Apertura: Photography in Cuba Today

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Photography in Cuba Today

Chazen Museum of Art
University of Wisconsin-Madison
March 6–June 21, 2015

Chazen Museum of Art

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition
Apertura: Photography in Cuba Today
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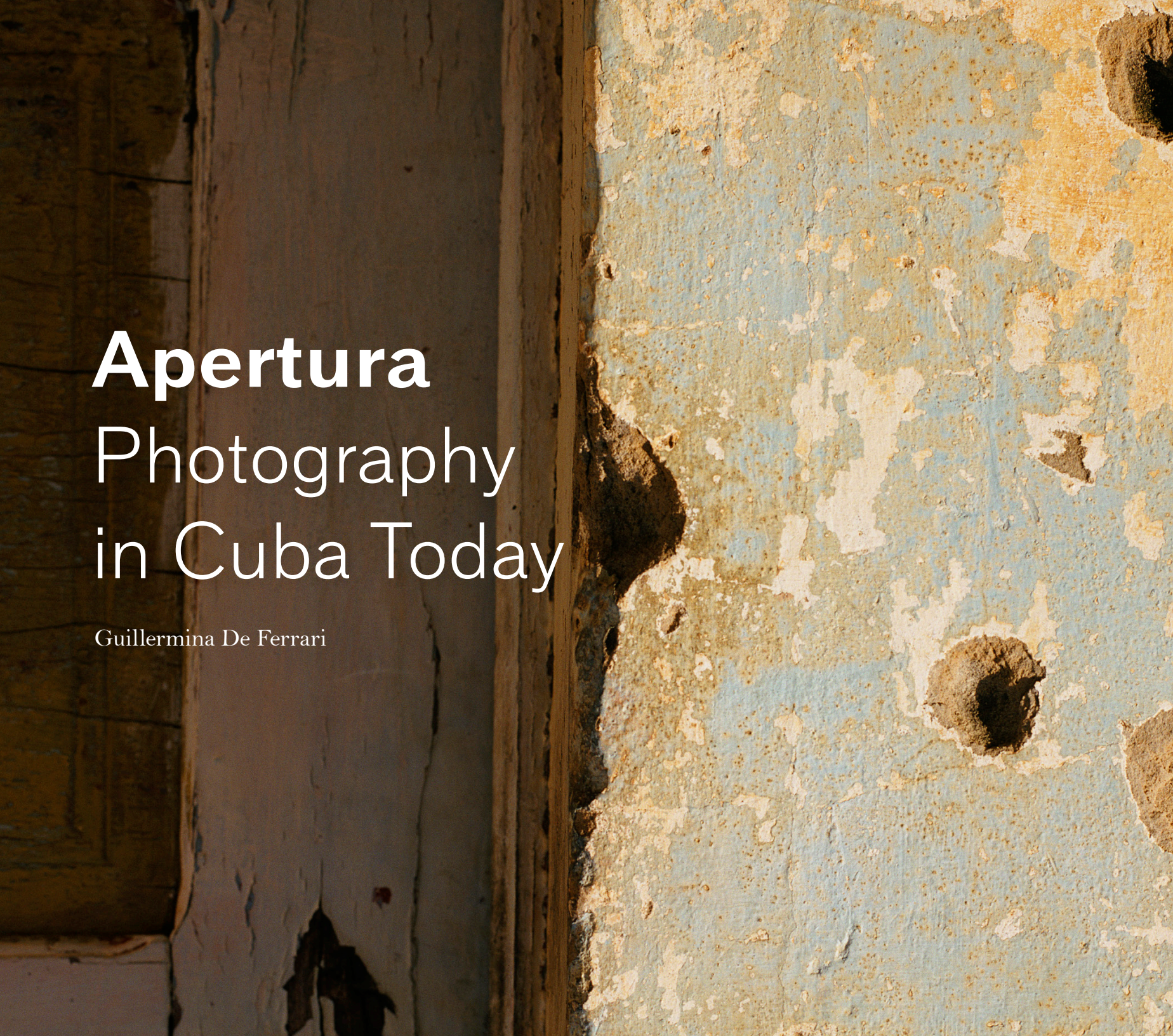


Apertura Photography in Cuba Today

Guillermina De Ferrari

Carlos Garaicoa, *Balazos y puerta (Shots and Door)*, detail, 1997–2000

Aperture, an essential element in the practice of analog photography, refers to the opening of the lens that regulates the amount of light that enters the camera and inscribes an image on the film. *"Apertura,"* the equivalent term in Spanish, also means a transition of something from being closed or fixed to a state of openness. When used figuratively, the term describes a sudden desire to embrace change, to accept new ideologies and cultures. Reflecting upon the traditional use of photography, *Apertura: Photography in Cuba Today* explores the way photography is currently used, understood, and experienced in a culture often portrayed as isolated both politically and geographically. New Cuban photography opens up the imagination, both in terms of what it can now do as a medium, and in its capacity to envision new cultural and political possibilities in a place that feels as though it has been frozen in time.

This exhibition brings together photography-based installations, digital photomontage, and "intervened photography" by eight contemporary Cuban artists to examine how photography has changed on the island over the last two decades, and to show how it creates meaning in light of technological, philosophical, and aesthetic changes. The premise of the exhibition is that, in contrast to the highly stylized documentary photography we tend to associate with the early days of the Cuban Revolution, the new Cuban photography aims to shape reality by creating a new language through the combination of expressive artifacts. Now, the printed image plays only a part in a complex, multilayered discursive practice. Through combinations of different images and media and through the displacement of photographic techniques to other senses and materials, new Cuban photography-based art creates an imaginary space of aesthetic openness against what is perceived to be a stagnant political reality.

The Cuban Revolution, which saw itself as creating a new, more just society, largely constructed its utopian image on the basis of photography. Soon after they seized power in 1959, Fidel Castro along with Che Guevara and other guerrilla fighters became the exclusive clients of photographers who had had successful careers in advertising in the 1950s. Their carefully constructed images drew on advertising conventions and techniques that emphasized the youthful, irreverent heroism of the new leaders. Showcasing the casual style and the aggressive masculinity of the guerrilla fighters, Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (known as Korda) (1928–2001), Osvaldo Salas (1914–1992), and Raúl Corrales (1925–2006) created an alluring visual archive of the early 1960s. Combining a euphoric tone with an intimate gaze, their images have had a profound influence on how contemporary artists see Cuba photographically. Even though enthusiasm for the Revolution itself has critically diminished over the years, those photographers created

the aesthetic template within which artists work today. It is in direct contrast with the documentary photography of the first years of the Revolution that one should begin to consider the contemporary, innovative use of photography in post-Soviet Cuba.[1]

The 1960s witnessed the end of tourism, restrictions on foreign travel for Cuban citizens, and the American embargo. By contrast, in the early 1990s the borders suddenly became permeable. Immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and upon losing Soviet subsidies and its Eastern European trade partners, Cuba entered an acute state of crisis that became known as The Special Period in Times of Peace. The government tried to attract much-needed revenue by resorting once again to tourism, which meant exposing a fairly isolated population to a sudden influx of foreign visitors. Notably, tourism brought the resurgence of prostitution, a pre-revolutionary social problem that had been eradicated. The new phenomenon, called *jineterismo*, was an informal practice that resembled dating: young Cuban women of color, often with university degrees, would go out with tourists for the duration of their trip, and show them around town. In exchange for their extended company, *jineteras* received imported gifts, hard currency, and perhaps marriage proposals that would allow them to leave a country then in the grips of a severe economic crisis. This type of socializing became an important means of exchanging goods, ideas, and information.

It was in cultural circles that the new openness was most productive. For the first time, writers were able to publish abroad at will, particularly in Spain, and visual artists were routinely invited to exhibit their work around the world. The titles of these exhibitions—*Made in Havana* (Australia 1989), *Nacido en Cuba* (Caracas 1991), *Comment peut-on être cubain?* (Paris 1998)—are clear indicators of the interest that Cuba generated abroad. The groundbreaking relationship between local artists trained in the prestigious art schools founded by the Revolution, on the one hand, and an avid international market, on the other, favored the creation of new aesthetic paradigms. The new Cuban art revisited the idea of what art is and how it should relate to reality. Inspired by the international success of Cuban art, new galleries opened up in Havana; the most famous among these was El Espacio Aglutinador, an alternative, clandestine gallery created in artist Sandra Ceballos' private home.

The *Fifth Havana Biennial* (1994) became a hit in the international artistic world. Held at the height of the Special Period, this *Biennial* displayed innovative art that underscored the extraordinary circumstances of the time, including the difficulties artists had in meeting their daily needs, the resourcefulness most Cubans displayed in making do with improvised tools and homemade products, and, of course, massive migration.

A result of the *Biennial* was the founding of one of the paradigmatic institutions of the new cultural openness, the Fundación Ludwig de Cuba (FLC). A non-governmental institution created in 1995 by German collectors Peter and Irene Ludwig as a response to their fascination with the Cuban art displayed at the *Biennial*, the FLC has since helped new artists produce and promote their art. Seeing the international success of Cuban art as an economic opportunity, the Revolutionary government followed suit by opening a number of stylish art galleries throughout Havana. Although they look, feel, and seem to function like independent art galleries, they cannot exhibit, promote or

Photography has lost its distinctive capacity to produce a "truth effect," however artificial and constructed it may have been, in inverse proportion to technology's growing capacity of simulation.

sell anything without the approval of the National Council of Visual Arts (Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas, or CNAP), which belongs to the Ministry of Culture.

Alongside this invigorating flow of art, currency, and ideas, the Special Period also witnessed a massive exodus of people trying to cross the Florida Straight in precarious boats made of the inner tubes of truck wheels. The Center for the Study of International Migrations (Centro de Estudios de Migraciones Internacionales, or CEMI) estimates that 60,000 people left the island illegally between 1991 and 1994, nearly 40,000 of whom left during the summer of 1994 alone. There is no information about how many survived the journey.[2] This unprecedented movement of people and cultural artifacts dramatically modified the socio-economic landscape of the island. Twenty years after the Rafter Crisis or "*la crisis de los balseros*," as the exodus was known, a more stable Cuba has loosened travel restrictions for Cubans, and is slowly entering a capitalist economy, although it has largely done so in an effort to protect its Socialist government.[3]

Part of the popularity of Cuba as a tourist destination in the 1990s was precisely the fact that it seemed to live in the past. With its 1950s cars and its crumbling buildings, Cuba looked like a protected haven away from globalization and technology. A victim of history, Cuba seemed to have stepped out of it. Images of a crumbling Havana appeared in films and photography books everywhere. The city became a favorite tourist destination. Havana became the object of what art critic Laura Marks called "analog nostalgia," a term that refers to the aesthetic attraction that postmodern first-world societies feel for a less-technological past.[4]

Indeed, a certain "vintage aesthetics" helped make Havana an especially attractive destination for photographers. However, the deteriorated city was much more than a pretty postcard. The city in ruins has been interpreted as a metaphor for the decadence of utopia. Furthermore, it can also be read as a metaphor for photography itself: the affective texture of the devastated city suggests a purely photographical operation, which is the capacity to capture an image and freeze it in time. Like the work of the camera, Cuba in the 1990s made the past look eternal.

The world that made the Revolution possible has changed. And so has photography. Originally defined as writing with light, photography operates now in ways that were unimaginable within its own logic a few decades ago. Photography as a medium has undergone an important evolution following the philosophical and technological

developments of the last decades of the twentieth century, developments that have contributed to the erasure of the lines that traditionally separate the different media. Painting, sculpture, and performance have absorbed photography, turning it into something new. Photography has lost its distinctive capacity to produce a "truth effect," however artificial and constructed it may have been, in inverse proportion to technology's growing capacity of simulation. The perception of what photography does has also changed quite dramatically as the theoretical discourse since the 1960s has heightened our suspicion of anything that calls itself "truth."

Today, the photographic medium builds on its own limitations. However, it does so by capitalizing on the specter of traditional photography, its "aura" or soul. Photography-based art in Cuba is a new discursive practice that revises both the distinctive role the medium played in the construction of the Revolution, as well as the changes the medium is undergoing due to technological innovation and the emergence of new aesthetic paradigms. As Geoffrey Batchen notes in his book *Each Wild Idea*, photography today has lost its status as a window onto a world only to become a message in itself.[5] When we think of photography today, we still think about it in terms of the premises of analog photography, but we have now added a large dose of skepticism. We are fully aware that photography is no longer what it used to be. And yet, we are nostalgic for the aesthetic and representational power of traditional photography.

Analog photography, particularly as it was used in Cuba in the 1950s and 1960s, lends the new forms of photography a material platform, its basic condition of possibility, as well as a rhetorical force—an aura—that provides the image with added value. The double presence of photography, simultaneously material and ghostly, constitutes in these works an enlightening paradox, one in which seeing and imagining can work together to create a truer truth-effect.

The works selected for this exhibition all have in common a tendency to experiment with the medium that highlights photography's changing status as well as its capacity to adapt and create a new language. They either underscore a traditional idea of photography, using its standard associations and a familiar archive as a secondary layer of meaning, or they play up its status as object. Or both. Regardless of whether they underline the idea of photography or the photographic object, their mode of representation is always an explicit comment on the medium in its current state: the window has now become the message. A wound, a lack, a fragment, a ready-made vehicle for nostalgia, the photographic artifact today is always incomplete, always a quotation, and yet it is always self-referential. We can't just see an image anymore without pondering what photography is, what it does, and how.

A New Syntax

Two questions guide this exhibit: What is photography today? And how does it help us understand today's Cuba? In relation to the first question, twenty-first century definitions are hard to come by. When we talk about photography today, we still think in terms of analog photography. We tend to focus on one of two different aspects: the way photography works, that is, the mechanisms behind taking

and developing a photograph, and the photographic object itself. In the first case, what is emphasized is the operation of photography, the process that Walter Benjamin called "writing with light," and the way it represents by capturing what is in front of it—a capacity that distinguishes photography from any other form of artistic representation. However, co-presence between photographer and object does not mean objectivity. In his essay "Seeing Photographically," Edward Weston wrote that the camera is an instrument that allows the photographer to look into the soul of the object and capture its true essence. The photographer's contribution is the "clear insight that the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object."[6] Photography is then that mechanism that allows for capturing what is in front of the camera, turning it into a bi-dimensional representation, and producing an image that allows us to see better and understand more deeply.

The second and very compelling aspect of photography is the material reality of the printed image. In *The Nature of Photographs*, Stephen Shore defines photography as, "in most instances, a base of paper, plastic or metal that has been coated with an emulsion of light-sensitive metallic salts."[7] If the most basic definition of photography as an object does not mention a reference to the camera it is because, as the philosopher Hubert Damisch suggests, the magic of photography resides in its capacity to forget, at least in part, the very existence of the camera.[8] Once the technology that made a photograph possible is forgotten, what is left is a concrete, physical image subject to cultural and political interpretations. According to John Berger, "we think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses, as new items. Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality." It is precisely the understanding of the image as likeness that has traditionally lent the medium its ideological capacity. For, as Berger notes, every image is "a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us."[9]

It is important to think of this double aspect—that is, the notion that photography is both an idea and an object—to better grasp the subtleties of the medium.[10] It is partly true that, while the idea of photography has changed with technology, some elements remain constant. Even when artists experiment with the medium, photography still depends on co-presence: the camera and the object need to be in the same place at the same time. It is true that images can be manipulated to include something that was not there (or to delete something that was), but this can only be done through tricks that have always existed in photography without altering its definition. Besides co-presence, photography still needs an optical apparatus, a platform to make it visible (whether material, like paper or digital), and an eye to appreciate it. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two aspects has become troubled. What we see in *Apertura* is a reflection on how the two aspects, the concept of how photography works and the printed image, interfere with each other, and redefine photography along the way.

Thinking of the photograph as an object—rather than an idea or a practice—allows us to better reflect on its political function. The effectiveness of a given image depends on its social life. Indeed, its meaning is largely determined by the logic of its presentation, the associations suggested by contiguous images and by the way in which a given

group of photographs is organized as a whole. Even though the photographic object is still thought of as the print that emerges from a darkroom, it has also become a much more malleable object and a collectible piece.

As art critic Rosalind Krauss points out, a photograph changes its function and meaning according to the discursive space it occupies.[11] Be it casual, intuitive or conceptual, the contextualization generated by the space that houses a given image (the museum, a wall in the family house, the newspaper) attributes to each image a specific genre (art piece, family photo, war image, etc.). The conditions of production and presentation of a photograph dictate its proper use and establish a specific "grammar" of signification. If what we say can never be completely separated from how we say it, the change of language in new photography-based art necessarily means a change of conversation.

This exhibition features art that significantly manipulates the photographic image at any of its production stages, altering at least one of the medium's basic premises: bi-dimensionality, co-presence of subject and object, the fact that it is printed on paper or other surface. We find collages that use fragments of old photographs, objects composed of piles of photographs, juxtaposed or superimposed photographs, all of which create the illusion of seeing time unfold in a single surface. Sometimes artists change the material condition of a photograph by printing images on material other than paper or by displacing the visual aspect of photography to other senses. By transcending the original, constitutive premises of the medium, any contemporary photograph is an invitation to ponder what it means to create, print, and look at a given image. In all these cases, photography is doing something new while commenting on the possibilities of photography to speak otherwise.

Apertura engages with photography in this new self-reflexive moment. In order to interpret a photograph, we need to understand the context of both its production and its exhibition. What a photograph says will depend on the objects that surround it, the objects it depicts, and the ones it evokes; it will depend on additional objects or signs, be it duplication, fragmentation, proliferation, displacement, or the addition of drawings and text. When looking at these images, we see a window into the difficult conditions of Cuba as an embargoed island, and as a prisoner of its own history. We also see that something has been broken on the surface of things. Representation is no longer whole. The pieces included suggest a new permeability in the definition of today's photography, and an invitation for artists to explore alternative forms of saying things with and through optically captured and recorded images.

Today's Cuba, which combines highly trained artists with complicated conditions of art production, offers a perfect laboratory for finding new forms of creating art. One could say that photography-based art emulates the survival practices of Cuba's Special Period, when essential objects had to be recreated through unexpected substitutions and esoteric combinations. As tools broke down and goods disappeared from markets, Cubans had to find creative ways to make dubious approximations of everyday items with materials borrowed from unlikely sources. In Cuba, then, the experience of the Special Period gives an additional layer of self-reflection to today's photography. Like Cuba in the 1990s, photography itself is undergoing its own "special period," one in which art objects are created through unexpected replacements, and the combination of apparently

incompatible elements. In this regard, the new photography seems like a particularly appropriate medium to help convey Cuba's recent history.

Carlos Garaicoa's Open Wound

What has come to define Carlos Garaicoa's (b. 1967) prolific career is his preoccupation with the vulnerability of cities, beginning with the city of Havana. In the 1990s, after years of neglect, crowded housing, and acute economic crisis, the once elegant city of Havana looked like it had lived through a war. In his first works, Garaicoa treated Havana like a body in distress, and the peeling surfaces of the old buildings as troubled skin. This was the concept guiding Garaicoa's early installations, which paired photographs of a collapsing Havana building with architectural drawings of an imaginary classical structure in the same place. In Garaicoa's more-recent photographs (p. 34) he uses a non-traditional material (gelatin-coated cow bone) to print images of Havana in ruins. By pairing up a material so basic as bone with images of the devastated city, Garaicoa invites us to think about what keeps a city in place, and about the metaphorical implications of a city's remains. Even though Garaicoa has at times shifted his attention to places other than Havana and to media other than photography, his work has retained his original sensibility. Even his most futuristic installations distill the sense that there is something structurally wrong below the glossy surface.

Garaicoa's treatment of Havana as a city ravaged by an invisible war led to an invitation to deal with the traces of a real war. During the Cold War, acting as a proxy for the Soviet Union, Cuba participated in a war in Angola that killed over 2,000 Cuban troops. When Angolan artist Fernando Alvim (b. 1963) invited Garaicoa to participate in a project on war and memory in 1996-97, the Cuban artist made close-ups of the impact of bullets on the walls of hospitals, schools, and other buildings in the town of Cuito Cuanavale, where the final battle had taken place (figure 1, p. 37). In Garaicoa's large color photographs, wall textures suggest human skin, and the traces of bullets on the walls look like illegible writing. Even though the marks are concrete testimonials of the war, the pieces are decontextualized and abstract. Entitled *Abstractions*, the works in the series invite emotional detachment in the viewer by testing the limits of our empathy. Garaicoa's images make us reflect on the relationship between art, the experience of war, and memory. When contrasted with the images of Havana, *Abstractions* simultaneously reinforces and questions the view of Havana as a survivor of an economic crisis of warlike proportions.[12]

While war remains a subject in Garaicoa's diptych *Noticias recientes (Brasil)/Recent News (Brazil)*, (p. 36) included in this exhibition, it takes the concept to a more abstract level. The diptych consists of two large, frameless photographs positioned at a 90-degree angle to each other, and depicts a street corner in a large, non-specified South American city. The composition in each of the two images is similar and almost symmetrical: the corner of each building rises towards the upper central corner of the photographic frame, giving the impression of being one building. Furthermore, the perspective of the diptych suggests the corner is coming toward the center of the room, when in fact the two images are meeting away from the spectator.

Figure 2. Carlos Garaicoa (Cuban, b. 1967), *Noticias recientes (Brasil)/ Recent News (Brazil)*, detail, 2008

The massive construction of the building, and its run-down condition, speak of agglomeration and the failures of modernity. This, at least, is how the installation appears at first glance. Upon closer inspection, however, we can see a series of bullet holes (figure 2). The diptych, laminated in Plexiglas and shot with a 9mm pistol, is about a wound.

Noticias recientes (Brasil)/Recent News (Brazil) was made while Garaicoa was an artist in residence in Rio de Janeiro and is a response to his sense of vulnerability, to the fear of being killed by a stray bullet. The work is about the fragility of modern life, particularly in large cities characterized by uneven development. What matters most, however, is that Garaicoa's *Noticias recientes* invites a metaphorical interpretation. The "recent news" to which the title refers might also point to the fact that photographic representation itself seems to be broken, wounded. In contrast to the Angolan images, the wounds in *Noticias recientes* are not the representation of bullet marks in a building. Rather, the photograph itself has been hurt. *Noticias recientes* can thus be interpreted as a statement about photography in its current state. Vulnerability is now seen at the level of the representation, of what photography does, and how it speaks. In light of technological and philosophical changes, photography has become more vulnerable as a medium. Photography has stopped being what it was supposed to be. Photography as we know it is now dead.

What Garaicoa's *Noticias recientes* makes visible at any rate is that photography is now at some level mourning itself as a system of representation. Photography has changed identities. Less inclined to suggest a story or showcase an object in an aesthetic light, a photograph is now a fragment whose meaning exists only in a string of other objects,

like parts of speech in a sentence, or a commodity whose meaning is formed in the invisible production of aesthetic and economic surplus value. However, it is an object that still celebrates the idea of photography. In the Cuban case, the memorial aspect of photography is in direct dialogue with the constitutive role photography played in creating an image of the Revolution, and the slow demise of both documentary photography and, as has become increasingly clear, the Revolution itself.

René Peña's Permeable Skin

René Peña (b. 1957) doesn't do self-portraits. Rather, he uses his own body as a platform to discuss what it means to be human. Peña offers his face and other parts of his body to the camera lens in order to evoke or suggest the many ways in which the individual is overrun by internal passions and permeable to external classifications and cultural notions. His images remind us that even though we assume we have an identity, we are very much constructed by language that escapes our control, and by desires and fears that may never materialize but nevertheless shape our experience of reality. The human skin, an element that is very important in Peña's work, appears as the limit of everything and of nothing. To the extent that Peña, an Afro-Cuban artist, uses his own body as a vehicle for these visual micro-essays, his images are inevitably a reflection on the question of race.

In his earlier work, particularly in a series entitled *Man-Made Materials* (1998–2001), Peña carefully composed black and white close-ups offering fragmented, decontextualized images of hair or mouth, for instance. The images reveal shapes and textures, exalting a formal beauty, and disconcerting the spectator. Because they represent specific parts of the body in such a fragmented manner, Peña's photographs are referential and abstract at the same time. The decontextualized fragments of a body require that we complete the image in the frame by thinking of the full body to which it belongs and perhaps of its stories. In doing so, we project among other things a racial identity, making the spectator responsible for labeling and naming the subject.

Beauty in Peña's image always contains a surreptitious degree of violence. What his images make visible is that there is nothing natural about race and, by extension, that seeing is never an innocent act. We can never simply "see" a body without projecting our own social understanding of race, class, gender, and beauty onto it. By becoming self-conscious about the difference between what we see and what we believe we see, the spectator gets a better understanding of how identities come into being and how they are codified. The categories we use to see and interpret the human body are the real "man-made materials."

In this exhibition, the photographs included in Peña's *Untitled Album* (1998–2001) depict his own body in an intimate, carefully balanced color composition. Against a dark background, a part of Peña's naked body emerges from the shadows with just enough light to appreciate an isolated feature or curve in nuanced shades of golden brown. At the center of the formal, studious perfection of these large images is an interruption: the series follows a dark, monochromatic human that is juxtaposed with an inanimate object in a bright color. The contrast between living versus inanimate, dark versus bright, surprises the spectator's gaze. In Peña, the color detail—what Roland Barthes would

call the *punctum*—shows a social wound. Bright color in the dark image shoots out like an arrow and makes us question aesthetically and emotionally not just what we think we see, but also what we think we are.[13]

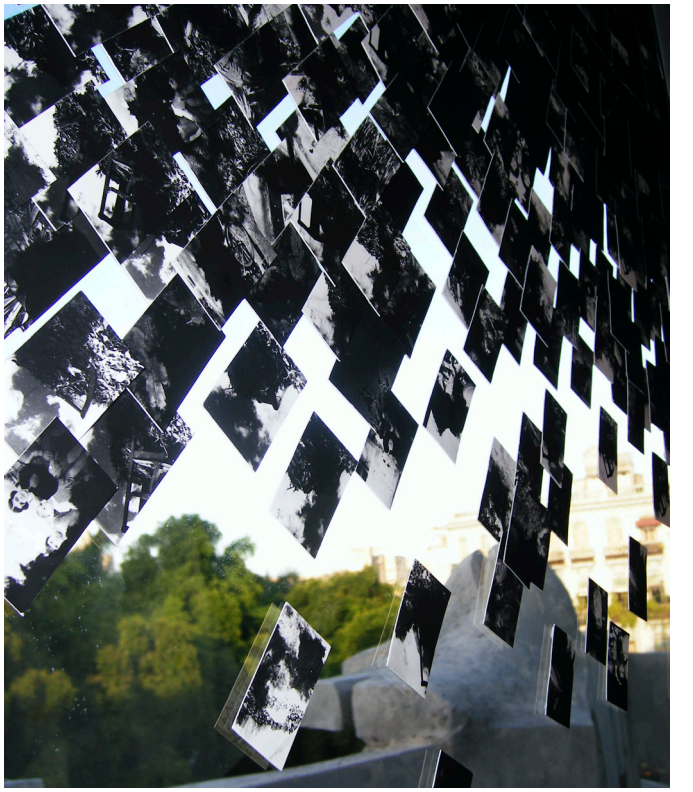
Ultimately, what is experimental about Peña's series is that it treats color photography as if it were black and white photography, an effect that is achieved by using a limited color palette. By including his own body in an essay on color, he makes the spectator rethink the concept of race as a mere question of color. Not only is race what you, the spectator, make of it, but also you, the spectator, inhabit an imperfect skin, permeable to the feelings of others, that fails to contain you.

Figure 3. José Manuel Fors (Cuban b. 1956), *The Great Flower*, 1999, gelatin-silver print, 72 in., collection of Leonard and Susan Nimoy.

Fors and Time

It was the lack of photographic paper during the early 1990s that made José Manuel Fors (b. 1956) the artist he is today. Unable to make the large photographs he envisioned, Fors began using old photographs, most of them taken by his grandfather, Alberto José Fors, (1885–1965), a scientist (who is considered to have brought modern forestry to Cuba) to create large collages. As his style evolved, Fors began combining photographs with objects found around the house at first and then in clandestine antique stores in Old Havana. His artistic language is made up of the collection and accumulation of recovered objects, including the photographic object, natural objects like tree leaves and seashells (what Fors calls "intervened nature"), and the passing of time. What matters most to Fors is how these objects showcase the wear and tear of time.

A conceptual artist, Fors sees the photographic image not as an end in itself, but as the elementary material support for an exploration of time and form. His work, which alternates between a view of photography as a flat representation and as a three-dimensional object, involves a multiple-step artistic process that often begins with taking photographs of old photographs, postcards, and letters bearing the weight of time. Fors usually combines them with found objects, and creates installations in his own house that he then photographs in order to produce the small photographic objects he uses in his final installations. Fors' tableaux are gigantic and precise grid-like structures that assume various shapes, like the circular *The Great Flower* (1999) (figure 3, p. 14) reminiscent of the



Figures 4 (above) and 5. (right) José Manuel Fors (Cuban b. 1956), *Vestibulo*, detail, 2007, installation, courtesy of the artist.

Mayan calendar. While Fors' photographic objects and installations have a "vintage" feel, his art is constantly looking for new ways to explore the possibilities of visual language.

Fors studied art at the Academia de Arte San Alejandro, and then museology at Havana's Instituto de Museología. His education emphasized the conceptual aspects of art as language, but also the use of space along with the material presentation of objects. Fors, who worked as a curator at Cuba's National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana for ten years, creates many of his pieces with the exhibition space in mind. He studies the setting and then develops a vision that best fits the space. This is why his installations are usually made *in situ*, as is the case of *Vestibulo*, (figures 4 and 5) and *Fragmented City* (figure 6).

In *Fragmented City*, like in *Atados 2 (Bundles of Memory 2)* (p. 27) and *A la sombra de los maestros (In the Shade of the Masters)* (p. 31), Fors uses two complementary forms of conceptualizing material: the collage and the synthesis,

Figure 6. José Manuel Fors (Cuban b. 1956), *Fragmented City*, installation, size varies, courtesy of the artist.

that is by creating concepts on the basis of unexpected combinations. In *Fragmented City*, small, irregular towers made of cut-up old photographs suggest the existence of a mass of human beings, disconnected from each other and from themselves, in a way that reminds us of the fact that we can never know the large majority of people who live in our own cities. That is, the true texture of a modern city is made of affective and physical connections, but mostly disconnections. At another level, *Fragmented City* underlines the notion that modern cities fail to provide the sense of community that human beings long for. In the case of Cuba in particular, the promise of community was somewhat tied to the idea of a more organic and just society that would be brought by the Communist revolution, a promise that, according to most critics, was not fulfilled.

Atados 2 consists of small bundles made up of old postcards and letters precariously tied up with a simple ribbon. The pieces evoke notions of private feelings and family memories. They speak of travel but also of exile, and of the work of memory done at the family level when a member takes it upon him or herself to organize, preserve, and cherish the visual residues of the family history. Part of the mystery and the beauty of these pieces are provided by their form; these letters and photographs are piled up and tied up, and we cannot see their individual content. In their compactness, they represent the peculiarity of private memories—that is, that they only make sense to those who know about the content. For outsiders, however, there is no meaning other than the idea of memories, and an invitation to reflect on the fragile vessels in which they travel.

In contrast with the private memories of *Atados 2*, *A la sombra de los maestros* ingeniously speaks of a collective artistic conscience made up by centuries of European art. Our sensibilities have been shaped by those masters and the way we create or understand art is inevitably conditioned by those images that populate our aesthetic unconscious. Tradition both shelters and confines us. Ultimately, the umbrellas in *A la sombra de los maestros*, like the rest of Fors' art, are meta-curatorial in the sense that they reflect on how much meaning is produced in the process of selecting, interpreting and "staging" a museum piece.

Reynier Leyva Novo and Silence

Reynier Leyva Novo's (b. 1983) installations usually reflect on Cuban history through a variety of media such as battle inspired perfumes, tea prints made of dried flowers, and puzzles that reconstruct maps of the battle of Dos Ríos, where poet José Martí died in 1895.[14] Novo's piece in this exhibition, the 2013 installation *Sólo la tierra perdura (La Batalla del Mal Tiempo) (Only the Land Endures [The Battle of Mal Tiempo])* (p. 41), juxtaposes a large photograph and a text. The photograph shows a landscape: green pastures topped by a few clouds on a bright blue sky. While the image gives us very few clues as to how to interpret the image, the title is more eloquent. *Sólo la tierra perdura* is about erasure and the loss of historical memory.

To the side of the photograph is a text in Spanish followed by the English translation. The words offer a vivid account of the battle of Mal Tiempo, one of the most significant battles of the Cuban war of independence at which an army led by Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo used machetes to kill several hundred Spanish royalist soldiers in less

It is difficult for photography, more than any other media, to represent what is not there.

than fifteen minutes. The narrative, which lends voice to Maceo's perspective and privileges sensations and emotions, is novelistic in tone, vividly recounting the obstacles encountered as well as the emotions associated with different stages of the event, ranging from doubt and passion to heroism. Most of all, it describes a bloody scene that cannot be imagined by looking at the photograph alone.

What originally struck Novo was the fact that there is no sign to commemorate what happened: the historic site has become pure geography. That is what the photograph shows, or rather fails to show, and what the text is there to provide. In fact, the text is more than a substitute for a commemorative plaque. It fills the visual silence of the image and humanizes the place. It superimposes on the photograph the sensorial experience and the emotions of the battle. The text is there to do what the photograph cannot.

In this piece, text and photograph work antithetically: the text visualizes what the image can't. The narrative accomplishes an act of communication that the visual image is incapable of accomplishing. It is difficult for photography, more than any other media, to represent what is not there. Writing, a less referential medium, helps make the absence of memory noticeable. When seen together, the image speaks of a void, of an absence of signs, whereas the text visualizes the carnage. But this operation communicates more than the experience of the war alone since it also shows an attitude of neglect and forgetfulness in the way the battlefield has been abandoned to the passage of time. For Novo, *Sólo la tierra perdura* is a counterpoint between word and image. In other words, it is not only the combination of the two media that create meaning but, rather the distance that separates them. The vitality of the piece results from the juxtaposition of different languages whose meaning resides in the invisible threads of comparative perception that suture the photograph to the written word. The text closes with a vivid description of the carnage that resulted from the battle: machetes have ferociously cut up bodies; the pasture has changed color and texture; the road is now paved with blood. This description can be interpreted as the photograph that could have been taken on December 15, 1895, but was not. The text is a photograph made of words.

Doors in Angel Delgado and Rafael Villares

Angel Delgado (b. 1965) refers to the images in his series *Límite continuo* (p. 24) as "intervened photographs." These are photographs depicting chains, locks, and barbed wire, printed on cloth, to which Delgado adds a drawing in wax pencil. The photograph is both the central piece "intervened" by the drawing, and the context or setting for a small sketch of a human figure lost in a Kafkaesque maze. The images suggest an array of emotions, ranging from the feeling of isolation to the idea of living in a politically or existentially besieged state or in a state of suspension between carefully guarded borders.

The title *Límite continuo* (p. 24) which can be translated as "continuous limit," reminds us of the impermeability of Cuba, an island that is embargoed both from within and from without. It can also and more generally speak of the loneliness of modern man. The human figure, drawn in wax pencil and embedded in a photograph of barbed wire and giant locks, is almost abstract: a solitary man who waits, or remains trapped, in an inexplicable world.

The photographic elements in the work are traditional: an image captured by a lens and printed on a sensitive surface; in this case, a canvas. Yet, the drawing embedded in the picture frame produces the effect of breaking or "intervening" in the photographic medium. The work superimposes not only two artistic languages—painting and photography—but two levels of interpretation, creating a story when the human figure intervenes in the landscape and serves as mark or index of subjectivity, however vague, in the otherwise dehumanized scene. The human figure, moreover, is all the more powerful in its neutral, generic appearance since it invites a multitude of identifications. Photography and drawing together point to human patience, or despair, in an impossible, unnerving, perpetual state of siege.

While Angel Delgado works with padlocks, Rafael Villares (b. 1989) works with imaginary doors. Villares' process of composition follows three steps: first, he photographs well-known Havana landscapes such as the Malecón, the Focsa building, the Hotel Nacional, and the Habana Libre Hotel. The artist includes himself in a position that suggests that he is manually painting doors in the air. Finally, he digitally adds doors. The series is called *Finisterre* (p. 47), a title that only obliquely suggests the disconnection from the world about which the images so powerfully speak. Like the images created by Delgado, Villares' suggest that enclosure is a perpetual state that can only be transcended by magical or digital means. Though virtual, the door on the Malecón, an esplanade and seawall that follows the contour of the island, is a testimonial element: it attests to the fantasy of exit, of leaving and returning freely (the images are from 2005, when exit visas were required for Cuban citizens and were often denied), or even the fantasy of canceling out the geographical and/or political insularity. Similarly, the door that opens to the Habana Libre (Free Havana) hotel seems like a joke: if you open the door, what you find is a free Havana. Or it discusses perhaps an internal frontier posed by the double economy that gives rights to tourists to enjoy spaces that are not available to most Cuban citizens. The double economy separates those citizens who receive *remesas* (remittances)

One of them is more real and the other more illusory, but it is hard to say which one is which.

from abroad or who work in the tourism industry and earn hard currency (including perhaps *jineteras*) from those who do not, a division that, in practice, means that Cubans have different degrees of freedom and even citizenship.

In the works of both Villares and Delgado, photography provides a setting. The drama occurs in the intervention. In both cases, the image would not work by letting photography do what it always does: capture the reality present in front of the lens. There is no lens wide enough to capture what is absent. In both cases, the comment on Cuba is only in part a comment on the medium itself. The failure of photography to capture desire and anxiety cannot be attributed solely to the exhaustion of the medium, but rather to the fact that reality is full of holes. The intervention does not operate in terms of the added element questioning the photograph, but rather in the way they together explore a fantasy.

Liudmila + Nelson

One of the first things tourists note about Havana is the lack of advertising. With the exception of a few billboards sporting revolutionary slogans and photographs of a very young Fidel Castro, the city is completely deprived of publicity. In their series *Hotel Habana Series* (p. 38) the duo of artists Liudmila + Nelson (est. 1993), composed of Liudmila Velasco (b. 1969, Russia) and Nelson Ramírez de Arellano (b. 1969, Germany), play with this aspect of the city. Their images, however, are about both fantasy and the passing of time.

This is how Liudmila + Nelson work: First, they find in the archives an old image of a Havana street scene that is in the public domain (it probably helps that Nelson is the director of the Fototeca de Cuba, the National Gallery of Photography). Then, they locate the same spot in the city where the photograph was originally taken and take new photographs, trying to recreate the archival image as much as possible. After that, the artists digitally superimpose advertising (Coca Cola, Hard Rock Café, MTV, and the like) that reflects Cubans' fantasies and fears about the future. The whole process usually takes months.

The image itself is a complex operation that is dominated by the superposition of two temporal stages onto the same space. One of them intervenes in the other, recontextualizing the other without erasing it. One of them is more real and the other more illusory, but it is hard to say which one is which. In addition, a world of advertisement, currently non-existent, is added digitally, alluding perhaps to a non-distant future. The word "Revolution," cast in the logo of Coca Cola, suggests the commodification of the utopian project that has already taken place. Likewise, the super-

position of old and new signs for the same products also suggests that the future may have already happened. The effect of these images is that of a poster that you peel off only to find an older one, a peeling off of skins on a palimpsest that reveals both the contingency and the fatality of Cuba, subjected to an eternal repetition of past and present. The layering also suggests a trap door that you have no idea where it will take you: To the past? To the future? To a nightmare? All the answers are possible. These images present Havana as an unfinished historical process, but also as a collectible object. This dimension is somewhat confirmed by the added advertising. If everything is going to be for sale, how can we be sure that it was not all along?

Technically speaking, the *Hotel Habana* series consists of two photographic events that become a third one. The fact that the present photograph of Havana gains its artistic value in its juxtaposition with a past photograph reveals much about the way in which an old photograph creates an affective "depth of field." It lends the new image aesthetic and emotional capital by feeding a nostalgia not only of the old city, the city that is no more, but also the nostalgia for analog photography, for a photograph that meant what it meant because one could look through it and find a reliable reality. Now, we see instead a multilayered desire to capture the changing reality of a wounded city.

I choose to finish with Liudmila + Nelson's images because they offer a metaphorical understanding of Cuban photography today. The *Hotel Habana* series is built on the dialectical relationship between the old and the new, desire and fear, hopes and memories, that make Havana such a special place. The series also foregrounds the conceptual battle between faith and skepticism that takes place in any photographic image. In today's photography, in particular, the aura of analog photography lends a surplus of aesthetic value to the present image. In Liudmila + Nelson's fantastic photographs, the material and the ghostly work together, exploring the contradictions and limitations of the genre, but also the emotional depth that comes with an original, unrepeatable past. In these images, photography explores its own limitations as a medium only to discover a truer sense of truth.

1 Tim B. Wride, "Three Generations: Photography in Fidel's Cuba," in *Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography After the Revolution* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001), 20–81.

2 Antonio Aja Díaz, "La emigración cubana hacia Estados Unidos a la luz de su política inmigratoria," Cuba Vs Bloqueo, July 2000, accessed February 2, 2015, http://www.cubavsbloqueo.cu/es/la-emigracion-cubana-hacia-estados-unidos-la-luz-de-su-politica-inmigratoria

3 Ariana Hernández-Reguant, "Writing the Special Period: An Introduction," in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*, ed. by Ariana Hernández-Reguant (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 8.

4 Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002), 152. See also, Guillermina De Ferrari, *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 179.

5 "What was once thought to be a window onto the world is transformed into an opaque, resistant surface volumetrically unfolding in space. We are forced to look at photography rather than through it." Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2002), 110.

6 Edward Weston, "Seeing photographically," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (Stony Creek, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 169–178.

7 Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2007), 15.

8 Hubert Damisch, "Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (Stony Creek, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 287–290.

9 John Berger, "Understanding a Photograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (Stony Creek, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 291-294.

10 This is a distinction explicitly made by Anne McCauley. See "The Trouble with Photography," in *Photography Theory*, ed. by James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 403–430.

11 Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. by Richard Bolton (Boston: The MIT Press, 1989), 288–302.

12 "Photography," *Without Masks: Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art*, accessed April 7, 2014, http://www.withoutmasks.org/index.php/artworks/photography/abstracciones-iv.html

13 Roland Barthes suggests that there are two approaches by which we appreciate a photograph. The first one is the *studium*, our general admiration of the technical or historical value in a given image, while the *punctum* refers to "this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" emotionally. The *punctum* "disturbs the *studium*" and gives the photograph a personal, inescapable meaning. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26–27.

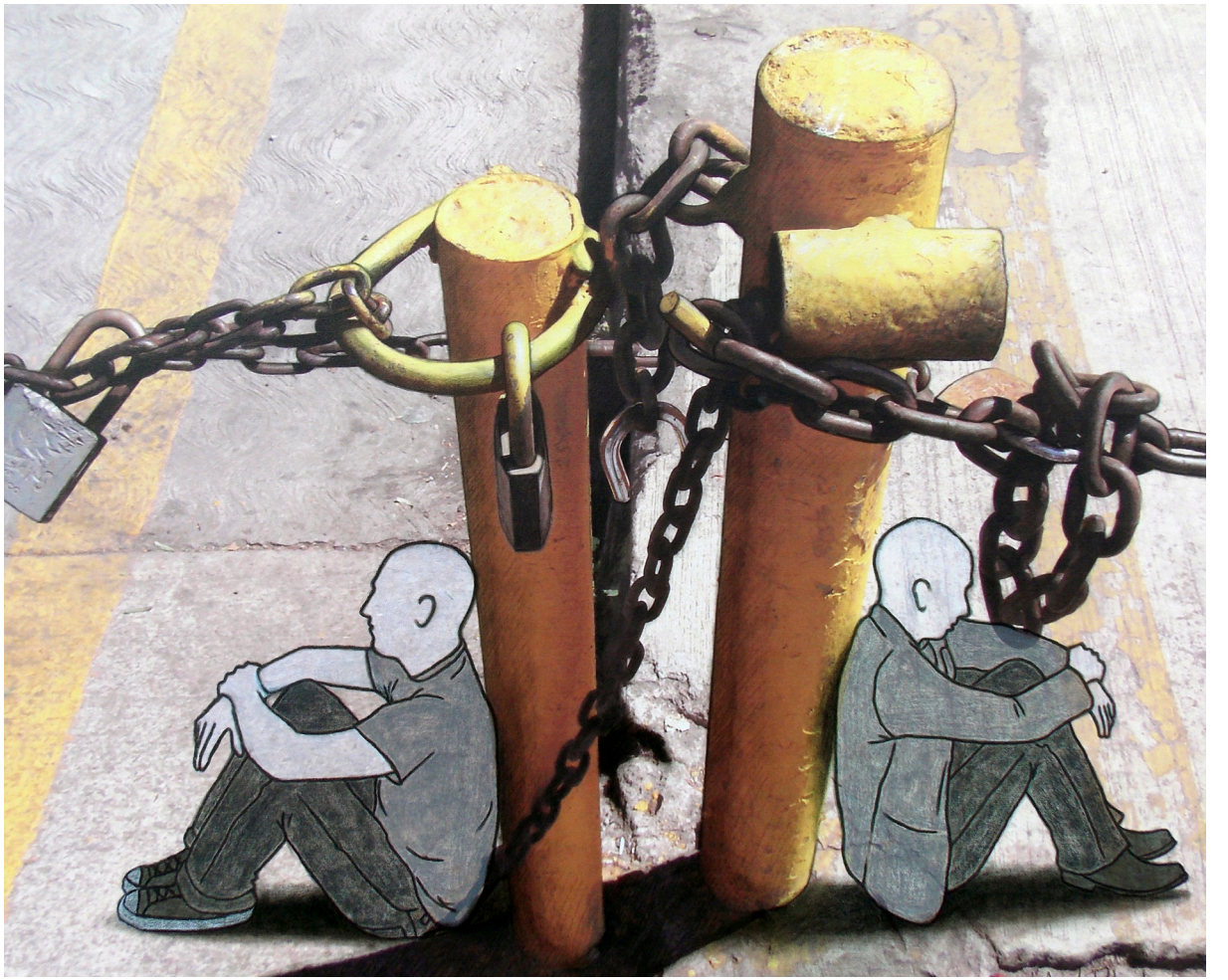
14 Novo's pieces about the Cuban Independence Wars alluded here are *Los olores de la guerra/The Scents of War* (2009); *Acerca de los mensajes que no han llegado a su fin/About Those Messages that Failed to Reach their Destination* (2008); and *El orden de la batalla I (De Playitas a Dos Ríos)/The Order of Battle I (From Playitas to Dos Ríos)* (2013).

José Manuel Fors, *Atados 2 (Bundles of Memory 2)*, 2011

Apertura
Photography in Cuba Today

The exhibition

Angel Delgado
Cuban, b. 1965
Límite continuo VII (Continuous Limit VII), 2009
Digital print on canvas, wax pencil, pastel, 39 ⅓ x 47 ¼ in., courtesy of the artist



Angel Delgado
Cuban, b. 1965
Límite continuo X (Continuous Limit X), 2009
Digital print on canvas, wax pencil, pastel, 39 ⅓ x 47 ¼ in., courtesy of the artist

Angel Delgado,
Cuban, b. 1965
Límite continuo XIV (Continuous Limit XIV), 2009
Digital print on canvas, wax pencil, pastel, 39 ⅓ x 47 ¼ in., courtesy of the artist

José Manuel Fors
Cuban, b. 1956
Atados 2 (Bundles of Memory 2), 2011
Mixed media, 7 x 11 x 3 in., Pan American Arts Projects Miami

José Manuel Fors
Cuban, b. 1956
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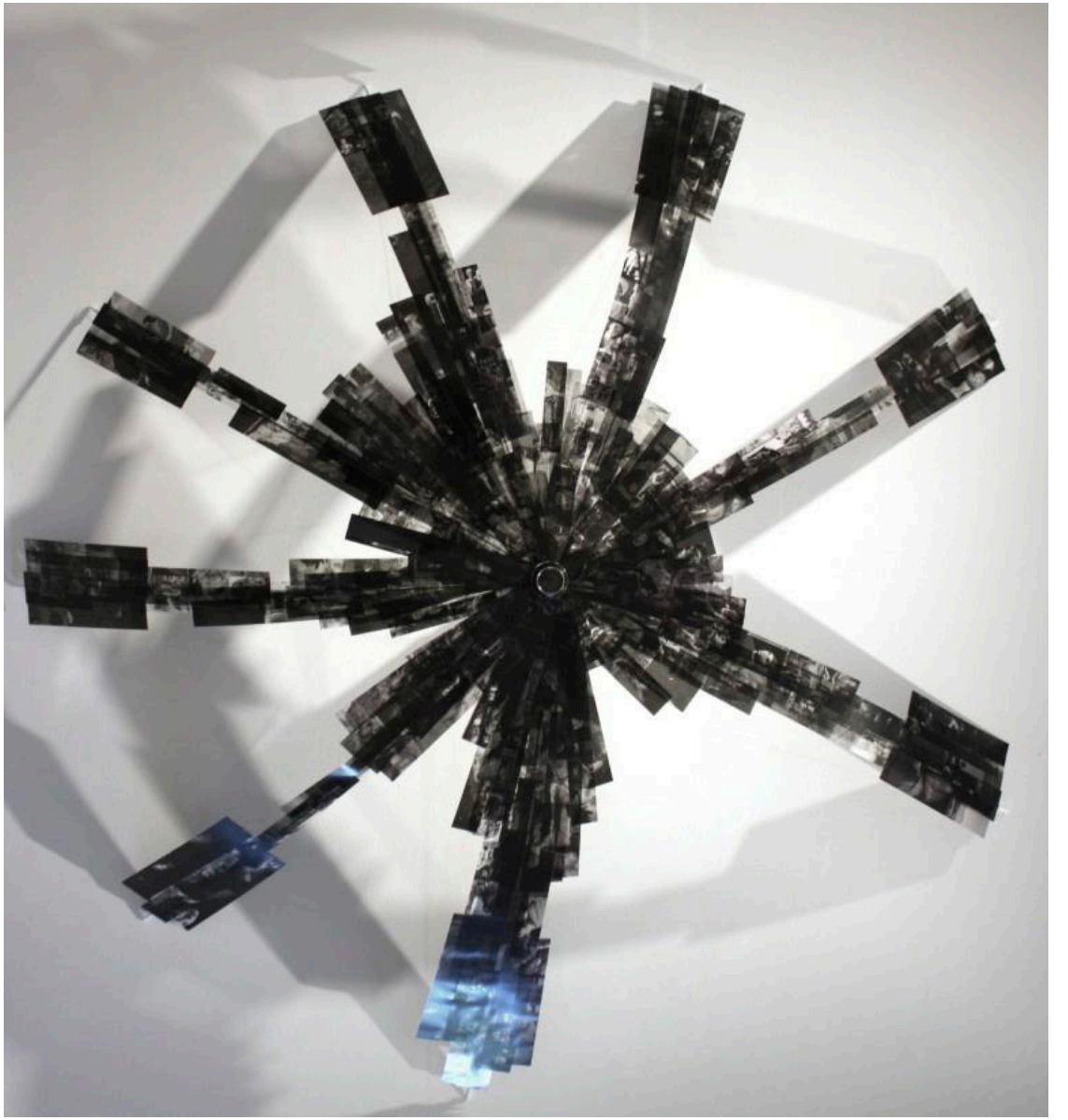


José Manuel Fors
Cuban, b. 1956
A la sombra de los maestros (In the Shade of the Masters), 2011
Mixed media, 64 x 64 x 16 in., Pan American Arts Projects Miami

José Manuel Fors
Cuban, b. 1956
A la sombra de los maestros #1 (In the Shade of the Masters #1), 2011
Mixed media, 38 x 38 x 15 in., Pan American Arts Projects Miami

José Manuel Fors
Cuban, b. 1956
A la sombra de los maestros #3 (In the Shade of the Masters #3), 2011
Mixed media, 38 x 38 x 15 in., Pan American Arts Projects Miami

Carlos Garaicoa
Cuban, b. 1967
Avenida del puerto y Luz (Corner of Seaport Avenue and Light), 2012
Pigment print on gelatin-coated bone, 4 ¾ x 6 in., collection of Arthur and Susan Fleischer

Carlos Garaicoa
Cuban, b. 1967
Cuatro caminos (Four Corners), 2012
Pigment print on gelatin-coated bone, 4 ¾ x 6 in., collection of Arthur and Susan Fleischer

Carlos Garaicoa
Cuban, b. 1967
Noticias recientes (Brasil)/Recent News (Brazil), 2008
Diptych, photographic prints mounted and laminated in Plexiglas with bullet impacts, 61 x 49 ¼ in. each, Celso Grisi collection.
Above, detail of preceeding page.

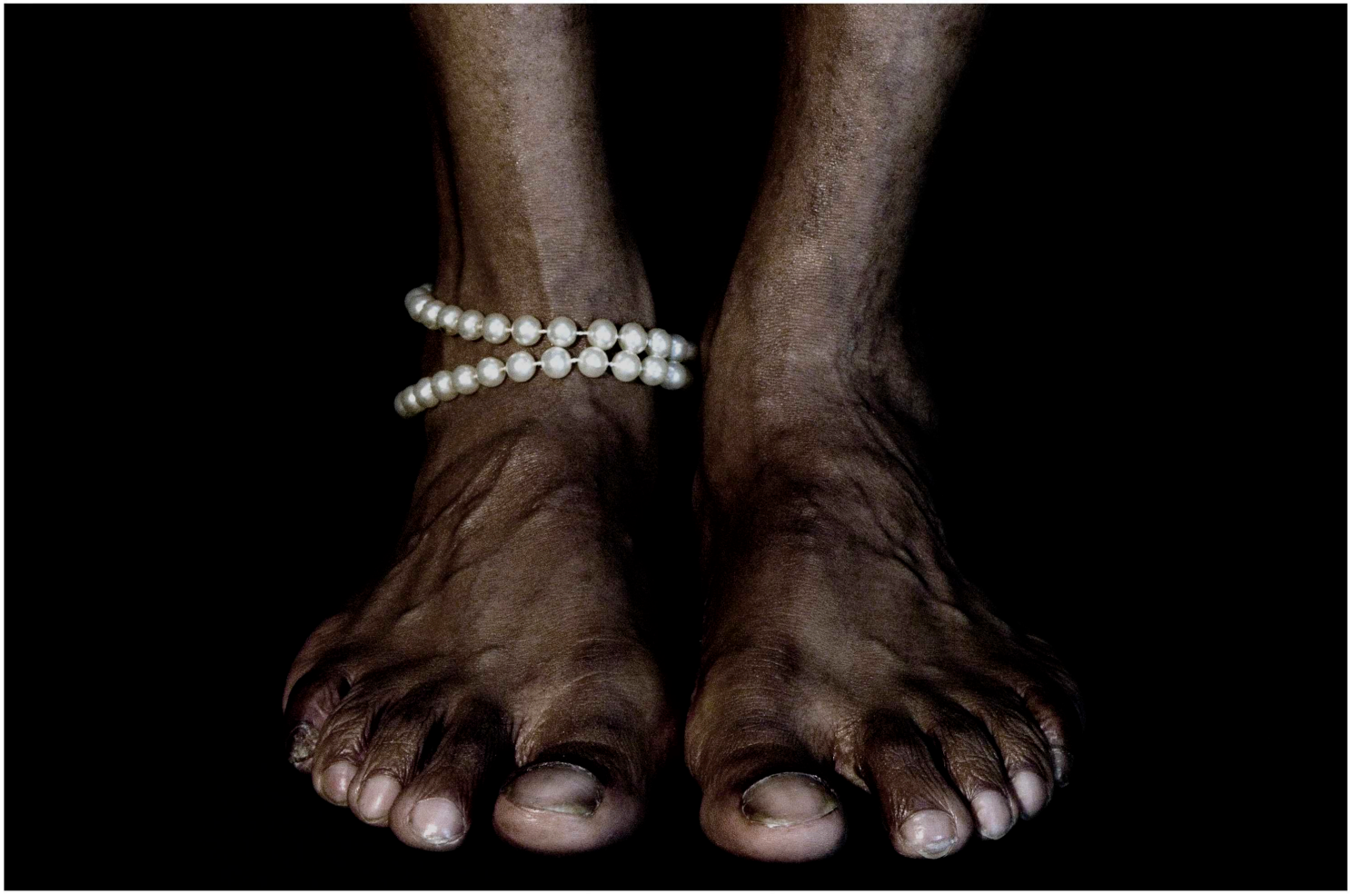
Figure 1. **Carlos Garaicoa**
Cuban, b. 1967
Balazos y puerta (Shots and Door), 1997–2000
color photograph, 48 ¾ x 39 ⅓, courtesy of the artist.
(This object is not included in the exhibition.)

Liudmila + Nelson
Cuban, est. 1993
Infanta y Carlos III, from the series *Hotel Habana*, 2009–2012
Transparency, 40 x 60 in., courtesy of the artists

Liudmila + Nelson
Cuban, est. 1993
Prado y Neptuno, from the series *Hotel Habana*, 2009–2012
Transparency, 40 x 60 in., courtesy of the artists

Liudmila + Nelson
Cuban, est. 1993
San Lazaro e Infanta, from the series *Hotel Habana*, 2009–2012
Transparency, 40 x 60 in., courtesy of the artists

Reynier Leyva Novo
Cuban, b. 1983
Sólo la tierra perdura (Batalla de Mal Tiempo) (Only the Land Endures [Battle of Mal Tiempo]), 2013
Digital print, size varies, courtesy of the artist



René Peña
Cuban, b. 1957
Sin título, de la serie Untitled Album, 2007
Digital print, 19 ⅔ x 24 in., courtesy of the artist

René Peña
Cuban, b. 1957
Sin título, de la serie Untitled Album, 2007
Digital print, 19 ⅔ x 24 in., courtesy of the artist

René Peña
Cuban, b. 1957
Sin título, de la serie Untitled Album, 2010
Digital print, 24 x 19 ⅔ in., courtesy of the artist

René Peña
Cuban, b. 1957
Sin título, de la serie Untitled Album, 2009
Digital print, 19 ⅔ x 24 in., courtesy of the artist

René Peña
Cuban, b. 1957
Tutú, de la serie Untitled Album, 2008
Digital print, 19 ⅔ x 24 in., courtesy of the artist

Rafael Villares
Cuban, b. 1989
Finisterre, 2005
Digital print, 11 ⅞ x 15 ¾ in., courtesy of the artist

Rafael Villares
Cuban, b. 1989
Finisterre, 2005
Digital print, 11 ⅞ x 15 ¾ in., courtesy of the artist

Rafael Villares
Cuban, b. 1989
Finisterre, 2005
Digital print, 11 ⅞ x 15 ¾ in., courtesy of the artist

Back: Angel Delgado, *Límite continuo XIV (Continuous Limit XIV)*, 2009

Chazen Museum of Art