Book Review: *Contesting Modernity* and *El Techo de la Ballena*

Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975, edited by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Tahía Rivero with María C. Gaztambide, Josefina Manrique, and Gabriela Rangel. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. 272 pages. 305 color + b/w illus. Hardcover $85.00.

El Techo de la Ballena: Retro-Modernity in Venezuela, by María C. Gaztambide. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2019. 256 pages. 73 b/w illus. + 24 pl. Hardcover $85.00.

These days, it feels as though we never truly left the shadow of the 1960s. The foment of political resistance and artistic experimentation has been so mythologized as to become a shorthand for any moment of revolutionary fervor, tempting us to draw parallels between that decade and our own. Part of this has to do with a certain degree of historical return. The rampant governmental corruption, socioeconomic inequity, and ecological peril of the long 2010s demands a study and a reevaluation of the tumultuous events of a half century before. But as we sift through the past for signals and tethers, it has become apparent that there was no singular 1960s, but multiple, competing experiences. Indeed, with respect to the arts, the rapid ascent of Latin American art into the Euro-US canon has uncovered a complex range of avant-garde practices that sought to challenge the status quo, both past and present, as universal ideals gave way to the uneven realities on the ground.

Two recent titles illuminate how the avant-garde, or rather the neo-vanguard (*neovanguardia*), adapted to local environments, taking as their subject the volatile artistic scene of Venezuela. The first, *Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975*, takes a panoramic view of artistic production during this period. Edited by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Tahía Rivero, who curated the accompanying exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, it brings to light the nebulous but potent Informalist movement, which forcefully called into question the hegemony of geometric abstraction. By contrast, María C. Gaztambide's copiously researched monograph *El Techo de la Ballena: Retro-Modernity in Venezuela* focuses exclusively on the eponymous artist collective (whose name translates to "the roof of the whale"), which exploded aesthetic and political categorization. It has remained, until now, almost completely unknown outside its home country. The two volumes take inverse approaches to the proverbial divide between art and life: Ramírez and Rivero argue that the turn from geometry to gesture was a fundamentally political one, while Gaztambide rescues the artistic innovation of a group too often dismissed as a partisan guerrilla outburst. Together, they reveal an altogether different Venezuela, and a different 1960s, than has been presented by canonical histories.

One of the most turbulent and misunderstood countries in the region, Venezuela experienced a 1960s that did not adhere exactly to the social or artistic coordinates found in other regions. The decade began two years early, with a coup d'état that deposed the military dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez and ushered a return to democratic rule, solidified by the election of President Rómulo Betancourt in 1958. The transition was not smooth. Betancourt's rightward pivot in the wake of the Cuban Revolution ignited the first serious guerrilla movement in South America, which staged bombings, kidnappings, and uprisings and was met with violent state crackdowns. In this unpredictable climate, the artistic winds swung away from the future-oriented kineticism and architectural heroism that defined the preceding decade, orienting instead toward gestural abstraction, found objects, and non-art materials. Grouped loosely under the banner of Informalism, this strain of Venezuelan modernism to date has not been as rigorously studied as the oeuvres of geometric stalwarts such as Alejandro Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto. Yet for a brief period, Informalism proved so *de rigueur* that even these two artists experimented with the tendency, debuting radical new work to decidedly mixed reaction.

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Otero and Soto feature in Ramírez and Rivero's exhaustive catalog, as do other familiar names like Gego and Carlos Cruz-Diez, but they are joined by a roster of figures who have been overshadowed in previous studies of the period. In partnership with the Colección Mercantil Arte y Cultura, Caracas, the MFAH exhibited over one hundred works in its galleries, which are beautifully reproduced in the pages of *Contesting Modernity* in five sections:

- "Surface Tensions," which highlights painting that attacked the picture plane, such as the archaeologist José María Cruxent's oneiric compositions of torn and wadded netting, and Francisco Hung's exuberant abstractions;
- a section devoted exclusively to the diffuse artistic and literary output of El Techo de la Ballena;
- "Return to the 'Real,'" which looks at Otero and Soto's turn to found objects;
- a miniature retrospective of the provocative compositions of Elsa Gramcko, which moved from sleek geometric canvases to assemblages composed of machine parts and car batteries;
- and finally a survey of "Marginal Strategies" that contains some of the most compelling work in the catalog, including Mario Abreu's exquisite, occult *objetos mágicos* and the humorously carnal ceramic pieces of Tecla Tofano.

Indeed, one of the catalog's triumphs is the abundance of high-quality reproductions of works that until this point have remained hidden within private collections and local archives. They are accompanied by an extensive chronology; an appendix of fifteen historical texts, many of which appear in English translation for the first time; and thirty-five artist biographies. As an archival project, *Contesting Modernity* offers an invaluable corrective.

The four essays included provide crucial historical and artistic context for readers, illuminating how Informalism, despite developing in dialogue with similar trends like *art informel*, was above all a localized response. The very name of the catalog, *Contesting Modernity*, points us to the overarching thesis of the project, that the Informalist eruption constituted a direct rebuke of the precarities that had been engineered by the country's modernist push. In her essay, Rivero defines Informalism broadly as a kind of anti-aestheticism, "distinguished mainly by its practice of replacing a work of art's traditional components with an eclectic range of materials that have nothing to do with making art and that all carry their own semantic baggage" (18). It calls to mind not just transatlantic lyrical abstraction but also contemporaneous assemblage techniques that gained renewed credence in the work of such disparate artists as Antonio Berni, Betye Saar, and Marisol. Rivero's angle, however, is more psychoanalytic—and more political. The Informalist fascination with nonrepresentative, chance composition rejected the rational universalism that had resulted in the headlong urbanization of Caracas and voracious development of the country's oil reserves, which came at the expense of the needs of the local populace. In Betancourt's Venezuela, the shift to more subjective, open-ended work dovetailed with the radicalization of the political left. The goal, as Rivero states, was nothing less than the cultivation of "a more human, less orthodox modernity" (20).

Following the lead of the artists, Ramírez and Rivero astutely stretch the definition of Informalism to its aesthetic and material limits. Gabriela Rangel writes on the short-lived multimedia spectacle *Imagen de Caracas*, staged by a team led by erstwhile painter Jacobo Borges in commemoration of the capital city's quadricentennial. The inclusion of *Imagen de Caracas* would seem a curious one, for it has seemingly little to do with Informalism, with the arguable exception of Borges's involvement. Yet Rangel's reading of the audiovisual project as a Brechtian "counterproposition" to Carlos Raúl Villanueva's synthesis of the arts reveals that, even if it did not adhere to Informalist aesthetics, it shared and intensified the style's critical bent (174). Informalism, that is, is much better defined along ideological rather than formalist lines. This rereading is offered most persuasively in Ramírez's essay on "Elsa Gramcko's Journey from the Void to the 'Real.'" Ramírez traces the arc of Gramcko's eclectic career, contending that an orthodox art historical deference to isms (Informalism included) can only occlude a body of work that refused to recognize the limitations of aesthetics or material. Gramcko's oeuvre requires "a shift from *image* to *signifier*," which unites her abstractions that opened the decade with the mechanistic assemblages that closed it (125). Both hermetic and iconoclastic—and overdue for her own retrospective—it is Gramcko who emerges as the catalog's biggest revelation, and who singlehandedly puts the lie to tidy discourses of Venezuelan modernity and the postwar neo-vanguard.

María C. Gaztambide's catalog essay on El Techo de la Ballena provides a brief but compelling overview of the

Caracas-based art collective, and it doubles as a précis for her book *El Techo de la Ballena*, which is the first comprehensive study of the group to appear in English. Gaztambide tells how *balleneros*, as members of El Techo dubbed themselves, jettisoned every convention of artistic practice and social acceptability. To call them Informalists is to do a disservice to the complexity of their ambition, for their fleeting engagement with lyrical and neofigurative aesthetics intermingled with experiments in photography, literature, philosophy, and performance. This mixture moved so far beyond the bounds of category and decency that the critic Ángel Rama infamously qualified them as cultural terrorists, in part due to their sympathy for and at times outright collaboration with radical militant cells. To her credit, Gaztambide doesn't shy away from the contradictions of El Techo's multipronged approach, which she concedes staked its claims "on shaky ground, both aesthetically and politically" (9). Rather, its slipperiness served a tactical purpose, enabling the group to produce one of the deftest and most effective assaults on the Bürgerian theory of the institution of art during the postwar era.

What gave El Techo's activities teeth, Gaztambide argues, was its resolute focus on the local inequities and injustices that were endemic to Venezuela's brand of modernism. In defiance of the imagined future of democratic stability, technological progress, and economic abundance promised by Betancourt and his allies, the *balleneros* worked from a position of what Gaztambide defines as *retro-modernity*. This "uncompromising return to an earlier and potentially inferior condition" was formally dependent upon outmoded colonial imagery but theoretically grounded in Bataillean notions of the abject (13). In this respect, they followed the path initially laid out by the Dada and Surrealist artists one generation prior. Indeed, Gaztambide insists upon El Techo's importance as a vanguard enterprise, and a necessarily Venezuelan one at that. Although she perhaps oversells the group's singularity—the *balleneros* were certainly not the only members of the neo-vanguard who sought to "change life, transform society," as they memorably declared—her thoughtful emphasis on local context sheds light on the riskiness of their proposition. As she demonstrates, El Techo is ultimately only legible against the forces of capitalism, neocolonialism, and religious conservatism that it attacked.

El Techo was active from 1961 to 1969, but Gaztambide focuses on the first four years of its operations. These include the group's three most incendiary exhibitions, each of which receives its own chapter: *Para la restitución del magma*, which marked its chaotic debut with a mordant take on the Informalist zeitgeist; *Homenaje a la cursilería*, which mined the kitsch of everyday material culture as an antidote to the sheen of modernity; and *Homenaje a la necrofilia*, a suite of works by Carlos Contramaestre that provoked outrage due to their incorporation of animal carcasses sourced from local butcher shops. In each case study, Gaztambide grounds her analysis in the specifics of its production and reception. El Techo's engagement with kitsch, for example, means nothing without an awareness of the bourgeois fear of working-class upward mobility that most of the *balleneros* represented. Similarly, Contramaestre's penchant for scandal is sharpened when viewed as a heretical takedown of conservative social mores steeped in Catholic dogma.

But for scholars of the neo-vanguard, chapters 2 and 3 get to the core of what distinguished El Techo from its peers. Chapter 2, "The Fluidity of Venezuelan Informalism," reads the group's inaugural exhibition as an exercise in routing Informalist aesthetics through the conditions of economic instability. Gaztambide proposes that Informalism materialized as "a response to a cycle of consumption, excessive accumulation, and waste," a kind of glut that was never properly channeled in Venezuela (54). But where the other artists of *Contesting Modernity* saw fit to invoke the unconscious as an emancipatory gesture, those of El Techo saw it as an idiom to be hijacked. The fact that *Para la restitución del magma* culminated with a false report that several of the paintings had been stolen (which was then picked up by local media outlets) reveals how Informalism provided the Trojan horse for the group's true goal: the infiltration of the public sphere and the manipulation of its narratives.

Yet the aim of El Techo was never so clear-cut. Chapter 3, "The Contingency of the Whale," argues that the group's cetaceous mascot served as the ambivalent conceptual basis for its activities. For Gaztambide, the whale conjures a chain of associations, from familiar beings like Moby Dick to symbolic structures like "the mystic mandorla, the *vesica piscis* marauding at the intersection of the circles of heaven and earth" (80). Here the stakes of retro-modernity come into focus. El Techo's publications frequently reproduced marine imagery sourced from

medieval woodcuts, which often depict acts of consumption. Gaztambide meticulously cites these sources, but she is careful to point out that this strategy was not merely a formal one. The obsession with the whale was grounded in its indeterminate, "inside-out" ontology, which Dámaso Ogaz termed *lo majamámico*. She offers a dexterous reading of Ogaz's theory, which takes the biblical story of Jonah as a parable of transformation from within, and applies it to El Techo's activities as a whole. The collective would adopt Informalism and actively insert itself into public consciousness, but it would do so as a pretext to the more ambitious project of sabotaging the established modes of cultural production.

With El Techo, nothing could ever be taken at face value. The same might be said of both Venezuela and the 1960s. Ramírez, Rivero, and Gaztambide recover a history of dissent and subversion that does not fit comfortably into received wisdom—or our received present. As we increasingly confront the museological, academic, and governmental institutions that we have inherited, both *Contesting Modernity* and *El Techo de la Ballena* offer road maps. We see the collapse of infrastructures that were previously taken for granted and the rush to fill the vacuum with innovative new experiments, both artistic and political; we see an interrogation of the streamlined histories that are marketed in galleries, textbooks, and media outlets. The Informalist wave, and El Techo's manipulation thereof, invites us to reject totalizing narratives of progress or protest, and to question which communities and individuals are left behind by such rhetoric. As these two texts so vigorously demonstrate, art can and must lead the way in breaking open our assumptions of what is possible. Sixty years removed from its heyday, the neo-vanguard still has surprises up its sleeve.

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