

Inner/Outer Exile in Contemporary Venezuelan Art

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Cecilia Fajardo-Hill (Wellington, New Zealand, 1963) is a British/Venezuelan art historian and curator of Latin American and Latinx art. In 2017, she co-curated the exhibition Radical Women in Latin American Art 1960–1985. She is the author and co-editor of numerous publications, including Performative Bodies: Artists/Spectators. Curating Radical Latina and Latin American Women Artists (2020), and Gender, Race and Feminism; Specificity in a Global Context: The Case of Chicanas, Latinas, and Latin American Women Artists, 1960s–1980s (2021). Her book Remains Tomorrow: Themes in Contemporary Latin American Abstraction will come out in 2022, after ten years of research.

“To what do we Venezuelans belong who have not died (nor do we want to die) in a war, who have not suffered (nor do we want to suffer) imprisonment, who have not been (and we do not want to be) heroic resisters of a dictator or courageous warriors in an epic? Are we perhaps, beings outside the homeland, admirers who witness History with a capital letter from behind the scenes? So, what does include us if history seems to be without us?”¹

—Ana Teresa Torres

¹ Ana Teresa Torres, *La herencia de la tribu. Del mito de la Independencia a la Revolución Bolivariana* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2009), 16.

This essay analyzes the idea and the experience of internal and external exile in Venezuela in the context of the ongoing social, political, and cultural crisis in the country, from the perspective of the work of eight Venezuelan contemporary artists. These artists articulate different conceptualizations and experiences of inner/outer exile, whether they live in the country or have migrated. The notion of exile for Venezuelans is not

circumscribed to the traditional definition associated with political exile during twentieth century totalitarian regimes such as Nazism, which brought a large number of European migrants to Latin America, including the artist Gego (née Gertrud Louise Goldschmidt) who migrated to Venezuela in 1939 to become a protagonist of Venezuelan modernism. In this essay, I use the term in the context of today's global migration and displacement due to climate change, violence, conflict, and severe economic and political instability such as is the case of Venezuela. International migration is estimated at almost 272 million people globally² and the internally displaced at 41.3 million.³ In the case of Venezuela, the Organization of American States report of December 30, 2020, states that 5.4 million Venezuelans, around 18 percent of the country's population, migrated due to the humanitarian and economic crisis.⁴

As daily life has become increasingly untenable, and cultural institutions in Venezuela have also been slowly destroyed, an exodus of artists, intellectuals, and art workers has left an enormous void in the cultural life of the country. Luis Pérez Oramas explains: "the destruction of Venezuela is also manifested in the collateral, gigantic, unstoppable, inexorable effect of our collapse and ruin: the Venezuelan diaspora around the world; the progressive, inevitable disengagement from the country of the lives of those who, without a doubt, were able to embody the best prepared, most informed, competent, creative generation in the nation's history."⁵ It may seem that in the context of global migration, the notion of Venezuelan exile is relative compared to its early twentieth-century definition, as it appears that migrating or not may be a choice. However, as Torres asks in her introductory quote: What are the implications of staying in Venezuela and being direct witnesses to History? What may be the choice for those who do not want to be the subject of either suffering or heroism? Exile means not only having to leave the country, but exile from the very idea of Venezuela.

It may be argued that two opposing but complementary factors and moments created the conditions for today's Venezuelan diaspora and internal and external exile. The first one occurred in the early nineteenth century and the second in the mid twentieth century. Venezuela has been built on the epic and utopian narrative of the early nineteenth century war of independence.⁶ The unfinished project is at the root of utopian Bolívarianism, the ideology behind Chavismo, involving the sacrifice of the people and the destruction of the country in the fight against the deviation of Venezuela's former progressive and internationalist political phase.

The second moment in the chronicle of Venezuelan exile is the establishment of its admired progressive—though vulnerable and contradictory—modernity. By 1940, Venezuela was the third largest producer of crude oil in the world, which resulted in an oil-reliant economy with periods of great economic boom followed by financial crisis when international oil prices fall, as happened at the end of the 1980s to the mid-1990s. In the

² As Ruth Erickson and Eva Respini write, "Today, we live in the highest-ever rate of displacement. The United Nations estimates that one out of every seven people in the world is an international or internal migrant." Ruth Erickson and Eva Respini, eds, *When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration Through Contemporary Art* (Boston: ICA and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 17.

³ *The World Migration Report 2020* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019), 4.

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report-colombia/situation-report-venezuelan-migration-and-refugee-crisis-december-2020>

⁵ Luis Pérez Oramas, "Ensayo sobre la destrucción," *Papel Literario El Nacional*, *Enciclopedia nacional de la destrucción* (May 30, 2021), 1.

⁶ Ana Teresa Torres explains that the Venezuelan War of Independence took place between 1810 and 1823, but it was Simón Bolívar's campaign to create the Gran Colombia, 1819–20, that determined the achievement of Venezuela's independence. Authors such as Fernando Coronil,

Luis Pérez Oramas, Rafael Sánchez, and Michael Taussig, establish Simón Bolívar as foundational to the Venezuelan State and to Hugo Chávez's Bolivarianism.

⁷ Ruth Auerbach, "La última contemporaneidad: La década de los 90 en el arte venezolano," *Estilo* 30 (April 1997), 41-42.

⁸ Luis Pérez Oramas, *Guide for La Invención de la continuidad* (Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1999), 16, 18, 20.

⁹ Raquel Rivas Rojas, "Ficciones diaspóricas: identidad y participación en los blogs de tres desterradas venezolanas/ Diasporic Fictions: Identity and Participation in Three Blogs by Exiled Venezuelan Women," *Cuadernos de literatura* XVIII:35 (January-June 2014), 228.

¹⁰ I would like to thank her daughter Rebeca Laufer and the researcher Yuleancy Lobo for providing me with the necessary information on Antonieta Sosa.

context of economic bonanza and the installation of a military regime in 1948, Venezuela embarked on a process of rapid modernization, with geometric abstraction and architectural modernism as their cultural banners. The Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas, designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva, perhaps the most representative example of Venezuelan modernism, was created during a dictatorship, against the grain of social reality, and became a celebrated monument in the context of the anti-left rhetoric of the Cold War. Venezuela was also one of the first Latin American countries to become democratic in 1958. The inheritance of a modernist tradition from the 1950s up to the 1980s, with its back to the social and cultural reality, cemented a reluctance by many artists to engage directly with its context, therefore perpetuating a progressive idea of nation. As the utopian and privileged idea of modernity failed in Venezuela, a change took place in contemporary art, leading Ruth Auerbach to define the art generation of the 1990s as a disenchanted generation.⁷ Pérez Oramas, on the other hand, in 1999, argued that contemporary art in the coming years would be primarily anthropological—as opposed to formal—in its political, social, and human contextuality.⁸ It is this very ambivalence and tension between disengagement inherited from modernism and engagement forced by the political crisis, that shapes Venezuelan art in the twenty-first century.

In the twenty-first century, the artists in this essay share the experience of exile as the loss of memory, the destruction of history, and the constant negotiation between the idea of home versus their new realities as immigrants in places that cannot be identified entirely as home, or experiencing exile or displacement within their own country. As Raquel Rivas Rojas explains in talking about Venezuelan contemporary writing, many artists and intellectuals in exile want to continue to participate in the cultural ambience and debates in Venezuela.⁹ In this sense, the artists in this essay are building the symbolic and cultural present and future of Venezuela, from within or without the country.

I have engaged directly with each of the eight artists, with the exception of Antonieta Sosa,¹⁰ to request their perspective on exile and how it relates to their work. They demonstrate the heterogeneity of the experience and conceptualization of exile. As the analysis of their work unfolds, we should keep in mind the tense dialectics of destruction and nostalgia, resistance and participation, in the Venezuelan present. Artists that have stayed have had the difficult role of negotiating the daily violence and either denouncing it or finding conciliatory ways of promoting hope.

Antonieta Sosa (1940), a pioneer performance and conceptual artist who has remained in Venezuela, performed the first version of *Tejido Amarillo, Azul y Rojo al Infinito* (Weave in yellow, blue and red towards the Infinite) in 1999. The artist sat in her white chair, created according to the *anto*, a measurement system based on the height of her body, inside the installation *Cas(A)nto*, at the Museum of Fine Arts in

Caracas, to knit the Venezuelan flag. Over the years, the artist repeated this performance, slowly constructing the nation. In 2002-03, for her second iteration of this performance, she knitted during the eight hours the museum was open. She explained that the durational element of time was key to counter the idea of immediacy, and that no matter the time needed, the main thing was to do it well. She asserted: "I also think that there is a maternal aspect (. . .) today's artists cannot separate art and life."¹¹ It is symbolic that this gesture of weaving the country is performed as a feminine, non-violent, and intimately personal act. In 2007, Sosa gave the final version of this performance at the National Gallery in Caracas as *Tejido Amarillo, Azul y Rojo al Infinito en negro* (Weave in yellow, blue and red towards the Infinite in black) (Fig. 1), to embody the idea of mourning. Sosa was now dressed in black to reflect existentially on the political and social violence in Venezuela. Behind the artist was a large photograph of a street wall with the words "No matarás" (Thou shalt not kill) in red letters and signed "Dios" (God). During the performance the artist got distracted while talking to the public and made a mistake in her knitting and had to undo part of the flag. Sosa commented that the mistake was also part of the work, because it showed that you can amend it. Every thirty lines Sosa began weaving a new color, symbolizing in the number three the third option needed to counter the polarity that leads to political violence and stagnation.¹²

¹¹ Own translation from transcription of Video CD, Sudaca Films, produced in the context of the exhibition curated by Maria Elena Ramos, *Fragmento y Universo* (Caracas: Fundación Corp. Centro Cultural, 2002).

¹² Video by Nancy Urosa, *Antonieta Sosa: Tejido Amarillo, azul y rojo al infinito, ahora en negro*, September 9, 2007, National Gallery, Caracas. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQs-Jw3o8ul&t=1s>



Fig. 1. Antonieta Sosa. *Tejido Amarillo, Azul y Rojo al Infinito en negro* (Weave in yellow, blue and red towards the Infinite in black), 2007.

Magdalena Fernández (1964) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Caracas, focusing on nature, phenomenological experience, and art history, in abstraction. She is one of the few artists who has continued to elaborate the modernist abstract tradition of both Venezuela and Latin America. Fernández's experience of exile pertains to the nature of her art beyond the political situation in Venezuela. For Fernández, abstraction goes beyond the "failure of modernity"; nevertheless, she feels demonized because her work, by centering on geometric abstraction, is seen as the very embodiment of the collapse of the modern, or a denial of this failure. She explains: "Since my beginnings, the global narratives that seem to revolve around art have always made me feel on the edge, if not outside, of the artistic context. It seems that what 'the other' expects is never 'one's own'; and each act seems like a battle to keep myself in a place: 'my place.'¹³ Fernández's work dialogues with artists such as Venezuelan kinetic pioneer Jesús Soto, Gego, or the Neo-concrete work of Hélio Oiticica; and with natural phenomena such as the rain, light, and the sound of tropical birds. Nevertheless, in recent years the social reality has started to percolate into her series *Instalaciones corporales* (*Mares*), (C corporal installations [seas]) (Fig. 2). and her *Pinturas Móviles corporales* (C corporal mobile paintings) In kinetic art, the spectator usually activates the work by moving in space; in these works, movement is born from within the body itself. *Mares* brought together young dancers to create movements that emulated the motion of waves and the breathing of the sea, thus generating a metaphor of collaboration, social unity, and beauty in the country that was unconceivable. Fernández's recent works introduce the social fabric in crisis as the catalyst of movement, they

¹³ Own translation.
Magdalena Fernández,
written exchanges with the
artist, April 29, 2021.



Fig. 2. Magdalena Fernández. *Pinturas Móviles corporales* (C corporal mobile paintings), n.d.

counter the contradictorily static and demonized history of modern kinetic art, to activate it socially in the present as both abstraction and engagement with reality in a form of restorative justice.

Armando Ruiz (1983) is an artist who negotiates a double exile, both from his native Colombia and from Venezuela. He moved to Venezuela at the age of seventeen and studied fine arts in Maracaibo. His developing artistic career tackled the theme of violence from a more confrontational perspective. He moved back to Colombia in 2017 given the hostility and insecurity in Venezuela. Ruiz feels somewhat exiled from both places: "Since then (2017), I have constantly felt alien being in Colombia despite having been born here. I like to think of my exile as something circumstantial that can be reversed at any moment; nostalgia continually makes me feel I'm without a clear direction."¹⁴ In 2018, he created the book *OLP (desalojos)* (Operation Liberation of the People [Eviction]) (Fig. 3), where he engraved on leather with a laser the testimonies of the victims of enforced evictions, describing how the government destroyed people's homes, robbed them, used violence against children, women and old people, performed illegal raids and detentions. Since Ruiz did not suffer a forced removal, in this work he is identifying with the experience of loss and insecurity that many other people have suffered, thus creating a shared space of dialogical empathy. At present, he is developing the project *Bandera* (Flag), a series of actions in the border city of Cúcuta, a place of forced coexistence, to explore his position as an exile and immigrant who has returned to his country.

Based in Southern California, Mariángeles Soto-Díaz (1970) is a multidisciplinary artist rooted in abstraction. She left Venezuela in 1990 months

¹⁴ Own translation. Armando Ruiz, written exchange with the artist, May 2, 2021.



Fig. 3. Armando Ruiz. *OLP (desalojos)* (Operation Liberation of the People [Eviction]), 2018.

- ¹⁵ A wave of protests, riots, and looting that started on February 27, 1989.
- ¹⁶ Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, written exchanges with the artist, May 2, 2020.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- after the Caracazo,¹⁵ an event that marked the beginning of an era of violence in the country. The artist is particularly sensitive to violence, for the way it has affected her own family and the country's history. Soto-Díaz began making art and practicing judo while still living in Venezuela. She describes exile as a state of plurality of meanings and becomings: "Exile as the impossibility of returning home and establishing an expansive new order, a pluriversal consciousness outlined with the might of self-determination. (. . .) Exile as moving forward only through the logic of dreams and futurity. (. . .) Exile as an unsettled state, dislocation, a displacement."¹⁶ For Soto-Díaz, exile involves hybridity of subject positions and temporalities which, while resisting violence and exclusion, promotes the embodiment of a "non-violent work of peace." Through her practice of martial arts in its intersection with art and performance, she is able to ask, "how not to exile the body from embodiment?"¹⁷ Her acts of self-determination generate a becoming, which is also present in her new series of digital collages, in 2021, where she creates, as in *Double Self-portrait*

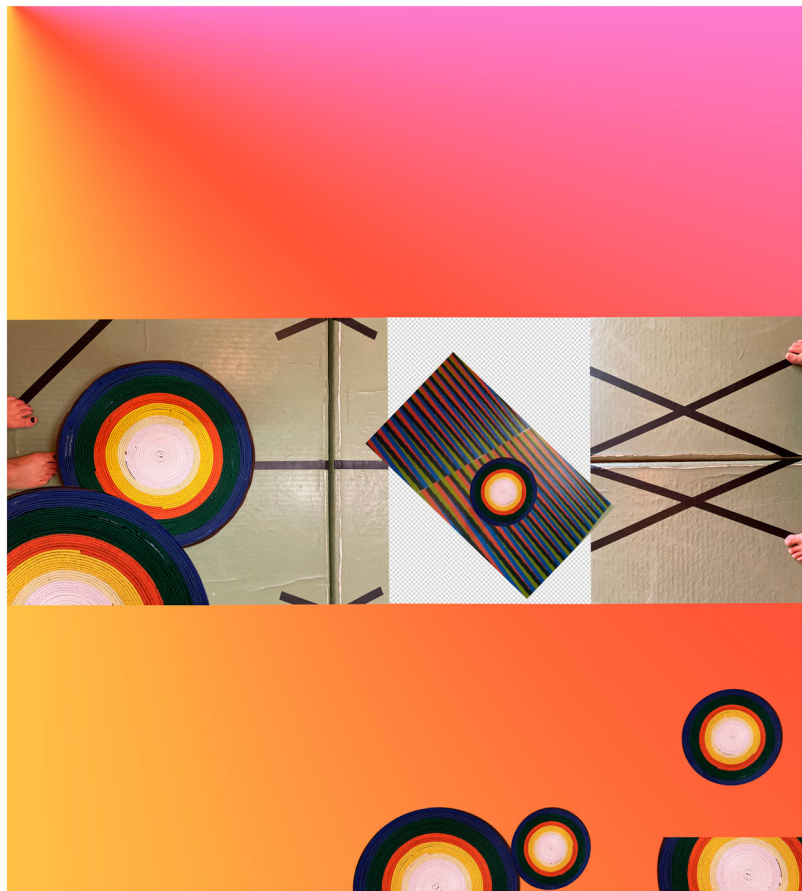


Fig. 4. Mariángeles Soto-Díaz. *Double Self-portrait with Judo Gi (Solo Practice)*, 2021.

with *Judo Gi (Solo Practice)*, 2021 (Fig. 4). a fractured representation by suturing disparate image fragments of judo practice, such as rolled judo belts of different colors arranged in compositions over grids, judo mats, color fields, and the artist's feet, as well as digital fragments of modern kinetic art such as a *Physichromie* by Carlos Cruz-Diez. These performative collages embody a "safe way to come back home"¹⁸ as well as a relational, collective futurity in self-portraiture.

Amalia Caputo (1964) is a photo and video artist, curator, and writer living in Miami. In 1992, she was awarded a scholarship to do a joint MFA at the International Center of Photography and NYU. Her plan was always to return to Venezuela, but she settled first in Barcelona, Spain, and then Miami. She has repeatedly explored the idea of home and belonging within her personal experience, conceptualized in key notions such as: "not having a place to return to (. . .) the idea that from the very condition of exile, we must flourish in the air, no land (. . .) the idea that one always resists optimism and despair in equal parts (. . .) the feeling of being orphans of a story that no longer belongs to us."¹⁹ Overarching in Caputo's work is memory and history, knowing that she is part of a story she did not choose, and that she needs to continue nurturing memory to preserve her uprooted histories steeped in affection and a sense of loss. In *Memorias del Olvido* (Memories of Oblivion), 2014, (Fig. 5), she used images of her childhood, altered them chemically, and digitized them. For Caputo, "If the photograph is erased, the memory is erased. However, the country, the place, and the moment of that image no longer exist, it is another, so it has also been deleted."²⁰ These images thus become "paradigms of (im)permanence."²¹ For

¹⁸ Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, written exchange with the artist, April 20, 2021.

¹⁹ Own translation, Amalia Caputo, written exchange with the artist, April 28, 2021.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ PDF by Amalia Caputo, April 7, 2021.



Fig. 5. Amalia Caputo. *Memorias del Olvido* (Memories of Oblivion), 2014.

mutatis mutandis, 2016-18, Caputo appropriated images of violence during the social uprisings in Caracas and combined them with her own photographs taken from a distance, creating thus a collectivity. This family of images provided a history that belongs to her despite her exile.

Alexander Apóstol (1969), a photographer and video artist focusing on the contemporary urban, cultural, and social landscape of Venezuela, traveled to Spain in 2002 for a residency, the same year as the attempted coup d'état. Apóstol postponed his return to Venezuela until 2015, when he decided to settle in Spain. He began to explore the identity of Caracas from the distance of his new place, leading him to understand both his personal history and the history of the city. As the years passed, the closeness of the lived experience was replaced by a focus on the history and changing circumstances of the country, an attempt to invoke something that was no longer there. Apóstol explains: "When I feel that I will never see the country that I left, that the city that was no longer is, or when I do not recognize myself within its space and its new dynamics, it is then (. . .) when my internal exile begins."²² *Régimen: Dramatis Personae* (Fig. 6, Cover), presented at the 12th Shanghai Biennial in 2018, is composed of one hundred photographic portraits, of characters that define contemporary Venezuelan society, ranging from the portrait of Simón Bolívar to anonymous individuals representative of the country's social fabric. Apóstol gives names to the anonymous citizens turned pawns in the current context. The artist worked in collaboration with an NGO and with transgender individuals as a way to conjugate the "pain of the construction of the identity of a transgender person, which is a life-long process, and the pain of the construction of the new Venezuelan society which will also take a lifetime."²³ According to Apóstol, the polarization in the post-Chavista era has created a simplified dynamic of heroes, victims, and negotiators or torturers. He then deploys a performative strategy to encapsulate their implicit duality.

A final theme central to exile is both the experience of migrating itself and the condition of the migrant. Blanca Haddad (1972) is an underground queer Venezuelan artist and poet of Middle Eastern background, living in Barcelona, Spain. She moved there in 2004, after a year of insomnia, but had left and returned to the country before. Haddad maintains that her role is to resist all forms of power; political, cultural, and institutional: "I never felt comfortable with the word exile, although now I feel practically exiled from the world. I am at a moment where I will not be comfortable anywhere for a long time."²⁴ She occupies a place of precariousness that she defines as *infra-modern*, a place of freedom, tenderness, and anger that she considers a-historical. It can be argued, however, that her refusal to occupy any place within the sanctioned present, means her position may be thought of as "supra historical," affirming the urgency of living reality in a vulnerable and stark way. *Untitled*, 2018 (Fig. 7), is an acrylic painting on an oversized advertising

²² Own translation. Alexander Apóstol, written exchange with the artist, May 2, 2021.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Own translation. Blanca Haddad, written exchange with the artist, April 19, 2021.



Fig. 6 (Cover). Alexander Apóstol. From *Régimen: Dramatis Personae* (El Héroe), 2018.

paper banner for Benneton that the artist found on the street in Barcelona. Haddad painted on the stolen banner to appropriate the “cool multiculturalism” it claimed to represent, but did it on the back of the banner in order to pinpoint the place that the majority of immigrants occupy, that is, the back of modernity and the State. Because the piece was so large, she had to destroy it after exhibiting it. This loss is both painful and liberating: “What is transcendent is the experience, not the place that this experience may occupy in history. My precariousness puts me in a non-historical place.” The only surviving photograph of this work shows the artist



Fig. 7. Blanca Haddad. *Untitled*, 2018.

treading with her boot on the rolled-up face of the Benetton Model, while a monumental painting stands behind her showing a large primitive-looking face with spiky hair, in graffiti style with rough black brushstrokes.

Pepe López (1966) is an artist living in Paris since 2014, whose work deals with the legacy of abstraction in contemporary art, identity, social, and political issues in Venezuela. López lived between Caracas and Paris for many years, until 2017 when he had to ship all his belongings to Europe. Before the objects traveled, he produced *Crisálida* (chrysalis), illustrating a personal history of the exile of the artist and his family, and as a ritual of closure (Fig. 8). *Crisálida* is an eighteen-meters long installation of two hundred personal objects wrapped in polyethylene film, such as clothes, a mattress, books, tools, a motorcycle, a machete, and the old paella pan that his grandparents brought to Venezuela when they migrated from Spain in the 1940s. During the exhibition, the artist did a performance where he wrapped himself in the same way as he had done with his belongings, becoming one more object. López writes: “Little by little, I have been building a group of works that share this confused emotion of eviction, of separation, of isolation, of estrangement, of



Fig. 8. Pepe López. *Crisálida* (Chrysalis), 2017.

²⁵ Own translation. Pepe López, written exchange with the artist, April 27, 2021.

being out of our own place, outside of ourselves.”²⁵ This sense of dislocation and suspense was already present in *Ambulantes* (Errant), 2007-ongoing, which emerged from his interest in homeless people and their shopping carts. When López produced *Crisálida*, he realized a close relationship existed between the two works: homeless people are also exiled, living in loss and isolation. In the same exhibition at Espacio Monitor, Caracas, he showed *País portátil*, 2017, a series of maps of Venezuela made with supermarket and plastic trash bags sewn together to encompass a circumscribed geographical territory on a humanly wearable scale, so that they could be worn as coats and accessories “no matter where you are.”²⁶

²⁶ Ibid.

These eight artists illustrate a broad range of notions of inner and outer exile in the context of the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, thus demonstrating the impossibility of a homogeneous experience. Physical exile or inner exile, neither are choices. As Rivas Rojas writes: “But it is also possible to insist on evoking a common past to establish the contrast between the before and now, to build a place in the world in which the origin has a specific but not determining weight and the right (. . .) to participate in the cultural context of the nation is not confiscated by distance.”²⁷ In contrast to the disengaged modernist tradition, these artists are profoundly engaged with the social and political crisis in the country, which is critical, imaginative, and existential.

²⁷ Raquel Rivas Rojas, “Ficciones diaspóricas,” 231.

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