

# THE FIST OF LÁZARO IS THE FIST OF HIS GENERATION: LÁZARO SAAVEDRA AND NEW CUBAN ART AS DISSIDENCE

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“Memory is a weapon/ against the blood/ and shit of history/ that propaganda of the victors/ that frozen wasteland” (Pommersheim, 239). This stanza recognizes the fundamental reality in Cuba that there exists a disparity between “history” and “memory,” the official representation and the actual. These words characterize the philosophy of the New Cuban artists who, beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the Special Period until today, have used art to “search for a culture of truth in the midst of the ideological rubble (*escombros ideológicos*) they see every day, in their hearts and their houses” (Guerra, 2007, p. 188). Lázaro Saavedra is one such artist who has used his work to express the problems and experiences of ordinary Cubans, professing independence from the state’s created historical narrative and dogma.

This paper seeks to elucidate the messages of Saavedra’s work, specifically *Sepultados por el olvido* (1997), *El que no sabe es como el que no ve* (2006), and *Seremos como Hatuey* (1997), and locate them within the framework of memory and its purposes. Saavedra’s works embody a subversion of the regime’s official (historical) narrative for the goal of recovering the true nature of Cuban identity; that is, through art he advocates living in the truth of the collective rather than remaining under the enforced position of the regime. I contend that Saavedra rejects the regime’s management of ideas to challenge the legitimacy of the state, create spaces for discus-

sion, and advocate for the recovery of an alternative memory.

## THE NEW CUBAN ART

The new Cuban art began in 1981 with the exhibition *Volumen Uno*, which “defined aesthetic autonomy against sociological programs for culture and against the enveloping institutional surround” (Weiss, 2001, p. xiii). This marked the end of the “dark period” of the 1970s in which art was used as ideological propaganda and instead began a spontaneous cultural phenomenon initiated by young artists. Their art was an “art of ideas,” provoking analysis and reflection through, among other things, the use of humor, the grotesque, and the manipulation of state rhetoric in order to transmit social and political criticisms (Zeitlin, Mosquera and Eligio, p. 26). The new Cuban artists used “visual arts as a site for discussion in a country where such sites did not exist” (Zeitlin, Mosquera and Eligio, p. 29). It was, in essence, a created space for subversion of the regime as well as a revolutionary movement to incite social change—a change of reality through a change of consciousness.

Lázaro Saavedra, “the rough and ready philosopher of Cuban life,” understood the power of ideas and possibilities of a changed consciousness (Capote, Mosquera, and Simonds, p. 13). He graduated from the Instituto Superior de Artes (ISA) in Havana in 1988, comprising the second wave of “new” artists,

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dubbed “Los novísimos.” Unlike most of the artists with whom he grew up, Saavedra remained in Cuba through the 1990s and still lives there today, continuing to create artwork as an attitude, ethic, and “strategy and tactic of life” (Matamoros, p. 18).<sup>2</sup> This makes Saavedra unique; his long-standing presence among Cuban artists speaks to his ability to create works that forge relationships with “ongoing social, political, and ethical issues”—and maintain the stamina to dissent. The weight of importance he gives to cognitive functions—both his as the artist and that of the public—should not be overlooked, for it is the crux of his purpose. In an interview with Havana Culture, Saavedra elaborates on this point, speaking of his education: “Back then...priority was given to a method where you develop skills to represent that which is outside your head, whether it be a still life, portrait, landscape, or human body. We didn’t develop skills to develop what we had inside our heads...I am also interested in displaying my work inside the human brain, not exclusively on gallery’s walls” (Saavedra, 2012). The external is often pointless; nothing obtains significance, the potency to stimulate change, or, above all, power, unless it is internalized.

The Castro regime acted upon this principle. The “Battle of Ideas” was instituted in the latter part of the 1990s as a “concentrated effort to culturalize the social and political space of the nation in the name of the Revolution, comprised of a massive campaign of media programming, arts instruction, and other projects undertaken by the national leadership and its cultural vehicles” (Weiss, 2007, p. 19). Culture was employed as a means to seek control of the public and guard against deviant opinions, thoughts, and ebbing allegiances. The victory of the Revolution would be achieved by controlling what goes on in people’s heads. Total unanimity in ideology, the state, social conformity, and collective memory would constitute a “victory of ideas,” and it was against such that Saavedra worked.

“Memory is a weapon/ against the blood/ and shit of history.” In order to apply this statement to Saavedra, it is necessary to begin with the word “shit.” Shit played an important role in new Cuban art because it afforded artists an evocative conduit of expression against the regime. It “countered the ponderous cadence of the Revolution in crisis and traversed it with the energies of popular protest”; it was humorous in a grotesque, yet very pointed, manner (Weiss, 2011, p. 108). At the opening of his 1991 Biennial Exhibition, which had been closed before it could open, Saavedra ran in screaming, “It’s all shit!” and proceeded to punch the functionary from the Ministry of Culture opening the exhibit (Weiss, 2011, p. 107). Saavedra’s choice of words is telling, and arguably intentional. The censorship, the façade of the regime and its socialist ploys in the midst of decay, the revulsion of reality—it was all shit. It was in this moment, as Lázaro was dragged off to a closet by other state functionaries, that a young artist standing next to author Rachel Weiss whispered, “The fist of Lázaro is the fist of his generation” (Weiss, 2007, pp. 13–14). He did so because Saavedra recognized the gap between history and memory, between the “shit” that constituted the “official” version and the lived version. Saavedra dedicated himself and his artwork to the battle to create an alternative narrative. His fist physically represented the ideas and memory he and the other new Cuban artists worked to inject back into the public.

A main stage on which this battle was fought was the Havana Biennial. Began in 1984 as a brainchild of Fidel Castro, the Biennial was an idealistic project meant to bring Third World artists together in an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist display of artistic solidarity as well as bring art to the Cuban public (Weiss, 2011, pp. 139–140). However, given the time period in which it was initiated, the new Cuban artists strove to use the Biennial for their own purposes; namely, to negate the fact that “the public had become the unrelenting space of the performance of commitment, while the private was the incessant

2. Matamoros (2003, 18). “*Cada creador hace el arte a su manera; Saavedra lo practica como conducta. Su creación es esencialmente actitud, ética. Es estrategia y táctica de vida.*”

realm of *resolver* (Weiss, 2007, p. 17). This particular venue has thus served as a site of controversy, scandal, and public exposure in an attempt to bridge the gap between public and private. The censorship of Saavedra's 1991 exhibition illustrates just one example of the tension between the state and artist. Saavedra's subsequent lack of invitation to the 1994 Biennial speaks to the state's desire for controlling dissenting thought and work. He returned to the Biennial after a six year hiatus in 1997 and used it as the platform and memory as the weapon to publically criticize the regime and its "official" version of history with his installment *Sepultados por el olvido*.

### SAAVEDRA'S WORK: THREE CASE STUDIES

*Sepultados por el olvido* ("Buried by Forgetfulness") featured unmarked tombstones placed in front of "a bullet-pocketed wall that was well known locally as the unmarked site of the executions that had culminated Ché's revolutionary tribunals" of *Batistianos* in 1959 (Weiss, 2012, p. 145; Guerra, 2013). (See Figure 1.) The theme of the Biennial was "The Individual and his Memory," which "proposed a tension between individual memory and memory as a social and historical repository, but many of the works lapsed into a family photo album approach suffused with inchoate learning" (Weiss, 2007, p. 16). Saavedra's did not. His piece blatantly commemorated an event that people only remembered privately but that was publically forgotten. The Castro regime, in its quest to gloriously paint Ché as a symbol of the Revolution, conveniently "forgot" about this little piece of history. Omitting it from official remembrance rendered the executions to seem as if they had never happened in the first place.

The historical memory of Cuba then, is one created for political purposes; it does not align with the collective memory. Collective memory can be understood as lived experiences, in contrast from historical memory which is the preserved narrative, often the "official." If "collective memory ultimately is located not in sites but in individuals" (Weiss, 2007, p. 11), there is a danger of the collective becoming the historical if individuals fail to act on recognizing the difference. Saavedra's graveyard was a call to remember and act upon that remembrance, otherwise society

would eventually be buried by the regime's narrative instead that of the collective. Saavedra advocated living in the truth.

**Figure 1. Sepultados por el olvido/  
Buried by Forgetfulness**



Source: Lázaro Saavedra, 1997

Saavedra's philosophy and purpose is consistent with that of the Czechoslovakian leader Vaclav Havel. Both of their works seek to recognize and to live in the truth. They profess that, by doing so, inner emancipation will result—the freedom for self-definition and from state manipulation. Havel writes that, "The primary excusatory function of ideology...is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe" (Havel, p. 134). Saavedra uses artwork, and an alternative memory of the past, to shatter this illusion, and the Castro regime's ideology of unanimity. Saavedra, like a modern-day incarnation of Havel's "greengrocer," who one day decides he will not hang his "Workers of the World Unite" sign in the window per Communist Party guidelines, stopped living the lie. By confronting the regime's narrative and identity construction through the control of ideas and memory, Saavedra "rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. ...His revolt is an attempt to live within the truth" (Havel, p. 146). Havel continues:

The singular, explosive, incalculable power of living within the truth resides in the fact that living openly

within the truth has an ally, invisible to be sure, but omnipresent: this hidden sphere. It is from this sphere the life lived openly in the truth grows; it is to this sphere that it speaks and in it that it finds understanding. This is where the potential for communication exists.

In Saavedra's case, the "hidden sphere" Havel refers to is collective memory. Living according to collective memory instead of the historical one crafted by Castro is Saavedra's method for embracing the truth and rejecting the lie of official memory. According to Arelys Hernández Plasencia, this quest to search for the truth was not unique to Saavedra but common of the other young artists who had experienced the Special Period.<sup>3</sup> Their work attempts to discover "a culture of truth that can fill the void of the one that we had, that betrayed us, that turned out to be more of a false truth or a half-truth than a lie" (Guerra, 2007, p. 188). By placing a graveyard at the place he did, Saavedra, in full view of both the public and the state, "demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie" (Guerra, 2007, p. 171). And there is great power in such demonstration.

Saavedra visually represents the greengrocer phenomenon and the challenge of embracing the truth in his video piece, *El que no sabe es como el que no ve* ("Not Knowing is Like Not Seeing") (2006). In it, he symbolizes Cuba's socialist society with a pile of beans. Everybody is equal, homogeneous in ideology and behavior, moving together inferably according to the dictates of the state. However, one bean, or "person," breaks away from the mass and begins to dance around, exploring the outside and its knowledge and then returning to tell his "friends" what he finds. They join in and start to follow the first independent bean, breaking away from the mass until the first bean is smashed by a hammer. The hammer symbolizes state repression, censorship, and intolerance for independence. By crushing the dissenting leader, the "state" scares the rest of the followers back to the mass, back in line with official doctrine. The piece ends with a close-up of the smashed bean.

In an interview with BBC, Saavedra said that the theme he played with in this piece was "knowledge, the level of knowledge that you have access to or that you are permitted to access, and also the dangerous nature that knowledge could have" (Toledo). His work suggests that accessing and interacting with certain types of knowledge is dangerous because it exists in contrast to the model or ideals espoused by the regime—hence the need for a "hammer." Since the beginning of new Cuban art, the "hammer" came down on those who represented this dissenting knowledge in different forms: censorship, jail time, harassment, to name a few. Ultimately, the independent bean strives for knowledge apart from the state, or essentially an existence autonomous of the state. The difficulty in obtaining that kind of knowledge is inherently obvious, yet the title of the video, *Not Knowing is Like Not Seeing*, suggests that not seeking the truth or knowledge equates to blindness. Knowledge yields vision.

While the previous two examined pieces of Saavedra's have been serious and biting critical, much of his artwork is humorous. Humor was a central tenet in the new Cuban art, as laughter was a technique used to subvert the power of the regime and invert existing structures of expression and control. It evidenced itself in a myriad of different ways and for different purposes, including revenge, relief, and simple fun (Weiss, 2011, p. 76). Laughter "has been related less to tragedy than to the grotesque...giving rise to horror and laughter in the same breath....This grotesque was the inevitable trajectory of a lone fact: revolutions are destined to eat their young" (Weiss, 2011, pp. 76–77). In the case of Cuban art, the grotesque was tied to the *choteo*—the classic element of Cuban humor, that which perverted the joke and was always making fun of things (Weiss, 2011, p. 89). The *choteo* is, essentially, rebellion, and "it abominates, humorously, every principle of conduct and disciplinary requirement: of absolute truth, punctuality, conscience, ritual and ceremoniousness, the methodical" (Weiss, 2011, p. 89).<sup>4</sup> It ridiculed the dif-

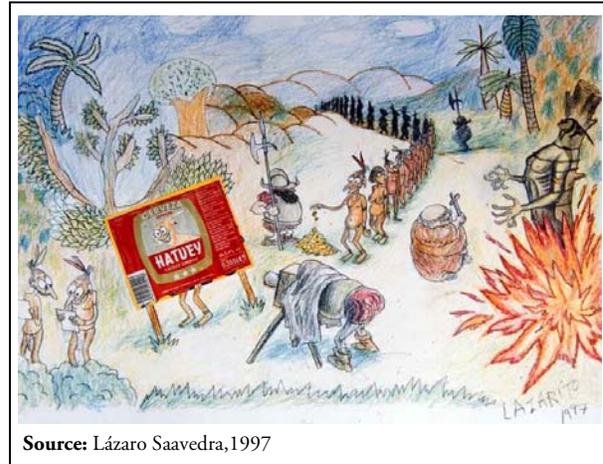
3. The Special Period refers to the years between 1989 and 1993 when the Cuban economy collapsed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, resulting in severe shortages of consumer goods and extremely difficult living situations.

ference between what was supposed to be and what actually was. Saavedra's used the *choteo* to make fun of the regime's images, words, and portrayal of reality through sarcasm and irony. Yet he did so in a way in which his critique of the subjected identity the regime sought to create could not be avoided.

*Seremos como Hatuey* ("We Will be Like Hatuey") (1997) might best illustrate this idea (Figure 2). In it, Saavedra drew "Indians" lining up to have their picture taken in a photo cutout board of the Hatuey beer label, with the hole for the face replacing that of the Indian chief normally at the center of the brand. Behind the man taking the pictures, the "actual" indian chief Hatuey is being burned at the stake. The picture is a parody of Theodore de Bry's famous engraving, *The Burning of Hatuey by the Spaniards at Yara, Cuba, on February 2, 1512* (1664) which depicts the story Bartolomé de las Casas wrote about Hatuey. According to his account, Hatuey fled from the Spanish on Hispanola to Cuba, but when he heard the Spanish were then crossing over to Cuba, he assembled his people to fight. Hatuey and his warriors eventually lost, and he was burned at the stake. He is famously remembered for telling the priest trying to convert him right before being burned that he would rather go to hell if heaven is where the Spanish went (Casas, pp. 24–25). Hatuey's resistance to the Spanish invasion made him Cuba's first "leader of indigenous rebellion against European conquest" (Backer, p. 204).

Fidel Castro would use the figure of Hatuey, this legend, and the "Indio" theme for his own purposes centuries later, adopting him as a national hero and father to the Cuban nation. In a 1985 speech, Castro remarked, "These are no longer the times of *el indio Hatuey*, nor are they the times when, at the end of our way of independence, there came others to stroll through here opportunistically; now, we are a conscious people, organized, patriotic, combative, well prepared, who are afraid of nothing and no one" (Backer, p. 230). Castro's imagery in this speech cast Americans as the new Spanish *conquistadores*, and the Indians as the Cuban people as a whole, fighting off

**Figure 2. Seremos como Hatuey/  
We Will be Like Hatuey**



Source: Lázaro Saavedra, 1997

foreign invaders. This time though, Cuba would avoid defeat and invasion. Through Hatuey, Castro transformed the Indian into "a foreigner who came to fight for the defense of a nation with which he feels some solidarity," an "internationalist revolutionary," and a "martyr whose blood sacrifice has been transformed into the sum of the idea of his life" (Backer, p. 231). Such rhetoric essentially bleached the "Indian" out of Hatuey, thus allowing Ché Guevara, the Argentinian revolutionary who came to Cuba to fight on behalf of the revolution, to become his modern day incarnation. Hatuey has thus stripped of his "Indian-ness" and molded to fit the purposes of Fidel Castro and the revolution.

Saavedra's title *Seremos como Hatuey* connects Ché and Hatuey el indio as well. It primarily satirizes one of the regime's slogans, "*Seremos como el Ché*" ("We will be like Ché"), which was said every day by Cuban students as part of their morning ritual before school. "Charged with the task of being like el Ché, Cuban youth were supposed to reach beyond innate, selfish desires and individual comforts to achieve an impossible utopia founded on voluntarism and the common good, not just temporarily but eternally" (Guerra, 2007, p. 173). However, instead of becoming like "el Ché," Saavedra changes the slogan to Hatuey—but in the picture he twists it again, refer-

4. See also Weiss (2011, pp. 85–92) for an extended discussion on *choteo*.

ring not to el indio Hatuey but the beer. With this Saavedra crushes the regime's idealism and rhetoric: Cubans are not going to be like Ché, and they are not going to embrace the myth that all Cubans are Indians. These myths, Saavedra suggests, are ridiculous and merely empty ideas. The fact that Saavedra drew the picture with colored pencils or crayons to simulate a child's drawing and completed the effect by signing the piece "Lazarito," a child's nickname, emphasizes the hollowness and degree of removal between the revolution's imagery and actuality. This implies that a child could easily mix up "Ché" with "Hatuey," and "Hatuey el indio" with the beer because beer was more real and familiar than the others. The revolutionary narrative, employing Ché and Hatuey as symbols molded to support the cause, does not, in reality, resonate with Cubans.

Thus, Saavedra humorously illuminates the disparity between the charade in which Cubans participate to go along with the regime's historical memory and what they actually live. Castro attempted to instill a certain consciousness into the Cuban people by employing his version of figures such as Ché and Hatuey, yet by the 1980s, and certainly by the Special Period, it fell flat. The regime's failure to respond to the many crises of the Special Period was a betrayal of the Revolution and essentially the Cuban people. It was fake, a lie, illegitimate. The "*Seremos como el Ché*" generation was then forced to redefine their identity apart from the state, and "they are doing so in ways meant to re-evaluate, critique and improve on the past" (Guerra, 2007, p. 201). As demonstrated by *Seremos como Hatuey*, Saavedra embedded criticism through funny twists, capitalizing on the Cuban tendency to make fun of things. Yet his intention to profess the truth of reality was not lost; his alternative

display of identity challenged that written and professed by the regime.

Lázaro Saavedra understood that what goes on inside of people's heads is far more important than what is seen on the outside. Slogans can be chanted, parades marched, meetings attended. But that is simply an outward display. Saavedra was interested in highlighting the truth, of living in the truth and seeking knowledge. In Milan Kundera's *The Joke*, one of the characters thinks that it is fortunate the younger generation was ignorant of what had happened to the previous, that they have closed their minds to the old world and rejected all that it stood for. The main character, Ludvik, responds to this idea with, "I don't think that's fortunate; I think it's terrible....Blindness gives way to blindness" (Kundera, pp. 230–231). In the same manner, with *El que no sabe es como el que no ve*, Saavedra equates a lack of freedom to think freely, about politics, life, memory, identity, as yielding the same sort of blindness. Finally, Saavedra sought to counter the "propaganda of the victors" with his graveyard, bringing an alternative collective memory to light to prevent a wrong from being forgotten.

Saavedra's artwork confronted—and continues to confront—the differences between the official narrative produced by the Castro regime and the reality experienced by normal Cubans. He challenges his audience to seek, recognize, and live in truth in order to craft their own revolutionary identities apart from the state, which includes defining their memory in contrast to the one written by the state. Lázaro Saavedra is a revolutionary, yet one not proclaiming the history or slogans of a regime but of independent thought, memory, and identity.

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