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HOMEBOUND

THE ART OF PUBLIC SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA

PALOMA DUONG

Scholarship on Cuban visual arts and cultural politics has largely overlooked the country's long tradition of salon culture before and after the 1959 revolution.¹ Contemporary art exhibits held in homes not only participate in this practice, they also respond to concrete spatial economies that have been at work from the 1990s onward in Cuba. I argue that the home-based art exhibits I examine here bring into relief notions of public space that compete with those put forth, in complicity, by the market and the state in the Cuban post-socialist milieu.

Cuba's present can readily be seen as post-socialist as soon as the term is no longer understood at face value, as a temporal marker—namely, as that which comes after socialism. Post-socialism must be understood in at least two other senses. In the politico-economic sense, it denotes the coexistence of new and aggressive foreign markets with the aging bureaucratic order, small and large privatizations spear-headed by the state apparatus and the Communist Party, and the

1 By focusing only on Havana's urban interiors, in the interest of brevity and cogency I sidestep approaches that have focused on arts in public spaces, including seminal performances in open and public spaces by Cuban artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s that have been the subject of several scholarly essays and monographs. Home-based cultural scenes outside of Havana are also not discussed here. This would require attention to the specificities of nonurban informal cultures and to the effects of Havana-centrism in the study of Cuban arts and culture. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish are mine.

substantial retreat of public, state-managed goods and services.² The second meaning of post-socialism registers the loss of hegemony of the socialist imaginary: the moment(s) of irreversible rift between the horizon of socialism as radical critique, on the one hand, and the historical experiences that usurp its name, on the other. In this sense, post-socialism stands for the symbolic and ideological dimensions of actually existing socialism that are culturally and socially experienced. A post-socialist aesthetic or disposition could—and often does—predate the nominal or actual dissolution of socialism as a political project.³

After the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, Cuban artists faced state institutions scrambling for political survival, while entrance in the global market ushered in circuits of exchange and valorization previously absent from the cultural field. The inaugural exhibits of Espacio Aglutinador in 1994, the oldest and best known of Havana's independent art spaces, explicitly targeted these historical coordinates. When Ezequiel Suárez's personal exhibit at the Galería 32 y L, El Frente Bauhaus (The Bauhaus Front), was canceled by authorities, it reopened in what would later become Aglutinador—the residence of Suárez and cofounder and artist Sandra Ceballos. Suárez's displaced solo show featured poster-inspired paintings that marshaled constructivist themes, parodying the government's penchant for grandstanding slogans in the midst of a nationwide economic collapse. (Ubiquitous references to Cuba as “the last bastion of communism” and “the last bastion of the Cold War” were common in the early 1990s.) In May 1994, a second Aglutinador event, *Arte Degenerado en la Era del Mercado* (Degenerate Art in the Era of the Market), was held in parallel with a Fifth Havana Biennial shrouded in controversy and suspicion.⁴

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- 2 All three of these elements have been well-documented characteristics of the Cuban reality since the mid-1990s, intensifying under Raúl Castro's government and the post-normalization impetus (2006–14).
 - 3 Recent works that have made significant contributions to Cuban studies within this paradigm include Rachel Price's *Planet/Cuba* (London: Verso, 2015); Jacqueline Loss's *Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); and Ariana Hernández-Reguant's “Cuba's Alternate Geographies,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 10, no. 2 (2005): 275–313.
 - 4 The Havana Art Biennial opened in 1984 as a showcase for art from the Global South—that is, primarily from circuits other than Western Europe and North America. Yet its claim as an alternative forum for artistic projects invested in postcolonial and capitalist critique has been complicated by frequent allegations of government censorship and by its growing profile as yet another layover in the transnational itinerary of art buyers. See Luis Camnitzer, “The Fifth Biennial of Havana,” *Third Text* 8, no. 28–29 (1994): 147–54.

Similar open confrontations between visual artists and the state's cultural institutions had been amply rehearsed in the 1980s, though they were followed by international departures *en masse* and a wave of highly publicized acts of censorship by cultural officials in 1990 and 1991.⁵ As such, neither critiquing the burgeoning art market nor recasting the home as an alternative to institutional spaces was a practice unfamiliar to Cuban artists. But at the time, Espacio Aglutinador was unique in its inclusive curatorial criteria (convening artists both young and established, living in Cuba and abroad), in emphasizing reception as the decisive interface between artworks and visitors, and in presenting itself as a permanent city fixture open to the public.

Like Aglutinador, the home-based art exhibits I examine here are part of a resilient but diverse residential cultural scene. More than two decades later, the history of these practices and their transformation under changing political and material conditions remains unexamined. As is suggested by the term *scenes*—for they are multiple—they are spaces that convene a loosely knit social network hosting music and poetry jams, theater plays, film screenings, community-oriented initiatives, art workshops, and literary reunions. Some—for instance, Tania Bruguera's *Cátedra de Arte de Conducta* (2002–9; Behavior Art School) and La Azotea de Reina (poet Reina María Rodríguez's roof)—have become mandatory referents for any cultural mapping of post-socialist Havana.

Heirs to a strong national tradition of *tertulias* (salons) hosted by artists and writers since the 19th century, these spaces were inevitably shaped by the networks of bootleg circulation and clandestine gatherings that shored up the phenomenon of an underground culture in the early decades of the Cuban Revolution. They are therefore linked to comparable phenomena in (post-)socialist cultures, such as the Soviet “kitchen culture” of the 60s and 70s, and the formal theorization of the home as an exhibition space in the early 80s under the rubric of

5 Most notably, this included the incarceration of performance artist Ángel Delgado and the censorship of the film *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas*. For the emergence of this radical aesthetic in the Cuban visual and performing arts of the 1980s, see Gerardo Mosquera, “New Cuban Art,” in *Postmodernism and the Post-socialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 208–46, and Rachel Weiss, *To and from Utopia in the New Cuban Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

“apartment art.”⁶ Yet, despite the complex but constitutive role of the Soviet model in Cuba’s revolutionary experience, Cuban cultural studies has been slow to define its research agenda in relation to post-socialist studies, partly because Cuba’s Communist Party is still in power and the country remains constitutionally socialist.

The conditions under which art is produced and exhibited in contemporary Cuba, however, resist any cursory reading of the residential cultural scene as being either in simple opposition to official state institutions or a form of individualist retreat into the realm of the private. In fact, the home-based art scenes I discuss here belong to a broader set of informal and live-work artist communities that accompany the proliferation of alternative practices for the production and exhibition of art beyond MFA programs, museums, and galleries. They attend as much to the rise of participatory, performance, and installation art from the mid-20th century onward as they indicate survival strategies balancing the impact of new art markets, gentrification, and real estate speculation in urban centers around the world.

BEYOND A SEMIOTICS OF THE HOME

A brief account of how revolutionary housing policies and domestic imaginaries shaped Havana’s cultural scenes can better connect the ideological and aesthetic debates in the Cuban Revolution with its spatial politics. The cornerstone of these spatial politics was the allocation of physical sites meant to subsidize widespread access to culture: cinemas, theaters, libraries, and art schools were to pop up across the country. Within months of the revolutionary victory, such investments took place in concert with intense polemics about the political value of popular cultural participation and of specific artistic projects.

Nonetheless, the private sphere within the home would remain a highly contested site of social meaning, insofar as the home was conceived as the last, and arguably the definitive, frontier to be conquered in the ideological wars of the 20th century. A microcosm of 20th century modernization utopias, both really existing capitalism and really

6 See, for example, Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Marina Gržinić, “Synthesis: Retro-Avant-Garde, or, Mapping Post-Socialism in Ex-Yugoslavia,” *ARTMargins Online*, September 27, 2000, www.artmargins.com/index.php/8-archive/258-synthesis-retro-avant-garde-or-mapping-post-socialism-in-ex-yugoslavia.

existing socialism bid heavily on the home life, and by extension on the private sphere, whether to romanticize or demonize it, to profit from it or to neutralize it. Susan Buck-Morss has convincingly argued that the early Soviet imaginary waged a “war against domesticity,” seeking to negate the capitalist other via the latter’s conception of domestic space.⁷ This process had an affirmative double, as well—that is, a war for domesticity—that pervaded the public discourse about, and cultural representations of, domestic space: a zero-sum campaign to conquer “the hearts and minds” of the people. The privacy of one’s home and the objects and routines that constituted it as a space—the radio, the TV, domestic labor, gender roles, family values, gatherings among friends, personal possessions—were understood as the ultimate battlegrounds of comprehensive social and political transformation.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 prioritized goals of economic nationalization and social justice over the kind of rapid industrialization characteristic of Soviet modernization in the first half of the 20th century. In Cuba, for example, the end of the private sector and the rise of agrarian and urban reforms were not accompanied by forced mass collectivization. In general, state-sponsored initiatives for urban reform tended to be highly participatory, while urban reform laws retained aspects of bourgeois notions of private property.⁸ Still the Revolutionary government trafficked in the enforcement of housing policy: housing redistribution, norms of occupancy, and the activities it sheltered were frequently instrumentalized for the purpose of granting political favors. In other cases, on the contrary, the use and distribution of housing became the subject of governmental scrutiny. New mass organizations—most notably the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), created in 1960—were designed to intervene on the street and in the home by surveilling, reporting, and steering matters of sexual orientation, political opinion, banned religious practices, and cultural consumption habits. Hitherto understood limits between the public and the private were partially redrawn, along with the jurisdiction of the revolutionary state to regulate public and private behavior. These practices drew Cuba closer to a framework where the home was conceived as a suspicious shelter of bourgeois improprieties, a potential incubator of

7 Buck-Morss, 192.

8 Ley General de la Vivienda (1984), *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba*, accessed September 25, 2016, <https://www.gacetaoficial.gob.cu/html/leygeneralvivienda.html>.

counterrevolutionary intrigue. In the first two decades of the Cuban Revolution, both real and symbolic processes construed the home as a nonprivate space.

After Cuba's state-backed pluralistic and daring cultural experiments in the early 1960s, this gradually gave way to sterner, more centralized, pedagogic approaches to cultural and ideological management, largely under Soviet aegis. Even after conscription into agricultural labor for so-called social misfits ended—Military Units for Aid in Production, or UMAP, were active from 1965 to 1968—playing rock music, displaying sexual or religious traits, or sharing ideologically objectionable writings and books could be costly political errors. Homes served as surrogate headquarters for cultural or social practices displaced from public view by the renewed orthodox sensibility of these years. A well-known example is that of Servando Cabrera Moreno, whose simultaneous pursuit of revolutionary and erotic themes became increasingly problematic for cultural authorities in the 1970s, but whose house was a site of pilgrimage on Saturday nights for artists and intellectuals. These semiclandestine microcosms were replicated in many more anonymous homes and roofs in the city, hosting familiar, everyday informal networks where cultural artifacts smuggled from abroad, or produced and exhibited unofficially, were enjoyed among friends and family.

To be sure, the kinship of the Cuban revolutionary process to the 1960s New Left sensibility mitigated the Sovietization of many aspects of government and cultural life, even at the height of Soviet influence in Cuba in the 1970s. Cuban artists and youth partook in the counterculture of the 1960s, and the 1959 Cuban Revolution was itself part of the global imaginary of the decade: socialist humanisms, the critique of bureaucracy, and the emancipatory power of culture were elements of the official public discourse as well. (Elsewhere in Latin America, where military coups and paramilitary violence played their part in various Cold War proxy fronts, youth counterculture and left radical politics were unambiguously inimical to state apparatuses.) Accordingly, national debates about aesthetics and ideology were attentive to the Soviet experience, while remaining overall suspicious of Socialist Realism and kindred orthodoxies. Broadly speaking, this meant that the cultural field was much more heterogeneous, and comparatively more autonomous from political society.

In this sense, even unauthorized cultural practices (e.g., those to

which the residential cultural scenes in which I am interested might be said to belong) cannot be read only as the rejection of attitudes associated with the bureaucratic cultural administration: ideological paternalism, aesthetic orthodoxy, and artificially produced scarcity. The principles of self-organization, and the claims to access upon which these unofficial cultural practices relied, belonged to the very same democratization of culture inaugurated by the revolution, albeit undermined by its own state apparatus. In other words, these home-based cultural interventions shared a point of departure with the revolutionary order they also seemed to antagonize: the symbolic and material conditions for all to enjoy and produce culture. The demand for and democratization of access to culture, the value of public investments in developing a mass taste for high culture, the disregard for nonengaged art, the interest in process over finished artworks, and the critical reflection on art's social function and on artists as producers were values that often converged in both governmental cultural politics—at least in theory—and the informal cultural scene.⁹

In addition, Havana's alternative, home-based cultural scenes have followed their own timeline. This periodization is of vital significance: by the 1990s, when these circuits were opened to wider publics, they were confronting not only the residual patterns of repressive cultural institutions, but the dollarization of the domestic economy and Cuba's growing participation in the global market as well.¹⁰ The resulting economic environment demanded transformations in spatial practices and cultural dissemination alike. Individual artists had been selling their artwork openly on the global market since the early 1990s, though the state kept shares of the profits and wielded a great deal

9 These values would remain points of reference for home-based and other cultural alternatives to official culture in the following decades—for instance, in Victor Varela's Teatro Obstáculo (Obstacle Theater) (1985) held initially in his home, and in the group of artists and intellectuals Paideia (1988–89), whose projected publication was aptly to be titled OIKOS, Greek for “home” or “family.” Among other things, in the self-described “General Project for Cultural Action” Paideia called for “overcoming the false dichotomy official-marginal in the cultural field” (n.p.). PAIDEIA V, Paideia dossier, *Cubista Magazine* (Summer 2006), accessed September 25, 2016, <http://cubistamagazine.com/dossier.html>.

10 Mario Bellatin's story “Canon perpetuo,” in *Pájaro transparente* (Buenos Aires: Mansalva, 2006), imaginatively re-creates one of these semiclandestine scenes. In this darkly humorous text, set in the Havana of the early 1990s, a poetry reading is interrupted by political paranoia, a black-market transaction, and the discomforts of the host family's living arrangements.

of influence with regard to resources and promotion.¹¹ Musicians, artisans, cultural promoters, improvised movie theaters, and multimedia content producers, also headquartered in private homes, gradually joined the growing commercial circuits of Cuban culture over the next two decades.

Beginning in 2011, many of these practices were formally legalized as a result of economic reforms that further increased the number of professions covered under sole trading licenses, known as the *cuentapropista* model. It is worth noting, however, that the limited forms of self-employment encouraged by these reforms continue to require gray and informal markets of cultural and economic production. For example, no stipulations allow for private art galleries, but a venue in an accepted category, such as a bar or café, can become an art pub or gallery-café. Similarly, although individual artists can organize only informally to sell their work collectively to an independent curator or art buyer, a license for “family photography” can cover an independent audiovisual production agency. Makeshift responses to real estate shortages, as well as the critical condition of urban infrastructure, have helped to make residential urban interiors the physical centers of this new market economy. The newly acquired economic role of the home thus compounds its longer-standing social function as a battleground for everyday life under the Revolution.

HOMEBOUND

In this new landscape, an appeal to defy the recommended itineraries of the XI Havana Art Biennial yet again began circulating online, by email, and by word of mouth in May 2012: “We are inviting you to visit (May and June and now July) our unofficial spaces (or alternative spaces)—galleries, studios, workspaces and heterogeneous places—which will be open to the public with fresh, dynamic and agglutinating samples of Art. . . . Don’t be guided only by governmental programs and test also the exciting result (or benefit) of the exploration!!!!”¹²

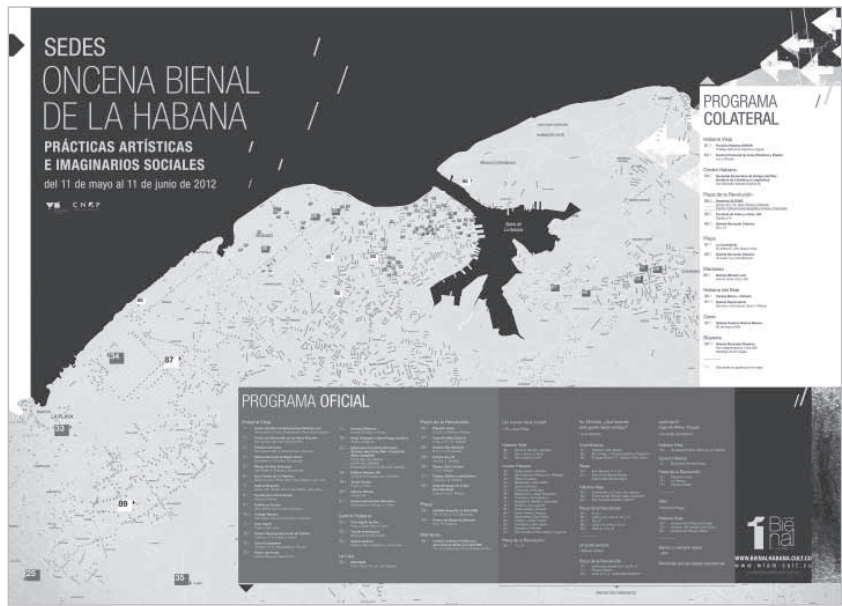
Written by artist and curator Sandra Ceballos, the invitation included

11 Visual artists were among the first to sell and promote their work abroad, bypassing direct ministerial involvement, after the 1988 Decreto Ley 106 and the dollarization of the economy in 1993.

12 Their translation; the original invitation is given in both English and Spanish. Lia Villares, Hechizamiento Habanémico (blog), May 23, 2012, <http://habanemia.blogspot.com/2012/06/muestras-privadas-en-estudios-galerias.html>.



Map of alternative spaces in Havana, 2012. Image courtesy of Sandra Ceballos.



Official map of XI Havana Biennial exhibitions, 2012.

a profile of home galleries and a map of Havana pinpointing their locations. This cartography of independent art spaces in the city, parallel to the one provided by the Biennial's well-oiled publicity machine, again called into question the Biennial's identity as an alternative forum.

In the 21st century it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is considered official and what is unofficial. In general, the term "official" includes actors, institutions, and spaces that answer to, and are economically dependent upon, Cuba's single-party state institutions. But the term "unofficial" no longer identifies, as it once did, aesthetic and philosophical positions anathema to a stipulated official doctrine and subject to concrete forms of reprimand. Therefore, the question of "to what" or "with respect to whom" a space like Aglutinador is alternative or independent is not always clear. However, because these initiatives are hosted in private residences, they can still claim to be unofficial spaces of cultural production and circulation.

Since 1994 Aglutinador has been known for gathering established and new artists within a single space, and it has long been recognized as a launching pad and laboratory for many emerging visual artists who would later achieve national and international recognition. Nonetheless, as we will see below, Aglutinador and similar spaces are not private galleries. They do not participate in the licensed or gray-market circuits of art commerce: the exhibition event is not a prelude to a sale, even if it accrues some form of commercial value. The unassuming nature of residential locales like Aglutinador also facilitates collaborations between professional and nonprofessional artists, and between the visual arts and other disciplines. In concert with global art trends but attuned to the local politics of space and speech, highly participatory forms of spectatorship and production dominate the scene. For instance, in the last decade, Aglutinador has hosted many cross-disciplinary projects, attracting social actors beyond the relatively small circle that surrounds the Instituto Superior de Arte and the San Alejandro Academy of the Visual Arts, the two main art academies in the capital.

This was the case for *Curadores go home!* (2008), an Aglutinador exhibit that highlighted both the internal challenges faced by collaborations between artists and nonartists and the residual political minefields of the unofficial cultural circuits. *Curadores go home!* put the informal art scene in contact with social actors from a more vocally antiofficial, politically active scene that included bloggers and musi-

cians critical of the government. Since some of the participants were black-listed as political dissidents, the National Council for the Visual Arts pushed to suspend the event, describing it as “a propaganda show whose main participants include representatives of the genocidal Bush government and known mercenaries.”¹³ After some back-and-forth, the 2008 show at Aglutinador would go on, but without the participation of the most politically compromising pieces—for instance, a multimedia project about the legal case of a dissident punk singer, Porno Para Ricardo’s frontman Gorki Ávila, prepared by then-independent bloggers Yoani Sánchez and Claudia Cadelo.

These routine interferences typify two aspects of post-Cold War Cuban cultural politics. First, a long-standing contradiction has endured in the logic of cultural democratization of the Cuban revolutionary government. While official discourse encourages critically committed art, the state’s very own appendages limit art’s social impact by managing access to polemical works and curtailing the dissemination of national cultural production in mainstream media. Second, political censorship is selectively enforced. It is less concerned with what is said than with who is speaking and in which context. In fact, state-sanctioned platforms for the promotion of national culture have demonstrated that the new policies of the market-friendly, single-party state not only sanction aesthetics of dissent, but even promote them.¹⁴ These concerted efforts to showcase a more socially and politically critical art characterized Abel Prieto’s tenure as Cuban Minister of

13 Claudia Cadelo, Octavo Cerco (blog), October 17, 2008, <http://octavocerco.blogspot.com/2008/10/nota-del-consejo-nacional-de-las-artes.html>. The same council would later encourage Tania Bruguera to hold her much debated, cancelled performance of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in a locale that was not the one chosen by the artist (Revolution Square), ostensibly so that participants could be prescreened and the duration of the entire performance limited. As a result, Bruguera was arrested and disinvited from the 2015 Havana Biennial, and her passport was confiscated, with legal action repeatedly threatened for several months afterward.

14 A measured flirtation with politics and social critique is the hallmark of most of the Cuban art showcased at the Havana Biennials, and the same can be said of many of the best-known contemporary Cuban artists, such as Carlos Garaicoa, Yoan Capote, Los carpinteros, Rachel Valdés, Kcho, and so forth. While this trend has to do with the language of contemporary art as much as with the global art market’s expectations concerning the thematization of the local, the confrontational tone of the more radical aesthetic experiments of the late 1980s and early 1990s is seldom visible. This change was accompanied by a governmental strategy shift, from overt suppression to disciplinary motivation. For a history of this period in the Cuban visual arts, see Weiss’s *To and from Utopia in the New Cuban Art*.

Culture from 1997 to 2012 and proved to be an approach as commercially attractive as it was politically expedient. Initiatives like Artex S.A.—the state’s commercial agency for national culture, created in 1989—suggest, as art critic Iván de la Nuez puts it, that Fidel went “from [being] Supreme Leader to Supreme Dealer.”¹⁵ This approach also became part of a more general move, involving popular mass culture as well as the fine arts. When former cultural exchanges within the socialist world gave way in the 1990s to individual and state actors trading in cultural capital, government policies pursued a double strategy: Cuban national culture was to become both a tourist destination and a lucrative export.¹⁶

In this sense, residential cultural events problematize the post-socialist Cuban landscape, where structural remnants of ideological orthodoxy and bureaucratic overreach are still operative, but cultural producers must partner with the state in order to gain greater domestic international visibility and to fetch higher commercial prices for their work. The poster for *Curadores Go Home!* is fitting, in this regard: a remake of the World War II Soviet poster *Motherland Calls!* (1941), in which a red-clothed, stern female in an epic pose holds in one hand a paper with the Red Army Oath, and with a second, raised hand directs the gaze of the observer toward a geometrically ordered gathering of bayonets in the background. In Aglutinador’s version, the Cuban flag

15 Iván de la Nuez, *Inundaciones: Del muro a Guantánamo. Invasiones artísticas en las fronteras políticas, 1989–2009* (Barcelona: Debate, 2010), 54. A recurrent subject in writings on Cuban art is the ways that visual artists have explored the effects of this commercialization, and in particular the pressure to incorporate international aesthetic languages and expectations in order to sell. See also Gerardo Mosquera’s “New Cuban Art” and Rachel Price’s *Planet/Cuba*, as well as Erica Segre’s “‘El convertible no convertible’: Reconsidering Refuse and Disjecta Aesthetics in Contemporary Cuban Art,” in *Latin American Popular Culture: Politics, Media, Affect*, ed. Geoffrey Kantaris and Rory O’Brien (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013), 109–38.

16 This was an important moment for the reflection and commercialization of Cuban culture both abroad and at home. Anchored in the marketing of Cuba as either a repository of 1950s nostalgia or a beleaguered socialist survivor, its icons were old American cars and the Buena Vista Social Club, as well as aging murals and faded symbols of both the Cold War and the Revolution. This period also saw increasing international tours of national *timba* music bands, the high profile of so-called dirty realism in literature (by writers mostly residing in Cuba but publishing in Spain), ongoing investment in the reconstruction of the colonial district of Old Havana as a tourist destination, and the reincorporation of cultural producers from the Cuban diaspora in the national canon. See Esther Whitfield’s *Cuban Currency* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Rafael Rojas’s “Souvernirs de un Caribe post-Soviético,” *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 48/49 (2008): 18–33; and Abel Prieto’s lecture “Cultura, cubanidad, cubanía,” in *Conferencia “La nación y la emigración”* (Havana: Editora Política, 1994).

has been pasted on the background. The paper held by the center figure, now empty, points to an ideologically hollow call, to the absence of a concrete aesthetic directive, though the presence of an authoritative figure remains. In turn, the exhibit's name, *Curadores Go Home!*, invokes the classic Latin American anti-imperialist slogan "Yankee go home!" The poster calls upon the viewer to make sense of mixed signals, where the rejection of the curator and the play on Soviet iconography highlight the coexistence of seemingly inimical but now complicit power figures. In this sense, consumption (in the art market, embodied in the figure of the foreign curator) and authoritarianism (in the state apparatus, represented by the political icons) are recognized as part of the same order through graphic juxtaposition. In contrast, the exhibit promises to reorganize these established terms of engagement by inviting all participants to be curators, artists, and spectators simultaneously. An alternative interpretation of *Curadores Go Home!* as an invitation to go and curate the home—perhaps in spaces like *Aglutinador*—adds a second layer of meaning. Instead of a dismissal, this reading of the phrase envisions the space of the home as a site of aesthetic action and echoes an early *Aglutinador* motto: "Cada casa una galería" (Every home a gallery).¹⁷

In 2009, *Aglutinador* convened another exhibit devoted to the commercialization of the Havana Art Biennial and of Cuban art in general. In particular, it targeted the absence of versatile mechanisms for art collection and ownership within Cuba, and therefore the lack of a Cuban infrastructure for the model of privately supported domestic art markets that prevails in much of the world. The title, *Perra Subasta* (*Bitch Auction*, 2009), played on Cuban use of the adjective *perra*, the noun for a female dog, which when used as an adjective means "huge" or "intense." Its motto was "Artistas de la 10 Bial de la Habana, 2009: ¡A venderrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" ("Artists of the 10 Biennial of Havana, 2009: Sellllllllllllllllllll!"). It was simultaneously presented as a virtual exhibit in Lizabel Mónica's blog *palaDeOindDeleite* and on *Aglutinador*'s own website. The catalog consisted of a series of questions about the art market posed to an art professor, a dealer, an artist, a foreign collector, a foreign art philanthropist, and an itinerant egg-seller. These

17 Found, for instance, in *Espacio Aglutinador: Un lugar de emergencia, 1994–2004*, ed. Sandra Ceballos and René Quintana (Havana: Espacio Aglutinador, 2004), exhibition catalog and archive. Provided courtesy of Sandra Ceballos.

CURADORES GO HOME!



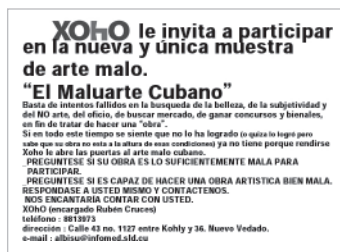
LABORATORIO AGLUTINADOR CALLE 25 ESQ. 6 NO. 602 OCTUBRE 2008

interventions comment on another recurring motif in recent artistic production: how the opening of a cultural market can be perceived to be the arrival of an aesthetic freedom, but is very quickly revealed to be anything but.

The exhibits held at the Xoho home gallery in 2008, 2009, and 2015 further explored how different kinds of cultural agents make sense of their own relationship to the field of art when they are taken out of their natural habitats: biennials, galleries, museums, grants, academia, and auctions. Xoho's exhibits and texts stress a desire for greater horizontality and transparency in the relationship between curators, artists, works, and the public, through a conception of the art exhibit more akin to a party than to a sober display of works: "Xoho is an alternative and independent cultural space that seeks to promote artists in shows where music, visual arts, audiovisual and performing arts are welcome. . . . Its objective is to gather different artistic manifestations in each event, fostering exchange among different publics."¹⁸ More significantly, the principle of eclectic, equal participation for artists, amateurs, and spectators alike turns the authorship of the entire event-space over to the participants as a collective. Alternative art events such as those held at Aglutinador and Xoho explicitly or implicitly reject the spatial and curatorial boundaries put forth by state cultural gatekeepers such as the National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba or the National Council for the Visual Arts.

The 2009 exhibit *El Maluarte Cubano* (Cuban BadArt) called on participants to submit an original artwork that answered the following questions: "Enough failed attempts in search for beauty, for subjectivity, for non-art, for trade, in search of markets, of winning competitions and biennials, in short, of trying to make an 'oeuvre' (*obra*). . . . Ask yourself if your work is bad enough to participate. Ask yourself if you are capable of making a really bad artwork." In the original Spanish, the title *maluarte* (a contraction of the words *bad* and *art*) is a play on words that sounds like *baluarte* (bastion). In the absence of industrial modernization capabilities, national cultural production and other intangible goals of the welfare state, such as education, sports, and public health, became the benchmarks of socialism as an alternative

18 "Proyecto Xoho" documentation, digital archive courtesy of Rubén Cruces, Xoho's creator.



path to modernity and were offered by the Cuban revolutionary government as testaments of its success. Xoho's wordplay mocks an obsolete and oppressive conception of art and culture as national assets.

The logic of projects like Xoho, Aglutinador, Fanguito Estudio, and Cristo Salvador Galería favors more experimental, lo-fi aesthetics; found objects, collages, and ephemeral installations share the walls with doodles, drawings, and paintings, and coexist with variegated performances. Here, the material and symbolic conditions of the home-based art exhibit gain precedence over the exhibited artworks, while the individual works tend to be less compelling than the whole they become part of. Whereas exhibit-goers at a gallery opening can socialize among themselves in addition to interacting with the artworks—or not—the very act of attending a home-based exhibit is part of the experi-

ence. This means that the aesthetic dimensions of apartment art—a space whose *raison d'être* is the critique of exhibition practices—cannot exclude their social dimension, as a scene whose conditions of reception and participation are informed by a specific historical and political context. The interaction among participants is as central to the experi-

ence as, if not more central than, the interaction between participants and artworks alone, and the same can be said for the context in which these interactions become meaningful. These “alt” happenings can also be said to rekindle the social significance of *la fiesta* (the house party) in the organization of youth countercultures that reject, lack, or are excluded from mainstream public spaces. The house party functions as both a recurring trope and a cloaking device. Deployment of the statement “but we were just having a party” becomes a complicit code of collective dissimulation, a strategic retreat from the pull of post-revolutionary Cuban public spaces toward museological festivity.¹⁹

19 The house party is an important social space for youth with few affordable and relevant nightlife choices, as well as an organizing tactic for other unsanctioned cultural activities, such as home art exhibits. The practice also critically addresses selective efforts by state institutions to revamp consumer culture and nightlife in parts of the city to attract tourists and newly well-to-do Cubans, most notably in the colonial neighborhood of Old Havana. Cuban writer Antonio José Ponte has described the government strategy to capitalize on Havana's 1950s reputation as a tropical playground, which resurrects and manages leisure and entertainment practices formerly vilified in earlier decades, as

The ephemeral and sometimes politically compromising nature of this informal art scene renders a comprehensive catalog of these spaces a practical impossibility, though such an account is still needed. In addition to spaces like Aglutinador, Xoho, el Círculo, Fanguito Estudio, or Galería Cristo Salvador, which maintain or have maintained an ongoing identity as meeting and exhibition spaces for performance and visual arts, there are also many other homes that have done so only occasionally and that include the participation of both professional and occasional artists. For example, La Paja Recolds, the home recording studio for independent bands created by Porno Para Ricardo, held a visual art exhibit and party in 2010, taunting in its poster the local chapter of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). The exhibit had no other logic than that of its own happening, titled *La Paja Recolds Presents: Expo Colectiva Pusimos el Cuadro y Qué* (Collective Exhibit We Hung the Painting, Now What?). The exhibit's poster reworks the official logo of the CDR as a watchful giant over the city skyline with a speech balloon that reads "Not one painting more," while a hand protruding from one of the apartment building windows flips it off. Here, too, professional and nonprofessional artists hung works on the wall without differentiation. These examples join the homes of a host of established artists, including Servando Cabrera, Glexis Novoa, Pedro Pablo Oliva, and Tania Bruguera, that have been used as headquarters for participatory and collaborative projects or as the subjects of site-specific works and exhibits, and not (only)—as is usually the case with home studios in Havana—as a showcase for finished products aimed at foreign art buyers and curators.

Instead of belonging to a strictly underground system of cultural circulation, artists now openly identify themselves and invite the broader public to their home studios and exhibitions. As we saw earlier, despite the echoes of *glasnost*, holding an unofficial but organized event in one's home was still uncommon well into the 1990s, as was publicizing such an event beyond one's immediate circle of friends and colleagues (especially if it could be, even remotely, politically misunderstood). The cultural politics of selective tolerance and the deep eco-

a nation-wide "supervised party." Antonio José Ponte, *La fiesta vigilada* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2007). For an English translation, see "The Supervised Party," *boundary* 2 29, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 215–24.

nomic and ideological crisis of Cuba's revolutionary government in the 1980s and 1990s opened a space in which artists and intellectuals began to rehearse a timid version of alternative culture. This metaphorical space of dissent laid its concrete roots in some of the city's residences during this period, cementing such venues as an integral component of the urban cultural fabric.

Surely we can no longer talk about these phenomena as being part of a clandestine art scene, even though they are called *alternative*, *independent*, and *autonomous* spaces by participants and observers alike, and though they are still subject to pressure from official cultural institutions. It may well be the case that, in the tradition of salon-style culture, social and cultural capital is still being accumulated by the figure of the underground or dissident artist. In addition, a muddled picture of funding and sustainability looms large over some of these spaces.²⁰ However, amidst the proliferation of home-based small businesses and corporate partnerships between artists, investors, and the state, these gatherings advance no clear goals—commercially, politically, or aesthetically.

In addition, these widely publicized invitations to the residential art circuit raise as many questions about their audience as about the media that document and extend the reach of these events beyond the city. Digital media technologies have changed the ecology of the unofficial art world significantly, especially in Havana, where Internet penetration and the use of digital technologies is relatively scarce, though considerably more frequent than in other parts of the country. Therefore, the action of opening one's home to the public is extended and lives indefinitely—even after the exhibit/party is over—in the virtual hubs that promote, document, and comment on the gatherings. Once it has taken place, an event's sphere of action is amplified and expanded on the Internet and in fragmentary personal digital archives. Events are no longer confined to the space and time of the happening, further upending the private-public thresholds that had once turned homes into clandestine cultural hubs. Once difficult-to-find performances, publications, and happenings from the 1980s and 1990s can

20 Support for these spaces is based largely on the personal resources of artists and collaborators, and to a smaller degree on donations or grants for specific events awarded by various foreign institutions supporting cultural initiatives in Havana, such as the Amsterdam-based Prince Claus Fund and the Norwegian Embassy (also a sponsor of the Havana Biennial).

now be found online or in digital archives that circulate from person to person. Contemporary art spaces have at times recuperated and preserved such works as part of an alternative cultural memory, as was the case with a retrospective of experimental and bootleg publications from earlier decades held at Cristo Salvador Galería in May of 2013. Beyond the illicit circuits of dissemination among close friends that characterized the unofficial cultural scenes of previous decades, digital documentation has made both systematic and more ephemeral efforts at preservation more common. As such, multimedia platforms of dissemination—including word of mouth; artisanal, samizdat-style materials; born-digital networks of publicity in blogs, websites, and social media; and multimedia auto-ethnographic documentation—which invite virtual participation from absent, secondary spectators via the Internet and social media, are not ancillary elements of happenings, but part and parcel of their constitutive logic. Nonetheless, though amplified and expanded in the digital era, this media presence remains as contested and unofficial as its equivalent in physical space, insofar as it is neither recognized by nor granted access to the mainstream national media.

The map of the Cuban art alt-scene may soon become more crowded, as other types of spaces emerge in the city. For instance, initiatives such as Kcho's Museo Orgánico de Romerillo—a community center, artist studio, and gallery folded into one—and the home gallery El Apartamento—opened in 2015, with an elegant website that enables patrons to contact artists directly and inquire about their work—are gaining traction with buyers and visitors both. Unlike the home-based exhibits described above, however, these market-savvy venues retain the spatial ordering of more traditional art spaces. Bodies, artworks, and gazes are not “out of place”; exhibit-goers interact with artworks but not necessarily with each other, and art is reduced to what hangs on the wall. Still, these other spaces also take advantage of the inevitable consumer expansion into the now-trendy “independent” and “alternative” labels that they, too, use, and capitalize on the Made in Cuba craze, fueled by the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between the United States and Cuba in 2014. These tensions, with their impacts on artists and exhibition practices alike, are layered onto the social significance and backstory of the home as a contested space for cultural action.

Reflecting on these changing conditions, Sandra Ceballos's note

of January 3, 2016, titled “Artista contra Artista,” laments the divisive-ness and self-policing introduced in the national art scene by new material stratifications, and the aesthetic and political strings that come attached to them. Comparing the carefully selected and high-yielding “farándula oficial folklórica e internacional” (folkloric and international official scenesters) with the upstart affluent taxi drivers of refurbished old American cars, Ceballos recognizes the temptation of moving Aglutinador from her tiny apartment to a place without water leakage, sick dogs, and peeling walls. Ultimately she settled for staying—a nostalgic exercise, but also an aesthetic decision in favor of the “oppressive discomfort” of the cheap alcohol, crammed sweaty bodies, and floating layer of cigarette smoke that are vital elements of the experience her location affords. She argues that what defined and distinguished Aglutinador was a function of the architectonic setup as much as of the history of noncompetitive, improvised sociabilities that the space produced: “the chaos at each opening generated by the smallness of the space, the modesty of the place, and the excessive attendance of an eclectic, nonselective public, is almost a performance, or an accidentally naive ludic action.”²¹

These claims do not intend to preserve spaces of sacred interiority from the political and the social. According to conventional wisdom, the private and the public realms of bourgeois society stand in opposition to each other. The private realm is the sphere of property relations (from which all other individual privileges and exclusions arise), and the public is the realm of their protection, adjudication, and regulation (with the modern state as representative and executor of these aggregate demands). Notwithstanding, competing notions of the private and public predate, coexist with, and arise counter to these historically contingent forms. Therefore, the material and sociocultural contexts in which these notions are deployed must be considered, along with their corresponding legal or political articulations. From a strictly materialist perspective, actually existing socialisms fell short of producing new meanings of the private and the public, effectively denying but thereby accepting the terms’ bourgeois meanings. Henri Lefebvre addresses this very equivocation when he asks “What of socialism—or, rather,

21 Sandra Ceballos, “Artista contra Artista (II),” in Hechizamiento Habanémico (blog), January 3, 2016, <http://habanemia.blogspot.com/2016/01/artista-contra-artista-segunda-fase.html>.

what of what is today so confusedly referred to as socialism. . . . Has [it] produced a space of its own?”²² Instead, the use of a private home as an open space for art allows us to consider a politics of public space beyond bourgeois divisions, by combining two meanings of the word “public”: the public as audience, and the public as the *res publica*, or public thing.

As such, in addition to blurring the lines of the official and the unofficial, home-based exhibits further complicate the distinction operating in the post-socialist context between what is public and what is private. Since the post-socialist-cum-neoliberal popular imaginary is prone to conflate that which is public with the state apparatus, and the institutions that manage it with the ruling party *du jour*, the word “public” is invoked almost as a bad word. By accommodating meanings of public space that do not materialize elsewhere in the city, these practices refract the defining aspects of contemporary Havana’s makeover: the commercialization of residences as small businesses, the austerity measures of economic restructuring, and the privatization of public space for tourism and foreign investment, with state institutions as their main commercial partner.²³ In the context of a transformed media ecology and increased governmental tolerance of criticism and aesthetic experimentation, these spaces respond to the commercialization of national art as symbolic capital, as well as to the de facto privatization of the state-managed, nominally public spaces in which that art is produced, exhibited, consumed, and enjoyed.

OF INSTALLATIONS AND ASSEMBLIES

Writers and visual artists have systematically read turn-of-the-century Havana as a citywide museum—Ponte has called it “a Cold War theme park”—due both to the city’s deterioration after years of isolation and bad investment and to the government’s astute management of Cuba’s lingering socialist identity. Therefore, if the entire city has become

22 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 54. For the contributions of Lefebvre’s work to contemporary studies of space, and of public space in particular, see also David Harvey’s “Space as a Keyword,” in *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

23 For an overview of Cuba’s changing economic landscape after the Cold War and the 1990s crisis, see Jorge I. Pérez Domínguez, Omar Everleny Villanueva, and Lorena Barberia, *The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), and Sergio Díaz-Briquets and Jorge F. Pérez-López, *Corruption in Cuba: Castro and Beyond* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

a museum of sorts, these alternative spaces constitute a special kind of intervention in space: the entire home functions as an installation in the city grid. This would be a way to read Alexandre Arrechea's 2004 Aglutinador installation *Dos nuevos espacios* (Two New Spaces). Arrechea's work consisted of a dollhouse replica referencing the construction of *barbacoas*, an illicit but widespread Cuban practice of building interior subdivisions with grid-like concrete or wooden planks within a larger space, aimed at overcoming housing and construction material shortages. More significantly, the piece showcased the subdivisions that allowed Aglutinador to function on one side as a gallery, and on the other as living quarters. It suggested that spaces like Aglutinador install themselves and their participants in the cartography of the city by linking the idea of an informal culture to both politics and art-making, insofar as these spaces forcibly carve out new public spaces for culture in a city increasingly stripped of them. As reappropriated spaces, their effect is that of a site-specific, large-scale participatory installation. Because home-based cultural gatherings convene the works exhibited, but also arrange participants as bodies assembled within the installation itself, aesthetic pleasure is derived as well from the unsanctioned nature of that particular spatial arrangement.

These home-based cultural sites are the interior counterparts to the visible emptiness—real and symbolic—of other prominent Havana exteriors, such as Revolution Square. This is a motif recently thematized in the multimedia works of artists with a much higher international profile: Coco Fusco's 2012 *La plaza vacía* (Empty Square), an audiovisual meditation on Revolution Square as a barren space sporadically filled with coercive, ritualistic mobilizations; the hauntingly spectral video loops of Liudmila & Nelson's photographic series *Absolut Revolution 1ro de Mayo* (2002–15); the eerily desolate, ominously monumental cities of Glexis Novoa's paintings. Moreover, the arrests and legal aftermath of Tania Bruguera's forcefully cancelled restaging of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in December 2014 poignantly reintroduced the idea of public space in Cuba as a heavily disputed terrain, and as a historically pregnant site for artistic action. (*Tatlin's Whisper #6* installs a podium with a microphone open to anyone for a minute, flanked by actors dressed in military garb that allocate speaking time and protect the audiences' performance of free speech.) Cuban authorities preemptively arrested Bruguera and dozens of other activists that were likely to

participate, closed much of the access to the area, and insisted on drawing a distinction between an art performance and a political provocation. Bruguera's 2009 performance of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* at the Centro de Arte Contemporánea Wifredo Lam elicited compelling interventions by the audience, but the second performance achieved success by defect: by being prevented from happening, the performance recruited the participation of the political and cultural authorities instead of that of the public.

In contrast to these examples, during exhibits private homes become concrete embodiments of a public space under dispute. The home's double function as both a residence and an art gallery temporarily turns an urban interior into a public space. As such, it differs from the privatized spaces that benefit and protect the new investments of a post-socialist economy, from private beaches and foreign land developments to small businesses based in family living rooms. As large-scale installations in the city, moreover, these interiors reference open urban spaces that are public in name only, either because of disrepair and abandonment or because of the kinds of activities that are prohibited in them, such as protests, impromptu gatherings, and art performances. Consequently, home-based exhibits ask spectators and artists to participate in a potentially risky enterprise in which art temporarily suspends the exterior political order, reframing the discussion of what "public" may mean in the rapid and opaque process of economic privatization.