

“The Roof of the Whale”: El Techo de la Ballena and the Venezuelan Avant-Garde, 1961–1969

MoMA.org



This exhibition examines the 1960s Venezuelan literary and artistic group El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale), as documented in their politically engaged publications and provocative exhibitions. With the goal of “changing lives and transforming society,” the loose-knit group of over 60 artists, writers, and poets organized diverse and daring activities during an extended period of political unrest. Together these manifestos, poems, and events show a group vitally engaged with a society in transition.

Organized by Jennifer Tobias, Librarian, Reader Services.

Image: Façade of Galería El Techo de la Ballena as it appeared during the exhibition *Homenaje a la cursilería (Homage to Kitsch)*. 1961

El Techo de la Ballena emerged in Caracas in 1961, motivated by political conditions—nascent democracy after a decade of dictatorship, coupled with unrest on the right and the left—and dissatisfaction with conventional artistic taste.

El Techo reacted against dominant artistic styles and genres associated with the Venezuelan establishment. In contrast to the clarity, simplicity, and order of concrete abstraction, El Techo looked to the unruly organic undercurrents of Surrealism and *l'art brut*, and to the expressionistic trends in contemporary Venezuelan literature, to embrace a radical, visceral aesthetic known as Art Informel.

In the early 1960s El Techo aligned with the leftist Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV), which organized insurrections in protest of the newly elected reformist Acción Democrática (AD) administration. Positioning themselves as “cultural guerrillas,” in the early 1960s El Techo published manifestos and organized provocative exhibitions. By the end of the decade, as the political situation stabilized, the group’s activities remained resolutely partisan, if less radical.



Para restituir el magma (For the Restitution of Magma). 1961
The title of El Techo’s first exhibition and manifesto refers to the idea of a primordial energy seeking release from imposed cultural constraints. The flyer features an expressive, magma-like representation of a whale surrounded with texts by writers and poets involved with the group. The publication also served as the first of three issues of El Techo’s journal, *Rayado sobre El Techo de la Ballena (Stripes on the Roof of the Whale)*.

Daniel González. **Para restituir el magma (For the Restitution of Magma).** 1961
Installation photograph



Rodolfo Izaguirre with Angel Luque’s drawing for **Rayado sobre El Techo de la Ballena** no. 1 (1961)

“Sobre cierta ballena” (About the Whales) in *El Nacional*, April 20, 1961
“Nuevos cuadros llevarán para inaugurar esta noche Galería de Informalistas” (New Paintings Inaugurate Informalist’s Gallery) in *La Esfera*, March 24, 1961
“El Techo de la Ballena espera a nuevos Jonás” (Roof of the Whale Anticipates a New Jonah) in *El Nacional*, March 24, 1961
Reviews of the exhibition *Para restituir el magma (For the Restitution of Magma)*.

Rayado sobre El Techo de la Ballena (Stripes on the Roof of the Whale) no. 2 (1963)

Rayado sobre El Techo de la Ballena (Stripes on the Roof of the Whale) no. 3 (1964)
An essay in the third and final issue of the journal asks, “Why a whale?”

“Just for that reason. It would have been easier to choose the alligator. . . . The whale is in the middle of goodness and horror, subject to all the stresses of the world and sky. From its belly, that laughs at Jonah and engulfs an oil tank, it lies extended from one to the other end of the earth, almost as wide as the earth itself or the tiny bird pecking its decayed tooth in which fishes swims. . . . That thrust into the unknown that can increase our reason to live and to contaminate the instruments of a corrosive substance that change lives and transform society.”



Two key exhibitions followed El Techo’s debut show *Para restituir el magma (For the Restitution of Magma)*: *Homenaje a cursilería (Homage to Kitsch, 1961)* and *Homenaje a la necrofilia (Homage to Necrophilia, 1962)*.

The shows confronted artistic and political conventions, presenting visitors to the unconventional Sabana Grande neighborhood with provocative forms—including animal remains. Word of the exhibitions spread through photographs, publications, and news reports, such as those seen here.

Façade of Galería El Techo de la Ballena as it appeared during the exhibition **Homenaje a la cursilería (Homage to Kitsch)**. 1961



Rodolfo Izaguirre (with mask), Edmundo Aray, and Carlos Contramaestre promoting the exhibition **Homenaje a la cursilería (Homage to Kitsch)**. 1961

Sofía Meneses (pseudonym of Sofía Imber). “**Homenaje a lo cursi**” (**Homage to Kitsch**) in *Páginas*, May 25, 1961.

Manuscript. n.d. This satirical manuscript conveys the spirit of the *Homenaje a la cursilería* show through biting, absurdist prose.

Homenaje a la necrofilia (Homage to Necrophilia). 1962. Self-published catalog for exhibition featuring works by Carlos Contramaestra. Texts and illustrations evince the theme of social and cultural morbidity, including antique anatomical engravings as well as texts about a necrophiliac by Alfred Jarry and Richard von Krafft-Ebing.



In 1963, El Techo’s third major exhibition, *Homenaje a Caupolicán Ovalles: Exposición tubular (Homage to Caupolicán Ovalles: Tubular Exhibition)*, explored the formal and metaphorical theme of tubes. In one interpretation, tubes were considered as symbols of the internal, submerged, or repressed—evoking images of plumbing, digestive passages, sausages, sticks of dynamite, and spouts of volcanic magma. At the same time, the form of the tube suggested new possibilities for the group’s writers and, especially, poets, enabling alternatives to the conventional page.

Homenaje a Caupolicán Ovalles: Exposición Tubular. 1963

Caupolicán Ovalles. **En uso de razón, mean culpan las cervezas (The Uses of Reason: When in Doubt, Blame it on the Beer)**. 1963. Manuscript for an extended text incorporated into the reverse of the exhibition poster.



Homenaje a Caupolicán Ovalles: Exposición Tubular. 1963. Installation photograph

Ludovico Silva. **“Las bodegas submarinas de Caupolicán Ovalles” (Submerged Stores of Caupolicán Ovalles)** in *El Clarín de los Viernes*, July 12, 1963

“Clarín en la exposición tubular de la Ballena” (On the Whale’s Tubular Exhibition) in *El Clarín de los Viernes*, July 18, 1963.

“El tubo como expresión plástica según El Techo de la Ballena” (Expressive Plastic Pipe under the Roof of the Whale) in *El Clarín de los Viernes*, July 18, 1963 Book and exhibition reviews



Publishing was integral to the group’s practice throughout its eight years of activity. Books in particular were vital, bringing together poetry, essays, and artworks. By the late 1960s, as the Venezuelan political system stabilized, El Techo members turned their attention more fully to publishing and performance-oriented works such as film and screenplays.

Humberto Peña. **Por qué te ríes? (Why Are You Laughing?)**

Daniel González. **Una disyuntiva: la gastronomía o el hambre (A Dilemma: Food or Hunger)**

Carlos Contramaestre. **Confinamientos (Enclosures)**

Pedro Alcántara. **Testimonios (Testimonials)**

Perán Erminy. **Autogerminación según Alfonso el Sabio (Autogermination as Alfonso the Wise)**

Examples from a series of postcards El Techo published in the late 1960s.

Antonio de la Rosa, Edmundo Aray, and Carlos Rebolledo. **Pozo muerto (Dead Well)**. 1967.
Screenplay

Francisco Pérez Perdomo. **Los fenenos fieles (Faithful Poisons)**. 1963

Adriano González León and Daniel González. **Asfalto/Infierno (Asphalt/Hell)**. 1963

Caupolicán Ovalles. **Duerme usted, Señor Presidente? (How Do You Sleep, Mr. President?)**. 1962.

Juan Calzadilla. **Dictado por la jauría (Dictated by the Pack)**. 1962

Edmundo Aray and Carlos Contramaestre. **Sube para bajar (Climbing Down)**. 1963

Los métodos y las seserciones imaginarias (Methods and Imaginary Defections). 1963

Salve, Amigo. Salve, Y Adios (Hail, Friend. Hail and Farewell). 1968

Jorge Zalamea. **Las aguas vivas del Viet Nam (Living Waters of Vietnam)**. 1967

Ezequiel Saad and Josep Maria Berenguer. **Hablar con propiedad (Speak Properly)**. 1968



The El Techo de la Ballena Collection was donated by Valentina and Ignacio Oberto in Honor of Luis Perez-Oramas in 2012.

Thanks to Jason Dubs, Milan Hughston, Aria Marco, Sean Nesselrode, Israel Ortega, Maria Carlota Pérez, Sandy Sumano, and Josh Young.

Fuente: <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/techo/>