



***The Sweet Burnt Smell of History***  
**The 8<sup>th</sup> PANAMA ART BIENNIAL**

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Panamá  
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When entering the territories of the former American Canal Zone in Panama, many questions arise out of the living memories and remains of place whose identity has still to be negotiated on a daily basis. How is one to understand the transformations of an environment that, having ceased to exist as an American enclave since the year 2000, remains almost intact, and has only recently started to show the first symptoms of local re-appropriation? What used to be known as the Canal Zone – an area that was simultaneously a military reservation, a company town and a colony – seems to exist today as an apocryphal memory nourished by the nostalgia of those who occupied its lands, and as a geographical ghost that embodies

Panama's colonial and post-colonial history. Eight years after Panama recovered complete sovereignty over that controversial piece of land, the 8<sup>th</sup> Panama Art Biennial deals with the former American Canal Zone as a historical marker, triggering a reflection on its recent social and political history through the lenses of contemporary visual arts.

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As it is widely known, General Torrijos famously stated, "I don't want to enter history, I want to enter the Canal Zone". However, what is usually less noted is that, after the signing of the Carter-Torrijos Treaties and the historical retrocession of the Zone to Panamanian authorities, the General refused to join the official delegation that, in 1979 for the first time, entered its territory, being certain that the country remained years away from shaking off North American colonial presence from its soil. A man of conviction who, according to Graham Greene, gave off the charisma of despair, Torrijos is said to have had a contingency plan code-named *Huele a quemado* ('It smells like burning') to blow up the Canal, should ratification of the 1977 treaties have failed. But, as we now know, the treaties were ratified and Panama got its Canal back. Operating from the reverted territories of the Zone, ***The Sweet Burnt Smell of History*** addresses the

conditions under which Panama's political history and cultural imaginary are slowly taking over this land. Simultaneously, it considers how the vanishing of its borders can resonate beyond their geographical location, exploring the cultural imaginary embodied by a divided territory that, standing as a crossroads between north and south, east and west, epitomizes the flux of global transactions.

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The former American Canal Zone represents a paradigmatic example of the surfacing and vanishing of geopolitical spaces and of the mobility of ideological mapping. Taking this as a point of departure, the 8<sup>th</sup> Panama Art Biennial conceptually operates within two communicating levels. Artists familiar with the Zone through previous (or future) residencies have been invited to develop *in situ* interventions that open up a dialogue with the past and present history of the country, many of which provide new readings of the social and cultural impact that North American occupation (and subsequent restitution) of a controversial piece of land had on Panamanian everyday life. Other artists, unacquainted with the place, have been invited to conceive works and interventions from abroad that operate remotely, and that will not necessarily be realized or performed in Panama, nor be experienced by the Biennial audience. Given that

Panama has often been considered a passage rather than a destination, they intend to address the modes of circulation of artistic practices and ideas under the guise of globalization.

The inclusion of commissioned works and site-specific interventions, along with a series of remote gestures and actions is meant to address the Panama Biennial's own location in the art world's map. However, deliberately modest in size and production, the exhibition's reduced scale looks into developing, on the one hand, a critical perspective on the sheer size of biennials as a determining factor for them to achieve the required visibility within a complex system of distribution and exchange of artistic values. On the other, following an old conceptual strategy, it aims to question the necessity of experiencing an artwork once it is publicly released and becomes accessible through its documentation, reproduction and mediatization. Since the effect of some artistic practices frequently depends more on the myths and legends generated in the aftermath of their conception, ***The Sweet Burnt Smell of History*** hopes to create a conceptual framework encompassing the *before* and *after* of its inaugural event in order to transcend its geographical venue.

Magali Arriola, curator of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panama Art Biennial

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