Conflicting Modernities: Venezuelan art in the 1950s and 1960s

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Abstract

Cinetísmo (kinetic art) is the best-known artistic movement to have emerged from Venezuela in its modern period. The works of the major artists of this movement, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesus Soto, and Alejandro Otero, are prominently displayed in Venezuela's major cities, and have been exhibited internationally. This movement, however, does not begin to cover the complex political, social, and economic realities experienced in Venezuela's modern period (1945-1970s), but rather hid the uneven qualities of the modernizing efforts. For this reason, another collective, El Techo de la Ballena, under the aesthetics of Informalism, Dada, and Surrealism appeared in Venezuela in the 1960s, and sought to challenge the methods of Venezuela's modernization and the works of Cinetísmo. The objective of this thesis paper is to examine and compare the works of Cinetísmo and El Techo de la Ballena in order to analyze how they represent Venezuela's history of uneven modernity. I argue that the Venezuelan state's embrace of Cinetísmo as emblematic of its modernist and nationalist ideals of progress—one which continues to dominate the history of Venezuelan art in the international community as well as inside the country as the most important modernist aesthetic movement—misconstrues and overshadows the importance of the complex relationship between art and politics in Venezuela's modernization.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Venezuela's modern art period of the post-World War II era is viewed by the historians and politicians of the time as a period of positive change and progress for the country. As Lisa Blackmore states, "the aesthetic modernism that flourished in the 1950s is a source of national pride that has nothing to do with politics but proves that Venezuela was an exceptional case, ahead of its time in spearheading the vanguard of modern art in South America" (Blackmore, 9). An oil boom in 1948 gave the country's elite a sense of immense wealth, and therefore the ability to construct a modernity inspired by the ideals of Europe and North America during a dictatorship under the regime of Marcos Pérez-Jiménez (1950-1958) and the subsequent democracy of Rómulo Betancourt (1959-1964). This push for modernity, however, created a chasm between sectors of the population; modernity benefited a portion of the population, those who were urban and who worked in the oil industry, while the traditional rural and agricultural sectors remained impoverished. In other words, modern Venezuela was built on two separate stories, one built for the rich in the name of progress, and the other neglected in its perceived backwardness. This division is particularly evident in the arts produced in the 1950s and 1960s, as two radically different aesthetics came to dominate the Venezuelan art scene.

On the one hand Cinetísmo, which encompassed both Kinetic Art and Optical (Op) Art, was a state-sponsored art movement inspired by Paris's Geometric Abstraction that served as visual representation of the modernist project. On the other, the Informalist collective El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale) sought to create a movement that would counter the works of Cinetísmo in order to highlight the flaws in Venezuela's rapid modernization. The differences between these two groups—both aesthetically and ideologically—embody the contradictions of the nationalist modernist project. The Cinetísmo artists were concerned with

the creation of a universal modern art for the increasingly modernized Venezuelan landscape, whereas El Techo de la Ballena was concerned with challenging the notions of modernity promoted by the state, which in reality were creating immense social and economic divisions in the population. It is my contention that Cinetísmo represents an illusion of the stability of the modernist project, while El Techo de la Ballena brought attention to the unstable and uneven nature of Venezuela's capitalist modernity.

The objective of this thesis paper is to examine and compare the works of Cinetísmo and El Techo de la Ballena in order to analyze how they represent Venezuela's history of uneven modernity. I argue that the Venezuelan state's embrace of Cinetísmo as emblematic of its modernist and nationalist ideals of progress—one which continues to dominate the history of Venezuelan art in the international community as well as inside the country as the most important modernist aesthetic movement—misconstrues and overshadows the importance of the complex relationship between art and politics in Venezuela's modernization. This complex relationship was explored by El Techo de la Ballena's practice in their counter-aesthetic movement. However, Informalism and El Techo de la Ballena do not hold the same praise as Cinetísmo does in the historicization of Venezuela's modernist art era.

Cinetísmo emerges from Geometric Abstraction, a movement that originated in Paris where the main Venezuelan artists of this movement were living in the between 1945 and 1950. Geometric abstraction appeared in the Venezuelan context by way of the collective Los Disidentes, a group of Venezuelan artists living in Paris, France (1950), and the creation of the Taller Libre de Arte by artists living in Caracas, Venezuela (1948). Both the Los Disidentes collective and the Taller de Arte sought a renovation of Venezuela's academic and official realist art by promoting abstraction as the aesthetic for the country's modernity. During the late 1950s,

Geometric Abstraction would become consolidated as a Venezuelan artistic movement through the Ciudad Universitaria project (at the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas), which was designed as a synthesis of modernist art and architecture. After the success of this project, and during the Betancourt democracy in the 1960s, this movement was expanded upon and transformed by the artists who had embraced Geometric Abstraction into forms of kinetic and optical art now known as Cinetísmo.

The main artists of Cinetísmo, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesús Soto, and Alejandro Otero, took the key tenets of Geometric Abstraction (line, movement, color, and structured abstraction) and developed these into a nationalist art movement focused on the kinetic properties of modernist art (kinetic translates to cinético in Spanish). They are well known for their experimentations with color and movement, which were works, often public commissions, that had a populist modernist appeal and seemingly apolitical nature. These experimentations resulted in the creation of rigid geometrical structures which formed optical illusions and made the works appear as if they were transforming, moving, or vibrating in place as the spectator moves around them—hence the dual terms Optical art and Kinetic art. During their rise to prominence in the 1960s, the Cinetísmo artists were commissioned by the Venezuelan state with the task of making Venezuela's public art match the state's modernist ideals, as epitomized by their best-known and later works, such as Cruz Diez's *Chromointerferencia* (1974) at the Simón Bolivar International airport and Jesús Soto's *Esfera Caracas* (1997).

These two works have become key symbols of an idealized past for the Venezuelan diaspora, an image of what Venezuela was and could have become as a developed modernist nation in contrast to the contemporary realities of the Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro regimes. Contemporary Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro has seen the collapse of the

modernist project and given rise to severe social and economic issues and extreme political divisions. Under these regimes, the arts have lost the state-sponsorship, making it appear as if Venezuelan art is restricted to the post World War II modern period. As a result, Cinetísmo is the best-known art movement internationally to have emerged from Venezuela and has become symbolic of the country's celebrated modernity of the 1960s and 1970s.

The emphasis on abstraction as emblematic of the Venezuelan modernist era glosses over the complex origins of Cinetísmo during the dictatorship of Pérez-Jiménez from years 1950 to 1958 as part of a larger history of aesthetic innovations departing from the traditional academic figurative style of painting that dominated the Venezuelan aesthetic during this period. Figurative painting focused on representing the social dimensions of rural Venezuela and its history: the *llaneros* (Venezuelan cowboys), the poverty in the marginal areas of the country, and depictions of armed revolutionaries of Venezuela's history. In Venezuela, this figurative realism was the literal representation of the social realities experienced in the country. Before the emergence and embrace of Geometric Abstraction by the Venezuelan state, figuration was the only aesthetic taught by the major art academies in the country—such as the *Academia de Bellas Artes* in Caracas. The emphasis on this movement was such that even Carlos Cruz Diez, one of the major Cíneticos, began his artistic career as a figurative painter.

At the same time as an academic style of figuration dominated the nationalist art scene during the dictatorship years of the 1950s, the Venezuelan collective Los Disidentes (The Dissidents), which had formed in Paris in the late 1940s, embraced innovations inspired by the aesthetics of French Geometric Abstraction, which were experimentations with color and geometric shapes to form structured abstract compositions. This collective of Venezuelan artists living in France, many of whom had French roots, was composed of Jesús Soto, Alejandro

Otero, Mateo Manaure, Pascual Navarro, González Bogen, Narciso Debourg, Luís Guevara Moreno, J.R Guillent Pérez, Perán Erminy, Aimeé Battistini, and Rubén Nuñez. The collective (and the magazine it published) were concerned with the creation of a new form of Venezuelan art, one without connections to a colonial rural past featured in figurative works about poverty, agricultural workers, and the llaneros. They sought to create a universal art form that eschewed the particularisms of figurative art and that would position Venezuelan art as international rather than parochial.

In this paper, I examine how the ambitions of Los Disidentes, which laid the groundwork for the development of Cinetísmo, coincided with the modernizing project of the Marcos Pérez-Jiménez dictatorship, one that was continued in the 1960s by the newly installed democracy of the Betancourt government. I explore how the evolution of Geometric Abstraction into Cinetísmo reflects the history of modernization in Venezuela to create what Lisa Blackmore has termed "spectacular modernity," as well as the context for the emergence of the collective El Techo de la Ballena in reaction to this spectacular modernity. In turn, I analyse how during the 1960s El Techo constructed an aesthetic that formally countered the works of Cinetísmo installed in the Venezuelan landscape and created exhibitions that challenged the modernist notions of sophistication and a homogenous middle-class prosperity and liberal politics promoted by the Betancourt democracy.

In order to analyze this complex intertwining of art and political history in this thesis, I draw from a variety of texts which focus on the influence of Geometric Abstraction in Venezuelan modernism and the emergence of Cinetísmo as a state-sponsored art. Marguerite Mayhall, Luis Pérez-Oramas, Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig, Maria Carlota Pérez, and Mónica Amor all offer a variety of perspectives regarding the history of Cinetísmo. In

"Modernist But not Exceptional: the debate over modern art and national identity in 1950s Venezuela," Marguerite Mayhall (Venezuelan curator and art historian) outlines the events which lead to the embrace of abstraction by a young generation or artists in the country. Mayhall offers a history which begins with the "confrontation between abstract and figurative painters" to suggest how this confrontation symbolized "the class struggle between the oppressed majority and the dominant minority, in effect re-creating the national debate over political orientation and national identity within the visual arts" (Mayhall, 125). As this quote suggests, artistic movements in Venezuela are so inextricably linked to politics and the search for national identity that the conflict between figuration and abstraction—and later between Cinetísmo and Informalism—parallels the social inequalities within the country. Therefore, Mayhall provides the initial framework of confrontation in Venezuelan art which I will later expand in my analysis of the conflict between Cinetísmo and El Techo de la Ballena in the 1960s.

In the essay titled "Notes on the Constructivist art scene in Venezuela 1950-1972," published in *Cold America: Geometric Abstraction in Latin America (1934-1973),* Venezuelan poet and critic Luis Pérez-Oramas provides a history of Geometric Abstraction and Cinetísmo through identifying "an ideological chronology of geometric abstraction in Venezuela consisting of four distinct, fundamental chapters—emergence, legitimization, acclaim, and deconstruction—each of which is marked by an agglutinating event" (Pérez-Oramas, 55). I draw on this "ideological chronology," which outlines the specific events which led to the ultimate embrace of Cinetísmo as Venezuela's official art form, in my analysis of Cinetísmo in Chapter One. The "emergence" chapter refers to the first abstract art exhibition held in Venezuela by the newly founded Taller Libre de Arte in 1948 as well as the rise of Los Disidentes. This chapter is followed by the "legitimization" period, which occurred with the construction of a large

university city complex in Caracas during the 1950s. It continued into the late 1950s until the early 60s and the "acclaim" period, when "geometric abstraction was condensed to, if not absorbed by, kinetic art" (Pérez-Oramas 55). The final chapter, "deconstruction," transpired towards the late 1970s with the disillusionment of the modernization project.

Venezuelan curator and art historian Mónica Amor takes a slightly different approach to Cinetísmo's history in her essay "Between wall and city: geometric abstraction's local contingency"—published in *Sur Moderno: journeys of abstraction, the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros gift*—describing how Geometric Abstraction was integral to the rise of modern architecture in Venezuela and Brazil. When discussing Venezuela, Amor centers her argument in one of the major projects of Venezuela's modernization, the Ciudad Universitaria (University City) of the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas, designed by architect Carlos Raul Villanueva. As Amor states, "the Ciudad Universitaria was not only a remarkable architectural achievement, but also a test case for a synthesis for the arts, which…was intertwined with the development of abstraction in Venezuela" (Amor, 121). This project was the first to integrate art and architecture in Venezuela and corresponds to the "legitimization" chapter of Geometric Abstraction. It incorporated works by international artists such as Jean Arp, Alexander Calder and Victor Vasarely—and Venezuelan artists Pascual Navarro, Alejandro Otero, Victor Valera, González Bogen, Alirio Oramas, and Mateo Manaure—and was subsequently perceived as a transformative moment in Venezuelan art that legitimized the modernist project and consolidated the aesthetics that would lead to the development of Cinetísmo.

The texts I am drawing from provide a multiplicity of critical perspectives on Geometric Abstraction and Cinetísmo by grounding the history of these movement within Venezuela's political history. One key element of this political history was the promulgation of the *Nuevo*

Ideal Nacional (new national ideal), a document published by the Pérez-Jiménez regime in 1954. As Lisa Blackmore explains, the New National Ideal sought to "discharge modernity by 'getting rid of all that tradition of bajareque [shacks or slum houses], spider webs, and soggy literature, penetrating in the jungle to create real cities there too'" (Blackmore, 5). It is particularly important to note that Geometric Abstraction would not have earned its acclaim in Venezuela were it not for the modernizing efforts linked to the 1948 oil boom and the Pérez-Jimenez regime's New National Ideal. During this period, the Venezuelan state was concerned with emulating the technological progress of European and North American modernization. Geometric Abstraction, therefore, arose in response to the modernizing needs of the state in what was perceived by the elite as a period of optimism in Venezuela; the art movement was seen to embody the progressive or constructive modernity that was beginning to transform the country. Through substantial public installations and sculptural interventions, Geometric Abstraction and Cinetísmo rapidly altered the façade of massive concrete buildings, government institutions, and the overall landscape of Venezuela's major cities.

The harnessing of these works by the Venezuelan state to a modernizing project, argues Pérez-Oramas, can be "understood as a sort of abstract 'muralism,' devoid of narrative yet able to convey, by means of the prodigal force of optical variation…the spectral figure or the 'kinetic illusion' of Venezuelan modernity" (Pérez-Oramas 55-56). In other words, this form of Venezuelan "muralism"—along with modernist architecture—became the ultimate representation of Venezuela's futuristic imaginary, one of bringing a form of European culture to a tropical nation. These works served the purpose of the state and the elite, particularly in that they did not offer any critical perspective of the country, which consequently created an illusion

of progress and stability during a tumultuous period in Venezuela of dictatorship, transition to democracy, and rapid urban modernization.

The common generalizations of Geometric Abstraction and Cinetísmo as the epitome of a Venezuelan modernism of progress and stability serves to mask the specific inequalities and multiple modernities which existed during the 1950s and 1960s. This "labyrinth" history is addressed by two major critical perspectives of Venezuelan modernity that I draw on in my thesis: Venezuelan historian Fernando Coronil's *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* and Lisa Blackmore's *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela 1948-1958*. Both of these texts examine the construction of modern Venezuela through spectacular acts by the state created through the booming oil economy. Fernando Coronil provides a critical history of Venezuela, beginning with the dictatorship of General Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) and ending with the presidency of Rafael Caldera (1994-1998). In doing so, he analyzes how this "magical state" was created by Gómez and consequently continued by the regimes which would follow. More importantly, he navigates Venezuela's "labyrinth history" to provide a complex overview of the country's oil dependence and resulting social inequalities.

While Coronil offers a large history of Venezuela's "Magical State," Lisa Blackmore's book focuses solely on the rise and fall of Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. Using Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as a theoretical framework, Blackmore explains the spectacular acts through which Pérez Jiménez introduced modernization in Venezuela. Throughout the text, Blackmore examines sites such as the Ciudad Universitaria as spectacles of modernity which were used to legitimize the dictatorship. The historical context provided by Blackmore and Coronil, demonstrates why Venezuela's modernization did not develop evenly throughout the

nation, and how the state, however briefly, succeeded in distracting from the uneven qualities of modernity through the use of modern art and architecture. Venezuela ultimately became a hyper-modern façade which masked extreme poverty and racial divides while continuing to present itself as a Utopia to the world.

This major aspect of the Venezuelan modernist project paved the way for another, more contentious debate in the Venezuelan arts scene. The collective El Techo de la Ballena, rooting their aesthetics in Informalism, Surrealism, and Dadaist provocation, constructed an aesthetic and ideological antithesis to Cinetísmo. Aesthetically, El Techo created canvases and sculptures with organic and highly texturized forms which would counter the rigidity of the geometric structures of Cinetísmo. Ideologically, although both sought to "change life" in Venezuela, El Techo offers a leftist, inclusive ideal for modernity, whereas Cinetísmo became associated with a sort of exclusive capitalist modernity.

El Techo de la Ballena emerged from Informalism, a movement that was introduced by Spanish artists migrating to Venezuela after the Spanish Civil War and took root during the democracy of Rómulo Betancourt, which allowed for new artistic freedoms. This movement aesthetically was the antithesis of Geometric Abstraction, composed of loose, rather than rigid abstract compositions, meant to represent the unstable nature of modernism in the post-World War II era. This movement inspired a politically motivated, confrontational artist-literary collective, El Techo de la Ballena, originally formed by Venezuelan students Caupolicán Ovalles, Alfonso Montilla, and Carlos Contramaestre (in Salamanca, Spain, in 1960) with the mission of challenging the country's hasty modernity and the art associated with it.

El Techo de la Ballena is interesting to examine as a counterpoint to Cinetísmo, as both were rooted in constant investigations of national and foreign concepts in the search of a new art

for a new dialogue in Venezuela's modern period. El Techo's connections to regional and international art circuits—as was the case for Los Disidentes—allowed them to explore a vast array of theories and artistic strategies which they would digest to create their own. It was through these explorations that El Techo was able to develop a clear aesthetic for their carefully selected political ideas. Additionally, their connections and understanding of politics opened their eyes to a fractured country where many saw a modern utopia.

While there are some similarities in the emergence of both groups—both originated in Europe with the mission of changing life in Venezuela—their methods of accomplishing their established goals were distinct. For example, while the Dissidents were promoting a Venezuelan art without connections to the country's past, El Techo de la Ballena established a "retrograde" stance. The collective described their wish to return to Venezuela's "archaic" or "uncivilized" past in search for a different modernity. For this reason, El Techo constantly sought to provoke the Venezuelan public by confronting it with the past which modernism was attempting to erase. At the same time as the Kinetic artists unwittingly constructed an illusion of modernity and sophistication in the country, El Techo de la Ballena sought to actively display and confront the flaws in Venezuela's modernist project under the Betancourt presidency. In other words, Cinetísmo created the perception of a modern utopia in Venezuela, which El Techo was firmly against.

This collective, which was short lived, only active between the years of 1961 and 1969, did not achieve the same level of acclaim and historical importance as Cinetísmo. Recently, however, there has been a renewed attention internationally and nationally towards this collective following an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston organized by Mari Carmen Rámirez and Venezuelan curator Tahía Rivero, which was composed of nearly 130

works of Venezuelan Informalist art. This exhibition titled *Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955-1975* in 2018, was the first instance of Informalism being exhibited outside of Venezuela. *Contesting Modernity*, and its accompanying book with the same title, provide an overview of the Venezuelan the Informalist movement within which El Techo de la Ballena rooted its creative explorations. In this book, Tahía Rivero, María C. Gaztambide, Mari Carmen Rámirez, and Gabriela Rangel, examine different aspects of the overall Venezuelan Informalist art scene.

Maria C. Gaztambide, in particular, addresses a brief history of El Techo de la Ballena and its confrontational stance towards state-sponsored art and Venezuela's uneven development. Gaztambide expands on this brief history in a book published the following year, *El Techo de la Ballena: Retro Modernity in Venezuela*, in which she provides an in-depth exploration of the multiple projects carried out by the collective between 1961 and 1969, rooting her argument in the political issues created by the newly installed democracy and the presidency of Rómulo Betancourt (1959-1964). As Gaztambide explains, this book tells the "story of how El Techo de la Ballena used the visual arts to expose the depths of the profound inequality hidden beneath the façade of Venezuela's modernization," tracing "how by the time the collective coalesced in the early 1960s, the imbalance between the country's hypermodern appearance and its untidy reality had produced an illusionary national project of development and the persistent backwardness of large sectors of the population" (Gaztambide, 5). For this reason, Gaztambide's book will be a major resource for this thesis, as it is—so far—the most comprehensive exploration for the life and work of El Techo de la Ballena in the complex Venezuelan context.

I also draw from other texts which have discussed El Techo's practice, such as Isabel Piniella-Grillet's "Object's corpse: Garbology and Eschatology in El Techo de la Ballena" and

Sean Nesselrode's "Defining the Aesthetics of Negation in El Techo de la Ballena." Both of these provide different perspectives on the collective's practice, as they focus on specific aspects of their creative projects. For example, Piniella-Grillet examines El Techo's use of trash and dead matter as a vehicle for their artistic and political critiques. Nesselrode, on the other hand, focuses on the aesthetics of their print material in conjunction with their artistic works in order to explain how their aesthetics carried their message. Furthermore, since El Techo de la Ballena was not only an artistic collective, but a literary one, I will also be drawing from several of their manifestoes and other published works to discuss the ideological goals established in these. This collection of texts which I have outlined above offer a variety of perspectives on the combative nature of El Techo de la Ballena which I will use to frame their history as the opposing force to Cinetísmo.

It is my contention that examining Cinetísmo and El Techo de la Ballena in relationship to each other and the Venezuelan political context illuminates the existence of multiple modernities in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, this thesis will be grounded in the theoretical framework of multiple modernities. Theorist Shmuel N Eisenstadt argues in "Multiple Modernities" that this framework "presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world is to see it as a story of continual constitutions and reconstitutions of a multiplicity of cultural programs…[these] are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity" (Eisenstadt, 2: 2000). I find Eisenstadt's definition of multiple modernities to be fitting to Venezuela's modern period, as the two contrasting aesthetic movements I discuss were established in pursuit of different modernities. For this theoretical framework I also draw from Jean Franco's book *Cruel Modernity,* where she identifies the

multiple issues which existed in Latin America's modernizing efforts in order to describe its uneven, and often cruel, results in the region. These sources applied alongside Venezuela's art and political history will highlight the misconceptions of Venezuela's modern period being perceived as a Utopia by both its citizens and international media.

Venezuela's modernity may be understood as separate explorations for alternative futures for the country. On the one hand, Venezuela's elite and middle classes sought to achieve modernity through technological advances enabled by oil and a capitalist economy, while on the other hand, lower classes continued to be exploited. The modernization efforts put forward by the state and the elite in reality left a large portion of the population—the agricultural sectors in the South of the country—behind by altering the Venezuela's economy from agriculture-centered to oil centered. The oil economy allowed for Venezuela to enter a capitalist modernism that was limited to the larger urban areas, while the rural states remained in poverty and underdevelopment. This discrepancy in the modernization of Venezuela is paralleled by the two major artistic movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Cinetísmo and Geometric Abstraction represent the elite oil state and exclusive modernity, while Informalism and El Techo de la Ballena sought to bring attention to the groups crushed by modernity and offer an alternative to the Venezuela's modernization efforts.

I have organized my comparison and analysis of these two movements into three chapters. Chapter one provides a chronology of the development of Geometric Abstraction into Cinetísmo, in relationship to the modernist project, the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez, the Nuevo Ideal Nacional, and the transition to democracy in the 1960s. Chapter Two analyzes the artistic and literary works of El Techo de la Ballena in three of their major exhibitions, in relationship to the Rómulo Betancourt presidency and its state-sponsored violence. The concluding chapter

undertakes a closer comparison of both artistic movements in their contrasting aesthetics and ideologies and introduce their legacies in contemporary Venezuela. Finally, I offer possible expansions on this thesis paper by introducing how contemporary Venezuelan artists follow the confrontational stance initiated by El Techo de la Ballena.

Chapter 1, Geometric Abstraction and Cinetísmo

Cinetísmo, or Op art, is the best-known artistic movement to have emerged from Venezuela in its history. Through the early 1960s and well into the 1980s, Cinetísmo became Venezuela's major state-sponsored academic art form and was commissioned by the democracy—from Rómulo Betancourt (1959-1964) to Rafael Caldera (1994-1998)—with the task of giving the country a modern appearance. The works of the major Kinetic artists, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Alejandro Otero, and Jesús Soto—known as the "holy trinity" of Kinetic art—are revered for their experimentations with color and movement and have been prominently displayed over Venezuela's major cities (particularly in the capital, Caracas) and exhibited internationally. As Marguerite Mayhall explains, "Venezuela's capital city, Caracas, today conveys a strong European modernist message that at first glance gives almost no hint of a specifically local identity" (Mayhall, 124). Yet Cinetísmo is often glorified as the epitome of Venezuelan art and understood as its own entity, separate from the country's complex modernizing history and the history of aesthetic innovation from which it emerged. It is my contention that this perception oversimplifies the convoluted landscape of Venezuela's modernization. In this chapter, I examine the history of the development of Geometric Abstraction in relationship to the country's history of modernization. I argue that the national and international acclaim of Venezuela's modernism and its modern art distracted from inequalities created by an aggressive push for modernization. I seek to demonstrate how Cinetísmo was adopted by the state to perpetuate a modernist illusion.

Venezuela's period of modernization (between 1945 and into the 1970s) is often misunderstood as a time of exclusively positive transformations in the country. During this period, the country experienced a series of radical changes in the political, economic, cultural, artistic, and public spheres, making the country suddenly gain a modern appearance in the mold of Europe and North America. In the early 1950s, as Maria C Gaztambide points out, "Venezuela possessed the economic means to import both modernization (in the sense of material technological progress) and modernism (the cultural production of modernization)" (Gaztambide, 14). This "importation" of modernization and modernism gave way to Venezuela's modern appearance and introduced modernist aesthetics in the country's arts. However, as Gaztambide continues, "the rapid rate at which modernization and modernism were introduced in Venezuela stymied the natural progression of modernity as the historical experience linking these two phenomena" (Gaztambide, 14). In other words, modernization in Venezuela was limited to the physical aspects of modernism: technological progress, expanding infrastructure, and the implementation of modernist architecture. Due to its apparently impressive nature—particularly its architectural and artistic innovations—discussions on Venezuela's modern period tend to overlook the historical context within which it emerged, which in turn oversimplifies the country's complex history.

In order to appreciate the complexity of the history of modernization and Geometric Abstraction in Venezuela, it must be understood in conjunction to the country's political history. Lisa Blackmore makes a similar point when she argues that "the legacy of Venezuelan modernity calls for a mode of cultural inquiry that addresses simultaneously—rather than separates—aesthetics and politics, modernism and modernization, progress and dictatorship. This task is crucial because commemorations of the 1950s as the zenith of Venezuela's 'modern spirit' evade

the question of how the country's aesthetic innovations served military ideology" (Blackmore, 11). It is important to recall that modernization began in Venezuela as a result of two major events: the 1948 oil boom and the rise of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorial regime (1952-1958). By using newfound wealth from the growing oil economy to expand infrastructure, build a highway system connecting the country, and commission modern architecture and art, this regime appeared to rapidly modernize the country through what they termed the Nuevo Ideal Nacional (New National Ideal). The sense of economic success associated with this period, and the goals of the Nuevo Ideal Nacional, opened a path for architectural and artistic innovations in Venezuela.

The historical context of the Pérez Jimenez regime is necessary to understanding the history of Geometric Abstraction (and its subsequent evolution into Cinetísmo), as the development of this movement closely parallels the modernizing efforts of this period. In the same way that Pérez Jimenez was transplanting a European modernity to the Venezuelan context, the Geometric Abstract artists used the European avant-garde for the creation of a new, modern Venezuelan aesthetic. The development of this movement, as Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig points out, "included the participation of artists and intellectuals who believed in freeing themselves from tradition, adopting new styles inspired by the European avant-garde, expanding their horizons by traveling abroad, and working against an environment reluctant to adopt new artistic trends" (Birbragher-Rozencwaig, 10). In other words, the artists associated with this movement travelled between Europe and Venezuela in search of a new art form which departed from Venezuela's history and traditions in benefit of the country's modernity. During this period there was an immense pressure to bring about aesthetic and technological progress in Venezuela, so that it could enter an international modernist dialogue. This argument may be

extended when looking through the ideological chronology of the development and evolution of Geometric Abstraction. I will be drawing from Luis Pérez-Oramas's periodization of the movement which involves four periods: emergence, legitimization, acclaim, and deconstruction to describe the chronology of Geometric Abstraction and Cinetísmo.

The emergence of Geometric Abstraction in Venezuela was the result of the creation of a series of independent art workshops and institutions which sought to counter the officialism and academicism of the art promoted by the Academia de Bellas Artes (the academy of fine art) and the Museo de Bellas Artes (the museum of fine art). Mayhall states that the Academia de Bellas Artes "was responsible for training artists and sanctioned academic styles dominated by landscape painters and not much else" (Mayhall, 127). Yet this institution began losing prominence after the death of dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) in 1935, since "the country experienced a relaxation in the political realm which extended to the cultural arena" (Mayhall, 127). Other art institutions—such as the Taller Libre de Arte (free workshop of art) founded in 1948—emerged as a counter to the official academic styles promoted by the state, by introducing European avant-garde styles in Venezuela. In order to understand the context of the creation of the Taller Libre de Arte, it may be relevant to point out that Venezuela had a ten-year period of open immigration between 1948 and 1958, where it received a significant number of European immigrants (from Spain, Italy, Portugal, and France) fleeing the aftermath of World War II. This period of European immigration had a great influence in the development of Venezuela's modernism and its aesthetic innovations. It strengthened connections between Venezuela and Europe which in turn inspired young artists—such as Otero and Soto—to pursue an academic artistic education in Europe, particularly in France.

The Taller Libre de Arte founded was founded in 1948 in Caracas by Cuban critic José Gómez Sicre and French critic Gaston Diehl, as a response to Sicre's proposal of creating an alternative to studying abroad (Mayhall, 128). The Taller is considered to be responsible for the introduction of the aesthetics of the European avant-garde to Venezuela, and especially Caracas. This institution, as Birbragher-Rozencwaig explains, "played a significant role in the emergence of Geometric Abstraction in Caracas.… it exposed its members to Geometric Abstraction, the style in vogue in Paris" (Birbragher-Rozencwaig, 11). Although initially associated with expressionist aesthetics, the Taller Libre de Arte was also responsible for holding the first-ever exhibition of abstract art on Venezuelan soil in 1948, consisting of works from Argentinian artist José Mimó Mena and Argentinian collective Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención. These works belonged to the Argentinean Arte Concreto movement, which consisted of compositional experimentations colorful geometric shapes over a solid color (usually white) background. The works included in this exhibition were purely non-representational and created under the aesthetics of European Geometric abstraction.

At this moment, however, Venezuela's public was not well aware of or informed in abstraction, since before then, Venezuelan academic art was based on aesthetics of figuration and realism. Marguerite Mayhall explains that even the members of the Taller were unaware of these tendencies, quoting Péran Erminy, who stated "we commented on the reproductions of abstract works in a tone that went from confusion to joking or surprise, but rarely it was admiring" (Mayhall 128). Yet this exhibition, by introducing abstraction aesthetics in a figurative environment, inspired other members of the Taller to begin experimentations departing from figuration. The most prominent members of the Taller, Carlos Cruz Diez, Mario Abreu, Jacobo Borges, Narciso Debourg, Rubén Nuñez, and Alirio Oramas would move past the academicism

of figurative paintings and produce works experimenting with abstraction and Expressionism. Carlos Cruz-Diez in particular, after having studied at the Academia de Bellas Artes, began his artistic career as an academic realist artist, painting figurative images of the poverty surrounding Caracas, but he would later become one of the great masters of Cinetísmo. One of his early works, *Cargadores de agua* (1949), is a clear representation of his initial aesthetics. The painting shows a family of three—a mother, a father, and their child—with slim, serious faces carrying and filling buckets of water while barefoot. The background holds a naked tree in front of an ominously dark sky, with a small section of a mountain covered in small, precariously built houses—or *ranchos* as they are called in Venezuela. *Cargadores de agua* shows the daily life of the lower classes in Caracas as a method of bringing attention to the deep inequalities which existed in the city. By including a child, a young girl, in this painting, Cruz Diez seeks to create an emotional response on the viewer, a common aspect of the imagery depicted through figurative realism. Yet Cruz Diez would eventually become disenchanted with the aesthetics of the academy, and with his involvement in the Taller, would begin his Geometric experimentations with color in the 1950s.

During the same time, in Paris, another group of Venezuelan artists began publishing a magazine titled *los disidentes* (the dissidents), which expressed their mission of transforming the state of official Venezuelan art. Active between 1945 and 1950, The Disidentes collective, formed by Alejandro Otero, Jesús Soto, Pascual Navarro, Carlos González Bogen, Mateo Manaure, Luís Guevara Moreno, Narciso Debourg, Perán Erminy, J.R. Guillent Pérez, Aimée Battistini, and Rubén Nuñez, over six months, published five issues of a magazine bearing the same title, where they expressed their ambitions for the future of Venezuelan art. Just as Cruz Diez became disenchanted with the inefficacy of academic realism, the Disidentes made

abundantly clear their mission of moving beyond the state-sponsored academic styles. In the first publication of the magazine *Los Disidentes,* the collective explicitly express their mission, stating:

> The leaflet Los Disidentes has as its essential mission to bear witness to the concerns and interests of a group of Venezuelan youngsters interested, individually and collectively, in rethinking from their roots, the topics and assets of Latin American culture and life. This first issue has as its immediate goal to communicate the essence of our attitude. No created interest, no sentimentality to what we believe is our inalienable duty. Latin American youth faces an alternative: To submit itself to the traditional canon or to make it possible for Latin America to achieve its true dignity (Birbragher-Rozencwaig, 12)

The artists of los Disidentes sought out to create an art without connections to Venezuela's past, in order to move beyond the country's academic figurative art, which they believed was holding back progressive thought in the country. They associated figuration with Latin America's colonial past and the traditions it imposed on these countries—traditions they sought to transcend to achieve Latin America's "true dignity." The traditions they referred to were rooted in Venezuela's pre-oil past—particularly the llanero traditions which were at the core of the country's agricultural economy—the colonial architecture which at the moment dominated Caracas's landscape, and the figurative aesthetics associated with the Juan Vicente Gómez dictatorship.

This collective and their few publications were the first instance of Venezuelan artists articulating a yearning for the renovation of the country's official art and is thus referred to by Pérez-Oramas as the moment when abstraction began as a movement in Venezuela. However, as Marguerite Mayhall points out, "the Dissident's initial writings deriding the Venezuelan artistic establishment for its provincialism contained no hint of what kind of art they themselves

proposed to create. In essays published in the magazine *Los Disidentes* there are no stylistic prescriptions, and the references to abstract art in general are confined to the final issue" (Mayhall, 131). In other words, while the Dissidents were constructing a proposal for the renewal of the Venezuelan art, they were unsure of what this would constitute. Alejandro Otero was one of the first members of the collective to formulate an argument for the use of abstract art in Venezuela. In the last issue of *Los Dissidentes* magazine, Otero included an essay titled "Of Abstract art" where he argued that "abstract art, rather than being divorced from social concerns or human meaning, was in fact purer, cleaner, and more human by virtue of its signification in and of itself" (Mayhall, 131). This is to say that Otero viewed abstraction as the most adequate aesthetic for the renewal of Venezuela's art. Yet most of the Dissidents wouldn't begin actual experimentations into abstract art until their return to Venezuela in the early 1950s for their solo exhibitions and/or for the University City project—a project which begins the "legitimization" period. Not all of the Disidentes returned to Venezuela, only Otero, González Bogen, Mateo Manaure, and Soto would travel back to Caracas to continue their projects.

In 1949, Alejandro Otero—who had been living in Paris since 1945— went back to Caracas to hold an exhibition of his *Cafeteras* series. This exhibition was the first instance of a Venezuelan artist experimenting with cubism and abstraction, and is thus "generally acknowledged as the watershed moment in Venezuelan modern art. The Cafeteras were the first paintings by a Venezuelan artist to make use of an unabashed abstraction" (Mayhall, 128-129). Alejandro Otero's *Cafeteras* series were his initial experimentations into a non-objective art form, by distorting the figures of coffeepots in a sort of Cubist aesthetic. For example, in one of his paintings *La Cafetera Azul* [Blue Coffeepot] (1947), Otero seemingly deconstructs a blue coffeepot into its basic geometric shapes. The wall behind the blue coffeepot is somewhat

distorted as well, as lines and geometric shapes travel through the muted background, disorienting the viewer. The coffeepot itself stands out in this work, particularly because of its blue color, which contrasts with the almost achromatic background and reminds the viewer of what object is becoming abstracted. The *Cafeteras* series marks the beginning of Otero's experimentations with geometric shapes, which will later become fully non-representational. The exhibition of this series also initiates the first of multiple public debates over the importance of abstraction for the Venezuelan environment.

Marguerite Mayhall posits that the *Taller* exhibitions and Otero's *Cafeteras* series initiated a series of debates concerning the implementation of abstraction into the Venezuelan art scene. This was particularly because of figurative realism's associations with not only Gómez's military dictatorship in the early 20th century, but also with the first years of the Marcos Pérez Jiménez military dictatorship in the 1940s. Mayhall explains that "artists such as Luís Malaussena (architect and designer of the Avenida de Los Precursores in Caracas) and Pedro Vallenilla (painter of large-scale murals for the regime) were commissioned by the military government to make large-scale public works that not only countered modernist styles but also celebrated specifically Venezuelan histories and events" (Mayhall, 125). Although figurative aesthetics had immense state support, in the 1950s it would fall out of favor with Venezuela's art critics who began promoting Geometric Abstraction.

The debate continued in 1952 with artists such as Alejandro Otero, Ida Gramcko, Carlos González Bogen, and Manuel Quintana Castillo supporting the aesthetics of Geometric Abstraction. The series of debates culminated in 1957, with an article published by Alejandro Otero in the national newspaper *El Nacional*, where he "critized the awarding of the national prize for sculpture to the figurative sculptors Eduardo Gregorio and Armando Barrios rather than

Víctor Valera and Omar Carreño, who worked on abstract modes" (Mayhall, 133). The final debate was the most powerful of these, with Alejandro Otero's promotion of abstraction being contested by critic and writer Miguel Otero Silva. Otero Silva argued that the Disidentes were "abandoning their national heritage" for an art that was "based solely on formal issues, elitist, and derivative of a decadent culture" (Mayhall, 133). In other words, while on the one hand the Disidentes and the members of the Taller promoted abstraction for the improvement of Venezuela's national culture, Otero Silva believed that abstraction had no place in the country's context since it had no relationship to the national culture. Ironically, the figurative and abstract artists held the same goals for Venezuela's culture, and is probably why their debates were so heated, since they both wanted to use art as a means for social transformation.

The final issue of the *Disidentes* magazine may be understood as belonging to the series of debates. It contained an article which is now considered to be their 'No' manifesto: "Manifesto No". The Manifesto No states their overall abhorrence of the state of Venezuelan arts at the moment. It states:

> NO' is the tradition that we want to establish. The Venezuelan 'NO' that costs us so much to say. 'NO' to false Salons of Official Art. 'NO' to that anachronistic archive of anachronism that is called the Museum of Fine Arts. 'NO' to the school of Plastic Arts and its promotions of false impressionists. 'NO' to the exhibitions of national and foreign merchants that are shown by the hundreds each year in the museum. 'NO' to the false art critics. 'NO' to the false folklorist musicians…. 'NO' to the newspapers that support such absurd things, to the public that every day goes quietly to the slaughterhouse. We say 'NO' once and for all; to the Venezuelan *consumatum est* with which we will never be anything but a ruin (Mayhall, 129)

Through this manifesto Los Disidentes portray Venezuela's 1940s culture to be outdated, stuck in a past of dictatorships, brutality, and overall backwardness. Herein lies their mission of

changing life in Venezuela through a new art form, as they considered that traditions and false folklore and nationalism were the reasons why the country was unable to move past its marginal status. The Dissidents believed that by creating a new aesthetic unrelated to anything in the country's past, they would be able to help Venezuela transcend its archaism and join the modern world. Being in Paris in 1950, where abstraction was the trending aesthetic, los Disidentes finally embraced abstraction as a means to modernity. Since it was a "pure and clean" art, an aesthetic with no connection to the Venezuelan context or its history, Geometric Abstraction was more than fitting to their ideations of the future of the country.

Parallel to the manifesto and its ambitions, the political leaders of Venezuela were launching a modernizing project under the ideology of the Nuevo Ideal Nacional (published by Pérez Jiménez in 1955). As Fernando Coronil explains it, "The New National Ideal was an 'ideologic composite' of Venezuelan liberalism, positivism, traditional militarism, and democratic party rhetoric…this doctrine asserted that the military's higher 'destiny' was to eliminate political strife and channel social energies toward the material construction of the fatherland" (Coronil, 173). In this dictatorship under the New National Ideal, Venezuelan citizens were meant to be the spectators, rather than the agents of progress. The "material construction of the fatherland," conversely concealed deep social, economic, and racial inequalities in the country, and created an illusion of progress and stability in Venezuela. In the same way, the Disidentes sought to bring about a modernist aesthetic which made Venezuela appear progressive and evolved. This is probably why Pérez Jiménez expanded his support of the arts into Geometric Abstraction and modernist architecture, since it fit the ideals he promoted through the Nuevo Ideal Nacional.

I find it relevant to note that the collective's perceptions of modernism, just as well as Pérez-Jimenez's modernization projects—despite seeking to transcend the country's colonial roots—were constructed in the mold of European modernity. Mayhall points this out by stating that "implicit in these artists' alliance with Europe was the belief that Venezuela's Cultural and racial heritage pertained to Europe…. Venezuelan intellectuals seem to have found no justification for championing anything other than their long-established relationship and debt to Europe, France in particular" (Mayhall 130). This is probably due to the period of open immigration between 1945 and 1955, as well as the influence the French Revolution had on Venezuela's independence. Furthermore, the country's indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan populations were perceived to be relatively small and restricted to the physical and social margins of the country. Herein lies another parallel between the development of Geometric Abstraction and Venezuela's modernization, as both art and politics, neglected these "marginal" populations in the same manner, thus highlighting an uneven aspect of the country's development.

The period of the emergence of Geometric Abstraction comes to an end as this movement becomes "legitimized" & popularized through a major state project, the Ciudad Universitaria (university city) project for the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas. This project was built between the 1940s and 1960s and designed by architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva. Construction began under the democratic government of Isaías Medina Angarita (1941 to 1945), continued by the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, and finished under the Rómulo Betancourt presidency. Pérez Jiménez enthusiastically adopted the university city project as part of his modernization efforts. This is because Villanueva's architecture, inspired by the Bauhaus, was able to seamlessly introduce a functional modernist aesthetic into the Venezuelan landscape. The

Ciudad Universitaria, as Birbragher-Rozencwaig points out, "legitimized Modernism as the most appropriate expression for Venezuela's society" (Birbragher-Rozencwaig, 13). Carlos Raúl Villanueva is a key figure in Venezuela's modernization, because of his incorporation of European modernist architectural aesthetics into the country's landscape and ability to work under both democracies and dictatorships. Having studied in Paris, at the *École de Beaux Arts*, Villanueva became influenced by European architectural trends, particularly the teachings of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus. Villanueva's inspiration in the Bauhaus to his beliefs that art should not be restricted to museums, but rather be fully accessible in the public sphere—a belief shared by the Disidentes.

Villanueva's Bauhaus-inspired vision of architecture led him to champion public art and seek a synthesis of art and architecture. In fact, Villanueva was the first patron of the Geometric Abstraction movement in Venezuela because of the Disidentes' promotion of an anonymous public art for social change, and its ability to be incorporated into architecture. This ideation public art, in turn, was applied to the University City, and as Mónica Amor states, "The Ciudad Universitaria was not only a remarkable architectural achievement but also a test case for a synthesis of the arts" (Amor, 121). This monumental modernist project incorporated art into architecture, not for decorative purposes, but for the physical transform the space of Venezuela's largest university as a space of "action, passage, assembly, and debate fit for an educational institution" (Amor, 123). Thus, the seamless incorporation of modernist architecture achieved by Villanueva created a sort of "museum without walls" (Mayhall, 138) for the students of the University. The university city project ultimately legitimized and consolidated modernism in Venezuela as it synthesized both the artists' and the state's ideations for the country's modernization.

Because of the similarities between the ideas espoused by Los Disidentes, and the modernist influences of the European avant-garde, Villanueva travelled to Paris in the late 1940s to find artists who would help him create his projected synthesis of the arts. The works incorporated into the Ciudad Universitaria's architecture were created by international artists such as Jean Arp, Alexander Calder, Victor Vasarely, Fernand Léger, Anton Pevsner, and Henri Laurens, and Venezuelan artists (most of which belonged to the Disidentes collective and the Taller Libre de Arte) Alejandro Otero, Victor Valera, Pascual Navarro, González Bogen, Alirio Oramas, and Mateo Manaure. The combination of both national and international artists into this project synthesizes what the Disidentes aspired for the future of Venezuelan art. In one of their publications, they expressed their belief that "art should be anonymous and public, making use of a symbiosis of different types of artists" (Mayhall, 132). This is precisely what the University City achieved, as it produced an apparently anonymous combination of local and international artists.

Incorporating the aesthetics of a national international modernist art into the local architecture—for both Villanueva and the artists—also held the utopian goal of improving the country's environment by making artistic movements more accessible to the population. Villanueva, particularly, as Mayhall states, "believed in the possibility of the built environment's acting as 'a teaching vehicle' that could enable the 'modification and creation of habits of conduct" (Mayhall, 126). This objective for the synthesis of art and architecture may be seen in the Plaza Cubierta [covered plaza], at the center of the Ciudad Universitaria. This structure is "topped by an irregular roof for protection from sun and rain…flanked by perforated concrete screens that fragment the sunlight…punctuated by freestanding murals, patios bursting with tropical vegetation, and patches of light and shadow" (Amor, 122). Thus, the artistic applications

into the architecture of the Ciudad Universitaria created a break from traditional architectural modes and structures. This break with traditional sought to inspire conversations and debates between the students which would lead to more innovations in Venezuela's modernization.

The Disidentes who participated in the Ciudad Universitaria project, used the campus and its many buildings as a way of experimenting with the ideas they articulated in their publications. For example, Mayhall explains that for the collective, "architecture and the city provided the ground for their experiments in creating not just an aesthetic movement but also a revolutionary social one…. they insisted on the transformative qualities of their art for people's everyday lives and argued that their goal was to break down the barriers between art and life, painting and architecture, artist and non-artist" (Mayhall, 132). Thus, the Disidentes used the Ciudad Universitaria project as a blank canvas through which they could visually articulate the missions stated in their manifestoes. The Disidentes who participated in this project did not seek to gain individual acclaim locally, but rather sought to promote the transformative capabilities of public art and the universality of Abstraction. Otero was probably the biggest proponent of this perspective and is often cited as a major figure in Villanueva's architectural projects. Otero believed that abstraction was not only "synonymous of a synthesis of the arts" but also the most adequate vehicle for transforming environments and in turn, inspire progressive thought (Mayhall, 132).

For Alejandro Otero, as Mayhall points out, "works of art had two possibilities: either they created a new reality that formulated a new time/space relation (their formal aspects) or they acted transformatively on the social and cultural plane" (Mayhall, 132). This may be seen in Otero's installation in the façade of library of the faculty of engineering of the Universidad Central. Otero's design on the façade of this building, is composed of a series of somewhat

distorted rectangles—most of which are black with a few gray, yellow, and orange figures—delineated by white lines. Two large sets of rectangular windows break up the composition with their perfectly straight angles and vertical orientation, which oppose Otero's distorted, horizontal rectangles. This building also bears a curvilinear roof composed of two arches which also contrasts with Otero's rectangular figures. Otero's addition to the façade of this building therefore manages to transform its environment by subverting the traditional geometry of architecture.

It is my contention that by including this installation in the library of the faculty of engineering, Otero sought to inspire innovative thought into the students at the university, the future engineers of Venezuela, and thus fulfilling his ideation of art as being able to transform society and culture. As Mónica Amor points out, "the implicit ambition of the Ciudad Universitaria was to model what citizenship should be" (Amor, 123). These installations sought to literally reconfigure spaces which challenged how the students would regularly walk to class. In this sense, the students were encouraged to gather around the multiple artistic installations to discuss the works, communicate, and formulate ideas for Venezuela's future and modernity. Amor also points out that "it is no surprise, then, that the university's students were instrumental in the downfall of the authoritarian regime in 1959" (Amor, 123). Thus, one could argue that the synthesis of the arts achieved in the Ciudad Universitaria was somewhat effective in its ambitious project of transforming thought and life in the country.

The innovative aspects of the Ciudad Universitaria were not restricted to the Plaza Cubierta, or the façades of its multiple buildings. The entirety of the University complex was composed of a large variety of artistic interventions. As Amor describes it, these artistic interventions created "visual forms that used repetition, discontinuity, compression and

expansion, dynamism, and rhythmic composition to interrupt a certain idea of rationalization and efficiency…. the forms of this unorthodox path incorporated contrasting geometric shapes and antitheatrical alloverness in the freestanding walls that punctuate the Plaza Cubierta, the murals and stained glass that cover the internal areas of campus buildings, and the polychromes of façades" (Amor, 123). It is important to emphasize that aesthetics were not incorporated into the university's architecture as just decorative elements. As Mayhall states, "the confluence of the Dissidents, Villanueva, and the renovating impulses of Pérez Jiménez's regime produced what is considered to be the most important architectural site of twentieth-century Venezuela" (Mayhall, 132). Thus, the projects and the works it incorporated were part of, and integral to a larger cultural modernist project.

A major artistic aspect of the Ciudad Universitaria lies in its main auditorium, the Aula Magna, which featured a massive installation by Alexander Calder. The Installation, *Las Nubes* [The clouds] (1953) covered the ceiling of the main auditorium with rounded geometric shapes meant to resemble clouds. These "clouds" were not only ornamental structures, the placement and position of the "clouds" also served as acoustic plates for the auditorium. This installation, along with others found in and around the University City campus, consolidated the missions espoused by the Disidentes in their publications. In this case, art was functional as well as aesthetically innovative so that it could inspire modernity, as it distorted conventional conceptions of space, movement, and therefore thought. Thus, the Ciudad Universitaria, in its "implicit ambition…to model what citizenship could be," ultimately legitimized the efforts of the abstract artists who sought to improve and transform life in Venezuela (Amor, 123). The Ciudad Universitaria became representative of the utopian goals espoused by the Disidentes and the

members of the Taller Libre de Arte, and, in the next years, would inform each individual's artistic practice.

Rarely discussed, as Marguerite Mayhall points out, is the relationship between Ciudad Universitaria and Pérez Jimenez's projection for modernism through the Nuevo Ideal Nacional (New National Ideal). One of the multiple aspects of the Nuevo Ideal Nacional was the "moral, intellectual, and material improvement of the inhabitants of the country and the rational transformation of the physical environment, in order that Venezuela occupy the rank that corresponds to its geographic situation, its extraordinary riches, and glorious tradition" (*Servicio Informativo Venezolano*, quoted in Mayhall, 126). In many ways, the Nuevo Ideal Nacional sought to achieve the same kind of modernity that the Disidentes and the members of the Taller aspired to. Through the University City project, then, Pérez Jimenez saw a physical representation of his New National Ideal, which led to his ultimate acceptance of abstract art as a means for the material transformation and modernization of the Venezuelan landscape. Although abstract art was not understood by Pérez Jiménez at the time—he had been championing the aesthetics of figuration—he nevertheless understood that these modern, European aesthetics would serve "as a tool for promoting his regime" (Mayhall, 132). As a result, Geometric Abstraction in this period became associated with the modernizing efforts of the Pérez Jiménez regime. Yet both Villanueva and the artists who participated in the project, in the following years would transcend their association with the dictatorship and become the state-sponsored art of the following democratic period.

The period in which abstraction received critical acclaim in Venezuela begins in the 1960s, after the 1958 overthrow of Marcos Pérez Jimenez's dictatorship and the installment, in 1959, of a new democracy in the country under the presidency of Rómulo Betancourt.

Abstraction became validated in the Venezuelan environment during this period, giving artists the freedom to develop their individual practices. This led to the distillation of a movement that had included a large variety of artists into major three artists Jesús Soto, Alejandro Otero, and Cruz Diez, who became well known through public commissions and state support. Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig explains that the three artists:

> were free to follow their individual paths. Some, including Soto and Cruz-Diez, stayed in Paris and developed works in which the participation of the spectator played a significant role in the nature of the piece. Building on the foundation of Geometric Abstraction, Cruz-Diez and Soto, together with Yaacov Agam, Jean Tinguely, Victor Vasarely and other artists connected with the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles and the Galérie Denise René, developed abstract works with kinetic and optical effects, forging a direct relationship between technology and art. Known as Kinetic Art, their work required spectators to actively participate in the art experience" (Birbragher-Rozencwaig, 13)

These artists began investigations into the effects of movement, light, and color, in order to create transformative environments through optical effects. The three main artists were consequently able to achieve a departure from the aesthetics of European Geometric Abstraction, and thus create a uniquely Venezuelan, participatory art form. This new movement for the Venezuelan environment finally became the ultimate representation of Venezuela's modernity and progress in a country which at the moment appeared to transcend its military roots.

Venezuela's democratization, however, was a complex process, composed of multiple armed conflicts. The presidency of Rómulo Betancourt (1959 to 1964) received major opposition on two fronts: right wing military groups and left-wing, Castro-inspired armed guerrillas. During this period of armed conflict, the kinetic artis, were residing and working in Paris, and were distanced from this brief period of unrest while the artists of El Techo de la Ballena were deeply

involved in the leftist revolutionary struggles. The Kinetic artists would not return to the country until the late 1960s, when the armed conflict subsided. Nevertheless, the 1960s in Venezuela were still perceived to be a period of positivism and hope, as the democracy focused on strengthening the middle-class and continuing the path to progress paved by Pérez Jiménez.

Once warfare and armed conflict subsided, Luis Pérez-Oramas explains, "state authorities began promoting large-scale civil projects, which were commissioned to artists such as Soto, Otero, Cruz Diez…. Geometric Abstraction finally left the *hortus conclusus* of the university campus and grew to be the dominant, monumental presence in the urban fabric of Venezuelan cities well into the 1980s." The massive public installations of these artists throughout the Venezuelan environment can be understood as "a sort of abstract 'muralism,' devoid of meaning yet able to convey, by means of the prodigal force of optical variation featured in their civic friezes, the spectral figure or the 'kinetic illusion' of Venezuelan modernity" (Pérez-Oramas, 55-56). The democracy, more so than the Pérez Jimenez regime, understood the importance of the implementation of abstraction in the Venezuelan environment as a means to bring about modernist thought. It, nonetheless, created an illusion of progress, by making Venezuela appear to be in the same wavelength of aesthetic innovations as Europe and North America.

While the Ciudad Universitaria project informed the state's use of art in the public during the final half of the 20th century, the democracy's integration of art and architecture proved to be more ornamental and decorative than functional. The optical illusions created by the kinetic artists, however, still appeared to visually transform spaces through their "dazzling spectacles of movement and retinal bewilderment" (Amor, 124). Soto, Otero, and Cruz Diez all excelled in their spatial interventions, but they did so in radically different ways. Each of these artists, using Geometric Abstraction as a starting point, experimented with different compositional elements,

color, line, and movement. Alejandro Otero continued his experimentations with geometric shapes, but his practice expanded from paintings and flat installations into the creation of large "blade" sculptures. Jesús Soto expanded his practice into creating what Amor referred to as "vibratory events" through experimenting with light, lines, and color. Carlos Cruz Diez dedicated his practice to investigating the effects of additive color, which culminated in different series of projects such as his *Fisicronomías*, *Inducciones Cromáticas* (Chromatic Inductions), *Cromointerferencias* (Chromo-interferences), *Transcromías*, and *Cromosaturaciones* (Chromo-saturations). The works of these artists were initially meant be participatory and inspire, yet in many cases, the state's use of their installations would strip the works of their original intentions.

Although Cinetísmo became a major movement in Venezuela during the beginning of its democratic period in the early 60s, it was during the 1970s—under the first presidency of Rafael Caldera (1969 to 1974)—when Kinetic art began consuming the façades of modern architecture and the overall Venezuelan landscape. As Mónica Amor states, "spurred by the 1973 decree by President Rafael Caldera's democratic government that all state-sponsored public buildings must dedicate 0.5 to 3 percent of their budgets to public art, Soto, Otero, Cruz-Diez… and many others produced works that were mostly inattentive to the nuances of public sites and interchangeably occupied corporate buildings, public institutions, and urban plazas" (Amor, 124). The works of Soto, Otero, and Cruz Diez are mostly found in government institutions, the outside of museums, inside theaters and cultural institutions, major plazas, and even airports and power plants. It becomes evident, then, that the democracy in Venezuela was concerned with creating an appearance of sophistication and modernity. Through simply transplanting these artists' works into state-commissioned buildings, the democracy sought to legitimize its actions—just as Pérez-Jiménez did—by showcasing the genius of Venezuelan artistic ability and

thus, the benefits of democracy and modernity. Although these works were arguably creating an illusion of modernity and stability in Venezuela—as El Techo de la Ballena often argued—they nonetheless became representative of the successes of democracy, modernization, and progress in the country.

A large majority of the works of the kinetic artists were exhibited in public spaces, particularly in major plazas and on the outside of universities and museums. This is the case for one of, if not the most, recognizable work of Cinetísmo by Jesús Soto. The installation, titled *Esfera de Caracas* (Caracas sphere) consists of hundreds of metal bars which create the illusion of a perfectly round sphere that floats in space and appears to vibrate when moving around it. It sits on the side of the Francisco Fajardo highway at the entrance of Caracas, placed there by Rafael Caldera during his second presidential term (1994 to 1998). Its location and aesthetically impressive appearance have made this work become a symbol for the city of Caracas. However, it also introduces how Cinetísmo, in its public works, became devoid of meaning as it became an official art form. Although this work has acquired major importance in present-day Venezuela, it was initially a part of the state's efforts of beautifying Caracas during the decline of modernity in the country.

Fourteen years after the death of Jesús Soto, a Venezuelan news source, *Caracas Chronicles* published an article by Arnaldo Espinoza, who discusses the story behind the placement of this installation. According to Espinoza, *Esfera de Caracas* was commissioned in 1994, but the piece would not be placed in the public sphere until a few years later; it was instead put in a storage belonging to the government of the city of Caracas. It wasn't until Soto, along with art critic Sofía Imber, inquired about the placement of his work that it would be pulled out of storage to be placed in a location designated by Rafael Caldera's wife. Espinoza explains that

Alicia Pietri de Caldera chose this location because of its proximity to the presidential residence of La Casona, making the *Esfera Caracas* not only a symbol of the city, but a symbol of Venezuela's democracy. It is my contention that this example, although late in the history of Cinetísmo, describes how the Venezuelan state used public art. This work was simply placed to its current location, instead of being specifically commissioned for a designated space, thus giving the state the power to decide the meaning or importance of the work. In this case, art is entirely representational of political and economic stability rather than functional in creating spaces for community and discourse, as originally intended by the artists.

The Venezuelan democracy during the 1960s and into the 1980s was attempting to construct a representation of the country's apparent leap into modernity and political stability. The works commissioned by the state, and its incorporation into the public sphere were meant to make the country appear modern and sophisticated through monumental installations. This can be seen in Alejandro Otero's large-scale sculpture, *Abra Solar* [open solar] (1982) in Plaza Venezuela, Caracas, as it rises over the plaza, somewhat its space. Otero's sculpture combines art and engineering, creating a technically impressive piece of art to be admired by the public. It's placement in the Plaza Venezuela invites the public to walk under it, as the structure creates a sort of arch framing the entrance. It consists of rectangular structures which come together forming a pyramid-like shape. The rectangular structures are made up of hollow cubes, each containing four triangular figures connected at the center. The diamond-like figures inside the cubes give this installation its kinetic quality, as the wind interacts with them, making them rotate within the structure. *Abra Solar*, in its masterful synthesis of art and technology or engineering, becomes a representation of Venezuela's progressions into technological advances

for the country. It does so by showing that technological progress was also applied in the arts, as the sculpture departs from kinetic illusion into physical movement.

The use of art to show technological advancement was a common practice for the Venezuelan state, as it demonstrated the ability to progress under the democratic regime. This may be seen in one of Carlos Cruz Diez's major projects, the turbine murals inside the Guri dam—Venezuela's largest power plant—in Bolivar state. This project consists of Cruz Diez's *Ambientación Cromáticas* [Chromatic Inductions] (1977) and his experimentations with additive color. The installation lies at the core of the hydroelectric plant, the Sala de Máquinas (hall of machines)—a long hallway containing ten large rotating turbines along its center. In this space, Cruz Diez creates a large-scale artistic intervention by entirely covering the colossal walls of the Sala, as well as the gigantic turbines.

The murals composing this installation, as Mónica Amor states, "seem to transform abstraction into function. But unlike the Ciudad Universitaria's Aula Magna, where Calder's clouds operate as acoustic devices, the Guri project…did not lead to civic assembly, or collectivity, or community…. Cruz Diez's turbine-chamber-turned-spectacle-of-color is a symbol of progress and technological domination—an image more than a public space" (Amor, 124). In other words, while the murals appear to be functional in that they are in movement, in reality, they are a simple application of art onto functional technology. Furthermore, although the Sala de Máquinas was intended to be a public space for the contemplation of Venezuela's artistic and technological abilities, it does not function as such. The Guri dam is located in Bolivar state, tucked away from the major cities, and thus, inaccessible to large sectors of the population.

Culture was also a major aspect of Venezuela's emphasis on modernization and progress. A portion of the works by these artists can also be found in major cultural institutions around

Venezuela—mostly in Caracas. The Complejo Cultural Teresa Carreño, also known as Teatro Teresa Carreño (Teresa Carreño cultural complex or Teresa Carreño Theater), Caracas's most important theater is a significant example of this. Inside the lobby of this building, lies one of Jesus Soto's major works, *Cubos virtuales blancos sobre proyección amarilla* [White Virtual Cubes over Yellow Projection] (1972-1982). The installation, suspended from the ceiling of the two-storied lobby, appears as if rain were falling from a golden sky. As Mónica Amor describes it, "scale overwhelms the awestruck viewer, who admires the technical feat that dematerializes the surrounding architecture, as suspended bars adapt and colonize the most diverse spaces" (Amor, 124). As the viewer moves around the lobby and up the escalators at the middle, the rigid "cube shapes" appear to move and vibrate, disorienting the gaze and the surrounding spaces. When moving up the escalators, the viewer finds themselves directly underneath the white bars, approaching the golden sky which continues to be out of reach. This work, although technically impressive, lacks the participatory aspects which the Cinéticos initially sought after. By being suspended from the ceiling, the installation is physically unapproachable, and the audience is left as contemplator rather than an active participant and element of the work.

Another cultural institution, the Centro de Acción Social por la Música (center of social action for music) in Caracas, also commissioned works by the Kinetic artists. A Jesus Soto installation hangs at the front of the building, next to a Cruz Diez installation on the ramp leading to the entrance. The inclusion of their works in the front of this building were meant to show a relationship between different aspects of culture, in this case art and music. This argument may be strengthened by looking at a Cruz Diez installation in its main auditorium, consisting of a series of *Inducciones Crómaticas* applied onto the chairs in the theater. Each chair in the auditorium contains a different combination of colors, making it gain an extremely colorful

appearance. Although this installation is vastly more accessible that Jesus Soto's *Cubos virtuales blancos sobre proyección amarilla*, it also somewhat lacks in its functional and participatory aspects, as it is entirely decorative, and the work would disappear once the auditorium is filled. In other words, while it appears to be functional in that the audience sits on the artwork, the chairs on their own are not the piece of art, as the design in merely transplanted onto a functional item.

Geometric abstraction's evolution into Cinetísmo unfolded in a complex political era in Venezuela. Geometric abstraction appeared in the Venezuelan landscape during a brief three-year democratic period referred to as the trienio (between 1945 and 1948) before the rise of the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez. Under the dictatorship, it became a prominent movement that later became consolidated into Cinetísmo after the fall of Jiménez and the beginning of another democratic period. During the final democratic period, Cinetísmo was utilized by the state as a method of perpetuating modernism and optimism while the oil-dependent economy was faltering. As Lisa Blackmore points out:

> oil 'enables state leaders to fashion political life into a dazzling spectacle of progress' that plays out as those in power mediate the interfaces of natural resources and political subjects. This magical logic infused distinct political mandates of the twentieth century with a performative dimension, where 'by manufacturing dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress, […the Venezuelan state] casts its spell over audience and performers alike (Blackmore, 19).

Thus, because of the State's "dazzling development projects" Cinetísmo became a sort of political propaganda for the state, one which hid deep economic and social inequalities by creating the appearance of sophistication, development, and progress. The slow collapse of the oil economy would eventually uncover the inequalities which existed in Venezuela, and

Cinetísmo and modern architecture became phantoms of the Utopian dreams of the country's modernization.

Cinetísmo effectively introduced a perception of modernity into the Venezuelan landscape, leading to it becoming the country's official academic movements. It, however, was stripped of its original intentions and meaning as it became purely representative of the ethos of the state. It is my contention that the use of Cinetísmo by the Venezuelan state created an illusion of progress and modernity. By considering the lack of functionality, accessibility, and monumental aspects of these works, ironically, resembles the modernization efforts in Venezuela. In fact, while Cinetísmo became commonplace in the Venezuelan environment, other groups of artists sought to challenge the illusion these works created, in order to highlight the flaws of the country's modernization. In the words of Luis Pérez Oramas, "in the late 1970s, emerging Venezuelan artists revolted against constructivism's illusions and kinetic art's in particular. With this came a new period that only anticipated the age of disillusion to come, and whose distinctive features and principles are to this day the backbone of contemporary Venezuelan art" (Pérez-Oramas 58). Between the 1960s and 1970s, as Kinetic art was on the rise, Informalism became its challenger, particularly through the collective El Techo de la Ballena.

Chapter 2. Informalism and El Techo de la Ballena

The late 1950s in Venezuela were a period characterized by a sense of improvement for the middle classes, ideations for a democratic future, and the renewal of the country's artistic language. Although the most well-known artistic movement of this period was and continues to be Cinetísmo, during this same time there was the rise of another more confrontational avant-garde movement, Informalism. This new art form provided leftist artists with a malleable aesthetic, an alternative to the capitalist hegemony and rigidity of geometric abstraction through which to explore a wider range of political and social expressions in art. Informalism was another form of abstraction, an anti-art which differed from the geometrical compositions and formal aspects of Cinetísmo and could be molded into social, political, and artistic critiques. As Tahía Rivero explains, "Informalism extended abstraction toward a freedom of expression that undoubtedly went beyond the styles from which it evolved: the *hazard-objectif* of Surrealism, the meta-irony of Marcel Duchamp, the anti-performance art of Dadaism" (Rivero, 11). Among the Venezuelan Informalists, one group emerged and stood out in their formulation of artistic and literary techniques as the means to bring about an artistic revolution in the country: the collective El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale). In their few years of practice (1961 to 1969), El Techo would develop an artistic practice and stance that sought to confront what they saw as a "tired Venezuelan environment" (Gaztambide, 12), mock its art institutions, its hasty modernization, and the myth of progress and democratic equality promoted by the country's elite.

The revolutionary practices of El Techo de la Ballena have not been examined until recently with the 2019 exhibition *Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela 1955-1975*

and Maria Gaztambide's book *El Techo de la Ballena: Retro-modernity in Venezuela.* The *Contesting Modernity* exhibition was held in 2019 in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and was curated by Mari Carmen Ramirez and Tahía Rivero. This exhibition is the largest collection of Venezuelan Informalist works to have been produced both internationally and abroad. Thus, I will use Gaztambide's book as the basis for a large portion of my historization and examination of the collective. There is a possibility for further research into the archives and written works of the collective, but at this moment I will have to rely on the research done by Gaztambide. In *Retro Moderity*, Gaztambide examines the multidisciplinary works of El Techo de la Ballena through their major exhibitions and multiple manifestoes, in the context of the politically complex history experienced by Venezuela in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

El Techo de la Ballena was formed in the late 1950s, by three Venezuelan students, Carlos Contramaestre, Alfonso Montilla, and Caupolicán Ovalles in Salamanca Spain. Maria C. Gaztamabide recalls their foundational moment, stating that as they walked down a street in Salamanca, they "paused for a moment at a crossing over which hung a plaque stating: 'On this corner a man was killed. Pray for his soul.' Upon reading it, they erupted in song, bellowing the irreverent hymn: 'Birds, birds, fornicate in the cathedral; [they] hurl their feathers against the wind. Birds, birds, fornicate in the cathedral" (Gaztambide, 1). This event not only marks the beginnings of the collective, but also introduces the confrontational and provocative nature of their practice. One could assume that Contramaestre, Montilla, and Ovalles were introduced to Informalism during their time in Spain, since it was a dominant aesthetic after the Spanish Civil war and the fall of Francisco Franco (1939). It is unclear exactly which Spanish artists the founding members of El Techo came into contact with. However, other members of the

collective, Gabriel Morera and Ángel Luque—who met in Madrid, Spain—were involved with Spanish Informalist groups such as El Paso and Café de las Cuevas de Sésamo.

Upon their return to Venezuela in the early 1960s, Contramaestre, Ovalles, and Montilla joined forces with over sixty other Venezuelan artists, poets, and writers which shared their political and social ambitions to *cambiar la vida, transformar la sociedad* (change life, transform society). These included novelists Adriano González León and Salvador Garmendia; poets Juan Calzadilla, Caupolicán Ovalles, Francisco Pérez-Perdomo, Dámaso Ogaz, Efraín Hurtado, and Edmundo Aray; and artists Jacobo Borges and Carlos Contramaestre. Though the early 1960s, El Techo produced a series of exhibitions—the most notable of which are *Para la Restitución del Magma* 1961(for the restitution of magma), *Homenaje a la Cursilería* 1961 (Ode to Kitsch), and *Homenaje a la Necrofilia* 1962 (Ode to Necrophilia)—critical articles, manifestoes, and poetry, all of which sought to ridicule and outline the flaws of the modernization and democratization processes of Venezuela. Deeply involved in leftist revolutionary ideas inspired by Fidel Castro's Cuba, and under the aesthetics of Informalism and the ideologies of Dada and Surrealism, El Techo de la Ballena created a movement which countered the utopic vision of progress associated with Geometric Abstraction and Venezuela's modernization.

El Techo de la Ballena emerged as a collective in the Venezuelan context following the 1958 end of the Pérez-Jimenez regime and the subsequent rise of democracy in the country in 1959. With the installment of a new democracy, and the election of president Rómulo Betancourt Venezuela entered a new period of optimism as it appeared to have evolved past its dictatorial roots. As Tahía Rivero points out, "the new political climate that Venezuelans began to enjoy in 1958 fostered greater freedoms, especially in the arts and literature. Artists clamored for artistic freedom…. Official and private salons provided national exposure for all movements, from

landscape painting to geometric abstraction and New Figuration to…Informalism" (Rivero, 12). The artistic revolution led by geometric abstraction in the previous decade, coupled with the perceived freedoms of a democratic period, paved a way for new aesthetics and ideas to be introduced into the Venezuelan context. The presidency of Rómulo Betancourt, however, was filled with contradictions and violence; it proclaimed a leftist ideology but continued the capitalist modernization initiated by Pérez Jiménez and attacked Venezuelan leftist insurrections inspired by the Cuban Revolution. Thus, a new generation of artists—inspired by Spanish immigrants fleeing the aftermath of the civil war and Venezuela's proximity to the Cuban Revolution—were influenced by Informalism's ability to construct social critiques, as they rejected the homogenizing efforts of geometric abstraction and Cinetísmo.

Sean Nesselrode points out that Informalist aesthetics appeared in Venezuela "by way of France, and especially Spain, as young Venezuelans traveled abroad during the 1950s and became familiar with the work of artists such as Manolo Millares and Antoni Tàpies," and was the first Venezuelan movement to "develop conterminously with its European counterpart" (Nesselrode, 2). Millares and Tàpies were two major artists of the Spanish Informalist movement and developed abstracted works which were highly gestural and texturized in nature. Informalism in the Venezuelan environment was—for young artists who did not subscribe to the hegemony of state-sponsored art—understood as the antithesis of Geometric Abstraction and was thus embraced by revolutionary artists such as El Techo de la Ballena. The collective often proclaimed their aversion towards the Betancourt presidency, particularly in its continuation of Pérez Jiménez projects which created an uneven development in the country. El Techo's understanding of Venezuela's economic dependence on oil, its hasty modernization, and their

awareness of Cuban revolutionary thought led them to become involved with leftist groups in Venezuela and influenced their artistic and literary practices.

Like Cinetísmo, El Techo de la Ballena was developed through the European avant-garde, inspired by movements such as Informalism, Dada and Surrealism One key difference is that the projects of El Techo were not derivative of these movements, but rather used them as a starting point for their confrontational art. While drawing on aspects of Impressionism, German Expressionism, Kandinsky's abstractions, Surrealism, Cubism, and abstract expressionism as the mold through which they would create an entirely new artistic, literary, and political language without being bound to a particular aesthetic, El Techo had a more focused agenda that transcended their use of these European perspectives; they did not seek to create a universal art, but rather an art that responded to the political and social issues in Venezuela. This addressed in what the collective later labelled as their pre-manifesto which stated:

> While we are certainly very much aware of those movements, we do not, by founding El Techo de la Ballena, intend to recycle or repeat any of what has, over time, been relegated to its appropriate place in history of literature and contemporary art. We do not intend to seek refuge under any protective label. But we do want to energize the placid environment of our so-called national culture. (Contramaestre and Calzadilla, 1962)

El Techo de la Ballena's countermovement was constructed through forms of civil disobedience mainly derived from Dadaist provocation and Informalist aesthetics which countered the rigidity and structures of Geometric abstraction and Cinetísmo. Through their complex, multidisciplinary explorations, El Techo de la Ballena created a socially and politically involved artistic movement which responded to a need for the renovation of Venezuela's environment, rather than becoming a simple byproduct of European

modernism. The political dimension of their artistic practice was in large part inspired by the events of the Cuban Revolution. The revolution's stance against American Imperialism inspired members of El Techo because Venezuela's capitalist modernization was financed in large part by the United States' control over Venezuela's oil industry.

The combination of literary and artistic materials in the collective's practice allowed for El Techo de la Ballena to create literal spaces for critical thinking and the re-imagining of Venezuela's modernity by confronting the mythification of progress and cultural amnesia. Sean Nesselrode explains that the collective "cannot simply be defined as an *informalista* group, even if it did have deep ties to the movement…. More than any one style, what defines El Techo…is its radical position of negation—negation of the status quo, of the hegemony of geometric abstraction and kinetic art" (Nesselrode, 1-2). As a collective, they believed that through provoking and unsettling the public they would be able to achieve their goal, *cambiar la vida, transformar la sociedad* (change life, transform society). Out of the variety of projects developed by El Techo de la Ballena during their few years of activity, three exhibitions stand out in their outright confrontation of the Venezuelan environment. The exhibitions *Para la Restitución del Magma* [for the restitution of magma] (1961) *Homenaje a la Cursilería* [Ode to Kitsch] (1961) and *Homenaje a la Necrofilia* [Ode to Necrophilia] (1962) are not only key points in their artistic development, but also reveal how the collective became more radicalized and politically involved over the years.

These exhibitions were constructed as collages of their artistic and literary materials, and in some cases, they included objects appropriated from everyday life in Venezuela. Through their exhibitions, as Gaztambide points out, "El Techo issued a poignant commentary against what they viewed as the spent utopia of geometric abstraction, clichéd genre painting, and the

depleted '[academic realism] of potbellied youths…or rifle-carrying revolutionaries'…. This criticism was also a denunciation of the complicity of the Venezuelan political and cultural establishments that promoted these tendencies" (Gaztambide 2). Their exhibitions provide a wide realm of explorations of near (the social, economic, and political issues of Venezuela) and foreign concepts (aesthetics and arrangements derived from the European avant-garde and leftist ideas from the Cuban Revolution) which outline the flaws of hasty development and suggest an alternative path to modernization. Their inaugural exhibition, *Para la restitución del magma* (1961), provides a concrete example of their proposal for the re-thinking of Venezuela's modernization processes. On 24 March 1961, in a garage in a working-class neighborhood of El Conde, Caracas, El Techo de la Ballena assembled its first exhibition, *Para la Restitución del Magma,* which marks the collective's foundational statement for the reformulation of Venezuela's modernity.

Through the exhibition, the collective sought to express their goal of actively confronting what they perceived to be a broken and stagnant environment in Venezuela. As Gaztambide explains, "El Techo's catchphrase ('to restore magma') also conveyed the group's ambition to renovate Venezuela, which as Contramaestre later recalled, was torn between the competing interests of those who sought to guarantee oligarchical privilege and those who fought for a more just and equitable country" (Gaztambide, 64). In other words, while the state and the elite were enamored with constructing an appearance of modernity and civility, El Techo de la Ballena understood its flaws and actively confronted it. This exhibition, and the manifesto which accompanied it, formulated El Techo de la Ballena's "retrograde" stance, a return to the magma, the core, or an archaic, underdeveloped past. In this exhibition the collective articulated their cultural stance—the rejection of the contemporary notions of art that did not seek to challenge

the newly instituted modern culture, but rather strengthened it. The proposal for the return to a pre-modern country marks their political stance, as they demonstrated their discontent with the accomplishments and methods of modernization.

Due to the deconstructive nature of the Informalist aesthetic, not much remains from the works presented in the exhibition. According to the exhibition catalogue for *Para la Restitución del magma,* it was composed of paintings by Fernando Irázabal, Daniel González, Manuel Quintana Castillo, Carlos Contramaestre, Ángel Luque, Garbiel Morera, Juan Calzadilla, and José María Cruxent. It also included sculptural works by Irazábal, Pedro Briceño, Luque, Quintana, and González. The catalogue suggests that it included a painting by Fernando Irazábal belonging to his *El Occiso* series. Maria Gaztambide points out that it is "quite difficult to identify the specific version of *El occiso* that El Techo showed at its gallery," but one might assume that it resembled other known works from the series (Gaztambide, 65). For example, one of his *Occisos* that he made in 1960 consisted of oil, gesso, and paper applied on a circular panel, and is entirely composed of muted, dark tones, making it almost illegible. At the center of the canvas lies an organic structure which protrudes from it, which, when related to the title, could be understood as an allusion to dead matter. A figure seems to appear in this structure, a face displaying agony as it disappears into the canvas. Gaztambide describes the series as "emblems of Informalism in their overall coarseness, thick impasto, subdued palette, and built-up matter, Irazábal's unapologetic confrontation with death and the remains of life… indicated the degree to which his interests extended beyond the realm of the artistic" (Gaztambide, 65). It was also a form of disobedience against the established norms of fine art; it was grotesque rather than aesthetically pleasing. One might assume that the rest of the works exhibited in *Para la*

restitución del magma followed similar technical applications and allusions to death, decay, and destruction.

Since it is difficult to determine which works were included in *Para la restitución del magma,* the exhibition may be best understood through the manifesto which accompanied it. The manifesto, holding the same title as the exhibition, served as its catalogue and introduction, and brings clarity to the exhibition by explaining its title and expanding on its proposal. It begins by stating: "We must return to the magma the boiling matter, the lust of lava we must place a canvas at the base of a volcano to bring back the world" (El Techo de la Ballena, 1961). Magma is used as a metaphor which expresses their goal of returning to what has been perceived as an archaic past—pre-industrial, pre-oil Venezuela—a history which is conveniently forgotten and deemed irrelevant by the proponents of modernist progress. As Gaztambide points out, "the Venezuelan collective's production hinged upon a paradoxical return toward the past to shape art focused on the future. The group's frequent allusions to abstract primeval tropes—magma and lava, the cosmos, the initial chaos from which the earth emerged—reinforced this visual current" (Gaztambide 13). Their retrograde stance was for one, an investigation into Venezuela's past to create a more stable future, and a direct attack on the mythification of progress which was perpetuated and strengthened by the Kinetic artists. The manifesto continues with an attack on *Cinetísmo* by stating:

> prove that matter is much clearer than color thus, what is unformed—amputated from reality from everything superfluous that precludes transcendence—dominates the immediacy of matter as a means of expression converting it not into an action tool but an active medium about to explode an impact matter transcending itself textures are quivering rhythms are prone to vertigo that monitors the act of creation that becomes violent to put on record that things exist because the descending magma must be restored… (El Techo de la Ballena, 1961)

El Techo claims matter (the primary medium of Informalism) to be superior to color (the medium for *Cinetísmo*) in its ability to transcend itself and become an active (rather than passive) means of expression. The collective also articulates the method by which they intend to *restore the magma*—by using matter or objects in such a way that creates relationships and becomes transformed into a more comprehensive understanding and exploration of Venezuela's complicated labyrinth history. In this sense, El Techo seeks to degrade *Cinetísmo* by outlining its weaknesses through the contrasting strengths of Informalism. Finally, the collective concludes its manifesto by stressing the importance of the Informalist aesthetic for their political and social critiques:

> Informalism repositions it in the actual act of creating reestablishes categories and relationships that science can already glimpse because Informalism also creates fungi the touch of an arbitrary matter that reaches even the most skeptical eyes it entails a potential for creation that is as obvious as the earth and stone that form the mountains because we must return to the magma the boiling mass of matter Adam's prosthesis" (El Techo de la Ballena, 1961).

El Techo de la Ballena concludes by expressing their mission of transforming the entirety of the dominating national perspectives by establishing a chain of reactions in their intended public which would ultimately reach—as they said—the most skeptical eyes. This manifesto may be understood as an outline of the primary position held by El Techo, as well as a guideline for the projects and exhibitions which would follow. It describes the collective's proposed reformulation of Venezuela's modernity through a return to a more primal past.

The exhibition pamphlet and manifesto also contain the image of a whale designed by Ángel Luque. The whale appears to be drawn chaotically, with a dark liquid bursting from its blowhole—a reference to oil or magma and lava. As Sean Nesselrode explains, the liquid

emerging from the whale "becomes a visual representation of the *magma*, the abstract base substance that may be molded into any number of forms, but which is most purely articulated through the expressive scrawls and drips of *informalismo*" (Nesselrode, 3). By depicting a whale spurting out the magma, the material which the collective sought to restore, El Techo places itself and Informalism as the major agents to carry out an artistic revolution in Venezuela. Given the name of the collective, it is apparent that the whale served as an important symbolic element for its members. The significance of the whale for the collective, Nesselrode explains, "lies not only in its embodiment of freedom and ferocity, but also in its associations with the historically demonic Leviathan in literature, from the Bible to *Moby Dick*" (Nesselrode, 3). Thus, the combination of magma or oil imagery, along with the whale illustrates their aggressive and confrontational stance. Whale imagery would later be transformed into a more archaic representation of the animal and would become an important element which produced a cohesive aesthetic for their literary publications.

For El Techo de la Ballena, the whale carried a variety of meanings, while serving as an imaginary space for artistic exploration and critical thought. In many cases, the meaning of the whale was expanded into physical space, which, Gaztambide explains, included "the city of Caracas, the sea, and the actual physical spaces occupied by several of its itinerant galleries, which they also named 'El Techo de la Ballena.' But [the whale] also came to embody El Techo's characteristic juxtaposition of fragmented and disarticulated elements" (Gaztambide, 78). Their exhibitions were thus constructed as the space within the whale, where the collective had the freedom to explore a multiplicity of perspectives and ideas in benefit of the creation of a new Venezuelan modernity. Upon entering one of their exhibition spaces, the audience would be entering the stomach of the whale, a chaotic environment where ideas and aesthetics are digested

and formulated into concrete concepts. This idea of the whale as a chaotic space became what the *Balleneros* would term *Lo Majamámico*—a "divergent" and "illegal reality" through which they would offer a new perspective for Venezuelan culture.

Lo majamámico existed deep within the stomach of the whale, it was the space where its members, through the ingestion of large quantities of information, were able to digest these into their projections for Venezuela's future and their methods of achieving it. Dámaso Ogaz wrote about the relationship between these two spaces in his text "La Ballena, Jonás y lo majamámico" (The whale, Jonah and *lo majamámico*). He wrote:

> The parallelism between two coexistent worlds that resulted from Jonah's unexpected entry inside the whale was perfect in its total lack of synchronicity [or sense]. The same lack of synchronicity created in the protagonists a succession of free, relaxed states that led to a new truth…. Jonah came from a universe where all of his contemporaries were consumed by the arduous task of deceiving each other as well as giving themselves [undue] importance…. The whale came from a limitless tedium of prolonged digestions of jellyfish, the silence of his kindred creatures and primal eroticism…. The introduction of Jonah into [the whale's innermost chambers] breaks with a stable and solemn reality. (Gaztambide, 87)

By creating a relationship between the whale, Jonah, and *lo majamámico*, Ogaz is able to explain the chaotic environment—within the whale—from which the collective drew its apparently paradoxical views. He places the collective in the same position as Jonah—tired of an environment of deception—and Venezuela as the whale, needing Jonah to disrupt a tired, tedious environment. The works of El Techo entering the Venezuelan environment was itself a form of disrupting the status-quo in the search of *new truths*. In their imagination, the disobedience originating inside of the whale is what Ogaz descried as "breaking the mold from the inside": using the absurdities of Venezuelan life to create new meanings, just as the introduction of a

foreign being—Jonah—into the whale created a lack of sense and therefore a new reality for the whale.

El Techo de la Ballena's use of *Lo Majamamico,* in its inherent disobedience and chaotic environment, both describes and can be found in their exhibition making process. El Techo described it as "The simultaneous occurrence of unrelated events, elements, or relationships that, when combined, resulted in works or objects with entirely new meaning" (Gaztambide, 87). Their involvement with *lo majamámico* and their explorations from the inside of the whale are cleverly transformed into their exhibition making processes. These chaotic exhibitions and the multiple elements involved in them—print media, news articles, objects, artworks, and sculptures—were used to create a ridicule of the modernist spectacle. These concepts explain the construction of *Homenaje a la Cursilería* (1961), an exhibition which presented a version of Venezuela that the elite neglected or actively tried to disappear—anything considered to be of bad taste or serves as a reminder of the archaic, "uncivilized," pre-oil Venezuela. This exhibition was conceived as a mockery of the illusion of modern Venezuela, and more specifically, a confrontation against the high-brow culture of the Caracas elite. It included objects and imagery which represented what the collective understood as the repressed values of Venezuela's national culture, and the hypocrisy of the state's efforts to homogenize the country.

Overall, *Homenaje a la cursilería* was constructed as a chaotic setting crowded with objects and print media which would offend the elite and attack their fragile sophistication tendencies. It signaled and critiqued every flaw in the construction of identity and in the State's actions. While most of the exhibition was composed of found materials, the collective also included a few Informalist works—such as *El Coño de la Bernarda* (Bernarda's cunt) by Gabriel Morera—which augmented their message. This painting is an Informalist, achromatic

representation of female genitalia, composed of fabric gessoed onto the canvas which gives it a texturized, chaotic appearance. This work appears as if slowly disintegrating before the viewer's eyes, as if it were dead matter rotting and decomposing. Gaztambide points out that the title "derives from a vulgar Spanish expression that conveys the notion of a free-for-all: a confusing domestic space without rules where everyone thinks they can do whatever they want without consequence" (Gaztambide, 111). This piece was a more obscure representation of the chaotic ambitions for *Homenaje a la cursilería,* it signaled a space without consequences as well as their perceptions on Venezuela. *El Coño de la Bernarda* alludes to two other repressed values, sex and death, which El Techo would expand upon in the following year, 1962. Morera integrates the concepts of sex and death, challenging the purity of love, and continuing the critique on the culture of sophistication in Venezuela's higher classes. These ideas would be further developed in their subsequent exhibition *Homenaje a la Necrofilia* (1962)*,* in which the collective intensified the radicalization its confrontational stance.

As with *Para la restitución del magma*, there is little to no documentation on the works exhibited in *Homenaje a la cursilería.* However, one may determine how the exhibition was constructed based on a few extant images of the exhibition and installation shots. Gabriel Morera's painting included in the exhibition, and the manifesto which was handed out during the opening night. The manifesto in particular—a text attributed to Alberto Brandt—expresses the ambitions the collective held for *Homenaje a la cursilería* and explains the reasoning behind applying the idioms of *cursi* and *pavoso.* It states:

> If with this exhibition—which we already know is flawed because we would have needed to include a large part of our history and of what has been called our RECOGNIZED VALUES in order to complete it…. we succeed in making *lo cursi* an extension of *lo pavoso*, which in turn implies a cliché; then we'll have

> reached the crux of the matter. Although not everything that may jinx you [*lo pavoso*] is cursi, everything that is cursi does bring bad luck [*pava*], and so it is essential to make this public (national) knowledge, in order to turn lo cursi into a state of consciousness that has been, unconsciously, a factor that we couldn't change throughout the history of this country (i.e. MOTHERLAND). In this way and by knowing the rules of the game, maybe the general state of the country will become more malleable and less grotesque. We therefore declare our exhibition to be strictly vernacular, almost folkloric, even ordinary. As a result, we will transform the repeated and timely slogan VENEZUELA FIRST into a very useful motto. (Gaztambide, 108-109)

Through this exhibition, El Techo de la Ballena constructed a critique of Venezuela's highbrow culture by literally confronting it with objects and literature referencing popular culture in the country—objects which the elite defined as *cursi* (kitsch) or of poor taste.

Lo cursi and its meaning are extended and related to another Venezuelan idiom, *lo pavoso*—the unlucky—which El Techo saw as a bi-product of extreme *cursilería*. The collective used their Venezuelan understanding of these idioms as a method of formulating a new reality for the country, one which was in direct opposition to the illusion promoted by the elite. In the words of Gaztambide, "Brandt suggested that the outdated vernacular values of *lo cursi* and *lo pavoso* could be used as antidotes for the stubborn habit Venezuelan elites had of ignoring or covering up the discrepancies between the poverty of most Venezuelans and the image of industrial modernization and cultural sophistication the state disseminated" (Gaztambide, 109). By placing Venezuela between these two concepts, they created an apparently ridiculous composition which drew attention to values repressed by the country's hasty modernization. The combination of these two related yet apparently antonymous concepts, and the tension created between them established the atmosphere for *Homenaje a la Cursilería.*

The exhibition included a variety of media and vernacular objects, such as "torn up book pages, newspaper clippings, political photographs and propaganda, bric-a-brac, gesso statuettes, kitsch memorabilia, popular mementos, fishing nets, and musical instruments…. an umbrella, indoor slippers, bronze-coated children's shoes" (Gaztambide, 102). All of these objects would be familiar to a middle- or lower-class Venezuelan households, and many of which were associated with lo cursi. Photographic documentation from the exhibition shows that the walls were covered in print media and newspaper articles which referenced a variety of aspects of Venezuelan culture. The exhibition was composed of seemingly harmless images and objects which on their own would not produce any form of critique, but together recreated aspects of the country's past culture which modernization sought to eliminate.

It contained representations of Venezuela's folklore, such as the *cuatro* (a Venezuelan instrument similar to a ukulele), maracas, a *llanero* hat (Venezuelan cowboy hat), an *arpa llanera* (a traditional Venezuelan harp), and *alpargatas* (a thin shoe commonly used in Venezuela's past). As Gaztambide points out, "El Techo's references to a *llanero* tradition directly confronted the bourgeois obsession with obscuring Venezuela's agricultural past through emphasizing the technological progress…[it] was an uncomfortable reminder to many urban elites of their own roots in the agricultural backlands of Venezuela" (Gaztambide, 119). Thus, El Techo de la Ballena created *Homenaje a la cursilería* as a statement against the highbrow culture associated with the country's elite. Venezuela's llanero tradition is specific to the llanos (plains) region, at the center of the country, between the Andes Mountains and the Amazon, distant from the country's major cities. Los llanos is composed of tropical grasslands which provide the perfect ground for agricultural production. While llanero culture was historically perceived as representative of Venezuela as a whole—particularly because of Rómulo Gallegos's novel *Doña*

Barbara—at this time, the *llanos* were left behind as a symbol of underdevelopment and Venezuela's archaic agricultural past. The growth of the oil industry led Venezuela to replace its agricultural economy with an oil-centered economy. The inclusion of llanero imagery in this exhibition was meant to confront the "sophisticated" Caracas society with a past that was being neglected by modernization.

The exhibition also included a document titled *Cartilla Cívica Popular*—a document commissioned by the state, published by the Universidad Central and distributed in the national newspaper *El Nacional*—which illustrated guidelines for the "rights and responsibilities of a democratic citizen" (Gaztambide, 116). The *Cartilla Cívica Popular* was meant to show the Venezuelan population how civic discipline would avoid future dictatorships. It promoted education, access to healthcare, the value of hard work, and the homogenization of society as methods of achieving a civilized, sophisticated, democratic society. The inclusion of this document into the vast collage of images and objects which composed the exhibition was meant to represent the kitsch aspects of political propaganda and demonstrate how the state promoted equality while large sectors of the population were forgotten in modernization efforts.

Gaztambide explains that by including this document in the exhibition, "El Techo underscored how the state engaged in behavior and activities that encroached into the realm of lo cursi and lo pavoso. Needless to say, the corrupt and violent government exhibited extremely poor taste in producing a poster that touted civic engagement when actually it was undemocratically gunning down and jailing citizens who disagreed with it" (Gaztambide, 117-118). In other words, El Techo used this document as a method of demonstrating the corrupt and cursi nature of Venezuela's democratic parties. The violence associated with the initial years of Betancourt's democracy would push the Balleneros to radicalize their political stance and

become more provocative and confrontational. This development in the collective's stance led to their formulation of the exhibition *Homenaje a la necrofilia* in the following year, 1962, which is considered by Gaztambide to be logical extension of *Homenaje a la cursilería*, in its expansion from the concepts of lo cursi and lo pavoso to encompass references to sex and death.

While in *Homenaje a la necrofilia* El Techo employed techniques similar to those in *Homenaje a la cursilería*—it included a manifesto, a strange arrangement of objects, and Informalist artworks—the objects which composed *Homenaje a la necrofilia* carried more intense symbolic weight. This exhibition was a scandalous, shocking, radical, and for some perhaps the most disgusting art show to ever be held in Caracas. The Caracas elite and middle classes—the intended audience for the exhibition—would have found it to be repulsive and a crude mockery of the art object. It was entirely composed of works made by one of El Techo's founding members, Carlos Contramaestre, who created a series of canvases and sculptures made exclusively of cattle carcasses—bones, blood, viscera, and actively decaying flesh. The works, as Ballenero Salvador Garmendia explained, were an "'ironic and sanguinary response to the very real and day to day exercise of repression and armed brutality that the state police indiscriminately carried out in the streets" (Gaztambide, 128). Thus, while *Homenaje a la cursilería* was a response to the promotion of a false sophistication in Venezuelan society, *Homenaje a la necrofilia* was a response to the acts of violence directed by the Rómulo Betancourt presidency in his so-called pacification processes.

In the early 1960s, some sectors of the population—particularly in right-wing military and leftist guerilla groups—were dissatisfied with the budding democracy, leading to two coup attempts against the presidency on May 4th and June 2nd, 1962. As a result, Betancourt strengthened his stance against armed militias on both the left and the right, with the intention of

"pacifying" the country by eliminating political insurrections. As Gaztambide explains it, "death was in the air in Venezuela in 1962…. The uprisings had resulted in hundreds of casualties and in the end, had the result of increasing the strength of a state-supported program of civilian repression" (Gaztambide, 126). Betancourt's aggressive stance against the extreme right- and left- wing insurrections resulted in what he labelled as a pacification process. To the president, this was seen as a method of maintaining a sort of political stability in the country. However, for El Techo de la Ballena this was perceived as another method of political repression, one which sought to thwart political thought that did not fall in line with the ideals of the democracy. Being involved with leftist Guerillas, the collective was enraged by these events, and built the exhibition *Homenaje a la Necrofilia* as a direct attack against the state violence of the Rómulo Betancourt regime.

The exhibition was composed of 13 artworks, some of which held titles related to necrophilia. In this way, Contramaestre implied the idea of sex and physicality of dead matter without explicitly demonstrating the act. Some of these pieces were: *Erección ante un entierro* [Erection prior to a burial], *El Vampiro de Dusseldorf posa junto a una de sus víctimas llamada Inge* [The vampire of Dusseldorf poses with one of his victims named Inge], *Estudio para verdugo y perro* [Study for Executioner and dog], and *Beso Negro* [Black kiss] (all made in 1962). The components of the exhibition were so disturbing that, as Gaztambide points out, "*Homenaje a la necrofilia* lasted only a few days before the urban sanitation unit of Caracas closed it because of its evident unsanitary aspects. Municipal authorities confiscated and destroyed all but a handful of the works" (Gaztambide, 144). Many of the pieces from the exhibition were destroyed in this process, and only a two of them, *Erección ante un entierro* and *Estudio para verdugo y perro,* still exist today. For this reason, all that remains of the exhibition

are a few images from the opening night and the testimonies of those in attendance. The literary material and few photographs give insight into what the exhibition looked like.

The two surviving paintings from the exhibition, *Estudio para verdugo y perro* and *Erección ante un entierro* can be used as examples to illustrate what the rest of the works looked like. Both of these works boast similar aesthetics, with bones standing out as the major focal points, yet they differ in Contramaestre's use of color. *Estudio para verdugo y perro* is highly colorful, with red paint applied gesturally in the bottom right and top left corners of the painting. The red paint frames and contrasts with the white bones, making it look as if it were blood spilling out of the dead animal. Contramaestre forces the viewer's eye to travel through the contours of the bones, back into the canvas and into the organic forms of his highly texturized paint application. As Gaztambide describes it, "[Contramaestre] purposefully drags us through the animate and the inanimate materials of the picture by making us follow the contours of jawbones and femurs lodged between thick layers of cloth, hide, and pigment" (Gaztambide, 136-137). *Erección ante un entierro*, on the other hand, is composed of a more subdued, monochromatic brown palette which is probably meant to resemble mud or fecal matter. In this painting, Contramaestre forces the eyes to travel directly to the bones, and then follow the lines scratched into the brown paint. The monochromatic nature of this painting makes the bones almost disappear into the background, as if the dead matter were being absorbed back into the earth. These two paintings effectively display the message Contramaestre sought to espouse; they are both a literal confrontation with death, and a reminder of the unstable, unpredictable nature of life.

In 1962 there was an atmosphere of death in Venezuela, as two coup attempts against Rómulo Betancourt failed. These uprisings "had resulted in hundreds of casualties and in the

ends, had the result of increasing the strength of a state-supported program of civilian repression" (Gaztambide, 126). The Betancourt presidency strengthened its stance against military and popular insurrections, which lead to repression and censorship. These events, along with the unfolding of the Cuban missile crisis, are what led Contramaestre to expand his practice into a more shocking and radicalized realm. Given the developments of Venezuela's political environment, the members of El Techo de la Ballena—specifically Carlos Contramaestre—felt that their social critique required a step further from merely recovering *lo cursi* and *lo pavoso* in the Venezuelan identity, they required greater shock value for their intended outcome.

This exhibition was considered a turning point in Carlos Contramaestre's conception of Informalism and art in general. To him, charcoals and disassembled materials were no longer enough to represent a valid critique. His ideas required his materials to originate from "the physical remains of death" in order to accurately represent the aggressive nature of Venezuela's environment in 1962. Even the tools used to create these pieces became transformed, "as the brushes and pencils of his Informalist beginnings gave way to bare hands, axes, cleavers, and butcher knives" (Gaztambide, 128). The actions performed to create these canvases also had to be representational of acts of killing, dismemberment, and violence. In doing so, Contramaestre was able to fully inscribe his new canvases with death; every aspect of these works was an inescapable reminder of death which sought to shock the audience into noticing the deaths caused by the homogenizing efforts of the democracy.

Argentinean poet Juan Antonio Vasco was involved with the collective when living in Caracas between 1958 and 1962. Vasco stated that these works showed how "La Ballena had reached the conclusion that Western culture was rotten and that art should not operate as a complicit deodorant, as a floral eau de cologne…. Art [must] intentionally and ostensibly rot in

plain sight, [in order to expose] all that is rotten" (Vasco, quoted in Gaztambide 128). This is precisely what this exhibition sought to accomplish, while also—by associating sex with death through the concept of necrophilia—bringing attention to the love of death the collective associated with the Betancourt regime. Just as with the previous exhibitions, the catalogue for *Homenaje a la necrofilia* is key to understanding the intentions behind it. The foldable pamphlet, designed by Daniel González, contained a variety of imagery of death, skeletal figures, and photographs of Contramaestre's experimentations with dead matter.

The front page of the catalogue contained a 1747 etching—*Human Skeleton with Young Rhinoceros* by Jan Wandelaar—which showed a skeletal figure next to a rhinoceros, the title of the exhibition and opening date—along with the whale logo common to El Techo's print material—and another morbid representation of human anatomy, *Transition of René de Châlon*, 1547, by Ligier Richier. The other side of the catalogue contained two images of Contramaestre working with the animal carcasses in his studio, an image of his painting *Flora Cadavérica*, and El Greco's painting *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586-1588). Gaztambide explains that the catalogue "reflected El Techo de la Ballena's desacralized view of the body and its ultimate demise…. The catalog sought to normalize Contramaestre's brutal affront on local propriety with images that created a linear progression of visual reflections on the…notion of the good death, extending from Wandelaar to Richier to El Greco to Contramaestre" (Gaztambide, 140-141). The catalogue also contained a series of writings which referenced necrophiliac acts or historical people who were rumored to have been necrophiliacs. Thus, the catalogue for *Homenaje a la necrofilia* condensed the artworks and literature which inspired Contramaestre to create such a repugnant exhibition.

The exterior of the home where the exhibition was held was decorated with signs created by El Techo; the exhibition catalogue was attached to the window's iron bars, a sign that read "no dogs allowed," and a cross from a local cemetery. Gaztambide describes the entrance as a "preamble to what was to come beyond the entrance to the garage," as another sign reading "El Techo de la Ballena" signaled the exhibition space, making the driveway "not merely a passageway to the gallery but an entrance to a metaphorical underworld. A Veritable gate of hell, it prepared attendees for a journey into the gut of the whale" (Gaztambide 134). In other words, El Techo de la Ballena once again invited its audience to witness the chaos inside the belly of the whale. Inside the belly of the whale, smell of the decaying matter was overpowering, as if it were a constant reminder that the audience was standing in front of actual rotting meat.

These sculptures and canvases were described by Robles Piquer as "structures assembled from heads, femurs, ribs, shoulder blades and other animal bones bound together by plaster and resitex and combined with viscera, reproductions of placentas and furs, not quite ermine. All of this covered in color that sometimes resembles blood and in other cases reminds us that we are standing in front of paintings" (Piquer, quoted in Gaztambide, 136). Piquer continues by describing the elements in the works of Contramaestre pulled the audience back and forth between grotesque figures and artistic works, making it a disturbing environment as the works called for further attention from its viewers. This is what Contramaestre intended, as he sought to create an art of decay which inspires disgust and admiration through its aesthetic qualities. In this way, Contramaestre was able to forcefully confront his audience with two inescapable aspects of life which are repressed in Venezuelan culture.

Contramaestre's *Homenaje a la necrofilia* produced such shock in the Caracas elite scene, that the exhibition was not only shut down after three days, but it also

received significant backlash from local media. The backlash was not only directed at the individual works of the exhibition, but also the catalogue and its references to necrofilia and the images included in it. As Gaztambide explains:

> The local press described the exhibition as a "repugnant and degenerate [Marxist] deviation of eroticism" that "morally degraded consciousness" and threatened to destroy the "Christian concept of the pious death." According to some critics, *Homenaje a la necrofilia* harmed and corroded the "dignity of the papacy" and constituted an "attack against respectable institutions . . . in favor of the engagement of abject practices." …Thus, the general consensus seems to have been that the exhibition and publication elicited "horror," "disgust," "repugnance," and even "nausea." (Gaztambide, 144)

The backlash was likely due to the explicit use of decaying meat and sexual allusions of the works, the political statements implicit in the exhibition, and the perception that *Homenaje a la necrofilia* as a whole constituted an attack towards the catholic church and its ideals (which are deeply engrained in Venezuelan culture). Overall, the Caracas elite, along with critics and local media, were disgusted by the components and the message of the exhibition.

In retrospect and compared to the realities experienced by Venezuelan in the early 1960s, it is my contention that this exhibition appears as less shocking and more of a necessity. During this time, Contramaestre explained, "the atmosphere was tainted with death, not just in Venezuela. I remember reading a headline proclaiming how there was this nauseating stench in the world, an atmosphere laden with necrophilia. What we did was to transcribe that environmental situation. That was the objective of *Necrophilia*" (Gaztambide, 145-146). Therefore, this exhibition was a literal representation of the violence common to this period, and the stench of the gallery showed that the Balleneros refused to be complicit in the masking of

repression, disappearances, violence, and torture. The exhibition offered a radical political critique in that it was "an undeniable decree against tempestuous international events, the vendetta of death the Betancourt administration had unleashed in Venezuela, and the increasing fallout from a failing capitalist system in that country." It was also an aesthetic critique, as the Balleneros "pronounced that they were opposed to the conventional art objects that historically had been the accomplices of such socio-political events" (Gaztambide 146). It was the ultimate representation of El Techo's mission to absolutely transform life in Venezuela and improve upon it, or as their slogan states "change life and transform society."

El Techo de la Ballena constitutes a multidisciplinary, radical parallel to the dominant art forms of Venezuela. Rather than obscuring political and social issues in Venezuela, this collective brought attention to them. They "find the ulcer, display it without fear, without hypocrisy, bravely, grotesquely, it if so wishes, it fulfills an action" (Rama, 33). During the time of absolute change to the country's environment, this collective constantly reacted to the initial failures of Venezuela's modernity. However, the modernist illusion proved too strong to effectively terrorize, and El Techo de la Ballena disintegrated. The first members left in 1964, when Contramaestre and Edmundo Aray concluded that "literature and painting, Informalism in particular, could not fully embody their interest in political dissent and in disrupting the status quo through provocation and scandal" (Gaztambide, 148), and left the collective. They believed Informalism no longer served a purpose, and that movements initiated by historical circumstances eventually fade away.

In 1964 Juan Calzadilla also questioned the collective's relevancy, publishing a statement that outlined his new understanding of art, and Informalism in particular. In it, he stated:

> The coffin of abstraction was made with matter. Informalism has played the part of a putrid cadaver in this ceremony. To bury it as soon as possible is something

> less than a humanitarian act; it is a beautiful necessity after which we will be able to ascertain if we are entering the last stage in abstraction's generalized death. From its demise, [abstraction] will recuperate the expenses for its neither poor nor luxurious burial. For better or worse, Informalism has died. (Calzadilla, 1964)

This statement mirrors the ideas that Contramaestre and Aray had arrived to concerning the use of art as a political statement. During the same year, the Betancourt presidency had intensified its efforts to repress political dissidents and insurrections, and for the collective, Informalism could no longer serve the purpose of changing life in Venezuela. Members of El Techo de la Ballena became involved with the leftist groups the presidency was seeking to eliminate. As Gaztambide points out, "the *balleneros'* varying degrees of allegiance to political groups… detracted attention from the group's artistic and literary activities. As important members were detained, incarcerated, persecuted, and exiled or began operating in secrecy to avoid further persecution, El Techo face the first of several (unremarkable) ends" (Gaztambide 149). In the following years El Techo de la Ballena would often cease and resume their literary activities in local newspapers. In 1969, the collective finally disintegrated as radical art forms became more normalized in the Venezuelan arts.

Conclusion

Cinetísmo continues to be the most well-known movement to have emerged from Venezuela's modern period: exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Guggenheim (New York and Bilbao), The Reina Sofia Museum (Madrid), and the Tate (London), among others, while El Techo de la Ballena has only been exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. This exhibition history serves to misconstrue the complicated nature of the country's modern history, a history of repressive dictatorships, two transitions to democracy, and an aggressive push towards modernization in a country "not yet emerging from the nineteenth century" (Mayhall, 140). In this thesis, I have focused my research around two movements which highly contrast each other in both their aesthetics and their ideas for the future of Venezuela. In doing so, I have sought to demonstrate how the national and international praise of Cinetísmo oversimplifies and idealizes Venezuela's modern history in contemporary Venezuela and reveal a history of art for this period as fraught with contradictions, a battlefield of contrasting ideas which manifested in debates for the artistic representation of the country's national identity. The history of art in Venezuela that I have analyzed in this thesis closely mirrors the political and social environment of the country, as these movements occurred as reactions to dictatorships, democracies, the oil state, and modernization. This can be seen in the early debates between geometric abstraction and figuration, and later in the Informalists' rejection of state-sponsored art forms such as Cinetísmo. It is my contention that by looking at the modern Venezuelan art movements, one might uncover the hidden complexities of the country's often misunderstood history.

These movements were at their core both dedicated to "changing life" in Venezuela, yet their methods of achieving their goals radically contrasted. The academicism of figuration they

were reacting to was anchored to a belief that creating realistic representations of the poverty and the history of Venezuela would inform the elite and higher classes on the underdeveloped aspects of the country. Geometric abstraction and Cinetísmo, on the other hand, perceived figurative aesthetics to be entombed in Venezuela's colonial traditions. Thus, Cinetísmo and Geometric abstraction sought to develop a universal art form without connections to the country's colonial past, an aesthetic which mirrored the period of optimism and modernization in Venezuela in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Informalism and El Techo de la Ballena's mission was to challenge both figuration and Cinetísmo, since both movements had been and were being used by the state as a form of political propaganda. The *balleneros* sought to uncover the uneven and violent aspects common to Venezuela's modern period, aspects which were ignored with the growth of the middle class and the increasingly modern appearance of Venezuela.

Cinetísmo received acclaim in the Venezuelan environment due to its "universality" and apolitical nature. The works made Venezuela appear modern because national artists were creating works similar to the European avant-garde. These works were exceptionally formal in their composition, containing rigid straight lines and focused on the creation of optical illusion. This movement, however, was lacking a critical perspective of life in Venezuela, its oil dependence, and the methods of modernization enforced by the state. Pérez-Oramas raises a relevant question regarding the effects of artistic illusion for the Venezuelan environment, inquiring "what exactly takes place where 'dematerialization occurs' and what is the political meaning or purpose of this event? What role does transparency play… vis-à-vis the opaque Venezuelan anthropological and political background?" (Pérez-Oramas, 58). Herein lies an opportunity for further examination into the effects that kinetic art played on the Venezuelan audience during the state's construction of modernity. For the purposes of this thesis, I sought to

show how Op art and Kinetic art mirrored the modernist illusion created by the state. Cinetísmo, by creating monumental works for Venezuela's developing cities (Caracas, Valencia, Maracaibo, Maracay, and Barquisimeto), gave the country an appearance of European modernity.

The kinetic art of Cinetísmo promoted a sense of European modernity into a country with deep developmental inequalities caused by a growing oil dependence which left agriculture behind, and the aggressive modernization efforts of Pérez Jimenez's dictatorial regime. In many ways, the democracy following the dictatorship was a continuation of this regime's modernization project and continued to deploy the repressive and aggressive methods of the previous dictatorship. The artists of Cinetísmo, however, did not experience the years of repression of the Betancourt dictatorship, as a majority of them—particularly Jesús Soto, Carlos Cruz-Diez, and Alejandro Otero—returned to Paris in the late 1950s to expand upon their practices. In other words, the *Cinéticos* were unaware of or not involved in the complex politics unfolding in the country during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This signifies a major difference between El Techo de la Ballena and Cinetísmo, since the artists of El Techo were not only living in Caracas at this time, but also deeply involved with the political insurrections and leftist groups that challenged the presidency of Rómulo Betancourt.

Informalism and El Techo de la Ballena are described by Pérez Oramas as "kinetic art's 'deconstructive' generation of artists" (Pérez-Oramas, 58). The "deconstructive" aesthetics of Informalism signified their absolute aversion against the illusions of Kinetic art, and its lack of reference to the political and social issues unfolding in the country. For El Techo de la Ballena, art had to serve a political purpose, and the loose qualities of Informalism's aesthetics were a fitting medium for their critical statements. As Ballenero Angel Luque once stated, "Informalism is the first movement in the history of western culture to have put expression ahead of aesthetic

ideas. It sees chaos as the element that best expresses our period" (Luque, 1962: Rivero, 11). Thus, while the *Cinéticos* were promoting a formal, rigid, structured art form for the Venezuelan modernity, El Techo de la Ballena sought to create the opposite. El Techo's destructive aesthetics were meant to bring attention to the unpleasant aspects of modernity, the state violence promoted by the Betancourt presidency, and the hegemony the state was seeking through implanting kinetic art to the Venezuelan environment. It is my contention that Informalism and El Techo de la Ballena best represent the realities of Venezuela's modern period. Furthermore, the differences between Cinetísmo and El Techo de la Ballena highlight the uneven aspects of Venezuela's modernity, by being representative of its two sides. Cinetísmo was the art of the state and the elite, while Informalism was the art of the revolutionaries to represent the lower classes.

For the middle class and elites of contemporary Venezuela, Cinetísmo continues to dominate the public imaginary of what defines Venezuelan art. This is because nowadays Cinetísmo represents a false memory of what Venezuela could have become in its future. The *Esfera Caracas* by Jesus Soto continues to be a beloved artwork in Caracas, the symbol of the most modernized city in the country. This work has slightly deteriorated since it was publicly installed in 1997, with some of the metal tubes which compose the sculpture stolen. Although the work no longer looks like a full sphere, it continues to carry the same symbolic weight it did when it was applied into the Caracas landscape. Yet one could consider the deterioration of the *Esfera* to be symbolic of the slow depreciation of the modernist project which has culminated in the issues of impoverishment, hyperinflation, state repression, and bitter political divisions that characterize contemporary Venezuela of the Chavez and current Maduro regimes. The public artwork, located at the once was the edge of the city and now surrounded by urban sprawl,

appears as a sort of specter of modernity, a symbol of an idealized past and a broken contemporary reality.

More importantly, Cruz Diez's installation in the Simon Bolivar international airport in Maiquetía (in the outskirts of Caracas) has become an important symbol for the Venezuelan diaspora. This installation covers the main floor of the airport, in the section before entering the security check. It is a classic Cruz Diez piece, composed of three colors which together create the illusion of a rainbow covering the floor. The Simon Bolivar airport is the place from where many Venezuelans have left the country for good, in search for a more stable life. Because of this, the Venezuelan diaspora has initiated a trend of taking a picture of one's feet, next to their suitcase, on top of the Cruz Diez installation. A few of these have even taken with them the tiles that compose the installation. These things are done as a method of carrying a memory of the homeland upon leaving the country.

The immense importance of Jesús Soto's and Cruz Diez's public artworks for Venezuela's younger generations, the ones which did not experience the complexities of the modern period, has created a sort of cultural amnesia. Because of the prevalence of these works in the Venezuelan landscape, many believe that Venezuela's past was a period of purely positive changes, and that its current humanitarian crisis is an anomaly. The purpose of this thesis was to introduce how this perspective is flawed, and how the issues experienced in Venezuela today are the result of the issues El Techo de la Ballena sought to bring to the public eye. In other words, I contend that El Techo de la Ballena predicted what the flaws in modernization would create for the future of Venezuela.

As a member of the younger generation in Venezuela—as well as being part of the Venezuelan diaspora—I considered Cinetísmo to be the quintessence mode of art and visual

culture of the country's past before undertaking this thesis. However, my research into the developments of the country's art for my thesis paper enabled me to understand the more complex realities of the country's modernist trajectory. For this reason, I have sought to demonstrate how and argue that El Techo de la Ballena is a relevant and arguably more accurate representation of Venezuelan uneven modernity than Cinetísmo. It is my contention that in contemporary Venezuela Cinetísmo represents an idea of what Venezuela's modernity could have become, while El Techo de la Ballena predicted how the flaws of the modernist project would unfold. Placing these two artistic movements in dialogue is essential to understanding the issues and the art of contemporary Venezuela.

There is further research to be done concerning the legacy of these movements, particularly in how they would be adopted by Venezuela's future generations of artists. While some contemporary artists have continued the optical illusion explorations of Cinetísmo, there is a larger number of artists who, in the 1970s, followed in the footsteps of the combative language introduced by El Techo de la Ballena. During the 1970s, after the disintegration of El Techo, artists began applying more critical perspectives into their works by challenging nationalism through patriotic symbols. This tradition continues in contemporary Venezuela, most notably in the works of two diaspora Venezuelan artists Deborah Castillo and Erika Ordosgoitti currently residing in USA. In the same way that El Techo de la Ballena used their practice to shock and unsettle the Venezuelan population, Castillo and Ordosgoitti use their bodies to challenge the contemporary *Chavista* regime.

Ordosgoitti and Castillo belong to a generation of artists who witnessed the rise of Hugo Chavez, who became President in 1998. Both their practices are created as challenges towards the regime and are so confrontational and provocative that they have both been persecuted by the

government and later exiled. As women, Castillo and Ordosgoitti construct a gendered protest, as they use their bodies as the main medium for their stance against male power and military associated with contemporary Venezuela. Their works have begun gaining traction in international circuits, and have recently been exhibited together in September 2020, in an online exhibition produced by the Rutgers Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities, titled *Gendering Protest*. They are both performative artists, yet their performances differ in the elements of contemporary Venezuela they seek to challenge.

In contemporary Venezuela, protests have become a regular aspect of life, some more prominent than others. One of the most significant protests occurred in 2014 after Nicolas Maduro was elected as the new president. The country fell into chaos as the opposition called for the shutdown of the country and sparked a series of protests with claims that the election had been fraudulent. During these protests, a stencil appeared in the streets of Caracas; it was a still photo of Castillo licking the boots of the military with the word "lamezuela" underneath. This graffiti was created by Castillo in collaboration with Erika Ordosgoitti, but eventually the word "lamezuela" began appearing on its own, as the public related to this image.

Lamezuela is a play on words, incorporating the name of the country and the word "lame" meaning to lick. "Lamezuela" could also be directly translated to "licking the soles," which is the literal act of the performance. It is also a play on the name of the country and its real meaning. The story of the naming Venezuela says that when the Spanish arrived at the delta of the Orinoco river, they saw indigenous tribes living in *palafitos,* homes built on the river. This image reminded the Spanish of Italy's Venice, and so Venezuela became "the small Venice." The story, however, conveniently neglects the fact that this name is derogatory. In Spanish, the

suffix -cito(a) means small, whereas the suffix -zuelo(a) adds a negative connotation to the original word. Therefore, the name Venezuela literally means an inferior, bad copy of Venice. The meaning of Venezuela's name very much comes into play in the meaning of *Lamezuela*, as the performance which lead to the graffiti showcases how Venezuela has degraded itself in its idolization of military figures of power. Castillo uses her body to represent Venezuela licking the boots of the military, never being able to escape the legacy of Simon Bolivar.

Castillo, however, is not the only contemporary artist who utilizes her body as a medium for her social and political critiques. Erika Ordosgoitti, the creator of the *Lamezuela* stencils, uses her body in ways similar to, but arguably more radical than Castillo—posing naked next to monuments in Venezuela. As she described in a recent talk, she does this as a form of graffiti, indirectly performing a sort of iconoclasm, degrading the figures next to her with her nudity. It would be safe to assume that her so-called interventions have not been well received in the country. Érika Ordosgoitti began her practice in Caracas, Venezuela, where she used her nude body to challenge monuments and structures of power simply by posing next to them. In her artist talk for the *Gendering Protest* exhibition, Ordosgoitti explains how she sees her practice as a sort of ephemeral street art, where her nudity acts as a form of iconoclasm. She explains that by simply posing naked next to important political and military monuments, her nudity threatens the *machismo* associated with military power structures in Venezuela.

As El Techo de la Ballena did, Ordosgoitti continuously made use of sex as a repressed value in Venezuelan society, where public indecency is an illegal act. As a result of her public nudity, Ordosgoitti was detained a few times by local authorities in Caracas, until catching the attention of a state-sponsored program, *Con el Mazo Dando,* which denounced her to the entire country. The Instagram page of the television program *Con el Mazo Dando,* shared images of

one of her interventions, with the caption: “they call themselves ‘iconoclasts’: whoever does this and plays with excrement we should call: ‘iconoshits’…Disrespecting us is one thing, but disrespecting the history that gave you a Homeland, name and identity is something else #theywon’treturn” (Ordosgoitti, Social Media Documentation) What resulted was an avalanche of comments threatening the artist’s life for “disrespecting” the image of the *Libertador*, whose statue she is posing next to.

The public reaction to her work showcases exactly how aggressive the country’s nationalism has become, as the immediate response of many was to insult her for doing this in front of the nation’s father, the great leader of the Wars of Independence in the early 1800s, Simon Bolívar. As a consequence, she was persecuted on social media, nearly kidnaped, and forced to leave the country. Now living in exile, Ordosgoitti has had to alter her practice, yet her exhibitions still contain images of her interventions in Venezuela. *Gendering Protest* includes prints of the interventions, videos of her new performances, and screenshots of reactions she has gotten from her works. By including these screenshots next to her own work in the exhibition, Ordosgoitti is able to magnify her message of protest and disobedience, as the reactions created by it demonstrate its effectiveness.

The kinds of performances undertaken by Ordosgoitti and Castillo —the sexual and the violent—while contrasting in their actions, both serve the same essential purpose. Both target Simón Bolivar, the most recognizable figure in Venezuela’s history, identity, politics, and public sphere. They were both constructed as a result to the Bolivarian revolution—an important point to examine—but it goes beyond a rejection or alliance to either political party. Furthermore, they both incorporate aspects of El Techo’s practice, calling upon Venezuela’s repressed values in the benefit of a social critique. Castillo both ridicules the cult of Bolívar and those who worship his

image, and also performs the repressed anger against the contemporary regime and its use of the national iconography. Just as El Techo critiqued the spectacle of modernity, Castillo ridicules the spectacle of Bolivar, as Chavismo has constantly called upon, associated itself with, and even altered the image of the Libertador beyond recognition. She does so in order to inspire an emotional response from the government, as she attacks the figure which holds it together. In this aspect, her works prove to be effective, as her practice led to intense critique from the regime. They ridiculed her, claiming her practice was not art, called her a threat to Bolivarianism, and even suggested that the United States was responsible for her performances as a way to humiliate Chavez and his regime.

Ordosgoitti and Castillo both use their bodies to create a novel form of protest and disobedience. In a country constantly referred to as *La Patria* or "fatherland," with a history of entirely male figures of authority, the female body can serve as a powerful tool of protest. These artists, therefore, defy not only the current regime, but also the machismo inherent to Venezuelan culture. They turn their bodies into a weapon which will disrupt the fragility of the country's emphasis on masculinity and expose the issues it has caused. The use of performance as the main medium of their works also relates to the large-scale protests which Venezuela has witnessed in the past two decades. For the Venezuelan opposition, performativity is the key method through which it displays its message of nonconformity. They ask those who agree with them to flood the streets and show how many are actively against the contemporary regime. Nevertheless, Castillo and Ordosgoitti push protest further by embodying it and attacking more than just Bolivarianismo and its ideologies.

The history of Venezuelan art and the modern period are necessary to understanding its contemporary art. When I began this research, my objective was to examine the works of El

Techo de la Ballena in relation to the confrontational stance of contemporary Venezuelan art. Through this research I realized that the connections I wanted to make between El Techo and contemporary art require an in depth contextualization of the art of Venezuela and the events that unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s. Contemporary Venezuelan art is part of a genealogy of artistic innovations and aesthetic debates which sought to create a national identity that addressed different approaches to the country's modernization project. In this thesis paper I have analyzed the complexities of Venezuela's modern art in order to lay the groundwork for future research I wish to undertake on contemporary art in Venezuela. I have sought to demonstrate how important it is to understand the works of contemporary Venezuelan artists, through a history of multiple modernisms. The history of modern Venezuelan art is a rich and contested site of investigation that provides the potential to fully appreciate the complexities of contemporary Venezuelan art.

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