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Curating an International Avant-Garde: *revista de avance* and the Visual Arts

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Abstract

This article examines *revista de avance*'s (1927-1930) engagement with avant-garde visual arts, both in the form of articles and reproductions, and in the form of art exhibitions: the 1927 *Exposición de arte nuevo*, the 1942 *Exposición Picasso* and the 1942 *Ciclo de exposiciones de pintores europeos*. Despite *revista de avance*'s will to break with academicism, and to make Havana the center of an international avant-garde, the magazine showed a very selective appreciation of avant-garde visual arts: it dismissed the radical aesthetic of European avant-garde movements such as Cubism, in favor of an exacerbation of realism as the preferred mode of expression for Latin American art. It is only after 1942, and its discovery by American curators and art critics, that a more daring Cuban avant-garde painting emerges in the eyes of the public. Ironically, the shift from the small group dynamic that had characterized the historical avant-garde in Cuba up until that point, to the international recognition it would then have, already signal its domestication, its assimilation by the cultural market. Finally, by analyzing Cuban artists' and art critics' perception of the state of Cuban visual arts, I stress the contradictions imbedded in *revista de avance* and later avant-garde endeavors in the island, as their will to participate in aesthetic modernity was accompanied by a strong sense of marginality with regard to the centers of cultural production—thus reinforcing the dichotomy between margins and centers, rather than breaking free from it.

Keywords

revista de avance, Cuban Avant-Garde, Avant-Garde visual arts, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, marginal modernities

Revista de avance (1927-1930) was the most important avant-garde publication in Cuba. In addition to the political endeavor that marked the origin of the magazine,¹ *revista de avance* played a fundamental role in the gathering of contemporary Cuban intellectuals, writers, and painters. The magazine linked such figures of Alejo Carpentier, Jorge Mañach, Juan Marinello, Marcel Poggolotti, Antonio Gattorno, and Víctor Manuel, some of whom made their first appearance in Cuba's cultural scene through the magazine's pages. But *revista de avance* and the group that gravitated around it also played a major role in the circulation of other Latin American and European avant-garde movements and works, some of which had never been published nor seen in Cuba. In particular, it was fundamental for the circulation of avant-garde visual arts from both sides of the Atlantic: from etchings and reproductions by Cuban painters Antonio Gattorno, Víctor Manuel, and Eduardo

Abela to reproductions of Mexican painters Gabriel Fernández Ledesma and José Clemente Orozco. These Latin American painters were featured side by side with some of the greatest names of European avant-garde painting, such as Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí.² In fact, the space accorded to avant-garde painting within the pages of the magazine only account for a small portion of *revista de avance's* engagement with the visual arts: the magazine was launched with an exhibition of contemporary Cuban painting, the 1927 *Exposición de arte nuevo*—the biggest, collective display of Cuban contemporary painting by the time. Two other exhibitions, this time of European painting, would later complement the *Exposición de arte nuevo*: the *Exposición Picasso*, from 1942—the first display of Picasso's work in Latin America; and the *Ciclo de exposiciones de pintores europeos*, also from 1942—which showcased works by Picasso, Joan Miró, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and others. Although these last exhibitions were not promoted by *revista de avance* itself, they were organized by the same intellectuals and writers that gravitated around the magazine, thus revealing a certain continuity regarding its devotion to the visual arts. This curatorial work, of course, had a great impact on Cuba's intellectual and cultural scene. More importantly, however, it also created a space, both physical and imaginary, where the island seemed to inhabit—or rather to be inventing—an international avant-garde.

What did it mean to publish Antonio Gattorno's etchings side by side with reproductions of such a major European artist as Picasso? What did it mean to unite the greatest Cuban painters of the time in one major exhibition—the one in 1927—, a completely unprecedented feat in the impoverished artistic scenario that characterized the island during the 20s and early 30s? What did it mean to bring to the island original works by major contemporary European painters, considering the island's lack of both cultural and economical capital during the 40s?

This article will examine *revista de avance's* and its collaborators' curatorial work, focusing on the space accorded to avant-garde visual arts through the pages of the magazine—etchings, reproductions, and articles—, as well as the exhibitions mentioned above. In doing so, I will also consider the role of *revista de avance's* co-editor Alejo Carpentier as a curator and art critic, a work to which he dedicated not only the years proceeding the magazine's creation, but that would endure over a decade after its closure.³ My aim here is not only to shed some archival light on an issue that has been overlooked by critics,⁴ but also to interrogate the impact and meanings of *revista de avance's* curatorial work as a sign of Cuba's will to become a cultural capital, a reference for the avant-garde all over the world. As I argue, this determination to become the center of an international avant-garde—or rather, to invent an international avant-garde from the margins of the modern world⁵—is

symptomatic of modernity as a sort of desire, unattainable by definition. A desire that, in the case of marginal modernities, entails a striking contradiction, in that for Cubans intellectuals and artists of the time, being willing to participate in modernity meant to acknowledge its own “backwardness.”⁶ Being modern then is not conceived here as a set of material conditions, but rather as a matter of *both* material and symbolic power relationships, as the appropriation and re-signification of paradigms that rely on and actually reinforce the dichotomy between highly “modernized” centers and “underdeveloped” margins. This article thus offers a significant intervention in the history and theory of the Latin American avant-garde, dialoguing with recent critics who have reassessed the contradictions and contributions imbedded in marginal modernities with regard to modern discourses and artistic practices. In particular, the case of visual arts in *revista de avance* illuminates Latin American avant-garde’s paradoxical position *vis a vis* the centers of artistic production, that is: its mimicking and modernizing impulse, and at the same time, its defiance to hegemonic discourses that are at the core of modernity.⁷

1. The Avant-Garde on Margins of Modernity

In order to assess the impact of *revista de avance*’s curatorial work, we need to first look at the state of Cuban visual arts and the circulation of contemporary European art in the island before the emergence of the magazine. The first obstacle to this endeavor is the lack of documentation for this period—which is itself a major indicator of the limited circulation of visual arts in Cuba by the time. If we were to attempt a short history of the penetration of avant-garde art in Cuba, we would have to start with the significantly titled group “La república chiquita” (“The Little Republic”), of which we have very little testimony. “La república chiquita” was a *tertulia*, a small group of intellectuals and artists organized by the art critic José Antonio Fernández and the illustrator José Manuel Acosta. The group would gather in Acosta’s house, where they exchanged materials and ideas about the “new art,” as well as their own work. The overall climate of the time was, then, that of small group gatherings (Baujín y Merino 26). This is how Carpentier characterizes the centrality of Acosta’s figure during the time:

... cuando todos estábamos haciendo poemas simbolistas, jugando con músicas verbales, cuando la pintura, en Cuba, era cosa de retratistas mundanos y hacedores de vulgares naturalezas muertas . . . José Manuel Acosta fue el primer hombre en recibir en La Habana aquella prodigiosa revista precursora que fue *L’Sprit Nouveau*,

de Le Corbusier, donde aparecían reproducciones de cuadros de Picasso, Juan Gris, Léger, Braque . . . (Qtd. in Baujín and Merino 27)

The French magazine *L'Sprit Nouveau* (1906-1920) was directed by the French architect Le Corbusier and the painter Amadée Ozenfant. It published a wide range of articles and materials, from arts and literature to architecture and sciences. But it is the visual aspect of the magazine that stands out, as each number would feature color photos and reproductions of the last novelties in urbanism, architecture, and painting. Thus, *L'Sprit Nouveau* was probably the main vehicle through which European avant-garde art started circulating in Cuba. However, as Carpentier suggests, the circulation of the magazine was restricted to the small group that took part in “La república chiquita,” and Cuban painting by that time consisted mostly of “mundane portraits” and “vulgar still lives,” in the writer’s words.

As Peter Bürger and Pierre Bourdieu have shown, this small group dynamic is also at the origin of the European avant-garde. It was only by detaching themselves from the artistic mainstream that avant-garde artists were able to engage in its radical rupture of tradition and criticism of bourgeois society; it was only by defying the institutionalization of art that avant-garde movements could be revolutionary. Therefore, producing avant-garde art necessarily implied the creation of autonomous groups of artists, alienated from both the public and the market.⁸ Let us recall here that, for Bürger, it is precisely when the public assimilates the avant-garde that it ceases to exist as such.⁹

This small group dynamic was counterbalanced by a strong cosmopolitanism, by the idea of an international artistic movement. Such cosmopolitanism responds directly to the phenomenon of modernity itself: the idea of an international avant-garde is not that different from that of an international socialist movement, nor—we may say, ironically—to that of an international market. To be a modern artist entails this double dynamic of small groups and intense cosmopolitanism that Carpentier observes in “La república chiquita,” and in this regard too there is no substantial difference between the ways avant-garde movements emerge on either side of the Atlantic.¹⁰

However, whereas Le Corbusier saw himself as both a spokesperson and a subject of the new art, Carpentier poses here as a sort of a spectator, and we can even say consumer, for whom “new art” was both a symbol of modernity, and a means to measure Cuba’s artistic scene. For Carpentier, *L'Sprit Nouveau* was more than a vehicle through which Cuban artists and intellectuals could get familiarized with the last “novelties” of European visual arts: it was also a material sign of the “backwardness” of Cuban visual arts.

By affirming that, I do not intend to stress the marginality of the Latin American avant-garde with regard to the centers of cultural production, or Latin America's "backwardness" with regard to modernity as a whole—as Carpentier implicitly does. Instead, what his perception of Cuba illuminates is the idea of modernity as an object of desire. An object of desire that, as such, necessarily had to be projected elsewhere—either in "more modern" nations, or in a teleological future. And this is as true for Cuba, as it is for Europe; even though, in most cases, the historical avant-garde would project its desire for aesthetic modernity in more "primitive," rather than more "modern" geographies.¹¹ The issue at stake then, is the circulation of art and its material means in the New and the Old Worlds: there is not any fundamental difference in terms of the way avant-garde movements emerge on either side of the Atlantic, or of its perception of the current state of art in their respective geographical areas. Indeed, the same sense of decay and backwardness that accompanies the emergence of the historical avant-garde in Cuba is also found in early twentieth century France; the same need for an elsewhere, in both space and time, is equally present on Europe and Latin America.

"La república chiquita" and *L'Sprit Nouveau* were not the only media of circulation of avant-garde art in Cuba. On the other side of the spectrum, we have Cuban magazines such as *Social* and *Chic*: non-specialized publications intended for the general public within whose pages we find several articles dedicated to contemporary painting. These articles were not always written by professional art critics and, for the most part, their aim was to educate the Cuban public on the "new art:" it was thanks to them that terms such as "Cubism" started circulating in the island. This didactic vocation reinforces the idea of modernity as an object of desire to which Cuba's "backwardness" was implicitly contrasted: the need to educate the public, after all, was a direct response to its "ignorance" with regard to contemporary art. The very titles of these publications—*Social* and *Chic*—already give us some clues about the overall nature and purpose of these articles: those were magazines intended for the middle and upper class, for whom being knowledgeable about contemporary art was a sign of distinction, a matter of cultural capital.

The articles published in these magazines were often accompanied by reproductions, which made them not only the primary source of information concerning European contemporary art, but also their first means of visual contact with it in Cuba. However, this first contact was constrained by at least two material limitations: first, the availability of images to be reproduced; and second, the medium of reproduction itself, that is, the fact that these reproductions were invariably black and white. For the Cuban public then, avant-garde painting was nothing more than a couple of

impalpable black and white images stamped in the pages of ordinary magazines, side by side with toothbrush advertising. It was as much of an object of desire, as a consumer product creating the need for itself, as its original artistic implications and meanings often got lost in its very means of circulation.

A great example of the precarious circulation of avant-garde painting in Cuba is the first appearance of Picasso's works in the island. His case is emblematic, since Cubism would later become a central part of the development of contemporary Cuban visual arts. According to Baujín and Merino, Picasso's first appearance in Cuba is an article published in *Chic* in 1924, "Grandeza y decadencia del cubismo," by Carpentier. The article is a perfect example of the didactic concerns mentioned above, explaining the emergence and characteristics of Cubism in great detail. Interestingly enough, it presents cubism not as a revolutionary movement, but as the logical outcome of the last fifty years of art history (Baujín and Merino 85). Rather than presenting Cubism as a radical break with tradition—as it was perceived in Europe—, Carpentier emphasizes continuity over rupture. In fact, he links Cubism to Impressionism, which was fairly well known to Cuban public: for him, Cubism revealed the same attention to form that Impressionism did. Regardless of whether or not his positions on Cubism are sustainable, this move makes it more accessible to the Cuban public, than it originally was to Europeans.

Though detailed, Carpentier's first article on Cubism contained no illustrations other than Picasso's self-portrait. A year later, he wrote yet a second article on Picasso, "El arte múltiple de Picasso," published in *Social*. The article is extremely short, more of a poetic piece than an article. This time, however, the text was illustrated by three reproductions of his works, all of them in black and white: his caricature of Igor Stravinsky, *El compositor Stravinsky* (1920), a drawing titled *Arlequin sentado* (1923), and a cubist composition titled *Tres músicos o músicos con máscara* (1921). Of all three, only one consisted of a Cubist composition. The other two, in contrast, were drawings, and noticeably realistic ones. Thus, Picasso's first appearance in the island is not only precarious, but somewhat misleading: as well informed as Carpentier's text is, the reproductions that illustrated it seldom give the Cuban reader an idea of what Cubism really was and meant. The bits and pieces of Picasso's *collages* seem to encounter an unintended parallel in the way European avant-garde visual arts starts to circulate in Cuba during the 20s.

2. Advancement and Backwardness: *revista de avance's* Curatorial Work

This preamble to *revista de avance's* curatorial work is anything but superfluous: what is at stake here is the limited circulation of avant-garde painting in Cuba during the 20s. What magazines such as *Social* and *Chic* demonstrate is, on the one hand, a will to overcome Cuba's "backwardness," to bring the island up to date with European art and art criticism; and on the other, the limited space and means accounted for avant-garde visual arts in Cuba. In fact, by that time, some of the most important Cuban contemporary painters were producing and showcasing their work outside the island.¹² On the island, contemporary painting was often associated with a turn-of-the-century aesthetic that drew upon the works of painters such as Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Gauguin.¹³ Avant-garde visual arts were restricted to the small group dynamic represented by "La república chiquita," and the domesticated bits and pieces we find in *Social* and *Chic*.

When the first number of *revista de avance* came out in 1927, it marked a huge change in Cuba's cultural scene: for the first time, a group and magazine produced in Cuba identified itself with the term "avant-garde;"¹⁴ for the first time, European avant-garde painting appeared side by side Cuban painting. This change was made even more dramatic by the *Exposición de arte nuevo*, organized by the magazine's board of editors that same year, which was the first great collective display of contemporary Cuban painting on the island, and the first one to showcase it under the label *arte nuevo* ("new art")—a detail, I insist, that should not be taken for granted.¹⁵

The *Exposición de arte nuevo* was launched in the Asociación de Pintores y Escultores, and showcased the works of Eduardo Abela, Carlos Enríquez, Víctor Manuel, Antonio Gattorno, Rafael Blanco, Amelia Peláez, Marcelo Pogolotti, Lorenzo Romero Arciaga, and many others. According to Cuban art critic and *revista de avance's* collaborator, Martín Casanovas: "Fue en el campo de las artes plásticas que la proyección de *Revista de Avance* tuvo mayores alcances y penetración, dejando huellas más profundas y persistentes. La *Exposición de Arte Nuevo* . . . ocasionó una violenta sacudida, y puede ser considerada como el comienzo, o si se quiere, el primer signo de una nueva era en la plástica cubana" (1972, 20). As Casanovas puts it, the exhibition purposely sought to shake Cuba's artistic scenario, "opening a new era for Cuban visual arts." Just as the first exhibitions of avant-garde art in Europe, however, the *Exposición de arte nuevo* did not seem to please the public, and even among art critics there were serious reservations with regard to it:

La reacción académica y burguesa fue violenta, porque resintió el golpe. Caían muchos tabús y falsos ídolos, se atentaba contra el retratismo oficialesco, los cuadros históricos escenográficos y el paisajismo litográfico . . . La "Exposición de Arte

Nuevo” constituyó una verdadera revolución, marcando el fin del academicismo y los primeros pasos del realismo cubano. (Casanovas 1972, 21)

Some of Carlos Enríquez’s paintings were removed from the exhibition, allegedly because they were nude portraits. And still, Cuban avant-garde was not only presenting itself as such, but also taking the public’s rejection as a sign of the modernity of Cuban art, not of its “backwardness.” Just like avant-garde artists in the centers of cultural production, *revista de avance*’s collaborators saw themselves as promoters of Cuban “advancement”—both artistic, and socio-political—, as visionaries whose iconoclastic impulse, whose desire to break with tradition, could only be resented by the “conservative bourgeois public.”

But it was not only the Cuban public and academic art critics who had reservations about avant-garde art. A few months after the show, Casanovas would publish a seemingly contradictory article on the *Exposición de arte nuevo*. The article, “Nuevos rumbos: la exposición de 1927,” attempts to distinguish “true” new art, and a “prescriptive” type of new art that, according to him, suffered from the same vices of the “old” art that it meant to combat:

Porque ocurre también, que dentro del arte nuevo . . . se amparan y esconden gentes cuya única preocupación es un novedismo de receta, de compromiso, de cajón. Gentes que, desertan del malabarismo correccionista, para darles a los malabarismos y pirotecnias de una modalidad artística que tiene de nueva solo la apariencia, pero que en el fondo padece del mismo mal de origen, de los mismos vicios y el mismo pecado decadentista del arte viejo, académico, de que pretenden abominar. (1927a, 100)

Criticizing the “prescriptive” character and the “excesses” of the avant-garde was becoming increasingly common by the time, not only in Latin America, but in Europe as well. We must also remember, pace Jorge Schwartz, Rosenberg, and Ramírez, that Latin American avant-garde movements were less inclined to novelty than their European counterparts. In contrast with European avant-garde movements, the Latin American avant-garde represented a compromise between the new and tradition, and often presented itself as the geopolitical future of contemporary art, when compared to the European avant-garde: its newness was not conceived temporarily, but rather geographically.¹⁶

Casanovas’s distinction between “true” and, to put it in his terms, “false” new art acquires new accents though, when we consider that he identifies the prescriptive type of art he criticizes with José Ortega y Gasset’s concept of “dehumanized art”—or a distortion of it. For Casanovas,

dehumanized art was an empty, merely aesthetic exercise—just as the “old” academic art was—, one that lacked human content and therefore, the type of socio-political vanguardism that *revista de avance* preached. But Casanovas goes even further in his critique. For him, dehumanized art was the symbol of decay, not renovation nor, as *revista de avance* would argue for, revolution; quite on the contrary, he associates dehumanized art with capitalism: “Este proceso de deshumanización . . . es fruto, fatal e ineludible, del espíritu y el imperativo de la época: época de materialismo, que desprecia todos los valores morales y las prerrogativas del espíritu, para atender solo a la eficacia de los actos y las obras humanas; eficacia que es, en suma, la única norma moral de la sociedad capitalista” (1927a, 99). Casanovas’s critique of dehumanization could be easily understood from the ideological point of view. In fact, according to Vicky Unruh, Ortega y Gasset’s concept of dehumanization was largely misinterpreted and often intentionally misappropriated in Latin America, where indeed, dehumanization became associated with a lack of human content, and therefore, any potential for socio-political critique—a fundamental aspect of the Latin American avant-garde. Instead, states Unruh, the Latin American avant-garde would often call for a “rehumanization” of art.¹⁷ However, breaking with realist patterns of representation, and therefore, with the sort of subjective appreciation that had characterized the public’s understanding of art up until the emergence of the avant-garde—as actually implied in the notion of dehumanization—was fundamental for avant-garde’s critique of bourgeois society and the status of art within it.¹⁸ Regardless of that, Casanovas associates the prevalence of the formal, more technical aspects of art implied in dehumanization with academicism, and thus with the very institutionalization of art that the avant-garde tried to overcome. Instead of dehumanization, Casanovas advocates for a “return of the real,” to cannibalize Hal Foster’s expression, and the return of an ideal of art based on the premise that art is, and should be, a direct expression and a source of human emotions:¹⁹

[L]a técnica, la pendolística, se ha enseñorado del arte, anulando su valor emotivo y su expresividad humana. El virtuoso, el hábil, el mañoso, se ha hecho dueño del campo, y el arte ha dejado de ser en sus manos una fuente de emociones, un medio de expresión, un medio de comunicación e inteligencia entre los hombres describiendo emociones comunes a todos ellos, para convertirse en una industria. (1927a, 99)

As we can see, Casanovas’s critique of dehumanization actually coincides with that of Ortega y Gasset to a great extent, with a fundamental difference: for him, dehumanization was not new art, but precisely what it was trying to surpass.

In a later text, “Arte nuevo,” Casanovas makes an even more revealing statement about dehumanized art. Here he identifies the avant-garde he dismisses explicitly with Cubism, claiming that Cubism is not really a new beginning, but rather an end; the end of Impressionism, and therefore, nineteenth century art with all that it represented: “[El cubismo] no es, como se pretende, un movimiento inicial, sino de cierre y conclusion” (1927b, 156). This argument does not seem to differ from the one we find in Carpentier’s article, published years earlier in *Chic*. In Casanovas’ case however, it is used to diminish Cubism; it is not, as in the case of Carpentier’s, a statement on art history, nor as a strategy to domesticate Cubism: for Casanovas, Cubism and the European avant-garde in general were the product of decay. This perception of the European avant-garde goes hand in hand with the popularization of Oswald Spengler in Latin America by the time, as well as the generalized sentiment of decay experienced by the Western world during the interwar period. This is among the reasons why, for Rosenberg (22), the Latin American avant-garde was able to engage in its characteristic criticism of the modern project, even though it was perceived to lack the material conditions associated with modernity. In Casanovas’s article, however, it also serves him to reject avant-garde aesthetics altogether.

The fifth issue of *revista de avance*—where Casanovas’s first article appears—also contained a supplement with photographic reproductions by both Latin American and European avant-garde painters. Ironically, the selection included Picasso. When we look at it however, it stands out that most of these reproductions belong to a phase in European art history known as “return to order”—a term that refers to a return to more realistic patterns of representation, and the critique of the “excessive” experimentalism that characterized early twentieth century art.²⁰ There is then an ironic synchrony here: while the European avant-garde was revisiting tradition and criticizing its own will to novelty, *revista de avance* was claiming its “advancement” based on the reproduction of the very academic traditions that the avant-garde meant to demolish.

The selection of visual arts pieces reproduced within the pages of *revista de avance* reinforces this dubious dynamic that consisted in a will to participate in aesthetic modernity, and the apparent rejection of any radical aesthetics. Most etchings and reproductions we find in the magazine were portraits and self-portraits, with a prevalence of drawings and caricatures. In fact, most works reproduced in the pages of the magazine were fairly realistic. For the first time in its history then, the island was able to see a decent sample of avant-garde art, one that featured Cuban and European painters alike, showcased side by side; for the first time, Cuba seemed to be inhabiting aesthetic modernity, or rather to be symbolically creating an international avant-garde from the margins of

modernity. However, the selection of contemporary painting featured in the magazine was hardly typical of the historical avant-garde.

If Cubism and the European avant-garde in general were the expression of decay, not of a new artistic order, what did Casanovas considered to be “true” new art, the “true” avant-garde? The answer is simple: Mexican Muralism. For Casanovas, Cubism lacks human content, and therefore, any potential for socio-political critique, actually aligning itself with capitalism. Mexican Muralism, on the other hand, is indissociable from its socio-political critique, and paid close attention to the particularities of Mexican realities and cultural traditions. In fact, Mexican Muralism was a powerful instrument of propaganda for the Mexican Revolution, also reflecting the Latin American avant-garde tendency to revalidate its pre-modern past in response to the “decay” of the Old World.²¹ For Casanovas then, Mexican Muralism was the model upon which the “true” Cuban avant-garde—a politically engaged and nationalistic one—should to be built.

Casanovas’s assessment of the European avant-garde may be inaccurate, but it is perfectly coherent with *revista de avance*’s type of vanguardism: after all, it presented itself as an *avanzada política* (political avant-garde), not an aesthetic one.²² And it also brings about an important geopolitical argument, that is: the idea that Europe and all it represented was in decay, whereas Latin America, once relegated to the margins, is now the future, the center of a modernity still to come. There is then a clear geopolitical agenda in Casanovas’s statement, one in which European newness is dismissed as “old,” and *revista de avance*, as representative of a Latin American newness, is presented as the true “new art.”²³

This is a perfect example of Rosenberg’s theory that, in Latin America, “newness” was conceived geographically, not temporarily: the Latin American avant-garde was not “new” because it came after the European one—which is not necessarily true—, nor because it was more “innovating.” Instead, it was “new” precisely because it came from Latin America, which was then perceived as “the future,” the new center of the Western world. Moreover, according to Masiello, Casanovas’s and Jorge Mañach’s view of the Cuban avant-garde is also emblematic of the conflict between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that characterized the Latin American avant-garde, which “called on a stock of national images to define its cosmopolitan project” (8). On the one hand, *revista de avance* expressed a strong cosmopolitanism, calling for an international alliance—“a plea for camaraderie and action to intellectuals abroad” (Masiello 19). On the other, it was marked by an equally strong concern about Cuba’s cultural identity and sovereignty, not only opposing the prevalence of European models in Latin American cultural production, but also the U.S. intervention in the island

– the replacement of European imperialism, by U.S. imperialism in Latin America (19-20).²⁴ This is why, especially after 1929, *revista de avance* would turn its attention to Afro-Cubanism, even though its collaborators' positions regarding the issue of race in Cuba are largely contradictory and problematic.²⁵

revista de avance's position regarding the Latin American avant-garde, as well as its place within the international art scene, is in blatant contrast with more recent developments in Latin American art. As Mosquera points out, the issue of cultural identity is no longer the main parameter by which Latin American artists and curators evaluate Latin American artistic production. Rather than producing Latin American art, and relying on its difference in order to attain international recognition—its “Latin Americanness”—, Latin American artists are now producing art *from* Latin America: “Latin American art has ceased to be so, and has instead become art from Latin America. From, and not so much of, in or here, is the key word today in the re-articulation of the increasingly permeable polarities local/international, contextual/global, centers/peripheries, and West/non-West to which the fable referred” (12). Mosquera notes that the imperative of difference led to totalizing generalizations with regard to what Latin American art was supposed to be. In the case of the historical avant-garde, this imperative was, to a great extent, a cannibalized response to the European avant-garde taste for the “primitive.” The imperative of “Latin Americanness” thus had a self-exoticizing effect that later artistic manifestations in Latin America would reproduce. In contrast with this approach, he observes two complementing tendencies in contemporary art from Latin America:

On the one hand, there is the internal process of overcoming the neurosis of identity among artists, critics, and curators. . . . On the other hand, Latin American art is being valued more as an art without surnames. . . . art from this region is now being recognized more and more as a participant in a general practice that does not by necessity show its context, and that on occasions refer to art itself. (20)

But there is yet another issue at stake when it comes to *revista de avance's* celebration of Mexican Muralism. As we have seen, the magazine clearly favored the so-called “return to order” when it comes to its selection of European painting, a more realistic type of art than early twentieth century avant-garde. Mexican Muralism, as well, is fairly realistic: despite its aesthetic radicalism, it relies on an exacerbation of realistic conventions. And so do contemporary Cuban realist painting and other examples of Latin American avant-garde published in the magazine. With respect to Cuban painting, no space was afforded in the magazine to artists such as Mariano Rodríguez, René

Portocarrero, and Wifredo Lam, all of whom were heavily informed by the European avant-garde. In fact, Casanovas explicitly affirms that the 1927 *Exposición de arte nuevo* had excluded some Cuban contemporary painters: “Y estos malabaristas, que de nuevo sólo tienen la etiqueta o la pretensión, han sido también, en lo posible, alejados de la exposición de ‘1927’” (1927a, 100). Just like the general public, Casanovas and other collaborators of *revista de avance* did not really seem to appreciate the avant-garde for its most radical aesthetic aspects, that is: its rupture with realist patterns of representation, and its formal experimentation.

There is a very complex dynamic behind Casanovas’s and other articles published in the pages of *revista de avance*. On the one hand, Cuban artists and intellectuals seem to be willing to participate in modernity, to create a space where the latest “novelties” of European art—the center—and the latest “novelties” of Latin American art—the margins—would cohabitate side by side, and moreover, where Latin American art would dictate the future of this international avant-garde. This determination to move from the small group dynamics that the magazine was caught in and to embrace a strong cosmopolitanism—which is characteristic of the avant-gardes in both sides of the Atlantic—is in direct relation to the phenomenon of modernity itself, to modernity as an object of desire which is always projected elsewhere, in either time or space; or as in this case, both time and space. This is why, for Casanovas, discussing the European avant-garde was so important in the first place: it was a means to competitively measure the Latin American avant-garde, putting México and Cuba in the center of this new, international avant-garde that the magazine represents, or rather, that it is trying to invent.²⁶

On the other hand, some of the magazine’s editors and collaborators showed a very selective taste when it comes to avant-garde art, dismissing some of its most experimental works in favor to the so-called “return to order,” and claiming for an exacerbation of realism, as opposed to a rupture with it. Whether this is actually a reflection of aesthetic reservations or a geopolitical move is hard to determine. What is certain is that Casanovas praises realism as the mode of representation of revolution, and thus also of the Latin American avant-garde.

3. From Paris (Not So) Directly to Havana

Despite *revista de avance*’s curatorial work, avant-garde visual arts still had a restricted place and impact in Cuba during the 30s. First, because the magazine’s will to break with academicism and revolutionize Cuban visual arts was actually quite selective. Second, because despite its desire to shake the island’s cultural scene and to transform Havana into a world cultural capital, *revista de avance*

had restricted means, reproducing the small group dynamics we observe in the emergence of the European avant-garde. Besides, many Cuban avant-garde artists were actually outside the island. Cuban avant-garde was, for the most part, a “peregrine avant-garde,” and the space created by the magazine, more of a symbolic, than an actual one.²⁷

The great turning point of this narrative are the exhibitions realized in the Lyceum de Havana in 1942. Both the *Exposición Picasso* and the *Ciclo de exposiciones de pintores europeos* that followed were organized by Alejo Carpentier and José Gómez Sicre, and were accompanied by a series of talks by Carpentier and Sicre themselves, Juan Marinello, and Jorge Mañach. All these names were previously associated with *revista de avance*, and the very idea to organize these shows would be unthinkable prior to the magazine’s efforts to disseminate contemporary art among the Cuban public.²⁸ Unfortunately, only Marinello’s text was published at the time, and there is no clear proof that Mañach’s conference ever took place (Baujín y Merino 43). Once more, the lack of documentation is just as eloquent as the event itself.

The *Exposición Picasso* was the very first exhibition of Pablo Picasso’s work in Latin America.²⁹ Its organizers insisted heavily upon this fact, and so did the Cuban press. More interesting, however, is the colonial logic behind Cubans’ perception of the relevance of this exhibition, the conflicting dynamics between a will to become modern, and the sense of backwardness that it entails.

The conferences organized for the occasion were not written for specialists, but rather for the general public, and reveal the same didactic impulse we saw in *Social* and *Chic*. Unlike the reproductions published in these magazines, or in *revista de avance*, the paintings displayed in this exhibition actually pertained to the very last phase of Picasso’s work.³⁰ In fact, many of these works had never been released. However, this desire to shake Cuba’s artistic scene with radical aesthetics was counterbalanced by the tone and content of these conferences: not only they were meant to educate the public on Picasso’s works, but also to prepare it to what it was going to see; an attempt to neutralize the shock that they could generate. For Sicre,

[L]a exposición Picasso que estamos presenciando y que, si ha de tener algún defecto, este ha de ser el haber carecido de una anterior que sujetara los conceptos plásticos que Picasso presenta en esta última fase de obra, que, para nosotros, público desprovisto de contactos con los últimos movimientos artísticos que ocurren en la humanidad, tiene que resultarnos algo insólito y desconcertante . . . Sensación semejante de desconcierto produjeron a los públicos europeos de mediados del siglo

pasado . . . aquellas manchas inconexas, vibrantes, con que los impresionistas se empeñaban en aprisionar la descomposición de la luz . . . Por eso, aquí venimos a tratar de familiarizarnos con los hermanos precedentes de esos seres descompuestos e insólitos que tenemos en exhibición en el Lyceum. (Baujín y Merino 43-44)

Sicre's statement is quite revealing: for him, the potential shock that Picasso's paintings could generate among the public was due to Cuba's lack of contact with European contemporary art. What is implied here is that the public should accept its own "ignorance" with regard to it, and embrace Picasso's "awkwardness," as it represented the latest developments in visual arts. In trying to persuade the Cuban public to "modernize itself," and accept Picasso's audacious aesthetic, Sicre compares the negative reception that he could have among Cubans to that of Impressionism in nineteenth century Europe. But it fails to acknowledge that Picasso did originally shock the European public. Once more, the will to synchronize Latin American with European cultural production that motivates the exhibition was somehow defused by a generalized sense of backwardness, reproduced by its very organizers.

Picasso's exhibition indeed got a very poor reception among the public and press alike (Baujín y Merino 39). Carpentier would recognize this years later: "Los óleos desconcertaron un tanto—no olvidemos que esto ocurría en La Habana, 1942—por la aspereza de sus trasmutaciones formales" (Qtd. in Baujín and Merino 176). The show was soon forgotten, and the one that took place in México two years later is often regarded as the first of its kind in Latin America (Baujín and Merino 47).

However, a quick glance at Cuban contemporary painting tells us that the island was not, as Sicre seems to imply, isolated from the latest developments in visual arts. Sicre himself acknowledges it when he adds:

Por primera vez vamos a ponernos un tanto al día de lo que ha estado sucediendo por Europa en estos últimos años, que ayudará a avivar y acrecer la estimación que por nuestros verdaderos artistas de hoy . . . debemos tener . . . A aquellos valientes artistas nuestros por lo que han venido realizando hasta ahora . . . es necesario cuidar y poner en marcha para no vivir con un enorme caudal de años de retraso en asuntos del espíritu. (44)

Sicre's sense of backwardness is negated by the recognition that Cuban visual arts were not, after all, stuck in the past. It was not that Cuba contemporary painting was behind its own time: it's the public that did not acknowledge the existence of a Cuban avant-garde, restricted as it was to small

groups, isolated from both the public, art institutions, and the market. All of which, I insist, should not be taken as a sign of the island's "backwardness," as it reflects the exact same dynamics that we observe in the emergence of the European avant-garde. What these exhibitions reveal is not Cuban visual arts' marginality with regard to the centers of cultural production, but rather its marginality with regard to the international cultural market and, with it, to the process of institutionalization of the historical avant-garde art that, according to Büger, signals its end.

Some details about the shows confirm this *other* type of marginality. First, they took place in the Lyceum de Havana, an institution created by upper-class women for whom being well versed in contemporary art was part of their overall education, not a matter of engagement with art production and criticism. In fact, the institution was created precisely to promote "modern art," which draws us back to the colonial logic that often undergird such initiatives.

Second, the lack of documentation about these exhibitions is not accidental. Neither were accompanied by a catalog, just signs and invitations. The very identification of the works featured in them was only possible thanks to Baujín and Merino's exhaustive archival work, and the list is still incomplete. Even though Acosta took pictures of the *Exposición Picasso*, these pictures were lost, and we only know twelve of the eighteen oils and *guaches* that it showcased. In fact, some of the works displayed in the *Ciclo de exposiciones de pintores europeos* were mere photographic reproductions, as in the case of Picasso's famous *Guernica* (1937). The desire to participate in aesthetic modernity surpassed the material means available to actually make Havana the new capital of an international avant-garde.

It may seem surprising then that these exhibitions even took place, and moreover, that the first showcase of Picasso in Latin America actually featured unreleased works. A curious reference in the Cuban press helps us understand how was that possible: "Han sido la guerra española y esta segunda guerra mundial las causas de que en La Habana hayamos comenzado a disfrutar de exposiciones extranjeras de buen arte" (qtd. in Baujín y Merino 241). The Spanish Civil War and World War II were responsible for an intense European migration to the Americas. Cuba, which had always been an important port of entry to the continent, suddenly became a point of passage for many exiled Spanish, French, and other European intellectuals and artists, some of whom eventually took up residence on the island. And it was also thanks to these historical events that Picasso's paintings eventually made it Cuba: it was due to the Nazi occupation of Paris that a certain *marchand* named Pierre Loeb ended up on the island, casually carrying with him a couple of paintings Picasso had just finished. According to Carpentier, Loeb barely made it to Havana with these paintings, as he was interrogated by British officers during his stop in Jamaica, and had to resort to a little lie in

order to proceed with them, swearing on his “military insignias” that the paintings belonged to him.³¹

The presence of Loeb in Cuba was largely accidental, as the island was not his intended destination. The fact that he was carrying these paintings with him, and that he managed to get into the island with them, even more amusing. As the story goes, when Carpentier heard about the fact that Loeb was in Cuba, he immediately contacted him. Organizing the exhibition, then, was a matter of connecting the dots. But he still had to face the island’s lack of resources and established art institutions in order to make it happen, giving this and later shows the sense of improvisation we observed. Which, again, should not be taken as a sign of Cuba’s cultural “backwardness,” but rather of its socio-economical marginality within the modern world-system. When Cuban art critics and writers contrast their will to transform Havana into a world cultural capital, with its perceived backwardness with regard to the centers of modern cultural production, they fail to acknowledge that there was indeed a Cuban avant-garde, and that it is precisely when the avant-garde moves from its small group dynamic and become a cosmopolitan, worldwide celebrated movement, that it ceases to exist as such.

4. From Havana to the World

Despite the lack of documentation, and the apparent dismissal of the general public, the impact of the 1942 series of exhibitions for Cuban visual arts—Picasso’s in particular—can hardly be overestimated. A quick look at the works of those considered the most important contemporary Cuban painters—Wifredo Lam, René Portocarrero, Mariano Rodríguez, Mario Carreño, and others—should suffice to make the year of 1942 an *annus mirabilis* in Cuban visual arts. However, the relationship between these exhibitions, and Picasso’s influence on contemporary Cuban visual arts is not as direct and obvious as it may seem: “Coincidencia o influencia estética, lo cierto es que cuando se revisa la producción cubana posterior a 1942 se advierte la impronta picassiana en casi todos los artistas” (Baujín and Merino 49). Neither a coincidence, nor a matter of aesthetic influence, I would argue. Many of these artists were actually familiar with Cubism and other European avant-garde movements prior to these exhibitions, as many of them studied outside of the island. In fact, many Cuban painters on the island were producing Cubist-like works, without necessarily possessing in-depth knowledge of Picasso. Yet, they were recognized neither in the island, nor outside of it: it was only after Picasso’s exhibition in 1942 that they materialize in the eyes of Cuban mainstream art

critics and public. It's the retrospective game of mirrors, then, that make that year so emblematic: 1942 is more of a symbolic turning point in Cuba's art history, than a concrete one.

In any case, there was indeed a *boom* of avant-garde painting in Cuba between 1942 and 1944. This is partially explained by a showcase of Cuban painting organized in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1944, which, unlike the exhibitions that took place on the island, was a great success among the public. This show was organized by none other than Alfred Barr, who was also responsible for organizing Picasso's exhibition at MoMA in 1939. Barr organized the exhibition in consultation with Sicre and María Luisa Gómez Mena, Mario Carreño's wife, whom he met during his trip to Cuba in 1942. Barr went to both Mexico and Cuba that year, with about US\$ 25,000 provided by MoMA's Inter-American Fund—initiated by Nelson A. Rockefeller—for the specific purpose of buying Latin American art. Apparently, Cuban painters responded to his interest by producing and sending him a considerable number of brand new, unreleased paintings, many of which would never return to Cuba.³² Even more interesting is the fact that art critics reacted to this exhibition by noting the outstanding influence of Picasso in Cuban painting. In particular, Wifredo Lam, who had already exhibited his works in the city in the year of 1942, created a great impression in New York's public: the press referred to him as a “Cuban Picasso.”³³ This, together with Barr's visit to Havana, may have been the main motivating factor for the organization of the 1944 showcase.

This exhibition makes it look as if contemporary Cuban painting had a long history of dialogue with the European avant-garde, Cubism in particular—which is partially true. If we consider, however, that most of the paintings that were displayed in 1944 were actually produced between 1942 and 1944, the idea of an intense, long-term dialogue with Cubism becomes very relative. What is interesting here is that it took a conscious will to become modern, lead by a few individuals, and a fragile cosmopolitanism, in order for a shift in the perception of Cuban visual arts to happen. In other words, an international physical space had to be created, almost accidentally, for the symbolic space opened by *revista de avance* to be truly inhabited by aesthetic modernity, for Cuban avant-garde to be recognized and embraced as such. A recognition that also had to count on the validation from the island's “more modern” imperial neighbor: the United States, with all its art institutions and a well-established art market. In this sense, the real change here may not be an aesthetic one, but the validation that the 1942 exhibitions of European painting in Cuba and the 1944 exhibition of Cuban painting in the U.S. brought to these painters. It was only when Cuban contemporary painting was

validated in the eyes of the centers of cultural production, only when it was already assimilated by the international cultural market, that it was integrated to the Cuban canon.

Here, the idea of marginal modernity, or what Madureira refers to as “cannibal modernity,” becomes illuminating. Whereas *revista de avance* expressed a strong will to participate in modernity, a desire to become the very center of what was being conceived as the avant-garde of an international avant-garde – the Latin American avant-garde–, the voice of the small group united around *revista de avance* was not really heard outside the island, and that of the group of painters that retrospectively best represent Cuban avant-garde painting—to which the very magazine was actually a bit resistant–, was not even heard in the island.³⁴ It was only after the Cuban avant-garde explicitly starts cannibalizing their European counterparts, adding a touch of green to the weariness of Picasso’s grey,³⁵ only when this marginal, isolated space becomes an important port for European intellectuals and artists, that Cuban avant-garde painting starts to exist in the eyes of the public.

A final remark. When researching avant-garde visual arts in Cuba, one notices that the wandering that marked the careers of the most important Cuban painters is reproduced in the fate of their paintings. Indeed, a great deal of contemporary Cuban paintings are outside of Cuba, either in major museums such as MoMA, or in private collections throughout the world. The curatorial work initiated by *revista de avance*, and continued by its editors and collaborators, were all attempts to adjust Cuba’s clock to aesthetic modernity, to make Havana the capital of an international avant-garde. However, these very same efforts actually reveal the limitations, the marginal space, and the colonial dynamic that the island had to face in order to “become modern.” Either that, or we have to accept that to be modern was already to be marginal, that modernity is more of a desire that always needs to be projected elsewhere, than some sort of state that stands in direct relationship to modernization as a socio-economical phenomenon. In either case, it seems that Cuban avant-garde painting was destined to survive in bits and pieces, to fragmentation, to dissipation. But it is not the revolution that explains it’s wandering. It is its very success, its uptake by the international cultural market that defines it.

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Notes

¹ *revista de avance* was founded by the *Grupo Minorista* (Minoritarian Group), which started to take shape when a group of intellectuals and artists reunited to protest against Gerardo Machado's dictatorship in 1923. Their first manifesto—published in 1927, in the pages of the magazine *Social*—interestingly mixes claims for the autonomy of cultural production and education in Cuba—in face of Machado's censorship—, with claims against U.S. imperialism and for a Latin American union. On the aesthetic and political concerns behind *revista de avance*, as well as its role in Cuba's intellectual and cultural scenario, consult Celina Manzoni's work, *Un dilema cubano: nacionalismo y vanguardia*, and Francine Masiello's article, "Rethinking Neocolonial Esthetics: Literature, Politics, and Intellectual Community in Cuba's *Revista de Avance*."

² According to Masiello: "*Avance* was the most handsome product of avant-garde creative activism in Cuba and perhaps Spanish America. Its pages were filled with reproductions of sculptures, lithographs, and paintings by internationally recognized artists such as Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dalí, and Henri Matisse. The journal thus provided superb examples of the flourishing of modern visual arts in the 1920's. . . . *Avance* demonstrated that it was in touch with both the European and U.S. artistic communities as well as with intellectuals from all over Latin America" (4).

³ Carpentier published several articles on avant-garde art, both before, and after the creation of *revista de avance*, and he was also the main organizer of the 1942 exhibitions. His articles were published in several different vehicles, the most important of which are Cuban magazines *Social* and *Chic*, and his column "Letra y solfa," published in Venezuelan newspaper *El nacional*. Most of these articles were reunited in the volume *A puertas abiertas: textos críticos sobre arte español*, edited by José Antonio Baujín and Luz Merino.

⁴ Even though there are many academic works dedicated to *revista de avance*, most of which acknowledge its engagement with the visual arts, very few of them analyze this engagement in depth. One exception is Lori Cole's articles, "Reproducing the Avant-Garde: The Art of Modernist Magazines," and "How Do You Imagine Latin America?: Questioning Latin American Art and Identity in Print." The first one compares *revista de avance's* curatorial work—and in particular, the 1927 *Exposición de arte nuevo*—with that of U.S. magazine *Camera Work*; the second one focuses on *revista de avance's* and *Imán's* understanding of "Latin American art," as well as its place within the international artistic production through questionnaires. Both articles stress the complex dynamics between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in *revista de avance's* approach to avant-garde art, that is: its attempt to create a national canon, or a Latin American canon—defined in opposition to Europe, to a great extent—all the while participating in the international artistic community (2013, 187-188 and 2014, 111). According to Masiello, however, *revista de avance's* collaborators did not necessarily agree with each other when it came to their assessment of the avant-garde. As we will later, the more "internationalist" sectors of the magazine were actually determinant to the future of Cuban contemporary painting.

⁵ According to Masiello, *revista de avance* combined its political endeavor with an effort to bring together avant-garde artists and writers from all over the world. In particular, it aimed to gather artists and writers from both Europe and the U.S. who somehow challenged the *status quo*, dissident figures that could be claimed as part of a broader political and aesthetic movement of defiance to capitalist world order and, in particular, U.S. imperialism in Cuba and Latin America: "*Avance* was participating in a wide cosmopolitan project that drew Cuban artists and writers into dialogue with those abroad. . . . *Avance* brought local political concerns into convergence with international esthetics. The Cuban avant-garde was not a servile imitation of European activism in the arts. . . . the Cubans turned their attention to a politicized appraisal of national culture" (7).

⁶ The term "backwardness" is used here both in reference to Cuban's own perception of the island between the 20's and the 50's, and to its prominence in Latin America's political and intellectual discourses: terms such as "backwardness," "underdevelopment," and "dependency" were key to the construction of the discourse of "progress" in Latin America—which is at the core of *revista de avance* (*advancement magazine*)—, and thus also to its more recent deconstruction among academic circles.

⁷ I am alluding to critics such as Luis Madureira and Fernando Rosenberg, as well as art critics and curators Gerardo Mosquera and Mary Carmen Ramírez, who have analyzed the Latin American avant-garde under the concept of marginal modernities. For Mosquera: "the appropriation paradigms [that characterize Latin American contemporary art], which are based on the incorporation of differences, underline the polar opposition between hegemonic and subordinate cultures" (16). However, as Ramírez highlights: "the dialogical nexus sustained by Latin American artists with their European counterparts led to a series of *versions*, *inversions* and *subversions* of the theoretical and practical postulates of the historical avant-garde movements. These intrinsic transformations not only yielded highly original proposals but turned the Latin American versions of this trend into agents in the upside-down projection of their societies" (2).

⁸ For Bürger, the historical avant-garde represents a self-critic stage of art in bourgeois society, as it both emerges from, and criticizes the autonomy of art as a social-subsystem: "[the historical avant-garde] criticizes art as an institution, and the course of its development took in bourgeois society. The concept of 'art as an institution' is used here refer to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works. The avant-garde turns against up both" (22). To which he adds: "Only after art has in fact wholly

detached itself from everything that is the praxis of life can two things be seen to make up the principle of development of art in bourgeois society: the progressive detachment of art from real life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of experience, i.e. the aesthetic” (23). As for avant-garde’s desire to reunite art and social praxis, he states: “The avant-gardists view its dissociation from the praxis of life as the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society. . . . The avant-gardists proposed the sublation of art . . . : art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life” (49).

⁹ Although Bürger argues that the assimilation of the avant-garde by the public and art institutions—what is to say, by the cultural market—signals the end of the historical avant-garde, the resistance to the commodification of art is a common feature in later twentieth century artistic production. In fact, many critics apply the term “avant-garde” to later contemporary artistic manifestations, as do critics Matei Calinescu and Hall Foster, among others.

¹⁰ Commenting on the proliferation of avant-garde magazines during the 1920’s and the 1930’s, Cole states that: “Because magazines fostered contact between writers and artists from various nationalities, they connected modernist communities across the Atlantic. . . . If, as Carpentier argues, avant-garde production constituted a ‘fever’ emerging simultaneously across a broad geographic space, it was enabled by an international periodical network, which Latin American writers and editors helped to shape” (2014, 113).

¹¹ In assessing the state of art in the Old World, and combating nineteenth century academicism, the European avant-garde often searched for inspiration in so-called “primitive cultures:” the influence of African and Asian art in the European avant-garde was fundamental. In the case of Latin America, as Rosenberg observes, there was a compromise between the search for the new, and the investigation of the continents’ own cultural roots. This led many avant-garde artists in the continent to embrace primitivism as a key element of its own aesthetic modernity: in fact, according to Ramírez, primitivism is the key defining element of the Latin American avant-garde, which presented itself as a *regressive* utopia, rather than a futurological one: “our forward-looking pioneers proceeded to recalibrate the postulates of the avant-garde to fit the socio-political conditions of their pre-industrial countries. The notion of Latin America as the exotic *no-place* of the European imagination would be quickly replaced by the avant-garde chimera: art itself as a form of utopia. That is to say, art as embodying brand-new values (in the context of capitalist society) liberated it from its mere instrumental function and transformed it into a source of enjoyment and participation for the masses. This ideal social and aesthetic order was the embryonic utopia pursued by such paradigmatic movements as Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Neo-Plasticism, Constructivism, and Surrealism; all of which relied on the technological forces un chained by modernization to make this ideal state possible. Yet, in the uneven context of the New World, this utopia would undergo an outstanding inversion. Instead of the forward thrust that modernization imposed on the European historic avant-gardes, Latin American went back to their glorious, untainted past in search for the chimerical elements for their avant-garde approach. This primeval state was set in the pre-Cabralian and pre-Columbian past” (3). This tendency had important geopolitical connotations, as many avant-garde movements in Latin America properly identified the colonial encounter as being the birth of modernity, of a world-system in which the continent was destined to occupy only a marginal position. According to Rosenberg: “The modern values that most Latin American intellectuals embraced implied temporal narratives in which primitivism was only a logical consequence, a resource seemingly available for contestation, albeit ironically implemented in the most diverse situations. . . . The seduction of primitivism left Latin American primitivists ensnared in backwardness dangerously close to what had led them to declare their vanguardism in the first place . . . primitivism was not just predicated on an archaic remnant . . . but was projected back into a global negotiation of cultural value, reworked through a postcolonial mapping” (25).

¹² This is the case of painters such as Amélia Peláez and Wifredo Lam, among others. Although Amélia Peláez first exhibition took place in Cuba in 1924, it was only after she went to France, in 1927, that she started to engage with avant-garde *topoi* and techniques. Wifredo Lam left the island even earlier, in 1923, precisely due to the academic style of painting practiced in Havana’s Escuela de Bellas Artes. Similar stories characterize the careers of most Cuban avant-garde painters. According to Cole: “The ‘Exhibition of New Art’ represented a break from the dogma of the reigning art school in Cuba, the San Alejandro Academy, deputing a new style that synthesized Cuban and European artistic innovations. To counter the approach learned at the academy, many artists traveled to Paris to immerse themselves in the latest developments in avant-garde art. Upon their return, artists such as Abela, Gattorno, and Víctor Manuel applied cubist and expressionist principles to Cuban subject matter” (2013, 190). Ironically, the same conservatism that Cuban painters attribute to the Escuela de Bellas Artes also characterized European art academies: it is outside these circles, parallel to them, that the European avant-garde emerges.

¹³ For an overall appreciation of Cuban contemporary art, consult Adelinda de Juan’s work, particularly *Pintura cubana: temas y variaciones*.

¹⁴ The first number of the magazine opens with an article titled “Vanguardismo,” where *revista de avance’s* director, Jorge Mañach, discusses in detail the notions of avant-garde and vanguardism. This may be the first text where the term

“avant-garde” ever appears in Cuba. Before that, avant-garde art was normally referred to as “new art,” a term that was often reserved to European contemporary painting.

¹⁵ This exhibition was preceded by a series of individual ones, which took place in the Salón de Bellas Artes between the years of 1924 and 1925. These were organized and presented by the very same artists and intellectuals that would later unite around *revista de avance*.

¹⁶ According to Rosenberg: “the Latin American avant-gardes therefore understood ‘the new’ spatially, not temporarily” (7). For him: “The avant-gardists were, in different ways, modernizers. . . . But it is exactly this disposition toward novelty and its artistic representation, even when some artists and movements constructed their stance in partial opposition to it . . . , that made their production sensitive to their historical position of enunciation – that is, to the place they occupied in the assigning of cultural values, such as novelty and backwardness, within a world of shifting hegemonies” (19).

¹⁷ According to her: “‘rehumanization’ of art alludes to a second level to a contemporary response within the Latin American vanguard movements to Ortega’s essay, an aversive reaction more to the word *dehumanization* itself than to the specific points raised in the piece. . . . Art, it was argued in countless manifestos and critical writings, even in its most modern forms, had everything to do with experience, and the words *human* and *humanized* became veritable buzzwords in Latin American vanguardist discourse.” (23)

¹⁸ I am referring to the fact that realism is the mode of representation of bourgeois art *par excellence*, according to Ortega y Gasset. Unruh makes an illuminating reading of the relationships between dehumanization, and Bürger’s conceptualization of the avant-garde as an attempted rupture with the institutionalization of art in bourgeois society: “it is precisely through the ‘dehumanization’ that alters perceptions by calling attention to the Ortegian windowpane that the avant-gardes forced artistic recipients to think about the idea of art itself and its relationships to life. If we filter Ortega’s metaphor through Bürger’s view, we can argue that the vanguards challenged artistic recipients, notwithstanding the daunting optical gymnastics required, to focus on the interaction of the windowpane and the garden, a reflexive engagement of art with life. Thus the very distancing quality in modern art that Ortega called dehumanization turns the public toward, not away, from lived experience” (22).

¹⁹ It goes without saying that Casanovas’ claim for realism is remarkably distanced from the postmodern “return of the real” that Foster analyzes, as it is also distanced from the sort of “rehumanization” that, according to Unruh, many Latin American avant-garde artists would argue for, since none of these implied the above mentioned conception of art as an expression of human emotions. Interestingly enough, it is not difficult to relate Ortega y Gasset’s concept of dehumanization to more contemporary artistic manifestations, as well as art critics who have underscored a certain solution of continuity between the historical avant-garde and postmodernism, such as in the case of Foster himself. In identifying a “return of the real” in late twentieth century avant-garde art, Foster points out that this “return” is far removed from being an innocent one: as referential as it may seem, it draws upon post-structuralist critique of representation. Indeed, this contemporary avant-garde presents itself as simulacrum, defying any possible sense of subjective identification with the work of art, and the very status of art in our bourgeois society—just as the historical avant-garde did. A good example of these continuities between the historical avant-garde—as well as Ortega y Gasset’s assessment of it – and more recent avant-garde movements is hyperrealism: if, on the one hand, hyperrealism could be seen as “realistic,” it has an unsettling effect in the spectator, preventing any sense of emotional identification with the work of art, and calling attention to its own artificiality.

²⁰ On the “return to order,” consult the 1919 entry of *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, “1919: Antimodernist Reactions”.

²¹ According to Ramírez: “the Mexican muralists called for a social and artistic revolution that would make possible an ethnic, a cosmic, and a historically transcendent flourishing of art ‘comparable to that [enjoyed] by our admirable autochthonous civilizations’. This aim was shared by a broad spectrum of artists across the region, including de Andrade, Torres-García, and the Cuban Minoristas, all of whom proposed a return to the elements of Latin America’s native past as both the antidote for the evident decadence of European art and the source of the avant-garde art of the future” (3).

²² In fact, as Schwartz (40-48) and others have pointed out, the dichotomy between aesthetics and politics is at the very core of Latin American avant-garde movements, which can be roughly divided into two tendencies: one, that defended the ideal of “art for the sake of art;” and another one, that defended the notion of “engaged art.” It is important to say, however, that it is not uncommon to find both tendencies into a same movement, of even artist, such as in the case of César Vallejo.

²³ However, as Mosquera has noted, there is a striking contradiction between the nationalistic approach to art we observe in the Latin American avant-garde, and this intended cosmopolitanism, as its celebrative, identitarian impulse would often present itself as attractive stereotypes for the outside gaze: “some artists were incline toward ‘othersicing’ themselves, in a paradox of self-exoticism. This paradox was still more apparent because the Other is always us, never them. This situation has also been motivated by nationalist mythologies where a traditionalist cult of ‘the roots’ was

expressed, and by the romantic idealization of conventions about history and the values of the nation.... At the end of the day, the cult of difference circumscribes art within ghettoized parameters of circulation, publication, and consumption ...” (20).

²⁴ In fact, there may be a direct relationship between *revista de avance*'s interest in Mexican Muralism and the Mexican Revolution, and the conflictive relationships that both Mexico and Cuba had with their imperial neighbor. In this sense, Mexican muralists were not so much of an aesthetic model for the Cuban avant-garde, in the view of *revista de avance*'s collaborators, but a political one.

²⁵ I am referring not only to the rejection of *negrismo* by a large sector of *revista de avance*, but also to the prevalence of unquestionably racist remarks in the way some of its collaborators assessed *negrismo* and racial issues in Cuba broadly speaking. According to Masiello: “exoticist interests were clearly directing the Cuban avant-garde. Ironically, when situated in the context of a wider international debate, Afro-Cubanism as an art form used to counter colonialist aggressions in Latin America of the 1920s, while Cuba odious stereotypes about blackness continued to exercise force” (25).

²⁶ According to Rosenberg: “the avant-gardes in Latin America indeed brought to the fore the problem of temporality, but they did so by confronting how production in the peripheries is conditioned by geopolitical position – by the intervals and simultaneities at a global level. Therefore, the key aspect statement that ‘the avant-garde has arrived late in Latin America’ is not so much the perception of belatedness but rather the ‘mistake very much on target’ that shifts the linear temporal dimension into a simultaneous dynamic, which suggests the pertinence of spatial reading. This idea of global modernity could likewise entail the affirmation that Latin America’s belated arrival can’t be voluntarily counterbalanced; it must be radically overturned” (17-18).

²⁷ Contrary to what Rafael Rojas suggests, it is not the Cuban Revolution that causes the most experimental writers and artists of the island to immigrate. This pilgrimage had started long before, in the early 20s, and in fact, we can safely say that *Lunes de revolución* was actually much more of an avant-garde publication than *revista de avance* itself. As for Cuban visual arts, there were important exhibits in the island during the 30’s, such as René Portocarrero’s first exhibit in 1934, or Mariano Rodríguez’s exhibit in 1938. These exhibits, however, were not launched under the label “avant-garde,” and did not seem to enjoy any appreciation from the intellectuals and critics previously associated with *revista de avance*.

²⁸ As Cole notes: “The success of the [1927] exhibition spurred the development of avant-garde art institutions in Cuba. Eduardo Abela founded the Escuela Libre de Artes Plásticas (Free Studio of Painting and Sculpture) in 1936. Although it lasted less than a year, the studio was extremely influential, both academically and artistically. The Lyceum, a women’s organization, was founded in 1928 by Berta Arocena and Renée Méndez Capote to hold art exhibitions, readings, and conferences. *Revista de Avance* continued to organize symposia on modern art ... [and it] was also part of a vibrant print community in Cuba, including its precursors *Cuba Contemporánea*, *Social*, and *Carteles*, its contemporaries *Atuei*, *Juventud*, *Revista de La Habana*, *Grafos*, and *Revista de Oriente*, and its successor, *Orígenes* (1944-1956)” (2013, 191). On the tensions between *revista de avance*'s members and those of *Orígenes*, see Remedios Mataix’s “De la revolución vanguardista al estallido de la revolución. Notas sobre poesía y política entre 1930 y 1959”.

²⁹ To be sure, it was only in 1939 that America got to see the first solo exhibition of Picasso’s works, launched in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) of New York, and brought to the Art Institute of Chicago a year later. This exhibition, which had a great repercussion all over the continent, most certainly inspired Cuba’s show from 1942.

³⁰ “Mientras la *Revista de Avance* se decide por la tendencia del ‘retorno al orden’, más asimilable por un público aún balbuciente respecto al arte contemporáneo, y a Picasso en particular, Carpentier intenta estremecer el ambiente cultural, y especialmente a la intelectualidad, mostrando un Picasso más audaz” (Baujín y Merino 29).

³¹ This is how Carpentier remembers the story: “Las navegaciones que por quebrados itinerarios lo trajeron a Cuba, impusieron a Pierre Loeb una molesta escala en Jamaica. Allí fue sometido a un largo interrogatorio, durante el cual la policía registró su habitación, dando con un pesado rollo, cuidadosamente envuelto en papeles encerados, que fue sometido al examen de las autoridades británicas, y grande fue la sorpresa de todos al descubrir que el paquete contenía un importante conjunto de *gouaches* de Picasso, así como varios óleos recientes del maestro... Viendo que las obras se le iban de las manos, el marchand recurrió, de pronto, al más inesperado procedimiento ... Ahuecando la voz, dramatizando el gesto, llevó los dedos de su mano derecha a la bocamanga izquierda:

- Juro por mis galones de oficial que estos Picassos me pertenecen.

- ... ¿Sus... galones de oficial?

- Sí, señor. Fui oficial de artillería en la Línea Margot.

Los británicos se pusieron de pie esbozando un saludo militar:

- Nos basta, puede llevarse las pinturas” (qtd. in Baujín and Merino 173).

³² Whereas some of the paintings showcased in this exhibition were incorporated to MoMA’s permanent collection, many others ended up in private collections.

³³ According to Baujín and Merino: “en 1942, y a propósito de una muestra individual de ese pintor cubano en la Galería ‘Pierre Matisse’ de New York, un crítico del *New York Times* saluda y reseña esta primera exposición bajo el título ‘A Cuban Picasso’” (49).

³⁴ I am alluding here to Madureira’s appropriation of postcolonial theory and the concept of subalternity to the issue of peripheral modernities and the Latin American avant-garde in particular, to which he dedicates the integrity of the introduction of his *Cannibal Modernities*.

³⁵ According to Cuban writer José Lezama Lima, “la mayoría de nuestros pintores, después de haber traído un gris *fatigué*, se encontraron . . . que les ayudaba graciosamente para el más seguro gris verdeante nuestro. Lo verde marcha por dentro como una oruga que humedece el gris. Gris de cansancio afrancesado, producido por el bostezo de aquel arte de mandarín simbolista . . . era el mejor gris para la malaria de los instintos de nuestras indiferenciadas boberías, diríamos naderías si este no fuera un linajudo vocábulo agónico” (702). An earlier reference to this idea, however, is found in a conference by critic Guy Pérez Cisneros: “El crítico Guy Pérez Cisneros advierte, por su parte, sobre las tangencialidades entre el cubano Mariano Rodríguez y Picasso, y afirma: ‘Mariano acaba por abandonar el rudo granito picassiano de pleno relieve para dejar que sus telas, verdaderas velas del trópico, se hinchen y se depriman’” (Baujín y Merino 38).