

HAVANA

## WINDS OF CHANGE FOR HAVANA BIENNALE

Jade Niklai

The line-up for the 11th Havana Biennale (May 11 to June 11) was promising for its absence of the usual suspects. The obvious reason for this is the cultural embargo on the UK and North America, although some transnationals (Marina Abamović, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov) and token “Westerners” (Andres Serrano, Herman Nitsch) were present. For a pan-European eye, the proposition of unknown Latin American and Caribbean artists was riveting, even if it was a little difficult to follow how the selected works responded to the curatorial theme of “Artistic Practices and Social Imaginaries.” Disappointingly, the Cuban works were the least ambitious and satisfying. They fell in to two key categories:

works addressing the 90-mile affair between Havana and Miami, typically by artists based in Cuba such as Sandra Ramos; and as clichés presented by Cuban artists living abroad. The latter was personified by the fetishized celebration of Afro-Caribbean culture through a procession by Manuel Mendive and an ill-fated performance by Los Carpinteros, which, intended as a gothic-style carnival in reverse, was pre-empted by an unusual display of power by Special Forces police and angry German shepherds. Both performances were presented in busy Old Havana by semi-clad Afro-Caribbean dancers bursting with sexual prowess; sadly, they did little to challenge the outsider’s impression of the Cuban arts.

The exhibition spaces proved to be most informative about the local arts scene. The established venues seemed old and sleepy (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales), while the newer spaces (Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, Factoria Habana) appeared shiny, but tired before coming of age. It was the alternative spaces (Ludwig Foundation of Cuba and independent artists’ studios) that offered a glimpse of an active discourse and striving arts community. Whether due to political astuteness or delayed organization, the absence of an English-language program and website were a hindrance to non-Spanish speakers, especially for American collectors, curators

and dealers who were visiting Cuba for the first time in many years.

The question is not whether Havana should or should not host a biennial: its existence since 1984 is a testament in itself. The issue is how it can best address issues relevant to both the local and international arts communities and promote contemporary talent without censorship — and beyond the state-supported stars and émigré pin-ups who were presented this year.

The relevance of the Havana Biennial remains to be seen: whether the winds of change will guide it towards North or South America; and whether it can maintain its status as a destination for international audiences.

BUENOS AIRES

## CONVERTED MILL NEW CENTER OF CULTURE

Interview with Director Ximena Caminos by Florencia Malbran



The Faena Arts Center site before the conversion.

*The Faena Arts Center is a new art institution that opened in Buenos Aires in 2011. The FAC operates out of a historical building — a windmill built a century ago when Argentina was the world’s breadbasket. Within the original architecture there are two vast exhibition spaces.*

**Florencia Malbran:** Will the FAC exhibit site-specific artworks in dialogue with the windmill as well as its cultural context?

**Ximena Caminos:** We are looking to create new lines of communication between the international artists that we invite to exhibit and the Argentine scene. We want them to fully experience Buenos Aires. This kind of interaction happened during the inaugural exhibition by Ernesto Neto. About 75,000 people visited the show. But beyond that, what unfolded from the experience was a real exchange between the artist and the local scene. Neto created a monumental piece. While installing, working with the art handlers on his monumental piece, Neto realized they were interesting local artists. Why not exhibit their work? So we are doing just that. We are opening a group exhibition of artists who work as art

handlers. Future shows include solo presentations by Los Carpinteros and Franz Ackermann.

**FM:** You mentioned that you are interested in interdisciplinary practices?

**XC:** Yes. Ultimately, what is art today? One of the ways in which we will address this query is by initiating a project entitled LEA (Lab of Artistic Experimentation), where each year we will invite artists working in different cultural realms to participate in a short program of collective reflection, concluding in an exhibition or gesture that captures the exploration. LEA calls for an intense context of exchange between participants. Their dialogue will widen the panorama of the forces driving art now. The only condition is that the conclusions, whatever they may be, come to fruition in an exhibition or some kind of gesture.

**FM:** So FAC embraces openness and experimentation?

**XC:** Absolutely. For the audience, this new space is still very much a question mark, a space for inquiry and exploration. For us, it is a desire — and also a challenge — that we are bringing to life.