

VANITY FAIR

At the Havana Biennial, the Art Is Politics ... and Vice Versa



Crowds gather along the Malecón as artists install works for the biennial. Courtesy of Joel Greenberg.

The 12th undertaking of event is the first since the thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations.

BY JOSEPH AKEL

Ever since President Obama's historic announcement in early December 2014, calling for the restoration of diplomatic ties between Washington and Havana, eyes have turned toward Cuba, waiting to see what

changes the new dynamic will bring to the island nation. Set against this backdrop, the 12th Havana Biennial, which opened May 22 and will close June 22, has this month hosted an international influx of artists, galleries, and collectors, many of whom, heady with Cold War–era romanticism and dreams of Hemingway’s El Floridita, have been eager to get a toehold in a country before it transforms, for better or worse. And yet, as many insiders close to the Castro regime will secretly acknowledge, the biennial, like much of the events unfolding in Cuba today, is part of a carefully orchestrated ongoing program by the government to project—and perhaps rehabilitate—the country’s image upon the international stage.

Depending on to whom you speak, the government seems either to be loosening its grip or still very much holding on tight these days. For Coco Fusco, a prominent American-born Cuban artist based in New York, any belief that the Cuban government will automatically change its attitude toward issues such as freedom of expression and the arts is misguided.

“The Cuban revolutionary government,” she points out, “has always used culture for diplomacy.” To that end, she notes, “the biennial is still the main venue for making the Cuban ideological project visible to the world.” For Fusco, who is no stranger to run-ins with the Castro government, “the presence of the police is just a given that you accept.”

In Havana, the world of art and politics mix more freely in private salons held at the homes of well-connected expats and local cultural elites. Among those who have played host to such intimate gatherings, the American transplant Pamela Ruiz and her husband, prominent Cuban artist Damian Aquiles, have become somewhat of a legendary duo for such fêtes. At a dinner party held to coincide with the biennial at their home on May 21, Ruiz’s guests included a Who’s Who of the art-world set, including the likes of Art Basel director Marc Spiegler, as well as several major international art collectors and several high-ranking government officials.

With Cuba Libres in hand, much of the evening’s conversation focused upon the longevity of recent political events. According to Ruiz, who has helped bring to Cuba exhibitions of Louise Bourgeois and

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Robert Mapplethorpe, the recent developments represent “Cuba’s Berlin Wall moment.” Meanwhile, one high-ranking U.N. official working closely with the regime struck a more circumspect tone. “The Castro regime,” the official noted on condition of anonymity, “is very concerned with maintaining what it considers to be its significant social achievements.”



A reception for the opening night of the biennial at the residence of the U.S. Mission Chief to Cuba.

Courtesy of Joel Greenberg.

For Cristina Vives, a leading curator of Cuban art, returning to the grim days of Cuba’s quinquenio gris—the “gray period” of the 1970s marked by heightened Soviet-style censorship—is not an option. Running an exhibition space from her home in the verdant Vedado neighborhood of Havana, Vives has worked with some of Cuba’s leading contemporary artists, among them Tania Bruguera, known for politically charged performance pieces, who is currently banned from leaving the country on charges of “disturbing the public order.” For Vives, “many things in the moment are not reversible,” noting that for “the everyday Cuban, once you see what kind of change is possible, you don’t want to go back.”

Rosa Lowinger, a prominent historian of Havana's architecture and close friend of current art-world darling Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea, points out that for Castro hardliners the sudden change in attitude represents a dramatic ideological departure "that has been entrenched for some time." Speaking at the artist's high-rise studio on May 27, Arrechea was quick to chime in, expressing that, while the current changes have more immediate effects for artists in Havana, those which will have "a lasting impact for everyday Cubans is still very much down the road."

For others, including *Buena Vista Social Club* film producer Rosa Bosch, a gregarious figure many refer to as "the other mayor of Havana," the turn of events augurs a positive change in the Cuban government's attitude toward individual expression. Driving her cherry-red Impala through the nighttime back roads of Havana's suburbs to one of several biennial-related parties, Bosch noted that, at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes opening for Arrechea, "there was the largest concentration of Cuban political heavyweights at an ostensibly non-political event." Stopping at the Iranian embassy for directions, she continues, "The blockades and embargoes did not stop people from coming. I remember in the 90s seeing Ethel Kennedy touring Havana with a flock of younger Kennedys—showing her grandchildren where she had her coming out party."

On May 22, the lush grounds of the residence for the U.S. mission were the setting for a reception to celebrate the biennial's opening. Attendees included several high-level Obama administration officials who had been close to the secret, months-long negotiations held between Obama, Raúl Castro, and Pope Francis. Speaking on condition of anonymity, one former top U.S. official said that "any substantive changes will only continue as long as it makes sense for U.S. interests in Cuba."

Of the works included in the biennial this year, American artist Duke Riley's faux-ice-skating rink installation gave an ironic counterpoint to thaw in relations between the U.S. and Cuba. Situated in an empty lot set back from the Malecón's buzzing thoroughfare, Riley used a heavy-duty plastic, lubricated with silicon and water, to simulate ice in lieu of the real thing. A result of intensive planning and a good deal of Havana-style improvisation, the installation offered awe-struck children from the surrounding

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neighborhood a chance to “skate” for the first time. With more tumbles than axels on display, the kids were nonetheless ecstatic with joy. Cultural diplomacy looked decidedly more fun for them.



Crowds of Cuban children line up for Duke Riley's ice rink installation. Courtesy of Joseph Akel.