

## PUBLIC ADDRESS

MANY THANKS TO Claire Bishop for her thoughtful assessment of events at the Tenth Havana Biennial ["Speech Disorder," *Artforum*, Summer 2009]. Since the 1980s, Cuba has managed to insert itself into an international art dialogue through the creation of the biennial, as Bishop points out, but it is still quite rare that art events in Cuba other than the biennial receive any attention from foreign art press, despite the fact that Havana is one of the few Latin American cities that have a fairly active art scene throughout the year. Therefore the biennial functions in international art discourse as a kind of synecdoche for Cuban art, which is why Cuban cultural officials exercised a particularly restrained form of control over the events taking place within its framework.

It is not just art but the state itself that is on display during such an international forum. The use of the biennial as a strategic staging ground for the Cuban state explains why artist Tania Bruguera's *El susurro de Tatlin #6* (Tatlin's Whisper #6), 2009, the primary subject of Bishop's text on the biennial, could take place at all. It also explains why the official repudiation of the performance by the same authorities that authorized it remained exclusively verbal and directed away from the author. Although it is quite understandable that an article about the biennial and Bruguera's intervention would focus exclusively on that event and the artist's recent trajectory, in order to make sense of the political volatility of subjects such as freedom of speech and censorship in Cuba, one is best served by looking away from the performance's podium, outside the frame, so to speak.

The performance's mise-en-scène suggests that the most recognizable channel for free speech in Cuba may be the pulp of the revolutionary political orator; nevertheless, the most potent public utterances in today's Cuba occur elsewhere. The most notorious performative expression of the desire for free speech is a weekly silent march by the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of seventy-five dissidents (twenty-nine of whom are journalists) who were arrested in the "Black Spring" of 2003, accused of being

enemies of the state for "subverting the internal order of the nation." Their imprisonment led to the withdrawal of funding by European supporters of previous Havana biennials. That scene from everyday life persists without local public attendance other than the paramilitary "rapid response brigades" whose members have been known to attack the women once they disband.

While Bishop is on the mark in noting that the Cuban state's hegemonic control of culture facilitates the exercise of government censorship, the question of whether

exist without Western subsidies—in the form of philanthropic support from European foundations and the tourist dollars that biennial visitors spend. The biennial has always built bridges to art communities in Western centers: Once upon a time it featured artworks by leftist artists from the US and elsewhere whose presence in Cuba signaled their rejection of various American policies. More recently, that anti-imperialist framework has been replaced by surveys of art from Chelsea galleries, which is itself an indication of the Cuban government's shifting interests.

not all, of the audience for *El susurro de Tatlin #6* was there by invitation from the biennial office, the artist, and the curator. Some, such as the bloggers who went to the podium, came prepared with statements, knowing full well that their utterances would quickly be heard by an international audience of art-world cognoscenti at the Centro Wifredo Lam and then broadcast on YouTube—to be seen by more foreigners, but not by Cubans, the vast majority of whom do not have access to the Internet. The rebuke that was sent out by the biennial organizers after the performance circulated among those who are associated professionally with the arts and culture in Cuba—the event was not reported in the Cuban press for local mass consumption. Even the official repudiation, which was echoed by a somewhat bizarre publicly circulated lament from Guillermo Gomez-Peña, comes off as a performance for an international audience.

What was perhaps most striking for viewers of the performance who know the language and the players was precisely what was absent from the discourse on the podium, and who was absent from the audience-participants. Cuba does boast a wide range of pro-democracy movements led by human rights activists, religious figures, and journalists—but none of those political platforms were invoked. The supposedly dissident statements from Cubans were overwhelmingly tepid and sadly unfocused—with the exception of superstar blogger Yoani Sánchez and one young artist who questioned whether it was time for the Castro family to be asked to step down from power. The woman who cried at the podium at the beginning was Lupe Álvarez, an important Cuban art critic from the 1990s who returned from exile in Ecuador for the event; her wordless anguish was perhaps the most sincere expression of the generalized frustration of several generations of Cuban intellectuals in the face of ongoing political inertia. The other Cuban speakers were young and obviously politically inexperienced. They spent most of their time talking about how it felt to be on stage, rather than giving form or substantive content to a desire for freedom of expression. I was surprised to see that other Cuban artists who were part of the biennial

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the Cuban biennial eschews mediation from Western centers, as Bishop claims, calls for further scrutiny. That purported independence is nothing if not a pose. As one Cuban artist put it to me in a recent conversation, "The revolution has gone from being a utopia to being a profit-making entity." The Havana biennial exists largely for the gaze of Western centers, and depends symbolically on legitimation from these same centers. Cuban officials go to great lengths to cultivate supporters in Western centers knowing that revolutionary lore continues to attract many to the island. The biennial could not

At one point in her article, Bishop asks whether *El susurro de Tatlin #6* was staged for international visitors and then suggests the official repudiation of the speakers indicates that this was not the case. One might reconsider drawing such a hasty conclusion. Nothing about the Havana biennial or the performance was left entirely to chance, not even its public. Although the biennial remains open after foreigners leave so that the general Cuban public may attend, the opening events are reserved for special guests and participating artists and are off-limits to the average Cuban. The bulk, if

did not go to the podium—I am thinking here of the more mature artists who are Bruguera's peers and seniors, some of whom had returned from exile to participate in the exhibition. It's unclear whether they chose not to speak or were not invited to attend the performance, but as a result of their absence the desire for freedom in Cuba appeared rather inchoate. The performance may have created a media sensation outside Cuba, but it generated virtually no heat inside, thanks to the containment strategies of the state and the mise-en-scène of the work itself. An important question about the usefulness of the piece is whether this performative spectacle effectively diverted attention away from ongoing activism on behalf of civil rights in Cuba, focusing the Western gaze instead on the theatrical props that frame official Revolutionary discourse and the emotive charge that those props impart.

It bears noting that the 1994 Havana Biennial touted immigration as its theme and featured raft-art by many Cuban artists—in the wake of an immigration crisis in which 35,000 fled the country in makeshift seacraft. One could easily compare that attempt by the state to use art to whitewash a political controversy to the Cuban government's showcasing of *El susurro de Tatlin #6* and its concomitant suppression of exhibitions at the independent Havana gallery Espacio Aglutinador (run by artist Sandra Ceballos in her home). One might also consider the relationship between the performance during the biennial and the arrest last summer of Cuban punk rocker Gorki Águila of the band Porno para Ricardo, whose most infamous refrain is "I don't like politics, but politics likes me, comrade." The reprimands from Cuban officials against Águila and Ceballos were also circulated via the Internet, but they were directed at the artist-authors, and resulted in direct, physical repression. Águila was tried as a public nuisance for making noise during his rehearsals. An exhibition of Korean art curated by Yu Yeon Kim for Espacio Aglutinador last year was withdrawn under pressure at the last minute. And then, just a few months before the Havana Biennial, on the eve of another exhibition at Espacio Aglutinador, Cuban cultural officials issued an inflammatory

invective against the gallery and Ceballos, suggesting that the opening was going to feature guest appearances by human rights activists who are known to be enemies of the state—the kind of accusation that usually serves as justification for the arrest of those accused of associating with dissidents. It took an international solidarity campaign via the Internet to prevent further repercussions against Ceballos and her gallery.

Águila's ironic lyrics lampooning revolutionary conduct (which he performs onstage in a Cuban student uniform) are far more scathing than anything that was uttered on the podium at the Centro Wifredo Lam. Espacio Aglutinador regularly showcases work by young and rebellious artists (including students from Bruguera's workshop), as well as by others who have been censored or strategically purged from official Cuban culture. What bothers Cuban officials about Águila is that he has a local following despite the fact that he receives no state support for his music. What irks Cuban officials about the gallery is that it represents not only divergent views but a parallel cultural framework: It is a concrete political and cultural alternative in a country where the state is supposed to control everything. Neither Porno para Ricardo nor Espacio Aglutinador are useful cultural expressions to or for the state.

—Coco Fusco  
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Claire Bishop responds:

Thanks to Coco Fusco for her reply, and for providing some much-needed context for a discussion about Cuban art in the pages of Artforum. As a non-Spanish-speaking first-time visitor to the biennial (but second-time visitor to Havana), I am unable to comment authoritatively on her points about local cultural politics and funding. I will therefore contain my comments to the work that triggered her reply—Tania Bruguera's *El susurro de Tatlin #6*—since it offers an opportunity to discuss some of the common criticisms leveled at contemporary artists whose work aims to engage in "real" systems and processes. These criticisms include dismissing a work of art for being produced within an art institution, for speaking primarily to an art audience, and for being

more staged/spectacular than a real political demonstration. The artistic paradigm that results is one of heroic opposition and moral purity, rather than one that engages with the complexities of the art world as a public body, the platform of a biennial as an opportunity to reach a wider audience, and the artist's desire to straddle the territory between symbolic efficacy and the potential for civic impact.

*El susurro de Tatlin #6* was first and foremost a work of art, and secondarily a political manifestation, and should be judged accordingly. Loudspeakers broadcast the event onto the street outside the Centro Wifredo Lam, which did not require tickets for entry. The contrived staging mapped the look of the rally ("the pulpit of the revolutionary political orator") onto the historical (the dove in Fidel Castro's first speech). With the exception of four invited speakers, the work was open in its structure, designed to take the temperature of a political situation, which is why the contributions were hit-and-miss. That many of the young speakers didn't know how to use a microphone seemed telling: It was the first moment in their lives that they were in a position of public address. Although Fusco rightly notes that most Cubans do not have access to the Internet, Bruguera did not upload the video documentation on YouTube; instead, she issued two hundred disposable cameras to the audience to ensure that documentation could circulate around the island (international visitors were assumed to have digital cameras). The visual spectacle that this created—two hundred yellow boxes simultaneously being lifted with a barrage of flashes whenever someone spoke at the podium—not only formed a preemptive strike against potential police censorship but pointed forward to the mediated, performative nature of contemporary political debate in countries with "free speech." The atmosphere was charged with an uncertainty and collective tension of a kind I have experienced before only at political demonstrations, when a critical mass of citizens are gathered in a potentially volatile situation; that this was created with minimal means (a dove, two guards, microphones, a podium) is no small achievement.

To judge a work of art by its effect (impact, consequences) is to judge a work politically, and in this respect art will always lose out against "real" political activism. This much has been proven time and time again. However, we also know that a work of art can, on occasion, by virtue of its conceptual and visual efficacy, achieve a level of public consciousness that political demonstrations cannot. The "scandal" of *El susurro de Tatlin #6* is that it managed to capture people's attention and imagination well beyond the walls of the Centro Wifredo Lam. (Indeed, in the week after its staging, the Damas de Blanco reportedly rerouted their demonstration to the Centro.) The consequences of a work of art are important, but what matters above all is that the gesture takes place, and how it is experienced.

Finally, we could view Bruguera's techniques as marking a generational shift. Her strategy is one of infiltration from the inside, rather than heroic dissidence from the underground. For Bruguera, the biennial, and the brief window of lax rules that it offers, is a tool to be instrumentalized for reaching a maximum audience, rather than a platform to be rebuffed as ideologically compromised. In a similar fashion, her art school, the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*, proceeded on the premise that more can be achieved by negotiating with the Instituto Superior de Arte, which enabled international teachers to be invited legally to Cuba, than by remaining militantly outside it. (When the state came to recognize *Arte de Conducta* as desirable and expedient, Bruguera closed it down.) She pulled off her students' show "Estado de Excepción" by playing the system's own game, out-fatiguing the authorities with burdensome amounts of information. The irony is that, after *El susurro de Tatlin #6*, the second part of "Estado de Excepción" was censored; the curators had planned several days of public discussion and student presentations—in other words, another opportunity for free speech. All of this indicates, even to an outsider like myself, that "constructive institutional critique" in Cuba should be painted in many shades of gray, rather than the crisp black and white of Fusco's footage.

—Claire Bishop  
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