Debating the Revolution: The Evolving Role of the Visual Arts in Cuba

Isabel Story
University of Nottingham

Culture, and the evolving cultural policy, in Cuba has frequently acted as a frontier across which different interpretations of socialism and national identity have been tested. It has operated, and continues to operate, as a space in which the revolutionary government and cultural practitioners have been able to define their differences and articulate their own definitions of revolution, socialism and politically engaged art. Moreover, culture has occupied a central role from the very beginning of the Revolution and has always remained a central tenet of all developmental, political and societal goals within the Revolution's overarching goals of social transformation and nation-building. As such, culture is at the heart of the unique nature of the Cuban Revolution and fundamental in the government's approach towards nation-building, including in providing spaces for critique of the revolutionary project. These spaces often blur the boundaries between the official and the informal, which, in turn, means that they often allow for a greater degree of discussion and suggestion of solutions to perceived problems than allowed by the more formal institutional spaces (Gray and Kapcia 11). Their creation is possibly linked to the daily reality of life in Cuba and the 'process of negotiation in which all Cubans have to engage daily and in which the whole Revolution has been engaged from the outset, as

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developments have come as much empirically as by (often flawed) design (Gray and Kapcia 11).

The visual arts are the arena in which the Revolution's discursive and reflexive qualities are most clearly visible. They were prized for their educational capacity and inherent mobility, but were also highly valued as revolutionary vehicles with which to combat colonialism, imperialism, and defend an emergent national identity. Precisely because of their inherent discursive nature, the visual arts were able to constantly push the limits of interpretations of cultural policy, thereby acting as a sounding board for the country's cultural policy. These characteristics meant that the visual arts, and their new forms that emerged, occupied a special position inside the Revolution in the process of cultural democratisation and in fighting internal and external colonialism. This was because the form of artistic expression proved particularly adept at generating mobility in Cuban society, both within the confines of the expressly political, but also in the everyday realities (Weiss, *To and From Utopia* xiv). This particular set of characteristics and the development of these 'positive spaces' of fusion and overlap (Gray and Kapcia 11) have also allowed the visual arts to develop a further integral function to the Revolution, that of forums and spaces for civil society. This article will chart the development of the visual arts in Cuba and the gradual evolution of their function in civil society before discussing some of the most recent examples of this new role.

Cultural Ajiaco

The international nature of the visual arts in Cuba is one of the most persistent reasons that it has become a valued and protected space for debate and the public discussion of problems of the Cuban nation. Due to its long history as a subject of colonial rule and imperialism, Cuba has been the cultural meeting point of Europe and the Americas. The merging of the distinct elements of Cuba's rich and diverse cultural influx is central to the idea of Cuban national identity, eventually giving rise to what the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz would call transculturation. Ortiz used the concept of the popular creole dish ajiaco to describe the numerous currents and cultural transmogrifications that characterise Cuba's history, and that he considered fundamental to the understanding of the nation (Ortiz 86). The ajiaco is a stew that is made up of different indigenous root vegetables, and a dish used by Ortiz as an example of Cuba's distinctive ethnic diversity. The ajiaco brings together the indigenous, Spanish, African, and Chinese elements of Cuban society. The stew keeps the individual flavours of each ingredient, which enriches the overall flavour. Some ingredients remain more obvious than others, which dissolve but are still present and give the stew its distinctive flavour. The meat that goes into the stew is the cheaper cuts, accessible to the everyday individual, and finally, as a stew, the dish's state is fluid.

Cuba's cultural ajiaco is most enduringly visible in the country's visual arts which, since the beginnings of the development of a Cuban movement, have been predicated around taking art outside of its traditional confines and making it accessible in some way to the wider population. Such commitment to the creation of a Cuban culture meant that 'modern art formed part of the fabric of a liberal tradition' from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Mosquera 24). The focus on the exploration and merging of many of the different elements of the country's identity from artists were integral elements of the enduring quest for independence from leader of the Cuban independence movement and important cultural figure in Latin America, José Martí (1853–95) and continue today. These ideas of exploration and integration evolved alongside the country's insurrectional struggles and independence movements as the emphasis on national liberation engendered the need for a liberated national culture. Thus, from an early stage, the visual arts were imbued with a strong sense of moral duty and a belief in their transformative abilities. The form's commitment to, and engagement with, politics and the various trends that have left their imprint on the cultural imaginary contributed to a wide range of aesthetic styles and personal understandings of the 'common good'. These characteristics have remained constant throughout the Revolution and see the visual arts in Cuba fulfil the role of forums and spaces for public dialogue, debate and negotiation of the concept of the common good in a changing geopolitical landscape.

Vanguard Tradition

Three distinct artistic vanguards existed prior to 1959, those of 1927, 1938, and 1953.[1] The original vanguard came of age artistically in the post-independence era of Cuba's history. They definitively 'mapped the terms of Cuba's modernism around contemporary nationalist discourses' (McEwen 37). The majority of the leading artists of this generation studied abroad, particularly in Paris (Amelia Peláez, Antonio Gattorno, Víctor Manuel García, Carlos Enríquez, Marcelo Pogolotti, and later Wilfredo Lam who came via Spain). When they returned to Cuba, their exposure to the trends and movements developing in Europe informed the ways in which they engaged with the reality of everyday life in the country. They were acutely aware of the need to construct a new cultural framework for the 'hybrid island nation' (Clavijo Colom 8). These artists took their time abroad as a period of experimentation and 'established meaningful references that, back at home, helped them circumscribe their own modernity' (Pogolotti 122). They appropriated the achievements of European art and, when they returned, their ongoing dialogue with Europe, and Paris in particular, meant that the European vocabulary of modernism was translated into a regional dialect (Pogolotti 2008: 122). In doing so, they 'came up with a symbolic picture of the possible nation' (Pogolotti 122) that helped to reinforce the emerging nationalist sentiment reflected in the rise in public engagement in the life of the nation and the collective desire to claim a Cuban national identity (Cobas Amante 124). Among artists, there was increasing awareness of problems that intersected with the artists' works and impacted the world in which they lived, such as Gerado Machado's prolongation of his presidency (extending his 1925–28 term to 1933) and the ensuing increasing brutality and restriction of previously enjoyed freedoms.

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[1] The first of these two vanguards is commonly referred to as the Generation of 27, the second is often referred to by the publication it was associated with, Origines. The final group is simply referred to as Los Once.

The following generation, coming of age in the 1930s, continued the search for national values but did so in a more private manner, in part due to the political circumstances of the time, which were characterised by intense social and political instability (de Juan 134). This instability included the overthrow of Machado in 1933, the frenetic reforms of the provisional government, the overthrow of the provisional government (which lasted five days), and a prolonged period of time when Fulgencio Batista ran Cuba, first as president (1940–44) and then via a series of puppet presidents (1945–51), before becoming a US-backed dictator (1952–59).2 So, in short, a period of intense political and social instability as power moved back and forth the Authentic Cuban Revolutionary Party (Auténticos), Independent candidates, the National Union, Democratic Socialist Coalition (Coalición Socialista Democrática) and the Progressive Action Party (Partido de Acción Progresista). The second vanguard generation emerged in the 1940s and was more introspective in their focus. However, they did not abandon the focus on the idea of a genuinely independent Cuban national and, actually, a more strident nationalist rhetoric developed. The lack of constitutional trust meant that the idea of what it meant to be Cuban became inextricably linked to the artistic vanguard's ideas of modernism and developed into a political project to overturn the cultural controls exerted by the Batista administration (McEwen 12). The group staked out an innovative and discursive place within Havana's cultural field. It equated the art form it was searching for with the possibility of a new, future Cuba (McEwen 13).

The generation that followed the generation of Orígenes differed in its attitude towards being actors in the public sphere. The emerging

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[2] The fifteen Presidents of the Republic of Cuba between 1925 and 1959 ran as follows: Gerardo Machado (1925–33), Alberto Herrera ya Franchi (1933), Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y Quesada (1933–33), Provisional Government (1933), Ramón Grau (1933–34), Carlos Hevia (1934), Manuel Marquez Sterling (1934–34), Carlos Mendieta (1934–35), José Agripino Barnet (1935–36), Miguel Mariano Gomez (1936–36), Federico Laredo Brú (1936–40), Fulgencio Batista (1940–44), Ramón Grau (1944–48), Carlos Prío Soccarás (1948–52), Fulgencio Batista (1955–59).

generation actively engaged with contemporary politics and increasingly saw their artistic practices as a type of activism. This attitude linked them very firmly with the generation of 1927 which had actively agitated against the Machado administration. By the 1950s the emerging generation had inherited two different legacies from the earlier vanguard movements. From the Generation of 1927 (and the Revista de Avance), they inherited a working model of commitment to political freedom – one that argued for the application of Avant-garde teaching and aesthetics into state initiatives. From the Orígenes group, they inherited a vision of universalism drawn from mostly americanista roots (McEwen 14). Throughout the decade, the visual arts continued to be sites of resistance and dissidence. In 1954, Los Once, the self-declared third vanguard, organised an Anti-Bienal in protest against the promotion of the delayed 1953 Second Franco-sponsored Spanish-American Art Bienal. This event was a contemporary art competition supported by the Franco regime under the title of The Politics of the Hispanic world. It was to be held in the National Museum of Fine Arts (MNBA) to project art as an activity that the Batista administration promoted and fostered. It also marked the end of a year of celebrating the centenary of José Martí's birth. This last fact became a point of protest as the cooperation between the Franco and Batista administrations to promote an official culture that emphasised the country's historical links with Spain was seen as an insult to the republican legacy of José Martí (McEwen 69).

Sculptors, painters, and ceramicists participated in the Anti-Bienal, actively boycotting the official Bienal and organising an activity to run in parallel (de Juan 135). The Anti-Bienal – known formally as the Homenaje a José Martí: Exposición de plástica cubana contemporánea [Homage to José Martí: Exhibition of contemporary Cuban visual art] – was held in January 1954 in the cities of Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Camagüey, also serving to take art out of the confines of the capital. It ended in the Primer Festival de Arte Cubano Contemporáneo [First Festival of Contemporary Cuban Art], which had been organised by the Federación Estudiantil Universitaria de La Habana [The Federation of University Students of Havana]; a group which were active in the protest against Batista. De Juan notes that the aesthetic rebelliousness of the event was limited to new ways of seeing rather than the incorporation of themes that directly addressed the national crisis (de Juan 136–37). The official Bienal Hispanoamericana was held in May 1954 with over 2,000 works from eighteen countries. However, after the Anti-Bienal, the official event was an anti-climax and had limited success (McEwen 79).

Los Once then boycotted an event showcasing Cuban contemporary art held in Venezuela under the authoritarian Pérez Jiménez regime, and jointly organised with the Pan American Union. This was another bold step that cemented the growing politicisation of the visual arts as it was one of the few opportunities officially provided to Cuban artists to exhibit their work abroad. Los Once finally dissolved in 1955, hoping to avoid retaliation from the Batista administration. In 1957, they resurrected the group and protested against Batista and his planned 'Salón Nacional'.

Revolutionising the Arts

By 1959, the visual arts in Cuba had a well-established range of surrealist, expressionist, abstract and figurative styles (de Juan 94–95). They also had a clear tradition of political engagement and activism, coupled with national and international aspirations. After the rebellion that gave rise to the Revolution in 1959, the relationship between artists and public fundamentally changed. Traditional elitist concepts of art and artists were dismantled, and artists who did not wish to remain in revolutionary Cuba left the country, although a great many remained. Many of whom had different interpretations of culture and its role which resulted in a decade of intense public debates regarding culture and Revolution. Culture occupied a central role in the rebuilding of the nation and this was reflected in the magnitude of the change in provisions made for artists and access and participation in culture implemented by the government. It became a priority for each Cuban to be able to explore their inherent creativity and the duty of the government to provide the training necessary to discover and begin to realise these latent talents. Consequently, large swathes of the population who had previously been excluded from both cultural participation and creation were given access to the cultural arena. In particular, the visual arts, and its new forms of expression that emerged within the Revolution, would prove consistently able to respond to and grow with the difficulties faced by revolutionary Cuba.

During this early revolutionary period, the wider population became increasingly aware of and involved in culture. This was achieved through the establishment of initiatives geared towards amateurs and people with little previous involvement in or exposure to culture. Initiatives included the aficionado [amateur] movement, the instructores de arte [art instructors] movement, along with movements related to specific artistic forms, such as the mobile cinema initiative or the escuela de brigadistas de artes plásticas [school for visual arts brigades]. The first two of these movements were interlinked and were concerned with helping the population discover their inherent creative talents and with equipping educators with the skills to help the population discover these skills. From the mid-1960s onwards, there was a radicalised atmosphere and an ongoing, mounting sense that Cuba was under attack. The cultural arena's response to this was twofold. First, the focus turned increasingly inwards to the rediscovery of national forms and traditions. Second, existing cultural tropes and poles began to be questioned in the search for new centres of non-alignment. The remaining structures that reflected the systems of artistic production under capitalism were abolished and it was decided by the government that the Revolution should provide for artists rather than leave them to live off the proceeds of their work. Royalties for authors were abolished in 1967, ensuring that authors had to be employed by, and thus dependent upon, the state (Casal 457). Cultural practitioners were paid to work within the existing cultural apparatus, educational systems, media and the diplomatic services and often the more 'problematic' cultural figures found themselves posted abroad (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 26).

The visual arts were at the forefront of the shift in cultural orientation, and its international projection. Already by 1965, a clear revolutionary art form, graphic design, had begun to emerge within the Revolution. Its vehicle of choice was the poster and this art form was particularly supported due to its rapid ability to respond to events (de Juan 99–100). The rise of Cuban graphic design and specifically poster art demonstrated another trait that had begun to develop in the first pre-revolutionary vanguard: assimilation and re-elaboration. Cuban artists assimilated international trends from Art Nouveau through to Czech film posters and pop art and re-elaborated it into a distinctly Cuban setting (Sontag xv).

Through the 1960s the visual arts continued to play a key role in the visual articulation of the distinct nature of the Cuban Revolution and its commitment to inclusion and sovereignty. Such priorities are visible in the active involvement of the visual arts at events such as the 1965 Tricontinental, the 1967 Salon de Mayo, and the 1968 Havana Cultural Congress. The latter of these events marked somewhat of a break with the political and theoretical ideas expounded by the European Left as well as the politics and ideas about socialism expounded by the Soviet Union and saw the use of culture as the principal sphere in which Cuba's specificity was able to be asserted.

As Cuba moved closer to the Soviet Union and the economic relationship gaining full membership to the Council for Mutual Economic Aid (COMECON), initially in 1972, there was a renewed drive for the country to gain economic independence. Part of this drive directly affected the cultural world and saw a reassessment of Cuba's resources, one of which was the inherent creative capacity in the people, which had been demonstrated by the ongoing successes of the instructores de arte and aficionado programmes. 1970 was also the beginning of a period of significant international recognition for the emergent generation of Cuban artists. During this time, they were a point of confluence for a number of different ideas about national identity, cultural history, the relationship between art and economy, and the role of art in socialism. Moreover, throughout the 1970s, the visual arts remained a firmly established site of collectivity and internationalism, demonstrating considerable progress in the development of an authentically Cuban art from which, it was hoped, would reflect the realities of the Revolution and the essence of the nation.

The drive to include more and more Cubans in culture and the internalising of these ideas helped to create movements and programmes that, along with the commitment to internationalism, began to lay the foundations for the development of 'safe' areas for public debate within culture and particularly the visual arts. This first began with the theatre collective Teatro Escambray which eschewed the metropolis for the countryside and talked with local inhabitants to find out what the problems facing the community were and then converted the findings into theatrical performances for those who had been the subject of the initial research. A complementary project, Cuadrodebate [painting debate], developed in 1973, encouraged rural audiences to debate and hold political discussions through responding to the display of a number of paintings (Camnitzer 156). Each community visited was then left with a painting with which to do as they saw fit (Carol 28). The continuation of such unambiguous and enduring commitment to the aims of the Revolution from the visual arts helped to imbue the arts with an ongoing level of independence that allowed for the later development of discursive spaces and an ability to push boundaries.

A new aesthetic began to emerge at the end of the 1970s, when artists of the 1970s 'adopted the new concepts and visuality of the Cuban renaissance that would [come to] mark the 1980s' (Montero Méndez 259). Parody, popular culture, symbols, the Americas and their constituent civilisations, Afro-Cuban religions, European cultures, and the transcultural nature of Caribbean heritage were all factors of influence for artists that were active in the 1980s. Many of them also embraced multimedia and interdisciplinary practices in their art (Montero Méndez 259). The visual arts and internationalism fused in another way with the Bienal de La Habana, which began in 1984. The Bienal acted as a platform that reasserted Cuba's place in the international arena and attempted to establish a new order (Wiess et al. 17). The event was organised by the Centro Wilfredo Lam (now the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wilfredo Lam), which was also inaugurated in 1984, two years after the artist's death. The Centro had the aim of investigating and promoting the contemporary visual arts from the areas of Africa, Asia, Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean. It also encouraged the study and promotion of the works of Lam ('Quiénes somos' 2016). The Bienal was the institution's signature event, a fundamental initiative in MINCULT's (Ministry of Culture) new political strategy and a 'banner under which Cuba would broadcast the diversity of its cultural landscape to the world and, in that, its re-conquest of its own identity' (Weiss et al. 17).

The event was notable for its ambition and brought a forum that was taken for granted in Europe and North America into the Latin American and Caribbean domain, providing a collective space for countries that did not traditionally have such forums. In creating this space, the Bienal 'aimed at nothing less than creating, for the art and artists of the entire Third World, a space of respect and stature equal to that granted artists in the developed West' (Weiss et al. 17). The Bienal has stalwartly advocated the need for a forum outside the mainstream in which local discourses and aesthetics can grow. It has told a story that differs from the stories told by international exhibitions elsewhere in the world. The ambition and scope of the Bienal was a reflection of the Revolution's resolute internationalism and anti-imperialism: cultural dependency would be replaced by a new international cultural order. In this way, the Bienal 'raised important questions not only about the nature of art made outside the Western market system, but also about its relationship with that system —these are, inevitably, questions about culture and power' (Weiss et al. 18).

Thus, culture was seen as an important means by which the Cuban Revolution was able to assert its sovereignty on a national level, to project the legitimacy of the Revolution on an international level and to provide as much of the population as possible with ownership of the revolutionary process. Because of the visual arts' privileged position, thanks to their supporting institutions, international prestige, and variety of potential interpretations and responsiveness, they were able to constantly push, and traverse, the boundaries of applications of cultural policy and, to some extent, were able to forge their own path, explore alternative ideas of socialism. These characteristics allowed for the tactical export of culture through participation at Bienals, exhibitions, or tours that showcased the most 'Cuban' elements of national culture. This 'connectivity' contributed to the artistic mode's global promotion by the revolutionary cultural authorities.

Revolutionary Society

However, enduring practice of engagement with everyday reality of the Revolution means that the visual arts in Cuba also fulfil an important developmental function. This developmental function is made possible precisely because of their prized space within the Revolution. They continue to have opportunities for debate and commentary that other artistic forms of expression do not have. This is visible in the additional role that it performs – that of civil society, considered as a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity. It is that part of society where people, as rights bearing citizens, meet to discuss and engage in dialogue about the polity. The United Nations Development Programme defines civil society as:

> an arena of voluntary collective actions around shared interests, purposes and values distinct from families, state and profit-seeking institutions. A key feature of this definition is the concept of civil society as an 'arena', a term used to describe the space where people come together to debate, associate and seek to influence broader society [...] The term civil society includes the full range of formal and informal organisations that are outside the state and the market – including social movements, volunteer involving organisations, mass-based membership organisations, faith-based groups, NGOs and community-based organisations, as well as communities and citizens acting individually and collectively. (6)

This role of the visual arts as a forum for civil society in Cuba developed significantly in the 1980s with the emergence of the New Art of Cuba. From the late 1980s onwards, and particularly so after 1991, when the country was submerged into a profound and prolonged crisis, discussions concerning the social and political situation in Cuba have often occurred under the aegis of 'culture'.

The exhibition Volumen Uno, which opened in the Centro de Arte Internacional in Havana on 14 January 1981, marks this emergence of the visual arts as a forum for civil society. The exhibition included the work of eleven artists and received 8,000 visitors in two weeks (Camnitzer 1). The new Cuban art was broad-based, appealed to a wide sector of the population and marked both the resurgence of old trends and the beginning of new ones. The exhibition was a reaction to the 'anathematising of culture and especially of its critical vocation by the Cuban leadership' (Weiss, *To and from Utopia* xiii). It also marked a foray into the public sphere of a cohort of artists who had been raised entirely within the Revolution and its contradictions.

As such, whilst it marked a rupture in some ways, it was, in others, the continuation of Cuban cultural traditions and their contradictions. This art, like that of the 1960s and of the Cuban vanguard in the 1920s and 1930s, was both politically committed and critical of contemporary politics. It also reflected its generation's belief in the Revolution's utopian project in independence as well as in the far-reaching possibilities of art (Weiss, *To and from Utopia* xiv–xv). Artists of the new Cuban art put forth work that expressed the complex and interrelated cultural heritages of the nation and that was in contact with global contemporary art practices (Weiss et al. 25). They also viewed art's revolutionary capacity in a different light, arguing that art was revolutionary in its independence of thought and its ethical foundation. Throughout the 1980s, their work became a space of struggle that firmly believed in the power of art but was aggressive and caustic at times (Weiss et al. 25). Parody was an important element of much of the reflexive work produced, which often alluded to political and social problems (Pogolotti 169). In this new art, there was also a focus on 'immediate effects, in creative forms that reflected the contingency of the moment and therefore showed a predilection for the ephemeral over the durable' (Pogolotti 170). This was a further departure from earlier art, which had focussed on producing long-term results. Artists tackled subjects such as widespread poverty, housing shortages, shortages of other resources, social immobility and collectivisation.

Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera (26) argues that, in addition to demonstrating work of a conceptual nature (1980–c. 1985) and then festive (1985–90), in the 1980s, the visual arts also 'took on the role of assemblies as well as the totally controlled mass media as they converted themselves into a space for expressing the problems of ordinary people' (Mosquera 27). In the second half of the 1980s, he argues, 'the visual arts became the most daring platform, and some street performances in the eighties were true demonstrations' (27). The criticisms and political commentary continued to grow stronger, until a series of events surrounding the exhibition of creative pieces that made particularly strong allusions to the disparity between the official representation of Cuba and the unavoidable reality in 1989–90 dispersed the groups (Mosquera 27).

However, this role played by the Cuban visual arts and artists persists in many ways, continuing the socially committed role of art in Cuba first seen in the 19th century. The visual arts have taken, and continue to take, 'advantage of the symbolic powers of art to carry on a problematic discourse that interweaves the multiple complexities of art and Cuban life' (Mosquera 28). At a time when Cuba and its international relationships currently undergo a profound period of reassessment in the light of anticipated political change, 'artists, battered by contradictions, have maintained in all cases the visual arts and a site for social discussion in a country where such sites do not otherwise exist' (Mosquera 29). The arts 'have become an important forum in which ordinary Cubans evaluate competing political alternatives, rethink the basis values of the Revolution, and reformulate visions for the future's (Fernandes 2).

As this article has established, this seemingly new role in the visual arts in Cuba has its roots in the enduring political engagement of the art form and their history of being provided with the discursive space that have not always been accorded to other art forms. Because of their advantaged status, the visual arts have created what Sujatha Fernandes dubs 'artistic public spheres' (2), which, in the absence of formal political activity are the centres of critical debate. These spaces bring together the achievements of the Revolution and the, at times very different, realities of everyday life in revolutionary Cuba. The term adapts the concept of the 'public sphere' to a socialist society which is frequently excluded from debates about civil society. This is largely due to the focus on the separation of the 'public sphere' from the apparatus of economy and society. Instead, Sujatha argues that artistic public spheres are 'spaces of interaction that are both critical of and shaped by state institutions, local relations of production, and global market forces' (Fernandes 3). The Bienal is exactly one of these spaces.

The Havana Bienal, as an event that brings together the national and the international, provides a prominent platform, intentionally or otherwise, to this relatively recent iteration of the enduring role of the visual arts as a discursive space. While 'the jewel in the visual-arts necklace of Cuban cultural policy and, thus, a site at which it has been important that all constituencies (organizers, artists, overseers) master, with careful practice, the art of looking "Cuban" in the proper way' (Weiss, 'Visions, Valves, and Vestiges' 25), it has also 'encapsulated the logics, progressions, reversals, and perversities of the Cuban reality as it has unfolded' in the last thirty-three years (Weiss, 'Visions, Valves, and Vestiges' 11), which includes the Rectification of Past Errors and Negative Tendencies campaign, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent Special Period in times of Peace, the Battle of Ideas, and the restoration of diplomatic relations with the USA. The changing aims and ideologies of the Havana Bienal, its shifting relationship with artists, curators and the state, and the rise of the expectation of the enactment of an element of critique and/or dissent in contemporary Cuban art is not the topic of this article but are addressed expertly and in detail by Rachael Weiss and Gerardo Mosquera, among others. However, the Bienal is a good example of the kind of space developed by several processes which have created an experimental structure with unclear boundaries (Gray and Kapcia 10). As a result, it devolves autonomy to Cuban citizens while enjoying state support as a fully Revolutionary project (Gray and Kapcia 8).

As such, the Bienal, and projects that feed into or grow from the event, provides a forum for the identification of problems facing contemporary Cuba, the open discussion of these challenges, and the search for possible solutions. Many of these discussions centre around internet access and knowledge of modern technologies in Cuba, breaking down perceived barriers between events for foreigners and events for Cubans in Cuba, and honest discussions about the limitations placed on production in Cuba due to a lack of resources. WiFi is a relatively new service in Cuba, and was introduced in a limited number of public spaces across the country in June of 2015. It has since been rolled out to more public spaces with reports of trials of fibre-optic broadband in some houses in Old Havana in 2016 and the potential for extending the trial in 2017. However, despite the state-controlled prices being lowered in 2017 to $1.5 CUC/hr, it remains inaccessible to many Cubans.

Alexis Levya, better known as Kcho has used his studio to create a space that makes the problem of internet access visible and also problematizes the issue of Cubans being left behind by technological developments. Kcho is a contemporary Cuban artist working in sculpture and mixed-media and has received national and international acclaim. Kcho started a project in 2015 in his studio that provided Cubans with free access to WiFi. His studio also acted as an exhibition space at the twelfth Havana Bienal in 2015, putting into practice the goal of his subsequent project. In March 2016, the artist opened up his workshop, in the Romerillo neighbourhood of the Playa municipality in Havana, once more to the public in collaboration with Etecsa (the Cuban state telecoms company) and technology giant Google. This centre is called Google + Kcho.Mor (Museo Orgánico Romerillo). It is a technology centre supported by Google products which aims to allow Cubans to get to know the latest technological items so that they are not left behind by technological developments. Google's virtual reality platform, cardboard, features heavily, allowing Cubans to see the world and explore places that are otherwise inaccessible to them. The centre simultaneously immerses the user in art as they have to share their physical space with installations, sculptures and paintings, promoting a greater understanding of, and coexistence, with art. At Kcho's cultural centre, anyone can use the WiFi by entering the password 'abajoelbloqueo' [down with the blockade], a phrase plastered on billboards across the island protesting the illegal embargo placed on Cuba by the USA. The password for the earlier iteration of the project was 'AQUINOSERINDENADIE' [no one surrenders here], the phrase reportedly made famous by Juan Almeida Bosque, a member of the guerrilla movement that eventually overthrew Fulgenio Batista's government.

Kcho's project aims to break down the new barriers imposed upon the Cuban people by the archaic embargo. Another recent and ongoing project, Detrás del Muro [Behind The Wall], breaks down the different barriers that sometimes surround visual art - so often seen as an elite pastime. In doing so, it actively involves the Cuban people in the creation and appreciation of national and international art. Detrás del Muro began in 2012, at the eleventh Havana Bienal, an event that prizes its role not only as a space for the exhibition of art but also as a meeting place for artists and the everyday inhabitants of the city. The project is a collective one which brings together Cuban and international artists in a gigantic intervention on the Havana Malecón (sea wall), and began with twenty-one participating artists ('Artistas participantes'). The curatorial team explain their choice of the Malecón as an exhibition point in the democratising nature of the location:

The Malecón is the most democratic stage of the Cuban capital: it is there that lust and contemplation, commotion and retreat, dissidence and affirmation, flight and refuge, death and civic resurrection are accepted within view of the local, tourist and police. Everything openly and crudely, without an infrastructure to favour those escapes of utopian violence (Castro).

The intervention is predicated around exchange between the art world and the public, emphasising art as a 'channel of communication, exchange and reflection' (Pimentel). In its second iteration, the project has more than doubled in size with 50 participating artists and their pieces ('Inauguración'). As with the interest generated by Kcho's studio/cultural centre, Detrás del Muro also enforces public debate and makes visible some of the issues facing daily life in Cuba, or simply causes reflection on the everyday realities of life on the island. One such piece is Colombian artist Lina Lear's work Secreter [Writing Desk] for the 2015 project which piled various household furniture items painted white on top of one another and which were slowly removed by Cubans for their houses. Alexander Guerra's Sweet Emotion, a sculpture of the outline of a large Facebook 'like', comments on the rise of internet use on the island. With Resaca (Hangover), Arles Del Río turned part of the Malecón into a tropical beach, complete with the type of recliners normally found at the nearby beach of Santa María where they are rentable in CUC (and therefore frequently inaccessible to many Cubans). Gabriel Kuri's Aire [Air] formed part of an exhibition Montañas con una Esquina Rota [Mountains with a Broken Corner], and reflected on poverty. It featured a man crushing empty cans of the beers and soft drinks produced in Cuba, mimicking the unofficial work done by some Cubans who collect the cans, crush them and sell them on in order to survive.

This seemingly new role of the visual arts in Cuba has its roots in the power accorded debate and the privileging of culture as a valued space for that debate. It also reflects the ever-evolving definition of the concept of Revolution which, throughout all its iterations, holds independence and inclusion at its heart (Kapcia 31). In the 1960s, the concept of

Revolution was equated with change and collective struggle. In the 1970s and 1980s, this morphed into the idea of something more distant, centred around the idea of a system and institutional structures. In the 1990s, the term moved towards an idea implying a sense of community and solidarity (Kapcia 31). The ongoing redefinition of Revolution has continued well into the 21st century with the Battle of Ideas which began c. 2000 and the Revolution's leadership and population sought to save the essence of the Revolution 'which meant first of all discovering, defining, and then redefining what that "soul" actually was' (Kapcia 29). The political culture in Cuba, since the beginning of the Revolution, has been 'an essentially, and often surprisingly, inclusive culture; this inclusivity has been fundamental to its definition, survival, and legitimacy' (Kapcia 35).

The rebellion that began the Cuban Revolution was popularly supported, broadly nationalistic, and sought to redress societal inequalities as well as achieve economic independence and national sovereignty. In pre-Revolutionary Cuba, artists looked to the traditional cultural poles of New York and Paris, whose artistic movements were more influential than the desire to develop an authentic national culture. By contrast, culture in post-rebellion Cuba played an active role in the construction of the nation and was considered to be central to the Revolution. The conception of socialism eventually adopted by the Cuban revolutionaries placed a high value on the role of culture in society. As a result, artists were presented with the opportunity to occupy a central role in the construction of a new revolutionary society and the fight against imperialism, thereby re-prioritising the links and interrogating the boundaries between politics and culture. As this article has demonstrated, debate and reconfiguration, and the pushing of perceived borders, are at the soul of the Revolution. These tendencies were particularly pronounced in the sphere of culture, which the government wished to democratise to the fullest extent in order to give as many Cubans as possible ownership of the new national imaginary.

As one of Cuba's most discursive forums and one that has been constantly mobilised in various campaigns and efforts to include the wider citizenship, the visual arts are particularly demonstrative of this complex process of negotiation of space and the fusion of the formal and unofficial. The artistic form also particularly values the international and is valued precisely for its connection to the global artistic community, which contributes with another layer of overlap and fusion, giving them an added ambiguously owned space for experimentation and dialogue whilst remaining within the Revolution. This lasting connection to the global is increasingly relevant as Cuba and its international relationships are currently being re-evaluated with the expectation of a shift in politics. Because the visual arts are particularly adept at generating mobility in Cuban society, both within the confines of the expressly political, but also in the everyday realities (Weiss, *To and from Utopia* xiv), they are able to constantly push, and traverse, the boundaries of applications of cultural policy and, to some extent, are able to forge their own path. In doing so, they are able to provide the inclusive, frequently informal, spaces for Cuban citizens to explore alternative ideas of socialism.

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