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Carlos Garrido Castellano

ON ART AND OTHER TRADES IN TURN OF MILLENNIUM CUBA: A CONVERSATION WITH ALEXANDRE ARRECHEA

This interview seeks to analyse the dynamics of the Cuban cultural context at the end of the millennium. To do so, it examines the work of Alexandre Arrechea, a former member of the collective Los Carpinteros. During the 1980s Cuban art had held an important position as a space for social and political criticism, replacing other spaces and becoming a major centre for discussion in the public sphere. That process changed substantially in the following decade as the country entered the Special Period and with the increasing attention of the international art market on the Cuban art sphere. This interview looks at the decisive years in which Cuban art became appreciated and consumed internationally, recovering the voices of some of the main actors in that process, such as Gerardo Mosquera, Carlos Garaicoa and Sandra Ramos. While the work of Los Carpinteros has been analysed several times, the oeuvre of Arrechea, one of the major creative voices from the Caribbean in the new century, has not received the same focus. The present discussion aims to fill this gap, by looking at his work as a whole and discussing issues related to migration and spectatorship, creativity and representation.

This interview looks at the work of Alexandre Arrechea (Trinidad, Cuba, 1970), one of the members of the Cuban collective *Los Carpinteros*, in order to examine the cultural context of Cuba at the end of the 20th century. During the eighties there was an unprecedented renovation of the country's artistic sphere, marked by the appearance of several generations of artists who pursued formal experimentation and played with a subversion of the codes and values that had articulated the ways in which the political life and artistic scene of the previous decades had functioned. Always acting 'within the Revolution', in a framework determined by a desire to revitalise and at the same time criticise revolutionary practice, the artists created a movement that was dynamised by provocation and the extension of the ways artistic work could have an influence on large sectors of society. New Cuban Art, then, was about coming close to life, an approach to the immediate reality of the country, as well as a revision of the patriotic symbols and slogans that have now come to integrate artistic discourses, by resorting to kitsch, appropriation and irony. The end of the decade, however, looks like one of the most disputed moments in the history of new Cuban art, dominated by a clash with officialdom, the growth of provocation and the massive exodus of artists who had played the main role in the renovation of the artistic panorama (Figures 1–3).



FIGURE 1 Alexandre Arrechea. Dust.

The activity of the *Los Carpinteros* collective (Alexandre Arrechea, Marcos Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez) is situated in the moment immediately after these events, which was marked by the need to fill the void left by the departure of the previous generation. Participants in what has been dubbed ‘the restoration of the aesthetic paradigm’ or the recuperation of ‘art as a trade’, their work seeks to recover artisanal techniques, like carpentry, that then become incorporated into the artistic repertoire.

The group forms part of a heterogeneous Generation of the Nineties that had to confront the artistic consequences of the Special Period in Times of Peace as well as its own definitive incorporation into the international art market. As with artists like Fernando Rodríguez, Sandra Ramos and Carlos Garaicoa, *Los Carpinteros* creatively engage from a perspective that seeks to ironise the new conditions of life and the



FIGURE 2 Alexandre Arrechea. Sweat.

direction that art in the country had adopted. Educated at the Instituto Superior del Arte (ISA), an institution that played the main role in the successive artistic reforms that have happened since the eighties, the members of the group have played a leading role during a decisive moment in the unfolding of Caribbean creativity now in a process of unprecedented expansion.

In 2003, Alexandre Arrechea decided to leave the collective and begin a solo career. Based in Madrid, he began to use new expressive media such as video, at the same time as continuing to be preoccupied with concerns like social representativity and the role of the individual that had framed the work of *Los Carpinteros*. In the course of the first decade of the new century, Alexandre Arrechea became one of the most favoured and best exhibited artists from the Caribbean, whilst at the same time becoming integrated into an international current that abandoned identitarian and regional labels to engage in a reflection of a more global character. Arrechea's solo work can thus be considered as important as that developed in the nineties in *Los Carpinteros*, even though it has received much less attention.

This interview goes over the key moments of the cultural process in Cuba and the Caribbean during the period from 1980 onwards. The artist reflects on the distance between the ideals of social renovation embodied in the art of the eighties and the new



FIGURE 3 Alexandre Arrechea. **Black Sun.**

position occupied by the work of art in the subsequent decade; the expansion of Cuban culture to other settings like Madrid and New York; the conditions in which Caribbean art has been internationalised by means of large-scale exhibitions and events organised by institutions inside and outside the region; and finally the current state of artistic activity in the Caribbean, at a new moment of expansion whose particular characteristics require a more detailed examination.

Interview with Alexandre Arrechea

Interviewer (I): Hello Alexandre. Perhaps we could begin with an analysis of the early nineties, with the beginning of your work in *Los Carpinteros* and the role the group played in exhibitions such as *The Metaphors of the Temple* or *The Trade of Art*. How do you view this stage now?

Alexandre Arrechea (A): Memory often betrays us and one tends to build up past times, but I will try and keep a clear view of the past and be objective. If there was anything particular to the nineties, I believe, it was that nearly all of us who were active at that time had a consciousness of the role that had fallen to us, above all because there had been a period when important artists had emigrated and a sort of void had appeared in the art scene in Cuba. We were thus placed in a situation in which we soon became the main actors, but were somewhat forced into this position. We were going to be the new graduates, thrown into an arena that required a new and different conversation: and here was our moment.

In 1991 *Los Carpinteros* was still just the two of us, Dagoberto and me, and then in 1992 Marcos joined the group. In reality the first year was 1990, when as students we

started to collaborate with our teacher René Francisco, who was the architect of our project and was responsible for getting different students to collaborate on an idea. We began to develop projects that bore the imprint of this collaboration with René in 1990 and we got our works into spaces like the Tabacquería or private houses It was our way of getting into different zones, with the aim of eventually getting to the galleries. That's to say, at that point we were students and it is really difficult for a student to get the opportunity to have a space. In fact, when the museum approached us it was really something tremendous In reality it still is. We still had this naïve understanding of the context of Havana, but also a responsibility to do something with that context.

I still have memories of *The Metaphors of the Temple* show, like travelling in an enormous lorry, each of us with his sculptures, to put them up in the museum, the Centre for Development, the image of the lorry, and of us off to show at *The Metaphors*, and I remembered the plans the Revolution was making to cut cane in a particular province. There we were, all of us travelling like workers, to carry out our mission. Undoubtedly, it was a very important project and its character would bring together everything that followed.

As a group, we were always interested in dialogue, even when the individuality of each member began to show through. We had that kind of a responsibility and, for example, we were very interested in documenting everything that happened. So, for example, every time we were going to be part of an exhibition, we'd make posters and put them up all over the school, everywhere in Havana that we could, and it was a way of giving a unity to what we were doing. In 1992 when people were already beginning to talk about the Generation of the Nineties, they began to define it as something that was going back to more traditional formulas to do with ways of building, after conceptualism and properly political art like what was being made in Cuba at the time, and let's say in our case we began with 'new tools' and a different way of telling, to talk about the same issues that had worried the previous generation, but now in a much subtler way. None of us were much interested when they took one of our paintings from a museum or a gallery, because we were just beginning and it was frustrating to think that when you are elaborating a certain social criticism that they take it away from you when the idea was that everyone should see it. We had all learned this previous lesson rather well, and it was a way of not opting for direct confrontation. Somehow we learned to establish relations with Cuban art institutions, which up to then had been quite strained, and there was quite a complex situation, above all thinking about projects like *El Castillo de la Real Fuerza* (The Castle of Real Power), which happened in 1989 and was a really powerful project, creating a confrontation between artists and institutions, with the artists doing something like politics.

This was the well-spring that nourished our thinking, establishing a point of view that was a little more 'acceptable', and so events slowly developed. Within Havana, we were still interested in exhibiting in places like El Morro, which is where the Havana Biennial is held, but trying to use it outside the Biennial's timeframes. For us the city was turning into not only a place of action but also a visual element that we could use. So we and other artists like Carlos Garaicoa began to make use of the city with this idea of experimentation that had appeared historically in Havana, but using it for our benefit.

This is when we began to develop a type of art where we made reference to the Cuban artisanal tradition that in our own case was nearly always bound up with the

tobacco growers' union, since it had been so important in Cuban history from the War of Independence to the present day. Using the tobacco industry and the tobacco workers as a referent, as a space of dialogue, underlined our inspiration by Martí's ideas, which we had fixed in our minds. It's something that appears in exhibitions like *El Oficio del Arte* which set out to rescue professions or trades. Nearly all of us were called *Los Carpinteros*, though we didn't begin to sign our work with this name until 1994: previously we'd signed with our own names, Alexandre, Dagoberto, Marcos, but everyone knew us by that name, precisely because of the techniques we were using.

I: What is the origin of this relationship to carpentry?

A: Our experience as carpenters began in the forest, because we were doing everything in a very primitive way, we'd go into the forest, cut down a tree, work it, prepare it, find a tractor or something we could use, carry the tree to the school, dry it out, cut it and make the works. It was something really basic, there was nothing pre-designed. Afterwards we couldn't chop down trees because it had become illegal, and we began to go to abandoned houses, houses that had belonged to the Cuban bourgeoisie before the Revolution and that were still empty, and because we knew that people in the neighbourhood would go and grab whatever was there, we decided to do the same even though there was a risk that the police might surprise us at it.

We began to use the wood from places like that and this led to a new stage in the history of *Los Carpinteros* and the meaning of our work. It was in some way a refiguring of history, we were seeing how all those inhabitants of poor quarters fitted out their houses with what they could steal from the houses of the rich. The Robin Hood story but done differently We saw that this could work at a conceptual level, this re-appropriation of Cuban history. For instance, we'd take wood from the fences and roofs and construct chimneys, in allusion to the bourgeois aspiration in the forties for everyone to have a chimney in their house, something completely illogical in a tropical country. It was a game with history, and we used the work to refer to the recent past, and I think it was in this sense that we developed an interest in rummaging about in the history of Cuba to talk about contemporary problems. It was something that often happened: Sandra Ramos, whose engravings used the image of Liborio, a caricature used in Cuba during the forties, appropriated the icons of that period and began to use them for her own purposes; Carlos Garaicoa began to use the derelict architecture of Havana, and like an archaeologist began to rescue elements that he put into dialogue with photographs that he made of the same places; Estereo Segura began to use all of the imagery of religion, mixing it with Communist symbology Everyone began to have a dialogue with the history of Cuba.

I: Is that when you were working on projects like *Havana Country Club*?

A: Exactly. Those are works that belong to our graduation. We called that project *Interior Habanero* (Havana Interior), because it alluded to the furniture of the forties. We made it using fine wood, all this historical waste of materials that was nevertheless to hand, what we could get hold of. In fact, the first time we left Cuba, we were fascinated by PVC rather than *caoba*, can you imagine? We worked in the houses that were around the ISA, in the districts of the upper bourgeoisie: rationalist houses,

houses by important architects It was somewhat on the outskirts of the city, in Cubanacán, between La Lisa and Playas, Ciboney, near the Palace of Conventions So it was also somewhat more patrolled; if you poked about in a house in Vedado, nobody bothered, but this was a protected zone.

With the rooms in this project, we also created a fiction that was our graduation thesis. Rather than writing a text about what the works meant, about our intentions, we invented something, concocting a letter from a collector who supposedly lived in Miami, and then we elaborated a discourse about why this man was buying our work and why he was interested in what we were doing. So we placed ourselves within the discourse. The letter provoked all sorts of reactions, and some months afterwards there was an article in *ArtNexus* that talked about a tycoon in Florida who had bought all the work by *Los Carpinteros*, as if this had really happened, and we were surprised.

I: And what do you make of the way criticism defined a generation, to show that something was happening?

A: I think that at the start there was a certain confusion and the critics began to write about what we were doing but in a rather naïve way, very superficially. Everybody saw the rescue of artisanal traditions, the creation of new discourses but I think that people were frightened by the engagement with things that had less unanimity. Later exhibitions like *El objeto esculpado* (The Sculptured Object) gave a much clearer image of things and Gerardo Mosquera, who was always a standard-bearer in this story, began talking about weeds, referring to those artists who were growing all the time without the conditions in which they worked seeming to matter. At the same time figures like Dan Cameron began to turn up in Havana, thanks to their connections with Kcho, who had already become a phenomenon during those years, and this gave the impression that the environment was being refreshed, that we were not so isolated.

With the arrival of these sorts of figures who also began to write about what was happening in Havana the first, perhaps naïve, phase was over and we got involved in a much more serious critique of what was happening, and became much more conscious of forming a group of linked artists. We hadn't written a manifesto but even as we were thinking of getting round to doing it, even as we were constructing the bloc, the individual nature of the members began to become more apparent and a certain distance began to grow between us as we followed our own lines of growth. Nor were many artists interested in group shows, they wanted individual exhibitions, to give them a name.

I: Do you think there is a change in the way of conceiving the role of the artist in society compared with the previous decade?

A: Well, I think the change was more one of consciousness, because at the artistic level I don't think anything we were putting forward was a complete rupture, totally different from what had been done before. In fact, we used rather basic materials in our works. I think that mentally there really had been a change because we didn't just have to think about art having an educative function as in the eighties, as being socially committed: now there is a generation that is much more cynical, no longer interested in previous clichés. There was a moment, for instance, when everyone treated Cuba like an island, it seemed like the only way of referring to the country. So, I think that is

somewhat the legacy that we had adopted from previous generations, for whom the island had become an icon of lived experience.

The generation had an important influence and continues to have one, just as it did in the eighties, but one of the things that marks a substantial difference with the previous generation is that we had the chance of travelling outside Cuba, it was already different. The Generation of the Eighties didn't have that opportunity; when they left the country they didn't come back. We could come back, we had that advantage. Then, in the international sphere there was a much more important change, especially because what we once saw as the clichés and commonplaces of Cuban art didn't work that way outside Cuba. Somehow we had to readjust our discourse, precisely because if we were interested in sailing in other waters, we had to understand that the language of art had to go through an important metamorphosis.

I: That is to say, you moved closer to the language of international art, abandoned the referencing of the Cuban artistic context, the quoting of art and concrete moments

A: Precisely. At the same time, I think we began to view the phenomenon of Cuba much more clearly, because by creating a distance, you get a clearer view. At the same time, whilst we were still talking about Cuba, we began to use the tools and instruments that the international artistic milieu was using. We were trying not to be hypocrites in any way: the Havana context absorbed a lot of energy and even if you want to, you can't detach yourself from that experience. We began to talk about Havana, but at the same time we also began to establish parallels: for instance between cities – Havana, New York, Madrid. One begins to weigh up, to compare these new contexts with that of Havana and see how one contains the other, or vice versa, and establish connections of affinities, of differences. Madrid, which was our first experience, gave us this vision first, because we had arrived in a context that seemed similar to us right from the start. Not opposed realities at all.

I: Let's move on. Why did you decide to work on your own?

A: René Francisco always had a saying, I think it was from Lezama Lima, that 'only what is difficult is stimulating'. From the time I started to make art in a conscious way as a student, after twelve years of experience in a collective, I think I had exhausted that mechanism of making art, making art in a group, with other people. And just as I had conceived of working with René as something that always changed, I wanted to carry on being true to my training and found a new region to reinvent myself. I don't think I'd had my own individual experience, because I had always been subordinated to the experience of the group; a group that went through slow metamorphoses; first with René, then Dagoberto and me, and then the group of *Los Carpinteros* properly speaking, with Marcos, Dagoberto, Alexandre,

I think it was right to throw myself into a new idea. Of course, in different circumstances: with Marcos and Dago, there had been a sort of 'institution' and leaving this entailed closing a chapter. And I wasn't just leaving a group; I was leaving my galleries, it was when I left Havana as well I understand the change was necessary, I didn't know in what direction to go, but your mind dictates: you have to comply,

you don't have any choice. And I took it on entirely, but I also understood that the absurdity of doing it meant something for me, and so one of the things I did when I left the group . . . I always compare my departure with the moment when John Baldessari burned all his work or when Duchamp took to playing chess. I think it's important to get away from what you are doing for a period of time, take a sort of sabbatical, to rethink everything. I didn't get to have this sabbatical, but on leaving I did realise that it was a golden opportunity, because you're forced, just like I'd been in the nineties but now from an individual perspective, to get involved in new sorts of work, but now with a greater urgency. That is, the context required my departure, that now you do something new, but of course I hadn't the least idea what. Then I recalled René Francisco's methods, I got hold of those tools and said to myself, I'm going to get out there in the streets.

First, I started to work individually at home, and developed a few pieces of work that I entitled *Reminders* or *Recordatorios*, which were made on magnets so you could put them on the refrigerator. These magnet pieces made allusions to the immediate circumstances of my own home. It was like using the art-work to memorise my home, which was still in Havana. Aspects of things and tasks that I had to do at home: washing clothes, calling someone I began to express these things in the work. All of it became the work. They were like scenes: doors, windows, all on magnets, but it was in order to remember what I had to do the next day. You could move these magnets around and tell different stories. They made the work like an instalment in which you are alluding to a specific situation, but that situation can change and can be changed again, and people can entirely forget what you started with. It was also like my position as an artist at that time: I was conscious of my weakness as a creator at that point, because I knew that my contribution wasn't very clear, that it was changing, undergoing a complete metamorphosis.

That was when I came to Madrid: but before I arrived I made two projects that are very important for me, and that's why I made the connection with René. They involved me getting out there in the street. After finishing these works I'd gained a certain confidence in myself and I'm out there. The first project was called *Sudor* (Sweat) and took place in a basketball court. What I did was to organise a game of basketball, with teams from the neighbourhood, and whilst they were playing I was filming the basket, everything that was happening, the scores. Then I took the backboards of both teams and put screens on them. You see the image of the ball going in, but I had also recorded what was happening around. Then my friend Raúl Cordero and I organised the loudspeakers so that the spectators could hear everything that was happening in the street I had a night-time opening to which people were invited, and only people with an invitation could get in, because they told me that although the court was a public space, it was part of a school and they didn't want any trouble there. There were people who couldn't get into the perimeter and remained outside the fence. My work, then, my project, was talking precisely about participation. In this case, you were in the middle of a game, watching what was happening, the manoeuvres of the players, in the middle of the court, but you realise that you can't change a thing. You are in the middle of a game that you cannot modify at all. And let's say that it was a new way of beginning to talk about this social criticism but indirectly. There was an audience outside, and one inside which didn't participate either, and was simply a spectator. It's a work that is fundamental for my trajectory.

After that project, *Espacio Aglutinador* invited me to develop a project for them, and they said, we don't want you to depict anything, but invent something. What I did for them was ask them what they did when they organised their exhibitions and they explained that they lived on one side of the house and on the other they had the space where they held their shows. So it was simple. What I did, based a little on that experience, was construct a gallery within a gallery. But a little gallery made with bricks, electricity, everything. Like a doll's house, very rationalist, and I put in connectors, monitors . . . I invited people to go in and whoever wanted to exhibit could do so within this space. In some sense this was a work that spoke of the lack of alternative spaces within Cuba, of that difficulty.

When I left Havana and arrived in Madrid, with the money I'd brought with me, I had no idea of how I would get through the next week. It was hard to mouth. I had a friend in the United States who had told me about the possibility of collaborating with a gallery in New York, which would also be useful for me. I told her that at that point I had absolutely nothing, but if they gave me a space that was great. That was in 1995–96. And I had my first solo show there. I showed a project that I called *Polvo* (Dust/Powder) because one of the last things I'd been doing in Cuba was videos that were about ruins, about their reconstruction . . . In *Polvo* I constructed some punch-bags, but made out of glass, and I put powder and fragments inside them, nearly all of it connected with spaces where I'd lived. All of the experience of the places I had visited was centred on that material that I had collected from each of them, little bits of them. I had kept them and placed each inside one of those bags. Of course, before constructing all this, I had to pass through Customs, where they asked me where I was going with all this. On occasions they threw it away and I lost years of work hunting this stuff out, and had to hustle to get it back. There were bits of dust that were original but some of them I had to collect again. What I wanted to make visible was a bit of the geography I'd passed through during those years, and place it within those containers. People could relate to those bits of dust through the vitrines at the same time as they were invited to engage in physical exercise, but in this case a sort of mental exercise in which you begin to remember the places you've been, in order to shape or fashion the geography that you've travelled through inside people's minds.

That was the most important of my first projects and on the basis of that things began to happen, though the fear that I'd initially experienced after leaving the group and beginning to develop my individual work was still there. In the first two years it was difficult to remember that I was an individual, lots of times, every time I talked to someone I'd say 'we' and they'd ask 'we, who?' and I'd correct myself and say 'I'. Collective work had penetrated that deeply. Letting go of the 'we' took me two and a half years, to understand that now I was producing an individual discourse, in which sadly I couldn't consult others, I didn't have that other voice, and I had to resolve everything on my own. It was a bit weird, but I was gaining confidence, to the point where I realised that I didn't have to consult anyone and I could produce a discourse that might even blow up my own clichés, because that is the other problem, I had created work in a collective but there were certain crutches that I used.

I: Something like freeing yourself from the burden of the work you'd done in the nineties?

A: Exactly. For instance, one of the things that I think helped me do that was the work with video. To be using new tools gave me a greater distance from myself. As for drawing, I was not going to do anything different to what I'd done two years before: but the paper would have a different form, because I chose it for its difference. These are little details but important ones because they help you to change. I was conscious of this need, but knew that I had to shape the change gradually. At first I abandoned the idea of the object as a possibility and concentrated on installations, on creating situations, on working with video, as if afraid of approaching materials that I usually worked with, or problematics that I had engaged with. I tried to get involved in other situations, but of course the weight of the object was enormous, and I took it up again around 1996, incorporating new materials, like glass, video, and began to understand the installation from a point of view that was different to the one we had in *Los Carpinteros* ... like *Granada de Mano* (Hand Grenade), where the object is understood as something domestic. I was interested in picking up the experience with *Los Carpinteros* and taking it out of the context of domesticating the object, so that it [the object] became a bit more aggressive.

That's how I developed the project of the *Jardín de la Desconfianza* (The Garden of Mistrust), which is a tree with security cameras hanging on it, because it's a work that thematises surveillance, which is very important inside and outside Cuba, and also showed how I wanted to construct objects that were no longer about pure contemplation. I wanted that object to attack as well, to be aggressive toward you.

I: You turn it into something more visual?

A: Yes, perhaps. In works like *El Jardín* the object is a tree composed of cameras which are constantly recording. The information goes to a computer and I'm going to use the information for other purposes, something I've not done yet, but I've kept all the film. My aim is to make a film, but I don't know whether I'll ever do it.

The idea that the object can attack is one of those basic principles that I was outlining in my head, and from which I began to jump to other experiences as the conversation went on; when I developed a project I liked it to be in constant relationship with the place where it was exhibited, using the platform of the gallery, the museum or the street, but in constant dialogue. That's the case with *Entrada libre para siempre* (Free Entrance for Ever), shown at the Patio Herreriano Museum. There I establish the connection with the museum itself, and place the camera so it films the entrance to the museum for two days and then take the information, edit it and display it on the stage that I put up in the Patio, in which [you see] the public flowing directly towards my work, as if they were accessing the work, but all the time the rows stayed empty. Metaphorically, it's a bit like the idea that access to the museum in some way changes nothing, and the patrons of the museum are just part of the entry accounts. I was very struck by the turnstile that they used in the museum to count the number of people going in and analysing how in this sense quantity changes nothing. I began to develop these problematics.

One of the things I like to do with my work is see it as though I were an apprentice alchemist in which you don't know what reaction you're going to get when you mix one compound with another, but you throw them together anyway. Whether it explodes or not doesn't really matter. I like to try and take aspects of determinate

places and situations and begin to construct things. I had a project that I was going to develop in Madrid consisting of a demolition ball, but made out of rubber so it bounced off buildings. I was trying to turn it into a game. But in the end they wouldn't let me do it. I wanted to organise it at the building of the Casa de América, but in the end it wasn't to be. I always think that they did me a favour because I realised that the work I was making wasn't finished, because if I wanted to exhibit a work and they vetoed it, I went back to what I used to think in the nineties and I thought, what I want to do is exhibit the work, not have them censure me or take it away from me. And that was when I realised that I had to make the idea more flexible and make it less aggressive. The desire for confrontation had to be visualised differently. So I turned the piece into a video, which is the same rubber demolition ball being projected onto the building. It's a projection, not a real object and so doesn't affect anything physically, but has a much greater weight. In fact I remember when I was making the piece that people were saying to me why don't you put sound on it, and I was thinking, no, people will have to give it sound mentally. One day I was watching my daughter at the same time as I was watching the video, and every time the ball was going to strike she went 'bum, bum'. Then I thought, perfect. People do it, there's no need to put sound on it. It was much more minimal, it doesn't need loudspeakers, or anything. In fact even after I'd finished the piece I was thinking I would show the piece like a graffiti artist, without permission. Arrive and project the piece so that people could see the work crashing into the building. I think that's one of the things ... when I relate to a particular place, I like to understand the space and that the work relates to it. In this case, this primary work, the rubber ball, didn't work, but I wanted to carry on having that same sense, that it should discourse with the building. Then, I didn't just think about making a flexible work; the piece in itself was flexible, it became very versatile, it could discourse in any place, and that gave me a great deal of satisfaction. And I think this is the direction that I'm trying to take the projects that I'm currently working on.

I: You've also set up a very intense relationship with sport ...

A: For some time, I've been concerned with themes connected to participation, representativity, the culture of the spectacle, and I think that through sport I can express these concerns rather well. It's something that has come up before: towards the end of the eighties, there was a performance in Cuba, *El Juego de Pelota* (The Pelota Game), which set up some of this. It played at creating an ambivalence between the position of the actor and that of the spectator, and I think this is something positive. You are not a spectator, you're a participant. And you also get the visuality associated with social networks and the Internet: every time I see photographs of exhibitions of mine, I see people portrayed with the piece, as if they were posing. This type of reaction has always interested me, because it puts people in an active position, which seems like a good exercise. My intentions in this sense seem to have been borne out, people are reacting to my work and I like that.

I: On the other hand, when you refer to the relation between participant and spectator, you do so from a problematic position, in so far as you are posing the limits of both things, aren't you?

A: Exactly. I have always tried to problematise the relation to the work. For instance, in the beginning *Entrada libre para siempre* produced a certain tension between me and the museum, because they put it to me that people would think that entry to the museum was free. Precisely, I wanted to dynamite that, create this ambiguity, turn the work into a vehicle for this. I think that nearly always when I finish a work, I try to complicate it. For instance, when they invited me to the Havana Biennial, I developed a project called *La habitación de todos* (Everyone's Bedroom), which is a prototype house made of metal that expands and contracts according to the stock market movements of the day. These pieces emerge when we get into the idea of the global crisis, and then we all saw that the crisis was going to affect all of us not only economically but psychically as well, and I made this work in which to some extent the artists loses control of the work. I'm making a piece which is going to depend on another institution which regulates it, which is what in some way is happening, the banks are organising what happens according to their desires. So the work is at the mercy of what is happening on the stock market. I try all the time to establish these connections, looking to set up problematics.

I: When you use architecture, do you think that perhaps there is a less utopian vision, a more pessimistic one, compared with the 'architectonic projects' that *Los Carpinteros* developed?

A: Well, I don't know if it's more pessimistic. Let's say that when we elaborated *Ciudad transportable* (Transportable City) we were at a moment of the internationalisation of Cuban art, and in some way we wanted to give ourselves a version of the city that could come with us everywhere. So we called it *Ciudad transportable*, as though we could travel with Havana everywhere, remembering buildings that were the basic references of Western society: the factory, the large building, the shop So the work I began to conceive from about 2005 onwards was developed completely outside the Cuban context, where I had access to other sources which I didn't have in Havana. So my vision is completely different: I'm no longer a Cuban artist who travels to different places; I'm living elsewhere and taking on other realities to my advantage, and trying to speak from that other position. They are different problems.

So perhaps the current works have a certain pragmatism, and perhaps they evince a certain pessimism, because the works I'm constructing are trying to breathe in the same rhythm as the society in which I am living. They are less utopian, but they have not lost the idealist factor that I always maintained in my work with *Los Carpinteros*. I don't think I've given up a certain idealism, but undoubtedly that idealism has been restricted by pragmatic conditions. You have to make some sort of concessions. Of course, you always try to keep the work isolated from any sort of economic problematic, and you do that when you manage to establish a sort of economic stability that allows you to play. The first few years have been very difficult, but now I've achieved a certain stability which allows me to develop my alchemical experiments with the same impetuosity as a student.

Translated by Philip Derbyshire

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