

Artist, writer Coco Fusco talks Cuban “artivism” amid government censorship

by Audrey Clayton

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Courtesy of Audrey Clayton.

Coco Fusco, a New York-based interdisciplinary artist and writer, presented a virtual talk Thursday titled “The Right to Have Rights.”

The event — hosted by the University of Michigan Arts Initiative, Center for World Performance Studies and Penny Stamps Speaker Series — focused on Cuban artists interacting with their country’s government, politics and history. The presentation was followed by a Q&A session moderated by Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, professor of Spanish, American Culture and Women’s and Gender Studies.

Fusco is the recipient of ten prestigious awards and fellowships and her art has been featured in museums across the world, including the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona. She is the author of four books and a professor of art at the Cooper Union School of Art. She began working with artists in Cuba during the 1980s to develop relationships with artists on the island.

“The term ‘the right to have rights’ comes from Hannah Arendt,” Fusco said, referring to the German-American political activist from the 1900s. “It was not my idea to use it in relationship to Cuban artists’ current struggles. It was actually the idea of the artists themselves who formed a group called 27N and wrote a manifesto, and in that manifesto, they talked about the right to have rights.”

27N was one of multiple Cuban “artist” groups that Fusco referenced during her talk. The term “artivism” refers to the intersection of art and social justice activism, Fusco said. Among the other activist groups, Fusco talked about were the San Isidro Movement and SIN349, groups created to protest against Decree 439, a Cuban law that further increased censorship of art. In September 2018, the Cuban government introduced Decree 349 to require all artists to receive government authorization before presenting their work in any context. “It’s basically like inviting a censor into your house,” Fusco said.

SIN349, which translates to “without 349,” was a group made of upper-class Cuban artists who attempted to discreetly meet with the government in hopes of changing the censorship laws, Fusco said. However, they quickly realized that the government was not going to act on any of their requests, so SIN349 began cooperating with the San Isidro Movement.

The San Isidro Movement helped organize protests between November 2020 and January 2021, all of which were met with violent hostility from government officials. During protests in January, the Minister of Culture Alpidio Alonso physically attacked protesters, leading 27N to call for his removal.

In July 2021, spontaneous protests led to Cuba's biggest riot in more than 60 years. Police met protestors with violence and more than 5,000 people were detained. "Every time people tried to assert themselves and demand rights and to use peaceful protests as a strategy, the government comes back trying to figure out how to prevent them from doing what they are doing," Fusco said.

Through these protests, Fusco said the Cuban government consistently fought to villainize artists, calling them CIA agents, terrorists and paid mercenaries. According to Fusco, Humberto López, a newscaster and high-ranking member of the Cuban government, frequently goes on television to make these claims.

"(López is) a high-ranking person in the Cuban government who gets on TV and basically says all these people are CIA agents, paid mercenaries, terrorists, criminals who are here to destroy the revolution," Fusco said. "Some audio of me has appeared on some of these programs and I just got a message today saying 'expect to be on Cuban TV very soon' because I'm involved in a campaign to boycott the Biennial."

The Havana Biennial was established in 1984 and is Cuba's largest visual arts event. Despite the recent imprisonment of many Cuban artists and the delta variant quickly spreading through the country, the government decided to go forward with the event. However, Cuban artists, including Fusco, have been calling on foreigners not to attend the event or financially contribute to it in protest with artists.

"Foreigners, don't come and spend your money here," Fusco said. "Don't legitimate a ministry that is participating in the persecution of artists."

According to Fusco, the artists organizing the boycott have been running social media campaigns to educate foreigners about why they should refuse to come to the event. They want to send a message to the Cuban government that it is not okay to vilify and imprison artists.

La Fountain-Stokes said the boycott is historic due to the scale of the Biennial. "The Biennial in Cuba is extraordinary, it's fundamental, it is huge, it is very important, so calls to not participate in this biennial are actually quite dramatic," La Fountain-Stokes said.

A running theme throughout Fusco's speech was the importance of the internet and social media, which has slowly expanded across Cuba, leading to the growth of independent music, art, journalism and film.

Fusco said nearly half of all Cubans have cell phones, and in 2018 the availability of the internet on cell phones turned this into a powerful tool to report live at protests. Marjoris Regus, doctoral student in the School of Music Theater and Dance, expressed surprise and excitement at the number of Cubans who have gained access to the internet.

Regus attended this event as a source of inspiration for her own work. She said she read some of Fusco's work and always enjoyed hearing from accomplished artists. "Even if I were to go down to make music, which to me seems very harmless, that's not so harmless for the people (in Cuba)," Regus said. "So I think it reminded me to always be careful, be thoughtful and be intentional of what I am doing and what I say to people, because a lot of the stuff I do here very freely in the United States is not so free in Cuba."