

## Between Strategy and Action

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(Includes excerpts from the text “En torno a Laboratorio Arte en Confinamiento” [“Around Laboratory Art in Confinement”], by Yenisel Osuna Morales published in Foro Cubano Vol 3, No. 22, 2020

### **Foreword**

Six centuries ago, Indigenous communities in Cuba lived in harmony with nature. We’re talking about a Cuba surrounded by forests and virgin lands. Communities that applied an incipient but sustainable agriculture: a harmony that was fractured after the Spanish colonialist domination that was imposed on our island. Four centuries of exploitation, indiscriminate felling of trees, burning of waste, and accelerated loss of organic matter from the soils, resulting in half of our forests disappeared. As a neo-colony, fifty-seven years were enough to leave us with only 14% of the original forest area. We also inherit from that era the dire consequences of monoculture farming.

All this brutal impact on the archipelago must be taken into account to preface Cuban agricultural history in its adversity, and to that we must add the revolutionary period with its own restrictions that affected the agricultural production. Six decades have passed since then.

### **Special Period Initiatives**

The sudden interruption of all imports from the Soviet Union brought an end to the many bonanzas that it had provided us. Agrarian modifications were introduced to confront the dismemberment and economic helplessness our country faced, which initially arose spontaneously, and collectively, as a popular response to the food crisis the population suffered. Between 1993 and 2005, citizens themselves initiated and maintained methods of urban and family agriculture, which, although they did not solve food problems, did become an exemplary entrepreneurial experience, demonstrating the effectiveness and drive of civil actions. Unfortunately, the smaller urban gardens that emerged in this period no longer exist, but some of the best semi-urban farms established in that time do, whose production can be considered profitable, even today.

On the other hand, the Cuban government also undertook actions to confront the crisis, creating the Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPC), organizations that demonstrated the validity of branched and small-scale production to feed the population, reversing the tendency toward a nationalization of the land and its centralization within the state sector.

The 2008 Agrarian Reform gave small farmers, individuals, organizations, and companies practically free access to land in usufruct. The government handed over one million hectares.

### **The *Lineamientos* [Guidelines]**

Actions aimed at improving what our agriculture urgently needed (and still does) were ratified in a draft of guidelines for economic and social policy, outlined on November 1, 2010, in preparation for the VI Party Congress. Promising aspects included: lowering production costs and moving towards the use of organic fertilizers and similar products, based on the application of science and technology; making the different cooperative forms independent from the intermediation of state companies; restructuring the current system for the realization of supplies and equipment; modifying the harvesting system; putting into practice a country-wide suburban agriculture program. Finally, gradually substituting food imports for those that can be produced in-country.

### **The Reality**

Panning history lands us in uncertain terrain. We realize the lack of stable, coherent, and satisfactory results, or that could decisively take us beyond mere possibility. Agriculture continues to be a sector in need of development, limited by multifactorial implications, some of a climatic nature, others where the issue is man-made, including the cultural and political circumstances.

At present, in 2020 we are talking about eroded soils that are low in nutrients, due to poor irrigation management or excessive use of the plow, and of large expansions of inactive or underutilized land; of the 11 million hectares in Cuba, six can be considered agricultural, of which only half are used<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Environment Agency in 1997 considered the degradation of soils as the main environmental problem that Cuba has. It is pointed out that 75% of the country's land is affected by at least some factor limiting its productivity. Many of the causes derive from environmental circumstances that affect Cuba and the planet. (Taken from: *Gabriela M. Fernández. ¿Son productivos los suelos en Cuba? [Are the soils productive in Cuba?] OnCubaNews. 8 de Mayo de 2015.*

Other issues are: insecurity in land tenure, the incoherent prices that the Acopio<sup>2</sup> system imposes on peasants, bureaucratic difficulties in establishing secure marketing channels, and the persistent inability of many peasant farms to organize value chains that provide and distribute agricultural products without price inflation, often tripling or quadrupling once they reach the sales points in the country<sup>3</sup>. Transportation limitations on distributing food and discouraging payments to producers are also aggravating factors that, among others, inhibit an expansion and diversification of productivity.

Achieving a change of perspective towards effective agriculture must incorporate the implementation of innovative strategies, supported by multisector activities. Education, to foster a deep awareness, must be an area of reflection and priority. It must cover from the most external social and political layers to the very centers of communities, in a relationship of involvement and exchange and with a coherent interweaving of social and environmental objectives, aimed, fundamentally, towards a prosperous and responsible quality of life.

It is on this line of thought that Evolving Natura is located. An art project conceived by Samuel Riera and Derbis Campos, which—in the face of the social challenges and confinement conditions imposed by COVID-19—invites us to rethink urgent issues such as ecological agriculture, climate change and its social implications in a Cuban context.

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<sup>2</sup> The Sistema de Acopio [Collection System] for agricultural products, especially vegetables and grains, sometimes known simply as "Acopio", began as Empresas Provinciales de Acopio [Provincial Acopio Companies], subordinate to the organs of the Poder Popular [Popular Power] (organ of the public administration of the government of Cuba). In 1986, with the elimination of the Mercado Libre Campesino (The Free Farmers' Market), these companies were incorporated into the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAG), creating the Unión Nacional de Acopio [National Storage Union], through which agricultural products are acquired by direct purchase or contracting and are distributed or marketed in a manner wholesaler or retailer.]

<sup>3</sup> Family farms and peri-urban gardeners produced in 2016 between 63% and 86% of the main national crops in Cuba. (Taken from: *Louis Thiemann, Max Spoor. Beyond the "special period": land reform, supermarkets and the prospects for peasant-driven food sovereignty in post-socialist Cuba (2008–2017). Canadian Journal of Development Studies, 40:4, 546-563, 2019.*)

Involved in seed collection, these two creators began to prepare sprouts of legumes, greens, and vegetables.

Now, what we see growing in Riera Studio are not crops from a common orchard. The sprouts (...) have required extraordinary care. We have taken into account not only the growth of the plants, in terms of water, sun and transplants, but also special spatial conditions, exposure to sunlight, humidity, and other considerations for irrigation, which is essential to ensure the development of these crops in such unusual places as on a desk, inside wooden structures, or on mesh frames. In short, we paid attention to every detail so that germination was achieved with the beauty and regularity that they show and so that, thereafter, we could harvest the desired food, which is what the project is ultimately about.

(...) Relating the crops within fractal architecture also originates a didactic dimension of the project (taking into account the assembly and disassembly of the wooden structures to which the crops adhere) aimed at suggesting symbolic forms of a kind of harmonious and respectful coexistence, between humans and natural habitats. A conflation of aesthetic, didactic, and reflective values that Evolving Natura has contemplated since the beginning of its gestation.

Evolving Natura finds its precedents in another project called Picturing Climate—a 2019 collaboration with a group of artists, activists, and researchers from the United Kingdom, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Jordan, where the artwork also revolved around agro-ecological and environmental problems. Supported by the humanistic sciences and using art methodologies, on this occasion they developed a series of actions with primary school children to whom they taught basic notions about urban agriculture, its importance, and methods to put it into practice, which resulted in the creation of a complete garden that was prepared and used within the school.

(...) A few days after the start of the confinement period in Cuba, the preparation of the first lentil sprouts began at Riera Studio. Samuel and Derbis busied themselves with ecological and urban agriculture issues with a different conscience, because (...) the sprouts were foods that were suddenly disappearing from stores around the country.

This is an artistic project that sheds light on several considerations. On one hand, it constitutes a reflection on the importance of organic food cultivation in environmental and economic terms; on the other hand, it makes us think of history, its connections, about the Cuba of the 1990s and the Cuba of COVID-19, about food shortage and possible alternatives.

To paraphrase Borges, humans possess a secret treasure that allows them, under any personal or global duress, to always come up with eloquent solutions. To that secret treasure, which is none other than hope, and to those eloquent solutions, man has clung today as he had not needed to for a long time.

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