



Contradiction Is My Logic

A Conversation with

Alexandre Arrechea

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Alexandre Arrechea, who was born in Cuba, worked as part of the well-known collaborative Los Carpinteros before embarking on a solo career in 2003. Now, he navigates between living in Spain and exhibiting in biennials from Venice to Taipei and in museums from New York to Honolulu. “The Map and The Fact,” his recent show at Magnan Metz Gallery in Chelsea, closed last month. Last year, in addition to several gallery exhibitions, he installed “No Limits,” a collection of 10 steel models of New York skyscrapers, along the Park Avenue Mall. Though recognizable, these icons came with a twist, reconfigured into unexpected new forms—a flag on a pole, a striking serpent, a pentagon, spinning tops, and an ouroboros (the snake eating its own tail). It took me a while to understand this subversive imagery. Why turn the Seagram building into an up-jutting fire hose? Why tilt a Courthouse tower to resemble a traffic barrier? As Lowery Stokes Sims explains, Arrechea “destabilizes these power symbols, thus preventing them from successfully assuming whatever political philosophy that might seek to co-opt them.” Earlier this year, *No Limits*, a film exploring power and architecture and featuring Arrechea’s Park Avenue works, was shown at the Rome Independent Film Festival.

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Opposite: *Conspiracy*, 2007. Wood and Formica, 87 x 17 x 32 in. Above: *Dust*, 2005. Blown-glass punching bag and debris, 14 x 42 in. each.

Jan Garden Castro: *How do you balance life and career?*

Alexandre Arrechea: When you are aware of what surrounds you, you have the perfect tools to build your work. My work contains my experiences of having a family and friends, of living in different countries, of being a Cuban. I don't separate things. I was born in Trinidad, Cuba, in a humble family that trained me, since I was a kid, to give more than I received. My mother, even when we didn't have enough money, always had something in her hands for our family and friends. I inherited that.

JGC: *Could you discuss the subversive images in *Conspiracy*, which was included in "Against the Grain" at the Museum of Art and Design?*

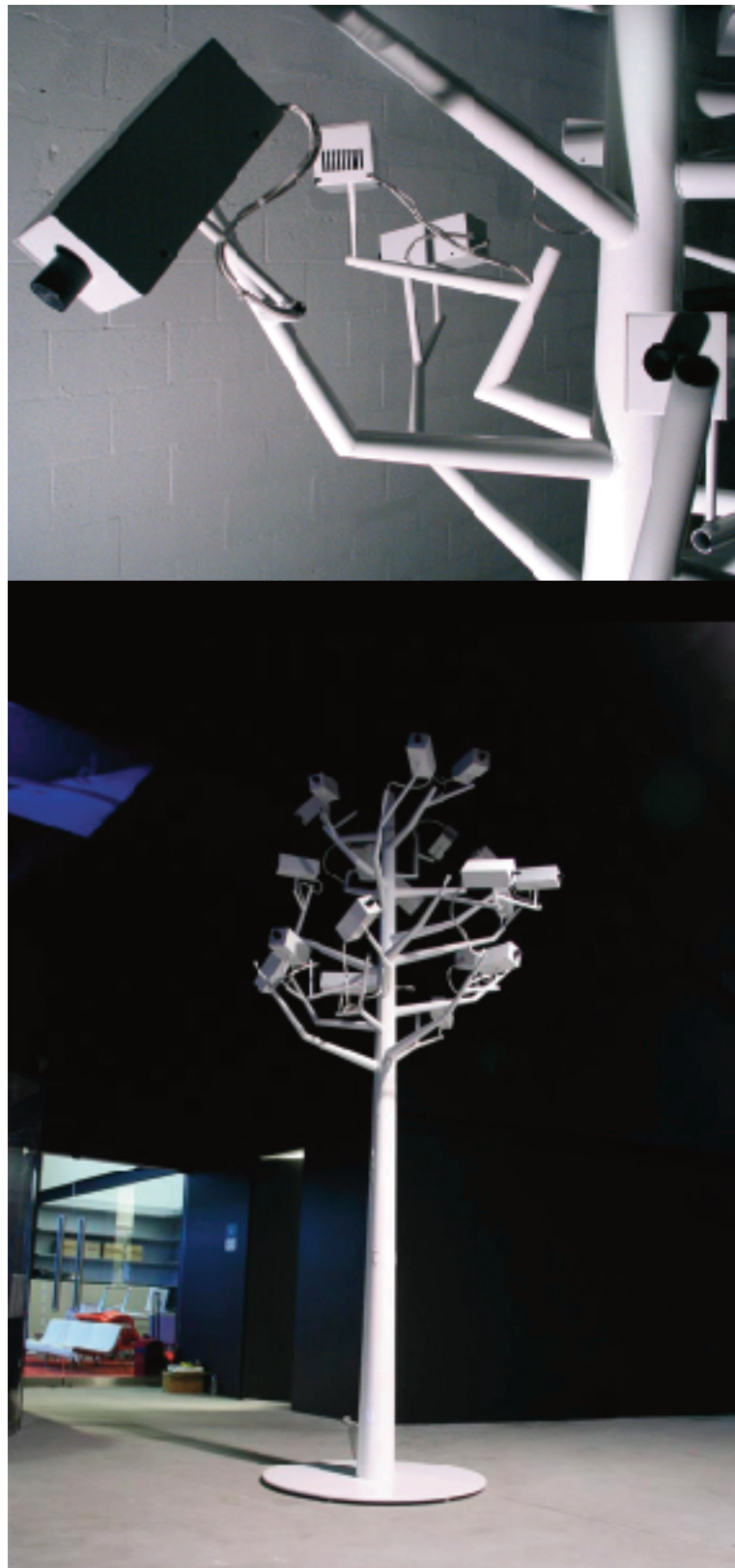
AA: My work has dealt with architecture for many years. *Conspiracy* comes from a period when I was focused on issues of surveillance and control. Prior to that, I had done *The Garden of Mistrust*, a metal tree with a surveillance system in its branches. In *Conspiracy*, I tried to create instability in the concept of what contains what. In this case, the chair contains the building rather than the building containing the chair. For me, the chair is the place where you sit down and ideas start to emerge. So, *Conspiracy* creates instability in familiar concepts. It was also the first time that I returned to making objects out of wood after my work with Los Carpinteros.

Somehow, my relation to architecture was natural. I was born in one of the most beautiful cities in Cuba—Trinidad—and from a young age, I was surrounded by magnificent buildings. Furniture, too, is part of the colonial past in Trinidad. Since then, as a student and as a professional exhibiting in art galleries, the buildings of Trinidad, Havana, Madrid, and New York City have influenced my notion of working with architecture. These cities deal with different social realities, yet they all share a love of architecture.

JGC: *How did you handle the transformation from student to world-traveling artist?*

AA: In early 1990, I first exhibited my work as an art student in Havana. This was the first of three periods for Los Carpinteros. Dagoberto Rodriguez and I were working together without being fully conscious of it until we realized that we should do our first show together. Our professor, René Francisco, encouraged students to create collaborative works. Dagoberto and I were already a team, so Marco Castillo joined us. That show was so successful that the National Museum acquired our student pieces. We fell in love with the idea of trying to create a second show, which we did, along with a third one.

An invitation to the Havana Biennial in 1994 consolidated our team. As we continued, we became better known, and we showed our work in cities around the



Above and detail: *The Garden of Mistrust*, 2003–05. Aluminum, surveillance cameras, and projectors, 157 x 71 in.

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world. After 13 years as Los Carpinteros, we had done so many things so fast. At 33, I wanted the challenge of creating my own work. I had already gained the beautiful tool of collaboration, which I will never lose, and I decided it was the right moment to start a new career as a solo artist.

JGC: *How many years did you do video and mixed-media work before getting back into sculpture?*

AA: For me, it's more about the ideas than the medium. I am an alchemist, and I try to mix as many formulas as possible, including video and performance. What drives me is the challenge to discover new things.

JGC: *What did you do for the Venice Biennale in 2011?*

AA: I created *The City that has Stopped Dancing*—three spinning tops that carry three buildings from Havana. Each represents a period in Cuban architecture—the Bacardi Building from the late '20s (the company no longer exists in Havana); the Someillan Building of 1957; and the Russian Embassy from the early '80s. Those three moments in Cuban history were important, especially in relation to stopping dancing and our ability to make things dance again. The work questions, but it also gives some answers.

JGC: *What are some of the inspirations behind "No Limits?"*

AA: There are several aspects to "No Limits." One is the notion of New York as a city of no limits. Then, you have the events of recent years, with the market crash and failure in so many different areas of the economy. Being driven by excess and the market has created a question: Do we or don't we need limits? My work plays with that idea.

JGC: *You used the ouroboros image for the Helmsley and Sherry Netherland buildings, explaining, "New York is a beast that is trying to devour itself constantly." Why did you choose these buildings to explore the myth of the ouroboros?*

AA: It's simple. These two landmarks are as important for me as the Empire State and Chrysler buildings. They're part of the architectural history of Park Avenue, and I needed a metaphor to capture the idea of New York as a city that is constantly trying to devour itself. In a beautiful way, a snake that bites its tail is the perfect image of Western society—demanding a lot from us and asking us to make it new. In my case, I have been influenced by New York since I came here at a young age in '96; even when I'm not living here, the city is shaping me. Every new trip to the city, you see that it wants more from you. The ouroboros symbol of eternal return to the same point is perfect for me.

JGC: *Was scale important in these works?*

AA: The tallest sculpture is the Courthouse. This is meaningful to me because it's the law first and then the rest. It was also the first of the 10 to be installed.

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Someillan, 2010. Aluminum, wood, and resin, 84 x 43 in.



Left: *Courthouse*, 2013. Aluminum and steel, 20 x 4.3 x 3 ft. Center left: *Helmsley*, 2013. Steel, 15 x 14.5 x 2.6 ft. Bottom left: *Citigroup*, 2013. Foam, polyurethane, and steel, 16.5 x 6 x 2 ft.

It resembled a sort of traffic barrier closing the entrance at Park and 60th Street. It leans to the right to show that law and order can collapse.

I want to transform architecture into a moving system rather than something stuck in one place. Architecture doesn't move in the sense that a car moves, but in terms of the ideas that a building contains. The law sometimes fails. The sculpture tries to show this aspect of the building, which is not visually contained in the actual building.

JGC: How did you decide to turn the Citigroup and MetLife buildings into spinning tops?

AA: For Citigroup and MetLife, I wanted to continue the experience I had at the Venice Biennale with the spinning tops of Havana. The idea explores the fragility of any system, and its capacity to fail, which gives others the opportunity to make it work. The pieces have a ball-bearing system underneath, and they rotate if you apply some force. I wanted the idea of a city that is constantly rotating rather than being stuck. In March 2010, I projected a wrecking ball onto the Nasdaq billboard in Times Square; *Black Sun* was about creating a tool to visually remove, in some way, the basis of the economic crash. But the wrecking ball projection is not the right tool to make it happen. The spinning tops are my reaction to that fragile moment in the economy — not only in this country but around the world.

JGC: In your 2007 solo show at Magnan Projects, "What Could Happen If I Lie?" you used building materials in unorthodox ways, creating a steel hand and a glass punching bag. And you've mentioned the tree that sprouts surveillance cameras, which you created for the Ellipse Foundation in Portugal. What is your strategy for combining effective protest and effective art?

AA: When creating something, I take both my social experience and personal experience into account. I can't control my personal experiences. The title, "What Could Happen If I Lie," came from events that happened to me personally. First, back in the late 1980s, I forged a pass to enter the Havana Film Festival. I was able to see the films for free, and no one questioned my forged credentials. But in 2005, when I was traveling to Berlin on a visa with multiple entries and returned to Spain, I was stopped by the police at the airport; they said that my visa was counterfeit. I explained, "I was granted this visa at the Spanish embassy in Havana." They said, "No, you're faking this and we're taking you into custody." As they were questioning me, the friend who brought me to the airport that day returned



Right: *Flatiron*, 2013. Aluminum, 18 x 6.5 x .75 ft. Center right: *Seagram*, 2013. Steel, 20 x 9.4 x 3.3 ft. Bottom right: *Empire State*, 2013. Steel, 15 x 10 x .9 ft.

to check his next day's ticket for Brazil. As he was walking toward the counter, he saw me being escorted by two giant policemen. He asked, "Alex, what's going on?" I replied, "Please explain to these guys in your beautiful German that I'm not faking this visa." They took me with my friend to a back room and discussed my situation in proper German; finally, they told me I had to go to a certain point to make sure my passport was right.

So, I came up with this idea: What is a lie and what is the truth? Another piece from this 2007 exhibition consists of two hands, one containing true facts about my life and the other containing lies. At some point, you don't know what is the truth and what is the lie — it's about the fragility of credibility. *Dust*, the glass punching bags, was from my first solo show at the gallery in New York. It contains dust and debris from different parts of the world — a geography of my travels. The clear punching bag allows you to see elements of where I stayed, but if you want to touch them, you have to break the glass. Contradictory elements — and the tension between them — are the basis of my work. In some way, contradiction is my logic.

JGC: Could you talk a bit more about your history with *Los Carpinteros*?

AA: Our first project, *Para Usted (For You)*, opened on January 28, 1990 in a cigar factory. We were a duo creating small objects out of cedar, the wood used to keep cigars fresh. We used cigar leaves, too — we felt that we owed the cigar industry something. At the time, only the cigar makers visited the project. There is a tradition dating from the 19th century of reading novels or newspapers to the laborers in cigar factories; we wrote what inspired us to create these objects and read that to them. They clapped on their tables with the knives that they use to cut the leaves. The workers all doing that at once was important to us. For the third project, there were three of us. *Pintura de Cabalete (Easel Painting)* included painting and sculpture, which the National Museum bought, and it appeared in *Sculpture* magazine.

JGC: What is your credo going forward?

AA: The closest word in English is nonconformity. I never conform, even with what I do. I always want more — that pushes me to keep going. Creation, in some way, is the only language that has no limits or borders. The only way to have good projects is to keep questioning. It's a process that never stops.

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