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Loiter

Sebastián Benítez

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In *Loiter*, Sebastián Benítez engages photography and sculpture to address conflicting values of exchange, decay, rebirth, and political and cultural currency in a post-colonial moment in his home country of Venezuela. The work implicates histories of modernist art into the uneven politics of contemporary Caracas. In *Loiter*, Benítez seeks to understand what relationship the vestiges of Modernism now have with their contemporary environments.

Venezuelan Modern artist Jesús Rafael Soto described his manifesto for art making as such: 'Artistic creation is a force which should preferably be directed towards the exploration of space, of the universe, of the infinite realities which surround us, but of which we are hardly conscious.'¹ Soto's series of public sculptures, *Penetrables* (1967-90), individually form large square grids from which hundreds of plastic tubes hang vertically like vines from a jungle canopy. The artist intended for these tubes to be interacted with both optically and physically by the viewer, who can wade through the artwork, feeling the pieces moving against their body. Breaking with the perception that art objects are precious and should not be touched, the Venezuelan artist of the Op and Kinetic

¹ Jesús Rafael Soto

² *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Edward J. Sullivan, Phaidon. pp. 146

³ *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Edward J. Sullivan, Phaidon. pp. 148

⁴ *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Edward J. Sullivan, Phaidon. pp. 153

Art movement sensed a need for playful reshaping of the way in which the artist, the institution, the art object and the viewer interact. The viewer is engulfed by the object, becoming one with it and is dematerialized within it. It is likely that Soto did not expect new interactions beyond those limitations put in place. In *Penetrable*, as we consume the art, the art consumes us.

Consumption and perception play a concerted role in the ways in which the arts and the economy of a Modernized country progress. Art markets play into the desires of the consumer, into a culture of ownership and collection, where objects are idolised, worshipped and consumed in the public and private arenas. We store them in acid-free environs or in climate-controlled vaults, so that they might exist, we hope, forever. Their precarity precedes their preciousness. However, in an age of digital reproducibility, with accessible online catalogues of images, videos and online journals of art criticism, the art object can never truly die – its existence is assumed to be eternal. Who owns an art object more often than not has more relevance to the market value of that object than the artists themselves. But when art is in the public, its value is worthless and priceless – valuable in its existence as an art object, but one that is at risk of environmental decay.

For those yet to make an encounter with visual art, the presence of public art in occupied urban spaces is essential but problematic. Public art subverts the context of wealthy ownership and private consumption of cultured bourgeoisie and class division. But what value was there in Modern art aesthetics to a Venezuelan public in the 1960s and 70s? The delights of the ethereal and the profundity of existentialism provide little in the way of real nourishment for those living in extreme poverty. While the modernist approach can be said to be universal and humanist, the degree to which the wealthy class helped shape the Venezuelan art world to this narrative for social capital was to the detriment of a society of people whose desperate reality was being publically ignored.

Under a booming oil economy of the 1950s, Venezuela made its accelerated progression towards Modernization. The kinetic art movement captured the exhilarating climate of this time, but over the next decade grew to “assume a hegemonic position in the cultural world, dominating the major institutions and public spaces of Caracas and leaving little room for new and different art forms.”² The suffering that existed under dictatorship and elitism did not disappear as the times gave way to a period of political stability and economic growth. As the country began to undergo Modernization in its urban planning, architecture, industries and economy, its government looked to show that progressive face to the world in its cultural output. So when Venezuela chose to commission Kinetic and Op Art in public spaces in the 60s and 70s, the apolitical nature of this work would have been specifically appealing to a government that wanted to appear forward-thinking and Modern without actually addressing any of its country’s social inequality.

The artist known as Gego began to produce her *Reticuláreas (Nets)* towards the end of the 1960s. These environmental sculptures, the size of rooms, were built up of finely modelled triangular steel components hooked together, forming “a discontinuous equilibrium... in a dynamic rhythm of tensions, forces and transparencies.”³ They were sensorial – a work in flux – that embodied the desires of that generation: to build great and modern structures that visualise the degree to which technological complexity was the driving force behind the nation’s coming success.

An encounter with public sculpture and Modern art during Benítez’ childhood in Caracas in the 1990s made a lasting impression on the young artist. Public works such as Soto’s *La Esfera de Caracas (The Sphere of Caracas)* - a vast suspended orb made up of different shaped metal tubes – were experienced while moving

² *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Edward J. Sullivan, Phaidon. pp. 146

³ *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Edward J. Sullivan, Phaidon. pp. 148

around the city but in a radically different context than at the time of their commission. In 1983, Venezuela saw its currency hugely devalued and in 1989 it had a close-call with bankruptcy.⁴ Since then, little or no upkeep has been performed on the outdoor sculptures. As Benítez saw during his childhood and during trips home from Toronto, the monuments have begun to exhibit signs of decay – both environmental and through vandalism.⁵ There are rumours that segments of Soto's *La Esfera* have been removed and sold for scrap metal by persons whose material needs supersede their cultural exigencies. The harsh irony is that these public sculptures are slowly being decayed by the social ills their existence purposefully ignores.

In *Loiter*, Benítez considers a new use for these Modern icons of Caracas. In a metamodernist reflection on abstraction, he is liberating the work from its original “modernist ideological naivety.”⁶ By imagining a repurposing of the work of Soto and Gego for contemporary times, through uses that are practical and frivolous, ironic and sincere, the artist is creating an artwork that speaks to the real circumstances of its arrival and art that is *truly* public. In *Loiter*, Gego's *Reticulárea* is repurposed – no longer just an object of rarefied introspection but also as an object of considered practical worth for a Venezuelan public. What remains instead is a utilitarian network of hanging frames that connect with other objects. Rather than remaining functionally separate from its environment, the piece has acquired new uses as a hanging rack. Photographs by Benítez show the Modern art of Caracas dematerialized and playfully re-appropriated while also considering the newfound value of the aesthetics of decay.

In contemporary times, as global oil-prices have dropped, Venezuela's economy

⁴ *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Edward J. Sullivan, Phaidon. pp. 153

⁵ Conversation with the artist

⁶ Luke Turner, *The Metamodernist Manifesto*. Web. Accessed 14 June 2016

has gone into tailspin, and with it, its social democracy crumbles.⁷ 2016 has seen inflation reach record levels and the imposition of a 60-day state of emergency due to the widespread looting and violence resulting from food shortages.⁸ When Soto tells us we should be ‘hardly conscious’ of art, he was unwittingly pre-empting the need for art that is exactly the opposite – boldly conscious and decisively political. In the late 20th century, the commissioning of public works seems now in contemporary times, to be an outlandish expenditure by a government that sought aesthetization of its poverty and social inequality instead of resolution. Rather than urban renewal and gentrification, Benítez’ artwork imagines the reclaiming of salvage and through it: rebirth. Taking back and rebuilding from the works of Soto and Gego is in itself an act of artist’s rebellion.

— Benjamin Hunter

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/20/venezuela-breaking-point-food-shortages-protests-maduro> Web. Accessed 14 June 2016

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/venezuela-crisis-basic-food-shortages> Web. Accessed 14 June 2016