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It Happened in Havana

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Workshop with Thomas Hirschhorn at Cátedra Arte de Conducta, Havana, 2007. Photo: Courtesy Studio Bruguera



Workshop with Claire Bishop at Cátedra Arte de Conducta, Havana, 2006. Photo: Courtesy Studio Bruguera



Workshop with Anri Sala at Cátedra Arte de Conducta, Havana, 2005. Photo: Courtesy Studio Bruguera

A couple of months ago, news broke of Fidel Castro's visit to the opening of artist Alexis Leyva's new studio, Kcho Estudio Romerillo, Laboratorio para el Arte. The media focused their attention squarely on Castro's public appearance itself, but in so doing overlooked the message of official approval conveyed by his presence at the opening of this "non-profit" workspace and art center, unconventionally run by artists. I doubt that anyone of such standing will visit the next opening at Espacio Aglutinador, Cuba's foremost center for independent art practice, which was founded by artists twenty years ago. The Kcho studio is not the first initiative of its kind; many similar proposals have been cooked up over the past few years, some aiming to make a profit, such as newly-inaugurated Fábrica de Arte Cubano run by musician X Alfonso.

This heyday of independent art centers in Cuba made me think of past initiatives that helped define the Cuban scene, in particular the project which I believe was the most active platform of them all, the Cátedra Arte de Conducta. Founded and run by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, the Cátedra emerged during a period of decline among the official art schools in Havana, the early 2000s. During the same period, the collaborative groups of artists who dominated the art scene during the late 1990s were breaking apart. These factors meant that the Cátedra found itself in an environment open to receiving its new initiatives, projects that threatened the scene's apathy and the emerging tendency of bad Cuban art to use self-branding as a marketing strategy.

I remember how intense my first few days as an assistant at the Cátedra were. They coincided with the third-year admission exams that ran every day from nine in the morning to ten at night. During the three days of these auditions, the courtyard of Tania's house—home to the Cátedra—was packed with students from San Alejandro, the Instituto Superior de Artes (ISA), and the art history school, and with self-taught artists, poets, and designers, all waiting impatiently for their half-hour presentations before an international panel of critics and curators. Curiously, this was the only time when hierarchical relations were really at play, because at the Cátedra, everyone was a co-participant. The open and anti-hierarchical nature of the project would result in its proposed educational strategy, which played out directly on social media.

Following the ideological and creative focus of its coordinator, the project centered on the discussion and analysis of sociopolitical behavior, and on the understanding of art as an instrument with which to transform ideology through civic action in a local context. Responding to these ideas, participants engaged in active dialogues about the reality of Cuban life, with an emphasis on process-driven art projects based on field investigations and direct interactions with the community, in which the gestures or actions involved in the process were more important than the end product. While in the past, Cuban art had always toyed with the social and the political through metaphor, irony, and double meaning, the work made in the Cátedra took instead the line of open discussion, confronting the paradoxes of context and directly approaching the links between culture and power.

What did the program consist of, precisely? The Cátedra was a two-year study program made up of weekly workshops with artists, curators, critics, sociologists, and scientists from Cuba and beyond. Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, Boris Groys, Thomas Hirschhorn, Anri Sala, Christine van Assche, Dan Perjovschi, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Artur Zmijewski were among the participants. Every six months, a guest curator would organize an exhibition of recently produced projects. Sometimes, the exhibition would take place in the Cátedra itself, sometimes at another institution in the city or at platforms with greater visibility and international prestige, such as the 7th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea (curated by Okwui Enwezor) or the 6th Liverpool Biennial (curated by Lorenzo Fusi).

The Cátedra represented an unprecedented channel for the visibility and promotion of young Cuban artists within the island, one more effective than Havana's own biennial or its emerging network of galleries. Without leaving home, the Cátedra attracted international focus, unlike in previous decades where interest in art made in Cuba had been generated through nationalistic exhibitions that took place outside the island.

In his introduction to *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Paul O'Neill cites the Cátedra as an example of the turn towards the educational that has taken place in recent artistic practice. I'd go so far as to say that contemporary Cuban art from the end of the 1990s is marked by this trend, and that the Cátedra marks its pinnacle. One need only look at the creative groups formed in the ISA, and at the continual work of artists such as René Francisco on his project *Desde una pragmática pedagógica* (Through a pragmatic pedagogy), which consisted of a creative collective in which all dialogues and exchanges of ideas took place on a horizontal level, transcending the boundaries of academic teaching practice and fostering ideas of culture and education. Paradoxically, the Cátedra closed its doors owing to the needs of its environment—the same reason it began. In the words of Bruguera, "The Cátedra Arte de Conducta filled a void when it was created, but in 2009, a new void needed to be created, precisely so that the project wouldn't become institutionalized, and to give space for those who had passed through the Cátedra. To continue with something when it is no longer necessary is a formalist action, and that has never been my way of doing things." This new void poses a challenge to other institutions, and to other politically committed artists, to hurry up and develop alternatives that counteract the commercial approach that once again stalks the classrooms of the ISA.