Globalization in the Contemporary Cuban Art World

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Abstract: As the Cuban revolution approaches its fiftieth anniversary, Cuba has become a more consumer-oriented society. The island country stands at the crossroads of several systems, each associated with alternative models of political economy and cultural policy. One of these models involves the pursuit of socialism at any fiscal or social cost; another entails the implementation of policies conducive to monetary reform and marketization as developed in Eastern Europe; a third might be the pathway of market socialism as in China. Along with the various sectors of trade and industry, the nation's art market is also in the process of change and transformation. It is within this multiplicity of economic systems and cultural models that this study is contextualized. This paper examines the work of four Cuban artists of the nineties generation, whose images often illustrate the ways in which they debate and engage in today's evolving globalized art world. Specifically, it considers how the artists' work integrates commentary of consumerism into their visual discourse, by including topics related to a dual art-market economy, multiplicity of value systems, artistic production and reception for multiple markets, commodification of art, consumer work-habits, the impact of media and advertising in the utilization of visual signs, and the artists' role in an open market economy.

In an article by sociologist Susan Eckstein, she recounts a conversation with a disheartened Cuban cab driver regarding the influence consumerism is having in his socialist country. The taxi driver cites the film Paradise Under the Stars, to illustrate his point. An immigrant has returned to Cuba from Spain for a funeral, bringing gifts for his family and friends. The cab driver laments over the uncustomary behavior of the Cubans, who were, evidently, so enthralled with the gifts, they forgot about the funeral. He wonders how such a fascination with consumerism could overtake the moral values of the Revolution with such ease. Despite the principles of Marxist philosophy, Cuba is increasingly becoming a consumer society.
As with all other sectors of society, the future of the Cuban art world is also undergoing myriad transformations. In this paper, I will discuss how Cuban artists debate and engage in today’s evolving globalized economy. More specifically, I will examine how these artists have integrated commentary on consumerism into their visual discourse.

Today, Cuba stands at the crossroads of several systems, each associated with alternative models of political economy and cultural policy. One of these models involves the pursuit of socialism at any fiscal or social cost; another entails the implementation of policies conducive to monetary reform and marketization, similar to those developed in Eastern Europe; a third might be the pathway of market socialism, as seen in China. I purposely selected images that illustrate the ways in which Cuban artists deliberate over this economic and cultural movement, although the artworks are in no way representative of the Cuban iconography, which thrives on diversity and cannot be placed into one overarching category.

The four post-utopian artists included in this presentation—Sandra Ramos, Abel Barroso, José Ángel Toirac, and Carlos Garaicoa—were born in the late sixties and attended the prestigious Cuban Graduate Institute of Art, known by its acronym, ISA. All four artists started their professional careers during the 1990s, when the lack of Soviet subsidies, coupled with the U.S.-imposed embargo, drove Cuba into a deep economic depression. The government implemented a reform, which gave way to the “Special Period,” during which forced domestic restrictions and belt-tightening measures resulted in a scarcity of consumer goods and, ultimately, a decreased quality of life for most citizens.

Recognized as La mala hierba, which means “the Bad Weeds,” because of their capacity to prosper in tragic situations, these nineties-generation artists managed to survive economically and artistically, in part, by decoding the laws of the international art market and by participating in the markets’ rituals. And, according to Eckstein, the government

2. This term was coined by curator, art critic and essayist Gerardo Mosquera.
had reached a point where it could no longer afford the “luxury” of enforcing its moral and ideological principles. Many Cuban artists became aware of the government’s inferred policies of consumerism. With time, they were able to develop an acceptable market identity while, at the same time, maintaining their artistic integrity. They strived towards international exposure, not a commercial aesthetic. As a means of promotion, they often prepared catalogues and DVDs of their work to distribute to potential buyers. Then, through the experience of exhibiting overseas, they learned to negotiate with national art institutions from a stronger position and soon had the weight and wealth of the international art market behind them. Accordingly, they started to produce artwork with social commentary that was not based on a new “economy,” but on a new “mentality”—that of the consumer.

The art market in Cuba, however, was not thriving merely because Cuban artists had a need to survive economically, but also because international consumers had a need to develop private businesses. It was the international collectors or dealers who played a significant role in the newly produced behavior of Cuban artists in their practices . . . behavior that resulted in the moving of these artists from a “local” system of cultural production to a “global” system of capitalist consumption. During the Special Period, works of art became a significant export in Cuba’s economy, which benefited both the State and the artist.

One of the main causes of this new open market economy, and the consequent class distinctions that occurred, was the introduction of the dollar. Eckstein believes that “Dollars earned informally and at times illegally through tourism [and] black marketeering . . . also contributed to the cultural transformation.” Sandra Ramos’ work comments extensively on Cuba’s socio-economic changes. In the engraving Los problemas del peso (Weight [Money] Problems (1996) (Fig. 1), she examines monetary dualities. On what appears to be a one-dollar bill, she uses a blindfolded statue of justice as a scale attempting to balance two diverse influences. Perched in the pan on one side of the scale is George Washington, representing the American dollar. Occupying the other pan is a Cuban peasant set lower,

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3. Eckstein, 335.
symbolizing the heavier weight of the Cuban peso. The pun intended is clear: the Spanish word “peso” also means “weight,” which, ironically and in purely monetary terms, is not the case.

Similarly, in *The CUC of the Colossus* (1996) (Fig. 2), where the letters CUC stand for the convertible Cuban tourist’s “peso,” Ramos depicts the struggle required to keep the Cuban peso afloat in the face of globalization and an open market economy.

By the late 1990s, the economic and political situation in Cuba eased. The legal export of artistic patrimony, the establishment of limited private enterprise, and the increase in tourism to the island allowed artists to negotiate as free players in the art market. They were permitted to be self-employed, to earn in dollars, to maintain the copyright of their work, and to circulate their work overseas. At the same time, visits from foreign gallery owners and museum curators increased, which provided Cuban artists with international exposure and the opportunity to adopt Western models for art sales.

In *Perhaps I Should Split in Two* (1993) (Fig. 3), Ramos inserts herself into a nineteenth-century engraving of Alice in Wonderland—a recurring character in her work—and she becomes the protagonist of ordinary dreams and the utopia of everyday life in Cuba. The adolescent Ramos is literally divided into two parts. To her left are images of Cuba, represented by the palm tree, a glimpse of the sea, and a childhood street-game on the sidewalk. To the right, the girl is facing the West, represented by the leaning tower of Pisa. The girl’s eyes shoot a flame superimposed with an oversized question mark, and her temptation to flee the island is clearly discernible. In this self-referential piece of Ramos, the splitting of herself into two persons resonates with the pressures that come with being a Cuban artist and dealing with the dual context of artistic production.

From this juxtaposition, one could extrapolate the tensions that come with producing art by the forces of globalization and creating products within two distinct value systems: “exchange value” for foreign institutions and private consumers and “exhibition value” for local art institutions and state-run galleries. Ramos also alludes to the dichotomy many

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artists face, that of cultivating overseas contacts as assets, while preserving local relationships as endorsers and legitimizers of art.

Gerardo Mosquera, Cuba-born curator and art critic, reiterates this divisiveness. He has said that “the potential of visual art works to become luxury and prestige objects, a highly profitable currency, and a means for laundering money has so inflated the market that the whole system of visual arts (education, production, circulation and reception) has become market-centric. This means, there are too many and too powerful interests making it difficult for art to pursue a major cultural or social function.”

Abel Barroso is an artist who shares Mosquera’s market-centric notion of contemporary societies. His work parodies consumerism and wealth mainly through his production of traditional woodblock master plates. In No One Can Assemble This! (1999) (Fig. 4), Barroso employs a visual language that lampoons the challenges facing artists today—challenges that include a desire to attain economic stability while still being trapped in the hard economic realities of the present. He carved this particular woodcut to portray Cuba as the embodiment of a sensual woman born of the Revolution, but who is now acting in her new role of attracting business and investors. The Cuban Republic is enclosed in an ambivalent value system, one defined by nature and desire, and another defined by culture and enterprise. Barroso conveys these mixed feelings through the image of a bikini-clad woman reclining on a boardroom table, while being surrounded by globe-headed business men in their usual capitalist attire as a clever metaphor for the exploitation that often occurs internationally in big business, whether of women, poor tropical nations, or any other object of desire that is turned into a commodity by the global marketplace.

The Republic and Foreign Capital (1994) (Fig. 5) alludes to the fact that the State has somewhat reluctantly become a party to Cuba’s newfound materialism. This work comments on how the government tacitly encourages consumerism, through reforms designed to capture and profit


from dollars Cubans informally acquired and from increasing consumer opportunities.8

Barroso’s work is satirical. It speaks of the difficulties of a local consumer, whose personal expenditure is very limited. Barroso has crafted wooden, wall-mounted sculptures of cellphones or televisions with movable parts (Fig. 6, 7), which speak to the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods in capitalist societies.9 Ironically, not even these inexpensively created artworks are accessible to the wider populations for purchase. They, instead, become limited editions and art commodities, typical for western markets, and are usually displayed in museums and art galleries.

With his resourceful technological inventions, Barroso examines the interchangeability between low-tech and high-tech value (Fig. 8). With a hand-turned crank, the consumer can scroll through a paper catalogue attached to a wood-framed screen; if it should happen to break, Barroso says it is “cheap to repair.”10

For the 2000 Havana Biennial, Barroso worked on an art installation entitled Third World Internet Café (2000) (Fig. 9), where he transformed a popular tourist restaurant into Cuba’s first Internet café. Out of wood and cardboard, he crafted a series of 3-D computers, laptops, and cash registers into objects of art. He presented his audience with real objects in real time, simulating virtual objects in virtual time, embedded within a social space where the consumer could play with the symbols of purchases and sales. With this installation, Barroso bridged the domestic with the foreign, by importing Western models of art performance.

Barroso believes that “the current international rage of technologically advanced video art is not possible to create in Cuba.”11 He explains it
this way: “I was born twelve years after the revolution, and I don’t know, practically, what is a TV commercial. Suddenly, I see myself expressing new words: WSP, Benetton, Mitsubishi Motors, Hyundai....”12 His comments are not surprising, because, by early 2000, the “Cuban awareness of U.S. brand-names had become among the highest in any non-English speaking country.”13 That is the reason why branding is relevant for Barroso’s virtual clientele. For the Internet Café (Fig. 10), he has branded his products “Mango Tech,” which is a double pun. “Mango,” in Spanish, is the mechanical term for “handle,” but it also refers to the tropical fruit; hence, the screen image becomes a south-of-the-border reference to the Apple corporation.

José Angel Toirac is another artist who raises questions about the main organs of control in society and the signs produced by two hegemonic systems of production: politics and advertising. In the piece Obsession (1996) (Fig. 11), Toirac appropriates political and cultural iconography of Cuba through the use of photographs and text taken from the press and then translates them into oil paintings. Toirac’s images raise the question as to whether the consumer is truly at liberty to make choices or whether choices are the very ideology of the industrial system, which entices consumers to expend.

In Marlboro (1996) (Fig. 12), canonical icons of Castro, as well as commercial photographs of the Marlboro man, are merely signs among signs. Castro—the anti-capitalist, anti-American leader—becomes the archetypical strong, independent American cowboy. This rendition, therefore, is ironic in that the Marlboro man—while formerly a brave image—has recently been maligned in the United States as a symbol of the unhealthy excesses of the tobacco industry. Toirac’s juxtaposition of political and commercial signs creates a paradoxical remark about the advertising of unhealthy behavior and politics. While Castro—himself a famous cigar smoker—is proud of Cuba’s system of socialized medicine and advanced health care, he is portrayed by Toirac as a champion of the tobacco industry.

Today, in Cuba, one of the most renowned photographs of Ché Guevara, *Guerrillero Heroíco* (1960) (Fig. 13)—taken by artist Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (who is known as Korda)—sells in massive numbers in souvenir stores. This commercialized photograph, which circulated around the world in the 1960s and was reproduced in myriad media outlets, has raised Ché to a divine status. It could be argued that the Cuban State has used Ché’s popularity through this image to strengthen its revolutionary mission. Toirac, however, uses this same image to critically demonstrate the machinery of advertising and centers of power. Writer and curator Euridice Arratia states that “the consolidation of power [goes] hand in hand with the consolidation of heroic iconography.”

Toirac’s appropriation of official imagery and rhetoric can be viewed as an attempt to market ideology. In *Apple part of A Brief History of Cuba as Told by Other Events* (2001) (Fig. 14), Toirac sells ideology by juxtaposing key moments of Cuban history with global corporate symbols. Korda’s photograph of Ché, for instance, is coupled with the Apple computer logo and slogan THINK DIFFERENT. Toirac appropriates Korda’s photograph as image and counter-image, thus inverting the position of the sign, simultaneously altering the sequential perspective of the spectator.

The comments of art historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh, regarding art appropriation, are applicable to Toirac’s work. Buchloh states that “each act of appropriation …inevitably constructs a simulacrum of a double position.... By becoming the property of the ‘cultural,’ it prevents the ‘political’ from becoming ‘real.’ Politically committed producers become singularized and classified as ‘political’ artists….“

Toirac’s objective is to strive towards a “depoliticized consumption,” but he seems trapped in an outsider’s market-imposed labeling that could easily be considered propagandistic. He defends his position by saying: “When we see a representation of… Napoleon, or 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.”17

Contrary to Toirac’s objectives, Carlos Garaicoa is a Cuban artist who intentionally engages in political discourse by drawing parallels between a consumerist past and a consumerist present. Garaicoa’s large-scale black-and-white photographs focus on the commercial glories of the past, where “images of retail shops and restaurants depicted in their present decay are transformed into social and political puzzles.”18 Garaicoa has transformed these Old Havana buildings—constructed primarily before the Revolution—into parodies through an intervention of the existing signage text. He has overlayed the photographs with commentary written in colored thread. His words float over the photographs on precisely placed pins and recode the name of the store—La Internacional (2005) (Fig. 15)—as “The International, up, down, without place, the poor of the world.”

In Garaicoa’s work, the words “marketing,” “purchasing,” “sales,” and “commodities” constitute a language in which an entire society communicates.19 These works resonate, once again, with Mosquera’s market-centric perspective; but Garaicoa sets a dual criticism—that of a capitalist consumption coupled with that of a socialist consumption, thus selling a new Cuban reality.

In La Republica (2005) (Fig. 16), the spectator is engaged in decoding Garaicoa’s double pre- and post-revolutionary cryptogram. Locería La Republica is a store that sells expensive “loza” or ceramics, and its name honors the Cuban Republic. The “new” code reads “Grocería,” meaning “coarse words,” such as: the Republic, Vulgarity, Independence, Cynicism, Liberty. Garaicoa frames a discourse that bridges the symbolic with the social order.

18. Lombard-Freid Projects, Carlos Garaicoa: The drawing, the writing, the abstraction (New York: Lombard-Freid Projects, October-November 2006).
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In *La Gran Vía* (2005) (Fig. 17), Garaicoa clearly speaks to a select Spanish-speaking clientele who are proficient in interpreting contemporary Cuban semiotics. In this artwork, the store, located on the grand boulevard, used to sell blouses, but, now, the signage advertises the establishment as a “Carnicería” (a meat store), not as a “Camisería” (a blouse store); the “Carnicería” exclusively and notoriously sells human fragments only to special clients.

Today’s Cuban artists are proficient in decoding the laws of the international art market, but they remain “virtual consumers.” They are trapped in a simulated game and a post-utopian field of signification and exchange of cultural signs. In the photograph *The Epoch* (2005) (Fig. 18), Garaicoa actually plays with the “absence” of utopia. On the front of the department store, *La Época*, he writes, “Misery is equal to this.” Conceivably, he has been unable to escape the crisis of the nineties and believes that misery continues into this new century.

Mosquera writes that “globalisation, despite its limitations and controls, has undoubtedly improved communication and has facilitated a more pluralistic consciousness. It has, however, introduced the ‘illusion’ of a trans-territorial world of multicultural dialogue with currents that flow in all directions.”

Because globalization is from and for the “centers,” and not from and for the “peripheries,” Cuba is clearly not a part of the hegemonic culture. According to Mosquera, “We are still far from a globalised art scene.”

As we have seen through this presentation, Ramos, Barroso, Toirac and Garaicoa are hardworking laborers of the forces of globalization, but, at the same time, they have been affected by the collapse of a dream. Although they have successfully decoded the rules of a free-market economy and actively engaged in the marketplace, while maintaining a connection with their own “cubanidad,” they have experienced “inverted consumerism,” a condition where countries with greater wealth purchase art from less prosperous countries, but rarely the other way around. Because there is no economic organization to ground a domestic art mar-
keth, the international consumer appears to be in charge of appraising, cir-
culating, and, frequently, legitimizing Cuban art, leaving Cuban artists to
believe they are not equal participants in the consumer culture.

Images: Paintings, Photographs, and Prints

Sandra Ramos

Calcography, courtesy of the artist.

22. In “Some Problems in Transcultural Curating,” Mosquera discusses the concept of
“inverted curating.” To better describe the phenomenon as it occurs in the art market, I
use the expression “inverted consumerism.” Reference: “Some Problems in Transcul-
tural Curating,” Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts,
FIGURE 29-2. Los cuc del coloso (The CUC from the Colossus), 1996. Sandra Ramos

Calcography, courtesy of the artist.


Calcography, courtesy of the artist.
Images: Paintings, Photographs, and Prints

FIGURE 29-4. ¡Esto no hay quien lo arme! (No One Can Assemble This!), 1999. Abel Barroso

Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 29-5. La República y el capital extranjero (The Republic and Foreign Capital), 1994. Abel Barroso

Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.
FIGURE 29-6. Celular-cuchilla multipropósito (Multipurpose handy), 2000. *Abel Barroso*

Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 29-7. Sin título 3 (Untitled 3), 2000. *Abel Barroso*

Mechanized Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.
Images: Paintings, Photographs, and Prints


Mechanized Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 29-9. Café Internet Tercer Mundo (Third World Internet Café), 2000. *Abel Barroso*

Mechanized Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.
FIGURE 29-10. Café Internet Tercer Mundo (Third World Internet Café), 2000. Abel Barroso

Mechanized Woodblock Master Plate, courtesy of the artist.
Images: Paintings, Photographs, and Prints

**FIGURE 29-11.** Obsession, from the series Tiempos Nuevos (New Times), 1996. José Angel Toirac

![Obsession](image)

Oil on Canvas, courtesy of the artist.

**FIGURE 29-12.** Malboro, from the series Tiempos Nuevos (New Times), 1996. José Angel Toirac

![Malboro](image)

Oil on Canvas, courtesy of the artist.
Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (Korda)

Black-and-white photograph, Copyright Diana Diaz, Korda Estate.

FIGURE 29-14. Apple part of A Brief History of Cuba as Told by Other Events, 2001. Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (Korda)

Oil on Canvas, courtesy of the artist and Art in General.
Images: Paintings, Photographs, and Prints

FIGURE 29-15. Sin título (La Internacional), [Untitled (The International)], 2005. Carlos Garaicoa

Black-and-white photograph, thread, pins, courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 29-16. Sin título (La República), [Untitled (The Republic)], 2005. Carlos Garaicoa

Black-and-white photograph, thread, pins, courtesy of the artist.
FIGURE 29-17. Sin título (La gran Vía), [Untitled (The Grand Boulevard)], 2005. Carlos Garaicoa

Black-and-white photograph, thread, pins, courtesy of the artist.


Black-and-white photograph, thread, pins, courtesy of the artist.
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