

Contemporary Cuban Video: Dispatches from the Front Lines

Noel Smith, Curator of Latin American and Caribbean Art, USF Institute for Research in Art

Occupying, Building, Thinking: Poetic and Discursive Perspectives on Contemporary Cuban Video Art (1990-2010) continues the Contemporary Art Museum's commitment to Cuban contemporary art. Past group and solo exhibitions include *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island* (2001); *Los Carpinteros: Inventing the World* (2005); and *Carlos Garaicoa: Making Amends* (2010), among others. Our good friend Dagoberto Rodríguez of Los Carpinteros put me in touch with the Cuban-Spanish curator, art critic and writer Dennys Matos, a recent transplant to Miami from Madrid. I invited him to visit Tampa where he showed Director Margaret Miller and me his curated compilation of videos by Cuban artists residing and working worldwide. In these accessible, fascinating and insightful works, we saw an excellent opportunity to introduce the genre to our USF audiences.

The artists represented in the exhibition have adopted video as an important part of their practices, and we show a number of them for the first time in Tampa. There are some who established their careers in the 1980s, such as Lázaro Saavedra and José Ángel Toirac; artists from the generation of the 1990s, including Carlos Garaicoa, Juan Carlos Alom, Luis Gómez and Alexandre Arrechea; and a newer generation of artists arising in the 21st century, among them Grethell Rasúa, Marianela Orozco, Celia-Yunior and Javier.C. Luis o Miguel.

The videos invite contemplation of what it means to occupy (a home, a plot of land, a city, a society) and explore the relationship between occupying and building, and the concept of the work of art in today's global culture. More particularly, they ponder the state of the individual life, led in private and in public, in a society such as Cuba's, dominated by the collective State. Each of the videos, the shortest 37 seconds and the longest 13 minutes, packs a punch and carries a powerful message with hard truths about the reality of the lives of everyday Cubans. Elements characteristic of Cuban art, such as inventiveness, humor (at times very black), political satire, nostalgia, bitterness, hope, piercing intelligence, memory and desire, all come forward in these sometimes heartbreaking dispatches from the front lines of the battle for "home."

Occupying, Building, Thinking... was shown last year at the Centro Cultural Español Miami, and we are proud to bring it now to our USFCAM audiences. We have added a sculptural, metaphorical vision of a revolutionary-era Cuban living room created by artist Vanessa Diaz, a recent MFA graduate of the USF School of Art and Art History. Tampa (notably Ybor City) has been home to so many Cubans since the 1880s that it is often referred to as "the cradle of Cuban independence" for its contributions to the decades long struggle of the Cubans against the Spanish in the late 19th century. Our city and our university are a welcoming and apt environment for the contemplation of the present and future of Cuban society as inspired by this intriguing and worthy exhibition.



Grethell Rasúa, *Cubiertas de deseos / Covers of Yearnings*, 2008



Acknowledgements

Margaret Miller, Director, USF Institute for Research in Art

Occupying, Building, Thinking: Poetic and Discursive Perspectives on Contemporary Cuban Video Art (1990-2010) introduces a rich sampling of Cuban video, a form that for various reasons has been late in maturing compared to other genres of Cuban art. However, the videos have attained recognition on the international stage and offer an insightful window on the reality of life for Cubans living on the island and beyond.

I am deeply grateful to the artists for their creative endeavors and very pleased that we can show the work in our museum. Thanks to Dennys Matos, a recent transplant to Florida, for curating this exhibition and for his collaboration with curator Noel Smith to bring the exhibition to Tampa. Thank you to Vanessa Diaz, a recent MFA graduate, for designing the sculptural environment for the presentation of the videos.

Noel Smith is acknowledged for her ongoing research of the artists living and working in Havana. This exhibition demonstrates her continuing commitment to bringing exceptional work to the USF campus. There are many staff to acknowledge that have assisted with the organization and presentation of *Occupying, Building, Thinking...* at the USF Contemporary Art Museum: Alexa Favata, Deputy Director, coordinated the project; Shannon Annis managed the loans; Tony Palms worked directly with Noel Smith, Dennys Matos and Vanessa Diaz to design the exhibition; and Vincent Kral supervised the installation. Don Fuller designed the invitation, publication and promotional materials, and engineered the videos and projections with the assistance of Desirée Moore. Amy Allison arranged for travel and the multiple events associated with the opening, Mitzi Gordon planned the reception, and Randall West managed all fiscal matters. Additional staff, students and interns that assisted with the project include Kienan Almeida, Chris Elmore, Jay Hollick, Eric Jonas, Ashley Martinez, Ville Mehtonen, Amanda Morales and Andrea Tamborello.

JAIRO ALFONSO
JUAN CARLOS ALOM
ALEXANDRE ARRECHEA
LOIDYS CARNERO
LIEN CARRAZANA
YAIMA CARRAZANA
CELIA-YUNIOR
LUIS GÓMEZ
CARLOS GARAICOA
HANDER LARA
HAMLET LAVASTIDA
JAVIER.C. LUIS O MIGUEL
ADRIÁN MELIS
MARIANELA OROZCO
GEANDY PAVÓN
LINDOMAR PLACENCIA
RENIER QUER
GRETHELL RASÚA
ANTUAN RODRÍGUEZ
LÁZARO SAAVEDRA
JOSÉ ÁNGEL TOIRAC
RAMÓN WILLIAMS

DENNY MATOS
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The Institute for Research in Art is recognized by the State of Florida as a major cultural institution and receives funding through the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, the Florida Council on Arts and Culture, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Arts Council of Hillsborough County and the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners. The USF Contemporary Art Museum is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.

OCCUPYING, BUILDING, THINKING:

POETIC AND DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVES
ON CONTEMPORARY CUBAN VIDEO ART
(1990-2010)

June 7 – August 3, 2013
USF Contemporary Art Museum

Contemporary Cuban Video: Relocating Our Place in the Universe

Dennys Matos, Independent Curator and Critic

I originally presented what is now the exhibition *Occupying, Building, Thinking: Poetic and Discursive Perspectives on Contemporary Cuban Video Art (1990-2010)*¹ as a lecture at the “Cuban Music, Art and Literature after the Fall” conference at Carleton College, Minneapolis, in April 2011. In the course of this event, it became apparent to me that there were two pressing issues concerning the production of Cuban video art during those decades.

First was the recognition that, unlike other forms of contemporary Cuban art that were well represented on the international art circuits, the low visibility of video failed to adequately showcase the breadth of content and the poetic variety that it had achieved between 1990 and 2010. The meager presence of video art was related to the fact that the artists of the generation of the 1980s, conditioned by the precariousness of technology in Cuba, had opted to express themselves in painting, sculpture, photography and installation. But while it is certain that the interest of Cuban artists in video has grown spectacularly since the 1990s, it is also clear that the medium’s presence on the international circuit remains opaque and fragmented.

Second was the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the profound socio-economic and cultural crisis in Cuba provoked by the collapse of communist Europe. As a result, the revolutionary utopian project drifted toward a diehard totalitarian political ideology. The island’s cultural community, as well as the entire island, was torn apart by a subsequent wave of migration known as the diaspora (Iván de la Nuez).

One of the consequences was that many artists, adopting a strategy that allowed them to maintain institutional ties with the island and also launch their work towards an international audience, established dual residences and studios between Havana and urban centers around the world. Others simply chose to settle in cities in other continents where they continue to actively produce. Clearly, I needed to probe this new map of creative activity as much as possible and consider the work of artists both on the island as well as those who live and work overseas.

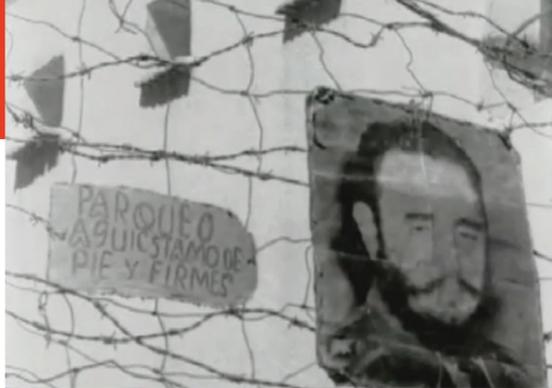
This approach, applied to an exhibition format, has advantages and disadvantages. If we look at *Occupying, Building, Thinking...* as a map to chart a territory in permanent flux, we will find this to be all but impossible, because the territory and the meanings of the signs transform much faster than cartography can ever

register. However, if we consider it as a project, that is, if we look at it as a process that takes into account the dynamics inherent in contemporary Cuban video, then this approach is clearly an advantage. This is the opportunity to update the successive editions of *Occupying, Building, Thinking...* according to the creative artistic changes it undergoes with its expanded transnational geographic reach.

The following artists were represented at Carleton College in 2011: Alexandre Arrechea, Adrián Melis, Carlos Garaicoa, Celia-Yunior, Renier Quer, Lindomar Placencia, Yaima Carrazana, Lien Carrazana, Loidys Carnero, Grethell Rasúa, José. Á. Toirac, Marianela Orozco, Jairo Alfonso, Hander Lara, Javier.C. Luis o Miguel, Lázaro Saavedra, Luis Gómez y Geandy Pavón. Three artists who live and work in Miami, where the production of video art flourishes, were added to the edition shown at the Centro Cultural Español Miami (CEMIAMI) in 2012: Antuan Rodríguez, Ramón Williams, and Hamlet Lavastida. The inclusion of their works in each of the segments—Antuan in *Occupying*, Lavastida in *Building* and Williams in *Thinking*—adds new and fresh considerations to the issues posed by the exhibition.

In the current version at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, two new features appear. First is an installation by the artist Vanessa Díaz, a metaphorical *Occupying, Building, Thinking...* which creates a dialogue with the videos and which Noel Smith curates. Second is the addition of Juan Carlos Alom’s *Habana Solo*, from 2000. Placed within the segment *Occupying*, this work can now be seen as a precursor to the posterior poetic and discursive development of contemporary Cuban video. In it emerge a variety of forms (the languages of the cinema, the documentary and advertising, etc.) and themes with which he addresses the rich and contradictory sociocultural reality of the island. The artists who followed him benefited greatly from this wealth.

The Tampa edition is the most expansive in its concept of interrelating video art with a sculptural installation, markedly enriching the poetic and discursive aspects of the project. Putting *Occupying, Building, Thinking...* into its poetic and discursive perspective, all of the works included, independent of the authors’ poetics, ask us to consider the meaning of *occupying*, and the relationship among occupying, building and the concept of the work of art in the actual circumstances of global culture. They ask how to reinvent a language for re-



Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo / Havana Solo*, 2000

imagining what is public, private and intimate in a culture like Cuba’s, where civil society has been supplanted by the State.²

This exhibition is articulated in three interconnected segments (*Occupying, Building, Thinking*) that draw a creative map that threads together such diverse cities as Havana and New York, Madrid, Miami and Amsterdam, Warsaw and Barcelona. At the same time it traverses an aesthetic itinerary that contemplates the most important poetics in contemporary Cuban video of this period, with artists very representative of the generations included here. And lastly, the transnational character of this exhibition at USFCAM shows how contemporary art teaches us a paradoxical lesson: the artist must be more local and at the same time more cosmopolitan. The apparent paradox is resolved by understanding that true universality is only achieved from a decentralized and anonymous *not* place and that the recuperation of the local is only reached from outside of the spaces mapped by states-nationalities. Taking up this challenge means to affirm the local (outside of any notion of autochthony or folklore) and the universal, without reducing the latter to an abstract idea that can be extrapolated to any time or place. All true universality demands a concrete character. Concreteness is needed for the spatial and temporary density granted by a place, so that we can relocate our place in the universe.³ This is the idea that is most primarily defined and proposed by *Occupying, Building, Thinking: Poetic and Discursive Perspectives on Contemporary Cuban Video Art (1990–2010)*.

Javier Castro (Havana, Cuba, 1984) graduated from ISA in 2009. **Luis o Miguel** is **Luis Gárciga** (Havana, Cuba, 1971) graduated from ISA in 2005. *Reflejos de un lago en el camino / Reflections of a Lake in the Road* (2007) is an attempt at contemplation on a street in Havana. Something unstoppable provokes surprise and perhaps frustration.

About the Artists and Curators

Jairo Alfonso (Havana, Cuba, 1974) graduated from Havana’s Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in 1998. He lives and works in Havana and Madrid. *Paseo con abuelo Juan / I Walk with Grandfather Juan* (2005) is an autobiographical homage to the village of his childhood and also to his grandfather.

Juan Carlos Alom (Havana, Cuba, 1964) studied photography at the Fototeca de Cuba and also studied the semiotics of urbanism. He lives and works in Havana. *Habana Solo / Havana Solo* (2000), with its varied score by contemporary Cuban musicians, offers a model for living in Cuban society.

Alexandre Arrechea (Trinidad, Cuba, 1970) graduated from ISA in 1994. He lives and works in Madrid and Havana. In *Polvo / Dust* (2005), the artist draws objects that might exist in an abandoned house. Each drawing succeeds the last, erasing it in an unending cycle of negation.

Loidys Carnero (Havana, Cuba, 1982) graduated in 2003 from the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro. He lives and works in Amsterdam. In *Multimueble / All in One Furniture* (2005) daily activities take place in an unusual place, subverting the function of a known locale.

Lien Carrazana (Havana, Cuba, 1980) graduated from the Academia de Bellas Artes San Alejandro in 2000. He lives and works in Madrid. *Mareas / Tides* (2007) creates a parallel between ocean currents and the flow of online chat communication in Cuba.

Yaima Carrazana (Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 1981) graduated in 2003 from the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro. She lives and works in Amsterdam. *Homenaje al último neón de La Habana / Homage to the Last Neon Sign in Havana* (2004) is a tribute to the things we are losing, as we lose hope of recovering them.

Javier Castro (Havana, Cuba, 1984) graduated from ISA in 2009. **Luis o Miguel** is **Luis Gárciga** (Havana, Cuba, 1971) graduated from ISA in 2005. *Reflejos de un lago en el camino / Reflections of a Lake in the Road* (2007) is an attempt at contemplation on a street in Havana. Something unstoppable provokes surprise and perhaps frustration.

Geandy Pavón, *Ananké: El héroe y las moiras / Ananké: The Hero and the Fates*, 2009



Vanessa Díaz (Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 1980) is an interdisciplinary artist working in sculpture and site specific installation. Her exhibition history extends to New York, Miami, throughout Florida, and nationally. She is a recent graduate of the MFA program at the University of South Florida.

Carlos Garaicoa (Havana, Cuba, 1967) lives and works in Madrid and Havana. *Yo no quiero ver más a mis vecinos / I don’t want to see my neighbors anymore* (2006) deals with the concept and reality of borders. The construction of a wall around the artist’s home suggests the many political and divisive walls that exist worldwide.

Luis Gómez (Havana, Cuba, 1968) graduated from ISA in 1991 where he teaches new media. He lives and works in Havana. *11811* (2005) is inspired by Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, and reflects upon the ethics that condition the behavior of individuals in society.

Celia González (Havana, Cuba, 1985) and **Yunior Aguiar** (Havana, Cuba, 1984) live and work in Havana. They both graduated from ISA in 2009. In *Havana: 15 seconds* (2008) air conditioning as an amenity becomes a metaphor for the revolution’s political and economic transformations in its life span of over half a century.

Hander Lara (Havana, Cuba, 1984) graduated from ISA in 2009 where he is professor and chair of the sculpture department. He lives and works in Havana. *Alfombrado / Carpeted* (2006) deals with the idea of place as a changeable space which can be altered as an extension of the individual.

Hamlet Lavastida (Havana, Cuba 1983) graduated in 2009 from ISA. He lives and works in both Miami and Warsaw. *Bienvenido al problema / Welcome to the Problem* (2007) redefines aesthetic imaginaries, specifically those employed by socialism in Cuba over the last fifty years.

Dennys Matos (Guantánamo, Cuba, 1966) studied journalism at the Universidad de La Habana in 1990 and received a degree in History from that institution in 1995. He is an independent art critic and curator based between Miami and Madrid.

Adrián Melis (Havana, Cuba, 1985) graduated in 2010 from ISA. He lives and works in Barcelona. *Elaboración de cuarenta piezas rectangulares para la construcción de un piso / Manufacture of forty rectangular pieces for building an apartment* (2008) addresses the frustration of the revolutionary construction project.

Marianela Orozco (Sancti Spiritus, Cuba, 1973) earned a degree in Arts and Letters from the Universidad Central de las Villas in 1996. She lives and works in Havana. In *Hipnosis / Hypnosis* (2006) a woman observes her surroundings; by subsequently taking her place and reproducing her movements, the artist creates a vision that simultaneously addresses both the woman and her point of view.

Geandy Pavón (Las Tunas, Cuba, 1974) graduated in 1994 from the Escuela Nacional de Artes. He lives and works in New York. *Ananké: El héroe y las moiras / Ananké: The Hero and the Fates* (2009) is a reflection on the impossibility of destroying myth.

Lindomar Placencia (Camagüey, Cuba, 1976) graduated in 1995 from the Escuela Profesional de Artes Plásticas de Camagüey. *Performance* (2009), which demonstrates to the viewer how to solve a Rubik’s cube, is one of several actions shot as an instructional video.

Renier Quer (Havana, Cuba, 1983) graduated from the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro in 2004. He lives and works in Havana. *Bunker* (2006) finds similarity between the resignation towards the impoverishment of city housing stocks and the attitude towards the weakening of the revolution’s utopian project in the Special Period (early to late 1990s).

Grethell Rasúa (Havana, Cuba, 1983) graduated from ISA in 2009. She lives and works in Havana. *Cubierta de deseos / Covers of Yearnings* (2008) is a look at how ordinary people approach the beautification of a city in ruins and showcases their makeshift aesthetics, in which they make something out of nothing.

Antuan Rodríguez (Villa Clara, Cuba, 1972) graduated from the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Alejandro in 1987. He lives and works in Miami. *Izquierda o derecha / Left or Right* (2010) proposes a critical dialogue between politics and disenfranchised citizens.

Lázaro Saavedra (Havana, Cuba, 1964) graduated from ISA in 1988. He lives and works in Havana. *El ideólogo del buen corazón (maqueta de obra en proceso) / The Good-Hearted Ideologue (draft of a work in progress)* (2006) addresses the individual and society in a reflection on the zealotries of totalitarian societies.

Noel Smith (Tampa, Florida, 1952) has an M.A. degree in art history, and is the Curator of Latin American and Caribbean Art at the University of South Florida Institute for Research in Art. She specializes in contemporary Cuban art.

José Ángel Toirac (Guantánamo, Cuba, 1966) graduated from ISA in 1991. He lives and works in Havana. In *Tengo / I Have* (2010) a deaf mute performs the poem *Tengo*, by the Cuban national poet Nicolás Guillén, in sign language.

Ramón Williams (Havana, Cuba, 1969) graduated in 1992 from the Instituto Superior Politécnico José Antonio Echeverría majoring in visual arts. He lives and works in Miami. *Las abstracciones perdidas / The Lost Abstractions* (2009) comments on a symbolic level on the presence and influence of money in the circulation of cultural goods.

Order of Projection

Habitar / Occupying

- 1) Jairo Alfonso, *Paseo con abuelo Juan / I Walk with Grandfather Juan*, 2006. 3:00 min
- 2) Loidys Carnero, *Multimueble / All-in-One Furniture*, 2005. 1:42 min
- 3) Javier.C. Luis o Miguel, *Reflejos de un lago en el camino / Reflections of a Lake in the Road*, 2007. 1:36 min
- 4) Lien Carrazana, *Mareas / Tides*, 2007. 0:37 min
- 5) Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo / Havana Solo*, 2000. 10:00 min
- 6) Yaima Carrazana, *Tributo al último neón de La Habana / Tribute to the Last Neon Sign in Havana*, 2004. 2:12 min
- 7) Renier Quer, *Bunker*, 2006. 4:36 min
- 8) Antuan Rodríguez, *Izquierda o derecha / Left or Right*, 2010. 6:00 min
- 9) Marianela Orozco, *Hipnosis/ Hypnosis*, 2006. 5:00 min

Construir / Building

- 10) Grethell Rasúa, *Cubiertas de deseos / Covers of Yearnings*, 2008. 2:45 min
- 11) Lindomar Placencia, *Performance*, 2009. 2:45 min
- 12) Hander Lara, *Alfombrado / Carpeted*, 2006. 1:55 min
- 13) Alexandre Arrechea, *Polvo / Dust*, 2005. 4:34 min
- 14) Adrián Melis, *Elaboración de cuarenta piezas rectangulares para la construcción de un piso / Manufacture of forty rectangular pieces for building an apartment*, 2008. 4:50 min
- 15) Carlos Garaicoa, *Yo no quiero ver más a mis vecinos / I don’t want to see my neighbors anymore*, 2006. 4:13 min

Pensar / Thinking

- 16) Geandy Pavón, *Ananké: El héroe y las moiras / Ananké: The Hero and the Fates*, 2009. 1:00 min
- 17) Ramón Williams, *Las abstracciones perdidas / The Lost Abstractions*, 2009. 1:06 min
- 18) Celia-Yunior, *Havana: 15 seconds*, 2008. 2:07 min
- 19) José Ángel Toirac, *Tengo / I Have*, 2010. 2:45 min
- 20) Lázaro Saavedra, *El ideólogo del buen corazón (maqueta de obra en proceso) / The Good-Hearted Ideologue (draft of a work in progress)*, 2006. 2:42 min
- 21) Hamlet Lavastida, *Bienvenido al problema / Welcome to the Problem*, 2007. 3:03 min
- 22) Luis Gómez, *11811*, 2005. 13:03 min

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1. *Habitar, Construir, Pensar: Perspectivas poéticas y discursivas en el video art contemporáneo cubano (1990-2010)*.
2. Dennys Matos. “Video contemporáneo cubano (1990-2010).” *Revista Art.es* (47). Spain, 2011. Pp. 44-48
3. Dennys Matos and Jorge Brioso, *Habitar otra vez* (unpublished)