
LOS CARPINTEROS

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INTERVIEW / GRAPHICSTUDIO

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Conversation / Interview with Los Carpinteros
(Alexandre Arrechea, Marco Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez)
by Margaret Miller and Noel Smith
July 15, 2003, in Havana, Cuba

Margaret Miller (MM): Let's begin by talking about collaboration. Remind me of the Spanish word for a 'collective?'

Alexandre Arrechea (AA): Equipo.

MM: Equipo, I like that word. Will you describe your collaborative process?

AA: The terms of collaboration are very practical, and they become important, once you decide that you are not working solo. You share your ideas and sign under a common name, which is what unifies the collaboration and gives authorship. You're working within a community of people with similar interests and there is no need to know the author of the idea. The idea in our case is to receive the benefit of what we are creating as a team, so to me, it's been a very pleasant moment, very important, and I've

been doing this for over 12 years.

Dagoberto Rodríguez (DR): I think that art is not something you do totally on your own, because the process of bringing about the actual work of art involves more than one. There is always a friend, a handyman, or a colleague who enriches the idea in a general sense. Many of our pieces have emerged from conversations we've had with each other, from certain influences we wanted to leave behind, and things like that. The actual creative moment is something else, and it is strictly personal, we know that. However, what has made us share that moment every time is the passion for seeing incredible things come to life.

AA: This (this interview) is collaboration. We are here.

MM: How expansive is your approach to collaboration – does it extend beyond the three of you to include appropriating from art history, referencing your personal history, and the practice of other artists?

Marco Castillo (MC): I think our collaboration started completely spontaneously. We were very young and still green. At school (Superior Institute of Art / ISA) there were groups of our colleagues who were always arguing about art and theory, and many times we joined those discussions, but we spent most of our time in the studio.

Everyone from outside of Havana stayed in a dormitory at the school. We lived in rooms next to each other, Dago and Alex in the same room. Sometimes we talked about working as a group, but the collaboration happened spontaneously. I don't know how we got there, we started working for just one show and we never have been able to stop working as a collective.

MM: Los Carpinteros started working together in the early 1990s. Describe your sense of the times. What was the socio-economic climate that you responded to as artists?

AA: Well, to start with, we were students, and when you are a student, the idea you have of the world outside your school is that you are unprepared. You're still in the process of becoming someone in the future. But then we realized that our place was already set and we had to be ready to take center stage. This was at the end of the 80s, when Cuban artists were leaving the country in large numbers. I'm talking about the top young artists in Cuba. There was a large exodus of artists and this left an empty space to be filled. There was also a pretty bad economic situation. At the time it was worse than it is now, and that created more difficulties for making art, because you needed materials. Because we couldn't afford fancy materials, we developed a strategy... It was easier to find wood in the forest, and we actually went to the woods and we cut trees. Not that everything was successful with cutting the trees. The first time we cut a tree it was at night. We were by a river and it flooded its banks, taking a beautiful cedar that we had been cutting for two days. We did not have the skills. So it was kind of a very primitive beginning. It's like the early history of humankind, to a point (laughs). You start cutting the trees, you produce the goods, and then you sell them.

MC: We went to the woods, but we also went to vacant houses. The Institute of Art is located in one of

the richest areas in Cuba. It's like Beverly Hills. Most of the houses, by the time we were students, were vacant. Nobody lived there, so we really invaded these houses. We knew this was illegal... but, we didn't have any other obvious alternative, and it was not only us, but also many other people from the neighborhood.

DR: We recycled the woodwork and details of decoration from the houses.

MM: How did the overlay of this 'climate' and your inventive search for available materials, shape your wit and conceptual position?

AA: At some point the approach to the houses became the source for our future work, because after that we started to work with architecture.

DR: Alex is talking about one element that is always present in our work – reflection about spaces. Working with materials from those houses... that was the beginning. It was like the hunter wearing the skin of the catch.

MC: When we started working together it was just when the Russians left Cuba and the aesthetics were completely different. All the furniture that became fashionable at that moment was more rational, conceptually more Eastern European. You know, very cheap materials and very practical. Obviously, it was more related to social development than to luxury, and we come from really poor areas, really poor. Not only were our families poor, also the areas in which we grew up, had always been poor. I had never been in a rich person's house until we went into those vacant houses in Havana. I'd never been in a mansion. It was really impressive and "enriching."

AA: We were really fascinated; because at some point we tried to imitate some forms that we found in the houses and even tried to be competitive with them. If they could do it, why couldn't we?

NS: Can you describe some of the elements you took from the houses and the works you created to 'challenge' and transform them?

AA: For our first major exhibition, Interior habanero (Havana Interior), we took all that was left from the houses – history, materials, and risk (the risk came from the police, who were always patrolling to protect the houses from vandals). The project was composed of five large-scale pieces of "furniture" that served as frames for paintings. Each work was a reflection on the past and present dichotomy in which we were living. In the paintings we depicted ourselves as protagonists or adventurers.

DR: The art school was built on a former golf course that housed a Victorian-style hotel. Around that time we built a piece titled Quemando árboles (Burning Trees). It was a winter fireplace, something that is completely anachronistic in this country. The hotel's was made of marble; we made ours of richly decorated wood. In the space where you burn the firewood we placed a painting of us dancing in front of a huge fire, stark naked.

MC: Habana Country Club was a similar piece. It is a large-scale painting done with a technique that evoked the style of the colonial period. Cuba's former high class had a predilection for that kind of art. Its cedar and mahogany frame also

was massive, and bore an inscription that said "Habana Country Club." The painting portrayed us as students trying to play golf in the new flowering fields of the art school.

DR: We also found a political connection to a kind of obsession with rich, tacky paintings.

NS: What do you mean by political connection?

DR: The preoccupation with the past always has some political connotations.

MC: We have grown up with a present versus past mentality, the accomplishments of the present versus the failures of the past, for instance. We dared to dig a bit deeper. We started to research a topic that had political implications of its own, although in reality we were much more interested in the habits and objects that characterized that period of our society. We felt like anthropologists digging up the lifestyle of Cuba's former middle class.

MM: So on one level you were regressing.

DR: It's regressive only in terms of language... That we could manipulate with our art the tastes and obsessions that defined the "country-club lifestyle" of those people was a very attractive proposition, because, just as they had fashioned their own statement, so we were searching for our own "shadow on the wall."

AA: That's what we were doing. We wanted to present to the public things that we considered part of the recent history of the country, through the filter of how we saw it.

DR: We were not only recycling wood. We recycled a conception of the past in Cuba.

MM: Your work was ostensibly conservative, yet subversive without being cynical. Is the element of wit and humor a self-conscious strategy?

AA: Things were falling apart. Things were totally destroyed. People were using what they found, as well as selling things in the street. As they tried to get rid of things, we tried to keep them, recreate them, and to reflect about that process in a critical way. This turned into a very humorous and ridiculous situation.

I want also to point out, that after we exhibited Interior habanero (Havana Interior), there were people very interested in buying the work. But it so happened that they were collectors from Miami, where many of the richest Cuban exiles settled, after they abandoned their houses in the early sixties. When we developed our thesis project for graduation, we took advantage of this interest. We created a fake letter from a collector in Miami, who wrote why he loved our work and wanted to buy it. Everyone thought it was real, and Art Nexus published a news item about how all our works were bought by a Miami collector, but it was a fake.

NS: How did your name, 'Los Carpinteros,' and the concept of your collaborative tie into this? Were the objects and materials you were rescuing, challenging and recreating made within a colonial or

post-colonial guild tradition? Or is the idea of a collective, artists or artisans working together, tied to socialism?

MC: As you say, the guild is something that has always existed in all social contexts. It's a practical necessity and something that happens when there are people with the same interests. We wanted to recreate a guild with all its operations; it didn't necessarily have to be a carpenters' guild, in fact, we were also inspired by shipbuilders, masons, railroad workers, cigar workers and many other kinds of guilds.

MM: And so this is how you came up with 'Los Carpinteros,' it was a revival of the guild. In the arena of art it functioned as a form of camouflage. Was this how you responded to the political atmosphere?

MC: We have to come back to this point. The moment we lived was a very hard time for artists not only because of the economic situation, but also it was a time of very intense discussions between artists and institutions. So – we created a strategy – a guild of carpenters, labor, not ideas. The institutions really became fascinated with our aesthetic, that is, with the artist doing the physical labor and the very process of creating objects...

NS: Who were the artists or theorists that you studied and read at ISA that have inspired your work?

DR: We consider ourselves avid readers of publications like Popular Mechanics, which circulated a lot in Cuba during the 1950's at a time when you could build anything that occurred to you. The art school curriculum also included authors whose writings fall under art criticism: Eco, Roland Barthes, Foucault. These authors shed light on our efforts to explain our work to ourselves from a sociological standpoint – in fact, this type of questioning was typical when we were in school – and we have kept on reading even until today. We have always been interested in conceptual art, in minimalism, 19th century Russian painting, and period furniture.

MM: To what degree, as developing artists, were you aware of what was going on in the art world – in the United States, Europe, Latin America, Asia or even Africa? Did you think of yourselves as working in a global situation or did this come as you began to travel?

AA: Well, that's an interesting point because the first time we traveled outside Cuba was in December 1994. We went to Spain (Ed. note: Santa Cruz de Mudela in Valdepeñas, about 63 miles southeast of Madrid). We were invited there for a residency. We got there and we didn't know what to do.

DR: I remember when they opened the airplane door. We went out into the freezing air, and it was like opening a refrigerator. It was like, wow!

MC: In terms of practical things: how to flush a toilet, how to use a shower, we were really in awe of all the basics – in the Middle Ages practically. But in contemporary art, I think the three of us and many other Cuban artists, felt like we were in the right place because our studies of art history were really intense, really serious. We knew what the outside world was doing. Many of our teachers traveled a lot, and they brought back all these materials, books, and catalogues, like we do now, when we come back to Havana. We knew what was happening with European and American art and what contemporary

artists from Latin America and Africa were doing. We were really up to date with this information.

MM: Can you talk more about Dago's comment that stepping off the airplane in Spain "was like opening a refrigerator?" How have your experiences traveling affected your art practice?

AA: When we got to Spain, we realized that we were working with concepts that related only to Cuba. We realized we had to do something different, in order to communicate new ideas. Traveling for us – and I think for many artists – is a way to measure and understand today's world.

MM: Was it at this moment that you recognized new opportunities for your work?

AA: We were in front of another public. So we didn't change the work dramatically. But we knew something was going to change.

DR: We realized that our roots would be our identity. We don't have to find our identity. I have my identity.

NS: Do you mean that you realized that your work would be always identified with your being Cuban and that was not acceptable to you as an artist?

DR: Around that time we realized that if we wanted more people to understand our art, we would have to go beyond the mere representation of local situations.

AA: So, we started to work with different materials. That was an important step of that trip.

NS: Can you explain this change, perhaps mention a new work or new way of working that came up at this time because of this realization?

DR: We made radical decisions, and oil painting vanished from our installations. We kept on painting, but this time we only used water color. Those studies became progressively more important. They became our means of communication and idea pool. Our concerns began to change, and the work became a kind of reflection upon the new spaces and objects with which we were interacting. It was like discovering the world all over again. We concentrated on buildings, utensils and almost all man-made artefacts. We were most interested in the functionality of things, and man's capacity to adapt the visual element of objects to different circumstances. We don't pretend to be designers, but our work requires high degrees of technical knowledge and observation. Lately we seem to need architects, producers and construction crews more and more. Ciudad transportable (Transportable City), Escalera (Staircase), Torres de vigía (Watchtowers), and Piscina llena (Filled Pool), are good examples of this process.

MM: When you accept an invitation for a residency do you respond to the place or the site in any particular way? Can you talk about the conceptual and collaborative process for developing an idea?

DR: The place where we install an artwork is like a good dessert after a meal... That is the time to stand back and look at how everything has turned out. When we decide that we are going to build something, the question of dimension and whether the work will be shown in different places, comes into play. We

love to build site-specific works; it's like ordering a pizza. We try to build in such a way as to make the final product flexible both for the purpose of interpretation as well as installation. Many of our recent installations have been done directly on the wall where they will be exhibited, so they have to adapt to the architectural anatomy of the site. They become blueprints of plausible objects, buildings, etc., and are built to natural scale. Examples of this process are: *Construimos el puente para que cruce la gente* (We Built the Bridge So That People May Cross), *Prisión* (Prison), and *Monumentos de agua* (Water Monuments).

NS: Humor is an important element in your work. How did this evolve and how do you work on that as collaborators?

DR: It's not 100% controlled. The joke is always something that surprises you. You can't control a joke. You create something and, I don't know, sometimes it's funny.

AA: For example, we have one basic idea, let's say roads. (Ed. Note: this refers to *Fluido*, the installation created for the 8th Havana Bienal.) You have the road, but then you inflate the road. There's no road you can inflate. We are always going to the contrary: that's the base. From there you start making other connections.

MM: You find the meaning in the contradiction.

AA: Right.

MC: I think also it has something to do with our personalities. The three of us are funny guys. Maybe you didn't notice, but...

(Laughter)

MM: I noticed.

MC: When we were really young, Alex was a comedian, I was the class clown and Dago was the funniest guy I had ever met in my life. So the way we communicate also is very humorous.

MM: Humor often relaxes the viewer so you can get your more serious intentions across.

DR: I think jokes are serious things that are exaggerated, turned up to such a high volume that they are funny. Almost anything... like a stove that's altered into a sofa, that alteration then turns into kind of a joke.

NS: Taking reality and turning the volume way up – it's also a way of dealing with the stresses and contradictions that are present in Cuban daily life, right?

MC: It's a very Cuban attitude, not only for artists but also for everyone. Very, very Cuban.

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