



Dirella Lazo

FROM HAVANA TO KUNSTHALLE

Adrián Melis addresses the contradictions faced by the practice of work or of 'non-work' in a post-communist society and also the issue of 'non-work' due to unemployment in a neoliberal society

It all began in the [Bòlit Centre for Contemporary Art](#) in Girona, Spain, when Adrián Melis (Havana, 1985) along with a few artist friends, presented his new works to Rosa Pera, who in those days was the director of the institution and who was already familiar with it due to his participation in the 10th Havana Biennial. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that it all began at the Biennial itself, or at Tania Bruguera's *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*, or in Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) or at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Art. The truth is that after the encounter in Girona, Melis was invited to participate in the collective exhibition *Dread of Being Devoured, Desire to be Devoured*, a show that gave him immediate exposure in the Catalan scene. And the chain of events continued: Adam Szymczyk, director of Kunsthalle Basel, came to know Melis's work through Bòlit's website and invited him to take part in the consecutive exhibitions *How to Work* and *How to Work (More For) Less*, which took place in April and June of 2011 respectively. A year and a half later Szymczyk reiterated the invitation, this time to offer Melis a solo exhibition.

The Value of Absence (24 March to 26 May, 2013) is the first wide-ranging personal exhibition in a public institution of Melis's career. The show is fundamentally organized around two main themes. On the one hand, the contradictions that are faced by the practice of work or of 'non-work' in a post-communist society as a Cuban, and on the other, the issue of 'non-work' due to unemployment in a neoliberal society such as Spain.

The exhibition begins with the video *The Making of Forty Rectangular Pieces for a Floor Construction* (2008). The images show a factory that is no longer in production while the background sound, improvised by the company's own workers, recreates the usual functioning of

the machinery during a single workday. *The Making...* introduces a distinct element to Melis's early work, which is the collectivization of the elitist practice of art through collaboration—in this case of civil servants who, voluntarily or in exchange for some symbolic retribution, trade in their unproductive state for the productivity of a *cuentapropista* (a self-employed worker). In other pieces such as *Production Plan of Dreams for State-run Companies* in Cuba (2010-2012), exposed in the same room, the collaborators, *sine qua non* of the artist's works, commit themselves to writing down the dreams they have had during their 'work-time nap' on a piece of paper. The final installation compiles over three hundred mass-produced dreams, resulting from boredom, lack of interest, tedium or mere tiredness. Unlike earlier projects where collective participation was not compensated financially, in other works such as *The Value of Absence – Excuses to be Absent from your Work Center* (2009-2010), a monetary exchange is established between the artist and the participants with ends that are more symbolic than lucrative. For this project Melis bought and recorded the 'excuses' presented by the workers to be away from work. The price of an excuse equaled the amount of money that was subtracted from their paycheck for being absent from work, so that the worker earned the same amount whether they went to work or not. The project involved a total of 114 workers whose excuses resulted in 327 days of absence from work, the costs of which amounted to the unlikely number of 3065.65 Cuban pesos (about €95.6, according to the current exchange rate). A great example of doing 'more with less', to paraphrase the Bauhaus aesthetic slogan.

Towards the end of 2010 Melis moved to Barcelona. Both the change of context and the realization in 2011 of two exhaustive exhibitions about art 'produced in' and about Cuba (Galería ADN, Barcelona and MAS, Santander, both in Spain) led to a process of adaptation and research into this new context whose first results are shown at the Kunsthalle. *The Best Effort* is the most refined and sharp of these results in this new interaction. For this project, Melis created a new campaign, still active today, in which he announced the offer of thirty jobs for Spanish people in Switzerland. The ad included a phone number that could be contacted for more information. Incoming calls were redirected to a phone installed in the exhibition space in such a way that every time someone called to show an interest in the job offer an audio recording was activated, reproducing an extract from Spanish president Mariano Rajoy's speech on 4 November 2012, in which he promised to create five million jobs in Spain. *The Best...* shows Melis's usual wit for illustrating the contradictions between political discourse and concrete reality.

Let's hope that *The Value of Absence* will manage to fairly contextualize Melis's work within the international young artist scene, and that it will be a preamble to poetics that are constant, solid and committed to the context of his work.

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