

Art in America

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Cover: Judy Rifka's "A. Museum," 1982

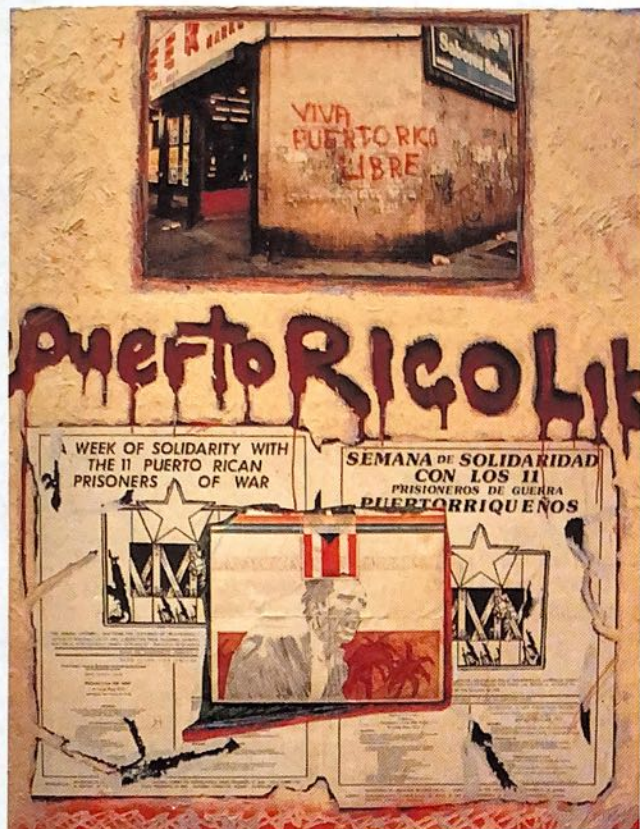
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Report from Havana

The First Biennial of Latin American Art

BY LUIS CAMNITZER



Juan Sánchez: Puerto Rico Libre, 1982, 66 by 52 inches.



César Paternosto: Recuay, 1983, acrylic and sand on canvas, 60 inches square.

Probably the most ambitious exhibition of Latin American art ever presented, the First Havana Biennial opened on May 25, 1984—that is, only a week after the unveiling of the renovated and expanded Museum of Modern Art in New York. The two openings had only the date in common: not surprisingly, their goals and intentions were completely at odds. (One symptom of the polarity is the fact that probably no more than one or two people witnessed both events.) Still, their juxtaposition is illuminating, for it brings to light the differences between metropolitan and colonial values, needs and ways of judging.

The flagship institution for international art affairs—"international" being, of course, a euphemism for "Euro-American"—the Museum of Modern Art has, historically, defined what international art is supposed to be and has implemented its definition with the help of metropolitan millionaires on its board of directors, colonial millionaires on its International Council, access to embassies and international circulation through the State Department. Throughout its existence,

The Havana Biennial sought to provide Latin American artists with an alternative arena where isolation could be broken down and where, through exchange and comparison, a collective dynamic might emerge.

MoMA has defined those artistic values which are acceptable to it as universal, those which are not as marginal.

More recently, however, the creation of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the proliferation of what seemed to be a series of regional esthetic movements in Germany, Italy, France, etc., as well as the restriction of the museum's activities during the renovation of its building have threatened

the museum's mythic status as the cathedral of contemporary international art. Its opening "International Survey of Painting and Sculpture" was an attempt to regain that status. To this end, Kynaston McShine was anointed mechanical Pope, a faithful representative with the power to canonize and to excommunicate artists—all in the name of defining what is interesting in art today, internationally speaking.

According to McShine, interesting art today is being made by 165 artists, 72 of whom originate in the U.S. and one, Antonio Dias, in Latin America. (A Brazilian, Dias also happened to be the only Latin American artist in the 1971 Guggenheim International.) Although McShine believes, presumably in good faith, that the presence of 72 U.S. artists in the show is not a sign of parochial nationalism, but a reflection of where quality is seated at present, it is, in fact, the sign of a vicious circle, given the conditions in which qualitative parameters are defined. Traditionally, Latin American artists have produced within these parameters once they have had access to information from the metropolitan centers, especially in the form of

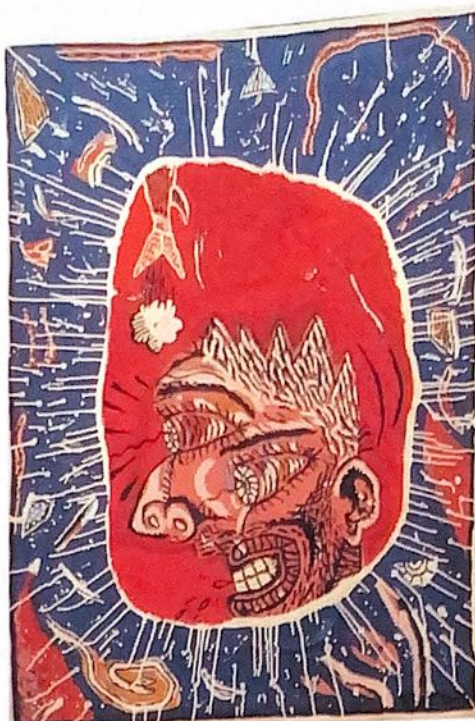
The Grand Prize, given to Arnold Belkin (Mexico), corresponded—not without logic—to the biggest painting, *Betrayal and Death of Zapata*, roughly 8 by 13 feet. Though it is somewhat banal and has been diluted with cheap commercial Surrealist elements, Belkin's work fits into the Mexican muralist tradition. This prize, along with a few others, might suggest that the jury was sympathetic to art with explicit social content; paradoxically, most members of the jury actually lean towards a modernist esthetic (including the Argentinian kinetic artist Leparo).

Most works awarded prizes seemed interchangeable with nonprize works in terms of originality, quality or any other possible criterion. Eliminating the prize institution would improve the Biennial. No artist is or should be in competition with any other artist, and this fact was recognized as much by visiting artists as by Cubans.

In fact, the traditional format may not be appropriate to a Latin American biennial. Latin America is complex not only in a political, but also in a cultural sense (if these two can be kept apart). The division of an exhibition according to nation-states—an artificial concept in itself when it doesn't correspond to cultural regions—becomes even more questionable when a great many artists are in exile, either bearing the burden of, or fighting, uprootedness. Exiled artists are a diverse group in themselves, faced with three equally powerful options: an egocentric individualism, contributing to the development of a national or regional art from a distance, or assimilation into the international market. With all these variables, the Olympic Games model employed in Havana seemed a very inelegant solution.

What is more, different countries employed different selection criteria and/or processes; and not all of them have the same ease of access to Cuba. The more a country is aligned with the U.S., or the more repressive its government, the more any contact with Cuba on the part of its citizens is regarded as a punishable crime. As a consequence, some countries were seriously underrepresented, their few examples arriving through exotic, Kafkaesque secret routes.

As a result, it was all but impossible to compare the production of different countries; extra-esthetic factors were sufficiently strong to slant the result. Colombia, for example, a country that usually excels in international competitions, was overrepresented by uninteresting work by both established and unknown artists. Mexico's entry demonstrated the same shortcomings. Guatemala, on the other hand, was represented by one artist—who hasn't lived there for years. Chile and Uruguay were underrepresented because of repression, although the Diaspora allowed for a larger contingent of artists; as national groups both were quite interesting.



Fernando Barata: *Untitled*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 55 1/8 by 37 13/16 inches.

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Because of its location in Havana, the impact of the Biennial must be assessed from both a national and a continental perspective. From a continental point of view, it is ironic that the same country that is frequently accused of being a "foreign body" in the American community should be the first to fully invest in a regional cultural enterprise of this size. (Cuba's importance in Latin American art activities, unlike its influence in literature, had waned since the termination of the Casa de las Americas printmaking competition in the late '60s.) Nationally, the impact of the Biennial cannot be underestimated; it was tremendous. During the first 6 days 44,000 people (in a city of roughly 2 million inhabitants) visited the exhibitions. News and interviews appeared on the front page of the press every day. The opening served as an occasion to invite a number of Latin American artists and critics, and many more briefly—interrupting the cultural blockade of Cuba.

That blockade, which is enforced not

just by the U.S., but by most Latin American countries in the name of the U.S., may be the major impediment to the Biennial's continental impact. The goal of intercontinental communication and regional exchange is seriously limited when only 10 to 20 percent of the exhibitors can overcome political and/or economic problems in order to attend the Biennial. The catalogue, which is excellent when compared with what is usually produced in such circumstances, is only a stamp collection for those who could not see the show. The Biennial could have had the desired impact only if it had been a traveling Biennial—a far-fetched idea, perhaps, but one considered by the organizers—or if it had produced clearer documentation that might have substituted for circulation.

After much time and many biennials of this stature, it should be possible to discover the common denominators of a Latin American identity. This process cannot be simply analytic, but must be heuristic as well. Seen this way, the Havana Biennial does not yet offer concrete answers, but at least the unevenness of the work becomes less important. The identification of individual merit seems unimportant; rather, the search should be for more general statistical data which may suggest definitions to be adopted or discarded.

At the Biennial, it was the Cuban entry in the painting section that brought the most surprises. With no obstacles to their participation, the Cuban painters were represented by a series of impressive works, in both ambition and execution. If there is a general criticism to be made of their work, it is that they seem overinformed about the international scene. In many works it is difficult to find elements which identify them as Cuban. This is not a criticism of Cuban artists for lacking a sense of national identity; rather, Cuba is different from the other Latin American countries, and one would expect this to be reflected in its art. Cuba is, after all, the longest-lived socialist country in America, and the values and working conditions of Cuban artists are radically different from those of the average Latin American artist.

One of the most important contributions of postwar art in the U.S. has been its concern with presentation: the size, finish, "esthetic packaging" of the work of art. Of all the works in the Biennial, the Cuban entries seemed to handle this esthetic most successfully. The most interesting works were by José Bedia, Flavio Garcíandia, Leandro Soto and Arturo Cuenca. Bedia addresses the continuity from the Indians to the present, using a repertoire somewhat reminiscent of that used by Beuys. His *12 Knives* resembles a clock: a set of 12 crudely reinvented wooden tools is placed around the circumference of a black circle painted directly onto the wall and covered with chalk writing. Garcíandia combines popular kitsch