
Public Penetrations: Jesús Rafael Soto's Entry into Political Art

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Résumé

L'artiste vénézuélien Jesús Rafael Soto a dirigé le mouvement d'art cinétique des années 1960 en Amérique latine avec ses sculptures en plexiglas moiré et ses installations géométriques. La critique actuelle décrit ses créations essentiellement dans les termes apolitiques du formalisme et de la phénoménologie. Pourtant, ses œuvres rassemblent des agents sociaux dans des espaces publics, ce qui soulève la question du politique. En utilisant la théorie critique de Hannah Arendt, cet essai présente les sculptures de Soto des années 1960 et 1970 dites *Penetrable* comme des interventions politiques à travers lesquelles la sphère publique est réintroduite, alors que le Venezuela se remet difficilement d'un régime totalitaire.

I never accepted the interference of politics in art, in literature or in songs. The image of a compromised artist always disturbed me.¹

Jesús Rafael Soto

...the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds." Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it.²

Hannah Arendt

During the 1990s, North American art historians and curators finally began to address Latin American abstract art, a subject which had largely been ignored in the literature until then. Among the beneficiaries of this belated interest is Jesús Rafael Soto (1923–2005), one of Venezuela's most celebrated twentieth-century artists on his own continent. When Soto moved to Paris in 1950 to study abstraction, he encountered a politically active group of Latin American expatriates,³ but most accounts of his work even from this period eschew any political discussion. Soto thus entered a newly minted international canon of Latin American modernists with little attention paid to the relationship between his aesthetic philosophy and the political.

Soto's own disavowal of politics in art may account in part for the apolitical treatment of his work. In his rare statements on the subject, he seems to conflate the political with the propagandistic and to oversimplify the relationship between politics and art, deflecting any charge of partisanship that would have limited his career. Most historical and critical literature follows suit, sanitizing the analysis of Soto's work by removing from it any hint of political controversy. Instead, our attention is directed toward formal and phenomenal aspects of the individual spectator's experience of the work. My contention is that Soto monumentally recasts art viewers as plural agents who communicate with each other in a public forum, and who thus act politically.

Current critical accounts of Soto's work tend to assume a solitary viewer, an isolated, introspective subject. This tendency can be explained by the development of his artistic production: Soto kept his early optical and kinetic work moderate in scale in order to encourage individual awareness of larger phenomena. Though it did not preclude multiple viewers, this work did not demand plurality. Beginning in 1967, however, and until his death in 2005, he created *Penetrables*, a series of environments that engulf spectators, rippling in response to their touch and encouraging social interaction.⁴ Because these works foster social activity, social theory may prove to be a better tool for considering them than has been the philosophy of individual consciousness and intentionality.⁵ Hannah Arendt's writings are particularly useful in this regard. Though Arendt is rarely cited in art historical journals, her political philosophy is easily adapted to the methods of social art history. What distinguishes Arendt's premise from dominant narratives in the social history of art are the central roles she ascribes to plurality and public activity. These two components are especially relevant when considering the actual movements of multiple viewers within Soto's environments. This kind of performance exceeds the familiar scope of social art history, which focuses on the socioeconomic conditions surrounding the production and the commodity status of art.⁶

The philosophy of Hannah Arendt allows us to redefine the political in art. Arendt refutes our tendency to equate the political with the governmental, arguing instead that politics arise naturally when free people communicate with one another in public. Offering a fresh perspective with which to analyze politics, Arendtian theory allows the art historian to discern political structures within art even when the work appears to be unconcerned with them. Other thinkers have also redefined the political in art. Jacques Rancière explains that "the sensible" enables subjects to create a shared vision of the world and, through this shared "aesthetics," to form the grounds for a political relationship. Jean-Luc Nancy also directly engages with Arendtian political philosophy, and though heavily influenced by it, he prefers to consider the "communal" rather than the "political."⁷ Our understanding of Soto's work would doubtless profit from analyses from the perspectives of Rancière, Nancy, or even Heidegger, but Arendt's political theory holds an

added benefit: she maintains the centrality of public space as the arena for political action. This, together with the distinction she draws between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, which I address later in this paper, makes her work ideal for my study. My argument is that this separation between the public realm and the apolitical private realm illuminates the way Soto's *Penetrables* constitute and delineate a common, public space. Soto's work carefully partitions space to engulf viewers in a shared aesthetic frame within which spectators' performative relationships to each other can be defined in terms of the political.

Soto has played an active role in establishing his autobiography and intellectual history. The narratives he rehearses are of course not irrefutable historical accounts but carefully constructed guidelines for the interpretation of his work, and they have greatly influenced the way critics and art historians have approached his oeuvre. In this essay, I introduce some of this story, together with certain details from Venezuela's political and economic history, not to create an essentialist autobiographical context, but to understand the conditions that have influenced the art historiography of his work.⁸ I follow with an introduction to the Arendtian concepts of plurality and social activity. In the final section, I apply these concepts to Soto's *Penetrables* in order to arrive at a political assessment of these works.

Soto was born in Ciudad Bolívar, a then-isolated regional capital, in 1923. He recalls that his formal education was limited to primary school, and that he had almost no contact with the Western art tradition.⁹ He quickly displayed significant artistic talent and worked as a sign maker at the age of sixteen, securing a scholarship to study applied art at The School of Visual and Applied Arts in Caracas.¹⁰ Though a conservative art scene, Caracas offered Soto greater access to Venezuelan masters and the opportunity to build friendships with artists who would become Venezuela's most important abstractionists, including Alejandro Otero, Pascual Navarro, Carlos Cruz-Diez, and Guevara Moreno.¹¹ (Many of these figures would join in Paris to form the art collective *Los Disidentes*.) Upon graduating, Soto assumed a teaching post as director of the particularly insular Maracaibo School of Fine Arts.

During these years, the Venezuela art scene was heavily influenced by various modernization programs that corresponded to a number of political upheavals. Soto was born under the brutal dictatorship of General Juan Vicente Gómez, who ruled Venezuela from 1908 to 1935.¹² It was under Gómez that Venezuela's vast oil stores were discovered and developed. General Eleazar López Contreras was appointed president in 1935, governed until 1941, and was followed by General Isaías Medina Angarita. These two presidencies witnessed a move towards liberalization that accompanied an accelerated development of

Venezuela's oil sector. October 1945 saw a revolution that ultimately led to the first legitimate presidential election in Venezuelan history. Revolutionary Rómulo Gallegos was elected in 1947 and held office from February to November 1948. These three years of democratic development, called the *Trienio*, ended with a military junta headed by Carlos Delgado Chalbaud. There followed a de facto dictatorship under General Marcos Pérez Jiménez that lasted from 1952 until the 1958 revolution.

Curator and art historian Luis Pérez-Oramas identifies the years 1948–57 as a period of intense artistic activity that coincided with Venezuela's volatile governmental changes. "For the most part," he writes, this activity "revolved around the huge works of infrastructure built under the dictatorship, specifically Carlos Raúl Villanueva's plan for a synthesis of the arts in Caracas's Ciudad Universitaria."¹³ In his published interviews, Soto addressed the impact of the dictatorship on his career only once, and it was in connection with this plan. The Ciudad Universitaria was to be the flagship of Venezuelan architecture, and several prominent Venezuelan artists were commissioned to create site-specific works. Soto was to join Otero in designing a mural for the campus, but did not follow through. When asked why, he responded,

Well, for political reasons, because of the opposition to the military dictatorship. My artist friends were telling me that we shouldn't cooperate with the military regime and I decided not to make it.... But in the end, you know, they made theirs and the only one that wasn't made was mine.¹⁴

In 1950, Soto abandoned his post at the parochial Maracaibo School of Fine Arts and left for Paris. Given the chronic political unrest in Venezuela, Pérez-Oramas characterizes Soto's move to Paris as exile, but Soto cites the country's hostility towards abstraction as his motive.¹⁵ In Europe, Soto found a thriving avant-garde, especially in music. He later recalled,

Once I was in Paris I took an interest in all new forms of musical expression. (I was later to attend the concerts of the "Domaine Musical", introduced by Pierre Boulez.) This approach enabled me to understand that modern composers were trying to discover sound systematics, using new values, outside the so-called "sensitive nature" of the artists, and where the harmonization of the elements used is reached in a random fashion.¹⁶

Soto continued to study music on his own, as it provided him with a structural model for composition. In particular, he followed Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone system, observing that "the notes, relieved of their traditional values, form a network of relationships obtained by a system of permutations of the values. It was these observations about music which led me to think of codifying my own language."¹⁷

The abstract language of musical form provided Soto with a seemingly apolitical basis for a new direction in art. Nevertheless, he was very much aware of the charged political landscape in Paris. According to his own account, he shunned the socialist movements that surrounded him, and even more so the propagandistic art movement known as Socialist Realism, stating,

I was certainly never passionate about Russian Communism; I wasn't a believer, and Stalin terrified me. I tried to participate, believe me, because the attraction and intellectual pressure were very strong. So many intelligent people were involved in it that I thought I was wrong, but I was just never able to feel fully convinced, and I always defended the artist's independence from ideological principles.¹⁸

Though he could not support his communist colleagues in Paris by making propagandistic art, he would arrive at their meetings with his guitar in hand to support them with music.¹⁹ He recounts that when criticized for not participating in the movement, he would respond, "If I am a man of the people, whatever I do must come from the people and must be useful to them." He adds, "every time I said that they would accuse me of being a traitor to my class."²⁰ This rare biographical disclosure suggests Soto favoured the less charged discourses of music and mathematics in part to avoid the ideological, and that he used the more neutral ground of formalism, both in art and music, to drive his published interviews.

Initially, Soto's Caracas schoolmates—Otero, Navarro, Mateo Manaure, Carlos González Bogen, and Narciso Debourg—helped him settle in Paris.²¹ He recalls,

The first thing I did was ask my friends about the artistic activity of the city: the galleries they went to, the museums they knew, etc. I immediately became acquainted with the four or five galleries that exhibited the most interesting things, among them the Galerie Denise René.²²

Estrellita Brodsky, who provides the most thorough consideration of Soto's development in Paris, has traced his friendship with *Los Disidentes* and its impact on his early work.²³ She reports that members of *Los Disidentes* initially introduced Soto to the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, where he would exhibit from 1950 to 1954.²⁴ She also highlights Soto's early desire "to minimize the subjective expression of 'artist-genius' and to emphasize the role of the active viewer/participant."²⁵

Soto's work from this period reveals a sustained interest in music and mathematics. Like Wassily Kandinsky, he titled some works *Compositions*, and his fluid geometric forms emphasize repeating rhythms.²⁶ In its use of abstraction to prompt perceptual shifts, Soto's work overlaps with the aesthetic directives of the Buenos Aires *Grupo Madí*, as well as with those of early optical and kinetic art.²⁷ Scholar and publisher Marcel Joray

succinctly summarizes this development in Soto's work, also noting its parallel to music:

His first *Répétitions* date from 1951. They were composed of very simple geometrical elements in a line, placed in a certain order and repeated to infinity. He was practicing his scales, as it were. *Progressions* followed, then *Peintures sérielles*, 1952, in which from an initial static draught-board emerged a dynamized composition. The following year appeared *Déplacement*, with the optical vibration of the intersection of points and lines, which suggests the third dimension. Next came *Spirale*, 1955, an important work constructed in two planes, one translucent, the other opaque, where the space is real, where there are two vibrations superimposed and where his kinetic movement really had its origins.²⁸

By 1955, Soto had created a body of work that earned him a place in the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René, commonly identified as a watershed in the development of Kineticism.²⁹ There, Soto joined younger artists, including Yaacov Agam, Pol Bury, and Jean Tinguely, as well as more recognized artists such as Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp, and Victor Vasarely.³⁰ Soto's contributions included four Plexiglas collages.³¹ Brodsky establishes the rhetoric with which Soto described this early work:

He claimed that, whereas sculpture was only engaged with static volumes, the overlaying of pictorial elements could engage the "fourth dimension" of what he called "time-space"—that is, a work in the process of physical change both requires a temporal period (time) and affects the physical sphere of its surroundings and viewers (space).³²

Critics, with the notable exception of Brodsky, quickly seized upon these formalist and phenomenological descriptions of Soto's early work, and their formalist-phenomenological paradigms still dominate contemporary Soto studies. In fact, the majority of extant literature on Soto, especially the monographs, favours interviews with the artist over extensive critical assessments.³³

In the mid-1960s, Soto began to make sculptures which he imagined the spectator could enter. These works, however, were not fully accessible, leading him to retitling them retrospectively as *Pre-Penetrables* (fig. 1). By 1966, he had created for the Venice Biennale an installation out of rods that would "envelop the spectator."³⁴ Following this, he states, "in 1966 and 1967 the idea of the *Penetrable* progressively emerged, by multiplying those rods until they covered the whole space and became an autonomous work"³⁵ (fig. 2). He later recalled that he was "trying to create truly enveloping works. That's what I called them: 'enveloping.' It was Jean Clay who started calling them *Penetrables*, perhaps because I told him that I had always wanted



Figure 1. Jesús Rafael Soto, *Pre-Penetrable*, 1957. Painted iron, 165.5 x 126 x 85 cm. Fundación Cisneros/Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (Photo: Jesús Rafael Soto: © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris).

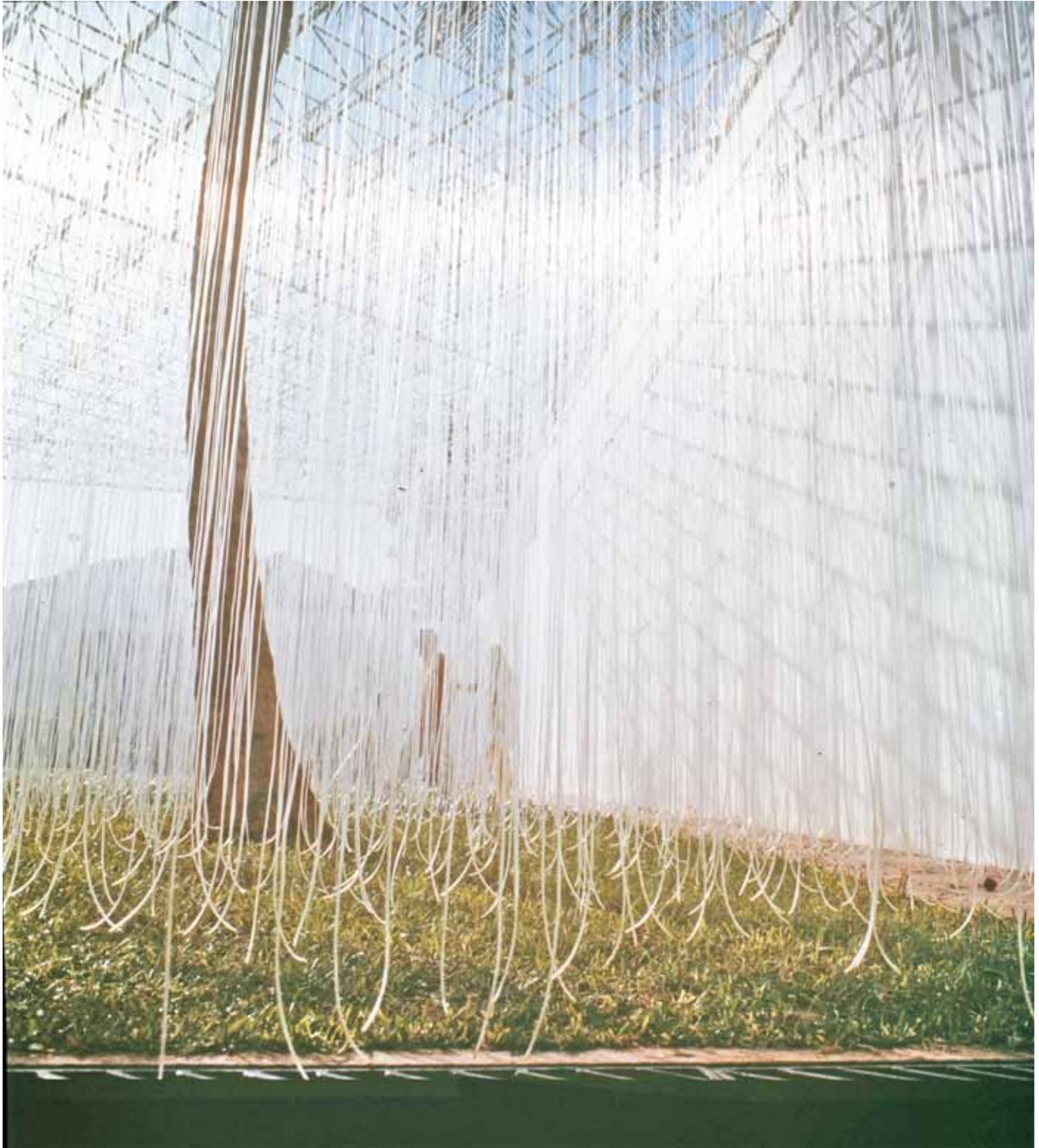


Figure 2. Jesús Rafael Soto, *Penetrable de Pampatar*, 1971. 300 x 1000 x 400 cm (Photo: Jesús Rafael Soto: © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris).

to penetrate that vibrating world of my Plexiglasses.”³⁶ Indeed, Soto spoke extensively of “vibration,” which for him described the fundamental motion of elements within the cosmos.

Following the first period of activity that occurred from 1948 to 1957, Pérez-Oramas identifies a second great period of artistic activity in Venezuela, largely influenced by the country’s return to democracy with the election of Rómulo Betancourt—who held the presidency from 1959 to 1964—and “the return to their ‘mother country’ of the artists exiled in Paris during the 1950s, among them Soto, Otero, Pascual Navarro, Cruz-Diez, and Omar Carreño.”³⁷ He states that kinetic art became “the country’s clearest symbolic manifestation, de facto if not in principle, of democratic development policy from 1959 to 1976.”³⁸

Not only did Soto play a foundational role in developing a background narrative for his work, he also established a body of terms to describe his work formalistically—in the specific sense of “restricted” formalism, the term that Yve-Alain Bois uses to refer to the surface analysis of “form-as-shape.”³⁹ This particularly superficial level of formal analysis never explores the deeper structural or semiotic layers of form.⁴⁰ Critics studying his work have followed this lead, and recurrently compare Soto’s formal depictions of space to shifts of spatial representation within the history of Western art. For example, though Pythagoras is rarely mentioned specifically, a significant number of accounts compare Soto’s spatial structures to the vibrations of strings and tonalities of music in Pythagorean terms. Alfredo Boulton romantically traces Soto’s work to “the rules of the purest geometry,” and to “mathematical equations of the purest classical roots.”⁴¹ According to Joray, “it is clear that Soto is engaged in an art-science. His artistic research can hardly be distinguished in principle from that of the scientist.”⁴² Joray traces a trajectory that locates in Soto the understanding of the universe as vibration, more specifically as “the intersection of points and lines.”⁴³ Ultimately, Joray links an “innate sense of musical rhythm” with Soto’s interest in “the structure of the universe” and “the laws of physics.”⁴⁴ Michel Butor also embraces the correspondence between Soto’s work and music. He cites Piet Mondrian’s influence on the artist: both “consider music as visual art” through which they derive “pure plastic” form and eliminate “the interference of the individual.”⁴⁵ Ariel Jiménez references Leon Battista Alberti in relation to Soto. In a short essay entitled “Geo-metries,” Jiménez describes the space of the *Penetrable* as that which “could extend itself in all directions with no limits, occupying the totality of the area that harbors it.”⁴⁶ Jiménez references Alberti’s use of perspective, which tricks the viewer into believing that a fully dimensional space lies before him or her. Boulton emphasizes “the void” established by the *Penetrables*.⁴⁷ Guy Brett insists that Soto’s work “is about the interrelation of two values: the real and the imaginary.”⁴⁸

Joray all but ignores the physical artwork when he equates the *Penetrables* with a wave: “The mass, dematerialized, is nothing more than vibration.”⁴⁹ He remarks: “Soto himself will tell you that he enjoys the idea as much as its realization. He thinks that his art is conceptual in the real meaning of the word, since once the concept is known anyone can reproduce the work that is thus programmed, without his help.”⁵⁰ Whether critics invoke the history of Renaissance perspective, Dutch geometric abstraction, or even Schönberg’s serialism, such formalist comparisons have not yet extended past the restrictive formalism against which Bois cautions.⁵¹

Brett offers one of the most convincing phenomenological accounts of Soto’s work. He too brings up some formal parallels, only to dismiss them in favour of the phenomenal: “Soto has generally worked with the anonymous elements isolated by Mondrian and Malevich, the line, the square, and so on. But this is not intended to remove the work to a geometrical realm.” Instead, “in Soto’s *Penetrable* the eyesight is scattered with all the delicacy of an object in one of his kinetic paintings. It is with our whole bodies that we experience the ‘climate’ of the work and welcome the illusion.”⁵² This is perhaps the most lyrical discussion of the experience of Soto’s installations and one of the few places where a critic directly addresses the public dimension of the *Penetrables*. However, like Soto’s other critics invoking phenomenological concerns, Brett is never able to apply this initial investigation to a deeper understanding of intersubjectivity and social interaction.

More pointedly, in an essay entitled “Soto y el ser” (“Soto and the Self”), art critic and poet Ricardo Pau-Llosa moves away from the formalist emphasis on geometry and towards the phenomenal experience of space:

Soto...acknowledges that for him “geometry was a trap [he] had to use” to make his new approach intelligible to the western public. And the idea was this: we automatically experience space as ordered, intuited geometry whose center is found in each person. Geometry provides the alphabet with which we express that sense of intuited order. Each geometric form is a scale model of our existential relationship to space. The referent for the scale model, however, is deep within us; geometry springs from the fact that we are corporeal beings and, as such, the centers of the series of spatio-temporal events we compose and recompose in our minds. Those events are our experiences, our lives. When the centrality of the self and the world seeks and [*sic*] outward an [*sic*] essential expression, it causes geometry to come into being.⁵³

Pau-Llosa’s phenomenological approach brackets a single “self” even more explicitly, an individual consciousness that experiences this space:⁵⁴

The *Penetrable* generates perceptions that fall within what Husserl called “transcendental phenomenology,” among these the act of grasping oneself as noema and not just as noesis—i.e. as an element in the world we “intend” or grasp, as well as the subjective center of that world.⁵⁵

In fact, this concept of the solitary self, and of the solipsistic universe which it precipitates, is precisely the grounds against which Luce Irigaray launches her famous critique against Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁵⁶ Irigaray introduces the idea of sexual difference to counteract phenomenology’s solipsism. I turn instead to the plurality of Arendt’s political philosophy.

Of Hannah Arendt’s eleven books, *The Human Condition* was the first to lay out an approach to political theory based on action. Published in 1958, it was immediately recognized as a major development in modern political thought.⁵⁷ Her work is highly influenced by both Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, in particular the latter’s hermeneutic pursuit of re-connecting with Presocratic philosophical traditions, as she also looks to the Greek *polis* to investigate the key components of democratic life.⁵⁸ Arendt develops the ancient concept of the *vita activa*, contrasted to the *vita contemplativa*, to set up a powerful lexicon for describing humanity’s relationship to politics. She begins *The Human Condition* by tracing the characteristics of the *vita activa*, which encompasses “three fundamental human activities: labour, work, and action.”⁵⁹ Building upon what initially appears to be a Marxist matrix, Arendt specifies that both labour and work have to do with the survival of the organism. Labour is that which keeps a being’s biological systems in functioning order. Eating is an example of labour, but so is feeding, since labour “assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species.”⁶⁰ Arendt writes, “The human condition of labour is life itself.”⁶¹ Work differs from labour in that it does not follow biology as strictly, but represents more “artificial” initiatives that nevertheless aim to maintain the health of humans. If labour is that activity which keeps bodies alive, work is that which transforms the earth into a *world*. Work involves the creation of infrastructure (building housing, for instance) that insures the survival not just of individuals, but of communities. Moreover, work is an activity that survives beyond a single life, benefitting the species more permanently. Work transforms the earth into a livable habitat for generations. “Work and its product, human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time.”⁶²

Arendt argues that the third type of activity that is unique to human beings is action, and it allows humans to lead political lives. “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds

to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”⁶³ She continues, “Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”⁶⁴ The very condition that makes political life possible is also responsible for historical life. Arendt makes this connection explicit: “Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.”⁶⁵

Upon admitting these terms into their vocabulary, art historians will have access to a kind of political analysis of art that goes beyond practices typical of the social history of art. In Arendt’s schema, art is not political because of its content, subject matter, or socio-economic context: it is political if it publicly communicates to a free plurality. In this sense, public speech acts constitute political action.

Soto and Arendt explore a common motif—humankind’s position within the cosmos—albeit to different ends. Arendt characterizes the human condition as both our imprisonment on earth and our desire to escape it. She begins the prologue of *The Human Condition* by invoking the 1957 launch of Sputnik, which evidenced our aspiration to transcend the one condition that defines our humanity: our perennial state of being bound to earth. “The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice.”⁶⁶ The desire to leave the earth suggests that we continue to struggle against the human condition. It is this struggle that Arendt tries to understand, a struggle she puts elegantly: “What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”⁶⁷ And *doing* is fundamentally linked to the *vita activa*—the active life.

Arendt outlines a historical shift in the philosophical treatment of the *vita activa*. In the ancient city-state, the *vita activa* was afforded the utmost respect, for it took as its noble object the participation in political activity. Over time, it became associated with noisiness, and the high regard in which it was originally held was ultimately redirected to the quiet life of contemplation, the *vita contemplativa*. Arendt explains that “in medieval philosophy the standard translation of the Aristotelian *bios politikos*, [what she calls the *vita activa*] already occurs in Augustine, where, as *vita negotiosa* or *actuosa*, it still reflects its original meaning: a life devoted to public-political matters.”⁶⁸ She adds, “With the disappearance of the ancient city-state—Augustine seems to have been the last to know at least what it once meant to be a citizen—the term *vita activa* lost its specifically political meaning and denoted all kinds of active engagement in the things of the world.”⁶⁹ Once greatly esteemed, the

vita activa was now no more important than any other worldly pursuit. The “only truly free way of life” after this fall could only be achieved through contemplation. As “the absolute quiet of contemplation” was promoted to the highest pursuit, the ascendancy of its accompanying quietude served to re-characterize the *vita activa* as an “un-quiet” activity.⁷⁰ Arendt contends that this pejorative connotation persists in the modern age.⁷¹ As the “un-quiet,” the *vita activa* “remained intimately related to the even more fundamental Greek distinction between things that are by themselves whatever they are and things which owe their existence to man, between things that are *physei* and things that are *nomō*.”⁷² For Arendt, a metaphysical position that invests the universe with supreme order privileges contemplation over action: “The primacy of contemplation over activity rests on the conviction that no work of human hands can equal in beauty and truth the physical *kosmos*, which swings in itself in changeless eternity without any interference or assistance from outside, from man or god.”⁷³

Though Soto was likely unfamiliar with Arendt’s work (although, interestingly, *The Human Condition* was roughly contemporaneous with the development of the *Penetrables* series), his aesthetic premises strongly resemble her characterizations of the *vita contemplativa*. Soto states:

A work of art must be capable of moving the beholder, but this does not mean that it must be born of an emotive situation. If the work of art has an origin it is in the reflection, the strictness and the logic of artistic research. Art is not expression. It is knowledge.⁷⁴

Later, he laments the pragmatic necessity of the physical work of art, stressing the importance of contemplation over action: “The function of any work of art is to stimulate reflection; its interest is highly conceptual, although the artist must resort to sensorial means to make his conceptions clear.”⁷⁵ Both statements demonstrate that reflection is central to Soto’s philosophy of art. They also show that while physical, emotional, and sensorial acts are necessary for reflection, they are not desirable on their own grounds. Nowhere does Soto find a more powerful tool with which to explore the *vita contemplativa* than in his *Penetrables*.

But Soto admits an essential contradiction here. On the one hand, he believes that his *Penetrables* effect a “dematerialization of bodies.” On the other, he acknowledges the centrality of the viewer’s body within the work:

In the *Penetrable* the beholder is really part of the work. The *Penetrable* is a work which has attained its object. It can be reconstructed without my help. I think that is the real meaning of conceptual art.

The *Penetrable* is the materialization of the idea which gave rise to my thoughts about the state of the space of the universe, completely occupied by relations. It throws light on the question of sensitive space, continually filled with the purest structural values, such as energy, time and movement. The reality of the experience of the beholder who takes part by going into the *Penetrable*, and so in a different time-space, will be clear for him the day he can move freely in weightless surroundings.⁷⁶

Soto’s view of the *Penetrable* as an artwork which attains its object, or rather subsumes it, relies on a conceptual assumption that runs counter to the practical reality of his works: that a single viewer enters the work alone. In my own experience, this is rarely the case. The *Penetrables* are so irresistible that they draw multiple visitors into the work at any given moment. The experience is thus far more chaotic (and un-quiet) than contemplative. As multiple viewers enter the work, the displacing of filaments creates dimensional ripples and fields of interference. This is not just a visual phenomenon. People laugh, cheer, and call out to each other; the clinking of the filaments follows their movements. The sculpture itself pushes against the skin, and as it envelops the body, a visitor today can even become aware that the aging sculpture itself has acquired a noticeable scent. When multiple visitors are inside a *Penetrable*, they cannot pursue the quiet *vita contemplativa*; they have no choice but to engage in the most political kind of *vita activa*. Their experience moves from a private meditation on universal forms to a shared exchange of open discourse. The daydream of the cosmos disappears, and into its place springs the public realm, as Arendt characterizes it: “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.”⁷⁷ In the midst of the *Penetrable*, though there is some visual clouding, each agent is freely seen, heard, and decidedly recognizable, and the impact of one’s actions ripple throughout the sculpture, amplifying the artwork’s role as a vehicle of communication.

The *Penetrables* thus frame a public space of action that Arendt contrasts to the “conditions of radical isolation,”⁷⁸ a precarious state in which humans are forced into separate, private spheres, unable to communicate with one another in public. As public spaces, the *Penetrables* constitute worldly spaces: “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.”⁷⁹ Arendt is careful to distinguish the world from the earth, however, because the world emerges out of human activity:

It is related...to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is

between those that have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.⁸⁰

Like the table, the *Penetrable* simultaneously frames a plurality and prevents agents from merging, just as in Arendt, the public realm “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other.”⁸¹ Interestingly, Soto’s public space maintains visibility while decreasing spectacle: spectacle and mass society can reduce crowds to a private, uncommunicative state. Most importantly, the *Penetrable* creates a public realm that reminds citizens that through action they constitute and share a common world. Only by creating public structures that ensure free expression can societies leave the private terrain of the earth and join the communal realm of the world. Perhaps at some level, Soto understood this. He recognized that through his art, he could form an open political arena or public structure with the potential to emancipate Venezuela from its political isolation:

In Venezuela we don’t have anything already made; we have nature on our side, but we are starting to tame it, and until we have a perfectly formed social structure, we have no right to destroy. We cannot act that way; we need to build first. That is why I have always defended the concept of structure, and at the very least that is what I hope to give my country. I don’t know what value it may have, what intensity it may achieve, but at least I intend to leave it clearly and precisely. I want structure for Venezuela, and thus for Latin America. The most important thing, what concerns me the most, is to give my field a notion of what this country must be someday.⁸²

One final point: the title of these works confirms their political performativity. The Spanish word *penetrable*, like its English counterpart, refers in common parlance to that which can be penetrated, entered.⁸³ While this first definition indicates a physical penetration, its second designates conceptual comprehensibility, which seems to imply a preference for the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*. But the word comes from the Latin, *penetrabilis*, and derives its meaning not from ideas, but from architecture: to penetrate is to enter the innermost part of an edifice. It is locational, and ultimately gains its meaning through the movement of the subject through architecture. While such a physical act could have retained a private frame, the *Penetrables* are all accessible, penetrable, and above all public. Considering that many have been built in locations that might favour the *vita contemplativa*, for example, in museums, schools, or government centres, we must conclude that Soto achieved an additional penetration: by creating an arena for action—an architectural polis for the body politic—Soto pierced the quietude of the *vita contemplativa*, cut through its stifling silence, and revitalized the democratically indispensable role of the active, political life.

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Notes

- 1 Jesús Rafael Soto in Ariel Jiménez et al., *Jesús Soto in Conversation with Ariel Jiménez* (New York, 2011), 30.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1998), 198.
- 3 See Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 30. On Soto and *Los Disidentes*, see Jesús Rafael Soto et al., *Soto: Paris and Beyond 1950–1970* (New York, 2012), 16.
- 4 This essay focuses on the *Penetrables* in a general manner, and not on a specific period or group of installations. Future studies considering the differences within this body of work will certainly benefit from the publication of a catalogue raisonné, which the Soto estate is currently undertaking. Anne-Sophie Chevallier, e-mail to author, 9 July 2012.
- 5 Leading phenomenologists such as Luce Irigaray charge their predecessors—most notably, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas—with creating a narcissistic ethics incapable of imagining the other. Most convincing here is Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY, 1993). This book is not without its own critics; Judith Butler, for instance, has suggested that Irigaray’s insistence on sexual rather than gender difference in her phenomenological ethics leaves much unresolved. See Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, “The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell,” *Diacritics* 28, 1 (1998): 27. Art historians can sidestep the as-yet-unresolved complications in phenomenological art analysis by redirecting the discussion of Soto’s work from phenomenology to social philosophy.
- 6 Another valid approach might include Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. While his approach to social networks certainly opens art to a sociological analysis, Arendt more pointedly pursues the *political*. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, 1998).
- 7 For a discussion of Rancière on Arendt, see Andrew Schaap, “Enacting the Right to Have Rights: Jacques Rancière’s Critique of Hannah Arendt,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011): 22–45. For a discussion of Arendt and Nancy, see Andrew Norris, “Jean-Luc Nancy and the Myth of the Common,” *Constellations* 7, 2 (2000): 287. Of additional import is Arendt’s complicated relationship with Heidegger; see Elzbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt!*

- Martin Heidegger* (New Haven, CT, 1997).
- 8 I thank my anonymous reader for referring me to the work of Jean-Marc Poinso, who argues that artists authorize particular narratives regarding their exhibited work and who explores the processes through which those narratives become authoritative. See Poinso, *Quand l'œuvre a lieu. L'art exposé et ses récits autorisés* (Dijon, 2008).
 - 9 Soto interviewed by Marcel Joray, "Jesus Rafael Soto," in Marcel Joray and Jesús Rafael Soto, *Soto* (Neuchâtel, 1984), 14.
 - 10 Soto, "Jesus Rafael Soto," 20, 21.
 - 11 Soto, "Jesus Rafael Soto," 29.
 - 12 The information on the history of Venezuela is taken from Hollis Micheal Tarver Denova and Julia C. Frederick, *The History of Venezuela*, Kindle ed. (Westport, CT, 2005). Other valuable historical overviews include John V. Lombardi, *Venezuela: The Search for Order, The Dream of Progress* (New York, 1982) and Franklin Tugwell, *The Politics of Oil in Venezuela* (Stanford, CA, 1975).
 - 13 Luis Pérez-Oramas, "Caracas: A Constructive Stage," in *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps De Cisneros Collection*, ed. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro (Austin, TX, and New York, 2007), 79.
 - 14 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 47–48.
 - 15 Estrellita B. Brodsky suggests that the "increasingly convulsive and repressive political atmosphere" contributed to Soto's departure, though she also mentions his frustration with the parochial art scene. See Brodsky, "Relocating the Dislocated: Collage, Décollage, and Assemblage in the Work of Jesús Soto," in Soto et al., *Soto: Paris and Beyond*, 14.
 - 16 Soto, "Jesus Rafael Soto," 36.
 - 17 Soto, "Jesus Rafael Soto," 36.
 - 18 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 29–30.
 - 19 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 30.
 - 20 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 30.
 - 21 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 35.
 - 22 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 36.
 - 23 See Estrellita B. Brodsky, "Latin American Artists in Postwar Paris: Jesus Rafael Soto and Julio Le Parc, 1950–1970," PhD diss., New York University, 2009, and "Relocating the Dislocated."
 - 24 Brodsky, "Latin American Artists," 16–17.
 - 25 Brodsky, "Latin American Artists," 17–18.
 - 26 Brodsky, "Latin American Artists," 18.
 - 27 Brodsky, "Latin American Artists," 18. See also Musées d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg, *L'Œil Moteur: Art Optique et Cinétique, 1950–1975* (Strasbourg, 2005), 14.
 - 28 Joray, "Soto and Kinetic Art," in Joray and Soto, *Soto*, 14–15.
 - 29 Musées d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg, *L'Œil Moteur*, 14.
 - 30 Brodsky, "Relocating the Dislocated," in Soto et al., *Soto: Paris and Beyond*, 26.
 - 31 Brodsky, "Relocating the Dislocated," 26.
 - 32 Brodsky, "Relocating the Dislocated," 26–27.
 - 33 For interviews, see works cited by Alfredo Boulton, Joray, Jiménez, Claude-Louis Renard, Guillermo Ramos, and Alberto Garrido, among others. Boulton notes that historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies tend to appear throughout the literature. See Alfredo Boulton, *Soto* (Caracas, 1973), 163.
 - 34 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 85.
 - 35 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 85.
 - 36 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 87.
 - 37 Pérez-Oramas, "Caracas: A Constructive Stage," 79.
 - 38 Pérez-Oramas, "Caracas: A Constructive Stage," 79.
 - 39 Yve-Alain Bois, "Formalism and Structuralism," in Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2011), 33.
 - 40 An in-depth discussion of the viability of this term, as well as a discursive analysis of formalism and Latin American art history, lies outside of the scope of this paper.
 - 41 Alfredo Boulton, in Jesús Rafael Soto et al., *Soto, Space Art: October 4–November 3, 1985, Center for the Fine Arts and the Hispanic Heritage Festival Committee* (Miami, FL, 1985), 30–31.
 - 42 Joray, "Soto and Kinetic Art," 15.
 - 43 Joray, "Soto and Kinetic Art," 14–15.
 - 44 Joray, "Soto and Kinetic Art," 15.
 - 45 "Envisager la musique comme art plastique et la porter, en l'intériorisant, à la plastique pure;" "la débarrasser de l'immixtion de l'individuel." Michel Butor et al., *Jesús Rafael Soto: [Exposition, Paris, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 7 Janvier–9 Mars 1997]* (Paris, 1997), 30.
 - 46 Fundación Cisneros and Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, *Geo-metrías: abstracción geométrica latinoamericana en la Colección Cisneros = Geo-Metries: Latin American Geometric Abstraction from the Cisneros Collection* (Buenos Aires and Malba, 2003), 159.
 - 47 Boulton in Soto et al., *Soto, Space Art*.
 - 48 Guy Brett, "Introduction," in Jesús Rafael Soto et al., *Soto*, exh. cat. (New York, 1969), 14.
 - 49 Joray, "Soto and Kinetic Art," 16.
 - 50 Joray, "Soto and Kinetic Art," 16–17.
 - 51 For additional formalist treatments, see Jesús Rafael Soto and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, *Soto: cuarenta años de creación 1943–1983* (Caracas, 1983–86), 116.
 - 52 Brett, "Introduction," 15–16.
 - 53 Ricardo Pau-Llosa, "Soto y el ser," in Jesús Rafael Soto et al., *Soto virtual* (Caracas and Miami, 1997–99), 7.
 - 54 Occasionally critics have offered cursory existentialist approaches. See for instance Alberto Garrido and Jesús Rafael Soto, *No tengo prisa: conversaciones con Jesús Soto* (Mérida, Venezuela, 1989), 59, and Jesús Rafael Soto and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Soto: A Retrospective Exhibition: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York* (New York, 1974), 19. For both formalist and phenomenological investigations, see Soto et al., *Soto, Space Art*, 159; Soto

- et al., *Soto: Paris and Beyond*, 11–13 and 40–43; Jesús Rafael Soto et al., *Soto a gran escala* (Caracas, 2003), 80, and Jesús Rafael Soto et al., *Jesús Soto: Universe of Change* (Scottsdale, AZ, 1998).
- 55 Pau-Llosa, “Soto y el ser,” 8.
- 56 See Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 217.
- 57 Though Arendt’s previous work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), certainly offered penetrating political analyses of the historical conditions leading to Nazism and Stalinism, *The Human Condition* was the first to present a systematic political philosophy, a term Arendt eschewed.
- 58 Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/arendt/> (accessed 13 May 2013).
- 59 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.
- 60 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.
- 61 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.
- 62 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.
- 63 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.
- 64 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.
- 65 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8–9.
- 66 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2.
- 67 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.
- 68 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 12.
- 69 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 14.
- 70 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 15.
- 71 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 15.
- 72 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 15.
- 73 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 15.
- 74 Soto, “Jesus Rafael Soto,” 52.
- 75 Soto, “Jesus Rafael Soto,” 53.
- 76 Soto, “Jesus Rafael Soto,” 174.
- 77 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.
- 78 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.
- 79 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.
- 80 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.
- 81 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.
- 82 Soto in Jiménez, *Soto in Conversation*, 83–84.
- 83 Real Academia Española, “penetrable, adj.” *Diccionario de la lengua Española*, Vigésima segunda edición, <http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=penetrable> (accessed 10 December 2012).