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Reflections on the Havana Biennial at Matanzas (2019)

Iftikhar Dadi

This article is a personal observation of my experience participating as an artist in the 2019 Havana Biennial (“Bienal de La Habana”) in the city of Matanzas, Cuba. As an artist, I work in collaboration with Elizabeth Dadi.¹

The Havana Biennial is run by the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, based in Havana, named after the celebrated Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (1902–1982, of Afro-Chinese background). Its staff is appointed by the Cuban government. For the 2019 installation, its authorities expanded the ambit of the Havana Biennial to include other cities as independent sites. We were invited to participate in the Havana Biennial at Matanzas, a 90-minute drive from Havana.

Biennials are large-scale, temporary international art exhibitions held every two years. Associated specifically with cities, they have proliferated across the world during the past 30 years. The Venice Biennale, founded in 1895, is the oldest, followed by the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1951. Even though the Havana Biennial started much later, in 1984, it is well established compared to many other biennials. And there are many with which to compare it, given the ceaseless proliferation, which has resulted in more than 200 biennials across the world.

The Havana Biennial has a unique trajectory. It started during the reign of Fidel Castro, as one of the many ambitious international platforms by which Cuba sought to establish itself during the Cold War and under U.S. sanctions. In particular, the Second Havana Biennial (1986) and the Third Havana Biennial (1989) have been analyzed in recent scholarship as landmark events. The Havana Biennial is now seen as among the first of the “Biennials of the South” in the developing world. By creating links with other regions of the Global South, it sought to counter the dominance of the canonical, highly capitalized Western art world. From this perspective, the Havana Biennial remains a landmark platform in the increasingly crowded biennial calendar of the international art world, due to its originary association with values of nonalignment and its anticapitalist ethos.²

Beginning in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost its major patron. Along with continued sanctions by the United States, this has taken its toll on the lives of Cubans. In the past two decades, Cuba has struggled with infrastructural development and maintenance, lack of provision of basic facilities and obstructed links with the rest of the world. American sanctions, which were beginning to relax toward the end of the Obama administration, have again hardened under President Trump. Travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens had become easier during the Obama era, was still possible in April 2019 provided that the travel was intended for education, research and cultural exchange, not for tourism.

The Havana Biennial at Matanzas was mounted under these challenging conditions. During my two trips to Matanzas, in

January and April 2019, I saw stores with bare shelves or a limited number of everyday commodities. The internet is strictly controlled in Cuba. In Matanzas, to my knowledge, it was available only in two sites near the city center. One had to purchase cards with codes that allowed up to five hours of access, but the process was cumbersome; one had to enter the codes manually to log in each time. Shipping art to Cuba from the United States is complicated because of sanctions, compounded by the bureaucratic customs procedures at the Cuban end. It was difficult and expensive to find tools and supplies. There was also a lack of local expertise in effectively promoting and communicating about the exhibitions, sites and events. Guidebooks, handouts, site plans and events calendars were unavailable or not easily accessible.

Historically, Matanzas has been surrounded by large sugar plantations that have formed the backbone of the island's economy, and a large percentage of the city's population is of African descent. Partly as a consequence of the policies adopted by the Cuban Revolution from 1960 onward, the mix of the residents in Matanzas is remarkable. Indeed, it is difficult to discern a dominant majority. Fellow artists from Mexico, Colombia and other Latin American regions also remarked on the much greater and more continuous ethnic mix as compared with other Latin American regions. In Cuba, African belief systems have also persisted to a greater degree than in many other regions in the Americas. Matanzas has an important place in the development of Afro-Cuban music. One of the participating artists worked with local musicians to

create an original sound composition based on Matanzas's Santería heritage.

The lead curator for the Matanzas exhibition was the internationally recognized Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Born in Matanzas in 1959, Campos-Pons has lived in the United States for many years. Her own installation-based artwork incorporates sculpture, photography, performance and moving-image media to address the legacy of slavery in Cuba and the Caribbean. Campos-Pons has also been an influential professor of art practice, having taught at a number of art schools in the United States. Many of her former students from diverse backgrounds have developed their own careers and are counted among important international artists. Some of them participated in the Matanzas exhibition, along with other internationally recognized artists from North America, Latin America, Africa and Europe. The U.S.-based artists included prominent African Americans: conceptual artist David Hammons; sculptor Melvin Edwards, who references motifs associated with slavery; photographer and conceptual artist Carrie Mae Weems; and painter and printmaker Julie Mehretu, who is Ethiopian American.

A much smaller city than Havana, Matanzas also has a less developed infrastructure for supporting large exhibitions. The curatorial team at Matanzas fortunately included three highly experienced international scholars, curators and writers: Salah Hassan, professor of Africana Studies and History of Art at Cornell University and curator of numerous exhibition on African and African diaspora art; Selene Wendt, a freelance curator and writer based in Norway and founder of The Global Art Project, who has showcased

many artists from the Caribbean and Latin America; and New York-based Octavio Zaya, a writer and curator who has been active in numerous international initiatives, including Documenta 11 (2002), and the Johannesburg biennales (1995 and 1997). These curators also attracted many international visitors to Matanzas. Significantly, the opening was attended by numerous emerging artists and museum professionals from the United States, primarily of African American background, who were drawn to the lead curator's focus on addressing legacies of slavery and racialization in the Americas. The program of discussions and talks organized by Campos-Pons during the opening days focused on these topics.

Part of the motivation for hosting the Havana Biennial in Matanzas was to develop its cultural infrastructure and to build capacity in the city for mounting large-scale exhibitions, which in turn might bring international attention to the city, as the curator explained in conversations. The biennial was fully supported by city authorities. This is normally the case for many of the emerging biennials of the South, which are also premised on the ambition of placing the city on the international stage as a site of significant cultural activities. Emerging biennial projects that promote culture are thus in tension with economic imperatives that are premised on ideas of "creative cities" and "creative economies" that are intended to attract transnational capital investment and tourism. These projects are caught between neoliberal celebrations of entrepreneurship and long-standing concerns regarding the promotion of local creativity and products. Nevertheless, critical observers have noted that these biannual

platforms also function as key spaces for dialog and civic engagement, especially when an exhibition is thoughtfully conceived with inclusive programs for discussion and outreach that can incorporate ever-larger and more diverse publics in every subsequent manifestation.

Many visitors from the art world were drawn by the promise of visiting Cuba, still viewed through the heroic legacy of the Cuban Revolution and seen as one of the last bastions of anticapitalism in a world dominated by neoliberalism. The Cuban economy remains highly regulated and under central control. There are growing, but still very limited, arenas for private entrepreneurship, seen in the small-scale shops and makeshift ventures lining one of the main streets in central Matanzas. These undertakings consisted of individuals selling handmade clothing, crafts and toys, greeting cards, kitchen utensils and basic plumbing and hardware fixtures, as well as small booths for making clothing and repairing cell phones and watches.

This snapshot of small enterprise, however, belies the invisible, imaginative creativity of the informal economy of Cuba. Even though the economy has been under central control for decades, the presence of a bewildering variety of vehicles on the street and their longevity is a testament to sophisticated informal knowledge and skills, a realm of expertise that needs more attention. The presence in the informal markets of plastic and metal objects that appear to have been made in private workshops is further evidence of this.

Matanzas's built form is layered and another marker of its informal economy. A large stock of the older, stately colonial-era

buildings and courtyard houses remains, but many people live in houses and buildings constructed since the Revolution. Unlike buildings in other communist nations, the newer housing stock in Matanzas consists not so much of massive centralized apartment blocks but of small makeshift buildings on small lots. The character of much of this construction, which appears to have been erected by individuals without relying on formal architectural planning and using whatever materials available, is very reminiscent of informal housing in the developing world.

From the microcosm of Matanzas, participation in the Havana Biennial thus presented interesting scenarios and possibilities to us as artists. During my first visit in January 2019, I spent several days in Matanzas, getting a sense of the city and thinking about a project Elizabeth and I could propose that would be meaningful with regard to our ongoing artistic work but also engage with Matanzas and Cuba in a way that was substantive and respectful. I also spent a few days in Havana, where I visited collections at the National Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of the Revolution and looked at architecture and street life. After returning to Cornell University and conducting more research on Cuba in February and March, we proposed a project that sought to investigate informality in Cuba in relation to developments in the Global South, which is a long-standing theme in our artistic work.

Some of our previous investigations have focused on South Asia cities as centers of production of machinery and everyday objects of seemingly little value. Many of these initiatives are local, with branding and advertising that is either missing or of

small scale. They exemplify a kind of bottom-up entrepreneurial capitalism and provide a different picture of life in the contemporary urban Global South than accounts of globalization that emphasize state withdrawal from development, the intrusions of transnational capitalism and the fantasies of neoliberal life in upscale gated communities. While these latter accounts are essential in understanding contemporary predicaments, they do not sufficiently attend to how ordinary people negotiate unplanned and uncertain conditions and strive to shape their lives and work under the constraints and possibilities of informality.

In our art practice, we have become increasingly interested in the productive capacities of everyday life. Our Matanzas project is titled “Cosmos.” The term bears multiple resonances. On one hand, it refers to celestial bodies and the universe, and metaphorically to a constellation of possibilities. Cuba’s alliance with the Soviet Union had led to a Cuban cosmonaut’s inclusion in the Soviet space program, celebrated in a framed newspaper at a restaurant in Havana. Cosmos also is a brand name we came across in Lahore in a part of the city dedicated to the production and sale of locally made machinery. We also came across revolutionary murals in Havana that celebrate the assemblage of machines working in concert with labor toward a developmental process of world-making.

“Cosmos” was presented as a site-specific installation in one of the main exhibition sites in Matanzas, the Palace of Justice, a stately building that had previously served as the courthouse. Installed in a large rectangular chamber with high ceilings, the work



ORGANO OFICIAL DEL COMITE CENTRAL DEL PARTIDO COMUNISTA DE CUBA

¡UN CUBANO EN EL COSMOS!

TRIPULACION CONJUNTA SOVIETICO-CUBANA

YURI ROMANENKO Y ARNALDO TAMAYO CIRCUNDAN LA TIERRA EN LA SOYUZ-38

EL HISTORICO DESPEGUE SE PRODUJO AYER

A LAS 3 Y 11 DE LA TARDE, HORA DE CUBA



Como un ejemplo de las relaciones de hermandad entre los pueblos de la URSS y Cuba, los tripulantes de la Soyuz-M, Yuri Romanenko y Arnaldo Tamayo, fueron forjando una estrecha amistad, desarrollada en el intenso periodo de trabajo y estudio previo al histórico vuelo espacial.

¡VIVA LA AMISTAD SOVIETICO-CUBANA!

● MOSCÚ, 18 de septiembre. (TASS)—A las 22:11, hora de Moscú, el 11 de la tarde hora de Cuba) en la Unión Soviética fue lanzada la nave espacial "Soyuz 38", pilotada por la tripulación internacional compuesta por el Comandante de la Nave, el Héroe de la Unión Soviética piloto-cosmonauta Yuri Romanenko, el cosmonauta cubano Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez.

Por el programa de vuelo de la nave "Soyuz 38" se estipula el acoplaje con el complejo orbital "Saliut 6" y "Soyuz 37" y la ejecución de investigaciones y experimentos científicos conjuntamente con los cosmonautas Leonid Brejnev y Valeriya Tereshkova que trabajan en la estación espacial desde el 9 de abril de 1980.

El lanzamiento de la nave "Soyuz 38" se llevó a cabo de conformidad con el programa "Intercosmos". A partir del año 1978 en la cooperación de las tripulaciones internacionales conjuntamente con los cosmonautas soviéticos se efectuaron investigaciones en el espacio cósmico, experimentos de una gran variedad.

El vuelo de la séptima tripulación internacional organizada por el cosmonauta soviético y cubano constituye una nueva prueba de la amistad de los pueblos de la Unión Soviética y Cuba y de la estrecha cooperación de estos países hermanos.

Por primera vez en las investigaciones espaciales intercontinentales el programa "Intercosmos" toma



Romanenko y Tamayo, en uno de los primeros trabajos realizados desde la nave antes de partir.—Foto por TTX (Libero Nordi)

para un experimento de la República de Cuba, país socialista del hemisferio occidental.

Los cosmonautas Romanenko y Tamayo se sientan bien. Los momentos de la nave "Soyuz 38" fueron fáciles gracias al cumplimiento del programa planeado.

Stefania...

Figure 1. "Cosmos" newspaper.



Figure 2. Mural Havana.



Figure 3. Palace of Justice Matanzas.

consisted of two components. An illuminated sign reminiscent of a mythical brand name Cosmos served to anchor the installation, around which were placed multiple images of machines, framed in ornate borders reminiscent of motifs from colonial architecture. These images were drawn from commercial

hand-painted signage in Lahore and Mumbai, creating a confluence of associations and motifs and the resonance between the title “Cosmos” as a quasi-brand and the galaxy of machinery emanating from it.

Although drawn from two geographically separate sites in Cuba and South Asia, these

references nevertheless serve to draw attention to overlapped and shared experiences among them — all now part of the Global South, where the question of development is tiered and multifaceted at the levels of the



Figure 4. “Cosmos” installation.



Figure 5. “Cosmos” installation, close-up.

state, of international agencies and of transnational capitalism, but also in the realm



Figure 6. “Cosmos” installation, close-up.

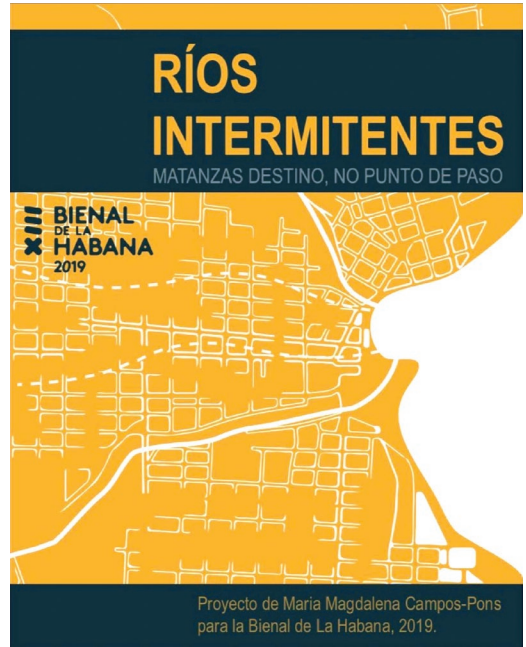


Figure 7. Matanzas announcement.

of informality, where it is perhaps the most invisible. Our concept note for the “Cosmos” project summarizes these concerns:

“Cosmos” examines world-making in developing societies by foregrounding their rich urban materiality and their diverse productive capacities. It focuses on practices of fabrication, especially the significance of machines that enable amplified prosthetic abilities even in relatively impoverished situations. Tools shape streetscapes and architectures, and forge everyday objects that emerge and circulate locally, even as all this remains largely invisible to the outside. Their presence is vital to widespread, dispersed, and ongoing informal transformations. “Cosmos” addresses imbricated processes of industrial and artisanal production, by bringing comparative materials and themes from South Asia in a conversation with the Cuban context. The project thus situates parallel developments from across the Global South. Above all, “Cosmos” emblemizes creativity that is dispersed throughout the fabric of these societies.

Notes

1. I wish to underscore that I am claiming neither ethnographic authority or expertise nor systematic participant-observation as a trained anthropologist. Instead this account is perhaps representative of the challenges faced by many artists today when they participate in large-scale international site-specific exhibitions. Typically, artists of diverse backgrounds converge on the exhibition site for a very short time. Even if they undertake prior research trips before the exhibition opening, their understanding of the place

they are engaging with is necessarily fragmentary. However, a key modality in contemporary art is precisely premised upon illuminating a larger sense of history and experience from fragmentary encounters. The risks of mistranslation and illegibility are always present in the nature of this engagement.

2. On the importance of the Third Havana Biennial (1989), see *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989* (London: Afterall Books, 2011). For a broad and multifaceted account of the rise of biennials globally, including a discussion of the Second Havana Biennial (1986), see Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016). For a historical account of Matanzas, see Miguel A Bretos, *Matanzas: The Cuba Nobody Knows* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010). For more images of the “Cosmos” installation, visit www.dadiart.net/cosmos.

Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi have collaborated in their art practice for 20 years. Their work investigates memory, borders and identity in contemporary globalization; the productive capacities of urban informalities in the Global South; and the mass culture of postindustrial societies. Elizabeth Dadi is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute. Iftikhar Dadi is an associate professor in Cornell’s Department of History of Art. He is the author of *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010) and the edited monograph *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (2015). He has coedited *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (2012) and *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (2001). He has been a recipient of grants from the Andy Warhol Foundation For the Visual Arts and the Getty Foundation. He received his Ph.D. from Cornell University.