Humor and Narrative in Contemporary Cuban Visual Art
A Semiotic and Cultural Analysis of Selected works by Abel Barroso, Lázaro Saavedra, Fernando Rodríguez, and Sandra Ramos

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Introduction

Visual humor and narrative are two interesting facets of Cuban culture and areas of the Cuban experience that remain under the proverbial radar. As such they are little appreciated. Instead, much discussion about Cuba revolves around its political and socioeconomic realities, funneled through traditional media for disseminating these topics such as political reports, journalistic documentaries, statistical databases, and international commentaries. A quick search of “Cuba news” online will result in news about Guantanamo Bay or the U.S. embargo and related travel restrictions. Yet, a careful analysis of Cuban visual art, together with its humorous and narrative qualities, adds a compelling layer in the understanding of contemporary Cuban society.

Looking at popular culture, at how humor and narrative work in daily Cuban life, and at visual art as parts of a cultural ecosystem that inform and mold Cuban society is important because as Chair of North American studies at Freie Universität Berlin, Winfried Fluck has expressed, these elements are “powerful socializing agents” that come through in all types of media from television to sculpture. Additionally, the aesthetic experience associated with looking at visual art requires a different type of interaction. The type of interaction that unfolds when reading a data report on country statistics written in a language not spoken in the country—for instance country reports on Cuba written in English by institutions in the United States—is different from the aesthetic experience of observing visual art. Before such data reports, the individual is not necessarily active unless he or she is invested with the task of analyzing the data for professional or academic purposes. The general public will largely remain inactive before such a text. To refer to Fluck once again, “Fiction and art allow us to become actors and aesthetic experience is another word for the fact that we have been successful in linking first and second narrative, cultural narrative and
individual narrative” (Fluck 241).

Looking at Internet Café Tercer Mundo, 2000 (Abel Barroso), El Sagrado Corazon, 1995 (Lázaro Saavedra), En la Bodeguita del Medio from De la serie Sueño Nupcial, 1994 (Fernando Rodríguez), and Por mas que corra no llego, 2003 and Quizas Deba Partirme en dos, 1993 (both by Sandra Ramos), a conversation about Cuban culture will arise. Inspired by the recent changes in travel restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba, I felt that it would useful and interesting to address visual humor and narrative in contemporary Cuban visual art as part of the larger conservation about Cuba that has the potential of expanding the picture of the island; particularly for American citizens, who may want to visit the island as part of a travel group or may participate more frequently in study abroad programs taking place in Cuba. Given the relationship between the countries, it is likely Americans have only been exposed to a very narrow and prefabricated view of Cuba.

My interactions with the selected artworks were a result of previous undergraduate studies of Cuban and Caribbean Art at Florida International University, where under Dr. Juan Martinez, our class discussed important as well as interesting themes, topics, explorations, and issues in Cuban culture and artistic practice. It was then that I was introduced to critics Geraldo Mosquera and Rachel Weiss. I focused specifically on contemporary art and have since my undergraduate studies engaged the works of Abel Barroso, Lázaro Saavedra, Fernando Rodríguez, and Sandra Ramos through analytical dialogue and by following their careers. Most recently, I saw an exhibition of Abel Barroso earlier this year in January, in Miami, FL at the Pan-American Art Gallery in Wynwood. His emblematic wooden works were on display as part of the exhibition titled, “Un país, una ilusión (A Country, an Illusion)”. Barroso addressed country borders, issues of migration in the contemporary context, and travel.

I will use semiotics to frame the analysis as an example of one way of thinking about how signs and symbols in the selected artwork are humorous and and/or form a narrative. Semiotics encourages inquiry into what is doing the
signifying, how it is doing so, and into analyzing the process of linking signs with meanings, in order to ultimately gain understanding. Additionally, semiotics is interdisciplinary and draws from other realms, such as cultural studies, to orient a viewer’s ideas and thoughts. By accessing the works in these ways—through signs and culture—a broader and richer understanding of art creation in Cuba will be possible and an appreciation of the signs symbolizing humor and narrative will emerge. The selected works were chosen because they depict well-known symbols in Cuban culture in humorous ways as well as are part of a larger narrative about the island. The symbols include religious and national icons, tropical motifs, and materials that are readily available in Cuba.

*Internet Café Tercer Mundo* (Third World Internet Café) 2000 by Barroso is an installation piece—exhibited most notably in the Seventh Bienal de la Habana (Havana Biennial)—comprised of wooden objects presented under the label *Mango Tec*. The works include wooden computers and mobile phones exhibited together in a popular Cuban restaurant in the capital. *El Sagrado Corazon* (The Sacred Heart), 1995 by Saavedra is his rendition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ—the popular religious devotional image known to most of the world’s one billion Catholics, and others, created from low-grade materials. *En la Bodeguita del Medio* from *De la serie Sueño Nupcial* (Nuptial Dream series: In the café La Bodeguita del Medio), 1994 by Rodriguez is one panel of five carved-wood pieces that together form a narrative that deals with dreams, Fidel Castro, and the Virgin Mary in what stylistically looks like the work of a novice artist. The last two pieces are both by Sandra Ramos—*Por mas que corra no llego* (No Matter How Much I Run, I Can't Arrive), 2003 and *Quizas Deba Partirme en dos* (Perhaps I should split in two), 1993. In *Por mas que corra*, Ramos appears as the head of a snail and in *Quizas Deba Partirme en dos* she presents herself as the young, fairytale-like girl in the middle of the work. Both are seemingly playful, yet nostalgic pieces. These descriptions serve as a brief introduction to the analyses that follow.

As mentioned earlier, the recent changes and revisions to travel from the
U.S. to Cuba and the popularity of attempting to visit the island, together with my previous studies in Cuban art and interactions with these artists, formed my motivations for focusing on these works. Not only can these works be analyzed and interpreted with the typical art historical terminology and as they appear in exhibitions, art fairs, museums and galleries, but they also have a role in serving to promote a broader understanding of art’s place in the classroom setting. In an educational environment, these works can foster an appreciation for visual culture by virtue of their roles as ‘socializing agents,’ as dynamic objects, outside of the museum, where they are traditionally isolate objects, selected and taken out of contemporary society. In other words, through these pieces it is not only an understanding or appreciation for the discipline of art history that can materialize, but also the appreciation for particular characteristics of a culture such as humor and narrative.

To enhance the experience of looking at the works in this way, I decided to apply the semiotic framework. I had initially dealt with semiotics as an analytical tool in undergraduate philosophy coursework, and revisited it under the tutelage of Dr. Eero Tarasti in my studies at the University of Helsinki. With humor, I am interested in the wit, sharpness, and cleverness that must be exhibited and utilized in order to create art that not only makes an impression the first time, but that also is a resource for further understanding other cultural components. By promoting a deeper or more varied understanding, narratives become more relevant and current. The selected works have had an impact on how I assign meanings, create insights, and form new ideas.

**Artworks as Collections of Signs: An Introduction to the Semiotic Perspective**

The artworks act as a collection of ‘signs.’ A sign, according to C.S. Peirce, is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Buchler 99). Peirce's definition resonates with others, which generally define a sign as, "something that stands for something else." In addition to
Peirce's definition of a sign, Mieke Bal's definition of semiotics and suggestion for application of semiotics will be informative approaches in this thesis. Namely, a work of visual art is a collection of signs (together these signs form the larger sign—the artwork), and as a sign it operates within a network of signs that largely depend on decoding and interpreting cultural dynamics for understanding their meanings. This is the process of semiosis because it involves reading signs in order to produce meaning.

For Peirce, semiosis meant, “But by "semiosis" I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant” ('Pragmatism', EP 2:411, 1907, Helsinki Metaphysical Club). Thierry Mortier’s description of American conceptual artist, Joseph Kosuth’s artistic focus characterizes art as signs and the process of understanding or interpreting the artwork as semiosis.

There’s a great focus in Kosuth’s work & writing on the ‘agency of the artist’ where the work of art is dependent upon the art context and the denomination as art by the artist. For me that’s semiosis, pure. A sign dependent on the context and its identification by the user, with the user as its relational agent.

Instead of isolating artworks as objects in a museum or in an art gallery, art will be seen as a product of Cuban society, and can assist in creating a more contextual, holistic, and engaging picture of Cuban culture. Attempting to derive meaning from art is challenging. Armen Marsoobian describes artworks as objects, “whose meaningfulness is rarely denied, but whose referents are the trickiest to pin down” (99).

Humor and narratives are considerably difficult to “pin down” and are also heavily influenced and shaped by culture. Utilizing a semiotic approach when looking at visual art, humor, and narrative is appropriate. Artworks as signs can be engaged and read through the process of semiosis defined above. With the semiotic framework, attention to culture is encouraged to understand how meanings are derived from the collection of signs. In doing so, the audience’s
point of view is incorporated.

Analyzing the selected works, as signs utilizing a semiotic framework, will offer insight potentially ignored by other methodologies. Though the intentions of the artist will not be disregarded (or overlooked)—the analysis will include the ways the artist employs signs to build meaning, and at times in multiple layers, taking advantage of the polysemous nature of visual art—the artist’s role and intentions, the artwork as a collection of signs, and the audience’s interpretation will together form the focus of this paper. Emphasis will be placed on how through semiotics, humor and narrative are symbolized in visual art from the artist’s point of view and from the viewer’s perspective. Semiotics enables the expansion of the dynamics of understanding art by placing emphases on the viewer and on the art as players in the meaning-creation network interacting on the same level as the creator/artist.

To better illuminate how symbols operate, the Peircian model’s distinctions: sign, icon, symbol as well as sign-vehicles—qualisign, legisig, sinsign—will be used. By discussing how viewers interpret visual humor and narratives in painting, sculpture, and installation through recognition of the many ways signs signify and mean things to viewers, a rich system of signs and societal vocabulary will emerge. Essentially, a visual work of art will not be understood simply as a product with inherent value and meaning, dictated solely by the artist, but instead as an active cultural force that influences and shapes Cuban society and the general audience.

The notion of culture in Cuban society is part of a lively conversation about what it means to be Cuban. Thus, a semiotic analysis is suitable for exploring Cuban identity and its ethos, lived and expressed in its varied way of life; intuitions and insights; values and concerns. The semiotic framework applied to works of art in cultures where issues of identity, hybridity, or nationalism are not focal points would not be as interesting or as challenging. Because culture involves a matrix of meaning, woven overtime as way of interpreting and organizing reality, a semiotic approach allows for a decoding of that multifaceted
meaning.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of semiotics and its heavily-oriented cultural focuses, I will attend to and interpret humor and narrative in the visual works of art more closely in this paper with interpretations by Cuban scholars, writers, and the artists as well as other with academics whose texts focus on relevant research topics. Additionally, humor will be defined by Jorge Mañach’s often-referenced form of Cuban humor, *el choteo (the jeer).* Semiotics will assist in seeing the visual manifestations of *choteo* as part of a larger conversation of meaning and identity. *Choteo* is Cuban humor; it adds a cultural dimension to the experience of amusement and laughter. It is not just that something is comedic, but that it is Cuban and comedic. Cuban as a descriptive adjective signifies that to appreciate the essence of the joke, some insight into the cultural dynamics of Cuban culture such as its food, community activities, festivals, dancing, and literature is necessary to access why it is not only comedic, but also subversive.

My analysis of visual narratives will also take into account the signs in the artwork as part of a storytelling process. Narratives in Cuban culture, storytelling specifically, provide fertile ground for expanding on the capacity of visual media. Through painting, often mixed with short texts and sculpture, narratives develop that elaborate particular areas of the cultural experience. Though the artwork exists in a defined space, its meanings connect with the larger cultural surrounding. This includes everyday humor, as well as the underlying stories that create the currents of reality for Cubans.

The Cuban reality is often characterized by its position as a ‘Third World’ island country, where many distinct cultures—African, Hispanic, European, Middle Eastern, and Asian—have blended to form a hybrid identity, constantly in flux and continuously renegotiating what it means to be Cuban; and these cultures achieve this identity and its expressions within a climate of sustained and ubiquitous political repression. In this way, Cuban art and humor transmits a more authentically Cuban grassroots culture, with its outlook, intuitions, and values, as an alternative to the sanctioned and standardized voice, which
characterizes so much of what the public outside the island perceives as ‘Cuban.’

The Cuban reality is well summarized through prominent themes such as economic exchange, censorship, identity, and dreams within the exhibition framework of “States of Exchange: Artists from Cuba” at Rivington Place in London. Curated by Geraldo Mosquero and Cylena Simonds, Mosquera describes Cuba in the exhibition literature as a, “…country caught in flux. With two legal currencies (the Cuban Peso and Cuban convertible Peso) and growing divisions between those who have access to resources from beyond the island and those who don't, the residents of Cuba have become experts at negotiating exchange between each other as well as with the rest of the world” (“States of Exchange,” Mosquera).

The conversation surrounding semiotics and culture is primarily captured by scholars crossing disciplines and attempting to devise theories or methodologies that are useful for a variety of applications such as art historical analysis, cultural studies, pedagogy, interdisciplinary programs, practical application of research, and more. The semiotic framework encourages a conversation between and among disciplines. The literature review will tie the above key points in this thesis with scholarly work about semiotics, visual media, humor, and narrative. I selected these resources for their ability to provide context when analyzing humor and narrative through semiotics in visual art. Key concepts within the literature review will serve as foundational definitions and frames of reference for analyzing the visual works of arts.

**Literature Review**

This literature review is organized according to the three theoretical and methodological themes—semitics, humor, and narrative—that are foundational in describing, analyzing, and interpreting the selected artworks. I interact with the following scholars by commenting on definitions and examples.
Semiotics

In On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics, Mieke Bal answers the question “What is a sign?” The study of semiotics is the study of signs. Commonly, and as noted earlier, a sign is defined as something that stands for something else. Bal’s definition of a sign answers the question above using the general definition of a sign, though she remarks that the question is improperly phrased. The question assumes a sign is a thing, which Bal refutes. Before Bal, Ferdinand de Saussure’s descriptions of the ‘immateriality’ feature also elaborate on this fact of sign. Saussure’s notes have been compiled in the influential Course in General Linguistics, and it is within these that he proposes that words have no value in themselves, and that a sign is comprised of the signifier and the signified; that it is arbitrary, relational, and differential.

These components of the Saussurian sign have historically played a role in criticisms and analyses. Likewise, in Philosophy in a New Key, Susanne Langer echoes Saussure’s immateriality feature stating, “Symbols are not proxy for their objects but are vehicles for the conception of objects“ (Langer, 61). This is because signs point beyond themselves. This feature of ‘pointing beyond themselves’ is what will be looked at in trying to understand how signs operate. Bal elaborates on the nature of a sign according to requirements she lists in her text.

...a sign is not a thing but a function, an event. A sign does not exist but occurs. A sign occurs, then, when something is perceived, for certain reasons or on certain grounds, as standing for something else to someone. It needs interpretation. Most work in the humanities consist of acts of interpretation. (Bal, 9)

It is through acts of interpretation that visual art—as an instance of ‘sign’ and ‘signification’—generate meaning in the minds of viewers. A painting, like a sentence, does not have an immovable, attached meaning by virtue of being a colored, stretched, and hung canvas or pixels closely combined according to computer coding to generate a font, which are used to type a word on this page.
Because human beings are ‘meaning-makers’, the viewer applies (or assigns) meaning to the brushstrokes and pixels as part of the process of interpreting the signs in the artwork. However, as Winfried Fluck argues,

The function of an aesthetic object goes beyond the mere communication of meaning or a message. To be sure, any aesthetic object may express views and value orientations that we also find in other discourses. Nevertheless, there is a difference. We are not exposing ourselves to aesthetic objects, at least not primarily, for the informations they carry, the arguments they make, or the opinions they express, because such meanings can be communicated more directly and less ambiguously by other discursive forms.

So, though aesthetic objects as visual art relays meaning, it does not do so as other “discursive forms” do, and the ways in which meaning is created by viewers is the concern of semiotics.

Much of semiotic analysis is concentrated on linguistic research, beginning with the smallest units contained in words, and leading eventually to literature and literary devices. A brushstroke, a small visual unit, does not mean in same way a vowel may mean, but it still functions together with other visual elements to elicit meaning as signs. Utilizing Peircean terms when describing and analyzing artwork is possible given Peirce’s notions about how meaning is formed. Peirce explains that, "All the universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs." (Peirce 1991, p. 258) This includes linguistic and non-linguistic systems because meaning is not solely the product of language and human beings can derive meanings from gestures, sounds, and images as well. Peirce’s specific terminology will be defined and expanded upon when necessary in the analyses below to form a direct connection between the artwork and Peirce’s ideas when appropriate.

According to Langer, “Visual forms—lines, colors, proportions, etc.—are just as capable of articulation, i.e of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of
syntax that govern language” (178). Though it is often the case that literature’s
temporal nature—a story developing over time, for instance— is contrasted with
visual art's experience as happening all at once, it is not so that the viewer reads
the signs and images immediately upon first glance, keeps that interpretation, and
moves on. Though the seeing or noticing of an object and identification of that
object as art may happen almost instantly, it is for similar reasons that when
reading a novel, the reader will not think it is the daily news. Both visual art and
writing (or literature) operate within a larger experience that encourage the novel
be read differently than a newspaper or a painting be seen differently than a
parking sign. This larger experience is also socially and culturally bound. This
experience can also be described as reader-oriented.

C.S.'s Peirce’s notions on the indexical, which are part of Peirce’s semiosis,
illuminate how the culture and reader bind. According to Hua-Ling Linda Chang,
Peirce’s semiosis…is a reader-oriented theory which depends
largely on the context/culture. Peirce’s trichotomies of sign—
icon-index-symbol— which is classified according to the degree
of relation between the sign to object, does provide more freedom
than Barthes’ separation of medium according to form. (Semiotics)
Though Peirce's provides more freedom, Roland Barthes' take on visual images
is highly relevant when discussing their meaning, and their being understood as
signs of art.

all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers,
a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and
ignore others. Polysemny poses a question of meaning and this
question always comes through as a dysfunction....Hence in every
society various techniques are developed intended to fix the
floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror
of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of those
techniques. (Barthes 156)

Barthes recognizes that due to the orientation of the reader, and the
individual's ability to decide what meaning to select, reaching a type of canonical consensus of what the image “means” may seem impossible. Yet, he identifies the linguistic message as a limitation technique. Generally, the range of meaning is limited, due to the limited scope of language itself and its effects in determining the extent and flexibility of thought. University of Washington Professor George Dillon offers actual examples of limiting techniques in the contemporary art world. Among these he lists captions, guidebooks, fliers, and labels that are, “...bits of institutional apparatuses which select and present texts and images for the public” (Art and the Semiotics of Images Dillon). Those in charge of technique selections can range from curators to educators, according to Dillon. The curators, educators, captions, guidebooks, and other material re-contextualize the art and affect its impact.

They in turn are parts of an even larger body of institutions and practices which stabilize how images are to be interpreted and used. That is, when an image is used in a textbook or a treatise, we assume it is there to illustrate and support the meanings and information provided by the text. (Dillon)

By re-contextualizing, these “stabilizing tools” help create what Caruana describes as “sufficient collateral experience of painting” (Caruana, 315). The notion of painting is thus, “…applied to a clustering of signs, that Peirce calls the representamen (or R)” (Caruana, 315). The analysis applied to the sign cluster called representamen is what the viewer interprets, “through one’s thought capacity, culture and knowledge of the specific field of painting” (315). This knowledge is mediated through the Peircian notion of semiosis, which describes a thought as a “sign requiring interpretation by a subsequent thought in order to achieve meaning” (Ryder 2004). Meaning is perceived through the constellation of interrelated and developing thoughts. Peirce's shift of focus, “from a relational view of signs and the objects they represent to an understanding of semiosis as an iterative, mediational process” (Ryder 2004) opens up the possibilities of semiotic interpretation through a framework that
does not make the deciphering of visual images a tedious affair. It allows culture to function as a useful pool of information for meaning generation. Indeed, culture itself is a lens through which reality and the human experience are interpreted and organized overtime.

Semiotics' emphasis on culture—its continuously changing dynamics and forms of making meaning—moves away from art historical criticism that seeks to find a “correct” interpretation of art. The semiotic angle thus opens up art criticism to the system of signs that operates in everyday life, whether or not art is involved. Though cognitively the way a sign is processed may be universal in some respects—the way the brain processes light, visuals, sounds, and information—the meaning to the individuals viewing the work depends on ‘context’ and cultural or sign-reading competence.

The combination of strictly conventional rules and rules which combine a cultural convention with other relations makes the set of rules on which basis most sign-events can take place—that is, if the sign-use has the competence, learning throughout his or her life, to work with them. (Bal, 14)

The emphasis on sign-user competence illuminates different avenues for art criticism, based on cultural realities and personal experiences. Patrizia Violi echoes this definition of sign-user competence as, “an average encyclopedic competence that an individual must posses to belong to a given culture, even though this concept should then be further articulated into more diversified sub-competences” (Violi 258). Culture has generally been taken into account in art criticism insofar as it could be tied to historical readings of art or biographical analyses of the artist. Culture was not seen as current or as influencing contemporary ideas. It was seen as part of art historical context, as the background of the work of art, and as the artist’s pool of inspiration for creating work.

Bal and Bryson question this very notion of “context” in a way that does not take culture for granted as “the way things were” (from a historical view) or life
as we know it today. With semiotics, context is seen as a 'text' itself that is open to interpretation. “'Context' can always be extended; it is subject to the same process of mobility that is at work in the semiosis of the text or artwork that 'context' is supposed to delimit and control” (Bal & Bryson 248). ‘Context’ can be read subjectively, it does not objectively exist outside members of society that generate context to form traditions, social norms, essentially to form culture.

With the semiotic approach the artist is not more of a “sign maker” or generator of meaning than the viewer. Bal and Bryson state that semiotics, “...argues that meanings are always determined in specific sites in a historical and material world” (Bal & Bryson 251). In other words, the artist, the intended or initial audience of the work of art, and observers later to come all determine the meaning of a work of art. “…the text or artwork cannot exist outside the circumstances in which the reader reads the text or the viewer views the image, and that the work of art cannot fix in advance the outcome of any of its encounters with contextual plurality” (Bal & Bryson 251). Also, each new subsequent audience that comes before the text brings its own context, concerns, ideas, issues, questions, intuitions, insights, and limitations before the text in order to converse with it. Yet, an argument can be made that each new interaction and interpretation of a text/art needs to take into account—as much as it is possible—the original intent, meaning, purpose and function of a text/art; and each audience should attempt to listen to the text on its own terms.

Within a semiotic framework, these theories are accommodated as ways people create significance, such as basing it on the historical meanings of the artwork or on the statements by the artist; and this is an essential point in the overall argument in this thesis—meaning creation is not restrictive. The artist is well-versed in sign creation and produces art that resonates with the community because he/she is an integral member of that community. “The painter who executes a work has a pictorial past, an experience of public and political life” (Caruana 328).

The artist cannot imagine all possible readings of his or her work and cannot
therefore be thought of as the sole source of artistic meaning creation. The community also influences the artist to create pieces, and it serves as an inspirational force. What would an artist create without a community? Would a lone, would-be-artist create tools for survival instead of artistic, reflective pieces? Marcel Duchamp once remarked that art is, “a product with two poles; there is the pole of the person who makes a work and the pole of the person who looks at it. I give to the one who looks at it the same importance as the one who makes it” (Caruana 329). Both humor and narrative are thoroughly based on community participation, and their appearance in visual art could be not possible without a surrounding culture or community. As I will discuss later, the communal aspects of humor and narrative form much of the cultural fabric in Cuban society.

**Humor**

Humor in contemporary visual art is not a theme often explored. Philosophy professor John Morreall at Northwestern University addresses this lack of attention to humor in contemporary art history curriculum in *Taking Laughter Serious*. “The same values of humor which we have been discussing with reference to writing are found too in the plastic arts; but if humor is merely neglected in classes on literature, it is virtually ignored in art appreciation classes” (Morreall 96). Generally, the analysis of humor as well as of satire or parody is applied to political cartoons or to the comic and graphic arts. As a result, it is not introduced as something that can stand for something else, it is not a sign to read or interpret because it has not been appreciated as such nor emphasized as part of a visual vocabulary of art or art history.

However, humor can be seen as a useful tool, particularly from a semiotic point of view, when operating in contemporary visual art in a country like Cuba. Renowned art historian, art critic, and curator Geraldo Mosquera has lucidly described the potency of the combination of visual art and humor in Cuba. Mosquera was born in Cuba, and writes extensively on Cuban art as well as on art from Latin America.
Unlike what occurs in other contexts, in Cuba, humor, appropriation, and deconstruction often go hand in hand. The social and political edge with which Lázaro Saavedra and other artists employ humor from the perspective of the man-in-street political joke is remarkable. In other circumstances, Saavedra would have been without any doubt a great journalistic humorist in addition to doing artistic drawings and making installations. In Cuba, he has used the space of the plastic arts, less controlled and more permissive because it is a limited and small scene, to carry on a constant humoristic critique of the life of the country. (Mosquera 237)

Humor operates on several levels at the same time, like visual art, and allows viewers to access different layers of meaning at the same time. Vietnam is another country where visual art’s limited and minor status encourages contemporary artists to take risks. In her article, *The Art of Censorship in Vietnam*, Samantha Libby interviews a contemporary Vietnamese artist who stated, “Many of us create artwork with multiple layers of meanings so we can explain it reasonably and differently to different audiences. It is a dangerous but also exciting game for us” (Libby 215). In both Cuba and Vietnam, art is censored, so devices such as humor and abstraction are used to communicate with audiences; and how they communicate depends on the audiences’ awareness of references and subtleties.

A viewer of visual humor can completely “miss the point” and see a visual work of art for its formalist aspects—line, colors, recognizable shapes, places, and so on or draw other conclusions. Oppositely, an observer can make note of symbols and icons in the artwork that may at first glance seem like there is not “more to it.” After a second look, however, the viewer may access other layers of meaning and see something further; depending on how thoroughly or quickly the viewer draws from a complex network of meaning. Within the Cuban context, the polysemous nature of visual contemporary art, layered with humor, makes it
difficult to “pin down” a set meaning. This apparent ambiguity is often intentional, and is part of the artist’s strategy. Viewers with a suitable level of cultural sign competence (or ‘sign sensitivity’ or ‘sign receptivity’) pick up on the message and can decode artist’s intention or draw from their experiences of living in Cuba, Vietnam, or of encountering a similar situation, and begin to assign meaning as a result.

“While the topics were serious, the tone was often humorous, satirical humor being one of the best ways to analyze reality, criticize oppressive institutions, affirm a people’s sense of worth and point to structural changes” (Cypess 246). Humor also functions as social glue, binding people together as they give expression to, and craft protest of, their common experience. In theater, “…the special Cuban choteo form of humor, music and customs of the region into the theatrical spectacle in order to facilitate identity between the theater and the community and integrate the spectator into the spectacle itself” (Cypess 254).

Analyzing the particular form of humor that is characterized by its Cubanness, choteo, Cuban author Jorge Mañach incorporated the island’s popular philosophy “don’t take anything too seriously” into the cultural conversation in the early 20th century. More specifically, choteo jokes about what is generally considered serious. An insightful example of choteo at work in the art world is evident in the following anecdote.

In the Center for the Development of Visual Arts some artists were gathered to present their work to Peter Ludwig. Toirac had a series of little sculptures of Fidel, and he had them on top of a table. So the son of another artist in the competition banged into the table accidentally, and knocked one of the Fidel sculptures onto the floor. And the story goes that at that moment Mosquera exclaimed, “Holy shit, he fell at last!” (Weiss 85)

The above is a common occurrence in Cuban conversation, and with humor, can be voiced using very little. Indignación del choteo (Indignation of “el choteo”), is an attempt to take such events seriously, to analyze and define an attitude that
pushes aside or relativizes order, authority, and importance. “El choteo—cosa familiar, menuda y festiva—es una forma de relación que consideramos típicamente cubana y ya ésa sería una razón suficiente para que investigásemos su naturaleza con vistas a nuestra psicología social” (Mañach, 14). Mañach explains why, though choteo by its very nature is not to be taken seriously and thus defined, he attempts to apply a definition, or at least to describe characteristics of choteo.

Rachel Weiss has also listed attributes of choteo in her highly influential book on Cuban art, To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art, such as “an anarchist energy, a built-in skepticism and lack of automatic hierarchy between artist and power” (Weiss 87). This built-in skepticism and sarcasm, which Weiss also describes as having “enormous cultural authority in Cuba” (Weiss 87) is what decades earlier, Mañach stated he could not ignore. He notes that it is a familiar and vital facet of Cuban culture and considered to be a typical way of interacting with others—a typical way of relating with others, and of operating within relationships. Its natural and daily presence in Cuban life makes it a part of the Cuban psychology, and together, all those components are sufficient grounds for mounting an investigation.

Understanding this facet of Cuban life as seen and understood by Cuban writers is important within a semiotic framework, as it expands on the value system, which is present in the visual arts as signs. Mañach sees humor and laughter as a “gesto social” (social gesture), and draws from Henri Bergson, among other 20th century European philosophers, to expand on his point. Stating that laughter is a distinctively human quality, Mañach agrees with Bergson's theory, which Bergson writes about in Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, that characterizes humor as part of the human experience. “Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in commons. It must have a social significance” (Bergson 12). Weiss elaborates on the social significance of choteo in Cuban culture. “The choteo, reborn in the new Cuban art, performed a double-bonding operation, creating identification between the artists and their audience.
and shooting that circuit through with renewed solidarity” (Weiss 89).

Dr. Jorge Duany, in his “From the Cuban Ajiaco to the Cuban-American Hyphen: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora” reviews Mañach's text, placing it within Cuba's nationalist writing tradition as, “an entire generation's soul-searching for the essences of Cuba's national identity” (Duany 11). Ultimately, Duany states that, “Informality and suspicion toward all institutionalized forms of authority, as well as a humorous approach to ceremonious norms of conduct in everyday life, are widely shared by the Cuban people” (Duany 12).

Visually, humor has gained recognition outside of the graphic arts in Cuba. The Cuban traditions of comic-book art and political cartoons have existed in Cuba for decades. However, in the fine arts sphere, satire, parody, and the absurd in paintings, sculpture, and installation have not been major points of references. The established methodologies—biographical, formalist, post-colonialist, feminist, Marxist, queer theory—for assigning meaning to visual signs in the fine arts did not make room for humor.

Caridad Blanco, Cuban curator and art historian, has been interested in eroding the divide between comic art and las artes plásticas (plastic arts) and in fostering an appreciation for the satirical and absurd in the fine arts. She curated an exhibition titled “La Ubre del Humor (The Udder of Humor)” in 2011 in the Old Havana headquarters of the Center for the Development of Visual Arts. The exhibition highlighted the tradition of humorous discourse in its many manifestations—language, literature, cartoons, psychology—in order to, Blanco stated, “…show the importance of the line of research that makes connections, without hierarchies, between cartoon humor in print publications and humor in the fine arts” (A Laughing Matter: Caridad Blanco on Cuban Humor).

If the Cuban people have a humorous approach to ceremonious norms of conduct in everyday life, it would make sense to include the fine arts in the sphere of things Cubans find humorous. The sign competency for picking up comedic elements exists as does the ability to take what is serious and create
something comedic from it. The semiotic approach encourages using this humorous cultural ability as a way of assigning meaning to signs and to making assessments on cultural values and outlooks. The social significance of humor in Cuban culture requires it be taken into account when looking at art, as another way of appreciating the work. Blanco made an important point when she used the phrase, “without hierarchies,” in describing how humor operates in different contexts. The presence of humor exists in different facets of life and it is not a lesser form of experience nor is its acknowledgment as a sign any less significant. In visual art, humor can occur as an incongruity or as a witty rendition of an event. It permeates through daily interactions, so its analysis as it appears in contemporary Cuban art is important

**Narrative**

The last topic of analysis to discuss in this literature review is narrative. Turning to Bal once again with, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, a narrative will be defined as something found within a text. “A text is a finite, structured whole composed of signs. These can be linguistic units, such as words and sentences, but they can also be different signs, such as cinematic shots and sequences, or painted dots, lines, and blots” (Bal 5). Though a visual work of art such as a painting or sculpture is comprised of pieces of wood or canvas, it is more than those individual units and out of such a text a narrative can arise. A visual work of art is also a ‘structured whole composed of signs,’ which together form that ‘sufficient collateral experience of painting.’ “A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof” (Bal 5). Bal goes on to define a story as serving as the content for that text and to further elaborate on the notion of narrative text.
A narrative text is a story that is ‘told,’ conveyed to recipients, and this telling requires a medium; that is, it is converted into signs. As was evident from the definition of a narrative text, these signs are not produced by an agent who relates, who ‘utters’ the signs. This agent cannot be identified with the writer, painter, composer, or filmmaker. Rather, the writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as the narrator. (Bal 9)

The usefulness of Bal’s definition and boundaries for narrative in this thesis is that she further develops its application. “…a narrative theory facilitates description only of the narrative aspects of a text and not all the characteristics, even of a clearly narrative text” (Bal 11). For visual artworks in this thesis, the narrative theory will be applied to the visual components that can be read as a narrative text in the art piece in order to understand the message. In other words, to describe those signs (collection of signs in a painting or sculpture), which ‘tell’ a story. To further unpack the narrative components in visual art, Sherline Pimenta and Ravi Poovaiah’s *On Defining Visual Narratives* will be utilized to define such key terms as the Static Visual Narrative (SNV later on referred to as). Their aim is to, “establish Visual Narratives (VN) as a distinctive area of study so as to open up sub genres to critical examination” (25). Among these sub genres is the SNV, which will be utilized later on in the analysis of *En la Bodeguita del Medio* from *De la serie Sueño Nupcial* (*Nuptial Dream series*), 1994 by Fernando Rodriguez.

The meaning of the message does not solely fall under the authority of the artist. Bal turns to Foucault when establishing the importance of the viewer in making meaning as a story develops. “Foucault's alternative is a radical proliferation of meaning, where the author/work becomes a fluctuating function always interacting with other functions in the larger discursive field” (Bal 15). She does this to, “emancipate both author and reader from the stronghold of a misconceived interpretive authority” (16) and to, “open academic and
educational policy” (17) to others outside the traditional boundaries of art historical criticism, which typically concerns academics and the artists. Though Bal does not aim to take away authority from the artist as the creator of the art piece, she attempts to place greater stress on the creation of interpretation from the audience’s point of view as members of a culture than traditionally done so in art criticism and analysis.

Again, the audience is not a passive viewer/listener, but a dynamic observer and thinker, and creative interpreter and meaning-maker. In fact, interpretation by the viewer is so important that it is also the subject of censorship campaigns. “Censorship of art, be it overtly political or subliminally social, is confirmed, strengthened, and perpetuated by censoring forms of interpretation” (Bal 16). This censoring takes place in the form of proper political campaigns, but also as an exclusionary process in academia, which reinforces the dominance of standardized methodologies. Within the semiotic framework, the artworks' meanings are dependent upon the interpretations of viewers. This broadens the authority of creating meaning from the established art world onto the society at large.

How to read – that is, how to give meaning to messages one vaguely senses but fails to analyse when only dogmatically restricted methods are consecrated as 'historical' or 'visual' enough – seems to me a valuable contribution of narratorial experiment to the understanding of art and literature; art, not as a fixed collection of enshrined objects, but as an ongoing, live process. (Bal 62)

The semiotic framework and focus on humor and narrative can help with assigning meaning to visual images that may initially seem out of reach. By unpacking information about the artworks using semiotic terms when necessary, the ways that signs operate can be highlighted. In doing so, it is no longer as overwhelming. The artworks analyzed in this thesis were selected as samples of creativity very present, active, and dynamic in Cuba. They do not belong to an
established or “enshrined” cannon of objects, solely to fill museum pedestals and walls, but rather as signs to encourage the understanding of a culture. Understanding builds appreciation and the ability to actively participate in the process of creating meanings is liberating. Art reveals insights about the culture, which in turn is made up of artistic works and processes that characterize the members of the community.

The analyses of artworks are meant to provide examples of how such interpretations within the semiotic framework—artworks as collections of signs within a cultural ‘context’ (of humor and narrative), drawing operating within the culture—can look like. The analyses below are demonstrations based on semiotic, cultural, comedic, and narrative theories and definitions with the goal of providing references for a broader, more inclusive appreciation of Cuban art.

**Motivation for Topic Selection**

As stated in the introduction, the desire to look at contemporary visual art created by Cuban artists stems from the attractiveness of exposing a side of the society that is relatively invisible to most international audiences, but that is part of a lively conversation among Cuban artists, critics, academics, and international academics, who focus on Cuban, Latin American, or Caribbean art. However, outside Cuba, the international art world, and academia, it is not a vocal part of the conversation. Taking advantage of the Peircian model and, “The visuality of Peirce’s semiotics—by which I mean the character of the reflection on images and the uses made of them” (Leja 97), the levels of meaning operating in visual art are given the attention they deserve. To make art more accessible, semiotics is applied to facilitate understanding by pointing to the possibilities of artistic interpretation and to the variety of ideas that can be generated from visual art. Perhaps audiences may opt for a museum visit to experience art and see it without immediately thinking it is pointless or grow more open to trying to interpret Cuban culture outside of the predefined and constrictive political jargon.

The sign competence for contemporary visual art is not as widespread as
it is for Greek or Renaissance art. This is largely a result of resistance by the academic community to study popular culture as well as the lack of cultivation of what Gerald Graff describes as “argument literacy.” Combined, inadequate “argument literacy” and lack of attention to popular culture result in aspects of contemporary culture, such as visual art, falling below the analytical radar. Graff claims that students must acquire argument literacy by learning, “…how to explain that data, apply it, promote their interpretations of it, and modify those interpretations through respectful debate and discussion” (Graff). However, students build meaning around art from historical, biographical, and formal points of view. These angles place the making of meaning on the side of the teacher, and the students are not integral components of the analytical process—the teacher tells them how to interpret the art. They are not working toward the goal, which Graff believes of argument to be, “…is not to destroy contradicting viewpoints, but to engage them in a way that reveals hidden dimensions of a problem” (Graff).

For many, when looking at modern and contemporary art, the idea running in the back of their minds is: I can also do that, what makes that person an artist? When the general public sees splattered paint on canvas or pieces of stone arranged in a line, occupying a space in an art gallery space, they do not see “the point.” The messages and meanings are not readily recognized, and they see “nothing.” This “nothing” does not mean viewers draw a blank, that the image is not mentally being processed, because it is, but it would take more than mechanical recognition of objects in a space to foster appreciation. Fluck points to ways to correct this.

The obvious implication for school and university curricula, then, is not to ignore popular culture, but instead to deal with it extensively, to point out where reality is distorted and to correct stereotypes where necessary. Such an approach would also have to include a description of the ways in which popular culture is produced and distributed. (Fluck 58)
The desire to make art from a country not known to the general public for its contemporary art scene accessible and meaningful is difficult, but not impossible. The works analyzed below are not as formally abstract as Jackson Pollock’s, but they are difficult to decipher because of their layered cultural associations; associations that outside of Cuban culture are not part of the predominant sign competence held by viewers. Examples of cultural elements include the use of religious imagery in popular culture and island syncretistic religion and the relationships between food and identity. This is essentially using food—ajiaco or mango—to describe Cuban identity. Additionally, the selection of material to point to the Cuban mantra, “en Cuba se resuelve todo” (in Cuba there's always a way) also requires insight into cultural customs and proverbs. This Cuban mantra expresses that works of art can be created from anything (wood, broken glass, old hardware), though it also means that bicycles, cars, and toasters can be fixed without the standardized tools. Cubans “make do.”

Applied, this analysis can follow in the practical vein that Bal promotes. Semiotics is a helpful tool in the interpretation of cultural products and, “...is also meant to provide insights that help us not only understand, but also counter, and eventually undermine, social practices that are felt to be damaging to certain groups of people” (On Meaning-Making Bal 8). In Cuba, where art censorship is common and where freedom of speech is severely curtailed, accessing the meaning in visual art is useful for understanding parts of Cuban culture that cannot be explicitly stated in writing nor reported on through news outlets. For example, instead of discussing at length the lack of available resources (from painting materials to new car parts), artists such as Abel Barroso and the artistic collective, Los Carpinteros (The Carpenters) use wood to create some of their art as well as material from old buildings. They could have commented in an essay about the deteriorating state of some homes or about the difficulty of acquiring canvas, but instead they created sculptural pieces, enabling them to evade the attention of Cuban authorities, who might have read a text discussing the lack of availability of resources as criticism of their management of the country.
According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in 2012 Cuba ranked number nine out the top ten most censored countries. CPJ's *10 Most Censored Countries*, was released in May to mark World Press Freedom Day. In the Reporters Without Borders’ 2013 *World Press Freedom Index* report, Cuba ranks in the bottom ten, as one of the countries that least respects freedom of the media. Prominent Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez, who is currently traveling around the world after many previous unsuccessful attempts to gain permission to leave the island, has stated,

There is a popular expression in Cuba that is synonymous with difficulty and crisis. When you want to indicate that someone is doing badly economically, it is sufficient to say that he is "eating a cable." Street humor has identified the act of chewing and swallowing a bundle of wires with scarcity and material want. (Sanchez)

Sanchez uses Cuban street humor or *choteo* to describe the Cuban reality. However, because she writes her criticisms and Cuban authorities are well-versed in written and verbal Cuban humor and satire, it is far easier to read her criticism and punish her for it than it is to “read” the criticism present in visual art.

The artists and the Cuban people do not see restrictions as entirely debilitating, and rather use creative means of getting around their reality. From *choteo* to fictitious narratives, Cuban society expresses itself outside the more ‘direct’ methods of communication, resulting in a vibrant form of art and community life that others unfamiliar with can appreciate if given some insight into the system of signs operating to send the messages.
In an interview with Public Broadcasting Service’s (PBS) Frontline/WORLD, reporter Natasha Del Toro remarked that,

…the political situation in Cuba forces artists to come up with subtle ways to critique the system. Because of censorship, they must be very clever in their approach. A curator once joked that skirting government censors in Cuba provided far better training than any top-notch M.F.A. program. (Del Toro)

Perhaps Gerardo Mosquera, Cuban curator and art critic, summarizes many points of interest in this thesis best, when he write about art’s role in contemporary in *The Social Function of Art in Cuba since the Revolution of 1959* (1985). Mosquera states,

> In Cuba, as in any other countries, the artist creates a work of personal expression, conditioned by his or her reality. This work is exhibited in a gallery, reproduced in a catalog and sometimes discussed in the newspaper; it is sold or given to someone who hangs it at home (perhaps playing with the “arnoyo” lamp and the “kitsch” wicker chair), in an office, in a museum, or even in a public place, or the artist simply takes it home after the exhibit. The work functions as a system of signs whose primary purpose is to transmit an artistic message (wherein creative, ideological, cognitive, aesthetic, ludic, educational, psychological, and other components all operate) to a spectator who receives and interprets the work from his or her own point of view. (Mosquera)

Mosquera places art as a tool in the learning process that is versatile and that enables the viewer to use it to interpret meanings and associations outside of itself. A work of art is created by an artist with specific purpose, but not entirely controlled by the purpose. The viewer brings his or her own experiences and intentions. Given art’s contemporary function as something not solely tied with religious goals or political aims, and as objects not only found in museums, churches, courtrooms, or castles, the viewer interprets the art according to his or
her own sign competence and reality. Indeed there are many ways of making meaning from looking at art. Mosquera advises, “We should not wait until a a que salgo o a que la bajen by decree, until they “orient it from above.” It’s time that we release some brain cells, lose a few hours of sleep, and concern ourselves with the social function of our plastic arts as well as with the necessity of opening art up to new possibilities” (Mosquera).

**Analysis of Artworks**

This analysis begins with Barroso’s *Café Internet Tercer Mundo*, introducing the reader to key events, concepts, and ideas in contemporary Cuban art and culture such as the Bienal de la Habana (Havana Biennial). Next are *El Sagrado Corazón* by Saavedra and *De la serie Sueño Nupcial: “En La Bodeguita del Medio”* by Rodríguez, which deal primarily with religious signs and symbols within the scope of the major foundational themes—semiotics, humor, and narrative—in this thesis. Lastly, two works by Ramos—*Por mas que corra no llego* and *Quizas Hasta Deba Partirme en Dos*—conclude the analysis, focusing on more personal and internal uses of cultural signs and symbols.

**Café Internet Tercer Mundo (Third World Internet Café), 2000, Abel Barroso**

Abel Barroso is a contemporary Cuban artist, born in 1971 in Pinar de Rio, Cuba. In 1990, Barroso studied at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro and in 1995, he attended El Instituto Superior de Arte; both are located in the Cuban capital of Havana. They are commonly referred to as San Alejandro and la ISA respectively, and are among the most prestigious art institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Barroso currently lives and works in Cuba, but has achieved international recognition for his master craftsmanship and for his blending of materials. The reason for providing this information, though semiotics is the methodology and not biographical background, is because the status of being an artist—the actions of art-making under the title artist—is layered with signs and meanings in society, particularly
in Caribbean culture, where the artist—dancer, poet, painter—has a highly defined and visible social status.

In the 1970s, some Cuban primary schools tested students for creative prowess in dance, music, theater, or art, and placed them in courses accordingly. Lázaro Saavedra was one artist who attended such a school. This type of emphasis on art education so early on establishes a sign competency that leads toward an appreciation for the arts in Cuba as well as toward the artist being seen as a creator of visual language based on social values and associations, in addition to the formal and traditional training in the educational curriculum.

By understanding these dynamics associated with the title “artist,” viewers of the artwork can attach what many Cubans confer to the visual piece when viewing it. Similarly, it would be useful to know that the poet in Qatari culture is taken quite seriously, so much so that contemporary Qatari poet, Muhammad Rashid al-Ajami, was sentenced in late February 2013 to 15 years in prison for a 2010 recital of a poem in Cairo, Egypt that allegedly criticized Qatari leadership. “Steve Caton, a professor of contemporary Arab studies at Harvard University, said political poetry is taken far more seriously in the Arab world than in the West. Nevertheless, he said, it is "very rare" for a poet to be jailed for his verses” (Bollier and Dekker). This is not to say that the ways Cubans see art, based on their cultural associations, is the only way to semiotically appreciate it, but it is argued in this thesis that it is a good starting point for initially grasping key points of the culture. This consequentially provides references for the creation of some interpretations of signs. By doing so, it is possible to proceed with what Bal mentions would lead to the correction of misconceptions about a particular society of people and/or their cultural traits.

As a printmaker and sculptor, Barroso has developed a visual vocabulary that aids in understanding the nature of art creation in Cuba. Though Barroso grew up in Cuba, surrounded by all the trappings of ‘Third World’ aesthetics and style, he expressed, “I was born twelve years after the revolution, and I don’t know, practically, what is a TV commercial. Suddenly, I see myself expressing
new words: WSP, Benetton, Mitsubishi Motors, Hyundai….” (Remba 507). With such a statement, Barroso brings up a key issue in sign recognition and interpretation: sign competence. In order to understand that a Ferrari is better than a Toyota, an individual should familiarize him or herself with the values of that society. “…signs are socially active forces, and so is interpretation. Therefore, the study of signs and the semiotic perspective on social communication is a relevant activity” (On Meaning-Making, Bal 7).

The quality of the machine, the speed of the engine, and the life of the overall car do play significant roles in determining its value. Additionally, there is the social status associated with such a product. This status-oriented quality is interesting to examine in Cuba. How are the car’s qualities interpreted by a Cuban artist, who claimed that his life was not typically filled with such products and signs? How does Barroso create a brand vocabulary similar to those employed by consumers in the United States, without the resources or exposure? International art platforms such as the Bienal de la Habana are perhaps the most obvious places to find such resources. These resources exist in other ways, but for an artist, meeting people in a platform sanctioned by the art world as a good place to share and absorb ideas cannot be ignored. The public also expects this to a certain extent and understands that art fairs are where artists, curators, collectors, gallery associates, and museum staff go to network, meet, and discuss.

Cuba’s Bienal de la Habana began in 1983 and has continuously been organized by the Wilfredo Lam Center. The creation of the Wilfredo Lam Center was a result of a meeting after Lam’s death a year earlier in 1982, which included his widow, Fidel Castro, and Ministry of Culture officials. They gathered with the purpose to promote visual arts within the Cuban revolutionary framework. One specifically stated function of the Lam Center is, “To promote internationally the art work of artists from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as of artists that struggle for cultural identity and that are related to those territories” (Decree #113 of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers, 1983). The Biennial was meant to act as a cohesive and creative force
for the ‘Third World.’ The first Biennial was characterized as a “sociological and anthropological event” (Camnitzer 213).

It is argued that by the Fourth Biennial, much of the grassroots elements, those elements that placed the Havana Biennial on a different level from the other art fairs, had withered away. Gaining international recognition, and not just ‘Third World’ interest, audiences with financial means began to visit the Biennial with commercial intentions. “Thanks to the lack of public transportation…, the broader base of the Cuban public was excluded from these sites. Meanwhile, the foreign public kept increasing, creating a previously unknown feeling of alienation and separation between the Biennial and the Cuban people” (Camnitzer 219). Barroso’s installation, Café Internet Tercer Mundo (Third World Internet Café), 2000 was on display during the Seventh Havana Biennial, and its title points back to the initial motivations for the creation of the Biennial. The installation was part of ongoing conversation about art in ‘Third World’ countries, consumerism, identity, and Cuban culture—which apparently Barroso felt needed further contextualization.

Situated in a well-known Cuban restaurant, Morro Castle—there is also a Morro Castle in the Hialeah area of Miami Dade County in Miami, named after this Havana original, and it is where many in the Cuban diaspora community in Miami go to eat churros and hot chocolate and other Cuban treats—the setting begins to transmit information about the art before it is actually seen. The environment: international art fair in a ‘Third World’ country, an art fair that began with aim of showcasing art outside of the established boundaries of the ‘First World’ as well as with the motivation of promoting Revolutionary notions about Cuban society. These characteristics, and others, are heavily layered with signs and meanings. It is within this ‘context’ that the art enters the field of vision of audiences. Bal and Bryson might say this is typically what art historians label the ‘context,’ and in this case it is the social, historical, and environmental context. However, as mentioned earlier Bal and Bryson argue, it is not enough to list aspects of context and take it as a ‘given’ without interpretation. The setting
is temporary, themed, and located in one city. How viewers experience visiting the Biennial is influenced by time constraints and space, and how they interpret its purpose is affected by the themes explored by curators, and which frame the fair.

Neither curators nor artists can determine all angles of the viewer’s experience, but the viewer cannot completely ignore their intentions. This interaction is part of a larger narrative of what it means to visit a biennale, part of a context that is not permanent, but rather part of the same sign-negotiating and interpretative process that is applied to the artwork. The characters (artists, visitors, staff, curators), their roles (planning, creating, facilitating, discussing), and the outcome (exhibition collateral) follow a familiar sequence of events, even if the curators and artists envision it differently or try to reinvent it. Like most art fairs, it is temporary, localized, themed, and also makes room for performances, lectures, and other events. The content of these events—the aspects curators most ardently try to reimagine—or lectures, and the themes may vary, but visitors can hold certain expectations about the structure, and they will not be terribly proven incorrect. Envisioning the act of attending the Biennial as a narrative is useful in this interpretation and illuminates more meaning-creating possibilities.

The art fair has its paradigm; it operates within the bounds listed above of time, space, and content. This can be labeled its “pre-established narrative program,” (Tarasti 392) a term utilized by Finnish semiotician, Dr. Eero Tarasti. The experience of attending the Biennial entails the development of a sequence of events, a sequence interrupted by such installations as Third World Internet Café. The sign for the installation is literally a sign outside the gallery space. It reads as any other typical, non-art space sign. The use of traditional restaurant signage to label an art installation is comedic. First, a visitor may think he or she is going to enter an internet café, a place where a drink and a small snack can be ordered and internet can be accessed.
A guest may arrive in New York for the first time in the morning and, after the long flight, stagger to a coffee shop. With his coffee, he is probably offered pancakes, whipped butter, and bacon. In such a way the new arrival is initiated into American-ness via a taste experience that unites the sweet and the salty-two rather opposed phemes-in the same meal. (Tarasti, 394)

In a similar fashion, a visitor is welcomed to ‘Cubanness’ through humor and use of materials. In addition to its being comedic, this very narrative of entering an internet café is humorous in the Cuban context because in Cuba, the internet is highly regulated and censored. Internet access is also extremely costly in Cuba. “Most Cubans do not have access to a computer, let alone Internet service at home, and an hour of wireless connection can cost $10 – half of the average monthly salary” (Interview with Cuban Blogger Yoani Sánchez). At the same time, the idea of the ‘Internet’ is redefined from the purely computerized/technological and expanded to include a ‘networking through art,’ which generates new webs of dialog and relationships.

Barroso plays with these incongruities and expectations by manipulating visuals originally intended to guide observers, to confuse them, and to cause them to rethink the experience based on their current environment; essentially, the “pre-established narrative program” has been adjusted through humorous devices and material choices to enliven the idea that: You are in Cuba now; a different reality. Barroso’s internet café highlights differences in experiences by combining opposing realities and shocking/awaking/alerting its viewers to the different reality. Tourists from Australia or Italy would see this combination of signs and may be confused, which can result in laughter. A Cuban, or anyone who knows more about the culture, would find it comedic, but not so much confusing. Semiotics pulls theses experiences together into a conversation about cultural competence, interpretation, and understanding. Semiotics allows for this appreciation of alterations.

“Semiotically speaking, as signs are both static and dynamic (or
evolutionary), any stereotypes may be true to life for a certain period of time, but we have to remember that, as signs are evolutionary, and they are changing all the time, no generalization can always remain reliable” (Gu Jiazo, China Media Research). Viewers had certain stereotypes in their minds about internet cafés and art galleries, and rarely do these preconceptions clash unless there are reasons for it. Signs cannot mandate their meanings; meanings arise at different times and on several layers. In addition to the text, CAFÉ INTERNET TERCER MUNDO outside the installation space, Barroso used two symbols commonly associated with the experience of surfing the internet or using a computer: the loading hourglass and the pointing arrow. These signs are legisign. A legisign signifies, “in virtue of the conventions surrounding their use.” ("Peirce's Theory of Signs," Atkin). Furthermore, it is a symbol, as it, “requires that the sign utilize some convention, habit, or social rule or law that connects it with its object” (Atkin). The use of these symbols further invited visitors to think of the experience as they commonly would have, and as a result they molded their associations accordingly.

Barroso was aware that visitors had certain expectations about the café. He provided them with computers and mobile phones, but he made them out of wood. These technologies were branded with a Caribbean twist as Mango Tec. The mango is a dietary representation of Cuban culture, used in many recipes as well as in jokes. The phrase, *Me a hecho la vida un arroz con mango*, literally translates into: “She/he/it has turned my life into mango with rice,” which means something has gone awry; it is as messy as mashed fruit accompanied by another staple ingredient of ‘Third World’ countries—rice. Though international audiences may not immediately relate with mango or rice, scholars such as Duany have argued, “National identity, in particular, is always represented through certain symbolic images and discursive practices, such as holy icons, myths, rituals, heroes, commemorations, maps, and landscapes" (Duany 4). Food, wood as artistic material, and a brand campaign all rely on visitors for interpretation and meaning generation. Though rice is just rice for people from
England, the oak tree for the English, an example used by Duany, has come to symbolize their reality and experience.

Cubans immediately identify with the mango reference as symbolizing Cuba and not an apple, which is associated with places like Silicon Valley in California or where else do apples grow, and which Americans also associate with aspects of life as diverse as education (teacher’s apple) and the imagined “fruit” of the Garden of Eden to the computer company. The qualities that enable the mango to symbolize Cuba are present as legisigns. The mango, like the wooden technology it is meant to represent, is exotic, tropical, and raw. These conventions and associations are made after experiencing life in a tropical island. A mango in Canada would be nothing more than that, it would not be invigorated by its surroundings and it would not find a connection to its environment that matches what it needs to grow and ripen. The mango needs sunshine and warmth; it is bright, sweet, and messy to eat.

These conditions are the Cuban environmental conditions, and through the experience of living in Cuba, the mango becomes more than a fruit. *Mango Tec* is therefore a witty and satirical brand name, inspired by mega brand, Apple Inc, and offers its users technologies as they know it and as they identify with it, both culturally and personally. Duany’s point that, “Poststructuralist thinkers have shown that the language of a discourse is as revealing as its ideological content—or better still, that the two are part of the same process of producing meaning” (Duany 20) is particularly important here as it exemplifies the two-way nature of meaning production in signs and how in visual art, this type of communication is vibrant.

This vibrancy is also prevalent in the mixture of cultures in Cuba, and as mentioned earlier, are part of the Cuban reality, a reality that is influenced by traditions and customs from many different countries. What in the United States is called a “melting pot,” in Cuba is called *ajiaco* (a Cuban stew or soup) by Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz. Duany writes about Ortiz’s description stating, “The famous metaphor of the ajiaco (proposed in lieu of the American
melting pot) serves to index the intense racial and cultural mixture among numerous ethnic ingredients: indigenous, Spanish, African, Asiatic, Anglo-American, and French” (13). The emphasis on Mango Tec in Third World Internet Café brings to light an assortment of signs operating in the various works of art.

Bal points to situations where a “semiotic effort pays off” (On Meaning-Making, Bal 16), as it allows for the type of interpretation that appreciates the humor, wit, and sharpness operating in the work of art. In her essay, Bal sets up an example involving a tourist guide, where a semiotic effort, like the one necessary to draw the connections from mangos, wood, and cafés to Cuba, is warranted. When the guide structures a seemingly simple sentence in an awkward way, Bal offers readers a few options to take. The option requiring the most effort is the one that leads listeners to the conclusion that the tour guide is speaking about the Hindu-Jain conflict in a way that eloquently expresses his complex feelings about it, “…the message becomes more interesting, reaching more levels of communication and meaning production” (Bal 16). However, this can only happen if the viewer or listener is willing to recognize it. “Technically, he conveyed the ambiguity in the relationship between Hindus and Jains in India by using the subliminal meanings of respect and contempt embedded in “the” and “those” and establishing a connection between himself and those meanings” (Bal 16).

Drawing from Bal, a reading of Barroso’s installation and understanding of Mango Tec operates in a similar way. For Cubans, and perhaps other viewers from Latin America or the Caribbean, the above parallels are drawn quite naturally due to sign competence. For others, close attention should be paid to material selection as well as to trying to understand that humor plays a crucial role in communication. When Cuban author and curator, Abelardo Mena Chicuri, learned that Barroso’s main studio was not in Havana, but in his rural home province of Pinar del Rio he, “humorously described him as a “guajiro globalizado”, a “globalized” peasant or countryman. Barroso agreed. “I try to
keep the origin of my place in the aesthetics of my work,” he said, “but the themes are universal” (The Cuban Art News Editors). The replacement of materials—from sturdy plastics and metals, polished in large factories and tweaked to stylistic perfection, to chopped wood, with visible craftsmanship—form an identity that contrasts the manicured brand of the ‘First World.’

Barroso created these works and placed them inside a café to encourage the type of behavior characteristic of the coffee-culture social setting. He wanted visitors to interact with the pieces and by doing so, interact with Cuba and its materials. His sculptures act as cohesive elements by binding visitor with setting and materials, though not with actual wireless service. Audience members cannot leave the world of the Third World Internet Café and surf through Google. Rather, they face the material boundaries of wooden computers when trying to use them to connect to the internet. This encourages users to think about the differences between ‘developed world’ internet coffee shops and the one they made use of in the ‘Third World.’ What is the difference in user experience? How does the user feel when he or she cannot use a product as initially accustomed to using it?

One piece in the Third World Internet Café installation, Untitled (2000-2001), is a mobile phone labeled “palm MANGOTEC.” The word ‘palm’ in the artwork can have two meanings: the palm of a hand and/or the palm tree. Both meanings work well in the Cuban environmental context, so two meanings of the word can be activated. The palm mobile opens like a book and is comprised of two wooden pieces held together by two hinges. Upon opening, the right side is a ‘screen,’ with a time and battery life header, and the typical home screen display of options ranging from address book to calculator. The left side is comprised of four shelves, stacked with small wooden pieces, shaped like pencils. The device is about the size of a regular mobile phone, but cannot be handled as such.

The ‘pencil’-filled shelves are comedic because viewers can clearly see that the work mimics a mobile phone, but that it is also somehow ‘aware’ that it cannot function as such. Pencils are objects that operate as writing utensils. In
this work, they do not operate as such, but they are symbolic of the act of writing. The act of writing is not required when using digital technology. Users press buttons to type or use a stylus to operate their mobile phones. Writing is unnecessary, and pencils in daily life are also often unnecessary in the ‘developed world’ because most people use computers at work and at home; even the act of jotting notes down has been usurped by the mobile phone and the computer with digitalized sticky-note applications for keeping track of short tasks or reminders.

The material acts as a symbolic sign, as the meaning of the usage of wood must be learned. It is not immediately apparent why wood would be used to create a mobile phone, so its presence would mean it symbolizes something. The palm mobile represents the desire to keep up with technology, and the presence of obstacles related with availability and reliability of resources. Ultimately, the work fits in the palm of a visitor’s hand and the visitor has his or her own ways of using a mobile. Depending on how the visitor uses his or her phone (or if the individual even has one), will determine how the signs are interpreted. Given that the mobile is an otherwise functional object in daily life and not solely an aesthetic one, visitors bring a lot of expectations about the nature of such a device that go beyond observation. When they think about functionality, they think about how accessing data or communicating with friends and family would work if they actually had to use a wooden mobile phone and pencils to accomplish their daily tasks.

The move from sign creation to making use of the signs through action—to trying to figure how to make use of an object based on its materials and signs—is made. International audiences from Western countries may not identify with the material selection, but they will see the global facet of the work through its use of brand language, a marketing campaign tool they know well. Through these experiences, Barroso connects visitors with the low-tech reality of Cuba.

Barroso has humorously stated when reflecting on his products, “Of course I am aware that my computers here at the Biennial could break down, but that's no
problem. I've got spare parts and they are really cheap” (Haupt and Binder Interview). This type of humor is what Mañach characterizes as *choteo* and emblematic of the “creole wit.” *Third World Internet Café* has *choteo* qualities attached to it. Instead of importing another semiotic term, the *choteo* description is useful and attractive here given that it is describing a work of art with a Spanish title. In some ways, the term and the title are part of the same ‘family.’

In *The Language of Art History* Catherine Lord and Jose A. Benardete elaborate on the use of culturally-specific terminology. Their example is Michael Baxandall’s description of German woodcarvings using the Yoruba term *dídón*. Though the wood carvings may be comprised of many of the details that would warrant the Yorubian description, it is difficult to justify. The question, “How then could they be taken seriously to exemplify the exotic label *dídón*?” (Lord & Benardete 97) arose following the thought, “‘Loanwords’ like *dídón* are “cultural orphans, not properly part of the collective framework of our thinking” (Lord & Benardete 97).

Lord and Benardete quote Michael Baxandall’s notions of using such a term to show his conflicted thoughts surrounding its implementation. Though the Yoruba term, Baxandall claims, is particularly useful and points to those particular signs and qualities of the German woodcarving he would like to highlight, the use of *dídón* seems awkward and out of touch. “But *dídón* is a fragment of Yoruba critical conceptions and takes its rich meaning from just this set of relations. Even for my private exploratory purposes I cannot possess it except in a crude and shallow, a dissociated way…” (Lord & Benardete 96). Drawing from Baxandall’s assessment and considerations, using the term *choteo* as a way of understanding how the signs in *Third World Internet Café* operate to elicit a humorous response is advantageous.

According to Caridad Blanco, Cuban humor does not so much evoke a hearty laugh as it does provoke a “knowing smile.” The “knowing smile” is itself a potent semiotic gesture. When people look at the same object and all react with a smile, viewers looking at the work simultaneously feel that they have all
“gotten” the meaning. This is an example of how each culture allows for the expression and development of the human potential, which no single culture—or even all of them together—can exhaust. The more cultures are involved, the richer, more complicated, the experience unfolds. Barroso speaks about humor as a form of language, thus pushing the boundaries of humor and expanding on its purpose beyond humor as simply a style or preference when communicating; it may serve as the only proper way to give meaning to reality. In an interview with Barroso in 2012, he expressed that humor,

Gives reality a turn to find a more affable and softer sense, to find a better face of reality, is part of who we are. Since the war against the colonial domination, Cubans have been using humor. The creoles used to make fun of the Spanish authorities in the country. This has transcended throughout history: we have inherited this language of communication. (Uprising-art) (Originally published in Spanish and translated by the author of this thesis).

Humor’s importance and its irreplaceable role in Cuban society go largely unnoticed in art history scholarship because the dominating art-historical methodologies—mostly Euro-centric or North American—have not accommodated the variety of meaning making present in all cultures. With semiotics, the inclusion of humor as a viable sign, worthy of investigation because of its abilities to generate and transmit meaning is possible. However, it may not be relevant in thinking about arts from other cultures. In other words, not all art has to be read the same way or based on the same values.

Barroso’s use of cheap materials and references to the mango were symbolic in his installation. This is so not because those references and others form a personal vocabulary, representing his memories or ways for him to personally sort through opinions, but because viewers could make connections and arrive at meanings depending on their backgrounds and sign competence. The signs ‘symbolized’/‘signified’ because an audience was present to activate the network of interpretations. If familiar with Cuban culture, the mango and materials could
be directly accessed; however, if not, the brand campaign with a twist can be seen a crash course on the culture through art.

*El Sagrado Corazón (The Sacred Heart), 1995, Lázaro Saavedra*

If unfamiliar with Cuban religion and politics, this second example, Lázaro Saavedra's 1995 painting, *El Sagrado Corazón (The Sacred Heart)*, could prove to be quite didactic or simply instructional. The painting is comprised of low-grade material—acrylic on cardboard—and is a moderately-sized 16 x 13-inch rectangular work. The image is of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ and could usually be found in the bedrooms of the devoted, not only in Cuba, but in many Catholic households throughout the world. The stylized image of Jesus has over the years, in part due to its popularity as a staple of contemporary Catholic devotion, established itself as an icon in the Peircean model. Though for Peirce an icon is a portrait—and it is unlikely anyone has a portrait in the strict sense of the category of Jesus Christ—the particular rendering of Jesus on the cardboard is the standard presentation, with long brown hair parted in the middle, a grown-out beard, a slender face with a compassionate or tragic expression overall leaning toward a hippie aesthetic. The heart, for which the painting is named, contains a collection of symbols of Christ’s passion: a crown of thorns, a pierced heart, and a flame traditionally representing the fire of his passion. The heart itself represents the core of Christ’s character, love. In all such depictions, the religious and others relate Jesus' demeanor and heart to Jesus’ suffering for humanity because of his unconditional, undying love for mankind.

Without all the above interpretations, it can be said there is a man in the depiction, some viewers may see just that, a man, or a man who means something to people of a particular religion. Others will see a religious deity; they may see their God. The same portrait elicits significantly different reactions. Saavedra's ideas and motivations are silenced at this initial moment, when viewers first come across the piece. By entering into the realm of religious imagery, Saavedra has relinquished a part of his artistic footprint, which is in line
with how religious imagery has been historically absorbed. Art in religious or sacred places or used in devotion is a tool to help envision a glorious moment and religious, social, and national experience. As Mosquera said, the function of art did not operate according to its own material and aesthetic merit, but only insofar as it could help with the religious or historical experience.

However, *El Sagrado Corazón*, unlike with many other images of Jesus Christ, does not remain for long a piece of religious devotion. The signifying elements operating within the cultural construct, which enable alternative interpretations of the artwork, lie in its other sign-vehicles; and according to Peirce, it lies in its legisigns. The purpose of understanding or making note of the types of sign-vehicles in an artwork is to exemplify the different levels of meaning-creation; how meaning is realized and cultivated through the acknowledgement as well as treatment of the types of ways signs operate and people analyze them.

The image is initially a well-known icon, one that may encourage deep spiritual attraction to some, and for others, simple acknowledgement. Jay Zeman, professor emeritus at University of Florida, stresses that, “It is important, by the way, to note that signs by no means need be purely icons or indexes (or symbols, either). The sign in front of a shop is indexical by its connection with the shop. But it also may be iconic, by, say, bearing a picture of a book to indicate that the shop is a bookstore” (Zeman). In this way, a well-known icon for one viewer, related with his or her personal religious beliefs and practices, might be a symbol of religion for someone else, and not an icon of devotion. In other words, it is fruitful to understand that the ways signs are interpreted by viewers varies not only as a matter of taste or stylistic preferences, but also in a manner of degree, as to how much meaning a viewer can assign to an image and in what ways. Once the image of the Sacred Heart has been noted, powerful symbols of nationalism and ideology emerge. They emerge once more quite humorously, as some of the religious-edge is taken off when viewers notice this portrait of Jesus Christ would not be one to hang in a chapel or Catholic school.
Jesus is surrounded by comic-like thought bubbles. The thought bubbles trigger ideas of comedy or narrative. There is something in the image to “read” now and not just to be absorbed as religious and devotional. Saavedra strives to visually communicate with the public in the way that language verbally and textually communicates. By utilizing religious iconography and nationalist symbols, he facilitates the process by building his meaning on top of already meaningful signs. Through humorous comic devices, he can share his ideas in an estranged way. He can disconnect himself by clothing the work in a comedic style, which people are not initially inclined to take too seriously, and thus are less likely to immediately feel offended. These conditions encourage seeing *El Sagrado Corazón* in a thoughtful, analytical way before passing rigorous judgment, which may result in feeling offended or in greatly disagreeing with what the image may represent.

In a video presented by Havana Club International S.A.’s Havana Cultura—a global initiative to help promote contemporary Cuban creativity and culture—Saavedra discusses his artistic upbringing and current artistic focuses. Saavedra shares that he emphasizes visual language and focuses on the artist’s mental activity, leading him to stress two linguistic functions: the cognitive and the communicative. His phrase that he, “wishes to exhibit in the minds of the people, and not only on gallery walls” (translated from Spanish by thesis author) evokes a very powerful semiotic image, one that describes the process of sign interpretation and meaning creation in the mind of the viewer. He also stated that he wants his works to be visually autonomous, and not just creations representative of his personal ideas so as to try to promote art as its own language. He closes by explaining how artists of his generation, who were working and engaged in artistic training in the 1980s, viewed galleries. He comments that they had a “skewed view” of what galleries were. They initially thought they were philanthropic spaces where artists exhibited their work to communicate with the public, but they eventually found out they were commercial spaces (Havana Cultura), which tends to reduce art—or anything
else—to the ulterior profit commercial motif. Knowing how artists initially perceived the role of galleries in Cuba is helpful in learning how Cuban audiences were reading artwork and were interpreting their role as visitors to the gallery, at least in the 1980s. When viewing *El Sagrado Corazón* in that setting, the way the work was being interpreted may have been different than it is now. The same images in the work may have pointed to different meanings externally. To begin to fathom what those meanings were would be very difficult, but memory is powerful and a person’s memories influence how he or she will create meaning in the present. Memories remain as a collection of sign meanings, and viewers are continuously renegotiating meanings based on passed experiences and current realities.

In 1995, *El Sagrado Corazón* exhibited in the Ludwig Foundation of Cuba (LFC) in Havana. LFC is an NGO and non-profit acting as a, “cultural center to encourage the creation of bridges of understanding in Cuba and abroad” (LFC Overview). In this case, the exhibition of the artwork took place in an environment that can be seen as philanthropic, with the aim of promoting culture and cross-cultural dialogue, not with the sole aim of selling the work. The audience before the work at LFC may have largely been Cuban as well as tourists or academics from all over the world. Standing before the work, they would have seen the image of the Sacred Heart is in the center of the canvas. Jesus’ heart is a heart-shaped Cuban flag. Turning flags into anatomical shapes carries a lot of significance. In this case, the heart-formation of the flag ties Cuba with the soul, with the essence of the person’s being and identity. It is not necessary to be Cuban to understand quite quickly that this image of the Sacred Heart is bleeding for the Cuban people. With the red garment as a background and the blue garment draped upon his shoulders, this image remains close to most renderings of the Sacred Heart. There is widespread sign-competency when it comes to seeing this image and it is unlikely viewers are initially confronted with confusion. With Saavedra’s piece, however as mentioned earlier, viewers are invited to “read” it somehow like a comic.
The Cuban flag is one of two flags and one of three national icons. The placement of the flags cannot be ignored and their positions signify different things. The placement of the Communist icon of the hammer and sickle is connected with the mouth. This connection occurs because the thought bubble ends at the mouth. There is a visual line running from icon to mouth. In semiotic terms, the thought bubble and its position function as an index, it indicates or points to something else, something it does not need to resemble—as an index finger points to something that is not itself nor represents it by means of semblance. “The pointing-to is a direct existential connection with the pointed-to, and so is an index in the Peircean sense” (Peirce’s Theory of Signs, Zeman). This index also carries an icon: the hammer and sickle. The hammer and sickle is connected with Jesus’ closed mouth through the index in a comedic fashion. Viewers may think, “Jesus wants to say something,” as they would think if they read into a thought bubble in a comic book. His forehead is tensely wrinkled, and the thought bubble next to the upper part of his head contains the image of the American flag, where the connection is also facilitated by way of the index.

To the 1995 Cuban audience, this may have elicited that “knowing smile” described by Blanco earlier. It is also part of dealing with a restrictive reality using choteo humor by combining the sacred with the trivial, with the everydayness of culture. Visual art enables this type of equalizing of forces—religious, national, communist, capitalist, and personal—in one shot. In a text, it would take a number of rather direct and expressive sentences with an open description of ideas. There would not be as much room for variety of interpretation and far more opportunity for censorship. The Cuban audience understands this because they not only need to operate as such when creating visual art, but also when interacting with neighbors or colleagues at work. In their daily interactions, humor facilitates the expression of ideas using layered meanings and estrangement techniques. In visual art, images and signs are open to the application of different meanings, and do not carry an explicit definition beside them.
When *El Sagrado Corazón* exhibited in 2012, over a decade later, in *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, at the Queens Museum of Art, in New York, the audience was much different than the 1995 audience. The opening took place during Caribbean American Heritage Month in June. The focus of the exhibition was on the works, from sculpture and paintings to film and books from Caribbean countries, the United States, and Europe. Saavedra’s piece was one of over 400 works in the show. Much of the meanings assigned to the images may have changed as a result, though the images on the canvas remain the same. The framing, like the Bienial de la Habana framework, of the exhibition theme also could have caused a shift in meaning making. Visitors of the Queens Museum of Art would have looked the artwork as part of the contemporary art world, focusing on Caribbean art. Therefore, the image of the Sacred Heart would not have been confused with religious iconography, meant to adorn a chapel because it was clearly in a museum, and contemporary art is not known for its reverent qualities—qualities that respect religion—but rather known more for its caustic criticism of authority. In 1995, there was no Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, or Pinterest. The image was not circulating in the blogosphere. In 2012, it appears on blogs and on the Google image searches. In other words, it could have picked up a lot of associations along the way, depending where viewers saw it—internet or exhibition.

In the Queens Museum, the conversation among the religious and nationalist icons could have been far less potent and less urgent. The viewers may not see their present situation as conflicting as the one depicted before them, and may appreciate the images for its colors, creativity, and wit. The cleverness would be difficult to deny, but would nonetheless not be integral to creating meaning because the function of humor may not be as crucial or central in New York, with the New Yorker the audience, as it is in Cuba. In the Queens Museum, the painting is an example; an introduction of art from the Caribbean for viewers. In Cuba, it is part of the national narrative, narrative in this case meaning it is typical of the sequence of mental events occurring in the minds of Cubans.
Cubans negotiate the images in *El Sagrado Corazón* as part of their existence.

The visual components that can be read as a narrative in *El Sagrado Corazón* come about through the use of thought bubbles and are also comedic elements in the work. The bubbles point to instances of thought associated with different mental actions through the index signs. As earlier noted, Bal turns to Foucault's understanding of art as a radical proliferation of meaning—always fluctuating and interacting with other functions. The other functions include the physical setting—the 1995 space, Ludwig Foundation of Cuba (LFC) in Havana and the 2012, Queens Museum in New York City. Bal argues that the images tell a story through signs. In *El Sagrado Corazón*, the story is revealed through sign devices commonly used in comic books, so viewers are more willing to “read” them that way. *El Sagrado Corazón* shares a story of contention and censorship.

In order to speak of censorship, the work must censor itself. Instead of mocking leaders or authority outwardly, *choteo* humor provides possibilities for opening the alternate routes to mock authority by making use of Cuban street humor. The dreaming of American capitalism, but speaking with pride, respect, and admiration for its economic, social, and political opponent, has broken the heart of the Cuban people, but not the spirit. Instead of looking at the image as an example of Caribbean art that exemplifies the nature of reality on the island, the Cuban audience may find the piece to be inspirational and may refer to it by elaborating on jokes.

The proliferation of jokes and analogies in Cuban society is also part of the country’s narrative, which tells the story of daily struggle in creative and captivating ways. The alternative to such an image for a Cuban audience may be recalling Spanish rule of the island. Instead of the Sacred Heart, an alternative religious image of the crown of thorns, with a Spanish flag as the crown of thorns and the Cuban heart on fire, plotting its revolt against the foreign power, could have also been imagined and created. Once there is insight into the ways meanings are assigned, new and alternative meanings that mimic the way the original meaning was created can follow suit. Alternatively, the method can be
reconsidered, but at least it can be initially understood. By framing it within the idea of the ‘visual narrative,’ instruction about understanding the image is given. The signs act both on their own and together to forge a meaning, namely that there are colliding identities, political structures, economic strategies, and cultural values that result in a divided individual. The story is not specific, but is part of the current of narratives that characterize many experiences of Cubans on the island as well as those in the diaspora. Laughing about authority, mocking religious and political icons, and doing so subtly are common ways of engaging neighbors and spending time with friends and family. These street culture aspects take place daily and *El Sagrado Corazón* captures these layered interactions in a visual form that is seriously comedic, and mobile, so that both those in Havana and in New York City can share in the experience.

*En la Bodeguita del Medio, De la serie Sueño Nupcial (Nuptial Dream series), 1994, Fernando Rodríguez*

*De la serie Sueño Nupcial*, like *El Sagrado Corazón*, lends itself to immediate understanding through the presence of potent religious symbols. In Fernando Rodriguez’s series *Sueño Nupcial*, it is not Jesus who makes an appearance, but the Virgin Mary. The series is comprised of five carved-wood panels, seen together in a specific order, pre-arranged by the artist. In Cuban culture and imagery, the prominence of the Virgin Mary cannot be ignored. From devout Catholics to Santería practitioners, believers pray to the Virgin Mary for help, counsel, or to seek blessings. Santería, also known as Legla de Ocha or La Regla Lucumí, is often described as a syncretistic Afro-Caribbean religion, based on Yoruba (from Nigeria) beliefs and traditions, with the addition of some Roman Catholic elements—in this case, the adaption of the Virgin Mary to suit Santería beliefs. The particular rendering of the Virgin Mary is Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre), who is also Ochún, the Yoruba goddess associated with water. Both Saavedra and Rodríguez use signs in their artwork that have already been heavily invested with meaning in
Catholicism and in Santería.

At the grassroots level, the image of the Virgen de la Caridad has been recognized primarily by the blue of her traditional costume or the color yellow, associated with the golden dress in which she was officially crowned by the Catholic Church as the patron saint of Cuba in 1916; by the boat with the three Juans situated at her feet; and by her golden brown face. (Fontanella Monterrey & Castellanos Mogena)

The description of the Virgen de la Caridad above is partly comprised of reading images based on qualisigns. The definition of qualisign employed by Peirce is, “Any sign whose sign-vehicle relies...on simple abstracted qualities is called a qualisign” (Atkin). To elaborate more on the qualisign, the definition, "A Qualisign is a quality which is a Sign. It cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied; but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign." ('A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic', EP 2:291, 1903, Helsinki Metaphysical Club) is also helpful because of the use of the term ‘embodied.’ The qualisign is an abstraction, which requires embodiment. Blue, yellow, and gold are qualities of the Virgen de la Caridad that have come to symbolize her image, but that are not symbols of her image on their own, by virtue of where they are located on the color wheel. It is through a system of signs and meaning generation, based on cultural consensus, that blue, yellow, and gold represent the Virgen de la Caridad.

The particular panel that will be analyzed within the series is En La Bodeguita del Medio (In the café La Bodeguita del Medio), 1994 because like Barroso’s installation, a typical Cuban gathering place—the restaurant in this work—is represented. En La Bodeguita del Medio translates as, “in the little market in the middle,” a very popular name of Cuban-style eating and drinking establishments. In Coral Gables, Miami, there also exists La Bodeguita del Medio and it is a popular spot to enjoy Mojitos, and unlike what can be enjoyed in Cuba, Cuba Libres. Like Barroso, Rodríguez utilizes the restaurant or café space, filling it with unexpected humorous as well as politically-relevant
elements.

In Havana, where the original *La Bodeguita del Medio* resides, the restaurant has hosted personalities such as Pablo Neruda, Ernest Hemingway, and Fidel Castro. It is also the mythical birthplace of the Mojito. Like Barroso and Saavedra, Rodríguez builds on the typical “players” in Cuban culture—the Virgen de la Caridad, Fidel Castro, Cuban restaurants, drinks, and humor. It would be difficult to memorize how and why every symbol or icon means and tells a story in Cuban visual art, but through semiotics, understanding *how* these symbols are what they are, and how they form meaning for their viewers, offers audiences the tools to access the images in ways that they can use to access many other cultural products.

An earlier example, which develops a description of Jesus with the Crown of Thorns, displays one such way of using sign-competence to access layers of meaning and generate more interpretations. It may encourage audiences to read historical texts, but it does not bind them to it. They can appreciate different levels of understanding or of interpreting the work while acknowledging that there are others. They can remain on the level of seeing Fidel Castro with the Virgin Mary sharing a meal or they can move on from there to think that there must be a relationship between the sacred and the political in Cuban culture. Signs in the image enable the construction of these ideas and interpretation through icons, colors, and references to popular culture. A more Cuban-culture savvy viewer may identify *La Bodeguita del Medio* as a significant place. The name is also used by restaurant owners in California and Mexico, and their restaurants serve Cuban cuisine. The development of the narrative does not have to follow the above stages, but the presence of a series of panels hints that there is certainly a back-story to Castro’s meeting with the Virgin at the restaurant, and this comes through in Rodríguez’s work at some points, which will be elaborated upon below.

However, *Sueño Nupcial* is not entirely the work of Fernando Rodríguez, but of Francisco de la Cal—a poor campesino (peasant farmer) who worked with
charcoal to make sculptures, but who unfortunately went blind during the first years of the Cuban Revolution. Francisco de la Cal is both a “fervent Catholic” and an enthusiastic “partisan of the Revolution” (Cuba Avant-garde: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Farber Collection, Mena Chicuri 159). As a result of his going blind, de la Cal called on Rodríguez to create works incorporating his instruction, and at times, completely presenting his point of view over Rodríguez’s. In art historical criticism, Francisco de la Cal is described as an alter ego, “fictional collaborator…as the everyman creator envisioned in the late-1960s and early-1970s cultural policy as the one best qualified to create revolutionary culture” (Weiss 119) or a “fictive collaborator” (Zeitlin 132). Rodríguez speaks of de la Cal as an individual. In an interview with Rosa Lowinger in Sculpture Magazine, Rodríguez speaks about him as if he were speaking about a fellow artist. He states he, “began with Francisco in 1990” (Lowinger). By offering a year, he gives Francisco’s relationship with him a starting point, and thus a story.

The story outside the artwork influences the interpretation of the artwork, however only if their story is known to viewers in the first place. If not, the work La Bodeguita del Medio is just seen as that, a work of art probably like many others the artist has produced. Upon seeing the 70 cm by 70 cm wood carving with paint, En La Bodeguita del Medio does not look to be the work of a fictitious alter ego, but of the artist. However, for Rodríguez, “Francisco is an artistic proposition, a way of incorporating a different point of view into art” (Lowinger). In other words, he symbolizes certain ideas and values, but he is not an icon. His image is not recognizable nor does it refer to himself immediately, but rather his presence in the works as the man sleeping beneath the panels is a symbol for a type of person such as the poor farmer.

His symbolic presence is not enough to share the story of Rodríguez and Francisco’s relationship. Here, the ability to interpret the signs can only take a viewer so far, no matter how competent the viewer is in decoding cultural constructs and sign references. There is no cultural or national system of signs
that refer to Rodríguez and Francisco’s personal interactions. It is through learning about Rodríguez’s background and intentions that they gain access to this story and to the signs in the artwork. “Like Barroso, Rodriguez can articulate much about Cuban reality because his work is appealingly toylike. And it is Francisco who is the front man” (Zeitlin 137). Viewers may miss out of the presence of the “front man,” Francisco de la Cal by not knowing about Rodriguez’s artistic methodology, but the “toylike” qualities are still appreciated. In other words, though the ‘main meaning’ is not accessed, the work of art is not meaningless. Again, people are creative and quite easily interpret signs to form and assign meaning, regardless their level of thoroughness or relevancy.

Rodríguez claims that Francisco is the protagonist and the subject, and he, as the artist, is the tool. It is not entirely clear how the presence of Francisco as front man allows him to criticize parts of Cuban life without punishment, as it is not clear how the authorities would know and thus think, “Oh, that is not Rodríguez’s idea, that’s the idea of Francisco de la Cal, so we cannot punish Rodríguez for this.” Although it would seem that the work is paying homage to Cuba’s highest religious and political icons, the stylistic elements in the comic-strip set-up may lead viewers to develop some ideas about what is unfolding before them that encourages them to rethink how the icons are actually being depicted.

Rodríguez elaborates on his stylistic choices such as the use of ‘naïve’ techniques, which make the artwork look as if in fact a poor, blind farmer had created it. Lowinger brings up the possibility of viewers ‘misinterpreting’ the work because they are unaware of Francisco’s presence. “Anyone looking at your series "Sueño Nupcial," in which you depict the wedding between Fidel and the Virgin of Charity (Cuba's patron saint), who does not know you or Francisco, could see it as an homage to Fidel Castro” (Lowinger). To which Rodriguez replies, “Yes, but someone else, especially someone within my context, could see it as a critique. That's the idea, to be in the very center of ambiguity, to let people choose which side they want to take” (Lowinger).
In other words, Rodriguez is open to the plurality of interpretations based on seeing the same signs. Generally, viewers may absorb the scene of the Virgin eating at a table with Fidel Castro while a painter or artist signs the walls of the restaurant as the figure below the scene sleeps as a glimpse into a story, as part of a larger narrative, which does not depend on the relationship between Francisco and Rodriguez. Signs have meanings even so those meanings may not lead to the ‘main’ or the ‘best’ interpretation. With semiotics, an appreciation of the process of seeing visual imagery and making meaning from those images is instilled, and it is not just about the quest to arrive at the ‘correct’ meaning, the least politically-charged meaning, or the most pro-Revolutionary meaning. Those meanings are assigned based on how the signs, symbols, and icons are interpreted by the viewer.

The Virgin and Fidel Castro are iconic images. Castro represents ideas larger than his personality and he has come to personify Communism and is the leader of the tiny island nation just 90 miles from the world’s self-proclaimed superpower and promoter of capitalistic values internationally. The images of the Virgin and Castro are icons in that they represent the people they depict in the artwork, but they stand for more than that as well, and this is what makes them symbols. They represent ideas and conventions that are learned, and meaning is then based on this acquired knowledge. The scene is one in a series of dreams that Francisco has about the Virgin and Castro. Abelardo Mena Chicuri describes comic-strip frames.

The dream is related in episodes, or comic-strip frames. Each shows a ceremony to be performed by the bride and groom according to the country traditions familiar to de la Cal. In every scene, he appears as a witness—wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses—and, in the lower portion of the frame, lying asleep dreaming.

(Mena Chicuri 159)

The comic-strip frame sets a pace and an attitude for viewing the work. It is useful to follow some ideas set forth about narrative in visual imagery as
explored by Sherline Pimenta and Ravi Poovaiah in *On Defining Visual Narratives*. Using their observations by applying them to what Bal mentioned are the narrative aspects of the image, provides insight into how viewers see a work. The narrative aspect in *En La Bodeguita del Medio* is in its comic-strip format. People are conditioned to seeing a series of images on the same plane as relational, as having a larger significance than just what is contained within its own panel boundaries, and of connecting with the other panels. The works come together to form a series of dreams, where the Virgin and Castro are present, as is Francisco. The continuous presence of the three provides signs of consistency. According to Pimenta and Poovaiah, the most essential part of a visual narrative is, “…a presence of actors (participants). An Actor is a character in the story who performs an action” (Pimenta & Poovaiah 30).

Action requires a development over time, and *En La Bodeguita del Medio* does not develop in the same ways that films or texts develop or verbal storytelling, but time elapses as the viewer sees. The story does not happen instantly, the viewer needs time to interpret. Semiotics makes room for this by defining how different signs operate (qualisign, legisign, etc) and it what ways (as icons, symbols, etc.), thus promoting the incorporation of the temporal nature of viewing art. “The visual is fixed but the viewer or the viewer’s eye is mobile. The SVN is viewed by a moving spectator, who finds connections between juxtaposed scenes that communicate a meaning” (Pimenta & Poovaiah 36). The order of viewing, unlike in a film, cannot be determined. Pimenta and Poovaiah continue, “The viewer is in full control of the contemplation time or as Goswamy refers to it ‘the ruminative viewing’ i.e. time taken to carefully regard a work of art (Goswamy, 1998)” (Pimenta & Poovaiah 37). This requires, as they stipulate, the active use of imagination on the part of the viewer. The imagination of the audiences is often forgotten in the quest to find the best interpretations of artworks. It is through their imaginations that signs and their meanings ultimately stir appreciation and significance, which leads to the construction of value systems and the creation of the vibrant parts that make up a culture. In this
analysis, the viewer is seen as a culture-generator and the artwork as part of the process of recreating and reinventing reality and perception.

In addition to its narrative aspects, the comic-strip format encourages a humorous look into what is happening. About these aspects Weiss states, “Like any proper epic the story unfolds with a wealth of peripheral detail. There are jokes inside jokes, all inside a primitivist idiom that is and is not ironic, tinged with a Rousseauian regret of the lost paradise” (Weiss 119). At the very least, it is amusing to see the leader of a Communist country sitting with the mother of Jesus Christ—considering leaders of socialist and Communist countries tend to replace images of religious deities with their own. The humor here is also choteo because it brings authority into one of the most commonplace arenas of Cuban life: the Cuban restaurant. This can be interpreted as irreverent and disrespectful both for followers of Christianity and for members of the Communist Party. For instance, “In late 1991 the guidelines for representations of Fidel were revised: it was forbidden to show him standing next to anybody taller or to show him eating, and it was forbidden to divulge any information on his personal life” (Weiss 119). Rodríguez created his series a year earlier and according to the above restrictions on Fidel depictions, he has clearly violated the guidelines.

Mena Chicuri identifies both the use of Francisco as protagonist and humor as ‘distancing mechanisms.’

This distancing mechanism, so full of humor, generates multiple tensions: between the artist Rodríguez and his role as de la Cal’s “translator,” as well as between the utopian evocations of the Revolution’s early years as recalled by the marshland farmer and the realities of contemporary Cuba. (Mena Chicuri 159)

These ‘distancing mechanisms’ work because people understand their use and function. It is common to hear the story, “So, I have a friend, and this friend would like to know…” The ‘friend’ is actually the speaker, but for whatever reason, the person speaking does not feel comfortable attributing the question the ‘friend’ wants to ask to himself or herself. By distancing himself, through layers
of humor and narrative, Rodríguez makes it difficult to draw lines between who is thinking what and how.

“Who is the cynic? Rodríguez invents an idealist and hides his own cynicism under Francisco’s credulity” (Weiss 120). However, it is not entirely clear just how idealistic Francisco truly is and this becomes apparent when he declines a hypothetical operation that could restore his vision. “But it becomes clear that Rodríguez is also being had by Francisco: at one point the blind man is offered an operation to restore his sight, but declines. “Why? Because if he suddenly saw, everything could seem a fraud to him” (Weiss 122). Perhaps his idealism, the type of idealism Rodríguez depends on to infuse with cynicism, is not pure idealism, but tainted with fear or disappointment. In other words, Francisco declines restoring his vision because he prefers to live through the imagination and through dreams than to live in reality. The dreams and imaginations can refer to the promised, but unobtainable utopia. He prefers to live with the idea of the utopia than with the reality of its failure, and it is only through his blindness that he can live in such a way and see his reality in this ‘idealistic’ light.

The ideas of utopia are part of a larger Revolutionary narrative, which has helped to fuel Cuban humor, which is severely disenchanted with false proclamations of idealism realized in society, and has influenced the network of signs and symbolism in Cuban culture. In order to deal with the lack of follow through, Cubans have made use of humor to fill the gaps between the expected and the real. Weiss even goes so far as to characterize Rodríguez’s visual language as “souvenir” in addition to naïve and “folk-like.” Essentially, nothing is refined and taken seriously, not even the style the story is shared with viewers. “It was humor through defetishizing tautology: the words were only words, the man was only a man, and their life force as concept and symbol were annihilated” (Weiss 92). In this way, though iconic, the images of the Virgin and Fidel can be humorously interpreted as: these are just two people having a meal. It can be both: the Church and Revolution coming together in holy matrimony or
a woman and a man eating at La Bodeguita del Medio.

The application of symbolic meaning and the taking away of symbolic meaning do not mean the visual works are meaningless. Meaning does not depend on one aspect of a thing, but on several, and on the interaction and the exchange of ideas in the minds of viewers, which makes for an enriching dialogue. “Something inside comedy is not funny. The form refuses to define itself on its own terms…it does more than acknowledge an ache…To be funny is to have been where agony was” (Walter Kerr, Tragedy and Comedy, Weiss 76).

Por mas que corra no llego (No Matter How Much I Run, I Can’t Arrive),
2003 Quizas Deba Partirme en dos (Maybe I should split in two), 1993

Sandra Ramos

In Por mas que corra no llego, it is the artist who has a visual presence, not religious or national icons. Ramos’ face appears in photographic form above a childlike drawing of a yellow snail shell, lined with tiny, yet muscular legs. Upon first glance, it will most likely be interpreted as comedic or “adorable” by the viewers. The signs operating to instill feelings of endearment and to disarm viewers are results of the “childlike” rendition of a snail. Children’s creations are typically both a source of joy as well as of uninhibited honesty. Children have not yet learned how to navigate through their environment with finesse when engaging certain topics and are not often socially tactful. This makes for comedic work, which is free from the social restrictions adults obey.

Though Ramos is not a child and did not create these pieces when she was, she utilizes, like Rodriguez and Barroso, toy-like or youthful stylistic choices to create a distance among herself, the Cuban reality, and her criticisms of it. Through this “innocent” visual style, she may or may not encourage viewers to see the more nostalgic, sarcastic, or painful layers of the work. The title, however, may point audiences in a certain direction, but it can still be interpreted as representing a stubborn child or the typical characteristics of adolescents as rebellious and frustrated. These meanings are assigned to the snail
shell as well as to the legs, which refer to the human form. Essentially, Ramos is saying something along the lines of, “I’m not really moving forward, I am making about as much progress as a snail.” This message is transmitted with the help of the title of the work, and would arguably be quite different or open to more possibilities if the title was excluded. It could visually be open to a whimsical interpretation about the synthesis between human and animal. It could also be comparably frivolous to the more “correct” message, and taken to mean that the artist must like snails. These possibilities are acceptable from the viewers’ perspective, but generally outside the art historical scope. Art historical methodologies tend to ignore these forces and eliminate them by focusing on the artist and on other art criticism, and by neglecting the spheres of the audience and the culture. It is not necessary to think about every possible meaning when writing art historic reviews and art criticism, but within semiotic framework, there is an understanding that meaning-making possibilities are vast and complex. Naturally, some of those meanings are more useful in art history given the motivations of the discipline. However, those that make it to the art journals are not the only meaningful interpretations. Thus, art education benefits from fields such as semiotic pedagogy, which has also incorporated visual art in education curriculums to create connections and to teach about culture, with the aim of sharpening analytical skill sets as well as tapping students’ imaginations and problem-solving abilities. “You make judgments about what you perceive as part of your ongoing way of being in the world. It is a continuous process” (Peirce and Work Ryan 23). Viewers do not operate outside their paradigm of perception and judgment, which is formed by their habit and experiences.

Perception...includes information gathering, the seeking of sensation or of inspiration, and the selection of the stimulus to be attended to. Judgment includes all the ways of coming to conclusion about what has been perceived. It includes decision making, evaluation, choice and the selection of the response after perceiving the stimulus. (Myers and McCaulley 12)
Essentially, artwork is the focus of art criticism, but it can also be utilized by people in ways not covered or promoted through the traditional study of art history. The perception of the audience is based upon many variables and negotiations. This thinking is not out of line with current cultural and art historical scholarship, which is becoming more multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary. As mentioned earlier, semiotic pedagogy can be applied to art education. The prevalence with which semiotics is being employed by academics in different fields and professions from marketing and psychology to humanities and anthropology represents how versatile methodologies have become as part of larger contemporary conversation that is about redefining the defined.

In Cuba and for Cuban audiences, the meaning may be more specific and may represent part of a narrative of lost utopias through a lens that is tinted with sarcasm, satire, and disappointment. The sarcasm is characterized by frustration, which is the fertile ground of choteo. The idea of progress through a visionary way of structuring society and government is questioned and mocked. In a society where progress, revolution, and activism were the proclaimed foundations, there are snails slowly crossing the sidewalks with the heads of people.

The symbol of the snail is less culturally dependent. The snail is a slow-moving animal compared with human beings, so it would not take a great cultural leap to think that immobility is a theme. The use of the snail is more versatile than the use of a clock or hourglass because although it symbolizes time, its purpose is not to tell time. Also, though the snail’s speed is not an attribute that requires insight into Cuban culture to understand, the ways the qualities of the snail influences meaning-creation is not static. The meanings associated with animals change as other parts of society change. The snail is slow and lined with a kind of mucus, which is unappealing to many people. However, if snails should be the center of a food scandal, when eating edible snails cause adverse effects, the association may change. Symbols are relevant as they are other ways of expressing an idea and sometimes articulate ideas better than literal
statements. In Ramos’ piece, the snail largely symbolizes the slow-moving process toward a state of utopia.

The idea of utopia has not been previously discussed in this thesis, though it is heavily discussed in discourses about Cuban art and culture. However, utopia here will be analyzed as a system of signs that have created an experience, in this case, an unattainable reality. Propaganda art and rhetoric have promoted the utopian vision through signs—as icons and symbols. In other words, utopia is a theme, and the ideas associated with it are present in visual art as signs and are communicated through narratives. The unreachable nature of utopia is often mocked in *choteo*, which may arrive at absurd ways of dealing with the disappointment or of taking it lightly.

In Ramos’ *Quizas Deba Partirme en dos*, the suggestion to split into two parts is offered as a way of dealing with a rupture in Cuban culture, which is symbolic of the description of exile or diaspora. As a result of a lost utopia, the individual is left torn. Many family members and friends may have left the island, breaking the union of the cultural identity. In this work, Ramos is not present in the photographic sense, but as a drawing of an ‘Alice in Wonderland-like’ cartoon. She stands in the center of the image plane, with her head turned to her left. Like in Rodríguez’s series, where the background relationship between Rodríguez and Francisco is not visually clear, it is not obvious that the young girl is Ramos. While this interpretation could have been the preferred one—the one where the young girl is just that, a young girl and not a representation of the artist—it is more so given the existence of such things as Google images.

With Google images, the image of the artwork can show up as a result of a specific search. The user does not even have to click on the image; he or she can see it in relation to other images generated by the search. In such a situation, the image can be interpreted in a radically different way than if encountered in an art exhibition at the Fraser Gallery in Washington, DC, which is a gallery that represents Ramos and has many of her works. In a Google search, it is one of many images, depending on the search text and search setting options, while in
the Fraser Gallery, it is a part of Ramos’ larger body of work, which includes other pieces where she represents herself through drawing and photograph.

These possibilities again focus on the environment of the viewer, which is not only an art historical focus, but also the aim of many branding, marketing, and service-oriented campaigns that seek to learn about the user and the ‘user experience.’ Viewers may not know the young girl is the artist and may more easily attach her image to a fairytale character. It can be assumed that Ramos is aware of this and decidedly enters into the storytelling traditions and depictions of fairytales to share a ‘typical’ tale about a confused young girl in a chaotic world.

Among other images sharing the frame with Ramos are a palm tree, an airplane, the island of Cuba, a bull’s eye target with arrow, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and a picture of Antonio Maceo, a well-known Cuban hero who was a vital figure in the struggle for independence from Spanish rule. These symbols bring the Cuban setting to life and many of them point to things are that externally interpreted as exuding ‘Cubanness’ such as the palm tree and the national hero. However deeply associated these symbols are with Cuban culture, Ramos has remarked, “In today’s world, it is difficult to establish what defines national art. The national interest is increasingly more diffused and extremely varied” (Remba 290). This description exemplifies how the artist acknowledges the use of symbols and their associations with Cuban realities, but also how they can be reshaped and diffused through different filters to combine interpretations and redefine meanings.

Ramos mimics those interactive possibilities through visual narrative. Namely, these symbols refer back to Cuba insofar as they form part of Ramos’ narrative about her personal experiences or insofar as the audience will interpret her work to be Cuban. How the audience views her work is something she thinks about.
…sometimes, it is not a good thing to be recognized by government officials, because it may actually compromise an individual’s artistic integrity. The state may request that you work collectively with other artists on a pre-selected theme—for instance, to decorate a hotel with a mural—but, the work might be interpreted as propaganda. (Remba 291)

Propaganda art then, according to Ramos’ definition, is themed, calculated, and prescriptive—there is a certain message in the minds of the authorities that they would like to have visually transmitted through art and artists are well-versed in visual coding, so they can reach the public and should therefore be employed to send the message. In Ramos’ piece, she is torn, and she is not transmitting a unified message, sanctioned by the government. The images are not haphazardly placed, but are strategically located to show a story, with Ramos and Maceo in the center. Without understanding who Maceo is, which is more likely than not recognizing the Virgin Mary or Fidel Castro, his presence at the center of the artwork provides a clue as to his importance. However, not all cultures see ‘centeredness’ as communicating the highest level of importance, so it is important to take into account that it is through tradition that the central position of an image may hint at importance. His image not does simply appear at the center with Ramos’ fairytale youth, but is contained within a triangular shape that looks to be inserting itself into the young girl’s body, above her exposed chest, which is marked with the bull’s eye target, and struck with an arrow. Her young body becomes a point of interaction for forces much larger than her. To her right, the viewers’ left, are images of Cuban life characterized through symbols of family, community, and ‘tropicalness.’ A palm tree raises high above, to reach the level of the Cuban hero, Maceo, over a street game of hopscotch and people holding hands. There is a sign with the island of Cuba on it as well as a farmhouse. The perspective is rather flat, only Ramos really comes out and appears in front of the other images. Her exposed chest is uncharacteristic of young female fairytale characters in today’s society, where it
can be interpreted as crude or even pornographic. Her exposure can symbolize a lack of innocence, similar to its symbolism in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve found out they were naked and were ashamed as a result. Interpreting nudity as vulnerable is only one way of seeing it, as there are others who find nudity empowering. How symbols are utilized to comment on aspects of society such as power or to describe personal feelings such as vulnerability depend on their visual attributes as well as on the ways the culture has needed them. Symbols are tools, their function is created and meaning assigned based on interpretation, which is geared toward obtaining an understanding. To attempt to understand is to have a desire to see something in a light that is cohesive with other experiences and that helps to illuminate an idea, event, or reality.

To her left—also the direction she is facing—are images associated with the world outside Cuba: the Leaning Tower of Pisa, an airplane, and a question mark. What happens when one leaves Cuba, particularly to non-Latin countries? This may be the most obvious inquiry the question mark is meant to ask. The bull’s eye is an iconic sign whereas the question mark is a grammatical punctuation mark. It is utilized in writing to ask, with the goal of receiving a reply. However, there is the rhetorical question, and this aspect of the mark in the artwork cannot be ignored. Another meaning that be derived from the question mark is a rhetorical one such as Why leave Cuba at all? What is really better if leaving means great personal, emotional, and mental loss? The depth with which this question mark is analyzed by viewers depends on their backgrounds. The artist has clearly engaged this question after years of contemplation and personal experience.

Joan Miro was quoted saying, “You can look at a picture for a week and never think of it again. You can also look at a picture for a second and think of it all your life.” This experiential component of viewing artwork is extremely relevant when thinking about the endurance of symbols and their complexity, about how they impact the viewer, and his or her creation of meaning. As with all other cultural products, the effect is difficult to confine or completely define.
Although *Quizas Deba Partirme en dos* has been largely interpreted until now as a nostalgic, tragic, and ambivalently frustrating piece, it is also sarcastic, and thus somehow humorous. The title, which appears as a written thought in the cursive style beneath the work, can be interpreted as a sarcastic solution to a difficult and painful situation. Unlike in Barroso’s *Third World Internet Café*, the words in Ramos’ pieces are not associated with a brand or with the name of a restaurant, and are more like sentences, containing a complete thought. In Rodríguez’s series, the words were used to describe a scene, and did not make any suggestions, and in Saavedra’s piece, words were not utilized. The words also facilitate the referring back to the Cuban motto that, “everything can be resolved,” in this case by splitting in two to alleviate an emotional strain.

Sometimes ‘resolving’ means using toaster parts to fix a motorbike or wood to build a computer, but in Ramos’ case, splitting into two parts may help to ease the mental turmoil. The presence of Maceo at the splitting point can come to symbolize that to tackle these issues requires heroic strength and courage. Using the symbolic associations Cuban audiences may assign to Maceo’s visual presence, Ramos can communicate what it may require to deal with the heartbreaking situation she depicts. References to national heroes are powerful symbolic tools because with the image comes a string of actions that have characterized the national icon according to the type of life led. In Maceo’s case, the symbol brings meanings of national pride, sacrifice, and eventual victory. The element of sacrifice is an important symbol. In order to navigate the Cuban reality, sacrifices must be made, relationships are strained, and resources need to be pulled in from unlikely places to resolve problems.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of visual art adds an energizing layer in the understanding of contemporary Cuban society. Its political, economical, social, and cultural themes operate in a variety of accessible and initially-seeming inaccessible ways in the artworks given the polysemous nature of visual art. Using narrative
techniques and humor to share their reactions and interpretations, the artists aim to generate meaning that viewers can agree with, expand upon, or completely neglect and ignore. Without the present audience, the intended-audience, or the artist, the work is still a product of human creativity, though without inherent symbolism or meaning. With semiotics, visual narrative and humor can be analyzed as part of the system of signs prevalent in the cultural environment as symbols for events, ideas, or frustrations. Though artists attempt to frame the experience and reception of their viewership, signs operate in complex ways resulting in an indefinite amount of possible readings.

The reception-user orientation of the semiotic analysis makes room for these possibilities because it encourages the understanding that these new meanings result from a ‘conversation’ between art and audience. Semiotics allows for this shift in interpretative authority to oscillate from artist to viewer, ultimately leaving what signs mean up to the audience, which draws from a system of signs that is dynamic and ever changing, not static and inflexible.

Art is susceptible to the same type of meaning reassignments and reinterpretations, as are other elements of society because it is a ‘socializing agent’ (Fluck) and as a result, is open to new insights. Artworks, as collections of signs understood to function as art through ‘sufficient collateral experience,’ (Caruana) refer to events, ideas, people, and places outside of themselves. Visual art requires the activation of imaginative thinking by both the artist that creates it and those who see it. Imagination is a powerful human faculty that enables the creation of culture and that characterizes the human experience as a collective sharing of existence in the world. Each member of society has an ‘average encyclopedic competence,’ (Violi) which allows him or her to interpret signs and assign meanings according to social and cultural values and customs.

My analyses demonstrate how a semiotic approach, with special attention to the cultural components that influence meaning-making such as sign-competence, can be utilized to describe and interpret humorous and narrative possibilities in visual art. Barroso’s Internet Café installation is not solely about
his ideas, but also about what audiences think when they enter and interact with wooden computers. The work of art becomes a point of reference for larger conversations about how we mean what we mean and why. Rodríguez’s protagonist, Francisco de la Cal, operates in a dreamlike setting, where very real parts of Cuban life interact with one another outside of the standardized hierarchies established by the government, religion, and society. The dreamscape encourages a blending of rules and a reshaping of norms. Applying the semiotic approach to signs within the five-panel series sheds light on alternative readings. These readings are a result of understanding the cultural significance of blue or gold, for instance, or of the Virgin. These formal elements in the realm of signs can be aesthetically and culturally activated to encourage meaning creation.

By activating these associations and placing proper emphasis on the audience’s point of view, an interesting and varied description of Cuban humor emerges. These descriptions depend on the audiences. International audiences can refer to more general theories of humor such as incongruity. In isolating instances of incongruity, the viewer can work from that operative platform to assign symbolic meanings and craft interpretations. They can do so informed by specifically Cuban aspects, such as choteo, and begin to develop a vocabulary of symbols, signs, and ultimately meaning. If the selected artworks would be used in a didactic way to articulate a definition of Cuban humor—essentially understanding what Cuban humor is from the perspective of the art analyzed—then one possible outcome from this may be that Cuban humor is layered, complex, and hybrid. It readily draws from religion as it does from politics; it is reactionary, and a common and communal mode of expression. In other words, Cuban comedy is not just for entertainment purposes, and a hearty laugh is not necessarily the obvious reaction to hearing Cuban jokes or seeing visual humor.

Practical application of ideas discussed in this thesis includes deriving texts or themes for study abroad programs to Cuba or for Cuban culture or art curriculums. Students unfamiliar with Cuban culture may appreciate the semiotic perspective as applied here because it demonstrates the process of making
associations and of being aware of influences beyond the canvas, installation space, or the artist. Visual art is a versatile object of analysis, capable of stirring fruitful conversations in classrooms or research centers. Contemporary visual art analyses and criticisms can act as a starting point for igniting ideas and dialogue. Visual art encourages unconventional thinking because the collection of signs operating as the work of art relate with one another and with culture in complex ways. What an artwork means or signifies must therefore be discovered and discussed. This promotes group work and collective and collaborative thinking.

Humor is also a binding social agent. It encourages clever conversation, which relies on sign subtleties and a sharp wit. Students can actively engage the work on different levels to discover and build associations. Narratives assist in identity formation in its passage and reimagining. Together, semiotics, culture, humor, and narrative have been inspiring points of reference as well as challenging aspects to discuss and interpret.

Scholars such as Deborah L. Smith-Shank have combined semiotic pedagogy and visual art curriculum in order to promote an enriching learning environment; one with the aim of expanding and disrupting the boundaries surrounding the study of art and writing art criticism. In her introduction to *Semiotic Pedagogy and Visual Culture Curriculum* she states, “Studying the multiple and intersecting visual sign systems within a cultural group’s artworks and artifacts helps make the contents of a culture more explicit, facilitates critical responses, and can be used to assist learners in their quests to understand the multiple ways cultures are organized, developed, and communicated” (Smith-Shank *Introduction*). Audiences benefit from high levels of explicitly as well as from the encouragement that art criticism and interpretation are activities for every individual in a culture to partake in and discuss. With these insights, looking at contemporary Cuban art develops as a learning process for the individual and can open up new ways at looking Cuban society.


Remba, Natania. "Globalization in the Contemporary Cuban Art World."


<http://linguistics.byu.edu/classes/Ling490Peirce/Psummary.html>.
Appendix

Selected artworks: Mixed-media paintings and installation

FIGURE 1


<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/bildn/publications/documents/Remba29_00_0.pdf>. 
FIGURE 2

FIGURE 3

FIGURE 6
