

No More Heroes Please ... *Kuba quo vadis?*

The Cuban Art Collection of the Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation

Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger (Berlin)

A special event took place in Aachen, on the 26th and 27th of January 2018, and it is worth to give a short impression of it to the members of the Caribbean Research Society, considering the fact that the Society always encourages including Caribbean art in its agenda. This special event concerned an international dialogue, organized by the Ludwig Forum Aachen, as part of the program accompanying the exhibit *Kunst x Kuba. Contemporary Perspectives since 1989*, inaugurated on 8 September 2017 and closing on 18 February 2018. The dialogue-colloquium was called *Kuba, quo vadis?* and to emphasize this question, the poster of the exhibition shows the interpretation of a special stamp, on which the first Cuban cosmonaut is flying in space, an inkjet print made by Adrián Fernández Milanés entitled: *In Search of Orientation* (2015). Another object seems to offer a clear response in this respect. Wilfredo Prieto's *Hero*, a six glass plates construction that forms a human-size box (200x80x60 cm), echoes the idea of the hero's absence, only making him visible when somebody catches a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass as being the hero of his own existence.

However, the history of the Cuban art collection of the Ludwig Foundation is not exempt from heroes, as the photograph of Peter and Irene Ludwig shaking hands with Fidel Castro in 1994 – projected on the screen during the introductory speeches - clearly suggested. Andreas Beitin (Director of the Ludwig Forum in Aachen) and Brigitte Franzen (Secretary General of the Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation) welcomed the audience giving details of the objectives of the Foundation, whose collection of over 14.000 items comprises multiple testimonies of a World Culture and is not limited to a special region or time period. Cuban art holds a specific place in it. Jürgen Harten, the former director of the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, told about its beginnings and recalled his enthusiasm when invited to the 3. Biennale in Havana in 1989. He described his efforts to organize the first German exhibition on contemporary Cuban art *Kuba o.k.* in

Düsseldorf, which he succeeded to realize already in 1990.¹ Wolfgang Becker, the former director of the Ludwig Forum Aachen, continued with memories about his trip with Peter and Irene Ludwig to Havana in the times of perestroika. He discovered how informed Cuban artists were about contemporary artistic tendencies – with Joseph Beuys as an icon – and was surprised to discover Fidel Castro’s interest in the plans to expand the Ludwig collection with many pieces of contemporary Cuban art. An exchange program was put in place and one of the first artists-in-residence in Aachen, Antonio Eligio (Tonel), is the curator of this current exhibition, together with Andreas Beitin, Janice Mitchell and Denise Petzold, the latter two curatorial assistants and project managers.

This exhibition speaks of the Cuban “Special Period in Time of Peace”, the official designation for the years in which Cuba went completely bankrupt after the disappearance of the socialist market, a situation of urgency which does not seem to have ended yet. Every single piece and object, therefore, exhibits a special value of use and this is documented by a white wall full of plugs, rings, ventilator blades, and other round component parts, as if they were classic objects, put in a certain order by the designer Ernesto Oroza. The rooms are filled with video performances, installations, paintings, sculptural works, photographs, multimedia, drawings, prints and graffiti, and the invited speakers to the colloquium were well-known artists and critics who have written frequently about different aspects of the Cuban art scene.

Most explicit about perestroika are two works from 1991: the *Tríptico* by Tanya Angulo, Juan Pablo Ballester and José A. Toirac, on which soldiers seem to leave for or come back from war, and *Utopia*, five big canvasses based on Soviet posters and interpreting socialist realism by René Francisco Rodríguez and Eduardo Ponjuán.

The next speaker in the colloquium was Celia Gonzáles Álvarez (Havana), a visual artist who uses anthropological methods for her compositions, investigating reality in a critical way, such as reproducing the titles of unpublished academic works or the records of marriages juxtaposed with records of divorces. Danné Ojeda Hernández

¹ Jürgen Harten, ed.: *Kuba o.k. Aktuelle Kunst aus Kuba/Arte actual de Cuba*. Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1990.

(Singapore) honored the memory of Desiderio Navarro (1947-2017), the translator of a vast number of East-European texts on art theory into Spanish, of which many young artists and critics profited immensely. She pointed to several representatives of the “neo-vanguard”, who tried to find a way to express critical speech and were repeatedly censored.

Iliana Cepero (New York) reproduced a collection of works of different photographers on screen, thus creating an “aesthetics of marginality”, of which Ramón Pacheco and José Ney are outstanding examples. Guillermina De Ferrari (Wisconsin) used for this aesthetics Ernesto Oroza’s term “technological disobedience” and saw the concentration on ruins as in Antonio José Ponte’s essayistic and poetical work in the same context.

Rubén de la Nuez (Singapore) explained the tendency of *postmodern mannerism* in contemporary Cuban art by the lack of opportunities to travel around and visit museums, galleries, and art houses. Artists, therefore, let themselves be inspired by classical works of world paintings reproduced in books. Examples of such “appropriations” are to be seen in the exhibition, like the paintings of Lázaro García or Rubén Alpizar.

Juana Valdés (Miami) is a multidisciplinary artist who participated in group activities located in the triangle New York-Michigan-Miami where migration was reflected as a complex issue. She is specially interested in porcelain as material for objects, in the change of their value, and in their historical backgrounds and contents. Amy McDonnell (London) presented examples of the changing discourse of nation in “social imaginaries”, not only in contemporary Cuban art but in English art performances as well.

Miriam La Rosa (Rio de Janeiro) concentrated on censorship as a constant feature not only in the Cuban art world (in which she considered censorship as rather moderate) but in the art world as a whole. And Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo (Havana), a well-known visual artist and performer herself, gave an extended overview of many Cuban women artists living in and outside Cuba.

Paloma Duong (Boston) argued about using post-socialist public space, in which the artists avoid the official institutions and galleries by creating a new “salon art” by way of

shifting to homebound activities to attract the audience. And Stephen Wilkinson (London), last but not least, gave multiple examples of irony and satire in different artistic manifestations.

What made this colloquium so rewarding was not only the quality and informative contents of the talks but also the environment: sitting in the middle of numerous objects, all of them with their history, without being able to remember them piece by piece. This gave the performance of Adriana Delahante Matienzo (Reyjavik) a special dimension. Dressed in the typical white *bambula* clothing of slaves of the past, she interpreted Nicolás Guillén's family elegy *El apellido* (The Last Name), thus paying tribute to Belkis Ayón, Olazábal, José Bedia, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, among others, who refer to the influences of AfroCuban cultures.

Kcho's² ladder (370x100x65 cm), with steps made out of sharp machetes and ending on the top with feathers intertwined with the almost invisible colors of the Cuban flag, has the title *La peor de las trampas* (The Worst of All Traps, 1990). She seems symbolic for Cuba's precarious reality and figured as a background for the lively discussions covering issues such as Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper* (2009), or El Sexto's provocative graffiti, *He is gone!* (2016). Obviously, with the organization of this dialogue Beitlin intended to call attention to this Cuban art collection and its relevance in the contemporary art scene. In my opinion, it cannot be emphasized too often how necessary this effort is, when looking at the German situation. The perestroika also here had far reaching consequences and, although politicians do not hesitate to express themselves about the diplomatic relations with Cuba (Sigmar Gabriel, Minister of External Affairs, contributes with a text in the catalogue), Cuban art is still *terra incognita*. There are pieces in scattered private collections and the Iwalewa House in Bayreuth possesses some Manuel Mendive's – one of the foremost contemporary painters. But where do we find a Wifredo Lam – worldwide the most famous visual artist from Cuba – in a museum in this country? In this sense, the Ludwig Foundation possesses a treasure of objects made by creators who with most different media succeed in translating the critical details of their everyday life following perestroika and the times thereafter.

² Kcho is the artist name of Alexis Leyva Machado, currently one of Cuba's artists with the widest international outreach.

A catalogue came out with many colored illustrations and interesting essays:

Art x Cuba. Contemporary Perspectives since 1989, Andreas Beitin and Antonio Eligio (Tonel) (eds.), Köln: Wienand Verlag 2018, 384 pages, 185 colored illustrations, 49,80 €. (<https://www.wienand.koeln.de/titel/Kunst-Kuba-zeitgenössische-Positionen.asp>).

There is also a short guide available, edited by Sonja Benzner and freely distributed in English or German, in which information can be found about every single one of the seventy-two artists in the exhibition.