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Unpacking Feminist Consciousness and Racial Politics: Representation and the Vanguard in Contemporary Cuban Visual Culture

Zusammenfassung

Die Entschleierung des feministischen Bewusstseins und der Rassepolitiken: Repräsentation und Avantgarde in der zeitgenössischen visuellen Kultur Kubas

Seit den 1990er Jahren umfasst das Spektrum post-sowjetischer Ästhetik auf Kuba aufgrund der nach dem Fall der Berliner Mauer eingetretenen politischen Entspannung vielfältige Ausdrucksformen, die von Blutvergießen bis zu Klage und von komisch bis grandios reichen. Doch wie gehen kubanische Künstlerinnen mit den Widersprüchen, Ironien, Mehrdeutigkeiten und sozialen Aushandlungen des kubanischen Lebens um? Dieser Beitrag geht der Frage nach, inwiefern kubanische Künstlerinnen am Gender- und Rassediskurs teilgenommen und auf diesen eingewirkt haben. Mehr denn je repräsentiert das künstlerische Schaffen heute einen quasi-unabhängigen, sich im Dialog mit dem Staat befindlichen Raum vor dem Hintergrund der eigenen Perspektiven auf die Revolutionserfahrung. Die Vielfalt zeitgenössischer experimenteller und konzeptueller kubanischer KünstlerInnen nachzeichnend, wird deutlich, dass diese anerkannte künstlerische und politische Diskurse nicht nur in ihrer eigenen Gesellschaft, sondern auch auf globaler Ebene infrage gestellt und verändert haben. Dabei werden auch die Umkehrung konventioneller Vorstellungen von „Zentrum" und „Peripherie" sowie die Verkörperung dieses provokativen, ironischen, humorvollen und zugleich alles verschlingenden Ansatzes nachgezeichnet. Die Arbeiten dieser Künstlerinnen geben Aufschluss über den Alltag kubanischer Frauen auf und fernab der Insel, über Geschlechter- und Rassepolitiken, Sexualität und Macht sowie einen globalen Feminismus in der Post-Sowjet-Ära.

Schlüsselwörter
Kuba, Frauen, Kunst, Feminismus, Sexualität, Afro-Kubanisch, Exil

Summary

In the 1990s and 2000s, sensing that the critical situation had loosened with the fall of the Berlin Wall, post-Soviet aesthetics in Cuba ranged from bloodletting to bitching and from comical to grandiose. How then do women artists in Cuba deal with the contradictions, ironies, ambiguities and social negotiations in Cuban life? This paper will look at how Cuba's artists have participated and contributed to this discourse on gender and racial politics.
Now more than ever, the artistic production represents a quasi-independent space in dialogue with the State in their views of the revolutionary experience. Drawing on a variety of experimental and conceptual contemporary Cuban artists this paper shows how they have challenged accepted artistic and political discourse not only in their own society but in the global arena, reversing conventional notions of "center" and "periphery" and embodying a provocative, ironic, humorous, and omnivorously critical approach. Their work sheds light on the everyday life of Cuban women living on the Island and abroad, gender and racial politics, sexuality and power, and the discourse of global feminism in a post-Soviet context.

Keywords
Cuba, women, art, feminism, sexuality, Afro-Cuban, exile

To confuse Cuban art and politics is a political mistake.
To separate art and politics is another mistake.

Armando Hart Dávalos, former Minister of Culture

In Gerardo Mosquera's essay, "The Infinite Island" (1998), he notes that one novelty in contemporary Cuban art production is that there are more women artists than ever before. At the same time he asserts that, in Cuba, "a feminist consciousness does not exist, and the female artists usually reject the label by considering that such labeling confines them to a ghetto." I argue against his generalization, since many of the artists in this study illustrate a wealth of feminist, gender, and queer issues that go well beyond what Mosquera identifies as "centrifugal feminism" (Mosquera 1998: 29). Mosquera argues that centrifugal feminism, or organized feminist consciousness, has not been at the center of Cuban culture.

Detrimental to the strength and continuity of Cuban art is the mass exodus of its practitioners from the island. A complex network of artists now works inside and outside of Cuba. Due to the fall in Soviet subsidies, Cuba suffered a great "brain drain" of intellectuals and artists that reached its climax in the 1990s. Many of the artists included in this study are now living and working outside of Cuba, and a reexamination of contemporary artistic and cultural production is much needed. Many of these artists also embrace exile as their status. The idea and imagination of a Cuban nation and identity is deeply woven into the history of a Cuba that transcends national boundaries. At the margins of the nation as such, this community has identified itself in relation to the island for over fifty years and functions both as mirror, sharing traditions, codes, symbols, discursive strategies, and as supplement. In different ways, their works articulate and attempt to contain the traumas of exile by repeating and denouncing the actual experience (the history of departures) and by symbolically reconstructing the "lost" home in a new imagined community.

In this essay, I use "Cuba" and "Cuban" to refer to the greater nation, beyond the geographical confines of the island, which includes the exiled communities. Despite this "brain drain," Cuba's cultural energy persists given the fact that "art in Cuba is like a machine that has kept on running although the motor has been turned off" (Mosquera 2003: 240).

Today, Cuban art production exists as much inside as outside of its national borders and a critical study on this phenomenon has yet to be explored in detail. The problem of how Cuban (and Latin American art) is defined and received is as much at issue inside as outside the region. This is in part a result of a renewed interest in many international biennials, from Havana to Istanbul. Also, there has been a growth in the world's commercial art fairs and the emergence of prominent, international curators who have focused much of their curatorial theses on Cuban and Latin American artists in their high profile traveling exhibitions. Gerardo Mosquera has been an indispensable curator and critic who has helped promote Cuban art abroad. According to Mosquera (1994), the economic reality of having to look outside Cuba for cash has turned many artists into 'fishermen': "They live here [in Cuba] and work here, where it's cheaper to get materials. But they are developing their careers abroad – in Europe, Latin America, and now

the United States. It's like exportation of art, in a way" (Mosquera 1994: 105) Access to foreign capital has put a relative handful of Cuban artists in an unusually fortunate situation. The 1980s and 1990s generation became part of Cuba's elite. The Special Period[1] not only created a second wave of immigration, but an exile of artists and intellectuals. During those years, Cuban artists preserved a "vanguardist spirit and group solidarity." Art continued to be linked to society and, because of that, art production was "frequently ironic, disassembling and self-referential" (Mosquera 1994: 35).

Finally, the emboldened art market, resulting from economic prosperity in the 1990s, facilitated many collectors to buy Cuban art at the biennials, art fairs, and then in galleries and museums. As a result, the profile of Cuban artists living and working outside their country increased dramatically during the 1990s. In many instances, these Cuban born, global art "stars" conceived visual statements without reference to their cultural heritage. Instead their art expressed the language of the avant-garde and was indistinguishable in subject and medium from that of many global artists. This study takes into consideration the issue of exile and emigration and examines the possibility of a Cuban culture and art that transcends geographical borders. Though its diasporic core is in Miami, its ramifications are extensive. They reach many art centers from Madrid and Caracas, San Juan and Mexico City, to New York and Paris.

The Rise of a Feminist Consciousness

Since the 1920s, a national feminist movement has played an influential role in Cuba. Many women leaders have been at the forefront of asserting women's rights, racial and gender politics, among other issues. In 1960, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) was founded, shortly after the triumph of the revolution. Since then, the FMC has played a pivotal role in channeling the activities and enthusiasm of the masses of women into many different areas. The FMC is organized throughout the island in both urban and rural sectors, with between 50 and 70 women in each of its grassroots organizations. This is just one of several institutional organizations that were created since the Revolution.

In the arts, women have been somewhat marginalized in the educational system. Many have complained of isolation. In 1981, the year the Cuban Renaissance was born, only 10 percent of the graduating students at the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) were female. Between 1982 and the early 1990s, the number increased to approximately 25 percent (Camnitzer 2003: 161). By the end of the 1980s, 43 percent of university students (in all sectors) were women. This rose to 60 percent in the second half of the nineties and the start of the decade (Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas 2001). These numbers demonstrate the need for further analysis since they reflect changes in women's social roles and the opportunities for social equity.

Vilma Espín founded the FMC and remained president of the organization until her death in 2007. The FMC is comprised of more than 65 000 delegates in the cities, towns

1 The Special Period in Time of Peace in Cuba was an extended period of economic crisis that began in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The economic depression of the Special Period was at its most severe in the early-to-mid 1990s before slightly declining in severity towards the end of the decade.

and rural areas. Espín, who was once married to current President Raúl Castro, was often described as Cuba's first lady and one of Cuba's leading public figures. She explains that feminism in Cuba reached a certain peak in the 1920s, mainly among intellectuals. In her book, *Cuban Women Confront the Future: Three Decades after the Revolution*, she describes that a strong female consciousness began:

"in 1924 and 1925 [when] the first and second feminist congresses took place in Cuba. But their demands, apart from the right to vote for women, were eminently bourgeois and elitist […] we concur with feminists in the idea that women confront a specific situation in society as a result of the secondary role they have been assigned by capitalism and all preceding class societies. Fidel described the women's movement [in Cuba] as a 'revolution within a revolution'" (Espín 1992).

In the arts, many artists, writers and musicians have contributed a contemporary vision to Cuba's national feminist consciousness. In the literary field, Lydia Cabrera and Nancy Morejón's legendary work on Afro-Cuban women and history has been central to Cuban history, literature, and culture. Among the vanguard in contemporary visual arts are artists like María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Belkis Ayón, Cirenaica Moreira, and performance artists Alina Troyano (Carmelita Tropicana), Tania Bruguera, and Ana Mendieta. Mendieta's *Silueta Series* (1975) merged her own body with the landscape. Some critics have drawn parallels between her *Siluetas Series* and the early work of feminist artists that sought to reestablish the link between the female form and the Mother Earth figure.

Abb. 1: Ana Mendieta: *Silueta Series*, 1973–1980 (Jacob 1991)



In recent years, several Cuban artists have participated at the Elizabeth Sackler A. Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the only official space for feminist art in the world. Ernesto Pujol's *The Nun*, for instance, was displayed at the venue through *Body of Faith*, a project showing a painterly tableaux of women and men consumed by religious faith and practice. In this series, Pujol gets into the spirit by dressing in a nun's habit for the self-portraits. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, who also worked on this project, uses her body through different media to explore the transatlantic voyage from Africa during the slave trade in the 18th century, to its aftermath in Cuban sugar plantations, to the present day in the United States. Her work utilizes a matriarchal image to build a family history that is intermingled with the sugar industry's presence in her hometown of La Vega.

Abb. 2: Ernesto Pujol: *The Nun* (frontal view), 1998–1999, © Ernesto Pujol



Campos-Pons, has worked to give voice to her Afro-Cuban identity in a contentious manner. Her multimedia installations and her large-format Polaroid photographs are based on oral family history, family relationships, and the meaning of objects and daily rituals. They explore her identity as a black woman in Cuba from her current experience in the United States. Her recent work has been an introspective negotiation with the legacy of her African roots, the Cuban slave trade, and the Diaspora experience. Based

on her readings of Homi Bhabha's concept of the "interstitial space" in "Beyond the Pale," she states:

"I placed myself in a Third Space: a space between territory, between what is home, between languages, between media, between performance versus ritual, between three- and two-dimensional, between all these layers and what happens there 'in between.' As a black Cuban female living outside of Cuba, I have to say that is particular and personal about this 'in-between' space" (Bell 1998: 42).

Abb. 3: María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Bin Bin Lady, Harvest Series*, 2005. A striking series of six large Polaroids grouped together to form a self-portrait, the nude artist appears veiled under a lattice-patterned fuchsia-color burka (Freiman/Enwezor 2007)

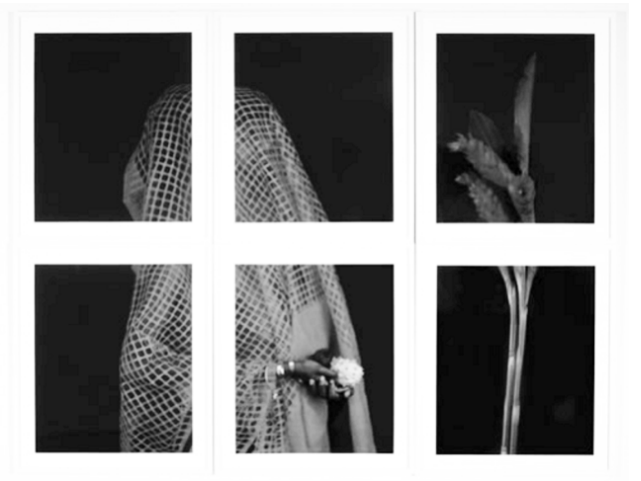
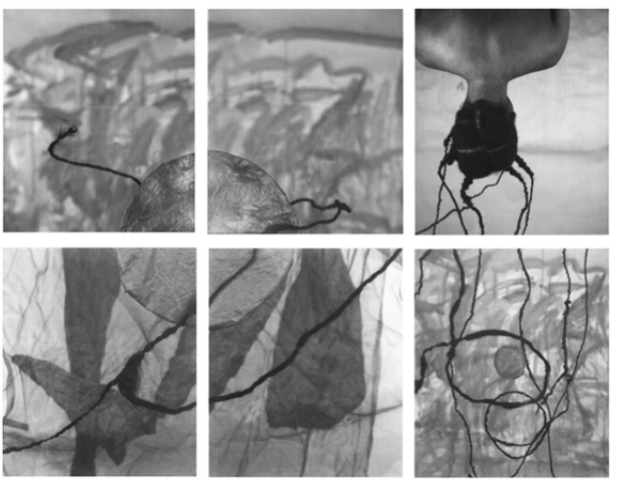


Abb. 4: María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Elevata*, 2002 (Freiman/Enwezor 2007)



Campos-Pons' work engages her personal biography to revisit national concepts of race and gender within the larger historical context of African Diaspora. In her many-layered bodies of work she has used photography, painting, sculpture, video, film, installation, and performance to investigate issues of identity, displacement, autobiography, matriarchy, domestic labor, race, femininity, memory, and acculturation. Campos-Pons uses aspects of personal and collective memories to reflect on her own heritage as a woman of Nigerian descent now exiled from Cuba and living and working in Boston. From large-scale photographs to multimedia installations, Campos-Pons continually uses her body as the site where she asserts blackness and female subjectivity. Her entire body is painted in a bright blue with white waves drawn throughout, so as to signify the sea and by extension Yemayá, the Yoruba deity of the sea associated with the Middle Passage[2] and motherhood. The artist is holding a small wooden canoe that covers her waist. From her neck are hanging two feeding bottles half filled with milk and ending with two orange nipples that hang at the same level as the artist's nipples, which are covered. The photograph is striking in its beauty because of the bright indigo-blue paint that covers the body superimposed with the small white wavelike lines. The pose of the truncated body is quite self-possessed, particularly in its symbolic meaning of a body as vessel (of milk), itself holding a vessel (of the sea).

By way of example, Flora González-Mandri's analysis of her large-scale Polaroid photograph titled *When I am Not Here/Estoy Allá* (1996) describes how Campos-Pons's work transcends the violence perpetrated on women of the African Diaspora by painting her body with blue and white, the colors of Yemayá. In this piece:

> "The painted body symbolizes not only the Atlantic Ocean and the Atlantic Passage but also the Caribbean Sea and the Pre-Columbian cultures (the boat is canoe). This Polaroid reinforces the survival of African women living in the Caribbean despite their historic function as the bearers of future slaves and the nurturers of children not their own. In Cuban vocabulary, a *criollera* (one who takes care of children) is a black woman who nurses white children as her own. In this respect, black women become "mothers" of the Cuban nation. In most instances, because these women were separated from their offspring, they were seldom able to nurse their own. Slave women's bodies, because they were sold and raped by their masters, became vessels for public consumption rather than private bodies who could choose to reproduce and nurture children" (González-Mandri 2006: 12).

2 As part of the Atlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage was the stage of the transatlantic or triangular trade route in which millions of people from Africa were taken to the Americas. Estimates of up to 10 million slaves took part in the brutal Middle Passage voyage to reach the Americas.

Abb. 5: María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *When I Am Not Here/Estoy Allá*, 1996 (Freiman/Enwezor 2007)



Regarding her work, Campos-Pons states that she feels torn apart because for her Africa is not a continent–Africa is her backyard. As an adult, as an intellectual, as an artist she has been looking at what constitutes "Africa" (Bell 1998: 35). In *Estudio para Elevata* (2002), Campos-Pons uses multiple frames and out-of-focus watercolors, which work in unison as a space of isolated time where every element assumes a metaphorical role. In this piece, "hair extensions float weightlessly like cellular tentacles of roots. The chain of stereotypes around the black female body has been abruptly dissolved, and the self-portrait is revealed as a terrain of conflict." (Mena Chicuri 2007: 61).

Belkis Ayón was also an important graphic artist who used Afro-Cuban elements and imagery in her work. At the age of 32, Ayón committed suicide on September 11, 1999. Her work has left an undoubtedly strong mark in contemporary Cuban art. She held two concurrent posts, one as chair of the Printmaking Department at the Instituto Superior de Arte and as Vice-President of UNEAC (she also served temporarily as the acting President). She scandalized the island's art circuit when she symbolically marched into an Abakuá ceremony, a patriarchal all male, Afro-Cuban secret religious society.[3]

Abakuá was founded in the early 1800s. The all male society functioned as an underground resistance movement to Spanish rule. It is one of four religious-cultural groups of African origin that have been present in Cuba since the slave trade. This secret

3 The historical antecedents of the *Abakuá* or *ñáñiguismo* are in secret society that existed in Nigeria and Calabar. Its organization and contents have the roots in the African legend that tells the story of the violation of a secret by a woman: the princess Sikán. She found the sacred fish Tanze and reproduced the roar in the sacred drum Eku.

society does not allow women, homosexuals, or any form of visual representation or recording. In Africa, all-male secret societies have allowed affluent women to become honorary members, though they have never granted full membership or knowledge of their secrets. Rejecting females to the point that interlopers of the opposite sex were put to death, the Abakuá are an amalgamation of spiritual sources brought to Cuba from Africa.

The term *ñáñigo* has also been used for the organization's members. Ayón caused quite a controversy when she entered the ceremony and later created art works that reflected Abakuá ceremonies. In these art pieces, she juxtaposed female imagery with male Abukuá figures performing sacred ceremonies. Though her graphic works made significant contributions to Cuban art, her work was considered sacrilegious and offensive to many Abakuá practitioners. In Cuba, Abakuá restrictions were stricter than in Africa or elsewhere. Inserting herself into a space that was all male, she assertively, powerfully, and boldly made a statement to the exclusive all-male social and religious sphere. The Cuban government has designated her work national patrimony, and so it is very difficult for her work to leave the island. However, her work has been exhibited throughout the globe.

Abb. 6: Belkis Ayón: *Nlloro*, 1991, collography, © Courtesy Estate Belkis Ayón, Photographs José A. Figueroa



Ayón was interested in relating the myths and rituals of the Abakuá to larger themes and issues, where she emphasized her role in uncovering the mysteries of this closely guarded secret male society. The principle feature of this artist's work is her depiction of the symbols and rites of the secret society. A recurring character in her work was Sikán, a woman who discovered the secrets of Abukuá and was sacrificed by the men in the society in order to prevent the dissemination of the sect's secrets.[4] In Ayón's prints, the sacrificed victim becomes an active participant, and one cannot help but see the artist in the figure of Sikán; Through her suicide, she is metaphorically a martyred Sikán.

4 The myth and death of Sikán established that only men could be initiated into the secret society.

Belkis Ayón was an influential artist that challenged patriarchal notions and traditions, and through her work she brought to light the secrets of Abakuá. Her suicide cut short a creative process in which a young female artist challenged established notions on several fronts.

Abb. 7: Belkis Ayón: *La Cena*, 1993, collography, © Courtesy Estate Belkis Ayón, Photographs José A. Figueroa



As a result of Ayón's suicide, Elsa Mora created a moving photograph, *Perda do Sentido* (2001), where Mora came to terms with Ayón's death. Mora and Ayón had worked together the previous year in New York, and before her death they were being exhibited in a two-woman show in Canada. The impact of the loss greatly influenced Mora's work. In this piece, Mora presents herself to the camera with her face transformed into a silent symbol of the tragedy. The piece's title, in Portuguese, is scratched on her forehead and refers to the absurdity of Ayón's decision to take her life. Her hands are covered in leopard spots alluding to the Abakuá society's history with the leopard. In a statement on Elsa Mora's homepage on September 25, 2007, she explains that Ayón's death came:

"as a big shock to me and to all the people who knew her. Her work was unique; she made these large black and white paper collographs with human figures flying away etc. Her work turned around this particular religion practiced in Cuba (Abakuá) that carries a secret revealed only to men. Belkis became a researcher of this religion and her work was a recreation of what she learned from it. She was fascinated with the 'secret' I think. In her work she created the figure of a fish that represented fears, the unknown and mystery. I remember an interview where she said that fears, unknown things and mystery were like a fish, slippery, because it was hard to keep them under control in your hands.
[…]
These photos were my homage to Belkis. I painted my face in black and took some pictures of myself. I just wanted to document my very personal good-bye ritual for my friend. I made the object that you see in the second picture in order to represent the fish that she was obsessed with. I am holding the object with my hands as a symbolic way to embrace all those things that even today I can't explain about what she did and about so many other things in life" (Mora 2008).

Abb. 8: Elsa Mora: *Perdida do Sentido Series*, 1999–2001, © Elsa Mora



Abb. 9: Elsa Mora: *Perdida do Sentido Series*, 1999–2001, © Elsa Mora



Though the government allowed for Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions to thrive to a certain extent, the Abakuá societies were marginalized due to their "delinquent," "antisocial" and "criminal" tendencies. Santería has entered the national iconoclasm – its music, songs, musical instruments, dances, and folkloric art have been catalogued as the folkloric, national patrimony. The Abakuá, however, never received national attention, although it entered popular culture and the daily lexicon of Cuban culture. For instance, words like *jeba*, the sexist, slang word used for "woman," and epithets like *chévere*, which originally meant a brave, macho man, is now widely equivalent to the North American word "cool."

Between the abolishment of slavery in 1886 through the US occupation of Cuba (1899–1902) and up to the early 1920s, the Cuban government marginalized and attakked many Afro-Cuban organizations. Many were arrested under Spanish colonial laws, and in 1839, the Abakuá society was outlawed for more than forty years of *ñáñiguismo*.

The practitioners of the Abakuá are also known as *ñáñigos*, a term that comes from the Efik *nyan-nyan* (ñan-ñan), or "man impersonator" and *-ngo*, meaning "leopard." Its full literal meaning is "the leopard man," so-called because of the original African ritual where the impersonator would crawl like a leopard before jumping on its prey.[5] *Ñañiguismo* was the historical term for identifying the Abakuá society, though now it is mostly a pejorative term. Their putative origins lay in the men's gerentocratic trading, judicial, recreation, and slave "leopard societies" of Old Calabar and the hinterlands of the Cross River Delta at the border of Nigeria and Cameroon (Brown 2003). The peoples of Calabar were one of the last ethnic groups to be transported to Cuba, and their first society was founded in 1836 on the island.

An official campaign by the Cuban government was set to eradicate "backward" African-based societies. Since the Abakuá societies controlled many of the Havana docks, the government wanted to have sole control over the docks (Hugh 1977). Policies like these were attempts by the government to further control the labor force. Even though the Revolution claimed to eliminate racism, its policies resonated with the idea of black criminality, as seen in the work Fernando Ortiz's first book, *La africanía de la música folklórica de Cuba* (1950). Ortiz looks at a time when *babalaos* (Afro-Cuban high priests) were arrested by police in an attempt to derail black Cuban power. For many, Fernando Ortiz is the founder of Afro-Cuban culture. Though the term Afro-Cuban has been shunned by some on the Island, Ortiz is credited with first using the term, and developing "transculturation", a concept that analyzes and deconstructs the notion of converging or hybrid cultures. In his chapter "Los Ñáñigos: Su origen y progresos," Rafael Roche y Monteagudo (1908) believed that the exposure of their practices, though masked in mystery, would help realize the extinction of the Abakuá society in Cuba, though he considered this a "grave offense to our culture" (Roche y Monteagudo 1908: 142).

Cuba's roots in the formation of the image of blackness in society has been a problem since early nation building, and remains an ongoing issue in the context of Caribbean, Latin American, and North American modernity. In her book on race in Cuba, Helg states:

> "Race was a fundamental social construct that articulated hierarchy of Cuban society…there were two social grouping distinguished from each other by physical appearance, and one group was dominant against the other. The barrier maintaining this hierarchy was founded on physical appearance, and one group was dominant against the other. The barrier maintaining this hierarchy was founded on physical differences characteristic of continental space (Europe versus tropical Africa), including skin color, hair texture, and facial features, as well as on cultural differences such as social customs and religious beliefs. In rough terms, it established the superiority of persons of full European descent over those with partial or full African descent" (Helg 1995: 12f.).

Brazil and Cuba were the last two countries to abolish slavery in the Americas (1888 and 1886). Cuba's connection with racism is evident since the birth of the nation. Racism was partly based on fear of the black *brujo* (witch) who purportedly stole white children as sacrificial victims and of the black *ñáñigos* who were linked with the rape of white

5 See Rafael A. Núñez Cedeño's essay (1988): "The Abakuá Secret Society in Cuba: Language and Culture". His study Reports on attempts to determine whether Cuban Abakuá is a pidginized Afro-Spanish, Creole, or a dead language. He concludes that some of this language, spoken by a secret society, has its roots in Efik, a language of the Benue-Congo, and seems to be a simple, ritualistic, structureless argot.

women. If the Revolution is to continue to proclaim an end to racism in Cuban society, it must disassociate racist fears from physical features. Today, Afro-Cubans still occupy a minority space within the artistic, intellectual, and literary canons.

Alina Troyano, is another artist who has participated in the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art. She is another example of a Cuban performance artist who has used gender and a strong feminist perspective in her work. Many Cuban, as well as Chicana, and US Latina(o) performance artists have been at the forefront by creating cutting edge performance pieces that are sexually transgressive and deeply rooted in themes from sexuality and gender, and heteronormativity, to a wide range of other different forms of expressing a feminist consciousness. Her campy sensibility and hilarious performance pieces led by her stage character Carmelita Tropicana, the self-proclaimed diva known as "Ms. Lower East Side beauty queen, famous nightclub entertainer, superintendent, and performance artiste." In her artist statement Troyano explains how she came to terms with her feminist consciousness:

"I confess, in the beginning I shunned the word feminism. For years I was in the dark, blinded by a *chiarascuro*, lost. Until 1982 when I stepped into the WOW Café [in the Lower East Side] (Women's One World) the door flung open and there was light. I stepped into the spotlight and became a thespian feminist. Finally I could see feminism was full of choices: you could be a fashionista or not, shave or be naturally hirsute. It was abundant, colorful and for women of color, fun, funny, sexually transgressive. I suffered an ecstasy greater than that of St. Teresa in the statue by Bernini. I had found my tribe – the feminists; I'd found my calling: *Kunst is my waffen* – art is my weapon. As an enlightened being I began to make mama and dada art dedicating myself to *Kunst*." (Troyano, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art Feminist Art Base)

Abb. 10: Carmelita Tropicana: *Candela*, 1988 (http://carmelitatropicana.com)



Tania Bruguera is another performance artist who has been at this forefront. Bruguera exhibited at the Global Feminisms at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (2007), where she exhibited *Estadística* (part of her *Memoria de la posguerra* series). *Estadística* was fabricated from human hair collected from residents of Cuba. During a five-month collaborative project, Bruguera worked with artists and citizens from all over the island who contributed their hair and assisted in the rolling or sewing of the work. After being rolled into cloth strips, the hair was then attached to the work's support structure. The textile is suggestive of the Cuban flag in its design and recalls the mourning flags flown outside homes on the island. Its technique of fabrication recalls the role of women during the Cuban war of independence (1868–78), when they sewed what was at the time a flag of liberation (*Global Feminisms* 2007).

Abb. 11: Tania Bruguera: *Estadística (Statistics)*, 1996–1998; Installation; Human hair of anonymous Cubans, thread/ fabric11.80′ x 5.57′, Courtesy of Studio Bruguera, © Tania Bruguera



Estadística represents Bruguera's exploration of the mass exodus of Cubans to the United States during the Mariel Boatlift of the 1980s. Of this she says: "What we were left with looked like a landscape of trenches devastated by war, in which many of us who remained were exhausted, beaten, or disillusioned and changed our outlook or picked ourselves up in a more personal, private way." In this manner, *Estadística* stands as a powerful symbol of nationalism woven out of the collective daily existence of ordinary people (*Global Feminisms* 2007).

All of these works counter Mosquera's argument, and show that there is a vibrant Cuban feminist movement and consciousness that continues to thrive since the 1920s. This movement spanned from institutional spaces to intellectual circles to artistic and literary manifestations. The artists mentioned above are just one example of how a feminist vanguard has led to an unprecedented role in racial politics and the formation of a national feminist consciousness. Their work also sheds light on the everyday life of Cuban women, gender and racial politics, sexuality and power, and the ongoing discourse of Cuban and global feminism. Because the new socialist revolution constricted the space available for discussions and considerations on race, the artists examined have created new spaces and found creative ways to represent race. These artists, most of them women, have redefined blackness and gender subjectivity, all while asserting their agency through their work.

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