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## Biennial Reflections, Part 2: On International Artists, Collateral Projects, and What Comes Next

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Havana art historian and critic Hamlet Fernández continues his assessment of the 2015 Biennial

The 12th edition of the Havana Biennial benefited from the participation of world-famous artists, including such classics of postmodernism as Joseph Kosuth (USA), Daniel Buren (France), Michelangelo Pistoletto (Italy), and Luis Camnitzer (Uruguay). The presence of these personalities is almost a luxury, and it shows the growing interest in the Havana Biennial.

### **Luis Camnitzer: *Exercises***

Among the more purely creative presentations in Havana (neither symbolic nor advertising-related), Camnitzer's exhibition in the Casa de las Américas seemed the most fruitful. At least it wasn't a remake of stale and globalized work.

His *Exercises* stands apart from the traditional art-world positions of intimacy, loneliness, uniqueness, or originality of subject. Instead, Camnitzer bases his conceptual and curatorial strategy on his long experience as a teacher. He positions creative expression as a dialogue: an exchange of experiences, ideas, and views, and the space to think collectively. Here, creation is understood as conversation, stimulus and response: an open, uncertain, ever-growing process in which all can participate, either as observers or creators.



At the opening of *Luis Camnitzer: Ejercicios* at the Casa de las Américas  
Courtesy CNAP

Before the exhibition opened, the Uruguayan master held a workshop with students and young Cuban artists. What we saw in the Latin American Gallery of the Casa de las Américas was a selection, by Camnitzer, of the results of these creative exercises.

The stimulus that triggered the wealth of creative responses was a series of hard questions, functioning as mental problems of a philosophical nature but also structured with a deceptive rhetoric. The students posed imaginary solutions to their teacher's mental provocations. As a result, viewers had to walk through the exhibition space calmly, not only to see all the details and subtleties of these works, not only to think about the problems posed by the teacher, but to participate themselves by writing or drawing possible responses, becoming part of the open and democratic creation. Wisely, Camnitzer managed to make his presence invisible, reduced to a gesture—but a gesture able to trigger a thought process that began to live, inevitably, in our minds.

¿Por qué volar? ¿Para huir del peso, de la tierra, ir al cielo?  
¿Es sorprendente? ¿Llamar la atención? ¿De quién? ¿No hay nadie  
¿Que disfrute en vuelo? ¿Que disfrute  
podrán encontrar los pájaros cuando se posan en la tierra.  
Ellos descansan ¿y yo? ¿Estoy descansando?

One of the works in *Luis Camnitzer: Ejercicios*  
Courtesy La Ventana

There were two excellent examples of how the Biennial can extend the influence of art organically, beyond its usual enclosures, without trying to justify such movements on the circumstantial whims of curatorial intention: the installations performed in the campus of the University of Havana by Belgian artists Koen Vanmechelen and Peter de Cupere.

### **Koen Vanmechelen: *The Library of Collected Knowledge* and the *Cubalaya***

At the Museum of Natural Sciences Felipe Poey, which is based in the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science, the public could interact with the *Library of Collected Knowledge*, a kind of multimedia installation by Koen Vanmechelen that provides information on the development of a scientific program named “Arena of Evolution.” This installation had previous editions in several countries. Here it took the form of a theoretical event, held in the early days of the Biennial, where artists and scientists exchanged views on issues of identity, evolution, and cultural diversity.



Installation view of the *Library of Collected Knowledge* (L.O.C.K.) by Koen Vanmechelen  
Courtesy Koen Vanmechelen

Also, in the majestic central patio of this school, a huge cage was located in which three examples of *cubalayas*, a kind of endangered Cuban native chicken, were shown to the public. Thanks to the Belgian artist's work in collaboration with the company Flora and Fauna, a program has been developed to promote the bird's reproduction.



Another Biennial project by Koen Vanmechelen: *Cubalaya* chickens in their coop in a University of Havana garden  
Courtesy Koen Vanmechelen

In turn, our *cubalaya* has entered a long chain of genetic crossovers, which now amount to 17 generations of "cosmopolitan hybrid chickens." The artist's goal is to achieve global hybrids by crossbreeding national poultry species. Projected onto cultural notions such as race, ethnic purity, or national essentialism, this scientific work becomes a provocative conceptual metaphor.

### **Peter de Cupere: *The Smell of a Stranger***

*El Aroma de un desconocido* (The Smell of a Stranger) was the title of Peter de Cupere's intervention in the gardens of the School of Nuclear Physics: an exhibition of plants whose aromas, according to the accompanying fact sheets, had been engineered. People could access these scents through a bell-shaped cup, located on the outside of the metal structure that protected each specimen. Small solar fans ventilated the branches and leaves to help the suggestive odors reach our nostrils.

Smoke, sweat, gunpowder, money, body, blood, sperm, vaginal secretions: those were the essences these exotic plants gave off. Crossing the beautiful garden, we had disturbing sensory experiences sampling those nice or nasty smells. But a conceptual story could also be shaped in that sensitive contact with nature: plants sweating, or contaminated with, human attributes.



Visitors investigate an installation in Peter de Cupere's project *The Smell of a Stranger*.  
Courtesy Vimeo

Peter de Cupere shows us, by means of a scientific experiment, the possible effects of genetic mutation, so that through a disturbing aesthetic experience of nature we come to reflect on the violence that human civilization wreaks, leaving its mark on the natural environment. (For a 4-minute video about the exhibition, click [here](https://vimeo.com/150387583) (<https://vimeo.com/150387583>).)

Both museographically and conceptually, Vanmechelen's virtual library and Peter de Cupere's aromatic plants were harmonically integrated into their respective spaces, creating a dialogue and enriching the cognitive symbolism of the institutions that welcomed them.



Visitors investigate an installation in Peter de Cupere's project *The Smell of a Stranger*.  
Courtesy Vimeo

These two examples show that it is possible to contextualize the work of foreign artists, which have an experimental discourse and a global aim, in such local and specific places as a modest natural history museum or the garden of a university campus. The problem is that when art seeks to operate beyond its institutional area, it is necessary to know, and be able to mobilize the attributes of the space in which it occurs—using it as a genuine cultural textuality that the work exploits in its favor, making it an essential component of the art.

### ***Montañas con una esquina rota* (Mountains with a Broken Edge)**

Of the semi-ephemeral projects that took place in other parts of the city, undoubtedly the most controversial was the site-specific intervention curated by Wilfredo Prieto, Direlia Lazo, and Gretel Medina at the so-called "bicycle factory on Linea y 18." The dilapidated factory warehouse—in past decades, a symbol of socialist production—was worked on by 13 international artists, invited by the Cuban curators under the metaphor of *Montañas con una esquina rota* (Mountains with a Broken Edge).

## MONTAÑAS CON UNA ESQUINA ROTA

MAYO 22, 2015 · FÁBRICA DE BICICLETAS, LÍNEA Y 18, VEDADO · 7:00 PM  
CURADURÍA WILFREDO PRIETO · DIRELIA LAZO · GRETTEL MEDINA

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS  
MICHAEL FRANÇOIS  
RYAN GANDER  
PIERRE HUYGHE  
GABRIEL KURI  
TATIANA MESA  
HELEN MIRRA  
NAVID NUUR  
ROMAN ONDÁK  
EDUARDO PONJUÁN  
SHIMABUKU  
ROMAN SIGNER  
ARIEL SCHLESINGER  
RICHARD WENTWORTH



BIENAL DE  
LA HABANA  
2015



These interventions aroused great controversy, first, because it was quite difficult to recognize—or even find—the marks left by the artists in the space. Most were almost invisible gestures that confused the viewer, or pretended to be the industrial waste of that desolate factory: industrial byproducts, raw materials, debris—in short, the useless trash of a place in ruins. That was the curatorial intention.

But if the historical and thus symbolic burden of a place is so strong, and its current physical and functional status so deplorable, as in the case of the large warehouse on Linea y 18, does an invisible and chameleonic mimicry as developed by the group of guest artists bring anything to the sensory experience of the environment or contribute to historical reflection?





The bicycle factory at Línea and 18th, site of the exhibition *Montañas con una esquina rota*  
Courtesy Arte por excelencias

In my opinion, it contributed nothing. Especially because the space spoke for itself, so that the interventions of the artists seemed simplistic and harmless additions. In short, they did not provide any substantial aesthetic or semantic content. At best, the mere ironic jokes didn't succeed, as with the parachute hanging from the ceiling, or the set of cans collecting water from a leak, on a floor left open to the heavens.

If, in such projects, the work of the artists and curators fails to generate a discourse based on rigorous research, organic understanding (more if it comes from foreign artists), and metaphorical manipulation of the historical symbolism of the place, art will not have fulfilled its mission. Biennial fireworks, nothing more.

### **Merrero y Toirac: Las Terrazas de Prado**

On the other hand, one artistic intervention that we can appreciate as an exemplary case of site-specific installation was that of Meira Marrero, José Ángel Toirac, and José R. Alonso at Las Terrazas de Prado, an outdoor coffee bar belonging to the Habaguanex Company.

Between 1942 and 1944, that location (formerly Prado #72) housed the Prado Gallery, which hosted the best of Cuban painting at the time. The soul of the project was the patroness and promoter María Luisa Gómez Mena, with the collaboration of the art critic José Gómez Sicre. All of this background information and more, accompanied by photos of the gallery, exhibitions, and artists, was arranged in large sheets at the café entrance. Meanwhile inside, people drank beer, ate hamburgers and fries, and listened to reggaeton and bachata music.



In a photographic detail, María Luisa Gómez Mena stands with a core group of artists and critics in the doorway of Galería del Prado, c. 1942-1944. Gómez Mena stands sixth from the left, in front. Others in the shot include José Gómez Sicre, Mario Carreño, Cundo Bermúdez, Alfredo Lozano, Amelia Peláez, Mestre, MLGM, Roberto Diago, and Eugenio Rodríguez. The photograph is attributed to Julio López Bernstein.

Courtesy José Ramón Alonso Lorea

Sitting at the Paseo del Prado and observing the movement around the place was a rewarding experience. Some people entered the café and weren't aware of the exhibition. But many people walking past stopped and read the information; it would be a blessing to know what was going on in their minds. That overview—the spontaneous outpouring of popular entertainment inside, while outside an archaeological fragment of the past showed a touch of what was a core of Cuban culture of the 1940s—generated a space-time short circuit.

Past and present overlapped in a historical paradox: a historical document of high culture juxtaposed against a living document of popular sociability. The space became heterotopic (in the Foucauldian sense): several realities and readings on several levels converging in one place, as time was suspended in a pure confrontation between what once was and what is today, in this fragment of the city.

### **Pros and Cons**

Surely there are many more successes of the Biennial to be highlighted, as well as other controversial points to go into in depth. What was discussed here is just a summary of what a mere mortal could assimilate. But beyond the pros and cons, I think the important thing for the national culture was the public access to this great feast of visual arts. Making art a common good, inclusive and democratic: this utopia shone throughout the city during the Biennial month.

However, it is worth asking: to what extent does the spatial spread of an event, and the overabundance of scheduled actions, enhance or detract from their reception, challenging our physical and mental abilities to comprehend simultaneous discourses?

Does the outpouring of artists' work into the social and urban atmosphere ensure *a priori* an interaction (leading to understanding) with a larger than usual audience?

During the next three years, the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center should undertake rigorous field studies in the disparate urban contexts in which the Biennial was showcased, if it wants to have a base of minimally reliable empirical information to test the real impact of the event.

Without this follow-up work of sociological research, without this feedback loop, the curatorial experiment of the 12th Havana Biennial won't rise above its experimental status.

— [Hamlet Fernández \(/?ACT=19&result\\_path=news/authors&mbr=78\)](#)

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