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Decolonizing the imagination: Artists' exchanges

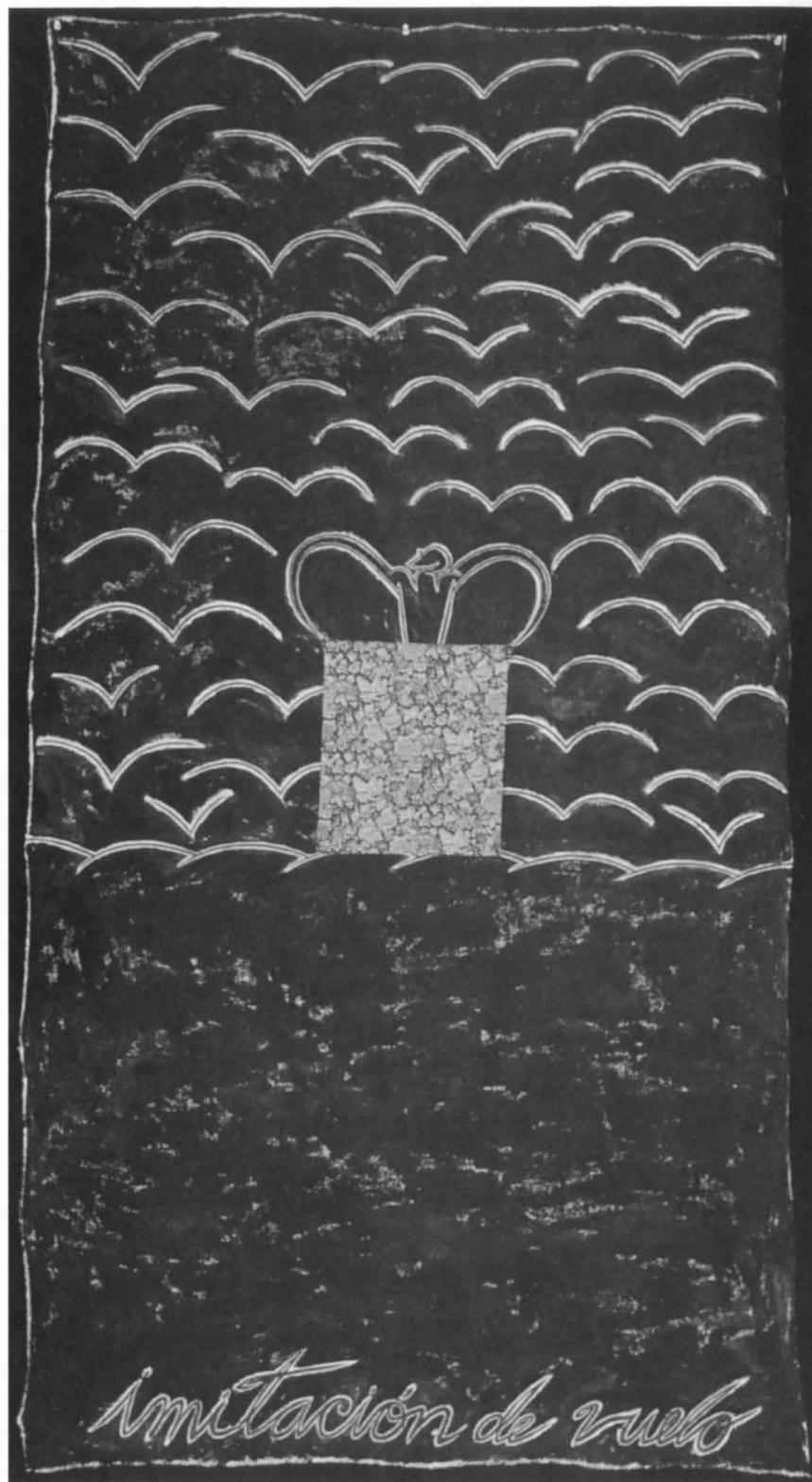
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Decolonizing the Imagination

Artists' Exchanges

CUBA: CANADA

by Dot Tuer

Barricades of ideas are worth more than barricades of stone.

José Martí, Our America¹

from mass culture and aesthetics from politics that constructed the parameters of modern art at the centre no longer shaped the terms of artistic practice at the margins. With an extensive literary, cinematic and visual arts infrastructure offering resources and support for progressive artists from around the developing world, Cuba became a centre in its own right. Providing a context for artistic expression that was integral to popular struggles for national liberation and cultural self-determination, Cuba was a reference point for the construction of a post-colonial culture.

In contrast to the centrality of Cuba to progressive artmovements in Latin America and the Third World, North American interpretations of Cuban culture tended to marginalize artistic contribution and focus instead on issues of state control and "freedom of expression." Employing a strategy described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as an "information retrieval mechanism," by which Third World events and texts are isolated "as tokens within a different cultural economy,"⁵ United States' media and academics fixed on specific examples to decry the interdependence of Cuban politics and culture. Events such as the "Padilla Affair" of 1971 in which Heriberto Padilla, poet and *infante terrible* of the Cuban avant-garde, was arrested and subsequently confessed to "serious transgressions" against the revolution elicited strong condemnation of Cuban government from across the political spectrum in North America.⁶ Cultural policies established by Cuba's Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura in the same year, proclaiming that "culture in a socialist society is not the exclusive property of the élite but rather the activity of the masses"⁷ were denounced by western media as repressive and dogmatic. Culminating in a blackout of information about Cuban art in western art circles, this outcry over the lack of freedom of expression in Cuba also allowed the centre to reassert its dominance over the terms of art debate.

In an essay entitled "Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America" (1971), Cuban theorist Roberto Fernando Retamar suggests that this equation between a politicized culture and an infringement on artistic freedom is but one manifestation of deeply embedded colonial attitudes underlying a modernist perspective on art. Identifying a series of hierarchical oppositions between the Old and the

New World, development and underdevelopment, civilization and the primitive, Retamar describes an encounter with a European journalist who asked him in all sincerity, "Does a Latin American culture exist?" He argues that the journalist's question casts into doubt "our very existence, our human reality itself ... since it suggests that we would be but a distorted echo of what occurs elsewhere."⁸ For Retamar, post-revolutionary Cuba becomes the reply to the journalist's question, providing a location from which artists and intellectuals can refuse the centre's terms of reference and undermine the colonizer's imagination. Proposing to understand the development of Cuban culture as a cohesive stance against an irremediable colonial condition, Retamar argues that Cuba's struggle to link culture to social and economic transformations contains the issue of artistic expression within revolutionary parameters. In so doing, Cuba offered a politics of location from which to envision an imagination of resistance to affirm the existence of a Latin American culture.

For the new generation of Cuban artists formed by a revolutionary context, an imagination of resistance is rooted both in an anti-imperialist stance and in a profound debate over the relationship of culture to consciousness that developed during the early years of the revolution. Focused on the potential to remodel human consciousness through educational and ideological initiatives, this debate was reflected culturally through the revolution's embrace of both the artistic experimentation of an avant-garde and the populist goals of mass participation. Institutions such as the Casa de las Americas and the Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industria Cinematográficos were founded to support an intellectual and aesthetic vanguard. Appeals to an activist base took place through the formation of rural boarding schools (*Escuelas-en-el-Campo*) and neighbourhood community centres (CDR) as well as the mass mobilizations of the Literacy Campaign of 1961, with its aim to "develop a love of country and a love for workers and peasants – for people as the creators of labour and the source of all social wealth,"⁹ and its army of a hundred thousand volunteer teachers.

Seeking to liberate "artists and intellectuals from the prison of an exclusive and narrow public which was maimed and deformed in its taste,"¹⁰ the embrace of a broad cultural spectrum also had the effect of exacerbating inherent tensions between populist and vanguard aesthetics and between urban and rural values. Culminating in an ideological polemic over the role of the artist and artistic form within socialism, these tensions were the subject of Che Guevara's essay "Man and Socialism in Cuba" (1965). It was Guevara's condemnation of social realism as a frozen form "born of the art of the last century,"¹¹ and his emphasis on



José Bedia
Nsense (Venado) (1991)
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 100 cm

Photo: courtesy the artist

the necessity of culture to confront in the ideological sphere "the extraordinary weight of ideas, habits, and concepts that society has accumulated for centuries"¹² through artistic innovation that set the conceptual stage for the generation of artists that has come to prominence in the 1980s. Privileging the role of technology, youth and education in a heroic effort to end all commodification, Guevara's projection of a morally charged socialism is reflected by the heirs of an idealistic legacy who also seek links between subjective ex-

pression and material change, political engagement and formal experimentation.

Framed by post-colonial struggles to shed the constrictions of the centre and by revolutionary visions of culture as a cipher of collective values, the work of the Cuban artists who exhibited in Canada in 1988 and 1990 revealed a fascination with ideological iconography and populist/traditional imagery. Bearing the postmodernist signage of kitsch, appropriation and *bricolage* aesthetics, the works used American-

Of all the artists whose work was exhibited in Canada, José Bedia articulated most cogently a concern in his work to map a critical dialogue between cultural contexts. Seeking to undermine the colonizer's imagination, Bedia's investigation of Afro-Cuban and native American traditions has led him to occupy a frontier between non-western and western values, to attempt a synthesis between "primitive" and "modern" artistic practices. Whether drawing from his experiences as a soldier in Angola to construct installations that simultaneously express solidarity

Ron Benner
As the Crow Flies (1984-91)
Installation



Photo: courtesy the artist

approved formal strategies to undermine the cultural hegemony of American content and ideology. Pieces such as José Bedia's mixed-media installation of photographs and artifacts, *Profile of a People (Homage to North American Indians)* (1986) and Consuelo Castañeda Castellanos's painting, *Triangle for the Gioconda* (1984), which incorporates visual fragmentation and a mixture of Renaissance icons and local memorabilia, reflected a strategy of hybridization that embraces popular culture and indigenous symbols as well as local Cuban history and solidarity with struggles elsewhere for self-determination. In a similar vein, Maria Magdalena Campos Pons's and José Bedia's extensive use of *santería* (an Afro-Cuban religious practice) to transform the ritualized resistance of the past into artistic mediations of the present signalled a search for the heterogenous and spiritual dimensions of a historical materialism.

with African liberation movements and a desire to transcend the inhumanity of war or visiting the shaman of an American Indian reserve in South Dakota in order to further understand the significance of the Sioux Indian figure in Cuban *santería* religious practices, Bedia's occupation of this frontier is both a political and conceptual act of cultural solidarity. His drawings – inscriptions of resistance to a cultural imperialism that extends back in time five hundred years – delineate the difference between a universalizing colonialism equating the primitive with the Third World with the illiterate and a revolutionary specificity eradicating illiteracy and privileging popular culture. As the guardian of memory and liberator of vision, Bedia's synthesis of the "primitive" and the "modern" is based on a transmutation of the past into a populist and dynamic representation of cultural differences.

Ironically, the dawn of 1992 has witnessed a

crescendo of memories of resistance at the same time that the political space for the affirmation of cultural difference throughout the Third World is being radically diminished. The Cuba of the 1980s, in which work such as José Bedia's emerged, continues in the 1990s to proclaim its defiance of the capitalist *weltgeist* of the 1990s. But with Lenin's statues toppling across Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union in dissolution and developing nations abandoning economic nationalism for World Bank handouts, struggles for economic and cultural self-determination at the periphery confront the increasing domination of a U.S.-engineered New World order. Never has the need for the construction of a cross-cultural dialogue seemed so urgent or more overshadowed by a centre/periphery imperialism.

For me, in this context, Ron Benner's recently completed installation *As The Crow Flies* (1984-91) offers a complement to Bedia's call for cultural solidarity and my own explorations of these issues. Seven years in the making, this mixed media photographic installation encompasses documentation of voyages criss-crossing the Americas and spawned, among other things, the Cuban-Canadian cultural exchanges. Photographing north and south views of specific points along the latitudes of 81.14 and 79.23, Benner links the seemingly disconnected geographies of Port

Erie at Port Stanley to see the northern view of Cuba's sandy beaches. Placing documentation of the cultural geographies of plants and architecture between the photographs on the gallery walls and drawing the outline of oceans and political boundaries on the gallery floor, Benner proceeds to challenge the conceptual as well as perceptual boundaries that divide peoples and cultures.

Dislocating and relocating the viewer within a prism of geographical landmarks, *As The Crow Flies* suggests that the remapping of a centre/periphery paradigm is not as simple as Curnoe's elimination of the United States as a territorial reality, but neither is it an impossible dream. For as *As the Crow Flies* suggests, the distances between Cuba and Canada and among indigenous cultures of resistance are not as vast as the colonizers have imagined.

Dot Tuer is a Toronto-based writer who has written extensively on film, video and the visual arts. She has a particular interest in the development of artists' institutions and politics in Canada and in Latin America. She teaches at the Ontario College of Art.

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NOTES

1. José Martí, *Our America: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p.84
2. A catalogue for "Chronicles of My Family" was published in Aug. 1991 by the Euclid Theatre, Toronto in Spanish and English
3. Exhibitions were held at Gallery 76, Toronto; Forest City Gallery and Cultural Embassy House, London, Ontario
4. Catalogue for the exhibition (Nov. 17 – Dec. 24, 1988) was published in Spanish by the Galería Latinoamericana, Casa de las Americas, Havana
5. Jean Franco refers to Spivak's critique of "informational retrieval" mechanisms in the introduction to her book *Plotting Women, Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1989), p.xi; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essays can be found in two collections: *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, Routledge, 1987) and ed. Sarah Harasym *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990)
6. For a detailed account of the scandal see Maurice Halperin, "Culture and Revolution," in ed. Ronald Radtosh, *The New Cuba: Paradoxes and Potentials* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1976) and Seymour Menton, *Praise Fiction of the Cuban Revolution* (Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1975), pp.145-49
7. For a complete list of policies see Menton, pp. 149-51
8. Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.3
9. Richard R. Fagan, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford: U. of Stanford Press, 1969), p.37
10. Alfredo Guevara, the first director of the Cuban Film Institute as quoted by Michael Chanan, *The Cuban Image* (London: BFI Publishing, 1985), p.104
11. Che Guevara, "Man and Socialism in Cuba," in ed. Bertram Silverman, *Man and Socialism in Cuba: The Great Debate* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p.349
12. Fagan, p.147

Photo: courtesy the artist



Ron Benner
As the Crow Flies (1984-91)
Installation detail

Stanley, Ontario; Cape Sable, Florida; Bay of Pigs, Cuba; Puerto Mutis, Panama; and Talara, Peru (on the 81.43 longitude) and Mohawk Point, Ontario; Cape Romain, South Carolina; Trinidad, Cuba; Panama City; and Pacasmayo, Peru (on the 79.23 longitude). Juxtaposing these geographies by hanging large photographs of north and south views at 90 degree angles to the gallery walls, Benner constructs an environment in which a viewer can stand and look south from Lake