

Art in a Changing Cuba

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Despite the lack of a national art market in Cuba, artistic talent is flourishing. This paper addresses questions that will be explored in a forthcoming exhibition on contemporary Cuban art at the Boston University Art Gallery. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue will include viewpoints gleaned from 2005 interviews with several renowned Cuban artists, art historians from Havana University, art administrators from Casa de Las Américas, and writers from two major art journals, *Artecubano* and *Revolución y Cultura*. Although the exhibition will include a broad view on Cuban art, this article focuses primarily on current issues relating to Cuban art production and the art market.

The first topic of discussion touches upon the applicability of a transition paradigm to the Cuban art world. The concept—as applied to the economy, society, and culture of Cuba—has been widely debated and has even been rejected by some in the artistic community. For many Cubans, the very notion of the contemporary art scene being “transitional” is an outsider’s construct. Foreigners often discuss “the transition” as if it is eminent, but because of the dynamic nature of Cuba’s art and culture, the applicability of a static transition paradigm is questionable and ultimately unproductive. Clearly, periods of artistic change in Cuba are not clear cut, but rather, are complex processes of ongoing opposition between preservation and transformation of culture and identity. It would be more suitable to forecast the future of the art world, not as fixed, but in flux, or as a complex process of dialectical dichotomies that embody the inherent social contradictions of continuity and change. Artist José Angel Toirac put it quite brilliantly when he said: “The word ‘transition’ has a very specific connotation in the argot of the tensions between Cuba and the United States. The phrase ‘future transition’ expresses an appallingly simplistic and erroneous idea of the culture. Cultural identity is

not a moving towards a specific point or an arriving at a specific point, even if we do find that point in the future. It is a vivid process of constant change and transformation. It is about a permanent transition that lives in the past, populates the present, and continues into the future and beyond.” (Toirac, 2005)

Change, as in “transition,” is used by Cubans as a kind of malleable construct. The following comment of Toirac illustrates this amorphous notion: “When I was born, Fidel was already the most important living political figure in Cuba. I cannot conceive of a Cuba without Fidel. It is absurd to do so, because that would be like pretending he is eternal. I know a change will happen, but I am not prepared for such a situation. What I am sure of is that Cuba—not Fidel—had a history before and will have a history after.” Toirac later added:

Every society changes every day and even more so a society like Cuba, which is a revolutionary society. For instance, unemployed women, who had become prostitutes to earn a living, were quite amazingly working in a bank the very next day managing the money of the wealthy! That was the revolution. That is what makes Cuba a dynamic society. The logic of Cuban thought is change, so it is logical for us to expect even more change.” (Toirac, 2005)

While some in the Cuban art community hope for a political reform translated into an open market economy, others take comfort in believing that the political elite has a calculated plan aimed at the continuance of a socialist regime. Several angrily resist even the concept of a transition and deny the role of the United States as the solution. However, the majority seem puzzled by this question of transition and voice wonder about its direction, its beginning, and its end. Because of the wide array of opinions given by interviewees, a monolithic forecast of “a transition paradigm” in the Cuban art world is not applicable.

Actually, Cuba has undergone a myriad of transitions since the 1959 revolution, advancing towards a socialistic future while restructuring its strategy towards economic stabilization. Within a 10-year period—from about 1993 to 2004—its economy also evolved, from the legalization of the dollar and the creation of a partial dollar economy to full sanctions against the dollar and the introduction of the peso convertible cubano. Comparable transformations have occurred in the art world as well. The new Cuban art of the latter half of the twentieth century evolved from numerous restrictions in the “gray years” during the seventies; to more openness during the “Cuban Renaissance” of the 1980s; and finally, to the exile of former established artists and the emergence of younger artists during the 1990s. Perhaps the question we

should pose is: what can we forecast for the next series of dialectical processes in the Cuban art world and its market?

The Cuban art economy is moving closer to North American and European models, with the export of Cuban art to wealthy collectors and institutions that can afford such work. It is interesting to contemplate how a socialist country, with a rich artistic tradition, could develop such a dynamic international art market, but not a viable national one. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the cultural model of Cuba has been based on mass democratization and the ideals of the revolution. All sectors of society had the opportunity to produce and appreciate art, but, for many years, the state demonized a capitalistic buyer mentality and praised culture as the antidote for consumerism. The art market was used primarily as a tool to promote national culture, rather than to advance private interests.

Despite such ideology, however, individual collectors were able to acquire artwork through long-term credit arrangements with Havana Gallery and through participation in art auctions organized by the National Museum of Fine Arts and Bonfil Gallery. But, during the socio-economic crisis in the early nineties, the state closed art institutions, eliminated outreach programs and vastly reduced the circulation of artworks. Simultaneously, the export of the Cuban artistic patrimony, not covered by the embargo, was legalized. Legal export of art, therefore, resulted in the opening of the art market to foreign buyers, which in turn inflated the prices of Cuban art. These newly inflated prices for art—based on international standards—were not affordable by either the Cuban general public or by local collectors. At the same time, visits from foreign gallery owners and museum curators increased and provided artists with international exposure and the adoption of Western models for art sales. Because of this new consumer-based economy and the import of international standards of review and criticism, Cuban artists became strategically poised to move away from collective projects and socialist subjects and towards the embracing of individual styles with personal themes. For many, financial survival depended upon creating works of art for both the cultivated foreigner as well as the ordinary tourist.

While the government established a new centralized gallery system called *Génesis*, ostensibly to eliminate competition among artists, the galleries actually catered to outside markets and resembled those in capitalistic economies. Some galleries were more prestigious than others, depending on a variety of factors: the prominence of the artists being exhibited, the size and location of the galleries, and whether or not they sold to a domestic or foreign market. In order to ensure sales and profitability, the government accepted or rejected—in accordance with their own standards—the applications of artists looking for an exhibition venue. Cuban artists, who were accepted into the

national gallery system, were allowed to keep 50 to 60 percent of the profits made upon the sale of any work. While this was beneficial for the most recognized artists, those rejected artists looked for alternative marketing formats and usually found them in tourist venues, such as state-sponsored art fairs and street stands.

The Cuban government today is faced with a dilemma: domestic sales of Cuban art may have the unanticipated consequence of actually devaluing those works of art. For instance, a foreign collector might buy a Cuban work of art for US\$500 in the United States, but that same piece might sell for less than US\$50 in Cuba. Naturally, both the Cuban government and the artist would prefer to establish a higher price point for sales. Consequently, the government appears to focus its marketing efforts on the foreign rather than the domestic collector. As a result, Cuban artists are becoming less dependent on a state salary as they rely increasingly on their own resources to sell in dollar equivalency. Many artists earn an above average annual income, compared to similar wage earners in other professions. That is why the Cuban art community is enthusiastically embracing the North American and European markets and concentrating less on its own national art market.

These market trends have caused concern in the Ministry of Culture. What is it doing to combat the forces of the international art market, in order to regain influence with the local artists? How can it get artists to once again focus on national institutions, even when these institutions do not pay? The Ministry, at its core, is dedicated to the promotion of the visual arts and has served as an intermediary between local needs and international competition. Since many artists seem to have shifted from the traditional role of the “cultural worker” to become earners of hard currency, (Camnitezer, 2003: 333) they have learned to negotiate with national art institutions from a stronger position, and they have the weight and wealth of the international art market behind them. For this reason, the Ministry is attempting to strengthen its own art institutions and to promote a culture of collectors, while still upholding its socialist principles. In an effort to stimulate art sales, for instance, the Ministry encouraged the development of galleries in towns outside of Havana and commissioned artists to produce works for Cuban hotels and government buildings. It has also proposed that state organizations allocate part of their investment budget to buy art. State institutions—such as banks, stores, and government offices—have already invested in art for their buildings, thereby expanding the national artistic patrimony, and at the same time, serving as an educational opportunity for the public who visit such buildings.

The Ministry has another project under consideration: the creation of a national gallery of contemporary Cuban art. In 2002, Rafael Acosta de Arriba—former president of the National Council of Visual Arts—said,

“Today’s collector culture becomes the museums of tomorrow.” (De la Hoz, 2002: 29). Acosta de Arriba’s statement may sound intellectually reasonable, but a collector culture in Cuba today is virtually non-existent. Although a few members of the artistic community purchase art inexpensively and artists may exchange artwork among themselves, they do not consider themselves collectors. The Ministry has attempted to promote a collectors’ culture among average Cuban citizens by selling reproductions of original artwork on posters, postcards, art books, and fine art prints, or on plates, cups and mugs. It has also looked into opening stores that sell arts and crafts, and it has even offered interior design services, hoping that these efforts will enhance art appreciation by the general public, who would buy and collect art as they would any collectible, such as books or stamps.

The Ministry has also worked diligently to generate the growth of national collectors through the in-house and online art auction business *Subastahabana (Havanaauction)*, and through the establishment of state-sponsored indoor and outdoor art fairs in Havana and other towns. The main art fair—the Biennale of Havana—has attempted to highlight the cultural value of the artwork, regardless of art market considerations, while focusing on educational activities and the exhibition of smaller shows off-site. Unfortunately, public access has sometimes been limited, due to high ticket prices, and the attempts to stress cultural value have been somewhat unsuccessful. (Cammitezer, 2003: 333)

In addition to these projects, the Ministry has encouraged a greater public appreciation of visual art through journals—such as *Artecubano*—monthly newsletters, art books, television programs dedicated to Cuban artists, and electronic bulletins and state-run Web sites. Moreover, the Ministry has provided better copyright protection for individual artists, and established benefit programs dealing with disability, maternity leave, pensions and death. Artists may be entitled to retain 12 percent of their salary as a benefit, pegged at 200 to 500 pesos taken per month, depending on the value of their sales. (*La Seguridad Social de los Creadores Plásticos*, 2001: 91).

With all of these new programs in place, the Ministry has demonstrated its commitment to supporting artists and to strengthening the role played by the commercial entities that function as their patrons. Nonetheless, the international market continues to have a strong presence in Cuban artistic circles and is not only shaping—but may continue to regulate—artistic production in Cuba. Knowing this, can we predict what forms artistic production will take in a changing Cuba?

Cuban iconography today thrives on diversity, originality, and individuality, and cannot be placed into one overarching category. It may more accurately be classified as “pluralistic.” Even when it has a strong connection

with the international avant-garde and its model is primarily imported from North America and Europe, it is usually contextualized within Cuban culture. Artistic practices very often balance a sense of “Cuban-ess,” that is Cubanismo, with foreign demands. Nevertheless, new artistic products appear closer in sensibility to the Western mainstream than to what one would typically associate with a socialist country. Artist Sandra Ramos interpreted Cubanismo not as homogeneous in nature, but, rather, as quite wide-ranging and complex. She said, “In today’s world, it is difficult to establish what defines national art. The national interest is increasingly more diffused and extremely varied.” (Ramos, 2005). Elvia Rosa, an editor of *Artecubano*, shared her thoughts regarding the current transformation of the arts in Cuba. “There is not one particular trend that dominates. Today, there is a global equilibrium.” (Rosa, 2005).

One of the consequences of global reintegration is the regulation of artistic production. Toirac expanded on the effects of this outcome. “At the end of the eighties, the art game between artist and institution was clear—the state regulated artists. Today, the rules of the game have changed. The game is a tacit accord, in which both artist and institution struggle for the same goal, that is, to find a way to convert art into gold.” (Toirac, 2005) Since market pressures are bound to influence art production in today’s Cuba, many artists claim to intentionally avoid making commercial art, but they are clearly playing with market rules, if only to sell ideas. According to Acosta de Arriba, “The market—willingly or not—establishes bullet-proof vests, and that which is not commercial passes immediately to a second (third, fourth...15th) plane.” (De la Hoz, 2002: 23) For Acosta de Arriba, all of these market barriers are new and there is no point of reference—no history from which to learn. He elaborated: “The status quo continues to be the Revolution, but the transformations are profound and, in [the art] sector, radical.” (De la Hoz, 2002: 23).

Where we may begin to witness the affects of outside influences upon Cuban artists is in their creative practices. Works of art may be smaller in size, to ensure easier transport abroad. Artist Abel Barroso created a piece that was specifically designed to travel in a wooden box and be assembled later by the consumer. Some artists also employ a visual language that lampoons the challenges facing Cubans today—a desire to attain economic stability, while still being trapped in the hard economic realities of the present. Barroso, for instance, carved a woodcut portraying Cuba as the embodiment of a sensual woman born of the Revolution, but now in her new role of attracting business and investors.

During the 1980s, visual arts played a critical societal role, and many artists produced works that made strong political statements about pressing

issues in Cuban society. But today, although many of these same issues remain, the political emphasis is being diluted. Artists are distancing themselves from the stereotype that all Cuban art must have a political subtext. In one instance, foreigners interpreted a painting by Toirac, which depicted Castro, as being politically charged. Toirac explained his position by saying: “You shouldn’t have a black and white attitude towards my art. It explores the whole gamut between the yes and the no, and the pros and the cons of socialism. When we see a representation of a pharaoh, a portrait of Napoleon, or the images of the kings by Goya, we are capable of analyzing them as art detached from political passion. It is my hope that people will dispassionately analyze my work separate from partisan politics.” (Toirac, 2005)

Many Cuban artists are considering how they present their artwork in first voice rather than by fulfilling pre-imposed agendas. Ramos explained this by stating that “sometimes, it is not a good thing to be recognized by government officials, because it may actually compromise an individual’s artistic integrity. The state may request that you work collectively with other artists on a pre-selected theme—for instance, to decorate a hotel with a mural—but, the work might be interpreted as propaganda.” (Ramos, 2005) As more Cuban artists move away from collective projects towards more independent works, they realize the need to distinguish themselves to remain competitive. They work to appeal to foreigners, not only for economic purposes, but also to maintain their international reputations. Many are already returning to work on traditional national themes, as it has become more trendy and such work sells well. Others seek recognition by the international artistic community by strategically integrating gender and race issues into their work or by marketing themselves as feminists or multi-ethnic. However, some sense a danger in such strategies. When artists produce works based on outsider constructs, they may dilute the authenticity of Cuban art, or *Cubanismo*. Toirac expanded on this concept. “The market regulates stereotypes of what is Latino, Black, or Asian art. It is challenging to be promoted by the market, when one falls outside market-established stereotypes.” (Toirac, 2005)

In conclusion, although art in its purist construct should not have a monetary payout as its goal, the prosperous global art market is having a significant influence on art practices in Cuba today. The future of the contemporary Cuban art world may look like this: members of the Cuban artistic community will either submit to or resist market pressures. Either way, they will be compelled to enter into a process of ongoing negotiation between the collective and the individual, the cosmopolitan and the local, the Western and the indigenous, the state and the market. Young collectors will attempt to cultivate a nascent national art economy, while the older generation will work to maintain the principles of the revolution. Foreign dealers will focus on the

development of an international art market, while Cuban critics will concentrate on maintaining the purity of a socially committed art practice. Local artists will work to maintain national identity, while artists in exile will mix their heritage with that of their adopted host country. Nevertheless, despite Cuba's attempts to reintegrate into a global economy and to enter into the international discourse, artists in Cuba will probably remain as outsiders for many years, as their country exhibits an exceptionally idiosyncratic dichotomy—a socialist and restrictive art economy, with an open and enlightened artistic community.

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