

Galerie Martin Janda, Vienna 30 November – 14 January

Crowds looting a bakery, hunger strikers with concave bellies, a young man claiming the currency in his hands is cheaper than toilet paper – these are some of the social media-sourced clips in Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck's video installation *Homeland's Agenda* (2016). Showing on the upper level of Galerie Martin Janda, the video alternates the aforementioned clips with footage of Venezuelan politicians and pundits vehemently denying problems; the late dictator Hugo Chávez glossing over issues of his time, for example. Looped on a flatscreen set into an upended shopping cart (and made in collaboration with Ana Alenso), the installation represents a disarming collage of disconnected realities and image circulation, propaganda and rising public revolt.

These are just some of the themes that resonate through the exhibition, which follows the Venezuela-born artist's practices of historicisation and artistic research into politics in his home country and beyond. The gallery's main space is dominated by *Love Washing Machine Made in the People's Republic of China* (2012–16), a ceiling-mounted sculpture composed of 400 washing-machine instruction manuals hanging from threads in a spirallike cascade; each is rubber-stamped with 'Chávez Corazón de mi Patria', a message from the dictator's last electoral campaign (weirdly, one of Chávez's campaign promises was the sale of half-price front-loaders on credit). Also on the ground floor is a photographic series of eight archival jet prints: *Humboldt Planetarium Fragments*,

circa 1960 (from the series *Nostalgic Apparatus, Caracas: Heaven's branch on earth*, 1998) shows the Caracas skyline silhouetted along the projection dome of the city's Humboldt Planetarium, an institution initiated by an oil-financed dictatorship in the 1950s but inaugurated in 1961 under a democratic government. Blurry, sepia-toned and atmospheric, the prints offer a shadowy representation of a city shaped by political tumult since its rapid colonisation.

Other works come from several series created or initiated in the past decade: *Corrupted Files* (2006–8) includes pieces from the project *Plan Caracas, 1974–1976*; here the artist has manipulated two photographs depicting children living in favelas that the Venezuelan government intended to provide with new infrastructure in the early 1970s. Despite the influx of oil money at the time, only two settlements were revamped. Balteo-Yazbeck overlays one image with black horizontal bars (echoing the prisonlike vertical window bars seen in the original image). Another image of children smiling into the camera is split and scrambled, distorting its documentary intention, just as the project that inspired the photographs was so dramatically distorted after its announcement.

Two pieces come from the *Modern Entanglements* series (2015), which intertwines art-historical tropes and forgotten political histories. In the print *Merchandise Exhibition – First Class – 1965*, Balteo-Yazbeck colour-codes two femurs in the colours of the Cuban and

Venezuelan republics, the upper (Cuban) one marked d-i-c-t-a-t-o-r in cursive handwriting, the other (Venezuelan) s-t-u-d-e-n-t, reenacting a Marcel Broodthaers 1964–5 piece showing two thighbones, one painted in the colours of the French flag, the other Belgian. And in the gallery basement, images from the same series delve into lost visual memory: on one wall are 19 bright logos of Venezuelan institutions and museums, many of which emerged through the country's graphics tradition of melding pre-Hispanic and European elements (researched in collaboration with designers Aixa Díaz and Álvaro Sotillo) but were discontinued in 2006 in favour of one umbrella emblem, shown here on another wall next to a BMW logo.

The works in this thought-provoking exhibition carry substantial background information (provided in an accompanying pamphlet), but even without knowledge of Balteo-Yazbeck's extensive research, their formal and documentary qualities manage to communicate the interlayered, often emotional narratives on propaganda and even nostalgia that long-term authoritarianism can cause; the memory and agency that it can erase. I left the gallery with a horrific sense of foreboding, recognising that the 'Venezuelan Case' so deftly illustrated (the country is currently truly on the brink of disaster) is perhaps a dire warning for all of us to look more closely at the precursors to a multitude of autocratic 'cases' so quickly unfolding, right now, in many other places around the world. Kimberly Bradley



*Corrupted file from page 14, [v1], 2006–08, from the series La Vega, Plan Caracas No. 1, 1974–1976, digital c-print from faulty scanner, 113 × 113 cm. Courtesy Galerie Martin Janda, Vienna*