

The Beachhead of the Global South



Much has been said about the ways that Art Basel has transformed Miami's relationship to the international art world. Once a year in December, when it's cold and gray in New York, London, and Berlin, the art jet set congregates in the waterfront hotels of South Beach to buy art, talk shop, cut deals, and party hard. Over the last 12 years, the number of fairs has grown from one to around 20, attendance numbers have reached six figures and the cash injection into the local economy is now estimated at over \$500 million a year. The media hype stresses the benefits of high-profile culture, which, like it or not, spurs gentrification on the one hand, and public and private investment in local cultural institutions on the other.

The positive spin on these fairs' ultra-chic blend of high art and high-flying nightlife has coaxed South Florida's art patricians to open their doors to the public. Being on display before the eyes of the global art world has prompted local art collectors to invest a bit more in the local art scene and upped the ante for local art organizations. Miami-Dade County's Art in Public Places has justly garnered national recognition for its innovative commissions. Artist-run spaces and artists' residencies have multiplied and become more entrepreneurial. Media coverage of the arts has also expanded; the birth of the *Miami Rail* marked a key turning point, offering the most exhaustive coverage of Miami's art scene that it has ever had. The city that has long been a key destination for immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as sun-worshippers from the North, has become a desirable place for visiting artists seeking respite from the cold *and* a foothold in a burgeoning market. The lingering questioning for me is how this all affects the artists who live in Miami year round.

I am no great lover of art fairs—I don't see them as really being designed for artists. Nonetheless, in the past three years I've been impressed on my visits in December to see so many regular folks coming out to look at contemporary art. Art fairs in New York and Europe don't usually make significant overtures to the general public; tourists looking for culture in New York or Europe are more likely to head for a museum. Miami, on the other hand, has embraced Art Basel as a must-see blockbuster event. I would like to believe that this is a sign of a broader rapprochement between local communities in Miami and the institutions and elites that call the shots in the world of art. Not too long ago, artists in Miami, particularly those who hailed from the Global South, had a tough time in every way: the local market was weak, the scene lacked verve, and there seemed to be no way to project oneself professionally using Miami as a base. Displaying an attitude that was once typical of regional arts institutions, Miami's museums showed little interest in the work of local artists, favoring traveling shows that featured art stars from New York and Europe.

The result of that disconnect between affluent collectors who keep vacation homes in South Florida, far-sighted museums that couldn't see the art that was just outside their doors, and local artists was that the ambitious generally left town as soon as they could. The Cuban artists who immigrated to Miami during the 1980s and 1990s used to complain to me that buyers dropping in at galleries in Coral Gables wanted paintings in colors that would match their furniture. Sadly, the city's dearth of economic opportunities and the absence of a broad cultural vision stymied the careers of more than a few immigrant artists who have tried to set up shop in Miami.

In 1994, on the occasion of the acquisition of one of the works of Cuban artist José Bedia by the Rubells, I was invited to Miami to speak at a public event and interpret for the artist. I remember being stunned to find that his was the first Latin American work that had been purchased for the collection. How could a place reborn in the postmodern era as a pan-Latin, pan-Caribbean hub and a key player in hemispheric political affairs still have an elite that chose to ignore their town's new status as the beachhead of the Global South? So when the *Miami Rail* invited me to come down for a visit without the art fair noise in the background, I saw it as an opportunity to take a closer look and engage in dialogue with members of the local arts community to get a sense of whether Miami's changing cultural landscape was affecting them for better or for worse.

I arrived in the midst of a political dispute at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA) over whose interests should prevail at this public institution: those of the local, working class, mostly Haitian population or those of the elite board members who sought to use city monies to expand the museum and create more space for an art collection that consists largely of works they have donated. The local citizens' decision to reject the board's bond proposal to expand the museum, the board's plans to transfer the museum's collection to the much more tony Bass Museum, and the bizarre duel between a board-appointed and a city-appointed new director—both of whom are claiming to be the legitimate institutional leader—are tell-tale signs that longstanding divisions between Miami-Dade County's various social sectors have not yet been resolved. What is interesting to me about this battle is that the Haitian community and its political representatives were ready to publicly oppose a culture elite that operates as if its idea of what was right for art was all that mattered. Long gone are the days in America when immigrant communities quietly submitted to whatever the established power structure mandated: Miami's newer communities clearly see themselves as stakeholders in the city's cultural life. On that note, I was particularly heartened to learn that the Pérez Art Museum Miami has embraced a curatorial vision for the institution that focused on the Caribbean and Latin America, which not only enables them to take advantage of a permanent collection of Latin American art and many prominent local collections of the same, but also acknowledges Miami's hemispheric position and the city's changing demographic.

Political clashes may have been in the air but local artists showed little interest in flexing their political muscles. None of the artists I spoke to during my visit mentioned the MOCA controversy during a group discussion about media coverage of the Miami art scene, even though news of the debacle was all over the national press. Only one artist I talked to during my trip mentioned that the conflicts surrounding the Miami Art Museum's 2011 decision to change its name to the Pérez Art Museum Miami were an open wound that he and his peers sought to stay away from. On a more positive note, none of the artists I spoke to expressed a sense of their being marginalized on the basis of their cultural identity—a far cry from what I used to hear 20 years ago.



José Bedia, *Naufragios*, 1996. Installation view. Photo courtesy the Rubell Family Collection.

I sensed a certain wariness about getting embroiled in political matters, a fairly strong desire among many artists to remain in good graces with the powers that be, and a general perception that media recognition and sale of their art was the top, if not the sole priority. Artists responded to my questions about the relationship between the local media and the arts community as a matter of whether there were sufficient reviews of art shows. When I ventured commentary about how soft journalism's personal interest stories about individual artists and emergent trends, together with the more strident voices of art bloggers who often break news and challenge social taboos, can invigorate an art scene and empower artists, I got the sense from the responses that more direct engagement with media seemed too complicated and labor intensive. Several lamented the lack of a full time art critic at the *Miami Herald*, as if the appointment of a single person would transform arts coverage and serve their interests. I was quite open in my skepticism about this proposal. Giving one critic total power to cover an entire arts milieu could easily do more damage than good. Other artists acknowledged that the range of coverage had broadened significantly in the past decade, that art magazines such as *ArtNexus* had established offices in Miami, and the *Rail's* expansive coverage was a boon to the local scene. But the idea of getting involved in writing or publishing, on or offline, didn't seem very attractive to many, although a couple of the younger artists I met had explored creatively manipulative uses of PR to create performances.

Perhaps the reluctance of artists to imagine themselves as political actors in the Miami art scene is due the media's characterization of political matters in the cultural sphere as ugly fights between rivals rather than crucial power struggles that are key to redefining the cultural character of the city. Who wants to see themselves as permanently engaged in public brawls? It may also be that the relatively recent expansion of support for local artists (including a steadily growing local market) after a long period of extremely limited possibilities could be contributing to artists' hesitance. But artists don't always win by playing nice and accepting whatever comes their way, or by expecting others to explain what they do and why their work should be valued. Critics cannot always be relied upon to understand the new, nor do collectors and curators invariably embrace the unknown—and, these decision makers are famous for being fickle. Artists aren't just object makers. We are also each other's first audience, the toughest and most incisive critics, and the most significant mentors. If we don't protect our status as cultural and creative beings, we can easily become tools for someone else's vision or agenda, or never reap the benefits of our efforts. Individual and collective advocacy by artists has historically been instrumental in the development of intellectual property and resale rights for visual artists, and it has helped to shape a more open dialogue between art institutions and practicing artists as more and more venues collect and showcase contemporary art. Artists have frequently stepped up and launched publications to give voice to their views, particularly in times and places where other arts professionals are either absent or uninterested. Eventually, others come around if artists make enough noise. All these activities are valuable political contributions that create and sustain culture as much as any studio practice.

The local creatives behind Miami's smaller, artist-run galleries and multi-service cultural organizations are the ones who are most clearly committed to a holistic approach to making an art scene happen. It was a real pleasure for me to walk into so many cultural spaces in Miami with young artists at the helm who were clearly enjoying themselves and drawing significant crowds to their activities. Dimensions Variable, Locust Projects, and Cannonball—just to name a few—are making truly important and lasting contributions to contemporary artistic culture in Miami, not only by hosting exhibitions that feature works by local artists and curators and bringing local artists into contact with visiting artists from abroad, but by enacting cultural models in which artists are the decision makers at every stage. These are places where artists can come together to share and assess what is valuable to them, rather than using the market or the art fair as the measure of all worth. It's important to have a sense of what artists care about as something distinct from the price tag that is placed on the things they make.

I heard quite a few people express concern about the imminent end of cheap rents and the prospect of being displaced by real estate developers who always get chummy when they want artists to make neighborhoods attractive then dump them when they can make more money off of others. That cycle is all too familiar to artists all over the world, and the only way to stave off evictions is by investing in property, which is usually impossibly expensive for fledgling organizations. It might be worthwhile to look at models in other cities: statutes that have been created for subsidized artists' housing and work spaces and new initiatives emerging in New York and elsewhere in which entire buildings are being converted into low-cost live work spaces for artists, available for purchase with extended payment plans. These sorts of options only become viable realities when artists band together and organize to bring them into being. So it seems like a next step for Miami's local arts community may involve thinking beyond short-term residencies and cheap studio rentals to imagine how more artists and arts organization can have a stake in real estate.

A final note in closing my comments on a thoroughly enjoyable visit: the issue that came up again and

again in my discussions in Miami was the absence of a high quality MFA visual arts program in Miami-Dade County. Artists who have taught locally pointed out that the best and brightest high school students from the city's art-focused high schools are courted by top-tier art colleges outside Florida, and they leave because local options are simply not as exciting. Unfortunately, the presence of Art Basel has not had much of an effect on existing college level programs in the Miami area. Everyone I met recognized that high-profile advanced art programs inject conceptual rigor into local cultural production and also into local art discourse. They raise the level of discussion by bringing good students, challenging teachers and prominent visitors together on a regular basis. While it is notable that local art collector Rosa de la Cruz has underwritten trips to Europe for students from the New World School of the Arts, there is still much work to be done in Miami to create the kind of advanced art education that adds gravitas to an arts community. Artists in Miami should keep in mind that in a global art market where supply exceeds demand, there is little incentive for collectors or gallerists to invest in improving the local production line. Those artists who see a need for more and better art schools in South Florida will have to assume a leadership role in making them happen.

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