

# BOX IN EXILE

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*Box in Exile*  
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Every time I arrived at a meeting in Havana they called me the Dutch. Cuban people have not met many Dutchmen. Even myself, I feel I still have not met enough Dutch people to know essentially what it is to be Dutch. But, despite being born and living there for most of my life, in Cuba I am Dutch. I'd better be.

In 17th Century Western Europe, the most economically developed region with the largest number of inhabitants was The Netherlands. The strategic location of its ports allowed easy entry to Europe, the proximity to England and the Baltic area offered an important commercial advantage. From

The Netherlands, all kinds of manufactured textiles, cereals, wood, salt and wine were sent to distant places, in an action that related north and south of Europe through the Dutch enclave. At the beginning of the 16th Century the Dutch already had the largest naval shipyards and European ship owners with the greatest capital. In addition, its ports became not only centers of redistribution of goods, but also department store facilities where products could be stored after a long maritime journey in winter, or waiting for boat transfers to other places.<sup>1</sup>

The Dutch interest in the Americas only came about because of political reasons, starting in 1572. Through hostilities against its sovereign, Spain. In the 16th Century, Dutch ships appeared more frequently in the Caribbean. However, there was a significant change when they verified the immense market that the Spanish-American colonies represented. The Dutch managed to break the

Iberian monopoly, supplying contraband to their settlers with all sorts of products, some at a price lower than those of the metropolis and others in an unimaginable abundance.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch efforts to colonize the Antilles were centered first in the Brazilian territory. The islands of Curaçao and Bonaire were occupied, which in a short time became contraband centers in Tierra Firme.

On June 19th, 1626.<sup>3</sup> The fleet of the Dutch admiral Boudewijn Hendricksz<sup>4</sup> rounded the Cape San Antonio and lay anchor in the Bay of Cabañas in Pinar del Rio. Admiral Hendricks decided to head to Havana after his unsuccessful attempt to take the city of San Juan in Puerto Rico from the Spaniards. On June 22nd, the fleet made a surprise landing, by the East and West of El Morro Citadel in Havana harbor and blocked it for a whole month, but many of the crew got very sick, perhaps of yellow fever. The admiral died without attacking. The fleet

went further to Matanzas City to get provisions, they left about 50 Spanish prisoners and sailed for Europe. This incident—not a very popular one—was the only registered attempt by The Netherlands to take the island of Cuba from the Spaniards.

I was born in the surrounding of La Coubre harbor in Havana. Growing up by the docks and near the Havana Central railway station conditioned my childhood and youth. Big machines moving and collapsing, the noise, the smell. La Coubre harbor is named after a French freighter that, on March 4 1960, arrived in Havana Harbor to deliver a load of Belgian munitions to Cuba's revolutionary government. Just hours after it docked in Havana, the ship blew up, destroying its high-risk cargo, scattering the limbs of ship's crew and Cuban longshoreman over the docks, killing as many as a hundred people. My grandfather, who worked on the docks as a longshoreman, survived the explosion.

Last September in conceiving ideas in response to an invitation to participate in the event Havana Art Weekend, I was stuck; worried how to send the works from Holland to Cuba. I started thinking that this condition could become a work in itself. The most urgent way to shape this idea was as a box. A box could represent many attributes of Cuban culture. From a colonial past to a financial and economic embargo imposed by the United States, Cuba's current situation—as I experienced last November of 2017—is characterized by a deep commercial crisis. For the last two years the country has had difficulty obtaining trade credits, due to late payments to suppliers. State companies do not even have transportation. Vehicles of all kinds are in a permanent state of repair, new parts to replace old parts are non-existent. The construction of a box and its transportation from one country to another was a fascinating idea, but I also came to understand it as an

aesthetic object to test political, social and personal relationships. In previous works I had experimented with boxes and their configuration in space, as a sculpture, but only from a static condition. Without taking into account the possibility of movement and transit. The shipment of a box from the port of Rotterdam to the port of Mariel would become a gesture which addressed trade restrictions and my position as a Cuban artist in exile.

My legal situation in Cuba is categorized as an “emigrado”; a person that has emigrated and lives abroad and that is “Cubano residente en el exterior”. At the moment I am authorized to remain in national territory for a limited time of 90 days only. Sending the box from my apartment in Amsterdam to Havana would also represent the fantasy of having a one cubic meter house in my own country, and just like a letter or an envelope, it should not be opened or intercepted.

This essay describes the story of a box shipped to Cuba to reflect on political and social issues in the country, faulty bureaucracy processes and corrupt power structures. Exploring cultural identity and exposing my own position alongside those of the country, considering my resources and privileges as an artist. Touching subjects such as the ways in which exile changes a person and a society and the role language plays in this. But what role does the box play in this text and why is it important, beyond being a practical container for artworks? I will use the box both as a symbol and something more. It defines my identity in relation to a political system. I address the box from a double function, as a container of goods—or perhaps a commodity unto itself—and also as a fetishized object<sup>5</sup> that will bring me protection.

The box was divided into two pieces. Constructed with a Skilsaw in my studio in Amsterdam. The lower part of the box consisted of; a foldable piece, made out of plywood sheets and galvanized metal gussets, to strengthen joints. I found the structure on the street, it caught my attention because it was labeled on all sides with the old logo from the company Xerox, “The Document Company,” I imagine it has been used for the transportation of office printers, or papers. Increasingly, the use of cardboard for packaging has made this type of box obsolete. The Xerox structure was open; it did not have the top, so I built another piece with the same measurements and attached it, having a total space of one cubic meter—a good size to dispatch inside a container. The box was not so heavy; easy to maneuver (with the help of one more person), and without a forklift. Later I reinforced the structure on the outside with three stripes that also worked as carrying handles of thicker plywood and a hinged lid.

The box looked like a custom fine arts crate, signs and symbols, as well as instructions in different languages, communicated what was inside, telling handlers what to do: "Handle with care" "Sculpture" "Paintings". Everything was spelled out in black big letters including addresses and contact details, nothing was a left to question. However, the composition of the box suggested that the content may not be precisely artworks. The measurements and divisions do not really correspond to any standard model, and it is made out of wood leftovers, in various color combinations, including paint stains and marks.

I finished constructing the box on October 4, 2017. It measured 60 x 65 x 125 cm and weighed 65 kilograms. A wooden chair went inside the box, among other works, as part of an installation. I arranged the shipment by email, with the Dutch company NIRINT Shipping, which has headquarters in Holland and Havana. They warned me

to keep in mind that all shipments to Cuba must be authorized by the Cuban State beforehand, which has absolute control over everything that enters and leaves the island.

On October 27th I left my apartment at six in the morning on a minivan from Amsterdam to the port of Rotterdam, one of the world's busiest ports. The warehouse for the delivering of the box was located in the Europoort area. A Heavily industrialized zone, with petrochemical refineries and storage tanks, bulk iron ore and coal handling, as well as thousands of containers. The atmosphere of the place was special, silver gray in color. Large interconnected structures, toxic smoke and sordid sounds. After registration by the windows, the box was picked up by a forklift and labeled in Dutch "Breekbaar! Let Op!" Finally sailing to Cuba in the vessel "Augusta Unity" on November 9th, lasting 26 days at sea. Everything worked well on the Dutch end; I received a Cargo

Receipt Confirmation and Bill of Lading (BL) number.

I was aware that making such a shipment to Cuba as a private person is practically impossible due to the US Embargo against Cuba. In the early 1960s, during the height of the Cold War, the United States imposed an embargo against Cuba, “El Bloqueo” as Cubans like to name this condition that continues to restrict trade as well as economic and cultural exchange to this day. During his term, President Obama used his executive powers to nullify many of the restrictions, especially regarding travel, but the embargo can only be completely eliminated by the US congress. Their persistence remains one of the principal obstacles to improve US-Cuba relationships. What makes shipment of goods to Cuba difficult and restricted is the fact that any foreign company that trades with Cuba will be consequently penalized by the US. All this seems quite abstract and complicated

to me. How is this situation possible in the middle of a global trade economy? Or just go to [shipmap.org](http://shipmap.org) and watch live the world's major shipping routes in constant flow. Moreover, who owns the sea? What would Hugo de Groot, the Dutch jurist who coined the notion of “free seas,” *Mare Liberum* (1609)<sup>6</sup>, think about this as he formulated the principle that the sea was international territory and all nations were free to use it for seafaring trade? But what happens once a shipping company or a Chinese vessel decides to break the laws of the embargo and enters the country, trading with Cuba? The government then blocks this transaction—a second internal embargo—and it does not allow a transparent distribution of goods. This is also reflected in the unclear destinations that take humanitarian donations inside the country.

Yet, I was determined to send the box. Of course I had doubts about how to get the box out of customs once on Cuban soil, since I did not have permission from the

government at all. The first edition of Havana Art Weekend was a private initiative from Cuban curator Direlia Lazo (who lives and works in Miami), with no support from Cuban Government, funded by a crowd-funding campaign and a great deal of her own money. The five-day program featured site-specific projects and performances. The events took place simultaneously in Havana over the course of November 30 and went on till December 5, 2017.

Artist projects were exhibited in unique places like an abandoned theater, artist studios, a municipal library, a cemetery, an old factory, a street market and a Wi-Fi hotspot on a public square. The curator's private campaign was launched on [gofundme.com](http://gofundme.com). Raising money with the help of friends from the art world, a total of 20 people made donations, including a substantial amount from an anonymous person, revealed later as an important American dealer interested in her event.

After several e-mails from the organizers of the event, I understood that to get the box out of customs in Cuba I would have to go through a complicated bureaucratic process with official art institutions. The shipment had to be consigned to the Cuban Fund of Cultural Assets (Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales) as this is the only Cuban State owned company authorized to import and export works of art. In the event that my box had been sent personally to a private address without making clear that they were works of art, I would need a commercial permit from another State company. The shipment was a “permanent import,” otherwise, temporary I would have to set a return date, and pay all shipment costs upfront to the Cuban company to bring the box back to Holland , a price that I could not afford. I traveled to Havana on November 14th, just two weeks before the opening of my exhibition and the arrival of the vessel.

The chair I have shipped is part of the work “De Ligt Chair - Heesterveld 28”, conceived after having built four “De Ligt” chairs, designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1919, which I reconstructed for the dining room of my studio apartment following instructions from a Dutch DIY book. It seemed cool to have dinner at my kitchen in Heesterveld, part of the Bijlmermeer district in Amsterdam Zuidoost using these chairs. The installation consists of a wall-to-wall 1:1 photomural reproducing the kitchen space of the apartment and one of the chairs arranged on the floor. Originally constructed with precise machinery, using oak and painted in black and white.

Expecting the chair would not arrive on time for the exhibition I brought the DIY instructions manual of the chair. I contacted a local carpenter, presented him the drawings and within three days I got the chair rebuilt. Felipe, the carpenter, had the workshop inside

his house. He works illegally, in a secret way, to avoid paying taxes and government inspections, having to justify the means of production. For him, the only way to find raw wood and machinery is the black-market. Felipe made the chair using cedar, a typical Cuban wood, and plywood leftovers for the back and seat, plywood sheets are really hard to find in Cuba according to Felipe. The look of the cedar wood and calculation mistakes in the final result turned the chair into a more interesting object, rich in details. For instance, solid cedar wood posts and rails were joined together using handmade wooden dowels. Very precise measurements are needed to construct this chair, and the use of a professional drill press machine is mandatory. Wood joints are made of three beams and three separate dowels. In dowel joints accuracy is paramount to ensure sides line up perfectly. Corresponding holes are drilled in each side then into which short dowels are inserted with wood glue. Felipe did not

have precise machinery, nor spare wood to replace damaged pieces, therefore many parts received unnecessary holes in the wrong places, fixed up with homemade wood filler and excessive sanding. The new chair (made in Cuba) represents the margin of difference between the two nations. In Amsterdam, for instance, it is easy to buy plywood, a heavily processed industrial product. The production of plywood sheets requires specialized machinery and facilities, far away from a socialist country sunk in misery, and with a double embargo.

Music is fundamental when analyzing cultural differences. For instance the Cuban Clave, a rhythm that Felipe (the carpenter) has. The chair was built on Cuban clave<sup>7</sup>, rather Reggaeton. In traditional Cuban music, the specific rhythmic patterns and the underlying rules that govern these patterns are called clave. Played with “claves”;<sup>8</sup> an Afro-Cuban hand percussion instrument

consisting of a pair of cylindrical hardwood sticks (measuring 2 cm diameter and with a length of approximately 20 cm), The clave 3-2—clave del son—is a highly influential key pattern, from eastern Cuba—where Felipe comes from—. El Son is a musical style and dance from the 19th Century, it achieved international projection in the 1930s. The rhythm combines the structure and characteristics of Spanish music with Afro-Cuban musical elements and instruments. One thing of absolute certainty, the Cuban-Rietveld chair knows how to dance.

The carpenter's nephew and assistant took snapshots with his mobile phone, documenting the construction process carefully, everyone at the workshop found the chair attractive and very original. I realize that what I was importing to Cuba was an inverse exoticism, the geometric order, and pure rationality according to Rietveld's own structural code on re-inventing chairs as if

no one had ever built them before. Marijke Kuper<sup>9</sup> reflects on Rietveld chairs as “a composition of lines and planes in space, which gives the impression of being separate from one another. In a highly unconventional move, the seat and the back are separated by empty space from armrests and vertical elements of the rear legs. It is the idea behind this spatial and compositional characteristics that detaches this chairs from tradition”. Yet it is different to look at a Rietveld chair in Havana, as a culturally displaced object, analyzed by Cuban carpenters and craftsmen, who are not familiar with this type of furniture. Felipe compared the chair with a model that he keeps in a safe place, his favorite chair. A chair of unquestionable Cuban origin, that inherits Spanish colonial style, a style that it is preferred in today’s Cuban interiors in a multitude of variations. Spanish furniture traveled to the Americas in the 16th Century, as abstracted and simplified renditions of their Mudéjar classical

and—Spanish—baroque style. The chair Felipe showed me is named “La Silla Eterna” (The Eternal Chair), as it shows on a beautiful tag situated on the back of the seat, the author unknown, it is a wonderful piece, sort of Spanish Colonial Revival style. La Silla Eterna is built entirely of solid wood, all parts fastened with carriage bolts, and it is—as its name implies—unbreakable.

The opening of the exhibition was on December 1st. I exhibited the installation with the chair made in Cuba, unpainted. Yet, after the exhibition I still did not know where my box was. The only confirmation from the company NIRINT was the ship had arrived at the port of Mariel. By continuing to insist on the matter I was informed that I could not go autonomously to collect the box, everything had to be processed through the company Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales (Cuban Fund of Cultural Assets), part of the maze of the Ministry of Culture,

created during the Cuban Revolution 37 years ago.

Upon being received at the commercial director's office, they asked for my passport and personal details, plus a detailed list of the content of the box. I had already created the list in Excel (on my laptop) including images of the works. However, the design of the document was not correct according to certain protocols. I had to redesign, copying a Chinese invoice handed to me as an example. The invoice was issued by a Chinese company: Wenzhou Times Co., Ltd. Product description was "Glass panels", 4 mm thick, size 1200 x 1500 mm, 1400 pieces for a total amount of 4687.46 dollars. Wenzhou Times Co., Ltd. was founded in 1995. The company manufactures bathroom accessories, including mirrors, glass, sinks, tiles and ceramics, on a large scale. I wonder what kind of art piece was to be done with such a large amount of glass panels? Of course this material was not meant for art purposes, but imported as such,

in order to avoid paying high commercial costs or confiscation from Cuban authorities.

I also needed a Certificado de Importación (import certificate), which is obtained through another State company Registro de Bienes Culturales (Cultural Goods Archive). When I arrived at the institution's desk I had to declare, in front of officials, that I was an artist and the author of the works that came in the box, and then sign an import form, stating clearly that I am importing works from Holland to Cuba on a "permanent" status. Having all the paperwork done and checked by the Aduana de Cuba (customs) I just had to wait for the "final paper". I had been asked for so many documents that I could only conclude that this paper would be something like a passport, with watermarks and official stamps. On the contrary, they handed me a yellowish form on tissue-like paper, 19 x 13 centimeters, it looked like a parking ticket. Written by hand, printed in some forms and numbers.

A diagonal large sentence read “Orden de Carga” (permission to load). Surprisingly, the paper only authorized the State company to pick up the box; my name was not printed.

By the first half of December I had already spent mind-boggling amounts of money on transport. The Airbnb apartment where I was staying was by the coast, west of Havana - near Karl Marx theater-. Airbnb works in a peculiarly way in Cuba, half digital and half analog. Because there is neither internet, nor a decent banking structure, the American company pays the owners of the apartments in cash and Cuban State makes them pay a monthly lease license, plus the responsibility to register each guest manually, with all registration forms containing guest’s private data had to be delivered to a governmental office on a monthly basis. The check-in process was as formal as having to show a valid passport and manually complete the form. The host and owner of the

apartment knew from the very first day that I was Cuban, but he noticed that I had not lived in Cuba for a long time. This feels quite offensive, and it has to do with language.

Cuban-Spanish is the variety of the Spanish language used in Cuba. It is a sub-dialect of the Caribbean Spanish with regional differences, mainly intonation, between east and west of the island. Because of Spanish colonization (as in the vast majority of Latin American countries), the official Cuban language is Spanish. However, external factors have contributed to the linguistics makeup of today's Cuba. During colonization, the Spaniards imported a large number of slaves from Africa, who spoke a variety of languages. It is hard to find out the precise provenance of African slaves in Cuba. A considerable number of the names who the masters named the slaves, or perhaps how they referred to one-another, have been preserved in Cuba, through a historical archive

of official documents, pamphlets, books and newspapers. All seem to allude to certain general areas of origin. Most important are: lucumí, mandinga, arará, gangá, carabalí and congo, but for instance, a substantial number of slaves arrived in Cuba from the region of Biafra. Languages were Yoruba (generally West Africa), Lucumí (South West Nigeria), Fon (Benin), Ewe (Ghana), Phla-Pherá (Togo), Efik (Cross River), Igbo (southeastern Nigeria) and Bantu. In Cuba the name Congo was applied not only to the ethnic groups and their numerous sub-tribes, but it was a general name used to assign people from a much more extensive cultural area, Guinea, Congo and Angola, and the area between Cameroon and the lower borders of Angola, all of these people spoke Bantu languages, the Congos were numerous in Cuba, and left behind a cultural and religious legacy only surpassed by the Yoruba.<sup>10</sup> Fundamental areas of African immigration to the Antilles were: 1) Sub-Saharan North-West Area

(Senegambian Confederation, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia), 2) Upper Guinea Area (Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, and Southern Nigeria), 3) Old Biafra area (Calabar, and northeast of Cameroon), 4) Lower Guinea (northern Congo, and Angola), 5) Mozambique (Southeast Africa).<sup>11</sup> A vast and complex ethnicity, cultural and linguistic diversity predominates in these five regions of sub-Saharan Africa from where the slaves came to Cuba. This inevitably affected Cuban Spanish and enriched the variety of languages in the Island. Cuban Spanish somehow differs from Castellano, especially in the way it is articulated, due also to a high density immigrant population from Canary Islands to Cuba, though it also has major influence from West Africa and France.

Native languages still survive in some aspects of Cuban-Spanish, in words and name places, maintaining some of the Amerindian tradition.

Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante lived exiled in London for 40 years, creating a very personal style, focused on Cuban-Spanish puns. Cabrera Infante recreated his passion for Cuba and its language in exile, he often said he wrote in Cuban, and not in Spanish:

“The Spanish language of America, when it was not contaminated by Chibchas or Cholos, was a mixture of Africa and its worst legacy, the slaves. As we know they were guilty of slavery (without slaves there is no trade) and everything it brought with it: bad color, bad odor, bad speech. In Cuba the slavers (that is, the whole white population of the island) thought that the next person had of Carabali (tar), what it did not have of Congo (soot). For another thing the common people (slaves or children or grandchildren of slaves) suffered strange Spanish aspirations and used to exclaim during the siesta: ‘Ah, how I would like to be white’. The language, naturally or unnaturally, aspired

too to be white. So in Cuba, the island that I know, the language is not exactly mestizo. It could be defined for you with the dilemma of the zebra. Are they black stripes on a white background or white stripes on a black background? But there is in any case something in the language of the Cubans that is not exactly Spanish. The same thing happens in Mexico, in Colombia, in Peru. The language is white but with black stripes. Or is it the reverse, as in Bolivia and in Paraguay, bilingual natives all?"<sup>12</sup>

I have been living outside Cuba for more than ten years. When I immigrated to Spain I had a strong Havana accent. For example, we assimilate the (r) to the following consonant. We pronounce the word "verde" (green) as "ved-de". Also, the post vocal, or final (s) fades off in Cuban daily speech: "las papas" (the potatoes) becomes "lah papa", or the word "basta" (enough) becomes "bahta". I have not lost my Havana accent, but I already

pronounce the (s) a lot more. Not only the accent is unmistakable in Cubans, but also vocabulary. For example, it is common to hear informalities when approaching someone, like: “mi corazón” (my heart), or “mi vida” (my life) but I no longer use these kinds of expressions. The Cuban Revolution in 1959, of course, had an impact on the Cuban Spanish vocabulary, for example, the use of “compañero/a” (comrade) instead of “señor/a” (sir/madam) when addressing strangers. Now I have removed the word “comrade” from my vocabulary. At the moment I communicate in English, sometimes I mix up English with Spanish words, creating what it is called Spanglish.

The influence of the English language in Cuba is gradually increasing, especially among new generations with the American-English infiltrating the local language. In addition, a significant number of Afro-Cubans speak Haitian Creole, which is, in

fact, the second most spoken language in Cuba. Spanglish is mostly used by Cubans living in the US, especially in Miami. A computer mouse is “el mouse” and not “el ratón” as in Spain. A Laptop is not “el portátil” as in Spain, it is “la laptop”, but Cubans living in Cuba usually pronounce “la laptó” and I say “la laptop”.

My host Jorge visited the apartment every day at the same time. He observed my behavior, heading out in the morning and returned at night. On more than one occasion I told him about the shipment of the box and my purpose of stay in Havana. I imagine he would have read the papers and certificates all messed up around the house. We talked about art; he liked to tell a story about how fake artworks from well-known Cuban artists have been sold to an Italian collector who was his guest. I rented the apartment for a month, my entire stay. It was evident at some point that Jorge was suspect of me, or just

curious regarding about how I make a living outside of Cuba. Wondering what kind of artist I was, if I am dangerous – perhaps I devote myself to falsifying art, internationally. However, for his peace of mind, Airbnb’s online booking system and security experts classify very well who is entitled to hospitality and who is a “parasite”.

Airbnb is a new hospitality model, perhaps too new, especially for a country like Cuba. It is cheap, cool, based on ethics, moral and decency, as well as certain rules of conduct. However, it is also framed within a country, where the concept of state-nation comes into play. Derrida theorized in detail about this phenomenon, arguing that there is no state-nation today that opens the doors to everyone, either with Airbnb reservations or no reservations, without limiting immigration. Every state-nation is based on the control of its borders, opposes illegal immigration and creates restrictions

to legal immigration. In Cuba, the state, or even your friends, who perhaps are not really your friends, showcase hostility towards the exiled individual. Words like “Exile” and even more “Drop-out” or “Return” are hated. But supposedly, when we make a reservation on Airbnb, the new arrival cannot be defined in advance. Hospitality must be offered to the outsider, the stranger, the total new arrival. Derrida states that the one who arrives should not be required to show his identity. It should not be insisted that they say who they are, or whether they intend to integrate themselves or not, so that it will be assimilated within the “family”, the nation or the State. Derrida’s *Of Hospitality*<sup>13</sup> specifies that an emigrant is received in a foreign land under the principle of hospitality. He is being asked: Who are you? Where are you coming from? In no way does the state allow the free entry of foreigners without prior verification. According to Derrida, conditional hospitality is the first act of violence. On the other

hand, absolute hospitality requires opening the doors not only to the foreigner, who is finite, but also to others—absolute—without any kind of reciprocity. Between “guest” and “parasite”; illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest—the difference is abysmal. While a foreigner is protected under the principle of hospitality, the state puts all the effort so that he is not damaged in any way, but as long as he remains a foreigner, if for some reason the traveler decides to take root, other forces and mechanisms will enter the game. The feeling that I do not belong anywhere, that I have no place in the world came as no surprise. The complete ignorance of my Cuban status by the State, by my friends calling me “The Dutch” and even by my family, because of their naive attitude towards my status as an immigrant.

I was informed, belatedly, that the state company that would pick up the box at customs —obviously—did not have

transportation at all. In order to find a suitable vehicle by my own means I decided to do what as a rule I do not do: find a shortcut, use connections. As a rule, I say I do not do this because I dislike putting friends or family to any trouble and, I hate it when people use such tactics with me. So I called my uncle who works for the Ministry of Transport and asked him for help. The box was inside a warehouse in the new zone of the port of Mariel. We went to pick it up in a minivan, imported from China that spilled oil from the engine if it gets very hot, limiting us to drive at 40 kilometers per hour.

The distance from Havana to the port of Mariel is approximately 50 kilometers. Mariel has played a central role in Cuba's modern history. "As the nearest port to the US, this was for many years the gateway between the two countries with two ferries a day running. Such was the traffic that USA gangster Lucky Luciano was said to be planning a

casino on the hill that overlooks the town until his scheme was interrupted by the 1959 revolution. Three years later, Mariel was where Russian naval vessels docked to unload the nuclear warheads that led to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. In 1980, the port was the focus of world attention, lending its name to the Mariel Boatlift – an exodus of 120,000 Cubans to the US”.<sup>14</sup> Today, Cuban government renamed Mariel as a “Special Economic Development Zone”, the island’s economic future. So far 27 companies, including the Dutch company Womy Equipment Supply, have been given a green light to start establishing commercial activities in the area. All container operations have been shifted from the Port of Havana to Mariel. Equipped with four new Post-Panamax cranes, with the capacity to handle 800,000 cargo containers per year. Yet, the port had not seem as lively as I had anticipated. The whole zone had a sleepy appearance. Yes, cranes were there, new warehouses and extreme security. However,

they were not doing any operation at all, not even docked ships. Only customs employees and security guards hanging around the desolate place, doing nothing, taking shelter from extreme heat inside containers and warehouses, equipped with desks and computers without Internet connection. Was this place the future of Cuba or the past? Obviously I was not allowed to enter the warehouse to get the box. I had to wait outside, sitting on the sidewalk under the sun “a sun that breaks the stones” as Cubans used to say. The entry was exclusively for Cuban drivers with a *Licencia Operativa* (operating license) number; a special license granted by the government that authorizes vehicles to transport goods. Drivers’ names, plate numbers and workplaces are to be filled in on several forms and handed over to security officers by the entry booth.

I got the box just a few days before returning to Amsterdam. I do not know if I will see it again.

At this point, three observations must be made. First, I received the box within a month, but only because, through a series of privileges I enjoy thanks to my social position as an artist in Cuba, and because of my education there, I was able to disturb a series of highly placed people in several private and public institutions. Without my presence in Havana, my attitude as a Cuban artist living abroad and the fact that I had to return to Amsterdam, my work would have never arrived to a secure place. A majority of Cuban artists develop their work in the precarious economic dependence of Cuban State, which also monopolizes the means of distribution, the organization of festivals and conferences, the educational centers, and national awards. The most valuable thing for an artist in addition to profit that is the awareness of

his contemporaries and the distribution of the work is in the hands and the mood of those who run Cuban State, unfortunately these people are not familiar with what it really means to be an artist. Most of these officials are doing a job that they do not fully understand, a typical inefficiency from an old socialist state model (The USSR), where employment is considered a moral duty. Leading to the absurd distribution of jobs (in all those offices I visited in Havana there were always more than three people sitting by a table without knowing what to do all day long). This situation in Holland, for instance, would never happen. The only thing any company would not do is to pay money to workers they do not need to employ.<sup>15</sup> However, in the technocratic Netherlands, replacing this policy with that of empathy—human affection—is practically impossible.

The second observation requires the reader to concentrate and try to picture all

the Cuban documents described: registration forms, import certificates, authorship statements, Chinese model invoices, lists of material descriptions, permits, loading orders and remembering every single issued paper was made on a unique paper size, 24 x 28 cm, 28 x 22 cm, 20 x 10 cm (none of them on the standard A4 format, according to ISO 216 international standard—ISO—paper sizes used in most countries in the world today). Paper in Cuba is very scarce, and the available quality is bad. Documents lasted only a few days without a hardcover to protect them. The colors that predominate are yellow, pink and blue. For instance, the last papers issued to pick up the box at customs which I still preserve were made using carbonless copy paper, designed to transfer the information written on the front onto the sheets beneath. Instead of inserting a special carbon sheet in between the original and the intended copy, carbonless copy paper has micro-encapsulated dye or ink on the back side of the top sheet,

and a micro-clay coating on the front side of the bottom sheet. When pressure is applied (from writing or impact printing), the markings made on the top sheet are duplicated. This method is ubiquitous in Cuba. It's the main resource used to create multiple copies of documents—white color, original paper for customer, yellow copy for records (company), and pink, or additional colors, for subsequent copies. Most of these papers are printed with Dot Matrix Printers. Only these machines can print on multi-part (carbon or carbonless copy Paper) forms since they print using mechanical pressure, by a printing head that moves back-and-forth. These printers have one of the lowest printing costs per page. As the ink is running out, the printout fades gradually, rather than suddenly stopping. They are able to use annoying continuous paper, not requiring individual sheets, useful only for data logging. Dot Matrix Printers are reliable workhorses in Cuba, where apparently low printing cost is more important

than quality. Low resolution (dots making up each character are visible) on the texts is very confusing, sometimes unreadable, and with frequent misspellings, like on one of the papers I read OLANDA without the H, also slowness when printing and more prone to jamming, causing paper debris that is tedious to remove. Yet, some of the documents could actually be printed by using any kind of printer and ink, or written by hand, by a random person working for the state. Would it be so hard to use computers to make standard, legal models that are legibly printed and distributed appropriately? I am not sure if the officials of Cuban institutions even have the knowledge to design forms on a computer. But they do have power, yes! All the power.

The third observation is the documents are of no value, easily reproduced, without identification codes, nor security patterns. Furthermore, the people who issue and control these documents do not even understand them. At the port of Mariel, when

checking-in at the windows, the official who attended to me did not understand the reference number written on the paper. She declared an error and therefore I had to bring the responsible party from the state company that issued the paper. In a moment of panic, I lied and told the lady that I was the responsible party, that I worked for the state company Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales (Cuban Fund of Cultural Assets), and that I needed to pick up the box immediately. This bureaucratic chaos creates a country full of fake artists with fake documents, because an artist in Cuban society does have privilege beyond what is known internationally—the fact that the media talks about the censorship of Cuban artists by the government. In a society where it is not known what is legal and what is not, people end up not knowing their own rights. But artists, exclusively, are allowed to do certain things that others do not even imagine doing. Apparently, art and culture are supporting a great part of the Cuban

economy at the moment. In the near future they need to create more artists, giving them more “freedom”, so they can sell more art. To Americans.

Here I want to go back to the beginning of the text and position myself regarding the shipment from Holland to Cuba. On the one hand, the import of a typical Dutch chair, and western design icon, handcrafted by myself, but not an expression of my identity. One may think that this chair made in Amsterdam rejects my true self. It could have been made by someone else, or perhaps purchased in a design store. On the other hand, the box is a practical container for the chair, but also a witness to an intense physical labor and care. A heavy structure, which has moved from one place to another, validating my manual labor and handling, although invisible, exposed to social conventions, bureaucratic forces

and negotiations with power, but perhaps it allows me to express myself in a successful way, although only with that chair inside did I confront the complexity of my identity, and the awareness of my political body. But again, why have my friends in Cuba called me by the name *El Holandés* (the Dutch)? In order to answer this question, it is important to address Caribbean migration. Caribbean people have been migrants for over 500 years and this movement plays an important role in constructing the cultural complexity found in Caribbean societies. Specifically, the movement to Cuba from Curaçao started in 1917, by 1919 about 1,900 Curaçaoans left the country. It was mostly a working-class male event in which men left the island to work in Cuba as cane-cutters. In Cuba, however, the number of Curaçaoans was relatively small in comparison with immigrants from Haiti or Jamaica. Because of their small numbers they were hardly mentioned and remained for a long time virtually invisible in Cuban

migration studies. The level of cultural influence was especially impactful because it was a circular migration. Many men would leave the island and return after work in Cuba was finished. Because of their renewed status as Cuban-migrants, they were greatly respected by the Curaçaoan population at the time. As “Cubanos”, they would identify themselves by speaking Spanish, dancing according to the newest styles, and display a knowledge of music, which gave them a renewed social status and greater respect in society.<sup>16</sup> In Cuba, the Curaçaoan people thus become part of a large group of black emigrant workers in the eastern part of Cuba where large sugar companies were established. Many migrants, when interviewed, gave evidence of the hostility towards them as black migrants. The categorization of race was based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features also manifested itself in the way the members of the Dutch migrant community, as a group, were approached. Curaçaoans

were called *Holandeses negros* (black Dutch), the Arubans *Holandeses blancos* (white Dutch), and the Bonairians *Holandeses indios* (Indian Dutch). In their interaction with Cubans they would stress their identity as *Holandés*. The term “Yo soy *Holandés*” (I am Dutch) was utilized to distinguish oneself—specially from Haitian cane-cutters, who were the most oppressed emigres in Cuba. By emphasizing this identity, they were able to gain a status apart from the Haitians.<sup>17</sup> I am not white, I am not black, my hair is wavy and dry, and furthermore, I am tall (1.89 cm), Cuban, I live in Holland and I cannot just return to my country, even if that is my will. I have become indifferent to my culture, indifferent to Havana. I have become invisible. In his dissertation *Mare Liberum*, Hugo de Groot defends the freedom of the seas – that is to say the sea as a neutral space. The text gave way to what is known today as the Law of the Sea, which studies the sovereign rights of the states over the maritime space

that corresponds to its territory, imposing the standard for a 12-mile territorial sea around a land. Within these limits, states are free to enforce any of their own laws or regulations or use any resources. If I am, perhaps, an artist in exile, distanced from my culture—as my own country has deemed it—I wonder, what would be the standard measurement of my neutrality? “en fin, el mar”.<sup>18</sup>



## Notes

1. Antonio Gutiérrez Escudero. Los Intentos Colonizadores de Francia y Holanda en el Siglo XVI. p. 369 <http://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/49771/1/Binder1.pdf>

2. Ibid p. 371

3. Leopoldo Fornés Bonavia, Cuba-Cronología. Cinco siglos de Historia, Política y Cultura. Sevilla 2003. p. 25

4. Boudewijn Hendricksz, known as Balduino Enricoto to the Spaniards, was a Dutch corsair and later Admiral. He is most famous for his role in the Battle of San Juan. Puerto Rico (1625) during the Eighty Years' War, in which he tried but failed to capture San Juan from Spanish forces. In the same year, prior the assault on San Juan he attempted to recapture Bahia, Brazil after the Spanish overcame Dutch forces in the city. He was also a former mayor of Edam-Volendam.

5. Karl Marx, Capital. Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1. The fetishism of

commodities and the secret therefor. Chicago, 1909. p. 81

6. Hugo Grotius, *The Freedom of the Seas, or the Right Which Belongs to the Dutch to take part in the East Indian Trade* (1609), New York Oxford University Press, 1916

7. See Wikipedia entry for clave (rhythmic pattern): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clave\\_\(rhythm\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clave_(rhythm))

8. See Wikipedia entry for claves (hand percussion instrument): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claves>

9. Marijke Kuper, Rietveld and De Stijl, on Rietveld's Universe, Edited by Rob Dettingmeijer, Marie-Thérèse van Thoor, Ida van Zijl, NAI Publishers, 2010

10. Jorge Castellanos & Isabel Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana*, Tomo 1, Ediciones Universal, Miami 1994 p. 28

11. Ibid p. 36

12. G. Cabrera Infante. *Mea Culpa*, Farber and Farber, London, 1995

13. Derrida Jacques, *Of hospitality* / Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond (Stanford University Press, California, 2000), pp. 38.

14. Jonathan Watts, *Welcome to Mariel, Cuba: The new port giving berth to hope*, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/19/welcome-mariel-port-cuba-economic-liberalisation>

15. David Graeber, *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant*, <https://www.strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs>, 2013

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17. *Ibid.* p. 116

18. Nicolás Guillén, *Tengo* (poem), 1964



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