

**Sol Calero**  
***Ciber Café***

The cyber café is nearly extinct. For decades, it has been a vital place of internet access for immigrants and travelers who wish to connect with relatives in distant home countries. These businesses, with their rows of numbered computers, are frequented for everyday necessities in pre-paid slots of time. They often operate simultaneously as shops, Western Union counters, salons or cafés, becoming places of community exchange built on flexibility, adaptation, and improvisation.

Calero set her first *Ciber Café* at Frieze London, where this spirit of multipurposing was embodied as the café became a stage for sculptures, paintings, and videos. The installation, replete with free internet access, was designed as an adaptable platform which could be reinstalled in future locations and host a rotating selection of content. Vernacular construction materials such as bricks, bungee cords, lumber and corrugated plastic roofing mingled with computer terminals and webcams among the houseplants. Ergonomic office chairs matched a corner sofa, all patterned and upholstered by the artist to coordinate with stools in the phone-booths. In place of a familial voice on the other end of the line, one would hear frantic dial-tones and call center banter through the phone receivers amid a blaring collage of Latin music played for callers on hold.

The cyber café implies movement and transience. Much like the beauty salon, it acts as a *third space*<sup>1</sup>—neither home nor work, neither homeland nor destination. It is an in-between place by definition, often serving as a location of social crossover, a regular stop for those from various diasporic communities, and a conduit between daily realities separated by great distances. The cafe's primary function may often be to maintain interpersonal relations abroad, but a transnational, macroeconomic factor is also heavily at work. It is estimated that people who migrate to "developed" countries send upwards of 600 billion U.S. dollars per year back to their homelands, far more

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of Third Space in Homi K. Bhabha, "How Newness Enters The World," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Excerpt: "The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences."

than the level of international aid moving that direction.<sup>2</sup> This means that developing economies and, by extension, their stability, are intimately tethered to their diasporic citizens.

The initial impression given by Calero's *Ciber Café* in the context of Frieze Art Fair was that of an exotic foreignness; an inviting corner of benign comforts and conveniences. Large, colorful, joyous paintings of fruit and salsa dancers pushed the kitsch to new levels alongside arte-povera-inspired assemblage sculptures wearing rumba skirts. The playful precarity of the construction was simultaneously tongue-in-cheek and perfectly sensible, embracing an iconographic tradition that has been misrepresented and excluded from art history's canonic narratives. The light-handed approach, the domestic plants, and the interactive element of the installation welcomed casual visitors in to observe, analyze, or simply check their emails. Yet camp, for all its flamboyance and revelry, is necessarily imbued with a certain melancholy. The "good face" it puts on always implies an escape, the simultaneous birth and death of a dream. Here, the underbelly is one of homesickness and longing. Beneath the surface, springing from the manic sound waves of the phone receivers, laid a metaphor for what truly awaits the immigrant who has perhaps risked much to arrive here: a potent blend of Kafkaesque bureaucracy, tropical nostalgia, typecasting, and the anxiety of rejection.

As the cyber café approaches obsolescence, a new type of fragmentation is being born from the individualization of technological interfaces. Gone are the days of rushed overseas phone calls and frenzied bouts of compartmentalized internet usage under the weight of the ticking clock. Today, while most people lead a virtual life to some degree, immigrants often live an almost *quantum* existence, psychologically dwelling within a home of chats with far-away family and friends, updated in real time. There is often no viable homeland to return to or remain in, and no feasible way in or out, so "home" becomes nebulous, everywhere and nowhere, defined mostly by interpersonal relationships. While the virtual sphere does offer some reprieve from loneliness and a means of transcending borders, it's still highly surveilled and monetized, far from a worthy replacement for physical presence and corporeal reality.

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<sup>2</sup> "Global remittances flows expected to reach US\$5.4 trillion by 2030 spurred on by digitalization," UN agency IFAD report, 16 June 2022. It is also important to note that 85% of migrant income remains in the host countries.

Despite the element of defiance in Calero's vibrant installations, being a willing outlier is rarely a sufficient antidote to the discomfort of being perceived as "the other". Her work leans into this discomfort, exoticizing itself on its own terms, taking pride in both its Caribbeanness and its diasporic creativity. The best remedy for alienation is to build community, and Calero's practice consistently attempts to do so through elements of both social practice and the inclusion and curation of her peers.

For *Ciber Café*, she invited Juan Pablo Garza to curate a selection of videos by other Venezuelan artists which could be played on the computer screens through a specially programmed interface. The stark reality is that the Venezuela of the 1980s and '90s in which Calero grew up no longer exists. Through a cascade of political, economic, and social problems (corruption being the most prominent cause and symptom at all levels of society), it's a place that has plumbed the depths of bad-to-worse. So, like Calero, many Venezuelan artists are scattered around the globe, giving the art community a general sense of disconnectedness. Here in *Ciber Café*, a handful of them are briefly gathered together, assembled virtually in a gesture of solidarity.

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Across the computer screen interfaces programmed by Mario Campos, Juan Pablo Garza curated a series of videos by Venezuelan artists: Hernán Alvarado, Cristian Guardia, Suwon Lee, Enrique Moreno, Julian Higuerey Núñez, Federico Ovalles, Armando Rosales, and Raily Yance with Fabio Bonfanti. A special screening of *El Pato Donald de Caimare Chico* by Marco Montiel-Soto and *Carnaval, Carnaval* by Laura Jordan played in rotation. Before leaving, one could take a piece of fruit wrapped in paper designed by Calero as an edition for <http://m-e-x-i-c-o.co.uk>, or purchase a new salsa CD release by Jose Otero, *Echando días pa' tras*.