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Curating *cubanía* Through the Lens of Visual Culture

DOI: 10.7311/PJAS.17/2024.10

Abstract: This article focuses on a multimedia event titled *Cuba Transnational*, which took place during the fall of 2011 in various locations across Colorado's Front Range. The implicit, overarching goals of *Cuba Transnational* were to introduce a public largely unfamiliar with the subject matter to Cuban diasporic cultural production outside the island, and simultaneously "preserve the nation's artistic and cultural identity." While *Cuba Transnational* confirmed the idea that a flourishing tradition of Cuban cultural expression was being produced outside the island, contrary to a counter narrative which suggested otherwise, ultimately the various exhibitions and corresponding events presented a mediated version or idea of Cuba to a foreign audience and thereby destabilized and disrupted the idea that one can fully capture cultural or historical reality and access or grasp another's culture.

Keywords: Cuba, transnational, diaspora, cultural expression

During the summer and fall of 2011, I collaborated with colleagues at art and cultural institutions across Colorado's Rocky Mountain Front Range in coordinating and facilitating a series of interrelated events, which highlighted Cuban diasporic artistic expression.¹ Collectively titled *Cuba Transnational*, this ambitious project had several moving parts, including:

- five art exhibitions presented at various venues across southern Colorado;
- a corresponding, open learning experience offered as a three-credit course at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS). Titled *The Cuban Diasporic Experience*, the course was team taught with Cuban colleague Maura Rainey and open to the campus and Front Range community;
- two symposiums at the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center in Pueblo, Colorado featuring nearly twenty of the participating artists as well as several local artists, an art historian and a cultural critic, both of whom specialized in Cuban Studies;
- a reception featuring Cuban artist Victor Caldée and his musical ensemble *Cuban Connection*;
- a theatrical performance of Cuban American playwright Carmen Peláez's semi-autobiographical one-woman show *Rum and Coke*;
- and poetry readings, which included Cuban poets Lourdes Gil, Irida Iturralde and Ricardo Pau-Llosa, as well as local artists such as Native American poet Janice Gould.

1 I wish to specifically acknowledge the unflagging faith, support, and generosity of Karin Larkin (former director of the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center) and Liz Szabo (former director of the Manitou Arts Center). This essay is dedicated to the memory of my brilliant and beloved colleagues and friends Leandro Soto, Lourdes Gil, Raúl Villarreal, Rosario "Chary" Castro-Marín, Liz Szabo and Janice Gould.

Four exhibitions were presented at the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center in Pueblo, Colorado: *CAFÉ XII: The Journeys of Cuban Artists and Writers of the Diaspora*² (which featured Jamaican guest artist Albert Chong); *woman.embodied* (which focused on an array of feminist themes, highlighted the art of female Cuban artists residing on and off the island, and included local artists Senga Nengudi, Melanie Yazzie, Margaret Kasahara, and Carol Dass as well as selected works by Cuban poets Lourdes Gil and Iraida Iturralde); *Cuba in the Southwest: The Art of Leandro Soto* (a solo exhibition of artwork Soto created during his sojourn in Phoenix, Arizona); and *FACES: 100 Cuban Artists* (a series of portraits by Cuban photographer Carlos Cárdenes, which was also presented at the Pikes Peak Library in Colorado Springs); and *Un Cafecito* (a smaller and more intimate version of *CAFÉ* located at the Manitou Arts Center in Manitou Springs, Colorado).



Leandro Soto tomando un cafécito.

CAFÉ and *Cuba in the Southwest* were co-curated with Cuban artist Leandro Soto—who famously participated in the provocative art exhibition *Volumen Uno* in

2 *CAFÉ* is an acronym for Cuban American Foremost exhibitions and was curated, until his untimely death in 2022, by Leandro Soto and directed by his wife, Griselda Pujalá.

Havana in 1981—and, respectively, his wife, Grisel Pujalá.³ All events were free and open to the public with the aim of reaching a range of economically, ethnically and generationally diverse audiences, which generally do not interact with the university or local art institutions. In this way we engaged a variegated audience in a complex conversation regarding migration, memory, history and identity formation in the context of displacement and movement. A specific effort was made to collaborate with local organizations that work primarily with underrepresented or marginalized populations, such as the public library, local public schools, and museums or art centers. Wishing to directly involve community members, the exhibitions and symposiums included local guest artists (as indicated above) representing various racial and ethnic roots. In the same vein, several of the exhibitions featured Cuban artists residing on the island as well as multigenerational groups of diasporic artists, including several from the *Avant-garde* as well as other art movements in Cuba, and others who either left the island as infants or children, or were born outside Cuba.

The springboard and inspiration for *Cuba Transnational* was the release of my monograph *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House* (U of Texas P, 2011), which explores diasporic identity formation through the lens of visual cultural, and poses a theoretical framework that is structured on a principle of multi-locality and movement. According to the advertising materials for *Cuba Transnational*, the participating *Cuband*⁴ artists were “seeking to preserve the nation’s artistic and cultural identity through their work.” Purportedly the implicit, overarching goal of the exhibitions was to introduce a public largely unfamiliar with the subject matter to Cuban cultural production outside the island. In the process, each respective exhibition confirmed the idea that a flourishing tradition of Cuban art was being produced outside the island, contrary to a counter narrative that argues (among other things) that the participating diasporic artists cease to be authentically Cuban simply because they were not creating art on the island. In other words, I was engaged in the act of curating *cubanía* or what it means to be Cuban for a largely U.S. audience through the lens of visual art.

Much of the artwork overtly treated themes regarding migration, displacement, and cultural adaptation, translation and transformation. In this way a preponderance of the artists, including those raised or born outside the island,

3 *Volumen Uno* was what many consider to be a radical and dissident exhibition that marked a distinctly new moment in Cuban art and challenged reigning political and cultural ideologies. The exhibition opened in 1981 at the International Art Center in Havana and included Cuban artists Leandro Soto, José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garciandía, Israel Leon, Rogelio López Marín, aka Gory, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Tomás Sánchez, and Rubén Torres Llorca participated in the exhibition. For more information, see: <https://cubanartnewsarchive.org/2011/01/14/volume-i-or-the-big-bang-of-contemporary-cuban-art/>

4 *Cuband* is an elastic, radically inclusive term O’Reilly Herrera first developed in the introduction to *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), to take account of the layered ethnic presences that constitute Cuban cultural identity while acknowledging the diverse, complex identities of those who identify as Cuban including the offspring born and/or raised off the island.

posed specific questions regarding what it means to be Cuban in the context of displacement, and who can lay claim to a Cuban—albeit vicarious or second hand—identity.

In general, the artwork presented in all the exhibitions also contained visibly identifiable Cuban elements and themes, which first appeared in the work of the Cuban *vanguardia* artists and authors following the island's independence from Spain at the turn of the Twentieth Century. For example, much of the artwork included distinct cultural forms, such as bright colors, patterns and Baroque rhythms that came to typify Cuban art and, in the case of the latter, writing. Many of the participating artists and writers also treated subjects that were also characteristic of the Cuban Avant-garde Movement, such as *criollismo* and vernacular art (which put into relief a range of social themes) and thematic trends, such as the exploration of Cuba's suppressed Indigenous and African roots.⁵ In this respect, the exhibitions purportedly presented some idea or mediated version of Cuba to a foreign audience. However, elements within the exhibits also put into relief the idea that the Belgian surrealist René Magritte made explicit in his 1929 world-renowned painting *The Treachery of Images* (also known as *This is not a Pipe* or *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), which undermines the public's assumptions about the nature of reality and what has been termed *cultural competence*—the ability to apprehend and fully understand a culture outside one's own.



Many of the elements that appeared in the *Cuba Transnational* exhibitions served to destabilize and disrupt the idea that one can fully capture cultural or historical reality, and in the case of the viewer, access or grasp another's culture. *FACES*, for example, is an ongoing photographic, documentary archive of a primarily Miami-based community of Cuban visual artists, who began leaving the island during the late 1950s and whose numbers continue to increase in the present day. In addition to serving as a testimony to the vital presence of Cuban artists outside the island, Carlos Cárdenes' series—by nature of its form—simultaneously raises fundamental questions about the representation of culture and personal or communal history. In spite of its ability to capture and thereby immobilize or arrest

5 For more information, see *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House*, pp. 51-92.

its subjects or given moments in time—thereby serving as what Susan Sontag termed “an instrument of memory”—the portraits in *FACES* are manipulated by Cárdenes, for following a conversation with each artist and researching their work and artistic process, the former *builds an image* of how each artist should be represented which *seeks out the inner essence of the subject* and reflects their personal experience and essential elements of their work. “Once I gained their trust,” Cárdenes observed in a personal interview, the artists “gave me the freedom to express myself as an artist and choose the set-up for the portrait, as well as the background and lighting. In this way, I place the creators and their creations in the same frame” and thereby “conflate the work and the artist into a single image.”⁶



Leandro Soto

Despite its claim to historical and cultural veracity, the images presented in *FACES* are framed and edited, thereby providing the viewer only partial glimpses and insights into their subjects and the culture(s) and histories they represent. Though the cultural and historical context of the photographs featured in this series are clearly defined and located, ultimately each image is an open referent whose meaning is contingent upon an interchange with the viewer that cannot be fixed. “A photograph,” Susan Sontag corroborates, “passes for incontrovertible proof that

6 Quotes are taken from a personal interview conducted on 1 March 2015, Miami, Florida. See, also, my forthcoming essay “Cuban Portrait,” *Cuban Studies* 53 (2024), pp. 127-145.

a given thing happened. The picture may distort, but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist . . . a presumption of veracity” (5-6). However, she continues, “photography is an elegiac art” (5-6). Among its functions, therefore, is to make its subjects historically meaningful, conserve a vanishing past, and confirm a present that is obscured or denied, thereby heralding a future that would otherwise be altered or deferred. Yet at the same time, photography as a media contains what Jacques Derrida termed its own *aporias*—the unresolvable contradictions and paradoxes *texts* may internally contain—for it raises fundamental questions about the ability to capture reality.⁷



Tómas Sánchez

Dedicated to Ana Mendieta (whose work was featured in the exhibition), the art presented in *woman.embodied*, on the other hand, envisioned the female body as the site at which the cultural past and present, which is often located in new geographical contexts, converge—a place where memory, imagination and desire intersect, and woman acts as creator, inventor, progenitor and guardian of culture. Presenting an anthropological approach to cultural expression, several of the participating artists pursued an interest in their multilayered heritage by infusing their work with Indigenous, Creole, African, Spanish and Chinese cultural forms and references to affiliated spiritual practices. Others, however, reinterpreted and transformed archetypal Western and Eastern religious symbology, therefore visually

⁷ *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford UP, 1993.

linking their art to other cultural signifying systems, and integrated and combined new cultural elements into their work. Although the art presented in *woman. embodied* did not represent a single or unified aesthetic, it fundamentally treated the interconnecting, intersectional themes of oppression and survival, loss, physical, psychic and/or spiritual displacement as expressed by the concept of *insilio* (a sense of non-belonging experienced by those who have not left the island) and, perhaps most significantly, the interstitial cross-pollination of cultural exchange, which engages at once the themes of cultural continuity, resonance and transformation.



Ana Flores, *Soul of Exile* (2004)

Among the *Cuba Transnational* exhibitions, *CAFÉ* and *Cuba in the Southwest* most overtly and intentionally integrated paradoxical and disruptive elements that challenged the concept that culture can be translated or conveyed in a transparent and seamless manner. *CAFÉ* intentionally defied traditional western modes of curation, which tend to comply with more strictly formulaic codes and regulations regarding the way in which artwork should be installed in the exhibition space; the way in which the audience interacts with the art; and how long the exhibition runs and where it will be exhibited. Every manifestation of the exhibit, for example, was curated and installed by Leandro Soto and, in the case of *CAFÉ XII*, me despite the fact that neither of us was formally trained as curators.

Functioning as an ideal metaphor for the fluid continuum of cultural identity formation, each manifestation of *CAFÉ* presented a different combination of works, therefore, no two exhibitions were exactly the same, yet each was linked to the other in a non-linear chain that pointed to a larger narrative about the nature of movement and dislocation, belonging and unbelonging, and rooting and re-rooting. In addition, each manifestation of *CAFÉ* conformed to, or was literally integrated into, the physical space where it was presented, rather than adhering to a set plan or predetermined arrangement. In addition to the fact that Soto spontaneously determined how the artwork should be installed upon seeing the work for the first time and consequently deciding upon its relationship to the exhibition space; virtually none of the artwork was framed, thereby suggesting the idea of transience, fluidity, change and impermanence in the context of movement and dislocation. Yet paradoxically, selected pieces were literally integrated into the exhibition space as Soto mimicked each respective work and extended it onto the walls or gallery floor with the artists' permission to suggest the ways in which the artists became rooted into new cultural contexts. Every showing of *CAFÉ* also included artwork that was performative and designed as a collaboration between the artwork and those who came to view it, as participants were invited to physically interact with certain pieces and actively participate in the exhibition in a variety of ways. Finally, *CAFÉ* was itinerant or ongoing in that it had no set or terminal itinerary but rather continued to manifest itself indefinitely unlike traditional art exhibitions, thereby mirroring Cuba's long and ongoing history of in-migration and outmigration.

In many respects Leandro Soto's aesthetic approach and his personal history of displacement embodied these disruptive elements. One of the first prominent artists of his generation to address fundamental issues regarding *cubanidad* or Cubanness, inter-culturation, and transculturation through an exploration of Afro-Cuban cultural forms and practices that directly reflected his own heritage, Soto left Cuba at the age of thirty-three and resided for significant periods of time in multiple locations including Mexico, Spain, Miami, Massachusetts, Buffalo, Phoenix, India, Barbados, and Mérida (Yucatán). His work in visual theatre, performance, set design, painting, sculpture and installation freely aligned African and Afro-Cuban religious symbols with newly acquired elements that reflected the various cultures and artistic traditions in which he had taken root in exile. Rather than

focusing upon difference, Soto—like many of the artists in *CAFÉ*—consistently stressed points of connection as well as difference he discovered during his sojourn outside of Cuba. As the exhibition statement for *Cuba in the Southwest* suggests, Soto persistently “incorporate[s] new elements into his art and re-contextualiz[es] his work according to where he is at any given time...the distinctive form of cultural eclecticism that emerges in his art is, according to Soto and other [participating artists in *CAFÉ*], fundamentally Cuban. I work with the complexity of being Cuban, a cultural heritage that is composed of diverse cultural presences,” Soto observed in a personal conversation (2011):

In my view, that which is apparently dispersed or diffused is also linked to the magical...I hold a vision of the world [in which] reality is conceived as a tapestry of transpersonal energies. My work is a constant exploration of aesthetics and cultural systems of representation, which have largely determined what it means to be Caribbean.

Cuba in the Southwest revealed explicitly the way in which the artist translated, integrated and transformed new cultural elements in his work in a chameleonic fashion, and simultaneously expressed his affinity with the desert environment in which he was surrounded. Commenting upon his residency in the U.S. Southwest from 2002 to 2009, Soto continued, “Cuba is geographically opposite to what we have . . . in Arizona—[the island] is green and surrounded by water. Being in Cuba is the opposite of being in the desert. Yet . . . I was absolutely connected in Arizona . . . I found the island in the desert.” Expanding upon this idea in his Artist Statement for the exhibition Soto commented:

I relocate and re-root myself in contexts far from my land of origin. I welcome the experience of movement, although often I look back and connect with my mother-culture and realize how much of it still lives in me. I name this process *redefining displacement*, and my art creations are simultaneous *space entries* in the travel journal that is my life. My art is the result of finding creative relationships among things: nature, spirit, society, the individual, and the cosmos. I respond to these relationships by engendering responses closer to the poetic, the mythic, and the sacred ways of perceiving reality. The work can be figurative or abstract, however, the key here is the inner organization of the work and its metaphoric implications. In my artwork, the personal anecdote has been displaced, leaving plenty of room to attempt at understanding not only the purely aesthetic necessity, but also the desire to understand those key symbols and rituals that transcend the individual. My approach to art includes multi-cultural and inter-disciplinary components that are the result of my traveling, living, and experimenting with a variety of art forms and living in different cultures. Always aiming for synthesis and the integration of values, my overarching purpose is to generate cross-cultural understanding.⁸

8 The unpublished exhibition statements were written in 2011 by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera. The quotations are based on personal conversations with Leandro Soto during the spring and summer of 2011.

The curatorial methods implemented in the *Cuba Transnational* exhibitions were modeled on a theory regarding diasporic identity formation, which positioned itself against the impulse to locate Cuban culture solely according to geographical coordinates, thereby contesting corresponding essentialist definitions that put forth static definitions of nationhood or national or cultural affiliation. More specifically, the theoretical paradigm I proposed respecting transnational, transcultural diasporic identity formation posited a more expansive and inclusive understanding of the paradoxes of migratory stability and rooted mobility that had been percolating since the outset of my career—as evidenced in the collection of testimonial expressions *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*⁹—and was rooted in my own personal inquiry regarding my enigmatic relationship to the island and its culture.

Conceived in Havana during my mother's final trip to the island and born the first week of January 1959 into a small but tight-knit Cuban diasporic community in Philadelphia, I was acutely aware at an early age—although I could not articulate it at the time—that I was a member of this community though I was not displaced in any literal sense. From earliest childhood, moreover, I recall feeling a profound and perpetual sense of un-belonging in spite of the fact that I was born and bred in the U.S. In effect, my sense of *cubanía* was based in large measure on an 'idea of a nation' rooted in absence—a displaced nation of word and memory. In effect, I had inherited “a weightless world—a world without scapulars and monuments, without physical ruins and sacred stones” (*Cuba, Idea of a Nation Displaced* 176).

A curio case of memory, *ReMembering Cuba* served as a petri dish for a theoretical approach to diasporic identity formation, which I continue to develop throughout several creative, curatorial and scholarly projects. Emphasizing the idea that I—as editor—was selectively re-member(ing) fragmented and disparate memories, I consciously acknowledged the idea that the various *testimonial expressions* in the collection—which manifested in different genres, media and forms—represented a very particular constellation of experiences and perspectives unified by the unstable, overarching concepts of dislocation and/or unbelonging. In addition to including (and acknowledging) my own, embodied experience, the intentional aim was to present a more inclusive range of perspectives, and thereby problematize and rethink the diverse and sometimes divergent ways *Cubands* residing outside the island self-identify—or are categorized by others—in the context of movement and flux.

This approach culminated in *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House*, and consequently reflected in the curatorial approach to

9 (U of Texas P, 2001). From the outset, as evidenced in *ReMembering Cuba*, I never felt compelled to present a unified or single narrative respecting cultural identity. On the contrary, my work aimed to present a range of diverse perspectives, as manifest in the range of genres represented in this collection that reflected a complex intersectional approach to social identity. My creative and critical writing, therefore, simultaneously served to explore my own personal relationship to Cuba and Cuban culture, at the same time that it enabled me to contemplate the frequently contradictory relationship among displacement, loss, memory, history and imagination.

Cuba Transnational. Arguing for a more nuanced, malleable paradigm in which to understand diasporic identity formation, *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora* moves away from traditional testimonial formats, and essentialist, and static territorial and linguistic-based concepts of racial and/or ethnic, national, or cultural identification. On the contrary, it posits a poetics of movement, and indeterminacy, which is grounded on a principal of multi-locality found in quantum physics. In this manner, it takes account of the fluid and shifting aspects of situated or contextual subjectivity. In the same vein, it troubles traditional concepts of spatiality yet remains rooted in the local and the historical.

This approach to curation is rooted in a concept articulated in *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora*, the idea that “Cuba—as an island—a geographical space with mutable and porous borders—has never been a fixed cultural, political, or geographical entity. Just as Cuba and its people have absorbed and been transformed by diverse presences and cultural elements, it has also become a moveable nation, a traveling, prismatic site of rupture and continuity resulting from continuous out-migrations and scatterings” (*Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora* 1-14) Like all forms of cultural expression that lie outside of our direct, personal experience, *Cuba Transnational* ultimately served as a stark reminder of the paradoxical affinity with, connection to, and proximity and distance from the cultures we wish to experience and seek to understand—a perennial lesson for students of any form of multiethnic cultural expression.

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