

***Un Moteur Sans Mouvement: Martha Boto and the Stillness of Kinetic Sculptures***

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## Final Acquisition Proposal

Assembled in plexiglas with suspended chromatic rings shifting from warm to cool, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* moves without moving. I'm proposing this work from 1975 by the Argentinian kinetic artist Martha Boto (1925–2004) for acquisition by the Jepson Center. Martha Boto was an Argentinian visual artist considered a pioneer of kinetic and programmed art. From a young age, she became involved in the art scene, joining the first abstract art movements in Buenos Aires, such as the Asociación Arte Nuevo in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Upon completing her studies at La Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Ernesto de la Cárcova in 1946, she began experimenting with different media, including plexiglas. In 1956, she co-founded the art group Artistas No Figurativos Argentinos (ANFA) alongside her partner Gregorio Vardanega, just as they were about to relocate to Paris, where she became one of the few women artists working in kinetic art until her death in 2004.

Currently, the Jepson Center holds no artworks by Latin American artists, nor any kinetic artwork in general. As the museum is committed to diversifying its contemporary art collection, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* would fill both those gaps. Doing so would create a direct dialogue with artworks already in the collection, such as *Forked Series #41 (White & Blue)* (2019) by Chul Hyun Ahn and *Cadmium Thrust* (1965) by Howard William Mehring, both of which use color and geometry to engage the viewer.

Composed of two half-cone forms in plexiglas, the sculpture features suspended chromatic half rings that gradually shift color, from yellows and oranges in the bottom rings to deep blues and purples in the wider rings in the center. *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* represents a period in Boto's career where she shifted from her earlier "lumino-kinetic" boxes to focus on plexiglas; it creates optical movement without the need of a motor. As the viewer walks

around the work, the rings shift in scale, creating the illusion of motion through color and geometry. Although this kinetic sculpture was produced during her time in Paris, her works have since been collected by major institutions in the United States, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The work is currently held in a private collection with provenance from Galería Gal., Spain; as edition 13/15, it exemplifies kinetic art's bypassing of the idea of the "uniqueness fetish,"<sup>1</sup> an artistic move that aimed to focus on the idea and movement of a piece rather than on the hand of the artist. Priced at €3,000–€5,000, it represents a fiscally responsible acquisition for the Jepson Center to expand its holdings and acquire work by an Argentinian artist who is already collected internationally yet is absent from regional museums in the American South.

**Word count:** 472 words

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Plante, "Kinetic Multiples: Between Industrial Vocation and Handcrafted Solutions," in *Keep it Moving? Conserving Kinetic Art*, ed. Rachel Rivenc and Reinhard Bek (Getty Conservation Institute, 2018), 104.

# Martha Boto

b. 1925, Buenos Aires, Argentina; d. 2004, Paris, France

## *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs*, 1975, Paris

Plexiglas on wood

Edition 13/15

Private collection, Spain

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Originally from Buenos Aires, Martha Boto relocated to Paris in 1959 to join an active Latin American kinetic art scene. Her work pursued a single obsession: movement, first through paint, then through Plexiglas mobiles, and ultimately without a motor.

*2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* moves without moving, but it appears to. Assembled in plexiglas rings that range in color, from warmer hues at each end of the sculpture, to cooler ones in the center rings, the work exemplifies what Boto described as “psychological reactions of joy or tension,” an art that, in her own words, “can become medicine for the spirit.” As a multiple edition of 15, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* represents the artistic commitment to bypass the idea of the “uniqueness fetish.”

## Catalogue Essay

And you, reader, just move. Move around the color-ranging rings and watch them generate movement in front of your face. Although Martha Boto (1925–2004) consistently appears in major surveys of Latin American art, she remains a deeply underrepresented artist in the Anglophone art world. This represents a gap shaped by: language barriers; a male-dominated kinetic canon; and a Buenos Aires-Paris circuit that is still systematically undertheorized, which is not incidental, but the result of decades of exclusion that Anglophone literature has yet to address. Given the recent acquisition of *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* from 1975, and placing it in dialogue with artworks already in the Jepson Center's collection, this essay argues that the historiographic gap that exists in Martha Boto's scholarship in Anglophone literature obscures her central artistic practice: that sculpture can move without the need for a motor.

Boto began her artistic career in 1950 after receiving her teaching degree from Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Ernesto de la Cárcova in 1946, which was, at the time, the most prestigious fine arts academy in Argentina. For the first years of her career, she painted mostly abstract paintings. In Boto's words, she began with a virtual movement, since she had always rejected academicism, gravitating towards subjects in motion, such as children, animals, and horses, anything that resisted the fixed pose.<sup>2</sup> During her years in Buenos Aires, she got profoundly engaged in the Argentinian art scene. At that time, Buenos Aires wasn't a passive recipient of European movements; it had developed its own geometric abstract movements, such as MADÍ, Arte Concreto Invención, and Perceptismo, which developed in parallel with the Peronist government.<sup>3</sup> These movements had their own manifestos and internal debates about

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Boto, "Martha Boto," interview by Claude Guibert, *Encyclopédie audiovisuelle de l'art contemporain: Lumière et Mouvement* (Imago, 2002), video, 13 min. Interview recorded 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Giunta, "Modern Art on the Margins of Peronism," in *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2007), 25.

terminology,<sup>4</sup> which meant they have been historically studied as if they could be isolated from the political realm, ignoring the relations Peronism had with the artistic milieu. As Andrea Giunta notes, when abstract art arrived in Buenos Aires in 1949, it didn't enter a void, unlike in Brazil, but found an art scene already in formation, shaped by local artists who had taken a clear, differentiated stance toward abstraction.<sup>5</sup> Though her early experimentations with suspended plexiglas mobiles happened while she was still in Buenos Aires, while still rejecting the idea of academicism,<sup>6</sup> it was in Paris that she continued working with motors and light bulbs.<sup>7</sup> She joined groups such as Asociación Arte Nuevo, founded by the Uruguayan artist Carmelo Arden Quin and the Argentinian art critic Aldo Pellegrini, and the next year she co-founded the group Artistas No Figurativos Argentinos (ANFA).<sup>8</sup> The kinetic art movement in Buenos Aires developed “in tandem,”<sup>9</sup> with the one in Paris demonstrating that its development was never one-directional. This context matters: when Boto arrived in Paris, she didn't arrive as a student, but with an already active artistic presence back home. In 1959, Boto and Vardanega relocated to Paris, the undisputed center for kinetic art in the postwar period. Under Vardanega's influence, she started working with electricity, arriving at what she called “mouvement réel.”<sup>10</sup>

Upon arriving in Paris, she entered an artistic scene already in formation, centered on the Galerie Denise René and the Latin American diaspora network, with leading artistic figures such as Julio Le Parc. The gallery, founded by Denise René in 1944, became, by the 1950s, the institutional center of kinetic and optical art in Paris, representing artists like Gregorio

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Giunta, “Modern Art on the Margins of Peronism,” 33.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Giunta, “Modern Art on the Margins of Peronism,” 45.

<sup>6</sup> Boto, interview.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Popper, “Light and movement,” in *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art* (New York Graphic Society, 1968), 168.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Gauthier, “Martha Boto,” in *Women in Abstraction*, ed. Francisca Garvie, Lorna Dale, Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, and Musée national d'art moderne (Thames and Hudson, 2021), 204.

<sup>9</sup> María José Herrera, “Argentina's ‘Tandem Scene’ of Kinetic Art,” in *Kinesthesia: Latin American Kinetic Art, 1954-1969*, by Dan Cameron, Jesús Fuenmayor, María José Herrera, et al. (Palm Springs Art Museum, 2017), 97.

<sup>10</sup> Boto, interview.

Vardanega, Luis Tomasello, and Julio Le Parc, and providing the Latin American diaspora network with a home in Paris. The 1967 exhibition *Lumière et mouvement*, organized by Denise René, helped not only in getting Boto publicly recognized in the international optico-kinetic movement, but also in bringing together artists who were hesitant to use light and optics as an artistic medium. Boto's presence in this Latin American diaspora network was formally recognized at the above-mentioned exhibition, where she was among the fourteen Latin American artists selected to exhibit.<sup>11</sup> While museums in Zagreb, London, New York, and Buenos Aires were acquiring works by artists like Le Parc, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris was acquiring works by Boto,<sup>12</sup> which matters because this recognition placed her on equal footing with the rest of the kinetic artists in the field. Boto wasn't imitating Vardanega, nor did they coin the term "Chromocinétisme" together; it was Vardanega who coined it and taught her the fundamentals, leading her to pursue her own journey in the realm of electricity. As the scholar Dan Cameron notes, Boto's approach to kineticism differed from that of artists like Vardanega or Julio Le Parc in that she treated light, color, and motion as a single entity, emphasizing the individual qualities of the materials she worked with.<sup>13</sup> Her optical work isn't incidental; it was a deliberate departure from the kinetic path that Vardanega showed her. While she chose to concentrate on different aspects on her kinetic sculptures, such as slow and continuous movement, circular forms, and intense luminous effects, she operates under the same framework of "Chromocinétisme" as Vardanega in pursuit of shared aesthetic objectives. As Popper notes, their investigations led in different directions; Vardanega's into the realm of

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<sup>11</sup> Isabel Plante, "A Universal Vocation: Paris as a Cultural Arena for South American Geometric Abstraction from the Postwar Period to the 1960s," in *Kinesthesia: Latin American Kinetic Art, 1954-1969*, by Dan Cameron, Jesús Fuenmayor, María José Herrera, et al. (Palm Springs Art Museum, 2017), 129.

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Plante, "Consagración individual y pertenencia grupal [Individual fulfillment and sense of belonging]," in *Argentinos de París: Arte y viajes culturales durante los años sesenta [Argentinians of Paris: Art and cultural travels during the sixties]* (Edhasa, 2013), 150.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Cameron, "Electric Shadows," in *Kinesthesia: Latin American Kinetic Art, 1954-1969*, by Dan Cameron, Jesús Fuenmayor, María José Herrera, et al. (Palm Springs Art Museum, 2017), 38.

transparency, while Boto's into the realm of reflection.<sup>14</sup> In the Parisian art scene, Boto's position as a female artist in a traditionally male-dominated artistic circle was significant due to the nature of the postwar kinetic art movement, which highlighted male artists such as Julio Le Parc, Jesús Rafael Soto, Carlos Cruz-Diez, and Victor Vasarely.<sup>15</sup> This motor-driven work wasn't a destination, but a transition. Movement, however, remained what she described as the central problem of her work, regardless of whether the works move electrically or not.<sup>16</sup> By abandoning the motor, Boto essentially moved kineticism away from the traditional notion of mechanical activation, towards, ultimately, perception itself, or what she called "Mouvement Virtuel."<sup>17</sup>

In 1975, she realized *Mouvement Virtuel* in material form with *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* in her Paris studio. This sculpture exemplifies this shift, from kinetic sculptures driven by motors to sculptures that don't move but appear to be based solely on color and light. Boto described her artistic practice in an interview conducted by Claude Guibert in 1996 as being always "based in nature."<sup>18</sup> *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* is a sculpture made of plexiglas. At a glance, the viewer sees two half-conical shapes cut in half, with a sheet of transparent plexiglas holding each half cone in the place of the cut. As suggested by the title of the sculpture, the "anneaux" make reference to the rings the cones are made out of, which are interspersed with rings of negative space. These color rings vary in color throughout the length of the sculpture, from yellows and oranges in the bottom and top rings to deep blues and purples in the wider rings in the center. Unlike Boto's earlier motorized structures, where movement depended on mechanical activation, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* shifts the responsibility of movement entirely onto the viewer's perception. This chromatic progression is

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<sup>14</sup> Popper, "Light and movement," 168.

<sup>15</sup> Gauthier, "Martha Boto," 204.

<sup>16</sup> Boto, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Boto, interview.

<sup>18</sup> Boto, interview.

not aleatory; it is the actual movement. In this sense, Boto is redefining one of the key principles of kinetic art, traditionally dependent on motors and electrical activation, shifting instead towards movement that becomes entirely perceptual and dependent on the viewer's position in space. The spectator no longer sees the sculpture from a fixed angle as the machine moves independently; instead, the work invites the viewer to move around it and view it from new perspectives. The shift from warm to cool across the rings gives the sculpture the optical illusion of movement, replacing the motor aspect of her previous works. As the viewer moves around the sculpture, the rings shift in scale and depth, giving it the illusion of movement entirely through the viewer's perception rather than mechanical activation. For kinetic artists, the idea of the "Multiple" carried an explicit political context, as Le Parc himself declared, "a Multiple is an art proposal conceived to be multiplied *ad infinitum* thanks to the industrial resources available. Every copy of a Multiple is identical and interchangeable with others. Each of them fully conveys the artist's original proposal."<sup>19</sup> As a limited edition of 15, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* aligns with the deliberate choice that characterized the kinetic movement that, as Plante argued, was at the core of these artists' strategies of "demystifying" art objects to avoid what she calls the "uniqueness fetish,"<sup>20</sup> therefore, it wasn't only about producing art that was fast and cheap, but also producing art that was accessible not only to private collectors.

In the context of the Jepson Center's collection, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* would not exist in isolation. It would enter into direct dialogue with artworks that, although not kinetic or by Latin American artists, share key formal concerns with Boto's œuvre. This dialogue becomes particularly visible when compared to Chul Hyun Ahn's *Forked Series #41 (White & Blue)*, which, similar to Boto, relies on light, spatial illusion, and the viewer's position to

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<sup>19</sup> Julio Le Parc, "Manifeste du Multiple," ca. 1966, cited in Plante, "Kinetic Multiples," 110.

<sup>20</sup> Plante, "Kinetic Multiples," 105.

generate the illusion of movement, achieving this effect by using fixed fluorescent lights and mirrors; an effect reminiscent of the logic behind Boto's motorized structures without relying on the mechanical aspect. On the other hand, Howard William Mehring's Cadmium *Thrust* parallels Boto's exploration of chromatic progression. Like Boto, Mehring uses stark chromatic contrast to generate directional thrust, creating movement without a motor. This painting is part of the Washington Color School movement that emerged in the 1950s and flourished in the 1960s. Mehring here becomes a direct interlocutor to *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* because it uses color in the opposite way to how other Washington Color School artists were using it, while others used color to dissolve form, he used it to emphasize it. Without Boto in the collection, Ahn and Mehring remain distant in dialogue. Her presence in the collection turns it into an argument about how color and movement can co-exist without the need for a motor, rather than leaving both Ahn and Mehring as merely interesting works without a clear common thread between them. The graduated color rings of *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* achieve a similar dynamism through repeated forms and chromatic sequencing, without the need for mechanical activation. Utilizing ordinary materials, these three artists generate the illusion of movement by playing with the viewer's perception... In Boto's own words, "avec le minimum des éléments, dire le plus."<sup>21</sup>

The absence of Martha Boto from anglophone literature is not incidental, it is the product of three compounding exclusions. Most scholarly sources and monographs about her exist entirely in either French or Spanish; the kinetic art canon has been traditionally dominated by men; and the Buenos Aires-Paris circuit has been systematically undertheorized in a discipline that has been historically interested in amplifying North American and European voices. *2 Demi*

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<sup>21</sup> Boto, interview.

*cones avec anneaux de couleurs* represents not only a justified addition for the Jepson Center, but a historiographic correction, as it introduces both a Latin American and woman artist to a collection that has been historically centered on American and European artists. As Dan Cameron argues in his essay “Electric Shadows,” kinetic artists were never too popular in the US, experiencing “a long delay in reaching a North American public.”<sup>22</sup> Recent scholarship, such as *Kinesthesia: Latin American Kinetic Art, 1954-1969* from 2017 or *Women in Abstraction* from 2021 show that this delay is actively being reversed by Anglophone art historians; making the present moment the ideal one for the Jepson to position itself at the forefront in this historiographic shift. Despite the gaps that currently exist with kinetic artists in North America and Martha Boto specifically, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs* continues to move without moving, bringing light to a regional museum in Savannah, Georgia.

**Word count:** 1960 words

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<sup>22</sup> Cameron, “Electric Shadows,” 25.

Image



Fig. 1. Martha Boto, *2 Demi cones avec anneaux de couleurs*, 1975, plexiglas on wood,  $13 \frac{4}{5} \times 8 \frac{7}{10} \times 7 \frac{9}{10}$  in ( $35 \times 22 \times 20$  cm).  
(<https://www.composition.gallery/art/martha-boto-2-demi-cones-avec-anneaux-de-couleurs-1/>).

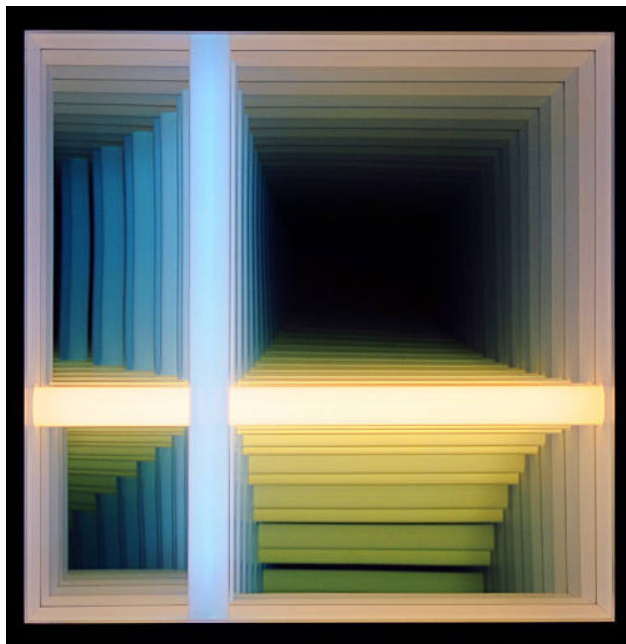


Fig. 2. Chul Hyun Ahn, *Forked Series #41 (White & Blue)*, 2019, plywood, fluorescent lights, mirrors, 21 × 21 × 4 inches (53.3 × 53.3 × 10.2 cm). Telfair Museums. (<https://collections.telfair.org/objects/9463/forked-series-41-white--blue?ctx=c2c33548284a229a854dc537c65d30bfd11fb50f&idx=0>).



Fig. 3. Howard William Mehring, *Cadmium Thrust*, 1965, oil on canvas, 66 1/2 × 58 1/8 in (168.9 × 147.6 cm). Telfair Museums.  
(<https://collections.telfair.org/objects/1730/cadmium-thrust?ctx=533d24384df096b633499e89de22fa1bd837393d&idx=109>)

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