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## THE ART NEWSPAPER

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### Interview with Los Carpinteros: the other and the same

The Cuban collaborators who won't be put in a box

By Gareth Harris. From Art Basel Miami Beach daily edition  
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From Havana with attitude: Sánchez (left) and Valdés

Art Basel Miami Beach gets a taste of Cuba with the launch of Güiro, a bar-cum-art installation by the Cuban-born, Madrid-based artist collective known as Los Carpinteros. The bar, firmly rooted in Cuban culture, is named after and inspired by the ubiquitous Cuban percussion instrument made from the dried wooden fruit of the higuera tree; güiro is also a Cuban slang term for a party.

The slatted bar structure, home to a curated programme of live music and performances, is filled with books and random objects selected by the artists. Blurring genres and media is a speciality of Los Carpinteros, whose works subvert the usual practices of art, architecture and design, prompting questions about the functional and aesthetic roles of objects.

The collective now consists of Marco Antonio Castillo Valdés and Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez (Alexandre Arrechea departed in June 2003). The three artists met when they were students at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte. From the outset, the group adopted an anarchic approach, taking the name of Los Carpinteros (the carpenters) in 1994 to show their kinship with an older tradition of artisans and the need to connect with the craft-led element of making art.

The "Transportable City" series, consisting of ten tents modelled on Cuban landmark buildings, was an early innovation; launching at the seventh Havana biennial in 2000, the itinerant installation travelled to MoMA PS1 in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2001. The concept highlighted migration as a result of natural disasters or war.

Their recent work is equally political; earlier this year, an exhibition at the Faena Arts Centre in Buenos Aires featured three large-scale installations, including *Avião*, 2011, a Piper Comanche plane riddled with wooden arrows, drawing attention to the disparity between technology and the age-old traditions of remote pockets of Brazilian society. Together, Valdés and Sánchez explain what motivates their multi-disciplinary works, why mundane materials matter and how they teamed up with Absolut Art Bureau for their waterfront watering hole.

**The Art Newspaper: You trained at art college in Cuba. How did this inform your ideas?**

**Los Carpinteros:** We had an artistic training in Cuba, it was intense and long. We started studying at art schools when we were children, and ended up at the Instituto Superior de Arte [in Havana]. We met there and began working together as a part of a class programme named El Otro, El Mismo, (the other, the same) and since then, we have worked together for the past 20 years.

**Is your art meant to make people laugh?**

If people get to understand our work it's great, but if people also laugh, it's a luxury.

**How did you make the transition from painting to design-inspired pieces?**

We actually didn't make this transition, our work has always involved varied fields and different disciplines. We make installations, sculptures, actions and even sometimes films. But drawing is also one of the main branches of our work and we use it as our memo pad, our diary, the space where we project and discuss our ideas. The immediacy of this media allows us to use it this way, so it acts often as [the basis for] projects which later materialise as sculptures or installations; on other occasions, they [the drawings] are Utopian reflections of the main [themes] we deal with.

**Who inspires you most: artists or designers?**

Depends on the season... most of the time we get inspiration from a lot of other things. Our work is more focused on everyday objects and their functions; we are obsessed with the utility of materials and functionality. We are concerned with the way human beings create utilities. Our eyes are always wide open to social practices and their relationship with visual and material contemporary culture.

**Do you still consider yourself artisans?**

It is very difficult nowadays to understand art through separate disciplines; making art today can be understood as a game of dice, sometimes we behave like artisans, sometimes like motherfuckers; what matters is to turn this experience into a value in itself.

### **Is your art today political in any way?**

We cannot escape from politics, it is everywhere like a virus, and it infects even material culture nowadays. Things fabricated by human hands always show somehow a way of thinking, a way of behaving, and even sometimes political notions.

### **Why is your *Güiro* structure, commissioned by Absolut Art Bureau, an important piece?**

Collaboration is a word that doesn't scare us, especially as we have been a collective for 20 years. For the Havana biennial, we have just finished *Conga Irreversible*, an action [based] in the streets: we collaborated with a composer, a choreographer, a costume designer, a film-maker and around 100 other people, from dancers to musicians. For *Güiro*, Absolut proposed a new idea of participation that we hadn't yet explored. It is about the creation of something that has a defined functionality. This situation has made us think about another kind of interaction between the public and the work, which includes a lot of new "features": alcohol, space, illumination, sound, furniture, to name a few. Thus the *Güiro* has been created from more than just financial support.

### **Why does the panopticon concept (18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham's building designed with a central point for observation and most closely associated with prisons) appeal to you? How have you developed this idea in relation to *Güiro*?**

We have put a few ideas into a single structure. We basically wanted to build a series of shelves that then turn into an architectural space. In other words, a piece of furniture that would behave as a building. This piece belongs to a series of structures that uses the language of panoptic prisons to create civic spaces. We appropriate real, existing buildings and we transform their size and functionality until they can serve as a reading room. This time we have moved the needle a little bit, and used the natural shape of a güiro, which is a musical instrument made from a fruit, as [a basis], instead of a building.

### **Does a Miami-based project have special resonance for you?**

Although Miami is a city where the Cuban population is very important, this work has not been created specifically for this public. But we feel that exhibiting there is somehow like exhibiting in our country, which is always a challenge because we are dealing with sensitive topics. This is our first presentation in a public space that will interact fully with the community [in Miami]. It will be interesting to see people's reactions.

### **What are your future projects?**

This month, besides *Güiro*, we have a solo show, "Silence Your Eyes", at the Hannover Kunstverein (until 3 February 2013); this is a travelling exhibition we first held at the Kunstmuseum Thun [Switzerland] last April. We are also participating in a couple of group shows: "Food", in Musée Ariana, Geneva (19 December-24 February 2013) and "Cartografías contemporáneas. Dibujando el pensamiento" (Contemporary cartography: drawing thought) at the Caixaforum Madrid (until 24 February 2013). In 2013, we start the year with a solo show at Matadero Madrid, opening on 26 January (until 21 April), and we will also have solo shows at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York in May, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, [Zurich] in June, and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, in September.