

rewriting cuba  
issue 15  
june 2017

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## ART AND CENSORSHIP

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*Yanelys Núñez Leyva by A. Koleman*

# EDITORIAL

## ART AND CENSORSHIP

For a long time, the thinking has been that, in Cuba, censorship was reserved for opponents of the regime: those who wanted to put an end to the Revolution, and those whose influence the people had to be protected against.

Although culture, especially the arts, were used as a means for propaganda, the government initially tried to be inclusive towards different schools of thought, which gave some space to intellectuals as long as they did not attack the essence of the Revolution. If they remained faithful to the Party, they had nothing to fear.

However, the years have shown that censorship is something that cannot be applied in small doses because it is like a cancer that eats away at the culture of a country, without sparing anyone. Its destructive power is so great that it affects the whole world, because it attacks the essence of people.

Just in recent months, we have seen how censorship has been attacking, in a more or less explicit way, people from the world of culture who do not see themselves as part of the opposition and do not have any intention of putting an end to the Revolution, but simply as people who want to openly show their ideas and opinions. Today, the Cuban government attacks anything that contains a seed of critical thinking; any artistic position that does not respond to its preconceived idea of how Cuba has to be or any cultural manifestation that does not fit with its current plans for the country.

Last April, the political police prevented people from attending a screening of the documentary *Nadie* (No one) by Miguel Coyula, in which poet Rafael Alcides openly speaks about his experiences as a revolutionary and writer in a system that did not allow him to have his own opinions and how he was ostracized. It is the same today, as other artists find their work threatened if they go outside of the imposed norm and for not using art in the way in which they have been told to use it. While fearing the arrival of a new “quinquenio gris” – the five year period of harsh repression during the early 70s, artists in Cuba have continued to fight for their space. It seems clear that the essence of art does not tolerate censorship.

**Agnes Koleman**

# ART AS A WEAPON OF THE REVOLUTION

ALBERT PÉREZ

In the last few months, the censorship has been attacking any art that forces people to think

In 2016 Abel Prieto returned to assume the command of the Ministry of Culture in Cuba, after a four-year break, in which he supposedly functioned as an advisor to the General President.

Rafael Bernal and Julián González, who served as ministers in his absence, went almost unnoticed while in the post. This was logical to expect, since neither of them would consider themselves as a part of the constellation of Cuban artists and intellectuals. For anyone to become a minister of culture in Cuba, they must only meet the necessary conditions, which are basically to be able to use the springs of Cuban demagoguery, which guarantee a rapid ascent to those who can lie more in less time.

The fact is that Abel has returned. But in the four years that he lost sight of Cuba's cultural policy, the intellectual fabric of the island has moved to unforeseen territory. The social fabric today is a diagram of chaos at its best.

In Cuban universities, the latest hit, "The Divine Dove", by a run-of-the-mill reggaetón artist, has supplanted the lyrics of Silvio Rodríguez or Pablo Milanés. The good musicians prefer the private bars of Havana - where the children of the workers cannot go - more than the theaters, so ordinary Cubans do not have access to the quality music. In hotels, dance companies receive only half of their salary, because the hotel managers regularly get 50% of their cultural revenue. The

historical archives of the nation are being lost between the termites and mold. In households, audiovisual products of the so-called "package" (offline copying and pasting of multimedia files) are consumed over the usual programming by one of the four national television channels. And, most interestingly, within the cultural institutions themselves, important debates are taking place, demanding a cessation of censorship and not returning to what Ambrosio Fornet calls "the quinquenio gris" (the gray five-year period during the 70s).

However, as the journalist Juan Orlando Pérez has said, the minister has returned with the air of a marshal. He is more focused on maintaining the omnipresence of the official media and on attacking the American cultural industry than on talking about the innumerable demands that are increasing every day in his field. The problem continues to be the same one posed by Fidel Castro: "Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution; nothing. Because the Revolution also has its rights. And the first right of the Revolution is the right to exist. " The point is that the boundaries of the "whole" are not defined. And they depend, to a large extent, on who is in power, on external circumstances in politics and on the interpretation that decision-makers make of intelligence reports.

Thus, in just two years we have seen how the film Santa and Andrew was removed from the theaters; Tania Bruguera gagged; the writer Wendy Guerra demonized; publisher Yanelys Núñez expelled from her

place of work for offering statements to an independent press outlet; and an entire street closed by police cars to prevent the screening of the documentary *Nadie* (No one), directed by Miguel Coyula.

Those who make decisions, today, about the cultural life of the country and the functioning (or not?) of the press are opting for segregation as a weapon to “preserve” the Revolution, when in fact this will be its tomb. What is revolutionary, for them, is that which is politically correct, or rather politically comfortable. They forget, beforehand, that nobody is an island. Meanwhile, the false idea of a majority consensus is falling apart. The last months indicate the immediate direction of the state of art in Cuba.

Many have dared to compare the present times with the sad years of “the quinquenio gris”, when everything was censored that was not compatible with the Soviet model, often denying the very essence of the nation. And although the phenomenon is similar, in practice it presents different shades of gray.

First, that stage, while it caused the exile of Cuban writers and artists – today popular in the whole world– over time resulted in the creation and expansion of cultural institutions by all Cuban municipalities or towns. Today, of that, only the memory remains. The houses of culture have, for the most part, been destroyed and the artistic educational programs have been

impoverished or prostituted in the business of the purchase of scholarships and internships.

The “quinquenio gris” was the result, according to Ambrocio Fornet himself, of a misinterpretation of three different events: Fidel Castro’s speech, known as The Speech to Intellectuals in 1961, Socialism and Man in Cuba by Che Guevara and the intervention of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez at the inauguration of the first art school in 1966.

The three, contradictory to each other, did not leave room for any form of dissidence against the government, but at the same time they tried to be inclusive of the different schools of thought, so long as they did not attack the essence of the Revolution. As we have already analyzed, the Revolution had a “right to exist” because it represented the interests of the exploited majority. Indeed, there were years when Cuba was at the center of the whirlwind, as was said by Jean Paul Sartre. Cortázar, Neruda, and Jean-Luc Godard all passed through Havana.


Fifty years later, the Marshal from his Ministry does not pretend to be inclusive. He does not bother. The recipe is “with me or without me”. That means not going around with a red flag and the image of Stalin on one’s chest automatically makes you a “mercenary of the empire,” a term formerly used to label dissidents and opposition activists. Today, the same label

is still used for directors, like Fernández Pérez or Pavel Giroud, that dare to demand, for example, a Law on Cinema, or young writers, whose books will not be displayed in any fair, but instead can only see the systematic reproduction of a Marxist ideology that is not necessarily connected to the history of the country or to what it means to be Cuban.

The exploited majority have less and less access to cultural products. And art, or at least good art, has for years been a product primarily intended for the “nouveau riche”.

The “quinquenio gris” must have been hard for those who ended up in exile or absolute silence while their bolder years slipped away. Yet, artists of an extraordinary caliber emerged as the heads of the most important cultural institutions. Whether one thinks along the same lines as them or not, no one can deny the richness of Nicholas Guillen, the intelligence of Juan Marinello or the experience of the sacrifice of Haydée Santa María, who, when shown the torn out eyes of her brother, still held on to her beliefs. Today, most institutions are run by individuals who could not even repair the cover of a book.

The “quinquenio gris” touched the nation, because the models of cultural consumption of the time included the neighborhood cinema, a theater with fantastic works in every corner of the country and




## **If the art is not a weapon, if it does not serve to fight, is it not art?**

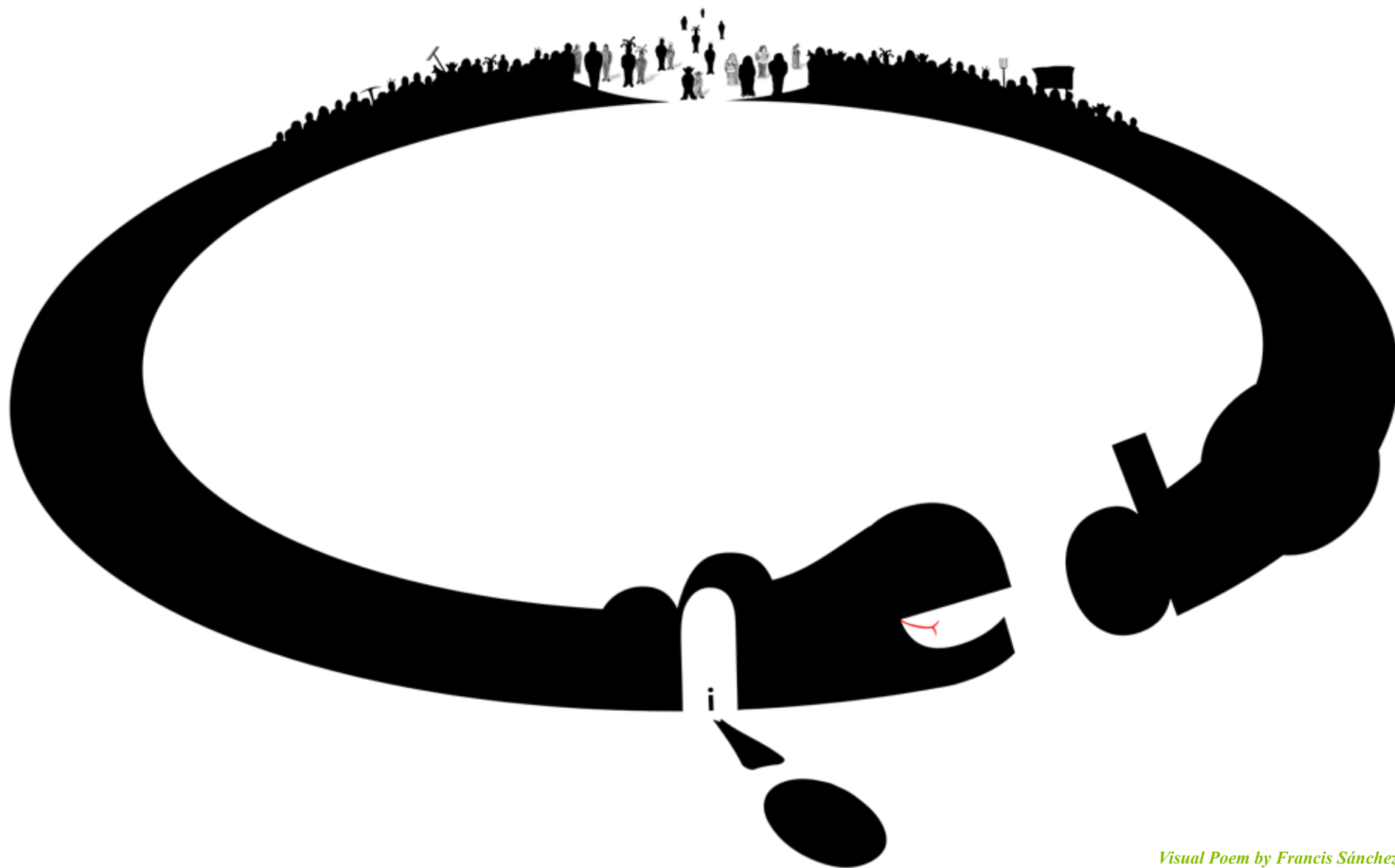
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murals and posters everywhere.

As the nation stands today, without Internet access, it cannot find out about the debate. The nation is completely focused on the telenovelas like “The Latin Beauty” and reality shows, while the ceiling of the cinema of its neighborhood increasingly collapses and its youngest children fight over the clothes brought by “mules” from Russia or Haiti and the latest reggaetón artist currently being played.

The “quinquenio gris” has never completely disappeared, but its marshals were silenced. Today we know only the certainty of Arturo Arango: “in the 70s... there was a prevailing slogan, which revealed a lot, that art is a weapon of Revolution. Let us carefully read how many limitations there are in such a few words. The first is to condemn art as far as its function (its use): it is a weapon. How to pretend that art is a weapon? And if it is not a weapon, if it does not serve to fight, is it not art? Later, there is only one trend that is allowed: of the Revolution, which is so exclusive that it eliminates the possibility that art is outside politics; that it makes a difference.”





*Visual Poem by Francis Sánchez*

# RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE TERM “DISSIDENT”



**Yanelys Núñez Leyva**

**Hatuey, José Martí and Fidel Castro  
were all dissidents as well**

The Museum of Dissidence in Cuba (MDC) is a work of art created in 2016 by the visual artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and the art historian Yanelys Núñez Leyva. It works as a dynamic platform that is displayed online - with an archive for consulting information, a space for temporary exhibitions about cultural identity, a blog, etc. - but it also presents itself in concrete contexts by offering spaces for dialogue and artistic creation.

According to the Dictionary of the Spanish Language, the word “dissidence” means “an action and effect of dissent “or “a serious disagreement of opinions”. Starting from this concept, which does not describe any differentiation or gap between its practitioners according to some kind of ideological connotation, the Museum approaches the history of Cuba assuming the dissidence as a mark that affects all the stories apart from the specific aspects of



Yanelys Núñez and Luis Manuel Otero during an interview for The New York Times  
Photo by Hannah Berkeley

each time period. It is from this starting point that the Museum wants to begin to re-contextualize the concept of ‘dissidence’, by affirming the current need for political diversity on the island.

Facing the lack of comprehension by the national authorities about the noble and conciliatory character of this artistic proposal, Núñez Leyva was expelled from her work place, the magazine Revolution and Culture; and Otero Alcántara began to be “cared for” by the country’s State Security.

The MDC has given its authors the opportunity to get to know and/or work with people who have not given into the

general apathy, which is present in many people’s lives, and who are interested in an ideal of a more inclusive country. In this regard, it has been one of the most rewarding experiences for them.

The Museum does not endorse any political program of any opposition party. It intends to explore how dissidence can lead to the development of projects for the nation; and wants to create a hybrid artistic form that uses the format of new technologies alongside a traditional perception of the concept of a museum, while at the same time providing the crossing point from the virtual world to the offline world through its programming.

# TO DELETE A NAME



Artistic composition by Nonardo Perea

## Nonardo Perea

When the  
government does  
not like an artist,  
it makes his work  
disappear

In Cuba, anything that could result in something new, whether in literature or some other means of expression, such as photography, or whatever artistic performance, as it could be innovative and provocative, can be a perfect target for censorship.

In actuality, some of those who have the authority to assess any kind of art, through their mediocrity, find it difficult to open themselves up to new concepts, to changes that are inevitable, and to digest certain creative processes unrelated to their interests or tastes. I suppose this is due to the lack of freedom and up-to-date information, and ignorance of what is happening in other parts of the world.

Tied to this is the fear of being looked at badly by certain institutions that would not want to see the reflection of a reality in art, such as any vestiges of social criticism or marginal issues. Although there have been art exhibitions with these characteristics, the curators have not been left out of the controversy and the censorship.

Personally, some of my photographic works have been described as subversive, and condemned to non-existence.

And not only my photographic work has received such blows, my literature has not been exempt; my name has been completely removed. When gay literature

is spoken or written about on the current Cuban scene, I do not exist.

Not only is it a matter of censoring a piece of work, but of turning its author into a completely marginalized being, and they do that by not publishing your writing, not having reviews of your books, and not accepting your stories in magazines; by not giving you prizes, and by not even letting you be cited.

The tactic is to delete a name. With this procedure, nobody will have the possibility of knowing your work; you will always be a stranger, even in your own homeland.

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## rewriting cuba

Biannual magazine about Cuba made by the Cuban team of People in Need, Prague, in collaboration with independent writers, journalists and artists from Cuba. | Issue 15 Year 2017|

Published with the support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

Cover and back cover photos by A. Koleman

Design: Punto Gráfico

**TRANSITION**  
Transition Promotion Program

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