

The Force of Desire/The Force of Necessity:
Cultural Exchange in the Bienal de la Habana
Michael Goldberg

In March this year I participated in the 10th Bienal de la Habana with a performance/installation titled: *La Fuerza del Deseo/La Fuerza de la Necesidad* (translation: *The Force of Desire/The Force of Necessity*). My experience in Havana was a profound one; from waiting to be rescued by a Bienal official after three hours in a dismal customs hall when the visa sent to me earlier was declared invalid; to the discovery that there were no installation tools available at the exhibition venue and apparently only one ladder to be shared among some 144 artists – unless I was Spanish – the artists of that country having arrived with a totally self-sufficient logistics crew, obviously honed after many years experience of the Bienal de la Habana.

And then there's Havana. With its dysfunctional infrastructure patched up where necessary, mainly for tourists, it was difficult outside of the tourist zone to avoid the inconveniences and sometimes depravities that plague ordinary Habaneros; and difficult not to admire and respect their resolve to persevere with *La Lucha*, the daily struggle to get by.

The Bienal curators had approved my proposal for a work that would deal with aspects of global financial markets, in particular live currency and share trading via the internet, an activity inconceivable in Cuba. However, it eventually became clear after weeks of email exchanges that the exhibition venue, the Cabaña Fortress on the eastern side of the entrance to Havana harbour, had no Internet access. I realized that the work would have to be very quickly reconfigured.

This paper will address some of the issues emerging from this reality check.

Let me begin by posing some questions about the international Biennial phenomenon.

What responsibility faces artists invited to participate in a Biennial? Is it to ensure that they are best represented by the most tried and tested work to emerge from their

studios; work that has already been recognized and acknowledged through repeated appearances on the global circuits?

Or is it to create new and explorative work that engages meaningfully with the place and the culture of the place where that biennial is being hosted?

And if an artist's strategies include social or political critique, how are these to be brought to bear in a culture different from their own, where it might very well be inappropriate to express dissonant political opinions or social critique?

In the Biennale 'reality' though, the responsibility is often wrested from the artist's control and placed firmly under the aegis of a curator. Original intention and contextual relevance may well go through a transformation as a result of curatorial strategy at best, and at worst, by other event considerations such as a work's public attraction, or spectacle value.

In this regard, recent Biennales have been the source of as much criticism, as praise. The term 'cultural tourism' is now common currency in describing these events, becoming a significant factor in determining the overall success or failure of the event.

Like the Olympics, it has been acknowledged that the massive civic investment in Biennales serves as an expedient to showcase not only cultural achievement, but the host country's economic development as well. This may well guide curatorial strategy as much as much as the search for social and political relevancy.

Addressing this issue, the 'City Breaks? Art and Culture in Times of Expediency' conference held at the 2006 Liverpool Biennial posed the questions:

'Is it possible to square demands of city marketing and cultural tourism with an urgent engagement with issues of citizenship, communities [and] dissensus [...] ? How can we constitute a bifocal perspective allowing us to examine the visual regime of capitalist consumption and the immanent meaning of art and social practices at the same time? Does the desire of the visual relegate dialogical practices [with regard to]

the conditions posed by the exhibition format? How do large popular exhibitions such as Biennials negotiate the difference between art as performance and art as competence?¹,

Like so much of the edgy, boundary challenging work that is consumed by the commercial interests, even art that is intended to be critical of the institution of the Biennale is transformed into spectacular entertainment, thus running the risk of being defused and rendered ineffectual within its own showcase.

The work of Spanish artist, Santiago Sierra, is a case in point. His provocative and immensely problematic installations have involved labourers paid the minimum wage performing menial tasks in the museum, or submitting themselves to degrading scenarios, such as have a line tattooed on their backs, or masturbating in front of a camera.

His controversial work aims to make visible the inequitable power relations inherent in the exploitation of labour under the capitalist system. He's proved to be a particular favourite with curators in Venice, where his work has been included in three successive editions of the Biennale, beginning in 2001. Curating the Spanish Pavilion, Rosa Martínez included Sierra in 2003, and again in 2005 when she co-curated the Biennale.

It might be argued that curators know when they're 'onto a good thing' by injecting the required dose of controversial, socially challenging work into their respective Biennales. In 2001 Sierra paid 200 non-European men, drawn from the ranks of informal salesmen plying their trade in the Piazza San Marco, to dye their hair blond. In 2003 he bricked up the entrance to the Spanish Pavilion, permitting admission only to Spanish passport holders through a back door.

By 2005 Sierra's Biennale propositions had de-materialized, featuring only a disembodied voice intoning an inventory of costs related to the production of the

¹ www.artinliverpool.com/moreinfo/oct06/CityBreaks.doc, citing George Yúdice in *The expediency of culture : uses of culture in the global era*, Durham : Duke University Press, c2003

Biennale, such as the salaries of each successive Artistic Director, and minutiae such as the price of a glass of wine during each year of the Biennale's 110-year history.

Perhaps like Hans Haacke, Sierra came to the conclusion that the only way to effectively critique the Institution and its structure is to find a way to focus on the language of the Institution. But, the intoning of a Biennale balance sheet is hardly as provocative and spectacular as walling up the Spanish Pavilion.

The repeated featuring of artists and particular works on the Biennale circuit is not uncommon. For example, Argentinian, León Ferrari's cruciform military jet sculpture, *La civilización occidental y cristiana / Western Christian Civilization*, of 1965 was featured by Robert Storr in 2007. It turned up again the next year in the Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's Biennale of Sydney. One might be forgiven for imagining an agreement between the two curators that, as the work had just been crated up after Venice at substantial cost, it might just seem a good idea to ship it on to Sydney. The work was described as, 'intensely politicized (questioning) all authority, especially religious and military institutions that claim to reveal the truth or to exist in the name of justice'².

It would be hard to resist including a work packed with so much of the 'right stuff'. It seems that in producing Biennales that are politically expedient and relevant to our times, resorting to proven models appears to be a reasonable rationale, even if the effect is a kind of tired déjà vu for audiences who manage to get around the Biennale circuits.

With its revolutionary beginnings and context, the Bienal de la Habana claims to provide a viable model; one that acknowledges the need to address on the one hand art's aesthetic traditions and legacies, and on the other; the necessity of addressing pressing social issues.

² Website of the Biennale of Sydney 2008.
<http://www.bos2008.com/app/biennale/artist/66>

As usual, in this year's 10th Bienal de la Habana, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, the social issues of *La Lucha* were to take a back seat, this time in favour of a more global outlook.

Bienal Director, Rubèn del Valle Lantaron writes:

'The theme, *Integration and Resistance in the Global Era* [...] acquires a dramatic quality and perhaps even greater appropriateness in the face of the worsening of the financial disaster being endured by the planet which has affected all nations one way or another'³.

I aimed to make a work that would somehow reflect this theme by seeking out the faint glow of capitalism's agency that would surely be present, even in the ordinary lives of those living in Havana. In attempting to address how the forces of necessity temper the desires of the material world in this context I was aware, that as an outsider, I would have to avoid making smug pronouncements, or indulge in political critique.

At whose feet then does the responsibility fall to reveal the underbelly of Cuba's status quo, to expose that which is hidden from the world's gaze?

Not surprisingly, with state censorship very active, there are few dissident Cuban voices in the Bienal; with the notable exception of Tania Bruguera, who lives and works between Havana and Chicago. Bruguera has worked with young artists in Cuba, encouraging them to address their social and political realities. She is no stranger to censorship. Interpreted as being critical of Castro, her installation in the 2001 Bienal was closed by the authorities.

Such situations are made more complicated by the dependency of the Bienal on government funding – it becomes problematic for the curators to promote, or condone work that might be critical of the government.

³ Biennale catalogue, *Décima Bienal de la Habana 2009*, Escandón Empresores, Sevilla, Spain 2009, p.19

With this year's Bienal the recipient of significant funding from Spain, in the form of logistical and promotional support, perhaps the curators felt a little more confident in featuring provocative Bruguera's work once again. She wasn't to disappoint.

In a performance staged shortly after the Bienal opening, she set up a podium equipped with microphones in the central courtyard of the Bienal operations' headquarters. 200 disposable cameras were distributed to a packed house, and the audience members informed by Bruguera they would have freedom of speech for one minute.

In Castro's post revolutionary speech in 1959 a white dove was reputed to have mysteriously settled on his shoulder, a moment that was reprised by Bruguera in the performance. An attendant wearing army fatigues placed a white dove on the shoulder of each speaker as they addressed the audience. The number of speakers was estimated at around forty eager to voice both criticism and support. One of the notable voices was that of veteran dissident, Yoani Sánchez, who declared, 'Cuba is a country surrounded by the sea, and it is also an island surrounded by censorship'⁴.

Of course Bruguera was not going to get off scot-free. Rumours circulated that following the performance she spent the night in a police cell under interrogation. But, it was the censure that came from an unsuspecting corner that was surprising. The Biennale's organizing committee released a statement distancing themselves from the comments of those speaking their minds from the podium, asserting that it was, 'particularly offensive that our public places and free events are used by those who are paid to manipulate public opinion, lie, censure, mutilate and systematically limit the freedom of speech and thought'⁵. The performance was cast by the organizers 'as an act of anti-culturalism, of shameful opportunism offensive to Cuban artists and to outside artists who come to share their work with us as well as to support our solidarity and also to all of those who have worked so hard through difficult conditions to put together such an amazing event'⁶.

⁴ quoted in Claire Bishop, *Speech Disorder*, Artforum online, Summer 2009 <http://artforum.com/inprint/id=22960>

⁵ quoted from Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez' site: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yoani-sanchez/the-winds-of-art-and-of-f_b_188478.html

⁶ *ibid.*

One might argue that the Biennale organizers had no choice but to publish the statement, knowing by including Bruguera in the Biennial that it was not likely that she would refrain from a political intervention. The necessity to censure was therefore a small price to pay for the real event.

Bruguera's performance became the highlight of foreign reportage on the Bienal, unfortunately at the expense of other excellent Cuban work that was not as spectacular in its political motivation. These artists were insensitively relegated by reviewers such as Artforum's Claire Bishop to the 'bulk of the work in the main exhibition venue [...] that was grindingly mediocre, with very little of the social, interdisciplinary, and research-based art that has come to be a hallmark of Western biennials'⁷.

It might be argued that the Bienal work of Cuban artists Douglas Pérez, Reinerio Tamayo, Abel Barroso, and Inti Hernández, although less spectacular and politically overt, certainly doesn't fit this rather limited description.

There have, however, been a number of more incisive perspectives written about the history Bienal de La Habana, particularly Rachel Weiss' excellent essay in the Spring 2007 edition of the College Art Association's *Art Journal*.

Included in her perceptive analysis, Weiss presents a useful a chronology. The event was inaugurated in 1984, conceived in part as a strategy for Castro's promotion through cultural exchange, his brand of anti-imperialism and cultural idealism. In its initial incarnations it served as a counterpoint to mainstream discourse and aesthetics; and of course as critical of the rampant commercialism of the art world.

Of necessity any history of the Bienal must take into account its complex trajectory, bound up in the tempestuous history of Cuba; from the mid-eighties era of a Soviet subsidized-economy and grand cultural ideals expressed in 1986 by Minister of Culture, Armando Hart, as 'a grand force of union of the values and common interests

⁷ Bishop, op. cit.

of Third World art'⁸, to the grim days of Soviet withdrawal and economic breakdown of Cuba at the end of that decade, leading to the crisis known as the *Special Period*. This lasted another ten years, the legacy of which is without doubt still keenly felt in Cuba today.

By the seventh Bienal in 2000, the event had begun to look beyond its own shores and inevitably to be affected by global events precipitated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The government looked to the new sources of foreign currency income that could be gained from promoting Cuba's tourist appeal. By the seventh Biennial of 2000 it was acknowledged by the president of the National Council for the Plastic Arts that the event served as 'a backdrop for tourism'⁹, attracting for the first time over two thousand international visitors. But the absorption of the Biennial into the international fold was not to be without obstacles.

In 2003, the Bienal's principal European sponsors withdrew their funding in response to a major government political crackdown. The fact that the Bienal is a government-run event is significant. Its curators are not short-term appointments, but essentially government officials. Thus dissonant responses from especially younger Cuban artists looking to voice their social and political ideas over and above the essentially aesthetic and poetic considerations of the earlier Bienals, are inevitably going to encounter resistance.

With the aura of censorship that hangs over the general impression of Cuba from the outside, these 'irruptions of conflict have been a natural hook' for European and North American art magazine reviewers, 'to headline the incidents of censorship and proscription', as Weiss has correctly observed¹⁰. This statement was prescient with regard to Bruguera's performance this year.

The research for my own project took me on a journey into the history of the Bienal's main venue, the Cabaña Fortress (Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña) on the

⁸ Rachel Weiss, *Visions, Valves and Vestiges: The Curdled Victories of the Bienal de La Habana*, in *Art Journal* Vol. 66, no.1 Spring 2007, p. 12

⁹ Weiss, op. cit. p.17

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 20

Eastern side of Havana's harbour entrance. The fortress is not without the taint of bloodshed in the unfolding of Castros' revolution. This was the location of the post-revolution Tribunals where, like most successful insurrections, the crimes of the previous government were investigated and the perpetrators punished, either by lengthy prison sentence, or death by firing squad¹¹. Rumour has it that the bullet-pocked walls have been retained for posterity, as they have in the deposed president Batista's former palace (now the Museum of the Revolution) but I was unable to find any evidence.

Rather than expose this dark underbelly of the Cabaña, which would probably not have been well-received, I set myself the task of finding a means to engage with the Bienal theme of global integration and resistance, not by reflecting on that of which I had no direct experience, but on a system of exchange that I knew a fair bit about – global financial markets¹².

My performance/installation ran from 27 March to 23 April, and was situated in one of the fortress's barrel-vaulted store-rooms.

Translated, the title *The Force of Desire/The Force of Necessity* is derived from a *telenovela* popular in Cuba, *La Fuerza del Deseo*, set in 19th Century pre-republican Brazil. The *telenovela* is a phenomenon in Cuban cultural life whereby those with access to a TV set can tune in several evenings a week to an episode of escapist, romantic melodrama.

Since the austere *Special Period* of the 1990s brought about by the collapse of the

¹¹ According to José Vilasuso, a lawyer who worked under Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara in the preparation of indictments that often resulted in the death sentence during the first months of the Communist government in 1959: 'The Appeals Tribunal never decided in favor of the appeal. It simply confirmed the sentences. It was presided by Commander Ernesto Guevara'. Executions took place from Monday to Saturday, and each day about one to seven prisoners were executed, sometimes more. Death sentence cases had a blanket authorization of Fidel, Raul and Ché, and were decided by the Tribunal or by the Communist Party... in La Cabaña, until June of 1959, about six hundred prisoners were executed, plus and indefinite number of prison sentences'. Quoted in Executions at 'La Cabaña' fortress under Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara by José Vilasuso, <http://chss.montclair.edu/witness/LaCabana.html>

¹² See: www.michael-goldberg.com *catchingafallingknife.com*

Soviet Union and the ongoing U.S. trade embargo, supplying the basic necessities of life has become a primary focus for *Cubanos*. Cuba's dual currencies, the national peso (CUP) and the convertible peso (CUC) have resulted in dual economies. The national currency provides only meagre purchase power over and above the pervading rationing of food and commodities; the second, the CUC, has become the replacement for all U.S. dollar transactions since 2004. Only those with access to the latter 'tourist dollar' economy are able in some measure to partake of the kind of everyday goods that most countries in the developed world take for granted. This is also the currency used by foreigners, mostly tourists, to pay for goods and services. Aside from rationed marketplaces, shops loosely termed 'dollar shops' sell items that westerners regard as basic necessities (for example, brand-name toiletries, clothing, packaged food and electrical appliances). These shops are only accessible to Cubans possessing Convertible Pesos. With the monthly wage, whether for doctors or street-sweepers, averaging around the equivalent of \$US20 (paid in national pesos), it follows that only those with access to the 'tourist economy' can afford goods and services beyond the most basic and frugal.

This state of affairs has given rise to the Cuban phenomenon known as *jineterismo*. Literally, 'horse-back riding', *jineteros* (m.) and *jineteras* (f.) comprise the subculture of individuals who attempt to access the tourist economy, and its desirable currency, through hustling by various means. This essentially street-level activity might take the form, amongst many others, of offering cigars for sale (most often cheap imitations of well-known Cuban brands), touting reservations at local restaurants (on a commission basis), providing tourist guides, or at its infamous worst – propositioning for sex.

As a form of cultural *jineterismo* my project aimed to provide access, if only vicariously, to an economy and locus of desire beyond the means of all but a few Cubans – the global financial market, in particular, the New York Stock Exchange.

I employed two young Habanero artists to render aquarelle impressions of the CEO portraits and logos of the five hundred companies comprising the Standard and Poors 500 Index. The S&P 500 is one of the most commonly used benchmarks for the U.S. stock market. It can also be said to reflect the general sentiment of the global

economy. The stocks comprising the index include many of the largest publicly held and highest capitalized companies in the world. They represent a cross-section of the goods, services and infrastructure readily available to many developed nations. As a result of the trade embargo imposed by the U.S. products of only a handful of these companies such as Nike and Coca-Cola, can be found in Cuba, and then only ‘unofficially’ through their South American subsidiaries.

I paid the artists the equivalent of the average Cuban *monthly* wage for each day of their thirty-day contract. Over the duration of the project, from the one thousand images I provided, they selected and painted logos and CEO’s portraits, which were then displayed in the installation space. The working day began at 10am with the Biennial opening to the public and ended with the close at 5pm. Lunch and rest breaks were provided. The project ended with the completion of as many logos and CEO portraits as possible within the timeframe¹³.

As an adjunct to the project I had planned a series of performances using four thousand new plastic shopping bags I had brought with me. With a shortage of these bags in Cuba many residents of Havana hold onto and re-use their bags over and over again, washing them and hanging them out to dry along with their laundry. Along with other such recycled items, plastic bags represent *value*, and as such are viable exchange commodities, similar to currency.

Ultimately I determined against staging the performances, having decided that my actions would have been patronizing and exploitative in the light of the dire economic circumstances I discovered in the city. Instead, over a two-day period I distributed the plastic bags in batches of four hundred to the first ten people (mostly elderly or in some way incapacitated) who approached me on the street for money. Their willing acceptance confirmed for me that these bags represented, for those individuals, significant possibilities for participating in *an* economy. My exchanges with these Habaneros were specifically not to be photographed.

¹³ See: www.michael-goldberg.blogspot.com

Making art about material conditions is never easy. The greatest challenge though concerns how an artist's critique can ever be effective outside of an aesthetic context such a Biennale. Really bluntly put; how can this critique ever be more than decoration?

To put this in perspective, a final opinion from a curator's viewpoint: Rosa Martínez, co-curator of the Venice Biennale in 2005, believes that even if it is just on the 'micro-level', as she puts it, critique *is* effective – that 'even in the context of the art market and our neo-liberal world, there is space for critique [...] and if artists are decorators, then at the same time they *can* actively affect people's consciousness'¹⁴.

The Italian culture minister, making a reference to Martínez' Venice Biennale being highly politicised, chided her for 'creating a scandal or a provocation' – most probably referring to Sierra's barricading of the Spanish Pavilion. I'd like to conclude with her agile response:

'... We are not trying to provoke anybody. The scandal and the provocation happen in reality, not in the artworks. Art is a mirror. I am not trying to create a scandal... the scandal is outside, in the world.'¹⁵

Michael Goldberg
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¹⁴ Quoted in Augustine Zenakos, *Talking a Little Further*,
<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/zenakos/zenakos8-2-05.asp>

¹⁵ Zenakos, op.cit.