

ESSAYS

Restaging Disappearance: The Missing Archives of Studios Korda

By Karen Grimson Posted on August 29, 2018

As part of the current research focus on the Caribbean region, the C-MAP Latin America group traveled to Cuba in May 2018. Reflecting on an installation of recently recovered photographic material from Studios Korda exhibited as part of “Bodas de Oro. 1968-2018,” a group exhibition at Estudio Figueroa-Vives in Havana, Karen Grimson comments on the inaccessibility of national archives in Cuba and questions art's ability to contest censorship and battle the state of “disinformation” that has afflicted Cuban society for decades.



View of *Bodas de Oro. 1968–2018* (Golden Anniversary. 1968–2018). Photo courtesy of Estudio Figueroa-Vives, La Habana

In a year of remembrance and re-evaluation of the 1968 international revolts, an exhibition at Estudio Figueroa-Vives in Havana, Cuba, explored the aftermath of a convulsive moment in the island’s political landscape. *Bodas de Oro* (Golden Anniversary). 1968–2018 is the title of the group show organized by curator Cristina Vives and her husband, the renowned photographer José Figueroa, in their eponymous exhibition space. A commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the controversial *ofensiva revolucionaria* (revolutionary offensive), the order of intervention and seizure carried out by Fidel Castro’s regime that put an end to private commercial activities in the country, the group show included works by contemporary Cuban artists Reynier Leyva Novo, Alejandro González, Fidel García, the artist duo Celia-Yunior, and finally, a collective endeavor staging a reconstruction of the missing archives of the celebrated Studios Korda.

Founded by Alberto Korda—author of the 1960 portrait of Che Guevara, the most iconic image of the Cuban Revolution, and perhaps the most widely circulated image ever—Studios Korda was a central agency in Cuban photojournalism, having documented much of the social and cultural scene in Havana in the 1950s, and notably, the revolutionary process that culminated in Fidel’s rise to power in 1959. Images from this latter project made up Korda’s *Archivo de la Revolución* (Archives of the Revolution), which included photographs from Fidel’s trips to the United States, the Soviet Union, and Sierra Maestra, on which he was accompanied by Korda himself.



Alberto Korda (left) and José A. Figueroa (right) with the first print of the original negative of Che Guevara's portrait (March 5, 1960), 1987. Photo courtesy of Estudio Figueroa-Vives, La Habana.

But Studios Korda was more than just a studio: it also functioned as a multipurpose and dynamic space, where on any given day, all kinds of cultural figures, from aspiring models, actors, musicians, and writers, to soldiers, pilots, politicians, and traders might converge while having their portraits taken. According to Vives, “Ultimately, Studios Korda was a replica of downtown Havana” in the 1950s and '60s. ¹

On March 14, 1968, immediately after Fidel launched his revolutionary offensive with a radicalizing speech delivered at the Universidad de La Habana, Studios Korda was closed and expropriated by government officials in search of evidence that would confirm what they were convinced was criminal activity in photojournalism. They were searching among other potentially incriminating material for pornographic images (which, to this day, are forbidden upon entry to the country). After days of carrying out an inventory of the images they found, the official authorities confiscated Korda's entire photo archive. The studio was allowed to remain open, but under Communist law, its activities were limited to hairdressing and shoe polishing.



José A. Figueroa. *Nixon hijo de puta*. La Habana, mayo de 1970. 1970. Gelatin silver print. 20 x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm). Photo courtesy of Estudio Figueroa-Vives, La Habana

José Figueroa (born 1946) was twenty-two years old at the time of Korda's expropriation. He began his career at the studio as a laboratory apprentice but quickly became Alberto Korda's assistant, and a photographer in his own right. Together with his wife, he has been searching for the photographs taken by the Castro regime fifty years ago. Convinced that the archives would not have been destroyed by the Communist government, the couple has visited myriad institutions in Cuba and abroad where the contents might have ended up. In a country where access to national archives is absolutely nonexistent, they were fortunate to find a considerable number of Korda's photographs and contact sheets in the holdings of Fototeca de Cuba and Casa de las Américas. Arguing research purposes, they intrepidly re-photographed the black-and-white prints they came across, and compiled a powerful hallway installation showing reprints of the fronts and backs of the expropriated material.



Installation view of *Bodas de Oro. 1968–2018 (Golden Anniversary. 1968–2018)*. Photo courtesy of Estudio Figueroa-Vives, La Habana

Visible in this hallway were images documenting, among other things, the 1962 visit of the Soviet circus to Cuba, alongside installation views of the *Primera Exposición de Obras de Arte Recuperadas* (First Exhibition of Recovered Art, 1962-63) organized by the revolutionary government, featuring artworks left behind by families who had fled the island (many of which are now part of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba).

The process of re-photographing and reprinting the expropriated images stands out as an attempt to desperately save these contents from oblivion. Acting as renegade researchers, Vives and Figueroa contest the inaccessibility of national archives, and moreover, battle the state of “disinformation” that has afflicted Cuban society for decades. Questions raised by this installation reverberated throughout the remainder of our trip: What is an archive if it cannot be accessed? Which speaks louder, an image or its erasure? And more pressingly, how can artistic production contest a tradition of censorship?



José A. Figueroa. Video still from *Testimonio. La Habana*. 2018. Video: color, 20 minutes. Photo courtesy of Estudio Figueroa-Vives, La Habana

A twenty-minute video titled *Testimonio. La Habana* (2018) was projected in the final exhibition gallery. The film consists of Figueroa in monologue, testifying as a witness to the occurrences and aftermath of the disappearance of Korda’s archives. He remains hopeful that the larger archival holdings still exist somewhere, and so might someday reappear. As he explains it, his ongoing quest to find them is motivated by the desire to avoid Korda’s “cultural death,” a predictable consequence of the studio’s physical closure. Reverting from the print to the oral tradition, Figueroa becomes a narrator (no longer a photographer) in order to reproduce from memory what remains lost or hidden, out of sight, and otherwise irreproducible.

1. Exhibition catalogue *Bodas de Oro. 1968-2018* (Havana: Estudio Figueroa-Vives and Embassy of Norway), p. 2. Available online at http://www.estudiofigueroavives.com/assets/media/doc/Bodas-de-Oro_2018.pdf.