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An Uncensored Minute with Detained Cuban Artist Tania Bruguera

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Following [the Obama Administration's announcement](#) on December 17, 2014 of a warming of the 53-year chill between the US and Cuba, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera returned to her homeland intending to stage a performance work titled [#YoTambienExijo \[I Also Demand\]](#). She'd performed it once before, as [Tatlin's Whisper #6](#) during the 2009 Havana Biennial. In essence, the reproduction of the work was to also see Tania offer one 'censor-free minute' to members of the public, this time in the capital's Plaza de la Revolución. In a country where freedom of speech and expression are often severely curbed, this would be a powerful invitation - and test of the ideological impact of the shift in Cuba-US relations.

However, the work did not take place. Having been refused government permission to perform it, Tania had continued with her preparations - but early on December 30, the day [#YoTambienExijo](#) was scheduled for, around 50 artists and activists who had intended to participate were detained by police, and Tania was arrested. She has since been arrested twice more, and her passport has been confiscated. The Cuban government have said they will return it to her if she promises to leave Cuba and never return. Though Tania has often lived and worked internationally, never being able to return to her homeland is, for her, not an option.

The artist now finds herself in a strange limbo; unable to leave, but unable to participate in Cuban life in the way most natural to her - as an artist. This is amplified by the fact she is a performance artist, so being barred from using public spaces makes it particularly difficult to practice. Despite this, Tania has renounced her membership to the government-run artists and writers' union, UNEAC, along with a cultural accolade she had been awarded in 2002, the *Distinción por la Cultura Nacional*.

Tania's situation is representative of the conflicted relationship a lot of Cubans have with their homeland. Many who dare voice their desires for a free Cuba end up effectively trapped within it. Meanwhile, the international media currently ripples with stories of how the country's newly-relaxed borders are opening it to (mostly commercial) opportunity.

As the Havana Biennial prepares to open once again this week - during the course of which an unprecedented number of art collectors from the US and elsewhere are expected to visit Cuba's capital - Tania remains in effective exile within her own country. In this interview with me for [Impolitikal.com](#) she asks that those attending the Biennial don't forget that the day-to-day realities Cubans are forced to deal with differ greatly from the image served to an international audience.

Can you explain what happened on December 30, and your interactions with the Cuban authorities since?

On December 17 - the day both the president from Cuba and from the US announced their decision to reestablish diplomatic relationship - we witnessed a moment when political beliefs Cubans had were put into question precisely by Raúl Castro, someone who has fiercely defended the image of the US as our historical and worst enemy. We witnessed a moment of identity crisis of the Cuban Revolution because it was a moment when all things established could suddenly have a very different meaning. It was a historical moment because everything could be interpreted differently and circumstances were claiming a different way of thinking on our part. As an artist I felt this very strongly and [my reaction was to write a letter to Raúl](#) asking about his vision for Cuba and his plans for Cubans. This letter sped immediately among Cubans and a platform called [#YoTambienExijo started on Facebook](#). Within a week we had more than 14,000 followers and many debates

regarding the situation. And we decided to enact one phrase in my letter, where I invited Raúl to let Cubans speak their minds regarding the new course of events and their vision on the future of the nation.

On December 30 I was planning to bring a microphone to the Revolution Square and give any person who wanted it one minute to express freely. The response of the government was to cut my phones - cell and landline - and arrive at 5:30am that day to detain me. Since they didn't have a detaining order they told me they just wanted to talk with me, but once I arrived at the police station I was dressed as a prisoner. I was detained three times in four days and interrogated around 16 times in the course of two months. My passport was taken as well as my computer and the microphone by the police. I have been waiting for the prosecutor's decision for almost five months now.

I'm still trying to understand why the Cuban government was so scared of one minute of free speech.

How has this affected your life, and ability to work as an artist?

I have lost professional commitments I accepted before all of this happened. I'm not in prison - due to the strong pressure of the international community - but I cannot even leave the city, and my movements, my telephone conversations and this email I'm writing you are being monitored.

I have not done any other artworks since December 30. I work with performance, with people and with public space; none of that is permitted to me at the moment. I will try to challenge this during the Havana Biennial since it would be harder for them to put me in prison with everyone here.

The Biennial begins on May 22. Has anyone boycotted it on your behalf? What would you like visiting collectors to know?

Some artists have declined the invitation to participate at the Biennial because of the way the Cuban government have managed this situation. They want non-participation to be a statement.

The Havana Biennial for collectors would be like a fair without the middle man - the galleries. At the moment money is what the government wants more than anything so it is a powerful statement where you put it, whom you want to support and why. The other thing the government fears the most is public opinion, so it would be good if collectors and visitors in general take out of their eyes the tourist mentality and participate in what is really going on here for a few days.

Generally, what has it been like to live in Cuba under the current regime? Has it changed since the recent shift in relations with the US?

Today Cuba is a place where people are very careful of what they say because they can lose the permit to open a business - also it is a moment when the government is more severe with anything that is 'out of official line'.

You studied in Chicago, can you tell that story?

I did my Master of Fine Arts on performance in Chicago. At that time it was the only place with a performance department where you had not only theory but also practice.

What is the main thing you would like the world to know about Cuba, or do to help the Cuban people?

That the Cuban government is obsessed with foreign investment but that none of that money will go to the hands of the people. It will stay, as it did in Russia in the hands of those close to power. That the government is not only accepting but giving orders to repress any gesture of discontent, dissent or demand.

What they can do to help Cuban people is to join our demands for free speech in Cuba and an end to the criminalisation of dissent.

Who are some other artists, or political situations we should know about?

Danilo "El Sexto" Maldonado, who is in prison waiting for a sentence for wanting to do a performance in public space and Angel Santiesteban, who is also in prison for writing a blog questioning Cuban government behavior. But these are only two of many artists, intellectuals, journalists and Cubans in general that have being imprisoned for doubting, questioning or saying what they think.

Please add any more information or thoughts you would like to share.

I'm currently starting to work on a project for a law to protect people from political hate crime.

Find Tania online at www.taniabruquera.com.

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