

Autobiography or the Displacement of Censorship

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Although an “art market” does not exist in Cuba, for some time, almost ten years now, when the subject comes up it is spoken of as if one does in fact exist. Yet while there is virtually no collecting on either a national or institutional level, a relationship does exist—in spite of definite interference and inconsistency—with foreign collectors, the majority being North Americans who come to the island. I do not know if it has been a force of habit or the symposia of experts, or the ongoing dialogue about the subject, or the enthusiasm spurred on by sporadic money that finds its way into the hands of those occasional collectors, or the efforts of the State gallery projects, that little by little were imposing NOT on the Cuban art market but on the illusion that a market existed.

And with this illusion came something original (in our context), a convenient system of capitalist censorship. An odd conversion to the bourgeois life of a vanguard arrived, whose focus until then had been on the painful themes of the Cuban Revolution. The ideological censorship substituted *itself for self-censorship*.

If before, legitimacy was confused between career and artwork, now it is career and life-style. There is a group of artists, myself among them, who even though our work sells—much more sporadic than others, perhaps—it has not turned into a commodity; something that allows us to still talk about the Market of *other* values and lets us cope with other illusions.

Cuba was converted into a socialist “Theme Park” for tourists that has an artistic output, which in many cases has conveniently reified the theme of ideology. So what is to be done in a place where the State has learned to capitalize on provocation (one of the primordial elements of the vanguard)? Where political strategy has transformed itself into advertising strategy and where ideology is bothersome and is converted into a tourist attraction. Where the censor dons the sheep’s-clothing of the art critic, now not censoring the conflictive or rebellious aspect that a work may have but the “aesthetic strategies” used in a symbolic construction where the subject is treated suspiciously as a secondary aspect.

Everything in Cuba is political and a place where the State better understands the symbolic value of gestures. My work has been a political statement that has dealt with different approaches to the events of power, focusing on the impact and the transformation that can happen within people. Today I will show you two of the ways in which I have traveled towards the market of those other values.

There have been two fundamental ways in which I work. One in which the work is symbolically completed through the interplay between it and the spectator and the other where the process of constructing the piece is, in reality, the piece itself and what one sees is then a reminder of this process of understanding. I will discuss two works that I made in which the historical aspect is also dealt with in a different manner.

Untitled (Havana, 2000)

The organizers of the Havana Biennial in 2000 invited me to participate. The theme was on communication and entitled *One Is Closer to Another*. Following my presentation of various projects that were

events are the ones with slogans for them that are repeated over and over ad nauseam until they create a sort of obsessive mantra. The slogans mark the moment in which the political and ideological are joined; when they are transformed into a simple text: *vox populi*. The unending repetition of these makes the historic event convert itself into a personal cause; but the events change and the political is transformed until it negates itself according to the needs of the moment. The slogans that yesterday were the bastion of defense against the world are today cast down or rejected. The slogans are an ephemeral state of the political, their strength is temporary, and in Cuba each one of us has to adjust to our autobiography so that the social narrative in which we live may have its logic. Those “without power” or, what is the same, those “without language,” only have the language of slogans.

This work has two possible presentations, one to be shown within Cuba or in those places where there may have been a large emigration of Cubans, that is the other which today I will not discuss—that which is to be installed outside Cuba. In the case of Cuba, the true action of the work is not in the piece itself, but what is outside of it: in the interactions with, and memory of, the spectator. The work is only a reminder.

Even though the materialization of political art and visualization of political acts contaminate themselves like the popular manifestation or political activism, what differentiates one work from the others, we might say, is that a popular manifestation is the use of the elements of interaction as a symbolic component. While in the manifestations or political acts there is an emphasis and the objective is the result in the work of political art, what is most important is the process, the investigation for creating the work, where the more significant aspects of the “truths” of the actions we see reveal themselves, for example in the work of Hans Haacke or the symbolic charge that the process has in negotiating the realization of the work. There is a look to the process of the work that remains, it is like a reminder, like coming upon a road sign and being able to go in a new direction; for revealing ironic, contradictory moments.

After having been postponed three times, for different reasons over a period of two years, they came one day to my home to review the slogans I was using and they asked me to eliminate some because they might be misinterpreted. Power made me reflect on myself.

Description of the work

The strategy of power is to appropriate from the symbolic and semantic essence of the works and redirect them towards a fierce aestheticism of the experience, this is not an appropriation from a reading or even a certain viewpoint of the works; it is about speaking of personal spaces in the history of the ephemeral condition of slogans within the permanent structure of an historic event.

Now they change the significance of the metaphors, they make a re-reading of the work. Before, they removed the work from you, now they are making you be aware of what they have done to redirector the reading and significance of it, not directly controlling the political impact, but the semantic impact.

eliminated for “aesthetic” reasons, I wondered why I had been invited because in the end my work was well known to everyone. So I presented a new proposal that more directly dealt with communication, in this case the way in which power is communicated through the mass media.

This time the organizers told me that my new proposal could not be realized because it was not possible to get the necessary materials to make the work: it was sugar cane, our primarily crop and exportation since the Spanish colonial era... “Tania, you can’t make the work because there’s no way to get sugar cane, or its pulp.” Ironically, at that time, due to overproduction of sugar cane, there were *guarapo* (sugar cane juice) stands on every corner, that in truth were creating an unhealthy situation because of the delays in getting the pulp delivered and then storing it for days. I took a truck myself which was a surprise to the organizers.

The day before the opening, several of the organizers came by to review the work. When they entered I turned out the lights and explained to them that this was how the piece would be and they offended me by saying that they were onto my trick and that they wanted the lights turned back on so they could see everything. They were not aware of the fact that the strength of the work was precisely that it was in total darkness, that the piece spoke of what was not seen; that it was a work whose politics were in the sensorial experience.

But to understand the work, this information is not really that important.

Description of the work

To be honest, I was tired and wanted to make a work that would not be censored. Even though, I think a political artist must push the symbolic limits to the point of uneasiness so power is not left any other option than the impotence of eliminating, which one must read as censoring. I also think that censorship can convert itself into a ruckus that helps the work to be comprehended because there is a deflection of the message towards scandal.

Later on, when they invited me for a solo exhibition at the Havana Museum of Fine Arts, I decided that this time the piece would be a work that was about the process of making it. The title of the project was *Autobiography* since the official critics rewriting my discourse always give it a personal dimension, almost intimate, that would more likely come from psychological, rather than social or political, analysis. The theme of the piece arose from a conversation with a girlfriend who told me how when she wanted to leave the country they arranged a repudiation session for her, where they screamed revolutionary slogans at her combined with personal insults.

Autobiography is a series of works that have as their principal working material the slogans used during the years of the Cuban Revolution. While in other countries, music, fashion or personal events mark the passing of time; in Cuba, they are things like Girón Beach, an illiteracy campaign, the sugar cane harvest involving ten million people, or Elián González. The most popular manifestations of those

The ephemeral is the strategy and it creates the path. The political is ephemeral and for that, its representation is also.

To use ideology is to counteract it. The power, as *counter like aids*, is the power from within.

In this work I forced power to be self-censored; in reverse, converting it into victory.

And it ends like the music in a discotheque. Why? because in the end everything in Cuba is a dance. Why? because if they were going to change the meaning of the work for me, at least we would dance and enjoy ourselves. Bliss repeats itself like tragedy does and later, like comedy. Marx. I would say that in Cuba it repeats itself like tragedy, a Cuban dance, a dancing fool.