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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

*The Sweet Burnt Smell of History: A self-reflexive analysis on the
conception of the 8th Panama Biennial*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts

in

Art History, Theory and Criticism

by

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2009

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University of California, San Diego

2009

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*The Sweet Burnt Smell of History: A self-reflexive analysis on the
conception of the 8th Panama Biennial*

by

Magali Arriola Ranc

Master of Arts in Art History, Theory and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2009

Professor Grant Kester, Chair

This text is witness to the research process leading to the theme and concept of the 8th Panama Biennial. Entitled *The Sweet Burnt Smell of History*, the Biennial took on the former American Canal Zone as its main theme, with the purpose of bringing about a reflection on the nation's recent social and political history, through the lens of contemporary visual arts. This text analyzes the historical backdrop against which the works that composed the exhibition developed, and draws a conceptual background of its curatorial framework. It consists of three chapters. Contrasting the historical, political and ideological significance of the building of the Canal both in the Panamanian and North American contexts, the first chapter describes the construction and projection of the Panama Canal Zone as a social tropical utopia. The second chapter is an

analysis of the historical evolution and transformation of the 19th century model of exhibitions as it leads up to the prevailing format of contemporary art biennials. Chapter three is a reflection on how the 8th Panama Biennial rethought its own model in order to problematize its localization in the contemporary global circuit.

Introduction

Splendid optimism: Splitting a continent and founding a country

Although the idea of building a canal joining the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans dates back to the 16th century, it wasn't until 1881 that Ferdinand de Lesseps, who had triumphantly built the Suez Canal and for many personified the *splendid optimism* of 19th century France,¹ tried his fortune again in Central America. However, this time, he was not at all fortunate. Multiple factors contributed to the Frenchman's spectacular failure in building a sea level canal through the Isthmus of Panama, among them the weather, landslides, yellow fever, and malaria (22,000 men are estimated to have died during the French period of the Canal's construction), faulty design, and ultimately bankruptcy, which triggered a scandal concerning massive corruption among the French political high class. All this ruined not only de Lesseps himself, but also hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic French investors who had acquired public shares of the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique*.

In 1903, after founding the *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama*,² Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a French citizen and shareholder in the company, proclaimed himself Panama's ambassador to the United States and proceeded to conceive and sign the Hay - Bunau-Varilla Treaty. The pact granted the US the right to acquire for a modest amount what was left of the second canal company but, above all, to build and administer the Panama Canal indefinitely—literally, in perpetuity. It also gave

the U.S. the prerogative to take over and control an area covering five miles on each side of the waterway. These privileges were granted in exchange for military support to the separatist Panamanians who sought independence from Colombia.



Fig. 1: Panama Canal under construction (1907)

After a great deal of excavating and major sanitation work in the region (a total of 75 million cubic meters of earth is estimated to have been removed from the isthmus), a lock canal was finally inaugurated in 1914 in the occupied territory that came to be known as the Canal Zone. Simultaneously a military reservation, a company town, and a colony, the Canal Zone remained under U.S. control until the Torrijos-Carter Treaties were signed in 1977, stipulating that the territories of the Zone would be revert to Panama on October 1st, 1979, and that Panama would gain complete control over its canal at midnight on December 31st, 1999.

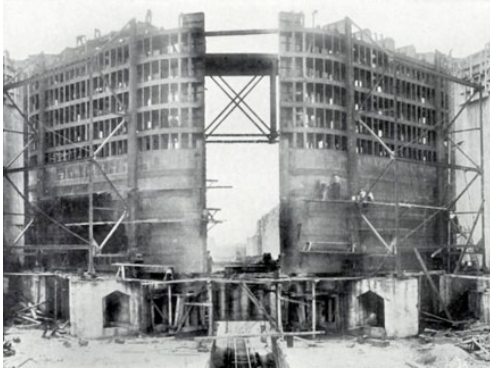


Fig. 2: Miraflores locks under construction (1913)

The questions that arise upon entering the reverted territories of the former Panama Canal Zone nowadays are closely related to the remains and memories of a place whose identity still has to be negotiated on a daily basis. How are we to understand the changes in an environment that, having ceased to exist as an American enclave, has remained almost intact and is only beginning to show the first symptoms of a local re—appropriation? The former Canal Zone exists today as an apocryphal memory, nourished by the nostalgia of those who occupied its lands, and at the same time as a geographical ghost that embodies remnants of Panamanian history, as it was experienced under the yoke of Yankee imperialism. For many of the so-called Zonians, as the Zone's inhabitants were known, the return of the Zone and the surrender of the Canal brought about deep questioning of what had been assumed to be the United States' manifest destiny since the 19th century, part of the country's foundational myth that legitimized the expansion of its territories and frontiers, on which North Americans have forged their identity. Had the United States betrayed its mission to offer the world the harmonious ideal of a free and democratic civilization in which the development of trade also embodied the advent of progress, as mandated

by Providence? Many thought so. They felt that their “government had really lost sight of the Panama Canal and of America’s record in Panama as major achievements—as specific applications of the general American mission to bring the nations of the world together.”³

The story of the founding of the young Republic of Panama was intricately linked not only to the construction of the Canal that split its territory, but also to the secession of a piece of land that, somewhat paradoxically, ceased to belong to it even before it became a nation. Panama’s history should also be read against the background of North American interventionism in Latin America and the development of capitalist imperialism. It therefore serves as a symbol of the confrontation between Latin America’s struggle to defend its sovereignty and to actively participate in the political and economical negotiations that define the construction of history, and the United States’ sense of exceptionalism and its quest to bring about a new world order, in compliance with a divine order that many believe represents an expanded form of capitalism.

The sweet burnt smell of history

Rumor had it that General Omar Torrijos—a man of convictions that according to Graham Green revealed a certain “charisma of despair”⁴—had a contingency plan code-named *Huele a quemado* ('It smells burnt') with the purpose of blowing up the Canal should ratification of the 1977 treaties by the U.S. Congress have failed. However, the treaties were ratified. Today, within those reverted areas of

the former Zone, questions arise about the conditions under which Panama's political history and cultural imaginary are slowly infiltrating these places, while evaluations are made about how the echoes of its disappearance resonate beyond Panama's history and society. Nearly ten years after Panama recovered complete sovereignty over that controversial piece of land, the 8th Panama Biennial—entitled *The Sweet Burnt Smell of History*—took on the former American Canal Zone as its main theme, with the purpose of bringing about a reflection on the nation's recent social and political history, through the lens of contemporary visual arts.



Fig. 3: Panama Canal Administration Building (built in 1914)

Taking the Canal Zone as a paradigmatic example of the appearance and disappearance of geographical boundaries, the works in the Biennial operated conceptually within two communicating levels. Some artists with first hand experience of the Zone developed works or site-specific interventions that engaged in dialogue with that territory's past and present history, as well as its overlap with the ideological configurations of the nation. Given that Panama is often considered more a place of passage than a destination, artists with mediated knowledge of the Zone

were involved with exploring the cultural imaginary elicited by a territory that stands at a crossroads between north and south, east and west. By proposing works and interventions conceived and carried out from a distance, they instigated a reflection on the historical evanescence of the Zone, simultaneously studying their own methods of circulation and the conditions of their existence, while questioning their place within the global art circuit.

This text is witness to the research process leading to the theme and concept of the Biennial. It marks both the historical backdrop against which the works that composed the exhibition developed, as well as draws a conceptual background of its curatorial framework. I, as much as some of the works produced for the exhibition, established a chronology that runs parallel to the historical events; they will be integrated to the text as occasional accents.

The first chapter contrasts the historical, political, and ideological significance of the building of the Canal both in the Panamanian and North American contexts. It describes the construction and projection of the Panama Canal Zone as a social tropical utopia. Having been conceived out of historical time and isolated from Panamanian land, this utopia was nevertheless caught by its own history, regardless of the conjectures projected on this remote and imagined territory, particularly at the moment of its inauguration celebration in San Francisco at the 1915 *Panama Pacific International Exposition*.

As we know, the history of art biennials and triennials—as punctual cultural manifestations with specific spatial coordinates meant to cut through historical time every two or three years—should be traced back to the history of 19th century World’s Fairs and international expositions. Starting with London’s 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, these kinds of events stood as assertions of cultural identities, imperial forces, and national pride; they provided a spectacular update on technological progress and social advance. The second chapter will review the historical evolution and transformation of the 19th century model of exhibitions as it leads up to the prevailing format of contemporary art biennials. The analysis of a few specific and relevant examples (such as the Venice Biennale, the Havana Biennial, and the 6th Caribbean Biennial) will bring into light the construction and development of a network of capitalist global exchange that has disseminated since the 19th century. It will also reveal how large-scale international exhibitions have slowly aspired to transform into politicized site-specific cultural events, aiming at redrawing the global map from a postcolonial perspective in order to challenge Western hegemony as embodied in the spatial politics of cultural power. In the third chapter, a close and critical reading of the conception, marketing, and diffusion of the festivities organized to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal with the *Panama Pacific International Exposition* will reflect on how the 8th Panama Biennial rethought its own model in order to problematize its localization in the contemporary global circuit.

Chapter 1: The 8th Panama Biennial: Historical Backdrop

1.1 *The land divided / The world united*

On who Wong Kong Yee was

Several accounts describe the events that occurred during a simple—but mysterious—half-hour on November 3rd, 1903, during which Panama's secession from Colombia took place. Some agree on the fact that at least six mortars were fired from the ship *Bogotá*, the only Colombian vessel that was not participating in the independence conspiracy. It is also said that at least one of the six shots hit Wong Kong Yee while he was sleeping in his bed. A shopkeeper originally from the region of Hong Sang, he became the battle's only human casualty. The other loss is supposed to have been a donkey that was waiting at the slaughterhouse.

"Wong Kong Yee was neither military nor a revolutionary, but he was the only one who died. Who was he? What was he like? Why was he forgotten? ... Every revolution has its martyrs, who become ennobled by history. Wong Kong Yee, martyred or not, has been unfairly forgotten," states a booklet published by Cheng Grangé Thornton & Associates, a firm of public accountants—and impromptu historians—who undertook their own historical research in order to "give due recognition to the Chinese community in Panama that took part, however silently, in the Isthmus's independence."⁵ For his part, artist Abner Benaím created *A Chinaman*

and a Donkey as a sketch for a monument to those fallen in a war that, although coinciding with the separatist impulses of a handful of Panamanian bankers, merchants, and businessmen who sought to attract foreign investment to the country,⁶ was also—and above all—orchestrated by the United States with the purpose of obtaining a favorable deal in the negotiations for the right to construct the Canal. It is "public knowledge" writes the artist "[...that] a Chinaman and a donkey were the only two dead on this day of independence, both victims of the few mortars fired, which were obviously not targeting them. This curious fact is usually studied in schools or mentioned in history books as nothing more than that: a curiosity."⁷



Fig. 4: Abner Benaim, *A Chinaman and a Donkey* (2008)

By adopting the aesthetic canons of equestrian sculpture to commemorate an event that circulates in the historical record under the guise of mere rumor, Benaím not only questions the transcendence of that event, but also the way in which a country such as Panama has conceived, constructed, and preserved its history. For this purpose, the artist collaborated with a professional sculptor specializing in monuments and public sculptures, and based the piece on a variety of images and

prototypical representations of Chinese people. By conceiving of a sketch with the intention of legitimizing oral history, the piece positions itself against the monumental heroism of equestrian sculpture. The humble figure of the Chinaman riding on a tired donkey not only contests the accuracy of the traditional historic portrait but also, as a mere visual speculation, becomes a sort of sublimation of the collective imaginary, revealing how “the art of memory in the modern world is both for historians as well as ordinary citizens and institutions, very much something to be used, misused, and exploited.”⁸

American exceptionalism: Mapping the fifth border

How unfortunate can a country be, complained General Torrijos, to have borders on each of the four cardinal points, but also to be afflicted with a vile fifth border that divides its territory in two? "Could new maps be drawn," asks Sam Durant in the text that accompanies his piece *Americas* “that are not reflective of separation, domination, control, and exploitation?”⁹ By developing a sort of chronological timeline of Panama’s history based on various cartographic representations, Durant not only challenges the authority of the alleged scientific objectivity of maps as instruments for measurement, but also emphasizes the distinction between *mapping* and *being mapped*. The artist essentially reveals the convergence and divergence of the ways in which history inscribes itself within a geographic area, symbolically and in relation to specific ideological interests.



Fig. 5: Left: Sam Durant, *Americas* (2008)
 Right: Mungo Thomson, *Proposal for the Apostolic Nunciature* (2008)

As we know, the first trip ever made to a foreign country by a president of the United States was by Teddy Roosevelt, who traveled to Panama in 1906. During that three-day stay in the Canal Zone—a visit that raised great expectations and anxieties both in Panama and the U.S.—Roosevelt promised to award presidential medals to every U.S. citizen who had spent at least two years working in the digging and construction of the Canal. More than six thousand medals were issued; they were made out of copper and bronze triumphantly recycled from equipment abandoned by the French after their spectacular failure in building the canal. The medals featured Teddy Roosevelt’s portrait on one side; the reverse depicted the famous Culebra cut—probably the most laborious cut that was done in the Isthmus in order to open the waterway—surrounded by the words: “The land divided / The world united.” The motto clearly referred not only to the magnitude of this titanic undertaking, but also to what it symbolically represented for a country that seemed to have recently awakened to colonialism. A country whose expansionist impulses were widely justified as being

part of the North American Manifest Destiny: “The Panama Canal ha[d] its broadest significance in the prodigious transformations it will make in the world’s geography. It [was perceived as] a literal fulfillment of the Scriptural promise to man that he should have domination over all the earth.”¹⁰



Fig. 6: Panama Canal, the Culebra Cut

Teddy Roosevelt served as Vice President during President William McKinley’s administration, and took office as the 26th President of the United States after McKinley’s assassination in 1901. A man of action, Roosevelt had served during the Spanish-American War over Cuba in 1898, after having resigned his post as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to accept a commission as Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. 1st Volunteer Cavalry.¹¹ Thereon, Roosevelt won lasting fame as a loud and impetuous character, tirelessly promoting North American expansion. “To many Americans at the turn of the 20th century, [he] embodied the rugged, masculine and independent cowboy hero of literature and popular culture. As president, Roosevelt embraced his own reputation as a cowboy and the values it represented, believing that they personified the ‘strenuous life’ that he encouraged his countrymen to lead.”¹²

During his administration, he increased the U.S. naval forces and also developed a foreign policy that has been referred to as the “big stick policy” in allusion to his little will for diplomatic negotiation. Probably one of his biggest undertakings abroad was his intensive lobbying at the Senate to achieve the construction of the Panama Canal.¹³

Not only did Roosevelt arduously follow of President Monroe’s foreign policy as stated in his seventh Annual State of the Union address to the congress on December 2nd, 1823, but he also created an amendment to it—the Roosevelt Corollary—almost a century later. What came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine asserted “as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, [were] henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European power.”¹⁴ In exchange, the United States promised not to interfere in other European colonial business. Announced just a year after the construction of the Canal began, Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine clearly added that it was the exclusive business (and right) of the United States—the only political and economical power of the Americas—to interfere in the economic life of any independent countries of the Caribbean and Central America, to militarily intervene whenever it judged necessary to stabilize their finances, and straighten any corrupt business detected in the area, thereby settling the bases for their future imperialistic ventures in the continent. The Roosevelt Corollary appears as a direct response to the Spanish-American War, and as justification of the U.S.

intervention in Cuba and what North America saw as the regaining of Europe influences on the Americas (as a result of the 19th century crises of the European empires in other parts of the world such as Africa and Asia).¹⁵

Against that background, the construction of the Panama Canal represented enormous interests for the expansion of financial capital and global trade. Gaining control of the Canal Zone would also allow the United States to develop military posts that would ensure their political hegemony in the area, as well as protect their ever-expanding interests in the region. As stated by David McCullough in his book, *The Path between the Seas, The Construction of the Panama Canal*, Roosevelt “was promoting neither a commercial venture nor a universal utility, to him first, last, and always, the Canal was the vital—the indispensable—path to global destiny for the United States. He had a vision of his country as the commanding power in two oceans, and these joined by a canal built, owned, operated, policed, and fortified by his country. The canal was to be the first step to American supremacy at sea.”¹⁶

Under this light, Roosevelt’s character and vision deeply resonates with Frederick Jackson Turner’s vision of the Frontier, the North American foundational myth that came to justify the country’s colonial moves first towards the West and then to Central and South America. In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner wrote:

It appears that the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness in order to enlarge their dominion over

inanimate nature is the actual result of an expansive power which is inherent in them, and which by continually agitating all classes of society is constantly throwing a large portion of the whole population onto the extreme confines of the State, in order to gain space for its development. Hardly is a new state or territory formed before the same principle manifests itself again and gives rise to a further emigration; and so is it destined to go on until a physical barrier must finally obstruct its progress.¹⁷

The forceful spirit that accompanied the exploration of the Frontier and its continuous recession is also closely tied to the North American sense of exceptionalism and its belief in its Manifest Destiny as the divine task of expanding its territories in a civilizing mission. Within that context, the development of commerce also represented the unfolding of progress, as commanded by the Providence in order to strengthen North American society's sense of liberty and self-governance. More importantly, the myth of the historical Frontier served to justify the expansion and the taking over of the unoccupied lands that were supposed to be available since, according to Turner, they didn't belong to anyone. In truth, the land did belong to the Indian populations and the Mexicans, however they weren't considered to be civilized people but rather savage, pagan and/or non-white populations). Not surprisingly, the slightly nostalgic undertone that characterizes his text describing the foreclosure of the American Frontier—meaning the settlers had exhausted the available territories westwards, thus bringing forth the accomplishment of American civilization and closing the first period of American history—also coincides with the country's enthusiasm for its incursions beyond its borders in countries such as Panama.

It should be noted that Turner presented his paper, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” at a special meeting of American Historical Association, which took place during the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, an international exhibition that was organized to celebrate the discovery of the so-called “New World” by Cristobal Colon (Christopher Columbus) and to emphasize American progress (mainly *North* American progress) since 1492. As we will see, the development of world exhibitions in the 19th century is closely linked to growing industrialization, urban development, and the creation of new markets within an idealized and globalized worldview. Chicago’s 1893 Fair was no exception. Probably one of the most ambitious in its kind, it integrated technology and modern management along with artistic ventures, historical conferences, and ethnographical displays, transforming the world exhibition’s didactic vocation and faith in progress into entertainment and spectacle. The fair was to become a ground breaking event that stood, in many respects, as a symbol of North American exceptionalism, and as a point of reference for later cultural developments in the United States—as exemplified in subsequent fairs for which the Chicago one stood as a point of comparison—and in its overseas territories, such as the Panama Canal Zone.¹⁸ The excitement raised by what could be accomplished by human kind was first brought forth by the construction of the Suez Canal and celebrated at the London Crystal Palace in 1870.¹⁹ It was a celebration of confidence. Confidence that “future systems of transport would bring all the people into contact with one another, spread knowledge, break down national divisions and make a unified whole humanity.”²⁰ The same expectations were raised by the construction of the Panama Canal, an

enthusiasm that was locally combined with the growing sense that the U.S. was accomplishing its manifest destiny in the Pacific Ocean, and commemorated in San Francisco in 1915 at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition:

Human endeavor has supplied no nobler motive for public rejoicing than the union of the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. The Panama Canal has stirred and enlarged the imaginations of men as no other task has done, however enormous the conception, however huge the work. The Canal is one of the few achievements, which may properly be called epoch-making. Its building is of such signal and far-reaching importance that it marks a point in history from which succeeding years and later progress will be counted. It is so variously significant that the future alone can determine the ways in which it will touch and modify the life of mankind.²¹

1.2 In perpetuity?

Projecting the Panama Canal Zone

It has been widely acknowledged that the architecture and urban structure of the Canal Zone finds its origins in the movement City Beautiful, a program of architectural and sculptural beautification seeking to contribute to the moral edification of American citizens, which developed out of the 1893 Chicago's Exhibition White City.²² What came to be known as the White City, a life-size model of urban planning laid out on the then desolated shores of Chicago, was meant to promote "all of the highest and best achievements of modern civilization; all that was strange, beautiful, artistic, and inspiring; a vast and wonderful university of the arts and sciences, teaching a noble lesson in history, art, science, discovery and invention, designed to stimulate the youth of this and future generations to greater and more

heroic endeavor.”²³ As stated by Robert W. Rydell, “it served as an exercise in educating the nation on the concept of progress as a *willed* national activity towards a determined utopian goal.”²⁴ The White City is generally recognized for its contribution to urban planning, arts, and architecture, an urban prototype that followed the principles of symmetry and balance of European classic architecture. The construction and design were directed by the architect Daniel Burnham and by the father of American landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmsted, who was in charge of overseeing the Midway Plaisance that was supposed to offer an ethnographical overview of the evolutionary principles of the civilization, cultures, and races of the world. However, it was a model that was built as a set, on a vacant land,²⁵ whose temporary visitors and occupants failed to transmit the density of the social dynamics and class relations inherent to any urban agglomeration, and provided instead with a supposedly scientific rigor, the basis for the American hegemonic view of non-white civilizations as barbaric.²⁶



Fig. 7: The White City, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893

For many critics, the White City's rationalism and neoclassical aesthetics are at the origins of what came to be known as the City Beautiful project. If this movement has traditionally been interpreted as a white, bourgeois conservative program of urban sanitation, it has also been read as the intent to combine cultural, environmental, artistic, and political concerns, in order to respond to the democratic demands that emerged from the growing North American cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁷ The movement was inspired by Edward Bellamy's popular utopian novel, *Looking backwards 2000—1887*²⁸ (as was the Garden city movement that, as we will see, followed City Beautiful), as well as by Frederic Law Olmsted's concern with class reconciliation and harmonious integration of populations through urban amenities. Among its basic considerations were the recovery and promotion of public spaces, the restoration of degraded or ignored natural attractions, the sanitation of the city (particularly with the creation of sewers), and the construction of open boulevards in a rational and controlled use of space, of civic centers and monuments. As it happens, all of these features are overtly present in the urban planning of the Canal Zone that was realized under the direction of Clarence Stein, an architect closely associated with the City Beautiful movement and a major proponent of the Garden City model.²⁹ Frederic Law Olmsted junior and the sculptor Daniel French were also part of a Fine Arts committee that was invited in 1913 to advise the military and civil committee in charge of defining how the architecture that was to replace the temporary construction barracks of this North American settlement would look once the Canal was inaugurated:

Their 1913 report emphasizes their interest in an urban design that integrates social and aesthetic control, specifically in the combination of monumental residential complexes inspired by classic architecture, with an informal organization of the residential areas that responds to the topographic conditions, as well as to the social and racial categories. As a result of those recommendations, the first structures and permanent settlements of the Canal Zone developed under the imposition of a uniform style. Designed under neo-Renaissance principles that combined formal and informal elements, the Canal architecture developed projecting an imperial image that reflected North American power and its underlying social organization.”³⁰

Besides having a civic center, a gym, a swimming pool, and a movie theater, all public buildings disclosing a concern with the social and civic integration of a population (a population that nevertheless still practiced social and racial segregation), every company town built in the Zone during the 1920s and 1930s had a similar structure: a rational architecture and urban design surrounded by green areas in an effort to integrate/domesticate tropical nature. The influence of the Garden City movement can be easily recognized in all the settlements. Initiated in 1898 in the United Kingdom by Ebenezer Howard, the Garden City model was also inspired by Bellamy’s utopian novel. It was conceived as an alternative to contemporary cities whose landscapes were being transformed by all the radical changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. Garden Cities were supposed to be small suburban towns carefully planned in such a way as to be freed from outgrown slums. An agricultural belt meant to build self-sufficient communities should surround them instead. Thus, one could enjoy simultaneously the benefits of urban life and the benefits of the countryside—that is, high salaries, an entertaining social life as well as low rents, fresh air, and green spaces. Moreover, Garden Cities were to be based on a

communitarian model and a communal ownership, and they were meant to be self-governed by members of all social classes—a social and political organization that again reveals strange similarities to the spacious urbanizations of the Zone and its extremely centralized bureaucratic government that eliminated any sense of private property.³¹

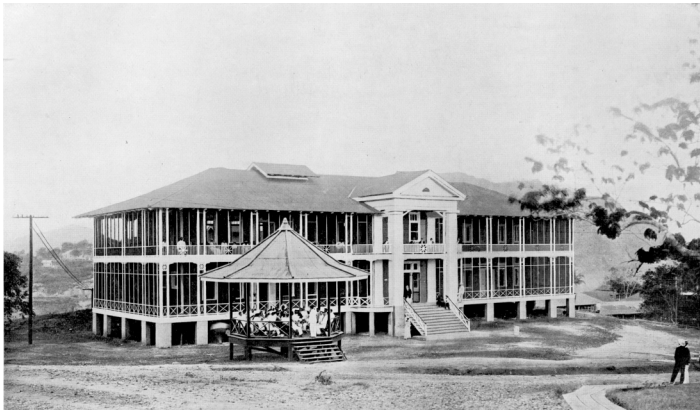


Fig. 8: YMCA Club House at Culebra

A star-spangled red, white, and blue paradise?

The Canal Zone embodied some of the most emblematic myths of a growing middle class America, and yet it epitomized them in the most atypical way since it also represented an experiment that responded to some deeply rooted socialist principles and collective impulses. The social experiment that the Zone came to represent has frequently been recalled as echoing Bellamy's novel *Looking Backwards*, particularly by Zonians themselves, who directly experienced it as "the world's first workers paradise...a star-spangled red, white, and blue post-capitalist society that was established while Russia was still groaning under the yoke of the Czar."³² As early as 1905, qualified employees who were U.S. citizens, and white),

had holidays on pay, annual vacations, free medical services, and could enjoy reduced railroad rates, low grocery prices, free furnished apartments with free water and electricity, all of these incentives and social policies being meant to attract people to come to an idyllic urban landscape. The Canal Zone was perceived by many of its inhabitants and visitors as a distant echo of the self-critical utopia conceived by Bellamy as a critique of capitalism that aspired to consolidate a white middle class.³³ For, even if the salaries in the Zone—at least initially—were thirty to eighty per cent higher than in the U.S., they were still subject to a hierarchy that responded to the logic of racial discrimination and segregation that was prevalent in the United States until the 1960s. As the accounts of the time state: “The color line [had] been drawn [...] in the Canal Zone by dividing the employees into two categories: ‘gold’ men and ‘silver’ men. In the first category were the Americans and in the second, the common laborers [mostly Antilleans] who had no skills.”³⁴ Thus, although the Zone’s organization tried to overcome some of the social divisions and inequities of the system, it did not allow for a re-evaluation of its racial policies.³⁵ On the contrary, the affirmation of white supremacy was considered an objective, as was clearly stated by Colonel W.C. Gorgas, responsible for the eradication of yellow fever that took so many lives during the Canal’s construction: “Even the world’s most remote tropical places will soon become centers of white civilization, as powerful and cultured as those that exist in the temperate zones.”³⁶

However, in the long run, Zonians did recognize that “the system had its limits. It provided only a small number of narrow avenues to predestined kinds of

success, diminished the value of the individual, and it brought change and history almost to a halt.”³⁷ Probably most common grievance among Zonians was in regard to the government’s authoritarianism —or “benevolent despotism”—with which the Zone was ruled, as a way to keep the daily and complex operations of the Canal under control. For G.W. Goethals, the military engineer who supervised its construction as of 1907 and, in 1915, was named Governor of the Canal Zone, this territory needed to be an autocracy. With the aim of maintaining the highest level of efficiency and productivity among its employees, Goethals took it upon himself to exert strict control over their working hours as well as their leisure time. Not only did he bring about the generalized practices of espionage, denouncement, and deportation, he also did everything possible to isolate them from the damaging influences of Panama City where, it was believed, they would be exposed to alcohol, gambling, and prostitution.³⁸ Over the years, this gave way to a certain silent dissatisfaction in reaction to the boredom and the lack of excitement in an environment where time seemed to be suspended — or, at least, to run slower than in the North American mainland — particularly during a period as agitated as the late 1960’s and early 70’s in which social, political and cultural changes rapidly succeeded one another. At that point in history, the Zone appeared as a changeless society where fashion, news and controversy were particularly filtered by the authorities, always reaching the population with a notorious delay.³⁹ As stated by a couple of high school teachers in the Zone, “the ordinary people in Bellamy’s utopia were concerned only with the present... There was more than a whiff of this *futurelessness* in the atmosphere of the Zone.”⁴⁰

Yet, despite all portents, the future did come to the Canal Zone as the Treaties were renegotiated and Torrijos slowly entered history, breaking the spell of the clause regarding perpetuity that had kept that area in a sort of spell, isolated from the transformations affecting the rest of the country. For Panama City began to show the social and political changes characteristic of a major urban conglomeration in which a growing educated middle class, and the masses influenced by the media, became aware of the changes occurring throughout the area (that is, in other Latin American countries, particularly under the influence of Fidel Castro). Thus, they started developing a sharper nationalism and publicly demonstrating their anti-Americanism.

1.3 Undoing time

The beginning of the end

The most open and violent confrontation between North Americans and Panamanians took place in 1964. It was one of those moments that retrospectively came to be perceived as *the beginning of the end*. The riots were the result of a long debate about whether the Panamanian flag should fly alongside the U.S. flag in the occupied territory. It was not until 1960 that the U.S. had agreed to have both flags raised side by side in one specific location of the Zone, a decision received with dissatisfaction by Zonians and also by Panamanians who wished to have the disposition made extensive to other parts of the Zone. After long and bitter discussions, on the 9th of January of 1964, an American student (apparently incited by

adults), raised a U.S. flag in front of his high school, a provocation to which some two hundred Panamanian students reacted by entering the Zone (where access was strictly controlled), in order to raise their flag again. The confrontation resulted in a torn flag, and triggered riots that lasted three days, causing more than twenty deaths, several hundred wounded, and more than two million dollars worth of property damage.



Fig. 9: Left: Cover of *LIFE* Magazine, January 24th 1964

Fig. 10: Right: Monument to the Martyrs of January 9th 1964

It is important to mention that the original treaty that granted the United States the right to settle in the so-called Canal Zone established that North Americans could occupy the Panamanian territory and behave *as if sovereign*, but not that they could exert sovereignty over that territory.⁴¹ The space for ambiguity and maneuvering between the application of sovereign power and the simulation of its legitimacy was thus an zone of exception in which Panamanian sovereignty became suspended in favor of the imposition of U.S. authoritarianism (it is well known that the Canal Zone

had its own police force and applied its own judicial system). The legitimacy of this zone of exception, simultaneously located within and outside of the law, could not but be continually questioned because, as Giorgio Agamben has written, the sovereign one is the one who declares the state of exception, and, by legally suspending the application of the law, sovereign power is the power that legally places itself outside the law.⁴² Therefore, “from the start, the question was not whether Panama had residual sovereign rights in the Zone, for it did, but what would happen if the Panamanians tried to exert those rights against the full control exerted by the United States.”⁴³ Because the Zone was constituted as one state within another, linked to each other through a relationship of proscription (access for Panamanians to that territory was controlled), there was a detachment of the territory in relation to the nation—state, which laid the groundwork so that—following Agamben—for Panamanians, from the very beginning, the Zone constituted a sort of *camp*:

The camp is the space that is open when the state of exception (...), which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on basis of factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which nevertheless remains outside the normal order... Insofar as the inhabitants of the camp [in this case, colored people and mainly, Panamanians and West Indians] were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp [is also a bio—political space] in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, it was against this situation that Panamanians repeatedly manifested, seeing their sovereignty violated time and again. In addition, the original treaty granted the United States the right to take over Panamanian land, beyond the limits of the Zone, if it was judged necessary for the construction, operation, or

sanitation of the Canal, as well as the right to intervene in [Panamanian] territory if and when it was considered necessary for their security (a privilege which Americans still hold to date).⁴⁵

All of this became apparent in Jonathan Harker's intervention, for which the artist recycled—and inverted—the traditional anti-imperialist slogan “Gringo go home”, which he then painted in white-on-white on an exterior wall of the Museum of Contemporary Art. The wall he chose is located precisely where the border between Panama City and the Canal Zone used to be, just a few meters away from where the 1964 riots took place. While the wall was covered with regular white paint, the text was painted onto it with anti-graffiti paint, a material particularly resistant to pollution and inclement weather. This allowed the area surrounding the text to deteriorate more easily, and left to chance the slow and somewhat ghostly appearance of the message. However, Harker's intervention was not only conceived as a response to a specific historical and geopolitical location, the presence of which still remains—silent and imperceptibly—rooted in the collective memory. Now reformulated as *Home go Gringo*, the slogan as modified by the artist constitutes an update of the relations between the two countries, making reference to the way in which North American investments have not only infiltrated the local real estate market, but are currently changing the face of Panama City, as well as its economic and cultural dynamics.



Fig. 11: Jonathan Harker, *Untitled* (2008)

On how the future entered the Zone

It is precisely against that background that the renegotiation of the 1903 Treaties between President Jimmy Carter and General Omar Torrijos should be read, as a complicated diplomatic dialogue that would eventually result in the retrocession of the Canal and the Zone to Panama. Coincidentally, the negotiations also took place while North American foreign policy was forced to change as a result of what historian Walter Lafeber has defined as the “Third Cold War,” beginning in the early 1970s.⁴⁶ The term refers to the difficulties the United States experienced in dealing with the so-called Third World nations of the southern hemisphere (where the influences of Cuban communism could be felt) as a result of the instability brought by the North American defeat in Vietnam, the decline of the dollar, and the 1973 oil embargo, all of which made evident the limits of that country’s political influence and military power. Under the leadership of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the United States had to look for new economic alliances with the southern countries they had previously ignored.

Although President Lyndon Johnson promised to revise the 1903 Treaties after the 1964 riots, it wasn't until the Nixon administration that the first round of negotiations between the U.S. and Panama took place, in the hope that the latter could recover control over its Canal and get a larger share of its revenues. However, even if the United States agreed to remove the "in perpetuity" clause from the original Treaty, they still insisted on maintaining the control of the Canal for another fifty years. This point was rejected by Panamanians and brought the talks to a deadlock. It wasn't until 1974 that an agreement was reached between Kissinger and Panamanian Foreign Minister Juan Tack, stating that the Zone would disappear and that the Canal would be turned over in stages to Panamanian authorities. The talks deadlocked again after the U.S. made manifest their will to maintain their military bases in Panamanian territory under the pretext of defending the canal.⁴⁷

Meanwhile discontent in the Zone kept rising. Zonians felt that by giving up the Canal, their country was betraying its vocation to bring the democratic ideal and global harmony to the world—as it had been exemplified, in their view, by the U.S. interventions in Korea and Vietnam that were meant to save the local populations from totalitarian regimes—and that the U.S. was failing to show the way to efficiency and economic prosperity. For many Zonians, the progressive-liberals that took the lead in the battle for the ratification of the treaties used the turning off of the Canal and the Zone over to Panama as a token to redress the image of what was broadly perceived as economic exploitation by the U.S.⁴⁸ They blamed President Carter for acknowledging the lesson of Vietnam and for publicly apologizing for the U.S.

imperialist moves. They were especially resentful that leaving the Canal Zone, a territory meant to be American in perpetuity—in other words, to remain out of history— signified living “without a vision of America as nation with a destiny—a mission.”⁴⁹



Fig. 12: President Carter Visit to Panama (1977)

On the Panamanian side, General Omar Torrijos had made the negotiation of the treaties his personal goal and political duty. Having taken power in 1968 after concerting a military coup with Coronel Martínez, Torrijos established himself as a down-to-earth leftist leader who proved, nevertheless, always to be inclined to negotiate. Therefore, notwithstanding his notorious anti-Americanism, he never aligned himself with Castro and to rising communism. Instead, he remained faithful to his populist social policies and defended Panamanian nationalism while being perfectly—and uncomfortably—aware of the importance the revenues of the Canal and the foreign private investors represented for his country’s sinking economy.

As pointed out by José de Jesús (“Chuchú”) Martínez, who, in addition to being a mathematician and philosopher, was Torrijos’ friend, bodyguard, and close advisor, because the General was a gambler, he took the risk of negotiating with the United States even though it could have both diminished his popularity and generated resentment among Panamanians who, once again, were witnessing their sovereignty violated. Moreover, since he didn’t believe in determinism, Torrijos thought that one should always feel confident about standing on the good side of history, and pointed to the fact that the weakness of North Americans was to be found precisely in their inability to negotiate. According to Chuchú, the United States couldn’t reach an agreement because

...that implied time, and those who are against history have no time. Torrijos realizes that [the U.S.] cannot negotiate, but neither can they recognize that they are against history. Therefore one has to force them to negotiate, and that was his [Torrijos’] invention: negotiation while holding a grenade in his hand, threatening to blow up the Canal.⁵⁰

General Omar Torrijos often stated: “I do not want to enter history, I want to enter the Canal Zone.” However, as Michael Stevenson explains in his video *Introducción a la teoría de la probabilidad*, the General surely knew the probabilities of both of those events taking place:

“A” (to enter history) and “B” (to enter the Canal Zone) were not mutually exclusive. The General might well achieve both. Moreover, they were not independent; the outcome of “B” affected the probability of “A.” The General had spurned “A”, but the probability of “A” was conditional on “B.” In clearing the path to

the Canal Zone, the General did indeed increase the probability that he would also enter into History.⁵¹

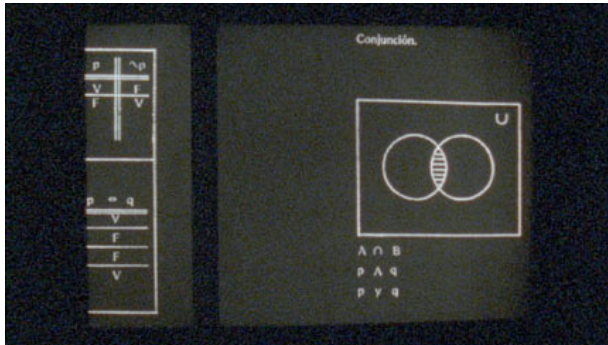


Fig. 13: Michael Stevenson, *Introducción a la teoría de la probabilidad* (2008)

However, despite the historical signing of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, Torrijos refused to join the official delegation that first entered the newly reverted areas of the Zone on the night of October 1st, 1979. He believed that there was still much to be done before Panama could actually free itself from the yoke of U.S. colonial presence on its soil. Stevenson's film deals with a series of unlikely and yet decisive encounters that took place on the island of Contadora in 1979. In addition to Torrijos and Carter, the encounters included the enfeebled Shah of Iran, the unique Patricia Hearst, the insidious José Manuel Noriega, and "Chuchú." In the film, a sequence of black and white shots illustrating the writings of Chuchú on the Theory of Probability alternate with color shots of a pair of hands playing solitaire, while a narrator speaks in voiceover. The narrator describes how, after the hostage crisis in Iran, with Mexico again refusing to offer asylum to the Shah, and with the impossibility of the U.S. granting him refuge, Torrijos saw in the Shah's exile in Panama an opportunity to play the negotiation card not only to secure the ratification

of the Treaties, but also in the hope of strengthening his country's presence and importance on the map of world diplomacy.



Fig. 14: Michael Stevenson, *Introducción a la teoría de la probabilidad* (2008)

By collapsing political eventualities and stakes with historical setbacks, Stevenson questions the way history is negotiated, constructed, and recounted—an inquiry in which, as the artist stated, "probability (...) becomes a way of conceptualizing narration. The other alternative would be fate." In this case, fate would probably be embodied by the insistent presence of Noriega who, it has been said, orchestrated Torrijos' death in a plane crash with the support of the CIA, shortly thereafter taking power - only to be overthrown himself by U.S. forces, some of whom, as we know, were stationed in the area of the Canal Zone.⁵²

Chapter 2: The 8th Panama Biennial: Curatorial Background

2.1 From the 1851 Crystal Palace to the 1990s Art Biennials

From the spatial politics of World's Fairs and international expositions to the tentative redistribution of cultural power

From their inception, international exhibitions and World's Fairs were part of a utopian project to establish global networks that would allow the shortening of distances and shrinking of the planet. They were intended to create new artificial spaces in which Western industrial capitalism would be able to take root and thus disseminate its hegemonic colonial power. By equating progress with the strengthening of growing markets, these events did not only intend to justify the West colonial expansion in non-western territories. The spread of an “imperial and hegemonic story of the cultures of the world,”⁵³ was also meant to accomplish a pedagogical goal and self-legitimizing mission justified by what was perceived as the event's universalistic vocation, a purpose that was usually fulfilled at the price of the subjugation of non-white populations and other marginal communities.⁵⁴ The implementation of these colonial narratives under the guise of a sensuous and celebratory spectacle could thus project the coming of a global community, while praising with confidence the fact that technological advancement would help to solve every social problem.⁵⁵

When Great Britain conceived of London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations as the international exhibition of its kind, it intended precisely

to display itself on a global scale as the nation leading the industrial revolution. Its stated mission was “The Strengthening of the Bonds of Peace and Friendship Among All the Nations of the World.”⁵⁶ It was thus not only meant to symbolize Britain’s industrial, economic, and military superiority in Europe, but also to secure its image and position in the colonies by means of the rhetorical discourse of a nascent globalization then formulated as some sort of propelling and protective force. As put forth by Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne in their seminal text “Mapping international Exhibitions,” such expositions were “stage-managed forms of national rivalry set within universalist assumptions and ‘international’ presentation...[They] were essentially utopian and quintessentially didactic, liberally deploying sensation and pleasure.”⁵⁷ The Great Exhibition was hosted in Joseph Paxton’s glass and cast iron structure, which came to be known as the Crystal Palace and was specially conceived for the event. Constructed in only ten days, it used standardized and prefabricated materials that reflected the industrial progress of those days, and whose transparency provided an all-encompassing vision. The building’s spectacular success undoubtedly set up a model for the series of international demonstrations of expanding capitalistic power and its fetish for commodities that was to follow. Although conceived in the first place as temporary structure, the Crystal Palace soon became a permanent landmark of the British supremacy, and inaugurated thereby a political space of self-legitimation.⁵⁸

For Marian Pastor Roces, the spatial politics—that is, the creation of a self-legitimizing political space—first outlined in the Crystal Palace and further developed

in international expositions around the world are still reflected in our “turn-of-the-millennium international art events.”⁵⁹ Notwithstanding the rhetorical shuffling that accompanied the proliferation of large-scale international contemporary art biennials during the ’90s, following to the development of multicultural discourse and postcolonial theory, it is as if the universalism uttered by the World’s Fairs model had simply been replaced by an equally utopian speech fostering the democratization of large international expositions in the global circuit. As we will see, it is precisely because the so-called multiplication of the centers that followed the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the redrawing of the political borders, and the remapping of the world (in particular within the expanding European Union⁶⁰) was done in accordance with economical readjustments brought by advancing global capitalism, that the actual possibilities to access the mainstream from the newly recognized cultural and political centers in the former peripheries still seem to remain unequal. As Pastor Roces states:

Even if we grant the shift towards global art events as an attempt to outstare the colonizer’s gaze, there are bedeviling risks of paralysis in spaces of contests that mirror the spaces created by the forces contested. Time then offers the assurance of safe distance and a guarantee of liberating epistemological change. That which is consigned to the past is rendered curiously unthreatening today...The spaces produced in the 19th century for the global diffusion of capitalist power may have closed off the reinvention for those same spaces for social justice. As a single spatial form that reasserts its controlling power even as it is perpetually replicated, the world exposition in its very dimensions annuls any new spaces that are shaped transformatively.⁶¹

In other words, it has been a general assumption that the dissemination of international art biennials during the '90s opened new spaces of resistance that were able to surpass and transcend the preceding decade's polarization of the centers and peripheries. However, the cases of the Havana and the Caribbean Biennials seem to demonstrate that what seems to have a greater impact on the redistribution of cultural power was not the multiplication of the centers as much as the consolidation of an international networking that allowed these off-centered locations to develop a horizontal dialogue instead of a hierarchical vertical one.

In the beginning, Venice: A short story of the August Biennale

The Venice Biennale was the first of its kind. Indeed, it is still one of the most important consecrating art events of the international (Western) artistic circuit, along with Documenta.⁶² The idea of the Venice Biennale (or the Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia, as its first edition was titled) was born in 1893 out of a resolution passed by the City Council. The resolution spoke of creating an Italian art exhibition to celebrate the 25th anniversary of King Umberto and Margherita of Savoy. Having been a success not only among the local audience, but also in terms of the profit generated by the commercialized works—at that time, the sales money was used for charity—the National Exhibition that was organized in 1887 was meant to revamp the image and economy of Venice. The original vision was “to boost the art of creating an art market from which the city would be able to derive a none too modest benefit.”⁶³ However, the Biennale quickly transformed itself into an international art contest to which major foreign and Italian artists were invited

to participate and were offered incentives such as the Major Prize and, two years later, the Critics Prize.

While the first editions of the Biennale were conceived in order to “affirm its faith in the moral energies of the Nation,”⁶⁴ by its fourth edition, in 1901, the Biennale started to integrate a few 19th century French modern painters (such as Gustave Courbet and the French Impressionists), instituting itself as a (late) legitimating vehicle of an already established avant-garde. By 1907, the Biennale had devised its system of national pavilions⁶⁵ with an underlying assumption about the competitive rivalry of nations, much in the same way the London Great Exhibition had done. This strategy ultimately enabled the Italian institution to extend its reach and its legitimizing function beyond its borders, at no extra cost, and to set (by the same token) an economic system of selection that seems to be pervading up to these days. For, even though the system of pavilions was originally meant to diversify the event’s take on artistic production, it also posited from the very beginning a discriminatory organization that consecrated the Western take on internationalism—as inherited from international exhibitions and World’s Fairs—as the triumph of modernism. As stated by Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne, “Although in a less polarized manner based on a schema of absences, the national identities set out in the pavilions of the Giardini in the Venice Biennial since 1893 have been simply a more circumspect but equally exclusionary form of internationalism.”⁶⁶

Following two interruptions due to the 1914-18 and 1939-45 world conflicts, the Venice Biennale's 24th edition (1948) showcased works by Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Joan Mirò, and Piet Mondrian, among others, many of which had been repudiated by Fascism and Nazism during the second World War. By then, the Biennale seemed to support artistic production in a more consistent manner, a political engagement of sorts that was also made possible thanks to the commitment of the foreign pavilions that took on the mission of promoting artists that had been excluded during the war. But it wasn't until 1964, with the arrival of Pop Art, that the Biennale finally caught up with the avant-garde production of its time. Simultaneously it reflected the newly acquired North American political and economic hegemony, as the Major Prize was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg. This short chronology illustrates how:

The Venice Biennale was constituted in the époque of transformation of national Modernist cultures into the international *language* of great European art and, subsequently, Euro-American Modernity (Modernism with capital M). In that sense, the structure of Biennale is “solved” (plotted) as the relation between national pavilions and the international exhibition. Biennale's organizational structure repeats (recreates) the point of initiation of XX century art, i.e. the transformation of national bourgeois modernities into the international language of Modernism.⁶⁷

By slowly becoming more receptive to the social and political events of its time, the Venice Biennale was also obliged to acknowledge the necessity to critically rethink its own structure, at least on the surface. Following the 1968 protests and upheavals around the world, the Biennale that had been targeted as yet another event supporting bourgeois culture, was struck by different spontaneous artistic

demonstrations. As a result, monographic shows were eliminated and gave place to a more democratic organization of collective exhibitions, while the Major Prize was eliminated (although restored again in 1986 with the Golden Lion Award). More importantly, the so-called Sales Office that had been directed by the art dealer Ettore Gianferrari, and used as an instrument for the promotion and commercialization of the artists exhibited in the Biennale was closed. One could cite the 48th edition of the Biennale curated by Harald Szeemann in 1999, *dAPERTutto*, for which he asked for the historical buildings of the Arsenale (Artiglierie, Corderie, Gaggiandre, and Tese) in Venice to be renovated. The main international exhibition that was traditionally hosted by the Palazzo delle Esposizioni (what used to be the Italian Pavilion) was now also accommodated in these buildings. It was a symbolic move not only aspiring to end the event's Euro-centrism as it had been condensed in the *Giardini* (where the Italian pavilion is located), but also seeking to democratize access to the event and diversify its participations by extending the exhibition surface.

The 1974 edition of the Venice Biennale should also be remembered for its political positioning against Augusto Pinochet's military coup in Chile.⁶⁸ The whole event was dedicated to that country; it constituted homage to the Chilean democratically elected and murdered president Salvador Allende. For the first time, it became an open political arena in which public space was used not only for the display of posters and mural paintings with an overtly critical message regarding the political situation of that Latin American country, but for also for theater plays, concerts, and performances. Likewise the catalogue of the event was conceived to

circulate under the guise of photocopied tracts, something that, retrospectively, seems to announce some of the cultural and political de-centering strategies that were put into practice in many international biennials that were spread around the world two decades later.⁶⁹ From that perspective, the 50th Venice Biennale, directed by Francesco Bonami, should also be remembered as one of the most transgressive curatorial intents to transform the traditional model of the Biennale and to modify the use and perception of its spaces. Titled *Dreams and Conflicts. The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, Bonami's edition not only adopted a more democratic approach by designating curators to develop exhibitions that would be part of the overall project:⁷⁰ *Zone of Urgency* was curated by Hou Hanru; *The Structure of Survival* by Carlos Basualdo; *Contemporary Arab Representations* by Catherine David; *The Everyday Altered* by Gabriel Orozco, and *Utopia Station* by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, among other exhibitions. While each of the individual shows used different strategies of interaction and display, the most radical proposal was *Utopia Station*, for which close to 60 artists, architects, and collectives were invited. A platform was designed by Liam Gillick and Tiravanija and constructed in the open space of the Giardini. The structure was meant to host public conferences, debates, and performances, and included projection rooms and specific lounging areas for the public. Other functional spaces were implemented, such as showers (Tobias Rehberger) and ecological toilets (Atelier Van Lieshout). Even if this participatory platform generated something of a commune, the truth is that it was designed for the very specific audience attending the Biennale, be it the general public or the art world professionals. Although this wasn't too much of a radical move at a time when

activating public space as a site of exchange became a widespread strategy, *Utopia Station* still managed to shake the Biennale's institutional expanse and to transcend its traditional fragmentation of space according to national representation, allowing for the use of areas of the Giardini that had barely been used before. However, it should be mentioned that although a great number of the exhibitions included in this edition of the Biennale addressed the urgency of recognizing (and sometimes implementing) all sorts of participative strategies as a social engagement and a political commitment, the fact that most of the shows were still organized by a curator-ambassador based on the characteristics, needs, and priorities of specific regions, only contributed to reassert what was already on the verge of becoming a series of regional stereotypes: Asia living under a tireless market economy, Latino America continuously implementing resourceful strategies of survival, and Europe striving to reinvent itself as the leading bastion of Utopia.⁷¹

2.2 Contemporary Art Biennials: The politization of space and the politics of the global network

As already mentioned, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the redrawing of the geopolitical borders, particularly in the old continent, allowed for a slow rewriting of history as it had been inherited from, and disseminated by, 19th century and early 20th century Western cultural institutions such as universal expositions. This gave way to the development of a shattered and more participatory historical narrative that was particularly reflected in the development of curatorial discourse and the tentative reconfiguration of exhibitions as a cultural medium as it occurred in the

1990s. From that perspective, *Manifesta* was one of the first institutionalized (Western) events intended to systematically implement the global reconfiguration of power as the centers multiplied and dispersed. Founded in 1996, it was conceived as an itinerant biennial that would migrate every two years to different peripheral capital of the newly formed Europe in order to integrate them into a larger cultural, political, and social discourse, thereby epitomizing the mobility of borders against any prevailing nationalism.

Working on the basis of site-specificity in order to respond to the priorities of a particular context has been commonly acknowledged as one of the points of departure of a politicized curatorial practice that, during the 1990s, put forward what Claire Doherty has termed a “rhetoric of place.” This particular discourse emerged from a combination of site exhibitions, research-based projects, and residency programs that respond to the specific social and political coordinates of a particular locale, that are then ideally explored to be transmitted and transposed into the larger network of cultural exchange.⁷² From that perspective, and in general terms, one could say that every international biennial represents a (self-generated) opportunity to redraw the global map with a new center—that is, from the perspective of the hosting locality (traditionally a peripheral locale), be it a city (as in Lyon or Istanbul), a country (Brazil or South Africa), or a whole region in the world (like Latin America and the so-called Third World as it happened, we will further see, with the Havana Biennial). As we know, however, the purpose behind international biennials and large-scale exhibitions isn’t only the repositioning of the artistic capitals, the

reactivation of the artistic circuit in new directions, or the re-sketching of the global map. These kinds of events are usually as much about the urban regeneration and the economic and political revamping of particular geographical location by means of cultural tourism, as international expositions in the late 19th and early 20th century were a pretext for the modernization of cities, and a tool for the promotion of colonial and imperial power. As stated by Rachel Weiss, it is clear that “biennials can and do serve as vehicles for civic aspirations far beyond the art world; potent showcases for local, regional or national ambitions, they have inaugurate in city after city where political and economic accelerations demand such apish and public conditions.”⁷³ In that sense, one could mention two interesting examples of how many events of these kinds, at least initially, put forward the cultural, social and political priorities of the hosting locality: the Johannesburg Biennial that was created to reposition the post-Apartheid South Africa on the world map as newly democratized country⁷⁴ and, before that, the Havana Biennial, which was created as a response to the very specific needs of the region. It is precisely the resulting “rhetoric of place” that will enable each biennial to forge itself an identity, an identity that will allow differentiating these events from one another and thus become regionally and internationally significant.⁷⁵

As put by Carlos Basualdo:

Moreover, the sheer size of these shows—necessary to achieve the impact on the marketing level that is expected of them—makes their insertion into highly particularized interpretative systems indispensable. Without these systems, the shows would loose their ability to communicate as discrete singularities; that is they would lack all identity. In many cases, it is even manifestly expected that the conceptual framework charged with giving these events legibility be related to local question.⁷⁶

The Havana Biennial: An alternative?

Organized for the first time in 1984 by the Centro de Arte Wilfredo Lam (a government run institution), the Havana Biennial was specifically designed to create a space for the dissemination of what its organizers perceived as the aesthetic discourse and political sensibility of a particular region, that of Latin America and the Caribbean. Its stated mission was not only to open a forum in the so-called peripheries for a series of artistic practices and cultural codes that the 1980s multicultural discourse frequently marginalized as coming from the position of the *Other*.⁷⁷ Indeed by creating a local, cultural, and political space for the dissemination of these practices, the Havana Biennial originally intended to bypass the legitimating centers of the West, and to generate an infrastructure that would allow an extended dialogue to be established and fostered among the countries of a specific geographical area: the “Third World.” It was a notion that, as we will see, had to be revised by the fifth edition of the Biennial.⁷⁸ Lillian Llanes, one of the event’s organizers, reflects on the term “Third World”:

[It] identified a common interest among countries which, irrespective of their geographical locations, their differences in cultural heritage, religion, political systems, economic structures or developmental level, faced serious problems (with few possibilities of solving them) arising from the system of relations imposed by the highly industrialized countries in the aftermath of colonialism; that is the underdevelopment and economic dependence of neo-colonialism...Out of the conviction that contemporary Third World art and artists are contributing to global art, emerged the idea of creating in Havana a space which would favor the dissemination of their work and encourage discussion on the

problems of contemporary art, especially those of the Third World.⁷⁹

The Havana Biennial was also one of the first events of its kind to have circumvented the nation-state based model of the Venice Biennial by instigating an exchange among the participating artists—instead of a display of national representations—in such a way as to integrate a larger international network, without having to sacrifice the event’s own founding prerogatives.⁸⁰ However, it was also originally based on a competitive model, a structure that was revised in 1989 as soon as the Biennial had to reevaluate its organizing criteria and parameters on what contemporary artistic production could possibly look like from the Americas, thus paving the way for a further reflection of the event’s location from a global perspective.⁸¹

Furthermore, one of the Havana Biennial’s particularities has been the specificity of its own geopolitical location—in other words, the fact that at the moment of its creation it was the only event of its kind taking place in a communist country, and hence it was never meant to find its place within the neo-liberal network of biennials that erupted during the following decade. “The Havana Biennial was the first instance in which an alternative vision of the Biennial was institutionalized. Taking up a locus of resistance to the spatial politics of the world exposition, it was also the one Biennial that projected a parallel world (the third) rather than a city realm.”⁸² Having been conceived specifically from the margins as a mechanism independent from the mainstream artistic circuit, the Havana Biennial stands as a

precursor of the international large-scale exhibitions that made postcolonial theory an inherent part of their curatorial discourse, starting with the controversial 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou.⁸³ At a time when it has become “a must” to muffle every artistic event with the political aura that implicitly emanates from the questioning of the Western hegemony, the Havana Biennial seems to have been central to the shift from the 19th century universalistic rhetoric of international expositions to the celebratory globalized discourse that taints every curatorial statement in the late 20th and early 21st century art biennials. As first stated in 1993 by Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne:

“Festival-exhibitions” with their roots in the large, international exhibitions of the nineteenth century are still a public model and a shifting backdrop against which the meanings of contemporary art are constructed, maintained and sometimes irrevocably altered. However, the very ideas of centrality and dominance on which spectacular, imperial displays were originally founded are now increasingly interrogated by ideas and practices imported from formerly “marginal” discourses and artistic activities, geographic and otherwise.⁸⁴

Moreover, by taking place in a socialist country, the Havana Biennial has obviously escaped the financial marketing prerogatives to which any event of its kind usually responds to, and has thus been able to play on more earthly bases and to intricately operate in the local, cultural, and political context. In this case, the possibility of establishing a site-specific dialogue with the city that does not raise or project any expectation of revitalization of the place, did not only anticipate the de-centering discourse that was to characterize much of the 1990s rhetorical shift in curatorial practice, but also allowed in the long term (that is, up to this day) to engage

a social body that has been deeply affected by the collapse of the Soviet Union and by the North American economic blockade. However, it should be noted that the very particular social and cultural derelict state of the Cuban context gives the Havana Biennial a character of its own that still serves, for better or worst, to brand the event as a deeply political one, one that is actually able to capitalize on its own contradictions: While the participating artists invariably complain about material poverty and the lack of resources (the production and installation of the work is always limited to what an artist can afford to bring with him), this situation is precisely what helps to trigger a close relationship to the context's social, political, and cultural topography. For "in this location, at the present time, there remains hope in rupture, because the city itself obliges art making to fall into and widen the cracks, instead of elevating it in the service of visions of global ascendancy."⁸⁵ And it is the insufficiency of funding, and the lack of proselytizing ambitions that has prevented, or at least delayed up to a certain extent, the Biennial's absorption and co-optation by the forces of the mainstream and the market. Here again, it should be noted that the image of Cuba as reflected by the Biennial also benefits from this densely politically charged situation: it not only appears as a bastion of resistance to the evils of capitalism, but it simultaneously helps to promote the idea of a liberty of speech that actually compensates for the pervading suspicion of a restricted freedom in a political context where the ghost of censorship is always present.⁸⁶

From this perspective, the fact that the Havana Biennial has managed to institutionalize itself as one of the main centers for the promotion of Latin American

and Caribbean art, for some critics raises the question of how successful it has proved to be as an alternative to the globalized artistic discourse.⁸⁷ By extending the pool of participating artists to other regions of the world, the Biennial has managed to attract international art professionals and art collectors, thereby diversifying its audience, extending and fortifying its international networking, and making it evident that the notion of the “Third World” was no longer applicable. As put by Cuban curator and critic Gerardo Mosquera:

The idea behind the Biennial was always to introduce artists who work outside of the main centers. It was meant to facilitate horizontal relations, which doesn't exclude North—South relations. However, this wasn't supposed to come as an attempt at legitimization by the mainstream, rather facilitate an equal relationship upon the inclusion in the mainstream mechanisms, which is something completely different. There's a difference between trying to be an active presence in these circles and letting oneself be subordinated. It's important how the Biennial deals with this problem, so that it doesn't end up a shop window for critics and curators from the centers—a kind of “scouting for Third World talent.”⁸⁸

An assessment of the Havana Biennial success—if one is to understand the notion of success as the event's ongoing capacity to renovate itself and to sustain a dialogue not only with the local community but also with the international art scene—should be less about evaluating its ability to forge a path parallel to the mainstream (that of the multicultural *Other* of the previous decade) than about its capacity to expand the already existing tracks and to multiply their crossovers and intersections. “I don't think it is plausible to look for a difference *per se* in Third World art opposite to other contemporary practices—states Mosquera. The differences will originate

from the use that each author, movement, or culture makes of art, which may be conditioned by *Weltanschauung*, values, strategies, interests, cultural patrons, themes, and particular techniques.”⁸⁹ Only by transcending its own early cultural regionalism and its geographical ghettoization, the event was able to reconfigure (instead of replicate them) the *spatial politics* of international exhibitions.⁹⁰ As Elena Filipovic questions, “How can the post-colonial project of cultural translation prevent itself from being betrayed by the frame through which art is shown in order to allow these large scale exhibitions to live up to their potentials as sites from which to question the consequences of global modernity?”⁹¹ More than looking for an alternative to the mainstream, one should look for an ongoing questioning of the global circuit legitimizing premises—as embodied in the assumption of the existence of regional aesthetic and cultural codes that need to be deciphered—in such a way as to redefine its acting parameters, both from the perspective of the hosting locality and from the multiple viewpoints that result from an un-coded dialogue and exchange of its multiple centers.

The 6th Caribbean Biennial: An avowal of failure

As stated by Pastor Roces, what has made the Havana Biennial case more interesting and compelling is the fact that the city has remained outside the planetary network of cities revamped during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, specifically in relation to the technological progress put forward by international expositions. As such, it also remains outside the circuit of locations that recently looked into anchoring their position in an international network that has shifted from the early

nationalistic rhetoric of imperial and colonial powers, to today's dominant global discourse of economic integration.

Realizing the organic and mechanistic metaphoric conventions that framed modernity, the universal expositions were factories—the hothouses—of this network of cities...It was, and is, the network itself that shaped and stylized itself as international. The unconnected place, Havana, connected itself to this network even as it thought to oppose it. But the world exposition form is a production and a supply mode, and it maintains linkage more than it contradicts. The contradiction constructed by the Havana Biennial is not that of without/within; the network rearranged itself to accommodate a productive bilateral symmetry. The Havana Biennial can hence properly claim to be an alternative biennial, and that indeed there is such a thing, but one which provides symmetrical beauty and fresh creative labor (from without), *within* the network.⁹²

Even if Pastor Roces' transposition of the universal reach of the 19th century assertive *spatial politics*—that is, the spaces produced and defined by international exposition for the dissemination of global capitalism, and imperial power on the basis of a projection of the future and a contraction of the distances—into the late 20th century global network seems to have annulated time and space—that is, the parameters that help to set new coordinates for an alternate area of resistance—within the field of cultural transactions, it still opens the possibility to elaborate a transformative discourse, based on the flows and exchanges, to reshape the politics of space. For it also suggests that the legitimizing power of international exhibitions can shift from relying on the events' factual visibility to their capacity to make their site-specificity transit the global network of information.

The 6th International Caribbean Biennial, *Blown Away*, organized by Maurizio Cattelan and Jens Hoffmann in the year 2000, is one recent event that played itself simultaneously on both fronts: it stood as a critique of the repetitive and unfruitful model of large-scale exhibitions that pretend to engage with a local context as a strategy to resist globalization, while it also exposed the tautological self-affirmation of a global network whose functioning and reach depends on its own capacity to circulate the information that feeds the system. Although for many people, the 6th Caribbean Biennial looked like a swindle—i.e., a paid vacation in the Caribbean for a select(ed) group of artists, with no art produced but a catalogue conceived as the circulating document that chronicles the Biennial⁹³—its organizing principles still so much mirrored those of other biennials around the world, that it also posited itself as a self-reflexive critique of those very same models on which it was based. Clearly a provocation, or as its organizers romantically put it, an “avowal of defeat,”⁹⁴ the event’s pessimistic cynicism appears less as a confession than as symptomatic proof of the need experienced by the mainstream art circuit to rethink the structure on which its international biennials have been constructed. “What are we looking for in the Caribbean?” ask Cattelan and Hoffmann. “We might as well say: What are we looking for in Venice, Sao Paulo, New York, Paris, London, Belfast, Berlin, all the same...”⁹⁵

Reportedly seeking to establish some balance in the trade routes of contemporary art and in the distribution of power within the cultural field, the 6th Caribbean Biennial was organized as a staged international event in the removed

island of St. Kitts. The outline of the event, its list of artists, its press release, and its director's presentation, were all inspired—when not literally copied—by the profile and rhetoric of the international biennials that proliferated during the 1990s decade.⁹⁶ This edition of the Caribbean Biennial, as many large-scale exhibitions of the sort, “officially intended to raise the Caribbean’s barely discernable profile on the global art circuit”⁹⁷—a profile that, quite predictably, was almost invisible: Even though this was supposed to be the 6th edition of the Biennial, virtually anyone both in the local and the global art scenes had heard of its five preceding versions. For they were, actually, inexistent. Organized *from* the mainstream, the event was deliberately playing on the plausibility that there could very well have been a low profile local art event—meaning from a Western perspective, unknown to the international circuit—that might have been instrumentalized in order to relocate St. Kitts on the map by adding cultural tourism to the range of leisure activities that already defined the island’s economic resources. To meet these expectations, its organizers (clearly two key agents of the global art circuit) drew the most predictable list of artists that have secured a captive audience among the mainstream art professionals (including Vanessa Beecroft, Olafur Eliasson, Mariko Mori, Gabriel Orozco, Pipilotti Rist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, among others). In other words, they simply put together a list of those recurring names that, in the year 2000, were most likely to be included in any international biennial or large-scale exhibition, thereby assuring the visibility of an event that would be covered by the international art press. However, the very fact that the selection of artists was based on an evaluation of their *symbolic capital* within the artistic *field*, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terms—that is, on the advancement of its

available resources in terms of recognition and prestige enhanced as a social assets and cultural value in the art system⁹⁸—rather than on a thoughtful analysis of their artistic practice in relation to a curatorial premise, allowed Cattelan and Hoffmann to take a step further the self-reflexivity of the project by exposing the legitimating mechanism of biennials as “cynical manipulations of consensus.”⁹⁹

Blown Away is no exception to this attitude. It works with structures, exposing the mechanisms of any show, revealing its skeleton but taking away all the meat and flesh. As with any other show, it is an exploitation of privileges, like virginity once lost. A matter of corruption if you will...Biennials and Triennials are designed to plug into the international art system certain groups of artists, curators, dealers and critics. The hierarchy varies accordingly. To be “hot” their works don’t have necessary to be good. In fact sometimes it is preferable for the works to be bad. During certain years to be bad was the fad. Why? Because they fit neatly into an art system designed to control and manipulate both culturally and commercially.¹⁰⁰

Obviously a provocation, the 6th Caribbean Biennial brought into light how international exhibitions construct, rely, and inevitably reveal the symbolic networks that, following Bourdieu, sustain the exercise of political and economical power in the art world through the production and reproduction of the social forces they represent. This becomes particularly evident when one takes into consideration the French sociologist’s notion of *field* in which what is at stake is the negotiation of different forms of “capitals”: social capital, symbolic capital, or cultural capital. As we know, Bourdieu suggests that the field in which these forces operate helps to reveal the characteristics and particularities of the context in which an artwork is embedded, not only at the moment of its production but also at the moment of its

reception. Thus, Bourdieu's concept of *field* supports a cross-interpretation of artworks in which a piece is read not only in relation to the artist's position within that field, but in relation to other contemporary artistic productions, producers, and legitimizing institutions.¹⁰¹ This becomes all the more blatant if one takes into consideration the fact that, being deprived of content—that is, of art works—the Caribbean Biennial consisted of a list of names. It was strategically conceived to circulate as information—that, is under the guise of a press release, an edited catalogue, and a couple of reviews but also plainly as gossip—possibly betting on the blind faith and mindless complicity one frequently encounters when entering the field of cultural transactions.¹⁰² It is not without irony that Cattelan and Hoffmann write: “Biennials celebrate the coming of a new economy, the economy based not on the scarcity of material goods, but rather on the unavoidable scarcity of human attention, the kind of attention that comes from audiences.”¹⁰³ In that sense, the fact that the 6th Caribbean Biennial didn't have a local audience but rather engaged those interlocutors and witnesses to the event necessary to place a review or two in an art magazine that can actually vindicate it as a *tangible* event, could stand as a critique of the spectacularization of biennials and their mediatized consumption, by still openly participating in what will soon become an economy of oblivion. However, quite unsurprisingly, the event's press release still posited the creation of “a space for dialogue and building relationships between the international art world and local communities” as the goal of the show,¹⁰⁴ while the ghost director's introduction to the catalogue, a reshuffling of the institutional discourse that overtly quoted many of the official presentations of biennials around the world, stated that:

The exhibition curated by Maurizio Cattelan and Jens Hoffmann continues our effort in bringing back the cutting edge contemporary art to the practices of daily life and at the same time, it serves as a link in the global art and museum world, which still tries to down size the role of the so-called “third world.”¹⁰⁵

“Don’t buy it,” wrote Jenny Liu in her review for *Frieze* magazine. “This biennial was even more self-consciously insular than the norm.”¹⁰⁶ In short, the only thing that probably differentiated this event from other international exhibitions was that no art was involved, nor was there anything particular about the location that was meant to prompt any creative act. The venue of the show was mainly selected because it was a tourist port with little ambition of becoming a cultural destination. The artists were deliberately invited to spend a week during the summer of 2000, but that being the hurricane season, they weren’t even able to enjoy a proper holiday. In other words, everything about the 6th Caribbean Biennial seemed to go against the grain, except its public perception. Because of its lack of content, one could say the event was less about making itself visible than about bringing attention to the different mechanisms that made its organization possible. “Attention can be moved and reorganized for good purposes. Like a spotlight that can be pointed in a new direction, illuminating a problem that needs to be solved.”¹⁰⁷

Chapter 3: Entering the Canal Zone: The 8th Panama Biennial

3.1 The Panama Biennial relocates itself

What happens when a locality that is naturally off-circuit, let's say St Kitts, or for that matter, Panama, does not display any crusading ambition within the cultural field even though it has had, as we have seen, a central place in the map of globalization as it was drawn starting in the late 19th century? As many Latin American art biennials, the Panama Biennial was originally conceived as an alternative to a poor institutional infrastructure.¹⁰⁸ Aiming to support and propel the development of contemporary art production, these sorts of art events are, nevertheless, generally based on the 19th century model of the Venice Biennial. Usually funded by private capital, they aren't properly curated exhibitions but rather organized as juried competitions that provide a supposedly democratic survey of local production every two years, offering an acquisition prize that is usually meant, in the long term, to build a corporate collection. The Panama Biennial, as many similar Latin American events, started as a painting contest that slowly opened to include other artistic genres, such as photography and, later, the so-called *new media*—that is, video and installation. Since these exhibitions are usually conceived for the development of the local art scene (a scene that, in many Latin American countries and certainly in Panama, comprise a very small number of professional practitioners), they frequently present a rather reduced selection of artists, thereby limiting the extent of the dialogue they were expecting to motivate in the first place.¹⁰⁹

The Panama Biennial wasn't originally conceived as an international event aiming to put a specific locality on the globalized map, as it was the case of other biennials analyzed in these pages. All the same, as soon as it was accepted that its eighth edition would be a curated international exhibition, the event had to create a platform that would respond to local priorities—both to the needs of the artistic scene as well as to the cultural politics of that specific context—while being able to articulate them in the global arena. In other words, the resulting exhibition should provoke, on the one hand, a critical reflection on the nature of the Biennial and on the need to renovate itself; this would not only allow to break the cultural boundaries that tend to isolate the Panamanian scene, but also rearticulate its artistic production in close relation to the international art scene. On the other hand, the curatorial premise should also question what the Biennial position could possibly be within that international arena, particularly if it wanted to define an identity of its own while avoiding being perceived as yet another biennial.

Knowing beforehand that there would be a definite and conditioning series of restrictions that would determine its operating framework, this edition of the Biennial looked rather into turning in favor of the event what appeared to be, in the first place and from the outside, a series of limitations and impediments. A poor institutional infrastructure, an extremely restricted budget that limited the number of artists whose work was to be produced, the possibilities of financing scouting residences for the international participants, and the impossibility of developing a marketing campaign

for a geographical location that felt removed from contemporary art centers, among other factors, were made part of a curatorial statement and thus came to be outlined in the main characteristic of the event: a deliberately small pool of artists, some of them with a firsthand experience of the Panamanian context while others, with a mediated knowledge and perception of the place, were invited to submit, respectively, *insitu* and remote collaborations, in order to put at play the “spatial politics” inherited from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and its recent transposition into a globalized informational network. By taking as its theme the construction of the Canal—a historical and geographical marker in the development of globalization—and the fate of the former Panama Canal Zone, the curatorial premise of the exhibition aimed at coalescing the cultural, historical, and political location of the show, with the Biennial location within the art world. Furthermore, by testing its ability to engage the gears of a complex system of mediatization, distribution, and exchange upon which the art world seems to be relying nowadays (as it was punctually demonstrated by the 6th Caribbean Biennial), the 8th Panama Biennial would ideally offer a critical perspective on the instrumentalization of the visibility and marketing of contemporary art biennials—with which, of course, it couldn’t realistically compete.

3.2 Reading the Past—Projecting the Future

Storytelling and mediation: From *The Panama Pacific International Exposition*’s model to the concept 8th Panama Biennial

After a long process of political lobbying, the construction of the Panama Canal brought about its own fair, the Panama-Pacific Exposition held in San

San Francisco in 1915.¹¹⁰ The event, once again, celebrated the contraction of distances and the shrinking of the planet, of which fairs and their system of national pavilions were scaled-down allegorical representations.



Fig. 15: Panama Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, 1915

“The exposition was officially opened on February 20th, 1915, by remote control: President Wilson turned a golden key in his office in the White House and ‘The electric current carried the message to San Francisco, an instant later releasing the water of the Fountain of Energy.’”¹¹¹ In addition to that fountain, some of the event’s main attractions were the Jewel Tower and the Column of Progress. However, that particular time, the Panamanian Pavilion that had been constructed for the occasion remained empty and closed for the duration of the exhibition. What stood out instead was a gigantic model of the recently inaugurated Canal as another achievement of North American supremacy.¹¹² Just like many chronicles of the time, the model—both a technological marvel and an illusionistic environment—highlighted the completion of a masterpiece of the United States’ economic and

military engineering, while silencing the social and political cost that the enterprise had caused south of the border. “In the popular picture of life in the Canal Zone as it emerged in hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles, the vast force of black men and women who were doing the heaviest, most difficult physical labor—some twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand human beings—could be but very faintly seen... As a consequence, the popular mental picture of what life was like in the Canal Zone, and popular pride in the kind of society that had been created there, were founded on a very limited erroneous view of reality.”¹¹³ The Panama Pacific International Exposition, but particularly the model of the Canal, was about reconstructing and narrating a history that was instrumental to the formation of a political imaginary. “The show is a working reproduction of the Panama Canal [and its surrounding territories], operating on such a large scale that it covers five acres,” states the brochure that was printed for the exhibition.¹¹⁴

The visitor can see it from cars that travel slowly around the scene, which are fitted with telephonic connections to a phonograph that explains the features of the Canal as the appropriate points are passed. Other than seeing the Canal itself, observing this miniature is the most interesting and instructive view possible of the great engineering feat. In one way it is even better than a trip to the Canal. It gives the broad general view impossible from any point of the Isthmus itself.¹¹⁵



Fig. 16: Top: Model of the Panama Canal at the Panama Canal exhibit
Bottom: Spectators gallery at the Panama Canal exhibit

On the one hand, the construction of the seaway was depicted as an innovative mechanized form of supremacy and control and, on the other, its mediated experience could be perceived as a tale of an almost miraculous triumph of man over nature, in a remote and imaginary territory. The experience of the event was not recounted nor depicted as a concrete historical episode with real consequences. In other words, the spectacular nature of the operation of the Canal as restaged in the gigantic model appeared to be a projection of the utopian perfection of the Canal Zone, an allegory of the North American imperialist adventure. However, as stated by Julie Green,

for many, the genius of the Panama Canal lay precisely in the fact that it seemed unconnected to imperialism, instead it was seen as a display of America's domestic strength in a world setting. In its triumph, the Panama Canal articulated American expansionism as

a positive, humane, and beneficial activity, one equally valuable to world civilization and to American national identity... Emerging as the antithesis of empire, the Panama Canal ironically helped to make American empire possible.¹¹⁶

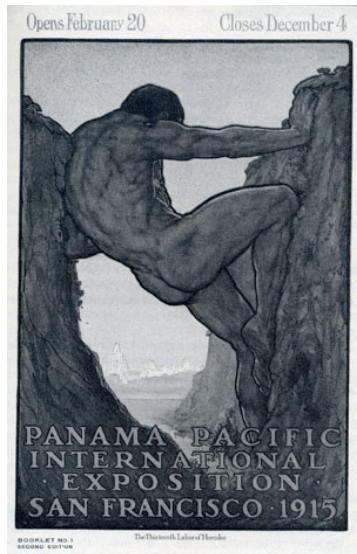


Fig. 17: Panama Pacific International Exposition, Poster

The mythological and somewhat anachronistic image on the *Panama Pacific Exposition's* official poster that illustrated Hercules' thirteenth labor—that is, the construction of the Panama Canal—not only condensed the work of thirteen thousand men and women into a single body, but also transfigured the exaltation of mechanization and progress typical of this sort of event into an allegorical representation of the force and strength of the North American empire. As demonstrated by Bill Brown in his essay “Science Fiction, the World’s Fair and the Prosthetics of Empire, 1910-1915,”¹¹⁷ this masculinization of the allegorical representation of the nation not only emerged from the theatricalization of the body of the North American male during the Spanish-American war (particularly via Roosevelt and his Rough Riders¹¹⁸) but also derived from the necessity to fabricate

the image of a unified national body. According to Brown, the fact that in this case the idea of technological advancement (as promoted in previous international expositions with the construction of architectural and monumental icons such as the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower) is replaced by an allegorical representation of physical strength, is no more about promoting civilization and progress but rather about seizing and consolidating North American global power. Much of this was made transparent by Humberto Velez's piece *The Last Builder*. Based on found footage of a super 8 film that shows the last living Canal constructor known, who was also Panama's first body builder, the work counters the aforementioned mythologization by providing a real face for the thousands of anonymous workers who took part in the titanic endeavor that the Canal construction represented.



Fig. 18: Humberto Velez, *The Last Builder* (2008).

Whereas, from a “God’s eye view,” the Canal was first conceived as a shortcut for marine transit from the east to the west of the United States (mainly from New York to San Francisco), the artist Roman Ondák conceived *Across that Place* as a way to bridge the distance (some would say the *divide*) between the continent’s north and south. Ondák’s intervention consisted of an open invitation to a stone—skimming event on the bank of the Canal. Ondák’s initiative, however, wasn’t so much about organizing a spectacular competition as about participating in an event, the main concept and motivation of which was to offer the possibility, however circumstantial, of closing a breach and reuniting a divided territory. This project was particularly pertinent as the Canal is going through a series of changes in order to increase both its width and its capacity. From this perspective, the event was perceived as the silent and shared experience of a group participating in a symbolic action. By turning to a children’s game, the artist was not only making reference to the vanity of the United States’ disproportionate pride in having split the continent in two, but also to the futility of the artist’s own attempts to confront, with self-defeating innocence, the waterway’s proportions and the history of a place where politics, the treachery of national pride, the displacement of borders, and the loss of thousands of human lives converge in a peculiar political saga.



Fig. 19: Roman Ondak, *Across that Place* (2008)

Entering the Canal Zone: The 8th Panama Biennial (in the guise of conclusion)

Panama and its Canal stand at the crossroads of both the finance industry and structures of economic exchange; a crossroads that epitomizes the flux of global transactions. As we have seen, paradoxically, the fact that the confluence of these flows is one of the key attributes of the global imaginary of Panama invites inquiry into how, in the process of internationalizing its biennial, the country should negotiate its supposed remoteness and isolation from major art centers. For some people the challenge of such an event lies in the forging of a unique encounter between the spectator and the artwork, thereby restoring the aura to the experience of art before its massive consumption.¹¹⁹ For others it consists of finding its place on the map of globalization by forging an identity commensurate with its size, allowing it to stand out among the hundreds of biennials that have proliferated in recent years as promotional strategies for particular locations.¹²⁰

As they developed out of post-colonial theory and multicultural discourse over the past two decades, large scale international exhibitions and biennials originally meant to transcend the hegemony of the cultural and political spaces first outlined by the self-empowered, colonial nations' international expositions around the world. They have traditionally been perceived as an opportunity to redraw the global map, putting forward the celebratory globalization of the art world via the multiplication and dispersion of its centers. However, notwithstanding the rhetorical shuffling that accompanied the proliferation of large-scale international contemporary art biennials during the nineties, the universalism uttered by the 19th century international exposition's model seems to have been replaced by an equally utopian speech fostering the democratization of the access to the globalized artistic circuit. It is precisely because the so-called multiplication of the centers that coincided with the proliferation of contemporary art biennials was done in accordance with economical adjustments brought by an advancing global capitalism, that the access to the so-called artistic mainstream still seem to remain unequal, hence the necessity of finding alternative curatorial models for the articulation and dissemination of this kind of events. For, if the visibility acquired by international biennials frequently stands as a potent mechanism in the economic and political revamping of a specific locale, that visibility still depends on the event's ability to insert itself into the system. What happens, however, when one is to deal with what initially seems a key yet inconspicuous off-centered global locale? Beyond the multiplication of political spaces, what appears actually relevant is the construction and consolidation of transnational networking that allows for a sustained dialogue that can reach beyond

the exhibition's geographical location. This would open the question of how can one transform the distance that traditionally separated the peripheries from their centers (the empires from their colonies, the West from the *Other*) into a space to be infiltrated and navigated in multiple directions? In other words, can we imagine a curatorial model that, by arguing for the autonomy of the artwork outside of the exhibition frame, would still reinforce curatorial practice as a porous and flexible engine enacting the flows and exchanges in the field of cultural transactions? For, such a situation would also suggest that the legitimizing power of international exhibitions, relying so far on the events' factual visibility in a particular location, could shift to its capacity to make the local priorities it embraces effectively transit the global network of information and operate outside the originating context of the exhibition.

One could say that, while the Panama Pacific International Exposition was planned as a spectacular phantasmagoria whose original referent could be made irrelevant by its magical display, the 8th Panama Biennial might journey through the art world, at times, as an unobtrusive cameo. Deliberately modest in size and production, the exhibition's reduced scale posed questions about the sheer magnitude of biennials as a determining factor with respect to their position within art's system of circulation and distribution. Since the effect of some artistic practices frequently enlarge their resonance in the aftermath of their conception, *History's Faint Smell of Burning* also hoped to create a conceptual framework that could encompass the before and after of its inaugural event. By doing so, encounters with some of the

works would be postponed and allow the work to transcend its geographical venue: By including off-site gestures and actions as well as site-specific interventions, the biennial sought to establish a frame of action which, following an old conceptual strategy, would reconsider the ways to access and experience a work of art. This would prevent from thinking about this biennial as a totalizing and self-contained seasonal event, in order for it to become ongoing curatorial gesture. Its structure would thus provide a discursive texture able to sustain a dialogue with artistic production that would outgrow the exhibition's temporal and spatial frames, paving the way for a deep questioning of the nature and purpose of exhibition making of which international biennials are but one example.

Endnotes

¹ See David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas, The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1977) 56. De Lesseps, who was popularly known as the Great Frenchman, represented a belief in progress and hope for vitality in turn-of-the-century France, which had been deeply humiliated by the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

² See McCullough 288-291. The *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique* was dissolved in 1889 and not until 1894 was the *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama* created, apparently to cover the original shareholders' losses.

³ Herbert and Mary Knapp, *Red, White and Blue Paradise: The American Canal Zone in Panama* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984) 264.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Booklet published by Grant Thornton Cheng y Asociados, Contadores Públicos Autorizados y Consultores, on the occasion of the photography exhibition *Presencia China en Panamá* organized by the Asociación China de Mujeres Ejecutivas y de Negocios de Panamá in 1997.

⁶ These members of Panama's future oligarchy laid the ground for U.S. interventionism. Moreover, most of them were employees of the Panama Railroad, a North American company that, in response to the Gold Rush, was established in 1850 in the province of Panama for the purpose of connecting the two oceans and speeding up the transfer of the gold from one coast to the other.

⁷ Abner Benaím, artist statement.

⁸ Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26.2 (Winter 2000): 179.

⁹ Sam Durant, artist statement.

¹⁰ William Rufus Scott, *The Americans in Panama* (New York: The Statler Publishing Company, 1913) 1.

¹¹ For an account of Roosevelt deeds prior to his presidency, see Byron Price, "A Rough Rider in the White House," *Cowboys and Presidents*, *Autry National Center Magazine* (Spring-Summer 2008) 16-17.

¹² *Cowboys and Presidents* 22.

¹³ The canal was previously planned to be built in Nicaragua.

¹⁴ From President James Monroe's seventh annual message to Congress, December 2, 1823, 8 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.ushistory.org/documents/monroe.htm>>.

¹⁵ The Roosevelt Corollary appears as a response particularly to the aggressive German and British policies in Venezuela where the two European countries were struggling to collect their debts. See Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal, The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 52-53. Although Roosevelt never saw himself as following imperialistic politics, but rather considered his strategic moves in Latin America as related to the expansion, growth and progress that were an inherent part of North American destiny, some people did fear that the United States were actually embracing the same aggressive politics they were trying to prevent Europe from exerting, betraying thereby what, to their view, were the democratic principles inherent to the Monroe Doctrine. This became all the more evident after the war with Spain over the liberation of Cuba, and the acquisition of the Philippines. "God Made the Americans a superior people to fulfill a high destiny, but he never made them so superior that they can trample all rights of weaker nations in the dust from a supercilious idea that we can manage their affairs better than they... The Spanish-American War was a revelation to them as it was to us. Far sighted Latin Americans could read in that altruistic interference in their affairs the forerunner of interferences which might not be so altruistic." See Rufus Scott 250, 253.

¹⁶ McCullough 250.

¹⁷ Frederic Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 8 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html>>.

¹⁸ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair. Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) 38-72.

¹⁹ Between 30,000 and 40,000 people are said to have assisted in organizing the public reception in London to greet the French engineer.

²⁰ McCullough 24-25.

²¹ Ben Macomber, *Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The Jewel City: Its planning and Achievement; Its Architecture, Sculpture, Symbolism and Music; Its gardens Palaces and Exhibits* (San Francisco and Tacoma: John H. Williams, 1915) 11.

²² See Eduardo Tejeira Davis, "Taking Back The Canal Zone: A Challenge For Panama City," *ciudadMULTIPLEcity. Urban Art and Global Cities: An Experiment in Context*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004) and Kurt Dillon, Roger Trancik y Sam Sweezy, "Ciudad Jardin: Planeación progresista y el Canal de Panama," text accompanying the exhibition *Garden City: Progressive Planning and the Panama Canal*, Universidad de Panamá, Sept 18th- Oct 21st, 2008.

²³ <<http://members.cox.net/academia/cassatt8.html>>.

²⁴ Rydell 46.

²⁵ "On a gray January afternoon in 1891, a group of architects appeared at a forbidding spot of shoreline on lake Michigan. The wind sent scudding foam over the lake, and along sandy ridges a few desolate oaks dipped their branches. One of them climbed upon a pier, looked back over the shore, and then called over the wind: 'Do you mean to say that you really propose opening a fair here by '93?' Another called back, 'Yes, we intend to.'" The beginnings of the Chicago's Columbian Exhibition as described by Clinton Keeler in "The White City and the Black City, The dream of a Civilization," *American Quarterly*, 22 (Summer 1950): 112-117.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3031448?&Search=yes&term=keeler&term=clinton&list=hide&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dkeeler%2Bclinton%26x%3D0%26y%3D0%26wc%3Don&item=2&ttl=751&returnArticleService=showArticle>>.

²⁶ As a matter of fact, the exposition was organized only five years after the race rioting of Haymarket Square in Chicago, a situation that the Fair tended to overlook, dilute, and ultimately ignore.

²⁷ William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement (Creating the North American Landscape)* (Baltimore: The John Huskins University Press, 1994).

²⁸ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backwards 2000-1887* (Stilwell: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005). Published in 1888, this futurist novel became one of the most sold books in the history of U.S. literature. Its main character, Julian West, falls into a deep sleep and wakes up 113 years later to discover the social, economic, and political transformations that have affected the city of Boston. The book, as stated by Bellamy in a preface dated on December 26th 2000, is more a celebration of "the future rather than the past, not of the advancements achieved, but of the progress that will be made, ever onward and upward, until the race achieves its ineffable destiny."

²⁹ Stein was also responsible for the construction of the buildings for the Panama-California Exposition held in 1915 at Balboa Park in San Diego, something of a second chapter organized later in the same year as the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco to celebrate the opening of the Canal, but in a more picturesque setting inspired by colonial architecture.

³⁰ Dillon, Trancik, and Sweezy.

³¹ Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, eds. *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³² Knapp 3-4. “‘The dream of the late Bellamy is given actuality on the Zone,’ trumpeted one visitor in 1913. Another testified more soberly that it ‘strongly resembled what Bellamy dreamt years ago.’ In 1928, a Zonian wrote that her community was frequently referred to as resembling Bellamy’s utopia. It was a similarity we often remarked on during our years as resident’s on the zone.”

³³ “Early in the last century the evolution was completed by the final consolidation of the entire capital of the nation. The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be constructed by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit, were entrusted to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit. The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed; it became the one capitalist in the place of all other capitalists, the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up, a monopoly in the profits and economies of which all citizens share.” Bellamy 21. As reported by Herbert and Mary Knapp, “‘The dream of the late Bellamy is given actuality on the Zone,’ trumpeted one visitor in 1913. Another testified more soberly that it ‘strongly resembled what Bellamy dreamt years ago.’ In 1928, a Zonian wrote that her community was frequently referred to as resembling Bellamy’s utopia. It was a similarity we often remarked on during our years as residents on the zone.” Knapp 4.

³⁴ Rufus Scott 189-199.

³⁵ Even though the writings of the time acknowledge the social inequities, they were perceived as being natural. The majority of the construction workers from the Indies lived in barracks that accommodated up to 72 men, or in the suburbs of Panama City and Colón. It wasn’t until 1913 that permanent housing was built for that population.

³⁶ W.C. Gorgas quoted in Julio Ramos, “Hemispheric Domains: 1898 and the Origins of Latin Americanism,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 10.3 (2001): 238. Ramos addresses the development of tropical medicine as a biological war without precedent in the history of imperialism. According to him, “Colonel Gorgas is thus an emblematic figure of a complex colonial apparatus, an intersection between financial and technological interests, military and medical knowledge—all of which leads us to place the war of 1898 and the construction of the Panama Canal in the wider context of a new *globalization* of the world, of a new planetary order, reconfigured by the modern *techné* brought on by the turn of the century,” *ibid.* 238.

³⁷ Knapp 275.

³⁸ For a detailed description of labor distribution in the Zone and of Goethals’ “benevolent despotism,” see Julie Green, *The Canal Builders* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

³⁹ The only anti-Vietnam war in the Zone was a two-block march down its main avenue, and was described as being only “a ghostly echo” of such protests in the United States.

⁴⁰ Knapp 104-105

⁴¹ This considered together with the fact that Bunau-Varilla, who negotiated the original treaty on behalf of Panama, was not Panamanian.

⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 23. “The state of exception,” he writes, “is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.” This space of ambiguity that the Zone embodied can be understood as a transposition of the state of exception that characterized the mobilization of the settlers of the U.S. and the subsequent displacement of the frontier towards what was then perceived as the Wild West. From this perspective, the Canal Zone appears as a reiteration—under the guise of civilization which, in Roosevelt’s eyes, the United States brought to the world—of those thresholds which in the Wild West separated, but also linked, the urban conglomerations that considered themselves civilized, from what was perceived as wild nature and no-man’s land. In those territories, the concepts of justice and order didn’t legally exist, but were rather carried out by avengers, gunmen, and even outlaws. As we have seen, once these territories had been conquered and the migration to the West concluded, North American expansion turned to other territories in the continent, just as President Monroe had foreseen in his Doctrine, of which Teddy Roosevelt was an ardent follower.

⁴³ Lafeber 45.

⁴⁴ See Agamben 169-171. Following Agamben, in the relation of exclusion that characterizes the state of exception, the one excluded finds himself not only outside the law, but also abandoned by it, that is, with his life exposed to all kinds of threats and dangers, in a state the Italian philosopher described as *bare life*: “What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it—at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured,” *ibid.* 109. To link this to the situation in the Zone, one has only to consider the terms under which Dr. Gorgas proposed his project of biological war. For a detailed description of the discrimination suffered by Panamanian and Antillean workers—whose lives were considered of little value—during the canal construction, see Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders*, *op.cit.* Extending his thesis, Agamben continues: “The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the *zones d’attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities,” *ibid.* 175.

⁴⁵ “Quite legally, then, the United States could have appropriated all of Panama... It would have been a sovereign but non existent nation, a legal curiosity.” Knapp 229.

⁴⁶ Lafeber 179.

⁴⁷ The North American right to defend the neutrality of the Canal (from Panamanians or any other foreign force) still prevails in the Carter-Torrijos treaties, a clause that caused Torrijos to lose much of his popularity.

⁴⁸ Knapp 138-40. They never forgave Carter for having promised during his presidential campaign that he would never give up full control of the Panama Canal and sovereignty over the Zone. Ronald Reagan, who at that point was running against him for the Presidency, understood this negotiation was a symbolic move reasserting the glory of the country. As a matter of fact, after the treaties were finally signed in 1977, Carter failed to be reelected.

⁴⁹ Knapp 241.

⁵⁰ Interview with José de Jesús (“Chuchú”) Martínez, in Gregorio Selser, *Panamá, Érase un país a un canal pegado* (México, D.F.: Universidad Obrera de México, 1989) 213.

⁵¹ Michael Stevenson, *Introducción a la teoría de la probablilidad* (2008).

⁵² See John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004) 158-161, and Richard Koster and Guillermo Sánchez-Borbón, *In the Time of Tyrants* (London/New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990) 213-239.

⁵³ Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne, “Mapping International Exhibitions,” *The Manifesta Decade, Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* ed. Elena Filipovic and Barbara Vanderlinden (Cambridge: The MIT Press/Roomade, 2005) 50.

⁵⁴ See Rydell 38-71. The ethnographic display of the so-called “primitive” populations and the illustration of evolutionary principles provided by World’s Fairs would frequently go as far as defending racial discrimination and eugenics, as it was the case in the 1983 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition and its Midway Pleasance.

⁵⁵ See Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America* (Washington /London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000) 132-133. As described by Rydell, Findling, and Pelle the utopian character projected by many of these fairs since the 19th century intended to distract the public attention from the shock waves created by a series of political upheavals and revolutions across Europe and North America (such as the 1871 Paris Commune, 1889 Haymarket Square rioting in Chicago, and the 1917 Revolution in Russia that soon prompted the Cold War’s crusade against communism), and also to artificially create a sense of national unity.

⁵⁶ Crystal Palace Exposition statement of purpose quoted in Marian Pastor Rocés, “Crystal Palace Exhibitions,” *Over Here, International Perspectives on Art and Culture* ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (Cambridge /London / New York: The MIT Press / The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005) 238-239.

⁵⁷ Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 50.

⁵⁸ The Crystal Palace was later relocated in South London, to Sydenham Hill, what was meant to be its permanent location had it not been destructed by a fire in 1936. This was

also the case of other monuments and urban infrastructures originally conceived as attractions for World's Fairs and became historical landmarks of city capitals' process of modernization, such as Paris' Eiffel Tower erected for the 1889 Exposition Universelle and its subway system, which was inaugurated for the 1900 World's Fair held in the French capital.

⁵⁹ Pastor Roces 234.

⁶⁰ For a complete analysis of the emergence of international large-scale exhibitions see, *The Manifesta Decade, Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* ed. Elena Filipovic and Barbara Vanderlinden, op.cit.

⁶¹ Pastor Roces 236-237.

⁶² Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 51. The other main consecrating art event being Documenta that, as we know, has a very different origin and profile than the Venice Biennale. Founded by Arnold Bode in 1955, Documenta was a response to the German post-war reconstruction and the traumas of the Second World War, specifically the cultural sanitation that prevailed during the Nazi era. "Here was a renewal of the humanist ideal...created as the antithesis of the propagandistic exhibitions and national rivalries that had been all too evident in the years before 1939."

⁶³ Riccardo Selvatico, mayor of Venice, in his official announcement of the creation of the Venice Biennale on April 6, 1894, quoted by Enzo di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale 1895-2007 Visual Arts, Architecture, Cinema, Dance, Music, Theater* (Venecia: Papiro Arte, 2007) 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The first pavilion constructed was the Belgian Pavilion, while the latest addition was the South Korean one in 1995.

⁶⁶ Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 51. Recently, all those countries that want to have a representation during the Biennial but aren't able to buy a pavilion simply rent a temporary location to exhibit their artists.

⁶⁷ Misko Suvakovik, "The ideology of Exhibition: On the Ideologies of Manifesta," <<http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma3/suvakovicengp.htm>>.

⁶⁸ The next radical political gesture that is to be remembered in close dialogue with the exhibition site during the Venice Biennial—but this time on an individual basis—was Hans Haacke's intervention in the German Pavilion in 1993. For his installation *Germania*, a direct reference to Hitler's 1934 visit to the Biennial, Haacke broke into pieces the marble floor of the Nazi-era remodeled pavilion, and with it any nationalistic overtone that could be associated to a recently reunified Germany.

⁶⁹ One could also mention the 2002 Gwangju Biennial that was composed of four curated projects and invited 25 alternative spaces to participate as part of Project 1 (curated by Hou Hanru and Charles Esche) as a way to imagine alternatives to the homogenizing forces of capitalism as well as to support artist run initiatives outside the Western artistic capitals, among them the Mexican commercial gallery Kurimazutto. The gallery's project

was to distribute free photocopied editions of the official catalogue. Even though, for some critics, “By highlighting the possibilities of collective self-organization in the face of institutional inertia, the biennial engaged in a real dialogue with its local context, offering artists multiple models of self-sustainable cultural production” (Filipovic 78), this is but one example of a very questionable gesture that should be put into perspective. For one shouldn’t forget that, as a commercial space, Kurianzutto had other interests beyond the democratic reach of the catalogue, such as promoting its own artists on the international scene, an agenda that in turn wasn’t unknown to the organizers of the event. See Hou Hanru, “Initiatives, Alternatives: Notes in a Temporary and Raw State,” *How Latitudes Become Form, Art in a Global Age* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and DAP, 2003) 36-39.

⁷⁰ This wasn’t of course the first time such a strategy was implemented for an international biennial.

⁷¹ Another interesting thing to point out is the fact that Bonami himself curated three exhibitions for the Biennial, one of which was *Picture/Painting*, a retrospective on painting at the Venice Biennale from 1964 to 2003—1964 being, symptomatically enough, the year when Raushenberg was awarded the Great Prize.

⁷² Claire Doherty, “Curating Wrong Places...or Where have all the Penguins Gone?” *Curating subjects* ed. Paul O’Neil (London: Open Editions and Amsterdam: De Appel 2006). Miwon Kwon’s book, *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), traces the origins of site-specificity and curatorial discourse back to individual artistic practices siding with institutional critique, and posits that, today, “the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location—grounded, fixed, actual—to a discursive vector—ungrounded, fluid, virtual,” (29). Implicit to Kwon’s argument is the fact that site-specificity seems to be more and more subordinated to identity politics or postcolonial discourse as reflected by community-based art, an argument worth being discussed.

⁷³ Rachel Weiss, “Sixth Havana Biennial,” first published in *Art Nexus*, num. 26 Oct.-Dec. 1997 <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/artnexus/no26/weiss_eng1.htm>.

⁷⁴ The first Johannesburg Biennial took place in 1995, one year after the first democratic elections in South Africa. Its second, and last, edition of 1997 closed one month in advance of its schedule calendar because of financial problems.

⁷⁵ This would be the case in an ideal scenario, for the question of forging an identity for international biennials is another questionable point. As we know, the usual biennial scenario dictates a simple shuffling of artists and curators that migrate from a locality to the next one.

⁷⁶ Carlos Basualdo, “The Unstable Institution,” *Curating Subjects*, op.cit. 48.

⁷⁷ For a critical analysis of multicultural discourse see, for example, Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Brokering Identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation,” *Thinking about Exhibitions* ed. Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996) or Gerardo Mosequera, ed. *Beyond the Fantastic, Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge: The MIT Press/inIVA, 1996).

⁷⁸ It was only in 1989, for its third edition, that the Havana Biennial opened to Africa and the Caribbean. For its fifth edition in 1994, it invited artists from the United States and Europe, although most of them were from African descent.

⁷⁹ Lilian Llanes quoted in Miguel Leonardo Rojas Sotelo, *Cultural Maps, Networks and Flows: The History and Impact of the Havana Biennale 1984 to the present*. (Diss. Pittsburg University, 2009) 138.

⁸⁰ In this, the Havana Biennial also differentiates itself from the other major biennial in Latin America: the Sao Paulo Biennial. Although the Sao Paulo Biennial is the oldest art biennial in the continent (and, founded in 1951, the second oldest art biennial after Venice), this text will not address its case since, having been inspired by the Venice one, it posits a very different conceptual framework. However, even if the Sao Paulo Biennial served also as a symbol of Brazilian modernization, it should be said that it still has served as a fundamental counterpoint to Western hegemony—even though it maintained a system based of national representations until its 2006 edition—just as much of Brazilian modern and contemporary artistic production has intelligently fought to establish a horizontal dialogue between Brazilian art (and other peripheral cultures) and the mainstream. The concept of *Antropofagia*, developed in 1929 by Oswald de Andrade as a metaphor for Brazil's assertion against European cultural domination, and recovered in 1998 by Paulo Henkerkoff when he curated the 24th edition of the Biennial, is but one example.

⁸¹ Ibis Hernández, another of the Biennial organizers and director of the Center Wilfredo Lam, states: "For example, how should we honor an artist such as Oiguiubi Fanabe from Nigeria who used to work as 'bogolan' artist driving ancestral and contemporary images and practices into his work...simultaneously with the work of artists such as Luis Camnitzer who was practicing international conceptualism?... We had to make a shift and to find a new space for discussion. In part, that discussion helped terminate the competitive model." Hernández quoted in Rojas Sotelo 140.

⁸² Pastor Rocés 242.

⁸³ Even if *Magiciens de la Terre* was much criticized for its paternalistic tone that was unable to transcend its own impulse to exoticize the cultural production of the peripheries, the show was still one of the first attempts coming from a mainstream institution to integrate the so-called Third World countries to a larger cultural discussion.

⁸⁴ Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 48.

⁸⁵ Pastor Rocés 243.

⁸⁶ For a report on the ongoing struggle against censorship as performed in the latest Havana Biennial, see Claire Bishop, "Tenth Havana Biennial," *Artforum* (Summer 2009).

⁸⁷ Weiss, op.cit. "In softening its original rhetorical position, the Havana Biennial may be loosing the edge which has given it such long term importance in favor of an easier fit with the current international discourse...Its organizers have proved that a convincing global position can be developed from outside the usual circles of power; their task now, one fears, is to defend their achievement from their own success well enough to preserve its voice and distinctness."

⁸⁸ Gerardo Mosquera interviewed by Gerhard Haupt, <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/havanna/opinion/e_mosqu.htm>. For a critical analysis of the export of talent see

Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Brokering Identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation,” op.cit.

⁸⁹ Mosquera quoted in Rojas Sotelo 143.

⁹⁰ See Weiss, op.cit. The first editions of the Biennial also included parallel exhibitions of local art crafts, as well as concerts featuring popular singers as Mercedes Sosa, Pablo Milanés, or Chicco Buarque.

⁹¹ Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” *The Manifesta Decade, Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, op.cit. 79.

⁹² Pastor Rocas 238. “Already a spatial discourse on the global in its prehistory and its textual formulation as universal, the Crystal Palace expositions hotheaded nothing less than the modern city, the spectacular space that materializes the power to command constructions of the global.”

⁹³ See Jenny Liu, “Trouble in Paradise,” *Frieze* 51 (Mar.-Apr. 2000), 9 Sept. 2009 <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/trouble_in_paradise/>.

⁹⁴ Maurizio Cattelan and Jens Hoffman, *6th Caribbean Biennial* (Dijon/Paris: Presses du reel, 2001).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Maurizio Cattelan in Maurizio Cattelan and Jens Hoffman, *6th Caribbean Biennial*, op.cit. “We started out by studying what a biennial is: well known artists, ads in magazines, a catalogue, a press office, a curatorial project, invitation letters, curators, guests. Then we produced exactly as it is.”

⁹⁷ Liu.

⁹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu in Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 97. “In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of the species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to the other positions (domination, subordination, homology etc.).”

⁹⁹ Cattelan and Hoffmann.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Genesis of the Concepts of Habitus and Fields," *Sociocriticism* 2 (1985): 16. As we know Pierre Bourdieu discusses his notion of field, and particularly his conception of a cultural field of production, as resulting from the rejection of both the "internal interpretation and external explication, before which were placed all the sciences of cultural works, religious sciences, art history or literary history." He proposes transcending the simple "opposition between a formalism born of the theorizing of an art which achieved a high degree of autonomy, and a reductionism intent on directly relating artistic form to social forms...[that] hid the fact that both of these trends disregarded the field of production as a social space of objective relationships."

¹⁰² Liu, op.cit. "The idea of a biennial without art could have been cool in a marvelously vacuous sort of a way, puncturing the self-importance of the art world by grotesquely aping it. What we got was a furtive and ungenerous gesture, a covert V-sign flipped at the art world behind its back, when more balls could have made it a divinely impudent mooning in its face...This was institutional critique in biennial drag, a collective vacation with around ten artists in attendance, along with a couple of representatives from the fourth estate, and a bare handful of unaffiliated attendees. What were we all doing there, under the auspices of a biennial, when there was no actual art? Many of the same things that we do at other biennials, only without the pleasure and burden of looking at art; oh yeah, and the added bonus of being in the Caribbean."

¹⁰³ Cattelan and Hoffmann.

¹⁰⁴ 6th Caribbean Biennial press release, quoted in Liu.

¹⁰⁵ Armando García in Maurizio Cattelan and Jens Hoffman, *Sixth Caribbean Biennial*, op.cit.

¹⁰⁶ Liu.

¹⁰⁷ Cattelan and Hoffmann.

¹⁰⁸ With the exception of the Sao Paulo Biennial, that is the case of events such as the Cuenca Biennial, the Biennial Centro Americana and other minor biennials that emerged from corporate funding during the 1990s (such as the Johnny Walker Biennial that took place as a local survey in several Latino American countries).

¹⁰⁹ As a result of the curatorial proposal, the 8th Panama Biennial was the first to be curated and to invite a pool of international artists to participate.

¹¹⁰ There was long political lobbying before it was decided that the fair celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal would take place in San Francisco instead of San Diego. It is important to mention that one of the main arguments was the fact that the city needed to rebuild its own image, having been destroyed during the 1906 earthquake. For a complete report see Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, op.cit. 208-233.

¹¹¹ Alexander Missal, *Seaway to the Future, American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008) 175. It should be mentioned that just two years prior to this, President Wilson pushed a

button in the White House that detonated the Gamboa dike in Panama, allowing millions of liters of water to flow—from Gatun Lake—and fill the Panama Canal.

¹¹² Ibid. 183-184.

¹¹³ McCullough 574-575.

¹¹⁴ Macomber 193.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. It should be mentioned that the guide only briefly refers to the existence of a Panamanian Pavilion in the exhibition. In relation to the so-called *Panama authors* (or *storytellers*) that transmitted all these accounts as mediated experiences, see Alexander Missal, *Seaway to the Future, American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal*, op.cit. “As the spectators in the gallery moved around effortlessly, the exhibit transformed the task of observing the American empire into a ‘remote-controlled,’ passive, and yet social, act of consumption. By implementing this commodified, globalized gaze, the Canal miniature foreshadowed the cultural framework of our own age. At the fair exhibit, the ‘great enclosure,’ became a manifestation not only of the triumph on the Isthmus but also of the American resolution to create a new society, literally a *model* for the future.” Missal 191.

¹¹⁶ Green 9-10.

¹¹⁷ See Bill Brown, “Science Fiction, the World’s Fair and the Prosthetics of Empire, 1910-1915,” *Cultures of United States Imperialism* ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) 138-39. The essay is an analysis of the relationship between the rise of science fiction in U.S. literature and the development of a narrative of technological dominance as the basis for the consolidation of North American imperialism.

¹¹⁸ As we know, Roosevelt was responsible for the introduction of the image of the cowboy into the White House.

¹¹⁹ Robert Storr, “Think with the Senses—Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense,” *Think with the Senses—Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense, La Biennale di Venecia, 52 Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2007).

¹²⁰ Basualdo 50.

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