# TO THE BITTER END

Civic Practices in Cuba at the Beginning of the 21st Century

# INTRODUCTION

The indispensable Cuban filmmaker Nicolás Guillen Landrián always ended his films with a card that emphatically declared, "the end but it's not the end." This sentiment marks the collection of materials presented in this exhibition and the practices that they represent, many of which are still active and continue generating proposals for a future world. The mapping of a network of civic practices that this exhibition begins to develop is the outcome of several encounters, conversations, and revisions between [NAME]—a non-profit organization based in Miami, whose projects emphasize the visualization of histories and practices often marginalized in dominant art and design histories—and various participants who were integral to the collectives whose activities are represented here, including: Isbel Díaz Torres, who founded Guardabosques (Forest-Keeper) and participated in numerous other initiatives; Mario Castillo and Dimitri Sansonov, central voices in Observatorio Critico (Critical Observatory) and other groups; Otari Oliva Buadze of Locación Cristo Salvador; and Hilda Landrove, who was part of Voltus V and later participated in numerous other collectives. These exchanges were mediated by an organization outside of the island in part because a number of participants in these projects no longer live in Cuba. They are dispersed around the world and facing the challenges of migration. It also seemed a practical approach (in the material and technical sense) to collect materials and present them in a spatial format that facilitates a view of the wide range of actions employed and lines of thinking developed in response to the conditions on the ground.

The end, indeed, is never the end as long as a horizon of emancipation beckons. However, in similar, if inverted, fashion, we also wish to propose that a "beginning is not the beginning." What sustains the attempt to highlight a group of projects with different modes of collective political articulation, and the networks they formed, is not oriented to tracing geneses. Even those projects with beginnings that can be dated always call forth other collectives and tie to long traditions of political thinking and struggle. Instead of genealogical plotting, what ties multiple projects together is the critical threshold they reached midway through the first decade of the new century, as they concurrently intensified their political articulation beyond institutional frameworks and support. In the so-called "democratic" world, the enterprise of generating counterhegemonies often begins in the bosom of civil society, through different modes of association and organization, from non-profit political entities and NGOs to activist groups. In Cuba, for decades now, political articulation has been funneled through institutional matrices, lest it be criminalized as "counterrevolutionary." Dissent, by the sheer oppositional stance it takes, always falls outside the bounds of the law in a society structured the way Cuba's is with a state apparatus in which executive and legislative practices are virtually indistinguishable. What seems interesting about the moment that this exhibition attempts to shed light on—which

we can roughly date to the two first decades of the century, even if many projects are much older and many are still going in the face of a current explosion of civic awakening and discontent—is that a liminal, unincorporated space in which to maneuver, a vigorous interstice, opened in the binary between institutionalization and old school dissent. It was a space in which critical observation, deep analysis, and political practice at the level of everyday life was exercised. It was—and what remains of it still is—a contested space, surely; at all times, chased by institutions for co-optation on the one hand, and at all times chased by institutions in order to dismantle the entire network of sympathetic independent projects on the other.

What is designated as dissent in the Cuban context is often associated with center and right-of-center manifestations; positions that demand a democracy of the liberal variety with parliamentary elections and free markets, rather than a horizontal one of social justice and emancipatory equality. Where the groups gathered here are distinct, even in their textured variance, from the opposition that Cuban institutions have faced in the past lies in their refusal of a liberal restructuring of society. Instead, they align themselves with anarchist ideals of statelessness, horizontal structures, mutual aid, egalitarian distribution of social benefits, and the destruction of the value-form. The critical interstice that these collectives managed to pry between old style dissidence and institution, between defunct revolutionary pasts and neoliberal proliferation, is the result of the manner in which they changed the imaginaries of the future by meticulously and collectively working on socialist and libertarian (in the anarchist sense) counterhegemonies, by holding fast to the notion that another world is, indeed, possible.

The exhibition To The Bitter End: Civic Practices in Cuba at the Beginning of the 21st Century is an attempt to activate the memory of these collectives and their activities. It falters, at least in part, because any effort to exhibit, historicise, or archive these practices runs head first into a wall of counter-intuitions, material realities, technical limitations of the time, and the very tactics that allowed these organizations to subsist within the social and political climate in Cuba at the time. Instead, the exhibition is grounded by a map, made in conversation with Diaz Torres, later supplemented by Oliva Buadze, revised by Castillo, Sansonov and Landrove. The map aims to render more visible the rhizomatic connection between these collectives. At the risk of turning the situated engagement with a specific empirical context that characterized these liberatory practices into the kind of political imaginaries that the contemporary art world over-fetishizes and devours, the exhibition offers only testimony by presenting bulletins, zines, images, artworks, video documentation, and correspondence that serve as proof of a handful of the many practices that took shape during this period.



#### Centro Social y Biblioteca Libertaria ABRA

[Community Center and Anarchist Library ABRA]

Located in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Havana, ABRA, opened on May 5th, 2018 with the purpose of fostering anticapitalist practices free from any state influence. Formed by participants of the Taller Libertario Alfredo Lopez, who at the time had been part of various autonomous spaces for nearly twenty years, the organization serves as a social space where film screenings, convenings, book exchanges, and collective writing exercises are held.

#### Ahimsa

The Sanskrit term ahimsa translates as non-violence. This project sought to disseminate the notion of non-violence in its profoundest sense—as consciousness and conscience and, by extension, as a civic attitude; as a viable and practical necessity for the foundations of a society that is after a harmonious and plentiful development. And more: non-violence, as a mode of living, as necessary for the survival of the species.

#### **Proyecto Arcoiris**

[Rainbow Project]

An anticapitalist and independent LGBTQ+I collective in Havana dedicated to fighting gender discrimination. In addition to organizing kiss-ins and other activities that brought awareness to the lack of freedom of the LGBTQ-I community on the island, they published a series of bulletins between 2012–2013 titled, "Ahi te va," (There It Goes) which included documentation on actions, editorials, and other writing on gender diversity within Cuba.

### Blackhat

A community brought together by an interest in informational science and related fields. It collaborates to produce digital materials and software to solve problems and difficulties related to new technologies. It understands its objectives as: a) to help in the development of digital culture in Cuba; b) to develop and encourage the creation of applications with social utility; and c) eliminate taboos associated with digital matters.

#### Carne Negra

[Black Flesh]

Carne Negra is a fanzine and website launched in 2012 as an editorial project that attempts to reanimate a dying practice of radical political imagination on the island. Originally associated with the Locación Cristo Salvador—an alternative art space in Havana—its purpose is to provide an autonomous editorial platform whose only responsibility is to the subjects determined in each issue: from emerging political theories to critical reviews of cultural events on the island, to independent translation of poetry and other texts not readily available in Spanish. The issues are filled with a pastiche of essays, art, and contributions often organized under fictional categories and with a performative flair meant to mimic the canonical weight of art theory journals.

# Catédra Haydée Santamaria

[Haydée Santamaria Convening]

The Catédra Haydée Santamaria is a three-generations deep collection of sociological researchers, university professors, writers and cultural producers. It is an itinerant space, open to debate, exchange

of different knowledges, and the recovery of historical memories tied to emancipatory practices in Cuba and throughout the world. It is well-known for its critical take when approaching problems related to existing Cuban realities, bringing together both macro and micro analysis with theoretical proposals and everyday experiences and cultural production.

#### Coco Solo Social Club

A private home turned into a social club in the Marianao neighborhood of Havana. It supported the local underground and community cultural scene there. Located in a house with its walls covered, from floor to ceiling, with writing, images, and other ephemera—which the group members refer to as a book without pages or editors—the project is both a space for the community to perform and enjoy theatrical, musical, and other kinds of performances, as well as a repository of cultural memory.

# Cofradía de la Negritud

[Black Brotherhood]

The work that the Cofradía de la Negritud has undertaken has been essential in criticizing racism in Cuba, especially after the dissolution of Color Cubano—a group established around the year 2000 made up of artists and intellectuals whose objective was to promote debates around racial inequalities in Cuban society. The group's activism has led to the establishing of different spaces for the study and analysis of racial problematics, the public discourse related to them, and the commemoration of individuals, dates and events regularly disregarded and suppressed in everyday life and in the practices of official history. The revindication of the rights of Blacks in Cuba is an essential part of its struggle.

# Esquife

Founded in 1999 as an offshoot of the youth arts association Hermanos Saíz (AHS), *Esquife* was the first online cultural magazine in Cuba whose ambitions aimed to promote dialogue between the arts and broader Cuban society. The project, founded by Andres Mir, Hanna H. Chomenko and later directed by the poet Jorge Enrique Rodriguez published texts, exhibitions, and music that attempted to carve an independent space for online arts journalism. The project lasted until 2015, when Cubarte, the digital media arm of the Ministry of Culture, censored the project and took down the site indefinitely.

# Grupo de Estudios Culturales "Nuestra América"

[Cultural Group "Our America"]

Cultural Studies Group "Nuestra América" was founded in April 2007 by a collective of young people interested in ancestral inheritances (Amerindian and African diasporic) in the Americas. It is committed to the dissemination of the Toltec paradigm which brings together and updates liberatory practices that are based on responsibility and search for transcendence—activities which cut across failed revolutions and the claims of so-called democracies. More broadly, the collective identifies itself with the struggle of Indigenous peoples in their claim for rights, the preservation of their cultures, and the defense of natural resources, as well as with the struggles of all the oppressed and displaced. From this point of view, "Nuestra América" actively engages with a broad network of groups, associations and people in debates about the present conditions and future possibilities of Cuba.

## El Guardabosques

[Forest-Keeper]

Ecological project that emerged from the thoughtless chopping down of a centuries-old Ceiba tree in the neighborhood of San Agustín and the increased deforestation of the city of Havana. Since 2007, it has edited an eponymous digital bulletin, in which it denounces ecological depredations in the country. It also promotes ecological thinking and organizes and participates in replanting events. It understands participation as an essential aspect of self-liberation.

#### **Havana Times**

Havana Times is a bilingual (English and Spanish) independent Cuban blog and online magazine founded in October 2008. The online publication is edited in Nicaragua. Most of its contributors live in Havana, Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo.

# Krudas Cubensi

Activist hip-hop group that promotes Black feminist, queer and vegan politics. The project began in 1996 as the street theater group Tropazancos Cubensi, which brought together community theater, rap and visual arts. In 1999, after performing in an annual rap festival in Alamar, and understanding the growing importance of the hip-hop movement in Cuba, Krudas Cubensi emerged. In 2005, the members of Krudas Cubensi, along with other performers, founded the Omega Kilay women's rap collective.

#### La Noria Magazine

Literary magazine based in Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo led by Oscar Cruz y José Ramón Sánchez. Established in 2009 with the support of the Centro del Libro y la Literatura and the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, this literary journal joins together translations, poetry, stories, fiction, and texts written in a variety of styles, with the purpose of bringing literature Santiago de Cuba and its surrounding communities. The first ten issues of *La Noria* document the stylistic evolution of a group of authors commonly referred to as the Generation Zero which includes Jorge Enrique Lage, Legna Rodríguez Iglesias, Ahmel Echevarría, Javier L. Mora, Jamila Medina Ríos, Osdany Morales and Oscar Cruz.

## Locación Cristo Salvador

[Location Cristo Salvador]

An unsanctioned and alternative space, independent of all state cultural institutions. It functioned in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana between 2011-2016. Founded and coordinated by Ezequiel Suárez, Jazmín Valdés Ramos, Álvaro Álvaro Diaz, and Otari Oliva Buadze, it sought to explore and underscore the potentialities in art production that function at a distance from the market—in particular, from the very peculiar kind of art market that took hold in Cuba. It hosted exhibitions, film screenings, lectures and activist events. More importantly, it sought to work with individuals, collectives, and processes marginalized by official institutions, and to articulate possibilities for re-defining radical leftist ideologies and practices within non-official art contexts. For Locación Cristo Salvador, the encounter with Taller Libertario Alfredo López produced a long term collaboration that grounded the anarchist turn of the space.

#### **Observatorio Crítico**

[Critical Observatory]

Observatorio Critico emerged from the diverging activities of the Catédra Haydée Santamaria in order to respond to a need for increased collaboration amongst the growing number of autonomous groups in the country who were dedicated to forging a different path

for Cuba's future. Between 2009 and 2014, it organized a yearly compendium that gathered many of the groups and collaboratives listed here in an effort to exchange ideas and consolidate project and agendas.

#### Salvadera

Short-lived communitarian ecological project in Reparto Eléctrico—a section of Havana. It involved different social actors, including state institutions, independent organizations, autonomous groups, children and neighbors. The protection of animals and plants determine the core of the project, without separating it from a critical analysis of the social situation in which it unfolds. It often collaborated with other projects, at times even leaving its immediate space of operation, Reparto Eléctrico.

#### SPD

[Participative and Democratic Socialism]

Democratic and Participative Socialism. A collective dedicated to elaborating proposals for a self-generated socialism that can structure Cuba's future. Its main activities have been the dissemination of the important text "Programmatic proposals for a democratic and participative socialism" and the production of the SPD's digital bulletin.

# **Taller Libertario Alfredo Lopez**

[Anarchist Workshop Alfredo Lopez]

Anarchist collective and anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist initiative started in 2012. It is part of the Anarchist Federation of Central America and the Caribbean. Since its inception, it has generated and promoted emancipatory spaces in Cuba, reflected on anti-authoritarian practices and fomented critique of Cuban and global reality.

# Tierra Nueva

[New Earth]

A printed newspaper/bulletin published by the Taller Libertario Alfredo Lopez which attempts to disseminate the group's liberatory, anarcho-syndicalist, and ecological concerts to communities in Cuba who may not have access to the internet.

#### **Trencito**

[Little Train]

Twenty-year old autonomous family-run and communitarian project that has developed a sustained and enriching practice of working with children through non-competitive, non-adult centric games that encourage solidarity, creative, and collective engagement. Their activities have become a critical reference and an important resource as Cuba's educational system begins to reveal signs of exhaustion, revealed in tendencies that are homogenizing, competitive and instructivist.

#### **Voltus V**

Voltus V was a zone of alternative experimentation and a horizontal network of community projects and individuals who attempted to build on the momentum of–and support projects with–shared affinities in respect to sustainable, autonomous, democratic, and liberatory practices. The group was named after Voltus V, a Japanese anime series from the late 70s that was popular in Cuba and which featured 5 robots that united into a single, uber-robot to save the earth from impending doom, demonstrating the power of coming together into collective formations. The group was organized to integrate diverse modalities in 5 different "capsules" or sectors: Cultural, Ethical, Economic, Political, and Strategic.