Los Súperarquitectos | (The Superarchitects)
Cuban Youth Imagining and Creating Futures through Street art, Graffiti & Skateboarding

Joelle Bueno
Swarthmore Sociology and Anthropology Department 2018
Mommy & Papi, Andrés
Nancy
Orly
Fabian, Miguel, Fiero, El Blackie, Leandro, Claudio, Ozmany, Damaris, Diarenys, Roosbelinda
Milton
Fraga
Graciela & Zulay
Lorena
Josepha, Ani, Helio, Joe, Claire, Ani

In memory of youth in Cuba, the U.S. and all over the world
Abstract

In this paper, I will be looking at the Revolution’s use of visual communication and street art, artists whose work can be found in Havana area today, and skate culture in Havana to understand the visual as tool. Through this, I will show the government’s strategic use of the streets, the city, and the visual in establishing a new Cuban identity. With that as context, I show how street art and skateboarding in Havana, Cuba today reveal current tensions between the state while allowing youth to express themselves and imagine alternative realities within the state. In this way, street artists and skaters in Cuba create and embody the multiplicity of the Cuban identities while creating Cuba’s future. Street art and skating become political arts and threats to the state because the state responds to them as threats. By painting and skating in the streets, young Cubans embody and practice future building. In creating alternative reflections of itself, the Cuban society physically manifests its own future, but through the actions of individuals.

Keywords

Youth culture, Globalization, Internet, Arts, Skateboarding, Street art, Graffiti, Citizenship, National identity, Havana, Cuba, Latin, America, Governance, Socialism, Millennial, Nationalism, Tourism, Visual Communication, Visual Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Art, Revolution, Imaginary, Future
# Table of Contents

- **Acknowledgements** 2
- **Abstract** 3

**Introduction** ......................................................................................................................... 5  
**Methods** ............................................................................................................................... 7  
**Literature Review**.................................................................................................................... 9  
**Part 1: The Revolution’s Use of the Visual**............................................................................ 14  
**Part 2: Street Art, Graffiti & Today’s Streets**...................................................................... 23  
**Part 3: The Art of Skateboarding**.......................................................................................... 35  
**Conclusions** ........................................................................................................................... 41  
**Works Cited** ........................................................................................................................ 43
Introduction

Power manifests physically and visually, disguising itself in things everyday onlookers may not notice. They become so normal that we may not consciously realize their original intention and/or effects. The ability to visually read one’s spaces or interpret the images one is consuming becomes an incredibly powerful skill, who once aware of manifestations of that invisible authority, can put themselves in a position of power and agency over their environment and situation. In the specific case of Cuba, the official propaganda is particularly visible and abundant, made with very strong visual codes of the Revolution and its values. The streets of Cuba function as a medium through which the official government power and belief systems are transmitted. But intersperse with the official street art, whether made by the government or by spontaneous artists moved by the Revolution. In between one finds the anguished faces of souls, a masked man always accompanied by a question mark, and a happy Zombie. Artists such as Yulier, Fabian and the Happy Zombie, render alternative visions of the Cuban nation, co-opting the walls for their own empowerment and the empowerment of others. The official wall art stands for important and eternally relevant values. The popular works of Yulier, Fabian and the Happy Zombie, speak to the current reality. Their re-appropriation of the city by street artists and skaters becomes a political and social move reimagining oneself in the streets outside of the state rhetoric. In this way street art and skateboarding reflect the dialectical relationship between the state and its people. In this paper, I will be looking at the Revolution’s use of visual communication and street art, artists whose work can be found in Havana area today, and skate culture in Havana to understand the visual as tool. Through this, I will show the government’s strategic use of the streets, the city, and the visual in establishing a new Cuban identity. With that as context, I will show how street art and skateboarding in Havana, Cuba today reveal current
tensions between the state while allowing youth to express themselves and imagine alternative realities within the state. In this way, street artists and skaters in Cuba create and embody the multiplicity of the Cuban identities while creating Cuba’s future.
Methods

My research took place between February-May 2017 and January 2018 where I initially began solely focused on the Revolution’s use of images. As such, I began be photographing various street art that appeared to be clearly produced by the Government. As I spent more time in the city and noticed the individual street art, I continued to take pictures, noticing patterns of style by different artists. Through meeting people and snowball sampling, I was able to meet many of the artists and friends of the artists who were able to show me locations heavy with street art. After having spent some time in Havana, I began to notice social connections between street artists and skaters and became interested in the Cuban skate scene.

Upon return to the U.S. I began following the street artists and skaters on various social media including Facebook and Instagram where I was able to keep up with their works and hear what they had to say themselves. I began researching skateboarding and the various Cuban skateboarding organizations and Cuban skaters themselves. Between articles in English and Spanish about the street artists, and various videos and articles from different sources on the Cuban Skaters, I was able to uncover short videos, documentaries, and homemade videos from skaters themselves. It was in this time that I learned about artists such as El Sexto, allowing me to further connect street artists to some of the more available information on El Sexto given his international fame.

Within this, it is important to understand that Cuba has restricted internet access. This influenced the channels through which I was able to research topics related to the country. Internet use looks different in Cuba than it does in the U.S. and I have been socialized to use internet from a very U.S. and academic perspective. As a result, I had more access to non-Cuban writers and would have liked to have read more from Cuban citizens on their understanding of
themselves and the city. Being able to read Spanish allowed me to read work in Spanish and allowed me to read some of the Cuban produced sources I did find. Given the limited internet exposure, many of my informants are most active on social media, particularly Instagram.

I returned to Cuba in 2018 where I stayed for close to three weeks. In this time, I was able to meet other skaters and participate in skating events as a participant observer through a relationship I had built with one of my informants and main skaters in the local scene. The skaters often hang out in public meeting spots where it is very easy to begin conversation. Moreover, being a white, female, from the U.S. made me an exciting outsider to engage with. The connections I made allow me to use snowball sampling to enter these social spheres and engage with people in the middle of these communities.

In this time, I conducted participant observation in the local skate scene, joining skaters at various skating events and activities. I followed local skate leaders as the engage with other skaters and stakeholders in the skate scene at spots like Paseo del Prado, Parque Acapulco, and Ciudad Libertad. I hoped to observe interactions between skaters and other skaters, the general public, tourists and people in positions of authority. I was interested in understanding what life for skaters looks like, what people do, how they do it and in doing so, understanding more what it means to be a skater in Cuba.
Literature Review

In my literature review I will draw from theory from various different topics ranging from citizenship, public space, media studies, youth culture, and work more specific to street art/graffiti, skateboarding, and hip hop. I will begin more broadly and theoretically, beginning with theory from Gramsci, Lefebvre, Foucault, and Becker. Their work on capitalism, power, and the city will root my research and provide theoretical frameworks through which to understand large themes of citizenship, national identity formation, governance. These readings help conceptualize the relationships between citizens, the government, youth, tourists and better allow us to examine relationships, notice trends understand the general arena in which all these stakeholders are participating. In this case, the arena would be the streets of Havana, Cuba. The stakeholders, make up some of the people in Cuba, becoming part of the society. Society like Foucault explains is a, “complex and independent reality that has its own laws and mechanisms of reaction, its regulations as well as its possibilities of disturbance.”¹ To understand society, one must look into the mechanisms, laws, and interests under which different groups operate.

To begin this topic, modern Cuba needs to be contextualized. Joseph L. Scarpaci’s “Material and cultural consumption in Cuba: New reference groups in the new millennium” discusses the material and cultural consumption in Cuba highlighting major shifts in tendencies between generations. He highlights youth, specifically millennials, as being connected to a global market despite various restrictions within the once strictly socialist state. After the Special Period hit in 1990s, the U.S. dollar was legalized again in 1993, increasing access to money and goods coming inland. This article provides an important economic backdrop to contextualize the economic experience of Cuban youth today. Scarpaci shows shifting values amongst Cuban

youth, who are more open to consumerist tendencies, who do not feel the same stigmatization for nonessential goods. Scarpaci argues a new consumerism among these younger generations who have their eye towards hard cash found in the tourism industry. It is in this socialist economy that allows for some capitalism (in state limitation) that Cuban youth are growing up and having to maneuver their values, and incomes and futures.

Ezekiel Dixon-Roman and Wilfredo Gomez take this one step further in, "Cuban Youth culture and receding futures: hip hop reggaeton and pedagogias marginal," where they address hip hop and reggaeton amongst Cuban youth, describing it as an “alternative space for self-expression, critical dialogue”2 and an envisioning of potential Cuban futures. Similar to my own research, they used ethnographic data, drawing from participant observation, and visual anthropology. They explain the changing relationship between the state and the people and address the racial and economic inequality that has come with the rise of the tourism industry. Spaces like hip hop give disillusioned, frustrated youth a place to vocalize, practice and imagine new possibilities. Like hip hop, street art and skateboarding also provide alternative environments outside of the state. They offer voices and existences outside of the government, serving as forms of expression, and reasons to live. These communities offer “cultural ‘tool kits’ of acts, practices, skills and styles”3 that may look different from past or dominant forms, but it is in these communities that people’s realities exist and are made.

Gregory J. Snyder expands this as it pertains to skateboarding in “The city and the subculture Career: Professional street skateboarding in LA” where he discusses subculture media and goes over the various skills involved in the act and production of skating, including the

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2 Ezekiel Dixon-Roman, and Wilfredo Gomez, "Cuban Youth Culture and Receding Futures: Hip Hop, Reggaetón And pedagogias Marginal" (2012), 364.
3 Ibid., 376.
skating, photographing, filming and editing. Snyder’s outline of the skateboarding career points to the various stakeholders involved in the production and creation of the subculture and provides an important model to understand how skating boarding both exists and maintains itself in Cuba. While the study pertains mainly to L.A. skate communities, many of the themes of DIY mentality, mentoring, entrepreneurial spirit and subculture media are central to Cuba’s skate scene as well. Cuban Skaters combine many of the practices of those in the skate industry in the U.S. but under Cuban social and economic restrictions.

In her paper, “Disqualifying the Official: An Exploration of Social Resistance Through the Subculture of Skateboarding” Becky Beal connects dynamic hegemonic relationships and daily practices of resistance to the practices involved and fostered in skateboarding. She argues that skateboarding is a non-capitalist sport that as such, encourages different values and social practices. Skate’s emphasis on self-governance, choice, creativity and expression, its non-competitive nature and ability to control one’s physical activity at their own pace often leads to empowerment. Similar to Dixon- Roman and Gomez’s argument, Beal argues that the values and mentalities practiced in skating can empower individuals to know that alternatives exist and that they can decide to practice creating those spaces. While some of the aspects function differently in the Cuban context, skating can be seen as an everyday response and form of resistance in one’s social and economic conditions.

Beal’s understanding of hegemony and dominances lends itself to Lee Smithey’s “Unionists, Loyalists, and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland,” whose work served me as a model of how to collect data on murals. While we both went street by street documenting mural by photograph, Smithey used a qualitative method to code the works. While Cuba’s murals have a different history and use different symbols, Smithey’s explanation of how murals
publically depict and convey ideology gives a mode through which the works can be analyzed and interpreted in their environments; in this way they perform identity. Murals and street art are impermanent in nature but can be used as a tool for either propaganda, or resistance to legitimate alternative narratives in order to reclaim and redefine identity. In the case of Cuba, this struggle is seen between local street artists and the state, reflecting the reflexive and changing nature of society, especially in response to a dominant group, in this case, the state.

Howard S. Becker continues the discussion of responses in a changing society in *Art Worlds* where states define what is a “nuisance” and what gets censored. These acts, whether art or skating, become political given the government’s response. Becker describes how states act in the interest of preserving public order, preventing certain art from being shown, punishing “threatening” work and even limiting artists access to their needs, in the case of Cuba, limiting travel, access to materials, and access to exposure. Non-passive and obedient citizens or actions become a threat to state control, and actions such as creating street art and skateboarding become political in Cuba as both acts can be ticketed, threatened by imprisonment, and are both directly impacted by Cuba’s travel, economic, and social policies.

In books like *Discipline and Punishment*, by Michel Foucault he emphasizes that the body is subject to a body of knowledge, in this way, the body is a political technology. Power is a strategy exerted through people, a “micro-physics” in which power is exercised on the body deliberately to make us think about ourselves and act in certain ways. Power is spread out and seems to appear natural and nonconformity to the norm can result in surveillance and/or punishment. Together, Foucault and Becker allow us to examine the ways in which power is enacted and by who. In Cuba, the once revolutionary government pushed strict anti-capitalist systems, Today, we can still see how specific ideologies are implemented and tied to state
control. Like Dixon-Roman and Gomez's hip hop and reggaetoneros, street artists and skateboarders engage in everyday acts of resistance through physical presence and alternative practices. In embodying the streets, these communities practice and share creative thinking, community building, and construct alternative realities and potential futures, engaging in the dialectical relationship that makes up the social arena, the Cuban public.
Part 1 – The Revolution’s Use of the Visual

The use of walls as a form of discourse in Cuba began before the Revolution. During the U.S. backed Fulgencio Batista regime from 1952-1959, people used walls to write slogans against the violence and injustice that was taking place. One would see acronyms of groups such as *el Movimiento 26 de Julio* (M-26-7), the group that would then become the Revolution. This graffiti challenged the state, creating a physical space for the alternative movements that would turn into the Cuban Revolution. As graphic art professor, Jorge Bermúdez, wrote, the street, walls in particular, serve as a “*interacción directa con su principal receptor, la sociedad.*” (direct interaction with its principal receptor, society). The *Movimiento 26 de Julio* began speaking to its audience, the people, through the streets. In writing their insignias, they announced to the people that there was a community and movement outside of the dominant regime that existed and stood in opposition to Batista and to the injustices of his dictatorship. This would mark the beginning of the Revolution’s use of visual communication with the public in order to spread its presence, goals, and ideology.

The fight against Batista began in June 1953, led by Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara with *el Movimiento 26 de Julio* (M-26-7) and would triumph in 1959. The Revolution was able to institutionalize themselves, quickly moving to nationalize private businesses including over $11 billion of U.S. private businesses from 1959-1961. The Revolution, remapped the island by changing toponyms that include counties, sugar mills, schools, and other landmarks to reflect iconic revolutionary historical events and personalities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The young revolutionary was, if anything,

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a consistent brander who has denounced the inhumanity of industrial capitalism and its attendant patterns of consumption (Castro 2002)\(^6\)

Private workers were made to work for the state for a low salary but were given low or free housing, education and healthcare as part of the new government’s services.\(^7\) January 1, 1959 would mark the release of the first poster of the Cuban Revolution, a screen print of Fidel Castro and a gun reading 26 de JULIO on the top and FIDEL CASTRO on the bottom.\(^8\) This would be the start of the Revolution’s use of visual communication and the start of using posters, a medium that is easily reproduced and accessible to all.

Now as Prime Minister, Fidel and the rest of the new revolutionary government would continue their struggle to achieve equality, fight imperialism, and to eliminate US capitalism. By the end of 1960, Cuba had nationalized properties worth over $25 billion dollars.\(^9\) In 1961, the U.S. imposed a trade embargo on Cuba, ending the sugar-trade relationship that the U.S. and Cuba had had since the early 1900s.\(^10\)

In response to the nationalization of U.S. properties, and the fear of communism, the U.S. banned exports to Cuba and in January 1961 broke diplomatic relations with the island. In that same year, 1961, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, a failed military invasion of Cuba, was undertaken by CIA financed Cuban mercenaries. This event marked the end of Cuba’s relations with the first world.\(^11\)

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\(^6\) Scarpaci, "Material and Cultural Consumption, 258.
\(^7\) Ibid., 259
\(^10\) Scarpaci, "Material and Cultural Consumption, 259
\(^11\) Mike Gonzalez, “The Culture of the Heroic Guerrilla: The Impact of Cuba in the
By 1962, the Soviet Union replaced the U.S. as Cuba's backer, providing trade, military and technical support.¹² A year later in 1962, a poster was created celebrating the 9th anniversary of the assault at the Moncada Barracks, the beginning of the Revolution. The poster shows a fist coming down on a worm, or *gusano*, screaming in pain with the words *9 ANIVERSARIO 26 DE JULIO*.¹³ The poster shows the strength of the Revolution coming down on *gusanos*, or Cubans who left/“traitors” of the Revolution. The images celebrate the successes of the Revolution and gives the message that “we are strong and will continue to crush our enemies.” Despite the moral strength of the Revolution, material scarcity has become a hallmark of the Cuban economy. From early on Cubans were given ration cards to buy subsidized foods and household goods.¹⁴ To this day, many Cubans note that the products provided by the *libreta* (ration card), is not enough for the average Cuban family.

While Cuba had freed itself from U.S., it replaced one super power with the next, subsequently becoming largely reliant on the then Soviet Union, who became its main economic backer. One of the government’s posters from the time shows a page one third blue with a tube

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¹² Scarpaci, "Material and Cultural Consumption, 259.
¹⁴ Scarpaci, "Material and Cultural Consumption, 259.
¹⁴ Jorge R. Bermúdez, *La Imagen Constante.*
down the middle leading into the rest of an otherwise white page. The poster, made in 1970, reads, _MOLER TODA LA CAÑA Y SACARLE EL MAXIMO DE AZUCAR_ (grind all the cane and get the maximum sugar). This simple yet brilliant design depicts a sugar cane releasing its sugar and is impressive for its strategic yet basic use of shape and color to convey a specific message reflecting the political and economic state of affairs at the time.

In addition to nationalizing the land and industries, much of which was owned by foreign American businessmen, the Revolution created a new social strategy aimed at improving people’s living standards by nationalizing public health and education, making them free to all. As part of these new government programs, they organized a national literacy campaign carried out by urban young people who were sent to the countryside to teach people how to read and write, at first, to a 7th grade reading level.15 A 1981 poster reads _Y AHORA, A ALCANZAR EL NOVENO_ (And now, to reach the ninth), at the top, showing a yellow 6 rotating upwards into a red 9. The ascension into a specifically red nine symbolizes the rise and growth of the Revolution, the red being a symbol of communism. The poster highlights the successes of the government’s literacy efforts, announcing the move towards a national ninth grade education campaign.

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15 Jorge R. Bermúdez, _La Imagen Constante_.

reading level for all. Ultimately, the poster shows off the success, perseverance and strength of the Revolution to its Cuban audience. During this time, becoming doctors and teachers were some of the most desirable jobs. given the government support to pursue college, people were motivated to give back given the Revolution had provided for them. Meanwhile, as the 1980s continued, so did the scarcity of food and other consumer goods impacting the material living conditions of the 11 million Cuban citizens.

With the fall of the Berlin wall and the disintegration of the European socialist camp, in the 1991 Cuba was hit with an economic and social crisis that Fidel would name with the euphemism *el periodo especial en tiempos de paz*, (The Special Period in a Time of Peace). This time is remembered very traumatically by most Cubans for its extreme lack of resources and the struggle to find food whether or not you had money to buy it. While called the Special Period, it was actually an extreme economic crisis that left many hungry, and in disillusion with the government. Younger generations especially felt this and while appreciative of all the good the Revolution brought, were born into this situation and wanted to see a way out.

The government affiliated youth group *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas* (UJC or Union of Young Communists), took it upon itself at this time to propose a new graphic communication that would appeal specifically to younger generations, hoping to inspire more support for the Revolution from the distancing youth. Rewriting their name UJC as UJotaCè, the group of

16 Ezekiel Dixon-Román, and Wilfredo Gomez "Cuban Youth Culture, 367.
designers created a graffiti-inspired style and, given the material limitations of the time, began writing and painting the streets and the walls with their new typography. More specifically, their work took three new forms, substituting numbers, acronyms and symbols for letters. In one image circulated in 1991 that reads *Por Cuba con Fidel* (for Cuba with Fidel), the graffiti writes *por* and *con* in traditional writing, but replaces the word Cuba with a graffitied Cuban flag and the word Fidel with a black and red diamond with a start in the middle, with two laurels on the bottom, the symbol for the Chief commander, or Fidel.

When the Special Period began in 1991, with the crisis brought more youth disenchantment. Younger generations began identifying the Revolution as belonging to older generations and not their own. As the economy continued to drop the government relegalized the U.S. dollar to the general public, expanding limited private sector jobs, and approving joining venture offers from foreign companies. This new move meant that the exile community could bring or wire dollars to the island and as a result of the opening, state

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
retailing companies emerged. Thought the prices were high for Cuban salaries these new outlets offered clothing, appliances and foods for the first time in over 40 years.

The reinstatement of the U.S. dollar also marked a big shift toward tourism as a national income. While this move allowed many access to the US dollar and currency above what people were being paid by the state, it also shifted the financial values and jobs in the labor market. People began moving away from jobs like doctors and teachers towards taxi drivers and hotel staff where they could make more money. This dynamic still exists today, where, “young girls are selling themselves out of necessity. Officials, there isn't prostitution in Cuba. But what do you think is going to happen when a doctor earns $24 a month, and quick sex gets you $30?”

The Special Period brought increased use of the black market, increased remittances from Cubans abroad, and the rise of *jinetería* (sex work). The term *resolver* (make do) has become common in Cuba as a response to the chronic scarcity on the Island.

The growth of the tourist industry has also added to racial inequality in the country. Though Fidel declared racism to be against the Revolution in 1959, racism persisted culturally, ideologically and in practice.

Prior to the legalisation of the US dollar and turn to tourism in 1993, over 38% of the workers in tourism were of colour (De La Fuente, 2001). When Cuba legalised the US dollar and opened its borders to tourism, many people then wanted to obtain employment in the formerly less desirable sector of the labour market. The remnant and reproduced ideologies of los negros [Blacks] as “lazy”, “inefficient”, “ugly”, “dirty”, “smelly”,

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24 Ibid.
“unintelligent” and “defiled” seemed to materialise once again in the hiring and firing practices of tourist labour. The rationales given were that los negros lack the physical and educational attributes to interact with tourists including “good presence”, “proper manners” and nivel cultural [cultural level]. In addition to these racialised labour market practices that contributed to increasing racial inequality in income, there was already an inequitable distribution of remittances from family members abroad since an overwhelming majority of the Cubans that fled were White. Both of these processes substantially contributed to the demographic shifts in the labour market and increased racialised income inequality.29

On top of racial inequality on the island, Cuba can be seen as functioning under a three-tiered apartheid system divided by Cubans versus foreigners, Cubans at high level of government versus Cuban people, and dollar-holding Cubans versus non-dollar-holding Cubans.30 Tourists, especially white tourists, receive the biggest privileges, never having to wait in line as is normal to Cubans and having better access to hard currency items known for their good quality in comparison to undesirable peso-valued items.31 The double currency allows foreigners to be sold postcard poverty and images of Cuba that include pre-revolution American cars, Che berets, and cigars.32 The real Havana is in the cramped and unreliable transportation system where again, tourists- read: hard currency-- are given privileges over Cubans and in the housing crisis where crumbling walls and exposed wires are normal.33 By 2008, cuentapropistas (self-employed workers), were earning more than the average Cuban worker and physicians.34 These jobs

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31 Berta Esperanza Hernández Truyol, "Out in Left Field: Cuba’s Post-Cold War Strikeout," (1994), 117
34 Ibid.
Tebaldi, David. "Dispatches from the Field: Havana."
include complicated regulations but allow Cubans to open home restaurants, rent homes, work as cobblers, beauticians, bicycletaxi drivers, lighter refuelers, confectionary and juice vendors, artists and more.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35} Scarpaci, "Material and Cultural Consumption," 270.
Part 2—Street Art, Graffiti & Today’s Streets

While UJotaCé attempted to create a youth movement, the group itself and the work produced was still off, and represented, the state. Parallel to the official movement began el movimiento de arte callejero (movement of street art), where youth began expressing their interests outside of the official UJC. Groups like ArteCalle (street art) put together murals, graffiti, events, and public performances from 1986-1989, inspired by documentaries they had seen about graffiti art in New York and the languages of autonomy and defiance.34 Upset that Cuba’s first art biennial in 1984 did not feature any Cuban art students, the group carried out anonymous political painting on walls throughout Havana from 1985-86. Some of their wall paintings read “We Don’t Need a Biennal, We Have Space” or “Art is Just a Few Steps from the Cemetery” written next to the Colon Cemetery.37 Their works continued to utilize posters and public space in order to reach the people. Their work was responded in various way by the state, at first invitations from bureaucrats towards inclusion, while simultaneously still being harassed by state officials for their work. In a later work in 1989 they painted Havana walls with murals denouncing censorship, for which they would be detained by state security and receive orders for military service as punishment.38

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
More recently graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado Machado, known as *El Sexto*, was imprisoned three times, once in 2014 for 10 months going on a hunger strike for 24 days after the prisoners were not receiving water. In 2016 he was arrested again, this time for 55 days after painting *Se Fue* (He’s Gone) on the Habana Libre Hotel and posting a video mocking Fidel Castro’s death in 2016. Calling himself *El Sexto* (the sixth), he represents himself as the sixth of the *cinco heroes* (five heroes), five Cuban spies that were imprisoned in the U.S., the final of whom was released in 2014. His name suggests a sixth hero—the Cuban people, which worked well before he became known as no one knew who was tagging all the streets, making any and all Cubans *el sexto*. While he no longer lives in Cuba, his works are identified by his signature *El Sexto*, signed off with his signature five-pointed star. In one interview with *El Sexto*, he talks about how he was, propagandized as soon as he reached school age. He and his classmates chanted such slogans as “We will be like Che [Guevara].” When they learned to read, they did not see such sentences as “See Spot run.” They saw “Fidel is in the plaza” or “Fidel is happy.” And, of course, TV, radio, and newspapers conveyed hardly anything but propaganda.

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Danilo liked to draw, and something strange happened when he was nine. He drew a picture of Fidel Castro in his army fatigues, but with a monkey head. When his mother saw it, she was horrified. She took it from him, threw it away, and admonished him never to draw anything like that again. The child was taken aback. His mother had always liked his drawings before. Why was she so afraid of this one simple drawing? “That started a little revolution in my mind.” he says.

When he was 18, he was conscripted into the military, like everyone else. On the base, he saw things he had never seen before: goods, supplies — stuff. He stole some of it. For this, he was sentenced to six years in prison, of which he served three. When he got out, he had an urge to satirize: to satirize every government campaign, to puncture the atmosphere of fear and propaganda.

*El Sexto* points out the early indoctrination of Cuban youth with “Revolutionary” ideology. State attempts at control spill into the classroom normalizing the Revolution from a young age. His mother’s reaction to his seemingly innocent drawing reveals the degree of social control and censorship to the house, the family, and through her actions, she teaches the extent to which it impacts the child imaginary. As Danilo got older he continued to see the disparities between government rhetoric and their use of surveillance through policing and punishment. “The State institutions’ panoptic gaze structures a sense of paranoia for most Cubans.” This paranoia is widely felt and is seen in what is said or not said depending on the social or physical context and leads to self-censorship. Danilo’s mom’s reaction to his drawing was a teaching moment for him to learn this skill, this internalized censoring of anything that could seem to threaten or undermine the state. *El Sexto* calls attention to some of the ways in which Cubans are policed.

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and surveilled, while calling attention human rights abuses executed by the Cuban Government.

Human Rights Watch describes Cuba, stating,

Cuba’s systematic repression has created a pervasive climate of fear among dissidents and, when it comes to expression of political views, in Cuban society as a whole. This climate hinders the exercise of basic rights, pressuring Cubans to show their allegiance to the state, while discouraging any form of criticism. Dissidents feel as though they are constantly being watched—a sense that fosters distrust among peers and self-censorship. They fear they will be arrested at any moment, and have no confidence in the willingness of the government to protect their rights or give them a fair trial. This climate of fear has led to the near-complete isolation of dissidents from their communities, friends, and sometimes even families, which together with other forms of repression has had profound emotional consequences, including depression and signs of trauma.44

Cuba’s laws essentially allow the state to criminalize any form of dissent. Cubans who criticize can be legally subject to charges such as “dangerousness” for which they can be exempt from due process and denied judicial protection.45 The surveillance, paranoia and censorship leave little room for dissent. Even the fact that an hour of internet use costs a third of Cuban monthly wages and is only available in specific locations means that few Cubans can read critiques or even hear about things outside of the state’s control.46

*El Sexto*’s work and the state’s response to him represents this type of relationship between the people and the state and the various levels of control and punishment that happen as a result.

The interests the state pursues through its intervention in the arts have to do with the preservation of public order—the arts being seen as capable both of strengthening and of subverting order—and with the development of a national culture, seen as a good in

44 “New Castro, Same Cuba: Political Prisoners in the Post-Fidel Era.”
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
itself and as something which promotes national unity ("our heritage") and the nation’s reputation among other nations.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{El Sexto} is vocal about his dissatisfaction with the state and uses the walls you use what is not allowed to be said publically. Artistic expression, which poses no real physical threats, does not incite violence or organize people in opposition, still challenges the dominant narrative given by the state. In this way, the art becomes a threat and falls under "subverting order" and disrupting state unity. In many ways, his street tags parallel those \textit{el Movimiento 26 de Julio} (M-26-7) at the very beginnings of the Revolution. In the same way that \textit{el Movimiento 26 de Julio}'s markings in the streets gave visibility and voice to those in opposition to Batista, these tags also showed life outside of the Revolution. Whether political, antigovernment, or playful, and by nature of being public in the streets, these tags announced voices and presences that existed outside the state and get interpreted and treated as threat.

\textit{Today}

In this particular historical moment, Cuba is in a state of ambiguity in between the Revolution, the aftermath of the Revolution, the death of its main leaders, and now a new president. A communist government with a tourist economy. Without a clear direction of what the future has to hold, what remains is an imagined future where various people, artists, intellectuals, families have visions about the Cuban nation at the brink. The Revolution was known for its slogans as seen in posters of Fidel and Che, nationalistic signs on

\textsuperscript{47} Howard Saul Becker, \textit{Art Worlds}. (Berkeley, California, 2012), 180.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Street_art_seen_2017.png}
\caption{Street art seen in 2017: \textit{por siempre Fidel} (Fidel forever) and \textit{Fidel es el pueblo} (Fidel is the people).}
\end{figure}
the side of the road, and walls with patriotic quotes, images and symbols. Today, the streets are still filled with visual images and reminders of the 50s Revolution and its ideals all over Havana and the country. Many of these classic pro-state slogans turned street art are produced by the CDR or Committee in Defense of the Revolution-- a group founded at the beginning of the Revolution to identify dissidents. As of 2017, one could find walls painted with phrases like *por siempre Fidel* (Fidel forever) and *Fidel es el pueblo* (Fidel is the people). Many of the locals stores that work in the peso (as opposed to the U.S. dollar convertible CUC) have painted signs that reference the government. Even signs celebrating national holidays reference Revolutionary values and identification with the Revolution and the state, as seen in 2018’s New Year’s poster.

The government also uses *vallas*, or official billboards, made by the *Editora Politica*. The official *vallas* are reproduced throughout the city, made from silk screening, allowing for various copies to be made from an original. Almost all *vallas* are strategically located in highly trafficked areas, where either many people walk by, or many cars and buses will be passing. For example, as one leaves the main José Martí airport and begins to enter the city, a *valla* about the U.S. *Bloqueo* presents itself, making itself visible to all tourists in la Habana upon arrival. Outside fo those that advertise upcoming events or public wellness campaigns, *vallas* can generally be split up and understood through various categories: the fusion
of nationalism and socialism; the relationship between Cuban nationalism and the U.S.; the memorialization of national heroes; and racial exclusions within nationalism.\(^{48}\)

As supported by what can be seen in the various *vallas*, to be Cuban means to be in support of the Revolution, of socialism and thus against the U.S., the capitalist, imperialist opposite. Historically in Cuba, those who rejected socialism or left to the U.S. were known as traitors, *gusanos*, and no longer Cuban. With the crisis of the Special Period, there was a new effort to defend socialism and the Revolution. There continues to be an effort to define Cuban nationalism in terms of U.S. imperialist acts such as the blockade, *Los Cinco Héroes*, or the case of Elián González. Artists such as *El Sexto* point out this saturation of U.S. culture within Cuban nationalism, again, calling himself *El Sexto*, as in the sixth hero, one that was always in Cuba, also touching on the use of the same national heroes to constantly represent Cuba. If it is not José Martí, Che Guevara, or Fidel Castro, it’s the Cinco Héroes. Where do the rest of the Cuban population get to exist? The focus on such a limited and generally white portion of the population is not representative of all of Cuba. The *vallas* do not racially represent the full nation of Cuba, where the country is Afro-descendent to a significant degree. The *vallas* almost all show predominantly white people or show

\(^{48}\) Mercer.
a white washing of the black people shown. In 1962, Fidel announced the end of racism and while black culture is embraced (more than the U.S.) and defines much of Cuban culture, it is still within the dominant white official context, as seen through the *vallas*.

*The walls speak*

The walls have been one of the media through which the Cuban government has been transmitting and reproducing its ideologies since the start of the Revolution. Whether intentional or not, artists such as Yulier, Fabian, and The Happy Zombie, along with 5Star, Luis Casas, and Sam33 have been co-opting this use of public space for their own empowerment and the empowerment of others, creating subversive spaces of alternative realities within the Revolution to exist and be seen. Similar to the official wall art and *vallas*, Yulier, Fabian, and The Happy Zombie and use repeated yet individually unique images, that they paint all over the city.

Between the revolutionary “graffiti,” one notices the anguished faces of Yulier’s souls that seem to line every other street in the greater Habana area. In locations that appear particularly overlooked, these paintings almost always depict said suffering faces, and a hand or outstretched arm. The position of the hand reaching out, and the strong and yearning eye contact that the souls make with a non-depicted viewer, suggests a begging or desire for something more. Amidst what is usually a falling apart wall, overlooked corner or a street, these figures, normally painted in black and white, occasionally featuring a red background suggest a suffering and an arm asking for help. Yulier’s art particularly brings up the question of audience.
Happy Zombie uses color and shapes beyond the color, happiness and life it gives to a specifically “sad” area, his work asks us to wake up. The bubbly nature of other work and the big smiling faces celebrate happiness. The Happy Zombie shares his quirks and liveliness around the city, engaging those who will engage with him.

Fabian López is one of the younger artists but whose work is prolific. Fabian works with the same character, who always appears wearing a ski-mask with downward slanting eyes that appear half sad, half unimpressed. His pieces are often paired with a question mark by the head, a tag that reads $2+2=5$ and the occasional egg. According to Fabian, it is everyone behind the mask, and the question mark reminds us that there are always questions, there is always a why, there is always a necessity. $2+2=5$ tells us that nothing is perfect in life or society and that things get in the way or happen unexpectedly, and that is life. Fabian’s masked figures are constantly asking us why and reminding us that nothing makes sense. Similar to Yulier’s, Fabian’s personalities question the social setting, asking us why this is happening, why this social situation, what is really going on? The anonymity of Fabian’s characters reminds us of *El Sexto* and the idea that both of these individuals could be any Cuban. In the image to the right, Fabians man holds an elegua, an Orisha deity in Santeria, a popular religion in Cuba. Located next to Callejon de Hamel, a street full of paintings, murals, objects, and sculptures in dedication to Afro-Cuban religions. The speech bubble that reads 5 CUC points to the hard cash in Cuba, the U.S. dollar convertible. The mural alludes to the selling of Afro-
Cuban religions and identity in the tourist industry, allowing Cubans to make hard money in their split economy. Locating the painting right next to Callejon de Hamel points out this relationship quietly in a broken, fading corner.

All artists have talked about being stopped by the police and most have experienced having a painting painted over. In expressing themselves, these artists bring visibility to different voices, feelings and characters in the city. The street art creates imaginaries where multiple identities within the state exist before they get erased and painted over. These artists create subversive spaces in their minds and by painting the walls create subversive spaces for the public. They remind others that you can think differently and allow for an alternative reflection for what often seems like a contradicting state.

These urban art pieces help shape and inform the social sphere, reflecting different aspects of what is happening in Cuba. Yulier’s souls show an anguish and a sadness and, with the arm stretched out, a begging. Fabian is asking questions, calling out the food shortages, and by putting the question mark, or with the position of the hands, is inherently asking for a response as well. The Happy Zombie is trying to bring life to the community, and to build community through the works themselves and how people respond, wanting him to paint on their walls. Their works create a tension between symbols of nationalism of the state and the competing alternate identities portrayed in their figures seen throughout the city. On the often crumbling walls of the city, places that reflect obvious state neglecting, Cuban youth are designing the Cuba they want to see. In this way, they are taking action into their own hands and engaging with a state that they may or may not feel speaks for them.

The difference between the state-sanctioned works and the popular work is that propaganda cannot have multiple interpretations. It needs to have one direct message and thus
requires specific codification and use of symbols. While replicated, works like those of Yulier, The Happy Zombie, and Fabian, are still singular creations, allowing for multiple interpretations and for one to bring one's own experiences and emotions to the work. At the same time, the replication of their works makes their messages more and more visible and accessible. Whether intentional or not, their works give voice to the people living the unspoken realities of the Cuban population that may not always get heard within the official discourse.

Artists like Yulier, the Happy Zombie, and Fabian are creating alternative notion of the Cuban reality outside of official channels. In a country with a single party system, these artists allow for multiplicity and complexity of the Cuban identity, something that officially has not been allowed for close to over 60 years. These artists are creating alternative notions of Cuban identity, using the streets to express their Cuban imaginary. They point out realities and experiences of the Cuban people and through their art, take back the city as of the people, and not of the state. In this way, the street art reflects the dialectical relationship between the government and the people as the youth practice liberty and freedom in response to state limitations.

That being said, the artists still exist within the Cuban state and as a result, must navigate the complicated economy and legalities imposed by the state. Most street artists produce more formal work to sell to tourist or generally non-Cuban audience (who tend to have more hard dollars). Artists like the Happy Zombie describe their work as colorful, but many artists note that materials are expensive and hard to come by. Artists often rely on outside visitors to bring things like spray cans which are technically illegal to bring in planes. That being said, street artists from all over the world come to Cuba to visit or paint in Cuba.

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In my time in Cuba in 2018, I was introduced to three young street artists from Los Angeles, California who had come to Cuba bringing various paints and skate gear to give to artists and skaters. They told me that they had gone out painting the other night with some of the street artists including Fabian. They described to me how painting with the Cuban artists was unlike anything they had experienced in the U.S., where they were all hanging out, street artists from the U.S., Cuba, all making art in collaboration. They even had local community members came out and thanked them for their work. While it can be difficult to envision in what direction Cuba will go in the next years, it is in these moments that one can envision an alternative reality, or potential future. One in which youth from the U.S. and Cuba can interact freely, where art is being made, communities being decorated, taken care of, and relationships being build. People often talk about community but forget that relationship and community building takes work and practice.
Part 3 – Skateboarding as an Art

Like street art, skateboarding in Cuba provides a similar yet physical way of imagining and embodying alternative realities and individuality outside of the state. Skateboarding gives skaters complete autonomy over their body and consists of bodily practices different than your average citizen. The sport itself practices non-capitalist relations in a non-competitive and self-expressive and creative sport. The skateboarding community is formed by their collective commitment to the sport and the practices that go along with being a skater. Skateboarding, like street art, allows youth to imagine their bodies in space and use an alternative, American-made and subversive, mode of transportation.

Benefits of skating

Skateboarding is often simplified, regarding skateboarders as lazy, irresponsible, and criminals who lack aspiration. In reality, they are often dedicated, courageous, and creative individuals who enjoy the sport for therapeutic properties. Skating is a physical expression as a sport and an art, requiring full body engagement and sense of awareness. Skating is an avenue for individuals to express their emotions and frustrations in a healthy and enjoyable way, essentially allowing them to find peace through the use of their bodies. The sport builds confidence and self-motivation, requiring one to constantly set goals and challenge oneself even if failing is inevitable. Skating is non-competitive where skaters learn at their own pace and with their own style, essentially creating the sport as they go. Skaters practice alone and together, encouraging open participation and practicing alternative norms. Skateboarders engage a creative and inventive lens to the world, reading benches and fountains as spots for new tricks and places of community.
Skateboarding began in the U.S. in the 60s and was brought to Cuba by the Russian. Some kids got boards from family members or friends who were able to bring them back from other countries, and other kids made their own boards out of wood and wheels from rollerblades. Today, skating in Cuba looks different than in does in the U.S. There are no skate shops in Cuba and skaters rely entirely on skate gear brought in from outside the country through friends, family, or extrajeros (foreigners). There are not many skate parks in Cuba, as opposed to the U.S. where one can likely find at least one park in every major city.

The other part of skating is being aware of your body in space. Skaters practice a keen way of seeing and experiencing the city. On a basic level one becomes familiar with the ground and the physically layout of the city in a new intimate way. One notices different flooring, how skating on sidewalk feels different than the street, how one zone feels versus another, and which parts feel/work best for skating. Different textures and physical designs/urban layouts work for different purposes. In the specific context of Cuba, this seeing becomes political, allowing skaters to notice, where are the parts of the city that are more taken care of and how the streets reflect the government’s attention and relationship to its citizens. Streets with cracks, ruptures that now function as ramps, and poles and trash in the streets become obstacles and the skate part in the city, but also reflect places and moments of government neglect. Social reaction also tells skaters different locations they can or cannot skate in, but similarly, reflect different locations and zones that are patrolled or more protected. Places where skaters are more openly told they cannot skate, ticketed or are even threatened imprisonment both reflect government official displays of authority. Noticing where these types of interactions occur, and with whom further shows selective policing and the policing of specific or favorable zones. One such place is Paseo
Bueno 37
del Prado, that while being one of the biggest, most common skate spots, one in which friends and children come to skate every day, is often randomly used for ticketing by the police.

Skaters are often harassed by the police and can be ticketed for skating or even leaning their boards on something as simple as a lamppost. In 2018 when I asked two police officers who were ticketing kids skating on Paseo del Prado if it was illegal to skate, they told me “No es illegal, pero no se permite,” (“It is not illegal, but it is not allowed”). Through looking at the social life of skating and skateboards in Cuba, one is able to see, “glimpses of the larger processes of surveillance and simulation by which public space, both physical and cultural, is produced.” The policing and criminalization of skateboarding, like street art, reveals state insecurities and fears. The state polices skateboarders exerting control as they choose, making skating a political act. Foucault state that,

government not only has to deal with a territory, with a domain, and with its subjects, but that it also has to deal with a complex and independent reality that has its own laws and mechanisms of reaction, its regulations as well as its possibilities of disturbance. This new reality is society. From the moment that one is to manipulate society, one cannot consider it completely penetrable by police.

Skateboarding, like street art, reflects a reflective part of society. The relationship between the police and the people construct society. Skating makes up an independent reality in which people can be free, mentally and physically. This relationship between skaters and the police gets amplified given the local context where many police officers are Cubans from outside of the city. There is said to be an unequal relationship where people from outside Havana can resent city kids and use their new positions to assert their authority. It is also important to note that Paseo del Prado is one of the biggest, most central streets in Havana, sitting right next to Havana Vieja and el Parque Central the biggest tourist central in the city next to the Capitolio and many of the expensive hotels that strictly serve tourists.
Skate Networks

Through looking at skateboarders and their networks in Cuba one is able to see the complex ways in which Cuban skaters navigate being a skater in Cuba. Similar to being a street artist, the state becomes involved in the acquisition of materials, making Cubans largely reliant on foreigners to bring in supplies. Street artists and skaters are seen as threats to the state, subverting traditional definitions of what it means to be Cuban. Moreover, both groups overlap, some street artists being skaters and vice versa, both co opting and reimagining the city streets engaging with the city on their own terms.

Skating often involves more than just skating. Skating pastimes often include listening to music, filming/shooting skate tricks, making skate videos, and often an individualized style and decorated board. While one can wear anything while skating, clothing preferences usually lean towards comfortable, and moveable. One needs to be able to wear clothing that one can move in and even more preferable, clothing that will not break and withstand falls, scrapes, and the rubbing of the grip tape against one’s pants. One can expect to get dirty, smudges, and rips. What may not be 100% clear from the outside, is that skating is a full body sport that can get one sweating from the moment they get on the board and start pushing. Especially once one has started to move, attempts tricks, and falls, one is almost inevitable going to get their hands, clothes, and body dirty.

Something that becomes particularly important, especially in the context of Cuba, are the shoes. Skaters are known for going through shoes very quickly, especially active skaters. While one can wear any shoe to skate, skate shoes are particularly made to help you skate better. Skate shoes such as Vans are generally made flat, have more grip, and are generally wider to help hold on to the board better. Someone who is skates actively often can go through a pair of sneakers
quickly, ripping the shoes from tricks and the board’s griptape. In Cuba, it is not uncommon to see kids skating with shoes full of holes or half falling apart.

Skaters in Cuba rely entirely on external support to bring materials to allow the skate community to exist and grow. U.S. based organizations like Cuba Skate and Amigo Skate work to provide material and financial support to Cuban skaters, helping provide skate gear and materials to build Havana’s skate park and sustain skating among the community. Cuba Skate does, bringing down bags of shoes, socks and assorted skate related clothing from brands or skate shops that donate goods. Volunteers and visitors bring materials for skaters to skate and even build their own boards and parks. Cuba Skate and Amigo Skate are formal organization that support skating in Cuba, both skaters and street artists must learn to navigate the scarcity and limitations of their practices imposed by the state. These relationships become crucial and reflect the current state and economy in Cuba.

Each skater expresses different styles of skating and dressing, reflecting the multiplicity and diversity of identities held by Cubans. Skating and street art both use the city as their stage as they reimagine space in their own ways while navigating the complex politics of being Cuban in Cuba. As such, one can see many overlaps between skating and painting and many of Havana’s street artists have come to paint on the self-built skate park at Ciudad Libertad. Artists like Fabian, the Happy Zombie, Luis Casas, and Sam33 all have work on the walls at the skate park, Fabian himself being one of
the top skater is Havana. In some ways, this skate park becomes the culmination of this imaginary, becoming a space made by skaters and street artists for skaters and street artists, allowing youth to create, and exist on their own terms. In one street art collaboration with Fabian at the skate park as seen on the image on the top right, he uses street art to discuss the politics of skating saying, *La patineta no es un crimen* (the skateboard is not a crime). Ironically, as seen in the photo below taken in 2018, the mural was painted over, reflecting the exact policing and criminalization of the sport and the art.
Conclusion

In this paper I look at visual communication between the Cuban people and the Cuban government as it takes place in the streets of Havana, Cuba. In this context, producing street art and skating become political given government response, highlighting the unequal and frustrating relationship many Cubans engage with. Through this paper, I hope to have highlighted various relationships, and made clear the various imaginaries: the government, the Cuban citizens/youth, and the tourist imaginary. Cuba appears to be in contradiction. Their communist government does not match with its growing tourist economy. In fact, the capitalist nature of the tourist economy contradicts one of the pillars of the original Revolution. The tension between the past and the reality has real effects. The government is still grappling with seeing itself as a revolutionary regime while trying to balance the needs of a tired population and complex economy. The Cuban youth, with frustrated and in some cases lacking hope in the government, exert their agency in how they navigate the complicated and restricted context they live in. The city and the state have an antagonistic relationship with street artists and particularly street artists and skaters whose markets generally rely on U.S./Western capitalism, Cuba’s historic enemy. Since the beginning of the Revolution Cuba had a strong sense of communication through the visual, using creative visual design in poster and street art from the government.

Today, we see a counter cultural capitalism where street artists and skaters maneuver the state and create tenuous alliances with non-profits and tourists who can help them in ways they cannot on their own. The conditions of street artists and skaters today shows in a lot of ways that times in the Revolution have changed, and there are more certain freedoms than before. That being said, street art and skateboarding reveal new relationships between the state and the people. In Cuba,
Because the state might act at any time… all works of art have a political meaning—by acting or failing to act, the government indicates that it does or does not think a particular work politically important or dangerous. Even work whose maker had no political intent acquires political meaning in the light of government actions.\textsuperscript{50}

Street art and skating become political arts and threats to the state because the state responds to them as threats. The harsher states respond, the more they create dissident populations who oppose the government’s chosen action. The action, reaction cycle is what creates society and constructs history. By painting and skating in the streets, young Cubans embody and practice future building. In creating alternative reflections of itself, the Cuban society physically manifests its own future, but through the actions of individuals. Street art and skateboarding practice specific skills and values. In Cuba, street artists often collaborate with each other and other visiting artists from all over the world. Street artists and skaters blur, some people being both and both groups being connected given Cuba’s smaller size. These youth practice imaging daily, and exert their agency through street art, graffiti, and skateboarding. Foucault reminds us that, “Liberty is a practice”\textsuperscript{51} and these youth practice free minds and expressive possibilities.

\textsuperscript{50} Howard Saul Becker, \textit{Art Worlds}. (Berkeley, California, 2012), 185.
\textsuperscript{51} Michel Foucault, \textit{Power}, (1997), 354.
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