

Antonio José Ponte

The Putinization of Cuban Art

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The contemporary art biennial that took place this past summer in Havana has been called the “Biennial of the Thaw.” The US market tuned in, and many Cuban artists living abroad returned to the island to exhibit their works. With the legitimacy that the label of contemporary art accords to certain gestures, there was an Obama look-alike strolling through the city, a sandy beach right in the middle of the Malecón, and a Facebook “Like” icon the size of an official government propaganda billboard.

It had been dubbed the “Biennial of the Thaw” not only because it took place during the restoration of relations between Cuba and the United States, but also because there were artists who were trying to give these negotiations a bit of a push to accelerate history. As such, the steps Obama was taking were understood as a foreshadowing of the journey to Cuba that the President promised he would make by the end of his term. Umbrellas and deck chairs on the sand dumped on the Malecón were a preview of the urban transformations that will be sweeping across the island. And the Facebook sign suggested a level of access to the internet that does not yet exist in Cuba.

As politically imaginative as they may seem, the artists participating in the Biennial were unable to elaborate a defense of artistic and civil liberties, and they were silent in the face of the censorship and repression of their colleague, Tania Bruguera, who had returned to the country some months before to stage a performance in the Plaza de la Revolución. That was to be her way of speeding up the thaw: installing a microphone where only the official monologue can be heard, in order to allow any citizen to express themselves. State Security officers didn’t let her get to the plaza; instead, they took her away, confiscated her passport, and for over half a year left her in judicial limbo, with the island as her jail cell.

When the Biennial began, Bruguera chimed in with her own opening ceremony. She began reading aloud, in the living room of her home in Havana, from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt. She invited her colleagues to join her, along with any other willing participants, and yet no Cuban artists came, with the exception of Levi Orta and the critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera.

The people who did show up were government officials and menacing mobs of State Security officers disguised as citizens who subjected her to an act of repudiation. Bruguera discovered she had been banned from virtually all galleries and museums. None of the people who had invited her to the Biennial’s opening ceremonies protested against this. They didn’t withdraw their exhibits, they didn’t stage a



A "Like" from Facebook, by the artist Alexander Guerra, appears on the Malecón.

walkout, and they didn't make a single public complaint.¹

This disregard for violations of basic rights is not, of course, limited to visual artists in Cuba. The previous December, during the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, the French film *Return to Ithaca* was censored. Cuban author Leonardo Padura, who wrote the screenplay, adapting it from one of his novels, asked the director Laurent Cantet not to speak out, and he also kept silent. And when the film community publicly condemned the censorship and Cantet thanked them in an open letter, Padura remained silent. He has created the figure of a victim of censorship who avoids any association with those who risk themselves by defending him.

All these signs suggest the emergence of a new class of artists in Cuban culture. Those residents both inside and outside the country who enjoy sufficient economic solvency to not depend on the regime, who count on a second nationality to support them, still behave as if they have drawn no lessons on freedom from these very advantages. They defend their economic privileges above anything else ... even (as we have seen in Padura's case) over their own work.

They take their works of art to Cuba or publish their books there for the benefit of those people who can read and attend exhibitions, not to curry favor with the regime. That's what they say, at least. But being unscrupulous soon makes them complicit with the authorities, and their silence ensures that censorship and repression will continue to operate smoothly. They are at once the stars and extras in art festivals that, ultimately, are always crushing someone.

By being ready to usher in the future, these artists are helping to form a relationship with political power that is not unlike Vladimir Putin's regime in terms of the way it controls the world of Russian art. Unlike Putin, however, Raúl Castro does not need to shell out much in the way of money in order to buy artists. He uses the US market and its appetite for discovering all things Cuban. An entire fleet of American curators land in Havana and – regardless of where they live or how well they're doing – Cuban artists return to the island. It's understood that Cuban art is what you buy on the island, in situ, paying for the value added by the spirit of the place. Cuban art is bought as a souvenir of a historical moment, and the regime takes its cut for providing the premises, which is their island. And from these transactions, the artists' commitment to submissiveness follows.

With the Biennial over, and after having read Arendt aloud in Havana, Bruguera has begun plumbing the Cuban government's repression of

political opponents as a source of future work. She has been beaten and arrested by State Security forces on a number of occasions, and she remains at risk of being brought before a judge with a mind full of preconceived rulings. In such a case, it is unlikely that her colleagues would reach out to support her, focused as they are on the process of Putinization their own art is undergoing.

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Translated by Ezra E. Fitz.

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Since the original publication of this article the Cuban government dropped its case against Tania Bruguera and returned her passport, and she returned to the US in August, 2015.

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