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Symbol and Symptom of Cuban Post-1959 Avant-garde.

First Version: Cuban artistic avant-garde (post-1959)’s raison d’être.

... when the name of art is avant-garde, this sign is always caught in the grip of a double necessity—to be the symbol of an impossible consensus and to be the symptom of an inevitable dissension.

Thierry de Duve

After reading Peter Bürger’s classic, Theory of the Avant-garde, where, upon analysing the purposes of this anti-artistic trend, he declares it, above all, an historical episode for the archives, one can hardly help looking back on avant-garde movements as, more than retro, démodé. This sensation of instability when dealing with the avant-garde is stressed every time one tries to appraise its allegedly disruptive and anti-aesthetic programme. Instead of undermining Art-as-an-institution,¹ the avant-garde only solidified the foundations on which the former stood. Yet, a most valuable aspect of Bürger’s essay is precisely his historical focus when analysing the events that marked Art’s transition from a state of autonomy to one of “heteronomy”;² a process in which the avant-garde played a decisive role.

Honouring this historical approach, I intend to comment on some of the traits specific to Cuban avant-garde and its post-1959 saga, for it constitutes the background where some of the keys to the contemporary art movement, known as New Cuban Art, can be found.³ I hope that, given the sui generis quality of Cuban avant-garde post-1959

¹ The concept “Art-as-an-institution” or “art institution”, as it is used here, refers to Peter Bürger’s, in his Theory of the Avant-garde “the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of artworks.” Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p. 22.

² “Heteronomy” is here related to what Bürger calls sublation of art as a social institution, uniting life and art.” Cf. Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde, p. 57.

³ This essay deals with the avant-garde movement that originated after 1959 which reached its peak during the ’80s and the ’90s, that is, the post-revolutionary avant-garde that thrived under the revolutionary process. The term avant-garde is usually an elusive one given the various meanings it has been assigned through the ages. On the one hand, it is tinted by “the bellicist metaphor of the frontline”; on the other by that of change and socio-political confrontation which, even if not mutually exclusive, highlight different nuances. Formerly used by the utopian socialists and by Marx and Engels, it was adopted by art during the second half of the 19th century to label the socially committed art, which afterwards became routine and tradition. Progressively, it comprised every movement that set out to deconstruct the representational patterns set by the academy. A very widely accepted usage of the avant-garde term is the one defined by Mario de Micheli as a sum of all artistic movements, programmatic or not, that thrived during the first half
—which intends to add different data to the avant-garde historical development—we might eventually wave aside any reservations Bürger may have planted related to the obsolete condition of this phenomenon.

In the Cuban context, “Revolution” (keyword for the avant-garde) was a social motto before an artistic one; it preceded the very avant-garde ideal. This socio-political revolutionary process is deeply-rooted in the subjectivity of all Cubans who, under the effects of the Utopian syndrome—another key concept for the avant-garde movement—offered the possibility of a complete social renewal within which Art would insert itself as a constituent subsystem and as an irreplaceable ally. These were the premises that outlined the revolutionary Cuban artistic avant-garde’s raison d’être.

The Argentinean writer, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, compared Cuba to Thomas Moore’s Utopia: the self-sufficient island which, territorially isolated from the capitalist network, tried to uproot and banish capitalism from within. Utopia is a neologism derived from the clipping and merging of two Greek terms eu-topos the good place where freedom, happiness and perfection reign, and ou-topos, the inexistent region, the location of the non-place. This explains why it was so widely used to label the upcoming process, whose programme aimed at building an entirely new model of society.

It was this very utopian ambition which assigned art a new role. One of the first institutions created to implement this new philosophy was the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), in March 1959, which gave cinema a predominant position among all other audiovisual manifestations after 1959. Films and ICAIC newsreels were the main media outlets through which the population was informed of day-to-day social transformations. ICAIC also carried out an ambitious mobile-movie-project in the late ’60s, designed to bring both universal classics as well as the latest emerging local productions to schools and villages deep in the Cuban countryside.

of the 20th century. (Mario de Micheli, Las vanguardias artisticas del siglo veinte (1967; rpt La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1973). We should however bear in mind the heterogeneity that is packed into such a long historical span. That is why we would like to draw the attention to Peter Bürger’s fundamental distinction between the “Isms” in his Theory of the Avant-garde. The distinction between a trend that takes on an essentially aesthetical task—total devotion to the aesthetical specificity of art—and between that other trend which redefines art as a derivative of social praxis, a trend that discards the aesthetical concern as a primordial issue for “the idea of art as representation is rejected.” The second trend’s aim is not only going beyond the realm of the strictly artistic, but also about challenging it by means of, for example, a direct attack on Art-as-an-institution. See Peter Bürger’s reflections in this sense in Theory of the Avant-garde. Whereas some artistic practices are avant-garde in the extent to which they dissent from tradition, others derive their avant-garde condition from their social mission and from the immanent criticism they bear towards the very institutional system that rules them. The latter is the sense of avant-garde that this work elaborates on. This automatically excludes from my current analysis the Cuban avant-garde that originated in the ’20s whose search focused on the tradition-modernity dialectics, as well as on the appropriation of international expressive resources to later translate them or recycle them into national themes; crucial issues that were at the centre of the modern debate in the Cuban cultural context.
The renaissance of the cinematographic industry brought about a movie posters boom. Because of its serial quality and its unsophisticated technological requirements, the poster became a recurrent and most valuable media strategy to disseminate the ideas of the emerging revolution. The remarkable synthesizing quality of those first posters derived from the need for massive access—including the large percentage of the population with less than a fourth grade level of education. The artistic poster, together with the political poster, thus, filled the mass media void.4

The ongoing social process, based on Marxism Leninism, linked itself with the Russian socialist experience which was eventually chosen as the social “model” of reference. The former USSR gave the island preferential economic treatment and offered consultation and qualification in several fields, including art. The critics of that era predicted the advent of pictorial manifestations similar to those of Soviet Socialist Realism. However, an extreme version of this tendency never really caught on in the island even if Socialist Realism did leave some clear prints on Cuban art, mainly via art academies, where Russian specialists collaborated.

Ernesto Guevara was one of the first to warn about “the error of realist mechanicism” in his essay *Socialism and Man in Cuba* (1965), while advocating the recognition and validity of freedom of artistic form. These statements were central to the debate about Socialist Realism and abstract expressionism, a debate that was right under the ideo-aesthetic and socio-political spotlight during the first years of the revolution. Some, like Guevara, claimed freedom of creative forms, whereas others deemed abstractionism an inadequate language for the masses. This argument, which spread across different levels of the cultural and political context, received wide coverage by the most important newspaper of that time, tautologically entitled *Revolución*.

If I stop to analyse some of the peculiarities of this historical moment, it is because I would like to highlight how, from the very beginning of the revolution, there was a presence of the mass debate about whether art should detach itself from social praxis or interact closely with it, according to the demands of the changing social situation.

This puts the Cuban avant-garde against a very distinct backdrop, one that differed considerably from the European avant-garde scene. Unlike the latter, Cuban revolutionary avant-garde does not define itself—at least, not at first as “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society”5 but, on the contrary, as a constituent part of the new historical epoch. In other words, the notion of avant-garde emerged, during this first stage, as one of the forces contributing to the radical reshaping of social structures,

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including the cultural institutions themselves. “Institution” has always been, in revolutionary Cuba, a synonym of State, for all were given birth and were ruled by the Revolution. Cuban art found a new raison d’être as a subsystem whose mission was to reflect the anti-establishmentarian anti-bourgeois changes, the birth and growth of a society that revolted against bourgeois values and its establishment. This projection branded the first stage of the post-revolutionary Cuban avant-garde. Therefore, its political orientation was tightly linked to an extra-artistic condition: the artist let himself be absorbed by the collective subject, bedazzled by the emancipatory promise of the political avant-garde. The artist’s projection thus, was moved by blind faith in relation to the revolutionary project.

The very term avant-garde acquired new meanings. It was stretched beyond its artistic sense, especially during the first three decades after 1959, when the Revolution found support in the international socialist system. Stressing its primary meaning of a front line of soldiers on the battlefield, the idea of being avant-garde implied sacrifice. As the “vanguard of the Americas”, avant-garde was a condition that the whole island claimed for itself. At the same time, avant-garde was the title awarded to the full-fledged, role model revolutionary. All institutions should be geared towards avant-gardeness or strive to be declared avant-garde. The Revolution stretched the semantic boundaries of the term, which now referred to the fulfilment of the revolutionary utopia, hence, its political and ideological meaning superseded the artistic one.

In Thierry de Duve’s words, the predominant attitude in this first stage followed the modernist slogan “Do whatever in order to ...” “Do whatever for the sake of the revolution,” or even better, “do whatever, make the revolution!” This was the mission assigned to art, which obviously went beyond and over art’s autonomy, forcing it to become politics, pedagogy, praxis. This way art found itself amidst the singularity of a

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6 Ernesto Guevara, El Socialismo y el Hombre en Cuba. (Socialism and Man in Cuba), letter to Carlos Quijano. Marcha, Montevideo, March 12, 1965 “Cuba is America’s avant-garde and should make sacrifices because it has placed itself on the front line, because it leads Latin American masses along the path of true freedom.”

7 Artistic academic institutions were also affected by the fact that art was overestimated as an ideological object. This deterred art from exercising criticism upon its very own structures; hence becoming some sort of mechanicistic visual art. This state of things resulted in artists creating a work that was parallel to their learning process, but detached from it as some sort of alternative secondary practice. This model was progressively subverted in the Higher Institute of Art (Instituto Superior de Arte, ISA), which caused artists to rethink creation in more research-oriented terms.

8 Fais n’importe quoi is the exact expression used by De Duve. More than just an explicit validation of any means serving a given purpose, this absolutely colloquial word choice, in my opinion, is an emphasis on the absorption of the popular, “uncultivated” spirit, in the widest sense of the term. De Duve also points out that such wording reveals “the utopia of an art made by the passer-by,” i.e., by someone who is not an insider. Thierry de Duve, Kant After Duchamp (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996) pp. 328, 341–344.
process that was conscious of its own uniqueness and which predestined to art an aprioristically transcendental mission.

Such a historical conjunction placed art in the modernist crossroads of helping to create an autonomous and self-sufficient subject. In a way, the Cuban Revolution echoed the spirit of the French Revolution. An overblown sense of the “here” and “now” became the banner of the times, cutting off any relationship with the past. The new enlightened man would wipe away, with his drive for change and negation, archaic and inefficient socio-cultural structures. This utopian conception would remain particularly vigorous during the first two decades of the Revolution, and its most illustrative token would be that of the “new man” ideal. As outlined in Ernesto Guevara’s work *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, this new social baptism required the creation of an altruist integral man, which could only be achieved through a patient process of generational formation. This new man ideal was often identified with Guevara’s own persona; his sudden and premature death served to reinforce this myth.

The “new man” required schooling. The need for “enlightenment” was addressed by means of establishing an institutional educational net, especially during the first two decades of the Revolution. The massification of culture and the firm determination to upgrade instruction was implemented, among other programmes, through an amateur movement, sponsored by Culture Clubs. These institutions proliferated all over the country and were not only in charge of planning cultural activities but, moreover, educational activities such as music, art, theatre, and dance courses. A similar role was played by local museums, which together with their regular exhibition function, had to plan formative activities to strengthen the links within the community. It was as part of these early educational and promotional initiatives that Cuban art began to take shape after 1959.

The institutionalised artistic system that evolved was therefore protected by State’s subsidies, which allowed the artistic field to develop undisturbed by the demands of the culture and entertainment industry. The fact that there was hardly an art market during these formative years gave way to a very healthy wave of experimentation, preventing the regulation of its own system. Once the competition between state and market came to a halt, regulation operated solely through the “social commission” as demanded by the art institution.

Cuban artists, educated in the public school system—twelve years of free instruction from secondary school up through the university—were gradually

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9 The Literacy Campaign, carried out in 1961, was unquestionably the most ambitious initiative in this direction. It resulted in illiteracy plummeting to 3.9 percent in 1961 from 23.6 percent in 1953. Cf. Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) p. 113.

10 Art galleries were exclusively exhibition venues and not commercial ones, at least until the late ’80s, when the country experienced some dramatic changes caused by the collapse of the international socialist system.
incorporated into the teaching staff at the same educational institutions where they studied. That is, artists who grew up under the avant-garde artistic precepts started to translate their own discursive strategies as teaching methodologies. In this sense, the believed necessary negative dialectic between academic institution and avant-garde was suppressed. Since then, an important part of the transformations developed by the Cuban art, has been generated in the academy’s ateliers themselves, which became one of the fundamental breeding grounds and perpetuating factors of the avant-garde tradition. The academy—especially the Higher Institute of Art—constituted, then, one of the institutional contexts responsible for preparing the critical avant-garde that followed: this first so called “romantic” era, and which built itself upon the deconstruction of the paradigms of that time: socialist Soviet art, Western art, and the domestic political paradigm itself. This way the academy laid the grounds for what Bürger calls avant-garde’s self-criticism.

Second version: the avant-garde versus the institution and the role of the “organic artist.”

Avant-garde revolutionary policy became stereotyped when the plurality and social aperture of the “romantic” era that boomed in the ‘60s began to be limited both officially

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11 In 1983, as conceived by Flavio Garcíandía—one of the artists and professors at ISA (Higher Institute of Art) and a key figure to the ‘80s artistic movement—, the project Art in the Factory (Arte en la fábrica) was carried out. Artists would create their work in the factories and recycle the waste material available on the sites. In 1989 another completely different teaching methodology conceived as project art, is implemented under the title Towards a Pedagogic Pragmatics (Hacia una pragmática pedagógica), which was later converted into DUPP Gallery (Galería DUPP). Both projects were conceived and led by René Francisco Rodríguez, Flavio’s disciple and ISA artist-professor himself. These projects sought to establish interaction between creative practices and social life, which made them target citadels and marginal areas of the Cuban capital to base their group work. They would listen to tenants’ worries and opinions, live with them, help them solve individual problems and occasionally meet some of their material needs. Three years later, artist-professor Lázaro Saavedra, who is also one of the main figures of the avant-garde, founds Grupo Enema in 2000. The city is again the chosen setting for their performances and socio-artistic interventions. These are just a few examples of an avant-garde tradition that has continued to the present day and was born within the premises of ISA.

12 Such self-criticism was encouraged by the assignments set by professors and leading artists at the Higher Institute of Art. As an example, the critic and art historian, Osvaldo Sánchez, designed a peculiar course entitled “Ten Cynical Assignments for a Sceptical Painter” (Diez ejercicios cínicos para un pintor escéptico), which focused on appraising the artistic fact by means of developing the capacity to manipulate and subvert. The author labelled them “difficulty assignments” referring to the degree of complexity they posed when it came to deconstruct a socio-historic norm. Similar exercises were carried out in the workshops Creation? (¿Creación?) and Towards a Pedagogic Pragmatics (Hacia una Pragmática Pedagógica), by Lázaro Saavedra and René Francisco Rodríguez, correspondingly. By means of these assignments, manipulation was increasingly resorted to, both as a pedagogic strategy and as a modus operandi aimed at undermining stylistic and conceptual paradigms. Therefore, some of these teaching programmes could very well be considered as some sort of platform or manifestos for the latest Cuban avant-garde movement.
and institutionally. The First National Congress of Education and Culture, held in 1971, laid the groundwork for art during the following decade: “Art is a weapon of the Revolution ... an instrument against the penetration of the enemy.” This dramatically divided a quorum that was supposed to be an active force in the construction—which also implies the taking apart—of a social system of all and for all.

“Do whatever, make the revolution” was the statement that revealed the inherently contradictory nature of the avant-garde’s new role. “Do whatever, provided...” here again De Duve would say “instead of purposes, here are contradictions.” Art as an institution—as seen above—replicated itself by being the first to translate a social model, a specific context, into a rhetorical space about Art, and by extension, into Art as such. Empowered with official status, it undertook the construction of the unitary society and it proliferated in “aseptic” and monologuing settings. Thus, the institution planted disbelief in the avant-garde project that it once fostered. But, by the same token, the institution put back into the hands of the artists “art’s task,” the norm to be defied: a dogma that was to become tomorrow’s tradition, tomorrow’s aspiring unchallengeable power. This paved the way for the birth of a counter practice, that was beforehand labelled as “avant-garde,” “protest art,” “sacrifice art,” “art for the sake of the revolution.”

Within this context of paradoxical relationships, a counterculture movement emerges, which up to a certain extent echoes the Gramscian “organic intellectual.” This notion of the collective intellectual that Gramsci elaborated on in his Quaderni del carecere shares more than a common ground with the de-legitimising environment that originated in the Cuban cultural context. Gramsci’s organic intellectual is the social group that identifies a need or collective will and turns it into the symbol of its dissension in relation to the structure governing existing relationships, which is like denying the possibility of consensus. Gramsci pointed out that this social group was likely to emerge exactly as the result of an “organic change, that is, it originated as a constituent part of the new social structure. “Organic” then implies a genetic order, based on the social contradictions, which in Gramsci’s words, “takes into account movement, the organic way in which historical reality is truly revealed.” It is from this quality that the organic intellectual derives its dynamic and collective condition.

We could reword Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” as “organic artist” in describing the role and context of art in the Cuba of the ‘80s. The new task of the avant-garde

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14 Thierry de Duve, Kant After Duchamp, p. 345.


artistic countercultural movement was to question the role of Art-as-an-institution, which was also, in essence, State-as-an-institution. Some sort of partisan group emerged in the heart of the visual art movement, which concentrated on negotiating with the state power structures, a new, differentiated notion of art, which was, in a sense a new social praxis proposal as well. Taking advantage of a process known as “the Rectification Campaign” (1985)—a State-run campaign against bureaucratic practices and economic and administrative mismanagement—an unprecedented phenomenon begins to take shape in Cuban art, one which compensated for the absence of a critical counterforce in the mass media and mass organizations. This is why the “avant-garde manifestation” carried out by the organic artist acquired the dimension of a historical “pact” within the artistic field.

Did this militant position in favour of the impossibility of consensus concerning the “ideology” of art—or concerning social praxis for that matter—mean that the sheer aesthetic or autonomous focus was somehow lost in Cuban art? It did not, precisely because artists made it a central dilemma. Since one of the decisive points of departure of this artistic countercultural movement was to rethink the flux between aesthetics and the ideo-political ambit, their debate aimed at clarifying art’s role in the widest sense of the expression. This led the Cuban avant-garde to favour conceptual art over the many paths being explored, insofar as this trend’s emphasis on the strategic conception of the creative act strengthened the partisan condition. Thus, the avant-garde’s resistance and opposition to the institutional context meant, above all, an ideo-aesthetic questioning; it aimed at restoring an autonomous territory for action enriched with ample liberties and closely related to social reality. This is why this fight is and was waged in an essentially ideo-aesthetic battlefield from where it challenged the “canon,” the “convention,” and inserted itself at the very core of the power zone tension.

On a separate note, the inclusive tradition, typical of a peripheral context, led Cuban artists to adopt a wide expressive and critical repertoire, coming either from the international arena of from the different social layers that moulded the organic artist as a direct result of the massification of culture. Yet, what truly keeps Cuban art from the reductionist formulas or binary oppositions is the asynchronous nature of the juxtaposed

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17 Cf. Sue Golding, *Gramsci’s Democratic Theory: Contributions to a Post-Liberal Democracy* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1992) pp. 111–112. “... a political party could be any number of social groupings; it could be the name for something as broad as a popular movement or as seemingly narrow as a newspaper, a theatre company, or even a review.” ... “The political party for some social groups is nothing other than their specific way of elaborating their own category of organic intellectuals.”

18 The organic artist realized itself through two major strategies. The first one was the proliferation of creation groups or “creation guilds” that were based on the development of micro-policies and social interaction: *Hexágono, Provisional, Arte Calle* Groups, among others. The second one, directly related to the first, was artists’ conversion into an institution-like figure by promoting and reorganizing the artistic field taking on simultaneously the role of the official agent, critic, and creator-activist: in the ‘80s, Puré Group, ABTV Team, Pilón Project, Castillo de la Real Fuerza Project; in the ‘90s, DUPP Gallery, Doboch Productions, Enema Group, *Aglutinador* Gallery, magazine *Lo-que-venga* (*Come what may*), *Memoria de la Postguerra* (*Postwar Memoirs*).
and chunked processes that have shaped its context. The scenario is one where a developing country races for cultural modernism on the basis of achieving a socio-economic one, which was in fact, uneven and incomplete, and hit rock bottom when its authority crisis coincided with the one labelled as post-modern on the international scene. This is the paradoxical setting in which the Cuban avant-garde traces its coordinates. It is within this “impure” context that its de-legitimising spirit lays.

All this resulted, broadly speaking, in two mayor distinct, but not exclusive, approaches. Some artists reacted to these conditions by segregating art from social praxis. In their detachment they sought to either spare them the extra aesthetic task, to recover an intimate creative framework, or establish a non-contaminated zone, alien to political affairs.

A second branch—undertaken through much of the ‘80s and ‘90s artistic movement—would rather recycle the emancipatory ideal and take advantage of that first avant-garde extra-aesthetic momentum fostered by the revolutionary state. Only now, the aim was to trigger criticism from within that trend and lead the whole movement towards a fission that would result in a plural field of action. The second half of the ‘80s witnessed a highly charged process of social and institutional criticism inspired by the same emancipatory ideals promoted at the beginning of the Cuban revolution. The avant-garde that had emerged as a spontaneous by-product converted itself into a movement that was fully aware of the stagnation that had taken over the power structures. It thus decided to claim a space of freedom that would not imply a lack of commitment.

Statements made by working artists at that time are very eloquent of the demands of the artistic avant-garde. “I want to tell the world that I am a believer, even if I am not. I want to redeem the mysticism that exists in every man,” (Luis Gómez); “I want to stop criticizing problems, something I have done until today, and find solutions,” (Adriano Buergo); “I want to become an unconscious and automatic bearer, telling the good and the bad with total crudeness and frankness” (Lázaro Saavedra); “I am not interested in any art expression. I want to questions institutions, ... I want the repercussions of my work to go beyond the realm of art,” (Aldito Menéndez); [My aim is] “to transform work into a personal therapy and cure, useful for others,” (Tania Bruguera).19

These statements probe how imbued the ‘80s avant-garde was in the emancipatory and therapeutic ideal. One could almost say that these statements all came from the same person, the organic artist, who—wearing the mediator’s aura—willingly wished to transform the world. This moment of avant-garde self-consciousness in terms of its social role was a big step ahead for Cuban art in relation to Cuban society.20

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20 During the sixties, a similar critical movement took place thanks to a certain plurality of opinion. The crisis was triggered by several censorship scandals in the literary ambit. The “Words to the Intellectuals,” a speech delivered by the Commander in Chief of the Revolution in the ‘60s and which we have briefly quoted,
could explain why the avant-garde in Cuba is not at all a démodé issue, but one of the plausible ways that art found to demystify the institution while readapting its own expressive drives; or perhaps the only path art was bound to choose.

But the State-as-an-institution was not ready to take the organic artist’s battering. The latter dealt blows there were it hurt the most: the State’s rhetorical and representational mechanisms, its stereotypes and worn out formulas. At the end of the ‘80s, institutional intolerance and censorship wound up in a succession of cancelled exhibitions as well as in the dismissal of artworld agents, who were ultimately responsible for exhibiting and legitimising the artistic fact. This was followed by the diaspora, the massive exodus of the protagonists of this non-conformist wave. The worse than sceptical local response to such criticism, together with the international resonance of their work, made them turn to a willing overseas audience, in the hope to continue their work. Though not for long: once out of the context, they were out of the game.

Third version: the avant-garde saga of the nineties.

- From the Rectification Campaign to the Special Period.
- From... to the corporative model.
- From comrade to mister.
- From the sanctioning of the US dollar to sanction-lifting.
- From the propaganda billboards to the commercial billboards.
- From the bus to the “camello”
- From the domestic exhibition to the international exhibition.
- From artist-organised exhibition to just the opposite.
- From the collective to the individual. From Utopia to Scepticism.
- From naïveté to simulation.
- From the “mercadito” to “la chopin”
- From the aesthetic value of the work of art to the commercial one.

Lázaro Saavedra

The decade-to-decade historicist distinction is, in the case of the ‘80s to ‘90s transition, a necessary commonplace for it coincides with the instauration of the new status quo that triggered each and every existential dilemma in Cuba. I refer to the sudden socio-cultural transformation publicly known as The Special Period. It is therefore impossible to study the new path taken by Cuban avant-garde without taking into account this social landmark, a leitmotif that dramatically reshaped the Cubans’ state of mind and their vision of the world.

momentarily inhibited the drive for plurality; however, this is ultimately an evidence of how aware the State was of the artistic movement’s opposition potential. Hence the ‘80s counter-cultural movement in the visual art field should not be seen as a first and tout court surge of non-conformism, but rather as the saga of the ‘60s intellectual movement’s critical spirit, now vindicated by the very children of the Revolution.
It would go beyond the boundaries of this essay to give a precise account either of the “special” conditions that were experienced on the island or of their socio-cultural consequences. Crisis, disorientation, disbelief, disillusion are some of the words that depict this moment. And also the word “post-war” which conjures up the image of waking up from a nightmare of battles and ambitions, only to find ourselves amidst a wasteland with a blurred and uncertain future ahead of us. This very much describes Cuba’s reality after the collapse of the Socialist Bloc, the loss of preferential economic treatment within the CAME system, and the reaffirmation of the local economic infrastructure’s precariousness. Moreover, this was the evidence of the failure of the Rectification Campaign launched during the second half of the ‘80s. In the artistic realm, it was also the evidence of the inattention to the very critical voices that once tried to negotiate alternative socio-political formulas with the establishment; among these voices, the artistic avant-garde.

The whole setting changed dramatically. Accessory commercial mechanisms were activated as palliatives to the economic depression and recession; while the State’s solution was to lift the sanction of the dollar, the black market was the people’s own solution: a survival sub-system, where prices were automatically regulated by the law of supply and demand. This brought about very serious consequences for art: the State’s subsidies for artists practically vanished and artists had to make do with a rudimentary art market that spontaneously found its breeding ground in the ongoing crisis. These are, *grosso modo*, the socio-cultural conditions that Cuban art had to accommodate itself to in the ‘90s.

Cuban artists found themselves overnight in the middle of a scenario where any truth was disposable. It took time for artists to adapt to the new rules of the game, namely to resume once again the “partisan” oriented process that had been left headless with the massive exodus of the most representative and influential creators of the ‘80s; a process of revision of art and of the prevailing socio-cultural platform and structures, which had been left stunned. These events wound up in a state of lethargy at the beginning of the ‘90s that imposed a mammoth task on the artists of that time. The artist is overwhelmed by the weight of his mission, and his history—as well as that of the decade—is one of recovery from such a challenge.

It is only natural that the first response was the sharp buzz of silence. And it was in the middle of that deafening absence of action in the ‘90s, that the first Cuban art recovery strategy was forged. In the end, what is it, if not vacuum and absence, that gives rise to the aprioristic identification of the emerging generational artistic movement of the ‘90s? This early baptism of “The Nineties” —please note it is imposed from and by

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21 “Culture industry” is hardly an accurate expression here. There was not a solid commercial network with international links; there was no national art market either. Culture industry in Cuba was in its infancy. It consisted of a very selective circuit of commercial galleries and it was mostly based on artists self-management operations. The emergence of this culture industry implies an inversion of the revolutionary ideal of art, as stated in the “First National Congress of Education and Culture Declaration” (1971), which proclaimed the “end of art as merchandise,” a statute that practice later derogated for art’s own survival.
the discourse about art—acted as a cohesive tactic for the artistic movement and in a certain way laid the groundwork for the open forums (most of them heated ones) that would boost the meagre remains of partisan consciousness. This in turn resulted in immediate historical self-awareness, and in almost agonised reflection about the prior decade, which explains why much of the early ‘90s creation is so reminiscent—sometimes redundantly so—of the already mythical ‘80s avant-garde’s poetics. However harsh, the debate reinforced among artists the awareness of being heirs to a critical avant-garde tradition and, above all, it ensured the preservation of the role of the organic intellectual in strictly counter-cultural terms.

Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel), bequeathed us with one of the most thrilling pieces of work about the conflicts experienced by the individual under the new conditions. In his Self-Portrait of an Organic Intellectual. Homage to Gramsci (Autorretrato como intelectual orgánico. Homenaje a Gramsci) a wooden cell or cage is erected in the middle of a room. The artist’s works that hang on the walls of the room can be seen through the square holes of the cage. The latter contains a smaller cage inside of which an electric saw automatically turns on and off by intervals. According to Tonel, the saw conveys the duality of an artefact that serves a creative and destructive purpose at the same time: a metaphor that synthetises in this work the inescapable circumstances that surround the intellectual once the abyssal gap between emancipatory utopias and reality have been perceived and taken on.

Is this about setting limitations interpreted in terms of linguistic barriers, in terms of code and character incompatibility? Is it about blurring the borders between the copy and the original? It definitely is a summatory of limits: cells turned into (their own) margins. That is why this poetic is reminiscent of the labyrinthine spacing, which tries to conciliate the real and the imaginary through places that are interconnected but cannot fit within each other given their irregular outlines. These are stunned angles, plying angles that at the same time project a mirage in the distance. It is about spaces that contain each other like a mother contains a fetus: so familiar, yet so strange. Spaces that ultimately express the urgent need to deal wisely with communication, regardless of the risks. It is precisely at this crossroad within this “spacialization” where the possible and the impossible converge, that the contemporary artist has to make his choices. Tonel’s installation thus pays homage to various generations of “organic” intellectuals who experienced a truly avant-garde metamorphosis: from the tour court utopia to some sort of post-utopian condition.22

Back to the latest avant-garde generation at the turn of the 20th century, that is under the current conditions, the ‘90s wave summed up the conflict of social communication, which then became the movement’s main dilemma. “To be the symbol of an impossible consensus and to be the symptom of an inevitable dissension,” continues to be the double necessity that gears this movement. This led artists to choose

22 For a better understanding of the, refer to the essay "Other Geometries or in Search of the Skin. The (A)utopian Condition in Danne Ojeda, Diagonal. Essays on Contemporary Cuban Art (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Editions, 2003).
micro-policies that sought to revitalize damaged zones of the social fabric—the individual, the city, among others.

This concerns where not alien to the ‘80s, where the avant-garde had an emphasis on the criticism targeted at the State-as-an-institution, as well as at the transcendental will of collective emancipation. One could say that in the ‘90s, even if such critique is not abandoned, the avant-garde micro policies focus on the possibility of the individual—the “other”—to represent himself, on the street, in the suburbs, in the different ghettos that society forms and classifies spontaneously, all of which are highly contrasting to the State representation of the collective subject. The avant-garde artist thus resumes his philosophy of praxis-as-art in an attempt to pluralize reception; the very process of creation and its collective authorship are deemed as of prime importance. These are the fundamental drives—yet certainly not the only ones—that have propelled most of the latest projects of social insertion, as well as the creative practices coined within the avant-garde rubric.

Translator notes

TN1. Translator note: Casas de Cultura, literally Houses of Culture or Culture Houses, an institution that centralized art education resources in municipalities and villages all over the country.

TN2. Huge, heavy and roaring trailer-bus designed to palliate the public transportation crisis in Havana City during the Special Period. Habaneros nick-named them “camels” (camellos) because they were M-shaped. Curiously, the Transportation Ministry made it official by printing a small camel logo on the chassis.

TN3. Chopin: The Cuban version of the English word “shopping.” It refers to the shops that proliferated once the sanction on the US dollar was lifted. These shops sell in dollars basic household and food products that used to be bought at the mercadito—small market—in Cuban pesos.


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