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ESCAPING THE TYRANNIES OF GEOPOLITICAL SPACE: CUBAN ARTISTS AND CURATORS OPERATING OUTSIDE THE PARAMETERS OF SANCTIONED INSTITUTIONS

In the decades following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, various waves of artists and writers representing all social categories were either punished, discredited or banished from Cuba. Others defected due to increasing censorship, widespread repression and ongoing and increasing restrictions on artistic expression. As Rafael Rojas argues, "Restrictions on artistic and literary free expression in Cuba were initiated in the early years of the 1959 Revolution and have passed diverse phases since then. Those phases corresponded to the mutations in the official ideology that broaden or narrow the permanent margins of what can or cannot be said [or expressed artistically]."[1] In June 1961, Fidel Castro announced in a speech to the intellectuals, "Within the revolution everything; outside of it nothing," thereby outlining the strict parameters that would be placed on freedom of expression.[2] The

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[1] See Rafael Rojas' essay "Censorship in Cuba" in *Artist at Risk of Connection*, July 11, 2023, https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/censorship-in-cuba; Amnesty International's report "Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Cuba" (London: Amnesty International Publication, 2010), https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/amr250052010en.pdf.

[2] Fidel Castro delivered the Speech to the Intellectuals on 30 June 1961, thereby establishing state control of all forms of expression including speech.

only aesthetic condoned by the Cuban government was socialist realism—a form of art imposed by Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union following his rise to power in 1924 that celebrated socialist life and ideals. All artistic expression that did not conform to this aesthetic was denigrated and banned.

In 1971, internationally acclaimed poet and novelist Heberto Padilla found himself at the center of a high-profile case that further delineated the limits drawn by the Castro regime. Initially supportive of the regime, Padilla began to publicly express his growing disillusion with and criticism of the government. In response, the Cuban government made an example of Padilla. His consequent, internationally publicized interrogation, forced confession (in which he renounced his views as well as accused other writers, including his second wife, Belkis Cuza Malé), imprisonment and torture sent a menacing message to artists of all stripes.[3] This, in turn, prompted international luminaries such as Susan Sontag and Jean-Paul Sartre to protest the human rights violations in Cuba and petition for Padilla's release.[4]

Since the 1970s, various waves of censorship have plagued the country's cultural scene. The most recent example—which we will discuss at length below—is Decree 349 (2018), a policy seeking to stifle creativity and criminalize independently produced artwork.[5] The ongoing, repressive political situation in Cuba has forced generations of artists to seek out subtly subversive forms of protest against the increasingly repressive atmosphere and deteriorating conditions on the island. Those who were discredited for their dissidence and consequently banished managed to reestablish their reputations and cultural identities outside the island. At the same time, the artists and curators who remain(ed) in Cuba found ways to operate outside the parameters of sanctioned cultural and/or state institutions and insert artists into the international art circuit. As our title suggests, Cuban artists and curators residing on and off the island have managed to mentally escape the tyrannies of geopolitical space. They have embraced a more malleable concept of cultural iden-

[3] This case drew international attention and was commonly referred to as The Padilla Affair.

[4] See the Center for a Free Cuba's report on censorship and free speech: https://cubacenter.org/cuba-brief-archives/2021/06/30/cubabrief-sixty-years-ago-today-castro-declared-to-artists-and-intellectuals-within-the-revolution-everything-outside-of-it-nothing-and-the-dictatorship-continues-to-ja il-free-thinkers-today.

[5] For more information on this policy see the online petition "NO al decreto 349 Carta abierta al Presidente de Cuba Miguel Díaz-Canel", https://secure.avaaz.org/community_petitions/es/Presidente_del_Consejo_de_Estado_y_de_Ministros_de_Cuba_Miguel_DiazCanel_Artistas_Cubans_contra_el_Decreto_349/?cjsGzmb.

tity and expression, as portable and nomadic, which circulates in the world—seen as something fluid and permeable rather than static or fixed.

ARTMAKING IN THE DIASPORA

In the case of the various waves of diasporic artists who were either forcibly banished, or left Cuba for ideological reasons and/or due to economic duress, the challenge of reinventing themselves outside the island has been formidable. The experience of renowned Cuban artist Leandro Soto provides an example. A participant in the 1981 groundbreaking group exhibition Volumen Uno, which "opened new horizons in Cuban art" by challenging the socialist realism aesthetic and consequently the dominant dogma,[67] Soto expressed his opposition to the repressive conditions on the island.[8] As a result, the Cuban government publicly discredited and ostracized him. Following his departure, Soto was all but erased from the official chronicles of art on the island, thereby laying bare the malleable parameters of civil rights and citizenship in Cuba. In exile, Soto was spurned by the art community in the United States and abroad. On the one hand, he was told repeatedly that his work no longer had currency simply because he was not creating art on the island. Others spurned and rejected him specifically because he had received his formal training in Cuba and came of age within the Communist system. In effect, this double-edged narrative stripped Soto of his artistic identity and fundamentally questioned his cultural authenticity.

[6] Maya Pontone, "Over 200 Cuban Artists Call to Boycott State-Sponsored Cultural Events on the Island," *Hyperallergic*, August 29, 2023, https://hyperallergic.com/841346/major-cuban-artists-call-to-boycott-state-sponsored-cultural-events-on-the-island.

[7] Volumen Uno was what many consider to be a radical and dissident exhibition that marked a distinctly new moment in Cuban art and challenged reigning political and cultural ideologies. The exhibition opened in 1981 at the International Art Center in Havana and included Cuban artists Leandro Soto, José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garciandía, Israel León, Rogelio López Marín aka Gory, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Tomás Sánchez, and Rubén Torres Llorca participated in the exhibition. For more information, see "'Volume I,' or The Big Bang of Contemporary Cuban Art. Three decades ago today, a single exhibition launched a new era in Cuban art," *Cuban News*, January 14, 2011, https://cubanartnews archive.org/2011/01/14/volume-i-or-the-big-bang-of-contemporary-cubanart.

[8] For more information, see Rachel Weiss's *To and from Utopia in the New Cuban Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Figure 1. Carlos Manuel Cárdenes, FACES exhibition at the Freedom Tour in Miami, Florida (2010)

Although a handful of diasporic artists gradually managed to reestablish the reputations they had earned in Cuba—such as José Bedia (also a participating artist in Volumen Uno) and Magdalena Campos-Pons—many have remained in relative obscurity following their departure from the island and have struggled to support themselves as professional artists. Given this reality, several key contemporary exhibitions of Cuban diasporic art were explicitly designed to demonstrate an ongoing tradition that continues to flourish and evolve outside the island, despite the dominant political narratives that suggest the contrary.

Cuban photographer Carlos Cárdenes' ongoing series FACES, which has been widely exhibited in Florida and permanently installed in Colorado, provides a salient example for it features portraits of generations of practicing Cuban artists residing outside the island.[9] At the outset, Cárdenes made the decision to photograph every Cuban artist who approached him. His democratic aim was to challenge and redefine traditional, elitist aesthetic hie-

[9] Leandro Soto is one of the artists featured in the FACES series. See http://carloscardenes.com/portfolio/cuban-artists.

rarchies and canons, which privileged Western forms and thereby determined artistic quality and value. Most fundamentally, however, his intention was elegiac in that he sought to chronicle the existence and re-establish the significance of artists who have been ostracized and marginalized on and off the island. For Cárdenes, this was the single most important connective tissue among his subjects; therefore, he intentionally chose not to distinguish his subjects according to social categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, generation, or migrational wave. His photo-documents foreground a visual discourse that makes palpable what he describes as the culturally and politically invisible, for the FACES portraits function as counter-memories that form a visual archive of Cuban cultural expression outside of Cuba. According to Carlos Cárdenes, the images quite literally make the proportions of the post-1959 exodus visible and offer a portrait of the ongoing realities of dislocation and displacement. The overt documentary intention of his portrait-chronicle symbolically reinstates and confers cultural value on its dispersed subjects even though they are not physically located on the island. Designed primarily as a project of recuperation, FACES locates Cuban diasporic artists in the present and ensures their place in the future, thereby rendering their lives and cultural contributions historically meaningful.[10]

Like FACES, the itinerant, evolving multimedia art exhibition CAFÉ—an acronym for Cuban American Foremost Exhibitions—aimed to decenter the dominant, totalizing hegemonic narratives of belonging and authenticity circulated on the island and abroad. It presented a more inclusive, transnational idea of the Cuban nation and culture which transcends geo-political borders and boundaries. Curated by Leandro Soto until his untimely death in 2022, CAFÉ posited an idea of community and belonging somewhat akin to Susan Koshy's conceptualization of "minority cosmopolitanism" that moves away from essentialist and static territorialist notions of national identity and culture. On the contrary, CAFÉ advanced a concept of rooted mobility, which privileged nomadic forms, what Koshy terms *translocal affiliations*, and intercultural exchange.[11]

CAFÉ, like FACES, was first conceived in the context of rupture and displacement. Expelled from the island due to his dissident political and aesthetic views, Leandro Soto relocated to Mérida (Yucatán, México), thereby joining a host of Cuban diasporic artists who were offered sanctuary

[10] Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, "Cuban Portrait," *Cuban Studies* 53 (2024): 127–45.
[11] "Minority Cosmopolitanism," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (May 2011): 592–609.

and personal and professional support by hotelier and gallerist Manolo Rivero.[12] On one particular evening, as Soto sat in Mérida's central plaza, sipping *café* with Yovani Bauta and Israel León Viera (also participating artists in Volumen Uno), the three men began to share their mutual concerns regarding how they would survive as artists given their lack of resources and the tepid reception they had received from the international art community. Drinking their *café*, they became nostalgic. Even though they were in exile, the combination of the coffee with the idea that the central square in Mérida closely resembled *La Habana Vieja*, or Old Havana, conjured up an almost palpable sense of place. The *café*, Soto recalled, inspired their conversation and ultimately became the catalyst and inspiration for the exhibition.

The first manifestation of CAFÉ in Amherst, Massachusetts (2001) set out to prove that Cuban art was indeed being produced outside of Cuba. In other words, it provided material evidence that one does not cease to be Cuban upon leaving the island, regardless of the circumstances. Reminiscent of the Vanguardia Movement, which emerged in the wake of Cuba's independence from Spain, CAFÉ I raised a host of fundamental questions regarding what constitutes cultural and national identity, belonging and authenticity.[13] Following the second manifestation in Colorado Springs, Colorado (2002), Soto determined that the exhibition would be ongoing and itinerant, thereby symbolically suggesting the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of culture and cultural identity.

As CAFÉ evolved, Leandro Soto began envisioning himself as a kind of mapmaker or cartographer.[14] The participating artists, in turn—many of whom had resided in various locations across the globe—resisted defining themselves according to a bounded notion of cultural identity or a fixed idea of nation. Instead, they placed emphasis on the relational, contextual and processual aspects of diasporic citizenship. Many expressed their affiliation with multiple physical locations and cultural contexts, including several (such as Glexis Novoa) who currently maintain residences on the island and in the United States. In effect, the CAFÉ artists acknowledged that territorial

[12] Soto articulated these views most publicly in his participation in Volumen Uno as mentioned at the outset of the essay.

[13] For a discussion on the Cuban modernist movement, see Juan A. Martínez, "Social and Political Commentary in Cuban Modernist Painting of the 1930s," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus et al. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 21–42.

[14] See Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's monograph *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 44.

dispossession and displacement—the phenomena that have long informed the Cuban experience given the realities of Spanish colonialism and its aftermath—"redefine the way distance is measured and informs our understanding of spatiality, for being in any one of these states necessarily suspends any normative understanding of the temporal and the spatial."[15] Seeking to make CAFÉ more inclusive, Leandro Soto expanded this concept of belonging. He allowed heritage Cub*ands* (those born or raised off the island) to participate in the exhibition along with artists residing on the island, who were not physically displaced but identified as being in a state of *insilio*, or inner exile, and expressed a sense of alienation and unbelonging.[16]

The physical presentation of consequent CAFÉ exhibitions emphasized the idea that diasporic cultural production demands "the reconceptualization of the relationship among physical spaces, culture and the idea of nationhood."[17] In one respect, each iteration of CAFÉ explicitly revealed its relation to the island. The artwork contained identifiably Cuban themes and cultural and artistic elements first visible in the work of the Cuban *vanguardia*, thereby visually *repeating* (to borrow Antonio Benítez-Rojo's term) aspects of the absent island which became present in the exhibition space.[18] Yet, each exhibition simultaneously interacted with the new cultural and spatial contexts in which it was presented, thereby suggesting the dynamic and transactional nature of cultural exchange. For example, adopting the untraditional role of artist-curator, Soto would literally integrate the artwork into the physical space in which it was presented. He achieved it by mimicking the participating artists' techniques with their permission and extending many of the pieces beyond their perimeters onto the walls or floors of the exhibition space. In this way, Soto drew visual connections between the work and the new cultural context in which it was exhibited.

[15] O'Reilly Herrera, 44.

[16] Cub*ands* is an elastic, radically inclusive term O'Reilly Herrera first developed in the introduction to *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), to take account of the layered ethnic presences that constitute Cuban cultural identity while acknowledging the diverse, complex identities of those who identify as Cuban including the offspring born and/or raised off the island.

[17] O'Reilly Herrera, *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora*, 45.

[18] Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

Figure 2. CAFÉ XII, Sangre de Cristo Arts Center, Pueblo, Colorado, Fall 2011

Soto consciously defied traditional curatorial practices. Rather than having a pre-set curatorial plan, each respective exhibition of CAFÉ was curated in conformance with the physical space and specific cultural location in which it was exhibited. For example, in 2008, the walls of the gallery space in Rome, Italy, were painted to resemble an Italian villa after Soto had spent the afternoon touring the city with one of the participating artists, Anita Guerra. In the same vein, although each exhibition featured a core group of works that were presented in every manifestation of CAFÉ, they were exhibited along with entirely new artwork. Soto would issue an open call and the artists who responded decided (unbeknown to Soto) which work(s) they wished to submit. As a result, he had to wait until the artwork arrived before he could determine how it would be displayed and paired in the exhibition space. In effect, Soto implemented a spontaneous, jigsaw puzzle curatorial approach in which meaning is seemingly infinitely transposable and only emerges as individual works constellate into thematic or conceptual groups and, consequently, form a whole. Each manifestation of

CAFÉ, therefore, suggested the unexpected ways in which diasporic subjects adapt to and integrate themselves into new cultural contexts.

Making the surprising affinities and congruences across cultural differences visible, each showing of CAFÉ, beginning with the sixth exhibition in Tucson, Arizona in 2007, included the work of both Cuban and non-Cuban local guest artists, writers, dancers and/or musicians. In the same spirit, Soto began to integrate performative elements into the exhibition that allowed local attendees to physically interact with various pieces, thereby suggesting their affinity to and connection with the artwork. The showing in Pueblo, Colorado in 2011 (CAFÉ XII*)*, for example, included an installation of paper boats, which were constructed by Soto and a team of volunteers with local newspapers. Soto arranged them in the alligator shape of the island. Guests were then encouraged to move the boats and create new and different formations. Similarly, at CAFÉ III in Phoenix, Arizona in 2003, the gallery space was painted by Soto in collaboration with his primarily Anglo students to resemble a Spanish colonial home in Havana. The exhibited artwork was grouped according to various rooms in the home. At the opening event, Soto brewed fresh coffee and fried eggs on a hot plate in the area designated as the kitchen and served them to the guests who came to see the exhibition. In this way, he positioned himself at once as a host and a foreign guest, thereby circumventing the traditional nationalist boundaries of hospitality.[19] By integrating these elements into the exhibition, Soto challenged and upended a traditional paradigm of cosmopolitanism that reifies what Jacques Derrida refers to as a stranger-native binary that distinguishes between the guest and the host.

While the exhibitions conjured up some idea of Cuba, each presentation of CAFÉ simultaneously emphasized themes of impermanence and transience. It was evidenced in Soto's decision to leave the artwork unframed, and to tack canvas and paper artwork on the walls of the exhibition space and/or hang it on temporary clotheslines with clothespins. In these oftentimes paradoxical ways, CAFÉ fundamentally acknowledged the idea that Cuba's cultural continuity—with its long history of immigration and outmigration—has always depended on a process of translation, absorption, adaptation, and transformation. It occurs in the context of the new yet, simultaneously, maintains fixed characteristics that remain firmly rooted and seemingly static, thereby connoting cultural and historical differences.

[19] See Jacques Derrida's essay "Hostipitality," trans. Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3–18.

Finally, as mentioned above, Soto's decision to present the ongoing itinerant iterations of the exhibition without an end date not only challenged traditional curatorial practices but also emphasized the idea that ethnic and cultural identity is constantly evolving. In this respect, CAFÉ presented a more cosmopolitan understanding of migration and cultural identity that is simultaneously fluid and rooted. As Abdellah El Boubekri observes, when read in a postmodern context, "the signifiers of stability, home and authenticity become subject to discursive rethinking." The diasporic condition, moreover,

> disrupt[s] the historically inherited consciousness that is based on binaries [and] that inhabit[s] the nationalist and the culturalist views known for playing on the reversal binarism…. [Migration] enables one to liberate oneself from the weights of essentialism [and] is used as a tool for repelling borders. The Western conception of the nation is undermined by the figure of the migrant who keeps on projecting future forms of belonging.[20]

In their total effect, the FACES and CAFÉ exhibitions refute and contradict the official narratives that disenfranchise, demonize, and, in some cases, erase the accomplishments of Cuban diasporic artists. These exhibitions deconstruct the politicized binary of island and diaspora and present an alternative, co-constituted idea of culture and transnational community. Both exhibitions aimed to present a more complex and nuanced vision of diasporic citizenship and community—of difference from and belonging to more than one place in the world. Ultimately, this vision simultaneously connects Cubans on and off the island as well as diasporic Cubans and their hosts. In this way, FACES and CAFÉ challenge[d] territorialist and essentialist political discourses, which stem from static and exclusivist nationalist paradigms or frameworks regarding authenticity, national or cultural identity, and spatiality.

Rooted in both the Indigenous and colonial pasts, as well as the contemporary economic and sociopolitical realities on the island, that have forcibly or voluntarily prompted more than ten percent of the population to relocate since the late 1950s, the idea of Cuba and its culture as a malleable and unstable entity informs the notion that the island cannot be understood as a unified and static category of analysis. Rather than treating the nation and its culture as unified or fixed, FACES and CAFÉ embody a concept of

[20] Abdellah El Boubekri, "Tenacious Displacement of Home in Mohamed Dellal's 'When the Wind of the Atlas Blows'," *Studies in Humanities and Displacement* 4, no. 2 (2023): 28–29.

migratory rootedness that serves as a living testimony to the vital presence of Cuban artists residing across the globe.

CUBAN ARTISTS' AND CURATORS' RECENT MIGRANT/NOMADIC TENDENCIES AND THE "INSTITUTIONALIZATION" OF APARTMENT-GALLERIES ON/OFF THE ISLAND

As the discussion of *FACES* and *CAFÉ* illustrates, the multidirectional migration of Cubans who settled in a range of locations abroad enabled artists and curators to conceptualize transnational spaces that conjured up some idea of the island but relied on a principle of replication, movement and change. That said, the current open, trans-local, and transnational definition of "Cuban art" is not only shaped by how diasporic artists and curators approach issues of nationality and belonging in their work/exhibitions, but it is also characterized by a process of alternative institutionalization that transcends the island while it includes it.

The process of institutionalizing alternative art spaces on the island commenced during the 11th edition of the Bienal de La Habana (Havana Biennial) in 2012, when several houses and apartments hosted solo and group shows, talks, workshops, etc.[21] Analays Álvarez Hernández has dubbed these venues "apartment-galleries," and Paloma Duong refers to them as "self-managed art spaces."[22] From a legal point of view, these "institutions" are classified as artists' studios, although they present and function in various forms.[23] While some are actual studios, others operate as museum-like spaces[24] or "private galleries"[25]—for as much as private galleries are legally forbidden in Cuba.[26]

[21] Although we are aware of the existence of apartment-galleries outside of Havana, we have not had yet the opportunity to visit them or speak with their owners. One of the most renowned is La Peña del Júcaro Martiano, in Camaguey; see https://www.programacuba.com/la-pena-del-jucaro.

[22] Analays Álvarez Hernández, *Climbing Aboard: Havana Apartment-Galleries and International Art Circuits*, Worlding Public Cultures (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023); Paloma Duong, "Homebound: The Art of Public Space in Contemporary Cuba," *ARTMargins* 6, no. 2 (2017): 27–49.

[23] Mailyn Machado, *El circuito del arte cubano, Open Studio i* (Leiden: Almenara, 2018); *La institución emergente. Entrevistas. Open Studio iii* (Leiden: Almenara, 2018).

[24] Venues such as Estudio Figueroa-Vives and Studio Riera have their own collections, offer educational programs, host shows, and display exhibitions in international museum institution.

[25] For a typology of these spaces, see Álvarez Hernández, *Climbing Aboard*.

[26] For many years, there was confusion about the legality of private galleries, with many people assuming that it was forbidden. To address this ambiguity, the National Classification of

During the 2015 Bienal, Havana's apartment-galleries became even more prominent. This occurred during the Presidency of Barack Obama when relations between the United States and Cuba were partially reestablished. This, in turn, opened the tourist industry and improved the economy on the island. Nonetheless, just as the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba eventually failed over a year later, this "state of grace," manifested in the Cuban government's partial acknowledgment and tolerance not only of the existence of apartment-galleries but also of the fact that they were profitable, was temporary.

In 2017, the same year as the inauguration of Donald Trump, Cuba's Ministry of Culture, the National Council of Visual Arts, and the Wifredo Lam Center announced that the upcoming 13th edition of the Bienal would be postponed until 2019 due to the financial strain caused by Hurricane Irma. In response, in May 2018, curator Yanelys Núñez Leyva and artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara announced on social media the creation of an unofficial event called the #00 Bienal de La Habana[27] which relied on the relatively newly-created circuit of apartment-galleries. They insisted that the Bienal de La Habana be a cultural heritage event and should take place without the government's consent.

The theme of this alternative biennial was "In Every Studio a Biennial," which ironically recalls the lyrics of singer and composer Sara González's song dedicated to the State's Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR): "On every block a committee, in every neighborhood a revolution."[28] CDRs are widely known for serving as watchdogs at the city level on behalf of the government.[29] The slogan—which has an added meaning since the #00Bienal was mainly held in these spaces—also recalls the creation of the first apartment-gallery in Havana in March 1994, almost twenty years before this kind of venue became a widespread phenomenon in 2012. In 1994, Cuban authorities banned artist Ezequiel Suárez from showcasing his solo

Economic Activities issued a list in February 2021, which included activities that cannot be conducted as self-employment, such as running commercial art galleries. See "Cuba pasa de 127 a más de 2 000 actividades por cuenta propia legales, gran salto en favor de la economía y el empleo," *Granma*, February 12, 2021, https://www.granma.cu/cuba/2021-02-12/cuba-pasa-de-127-a-mas-de-2-000-actividades-por-cuenta-propia-legales-gran-salto-en-favor-de-la-economia-y-el-empleo-video-12-02-2021-13-02-42?page=2.

[27] See "Convocatoria #00Bienal de La Habana," Facebook, October 31, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/00Bienalevento.

[28] E-flux, Announcements, #00Bienal de la Habana: *In Every Studio a Biennial*, April 29, 2018, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/196251/00bienal-de-la-habanain-every-studio-a-biennial.

[29] E-flux, Announcements, #00Bienal de la Habana.

exhibition "El frente Bauhaus" (The Bauhaus Front) at Galería 23 y 12, a State-owned art venue in Havana. As Silvia Spitta explains, the exhibition was censored "due to the fact that [Ezequiel] had written the sentence 'all institutions are shit' on some of his paintings."[30] Officially censored by the government, Suárez and his partner, artist Sandra Ceballos, decided to show his paintings publicly at their home, situated in a central location in Havana. They famously declared: "Cada casa es una galería" ("Every home is a gallery"), taking inspiration from Joseph Beuys' famous quote: "Everyone is an artist."[31]

As mentioned above, the #00Bienal was primarily held in Havana's network of alternative art spaces or apartment-galleries, which put the latter in the authority's crosshairs. It is likely that holding #00Bienal activities in these spaces influenced the government to issue Decree 349 in late 2018. It was an overtly oppressive ruling that gave the Cuban government the power to cancel events held in non-institutional venues, like apartment-galleries, if they were deemed to be contrary to revolutionary values or good morals.[32] The expression of discontent as a result of these measures escalated and manifested on social networks and through the actions of the San Isidro Movement. Eight members of the movement staged a hunger strike in November 2020 in protest against the imprisonment of rapper Denis Solis.[33] By the end of the month, on November 27, Cuban artists and intellectuals met with members of the Ministry of Culture to demand freedom of creation and expression, adding another layer to an already unstable climate.

AVECEZ ART SPACE: FROM A HAVANA-BASED ART VENUE TO A TRANS-CONCEPT

In light of the increasingly oppressive atmosphere in Cuba and the consequent protests across the island on July 11, 2021,[34] *Avecez Art Space*

[30] Silvia Spitta, *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 185.

[31] Magaly Espinosa, "Aglutinador: un laboratorio, el experimento," *Rialta Magazine*, August 4, 2020, https://rialta.org/aglutinador-un-laboratorio-el-experimento.

[32] Álvarez Hernández, *Climbing Aboard*.

[33] "Cuban security forces evict hunger-striking activists in raid on HQ," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/27/cuban-security-forces-evict-hunger-strike-activists-in-raid-on-hq-san-isidro-movement#:~:text=After%20group%20members%20prote sted %20against,were%20not%20drinking%20water%20either.

[34] Cubans took to the streets on July 11, 2021, to express their concerns about the lack of freedom and the dire economic situation. The government responded heavily by arresting many

(AvAS)—one of the apartment-galleries that "opened" its doors in the wake of the softening relationships between the U.S. and Cuba—became a meeting place for many of the artists, curators, and activists who took part in the public unrest. Established in 2014 and located in Havana's El Vedado neighborhood, *Avecez* is a unique entity. It was not just an art venue but also the permanent home of curator Solveig Font and her son. The name "Avecez," translated as "sometimes" in English, reflects the dual nature of a space that simultaneously served as a personal residence and a platform for artistic expression, for the "z" in "Avecez" stands for an inverted "s."

Font was detained the day after the protests of July 2021 and, shortly after her release, decided to go into exile after the government began a "restoring-the-country-back-to-order" rant reminiscent of the repressive climate in the years of the *Campaign to rectify errors and negative tendencies*, launched in 1986.[35] However, Font, who has been residing in Madrid since 2022, did not completely abandon AvAS. Instead, she transformed it into an itinerant and nomadic gallery space in that she removed it from its physical location in Havana and, quite literally, took the gallery on the road. In so doing, she added a fluid, temporal dimension to the project as a concept. AvAS—like *CAFÉ*—continues to evolve depending on the context in which it is presented and throughout its manifestations.[36]

This strategy reminds us of the tactics of the "trans," described by art historian Caroline A. Jones in her monograph *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*.[37] Jones retraces the origins of these "trans" operations in the "trans-objects" that Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica created in the 1960s, such as the artwork *Dialogue of Hands* (1966).[38] A "trans-object" is a work of art that entails the possibility of existing in a different context: being understood, used elsewhere, and capable of re-rooting itself. As posited by Jones, a trans-object is always in motion, crossing borders, and can be replicated in other contexts.[39]

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of the protesters, and some remain imprisoned to this day. This situation has forced numerous artists, art historians, and activists into exile.

[35] Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel), "Aller-retour de l'art en utopie. Cuba: arts visuels, culture et société à la fin du XXe siècle," in *CUBA. Art et histoire de 1868 à nos jours*, exhibition catalogue (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2008), 330–35.

[36] See '@avecezartspace,' Instagram.

[37] Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[38] The Dialogue invited participants to engage by inserting their hands into a rubber elastic band, emphasizing a tactile and interactive experience that challenged the traditional notions of static art objects.

[39] Jones, *The Global Work of Art.*

This approach can also highlight local aspects of a work of art, as the latter can be reproduced elsewhere while adapting to the particularities of a new setting.

The transformation of AvAS into a nomadic gallery after Font was exiled to Madrid exemplifies these tactics of the "trans." She adapted her project to her new setting and reality. On August 25, 2023, she curated a one-day exhibition titled *Currently Not Available In Your Country or Region* in the Madrid apartment owned by her friends. Font invited twenty-three Cuban friends—including artists, curators, journalists, activists, and others—to choose an object encapsulating their migratory process and reflect on their diasporic condition, which for many is one of exile. AvAS thereby embodied a trans-concept that, similar to a trans-object, can be replicated anywhere and constantly moves, thus it is perpetually changing.

Like *CAFÉ*, AvAS defies geopolitical and national boundaries and conforms to the locations where it unfolds, for it raises fundamental questions, such as: Is it a "Cuban" art gallery, exhibition, or project? In other words, it adapts to the setting where it is put in motion to respond to a site-specific situation. *Currently Not Available In Your Country or Region* offered a healing space for Cubans in exile. Like Clark and Oiticica's *Dialogue of Hands*, its goal was to transform the spaces it inhabited and the subjects who encountered it. In an interview, artist, curator and co-founder of AvAS, Julio César Llópiz-Casal, addressed its potential of "becoming" everywhere. He posited the following: "We also have the opportunity to reinvent ourselves and evolve, ensuring that the concept behind [AvAS] is preserved and can be adapted to any location, whether it's in the middle of Antarctica, in the heart of Madrid, or the center of Montreal."[40]

AvAS' discursive nature creates a "world" without the need to be tied to a specific location. This project is, in fact, an agent of world-making because it tells stories rather than representing them.[41] From the outset, it was conceived as a venue that responded to the moment's needs. Llópiz-Casal argues that it "was, above all, a laboratory. Exhibitions happened when an exhibition needed to happen, but a discussion happened when a discussion needed to happen, or a party when a party needed to happen, but always seeking to contribute to the cultural dynamics of the context."[42]

[40] Interview with Julio César Llópiz-Casal, Madrid, July 12, 2023.

[41] In "World against the Globe: Toward a Normative Conception of Word Literature," Pheng Cheah offers a new definition of world-literature as an agent of world-making. Based on Hannah Arendt's ideas, Cheah writes that a word is, in fact, "formed by the telling of stories," (325) that is, it has a narrative/discourse structure. See Pheng Cheah, "World against Globe: Toward a Normative Conception of World Literature," *New Literary History* 45, no. 3 (2014): 303–29.

[42] Interview with Julio César Llópiz-Casal.

AvAS' first exhibition in Havana in 2014 was a response to a specific situation. *Sistema (operativo) de referencias/(Operative) References System* (figure 3) "officially" inaugurated this art venue. Cuban curator Raquel Cruz Crespo brought together artists such as Amed Aroche, Yonlay Cabrera, Odey Curbelo, Julio César Llópiz-Casal and the fictional presence of the late Italian artist Piero Manzoni (figure 4) to explore the practice of appropriation in contemporary art. Cruz Crespo wished to experiment with the format of the exhibition itself. She wanted to ground it in collaboration, discussion, friendship, and *affects*, as posited by Cuban art critic Daleysi Moya.[43] The exhibition ended up in Font's apartment. AvAS thus surged partly due to the impossibility of finding a state-owned institution to host *(Operative) References System*. From that moment on, AvAS became the place to experiment, fail, and try again, perfectly in line with the discursive aspect that makes it an agent of world-making. As Llópiz-Casal explains:

> The great legacy of Avecez Art Space is that it is a way of feeling art. It is a bet for the exercise of trial and error, especially trials betting on contradiction and trials betting on the creative potential that is there. With Avecez Art Space we understood that there is a way, obviously not the only way, to bet on and make the most of this way of rehearsing that does not happen in spaces when they are institutionalized, regardless of whether it is the institutionalization of a domestic space.[44]

As previously mentioned, AvAS is a hub that prioritizes discourse and refuses to be a typical "Cuban" art gallery where one can simply buy or consume "Cuban art." This position frees it, like CAFÉ, from the "burden of representation,"[45] as the curators refuse to show art that "would function as a surface from which a clear national, ethnic or religious identity could be read off."[46] This expectation from the international art community undoubtedly contributes to some extent to the degree of "self-orientalization" shown by some apartment-galleries. This does not exempt AvAS from pecuniary interests, but it rarely self-exoticizes itself to attract clients.[47]

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[43] Daleysi Moya, "Avecez Art Space. Una curadoría desde la conversación," *Incubadora*, June 30, 2024, https://in-cubadora.com/2024/06/30/daleysi-moya-avecez-art-space-una-curaduria-de-la-conversacion.

[44] Interview with Julio César Llópiz-Casal.

[45] Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990): 61–78; Monica Juneja, "'A very civil idea…' Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making – With and Beyond the Nation," *Zeitschrift Fur Kunstgeschichte* 81, no. 4 (2018): 461–85.

[46] Juneja, 477.

[47] On the international activity and commercial aims of *Avecez Art Space*, see Álvarez Hernández, *Climbing Aboard*.

Figure 3. Opening of the group exhibition *(Operative) References System*, 2014, Avecez Art Space, Havana. Courtesy of Solveig Font

Figure 4. *S/T (apropriación indebida, obra falsa de Piero Manzoni)*, 2014. Fingerprints on boiled eggs. Group exhibition *(Operative) References System*, 2014, Avecez Art Space, Havana. Courtesy of Solveig Font

CUBAN ARTISTS, CURATOR AND ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONS' MULTIDIRECTIONAL MOVEMENTS

While some artists and curators have chosen to sever their official ties with Cuba, such as Solveig Font and Julio César Llópiz-Casal, others have decided to maintain a sort of in-between-ness. Over the last two to three years, there has been a surge of studios and apartment-galleries of Cuban artists residing in the neighborhood of Carabanchel and other areas of Madrid. Many of these artists run satellite spaces in Havana or at least claim a living and working situation in both cities. Examples include artists Carlos Garaicoa, Alejandro Campings, René Francisco, Luis Gómez, and others. Additionally, *El Apartamento*, one of Havana's most prominent apartment-galleries, which is, in fact, a private gallery, has opened a second venue in Chueca, Madrid. In Spain, *El Apartamento* operates openly as a commercial gallery, while the Havana branch is still presented as an artists' studio for legal reasons.

This phenomenon enables a back-and-forth exchange between cities, contexts and even legal statuses, highlighting the importance of claiming a place in Cuba, a country whose former marginality with respect to artistic circuits has been commodified as a "periphery asset."[48] Although we have previously discussed the idea of considering Cuban artists and their cultural production as not solely dependent on their ties to this island, we also acknowledge that the "politics of location," or the pressure to remain connected to the "place of origin," still strongly affects artists and curators. International market forces impose this pressure, part of what we call the *tyranny of space*, and can make it difficult for these individuals to discontinue their relationship with the island while remaining relevant in the international art scene.

Despite the sociopolitical and economic crisis in Cuba, the massive departure of intellectuals and artists since 2022, and the dis/relocation of studios and apartment-galleries in Madrid, artists, art historians, and cultural workers continue to nourish the alternative institutional network that has cut across and transcended national borders, thereby becoming resolutely transnational and trans-local. In the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of what was termed the Special Period, Cuba saw an overwhelming departure of artists and intellectuals, including Leandro Soto. Consequently, a feeling of emptiness informed the Cuban art scene. Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera observed, "The migration was so sudden that the artistic scene could have been left barren. But the

[48] For a discussion of Cuban art as a "periphery asset," see Álvarez Hernández, *Climbing Aboard*.

void was quickly filled: a new group of artists appeared suddenly, like *mala yerba*, weeds."[49] Similar to the artists' resurgence in the 1990s, new or less prominent apartment-galleries—like Riera Studio—took over and currently continue operating in Havana and participating in the international art circuit without leaving the island.

Riera Studio[50] was founded in 2012 in El Cerro, a Havana neighborhood. It is the house of artist Samuel Riera and his husband, Derbys Campo. They work with self-taught artists whom State-owned institutions often reject; many of these artists live with neurodivergent conditions. Riera Studio aims to foster creativity and independence among its artists by providing them with weekly workshops and workspaces and promoting their work locally (at the Studio) and internationally at venues, such as the Outsider Art Museum in Amsterdam, La Maison Rouge à Paris, and Art Enables in Washington, DC. One of the most recent exhibitions at the Studio is *From Mysticism to the Syncretism Reality* (April 12–May 12, 2024), which brought together artists from Cuba and the Netherlands around the topic of the language of abstraction in the outsider art movement.

A final example worth mentioning is Unpack Studio,[51] originally founded in Toronto in 2013 by a Cuban-Canadian couple, artists Omar Estrada and Alexandra Majerus. After closing the studio in Toronto, they decided to open it in Havana in 2016, specifically in their house located in El Vedado. This apartment-gallery offers a residency program that operates in a manner similar to the *Artista x Artista* residency, which artist Carlos Garaicoa has led since 2015 in an apartment in Miramar. After attempting to attract international artists who would personally finance their own trips, Majerus and Estrada altered the residency model and decided to apply for Canadian grants to fund the program.[52] Unpack Studio can be understood as an apartment-gallery operating, like AvAS, as a trans-concept but with a trajectory that heads in a different direction, from abroad to the island.

[49] Gerardo Mosquera, "An Indescribable Adventure: The New Cuban Art," *Transition* 10, no. 3 (2001): 124–36.

[50] https://www.rierastudioart.com/start.

[51] https://www.unpackstudio.ca.

[52] "Call for Applications: Two Fully Funded Residencies at Unpack Studio, Havana," https://akimbo.ca/listings/call-for-applications-two-fully-funded-residencies-at-unpack-studio-havana.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The vibrant presence of artists and curators who have emigrated due to the oppressive economic and sociopolitical realities in Cuba, coupled with the visibility of those who have remained or returned and yet are not authorized or supported by sanctioned state institutions, suggests the existence of a global cultural exchange that transcends geopolitical borders and boundaries. The alternative cultural spaces that have been created on and off the island have made it possible for Cuban artists and curators to insert or, as the case may be, reinsert themselves in the international art circuit by locating value in the condition of marginality and difference from traditional Western sites or modes of valorization. Leveraging the available modalities of electronic transmission of information, communication and access to social media, apartment-galleries circumvent the economic and sociopolitical realities that prevent artists from making themselves visible and relevant, thereby establishing themselves domestically and internationally outside the parameters of sanctioned cultural and state institutions.

Implementing a comparative, transversal theoretical approach, this study is based on the premise that globalization has opened itself up to non-Western cultures and artistic traditions in its simultaneous disruption of more traditional understandings of spatiality and overturning of any notion of territoriality. Comparing the work and initiatives of these artists and curators creates a refracted and mirror-like analytical inversion. As our essay demonstrates, the ongoing politically and socially oppressive conditions that continue to drive scores of Cuban artists and curators from the island have prompted those who have remained to adopt strikingly similar means to reify their artistic and cultural identities. In this way, they have established their autonomy and actively participate in and engage with the international art scene.

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ESCAPING THE TYRANNIES OF GEOPOLITICAL SPACE: CUBAN ARTISTS AND CURATORS OPERATING OUTSIDE THE PARAMETERS OF SANCTIONED INSTITUTIONS

Summary

In this essay, we examine the themes of cultural transmission, transformation, and exchange within a transnational and trans-local framework. We specifically focus on Cuban cultural production on and off the island through its visual arts. Through a transtemporal and transgenerational perspective, we explore the artwork, exhibitions, and "institutions" produced by key Cuban diasporic artists Leandro Soto and Carlos Cárdenes and curator Solveig Font. They have successfully established themselves domestically and internationally outside of sanctioned cultural and state institutions by creating transnational and transcultural modes of production and exchange. We envision, therefore, the boundaries of Cuban art, artists, and curators as a network that includes the Cuban diaspora and its multiple, sometimes contradictory or antagonistic, but not less emotionally charged, relationships with the island. Cubanness thus extends beyond the limits of the nation-state and enters a state of perpetual becoming.

Keywords: Cuban art; diaspora; apartment-galleries; transnational; transcultural; Cubanness

UCIECZKA PRZED TYRANIĄ PRZESTRZENI GEOPOLITYCZNEJ: KUBAŃSCY ARTYŚCI I KURATORZY DZIAŁAJĄCY POZA RAMAMI I KONTROLĄ SANKCJONOWANYCH INSTYTUCJI

Streszczenie

W artykule badamy tematy transmisji kulturowej, transformacji i wymiany w transnarodowych i ponadlokalnych ramach. W szczególności skupiamy się na kubańskiej produkcji kulturalnej na wyspie i poza nią poprzez jej sztuki wizualne. Obierając perspektywę transtemporalną i transpokoleniową, badamy dzieła sztuki, wystawy i „instytucje" tworzone przez kluczowych artystów z kubańskiej diaspory, Leandro Soto i Carlosa Cárdenesa oraz kuratorkę Solveig Font. Z powodzeniem ugruntowali oni swoje pozycje w kraju i za granicą, w oddaleniu od usankcjonowanych instytucji kulturalnych i państwowych, kreując transnarodowe i transkulturowe strategie produkcji i wymiany kulturalnej. Wskazujemy zatem nową perspektywę rozumienia granic kubańskiej sztuki, ukazując artystów i kuratorów jako sieć jednostek, która obejmuje kubańską diasporę i jej wielorakie, czasem sprzeczne lub antagonistyczne, ale nie mniej emocjonalne relacje. Kubańskość wykracza więc poza granice państwa narodowego i wchodzi w stan nieustannego stawania się.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka kubańska; diaspora; mieszkania-galerie; transnarodowy; transkulturowy; kubańskość