

**From Modernism to Populism –  
Art as a discursive mirror of the Nation Brand**

**Abstract**

**Purpose-** This purpose of this paper is to examine the role played by the visual arts in expressing and shaping the nation brand. In doing so, it establishes the centrality of visual discourse in nation branding; illustrating that discursive strategies can directly alter the nation brand's perception.

**Design/ methodology/ approach-** This single case study drawing on depth interviews, field observation and secondary/historical material, applies mediated discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis to capture a transitional period in the cultural policies and nation branding rhetoric across a timeframe of 60 years.

**Findings-** This study establishes the visual arts as a significant carrier of meaning reflecting changes in national discourse. This analysis illustrates that publicly supported visual arts can articulate policy aspirations and provide insight into the power of competing national discourse which co-exists, thereby shaping the internal and external nation brand.

**Practical implications-**The paper establishes visual arts as central to expressing national identity and policy and a tool for examination of national identity and policy. More broadly, the paper establishes public support for the (visual) arts as central to organic and inorganic nation branding projects providing insight for those engaged in such campaigns to prioritize arts funding.

**Originality/value-** The authors' study indicates the marketing relevance of visualization of the nation through the arts and establishes the visual arts as a central tenant of the nation brand.

**Keywords** Nation brand, aesthetics, art, Mediated Discourse Analysis, policy

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2000, p. 57) argue for the acceptance of the nation as brand in - "we think about a nation in terms of the people and their culture rather than [...] in the abstract". Olins (2002) also defends the application of branding theory to nations by illustrating the benefit to understanding the complexity of nationhood within a broad socio-political and historical context. Distinguishing between imagery and propositional representation, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2000, p.59) state that images are not unified entities, retrieved as consistent wholes, but consist of fragments that can change over time: "the nation's image can be a signaling device to telegraph meaning in cryptic form, a meaning typically built up over years". Our paper investigates the role of the visual arts in nation branding, foregrounding the image as a signaling device.

It is important to consider brand images, including national ones, as mental constructs (Brown *et al.*, 2013). Image has to do with our mental representations or perceptions, whereas identity is about factual characteristics of the brand, product or nation (Dinnie, 2015). Building up a nation's image can be done organically or inorganically (Gunn, 1972), so that organic images are those molded by historical accounts and expressions of culture, and inorganic (or induced) images are purposefully selected by national governments and propagated through tourism campaigns, FDI incentives and even consumer goods (Leisen, 2001; Hankinson, 2004). Organic images - including the visual arts - are seen as lying "beyond the control of the destination area" given that governments should not directly control nor prescribe their nation's creative output (Leisen, 2001, p. 50).

By applying mediated discourse analysis (MDA) to two distinct Venezuelan art movements, we demonstrate how political discourses effectively seep into the production, dissemination and consumption of the arts, in turn playing a role in propagating a national brand image, revealing how seemingly organic imagery can induce a very particular national

image. In examining this shift in political discourse and its impact on the country's image, our study approaches the subject from a discursive and visual analysis perspective, unpacking how visual art contributes to producing a particular national brand for local and global audiences. Our study shows how the dominator/dominated can shift over time and how the combination of textual and visual discourse analysis can illuminate such power struggles. Wodak *et al.* (2009) acknowledge the need in many nation-branding contexts to engage in 'othering' to establish a perceived image, as clearly shown in the case of Venezuela with the arrival of the incoming government under Chávez.

Broadly, we understand how discourse consolidates collective meaning, explains the workings of our socially constructed world to us, and outlines social norms to abide by, essentially explicating, "why things are the way they are" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966/1991, p.111). Discourse shapes our practice at all levels (Scott, 2013), including our mental constructs of nations (Bhabha, 2004) or nation brands. Language and rhetoric - shaped by government policy aspiration - play a key role in determining discourse, so that changing the prevailing vocabulary can result in a palpable transformation of country image, as clearly illustrated in our case study on the Venezuelan art scene. According to institutional theorists (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011), there is a limit to the official discourses that can be used simultaneously, so that shifting prevailing rhetoric and language replaces older practices favoring new ones, as shown in our study.

We argue that visual art provides an ideal setting to study the dynamics between discourse and country branding as visual artists project outward an image (of the nation) through their work. More subtly, discursive shifts at government level will inadvertently trickle down into the visual arts through a redirection of cultural policies that then filter what art is selected for national representation. Our focus allows us to highlight the power of the visual and the prevalence of this in the case of Venezuela illustrates the centrality of the



visual in developing the image of the nation. We examine the discursive policy shifts and subsequent effects on the expression of national image in Venezuela's recent history, from projecting a modernist cultural movement – heralded by the country's Kinetic artists (during the 1950s to 1970s) – to a focus on a Populist discourse instigated by the Chávez administration.

Our study therefore offers theoretical, methodological and practical insights while contributing to the journal's ongoing discussions on sense of nationhood (Närvänen and Goulding, 2016). We demonstrate how focusing on the visual arts as a data source illuminates the power of different nation brand stakeholders, in reviewing the visual discourses popularized at particular points in the history of a nation. Visual art can be viewed as a mirror to understanding political change, and impact on the nation brand over time.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Nation Branding through the Arts***

Place branding is seen as the framing reputational assets to improve the profile and build on values and symbols that can derive from the physical place identity and contribute to developing place equity (Giovannardi *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, nation and place branding share similarities. What distinguishes them is the need to account for the political in the context of nation branding, as the naming implies and 'official' branding strategy aimed at broad stakeholders beyond attracting visitors or investment.

Anderson's (2006) work has been influential in shaping our understanding of nation branding (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2012; Wojak *et al.*, 2009) and the role of brands in shaping communities (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008). Books, films and other cultural artifacts contribute to creating these imagined communities, through organic imagery. Dinnie (2015, p. 5) defines nation brands as "the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the

nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences”. Culture is understood to be “the mechanism through which individuals, communities and nations define themselves” (Yeoman *et al.*, 2009, p. 6) and since the eighteenth and nineteenth century, public museums have played a part in this (Bennett, 1995). Governments financially support cultural institutions to project an identity for local and foreign audiences, thereby utilizing nation branding to communicate the country’s competitive advantage. The State may also play a substantial role in temporary events, such as art festivals and biennials (Rodner *et al.*, 2011).

Traditional diplomacy bolsters brand building and reputation management (Van Ham, 2008). Art and culture have been used by politicians to transform a national image globally, applying what Nye (2004, p. x) termed “soft power”; projecting for diplomatic purposes “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies”. South Korea demonstrates how recent industrial and cultural policy results in a popularization of its national brand (Huang, 2011). Prior studies have shown the significance of supporting and exporting art and culture ranging from film (Akinola, 2013), television (Castelló, 2007), literature (Yip, 2004) and music (Madichie, 2011).

While studies on nation branding and the arts are limited, a number of studies have identified the centrality of the arts to place branding. These studies have focused on the strategies and implications for specific places, rather than nations, with a focus on visiting rather than the evolution of the nation brand. Rentschler *et al.* (2012) and Patterson (2010) position culture as central within urban development contexts. However, the significance of visual art movements in contributing to national brand discourse has not previously been considered. Given the acknowledgement of the importance of soft power in establishing and communicating national identity, there is a need to consider the role of visual arts in establishing and communicating a national brand.

Place branding literature has acknowledged the complexity involved in balancing the needs of multiple, sometimes conflicting, stakeholders (Merrilees *et al.*, 2012; Trueman *et al.*, 2004; Virgo and de Chernatony, 2006). This is exacerbated at the level of nation (see Pomeroy, 2013 on indigenous identity in Australia). In their nation branding efforts, governments “formulate, communicate and assimilate [a] vision” that projects a clear, unique and differentiated national image to local and global consumers and stakeholders (Balakhrisnan, 2009, p. 613; see also Kaplan *et al.*, 2010). Nation branding therefore can be seen as a “tool for communication between the country and the rest of the world” (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2012, p. 319), where governments consider art and culture as powerful not only for social policy purposes but also for nation branding (Anholt, 2009; Dinnie, 2010; Niesing, 2013).

Närvänen and Goulding (2016, p. 1522), found national identity could “ignite the cultural imagination” of local consumers via strong, pseudo-patriotic associations. Consequently, national brands can be “appropriated, resignified and reinvented in the light of cultural and national preferences and norms” (Närvänen and Goulding, 2016, p. 1541). The image of *nation-ness* can be limited to an idealized projection of the country to a global public, focusing on desirable, easily consumed stereotypes (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2000), or include interpretations of more marginalized social groups (Cooke, 2014). Next we examine the projection of contrasting images of *Venezuelaness* in light of recent macroenvironmental shifts.

### *Brand Venezuela*

Marketing and management narratives continue to focus on ‘global market’ discourses, where “the West is clearly dominant” (Quemin, 2012, p. 57). Empirical findings from peripheral markets, such as Venezuela’s, remain marginalized in contributing to theory.

Such settings, however, allow us to assess the impact of discourse in the construction, legitimization, transformation and propagation of a national image for local and global audiences, due in great part to their political volatility and socio-economic changefulness.

Although Venezuela has a rich history of colonial and postcolonial artists, our paper focuses on two key periods or movements; Kinetic artists of the country's modernization era and the expressions of Populism emerging during the Chávez administration. The Kinetic artists' work lies within the framework of Venezuela's Modernism, hence their work is considered an expression of modern art. Although other texts unpack the intricacies of Modernity and modern society (see for instance Hall *et al.*, 1996), Harrison and Wood (2003) detail the distinction between modernization, modernity and Modernism within art. Modernization refers to the industrialization and the "growing impact of the machine", whereas modernity refers to how such changes influenced society and culture at a time of modernization, meaning that it is a "form of experience, an awareness of change and adaptation to change", and finally Modernism refers to the "representation of that inchoate experience of the new" (Harrison and Wood, 2003, p. 128). The Kinetic artists responded to the country's modernization and drive for industrialization that characterized Venezuela during the second half of the twentieth century, with an inherently modern art movement. Our findings show that, the Venezuelan Kinetic masters wove elements of the country's strive for modernization into their artistic output, meaning that their abstract geometric work seamlessly complimented the modern ethos (and discourse) of the nation under construction. Contrastingly, contemporary Venezuelan Populist artists reflect the political discourse heralded by the country's Socialist leaders, with clear representations of national icons, folkloric art forms, historical references, and a desire for collectivism and inclusion.

The Kinetic masters' geometric abstraction complemented the nation's effort to brand itself as 'modern', 'progressive' and 'globally relevant'. When oil prices rose in the 1970s,

Venezuela's art scene rode the crest of the wave. As oil prices fell, official overspending and mounting debt ended in economic crisis and currency devaluation. This volatile socio-political context was no longer able to host Kinetic art's "liberating sense of playfulness" and socio-political disinterestedness, and a new generation of artists "responded by creating socially and politically engaged art" (MoMA, 1992, p. 43, 45). This new generation of visual artists were viewed as snubbing Modernism in their Neo-figurative return to their nation's Pre-Columbian heritage, the "earthly paradise" of Latin America before the Conquest (Barnitz, 2001, p. 311). By the 1980s there was a new wave of Venezuelan conceptual artists, whose intellectual message outweighed the medium or execution of the work itself. A couple of decades (and several *coup d'états*) later, Chávez's administration projected a brand new image for the country, where cultural activities centered round a populist discourse of Socialism for the twenty-first century (Bruce, 2008; Carroll, 2013). Although art movements preceded and followed the Kinetic masters, our focus on these moments in Venezuela's history capture two critical shifts in discourse, which influenced the country's brand image through cultural production. Our study reveals how the new brand image projected by Chávez (and continued by his successor after his untimely death in 2013) aimed to break away from Neoliberal, postcolonial, Western hegemony to revitalize local narratives, folkloric imagery, national icons, heritage, and popular art in a drive for *Venezuelanness* and an ethnic identity depicted through the country's cultural expressions.

Venezuela offers an illuminating cultural context to study volatile shifts in political discourse, slippages of category (in Bhabha's, 2004 term), and how these changes impacted the national image being constructed and subjectively projected through the arts. Our temporal comparison of country image projected through visual art shows how Venezuela's national identity shifted from one of global positioning and expression of modernity, to one

of self-ostracization from the global economy, focusing on an ethnic identity and the promotion of a populist discourse.

### **Research Methods –Discursive Construction of National Identity**

Our study examines discursive policy shifts and subsequent effects on the expression of Venezuela's national image through its artistic output, namely visual art. Our analysis incorporates both text and visual data in providing a rich account of the evolution of the nation brand, therefore combining logo-centric and visual analytical methods. We couple our qualitative primary data gathered through in-depth interviews, fieldwork, and textual analysis of secondary data sources with analysis of the visual – that is using works of art and the contextual setting as units of analysis - to reveal the evolution of the power discourses at play within our study. As a method, MDA aims to explicate “the socio-cultural production of group identities, boundaries, and the discursive process of ‘othering’” (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2011, p. 70; see also Scollon, 2001a). In a Constructivist vein, MDA helps us in our understanding of how more general macro-social-political discourses become part of our “embodied-life” (Scollon, 2001b). Although it is understood that MDA borrows from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Norris and Jones, 2005), the key distinguishing factor is the shift from CDA's ‘discourse *as* action’ to ‘discourse *in* action’, with the specific focus of MDA being on these actions. Norris and Jones (2005) refer to the broad scope of enquiry of MDA to include objects, non-verbal sounds, gestures and the built environment. Therefore, in MDA the focus is on the nexus, that is, the interaction of discourses and social actions. As a method, MDA offers us some pertinent questions to consider, namely what is the action being taken and what is the role of discourse in this action (Scollon, 2001a). Our data analysis answers such questions regarding the discursive shifts that impacted Venezuela.

Wodak *et al.* (2009) noted how CDA aims to unpack how discourse can construct specific social conditions, restore or legitimize the status quo, maintain or perpetuate the status quo, and lastly transform or even destroy the status quo. We assume, like Wodak *et al.* (2009, p. 4) that such national identities are “produced and reproduced, as well as transformed and dismantled, *discursively*”. CDA complements studies on nation branding, where the method can shed “light on the largely contingent and imaginary character of nation and to sharpen awareness of a dogmatic essentialist and naturalisation conceptions of nation and national identity” (Wodak, *et al.* 2009, p. 9; see also Wodak, 2013). Ontologically, we see reality as perceived and constructed by our participants and via various sources of secondary data. We present our participants’ perspectives on reality, coupled with published accounts in order to understand the discourse of the nation prioritized. Our data consists of interviews, field observation, and secondary data from published interviews with key stakeholders and other pertinent historical material. We use these multifarious sources of primary and secondary data in our findings so as to weave a cohesive story, whereby the media interview material affords a longitudinal interpretation of the events, government policies and nation branding strategies that took place in Venezuela’s recent history.

Our participants were 31 art professionals active in the museum field, government agencies, education, private arts sector, visual artists, or who worked as independent curators and dealers (see **Table 1**). These high status professionals are well placed to identify the shift in discourse that Venezuela’s art scene projected to the world. Interviews and field observation took place in Caracas as the country’s cultural hub and where the formerly elite in the local art scene continue to operate.

**Table 1. Participants in the study**

Name	Role in the art world
<b>María</b>	Venezuelan pavilion curator 2009, curator at Museum of Fine Arts (Caracas)
<b>Berenice</b>	Artist representing Venezuela at Venice Biennale (2009)
<b>David</b>	Artist representing Venezuela at Venice Biennale (2009)
<b>Alana</b>	Dealer, art restorer
<b>Rigoberto</b>	Art critic, art educator (Central University Venezuela)
<b>Claudia</b>	Curator Museum of Fine Arts (Caracas), Manager <i>Romulo Gallegos Centre for Latin American Studies (CELARG)</i>
<b>Fernanda</b>	Curator Museum of Contemporary Art (Caracas), art historian and critic
<b>Mauricio</b>	Independent curator, art critic, gallerista
<b>Jorge</b>	Art critic, curator, co-founder (director) <i>Los Galpones Art Centre</i>
<b>Felipe</b>	Curator at Modern Art Museum Jesús Soto (Ciudad Bolívar), art scholar ( <i>Central University Venezuela</i> )
<b>Isaac</b>	Visual artist, art restorer Carlos Cruz Diez Studio
<b>Gustavo</b>	Art critic, independent curator
<b>Bianca</b>	Art critic/magazine ( <i>Arte al Dia Internacional</i> )
<b>Elizabeth</b>	Gallerista, sales manager ( <i>Galería Freites</i> )
<b>Leopoldo</b>	Gallerista, curator National Gallery (Caracas)
<b>Paloma</b>	Museum professional at <i>National Council for Culture</i> , art restorer
<b>Nelson</b>	Visual Artist, independent curator and art restorer
<b>Carmelo</b>	Visual Artist and art restorer
<b>Tamara</b>	Curator Alejandro Otero Museum (Caracas), curator of Mercantil Bank Corporate Collection/Mercantil foundation
<b>Jacobo</b>	Visual artist
<b>Armando</b>	Chief curator ( <i>Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros</i> ) Art critic and historian
<b>Amanda</b>	Gallerista ( <i>Faría Fábregas Gallery</i> )
<b>Roberto</b>	Visual artist
<b>Amapola</b>	Museum director (Jacobo Borges Museum, Caracas); museum director (Cruz Diez Museum, Caracas); gallerista; Director of Culture for the Federal Government (Gsiete)
<b>Fermín</b>	Art educator, co-founder <i>Los Galpones Art Centre</i>
<b>Linda</b>	Gallerista ( <i>ArTepuy</i> )
<b>Rocío</b>	Curator ( <i>Sala TAC</i> )
<b>Nicolas</b>	Gallerista ( <i>D'Museo Gallery</i> ), founder and manager <i>Feria Iberoamericana de Arte</i>
<b>Mafalda</b>	Manager <i>Atelier Carlos Cruz Diez</i> (Paris studio)
<b>Humberto</b>	Gallerista (co-founder <i>Faría Fábregas Gallery</i> )
<b>Dan</b>	Post War/contemporary specialist (Christie's)

Our data were analyzed by applying a series of questions. From MDA, we asked: What is the action, and what is the role of discourse in this action? We drew on Wodak *et al.* (2009, p.8) to classify the discourses in terms of their discursive role: the production and construction of specific social conditions, the “restoration, legitimation, and relativisation of a social status quo”, maintenance and reproduction of the status quo, and lastly “transforming, dismantling,



or even destroying the status quo”. In our analysis we answer each of these discursive questions for each of the art movements studied.

## **Findings**

The following section presents the discourses at play during the two distinct periods of artistic change, highlighting the importance of discourse in establishing and communicating a nation brand. Although other art movements have come and gone during our chosen timeframe, the country’s Kinetic and Populist art movements demonstrate how (opposing) political discourses directly impacted the production, dissemination and consumption of the arts, hence portraying a distinct brand image for the nation. In examining these discursive policy shifts and the effects on Venezuela’s national image, our study contributes to the ongoing narrative on nation branding, namely, the centrality of visual art in the development and understanding of nation brands and the utility of surveying the visual arts in order to understand the discourses of power between various stakeholders. We particularly make the case for examining visual expressions of art in order to understand the articulation of policy and how this may shift over time. In tune with our methodological framework, in this section we revert back to our analytical questions, firstly by unpacking which (nation branding) actions are taking place during each of these art movements and how discourse impacts this action and secondly categorizing the role of discourse during these moments of discernable change.

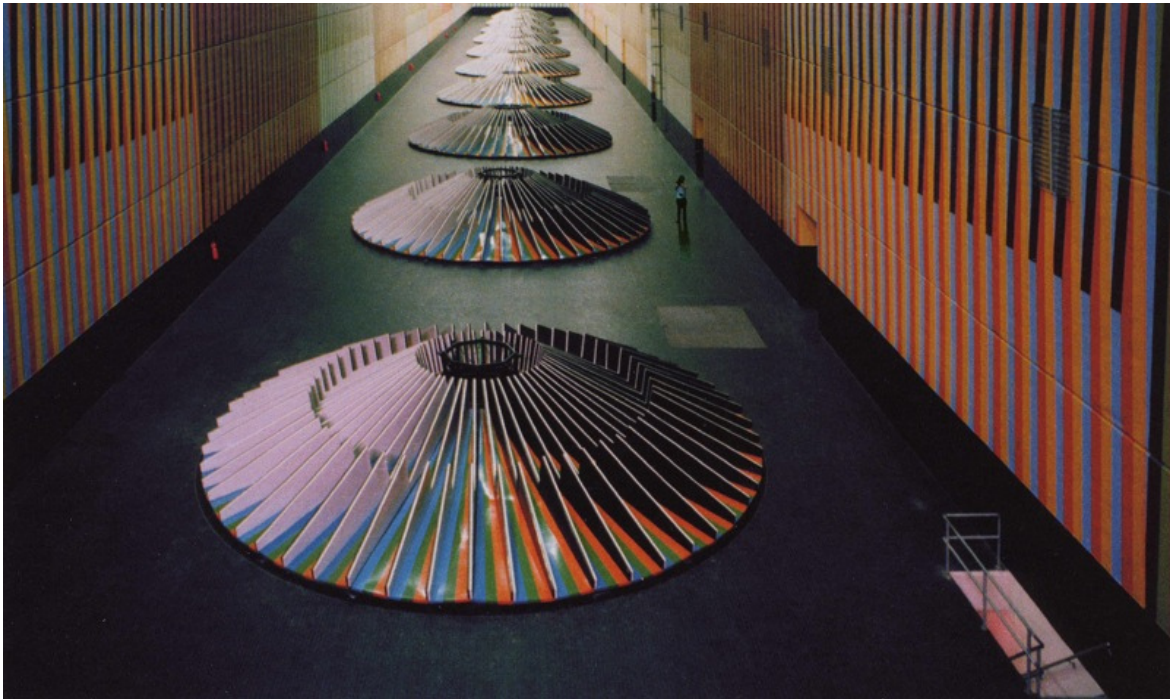
### ***A drive for modernization & the rise of Kinetic art***

During the country’s last dictatorship (1952-1958), *nationalism and Modernism were fused together* [Jorge], so that a discourse centred round modernization went hand in hand with a Modernist movement in the arts. During this fervent industrialization, Venezuela

underwent rapid modernization under the leadership of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who used the increased oil prices to invest in the country's infrastructure and development: roads, avenues and cross-country motorways were built; mines were open; basic service facilities including hospitals, schools and the country's first university were constructed; large government housing projects were erected; hotels, cable-cars and military bases were made; and the country's most important source of energy to this day, the Guri hydroelectric dam was inaugurated. **Plate 1** shows a Kinetic art installation by Carlos Cruz Diez at the Guri dam, commissioned by the state. The merging of art and infrastructure here indicates the centrality of the Kinetic artists to this positioning of Venezuela as progressive.

Under Pérez Jiménez the country enjoyed prosperity that trickled down into the arts. Local historian, Jiménez (2008) noted “a spirited enthusiasm for modernization” (p. 82) inspired a surge in public building, including the arts. This peaked in the mid 1970s with the nationalization of oil when Venezuela purposefully invested in its cultural panorama, establishing the main fine art museums. Venezuela was presented as;

*[...] a modern nation [and] in modern countries one has modern museums, museums full of people, museums where people touch the exhibits, learn things, enjoy themselves.... And that was the [sort of] city that was taking shape. [Fermin]*



**Plate 1. Chromatic environment (Ambientación Cromática) by Carlos Cruz Diez (1977) Guri hydroelectric dam, Bolivar state, Venezuela. Source: McFadden (2010); “Chromatic Environment Ten circular Chromostructures and Walls of Additive Color. Machine room number 1, Raúl Leoni Hydroelectric Plant. Guri 1977-1986” by Maryellen McFadde/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.**

In its desire to be modern, Venezuela looked to Europe and North America, mimicking foreign art world models. An example of this mimicry lies in the creation of *Museum Plaza* (in downtown Caracas) as the hub of the city’s main museums, theatres, and cultural centers emulating the purposeful clustering of culture in cities like Madrid and New York. Another example of this drive for modernization is the Central University campus (*UCV*), considered a “synthesis of all the arts” (Negrón, 2008, p. 57), with elements of sculpture, architectural design, painting and music. Developed by local architect Carlos Raul Villanueva, the university’s emphasis on Abstract, Optical and Geometric art forms within an academic environment encouraged the development of the Kinetic movement in the country (Traba, 1994). Villanueva’s legacy is presented as playing “a key role in building and shaping Venezuela” (Pintó, 2008, p. 349), so much so that to this day:

[...] it is fascinating to see modernism still standing in the shape of buildings and art throughout the city and, especially, in the superb modern project of the Ciudad

Universitaria de Caracas [the *UCV*'s campus]. One of the highlights of this campus is the display of public art that connects buildings, green zones, libraries and internal roads [...] By bringing artists into the design team, Villanueva intended to find solutions to the urban problems faced by modern cities by using art as a bridge between public and private space thus humanizing the urban experience.

(Davila-Villa, 2008)

Projects such as the Central University campus and *Museum Plaza* are considered in the data as foregrounding visual art in articulating the official nation brand. Weaving a modernization discourse with cutting-edge contemporary Abstract and Geometric art of the moment in turn attracted others to Venezuela's cultural melting pot. Curator-turned-gallery owner, Amapola states

*[...] thanks to the country's cultural policies of the time, Venezuela was one of the first countries in Latin America to welcome Modernism...with an enormous influx of visual artists, writers, musicians that arrived during the 1950s and 1960s, Venezuela was bubbling with activity... as if the nation was anxious to be part of all that culture that was also bubbling at the time, particularly in Europe.*

Such testimonials, repeated among our informants and analyzed texts, reveal Venezuela's desire to be part of the global art scene and a strong internalized discourse among the country's cultural community. According to art critic, Marta Traba, Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil are considered "open to outside influences and exchanges", in contrast to the "oyster" or closed countries, Peru, Colombia and Ecuador, which are more reliant on indigenous aesthetic and thematic influences (Jiménez, 2008, p. 90). Our data established a

strong agreement among the art establishment that the modernization project was linked to the support for modern art and artists.

Venezuela has a long history of emulating foreign models in their pursuit of global positioning. Painters of the nineteenth century received government funding to study in Europe to perfect their French Realist techniques, in turn reinforcing the European tendencies in Venezuelan academic art (Esteva-Grillet, 2009a). A century and a half later and Venezuela's Kinetic masters also trained and lived in Europe. In their study on ethnocentrism and arts consumption, Kottasz and Bennett (2006) found that art audiences shape their artistic taste due to early exposure to specific artworks, rather than an inherent preference for national art. Therefore, we see how Venezuela's art audiences during the Modernist period were conditioned to accept foreign influences and consequently embrace a globally relevant national brand.

Although Venezuela had looked to the dominant West for inspiration, the Kinetic artists were viewed as being distinctive from previous artistic movements. Rather than being a *late echo of the first world* [Armando], the Kinetic artists were depicted as a new artistic movement that would be triumphantly produced, disseminated and consumed both at home and abroad. Their approach to geometric abstraction was considered both aesthetically ground-breaking but also inherently global: with no discernable Venezuelan (nor Latin American) traits, Kinetic art could quite literally have come from *anywhere*. This also meant that *anyone* in the world could relate to the work based on aesthetics and technique alone. More than a regionally specific art movement, Kinetic art is seen as a globally recognized genre. Here we unpack further how this globally relatable discourse went hand in hand with the nation's desired brand image of modernity.

Kineticism was heralded by three key artists: Alejandro Otero (1921-1990), Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005) and Carlos Cruz-Diez (b. 1923), whose work "addressed the

intangible forces of the space age, cosmic energy, and the effects of these on the human psyche” (Barnitz, 2001, p. 199). As Venezuela looked to the future, Kinetic artists adopted “a type of expression in which figuration would totally disappear” explains Boulton (1973, p. 173), with their use of geometry, colour, and light creating illusions of space and sophisticated optical tricks. Conceptual, intellectual, cosmopolitan, abstract, chromatic and “pure”, Kinetic art was seen as responding strongly to Venezuela’s cultural needs at the time. Instead of playing catch-up to the dominant Western art discourses, as is customary for peripheral markets, the Kinetic movement was seen as an artistic trailblazer, with international artists following the lead of the Venezuelan masters (cf. Otero, Soto and Cruz Diez).

Armando insists on the importance of *weaving artists into the historical and cultural context of the nation itself*. The inscription of an artist’s discourse into a historical context being a crucial piece in the (legitimation) puzzle. As well as being inscribed into Venezuela’s art historical context, Kinetic master Jesus Soto was legitimized on the French art market, having lived and worked in Paris for much of his life. Soto has been the only artist to place Venezuela firmly on the global art ‘map’. In a Venezuela where “technique was God”, Jesús Soto was “its prophet” (Traba, 2008, p. 280), and according to Alana his success lies in his capacity of *engendering a whole art movement [so that] he pioneered Kinetic art on a global scale*. Moving between Paris and Venezuela, Soto remains the country’s most globally renowned artist. Soto’s international success is seen as his having “stood for a progressive and forward-looking model of a Latin America that could be in full and complete dialogue with the rest of the world” (CPPC Director Pérez-Barreiro cited in Jiménez, 2011, p. 6). Testifying to Soto’s art historical relevance, Alana notes how the best Modern/Contemporary art museums across the world have at least one Soto and major auction houses continue to

feature exemplars of Soto's work in their Post-war/Contemporary sales. The Kinetic artists and their work were central to the external positioning of Venezuela intellectually.

The Kinetic masters, above other visual artists of the time, benefited from official government backing, public commissions and national exposure. Jiménez talks of the Kinetic artists as “intervening in urban spaces”, so that these artists

[...] had truly exceptional opportunities to execute their ideas [...] realize their desire to produce work that could break free from the limitations of the museum. The great public works constructed in Venezuela during the 1970s and 1980s [...] gave them some of their most important opportunities.

(2010, p. 103)

Local museum curator Fernanda observes how these artists' work projected an image of a modern nation

*[...] they contributed a lot to the image of the modern country, a thriving country, a developing country, an optimistic country... there was a chemistry between what the country wanted to do and the image that these artists projected.*

These artists' work, continues to dominate local and international art markets over other examples of Venezuelan artists, including the more recent Populist artists. Art restorer and dealer, Alana equates the Kinetic masters with a *brand* that all collectors want to buy into, with signature pieces by the artists selling the most on the secondary art market. As a secure investment (or brand), the Kinetic masters continue to attract considerable attention within the context of Latin American art, where collectors *value the work and value the artists of that era*, explains Cruz Diez art restorer, Isaac. He explains that Venezuelans purchasing ‘a Soto’, ‘a Cruz Diez’ and to a lesser extent ‘an Otero’, buy into the brand

Venezuela used to represent: a cutting-edge, globally-relevant, modern society explain Alana, Paloma, and Carmelo.

Apart from private ownership, public commissions were placed in prominent areas of the capital becoming part of every day life. **Plate 2** below shows the *Caracas Sphere*, installed off a main highway in the capital, and **Plate 3** shows the ceiling installation at the Teresa Carreño Theatre in Caracas, both by Jesus Soto, ensuring that his work has broad and bold visibility.



**Plate 2. The Caracas Sphere (*La esfera de Caracas*) by Jesús Soto off the Francisco Fajardo Highway, Caracas, Venezuela was designed in 1974 and installed in its current location in 1996. Source: Fieldwork photography (2010).**

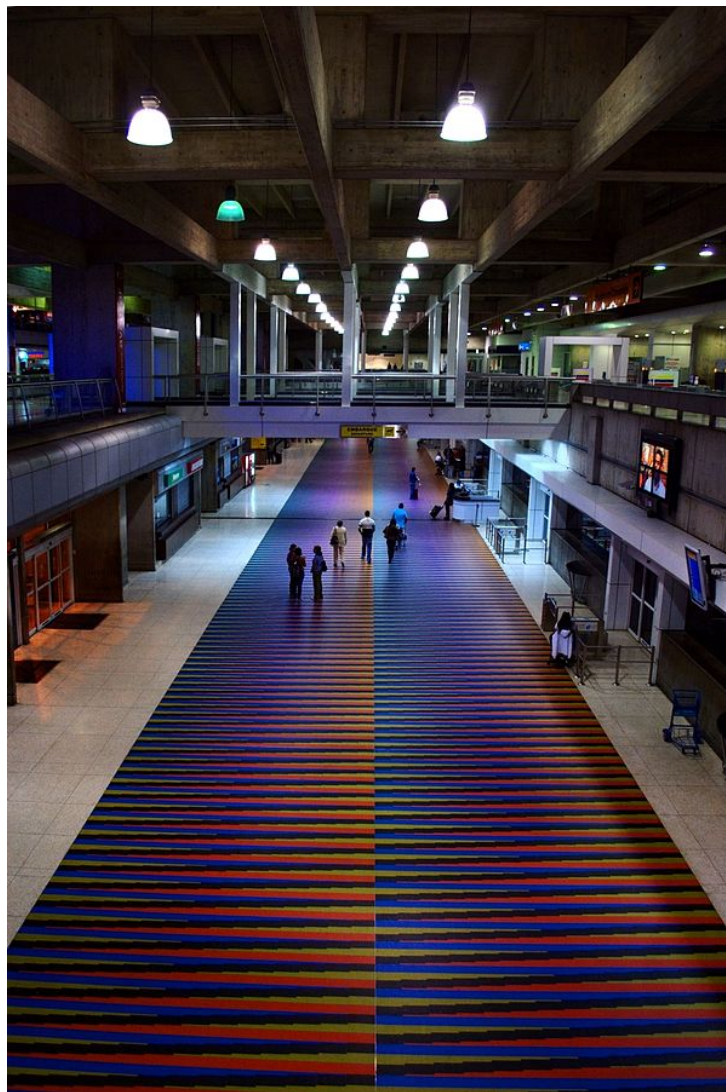




**Plate 3. Jesús Soto ceiling installation (white cubes on yellow projection) in the foyer of the Teresa Carreño theatre in Caracas (1983). Source: Rodriguez (2012); “Stairs at Teresa Carreño Theatre” by Wilfredo Rodriguez/ CC BY SA 3.0**

As one exits the country there is a reminder of the significance of the Kinetic masters at Simón Bolívar International Airport with Carlos Cruz Diez’s signature style spread across the building’s floor (**Plate 4**).

The positioning of these works at key transport hubs recognizes the power of the visual in establishing a nation brand. Supporting this placement which exposes residents moving around the city to these Kinetic works can be seen as a powerful reminder of the desire for Venezuela to be modern. Their continued visual dominance in the landscape ensures this view of the nation brand, which is not in keeping with current political ambitions for Venezuela, is still present in the daily lives of Venezuelans.



**Plate 4. Floor designed by Carlos Cruz Diez (installed between 1974-1978) at Simón Bolívar International Airport, Caracas, Venezuela. Source: Hernández Aponte (2012); by David Hernández Aponte/CC BY-SA 3.0.**

Outside the country, the Kinetic artists were co-opted into the government's own modernization discourse (and nation branding strategy), as their globally relevant, culturally

legitimized work, could contribute to revoking some of the negative images of a once peripheral Venezuela, placing their art movement and by association their national brand, on the global map. The success of these Venezuelan artists abroad consequently projected a positive and modern image of Venezuela in general, explains Armando. Art curator Felipe refers to the Kinetic artists as the *sacred cows* of Venezuela's modernization, who continue to be venerated for their aesthetic movement and co-branding of a nation under construction:

*The government took advantage of their [the Kinetic artists'] international exposure to promote the country. The government had a very clear idea of what they wanted to achieve ... where they wanted to take the country [so that] they became the 'official artists' for the country, a country that wanted to have an international presence.*

During the country's boom years of the 1950s-1970s when oil was nationalized and there was a modernization frenzy, a national discourse centered round 'modernity' overshadowed everything else. Public and private funding supported the work of the Kinetic masters as they projected a desirable image of a cutting-edge and influential Venezuela at home and abroad. By supporting the Kinetic artists through commissions and dissemination, the government at that time deployed these discourses to indicate the desired nation brand. To answer our second discursive question, we see how during Venezuela's modernization period there was a purposeful construction of specific social conditions to support the Kinetic artists' work, whilst legitimizing the work of these artists for both local and international audiences.

### ***Populism & Nationhood seep into the arts***

Under Chávez, government policies in Venezuela were redirected and localized populism over globalized modernism became the focus of the new desired nation brand. Here, we unpack how the country moved from mimicry and purposeful positioning on the

global playing field toward a desired emancipation from global structures under Chávez's leadership, as well as a distancing from already legitimized norms and practices as a means of discursive action. Through the new political rhetoric, the government hoped to dismantle the status quo (in the arts and beyond), establishing an alternative *modus operandi* for the country. Looking initially at the context from which this political discourse emerged, we then demonstrate how the government projected a new desired image for the nation through support for visual art.

After his initial victory in 1998, Chávez lamented the frail conditions of the country that he had inherited: "I was the head of state, but what kind of state? A ship of a state that was rapidly sinking" (Chávez and Guevara, 2006, p. 34), which he promised to finally "sink" with his revolution as a means of washing away a decrepit political system and replacing it with a new socialist one. Despite its petro-wealth, Venezuela had suffered immense socio-economic inequality and high levels of poverty for most of its history. Chávez's Populist discourse resonated with the people, similarly to other populist movements which have pitted the elites against 'the masses'. Through his discourse, Chávez aimed to reconfigure a nation in need, breaking away from the prevailing economic system, making new friends, blaming new enemies, and writing new constitutions. According to Barrera-Tyszak (2016, p. 17):

"Chávez proposed a new narrative of the country from the perspective of the poor, in the voice of the laboring classes where [the country's] wealth ... needed to be recuperated and shared out by a strongman, by a leader in uniform".

As political leader Chávez "turned populism into an emotional experience, presenting the country with a radical choice: you're either with me or against me" (Barrere-Tyszak, 2016, p. 18), resulting in a strong sense of 'othering' during his administration. Accordingly,

the Minister of Culture – Francisco Sesto – assured that those who did not sympathize with the revolution would jeopardize financial support for their creative output (Wisotzki, 2006): the government supported artists who supported them. Minister Sesto shared Chávez's revolutionary zeal, arguing for dramatic changes to be made:

It is true that some people or sectors don't like dramatic changes and prefer things to 'evolve', especially if they can control that 'evolution'. Well, I'm sorry to say – this is a revolution [...] We have to stop caring if those in the North will accept us, if we can be part of their dubious list... if international critics will talk fondly about our art. The path cannot be mimicry

(our translation, Minister of Culture Francisco Sesto in Wisotki, 2006, p. 9, 13)

As government policies embraced a new rhetoric of forceful distancing from the 'dominant' North, public sector organizations - including cultural institutions - were used to project an official message regarding a new and decisive country image. The break was not only from foreign influences, but also from the local cultural elite, which previously dominated the sector. This cultural elite had also been 'tainted' owing to their professional development overseas and ties with cultural institutions abroad. Minister Francisco Sesto lamented how the country's cultural policies had been created *by* and *for* the elite, ignoring the needs and tastes of the masses (Wisotki, 2006). President Chávez announced that

The time has come to propel the creative and liberating cultural revolution [...] but it is hard in the world of culture [because it] has been made elite [...] princes, kings, heirs, families have taken over state institutions [believing that] they are autonomous

(our translation, President Hugo Chávez, *Aló Presidente*, No. 59, 21.01.2001)

Chávez's colourful discourse and enigmatic personality brought the Bolivarian Revolution (named after the iconic war hero) to life and new curatorial activities introduced by the incoming government were re-aligned with altered political ideology, so that ideals on inclusion and glorification of Populist discourse overshadowed previously (and globally) legitimized practices and values. The cultural scene under Chávez *would show the world what the 'real' Venezuela was all about*, adopting a more autochthonous and nationalist curatorial discourse [Felipe]. On this 'real' image of Venezuela, Felipe adds how *everything that had been done in the previous administrations was a vulgar and subordinate copy of the dominant art centers of the world [western art practice] and NOW we are showing real Venezuelan culture*. Cultural policies now favoured an inward approach to cultural production and dissemination; expressions of popular culture and indigenous art were highly protected under the new laws such as *Ley Orgánica de Cultura* of 2005 and popular art forms were thought to capture the essence of Venezuela. Minister Sesto calls for artists to look inwards, to their Latin American roots, for inspiration: "if you are not from a specific place, if you do not recognize your roots, you are no one" (our translation, Minister of Culture Francisco Sesto in Wisotki, 2006, p. 18). Discursively, this mantra is worlds apart from the regional-neutrality that characterized the Kinetic artists.

Art under Chávez moved towards more locally relevant representations of folkloric and national iconography, musical customs, indigenous heritage, and patriotic emblems, depicted in a figurative, and sometimes naïve style [Claudia]. The genre that best captured the country's new image of 'Socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (Bruce, 2008) was Popular art, and although the genre had always existed, it was seen by the cultural elite to be *overvalued* by the government and deemed the *only art form worthy of public support*, explains Armando. Noticing this trend, Esteva-Grillet explains how there had been a significant drop in art criticism centred round fine art, but "a fast flowing number of supposedly 'community'



or ‘alternative’ leaflets which only have room for Popular Art” (Esteva-Grillet, 2009b). Similar to the narrow focus on Kinetic artists at the height of the country’s modernization, Humberto notes how the current government *is only interested in promoting a certain type of culture... in supporting a cultural image that complements what they [the party] are trying to achieve in ideological terms*, implying that Popular art carries with it a discernable political if not revolutionary message (Khan, 2013).

Popular artists were commissioned to decorate murals depicting strong political messages. As Venezuela sought to rebrand under the new regime, mural art became a good source of income for self-taught or less privileged artists, some showing considerable craftsmanship [Rigoberto].

Beyond patriotic imagery or political idolizing (see **Plate 5**), mural paintings may include political slogans such as ‘*Venezuela is now ours*’, making the *revolutionary message* loud and clear for all to see, explains Rigoberto.



**Plate 5. Chávez mural to mark the first anniversary of the president’s death by Colombian-born artist Nikolay Shamaniko, Caracas, Venezuela. (source: The Photographer (2014); The Photographer / CCO 1.0.**

Popular art was a *banner* for the country to project a message of appropriation and authenticity explains Claudia.

Considering the legitimization of art movements and inclusion of visual artists into an institutional framework, another government rebranding strategy was the opening up of the museum network not for all to visit but for all to exhibit. In keeping with contemporary political rhetoric, *everyone has a right to submit their 'artwork' to the museum because under Socialism we are all equal*, explains Paloma. The Ministry of Culture created several platforms (mainly at Mega Exhibits) where amateur artists could exhibit their work (alongside established artists) in museums and national galleries for all to see. Minister Sesto explains how

“[...] we all have the capacity of [artistic] expression [...] all of us absolutely all of us have the ability of creativity... It is part of our human condition [...] the job of the state is to encourage, stimulate, facilitate, showcase and collect” this creative output (our translation cited in Wisotki, 2006, p. 23).

These mega-exhibits interspersed works by artists, artisans, and amateur artists without consideration of their training, career, artistic vision or genre. Local curator Federica Palomero, saw this drive for inclusion as misinterpretation by the government:

“[...] inclusion does not mean that any artist, artisan or art enthusiast can exhibit at museum level [...] art is in itself, an elitist production. There are few artists that have the gift, the talent, we are not all artists” (cited in Méndez, 2007).

Instead of demonizing elitism, explains Federica, museums should bridge an innately ‘elitist’ art world to wider society, “making it accessible to all without distinction” (cited in Méndez, 2007). Unlike the singling out of key Kinetic artists whose signature style and



artistic narrative encapsulated the country's national image of modernity at the time, Populism embraced a broad range of artists without distinction or curatorship, heralding a strong message of the power of the masses.

As well as supporting its Popular artists, the government also favors foreign expressions of culture that are more censored, patriotic, and slightly archaic in art world terms. Echoing Nye's (2004) thesis on soft power, Fermin argues that *one must not forget that culture in general, and the visual arts in particular, is a diplomatic tool*. In engendering a brand image, governments "take into consideration the relationships they want to develop" particularly internationally (Balakhrisnan, 2009, p. 621).

This Populist discourse directly impacted government-run cultural institutions, namely museums, national galleries, and official representation of artists at international events. Our participants, as largely members of the former art elite in Venezuela, were not supportive of the Populist turn. They noted how new cultural policies in the country departed from previously institutionalized practices that aligned with the global art world institutional order, subsequently embracing a new discourse centered round Populism. For artist Isaac, this purposeful distancing from a globally relevant art practice was *a set back* for the country, in that Venezuela risked losing its cultural positioning by adopting new practices and a discourse that had little to do with the rest of the art world. However, Fermin explains how the beauty of Populism might depend on the eye of the beholder. For ALBA members, i.e. countries affiliated to the 'Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America' (an intergovernmental organization established by Chávez based on ideals of social and political integration), such cultural initiatives and collaborations with like-minded member states is forward thinking, daring and, socially progressive. Within country branding literature, this resonates with the notion that places are "perceived differently by different segments" (Balakrishnan, 2009, p.

618), so that supporters of Chávez's regime and his ideals of a new Socialism would glorify these new practices as central to the creation of a desirable national brand.

With the switch in political regime and accompanying visual turn, public art takes different forms. Just as the public display of the Kinetic artists reminded the populace of the globalized, modernist perspective, contemporary streetscapes reinforce the current focus on an autochthonous local identity. What is interesting is the mirroring of the internal visualization of the nation brand outside of Venezuela. **Plate 6** below shows a 2012 temporary installation of 10 volumetric sculptures by post-Kinetic Venezuelan artist, Rafael Barrios (b. 1947), on Park Avenue, New York. Born in the USA, of Venezuelan parents, Barrios is a renowned post-kinetic sculptor, given the palpable geometric influence of the Kinetic masters in his gravity-defying work. He is represented by private galleries in Venezuela, Latin America and North America, has public and private collections across the globe, and continues to work from his studio in Caracas. Barrios's geometric sculptures have brought him national, regional and global fame, leading to the prominent temporary exhibit on Park Avenue, New York. The high visibility of this work in Manhattan – like other recently publicly commissioned work by Cruz Diez (see **Plate 7**)- indicates the global acceptance of such Modernist art forms (and discourses) on the global playing field.

Populist art also travels. A recent Chávez mural by street artist Andre Treiner in the Bronx, New York, was inaugurated by Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez, during her visit for the 71<sup>st</sup> session of the UN General Assembly (Pestano, 2016). However, this mural was later defaced with the message “Venezuela is screaming for help and democracy” given the growing economic turmoil, violent protests, and military intervention that the country has suffered since the start of 2017 (*El Nacional*, 2017), illustrating the competing discourses at play.

Juxtaposed in the same city, Barrios' geometric sculptures and the Chávez mural depict brand Venezuela in a contrasting but visible way: the post-Kinetic movement continues to be legitimized and consumed by the cultural elite whilst Populist discourses are projected in predominantly Latino and marginalized areas of the city.

We have seen how new cultural programming shifted in line with the overall political agenda, which centred round a Populist rhetoric. Minister Sesto openly states that museums are ideal mouthpieces for the government, in that they are not only platforms for “conserving our shared values, but ideal settings from which to project new ones” (in Wisotki, 2006, p. 53). Therefore we can characterize the move from a nation brand embracing the Modernist Kinetic artists through public commissions and other institutional support, to a Populist approach to the visual arts which ‘others’ the global art elite, rejects elitist art forms and practices and espouses arts policy that enhances the creativity within everybody as a shift in the official discourse of the nation brand and the final section, discussion and conclusions will draw this out further. If, as O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2000, p. 58) wrote, “a nation offers a fragmented set of images”, the nation brand of Venezuela can clearly be viewed as a fragmented nation as evidenced by the images popularized and supported by the nation at these contrasting periods of time.

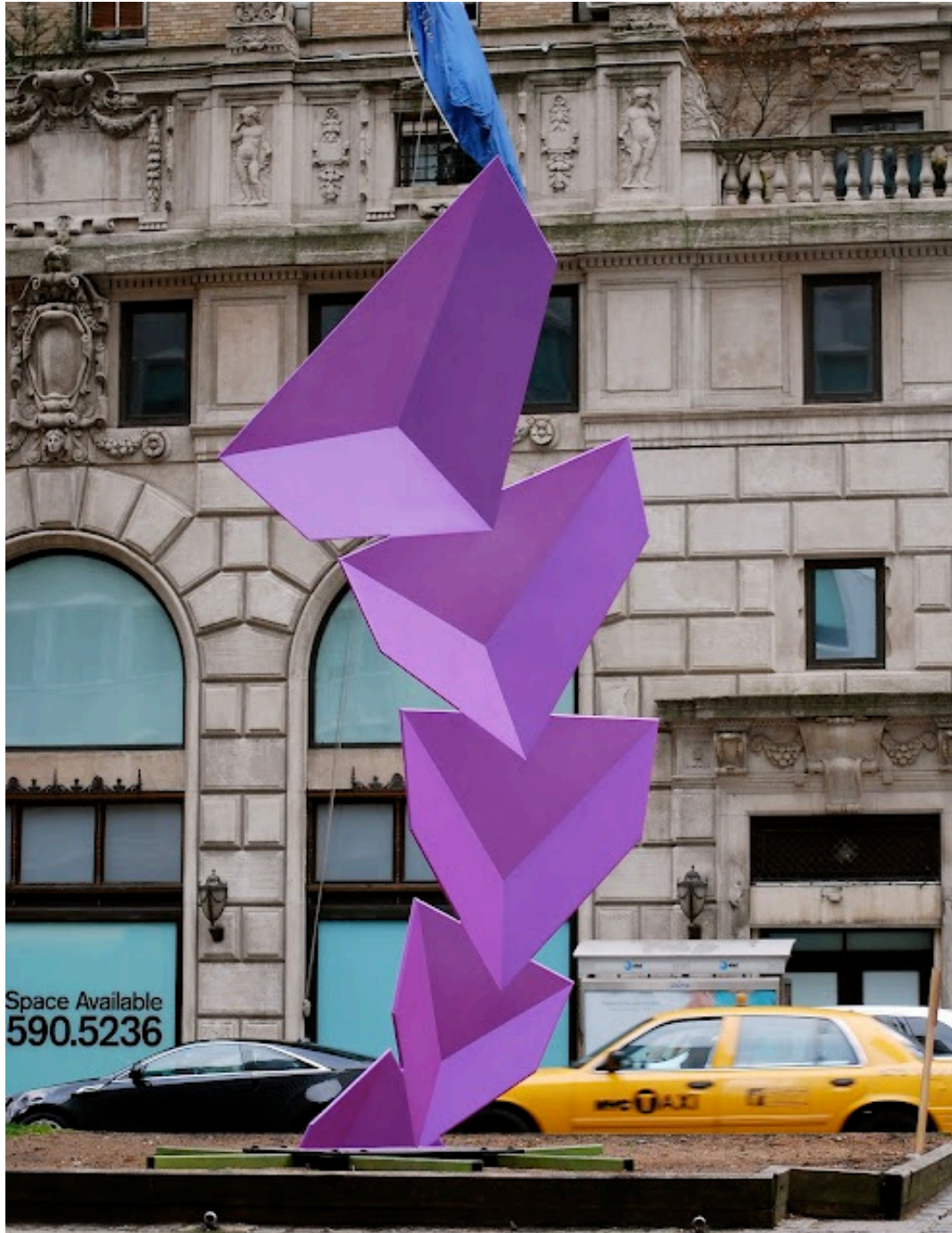


Plate 6. Rafael Barrios Volumetric Sculpture, Park Avenue, NY (USA) temporary exhibit 2012. Source: Rafael Barrios





Plate 7. Cruz Diez pedestrian crossing installation at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles.  
Source: Stromberg (2017); © Matthew Stromberg.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Our study shows that substituting existing language and rhetoric (modernist/global) with new rhetoric (populist/local) necessitates the replacement of previously habitualized discourses and practices. The application of MDA, which accounts for consideration of textual discourses alongside gesture, objects and the built environment, allows for the consideration of the multi-faceted nature of national brand discourses. We have shown above the efforts by the current political powers to replace the previously dominant desired nation brand with a new, more inward-focused conceptualization. They employ a range of nation branding efforts, from the development of explicit policy, to the replacement of art school educated, curatorially trained, internationally mobilized art curators and educators with more Populist institutional actors. This signaled a significant shift in rhetoric and the resulting institutional practices. In recognition of the importance of the visual and the built environment, an increase in support for Populist art forms to challenge the dominant Modernist work has been central to this shift in political discourse.

According to Scott (2013) and Friedland and Alford (1991), fragments of old and new discourse could not co-exist, old rhetoric had to be pushed aside to make way for a newly imagined nation brand. The arts can be viewed as mirrors of society, reflecting prevailing national discourses. In the case outlined above, the nation brand itself has swung from Modernist to Populist, from global relevancy to local empathy, from focusing on the individual artist as creator, to the group and collective creative output, resulting in an extreme shift in art discourse evident in State-supported programming. In identifying the areas of art where State actions are more clearly evident, ‘official discourses’ of the nation are communicated through these ‘official’ arts. Our findings establish that consideration of the visual and the built environment illustrate that old and newly privileged discourses of the

nation may still co-exist, but that shifts in power can be determined through understanding the art work which flourishes during a particular political period.

Our findings clearly chime with O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy's (2000) conceptual paper, as they conceived of images as fragments rather than consistent wholes and that these images can change over time. Applying a cross-temporal case to the study of Venezuela allows us to empirically show this change over time, and highlight the centrality of the visual in internalizing and articulating these images. What we have shown, is that rather than the images replacing each other, the different nation brands - the globalized modernist brand as communicated through the Kinetic artists, and the autochthonous brand as communicated through populist art - illustrate the competing and coexisting nation brands in contemporary Venezuela. Understanding the shifting state endorsement of and allegiance to one visual discourse over another, allows us to understand the policy aspirations of the current administration, and ultimately where power lies. Building on previous work recognizing multi-stakeholder approaches to nation brands, we demonstrate an MDA approach to examining the visual arts can establish the hierarchy of power between competing discourses.

Our empirical examination of nation branding has put the socio-political firmly at the center of the study in acknowledgement of Olins (2002) identification of the need for a broad historical context within which to unpack nation branding. Putting the visual arts at the centre of the study allows us to understand its importance in shaping the imagination as well as the utility of the visual arts as the focus for understanding socio-political shifts which occur. Following Yeoman *et al.*, (2009), our paper illustrates that culture is indeed a mechanism for individual, communal and national self-definition. Although overlooked by prior studies on nation branding, Balakhrisnan (2009, p. 613) recognized the need for a vision "to project to local and global consumers and stakeholders that is clear, unique and differentiated." We

illustrate the significance of the visual arts in articulating this clear, unique and differentiated vision. However, it is not possible to totally eradicate alternative articulations of the nation brand.

Our focus on the public positioning of visual art illustrates the role in shaping national imagination. This imagination can be seen as internally and externally focused, as seen from our examples of modernist and populist art as situated with Venezuela as well as that popularized globally. In examining this shift in political discourse and its impact on the country's brand image, our study illustrates the importance of combining a discursive and a visual approach to understanding nation brands.

Theoretically, our study establishes the utility of visual and discursive methods in studying nation brands, and brands more broadly. A visual approach allows us to explore the imagined nature of branding and specifically to understand the shaping of national imagination in formulating nationhood. Taking art works as the unit of analysis, and through examining the intersection of state funding or support, commercial endorsement and consumer popularity of such artistic objects from an historical perspective, provides a rich context within which to understand the complexity of the nation brand. We illustrate the relevance of considering both organic and inorganic imagery, while foregrounding the need to take a temporal approach to understanding nation brands.

Managerially, our paper contributes directly to the practices of nation branding, through establishing the need to prioritize the arts in any nation branding process. What this implies is consideration of the role of organic and inorganic visual objects in projecting a national brand. Similarly, accounting for shifts in the expression of the nation brand need to account for the process of 'othering' or de-legitimization of previous national discourses.

Just as Närvänen and Goulding (2016, p. 1541) established the centrality of brands and material objects in constructing, maintaining and expressing national identities. Visual art



brands, in the form of artistic movements can translate nation brands into communicable visual discourses. Närvänen and Goulding (2016) found that national brands can be “appropriated, resignified and reinvented” (p. 1541) and our study illustrates that this is the case. But, rather than one national brand replacing another, we illustrate the challenges involved in replacing one endorsed country image with another, particularly an oppositional other. These idealized projections can be seen as fragments of a whole nation, rather than illustrative, completed and representative nation brands. Our consideration of public art or publically visible art in the context of Venezuela, illustrates the difficulty of eradicating past heritage in pursuit of an upgraded and contrary nation brand. Bhabha (2004) points out the need for secular interpreters of the nation. We argue that an essential tool of such interpreters are the visual arts, and the analysis of visual discourse allows an uncovering of shifting ideas of nationhood that can be viewed alongside evolving political discourse.

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