

Kaarina Kaikkonen. *Departure*, 2003. Outdoor installation. 50 m. long.

# 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial

Much of the work in the Biennial found its sources in political discourse, world events, issues of identity, consumerism, travel/nomadism/territorial uprooting, and ecology. Although it is impossible to discuss here all the work worthy of mention, the following attempts to provide a survey of the dynamic work characteristic of this event.

JULIA P. HERZBERG

Thanks in large part to the expertise of the curatorial team of the Wifredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art, the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial got off to an effervescent start, one that without a doubt will be remembered as contributing to the understanding of global art in the making at this his-

toric moment.<sup>1</sup> The theme of the Biennial, *Art with Life* (*El Arte con la Vida*), embraces a multiplicity of practices with respect to artistic, material, and conceptual approaches suggesting the ways art and life intersect, inform, and define each other. After surveying the official selection of works including performances, films, and videos, together with an

extensive presentation of parallel exhibitions and theoretical events in the form of individual presentations or panel discussions, the viewer senses the dynamic, inventive, and in many cases, low-tech know-how of brilliant talent from diverse artistic communities from around the world.<sup>2</sup> The thematic focus of art with life, and its corollaries, art in life and art and life, are thoroughly integrated concepts in the work presented, much of which was installation art.

In spite of Cuba's economic uncertainties and political vicissitudes, the Biennial's organizing team continued its persistent outreach for talent, experimentation, and cutting-edge practices of unrecognized or under-recognized artists who redefine transnational dialogues.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the work in the Biennial found its sources in political discourse, world events, issues of identity, consumerism, travel/nomadism/territorial uprooting, and ecology. Although it is impossible to discuss here all the work worthy of mention, the following attempts to provide a survey of the dynamic work characteristic of this event.

Political discourse is the subject of three superbly crafted and visually dramatic installations by Kaarina Kaikkonen (Finland), Tania Bruguera (Cuba), and Siron Franco (Brazil). *Departure* by Kaarina Kaikkonen features a thousand jackets furling in the breeze between two massive stone walls high over a dry moat in the Fort of San Carlos de la Cabaña. The dark jackets, formerly worn by Finnish civil servants, are suspended from a network of cables forming the shape of a boat, one similar to the type used by Finnish fishermen. The strategic position of this installation is impressive: as you cross the bridge to enter the fort, your eye is captivated by the sight of the enormous number of jackets spanning the area under and beyond the bridge. As a result of their size, materiality, and placement, the empty garments appear to be marching toward the sea beyond the wall. The



forward thrust of the absent bodies suggests humankind's transterritorial journeys throughout the ages, Cuba being no exception. As in previous outdoor installations, the artist's garments simultaneously symbolize both the individual and the collective body connected in some fashion to the larger history of the place in which they are inserted.<sup>4</sup>

Tania Bruguera's *Autobiografía* (Autobiography) occupied a gallery in the National Museum of Fine Arts where its three elements consist of an empty stage, a microphone, and speakers blaring political slogans such as "*Revolucionario hasta el fin*" (Revolutionary until the end); "*¡Escogeremos siempre el sacrificio!*" (We will always choose sacrifice); "*Libertad o muerte*" (Liberty or death). Such ideological rhetoric is familiar to Cubans of the post-Revolutionary years. Although the physical presence of the leader, who is intimately associated with this rhetoric, is absent, his aura is present—especially when the spectator walks over to the onstage microphone and feels the vibration as if the Comandante's energy itself was emanating from it.

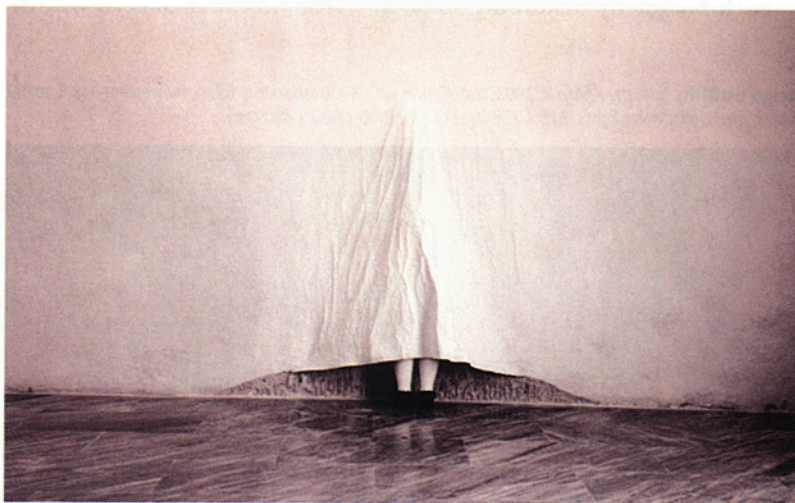
Sirón Franco's *Intolerancia* (Intolerance) projects a similar kind of heightened energy. The installation consists of countless stuffed figures in piles covering the entire space of the large gallery, conjuring the diverse scenarios (such as mass graves) with which we have all become too familiar. Franco's inert bodies occupy a space somewhere between violence and silence, and in that sense are similar to Mona Hatoum's headless figures in her recent exhibition "Here Is Else Where" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Artists such as Navjot Altaf (India), Gabriel Valansi (Argentina), Dario Oleaga (Dominican Republic, living in New York), and Jorge Pineda and Libia Posada (both from Columbia) responded to recent world events in notable ways, many of them memorializing people who lost their lives in the everyday flow of life and death. Navjot Altaf's video installation, *Lacuna in Testimony*, images the eternal



Dario Oleaga. *Dreams are Simply Dreams: Passport to Heaven*, 2003. Installation view. Variable dimensions.

Jorge Pineda. *Innocent Saints*, 2003. Installation. Variable dimensions.



Sirón Franco. *Intolerance*, 2003. Installation. Variable dimensions.





movement of ocean waves breaking at the shoreline. The blue water of the Arabian Sea eventually turns red, symbolizing the blood spilled during the Hindu-Muslim riots in the state of Gujarat in India in 2002. During that incident thousands of Muslims were killed by Hindu fundamentalists who retaliated after a group of unknown persons, alleged by the Gujarat government to be Muslims, set fire to a train carrying Hindu religious pilgrims. The pilgrims were returning from Ayodha where a sixteenth-century mosque had been destroyed by Hindu extremists ten years ago. The background sound records almost inaudibly a Muslim child's refrain captured by the artist during her interviews of victims in transit camps. The silence and slow motion of the waves, interrupted by the child's lamentations, make for a quietly disturbing scene in

which the events of the historical narrative have to be reimagined in the viewer's mind.

Darío Oleaga's installation, *Y los sueños, sueños son: Pasaporte al cielo* (Dreams are Simply Dreams: Passport to Heaven) posthumously commemorates American Airlines flight 587 that was en route to Santo Domingo from New York City when it crashed in October 2001. The gallery contained 265 airplane pillows representing the passengers who lost their lives. Photographs of street altars in the shape of airplane windows lined the walls of the gallery. The images were printed on special paper submerged in water that was later frozen so they blurred to create a dreamlike state suggestive of transcendence rather than literal death.

The generalized violence resulting from decades of civil war in Colom-

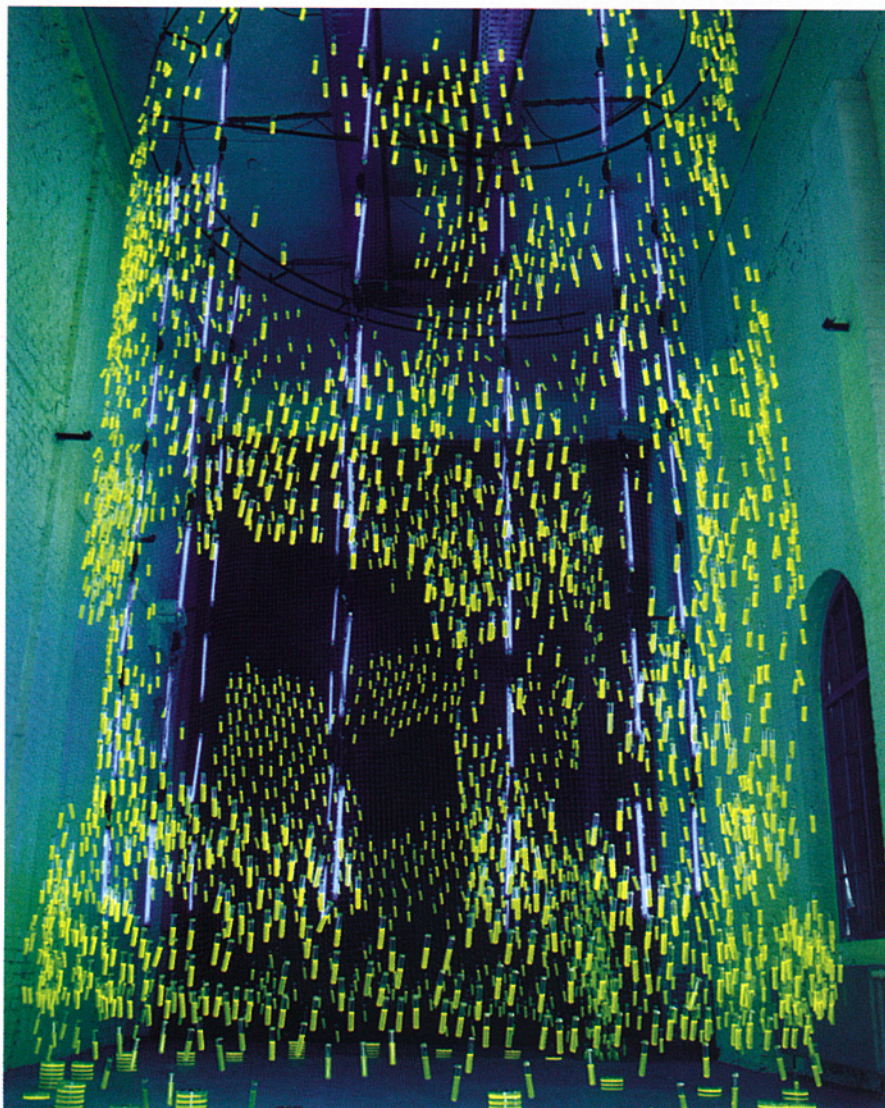
bia motivated two artists from that country to respond to daily realities. Jorge Pineda's *Santos Inocentes* (Innocent Saints) presented a tableau in which the spectator views the lower part of a young girl partially hidden behind a wall that literally projects out over her, thus concealing the upper part of her body. One wonders if she was playing hide-and-seek or protecting herself from harm's way caused by cross fire from the civil war or by familial violence contained within the walls of her home. The arresting quality of the spare elements in an otherwise empty room moves the spectator as s/he ponders the effects of violence on children's lives.

In response to the prolonged war, which has left many maimed, Libia Posada presented an unusual installation, *Sala de Rehabilitación*, which re-created a rehabilitation room in a hospital where the injured learn to use prosthetic devices. The installation, outfitted with medical equipment as well as specialized manuals and charts, provided the opportunity to consider the casualties of war from the particular perspective of the wounded.<sup>5</sup> A Biennial gallery attendant dressed as a nurse accompanied the visitor into the installation space, adding a human touch to the otherwise anti-septic look of a hospital.

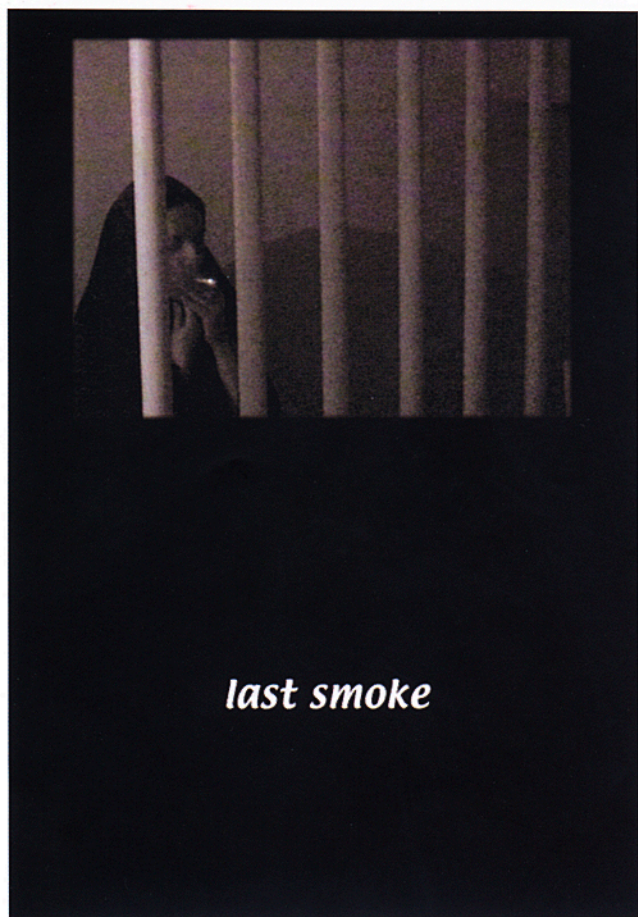
Gabriel Valansi's *Zeitgeist* of 2003 features a three-panel work made from three lenticular lens screens, creating a kinetic surface.<sup>6</sup> The green surface is dotted with images of the night bombings in Iraq and Kabul last March (2003) filmed by CNN using infrared. Neither a traditional painting nor a moving image, the work combines elements of both in its attempt to relay the visual sensation of high-tech news coverage from a war zone. Of equal interest is the twist Valansi gives to postmodernist abstraction and kineticism in a further attempt to utilize an aesthetic mode to bridge current events with art.

Among a large group of artists who examined identity questions

**Helga Griffiths.** *Identity Analysis*, 2003. Installation with 4000 laboratory tubes, fluorescent liquid, metal spirals, plates, mesh, ultraviolet lights. 315 x 236 1/3 x 177 in. (800 x 600 x 450 cm.).







**Ghazel.** *Last Smoke*, from *On 'Me' Series*, 2003. Still from video installation.

were Ghazel (Iran, lives in France) and Helga Griffiths (Germany). Ghazel did three videos titled *On 'Me' Series*, based on personal writings in the form of captions and humorous quips in which she attempts to define her multiple selves (insider/outsider, Eastern/Western) and at the same time to interrogate the spectator's perceptions about her Iranian identity. Dressed in a chador, the artist performed routine movements on the rooftop of her apartment building in New York City (2001), in Tehran (2002), and in her studio in Paris. Her short texts, written in the spirit of black humor, attempt to deconstruct preconceived notions that Muslims are like-minded fundamentalists involved in radical ideas and actions.

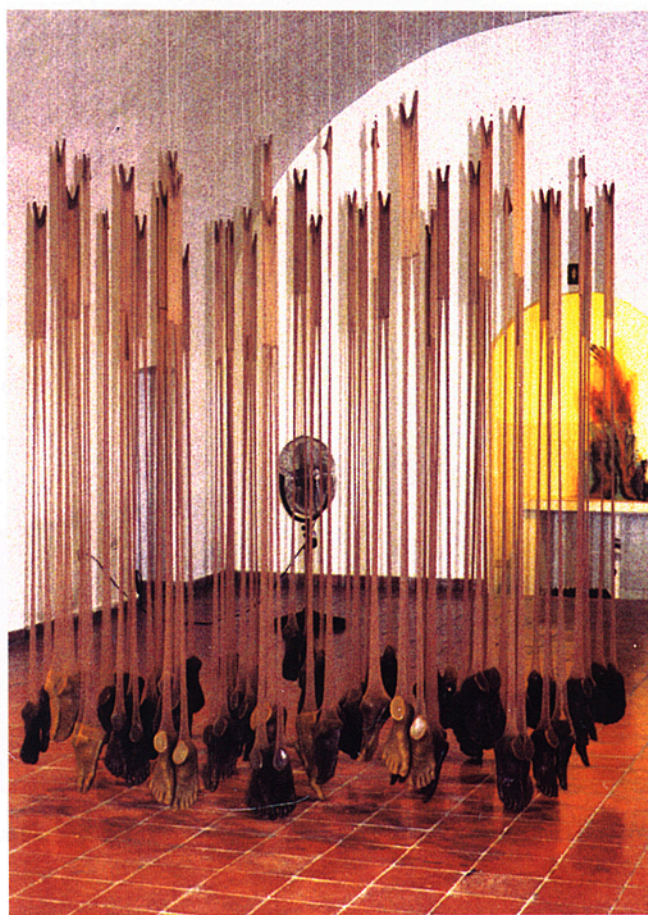
*Identity Analysis* by Helga Griffiths is a multisensory installation constructed in the form of a spiral through which the spectator could walk. The spiral consists of four thousand suspended test tubes filled with a fluorescein solution. Fluores-

cein, used in both science and medical research, glows when irradiated with ultraviolet light and gives off a greenish light. The artist's actual genetic code is contained in petri dishes placed on the floor at the base of the spiral. Walking through this spiral-shaped coded space, spectators could touch the surface of the test tubes, thus producing vibrating sounds as in a musical composition. Faced with this display of the artist's genetic structure, the viewer cannot help but feel somewhat disarmed by the recent advances in scientific research which allow for the exposure of one's individual identity.

The body as a social, gender, political, and philosophical construction is addressed by many artists. Rosa Irigoyen's (Puerto Rico) series of eight diptych photographs and three documentary videos feature the unusual subject of fingernail decoration as body design, similar to tattooing and scarification. The artist researched the his-

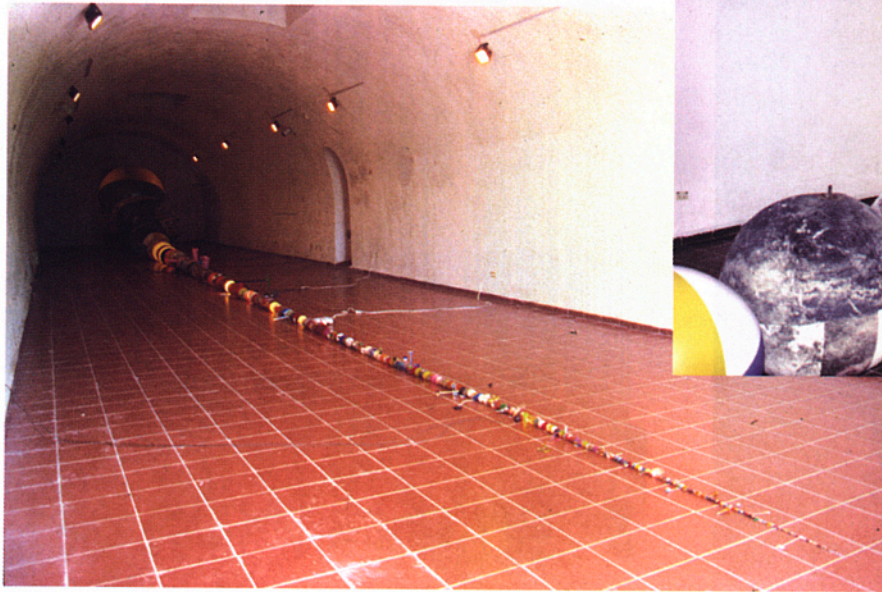
tory of fingernails in Asian and Egyptian traditions, among others.<sup>7</sup> While she was evolving the tableaux documented in the photographic series, the artist wore false nails for several months to get accustomed to their feel. In some of the scenes Irigoyen's false nails touch parts of her aging body, emphasizing the contrasts between the new, exotic decorative elements and her aging skin (think of a younger John Coplans). In other photographs, the artist's hands touch the hairy skin of her old dog, creating a strange and somewhat disturbing contrast. The interesting documentary material in the videos (*Nailing On*, *Nailing During*, and *Nailing Off*) illustrate the intricate operations required to design and paint the false nails that effectively alter a woman's appearance.

In the context of body art, two very different works are worthy of mention: one by Raquel Paiewonsky (Dominican Republic), the other by Ousmane Ndiaye Dago (Senegal).



**Raquel Paiewonsky.** *Levitating: On a Single Foot*, 2003. Installation. Bee wax and nylon. Variable dimensions.





Wilfredo Prieto. *Avalanch*, 2003. Found objects in the shape of spheres. Variable dimensions.

Paiewonsky's *Levitando: A un solo pie* (*Levitating by a Foot*) suggested the presence of human bodies by means of a large arrangement of suspended panty hose each with feet made of beeswax. The soft, delicate material of the interior garments contrasts with the hard sculptural form of the feet and imparts a sense of fragility, strength, and beauty at the same time.

*Femme Terre* is a gorgeous series of color cibachrome photographs by Ousmane Ndiaye Dago. Young women as embodiments of mother earth perform dance-like movements in ritualistic celebrations. Underneath each photograph, small piles of colored dirt or substances reinforce the relationship between woman and Mother Nature. Bare breasted, with colorful, traditional skirts and elaborate hairpieces, the models' bodies are covered with layers of brown clay and touches of colored paints creating a rich surface texture that can be likened to a painting. One is reminded of Yves Klein's anthropometries, with the difference that the individual faces of each of Dago's models are never photographed by the camera in deference to Islamic customs.<sup>8</sup>

Many works in the Biennial were whimsical, parodic, and serendipitous, for example, Wilfredo Prieto's *Avalanch*, which uses everyday materials in a most inventive and humorous way. Prieto's installations consisted of a collection of round objects that formed a long line on the floor, beginning with very tiny beads and ending with a *cocotaxi* (the motorized cart used to transport tourists in Havana), and a round juice stand borrowed from the Cabaña. Cuban artist Lisset Castillo produced another ingenious work titled *Punto de partida* in which large-scale photographs appeared to feature sections of highways. Upon closer examination, one realized the artist constructed an intricate expressway system out of sand in an impeccably realist mode. The artist's close observations of highways may have come from her living and working (part time) in Holland, but her ability to create an ephemeral work that imitates a high-tech product foreign to the Cuban reality is shaped by the need for Cuban artists to put their imaginations to use in the extreme. *Propósitos para el año nuevo* (New Years Resolution) by Zeger Reyers (Holland) features more

than twelve meters of white Dutch Royal Mosa porcelain, stacked plate by plate by the artist's hand—an incredible balancing act! In rethinking the possibilities for a contemporary still life, the artist shifts the meaning of the mundane (albeit very attractive) porcelain objects, leading to changes in perception of the way we view things we use everyday.

Nodding to Robert Indiana and the broader Pop movement, Minimalism, the aesthetic strategies of Félix González-Torres, the subject of shopping in art, and design and marketing in the consumer industry, Alejandro Díaz (USA) created an installation cum gift shop, an ironic statement in a country where consumerism is all but nonexistent. *I ♥ Cuba* was a wonderfully whimsical installation consisting of tote bags, postcards, key chains, beach towels, and balls all with the logo *I ♥ Cuba*. Borrowing from the logo "I Love New York," Díaz's title is open to many interpretations; but judging from the reactions of Cubans who saw the installation and those who received the items the artist distributed in public spaces around the city, it was gladly welcomed. Making similar comparison with objects and images used in everyday life, Patrick Hamilton (Chile) created a beautiful series of ten large-scale photos of a handsaw, mask, and an ax. *Queer Tools* blurs the lines between marketing, advertising, and



reconsiderations of Duchampian ideas for conceptual art.

Claudio Correa (Chile) covered the interiors and exteriors of the toilets, sinks, and the common laundry basin in the women's and men's public bathrooms in one of the galleries with scenes from three famous murals in Mexico by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Flames interspersed within the imagery bring renewed attention to the need for water in the operations of sanitary utilities! Correa acknowledged Siqueiros's art historical place as he also debunked the muralist's ideology concerning the role of art in serving the Revolution. By relocating Siqueiros's scenes in the most common of common places, the bathroom, the artist utilized sanitary receptacles to question the extent to which art can be merged with life.

Standing by the Cuban Armando Mariño's *La patera* listening to the chuckles of the passersby, one realizes how critical observation and a lion's share of humor can meld perfectly. The 1950s red Chevrolet, supported by rows of brown-skinned legs and feet, exemplified the notion of people power, a necessity emphasized by the Revolution, but one that appears to be outmoded in a country where there are more people than opportunities for productive work.

Pablo Helguera's installation *Instituto de la Telenovela* (Soap Opera Institution) is the last phase of the larger project on soap operas that was first presented in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in May 2002. Since then the artist has created several multidisciplinary installations that draw the art-going public's attention to soap operas considered as an artistic genre. Soap operas appeal to millions of viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds who find credibility in the televised stories of idealized love in which the protagonists overcome economic barriers and traditional social conventions. In the Havana installation, the *Instituto de la Telenovela* focuses on the history of the Cuban soap opera, which influenced the development of the genre in Latin America. Helguera's concepts, texts, and visual imagery, down to the closed-circuit TV programs, affirm the artist's proposition that Latin American soap operas continue to shape the perception of Latin America.

Several artists, including Alma Quinto (Philippines) and Mauricio Dias (Brazil) and Walter Riedweg (Switzerland), executed poignant works that engaged social issues involving abused or abandoned youths with whom they have worked for years. In her performance at the opening of the Cabaña, Quinto dragged a train of burning leaves, then stomped

them out, signaling the end of bad omens. The artist, whose head and face were covered with the words "Stop Rape," was dressed in a gown pieced together with stories written by young girls about their tribulations.

Dias and Riedweg's *Devotionalia* featured two documentary videos of a multidimensional project involving street youths in Brazil over a period of seven years. The artists worked with social agencies and NGOs in many areas of Rio de Janeiro. In workshops the artists encouraged the youths to make ex-votos (objects offered in gratitude for a granted prayer or wish) in the form of their own hands and feet. The 1,276 wax castings made from the ex-votos were displayed in museums in Rio and Europe. Finally, the objects were deposited in the collection of the National Congress of Brazil. In making the new videos, many of the youths who had formerly participated in the art workshops were asked to talk about concerns, even wishes, most dear to them. Their answers were alternately surprising, sad, and sometimes harrowing. During the eight years between the workshops and the new videos, almost half of the original participants were no longer living.

A pivotal event of the Biennial took place at the Solar de La California, a housing complex rebuilt under the auspices of the Union of Writers and Artists

Armando Mariño. *La Patera*, 2003. Installation. Variable dimensions.



Betsabeé Romero. *Memoria que rueda* (The Memory of a turning wheel), 2003. Carved rubber tire and paint.







**Claudio Correa.** *Self-Sufficiency*, 2003. Oil on fabric laid down on porcelain. Intervention in a public bathroom. Variable dimensions.



**Alejandro Díaz.** *I ♥ Cuba*, 2003. Photograph of two Cuban men with the beach balls that the artist distributed in a public action.

from the mid-90s. Recently the Union initiated a series of cultural programs intended to involve the residents in activities otherwise inaccessible to them. The artistic programming involved the residents of the Solar and visual artists from Cuba such as Manuel Mendive, Eduardo Roca (Choco), Juan Roberto Diago as well as Fabiana de Barros from Brazil and Betsabée Romero from Mexico, who gave on-site performances and workshops in printmaking, dance, poetry, and body movement. The project aimed at presenting artistic objects or actions followed by workshops for both discussion and hands-on participation. All the performance activities sought to emphasize the ways in which art may be better understood by the community, and the reverse, the ways in which artists may enrich their practices through interaction with the community—a utopian idea that still holds promise.

#### NOTES

1. The Biennial opened on November 1 and closed on December 15, 2003; this article is based on my attendance during the first week of the event. The curators and the geographical areas covered are Hilda María Rodríguez, Asia and the Pacific; José M. Noceda, the Caribbean, Central America, Perú, Ecuador, and

Bolivia; Nelson Herrera, the Middle East; Ibis Hernández, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia; Margarita Sánchez, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, and Venezuela; José Fernández, Africa.

2. The Wifredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art, the Fort of San Carlos de la Cabaña, and the Pabellón Cuba were the three principal venues. Theoretical events (lectures and round-table discussions) were held in the National Museum of Fine Arts and the Department of Arts and Letters, the University of Havana. Many performances and artist-community workshops were held in the housing complexes of La California and Alamar. In addition there was an extensive series of parallel exhibitions organized by art galleries, museums, and other institutions that were held in conjunction with the Biennial forming an entire art work (*kunstgesammen*) out of the city.

3. See Maria Finn, "Visions of Dollars Dance Before Cuban Artists' Eyes," *The New York Times* (November 23, 2003): 48 AR, for reference to the political imprisonment of Cuban dissidents and the subsequent withdrawal of the Prince Claus Foundation's funding of the Biennial.

4. The Fort of San Carlos de la Cabaña was built in 1763 by the Spanish government after the English invaded Havana. It was one of several fortresses that formed the defense system at the time. Because of its size, the majority of large-scale installations in the Biennial are exhibited there in the renovated spaces. Kaarina Kaikkonen began working with men's garments about a decade ago in part to deal with the remaining emotional wounds created by her own father's death when she was a young child.

5. In this context, we are reminded of Pepón Osorio's *Barbershop* shown in the 1997 Biennial, a work which also imparted a resounding sense of drama and realistic

detail. Along these lines we are also reminded of Edward and Nancy Reddin Keinholz's extremely detailed installations. In contrast to these artists, however, Posada has employed a minimal, aesthetic style, one that has an antiseptic look.

6. A lenticular lens is a flat sheet of plastic the surface of which is embossed with an array of parallel cylindrical lenses or elongated lenses. Each lenticule has a focal length equal to the thickness of the sheet. Each magnifies a very narrow strip of whatever is on the opposite side of the sheet. One lenticule can show one of 36 different strips depending on your angle of view.

7. In China, for example, long fingernails were a mark of high social standing; in Thailand women wore long, gold fingertips in rituals and dances. From Egyptian customs to contemporary practices, decorated fingernails are considered signs of wealth, leisure, beauty, and strength.

8. Ousmane Ndiaye Dago, email communication with the author.

#### JULIA P. HERZBERG

Ph.D., independent curator and art historian who has specialized in contemporary Latin American, Latino, and multicultural artistic practices in the Americas. The author has organized many contemporary exhibitions that have traveled internationally and has published and lectured extensively on modern and contemporary art.