

English

REVOLUCIÓN SIN LA REVOLUCIÓN

HAMLET LAVASTIDA

10.12.24 -
02.02.25

KFW STIFTUNG



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HAMLET LAVASTIDA BETWEEN ART AND ACTIVISM

In the artistic practice of Hamlet Lavastida (*1983 in Havana), art and activism are interconnected. Trained as an artist in Havana, his career has been strongly influenced by political events. In a country where any deviation from the official political narrative is punished with severe repression, independent artistic production poses a threat to the regime. Thus, since 2018, Cuba's president Miguel Díaz-Canel has signed a series of laws aimed at criminalising all artistic production not authorised by the state. In 2020, Lavastida took part in the artist-in-residence programme of KfW Stiftung in cooperation with Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. Upon his return to Havana in 2021, he was arrested by Cuban authorities, who accused him of inciting civil disobedience and influencing 'counter-revolutionary elements'. His arrest was based on the interception of private messages in which he suggested stamping Cuban banknotes with the acronyms of the pro-democracy movements '27 November' (27N) and 'San Isidro' (MSI). For this exhibition, *Revolución sin la Revolución* (Revolution Without A Revolution), the artist re-conceptualised and performed this action during the opening. Following political pressure from the international art and culture scene, Lavastida was deported to Europe in late September 2021, after being imprisoned for three months. He now lives in forced exile in Berlin. He was subsequently invited by the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR), an initiative that supports independent cultural production in countries where freedom of expression is under threat, to exhibit as a project member at documenta 15 (2022). In 2023, he exhibited as part of the fifth Kyiv Biennale, which focused on the threat to democratic structures, among other things. Lavastida is currently taking part in the Berlin Programme for Artists (BPA) at KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin.

REVOLUCIÓN SIN LA REVOLUCIÓN AT VILLA 102

A parkour of angled walls in a disconnected zig-zag pattern and bold colours fill the exhibition space. Placed in the centre of the room, the repetitive designs of the wallpaper on one side contrast with a series of original paper cut-out drawings on the other. Stop-motion videos are played on screens placed on the floor. Together, they transform the exhibition at the historic Villa 102 into an immersive, site-specific installation.

In its fragmentation, the exhibition architecture echoes the historiography of Cuba. Each symbol, acronym, portrait and graphic element in Lavastida's works alludes to something concrete. For example, the viewer is beckoned into the exhibition with the designed acronym UMAP which stands for *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* ("Military Units to Aid Production"). These were labour camps set up by the Cuban government from 1965 to 1968 in the Camagüey province for political prisoners and those who deviated from desired social norms. Never publicly denied, the extent of abuse those interned suffered and the reasons for incarceration were greatly downplayed by officials.

In Lavastida's practice, the appropriated acronyms take on an ornamental character. The constant graphic repetition of the wallpaper reduces the visual flood of propagandistic imagery to absurdity, leaving only their decorative form. On the other hand, the paper cut-out drawings connect images of political officials and intellectuals with design elements that were often erased from collective memory and allude to the visual language of other autocratic regimes. They depict military control systems that monopolise Cuba's economy and state power, as well as its sovereignty of interpretation over a romanticised image of a socialist

state in its alleged authenticity. Combined in the space, all these fragments found in different media create fixed points, making various narratives of a Cuban history visible.

HAMLET LAVASTIDA'S ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Hamlet Lavastida's artistic practice is dedicated to the creation of an archive. Collected from newspapers, broadcasts, posters, companies and government institutions, it is an archive of found images, slogans, logos, speeches and videos. In short, anything that has served and shaped the rhetoric of Cuban socialist history. Lavastida then appropriates these materials, re-arranging them to break down the iconography of the Cuban Revolution to its most basic elements. Ultimately, he deconstructs the narrative crafted by the regime from the sixties onward of a fair and successful political agenda. He emphasises that his works do not portray anything new but rather follow the methodology of the government, subverting the narrative and revealing the materials for what they are, namely propaganda. By linking the specificity of the socialist Cuban historiography to that of other autocratic regimes, its visual language is laid bare for comparison.

A trained painter, Lavastida's craftsmanship is an important characteristic of his artistic practice. He takes the archived materials and transforms them into meticulous paper cut-out drawings. The precise lines revert the image into its basic graphic elements, highlighting form and shape through compositions and large-scale installations. Consisting of fragments, the cut-and-paste arrangements reveal both historical ruptures and the construction of political narratives. The physicality of the paper and the precision

with which the works are executed also create a perceived objective truth, much like the propagandistic images' original purpose. The nature of the cut-out drawings allows for another reading as well. Placed in front of a white background, the images would be hard to distinguish. Mounted on colour, they stand out and subtly allude to Lavastida's intention - to look closer at what lies beyond.

VIDEO WORKS

In his series of video works, Hamlet Lavastida subverts the monumental visual language of Cuban propaganda with dynamic stop-motion animations. In contrast to his almost clinically executed cut-out drawings, the materiality of the paper is emphasised more strongly in the video works. In short sequences, he arranges print excerpts from state editorial publications, didactic materials and political print products as well as sound recordings to create multi-layered visual narratives. In fragmented montages, the socialist visual language is playfully broken down into individual parts, re-organised and ultimately deconstructed.

The rhythmic composition of these collages is reminiscent of the visual language of the newsreels of the Noticiero ICAIC Latinoamericano, which showed local and international news between 1960 and 1990. Lavastida combines fragments of these historical recordings with excerpts from current state-controlled print publications. The hectic rhythm of the montages is inspired by the visual flood of state propaganda that has been affecting the Cuban population for decades. In their changeability, the montages reveal the dissonant narratives of a political system that continually restages and reshapes its own history.

The two video works exhibited here show excerpts from the hearings of Colonel Antonio de la Guardia and Captain Miguel Martinez Po before a Cuban military court. They were accused of having used their positions for drug trafficking. Both were convicted and de la Guardia was finally executed - presumably as scapegoats in a political power game. It is speculated that the Cuban leadership under Fidel Castro was itself involved in drug trafficking and used the executions to conceal internal power struggles. The exact background remains unclear to this day.

TRANSLATIONS FOR VIDEO WORKS

Left:

Causa No.1 -1989. Es un mecanismo/Miguel Ruiz Po

1m11s, 2019

[Prosecutor Escalona]: Can you answer a couple of questions now?

[Miguel Ruiz Po]: Yes. And believe me when I say I will answer them. (Po seen breathing irregularly).

[Miguel Ruiz Po] Yes, I was in that position at the end, but I could actually realise the way the mechanism was working. I realised this, and this is what I told the instructor. It was like a mechanism. It was a repetition. It was a mechanism. The thing was not really the way it appeared to be, and, as I told the instructor, we reached a point where one could no longer say no. Is there anything else to say? There is nothing else to be said. This is shameful. As I told the instructor, this is a situation in which it seems as if I had been recruited, as if I was an enemy (voice breaks, breathes agitatedly)

[Prosecutor Escalona]: The accused you are not an enemy.

(Ruiz Po breathes agitatedly) In addition to your contact with Martinez, do you know anything about the operations in which he was engaged?

[Prosecutor Espinoza]: Secretary, have him seen by a doctor (Ruiz Po sobbing)

[Prosecutor Escalona]: I ask for a few minutes to have the doctor examine him.

[Unidentified voice]: Yes, (words indistinct, Ruiz Po continues to breathe agitatedly)

[Prosecutor Escalona]: Come on, come on. (background voices, unintelligible voices)

Right:

Causa Nr.1 -1989. Nosotros los acusados aquí/Antonio de la Guardia y Font. Colonel Antonio de la Guardia Font

1m55s, 2019

We - the defendants - who are here do not represent the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Interior is filled with hundreds of heroic fighters who, day after day, shed their blood and wipe the sweat from their brows, making sacrifices, guarding the coasts and keys of our country; they provide security, guard us from our enemy, and fulfil internationalist missions.

We forgot all of them; all of this was forgotten. We betrayed the image of our (cries) martyrs, of our brothers whom we have infamously betrayed. (De la Guardia continues to cry as he speaks). I did not think of them, I just did not think of them. My conscience bothers me very much; I feel very bad just to think of my brothers who died in Angola and Venezuela. We deserve the worst; we deserve severe punishment.

I ask that this serve as an example to other revolutionaries, fighters, so they will not commit the crimes I committed, ever. This can never be erased from one's conscience - impossible - to betray the commander in chief and his image, the Revolution, my institution, my comrades who were loyal to me for so many years. How could I be so disloyal to them, after they trusted me so much?

CUBA SINCE 1959

Cuba underwent a profound upheaval in 1959 with the Cuban Revolution. Under Fidel Castro, the Batista dictatorship was overthrown and a socialist one-party regime was established. As a result, almost the entire economy was nationalised within a few years. This was followed by massive persecution of political opponents and show trials. In 1961, Cuba declared itself a socialist state and established relations with the Soviet Union, which led to a trade embargo by the USA. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the climax of the Cold War with the stationing of Soviet missiles on the island, brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the lack of subsidies from Moscow, Cuba plunged into an economic crisis. To avoid national bankruptcy, cautious reforms followed, such as opening up the country to tourism and allowing foreign investment. Behind the continuing martial revolutionary rhetoric and socialist promises of welfare, a state-run capitalist system began to establish itself comprehensively, which is still dominated by military companies today.

In July 2021, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets against the Cuban government - the largest protests in decades. They demanded reforms and denounced grievances such as supply shortages and state surveillance, which had worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. The government responded with arbitrary arrests, accelerated trials and temporary internet shutdowns. Some measures were relaxed under international pressure, but the repression continues.

The regime's totalitarian attitude also has an impact on the country's collective memory. Cuba evades empirical historiography. Archives are controlled by the state, are inaccessible or incomplete. The Cuban politics of remembrance resembles a systematic lack of memory in which historical events are manipulated by propagandistic means. Only abroad is it still possible to reconstruct a relatively scientifically grounded history of the socialist state from scattered data and available reports.

PUBLIC PROGRAMME

Panel Discussion

CAN ART DO REVOLUTION?

29 January 2025

What influence can art have on the perception of political ideologies? And how can it be used to empower or alienate? How can a protest be influenced by images? The artist Hamlet Lavastida and the design researcher and graphic designer Dr. Felix Kosok will talk about the links between art, revolution and democracy.

The panel discussion will be moderated by Aisha Camara. The discussion will take place in English.

The panel discussion is a continuation of the **Democracy in Dialogue** series.

Public Tours (in German)

- Tuesday, 10.12.2024, 17.12.2024, 14.01.2025, 21.01.2025, 18:00 – 18:45

Curator's Tour with an Aperitif (in German)

- Tuesday, 07.01.2025, 18:00 – 19:00

Please register via www.kfw-stiftung.de/en/hamlet

Guided group tours upon request: veranstaltungen@kfw-stiftung.de

OPENING HOURS

10.12.2024 - 02.02.2025

Tue-Fri 13:00 - 19:00

Sat-Sun 12:00 - 18:00

Mon closed

The exhibition is closed on public holidays.

Free Admission

ABOUT KfW STIFTUNG

KfW Stiftung was established in 2012 by the KfW Bankengruppe. The foundation addresses major socially relevant transformative issues on the basis of three fields of activity: Ecology & Sustainability, Economy & Society and Arts & Culture. KfW Stiftung aims to actively shape change by offering opportunities to those who are advancing social transformation. Villa 102 in Frankfurt's Westend is the platform for culture and dialogue for KfW and its foundation.

Curator: Rose Field

Assistant Curator & Exhibition Production: Alica Sanger

Texts: Rose Field, Alica Sanger

Acting Programme Manager Arts & Culture at KfW Stiftung:
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Special thanks to Hamlet Lavastida and all those who helped make the exhibition possible.

All artworks courtesy of the artist.