Havana Biennial

Under the idealistic rubric "One Closer to the Other" the seventh Havana Biennial proposed to consider communication in the current technological age. Using the impact of new technologies as a touchstone, some of the most eloquent work actually created moments in which communication was lost. The duo Ordo Amor (for example, erected two tall antennas in a sunny room in one of the city's foyers) killed the minimalist space with the sounds of unheard messages which vibrated around the two poles. Gustavo Romero's ghostly video projection of an X-ray of a hand writing words invisible to the viewer, accompanied by the amplified scratching of the fountain pen, conveyed something of the expressiveness of language precisely by dissolving its physical structures.

Other artists pointedly represented communication in a more abstract manner. William Embury used sound to stencil into the floor words from several newly official South African languages, along with abstract English "nouns" and "conjunctions". It was a gesture that removed a usual relationship of dominance by giving speakers of lesser-known languages an advantage over anglophones, who were unlikely to know the words from their own language.

Works that resisted the complications of globalization on local cultures were countered by those that adopted the very signs and practices of trade as their media. Nance Ramírez's signposts juxtaposed arrows pointing to cities around the world with quips from public personage regarding citizenship, and Diego Toledo's logo-like sticker designs representing conditions of exchange (such as a cluster of arrows forming a virtual globe of pure contradiction and no destination, constantly avoided the glibness found in some of the latter).

Sílvia Hidalgo's installation Dream Houses of People Who Live with Their Parents (2000) - a small village of folded carbo drawings depicting exactly what the title describes - was also a touching reminder that exchange creates cultures which shape personal identity.

More radically, the pressures of globalization also manifest in the shape of the exhibition: the preponderance of installation, conceptual and media-based works suggested that those have effectively displaced studio and craft-based practices as the dominant currency of international art, even within this traditionally euro-centric context. Some works uncomfortably enacted local symbologics to this type of gymnastics of translation, and in the attempt often seemed to miss any real ability to communicate. On the other hand, the choice to mount a special adjunct exhibition featuring the work of Hito Steyerl was a just recognition of a practice that exemplifies independence while insisting radically on human exchange.

Nevertheless, an emphasis on individual experience and personal exchange was apparent, not only in the many performance and live-action works, but in several installations that focused on local action, presence or witnessing. In Graciela Sacco's torch-tastic installation, the viewer's gesture was the critical agent, creating an uncomfortable sense of complicity and responsibility. As you pointed the torch onto the walls, projecting an image of an armed gun, your action simultaneously produced fleeting shadows of eyes (victims?) cast by suspended pieces of etched Perspex. Tania Bruguera's work also made history palpable, setting the sharp odour of sugar cane crushed underfoot, viewers ventured into a tunnel whose darkness was revealed only by an overhead monitor playing footage of Fidel Castro. Once inside, it took some time before you perceived the five figures posed around you, quietly tending their napped bodies. In a rather more playful event for public catharsis, Gustavo Artigas lent out polystyrene toy airplanes and Headset radios tuned to a radio station broadcasting cockpit recordings from air disasters.

Official shows inevitably preclude unofficial local responses, and hence it is worth mentioning two alternative events. For 'Esta es a casa Nostra!' (This is your house Vicente), a group of Cuban artists borrowed a private house. Personal exchanges with the resident of the house were integral to experiencing the show. 'Extra Marzo' was a series of international interviews into public and non-institutional successes organised by expedient Talyana Pimentel, negotiating the real living conditions of the city - in some cases despite censorship - both events may have been more effective than the official biennial in pinpointing the problems of communication as they pertain to Havana.

According to some rumours, this may be the final installment of the Havana Biennial. Should this prove true, the emphasis on local action will have been an ironic end to an institution that has consciously championed art from the non-Western world. At yet another forum on the future of biennials, director Néstor Hernández-Yela claimed that the organizers no longer needed to distinguish between centre and periphery. Given that the exhibition (its scope now expanded to include the US and Europe) clearly wished to approximate any other international megashow, it seems that they feel their mandate has become redundant.

Yet, this fact also confirms the very need for a new model to represent non-dominant practices and to speak to, and of, the difficult conditions of places such as Havana. That is, the complicated conditions affecting local expression that spawned the theme of this show are also the ones this underdetermined biennial must address as it declines now - and whether to rely itself.

Germaine Koh

Using the impact of new technologies as a touchstone, some of the most eloquent work in the Havana Biennial actually created moments in which communication was lost.

Marco Ramirez

Drawing

Mediamedia

Dimensions variable

frieze