



Panama without Distances or the Drawing of a Sentimental Cartography

by Rosina Cazali

In April of 2003, I landed at the Panama airport by chance. I was on my return from a few days in Cartagena, and the airline decided we would not fly to San José and from there on to my destination, Guatemala, because there were not enough passengers to justify the cost of the flight. On the way into Panama City, on the super highway known as the *Corredor Sur* along the shoreline of an exceptional bay, I was surprised to come upon a huge concentration of skyscrapers, shining in the last rays of a setting sun. The dramatic contrast with the nightscapes of other Central American cities – generally characterized by low-rise architecture and long extensions into the horizon—seemed astonishing and movingly modern. For me, it even evoked the science fiction city in the film *Blade Runner*. After a twelve-hour layover, with only a hotel lobby as *terra firme*, I left at seven the next morning in a bus that returned the same group to the *Tocumen* airport. Having had no opportunity to explore the city, I promised myself to return to Panama someday.

I never imagined that my return would be as the curator for the Art Biennial that takes place in this Central American country. This privilege has seemed like a gift to me from its organizers Monica Kupfer and Walo Araújo, even more so now when I consider the experience in retrospect: the dialogues I had with the participating artists, and the opportunity to share in their talent and the genesis of their artworks.

To begin, I must confess that I would need a great amount of space to write about all of them. Nevertheless—and I hope this personal appreciation will be a sufficient judgment of value—I have already insisted on finding in the concerns of these artists the most appropriate map for truly understanding the nature of this country and dispelling any long entrenched misconceptions. For me, and in general for most Central Americans, Panama has always been a distant country, the last and doubtful end to what we recognize as the Central American region, which makes clear to me, at least partially, why we insist on saying *Central America* and later adding...*and Panama*, as if it were an appendix about to be removed. When one thinks of Panama, it is the canonical image of Ruben Blades that comes to mind. When considering Panama's history, past, present and future, one's mind inevitably turns to thoughts of the Canal. Or, when people emphasize its condition as a fiscal paradise, Panama announces itself to the world through its casinos, horse races, and "duty free" stores. Nevertheless, as I have already stated, the works of these thirteen artists offer us more perspectives on this cosmopolitan society than any of the abridged views, typical of tourist brochures.

Actually, when we held the first sessions to discuss the 7th Panama Biennial, one of our first objectives was to find a common thread that would make it possible to define a central theme and the necessary coordinates to better understand the contents of the exhibition. To me, a group show is not just a handful of artistic objects more or less well arranged within a museum space. I believe in the urgency of granting importance to the intellectual effort invested in each one of the artworks. Regional experiences of this kind tend to ignore that by joining efforts one can build an important network of ideas which define not only the artists but also the society to which they belong. With the exception of the 7th Panama Art Biennial, I don't know of a single attempt within the region to put together a biennial through a framework based on reasoning. It follows that one of the most substantial consequences of this effort was the possibility of depicting, through art and from a specific geographical point, the nature and validity of human knowledge in art.

To begin to approach its contents, I would say that it is essential to take into account that we are considering a group of artists made up by individuals—men and women—who have been formed by very different experiences. And yet all of them show attitudes that are both critical and thoughtful in reference to the society that feeds them. I cannot help but point out that the majority of them speak out about situations that have marked Panama's political biography, reconsidering the more common collective imaginari-um of what we might describe as typically Panamanian, or following existential paths that merit greater attention and sensibility. On different poetic wavelengths, the importance of this biennial is that it proves that the artists in this country are thinking as individuals of their time and as artists who stem from a unique place. Art is the common language that encourages them all. It is the bridge that serves them in the transformation of many everyday subjects into symbolic, beautiful, or simply disquieting objects. Moreover, this permanent transposition of the everyday into the artistic discourse provokes a never ending flow of analogies and oppositions. It

brings to the fore the fact that in this Central American country, art is being approached intelligently.

I read once that cartography, in contrast to maps that are static representations of a whole, is a drawing that is created simultaneously with the transformation of the landscape. Returning to Panama has meant for me a privileged introduction into an artistic structure built by exceptional people who give evidence of that changing cartography. The work that is woven throughout this catalog offers its best proof.

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