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Cover Page Footnote

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I Have to Live Free: The Use of Public and Private Spaces for Art and Dissent in Post-Fidel Cuba

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Abstract

This article details the work of dissenting artists in Post-Fidel Havana and their use of public and private spaces. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork from 2018 and 2019 in interviews with different artists who have experienced government censorship because of their public displays of art critical to the regime. In 2017, the Cuban street artist Yulier P. Rodriguez was thrown in jail and forced to sign a document saying he would never paint on the street walls again. Soon after, the government began covering up his anti-Castro murals at night. Yulier once had over 200 paintings on the walls of Havana, and now, less than 20 exist. This article looks at how street artists like Yulier use public visual art to protest the communist regime. Through methods of ethnographic research — participant observation, visual analyses and oral interviews — I examine how these artists persevere despite being under constant government surveillance. This article particularly looks at how these artists circumvent official rule and the differences in artistic censorship within private and public spheres in Cuba.

Keywords: Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, Visual Anthropology, Cuba, The Special Period, Communism, Post-Socialism, Capitalism, Resistance, Art

Introduction

I traveled to Cuba for the first time in the summer of 2018 to conduct ethnographic research for my thesis. I flew there with my boyfriend Krishna, and my friend Claire later joined me because Krishna had to go back home for work.

About a week after Krishna and I arrived in Cuba, we were getting dinner at a restaurant when some paintings caught my eye. After we sat down, I walked to the bathroom. On the door, I saw two voluptuous rear ends painted on two tiny wooden plaques (SEE FIGURE 1). “Cool,” I thought, as I pushed the door open. I glanced at the artwork again on my way out and decided that I liked the tiny paintings. They were pretty good, I thought. When I sat down, I asked the waiter if he knew the artist. “It’s by Botero,” he said. “He’s Cuban — you can find his work at the San Jose Market in Habana Vieja.”¹



FIGURE 1: Botero

These are the Botero plaques
I first saw on the bathroom
door in Havana in 2018.

¹ For readability, I translate the dialogue throughout from Spanish to English.

The tiny paintings were filled with yellow, pink and red hues, and they depicted the rear view of two busty subjects who were facing away from the viewer, completely nude. The paintings mirrored the warm, light-hearted atmosphere of the restaurant. They looked vaguely familiar, and I couldn't stop thinking about how interesting they were. I hadn't seen many artistic depictions of heavier bodies — probably because there isn't a lot of that in American art culture. Botero's figures were reminiscent of the famous Venus of Willendorf sculpture, but besides that renowned work, I had not seen anything else like it. A couple days later I decided to go to the San Jose Market to search for more of Botero's work. After nearly an hour of searching the market, I discovered some magnets with the same style of the paintings. "It's Botero," a vendor confirmed. I bought all of the Botero magnets I saw. I showed them to other vendors at the market, hoping there would be more for sale. ² "There are no more left — we are sold out completely," they said, disappointed. People seemed to really like Botero in Cuba.

The next day, I walked around a smaller art gallery in Habana Vieja and admired the owner's art book collection. At the very bottom of the pile, I spotted a book called "Botero." It was published by Taschen. I was immediately impressed — this guy must be a pretty old and famous Cuban painter, I thought as I picked up the book. ³ Sure enough, while flipping through the pages, I saw Botero's signature backward-facing busty, nude subjects.

"This Cuban artist is incredible," I said to the gallery owner.

"Oh no," she said. "This is a famous Colombian painter. We love him like he's our own in Cuba, but he is not Cuban." That explained why I couldn't find much of his work at the San Jose market.

² Together, I bought four magnets that were about 20 Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC). CUC and USD are equal, so the total was \$20 USD.

³ Taschen is an art book publisher based in Germany.

“If you love Botero,” the gallery owner added, “you would love the artist Juan Carlos Garcia. He lives in Vedado and you can visit him any time. His studio is always open.” She walked over to her desk and scribbled his address on a piece of paper. I thanked her and headed home, thrilled to discover another artist.

From the outside, Garcia’s studio looked like any other building on the street. Colorful, pried beauty. Cracks ran down the wall and the pollution from the old cars on the street had coated the blue paint with a dusty gray film. The wooden door leading in to the studio from the street was cracked open, so we walked inside. Juan Carlos Garcia and his swiss artist-friend Lazaro Noris were painting and drawing together next to a window that looked onto the street.

Claire and I introduced ourselves and Garcia gave us a tour of his studio. He showed us every painting, some small, the size of a book, and some large, the size of a door. His paintings also depicted busty nude figures, but they employed cubist, geometric elements. I asked Garcia which painting he liked the best, “This one,” he said, pointing toward what looked like a cubist and mouthless version of The Mona Lisa (SEE FIGURE 2). I asked him why she didn’t have a mouth and he responded, “I painted my own Mona Lisa without a mouth because I do not have a voice in Cuba.”

The more I thought about Garcia’s Mona Lisa, the more I realized how political it was. It was a commentary on censorship – on the inability to speak your mind in Cuba. After this 2018 trip when I met Garcia, I decided to return to Cuba to research this subject he had unveiled to me: political critique in contemporary Cuban art.

This article focuses on political critique in contemporary visual art in Havana and looks at how Cuban urban art contributes to the global conversation regarding the experience of living

under authoritarian regimes. My analysis addresses the massive problems that the regime has caused the Cuban people and how these problems manifest in subtle art forms.



FIGURE 2: Diana Perez + The Mona Lisa

My research assistant, Diana, in Juan Carlos Garcia's studio in May 2019. Behind Diana in the top right corner is the Mona Lisa painting that I described in the introduction.

Additionally, this manuscript addresses the oppressive Cuban government and how a small group of visual artists in Havana has managed to openly resist the communist regime by spreading messages of dissent in public spaces. These artists utilize stencils, tags, sculptures, paintings and performances to spread their message publicly, but their work does not come without punishment. Many of them have been imprisoned and threatened, yet they still continue

to persevere. I examine what drives them and how they manage to continue working despite the constant pressures from the government to surrender.

The material that forms the basis of this manuscript was formed during multiple visits over the course of 2018 and 2019. During my research in Havana in May 2018, I made new contacts and became acquainted with the city, history and culture. I revisited several neighborhoods within the city in 2019 including Vedado, Habana Vieja and Centro Habana, where I previously made key contacts as well as observed pertinent street art and paintings.

In the summer of 2019, I conducted ethnographic research using methods such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, snowball sampling, photography and a visual analysis of paintings, drawings and graffiti that expressed political critique. I had a research assistant there during the interviews. My analysis here is based on these in-depth interviews with four artists. These interviews were later supplemented by informal conversations with people around Havana.

Political Art and Censorship in Cuba

When walking down Havana's Malecón, you are confronted by decay; the most ornate buildings overlooking the sea are lined with piles of rubble, and the colorful paint has long been worn away.⁴ Massive pastel-colored apartments border the sidewalks with gaping holes, and the grocery stores are filled with empty shelves. Sometimes, the stores go for days without stocking bottled water. This is what the capital of communist Cuba looks like in 2019. The art scene in Havana reveals dissatisfaction with such decay — a decay that is symbolic of the government's continuous disinterest in caring for its people. Art such as Garcia's illuminates the pain and

⁴ The Malecón is a Spanish word used to mean a paved public walkway by a lake or ocean; in Cuba, the Malecón spans for about five miles, lining the main neighborhoods in the city.

discontent that stems from this callousness. Illustrating this frustration allows artists to contribute to the incremental improvement of their city. Despite government censorship of their art, these artists continuously make their mark. Here, I detail a recent history of political critique and censorship in Post-Fidel Havana.

Censorship in Cuba began in 1948, and in 2013, the Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Commission estimated that there were over 4,000 arbitrary detentions in connection with free press, expression, and association (Aldous 2015). Even more recently, President Díaz-Canel threatened to further curb this freedom. A new law signed by Díaz-Canel in April 2018 has continued to affect artistic self-expression. According to Erika Guevara, Americas Director at Amnesty International, this law, called Decree 349, allows for an increase in arbitrary detentions: “Under the decree, all artists, including collectives, musicians and performers, are prohibited from operating in public or private spaces without prior approval by the Ministry of Culture,” Guevara noted. Given the historical context, this law does not come as a surprise, but it has been disappointing for many Cubans who have been hoping for a change in the system. And more recently, Weber (2019) reported in *Hyperallergic* that over 11 artist-activists were detained after planning a sit-in at the Ministry of Culture to protest the incoming Decree 349. In this article, Weber interviewed Cuban artist and scholar Coco Fusco, who said: “[The artist-activists] perceived that this was going to be an attack on the poorest artists, the most autodidact, the most political, and the people that don’t want to work with the government ... And so they’ve been fighting this in a number of different ways since July.” Fusco added:

[This group] had exhausted all of the legal means in Cuba to get the government to sit down with the art community, and they weren’t getting an answer. They submitted forms to every political entity in the country, and they got no answer (Weber 2019).

This group of artists reported that they were under surveillance before the sit-in. Patrol vehicles would park outside their homes and watch their every move (Weber 2019). Some were arrested in their homes, and others, outside of the Ministry of Culture in Havana. These arrests have drawn national attention and in England, The Tate Modern Museum has issued a statement saying that its institution stands behind these protestors, Weber said.

Regardless of the recent developments in Cuba, artists continue to discover novel ways to find a voice amid the chaos. After artist Tania Brugera's work was banned in Havana at an exhibition in a Spanish colonial fortress, she sought a national audience. According to a 2018 article in *The Miami Herald*, the Cuban government shut down Brugera's work after a few hours under the pretense that male nudity was banned. She presented her work at the fortress because it is the site where the Castro regime tortured and killed its opponents in the 1960s (2018). According to her program, her work addresses the contradictions of life in Cuba under the Castro regime.

Despite today's censorship in Cuba, the original ideals of the revolution were to foster freedom of expression, not to curb it. Che Guevara (1965) gives a detailed outline of where he places art's importance in Cuban communist society in his letter to the editor of a Uruguayan weekly paper. In this letter, he writes:

For a long time, individuals have been trying to free themselves from alienation through culture and art ... One defends one's individuality, which is oppressed by the environment, and reacts to aesthetic ideas as a unique being whose aspiration is to remain immaculate. It is nothing more than an attempt to escape (9-10).⁵

⁵ For readability, the text has been translated from Spanish to English.

In the older Cuban communist society, artists were regarded as a fundamental component of the workforce, and they were especially important because, “They were nurtured as instrumental to the reproduction of revolutionary nationalist ideology” (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009)). This pushback against artists in Havana is ironic, considering the Cuban communist mastermind, Che, was incredibly supportive of artists since the very beginning. While Che openly preached about the importance of art and freedom of expression, the Cuban government continuously censored public artwork, literature and other expressions. Despite constant public censorship, there have been some loopholes to expressing dissent, especially in spaces that are not directly in the public eye. The government predominately censors public spaces, but not necessarily the privately-owned ones.

Public and Private Spaces

Painting, sculpture and drawing are heavily integrated in the streets of Havana. Nearly every street in the city has public street art or original art inside a privately-owned vintage store, restaurant or art gallery. In Cuba, notions of private and public immediately bring to mind the specific history of property and ownership. In this section, I examine the specificity of public and private spaces in the context of art as social critique in Post-Fidel Cuba. In 2018, Cuba recognized private property for the first time in their new constitution. The current Soviet-era constitution “only recognizes state, cooperative, farmer, personal and joint venture property” (“Communist-Run Cuba to Recognize Private Property in New Constitution”). Thus, as of 2020, Cubans have been able to own private property for nearly two years. Many art galleries have popped up on private properties — some of which are owned by the Cuban people and some by foreign embassies. These private properties are open to anyone from the public, not unlike a park or public library. Some of them require a cover charge, and others merely have a suggested

donation or donation box. But, unlike a public library or park, these galleries are privately owned by Cubans or foreign governments. An embassy in Havana, for example, has a full floor gallery filled with Cuban art pieces, many of which are critical of the government. In what follows, I look at the differences in the positionality of such displays. How is it visible to the public? Is it visible from a street view? Is it displayed inside or outside? Additionally, I examine the differences in censorship with regard to positionality. In which of these spheres does the government censor these pieces? Why do they censor in some spaces but not others? While critical art may be on private property, it could be visible on the street. In which of these scenes does the government choose to censor political art? And while critical art may be displayed on public property, it is not necessarily visible on the street. Here, I examine the nuances of censorship in the private and public spheres from which people view art in Havana, and I look at the distinctions between these private and public spaces.

Walking with Gaby

I went on a walking-art-gallery tour in Vedado in May 2019, led by a young Cuban art history teaching assistant at The University of Habana named Gaby.⁶ Before taking the tour, my research assistant Diana shared my interests in Cuban political art with Gaby. When I met Gaby, she told me that every gallery we were going to walk to in Vedado was full of overt political critique — sometimes much more political than the work I had seen on the street. I expressed my surprise and Gaby said, “Well yes, the government does not care so much about what art we choose to view privately, what matters to them is work that can be seen by many people all the time; work that is in public spaces.” This prompted me to begin thinking about the differences between expression in the private and public sphere in Cuba. While street artists can be strictly

⁶ Vedado is a neighborhood in Havana known for being wealthier than others.

punished, artists displaying critical work in the private sphere are overlooked. Gallery after gallery we visited were full of ironic portrayals of the regime and harshly critical of the communist leaders. While not rare in the public scene, political critique is less visible in the street because of strict censorship. The confusing thing about this occurrence is that most of these galleries we visited were free to the public. Technically, this art was accessible to everyone. So why was it not censored? I asked Gaby. Gaby noted: “Because only artists go to see the work of other artists usually. Graffiti is illegal even if it is not political. And, political critique is trendy among artists right now in Cuba.”

This fascinated me, so I asked to interview her later. After the tour, I discovered that Gaby was the second woman I had ever heard of in the Cuban art scene who had been censored because of a public display she created.⁷ Gaby also shared her views about political art and her perspective on sexism in Cuba, specifically within the art scene.⁸ Women still need to be encouraged to join the arts and voice their opinions, she told me. When I asked her why there are not many women that express political critique in public, she told me that, like many other countries, feminism is growing, but sexism is still pervasive and prevents women from excelling in many fields, especially because of the macho culture.⁹ Given the communist ideals of gender equality, this caught me by surprise.

Gaby’s work walked the line between being in a private or public space: it was installed inside (seemingly private), but the display was visible to the public through the windows. In the gigantic windows of a privately-owned grocery store in Havana, Gaby had installed large mirrors

⁷ Tania Brugera is the only other female artist who has experienced censorship that I could find, but I was not able to interview her.

⁸ According to *The Miami Herald*: “Despite achievements in gender equality, emancipation and representation at the highest levels of government, women in Cuba still face problems related to domestic violence and sexism, according to the secretary general of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC).” (Espinosa).

⁹ Macho, or machismo, is a sociocultural phrase used to characterize a set of values about masculinity. Machismo is often used to describe a strong display of masculine pride.

that were covered almost entirely in a yellow plastic and starkly visible from the street. In the middle of these mirrors in large letters she had cut words out with an X-ACTO knife. She cut out these letters with the knife in Spanish that read, “What happens when nothing happens” (SEE FIGURE 3).



FIGURE 3: Gabriela “Gaby” Román González

Gaby’s political window installation that says, “What happens when nothing happens.” Gaby posted a series of images on her Instagram account that make up a full image of the installation; this is a screenshot taken of its presentation on her Instagram.

Gaby explained its meaning, “It has to do with the state of life, with a state of seeing, of being almost like an automaton, like letting everything happen ...” She described her piece as an encounter with oneself. “Looking at yourself in the mirror and realizing what is happening.” Like the work of many political Cuban graffiti artists, her work was not up for long before being taken down by the government. The grocery store owners lied to her, she told me. She was walking past the windows one day and realized her work was no longer on display, so she went inside to talk to the owners. The owners said they had to replace her installation with new products for

their store. Only, the new products were not there, she noted with a smile. “Everyone has the fear of being heard, of being watched. [My parent’s generation] is always [worried] something can happen to you. I feel that our generation does not [worry] so much.”¹⁰ Political critique is so common, especially in the private sphere because “artists try to be avant-garde ... so they contest everything,” Gaby said. She added that worldwide, the public sphere is often monitored by those in power: “public space is undermined by instances of power in all countries; you have to reach a kind of negotiation.” My conversation with Gaby reminded me of a quote by Michael Taussig (1999) (cited Shryock 2002) that examines power and how it can manifest in public spaces: “Wherever there is power, there is secrecy, except it is not only secrecy that lies at the core of power, but public secrecy (7).” In authoritarian regimes like the one in Cuba, there is so much government secrecy — secrecy that’s observable to members of the public who do not believe in propaganda. An example of this in Cuba is the voting system. Elections are public, but many people think they are secretly predetermined. Cubans are led to believe they have a voice, but their voice is neither valued nor counted. These ambiguous boundaries of public secrecy aim to strengthen the power of the government and create an aura of fear among the Cuban people. There are very few public street artists because of this authoritarian power that the government wields. However, certain conditions make it possible for artists to make and succeed at creating public political art.

What is public?

When looking at art in the private and public sphere, it is also important to consider intent. The private and public spheres in Cuba are structured by government censorship and the

¹⁰ I observed this notion during my stay in Havana, too. In the context of interviewing political artists, my research assistant Diana said, “Cubans [who are not trusting of the government] do not trust older people as much, they tend to assume that older people are more likely to tell the government something you did that they did not like.” And, instead of hiring an older person to assist me in Cuba, I hired a younger woman, so that the artists I interviewed were not afraid.

growing private market of tourism; this makes for a very peculiar combination of censorship and openness to the global market of art. The tourist gaze in Havana is massive; many Cubans in Havana rely on tourists' money as the sole source of their income (Stout 2014). Perhaps, then, does the tourist gaze affect whether an artist chooses to display their work in public? Yulier told me that he paints because he wants the whole world to know how Cubans are being treated: he wants Cubans to face reality and he wants the world to see that reality. But beyond painting on the street, Yulier reaches an audience beyond Cubans and tourists who come to Cuba. With his popular Instagram and Facebook accounts, he can share his work and thoughts with the rest of the world. Yulier and the other artists I interviewed, share videos, stickers, t-shirts, prints, and other public displays on Facebook and Instagram for an international audience to see. For them, their social media accounts are like a street wall on which they can illustrate their ideas. Viewers can then engage with their posts worldwide, asking questions or commenting words of support. Occasionally, other journalists or photographers will reach out to them via social media and connect with them about a future interview too, just like I did. Additionally, Yulier sells a small portion of his work in the tourist district in Habana Vieja (Old Havana). Small drawings of his are sold (illegally) and almost exclusively to tourists internationally. A couple I befriended in Havana who were from Vienna, Austria, were determined to buy Yulier's drawings from this tiny shop on a busy Havana street. Despite its prime location, Yulier's work was in the far corner of the shop, clearly not visible from the street. Yulier is prohibited from selling his work in Cuba because he does not have a permit from the government to sell art, which is required. Either the government has not yet discovered his small trove of drawings, or they do not care, because the gallery does not get enough foot traffic for it to be a threat.

However, just like street walls are censored, so is social media. Yulier told me how the government hacked his Facebook. “I had to make two accounts,” he said. “I did not know I was hacked until I logged out of my Facebook and tried to log back in. My account would not let me. Once I made a new password, so many messages I had received months earlier came flooding in — the government had been keeping them from me.” Yulier says that even his private forms of social media like WhatsApp have been hacked. “They always want to check in on me,” he said.

Despite being under constant surveillance, Yulier continues to toy with the use of public space and rules outlined in the document he signed years ago. While the document explicitly says that he can never paint on public walls again, it does not say he cannot make art in his studio and leave it visible to the public. So, Yulier created a project called “Los Regalos” (The gifts). Cuba’s buildings are constantly deteriorating, and there are many piles of rubble on the street. So, Yulier chooses his favorite piece of rubble from a nearby pile and brings it back to his studio to paint. Later, he puts it back on the pile of rubble and leaves it as a gift for passersby. Like his other works, these painted stones are political, often depicting worms. The vernacular image of worms has a special potency in Cuba — calling to mind the many times Fidel Castro labelled Cuban exiles worms during his reign.

In addition to Los Regalos, Yulier implemented another project in public spaces. He made paintings on top of bicitaxis.¹¹ While the tops of these taxis existed in the public sphere, they were not visible to the public eye. They could only be viewed from apartment balconies, which are ubiquitous in Havana. Older folks who live in the city will sometimes spend hours sitting on their balcony, looking out at the busy street below. Thus, Yulier’s work undoubtedly reached many onlookers from the crowded balconies of Havana.

¹¹ The bicitaxi, also known as a cycle rickshaw, are rickshaws powered by human pedaling.

What is Private?

Occasionally, Yulier shares his work in private spaces. In December 2019, he had an installation in Vedado at La Fábrica de Arte Cubano (The Cuban Art Factory).¹² The factory is a famous, hip gallery and performance center housed in a massive old factory on the outskirts of the city, and it draws international celebrities like Beyoncé and Mick Jagger.¹³ The gallery requested Yulier fill an entire bar in the art factory filled with paintings and sculptures. In this exhibition, Yulier created massive paintings and even a sculpture (which he does specialize in). The factory loved the paintings, but they had strong feelings about the sculpture. The sculpture, a stuffed animal Santa dressed in the green attire Fidel usually wore, was impaled by a large thick nail and stuck to a white panel. The factory, afraid of who might see this installation, told Yulier it needed to be removed. Yulier was frustrated and told them that if they removed his sculpture, then he would withdraw everything else in his exhibit: it was all or nothing. Reluctantly, the factory listened, and his exhibition debuted in December 2019.

While the art factory certainly has a mark of exclusivity, it is still a private space open from evenings until early hours of the morning to the public.¹⁴ As a “private” space, however, it differs greatly from the smaller private art galleries around the city. Because of its popularity and the variety of events offered in the factory, it draws thousands of people every month. And, unlike most art galleries, it is never open during the day. Last year, TIME magazine named it one of the greatest places in 2019, “Within the cavernous warehouse’s refurbished walls, you’ll find galleries, performance-art spaces and a dance floor that’s home to the capital’s most captivating

¹² Fábrica de Arte Cubano is the “it” spot in Cuba among both Cubans and tourists; it constantly draws international celebrities. There is a line out of the door that wraps around the block when it opens in the evening; it is only open 2-3 times a month Thursday through Saturday, so its infrequent openings give it an exclusive appeal.

¹³ Transforming old factories into artistic hubs is especially popular in Europe; one of my friends from Austria who went with me to the Cuban Art Factory told me about this phenomenon.

¹⁴ There is a cover charge to get in, and you have to know what their hours are ahead of time, because they are often closed for renovations or installations.

movers and shakers” (Lang, 2019). The online travel company TripAdvisor calls it “a new oxygen in Havana.” Due to its increasing popularity and heavy foot traffic, it is not a surprise that its owners were afraid of government pushback, especially with Yulier’s reputation as a dissident.

What is censored?

While the government does not appear to censor much of what exists in indoor spaces, it does check in on them. I can account for this phenomenon firsthand: when I went back to Havana in December 2019 to conduct follow up research and create a short film about Yulier, we had a run-in with government agents. One afternoon, Yulier and I were filming on the roof of his new apartment on the outskirts of Havana. Yulier took a break from painting and looked down at the street below. He stood still for a minute, with his brow crumpled slightly. “The government agents. They are here to watch me,” he said. “They want to see what I am doing. You can take a picture, but make sure they don’t see you.” He sat still for a moment while I quietly tried to take photos. None of them turned out — my hands were too shaky, and I couldn’t get a good angle without them seeing me. Yulier looked at me, “Actually,” he said, “you can try to film them if you’d like. Just pretend you’re filming me. I’ll walk outside with you. It will be safe.” He was quiet for a minute. “Are you sure it’s safe for you?” I said. “No, it is okay ... this is my life,” he said. “Nothing is safe for me in Cuba, but I think it would be cool for you to get this shot. Are you scared?” “I’m not,” I responded. “I just don’t want to get you in trouble.” “No, it’s fine,” he said. And we walked downstairs and through the front door. As soon as I walked 10 feet outside the door with Yulier and my large camera and tripod, the two men jumped on their motorcycle and sped away. “Do you see?” Yulier said. “I knew they wouldn’t like that. Did you get a picture

of their faces?” I told him I did and showed him the picture. The agents were both wearing hats and sunglasses. “Nice,” he said with a smile.

After this encounter my heart was racing. What were the implications of our actions? I wondered. Almost immediately, Yulier answered my thought. “They might try to arrest you,” he said. “What?” I responded, shocked, and wondering why he didn’t think to mention this before. “You can give me your SD card,” he said. I shook my head and told him I’d be alright. Luckily, I was. I don’t know if it’s because of the American government’s stigma, but they never approached me in person about our brief but strange encounter.

Creating lasting art in public spaces without government approval can be tricky, but, like Yulier, other dissident artists have found loopholes. During the 2019 Cuban Art Biennial, artist Lazaro “Salsita” was banned for his artistic government critique, but he decided to participate in the public display on the Malecón anyway.¹⁵ His trademark works are upcycled rat sculptures, and many of them appear in cages. The communist government takes advantage of the Cuban people like rats in a lab, he explained to me in an interview. During the biennial, he created a massive rat sculpture and placed it on top of a fountain in Antonio Maceo Park in Central Havana.¹⁶ It stayed up for the entire month of May; as far as I know, it was never removed by the government, nor was it noticed by them. Lazaro said, “people think it is part of the Biennial.”

The Cuban Revolution of the 1960s had “visions of justice and human fulfillment, of realizing, at last, a historic destiny, the audacity to proceed on its own terms, on the one hand; the inevitable gaps between a revolution of ideals and its regime of controls, on the other” (Weiss

¹⁵The 2019 Cuban Art Biennial was a massive public art exhibition along the Malecón in May, featuring dozens of famous international and local artists. Robert Fabelo, a famous Cuban surrealist artist, was among those who had installations or paintings on display for the month.

¹⁶Antonio Maceo was known as a guerilla leader in the Ten Years’ War; The Ten Years’ War was part of Cuba’s fight for independence against Spain. The war was primarily led by wealthy Cubans or native planters; it was the first of three wars for their fight for independence.

2010). And, since the 60s, the government has struggled to balance its power and its original ideals of “equality” and “free-will.” The communist government has been teeming with contradictions for decades, and the policing of human expression has long been among those inconsistencies. In her short essay “Si quieres tomar ron pero sin Coca Cola” (If You Want to Drink Rum without Coca Cola) that was published for the Havana Bienial in 2009, Gita Hashemi mocks such contradictions and also acknowledges the importance of the Cuban revolution’s old but original ideals:

The revolution will not unfold in the convivial clink of wine glasses, polite conversations or cozy knitting circles. The revolution will not attend opening nights, dinner parties, gallery or city tours. The revolution is not an innocuous performance. The revolution’s space is that of conflict and its aesthetics antagonistic and utopian ... The revolution’s relationality is in ongoing negation of relations of dominance and exploitation; its sociality guided by enduring, never-remitting utopian ideals; its utopias always in-progress. The revolution is a political aesthetic. Its representational field is populated by real people in real time and space engaged in real action. The revolution is real and continuing. Viva la revolución (Hashemi, 2009).

Hashemi also touches on the fact that while the Cuban government refuses to accept or revisit its original notions of fostering free thought and expression, those notions, however censored, still remain ingrained in the Cuban population.

Censorship in Cuba exists not only in public displays of graffiti, painting, sculpture, or drawing, it also exists in performance: in dance, spoken-word and hip-hop music, especially,

reggaetón.¹⁷ In a conversation I had with one of Yulier’s artist-friends, I learned that reggaetón is probably the most censored artistic expression in Cuba because of its public popularity, and the large number of reggaetón fans who attend concerts.

After learning about its popularity, I read about the recent decree called decree 349. It was instituted in July 2018:

[prohibiting] artists from operating in public or private spaces without prior approval by the Ministry of Culture and [giving] authorities power to shut down artistic activity if they feel something contains “sexist, vulgar or obscene language.” Since the heavier themes of música urbana fall under that category, people have pointed out that the law could take aim at popular styles of music (Lopez 2018).

But the Cuban government has cracked down on other small public displays of resistance — or even banned gatherings they thought could possibly be a threat in the future. During the time I spent in Havana in May 2019, hundreds of Cubans orchestrated a march to advocate for better treatment for animals.¹⁸ At the end of the march, a participant yelled “Para cambiar” (for change) and the marchers panicked. “The government did not like that,” my friend Sergio said. “They are afraid of what change means.” The gay community in Cuba also attempted to orchestrate a pride march, but the government denied their application. Many were outraged. “The government wants to keep people from gathering in any way,” Sergio said. Another one of my friends, Biti, an avid skateboarder, was arrested and put in jail one night for skateboarding on the street. “It is crazy,” he said, “I couldn’t believe it.” A group of skateboarders had planned to skate together the week before he was arrested, but the government banned the gathering, for fear of a coup

¹⁷ Reggaetón is a genre of music that originated in 1990s Puerto Rico, known for spreading through everyday networks; it’s extremely popular in the Caribbean, especially in Cuba. It has been influenced by American hip-hop and other Latin American and Caribbean Music. It can often be heard loudly in the streets, blasting from large speakers in apartments or cars parked nearby.

¹⁸ Animal abuse is pervasive in Cuba, my Cuban friend Sergio told me, and many stray dogs and cats live on the streets; this march was to raise awareness for the poor treatment of animals in Cuba in hopes of making a change.

d'état. Thus, the government issued a strict ban on skateboarding altogether. Yulier retaliated by making stickers with a picture of a skateboarder that said *Se Busca* (Wanted), drawing even more attention to the government's unreasonable acts of censorship. In December 2019, I also saw graffiti art in Habana Vieja, depicting a person wearing roller blades that also said "wanted," because roller skating is a popular activity among young people in the plazas at night. These skaters also hang out in groups, and I saw policemen watching these gatherings at night to make sure they did not become a "threatening" size.

Conclusion

If the law indicates that the government must approve expression in both private and public spaces, then why does it often overlook critique in private ones? Drawing from ethnographic research carried out in Havana last year, I observed that smaller art galleries which get less foot traffic than La Fábrica de Arte Cubano are subject to little (if any) censorship. Gaby could not recall an instance in which the government had removed anything from the galleries she knows in Havana. Since La Fábrica de Arte Cubano has recently become an international sensation for arts and culture in Cuba, the owners are afraid of any government pushback that could hinder their success and lucrative business.

The government does not clamp down on privately-owned or operated avant-garde spaces such as Cuban-owned galleries or foreign embassies. Rather, it cares about heavy foot (or eye) traffic. If something is visible in the street view (like public street art, or its equivalent on social media), it is either shut down in secret, or an owner is encouraged or forced to take it down. Anything visible from the packed streets of Havana will certainly be seen. Large critical art displays visible to the public or displays in galleries like La Fábrica de Arte Cubano, that continuously have thousands of visitors on a monthly basis, are also shut down or encouraged to

do so if their art is deemed “too political.” The Cuban government of the Post-Fidel era does not have that totalitarian feeling because of their varied approach to the censorship of political art, but they still work in the shadows of some private and public spaces, leaving many Cuban artists afraid to speak their mind. Censorship in Cuba is not applied everywhere, but there are spaces where critical artistic thought is allowed. This distinction across public and private art also relates to the different kinds of markets that operate in Cuba — the communist market and the participation in a global capitalist market.

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