

Panama City: a Pandora's Box for Contemporary Art

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On 8 May 2003, the Bay of Panama suddenly turned red. The Coca-Cola factory had spilled a massive amount of non-toxic red chemical dye and was fined 300,000 dollars for its negligence. Before the culprit confessed, some people feared a catastrophe of biblical proportions, while a few others believed it to be an artwork by one of the artists participating in ciudadMULTIPLEcity. The one-month international urban art event curated by Gerardo Mosquera and me had just concluded two weeks before. "The Red Bay was my favorite piece", someone said to me. Another enthusiastic spectator described it as "a powerful visual metaphor for rampant corruption and political crimes". 2013 marks the tenth anniversary of ciudadMULTIPLEcity and people still ask me about the inspired author of that work. "The uninvited and unwitting artist was Coke", I reply.

Although none of the participants of ciudadMULTIPLEcity went as far as changing the color of the ocean, this stupendously mistaken attribution goes to show to what extent our megaproject constituted an exceptional experience in Panama. We invited twelve artists from different parts of the world (including Francis Alÿs, Ghada Amer, Cildo Meireles, Gu Xiong, Yoan Capote, Jesús Palomino, and artway of thinking) and three Panamanians (Gustavo Araujo, Brooke Alfaro, and Humberto Vélez) to create works capable of making a direct impact on the people in the streets of our small but intricate metropolis. To conceive their works, the foreign artists visited the city for a week or two, and returned on March 2003 to carry them out. All the works were conceived as hybrid experiments, fusing diverse contemporary genres, such as video, photography, happening, installation, sculpture, painting, performance, conceptual art, participatory art, and community work.

The project was inspired by Panama City's social, cultural, and physical character. The city was not merely the site of the event; it was its muse and protagonist. Most of the casual onlookers who came into contact with one or more of

the works probably never got to know about the whole project, nor even felt that they were experiencing art, but that is beside the point. Our challenge was to transcend the art world and engage ordinary citizens, not with mere spectacle or conventional public art, but with experimental artistic practices.

The strategic shape and geographic location of Panama made it a global city before globalization. It has bridged the waters of the world and the lands of the Americas centuries before the canal was built. Gate to the world, hub of telecommunications, and air and sea transportation—our city has become the embodiment of transit and movement.

Panama City's history can be traced way back to Panamá Viejo (Old Panama), the first European capital founded on the American mainland. Built in 1519 and sacked by pirates in 1671, it was relocated just two kilometers further west. The ruins of the first city and the historic quarter of the actual city are World Heritage sites. Restricted to the South by the ocean and to the North by the ex-Canal Zone (until 2000 a U.S. military enclave, a country within another), Panama was forced to expand along a narrow strip and grow upwards to such an extreme that it has become one of the tallest cities in the world. A huge ethnic and cultural diversity has given it a uniquely rich profile, though its chaotic modernity goes hand in hand with the poverty of most of its people.

All of the works in ciudadMULTIPLEcity underwent important changes during their interactions with the city. To me, this malleable, embryonic potential is one of the real measures of significant public art. Take, for instance, Brooke Alfaro's multimedia performance *Nine*. The artist worked for over a year with two rival gangs in Barraza, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. He persuaded them to interpret a song (each gang separately) by the popular singer and ex-gangster El Rookie; he then choreographed and filmed them. The two videos were projected side by side on the facade of a building in Barraza, with the community as the main spectator. The crowd's reaction was intensely moving. It became viscerally evident to all of us—family, neighbors, visitors, and the gang members (who watched the whole show in hiding)—that the work was being charged with completely new meanings. Alfaro's intention was to symbolically unite these mortal enemies through art, but the community behaved like the screaming, ecstatic fans of rock stars, precisely

because of the performers' bigger-than-life status as powerful gangsters.

The most significant factor leading to ciudadMULTIPLEcity was the emerging local art scene. Young artists were already scrutinizing the city and working within conspicuously urban languages that thrive on close encounters with the unpredictable and fractured street life. Many of these artists do not even belong to an artistic tradition; they come from the digital world of computers, of video and photography; others work in advertising, graphic design, architecture, engineering... The vast majority live in the capital, a deliriously expanding city of services, a communication axis, and a key commercial and banking center. There is great demand for professions whose university education in Panama far surpasses our feeble visual arts academic offer.

Most of these artists—as well as a whole array of students, volunteers, intellectuals and professionals of different fields—actively participated in carrying out ciudadMULTIPLEcity, a truly collective effort that included close to one hundred collaborators. In other words, the event hooked on to a cultural evolution already taking place locally, thus encouraging existing efforts towards a more innovative, critical and socially relevant art.

Although no other experimental urban art project of similar scale and daring has been attempted in Panama (and rarely elsewhere), a continuous output of artworks motivated by the city's dynamics keeps emerging, as well as collective urban projects curated by artists, such as *Exposed to the Public Eye* (2004) and *Bus Stop* (2009), and remarkable exhibitions, such as the VIII Panama Art Biennial (2008), which focused on the deep social, historical, and urban issues surrounding Panama's ex-Canal Zone, a colonial phantom that still lingers in our collective psyche.

Perhaps no artist has delved into Panama City's cultural ethos more intensely than Humberto Vélez, particularly the idiosyncrasies of popular urban classes. Although he has gone far beyond its borders, Panama still remains at the heart of his research. With *La Banda de Mi Hogar*, the project he conceived for ciudadMULTIPLEcity—a popular brass-and-percussion band that paraded at the “wrong” times and the “wrong” places— he began to develop a worldwide artistic corpus that he calls ‘aesthetics of collaboration’. Vélez's unique participatory performances center on the ways communities relate to their corporal, psychic, and

geographical territories by creating their own aesthetics and appropriating public spaces.

Another salient case is the work of Donna Conlon, an American biologist-turned-artist who decided to make Panama her home decades ago. No wonder. This concrete emporium plastered with billboards, and besieged by an uncontrolled frenzy of demolition and construction, is spectacularly flanked by nature. One can go in minutes from the urban center to one of the world's richest areas of biodiversity, and in less than two hours from one ocean to the other. In her videoperformances, photographs and three-dimensional projects, Conlon highlights the shifting character of beauty and coexistence by working at the threshold where nature and humans relate, and transform, in meaningful ways. Her photographic series titled *Synthetic Landscapes* captures outlandish but real urban environments: a concrete "peninsula" ensued from industrial waste, green "mountain ridges" of recycled soda bottles, a shimmering "lake" of glass and bottle caps...

Conlon has also co-created many videoperformances with artist Jonathan Harker, most notably the ongoing *Video(games)* series, which show their hands playing uncanny board games by self-made rules symbolizing power struggles between diverse social actors. The chips are made of debris from the myriad construction sites in Panama City, the current victim of fierce speculation that has destroyed much of its architectural heritage.

Equal parts video and conceptual artist, performer, draftsman, photographer, and writer, Harker has gravitated mainly around Panamanian social dynamics in order to expose and subvert conventional wisdom. Other important multimedia artists working within distinctly Panamanian urban poetics include Abner Benaim, Ramón Zafrani, Enrique Castro, Pilar Moreno, and Darién Montañez, as well as photographer José Castrellón, whose portraits and landscapes capture extraordinary personal ways in which a collective sensibility is made manifest.

Artists have always contributed to the understanding and reinvention of the public and cultural life of all cities, not only by exposing disturbing truths and provoking dissent, but also by pointing towards profound, imaginative, unpredictable and exciting new ways of living our shared urban spaces. Panama City is privileged to be the dark muse of incisive creators. However, the real burden of effective social

change should not be theirs. This daunting task lies beyond the limits of art and belongs to every one of us.

Published in *ReVista, the Harvard Review of Latin America: The Panama Issue* (Cambridge: David Rockefeller Center, Spring 2013).