

The 14th Havana Biennial Has Opened to the Public— But the Show Has Taken a Backseat to the Protests Around It

Ahead of the biennial's opening, more than a dozen invited artists declined to participate in protest of the state's actions.

Taylor Dafoe, December 9, 2021

Midway through last month, the 14th edition of the Havana Biennial opened—not with a bang but with a whimper.

The state-sponsored exhibition, historically Cuba's most important art event, has long had a dual nature. It's a welcome platform for Cuban artists to introduce their work to the world, but also a tool of soft power for the local government. And because of the attention it brings, positive and negative, it has also been a hotbed for political action.

"The main purpose of the Havana Biennial is to project an image abroad of the Cuban art scene, that the state is so beneficent and that everything is so wonderful," Cuban artist and writer Coco Fusco, a past participant in the show, explained to Artnet News. And yet, for invitees, the prospect of partaking can be too tantalizing to turn down: "Artists often make enough money in sales from that one event to live for a year or two," she added.

But this year, even in the wake of violent protests around government crackdowns, surging infections, and a drastic economic dip, turning down the invitation is just what many artists did. Indeed, it seems that opposition to the exhibition has overshadowed the event itself.

A Statement of Protest

Ahead of the show's opening in mid-November, over a dozen invited participants declined to participate.

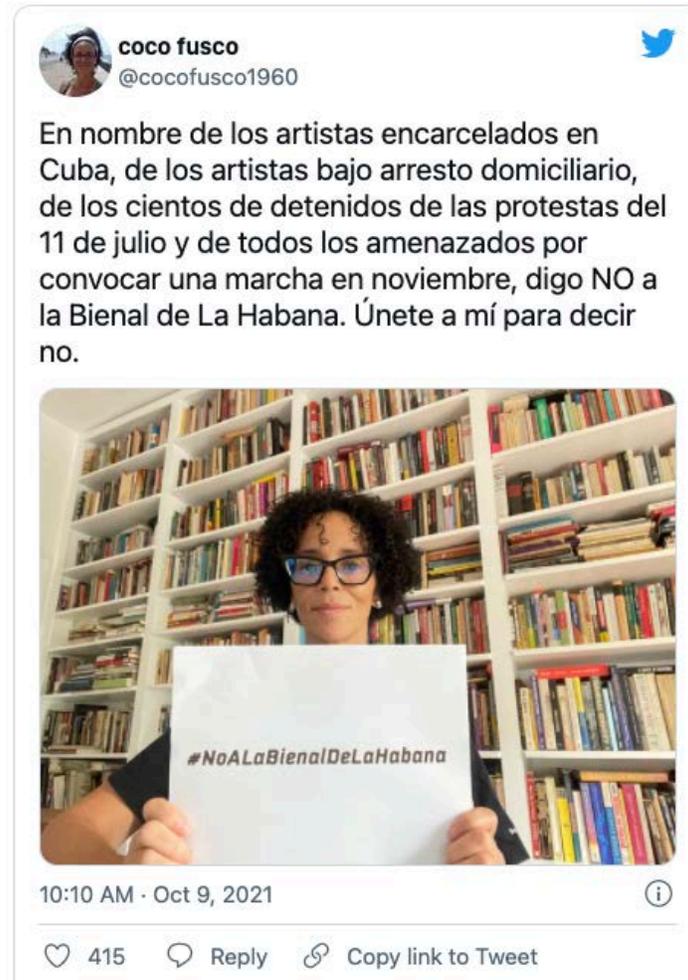
These include twelve of the participating artists: Yazmany Arboleda, Aimee Joaristi, Argüelles, Abel Azcona, Ursula Biemann, Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Carolina Caycedo, Terike Haapoja, Miler Lagos, Joiri Minaya, and Rosângela Rennó.

It also includes curators Nicolas Bourriaud, María Belén Saéz de Ibarra, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, as well as writer Laura Gustafsson.

Meanwhile, hundreds more signed an open letter calling for an across-the-board boycott. This included well-known figures such as Marina Abramović, Pablo Helguera, Teresita Fernández, Theaster Gates, Thomas Lax, Julie Mehretu, Cildo Meireles, Naeem Mohaiemen, Shirin Neshat, Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Robert Storr.

"The institutions and functionaries that organize the 14th Havana Biennial are the same ones that have refused to listen to us," the letter, penned by the activist group 27N, read. "They have condoned and participated in the violence perpetrated against Cuban cultural workers who seek greater autonomy for Cuban culture and civil rights for our citizenry."

“The problems we face cannot be reduced to an isolated case of censorship,” the document went on. “We are contending with a systemic effort by the Cuban government to silence those who think differently. The lives of people in the cultural field are at risk.”



The Background

In July of this year, thousands of Cubans took to the streets in a spate of protests against the Communist regime under Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel. Spurring them was a lack of basic goods, a rise in COVID-19 cases, and the government’s impingement of civil liberties, including a controversial censorship law, Decree 349. Over 1,000 artists and creatives were detained during the course of the protests.

The 14th edition of the Havana Biennial arrived in this climate. “Futuro y Contemporaneidad” (“Future and Contemporaneity”) is the name of the exhibition, which for the first time is broken down into three different installments—or “experiences”—spread across its six months. The first two opened on November 12 and December 6, respectively.

The show isn’t driven by a cohesive theme but rather by a series of lofty—if somewhat cryptic—descriptions. According to the curatorial statement, the exhibition purports to be a “decolonizing space...for all those interested in a dialogue of coexistence” and “a platform for reflection on the development of civilization from the territories of art as a plural and decentralized space.”

According to Prensa Latina, Cuba's official state news agency, more than 1,000 "visual artists, gallery owners, writers, thinkers and political scientists" signed a petition in support of this year's biennial. The news outlet also reported that the Biennial's organizing committee confirmed the participation of 300 artists. And since its opening last month, the show's Facebook and Instagram pages have been consistently updated with photos of events.

Conflicting Messages

Still, little information has seeped out of Havana about who actually is participating in the show. Few if any non-local news outlets have covered "Futuro y Contemporaneidad," and the materials provided by the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center, which is responsible for organizing the event, contain out-of-date information about artists who have since publicly withdrawn.

For instance, the list of participating artists for the first installment listed on the website includes mixed-media artist Joiro Minaya, one of the artists who has publicly dropped out. Minaya explained in a statement shared on social media that she "corresponded for a while with [the] administration to understand what they were interested in and what the logistics would be, but I have not corresponded for more than a month, nor have I taken any steps to send my works." She continued:

"I have concluded that it is difficult, contradictory, even hypocritical, to be part of an event organized by a regime that violates the freedoms of dissident artists; that tortures, imprisons and deports artists for doing their work or expressing their opinion; that I consider will be a smokescreen to cover up a crisis... In solidarity with the Cuban artists repressed, imprisoned, tortured, violated, silenced, disappeared or deported for their art or thought, I will not participate in this event under these circumstances."

The organizers of the Havana Biennial did not respond to Artnet News's request for more information.

An Ongoing Struggle

Tania Bruguera's name is also among those signing the new international letter. In October, Bruguera agreed to leave her home country on the condition that the Cuban authorities release 25 political prisoners, among them fellow artist and activist Hamlet Lavastida and members of the 27N Movement. (Neither Bruguera nor Lavastida responded to inquiries from Artnet News.)

Yet dozens of artists and dissidents, including Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel Castillo and members of 27N-adjacent San Isidro and Archipiélago movements, remain in some form of detainment. Scores of others are reportedly subject to surveillance, abuse, and other forms of punitive state action.

In yet another letter this week, co-issued by the human rights advocacy groups PEN America, PEN International, and Human Rights Watch, over 300 cultural figures, Meryl Streep, Orhan Pamuk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Khaled Hosseini called on the Cuban government to "stop its unrelenting abuses against artists, release all arbitrarily detained artists, and drop all charges against them."

"Throwing artists in jail or exiling them from the country forever—in response to their art, words, and ideas—is abusive and inhumane," the statement said. "We stand proudly in solidarity with Cuban artists. Art should be free from censorship and repression, in Cuba and everywhere."