

La Fuerza del Deseo/La Fuerza de la Necesidad
(transl. The Force of Desire/The Force of Necessity
2009

10th Bienal de la Habana

The Biennial, comprising the work of three hundred artists, was primarily located in the Cabaña Fortress (Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña) on the Eastern side of Havana's harbour entrance. My performance/installation ran from 27 March to 23 April, situated in one of the garrison's barrel-vaulted storage rooms.

Translated, the title *The Force of Desire/The Force of Necessity* is derived from a *telenovela* popular in Cuba, *La Fuerza del Deseo*, set in 19th Century pre-republican Brazil. The *telenovela* is a phenomenon in Cuban cultural life whereby those with access to a TV set can tune in several evenings a week to an episode of escapist, romantic melodrama.

Since the austere *Special Period* of the 1990s brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ongoing U.S. trade embargo, supplying the basic necessities of life has become a primary focus for *Cubanos*. Cuba's dual currencies, the national peso (CUP) and the convertible peso (CUC) have resulted in dual economies. Only those with access to the 'tourist dollar' economy are able in some measure to partake of the kind of everyday goods that most countries in the developed world take for granted. The national currency provides only meagre purchase power over and above the pervading rationing of food and commodities; the second, the CUC, has become the replacement for all U.S. dollar transactions since 2004. This is also the currency used by foreigners, mostly tourists, to pay for goods and services. Aside from rationed marketplaces, shops loosely termed 'dollar shops' sell items that westerners regard as basic necessities (for example, brand-name toiletries, clothing, packaged food and electrical appliances). These shops are only accessible to Cubans possessing Convertible Pesos. With the monthly wage, whether for doctors or street-sweepers, averaging around the equivalent of \$US20 (paid in national pesos), it follows that only those with access to the 'tourist economy' can afford goods and services beyond the most basic and frugal.

This state of affairs has given rise to the Cuban phenomenon known as *jineterismo*. Literally, 'horse-back riding', *jineteros* (m.) and *jineteras* (f.) comprise the subculture of individuals who attempt to access the tourist economy, and its desirable currency, through hustling by various means. This essentially street-level activity might take the form, amongst many others, of offering cigars for sale (most often cheap imitations of well-known Cuban brands), touting reservations at local restaurants (on a commission basis), providing tourist guides, or at its infamous worst – propositioning for sex.

As a form of cultural *jineterismo* my project aimed to provide access, if only by vicarious means, to an economy normally beyond the means of all but a few Cubans – the global financial market. In an integral element of *La Fuerza del Deseo*, I employed two young Habanero artists to render aquarelle impressions of the CEO portraits and logos of the five hundred companies comprising the Standard and Poors 500 Index. The S&P 500 is one of the most commonly used benchmarks for the U.S. stock market. It can also be said to reflect the general sentiment of the global economy. The stocks comprising the index include many of the largest publicly held and highest capitalized companies in the world. They represent a cross-section of the goods, services and infrastructure readily available to many developed nations. As a result of the trade embargo imposed by the U.S. products of only a handful of these companies such as Nike and Coca-Cola, can be found in Cuba, and then only ‘unofficially’ through their South American subsidiaries.

I paid the artists the equivalent of the average Cuban *monthly* wage for each day of their thirty-day contract. Over the duration of the project, from the one thousand images I provided, they selected and painted logos and CEO portraits, which were then displayed in the installation space. The working day began at 10am with the Biennial opening to the public and ended with the close at 5pm. Lunch and rest breaks were provided. Due to the scarcity of art supplies, all paper, drawing and painting materials were brought from Australia with me. The project closed with the completion of as many logos and CEO portraits as possible within the timeframe.

As an adjunct to the project I had planned a series of performances using the four thousand new plastic shopping bags I had brought with me. With a shortage of these bags in Cuba many residents of Havana hold onto and re-use their bags over and over again, washing them and hanging them out to dry along with their laundry. Along with other such recycled items, plastic bags have come to represent *value*, and as such are viable currency commodities.

Ultimately I determined against staging the performances, having decided that my actions would have been patronizing and exploitative in the light of the dire economic circumstances I discovered in the city. Instead, over a two-day period I distributed the plastic bags in batches of four hundred to the first ten Habaneros (mostly elderly or in some way incapacitated) who approached me in the street for money. Their willing acceptance confirmed for me that these bags represented, for those individuals, significant possibilities for participating in the local economy. My exchanges with these people were specifically not to be photographed.