

OPINION

Case Dismissed: On Cuban Artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara's Arrest and Release

The artist has been detained over 20 times in two years. But this time, his colleagues on the island mobilized in his defense — and that made all the difference.

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The recently released artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara with friends and colleagues (image courtesy Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara)

In Cuba, a battle for freedom of expression was recently won. Artist and activist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, who is self-taught, Black, and of humble origins, was released on March 14 after nearly two weeks in prison. Four days earlier, his trial on charges of flag desecration was mysteriously suspended. On April 15, the Ministry of the Interior issued notice that the criminal charge against him of property

damage was dismissed. While Otero Alcántara searches for a remedy for the scabies that he contracted in prison, he awaits the dismissal of the flag desecration charge, which presumably is only punishable by a fine. This about-face from the state is nothing short of extraordinary. The Cuban government had clearly wanted to lock him up — police has detained him for short periods over 20 times in two years. Cuban cultural officials laid the groundwork for his arrest by repeatedly declaring that he was not a “real” artist. It is not unusual for Cuban artists and writers to be harassed by State Security, excluded from professional

opportunities and publicly shunned. Several artists and writers have spent time in Cuban prisons. But this time, the artists' colleagues on the island mobilized in the artist's defense — and that made all the difference.

In an unprecedented manifestation of solidarity, a broad spectrum of the Cuban intellectuals and artists inside Cuba sprang into action, supported by others in the diaspora (myself among them). In speaking out, they broke with the culture of fear inculcated into Cubans from childhood. Their methods were typical for the rest of the world, but inside Cuba they are relatively new — street protests, petitions, letters to political leaders, articles in the press, and a flood of posts in his support on social media. Art critics penned essays on the importance of Otero Alcántara's work and the long history of treatment of political symbols in art. Bolder artists coaxed establishment figures to stand up for Otero Alcántara, which resulted in endorsements from staunch Castro loyalists such as artist Kcho and musician Silvio Rodríguez. A core group of supporters posted photos of themselves on meeting in public on social media, filing appeals to the judiciary and marching into the Ministry of Culture to demand a face to face meeting with officials. Cubalex, an organization of independent Cuban lawyers that provide defense for opponents, prepared the Habeas Corpus. [Amnesty International](#) declared Otero Alcántara a prisoner of conscience. The Cuban government was put on the defensive; functionaries were reduced to tweeting personal attacks against the imprisoned artist. Even Otero Alcántara noted that State Security agents were nervous when they interacted with him in prison.

Although activist groups in Cuba such as the Ladies in White and UNPAGU (The Patriotic Union of Cuba) have also taken to the streets and the internet and have garnered international awards, they have suffered from internal isolation. Cuban State Security retains the power to turn anyone who criticizes the state into a pariah, and weak local support adds weight to the state's position that opponents are tools of foreign interests. Even celebrated independent journalists such as Yoani Sanchez are vilified inside Cuba, by functionaries *and* peers that tow the party line. Cuban artists in good favor can travel, earn hard currency, and cavort openly with visiting foreign dignitaries — and many fear that adopting dissenting postures will bring an end to their comfortable lives. They dodge sensitive questions during interviews and stay away from dissidents. The fact that artists and intellectuals from both ends of the political spectrum defended Otero Alcántara signals a seismic shift in Cuba's public culture.



Otero Alcántara’s artistry and his unusual characteristics make him a lightning rod for Cuban officials. Unlike most Cuban artists that hail from educated, if not affluent families and are, in their majority, white; Otero Alcántara is a black man from El Cerro, one of Havana’s poorest neighborhoods. He has no fine arts degrees, but he is an avid reader, a quick learner, and an active participant in independent cultural events. He has managed to integrate himself into a professional milieu that is elitist and detached from Cuban popular culture, where black practitioners are more commonly found. His success challenges to the notion that “real artists” must be products of Cuba’s much-heralded education system.

Otero Alcántara’s performances often respond to government action or inaction, and they throw into question the state’s commitment to its ideals. When a balcony fell on three Cuban girls in Old Havana in February, a tragedy that underscored the poor condition of housing for Cubans living in the shadow of five-star hotels, Otero Alcántara took to the streets in a hard hat and filmed himself pointing to other buildings on the verge of collapse. When the Cuban government issued new

restrictions last summer on what Cuban citizens can do with their flag, even though the tourist industry puts flags on a wide assortment of merchandise, Otero Alcántara wrapped the Cuban flag around his body and wore it on the street, at the beach and in his home, declaring that “the flag belongs to all!” His insistence on his right to make the art that he wants, to speak his mind and to claim the streets as his own, breaks a silent rule in Cuban culture — that if one speaks of politics, one can only do so without speaking of power. Other Cuban artists address the visual culture of the revolution obliquely, but Otero Alcántara’s performances dramatize the exercise of punitive state power over its citizenry.

Social practice art that aims to create social or political change via collective endeavor has become something of an institutional fad in recent years, but in Cuba it’s the symbolic equivalent of a Molotov Cocktail. Cuban artists that have ventured into this terrain, such as Tania Bruguera, have found themselves in conflict with a state apparatus that only supports discreet works that can be exhibited behind closed doors and sold, or tropicalist spectacles devoid of controversy. Risk-takers have also contended with a timid intellectual milieu. Otero Alcántara’s challenge to the establishment, his arrest and the galvanizing effect it has had on his peers, marks a watershed moment. Cuba has long relied on the talent *and* discretion of its island-based artists and intellectuals to provide evidence of the revolution’s legitimacy. That era may well be coming to a close.