

## Sweet Dreams

*The Seventh Havana Biennial addressed the theme of "communication," which many artists interpreted in terms of escape or migration.*

**BY GRADY T. TURNER**

### **Communication Breakdown**

The greatest number of works in the Biennial were installed in the two colonial-era fortresses of the Parque Histórico Morro y Cabaña, situated on a seaside cliff across the bay from the old city. The two structures have served the martial goals of commanders from Philip II to Che Guevara, whose guerrilla forces occupied the buildings in 1959. Even today, the Morro-Cabaña remains an active military base. In a locale so thoroughly infused with military history, it was perhaps unavoidable that some artists would draw official censure.

An installation by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera was situated in the Cabaña in a dungeon off the Foso de los Laureles, a grassy area that was used in the past as a site for executions. For Cubans of any political stripe, this small courtyard is as consecrated by blood as Gettysburg. A long line formed outside the installation on opening day, as word quickly spread that Bruguera was among the Biennial's most impressive artists. As they stepped from the courtyard into the dark stone vault, visitors' feet sank into crushed sugarcane piled 3 feet deep. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, those who ventured into the space found their way by the dim blue glow of a monitor installed in the center of the dungeon's curved ceiling. The monitor showed 40-year-old newsreel footage of Fidel Castro.

Given the nauseating stench of fermenting sugarcane, few lingered in the space. Turning toward the door, viewers soon became aware that they were also in the midst of a performance: naked men were loitering near the walls, absorbed in repetitive acts, such as wiping their mouths or slapping at their forearms, motions that suggested a compulsive if futile attention to cleansing. It was inevitable that the men would be associated with the doomed prisoners who once awaited death in this very room. Perhaps no less inevitable was the call from the Biennial curators notifying Bruguera that her work could not be performed again.