

Provocation

Performance and the Political Police

The Cuban Short Circuit

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo

Despite its massive parades and rallies, the Cuban Revolution is terrified of public space. During his more than half century in power, Fidel Castro has mandated that, “The street belongs to the Revolutionaries,” so that socialist Cuba may legally punish any spontaneous demonstration beyond the bounds of official control.

Galleries and private exhibitions are pressured from all sides. Rebellious music and independent film are censored through control of distribution circuits. Literature that is critical of the state is not published on the island. And more than a few artists have been imprisoned for their works or their behavior, charged with “ideological deviations,” causing a “public scandal,” or “disrespect.” Thus, one generation follows another into exile. That is the story behind the apparent apathy of Cuban artists toward politics.

Nonetheless, performance is deployed as a strategic form of irreverence by young artists and activists. In recent years, art collectives such as Omni-Zona Franca have transformed the scene in their communities with an alternative cultural festival that has survived despite Cuban Ministry of Culture repression, which has included police arrests and forced removal from designated locales.



Figure 1. Amistad’s *One Square Meter of Freedom*, Havana, September 2010. (Photo courtesy of Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo)

of cardboard served as a symbolic platform where participants were given three minutes to offer their opinions—uncensored—about their dreams and their reality, their fears and hopes, their accomplishments and frustrations on topics that ranged from the domestic economy to the spiritual state of the Cuban nation.

At this event the speakers threw out their ideas such as, “You can’t convert an intellectual into a ventriloquist to simply repeat ‘Long Live the Revolution’ and ‘Down with the Blockade,’” because “we want to be, once and for all, part of the future, not the dust of the past.” They questioned the thirst of many officials for monetary gain, but also the cultural and military institutions that continue to be obsessed with watching and punishing all forms of civic activity, using students and workers to harass members of civic groups.

There are always uninvited guests at these performances, whether the audience is large or small. They are easily recognized because no one there knows them: they are the State Security agents working undercover, anonymous faces who don’t say a word, but record everything while they talk on their cell phones. It is obvious that the Revolutionary State still does not want to give up, not even for a second, not a single square millimeter of its absolute control (the authorities have a paranoid distrust of the rest of society).

Today, a number of collectives form the vanguard of this movement. Among them are Demóngeles, Raspadura, Love In, Talento Cubano, Matraka, and Amistad. Amistad—meaning friendship—managed to pull off the first successful independent demonstration in the history of the Revolution when, on 6 November 2009, they walked along 23rd Street in el Vedado district with signs and body-paintings that said “against violence.” Their video documentation of the event was as important as the act itself, which was a curious mixture of civic and aesthetic gestures, of provocation and pacifism.

In September 2010, Amistad convened another performance entitled *One Square Meter of Freedom* at a centrally located park in el Vedado district, Havana. A piece

The future of these groups depends upon the solidarity that comes, paradoxically, more from the exiled diaspora than the island itself. Their actors often lack a conceptual long-term program, making them vulnerable to the stage set by government intolerance. It is a molecular movement at risk of dissolution due to pressure from the monolithic machinery of the state and the political police. This would be unfortunate because they have become an attractive alternative for most Cuban people, in contrast to the opposition groups who use the same tired language as the regime's demagogues, simply with the opposite sign.

The X-Ray as Therapy

Yoani Sánchez

The décor seems haphazard, but that is the result of the crush of people—a waiting room filled with political slogans and a huge poster from which the Maximum Leader points his finger at you. Nobody looks you in the eye and few interact, as if they know that every word spoken in the Office of Immigration and Aliens will be recorded. Among those seated in the waiting room not one is an immigrant, much less a foreigner, but the euphemisms by which the island's official institutions are named is based on the science of encryption. You are not here to get an exit permit, the authorization to travel designed to remind you of your permanent condition as the child of Daddy State, who will never let you leave the house freely. In fact, you have come to the mansion at 17th and K in el Vedado district to perform—an almost theatrical enterprise where life gives you the script and you let yourself be led by it. There will be no applause, nor any exit permit.

You have a microphone in your pocket and a friend follows you—through the window—with his cell phone camera until they call your name. You know perfectly well what is going to happen in there: They will ask you if you have family members who have deserted, or if you own any property. They will inquire about whether or not you belong to any “little group” and will be a little more emphatic when they inquire about whether or not you are member of Las Damas de Blanco [a group of relatives and friends of political prisoners arrested in the Black Spring of 2003. Weekly since the arrest, they have marched silently in Havana]. Then you will have to tell them the reasons for your trip. A prize received from some place—you will say with very little *hope*—while the official who is meeting with you will make a gesture that can be translated as, “Ah...another counterrevolutionary prize.” Your only consolation comes from knowing that the tiny technological gadget in your pocket is recording every one of these words that lead—inevitably—to a new denial of permission to travel. You leave the place with your trophy, in the form of an MP3 recording. It is time to complete the staging.

Outside you extract the entrails, playing the recording as therapy—highly effective when trapped in a totalitarian state. The powers-that-be count on the victim's silence, for the stigmatized to simply turn the page. What worries the authorities are the exhibitionists, those who refuse to hide, under their clothes, the atrocities committed by others. Undressing in public does not have to be the shortest path to shame, rather it can be the key to protecting yourself and protesting against a system that wants to reduce you to obedience.

So, you post on the web, where everyone can see it, the recording you made in that dreary office, and with it you post your face, your ID card number, your whole life, in hopes that such an exorcism will save you. You cannot avoid the fact that, along with the viewers who identify with you, and those who are bored, there also will be the faces in the shadows, searching through your stories, looking for some weakness they can use to shut you up. And nobody thinks to drop the damn curtain!

—translated by MJ Porter

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