

THE SHIFTING GROUNDS OF CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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When I performed *Tatlin's Whisper #6* at the Havana Biennial in 2009, I relied on the principle that an art institution can be a civic institution. Art spaces offer a platform to say what it is not possible to say in other spaces, to be the citizen you are not permitted to be in public.¹ The Havana Biennial offers a distinct opportunity to sharpen this potential, because many foreigners and journalists are present, and all eyes are on Cuban art for a moment. The government uses the biennial to position Cuba within an international art community, tempering its stricter forms of censorship to project an image of openness to the world. Aware of this recurrent exception to the rule, I wanted to do something that would not otherwise be authorized. I staged a performance that conveyed the absence of a leader—and therefore the possibility that anybody, or indeed everybody, can be a leader—but also the idea that by conquering your fears you can feel what freedom is. My hope has always been that once people experienced freedom, they would seek it in spaces where their rights have been denied; in this way, I see art as a safe space to rehearse the future.

As soon as this performance finished, I was called to the Ministry of Culture and reprimanded in meeting after meeting. I was asked to sign a paper regretting the interventions of the audience into the piece. I explained that as an artist I only set up the conditions for the work, which is ultimately made by its participants, and that I would not sign such a declaration. What I didn't understand at the time was that I would be banned from every cultural institution in Cuba. Only five years later did I realize that nobody had invited me to show in Cuba since, and it was no accident. In the summer of 2014, I met with the deputy minister of culture and asked him about my situation. He told me, "No, of course we're not going to let you do anything in our institutions after what you did." Then he asked, "Are you coming here to negotiate your new relationship with us?" And I said, "Yes, but I'm going to do things on my own terms." After that they became even more suspicious of me, and needless to say, I was kept on the blacklist.

So, when I thought about performing *Tatlin's Whisper #6* again, in December 2014, amid the new geopolitical context of restored diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, I knew that I wouldn't try to do it through art institutions. This time I understood that the biggest challenge would be to conquer public space, because everything happens behind closed doors in Cuba, and that is where art is supposed to stay—among one's peers, and not the people. Cuban artists, like all citizens, are trained not to see the public sphere as an option.

I believe that political art works cannot simply be repeated, but must be updated by understanding the source of the work's impact in its initial context, and analyzing how a current political state affects not only the reception but the content and the form the work takes. In the case of *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, it was important to preserve the collective memory of its first reiteration because freedom of expression had reemerged in the imagination of many Cubans, with a new valence.

People thought, if the United States and Cuba were in negotiation, surely the right to free speech was under discussion. And they were imagining a different reality for the first time in decades. I responded to this collective enthusiasm by creating a space for everyone's imagination and desires. Raúl Castro had announced the restoration of relations as a *fait accompli* in which Cubans had no say; the people were pronounced happy with the decision, and that was supposed to be that. It was the right moment for art to enter everyday political life. Art could help construct a civic sphere, restoring the right of everyone to imagine the society we were building, and to make sense of a state of uncertainty.

The new version of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* began with a simple, spontaneous act. I wrote a letter congratulating the Pope, President Obama, and President Raúl Castro on the historic decision to reopen relations and set in motion the process to end the U.S. embargo on our country. But the letter went on to ask Castro what would come next for Cubans. What would happen to the revolution and its aspirations for social justice? What would happen when capitalism took root in Cuba? I posed socially oriented questions that were particularly uncomfortable at this moment, when new forms of racism and classism are setting in, and Cuba is rapidly transforming into a neoliberal country with socialist propaganda. The letter went viral on Facebook, and someone made a fan page for it called #YoTambienExijo (#IAldemand), which became the title of the piece. #YoTambienExijo was therefore a collective project for which I was only the spokesperson. All I did was help to create a space for Cubans of various backgrounds and political leanings to express their hopes and concerns about their country's future.

In Cuba you are labeled a dissident not for making a statement, but for asking the "wrong question." #YoTambienExijo quickly angered the government, which attacked the letter because I wrote it outside Cuba and put it on the internet. But if I had written it in Cuba,

The Shifting Grounds of Censorship

I wouldn't have been able to finish it, let alone circulate it. Government officials would have intervened; that's how censorship works in Cuba today. Even so, it was important for me to follow through with the work by going to Cuba—by moving from the digital to the direct experience. **Artists should not just be observers from afar but a presence in places where there is injustice, even if it will hurt their careers. Such are the consequences of political beliefs, and they are actually not that important when you see the effect the work has on people.**

Boycotting an unjust state or institution from afar is important, in that this act works as an educational tool for people who are unaware of a situation, while showing those closer to the site of injustice how others perceive them. I will always support economic boycott as a tool against oppression, because it has proven effective no matter what the issue or target at hand is. Cutting the bottom line for corporations and governments is the surest way to change their policies. Nevertheless, there should always be a combination of tactics. **One tactic that should not be neglected is witnessing.** This is why, as artists, we have to go to the frontlines of a struggle and tell stories to counterbalance official propaganda and fight the status quo. We have to be present, not just engaged. This is a long tradition in our history. Artists have been correspondents from the trenches and the streets, working in the places of political upheaval where they are needed.

As for cultural boycotts, I am still waiting to see whether they can have effective results. To me, such boycotts cannot be a matter of simply saying, "I'm not participating in this." Instead I would like to see artists ask, "What is the most effective way we can change this situation?" We should not settle for the most popular response to this question, but rather think hard about whom a cultural boycott will impact and how. It is important to recognize, too, that it is not the same for a popular musician or athlete to boycott an event or country as it is for a visual

Assuming Boycott

artist or scholar. It can be very effective to boycott as a celebrity, as most of one's fans will likely learn about the political situation in question through one's withdrawal. By contrast, if a pop musician plays a concert as usual in a place s/he has been asked to boycott, it will only validate the status quo.

For visual artists, however, I don't like the idea of *remaining* afar when you are engaging with the politics of another community. It's too comfortable. It's much easier to stand in New York with a placard that reads "Free speech for Cubans" than it is to be in Cuba and not even finish writing on your poster board by the time you are detained. If you want to fight for the Cuban people, go to Cuba; if you want to fight for Palestinian rights, go to Israel-Palestine. But do not go only to mount another show of your "best" work, assuming it will magically change people. **Go to make work addressing the uncomfortable facts of the place, to make the institutions that invited you confront their complicity—even if it means you will not be invited back. If you have privileged access to these institutions as an outsider, then make sure that before any act of yours, you speak with local artists and activists so you are informed not only by your own impressions or research from a distance, but by people who live the unjust situation as their daily reality.** Above all, **know that you will have to keep these conversations going in the long term,** dedicating yourself to putting pressure on institutions to change—and boycotting them if they don't—and **to staying in touch with the people most affected by the political situation.** Never get seduced by the access those in power will give you in exchange for your collaboration with them; you are not there for yourself but for a cause.

As someone who grew up in Cuba, I am the person I am now in part because of people who came to Cuba despite the sanctions, despite the embargo, despite all the obstacles. They showed us another reality, other aspirations. I remember the conversations I had, as an art student,

with people who came from the United States and Europe. They talked to us as if we were free people, and the contradiction between those encounters and our daily reality instilled a desire for more of these experiences. We wanted to fight to be as free as we were when we were talking to these people.

In Cuba, censorship has taken many forms over the years. During the first years of Castro's rule, Cuba didn't have to censor anyone because people were so happy about the great achievements brought about by the revolution. There were amazing social advancements that people hadn't even dared to dream of, so there was legitimate enthusiasm among artists of all kinds, and no need for censorship. But toward the end of the '60s, artists began to show some of the contradictions of the revolution, and the government came to understand the power of cultural propaganda. Officials began to "suggest" to artists what they should be working on, and whoever didn't follow their advice was isolated until eventually they could find no venues to release their music, print their books, or show their paintings. Of course censorship was never framed as political. Government officials would criticize your art, or they'd call you depraved and denigrate your character in whatever way they thought would demoralize you. Political censorship was expressed as moral or aesthetic censorship. This was hard on the artist, because if you claimed persecution, you were essentially told, "No, it's not that; it's just because you're a bad artist."

Then in the '70s and '80s a new figure emerged: the official artist. These artists did not complain, defended government decisions in gatherings where other artists expressed their political frustrations, and sometimes snitched on their peers when they became "dangerous." Many of these men (they were almost all men) were trustworthy enough to those in power that they could incorporate a bit of social critique into their work, but only as long as it was mild, and pointed to the symptoms rather than the sources of the problems.

During the late '80s, Fidel himself said for the first time, "We have made mistakes." This admission caused huge turmoil because he had never recognized that he had done wrong—he was the Revolution. There followed a very special moment in culture, with art aiming to address the people, not just the art world. Women came into positions of power in major cultural institutions and created more openness. Artists began to make more critical work, sometimes featuring Fidel, and one artist defecated into a national newspaper as a performance.² It was all very performative: artists understood and used the power of the gesture. The gesture was changing visual art, even if there were still many objects being made. It was a renaissance for Cuban art, similar to the first years after the revolution. Soon after, the government got scared and started censoring these artists. Backlash to the government's actions generated more awareness of censorship among the public, and stirred discussion among artists, but that only led to more severe censorship. Many artists emigrated because their shows were closed and they had nothing left to do. That's when the Cuban government came up with its amazingly effective strategy of controlling artists through the market.

In the '90s, Cuban officials put aside the socialist model of censorship for the capitalist model—success on the "free market." It was around this time that they started opening state galleries, so if you wanted to be a successful artist, you had to be in a state gallery, which would take your work to art fairs and show it to collectors. Still, in the '90s there were virtually no Cuban collectors, because there were few Cubans rich enough to buy art. There was no market, but all the critics talked about the market. I remember thinking, "What are they talking about? Nobody is selling anything!" Later I realized it was all in preparation for the moment to come; they were projecting the parameters of success they wanted people to respect, the forms of art they wanted people to desire.

The Shifting Grounds of Censorship

Today we are seeing the self-censorship that follows twenty years of institutional policy, driven by the Ministry of Culture, positioning the art market as the index of what makes good art. A comfortable life making art: what artist can resist that? But to be a “good” artist, you have to be extremely subtle in your critiques, or become entirely apolitical. All those who make critical art lose access to collectors and institutions, so they slowly descend the social scale until they are regarded as total failures—and examples of where artists will end up if they don’t tow the line. Meanwhile those who hold back their critiques of the government get rich quick. Now many of these artists are part of the 1 percent of Cuba—something unheard of elsewhere, that so many visual artists are ultra-wealthy relative to other professionals. As a result of their socio-economic position, they are reactionary on many political issues, and they never push for change, because they are comfortable with things as they are. Self-censorship is their currency.

Another recent development is how government officials have learned to censor earlier in the process. In the past, when a show opened and they saw something wrong, they’d close the show and ask the artist to take down the work. Then they realized this was not effective because it created a scandal. So they started to come by the gallery while the show was being installed, and they negotiated with the artist: “Take this down or your work will not be shown.” And some artists agreed while others refused. Since it wasn’t working with everybody, they started to enter the process of production. They would come to the artist’s studio (or send a trusted artist to do it for them) and complain that one work or another was not aesthetically strong, or might create political conflict, and then advise them not to show it.

Government censors have now become so afraid that they may even try to pre-emptively censor an artwork. One day, when I asked people to come to my house so I could give my version of what happened

Assuming Boycott

during #YoTambienExijo, since the government was propagating a version that was not true, people from the local government came to me and said, “We know you have a meeting today. We are not going to allow you to go out and march on the street.” I told them, “Thank you for the idea.” I hadn’t even thought about marching. Now they censor you before you even have an idea; they’re thinking for you. I think that’s the one specialty Cuban censors have that nobody else has: imagining an artist’s work before she imagines it, and censoring it before it even exists.

Unfortunately, although I’ve never seen this fantastic form of pre-emptive censorship in other countries, I’ve experienced similar strategies of censorship everywhere I’ve worked. The difference between Cuba and places like Europe or the United States is that, whatever censorship you face, you can discuss it in the public sphere. Even if you have right-wing politicians shutting down a show, you can have a conversation in the open, and this is how you push perceptions and policies forward. **You can make cultural change by challenging censorship.** In Cuba the government works so hard to instill fear in people, and to make it impossible to imagine change coming from the people, by labeling any dissent a national security issue. And recognition never comes later, because the same people who censored you remain in power for decades. They never say, “We were mistaken.” They just pretend nothing happened. Only when well-known artists die will they proclaim their importance—after framing their work so that it appears to be in favor of the revolution, or at least, not critical of it.

On the other hand I was actually shocked when I first came to the United States and saw how much power the market had. Back then many artists separated their art from their activism, distinguishing what they did in their spare time or their civic life from what they did in their professional lives as artists. That’s why I claimed and defended the idea of “artivism”—to unite the two activities. I believe it is important to be

an **artist-citizen**, to be both of these things together, and to think of aesthetics and ethics as conjoined—**aesth-ethics**.

I believe that artists are losing their fear. In Cuba today there are many artists who do believe in making political art, like the graffiti artist El Sexto, who has been arrested many times, or the duo consisting of the critic Yanelys Nuñez Leyva and the artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara, who created an online Museum of Cuban Dissent. They started with Hatuey, who was the first Indian to famously rebel against the Spaniards, and they even included Fidel as a dissenter during the Batista regime, but they were censored nonetheless. Nuñez Leyva was fired from her job and Otero Alcantara has been discredited as an artist and isolated.

Still, I am certain that we're going to have freedom of expression in Cuba. It's hard to see it, and people think I'm utopian for saying this, but I know it will happen. **The real problem is not to have freedom of expression—it's what to do with it.** Before we have this right, we need to discuss how we will express ourselves, how we will make our desires for our society into reality. That's why I'm starting the Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism at my home in Havana.

As the last Havana Biennial unfolded, **I decided to do a four-day, twenty-four-hour-a-day marathon reading of Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.** It was a kind of defense mechanism. I knew that they were going to accuse me of doing something wrong because they were so eager to portray me as a disrupter, or insane, or desperate for attention, to empty my gestures of political meaning. I wanted to tell the government, in a way that would be difficult to stop, that we're a totalitarian society that does not allow freedom of expression. So I thought, how better to do this than to read Arendt with the people around me and discuss the state of Cuba today?

When one of my neighbors came over and started reading, he looked at me and said, "Tania, you're crazy. You're going to get into

trouble because of this text. Why are you reading it? This is really subversive." That was when I realized I had to turn this moment into an ongoing process, because Arendt was clear and pertinent, but it would take more than a single gesture to make sustainable change. I thought, let's make an institute carrying Arendt's ideas forward—let's take her ideas, and the discussions we are having about civic literacy and education, and facilitate a long-term conversation.

In addition to freedom of expression, what we need now in Cuba is social responsibility. I have seen in other formerly socialist countries how the idea of collectivity transforms into a fierce individualism, where even doing socially engaged art is not possible because people have become cynical and are fed up with social commitment. I think that is very dangerous, because you can end up with an extreme right-wing society. My hope is that we can transition from an authoritarian form of socialism to something that is not capitalism but a new way to bring about and uphold social justice.