

Coco Fusco  
**Editorial –  
“Cuba: The  
Fading of a  
Subcontinental  
Dream”**

e-flux journal #68 — #68 december 2015 Coco Fusco  
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In the spring of 2009, during the 11th Havana Biennial, a recent art school graduate named Hamlet Lavastida stenciled a quote from a famous speech by Fidel Castro on the steps of Galería Habana and called his piece *Intellectuals Without Words*. The quote reads:

The existence of an authority in the cultural sector does not mean that one should worry about abuses by that authority. Who would want, or who would desire for this authority not to exist? If we continue with that line of thought we might begin to wish that there were no militia or police, that there were no state power.

The quote is from “Words to the Intellectuals,” a speech Castro gave at Cuba’s National Library in June 1961 to an audience of illustrious literary figures. It included the well-worn phrase “within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing,” that instantly became the benchmark of Cuba’s cultural policy regarding expressive freedoms. Though the phrase reads as an absolute commandment, it is vague, and perhaps purposely so. Who sets the border between inside and out is not made explicit. What exactly constitutes antirevolutionary expression is also not specified. The lack of concrete detail gives the mandate a plasticity that has facilitated arbitrary decisions and sweeping dismissals ever since.

Fidel Castro gave his speech in the aftermath of the first major censorship case of the Cuban Revolution – that of the documentary short *P.M.*, made by Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal.<sup>1</sup> The film shows a largely black crowd of Cubans socializing in a bar in Havana’s port area, and lacks the moralistic voice-over that came to characterize the revolutionary newsreels of the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry – ICAIC). Authorities at ICAIC decried that the directors were celebrating counterrevolutionary activities associated with tourism, organized crime, and prostitution. The country was in an uproar over the Bay of Pigs invasion and the severing of diplomatic ties with the United States. Fidel’s speech was supposed to put an end to the fracas that ensued when the film was confiscated. Although the speech at the library was followed by a long discussion, the publications of the proceedings left out the retorts and entreaties made by several Cuban intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of politics and posterity, Fidel got the last word. The filmmakers in question chose exile, as did several of the writers whose publishing outlets would soon be shut down.

Lavastida's piece alludes to an historical moment in which filmmakers lost their film and intellectuals were left without words by drawing our attention to the irony in Fidel's rhetorical question about public trust in the state's administration of revolutionary justice. A phrase that was originally designed to suggest mass approval for state authority becomes a hint that generalized fear exists about speaking out against abuses by the state. Lavastida created the piece for the same biennial in which Tania Bruguera first set up her open mic for *Tatlin's Whisper* at the Centro Wifredo Lam, and subsequently faced public excoriation for supposedly offering a platform to counterrevolutionaries. Not surprisingly, Lavastida's stenciled words were removed shortly after they were installed. While contemporary Cuban art abounds in popular phrases and double entendre, the political right to speak publicly and the authority of the state were unwelcome subjects during an international event that showcases Cuba's artistic talent and guarantees a significant influx of cash.

Intellectuals' words have been prized symbolic currency throughout the course of the Cuban Revolution. The state's legitimacy has been inextricably tied to the promotion of mass literacy and its role as a cultural laboratory. Cuba credits itself as a progenitor of the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s, as the launching pad for the New Latin American Cinema, as the root origin of salsa music, and the home base for the Caribbean's finest art cadre. During the 1960s and '70s, when most Latin American countries broke diplomatic ties with Cuba, the support for the Revolution bestowed by an international cadre of literary luminaries substituted for diplomatic alliances. Even today, Cuba's most powerful export is culture – perhaps not in hard economic terms but as symbolic capital that attracts tourists and counters its critics' claims about a lack of civil rights. Because officially recognized artists in today's Cuba are part of an economic elite that earns money in hard currency, travels frequently, and owns property, they are usually the last to complain about a lack of freedom.

Most Cuban intellectuals and artists say little about political rights, but they have been subject to restrictions as to what they can do and say in public and whether they can represent their country abroad since the Revolution began. Those who ruffle feathers by speaking out risk professional suicide, imprisonment, and exile, and rarely find support among their peers. They face a formidable apparatus and the incredulity of foreigners who see Cuba as the embodiment of utopian leftist ideals. In the 1960s and '70s,

the state sought to excise “bourgeois” tendencies among intellectuals educated before 1959, to root out the sectarian tendencies of academics who published journals critical of centralized state socialism, to undermine cultural activities that focused on minority identities or religion, and to survey artists who fraternized with foreigners. To that end, in the 1970s, Cuba experimented with placing all culture under direct control of the Communist Party, blacklisted many well-known intellectuals, criminalized “Western” influence, and developed pseudoscientific categories to pathologize “excessive” intellectualism and homosexuality. By the 1980s, the cultural sector had acquired its own institutions and cadres of “experts,” and younger generations that had been educated within the revolutionary system began their professional lives and ushered in what is widely considered a cultural renaissance. The decline of socialism at the end of the 1980s destabilized Cuba economically and left the country politically isolated, which led to another backlash against intellectuals and artists who were clamoring for reforms and greater autonomy. During the economic crisis of the 1990s, the Cuban government countered the impact of a mass exodus of artists and intellectuals with a peace offering to those who stayed – they could earn hard currency and travel, provided that they did not rock the boat politically. From time to time, artists or musicians would fall out of favor, but in general, they maintained their distance from opposition political activists, who were considered US-backed mercenaries by Cuban authorities. Visual artists turned their attention to sales and travel, writers who wanted to publish fiction about societal problems sought out lucrative foreign contracts, and rappers who drew large crowds but had no ties to government agencies became the principal mouthpieces of dissent. More recently, the nonconformist worlds of disaffected youth subcultures, dissident bloggers, self-taught artists, and politicized rappers are the principal sites of oppositional cultural practice and demands for greater expressive freedom. Their increasing visibility abroad and the stridency of their voices may be emboldening what has for a long time been a rather timid intellectual milieu reluctant to speak out against state censorship and repression.

In the past year, since Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced that their governments would begin a dialogue aimed at restoring diplomatic relations after more than fifty years, there has been constant public discussion of what this will mean for Cuban society and culture. Many of Cuba's critics, inside and outside the country, have pointed to the reality

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that Raúl Castro has made no promise of any internal political change, that his reforms up to now have been economic and insufficient to bring about needed change, that the rate of detention of political opponents has risen dramatically, and that illegal immigration has skyrocketed. Those facts have not stopped foreign visitors from expressing quixotic expectations that Cuba's entire political system would change overnight because of a reopened embassy and an increase in tourism. The Cuban government continues to assert its sovereign rights and insist on the permanence of its political system, which is ignored by foreign journalists who endorse the Obama Administration's plans for renewed ties, and frustrates the country's internal opposition.

During the past year, several confrontations between Cuban artists and the government have received an unusual degree of attention from the foreign press. One could argue that these cases represent "business as usual" for Cuban authorities that are always keen to limit public expression of social criticism and keep culture away from any kind of oppositional political activity, particularly when delicate political matters are on the table. One might also argue that some Cubans intellectuals and cultural producers are capitalizing on the international media attention that Cuba currently receives to thrust their concerns into the global media sphere while they can.

The most widely publicized case was that of artist Tania Bruguera, who returned to her home country last December with a hastily devised plan to restage *Tatlin's Whisper* in Havana's Revolutionary Plaza – a project that was never authorized, never realized, and for which she was detained briefly and then forced to wait for seven months before having her passport returned. Street artist Danilo Maldonado Machado was also arrested in December 2014 on his way to Havana's Central Park to let two pigs loose with the words "Fidel" and "Raúl" painted on them. He spent ten months in prison awaiting trial before being released, during which his friends carried out an extensive media campaign that led to his being named a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International. Last summer, the prize-winning film and theater director Juan Carlos Cremata-Malberti mounted a production of Eugene Ionesco's *Exit the King* just as the Cuban and American embassies were reopening – and the play was shut down after two nights. When Cremata-Malberti published his critiques of the state's censorship on opposition blogs, his contract as a theater director was unceremoniously cancelled. The Cuban film institute also recently blocked a film scripted by leading Cuban novelist Leonardo Padura from

being shown and another film based on a novel by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez from being produced on the island.

It remains unclear whether the presence of foreign media is increasing public expression of critical views by Cuban artists, pushing the state's hand in exercising control, or simply drawing international attention to the routine tussles between an authoritarian state and the citizens who for the most part enjoy a privileged status as long as their nonconformist tendencies are not perceived as politically inspired. The broader silence of the Cuban public as to their political aspirations and their opinions about culture still stands. Despite frequent media speculation as to what kind of political transitions Cubans may want for the future, there is a complete lack of regard for the history of attempts by Cuban intellectuals to advocate for the democratization of the Cuban system from within. In that sense, the Cuban government has succeeded in erasing history by classifying all political activism as illegal, mercenary, and counterrevolutionary, and by selectively omitting politically oriented art from institutionally produced histories.

The texts gathered in this issue of *e-flux journal* reflect upon the censorship of Cuban artists that has taken place in the shadow of the political negotiations between the island and the United States. They are the words of Cuban intellectuals who have chosen to respond to erasures brought about by overzealous state authority, a politics of complicity among Cuban artists, and the strategic blindness of Cuba's enthusiasts.

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To view *P.M.*, see  
<https://vimeo.com/21580685>

2

For more details about the  
censorship of the film, please  
see Orlando Jiménez Leal and  
Manuel Zayas's *El caso PM: 14  
minutos que duran medio siglo*  
(Editorial Colibri, 2012).

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