Carl De Keyzer

CUBA

la lucha
In December 1962, Agnès Varda visited Cuba at the invitation of the ICAIC.1 The Belgian-born avant-garde filmmaker intended to make a short film about the changes that had ensued in the Caribbean nation during the three years since the triumph of the revolution. Her vision was set to capture the signs of progress, as well as the symptoms of the unparalleled optimism that had seized the population.

In preparation, she took thousands of photographs: black-and-white reality bites that featured the popular celebrations with impromptu dancing sessions, the beauty of the women, the recurring marching of militias’ parades, the sugar-cane harvesters’ sweaty devotion and the general intensity of being. Making use of photomontage – a technique much in vogue at the time – Salut les cubains was completed in 1964, with an original soundtrack of readings by Varda and actor Michel Piccoli, embellished by the melodies of the great Cuban singer Benny Moré. Varda’s accomplishment was to deliver the spirit of that incomparable moment, not as a conventional documentary film, but as a syncopated sequence of still images.

Fuelled by the charisma of its leaders and their innovative rhetoric, the Cuba portrayed by Varda in Salut les cubains became one of the trademark images of an era marked by global fascination with Socialism at the peak of the Cold War.

For Cubans – and by extension, for Latin Americans and Africans – Varda’s fine-looking film served as a visual reminder of unbound hope and indisputable Utopia. Nevertheless, Varda’s own definition of Cuba as an incomparable marriage of Socialism and cha-cha-cha gives account of her exoticising gaze. Made one year after the Cuban regime had repelled the American invasion at the Bay of Pigs and the start of the fifty-six-year embargo that strangled the nation with merciless economic restrictions, such a romantic view remains questionable. Like an implicit reference to the Surrealist motto “Beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d’une machine à coudre et d’un parapluie”2, so dear to the French literary tradition, the definition seems to do little more than to reinforce the ready-made propaganda of the Cuban Revolution as a spicy Caribbean version of deadpan Socialism.

“A LUTA CONTINUA”? 

On the other side of this story and after decades of political stasis, Cuba is under international scrutiny again. The once-young magnetic leaders that guided the nation to progressive change remain in power after a sustained economic crisis, which led millions to either exile or imprisonment for dissent. La lucha has become the most common definition of a state of being for Cubans since the times of the economic collapse of the 1990s. An expression coined by people to define their struggle for survival, it was normalised by the crisis and continues to be regularly used today. Echoing such a spirit of struggle, Carl De Keyzer’s latest body of work Cuba, la lucha is the fruit of his observing the changes affecting the island at this very hour.

Also significant is the relationship of the expression with the anticolonial struggle motto “A luta continua”, employed by Mozambican independence hero and first president Samora Machel, which seems to palpitate at the heart of these photographs. Nonetheless, in light of the present shifts towards Capitalism and the opening of Cuba’s frontiers, the struggle signifies, not only material improvement, but also a softening of state control. As the latest chapter of Carl De Keyzer’s on-going investigation of falling socialist regimes around the world, the series attempts to capture the atmosphere of Cuba’s uneasy jump from Marxist-Leninist ideology to capitalist economy.

The photographer’s personal investment in the subject is typical of the age he has lived through. He witnessed the end of the USSR, which he recorded, when first visiting in the late 1980s, from the angle of a proto-socialist disappointed with the end of a political Utopia.

His book Homo Sovieticus (1988–1989), the second in a series of on-going monographic publications, was launched at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The photographs, while not conceived for exhibition purposes, but for a book format comprising images and his
employs diversionary techniques based on the proposition of multidimensional readings that invite us to choose what to see in a single image. A number of aesthetic conventions proper to art photography help him to unravel big themes departing from the minuscule, from gestures and small details, to unpick the humanity of the subjects as if in a whisper, for his is not the endeavour of an objective photojournalist.

In conceptual terms, Carl De Keyzer claims not to be interested in proposing changes, but in merely recording the transition of significant historical moments, making it visible by enhancing the splendour and uncertainty of fleeting moments. Examples of how he emotionally deconstructs major historical events can be found in the pictures taken in two crucial sites of resistance at the end of the USSR: in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania, and in Yerevan, capital of Armenia.

One could say that this photographer’s strength is his sense of timing, fundamental to seizing the opportunity offered by the moment of action, a skill he learned as an agency photographer. He knows that images have a greater impact when they emerge from the ‘zeitgeist’. Although he recalls feeling constrained while working in the USSR, he seized the opportunity given by the easing of restrictions under the policies of Perestroika and Glasnost, using these to his advantage.

CUBA, LA LUCHA

Twenty-six years later, Carl De Keyzer embarks again on another photographic voyage to engage in what appears to be the end of Socialism. He arrived in Cuba in January 2015, after President Obama’s highly media-tised announcement of the re-establishment of Cuban-American relations, dramatically severed since January 1961. In his historic speech, Obama proposed to relieve the burden of Cubans with the end of sanctions, publicly recognising, in a gigantic and memorable political gesture, how the embargo had not served the interests of both countries. Obama’s condition: “We are calling on Cuba to unleash the potential of eleven million Cubans by ending unnecessary restrictions on their political, social, and economic activities.”

The game became clear: both sides in the fifty-six-year-old conflict needed to actively work on their rapprochement, supposedly on condition of putting an end to socialist rule on the island.

One of the series’ first photographs, taken from the derelict interior of an apartment building on Obispo Street in the heart of Old Havana, shows the Capitolio, standing memory of the old city’s splendour, seen through the apartment’s window. The majestic dome appears covered in scaffolding, due to its undergoing restoration, and thus becomes a telling visual reminder of a nation ready to inaugurate another chapter in its history. Completed in 1929 by Cuban architects
heavily influenced by the designs of the Capitol in Washington, DC and of the Panthéon militaire des Invalides in Paris, decorated by Tiffany & Co. of New York, the Capitolio ceased to fulfil its official purpose in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution.

The placing of this particular image at the start of the series is highly symbolic: marking the close of an era known as a landmark of twentieth-century history, the building’s restoration is led by Eusebio Leal Spengler, Havana City Historian, Director of the restoration programme of Old Havana and its historical centre. Once revamped to a new life, it will see its former function reinstated as the future stage of political action.

Between the covers of this book lies the intensity of a moment that has been equally feared and desired on both sides of the Straits of Florida for over five decades. But the task at hand is highly complex, given the intricacy of the changes taking place in Cuba. A transitional phase for political leadership and the reduction of the public sector go hand in hand with the rapid rise of a market economy, including the spread of private enterprise and the establishment of a real-estate market.

Perhaps because of the shock produced by such an enormous shift, condensed into a relatively short period of time, the photographs exude a sense of unease, or as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would put it, a sense of being in “a period of interregnum, between a time when we had certainties and another when the old ways of doing things no longer work.”

In Cuba, la lucha, scenes of crumbling interiors framing the lives of people affected by scarcity appear unavoidable. One is accustomed to the usual Cuban visual repertoire, featuring the decay of the city and the nostalgia-fuelled images of vintage American cars driven along the broad seaside esplanade of the Malecón. Even when the photographer consciously avoids clichés, these are inevitable in a nation that, simultaneously, tries to shake off its traditional stereotypes and is ready to exploit the old system and the new reality is intensifying as Cuba begins to change, and since photography’s relationship with time is intrinsically ambivalent, the contrast of feeling contained in Varda’s and in Carl De Keyzer’s images embodies that tension. In this regard, no one has made the complex nature of photography’s temporality more explicit than Roland Barthes:

“The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of there of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then.”

In Carl De Keyzer’s photographs another element adds to this complexity: the choice of characters whose existence seems immersed in the awkwardness of time travel. Such is the case with the elderly ballet dancer posing in her modest basement room, displaying a decadent neoclassical bed frame under the unbearable weight of a concrete staircase. Such domestic settings carry a prickly feeling of voyeurism that makes us wonder if we shall be allowed into these private spaces, where shame and the good nature of the hosts are two
sides of the same coin. Does this sense of discomfort allow the recognition of how people imagine their own world and hence construct their image; or conversely, are we mere dispassionate witnesses of the hardship of those subjected to a broken promise?

Images of poverty and struggle constitute a distinctive focus of the photojournalist genre. Some artists and photographers, whose take on the exploitation of human tragedy gave rise to poetic conceptual approaches, have sharply challenged this tendency. Such is the case in Alfredo Jaar’s body of work about Rwanda, where the traces of the genocide are totally obliterated, giving way instead to an installation made of slides showing a single image: a close-up of the eyes of a boy who witnessed the horror of the massacres.

Moreover, throughout the history of art this topic of representation is far from being exhausted. Such a perennial question is concerned with the psychological engagement of the sitter, namely whether the photograph is taken in such a way as to allow our gaze to be reciprocated; and if so, how much in control is the subject of the image’s ultimate meaning? Additional to the question of the gaze, our role as spectators carries the shadow of guilt, as we may feel accomplices in our passivity when facing the situation denounced by the image. This question was dealt with by Roland Barthes in his essay *Shock Photos* in which he advances that “a photograph is not terrible in itself… the horror comes from the fact that we are looking at it from inside our freedom.”

An image of a poor elderly woman in the hall of a stunningly stylish Art Deco building in Havana places the viewer in an ambivalent position. Exposed with her ragged dress and seemingly lost or confused, the woman stands as a metaphor voided of subjectivity. Carl De Keyzer reminds us that “there is a border, a line that you don’t cross: you don’t go backstage in the theatre.” The domestic setting of the private boxing club, where impromptu fencing exercises take place under the gaze of revolutionary icons, is a reminder of a long-standing struggle.

There is an imprint of the photographer’s mind in these images, as innocence is not possible even if photography works to naturalise a view of the world that is, in fact, always political and interested. Consequently, it does not seem feasible to append authorship.

A VERY SPECIAL PERIOD

It is widely known that to fully grasp the present it is paramount to examine the past. A crucial moment of Cuba’s recent history, the euphemistically called ‘periodo especial’ can be considered as the beginning of the revolution’s end.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Cuba suffered the impact of significant collateral damage. The immediate consequence was the declaration of an economic state of emergency – the so-called ‘Special Period in Peacetime’, fruit of the collapse of trade agreements with the Soviet Union, which at the time amounted to an annual subsidy of six billion dollars. By 1993, the economy had dropped by thirty-five per cent, leaving people unprotected; so most Cubans’ daily preoccupation was to secure a minimum level of subsistence for themselves and their families, by any means. This is when the struggle – *la lucha* – begins, a state of mind carried into the present behaviour of the population.

In political terms, the opening of the Soviet Union to a dialogue with the world planted a seed of hope for Cubans, especially in artistic and intellectual circles. But the seed was soon to perish before germinating, as government control and restrictions on freedom of expression augmented and punishment of dissent grew harder, causing thousands of citizens to emigrate.

Fast-forwarding to Carl De Keyzer’s depictions of Cuba today, his aforementioned skill to seize opportunities appears clearly in the photograph depicting a blind man walking over a floor drawing of the Cuban and American flags with the legend: *Welcome – Por la unidad de los pueblos* (For the union of the people). The man’s step on the graffiti and its photographic memento operate in two simultaneous realms: those of premonition and paradox, as who is welcome, and under what terms, is not clear.

Similarly, irony emerges in the surreal image of the natural history museum of the colonial city of Trinidad. A stuffed crocodile opens its menacing jaws, somehow pointing at the admissions lady on the other corner, whose equally frightening look seems in turn directed at the photographer.

Like her, some of the subjects in the series glance obliquely or in defiance, as if intending to take back some of their power. They rarely smile or assume agency when their world is penetrated by the camera, except for the man who joyously shares his domino moment with us, waving his inviting hands in the sweet afternoon air.

In general terms, one senses the unease of Carl De Keyzer’s intrusion into the private and social spaces that Cubans are so open to sharing with curious foreign visitors. This feeling is possibly born out of the ambivalence of the present time and the enormous curiosity shown by the world.

Cockfight scenes in remote rural areas where men place their bets in Cuban convertible currency (CUC) address parallel economies, but the pervasive hustling of tourists by young men and women in nightclubs, and out in the streets, is not to be found in these photographs. Such amply visible activity – also euphemistically named *la lucha* by those who practise it – speaks of the
paradox of the struggle for survival in a country where education was not only paramount, but also deemed to eliminate prostitution. According to social anthropologists who have studied this subject, also widely covered by artists and photographers, the historical stigmatisation of prostitution, linked to the vices of imperialism, and therefore, displaced by the construction of the New Man, could not prevent the spreading of sex for money exchange with foreigners.9

As in real life, the photographs convey the decay of the socialist project in ways that are most visible when reading between the lines. Often small gestures define a place better than grand narratives. Ironic and poetic, a view of the Parque de los dinosaurios near Santiago de Cuba is an invitation to time-travel to a remote past lying beyond revolutions and their aftermath. In another image, a symbol appears disturbingly out of place in a street scene of Baracoa, the town built on the site where Christopher Columbus set foot on the island: among a youth group, the head of a man shows a shaved swastika design as part of his hairstyle.

Interestingly enough, the flying saucer-shaped architecture of the landmark ice-cream parlour Copelia does not feature in Carl De Keyzer’s choice of images for this book. The famous modernist ice-cream parlour opened in 1966, borrowing its name from the celebrated ballet comique with music scored by Léo Delibes and based on E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story The Doll. Naming a shop after literary and classical ballet references speaks of a cultural atmosphere that for decades made Cuba stand among the most progressive nations in the world. This, alongside the 1961 literacy campaign and the provision of housing for the entire population, remain remarkable victories in the context of the Caribbean, a region historically marred by inequality and lack of education.

Although it could be argued that precariousness contributed largely to the Cuban regime’s decline, it is in the persistent panoptic monitoring of the population’s revolutionary conduct, that the political project lost its credibility, seeding discontent. The internalisation of fears that prevented certain thoughts and actions from being expressed had a disabling effect: Cubans are naturally open, generous and certainly resilient, but the policing of behaviour induced a bitter taste of disenchantment. The widening gap between party rhetoric and its authoritarian modus operandi, including the detention of artists and intellectuals, as well as general ideological oppression, became a self-destructive force against which wide sectors of the population rebelled in a variety of ways.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES
Following in the footsteps of his previous bodies of work, in Cuba, la lucha, Carl De Keyzer places the emphasis on a non-literal visual analysis of man-made schemes and their effect on humans. Notably so, in his highly acclaimed series God Inc., by forcing himself into religious communities under the pretence of seeking salvation, he demonstrated his capacity to role-play. In his project about Congo, the photographer portrayed the living symptoms of post-colonialism as seen from the old colonial power’s perspective. In Cuba, la lucha, his questions are open as wounds or fresh flowers, given that the subject of the series is indeed change and, therefore, both sore and unfathomable. Such ambiguity manifests itself in oblique portraits of people, with their bodies in deep connection with buildings, immersed in striking fields of primary colour or engaged in outdoor routines. Private and social histories are told though the inclusion of a minimal selection of elements, among which architecture features repeatedly. The image of a young man playing the piano in a room inside a cultural centre is made all the more seductive by the orchestration of signs of decay: a broken window shutter and disintegrating chairs become signs of his struggle. Illusions are created in seconds and killed through years of continuous deterioration. References can be comical or unexpectedly surreal, and might be traced back to the likes of Monty Python or Buñuel, conceivably lodged at the back of the photographer’s mind. The expressiveness of man-made constructions, such as the interiors of dilapidated buildings, is a key narrative and conceptual element in these photographs of a country being deconstructed by the camera as it rebuilds itself.

Unexpectedly, the book’s last image tells us a very different story. Showing the visual symmetry of coloured wooden cabins in a resort, associations with wealth and leisure present a seamless and familiar global fantasy. Miami? I am afraid not: it is Varadero.

Texto en español al final

1. Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos.
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