

## Longing for Dialogue: Art, Historicity & the Intellectual Public Sphere at the XIII Havana Bienal

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### Introduction

It is no exaggeration to characterize this year's authorized, 13<sup>th</sup> Havana Bienal, titled *La construcción de lo imposible*, as taking place in an atmosphere of division and mistrust. Nonetheless, for the divided Cuban intellectual public sphere, the Bienal provides a discursive and infrastructural space for art to move beyond rhetorical gestures towards either a better or apocalyptic future (depending on one's ideological position) and intervene in more grounded socio-political debates. These interventions took a curious form during the 13<sup>th</sup> Bienal. Across the palpable antagonisms in the Cuban art world, it was artworks that referenced and reworked Cuban history that seemed to allow for the widest possible discursive participation. Here, I will discuss one work included in the *Museo de Bellas Artes* contribution to this past Bienal, José Manuel Mesías' *Rectificaciones a la obra de Armando Menocal "La Muerte de Maceo"* (2017). I will argue that despite the exhibition's particular interpretation of Cuban history and historiography, the historical material itself opens a space for dialogue among an informed public, in this case of Mesías' painting, one concerning race and the nation.

Contrary to criticism leveled at recent past editions, I'm unconvinced by assertions that the Bienal has become *solely* geared to specialized tourists on the international biennial circuit or that it provides a cynical spectacle of Cuban cultural exuberance that masks the government's authoritarian character (Camnitzer 2009 [1999]; León 2001; Checa-Gismero 2018). If anything, my sense is that for art professionals the Havana Bienal is not a place to see cutting-edge art and the exhibition's organizational deficiencies do not warrant the logistical difficulties and infrastructural hassles, especially for US Americans, of traveling to Cuba. The above notwithstanding, from the perspective of, especially less-established, Cuban artists the Bienal remains a lynchpin of their livelihood.

Political scientist Sujatha Fernandes proposes the term "artistic public sphere" for understanding the political dynamics of creative expression in Cuba both in relation to the state and to global art markets. For her, the artistic public sphere refers to "sites of interaction and discussion among ordinary citizens generated through the media of art and popular culture" (3). Despite Fidel's own ambiguous promotion of art's propaganda function, she notes that within Cuban socialism there is a long tradition among the country's cultural elite of championing critically engaged art and cultivating active spectators (14). This tradition has allowed for the arts to maintain relative autonomy and function as a kind of public through which "new kinds of negotiation within and against the limits of state power and cultural markets" could be imagined and mobilized (14-15). While it is beyond the scope of this essay to suggest Cuban art continues to serve this function writ large, I argue that if the Bienal does retain a critical function, it is not in its engagement with "ordinary citizens", but rather in cultivating complex debates among a highly specialized, but divided, intellectual public sphere

One accusation made against the role intellectuals in the Cuban public sphere is that, in the words of the late Cuban cultural critic and translator Desiderio Navarro, the cultural elite was prone

to present itself as “*the* Critical Conscience of society, that is, society’s only and exclusive critical conscience” (195). An accusation Navarro himself criticizes, pointing out that “the intelligentsia could only aspire to and achieve that status in a public sphere where the rest of society does not or could not intervene critically” (ibid.). It is not so much that art is necessarily politically transformative, but rather creates a discursive space in which debates about critical intervention, for and against the status quo, continue to take place.

The contours of art and public debate in post-Soviet Cuba have shifted: what initially seemed like increased political tolerance for dissent can be read either as a cynical ploy on the part on the state to strengthen its own international standing or an opportunistic attempt to satisfy international art audiences titillated by government censorship and repression in socialism (Humphreys 27). Anthropologist Laura-Zoë Humphreys puts it as follows: “[in post-Soviet Cuba] criticism itself came under suspicion as artists and audiences found it increasingly difficult to distinguish freedom of expression from complicity with the socialist state or the global market” (ibid.). This atmosphere fosters what Humphreys, in contrast to a democratic public sphere, calls a paranoid public.

What is striking is that despite the widespread mistrust, active exclusions, and state censorship that characterize the today’s Cuban art world, serious conversations about the relationship between politics, society, and art *are* being had across “enemy lines”. One discursive space around which such dialogues are happening is the pervasive historicity of many featured art works in the 13<sup>th</sup> Bienal. I’m not using historicity in the sense of factuality or, to quote anthropologist Charles Stewart, a “‘verifiable past’... [with an] insistence on objective evidence and rational inference” (81). Instead, following the usage in contemporary cultural anthropology, I use historicity to refer to: “the full variety of possible cultural means of perceiving, understanding, and representing the past”, the “manifold interdependencies between a present (always sensing the future) and the pasts it elects to consider” (83, 82). Paying attention to the contours of these history-laden discussions around art works may work towards creating a dialogue within the impasse that characterizes the contemporary Cuban intellectual public sphere. By making history the discursive space of debate, the painting I will discuss below reconfigures the paranoia surrounding more obviously political art works.

### **The Affordances of History: Integral Audiences At The *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes***

In an article reviewing several editions of the Havana Bienal, art historian Rachel Weiss cites an airport conversation she had with curator Jan Hoet in which he evaluated the famed 1989 edition: “The works were, for the most part, ‘only sociology’, ‘only history,’ ‘totally irrelevant to art.’ They were only speaking to themselves, so why should he care?” (13). Ironically, cynical approaches to more recent Havana Bienals and their featured artworks, especially by Cuban participants stress that the exhibition is less of an internal conversation than a showcase for people like Hoet. My contention is, however, that the historicity evident in several art works and individual exhibitions is precisely about establishing a conversation amongst Cuban intellectuals, on and off the island, that is *not* easily translatable across contexts; these works are geared towards and work to establish what Richard Schechner calls an “integral audience”, audiences composed of “those ‘in the know’” (13).

While not part of the central Bienal exhibition, as part of its official participation, Havana’s *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* hosted 5 shows focusing on Cuban history and national identity (*cubanidad*). One of the shows, the inspiration for this paper, “*Más allá de la utopía. Las relecturas*

*de la historia* ” asserts the following about new research, interventions, and appropriations of history in the visual arts: “[such methods] are like art-bombs for reformulating relations of power and proposing new signs for this great possible utopia that is the nation of all of us” (López Campistrous, translation mine). The overblown rhetoric of the official Bienal notwithstanding, several of the works included in the show do engage in semiotic reformulations using the stuff of history. Artist José Manuel Mesías’ work is featured prominently in the show; in fact, during the Bienal his work was found throughout Havana: in commercial galleries, state exhibitions spaces, and alternative shows with a decidedly critical approach to the Cuban state. His contributions fall squarely within the aims of the show’s curatorial parameters; they attempt a dialogue with both Cuban historiography and art history to in effect “reread history”. By using the language of historical imagery, Mesías exploits the multi-referentiality of the sign and demands a good deal of historical work from the viewer.

One of Mesías’ works featured in the exhibition was the large painting, *Rectificaciones a la obra de Armando Menocal “La Muerte de Maceo”* (2017). Here Mesías “corrects” the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuban painter Armando Menocal’s epic depiction of the 1896 Antonio Maceo, killed in action shortly after having arrived in Cuba from exile. The rigorous brushwork and crowded battle scene of Menocal’s 1908 painting contrasts notably with Mesías’ staid, closed figures calmly lifting Maceo up out of the grass (even the horse no longer seems interested). Although appropriating a national art historical canon may not be particularly innovative, for the integral audience I believe Mesías to be, at least partly, addressing this criticism is a non-starter. As Cubans are still coming to terms with Fidel Castro’s death, the approval of a new constitution, Raúl Castro quietly retiring from public life, the prospect of some form of real political and economic change (or disaster) colors all discussions about politics and society. In this historical context, a painting of a deglorified national war hero’s death provides a poignant framework for making sense of the present.

On one level, this “rectification” could be convincingly read as a fairly straightforward allegory for the current political context in which the “heroic generation” of the 1959 Cuban Revolution is disappearing from public life and the leadership is increasingly populated by party bureaucrats born well after the Revolution’s triumph. For an informed Cuban intellectual public, this painting may elicit other connections and narratives, for example the bizarre afterlife of Maceo’s remains.

The Cuban nationalist elite, who were mostly of European decent, were never quite comfortable with Maceo’s prominent position within the independence struggle given his visible African ancestry. These racial anxieties gave rise to an anthropometric study commissioned in 1900. After exhuming Maceo’s body and examining his skeletal remains, three Cuban scholars were happy to declare that Maceo’s skull “was closer to the skulls of ‘modern Parisians’ than to those of ‘African blacks’...For a person of his race, they concluded, Maceo been a ‘truly superior man’” (Ferrer 168). These racial antagonisms have historically been excluded from official representations of Maceo, whose 1916 statue features prominently on the *malecón* and the five convertible pesos banknote.<sup>1</sup> While it would seem that revolutionary Cuban historiography could have exploited Maceo’s posthumous mutilation to further highlight the racism of US occupied and later Republican Cuba, this isn’t the case. Just as the Revolution didn’t take down most Republic-era statues of Cuban independence heroes, official portrayals of Maceo post-1959 continued to emphasize the social cohesion and racial harmony that Republican-era textbooks aimed to instill (Nathan 264-26).

I've followed this historical rabbit-hole at some length, in part, as a performative demonstration of my own research after viewing Mesías' painting and attempting to answer the question: why did Menocal's painting need to be rectified? Although I have yet to come across any critical discussion of the painting, the discursive space it opens up has significant contemporary reverberations. Maceo's death and his body's afterlife opens up a terrain of serious historical debate on the role of state, intellectuals, and artists in perpetuating a myth of racial harmony in the midst of ongoing post-plantation social inequality. While it is true that socialist Cuba made important interventions to end racial discrimination, it is equally true that open debates about race and society ended once the Revolution had declared "victory" over racism (de la Fuente 259-316), a narrative that today is being vigorously contested by black identified intellectuals and collectives. Furthermore, many the revolution's important gains in racial equality have been undermined since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of a tourism and remittance economy that disproportionately puts black Cubans at a disadvantage (Blue). There are serious disagreements on race and racism in Cuba, across and within political orientations, but Mesías' painting of an Afro-descendent 19<sup>th</sup> century war hero invites the informed viewer to engage in a comparative historical analysis concerning the possible pasts and futures of a more equal Cuba.

## Conclusion

As I conclude, I would like to anticipate some possible objections to what I've said. I think that it's more than fair to accuse me of a kind of wishful thinking. I have no real empirical evidence to prove my argument. I didn't hear any excited debates about race in front of the painting and I've encountered only passing references to the painting in the deluge of art criticism evaluating the Bial. In part I think this is an inherent difficulty in taking a social approach to contemporary art; it is hard to find evidence, Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* notwithstanding, of social effects in the moment and impossible to know what works will have a longer discursive afterlife. However, there is something about Mesías' historically oriented work that allowed it to cross ideological divides in the Cuban art world. My hunch is that 19<sup>th</sup> century history is a theme canonical enough to calm any official anxiety and trendy enough for viewers looking for more critical engagement. History can provide what critic and art historian Isel Arango Rodríguez in an excellent, trenchant review of *Más allá de la utopía. Las relecturas de la historia*, disparagingly calls a "convenient ambiguity".

Concluding her critique, she states: "La selección y el discurso curatorial priorizan la corrección ideológica por encima de la objetividad y el pensamiento crítico; no solo evaden el conflicto, sino que carecen de análisis y originalidad, y reflejan la falta de independencia intelectual de las instituciones encargadas de salvaguardar, investigar, interpretar y socializar el testimonio del arte y la historia en nuestro país." This may be true of the show's curatorial strategy, but once History is opened up as a space of inquiry, determinations are hard to sustain, conflicts harder to cover over; ambiguity, however convenient, becomes necessary. What I have argued is that the open-endedness of rereading the past can establish a structure for dialogue across difference. At the very least I hope that my own discussion of Mesías' painting and its possible contemporary resonances does so.

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<sup>i</sup> The statue itself was conceived as part of a government attempt to project racial cohesion in the wake of the brutally suppressed armed revolt of the *Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Party of Color or PIC) (1912). The PIC was mostly composed of black veterans of the independence wars who organized themselves once it was clear that the new Cuban republic would not deliver on the promise of racial equality. As historian Robert Nathan puts it: "The memory of Antonio Maceo shaped Cuban reactions to

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the PIC conflict and, in turn, the monument project forced Cubans to debate and reformulate the meanings of Maceo amid a crisis of racial cohesion” (70, see pp. 68-121 for a detailed analysis of the debate surrounding the statue’s inauguration).

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