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ARTICLES

## Why Did Cuba Deport Artists Trying to Attend Havana's First Alternative Biennial? [UPDATED]

While governments and the media may tout the reforms in Cuba, the reality for artists on the island nation is far more precarious.

Coco Fusco 5 days ago

(comic by Garrincha and used with permission)

It has been argued in *The New York Times* that [Raul Castro is a reformer](#) who made the expansion of independent businesses in Cuba possible. The recent explosion of bed and breakfasts, beauty parlors, and repair shops run out of private homes is widely welcomed as a sign of positive change. While the Trump administration attempts to [reverse Obama's Cuba policies](#) and curtail profits from tourism that flow to the Cuban state, it has spoken favorably about the country's burgeoning private sector. The country's new president, Miguel Diaz Canel, has been cast as a liberal who has a Facebook account, rides a bike and supports gays in his home province of Villa Clara. Prior to taking office he gave no hint of wanting to reverse the alleged reformist trend.

How then, do we explain why a small band of Cuban creatives that launched an alternative biennial so that artists across Havana could open their homes to the public would be subject to a full on attack by their government? The organizers of

the [#00Bienal de la Habana](#) — artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara and curator Yanelys Nuñez Leyva — decided to put together their event after the state-sponsored biennial was postponed due to the impact of Hurricane Irma. They felt that artists needed an outlet and that the citizenry could benefit from an injection of creative energy. They raised money for their project through crowd funding and deftly used social media to promote their venture, posting catchy videos and even a theme song. They encountered resistance from Cuban authorities but decided to forge ahead nonetheless.

At first, established artists on good terms with the Cuban government seemed reluctant to join up with a bunch of autodidacts who have had their share of confrontations with the authorities — six months ago, Cuban police arrested Otero Alcantara while he conducted a performative pilgrimage on the day of Saint Lazarus. Nonetheless, as the opening date of the [#00Bienal](#) grew closer, the numbers of Cuban art world notables who decided to participate shot up. Reynier Leyva Novo took the proceeds from a \$3,800 art sale he made to the Cuban Center for the Fine Arts and made a public statement of support by donating the money to the [#00Bienal](#). Well-known figures such as artist Tania Bruguera and curator-critic Gerardo Mosquera endorsed the event in videos posted on Facebook. Foreign artists promised to join them but the organizers hid their names from the press so they might slip into the country unnoticed. The tally of participants reached 140.

Then three days before the opening the Cuban Artists and Writers Union issued a statement repudiating of the [#00Bienal](#), calling it an operation designed to denigrate the state run biennial and claiming that it was financed by counterrevolutionary mercenaries. High school students at San Alejandro Art Academy were compelled to watch a video denouncing the event. Participating artists received calls from the Artists' Registry, a division of the Cuban cultural ministry, telling them that if they participated in the [#00Bienal](#) they would lose their accreditation, which permits them to operate as independent artists and not hold a formal job. Miami-based artist and curator Gean Moreno was held at customs on May 4 and interrogated for 10 hours because he was carrying printed matter with the [#00Bienal](#) logo and 12 multiples made by Cuban artist Ernesto Oroza for the exhibition. Those multiples included donated items by Rikrit Tiravanija, Antonio Muntadas, and José Bedia and were summarily confiscated as “enemy propaganda.” Artists who visit the organizers are being ambushed by

security agents and threatened. The event opened on May 5 with the artists surrounded by state security agents. Scholars who are interested in this venture — myself included — have been refused entry to Cuba without explanation.

It is hard to believe that a well-oiled machine like the Cuban Ministry of Culture would feel so threatened by its artists that it would stomp out what essentially amounts to a 10-day art party. But that is precisely what is happening. Cuban government officials view independent artistic activity as a threat to their control over *their* art world. They will not relinquish power over an asset that is dear to them in symbolic terms as one of the revolution's few success stories. Foreign arts professionals that flock to official Cuban cultural events rarely challenge the cultural bureaucracy's whitewashing of ongoing tensions between artists and the state — either because they don't understand the system, or they are blinded by their political allegiance to outdated ideologies, or they fear being expelled from the country. Nonetheless, as Cuban youths become savvier about social media and the fundraising methods used by artists in the rest of the world, they are succeeding in getting around the Cuban government's monopoly on culture.

Crowd funding has enabled young filmmakers to make films outside the Cuban Film Institute and young musicians to produce recordings on their own that they upload to YouTube. Artists no longer have to graduate from the island's top schools, court favor with government officials, or stay away from political subjects to find an audience. That new reality is making them bolder about airing their political concerns. It's also setting off a wave of repression by a government that would like to have reason to blame the CIA or even the Trump administration for these expressions of creative autonomy. This time the Cuban government is wrong. Yes, it's true that the CIA tried to kill Fidel hundreds of times in the 1960s, but it's the revolution that has produced artists who are smart enough and brave enough to think for themselves. The Cuban government tarnishes itself in choosing to squelch the very ingenuity that has made its artists so compelling to the rest of the world and so valuable to the country.

**UPDATE, May 9, 2:01pm EDT:**

Bienal organizer Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara says that several foreigners who entered Cuba to participate in the #00Bienal have been threatened by Cuban officials. He notes that a few days ago Spanish artist Diego Gil was notified at the

Bed & Breakfast where he was staying that he had to report to Immigration. There, he was told that he did not have permission to participate in any cultural events and that if he showed up at the #00Bienal he would not be able to leave the country. Fearful that the authorities would make good on their threat, he stayed away and returned to Spain yesterday. According to Otero Alcantara, there are three other foreigners still on the island who have received the same warning. —  
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