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Hidden in Plain Sight

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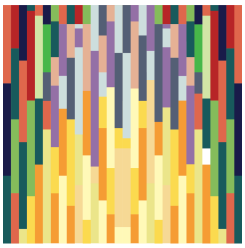

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Abstract

The movement of street artists in Havana as an example of a contemporary functioning heterotopia.

In an environment of political censorship and the fear of legal persecution, the strength of this informal community not only helps it survive but grow and progress in the direction of social acceptability. The energy of the movement attracts both young Cuban artists and established artists from around the globe to help create a living gallery on the streets of Havana.

The struggle with a police state is not the only one to overcome. The lack of resources and proper materials make these artists experts in backyard chemistry to create paint. Creating social commentary and, at times, visual art in Cuba can be dangerous. Legally, graffiti is not seen as mere vandalism but as "destruction of public property." What is art and who can produce it is dictated by the state.

In a country where silence is synonymous with safety, where the names of leaders would not be whispered in the streets and dissent is seen as a social illness to be eradicated, for the first time, a generation in Havana has a public voice and is not fearful to take it to the streets visually.

Essay

"The act of doing graffiti in the dystopia of crisis shows the desire of grassroots artists and cultural activists to use their creative capacities to overcome the unfavourable material conditions of their existence and to build alternative counter-hegemonic spaces of representation in the urban landscapes, challenging austerity policies and the existing social order."[1]

Long before street art became popular as a decoration in hipster bars, a marketing tool for luxury cars or an urban background giving street cred to wedding photos, it was the domain of hidden artists known only by their street tags. Until fine art galleries started to promote them as newly-discovered geniuses, they were looked upon as vandals who disrespected the property of others. Now many of these artists travel the world painting commissioned murals, often paid for with public money, and designing packaging for luxury consumer products. Street art has become the cool factor in modern urban society. Revered as daring anti-establishment while being appropriated by restaurants and local business-improvement associations. And then there is Cuba…

In 2018 the Cuban government enacted Decree 349:[2] a law requiring artists to obtain official permission in advance of any exhibit, concert, book launch or sale of art. It allows inspectors to impose fines on artists and confiscate work. It also allows the government to define what is considered art and what is to be condemned as counter-revolutionary propaganda without any formal guidelines but on the whim of an official. It even allows the government to determine who may be considered an "artist" and who may not. "In addition to sanctions that include fines, confiscation of privately owned materials, and the seizure of homes used for artistic production not authorized by a government agency, Decree 349 also enables roving citizen-inspectors to shut down activities taking place in private spaces, such as home-based galleries or recording studios."[3] Yet somehow, there is an exploding street art scene of local artists and those from around the world travelling to leave their marks on the streets of Havana. Within the highly controlled and censored confines of the Cuban environment a well-defined subculture has formed.

Censorship has a long history in one-party societies. In Cuba one doesn't see billboards advertising the latest commercial enterprise or product. The item being sold and advertised is ideology. The majestic heroism of the revolution was the only message one would see painted on the walls throughout Cuba. Within a month of the public demonstrations for personal freedom on July 11, 2021, the government passed Resolution 105. This resolution further tightens the restrictions on personal freedom of expression. Resolution 105 lists punishable online offenses including the "dissemination of false news" and "defamation with an impact on the country's prestige," as well as "harmful diffusion."[4] With a history of disproportionate punishment for any act that can be branded as counter-revolutionary, self-censorship becomes the ultimate tool of suppression. To say that this stance is Orwellian would be ironic, as the author's work, while not officially banned, is not taught or easily available on the island.

At the time of publication, there are artists imprisoned because their work was seen as an attack against the official government ideology. At least two artists (Hamlet Lavastida and Tania Bruguera) were told the only way they could get out of jail was to be driven straight to the airport and directly into exile without even seeing their families. Performance artist Luis Manuel Ortero Alcántara has been either in jail, under house arrest, missing (even while in the hospital system) and otherwise punished and silenced for years for his anti-revolutionary performances that often feature such dangerous actions as flag waving. He is considered a political prisoner by international NGOs including Amnesty International, PEN and others.

Hidden in plain sight is a term Mr. Myl uses frequently. Mr. Myl, in his mid 30s with a short haircut, plain t-shirts, and skin marked by the sun but not by tattoos, can pass through the streets without drawing attention to himself. Certainly nothing about him screams "public enemy" nor does it hint in any way at his position as a central figure in the world of Cuban counterculture.

Mr. Myl has become the main contact for foreign artists who wish to leave their mark on the walls of Havana. He has collaborated with many artists from Europe, Latin America and beyond. A list of his collaborators reads like a Who's Who of contemporary street art, including artists such as Seth (France), Brebar (France), Sedr84 (Poland), Ola Kanins (Sweden), ScottandDestroy (Canada), Entes (Peru), Abstrk (USA), STP (USA) and the founder of the Museum of Graffiti in Miami, Alen Kets (USA). "The foreign artists would bring materials (Both paint and spray cans are extremely difficult to get in Cuba and professional quality spray paint must be imported or smuggled into the country) and share techniques with the Cubans (if a Cuban artist cannot get spray paint, they certainly would not have different caps and techniques to attain specific effects). Proper materials are almost impossible to find or are smuggled in by "friends". If need be, printer toner mixed with gasoline makes an undesirable but useable paint. Mr. Myl is also quick to counter that the visiting artists also learned something very important from the Cubans. They learned to paint in daylight. Hiding in plain sight was a new concept for them, but as Mr. Myl stated on French television earlier this month, "If you paint in daylight everyone just assumes that it was approved."[5]

Mr. Myl's work is abundant throughout Havana. If you search for a connective theme you may not immediately recognize one. Mr. Myl paints in many styles. One day it could be throwing up letters, another painting with stencils, brushes, or spray. "I paint for myself, for my desire to create. One day I stopped worrying about searching for concepts, messages, justifications and I just let myself paint what I wanted: letters, characters, whatever."[6] In May 2020 a large intervention by Mr. Myl appeared high above the streets of Havana. The image of a young boy with his face covered by a bandana and the word "Coraje" (Spanish for Courage) in large bold letters. Two months into the Covid-19 pandemic this was a message for all Cubans,

for all people. A year later, when Cubans took to the streets in a historic demonstration of discontent, coraje was demonstrated in a manner that has not been seen in decades. At a time of shortages that included necessities like food, medication, electricity, and freedom of expression, coraje is the one thing the Cuban population showed in abundance. As Mr. Myl said, "This year has been a surprise for most of us. During the first wave of the pandemic, I decided to paint Courage again, one of my favorite images recontextualized for the moment. In Cuba you have to live with Courage all the time."[6]

Subcultures are influenced by the prevalent culture they are a part of. Whether the influence is active or passive is less important than the reaction to it and how it affects the evolution of the sector in question. The street art community is not one organized faction in Cuba, but a group of cliques that on occasion work together, but tend to paint independently or in small groups. Almost all of the artists have been arrested and fined, some have been imprisoned, lost jobs, studios and even had their families harassed. Rarely is the subject matter of the art blatantly political but the act itself is. Graffiti is considered an act of counter-revolutionism. Not merely an act against property but an action against the ideals of the revolution itself. As the Chinese artist/dissident Ai Weiwei stated, "All art is propaganda. But it's not propaganda from a powerful state but from the heart of an individual. The essential power of art is a subversive power. Art is about freedom."[7]

Cuba's social etiquette governed by fear and self-censorship predates the revolution that took power on January 1, 1959. The previous government of Fulgencio Batista suppressed dissent violently, and the transfer of power did not liberate personal freedoms of expression. For many years, political discussions were only conducted in the privacy of homes, and even then, in a low whisper. In the streets the name of Fidel Castro was not voiced unless in praise. When one

wanted to express any opinion that may be construed as negative, they would instead rub their chin, to evoke the beard of the country's leader. A tap on the shoulder would signify a general or other government leader without specifically mentioning the identity of any individual. The generation that has led this movement of public art was born into this fear. The only difference is that upon reaching young adulthood they decided they had a voice and that it should be heard. Their artistic interventions are the embodiment of these voices. Some artists create works of art solely for their artistic value and others use it to express social concerns, some have used their medium as a form of moral support for their fellow countrymen.

In western cities when we see street art we have become desensitized to it. We have accepted it as part of our urban landscape. We are more likely to see commissioned large scale murals than quick throw ups of spray-painted tags. A large percentage of the wall paintings we see are not only commissioned but government approved if not government funded.

In Cuba, a country where traditional art supplies are precious and difficult to purchase, the search for spray paint is almost as difficult as Ponce de Leon's search for the fountain of youth. The "community" functions surprisingly well as a movement without the formality of leaders or organizers. This informal formation has been, for the most part, an organic reaction to the reality of their clandestine world. Alliances are formed between artists based on both artistic respect and friendship. These groupings aid in the search for materials, sharing of walls, opportunities, and the basic need to have spotters warn the painter when police are in the vicinity. Though censorship has been spoken about earlier, it is less of a deterrent for graffiti artists as the act of painting itself is illegal, regardless of content. In the world of street art, the artists refer to their work as impermanent art, knowing full well that the work has a limited life span before it is painted out. Some last for years but others live for a shorter time than they took

to create. Like most subcultures, it has prospered on its own strength of conviction and some unexpected collaboration of those like-minded but outside the genre.

There are some driving forces that keep the culture growing despite the tightening noose of officialdom. Havana has gone from a city devoid of street art beyond the authorized government propaganda to a living gallery. Written about in magazines around the globe, street art has become a cultural promotion geared towards both the artistic community as well as general tourism. It is ironic that a group that is both prosecuted criminally and surviving under oppressive conditions both politically and materialistically has become the new draw for the one industry that drives its economy and is a high government priority– tourism.

Recognition has come from media ranging from the New York Times to Al Jezeera television. Travel and art magazines alike have featured this growing phenomenon. One of the early prolific artists is a man named Yulier P. Yulier painted images of humanoids throughout Havana. His work is arguably the most political of the genre; featuring creatures with no mouths, symbolic of the forced silence of the population, or prominent screaming mouths symbolizing the pain, anger or frustration of the people. His work has been written about globally, but this new-found celebrity has made him the focus of severe persecution. He has been charged so many times that he has been told he cannot paint on walls any longer under threat of prison. Having his studio taken away from him as well as his right to show and sell his work, he has turned to painting the pieces of concrete he finds on the street from collapsed buildings and then leaving them on the street to be found and collected by any passer-by. This work has become far more explicitly political, speaking directly to the suppression of personal freedoms felt by artists and the population alike. “I have been arrested a couple of times by the police and accused of damaging the social property. A few months before I was told that I had to erase all my work from the streets, or I could go to jail. And I wonder:

How can my graffiti make a place that is already totally in ruins ugly? If instead of painting disturbed souls, I painted socialist slogans, would that also bother the authorities? The crime isn't to paint something on a public wall, it is to be aside of what is considered as 'politically correct'."[8]

As a cultural movement matures it is natural that subgenres develop. This is a sign of both the durability of the movement and the allure it has to draw in more participants. As stated earlier, cliques have formed both out of shared ideas and necessity. The sharing of resources is essential when one cannot run to a store and purchase what is needed. One of these groups is an emerging force of female artists who have been painting together in the outskirts of the city. While differing in artistic styles, they share a message of female empowerment. Cuba officially has a doctrine of gender equality but like many other Latin and Caribbean cultures it is extremely misogynistic. It is quite common for women in the workplace to find themselves forced to tolerate sexual invitations from co-workers and superiors. Failure to comply could be detrimental to success in a system where who you know is more likely to lead to promotion than what you know. These artists, with their shared vision and shared walls have allowed their talent to be seen exponentially more than if they painted alone.

This is an example of the second generation of this movement. Younger and less fearful (the second-generation work tends to be more political than earlier work), they have used social media to expose their work to great acclaim. Social media has proven to be the primary point of exposure for many artists but is a double-edged sword. It has allowed many of the artists to try and gain some financial support through the sale of their art but has also made them more visible to the authorities. The additional international exposure and growing support of international followers has decreased the fear factor that suppressed the production of street art and has made it a fashionable pursuit for the younger generation.

2+2=5 is not a mathematical equation representing the absurdity of the day-to-day lives of regular Cubans, but the street name of a young self-taught artist that has become the most popular and recognizable of the current troop of artists. His paintings of a man in a diaper and balaclava can be found throughout the city. The character, named SuperBad by his creator, has become an icon of the daily struggles that are the routine of life for most Cubans. Whether casually sitting dreaming of fried eggs or participating in the normal activities of daily life it has been accepted by the population as a portrait of their own lives.

Whether the messaging of the work is political in nature that elicits a knowing smirk, or simply a colourful work of art that brings a smile to the viewer, the street art movement is now a part of the modern Cuban culture. While the artists' identities are frequently hidden, the cultural shift is blatant and in the public eye for all to see. It is a self-supporting movement of creativity and self-expression that flourishes under the watchful eyes of a government that is more suppressive of it than supportive. It has created identifiable work and identifiable personalities. Some municipalities have even started approving street art festivals within allowable restrictions, knowing full well it can lead to gentrification and the improvement of the neighbourhood. Street art increases the likelihood of tourists venturing into previously ignored impoverished residential areas. Tourism brings added security and potential revenue into the location. Gentrification is often seen as a negative, but when it encourages the government to improve water and electricity supplies to a neglected part of the city the residents enjoy the improvement which otherwise may have been delayed for years. The artists frequently hold community events that offer a day of joy to local residents, teaching the children of the neighbourhood to paint, feeding them and providing live music. Street art is often accepted with a sense of pride and many homeowners gladly offer their walls to the artists.

While still a clandestine movement, it has become a legitimate force and part of the visual identity of the city. Restaurants and bars commission murals, galleries hold cultural exhibitions of the artists' studio work, and many artists have found financial success selling their art or creating commercial product like reusable shopping bags. Born out of a need to create and express themselves and developed despite many perils (both legal and financial) to support the work, street art and those that produce it have become an established modern culture in a city that was once identified with dated stereotypes.

The group of artists that are driving this movement have created a genre that may have been originally viewed with suspicion but has quickly been accepted by many for both its artistic merits and the social impact it frequently fosters. Within a climate of limitations and shortages it has truly become a rare celebration of individuality. As heterotopia has been described, truly a world within a world.

Footnotes:

[1]Yiannis Zaimakis. *Welcome to the civilization of fear: on political graffiti heterotopias in Greece in times of crisis*. (Visual Communication 4, November 2015) 373-396

[2] ART UNDER PRESSURE – Decree 349 Restricts Creative Freedom in Cuba, (PEN America, March 4, 2019) https://pen.org/art-under-pressure-decree-349-cuba/

[3] Lillian Guerra, "Decree 349 and Today's History of Artistic Expression in the Cuban Revolution: A Review Article" *Cuban Studies* No. 50 (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), 333-345 10.1353/cub.2021.0029

[4] *Cuba passes regulations criminalizing online content, further restricting internet access*. (Committee to Protect Journalist, August 19, 2021) https://cpj.org/2021/08/cuba-passes-regulations-criminalizing-online-content-further-restricting-internet-access/

[5] Le graff aux accent cubains., France 3 (French TV), July 12, 2021

[6] *Unpublished interview with Mr. Myl* conducted by the author July 2021

[7] Larry Weinstein (director), *Propaganda: the Art of Selling Lies*. (Hawkeye Pictures and Taglicht Media, 2019)

[8] Amir Saarony and Claudia Padron Cueto, *Painted Walls Havana*. (Toronto: OCCS Publications, 2019), 187

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Amir Saarony and Claudia Padron Cueto, *Painted Walls Havana*. (Toronto: OCCS Publications, 2019), including unedited interviews of over 30 artists compiled while researching the material for the book.

Larry Weinstein (director), *Propaganda: The Art of Selling Lies*. (Hawkeye Pictures and Taglicht Media. 2019).

Yiannis Zaimakis, *Welcome to the civilization of fear': on political graffiti heterotopias in Greece in times of crisis*. (Visual Communication 4, November 2015) 373-396 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1470357215593845.

About the author:

Amir Saarony is a graphic designer and art director living in Toronto, Canada. He has been working on corporate, artistic and humanitarian projects in Havana for over 20 years. Amir has published many books including two coffee table books on Havana. One on the history of the cigar brand Partagás and one on the recent development of street art in Havana. He has written numerous articles published in magazines around the globe and has been featured in over 20 more. His writing focuses on graphic design, art, cigars, food, culture and travel. Currently he is focused on exposing the world of street art in Cuba through his writing and hopes to create a documentary on the urban life of Havana. Amir is working on the development of commercial opportunities for the artists to finance their work and support themselves and their families. Amir's formal education includes the Sorbonne in Paris, OCADU in Toronto and symposiums in Havana. His informal education is fueled by a series of opportunities and adventures created by curiosity, passion and open eyes.