
Cuban Artists across the Diaspora is an impressive chronicle of the development of the extended traveling exhibition “Café,” primarily curated by Leandro Soto, a Cuban artist in exile. In studying this visual manifestation of the exploration of identity and place linked through the emblematic substance of café/coffee, Andrea O’Reilly Herrera deploys multiple strategies to help readers understand how the themes of “Café” relate to the fluid circumstances of self-definition and the impact that time, place, history, tradition, personal experience, and expressive desire have on artistic creativity.

The book begins with a brief description of the nature of Cuban coffee, laying out the various ways of preparing and drinking it in order to give readers some familiarity with this almost Eucharistic beverage that serves as the point of unity for all Cubans. The introduction establishes the theoretical framework for O’Reilly Herrera’s exploration of “Café,” making it clear that her goal is to describe the fluidity of a national experience of identity markers that can become transnational as the associations that defined an identity of place become transformed into definitions of multiple identities affected by movement across places. She employs the existence of the island of Cuba as a locator and metaphor for the explorations of experience shared by those who identify themselves as Cubanos inside and outside the physical island. The metaphoric, allegorical title represents O’Reilly Herrera’s position that exile can be “insilic” (within the original place) and “exilic” (outside the original place) and that either state of displacement can result in a variety of explorations and redefinitions, all of which are evident in the changing groups of artists who have participated in “Café” over the twelve incarnations of the traveling exhibition (see pp. 211-17).

Chapter 1 provides a brief review of the artistic movements that inspired Leandro Soto and the majority of the participants of “Café,” beginning with the 1980s group Volumen Uno, which was meant to be a protest group that critiqued the Cuban government in coded signs embedded in the works of art created by artists trained in Cuba. Here O’Reilly Herrera links some of the artistic production of this group with responses to Soviet Socialist Art. The expression engendered by Volumen Uno continued in other exhibitions, traced by the author and identified as Puré (“mashed potatoes”)
and Arte Calle ("street art"), both manifestations of the desire of artists to connect with Cuban popular culture to emphasize Cuban identity. In this chapter (which also covers the exhibitions outside Cuba that brought to international attention Cuban-born artists who were exiled as children and adolescents), O’Reilly Herrera maintains parallels between those outside and those inside the island. Her review ends with “Ajiaco: Stirrings of the Cuban Soul,” a traveling exhibition curated by Gail Gelburd (2009-2010).

Chapter 2 traces the origins of “Café” to a conversation between Leandro Soto, Yovani Bauta, Israel Leon Viera, and Grisel Pujala (Soto’s wife and the director of “Café”) which took place in the Yucatan, where they reminisced about Cuba and discussed their work while preparing Cuban-style coffee. As the connections between coffee and art and identity became clear, they decided to organize a series of exhibitions of fluid definition to illustrate the linkage that coffee represents for Cubans everywhere, many of them from very diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, ranging from Afro-Cuban to Jewish—yet all bound by the ambrosial liquid of their childhood perception of what it meant to be Cuban. Chapter 3 discusses how the process of traveling with “Café” replicates the process of movement across time, places, and cultures experienced by the exiled, who reinvent their lives as they emigrate and migrate. Chapter 4 explores how the visual styles and thematic concerns of the artists of “Café” continue or break with previous Cuban artistic traditions, beginning with the Cuban Vanguardia artists of the 1920s and 1930s. This chapter also includes brief biographical sketches of artists who have participated in “Café,” identified by O’Reilly Herrera as belonging to Cuban modernist art. Chapter 5 continues the theme of connection established in the previous chapters, but focuses on artists who employ landscape and who respond to Cuban traditions of landscape paintings in their offerings to “Café.” Chapter 6 focuses on artists who use architecture to situate their memories of time and space.

O’Reilly Herrera’s goal is to remove iconic definitions of exile in order to allow a more organic recognition of the actual state of becoming displaced. In Chapter 7 she identifies those artists whose work is intrinsically linked with displacement and disruption but also with freedom of expression. As this aspect of “Café” is considered, she argues that the self-invention for which movement is a catalyst creates a dynamic flow for the life of the exile that cannot be bound into tight categories of definition. Chapter 8 is where the book’s manifold arguments are brought together by a convincing