

When Doves Cry



Tania Bruguera's Untimely Practice

Candice Amich

The way to make democracy in Cuba is to live out of time, to act as if we live in a Cuba that does not yet exist, but is the one we want. We Cubans should cease living in a place and begin to live in a time: the untimely. Decide not to wait any longer.¹

— Tania Bruguera (2019)

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's proposal to occupy the untimely — as the way to make democracy in Cuba — reveals her strategic orientation toward utopia. Through bold performances that blur the line between activism and art, Bruguera accesses an untimely variant of utopia whose “surplus” — that which exceeds the ideological confines of the present in its “anticipatory illumination” of a better world (Bloch [1972] 1993:41) — surpasses Cold War binaries of revolution and exile. Emerging from within Cuba, Bruguera's untimely practice challenges the official utopianism of the communist state, which, according to the artist, converts the meaning of “revolution” from something active in the present into something passive from the past. Yet her untimely practice

1. “[L]a manera de hacer democracia en Cuba es vivir a destiempo, actuar como si viviéramos en una Cuba que todavía no existe pero que es la que queremos. Los cubanos deberíamos dejar de vivir en un lugar y empezar a vivir en un tiempo: en el destiempo. Decidir no esperar más.” All translations unless otherwise indicated are mine.

is not tethered to an entrepreneurial dream of freedom, nor tinted by the nostalgic light of the pre-Castro years—as we might expect from a dissident or exilic Cuban perspective. Rather, this unlocatable practice is like the “island utopia [that] arises out of the sea of the possible” in Ernst Bloch’s conception ([1964] 1993:3). “This island does not even exist,” Bloch maintains; “it is not *yet* in the sense of a possibility.” It is the movement toward a deeply desired possibility that defines utopia for Bloch—and art, with its ability to ignite the anticipatory illumination of this *not yet*, fuels this untimely travel.

For Bruguera too, art is a means of activating a utopian *now* that draws on cultural memory to conjure a future open to rehearsal and revision in the present. She embeds democratic energies in ephemeral actions that build collective self-esteem in a Blochian manner: tapping into past reservoirs of hope to project future, not-yet-imaginable speech and corporeal acts. In doing so, the artist defies the linearity of Cuban revolutionary time, which is based on the excruciatingly slow succession of Communist Party–appointed white male leaders committed to a patriarchal vision of state power. However, rather than default to a passive vision of liberal democracy, Bruguera creates situations that urge participants to risk new collective formations.

Though Bruguera is an internationally renowned performance artist who has been written about widely, not enough scholarly attention has been paid to her practice as specifically Cuban—that is, as arising from and intervening in the particular challenges of her shape-shifting communist homeland. Bruguera staged a series of increasingly confrontational free-speech performances during Raúl Castro’s presidency (2008–2018), a time of opening borders defined by economic restructuring, the renegotiation of diplomatic relations with the United States, and an expansion of internet connectivity. In these free-speech performances, the artist, through orchestrated acts of dissensus, not only illuminates the economic and ideological contradictions of Cuba’s neoliberal conjuncture, but also posits untimely alternatives. Flashing forward to the Miguel Díaz-Canel presidency (2018–), this untimely practice bursts into the present. Approaching the “now” of current events in Cuba, the cast of actors grows, as does the velocity with which the untimely manifests as growing numbers of artists test the waters of the possible.

Tatlin’s Whisper #6 in 2014

Prohibited from restaging her controversial free-speech performance *El Susurro de Tatlin #6* (*Tatlin’s Whisper #6*; 2009) in Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución in 2014, Bruguera was arrested by Cuban authorities on the morning of 30 December that year.² Several dozen dissident artists, civil rights activists, and independent journalists who answered Bruguera’s untimely call for Cuban citizens to meet—“for a peaceful gathering in Havana’s historic Plaza de la Revolución on December 30th at 3pm (local time) in order to discuss, via an open microphone, what kind of nation they want

2. For the international petition demanding the artist’s release see <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdRIY-haKimfOnv-wwwKQwutS132m-1IW5CUeK98OtFnt1k3vA/viewform>.

Figure 1. Cuban exile Lupe Álvarez weeps during her “1-minute of censorship-free speech.” Tania Bruguera, El Susurro de Tatlin #6 (Tatlin’s Whisper #6). Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, 2009. (Photo by audience member, taken with disposable camera; courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)

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for themselves”—were also rounded up from their homes or on their way to the plaza.³ Though Bruguera was released later the same day, her passport and laptop were seized and for the next eight months she effectively remained under city/house arrest, unable to leave Havana without relinquishing her right to return to her homeland. During this period Bruguera was charged with resistance and public disorder and detained and interrogated by police on numerous occasions.



Figure 2. Cubans await the start of free speech performance in Plaza de la Revolución, 30 December 2014. The gigantic portraits celebrate icons of the revolution. (#YoTambienExijo; courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)

According to the various representatives of the state-run cultural organizations that censored Bruguera, refusing her permission to stage the work, the artist’s proposal for a 90-minute “symbolic collective occupation” in the Plaza de la Revolución threatened historic negotiations between Cuba and the United States (see UNEAC 2014; CNAP 2014).⁴ The president of the Association of Plastic Artists of UNEAC (Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) labeled the performance a “political provocation,” arguing that “the meaning of this performance will not be interpreted as an artwork” (UNEAC 2014). The preemptive arrest of those branded by the Cuban state as “dissidents”—that is, those individuals already known to the police as having something to say outside the bounds of the official discourse—indicates that the space of bodily appearance in the historic plaza was reserved for those whose speech acts would not contradict Fidel Castro’s oft-cited dictum: “Within the revolution, everything. Against the revolution, nothing.” While at the time of Bruguera’s arrest both her detractors and supporters depicted the attempted performance as a rebellious act intended to provide evidence of ongoing political repression in Cuba, in hindsight Bruguera’s disobedient gesture was the opening salvo of a months-long performance of democratic dissensus.

In Bruguera’s widely circulated open letter to Raúl Castro, Barack Obama, and Pope Francis (17 December 2014)—in which she first proposed restaging *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in the Plaza de la Revolución—the artist seized the announcement of restored diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba as an opportunity for untimely performance. It is now evident that the short-lived rapprochement between the Cuban and US governments (reversed in 2017 by Trump when he shut down the US embassy in Havana), provided an opening for activist practice. The sudden resumption of diplomatic relations between the two nations at the end of 2014 signaled that the United States, “a power sworn to destroy the revolution,” was no longer an immediate threat to Cuban national sovereignty (Klepack 2005:11). This easing of hostilities gave Cubans a chance to express dissent that could no longer be summarily dismissed as the product of US mercenary influence.

The “political timing-specific work”—a term that art historian José Luis Falconi uses to identify Bruguera’s numerous “conceptual interventions” that reformulate the relationship between art and activism—names the strategy of Bruguera’s open letter and subsequent actions (2018:85).

3. The cited language comes from a press release of the #YoTambienExijo campaign. Materials were created in Spanish, translated into English, and made available on the artist’s website; see www.taniabruquera.com/cms/711-0-2014+overview.htm.

4. “Symbolic collective occupation” is the language used by the artist in a press release: www.taniabruquera.com/cms/files/response_to_the_cuban_institutions_releases_-_december_30.pdf.

The political timing-specific work is: “an intervention in a specific place, with a specific history, because of specific political conditions”; “a temporary gesture that is only given or carried out in a specific time and place”; and a work “done so that a state or institution or large political body will act” (92, 93). As Bruguera’s proposal to restage *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in the Plaza de la Revolución was intended to trigger the Cuban state’s repressive cultural apparatus, the gesture, according to Bruguera’s own performance vocabulary, demands to be read as the product of a particular historical conjuncture. The attempted restaging was summoned by the sudden shift in political conditions and was time and place dependent. Additionally, the ultimately unstaged performance played the “three major varieties of performance time”—event time, set time, and symbolic time—against each other (Schechner [1977] 2003:8). While the 90-minute symbolic collective occupation of the plaza would be of set duration, the event itself—beginning with the open letter that propelled the state censors into action—was of indeterminate length, requiring a symbolic completion.

Cuba’s Neoliberal Conjuncture

Born in 1968, Bruguera came of age as an artist during a protracted moment of danger—the onset of the Special Period—in which the Cuban Revolution’s future, and therefore also its eventual past, were radically uncertain. By the time she graduated from Havana’s prestigious Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in 1992, she had witnessed both within and beyond the Cuban art world the ideological crisis fomented by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cuban government’s subsequent partial entry into the free-market system. As a student at ISA, she was taught by members of the Volumen Uno group of experimental artists who transformed Cuba’s art scene in the 1980s. Many of these teachers were inspired by the performative eruptions of Eastern European dissidents. Her earliest performance works were dedicated to keeping alive the memory of artists who were exiled or fled from the island at the onset of the Special Period.⁵ Already she was imagining and inventing means for helping Cubans excluded from the national body to be both seen and heard. Bruguera pursued international art residencies throughout the late 1990s, largely as a response to increased state surveillance in the wake of her *Memoria de la Postguerra* newspaper project (Postwar Memory; 1993–1994) and to pressure from her father, a Cuban diplomat and intelligence officer, “to collaborate with the regime” (Bishop 2020:62). After earning her MFA in Performance from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2001, Bruguera directed what has been referred to as “the only training program on performance art in Latin America” out of her home gallery in Old Havana from 2002 to 2009 (Mosquera 2009:33). Though the program was officially sponsored by ISA (which allowed for the processing of foreign visas for visitors), Bruguera, who split her time between Chicago and Havana, funded the program with her earnings as an assistant professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago (Bishop 2020:25). A pedagogical experiment, the stated goal of her Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavior Art Department) was to use performance as a tool to develop engaged citizens. The term “Arte de Conducta” takes on special significance in Cuba given the country’s “escuelas de conducta” or “behavior schools” dedicated to the rehabilitation of disobedient youth; Bruguera, having taught art therapy classes at one of these schools, twists the term for her school dedicated to the generation of social actors.

Though Bruguera encountered state censorship from early in her career, as a rising international art star she was also an asset to the Cuban government. In fact, one of her sculptural pieces, *Estadística* (1996; a flag collaboratively constructed from human hair), still hangs in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes—despite the fact that the artist herself was denied entry into the building during the 2015 Havana Biennial. It is not a coincidence that a number of the performances that I analyze in this article were staged during the Havana Biennials, including *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in 2009. While the first 1984 Havana Biennial promoted an explicitly “Third World” outlook, by the mid-1990s the Biennial had become a major tourist attraction, largely, if not entirely, geared towards the tastes of buyers from the Global North hungry for access to the “exotic” and “forbidden” works

5. I refer to works such as Bruguera’s *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta* (Homage to Ana Mendieta; 1985–1996) and *Memoria de la Postguerra I, II* (Postwar Memory I, II; 1993–1994).

of the Global South (see León 2001). Bruguera has repeatedly made use of the international art exhibit, in both official and clandestine performances, to put into play Cuba's multiple, conflicting temporalities. In her increasingly frequent run-ins with the Cuban authorities, it is Bruguera's refusal to behave like a rational market actor—especially within the context of Cuba's international art market—that has gotten her repeatedly detained, censored, and censored.

Bruguera's proposal to restage *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in the Plaza de la Revolución on 30 December 2014 powerfully illuminated the economic and ideological contradictions of Cuba's unique neoliberal conjuncture. As noted, Bruguera first proposed reprising the performance in her 2014 letter to Raúl Castro, Barack Obama, and Pope Francis. In her letter, Bruguera posed a set of critical questions that honed in on the political stakes of the moment:

With the restoration of diplomatic relations, you have transformed the meaning of fifty-three years of policies defined by one side (the United States) and used by the other (Cuba) to ideologically guide the daily lives of Cubans everywhere. I wonder if this gesture is not also a proposal to kill ideology itself? Cuba is finally seeing itself, not from the perspective of death, but of life. But, I wonder, what will that life be and who will have the right to that new life? (Bruguera 2014)

News of the death of ideology abroad arrived belatedly to Cuba, if indeed it had ever made it to the island—a flashback to the post-Cold War consensus of the 1990s when communism was declared dead on the global stage but persisted in Cuba. But who or what was killing it? Rather than answer her own rhetorical question the artist turns to the presumption of life: on what model will the new Cuba be run? Directing the remainder of her letter to Castro (whom she addresses as “Raúl”), Bruguera demands a transparent political process and insists that Cubans “not be defined by the financial markets nor by how useful we can be to government.” These assertions reveal how neoliberalism inverts “the relationship of the social to the economic,” putting the social at the service of the economic (Foucault [1979] 2008:240). This conversion is crucial both for understanding Cuba's neoliberal turn and Bruguera's intervention.

The onset of the “Special Period in Times of Peace,” officially declared on 31 December 1990, required a change in economic policy given the sudden and devastating loss of Soviet subsidies. According to Ariana Hernandez-Reguant, “Reforms had the goal of both inserting the Cuban economy into international markets and stimulating domestic production so that the population's basic needs could be met; but they were to do so without disrupting the social structure or, much less, the government and the political system” (2009:3). In this equation, economic policy was subordinated to revolutionary politics; however, what this experiment bore out is how socialist governance, in its attempts to manage economic scarcity, was ultimately converted to a neoliberal market-driven rationale. Those who would deny Cuba's neoliberal transformation most often cite its support in the past of public-sector employment, healthcare, and education (see, for example, Fanelli 2008). However, structural adjustment over the past three decades has resulted in a situation where an estimated 40–50% of the population relies on earnings gained in the private sector (Bye 2019; Feinberg 2016). New self-employment categories have made it possible for the government to legalize, and therefore tax, professions associated with the country's sizeable informal economy (Ritter and Henken 2015). Though the Cuban government insists its reforms are not indicative of a transition to capitalism, the material effect of this shift to a tourist economy open to private enterprise has been increased social inequality, especially along racial lines.⁶

6. Consider the case of Roberto Zurbarano, former director of the prestigious Havana publishing house Casa de las Américas, who was dismissed from his position for exposing Cuban racism in a *New York Times* editorial entitled “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun.” The editorial was uncompromising in its insistence that Cuba is composed of “two contrasting realities [...] The first is that of white Cubans, who have leveraged their resources to enter the new market-driven economy and reap the benefits of a supposedly more open socialism. The other reality is that of the black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island's least comfortable quarters” (2013).

If we understand neoliberalism not only as a set of free-market policies, but also an “order of reason,” then we can apprehend how state capitalism (the more accurate definition of communist Cuba) fits the bill of “running the nation on the model of a firm”—which is how Wendy Brown characterizes neoliberal governance (2015:35). Since the end of the Cold War, nearly all state enterprises, including the tourism sector, have been controlled by the military, concentrating wealth and power in state hands (Klepack 2005). Though Cuba and the revolution’s most fervent supporters claim it is a socialist democracy, rule by the people at the local level has only been allowed in times of relative prosperity and only for citizens who adhered to the party line. Since the onset of the 1961 trade embargo, the question of democracy has been central to the debate around restricting travel and the flow of goods to Cuba. As Bruguera’s open letter suggests, though, both the US and Cuban governments have opportunistically claimed the mantle of democracy with little desire for actual rule by the people. Referring to “issues related to human rights and democracy in Cuba,” Obama, in his historic 2014 speech, claimed, “I believe that we can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement” rather than isolation. While an end to the collective punishment of the Cuban people as a means of disciplining the Castro regime would have been a positive development, the values the Obama administration hoped to promote in Cuba were aligned with the neoliberal policies that Cuba had already implemented since the loss of Soviet funding in the early 1990s—namely, a turn to entrepreneurial solutions for a bloated state sector, participation in joint ventures with foreign capital, and the opening of special development (export-processing) zones (Feinberg 2016). Despite its communist branding, the Cuban government follows the same path of austerity as its ideological enemies. In her letter Bruguera recognizes “the Cuban who, due to the blockade/embargo, spent his life working in a factory only to come home a proud worker’s hero but now has no place in a world of foreign investments and can only hope to receive a pension defined by the standards of socialist times, not by today’s market economy.” Rather than erase the debt owed to the Cuban populace, Bruguera agitates for transforming the nation’s more-than-half-century experiment in sacrifice into something more “revolutionary” than a new set of economic metrics.

Untimely Interlude

The epigraph that opens this article, in which Bruguera posits the untimely as the way to make democracy in Cuba, comes from a 22 February 2019 *New York Times en Español* editorial entitled “We Cubans Have Started Living in the Future Cuba Without Asking Permission.”⁷ Bruguera’s opinion piece was published as part of the *Revolución 60* series, marking the 60th anniversary of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Her contribution opens with an image of the artist riding in the back of a police car. With her head between her legs and eyes closed, as ordered, she arrives at an undisclosed location. Military personnel in plainclothes interrogate her about her opposition to Decree 349, a Cuban censorship law targeting artists working outside the official cultural sector. Passed by the National Assembly as one of the first acts of Miguel Díaz-Canel’s presidency (2018–), Decree 349 was signed into law in April and went into effect on 8 December 2018. Bruguera was detained in the early morning hours of 3 December, before she could leave her home to join a weeklong sit-in scheduled to take place outside the Ministry of Culture. Artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and art historian Yanelys Nuñez Leyva, organizers of the independent #00Bial de Habana, were also preemptively arrested that morning (*Artforum* 2018).

In her essay, Bruguera anticipates the skepticism with which Cuba’s international supporters will consume this news (even as the scenario is not an atypical one for these dissident actors). For many who identify with the left and live outside of Cuba, the Cuban Revolution functions as a convenient point of contrast to the neoliberal machinations of their own governments. Bruguera asks if the Cuban regime’s uncritical supporters are “aware of the responsibility that comes with defending

7. The original Spanish-language title: “Los cubanos hemos empezado a vivir en la Cuba del future sin pedir permiso.”

a fantasy that has condemned a people to civil immobility” (2019).⁸ Later, she asserts that those Cubans who have begun to act as members of civil society, without waiting to ask for the state’s permission, are living according to an untimely proposition: they act as if they have rights they do not *yet* have. In doing so, these artist-activists urge us toward a Rancièrian redefinition of the political as that which disrupts the distribution of the sensible in the interest of radical democracy.⁹ What this radical democracy might look, sound, and feel like is best captured by a term that Bruguera uses for what living under a totalitarian government destroys: “la autoestima colectiva” (collective self-esteem). The self-censorship this situation breeds is, for Bruguera, the Cuban state’s “most refined expression of violence” (2019).¹⁰ It is the fragile condition of collective self-esteem that we can, in retrospect, locate at the core of Bruguera’s 21st-century experiments in pedagogy and assembly.

#YoTambienExijo (I Also Demand; 2014–2015)

Following the publication of Bruguera’s open letter, the #YoTambienExijo (I Also Demand; 2014–2015) campaign circulated Bruguera’s proposal to restage *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* on social media. The digital campaign—which lifted its name from the refrain of Bruguera’s letter (“As a Cuban, today I demand”)—amplified Bruguera’s call for all Cubans to gather at the Plaza de la Revolución “to discuss, via an open microphone, what kind of nation they want for themselves.” Though *Granma*, the official organ of the Cuban Communist Party, refused to publish Bruguera’s open letter, the #YoTambienExijo campaign, which referred to itself as a “volunteer civic platform,” released regular updates on its Facebook page.

Bruguera flew into Havana on 26 December from Italy, where she had been traveling when she first heard the news of the historic rapprochement. She attended a series of meetings with the directors of the main cultural organizations and the police. Ultimately, she was denied permission to stage the performance, but the #YoTambienExijo campaign announced that the event would go ahead as planned. Following Bruguera’s arrest on the morning of 30 December, the online campaign (which was maintained by the artist’s sister, Deborah Bruguera, and other collaborators) provided regular updates as to Bruguera’s whereabouts and legal status.¹¹

Though Bruguera and many of her supporters were rounded up before the performance could be staged, the work of the unstaged performance—that is, the performance imagined by the digital campaign transmitting the call of the open letter—is significant. Helpful here is Marcela Fuentes’s cross-media definition of performance as “a symbolic mode of action that connects physical and digital environments and situated/physical and virtual spaces, thus configuring transmedia actions,” which enables us to assess the reverberations of the unstaged performance as its own act of digital dissensus (2019:16). The #YoTambienExijo campaign not only gathered potential activists on the street, some of whom actually made it to the speakerless square, but also projected an alternative image of Cuban democracy to the world.¹² The digital call for an open-mic performance and the simple, sleek imagery of raised hands extended towards speech (as if waiting their turn to speak), with which the performance was advertised, drew on a global imagery of direct democracy, evoking

8. “¿Serán conscientes de la responsabilidad que conlleva defender una fantasía que ha condenado a un pueblo a la inmovilidad cívica?”

9. In *Dissensus*, Jacques Rancièrè defines politics as: “an intervention in the visible and sayable”; “a space for the appearance of a subject”; and “the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself” (2010:37–38). “Political subjects,” he argues, “construct the world in which those rights [which they are denied] are valid, together with the world in which they are not” (69).

10. “La expresión más refinada de la violencia del Estado cubano es la autocensura.”

11. In the credits of *Tania Libre*, in addition to the artist’s sister, the following contributed to the online campaign: Clara Astiasarán, Valia Garzón Diaz, and Miguel Lara Hidalgo (Hershman Leeson 2017).

12. Coverage of Bruguera’s arrest appeared in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

TOD@S EN PAZ

LEVANTA TUS MANOS, UNE TU VOZ



Figure 3. Flyer calling for Cubans to gather peacefully on 30 December 2014 at 3pm in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución for a free speech performance. (*#YoTambien Exijo* campaign materials; courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)

a new, more open-ended, less disciplinary Cuba in its contours.

As the site of official addresses to the Cuban people and political rallies choreographed by the state, the Plaza de la Revolución, in the post-Soviet era, is also a tourist attraction—one that celebrates icons of the revolution (Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, José Martí), but prohibits spontaneous revolutionary practice in the present. Consider, for example, Coco Fusco's 2012 video *The Empty Plaza/La Plaza Vacía*, which visually and aurally contrasts the abandoned revolutionary stage to scenes of vibrant protest from Tahrir Square to Wall Street.¹³ Though physically impossible to stage the performance in the Plaza de la Revolución, the *#YoTambienExijo* digital campaign created a utopian imaginary in which the Cuban people might join the mass actions of "collective self-esteem" that the Occupy, 15-M/Indignados, and Arab Spring protests represented.

The Cuban assembly envisioned by the digital network activated new political subjects both within and beyond the socialist state, opening up new horizons of possibility for Cubanía (or Cuban-ness). This temporally and geographically expanded community, no longer imaginatively defined by the laws of revolution and exile, claimed a digital imprint beyond the bounds of the communist state media and the right-wing Miami outlets. Though this utopian imag-

inary of Cubanía did not achieve its concrete form in the plaza, it did achieve virtual expression as an anticipatory illumination in cyberspace.

Tatlin's Whisper #6 (2009)

Tatlin's Whisper #6, as originally performed during the Tenth Havana Biennial in 2009, was staged before a theatrical orange-red curtain. As audience members entered the space, they were confronted with an empty podium on a raised stage. The empty podium evoked Fidel Castro's famously long speeches, and thus his absence, inverting the traditional relationship between orator and listener in Cuba. Bruguera distributed 200 disposable cameras to audience members before the performance began, thus positioning spectators not only as active participants in the work's documentation, but also as witnesses to forbidden speech acts.

The performance was built around one minute of censorship-free speech in which anyone could line up for a turn. As each speaker ascended the platform to approach a pair of microphones, a "military guard" placed a dove on their shoulder—a citation of an iconic image of the Cuban

13. See www.cocofusco.com/the-empty-plaza.



Figure 4. Dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez during her “1-minute of censorship-free speech.” Tania Bruguera, El Susurro de Tatlin #6 (Tatlin’s Whisper #6). Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, 2009. (Photo by audience member, taken with disposable camera; courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)

Revolution’s promise. On 8 January 1959 Fidel Castro addressed the nation from the military headquarters of Fulgencio Batista, the defeated dictator. Tens of thousands of Cubans listened enraptured, as Castro spoke for hours into the dawn. As he concluded his victory speech, white doves were released in celebration. Captured on camera surrounded by doves, one of which landed on his shoulder, the beatific image of Fidel—widely circulated by the global press and reproduced in homes across the nation—symbolized a new era of peace for Cuba. Placing the dove on each speaker’s shoulder in Bruguera’s performance, then, symbolically cast participants as political actors endowed with visionary potential—even as, through repetition, the gesture demythologized the dove on Fidel’s shoulder—creating a unique, event-specific temporality.

At the time, Bruguera’s performance received a mixed response. Claire Bishop described “the atmosphere as utterly electric,” while Coco Fusco observed that “the supposedly dissident statements from Cubans were overwhelmingly tepid and sadly unfocused” (Bishop 2009:122; Fusco 2009:38). Both Bishop and Fusco acknowledged that the international art world presence at the biennial allowed for a loosening of restrictions on speech that was atypical for Cuba. Bruguera’s performance relied on the participation of spectators for its activation, recalling Luis Camnitzer’s description of “the blurriness of the borders” that separate “pedagogy, poetry and politics” from the visual arts under the rubric of Latin American Conceptualism (2007:10). Bishop described how “a woman was the first to mount the podium, where she simply wept, her hands shaking as she clutched the microphone.” Fusco identified this woman as “Lupe Álvarez, an important Cuban art critic from the 1990s who returned from exile in Ecuador for the event” and asserted that Álvarez’s “wordless anguish was perhaps the most sincere expression of the generalized frustration of several generations of Cuban intellectuals in the face of ongoing political inertia” (2009:38). Viewing the video of the performance, what is most palpable is the silence between speakers—the trepidation with which Cubans (with the exception of well-known Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez, the second person to speak) approached the microphones.¹⁴ This reticence, though perhaps “tepid

14. See video of the performance at <https://vimeo.com/21394727>.

and unfocused” at times, as Fusco described it (38), suggests the disempowering of citizenship that Bruguera’s body of work contests.

The discomfort the Cuban speakers experienced, enclosed between the podium and the fatigued “guards” behind them—never mind the frenzied flapping of the wings of the birds planted on their shoulders—made palpable the disconnect between their desires and their reality. Cynical references to revolutionary slogans, opposition to the militarization of life, concern for political prisoners, and awareness of the second-class status the majority of Cubans occupy as compared to international tourists did, in fact, surface, but these distinct grievances, complaints, and pleas were enfolded within uncomfortable bouts of silence—interrupted by the agitation of international visitors, some silliness, and a wordless scream from behind the podium. Reflexive observations by some of the speakers on how unusual it was for someone to provide a forum for diverse voices and opinions also broke through the apprehension to find expression. Much cited in reviews of the performance was the pithy wish of blogger Claudia Cadelo that “one day freedom of expression in Cuba will not only be a performance.” Also compelling was the yearning expressed in a young man’s declaration: “I am 20 years old. This is the first time I feel so free. Of course, I invite those older than me, even those who are dead, to come and recite here.”¹⁵ The caution—and occasional explosiveness—of the young Cuban speakers evoked the simultaneous giddiness and panic that defying authority in a repressive context produces. One speaker protesting “surreptitious militarization in Cuba” repeated “I am against it” half a dozen times without specifying what exactly he was against. The young Cubans new to the practice of expressing their political dreams at times fumbled their words; yet, also palpable within this unease was the flickering of something new, not yet defined. Within the bounds of the performance, participants experienced public speech that openly defied Fidel’s mandate prohibiting expression against the revolution, and instead of being isolated, witnessed each other speaking out. The danger of this incipient democratic practice was seized upon by the organizing committee of the biennial who denounced the participants who opportunistically took advantage of the international event to discredit the Cuban Revolution.

I attribute this utopian possibility to Bruguera’s staging of multiple, conflicting temporalities. The execution of the performance within the courtyard of the Centro Wifredo Lam, home base of the Biennial that year and crowded with international guests, ushered participants into an entrepreneurial temporality—that is, time defined by the foreign consumption of “Cuban free speech.” Yet, the outdoor audio speaker that carried the one-minute speeches into the surrounding streets suggested a refusal to separate inside from outside, consumption from participation. While the staging evoked revolutionary nostalgia, the performances of free speech ironized this nostalgic temporality, and in doing so might have made (at the least the more attentive) international visitors uncomfortably aware of the limits of their own performative solidarity with the Cuban people. For the Cubans in attendance, the reactivation of the dove image paired with the invitation to speak openly made concrete what Raúl Castro promised but did not deliver when he entered office: the opportunity to envision a more genuinely democratic future.

Utopia in Post-Soviet Cuba

The title of Bruguera’s piece, with its allusion to Vladimir Tatlin’s Constructivist design for a *Monument to the Third International* (1919–1920), sheds light on the artist’s untimely practice. Tatlin’s so-called tower, which was to be higher than the Eiffel Tower, was imagined in accordance with a vision of the Bolshevik Revolution’s international reach. The massive moving structure was never realized, not least because of the shortage of materials during the ongoing civil war. Though workers paraded around a crude wooden model in 1923, and models based on Tatlin’s original design continue to be constructed into the present,¹⁶ the tower’s dazzling design speaks to a

15. Find a link to participants’ translated speeches at www.taniabruquera.com/cms/112-0-Tatlins+Whisper+6+Havana+version.htm#author.

16. Examples include Dan Flavin’s fluorescent “*monuments*” for *V. Tatlin* (1964–1990) and Ai Weiwei’s floating *Fountain of Light* (2007).

moment in history when socialist revolution promised to merge art and life. Bruguera acknowledges both her debt to Tatlin and the changed context through her title—the international call for utopia dimmed to a “whisper” in the light of failed (and betrayed) socialist revolution; yet, the serial aspect of the title gestures to the ongoing project of utopia, the desire to merge art and life through avantgarde strategies.

Like Tatlin’s unrealized tower, Bruguera’s unrealized 2014 performance in the Plaza de la Revolución tells us something about the status of utopia in post-Soviet Cuba. In many ways,

Bruguera’s proposed reactivation of the performance was much more modest than the experimental art of the Bolshevik era, and this despite new technological possibilities. Pared down to its essentials, her imagined performance only required physical bodies—a people’s open mic (or human microphone) if authorities seized amplification equipment.¹⁷ It was the proposed movement of the performance from within the walls of a cultural center to outside in the public square that ultimately qualified it as a “counterrevolutionary” gesture by authorities.¹⁸ Though Bruguera repeatedly clarified that she was in favor of dialogue between the two nations and an end to the US embargo, UNEAC deemed the performance a “provocation” aimed at threatening negotiations. When given the option of moving the performance to a space more appropriate to the display of art, Bruguera refused. By dropping the aesthetic framing of the biennial performance, the proposed restaging would more directly confront the state’s repressive apparatus.

Bruguera’s refusal suggests that the actual physical staging of the performance was less important to the artist than its digital and conceptual life. This is the utopian wager of Bruguera’s untimely practice, which does not require for works to be realized to do their work in the world. In the weeks following the deterred performance, the #YoTambienExijo campaign posted regular updates as to the artist’s legal status, keeping her detainment—and therefore the ongoing repression of free speech—in the news in the months leading up to the 12th Havana Biennial.¹⁹

Where Your Ideas Become Civic Actions

Banned from attendance at the 2015 biennial, Bruguera staged from her home studio a 100-hour marathon reading of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She later titled the work *Donde tus ideas se convierten en acciones cívicas (100 horas lectura Los orígenes del totalitarismo)* (Where Your Ideas Become Civic Actions [100 Hours Reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*]; 2015).



Figure 5. Tania Bruguera looking at the workers drilling outside her home, Havana, May 2015. (INSTAR; courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)

17. The human microphone is a technique for amplifying speech in large groups when electronic amplification is not available or permitted. The speaker utters short phrases, which the crowd within earshot repeats in unison. Those behind the first group repeat the phrase, and so on as it moves to the back of the gathering. The human microphone was widely employed during the New York City Occupy Wall Street protests (2011–2012), in which Bruguera participated, to bypass the city’s sound laws.

18. The National Fine Arts Council released a statement forbidding the staging of the “pretend performance,” which was initiated by the “counterrevolutionary media,” in the “symbolic space” of the Plaza de la Revolución (CNAP 2014).

19. During this time, it was unclear if the artist would be charged with treason. Since Cuban lawyers are employed by the state, the artist was also unable to find independent legal representation for her case (see Hershman Leeson 2017).

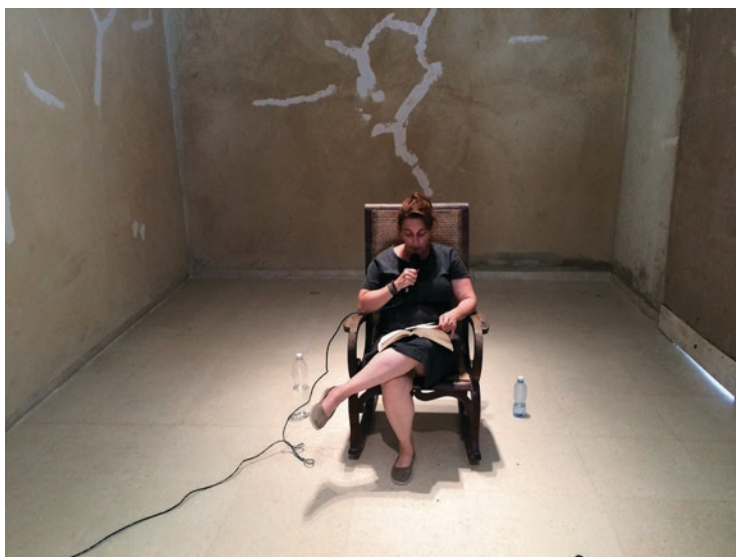


Figure 6. Bruguera reading from Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* during the 100-hour continuous reading, Havana, May 2015. (Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)



Figure 7. Tania Bruguera releases a dove prior to her arrest following the 100-hour marathon reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Havana, 20 May 2015. (Photo by Kate Flint; courtesy of Estudio Bruguera LLC)

The reading, which coincided with the biennial's opening week, inaugurated the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR, the Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism). Since Bruguera was prohibited by authorities from performing in the street, she pointed a loud-speaker outdoors from inside her home, thus confounding Arendt's own distinction between public and private life. According to Bruguera's design, anyone could come in and take over the continuous reading of Arendt's text. Despite the drilling in the street outside her home, which most observers intuited was unnecessary and simply a means of distracting from Bruguera's performance, the reading was completed. At this point, Bruguera was handed a dove (a reference to her citation of the dove in *Tatlin's Whisper #6*) and exited onto the street holding Arendt's book.

In the publicity for the 100-hour reading, a "public action" was promised upon completion of the durational performance. According to Bruguera, more than 50 dissidents were detained before they could reach her home gallery for the closing action—in a replay of events from the previous December. Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera, who participated in the marathon reading and was present at its conclusion, vividly describes what happened when Bruguera stepped outside. He attests to

"the menacing presence of rough-looking men" (i.e., undercover police) and the sudden appearance of three cars, from which emerged uniformed police, blocking Bruguera's path: "It was a moving and powerful image to witness the tall, corpulent woman in uniform and the other interrogators confronting the artist as she held the white dove and the book in her hands" (Mosquera 2015). The individual participants and visitors who followed Bruguera outside were largely prevented from taking photos and videos by "a group of men and women, many of them seniors, [who] arrived in a line to surround us." After Bruguera was driven away, "the group of civilians began to shout Cold

War-era slogans, while Bruguera's neighbors remained silent." Mosquera explains, "In Cuba this type of organized action is called a 'repudiation act' and has been staged over the years to intimidate dissidents" (Mosquera 2015).²⁰

Mosquera's testimony reveals the way in which the different actors in this street scene used performance: the tightly choreographed moves of the state in contrast to the improvised and open-ended approach of the artist, who released the dove and threw the book before entering the car. As Mosquera relays,

Later Bruguera told me that she thought to give the book to the police in a symbolic gesture. But then she decided that it would be better to free the dove, which she cast into the air. The bird flew free but, nervous and disoriented as it was, hit a house's façade and went down to the pavement, where it remained, confused. Then the artist threw up the book very strongly. It happened to hit a façade too, in a very violent way, producing a loud, impressive sound—even if the place was crowded, a general silence prevailed in the street. It was as if that sound of the book's blow against the wall would have compressed in one single bang all of the volume's content, summarizing the 100-hour reading of the book that had just been performed. (2015)

Bruguera's on-the-spot decision to privilege the dove's flight, and then forcefully throw the book, instead of making the "symbolic gesture" of handing over the book, is telling. In contrast to the symbolic gesture is the entry into symbolic time, which the freeing of the dove and throwing of the book activated. The artist's gestures are concrete while time itself is symbolic. This is the untimely horizon summoned by the promise of the dove, transplanted from Fidel's shoulder to the undisciplined present. Though the dove hit a wall and fell to the ground, the artist picked up and amplified the sound of its aborted flight by throwing the book. The sound of that crash, encapsulating the prolonged frustration of captivity, silenced the street, which had been loud with jackhammers all week.

Emblematic of a betrayed socialist dream, the dove suddenly set free then dazed by its fall recalled the "tepid and unfocused" remarks of the young Cubans from the 2009 biennial performance whose voices were unaccustomed to free flight across institutional space. Rather than hand over Arendt's book to the police, Bruguera ignored the authoritarian directive with her defiant gesture. Both the visual image of the dazed dove and the violent sound of the thrown volume redistributed the sensible as Bruguera herself was stolen away from the scene by police. Witnesses to Bruguera's performance of defiance were then assaulted with the Cold War chorus of the repudiators, an appropriate finale to the untimely antiauthoritarian act. Away from the entrepreneurial temporalities of the official biennial, foreign participants were sudden witnesses to the state's repressive use of Cold War time to silence dissent. I thus locate the symbolic completion of Bruguera's months-long performance of democratic dissensus in the freeing of the dove. The whirring of its wings recalls the exile's cry reverberating through space, vocalizing for all who do not fit the mold of revolutionary citizen in Cuba's neoliberal times.

The Untimely Now

It is my contention that Bruguera knowingly risks detainment and harassment and uses these instances of predictable state censorship as material for performances of civil disobedience at moments she deems fortuitous. She leverages her professional privilege to model for her fellow Cuban citizens an imitable practice of democratic dissensus. As an independent hub, Bruguera's Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt serves as an important meeting place for the island's dissident artists and thinkers, providing a space for the display and performance of censored works

20. Repudiation acts or "actos de repudio" are coordinated verbal and sometimes physical assaults, in which a mob-like group, often older citizens organized by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (see note 21), shout down and attempt to intimidate dissident activists on the street and outside their homes.

in recent years. One of the groups to use this space is the Movimiento San Isidro, an activist collective that formed in response to Decree 349, the censorship law that endows government bureaucrats — without professional training in the arts — the power to determine what is permissible content.

The recent and rapid rise of digital technology on the island interacts with the category of the untimely, as practiced by Bruguera and other dissident artists in her orbit. While a dozen years ago Mosquera could formulate the unspoken law of Cuban censorship as “total government control over the media, restricted freedom for the arts,” the rapid spread of internet culture on the island has fundamentally changed this dynamic (2009:30). In 2009 less than 10% of the population had intermittent access to the internet; the spread of telecommunications networks across the island in the following decade, culminating with the availability of 3G on cellular phones in December 2018, radically altered the media landscape. Since then, independent blogs and social media sites have allowed for the amplification of dissident voices and blurred the neat divide between news media and art. As Coco Fusco wrote early in this turning of the tide, “Daily-life political dramas that were once hidden from view by state-controlled media that did not report them are now viewable online worldwide; this new condition of hypervisibility encourages more displays of defiance” (2015:35). The ways in which independent artists have seized use of these new digital tools points both to the origins of and response to Decree 349.

Decree 349 aims to manage all art practices. Bear in mind that in Cuba, there is a distinction between “official” artists who are financially and organizationally supported by the state and “independent” artists who do not receive state funding. The most controversial aspects of Decree 349 include the forced registration of all artists, whether official or independent, and the power it gives to inspectors to censor content the state deems “vulgar, offensive, [or] mediocre” (see *Artists at Risk Connection* 2019).

News of Decree 349 was officially released to the Cuban public in July 2018. Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Yanelys Nuñez Leyva (who, as previously mentioned, along with Bruguera, were arrested before they could join a sit-in outside the Ministry of Culture) were — with poet Amaury Pacheco and actor Iris Ruiz, among others — at the center of those organizing efforts against 349. Otero Alcántara and Nuñez Leyva organized the independent #00Bial de la Habana, held in May 2018 despite the state’s intimidation of invited artists and foreign participants and charges of outside “mercenary” influence. The tagline of the #00Bial was “on every block, a studio,” a celebration of independent art production and an appropriation of a worn-out slogan of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.²¹ (It is more than a coincidence that Decree 349 was signed into law the same month the #00Bial occurred.) Otero Alcántara and Nuñez Leyva represent a new generation of dissident artists and writers mentored and supported by veterans such as Pacheco and Bruguera, who have been battling state censorship since the 1990s.²²

On the Facebook page of *Artistas Cubanxs Contra Decreto 349* one can find a host of videos showcasing independent poets, photographers, performance artists, rappers, and visual artists denouncing the decree. Several videos show shaky footage from the first action against the decree on the steps of the Capitolio Nacional.²³ Otero Alcántara, Pacheco, Ruiz, and rapper Soandry del Rio are awaiting Nuñez Leyva’s arrival when Otero Alcántara is preemptively arrested by the police. We see him struggle with the police as they violently force him into a car while he and his friends continue to shout in protest. When Nuñez Leyva arrives on the scene her flesh is already smeared with human shit, which she

21. “On every block” refers to the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDR, or Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), neighborhood spy networks charged with reporting on counterrevolutionary activities. Fidel announced that committees of revolutionary vigilance would be set up on every block in the early years of the revolution.

22. Poet Amaury Pacheco is cofounder of *Omni Zona Franca*, an art collective based in Alamar, a satellite city on the outskirts of Havana.

23. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rN_McujNWo.



Figure 8. Police preemptively arrest artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara on the steps on the Capitolio Nacional, 10 July 2018. (*Artistas Cubanxs en Contra del Decreto 349*; screenshot courtesy of Candice Amich)

continues to spread on her face and arms as she denounces the decree that turns artists into criminals. After Otero Alcántara is accosted, Nuñez Leyva steps in and completes the performance for him. Of the group of five gathered in front of the Capitolio, she is the only one not arrested. With her body coated in feces, the police do not dare touch her. The spontaneity with which Nuñez Leyva takes up Otero Alcántara's blocked act, completing the gesture for him, returns us to the category of the untimely now. Nuñez Leyva's act recalled Angel Delgado's 1990 live performance of shitting on a copy of *Granma*, which Coco Fusco credits "as a turning point in post-revolutionary Cuban art," and also prefigured a moment when Cuban artists will have the rights they do not *yet* have (2015:22). With the arguably "vulgar, offensive and mediocre" (or worse, in terms of aesthetic value) act of smearing shit on her body, Nuñez Leyva's protest against Decree 349 confronted the limits of artistic expression.

The demand for the right to have rights—not just as artists but also as citizens—erupted as the rallying cry of the 27N movement, a broad coalition of artists and intellectuals who staged a historic protest outside the Ministry of Culture on 27 November 2020.²⁴ The violent breakup by police the night before of a hunger strike at the headquarters of the Movimiento San Isidro (which artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara coordinates out of his home) was captured on video and quickly circulated on social media. Artists outraged at the footage of the police attack and concerned about the safety of the hunger strikers formed new WhatsApp groups to plan a protest outside the Ministry of Culture the following morning at 11:00 a.m. Once they began publicizing their protest on social media, their numbers quickly increased so that by nightfall between 300 and 500 arrived on the scene. Bruguera was among the 32 protestors delegated by the crowd to enter into dialogue with Fernando Rojas, the Vice Minister of Culture. Though officials felt pressured to meet with the representatives of the 27N movement (given the unprecedented numbers at the spontaneous gathering, including highly revered state-sponsored artists), the following morning the protest was denounced as a "media farce" by President Díaz-Canel, and the state news launched a smear campaign against the hunger strikers. Soon thereafter, the Ministry of Culture unilaterally broke off talks. During the following weeks, Bruguera was repeatedly detained by police whenever she tried to leave her home. On her Facebook

24. The protest received international coverage (see for example, Augustin et al. 2020). For more of the historical context surrounding the 27N movement and its significance see Fusco (2020).

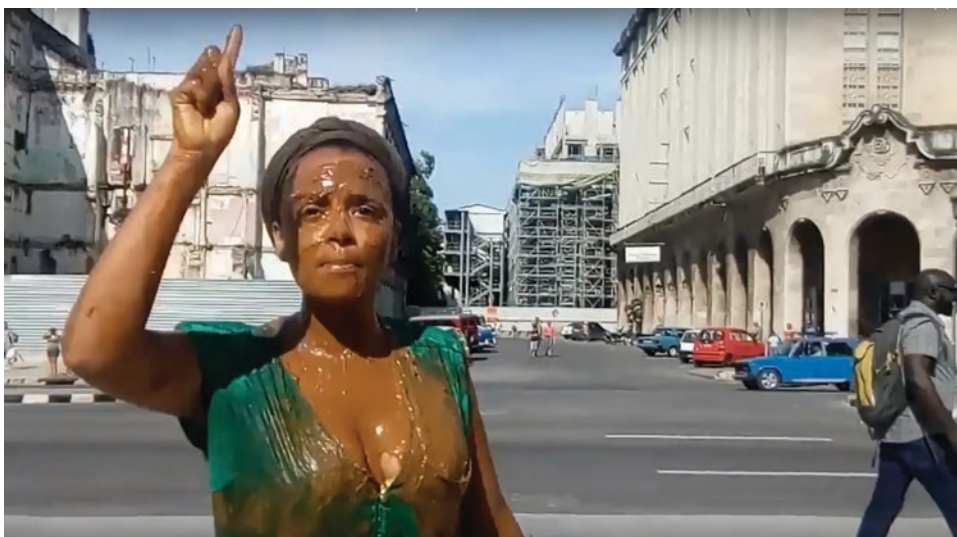


Figure 9. Yanelys Nuñez Leyva completes the act Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara was prevented from performing on the steps of the Capitolio Nacional. Covered in excrement she denounces the decree that turns artists into criminals. Havana, 10 July 2018. (*Artistas Cubanxs en Contra del Decreto 349*; screenshot courtesy of Candice Amich)

page, Bruguera's sister denounced these arbitrary detentions in which the artist was swept off the street while walking with a friend, or removed from a slowly moving vehicle by plainclothed police.

For Bruguera, the betrayal of the movement by cultural officials is a collective lesson, part of the struggle for civil rights. In an interview the following month, Bruguera stated of the 27N gathering, "I spent half the time crying with emotion: I've been waiting 20 years to see that in Cuba" (Rodríguez and Curbelo 2020).²⁵ While inside the ministry offices, Bruguera and the others who dialogued for hours could hear those outside clapping in support every 10 minutes. This gesture of collective self-esteem recalls what Bruguera describes in her "Revolución 60" essay: "I live in the future, in a different Cuba. To catch me, the censors have to come to that place, they have to see themselves in that future, understand what they will look like when the circumstances are different."²⁶ We can imagine how that night the cultural ministers were forced to see themselves in the mirror of the future Cuba. To disperse the crowd, they had to join the protestors in the future Cuba—even if only for that night. The repression that ensued (police surveillance, internet cutoffs, acts of repudiation) was simply a throwback to a past resoundingly rejected by the tearful laughter and free-flying cries of the hundreds clapping outside the ministry gates.

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25. "[M]e pasó la mitad del tiempo llorando de la emoción: llevo 20 años esperando para ver eso en Cuba."

26. "Para atraparme, los censores tienen que venir a ese lugar, tienen que verse a sí mismos en ese futuro, entender cómo se verá lo que hacen hoy cuando las circunstancias sean diferentes."

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