

Participants in art show branded as 'dissidents'

By: Fabiola Santiago

In a swift reaction Tuesday to a daring call for freedom by participants in a public performance art show in Havana, the Cuban government branded the speakers "dissidents" and "individuals at the service of the propagandistic anti-Cuban machinery."

The reaction came via a statement from the 10th Havana Biennial's Organizing Committee, which charged that those who took the opportunity of a minute at a podium to protest the lack of freedoms on the island had "taken advantage" of artist Tania Bruguera's Monday performance.

But Bruguera, who staged the most daring performance art show the city has seen in decades, sees herself only as conceptual performance artist.

"I'm fine. I don't want to create unnecessary mythology," she said Tuesday from her home in Havana, a day after the stunning images of Cubans clamoring for freedom were posted on YouTube, generating thousands of hits and Internet commentary.

"What I was doing," she said, "was giving my space to others."

The biennial is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. Bruguera said her performance was on the approved schedule.

Bruguera set up a podium in front of an ochre curtain with a microphone at the Wifredo Lam Center, an official art-exhibition space. Two actors clad in the military fatigues of the Ministry of the Interior, the agency charged with spying on Cubans' activities, flanked the podium and tended to a white dove.

When Bruguera invited people from the standing-room-only audience to come to the microphone and, for a minute, say whatever they wanted, Cubans and foreign visitors protested the lack of freedom of expression on the island.

As some spoke, the white dove was placed on their shoulders by the

actors -- a mocking reference to a historic Jan. 8, 1959, victory speech by Fidel Castro during which a similar bird landed on his shoulder, a sign many people viewed as divine recognition.

The dove wasn't the only mockery of Castro.

A man in a black hood strode to the microphone, lifted the hood just a little to reveal a scraggly white beard and, mimicking the voice of Castro, said, "I think this should be prohibited."

He was booed, but to every call for more freedoms, the audience responded with applause and shouts of "Bravo!" The commotion could be heard from the street, as speakers were set up outside the Lam Center to broadcast the art performance, and passersby flocked inside to see the performance and cheer.

Bruguera, whose late father was a high-ranking Cuban official, said she had no idea how the audience -- a mix of Cubans, foreign visitors and artists, curators and collectors from the international artistic community -- was going to react to her offer of a microphone.

"People went up, but they could have done nothing, and the performance would have been the vacuum," Bruguera said. "I never thought that so many people were going to go up like that, that people were going to speak out like they did. I don't know the people who spoke."

She added: "In reality, it was out of my hands, which I think is fine." Bruguera said the performance ended when Bruguera thanked the participants -- not when a technician dismantled the audio system, as a news outlet reported.

"It was dismantled because it was over. There was another performance scheduled after mine," she said.

The Havana performance was one in a series of works Bruguera has titled *El susurro de Tatlin* (Tatlin's Whisper) after Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin, famous for his attempts to build a monstrously tall building.

In January, as part of that series, Bruguera staged another titillating performance at the Tate Modern in London.

Mounted police rode into the museum and confronted perplexed museum-

goers, riding around them, back and forth, and using the horses to corral and control movement. Bruguera stood, observing, in the crowd.

"People were reaching all sorts of conclusions, that there was a bomb scare," said Bruguera, who holds a tenure-track position at the University of Chicago and a U.S. work visa she obtained before cultural exchanges were curtailed during the George W. Bush years.

Bruguera also staged a disconcerting performance last December during Art Basel Miami Beach at the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO).

Basel VIPs were brought at random into a room filled with historic images of dead people and then interrogated by a museum guard about "why so many people want to assassinate President Barrack Obama."

She staged that work because she found it unusual that people were having such a conversation.

"I'm an uncomfortable artist wherever I go," Bruguera said. "I'm an artist who tries to do the impossible. That's my work, and that's how I conduct my personal life."