

Arte de Conducta: A Pedagogical Project Based on Art

“...the widened concept of art is not a theory,
but a form of behavior, which says that the inner
eye is much more critical than the external
images emerging later...”

Joseph Beuys

On the Excellence of the Project *

In 2002, artist Tania Bruguera called on those interested in entering the “Catedra de Arte de Conducta” (Behavioral Art Chair), which would be a program of studies on performance and art taken in by the Instituto Superior de Arte de La Habana (ISA) with its first workshop starting in January 2003.

Four calls and three graduations later, the most interesting facet stemming from this experience is that it has become a pedagogical project in an artistic space,¹ the most active and experimental of those in the country today.

Was this its initial purpose? Or was it only to serve as coverage to an attitude on art that has its roots in the tradition of making art approach life, as the historical vanguard did, but facing these intentions from a different perspective?

There are some details in the project that it would be worthwhile to learn before entering the field of value judgments and the questions its results have given rise to.

According to its program, it is a two year course divided into four semesters, with a total of 680 hours of classes. The call is launched on October and the test is held on December.

Students are chosen by an International Selection Committee of Cuban and foreign artists, critics and art historians. There is an aptitude test divided into: Presentation of a file whose contents may be pictures, videos, sketches and others; a sample of a live work: a theoretical and general culture test and, finally, an interview that generally lasts for one hour.

All those interested, with no age limits, may answer the call. In the case of graduates and students of the Instituto Superior de Arte, requests from its various faculties are accepted. Graduates and students of History of Art or other specialty in the Arts and Letters Faculty at Havana University may also apply, as well as any person who can demonstrate artistic talent.

After the two years of study, university graduates are handed a diploma of the postgraduate course in Arte de Conducta; those who are not university graduates are handed a title of university extension course in Arte de Conducta.

As to the program, the Chair has five areas: 1. The curriculum. 2. Invitations to acknowledged national and international artists to exhibit their work and share their experiences with the students. 3. Academic exchanges with international art schools. 4. Exhibitions summarizing the teaching work. 5. The creation of a specialized file.

The curriculum "... is structured through courses, lectures, workshops, exchanges among schools and public exhibitions of the works. Conduct and context aspects are included in it. We also explore how conduct becomes evident and remains, as well as the ways it can be transmitted. The limits of the medium, the paradoxes in cultural identity, representation, conventions and memory, historical condition and ideology are also explored. The program focuses on the various structural elements participating in this type of art, as well as on its discursive models... In this sense, building an interdisciplinary teaching curriculum for the students is required. Its premise must be the interaction of heterogeneous branches of knowledge and expressive means making it possible to grasp and research the dissimilar and mutable nature of performance as a language and a means of representation.²

Combining each of these elements in the teaching of a group of students with such an uneven education has been a decisive factor to reach the communication and empathy this type of training requires, taking into account that previous studies in art or higher education are not necessary to be chosen, but only the imagination of the project presented at the test, the possibilities to leave behind the traditional framework of art and entering into other areas of culture and contemporary life from a sensitivity and a reflexive position that may allow them to keep abreast with the pace and liveliness with which classes are offered and the multidisciplinary referential framework of the curriculum.

This combination has included academic classes in subjects like History of Art or Aesthetics, lectures offered by curators and critics with the experience of Gerardo Mosquera or Thierry de Duve, exchanges with artists as important as Stan Douglas, Thomas Hirschorn, Anni Sala, Rogelio Lopez Cuenca and Antoni Muntadas, among others, as well as groups of artists who have exhibited the results of their works while exchanging opinions on those by the students. Remember, for example, the Spanish group “El Perro.”

For those of us who have had the fortune of sharing this project, based on the multidisciplinary and open nature of the curriculum, some of the factors that have contributed the most to compensate the dissimilarities in training and experience of its participants have been the interest, seriousness and perseverance shown by them, favored by the fact that most are artists in medium and higher levels of study. The true challenge is to make the students approach the changing situation in contemporary art and culture, in the search for non-prioritized functions of art that would become the center of attention of their creative work, the documentary and utilitarian functions, among others.

It is a known fact that today art goes beyond the referents of its evolutionary line, that this lost evidence of which Adorno talks has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish its boundaries and parameters, in the midst of a “show and knowledge society” which infringes “cultural differences.” But the challenges visual creation faces today when dealing with peripheral societies

circling the international art scene have a different orientation, although this scenario influences the fate of production and the creation of that diverse cultural world.

Perhaps that is why Tania Bruguera speaks of the project as a space interested in another form of creative practice, when transcending the usual ways in which art is identified, turning discursive elements into a cultural procedure.

Understanding how this purpose has been increasingly fulfilled is the main interest of this paper, since the intention of the Chair is not only to achieve a given degree of instruction, but also to act on the spiritual world of each of its participants, on their concerns and interests, entering into the strategies which place them vis-à-vis their environment as social activators. Following this path, we find ourselves before the figure of creators sustaining their works in cultural processes on the basis of gestures that turn them into agitators of social life.

Cultural perspectives awakening ethnological turns, the values of artists as cultural bearers and reproducers, social commitment and social insertion of art are impelled from the tradition of process art and action art. Artists are an active part of their cultural environment, wising up the main contradictions and social forces in those areas that are not evident, are hidden or are little transparent.

The various proposals of social intervention and social art impelled from within this project, however, do not have up to now a purpose as spiritual as that seen in works of Cuban artists Juan Francisco Elso or Luis Gomez, but are more deeply rooted in the natural flow of daily life itself.

This flow rests on social behaviors and situations mobilizing artistic gestures without frequently abandoning their aesthetic excellence, although it will not come from the formal values of the works, but from the imaginative bent they show to society and culture in their most essential and intimate forms. This level of life is very rich because of that intimacy and because it continuously violates economic and political orders, by showing their duplicity in relation with the power of clever and slippery laws having to do with subsistence.

That is, these are searches whose main purpose is an art drawing sustenance from social and cultural topics and another one of social insertion. Both possibilities are intimately related, but there are nuances between them which help understand how varied the contents of the works may be in the case of artists that are not only reproducers but also producers of these contents, of the topics, actions and processes with which their works identify.

After a Tradition of Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics, Art and Anti-Art

The exhibitions made by this group of students in these four years have been several. The main ones are that in 2003 which had no title; *Centrifuga* (Centrifuge -- 2004), curated by Eugenio Valdes from the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales (Visual Art Development Center); *Reescribible* (Rewritable -- 2006), curated by Luis Garciga and exhibited in Tania Bruguera's house and *Ni en favor ni en contra, todo lo contrario* (Neither For or Against, but Quite the Opposite -- 2007), curated by Mailyn Machado from the Arts and Letters Faculty.

Also about a hundred events were held under its impetus or with its participation. Outstanding among them were the presentation of works to guest artists and professors, collective exhibitions with the presence of students from the Chair, public interventions and exchanges with other institutions. Among the most significant, *Makarov* (2004), in which five members of the Chair took part; *Bueno, bonito y barato* (Good, Nice and Cheap – 2005) organized by Luis Garcega with students of the Chair and guests (which won the Curatorship Award granted by the Spanish Embassy in Cuba and the Spanish Agency for International Collaboration); *La Habana tomada por otra cosa* (Havana Taken by Something Else) at the Morro-Cabana Park (2005), *Vista al frente* (Looking Forward, 2006), by Jesus Hernandez and Reynier Leyva Novo exhibited in the framework of the 9th Havana Biennial, and Hamlet Lavastida's exhibition at Tania's house which received the Honorable Mention in Painting from the Spanish Embassy in 2006.

It is important to point out that students in the Chair and some already graduated from it attend many of the seminars held each semester and some frequently visit it. It seems that the affinity with which they identify their actions has to do mainly with the forms of conceiving and constructing the artistic event.

In the activity displayed, although brief in time, a quantitative factor can be appreciated, together with something more essential: the increase in the quality and soundness of the proposals, whether individual or collective. These are presented as behavioral, action acts shifting the simple appearances of the objects by turning them into artifacts, documents, testimonies or services enriched under conceptual premises.

The aesthetic characteristics of this form of creation was already mentioned when highlighting some of the various elements that turn it into a contemporary projection of the social tradition of art, since artists are, at one and the same time, producers and reproducers of cultural meanings, stimulators of social assignments violating the boundaries between art and life and those still persisting in the duet highbrow art and popular art.

The critical awareness stemming from this attitude is the most uncomfortable social circumstance surrounding them, since no concessions are made to taste, institutional interests, ideological criteria; every individual decision adopted in making the work – whether naïve, cynical, parodistic or simulative – has a value as an exploration deeply-rooted in ethno-aesthetics, in daily life, in concepts turned into cultural events and in the details of the risks that have been faced to make them corporeal.

The fact that the ethnological perspective acts as a solid spur is what allows the display of ethno-aesthetic values, bearers of the structures that are to be found in habits, customs, beliefs and the social imaginary from its most specific forms of presentation. Traditional aesthetic qualities of beauty, harmony and balance stand out next to this perspective, but, as already pointed out, they depend on the nature of the process, document or service in which proposals end up. In some, these qualities are absent and, therefore, more than looking for *techné* or

accomplishment, attitudes, experiences, habits are exchanged and are the setting giving body to the works.

Although all functions of art are social, when creation directly handles cultural elements of an ethnological or anthropological nature, of popular culture as a whole, it must deal with very specific dynamics and representational corpus that artists use for their textual and metaphorical games to widen the field of these functions.

In the continuous work of this group of students, unique importance is given to the slight tone differentiating artistic practice fed with social and cultural contents from that trying to encourage or influence the natural dialectics of daily existence, abiding by its demands, aesthetic frameworks or forms of existence. This contrast is one of the elements enriching the diversity of the works and marking the distance between a type of creation with a social contents and another inserted in sociocultural elements.

Social insertion art offers fewer possibilities to display aesthetic values, since the intervention of artists must be cut back to a minimum, monitoring in various ways the complexities of socializing. Its skill will rest in the ability and imagination of artists to discover the most sensitive and active areas in the social weft, creating mechanisms putting them into evidence. Artists that take social and cultural contents as referents may display in the creation of their pieces expressive constructions with a larger aesthetic diversity.

It is difficult to draw apart both possibilities, because they are generally interweaved, since installations, performances, videos or processes narrating an action are based on social demands or requests. This creative practice activates sociocultural energies and, even when peculiarities of the narration or the labyrinths covered to reach them are respected, results may convey large analytic contents which will increase the wealth and complexity of the issues taken into account to build the pieces.

As Cuban critic Mailyn Machado points out, the works by these artists reproduce the logics of daily survival³ and it is necessary to know how to appreciate the specificities of their aesthetic forms, colors, nuances, tones and meanings that most of the times are part of the culture of laughter, of oral culture, habits, uses and beliefs.

It is a sustained creative process in images and rules emerging from social gaps and, therefore, its chances to disseminate are more limited, since their consumption channels have more to do with the very spaces where the works take place. There is a paradox in this, because since social spaces in Cuba have an institutional profile, samples and events must generally be held in them. With this circumstance as a basis, Tania offers a series of reasons that it is important to take into account to understand the exhibition mood of the project: "As to why our events last only for a brief time, this is a predetermined idea and a strategy in the work of the Chair. The reasons are: First: to hold exhibitions that are close to being actions by doing away with part of the permanent nature of the objects shown in them as well as with the sacred nature generally accompanying them, thus seeing the exhibitions as happenings. Second, because I do not believe in holding an exhibition for a month. This is not a canon I am interested in. I do with my own work too. Third, I am interested in guerrilla aesthetics, in the social insertion not only of the works produced in the workshop, but also in the form they are presented, in their exhibition."

Social contradictions, the paths taken to represent subsistence, are the main inspiration of most of the pieces; this, however, is not in tune with the officially declared promotion interests of the social project. In spite of this, the creative results of the Chair, exhibited in various types of samples, although having no weight in the world of Cuban art, have created a cultural environment that moves over it like a silent cloud.

New Cuban art,⁴ in spite of being very much imbued with the relationships between art and society, displayed its three main creative lines in a widened sense of art: the anthropological, vernacular-kitsch and sociological-critic lines,

offering special attention to neo-conceptual and neo-minimal trends. Therefore, the problems with art discourse, with its various functions, nuances and levels in which aesthetic value may be outwardly expressed, have been factors continually present in its proposals.

In the works I will discuss, the interconnection of these lines with the forms adopted for creation, pointed out as the social insertion of art and art with social contents, is significant. Although anthropological searches prevail in them, they mainly stem from parodistic or simulative positions, and are a different attitude vis-à-vis art, because times have changed. Mixtures of political, ideological and critical reflection are achieved rummaging into daily life through its more individual and private forms. Although there are no large stories or utopias, there is an intense sensitivity and a way of looking at culture and society that associates them to the art undertaken from the '80s on or bringing them closer to it.

Art-life relationship or life and art will continue to be reflected in kitsch, vernacular, anthropological forms or in a bent on social criticism and, in tune with the international art movement, proposals in art video and documentary video are the most frequent in the group.

Continuity and/or Rupture

As can be seen, this panorama of social art and art of social insertion is not unknown in the experimental context of Cuban visual art. The inheritance of the last twenty years in this tradition laid the foundations to think in the new Cuban art as a very unique movement, since it had no programs or manifestos. It was identified by the attitude of searching into artistic procedures of the historical vanguard and the neo-vanguard, by the risk these searches ran in a setting unprepared for them and with a strong awareness of social criticism. Also, the movement was brought close by the age of its members, the experiences they had lived through, their interests because of considering themselves an active part in the social process in the country with full faculties to think about the process.

The contact of these artists with that tradition has not been systematic. Access to catalogues, images and texts with information on the works and allowing them to relate with the poetics they feel near to is difficult. However, this deficiency was partially settled through contact with artists of the Cuban contemporary vanguard, theoreticians and critics who know the life of the movement.

In experiences as those in Cuban art, the continuity of this transgressive spirit is not something organically projected since it is not systematically transmitted through the resources of the art institution or the educational system. It has rather survived in the collective memory forged in the world of art and on the bases of the educational project at the Instituto Superior de Arte (Higher Art Institute – ISA), although it has against it that there is nothing as weak in our countries as memory, its main bearer, and all the more so if it is not part of institutional interests.

But survival is to be found in the different variations adopted by artists to take up a stance on social reality by reflecting critically on it. For them, the interest in social transformation is not an end, but a means allowing them to express the meanings and feelings of their times through half-hidden paths, taking them on in a more individual form. They connect with the movement of the '80s through the bridge devised in '90s, recorded by cynical and simulative positions. From this double influence, they try to keep in tune with the conditions of the new times and, unwittingly, their social and cultural environment impels them to sink their roots in these conditions that so greatly encouraged the artists of the mythic '80s. They scratch critical reflection, but do not make a commitment with the social roles of artists; from this we can deduce that they act as go-betweens on the social environment, venturing on ethnic contents, urban life, dreams and the demands of the context surrounding them.

At the same time, there are several points of contact with the historic tradition of art, with productivism and constructivism, with a practical ethics – as Maillyn pointed out in the abovementioned text⁵ –, with their position as makers

impelled by Juan Francisco Elso. But they are not entirely aware of all this; it is the cultural assumptions set within the very conditions of artists as cultural bearers and reproducers, the creative environment surrounding them and the artistic sap accumulated up to now what marks the sign of these times in these “children of mistreatment”⁶ that, in the Cuban context, has lasted for more than three decades.

Comments on some works. Artists as producers of cultural meaning

Art should take care of what is real, although questioning all the conceptions of what is real. It transforms the entire reality in the façade, representation and construction. But also asks the question on why this construction.

Mike Kelley

It is difficult to talk about the artistic results of all those who have gone through the Chair or are in it right now. Perhaps it would be best to group them in their two main sides and in the genres reiterated in their creations, as happens with installation, performances and videos in their various types. From then on, to take some of the most meaningful works or projects to help understand the wide range in which they move and which are related to the main creative lines displayed since the '80s which have to do with what is vernacular and with critical reflection. This may be the conductive thread to briefly trace the logics and contemporary history of this educational-artistic experience.

As I have said, these aspects see the values and functions of art from a different point of view, since the events in which creation is inspired become daily life statements or documents. Reaching this dimension of artistic values identifying and evidencing a context, and therefore having their matrix in ethnoaesthetic procedures and categories, is one of the most commendable merits supporting the new Cuban art.

Among what is being given the name of social insertion of art, one of the most outstanding works is that of the duet formed by Luis Garciga and Miguel Moya. They make their pieces between genres and types of art which are close and different, as photography, video and performance, linking them without much emphasis made in respecting their boundaries or aesthetical principles, since they act or create a performance environment that involves the very main characters in the context.

Actions and interventions are generally marked by social uprising. The metaphors composing them, with their habitual evocative meaning, seem to be invested by action itself, since the contents of their works is read under these actions, thus making social contradictions and antagonisms, in which they themselves are the main characters, emerge.

The most prominent element in the implementation process of the pieces, however, is not so much the previous sociological research, which generally comes down to establishing the space and time parameters in which the action will take place and the possibilities this process offers for the context to become evident. In this way, performance actions take place catechizing the results of their work without distorting the natural tempo and steadiness of the social life that serves them as a referent.

Among all the pieces made up to date, the one known as “Reporte de ilusiones” (Report on Illusions – 2003-2004) is outstanding. It began by offering the neighbors of the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales (Center for the Development of Visual Arts) in Old Havana – a center in which the works made by the Chair in that semester were later exhibited – “a home-delivery photographic service which would allow them to make alterations in pictures according to their wishes: for example, the inclusion of members of the family that because of any reason – missions abroad, exile, death or distanced relatives with which they want to get close again – are not there now... Physical transformations of the place, introducing public characters, artists, politicians, thinkers, and so on, were also made.”⁷

As was the case with others pieces, this one was structured on the go. Every step gave way to the next one. First: the exchange of the artists with the neighbors – learning who wanted to have their pictures taken, learning what they wanted and taking the pictures. A second moment focused in working on them digitally, manipulating them to make the modifications that had been requested. Then, printing them, mounting them and having them ready for delivery.

Some orders thus manipulated reminded procedures in syncretic cults based on the faith on the force of images. Faith and desire exorcised hidden passions, dreams, nightmares, fears and hopes. As an anticipating reflection of reality, very uncertain petitions surfaced. And perhaps their deepest meaning was verifying the path they all open, as memory and testimony of what we are: how can we get to know persons better than by knowing their dreams?

“Rafaela dreams to have a house in the country. Pavel wants the background of his picture to be New York City. Ramon Lorenzo yearns to be a Hindu yoga. Ricardo wishes to have a Toyota jeep. Wanda wants to have a sports medal. Marco, who lives in an eclectic building from the early 20th century, wants to see it repaired.” Most of these petitions were very difficult to carry out because their space was only to be found between utopia and illusion.

There was a group that was kept anonymous at the petition of the users. Luis and Miguel say these were some of the most intense experiences they had when making the piece.

The memory of what had been done was kept in a CD with the pictures and a text briefly explaining the wish and showing the initial picture taken by the artist ,at the time and place where they had met, and the final one with the wish fulfilled, so the meaning of both moments coming together could be understood. The intertextual link between the image and the text seems to be weak and is orchestrated in different ways: in some, the relationships between image and words are tautological: words to not add to the contents of the work, but only

link the initial state having to do with the wish and its expression. In others, the brief explanation by the artist clarifies its contents.

The creative act closed when about a hundred pictures were handed to their owners. These were the only prints made and were set in frames with a glass to their taste. Luis points out: "That instant of condensation of the event registered in the collective subconscious is, at the same time, a space and time area in which transference of subjectivities and latent imaginaries takes place. Meeting together in a space in Old Havana they showed and showed themselves with their dreams and wishes in hand. The simple daily fact of showing a picture, when multiplied and agglutinated through the collective illusion of exposing and abandoning the condition of not being represented by becoming visible, displayed an act of dramatic intensity, a climax the dozens of persons involved in the piece were able to reach. It was like choreography of intentions in which we were only the consultants."⁸

In this type of project, typical of a form of social insertion of art, the concept of the art work escapes the understanding that has historically identified its qualities, since creators move in the widened field of these qualities, a field that allows understanding it as the result of splitting reality without metaphorical alterations, without allegories justifying it, since it succinctly means the combination of the photographic image with the words accompanying it so spectators may put together the meaning of the wishes and construct the world of interests of an imaginary.

In creations of this type, critical perspective, so lengthily praised in the tradition of new Cuban art, is aired through its testimonial character. Given the lack of documented events reflecting daily awareness without institutional pressures, Luis's or Miguel's actions bring us near to the spectrum of the look emanating from daily life and judging social events with a heavy load of humor and popular wit.

Just as Luis and Miguel, two very valuable students because of the individual experience they offered and the quality of their works, shared the experience of

the Chair: La Vaughn Belle from the Virgin Islands and Andres Matute from Colombia.

In the above mentioned exhibition “Centrifuge”, La Vaughn showed the work “Se permuta” (Swap – 2004), which had as a referent the name given to the procedures to move to a different house. The artist previously visited neighbors living close to the place where the exhibition was to be held and offered to swap objects they no longer needed for others they might be interested in. The opening day, there was information on every offer on the walls in the gallery with pictures of the persons and the objects they wanted to swap. This performance turned the space into a small fair in which, among other things, Jenny wanted to swap two blouses and 2 skirts for cosmetics, lipstick or nail polish. Vladimir offered an electric fan and a picture and was ready to listen to any interesting offer.

The gallery reached the animation of a shop, with the noisy enthusiasm of a public that was not used to have these exchanges, generally private, turned into social acts. Thus this space acquired a different nature and the artist made the social context to solve some of their daily needs. The creator’s ingenuity is at the aesthetic basis of this work, as was the case with those by Luis or Miguel, which transformed a potential demand or social need in the creative assumption to arm a piece with conceptual value. The artist acted like a middleman, an agent of the social act, achieving with her intervention its access to the world of art.

Of the works by Matute in recent years, “Maquina” (Machine – 2005) may be highlighted. In a video made by the artist in a collective taxi ⁹ traveling between two distant municipalities in Havana, Playa and Old Havana, is described in it. The urban environment: passers-by, streets, buildings, parks are viewed from the taxi window with the video camera. Since the car goes down very well known places in the city, when seeing the images we may think we are before reiterated descriptions of very diverse forms, but the fact that we can approach their cadence and inner rhythm is seen in a different way, as if emerging once and again.

There are moments in which those walking down streets and sidewalks seem to do it in slow motion and in the displacement we see faces full of nuances, imperceptible gestures, dialogues we do not hear. But the greatest impact is not the beauty of the city, which to a large extent depends on the diversity of its architectural styles, but seeing its change from one municipality to the next and, especially, its deterioration and the humbler and simpler people living in it as we arrive at the end of the trip.

By using an irregular sound, like a litany, as the background for the images, Matute is able to condensate an intense emotion: the city seems to beat and allows us to pierce it with our eyes, giving the impression that its strength is to be found, in spite of all, in staying in place and continue to be what it is.

Very close to these perspectives of art with a social trend is the work by Adrian Melis, whose uniqueness is creating needs that satisfy actual needs. He builds his artistic process by mobilizing social behavior, inserting himself in social life through a gesture that turns him into a mediator of this behavior and of the way it becomes evident. In his piece "Vigilia" (Late-Night Shift, 2005), the artist secretly buys planks from night watchers in some state carpenter's shops and with them builds sentry boxes for the watchers who may use them when they are working. Of the purpose of his work, he says the following: "The sentry boxes will be placed in an area favorable to control activities of a nature similar to those which made it possible to build it and it may be used by the guard."¹⁰

A video records the entire process. There are images of the carpenter's shop, the moments in which the planks were bought and transported and of Melis building the sentry box. Contributing to the needs of social demand is the apparent meaning of the piece, but its real purpose is to show work irregularities caused by social existence itself. Another of his bold attempts is the video "Aquí todo el mundo me cuida" (Here Everyone Takes Care of Me -- 2006). It is an interview with a director of a work place on his form of management. The artist knows this director suffers from personality disorders that his workers take advantage of to carry out illicit activities with the resources of the workplace but,

at the same time, these disorders allow the director to establish a form of management in which he feigns he is not aware of these activities, while this actually is a tacit agreement among them all.

The piece is only the visual display of this circumstance: the camera moves next to the table, the chair and at times from above and, although in that case the face of the interviewee can be seen, his image is barely perceptible. Photography does not respect angles and has no aesthetic claims, on the contrary: the fact that it does not comply with traditional rules of photographic framing helps the artist to make us understand that there is no interest in revealing the manager's appearance.

Part of the conversation goes in the following way:

Interviewee: Come on, man, who says I have psychiatric problems?

Interviewer: No, I know you are not sick. May I sit here? How do you run your work?

Interviewee: Everyone likes me here, they take care of me, they endure me and I spend my moments of anxiety here, in the office.

Interviewer: How do they help you? By hiding the problem?

Interviewee: They don't tell on me. They help me, because they need me in this position, when they see how I act, how I deal with them... they reciprocate... A change of administration, a change of management, will go against their best interests.

Interviewer: You are the ideal person?

Interviewee: Exactly. I am ideal for this position... it calms everyone down...

Generally, the pieces end as directly as they begin. Narration shows circumstances just as they are. They are a document with no aesthetic claims, the immediate narration of an event. The strong emotional impact characterizing them is the expressive path through which Adrian unfolds events by activating their behavior mechanisms.

Another of the members of the group, Grethell Rasua, bases her work in processes stemming from social demands, but following a path different from that of Adrian Melis. In the composition of her works she includes several elements: making social needs her points of reference, she puts into play her ingenuity and skill to turn her pieces into aesthetic objects articulating needs with the physical participation of the clients, the price of the piece when sold and a film summarizing the steps to make it. Grethell bases this process as follows: "Norms should clarify very well the limits of what to consider good or bad, beautiful or ugly. I am interested in giving rise to questionings on these pre established and well defined aspects. Therefore, I offer pieces that please popular tastes. I make objects and/or carry out actions intended to expand the daily lives of people while coexisting in the duality of being beautiful and contemptible. They are intended to cover their needs and petitions with their own physical and mental waste..."¹¹

Through the piece "Con todo el gusto del mundo" (With All the Taste in the World), with which she graduated from the San Alejandro Academy in 2003, she started on a path that has become one of the most attractive examples of social insertion art in the Chair. Her artistic action combines some mastership in handicrafts and covering the needs of those who ask for her products by complying with their aesthetic desires. She makes rings, earrings, wrappings and dishes with the peculiarity that they include secretions, hair, dandruff or warts of the person who commissions them. In one case, the gold rings for a wedding were made with blood of either partner, his in her ring and hers in his. Some of the accessories in the wedding, as the wrappings of the presents or the cards, were stamped with the same waste used in the design of the object and the gesture was repeated in other actions using semen or secretions or in dishes made with resin and vomit.

The work “Con tu propio sabor” (With Your Own Flavor – 2005-2006) also makes use of residues of each of the persons taking part in the project. Grethel creates a garden with aromatic plants and spices to season food, but the excrement of those who commission the seasonings and aromatic plants will be used as fertilizer in their cultivation. In individual pots, the artist mixes excrement and soil in equal parts and then plants the seed or the cutting and waters it. This will make them grow in extraordinary conditions given the mineral wealth of the fertilizer used in their germination. Once they grow, they are dried and ground and bottled in the form of powder.

The last act of this process is handing the product to the person who contributed the fertilizer and collecting the payment. The productive process concludes in a unique form, since the product of which the donated raw material is part returns to the donors to flavor their meals.

The creations by this artist are characterized by the inventive way in which the elements taking part in the contents of her works are chosen and her unique way of subordinating handicrafts to art, making the artistic gesture vitalizing and inciting the system of appreciation and social appraisal coincide with a specific way of seeing the social insertion of art since, taking into account daily material life, it boosts artifacts giving a beautiful solution to their appearances by making them answer the tastes of those who will wear them.

Her position towards art offers Grethell the possibility of attaining results from social demands intending to go beyond the traditional concepts of what is beautiful and what is ugly, what is repulsive and what is appealing. Grethel has been able to remove the daily value judgments of the subjects involved in the project with pieces in which their own body substances are included.

In the duet formed by Celia Gonzalez and Junior Aguiar we find a variation in these positions. Next to the path followed by Melis and Grethell, they combine the satisfaction of a social requirement with a montage of pseudo-real

circumstances which are underground in their natural state. The demand exists and they comply with it by taking the roles that will allow them to accomplish it.

Through the piece “Contraseña VHS” (Watchword VHS – 2006), the duet reproduced the experiences of citizens who have underground banks to rent films. The artists record and distribute them through a retired person who earns a percentage of what is charged for the rental. Apart from being a memory of a very much extended illicit activity in Cuba, we learn what the distributor used to do before, something completely opposite to the way he is now earning his life, since he was a member of the state security department. Both are hidden activities that the artists combine, as if a dialogue or a similarity between them were possible. Celia and Junior’s last work also threaded a risky path. Under the title “Extensión JCCE” (Extension JCCE – 2007) they entered the illegitimate trade in computer parts. On this, they say: “Sixty-four virtual computers, assembled with the offers of PCCUBA general delivery were sent through e-mail from May 2006 to today’s morning (February 9, 2007) to five JOVENCLUB in Havana with access to Internet.” ¹²

They virtually tried to cover a demand with a service and offered themselves as middlemen of the actual trade with an unreal act: the work exists in the buying and selling acts that turn the metaphor into a virtual exchange in conditions interacting with the already existing ones. “...There is no better camouflage than invisibility, what reaches your electronic account in a potential computer, with each of its components detailed, with their prices and the location of the seller. And also updated, so if you decide to buy it today instead of yesterday you may know if what you were interested in is still available.” ¹³

This is an actual manipulation of ingenuity revolving reality on a fiction and making them both equally credible.

Javier Castro, as the rest of his comrades, focuses his poetics in a group of works with social contents. However, the anthropological aspect, the ethnological art identifying a large part of the creative bent of his colleagues show a different nuance in the pieces by this artist. He approaches the context

in which he lives, Old Havana, registering the behaviors, attitudes and gestures of its inhabitants and the forms through which they solve difficult situations in their lives. His artistic procedure is showing us that semi-marginal world by distorting its natural state so we understand, in a succinct narration, that survival is not that simple.

In his work “Yo no le tengo miedo a la eternidad” (I Do Not Fear Eternity – 2006) he makes various characters from that context pose to the camera. In spite of being motionless, since the image is prolonged in a video, there are imperceptible movements offering spectators a view with a rather unusual result: we understand that we are not before an accomplished photography, but before a simulacrum, since the portrait changes between the habitual traditional pose and its presence before the camera.

Of these pictures, the one with the most impact is that of a child sitting on a dilapidated rocking chair with someone we suppose is his grandmother. They barely move while they receive the wind from an electric fan, as if the artifact were the only really living thing.

The works “Solo para mí” (Just for Me – 2006) and “Conciliando un alivio” (Reconciling Relief – 2005) are brief visual exercises underlining Javier’s personal poetics. In the first, there is a child watching TV. Another child arrives and offers to share a cracker he divides into two parts. A while later he asks for water and the other child says there is none. The child leaves and the one who was watching TV goes to the upper part of the house and drinks water from a glass.

The second is the offer by the artist to a mother of paying her 50 Cuban pesos if she slaps her daughter. She accepts and the image we see is the moment when the mother slaps the girl and she asks her: “Mommy, why?” while the mother turns to the artists and exclaims: “Oh, I hit her too hard!”

Through these acts, Javier encourages the environment to act according to its daily forms of survival, at times with stark realism; he interacts with events

making small turns at what might happen and creating very subtle changes from which, as he points out, the metaphor of the piece emerges. This way of approaching the context achieves a very intense aesthetic since the expressivity of formal values emerges from reality, with no artful devices, showing what habitually takes place in life. That is why artistic intention achieves such eloquence and becomes a different way to make art approach life.

In Jesus Hernandez's work "Informe de hechos vividos" (Report on Lived Events -- 2009), the path to social art rests, according with what he has said: "in events already manipulated by daily life I take, in the same way rumors go around. These I capture, rearrange what they bring as information and give them a reporter corpus." ¹⁴

With this video, Jesus becomes a journalist who, from the aesthetics of the National TV newscast and rumors as a basis, informs of events that supposedly happened and were enriched by popular imagination. This is one of the most active cultural practices in Cuban oral culture, since it plays a very outstanding role by providing information the media does not offer and, since being disseminated orally, becomes loaded with metaphors that widen the contents of the event itself.

The official newscast and that made by the artist share the same aesthetics thus convincing spectators of the truth of what is being broadcasted: news like that of a criminal who cuts the face of his victims or a new form of public transportation with a higher price than the established one. Jesus says: "I have created an information reality with an official nature, taking the other information reality that is not official at all, but that, in spite of it, is still real." ¹⁵

The contents of the piece are differed and its metaphor is not centered in what images show, but in the possibility of offering a narration that seems to be real. From this point of view, the piece represents social life with the values supporting it. There is no previous demand or order, apart from than those established by the act of TV communication.

Differently from the already commented work, that by Susana Pilar Delahante is characterized by the use of the expressive possibilities of photography. While her colleagues activate social processes or simply encourage behaviors, habits and beliefs and turn them into the main meaning of their pieces, this artist uses photography to deal with the topic of physical violence in rapes or mutilations. In her series "Pase, acceso ilimitado" (Come In, Unlimited Access – 2003) she shows pictures taken in the morgue of women who have died by these causes. She manipulates them, thus creating mixed images in which her own figure fuses with those of these persons, shading off their traits. It is difficult to distinguish between fiction and reality, to understand where the body and face of the artist begin and where those of the murdered persons.

Of this piece, Susana says: "The montages of these victims and my body make me see photography as a space where two states come together: Life and Death. I see it as a place where these bodies can cohabit, a space in which at times my body is less evident and in which these victims somewhat come to life..." ¹⁶

Her last piece, "Inseminación artificial" (Artificial Insemination --2006-2007) deepens more into this dilemma without making a treatment of the visual metaphor necessary. The artist points out: "The work started and ended in the very action of undergoing Heterologous Insemination from an anonymous donor from whom spermatozoids were extracted when the irreversible biological death of his body was declared... The action was an attempt at uniting two organisms in different stages of existence – one alive and the other dead – precisely to make the blur existing in the limits we establish between both states evident... One of the two organisms in the action, although considered entirely dead, still has in itself elements creating a contradiction and ambiguity on the state of the person, when we see that it is possible to inseminate a living organism with successful results... By uniting both stages in this work, I have found an answer to the dilemma and questioning I had been trying to solve for some time." ¹⁷

This experiment is a consummated event conferring the proposal an unusual link between the tradition of intervening in life and the possibility to show it. It is based on a real action: the insemination test proved positive. And as Susana says, the results go beyond the scope of the work by showing us that the line joining life and death is many times almost imperceptible. More than a mise-en-scene with aesthetic values, what we have is an ethical concern on one of the most complex and disturbing human problems: where does existence begin and end?

Glauber Ballesterro sets on a more conceptual path that does not act directly on behavior and social processes, but on their contents. This artist moves between installations and videos and at times puts them in relation with each other. The piece "Ilusion" (Illusion -- 2006) consists in the screening "...of a video showing the Cuban flag flying in the vacuum. It will be screened on a wall and, because of its place, it will visually coincide with an actual empty flagpole, giving the impression that the flag is flying on it" ¹⁸. The visual image of the screening on the wall, the flagpole with no flag and the perspective in which both coincide offer various readings of one of the symbols more resorted to in the context of Cuban art, because much has been said about the fact that its repeated presence in daily imaginary empties it of meaning.

The piece "Cuando no estés" (When You'll Not Be Here – 2005) is another piece that should be commented. It is a group of postcards with views of urban spaces in which Jose Marti's memorial in Havana was seen.¹⁹ When manipulating them, the artist does away with the monument, which is a very potent symbol in the history of the Revolution, and makes the spectators think in the possibility of its absence, as if forecasting the future of Cuba.

These and other works form part of a group produced by Glauber in recent years and open another aspect in the aesthetic bents of the Chair, since with their neo-conceptual concerns and the form in which they build them they imply an appropriation of the visual contents of Cuban social reality simulating situations that change with their change in appearances.

The video piece by Reynier Leyva Novo “Ascensión” (Ascent – 2006) approaches the restless art-life confluences, also from a conceptual perspective. An image of a staircase with two levels is seen. In the background of the first one there is a stained-glass window with the sculpture of a virgin as if showing us how to ascend. The artist climbs it slowly and disappears in its upper part.

He comments: “The work was created under conditions that had nothing to do with what our immediate present offers us and was immerse in a process that started the day we left for Oriente and ended when we again arrived in Havana. “Ascent” speaks about the meaning of that trip and the meaning of our existence. The location in which it was built exactly faced the space we lived in during our retreat at Don Bosco church in Santiago de Cuba. Monks and priests continuously went up and down the stairs in their daily routine and nobody noticed where they went or the image relentlessly looking at them. “Ascent” was born from this simple observation.”²⁰

In these last six years, Novo has made some trips which he sees as moments of creation and retirement. His actions, whose main purpose is to spiritualize the natural environment by letting the metaphor of images flow, were born of this. It may be the space in a church or the recording of the sound of a waterfall, since it is not “a mere translation of space, but a search and an inner movement”²¹

While in Reynier visual sensation and spiritual projection prevail, Ana Olema Hernandez develops a piece in the form of a vocational orientation program. Under the title “Programa de orientación vocacional: Para un futuro éxito en Cuba” (Vocational Orientation Program: For Future Success in Cuba – 2007), the artist starts a project that groups of specialists from various branches – psychologists, sociologists and economists – for, on the basis of a previous study and exchange, encourage vocational orientation in youngsters by offering them a strategy to choose their career.

Through research, the psychologist will determine the area for which the student shows more capacity, the sociologist will forecast the type of social

work which will offer most possibilities because of socially being the best, and the economist will take into account the five work opportunities that are offered to university graduates when they finish their studies and will guide them towards the most remunerated area. All this must conclude with a final report as an Aid Program and a “Press Conference” to promote future success in choosing a profession.

The function of the piece is guaranteeing the work success of the student under research. The process will last the entire year and the next, 2008, when the student will receive the recommendations to choose his or her career by filling their ticket asking for a job, according with what the program will determine.

Ana Olema explains: “I use a scientific means to avoid space for doubts and appropriate their language to speak about art... Forecasts are for a 5 year period... so when finishing their studies everything will be ready to live successfully in this country... An absurd gesture which touches dementia if we take into account the historical moment we are living... I believe this work is entirely temporary... The project will be implemented, but it is a microprojection of the way of thinking in the country.”²²

How much valuable information will emerge from this program? Where will its results lead? Through this work in process, she will arrive to conclusions closer to the knowledge of a social event than to a specifically aesthetic one. As with other pieces, the extended field of art will allow her this license and the artist will then behave like a mediator building an artifact²³ in the form of paper with sociological contents.

Results

As a whole, the creative process of the Chair flows among ideas with an ethnological turn in the form of happenings, performances, installations and social actions of various types, exchanging positions between artists who take social referents as the inspiration of their work with those who get lost behind social encouragement, taking into account the wefts in art discourse and the

analytical complexities sustaining the constructive-intertextual procedures of some works.

It is very encouraging to discover in these young creators the paths through which their works shape up from certain ideological and aesthetic constant elements. To think on this also implies to learn the links and approaches with the international art discourse, not only of the great masters who have historically influenced Cuban art like Joseph Beuys and Hans Hacccke, but also some closer in time, like Andres Serrano or Tania Bruguera herself. The form the project has taken, the importance of action art, of art as a process is due to this creator who is doing her utmost in the search of behaviors that take the appearance of artists as producers of cultural meaning.

As she affirms: "One of the ideas of the Chair, from the start, was to create a critical link but very close to the motivations of the '80s generation, as in an updating process. One of the things that have influenced me the most is having lived the '80s not as a symbolic-objectified production, but as a space of discussion, a circumstance created by artists in daily reality, a cultural gesture, not simple artistic production." Demands and social orders, demands creating other demands, pseudo-realities, alternate realities, circumstances that show without changing the meanings of that reality, the evidence of some given behaviors and social values, neo-conceptual strategies are some of the options displayed through intertextual, appropriative or social simulation links.

All this has given great splendor to the hotbed of interests and searches characterizing the project during these four years, privately refreshing the tradition of social art established by the new Cuban art through its least apprehensible existence: daily life and through neo-conceptual paths which very cautiously turn them into metaphors.

This type of art has some drawbacks, however. In one direction, the local contents of the topics approached by most of the pieces demand from spectators an elementary knowledge of these contents to be able to fully enjoy them and appreciate their cultural wealth. In other cases, works-in-progress,

ephemeral or with no interest in aesthetic values are not conceived taking into account the consumption and distribution mechanisms existing in the present world of art and in the long run each of the students in this project will have to make decisions on both factors and on the attitude they will take on the fate, objectives and forms of presenting their creations.

Today, the creative space where the students of this project are liberates them from those presumptions. Because of their experimental nature, their works may take many liberties and, with this as a basis, they may consider the conceptual assumptions and creative lines supporting them. These are elements that should be of the utmost importance in the artistic purposes of its members. Also, such a delicate field of work is very close to ethical values, about which Kant would say: "... there is no thing or no concept, no matter which, whose consideration allows us to recognize and infer what should be done if that which is presupposed is not an end and the act is a means. It should not be this, since in that case it would not be a compulsory formula, but a form of problematic ability."

Since works mobilize the social weft, their ethical implications are compulsory and it will be necessary to relate conceptual suppositions with the creation lines displayed by the artist, together with the results and consequences that maneuvers with that weft will always entail.

Dr. Magaly Espinosa

Note:

* I thank Tania Bruguera and the present members of the Chair or those who already attended it for their help in making this text. Their suggestions have been very valuable, at times for my understanding of the meaning of the pieces and, also, to reflect together on the project.

¹ The idea of the Chair as a stage which has become a pedagogical project in an active exchange of artistic experiences is shared by some of the Cuban critics and theoreticians who keep abreast with the development of the project.

² Program of the Arte de Conducta Chair, by Tania Bruguera, p 3-6.

³ Machado, Maily. "Mirar los 80" (Looking at the '80s) Catalogue of the exhibition "Ni a favor ni en contra, todo lo CONTRARIO". Faculty of Arts and Letters, Havana University, 2007, p.10.

⁴ The new Cuban art is a process of renovation of form and contents which started in 1981 with the exhibition "Volumen I" (Volume I), which marked the updating of the presence of the international art language and sociocultural contents linked to Cuban reality.

⁵ Machado, Maily, "Mirar los 80", op. cit., p. 9.

⁶ Álvarez, Lupe. "Los hijos del maltrato" (The Children of Mistreatment) Catalogue of the exhibition "No valen guayabas verdes" (Green Guavas Are of No Use), Visual Arts Faculty, ISA, 1994.

⁷ Luis or Miguel. Presentation of the work "Reporte de ilusiones" (Report of Illusions), 2003-2004.

⁸ Luis or Miguel. Presentation of the work "Reporte de ilusiones" (Report of Illusions)

⁹ In Havana, a taxi with a fixed price whatever the distance and always following a given route.

¹⁰ Melis, Adrián. Presentation of the work "Vigilia" (Late-Night Shift), 2005.

¹¹ Rasua, Grethell, Presentation of the work.

¹² Gonzalez, Celia and Yuniór Aguiar. Presentation of the work “Extensión JCCE” (JCCE Extension), 2007.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Hernandez, Jesús. Comment on the work “Reporte de hechos vividos” (Report on Lived Events)

¹⁵ Idem.

¹⁶ Delahante, Susana Pilar. Comment on the work “Pase, acceso ilimitado” (Come In, Unlimited Access), 2003.

¹⁷ Delahante, Susana Pilar. Comment on the work “Inseminación artificial” (Artificial Insemination), 2006-2007.

¹⁸ Ballesteró, Glauber Comment on the work “Ilusion” (Illusion), 2006.

¹⁹ Monument in the Revolution Square, where mass rallies and historic events have taken place in during these years of Revolution.

²⁰ Leyva, Novo. Reynier. Comment on the work “Ascención” (Ascent)

²¹ Leyva, Novo. Reynier, Reflections on his creative process.

²² Hernandez, Ana Olema. Comment on the work “Programa de orientación profesional: Para un futuro de éxito en Cuba(Vocational Orientation Program: For Future Success in Cuba”

²³ Kant, Immanuel. “*Ensayo sobre la claridad de los principios de la teología natural y de la moral*” (Essay on the Clarity of Principles of Natural Theology and Morality), quoted by E. Cassirer. “*Kant. Vida y doctrina*” (Kant. Life and Doctrine) Ed. F.C.E. Mexico-Buenos Aires, 1948, p. 276

