

OPINION

Cuba's Campaign Against Artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara

The treatment of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is emblematic of a struggle in Cuba over who defines and controls art and culture.

Coco Fusco September 19, 2019



Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara's performance *The Flag Belongs to Everyone* (all images courtesy of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara)

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, a self-taught artist of color from a humble background in Cuba, has been the target of an ongoing campaign of intimidation and harassment for the past two years. The independent artist, who is targeted for challenging the Cuban government, has been forcibly disappeared by Cuban police on numerous occasions, sometimes for hours and other times

for days. Most recently, on the night of

September 12, Otero Alcántara was arrested while standing outside the Taller Gorriá Gallery near his home. According to neighbors who witnessed the arrest, several police officers and plain-clothed security agents beat him as they took him away. He was held incommunicado for four days and notified upon his release that he would be charged with misuse of patriotic symbols and “*descato*” (“disrespect”) toward the president, and that he would be subject to a curfew denying him the right to leave his house at night. Up until now, his many detentions had not resulted in formal charges being brought against him — on some occasions, police admitted to him that they did not know what he was being arrested for but they were taking orders from the Ministry of the Interior to detain him. This new charge signifies another level of pressure, not only against him, but also against the entire artistic community in Cuba.

Otero Alcántara's art practice is overtly political, in that he deals with issues of freedom of expression and works with revolutionary slogans, iconic images, and national symbols. His practice includes performance, street intervention, and sculpture. He has exhibited widely abroad, and he and his collaborator Yanelys Nuñez Leyva won the 2018 Freedom of Expression Award from Index on Censorship in the UK for their public art and online projects that recuperate histories of dissent on the island.

In 2017 when the 5-star Hotel Kempinski opened in downtown Havana, Otero Alcántara wrote a letter to Raul Castro, then-president of Cuba, asking why the bust of the Cuban Communist Party founder and national hero Julio Antonio Mella had been removed from the site of the hotel. Otero Alcántara then staged a street performance outside the hotel in which he covered his face with an image of Mella and carried a sign that said "Where is Mella?" and was arrested by state security within minutes. That same year, he co-founded Havana's first alternative art biennial and was deemed an oppositional mercenary for daring to organize an international event without state involvement. In 2018, he spearheaded a social media campaign and a series of protests against the imposition of Decree 349, the new law in Cuba criminalizing cultural activity that is not authorized by the state. Since the Cuban government established new restrictions on the use of patriotic symbols by the Cuban people in the summer of 2019, he has engaged in several performances using the Cuban flag entitled *The Flag Belongs to Everyone* to assert the right of all Cubans to engage with their country's symbols as they see fit.



Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara's performance *The Flag Belongs to Everyone*

Otero Alcántara has proven quite adept at using social media to promote his endeavor of political reform in Cuba, circulating news about the state of the nation globally. Amnesty International regularly reports on his detentions, even though the Cuban government does not allow human rights organizations to conduct investigations on the island. Otero Alcántara has been subject to lengthy interrogations when he returns from trips, his family members have

been threatened by authorities. His art studio was confiscated. His friends have been warned by state security to stay away from him or suffer consequences and his former partner Yanelys Nuñez Leyva requested political asylum in Spain a few months ago after enduring years of threats to her family and her person.

Cuban cultural officials collude with Cuban state security by insisting publicly that he is not a real artist, but merely an activist. During a press conference at the last Havana Biennial (during which Otero Alcántara was arrested), an official responded to queries about Otero Alcántara's arrest by stating that he was an activist, not an artist, as if to suggest that this distinction legitimated his detention. They speak of him in this way even despite the reality that Otero Alcántara has exhibited his sculptures in independent galleries in Cuba; has been invited to art residencies in Mexico, France, and Spain; and lectured at many art schools, art conferences, and museums. This is not the first time that a Cuban artist engaging in performance has been recast as a public disturbance. In the 1980s, artist Juan Sí Gonzalez, the first Cuban artist to use the streets of Havana as a laboratory for his social practice, was frequently arrested along with collaborators, and eventually had to flee the country. In 1990, artist Angel Delgado created a performance in which he defecated on a Cuban Communist Party newspaper at an art opening and served a six-month prison sentence for having done so. The most well-known case is that of Tania Bruguera who in 2015 attempted to stage a participatory performance in the "Revolution Plaza," which she dubbed "Censorship Plaza." These artists not only push the envelope of what sort of gestures and materials can be used in art, they also challenge the state's control of public space and bring into relief the ways that supposedly aesthetic judgments about the definition of art are deployed for political purposes.

In recent months, several Cuban artists have been threatened by security agents, had their freelance licenses revoked, their concerts canceled, and some have also prevented from traveling abroad to attend cultural events. The Cuban government appears bent on suppressing dissent and purging the art community of its most radical voices.

The treatment of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is emblematic of a struggle in Cuba over who defines and controls art and culture. The state seeks to maintain total control, not only of the distribution of art but the definition of who is an artist. There are political and economic and ideological stakes in this battle. Cuban culture is a highly valued export that not only represents income for the government: art is also valued as social capital that can be exploited internationally, in that it serves as evidence of the beneficence of the state, the success of the educational system and even suggests by virtue of its very existence that freedom of expression prevails. In the domestic sphere, culture is the only arena in which a certain degree of non-conformity may be accepted, but the limits of that acceptability are carefully policed and artists are systematically scrutinized. It is not uncommon for official Cuban artists to receive an intimidating lecture from state security before they travel, in



Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara's performance *The Flag Belongs to Everyone*

which they are admonished not to speak against the government while abroad if they want to maintain their privileges at home.

Popular culture is considered particularly volatile in that it brings together Cuban youth that seek diversion in a country where most entertainment is expensive and aimed at foreign tourists; foreigners may come to Cuba in search of the nostalgic

strains of the Buena Vista Social Club, but Cuban youth is attracted to charged lyrics and fast rhythms in reggaeton and hard rock. Furthermore, senior officials in the Cuban government have acknowledged publicly that due to the growing presence of the internet and the availability of pirated media from abroad, the state has lost control of the information on the island. Artists are members of an island elite with the greatest access to travel, digital technology, and foreign influence. Together with a growing cadre of independent journalists and bloggers they have introduced methods of communication and civil disobedience into public culture that state officials are not used to having to deal with.

While Otero Alcántara was missing, Vice Minister of Culture Fernando Rojas cynically tweeted that he had just seen him at an art opening, but that in any case, Otero Alcántara has no artistic standing and that he is not representative of the 50,000 artists that make up the Cuban art community. The Vice Minister's dismissive comments about Otero Alcántara are in keeping with the strategy that he has maintained ever since the artists' community in Havana began protesting Decree 349: drive a wedge between official artists who concede to government control and the independent ones who challenge it. But the outpouring of indignation from the cultural sector on social media in the past year suggests that Cuban cultural ministry has less support than Rojas claims.

Upon his release on September 16, Otero Alcántara insisted that he would press onward: "They are not going to win with me. I am going to continue living my life normally, I will continue to make my work and I couldn't care less what they say."