

The Creation of Sanctioned Spaces and the Fall of the Cuban Wall:

The 12th Bienal
de la Habana

By Victor Wang



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Only weeks after the symbolic handshake that took place between Cuba's President Raúl Castro and US President Barack Obama during the Summit of the Americas last April, the edition marking the 30th anniversary of the Havana biennale opened its doors. In a transitioning political and social environment that began with the temporary transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl Castro in 2006,[1] the biennale was thick with the anticipation of foreign venturists, collectors, curators, gallerists and tourists, who had been eagerly awaiting the easing of economic restrictions on the island nation. Yet when speaking to local Cuban artists, it would be inaccurate to say the anticipation was not mutual, or that this did not present an opportunity to draw international attention to political activism and social injustices in the country.

Since its inception in 1984, the Bienal de la Habana has been a vehicle of diplomatic communication between Cuba and the rest of the world, building unilateral relationships with countries, cultural institutions and artists from South to South rather than through a top-down, North to South exchange. Fostering a cultural dialogue with Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, the biennale included nations that, historically, had not been included in international exhibitions in Europe and North America.

As the first biennale to depart from the Venice model (featuring pavilions of national representation), the Bienal de la Habana this year faced the question of how to address the impending modification to national identity, and what it means to be a Cuban citizen or artist in the wake of restored diplomatic ties between Cuba and the US, as well as the rest of the world. To these ends, the biennale, as in the past, would sanction a brief moment of semi-immunity for both local and foreign artists on an island where no one has the legal right, according to Cuban law, to use public spaces for demonstrations or cultural events without prior authorization.[2] This perceived opening up of restrictions came at a moment when opposition (the recent detaining of artists such as El Sexto, or the censorship of Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #6*) appeared more prominently in the international media.

Working on the biennale for the last year, I had many opportunities to speak to the curatorial team, and to Jorge Fernández Torres, Director of the Bienal de la Habana and of the Wifredo Lam Center of Contemporary Art, about such topics. He is quick to point out that this biennale is not about the *public sphere*, as defined in the west, but rather about what he calls a social connecting and activation using the biennale as a platform to connect different neighbourhoods while reconsidering the role of citizenship to urban developments in the city.[3] This is a practice that I believe must derive from the *Núcleos* curatorial model that had been adopted by the Havana curators since 1989,[4] as the only biennale to maintain its core curatorial staff with each edition, with some having been there since its inception. There is resonance between the opening of the third Bienal de la Habana, which opened the same week the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the twelfth edition, as they both mark moments of political instability for the regime. In sharp contrast to the latter, the 1989 edition marked the fall of the prevailing socialist regime, which, in hindsight, was initially celebrated in the early 1990s as the end of a repressive regime; gradually, as witnessed in Eastern Europe, the introduction of free-market capitalism eroded the initial optimism, rapidly giving way to

disenchantment in the face of the reality of privatization.

Of the artists who participated in the Twelfth Bienal de la Habana, in particular, there are three projects by international artists that significantly attempt to rethink the role of the invited artist in relation to Cuban society, and the forms that a work of art may take in considering the role of the citizen, or *public* (and non-professionals). These projects also consider the nature of participatory art in the context of the Bienal de la Habana, reflecting perhaps what Cuban art historian Magaly Espinosa has expressed as a contrasting of international methodology with Cuba's Eastern Marxist-Leninist formation.[5] When discussing international projects commissioned by the Bienal de la Habana, it is important to note their divergence from the Western discourse of the public sphere and participatory art, and their emphasis on a collectivism and community where censorship, collectivism and communal space are both state-imposed and an ideological requirement. Further, they elicit a constructed moment of opposition that may only take place during the biennale.

Adrift, 2015, Aman Mojadidi



Aman Mojadidi, *Ferry to Casa Blanca (White House)*, detail from *Adrift*, at the Twelfth Biennial de la Habana, 2015, Cuba **image courtesy of the artist**

In *Adrift*, Afghan-American artist Aman Mojadidi approaches an institutionally regulated framework that encompasses all contemporary Cuban citizens: communication and distribution methods of public and political information on the island; platforms of public speech and discussion, and more specifically the opinions held by local *habañeros* about the US Guantanamo Bay Naval Base. The work itself is a constellation of several platforms: a publication of transcribed interviews, images of symbolic gifts for the detained prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, sculptures that are mounted onto ferries going back and forth from Havana to Casablanca, and the lasting legacy that these experiences have for the public.

Aiming to explore the importance of dialogue and conversation in the passing on and sharing of sensitive information in a regime that closely regulates public opinion, *Adrift* is a series of conversations about Guantanamo Bay between the artist and the local population, which were later

transcribed and published and then given away for free at the Terminal de Ferris. Questions and information were relayed back and forth between locals and the artist, questions such as, “What should Cuba do with Guantanamo Bay if it was returned?” “Do you know what happens inside the prison?” And finally, “if you could give a symbolic goodbye gift to the released detainees of Guantanamo Bay, what would it be?” Involving a local community in such topics requires skilled manoeuvring around the imposed regulations on political speech, and a willingness by both parties to engage in conversation around these topics, as some did not wish to participate for fear of being prosecuted for their views. These symbolic gifts were then literally found and documented, or, in the case of the more abstract ones, interpreted by the artist and photographed. Later, these images were displayed in a modest exhibition in the Terminal de Ferris [la Lancha de Regla], with the accompanying transcribed interviews.

A noteworthy component of this project was its site of display. Creating an exhibition outside the white cube of the gallery, and within the weathered ferry terminal, allowed the project to take a new direction, as a different community of commuters is pulled into its orbit as they rush to catch the ferry. To a public accustomed to images in public spaces being state sanctioned or imposed, they are now confronted by images of Havana, its *markados*, locals, moments of intimacy, a kiss, a bible, a clock. One man stopped and asked, “Can these images stay up?” The ferries themselves also became devices for the metaphor of migration and departure. Pedestals for assemblages of vintage suitcases were fastened to the roof of the ferryboat.

One morning, before heading to meet with Aman in Habana Veija, I read a copy of the Cuban newspaper *Granma*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, and often the only source of (political) information on the island for foreigners. Between the punchy titles and neatly organized content, it became apparent that although *Adrift* had material components, it quickly moved beyond the effect of simply providing objects for the Cuban public to admire, but more importantly it had provided an outlet for personal experiences and a space for conversation on a significant political issue. Significantly, this conversation was manifest in print, which is not a common occurrence on the island, where opinions were shared, stories were told, and new ideas were formulated about what the Cuban public, at least a section of it, thought about Guantanamo Bay, and how its future should be managed.

Meditation on Memory, 2015, Victor Ekpuk



Victor Ekpuk, *Meditations on Memories*, 2015, white chalk on black wall, 11.88m x 5.13m x 13.88m x 5.13m photo: javier labrador deulofeu; image courtesy of the artist

Ritual and magic are often discredited in the West, especially within scientific and museological institutions that limit their validity and functionality to the past, citing them as customs that are no longer relevant. Nigerian-born artist Victor Ekpuk asks a different kind of question of these institutions, one that considers how contemporary art can reconstruct history spatially through the use of ritual, further connecting history to memory and to forms of colonization. In the work *Meditation on Memory*, Ekpuk, as an Ibibio artist, builds from the special kinship he feels with Cuba's Abakuá community, a secret society originating from the Cross River region of south-eastern Nigeria. Cross River is a region close to the artist's hometown, where people still practise the Abakuá rituals. Adopting an archaeological approach, Ekpuk maps the movement of rituals and people from the Cross River region to Cuba, connecting two separated countries and histories and considering the many effects that migration has on a community – and the place of ritual and personal belief on this Communist island.

Conscious of how stories of migration and diaspora are contextualized and presented in traditional academic contexts, Ekpuk makes a considered decision to break from established forms of academic representation. When tracing relations and dealing with the movement of the Abakuá and the local Cuban community, he avoids the archetypal outputs that these devices prompt in favour of a visual genealogy of people, language and cultures that have been dislocated and separated from each other.

Ekpuk does this through an expanded aesthetic, filling the gallery walls with a visual language he has developed based on the aesthetic philosophies of Nsibidi, an ideographic writing system associated with the powerful Ekpe men's secret society in southeastern Nigeria. For the opening event of the Twelfth Bienal de la Habana, in a traditional song and dance, performers and ceremony leaders commanded the gallery space as a mixture of chaos and disarray erupted around the audience. Ekpuk, in an almost trance-like state, battled through the blackened gallery wall until only symbols drawn in chalk remained. Surrounded by energy, song and ritual, the audience spilled from one side of the room to the other, chasing the fleeting experience of the Abakuá ceremony and

the artist. Caught between outsider and participant, the secrecy that surrounded the ceremony divided the audience: some audience members (mostly locals) knew the chants and songs, but others could not participate – perhaps a telling metaphor for the dichotomy that surrounds many ethnographic museums today. During the ceremony, I was reminded that the interjecting of live histories into a institution is an important one, as many of the objects collected during European conquest still remain encased in glass, never to be used again for their intended purpose.

When speaking to me some days later, Ekpuk said, “I believe that I share common ancestry with some of people on this island. I believe that the memories of my ancestors are preserved and manifested in the rituals of Abakuá.” Consequently *Meditation on Memory* will be just that, a memory, as the work is impermanent, and all marks made in the gallery will be ceremonially wiped away. With no material to furnish a museum collection, what remains is instead just an experience, and perhaps the digital documentation that will permeate the Internet: an ephemeral gesture that both speaks to the local community and comments on the institutional logic of collecting and preservation that is at the heart of most museums today.

Dreams on Wheels, 2015, Jeanno Gaussi

How do we experience our cities? Or the cities we visit as tourists? In an island country that carefully regulates tourism, sightseeing can be a semi-prescribed experience. Caught between history and progress, moments of Havana’s past are relived through every Telepunto queue or foreigner in a 1950s Chevrolet.



Jeanno Gaussi, *Dreams on Wheels Habana*, 2015. **photo: jeanno gaussi; image courtesy of the artist**

In a city caught in suspension, artist Jeanno Gaussi aims to use memory as her medium to expand the way that visitors access and engage with the city and its inhabitants through their memories. In a process that combines oral histories, cartography and transportation, Gaussi works with the local

community to reassemble the city of Havana through the memories of its citizens. In interviewing locals, Gaussi asks: “What spaces in the city are most meaningful to you?” Drawing on the experience and memories of her interviewees, Gaussi remaps Havana; new monuments are raised, *calles* outlined, and forgotten buildings gain new importance through her collection of personal experiences. In a composite of tours based on local memories, these narratives are published as a new Havana city guide for both tourists and locals.

Combining both city guide and mode of transport, Gaussi also provides a set of wheels/transportation to these sites. Collaborating with local Cuban artisans Roberto Bess and Aramis Villama, Gaussi transformed a bicitaxi, a converted three-wheeled bicycle (infamous for their cunning ways and persistence), into a “Dream on Wheels,” literally. If you’ve ever travelled around Havana, then you know of the bicitaxis, and the community of young men who command their fleets. Using images and references based on the dreams and aspirations of its driver, Javier López Urrutia, this bicitaxi (now christened *El sueño de Javier*) received a complete facelift and makeover. A flash of individualization is thus introduced – one which is rarely seen in his business.



Aman Mojadidi, *Regina*, 38 years old, detail from *Adrift*, 2015, digital C-print, 100 x 65 cm **image courtesy of the artist**

In a competitive market that sees locals and tourists whisked away around town on the backs of these converted bicycles for a few pesos (prices vary) – Urrutia’s pimped-out ride stands out. Free of charge, viewers are encouraged to ride Urrutia’s “dream machine” on a guided tour of Havana, connecting visitors and locals to the city through the memories of others. This tour may lead you to unexpected spaces, such as the Universidad de La Habana, where 38-year-old pharmacist Susel Polo, one of the interviewees whose memories and experiences are explored in this trip, once was a student.

Entering the physical space of a memory, anchored by feelings and architecture, Gaussi’s work uses inhabitants’ memories as a platform for participants to build upon and relate to. In opposition to the monumental, which is based on mass social memory, *Dreams on Wheels* offers a

more personal approach to public spaces, drawing on the intimacies that they conjure, and the plurality of experiences that can exist simultaneously within one space.

In a country where state-imposed divisions still prevail between locals and foreigners, no act is transparent. Dual currencies (the Cuban peso [CUP] and the Cuban convertible peso [CUC]), and accommodation restrictions only reinforce this situation. Much of the Cuban public still operates on a different standard. Yet the participatory, as a collaborative practice, offers a brief collective space where knowledge and information can be formed and shared within a state-controlled arena.

All three of these projects attempt to engage with different aspects of Cuban society, from the socio-political and socio-cultural to the historical construction of both memory and the city itself. Like this piece, they cannot sum up or attempt to remedy the complex and multilayered local political environment in Cuba. Even the state-run operating apparatus – the very biennial that many attempted to boycott – has given rise to a new generation of local Cuban artists, which helped them to transition to international art stardom; ironically, some of these artists are now being prosecuted by the very state that supports such structures. The biennale, and what I call the state formation of semi-immune spaces of exchange through exhibition-making, under the banner of cultural diplomacy can enable temporary moments of connection, dialogue and production, where artists have found ways of including, subverting, and engaging with local and international publics. It was Lillian Llanes Godoy (Director of the Lam Center and of the biennale from 1983 to 1999) who perhaps first envisioned the biennale as a meeting place, both between artists and the life of the city and amongst artists themselves.[6] Yet in 2015, a biennale model and ideology such as this one take on newfound meaning when coupled with a significant political moment – the potentiality of western diplomacy through cultural exchange, and the accelerated commercialization and touristization of the country. Yet what remains to be seen is how these developments may influence state censorship on the island and the role of regime favouritism amongst artists moving forward.

Endnotes

- 1 As stated in Fidel Castro, “PROCLAMA DEL COMANDANTE EN JEFE AL PUEBLO DE CUBA,” *Granma*, 2006.
- 2 As stated in Coco Fusco, “The State of Detention: Performance, Politics, and the Cuban Public,” *e-flux Journal*, 2014.
- 3 For more information on the curatorial premise of the *12th Bienal de la Habana*, see: Jorge Fernandez Torres, *Entre La Idea Y La Experiencia: Doudecima Bienal De La Habana* (Maretti Editore, 2015).
- 4 For more information on the Núcleos approach, see: Rachel Weiss, et al., *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989* (Afterall, 2012).
- 5 Weiss, et al., *Making Art Global (Part 1)*, 17.
- 6 Ibid.

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