

End of the World Biennial

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Ushuaia,

1st Biennial of the End of the World 2007

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<http://www.latinart.com/exview.cfm?start=3&id=254>

1.

The first edition of the End of the World Biennial was presented during April of this year in Ushuaia, capital of Argentina's Tierra del Fuego Province and of the Southern Atlantic Islands. Promoting the southern tourist pole of "end of the world city" with the Ushuaia municipality, a joint initiative was carried out by the Patagonia Arte y Desafío Foundation and the Parlamento Latinoamericano of San Pablo Memorial Foundation. With tight programming and a planning schedule that spanned over a year and a half, these institutions carried out the titanic task of bringing together, in this small city, around 60 artists from various places in the world. They were directed by a Brazilian-Argentinian co-production under the general curatorship of Leonor Amarante (Brazil) and Corinne Sacca Abadi (Argentina) and assisted by adjunct curators Hernández Abascal and Florencia Battit, respectively.

On the whole, and in tune with devices displayed by biennial exhibits these days, the End of the World Biennial in its curatorial presentation appropriated and emphasized its setting as a tourist attraction, taking on the city's *site-specificity* with a very wide spectrum of productions. Many of them, presented as installations or signposts within the local urban territory, intervened in the landscape or reworked territorial aspects of the Tierra del Fuego setting. At the same time, but undoubtedly less successfully, they attempted to underscore the environmental problems specific to the particularly tenuous position that certain polar regions presently hold in relation to the planet's overall environment. While the curatorial presentation adhered to the celebration of the polar region's international day, the key issues with which this scientific program deals with --such as the polar environmental situation, the sustainability of circumpolar societies or the interconnection between polar and global processes-- were little understood by the public and by some of the artists. The difficulty posed by this gap is of a curatorial nature and stems from the difficulty involved in presenting recent technological innovations within the field of scientific investigation and in knowledge of the polar regions themselves, all of which requires a more complex exercise than a mere signalling. At present, environmental legislation and scientific investigation, at least in Argentina, fail to make their presence felt or, one might say, to be active in our every day community. In other words, they fail in helping to design ways for us to think and move in such a diversified world. Unfortunately, only through voluntary cooperation by civil minorities and by a number of associations concerned with stimulating collective awareness, is it possible to obtain visibility of this matter. In this sense, the curatorial initiative chose to give pre-eminence to this approach and took into consideration small groups of artists concerned with thinking about "natural" aspects from the perspective of art, thereby making such an approach attractive within the local context while getting to know some of Tierra del Fuego's productions. Nonetheless, we understand that creating a device for dealing with environmental matters and signaling them through artistic productions involved in the topic may trigger another problem: How to demonstrate these concerns without making it an obviously pedagogical, illustrative process, or over-simplifying a scientific problem?

The curatorship attempted to articulate answers from two vantage points. On the one hand, and smartly so, it created an educational program in schools that brought together researchers and educators from various areas, and on the other hand, it designed strategies with several artists for working with the site-specificity of Ushuaia, which conceptually presented highly varied problematics. Nonetheless, The questions regarding what was to be made visible of that place through production? How long will they last? Or questions regarding whether these productions may or may not be re-localized were matters that the curatorship was unable to figure out with ease, particularly when it pertained to distinctions to be made among site-specific signposts. Perhaps in a different direction, it turned out to be a more difficult undertaking bringing to the fore inquiries concerning how to show the world art from the Southern Cone in dialogue with other works, this being the position that the biennials generally propose. Another challenge was how to articulate an exhibition platform that integrates a scientific-technological reflection while simultaneously considering environmental concerns. The result here was less successful but, on the other hand, the effort to include projects related to a service-oriented art, or to note art practices pertaining to territoriality (of the flaneur type, or situational) should be deemed important. At the same time, it included trans-national dialogues arising from the discursive debates that emanate from cities, forms of appropriative *urban marketing* and facilitated by the marketing of destinations.

2.

Recently, in *Ruin*s --a brilliant and devastating essay by the Lebanese artist and critic Jalal Toufic-- the issue was raised regarding contemporary art representations in the Arab world and their contexts as follows: What does Lebanon have that is site-specific? In search for an answer, the narrative intricately progresses as it gives shape to the idea of ruins as places stalked by survivors inhabiting a city that has been devastated by the Israeli wars of invasion from 1982 through the present. In the process, he describes a city that, by its ornaments and patrimonial details --like some spatial-temporal labyrinth-- recovers today's memory of what has been a certain place in history and, along with it, today's history of the reconstruction of Beirut's central district.

Toufic's experience of migration and exile with his family in 1982 is important, in this narrative, and surely in many other life narratives, which explains why it was appropriated by the curatorial *intelligentsia* when it made up its mind to incorporate for the first time Lebanon's pavilion in the 52nd edition of the Venice Biennial. No matter how distant the latter may seem, the globalized scenario in which we find ourselves today forces us to think through these resonances and to imagine and adapt our perceptions in the face of experiences difficult to ignore. 1982 is a key year. Ushuaia --located 600 miles from the Malvinas Islands and now a British territory-- is the closest witness to a war that many Argentinians find difficult to forget, one that is recalled through a traditional, wakeful commemoration on the night of April first at the Monument to the Islands, far away from any biennial. If we are forced to imagine, then we know how easy forgetting can be, how simple it can be to deviate from the actual memory of an event or to put a slice of fiction in its place. Going back to the Biennial, we know that it dealt with other matters and that it chose to refer to a different type of urgency, although we can not help observing, in a self reflexive way, allowance for a different way of remembering.

3.

Between past and present, the works presented made the invisible visible. From the curatorial perspective, site-specific projects were chosen that marked an institutional interest in favor of historical places, museums and cultural areas of the city. And if it is true that the proposal managed to establish links with the history of the place, the very nature of the spaces themselves neutralized the exhibitor's experimental risk and the discursive quality of the works. For example, one might consider the successful installation of collages that make up León Ferrari's *L'Observatore Romano* series at the historical prison, along with José Rufino's "furniture" constructions, and also the installations and drawings by Alexis Leyva Machado (Kcho) at La Casa Bebán. But considerably less successful were the prison themes photographs by Rochelle Costi installed at the sports centre. The site managed to dilute one's readings of a project dealing with the analogies packaged into the notion of "deviation" between cross-eyed individuals and prisoners. This work, if considered at the prison site, might have lead one to consider the regulatory and social reinsertion mechanisms imparted within disciplinary societies while taking, as starting point, current normalized and "aestheticized" behaviors.

Installation and video tend to be considered canonical at many present day biennials and this case was no exception. Nonetheless, the inclusion of body-centered performances is worth noting, among them the performance *Cara o cruz versus Cruz* and Jorge Orta's blood donation for the Malvinas; the works of Brazilians Falminio Jallegas and Patricia Gerber; Bijari's collective actions, and Gabriel Guaraci's *RaioXexpandido*, along with the ironic and surprising proposals by Canadians BGL --all suspect strategies that without a doubt, held the public's attraction.

More consciously, the artists resorted frequently to fiction in order to place into perspective Ushuaia's specificity and the strategic game that tourism brings to the site. There were projects that managed to stand out and which articulated heterotopic meanings. This contrasted with strong localizing factors but were nevertheless persistent in the imaginary display of a territory inhabited by a multiplicity of regimes. Ushuaia presents itself as a prosperous place where the supply of tourists grows and their demands enter into the "free play" of the service-oriented market. This dynamic makes watching and observing the region's panorama, very interesting. With so much recent prosperity, Ushuaia lives thanks to diverse immigrants. This facts reveals a generational absence or *lack* of Tierra del Fuego natives and problematizes the idea of an *end of the world landscape*, to include issues of escape or flight. Those who arrive from elsewhere, as immigrants, create fictions, compose new sites, settle in, dwell, and build in a place where the history bears no weight. They give birth to new mythologies and refer back to other stories. The sound recordings, drawings, and photographs by Paul Senderowicz in *Transient shelter*, are about memories over distance, like a fragile refuge, ephemeral, made of ice, created so that the histories or mythologies appropriated by their sensory double will "settle" here.

With this perspective as part of their vision, but mediated by a criticality that kept their "enchantment" with the landscape in check, the work of artists such as Herrero, Julián D'Angiolillo, Daniel Trama, the Grupo del Borde and the collective work of Jorge Haro+ Nicolaj Callesen+ Mai Stautsager, uncovered the discontinuities and fissures in the self-reflection. They add movement, breaking away from the positivist idea of contemplation as something that is static and frozen in time. In D'Angiolillo's case, a tricycle moves taking his body or someone else's to wander throughout the city. He tries to strike real-estate deals in ruinous terrains, on what is left of them. He draws his plans in empty factories, makes up story boards, only to stop at the space provided by the sports centre. There he leaves a log or register of all these actions, inside a basket containing a TV set and a video, possibly a postponed performance, setting off into the distance.

In one of Ushuaia's tourist ports, Alicia Herrero's *The Paradigm Confine Tour* acted a kind of (de)constructive search for historical and critical temporalities. The "tour" consisted of a three hour navigational experience across the frontier waters of the Beagle Canal had almost 40 passengers on board. The "guided" tour was presented as a contemporary reflection away from the scientifically and exotically oriented paradigm of "landscape" and "confine." It was a purposeful strategy given the frequency of contemporary readings within the discursive platforms of Modernism. The installation of a discussion platform whose artistic practice allowed the status of today's biennials to be appreciated "in their situation", was encouraged as a result of a flexible laboratory integrated by Carla Zaccagnini and Alicia

Herrero, along with thinkers such as Francisco Alí-Brouchaud, Mieren Jaio and Jaime Iregui, predominantly active within the realm of institutional criticism. A magazine, *MIS6* ([magazine in situ](#), sixth edition, an ongoing project by Herrero since 2004), dealing with “service oriented” art, discusses the biennial’s format (although not without assistance from biennials themselves) addressing the issue of the problematic distinction between exchange and participation that the political biosphere manages in terms of our experience of contemporary life. Herrero posits an escape from the subject-object confinement situation by creating other criteria of coexistence between art and life; a coexistence meant to challenge the “art” institution. Without a doubt, Francisco Alí-Brouchaud’s participation was a playful attempt to signal out the “reclusion” suffered by art at the hands of the spectacle society articulated through its cultural machinery. The sagacity of his text *Gran Hotel Abismo* alludes to the famous image that Lukács used to describe the symptomatic deterioration of the German *intelligentsia* against whom he fiercely fought.

Proyecto Casa Nómada by the Grupo Del Borde, is presented as a temporal and mobile make-shift dwelling that travels from one place to another on a tree trunk. Lacking any sort of fixed residence, it moves constantly. The project was parked for only a day at the Paseo de las Rosas in Ushuaia, before embarking on another journey. They move onto the Bahía Encerrada, perform and stop once again momentarily at the Barrio Felipe Varela, not without first inviting all those who wish to stop by and visit with them to dance a tango, drink some hot brew, or simply chat with them at their house. In another more distant dialogue, Haro Callesten and Stautsager draw upon the similarities between Ushuaia and a Danish city help of publications, conversation, field recordings and photographic records.

Daniel Trama’s work insists upon going over a different territory: the installation format. His proposal’s concern with how to recycle temperatures translates itself into a simulacrum toying with the idea of circuitry. Ice blocks, represented on blue wax, melt with the aid of cables fed by hot stoves crossing a landscape and back again. The cable becomes a line in the drawing and serves as an energy conduit in a self-sustaining feeding system. The cables are also a system of passages and transformations on the state of the material that turn it into a self-referencing circuit. Helical lights act as a conceptual oscillation and manage to project a very potent rectangle of light on the wall, transforming the drawing into something pictorial and thereby disarticulating the limits proposed by the format.

4.

Aves Migratorias, a project carried out in several stages and coordinated with the assistance of schools by Edith Matzen Hirsch and Fernando Goin as well as *Prácticas Sensibles*, directed by Marcelo Giménez and Alicia Romero, were initiatives linked to the educational sphere. In this way, an *in situ* platform and a virtual one were articulated as part of the promotional effort, teaching, training, and artistic discussion. Interviews and information were available through a website showing the activity by the artists of the Patagonia region. Environmental concern was to be found in videos by Andrea Juan, who worked with a team of glaciologists and geographers registering performances in the Antarctic.

Charly Nijenshon also inscribed his work in this line through his landscape projects. Among other artists who also focused on ecological emergencies, Jorge Fargas presented the *Modelo de centinela climático*, a gigantic information collecting sunflower that is sensitive to meteorological changes.

5.

Finally, we might say that what is specific to a site can be thought of only through repetition. This biennial amounts to a first exercise of perception upon place. Self-Reflexivity is no doubt a point of departure. Only insistence and (dis)continuity will give this movement new possibilities capable of actualizing a small story that is to begin at the end of the world.