

**SERPENTINE**

**JESÚS RAFAEL SOTO:  
PÉNÉTRABLE  
BBL JAUNE**

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**16 JUNE – 25 OCTOBER 2026**

Jesús Rafael Soto is known as one of the leading figures in kinetic art. Over the course of his seven-decade career he created an expansive body of work spanning drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations. Born in Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela, in 1923, Soto served as director of the School of Fine Arts in Maracaibo in 1947. After receiving a scholarship to study in Paris, he relocated to the city in 1950. There, he became part of a new generation of artists exploring the possibilities of incorporating movement into art. In 1955, he participated in the landmark exhibition *Le Mouvement* at Galerie Denise René alongside artists such as Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp and Victor Vasarely; a defining moment in the development of kinetic art.

From the 1950s onwards, Soto experimented with ways of creating movement with line, repetition and optical illusions. In 1957, he began his *Vibration* series by affixing metal wires in front of a striped surface to create a *moiré* effect where the wires appear to shimmer in tandem with the viewer's movements. Soto later expanded these ideas into three-dimensional works using suspended rods and hanging elements that transform space into something that is constantly shifting and alive. These ideas reached their fullest expression in Soto's *Pénétrable* series, immersive environments made from thousands of suspended tubes that visitors can physically enter and move through. The first *Pénétrable* was created in 1967 and exhibited in Galerie Denise René. Presented in Kensington Gardens, *Pénétrable BBL Jaune* (1999; 2023 Edition) consists of 4000 identical PVC tubes suspended from a rectangular steel framework measuring 10 metres long. When viewed from afar, the slight gaps between each strand create Soto's iconic *moiré* effect. This sculpture is based on the original *Pénétrable BBL Jaune* made by the artist in 1999 and was relaunched by his estate in 2023 to mark the centenary of his birth.

Visitors are invited to walk through the sculpture, interact with the yellow tubes and experience the work through movement and touch. For Soto, participation was essential — the artwork is completed by the presence of the viewer. As he wrote in 1968:

‘The viewer becomes an integral part of the work. Heretofore, the viewer was in the position of an external observer of reality. Today, the notion that there is mankind on one side and the world on the other has been superseded. We are not observers but constituent parts of a reality that we know to be teeming with living forces, many of them invisible. We exist in the world like fish in water: not detached from matter-energy; INSIDE, not IN FRONT OF; no longer viewers, but participants.’

## Jesús Rafael Soto in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist

This interview took place in Paris in March 2004

Translated by Michelle Suderman

*Hans Ulrich Obrist* – I'd like to start this interview by returning to your beginnings. You made your first works in Ciudad Bolívar, and that's also where you founded the Museo de Arte Moderno Jesús Soto (Jesús Soto Museum of Modern Art).

*Jesús Rafael Soto* – It all started in the 1950s. The original idea was to open a small museum in the garden outside my mother's house. But then the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva who had designed the Caracas University campus, who had become one of my closest friends, suggested that we come up with something on a grander scale, something focused on my own practice. The project began with the idea of presenting the collection of my work, but I was more interested in building a collection that represented what I considered to be the most exciting art of that time. I already had a small collection. I had begun collecting works by [Victor] Vasarely (1908–97) and other friends that had been shown in the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René (Paris, 1954). I began contacting different galleries, especially in Italy and Germany, which is how I met some of the members of the Zero Group like Heinz Mack (b. 1931), Günther Uecker (1930–2025) and Christian Megert (b. 1936).

*HUO* – It was through artist friends that your collection began to take shape?

*JRS* – Yes. I started travelling to all the major art centres in Germany, the Netherlands, France and Belgium. During those trips, it occurred to me to trade work with other artists: they would give me one of their pieces in exchange for one of mine. The transactions were done more or less at market value. A twenty-dollar painting bought you another twenty-dollar painting. That's how I managed to form such a sizeable collection. My only purchases were two small drawings by [Kazimir] Malevich (1879–1935) that I found in Germany, and a drawing by [Piet] Mondrian (1872–1944). I wanted to acquire work that represented the major points of reference of abstract art as I conceived it, in order to establish a clear foundation and spirit for the collection.

*HUO* – You mentioned that Mondrian and Malevich form the cornerstone of your collection. How have these two artists influenced your work?

*JRS* – When I enrolled at the School of Fine Arts in Caracas in 1942, the professors at the time were some of the most avant-garde artists in the country. They taught us art history as far as Cubism. Back then, I was very passionate about Georges Braque (1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), but I knew that Cubism was a movement that belonged to the past, and that it had ended before I was even born! I wanted the professors to continue after Cubism, but they told me they couldn't because Europe was at war. "We've seen all the Impressionists up until Cubism and if you want to find out more about what happened after that, you have to go abroad." So, I followed their excellent suggestion and left with the intention of finding an answer to the question: "What came after Cubism?"

*HUO* – On the subject of Mondrian, I understand that you are particularly interested in how he handles movement—for example, in the pieces in the *Boogie Woogie* series (1942–44).

*JRS* – When I first got to know Mondrian's work, especially his really colourful pieces with the crisscrossed vertical and horizontal lines, I felt that they inhabited the realm of greatness and spirituality. I could even draw an analogy with the greatest works of Renaissance Art. I had the feeling that Mondrian's search focused more and more on two-dimensionality, which is paradoxical because having started in Cubism, rather than seeking movement, which was Cubism's true aspiration, he did the exact opposite. Mondrian openly sought a kind of absolute immobility. In my case, I was interested in moving toward movement. I tried to create art that revisited what had fascinated me about Mondrian, but adding an element of dynamism. To tell the truth, I wasn't sure how to go about it. I just had an idea that it was necessary to walk that line. Later on, I had a chance to see *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43). That's when I realised that near the end of his life, Mondrian had understood and found the perfect solution to the problem. The work presented a kind of optic vibration. And since Mondrian had found the answer, I had to set myself new challenges, asking new questions, to take the concept a little further. I started bringing together all the artists whose works dealt with movement. László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), and in particular Naum Gabo (1890–1977), who impressed me the most. He did a sculpture, *Kinetic Construction (Standing Wave)* (1920), which I believe is one of the most important sculptures of the twentieth century, with iron wires that move so quickly they produce a virtual volume. Of course, Naum Gabo didn't refer to his work in this way, but I think that it's the same idea.

HUO – We have yet to talk about the show *Le Mouvement*.

JRS – When I went to Paris, there was another major gallery aside from Denise René, near Saint-Michel, that showed Constructivist painting. By this, I mean art that is highly constructed, as opposed to the freedom of abstract painting. Straight off, they told me about a salon created by abstract artists in the postwar years, because France had a lot of abstract painters then with nowhere to show their work. One of them, Auguste Herbin (1882–1960), had created the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. He rented a space for a month, each artist paid a fee, and the only condition for joining was that you had to be an abstract painter. I arrived in 1950, and in 1951, at the advice of my Venezuelan friends who were members of the salon, I showed my work to Auguste Herbin. He agreed to hang some small paintings that I had with me. Shortly after, other artists like [Jean] Tinguely (1925–91) and [Yaacov] Agam (b.1928) also joined the Salon.

HUO – So that's where you first met.

JRS – Yes, and then we launched *Le Mouvement*, with the participation of some more established avant-garde artists like [Alexander] Calder (1898–1976) and [Marcel] Duchamp (1887–1968). The exhibition had quite an impact, because we were immediately offered shows around Europe and even in the United States. For example, *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art (1965), but I wasn't very interested in it, so I decided not to participate.

HUO – What do you think about Marcel Duchamp's comments on the spectator as the one who completes the work—in the sense that from 1950 onwards, the spectator's place became more and more important in your practice?

JRS – It certainly was. I ended up putting the spectator inside the work with the *Pénétrables*. That was the main idea behind those pieces.

HUO – I saw photos of an amazing show of the *Pénétrables* organised by Suzanne Pagé and Pierre Gaudibert in the square between the Palais de Tokyo and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1969 (*Soto*, Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris).

JRS – When I worked in that space, Gaudibert was the director and Suzanne Pagé had just started to work as the conservator. Gaudibert was a wonderful man. When I told him that I had made a *Pénétrable* in Germany, he asked me how I would do it. I said I would need an engineer to build the structure (*Pénétrable*, 1969). And that's how I met the great master, Mr. Prouvé.

*HUO* – Jean Prouvé (1901–84) designed it. That’s incredible!

*JRS* – Yes, it was Prouvé’s work. I went to see him because his studio wasn’t far from mine. I needed his help to find the best way to position a *Pénétrable* in a space with no roof. I asked him to come up with a design for a structure to be rented out. The *Pénétrable* had to be at least 400 square metres. That’s when he suggested tridilosa<sup>1</sup>, which was starting to be used around then.

*HUO* – You might say it was an almost utopian project in the sense that it seemed impossible to build anything like that, with this obsessive concern for safety, of the work itself and of the public, as well as the technical difficulties.

*JRS* – Actually, my only problem was an older gentleman who used to dance in that space every afternoon. He’d put on a record and dance. I finally managed to convince him to dance inside the *Pénétrable* along with the kids that were running around in there.

*HUO* – Do you have any utopian projects that are impossible to do?

*JRS* – No, I don’t think so. That really wasn’t my thing. What I wanted was to show that space is more important than any object or element in it. Contrary to what we have always believed, space is not something that is filled with objects. Objects are in fact filled with space. Space flows. Nothing limits it. I’m interested in showing people who are interested in space as a quality or a universal density that in fact it is space that is in control—it defines and sets its own conditions.

<sup>1</sup> *Invented by the Mexican engineer Heberto Castillo, a tridilosa is a three-dimensional structural system made from steel and concrete. It is widely used in architectural and engineering projects to build bridges, overpasses and high-rise buildings.*

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Soto in the *Petit pénétrable* (*Small penetrable*). Solo exhibition *Soto*, Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb, Croatia, 1970. © MSU, Zagreb. © Jesús Rafael Soto / ADAGP, Paris 2026. Courtesy Atelier Soto, Paris.

Jesús Rafael Soto, *Pénétrable BBL Jaune* (1999;2023 Edition). © Jesús Rafael Soto / ADAGP, Paris 2026. Courtesy Atelier Soto, Paris. Photo: George Darrell. Courtesy Serpentine.



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Serpentine has maintained a long-standing commitment to bringing art out of the traditional gallery context and into the surrounding landscape. In 2010, Serpentine initiated a major presentation of sculpture in Kensington Gardens with *Anish Kapoor: Turning the World Upside Down*, in collaboration with The Royal Parks. In recent years, our public art programme has emerged as a central strand of Serpentine's work with artists who are constantly expanding the possibilities of public art today.

Soto's *Pénétrable BBL Jaune*, alongside Giuseppe Penone's *Albero folgorato* (Thunderstruck Tree) situated on the plinth at Serpentine South, are the latest additions to a long-standing series of public presentations in The Royal Parks.



Discover more about *Jesús Rafael Soto: Pénétrable BBL Jaune* in our free digital guide on Bloomberg Connects



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