

BIENAL DE LA HABANA, 1984: ART CURATORS AS STATE RESEARCHERS

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Art biennials are major art exhibitions that happen every two years. They inform a global art community of nomadic professionals and objects moving from city to city, reassembling in variable narratives parallel to market trends. In 1980 the number of international art biennials was four: Venice, Sao Paulo, Kassel, and Cali. Today there are over 100². In them, curators work with objects, institutions, and literature shaping representations of the world for a specialized public.

When one tries to picture biennial curators certain figures come to mind: Okwui Enwezor, Catherine David, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Jay Sanders, Harald Szeeman. In recalling his early days in the profession, the latter speaks of a moment of “great intensity and freedom”, “improvisation”, and a very much needed versatility, characteristics that speak as much of him as of his context. The formation years of a Western international art circuit also cradled today’s biennial curators: dislocated experts, powerful professionals fusing creative, administrative, and publicity duties; experts in generating layers of exchange value for objects. But a curatorial tradition alien to the market was once incipient.

This paper focuses on the position of curators as translators between Cuban state ideology and the Bienal de La Habana. Following, is an analysis of their role fitting the particular conditions of cultural

production in 1980s Cuba. This paper looks into the formulation of curators as intellectuals caught in a complex set of linguistic games involving state rhetoric, global contemporary art codes, and individual professional criteria.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The tumultuousness of the 1980s demanded from countries explicit statements of political affiliation. Initially, La Bienal de La Habana was meant to serve this purpose. In a context of conservative, neoliberal politics consolidating in the First World, and the USSR witnessing its own decline with the failure of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, the Non Aligned Movement strengthened its position in the wider international political map, reinforcing cooperation among its members through military, infrastructural, and monetary support. La Habana’s foreign policy was articulated around a permanent effort to fight US hegemony across the world map.

Based on the principles of *latinoamericanismo* and a defense of national sovereignty, Cuba’s two diplomatic fronts in the eighties were the Caribbean and Latin American community, on the one hand, and the whole of the Non Aligned nations’ bloc, on the other. The island supported all of these countries’ efforts to remain outside of neocolonial dependencies with the US, and was active in helping them undergo

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2. As stated by Museum of Modern Art Director Glenn Lowry in 2012. Glenn Lowry, “Battle of the Biennials”, *The Economist*, November 2012.

profound structural transformations with this purpose. Between the years of 1979 and 1983, the country held the chair of the Non Aligned Movement. As the only Spanish-speaking and Latin American founding member, Cuba was placed in an interesting position: it not only became the official interlocutor between the Non Aligned Countries and the new Latin American democracies, but it championed the claims of new left movements all across the continent. This effort was translated later to the Bienal's focus in creating an image of cooperation among nations, bringing to foreign eyes an image of a strong common third world identity.

Moreover, at a national level, since the late 1970s, Cuba had faced a series of internal reforms returning to the country's orthodox socialist agenda of the early post-Revolution days. After a period of relative flexibility and the trial of market-reliant policies in the mid 1970s, the country adopted a series of measures recentralizing power and reinforcing strong state interventionist policies. These times of crisis called for the reinforcement of state hegemony. While the 1960s were characterized by a development "miracle", translating in an increase of the quality of life and the relaxation of censorship and control of cultural productions, the 1970s were in turn marked by an escalating control over art and literature by the state, with the first big exodus of intellectuals leaving the island. After the strengthening of control over cultural productions in the 1970s, the following decade witnessed several attempts from state officials to create new avenues for art production and dialogue more attuned with the demands of Cuban artists and international production trends. La Bienal de La Habana fits into these series of reforms, and speaks of the regime's disposition to negotiating the reach of its policing mechanisms over art production and its exhibition.

Parallel to the implementation of centralist economic policies, in the 1980s Cubans witnessed an emphasis on mentioning socialist revolutionary values in their leaders' discourses, mirrored by the generation of extensive political propaganda inside and outside the island, as well as the reappearance of the figure of the *revolucionario* as identity formation in state-spon-

sored cultural productions and official discourses. This turn had a clear impact on Cuban art. One among its many effects was the creation of the Bienal de La Habana, whose first edition was announced in 1983 by official decree, to be held in the then-recently opened Centro de Arte Wilfredo Lam. The Bienal as an institution had the function of displaying Cuban hegemony to national and foreign audiences. Moreover, it aimed to prove the possibility of alternatives to the Western art canon. This last point was put forward not only through a selection of works in general alien to contemporary art discussions set by leading art museums and biennials in Europe and the US, but also through the definition of the role of the curator in terms that were unlike to those working in main exhibitions like Kassel's documenta, or the Venice and Sao Paulo biennials in Venice and Sao Paulo.

Performing an institutional act of speech, the I Bienal featured the production of 698 Latin American artists, most of them not known outside of their local contexts. Among the most known featured artists were names such as Ana Mendieta, Juan Downey, Luis Camnitzer, and Leon Ferrari. Works were displayed following traditional Western genres: arranged in paintings, sculptures, and graphic art. The catalog's introduction stressed the importance of local cultural traditions all over the globe, defending art as a constituting feature of human nature, where "every culture's idiosyncrasy" shapes the "invaluable effort of the artist" in "his attempt to get closer to the enigma of the universe". In addition, the variety of languages and subjects obvious in the selection would prove, according to Eliseo Diego, signer of the introductory essay, "our Constitution[']s consacrat[ion] of freedom of expression as an inalienable right". Legitimated by a six-person jury formed by diplomats and artists from different origins, this extensive selection of Latin American art preannounced the following edition's survey that will give the public access to "the same type of tender knowledge about our African and Asian brothers". *Latinoamericanismo* first, and *thirdworldism* two years after, were put forward as alternative curatorial narratives to Kassel documenta's and Venice and Sao Paulo's biennials of that same period, three big art exhibitions more aligned

with what it was by then becoming the norm in contemporary art practices in the context of neoliberal Western democracies. In this context, the role of the Cuban curator becomes essential. As mediators in the construction of a discursive device targeted to both foreign and national audiences, the group of appointed art historians provided the state with a symbolic configuration working as evidence of the ideological and factual extent of Cuba's power. In the framework of a recentralization of the figure of the *revolucionario*, curators inherited a very particular mission as professionals in the service of the state.

Translation between the abstract nature of state ideology and the concreteness of curatorial practice becomes a key factor of curatorial practice. Far from an understanding of it in a purely deterministic manner, one should always leave the door open to the possibility of these curators having their own ways of performing that translation, after their own individual politics and artistic taste. Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci spoke broadly of the translation duties informing the practice of the organic intellectual. He described this character as a point of negotiation between different levels of society, a negotiation involving the forging of affinities or personal identifications with state ideology, but a negotiation as well that stands between the deterministic, direct up-down relation between state and the sphere of civil society.

“What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural “levels”: the one that can be called “civil society”, that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”, and that of “political society” or “the State”. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of hegemony exercised by the dominant group and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the State and “judicial” government. The functions in question are precisely organisational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group’s “deputies” exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government” (Gramsci, 1971).

Antonio Gramsci's elaboration of the notion of *organic intellectual* is key to understanding the role the curators of the Bienal de La Habana had in helping shape the state's hegemonic political discourse. After his differentiation between rural—or traditional—

and *organic intellectuals*, the Italian Marxist dissects the role of intellectual elites in the reproduction of ideologies. To each social class corresponds the emergence of its corresponding intellectual group, he claims, whose main objective is to mediate between the former and the broader political framework with the crafting of a class discourse. However, in his writings he focuses on the case of the Communist Party and the potential overcoming of class struggle by the working class (Gramsci, 1971). In this case, the *organic intellectual* works mainly towards organizing and directing production, while assuming directive political functions within the Party. Further analysis of Castro's formulation of the rule of artists and intellectuals in the nation makes explicit the ties with Gramsci's thought.

On June 30, 1961, Fidel Castro pronounced his speech *Palabras a los intelectuales* (*Words to Intellectuals*). In this speech, Fidel Castro bonds the revolutionary call to action with a state mission to enlighten citizens increasing the nation's cultural and scientific level, in order to escape inherited colonial shadows of “obscurantism, superstition, and falsehood” (Castro, 1961). So, the role of Cuban intellectuals, in general, and the biennial curators in particular, would be that of putting their expertise at the service of a bigger enterprise. In them meet what Gramsci called deliberative activity and technico-cultural activity, rendering a whole new bureaucratic body. To the Italian, *organic intellectuals* mediate within superstructures, yet maintain a degree of connection with a fundamental social group. At the same time, the state decides on a gradation of their functions, limiting the impact of their work after the Party's interests. Their function is to be “the dominant groups' deputies exercising the functions of social hegemony and political government” (Gramsci, 1971). These functionaries are responsible for generating spontaneous consent in the masses, in addition to legitimating the discipline legally enforced by the apparatus of state coercive power through their production of discursive and representational devices. *Organic intellectuals* are one among many gears in the state's functioning. As a result, they should be looked at in terms of their belonging to a structure, where their individual features have little space, since their

room for critical thinking is in appearance practically null. “It is a mistake to describe intellectuals by the concrete activities they carry out. Instead, they should be determined by the whole ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities have their place within the general complex of social relations” (Gramsci, 1971). Their reduction to a mechanical agent reminds of Weber’s articulation of bureaucracy as a process resulting in the rationalization of labor and the later formulation of the notion of instrumental reason by members of the Frankfurt School. According to Gramsci, the intellectual endows the Party with a “humanistic conception of history” (Gramsci, 1971), becoming a permanent persuader through active participation in practical life. This persuasive character of the *organic intellectual* is transferred to his discursive production in manifold ways. One of them is the art exhibition.

In Gramsci’s understanding of communism, state is dictatorship plus hegemony. In the case of Cuba, civil and political society symbolically merge in the construction of the *revolucionario*. To the first, the Italian relates the concept of hegemony; to the second, the state. After the success of the Revolution, the Communist Party, in power, brought together the two categories in what Gramsci had called “the integral state”. Hegemony would be thus maintained through time under the thumb of coercion. Quoting his words: “State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci, 1971).

In the enterprise of endowing the Party with a humanistic conception of history, the duty of intellectuals becomes one of a specialized and political nature. This links with director Lillian Llanes’ decision of naming her group of curators “researchers” prior to the preparation of the first edition of the Bienal. This particular division of labor inside the Party’s intellectual elite is analogous to the creation by Cuba in the 1970s of an extended and successful diplomatic body. Gramsci recognizes *organic intellectuals* in connection with all social groups, yet closely related to the dominant one through complex and extensive

bonds. School is put forward as the exemplary instrument by which an intellectual class is produced. Their actions are defended in the light of the dominant fundamental group’s new necessities. “[P]erforming their work in specific conditions and in specific social relations”, intellectuals enjoy a certain degree of autonomy inferred “from their special qualification and their function granting historical continuity” to the state (Gramsci, 1971). The formation of an intellectual group in Cuba was tied to the new university system established after the Revolution.

The *revolucionario* is an identity construction crafted by Fidel Castro to interpellate Cuban citizens. As an adjective related to the noun *revolución*, it addresses all Cubans and defines the subject acting for the sake of a common struggle: the perpetuation of the *revolución*. Castro’s speech Words to Intellectuals (1961) bonds the role of Cuban intellectuals with the overarching set of historical, moral, and political duties fusing under that identity denominator. This move creates a logic for state control over artistic production, setting the limits of allowed and forbidden practices for intellectuals in Cuba. Since biennial curators belong to the group of intellectuals, they are key to engage in an analysis of how the identity of the *revolucionario* conditions their practice.

American scholar Shifra Goldman discussed in 1987 the three pillars of the Bienal. In a lecture she delivered in San Juan, Puerto Rico, she identified “internationalism, nationalism, and fighting the blockade”, as the terms triangulating the exhibition’s curatorial discourse. According to her, “[t]he internationalist proposal is the cultural partner of a political line inaugurated in the 1960s” (Goldman, 1987). The second pillar refers to “presenting modern Cuban art” as the “ultimate product of the Cuban Revolution” (Goldman, 1987).

In his mentioned 1961 speech, Castro presented the *revolución* in classic Marxist terms, as the necessary unfoldment of class struggle’s historical materialistic logic. He talked about the *revolución*’s “right to exist, right to develop, and right to win” (Castro, 1961). This description of the Cuban present as rightfully historical logic constitutes a message of belief in Cuba as a culmination of a process of progress,

emancipation, and advancement towards the improvement of the working class's conditions of existence. In achieving and maintaining the revolutionary state, Castro called on intellectuals as agents with a larger common political, ethical, and production duty: to dedicate their production for the benefit of revolutionary goals. He spoke about the necessity of the commitment by intellectuals to act in coherence with this identity. He classified intellectuals into two groups, according to their level of giving to the enterprise: genuine revolutionary intellectuals, on one hand, and honest intellectuals not necessarily committed to the revolution, on the other. The first group includes all intellectuals invested in spirit and action to the defense of the revolutionary state. The second group fits artists adapted to this new reality, but without necessarily a revolutionary attitude. The Revolution should be concerned with this second group, said the Cuban leader (Castro, 1961), and it is the task of true revolutionary intellectuals to "try to win the majority of the people over to [the Revolution's] ideas" (Castro, 1961) and transform their spirit according to the values promoted by state ideology.

This acknowledgment of true revolutionaries being a minority group in Cuban society puts them in a position of mediators between state ideology and the mass of citizens. "Revolutionaries are the vanguard of the people, but the revolutionaries must aspire to having all the people march along with them" (Castro, 1961), a quote that not only reminds of Gramsci's definition of the organic intellectual's role in a totalitarian state, but also of Stuart Hall's formulation of identities as being in permanent processes of formation. In his 1991 essay "Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities," Hall talks of identities as fluid formations where imaginary political re-identification happens through the symbolic as mediating stance. Always in process of formation, and simultaneously connotating identification and togetherness, identities are seen by Hall in their fragmentary dimension in coherence with the configuration of global circulation spaces (Hall, 1991). Despite Cuba's relative isolation from those emergent global spaces of circulation, the Cuban *revolucionario* can still be seen as one of those identity labels aiming to work

as totalizing descriptors at a national level, since the multiplicity of citizens' types is recognized by Castro as a fact, and intentionally addressed as plurality to be unified with a common descriptor.

In his analysis of the forging of Thatcherism in Britain as a hegemonic moment, Hall points out how hegemony benefits from the permanent inclusion of differences into broader identities. Quoting Gramsci he states that "hegemony is the construction of a collective will through difference" (Hall, 1991), although, in the Cuban state, there is less investment in building consent than in Capitalist societies like the United Kingdom, and national ideology has to be reinforced with special punitive policies. In this line, Castro is very explicit with the issue of intellectuals' freedom of expression in post-revolutionary Cuba. In his speech he distinguishes two types of freedom: formal freedom and freedom related to the content of an art work. While the first is not problematic for Castro, the second one is more delicate "because it is exposed to the most diverse interpretations" (Castro, 1961). In that regard, he goes on to acknowledge the term's semantic diversity, concluding that the problem of discernment between notions of freedom should be posited soon so that whoever doubts "[understands] the *raison d'être* and the justice of the Revolution" (Castro, 1961). In this same speech, Fidel Castro remarks on a third group of intellectuals who are a threat to the revolution: those not committed either in spirit or in practice to it, those who manifestly reject the interests of the state. "The Revolution should reject only those who are incorrigible reactionaries, who are incorrigible counterrevolutionaries. And the Revolution must have a policy for that portion of the people" (Castro, 1961). Consent is pursued just up to a certain limit, beyond which another type of "attitude" is required (Castro, 1961).

The issue of freedom of expression relates to Walter Benjamin's remarks on the positionality of intellectuals in his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer". Arguing for the need to understand artists as historical products, the German thinker defends art as always being political, and identifies two formulations conditioning the poet's work. First, the author's de-

clared political affiliation; second, the “justified expectation for him to do work of quality” (Benjamin, 1970). These two factors condition producers’ ability to communicate specific political messages, and should be regarded together in order to read its impact in a particular context. According to Benjamin, these two factors are highly dependent on the conditions of production in which an author finds himself. Hence, an artist working with technology only available to a privileged class, no matter how strongly he declares himself in affiliation with the exploited working class, will never reach the political effect he pursues with his practice’s content. Benjamin calls this “matter of factness”, a certain notion of realism with the content aimed to express, but with the relations of production within which the author is placed (Benjamin, 1970).

The message of an artwork, according to Benjamin, is therefore dependent on the place its producer occupies in society. Benjamin’s emphasis on the two-folded nature of the conditionants determining the political impact of an artwork seems present too in Castro’s concern that revolutionary intellectuals should be committed in spirit and practice to the revolution (Castro, 1961). One of the points the Cuban leader makes in his speech is the state’s investment in art education and production institutions. He mentions the case of the National Cinema Institute, the National Ballet, and the national press (Castro, 1961), all of which were founded in the early 1960s with the aim to centralize production and control of culture. These would be followed by many other art schools and cultural institutions. Later in the 1980s, Castro will reformulate the policies running these institutions seeking international cooperation with other countries from the Non Aligned Bloc. Castro’s stress on the Revolution’s concern with improving both the technologies available to intellectuals and their living conditions, reminds us of Benjamin’s deterministic approach to the artist’s positionality when he states that “the role of the intellectual in the class struggle can be identified, or better, chosen only on the basis of his position in the process of production” (Benjamin, 1970). Since the place of intellectuals has been pretty strictly determined by Castro since the early 1960s, their position in society is de-

termined in terms of their fitting into the identity of the revolutionary intellectual.

In his June 30, 1961, speech *Palabras a los intelectuales*, Fidel Castro set out the degree of freedom that artists and intellectuals were granted within the frame of the Revolution and opened the door for a defense of their subjugation to the state’s interests as an structural need in the joint pursuit of a better future. Implicit in his message was the need for the absolute identification of intellectuals’ concerns with those of the Revolution:

“[T]he state of mind of all revolutionary writers and artists, or of all artists and writers who understand and justify the Revolution, must be: what dangers might threaten the Revolution, and what can I do to help the Revolution? [...] Because this is the first thing. The first thing is the Revolution itself, and after that we can concern ourselves with the other matters.” (Castro, 1961).

Gramscian *organic intellectuals* are considered by the Party as revolutionaries from the beginning. In a context such as post-Revolutionary Cuba, where the Communist Party has succeeded in bringing the working class to power, all citizens are interpellated as revolutionaries by the state, thus inserting the Party’s ideology and ethics into the core of the newly forged Cuban identity. The revolutionary is characterized by the direction of its purposes and objectives towards the changing of reality. This inscription of the Party’s ideology first in the very definition of the new citizen and, second, in the core of the conception of the Cuban intellectual fits perfectly in Antonio Gramsci’s discussion on the role the *organic intellectuals* had in perpetuating the Communist Party’s hegemony. This is presented as a mission of the state: to enlighten citizens, raising the nation’s cultural and scientific level, in order to escape the shadows of “obscurantism, superstition, and falsehood” (Castro, 1961).

As in Gramsci, from its foundations, Revolutionary Cuba marries state-sponsored education with the crafting of an intellectual elite at the service of the state. “[D]eliberative bodies tend to an ever increasing extent to distinguish their activity in two ‘organic’ aspects: into the deliberative activity which is their essence, and into technical-cultural activity in which

the questions upon which they have to take decisions are first examined by experts and analysed scientifically. This latter activity has already created a whole bureaucratic body, with a new structure” (Gramsci, 1971). The Italian Marxist links the formation of an intellectual class in the service of the state to the creation of specific institutions that facilitate their *scientific* training.

“We want to create the ideal conditions for the creation of the artist and the intellectual, because if we are creating for the future, why would we not want the best for the present artists and intellectuals? We are asking for the maximum development for culture and, very precisely, in function of the Revolution, because the Revolution means precisely more culture and more art” (Castro, 1961).

Again, here the relation between the formation of an intellectual class in the service of the state is legitimized with a vision of the future, where the consolidation of the Revolution will only be possible with the aid of a revolutionary intelligentsia. Returning to Gramsci, new necessities call for the making of new specialized functionaries.

“[T]he [new] leader must have that minimum of general technical culture which will permit him, if not to “create” autonomously the correct solution, at least to know how to adjudicate between the solutions put forward by the experts, and hence to choose the correct one from the “synthetic” viewpoint of political technique” (Gramsci, 1971).

Since the late 1950s Cuba created a series of national organisms in charge of controlling education, with an emphasis in centralizing superior education and formation in the arts: the National Printing House (1963), National Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industries (1959), the five National Art Schools (1961), etc. The latter were conceived by Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara as a complex for tuition-free education aimed at young artists all across the Third World, in line with their objective of turning La Habana into an avant-garde art hub for the members of the Non Aligned Movement. But Castro’s stress in the forging of an intellectual class aligned with the Party’s ideology is not just seen poured in the creation of National Schools. It is state policy to regulate the production and ideology of intellectuals with the country’s future best interest in mind. He sig-

naled “[the need for a] council which orients, stimulates, develops, and works for the creation of better conditions for the work of artists and intellectuals [...] because if we are creating for the future, why would we not want the best for the present artists and intellectuals?” (Castro, 1961). In his discourse he defends the need to facilitate the general conditions for the creation of the intellectual as a state functionary, leaving an open door to the creation of other ambitious discursive devices, such as our case study: La Bienal de la Habana.

EXHIBITIONS AS MEDIATION MECHANISMS

Like Castro makes a distinction between those who understand the Revolution and those who do not, Gramsci speaks of the difference between the masses, who *feel*, and the intellectuals, who *know*. In his note *Passage from Knowing to Understanding and to Feeling and vice versa from Feeling to Understanding and to Knowing*, he manifests the hegemony’s need to create mediating representations. “One cannot make politics-history without passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation. In the absence of such a nexus the relations between the intellectual and the people-nation are, or are reduced to, relationships of a purely bureaucratic and formal order; the intellectuals become a caste, a priesthood (so-called *organic intellectualism*)” (Gramsci, 1971). La Bienal de La Habana, as any other global biennial, acts as a medating mechanism articulating particular representations of a certain ideology.

Benedetto Fontana has remarked on the classical foundations of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Remembering the persuasive nature of language, he brings about deliberative rhetorics, since they are “the art of addressing people, either formally in their political and popular assemblies or less formally in meetings, demonstrations, and other forms of gatherings” (Fontana, 2005). How does a determined conception of the world circulate among the people? In order for it to reach the status of common sense it needs first be articulated over a series of persuasive devices produced by ideologues. “[H]egemony describes the ways and methods by which consent is generated and organized”, says Fontana, “which, in

turn, is directly related to the mechanisms and processes by which knowledge and belief are first, produced, and second, disseminated” (Fontana, 2005).

In turn, in his essay *Exhibition rhetorics: Material speech and utter sense*, Bruce W. Ferguson addresses the relation between art exhibitions and institutional ideologies. He presents exhibitions as strategic systems of representations articulated over a group of resources (architectural, communication, didactic, human), and curatorial premises (research, selection, creation of a narrative, handling, showing). According to him, an art exhibition is a set of utterances, acting like a chain of signification. It is, in short, an institutional act of speech. “Like rhetoric itself, [exhibitions] might be best described as strategic systems of representation; strategies whose aim is the wholesale conversion of its audiences to sets of prescribed values to alter social relations” (Ferguson, 1996). In this light, an art biennial is endowed with the function of uttering that which art curators have articulated in a language other than the one used by politicians.

This utopian dimension of exhibitions, as Fredric Jameson would put it, is the same as in of any other spectacle acting in celebration of the renewal of social relations. Art exhibitions, hence, become publicly sanctioned articulations of identity of the institutions which present them. They are the narratives that utilize art objects as elements in institutionalized stories promoted to an audience. The audience in this study case is double. It is first the Cuban population, addressed in terms of *revolutionaries*. Second, it is the international community, the primary public for the message of cooperation among Third World Countries that Castro had been espousing since the 1960s. Understanding art exhibitions as utterances gives way to their reading within broader ideological frames, simultaneously conditioning social relations inside and outside their walls.

Liliana Llanes was the director of the first three Bienales. In her role as state functionary, she had to coordinate the narrative behind the production, the curatorial team, infrastructure, and all other resources needed for the production of the event. In the months prior to the celebration of the first Bienal,

she selected a group of young art historians to integrate the curatorial team. Her idea was to call them *researchers* instead of curators, highlighting the need for anticipating the selection of artists with a thorough process of investigation on contemporary art practices in South America and the Caribbean region. With this move, she sent members of her team in search for works that would embody in themselves the local identities of their places of origin with concerns common to all Third World countries. *Researchers* would grant the Bienal’s selection with a scholarly discursive layer, legitimating it in terms of the *régime*’s official ideology, potentially presenting all artists as close as possible to the notion of *revolutionarios*. As Miguel Rojas-Sotelo states, Llanes designed a research-based curatorial method, in which researchers-curators would “travel to a region of [their] choice to collect materials from primary sources, interact with individuals and collectives, make interviews, visit museums, galleries, and studios”. Relying on exploring through Cuba’s extended diplomatic network, these state employees would weave a transnational web bringing together representations from all Third World Latin American countries. Hence, the curatorial team’s outreach traced the nation’s diplomatic structure, consecrating itself as another branch within the country’s mechanisms to strengthen foreign relations and attract international attention. In Benjaminian terms, the political dimension of their work was highly dependent of their formal and content-related commitment to the revolution, hence closely indexical of its ideological guidelines. In our case of study, curators in La Habana’s art Biennial practice their profession within the limits of Cuba’s ideological and geographic reach. They curate in “matter of factness”, within Cuba’s diplomatic network and limited by strict predetermined ideological intentions.

Curators are in charge of translating from the abstract ideological to the concrete character of objects, texts, and people informing an art exhibition. They employ art objects as elements in institutionalized narratives uttered to an audience, and convey particular ethics present in their practice and the spaces they design; more particularly, the way they do so depends mostly on their position in a particular histori-

cal network of relations, and the room left for individual authorship is highly informed by these. In the current case study case of 1984 Cuba, the state addressed them in terms of their revolutionary nature, explicitly shaping the limits of their practice with national ideology, as well as by the two-fold audience of the Bienal de La Habana: the Cuban popu-

lation and the international community. Understanding art exhibitions as utterances performed by a set of appointed experts ruled by a particular work ethic gives way to their reading within broader ideological frames, simultaneously conditioning social relations inside and outside their walls.

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