

Introduction

The Alchemy of Refinement

At the corner of Avenida Jalisco and Avenida Principal, among the shopping centers of the Las Mercedes commercial district of Caracas, that most quotidian of urban structures can be found—a twenty-four-hour gas station. Managed by Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), the government-owned oil and natural gas company, it conforms to the mundane hallmarks of the genre. Several gasoline pumps and a convenience store are outfitted in Bolivarian red, but one surprising element accompanies them. In the adjacent parking lot, taller even than the sign advertising the prices of various types of fuel, rises a forty-five-foot-tall totem of concrete and corrugated aluminum. It juts against the sky, reflecting the Caribbean sun in its repeated, metallic slats, uninterrupted save for six slashes across its face that conjure something of an incipient grid. Surrounding the sculpture is a low steel fence that delineates it from the parking area, thus designating it a work of art worthy of special attention. It predates the PDVSA station, indeed even the formation of the state-run company in 1976 upon the nationalization of Venezuela's oil reserves. A small

plaque indicates that it was constructed in 1954 by the artist Alejandro Otero, one of the earliest and most renowned practitioners of abstraction in the country and a leader of what would become the defining visual aesthetic of Venezuelan modernity, kinetic art.¹

A photograph taken shortly after the completion of *Mástil reflejante* (Reflecting Mast), as Otero's sculpture is known, reveals the work as it originally appeared in situ at this intersection (fig. I.1). We see the gas station in a previous incarnation, owned by Royal Dutch Shell. The repeated name of the company functions as both a graphic emblem and a mark of ownership of the gasoline that will no doubt fuel the car that is currently parked at the curb. The photograph reveals that Otero's sculpture, far from being the somewhat awkward, nearly superfluous design element that presently sits in the ignoble location of a parking lot, originally constituted part of the architectural schema of the gas station. It dramatically pierces an overhanging roof through a small opening, extending to the clouds as if in demonstration of its own weightlessness. Indeed, the physical disruption of the boundaries of the station's architecture introduces a sense of momentum and upward thrust, which forces us to follow the monolith's trajectory skyward. With its insistent verticality, Otero's sculpture suggests the breaching of a barrier. It has been likened to an abstract representation of an oil gush spurting violently from the ground, a solidification of crude into the hard, metallic sheen of aluminum.² In such a reading, we find ourselves beneath the surface, among the contents of the subsoil with which architect Carlos Augusto Gramcko adorned the gas station: the black marble that runs along the edge of the roof, the rugged stone that comprises the exterior walls, and the large glass panels that let us peer into the areas of automobile maintenance.³ If the Shell gas station presents us with an overly tactile object, Otero transmutes its materials into the seductive glimmer of light, a visual rhythm at once solid and ephemeral, ascending into the heavens.

Mástil reflejante marked the artist's first foray into freestanding public monument and the beginning of his transition from geometric abstraction to considerations of motion and perception. The sculpture immediately preceded his breakthrough *Coloritmos* (Colorhythms) series, which are widely regarded as the first genuinely kinetic works of Venezuelan modern art. They assumed the monolithic form of *Mástil reflejante* but in smaller, more recognizably human dimensions.⁴ Yet if the towering aluminum structure sits at the fulcrum between Otero's earlier experiments in two-dimensional abstract painting and a more embodied idiom that was predicated on perceptual motion, it also represents a pivot point for midcentury Venezuela. It conjoins abstract, monumental



FIGURE I.1. Alejandro Otero, *Mástil reflejante* (Reflecting Mast), 1954. Corrugated aluminum. Las Mercedes, Caracas. Courtesy of the Otero Pardo Foundation.

sculpture, which had recently gained credibility thanks to Carlos Raúl Villanueva's recruitment of modern artists (including Otero) to contribute to his Ciudad Universitaria (University City) campus in Caracas, with the economic and cultural hegemony of the oil industry. As attested by the photograph, Otero's sculpture is visually and structurally inseparable from the gas station, its shadowy lateral face appearing to merge into the first *L* of the word *SHELL*. That may be why it so readily conjures the image of the oil gusher, our reading of a nonfigurative exercise in form conditioned by the environs in which we find it. At once we can elaborate a dialectic, between the verticality of the sculpture/gusher and the horizontality of the architecture/industry, between the sensuous materiality of the gas station and the apparent lightness of the monument.

Another, deeper relationship lies beneath the visual surface. The incongruous, interpenetrative coexistence of kinetic sculpture and the gas station calls to mind another image, taken by Colombian photographer Sebastián Mejía in 2012 as part of his *Quasi Oasis* series (fig. I.2). Here, Otero's metallic totem has been swapped for a palm tree, which juts proudly through the roof of another Shell station, this one in Santiago, Chile. This uncanny duo of photographs, taken nearly seventy years and three thousand miles apart, invokes the binary between the geometric and the organic, or as conceptual artist Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck put it, between the grid and the palm tree.⁵ As two mythic poles of South American modernity, the abstract and the natural have been commonly taken as oppositional ideals, one a stand-in for cosmopolitanism, cerebral rigor, and a future-oriented utopianism; the other for tropical locality, visceral intuition, and a state of idealized primitivism. Yet the meeting of Otero and Mejía, as unlikely as that between the gas station and its various interlopers, suggests that perhaps these two poles are not so distant after all. Both occupy the same position in relation to an equivalent structure. If we take the photographs as allegories of modernity, they propose that abstract form and natural phenomena may inhabit the same privileged space, that they indeed may be interchangeable within the purview of the oil industry. In looking at these two images, we can imagine Otero's metallic totem morphing into, or more precisely *back* into, the fronds of the palm tree, or we may muse upon the tree's coalescence into the hardened, grooved slab of modernity. For what is oil development itself but an exercise in converting the palm tree into the grid, in reconfiguring nature along capitalist lines so as to perfect and thereby commodify it?

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FIGURE I.2. Sebastián Mejía, *Quasi Oasis* series, 17 (*Avenida Simón Bolívar, Santiago, Chile*), 2012. Silver gelatin print. © Sebastián Mejía.

This book is about how and why the palm tree was refined into the grid. It takes a transdisciplinary view of the visual, spatial, and material conditions of Venezuelan modernity through the lens of petroleum as a source of real and imagined national development. Oil operated as both the literal and symbolic engine of progress in Venezuela, a binding agent flowing beneath the disparate and often contentious production of a new, modern state of being. Through a suite of five episodes—concerning a print magazine, a planned housing community, a luxury hotel, a kinetic museum installation, and a documentary film—I argue that the idiosyncratic ideological contours of Venezuelan modernity, indeed the very conditions that enabled a gas station to serve as the venue for a totem to abstraction, were sculpted by the nationwide experience of oil extraction and refinement, with radical consequences for the ontologies of nature, history, and materiality. The modern era in Venezuela was marked by sudden economic upheaval and vertiginous physical transformation, with a concomitant rise of social inequity and political repression. This book covers a fervent, roughly thirty-year period of that history, from the advent of a concerted global public relations effort by foreign oil corporations in the 1930s to the eruption of artistic insurgency that critiqued the failures of oil dependency by the close of the 1960s. In tracing the origins, codification, and ultimate collapse of Venezuela’s dream of petroleum, I question the triumphant narrative of exceptionalism that has buttressed the emergence of an ostensibly apolitical canon of Venezuelan kinetic art and modernist architecture, and which has romanticized a period that was defined as much by neo-imperialist diplomatic relations and rampant socioeconomic precarity as by dizzying profit margins and triumphant proclamations of *bien nacional* (national good).⁶ Oil, as the fuel of extractive capitalism, operates in this paradigm not just in terms of financial or institutional patronage, but as an ideological force in its own right. It structures and naturalizes the will to transform nature, society, and the overall destiny of the country.

The Venezuelan twentieth century is typically bracketed by two dates that mark the country’s entry into and departure from the modern: 1922 and 1998.⁷ The first of these refers to the blowout of the oil well Barroso No. 2 on December 14 on Lake Maracaibo. The gusher confirmed what had previously been mere speculation, that the Venezuelan subsoil was home to massive petroleum reserves. This bounty would transform the country from a somewhat provincial state along the Caribbean Basin into the preeminent consumer market of Latin America. The latter date marks the election of Hugo Chávez Frías to the presidency on December 6. Chávez’s ascent to power initiated a period of greater state control over oil production, a realignment of geopolitical relations, and a combative,

populist discourse that foregrounded nationalist struggle as the preeminent mechanism of political action. It is a century that twins the political with the economic, and which privileges the myth of an inexorable democratic march that ends only with the success of the *Revolución Bolivariana* (Bolivarian Revolution) and the ensuing Pink Tide in South America.⁸ But another, earlier date stands out as a moment of transition, when the economic and political provenance of petroleum was revised in rhetoric and in policy. This was the nationalization of oil reserves by the Carlos Andrés Pérez administration, a long-desired goal that finally took effect on New Year's Day of 1976. Nationalization formally ended over a half century of foreign control of oil production. Venezuela was the last major oil producer in the Western Hemisphere to expropriate its reserves, after Mexico, which had done so in 1938.⁹

For the greater part of the twentieth century, Venezuela was the oil nation par excellence, a model country that embraced the values of a market economy, a thriving consumer society, and democratic governance (with some exceptions). The construction, or rather reconstruction, of Venezuela as a petrostate depended on the careful management of the relationship between what historian Fernando Coronil, in his paradigmatic study *The Magical State*, has termed its “two bodies.” As Coronil argues, Venezuelan modernity extended the definition of the nation beyond the “social body” of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community to contain the “natural body” as well—that is, the land itself and its subterranean resources, upon which the social body’s political and economic destiny is predicated. The production of the Venezuelan modern thus required a revision of the terms of engagement, whereby nature was reformulated as an object to be harnessed by the state and private industry working in tandem, to be exploited and enjoyed by the body politic.¹⁰ It would be petroleum, in all its lucrative abundance, that would equip Venezuela with the metaphorical tools to remake itself into a modern, productive nation. Oil development rewrote history as a teleological march out of an imagined, primordial past and into a fully industrialized, urban future. Within such a regime, nature became a repository of fungible elements—an immense collection of potential commodities, to paraphrase Marx—that could be mined for profit and physically reconstituted into a built surrogate, composed of highways, oleoducts, bridges, housing blocks, and skyscrapers.¹¹ If Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt had hoped, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, that “those who lie on the banks of the Orinoco . . . may see cities enriched by commerce and fertile fields . . . on the very spot where during my travels I saw impenetrable jungle and flooded lands,” the urban transformation of the country by the middle of the twentieth century seemed not only to bring that vision to fruition, but to exceed it

beyond Humboldt's imaginative limits.¹² The total, almost obsessive drive to remake the country from the ground up into a concrete paradise, populated with abstract monuments to its own self-transformation, at once confirmed the arrival of modernity and wrought it into being.

THE FUEL OF MODERNITY

Petroculture, as defined by the Petrocultures Research Group based at the University of Alberta, comprises the “social imaginaries brought into being by the energies of fossil fuels.” It derives from “the material and immaterial infrastructures and superstructures that shape our daily lived realities and govern our choices and mobilities within existing social, economic, and political networks.”¹³ Venezuela's transformation—into a rentier state and then into a fully fledged petrostate—generated a new kind of Venezuelan imaginary. Here I follow Édouard Glissant's use of the term *imaginary* to refer to the social making and consolidation of a worldview, in which conceptions of the self, the nation, and the world one inhabits are conditioned by collective narratives and ideological presumptions. As translator Betsy Wing has explained, Glissant's imaginary differs from Lacanian invocations of egoistic self-perception and self-definition. Rather, it references “all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world. Hence, every human culture will have its own particular imaginary.”¹⁴ Shaped by the ideological pressures exerted by oil itself, the Venezuelan imaginary often took the form of symbolic, indirect, or unexpected expressions. Otero's *Mástil reflejante* is, ultimately, a rare instance where the repressed subtext of modernity is rendered fully explicit.

It is imperative, before proceeding further, to distinguish briefly between a pair of related terms. *Modernism* here refers specifically to artistic, aesthetic, or otherwise primarily visual practices that will form the basis and scope of this study. *Modernity* denotes a more diffuse ideological impulse toward, formulation of, or condition of being modern; in Venezuela, this was primarily spurred by technological progress and rapid urbanization. Modernism may thus be understood as a crystallization of the broader ideological strokes of modernity. In Venezuela, a description of this process must be further nuanced, for the modern was predicated on, and in many ways shaped by, the experience of oil extractivism. The term *petroculture*—denoting a social imaginary conditioned by a reliance on the subsoil as the means of achieving modernity—thus forms an uneasy, shifting triad with