DRAPEMÓNIA: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro Cuba

March 7 - July 18, 2014
Open Hours:
Tuesday-Thursday 11-6pm and Friday 10-5pm

In an article published in the mid-19th century, Samuel Cuthbert, a medical doctor in a Louisiana plantation, described a new disease among slaves. The most visible symptom of this disease, which Cuthbert called drapetomania, was an irresistible and pathological urge to flee and to be free. A form of resistance practiced by African slaves since the beginnings of European colonization in the Americas was transformed into a psychiatric disease. As any other pathology, drapetomania could be treated medically. The suggested remedies, however, were not particularly innovative. According to Cuthbert, there were only two effective remedies to treat drapetomania: flogging and amputation, especially of toes.

Neither drapetomania nor the barbaric remedies prescribed by the famous doctor were new, of course. Along with other forms of resistance, the existence of runaways among African slaves in the Americas is reported since the early sixteenth century. Resistance and what the liberators called cimarronismo were inherent to slavery and inseparable from it; to the point that sale contracts often included the propensity to flee as one of the “risks” or defects of the slave. As early as 1835, chronicler González de Orozco y Valdés, writing about Hispaniola, the first European colony in the New World, asserted that “Cimarrones... means in the language of this island, fugitives.”

The term cimarrón was initially applied to “wild” cattle and was used to describe barbary, savagery and wildness, attributes, that, according to the slave owners, characterized all Africans. But the slaves invested the term with new meanings and cimarronismo came to represent not only the obstinate resistance of Africans and their descendants to slavery, but also to the process of deslaving to which they were subjected. What was initially an attribute of specific individuals became a symbol of rebellion and resistance against European colonial oppression. In the nineteenth century, Caribbean thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, René Dépestre, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant conceptualized cimarronismo as an expression of cultural resistance and as a central feature of Caribbean identity. As poet Pablo Anderson Fernández stated, Grupo Antillano was asking a fundamental question: “What and who are we as inhabitants of the Caribbean?”

During its five years of existence, Grupo Antillano articulated a new vision of Cuban culture through the visual arts. This vision was popular, radical, Caribbean, Manichean, African, revolutionary. As the founding manifesto of the Group claims, they did not want to promote a new artistic concept, but rather sought to highlight the centrality of Africa in Cuban culture and to discard dominant narratives that equated Cuban progress and modernity with European influences. They valiantly opposed the persistent belief, supported by vast sectors of the Cuban bureaucracy in the 1970s, that Afro-Cuban religious practices were backward, primitive and grotesque: “a remnant of the past” as they were frequently described at the time. Cuba, Grupo Antillano proclaimed, was quintessentially an Afro-Cuban nation. Cuban modernity was anchored in the knowledge, the aesthetics, the cultures and the sweat and blood of the African peoples. “We are not interested in other worlds,” their foundational manifesto asserted.

Grupo Antillano engaged the support of a large group of collaborators and created what can only be described as a vibrant Afro-Cuban cultural movement. Among their collaborators were key figures in Cuban art, including Wilfredo Lam, who became an active member of the Group and its Honorary President until his death in 1982. But they exhibited not just visual art events. They were multidisciplinary events that included theoretical workshops, theater plays, concerts and recitals where Cuba’s best and most influential intellectuals participated.

“The voice of a new art is being heard,” ethnomusicologist Rogelio Martínez Fuentes wrote about Grupo Antillano in 1980. Yet neither this voice, nor this “new art” or even the very existence of Grupo Antillano are remembered today. In fact, Grupo Antillano has been erased from all accounts of the so-called “new Cuban art,” a movement in Cuban artistic production which took shape precisely during those years and that is frequently associated with the legendary exhibit Voluntad (1981).1 Voluntad Uno is remembered today as the initial salvo of a new generation of artists who tried to break away from socialist realism and to experiment with new techniques and artistic expressions. Some of the artists of Voluntad Uno, notably Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elío Polidro and Cándido Soto, developed lives of work which included some of the concerns of Grupo Antillano. But Voluntad Uno did not look towards Africa, Africa for Cuban inspiration. Those artists searched for new formal and artistic horizons in Western art. The “new art” of Martínez Fuentes did not become the “new Cuban art” of the 1980s; that is, the art that was embarked by international collectors, critics, and curators. Grupo Antillano was relegated to oblivion, their contributions silenced for decades.

The exhibit, DRAPEMÓNIA: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro Cuba (The 8th Floor, March 7-July 14, 2014), seeks to recover the memory of this group and their important contributions to the art of Cuba, the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. Several members of Grupo Antillano had attended the Second World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture (ES-TAC) in Nigeria in 1977 and saw their work as part of a diasporic conversation on art, race and colonialism. At FESTAC they met other artists and intellectuals interested in seeing justice issues, such as activist sculptor Mel Edwards, who became a lifelong friend of several members of Grupo Antillano.

The exhibit showcases works by the artists of Grupo Antillano (Eliot Abreu, Royella Rodríguez Cobas, Manuel Cuevas, Heminna Escalona, Ever Fonseca, Ramón Martí, Audelis Herrera, Arnoldo Rodríguez Larraga, Óscar Rodríguez Lázaro, Alberto Lescy, Manuel Mendive, Leonel Morales, Clara Moreira, Miguel Ochoa, Rafael Quinatada and Julia Valdés). DRAPEMÓNIA also includes works by a group of contemporary artists (Belkis Ayón, Bedía, Cicho, Diego, Esquivel, Marta María Pérez Bravo, Montalbuy, Cibidú, Douglas Pérez, Pélo, Elia Rodríguez and Leandro Soto) who share some of the concerns articulated by Grupo Antillano in the late 1970s.

I hear, or more precisely, “see” echoes of Grupo Antillano in the word of these contemporary artists. This does not necessarily mean that they acknowledge, either explicitly or implicitly, a debt to Grupo Antillano. As an intellectual and cultural project, the exhibit suggests continuities and proposes a genealogy that does not depend on the inscription of each individual artist. The exhibit offers a fresh and alternative look at the “new art of Cuba” through the work of artists who have been concerned with issues of race, history, and identity. It reasserts the importance of Grupo Antillano by linking their work with that of a new generation of Cuban artists, particularly those associated since the 1990s with the Guesbélis cultural project.

DRAPEMÓNIA argues, without hesitation, that “the new art” that Grupo Antillano produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s is part of what we have come to know as new Cuban art. Thirty-five years after its creation, Grupo Antillano continues to assert, as the late Fernando Ortiz used to say that “without the black, Cuba would not be Cuba.”

1 Grupo Antillano is not mentioned in the best books on Cuban contemporary art, such as Luis Carlos Coronell, World of Callis (University of Texas Press, 2002), Rachel Mock, Eliot Abreu (Cuba) (University of Illinois Press, 2011), or Rafael Méndez, Cuba: Art and History 1868-2008 (Pendula, EDA, 2009). It is my experience, however, the existence of Grupo Antillano is registered only in two sources: José Regino, Zanuy, et al., Modernism, Cuba Art of the 20th Century (Casa de las Américas, 2002) and Judith Bethune, ed., Allexania: Works on Paper 1968-2003 (San Francisco State University Press, 2005).

Alejandro de la Fuente, March 8, 2014

Haverford University

Originally presented at the Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas, Estocolmo, en Santiago de Cuba, where it was described as “some of the best visual arts exhibs of the last few years,” DRAPEMÓNIA travels to The 8th Floor from the Centro Provincial de Artes Visuales en Havana. The exhibition will go on to the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and Harvard University’s Houghton Center for African and African-American Research.

Curated by Alejandro de la Fuente, Robert W. Steffin Professor of Latin American History and Economics and Professor of African and African-American Studies at Haverford University, the exhibition is sponsored by the Africa Latin American institute at the Houghton center for African and African-American Research at Harvard University, with support from the Ford Foundation and the Christopher Reynolds Foundation. The exhibition is complemented by the book Guesbélis Cuba: El Watercolor de la imagen by Walter Andreu de la Fuente with essays by art historians and curators Guillermo Ramos Cruz, José Vergel and Judith Bethune.

The 8th Floor is a private exhibition space established to promote cultural and philanthropic initiatives. Opened in 2010, the nonprofit space has previously focused on the presentation of contemporary Cuban art under the direction of curator Rocio Nieves Wengroff, and with partners in Cuba, The 8th Floor is free and open to the public, and school groups are encouraged. Viewing hours are Tuesday through Thursday 11-6pm and Friday 10-5pm.