Havana, 1959: Art as a Public Encounter

By Juan Sarracino

The Havana Woman's Club exhibition and the memory of an unfinished programme

El
WOMAN'S CLUB DE LA HABANA
ofrece
esta exhibición de Arte Plástica
al pueblo de Cuba

Habana, Febrero 15 al 1 de Marzo, 1959.

Persuadido que la creación artística —como cualquiera labor intelectual no puede desarrollarse sin libertad y consciente del afán de los artistas cubanos de brindar su mejor obra en homenaje y a las proyecciones de una Cuba que todos soñaron, consideramos el momento oportuno de organizar con todos los medios a nuestro alcance esta exhibición en el cual tanto el pueblo Cubano como gran número de extranjeros residentes puedan apreciar una vez más lo mucho y lo espléndido que producen los artistas que aquí exponen.

Nuestra iniciativa encontró caluroso apoyo en todos los medios artísticos e intelectuales y mucho tenemos que agradecer la colaboración del Instituto Nacional de Cultura que nos permitió dar a la exhibición el marco que merece, en el Palacio de Bellas Artes.

Exhibition programme, February 15–March 1, 1959.
Documentary reproduction; the image has not been recreated.

An exhibition begins not only with the pictures it hangs. It also begins with who takes the initiative to bring them together, whom it invites to see them, and what reasons it offers for that encounter. The programme of the exhibition organized by the Woman's Club de La Habana —the Havana Woman's Club— from February 15 to March 1, 1959 allows us to examine those three decisions. On its cover, the organization announces that it offers an exhibition of "Arte Plástica" to the people of Cuba; its introductory statement thanks the Instituto Nacional de Cultura, or National Institute of Culture, for its assistance in presenting the exhibition at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, or Palace of Fine Arts. [1]

The document contains more than a list of participants. It includes a statement about creation and freedom, a proposed relationship with the public, and a record of works that acknowledges its own gaps. Among its most precise details are two titles by Loló, *Estrella Cuadrada* (Square Star) and *Luna de Espalda* (Moon with Its Back Turned), and one by Mijares, *Formas sobre fondo verde* (Forms on a Green Background). Beside certain other artists, including Sandú Darié, an asterisk appears. Its explanation is crucial to a correct reading of the whole. [2] [3]

The argument guiding this reading is that the exhibition can be understood as an initiative of cultural mediation: it connects an organizing body, a collaborating institution, artists, and intended audiences. The programme allows that relationship to be studied without reducing it to an artistic school or confusing the intentions of its promoters with the actual experience of every visitor.

An initiative of the club at the Palace of Fine Arts

The cover does not present the Palace of Fine Arts as the convening body. It is the club that "offers" the exhibition. The acknowledgement to the National Institute of Culture identifies a collaboration that made it possible to provide the setting of the Palace. This distinction between initiative, support, and venue should be preserved: it prevents the prestige of the building from obscuring the organization claiming responsibility for the event. [1]

The text does not identify the members responsible, describe the financing, or reproduce an institutional agreement. Recognizing the club's role therefore does not authorize us to invent a selection committee, assign the exhibition to a particular leader, or define its social structure. Its documented contribution is narrower but important: an organization presenting itself as a women's club publicly assumed the initiative of bringing works together and displaying them.

The exhibition thus encourages a broader mapping of artistic life. Besides the artists and the places where works are preserved, those who create opportunities to see them also matter. In this programme, the organizer is not outside the history of the exhibition: its voice occupies the cover and explains why it considers the initiative timely.

"To the people of Cuba": imagining the visitor

The heading addresses the exhibition to the people of Cuba. The explanatory paragraph specifies the aim of enabling both the Cuban public and foreign residents to appreciate the artists' production. We do not need to determine who attended to recognize the breadth of the intended audience. The organization does not address only its own members, nor does it identify buyers as its principal interlocutors. [1]

This wording gives the exhibition a public orientation in its presentation. It does not, however, establish that admission was free, that an educational programme existed, or that a particular attendance figure was achieved. The audience a project invites and the audience it actually brings together are different matters. The source tells us considerably more about the former.

The introduction argues that artistic and intellectual work cannot develop without freedom and connects the initiative with aspirations for an envisioned Cuba. These are statements made by the organizing voice. They should not be converted into individual declarations by every artist or evidence of unanimity among them. The programme articulates expectations, but it includes no signed endorsements and does not explain how each participant understood its words.[1]

Its historical importance lies precisely in preserving this way of presenting the exhibition. Analysis can examine the proposed relationship between freedom, creation, and audience without assigning the works content unsupported by their titles or treating the announcement as an exhaustive account of cultural life in 1959.

A broad roster and a count that distinguishes units

The images allow us to count 41 names under “PINTORES” (Painters), 12 under “ESCULTORES” (Sculptors), and one under “CERAMICA” (Ceramics): 54 participant entries. The numbering of works starts again with each artist, so there is no general sequence that can be read as the exhibition’s total. The printed document also calls itself a “programa” (programme) in its final note.[2][3]

Printed section	Announced names	Names with asterisks	Numbered entries
Painters	41	13	48
Sculptors	12	2	12
Ceramics	1	1	0
Total	**54**	**16**	**60**

The count of 60 numbered entries does not equal 60 objects. Some use collective expressions, such as *Colección Signos de Zodíaco* (Collection of Zodiac Signs) or *Dibujos a Tinta* (Ink Drawings). Under “Cerra, Mirtha,” *Composición* (Composition) is followed by “y dibujos” (and drawings); Tapia Ruano has two entries called *Pinturas* (Paintings). The physical number of works is not resolved by the number of lines.[2][3]

This is not a statistical technicality. It helps explain what the publication records: a combination of names, individual titles, collective descriptions, and information still outstanding. The breadth of the announced participation can be counted; the exact number of works installed requires another source.

The asterisk: a trace of the moment of printing

The note at the bottom of the final image states: “Al confeccionar este programa no se habían recibido los títulos de sus obras” —“When this programme was prepared, the titles of their works had not yet been received.” This explanation applies to the names marked with an asterisk. It does not say the works were untitled, had been rejected, had been sold, or that their artists had withdrawn. It describes information that had not arrived when the programme was prepared.[3]

This distinction is especially important for Sandú Darié, Cundo Bermúdez, Hugo Consuegra, Wilfredo Lam, and Amelia Peláez, among others. All are announced; their titles are missing. Roberto Estopiñán and Eugenio Rodríguez appear in the same situation in sculpture, as does Marta Arjona in ceramics.[2][3]

For an archive, “title not received when the programme was prepared” must be a documentary status distinct from *Untitled*. Nor should an asterisk be turned into a single work with an unknown name: the note uses the plural “sus obras” (their works) and supplies no quantities for those participants.

The source therefore preserves a stage of the organizational process. The programme was fixed while part of the information remained open. This circumstance provides grounds for seeking later records—receipts, labels, inventories, or photographs—without treating every information gap as an aesthetic decision by the artist. The time of printing and the time of the exhibition are not necessarily the same.

Loló: a square star and a moon with its back turned

In the painters' section, the programme prints "Loló, (Soldevilla)" and records two entries: 1, *Estrella Cuadrada* (Square Star); 2, *Luna de Espalda* (Moon with Its Back Turned). Unlike an isolated mention of "Loló," the surname in parentheses here facilitates documentary identification. No medium, support, dimensions, or individual execution date is provided.[2]

These titles open a reading that should not be confused with a visual description. *Estrella Cuadrada* brings together a celestial referent and a geometric qualification; *Luna de Espalda* combines another celestial referent with an expression of bodily orientation. Both establish associations between different vocabularies. We do not know whether the first work contained a square or a recognizable star, or whether the second included a figure or a circular form. The available information concerns how the works were named.

That is precisely their interest: the titles allow us to ask about the relationship between poetic imagination and formal organization without assuming that geometry excludes evocation. They do not constitute a theory signed by Loló, but they preserve two naming decisions attributed to her works within the programme. Read together, they make productive a question that identifying the pieces would allow us to develop.

Comparison with documents already examined broadens the inquiry. The VIII Salón Nacional of 1956 records her two sonatas in painting and two sculptures in metal. In the anniversary exhibition at Color-Luz in December 1958, Loló appears among the sculptors. In this February 1959 programme, she is listed among the painters.[2][4][5]

This sequence documents different exhibition classifications, not the successive abandonment of one medium for another. The musical titles of 1956 and the celestial ones of 1959 do not establish a shared series either. They provide a basis for studying a practice that the documents do not confine to one section. Before explaining a stylistic change, we need to locate the works designated by each record.

Mijares: colour enters the identification

Under "Mijares, José" appears *Formas sobre fondo verde* (Forms on a Green Background). Unlike a generic designation such as *Composición* (Composition), the title incorporates a spatial relationship—forms on a background—and a specific chromatic reference. It is useful because it narrows a documentary search, not because it is sufficient to recognize a painting today.[3]

We do not know what kinds of forms it used, how many there were, or how they were distributed. "Green" does not determine an exact shade either. The publication supplies no image confirming the relationship between title and appearance. Consequently, a work attributed to Mijares with a green background does not acquire this exhibition history merely by seeming compatible.

Its relationship with *Forma y presencia* (Form and Presence), recorded under "Mijares, José" in 1956, allows a small chronology of titles to be assembled, not the identification of the same object or proof of a formal evolution. The shift from singular to plural and the introduction of a reference to the background are observable textual differences. Their visual significance requires visual evidence.[3][4]

For serious research, the 1959 title should be preserved precisely. Replacing it with *Untitled*, or automatically expanding its medium to "oil on canvas," would remove certain information and add information that the programme does not provide.

An exhibition that cannot be reduced to one tendency

The roster brings together diverse subjects, naming practices, and material references. Eduardo Abela presents *El Niño Travieso* (The Mischievous Child) and *Jinete* (Rider); Agustín Fernández, *Flores* (Flowers) and *Naturaleza Muerta* (Still Life); Joaquín Ferrer, *En Azul* (In Blue) and *Figura Mitológica* (Mythological Figure). The continuation lists *Equilibrio Negro* (Black Equilibrium) and *Corazón Vegetal* (Vegetal Heart), by Julio Matilla, and *Figura en Gris* (Figure in Grey) and *Pintura* (Painting), by René Portocarrero. [2] [3]

In these pairs, a chromatic reference can coexist with a figurative or evocative designation. Without reproductions, the works cannot be assigned to fixed visual categories. We can, however, observe that the programme does not divide participants by movements, and that the word “composition” coexists with landscapes, maternities, figures, and still lifes.

Raúl Martínez’s case adds another useful caution: *Pinturas 1958* (Paintings 1958) appears as a single numbered entry. The plural establishes no quantity, and the year embedded in the title should not be confused with a complete technical record. Meanwhile, Raúl Milián’s two *Flores* (Flowers) and Palko Lukács’s two *Paisaje* (Landscape) entries retain different numbers within their respective records. A repeated title is not a duplicate that an archivist should eliminate. [3]

The exhibition allows coexistence to be studied without imposing stylistic unity on it. Sharing a programme establishes an exhibition relationship; it does not prove membership of a group or turn the introductory statement into an artistic manifesto subscribed to by all.

Sculpture and ceramics: the limits of the printed divisions

Marta Arjona alone occupies the “CERAMICA” (Ceramics) section, although an asterisk replaces the list of titles. The lack of an inventory does not erase the institutional fact: the programme gives this medium its own heading. It neither silently subsumes it under sculpture nor excludes it from the exhibition of visual arts. [2]

In sculpture, Tomás Oliva is listed with *Escultura No. 1* (Sculpture No. 1) and *Escultura No. 2* (Sculpture No. 2). Alfredo Lozano presents *Madona* (Madonna), accompanied by “madera” (wood), and Ernesto Navarro, *Ave* (Bird), with the indication “majague” as printed. Pablo Porras appears with *Bailarina en Cemento* (Dancer in Cement): here the material forms part of the designation rather than a separate technical record. [2]

Enrique Moret supplies a case that prevents the sections from being treated as uniform technical inventories: under “ESCULTORES” are *Colección Signos de Zodíaco* (Collection of Zodiac Signs) and *Grabado Bembé* (Bembé Print). The document does not explain this placement. It should be preserved and studied, not automatically transferred to another category to make a database tidier.

Something similar happens with “PINTORES,” which includes drawings and annotations such as “pluma” (pen), “cera abejas” (beeswax), and “óleo esmalte” (oil enamel). The last two accompany Harry Tanner’s landscapes and Antonio Vidal’s *Pintura* (Painting). These are material indications of unequal scope; they do not authorize the completion of missing techniques, formulas, or supports. [2] [3]

The printed divisions help organize the exhibition but do not exhaust the practices they name. Reading their irregularities too makes it possible to understand the programme as a historical instrument of classification rather than a perfect technical system.

The same title in 1956 and 1959: constructing a lead

María Capdevila appears here with *Hermanas de la Caridad* (Sisters of Charity) and *El Bembé* (The Bembé). In the catalogue of the VIII Salón Nacional of 1956, *Hermanas de la Caridad*, number 37, is recorded under her name as an oil. This coincidence supplies a concrete line of inquiry between the two exhibitions. [2] [4]

It is not enough, however, to establish that the same object is involved. A title may be reused, designate versions, or be associated with a series. The 1956 source specifies a medium that the 1959 programme does not repeat; it should not be transferred automatically. Photographs, dimensions, provenance, or loan documentation could establish the connection.

This example summarizes a way of using the archive without overstating its results. Research advances when a question becomes more precise: the search is no longer for any painting by the artist, but for the possible relationship between two specific references. A carefully recorded coincidence is more useful than a premature identification.

The words of the publication and the marks on the copy

Attention to names is part of the analysis. The programme prints “Eirez, Antonia,” “Cerra, Mirtha,” “Lam, Wilfredo,” “Martínez, Pedro Luis,” and “Serra Badué, Sergio.” A transcription should preserve these forms. Their correspondence with standardized names belongs in a separate field; it is not resolved by silently correcting them. [2] [3]

In particular, “Martínez, Pedro Luis” should not silently become Luis Martínez Pedro, nor should a reading of the handwritten interventions beside “Arciaga, Romero” become a definitively established identity. Distinguishing printed wording, handwritten additions, and subsequent interpretation safeguards the document’s traceability.

The cover combines a centred heading with a border of asterisks enclosing the explanatory text. On the final page, an asterisk ceases to be ornament and becomes a reference sign. This graphic difference accompanies a difference in function: in one place it frames the institutional voice; in another it explains a limit to the information. [1] [3]

The folds, annotations, and “Biblioteca Museo Nacional” (National Museum Library) mark belong to the history of the reproduced copy. They do not authenticate the works or turn pencil marks beside certain names into sales results. Preserving them allows future research to examine the document without confusing material use with editorial content. [2]

The exhibition as a relationship, the archive as a task

The 1959 programme preserves two overlapping histories. The first is that of a proposed encounter: an organizing body brings artists and audiences together with the collaboration of a cultural institution. The second concerns the knowledge available when it was printed: some titles are fixed, others remain outstanding, and certain entries name one work while others may cover groups.

For scholars and collectors, both histories matter. The first broadens attention to those who made the circulation of art possible. The second teaches us not to confuse a period publication with an exhaustive inventory. Loló’s two titles and Mijares’s title are specific references; the asterisks beside Darié and other participants are also evidence, even when they record missing information.

The source does not reproduce the works, but it allows us to improve the questions with which we search for them. Its greatest contribution is not indiscriminate certainty, but a demonstration of which connections are

documented and which remain to be established. The exhibition publicly brought together a proposal; the archive preserves the task of reconstructing it without replacing its gaps with our expectations.

Between a work and its public lies a history of people, institutions, and documents. This programme allows us to begin telling it.

Documentary note

The central source consists of the three supplied images: cover and statement; the spread with sculptors, ceramics, and the first part of painters; and the continuation of painters with the asterisk note. They are arranged in that order in the reference facsimile. The reproductions are not assumed to establish that every announced arrangement was carried out or to document every circumstance of the exhibition. Comparison with 1956 and Color-Luz is restricted to information in other period documents already consulted. No external context is introduced. English translations of titles are for guidance and do not replace the Spanish originals.

Documentary references

[1] Woman's Club de La Habana, programme for the exhibition of "Arte Plástica" (Visual Art), Havana, February 15–March 1, 1959. Cover and organizational statement. Image "Cub-1959-2.jpg"; reference facsimile, p. 1.

[2] Same programme. Spread headed "ESCULTORES" (Sculptors), "CERAMICA" (Ceramics), and the beginning of "PINTORES" (Painters). Image "Cub-1959-2 2.jpg"; facsimile, p. 2. Basis for the count of 12 sculptors, one ceramics entry, and the first 20 painters.

[3] Same programme. Continuation of "PINTORES" (Painters), from Lukács to Manuel Vidal, and asterisk note. Image "Cub-1959-2 3.jpg"; facsimile, p. 3. Basis for the remaining 21 painters. The essay's count distinguishes participants, asterisks, and numbered entries, not installed objects.

[4] VIII Salón Nacional de Pintura y Escultura (Eighth National Salon of Painting and Sculpture), Instituto Nacional de Cultura, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Havana, 1956. Reproduction "Cub-1956-11 pdf.PDF": digital p. 4, María Capdevila, painting no. 37; p. 6, "Mijares, José," no. 143; p. 7, Loló Soldevilla, paintings nos. 201–202; p. 10, sculptures nos. 69–70.

[5] Galería Color-Luz, "Exposición aniversario. Pintura y escultura cubana 1958" (Anniversary Exhibition: Cuban Painting and Sculpture 1958), Havana, December 1958–January 1959. Roster "Cub-1958-4.jpg": "loló" under "ESCULTORES" (Sculptors). Comparative document; it does not establish which works were shown.

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Sources consulted: Sarracino Gallery Archives.

Web edition: images cropped and retouched to remove unrelated marks. References in the text to stamps and annotations describe the archival originals.