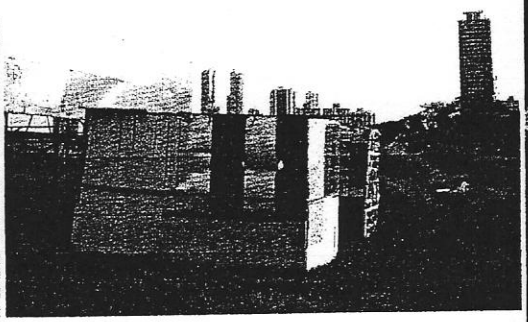
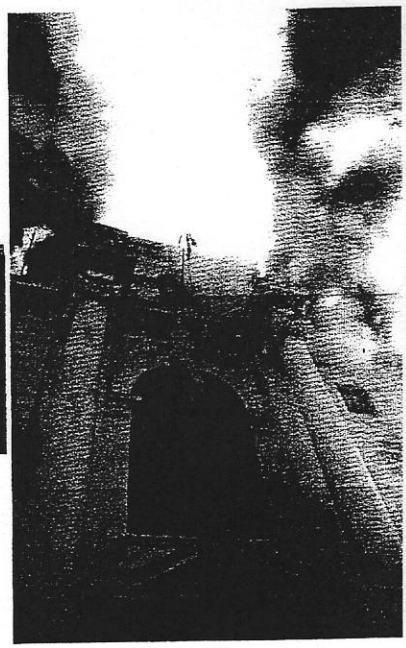
Flash Art, Milan, Nº 230, Págs. 75 y 82, Mayo-Junio 2003
Craig Garrett





MultipleCity: Revolution in Panama

Craig Garrett

Attempts to reconceive art within the territory of social praxis usually meet with limited success. For every public intervention to effectively probe mechanisms of social control in a distinct community, dozens of other projects only reify the commodity-capital relations they set out to interrogate. Panama's "MultipleCity," on the other hand, a locally-produced exhibition featuring the interdisciplinary work of 14 international artists, represents an early victory for this new tactical art.

Panama, a nation where dependence on international trade has elevated the commodity to a position of remarkable privilege, and whose art scene, as a result, has long been stuck at the impasse of quasi-modernist easel painting, is not an obvious site for a lesson in contemporary art's most radical developments since the 1960s. But what made "MultipleCity" so revolutionary was that it didn't simply explain, for example, the dematerialization of the art object — it actually demonstrated it. And it did so with a fearless open-endedness that promised to invigorate not just an emerging local art scene but also an entire city.

The story behind "MultipleCity" begins with its co-curators: Adrienne Samos, the director of Fundación Arte>Panama (Arpa) and former editor of Panama City's award-winning culture weekly *Talingo*; and Gerardo Mosquera, a Cuban art theorist, adjunct curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and one of the founders of the Havana Bienal. Instead of lamenting the lack of institutional infrastructure in Panama, Samos and Mosquera exploited the unusual freedom it provided. Under their decentralized curatorial structure, international artists were paired with locals who helped them adapt a series of projects for sites throughout the city. The result, in most cases, was a mutually beneficial collaboration that on the one hand provided local artists with an opportunity to learn about personal and professional issues in contemporary art, and on the other hand produced artworks with a unique sensitivity to the micro-politics of the neighborhoods in which they were situated.

Local children, for instance, didn't seem to notice that Cuban artist Juan Andrés Milanés' sculpture — hundreds of interlocking ice blocks laid out to form a temporary tropical skating rink — visually evoked the minimalist sculpture of Carl Andre, nor that it demonstrated ephemerality via a quite literal dissolution of the art object. And they certainly didn't mind that their giddy participation brought into sharp relief their region's fantasies of its Northern 'other.' Many of these same children, though, the residents of the city's historic and ramshackle San Felipe neighborhood, took a similar shine to Yoan Capote's sculptures, ten lushly upholstered but fully functional garbage receptacles. Though Capote had previously exhibited similar pieces in museums and galleries in his native Cuba, these works gained a new relevance in a neighborhood where art is scarce but garbage is not. Their overwhelmingly positive reception was evident in the care with which residents used them — after two weeks the pink and white fabrics remained almost spotless — but also in these residents' constant re-siting of the containers around their neighborhood as if they were moving a favorite sculpture around the living room.

Panamanian painter-turned-video artist Brooke Alfaro also lived for many years in the San Felipe neighborhood, and his familiar presence in the local housing projects gave him a unique insight into the codes of machismo and violence that mold life — and death — there. For "MultipleCity" he produced *Nueve*, a two-channel video whose title is the local abbreviation for the favored weapon of the project's warring youth gangs.

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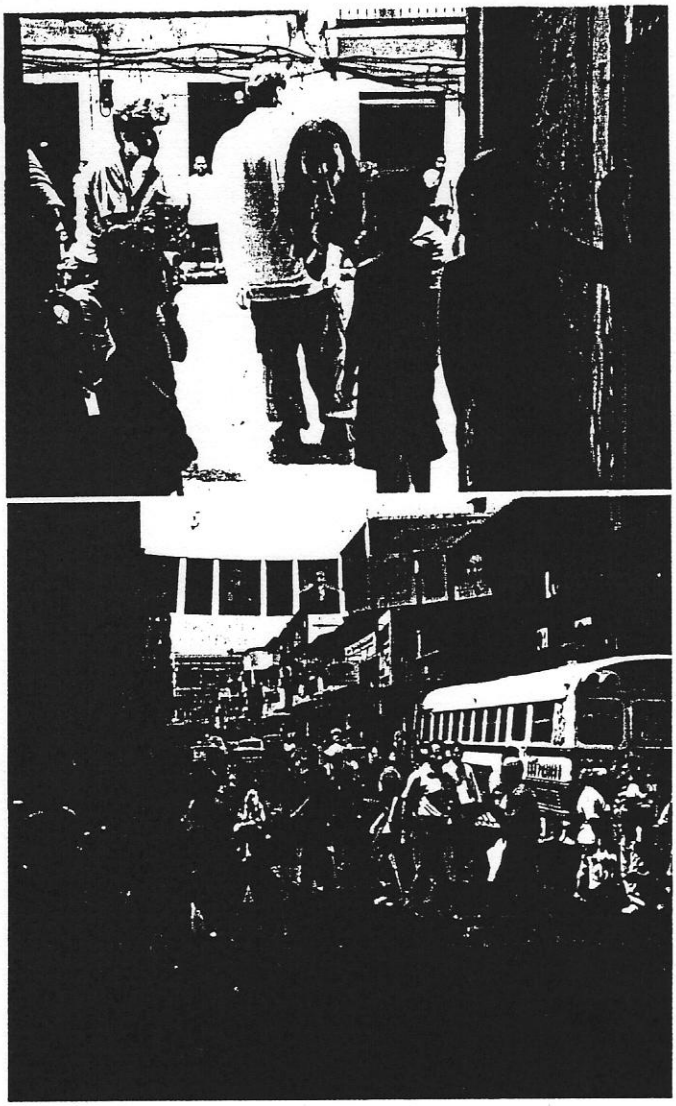
From left: GHADA AMER, Chinese Proverbs, 2003. Photo: Fernando Bocanegra. JESÚS PALOMINO, Buhoneros y Precaristas, 2003. Photo: Miguel Lombardo and Francisco Barsallo. GUSTAVO ARTIGAS, Fire, 2003. Courtesy Fundación Arpa, Panama City.



From top: FRANCIS ALŸS, Minute of Silence, 2003. Photo: Alfredo Bocanegra. GU XIONG, I am who I am, 2003. Photo: Miguel Lombardo and Francisco Barsallo. Courtesy Fundación Arpa, Panama City.

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When he proposed screening the video on the side of the same building inhabited by these gangs, local residents initially balked, fearing potential violence. On the night of the screening, however, tension gave way to jubilation as mothers, grandparents, and younger siblings — as well as a handful of brave art supporters — cheered the monumental images of these young men, singing and posturing to a hit song by famous ex-gangster El Rookie in two side-by-side projections. With this video, Alfaro managed to create a meeting that could never take place in reality, and as the piece finishes, both gangs, through the magic of editing, appear to walk towards one another in a gesture of simulated peace, tossing each other a soccer ball instead of bullets.

Panamanian artist Humberto Vélez also enlisted a popular musical format to illustrate how local inhabitants view themselves. Each November big bands from schools across Panama march in Independence Day ceremonies while playing a particular hybrid of Brazilian *candomblé* and American martial music that evokes in all Panamanians — but especially inhabitants of society's lower rungs — a purely joyful patriotic zeal. Vélez's insertion of one of these marching bands into unexpected urban settings elicited outbursts of spontaneous celebration — precisely the opposite effect sought by the work of Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs. Alÿs, in collaboration with Mexican filmmaker Rafael Ortega and a team of artists/assistants, sought to elicit one minute of impromptu silence in the city's most chaotic public spaces: a crowded café, the national lottery hall, a bustling public market. When questioned by passersby, Alÿs insisted that the intentions of this minute were undeclared, but many of them understood it as a protest against the U.S. invasion of Iraq, thereby reclaiming the open-ended action for the expression, in the absence of larger public demonstrations, of their own concern.

The war also played a critical role in the cancellation of Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles' project to pilot a miniature cargo ship through the Panama Canal via remote control. Surprisingly enough, however, Mexican artist Gustavo Artigas was permitted to stage a conflagration at the city's Museum of History. Overeager firefighters, who helped set the fire with burning tires on the museum's roof, almost turned Artigas's artistic statement into a historical tragedy. In the end, though, the very public spectacle of fire — which had laid waste to vast swaths of the city in previous centuries — served an apt symbol, during Panama's centennial year, of the need to look forward.

Though the recent departure of the U.S. military resulted in the opening of the Canal Zone — a verdant city-within-a-city previously off-limits to all Panamanians — it came at a difficult moment for the Panamanian economy. For his piece local artist Gustavo Araujo plastered the city's suddenly plentiful empty billboards, a highly visible indicator of this slump, with a common Panamanian idiom that illustrated the pessimistic resilience with which his countrymen have faced down many past crises: "La Cosa está dura" (Things are tough). Italian collective artway of thinking also addressed what they saw as a wound in the city's psyche with a healing ceremony on the city's long Pacific shoreline. Featuring candles, food, a Santeria priestess, and a dramatic reading by a local artist, the event's air of meditation didn't last long once Humberto Vélez's marching band arrived. Gu Xiong's work on the other hand, had a more lasting presence. This Chinese-Canadian artist's banners, strung across a major thoroughfare in the city's bustling Chinatown, portrayed residents of this sometimes overlooked minority whose sizeable presence in the city dates back to at least the mid-19th century.

Of course, truly populist art sometimes must address power more confrontationally. New York artist Ghada Amer commissioned a series of signs from local artisans (the same ones responsible for the colorful vernacular paintings on the sides of the city's public buses) to illustrate her selection of Chinese proverbs. On their own the signs were not particularly provocative, but when placed at strategic urban sites — chosen by local artists Miki Fàbrega and Ramón Zafrani for maximum impact — these statements proved too bold for the agencies of power. Two of these signs — including one posted at a busy underpass between a McDonald's and a Wendy's and reading "Si comes menos, saboreas más" (If you eat less, you taste more) — quickly vanished without a trace, and another, originally placed outside the State Controller's office, awaits a new home after its government-ordered removal.

The other works generating the most controversy belonged to Spanish sculptor Jesús Palomino. Removed for the first time from a gallery context, Palomino's delicate constructions of wood and paper immediately provoked a backlash upon their placement in vacant lots throughout the city. The problem was not an overt political message, like Amer's, but rather their uncanny resemblance to the rudimentary stalls that spring up around the city like parasites on privately-owned structures. The ire that these delicate sculptures provoked from property owners spoke loudly of the social disparities of a city where subsistence fishermen reside in the shadows of 30-storey luxury residences. Moreover, it suggested that contemporary art still has the power to agitate, a conclusion that bodes well not just for Panama but also for the future of art around the world.