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# VIII BIENAL DE HABANA

VARIOUS VENUES

## CHRISTIAN RATTEMEYER

Organized by a team of six local curators affiliated with the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, including its director, Hilda María Rodríguez Enriquez, the eighth Bienal de Habana faced difficulties on several fronts—political, financial, and conceptual. After the Cuban government arrested seventy-five Cuban intellectuals in the months prior to the exhibition and the biennial failed to distance itself from the government's actions, the organization found itself severely compromised, as key European foundations withdrew their support. A statement by the president of the biennial's board in the exhibition catalogue sweepingly condemns the withdrawal of funding as "part of the wave of hostile actions carried out by the European Union against Cuba." The biennial struggled as well in trying to maintain its role in relation to the growing number of other recurring international art events. As Uruguayan artist and critic Luis Camnitzer writes in his contribution to the catalogue, rather than partake in the "system that defines art at a given moment," the Havana biennial has traditionally aimed to "underline the ethical context within which that definition

occurs." Inscribing the exhibition into a discourse that favors moral judgments over aesthetic ones, and local authenticity over global intelligibility, Camnitzer iterates a position often assumed by "peripheral" biennials that claim an advantage derived from geographical (and economic) marginality. With this installment, titled "Art and Life," the Biennial attempted to perpetuate its ethical prerogative while simultaneously aligning itself with the history of the European avant-garde and the Cuban revolution. The hybrid agenda was an awkward one. Referencing artistic practices of the 1910s and '20s as well as the climate of cultural and political change in the 1960s, the exhibition merged the current trend toward reengaging historical utopian propositions with Cuba's grandiose postrevolutionary rhetoric.

Camnitzer, while not among the exhibition's curators, went on to provide lucid guidance as to how the exhibition's theme might be understood: "If *Art and life* as title of this Eighth Biennial pretends to be more than a purely anecdotic theme, the election of the phrase revives two main hopes that go hand-in-hand: the blockade of the temptations of mercantilist artistic tourism, and the maintenance of a forum for discussion of the ethical contexts that to such great extent go beyond the mere making of objects." Here, Camnitzer confronts the most paradoxical aspects of contemporary art in Cuba head-on: For as art in Cuba is less policed than other goods (it's not embargoed either), artistic production has become a tempting prospect toward participating in the world



Above: Krystal performing Humberto Vélez's *Una canción para la bienal (Por que el amor no existe)*, (A Song for the Biennial [Because Love Does Not Exist]) at the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, Havana, 2003. Photo: Ovidio Gonzalez. Bottom: Nelson Ramirez de Arellano and Liudmila Velazco, *Absolut Revolution*, 2003. Installation view, Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña.



market. And while the desired discussion of ethical contexts beyond the mere making of objects would be a more radical conceptual proposition, it would require a culture of tolerance and openness incompatible with government censorship.

The biennial brought together works by 150 artists and artists' groups and was largely concentrated in three venues, the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, an eighteenth-century colonial fortress across the bay from the historic city center; the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam; and the Pabellón Cuba, a '60s modernist trade-fair pavilion. Several smaller projects were scattered throughout the city, and a range of additional exhibitions coincided with the main event. There was also a three-day forum for discussion, which complemented the organizers' interest in exchange and debate. But while the symposia addressed theoretical issues raised by the biennial, as well as current curatorial practices, the exhibition itself remained largely disconnected from the debates. Rather, the correspondence between art and life seemed to be confined mostly to works that engaged with aspects of everyday living, such as domestic environments. A number of artists presented dinner tables and food as signifiers and sites of intimacy and ritual. Only a few artists attempted to interact directly with the living conditions of Havana or their own city or country of origin: The Havana-based artists' group Department of Public Interventions staged several events in public places in Cuba's capital; Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg's video *Devotionalia*,

1995–2003, documented a project for which the artists worked with inner-city youths in Rio de Janeiro, producing plaster casts of hands and feet to learn about creativity and regain a sense of self; and Mexican-born artist Pablo Helguera presented *Instituto de la Telenovela: Fase Habana (El Derecho de Nacer)* (Soap Opera Institute: Havana Phase [The Right to Be Born]), 2003, a long-term research project about the impact of the *telenovela* on Latin American culture.

*Absolut Revolution*, 2003, an installation by Nelson Ramirez de Arellano and Liudmila Velazco, most readily acknowledges the competing influences that the curators tried to bring into play for the biennial. Crossbreeding revolutionary symbolism, popular objects, and icons of avant-garde art history, the artists effectively vacate these signifiers and ironically undermine their heroic histories. The protagonist in *Absolut Revolution* is the monument to Cuban writer and independence fighter José Martí, a well-known feature of the Havana cityscape and a favorite backdrop for Castro's early public addresses. Inserting an image of the monument into iconic photographs—from Rodchenko's mother to Man Ray's *Violon d'Ingres* and August Sander's peasants in their Sunday best—the artists inscribe the multilayered revolutionary history of Cuba into the tradition of avant-garde Western art. Displayed in a mock living room, placed on side tables and hung in small recesses and corners, the framed manipulated images are kept deliberately ambiguous in their purpose, while three-dimensional replicas of the monument, assembled from small

Cuban flags rolled on wooden sticks, add to the obsessive character of the room.

Two other projects equally engaged with the spectrum of Cuba's complex and layered history. Panama-born and England-based artist Humberto Vélez continued his practice of collaborating with local musicians by writing and producing a song together with the Havana-based all-female band Krystal. Presented twice during the opening weekend, the concert camouflaged itself as an unofficial or clandestine event. Based on a poem Vélez found in an old diary discovered in the former Panama Canal Zone Company headquarters, *Una canción para la biennial (Por que el amor no existe)* (A Song for the Biennial [Because Love Does Not Exist], 2003) combined elements of traditional Cuban music and Panamanian reggae with broader cultural references. While Krystal recalls "girl bands" popular in Cuba in the first half of the century, Vélez produced costumes for the performers based on Cuban couture from the late '60s and early '70s that merged bold tropical colors and patterns with designs inspired by Courrèges. Layering cultural and artistic heritage both Cuban and Panamanian, Vélez's concerts retained the character of casual street performance; they did not attempt to function as artworks first and concerts second. His work opened the biennial's framework to otherwise missed utopian moments by referencing a time in Cuban history when revolutionary optimism coincided with a highly developed culture that was both distinctly local in its vernacular and thoroughly international in its scope and ambition.

The artists' group RAIN—founded several years ago in Los Angeles and

building, the pavilion is emblematic of both Cuba's cultural optimism and its vulnerability during the '50s and '60s. For its part, RAIN traversed the pavilion with a monumental scaffolding akin to those used in the renovation of buildings all over Cuba, and placed works in small open booths, recesses, and corridors. The exhibited works often engaged similarly liminal spaces or threshold zones, such as the border between San Diego and Tijuana (Grupo Torolab) or the concrete bunkers left behind in Albania (Bunker Research Group). The German collective AnArchitektur's publications about such projects as nuclear bomb shelters, World War II army test sites, and the architecture of Guantánamo Bay; Nils Norman's designs for the radical reuse of public space; and Gülsün Karamustafa's video about a group of Turkish women who were sentenced to prison by their government all tied in with the research- and documentation-based aesthetic of RAIN's exhibition. A nightly series of concerts, performances, and talks turned the pavilion into the unofficial center of the entire event.

Less obviously inscribed into the guiding theme of the eighth Havana biennial were several strong, young Cuban artists who are poised to achieve the international exposure of artists such as Kcho, Carlos Garaicoa, Tania Bruguera, and Los Carpinteros, each of whom had major exhibitions in Havana coinciding with the biennial. Liset Castillo exhibited photographs of highway intersections, ramps, and cloverleaves, all pristinely rendered in sand and photographed from an aerial perspective. Set against rough and undefined ground, the meticulous models gave



Clockwise from above left: **Pablo Helguera, Instituto de la Telenovela: Fase Habana (El Derecho de Nacer)** (Soap Opera Institute: Havana Phase [The Right to Be Born]), 2003. Pablo Helguera interviewing Silvia Perez Yera, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wilfredo Lam. **Wilfredo Prieto, Apolítico, 2001–2003**. Installation view, Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, 2003. **Glenda León, Destino, 2003**, stills from a color video, 48 seconds.

cars. In each sequence, two cars of the same color drive through the frame from left to right and right to left, passing each other in the center of the frame. But as the white, purple, blue, and green cars pass without further consequence, the red Lada in the last sequence makes a sharp turn and follows the other red car that had just passed from right to left. Humorous and poetic, *Destino* is a love story in forty-eight seconds.

One of the most interesting artists of the younger generation is Wilfredo Prieto, who was represented by two works. With

the national flag of every country recognized by the United Nations, symbolically uniting the world, albeit in black-and-white. Prieto's *Avalanche*, 2003, also functions as a minimalist formal exercise, though it's colorful in its details—consisting of a single line of spheres that increase in diameter from the size of a pea to that of a yellow Coco taxi, a three-wheel motor scooter commonly found on the streets of Havana.

Professional and perfectly versed in the vocabularies of global contemporary art, these young Cuban artists seem eager



consisting of Siggie Hofer, Susi Jirkuff, Lisa Schmidt-Colinet, Alex Schmoeger, Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, and Florian Zeyfang—curated the space within the Pabellón Cuba. For their project, *4D*, they invited twenty-three artists and groups to engage the history and cultural significance of the venue. The Pabellón Cuba was inaugurated as an exhibition pavilion for Cuban art during the 1963 International Architects' Association meeting. Located in one of the busiest areas in downtown Havana and bisected by a preexisting

the vexing impression of development lacking any connection to surrounding infrastructure. Innocent and playfully unreal, Castillo's photographed sand castles capitalize on the metaphoric capacity of their material, alluding to the ultimate futility and fate of real-world, life-size constructions. Glenda León's video *Destino*, 2003, less than a minute long and disarmingly simple, shows a view across a street in Havana, as seen from sidewalk to sidewalk. In five short sequences, the video tracks the cross traffic of variously colored

*Apolítico*, 2001–2003, Prieto presented over thirty national flags on flagpoles in front of the Fortaleza. Reminiscent of trade fairs, political conferences, or international hotels, the flags were manufactured by the official workshop that produces all flags in Cuba, but Prieto changed their designs ever so slightly. Replacing their appropriate colors with a grayscale, he evoked a ghostly presence and in some cases (France and Italy, for example) the interchangeability of national banners. Prieto aims to re-create

to participate in the international art market. Castillo lives in the Netherlands, León is a critic in addition to being an artist, and Prieto's flags have already sold to the Daros Latin America Collection in Switzerland. These artists clearly defy the heavy-handed discourse of ethics that has traditionally surrounded the Havana biennial, but at the same time they attest to the vitality of the local scene that continues to benefit greatly from the exhibition, regardless of its struggles. □

Christian Rattemeyer is curator at Artists Space, New York.