

## ***INTEGRATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE GLOBAL ERA:***

### **A REVIEW OF THE TENTH HAVANA BIENNIAL (2009)**

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From March 27 to April 30, the 2009 Havana Biennial celebrated the event's tenth edition and twenty-fifth year anniversary. Upon the 1982 death of the world-renowned Cuban modernist Wifredo Lam, Fidel Castro initiated the founding of a center for research of the arts from the Third World. The *Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam* [Wifredo Lam Center of Contemporary Art] was founded in Cuba in order to end the country's peripheral and isolated position in contemporary world culture. In 1984 this institution inaugurated the Havana Biennial under the support of the Fine Arts and Design Division of the Ministry of Culture. Since then the biennial has served as the visual hallmark of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution (January 1959) and has become the hub of the activist avant-garde art of the Third World. After the Revolution Cuban cultural institutions and the Havana Biennial were founded to challenge Western value systems imbedded in colonialist discourses with the cultural solidarity of Latin America, Africa and Asia—geographies with a historical resistance to Western hegemony. In the 1980s Cuban artists could not travel out of Cuba, and art materials were scarce because of the country's economic hardships and the U.S. blockade. The art history books briefly referred to the Cuban art of this time as an exotic *modus operandi* and a multi-polar art discourse from the Third World was greatly needed. Thus the Havana Biennial was launched to make Cuban art accessible to wider audiences.

The first edition of the Biennial was the largest exhibition of Latin American and Caribbean Art of its time and included some 800 artists from 22 countries in the region. The second edition included Asian and African art in a quest to represent the cultural authority of the neglected groups, communities, nations, and individuals from these continents. Some 2,500 artworks by 700 artists of 60 countries were displayed, making it the greatest art festival of the non-Western world. Since then the exhibition has been celebrated as a triennial event because of Cuba's financial difficulties, even though it is still called *la Bienal de la Habana* [the Havana Biennial]. In 1989 the third edition eliminated both prizes and a presentation scheme based on geographical areas, transforming the biennial structure into a more open

space in which the artworks were not judged, categorized, and exhibited by the nationality of the artists. This was Havana's major step in departing from the exhibition models that most international biennials had adopted at the time, which merely replicated the colonial logic of their precursors, such as world fairs and salon exhibitions.

In the last two decades, the number of the contemporary art biennials has grown significantly. There were around ten biennials or triennials in 1989 and there are more than one hundred today; around sixty of them are international mega-events. Biennials were founded to provide means for the local artists to be included in the global art system. The Havana Biennial is one of the very few that has maintained its mission to reach worldwide audiences in alternative contexts. It has also searched to resolve the complex relationship between the local cultural expressions and international languages, especially with issues pertaining to the Eurocentricism of the art world.<sup>1</sup> With that, it aimed to create the space of a horizontal connection South to South, not only seeking legitimacy, but also looking to critically affect the North-South axis of Western art practices. For twenty-five years the Havana Biennial has challenged the commercialization and neo-colonial reductionism manifested in Venice, São Paulo, and Kassel Biennials. Other peripheral biennials, such as those of Istanbul (1989), Sharjah (1991) and Gwangju (1995), lost their focus on challenging the Eurocentric market.<sup>2</sup> Hence, now, the majority of the exhibits have an important mission that transcends promoting local artists and instead aims toward the inclusion of their host city in the new post-1989 economy. Still the Havana Biennial has insisted on the activist and radical seal of its *raison d'être*.

Since 1991 Havana has also invited marginalized artists of the First World to expand the network of Third World cultural solidarity. The tenth Havana Biennial officially opened its zones of interaction to the rest of the world. Artists from Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada, the United States and Japan were present, but the most weight was still given to the works from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. With the theme "Integration and Resistance in the Global Era" the Biennial sought to critically look at the universalizing dynamics of the so-called "global world" in an attempt to analyze "on one hand, the complexities of a real and active process of integration to the global order and, on the other, the capacity to challenge the homogenizing farce this process presupposes."<sup>3</sup> Jorge Fernández,

director of *Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam*, summarized the tenth Biennial's goal as "to establish the relationship between art intervening with the social processes and the processes that search for transformation."<sup>4</sup> Occurring during the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, with more than 1,000 works by 300 artists from 54 countries, the Havana Biennial once again became a platform for radical artist brigades, heated leftist debates, and sincere dialogues among engaged artists, intellectuals, and scholars. The exhibition was housed in sixteen official sites as well as an additional 130 collateral exhibitions scattered all around the city and its outskirts (Plate 3). Thus this giant art exhibition enveloped the city, poured onto the streets, and exploded into the plazas.

For example José Emilio Fuentes Fonseca (JEFF)'s herd of life-size metal elephants titled *Memoria* [*Memory*] wandered the streets of Havana and stopped at the Capitol Building, the José Martí Anti-imperialist Tribune, the Old Plaza, in the Buena Vista neighborhood, and on the steps of the Havana University. Elephants, symbolizing power, marked their footprints first in the colonial spaces, and later in places that symbolize the engagement in the historical struggle for such power. JEFF chose to convert symbolic sites into playgrounds by allowing children to climb on the elephants and play with them. The metal elephants visibly revealed their fusion lines. Their bodies also contained inflation valves to suggest that power may potentially dissolve (or deflate) due to changing conditions, no matter how giant and stable a power may appear to be. JEFF's elephants symbolize how the totalitarian power structures that Cuba encountered during colonial times, and later in Revolution, have not been solid and uncontested.

JEFF's project serves as an allegorical response to Marx and Engels' statement in *The Communist Manifesto*, in which they comment on the ambiguity of changing social relations within the emergence of the bourgeois class. Marx and Engels state, "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."<sup>5</sup> Since the dissolution of the Soviet Republics in 1989 and the economic crises that hit Cuba in 1994, Cuba adopted state capitalism. The Cuban government initiated a series of reform measures, such as opening the economy to

foreign investment and establishing free-trade zones. The tourist sector, based on foreign investments, is expected to save the central economy that has depended on sugar exports, while tourism also creates an unbalanced income structure (with tips and other informal wages) and growing social inequalities. Cubans have been experiencing “the everlasting uncertainty and agitation” caused by the radical changes in the modes of production, as explained by Marx and Engels. The Revolution is now being contested with the weakening central/socialist economy and the future is very uncertain for Cubans. JEFF’s elephants, giant and solid, give the impression that they could melt into air if pulled at their fusion lines. Thus the illusion of the elephant’s stability parallels that of Cuba’s current state and economy.

Manuel Mendive, who is known for his joyful performances at the last three Havana Biennials, presented another spontaneous and ritualistic performance that created the most carnivalesque moments of the Biennial. For the opening of his exhibition *El espíritu, la naturaleza, cabeza and corazones* [*Spirit, Nature Heads, and Hearts*] at the Orígenes Gallery in Havana’s Grand Theater, Mendive painted the dancers from Cuba’s Contemporary Dance Ensemble, the National Folkloric Group, and Caribbean Dance Company from eastern Santiago de Cuba province and prepared them for the performance. Huge crowds gathered when a group of dancers, dressed in carnival costumes that Mendive designed along with the experienced designer Ignacio Carmona, started their parade at the Saratoga Hotel and danced through the avenue Prado Promenade to the rhythm of percussion. When they arrived at the Grand Theater, other groups of dancers with painted naked bodies joined them while Maestra Pura Ortiz played baroque music. Here the performers engaged in a dance that mimicked the rituals of transformation, resurrection, and renewal of life. In this representation of carnival rituals Mendive mixed the rituals of Cuban daily life with that of the African spirit world. During a press conference just prior to the event Mendive commented, “I’m Cuban, I’m black, and I’m proud of it. I have a lot of energy and the poetry of my ancestors, with which I can tell the world beautiful things from my country, my identity.”<sup>6</sup>

Mendive’s affirmation of African identity through Afro-Cuban social and religious rituals re-articulates *Afrocubanismo* in Cuba, which developed as a parallel ideology to that of *Cubania* [*Cubanness*], the basis of nationalist movements in Cuba since the late-nineteenth century. *Afrocubanismo* was

established as style of counter-colonial representation in the 1920s and 1930s by the authors Fernando Ortiz, Alejo Carpentier, and Juan Marinello. The Cuban modernist Wifredo Lam figures as the prominent visual artist using this artistic style. In the early-twentieth century Lam marked the colonial difference between Europe and Cuba by introducing content of African origin into modern art. In the contemporary moment Mendive similarly employed *Afrocubanismo* in his performance to constitute an “other” universal perspective in the ideas pertaining to the neo-colonial Western epistemology that expanded through the world with the processes of globalization.

The Havana Biennial serves not only as a site of political struggle but also as one of a linguistic struggle between the state and Cuban cultural workers. Thus one can say that the subjectivity of local artists and intellectuals is not completely lost within the dominance of the state’s ideological language. The Havana Biennial, on the contrary, offered a space for a dialogical interaction. Tania Bruguera’s *Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* at the *Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam* literally worked with the idea of language and speaking. Bruguera, founder of *La Cátedra de Arte Conducta* [Department of Conduct Art] at *Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana*, created a stage and invited Cubans to talk about “anything” for one minute. She also provided two hundred disposable cameras to the public to document the event. During the speeches two actors, a man and a woman dressed as officials of the Ministry of Interior, tried to put one of two doves on the shoulder of each speaker. This gesture invoked the event that occurred on January 6, 1959, when a white dove landed on Fidel Castro’s right shoulder while he gave his initial speech of the Revolution. At the time the dove provided proof for the followers of Santería—the Afro-Cuban religion—that the gods supported Castro as he was spiritually “crowned” as the leader of the Cuban people.

Upon taking the stage in Bruguera’s performance, a woman cried hysterically, another screamed, and a young man kept silent for a minute. One participant acted like Castro and said, “This should be banned.” Another was thrown off of the stage because she exceeded the one-minute rule. Approximately thirty speakers criticized the government’s actions against the freedom of speech and the use of internet. In an interview for *La Jornada* the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto condemned some speakers for being provocateurs. Yet he added,

“This is a healthy criticism since the Revolution, from a position committed to the Revolution, and these often coincide with the critical analysis we are doing to achieve greater efficiency, fighting the same bureaucracy that we ourselves have created.”<sup>7</sup> Since the more open-minded Armando Hart became the Minister of Culture in the early 1980s, the office has acted as a buffer between Castro’s government and the demands of young artists. With this statement Prieto openly referenced Castro’s infamous speech “Words to the Intellectuals” delivered in June 1961, to address the younger generation about the problems of freedom of expression. Castro had said:

The Revolution has to understand that reality, and for instance it has to act in order to give artists and intellectuals that are not genuine revolutionaries, within the Revolution a field to work and to create, and that their creative spirit, although they are not revolutionary writers and artists, has the opportunity and freedom of expression within the Revolution. That means that within the Revolution everything; against the Revolution, nothing.<sup>8</sup>

However, interestingly, this speech is not known for this complete passage but for Castro’s now infamous saying “Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing,” which if quoted alone causes a fatal misunderstanding of Castro’s cultural policies. In the remainder of his speech, Castro outlined plans for a greatly expanded system of artistic education that remains one of the Revolution’s great achievements, as well as plans for a centralized organization of artists and writers.

Soon after Bruguera’s Biennial event, Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance started at the courtyard of *Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam*. Gómez-Peña, with Roberto Sifuentes, created a baroque theatrical presentation of the colonial condition of the Americas (Plate 4). For the eighty-minute performance Sifuentes, along with a female assistant, performed the 500-year history of colonization of the Americas as commentary about the discovery of the Antilles, the slave trade, the independence wars, and finally on Latino identities in the United States. Rather than providing a visual narrative of historical events, the artists performed the piece as “flash backs” in the psyche of a traumatized person; each historical event was represented

along with intervals of present day events. At the end of the performance the artists invited crowds to write on Sifuentes' body as he embodied the persona of the colonized peoples of the Americas. I was present at this performance. At this moment Gómez-Peña asked me how the performance should end and called me onto the stage with another woman. As Sifuentes was lying dead, both of us "resurrected" him with a gesture of hope in the new revolutionary epoch of the Americas.

Alexis Lyva Machado [known as Kcho]'s "happening" in this Biennial added to the notion of the exhibition as a "spectacular event." When closely examined, the happening scratched a bleeding scar of thousands of Cubans, families and children who gathered while Cuban television stations aired the event. Kcho organized his action at one of the largest plazas in Havana in front of the Convent of San Francisco de Assisi. He burned a boat with the help of Halo de Cai Guo-Qiang, who carefully mounted hundreds of fireworks on a wire that raised the boat off the ground. The artists also covered the wooden skeleton of the boat with fireworks. With thousands of locals and the Biennial visitors clapping, screaming, and yelling, the artists raised the boat four stories above the ground, exploded, and burned it. This loud and exuberant gesture was meant to suggest a re-thinking of the "*balseiros* [boats] period" in 1994 when thousands of Cubans fled to the United States, including an entire generation of artists who were born and raised during the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> The event also publicly celebrated Kcho's career; he enjoyed fame in Europe in the 1990s and came back to Cuba during the *balseiros* period. He is quite a well-known figure by the Cuban public, not only because of his celebrity status as he earns ten-thousand-Cubans' salary by selling one small piece of art, but he also has proven himself to be an activist by organizing the Martha Machado Brigades. This project involved young artists, musicians, actors, and dancers who traveled to rural Cuba after the devastating effects of recent hurricanes to help improve the living conditions and well-being of the people. Additionally Kcho organized a branch of this project at the La Cabaña ditch to provide an open space for Biennial artists to live, interact, and create together, adding another layer of energy and interaction to the Havana Biennial.

On the second floor of the convent of San Francisco de Assisi, the collective exhibition *Bisagra: muestra multiple de arte, de re-accion, situaciones*

*plasticas y otras reverberaciones* [Hinge: multiple exhibitions of art, re-action, plastic situations and other reverberations] invited viewers to contemplate the aesthetics of street activism. Curated by Patricia Mendoza, *Bisagra* erased the borders between art and street politics. The images of 2006 Oaxaca resistance mixed with the traditional images of strong cultural roots, such as those of Zapata. The photographs of the Oaxaca uprising hung side-by-side with printed images of Zapatista women on batik material as audiovisual testimonies of Oaxacans played in the space. For this project the rebels of the 2006 uprising, when people occupied governmental buildings for almost three months and fought against the federal army, transformed street activism into what they called “audiovisual activism” and “editorial poetics.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore the exhibition made strong references to the global solidarity of the many heterogeneous activities, known under the Anti-Globalization Movement, which makes use of conventional networks as well as those of digital communication.

While the Eurocentric biennial system raises private profits instead of creating public consent, some young and emerging artists in the Third World are not passively sitting and waiting for their turn to come; they engage in complex, heterogenic, anti-capitalist and anti-establishment art practices. The Havana Biennials have included such artists in their struggle to challenge the neo-liberal world order. Thus many artists in the 2009 Biennial chose to interpret the theme of the Biennial not in the “universal” frame of the concept of globalization, widely circulated by the Western academic thought and showcased by the means of international art world events and biennials. Instead the artists approached the topic from their own local understanding of the phenomenon. Carolina Caycendo, from Puerto Rico, is one of the boldest of these artists. She displayed ten red machetes on high white pedestals in the historical fortress San Carlos of Cabaña—Che Guvera’s military headquarters after the triumph of the Revolution (Plate 5). Caycendo’s title *In Case of Emergency* introduced a satirical tone to the sharp edge of the machetes. The texts inscribed on the blades’ surfaces were as sharp as the blades’ edges. Each machete contained the name of revolutionary movements, organizations, parties, and legal and illegal popular fronts of one or two Latin American or Caribbean nations. Machetes symbolize the defense of the land in Latin America’s indigenous struggles. In this artwork indigenous struggles for political representation and social equality were imagined as collective, historical, and continuous.



*El maíz es nuestra vida* [*Corn is Our Life*], a traveling exhibition created by the Mexican collective MAMAZ and curated by Marietta Bernstorff, also examined the subject of indigenous resistance to globalization through unusual representations of corn—the main nutrition of indigenous peoples since antiquity. Twenty women artists produced daily objects made of corn stalks and presented them with their family pictures. In the social imaginary of the indigenous movements in Mexico corn symbolizes resistance to the uneven economic developments caused by the globalization processes that have led to the impoverishment of millions of rural indigenous communities in the Americas. For example, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, a project of neo-liberal globalization, enforces the reversal of the land reform in Mexico, which means the *ejido* [common land] of the indigenous communities is given to rich *hacendistas* [big ranch owners]. This not only condemns the indigenous peoples into extreme poverty, but it destroys the conditions of communal social life that depend on collective decision-making processes. By creating art objects with corn, the artists in this exhibition critically drew attention to daily life and such issues.

Chilean artist Máximo Corvalán's provoking work in the El Morro Fortress *Free Trade Ensambladura* [*Free Trade Assembly*] also demanded strong reactions. Corvalán mounted a dozen mixed-media cadavers on the floor; neon light wove in and out of the bodies (Plate 6). When the neon lights were lit in the dark, the bodies became invisible as the neon lights illuminated the words "open" and "welcome." The viewer first saw them through a looking-glass filled with sand from the Chilean desert. After the initial shock of the representation of the dehydrated bodies, the viewer was invited into the room to walk around them. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels noted, "[The bourgeoisie] has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade."<sup>11</sup> In this era of global neo-liberalism, the open market economy welcomes the flow of capital into the new and old financial centers, but not the flow of impoverished immigrants. Every day the media reports the number of dead border-crossers in the Chilean desert, Chihuahua, or the Mediterranean. The public watches the spectacle with empty eyes while governments discuss what to do with the bodies among themselves. Corvalán's cadavers demanded attention be directed toward the Chilean victims of free trade as well as to the victims of other "illegal" border crossings, such as the Mexican immigrants dying

on the U.S.-Mexican border, or African and Asian immigrants and refugees drowning in Mediterranean Sea trying to land in Europe.

Since its second edition in 1989 the Havana Biennial has included symposia and theoretical events to be a magnet for leftist intellectuals. In this edition's *Evento Teorico* [*Theoretical Events*] many radical scholars, activists, and artists discussed the relationship of globalization and art—a very popular subject at the forums of international art biennials for the last couple of years. However while star curators have discussed this subject at the mainstream biennials in spaces closed to the public, the Tenth Havana Biennial's *Evento Teorico* provided an active intellectual platform of panels, presentations, and discussions open to the public. During a full week of heated debates with tremendous intellectual energy, the Biennial organizers and debate participants treated the contextual theme “Integration and Resistance in the Era of Globalization” as a dialectical approach to analyze the differentiating matrixes of a phenomenon that has often been discussed from a polarized perspective in the works of academics. The *Evento Teorico* took place at the Fine Arts Museum of Cuban Art. During the events young officers of the Ministry of Interior conducted daily group visits to the museum with the guidance of their senior officer. Topics discussed included: “Political Activism and the Art of Resistance,” “The Art System Cultural Industry and Globalization” and “The Art of Difference and Contemporary Art.” Prominent scholars invited to the event included: Nelly Richard (Chile), Nicholas Bourriaud (France), Richard Martell (Canada), and Isadora Reguera (Spain), whose theoretical aspirations of art's condition in the globalized world grounded the debate. José Luis Brea (Spain), Raúl Moarquench Ferrera-Balanquet (Cuba-Mexico), Joaquín Barriendos (Spain), Gita Hashemi (Iran-Canada) and additional renowned radical artists talked about their alternative art practices that aim to create a collective visual astuteness while also defining the new critique in the era of “cultural capitalism.”

At the closing event Nelson Herrera Ysla, curator and founder of the *Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam* and the Havana Biennial, explained that no one knows if the Eleventh Havana Biennial will take place. The continuation of the event remains ambiguous because of Cuba's state of constant flux in trying to adapt to the changing circumstances in the world while, at the same time, maintaining Revolutionary ideals. However there is

a pressing necessity of a new imperative and even a new model for art events called “biennials” that were founded to celebrate the globalization of the art market. The collateral shows and collective projects of the Tenth Havana Biennial pointed out the limitations of the Biennial’s official structure of exhibitions. The curators, participating artists, collectives, and institutions that have produced the Havana Biennial for twenty-five years are well aware of its short-comings in its attempts to confront Eurocentric contemporary art. Havana generates and accumulates unprecedented intellectual and artistic energies and has potential to create an alternative model in the world of global art that has become another instrument of neo-liberalist principles. From the perspective of the Cuban government the Tenth Havana Biennial was another success story in continuing Cuban involvement and importance in the international cultural arena. For Cuban artists it served as a gateway that opened opportunities in the international market. For the Cuban public the Havana Biennial once again transformed the city into giant carnival with exhibitions, workshops, happenings, plays, performances, concerts, films and dance programs all around the city. With the rigorous help and sincere solidarity of the international artists, scholars, intellectuals, and cultural organizations, I believe that the Havana Biennial will continue to further a Third World space as it functions within the Euro-centric biennial system, while also challenging the neo-liberal logic of that system.

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NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> See Luiz Caminitzer, “Between Nationalism and Internationalism,” in *Signs of Tradition: 80’s Art from Cuba*, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> All the biennials except that of Venice and São Paulo were created after the new world economy of 1980. Those that are not at the centers (not just geographically but also politically) of the art world are called “peripheral biennials.”

<sup>3</sup> Organizing Committee of the 10th Havana Biennial, “10th Havana Biennial: Integration and Resistance in the Global Age,” *Universes in Universe- Worlds of Art*, available at <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/index.html> and at <http://www.bienalhabana.cult.cu/bienaldelahabana/boletinen.php?nop=1> (accessed 2 March 2009).

## HEMISPHERE

<sup>4</sup> Author's notes of Jorge Fernández's opening talk at the *Evento Teórico* during the 10th Havana Biennial, 31 March 2009. Translated from Spanish to English at the event by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Cuban News Agency, "Cuban Painter Manuel Mendive and the 10th Havana Biennial," available at <http://www.cubanews.ain.cu/2009/0327bienalhabana.htm> (accessed 25 April 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Translation by the author. Abel Prieto, "Bielal Habanera Cuba fomenta un arte crítico para defender la utopía: Abel Prieto," interview by Pablo Espinoza, *La Jornada* (5 April 2009): 22.

<sup>8</sup> Fidel Castro, "Words to Intellectuals," Speech of June 30, 1961, Havana, Cuba. Extracts reprinted in J.M. Cohen, ed., *Writers in the New Cuba* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 183-187.

<sup>9</sup> In the Cuban collective consciousness, boats signify the "escape" from the revolutionary regime as well as the "discovery" and colonization of the Americas, with the Indies as the threshold of this supposed discovery.

<sup>10</sup> Quotes taken from the booklet posted on the entrance wall of the exhibition site.

<sup>11</sup> Marx and Engels, 18.