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“De Palo pa’ Rumba:” An Interview with Leandro Soto¹

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Leandro Soto has been involved in the art world for the past thirty years, participating in well over a hundred solo and group art exhibitions at both the national and international levels. He currently teaches and works in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Performance Department, Arizona State University, Phoenix, Arizona. This interview was taken place in April 2007.

Isabel Álvarez Borland: Tell us about your beginnings as an artist in the Cuba of the 70s and 80s. What was the importance of *Volumen Uno*, the group of visual artists to which you belonged?

Leandro Soto: *Volumen Uno* was a very important exhibit that took place in Havana in 1981, at the Galería de Arte San Rafael, Centro Habana. The art pieces we exhibited created a lot of controversial discussion at the national and international level. The show was very successful and was visited by thousands of people. Eleven artists participated in the event: José Bedía, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garcíandía, Israel León, Rogelio López Marín Gory, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Tomás Sánchez, Rubén Torres Llorca, and myself. The majority of us in the group were recent graduates from ENA (National School of Arts, in Cubanacán) and the San Alejandro Art School. We were extremely disappointed with what was happening at the time in the professional art scene. We were also the first generation totally educated under the “new revolutionary system.” Our attitude and opinions were perceived as “bad boy behavior” by artists of previous generations. We were the first group of artists that used our own spaces—studios and residences—as space for our shows. We used parties, group trips, and any vacation time to create art events with the purpose of sharing ideas, concepts and opinions about our work and to share the meaning and significance of what it meant to be an artist in Cuba at that particular time.

IÁB: Was your art ever compromised in Cuba due to political reasons?

LS: I was one of the first artists in my generation to deal with social and political issues in my art. I did an exhibition in Galería Habana, in 1986, named: *This Is How It Is*. In this show, I made 365 comics (one for each day in a year) where I

questioned different situations from every day life in the Cuba of the 1980s. I was also the first Cuban artist that assumed performance and installation art work as a personal expression. Also, I was an avid participant in a variety of art disciplines as well as in literary activities at that time: theater, movies, dance, and interdisciplinary experimental art.

IÁB: Were you affected by the restrictions imposed on artists during the 1990s economic crisis known as the *Período Especial*?

LS: I did not live in Cuba during the years of the *Período Especial*. I had left Cuba in 1988 for Mexico, disappointed and disillusioned with cultural politics. Mexico was a cultural and political exile for me and, at the same time, a new artistic journey. There, I learned the language of the native indigenous people, native dances, theater, mask work, and other artistic expressions. After visiting and working with indigenous communities, I created my own art school in the village of Tamulte de las Sabanas in Tabasco, a native Chontal community. There, I was free to experiment with Non-Western visions of reality and finally became free of “ideological Marxist limitations.” At that time, I was ready to question “ready-made” ideological solutions for reality.

IÁB: As your many exhibits indicate, you have resided in various places around the world and have incorporated the traditions of these countries and cultures into the work you were doing at the time. How would you describe the thematic/aesthetic path your work has taken in terms of these multiple residences?

LS: I have developed various paths through my artistic vocation. I consider myself an interdisciplinary artist who expresses himself through various media and art forms: theater, performance art, and visual arts. My first art show was devoted to my ancestors and to the memorabilia of the past in my native city of Cienfuegos, Cuba (founded in 1854 by French immigrants from Louisiana). Later, I have used as my “material,” or content for my art, situations and historic events that touch me deeply.

I work with the complexity of being Caribbean, a cultural heritage that is composed of a number of diverse cultural presences. In order to nourish these expressions, I have done a lot of anthropological research in the countries and cultures where I have lived. I have used the term “cultural translation” to talk about this process. I have lived, which means for me “doing art,” among many different cultural communities: European people and their descendants, Africans from Anglo and also Hispanic heritage, and Native Americans (in a different part of the American continent). In my art statement, I insist that I should become part of the

communities in which I reside at a particular moment in my life. In order to become a "channel" (artist-shaman), for this community, I have to work with a transpersonal thematic and transpersonal issues. I do not have anything personal to say in my art, which does not mean that I am not in touch with situations that affect the communities where I reside. During my years in Mexico, I used mythology and my own experience with native cultures as inspiration for my art.

IÁB: Your exhibit *De Palo pa' Rumba* (Mexico 2001) encapsulated the merging of the sacred (the Palo Monte Afro-Cuban rituals) and the profane (the rumba). What drives you to bring together such extremes? What do you hope to communicate to the viewer?

LS: Among Cubans there is a very popular expression "*de palo pa' rumba*" that is used when, during a normal conversation, the person that is talking suddenly changes the topic or the theme of the conversation. This also means diverse things coexisting together or, in my terms, a mixing of the profane with the sacred. In the particular art show *De Palo pa' Rumba* I presented a diverse and eclectic body of art works. As you know, the *rumba* is a complex system of rhythms—there are a lot of them—always dealing with mundane issues, narratives of events from everyday life, enjoyment, pleasure and so on. The term Palo is from the religion Palo Monte, which is a more esoteric practice in Cuba. It refers to the power of certain plants—*palos*—in the forest. The African slaves brought this religion to Cuba. There is a book named *El monte* by Lydia Cabrera that explains this very well. In that exhibit, I wanted the viewer to fall into Cuban culture, into Cuban issues, into an open reflection of what is happening today at the social and cultural levels within the country and also within the Cuban community in exile. That was the reason that Orishas—Santería deities—of movement, travel and displacement were present at that show: Eleguá (the god responsible for opening new paths), Babalú-Ayé (deity of the homeless, of healing, and displacement), and, of course, Yemayá (goddess of the ocean, dreams, motherhood, and creativity). All are archetypes, very similar to the old Roman and Greek gods and goddesses.

IÁB: Can you expand on the role of Afro-Cuban religions in your works?

LS: The African presence has had a crucial role in my work (visual and performance art), in particular my vision of a cosmos where everything has a spiritual/conceptual component. In my view, that which is apparently disperse or diffuse is also linked to the magical, that is, I hold a vision of a world where reality is conceived as a tapestry of transpersonal energies woven—in this particular case—by the Orishas. I lived this same experience among the Maya-Chol and the Maya-Chontal indigenous communities in the South of Mexico. Right after I arrived in

Mexico, I participated in various rituals that were not public to tourists or visitors. How was it that I, a foreigner, was allowed to partake of such intimate rituals? I think that what I had learned from African rituals while I lived in Cuba, in particular the Regla de Ocha, provided me the wisdom and the familiarity that later allowed me to easily integrate into the indigenous cultures of Mexico. While in Mexico, I was initiated as *Ix-men* (a Mayan priest in the rituals of the Ujanli-kol, who are the ones who bless the fields before the planting). They felt that I understood their culture and rituals, an understanding which I had obtained from what I learned in Cuba from the *toques*, the *bailes*, the *trances*, and all of the other non-Eurocentric spiritual practices which are part of Afro-Cuban religions. In the archives of Mérida (Yucatán, Mexico) there are documents that accuse the black slaves of participating—along with the indigenous people—in rituals forbidden by the Catholic Church ... isn't this interesting? These cultures share very similar cosmic visions. The *choles* would say to me, "Master, you understand us," meaning that I accepted and knew, and did not need any further explanation from them.

IÁB: Your portrayal of reality appears to be a combination of the sacred and the mythical, a kind of sacred way of looking at the world. Do you consider the creative act a form of worship?

LS: Each individual should create his or her own religion. I am using the word religion in the Old Latin language sense as "*re-ligare*" which means reunion, re-connection, re-integration, and communion. "My religion" is the daily practice I do in order to be awake, creative, alive, and self-aware. When I went to Mexico, my interest in studying and working with non-western descriptions of reality became stronger. There, the native people still perform rituals connected with pre-Colombian traditions. I was initiated in some of these. In this sense, doing art is part of my religion as well my teachings, including everything I do at large as a contribution to the enrichment of this world.

IÁB: When did you become interested in Afro-Cuban religions?

LS: Since I was eleven, I was educated under the system of Art Schools in Cuba. My philosophical formation was Marxist. It couldn't have happened any other way, since anything not related to Marxism was forbidden or seen as backward during those years. My father was a communist soldier, and when Carnival time arrived, he would not allow me to participate in the street *congas*. He was a mulatto like myself, but belonged to the upper middle class in Cienfuegos and joining the city's *congas* was not acceptable given our social status. Of course, as soon as I became a teenager, I escaped his supervision and participated in the *congas*: the drums made my solar plexus vibrate. My dad was the son of a mulatto woman and a white

Spanish/Frenchman, my granddad, a sculptor. As a kid I could "see" and could predict events to such a degree that, when I evoke my childhood, I cannot separate the normal from the extraordinary. As an adolescent, I researched the esoteric arts: theosophy, spiritualism, yoga, and *batá* rituals. I read Herman Hesse, Tagore, Krisnamurthi, Madame Blavatsky, and a thousand others searching for answers and information about a different dimension of reality that could not be found in the books that we were allowed to read in our Cuban schools. My experiences could only be understood and explained by the *santeros*. When I was 18, I went to visit a *babalawo* and I was told that "the dead and the saints were requesting my head." For this reason, I consulted with the *Tablero de Ifá* when I was a bit older and found out that I had been born "*con el santo hecho*" and that I did not need to undergo any other ceremony. This explained incidents of my childhood where I could "see" and "hear," abilities that today play a role in my work as an artist. I was also told by the *Tablero de Ifá* that my destiny was to "create bridges among the worlds" which is something that I continue to do in my art. Isn't this the condition of Cuban culture where everything becomes integrated? The American Indians call this condition "*the rainbow's warrior*."

IÁB: Do you make a distinction between Palo Monte and Regla de Ocha or do you combine them?

LS: Today the African religions that are present in Cuba are undergoing a certain "postmodernity" where there is a tendency to blend and integrate, and thus practitioners can belong to more than one of these religions at once. I know *babalawos* that are *espiritistas* and Abacuás that are initiated into Santería, so that a person can belong to more than one religion at the same time. And this is not new. Brindis de Salas, the famous black violinist was a Mason, had been initiated in *Palo Monte*, and was also a *santero*. My first performance installation, *Ancestros 1979*, was created in Cienfuegos at the foot of a Ceiba tree where Santería rituals usually took place. *Ancestros* was a performance/installation where I combined the indigenous elements of Cienfuegos and my Spanish heritage ... and where was the African? It was in the concept of integration of anything and everything. African religions tend to be integrative in essence. All can be mixed because it is the intention or idea of the *ofrenda* (offering) that is most important to all of them.

IÁB: What about the Abacuás?

LS: I am not initiated as an Abacuá, but I very much like their music and their dances and, above all, the concept that the *ireme* communicates with the community through dance in much the same way as the Kachinas, the Hopi dancers. I have to give credit to Umberto Peña because he suggested a long time ago that I

should work with the *diablito* Abacué in my performances. I did this only after my dad passed away and appeared to me in a dream and requested the same thing. In the dream, he took me to an Abacué ritual and told me that I had to recover my Cuban heritage. Of course, he was meaning my African heritage, at least that is how I interpreted this dream.

IÁB: Have you had any personal experiences with these religions?

LS: Everyday I experience these religions, these integrations, because all artists are in great measure religious or shaman-like. To be an artist is complicated no matter in which reality one has been assigned to live. Yes, I have had, and continue to have, very strong religious experiences. I like to experience trances and I explore this avenue constantly. It is quite difficult to explain to my university students that there is no creation if there is no trance. We live in a culture that feeds the ego and stresses separation while the state of the trance is really transpersonal.

IÁB: Can you expand on this idea of “separation” in U. S. culture?

LS: The paradigms of the context in which we live—the United States—cannot be applied to the Cuban cultural reality. This is why they don’t understand us!!! Remember the theory of Fernando Ortiz’s *ajiaco*. Here they don’t eat *ajiaco* and they never will because they are unable to integrate. Here everything is either black or white, left or right, and this is why Postcolonial theory cannot be applied to Cuba or even to Latin America. Cubans are many things at the same time, but it is the African component that integrates them all in one single brew. But in order to do this, we need fire or creative passion. I cannot separate the difference between doing yoga, dancing the rumba, doing Tai Chi ... it all goes to the same source. The rest are only exterior forms. It is the spirit that gives them all life.

IÁB: Can you elaborate on the idea of the merging of the Cuban and the American reality and culture in your work?

LS: We are living now in a moment which combines things, which integrates cultures in a new way. We are now in the XXI century. In the series of installations that I have created in the United States for example, *A Glance over the Garden* (1997), I used elements of this country’s white culture but from a perspective which is Afro-Cuban. A good example is the installation I devote to Eleguá—the god of new paths and avenues. I used maps of the routes I followed to go from Miami (my point of entrance in this country) to the Northeast of the United States (where I resided for a number of years). I displayed an image of Mickey Mouse—red and black, Eleguá’s colors—as part of this installation because a mouse is

Eleguá's favorite animal! Thus Micky Mouse—who is black and red and a mouse to boot—is the perfect cultural object to explain and visually translate Eleguá Laroye. Also, I displaced a small version of the Statue of Liberty from its original location in New York City to the Miami area since, for many exiled Cubans, Miami is the most important city in the United States. I also used envelopes—black and red—from the United States mail overnight service in order to provide color and content for this installation. In another installation I devoted to Oshún—the goddess of water, love and happiness—I introduce a video I did of Niagara Falls. All rivers and streams belong to Oshún.

I love the idea of mixing traditions, and in my most recent exposition in Arizona, *Abacua: The Signs of Power* (2007), I integrate the figures of the Kachina Hopi with the Ireme Abacua. That is the reason I coined the word *KACHIreme*. I love these integrations. When I danced the first time the *diablito* Abacua in the Mesa Art Center in Arizona, the Chicanos and the natives of that area asked me why I had danced the Kachina with the rhythm of the tropics. Then and there I had an epiphany, and told myself: "How can I profit from this confusion?"

IÁB: In your images we can perceive a *barroquismo*, depicted mainly through your expressive use of color, the superabundance of detail, and the layering of levels of reality within your paintings, a quality that makes these images seem or feel multidimensional. What is the challenge you wish to pose to the viewer and why?

LS: Using various layers to create a multidimensional quality in a flat surface is a visual metaphor of a philosophical conception. As you already know, creativity for me is related to spirituality, so, spirituality needs to be present whenever possible. As a result, the art piece should try to reach out and touch the observer with particular emotions. The work can be figurative or abstract, but the key here is the inner organization of the work and its metaphoric implications. My goal in this case is to create a piece that could serve in the process of transformation or understanding of human beings.

The basic approach in my artwork is transpersonal, which means it is not self-centered or egotistical in nature, therefore voided of psychological drama. The transpersonal in my work has displaced the personal anecdote, leaving plenty of room for the mythical and the archetypal aspects of reality. When I work with native cosmogonies, reality in my work is perceived as a universe of infinite energies tightly woven. "The gods and goddess of creation weave the universe with fine threads of every possible color"—said the oral tradition of the Maya-Chol Indians. According to this cosmogony, the archetypes are in search of minds free from personal contents that can express their possibilities (A story in search of a writer, say the Native American shamans). In this shamanic tradition, I offer my body, my mind, my hands,

and my artistic knowledge for the manifestation of the more transcendental aspect of life, which is so important to mankind. I do not look for themes, on the contrary, I allow them to search for me and use me as a channel for their expression. I arrived at this conceptualization during my time living in Mexico among indigenous people. At one point I realized that if I wanted to represent reality in a new way, I had to “weave” my images.

IÁB: In your visual work and installations are the religions—as represented by the colors and the images—purely aesthetic or are you exploring other levels of communications through your use of color?

LS: Color is a part of the symbols and the textures, it is also part of objects and cultural artifacts, and it is also part of the movement of the body. The initial inspiration came from a narrative about the “God of Thunder,” from the Maya-Chol people, where Goddesses “weave the reality with energy threads of different colors.” It was very important for me at that time, to study textiles and pre-Colombian art, in order to find a viable way of expressing my art. Now I am applying the same conceptualization to art pieces I do based in Cuban mythologies from African origin. All I do is symbolic, my art is poetry and metaphor, but it is at the same time “real,” that is to say, it can function as power. Isn’t art powerful?

IÁB: How do these techniques relate to your objectives of blending and merging diverse cultures and traditions?

LS: I define myself as a conceptual artist (even though I have had extensive academic training both in painting and theater). My work has several levels of interpretation depending on who is looking at it. For me—similar to Jorge Gracia, the Cuban philosopher—the “context” is always more important than the “text.” I need to take this into account because I live as a political and cultural exile, in “displacement,” that is in a double exile. Yes, I am very much interested in communication: I work in theater, I am a dancer, a designer of theatrical scenarios, and I am a writer. Thus I have to communicate according to where I am at the moment and utilize the means that are available to me at that time. My work process now is to crystallize art expressions that combine and integrate important elements from Africa, Indigenous America, and from some European cultures. I really think that new art concepts will emerge in this part of the world, not only thanks to the use of technology but also to new conceptual descriptions of reality. Native American cultures in this continent have a lot to offer.

IÁB: What is the relationship between painting and poetry for you? I was partic-

ularly interested in your exhibit, *Poiesis: The Languages of Images: Books, Paintings, and Drawings* (Massachusetts, 1999).

LS: Leonardo Da Vinci used to say that painting and poetry were very similar, because both express themselves in images. I have loved poetry since my adolescence. I used to read Walt Whitman, Rabindranat Tagore, Dante, Góngora, San Juan de la Cruz, Santa Teresa de Ávila, and also Pablo Neruda and Luis Cernuda, who was a professor at Mount Holyoke College in the early fifties. While I was still living in Cuba, I did an exhibition called "Objeto-Poemas." It was an excellent show. People loved it. I made the "objects" using poems from Federico García Lorca, and Cuban poets Albis Torres, Eliseo Diego, Miguel Barnet, Mirta Yañes, Víctor Casaus, Raúl Rivero, and Lucía Ballester, just to mention a few. Here in the U.S., I have worked with Cuban poet Amando Fernández (d. 1994). We did a show together and he wrote his poems in my art pieces. Last year, I worked with Heberto Padilla's poem "Out of the Game," and recently, I worked with a poem by Guillermo Arango for a current art show in La Casa Azul Art Gallery, in Texas organized by Belkis Cuza Malé. I do not write poetry but I use a lot of visual metaphors in my work. I have developed a system in order to create visual poems, which I also use in my theater designs and performance pieces.

IÁB: Being a product of a society such as Cuba that resisted the spiritual dimension, how do you reconcile that your art seems to be fueled by the world of the spirit?

LS: At the time I was being educated in Cuba, all religious or spiritual activities went underground. Fortunately, I had my own ideas about religion. When I was seventeen years old I began practicing Yoga (underground of course), so, by the time I was twenty years old, I had some mystical experiences: I enjoyed natural ecstasies. I was at that time a secret practitioner of Yoga meditation. In one of those states, I saw Bernini's Saint Teresa sculpture but animated: The angel was really in movement, driving his arrow into her heart. According to my inner voice, that vision was an explanation of what was happening to me at that time. In contradiction to my underground Yoga practices, I was being educated in an art school under a Marxist ideology to become the ideal revolutionary, Che Guevara's New Man. Fortunately for everybody, Cuban culture is still much more than that. In my hometown of Cienfuegos, there was a magnificent esoteric library that belonged to the Theosophical Society and I used to borrow books from there. In Cuba, I learned a lot of things that were "not official at all," for example, how to read Tarot cards. I also attended Santería rituals and other practices of African origins, and had my astrological chart read.

IÁB: A prevalent theme in some of your images such as “*La Diáspora*,” “*Y la nave va*,” and “*El destino de una isla*” is the idea of the island as a vagrant vessel and of the rafter or *balseiro* as the unwitting passenger. Could you elaborate on your predilection for this theme?

LS: These pieces are part of a large body of work named: *Soledad de las Islas* (2000). This series started as my poetic and artistic response to my last trip to Cuba in 1999, after nine years in exile. In these paintings, I use the image of a rafter—a *balseiro*—as a metaphor for the Cuban diaspora. The theme of the ocean has also some mythological components for me. For example, it represents Yemayá, goddess of the ocean, in her various manifestations in the Yoruba tradition. Blue is her favorite color. In “*La Diáspora*,” I made a real wood sculpture shaped like the island. Cuba becomes a raft to suggest that the island is floating adrift. “*The Destiny of an Island*,” a large scale painting, was part of a group exhibit in the Florence Biennale (2001).

After this trip, I had left Cuba in a very emotional and contradictory state of mind. I wanted to stay there, but at the same time, I knew deep in my heart that to live again, in that system, after living in other countries, could be very difficult for me. I cried all the way back to the U.S. This was the reason for the Pierrot mask—with a black tear on it—in my piece “*Liborio Wants to Escape*.” This painting is part of a very successful installation by that name also inspired by this trip. While visiting Cuba, it was very hard for me to hear my uncle say to me: “I criticized you a lot when you left this country, but now I would love being where you are.” My uncle was one of my heroes when I was a child. He was the perfect revolutionary, honored with medals and distinctions because of his devotion to the revolutionary process. Today he is retired and his pension amounts to \$3.50 dollars a month!

IÁB: While in exile, who has had the most influence over your work?

LS: During my years as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Theater Arts at Mt. Holyoke College and at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, MA (1998–2003), I became very close to Antonio Benítez Rojo (d. 2004), who had a long career at Amherst College as a Professor of Spanish literature. Although I did not get to meet him until we were both in exile, I knew about him in Cuba, and when I was a student in the Escuela Nacional de Arte I even wrote about one of his stories, “*El escudo de hojas secas*.” Upon analyzing that story, I could see that Benítez Rojo was the only writer in Cuba that dared to work with our African heritage during those very repressive years in Cuba. He accomplished this by using a style which reflected a kind of tropical magical realism that made it hard to detect—if you weren’t acquainted with the principles of Santería—that

Babalú-Ayé was in fact his main protagonist! This I was able to confirm with Antonio during our many long conversations in his home in Amherst. This is also the reason I dedicated to him my installation on "San Lázaro" (Amherst College Art Gallery, 1999) in which I introduced one of his books as part of the objects offered to this Orisha. Antonio would call me in the middle of the night in order to read me portions of his novel *Mujer en traje de batalla* (2001). What a privilege this was for me! Can you imagine a writer of his caliber asking me about what I thought of his book? I painted with the phone taped to my head and listening to his voice inspired me to paint even better and with more *gusto*.

Antonio was a great cook of Cuban food and my wife, Dr. Grisel Pujala, and I would visit with him and his wife, Hilda, almost three times per week. I think we did this as a mutual strategy in order to survive the cold, not only in terms of temperature, but also in terms of our culture. We were both in a double exile, political but also artistic, and we had no context to feed our creativity. Antonio advised me to never leave out the context of Cuba and Cuban culture from my art, and suggested that I use Cuban culture as context in all my intellectual and creative endeavors. This I was already doing, but it was through him that I was able to figure out why I needed to do this. Antonio knew that Cubans had a culture of mergers and coincidences and that practically "everything" was contained in it: the Asian, the Arab, the European, the indigenous, and of course the African. He also knew that he would die without ever returning to Cuba. When his daughter was to be buried, the people in the Amherst cemetery made an error and inscribed his name instead of hers in the tombstone. He took that as a sign of his fate to die there in Amherst, in the cold temperatures of the North.

Antonio also influenced me a great deal. He would collect my visual work and would provide me with the new publications of Cuban writers who lived outside the island. Often in his home there were gatherings of first-class Cuban intellectuals and we would participate in a kind of inter-generational exchange. Everything was spoken in Spanish, and English was left at the door. This is interesting, don't you think? Hilda and Antonio became more Cuban (as I did) in order to culturally survive. Without the exile experience, our Cubanness would not have crystallized. We both came to this conclusion. Acting upon this belief, we would discuss works that were central to Cuban culture: Martí, Villaverde, Valera, Heredia, and many more.

In terms of the African influence, Benitez Rojo admired Wifredo Lam and had an original work of his hanging over the fireplace. I could never take my eyes off of it when we were in that part of the house. It was a privilege to have had this close relationship with Antonio, we would tell each other our dreams, and we could both "see" (spirits) in the old mansions of the Amherst, Massachusetts region. Antonio was my tutor, not in my art so much, but as a catalyst of my "*asiento*"—a term used

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in Santería—he was a catalyst of my Cuban identity which was in danger of disappearing through the distance of exile.

Note

¹ Isabel Álvarez Borland. Interview. Internet correspondence: May 7, 2007.