The Cuban art historian, critic, and curator Gerardo Mosquera and writer Elizabeth Hanly met in New York City last April. Their conversation took place shortly before Mosquera returned to Havana after participating in a curriculum planning seminar (funded in part by a Getty Grant) at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies.

Gerardo Mosquera was born in Havana in 1945 and received his degree in the history of art from the University of Havana. From 1975 to 1980 he was head of the Department of Press, first for the National Council for Culture and later for the Ministry of Culture in Havana. From 1980 to 1985 he was Advisor for Visual Arts and Design to the ministry, and from 1985 to 1990 he was head of the Department of Research at the Centro Wifredo Lam in Havana, where he was also co-curator of the first three Havana Biennials. Through his curatorial work he has been instrumental in placing contemporary Cuban art before a wider audience, not only in Cuba but also in the United States, Angola, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Mozambique, Venezuela, and Zaire.

He has taught and lectured at universities and other institutions in more than fifty cities in Latin America, the United States, Africa, and Europe. A prolific writer, he has published more than 350 essays, articles, and reviews in journals such as Art Criticism, Artforum, Art Journal, Cahiers, Imagen, Kunstforum, Poliester, Third Text, *and* Oxford Art Journal, *among others; in catalogues for numerous international exhibitions; and in nearly a dozen books including the forthcoming* Dictionary of Art *(Macmillan) and* Latin American Art in the 20th Century *(Phaidon). In 1990 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. His current projects include tentative plans for exhibitions in England and Spain of work by young Cuban artists.*

Elizabeth Hanly, who has a longstanding interest in Latin American culture, has written for The New York Times, Miami Herald, Village Voice, New York Newsday, ARTnews, Elle, Vogue, Lears, Omni, *and* Mother Jones, *among others. As a human rights reporter during the eighties she traveled to Honduras, El Salvador, Argentina, and Paraguay. She has visited Cuba five times in the last six years on assignment for magazines ranging from the U.K.'s* Guardian Literary Supplement *to* Allure. *Among her current projects is a book on the religious imagination and the erotic in Cuba.*

Elizabeth Hanly: Would it be fair to say that the visual arts in Cuba have been at the cutting edge of critical discourse on the island?

Gerardo Mosquera: Well, historically this may not always have been the case, but in postrevolutionary Cuba the visual arts have become the locus of the most radical experiences in the culture, certainly with the emergence of the generation that came of age in the late seventies and early eighties. That is, the visual arts have become a critical space within Cuban society, unlike many other societies in which the visual arts are the preserve of an elite and thus less directly engaged with the society at large than theater, music, or literature. Today the visual arts in Cuba have become practically a substitute for the press, the electronic media, even the meeting hall, and have assumed functions usually provided by these other institutions. In this way a critical culture has taken root; from the visual arts it has broadened to include the other arts.

Hanly: A number of young artists and poets have described to me the early years of the revolution, the early sixties, as a golden age of Cuban culture.

Mosquera: It may be convenient for discussion to divide the history of art following the revolution in Cuba into three main periods. The first one was the sixties; these were the so-called hard years—which is also the title of a book of short stories by Jesús Díaz, *Los Años Duros,* published in 1965. It was the time of the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy assassination, deepening United States involvement in Vietnam, sweeping social changes. Paradoxically enough, during those violent

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times, with guerilla wars all around Latin America, and with Cuba in the center of much that was going on, the cultural scene in Cuba itself was quite open. There was a lot of energy in the air, with Cuban artists feeling quite autonomous from state control.

Hanly: Early on, were there attempts to create a "revolutionary culture"?

Mosquera: No, I don't think so. And that's an important difference from what took place in the Soviet Union in the twenties during those romantic early days of Mayakovsky, Tatlin, and Rodchenko, that insofar as modernism was already deeply ingrained in the life of the arts in Cuba, when the revolution occurred modernism simply continued. So, on the one hand, there were no decrees from the state, trying to impose a doctrine of socialist realism or whatever. On the other hand, neither did we have our Rodchenkos, our Maleviches, our counterpart to the Russian avant-garde spirit, to transform the whole culture as the Soviets did. Consequently, the culture that emerged in Cuba was largely an extension of what was already developing in literature, in the visual arts, in music, and so on. But what happened in the sixties was that the state began to provide a lot of support for culture. The cinema, for example, experienced an upsurge, and it's no exaggeration to say that the state virtually created the film industry in Cuba.

Hanly: But by the late sixties things had changed, no?

Mosquera: Yes, Cuba, as you know, had been playing a revolutionary role all over Latin America. After the failure of that movement, and after Cuba had spent all the money that was left over from the days of Batista, the country was in a mess. There was no systematic organization, there was nothing, only utopian ideas. By 1968 the situation was critical: the economy was in a terrible condition, everything was falling apart. The government's solution was to form a closer alliance with the Soviet Union, and by the beginning of the seventies Cuba had become part of the Socialist bloc. In cultural terms this was very bad because under the Soviet influence, although the Cuban regime still didn't impose any aesthetic dogma of socialist realism or the like, it did exercise greater control over intellectuals and cultural life. The government might, on moral or ideological grounds, marginalize many of the most important artists and writers. For being homosexual, for instance, you were marginalized; for deviating from the party's guidelines, you were marginalized. This happened to many of Cuba's leading writers and artists: José Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera, Cintro Vitier, Antonia Eiriz, Servando Cabrera Moreno, Manuel Mendive. . . . Such was the situation during the seventies, the second period of art history in revolutionary Cuba.

But I insist you can't match this to the situation in Eastern Europe at that time because, as I mentioned earlier, there was no official style imposed, and because the modernist tradition was very strong in Cuba. What the regime did, however, was to ask for an "ideal"—meaning ideological—art, a sort of superficial cult of Cuban identity. So artists, even though they continued to develop the modernist idiom, were following the official guidelines, and those artists who wished to pursue a different course found themselves consigned to the margins of the culture. The state was promoting propaganda-type art, so you had countless paintings of *campesinos* and revolutionary heroes.

Hanly: I remember hearing that the painter Servando Cabrera Moreno's answer to his work's not being shown in galleries and museums was to give one of his paintings to most of the important cultural figures and bureaucrats in Havana. The paintings were simply too beautiful not to display, so whoever went to those homes in Havana would see these huge lilac-colored canvases of gay lovemaking.

Mosquera: Yes, and there were other forms of protest, like that of Antonia Eiriz and Humberto Peña, who simply abandoned painting altogether. Without any declaration, any formal statement, they just stopped painting.

Hanly: Forever?

Mosquera: Well, interestingly, Antonia Eiriz, who is now living in Miami, just recently began to paint again, twenty-five years later.

It's highly original work; for a point of comparison you might perhaps look to de Kooning.

Hanly: So the next phase would coincide with the coming of age of a new generation of artists at the end of the seventies. I doubt anyone could have predicted that it was with this generation, the first trained in the revolution's own art schools, that the state would lose whatever control it had on the visual arts.

Mosquera: Yes, these people were born in the late fifties and early sixties, so their life experiences were entirely inside revolutionary Cuba. And they came from all social strata—blue-collar workers, *campesinos*, Afro-Cubans—but they all had received professional training, so they were aware of art history, aesthetics, semiotics; they were well informed about what was going on in New York and elsewhere. What they held in common was a deeply felt commitment to doing art without chains, so to speak, art free of any connection to official culture. Implicit in this stance was the commitment to abstain from the opportunism that characterized what many other artists had begun to do in the early seventies, a recognizably "Cuban," or more precisely, Cuban-flavored, style of art, which had been generously rewarded in the form of stipends, grants, prizes. These new artists wanted to pursue a different direction.

Hanly: Were the art schools in Havana superior to their counterparts in Eastern Europe?

Mosquera: Perhaps they weren't any better in pedagogical terms. The difference was that modernism was not merely tolerated or accepted, but was an integral part of the orientation of these schoools and had been so for quite some time. So even though the teaching was academic, the ethos was much more liberal than in Eastern Europe. What's more, many former students went on to become professors.

Hanly: Immediately after graduation?

Mosquera: Yes, by then the system had grown so large that additional faculty were needed, so a number of the recent graduates who were thought especially talented were offered professorships, and their presence gave a really fresh accent to the art schools. These artists wanted to be open to information and to use new methodologies and languages in art. As a practicing art critic I got involved with them at the end of the seventies. At the beginning it was far from certain that they would be given the opportunity to show their work; we were exploring different possibilities for producing an exhibition, and I began to write about them.

Hanly: So we're talking about José Bedía, Tomás Esson, Flavio Garciandía, Rubén Torres Llorca—

Mosquera: Yes, and Alejandro Soto, Ricardo Brea, and others, all or most of whom are living abroad now.

Hanly: It must have been quite a moment.

Mosquera: The feeling was exhilarating, similar to what I suppose it must have been like for the avant-garde in Paris at the turn of the century—the sense of fighting for something that mattered, a passionate concern about art and culture, the possibility of making a difference, of doing something new.

But of course for a work of art to have an impact on society, it must be shown to the public. And in Cuba in the late seventies we found this to be extremely difficult. Finally, after many attempts to secure an exhibition space, we approached the officials at the "L" Gallery of the University of Havana, and they said yes. So the work was assembled, a catalogue was printed, and everything was set for the opening in one week. And then we received word that the exhibition had been canceled because a university official had come to preview the show and had considered it not to be, shall we say, ideologically correct. So we were asked to remove the pieces from the gallery, and that was all. I did manage, through a friend, to get several copies of the catalogue from the warehouse before the rest were destroyed; the surviving copies are something of a curiosity now.

Hanly: But the matter didn't come to rest there.

Mosquera: No, what happened next is that the artists met and resolved to keep pursuing the goal of an exhibition. A delegation went to the Ministry of Culture to make their case, and again the answer was no. So it was decided to put together a show at the house of one of the artists, José Manuel Foros, and for the opening they invited everybody, including bureaucrats, prominent cultural figures—*everybody.* It was like an underground event, but there was no effort whatsoever at secrecy, and so a huge crowd came and had a party. The atmosphere was youthful and exuberant, and the event had a very strong impact on the bureaucrats.

Hanly: Of course there was no coverage in *Granma* [Cuba's official newspaper].

Mosquera: To be sure! But the fact that this turned out to be such an event put the bureaucrats in a difficult position. They were afraid that an underground culture might begin to grow, a movement that, over time, might become increasingly opposed to the regime. In the end they relented and gave the artists a chance to show their work officially, and this was the famous exhibition "Volume I," which took place in January 1981 in Havana at the Galería Central del Arte Nacional.

Hanly: Three years later!

Mosquera: Three years later, yes. But that show marked a new era in Cuban culture; afterward, other artists were able to show their work, and as a result the nation's cultural atmosphere was reinvigorated. The visual arts had never before assumed the vanguard position in Cuban culture, a role historically occupied by music or literature.

So from here a critical culture began. Originating in the visual arts, it expanded to theater, music, and dance.

Hanly: I remember the Pedro Luis Ferrer song from the eighties: "The old uncle would rather tear down his house than have anybody touch a shingle that he built."

Mosquera: In theater, too, there's a lot of strong opposition to the status quo.

Hanly: Are you speaking of guerilla theater?

Mosquera: No, these are plays that get produced in the conventional way. But there are many cases of censorship; it's an ongoing battle. So dramatists often use allegorical modes of discourse, speak in metaphors. Other times they're more direct. No matter, everybody understands what they're talking about. The cinema, too, with such films as *Adorable Lies,* has been quite critical.

Hanly: When was that film released?

Mosquera: About four years ago, from a screenplay by Senel Paz.

Hanly: Many of the young poets that I've spent time with, those gathered around Reina María Rodríguez, regard Paz's work as compromised. I haven't yet seen the latest film he worked on with Gutiérrez Alea, *Strawberry and Chocolate,* but many of the young were nearly contemptuous of the Paz novel it came from.

Mosquera: Well, I didn't like it very much either. But that film is different.

Hanly: Do you think it's because of Gutiérrez Alea?

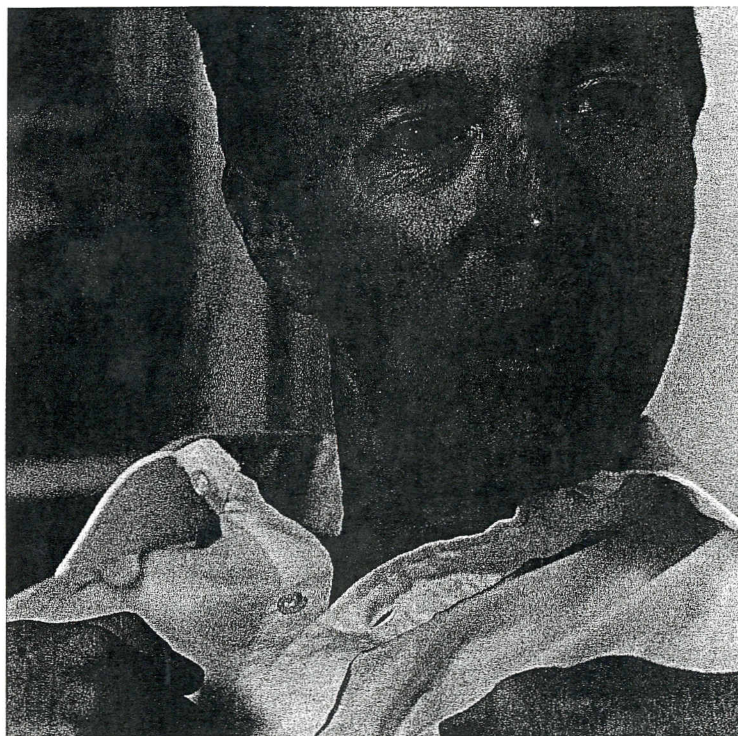
Mosquera: Yes, and probably Paz sensed the time was right to do something more liberal.

Hanly: It's confusing for me that at one moment, with *Adorable Lies,* he was able to create something marvelous, and then with this book that came a few years later, he was, according to some people whom we both respect, backpedaling.

Mosquera: I don't think that's his strategy. I think it's to stay just inside the borders. He's one of those intellectuals that we find in this socialist regime who seem to know exactly what they can do and still remain within the limits. For better or worse, that's how it is.

Hanly: But certainly the painters you were describing were trying—

Mosquera: Oh, yes, they were going beyond every border, and so were the people in theater. There is a critical theater in Cuba now, quite direct and very good indeed. In recent years—and here I'm speaking generally—the critical spirit has become pervasive in Cuban culture, and I think it's because of a genuine need to deconstruct all this false represen-



tation, this rhetoric that we receive through the media, through the official propaganda, which is everywhere. Lacking another forum to discuss our problems and concerns, to articulate our goals, we've made culture into that forum. It's hardly surprising that such a culture will be critical, given that both the press and the university are controlled by the regime. As for theater, the intent of the plays is not so much to criticize specific policies but to bring into sharper focus such issues as the problems of socialism, of utopia, of the transformation of society in general, and to do it in a, let's say, philosophical way. I remember going to a performance of a play by a young dramatist whose underlying commitment was to socialism, but whose approach to the issues was highly critical, very disturbing. Numerous times during the performance, people stood up and applauded; the ambience was electrifying. After one weekend a ban was imposed, and there were no further performances.

Hanly: It's a wonder that the play was ever performed in a theater at all.

Mosquera: But, you see, the society is not monolithic; there are many people who are trying to support such things, many individuals who are in sympathy with what is expressed in such plays, or paintings, or poems. It is a continuing battle.

Hanly: But at this point can we say that the visual arts are leading the battle?

Mosquera: In my view, yes.

Hanly: What happened to the street art movement of the eighties?

Mosquera: Oh, you're referring to the Grupo Arte Calle. Most of those artists are living abroad now, but for a couple of years in Havana they drew on sidewalks, painted murals in popular neighborhoods, and gave street performances that resembled political rallies. A lot of them have left the country; a few were jailed, but for unrelated reasons.

During the same decade there was another development in the arts, one which arose from the circumstances of some of the young artists I was speaking about earlier, namely, their involvement with the Afro-Cuban religions. These were young people who grew up within families whose connection to those spiritual traditions spans many generations, in neighborhoods where Afro-Cuban religious practices were part of everyday life. And this is a very different kind of initiation from what an intellectual might undergo who becomes attracted to these rituals and myths. So here you had these artists receiving professional training, exposure to Western art forms, aesthetics and critical theory, and so on, and a very interesting phenomenon occurred: professional artists, Western-educated, making art with a worldview steeped in certain profoundly unique aspects of Afro-Cuban culture. Their art, often installation art or art related to conceptualism, tended to focus not on the religious rituals or trappings, the outward forms, but on the content, on meanings based in the non-Western world. In a way, they were taking a different route to go to the heart of the society.

Cuba, I think, has produced the epitome of African American expression, at least in the visual arts and probably in music as well. Think of painters like Wifredo Lam, José Bedía, Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas, Manuel Mendive, Minerva López, Ricardo Brea, Marta María Pérez Bravo—it's really quite a lot.

Hanly: Is work of that quality being done elsewhere in the Caribbean?

Mosquera: No, I think it's unique to Cuba. All around the Caribbean you'll find what I think is a more formalist approach, using the outward signs, the myths and images, the reproduction of altars and rituals in art. But this more *internal* expression is, I think, found only in Cuba. And it began with Wifredo Lam and the pioneering ethnography of Fernando Ortíz and Lydia Cabrera back in the forties and fifties.

Hanly: Speaking of Afro-Cuban religion, would you agree—this is a preoccupation of mine, as you know—that there is an uncanny reverence one can feel on the island?

Mosquera: Probably your approach is more romantic than my own because I myself am living inside what you're describing. But there is something haunting about Havana. Maybe it has to do with Cuba's being the site of many different cultural expressions. On one hand it's very white; there's a white Creole culture which is very strong. On the other hand it's very black; we have more African traditions than Brazil. In Cuba, as you know, there are four main African religious systems: Palo, Santería, Arará, and Abakuá. Then we have voodoo from Haitian immigrants, and a lot of hybrid cults. Besides, Cuba is, after all, an island, a situation that has facilitated many connections among even more traditions over time.

Hanly: The coexistence of all these cultural expressions hasn't always been comfortable for Cuba, has it?

Mosquera: Well, you know, in Latin America generally we've had a problem with identity. There was the early settlement of Europeans in Latin America and the presence of an indigenous population of Native Americans, and then the importation of African people through the slave trade. All this created a certain instability, an ontological insecurity with regard to defining our identity. So always we Latin Americans have worried about whether we're Europeans, Africans, *indígenes,* or whatever. At times we wanted to be more European than the Europeans; we've considered ourselves less African than we might wish. It's always been an issue. But I think it's time to get rid of all this and just be ourselves. And what we are is this mosaic. We have to take upon ourselves the fragments, the collage, and not try to construct this totalization whereby we define ourselves as *mestizo.*

And probably we should be acting more, rather than reflecting on our identity. In fact, I think the Cuban experience during the eighties had to do with acting out of our identity.

Hanly: No wonder, then, that Cuban culture today is a critical culture.

Mosquera: The culture is responding to our current situation; the government has to deal with that, and the process is one of continual negotiation. Sometimes this may be hard for the American reader to understand because of the prevailing image of Cuba as an oppressive society with no space for confrontation, although that's not really the case.

Hanly: Are you working with young artists these days? What are the youth of Cuba doing?

Mosquera: Well, there's a new movement that I've named the Weeds because they receive almost no attention and yet somehow they thrive; very strong, very vital. I'm working with them.

Hanly: How old are these kids?

Mosquera: Typically around twenty-two, twenty-three years old. Many of them are students or recent graduates of the Instituto Superior del Arte.

Hanly: Given the economic crisis in today's Cuba, where do they get their materials?

Mosquera: In practical terms I don't know how they manage. They pilfer materials from here and there, or they receive things from abroad. Some of them make wooden sculptures; they're very interesting. But they steal the wood. They really do!

Hanly: Are they getting their work exhibited?

Mosquera: Yes. The Havana Biennial earlier this year included some of their work, probably to convey a good image of a free atmosphere in Cuba. But I'm sure many bureacrats and people in power were upset by what they showed.

Hanly: Can you describe any of the pieces?

Mosquera: For example, an installation by a young artist known as Cacho, who's twenty-four years old and beginning to exhibit internationally. In the gallery he used a compass to find exactly where north is, and then placed on the floor a fleet of small boats, made out of wood, paper, cardboard, like toys made by a child, hundreds, thousands of them, arranged in the shape of a triangle like a fleet heading to the north. And part of the fleet consisted of old shoes, personal objects, and also rafts and small boats made of lead—a very poignant reminder that some of these raft and boat people are surely going to sink and drown. It's truly an impressive piece. He says that he'll keep doing boats as long as the problem persists.

Hanly: You worked on earlier biennials?

Mosquera: I worked as part of the curatorial team for the first three biennials, and at the same time I was head of the Department of Research at the Centro Wifredo Lam. The Centro was created in 1984 as an institution to research and promote so-called third world contemporary art—art from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. The Centro Wifredo Lam organizes the Havana Biennials, which are huge exhibitions of contemporary art from these continents, accompanied by workshops, symposia, and the like.

Hanly: When did you leave the Centro?

Mosquera: In early 1990. It was becoming difficult to write as I wanted to write and still maintain my professional position there.

Hanly: When you write now about the Weeds or other artists, does anyone urge you to stop? Have you experienced any interference with your writing?

Mosquera: No, I really don't have a problem with interference, at least not directly. Of course there are other forms of pressure; the last time I returned to Cuba after a trip to New York, I was subjected to a prolonged search at the airport in Havana. For more than two hours they searched all my luggage, half a dozen customs officials looking for some document that might be compromising for me.

All the other passengers had left, and the search continued. I was carrying tons of mail from people here in the United States, and they opened every envelope. They retained some exhibition notices and catalogues and slides; I'm still trying to recover them from customs.

Hanly: Isn't it contradictory to create that kind of havoc for you at the airport and yet not to interfere with your writing?

Mosquera: Except that my articles appear regularly in journals abroad; I'm known outside of Cuba. For instance, I'm currently writing a piece for the Centro La Reina Sofía in Madrid, and if the Cuban authorities interfered, it could create something of an international scandal. Not a scandal with a capital "S," but trouble all the same, because La Reina Sofía is a prestigious institution, and they would ask, Why won't you allow this internationally known critic to write this essay for us? Much easier to create problems in a space that's totally under control, as in the airport, where everyone is required to go through customs, so you're completely in their hands. But, you see, they know very well that I'm not trying to play the role of a dissident, that I'm not a CIA agent or anything of the sort, that I'm not in contact with any of the political groups in Cuba. I'm simply trying to be part of a culture, to put forth my own ideas, and to work in my field.

Hanly: I know you don't want to throw yourself any bouquets, but there aren't many other people in Cuba who are writing about the new art, about groups like the Weeds, or their equivalent in theater. Not only that, but I can't think of another Cuban who's living on the cutting edge of the cultural scene on the island and reporting on it for the international community.

Mosquera: Yes, it appears that my situation in Cuba is rather unique.