

QUISQUEYA HENRÍQUEZ AND THE WORLD OUTSIDE by Amy Rosenblum Martín

From her early paper cupola maquette and arrangements of seaweed in honeycomb patterns on the beach to her recent sound recordings from construction sites and photographic studies of graffiti in Santo Domingo, Quisqueya Henríquez's oeuvre involves meditations on perception, inventiveness, power, self-determination, and tenderness. Henríquez's works are often performative and may be appreciated simply as formally powerful and symbolically rich. Her primary concern is an awareness of perception: "seeing yourself seeing." Yet by introducing elements such as temperature in works like the edible *Helado de Agua de Mar Caribe (Caribbean Seawater Ice Cream)* (2002), she shows how not just the eye but the entire body responds to various stimuli—in addition to the emotional and intellectual reactions one might have when anticipating, discovering, and experiencing a new or altered situation. Henríquez's work often involves an intervention that either takes its cue from its surroundings or imposes upon them constructions that affect them in some way. Her installations may incorporate properties of light, color, geometry, movement, water, wind, sound, and temperature. She uses natural and industrial materials, as well as natural and architectural environments to create situations that are less about their look than about the experience they create for the viewers—who, by their very presence, become integral elements in the work.¹

Henríquez's artistic trajectory has unfolded organically, in response to her changing cultural and intellectual milieus. She has moved frequently in her life and has shifted her practice as she has engaged in local variations of international contemporary art discourse. Born in Cuba in 1966, Henríquez moved with her family at age seven to the Dominican Republic, where they lived from 1974 to 1986, during which time they made two extended visits to Cuba. She attended graduate school for art at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana (ISA, 1987–92)—just barely missing, by a year or two, being considered an artist of the Cuban '80s generation, also known as the Cuban Renaissance.² She certainly overlapped with its members, however, and that generation's explosive artistic and activist synergy shaped her vision as an artist early on. At ISA, she studied (with

1 The latter half of this paragraph is indebted to Carol Diehl's article "Northern lights: Olafur Eliasson nudges the participant-viewer into an ambient perceptual awareness," *Art in America*, October 2004.

2 The Cuban Renaissance was the first generation of Cuban artists whose aesthetics were entirely informed by revolutionary society. Its groundbreaking exhibition, *Volumen I* (1981), included conceptualism, performances, installations, and pop

art and broke dramatically with previous Cuban art. These artists were well informed about both socialist and capitalist art. Critics, including Gerardo Mosquera, provided a theoretical framework for the generation's work. By the end of the 1980s, these artists were mainly motivated by ethics and politics. Their art was not subject to politics but was an active participant in politics. (This note is indebted to writings by Glexis Novoa and Luis Camnitzer.)

colleague Tania Bruguera) under leading members of the '80s generation, including Magdalena Campos Pons, Consuelo Castañeda, and Flavio Garcíandía. In that historical moment when collaborative artist groups proliferated, Castañeda belonged to Grupo Hexágono, which produced works such as *Arena y madera (Sand and Wood)* (1983), which Henríquez's have echoed in terms of form and content, as in *Untitled (Seaweed)* (1991).

Government censorship of Cuban Renaissance artists reached its height in 1989, and some were jailed for questioning the state's authority. Most of the influential figures of the generation left the island in 1989 or soon thereafter in a mass exodus to Mexico. Today they live in Miami, New York, Barcelona, Brussels, and other international cities. Henríquez was among those who went to Mexico City, where she lived from 1991 to 1993, and where she wrote her thesis, which she defended in Cuba. She then moved to Miami, where she lived from 1993 to 1997, before returning to Santo Domingo for personal and political reasons.³ Recently, Henríquez has traveled in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Spain, and the United States. This peripatetic artist stops to examine the concerns of each place in unexpected details of its daily acts and spaces.

From 1989 to 1996, Henríquez worked collaboratively with Consuelo Castañeda, with whom she studied at ISA, and together they produced seven major works, including *Untitled (Metastasis)* (1996). "Metastasis" refers to the spreading of cancer cells from one organ or tissue to another. The artist team used this biological model to sequence the pattern of how lighting fixtures on the floor turn on and off, illuminating and darkening the entire space in a systematic and dynamic way. The disease reference, which infiltrates the purity of the work's minimalist aesthetic, was borrowed from the philosopher Jean Baudrillard's description, as Henríquez paraphrases him, of the overwhelming quantity of (often questionable) information and the velocity with which it is reproduced and transmitted. For the artists, this work deals with the mortality of information and how it becomes dominant at the expense of content and communication.

Henríquez is guided by highly considered philosophical, sometimes ethical concerns. Her work often seems to ask: Is humanity able to recognize a common horizon beyond all differences? Her oeuvre fleshes out the concept of a new transnational social coherence based on individuals' complexity and the fluidity of identities. More specifically, she aims to move viewers beyond hegemonic assumptions about Latin America, especially the Caribbean; indeed, she aims for nothing short of restructuring representation of the world and thus renewing society. Her work reflects the cultural theorist Nestor García Canclini's ideal of Latin Americans exporting hybrid popular-international culture (as opposed to defending the national-popular as was customary in the 1960s and 1970s). In this way, Henríquez's work playfully and poetically transforms common objects bearing centuries of accumulated meanings, reinventing their myths. While her early works explore conundrums in language and mathematics, transgressively incorporating provocative ideas into post-minimalist forms, recently Henríquez's enthusiasm has shifted to Santo Domingo's street life and she has moved toward post-dada aesthetics, postcolonialist discourse, and environmentalist concerns. She photographs construction sites, historical or abandoned architecture, monuments and anti-monuments, and beaches strewn with trash, emphasizing how these sights echo global economy, culture, politics, and climate. She has also exploited the symbolic potential of temperature extremes (hypothermia/hyperthermia) adding this to her many challenges to expectations about art, ideas, and life in the Caribbean. With a sense of intimacy and absurdity, her wryly elegant visual puzzles subversively dismantle essentialism.

³ The latter included counteracting brain drain, part of the legacy of colonialism that has long been discussed by Latin American modernists. Rubén Darío (1867–1916), the Nicaraguan poet who, according to Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 3, coined the term

"modernism," urged young Latin American writers to stay put. Resolutely attached to their native countries, many avant-garde artists throughout Latin America exported innovative art and ideas of international importance, related to what Nestor García Canclini describes as hybrid popular-international culture.

There are two sides to Henríquez's work: the fiercely mathematical and its playful opposite, which is open to chance. In this survey exhibition, a selection of works from 1991 to 2007, viewers see early sculptural works that put a new spin on constructivist paradigms, as well as recent photo-based works that echo the visual chaos of dada. Henríquez's neo-avant-garde activities connect various approaches of the historical avant-garde in the early twentieth century. While her central social and art historical concerns have remained relatively steady, how did this infinitely thoughtful artist's aesthetic approach get from sublime to raucous?

Some of the manifold answers to this question have to do with art history, social and cultural politics, and place. She dramatically metamorphosed her practice after moving in 1997 from Miami to Santo Domingo to reflect changes in her life and thought. The Dominican Republic is on the periphery not only of the world map but also of the Latin American artworld map. Henríquez was acutely aware of how Caribbean artists in recent history have dealt in their work with living on the periphery: in the 1970s, she has noted, they used folklore as a tactic to insert their distinct experience and history into international art discourse; in the 1980s, many delved into the real-life melodrama of the Cuban rafters and immigration in general; and in the 1990s, multiculturalism was the theoretical mode of choice for many artists. Henríquez respected their historical motivations, but in 2000 felt suffocated by these limited options, and sought lines of flight. She deterritorialized her practice by mocking these earlier tactics, lightening them up.

In fact, she has used light several times as an analogue for lightness, as in the work *Untitled (Metastasis)*. And years before Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda illuminated the World Trade Center site post-9/11 with *Towers of Light*, Henríquez's *Light Architecture* (1999), part of a series of studies of monuments and anti-monuments, projected her vision of a skyscraper into Santo Domingo's night sky using that most immaterial and transcendent of media—light.

The earliest work in this exhibition is *Untitled (Seaweed)*, which connects the post-minimalist strategies of Henríquez's early sculptures to the chance aesthetics (tangle of seaweed), geographical specificity (beach), and photographic medium of her later works. These photographs document an ephemeral action in which Henríquez rethought hegemonic modernism from a specifically Caribbean perspective by making geometric abstraction into a beach activity, thus taking playfulness (associated with the Caribbean) seriously and serious art issues (associated with the G8 countries) playfully. *Untitled (Seaweed)* recalls neoconcretist tactics, especially those of the artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape. Henríquez used organic material associated with the senses of touch and smell (seaweed and sand) to construct a hexagonal pattern, which in turn has an organic reference associated with the sense of taste (honeycomb).

What motivated Henríquez to operate in this kind of post-minimalist mode in the early 1990s? I propose that she was seeking to create theoretical models of radical self-determination, which would look beyond ethnicity and nationality and counter the prêt-à-porter identities and redundancies that lurk in so many radicalisms. It is difficult to represent people in art without tapping into stock images in the public imagination, which buttress inequalities. In the words of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "It is hard to break through the wall of the signifier and the subjective (mechanism of significance) toward the realms of the asignifying, asubjective, and faceless."⁴

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 187.

How to create new ways of thinking that do not refer back to social structures based on hierarchies and stereotypes? Do we have to abolish memory in the form of recognizable representations—an impossible task—to move ahead, to leave behind coloniality and other limiting mindsets? While representation reinforces stock images from the collective imagination, the political ambiguity of abstraction itself (without artists' accompanying writings) leaves space for status-quo assumptions to creep in. It may be that this latter concern is among those that lie at the heart of Henríquez's choice to shift away from post-minimalism and toward photographs of recognizable objects and places. In her newer work, Henríquez dares to call up, critically, some of the very archetypes and stereotypes that impede self-determination for Latinos, as in the works *Salón de Baile (Dance Hall)* (2004) and *Untitled (Baseball Players)* (2007).

When reviewing Henríquez's work from 1991 to 2007, the first impression is of multiplicity. She uses multiple and widely varied tactics in terms of media (from video to furniture to vinyl on wall to Internet) and visually (words, geometry, graffiti, architecture, mod color play) in order to connect distinct forms of knowledge both art historical and political (from dada and minimalism to environmentalism to feminism to postcolonialism). Yet given this multiplicity, from her present-tense perspective, specificity is the rule. She always chooses her material, tools, and procedures with reference to the particular occasion and specific context of her new production: the result can be a video installation, an Internet project, a curatorial project, or an intervention in public space. In this way, her practice echoes that of artists like Cildo Meireles and Bruce Nauman, whose consistency lies in intellectual process, not materials or style. The heterogeneity—not of impulses, but of tactics—is also a statement against traditional academic, modernist, arch-modernist (as in identity politics), and market-driven demands for consistency. Henríquez purposefully resists any gratuitous predictability that would hamper either her freedom in making art or the public's fresh experience of what she does.

Henríquez's refusal to give in to linearity of thought or of artistic exploration in favor of working according to life's true unpredictability evokes the idea of the rhizome as expounded by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. According to these philosophers, the structure of the rhizome (a horizontal, underground plant stem that sends out a tangle of roots) proposes an organizational model alternative to that of a tree (vertical and linear), a structure that has shaped Western thought at least since the Enlightenment. Deleuze and Guattari outline six main traits of the rhizome: connection and heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalcomania. The rhizome is anti-hierarchical in structure: no point of a rhizome comes before another, and any point can be connected to any other point. The rhizome may be "shattered at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines."⁵ In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the rhizome is not a tracing mechanism, but a map; tracing is not creating the new, but representing the old, following lines that already exist, while mapping can exist without referring to anything outside of the map.⁶ Within this terminology, Henríquez's rhizomatic work is a map, not a tracing. Deleuze and Guattari summarize, "The rhizome is an a-centered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states."⁷ The rhizome and its engendering of lines of flight inform an understanding of Henríquez's work and its stakes.

⁵ Ibid., 9

⁶ Ibid., 12

⁷ Ibid., 21