (1968) that Vicente Rojo made with Octavio Paz as a tribute to the work of Marcel Duchamp, located in a nearby area within the exhibition. While in the original work Duchamp used the book as an exhibition and container for his final works, in his self-portrait-toolbox Rojo accumulates not final works, but potential works: in this work Rojo unfolds in objects and references, as if he had already curated his own hindsight in a painting (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. *Volcanes* (*Volcanoes, in English*) Series by Vicente Rojo (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).



A few steps further on, past the tributes and the explosive volcanoes made of ink or ceramic, the exhibition closes with a storm in which around fifty painted and sculpted rains are gathered. They all rain, in different sizes, different materials and moments. The series *México bajo la lluvia* (*Mexico under the rain*) becomes a masterful lesson in synthesis and an insistent obsession that returns to form time and time again.

This series and the entire exhibition teach us to be suspicious of all forms and show that it is necessary to learn to observe them again: the circle, the triangle, the square, the pyramid, the cube and all its possibilities. The work of Vicente Rojo is an art of square and protractor, and T-square, and the T as a ruler. After seeing Vicente Rojo's wandering between form and its possibilities, the letter T is no longer a letter, but non-rain. It is the sum of vertical and horizontal. Inside a T fits the world, fits a rhythm of circles, of stripes. Vicente Rojo teaches us that the rain is diagonal. Between the vertical and the horizontal, the parallel deluge (Figure 10).

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FIGURE 10. Series *México bajo la lluvia* (*Mexico under the rain*) by Vicente Rojo (Photograph: Gerardo Díaz Sandoval; courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico).



In general the exhibition is a meeting exercise in which many works inhabiting various collections come together in the museum. All gathered, in harmonious dialogue, but each with their own voice. This is how the work dialogues with each other, while the public attends a pouring geometric concert.

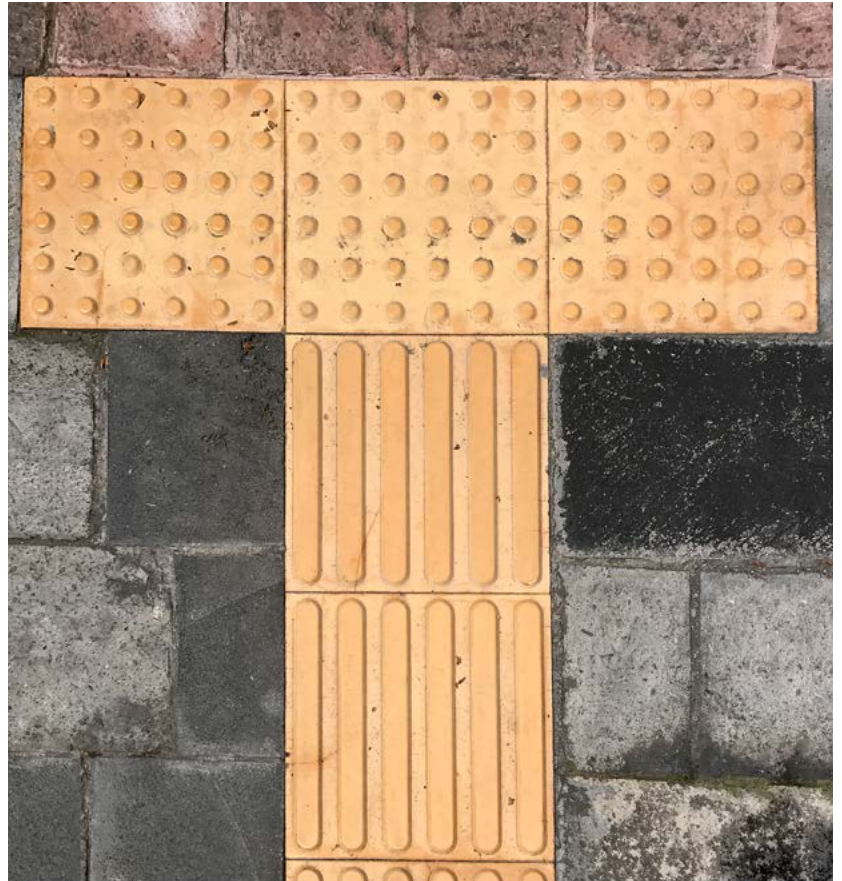
It also happens that the dialogue of the exhibition is not only between the works it contains, but of the exhibition unit as a whole with the world. Upon leaving the museum, it seems that the entire city has become a code, all forms are legible, everything adds up, everything is form. The world in its disorder folds to the regularity of the circle, the triangle and the square. Within the exhibition, a video from the Film Library of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in which the camera accompanies Rojo as he navigates through the city in 1965, sets out the rhythm of the approach. In the video, the world is seen through the eyes of the artist, a world in which everything speaks a visual language and in which codes accumulate, everything has shape, and the line puts everything in dialogue. Before Rojo, the city becomes a case of signs, arrows and signs to follow with your eyes.

This is how attending Vicente Rojo's exhibition means being inside and outside at the same time, with one foot in the museum and the other in the city. Within the space, everything has been related and, teaching our eyes to look as if it were the first time, we discover the possibility of seeing reality again through Rojo's code. We discover that, indeed, the world is then more beautiful (Figura 11).

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FIGURE 11. Finding
Vicente Rojo in the
streets (Photograph:
Carolina Magis
Weinberg, 2023).



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Her practice is developed through different media, such as photography, artist's book, installations, graphics, video and textiles. Between 2014 and 2017, she obtained two master's degrees: in Visual Arts (Master of Fine Arts) and in Critical and Visual Studies (Master of Arts) at the California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco, United States, as a Fulbright-García Robles and Fonca-Conacyt scholar. In 2013 she obtained a degree in Plastic Arts at the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado "La Esmeralda" (National School of Painting, Sculpture and Engraving "La Esmeralda"). She has exhibited individually and collectively in Mexico, the Philippines, Germany, France, Colombia, and the United States. In 2019 she was awarded a scholarship from the Jóvenes Creadores del Fonca (Young Creators Fonca) program. Since 2022 she has been a professor at "La Esmeralda".