





The 8TH Floor

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Stealing Base: Cuba at Bat

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Curated by Orlando Hernández and Rachel Weingeist

I am the least ideal person to write this text. I am neither a connoisseur nor an enthusiast of baseball, much less am I a fanatic. Despite being Cuban, my relationship with the so-called “national sport” (although either dominoes and *la bolita*¹ could also claim that title) has been quite thin and as such very atypical. Perhaps my most evident link to what Cubans call *la pelota* is sharing a name with a world-class pitcher Orlando “El Duque” Hernández. But far from making me happy or proud, I must confess that this coincidence makes me a bit uncomfortable because each time I extend my hand and say my name, especially in certain low-brow environments, I must endure, with a feigned smile, the same remark: “Ah, Orlando Hernández, like “El Duque”?” That is to say nothing of a second negative consequence particular to the digital age: the celebrity of his name has caused mine (which is exactly the same as his) to be buried at the far bottom of any Google search, with references to me only appearing after additional search parameters like “Cuban art” or “art critic” are added.

However, my lack of competence to write to this article about art and baseball is not based on my supposed bitterness about the fame of a retired Cuban baseball player who shares my name (or I his). Rather, it has to do with another alarming fact: being from Havana (or at least having lived here for more than 40 years), I do not suffer or get upset when our “home team,” the *Industriales*, loses a game or a National Series. My heretical position follows from the fact that I have never been a fan of the *Industriales* nor of any other particular team for that matter. If forced to choose sides, I would rather support “Team Cuba” or Cuban baseball in general. My uniform—if I had to wear one—would look a little eccentric because it would be a combination of blue, red, green, black, brown, orange, etc., and would have on it the insignia of each one of our teams. Despite this, I don’t scream for joy when we defeat Japan, the United States, or South Korea. In fact, I’d be inclined to applaud them, had they played a better game. Haven’t some fastballs tossed by Japanese pitchers been the cause of recurring Cuban nightmares, as we see in the work of **Reynerio Tamayo**?

I definitely detest when baseball (or any other sport for that matter) functions with impunity as an instrument of chauvinism, regionalism, or as an expression of an exaggerated and xenophobic patriotism that only emboldens rivalries and a false sense of superiority. Such sentiments are far removed from the friendly spirit that should guide competitive sports. In reality, I don’t even like seeing the “opposing” team lose, and even less do I consider sporting adversaries my enemies. Isn’t it this kind of enmity, or desire to win at all costs, that **Reynerio Tamayo** has portrayed in

¹A traditional illegal form of gambling that combines elements of Chinese charadas, numerology, and regular “numbers” lottery games. Traditional Cuban “bolita” games are based on drawings from a bag of 100 small, numbered balls. Players typically pay a small fee for a ticket to bet on matching the string of numbers pulled from the bag, with the jackpot divided among those players with the most matching numbers.

the valiant Cuban baseball player wearing boxing gloves in his amusing work *Boxing Ball?* Or why master animator **Juan Padrón** has placed broken bats as the sharp stakes on which the Santiago team is about to impale the *Industriales*, as if the game were a never before seen episode of his animated film *Vampires in Havana*?

It makes me happy, for example, when a fly ball soars and becomes a home run, no matter where it came from or the color or flag of the team that hit it. I delight at seeing the ball make it over the fence, over the wall, evading the raised gloves. Those are the same gloves that the artist **Arlés del Río** has placed before us and our consciences, to reveal (somewhat “starkly” in his sculptures) the eagerness or indolence with which we sometimes expect things to fall from the sky (a “sky” that was once called the Soviet Union, but which has now been replaced by Miami or perhaps Venezuela). And although it is true that perhaps “we all expect a fly ball,” as **Aristides Hernández** (Ares) has said in his work, not only will we have to interpret that fly ball as an airplane flight –God knows to where– but also the possibility to see it as something much higher, spiritually speaking, because we deserve it, and we must jump to reach it. Isn’t this true?

For my part, I applaud the pure home run, the absolute “homer,” because I think it represents the untamable spirit of liberty, the exaltation of the energy with which we can overcome all confinements, all oppressions, and leave behind all boundaries, transporting ourselves beyond the here and now. Undoubtedly, that is the idea represented –using archival images– by the artist **Frank Martinez** in his painting, *Otra manera de superar los límites* (Another way to overcome limits). Another one of those mega-hits, that sends the ball out of the park, forcing us to search for it in the parking lot or the clouds, is that of the artist **Alejandro Aguilera**, who has invited onto his “team” none other than the famous self-taught artist Bill Traylor (Alabama, 1856-1949), an impoverished former black slave whose work is already considered classic among the art of the American South. I’m pleased that a Cuban artist has decided to pay homage to such a simple and powerful man, whose dark and rotund poetry forces us to score a thousand runs, or at least the single decisive run of total freedom, beyond the small “diamond” and “fields” of a ball park.

Without any doubt, baseball is a great generator of implications, of meanings, and can be (and should be) used as a grand metaphor to express or to understand not only art, but the reality in which we live. In my case, my little knowledge of the sport could be an obstacle to discovering these hidden meanings. That, in turn, forces me to proceed little by little, feeling my way around, “stealing base,” to reach the still invisible and probably unreachable “home base” of this simple text. Because, in all honesty, with my knowledge of baseball, I could not even sustain a five minute debate if, by chance, I thought of participating in the most prestigious baseball forum in Havana. Known as “The Hot Corner,” its headquarters is the left wing of Havana’s *Parque Central* (Central Park), a few meters away from the first statue erected to honor Cuba’s Apostle, José Martí, the very monument that was desecrated by a drunken US marine named Richard Choingsy in 1949.

I recognize that this last comment is a deviation (akin to throwing a curve) since that event has nothing to do with baseball. However, I would like to consider it one of the historical factors that influenced the creation of this baseball-related open forum, given that the vehemence with which its current participants debate the game evokes the fiery discussions and protests that that unsavory act generated at the time among Habaneros around the figure of Martí. This is the same Martí in whom the artist **Villalvilla** has vested all the sober attributes of the umpire, the Just Judge, the infallible referee, in this world full of faults and infractions.

On second thought, perhaps what is most notorious (and most meritorious) about this forum is not actually the debate over baseball at all, but the exercise of freedom of expression that this debate represents. In fact, this “Hot Corner” probably is the most open and polemical space for dialog in the entire city. It is also likely

that the space has the most heterogeneous social composition, for in it engineers, doctors, laborers, office clerks, professors, ex-ball players, as well as criminals, functionaries, and the unemployed all take part equally, without their having been pre-approved or elected by anyone. They use baseball as a topic, as a pretext, but freely enjoy the hottest confrontation of diverse, conflicting, and often completely contrary opinions. Is then the game itself, and the subsequent analysis of its plays, strategies, and statistics, a small escape valve? Don’t ask me. What do I know?

In any case, thanks must be given to baseball for having facilitated a public stage for the exercise of that delicate sport of the meeting of the ideas, the discussion, and the debate so needed in our society, because, as a work by **Reynier Leyva Novo** states, *La palabra le corresponde al pueblo* (The Word Belongs to the People). Is it possible that one of those fastballs from “The Hot Corner” could break out into the street, igniting the cold, slow, and ineffective character that contaminates our other analyses and discussions, those that have to do with our most pressing problems and necessities, with our national destiny? One can only wish.

To deepen my shame, I should also state that despite living in Havana’s Cerro neighborhood for more than 15 years, I have never, to this day, attended a single ball game at the famous *Estadio Latinoamericano* (Latin American Stadium). Known to locals as the *Coloso del Cerro* (Colossus of Cerro),” it is the equivalent –if Wikipedia is to be believed– of New York City’s Yankee Stadium. This fact could very well mark me, in the eyes of most of my compatriots, as truly unpatriotic, even “an enemy of the people.” And that saddens me, of course, because I think that it is time we Cubans get used to coexisting with diversity, with the existence of unique Cubans - atypical ones with different concepts and tastes in sports, aesthetics, religion, sex, yes and even politics. This is exactly what we see represented in **Yunier Fernández Figueroa**’s beautiful and original bats, all of them unique, and each with a different function, history, symbolism, and meaning; an artistic gesture that seems intent on showing us that despite our differences, we can continue playing together, perhaps the same game, or perhaps another game.

People talk about baseball as an element of super-Cubanness (and here we touch again that old issue of our national symbols). In reality, however, its portrayal in the arts has been very sparse and understated. Despite thinking long and hard to find examples aside from the recent works mentioned here, I can only come up with two works that truly stand apart: the famous and controversial painting by **Antonia Eiriz** called *La muerte en pelota* (Death by Baseball, 1966) and the September of 1989 performance by Cuban artists and art critics called *La plástica cubana se dedica al béisbol* (Cuban Fine Arts Dedicate Themselves to Baseball), also known subsequently as *El Juego de Pelota* (The Ball Game).

Significantly, both works are intimately related not to the opening of a National Championship or the Pan American Games, but to the unpleasant phenomenon of censorship. That is to say, in one-way or another, both were civic responses by the artists to the intolerant attitude of the official institutions toward freedom of expression. In the case of Eiriz, works like *La muerte en pelota* (Death by Baseball, 1966), *El dueño de los caballitos* (The Owner of the Carrousel, 1965), or *Una tribuna para la paz democrática* (An Open Forum for Democratic Peace, 1968), that are shown today, with astonishing ease, at the National Museum (although the museum guides do not mention the works’ real history), were officially deemed in their day to be “conflictive” or “pessimistic” works, which did not exhibit the triumphalist attitude expected from a revolutionary artist. Such receptions led Eiriz to abandon painting altogether and dedicate herself instead to making papier-mâché figurines with her neighbors in the Havana barrio Juanelo. She painted nothing at all from 1968 until approximately 1993, in other words, most of her life.

In the case of artists from the 1980’s generation, the malaise was collectively felt, for on top of individual censorship, public spaces dedicated to showing

avant-garde art, like the *Castillo de la Fuerza* Project, which until then had supported the young creators, began to close. The artists decided that if they could not continue creating on their own terms, without the State’s constrains, then they would do something completely different, and that was to play baseball. It was no joke (although humor has never been absent in the rebellious attitudes of many of them) and soon it was clear that the erroneous decisions that led to that sort of creative “walkout” were to have dire consequences. Almost immediately afterward began the mass exodus of artists to Mexico, the United States, Spain, Venezuela, etc. Therefore, both the large paintings and collages by Antonia Eiriz in the 1960s, as well as 1989’s *El Juego de Pelota*, must be understood as two huge sociocultural milestones in the history of Cuban art.

On the work *La muerte en pelota* (Death by Baseball), it is encouraging to find an artistic exploration as rigorous and attractive as that created by **José Angel Toirac** with his piece *La muerte en pelotas* (literally “Death by Balls,” but really “Death in the Nude”). This work is not only a well-deserved homage to Eiriz’s mordacity, but also offers new possibilities of interpretation of her impressive work. In his research Toirac uncovered the identity of the batter, previously an anonymous, phantasmagoric figure, thanks to his discovery of the original press photo used by Eiriz as model.

Looking at the total box score, it is curious to note that between *La muerte en pelota* (Death by Baseball, 1966), and *El Juego de Pelota* (The Ball Game, 1989), there is a 23-year interval, almost the exact same interval (24 years) that exists between that last event and the current pair of exhibitions (2013), both of which have baseball as their central (but not exclusive) theme: *Clásicos del Béisbol* (Baseball Classics) at the ICAIC Culture and Film Center in Havana, and this one today at The 8th Floor in New York City: *Robando base: Cuba al bate* (Stealing Base: Cuba at Bat).

Are there any elements in this pair of exhibitions that can allow us to compare them to those other two of 47 and 24 years ago? Are these, perhaps, civic responses by the artists to the on-going issues of official lack of understanding, repression, and censorship? Or do they only express the same chronic unrest and inconformity that have always been latent in a more restrained, moderate, and therefore more pragmatic, less dramatic, or “cooler” way? Perhaps we have grown so accustomed to this reality that it only makes us laugh? Perhaps we are guilty of trying to take advantage of it? In any case, I think that we can conclude that baseball has had a worthy role as active companion to that impugning, critical, and revolutionary spirit which Cuban artists have brandished almost permanently when facing with acts of dogmatism, official intolerance, and censorship. Thanks to that, we realize that the game is not yet over.

Orlando Hernandez
La Habana, May 9th, 2013

The 8th Floor wishes to acknowledge the artists for their exciting and thoughtful contributions to this exhibition—it has been a pleasure to share in the process. The collaboration with Orlando Hernández was as always fruitful and continues to be a productive partnership. Based in Havana, the insight he provides into Cuban visual culture and his understanding of daily life on the island allows us here in New York to continue to present exciting work from new Cuban artists. Ted Henken’s astute translation and thoughtful insights, extends the reach of Orlando’s valuable contributions. The dedicated staff at The 8th Floor—Anna Gonic, Matthew Johnson, Anjali Nanda, Elise Roedenbeck and Sarah Van Anden—who’s tireless efforts is much appreciated. Without the generous support and thoughtful contributions of Shelley and Donald Rubin, this opportunity to share a range of Cuban voices would not be possible.

Detail: Reynerio Tamayo, *El Cuarto Bate*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas. 63 x 51 inches.
Reverse: Arlés del Río, *From the series Esperando que caigan las cosas del cielo o Deporte nacional*, 2012. Oil and charcoal on cardboard. 55 x 75 inches.

