

La Habana NORTH / SOUTH Hialeah¹

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The Hypothesis

The city of Hialeah in the state of Florida is a landmark in the Cuban-American geography of the last 60 years. This interrelation, however, has been scarcely (or not at all) studied either from the socio-economic point of view or from the standpoint of the political discourse handled by both countries when referring to governmental relations. The true relations connecting Hialeah with Cuba, or Havana with Hialeah, or Cuba with the United States, or in whichever way we want to see them, are much deeper. They do not occur in linear form as indicated by the historical-political-ideological discourse, but their roots, as indicated by another structure are essentially based on the family and the household that repeats greater social and economic values but which, in the end, are based in the very infrastructure of survival.

These relations have not been sufficiently analyzed from the cultural perspective, and scarcely from art. However, a brief ground observation would allow us to assure that the notion that most Cubans in the island have of the United States as a country is restricted particularly to Florida, and it is generically called Miami ignoring, due to lack of knowledge or because of a simple affective relation, that Miami is just one of Florida's many cities. But they definitely speak of Hialeah without knowing that it is there that almost an entire country becomes a unique meaningful territory.

And that is so because the ties that unite Hialeah with Cuba both materially and spiritually from the 1960s to date have been constructed in such solid way as it only possible when there is a blood relationship and also a personal or group imagination.

Hialeah is the city with the highest concentration of popular Cuban sectors of worker and peasant origin in the United States today; the one with the highest number of small and medium manufacturing industries and business initiatives capable of absorbing in a relatively short time the new migratory waves from the island; and the one that reproduces with strong rooting in its original culture the Cuban way of life inherited or recreated in its new circumstances.²

We start from the certainty that the flow of information, luxury articles or basic essentials, forms of life, aspirations, ideals and personal challenges move today in both directions between the north and south of these communities. But now they do it with a dynamics that did not exist before, made possible by the new

¹ Exhibition at the Estudio Figueroa-Vives and the Norwegian Embassy, Havana, 14th December, 2018 - 22nd February, 2019.

² Most official data refer the emergence of Hialeah ("beautiful plain" according to the native Indians) in relation with the Missouri entrepreneur James H. Bright, who saw its potential in 1921. The city was essentially North American, linked to horse racing and the practice of jai-alai, up to the decade of 1960 when it gradually started to become the destination of numerous Cuban families. Data from The City of Hialeah 2018 shows that it currently ranks fifth among the cities of the state of Florida, with 236 000 inhabitants, of whom over 94% are Hispanic, mainly Cuban or their descendants. It offers the highest employment capacity of Dade County.

forms of communication, certain migratory flexibilities in both directions, the first signs of some openings for the individual or family business in the Island, and the recovery of legal rights for the Cuban emigrants, among other possibilities. These new circumstances have encouraged in recent years the connection between both parties and the transformation of the old monologue into a dialogue, still unstable but quite more encouraging for the ordinary Cuban from here and from there.³

This dialogue becomes evident, above all, as a cultural phenomenon with very strong ethical and aesthetic ramifications.

La Habana NORTH/SOUTH Hialeah is an exhibition that helps to think about that deeper interrelation existing between these two current poles: La Habana, the country's capital, with higher concentration of all national events, and Hialeah, the migratory funnel where most of them come together. Two cities of inter/transcultural force, also creators of stereotypes and false paradigms, from both sidewalks of the same avenue.

The artists invited to explore these convergences have shared vital experiences in both realities; they have belonged here almost to the same extent that they have belonged there; or have made research on these territories from their personal points of view. They give back to us a multiple image of a highly complex phenomenon whose ramifications concern us all.

The conflicts or dissatisfactions produced by these convergences are not solved by art, but neither does politics clarify them. This exhibition seems to suggest that.

Another Route for the Silk: La Habana-Hialeah-China-La Habana

"I see silk garments, if the materials that do not hide the body, not even the own decency, may be called garments..."

Seneca the Younger (ca. 3 AC – 65 BC) Declamations, Vol. I

The figures still cannot be determined because they are not included in the official statistical data, but it suffices to verify the sole existence of tens of stores with Chinese products in the blocks surrounding 54th and 52nd Avenues NW and 163 St. in Hialeah; or to take a look at Havana's most crowded streets (to speak only of the island's capital city), or its peripheral quarters, to assert that we stand before a structured and efficient market. It flows very much in spite of customs controls, and succeeds to reach its target clients directly. The absence of a counterpart in the national market makes it almost omnipresent and it has been designing a form of life, of dressing, and of "showing off" in recent years. It

³ Although considerably reduced by the Trump administration, the opening created by the Barack Obama/Raúl Castro dialogue in 2014 may be considered irreversible. It is socially impossible to trace back the concrete events that mark it: some 20 daily flights by U.S.A. companies, with an estimate of 1,13 million passengers in both ways only in 2017; more than 40 000 emigrants of Cuban origin who recovered their condition of Cuban citizens with equal rights, including those engaged in private work in the island; the establishment of the U.S.A. multiple visa for a 5-year period that stabilizes both the families and their economic sustainability; the insufficient but at least existing satellite connection between both countries, and, above all, the notion of nearness and immediacy between both communities.

is also the most effective form in which the Cuban community abroad remains tied to its people and its island.

It is a growing market that copies a “two-way” aesthetics, a triangulation never thought of before that connects directly the taste of the Cuban community that arrives in Florida (meaning mostly in Hialeah) in recent migratory waves with the preferences of those who remain in the island. The former, generating a demand of consumer goods that exceeds the standards of the local industry but finds an echo in the Chinese factories; and the latter, producing tons of now “Cuban-Asian” products according to the “Cuban” taste that are sent back to the island in the up to 50 pound suitcases allowed by the U.S.A. commercial airlines.

Angela Valella found her way to those Hialeah Chinese-Cuban warehouses and has studied that demand. Without the pretensions of an academic research, but indeed grounded by field tracking, she gives back to us (as Chinese producers do) a reality constructed with over one hundred products chosen by her but in many cases suggested by the sales clerks (all Cuban women), who, without knowing it, have been protagonists of this process. They have informed accurately the reasons for the demand.

They are articles of doubtful quality but showy appearance that combine hedonism with popular economy up to astonishing levels. They come pre-packed by the dozen, and the buyers must separate them carefully when sending them to the island in order to evade the customs inspection or enter in complicity with that authority. Together they make up a shop window of illusions that in many ways embody the identification process between the social groups of both shores, and also their aspirations. One could say that in this exchange process they are more than products: they are sensations.

Valella has also documented the process with photographs, and the result is a hallucinating site specific construction, halfway between glamour and precariousness that maps through objects an important part of the present society and culture of the average Cuban in both geographies. We are not speaking of a detailed taxonomic approach to the phenomenon, but of a typological one, rather a critical anthology. Its verisimilitude suffices to make the spectator react in front of the work also in his consumer condition, since, as expressed by the artist, “it is a porous relation in which we are all involved.”

From A Park

“Hey! Do you hear me? – Yes, but poorly. – And now?
– A little better. – What’s up, man?”
(WiFi park at Coppelia ice cream parlor, La Habana)

The late and gradual opening of the WiFi hotspots in Cuba has been filmed by Javier Castro almost since the beginning of this process. He has spent long hours filming and recording conversations (some stolen and others borrowed from the persons speaking to him) in different city areas. Many accept his camera-in-hand presence, others simply see him and ignore him, let him do, because in the end, what difference does it make to have another witness of the already promiscuous reality in the city?

Those spaces of connection unleashed experiences unknown to thousands of Cubans: to see and speak to your relatives in real time! That was a social and group orgasm.

Contradictorily, in spite of the nearness of the “other”, when you arrive at the WiFi you are the one and only, your space is private, and your time is yours. They are impressive exercises of concentration. Cuba’s WiFi parks are the most exposed intimate spaces that can be found, and it is not a paradox. Tens of people come together there without privacy to “communicate” or talk anytime during the day or night with their relatives and friends abroad; they are the most trustworthy record of the nature of interpersonal relations between both sides using cell phones.

Javier is used to that “fusion” of Havana’s neighborhoods; his in particular is Belén neighborhood in Old Havana where he grew up and obtained the credentials required to understand his people. He has therefore inborn abilities to penetrate the depths of his interviewees and their intimate spaces. His videos are not those of a voyeur, but of an equal.

Con olor a yuma is a video in the style of a documentary: direct, incisive, and even aggressive, as customary in the artist. His direct or tangential approach to those that “communicate” with the world through the WiFi reveals not only the origin and destination of the conversations (mainly with Florida and highly concentrated from and to Hialeah) but above all their contents. His camera moves and betrays the dialogues, even the most private ones, which evidently no one is concerned with hiding. The cell phones show the speakers and you understand that important things are being defined in both directions and expectations are also being created. One feels the truth or the illusion in those conversations. That other end of the cell phone we see or listen through is known in Cuba as *la Yuma*, an indefinite and generic geography that many connect with welfare, comfort, objects of desire, and feeling of freedom.

Con olor a Yuma follows the course of those dialogues through which many Cubans plan their lives, face other realities, or simply create their personal fantasies.

Cubas Everywhere

“Hialeah is in my memory the place that I could not wait to escape from”
Tony Labat

The first Cubans arrived in Hialeah in 1932 as a premonition. It was a group of 20 flamingos brought from the island by Joseph Widener, one of its founders, to stock the lakes of the territory. Another 100 flamingos were brought in 1947, and already by that time 100 000 royal palms had been planted. One can still see flamingos in Hialeah, but the city landscape today differs greatly from the aspirations of its founders, who conceived it as a potential resort. New waves of immigrants, mainly Cuban, have replaced the vegetation with cement to park the several cars in each family, and also to avoid the work of gardeners and the stress of fallen leaves everywhere. The fountains, built with the same industrial

mold and distinctive decorative item of the city are in almost every house entrance, but do not throw water. The polychrome mailboxes of zoomorphic forms (many of them dolphins) are also part of that decorative typology and are placed next to the fountains. There are many sculptures of horses, gods and saints also at the house entrances. But no one walks amid such gear. Instead, it is in the avenues where you find part of the real nature, represented by fruits and flowers that you cannot help but connect with the Cuban identity. They are offered by ambulant vendors who are also Cubans. When you are in Hialeah, as in other zones south of Florida, you are in Cuba, and it is because the Cuban almost always exiles in other Cubas.

For most Cubans emigration is not the starting point of new roads, but the fact of arriving at a comfortable place where they may see their dreams of welfare reflected and copy their references. If they achieve it, they remain immovable. There they create communities similar to bee hives that reproduce standards of conduct, codes and habits brought from the island which they zealously protect from intruders and risks. Cubans do not really mix with the natives from the places where they arrive, and if they do, they end by establishing their levels. According to them, it is thus that they maintain their identity, although it is really a deceitful process in which economic comfort and welfare are not necessarily synonyms of development, nor does the dynamism of their new lives indicate the transformation of their minds.

Hialeah Still Life by Tony Labat tells about that process from his personal experience. Two sequences documented in video run in parallel on the screen and alternate continuously. The action seems to go *in crescendo*. The artist rides along the same avenues from the city of Hialeah where he grew up in his teenage years when he arrived from Cuba in the mid-sixties, and buys from his car what his ambulant fellow countrymen offer him: mangos, avocados, *mamoncillos*, pineapples, sunflowers... His hands pile up, order and re-order the purchase over and over again on the same table. The composition grows and the movement does not cease in both sequences, but what is really happening? What Labat is documenting are fragments of inertia.

No better metaphor to summarize this experience than to capture a still of that literally dead nature in which those segments of identity bought by the artist end by coming together. That still has been reproduced in an oil painting by an anonymous painter in some workshop in China, probably near to the factories producing the tons of clothing and accessories that fly from Hialeah to Cuba. The oil painting is technically perfect, but made by foreign hands; it travels to Havana and rounds up the installation. So closes a vital circle defined by the artist as "*the place where I ended up in exile, a place from which I could not wait to escape.*"

“Three, Three Beautiful Cubans. If I Die Tomorrow, Scatter Flowers...”⁴

“She is a fashion model. 65 inches, 125 pounds. She is a militia woman, has no boyfriend, and Marisol likes the sea and the sun.”

(“La ninfa constante”, Revista Cuba, May, 1967)

The beauty of the Cuban woman is one of the many stereotypes created around the nationality. She has been assigned values and virtues that are almost proper of deities, and are considered paradigms. She has had to bear even the symbolical weight of politics as if it conveyed virtues that contribute additional beauty. Like in many other countries, the woman in Cuba has worn the Phrygian cap and the flag, thus forming a trilogy that raises her almost to the dimension of national emblem. But also, particularly since 1959, the symbolical discourse constructed around women enriched with new attributes that pretended to deny others with which they were formerly described. Let us say, for example, that the glamour with which she was characterized and represented in previous decades was replaced by the concept of simplicity that opposed the idea of material consumption. Sensuality was stigmatized and associated with the consumption of pleasure, and the representation of feminine sexuality in any of its forms was identified as pornography, with its consequent social and legal veto. The Cuban woman, according to the socialist project, should “look” physically and morally upright. She was frequently referred to by the generic name of Mariana, not precisely because of the biblical virtues attributed to the Virgin Mary (which very few Cuban women practice) but for the patriotic courage of the mother of the Maceos.⁵ No more frivolity but sacrifice. And thus, successively, the concept of beauty derived from aesthetic to moral, identified as revolutionary beauty.

But the Cuban woman of today is different, just as her circumstances are also different. She is undoubtedly still brave (one could say she is a new Mariana), but her struggle is waged in the streets for survival, and she does it day after day with all the resources within her reach. She has lost glamour to some extent due to the material precariousness, but she does not oppose sensuality and lasciviousness. She is daring in all aspects, even coarse when speaking, because the direct language she has had to learn along these years has ensured success to a certain extent. She exposes herself to the glance and public judgment without shame and exhibits herself at times with an also precarious but massive aesthetics. This new image in most cases is determined by the products in Hialeah’s Chinese warehouses or similar ones. From there also arrives a good part of the commercial information she consumes (lacking another) while she tries to equal the image of her new paradigms. It is thus that what is possible becomes what is desired, reducing the margin for other aspirations. Now she responds to other references.

Employing design, photography and text, Nelson Ponce, Arien Chang, and Gilberto Padilla explore those territories at times sordid where his contemporary

⁴ Guillermo Castillo. “Tres lindas cubanas”, danzón, 1926.

⁵ Mariana Grajales, mother of Antonio and José Maceo, heroes of the Cuban Independence War against Spain.

Cuban woman we attempt to describe may be found. They do it to a certain extent paraphrasing those beauty columns that Cuban magazines like *Carteles* (column "Cine-Belleza") and *Cuba* (column "La ninfa constante") developed with great quality since the decade of 1950 until the 1970s, through which beautiful women that were representative of the beauty ideal of each period were discovered and launched to advertising, fashion or the movies. The women that these artists "find" today in the streets of La Habana revert those principles. On occasions they take pride in doubtfully perfect virtues and in many cases copy the forms imposed by the tourism market. But they are real, and their attitudes are consequence of other much more complex realities. The artists identify them and show them with respect; that is why they have called them *Ninfas inconstantes* (Unsteady Nymphs).

To Know How to Shoot and to Shoot Well!

"To coerce a man is to deprive him of freedom - freedom from what?"
Isaiah Berlin

Almost all adult Cuban men and women have practiced handling weapons, since for many years it has been a quality of being revolutionary. Each period of crisis has aggravated that practice. Having lived permanently with the feeling of being waging a "battle" for independence, the coexistence with war, or its presumption, is not a state of exemption. "Every Cuban must know how to shoot and shoot well", according to Fidel Castro, became since the 1980s in Cuba an emblematic phrase of the Cuban spirit. The collapse of European socialism made it much more popular at the end of the decade and during the '90s, when the movable kiosks imitating small firing ranges proliferated throughout the country as a civic module. Children and adults interacted in them, in a practice that combined sports shooting with the citizens' military training.

Almost inherited, most Cubans who have emigrated as adults since those years carry that ability with them, added to the group of other attitudes and customs linked to their identity attributes.

Freedom and defense are associated concepts, although their causes or purposes may be of opposed nature. For some the defense, including the use of arms, is an unavoidable duty to protect freedom (understood in patriotic, group, altruistic terms, as is the case of the Cuban ideological discourse); for others, instead, regarded as individuals, defending freedom is a right they use to prevent its obstruction.

The paradox of the concept of freedom (the "negative freedom" or "freedom of", and the "positive freedom" or "freedom for", according to philosopher Isaiah Berlin (Riga, Latvia, 1909 – Oxford, UK, 1997)) applied to a concrete community is the subject of the research undertaken by the Spanish anthropologist and art historian based in Miami Ariana Hernández-Reguant. *La Paradoja de la Libertad. Espacios de ciudadanía inmigrante* (The Paradox of Freedom. Spaces of Immigrant Citizenship) is the provisional title of this research of anthropological-social nature and strong cultural significance, still in progress.

Its author goes in search of the freedom concepts enunciated or raised by immigrants in the United States, specifically in the city of Hialeah, of great concentration of Latin immigrants and very much in particular by the Cuban community. It showed a marked trend to understand freedom as individual condition exempt from every tie, even from the most elementary norms of control of any social network. A kind of civic primitivism, perhaps, but definitively caused by years of structured, pyramidal social organization, regulated in all forms of behavior in her country of origin. During the process, those spaces in which the surveyed citizen found his concept of freedom achieved were gradually identified during the process, and following that path both author and surveyed succeeded in identifying the use of arms and spaces created for them as almost ideal instruments and spaces for the expression of freedom or, at least, for the training required to defend it.⁶ Peculiar paradox is that of such methods employed by equal individuals for opposed purposes.

Hernández-Reguant has decided to make a stop in the course of her fieldwork and show part of its components or stages, now in a format and space uncommon for academic presentations but characterized by the visual language and aesthetic apprehension. One and the other are not excluding but require negotiation. Let us say then that *La Paradoja de la Libertad...* (The Paradox of Freedom...) is an “installed” research that reveals in the exhibition space several of the elements that make it up (maps, interviews, texts, objects collected through the research process, video and sound track⁷). As pointed out by the author herself, her aim is to disrupt and fragment research narratives that are otherwise linear and literal, so as to generate new knowledge and experience of our social world.

The Nightclub

You, crying in Miami and I having a good time in Havana”.
(La Charanga Habanera, 2009)

A blue neon sign with the name *The Nightclub* travels and installs itself in dissimilar stages, almost always distant from the traditional system of art. It lights up from 7 to 11 p.m., only one night, and operates as identifier or trademark of a very varied cultural event that takes place under its light. It has done so 23 times since 2012 in Miami, following the idea of its creator, artist Angela Valella. Each time the neon acts as headquarter with different contents, each time under the curatorship or initiative of very diverse guests. Valella describes the action synthetically: *The neon takes its place in space and invades it, absorbing and appropriating itself of everything that happens around it.*

⁶ According to the data supplied by this research, Hialeah is the city south of Florida with most businesses of arms sales, fabrication and assemblage of arms and munitions, and firing ranges spread throughout the city lacking sound rules and with very few regulations for their use; hence the strong visual presence of this theme in the installation created for this exhibition.

⁷ The installation includes a sound piece *Study on the Sound of a .22* (2017) by the Argentine artist Paula Gerszensvaig (originally included in an installation with Ariana Hernández-Reguant at the Art Center-Miami Beach). It also includes a video entitled *El Fin de la Libertad* (Freedom’s Ends), 2018, 6’27” min, by Ariana Hernández-Reguant and Oriol Tarridas. Both works are part of HICCUP (Hialeah Contemporary Culture Project).

The Nightclub is nomad, flexible; it accepts all types of collaboration in the field of art, defends plurality and the difference. It is also ephemeral, and therefore does not stagnate. Now, in December, 2018, the neon and what it implies as cultural connection, travels away from Miami, and does it symbolically to Havana, this time invited by the Figueroa-Vives Studio and the Embassy of Norway in Havana in another non-nomad but flexible project that also promotes plural creation and the difference. *The Nightclub*, in turn, this time hosts a session by DJ Gabo (Gabriel Lara), who covers part of the repertoire that has characterized a large part of the music stage and night life of both Hialeah and Havana since the late 1960s, and the ways in which this stage interconnects.

This attempt to map the flow of this music relation and identify Hialeah as a center that produced and promoted a large part of the rock, disco, dance, and Latin pop music since the late '60s and particularly since the '70s, turning the south of Florida into a point of reference, will be a discovery for many. *The Times* described it as follows, as early as 1976:

*It would be hard to imagine a more unlikely location for a major recording center than Hialeah, Fla. Nestled between Miami and the Everglades, a racetrack its best known cultural attraction, this sleepy tropical town of 100,000 is far removed from the New York-Los Angeles-Nashville axis around which the music business revolves. Despite its isolation, or perhaps because of it, Hialeah has given birth to an extremely popular, elemental rhythm - and - blues sound which is at odds with the slick string-laden soul music produced elsewhere. In the past 18 months the Miami Sound, as it is known, clattering, boisterous, hot-blooded, has become a fixture in discos around the country and at the top of the national charts. (Steve Ditlea. "Florida Funk. Hot Stuff from Hialeah", *The Times*, March 7, 1976).*

Bands and figures like Harry Wayne Casey (KC and the Sunshine Band, 1973) and Emilio y Gloria Estefan (Miami Sound Machine, 1975), just to mention two icons from the period; numerous radio broadcasting stations (the WQAM being the most popular in Cuba, which could be heard in AM in many points west of the country), and the existence of TK Records, which recorded and distributed throughout the United States, were some of the theme sources that, though not officially broadcasted in Cuba, circulated among a large part of the city's youth and began to arrive in the country at the end of the decade in cassettes and recorders brought by Cuban relatives abroad starting in 1979.⁸

Successive waves of Cuban emigrants later inverted the flow of musical information, creating at different moments a mirror effect in Hialeah for the music recorded in the island. Particularly today, when relations invigorate in both directions, the difference between what is heard and danced on both shores is imperceptible.

⁸ It should be recalled that since the mid '60s and during the '70s, as a result of the Revolutionary Offensive (1968) and the so-called Gray Five-Year Period (1970-1975), nightlife slowed down considerably and the music heard in Cuba was produced in the island due to the express policy of not transmitting any kind of music in English.

This session symbolically shapes with music a relationship that has existed between the north and south of the Florida Straits in successive two-way trips along more than half a century.

The Thesis

There are unsuspected connections between territories that cannot be avoided. Art interprets them; politics or laws do not solve them. Perhaps because their origin is elsewhere, closer to the economy and society, where the root of almost everything is identified.