
HEMISPHERE

VISUAL CULTURES *of the* AMERICAS

VOLUME VIII, 2015

OIL IN THE ABSTRACT: Designing Venezuelan Modernity in *El Farol*

SEAN NESSELRODE MONCADA, PH.D. CANDIDATE, INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Marking its thirtieth anniversary of publication, Issue 230 (July 1969) of the Venezuelan journal *El Farol* boasts a striking and memorable cover design by former art director Gerd Leufert. A purely abstract composition, this design presents the reader with a hallucinatory overlay of two grids, one pink and one orange (Figure 1). The placement and configuration of the orange grid adhere to the physical dimensions of the journal, but its pink counterpart introduces a sense of formal and structural instability. As a printed duplicate of the underlying orange form, this pink grid announces the mechanics of the chromotype process, in which a single image is produced by the printing of successive layers of visual information. Within the spatial logic of the design, however, the pink quadrilaterals appear utterly dislocated, floating away from the orange field and perhaps even off the page itself. The very layout of the cover is one of flux, a perpetually moving optical illusion that refuses both stasis and formal resolution even as it foregrounds the material conditions of its own production.

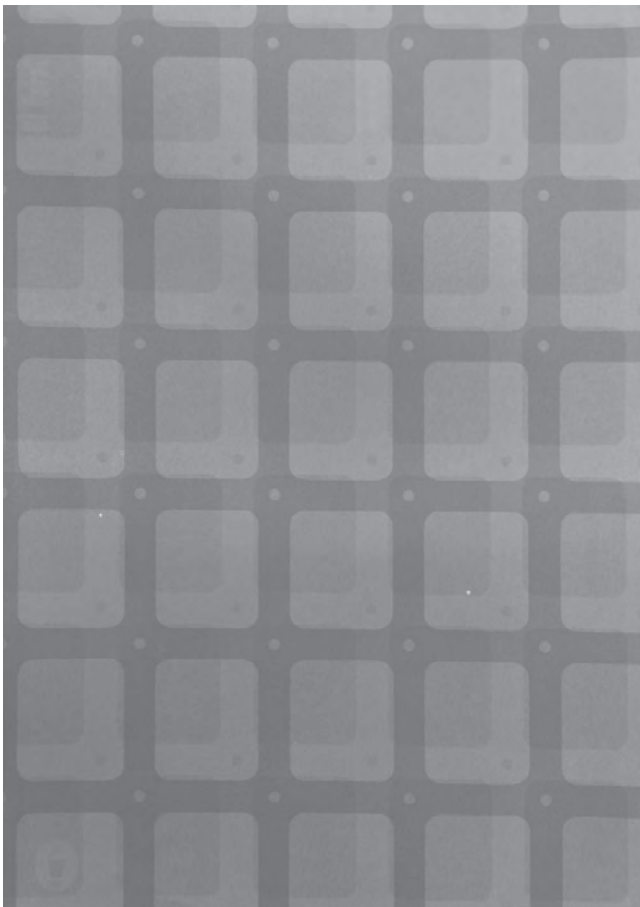


FIGURE 1. Gerd Leufert, front cover of *El Farol* 230 (July 1969). Image courtesy of Gerd Leufert Estate.

Referring to this design in particular, Leufert commented that “it would be best if the cover, rather than reflecting the end of an era, marked the beginning of a new one.”¹ That Leufert heralded this brave new world with an exercise in optical dissonance is not all that surprising. By the late 1960s geometric abstraction, especially its kinetic variant, had taken hold in Venezuela with acutely nationalist overtones, the visual expression of a broader, more deeply rooted ideological impulse to modernize the country. Yet if Leufert’s cover was meant to signal the future, the content of this issue of *El Farol* was much more invested in the past. Included were the proceedings of an informal roundtable conversation between Enrique Puig-Corvé, a public relations consultant who had served as a founding member of *El Farol*’s Caracas editorial team, and its three best-known art directors: Leufert, Nedo Mion Ferrario, and Carlos Cruz-Diez— all of whom had achieved international acclaim as artists in their own right. The primary topic of conversation was the journal’s historical importance as an arena for the development of Venezuelan graphic design, and the Lithuanian-born Leufert—who had served as art director for the journal from 1957 to 1959— was singled out by his peers as the main instigator of the publication’s development into an artistically significant institution: “In reality, when Gerd entered the picture,” Cruz-Diez stated, “*El Farol* began to be *El Farol*.”² The comment is telling, for Leufert’s tenure was cited as a point of origin, reducing the first eighteen years of the journal’s run to little more than prehistory. In the estimation of Cruz-Diez and his contemporaries, it is only through Leufert’s intervention that *El Farol* became relevant as a cultural institution, transforming from a functional but unremarkable publication to an aesthetically vital and, more importantly, intrinsically Venezuelan paragon of design.

Noticeably absent from the conversation is any mention of *El Farol*’s function as the official mouthpiece of the Creole Petroleum Corporation, the Venezuelan subsidiary of Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and the largest oil producer in the country. Nearly forty years after its final issue was released, this fact has largely receded from public memory, or has been absorbed so thoroughly as to be accepted without consequence. The journal is instead remembered primarily for its graphic work, largely thanks to the efforts of its own team of editors and designers, but since its foundation in 1939 *El Farol* had in fact served as part of a broader public relations campaign undertaken by the U.S.–owned oil company. True to Leufert’s intentions, the sumptuous look of the thirtieth-anniversary issue bears almost no resemblance to the journal’s first numbers, which are marked by uniform textual layout and a relative dearth of imagery. Indeed, over the course of 249 issues until its final edition in 1975, the design of *El Farol* would encompass everything from regionalist figuration to the hard-edged geometric abstraction denoted by Leufert’s grids. The only unifying factor remained the publication’s steadfast alliance to and promotion of company interests.

How did an apparently nondescript oil journal become an exemplar of Venezuelan graphic design and of Venezuelan modernity? Certainly Leufert’s work as art director

constitutes a decisive intervention, but this is not simply a case of rebranding. To bifurcate the run of *El Farol* into pre- and post-Leufert eras is to deal with the journal on a strictly visual basis and thereby obfuscate the considerable ideological consistency of its mission, which has not been dealt with in relation to its shifting aesthetic identity. Existing literature on the oil industry and of *El Farol* in particular tends to detach corporate interests from artistic practice: accounts of the oil industry in Venezuela frame *El Farol* primarily within the scope of a broader corporate public relations gambit, while design histories mention the journal only in passing as an important though ultimately minor publication.³ Yet when viewed as critical visualizations of the modern that are nonetheless products of their corporate, developmentalist context, the imagery of *El Farol* carries far different implications. By tracing the evolution of the journal's design under its primary art directors—Cruz-Diez, Leufert, and Nedo—it becomes evident that the cultivation of a modernist aesthetic functioned not in spite of Creole's interests but instead constituted a manifestation of a modernity as it was determined and espoused by the petroleum industry in the very pages of the journal. In its self-presentation and in its reception, the perceived metamorphosis of *El Farol* from a foreign-owned corporate organ to a source of national artistic pride mirrored the imagined trajectory of Venezuela's modernist experiment, principally with respect to its relationship with the oil industry, from a product of foreign intervention to a project of national self-actualization.

This is not to indict Leufert, Nedo, and Cruz-Diez as necessarily complicit, nor to dismiss the Venezuelan vogue for geometric abstraction as essentially participatory within a framework of foreign-led, capitalist exploitation of natural resources. Rather, a consideration of *El Farol's* graphic design in light of the journal's ideological basis begins to illuminate the idiosyncratic contours of artistic modernism in Venezuela, as well as the contradictions and fissures that kinetic art sought to resolve. That artists like Leufert found a receptive platform in the oil journal—and that their work was promoted so enthusiastically as the emblem of a revitalized, redefined oil nation—reveal that the most immediate visual hallmarks of Venezuelan modernity, namely its fetishization of abstraction and technological innovation, were constructed in dialogue with and largely due to the circumstances generated by the development of the oil industry. The designers' reluctance to address those circumstances in the roundtable discussion only speaks to the naturalization of this ideological matrix as a necessary precondition for a modernist narrative of progress.⁴

El Farol's thirtieth anniversary issue opens with an editorial by director Felipe Llerandi that argues that the journal, due to its longstanding support of the arts in Venezuela, amounts to “Algo más que petróleo.”⁵ Such a characterization certainly paints the publication in a flattering light, but Llerandi’s need to justify *El Farol's* continued presence in Venezuela is betrayed by his acknowledgment of the unusual premise of the journal itself. He concedes that “the very idea of creating a magazine that responded to the industry’s concerns through the [Venezuelan] community’s cultural affairs was, in its novelty, as strange as it was suspicious.”⁶ By this point in the journal’s history, the rhetorical moves of Llerandi’s statement had become commonplace for *El Farol*: the 1939 inaugural issue opened with “Palabras preliminares” by the editorial team, which declared that “we aspire to collect the most intense palpitations of national spirit in our pages... believing sincerely that in so doing we reaffirm, once more, the sincerity of our patriotic devotion.”⁷ From its very first issue, *El Farol* defined itself against its inherent status as an oil journal, proposing not that it denied its corporate function but exceeded it. The scope of *El Farol* would include the oil industry but not be limited to its interests; its import would be cultural as well as economic. Throughout its print run, the U.S.–owned company journal would position itself as a force in the service of Venezuelan patriotism, so frequently and deliberately that its efforts to do so ultimately underscored the strangeness of such a proposition.

The peculiarly confident yet defensive tone that *El Farol* frequently adopted can be explained, in part, by the precarious status of the oil industry at this moment in Venezuela and abroad. Creole Petroleum was founded in the midst of a contentious economic climate in which the uncertainty of oil exploration was accompanied by the possibility of sudden, unimaginable profits for both the industry and the Venezuelan state. Initially a small U.S.–owned syndicate that managed leases and options in several Caribbean countries including Venezuela, Creole was acquired by Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) in 1928 and became a subsidiary of its U.S.–based parent company.⁸ A byzantine sequence of acquisitions, sales, and power struggles—of which the protagonists were overwhelmingly foreign businessmen—characterized the early years of the industry and its relationship to the Venezuelan government under the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, which welcomed foreign speculation as a means of consolidating power in his own hands.

To understand the stakes that motivated the foundation of *El Farol*, it is crucial to consider the broader perception of Creole and other companies following Gómez’s death in 1935. During this period the oil industry at large experienced an international crisis of public relations, spurred primarily by the 1938 expropriation of Mexico’s oil resources by newly elected President Lázaro Cárdenas. Venezuela, with its vast oil reserves and favorable political climate, became all the more attractive; at this moment, however, the political elite saw an opportunity to wrest economic power from foreign entrepreneurs.⁹ In 1936, the writer Arturo Uslar Pietri, responding to a cresting of hostility toward the industry and shifting political tides, identified oil as

the lifeblood of a vital, industrial, and wholly modern nation:

If we were to propose a motto for our economic policy, we would suggest the following, which dramatically sums up the necessity of investing the wealth produced by the destructive mining system, so as to create reproductive and productive agricultural wealth: sow the oil.¹⁰

Uslar Pietri's paradoxical metaphor of "sowing the oil" rescues oil production from its harmful potentialities by formulating as a necessary investment for the renovation of the country into a modern economic power. Subterranean petroleum deposits would provide the collective base material for the reshaping of the nation, and in a single, three-word phrase Uslar Pietri articulated what would become the ideological maxim for practically all subsequent Venezuelan political and economic philosophy.¹¹

If *El Farol* was born out of this climate of hope and hostility, the first serious steps towards its creation were taken by a young Nelson Rockefeller. A member of Creole's Board of Directors since 1935, Rockefeller toured the company facilities in March 1939 and was appalled to find that they functioned as self-contained enclaves, and that almost none of the U.S. employees had even bothered to learn Spanish. With the situation in Mexico souring despite his own efforts to forestall expropriation, Rockefeller quickly notified Creole's management team and, in the hopes of reforming relations with local communities, began to put together a comprehensive public relations program. Of paramount concern, according to Rockefeller, was that "we convince the Venezuelan people in all walks of life that...[we] are not interested solely in coming down to squeeze as many dollars out of the country as possible, but that [we] have a real concern for the general economic and social welfare of the country."¹²

The results of these efforts were outlined in an internal memorandum, submitted in May 1939 for Rockefeller's approval, that proposed an elaborate, countrywide media strategy. In addition to a strengthening of relations with the press and the establishment of a weekly radio program, most ambitious was the proposed foundation of a "company magazine...designed (a) to foster where possible a community of interest among our employees, and (b) to distribute among a selected group of outside people, thus making a visual demonstration of our social program."¹³ It was to be published jointly by the Standard Oil Company of Venezuela and Lago Petroleum Corporation (both of which were, at the time, managed by Standard of New Jersey under the umbrella of Creole), and would cover a variety of subjects that included professional matters—safety tips, the progress of refinery construction, and notable company promotions—as well as themes relating to leisure and entertainment.¹⁴ In this respect the journal, which was to become *El Farol*, was conceived as a sibling of Standard's bi-monthly English-language journal *The Lamp*, in publication since 1918. Not only did the Venezuelan journal derive its name from its forbear—*El Farol* (a

literal Spanish translation of *The Lamp*) but it too would attempt to, in the words of one Standard executive, “merge the [oil] industry into the economic and social life of the country.”¹⁵

The front cover of *El Farol* 1 (June 1939), published only one month after the public relations memorandum, bears a reproduction of a landscape by the Venezuelan painter Tomás Golding, the title of the journal rendered in angular script yet seemingly emergent from the clouds overhead (Figure 2). The editorial team’s choice to use Golding’s painting for their cover is not altogether unexpected. Its depiction of two women carrying baskets on their heads as they walk toward a small thatched hut, the only human-made structure on a Caribbean beach full of cacti and plantains, exoticizes the country as a paradise that is not merely tropical but, more importantly, necessarily rural and unspoiled. The image also serves as a direct link between the journal and its U.S. counterpart, for it would also be used for the August 1939 cover of *The Lamp* that highlighted Standard’s “Venezuelan Shift” and related “An Intimate Picture of the Third Largest Oil Producing Country.”¹⁶ The repurposing of Golding’s painting for both journals speaks to an editorial (and corporate) overlap—or, more practically, perhaps to the rushed publication of the latter—and registers the shift of ideological and aesthetic valences that distinguishes the two publications. For the readership of *The Lamp* the image connotes a far-flung paradise, passive and primitive, with natural resources ready for the taking. In *El Farol*, it is a signifier of nationalistic pride. It established a visual template that would dominate the covers of the first decade, consisting of folkloric paintings of (predominantly pastoral) Venezuelan life.

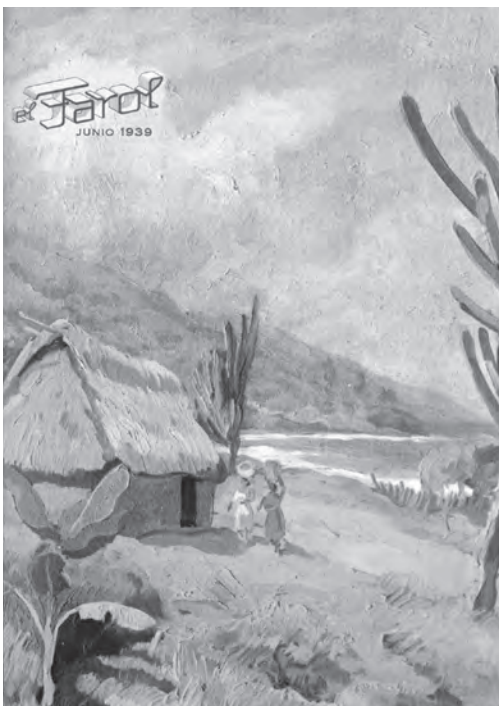


Figure 2. Front cover of *El Farol* 1 (June 1939), painting by Tomás Golding.

For *El Farol*, Golding's sentimental landscape serves as the visual equivalent of the "Palabras Preliminares" that attempted to fold the interests of the U.S. company into a nascent Venezuelan nationalism. To accommodate its new audience, the Venezuelan journal would have to thread a very particular needle, and to do so it adopted a strategy of *venezolanización*: the publication "should be a purely Venezuelan magazine, not aimed at the foreign staff," the Creole memorandum reads. "All illustrations should show only Venezuelans, and [all imagery] emanating from the States should be redrawn to local appeal."¹⁷ Much as Uslar Pietri had called for, *El Farol* would redefine petroleum extraction as a patriotic mandate, a symbiotic effort between foreign companies and the Venezuelan people in the ongoing modernization of the country.

The idea of modernity was foundational for a journal that emphasized the titular *farol* as a graphic and thematic leitmotif: the first sixty-three issues featured a small image of a lamp on the margins of every page, visually unifying their disparate contents with an icon that suggested intellectual and spiritual illumination.¹⁸ The journal took its cue from *The Lamp's* declaration that it would "light the way to an understanding of one another" but adapted this maxim for more overtly nationalist purposes:

Venezuelan, instruct yourself; light the divine fire in your spirit...
the love of your country, a respect for its laws, and the veneration
of its heroes, who gave their blood and their life for you, will
all flourish in your heart; and your conscience will be elevated,
perfumed with culture and civic integrity.¹⁹

El Farol presented itself—and the oil companies—as bringing modernity to Venezuela, but it did so in a manner that, much as the journal title was integrated into the cover imagery, was less a rupture than a reconciliation. Through Creole's intervention, the citizens of the "host nation" become safer, healthier, and wealthier, and they would also look back proudly upon their own history. The oil company would thereby fashion itself as a supplier not just of modernity but of tradition as well, Venezuela's past and future united by the oil industry. Yet the passage above begins to reveal the seams of this project. It marks a shift in focus, from the light of the "lamp" that would usher Venezuela into a modern future to the Venezuelan *reader*, who was clearly identified and circumscribed by nationality. In a curiously reflexive manner, the reader was forcefully commanded to "instruct yourself" and foster a love of country. Notably absent is any mention of the medium by which this instruction may take place, namely *El Farol* itself. Here a central tension of the journal may be elaborated: for its reconciliation of foreign industry and homegrown, nationalistic modernism to be successful, it had to be naturalized. This process plays out in the pages of the journal. Significantly, in the same issue, *El Farol* 5 (October 1939), only the authors of those features that directly relate to Standard or Creole—those on the La Salina cement plant, on the benefits of kerosene, and

even on the Miss Esso pageant—remain anonymous. These are in contrast to the articles on aboriginal caciques and Venezuelan writers, which are credited to Felipe Tejera and Manuel Perfiles, respectively. As a result, the historical and cultural past was framed as something to be retrospectively assessed, summarized, and explained by contemporary Venezuelan writers; the activities of the company, however, were given no such distance. They are related to Creole's readership by a nameless editorial author, presented as nothing less than the voice of the company itself. The absence of consistent bylines would persist until the mid-1950s, effectively subsuming all information regarding Creole's activity within this monolithic company voice. If the revelatory light of *El Farol* sought to illuminate the country's pre-petroleum past as well as the means by which it could transform itself into a modern nation, that light burned so bright to be blinding.

It was the company itself that would remake Venezuela and transform the romantic landscapes of the journal's front covers into a geography of charts and numbers that illustrated their back covers (which were similarly uncredited). Issue 5 (October 1939) presents the first of these diagrams, which overlays two pie charts quantifying global and national levels of oil production for the year 1938 (Figure 3). If this image employs a visual vocabulary of technical data and measurement as a foil against the landscape paintings of the front covers, the dialectic between landscape and industry is one of translation rather than opposition. At the center of the pie chart totaling national production is a miniature landscape that echoes the illustration on the bottom left of the page. It is an industrial-pastoral scene of an oil encampment in Venezuela, horizontally bifurcated by the edge of a body of water—likely Lake Maracaibo, the site of the majority of Creole's activity. In the top half of the illustration, two oil derricks dwarf a mountain, the form of which is echoed by an enormous white cloud. Industry is thus firmly situated within an elemental repertoire of water, earth, and air; the derricks a visualization of how Creole harnesses and rationalizes the untamed Venezuelan landscape. Thus, the early years of *El Farol* already linked graphic design, albeit in a relatively preliminary form, with its ideological foundation in the logic of industrial development. Only through the intervention of the foreign oil corporation, conceptualized as an autonomous entity unto itself, would the ostensibly primitive Venezuelan landscape—and its inhabitants—be so rationalized.

To play up the country's modernist credentials in anticipation for the X Inter-American Conference held in Caracas in 1954, Cruz-Diez selected a relatively abstract photograph of Alexander Calder's recently completed *Nubes acústicas* that was created for Carlos Raúl Villanueva's famed Ciudad Universitaria. Perhaps the Ciudad Universitaria, the most celebrated of the grandiose urban interventions undertaken during the reign of Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1953–58), proved to be the site of abstraction's legitimization in Venezuela. Villanueva sought to synthesize International Style architecture with modern art, inviting an international roster of artists to contribute large-scale public works. The Calder mobile thus functioned as a shorthand for a type of Venezuelan artistic modernism that, at the moment of its codification at the University and in contemporaneous cultural debates, was thoroughly embraced by *El Farol*. The cover promoted a newly abstract signifier for the nation, and the issue similarly extolled the virtues of developmentalism as manifest in the rapid urbanization of the capital city. Photographs illustrating the issue constitute a now familiar repertoire of highways, skyscrapers, and abstracted compositions, all of which are set against and in conjunction with the mountains and forests surrounding the city. Such imagery lauded the metamorphosis of Caracas into a rationalist, urban center than retained an essentially tropicalist character, a synthesis of the dialectic between primitive and industrial.

Even after Cruz-Diez left *El Farol* in 1955, his interest in the Ciudad Universitaria and geometric abstraction proved to be influential. Much as abstract art proved to be compatible with the developmentalist visions of Pérez Jiménez, so too did it provide a new iconography for the journal's own ideological aims as an organ of the oil industry. The Ciudad Universitaria would be invoked once again in Issue 166 (September–October 1956) as a means of formally resolving the heterogeneity of *El Farol* (Figure 4). A boldly geometric composition, the first in the history of the journal, appears on the front and back covers and reflects the growing acceptance of abstraction under the *perezjimenato* of the 1950s. Alternately overlapping and contiguous, the flat, unmodulated forms constitute a matrix within which appear images taken from various time periods and media. Direct references to the University appear on the back cover in the form of a photograph of the Estadio Olímpico and a drawing of Spanish sculptor Baltasar Lobo's contribution to the campus, an abstract sculpture titled *La Maternidad*. Taken as a pair, the images represent architecture and the arts, photography and drawing, in a visual synthesis that recalls Villanueva's professed aims.²⁰ The front cover, in a contrast that reinforces the dialectic of progress so promulgated by *El Farol*, references the past; an overtly old-fashioned woodcut of a printing press presents a clear signal of the newfound importance of graphic design.

Issue 166 was the first to feature work by Leufert, and it signaled the direction in which he would take the journal when he assumed the mantle of art director in 1957. Leufert had come to Caracas in 1951 from his native Lithuania, drawn by the prosperity of the oil boom, and he brought with him a strong European training in

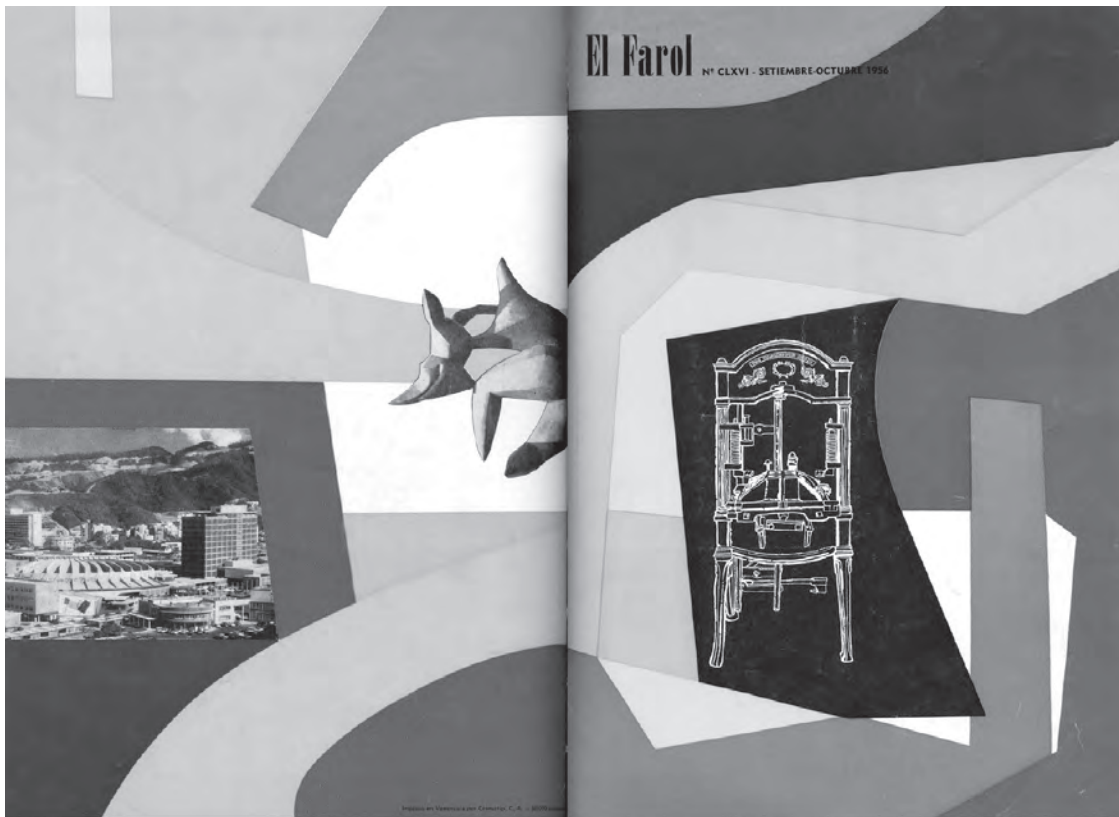


Figure 4. Gerd Leufert, front and back covers of *El Farol* 166 (September–October 1956). Image courtesy of Gerd Leufert Estate.

the graphic arts, having studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich under the tutelage of designer Fritze Helmuth Ehmcke.²¹ As art director for *El Farol*, Leufert worked closely with editor Alfredo Armas Alfonzo to transform the journal into an entirely new kind of publication that, more than delivering news and commentary about the activities of Creole, would serve as a record of Venezuela's ascendant modernity even as it strengthened its commitment to documenting the country's pre-petroleum history. Leufert's *El Farol* deployed geometric flourishes and brilliant color palettes in conjunction with overtly historicizing imagery that, even more so than the iconographic dichotomy of pastoral and industrial landscapes of years before, declared itself both modern and Venezuelan. In this sense his work for the journal, though it has come to be known as a high point in the history of graphic arts, responded directly to *El Farol's* well-established ideological program.

The irony of Leufert's involvement with *El Farol* is that his (retrospectively applied) status as the father of modern Venezuelan design obscured two key aspects of his work for the journal—its scarcity and its fetishization of tradition. Leufert only served as art director for two years, and not including Issue 166 he produced a total of only four wholly original cover designs for the journal.²² Nonetheless, even though his time with *El Farol* was brief, Leufert's impact was considerable. Drawing upon his

training in Munich, he brought a desire for a total aesthetic that holistically unified typography with imagery specifically for the journal. The advent of this approach to “design,” Leufert argued, superseded the journal’s longstanding dedication to mere “layout,” in which each element functioned as a relatively discrete unit and was often reproduced from or in conjunction with another source.²³ Compare the inaugural issue’s use of the Golding landscape, which was also chosen as the cover of the *The Lamp*, with Leufert’s debut seventeen years later. Where the former functions as an illustration that has little bearing on the margins and typography of its contents, the abstract forms of the latter find a complement in the inset pages, which similarly utilize geometry as a framework for references to the past, in this case the title page of a nineteenth-century treatise by Andrés Bello that is praised for its “sobriety and good typographic taste.”²⁴ They are words that double as a reference to *El Farol* itself at the moment.

The overall effect of Leufert’s “design” is one of disparate elements that are unified in such a manner as to suggest an overarching logic that is not only visual but also historical in nature. Geometry in this cover appears as the vehicle through which the past and the present of Venezuela can be delivered to *El Farol*’s readers. A literal circumscription that smoothes the disjunctures of rapid industrialization by retroactively positioning them as the anticipatory prehistory of a modernist present and projected future. Leufert’s consistent design preferences, particularly his use of geometry as an organizing principle, ensure that any variations in typeface or illustration were read not as evidence of inconsistency but rather as permutations within a larger structural framework. It is as if the developmentalist foundational program of the journal itself, of Creole and the oil industry at large, found visual expression. Of importance is that this was not necessarily a proscribed aesthetic or even one that Leufert intentionally adapted for the purposes of the journal, but instead that the very genre of the oil journal, in all of its ideological contradictions and nationalist discrepancies, proved fertile ground for a Lithuanian artist to introduce to Venezuela—as it would be subsequently framed—a viable, professionalized discipline of graphic design. Certainly, Leufert’s contemporaneous pedagogical and exhibiting activities were critical to his fostering of a design tradition in his adopted home, but the fact that this tradition was disseminated widely in conjunction with, and as a representative of, the oil industry reveals the latent politics at work in the crowning of geometric abstraction as the de facto visual language of a modern Venezuela.²⁵

Leufert’s contributions to the journal proved so distinctive that his departure marked a clear shift in its design. The first issue produced without him, *El Farol* 183 (July–August 1959), eased the transition somewhat by featuring on its cover a reproduction of an abstract composition by Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), the German-born partner of Leufert. The appearance of Gego on the cover of the journal signaled the direction that the new art director, Nedo, would take the publication. Born Nedo

Mion Ferrario, but known professionally by his first name, he had followed a similar trajectory as his predecessor. After studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, the twenty-three-year-old artist arrived in Venezuela in 1950, where he would remain for the rest of his life. He worked for local subsidiaries of the advertising firms McCann–Erickson and for Colman Prentis & Varley, Inc., but he would also serve as art director for the entire run of the journal *CAL: Crítica, Arte, y Literatura* (1962–67), since recognized as one of the most prestigious cultural publications in Venezuelan history.²⁶

Nedo did not cultivate a unifying aesthetic for the journal, nor did he assume sole responsibility for the cover design. He expanded Leufert's abstracting impulse to include other artists such as Gego, fostering a greater, more unpredictable variety of visual idioms over thirteen years and sixty consecutive issues of the journal. While Leufert had produced his own covers for the journal in accordance with the themes chosen by Armas Alfonso, Nedo established himself as a single, independent voice among several of the country's most respected artists. Throughout his tenure the covers of the journal would feature, to name several examples, colonial woodcuts depicting the settlement of the Venezuelan landscape, informalist assemblages by Elsa Gramcko, and impressionistic pastoral paintings by Régulo Pérez, in addition to and hard-edged, abstract works by the designer himself.²⁷ This resistance to the relative unity and coherence introduced by Leufert, however, is indicative not of inconsistency but instead of a different approach to the same problems addressed by his predecessor; it marks not a return to but a modification of *El Farol's* history of avowed heterogeneity. Nedo's especially candid comments from the 1969 roundtable conversation provide an insight into his work for the journal. "In its contents *El Farol*...doesn't know if it wants to be a technical or literary journal," he lamented, before concluding that it simply "lacks direction."²⁸ This statement was met with a courteous but forceful response by Puig-Corvé, who noted that the designer's arrival coincided with an editorial change of guard, but Nedo's criticism could be easily applied to the conceit of the oil journal in general.²⁹ They reveal that, rather than attempt to reconcile the contradictions of *El Farol* as had Leufert and Armas Alfonso into a single program, Nedo's strategy lay in foregrounding its pluralities. Yet reading against Nedo's somewhat pessimistic attitude toward the direction of the journal, the covers are not symptomatic of a disharmonious or unfocused editorial mission. They affirm the productive legitimacy of multiple visual vocabularies and temporalities that, in the journal's greater emphasis of culture over company, are no longer subordinate to an overarching corporate voice.

As the 1960s progressed, Nedo turned to increasingly unpredictable aesthetics and materials, which in the oil journal functioned to a similar end. This moment saw the international and institutional success of kinetic artists such as *El Farol's* own Cruz-Diez and Leufert, as well as Jesús Soto.³⁰ If Venezuelan kinetic art can be taken, as Marta Traba construed, to be the hegemonic crystallization of a developmentalist

modernity, its implications were explicitly articulated by the contributing writers of the journal.³¹ A 1960 article by Meneses on the work of Soto is illuminating in this regard. Relating a fairly standard biography of the artist that describes Soto's progression from figuration to abstraction to kinetic art, the author subsumes this trajectory within a broader, and much more familiar, teleology from primitive to modern.³² His repeated references to the Orinoco River and "great, powerful... virgin jungle" of Soto's birthplace of Ciudad Bolívar are interrupted by parenthetical digressions involving pirates, tropical birds, and indigenous tribes, all of which characterize the artist's origin as one that is more than simply Venezuelan: it is Venezuelan beyond civilization.³³ As Meneses locates traces of this mythic past in Soto's dynamic use of color but firmly categorizes the artist's present kinetic output as a signifier of modernism that, in its universalist non-objectivity, he reaffirms the distance Venezuelan culture has ostensibly traveled for its arrival upon the international stage. The conceptual transition from primitive to modern, in effect, is grafted upon a stylistic progression that finds its culmination in abstraction.

With kinetic art folded into the ideological program of *El Farol*, Nedo's material manipulations of the journal carry connotations beyond those of mere stylistic diversity. The use of a variety of paper weights and finishes, with non-archival newsprint for historical pieces and glossy paper for more technical material, was practice that anteceded Nedo's time at *El Farol*, but as art director he elaborated this strategy to include different sizes, grains, transparencies, and even orientations. The title page of the Soto article by Meneses, for instance, is printed on heavy blue cardstock half the width of the journal, a tendency that Nedo frequently used for title pages as a strategy for isolating discrete articles. Other issues feature graphs and charts of global petroleum production on transparent paper, elaborate photo spreads on double-folded paper, and intentionally disordered *tables of contents*. The cumulative effect is one of disorientation and unpredictability, and the shifting visual codes turn the journal into a kind of kinetic object in itself. For Nedo, such challenges to the layout of *El Farol* served as the fullest articulation of modernity. Not only did they reposition the journal as a luxury commodity, self-consciously reveling in the sheer availability of newly accessible materials thanks to the profits yielded by the oil boom, but they also elevated the dazzling forms and material mutability of kinetic art as clear evidence of the arrival of a Venezuelan modernism.³⁴

The most unambiguous indications that Nedo had embraced the language of abstraction were evident in his cover designs for the journal's final decade. In these years he produced original compositions that derived from his own longstanding interests in non-objective form and optical puzzles.³⁵ One of the most critically praised of these was his work for Issue 229 (April 1969), which dispenses with imagery altogether in favor of twelve repetitions of the name of *El Farol* (Figure 5). The overlapping lines of his original typography, which in its series of contiguous tubular

OIL IN THE ABSTRACT

forms resembles nothing so much as the much-vaunted pipelines that enabled oil transport, produces a visual interference that at once recalls the buzzing *moiré* of kinetic masters like Soto and anticipates Leufert's superimposed grids, which graced the cover of the subsequent issue. Nedo's typographic intervention practices a type of alchemy that transforms the name of the oil journal into a kind of kinetic mantra—its own potentially indefinite self-replication producing the very image of an endless, hyper-modern, futurity that *El Farol* proclaimed to deliver. With this cover *El Farol* became, in a way, the very emblem of Venezuelan modernity, cementing the link between oil, economic prosperity, and cultural development.³⁶

If the life of *El Farol* can be read as a gradual process of the *venezolanización* of a petroleum-led, developmentalist iteration of modernity, this vision saw its fullest manifestation in one of the journal's final issues, from 1974. Now operating at a less frequent run under the direction of Felipe Llerandi, this issue was the first of five that adopted the somewhat ingratiating subtitle *La calidad de la vida*. On this occasion the editorial team welcomed back Cruz-Diez as a guest designer. In the nearly twenty

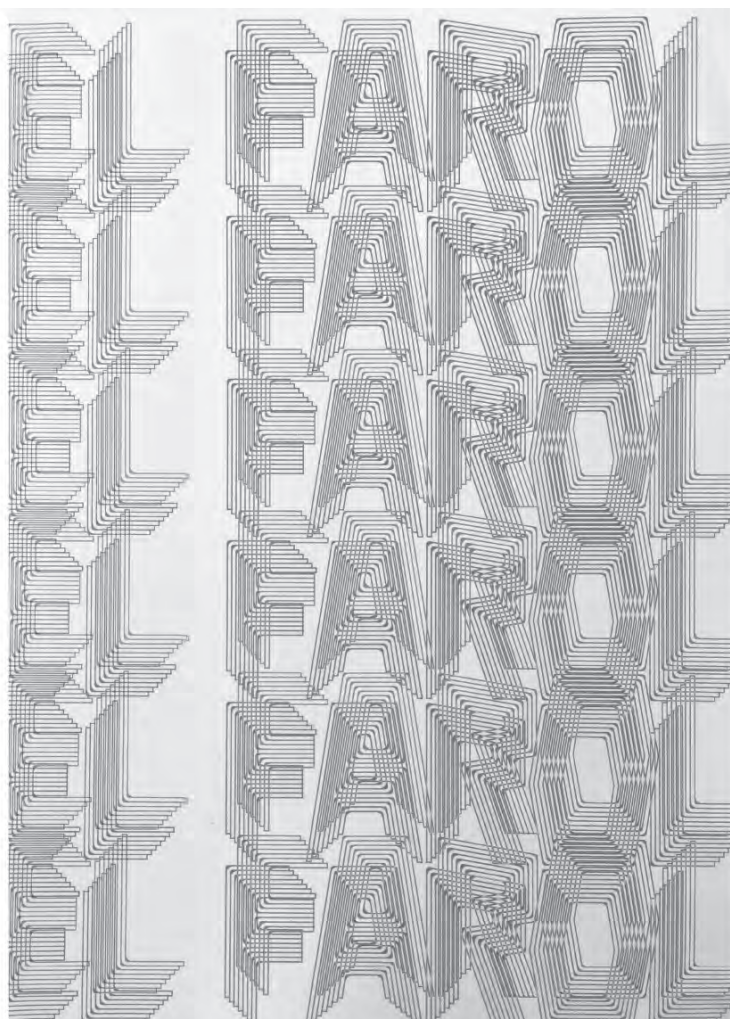


Figure 5. Nedo Mion Ferrario, front cover of *El Farol* 229 (April 1969). Image courtesy of Sucesión Nedo M. Ferrario.

years since he had left *El Farol*, Cruz-Diez's name had become synonymous with kinetic art, his visual style as recognizable as it was renowned. His distinctive wedges of color could be found in his *Fisicromías* that adorned murals, crosswalks, and public spaces in Caracas and beyond. When given the opportunity to return to *El Farol*, he chose reconfigure the journal as a vehicle for his own artistic interests in a manner much more radical than anything Leufert and Nedo had attempted. Though the issue focused almost entirely on Creole's support of the burgeoning environmentalist movement—a strategy intended to save face in the midst of growing concern over oil's harmful ecological effects—Cruz-Diez neglected to address its contents.³⁷ Rather, he wholly restructured the physical format of the journal. The cover consists of a black page, half the width of the entire journal, upon which the name and date of the journal appear; the other half, which at first appears to be a series of abstract forms replicating the details of a red, blue, green, and black *Fisicromía*, is comprised of the margins of subsequent pages, each progressively wider by several centimeters (Figure 6). This same operation is carried out in reverse over the second half of the journal. By turning *El Farol* into something of a paper-based *Fisicromía*, its material form shifting as the reader flips through the pages of the journal, Cruz-Diez fully collapsed the distinctions between art, design, and print matter.

Even as Cruz-Diez closed the circle of his career—from art director to kinetic artist and back again—he asserted his remarkable degree of authority by subordinating the journal to his aesthetic brand. That this issue was the first of the journal's final reinvention as *La calidad de la vida*, a name that in its optimism belies the growing

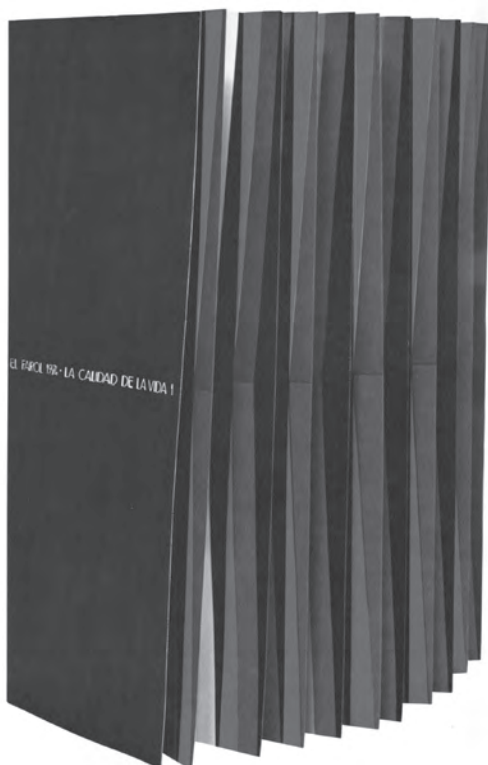


Figure 6. Carlos Cruz-Diez, *El Farol: La calidad de la vida 1* (1974).

Image © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

calls for the industry's expropriation, furthers the notion that this constituted a break with the past. Leufert's thirtieth-anniversary design may have looked toward the future, but Cruz-Diez's contribution five years later declared its arrival. Here, a Venezuelan-born artist, known foremost for his kinetic work and with a greater degree of international recognition than his European-born colleagues, successfully marshaled the visual codes of artistic modernism in a manner that materially revised, even dismantled, the genre of the corporate oil journal. And yet what is construed as a graphic rupture was actually extensively well prepared, even anticipated, by the journal's foundational identity. *El Farol* never ceased to function as the official journal of Creole, a status that remained unchanged until its final issue the following year, and its underlying pursuit of a quintessentially Venezuelan modernity formed its organizing logic from the very beginning.

To adopt, momentarily, the teleological rhetoric of the journal itself, Cruz-Diez's 1974 issue represents the culmination of *El Farol's* mission. The passage from an imported, predominantly U.S.-based mode of development that (not entirely convincingly) sought to industrialize an economy, a society, and a state thought to be backward or unsophisticated, to a confidently nationalist belief in the flourishing of an internationally relevant but innately local modernity, is complete. Such a shift, from Golding to Cruz-Diez, depended upon the obfuscation of its own origins, on the dislocation of the product from its ideological roots. When Leufert chose to package *El Farol* in the language of the grid—especially in a high-keyed, implicitly tropicalizing color palette—or when Cruz-Diez converted the form of the publication into a tangibly luxurious object that replicated the visual hallmarks of one of the nation's most famous artists, the reader witnessed the material fulfillment of the pledge to “sow the oil.”

In 1996 Aquiles Esté, in writing about the significance of *El Farol* to the history of Venezuelan graphic design, argued that the journal's long run and its many visual identities allowed it to register “the marks of a certain *criollismo*.”³⁸ His terminology is fitting, as *criollismo* is used colloquially to signify Venezuelanness but literally translates, imprecisely, as “Creoleness”: Esté's canny word choice ascribes nationalist import to *El Farol* but nevertheless evokes the name of the petroleum company that founded and sponsored the journal as a public relations device in the first place. Much as the term *criollo* historically signifies hybridity, the publication straddled the divide between past and present, culture and industry, and the local and the transnational. That the journal transformed itself into “Algo más que petróleo,” however, did not negate its oil-based ideological coordinates, and ultimately it was its unyielding entrenchment with Creole that assured its demise. The final, brief turn to *La calidad de la vida* occurred precisely at the moment of the journal's impending dissolution; its parent company ceased to exist after the industry was formally nationalized in January 1976. The final issue of the journal makes no note of these impending events, instead devoting its opening editorial to a history of the progress and development

of human civilization over thirty thousand years. Ever forward-looking, *El Farol* welcomes the “fourth great revolution...of science and technology” that will benefit the Venezuelan nation. Yet this was to be a future without Creole.³⁹ It is as if petroleum and its attendant modernity had become so thoroughly, successfully Venezuelan that the U.S.–owned oil company had been rendered superfluous, a remainder of yet another past that would be soon discarded for the promise of a future as bright as it was illusory.

SEAN NESSELRODE MONCADA is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University specializing in modern and contemporary art of the Americas. His dissertation examines the artistic development of Venezuelan modernisms through the lens of petroleum as a real and imagined source of progress. He earned his MA in the History of Art and Archaeology from New York University and a dual BA in Art History and English Literature from Swarthmore College.

NOTES

This article has been adapted from the first chapter of my dissertation, and as such it has benefitted from the support and feedback of many. My thanks especially to Edward Sullivan and Thomas Crow for their commentary on earlier versions of the project, as well as to Robert Brennan, Kara Fiedorek, Marci Kwon, and Brett Lazer for reading numerous drafts and posing reliably challenging questions. Additional thanks to Lourdes Blanco de Arroyo and Aixa Díaz for taking the time to answer my many inquiries about the history of the journal. For their patience and generosity with archival materials, particular thanks are due to Clayton Kirking and the staff of the New York Public Library; to Linda Gill and the staff of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin; and to Tom Rosenbaum and the staff of the Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York. I am also grateful to the editorial staff of *Hemisphere* for their thoughtful, rigorous comments on an earlier iteration of this paper.

¹ “Yo pensé que la carátula más que reflejar el punto final de una época debía mejor marcar el comienzo de una nueva.” Gerd Leufert, quoted in “*El Farol* y la imprenta,” *El Farol* 230 (July–August–September 1969): 50. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

² “En realidad cuando Gerd entró, *El Farol* empezó a ser *El Farol*.” Carlos Cruz-Diez, quoted in *Ibid.*