

“Cunning is necessary to spread the truth.” Berthold Brecht¹

Curator’s Notes on Wilfredo Prieto’s *Mute*

Ingrid Mayrhofer

In September 2005, Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto visited Hamilton to conduct a site visit in preparation for his installation at the McMaster Museum of Art. Recent site-specific projects by the artist in Cuba, Holland, and Spain had responded to what he perceived as contrasts and contradictions in a given place. By removing expected functions from everyday ordinary objects or taking them out of their usual place, the artist initiates a dialectical process. Prieto insists on quick absorption and slow release of the sensory impression that his work provokes. Aspects of symbolic loss or systemic dysfunction evolve over time as the viewer contemplates the piece. Prieto has received much critical acclaim for his art, which is often described as minimalist, and which, in spite of his youthful and international practice, is considered most relevant to the “present-day life and affairs of his country.”²

Imre Szeman’s essay *Global Silences: On Wilfredo Prieto’s Mute*³ locates Prieto’s practice in the globalized political territory, where “the local and global are today folded into one another...”, and where Cuba represents an allegorical bump in the path of neo-liberalism. The synecdochical relationship between the island and global economic politics presents circumstances under which an action can be minimalist and baroque at the same time. Prieto’s *Mucho Ruido Pocas Nueces* reflected precisely on that paradox of excess output for limited return — much ado about nothing.⁴ In light of the scarcity of gasoline in Cuba, and the global fresh water crisis, Prieto’s installation of two gigantic machines in the street outside the prestigious Galería Habana in 2003 set an extravagant stage: a tank released a drop of water every hour, while a generator fed a single 60-watt light bulb. Both were employed to grow a tiny plant inside the otherwise empty gallery.

Fascinated by Prieto’s installations *Apolítico* and *Avalanche* at the 2003 Bienal de La Habana, I invited the artist to search for collectibles, to modify or reclassify, and ultimately, to arrange them in the McMaster Museum of Art’s contemporary Sherman Gallery. Perhaps his array of objects would lead to a subversion of curio items and impressions gathered by Canadian tourists in Cuba, and at the same time reflect on the history of obsession with collecting spoils from faraway lands.

Since receiving a major donation from Hamilton businessman Herman Levy in the 1980s, MMA holds one of the most significant collections of European art in southern Ontario. Prieto expressed his awe of the way in which the museum cares for the art in its vaults: “... the sobriety and the concentration of so many works in such a small space, the silence and the respect there, and, above all, the security that practically equals that of a bank.”⁵

On his first visit to North America, Prieto sensed a wealth of past splendor frozen beneath the surface of the post-industrial landscape, scenery that he perceived as “gigantic façade-structures with zero productivity.” The contrast between the remnant beauty of Hamilton’s downtown in its inexplicable state of abandon, surrounded by ugly suburban sprawl — in diametrical opposition to the “creative city” — provided the social framework and pictorial tension for the artist’s intervention. Unlike Cuba’s charmingly decayed colonial baroque façade, which attracts much-needed foreign currency, Hamilton’s post-industrial gothic does nothing to reverse the economic downturn that followed the loss of manufacturing jobs in the 1970s.

Mexican critic/curator Cuauhtémoc Medina, who visited Prieto’s installation at MMA in February 2006, also found traces of Hamilton’s glory in its impressive architecture. Driving past our “brownfields” in the North End, Medina observed how simulations of redemption — numerous bingo halls, adult entertainment, and evangelical temples — widened the abyss of loss. Unlike the hyper-reality of façades such as Las Vegas, these empty

storefronts and factory remnants suggest an inversion of false hope. Prieto's challenge here was to visually represent the effect of loss, deception, and disillusionment, and to pursue his own goal of creating an immediate sensory impact to secure lasting dialogue with his work. Medina's essay, "Neither In the Slime of the Earth Nor in the Purity of Heaven,"⁶ begins with a caution on confusing our expectations with reality. Disappointment, he suggests, is inherent to preconceptions, and therefore, the viewer's reward lies in seeking the unexpected.

Contrary to my own expectations — a collection of pretty or not-so-pretty things to place in the museum as he had done for previous installations — Prieto picked up a hidden image in Hamilton, one that explores the potential behind the boarded-up storefronts. He visited scrap yards and brownfields, subdivisions and box stores. He spent half a day at the Camco demolition site on Longwood Avenue,⁷ a plant that had once been the pride of North American appliance manufacturing and which is now destined for reincarnation as a state-of-the-art research facility, the university's "McMaster Innovation Park." Prieto remarked at the time that in Cuba it would be most unlikely for such a perfectly intact building to be demolished in the name of progress: "...the abandoned industrial sites in Hamilton left a strong afterimage, for example, that of an inverse bridge between development and underdevelopment."⁸ After his first visit, Prieto returned to Cuba with impressions that shaped, as he says, the "idea" of an image, and retained an even deeper sense of inverted values.

The idea that congealed in situ four months later would be impossible to represent or read on a surface. With *Mute*, Prieto realized his artistic mission to "see the piece meld into the medium." Working with light and space, the white cube of the gallery transformed into a black box, the piece would neither be framed by corners nor defined by a horizon. Up above, Prieto installed a rig of disco lights — strobes, beacons, vacillating/oscillating⁹ spinners, black light, and a disco ball — mimicking celestial bodies, constellations in an accelerated, perpetually mobile, yet silent universe. Light became image, not as reflection, nor to simulate volume, but as allegory of space and time on a collision course.

In his interview with art historian Direlia Lazo¹⁰, Prieto states that *Mute* realizes the "idea of the image." As manifest idea, the image of *Mute* exists without mediation, and thereby escapes commodification. An earlier piece by the artist, titled *1 Million \$*, presents an even more directly applied critique of the speculative market value of an art work: the artist specifies that the object (a single one-dollar bill reflected in endless images on the four sides of its container) shall always maintain its title price tag, not to fluctuate for insurance purposes or resale. While *1 Million \$*'s defiance of free trade renders it absolutely impossible as merchandise, and severely limits its potential for exhibition in public galleries, it remains as an object — a tangible dollar bill contained in a mirror box, safe in the artist's own collection.

In its ephemeral image/action, *Mute* takes a sharp turn on market values. It mimics not an object of fetish, but an intangible condition. The soundless, mute disco image, void of its expected function as a medium of entertainment, refutes any suggestion of mindless escapism. Instead, it takes on the opposite meaning as a symbol of the human experience, of a moment of truth in the instant of recognition. It is in that momentary spatial anomaly, "the instant of a gap between presumption and disappointment"¹¹ that *Mute* reveals the true power of illusion. Upon seeing the disco lights in action, we expect music, and not just any music, but the specific sounds that are mediated by the cultural industry. Inherent in our expectation from the visual teaser is the commodity of entertainment. Without its fetish companion, the disco rig becomes a singularity, a trope of loss in human experience.

Imre Szeman poses the inevitable question: What is mute here? What is contained in the entropic curtain of giddying light? Szeman's essay opens a connection between the accelerated changes in our globalized present and the momentary heuristic space between "object and action." Similar to the lack of sound in *Mute*, the elimination of colour in the flags of Prieto's *Apolítico* also played on systemic dysfunctions, and hinted at the retention of lost potential. In *Ouroboros, Cayendo Hacia Arriba*¹² (Falling Upward) a piece that Prieto created for Madrid Abierto following his project at MMA, he pushed the sensory tension even further, onto a physical

entity. A construction crane was rigged to pull itself up, like the mythical serpent biting its tail, or the fibbing Baron Münchhausen. The resulting image is one of a vicious circle of loss — loss of purpose, loss of power, loss of autonomy — caused by systemic inversion, and concluding in the empty chaos of false expectations.

Prieto's own exploration of the idea of an image, the appearance and the reality of things, has led him away from the production of or even intervention with objects, reaching the state of a revelation in *Mute*. Prieto, Medina, and Szeman all link our contemporary condition to the experience of loss of reality, and the global illusion that has replaced it. Medina's conclusion on *Mute*'s impact is in how the piece subverts the typical self-referential space of a museum, by allowing for a "... raw simple experience [that] has become an unattainable luxury. It is only through the constant stimulation of our senses that the world does not crumble."¹³ In an artificially created space filled with the absence of sound, "...art is one such matter that accentuates its own symbolism."¹⁴

-30-

Ingrid Mayrhofer (BFA, MA, York University), was Assistant Curator at the McMaster Museum of Art from 2003 to 2006. Her curatorial focus is on international exchanges with artists who engage the public in meaningful social and artistic dialogue. As Programme Director at A Space in Toronto, Mayrhofer initiated exchanges between artists from Ontario, Chile, Quebec and Serbia. A member of the Red Tree artists' collective since 1989, she is active in labour and community art practice.

(Endnotes)

1 Berthold Brecht, 1935, "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties," quoted in Patricia Bickers, *Oh Politics Schmoltics! Art in the Postmodern Age*, Third Text, Volume 16, Number 4/December 2002.

2 As Gerardo Mosquera, critic and co-curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York stated in the media release to Prieto's exhibition *Speech*, at Amsterdam's Galerie Martin van Zomeren in 2004, "Wilfredo Prieto is one of the most talented artists of the last crop sprung up in Cuba, besides he is a paradigm of the new ways of visual arts on the island. He is characterized by his net, simple, highly impacting, and meaningfully rich ideas. His work almost always comes out from the context, but it unchains senses that go beyond, opening themselves into a wide-scope perspective. After the representational and symbolic redundancy that has threatened Cuban art with the creation of stereotypes, Wilfredo personifies the most straightforward minimalist and international orientation of the new artists. And among them, he is the one that most accurately refers to the present-day life and affairs of his country."

3 Imre Szeman, catalogue essay.

4 Literally, "a lot of noise for a few nuts." The Dutch version, *Veel Geschreeuw en Wenig Wol*, was reviewed by Héctor Antón Castillo www.lajiribilla.cubaweb.cu/2003/n102_04/mirada.html, who observes that "beyond being a satire of the paradoxes of consumerism, what is evident right away is the counterpoint between essence and appearance, which generates contrasts between form and content, banality and profundity, big and small, fullness and void."

5 Wilfredo Prieto, interview with Direlia Lazo.

6 Cuauhtémoc Medina, catalogue essay.

7 We are most grateful to Murray Demolition and especially to Gabriel Pappel for allowing the artist on site to observe the fall of the old plant.

- 8 Wilfredo Prieto, interview with Direlia Lazo.
- 9 A technical challenge, since the lights were designed to move in response to sound waves. This was solved thanks to the suggestion of Hamilton's own Dr. Disc, who provided tiny headphones for the apparatus.
- 10 Wilfredo Prieto, interview with Direlia Lazo.
- 11 Ibid/
- 12 www.madridabierto.com/eng/2006/wilfredo_prieto.html
- 13 Cuauhtémoc Medina, catalogue essay.
- 14 Wilfredo Prieto, interview with Direlia Lazo.



Installation view, photo: Ingrid Mayrhofer