

## **International Contemporaneity and the Third Havana Biennial (1989)**

Amy Bruce

### What is Critical Curating?

Qu'est-ce que le commissariat engagé ?

Volume 43, numéro 2, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1054380ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054380ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Bruce, A. (2018). International Contemporaneity and the Third Havana Biennial (1989). *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(2), 25–33. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054380ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Cet article se concentre sur la troisième Biennale de La Havane (1989) et analyse la conception de la contemporanéité internationale que propose Reiko Tomii afin de diversifier l'histoire des biennales. La contemporanéité internationale mobilise des pratiques locales pour construire des analyses globales qui développent une compréhension polycentrique de l'histoire mondiale de l'art. De même, l'approche commissariale de cette troisième édition visait à décentrer l'art contemporain, en créant une exposition pour les milieux artistiques marginalisés à un moment de tensions politiques, culturelles et économiques à Cuba, et de crise politique mondiale. La troisième Biennale de La Havane s'opposait aux discours eurocentriques dominants de l'histoire de l'art en préconisant la coexistence des multiples arts contemporains.

# International Contemporaneity and the Third Havana Bienal (1989)

Amy Bruce

**Cet article se concentre sur la troisième Biennale de La Havane (1989) et analyse la conception de la contemporanéité internationale que propose Reiko Tomii afin de diversifier l'histoire des biennales. La contemporanéité internationale mobilise des pratiques locales pour construire des analyses globales qui développent une compréhension polycentrique de l'histoire mondiale de l'art. De même, l'approche commissariale de cette troisième édition visait à décentrer l'art contemporain, en créant une exposition pour les milieux artistiques marginalisés à un moment de tensions politiques, culturelles et économiques à Cuba, et de crise politique mondiale. La troisième Biennale de La Havane s'opposait aux discours eurocentriques dominants de l'histoire de l'art en préconisant la coexistence des multiples arts contemporains.**

Amy Bruce is a PhD candidate in Cultural Mediations at the Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art, and Culture at Carleton University  
—amy.bruce@carleton.ca

1. See Elena Filipovic, et al., *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (Bergen, Norway: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010); Ute Meta Bauer, et al., eds., *Shifting Gravity: World Biennial Forum No. 1* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013); Galit Eilat, et al., eds., *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times: Essays from the World Biennial Forum no2 São Paulo*, 2014 (Amsterdam: Biennial Foundation; São Paulo:

Curators often distil contemporary arts' many temporal and spatial horizons through the phenomenon of the international biennial. In many ways, biennials democratize global contemporary art by passing the proverbial microphone to multiple curators, illuminating local or regional artistic contexts, and challenging the homogenizing tendency of the dominant cultural industry.<sup>1</sup> However, while the present moment in the field of contemporary art is “disjunctively unified,”<sup>2</sup> a dominant “Western” or Eurocentric art-historical narrative persists. For example, although recent scholars have undertaken the task of historicizing biennials, they continue to present historiographies that largely follow a linear chronology.<sup>3</sup> These scholars consistently assert that all biennials originate in the international industrial exhibitions and trade fairs of the nineteenth century and the Venice Biennale.

An exception is the scholarship on the Havana Bienal/Bienal de la Habana (hereinafter referred to as the Bienal), which was inaugurated in 1984, thus making it the first contemporary art biennial.<sup>4</sup> From its inception, the Bienal was conceived as a new global exhibition based on the assumption that contemporary art was heterogeneous. Of particular interest is its third edition—*Tercera Bienal de la Habana*—which was presented in 1989 amidst the heightened geopolitical tensions of the end of the Cold War, which Cuba used to leverage itself as a Third World cultural leader. As Soviet-Cuban ties strained due to Soviet economic and political reforms, Cuba gained Latin American, Asian, and African allies to become a leader in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the 1970s and 1980s. Although, in the 1960s, NAM lost credibility for being dominated by formerly Soviet-allied nations, under Cuban leadership it fought against the imperialism and colonialism of “great power and bloc politics.”<sup>5</sup>

Aware of what George Yúdice would come to call to as the “expediency of culture,”<sup>6</sup> the Cuban government established the Ministry of Culture (1976) to revive Cuban and Third World cultural politics. This centralizing of cultural policy coincided with a softening of previously repressive state artistic control, which resulted in a “golden age” of Cuban artistic production. Cultural diversity was institutionalized with the creation of the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam. Under its umbrella, the Bienal was launched as an ambitious international cultural event with a focus on Latin America, the Caribbean, and the so-called “Third World.”<sup>7</sup> Art historian and curator Lillian Llanes Godoy was the director for the 1986 edition, a position she held until

Fundação Bienal de São Paulo; ICCO—Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2015); Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

2. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso Books, 2013), 17.

3. See Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich, CT.: New York Graphic Society, 1968); Marian Pastor Roces, "Crystal Palace Exhibitions," in *The Biennial Reader*, 50–65; Rebecca Coates, "From the Margins to the Center: The São Paulo Biennial, the Biennale of Sydney, and the Istanbul Biennial," *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 2 (2014), 113–132; Green and Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta*; and Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetic of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

4. Rafał Niemojewski, "Venice or Havana: A Polemic on the Genesis of the Contemporary Biennial," in *The Biennial Reader*, 88–103.

5. Miguel Leonardo Rojas-Sotelo, "Cultural Maps, Networks and Flows: The History and Impact of the Havana Biennale 1984 to the Present," PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009, 8–28.

6. George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–35.

7. During the early editions of the Havana Bienal, organizers embraced the term "Third World." In *Third Text*, Lilian Llanes Godoy explains the curatorial team's understanding of the term as identifying "a common interest among countries which, irrespective of their geographical locations, their differences in cultural heritage, religion, political systems, economic structures or developmental level, faced serious problems (with few possibilities of solving them) arising from the system of relations imposed by the highly industrialized countries in the aftermath of colonialism; that is, the underdevelopment and economic dependence of neo-colonialism. This is the meaning of 'Third World' ... and despite its limitations, we shall continue to use the term for lack of a better one." This historical term is used throughout the article to reflect their ambitions and worldview. See Lilian Llanes Godoy, "La Bienal de la Habana," *Third Text* 6, 20 (Autumn 1992), 9.

the sixth edition in 1997. Her social and political background allowed her to recognize the benefits of cross-cultural exchange. She assembled a research department responsible for curatorial work comprised of recent art history graduates.<sup>8</sup> Prominent Cuban art critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera led the research team for the Bienal until he left after the third edition, due in part to diverging curatorial agendas. Although the Bienal itself was inaugurated as part of governmental manoeuvring for political or economic gains, I contend its third edition achieved critical curatorial agency, because it acknowledged the power dynamics at play in the predominately Eurocentric system of art.

For some art historians, 1989 is the year contemporary art eclipsed modernism. Of greater concern to this article, however, is the third Bienal's curatorial ambition towards international networks through which it adopted an even greater and more relevant critical agenda. It introduced a shift in exhibition making and the discourse around contemporary art. Considering these changes, several questions arise: How can the history of biennials be constructed so that it honours the artistic diversity that the Havana Bienal model promoted? How should a historiography of biennials emphasize local reiterations of contemporary art in relation to the globalising biennial format?

Historicizing the global contemporary as a temporality—what art historian Reiko Tomii calls international contemporaneity—means understanding the present as resting on a given locale's self-perceived relationship to the outside world, be it real or imagined. External (or global) and internal (or local) reflections navigate "sites of globalized interface."<sup>9</sup> Locales look to each other and out to the world, thereby making lived experience as important as fact, because of the geographic and temporal limitations imposed on artists, curators, and others. This means there is a "retrospective" aspect to international contemporaneity, where "connections and resonances" examine "similar yet different" characteristics. For Tomii, contextualizing similarities and differences localizes artistic practice away from Eurocentric art-historical paradigms.<sup>10</sup>

This article advocates for Tomii's relational model of international contemporaneity, while also arguing more broadly for it as a means of applying analytical pressure to biennial historiography. This is a critical part of the third Bienal's outcome, as well as what scholar Reesa Greenberg terms "exhibition as discursive event."<sup>11</sup> Rather than pictorial or written representations of the exhibition, which potentially alter or narrow critical analysis,<sup>12</sup> this article emphasizes the ephemeral event of the biennial exhibition in relation to discourses about it, regardless of its aesthetic successes or failures. Assessing the Bienal's structure and critical outcome through the concept of exhibition as discursive event means considering it as an exhibition model and institution that is not an isolated, fixed event, but an event in ongoing dialogue between participants, artists, curators, and scholars. As art historian Anne Szefer Karlsen argues, the biennial is generally thought of as "homeless and chained" to institutions.<sup>13</sup> Biennials, unlike museum or gallery exhibitions, are generally detached from a collecting mandate, while nonetheless preserving exhibition histories and organisational bodies and power. The biennial exhibition as discursive event does not negate a biennial's institutional structures, nor does it designate relevance to only one edition. Instead, it highlights nuances of a specific biennial edition and allows them to be scrutinized. It is for this

reason that the present article focuses on a single edition of the biennial, so that its unique curatorial ambitions may be assessed within the context of its larger institutional legacy. This article largely considers Mosquera's understanding of the event, as he continues to be an outspoken advocate for the historical significance of both the early editions of the biennial and the Bienal in general. It is admittedly problematic to rely solely on Mosquera's perspective, however, because he was part of a curatorial team and resigned immediately after the third edition.

What follows is a brief history of the Bienal and an overview of Tomii's theory. This will allow us to examine the structure and the curatorial aim of the third Bienal in its culturally isolated context, which made a claim for international contemporaneity through its Third World agenda of global contemporary art. I argue that the Bienal resulted in an "interface," which allowed for what Tomii, in her ongoing project of circumventing Eurocentric art history, calls "narrative tangents."

### A Pachanga that Involved the Whole City

The Bienal is notably not the first "southern" biennial. Anthony Gardner and Charles Green have recently theorized the "southern" as a perspective that extends beyond geographical location and geo-economic development. Biennials of the South reinforce so-called "South-South" exchanges that challenge institutional Euro-American bias in art history and the art world. Among the southern biennials preceding the Bienal were the São Paulo Biennial (1951) and the Biennale de la Méditerranée (1955) in Egypt, now known as the Alexandria Biennial. The former will host its thirty-third edition from September 7 to December 9, 2018, and the twenty-sixth edition of the latter took place in 2014.

Although the Bienal was inaugurated after such established biennials, scholars Marian Pastor Rocas and Rafal Niemojewski agree that its overt desire to challenge power imbalances within the art world make it the first alternatively institutionalized biennial. Havana's location "outside a planetary network of cities," which was architecturally, artistically, and technologically recreated after the Second World War, was an ideal setting for the curators of the Bienal to demonstrate the limitations of the dominant centralism of the art world.<sup>14</sup> Because of Cuba's political agenda, the Bienal maintained a regional curatorial focus, much like the São Paulo Biennial and the Biennale de la Méditerranée. Regionalism was a strategy for ensuring the inclusion of non-Euro-American artists within the contemporary art world. Unlike earlier biennials, however, the Bienal modified the replication of the nationalist biennial model put forward by Venice to incorporate a distinctively post-colonial rhetoric. It was thus reconfigured as an open space for artists. Bars were a main feature of this "open structure," because they were accessible spaces for informal meetings of mutual encounter and exchange for visitors.<sup>15</sup> For the third edition, this open structure increased to include free admission. Prizes were also eliminated, which symbolically diminished hierarchical notions of cultural production put forward by the new curatorial model of the third Bienal edition. This resulted in the creation of a distinct "complex constellation of artistic and cultural practices"<sup>16</sup> that better rendered a

8. The first curatorial team formed in 1984. It included Gerardo Mosquera, Nelson Herrera Ysla (who would become the director of the Centro Wifredo Lam in 2000), Juan Blanco, Ibis Hernandez Abascal, Magda Ileana Gonzalez Mora, Leticia Castillo, José Noceda (who would become the director from 2001–2005), and Silvia Medina. Rachel Weiss, "A Certain Place and a Certain Time: The Third Bienal de La Habana and the Origins of the Global Exhibition," in *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, eds. Rachel Weiss, et al. (London: Afterall Books, 2011), 21, 24.

9. Reiko Tomii, "Historicizing 'Contemporary Art': Some Discursive Practices, in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 12, 3 (Winter 2004): 614.

10. Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 16–22.

11. Reesa Greenberg, "The Exhibition as Discursive Event," in *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby*, ed. Edward O. Wilson (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 1995), 118–125, [http://www.yorku.ca/reerden/Publications/EXHIBITION/exhibition\\_discursive\\_event.html](http://www.yorku.ca/reerden/Publications/EXHIBITION/exhibition_discursive_event.html) (accessed March 26, 2016).

12. Madeleine Kennedy, "Documenting the Marvellous: The Risks and Rewards of Relying on Installation Photographs in the Writing of Exhibition History," *Stedelijk Studies* 2 (Spring 2015) [http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/documenting-the-marvelous-the-risks-and-rewards-of-relying-on-installation-photographs-in-the-writing-of-exhibition-history/#\\_edn3](http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/documenting-the-marvelous-the-risks-and-rewards-of-relying-on-installation-photographs-in-the-writing-of-exhibition-history/#_edn3) (accessed March 26, 2016).

13. Anne Szefer Karlsen, "An Institution Already First Time Around," in *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times: Essays from the World Biennial Forum No 2*, eds. Galit Eilat, et al. (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo and Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2015), 77.

14. Rocas, "Crystal Palace Exhibitions," 61.

15. Gerardo Mosquera, "The Third Bienal de la Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts," in *Making Art Global (Part 1)*, 76.

16. Gerardo Mosquera, "The Havana Biennial: A Concrete Utopia," in *The Biennial Reader*, 183.

productive relation with the city of Havana and the Third World. According to Mosquera, the variegated structure of the Bienal “made it a true urban festival, a pachanga that involved the whole city.”<sup>17</sup>

### A Spirit of Action

Despite the government’s political ambitions for the Bienal, it retained a certain “degree of autonomy” that was unusual for Cuban institutions.<sup>18</sup> Art historian Rachel Weiss suggests there was a romantic euphoria around the Bienal, which was seen as something influential and important and thus garnered respect from the government and the public. Mosquera described the Cuban curatorial ambition as being “born from a spirit of action.” In his words, “If we are to be marginalized, let us create our own space, our own networks, values, and epistemes, and project them to the world.”<sup>19</sup> For him, the Bienal had utopic aspirations and aimed to create a new space for contemporary artists, critics, curators and scholars to “meet and become acquainted with each other’s work and ideas beyond questions of ideology or pure politics.”<sup>20</sup> The Third World regionalist intentions of the Bienal are distinguished by a shared international context of artistic exclusion.

Within Tomii’s framework of “international contemporaneity,” the Cold War socio-political consciousness that influenced Mosquera is placed in dialogue with the world. “Simply put,” Tomii asserts, “[international] contemporaneity’ is awareness or observation that ‘We are contemporaneous with them at this point.’”<sup>21</sup> Adding the spatial demarcation “international” (meaning “between nations”) to the temporal term “contemporaneity” emphasizes a locale’s reflection upon its place in the external world.<sup>22</sup> For example, post-war Japan—Tomii’s area of specialization—was historically perceived as peripheral to Euro-American centres. While New York City saw the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s as confirmation of its status as the world’s artistic leader, Tokyo viewed it as a shared experience with various counterparts around the globe. From the perspective of international contemporaneity, Abstract Expressionism is part of a network of local expressions rather than the product of a dominant, originating source. As a paradigm, it thus offers a relational structure through case studies that build outwards from the particular to the general.

While hindsight often reveals historical resonances, the practice of curating usually lends itself to drawing immediate relations. I would like to suggest, therefore, that biennials are fruitful contact points for Tomii’s methodological search for “similar yet different” international contemporaneous practices. Tomii herself suggests international contemporaneity as a framework for studying biennials in her examination of the *Tokyo Biennale 1970: Between Man and Matter*, which she positions as a direct contact point or an “incoming interface.”<sup>23</sup> More broadly, however, the biennial model involves an international exhibition format in which external interfaces are adapted to local contexts. Critics sometimes refer to the “replication” of the biennial format as “biennial syndrome”—a form of “branding” whose promise of international relevance comes at the price of creating a homogenising “global white cube” that disempowers alternative artistic practices.<sup>24</sup> Each new edition of a biennial offers new occasions for considering a variety of established geo-historical

17. Mosquera, “The Third Bienal de la Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts,” 73.

18. Weiss, “A Certain Place and a Certain Time,” 23.

19. Mosquera, “Havana Biennial,” in *Where Art World’s Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon—International Symposium*, ed. Robert Storr (Venice: Marsilio 2005), 181.

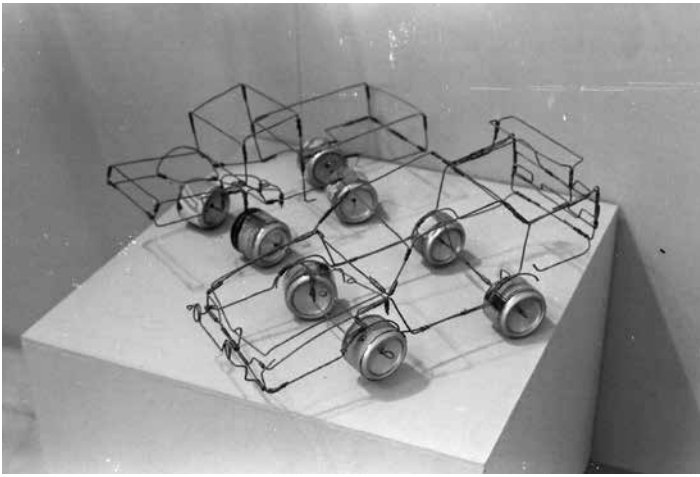
20. Mosquera, “The Havana Biennial,” 202.

21. Reiko Tomii, “‘International Contemporaneity’ in the 1960s: Discoursing on Art in Japan and Beyond,” *Japan Review* 21 (2009): 125.

22. Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness*, 14.

23. *Ibid.*, 159–193.

24. Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” in *The Biennial Reader*, 322–345; Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “The Biennale Syndrome,” *Janus* 8, 22 (June–December 2007), <http://1995-2015.undo.net/it/magazines/1201013037> (accessed April 9, 2016).



Figures 1–2. *Juguetes de alambre africanos (African Wire Toys)*, Núcleo 2, installation view, Museo de Artes Decorativas, Havana, Cuba, 1989.



Figures 3–4. *Bolívar en tallas de madera (Bolivar in Wood Carvings)*, Núcleo 2, installation view, Museo de Artes Decorativas, Havana, Cuba, 1989.



contact points. Tomii's framework of "similar yet different" aligns with more general critiques of globalization and thus mobilizes a historiography of biennials in which unique, local reiterations and adaptations of the biennial model are highlighted. The study of one edition, as in this article, offers what can only be a brief reflection of many interfaces.

#### Curating Tradition and Contemporaneity at the Third Bienal (1989)

By the time of the third Bienal, Cuban visual culture had been redefined. Artists of that generation adopted the revolutionary spirit they had lived through. According to art historian Miguel Leonardo Rojas-Sotelo, the exhibition *Volumen Uno* (1981) set "the new tone for visual arts in the country." This exhibition, which was, as Rojas-Sotelo notes, "institutionally and conceptually" supported by Mosquera, focused on hybrid identities and questioned the status quo through the mobilization of postmodern and anticolonial discourses.<sup>25</sup> This artistic reconceptualization was faced, however, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the tightening of the United States embargo, and the economic crisis in Cuba. Poverty and massive Cuban emigration followed. Under an authoritarian and military regime, Cuban art's future became unstable, as radical artists faced increased censorship, as the government imposed a climate of artistic conservatism.

The delay caused by political and economic strain provided an opportunity for the curatorial team to deepen their focus and, for the first time, introduce a curatorial theme: "tradition and contemporaneity." As the world systems model disintegrated, the concepts of tradition and contemporaneity in contemporary art developed as part of debates occurring within the emerging unipolar or global capital world. Eurocentrism valued tradition in non-Euro-American cultures for its authenticity and links to the past, while contemporaneity seemed adverse to the Third World's underdevelopment and perceived lack of advancement. The theme was a timely international appeal for a "plurality of active modernisms"<sup>26</sup> that coincided with the Cuban decentralisation and bureaucratisation that occurred until 1989. Cuban society pursued a lived, self-determined nationalism for itself and the Third World, which contrasted previous Soviet-Cuban national artistic programs. Art historian David Craven summarizes postcolonial theorist Samir Amin who argued that "the aspiration to national self-determination in the Third World is as important for ending dependency and underdevelopment, as the threat of official nationalism in the West is essential for maintaining that same dependency and state of underdevelopment."<sup>27</sup> Peruvian critic Juan Acha echoes the notion of Third World dependency in his contribution to the third edition's catalogue, in which he argues that education brings acceptance of difference.<sup>28</sup> The 1989 edition initiated explorations of multiple kinds of art and the Eurocentric limitations surrounding what is contemporary art in other parts of the world. Its theme reanimated the global by offering exhibited clusters of regional artistic contexts bound in contemporaneity, while also articulating existing power relationships.

Artist and art critic Luis Camnitzer, who was an advisor to the second Bienal, deemed the concepts of tradition and contemporaneity to be present and absent in the work of many non-Euro-American artists. He continued

25. Rojas-Sotelo, "Cultural Maps, Networks and Flows," 25, 96.

26. Mosquera, "The Third Bienal de la Habana" 77.

27. David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America: 1910-1990*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 93.

28. Rojas-Sotelo, "Cultural Maps, Networks and Flows," 241.

to describe the exhibition's presentation of artists as "thisness."<sup>29</sup> He saw the Bienal as an opportunity for artists to define themselves with their art as opposed to being subjected as an "other," as in exhibitions like *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984) at the Museum of Modern Art and *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) at the Centre Georges Pompidou. For the Bienal, popular or contemporary expressions of tradition permeated with, or in response to, the present day, and from multiple locations, refuse the essentialist identity politics of display. The array of creative practices displayed included painting, photography, sculpture, textiles, toys, crafts, and calligraphy. Artists conflated Eurocentric divisions of high and low art on their own terms.

The theme also posed questions related to Mosquera's more recent statements regarding the broader framework of the Bienal's artistic selection and the acknowledgment of a "Western basis" in global contemporary art produced in the Third World. Including Third World art under global contemporary art rhetoric maintains Eurocentric historical authority. "We were starting out with the idea that there was a certain language that was shared. We were dealing with a Westernised art, artists who were producing what we called contemporary art."<sup>30</sup> Mosquera's understanding of a "Western basis" in art seems to be critical of the curatorial framework of exhibitions such as *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* and *Magiciens de la Terre*. These seminal exhibitions attempted to include non-Euro-American artists with Euro-American artists. In so doing, however, the former were relegated to a reservoir of "primitive," "exotic," and "traditional" identities and aesthetics stereotyped as "authentic." These demarcations would have been contentious and problematic for Mosquera, who, during the 1980s, was interested in and associated with the so-called "new Cuban art." Artists linked to this movement did not separate contemporary art from Cuban popular culture. It was, therefore, important for Mosquera to include new Cuban artists, such as José Bedia, Ricardo Brey, and Juan Francisco Elso, in the 1989 Bienal, because their art advocated for freedom from "ideological coercion."<sup>31</sup> His support for the new Cuban art diverged with Llanes wider mission for the Bienal. The inclusion of artists associated with this movement was, however, a means for the curators to address the thinly disguised set of international idioms of art. The "international language" of art established an exclusionary multilateral structure, as opposed to an internationally contemporaneous one.<sup>32</sup>

#### Narrative Tangents for Third World Contemporary Art

The third Bienal was made up of one main international exhibition, whose importance was mitigated by eleven sub-thematic group shows, ten individual exhibitions, two international conferences, eight international workshops, and several outreach programs.<sup>33</sup> The central exhibition, entitled *Tres Mundos (Three Worlds)*, included a broad spectrum of artists exemplifying the kind of work that, according to Mosquera, could remodel the central hegemonic artistic-cultural production.<sup>34</sup> These artists were critically reforming the language of art to their personal, historical, cultural, and social contexts. At this time, only a handful of artists in the third edition—specifically, Dittborn, Silvia Cruner, Mona Hatoum, César Paternosto, Adolfo Patiño, Arnaldo Roche Rabell, Twins Seven Seven, and Border Art Workshop—had international

29. Luis Camnitzer, "The Third Biennial of Havana," in *Making Art Global (Part 1)*, 207.

30. Weiss, "A Certain Place and a Certain Time," 31–32.

31. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

32. Gerardo Mosquera, "Beyond Anthropophagy: Art, Internationalization and Cultural Dynamics," *Summer Academy of Fine Arts Global Art Symposium*, 2011, <http://archive.summeracademy.at/media/pdf/pdf776.pdf> (accessed June 24, 2016).

33. Lillian Llanes Godoy, "Catalogue Introduction," in *Making Art Global (Part 1)*, 182.

34. Mosquera, "Beyond Anthropophagy," 10.



profiles. However, the third Bial included artworks not limited to an international set of idioms and practices. The curatorial team did not see “Third World art” as an ontological category in opposition to “Western art.”<sup>35</sup> This is clearly delineated by the four, sub-themed cluster exhibitions called *núcleos*. The *núcleos* functioned as a very specific set of group exhibitions for comparison to the central exhibition. The first exhibition was conceived to tackle contemporary artistic engagements with cultural traditions; the second presented popular cultural engagements with traditional crafts; the third investigated contextual cultural-political questions; and the fourth consisted of debates, conferences, and other colloquial programming with and by the students of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA).

The third Bial’s interest in operative expressions of culture that opposed Eurocentric parameters is perhaps best demonstrated in the second *núcleos*. It included three exhibitions at separate locations that focused on popular cultural interpretations of local histories. The first exhibition was a collection of wire toys made by children in six sub-Saharan African countries. The second exhibition included wooden effigies of Simón Bolívar—a nineteenth-century Latin American revolutionary leader who opposed the Spanish Empire—carved by “popular artists” from Venezuela (*Bolívar en tallas de madera*). The last exhibition presented Mexican dolls (*Muñecas mexicanas*) created by renowned Mexican artists and artisans.

Situating non-Eurocentric art within the international contemporaneity framework destabilises the former Cold War power or centre-periphery paradigms and allows for the introduction of objective and subjective relational considerations that place a given locale within its local and larger contextual history. The curatorial framework for these objects emphasized local contexts and thus moved the dialogue away from the historically and politically saturated terms of centre and periphery.<sup>36</sup> Focus on the local often runs the risk of romanticizing regional or non-European art as derivative or exotic—what Mosquera referred to as the “Marco Polo Syndrome”<sup>37</sup>—or placing it in a subservient, binary opposition to the global. Art historian Inaga Shigemi frames this model of understanding non-Euro-American participation in the global or “universal” market as “admissible heterogeneity,” which implicitly presupposes “admissible homogeneity.”<sup>38</sup> Local artistic practices that differ too greatly from Euro-American “universalist” art are discarded or deemed irrelevant.

The wire toys, wooden effigies of Simón Bolívar and Mexican dolls in the second *núcleos* were contemporaneous objects rather than relics of material culture. Their status contested Eurocentric categorisations of fine art as a purely aesthetic object, and instead situated individual artistic contexts. Instead of being framed as broadening the definition of art, these objects stood in relation to Eurocentric categories to deliver a multifaceted understanding of international contemporaneous arts. By shifting the modality of interaction towards international contemporaneity, articulations of art move away from Eurocentric assumptions and aesthetic categorisations of being included or excluded as art. The second *núcleos* allowed for the sketch of existing contemporaneous narratives of heterogeneous contexts and understandings of artistic production that could become narrative tangents for Third World contemporary art.

35. Mosquera, “The Third Bial de la Habana,” 77.

36. Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness*, 16.

37. Gerardo Mosquera, “The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism,” in *The Biennial Reader*, 416–425.

38. Shigemi Inaga, “Translation,” in *Art and Globalisation*, eds. James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2010), 29–30.

As a convergence of political and contemporary art goals, the third Bienal facilitated horizontal relationships between Third World artists and curators. Its objective was to create a space and network for marginalized art worlds to confront exclusion and to challenge Eurocentric art-historical narratives. Through its curatorial aim, the Bienal initiated a multifaceted structure for the development of Third World narrative tangents and thus created a site of interface for Third World art. Embracing a spectrum or multiplicity allows histories to be situated in and among exchanges; they thus become part of known histories and are no longer overlooked or marginalized.

#### Conclusion: From Official to Unscrupulous

Recently, the Ministry of Culture, the National Council of Visual Arts (CNAV), and the Centro Wifredo Lam announced it would postpone the upcoming thirteenth edition of the Bienal until 2019, due to the financial strain caused by damage from hurricane Irma. Postponing the Bienal alarmed many of its supporters in and outside Cuba, as they anticipated and were relying on its discursive potential and public interaction with a global art world. The cancellation sparked debates on the island about the government's authoritarian rule over its people and why artists were not invited to contribute to the decision-making process. Ultimately, the Bienal is no longer a space for confronting contemporary art's exclusions, because it has become a rigid institution from which Cuban artists themselves feel excluded.

Curator Yanelys Nuñez Leyva and artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara recently took to Facebook and social media to demand the Bienal be reinstated. A grassroots project, in association with the organization team at the Museum of Politically Uneasy Art (MAPI), announced an unofficial event that took place from May 5 to 15, 2018. The organizers of what was called #00Bienal de La Habana insist the Bienal is cultural heritage and therefore transcends government institutions. The event adopted the slogan "from official to unscrupulous," taking up a spirit remarkably reminiscent of the third Bienal's curatorial ambition to challenge oligarchic forces or Eurocentric mainstream notions of art.<sup>39</sup> As with the third Bienal, critical success for #00Bienal de La Habana means advocating for change to the cultural status quo in Cuba, and offering an interface for new narrative tangents for today's cultural producers. ¶

39. Mosquera showed support for this event by sending a video and a paper to the organizers; the paper was titled "Havana's Utopia," and it was read by Cuban actor Lynn Cruz. See Lynn Cruz, "'Utopia in Havana' at the #00 Bienal," *Havana Times.org*, May 7, 2018, [www.havanatimes.org/sp/?p=133091](http://www.havanatimes.org/sp/?p=133091); Luis Felipe Rojas, "Recognized critic Gerardo Mosquera backs #00Bienal de La Habana," *Marti* April 26, 2018, [www.martinoticias.com/a/reconocido-cr%C3%ADtico-gerardo-mosquera-muestra-apoyo-00bienal-habana-cuba-173838.html](http://www.martinoticias.com/a/reconocido-cr%C3%ADtico-gerardo-mosquera-muestra-apoyo-00bienal-habana-cuba-173838.html); and "Alternative Havana Biennial May 5-15, 2018," *Havana Times.org*, September 28, 2017, [www.havanatimes.org/?p=127562](http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=127562) (accessed October 1, 2018).