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“I am the instrument that people might play” – Participation
and Collaboration in Contemporary Art from Havana

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Abstract

In my paper I will focus on the relational art projects of René Francisco Rodriguez, a Cuban artist and professor at the *Instituto Superior de Arte*, living and working in Havana. Cuba, its special political and economic situation and the social process it produces, are the point of departure for the artist, while at the same time his oeuvre is widely perceived outside the island.

In his art projects René Francisco Rodriguez leaves the studio with the intention to participate in the life of Havana's people, engage in a kind of anthropological fieldwork and make art inspired by contact and collaboration. In this article I will give an account of his project “Agua Benita” (2008), realized in one of the urban districts of Havana, in direct contact with its inhabitants. The paper will contribute to the question about entanglement and borders between relational art and other social approaches and relations to people, like anthropological research as well as social and political engagement.

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“I am the instrument that people might play” – Participation and Collaboration in Contemporary Art from Havana

Natalie Göltenboth

Introduction

With her concept “Arte Útil”, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera argues for a kind of contemporary art that should not only be consumed by the art world, but might also be utilised, and so made useful in the direct sense of the word, by the spectators or even participants. “Arte Útil” she argues, “aims to transform some aspects of society through the implementation of art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor and proposing with their activity some solutions for deficits in reality” (Bruguera 2013). She suggested that the most innovative act today would not consist of admiring Duchamp’s famous urinal in a museum of modern art, but to give it back to its origins – perhaps make it useful again in a public restroom (Roque Rodriguez 2013:1).

The intention to achieve an interlinkage between the realms of art and social life has already inspired artistic work in varying eras within the history of art and constitutes one of the main features of what is known as Relational or Collaborative Art today. The attempt to define an interrelation between art and life in a new way can be traced back to the delimitations of the European *avant-garde*, such as Dada and Surrealism, from a bourgeois understanding of art as a highly aesthetic and individualistic product consumed by individuals, which has the dissociation of art from the praxis of life as its main characteristic (Bürger 2006). Art movements such as Fluxus, Action Art and Happening in the 1960s acted on that idea of creating spaces of encounters and making art a fluid medium with direct impact in and on society. Collaboration or Relational Art today draws lines of options which run beyond the borders of politics, social work, anthropological fieldwork or community-based actions, as the artist exceeds the limitation of an art production understood as individual production of aesthetic objects.

“The untenable dichotomy of art versus reality is exploded by these projects – a dichotomy that anyway usually hides the positioning of art in a privileged and aloof status in relation to other forms of cultural activity, however weak art may be when located in ‘living reality’. The distinction between art and other realms of knowledge is made operative in the osmotic exchange between different capacities to do things” (Bang Larsen 2006:172).

We could say that Collaboration Art blurs the boundaries that make art distinguishable from other forms of actions or objects not only in visual terms, but also in terms of art practice and presentation. The art-project “Land in Sicht – alle im selben Boot” (“land in sight – all in the same boat”) (2007), realised by the Austrian Art Collective *HEIM.Art*, consisted of the documentation about their collaboration with a group of refugees in order to grant them permanent status in Austria by engaging them as artists, whose status was more easily legalised at that time. Other examples would be Tania Bruguera’s “Immigrant Movement International and Migrant People Party” (2010-2015), with direct impact on immigration policies in Mexico, or “Eco-favela Lampedusa Nord” (2014) at Kampnagelfabrik in Hamburg, an art project realized by the art collective *Baltic Raw* that constructed houses for immigrants coming from Lampedusa. While Collaboration artists open up restaurants (Gordon Matta Clark 1971), children’s playgrounds (Palle Nielsen 1968/2014) or even charity bureaus (like the German art collective *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* 2014), became engaged in field research and social and political actions, we might ask for the kind of possible interpretations of these activities. Regarding actions or forms of presentation, Schneider and Wright have shown (2013) that there are analogies between Collaborative Art practice and methods of cultural anthropology.

Following the American art philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto and his concept of “aboutness”, I deliberately want to try a naïve point of view on collaborative artworks in this paper and ask about the determining criterion that distinguishes them from common daily life situations and objects. According to Danto, who exemplifies his theory of ontological difference by analysing the link that connects Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes to their aesthetically similar counterparts in the supermarket, it is the “aboutness” that marks an artwork in contrast to other common phenomena or objects. Only by means of a kind of constant effort of research and interpretation, which comes close to the anthropologist’s approach to foreign communities and his or her penetration into their very interior fields of meaning, can the decoding of the artwork’s “aboutness” be achieved (Danto 1981).

In the following pages, I will give a presentation of one of the art projects of René Francisco Rodriguez, a Cuban contemporary artist with an oeuvre that encompasses fieldwork, *trabajo social* – social work and restoration work, i.e. the reconstruction and restoration of the domicile of a needy resident in Havana City – a case in which the making of art literally means building houses. My comments on the art projects of René Francisco Rodriguez are based on fieldwork I realised during several periods (between 1998 and 2002, 2012 and 2014), interviews and documentary material. The interpretation will be realized in two voices, focusing on the artist’s comments on his work and my own ideas on the project.

René Francisco Rodríguez: Art as Social Sculpture

At the end of the 1990s, a new generation of artists started to expose their ideas in Havana’s art galleries, in public squares and open urban spaces, motivated by new intentions and topics: their device was *transformación social* (social transformation), with the intention of producing a kind of art that was concerned with the social life of that highly specific place – Cuba. The aim was to stimulate participation and reaction in the audience and, thus, perpetuate (and circulate) this new approach to art into Cuban society. Artists of the 1990s, such as Lázaro Saavedra, Ana Albertina Delgado, José Toirac, Glexis Novoa, Eduardo Ponjuan and René Francisco Rodríguez, explicitly rejected an understanding of art as a purely aesthetic concern, connected to the intellectual flows moving the global art world at that time. Havana was roughed up by new goading artworks: happenings, installations, action and painting were answered by an audience that, for the first time, were confronted with this kind of conceptual approach to art (Alvarez 2007, Mosquera 2007, Valdés Figueroa 2007).

René Francisco Rodríguez, born in Holguin in 1960, studied at the ISA (Instituto Superior de Arte), one of the most renowned national art academies in Cuba, graduated in 1982 and since 1989, has worked as an art professor at the ISA. In addition to various exhibitions in Cuba and participation in various Biennials in Havana, numerous exhibitions, art projects and scholarships have led him to a great variety of different countries. In 2007, he participated in the Venice Biennial with his art project “Patio del Nin”.

René Francisco Rodríguez’s artwork spans across painting, objects and installations to video installations as a way to make his art projects visible to the audience. In this paper, I will concentrate on René Francisco Rodríguez’s art projects that he realised in a neighbourhood in Havana, and which he links to the concept of Social Sculpture, referring to Joseph Beuys as an iconographic figure who represents the equation of art and social life in a very explicit way.

René Francisco Rodríguez invokes this equation in his art projects, which, in his oeuvre, turns out as a kind of direct social interaction between the artist and the inhabitants of a specific social setting in which the project is located. Coming close to what Tania Bruguera calls “Arte Útil”, René Francisco Rodríguez locates his art projects in the realm of social work (*trabajo social*) or even sociology (*sociología*), which means that the artwork is useful as well as meaningful for the people involved. The art practice can be divided into three parts, starting with what the artist has titled “archaeology of the situation”, a kind of ethnographic fieldwork where first contact with the neighbourhood and its people is established. This is followed by a consensually taken decision regarding which of the local people will join the art project. René Francisco Rodríguez’s aim is then to get to know the main concerns, problems and needs of the people involved. In step three, he tries to

realise their desires and transform them into reality, which has often meant reconstructing the entire house of one of the inhabitants, which had previously been in decay, without running water and mostly with poor sanitary arrangements.

The entire project is documented by video material, and subsequently worked out as a video film or video installation which can be presented at exhibitions and biennials. The equation art = social life also lies in the background of his educational theory. Therefore, before taking a closer look at his art projects, I want to present his concept of pedagogics of art and the method of ethnographic fieldwork it implies.

“Galería DUPP”: Fieldwork as Art Practice and Pedagogic Concept in Artistic Education

I first met René Francisco Rodríguez in 1998 when I was in Havana on a dissertation project. At that time, he was concerned with “Galería DUPP”, a pedagogic art project that is still running and continuously transforming today. René Francisco Rodríguez is, at the same time, the innovator, initiator and the co-ordinator of “Galería DUPP”. DUPP – which stands for *Desde una Pragmática Pedagógica* (based on pedagogic pragmatics) – has no location, no fixed address and shows art only on certain occasions. In fact, it is nothing like an art gallery, but has a collective identity that works as a connecting link between René Francisco Rodríguez and his group of young artists (Binder and Haupt 2000, Ojeda 2007).

The idea emerged out of a state of discomfort that René Francisco Rodríguez experienced while teaching art within the insularity of the classrooms at the ISA, separated from the effervescent life of Havana. He gathered together a group of young artists with whom he left the classrooms of the academy, and thus, the institutionalized form of teaching and understanding art, in order to participate in the life of Havana’s people, engage in a kind of ethnographic fieldwork and make art inspired by contact and collaboration. The purpose was to develop an original exclusively Cuban approach to art by getting involved in the life of Havana City and letting the students find their topics “on the street” – i.e. develop art through participation.

The rules of first contact in the “field” were the following: Students stepping into carnival groups, *santería* (an Afro-Cuban religion) communities, families or single households agreed to, firstly, ask whether or not participation was possible and if they could share the life of the group for a determinate period of time; and, secondly, ask what they might do for these people and so get to know the desires of their hosts.

The idea behind this engagement in the *vida social* (social life) of these people was to capitalize on the social settings the young artists came from and get artistic inspiration out of their own social and aesthetic resources.

Many of the students had been participating in the carnival groups since their childhood or were engaged in Afro-Cuban religious practices. René Francisco Rodríguez emphasised an understanding of this first contact as research, out of which, in a second phase, artistic production might emerge. In one case, the desires of the host family were realised as a complete painting of the walls of their house with Afro-Cuban religious motives: the decayed bathroom as a domain of the *oricha* (santería gods) of the sea, *Yemayá*, was painted in white and blue, whereas the peacocks and yellow colours indicated the presence of *Ochún*, the *oricha* of love and sexual desire, in the couple's bedroom. On another occasion, the shared lives of the young artist and an old musician called Ismael, who used to play *trompeta* in a Cuban Son orchestra, resulted in a project called “*La región de Ismael*” (the domain of Ismael). Ismael's desire was to learn how to paint. Therefore, the interaction with Ismael was to give him painting lessons and, on top of that, paint his flat in an elaborate system of colours determined by *santería* significances. After this interference, Ismael left the band, became an artist and today still works in the *Taller Experimental de Gráfica* (Experimental Graphic Workshop) in Havana.

For the artists, the research focused as much on aesthetic as on social impressions: Inspired by the mixing structures of hanging clothes and broken and fixed window shutters, by the social interaction in the carnival groups or in the bakery, a variety of artworks had been created manifested in different media, such as film, painting, conceptual art and artistic actions. “Galería DUPP” continues to act in different formations, but always conserves its main feature, that of collective art production.

It is noticeable here that the process of fieldwork as a prelude to artistic production is a site-specific process which René Francisco called: “*crear una antropología de la Habana*” (create an anthropology of Havana). In his own art projects, René Francisco intends an even closer engagement with the people with whom he is working. One of the projects I will present here is “*Agua Benita*”, from 2008, which was financially supported by Artcircolo in Munich and was realised in the context of an international call for art projects on the conflicting global issue of water.

“*Agua Benita*” – An Art Project in the Outskirts of Havana

In the case of “*Agua Benita*”, René Francisco Rodríguez established first contacts with the inhabitants of Havana's Buena Vista district. In a process of frequent visits and conversations, the inhabitants finally came to an agreement that Benita, an old lady of the *barrío* (neighbourhood), would benefit most from the project. When she was young, Benita had been working as a maid in the villa of a banker's family that fled to the US after the victory of

the revolution. Benita stayed and moved to the Buena Vista district, where she has lived since that time. The artist describes her situation as follows:

“Agua Benita was about getting to know a person in one of the narrow little streets where you find a lot of small houses and apartments all penned up. Generally, all the people there are faced with a severe problem with public water supply. The water is available only every second day, then of course you have to collect it. Benita was a person “full” of water containers, washing pans and tanks. There was a water-tank in the kitchen, another tank over there, say, in this district, people tried to collect water with whatever they had in order to save water for at least two days. We came there at two o’clock in the morning. It was an incredible impression to film them there at this time of the night, to see the people washing their clothes at two o’clock in the morning. Benita has severe problems with her legs; she had to walk outside, fill up the water, come back with a bucket of water, go out again, like that - you know!!” (René Francisco Rodriguez interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth 22.3.2012)



Fig. 1: Agua Benita Art Project by René Francisco Rodriguez 2008.
Published with the kind permission of the artist.



Fig. 2: Agua Benita Art Project by René Francisco Rodriguez 2008.
Published with the kind permission of the artist.

After the first stage of contact had been made, the second part consisted of gaining Benita’s confidence and learning about her daily needs and her most urgent desires. René Francisco gives an account of how he experiences a situation that is equivalent to anthropological fieldwork and participant observation:

“The first part of my work is very delicate; it is when you first get access to the privacy of the people. It is about how they reveal their private life and let you participate in it. Sometimes, I passed by early in the morning. I knocked at their door. I filmed them still sleeping – let’s say I entered into the heart of this family and, by asking questions and by sharing their daily life, I get to know which are the items of their desires. You have to detect the kind of desires which could later on serve as the basis of my material artwork.” (René Francisco Rodriguez Interview in Cultura Cuba 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCo70v_Ktss; author’s translation)



Fig. 3: Agua Benita Art Project by René Francisco Rodríguez 2008.
Published with the kind permission of the artist.

Phase three of the project was to follow Benita's visions regarding her house and transfer them into reality. René Francisco Rodríguez, together with his family, friends and colleagues, eventually carried out an almost complete restoration of Benita's house. What remains of the art project are the sequences filmed of the interaction, from the beginning until the very end when the old lady was finally led into her revived home by René Francisco Rodríguez's daughter and the whole crew of friends and artists.



Fig. 4: Agua Benita Art Project by René Francisco Rodríguez 2008.
Published with the kind permission of the artist.



Fig. 5: Agua Benita Art Project by René Francisco Rodriguez 2008.
Published with the kind permission of the artist.

*“What I always do when I interview is to see what are their, what are their desires, what frustrates them. The things that do not even appear solvable. Well – the roof, the water leaks through – Benita had to put plastic everywhere when it rained. She can only walk slowly, putting all her stuff together in one corner, because it gets wet here – over there not. We reconstructed the whole roof, we almost reconstructed the whole house, we built a new roof, we tried to do it as she wanted it, how she told us that she wanted it. In fact, that shows the way in which I work.”
(René Francisco Rodriguez interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth 22.3.2012)*



Fig. 6 and 7: Agua Benita Art Project by René Francisco Rodriguez 2008.
Published with the kind permission of the artist.

Interpretation in Two Voices: René Francisco Rodriguez and Natalie Göltenboth

In the following chapter, I will try to establish a path to a possible “aboutness” of the art project, based on the assumption that the potential of a subjective, variable and manifold interpretation is one of the unique features of artworks. The interpretation will be presented in two voices, which here means that I will relate my suggestions to the interpretations given by the artist and derive the topics out of expressions which he, himself, had developed during the fieldwork.

1. *“Crear una antropología de La Habana”: Art as anthropology and archaeology*

“We always do lots of filming, lots of interviews, trying to get lots of material – it’s a kind of archaeology of the person involved, and we are archiving this material.” (René Francisco Rodriguez interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth 22.3.2102)

In fact, the process of establishing deep contacts with the people with whom he is working seems vital to the work of René Francisco Rodriguez, and serves as the very basis and material of his artistic work. What Bourriaud writes about an art that focuses on interhuman relationships (Bourriaud 2009), could also contribute to the understanding of the work of René Francisco Rodriguez:

“Artists produce relational space-times, interhuman experiences. They are, in a sense, spaces where we can elaborate alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of conducted conviviality” (Bourriaud 2006:166).

It is notable here that the fieldwork-like art practice in the case of “Agua Benita” expands into the realm of the imagination of the people with whom the artist chooses to work. The point is “to get to know their desires”, says René Francisco Rodriguez, which might also be understood as calling upon the creation of a kind of self-imagination which already includes a future perspective. For the particular Cuban setting, this means to ask for something that is often hard to do in the actual situation that exists and, for many people, must have often seemed futile to even try.

The “anthropology or archaeology of Havana” created by the artist, thus, is a two-sided undertaking. It concentrates, on the one hand, on the documentation of the actual situation of the people, their decayed houses, their needs, and their daily practice of surviving, and, on the other hand, it operates with a potential that is stimulated by the artist: the creation and expression of a clear portrait in an imagined (better) future.

What the artist archives, therefore, are these two realities: the living environment and the imagined one, which together reflect the Cuban situation in a palimpsest of a two-fold reality both lived and imagined at the same time. Archiving by means of filming and a collection of interviews comes close to the desires of academics (archaeologists or even anthropologists) to at least document the present, which in that specific setting requires bearing in mind the precious as well as precarious ephemeral social and historical Cuban situation.

2. “*Volcarse a la vida*” – *Art as social commitment*

“Because, when you become engaged in this kind of social work, your work goes along with educating people. In the end, it’s not a big thing, it’s just about getting some colour and paint. Because people finally get used to working and living in whatever kind of situation. Sometimes, it can just be a kind of oblivion, you know?” (René Francisco Rodríguez interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth 22.3.2012)

Reconstructing houses is what comes out of the encounter with the imagination of the *gente del barrio* (the people of the neighbourhood) in Havana. In fact, the question of housing is one of the main concerns in Cuba, where most of the people are owners of their dwellings, but where, at the same time, the means of repairs are hardly ever possible to achieve. The art of René Francisco Rodríguez takes on the shape of social commitment, of creating social situations as well as “creating and staging real life structures that include working methods and ways of life, rather than the concrete objects that once defined the field of art” (Bourriaud 2006:169f). The creative process in the case of “*Agua Benita*” is to be defined as the production of a social situation and a social engagement with the people involved. In that case, working against resignation and oblivion, and showing, with the reconstruction of the house, that the imagined future, at least in that very moment and for that very person, can be turned into reality. It is important to stress that the act of renovation, even so, only worked out for the old lady Benita (and in several similar art projects for the people involved), who, in the eyes of the artist, serves as a symbol of empowerment that, in the ideal case, continues to influence the entire *barrio* and the minds of its inhabitants.

3. “*Nada mio! Es todo tu!*” – *Providing agency*

In his art projects, René Francisco Rodríguez understands his role as a mediator, acting as a kind of agent in the interstice between the often irreconcilable realms of the present situation and the desired future:

“I am like a sound-board, an instrument that they can take into their hands and start to shape. Only by their power does it achieve shape. In other words, it requires strong efforts to understand the mission of art as something that has much in common with sociology.” (René Francisco Rodriguez Interview in Cultura Cuba 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCo70v_Ktss; author’s translation)

He states that not only the desires of the people of the neighbourhood are the raw material of his work, but also he himself, his body, his capacity and the resources to which he has access, such as financial grants and social connections, serve as a kind of raw material for them. They can shape their houses, their ideas about getting better, relying on his capacities to organise money, people, ideas and workers. He comments:

“The point is to let these people think through me, dream through me, realise themselves through me, and speak through me. And you share their dreams.” (René Francisco Rodriguez interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth 22.3.2012)

We might call it a kind of interrelation in which the artist renounces the creation of his own subjectivity in art, and instead of that, lets the people of the barrio gain access to the potential of agency to which he has access. On the other hand, René Francisco Rodriguez benefits from the whole artistic process which, in turn, leads him to exhibitions and biennials in the international art world – a kind of bidirectional agency that is achieved by the artwork. The mutual benefit is also explained by René Francisco Rodriguez:

“or let’s say it’s also a question of attitude: to create space for the others more than for myself, and I also benefit from that. Say, it’s like a boomerang, no? It is not my intention to be the protagonist – René Francisco – you understand?” (René Francisco Rodriguez interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth, 22.3.2012)

Conclusion

Observing his own art projects with an unfamiliar view, the artist himself comes to a point where he notices the potential of possible misinterpretations of his oeuvre as the labour of a social worker, an action anthropologist or somebody who “just wanted to help people”. He comments on his impressions by emphasising that the crucial part of all his projects is that he is not a social worker nor an action anthropologist, but an artist, and that his action always flows back into the discourse of art, which means that is where it achieves its significance. He states:

“In this moment, I am thinking that the artist in this process turns into something that seems very far away from what we call art. However, at the same time, it returns into the circle of art, because I am not a doctor or a sociologist. I am an artist who tries to do sociology. I try to create medicine with curative qualities somehow. And then, anyway, it is great material that you are working with, because you are not just shaping the material that you are planning to exhibit, but this material comes directly out of people’s lives and from their needs, those with which you are working. It is not the same as being an artist who simply imagines something, but to be an artist who is receptive and demanding and who is working with that kind of outcome. So, there is a way of communication in my work that to me seems very interesting.” (René Francisco Interview in Cultura Cuba 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCo70v_Ktss; author’s translation)

Crucial to his work, in my opinion, is that it comments on the specific Cuban social situation in a very precise way. Taking into account that the video installations and their images do something that Benita cannot do: show her situation and that of many Cubans in public spaces, galleries and biennials not only on the island. The images are able to emigrate and travel around the world, speaking in different parts of the world in an international language – art – on a topic that normally would not be possible to talk about easily. They embody the synchrony of different and sometimes opposite social realities, energies and motivations in that specific time and place: We can see the hardship illustrated by Benita’s house and the people washing clothes at night, we follow their lives and their projections of future desires. At the same time, we can recognise the amount of social interaction and solidarity of the people in the *barrío*. The Cuban political system fosters the idea of a collective to which the single person, to a great degree, surrenders his or her individual desires. In the *barrío*, this has led, to some extent, to a collective resignation and loss of agency which is partially changed by the artist as an individual, breaking through the wall of indifference and asking people to express their desires and participate in a communal renovation of at least one of the houses. René Francisco Rodríguez’s art project makes the tension that exists between individual and collective obvious. He, himself, acts as an individual person and as a member of an artist collective at the same time. He, as an artist, is able to conduct the project on behalf of his publicity, but, at the same time, is realising the work in a collective of friends, family members and the people of the *barrío*. The friction that accompanies collective and/or individual identities is, at the same time, one of the exigent Cuban questions – still unsolved and more prevailing nowadays when new laws are enacted almost every year, which allow people, for the first time since 1958,

to act and plan as individuals: as sellers, landlords, small businessmen and women, artisans, and so on. Included in that process is the result that social inequality is emerging which had not been perceived in that way since the Cuban Revolution. The question of social consciousness and social commitment – a topic that for René Francisco Rodríguez is vital in his work – has also arisen in tandem with the latter process. Therefore, in spite of what is ostensibly going on – the reconstruction of a house – the artwork itself is like a living metaphor of Cubanness and all the issues included in that term, and it is this metaphoric dimension that makes its “aboutness” (Danto 1981). Despite the apparent similarities of methods that the “Agua Benita” art project has in common with other forms of social interactions, there is this special feature that disassociates the project and incorporates it into the discourse of art. But the last words I will leave to the artist:

“I affirm that I am more enthusiastic and I feel more vital when I am engaged in collective artworks. It’s an experience that has formed part of this era, part of my generation and then, it is not only about making art, but also about your own lifestyle. It is about not getting separated from the people, especially nowadays with all the difficulties that we are experiencing that make people become more and more disconnected!” (René Francisco interviewed by Natalie Göltenboth, 22.3.2102

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