

## 'Since They Can't Put Venezuela in Their Suitcase, They Take Mosaic Tiles from the Maiquetía Airport'<sup>1</sup>

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Natalia Sassu Suarez Ferri

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# 'Since They Can't Put Venezuela in Their Suitcase, They Take Mosaic Tiles from the Maiquetía Airport'<sup>1</sup>

Carlos Cruz-Diez's Kineticism in the Time of Migration

Natalia Sassu Suarez Ferri

1 Johanna A Alvarez, 'Como no pueden meter a Venezuela en la maleta, se llevan piezas del mosaico de aeropuerto de Maiquetía' (Since They Can't Put Venezuela in Their Suitcase, They Take Mosaic Tiles from the Maiquetía Airport), *El Nuevo Herald*, 27 February 2018. All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

2 UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/venezuela-emergency.html>, accessed 1 July 2022

3 The data on the current economic and social situation in Venezuela

The current Venezuelan diaspora has been described by the United Nations Refugee Agency as the 'second-largest external displacement crisis in the world'.<sup>2</sup> UN Agencies have estimated that, as of May 2022, over six million Venezuelans have left their country as migrants or refugees due to the political and economic crisis of the last two decades under the presidencies of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro.<sup>3</sup> According to a household survey carried out in 2020 by Reuters, ninety-six per cent of the population lives in poverty, with ongoing food and medicine shortages, power cuts, hyperinflation and constant struggles with the government.<sup>4</sup> The practical impact on daily lives of the socialist ideology of Chávez's government (1999–2013) and of the subsequent Maduro government (2013 to present) were studied in a 2015 article published by Christopher Reeve in the *World Policy Journal*.<sup>5</sup> Reeve explores key issues from expropriation, to armed robbery, express kidnapping and inaccessibility to primary goods, giving a useful example of the political economy of the country that can enhance our understanding of such numbers of emigrants:

included in this article are those published by the UNHCR. Their starting point for data on migration processes is 2014, the beginning of the presidency of Nicolás Maduro, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/venezuela-emergency.html>. In 2018, the United Nations declared that serious human rights violations were taking place in the country (<https://www.unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Draft-Resolution-Venezuela-HRC-39.pdf>).

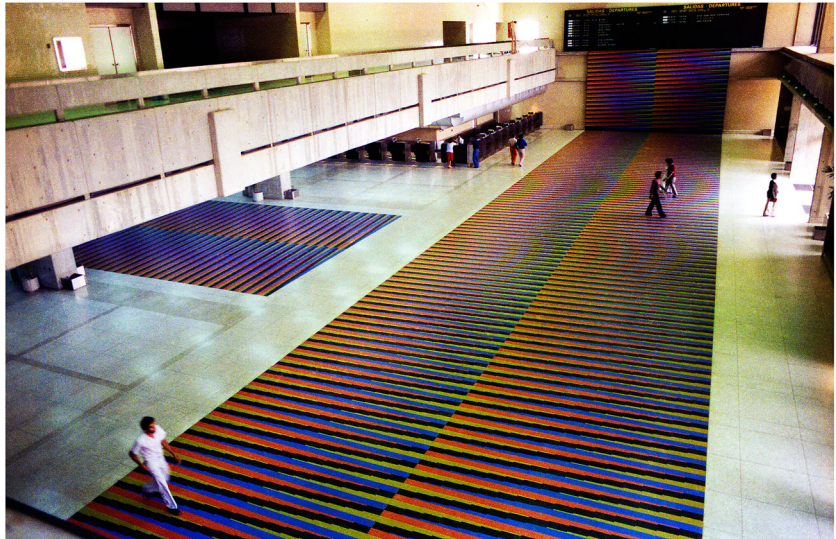
- 4 Reuters, 'Venezuela Poverty Rate Surges Amid Economic Collapse, Inflation', 7 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-poverty-idUSL1N2EE1MG>. For detail on the migrant crisis in Venezuela, see: <https://www.iom.int/venezuela-refugee-and-migrant-crisis>; Naiara Galarraga Gortazar, 'Radiografía del gran exodo venezolano' (Radiograph of the Great Venezuelan Exodus), *El País*, 26 March 2018. To learn about the effects of the pandemic in Venezuela, see Robert Evan Ellis, 'Venezuela: Pandemic and Foreign Intervention in a Collapsing Narcostate', *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), 2020.
- 5 Christopher Reeve, 'Goodbye, Venezuela', *World Policy Journal*, vol 32, no 4, winter 2015–2016, pp 26–36
- 6 Reeve, op cit, pp 27–28
- 7 Tomás Páez, *La voz de la diáspora venezolana*, La Catarata, Madrid, 2015, pp 73, 103
- 8 Ibid, p 32, p 62
- 9 Ibid, p 348
- 10 A selection of Instagram posts of travellers' feet on *Additive Colour* were gathered by Cruz-Diez's atelier in Panama City: Articruz Panama, ed, *Llegadas y despedidas*, 2014, [https://issuu.com/articruzpanama/docs/llegadas\\_despedidas](https://issuu.com/articruzpanama/docs/llegadas_despedidas).

Three legal and one illegal exchange rates feed speculative trading and gaming of the monetary system. Depending on which rate you apply, a basic lunch might cost over \$100 and a domestic flight less than \$7. The chaos that is Venezuela's economy is currently a vicious cycle that feeds on the lack of confidence it creates. The 'food basket', a tool used to determine how much the average Venezuelan household needs to spend on the minimum amount of monthly food, is currently at over 78,000 bolívares (or \$12,284). The minimum wage is just under 7,500 bolívares (\$1,181). Venezuelan homes need over ten minimum wages to be able to afford the baseline nutritional intake. It doesn't matter though. Venezuelans can spend several weeks trying to find milk and rice unsuccessfully.<sup>6</sup>

With over eighty-five per cent of the media owned by the state and statistical data produced by the government-controlled Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Venezuela, gathering reliable numbers on migration is a challenge, often addressed by adding up the numbers of Venezuelans entering other countries as immigrants rather than relying on government data from the Venezuelan border. This system of course excludes people entering other countries illegally or with their legitimate second passports and leads to incomplete data.<sup>7</sup>

The difficulties of gathering conclusive information about migration is one of the topics analysed in the 2015 book by sociologist Tomás Páez, titled *The Voice of the Venezuelan Diaspora*, where he focuses on the variety and multiplicity of migratory experiences, expressing the inability to consider migrants as a homogeneous block, due to the subjectivity of individual conditions and experiences. According to Páez, between four and six per cent of the Venezuelan population has migrated during the Chávez and Maduro governments, and he argues that Venezuela has lived under a 'political apartheid' since Chávez's first election, because of the government's public expression that any person who disagreed with their ideology would be excluded from any roles in public institutions or nationalised companies.<sup>8</sup> Páez explains that the government has nonetheless denied the consequential economic and migration crises, concluding that 'the stubborn reality, despite the determination to deny it, prevails and does so with the image of the great Cruz-Diez, in the international airport of Maiquetía'.<sup>9</sup>

In the process of displacement caused by the Venezuelan political and economic situation, the Simón Bolívar International Airport in Maiquetía (Caracas) has indeed become the image of migration. Its floor in particular, featuring Carlos Cruz-Diez's *Additive Colour* (1974–1978), has acquired symbolic meaning due to traveller rituals, well documented in newspapers and on social media.<sup>10</sup> While many people leaving the country take photographs with the mosaic, the state of degradation of the floor and the failure to restore it has made it easy for travellers to take mosaic tiles with them as personal memory triggers. Although the heterogeneity of migrating histories means that some Venezuelans leave the country by land or sea, many still leave through the airport. It is this subset of relatively privileged political migrants that this article addresses, and the added meaning that Cruz-Diez's mosaic acquires for and through them. Not only is Cruz-Diez's *Additive Colour* the place where these migrants part from their country, but it is also



Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Additive Colour (Ambientación de Color Aditivo)*, 1974–1978, sialex tiles, 270 x 9 m, (300 x 10 yd), Simón Bolívar Airport, Maiquetía, Caracas, © Atelier Cruz-Diez, Paris/Bridgeman Images

perceived by them as a symbol of a democratic Venezuela that no longer exists.

National identities and collective memories are hardly measurable and homogenous, and they inevitably undergo subjective reconstructions through migration, diaspora and exile. To paraphrase a 2014 analysis of literary contributions by exiled Venezuelan women, in the context of displacement, ‘the nation... can be reconstructed in a selective memory, that conveniently forgets or reformulates a fragmented past’.<sup>11</sup> In the full awareness that the meanings of collective memory and Venezuelan identity applied onto public works by a number of Venezuelan migrants are subjective and can neither be considered fully shared nor nationally agreed, in the next few pages, I aim to analyse how Cruz-Diez’s work for the airport and kinetic public works more broadly have come to acquire those national, political, and affective values in the moment of migration.

### *Additive Colour* (1974–1978, Simón Bolívar International Airport, Maiquetía)

The *Additive Colour* for the walls and floors of the Simón Bolívar International Airport in Maiquetía is one of many architectural integrations that Cruz-Diez created for public spaces in Caracas in the 1970s, a period of economic boom resulting from both the 1973 US oil crisis and the 1975 nationalisation of oil in Venezuela. With a length of 270 metres and a width of nine metres, *Additive Colour* covers a large part of the main hall of the airport with the colours of the Venezuelan flag – yellow, blue and red – interrupted by black lines. The ways in which the lines are placed against one another, combined with the viewer’s

11 Raquel Rivas Rojas, ‘Diasporic Fictions: Identity and Participation in Three Blogs by Exiled Venezuelan Women’, *Cuadernos de literatura*, vol 18, no 35, January–June 2014, p 231

- 12 For detail on the role of government authorities in designing and building airports at a more global scale, with specific links between transport and decolonisation, see Vanessa R Schwartz, *Jet Age Aesthetic: The Glamour of Media in Motion*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2020 (especially chapter 1, 'Fluid Motion on the Ground: Designing the Airport for the Jet Age').
- 13 Monica Amor, 'Between Wall and City: Geometric Abstraction's Local Contingency', in Inés Katzenstein ed, *Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction, The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019, p 124
- 14 Montemayor and Sully were part of a team that also included Joseba Pontesta, Etanislao Sekunda, Leopoldo Sierralta and Joaquin Leniz.
- 15 Unpublished project, Centre de Documentation de l'Atelier Cruz-Diez, Paris, nd
- 16 The concept of 'educating' the public through infrastructure recalls the work of the French anthropologist Marc Augé and his definition of 'non-places'. In his words, the term "non-place" designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces', (Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, John Howe, trans, Verso, London and New York, 1995, pp 94–95).
- 17 Ariel Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez in Conversation with Ariel Jiménez*, Fundación Cisneros, New York, 2010, pp 107–108

movement across the floor, create the optical illusion of a range of other colours that are not physically present in the artwork. This abstract work simultaneously depends on movement and creates the impression of movement. For this reason, it is an example of Kineticism, a modernist style whose origins are associated with the 1955 exhibition 'Le Mouvement' (Galerie Denise Renè, Paris).

The airport's *Additive Colour* is the second architectural intervention commissioned from Cruz-Diez by the Venezuelan government, after the Central Hidroeléctrica José Antonio Páez (Santo Domingo, Venezuela) of 1973.<sup>12</sup> With president Rafael Caldera's 1973 decree that all state-sponsored public buildings were to dedicate between 0.5 to 3% of their budgets to public art, the integration of arts became the norm.<sup>13</sup> Cruz-Diez was approached by architects Felipe Montemayor and Luis Sully when the building was in the very early stages of construction, allowing for a true act of integration.<sup>14</sup> The architects explained the reasoning behind their choices in a project preserved by the Atelier Cruz-Diez in Paris.<sup>15</sup> Here, Maiquetía is proposed as the 'main entrance to the country' and as such, according to the team of architects, it had to provide spaces that exemplify what the country needs, and 'educate its users' through its structure and activities.<sup>16</sup> The architects recognise the social impact of their choices and the importance of guiding the public through their building. Furthermore, they reflect on the difficulties of planning an airport without being able to foresee the infrastructural changes required by future technological innovations in air travel. This is an important insight on the fast pace of the jet age and on architects' and artists' awareness of the necessity to adapt to the new scientific advancements, a constant *fil rouge* in the work of the kineticists too. The project includes a text written by Cruz-Diez where he explains how his work integrates within the building. Both this text and the plans of the artwork demonstrate that the initial choice of colours was red, blue and green (in addition to black diagonals) and not the red, blue and yellow tiles that we see today. Red, blue and green are in fact known as the three primary colours of light (or physical colours) and are the colours favoured by Cruz-Diez for most of his series to enhance a variety of colour phenomena. Physical colours are consistently presented against black or diagonal black lines (for example in the *Psychromie* series) to make their spatial potential more evident to the eye. Replacing green with yellow aligns with the architects' conceptualisation of Maiquetía as the entrance to Venezuela, where the choice of the three colours of the flag is apt to the specific location of Cruz-Diez's work in the airport: at the entrance of the international terminal. Cruz-Diez was not the only artist approached by the architects. The prominent Venezuelan artist Héctor Poleo (1918–1989) was also asked to produce an artwork for the airport. While Poleo is best known for his figurative work, his monumental stained glass for Maiquetía, inaugurated in 1978 and covering 45.25 square metres floor to ceiling, also focuses on the interaction of colours with a geometric abstract approach. However, its location in the Conference Hall of the international terminal makes it less accessible than Cruz-Diez's work.

The idea behind *Additive Colour* was explained by Cruz-Diez as a way to create an event that could animate the boredom of passengers in airports, who, in his words, are always 'looking at the same watch, the same necktie in stores, because there's nothing else'.<sup>17</sup> The choice of materials, as is



- 18 Ibid, p 108
- 19 Unpublished project, Centre de Documentation de l'Atelier Cruz-Diez, Paris, nd
- 20 Alexandra Sucre, 'El falso vandalismo al mosaico de Cruz-Diez en Maiquetía' (The False Vandalism to the Cruz-Diez Mosaic in Maiquetía), *El Estímulo*, 19 March 2018, <https://elestimulo.com/climax/vandalismo-al-cruz-diez-de-maiquetia-descuido-y-posverdad/>, accessed 18 January 2021; Xiomara Jiménez, 'Se pierde el contrapunteo cromático del Cruz-Diez del aeropuerto de Maiquetía' (The Chromatic Counterpoint of the Cruz-Diez in the Maiquetía Airport is Lost), *Institutional Assessts and Monuments of Venezuela*, 5 March 2018, <https://iamvenezuela.com/2018/03/se-pierde-contrapunteo-cromatico-del-cruz-diez-maiquetia/>, accessed 18 January 2021
- 21 *Chavismo*, also known in English as Chavism or Chavezism, is a left-wing populist political ideology based on the ideas, programmes and governmental style associated with the Venezuelan President between 1999 and 2013, Hugo Chávez, that combines elements of democratic socialism, socialist patriotism, Bolivarianism, and Latin American integration. Supporters of Hugo Chávez and *Chavismo* are known as *Chavistas*. One of the first effects of the government's control over the news was a resort to social media to circulate and acquire information without governmental filters. Amongst others, see the following and especially the threads of debates sparked by these tweets, all accessed 18 January 2021: <https://twitter.com/venezolanos/status/968569846966489093>; <https://twitter.com/>

typical for Cruz-Diez, was an essential stage of the project. Kinetic works completely depend on the efficacy of the optical effects created by the work and on audience mobility. The resistance, permanence, and conservation of these materials are crucial aspects for the preservation of the original meanings of the artworks. After travels to Spain, Italy, and Portugal, Cruz-Diez found Sialex, a material produced in France, which was resistant to abrasion and could be impregnated with colour rather than simply coated with it. This would allow the colours to stay unchanged despite the flow of traffic.<sup>18</sup> The project for the airport was originally conceived with a horizontal expansion in mind, and in fact the architects planned for a building that could last for around twenty years in its original structure.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, although Cruz-Diez's *Additive Colour* includes walls as well as floors, the main focus was on the floors, whereas the walls were conceived as removable. The airport was eventually expanded vertically rather than horizontally, so the removable part is still intact and it is the floors that are now being lost.

The ritual of taking tiles away from the airport floor sparked a lively debate on Twitter (X) that coincided with newspapers denouncing the ritual as vandalism.<sup>20</sup> Twitter (X) users are divided between those denouncing the ritual as disrespect for the artwork, the artist, and the culture of the country, and those who believe that calling it vandalism is a *chavista* excuse to blame the striking deterioration of the mosaic on the *non-chavista* emigrants.<sup>21</sup> Tweets supporting the vandalist narrative are challenged by non-chavista responses claiming that the real vandalism at work is that of the government, who is forcing people to expatriate to avoid starvation and inaccessibility to medications and health care. Whether the tweets support or oppose the Chávez-Maduro socialist ideology, the mosaic remains a symbol of expatriation and of national cultural value. The current state of the mosaic has been taken to signify the disintegration of the country: *chavistas* blame it on non-chavista emigrants; non-chavistas blame it on the government and its supporters. The truth is that the floor of the airport has been deteriorating for years, and the tiles are only available for the taking because of a lack of public funding and interest in the preservation of national heritage. It would be impossible for anyone to rip these tiles out, had the artwork been appropriately preserved by the government.

The Venezuelan art historian and curator Luis Pérez-Oramas discussed the Maiquetía *Additive Colour* and its added symbolic aspects in the time of migration in a 2016 interview with Jean-Philippe Hugron. Prompted by a question on a shift in the audience's appreciation of Cruz-Diez's work, Pérez-Oramas explained that the current state of public works is not symptomatic of a lesser appreciation of kinetic art:

The so-called revolution, which is nothing more than a crude authoritarian populism centred on a cult of personality – changed nothing in how Carlos Cruz-Diez's work was appreciated. It was more a case of unfortunate circumstances: political irresponsibility, ignorance, and propagandist populism contributed to and possibly brought about the nation's ruin. Neglect and the absence of a conservation strategy had an impact on some of the artist's public work. This phenomenon affected all the country's infrastructure.<sup>22</sup>

OliverLaufer/status/968593845490470913; <https://twitter.com/Gavil0224/status/917352686667943936>; <https://twitter.com/DolarToday/status/971182809791438848>; <https://twitter.com/MalvinaForsyght/status/968147079951470592>; <https://twitter.com/AbreuReport/status/968497997863669761>;

22 Jean-Philippe Hugron in conversation with Luis Pérez-Oramas, 'Carlos Cruz-Diez, A Photographer', *Hors-série, Projects: Carlos Cruz-Diez. Construire l'art avec l'espace, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 2016, p 43

23 A wide range of souvenirs based on kinetic art and artists is available online, including Cruz-Diez's face on throw-pillows, notebooks, stickers, postcards, etc. For example, see: [https://www.redbubble.com/i/throw-pillow/Carlos-Cruz-Diez-Design-CC10-by-Sekult/22432849.5X2YF?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=g\\_pla+notset&country\\_code=GB&gclid=EAlaIqobChMImY3skKCx7AIVCLrtCh2-WwyAEAQYDSABEgLnSPD\\_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds](https://www.redbubble.com/i/throw-pillow/Carlos-Cruz-Diez-Design-CC10-by-Sekult/22432849.5X2YF?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=g_pla+notset&country_code=GB&gclid=EAlaIqobChMImY3skKCx7AIVCLrtCh2-WwyAEAQYDSABEgLnSPD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds), accessed 18 January 2021.

24 Op Art was originally promoted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, curated by William Seitz. In that occasion, MoMA was reprehended in the press for *creating* Op art as a lucrative trend instead of *recording* an existing art movement, for example in Andrew Hudson, 'Op Show is a Visual Curiosity', *Washington Post*, 19 December 1965, MoMA Archives, Manhattan, NY. Exh. 757. Folder: Publicity.

25 Cruz-Diez in conversation with Arnaud Pierre at

But why are people taking these tiles? Would people take them if this was an ordinary floor? Why has this specific mosaic sparked such debate? In my view, these tiles, alongside images of the airport floor, have acquired symbolic meaning because of the experience of Kineticism that Venezuelans share, regardless of their political views or their appreciation of Kineticism. The mere presence of kinetic public works around the country means that people associate their memories of ordinary or extraordinary moments of their lives with the heavy urban presence of Kineticism. Kinetic artworks and artists have become so representative of the country that they have populated all sorts of national souvenirs for decades.<sup>23</sup> This commodification of Kineticism has led to an association of capitalistic intentions with this type of art. The fact that these artworks depend on precision and therefore are made by machines further adds to the association of these artists' studios with money-making businesses. Moreover, their formal similarities with Op art, and Op art's links with a capitalist exchange economy has distracted from the fact that kinetic public works (or what is left of them) are still effectively part of people's surroundings, that they prompt relational experiences between individuals, and that they are the 'setting' for the lives of entire communities.<sup>24</sup>

My purpose in this article is to go beyond this layer of skepticism by demonstrating that Kineticism was built on intrinsically democratic foundations and that the involvement of audiences in Kineticism is a key reason for its identification with national values. After all, Venezuelan emigrants are leaving because they have lost faith in an imminent return of a real democracy in Venezuela. Their nostalgic attachment to the airport tiles is really a nostalgic attachment to Venezuelan democracy. We will never know where all these tiles ended up and what people are doing with them. My purpose here is to understand why the people who take them associate them with an aspect of their own country.

## Cruz-Diez, a 'Realist Painter'

One of the paradoxes in Venezuelan Kineticism is the artists' insistence on calling their works universal, while also acknowledging their role in creating a national art.<sup>25</sup> Yet, despite Cruz-Diez's self-constructed modernist narratives built around universality, his social and local intentions are at the foundation of his works. In order to explain the implicit social statement in *Additive Colour*, it is vital to look to the origins of social engagement in Cruz-Diez's work.

Even before committing to abstraction with *Physichromie 1* (1959), Cruz-Diez placed the social dimension of contemporary Venezuela at the centre of his work. The artist's lesser-known figurative paintings present a variety of styles, and the same constant experimentation of his abstract production. In the 1940s and early 1950s, Cruz-Diez believed that artists needed to be witnesses of their times. Although he explored several formal languages, he was firm on the subject matter: the denunciation of economic and social inequalities. The paintings of this period are the result of weekly visits to the slum areas around Caracas, where he took photographs that have only relatively recently been published.<sup>26</sup> The 1948 photograph *El Barrio El Observatorio Caracas*, for example,



Carlos Cruz-Diez, *El Observatorio District (El Barrio El Observatorio Caracas)*, 1948, gelatin silver print, private collection, © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez, all rights reserved 2023/Bridgeman Images

INHA, Paris, 22 October 2013; Cruz-Diez in conversation with Joanne Harwood at the Royal Academy, London, 4 July 2014

26 Carlos Cruz-Diez and Edgar Cherubini Lecuna, *Cruz-Diez en Blanco y Negro (Cruz-Diez in Black and White)*, Cruz-Diez Foundation, Houston, 2013

offers a parallel to the standpoint of the 1949 painting *The Green Kite*.<sup>27</sup> The modularity and repetition of the houses in the painting follows the same structure of the photograph. The foreground of the canvas is used as a setting for a geometric and stereotyped representation of people, absent in the photograph. Cruz-Diez's inclusion of people in the foreground of a view of Caracas is in line with the imagery of the Pérez-Jiménez regime (1953–1958). In 'Revista de Banco Obrero' (Worker Bank Magazine, 1954), for instance, the progressive built environment of the background is presented as a symbol of the better future promised by the government. The figures in the regime's imagery traditionally turn their backs to the camera, as they passively contemplate the 'spectacle' of





Carlos Cruz-Diez, *The Green Kite (El Papagayo Verde)*, 1949, oil on plywood, 63.5 x 81.2 cm, (25 x 32 in), private collection, © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez, all rights reserved 2023/Bridgeman Images

27 Ibid, p 41

28 Lisa Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space, and Visuality in Venezuela 1948–1958*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2017, pp 120–123

29 Olga González, 'El cinetismo no es una moda' (Kineticism Is Not a Trend), *La Republica*, 4 August 1967. Artist's conversation with Arnaud Pierre at INHA, Paris, October 2013. Interview by Daniela Franco, 'Como salir de un pozo' (How to Exit a Well) *Letras Libres (Free Letters)*, December 2014, <http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/artes-y-medios/como-salir-de-un-pozo>, accessed 18 January 2021

urban development. The message of passivity and deprivation of freedom is further demonstrated by the caption of the image: 'socially organised life for the inhabitants of the Caracas hills'.<sup>28</sup> Instead of presenting people as voiceless 'spectators' of a promised future, Cruz-Diez shows the inhabitants of the *ranchos* (Venezuelan slums) as witnesses of their present reality. While both Cruz-Diez's and official photographs under Pérez-Jiménez were in black and white, *The Green Kite* shows the artist's systematic approach to primary and complementary colour. The focus on the repetition of geometric elements is another preview of his preoccupations of the following decade.

The label of 'realist painter' – surely relevant to his 1940s and early 1950s works – was counter-intuitively claimed by Cruz-Diez for his kinetic production too, motivated by the fact that he created works where perceptual realities can occur.<sup>29</sup> With respect to the social dimension traditionally attached to Realism, Cruz-Diez argued that his abstraction is even more social than his figuration. In his words:

What is more social than making you participate? I can paint you a soviet man, a labourer, but what you'll do is contemplate the labourer. When I



Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Mural Project (Proyecto Mural)*, 1954, Casein (plaka), latex house paint on plywood with metal rods, 70.5 x 54.6 x 10.8 cm, (27 3/4 x 21 1/2 x 4 1/4 in), private collection, © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez, all rights reserved 2023/Bridgeman Images

Painted poverty, I was telling people: 'look, you are poor', but I was not giving them a solution to their poverty. Saying 'you are miserable' and giving a solution to misery are two very different things... So, what seemed fairest to me was to make people participate in my pleasure. When I made those first works, I felt pleasure and I decided to share it with others. So, for instance, the *Mural Projects* were made so that people could play in the street and feel the same pleasure I felt in the studio when I played with them. The joy I feel when I make a work is the same joy that you feel in front of my work, because you are making it too. I do my part and you do yours. And that is when you are really implied. It's more human, more social.<sup>30</sup>

The artist takes his *Mural Projects* (1954) as a point of comparison for his figurative phase because these are his first experiments with abstraction and with a more active inclusion of the spectator. *Mural Projects* are the materialisation of the desire to reintroduce art into everyday life as a primordial, sensorial experience, where people can play with shadows and reflections of primary colours. They were a radical and momentary example of non-figuration, whilst the following five years would show constant hesitations between figuration and abstraction (1954–1959). They are also a good example of the artist's first experiments with colour. The mural tradition in Latin America is well known. Mexican Muralism was one of the most influential movements across the continent and, in the case of Venezuela, this became apparent with Héctor Poleo's return from Mexico. His 1941 show at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas offered new insights to the Venezuelan public into the Mexican muralist tradition, and it served to offer an alternative to the academic teachings of the time. In Cruz-Diez's words, Poleo's exhibition 'shook up our exclusively Cézannian world'.<sup>31</sup> In the 1940s, the second-hand impact of Mexican Muralism on Cruz-Diez affected his choice of subject matter.<sup>32</sup> In the 1950s, the focus shifted towards Mexican Muralism's theoretical commitment to urban interventions and broader audiences. It is important to note that all of Cruz-Diez's *Mural Projects* of 1954 remained just projects. They never materialised as urban interventions and in fact they are treated as portable canvases within exhibitions. Nevertheless, they are the starting point for a new perspective on social inclusion in Cruz-Diez's work that is at the root of today's airport rituals.

Cruz-Diez's identification as a 'realist' is not the only debatable concept at play. He also identifies as a 'painter', and this has to do with his purpose of liberating colour. Since colour is one of the central elements of painting, the artist believes that its liberation pertains to painting as well, just not traditional painting. In his words: 'I am definitely a painter. You could say that a *Physichromie* contains painting in its purest form. All the effects and pleasures of painting are there: the harmonies, the glazing, the transparencies, even though it has nothing to do with the painting of the past.'<sup>33</sup> The accent on colour in *The Green Kite* and the *Mural Projects* anticipates its later role as the main way in which Cruz-Diez encourages spectators to participate. In Cruz-Diez's art, the study of colour started from a discovery of a simple phenomenon. While leafing through a catalogue, Cruz-Diez realised how the red page on the right made the white page on the left look pink.<sup>34</sup> Recognising reflected colour became an opportunity to study a new way of including

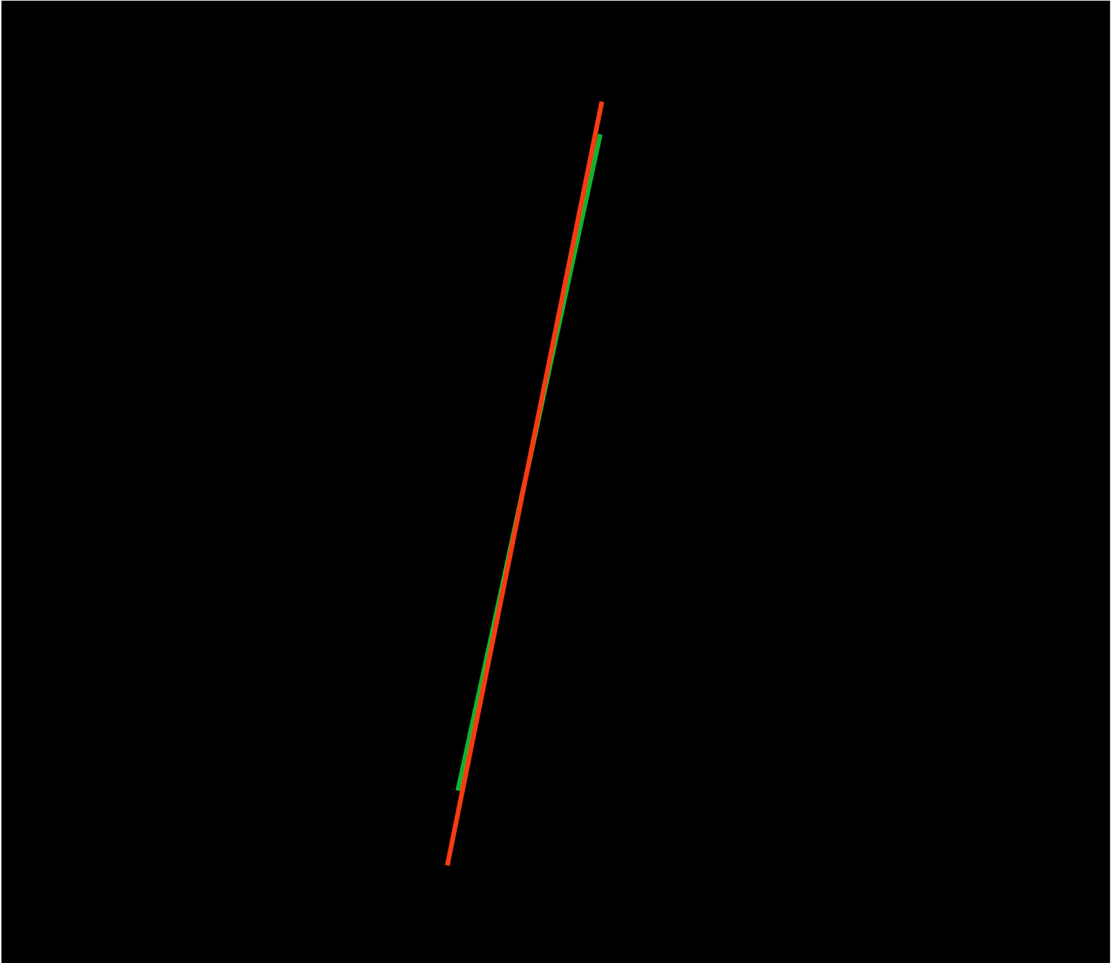
30 Author's conversation with Cruz-Diez, 13 March 2015

31 Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez in Conversation*, op cit, p 31

32 The landscape classes that he was taking at the School of Visual and Graphic Arts also informed his work significantly, as most of those classes were held in the slum areas of Caracas.

33 Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez in Conversation*, op cit, p 53

34 Recounted in Mari Carmen Ramírez, *Color in Space and Time*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, p 60



Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Additive Yellow (Amarillo Aditivo)*, 1959, acrylic on paper, 41.9 x 48.3 cm, (16 1/2 x 19 in), © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez, all rights reserved 2023/Bridgeman Images

colour in his work, one where it was no longer mere pigment. The idea of creating dematerialised colour represented a real innovation for Cruz-Diez, as he began to experiment with this and other scientific phenomena.

The series of *Colour Additions*, of which the airport's mosaic is part, saw their programmatic work developed in 1959. *Additive Yellow* started as an experiment in line with scientific experiments held by Isaac Newton, later reinterpreted by Edwin Land.<sup>35</sup> Both Newton and Land were crucial sources for Cruz-Diez, and their success in creating a range of colours through screens in Newton and projections in Land was inspirational for most of his art. The creation of dematerialised colours in these scientific experiments is known as addition of colour. By applying this scientific phenomenon to his art, Cruz-Diez managed to make colours appear in the eyes of the viewer without them physically being present. This is what he defines as 'colour-events', and the reason he discusses his works as 'triggers for events'. Making colours occur in the eye of the viewer implies that the innovation of the work is reliant on the participation

<sup>35</sup> Edwin Land, 'Experiments in Color Vision', *Scientific American* 200, 1959, p 84



36 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* [1810], *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, Legare Street Press, 2022; Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* [1910], *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular [An Updated Version of the Sadleir Translation]*, Martino Fine Books, 2014; Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color* [1973], John Wiley & Sons, revised edition, 1974

37 Amongst others, see the 1972 *Physichromie* for the Central Bank of Venezuela (Caracas); the 1973 *Chromatic Environment* for the José Antonio Páez Power Plant (Santo Domingo, Venezuela); the 1975 *Chromatic Environment* for Torre ABA (Caracas); the 1975 *Additive Colour Mural* for the left bank of the Guaire River (Caracas).

38 The first two presidents, Rómulo Betancourt (1959–1964) and Raúl Leoni (1964–1969), both from the Acción Democrática (AD) party (Democratic Action), faced constant coups and insurgencies, both internal and external to the country. The following president, Rafael Caldera (1969–1974), was a member of COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente, Independent Political Electoral Organization Committee), the Social Christian Party. This was the first time in Venezuelan history when power was transferred peacefully between two opposing parties. In 1970, Caldera signed a permanent truce with the guerrilla groups that had been threatening democracy in the previous decade.

39 See Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity*, op cit. For comparison on a similar use of modernity as propaganda under

of the spectator. Parallel to the focus on colour perception is what the artist calls 'affective colour', the different symbolic meanings or memories that every spectator attaches to specific colours. Cruz-Diez's approach to colour as both physical and psychological is no innovation in colour theory. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johannes Itten, and Wassily Kandinsky had all theorised the coexistence of subjective and objective elements in colour and were amongst Cruz-Diez's key sources in his 1950s explorations on both colour and abstraction.<sup>36</sup>

Cruz-Diez's *Additive Colour* employs 'affective colour' by using the colours of the Venezuelan flag in the place where people depart from or arrive in the country. In terms of physical colour, the mosaic was based on the same principle as *Additive Yellow* and depended on the viewer's movement across the work. When spectators walked on this floor, they saw colours that were not physically there. What the artist referred to as the 'liberation of colour' was evident in this work, where colour did 'happen', and were not trapped in a static physical strata of the work. It pertained to the artist's idea of 'realist painting' because it engaged viewers through colour, and it created new individual realities in a public space. The past tense in reference to the mosaic is due to the fact that the success of colour-events is completely reliant on the precision of each element of the work, something that most kinetic works in Venezuela have now lost through deterioration and defacement.

## Venezuelan Kineticism: Modernity and National Identity

In the 1970s, Carlos Cruz-Diez – who by then had relocated to Paris and had become one of the most internationally recognised Venezuelan artists – was commissioned to create a series of public works that turned Caracas into an open air museum.<sup>37</sup> These commissions were part of a process of renovation of the capital city, intrinsic to the political agenda of the democratic governments that followed the rule of dictator Marcos Pérez-Jiménez (1953–1958) and the stabilisation of an initially ephemeral democracy (1958–1970).<sup>38</sup> One of the key political tools employed by Pérez-Jiménez's regime was urban and infrastructural development. This resulted in the public's association of the dictatorship with visible improvement and modernisation of the main cities.<sup>39</sup> It is undeniable that the democratic governments after Pérez-Jiménez's regime took advantage of the bonds between built environment and national identity constructed under the dictatorship, and equally used the appearance of modernity and progress as political tools. The crucial difference, however, is that while the Pérez-Jiménez regime positioned Venezuelans as mere 'spectators' of this urban transformation, the emerging democracy promoted an art based on participation. Lisa Blackmore explores what she defines a 'spectacular modernity' following the 1948 coup d'état and into Pérez-Jiménez's regime, emphasising the paradoxes surrounding the promises of national development and instant modernity. The terms 'spectacular' and 'spectacle' are contextualised in her work as implying power relations and an agenda that directed people's eyes towards what, according to the government, 'deserved' attention.<sup>40</sup>

dictatorial regimes, see Abigail McEwen, *Revolutionary Horizons: Art and Polemics in 1950s Cuba*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2016.

40 Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity*, op cit, p 102. The concept of spectacle has been traditionally opposed to that of dialogue, most notably by the French Marxist theorist and artist Guy Debord in his *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord claimed that the role of the spectator robs individuals of their activity and forces them into passivity. In his view, the term 'spectacle' only relates to vision, and therefore equates exteriority, a point famously later rejected by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who instead proposed viewing as an action. For Rancière, a spectator 'observes, selects, compares, interprets', and therefore is not passive. Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans, Zone Books, New York, 1994, p 23; Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Gregory Elliott, trans, Verso, London and New York, 2009, p 13.

41 Walter D Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina and London, 2011, pp 67–68

42 The term 'participation' is often used by art historians to describe works with explicit social and political commitment, leading some to argue that kinetic works are not 'participative', but rather 'inclusive' or 'interactive', see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London and New York, 2012, p 89. Larry Busbea speaks of Kineticism and its experiments as occupying a 'grey area between technological integration

The focus on modernity is a complex narrative intertwined with the idea of 'westernisation' and is discussed in postcolonial discourse as an effect of both colonialism and imperialism. Semiotician Walter Mignolo has notably termed coloniality as the 'darker side of modernity', where modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin.<sup>41</sup> The modernisation of Venezuela was without doubt a consequence of both Spanish colonialism and the presence and economic power of the US in the country. The visible, 'spectacular' modernity promoted during regimes and democratic governments was a reflection of the power relations between the country and the Euro-US world. Both the dictatorships and the democratic governments promoted modernist art and architecture as the embodiment of progress and national pride in an attempt to acquire international visibility, or rather visibility amongst Western powers. The democratic presidents, however, prioritised an art based on the values of freedom and interaction. Kineticism – with two Venezuelans at its forefront (Jesús Rafael Soto and Cruz-Diez) – was based on the participation and physical engagement of viewers, who were encouraged to move in front of, on, or through the works and were therefore active participants.<sup>42</sup> Here, I argue that Kineticism – although preserving an element of individuality – has strong democratic and social elements: democratic because it includes and involves each individual in their own personal experience of space and colour; social because the experiences of space and colour triggered by kinetic works are shared and relational.<sup>43</sup> In the apparent neutrality of abstract art in Venezuela there is indeed a strong relation to the country itself through its focus on perception, activation, and experiences. In Kineticism, knowledge is neither imposed nor required. In a history of dictatorships and social disparity, offering an experience that awakens perception, that can be enjoyed by anyone independently from their cultural and social background, is a strong social statement, even if it is implicit. Moreover, the implicit nature of the message is firmly related to the non-representational character of abstraction: if figuration is left behind because the intention is to 'create' and not to 'represent' a reality, the explicit representation of specific times and places must also be avoided.<sup>44</sup>

The presumed apoliticism of Venezuelan Kineticism was part of a narrative of a presumed apoliticism of abstraction more broadly. Venezuelan writer and communist politician Miguel Otero Silva had publicly attacked the emergence of abstraction in Venezuela through a series of articles published in the newspaper *El Nacional* in March and April 1957. His polemic against abstraction and one of the key artists involved in the introduction of abstraction in Caracas, his cousin Alejandro Otero, was published in eight parts in the national newspaper and formulated again in a book co-written by the two, *Polemica sobre arte abstracto* (1957).<sup>45</sup> The main accusation posed by Otero Silva was against the neutral appearance of abstraction, and the absence of any elements recognisable as 'Venezuelan'. This accusation was later fuelled by the kinetic artists' insistence in discussing their works as universal. This way of presenting their work is in line with the Greenbergian modernist belief in form.<sup>46</sup> The modernist approach of the Western tradition, championed by Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr, and equating the history of art to a linear development based on form rather than context, needs to be considered, in Cruz-Diez's case, as heightened and reinforced by the post-

and social intervention', Larry Busbea, 'Kineticism-Spectacle-Environment', *October* 144, spring 2013, pp 92–114.

43 For a discussion of the relational dynamics between abstract objects and their publics in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, see Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse, The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth Century Latin American Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2017.

44 Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich are of great influence on Cruz-Diez in his moment of transition from figuration to abstraction, see Osbel Suarez, Gloria Carnevali and Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez: Color Happens*, Fundación Juan March, Palma de Mallorca, 2009, p 71. Both European artists discuss the binary creation/representation in their definitions of abstraction. Piet Mondrian, 'Neo Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence' [1920], in Charles Harrison and Paul Woods, eds, *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*, Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts, and Oxford, 2003, pp 289–292; Kasimir Malevich, 'The Question of Imitative Art' [1920], in *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*, op cit, pp 293–298.

45 Alejandro Otero and Miguel Otero Silva, *Polemica sobre arte abstracto (Polemic on Abstract Art)*, Ministerio de Educación, Dirección de Cultura y Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1957. For more detail on the debates surrounding the emergence of abstraction in Venezuela, see Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse*, op cit, (Chapter 2: 'Time-Objects').

46 Clement Greenberg expressed his prioritisation of form and separation of art forms in most of his

colonial attitude of an artist concerned with the absence of any Venezuelan artists in that linear progression.<sup>47</sup> The artist recalls his formative years as a 'period of anguish', leading to an obsessive search for a way to insert Venezuela into history:

That isolation, that feeling of adolescent marginality and cultural dependence that aroused my desire to enter into the universal context of ideas has abated in the past few decades. We have redeemed ourselves as Latin Americans, we have entered the history of the West without killing or crushing anyone, and we have achieved this through the universal dimension of our work.<sup>48</sup>

Universality for Cruz-Diez is the only alternative to being written out of history. His concern was for his work to be judged against Western criteria, not to neglect his origins but to avoid the marginalisation that he identified in only being measured up to other Latin Americans. This was particularly important for Cruz-Diez because he always felt that he, as a Venezuelan, was part of that West. The heavy presence of the West through colonialism and postwar immigration in the South American countries on the Atlantic coast is a well-known narrative.<sup>49</sup> As much as our present-day perspective pushes us against such colonial and imperialist patterns, it is important to note that often modernist artists did believe in that narrative of Europe having a heavier presence in their countries than the Indigenous features, which explains their choices as a consequence. In Cruz-Diez's words:

A good number of the human beings who inhabit this continent are direct descendants of that historical fact (colonialism). Had I been Inca, Aztec or Arahaco, perhaps I would never have felt the need to be part of Western history, because I would have a history of my own. What I am trying to say is that I am not and feel neither Indian, nor African, nor European: I am the product of that unexpected event that gave birth to a new culture that is quite clearly a part of the West. During adolescence in my formative years, there was this feeling floating inside of me of being part of that European culture, of being a true member of something whole. If I were the same as everyone else, why had they forgotten about me? Why didn't they listen to what I had to say? I think that this was the kind of reasoning in our subconscious when we demanded historical representation.<sup>50</sup>

The emergence of geometric abstraction in Europe was a crucial source for Cruz-Diez, who follows Mondrian's, Malevich's, and Van Doesburg's definitions of abstract and concrete art extremely faithfully from 1959 onwards. For this reason, the implicit nature of the political message in Cruz-Diez's work is not due to any type of censorship, but to a quest for universality inherently connected to the modernist approach and sources chosen by the artist. In his view, the only way for a work of art to be visible, to access history, is for it to be universal, not local. In a 1967 interview, Cruz-Diez asserted how he accomplished his civic roles and duties as a citizen, not as an artist, because artists do not have more responsibilities than others. In his words: 'our attitude [as] citizens is transitory, but the work of art – if it truly is a work of art – survives the

writings, see for example 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' [1939], in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965, pp 3–21; 'Modernist Painting' [1960], in Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, eds, *Modern Art and Modernism: a Critical Anthology*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London, 1982, pp 5–10.

47 Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez in Conversation*, op cit, p 12

48 *Ibid*, p 16

49 See, for example, Ariel Jiménez, 'Neither Here nor There', in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Hector Olea, eds, *Inverted Utopias*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, p 247

50 Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Diez in Conversation*, op cit, p 17

51 Olga González, 'El cinetismo no es una moda, es la captación de un mundo nuevo' (Kineticism Is Not a Trend, It's the Caption of a New World), *La Republica*, Caracas, 4 August 1967

52 Néstor García Canclini, 'Aesthetic Moments of Latin Americanism [2004]', in Héctor Olea and Melina Kervandjian, eds, *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?*, Museum of Fine Arts Houston and International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Houston, 2012, pp 1056–1067

53 Marta Traba, *Mirar en Caracas (Looking in Caracas)*, Monte Avila Editores, Caracas, 1974, p 280

54 *Ibid*, pp 278–279

55 *Ibid*, p 279

56 Jean-Philippe Hugron in conversation with Luis Pérez-Oramas, op cit, p 43. For detail on the links between the political economy of the 1970s and the purchase of Kineticism

temporal'.<sup>51</sup> The airport's mosaic points towards such survival because the current socio-political context in Venezuela provides both its ephemerality and a brand-new reading of the artwork.

The narrative of apolitical universality was intrinsic to the utopian nature of early abstraction in Europe and the US. However, utopia is also the first of three 'aesthetic moments of Latin Americanism' identified by the anthropologist and Latin Americanist Néstor García Canclini.<sup>52</sup> Canclini discusses utopia as a continental thread, with artists expressing their belief in political and territorial freedom and striving to create a national identity for their countries through works that embodied the optimistic views of the specific times and places in which they were created. The phase of utopia analysed by Canclini coincides with emerging democracies after colonial independence and is followed by a phase centred on the 'memory of the defeat' of that utopia, happening during unstable democracies or new regimes. Canclini's 'memory of the defeat' phase groups all the expressions across the continent arising when the previous dreams of a perfect future not only did not last, but made the new repressive governments even more appalling. In the third phase, or 'focus on the instant', artists no longer idealise the future as in the utopian phase, and they no longer commemorate or condemn the past as in the 'memory of the defeat' phase. Instead, they concentrate on the present.

If we apply Canclini's framework to Venezuelan modernist and contemporary art, Kineticism coincides with his first phase of Latin Americanism, utopia, and with the unrealised promises of a never-ending democracy. Yet, the utopian features of Kineticism have marginalised the group within discussions of Latin American art for surrendering to imperialist canons. Marta Traba, one of the most authoritative sources on Latin American art between the 1950s and 1980s, is known for her dispute with Kineticism in Venezuela and for reproaching its obsession with technical perfection. As Traba put it: 'Technique was God, and Soto was its prophet.'<sup>53</sup> In 1974, the year in which Cruz-Diez began working on the airport project, she argued that Kineticism was supported by the government to enhance the country's 'progressive image' in spite of other nationally recognised artists.<sup>54</sup> Kineticism in Traba's terms is described as an 'official art' that damages 'new avant-garde trends', and conveniently embraces the government's ideology of progress without reflecting Venezuelan society. In other words, Traba somehow accuses Kineticism of being both apolitical and politically biased. Traba believes that Venezuela *chose* and *purchased* Kineticism – taking advantage of the artists' Parisian experimentations – but never *went through* it.<sup>55</sup> The fact that Venezuela did choose and purchase Kineticism in the 1970s, a time of oil boom, newly found stability and promised infrastructural development, is undeniable. Kinetic art's emphasis on technology and universality was undoubtedly convenient to the new ruling classes, who were trying to promote a progressive image of the country at an international level and, according to Pérez-Oramas, found in kinetic works the embodiment of their 'social and democratic development project based on the transformation of natural assets into civic energy'.<sup>56</sup> The apolitical appearance of Kineticism was ideal for the bipartisan nature of the Venezuelan government, which alternated between AD and COPEI presidencies, respectively the Social-Democratic and Social-Christian parties.



from Pérez Oramas's perspective, see Luis Pérez-Oramas, 'Caracas: a Constructive Stage', in Gabriel Pérez Barreiro, ed, *The Geometry of Hope, Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, Blanton Museum of Art and The University of Texas, Austin, 2007, pp 74–85.

57 Osbel Suárez and Miguel Angel García Hernández, *Los Cinéticos (The Kinetics)*, Museo Reina Sofía and Bancaja, Madrid, 2007, p 22. Giò Ponti, 'A Caracas' (In Caracas), *Domus* 307, June 1955, p 2. Leon Degand, 'Essai d'intégration des arts au centre culturel de la Cité Universitaire de Caracas' (Attempt of Integration of the Arts at the Cultural Centre of the University City of Caracas), *Art d'Aujourd'hui (Art of Today)*, vol 5, no 6, September 1954, p 1–6

58 Guy Brett, 'Gego, arte, diseño y el campo poético' (Gego, Art, Design and the Poetic Field) in Mónica Amor, Yve-Alain Bois, Guy Brett and Iris Peruga, eds, *Gego: desafiando estructuras (Gego: Challenging Structures)*, Museu Serralves and Museu d'art contemporani de Barcelona, Porto and Barcelona, 2006, p 37

59 Luis Pérez-Oramas, 'Caracas: a Constructive Stage', op cit, p 76, p 77

60 For discussions of ephemerality and impermanence in art between 1960 and 2000, see Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003.

61 Unpublished note, Centre of Documentation Artcrucuz Panama, nd

62 For discussions on the ties between the art market and local economies within Latin America, see Néstor García Canclini, *La producción simbólica*:

Nevertheless, restricting the historical value of Kineticism to simply biased 'official art' undervalues the impact that, for the first time, Venezuelan artists were having in local and global contexts.

The error in seeing public kinetic works as a product of a political, economic and capitalist bias comes from the assumption that these works were conceived after the commission. While the airport's *Additive Colour* was created in 1974, the first works in the *Additive Colour* series date back as early as 1959, when Venezuela was coming out of Pérez-Jiménez's regime and the two parties who paid for those public commissions had not yet been fully established. We can certainly find a political bias in the government's choice of commissioning public works from Cruz-Diez, but the reality is that those works were conceived decades before. As previously discussed, the universal narrative in Cruz-Diez's work had little to do with political loyalties and a lot to do with historical visibility.

When, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cruz-Diez and Soto received public commissions within a project of modernisation of Caracas, kinetic art was everywhere.<sup>57</sup> Caracas was the city where kinetic art was most featured in Latin America, with integrations in banks, apartment buildings, theatres, and even power stations. Art critic Guy Brett speaks of Kineticism as the 'monumental official art of a nation in process of modernisation' and of Venezuela as a rare example of large-scale commissions.<sup>58</sup> In Luis Pérez-Oramas's words, Kineticism became Venezuela's 'clearest symbolic manifestation, de facto if not in principle, of democratic development policy' and it is in fact its association with that 1970s policy that renders it a 'symbol of the representative democratic "ancien régime", stigmatized by the new authorities as an example of bourgeois shame and partisan decadence' today.<sup>59</sup>

Here, the fact that Kineticism was used as a political tool to promote progress is not under question. What is under question in this article is the reduction of Venezuelan Kineticism to a mere desire to please a powerful commissioner and the notion that Kineticism has only acquired the added value of national identity in the eyes of an élite of conservative spectators.

## Destruction and Degradation

The degradation, defacement and removal of parts of Cruz-Diez's artworks are here presented as both destructive and productive phenomena. Absence – or the threat of it – becomes productive when it acquires its own identity, and one that becomes more potent than presence in the context of political migration and conflict.<sup>60</sup> In an unpublished note, Cruz-Diez wrote how in the 1950s he had become concerned about the numerous prizes that his paintings of poverty were winning and generally the idea of becoming rich by illustrating poverty.<sup>61</sup> The success of his figurative works was largely surpassed by that of his abstract works in the 1970s, when Venezuelan oil wealth was in its full boom and art had become a safe investment.<sup>62</sup> Both the market value of Cruz-Diez's works and the public commissions resulted in an association of his art with an élite of privileged collectors. This, however, does not exclude Kineticism's success in integrating spectators as communities as well as individuals.

*Teoría y método en sociología del arte (The Symbolic Production: Theory and Method in Sociology of Art)*, Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires, 1979; Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1995.

63 For the connections between kinetic artists and national pride, see, for example, Verónica Abreu, 'El cinetismo de Jesús Soto es un símbolo de Venezuela' (Jesús Soto's Kineticism Is a Symbol of Venezuela), 5 July 2019, <https://contrapunto.com/cultura/el-cinetismo-de-jesus-soto-es-un-simbolo-de-venezuela/>, accessed 18 January 2021; NTN24 Venezuela, 'Orgullo venezolano: Carlos Cruz-Diez lleva su arte a las calles de Perú' (Venezuelan Pride: Carlos Cruz-Diez Takes His Art to the Streets of Peru), 20 April 2018, <https://www.ntn24.com/entretenimiento/venezuela/orgullo-venezolano-carlos-cruz-diez-lleva-su-arte-las-calles-de-peru-86299>, accessed 18 January 2021; Juliet Pineda, 'Venezolanos dicen adiós a Cruz-Diez y celebran su legado' (Venezuelans Say Goodbye to Cruz-Diez and Celebrate His Legacy), 28 July 2019, <https://efectocuyo.com/la-humanidad/venezolanos-dicen-adios-a-cruz-diez-y-celebran-su-legado/>, accessed 18 January 2021.

64 Carlos Cruz-Diez, 'La calle y el habitat como soporte del arte acontecimiento [Caracas, May 1991]' (The Street and the Habitat as Support of the Art-Event) in Julio Cesar Schara, ed, *Carlos Cruz-Diez y el arte cinetico (Carlos Cruz-Diez and Kinetic Art)*, Conaculta Arte e imagen, Mexico City, 2001, pp 117-118

65 Ramírez, *Color in Space and Time*, op cit, p 333

66 Ibid, p 333

Kinetic works are installed all around the main Venezuelan cities. The participation in kinetic public works, whether voluntary or involuntary, became a daily routine for Venezuelans since the 1970s. Venezuelans have become so familiar with them that they relate this type of experience with what they call home, independently from the cultural, political or economic value they associate with them.<sup>63</sup> Technology was certainly part of a political agenda in the eyes of the commissioners, whether they belonged to the AD or the COPEI party, but it had already been a crucial ingredient in Kineticism for over a decade before the public commissions. The focus on technology in Kineticism was due to two main factors, both independent from Venezuelan politics. Firstly, the machine-like, and often machine-made, precision of kinetic works is what makes them appear to move in the eyes of the viewer. Secondly, technology was part of the idea of progress and innovation imbued in modernist desires that were shared not just nationally, but continentally and globally, and not just by kinetic artists. While the choice and purchase of Kineticism in Venezuela is undeniable, today's airport ritual of taking parts of the artwork as souvenirs demonstrates that, a few decades after Traba's claims, Venezuela did *go through* Kineticism.

The first example of how participation in kinetic works was not an exclusive and detached experience of the élite is the palette of colour combinations that Cruz-Diez created in 1980 for the houses of the Caracas area of Chapellín. The artist financed and designed improvements for the area, with the support of the City Council of Caracas. Here, the goal was to awaken perception and transform situations that were considered neutral or routine into situations that stimulated the public. This was achieved by physically involving the community in painting the houses according to Cruz-Diez's plan, making his colour palette become part of their daily lives.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, *Induction of Yellow* (1975) was based on the involvement of the community with the work. This was an ephemeral intervention, in which the colours added by Cruz-Diez were supposed to fade away until the area in front of La Pastora Square in Caracas went back to normality. However, students from municipal schools and locals started repainting the colours themselves every two months. To quote Cruz-Diez in a 2011 interview with Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'the beautiful thing about art in the street is that people take possession of the work and feel that it belongs to them'.<sup>65</sup>

In the interview, he then mentions another work that, on the contrary, was planned as permanent but was demolished under Chávez:

When, for political reasons, the current government demolished my *Chromatic Induction Mural*, a mile-and-a-quarter-long wall that bordered the La Guaira port, over a thousand people took to the streets in the port area to protest. Why would the administration destroy what belonged to the people? That mural had been there since they were born, it was their heritage.<sup>66</sup>

Here, Cruz-Diez refers to the 2005 destruction of his work, with the first mallet blow given publicly by the mayor, Alexis Toledo. Toledo asserted that the mural prevented the 'relation of the port with the communities', and it 'threatened the right of the people to appreciate airport



Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Chromatic Induction Mural (Mural de Inducción Cromática)*, 1989, alkyd paint on concrete, 2 km, (2,188 yd), Port of La Guaira, Caracas, destroyed on October 20, 2005, © Estate of Carlos Cruz-Diez, all rights reserved 2023/Bridgeman Images

67 Humberto Marquez, 'Plástica-Venezuela: Cae muro de la discordia' (Venezuelan Plastic: The Wall of Discord Falls), *Inter Press Service*, 10 November 2005, <http://www.ipsnoticias.net/2005/11/plastica-venezuela-cae-muro-de-la-discordia/>; [http://www.eluniversal.com/2005/10/21/ccs\\_art\\_21404A](http://www.eluniversal.com/2005/10/21/ccs_art_21404A); [http://www.eluniversal.com/2010/01/24/grccs\\_art\\_puerto-sin-cruz-diez\\_1731142](http://www.eluniversal.com/2010/01/24/grccs_art_puerto-sin-cruz-diez_1731142), accessed 18 January 2021

68 Juan Antonio González, 'Al rescate de un patrimonio olvidado' (To the Rescue of a Forgotten Heritage), *El Universal*, 13 May 2018. For details and images on the other works by Cruz-Diez in need of restoration and the corresponding

operations'.<sup>67</sup> Amongst the reasons for destroying the work, the government mentioned the need for renovation of the area; the fact that the costs of conservation were too high; and that the mural obscured the view of the port, which is the identity of the people of La Guaira. The destruction of Cruz-Diez's mural was part of the demolition project for the largest viaduct on the Caracas-La Guaira highway, one of the most prominent accomplishments of Pérez-Jiménez's rule. Destroying the bridge and the mural was an attempt to promote a new official narrative by erasing a symbol of a previous dictatorial regime – the bridge – and a symbol of previous democratic governments, Cruz-Diez's mural.

The case of the *Chromatic Induction Mural* (1989) points to an imposed absence. Nevertheless, what is currently most common in kinetic public works is the issue of deterioration: an announced, incumbent absence. Today, out of 157 public works by Cruz-Diez disseminated around the country, about 100 have suffered significant deterioration.<sup>68</sup> Although conservation projects are being planned, the figures offer particular insight on the current state of public art in Venezuela. In a moment in which public priorities are inevitably elsewhere, the state of these works becomes a reminder of the loss of that modernity, wealth, progress and democracy that this public art originally embodied. When

conservation projects see:  
<http://insituartprojects.com/projects/restoration/proyectederecupe/raconcruzdiez/>.

the concepts of home and identity are challenged by a political, social, and economic situation that leads people to either live in an unrecognisable country or to depart from it, both the remaining works and their absences become memory triggers, creating a sense of nostalgia and loss. This brings us back to Canclini's three moments of Latin Americanism, and specifically to the stage that follows utopia: the 'memory of the defeat'. Kineticism has become the starting point of many contemporary art works, from Alexander Apóstol's *Chromosaturated Social Contract* of 2012, to Luis Molina-Pantin's *Lectura cinética* of 2014, and Magdalena Fernández's homage to Soto in *1pmS011* of 2011. In all these works, kinetic art is treated as a familiar background and starting point for present explorations of life after the end of the democracy that Kineticism embodied. Alexander Apóstol's work, for instance, engages with a series of public works by Cruz-Diez, including the one in the airport. *Chromosaturated Social Contract* points at Cruz-Diez's series of *Chromosaturations* in its title as well as to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762). The silent video is organised into six chapters, each showing specific works by Cruz-Diez as a background for the portrayal of different occupations. The airport features in a chapter entitled 'Composition, subtraction and addition of colour through the cathode ray tube', clearly using, and perhaps mocking, Cruz-Diez's scientific vocabulary. The mosaic is still intact in this video, and it is used as the setting for the portrayal of businessmen in suits, one of whom is then also shown sitting on one of the theatre seats made by Cruz-Diez for the Centro de Acción Social por la Música in Caracas (*Ambientación Cromática*, 2007). The men in this chapter are dressed in 1970s fashion to reflect the economic boom that that period entailed. Other chapters show a very different approach to the concepts of labour and work, including the ones set against the background of the Simón Bolívar Power Plant in Guri (*Ambientación Cromática*, 1977) and the La Guaira Silos (*Cilindros de Inducción Cromática*, 1975). While the businessmen walking on the airport mosaic are faceless, in Guri the focus is on the face and identity of the 'trapped' individual doing repetitive work in a workplace deprived of contact with any real light and surrounded by Cruz-Diez's immersive artwork instead. Kineticism is therefore used by Apóstol as a common background that highlights the social disparities in the country. The repetitive situations in which all workers are captured are a reflection of the seriality and modularity of kinetic art. Despite the ironic and critical stance of the artist, by using Cruz-Diez's works to comment on the disparities of different social backgrounds, Apóstol's work confirms Kineticism as a constant background for Venezuelan work and life. When we consider that this video was created under Chávez's rule, Apóstol's reference to Rousseau in the title seems to question the physical freedom of Venezuelans, a freedom that was promised at the time of the kinetic commissions, but that was in fact ephemeral, contradictory and relative.<sup>69</sup>

69 For Apóstol's account on the impact of Venezuelan migration on the cultural sector, see Alexander Apóstol, 'Welcome to Caracas', 2015, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/welcome-caracas>.

Whether contemporary artists celebrate or reject Kineticism and its utopian ideals, their engagement with it proves how strong its presence still is in today's Venezuela. Canclini's 'memory of the defeat' phase, however, is not just central to contemporary art. The degradation and slow disappearance of kinetic public works includes them in this second stage of Latin Americanism. When democracy is replaced by



repressive governments, the state of those symbols of democracy is a constant reminder of the loss of the principles they stood for. The coexistence of Kineticism and the act of migration makes the link between art and memory even stronger. Somehow, the artists' invitation to participate in their works and the current political situation in Venezuela have entitled the public to take parts of these works, imbuing them with symbolic meanings. The mosaic tiles that Venezuelans take away with them were not made with the intention of symbolising the country. They were triggers for experiences, and it is precisely this experience that makes the value of these objects shift from artistic to personal. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, individuals become members of their society not through education but through habits and their interaction with the order of the objects they find around them.<sup>70</sup> In the case of Venezuela, Cruz-Diez's airport floor has become a symbol of national identity and pride, of memory and loss, of departures and hoped-for returns.

70 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977; Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010, p 135