

The Winds of Art, and of Freedom, Blew For a Few Minutes in Havana

The Tenth Visual Arts Biennial in Havana allowed us to enjoy some bubbles of freedom. Hidden in metaphor and protected by the multiplicity of interpretations, young artists presented very critical works throughout the month of March. On canvas or using recycled materials, they managed to express the dissatisfaction and desire for changes of an entire population. The cultural authorities were not able to stop the flood of openly rebellious art.

In one gallery a corner was fitted out with an enormous sign that said, "Access Denied," alluding to our limitations for accessing the Internet. A broken computer with sheets full of rules and prohibitions greeted those who chose to interact with the installation. The large number of foreign guests gave the event a cosmopolitan air that blurred the actions of the censors. The feeling of protection, created thanks to the cameras of the news agencies, gave some artists the opportunity to show their controversial happenings.

The strongest winds of daring blew in a well-known cultural center where a pair of microphones had been installed with access for the public. This performance, by the artist Tania Bruguera, allowed anyone to make a speech of just one minute. Many young people jumped on the podium to offer shouts of "Freedom!" and "Democracy!" to a wildly cheering audience. For a couple of hours we felt we should preserve that spirit of tolerance brought to us by the Tenth Biennial. There were even those who proposed that we should all stay there until the microphones were available to all Cubans.

But the performance ended, as did the Biennial, taking with it the permissibility it had brought. Once again, those at the podiums with the microphones in their hands are the same actors as before.

Here is the text I read that night;

If they gave me the microphone... I would say:

Cuba is an island surrounded by the sea and it is also an island surrounded by censorship. Some cracks are opening in the wall of control: of information, the internet, and especially blogs. The phenomenon of the alternative blogosphere is already known by a good part of the Cuban people. We are still only a few bloggers, our sites highlight the awakening of public opinion.

The authorities consider the technology as a "wild colt" that must be tamed, but we independent bloggers want the wild colt to run freely. The difficulties of disseminating our sites are many. From hand to hand thanks to flash drives, CDs, and obsolete diskettes, the content of blogs travels the Island.

The Internet is becoming a public square for discussion where we Cubans write our opinions. The real Island has started to be a virtual Island. More democratic and more pluralistic.

Sadly, these winds of free expression that travel the net with difficulty have been looking out from our monitored reality. Let's not wait for them to allow us to enter the Internet, have a blog, or write an opinion. Now is the time for us to jump the wall of control.

The Aftermath, I Am Charged With "Provocation"

Without the statement made by the Tenth Havana Biennial Organizing Committee about what happened, the performance of Tania Bruguera wouldn't have been complete. For the minute of freedom at the microphone it was the fitting punishment. Absent the rebuke, the performance event would have seemed like a signal that the intolerance has yielded, that it is possible to mount the podium and express oneself without fear. So we should be grateful to those who wrote the insulting tirade. Without it, everything would have been on the plane of the permitted, it would have seemed like something fabricated to give the appearance of openness.

With those five paragraphs they closed--in the best possible way--the performance. They reminded us, the rash ones who took advantage of the brief

moment of freedom, that here the penalty and rebuke remain in place in response to free opinion. The Organizing Committee has confirmed, in its text full of insults, why so many cries of freedom came from the podium. With its accusations they have exposed the reason why so many didn't dare--that night--to take the microphone.

Here is the Declaration of the Organizing Committee [English translation]:

Last Sunday March 29th 2009, in the Wilfredo Lam Contemporary Art Centre, various people unrelated to the culture, headed by a professional 'dissident' created by the powerful media group PRISA [of Spain] made use of a performance by Tania Bruguera to strike a blow at the Cuban Revolution. It was a case where individuals, in the service of the anti-Cuban propaganda machine, repeated worn-out claims of "freedom" and "democracy" demanded by their sponsors. They spoke - or rather acted - for the cameras and now several media outlets in Florida are turning it into big news.

The Organizing Committee of the Then Biennial of Havana considers this an act of anti-culturalism, of shameful opportunism offensive to Cuban artists and to outside artists who come to share their work with us as well as to support our solidarity and also to all of those who have worked so hard through difficult conditions to put together such an amazing event. It is also offensive to our people, who have exceeded the facilities and areas of the Bienal and enjoyed an intelligent avant-garde art that is critical and humanistic.

It is also particularly offensive that our public places and free events are used by those who are paid to manipulate public opinion, lie, censor, mutilate and systematically limit the freedom of speech and thought.

{...} This mediocre political take-over of an artistic work demonstrates the scorn that these people and those who sponsor them have for the culture. On the other hand, despite the fact that our institutions and artists are continually criticized as being of the same type of political machine they themselves are, we will continue to support the free and diverse creation of art and its availability to our people.

In spite of these provocations, The Biennial will keep on being a place of anti-hegemonic rebelliousness impregnated with heresy and authentic dissent that defined the success of the Cuban Revolution for the artists of Cuba and for the world.

Signed: Organizing Committee of the Tenth Biennial