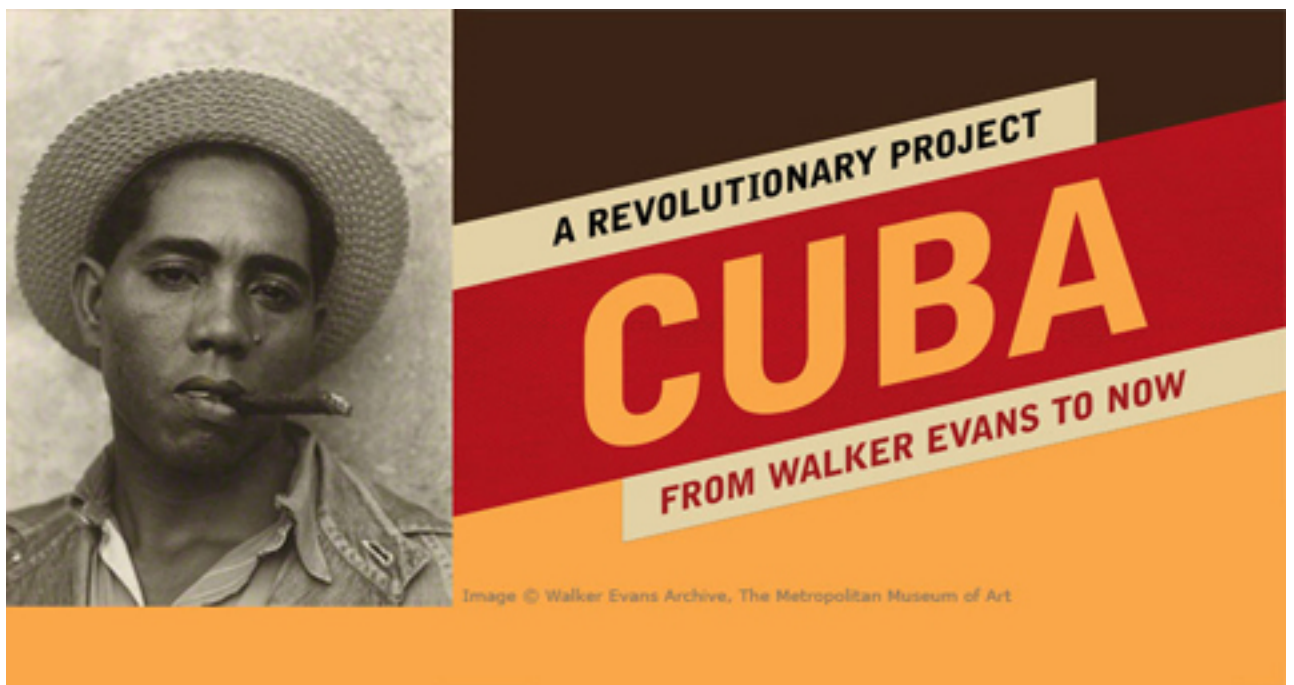




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Our Men in Havana: Walker Evans and Alexey Titarenko

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Seventy years separate the American photographer Walker Evans' images of Cuba from those of the Russian photographer Alexey Titarenko. When Evans went to Havana in 1933 it was on assignment by publisher J.B. Lippincott to provide illustrations for Carleton Beals' political *exposé* of the corrupt Machado regime, *The Crime of Cuba*. Beals was a highly regarded essayist who had written for many left-leaning magazines such as *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Harper's*. During a more than fifty-year writing career he published more than forty books.



THE CRIME OF CUBA

CARLETON BEALS

When Alexey Titarenko in 2003 made the first of his two trips to Havana, it was a personal photographic journey into the ethos of a city that, like his native St. Petersburg, bore the scars of its revolution in the hearts and minds of its people, but also in the very foundations of its once beautiful architecture.



Untitled, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2003.

The current photo exhibition at the Getty Museum examines Cuba, mainly the capital city Havana, through the lenses of Cuban and foreign

photographers in three crucial periods of its history. The fifty-five photographs of Evans are all from the extensive holdings by the artist in the Getty's collection. The thirty plus images from the revolutionary period, 1958-1965, are all by Cuban photographers, mainly Osvaldo Salas and Alberto Korda. The latter made the iconic portrait of Che Guevara that graces T-shirts worldwide and for which the artist received virtually no royalties. He also made the powerful image of ranked women revolutionary soldiers, much in the spirit of 30s Soviet era photographers whose images served the Stalinist agenda.



Plaza de la Revoluccion, May 1963, Alberto Korda, Skrein Photo collection.
The third section of the exhibition features three non-Cuban artists. Virginia Beahan worked mainly outside Havana in the villages,

roadways and beaches and the countryside; she photographed many highway propaganda billboards as well as a haunting landscape of the beach of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion.



Hombre Nueva, Las Tunas, photo by Virginia Beahan, 2004.



Roadside Billboard in Santa Clara, photo by Virginia Beahan, 2002.

Alex Harris, a student of Evans, is attracted to contemporary iconography exploiting the full range of saturated colors in the chromogenic prints that he and Beahan prefer. Harris is especially attracted to vintage car interiors, monuments, and sympathetic portraits of women.



Sol and Cuba, photo by Alex Harris, May 23, 1998.

But it is the Russian, now transplanted to New York City and quickly mastering English, whose work best provides a link back to the quotidian human images of Evans' 1933 Havana.



Old Havana Housefronts, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.

Dilemma, 2006, photo by Alexey Titarenko.

Evans had studied in Paris a few years before he traveled to Havana, and the Cuba assignment was one of his early commercial jobs. In Paris, he had been drawn to the street photography of Atget whose documentation of old Paris included many storefront window displays and signage, images that soon became contrasting tropes of French Cubism. Evans explored all of these stylistic themes in the Havana images. They quickly morphed into recurrent motifs in his work for the FSA and Roy Stryker's photo unit; but they were first developed in Cuba.

Titarenko found the iconic Korda image of Che painted on the wall of a crumbling building, an echo of his own St. Petersburg images of signage.



Che, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2003.

Evans and Titarenko both explored the back alleys and rundown parts of the city and the people who lived and worked in its cramped quarters. A short film from the early thirties that is contemporaneous with Evans' photo essay shows a much different view of the capital, one that emphasized the newness and modernity of its public squares and government buildings. Although it is a tourist view of Havana, it is a revealing portrait of the rhythm of life and the pride of its people—a look into a lost world that bares traces of its still recent colonial past but more than a generation before the revolution that brought Cuba isolation and boycotts by the US, and the subsequent crumbling

infrastructure that is the Cuba we know today. It is a perspective that is very much embodied in Titarenko's impeccably toned black and white photographs.

The anonymous flow of Cubans going about their everyday rounds or posing for Evans' lens already hints at the empathic vision he will demonstrate a few years later in his work in the agrarian South.



Coal Dockworkers, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.

It is in the more candid images of people in the streets that reveal the formalist underpinnings of Evan's seeming socio-political portraits,

such as this almost Cubist, fractured view of men and hats,



People in Downtown Havana, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.
Or this lone snoozer amid a rank of chairs in a park.



Parque Central II, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.
Or the triple portrait of a full figured woman, a gawker and a hastily retreating figure,



Woman on the Street, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.

and of a barber and his customer, who seems as intent on looking at Evans as the photographer is at looking at him— and where the white-suited barber is echoed in the customer sitting in the uni-pod, white pedestal chair.



Havana Barbershop, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.

Titarenko's portraits tend to be made from a wider perspective, placing his subject within a broad architectural field that carries with it a metaphor of decay.



Balcony, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2006.

The seven decades that separate these two visions of Havana are also a window into the soul of its people. Although Evans was aware of the lash of the corrupt and cruel Machado regime, he was not much of a

political animal and his photos reflect none of the leftist rhetoric of Beals' text. Titarenko, on the other hand, had come of age in the waning days of the Soviet empire and had lived inside the toll that a totalitarian government had taken on its citizens and on his beloved once-imperial city.

Evans' formalist photograph of a horse cart is wondrously static like a sculpture,



Mule, Wagon, and two Men, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.

while Titarenko's of a man and his broken-down car pulsates with tension.



Square/Broken Car, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2003.

Is Titarenko's study of a woman standing in raking sunlight behind a grate just an image of a woman waiting for someone—or a metaphor of the Cuban condition seen by an artist who had recently shared it?



Woman Behind Door, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2003.

What is clear when you study a group of Evans and Titarenko portraits in the Getty exhibition is the shared concern both artists have, possible political context aside, for compositional and formal, rather than only documentary, values.

A documentary made for the French television channel Arte affords a close-in look at Titarenko's working technique, a method, he told me, that is how he approached his work in Havana.

It is precisely the kindred link that I sensed in the shared vision of Cuba between Evans and Titarenko that led me to consider writing this essay as something more than a report on this very rich exhibition. It was also sparked by knowledge of the intense emotional underpinnings that Titarenko carries with him as he wanders urban streets with his Hasselblad and tripod. It has emotional density that also suffuses his carefully rendered photochemical darkroom prints. The creation of his prints is too personal and valued an experience for Titarenko to leave either to a home digital printer or to a lab.

I asked him why he chose to go to Cuba, whether it was partly due to the history of the Soviet era Cold War conflict with the US, or for purely aesthetic reasons.

My interest to take pictures in Havana was inspired by the underlying similarities between Havana and St. Petersburg. At one time both were grand; and then, both went through the same process of decay due to the revolution and the communist regime/dictatorship that followed.

Both cities are unique and beautiful. Water has played a primordial role in their history. For both, their reason for existence belongs to the past and both are like an aristocratic person whose pride and beauty were violated and humiliated by the communist regime (but let's add metaphorically that she nevertheless persists in opposing human savagery with incredible vitality, humanism and a magical ability to transform ugliness into a treasure).

In the Getty gallery video Alex Harris discusses the rationale behind photographing Cuba through windshields of old American cars. Titarenko had an alternate, more visceral experience of automobiles.

There were all kinds of Soviet cars and the odor of cheap fuel along with the noise of these cars reminded me my childhood [and] made me feel happy.

I asked Titarenko if he had known of Evan's Cuban photography prior to the show. Evans work there was the focus of a 2003 book published by the Getty, with an introduction by Judith Keller and an essay by critic/poet Andrei Codrescu:

[Amazon.com—Walker Evans: Cuba link](#)

Gallery owner and artist's wife, Nailya Alexander, was with Titarenko for the preview of the exhibition. She told me that:

Alexey spent a long time looking at Walker Evans photographs, enjoying the fact that he stayed around the same spots photographing the same people, (variations of the same scene). He said that Evans, like him, had favorite places he would come back to over and over again. Alexey had probably 4 favorite places in Havana; he would visit them twice a day like a ritual, usually in the morning and at sunset, to see what changed, photograph them from different angles. Those places were like 'signs.' They represented something special in his mind. This was in 2003. When he came the second time in 2006 his favorite places were gone, they were transformed, things changed, and he felt sad that he lost them...

Knowing that Titarenko, like many artists, does not readily embrace the concept of stylistic parallels with other artists, I nonetheless asked him about the similar view of Havana between Evans and him.

I think Evans did not, like me, have any pre-existing concept of what he is doing [in Havana] and was just following his artistic instincts

and emotions/love rather than his intellect. This is maybe the link between him and me. But of course, it is just an idea...

This is [also] one of the beautiful ideas of Dostoyevsky's short novel 'White Nights,' where for the main character/ narrator, buildings are like humans and have their own character.... This is also what inspired me even before Cuba, in "Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg."

This riff about buildings being like humans was evocative for me. I thought of the high angle photograph Evans made of a central Havana square that he also detailed in closer eye-level angles. They reveal an impoverished city with already crumbling buildings,



Plaza del Vapor, photo by Walker Evans, 1933.

and of Titarenko's highly emotional, poetic image of a narrow Havana street in the rain.



Untitled, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2006.

Several days after I began to discuss his Cuban photos with Titarenko, and sensing it was still awkward for him to articulate his more subtle thoughts in English, the aesthetic underpinnings of his work, he sent me an artist's statement he had written in Russian, translated by John Nicolson.

Working in the course of many years on the theme of my native city, St Petersburg, I have gradually begun to understand what part of the creative joy that I have felt in my work is due to its unique originality – a uniqueness which has entered my own personality and become part of my interior world; and what part is a matter of the atmosphere, life, and dynamism of any large city. . . during a certain period... the period during which I grew up, the period of my childhood and youth...

I have instinctively tried to find this ‘other half’ (which has likewise become an integral part of my soul) in each new place, which has. . . . become my home, my place of residence ... But it’s only rarely that I feel something stirring, waking... singing inside me... The world has changed too much, and St Petersburg with it. Here you can no longer find a spot that’s free of the very latest models of car, and the facades of houses hide behind bright advertising – advertising that’s perhaps just as beautiful or ugly as in New York, London, or Paris, but which was nevertheless absent from the world of my childhood...

Once, it happened that after flying in late one evening, after many hours spent in an airplane, into an unfamiliar country and venturing out from my hotel the following morning, I was struck by a wave of unexpected joy – of unconscious, all-encompassing joy that surged from somewhere deep inside me and bore me aloft as if on wings so that I wanted to sing, shout out...! I was in Havana.

A miracle had taken place in my consciousness; I felt as if I had flown back in time to 20 years before. I was passed by slowly moving cars ...

but cars from an age that is usually referred to as 'once, a long time ago'. Modestly dressed people walked past palaces of stunning architecture and dilapidated physical condition, and there were Pioneers and schoolchildren merrily marching across the road in neat columns by the traffic lights... the sun was shining and a fresh wind blowing...



Square, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2003.

There was no time to lose – given that even what we see is already in the past (the fractions of seconds that we spend on taking in what we have seen deprive us of the reality of the present).

But at last I had my camera in my hands. And then long hours during every day of my stay in Havana . . . were filled with one objective, one meaning – to try to see, isolate from the complex kaleidoscope of unhurried life that seemed to have frozen at a certain period in time, and convey in photographs that air, that atmosphere of joy, enthusiasm, and universal love for one's neighbor and for this world, that from the first second I perceived and understood with all my senses...

Titarenko spoke about the presence of water as a common theme in the cities of his native St. Petersburg and Havana: the labyrinth of canals that flow through the former, and the ocean that encircles Cuba, nowhere so present as in the breaking waves along the Malecón. All the visual, emotive poetry he writes of in the citation above is embodied in a single image he made of boys facing the breakers pounding the Malecón seawall, the city itself almost lost in the sky like a luminous painting by Turner.



Malecon, photo by Alexey Titarenko, 2003.

Only a reductive analysis to their barest formal properties could fail to reveal the kinship between Evans and Titarenko, two flaneurs in a single city, separated only by time— and the vicissitudes of history. One can't help but speculate what they may have said to each other about the state of Cuban life today over a few shots of *anejo* “Cuba Ron.”