Episode 5: El Paquete Semanal

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**SPEAKERS**

Julia Weist, Nestor Siré, Lee Tusman

**Lee Tusman**

You're listening to Artists and Hackers, the podcast dedicated to the communities building and using new digital tools of creation. We talk to programmers, artists, poets, musicians, bot makers, educators and designers in an effort to critically look at both online art making and the history of technology and the internet. We're interested in where we've been, and speculative ideas on the future. This episode is supported by Purchase College. I'm your host, Lee Tusman. In this episode, we're talking about the phenomenon of the offline internet in Cuba, known as El Paquete Semanal or The Weekly Package. To understand some of the conditions that have led to El Paquete Semanal it's important to understand the history of the cold war between the United States and Cuba. The United States has been in a cold war against Cuba since the 1950s. It's placed an embargo against Cuba starting with President Eisenhower in 1958, originally against weapons but in 1960, extending to almost all exports. The embargo prevents exporting almost all goods into the country, whether that's cars or electronics, and only in 2002, the United States begin to allow food and humanitarian supplies to reach the country. On the Cuban side, the government's officially socialist based on the "one party, one state" principle. The Communist Party of Cuba is the leading force of society in the state, originally led by Fidel Castro from 1926 to 2016. And now by his brother Raoul, the island nation is home to 11 million people. Cuban media is tightly controlled by the government, and they've only begun to allow internet access over the past decade, first to select individuals. And then in the past few years, an extremely limited amount of government licensed Wi Fi hotspots, and internet cafes. In addition, as a result of the US embargo, Cubans cannot access for example, Amazon, Netflix, Google and many other online services as a result of these restrictions. One of the main ways most of the country accesses media today is through El Paquete Semanal, or in English The Weekly Package. El Paquete is a phenomenon in Cuba, reaching almost the entire population. And it consists of a weekly one terabyte USB hard drive, containing materials like movies, articles, and locally advertised goods. I spoke with the collaborative artists team of Julia Weist, and Nestor Siré, who have been researching and making art about El Paquete for the last five years. Julia is an American. Nestor is Cuban. I spoke with them over the internet with Julia in Brooklyn and Nestor in Havana. Due to the constraints of both the embargo and the constraints on media and communication in his country, Nestor had to use two different VPN services, and to tether his laptop to his phone connection in order to speak with me.

**Nestor Siré**

My name is Nestor Siré, living in Havana,, and the focus of my research is, you know, data connectivity, informal ways of digital distribution here in Cuba. Also, I am interested in finding different creative ways to distribution or circulate digital materials in different parts of the world.

**Lee Tusman**

I'm interested in this topic as well. And I really wanted to find out more about Nestor and Julia's collaborations relating to El Paquete.

**Julia Weist**

Nestor, and I have been collaborating since 2016. Most of the focus of our collaboration is the Cuban Cuban phenomenon called El Paquete Semanal. But we both share an interest in cultural record keeping and what that record keeping means for shared understanding and shared notions of history. So we have created a variety of works on those themes since 2016.

**Lee Tusman**

And how did you two originally meet?

**Julia Weist**

We met through a mutual friend that connected us when I was visiting Cuba. And when Nestor and I met it was totally remarkable because I had never met another artist that I felt like I had more in common with in my whole career. And it was this interesting process of beginning to talk and the more we talk about Nestor's work because I was visiting his studio, the more I was realizing that we were like twins. But he didn't know because I had nothing to show him. And I said, just wait, I'm going to leave a hard drive because I was heading back to New York. And when you see my work, you'll understand why I'm so overwhelmed right now. And he did. And we began long distance communication, which was very challenging between the US and Cuba. for technical reasons, I'm sure we'll discuss. And that began a long, multi year partnership where we worked within and around the restrictions that were in place in both of our countries and for a variety of geopolitical factors, most noticed, most notably the US embargo. And here we are.

**Lee Tusman**

And just maybe even to give a very small window into some of the restrictions that you're dealing with Nestor can you say a little bit about how you connected with me right now?

**Nestor Siré**

Yeah. Okay, the situation is because of the embargo, a lot of service that have like, you know, for example, a base in in in the United States, our blog for Cuba, many service of Google, everything in relation to App Store is blocked. And for that, for getting access, access to this service will normally use VPN. The thing is that almost all the internet, like, in my personal experience, here in Cuba, all the internet that I receive, all all my connection is using my phone. I am almost never using my Mac, because for using the Mac, I will need to go to some hot spots, or hotel lobbies, with Ethernet for getting Wi Fi, you know, access to internet. And I always use my phone. Normally for a VPN, you need to have like a credit card or you know, like a Softbank account. Also for the free time that you are using the VPN you need to put in some information in the system that you can pay for the VPN if you'd like to continue using the VPN in the future. But this is another problem that Cubans don't have any bank account that is actually working in the international world.

**Lee Tusman**

And is it some of these kinds of issues that you've been dealing with that's led to El Paquete Semanal?

**Julia Weist**

Yeah, so essentially, after the Cuban Revolution, the government nationalized all media distribution. So that included print, but also radio, TV, any form that was in place for the circulation of various forms of media. As a result, independent networks developed so that from citizen to citizen bypassing the government media could be distributed. So this began at first with paperback novels. So for example, Corin Tellado, spanish author, and romance novels, what we call westerns, sort of cowboy stories were very popular and they circulated first within cities and then between cities as distributors within cities would trade with each other for fresh inventory. After paperback novels, it moved on to incorporate as well, magazines, and then eventually VHS, VCD, betacam, DVD. And as the technology changed for the way that people were consuming media, the format's changed through these distribution networks as well. But they remained in place where for a, you know, a variety of different prices, depending on the format, you could rent very cheaply, a book, a VHS, a movie, you know, shows from your neighbor's living room or from your local distributor in the city who was engaging in these trade networks between other cities within Cuba. So the Paquete Semenal is actually just the next revolution of technology in that long chain of distribution. When internet became available, within Cuba for a select group of people, and then, in the subsequent years greater and greater groups of people, although still highly limited, censored and restricted by the government groups developed to aggregate and download media from a variety of places online, as well as, as Nestor said, digital capture from TV channels that could be picked up in Miami. All of that digital content, then gets packaged into hard drives that can that can accommodate one terabyte of media, and then distributed throughout the country, person to person, so hand to hand. So you'll meet up with someone and copy from their hard drive to your hard drive, you may then share it with your neighbors, your families, your friends, sometimes for free, sometimes for a small amount of money. And through this very miraculous, miraculous human to human very lofi way of copying.Tthat's entirely up outside of any digital internet network. This media reaches what we estimate to be a large majority of the Cuban population every week.

**Lee Tusman**

And can you say a little bit more about what's on El Paquete Semanal? I understand from what you were saying earlier, and from some research that there's TV shows, there's some magazines on it, for example, what are some other content that you would see in the in the weekly packet?

**Julia Weist**

Yeah, I think one of the most interesting pieces of original content that you can find that's local, specifically to Cuba, in the Paquete Semanal is advertisements. So there's very limited space for ads within the nationalized system, because it's still a socialist country that has tight economic restrictions in place by the government, one of which is to limit advertising and promotion. So you don't see billboards for companies, you may see billboards for public programs and cultural events within Havana, for example, but you don't see ads in newspapers on the radio, on TV, but you do find them in El Paquete Semanal. And it's a very interesting look into the emerging entrepreneurial economy. So ads for restaurants for services for beauty salons for clothing stores for real estate agencies, because even that is fascinating that home, private homeownership was only possible in the last 10 years in the period after 1959. So it's a really interesting way to, to see not just entertainment materials, but also indicators of larger economic changes in Cuba. But of course, also there is tons of entertainment materials, everything from local cubaton. So reggaeton from Cuba, music videos and audio files. Like you said, digital magazines, shows that are what we would sort of associate with like, Access Hollywood, you know, sort of like celebrity and host based, fun local cultural shows.

**Lee Tusman**

I'm actually also curious how it gets made. I'm in my head, I have some idea like there's some team or an individual working in like a basement or garage or some or some place somewhere and kind of putting it together. But I'm also curious, like, Is there a single Paquete? Or is it actually multiple ones that happen? or? Yeah, I'm curious about a little bit what you know about how it gets created.

**Julia Weist**

Yeah, there's a couple different brands. I mean, brand is just the best way to say it of Paquetes. The sort of technical term, Cuban term is matrices, or matrice is the singular version, where teams work together to aggregate the content. And typically, this falls along lines of interest. So someone on the team just really loves YouTube videos. So they know the ones that are great. They download all of them every week, and they throw it in the pile along with everything else in the folder that's designated for that. Someone else loves novellas, so they are downloading the soap operas every week. Typically, the aggregators are people who have unlimited access to internet. So often, this falls along the lines of someone who potentially works for the state communication department. There's a variety of ways and without, you know, sort of revealing too much. It is a combination of recording, like I said, channels that come through from from Miami, people with access to Netflix account that are hosted and paid for and other countries that can record off of those channels, as well as your typical Pirate Bay and other sort of pirated media sources. And those folks work together, compile and then there's single points of distribution under these sort of brand names that then transport media to other distributors throughout the island, as Nestor said on bike, plane, bus, car, motorcycle, everything you can imagine, basically, backpacks full of hard drives that then get copied in those cities. And it it goes outwards as a rhizomatic model.

**Lee Tusman**

And I'm also curious how someone gets involved in terms of getting their own material onto it, like, for example, Nestor I understand you were involved in distributing work through El Paquete, can you say a little bit more about that?

**Nestor Siré**

You know, not only for putting songs inside the Paquete do you need to pay for that. In my case, I am creating the space for contemporary art, that is actually not a business. Also, because the development of visual art in Cuba doesn't have any relation with you know, with the commercial, our work is more like a project that I create, because, you know, after research about the phenomenon, at some point, I was close to one of the matrices, and they was interested in diversification of this content, you know, like, diversify the kind of material that they have, but, you know, the weekly packet have like two big limitations, two rules. The first one is no political materials. And the second one is no pornography. This limitation are almost, you know, like, are like, the big limitations of Cuba, in general, is not something that, it's something that everybody knows. The pornography is like, a big deal. And also, everything in relation with politics in Cuba is very, very strong. And this is why the Paquete, you know, continues in this kind of, I don't know, like a gray area, like, it's not completely legal, but it's not illegal. It exists, because the government, you know, allows, and, also, because the kind of content that you can find in the Paquete does not have any relation with politics. And this is more or less the, you know, the way that some people create content for the Paquete, and the kind of content that people can put in the Paquete.

**Lee Tusman**

Can you also say a little bit more about your collaboration together? You know, you've been working for years researching El Paquete Semanal and, in working on it, can you say a little about your art projects together and how they relate?

**Julia Weist**

One of the most unique things about the Paquete is its ephemerality. So because technical equipment is in short supply, very difficult to import, and there's not as much of a day to day need to save previous weeks of the Paquete Semanal they don't exist. So a hard drive will be copied over from last week to this week with all the new content, because otherwise, as you can imagine, you'd have to buy a new terabyte hard drive every week. As artists, Nestor and I saw that and thought about all of the unique original material, both digital and technical, cultural, that was getting lost every time. The previous week was overwritten. So we set out at the very first project to just create a one year archive of the Paquete Semanale. It sounds very simple, it was incredibly challenging. Partially because as I mentioned, there is such a limited supply of high capacity, and especially in 2016, where one terabyte drive was much bulkier and more expensive than it is today. It's been only a few years, but the change is significant. It was a challenge to aggregate that equipment, keep it in working order, and then move it into and out of the country as we exhibited internationally. So for example, any traveling passenger so every time I went to Cuba, I was only allowed to bring two hard drives with me upon entry. If you have more, they will be seized or you're allowed to keep it but then you have to prove a serial number that you're taking it back to the United States, in my case with you as you're leaving the country so they understand that it's not being left behind. We use a variety of different creative problem solving techniques involving other collaborations services and the gray market in Miami where you could pay travelers to bring things for you into and out of the country. And eventually, we built a 64 terabyte archive with some, you know, redundancy. And we were able to exhibit it internationally. have now four copies of the archive. And it is something that we're thinking about long term where it makes sense to save and preserve this material. And I should say we were not able to create that archive without the full collaboration of one of the two major matrices in Havana, who worked with us every single week, in collaboration to create this, this digital preservation system, essentially, that we created. So that was the centerpiece of a lot of our projects. But Nestor can explain some of the others that we created to contextualize and share and interrogate and intervene in the systems that we were exploring, and Nestor, maybe you can also talk about the process that we took to meet with every major distributor in the country, which was one of our most ambitious efforts.

**Nestor Siré**

For us it was very interesting how the Paquete is changing between you know, cities. We were traveling for two weeks, all the country, Cuba is not so big. And we'll be using like the normal structure for the Paquete like using the symbols, the same taxi, the same motorcycles that the people from the Paquete for the distribution, and we'll meet with a big sub-matrice in each city of Cuba.

**Julia Weist**

One other project that we did that really helped contextualize some of this work was we hired one of the advertising agencies that is used by businesses to create ads for the Paquete to create what we call an infomercial for the idea of the Paquete Semanal. So essentially, to explain what the phenomenon is basically what we're doing now, giving details, providing the history in a video, so that we could share it at museums and galleries when we are exhibiting our other work in relationship to the phenomenon. So that's very characteristic of the type of work that Nestor and I make where we're using the system itself. The advertising companies that already exist, because of and for the Paquete, to create a collaborative artwork that then explains the Paquete to an international audience.

**Lee Tusman**

In 2017, Julia and Nestor began exhibiting their work about El Paquete Semanal in museums around the world. One of their exhibitions was at the Queens Museum in New York,

**Nestor Siré**

For us it is always very, very interesting how the, the rights are working outside Cuba in relation with you know, like, Julia explained for example, for exhibiting in the exbition at The Queens Museum we worked in collaboration with the lawyer for, I don't know Julia maybe you can explain more about that the technical name of the lawyer?

**Julia Weist**

Yeah, intellectual property for contemporary art.

**Nestor Siré**

It was impossible to show even show, like some videos that we actually received from the Paquete there, but in Cuba, we don't have any problem with that, because you know, the system, but in in the Queens Museum was a big, big problem. And we're working for many months Julia working directly with this situation for many months to find a way that we can exhibit but even you know, outside Cuba, the context change.

**Julia Weist**

I'll share one really funny anecdote, which is that for one exhibition, we contacted every copyright holder that we could from one week of the Paquete to ask their permission to allow us to share digitally with visitors to the exhibition, a copy of their file in the exact same way it was shared digitally, in Cuba. And of course, this was an enormous effort, we had a lot of help. It's just a lot of thousands of emails and research to find copyright holders even for the different materials. But one producer that we spoke to for Sharknado for which is you know, a sci fi movie in the Sharknado franchise was so thrilled to learn that their movie was circulating in essentially what's a media black market. You know, in Cuba it so lined up with the mythology that they were trying to build around that film, and its reception globally, that they were so excited, they gave us full rights to share it. They asked if we needed help with anything, you know, anything they could do to support our project. So obviously, on the one hand, some people you know, were not thrilled to learn that their their media had been pirated and shared millions of times over. But others sort of understood the larger geopolitical picture, because there's many cases where Cuban consumers cannot legally pay for their content. So the, you know, streaming platforms, broadcast networks, other subscription services are not legally allowed, because the embargo, so that production company, that streaming service cannot legally accept money from Cuban consumers. And so it is this gray area where if you can't legally buy it, you know, does that mean that you're just completely banned from seeing and sharing that content ever, in your context? So it did produce a lot of interesting conversations around why media is made, why it's shared ,who different producers want their audience to be, and what the limitations are, in, you know, both a technical and cultural context.

**Lee Tusman**

That's interesting. Yeah. I think that's where I'll stop it for now. Thank you. Thank you both so much.

**Nestor Siré**

Thank you.

**Julia Weist**

Thank you.

**Lee Tusman**

That's our show today. You've been listening to Artists and Hackers. Our guests today are Nestor Sire and Julia Weist. I'm your host Lee Tusman. Our audio producer is Max Ludlow. Coordination and web design by Caleb Stone. This episode was supported by Purchase College. Our music in this episode is Algorithms by Chad Crouch, Drake Meditation Spirit by Lobo Loco, Note Manual by The Books and this is Difference by Ketsa. You can find out more about Nestor and Julia and links to their websites as well as past episodes of the show on our website, artistsandhackers.org. You can find us on Instagram at artistsandhackers. And we're on twitter at artistshacking. You can write to us at hello@artistsandhackers.org and if you enjoy the show, please let a friend know. Thanks.