



Dossier

# Vth Habana Biennial

Antonio Martorell, *Yemayá's Balcony*.

Installation, 1994, La Habana.

Photo: Elba Capri.

# Art, Society and the Habana Biennial

BY NELSON HERRERA YSLA

In the contemporary world there aren't any forums where the diverse expressions of contemporary art of those nations considered industrial powers and of those other nations, euphemistically referred to as "in process of development" can meet face to face. As a rule when art works and artists from both hemispheres can meet up, the outcome is a timid version of a confrontation that would otherwise transcend for its quality, for the plurality of viewpoints and the search of a mutually beneficial understanding all round.

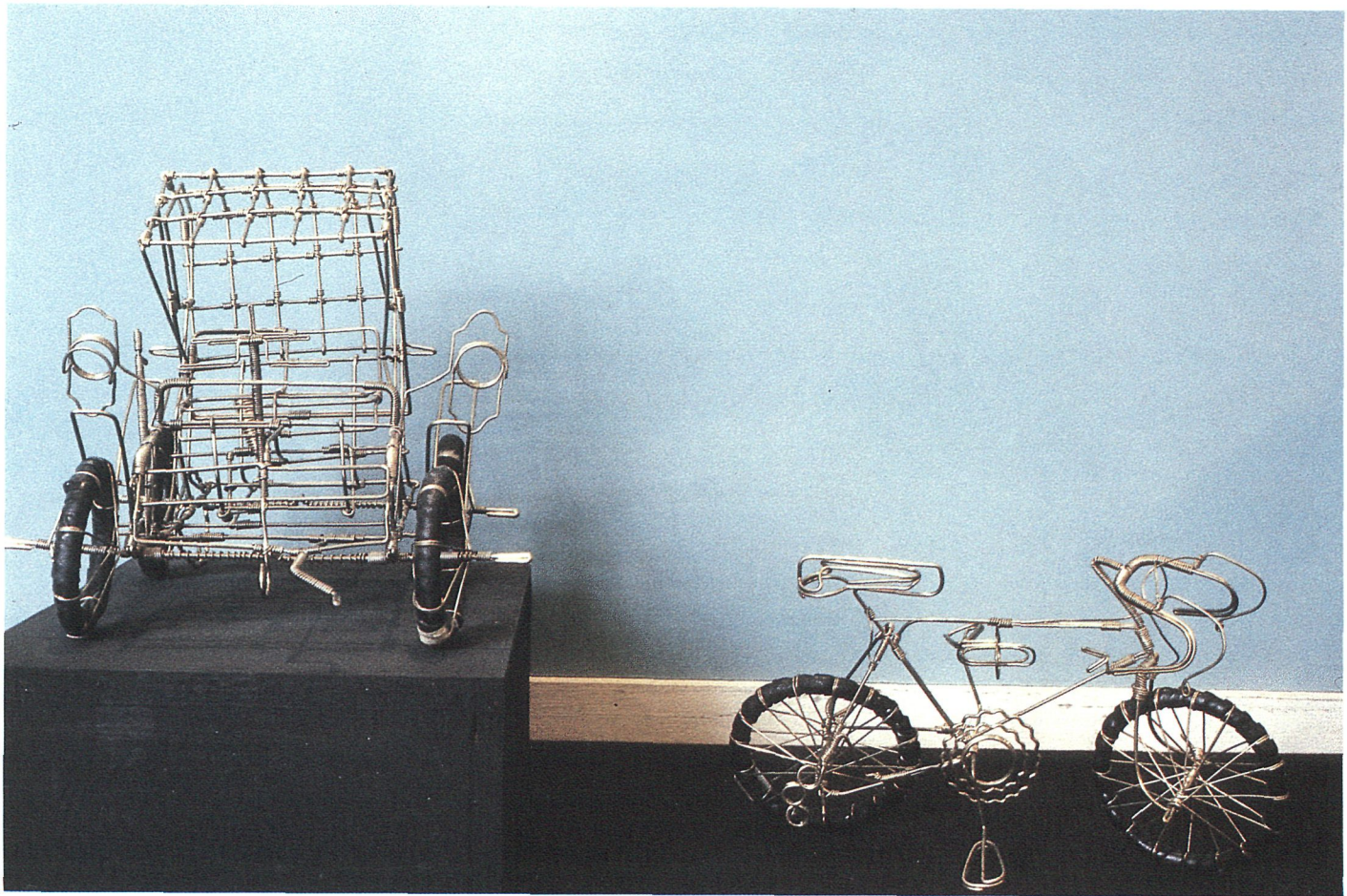
There have been efforts in global exhibitions directed to similar goals, like *Magiciens de la Terre*, that considered works produced by a significant group of artists that live and work in their countries of origin or have if not emigrated to the traditional centres of cultural power. Under no circumstance has such a meeting been attempted with those countries "in process of development" considering their

perspectives; that is to say, from within their respective cultures, from the depth of their ideological concepts that provide not yet another version of the "other" but open, democratic, plural, hybrid thought, that genuinely relates to interactions, appropriations and crossfertilizations that for centuries have occurred in the world of universal art.

With its modest resources, the Habana Biennial tries to bridge that gap. When in 1983 the Wifredo Lam Centre was founded in Cuba, the idea of organizing a systematic and broad encounter for the most excellent cultural expressions of Latin America dawned, aimed at reaching greater understanding and communication of the artistic-visual phenomena being produced in this part of the world. With this spirit the first invitation for the Habana Biennial to be celebrated in May 1984 was sent, and it established four prizes: Painting, Etching, Drawing and Photography, awarded by a jury of prestigious members.

More than 800 artists from the insular Caribbean and Central and South America took part and almost 2000 art works were exhibited. The Biennial, from its beginning, attempted to be not merely another exhibition space, but one of analysis, debate and creativity: this was the reason for celebrating an international conference on the work of Wifredo Lam.

The positive experience of this initial Biennial, that enabled one to gauge its considerable rallying power, meant that we could go beyond the Latin American Continent to other areas that historically have suffered and lived through similar experiences in their political, historical, economic and cultural development: I refer to Africa, Asia and the Middle East, which are grouped under the title of the Third World. The similarity of circumstance and experience tended to make for a forecast of discursive homogeneity within a context of varied visual expression, such as can find in the world of music, dance and architecture.



*African wire toys. Ilrld Habana Biennial (1989). Photo Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.*

Somehow these cultures and countries constituted a more or less coherent body that at the beginning of the 60's were identified as "non-aligned" countries despite the logical differences between many of them. What was or wasn't achieved in political terms didn't mar the achievement of a certain cultural success for those countries that have always existed and have transcended the circumstantial considerations and the vicissitudes of geo-politics. The Habana Biennial from the start decided to discuss and reflect upon all subjects rejected by the mechanisms of dominant power, all that has been perverted,

despised or underrated and that corresponds to the most authentic content of a visual culture that has gained in intensity, vitality and strength during the past decades.

*In its second edition of 1986 the Biennial had fifty seven countries represented and accepted more than 2000 works of all artistic disciplines. Prizes were awarded to artists of the three main areas, although during the exhibition differences and certain inequalities inherent to any competitive event surfaced. It was thus decided to stop handing out prizes, and considering*

the general interest for the Biennial in many cultural sectors of different countries, to establish criteria recognition and merit. The essential was displaced to the field of healthy competition, towards dialogue. For the first time artists from radically different backgrounds met in Habana and they discovered, idioms and common strategies that astonished them. Art critics, professors, theorists, museum directors the world over came to debate the art of the Caribbean.

Both Biennials enabled the world to know more than one thousand six

hundred artists and to indicate some of the principle tendencies that flourished and developed within our cultures and that remained isolated since they lacked exhibition space, separated both from their own contexts and from the rest of the world. The Habana Biennial opened the way for such recognition and such communication and it left us, (all those that had intervened in its organization), with the agreeable taste of scholarship and investigation. What would we do then in the future? How should we prepare future encounters?

Until that time we had shown work by Roberto Mata, Wifredo Lam, Jacobo Borges, Francisco Toledo, Valente Malangatana, Alirio Palacios, Mariano Rodríguez, Vicente Rojo, Omar Rayo, León Ferrari, Alejandro Otero, Raúl Martínez, Nja Madoui, Hervé Télémaque, Edgar Negret, Baya, as well as examples of Nicaraguan Primitive Art, contemporary painting from India, Kuwait and a considerable number of north american artists who showed how to fool the blockade imposed on Cuba by the US.

All of this, together with the great exhibitions that assembled the participating artists, was something that by far exceeded our resources. However, it only emphasized the whole adventure and its fascination.

When the Third Biennial was announced for 1989, we had decided to modify the

panoramic and somewhat crowded structure that the event had. The journeys of our specialists to various parts of the world enabled us to have a clearer picture of that diversified visual culture whose deep aim was the expression of transcendent cultural values. We started to understand better certain manifestations that could take on the hegemonic tendencies of dominant power centres, and how to escape the market's swan songs or how to subvert the subtle manipulations of certain "developed" cultural institutions.

We were able to discover manifestations that until then weren't considered sufficiently "prestigious" to be exhibited in museums, galleries or great international events, and which weren't promoted in catalogues, magazines or books.

The Habana Biennial became a non-discriminatory and a non-hierarchical space, an open space for the encounter of artists and analysts of our art, (whether they lived or not in our regions).

The documentary investigations and the travels that became more intense after 1986 revealed a notorious fact that could perhaps define an essential quality of the symbolic production of the Third World: the tensions generated by living tradition and the new language of contemporary art; for this reason, thenceforth the Habana Biennials would

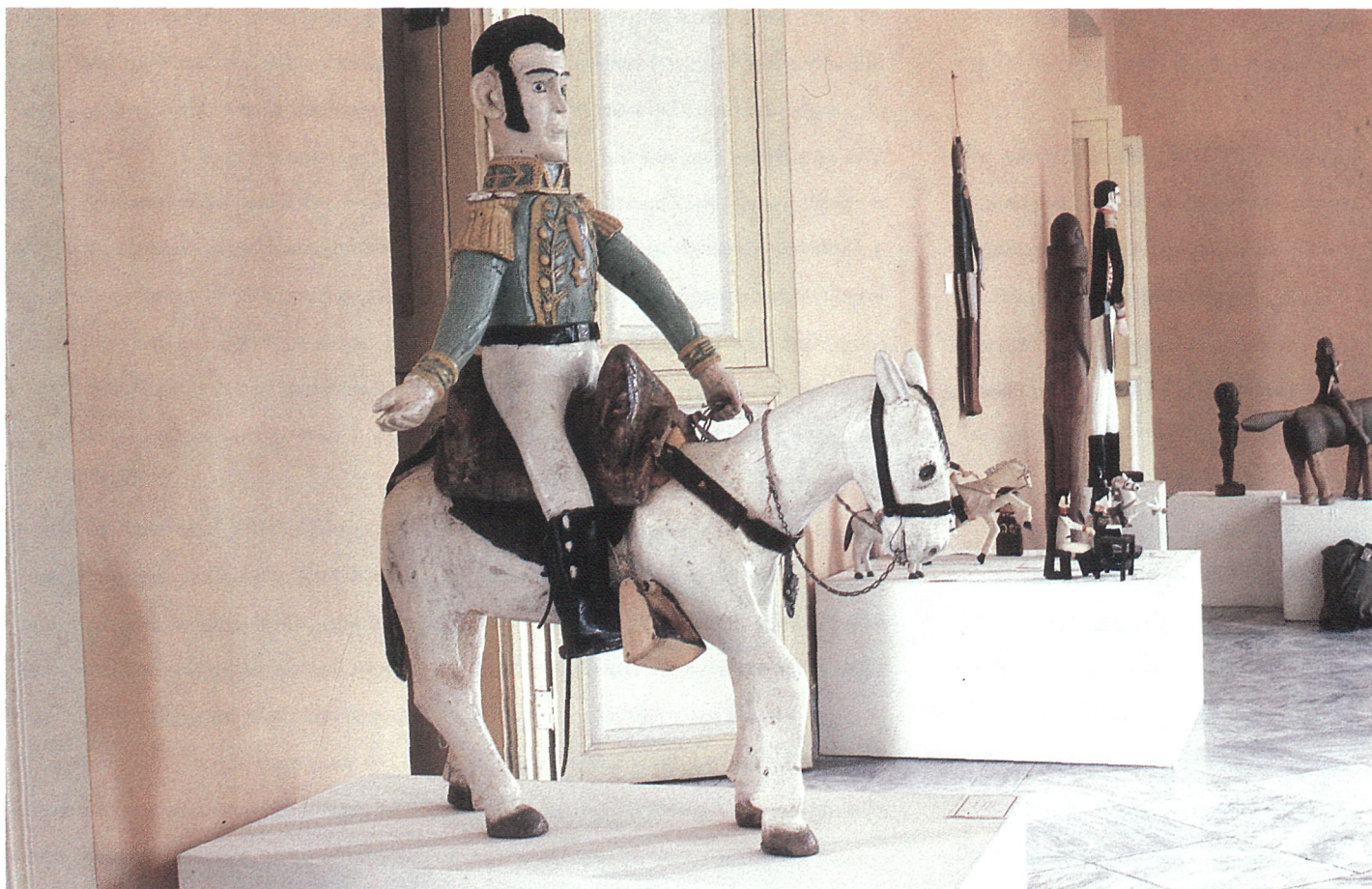
advocate an integrating, organic project. That became "Tradition and Contemporaneity" of the third Biennial.

At the same time we didn't only want to emphasize the role of traditional visual arts but to encompass the whole of man's visual universe where the so-called environmental arts occur: architecture, graphic and urban information.

The Third Habana Biennial divided artists into four great groups based on the interrelation of their work and so individual or monographical exhibitions were accordingly organized. We were able to appreciate examples of calligraphy in contemporary Arab art, Latin American textiles, the Cuban lithographic tradition, Mexican dolls, African wire toys, the Cuban Humour tradition, Mexican dolls, and individual shows by Roberto Feleo, Victor Teixeira, Ahmed Nawar, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, Sebastián Salgado and José Tola among others; we also showed a group of considerable young cuban artists and especially students of the Instituto Superior de Arte de la Habana. More than fifty countries participated, about 400 artists and renown latin american architects such as Rogelio Salmona, Fruto Vivas and Sergio Magalhaes.

Debate centred on this aspect of the visual arts and the conditions and atmosphere of the Third World.

It is worth pointing out that from the



*Bolívars of wood, Venezuela. Illrd Habana Biennial (1989). Photo Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.*

start the curatorial selection work of the artists was a collective enterprise assumed by the specialists of the Wifredo Lam centre, the institution in charge of the preparation and the organization of the Habana Biennial. It is always difficult to establish overall responsibilities in this complex task, despite the leading role that in recent years certain personalities in the art world have played and to whom were entrusted the project of polemical activities. To select artists and works from more than 100 countries would require much more time than that available between Biennials, if any one

person were given the whole task; therefore we esteem that it is more rational, much more scientific and precise, to entrust such work to a team of highly trained specialists, that after ten years of experience have acquired notable proficiency. In the Submanagement of Research at the Wifredo Lam Centre every specialist concentrates on a group of countries that he systematically studies from all possible angles: this gives him a series of initial results that are then confirmed or rejected after more research or after inspection during visits to these countries. Their dialogue with artists,

critics and personalities that visit us during the Biennials enriches their ideas, develops comparison and eventually leads to the collective discussion of ideas in specific work sessions. This team, that I am responsible for, has played an important part not only in the preparatory work of the Biennial but in the museographic concept of all the exhibition space, in the compilation of the general catalogue, as well as in the participation and organization of the critical and theoretical workshops. Each specialist acts as a specific curator on a proportional scale, (in his own area of investigation), and simultaneously, takes

part in the curation and selection at global level for the Biennial.

Essential as well is the fact that the Habana Biennial is made up by basic elements: the exhibition of works, the critical and theoretical workshops, that are planned from the very start of the project and which are given a balanced structure.

In the Third Biennial we decided to introduce further complexity into the event, as part of our search for information and debate, by programming discussions and encounters between different art magazine editors, directors of cultural institutions, and the participating artists, as a means of discovering new roads and fields in that extraordinary jungle that has today become the art of the Third World.

For the fourth edition of 1991, on the eve of the so-called Fifth Centenary of the "Discovery of the New World" we held a big debate on the meaning of that controversial celebration. We didn't let the influence of the circumstances propelling that event affect us, nor were we concerned with being trendy, rather we went on to debate this issue passionately because it still is crucial for a better and deeper understanding of our cultures. That means, that now "encounter" currently acts as a base and platform for a deeper analysis of what we are and of where we are heading

towards. The syncretic process of our cultures is five hundred years old, and with logical variants between Africa, Asia and Latin America, has continued to develop incorporating other elements. A hybridity has emerged and it isn't easy even for ourselves, to fully comprehend the contemporary expressions that have consequently developed. That has represented and represents a challenge: thus the name of "The Defiance of Colonialization" that we gave to the Fourth Habana Biennial and which gathered more than two hundred artists from 40 countries.

We resolved, after a firm decision, to extend the research and analytical criteria for the selection of artists participating in the Habana Biennial and we invited creators that belong to ethnic minorities in the USA, Canada and Great Britain, in order to emphasize

the similarities between those groups that have suffered alike degrees of marginalism within developed societies. This opening towards a "Third World" in the First World allowed us to understand such great topics as marginalism, self-marginality, migration, appropriation and cultural intermingling and the connections between art and its contextual realities.

The analysis threw light on our Third World, for the spiritual and material conditions of the habitat that defines a particular culture and its artists, can't fully explain everything.

The processes of assimilation, resistance and defiance produce extremely valuable art in many countries and in different world regions, beyond labels or classification. It is these expressions that we are interested in supporting at the



Enrique Zamudio (Chile). Installation. IVth Habana Biennial (1991). Photo Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam. La Habana.

Biennial to assemble a great concert of voices that unite in singing a common song.

In this fashion we broke cultural and geographical limitations formed years ago and we plunged into the complex network of interculturalism and multiculturalism.

In the Fourth Biennial there were individual shows by Luiz Paulo

Baravelli, Eugenio Dittborn, Rachid Koraichi, Zerihun Yigumeta; collective shows of Brazilian Applied Native Art, Bogolan Painting from Mali, Chinese Kites, Canadian Amerindians, and we devoted a prominent section to our contemporary Latin American architect masters: Luis Barragán, Walter Betancourt, Joao Vilnova Artigas, Carlos Raúl Villanueva, and we included young groups of enthusiastic Cuban architects and specialised workshops.

The *Defiance of Colonialism* was above all a challenge for us. We reduced the number of participating artists, nearly 200, but we gave each greater space so that they were better represented.

Editors' and critics' meetings were programmed and we had the exceptional opportunity of receiving the members of the International Council of Modern Art Museum Directors, whose annual meeting took place in December of that year in Habana.

To Luis Cammitzer, Ida Rodriguez

Prampolini, Adelaida de Juan, Desiderio Navarro, Roberto Segre, Fernando Salinas, Alberto Petrina, Humberto Elias, Jorge Glusberg, Juan Acha, Federico Morais, Aracy Amaral, Rita Eder we added the names of Rashed Araeen, Guy Brett, Greeta Kapur Pierre Gaudivert, Eduardo Subirats, Shifra Goldman, Pierre Restany, some of which had been following the Biennial since its First edition.

That Biennial was certainly more plural and diverse. The exchange with artists, critics and prominent personalities gave us the idea for the next Habana Biennial, that would be held in May 1994, with the title of *Art, Society and Thought*.

Its content is evident; it's a critical and analytical outlook on the circumstances that the artist lives or survives in. The contradictory character reflected in the radical polarity between North and South is followed closely by artists resident in the Third World and in industrialized countries. Despite these contradictions, that unleash violence causing the death of dozens of people daily, other artists keep their roots and living traditions, which they express in the contemporary idioms of art, (both coming from the artisan world and the refined world of technology), and who don't waver in the effort to consolidate a cultural identity that many believe already defunct or diluted in the pretended "global village" that the

centres of dominant power have mapped out for us.

Our universal projection has never implied disconnection from our roots and history because in them lies a wealth that false manoeuvres of Art History have silenced or refused to acknowledge. That is why we bring to this Biennial a debate of the universal, the regional and the local; of the part played by art magazines and the media; of the importance of public and private collectionism, that are all in the long run an integral part of those difficult circumstances that the artist has to live in and express in our regions.

We will establish a workshop for debate on the Biennial of Habana itself, its achievements and its value as a highway to communication with the public.

Exhibitions will be divided into five great areas: The Social and Physical Environment, Marginations, The Migratory Phenomenon, Appropriations and the Role of the Market in Art and the global problems the individual faces in a non central situation. For such purposes we have invited about 200 artists and minority groups from the US, Canada, Great Britain and Australia. It is worth indicating the presence of the work of more than ten South African artists, and from countries such as Senegal, Reunion Island, and Thailand, who will be showing in Cuba for the first time.



Tomás Esson (Cuba). Installation. IIIrd Habana Biennial (1989). Photo Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

As the tradition goes, the Biennial will take place in different buildings in the old quarter of Habana: at the Fortaleza de la Cabaña, the Castillo del Morro, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Museo de Arte Colonial, Wifredo Lam Centre, Palacio de la Artesanía, Casa Bolívar, Casa Benito Juárez, Casa Guayasamin, Casa de los Arabes and many others, which confers on the event a marked architectural and urban character and a unique chance to admire some of the important colonial buildings and squares that have led the UNESCO to proclaim old Habana “Cultural Heritage of Mankind”.

On this occasion architecture won't be included in a special exhibition, rather the invited latin american architects (Oscar Imbert, Edward Rojas, Bruno Stagno, Paolo Méndez da Rocha, Teodoro González, Carlos González Lobo, Luis Flores), will be integrated in the five exhibitions as artists whose work fits into the general theory of each section.

The Biennial is undoubtedly a living organism that transforms itself following the stimuli of contemporary art's evolution. It isn't a frozen entity, rigid, inflexible and dependent on great names

or firms . On the contrary, the Biennial is a constant challenge, an institution that can feel the evolution of our artists and artistic form in the most open and plural manner, that seeks to promote encounter and confrontation through the active participation of all its guests.

Henceforth, the Biennial will have a new face and it will count on new elements that we will include in this hard and long task of determining what is best about ourselves and how best we can submit it to everybody's consideration.