

Carlos Martiel



Translated by Gean Moreno

MARIVI VELIZ (RAIL): You say that your work is principally focused on the relationships of power that subjugate an individual within a determined context. Do you think that by positioning yourself as any individual you can obviate the fact that you are black? Did your work emerge from some kind of awareness regarding blackness? What are the origins of your work and what were the initial concerns that led you to art?

CARLOS MARTIEL: Ideally, we should transcend racial discourse in art, because we are human beings beyond “race” and other qualifiers. When the theme ceases to be a concern for artists, we will be able to say that society has really begun to change. But unfortunately today’s society doesn’t function in this way. We live amid exclusionary cultural and economic systems. This is why some of my works engage a racial problematic and how it may affect the individual. By the very nature of performance art, in all of my works I become both subject and object. Sometimes I discursively transcend the fact that I am black, and sometimes I do not. It depends on the work. The goal in both my life and my work is that I be viewed as a human being, and not as a black.

My work emerged as a search for my identity within a social fabric that was unraveling. It was a coming to awareness in a context in which things didn’t function properly, where social groups are stigmatized due to their historical and class legacies. My work was born from the discomfort of having to assume and haul along a condition that didn’t correspond to me. My work originated as a disagreement with the established.

I always knew I was an artist. It’s a sensibility one is born with. The beginnings of my work can be found in jewelry-making and drawing. It was drawing, mainly, that catapulted me into performance. During my time at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas “San Alejandro” [National School of Visual Arts], I executed a series of drawings using my own blood as pigment. Working with the material posed the inconvenience that I could never finish the drawings when I wanted to. There were two limitations. Nurses weren’t always willing to draw blood; and when they did, it often wasn’t enough. Time and process became part of the work, and this is how I get to performance art.

RAIL: How did you arrive at using your naked body and what relationship do you have with it?

MARTIEL: Removing your clothes is an act of sincerity. Being naked is a method of acceptance in order to resist the prejudices with which Cuban society has stigmatized my body, and my identity.

RAIL: Do you employ the sexual power of your body as a presentational strategy?

MARTIEL: In my work I haven't really explored the space of sexuality to the point of being able to employ it as a resource. I think that if up to now I have employed any power, it's been my critical power.

RAIL: Don't you think that acceptance of one's body confers sexual power? Don't you think that for someone with a physical deficiency or without any reconciliation with their body it is very difficult to engage in performance art?

MARTIEL: Personal acceptance confers many powers, among which we find sexual power, but this is only one. In my work, I always try to distance myself from any reflections on sexuality around my body. Personally, I have more urgent problematics to criticize and reflect upon. But I think it depends on the artist. Look at the work of Bob Flanagan, who suffered cystic fibrosis. It seems he wouldn't have an option to reconcile with his body, but he turned out to be one of the most influential performance artists. In another direction there is also David Nebreda, who suffered from terrible schizophrenia that led him to be locked up for years, developing an interesting and disquieting body of work around himself.

RAIL: At the moment, with which artists do you feel connected?

MARTIEL: I like the work of Paulo Nazareth, Nuria Güell, Regina José Galindo, Regina Magdalena Sebald, among others.



Carlos Martiel, *Sentence*, 2014. Performance in public space. Commissioned by Cannonball, Miami. Photos by: Grayson Hoffman Photography.

RAIL: Who were your principal artistic references at the beginning?

MARTIEL: Initially, I had no references. I had never seen a performance. My incursion into the field was a blind leap, having only the need to say things as a propelling engine. Later, I studied a bit and was motivated by the initiation rituals of certain tribal groups. Within art itself: the Viennese Actionists, Ana Mendieta, Tania Bruguera, Berna Reale, among others.

RAIL: What do these artists offer you? How do they relate to your work?

MARTIEL: The artists I mentioned deal with the tension with which they live in their contexts. They produce work that is critical toward power. This is what makes me identify and connect with them—the realization of artwork that is socially engaged, that refuses become evasive or silent before the abuses of power.

RAIL: The critique of power that you refer to, in your case and in that of some of the artists that you mentioned, is articulated through actions which put the body through a great deal of pain, through a resistance of the flesh, where almost no one can escape from reacting to the danger involved. Does this relate to death? How do you understand the role of pain in your work?

MARTIEL: Death is on the same timeline as life. The two are inseparable; two sides of the same coin. Although I understand it this way, in my work I stay on the side of life. My works come from my life experiences and the experiences of others.

Pain is a doorway that cuts through my work, but it is not the center of it. Like any threshold, it is traversed and transcended. In the end, what binds me to the spectator is the energy, a common feeling as human beings—not pain. The core of my work is the revelation of truth, and I don't mean this is some mystical sense. I mean it in a practical sense. I'm interested in revealing the conflicts that are taking place all around us, suffered by individuals that generally don't have a way or channel to express how these affect them.

RAIL: What does your personal experience offer your work?

MARTIEL: Life is the most important thing. It's what artistic practices feed on. In performance art, it is often very difficult to separate the experience of everyday life and that of the artwork. In the end, everything forms part of the same experience, of the same reality, for whoever is executing the work. What I do is not theater. I don't represent a character. My work reveals my life experiences and the experiences of others.

RAIL: Which of your works do you like the best? And why?

MARTIEL: At the moment, “Condecoración Martiel, Carlos” [“Commemoration Martiel, Carlos”] (2014) is one of my favorites because, beyond its critical content regarding the conditions of racism in Cuba, it has the capacity to be expansive in its criticism. It's a work that reflects on the social conditions of Cubans more generally, on the sacrifices and the communal immolation that has come to comprise

Cuban identity. It is no longer possible to postpone the reweaving of the social fabric and recognition of its citizens, who have historically, since the establishment of the Cuban nation, been marginalized and deprived of their rights. This work is a commemoration for all the Cuban people. As Antonio Maceo said: “Ask for nothing as a black man, and for everything as a Cuban.”

RAIL: Of what rights have we been deprived? Don't you find it problematic to speak of citizenry in relation to Cuba after so many years of dispossessing the notion of the individual?

MARTIEL: In Cuba, it is very difficult to speak of rights, because it's something that no one has ever cared for. At the very beginning of Cuban society, the natives were exterminated by the conquistadors and replaced by Africans brought as slaves. On the island, “citizens” have historically not had a right to free elections. Dogmas and laws are imposed on them. Maybe the production of a citizenry is difficult. But it is also necessary. We need to face and change the concepts that dissolved the individual into the collective, into the multitude; the politics that annul the individual as the constructive engine of his or her reality, in correspondence with totalitarianism and a dependence on the state.

RAIL: Doesn't such dependence on the state explain the development of performance art in Cuba?

MARTIEL: In Cuba, there have been artistic groups which have developed performance art. For example, DUP, Colectivo ENEMA, OMNI, Zona Franca, La Cátedra de Arte Conducta. But aside from collective experience and collaborative work, there have been very few artists that have engaged the field with any depth. I don't know if it is due to economic conditions, since performance is one of the most difficult ways to sustain oneself economically and in Cuba economic matters are always urgent matters. Artists don't escape this reality. Or maybe it's fear, since performance has been tied to controversial events and has been censored institutionally. Many artists have paid a price for their actions. Angel Delgado, for instance, was imprisoned for six months for his work “The Sculptured Object.” Tania Bruguera has been more than once denied entrance into the country. The OMNI group has also found itself in trouble. They have all suffered a great deal of harassment. We shouldn't forget that in Cuba “being made a lesson of” is one the state's favorite weapons to practice censorship through. I don't feel that at the moment there is a great deal of performance happening—and I hope this will change.



Carlos Martiel, *Sentence*, 2014. Performance in public space. Commissioned by Cannonball, Miami. Photos by: Grayson Hoffman Photography.

RAIL: You are starting to gain a lot of experience working in the U.S., first in Chicago and you just finished a three-month residency at Cannonball, sponsored by CIFO. Does institutional control or the control of the state also interfere in performance art here? Is performance being done in galleries? What have your impressions and experiences been?

MARTIEL: In the U.S., I feel that there is an obsession with control and security. This impinges on all spheres of life, including art. Here, public space, the space of the other, is highly regulated. And performance works against this, because it offers the possibility of dynamiting the social “order.” It has a subversive and conflictive root, and this is why it loses strength when it is confined to four walls and a select public. Maybe this explains its inclusion inside the institution—it is a form of control. I’m bothered by the tacit agreement with the gallery public, the ceremonial complicity in which everyone just observes without any expression and, at the end of it all, applauds. In the experiences I have had in public space, there have been very different reactions from people; the work wasn’t something distant and sacred. It was alive. People became worried about what was happening; they were moved. Performance should never lose its extra-institutional character.

RAIL: Your time in Miami ended with the work “Sentence,” undertaken in front of Cannonball, in a place where both artists and the homeless come together. What made you make this work?

MARTIEL: Cannonball's building is at the edge of Overtown, a well-known African-American neighborhood. The first image I came upon every morning from the window of the room I was staying in was of two or three people sleeping in the street. The difference between my experience as an artist, the privileges I had, and the rawness of the lives of these people, was jarring. I began to do research and found that the mid-20th century the neighborhood had been a mecca of black cultural life in Miami and the construction the I-95 highway right through the middle of the neighborhood just buried it in misery and decadence. In the years that the construction took place more than 30,000 neighborhood inhabitants were displaced. This information had such an impact on me that I could not help but make a work.

RAIL: Finally, What are you taking away from Miami? What have you learned here?

MARTIEL: Every voyage I have taken has left its mark on me, and Miami is no exception. Here, for the first time, I was faced with the fact that the protagonistic character of my body, that is, of the performative experience in public, was displaced by documentation and the object. This is difficult for someone used to always being at the place and time where the body becomes the work.

Marivi Véliz is a Cuban independent writer and curator, based in Miami since 2012. She specializes in Central American Art, although her current interests reach the Hispanic Caribbean.