

Artist's work lets Cubans speak out in Havana for freedom

By FABIOLA SANTIAGO

A packed performance art show at the 10th Havana Biennial, a prestigious international festival, turned into a clamor of "Libertad!" as Cubans and others took to a podium to protest the lack of freedom of expression on the island.

The provocative performance Sunday night, recorded and posted Monday on YouTube, was staged by acclaimed Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, a frequent visitor to Art Basel Miami Beach who lives in Havana.

Bruguera set up a podium with a microphone in front of a red curtain at the Wifredo Lam Center, an official art exhibition space and biennial venue. Two actors clad in the military fatigue uniforms of the Ministry of the Interior, the agency charged with spying on Cubans' activities, flanked the podium and carried a white dove.

Bruguera let people from the standing-room only audience come to the microphone for no more than one minute. As people spoke, the white dove was placed on their shoulders by the actors.

"Let's stop waiting for permission to use the Internet," urged Yoani Sánchez, who has written a controversial award-winning "Generación Y" blog chronicling Cuban life under constant threats from the government.

"Libertad! Libertad!" shouted one man. "Too many years of covering the sun with one finger," said another. To every call for freedom, the audience responded with shouts of "Bravo!" The performance appeared to mock a historic Jan. 8, 1959, victory speech by Fidel Castro at which a white dove landed on his shoulder, viewed by many as a sign of divine recognition. In Bruguera's performance, the dove appeared to fly off people's shoulders, and the fatigue-clad actors would force it back.

"It was strong, strong," said Miami-based Cuban artist Glexis Novoa, who received an e-mail from an artist friend in Cuba that said: "Today, it seemed as we were in Miami and not Havana." Bruguera, the last speaker seen on the podium, simply says: "Thank you, Cuban people." It was a surreal scene, made more so by the biennial's website description billing the festival as "a space for confrontation and reflection of particular relevance in the international scene of the fine arts." In its 10th edition, the biennial is celebrating 25 years; more than 200 artists from some 40 countries are participating in the event, through April 30.

Attempts to reach Bruguera in Havana were unsuccessful. Any repercussions the event had were unknown, but the video was getting hundreds of hits. It's unclear how the performance ended, but Madrid-based online magazine Cuba Encuentro reported that a sound technician turned off the microphone. Sánchez wrote about what she witnessed Monday with her trademark wit on www.desdecuba.com/generaciony.

"In front of the lenses of national television and protected by the foreign visitors to the X Havana Biennial, there were shouts of freedom, democracy and even open challenges to the Cuban authorities," she wrote. "I remember a 20-year-old confessing that he had never felt freer."

Novoa, who travels to Cuba often, said Bruguera's performance is the kind of art that Cubans are calling "ochentoso," from the '80s, when his generation of artists broke with conventional censorship and staged such performances. One group of artists staged an arbitrary baseball game in which an umpire who looked like Castro made arbitrary calls. Another artist, Angel Delgado, defecated on Granma.

But Novoa warned against reading too much into the Bruguera performance. "Allowing this serves a purpose to the Cuban government," Novoa says. "They appear to be less repressive to the international community, but the bottom line is that there is no democracy in Cuba, that there's a dictatorship in place, that people are still in prison. That never changes."