The Appearance of a Ghost

Jorge Pedro Núñez

At Seoul Airport, I found myself standing in front of the display window of Louis Vuitton. Drawn (serigraphed) all over the immense extension of the shop window, I saw parallel vertical lines delimited and grouped into sets by squares that multiplied all over the surface of the glass. These groups of parallel lines were seconded by another layer of glass, also serigraphed with the same motif, but slightly offset from the first. The back wall was a sheet of opaque white Plexiglas hiding a series of white fluorescent tubes that illuminated the whole display. On exhibit inside the window were bags and cases, the brand's emblematic products. The whole thing gave the impression of being a giant video screen activated by the viewer's movement and the reaction of the retina. The spectacle was assured. People walked from right to left and from left to right. Passers-by had photos taken of themselves in front of the window, but *souvenir* photography would never be able to capture what the human eye perceived in its physical interaction with the material universe of the optical illusion.

After formally analyzing the "phenomenon," I was immediately struck by its resemblance to Jesús Rafael Soto's superimpositions of printed lines on Plexiglas, such as *La cajita de Villanueva* (Villanueva's Little Box), 1955. The image creators of the great luxury ready-to-wear brands like Prada and Louis Vuitton were using the optical techniques developed by Soto and Cruz-Diez in the sixties as a catalogue of forms feeding the world of glamorous lifestyles with motifs lending themselves to optical illusion.

But could we read the meaning of a work from the use it is put to in the same way as the meaning given to it by the artist? Were this so, then in standing before Prada's Kinetic window displays in twenty-first-century Communist China, we would be observing something rather like Marcel Duchamp's *Reciprocal Readymade* (a project that was never realized) and its "use [of] a Rembrandt as an ironing board," which, mistakenly read, seems to sum up the very nature of the contemporary global economy.

In the "planetary aesthetic war," as Maurizio Lazzarato calls it, "A war that takes place over the ready-to-wear worlds created by capital, in the ferocious competition between machineries of expression rivaling with each other to conquer the market of subjectivities thrown into crisis. For it is not enough to create image worlds; they must also have the power to seduce, so that the subjectivities choose them as models for their remapping and concretize them in their everyday life."[1]

Today's processes of image production go through a great many phases of "swallowing" and digesting forms. The result is a displacement that has to do with the new exoduses of cultural forms and their deformation in translation.

In 1955, in a text by Pontus Hultén on the work of Jean Tinguely that looked back at the origins of Kinetic Art, attention was drawn to the ideological gap between the

1. Suely Rolnik, "Politics of Flexible Subjectivity: The Event Work of Lygia Clark," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 104.

artworks of the start of the century and those of the sixties and seventies, showing how most of that production has lost its revolutionary dimension.[2]

Retrospectively, without distancing himself from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1913–18, Kazimir Malevich referred to Suprematism as a cosmic and suprasensible movement that invites viewers to experience the universal vibration. Art becomes a conflict zone that reinvents itself in an industrial society focused on the production of consumer goods for use by the masses. In 1920, Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner inaugurated Constructivism with the publication of the "Realistic Manifesto," their idea being to conceive objects that would combine movement, space, and light. This revolutionary aesthetic project begun by the Russians was continued by the German Bauhaus, and this in turn by what is known as the International Style. However, the Kinetic current has older and more fortuitous origins in what one might describe as the anemic attitude of a Marcel Duchamp mounting a bicycle wheel on a stool in a Paris apartment and spinning it for fun in his spare time. The Italian Futurists induced movement in their works inspired by industrial machinery, and promoted a moral attitude close to anarchism in their desire to smash representations of the old world: "Demolish Venice!"

In his *International Monument III*, 1919, Vladimir Tatlin imagined an enormous building with rotating platforms. Man Ray realized an assemblage of clothes hangers that moved in the wind in his *Obstruction*, 1920. Bruno Munari created the *Useless Machines*, 1930, also moved by the action of the wind. Alexander Calder constructed a series of mobiles activated by motors (1932). The list of emblematic works in the career of Kinetic Art is a long one, and there is no need to be exhaustive here. The Kinetic current seems poised between the nihilist irony of the Dadaists and the scientific intentions of a positivist modernism. In 1955, Victor Vasarely used the term "l'art cinétique." In another field, the poet Brion Gysin was helped in 1960 by the engineer Ian Sommerville to devise a luminous, rotating paper object called *Dream Machine*, which was intended by its creators to generate an experience in the viewer similar to the consumption of narcotics. The *Dream Machine* was presented as a publication in a magazine, including assembly instructions allowing it to be reproduced by anyone.

Grande núcleo (Grand Nucleus), 1960, by Hélio Oiticica, the participative works (1962) of Lygia Clark, the *cromosaturaciones* (1965) of Carlos Cruz-Diez, the *penetrables* (1967) of Jesús Soto, and the *reticulareas* (1969) of Gego are clearly cases where the viewer is no longer situated in front of the artwork. Rather, the viewer is bathed by the artwork. The viewer is no longer a viewer, but becomes the activator and material of the perception of art. In the late seventies, Dan Graham analyzed how the stage (the platform) of punk rock bands becomes integrated in public space. The audience climbs onto the platform and the musicians throw themselves into the audience. The concert is experienced as a participative work.

What resonance do these enveloping and participative practices have in the construction of Kinetic "monuments" in the Caracas cityscape from the 1960s to the 1980s? These works were mostly designed in the context of automobile traffic and aviation, whether for the passages of Cruz-Diez's Simón Bolívar International Airport of Maiquetia or Soto's entrances to the Caracas subway, where they are read as a metalanguage for the flow of city life and modern progress. These artistic interventions are found in places of human transit, but is it possible to inhabit them? Are they symbols of progress contained in the authority of the monument? As Luis Pérez-Oramas remarks, "In Venezuela between 1959 and 1976—at least in terms

2. Pontus Hultén, "La liberté substitutive" (1955), in [illegible], exh. cat. Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris: Éditions [illegible] Centre Georges Pompidou, [illegible]

of public art—[these works] constituted another form of muralism: one that had no story line."[3]

We could speculate about these fascinating Kinetic works and the public landscape of large modern cities, but, objectively, these works can also function as historical referents for the evolution, stagnation, and deterioration of the city's modern infrastructure, and also (why not?) as a process that anticipates globalization or, as the philosopher Félix Guattari calls it, "integrated world capitalism." Peter Sloterdijk defines the modern era as one ruled by the "cult of rapid combustion," the age of superabundant energy and permanent growth, the "era of motors."[4] Have we really left that world?

At the forefront of aerodynamic technology in an artwork, Alejandro Otero's *Abra Solar* rises like a UFO in Plaza Venezuela. Located in the midst of several of Caracas's principal thoroughfares—with the Guaire River, the city's main waterway, on one side, and the buildings of the country's most prosperous companies on the other—Alejandro Otero's *Abra Solar* was set up in Plaza Venezuela in 1983 after being shown at the entrance to the 40th Venice Biennale in 1982.

In August 2012, *Torre David Gran Horizonte*, a project by the Urban Think Tank studio, was presented at the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale. The installation recreates a restaurant serving local Venezuelan food. A book was also published relating the attempts of communities of homeless people who out of necessity occupied the Tower of David,[5] known locally as the world's biggest high-rise slum. The project was rewarded in Venice with the Golden Lion. Times have changed.

We know that the reading of a work of art is intimately linked to the context of its production and presentation. In addition to perhaps representing the unrealized utopias of a modernism idealized in Europe, Kinetic Art in Venezuela became a reality in an urban landscape—that of Caracas from the sixties to the eighties—which might, if one wished, be described as avant-garde. At the same time, however, I cannot help thinking of these forms as a corporate aesthetic linked to the Venezuelan petroleum company PDVSA and to the Caracas electricity or subway companies. While evidently linked to the state apparatus, they are translated here into an image of dynamic progress that shares in the development of the city and the country in general, just as serial reproductions of Kinetic works of art also populate the interiors of government offices, law firms, and dental clinics. For my generation, I think it is difficult to perceive these works within the sphere of pure aesthetic experience without thinking of their corporate dimension.

Far from this vernacular context, the Hong Kong or Seoul of 2012 are cities that are currently experiencing significant economic development. Perhaps the Kinetic experiment of pure forms will again function in its most spectacular dimension, but a dimension advanced by the fetishistic structures of the globalized ready-to-wear market.

3. Luis Pérez-Oramas, "Caracas: A Constructive Stage," in *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, ed. Gabriel Pérez Barreiro, exh. cat. The Blanton Museum of Art (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 266.

4. Peter Sloterdijk, *Le palais de cristal. À l'intérieur du capitalisme planétaire* (Paris: Hachette, 2008), 321; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Radicant. Pour une esthétique de la globalisation* (Paris: Denoël, 2009), 205.

5. The Confinanzas Financial Center, also known as the Torre de David, is the third tallest skyscraper in Venezuela. Construction of the tower began in 1990 and remains unfinished today. The tower earned its nickname after David Brillembourg, the tower's promoter, died in 1993. During the Venezuelan banking crisis of 1994, the Government took control of the building, which lacks elevators, electricity, water, balcony railings, windows, and walls. Venezuela's massive housing shortage led to the occupation of the building by the dispossessed classes in October 2007.