

THE 2ND CUBA CRISIS TRIPPIN' IN HAVANA

CUBA IS A LITTLE CROCODILE-SHAPED ISLAND in the Caribbean Sea. Trapped between Florida and Jamaica, the Bahamas and Haiti, the island offers rum, cigars and a whole lot of love on top of an azure-blue sea and ample sunshine. But Cuba also stands for slavery, racism, revolution and bloody battles. Despite being such a small part of the world, Cuba has been through more than its fair share of misery and is certainly going to see some more. Guantanamo Bay and an aged dictator, a psychotic climate and a Big Brother state that controls and restricts its people in spite of defunct technology and infrastructure – Cuba stands for all of the above. If you go to Venezuela you find Burger King and McDonald's on every

street corner and everyone's on crack. In Cuba, there are no drugs or advertisements, apart from the omnipresent hand-painted propaganda posters celebrating the revolution and its leaders. Propaganda and censorship determine every day. Free-thinkers, like artists for example, have it particularly hard. For them, the image of the boat has become a symbol of freedom, since there are no boats in Cuba. Because of the trade embargo against Cuba all products and commodities are rare. Even in the capital Havana it's difficult for a painter to buy a simple brush.

The following pages take a look at Cuba from different angles. You will find out about the police action against a contra-revolutionary pirate TV station, how the first graffiti came to Cuba, and how Cuba is hosting the largest art biennial of the Caribbean. ...



JUST DO IT
¡ADELANTE!

TENEMOS Y TENDREMOS
SOCIALISMO
TU EJEMPLO
VIVE
TUS IDEAS

KILL THE IDIOTS

¡CUBA SÍ!

¡TODOS A LA MARCHA!

LIBERTAD O MUERTE

REVOLUCIÓN
AND IMPROVED



OS GEMEOS & NINA

»I have never before seen a little girl just coming up and kissing a character affectionately on the mouth. What's the use of being represented in the most important museums? Something like this is makes the work much more worthwhile.« WON ABC

ANARANJADO
PATATA ANORMAL
CRIATURA BY 32AK

BRINGING AEROSOL ART TO A COUNTRY WITHOUT PAINT graffiti arrives in cuba

GRAFFITI IS FOUND EVERYWHERE. Many know this phenomenon from vacations. Basically all that's required are a few spray cans from the nearest home improvement store and off you go. There's graffiti in Jamaica, Cambodia, China, Saudi-Arabia, Israel, New Zealand, everywhere. Sport, music and the arts are connecting the world into one huge culture. But what happens if a trade embargo is stringently enforced and a country is censored as if there's no tomorrow? When even cheap household colours aren't available, not to mention any spray cans for vandals or artists. Of course there are a few rare fake sneakers from China and even some Reggaton MCS, but that's about the greatest impact the hiphop movement has had so far. Stone from Berlin needed a full three months to smuggle MTN spraycans declared as "art information from Southern Spain" through the trade embargo. While tourists drink and party in their hotels, on beaches and the fresh air, a few sprayers from all around the world are gathered in an apartment in Havana. Their mission: to bring graffiti to Cuba. Their names: Stone and Neon from Berlin, Won and 32AK from Munich, Jana Joana, Nina, Vitche and Os Gemeos from Sao Paulo. A colourful team and with a lot of sketches and ideas among their luggage.

»Passers-by stopped to say thank you for bringing colour into their dull quarter. The people in Cuba don't even have paint for their house numbers.«
32AK

Tagging trains is impossible in Cuba and also quite unwise. The people here have so few things that armed security personnel guards every single car. So all that's left for sprayers are walls. Now this is Cuba, too: simply ask and start spraying. A graffiti performance usually causes a lot of furore and turbulence. Follow up jobs are the order of the day - everyone wants their house painted. But careful! Customs want to see every can and every used up bit of material when you leave the island again - and it's rare to see the Cuban authorities in a good mood..

The result of the gang's stay in Havana was a whole bunch of wall projects. Among the large collaborative paintings that catch the eye and small, fast-style with nice characters to brighten up dark streets and alleys. Graffiti is a wild-style thing, but in Havana, everybody in the team realised once again that it's a public art and therefore all about communicating with people. New topics for paintings came up through this experience and it opened up a new point of view: the wall is only the canvas, the medium is the graffiti.



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RAY, WON, 32AK, NEON & VITCHE



NINA

-20- RGD



GUANTANAMO ZOMBIE



-21- RGD



DYNAMICS OF URBAN CULTURE

The Caribbean art biennial is a large and unusual event. About 90 artists from all over the world present their work in every imaginable and unimaginable category. In this place professional art and Third World art clash hard. But once again it's left to the eye of the beholder to decide who are the professionals and who are the pretenders. The big German art exhibition "Documenta" usually leaves a much worse after taste. Okay, so many of the works at the Cuban biennial were simple rip-offs, but a lot were of a very high quality.

THE BIENNIAL HAS IT ALL: street art from Chile, photography from Nicaragua, garbage sculptures from Nigeria, and oil paintings from Mozambique. Here they display art like you've never seen before – at least not on the Internet or wherever else where many of us do our research. Many artists come here at their own expense. In Cuba, there are no poor people, but that's because in Cuba, there is no money. The catalogue to the biennial is limited to CVs, and project descriptions are censored or re-written anyway. Many painters arrive with canvasses under their arms only to find out to their surprise that there is no wood to mount their paintings on. Sculptures can only be made from material found in the street. Artists literally fight over garbage here. A highlight of this year's biennial was the "shark taxi" welded together from pieces of submarine steel – the only way to leave the island. The "Ghetto-Pinball" of a Brazilian sculptor, who grew up in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and is now touring the world successfully with his art, was a lot of unexpected fun, too.



CubaBrasil is a German-Brazilian-Cuban co-project, founded by Stone two years ago. Urban art and graffiti are coming together to form an all new category at the biennial in Havana.

WWW.CUBABRASIL.NET



THE BERLINBEAMBOYS mix their propaganda live in their laptops and project them onto walls or other public places. From roof to roof or directly from the back seat of a driving taxi. They often cause an enormous sensation and crowds gather within minutes. Their art isn't just decorating clubs and parties as is the case with the work of most VJs. It is politically subtle and thought-provoking in a very tangible way. The BerlinBeamerBoys usually operate in Europe, but in the course of the great art biennial they ended up in Cuba this time. And of course they didn't say no to giving a few extra performances in the streets of Havana aside from "official" exhibition duties. Their video performance called "Rebelde TV", a street performance concept in the style of a pirate broadcasting station which ended up in a live event at the Malicon, Havana's famous boulevard, where they projected their slogans onto the highest building in town. The performance ended in a sensational police intervention and an arrest for contra-revolutionary acts, leading to hour-long interrogations by intelligence agents and propaganda specialists. RUGGED reporter Ernesto Escopedo talked exclusively to him about their performance and their subsequent arrest.

Who are the BerlinBeamBoys?

We are Dark Fader and Ray Beams (Christoph C. Petersen und Torge Peters). We've been working together as BeamBoys since summer 2003.

Okay, give us your angle on the Cuba story!

We projected a six-story high image on a house wall from a neighbouring building. The image was visible over the whole Malecon for three hours as live video – Rebelde TV. The only thing left to do was to gain access to the rooftop of the neighbouring building.

How come this kind of performance causes so much interest in Havana?

The people hardly know the projection technology. Then of course this is a propaganda instrument – a conveyor of information, with the capability to be seen by many. This is dangerous everywhere where somebody holds the monopoly on information. Something that became clear when we saw the police cars from the roof. There was no back exit. We would have had to have flee over the rooftops but we also had to carry our equipment. Once we

reached street level again, we were arrested straight away. Seven police cars, 14 normal policemen and even two in civilian clothing. BeamBoys and equipment were escorted to the police station. There, we were separated and had to wait. During that time, Ray Beams managed to delete or change the critical files from our computers.

Why were you arrested and who interrogated you?

We were arrested for spreading contra-revolutionary propaganda. Present were a high ranking police

officer and some kind of "Stasi" in a nice uniform. He asked us questions in a polite but also very serious manner. They also inquired about our motifs and why exactly we worked with Cuban slogans. That made us think a bit about our exact answers... Our stay took maybe two hours. We apparently managed to convince the gentlemen in the course of the discussion that being European artists we respect the Cuban culture and government and in no way had any contra-revolutionary intentions.

Who do you think learned more from this, Cuba or you?
Well, we value the freedom of speech. It's a great commodity.

Do you think this kind of propaganda art only works in Big Brother states like Cuba or would it work in Europe too?

Well, over here, you certainly require a much larger calibre, but you can get arrested too. But luckily not just because of the message you are conveying. ■

WWW.BERLINBEAMBOYS.COM.