

NEWS

An Insider's View of the Cuban Art World and 2019 Havana Biennial

In an in-depth interview translated from Spanish, artist and scholar Coco Fusco discusses the 2019 Havana Biennial and state of the Cuban art world with poet and cultural commentator Katherine Bisquet.

Coco Fusco July 30, 2019



Katherine Bisquet (photo by and courtesy of Hector Trujillo)

Katherine Bisquet's commentaries on the most recent last Havana Biennial and the adjacent exhibitions published in the online daily Diario de Cuba were the most incisive commentaries about Cuba's premier art extravaganza, but unfortunately only appeared in Spanish. As a poet who frequents cultural events on the island, she has a critically

informed perspective on the status and potential of visual arts in Cuba. I asked her to talk a little bit about her views of contemporary Cuban art for an English language audience.

Bisquet received her BA in Literature from the College of Arts and Letters of the University of Havana. She published a book of poetry, *Algo aquí se descompone* (*Something Here is Falling Apart*), in 2014. She received an Honorable Mention from the Pinos Nuevos Prize in 2015 and 2018, and an Honorable Mention for the

Hermanos Loynaz Prize in 2015. She is the poetry editor for Unión Publications in Havana, writes for Diario de Cuba in Madrid, and was one of the organizers of the #ooBienal de la Habana in 2018.

Interview and translation by Coco Fusco. This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

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Hyperallergic: *How and when did you become interested in the visual arts?*

Katherine Bisquet: I first got interested in art when I was a student at the College of Arts and Letters of the University of Havana. I was pursuing a degree in literature, and I was very interested in attending exhibition openings in Havana. These were events that all those who share an interest in the arts attended — art and literature students as well as artists. Even though they were superficial, art history classes provided me with a broad understanding of Cuban art. What really piqued my interest was developing friendships with artists and getting to know their preoccupations. I was attracted to their poetics and their carefree ways of creating impact.

There was a time when I was not interested in writing about art. It was not until July 26, 2016, when a poet friend invited to the presentation of an artwork by someone I did not know. The artist was Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and his work was entitled “The Museum of Dissidence.” This made me think of many questions and issues related to art. I remember that on the way back to my house I was arguing passionately about art that was timely and art that as opportunistic. That evening, I wrote my first essay about art, “Escape no. 1 in Ro may Dissidentum Museum,” with my friend the poet Yanier H. Palao, and published it in *El Oficio* magazine, where I was the editor of the poetry section.

H: *Why do you think that Cuban visual arts have received so much attention nationally and internationally? It seems to me to receive more attention than other art forms in Cuba.*

KB: The visual arts are more privileged than other art forms. Since the 1980s, there has been a notable increase in sales of contemporary Cuban art abroad. The combination of Cuba’s economic precariousness and its socialist system make it impossible for there to be a national market for visual art. Cuba cannot sustain the dealers, collectors, and art patrons that a local art market needs.



Hamlet Lavastida, "Manual for Reading the Proletarian Alphabet" (2019) (photo courtesy of the artist)

In Cuba, every year we have festivals of cinema, dance, ballet, theater, literature, and music in Havana, and in the provinces, there are also many events. However, once each festival is over, the audiences return to their homes knowing that well, yes, our island offers these activities. They might be carried out with limited funds and they might be mediocre, or even scandalous; in short, they might be cultural events that do not merit international exposure. But things are different in the visual arts. Local Cuban audiences are not as interested or identified with this form of cultural expression. While music concerts and other performing arts events are often mobbed, fine arts

venues are far less likely to be overwhelmed by the local public. The audience for fine art is an elite audience, and it is more international, less local.

Cuba is defined by its conditions of existence — it is geographically and politically isolated. It is stuck. It lags behind. It is out of date. Even in its most radical aspects, Cuban art is only understood through its fateful connection with the ideological, political, social, historical, and commercial life Cubans live. Art might reflect all these realities at once: that which is hidden, or permitted, or censored. Our politics are measured by our art in a general sense. At the same time, the domain of visual art has been the most incisive, which is to say the space of greatest resistance.

H: *Where can one publish art criticism in Cuba? What kind of restrictions does an art critic face in Cuba?*

KB: Although I am not focused on my work on art criticism — I see myself as reflecting upon the situation of contemporary Cuban art — I will comment here about the publications that are dedicated to art criticism. There are few venues in Cuba in which to publish critical texts about art. *Revista Arte Cubano* has existed since 1995 and is one of the only magazines that is exclusively dedicated to art writing. The best known art historians, curators, and critics on the island, as well as those who want to become important cultural figures (which is to say graduates

of the College of Arts and Letters that aspire to follow in the footsteps of their mentors), focus their efforts on publishing there until they decide to opt for seeking a fellowship that takes them out of the country. I find a lot of art criticism in Cuba to be problematic and pedantic. Rarely does anyone judge anything or introduce unusual or innovative ways of looking at art. The practice tends to be formulaic and focused on established artists that operate within state institutions.

So, as a result, there is an absence of commentary about independently produced art, the art of the margins that circulates outside state institutions. That kind of art activity is rendered invisible by the intentional lack of coverage. There are other venues in which to publish art criticism — such as *Noticias de ArteCubano*, *Art OnCuba*, and *Art par Excellence* — that are designed for the tourist market. Despite the limitations of these publications, thanks to the growing internet access on the island, many have created their own blogs or they have created independent magazines about art, but it is impossible to obtain an ISSN that would legalize their status.



Reynier Leyva Novo, "A Happy Day"
(2019) (photo courtesy of the artist)

H: Does the Havana Biennial still have the same relevance that it had when it was started? In the 1980s when the first Havana biennials were carried out, there were few such events in the so-called periphery, and the established biennials in places like Venice and São Paulo did not include many artists from what we now call “the Global South.” One of the main goals of the Havana Biennial was to create a platform for the arts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Today there are biennials

in India, in Africa, in the UAE, and in China. The next Documenta will be curated by a collective of artists from Indonesia, and at this year’s Venice Biennale, the Golden Lion prize went to Jimmie Durham, who identifies as Cherokee. In your opinion, what is the current objective of the Havana Biennial? Does the XIII Havana Biennial have a different orientation from previous ones? What were the best and worst aspects of the XIII Biennial?

KB: In a text he wrote last year for the alternative ooBienal, Cuban critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera noted that when the Havana Biennial started in 1984 the curators were very idealistic, believing that such an art event could create a better world.

What we have seen with the last biennial, however, is the resurrection of well-worn terms from the revolutionary era, which is to say “construction” and “the possible.” Throughout the years, the government has used these terms to evoke an ideal, to speak of the revolution as an act of building a future both materially and psychologically. These terms were used in an almost maniacal fashion to impose the realm of the possible over and above what was actually necessary.

It is true that the original intent of the Havana Biennial was to create a space, a network, and a set of values for artists of the Third World. This was the Cuban government’s way to promote its own messianic politics and present a positive image of itself to the world. The 2019 biennial emerged in the midst of a public relations crisis for the Ministry of Culture, which has recently been affected by the campaign against [Decree 349](#) led by many Cuban artists. Decree 349 criminalizes many aspects of free expression, as well as the distribution and promotion of independently produced art that is not authorized by the state.

The biennial was once inspired by a liberal desire for cultural renovation, but it has been paralyzed by apathy and stunted by the censorship of old bureaucrats. The biennial that, according to Mosquera, was once “an urban festival,” “full of energy and vitality,” and “a big party that involved the entire city,” has 35 years later become a rather boring event. It went from being grand and chaotic to being restricted and controlled. Exhibitions opened at 10am to avoid crowds. There was no emblematic gathering place for parties at night. The roster of international guest artists was rather meager.

The biennial felt very official and somewhat funereal, curated by people with very outdated views. The independent spaces were quieter this year, as if there were a kind of extended plague or a lack of motivation due to the disastrous “festival of art” that was the official biennial. The official biennial was eclipsed by the collateral exhibitions. To say that the biennial was everywhere was absurd. I would characterize the biennial by the question that many of us would ask on a daily basis, which was — is there anything to see today in the biennial?

H: *What was the difference between the collateral exhibitions and the independent exhibitions?*

KB: There is a difference between the collateral shows in spaces that are in a sense protected or accepted by the state — I refer here to The Apartment, the Figueroa-Vives Studio, the exhibition venues in embassies, for example — and the shows that are organized by independent artists in their studios, homes, and



Leandro Feal, "The Intrusionism of the Inspector" (2019) (used with permission)

galleries. They pertain to that part of the private sector that has been adept at integrating itself into the official sector by flirting with the system. The collateral exhibitions that were approved by the biennial committee took place in spaces that feature younger, more cutting edge artists. And they understand the art market and art promotion in a more professional and less prejudiced way. It is thanks to this

sector that Cuban art has been able to insert itself into international networks, international art fairs, and international collections. These spaces are more efficient than the state institutions, which are chained to old norms, old aesthetics, and old bureaucratic and mercantile structures.

The state does not have the capacity to represent all artistic activity in Cuba, and cannot act as the spokesperson for all that is contemporary. At the same time, the state does undermine individual empowerment in the world of galleries and has established certain means for supervising Cuban art. Under the aegis of this conservatism, various organizations of limited vision have emerged over the years designed in principle to facilitate the commercialization of contemporary Cuban art but which in reality exercise control over it. First, this task was carried out by the Cuban Cultural Heritage Foundation, then the Génesis Art Galleries created in 2001, then again the Cuban Cultural Heritage Foundation, then finally the National Center for Fine Arts. At the same time, art projects were developing and being exhibited in home galleries. I would say that these state institutions have become outdated.

The independent spaces are better at keeping up with and make art visible with greater speed and frequency than the state institutions. They are on top of what is really going on in Cuban art and have known how to promote it.

H: Do you think there are strategies or themes that define Cuban art that was shown in or out of the biennial?

KB: Cuban art is driven by the theme of making revolution. But whatever the strategies may be, inside or outside the biennial, Cuban art should not forget its role as an agent of critical reflection in these times. I would say in the end that in

this biennial were was no revolutionary art in terms of aesthetics and concepts. From what I saw, everyone was making the same point in different ways.

H: *Can you tell us about your experience with the Cuban authorities when you did your presentation at the last Havana Book Fair?*

KB: As has been the case in previous years, I was invited to the last edition of the Havana Book Fair to participate in poetry readings being that I am a young author. This time, however, I was attacked by one of the organizers of the festival (who was also a former classmate) during my presentation because I had decided to express myself freely. I wore a T-shirt that said “#I vote No” in response to the Vote Yes campaign the Cuban state was carrying out before the last Constitutional referendum. I also spoke out against Decree 349 before I read my poems. I was also subject to physical aggression, and a few days later I began to be harassed by State Security (The Political Police). I have dealt with the more subtle forms of repression by State Security. Cuba spends a lot of money every year on the sale of political propaganda. The state controls of all communications systems inside the country, for example, the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC), which was established to produce and circulate the revolution’s propaganda. The Cuban state is interested in maintaining an image of itself before the world as positive and democratic. Therefore to act in a brutal manner against pacifist intellectuals who confront state power would be counter-productive. There is physical mistreatment and imprisonment of many opponents, but in general, the Cuban form of repression is more subtle than that of other Latin American and Caribbean countries. What we have here is colder, more calculated, and more psychological. I felt the presence of state security it generates a great deal of fear. The psychological tactics used are Soviet methods. Cuba has had its hands in many places, it has taken states apart, and it has always done so through discreet means use human services as bait.

State Security did not pressure me in a direct way, because there was no reason to do so. If they had detained me they would have shown me the true face of repression, which would have confirmed the lack of liberty of expression in Cuba. Given that I presented my opinion publicly from within an institution, acting on my role as an intellectual, and doing so peacefully in a lawful manner, there should in principle be no basis on which to accuse me of anything. However, I could see how I shifted in their eyes to the category of troublemaker. They tried to silence me, to relegate me to being ostracized. They harassed not only me but also my family and close friends, as well as people who have welcomed me into their homes. The confrontation has taken place in that cynical and underhanded way.

H: In a press conference at the biennial, the director of CNAP [el Centro Nacional de las Artes Plásticas (The National Center for Fine Arts)] commented when asked about the situation of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara that he was not an artist but rather an activist. There are many examples in the history of art of artists who have dealt with social and political themes, artists who have confronted regimes of power with their work and who have advocated for human rights, the environment, women's rights, etc. Why do you think the Cuban officials maintain rigid and in a certain sense retrograde definitions of art and its relationship to the social?

KB: The authorities play a clear role as defenders of state interests. The director of CNAP obviously has a limited notion of what an artist is and what an activist is, and doesn't even imagine that an artist might also be an activist, or does she?

In the Cuban context, the dividing line between art and activism can be difficult to define, as is in the case of political art. A genuine act of creating art is also an act of resistance in its proposal of a new aesthetic form and ethical stance. That implies a form of dissidence insofar as it is against established doctrine or power. In Cuba, no form of "dissidence" is tolerated. In the speech "Words to Intellectuals," Fidel Castro made clear what the moral function of revolutionary art was. Since then, any form of art, whether it is political or not, if it was outside the esthetic and ethical paradigms of the cultural policy, would be subjected to official judgment and censored, condemned, and denigrated. An example of this was the "Grey Years" period of the 1970s, with its witch hunts and its banishment of scores of Cuban intellectuals. We still live with vestiges of those times, in that there is a culture of fear and self-censorship. This is not a sign of unwarranted paranoia, because any artistic act that is not understood by officials and that bears the slightest hint of subversiveness can lead to rebuke and delegitimation. This is why political art on the island has been stigmatized as "not art" but activism, substituting the creative aspect (the notion of useful art) for political activism, which is understood in Cuba as oppositional. That is why many political artists have decided, with a certain degree of irony, to call themselves "artivists" — it is the result of the regime's labeling them "non-artists," and calling them dissidents paid for by the CIA or whatever other insult state cultural institutions choose to deploy against them.