

(Ab)Uses of Memory: Cult Figures from Cuba and Venezuela

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The project examines official and dissident discourses around the cult figures and independence heroes of Cuba and Venezuela, José Martí and Simón Bolívar respectively. It reflects on the use and abuse of collective memory in the public space based on the critical translations in the artistic expression of Reynier Leyva Novo and Deborah Castillo, among other examples. The comparative frame is based on the formal similarities of the artworks, but also on the revolutionary paths and current crises of both countries. Novo's solo exhibition *Lo que es, es lo que ha sido* (2020) at El Apartamento showcased an installation in which the bust of Martí was covered more than 350 times with layers of vinyl and lime to the point of disfiguring the hero's facial features; while Castillo's live performance *Slapping Power* (2015) at her solo exhibition at the Mandragoras Art Space in Queens belongs to a series of affronts to the *caudillo's* authority as she slaps the wet clay of the bust until its facial features disappear. Both artists emphasize not just the plurality that overlaps any official narrative, but the subversive potential of the subjective perversion of any legacy. More generally and in relation to heritage debates, these artworks reflect on the role of such monuments in contemporary societies. It is precisely the (abusive) relationship between heritage (understood as a site of memory), history, and emotions that drives the project. Since heritage is not a neutral object, but has the function of awakening or activating, through an affective or emotional relationship, a memory, it has not so much the function of preserving the past but of projecting a conception or relationship with the past into the future. Indeed, Cuba and Venezuela have opted for an urban palimpsest with a retro-revolutionary aesthetic and an obsessive monumentalization of heroes that ends up highlighting the historiographic fabrication. Initially, the project foresees a bibliographic and iconographic review: it is crucial to create a comparative framework by examining the existing literature about the conformation of the myths of Martí and Bolívar, as well as about the local policies in the context of *Castrism* and *Chavism* regarding cultural heritage. Secondly, the discursive nature of artistic devices will be examined through semiotic analysis, borrowing also methods from the sociology of art. Thirdly, since the display at art institutions plays an important role in the understanding and dissemination of certain discourses, exhibition contexts will be also considered for the overarching theoretical question about artistic dissent. With regard to the global frame, the project also resorts to debates on recent removal of statues and decolonizing practices, a background scenario that places this research proposal within contemporary debates. This research project aspires to contribute to the understanding of the political instrumentalization of collective memory as a key aspect of the mobilization of emotions and affect around the nation. It is oriented towards the concept of *de-memory*, a hypothesis that allows a critical look at the use and abuse of memory in order to understand the overlapping of official and dissident narratives. The busts of national heroes, reproduced over and over in countries with precarious living conditions, became pieces of the country, residues of the nation: what to do with the materiality of a nation that has become a junkyard of history, but at the same time is projected in a heroic epic through a mythology of *de-memory*?