

New Art of Cuba. - book reviews

Gerardo Mosquera

OUR MAN ON HAVANA

New Art of Cuba, by Luis Camnitzer. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. 432 pp. 207 black and white illustrations. \$24.95.

IN HIS ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, Luis Camnitzer says that I should have written this book. This seems the perfect example of the post-Modern death of the author, especially if one also ends up reviewing one's own unwritten book. But Camnitzer is really the right person for the subject. A frequent visitor to Cuba, he has been involved with the new art since the early '80s, and, as a Uruguayan, he shares a general cultural perspective as well as some related experience of the periphery. At the same time, living and working in New York have allowed him to maintain a distance from all this. As an artist, critic, and professor he has influenced both the conceptualist tendency of the new Cuban art and its local and international "legitimation."

This is Camnitzer's first book, as well as the first systematic presentation of the artistic movement that has existed in Cuba since the late '70s. The new art, which has stirred up Cuba's whole cultural atmosphere, addresses controversial issues such as appropriation, kitsch, the vernacular, the "international" identity and the Afro-Cuban. It also addresses the island's social and political situation through a critique of the regime's representations. Now widely recognized as the most powerful and provocative visual-art phenomenon in contemporary Latin America, it initially appeared as a surprise. In Lucy Lippard's words, "a socialist republic was not expected to come up with an exuberant art ... that confronts the mestizaje and syncretism that are also beginning to be major issues in North America."

Unlike most discourses on Latin American art published in North America, Camnitzer's book deals with these "complexities and contradictions" without resorting to clichés. This is particularly important because the new Cuban art, more so than that of many other countries, assumes most of the postcolonial paradoxes that affect cultural practice in Latin America, together with the post-Modern playing on the periphery. That is one reason for the international attention this art has been receiving. (A second book on the subject by scholar Jana Cazalla, focusing on the key aspect of resignification, will appear in Spain.)

By writing as an art historian rather than an art critic, Camnitzer has imposed a challenge on himself: he has used the art-historical format in order to fill the scholarly vacuum in the field, structuring a huge volume of information--including reproductions--and discussing it objectively. Despite some minor errors, the book is an essential source for understanding not only Cuba and its visual imagery but also the stuff of Latin American art. In addition to the scholarship in this book, Camnitzer deserves attention as a writer for his insightful, brilliant, and devastating art criticism, which he has mainly published in Latin America.

Unfortunately, because of his commitment to and respect for Cuban art, Camnitzer has chosen to "censor" himself, softening the well-known South American "soccer style" I so enjoy in his more personal remarks on art. Also, though he is now more visible for the English reader, he is in a way handicapped: the text was written in the midst of a period of crisis in Cuba, when many of the new artists left the country. The sudden change in the situation on the island has rendered much of his lively discussion of current problems outdated or naive. Despite its two postscripts, then, events have pushed the book toward a different kind of art history than was intended. It's as if the text were constructed from utopia during postutopia.

Contributing to this feeling is the author's concern to maintain the best possible image of the Cuban Revolution, which leads him to justify and relativize even in cases that demand radical criticism. It is an obsession springing from his personal '60s dreams, as Ana Tiscornia, in another review, has underlined, pointing out that the book is also a self-portrait of his generation of Latin American intellectuals. Not unlike the North American left--whose reaction to the Cuban situation is both naive and guilty--Camnitzer is careful to avoid "arming the enemy" of the revolution. Such well-intentioned solidarity confuses the authoritarian Cuban political establishment with the society that it dominates, and ends up arming the enemy within. Indirectly, it also hampers progressive

positions within Cuba, and the possibilities for a more popular, pluralistic participation. Problems like these lie in the background of the artists' diaspora that so dramatically changed the situation described in the book. An example of the similarity between Camnitzer's perspective and that of the North American left is his attempt to link critical art to the meaningless official "rectification process," instead of discussing it as resistance to hegemonic power.

Nevertheless, Camnitzer's long, crucial commitment to the new art has proven instrumental for the critical culture inside the island. His actions have been more radical than his careful book, surprised by these changing times. As Cuban rock singer Carlos Varela put it, "Politics don't fit in the sugar bowl."

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