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Revelations of the aesthetic experience: 
Artistic creation under constraint in 
contemporary Cuba

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Abstract
Since 1959, the Cuban communist regime has instrumentalised art and artists as a key soft-power tool for disseminating the country's revolutionary project. The Cuban art world is controlled through arbitrary laws and decrees that erratically set the parameters of acceptable forms of cultural and artistic expression. This thesis explores the complex entanglement between art and politics under political and cultural authoritarianism. It does this through a phenomenological experiencing of selected artworks by artists who have been part of a group of art-activists that in 2018 formed what is known as the San Isidro Collective. Three conceptual pillars anchor the thesis. The first explores the ontology of the Cuban revolutionary landscape embodied by Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s ‘New Man’ as a totalizing and ‘cosmogenic’ collapse of the state and individual (Holbraad, 2014). Second, subjectivities are explored within this landscape to consider how aesthetic experiences and inner worlds are shaped by social and historical contexts to understand the conditions for political subjectivization. Finally, Jacques Rancière’s (2010) conceptualization of the autonomy of the aesthetic encounter is used as a productive lens for considering how artworks might hold the potential for opening up new subjective spaces that transcend or deepen the ontological landscape of the Cuban Revolution through scenes of dissensus.

Therefore, this thesis asks: How might engagement with the aesthetic experience enable views into subjective and moral spaces beyond those defined by the political ontology of the Cuban Revolution? What might an aesthetic encounter – as a distinctive perceptual and sensorial event – with these artworks reveal that engagement with artists’ activism cannot? What, in short, does artistic creation under authoritarian constraint look and feel like? A commitment to ‘lyrical sociology’ (Abbott, 2016) underpins the project, as both method and as an epistemology of interpretation. To this avail, I complement my own subjective, poetic encounter with the artworks with interviews with the artists on their own positioning and understanding of their creative process.

The thesis is organised around three essays. The first examines the everyday poetics of poet Amaury Pacheco to ‘feel’ the sensory fabric of the revolutionary experience: the tension between survival logic and moral duty, states of physical and ideological depletion, the existential void of the failed New Man. These ‘epiphanic’ poetics propose another grammar of existence that reinstate a dignified relation to self
and others. The second dives into the partnership of the co-founders of the San Isidro Collective through a typology of the various creative moments of their artistic collaboration. I show the subtle distinction between dissensual art, which offers new imaginaries and subjectivities, and art that is merely resistive by staying grounded in a grammar of existing identities within an established rapport of domination. The last essay engages deeply with three artworks by artist and leader of the movement, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. I find that the artworks restore a sense of individuality through love as action, and thereby open new frames for moral subjecthood. The core substantive finding of the thesis is that a lyrical, poetic encounter with the artworks enabled me to see something beyond the artists’ activism – to perceive how their work contained within it the possibility for new subjectivities to emerge, ones that are orientated by values such as love, the multiplicity of desires, individuality, and community. These effectively carve new moral spaces within the ontology of revolutionary politics. On this basis, the thesis argues, first, that the aesthetic encounter helps to disentangle the different time-spaces and subjectivities of the activism and artistic spaces to explore how the urgency of politics threatens to devour the sensitive ‘quietness’ required of artistic creation. Second, the artists’ poetics reveals the possibilities of existence that escape the morally exhausting duties of the New Man. Therefore, centring their art rather than their identities as artists within Cuba’s authoritarian context frees them, in a Rancièrean sense, momentarily, from their constraining roles in the social order and reveals the deeper ‘moral intuitions’ of their artistic praxes. This thesis contributes to studies of artistic creation under constraint by revealing how the autonomy of the aesthetic encounter can open space for new subjects and new ontological frames to emerge. It also calls for allocating scholarly consideration and intellectual space for positioning the artists’ oeuvre as an epistemological response to the contested place that artistic practice can have within culturally and political authoritarian contexts.
Lay Summary

Since Fidel Castro’s successful revolutionary uprising in 1959, the Cuban art sector has been a powerful arm for promoting the regime’s ideology both at home and abroad. In Cuba’s authoritarian context and single-party rule, freedoms (of expression, creativity or the press) are greatly limited. The Cuban art world is thus both vibrant, due to its function as a promotional tool of the revolution, and highly controlled. In this context, artists have been conditioned to navigate the regime’s restrictive parameters of (un)acceptable art. Those that create art that criticizes the revolutionary project can suffer from censorship or sanctions. Such conditions of constraint greatly affect how artists create and what kind of art they make. Therefore, this thesis explores the entanglement between art and politics in Cuba’s authoritarian context.

It does so through an interpretive immersion within artworks created by artists who constitute the art-activism collective, the San Isidro Movement, founded in 2018. This exploration is anchored in three core ideas. The first looks at what the Cuban Revolution is to itself, to understand the wider daily experience of living in a society where the individual is expected to commit and dedicate all aspects of who they are to the revolutionary project. The second focuses on how the self and identity are shaped within this totalising daily experience. The third considers how our unique experience of encountering an artwork bears the potential for understanding ourselves differently, for escaping the conditions of existence imposed by the revolutionary landscape. Based on this, the thesis essentially asks how does looking and immersing within artworks enable to see newfound ways of being and doing that escape the constraining everyday experience of authoritarianism.

I explore this by writing poetically to evoke my own feeling and understanding of the artworks, which commits to an approach that seeks to give space to interpretation rather than explanation. The thesis is centred around three essays. The first looks at the poet Amaury Pacheco’s practice and how it provides glimpses into the exhausting state of living under the pressure of constant self-improvement for the sake of upholding the revolution. Pacheco’s poetry proposes another vocabulary for understanding individuality, community, and citizenship. The second focuses on the partnership between two founders of the San Isidro Movement to explore various phases of their artistic journey. It makes the subtle but important distinction between artworks that are works of resistance, in that they remain locked into a relationship of
oppression/domination, and those that veritably provide another framework for existence in Cuba’s social and political landscape. The third dives deeply into three artworks by the artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. Here, I suggest that his practice enables to free us from the constriction of categories and stereotypes to be made aware of our infinite capabilities, in spite of how we are socially categorised in everyday life.

By immersing in artworks, this thesis argues that paying careful attention to the expressive power of artistic creation reveals offers new ways for thinking, interpreting and representing ourselves to ourselves. Such new ways, foster a re-encounter with our moral selves by carving pathways that bring us closer to what matter the most to us. This is why disentangling the artists from the constraints of their roles as activists and as oppressed individual in Cuban society, helps reveal, more deeply, their motivations for planting ways of existing that escape a given rapport of domination.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Joséphine Foucher
Edinburgh, October 31, 2023
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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my friend Altaïna Thilges: ‘mon éternelle estivante’.
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Introduction

Since 1959, revolutionary Cuba’s tightly controlled cultural sector has served as a soft power tool to improve the revolution’s image at home and abroad. Unlike the Soviet Union, where culture and the arts were restricted to socialist-realism, Fidel Castro made cultural production a fundamental pillar of his revolutionary project from the outset (Gordon Nesbitt, 2015). Throughout his rule, Castro maintained an ambiguous relationship towards artists; he was wary of their ‘bourgeois’ concerns about freedom of expression, but understood the value of an active and flourishing art sector in which artists could serve as ambassadors of the revolution. To this avail, Cuban artists have been able to enjoy a vibrant cultural sector and flexibility to pursue the art form of their choosing – so long as their work explicitly reflected the revolutionary project. As Castro famously said in his speech ‘Words to Intellectuals’ in 1961: ‘Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing’ (Kumaraswami, 2009). This ‘everything/against’ stance has since shaped the contours of creative expression in Cuba, setting parameters that have evolved in parallel with the revolution’s ideological realignments to global paradigmatic shifts over six decades. Nonetheless, the Cuban art world remains strictly monitored, forcing artists to operate within the confines set by governing powers; what the artist Tania Bruguera refers to a complex ‘dance’ with the boundaries of (un)acceptable artistic content (Grenier, 2018).

However, art from the margins or ‘dissident’ art has always existed, since the early years of the revolution. The artist and scholar Coco Fusco has studied at length dissident artistic movements in Cuba, specifically from the lens of performance art which lends itself well to subversive act due to its ephemeral nature (Fusco, 2015). Her monograph Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba published in 2015 provides an intricate look into the various art collectives and artists since the early years of the revolution who have pushed the boundaries of expression with socially and politically abject art: from the scatological performance Hope Is The Last Thing We Are Losing by Angel Delgadlo in 1990 who defecated on the Communist Party newspaper Granma (which cost him a six-months prison sentence) to a daring initiative by the artist Sandra Ceballos who founded Cuba’s first independently run art gallery from inside her home known as Espacio Aglutinador in 1994. Such events constitute the erased chapters of Cuban art history that are not taught in the country’s
schools or textbooks. Fusco and more recent scholars have been endeavouring to build an archive of these dissident works in order to correct the historical narrative of the Cuban artistic canon curated by the revolution.

Apart from Fusco’s extensive project, scholarly works on the Cuban dissident art scene remain scarce. Two seminal studies worth mentioning include political scientist Marie-Laure Geoffray’s research on alternative art collective and political groups in Havana from the art collective OMNI Zona Franca to bloggers. Her book *Contester a Cuba* (2012) provides illuminating insights into how such groups manage to carve what she called ‘semi-autonomous’ spaces of contention that reimagine the revolutionary hegemonic discourse. A second important piece of research that also stems from the field of political science is Sujantha Fernandes’ ethnography (2006:3) on the emergence of Cuban hip-hop which generated insights into the state’s ‘co-option, repenetration and reabsorption’ of the movement, and so constitutes an important vantage point from which to conceptualise the public sphere in Cuba’s paternalistic system. More recently there have been edited volumes of essays that explore the entanglement between art and politics in the country, such as Greiner and Hernandez’s edited volume *Pan Fresco: Textos críticos en torno al arte Cubano* (2019). This inter-generational, analytical, and poetic conversation includes authors who use their craft for political action. For example, Abel González Fernandez, who opens the book with an essay on the Cuban avant-garde, directed a series of short documentaries, *Sin 349*, profiling artists and curators involved in a campaign against a decree passed in 2018 that outlaws independent artistic operations. In addition, Yanelys Núñez Leyva, who contributes to the book’s final chapter on the impact of emerging public art practices, is a founding member of one of Cuba’s leading artistic and dissident movement, The San Isidro Movement.

In this context, this project attempts to expand on these previous studies to explore in depth the work by artists who make up the very San Isidro Movement, founded in 2018 by the performance and conceptual artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and art historian Yanelys Núñez Lleyva. Otero Alcántara, as this thesis will demonstrate extensively, has become a leading figure of dissidence in Cuba since 2019. However, the scholarly attention given to his work as an *artist* rather than an activist remains sparse. He is mentioned briefly in Fusco’s monography and Greiner and Hernandez’s edited volume as well as in a couple of more recent essays, both academic (Loss, 2021) and non-academic (Gonzalez Fernandez, 2020; Batet, 2021). In this vain, the
thesis provides in-depth attention to the artworks created by him and other contested artists in his entourage, to argue that such an entry-point offers a different epistemic access into their moral and political intentions.

The San Isidro Movement’s primary mission is to examine art’s ability to shape new imaginaries and inspire change amid major leadership and institutional transformations in the country. In 2018, Raúl Castro, Fidel’s brother, stepped down as Cuba’s president, ending nearly sixty decades of Castrist rule. The new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel – selected by the Communist Party, the country’s sole party – took the reins with a promise of ‘continuity,’ pledging to defend and uphold the revolutionary project in this new ‘era’. That promise became explicit in the government’s repressive turn, characterized by a series of draconian laws banning artistic operations not sanctioned by the country’s cultural institutions (Decree 349) (Reyes, 2018) and a crackdown on expression online (Decree 370 and 49) (Freedom House, 2020).

In this context, the PhD project interrogates the entanglement between art and politics. It is the product of salvaging the aesthetics from the (at times) constraining grasp of both the activism and police spaces. The Covid-19 pandemic, which began during my first year of research, disrupted initial plans to conduct an ethnography of the artists’ everyday practices in Cuba, requiring me to cancel my fieldwork. The pandemic and pandemic-related restrictions also had an immediate and drastic impact on Cuba’s already fragile economy, striking a blow to tourism, a crucial (though unofficial) revenue source. Dire shortages of food and medicine followed (Chaguaceda and Fusco, 2021).

The crisis, exacerbated by the regime’s repressive tactics, engendered unprecedented protests. Mass demonstrations in July 2021 to contest the government’s crackdowns on freedoms and its handling of Cuba’s deepening humanitarian and economic crises were partly inspired by previous actions by artists from the San Isidro Movement (Jiménez Enoa, 2021). Indeed, my object of study turned into a media ‘hot topic’ when members of the San Isidro Movement led a hunger strike in November 2020 (Lamant, 2020) to protest police violence against artists and activists (Alvarez, 2023). The hunger strike culminated in a sit-in on November 27, 2020 that shook the country unlike any other social uprisings in decades (Fusco, 2020a). As many Cuban activists have said, in 2020, the veil of fear was starting to come off (Alvarez, 2020b). Solidarity campaigns on social media empowered everyday
Cubans to speak freely in a social context long defined by psychological control that limited dissent. (Bloch, 2011).

The urgency of the moment provided a crucial case study of the relationship between art and politics. Two practices that intersect, overlap and have been studied in conjunction, but that also sit in different time-spaces, depending on how they are defined and understood. The ‘artivists’ whose artworks I wished to explore no longer had time to speak about their artistic processes; they were submerged by the urgency of amplifying the voices of colleagues who had been jailed for speaking out against the regime or relaying information about police violence. Yet, that tension – the role of art as a tool for dreaming up other vocabularies of being and belonging – was always the underlying driver behind their actions.

**Project aims: Interpreting the aesthetic encounter**

The shifts that swept Cuba in 2020 transformed this dissertation into an epistemological exploration of the entanglement between arts and politics in a restrictive and authoritarian context. In doing so, it inscribes itself somewhere between the sociology of art, political sociology, and art history. It adopts an innovative approach by carving ample space for artworks, rather than focusing on their production, mediation, or reception. Sociological research on art and artists tends to over-contextualise the former in conjunction to historical and social processes, giving little room for the beholder to ‘play’ with their own imaginative engagement with the art in question, while artists are often studied as part of a wider social puzzle of markets and networks (McCormick, 2022). Concern for the social organisation of artworks, that fosters an ‘outside’ lens for studying art, has eclipsed productive questions about the meaning of artworks as primary loci of enquiry (Eyerman and McCormick, 2016). Nonetheless, grappling with artworks’ meaning within our aesthetic encounter warrants careful attention. Not least because art today, as many would argue (Bishop, 2012), has a social and political impact. The art world itself demands that art be ‘useful’ and critical. As the philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) contends, art has replaced the moral orientation provided by religion in our secular (post)modernity. To this extent, it is crucial to study what an artwork can reveal, before and beyond subjecting it to formal historical and social analysis.
This thesis aims to revive the precious tripartite relationship between artwork, beholder, and artist. It demonstrates that the aesthetic experience offers a privileged realm, when studied in its autonomy, that can escape the ascriptions of the social worlds it lives within, such as the activism space or Cuba’s police state. Many scholars in the field of cultural sociology or the sociology of art advocate for a return to meaning and interpretation, through a sociology of artworks (Heinich, 2022). This project aims to do just that.

It does so through an innovative focus on the aesthetic engagement provided by artworks that have been made in spite of a regime that continuously discredit these artists as mere dissidents or ‘counterrevolutionaries’ (Diario de Cuba, 2019). It seeks to unravel what the artworks in our interaction with them reveal about the artists’ moral intentions and subjectivities. I aim to listen to the artist’s symbolic language and grammar in ways that are not constrained by the language of activism. In other words, this project intends to provide theoretical space to the artworks through a phenomenological engagement with them. My commitment has been to travel through Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s and others’ works to understand their potential for offering a new lens to understand the world, to see it beyond delusions. How artworks provide meaning that brings us closer to our moral background in an unobstructed way. How they might allow us to see beneath the illusion of the social order, the unwritten rules of social media activism, ideological partisanship, diasporic imaginaries, or misinformation. Therefore, this thesis asks, how might engagement with the aesthetic experience enable views into subjective and moral spaces beyond those defined by the political ontology of the Cuban Revolution? What might an aesthetic encounter – as a distinctive perceptual and sensorial event – with these artworks reveal that engagement with artists’ activism cannot? What, in short, does artistic creation under authoritarian constraint look and feel like? This quest for the ‘real’ via the aesthetic experience leads to a key question: How does art, even in a context of immense constraint and restriction, create new subjective spaces? How does that revelation allow new imaginaries to be constructed, for the moral self to unravel?

To this end, three conceptual pillars anchor the thesis. The first explores the ontology of the Cuban revolutionary landscape embodied by Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s ‘New Man’ as a totalizing and ‘cosmogenic’ collapse of the state and individual (Holbraad, 2014). I suggest that the ontology of revolutionary politics is embodied in
Fidel Castro’s famous speech to intellectuals where the revolution remains the priority. Nothing, not even freedom of expression, can come before that (Kumaraswami, 2009). Castro’s theoretical positioning of artists as agents for inspiring revolutionary change, compounded by Che’s roadmap (2008) of the noble revolutionary, formulate an ontological landscape of a totalising commitment of the mind, soul and body towards the revolutionary project. The totalization of the forward-facing New Man is coupled with a paternalist regime, which, over the years, has created a state of dependence of citizens on its unpredictable policy changes that dictate their quotidianity and livelihood.

Consequently, this landscape shapes a ‘sensory fabric’ of the revolutionary experience. This is where turning to arts and culture provides key clues and glimpses into what the fabric looks and feels like. Cuban literature, for example, gives insight into states of moral and physical exhaustion, especially during the Special Period of the early 1990s, when the country underwent a dire economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, its primary benefactor. The exhaustion Cubans experience translates into states of anguish and self-depreciation, as the social body fails to achieve the New Man’s heroic, future-facing duties. Another glimpse into the sensory effect of the revolutionary landscape is the infiltration of the New Man in everyday life, down to one’s most intimate corners. There is a particular ‘engineering of the soul’ (Wang, 2014) that affects familial and intimate relationships. Identifying certain elements of this sensory fabric helps to understand how some artists propose another ‘regime of senses’ (Rancière, 2004) that confirms, usurps, or makes obsolete the very ontological conditions for existence within the landscape of revolutionary politics.

As a second pillar, I explore the relationship between that sensorial experience and the self. Subjectivities are explored within this landscape to consider how aesthetic experiences and inner worlds are shaped by social and historical contexts to understand the conditions for political subjectivization (Rancière, 1992). Here I draw on Charles Taylor’s (1989) argument that the epistemology of subjectivity is shaped by self-interpretation: how we represent ourselves to ourselves is as constitutive of personhood as the discursive process of connecting our inner and social worlds (Biehl et al., 2007). In this view, personhood is both experiential and intersubjective; selfhood is always in dialogue: with others, our lineages, and ourselves. If we understand this notion of subjectivity as a locus for interaction where meaning and interpretation are
co-constructed and fluid, we can make sense of the aesthetic encounter’s potential to carve out new subjectivities. In fact, Deleuze contends that imagination can be understood as a function of subjectivity, with the ability to transform perception (Levin, 2013). This is where I seek to explore the potential for subjectivitization in the aesthetic encounter. Here, I subscribe to Jacques Rancière’s notion of political subjectivization that he defines as ‘the enactment of equality – or the handling of a wrong – by people who are together to the extent that they are in between’ (Rancière, 1992: 61). According to Rancière, then, becoming a subject is an assertion of an in-betweenness – a verification of an individual’s equality that has been negated or relegated to a subservient position in the social order. Political subjectivization can never simply be an assertion of an identity or the refusal of an identity imposed by others or by the political order. Instead, it must involve an identification with a subject self that is placed in the interval or gap between existing identities, or the empty subjectivity that is intended to address a wrong (Rancière, 1992). Therefore, Rancière’s ideas of political subjectivization as an unstable ‘in-betweenness’ which can be made possible within the aesthetic encounter and Taylor’s wider moral philosophy which connects selfhood to morality are drawn from in parallel. Indeed, Rancière’s theorisation helps to make sense of political subjectivization as a ‘scene’ or a moment that opens a rift between ascribed identities in the social order for the emergence of new subjectivities, while Taylor’s work helps to conceptualise how the very language of creative expression, within that aesthetic encounter, enables the articulation of moral intuitions, or how it helps build new frameworks for understanding the self; for articulating ourselves to ourselves. The two theorists will be helpful to provide a layered understanding of the aesthetic experience’s potential for opening new subjective spaces and to articulate what it reveals in terms of new moral frames within the ontological landscape of the Cuban Revolution. In other words, Rancière’s idea of subjectivization helps to conceptualise what happens during the aesthetic encounter by way of rearranging ‘what is common to the community’ whilst Taylor helps to make sense of the role of artists in articulating, through expressive language, the moral background that shapes selfhood.

Finally, the third conceptual pillar rests on Jacques Rancière’s (2010) idea of the autonomy of the aesthetic encounter. This helps reveal artworks’ potential to open new subjective spaces that transcend or deepen the ontological landscape of the Cuban Revolution through scenes of dissensus. Indeed, the project highlights the very
‘thing’ of the aesthetic experience. I understand aesthetics as a phenomenological experience, made possible by artworks. Aesthetics refers to anything pertaining to sense experience, as a perceptual and sensory endeavour. The aesthetic experience, thus, is the encounter with a work of art, where the artist, artwork and spectator enter a situation-based conversation, and where interpretation and meaning, by way of emotional, embodied, and spiritual inter-subjectivity, take place. The aesthetic experience, in this basic sense, is universal and relatable; anyone has the capacity to feel, or to judge, using cognitive, physical, or transcendental perspectives—a work of art, a song, or a beautiful sunset.

This is where my understanding of the aesthetic experience subscribes to Rancière’s project in its enabling potential, as a democratising experience, a catalyst of our capabilities for sensibility (Rancière, 2004). In a Rancièrian reading of art – as a specific way of ‘doing and making’ – there is no need for a ‘deciphering’ capacity by way of cultural or social capital, as theorised in a constructivist or Bourdieusian approach to the ‘field’ of art as a distinguisher of taste, and class. It is an unstable, autonomous ‘time-space’ that has the potential for bearing upon politics. Not all art leads to the ‘political’, which for Rancière differs from politics. The ‘political’ refers to a situation when our underlying, foundational equality emerges and reshuffles what is common to sensory experience, or what he calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2004): ways of being, of doing, or saying that are visible to the community. The distribution of the sensible, thus, is both exclusive and inclusive; it delimits the roles and functions we occupy within a specific ‘sense order’ or ‘regime’. To Rancière, art bears the potential to be emancipatory or political when it enables scenes of dissensus; redistributes what is common to the community; or breaks the hierarchy of roles and senses that we occupy in the social order. Therefore, the ‘disinterested’ practice of gazing at art (Kant, 2000) allows for a momentary suspension of the partition of roles and functions in the social order. This is where Rancière’s amalgamation of aesthetics and politics, in a specific regime of arts, comes full circle. Rancière contends that the aesthetic experience allows for subjects that are invisible and inaudible in the social order to emerge, through a process of subjectivization. In the autonomy of the work of art, which responds to no rules of meaning-making or interpretation, there is thus the potential for an autonomy of new senses, of a new community, and of new subjects.
Methods: Lyrical writing to convey the ‘beholder’s share’

The methodological toolkit developed to centre the aesthetic experience as an entry-point into the artworks is the result of several turning points: the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced me to forgo plans of physical fieldwork, and the growing economic and political crises in Cuba, which directly affected my participants, who were instigators of major social uprisings in the country. The pandemic compelled me to pivot my methods towards a digital ethnography of the collective’s social media activities and conversations. Social media analysis in this particular moment in Cuban history lends itself particularly well to the study of art from the margins. Indeed, the democratisation of Internet access in 2016 has given way to a relatively ‘free’ space for expressions of contention and criticism within Cuba’s restricted public sphere (Henken & Santamaria, 2021). As we will see, many of the artists included in this thesis have been barred, progressively, from exhibiting their works in the country’s galleries and institutions, which has made social media their primary space for showcasing their works, advocating and gaining solidarity with a wider, international network of artists and activists (Dafoe, 2020). This reality was further compounded by the pandemic experience of state-mandated ‘lock-downs’ which forced people to stay indoors and connect ever more via social media platforms. The year 2020 propelled The San Isidro Movement into the international limelight specifically because of its members’ savvy use of social media; from livestreaming daily declarations, ideas and altercations with the police, to participating in invited online talks and conferences. It is on such platforms as Facebook, for instance, that members of the collective organised press conferences and artistic-activist campaigns like #labanderaesdetodos [#theflagbelongstousall] which called on Cubans to publish photos of themselves with the flag, in an effort to protest the regime’s new law that restricts the use of national symbols (Rojas, 2020). To this avail, mapping the conversations and initiatives taking place on social media was crucial in helping refocus my enquiry into what the aesthetic experience revealed of the artists’ deeper intentions. The study of the San Isidro Movement’s social media activity allowed me to see that the message contained in their artworks was being silenced or stifled by the politics of the social media activism space. This was a key turning point in my research.

Consequently, the digital ethnography allowed me to refocus my research objectives, in order to ask: What does a phenomenological engagement with artworks
by artists in a contested and activist space reveal about their deeper intentions and message? My interviews with members of the San Isidro Collective confirmed that, despite pressure from activism and police spaces, the artists’ raison d’être remained shaped by their artistic praxes and subjectivities. Therefore, I decided to reroute my methods to carve out space for my encounter with these artworks.

In so doing, I set out to describe the immersive experience of the aesthetic encounter. Andrew Abbott’s (2016) ‘lyrical sociology’ provided methodological and epistemological guidance for this exercise. Methodologically-speaking, lyrical writing about social processes sharpens the writer’s emotional engagement through a focus on fragments and moments. Abbott contrasts lyrical writing to narrative writing, which focuses on telling stories and providing explanations with a beginning and an end. In contrast, conferring ample space to emotional engagement with poetic attention to the passing of time facilitates ‘a sociology of transition’ (Abbott, 2016: 78). Considering the instability of an artwork, this focus on the transitional gives sociological freedom to the artworks studied herein and thus allows the viewer to explore their emancipatory, albeit ephemeral, potential. Epistemologically-speaking, a lyrical sociology fosters my engagement with artworks in the sense that the aesthetic experience is something that needs to be articulated. By writing and reacting, I commit to a stance that is anti-narrative and, crucially, interpretivist. Articulating the aesthetic experience is about interpretation more than description. Interpretivist sociology hinges on the premise that we are language-bearing beings; we cannot be understood through causal relationships or explanation (Taylor, 2014). Lyrical sociology frees us from the constraint of explaining something causally; it is a commitment to interpretation. The aesthetic experience is contingent on the moment it is being experienced; an artwork’s meaning changes over time and context. A lyrical sociology, then, facilitates my commitment to the momentary, and to using ‘a single image to communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality’ (Abbott, 2016: 87). This approach provides both methodological and epistemological space for interpretation. The artwork provides an opportunity for the reflective exploration necessary to articulate the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience cannot be explained but can be conveyed; it is an invitation rather than an affirmation. All quoted excerpts of poems, artwork descriptions, or social media publications in Spanish were translated by me, unless stated otherwise.
Voyaging through the artworks, and articulating the ‘beholder’s share’ (Wilder, 2020) – the spectator’s part in making sense and giving meaning to artworks – acknowledges what matters the most to an artist: engaging with their work. This kind of engagement takes on new urgency when the artists in the study are discredited by Cuban cultural authorities, who deem them dissidents, not artists (Diario de Cuba, 2019). Therefore, a lyrical epistemology creates space for the artworks to breathe throughout this thesis. Each chapter begins with a subjective interpretation of artworks to anchor the exploration. I then provide contextual analysis of what the artworks accomplish, and the questions they allow us to ask, situating them against the backdrop of the ‘sensory fabric’ of Cuba’s authoritarian revolutionary politics. This process is always attuned to my participants’ words, drawing on interviews I have conducted since the spring of 2020. My contact with Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, however, was abruptly interrupted in July 2021 when he was arrested; he remains in prison at the time of this writing in October 2023. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English by me.

Thesis Structure

The next chapter details the three pillars of my conceptual framework: the landscape of revolutionary politics; the self and the good; and the aesthetic experience. This offers the theoretical scaffolding for approaching the artworks in this study. The following chapter outlines my methodological process, in chronological order, from the initial research questions to the various turning points that shaped my methodological toolbox. My approach is founded in sociological listening, centring the aesthetic experience through a lyrical epistemology, then taking distance and adding context through art historical examination. This toolkit forms part of an innovative approach that sits within what my supervisor Liliana Riga has articulated as an ‘art-historical sociology’ (Art-historical Sociology and the Construction of the Modern Self, forthcoming).

Then follow the three core essays of the thesis. I have developed these chapters as standalone essays to give credence to a lyrical sociological approach and to give ample space to an articulation of my aesthetic experience. The essay format allows to shed light on what engagement with the artworks unveils, what the artworks display, and the possibilities they hold for reframing subjectivities. By opting for essays, I
structure this thesis anti-narratively; the essays allow a focus on fragments as the locus of social processes. When read together, my arguments about what the aesthetic experience reveals come into focus.

Essay one, ‘The everyday poetics of Amaury Pacheco’ examines the poetical and artistic lineage of Amaury Pacheco, a co-founder of the San Isidro Movement. I situate his praxis between his dialogue with an inspirational poet of his generation, Juan Carlos Flores, and his influence on younger artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. This first essay offers an intimate dive into the specific realm of ‘alternative’ or ‘independent’ art in Cuba’s highly centralised and bureaucratised art regime, especially during the Special Period, which began in 1991 and is, arguably, ongoing. By journeying through several poems, I hope to grasp the underlying ‘feel’ of the Special Period’s sensory fabric that endures today: the tension between survival logic and moral duty, states of physical and ideological depletion, the existential void of the failed New Man. Finally, I travel to the year 2021 and observe how Pacheco’s both cacophonous and focused poetical praxis seeks out love and harmony in a climate of police repression. I argue that, through ‘epiphanies’, these poetics reveal the moral intuitions that underlie the human drive for a good life (Taylor, 1989).

Essay two ‘Play, Obsession, Quiet: Entanglements of the political and artistic subjects’ traces the evolution of the work and professional partnership of Yanelys Núñez Leyva and Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, focusing on distinct creative moments of their artistic collaboration. I typologised these creative moments as ‘Play’, ‘Obsession’, and ‘Quiet’. This essay delves into the entanglement between artistic and political subjectivities, and identifies the forces that cause the artists’ artistic subjectivities to be devoured by the urgency of the activism space. I also begin to unravel a key argument and subtle distinction between dissensual art, which offers new imaginaries with a veritable emancipatory potential, from art that is merely resistive, in that it remains founded in a grammar of existing identities within an established rapport of domination.

Essay three, ‘Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara: Opening new subjective spaces,’ culminates with a look at three of Otero’s artworks, to explore how the aesthetic experience provides a clearer vision of reality. By experiencing and subsequently analysing Otero’s artworks, I suggest that they deepen the ontology of Cuban revolutionary politics, restore a sense of individuality through love as action, and shape new grounds for the moral self.
Contribution: The aesthetic revelations of creation under constraint

Centring this thesis’ entry point on the autonomy of artworks and the aesthetic experience permits theoretical space for interpreting the more profound moral and subjective drivers at the root of these artists’ praxes. This in turns gives insights into their wider political project, in a Rancièrian sense. Focusing on the subjective, inter-relational meaning-making of the aesthetic experience gives pause and intention to the creative labour of the artists, and momentarily disrupts the constraining context surrounding the artworks. Momentarily abstracting to the social world in which these artworks reside sheds light on what the unconstrained imagination seeks to tell.

Grappling with the artworks’ meanings within the aesthetic encounter enabled to interpret the artists’ deeper moral intentions and subjective praxes. In the first essay, I found that Amaury Pacheco’s poetics make visible and palpable the exhausting conditions of the New Man’s looming shadow. They provide, through the enchantment of poetry, a revamping of time by salvaging the cyclical present. The escape from the linear, future-facing New Man towards a focus on the stillness of the present produces a new grammar for perceiving and understanding individuality, citizenry, and community. In the second essay, I find that despite the entanglement between artistic and political subjectivities, the desire and ‘itch’ to create remains a constant, and that moments of quietness enable the artist to rekindle time for himself—time that is solely focused on the subversive potential of artistic contemplation and imagination. Such a scene that reclaims the artist’s time offers grounds for new subjects to emerge. Finally, the last essay argues that Otero’s aesthetics offer another register for existing within the confines of the revolution—a new existence that honours our contradictions, impulses, and ‘morbid’ desires, in ways that allow us to re-imagine the self as bigger than the very cosmogenic landscape of the Cuban Revolution (Holbraad, 2014). Otero’s aesthetics, more profoundly, reveal a commitment to love in a muscular and wilful sense (hooks, 2001), reinstating its space within the ontological landscape of the revolution.

In summary, I have determined that deep sensory engagement with the artworks allows us to more accurately sense the intentions of politically engaged artists within Cuba’s authoritarian context. When read and experienced subjectively, the poems and artworks tell a story about the struggles of navigating a long-standing state of moral
exhaustion that comes with a never-ending ‘revolution’. They tell us that the onus of continuing to work tirelessly towards a better, selfless, and improved New Man prompts a desire to escape such suffocating and unattainable expectations and reclaim a sense of individuality. The aesthetic experience enables us to ask questions that look beyond the landscape of revolutionary politics; it brings to light the very composition of that landscape, providing sensorial glimpses into other ways of existing in a society where the personal need to demarcate oneself from a panoptic revolutionary process has ontologically been framed as ‘ideological diversionism’ by the regime. It also provides insight into the link between emancipation and the self: that emancipation means a reassertion of a shared equality—a right to become ‘other’, a third ‘thing’. Finally, I argue that the artworks herein restore love as an active component in morality, in line with the work of Iris Murdoch (2014) and bell hooks (2001).

Crucially, I argue that, by engaging with these artworks, the aesthetic experience disrupts the illusion of the politics of the Cuban police state and activism space, and gives necessary attention to the wider political of these artists’ works. By approaching the artworks as autonomous, we can appreciate their ability to enable an experience that is ‘distinct from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason’ (Rebentisch, 2012: 11). Such autonomy does not mean the artworks escape their social and historical context. It does, however, confer a potential for perspectives distinct from what has been established as ‘common’ to the community or ‘habitual’ (Wilder, 2020). Here, dissensus or emancipation can arise; other forms of relating, existing, and speaking emerge, as ‘the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect’ (Rancière, 2009b). This careful attention to the artworks by way of the aesthetic experience provides a glimpse into how the artists of the San Isidro Movement refocus elemental components of the ‘good life’ such as love, community, and individuality. Engagement with the artworks in the aesthetic encounter can reveal alternative ways of perceiving the world that provide new pathways of selfhood and morality.
In this chapter, I introduce the three main concepts that guide my study on what engagement with artworks in a restrictive context reveals. First, I introduce the overall ontological and sensory landscapes of Cuban revolutionary politics to shed light on their constitution of moral obligations and duties, and their impact on Cuban subjectivities. Second, I dissect the concepts of subjectivities and political subjectivization, which will guide my exploration of art’s possibility in carving space for new subjects to emerge. I also elaborate the link between selfhood and morality in order to push the enquiry further into the potential for aesthetics to reveal the background of our moral frameworks and for introducing new vocabularies that transform self-understanding. Finally, I dive into the theorization of the aesthetic experience, within the aesthetic encounter, by drawing firmly on Jacques Rancière’s overall project on the relation between politics and aesthetics.

I. The landscape of Cuban revolutionary politics

The ontology of the Cuban Revolution
As a first important theoretical pillar that supports this investigation, it is important to review the place that art and culture hold within the wider Cuban revolutionary project. This sketches the beginning of a picture of the ontology of revolutionary politics, especially as it relates to the place of artists. Unlike the Soviet Union, cultural production was a fundamental facet of Fidel Castro’s revolutionary project (Gordon Nesbitt, 2015). Castro was aware of the crucial role artists played in illustrating and conceptualising the revolution’s efforts both at home and internationally. The arts constitute a powerful medium for advancing a nationalist project and gaining the trust of the population at large (Leoussi, 2004). Castro’s roadmap on the role of intellectuals and artists can best be deciphered in his famous speech ‘Palabras a los intellectuals’ [Words to Intellectuals] delivered at the National Cultural Council in June 1961. In this speech, we understand the double meaning Castro subscribes to culture, which is that it relates at once to art and education (Kumaraswami, 2009). Given the nature of the revolution as a future-oriented project, the role of education in preparing the next generation of revolutionaries cannot be emphasised enough. The speech was a response to groups of artists who had followed the revolution’s development closely over the last two years and who feared its radical turn, after the regime’s first
censorship effort of the documentary PM by Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante. In ‘Palabras’, Castro works to persuade artists and intellectuals that they have nothing to fear, that the revolution or the process of socialism is still in its infancy and that the role of artists within it still needs to be theorised. The speech reads like an attempt at rallying artists to commit to the revolutionary project. Castro emphasises the productive, participatory role artists can play in educating future generations, arguing that ‘the people’ all have great potential for creativity. Importantly, Castro explicitly lays down the parameters within which artists and intellectuals can create by reminding that the priority, of all citizens and of the nation, is the revolution. Everything else is secondary, including artistic freedom.

In the speech’s most cited line, Castro pronounced ‘Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada’ [‘Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing’] (Kumaraswami, 2009), thereby announcing that artists and intellectuals would be expected to create from within the revolutionary project in order to advance its agenda, and that critiques from ‘outside’ such effort would not be tolerated. However, Kumaraswami (2009) invites us to temper this ‘Dentro/Contra’ stance, which has been cited at length as proof of the revolution’s autocratic and authoritarian character to remind us that this speech was delivered in a time of euphoric and tumultuous change in Cuban history. 1961 marks the year when relations with the United States were officially strained and Castro declared the revolution as socialist, hence aligning his guerrilla uprising with the Soviet bloc. In April, Cuban soldiers successfully defeated an attempted coup from Cuban exiles at Playa Girón, or the Bay of Pigs. In other words, the regime presented the country as ‘under siege’ and the priority of the moment was defending national security. The speech was delivered in this spirit, with the imperative of prioritising national security and the revolution’s process, cultural freedoms would be secondary. This rhetoric of perpetual threat to the revolutionary process has endured over the decades that followed and has been a strong argument for maintaining a hard line against all forms of detractors in the country. Finally, an enlightening revelation of the ‘Palabras’ speech is the Castrist regime’s ambiguous position vis-a-vis culture and the arts. On the one hand, Castro conveys disdain towards artists and intellectuals’ bourgeois worries about their craft being restrained when the revolution calls for an ‘all hands on deck’ commitment. On the other, he has the political intuition that maintaining a thriving cultural and art sector would only bolster the revolution’s international prestige. This tension still rings true
today, as the Cuban government continues to invest in artists who serve as powerful diplomatic agents of the revolution’s image abroad. Cuban cultural production remains an important facet of the country’s soft-power strategy. Castro painted the revolution as an inclusive place where artists, as individuals, could contribute to the project in whichever way they wished. This is partly the reason why Cuba did not experience a rigid socialist-realist turn in its artistic production (Camnitzer, 2003). However, the speech makes clear that what must prevail before all is the collective effort of bringing about a new socialist form, as Kumaraswami (2009: 538) suggests: ‘The Revolution was an inclusive church, but [its] right to exist superseded all other rights, including that of artistic freedom’.

The ‘Palabras’ speech is key in deciphering the wider theoretical or ontological project of the revolution by explicating the conditions that upright citizens must meet: they must self-sacrifice, be heroic, future-oriented, self-evaluative, and must prioritize the majority before any individuals or groups. This ethos endures today and gives us a crucial starting point to understand the constraint that the revolution’s parameters imposed on artistic creation. From the onset of the revolutionary uprising in 1959, cultural institutions were established such as the Casa de las Americas (1959) and then the larger body that oversaw artistic works, the Cultural National Council (CNC) in 1961. The CNC was first run in a Soviet-style manner with a hard-line stance on how artists were expected to create, as Weiss (2017: 70) contends:

The CNC required that artists be ‘capable of representing in their work not only objective reality but also reality in its revolutionary development, helping it in its important task of transforming old ways of thinking and lapsed ideas, educating workers in the spirit of socialism’: among its targets were ‘minority’ art forms such as abstraction, abhorred as depraved and dehumanizing and, in García Buchaca’s words, ‘preoccupied with describing the reactions and psychological abnormalities of drug addicts, homosexuals, prostitutes and the mentally ill’.

Several accounts (Gordon Nesbitt, 2015; Weiss, 2017) of the beginning years of the revolution assert that the management of cultural policy was handed to the more orthodox factions of the revolutionary government (Fidel Castro was considered more ‘liberal’) such as members of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary communist party who had had experience dealing with cultural activity. However, documented evidence suggests that Fidel Castro’s direct circle was in charge of giving clear policy directives. Weiss (2017: 72) highlights that Castro was ‘famously a micromanager’ and that culture was a priority of the revolutionary leadership, not a side project handed down to a few bureaucrats. The first decades of the revolution saw scenes of the regime’s
experimentation with cultural policy, with tensions between cultural authorities and artists who sought to make sense of where criticism fit within the confines of the revolution. The case of the poet Heberto Padilla, who was disgraced and accused of ‘ideological diversionism’ after being closely aligned with the revolutionary leadership, exemplifies the patchwork of approaches in shaping acceptable forms of expression (Fusco, 2021a).

First a staunch supporter of the revolution, Heberto Padilla started voicing criticism of the revolution’s growing radicalisation. This materialised in the collection of essays *Fuera del Juego* published in 1968 by the country’s union of writers (UNEAC) after much debate on whether it should be published at all. The book was released with an introductory disclaimer written by UNEAC’s members warning readers that the manuscript was ‘counter-revolutionary’. Amid growing tensions and the implementation of more authoritarian measures in the cultural field, Padilla’s tolerated criticism became unacceptable and he was jailed in 1971 (Tello Diaz, 2005). He was released a month later but only after delivering a speech of self-criticism to UNEAC in which he had to publicly repudiate himself and admit to having poor judgement. This event provoked a turning point in leftist support of the Cuban Revolution by international intellectuals, as admirers of the revolution such as Simone de Beauvoir and Gabriel García Márquez spoke out against Padilla’s imprisonment. This case marks the beginning of a period of censorship known as the Quinquenio Gris [the Five Grey years] from 1971 to 1976, during which the CNC leadership embraced a dogmatic, Soviet-style cultural policy (Grenier, 2017).

The bureaucratization of the revolution through centralised institutions, compounded by Fidel Castro’s charismatic personality, rapidly escalated into a totalitarian leadership style. As Tudoroiu (2014: 392) suggests, the structure of the Cuban regime involves a mix of ‘charismatic and bureaucratic-rational elements’ with both legally-binding entities and the arbitrary authority of the leader. In this sense, Fidel, as the *Líder Máximo* embodies the role of both referee and coordinator (Tudoroiu, 2014: 393). This dual, totalizing role of the leader comes with a strong paternalist component. Castro himself reflected in an interview with journalist Ann Louise Bardach in the late 1990s that one of his weaknesses, and thus of the revolution during the first decades, might have been his ‘excessive paternalism’ (Castro cited in Bardach, 2002: 37). This paternalism was embodied in Fidel Castro’s omni-presence in his hours-long speeches or extensive op-eds in national newspapers.
that read like intimate ruminations on his politics, and in local-level neighbourhood-watch groups that served as a kind of moral police (through the Committees of Defense of the Revolution). Bardach offers a compelling analysis of the country’s national and foreign policy (especially as it touches the conflictual relationship with the U.S.) through the lens of family values, arguing that Castro’s personal family affairs of womanizing, political rivalries, and patriarchal parenting directly drove political strategy; the personal is always political in Cuba (Bardach, 2002).

The intention here is not to draw a complete picture of the cultural policies in revolutionary Cuba, but rather to situate how institutions came about in shaping artistic production. More specifically, how such institutionalisation influences practices and behaviour within the revolutionary landscape. In 1976, the Ministry of Culture was implemented; a ruling body that bureaucratized how artists operated, giving cultural players identity papers that endorsed their right to practice. Within this landscape emerged a clear distinction between state-sanctioned artists and ‘independent’ artists, the latter being those who were not professionally socialised within the county’s art institutions.

Therefore, critique from within the world of arts has always existed since 1959, some coming from institutionalised artists and other from artists at the margins. To gain a clear understanding of the volatile parameters of expression within the Cuban revolutionary landscape, Yvon Grenier’s (2019) analysis of what he calls the ‘gatekeeper state’ provides illuminating points for situating the ontology of the revolution. Cuban cultural authorities operate with moments of more or less tolerance, through simultaneous and randomised practice of rigidity and openness, where the state sets the parameters of ‘what can be said and done, how, when and where’ (Grenier, 2019: 272). In response, artists learn the steps to a fastidious ‘dance’ of knowing the limitations of that parameter in order to inscribe themselves within it or risk being ostracised. There is an opaque system of formal and informal control. The executive function of instilling openness and rigidity leaves creators in a state of perpetual uncertainty about the legality of their actions, which leads to a practice of self-control and self-censorship.

This strategy is similar to the types of unannounced policy changes in the economic field (Bloch, 2011). The blurry space of contention means that while artists might endeavour for more autonomy from institutions, this quest for independence does not necessarily translate into political critique. In other words, autonomy does not equate
critical expression. The regime’s strategy of opening partially and sporadically a
certain tolerance in the field of arts leads to artists being risk averse. This is because
it is difficult to assess how much criticism is tolerated by the regime at a given time. In
the end, ‘the supreme leaders’ (Grenier, 2019: 276) always decide which orientation
the revolution is taking at a given time.

Grenier qualifies the Cuban government as a ‘post-totalitarian’ regime renovating
totalitarianism through an undisputable main narrative. A narrative he defines as: ‘the
never-ending revolution, its identification with Fidel and Raul, the irrevocability of
socialism, the single-party/man state and the US embargo’ (Grenier, 2018: 51). His
scholarship helps to understand why some seemingly critical art is tolerated. He
argues that some critique – that abides to the Main Narrative – stemming from the
relatively hermetic art world is politically costless and even helps nourish the state’s
rhetoric of free speech. Indeed, themes around distress, poverty and economic
difficulties in the 1990s were tolerated (as long as they remained cryptic and did not
explicitly point fingers at the regime). Indeed, such hardships could easily be blamed
on the U.S. embargo, a crucial character in the ‘Main Narrative’ and a vital political
scapegoat onto which to place responsibility for the regime’s economic and social
shortcomings. Grenier (2017) also asserts that in Cuba the personal is political, and
artists who enjoy direct support of leaders – such as the installation artist Kcho who
was famously Castro’s favourite artist (ibid) – enjoy small avenues of critical
expression, as long as they remain adequately ambiguous. Grenier’s research offers
a complex look into the subtle and tacit negotiations between artists and the state.

Where does this leave artists? What does a state of constraint, where the
parameters of acceptable expression are volatile and sporadic, do to creativity? How
should we interpret this cultural production? In navigating the uncertain routes of
expression, many artists who are state-sanctioned avoid the political or critical terrain
all together, leaving a sanitized aesthetic that focuses more on meeting international
demands of a specific type of ‘Latin American aesthetic’. This trend was mostly
persistent in the 1980s and 1990s according to Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera,
who identifies two traps that artists often fell into during these decades. The first relates
to the hegemonic thirst for ‘difference’, which has led artists from the periphery to ‘self-
exotisize’ in response to a dominant demand of ‘primitive’ aesthetics. The second is
its opposite, or the tendency to embrace an aesthetic of ‘abstract cosmopolitanism
that flattens out differences’ (Mosquera 2001: 27).
In reaction to young Cuban artists depoliticizing their works to respond to an international craze around Cuban art, the performance artist Tania Bruguera launched a bold initiative. Through the foundation of *La Catedra Arte de Conducta* [The Department of Behaviour Art], which ran from 2003-2011, Bruguera organised intensive courses and seminars that focused on behaviour as the primary form of art material. The programme aimed to reassert critical responsibility in art, encouraging young Cuban artists to become agents of change and social critique in their own country. The courses and guests who were featured in the *Catedra* were invited to think about how art can intervene in everyday life (Ribeiro dos Santos, 2016). Through this initiative, Bruguera had to use various routes of legitimacy open to her as a state-sanctioned artist whose work has always toyed with the ‘dance’ of acceptable and unacceptable art. As a world-known performance artist, Bruguera managed to use her fame as a shield against repression, though in recent years, her work has been subjected to more direct censorship, and the spaces she managed to navigate in the Cuban art world have been growing smaller. Bruguera’s trajectory, however, provides insights into the entanglement between art and politics within a landscape where the latter can only englobe one vision of the world wherein the revolution triumphs. As a critical artist, Bruguera’s art is resistive and responsive to the grammar imposed by the parameters of the revolutionary landscape, sometimes crossing a line she knows she cannot cross.

To summarise, the ontology of the Cuban Revolution rests on a totalising commitment of the mind, soul and body towards the revolutionary project. The totalization of the forward-facing New Man is coupled with a paternalist regime, which, over the years, has created a state of dependence of citizens on its unpredictable policy changes that directly affect quotidianity and livelihood. Whilst the uniqueness of socialism *à la cubaine* is its relative openness to various forms and genres of art (there was no strict socialist-realist turn), the content continues to be required to fit within the revolution’s meta narrative. As mentioned in reference to the ‘*Palabras a los intellectuals*’ speech by Fidel Castro in 1961, the values brought forth by the guerrilla government revolve around complete dedication to the revolutionary cause, self-sacrifice, self-evaluation, and altruistic heroic qualities that prioritize the majority over group or individual rights. These values, which were further developed in Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s theorisation of the New Man in his 1965 speech (2008), shape the very organisation of how bodies and minds should move and think in the
revolutionary order. As the anthropologist Martin Holbraad (2014) analyses from this Guevarian conceptualisation, the ontology of the revolution is founded on a complete collapse of the state-individual. In the spirit of the perpetual self-betterment and forward-facing injunction of the New Man, individuals are invited to critique the revolution ‘from within’ and to contribute to its betterment, which, as Guevara states, is forever ‘incomplete’. The revolution’s Master Narrative ‘revolves around the notion that [it] continues and the government’s opponents are counterrevolutionaries’ (Grenier, 2018: 271), and cannot be disputed. When criticism counters this narrative, it directly touches the tenuous question of power, and leads critics to their ‘social death’ (Fusco, 2015) or to being ‘de-ontologised’ (Holbraad, 2014). Such a landscape effects how the Cuban social body can and cannot move, it shapes subjectivities in certain ways, and inflects on moral expectations.

To provide texture to this landscape and evoke what this ontology looks like in practice, I now turn to what the landscape of the Cuban Revolution feels like, by offering glimpses into its sensory fabric. Doing so brings me closer to this chapter’s third pillar on the aesthetic experience, as a lens for exploring how artworks open up fields of perception that are ‘other’ than those within existing political or social orders.

It seems important to locate, albeit partially, the ‘common sensory fabric’ (Rancière, 2008) of the post-1959 revolutionary experience. While it would be impossible to paint a complete picture of the sensory world of revolutionary Cuba as it spans over sixty decades, there are certain indicators, feelings, experiences, moods, social contracts, that help draw an (incomplete) picture of where the artworks explored in this study are located culturally, politically and, more importantly, aesthetically. Illustrating a few of these constants in the revolutionary experience provides the palette of the ground onto which the artworks studied herein rest, how they disrupt this landscape, deepen it, or propose an entirely different one.

Borrowing from the main provocation of sensory studies that perception is social and entails ‘using a specific cultural order of perception’ (Reckwitz, 2016), we can begin to decipher the ‘sense regime’ of the Cuban revolutionary experience. We can grapple with the everyday perceptual, emotional, and embodied feel of this experience by turning to literature and the arts, common language and social practices.
Moral and physical exhaustion

Clues of the experience of living within such a ‘sense regime’ can be found in literature and the arts. For instance, Esther Whitfield’s (2011) analysis of Cuban literature from the decade of the Special Period, in the 1990s, when the country was undergoing a dire economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, borrows from John Barthes’ idea around a ‘literature of exhaustion’. In analysing the works of the writer Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, whose prose can be coined as ‘dirty realism’ for its hypersexualisation of characters living under miserable conditions, Whitfield proposes that the increasing ‘physical and psychological weariness’ of the novel’s narrator ‘corresponds to the exhaustion of the ‘Special Period’ itself’ (Whitfield, 2011: 34). She argues:

Driven by rage and frustration at his impotence in an ailing but repressive society, writing is portrayed by Trilogía’s narrator as a process focused on his own private crises. In Animal tropical (2000), the third book of the ‘Ciclo’, Pedro Juan has already begun to emerge from his obsessive introspection to become a more public figure, comfortable and recognizable in a community that reaches beyond his own physical presence and beyond Cuba: readers come from abroad to seek out the raw and hypersexual character of the first book but are surprised instead by a narrator who is worldly and self-assured (22; 69). (ibid: 35)

The rage and impotence personified in Gutiérrez’s books resonate with other writers and artists from this era, bearing in mind that most of the artists studied in this thesis are children of the Special Period who did not experience the more ‘glorious years’ of the revolution (the 1970s and 1980s). They were socialised into an already declining and ailing socialist system. The physical and moral ‘exhaustion’ of not being able to get by financially, doubled down by the ever-present shadow of the New Man and his requirement of perpetual self-betterment, leads to states of despair and incompleteness. The self-sacrificial prerequisite of the revolutionary experience has shown to normalise the notion of suicide. Historian Louis A Pérez Jr’s (2007) study on death and suicide in Cuba traces how suicide has been part of the national imaginary around heroism and resistance since the nation’s independence. Within the scope of the revolution, suicide has and continues to be painted as an act of virtue if done for the greater good of the revolutionary project. Such ‘common sensory fabric’ therefore normalises social suffering in ways that undermine the suffering of individual lives.

As we will see in more detail in the first essay of this thesis, the moral exhaustion of never reaching perfection, the future orientation of a social body whose completeness is never actualized, leads to an ambiance of failure, of not being
enough. Juan Carlos Flores’ poetry (see essay 1) captures this state of the never-ending revolving expectations of the revolution on minds and bodies that simply cannot keep up, in an environment of growing decrepitude (Flores 2016: 101):

Machi-nation
Future part, in archeological museum or warehouse filled with junk, there’s a-biomachine-animist. Massive bloated automobile, to complete assigned routine, must continue extracting their blood, as if the donors were a pool of blood, and not specifically anemic beings, beings whose skin sits on their bones, beings licking at marks of usury, with no capacity to run off toward a breaking point, point of no return or potential recycling process. Something that would definitely wipe out memory, maybe.

Maqui-nación
Futura pieza, en almacén de antiguallas o museo arqueológico, hay la-biomáquina-animista. Pesado automóvil gigante, para cumplir hoja de ruta, tiene que continuar extrayéndoles la sangre, como si los donantes fueran el pozo de la sangre, y no esos seres anémicos, seres de piel pegada al hueso, seres lamiendo las marcas de la usura, sin poderse correr hacia un punto de corte, punto sin regresión ni reciclaje posible. Algo que borre definitivamente la memoria, quizás.

The lived experience of never reaching a breaking point within an infernal race towards an unattainable future leads to a state of self-effacement, to a certain de-individualisation, which Juan Carlos Flores beautifully portrays in his monotonous and nostalgic poetry.

‘Engineering of the soul’
Another sensorial dimension of the revolutionary experience, which derives from the totalizing ascription of the New Man, rests in an infiltration of the revolution within the most intimate corners of individuals’ lives. On an economic level, Vincent Bloch’s (2011) edited study demonstrates the various aspects in which the Cuban regime regulates the quotidian experience, down to what kind of food people have on the table. In a post-1990s context of crisis, individuals navigate a complex web of social and economic relations that range from subscribing to norms of revolutionary behaviour required of the ‘good citizen’, to enjoy simple privileges (like receiving a television), whilst also relying on an underground network of black-market practices to make ends meet. From the 1960s onwards, the organisation of revolutionary

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1 Translated from Spanish to English by Kristin Dykstra for the bilingual edition of Juan Carlos Flores’ third book of poems El Contragolpe (y Otras Poemas Horizontales)/ The Counterpunch (and Other Horizontal Poems) published in 2016.
institutions is decentralised into regional, municipal, and neighbourhood factions such as the Committees of Defence of the Revolution (CDR), which oversee the well-functioning of local sectors through a system of obligatory membership. An array of groups, from sports clubs to women’s support groups, exist. Citizens are expected to enlist in those groups as a way of demonstrating direct participation in the revolutionary effort. Not belonging to one or two local revolutionary associations is politically costly. These various entities serve as ways to control the population and delegate the eyes and ears of the regime to individuals who take it upon themselves to maintain order and obedience to the codes of conduct. CDRs across the country are believed to contain millions of members, which is a lot for an overall population of just over 11 million (Tudoroiu, 2014). This ambiance of ideological promiscuity generates an uncertainty about who to trust within one’s own family since the fear of being denounced for ‘divergent behaviour’ is always present. This climate of uncertainty and gossip is one of the regime’s strongest arms of power as it disables forms of social cohesion and enhances paranoia (Tudoroiu, 2014).

This infiltration into the very structure of family relations and affect is common to the revolutionary experience, more widely. Chinese anthropologist and painter Aihe Wang has written about the painting group she belonged to at the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Wuming movement, and its focus on quiet, apolitical art. In her account, she suggests that a revolution’s goal of changing ‘hearts and souls’ makes government authorities ‘engineers the soul’ (Wang, 2014: 36), where the very collective ‘affective consciousness’ is transformed, and directly affecting individuals’ psyche. Similarly, this thesis explores how some of the artists manage to carve quiet spaces of expression, through creative moments that tap into their inner worlds in ways that remain untouched by the omnipresent state (see essay 2).

The Cuban writer, Celia Irina González asks in her analysis of works by artists who explore the ‘double authority’ of the father as patriarchal and totalitarian: ‘how do we deal with affective relationship penetrated by totalitarian systems?’ (Greiner, 2019: 99). Her essay, which fuses critical analyses with anthropological reflections of her own conflictual relationship with her ex-military father offers glimpses into the aesthetics of an invasive state. She describes the work of mixed-media artist Renier Quer, Invernadero, who films his father, a member of the revolutionary guard, while

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2 My translation from Spanish: ‘Como lidiar con relaciones afectivas atravesadas por sistemas totalitarios?’
sleeping and dreaming. In this ethnographic approach, the ‘son/artist’ seeks to enter in communion with his ‘father/Other’s’ reveries, his subconscious, parts of him that are not subjected to revolutionary performance. Through the poetics of the encounter, he is able to contemplate the patriarch and the generational/ideological rift between them with new eyes and another vocabulary of affection.

This ‘other’ grammar of affection through the subconscious raises an important question of where love fits within the sensory and ontological fabric of Cuban revolutionary politics. Love for the revolutionary project is inferred in Fidel Castro’s passionate articulation of revolutionary duty and ‘Che’ Guevara’s design of the New Man. However, love as a muscular action towards others (hooks, 2001), or as a dignified respect of self, seems absent. The moral landscape of the revolution does not seem to place love as a constitutive component of duties and obligations, and we will see that the artworks in this study all have something to say about the very displacing and healing power of love. In the next section, I introduce my second theoretical pillar on the self and subjectivities, where I subscribe to a moral philosophy of the self that renews love’s central place in morals.

II. The self and the good

Subjectivities and subjectivization

Subjectivity is a term that grasps the process and discursive dynamic of one’s interconnected social and inner worlds, a discursive process informed by ‘the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviours – through which people actually represent to themselves and to one another’ (Biehl, 2007: 7). Fox Keller pushes the quest for a core subjectivity further by arguing that all individuals share the capacity for self-reflection. In her view, this capacity for self-reflection implies an ability to have agency: ‘Subjects are epiphenomena, constructed by culturally specific discursive regimes (marked by race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on), and subjectivity itself is more properly viewed as the consequence of actions, behaviour, or ‘performativity’ than as their sources’ (Fox Keller 2007: 2). Since subjectivity refers to a ‘dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement and action’ (ibid: 4), it is socially and historically situated. To appreciate this framework, Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007: 53) propose looking at subjectivity from an experiential point of view. They define experience as:
the felt flow of interpersonal communication and engagements [...] Experience is intersubjective in as much as it involves practices, negotiations, and contestations with others with whom we are connected. It is also the medium within which collective and subjective processes fuse, enter into dialectical relationship, and mutually condition one another.

Thus, understanding subjectivity from the framework of experience necessitates an awareness of the local world that conditions the experience. This situated experience is comprised of an interrelation of ‘cultural representations, collective processes and subjectivity’ (Kleinman and Kitz-Henry 2007: 54), providing a comprehensive tableau of the human condition. With these theoretical considerations in mind surrounding subjectivity and experience as the spatial framework from which to observe these interrelated processes unfolding, we can see, first hand, the potential of the aesthetic experience in opening new subjective spaces.

The anthropologist Alex Flynn (2016) makes a formidable attempt at formulating the link between the aesthetic encounter and the unfolding of subjectivities. Flynn frames his analysis of the porousness between artistic interventions and the ‘subjective turn’ of social movements through the lens of Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ (2002). He does so to distinguish between artistic practices that ‘offer possibilities for encounters between different subjectivities’ and those that ‘may seek to delimit such intersubjectivity, promoting the transference of a message as opposed to the creation of dialogue’ (Flynn, 2016: 63). Bourriaud’s analysis of contemporary art from the 1990s rests on an observation that art seeks to be inclusive, to exist outside contained gallery spaces, and spatially situated in the present. Such art seeks to foster fragments, moments of togetherness that reveal new worlds and new possibilities. The ‘micro-utopias’ (Bourriaud, 2002) provided by relational art favour an incomplete, subjective focus on the present, rather than on a grand narrative of future-oriented Utopia as promised in a Marxist tradition. In this sense, Flynn draws from Felix Guattari’s definition of subjectivity as ‘collective and specifically relational’ (cited in Simon O’Sullivan, 2012: 258) where the process of subjectivation is one where the consumer becomes co-creator. Agency in the aesthetic encounter or in new social movements appears when actors ‘seize the means of producing themselves as subjects’ (ibid). Such capacity rests on two components of the aesthetic experience that resonate strongly with the artworks of this study: the temporal-spatial volatility of the aesthetic encounter itself, and a form of representation that ‘leaves subjectivity in the hands of beholders’, a type of art that does not sloganize (Bourriaud, 2002).
Relational aesthetics’ micro-utopias stand in opposition to social-realism, for instance, where the message intended leaves far less room for the beholder’s subjectivity to infer on it. Relational art co-produces meaning, it materialises through the very intersubjective encounter. On the other hand, art that ‘promotes the transference of a message’ rather than creating dialogue “obliterates meaning” (Flynn, 2016: 63).

It is within this intersubjective understanding of the aesthetic encounter, where multiple and diverse experiences construct meaning, that we want to turn to subjectivation. Subjectivation in Michel Foucault’s sense refers to a process of becoming a subject in a power or knowledge relationship. Foucault’s understanding of subjectivation holds a double and paradoxical quality as it refers to becoming ‘subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his [sic.] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1982: 227). It is both being in a power relationship while having self-awareness of that dynamic. Foucault detained a negativistic formulation of subjectivation because he saw it as a form of imposed identification, which never allowed for true freedom. Indeed, Foucault understood freedom as the possibility of becoming another ‘instead of remaining fixed in one identity of the self’ (Liebsch, 2016). However, subjectivation, has come to be understood as a term that mediates ‘tensions’ between the ‘promising “idea” of autonomous “subjectivity” on the one hand and the discouraging “reality” of heteronomous subjection on the other – two opposites that are amalgamated into a unique and confusing term’ (Oberprantacher & Siclodi, 2016: 3). Understanding subjectivation as a ‘contorted term’ (ibid) that refers to the tension of emerging from whilst being pushed down into a specific order and experience of subjection helps to make sense of its ephemerality and instability. Liebsch (2016) agues that it is an ‘occurrence’ that is relational, which always takes place ‘between us’ by engaging others.

Political subjectivization, according to Rancière, and as distinct from the Foucaudian theorisation, is a handling of a wrong, where the tension between our foundational and universal equality and the distribution of ‘parts’ within the social order, materializes. The underlying equality upon which the hierarchical social order rests is verified in this tension, where this order (or what he calls policy or la police) wrongs our radical, ontological equality. In this way, a subject, according to Rancière, is an in-between. It is not an ‘identification’ with a specific, even oppressed identity as it stands in the ‘policy’ of the social order, but is rather a process of disidentification or
declasification, that is not a recognition of a self but rather of a ‘relation of a self to another’ (Rancière, 1992: 60). This is why political subjectivization can never simply be an assertion of an identity or the refusal of an identity imposed by others or by the political order. Instead, it has to involve an identification with a subject self that is placed in the interval or gap between existing identities, or the empty subjectivity that is intended to address a wrong. Hereby confirming the relational component of political subjectivization which is ‘the enactment of equality – or the handling of a wrong – by people who are together to the extent that they are in between’ (Rancière, 1992: 61). The ‘in-betweenness’ of the political subject whose emergence takes place in ‘scenes’ or ‘demonstrations’ provides us with the theoretical tools for approaching the aesthetic encounter as instances of such ‘unstable’ scenes, where new subjects and voices emerge in a rift between two different registers of senses.

**The moral self**

The entanglement between artistic and political subjectivities, and the ‘relational’ conditions of subjectivization which can be facilitated by an aesthetic experience, invite a pause on another key concept that supports this investigation: the moral self. The artists’ own struggle between their conflicting subjectivities, and our own experience of potentially emerging as new subjects as we encounter these artworks, opens up a discussion about the moral intuitions and background that found the artworks’ potential for emancipation. What kinds of ‘moral goods’ does the aesthetic experience articulate? To consider these questions, I turn to concepts developed by philosophers Iris Murdoch and Charles Taylor who both restore in their mapping of a moral philosophy questions on what constitutes a ‘good life’. Such inclusion diverts from a tradition in modern moral philosophy that tends to separate morality as a question of rights, duties and obligations, from ‘the good’ which tends to belong to the domain of ethics. Taylor specifically uses the term *morality* to englobe both the universalizable components of morals and person-specific questions of self, meaning and fulfilment (Abbey, 2004).

The conflict between the artist’s creative and political subjectivities can be understood as a conflict between various ‘life goods’. Here, I adhere to Charles Taylor’s (1989) moral theory that human beings have multiple ‘goods’ that make up their moral orientation, where some of those goods are universal (like the dignity of human life), while others are more culture or group specific. This pluralism is
ontological, meaning that the goods that constitute our morals are not all weighted equally (contrary to a Kantian or Platonic tradition); some are considered qualitatively stronger than others. For example, the artists in this study find themselves struggling between the desire to create, which is ‘vital’ for some, in the sense that it is their only way to make sense of the world, and the struggle for social justice. A conflict that Otero Alcántara has confided being a difficult one to navigate. His desire to pursue an artistic career and to create freely cannot come at the expense of giving up his responsibilities as an activist. In Charles Taylor’s terms, he juggles some of his key ‘strongly valued goods’. Therefore, the artists in this study, in their multiple subjectivities, express a certain crisis that makes them self-aware of the moral framework that underscores their actions. This self-awareness constitutes the poetic ‘fate’ of artists who, as James Baldwin contends in his essay ‘The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity’ (2010), are the only ones who can:

[...] tell, and only artists have told since we have heard of man, what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it. What it is like die, or to have somebody die; what it is like to be glad. Hymns don’t do this, churches really cannot do it.

The self-understanding of the artist is a responsibility that strongly orientates how they move in moral space. This self-awareness renders visible their conflict with other valued goods. Such is the cruel fate of the artist, according to Baldwin. This is one level of how the moral self comes into play.

On a second, perhaps more subtle but illuminating level, I wish to explore how the artworks themselves, by way of our aesthetic experience within our encounter with them, as beholders, articulate some of our deeper moral sources. Here again, I subscribe to a Tayloren moral philosophy that understands notions of the self as closely linked to morals with the idea that our moral orientations inform selfhood. That what we establish as our strongly valued goods is attached with how we perceive and conceive of ourselves. Taylor’s response to the pluralism of moral goods can be found in his conceptualization of ‘strong evaluation’, which involves the capacity to rank some desires as more worthy than others. This ability of ranking, in a hierarchical manner, what we find more noble from the base, or more ‘admirable’ from the ‘contemptible’ is a quality required for full personhood (Abbey 2004: 20). In this sense, strong evaluation refers to decisions that directly infer on how we identify.

Taylor’s important contribution to moral philosophy is that these strongly valued goods that constitute our moral framework are independent of our choices, we cannot
easily change this framework, and doing so would mean changing identity. Secondly, these strongly valued goods are most often intuitive or inarticulate, we are not aware of them, especially if we live a life that does not cause conflict with these goods. Times of crisis tend to bring to light our moral intuitions. Hence, Taylor’s emphasis on articulation as the idea of bringing to the foreground our, often, intuitive moral background. Articulation is a process of self-understanding in which we are able to locate and assert the goods that constitute our moral framework and their qualitative hierarchy. This is where Taylor’s philosophy reinstates the role of artists in our modernity as articulators of moral sources. In our secular age, artists and writers become the religious prophets — they hold the same roles that were previously filled by religious figures or philosophers, for instance. Artists are now saddled with the burden of articulating ourselves to ourselves, which affects their subjectivities. He argues that the articulation of our moral landscape can be done through these forms of creative expression where art bears an ‘epiphanic potential’:

the artist as one who offers epiphanies where something of great moral or spiritual significance becomes manifest — and what is conveyed by this last disjunction is just the possibility that what is revealed lies beyond and against what we normally understand as morality (Taylor, 1989: 423).

Therefore, articulation is a key process of advancing in our self-understanding, in making perceivable what moves and motivates us. Artists, through their creative language, bear this heavy and beautiful role of articulating our moral sources and background by way of the aesthetic encounter. This is where Taylor’s project connects morals with selfhood through the idea that our identities are shaped by a more or less intuitive moral background.

In addition to our capacity for strong evaluation, Charles Taylor’s ‘thick description’ (Abbey, 2004) of full personhood includes three key ontological conditions: self-interpretation, dialogical selves, and purpose. The overarching condition of human nature is the fact that we are language bearing beings; expressive power and capabilities help to make sense of ourselves and this varies across cultures, languages and times. By self-interpretation, Taylor insists that what differentiates humans from animals is this capacity of construing a narrative about ourselves by developing an understanding of who we are. This is universal; being self-understanding contests behaviourist, natural science approaches to the study of humans. The capacity for self-interpretation or how we make sense of ourselves
renders the study of humans a ‘subject-dependent property’ (Abbey, 2004: 59). The capacity for self-interpretation is therefore a key methodological concept that informs this study’s epistemology: seeking to understand how individuals represent or feel themselves counts as much as their social and historical ascriptions. Or as Abbey (2004: 60) suggests: ‘when it comes to selfhood, the self is not just the text to be interpreted but also the interpreter of that text’. Such an understanding helps to better situate the role of articulation in how we understand ourselves, that language, as a mode of expression, enriches and develops our life narratives. Expression, from language to creative forms such as the arts can transform certain ideas we have of ourselves. These forms of expression can provoke new vocabularies through symbolic representations, social or theoretical movements that reframe or bring new meaning to our relation to ourselves and others. This is why a second key component of selfhood rests in the idea that we are dialogical selves, that we construe ourselves through constant conversations, whether they be actual, imagined, or internal (Abbey, 2004: 69). We ‘are continuously formed through conversation’ (ibid), our identities are always relational. And finally, the notion of being driven by purpose constitutes a third component of personhood; we orient ourselves and our choices through goals and purposes, and understanding the sense of one’s purposes helps to interpret who they are. This ‘thick description’ of personhood by Taylor will serve as a driving conceptual anchor that completes notions of subjectivities raised earlier. It builds the bridge for theorising the potential of aesthetic encounters in carving space for new moral selves.

Irish Murdoch’s moral philosophy (2014) also unites art and artistic contemplation with moral frameworks, and she argues that this can be found in the practice of attention, driven by the loving gaze. In this sense, I finish this section with both Murdoch and Taylor’s reinstating of love as a constitutive component of morals as philosophers whose projects rest on asking ‘what is the good?’ For Murdoch, morality, before all, is a ‘matter of thinking clearly’ (Murdoch, 2014: 5) in order to have an honest grasp of reality and to proceed with our relational duties towards others as justly as possible. Clarity, or thinking clearly, requires ridding ourselves of illusions, and this means quieting the ego. To Murdoch, therefore, the practice of attention is one of grand moral importance. The ‘characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent’ is the ‘attention’ of a ‘just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality’ (Murdoch, 2014: 33). Activating a loving gaze requires a patient ability to suppress the self (ibid: 64). Murdoch suggests that both artists and those who look at art can convey and
access a truer reality, respectively, through a Kantian detached engagement with the beautiful (2000). Therefore, both the creative attention of the artist and the contemplative attention of the beholder, when authentic, require a quieting of the self, a tempering of the ego. Murdoch’s ode to artists and artistic contemplation as vectors towards a particular quality of attention – driven by love and a selfless clairvoyance – serves as a compelling suggestion for locating the particularity of the aesthetic encounter as a locus for gazing responsibly and clearly.

Similarly, Taylor revives the close link between love and morals in how we qualitatively distinguish between our ‘strongly valued goods’ (Taylor, 1989: 7). A distinction that is driven by selecting what moves us the most or in a particular way. Therefore, there is a link between identifying those most valued goods that orient us in moral space, as Taylor would say, and feeling. This is where, according to Abbey (2004), Taylor’s moral philosophy reinstates the question of love as a core component of morals; what moves us is what we feel admiration or dedication towards, it is something that we want to remain infinitely close to. This reinstating of love within a theory of moral philosophy proves important in this study because, as I suggest in the essays that follow, sustained attention or engagement with the artworks revealed something important about the role of love as a constitutive good. Love, we are reminded, makes life worth living, not least within the wider ontological commitments of the revolutionary landscape. Reintroducing love in the concept of morals, by way of artistic quieting of the self or commitment to enhancing self-understanding, offers a unique standpoint from which to understand the deeper, moral suggestiveness of the artworks examined herein. It also helps make the connection with the moral function of the sensible, or the wordless sense experience, within the aesthetic encounter. This leads to the final conceptual piece of this study, which is the very sensorial ‘thing’ of the aesthetic encounter and what it enables us to open through another perceptual register.

III. The Aesthetic experience

Aesthetics in philosophical, sociological and art historical literature has been a contested and difficult term to define. It has come to encompass two main modalities. On the one hand, it defines anything relating to the ‘thought of art’ (Robson, 2005: 77), which contains theories on the differentiation and appreciation of art (through
disciplines like the sociology of art). On the other, it includes a ‘wider field of perception’ (ibid) that defines a type of sensory and perceptual experience, or more generally a way to understand sensibility (in a more philosophical tradition). In general, aesthetics can be understood as pertaining to the thought, perceptual, sensory, and embodied organisation of the world; it is a theory of perception and sensibility. Its conceptualisation has ranged from aesthetics being a whole separate ‘field’ in itself, with the sociology of Bourdieu, and the constructivist tradition that define aesthetics through the lens of access and appreciation of art, and a signifier of taste and class distinction, to being, within a certain regime of it, a collapse with a form of emancipatory politics as theorised by the philosopher Jacques Rancière.

More specifically, the aesthetic experience can be described as a moment of sense experience that takes place during a beholder’s aesthetic encounter with an artwork. López-Sintas et al. (2012) (cited in Mullen, 2022: 139) describe the aesthetic experience as ‘the experience of two types of feelings, the distortion of sense of time and a sense of transcending the ego’. In the conceptualization of the aesthetic experience, there is a notion of space and time being revamped, where a reorganisation of sensory experience takes place (Rancière, 2009a). Therefore, it is within this revamping through the ephemeral ‘time-space’ of the aesthetic encounter that lies the potential for new subjectivities to emerge. Gilles Deleuze contended that the aesthetic encounter is productive in expanding our subjectivities, in the sense that art is not solely about recognition or representation but is a productive force for the unravelling of our subjectivities (Levin, 2013). Deleuze asked about the potential of the imagination to be a faculty and to be the point of departure in generating subjectivity. Similarly, Schiller’s identified ‘free play’ in the aesthetic experience as the place where the conflicting and hierarchical forces of the human condition (rationality versus sensation, or form over matter) are neutralised and where free will can unfold (Schiller, 2020). All these ideas draw from Kant’s notion of the disinterested gaze of aesthetic judgement (2000), where the aesthetic experience allows for a wandering of the mind, a liberated dialogue between the active faculty of intellectualization and passive faculty of contemplation. The hierarchy between the more ‘noble’ intellect and more ‘primal’ embodiment is neutralised.

The productive force of the aesthetic experience does not tend to be an object of study in sociological theories on art (Becker, 2008). In fact, the very foundation of the ‘sociology of arts’ in the French tradition, for example, sought to differentiate itself from
an art-historical approach, through an innovation in methods. In the field of cultural sociology, the lens adopted always places the ‘social’ as the central point of analysis when exploring cultural objects and phenomena (Prior, Darmon and McCormick, 2017). Sociological tools such as surveys and interviews are applied to expand what constitutes the study of art beyond a formal analysis of artworks. This is where key subcategories of the sociology of art came into fruition to consider artists (sociology of production), audiences (sociology of reception), and cultural intermediaries (sociology of mediation), among others. In turn, the sociology of artworks has elicited little work and interest (Heinich, 2022). The discipline was born out of an epistemological and empirical concern for understanding art as a configurative component of social processes. The critical tradition of sociology has brushed aside the study of artworks to favour exploring the conditions for art appreciation and access (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1966, Passeron and Pedler, 2019) or the interaction between audience, artworks and mediators. The place of artworks themselves, within the various methodological and epistemological schools and generations of the sociology of arts tends to be understudied. The sociology of the arts, generally speaking, will champion approaching art in relation to its historical context and ‘relating to existing or emergent political, social, and economic developments’ (Zolberg, 2005). The field of the sociology of art (whether as a subfield of the sociology of culture in an Anglo-American tradition or its own sociological discipline in the French tradition) still struggles to extend beyond production perspectives, of centring the artwork seriously as an object of inquiry or of moving past the legacy of Pierre Bourdieu or Howard Becker (McCormick, 2022), because of sociology’s deconstructive tradition which makes it difficult to epistemologically consider artworks and artists separated from their social locations.

These difficulties have nourished fruitful research within ‘the new sociology of art’ to attempt grappling with the aesthetic properties of artworks in ways that are compatible with social constructionism (de la Fuente, 2007). Such strands within the sociology of art vary from the strong programme in cultural sociology and the surface/depth analysis of the materiality of artworks approached through iconography (Alexander, 2008; Alexander, 2008a), or colour perception (Rose-Greenland, 2016) to the influence of actor-network theory in the sociology of mediation (Hennion, 2015) and the theorisation of artworks’ active character in the coproduction of meaning (DeNora, 2000). To this avail, this project attempts to contribute to these strands by
focusing on: (1) artists’ creative processes and (2) the aesthetic experience of the spectator (the ‘beholder’s share’ (Wilder, 2020)). These are two different but complementary pieces of the aesthetic encounter that this thesis grapples with as its key ‘data’ points for understanding art’s political possibilities. To this avail, it aligns with Ann Mullen’s research (2022) among artists in San Francisco who explored meaning-making within artworks through the perspectives of how artists shape and construct it. She finds that meaning-making is much more complex than activating a certain ‘deciphering’ capacity through socialised modes of classification and decoding to make sense of an artwork’s meaning, as defended in a Bourdieusian tradition (Prior, 2005). In contrast, meaning-making can be as much cognitive, embodied, and transcendental. These three modalities of meaning that she develops offer a richer and more complete insight into the complex structure of feeling and reflection involved in the aesthetic time-space, or encounter, where meaning is co-constructed, fluid, and multiple. Her research provides a convincing argument for furthering studies that explore why artists do what they do. A second element of the aesthetic encounter that this thesis investigates is the spectator’s experience. Traditionally, this tends to be examined through the macro lens of ‘audiences’ in the popular subfield of the sociology of reception that looks to explain art consumption and access through social categories such as class and gender (in a positivist tradition) or via the mental representation of actors (in an interpretivist approach). Neither proposition, however, focuses on the space provided by the encounter between viewer and artwork. That productive place of ‘losing oneself’ in something that moves us in a particular way.

Sociologist Nathalie Heinich (2022) maintains that one of the most prominent controversies of the sociology of art is whether there is the possibility of a sociological analysis of artworks, due to the field’s effort of differentiating itself from art history through distinct methods. I seek to embark on this challenge of exploring what artworks can say by taking as my point of departure, as the object of focus and my methodological approach, the very dynamics and ‘thing’ of the aesthetic experience. In this sense, the aesthetic experience becomes my key point of entry into the ‘data’ for exploring what it reveals to the spectator by reshaping certain imaginaries and sensory ‘norms’. I defend, therefore, a lyrical sociology (Abbott, 2016, Stewart, 2020), through an interpretivist epistemology (Taylor, 2014), where my subjective attention (Murdoch, 2014) and writing of the artworks enables me to ask questions about the new perceptual possibilities they open up for making sense of the social world in which
they are embedded. Such an enquiry, when exploring the works of artists in a context of repression, frees the art from its constraining context, momentarily, and enables an alternative, interpretive route into artists’ praxes and creative output.

Therefore, this is not a study of the dynamics between the artworks of politically-engaged artists with markets, networks, political, social and historical developments. Instead, I use the aesthetic experience as the locus for exploring the ways in which the artworks might reorganise sensory and perceptual experiences, subjectively. What does this reorganisation allow us to see about the landscape of the Cuban Revolution that other routes might not? What does it reveal about the moral self? Might it offer a way of existing that transcends the confines of revolutionary politics? This is where I subscribe to the wider project of Jacques Rancière around the politics of aesthetics and the dissensual potential of the aesthetic experience.

Rancière’s project rests on a fundamental presumption: we are all ontologically equal. The social order is unequal and hierarchical, but its very foundation rests on an ontology of radical equality (Rancière, 2003). The social order is an arrangement of roles and experiences, functions and identities that are organised and weighted hierarchically. This is what he calls the distribution of the sensible or ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that defines the respective parts and positions within it’ (Rancière, 2004). Aesthetics, in a Rancièrian sense, is a ‘system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience’ (Rancière, 2004: 13). To Rancière, artistic practices shape the arrangement of the distribution of the sensible, of what can be visible and sayable, and they fit within a specific regime of arts, which he defined as the ethical and representational regimes. The ethical regime is a regime where art serves as a function, where images are questioned about their context and their subsequent purpose. Therefore this is a regime where art does not have space for individualizing itself. In the ethical regime, which he traces as the period of the antiquity, aesthetic judgement reflects morals. The second regime, the representational or the mimetic regime, is a regime of visibility of the arts based on specific functions of what is expected and limited as constituting art: ‘It identifies the art […] within a classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations’ (Rancière, 2004: 22). The fact that it is a regime of visibility makes it autonomous as art but it must correspond to the rules of visibility within the social order. This regime relates to
art up to the French Revolution where there is a grid for determining ‘good’ art, which is supposed to reflect reality accurately.

What he formulated as the aesthetic regime of the arts stands in opposition to the two previous ones where ‘the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products’ (Rancière, 2004: 21). In other words, it is a regime where the artwork stands for the artwork’s sake and is not tied to a specific role or function within the distribution of the sensible. It gives room for the emergence of the power of a form of thought that ‘has become foreign to itself’ (ibid). The aesthetic experience, in this sense, provides a rift in shared sensible experience and rearranges or redistributes the partition of the sensible. It works as a ‘supplementation of this partition – a third term that cannot be described as a part but as an activity of redistribution, an activity that takes the form of neutralization’ (Rancière, 2009: 3). This neutralization of the division of the sensible thus gives way to dissensus. This emancipatory or dissensual potential of the aesthetic regime of arts surpasses or ‘supplements’ the construction, in the social, of human nature:

aesthetics is not a domain of thought whose object is ‘sensibility’. It is a way of thinking the paradoxical sensorium that henceforth made it possible to define the things of art. This sensorium is that of a lost human nature, which is to say of a lost norm of adequation between an active faculty and a receptive faculty (Rancière, 2009: 11-12).

This is where aesthetics, in this regime of the arts, bears upon politics by verifying the very ontological radical equality upon which the social order rests. The ‘norm of adequation’ between differently ‘partitioned’ faculties is destroyed. Through the ephemerality of the aesthetic encounter, the unsayable and invisible in the hierarchical arrangement of the social order can emerge. The specificity of art in the aesthetics regime ‘consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space. And it is in this way that art bears upon politics’ (Rancière, 2009: 24). The suspension or the rift in common sensory experience provided by the aesthetic experience can be political or dissensual when it gives way to a sensorium other than that of domination. In doing so, it proposes a ‘new form of living’ or a ‘new life-in-common’ (Rancière, 2009: 44). This idea draws from Schiller’s free play and free appearance, where play is an activity that resides within another sensorial framework than the ‘servitude of work’ (ibid: 31), it is free because it is an activity that has no end other than itself, it is an activity that is also an ‘inactivity’. Free play and free appearance suspend the
hierarchical order or the power of form over matter, intelligence over sensibility. There is a neutralisation of the hierarchy of the faculties (Rancière, 2009a).

In art’s autonomy, in the solitude of the artwork, there is a potential, Rancière (2008) suggests, for shaping new subjects through sensorial transformation. Human communities are tied together by a shared sensory fabric or a certain distribution of the sensible, as we saw in the sensory landscape of revolutionary politics. Dissensual artworks thus bring together a paradoxical conjunction of a set of senses that are foreign to that community with a set of senses that are familiar:

the link between the solitude of the artwork and the human community is a matter of transformed sensation […] what the artist does is weave a new sensory fabric by tearing percepts and affects out of the perceptions and affections that constitute the fabric of ordinary experience (Rancière, 2008: 3-5).

Therefore, in dissensual artworks new sets of senses and relations are proposed: ‘The set of relations that constitutes the work plays as if it had another ontological texture than the sensations that make up everyday experience’ (ibid: 9). In this sense, dissensus is an unstable moment that permits political subjectivization. This struggle for political subjectivization is the struggle for the existence of a political subject (and subjectivities), and it occurs only when those who have ‘no part’ or who are inaudible or invisible politically assert their egalitarian and collective claims to existence as ontologically equal political subjects. The aesthetic experience, as a suspension of the sense order, allows for another relation that escapes that of domination to come into being. Only then can we understand the potential of aesthetics for bringing about ‘scenes of dissensus’, wherein ‘the political’ means being able to assert claims about certain rights, and with such claims being heard in a specific ‘moment’ or ‘demonstration’ when they would be otherwise inaudible or unsayable.

The ‘as if’ demonstrated by the dissensual scene provides a productive guide for exploring what the artists, through their artworks, are able to say and communicate that has no echo or voice in the constraining social and political world from which they operate. Herein lies the subtle but important distinction between dissensual art, meaning works that set a scene for new subjects to emerge through the proposition of new imaginaries and vocabularies, and resistive art, works that sit within an established framework of domination and that respond with the same tools available within that framework. For example, Rancière would argue that Foucault’s notion of subjectivation always stays within the policy or police realm (read: resistive) of the
social order, by employing an existing language of oppression, through established forms of identification. Political subjectivization, on the other hand, brings something that did not exist into being, whereas subjectivation à la Foucault (what Rancière would qualify as identification) is the assertion of oneself as repressed and named as such in the existing order. Perceiving political subjectivization through a Rancièrean lens as this in-between, relational assertion gives us the lens for differentiating the true emancipatory (read: dissensual) potential of the artworks from their merely resistive propositions.

This subtle distinction serves as a theoretical guide to identify propositions of emancipation/dissensus in artworks that reconfigure or transcend Cuba’s revolutionary landscape. In the chapter that follows, I walk through my approach for engaging with artworks within the aesthetic encounter. I discuss my method for articulating my subjective experiencing of the artworks and how that enables me to infer on the artists’ deeper political project.
Methods: Centring the Aesthetic Experience

This chapter begins with an account of the various challenges I encountered during my PhD project to articulate the innovative methodological toolkit I developed in response. This toolkit takes as an entry point my poetic and subjective experiencing of the artworks studied herein. I illustrate, in detail, how the aesthetic experience, as a tool, allows us to ask questions about what the artworks reveal that the activism space does not permit us to see. This is where the political, in Jacques Rancièr’s sense, becomes apparent, through the beholder’s encounter with artworks in their autonomy. I include vignettes from my field notes to evoke the visuality of my digital ethnography section, as well quotes from my methods journal.

In the first section of this chapter, which is the ‘deconstructive part’, I discuss the trajectory of my methodological scaffolding. I illustrate and reflect on the various challenges I encountered in the first two years of the project (phase 1). These challenges were brought on by major contextual and historical events: a pandemic and unprecedented social and political uprisings in Cuba. Consequently, I address how the pandemic imposed a rapid restructuring of my methodological plan, which, originally, relied on conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba. I justify my shift towards doing a digital ethnography paired with in-depth online interviews. This first exploration takes me to the second challenge I encountered which was around navigating the politics and narrative on the ‘hot topic’ that is ‘Cuba’. Indeed, research on and in Cuba has always been complex due to historically contentious politics around the Cuban Revolution, whether in media, academic, and activist circles. Finding reliable and serious social research on Cuba is a familiar dilemma among researchers who specialise on the region (Geoffray and Dabène, 2012). More, it is a complicated place to conduct fieldwork where state surveillance and bureaucratic opacity foster feelings of paranoia and uncertainty (Geoffray, 2020). An aggravating component to the already complex task of doing research on and in Cuba is the intensifying climate of ideological fervour and polarization since the 2016 Donald Trump election in the United States (Grenier and Lai, 2020), which was heightened by recent social and economic crises, in part triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Phase two of my methods journey is marked by a moment of reckoning which led me to think more clearly about my role as a researcher, and a refocusing of the project’s intentions. I reached a humbling turning point when the temporality of the
urgency of activism clashed with the temporality of research. My methodological adaptation to the context of the pandemic took me down a path that cornered me into the very ‘on the ground’ politics of my participants. I discuss how getting lost in the urgency of my participants’ militancy guided me towards a process of better sociological listening in order to reshape and reframe my research approach, and to be more intentional about my objectives and epistemological commitment. I established a methodological plan that fished me out of the waters of the turbulent politics to remain grounded in my participants’ voices.

Therefore, the second phase constitutes the ‘constructive’ part of this chapter which develops what I have identified as my ‘interdisciplinary methodological toolkit’ for studying the work of contested artists in an authoritarian context, where access to participants is, at best, precarious and, at worst, impossible. I lay down the foundation for conducting what my supervisor Dr Liliana Riga has coined as an ‘art-historical sociology’ of artworks, where I am not exactly doing a traditional art historical analysis of political engaged artworks nor a political sociology of an artistic movement. My innovative approach centres on a four-step cyclical process. It begins and ends with a practice of sociological listening, as theorized by Les Back (2013): this practice has been my reflexive metronome throughout the entire project. I then explain how turning on a better sense of listening led me towards committing time-space to the aesthetic experience of artworks through an interpretive, contemplative and poetic writing of the artworks. Here, I rely on Jacques Rancière’s (2009) conceptualisation of the autonomy of the aesthetic experience as a fundamental theoretical driver of this exploration. I then turn to distancing mechanisms provided by art historical examination. Finally, my analysis is grounded in a practice of engaged writing that regards ‘moments’ as places where social processes unfold, as theorised in Andrew Abbott’s (2016) lyrical sociology. This approach is both methodological and epistemological through a commitment to understanding rather than explaining. The terms of self-understanding in both the verbal and symbolic language of the artists and artworks, respectively, constitute interpretive material for making sense of the artists’ wider aspirations, emotions, and dreams.

This methodological toolkit enables me to bring three-dimensionality to the voices and the ‘on the ground’ experience of artists somewhat cannibalized by the all-consuming politics of their context. More, in considering the immense repression they are and continue to be subjected to, my toolkit shapes my political-ethical commitment
as a researcher, and vice-versa. By devoting time and space to their artworks as primary objects of emotional, relational, embodied and intellectual inquiry, I build an archive of their artistic portfolios. Such output, in the realm of my dissertation, contributes to a political project initiated by artists and academics living in the diaspora of expanding and diversifying the ‘canon’ of Cuban art in response to the constant erasure and rewriting of history by the regime. It constitutes an effort to centre Cuban art and give credence to marginal artists’ work in carving new subjective spaces in a changing society. The lyrical approach to social processes via a pause on the artworks invites for an overall design that is not narrative this is why the thesis is structured into three core ‘essays’ rather than chapters. The essays are stand-alone pieces of analysis that contain as their main source of focus poems, a creative partnership, and three artworks, respectively. While they can be read as stand-alone, they each make distinctive arguments that in their accumulation enable to paint a more complete picture of what artistic creation under constraint feels like. An essay design appeals, perhaps, to a less commanding reading experience and aims to provide ample space to the contemplation of the art. I invite the reader to take the description of my subjective interpretation of the artworks as a gentle steering for forging their own subjective and imaginative aesthetic experience.

I. Nascent motivations

Friendship as method?

This project is borne out of a long-standing friendship with the Cuban artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. We met in Havana in 2013 and have been in touch regularly.

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3 In recent years, there have been several initiatives led by artists in and outside of Cuba to honour, archive and make visible Cuban art that disrupts the canon imposed by the regime. Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco, for instance, has been working for decades in writing about and documenting dissident art: her seminal book Dangerous Moves: Performance and politics in Cuba (2015) is an example. More recently, Fusco directed a performance/video re-enactment of the trial the poet Heberto Padilla and his forced public confession after being detained and psychologically tortured by the Castro regime for his anti-revolutionary views (https://www.cocofusco.com/padillashadow). Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera has been endeavouiring for years to shed light on art and artists who are in the shadows for their critical views, she has created an institute known as the Hannah Arendt Artivism Institute (INSTAR) which has gained international recognition for its work towards social justice and civic literacy in the country. One final example rests in a series of exhibitions in Europe and the US in recent years that focus on Cuban dissident art such as the OBSESSION exhibition at Entre Vienna in November 2021-February 2022 or Ya nada es como antes exhibition at the Hessel Museum of Art in April-May 2023 curated by Abel González Fernández.
since then. I last spoke to Otero in June 2021, a month before he was jailed following his participation in the nation-wide protests on July 11th 2021, just like thousands of other protesters (Cubalex, 2021). He was sentenced to five years in June 2022 on fabricated charges for his ongoing activism and artistic practices, and remains in prison at the time of this writing (September 2023).

When I met Otero Alcántara, at a house gathering in Havana, he was an emerging artist, beginning to make some of his work known. His sharp sense of humour, inquisitive wit, contagious passion, and radical honesty took us to hours of conversations about big and small things: he was carnivorously curious. He was keen on testing his ideas with me, eager to hear what I thought about his artwork. He liked to probe my knowledge and always sought to provoke me to think outside of my own preconceptions. I had minimal understanding of art at this point, but knew from my first encounters with his work that there was something special about it. His interest in my perception and interpretation of his artworks, when he knew that I had no formal training, was empowering. He demonstrated inclusivity by listening carefully to my responses. When we met, he was preparing to set out for a 900-kilometre pilgrimage with a two-meter high papier mâché statue of Cuba’s Patroness Saint (La Caridad del Cobre). Otero introduced me to the power of the aesthetic experience. I trusted and embraced my naiveté; I was keen to understand what it was about this thing called ‘art’ that animated him to a level of spiritual zeal. I wanted in on the secret. Throughout the years, as I went on my own journey of developing an appreciation for art, I would think back to a statement Otero had made about this or that, and realised that I was only beginning to understand what he meant. I did not have the conceptual register to label it as such then, but I discovered over time that Otero’s artistic practice opened vectors of sensitivity that helped me make sense of the world in a more meaningful way. It introduced me to the formidable potential of art as an elevator of consciousness.

Our friendship rests in a certain relational poetics. We have confronted, joked, and challenged the opacity that lay between us. We come from drastically different worlds. We were candid, from the start, about the privilege imbalance that rested between us. I was a white, European twenty-something woman taking intensive Spanish classes at the University of Havana during the day whilst exploring the capital’s sound and fury at night: I arrived with an urge to listen to son and salsa, only to quickly realise this perception as an oversimplified and orientalist understanding of Cuban music, let
alone culture. He was a Black, twenty-something man from one of Havana’s most disenfranchised neighbourhoods, who grew up in a household where alcoholism and domestic violence were prevalent (Alvarez, 2023). He had not yet travelled outside of Cuba when we met in 2013. His days consisted of juggling various entrepreneurial endeavours to sell his artworks, and nights were spent socialising wherever artists networked; exhibition openings, house parties, nightclubs. When we first met, I was able to scrutinise, critique, and engage with his world, while mine remained a distant fantasy. We were also both acutely aware of the complex politics of tourists befriending Cubans in the backdrop of an ailing post-socialist economy where contact with foreigners had become – to many young Cubans – a rare (and sometimes lucrative) opportunity for escape (see essay 3). We navigated this with gravity and humour. Some poetic justice was served, however, the day we reunited in Paris in 2016, after he presented his project, The Museum of Dissidence, in Madrid. There was something distinctively satisfying and vulnerable to experience being on the other side of that gaze; for him to have his turn at being the tourist.

The opacity was a source a stimulating discussion. The reality of the wide socio-economic and cultural rift between us permitted an unfiltered, at times brutal, honesty about who we were and what we thought. Neither of us knew enough about the other’s cultural etiquette to bother ‘dancing around’ with niceties and polite omissions. Rather, there was an imperativeness in making sure we understood each other; my Spanish was far from perfect, and Otero made little effort to tone down his nimble, Cuban slang. Only when I expressed enough panic for not understanding something he said, would he repeat himself in a comical, exaggerated French accent. Somehow, we still managed to get to know each other well, though some things may have been forever lost in translation.

Sociologist Lisa Tillmann-Healy coined the concept of ‘friendship as method’ which is a qualitative methodological approach that ‘involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship’ where the ‘primary procedures involve conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2006:7). This practice is grounded in an interpretivist, feminist tradition exemplified by standpoint theory, among others (Harding, 2004). The idea being to turn to a form of enquiry that contests notions of universal truths and ‘neutrality’ towards epistemologies of empowerment. The practice of such an approach grounds itself in a blurring of the researcher-researched and an ethics of caring, dialogue and
commitment to the relationship between the participant-interviewer. Moving away from ‘speaking for’ or ‘giving voice’ towards ‘researchers get[t]ing to know others in meaningful and sustained ways’ (ibid: 6). It is a practice that privileges collaboration and lived, emotional experience.

Taking into consideration the length of my friendship with Otero, this approach offers a compelling and a productive guiding principle of the ethics of my research. As Tillmann-Healy (2006: 8) suggests, the benefits of a close friend relationship allows for sharing ‘deeper, more intricate perspective of self, other, and context’. However this closeness can sometimes blind us to certain objectifying principles, which is why it is important to ‘continually step back from experiences and relationships and examine them analytically and critically’ (ibid). As I describe the two phases of my methodological framing, I address how the emotional involvement provided by friendship, especially in the situation of witnessing a close one suffer emotional and physical harm has been overwhelming. Such an emotional state can obscure judgement. This led me to implement a tool that enabled perspective while remaining sincere to my friendship. This tool, which consisted of giving space, time, and intellectual inquiry to the artworks produced by Otero and other artists became a constructive strategy for mitigating the emotional involvement at the core of this research. On the other hand, the immense advantage of my close understanding of Otero on a deeper level provides me with subtle insights into his complexities. It allows me to sift through his, at times, contradictory discourse to objectify it and know how to position it. For example, I have learned to distinguish between his theatrical provocateur ways that sometimes adopt confrontational, macho rhetoric from his genuine, foundational values that have firmly remained consistent over the years, in spite of his growing fame.

Indeed, when I met Otero he was a ‘regular’ struggling artist, unknown to most people outside of his circle of friends and acquaintances (of which he already had many!). In the last five years, however, he has been propelled into the spotlight both in and outside Cuba for his activism and art (he was nominated as one of Time’s most influential people in 2021 by Ai Weiwei (2021) and featured in a song that won ‘Best song’ at the Latin Grammys that same year, just to name a few examples (Martinez, 2021)). There is, in this sense, a certain particularity about witnessing a friend navigate the complicated effects of notoriety. As he often said when we have spoken in the last few years, ‘we’ve known each other since we were kids’ and this idea of his life ‘before’
becoming someone with leadership responsibilities sits in a time-space that feels both ancient and comfortable, and signals the kind of complicity we have managed to maintain over the years.

**Developing research objectives**

What inspired me to explore Otero’s growing activism and artistic expansion was an intuition that he was *en route* towards an extraordinary journey. I have trusted Otero’s energy from the first day we met. Following his moves seemed like a good idea, as his determination and relentless vigour to succeed as a famous artist (in spite of all the odds stacked against him), paired with his stubborn concern for social justice, made him a force to reckon with.

I had an intuition that Otero’s work held an emancipatory, restorative, inclusive, democratic, ‘in-between’ dimension to it. If it managed to speak to me, as someone who did not possess the cultural register to contextualise it, I realised that it must have a displacing particularity and familiar universality to it. The desire to touch, define, and bring to light what his artwork does became the first propulsive motivator for this research. Then, I wished to find out what his and the artworks of members of the collective he co-founded, the San Isidro Collective, offered by way of dreams for a better future. What kinds of worlds are imagined by these artists and activists that transcend the parameters of the Cuban Revolution and its ‘anti-thesis’, the United States? More importantly, how might their art provide answers where their activism cannot?

I wish to begin here by making two points that guide my approach. The first is epistemological, the second reflexive. First, as I witnessed Otero being subjected to more violence and limitations by the repressive turn of cultural authorities in the country, I wanted to take on a project that would amplify his voice as an autodidact artist who was never given a chance to work within the country’s cultural institutions. This is where I subscribe to Howard S Becker’s (1967: 240) contention that it is impossible for research to be ‘uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies’, and that the question we sociologists need to ask ourselves is not whether or not we are choosing a ‘side’ but, rather, whose side are we on? This research lies clearly in the realm of being a ‘political case’ where the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ of who has the right to be heard is being disputed by the group of artists on which I focus my study. I choose to side with a group of art-activists who are subordinated in the rank of Cuba’s
cultural system, where cultural institutions have had the privilege of legitimacy and power in defining who is an artist and what is ‘real’ art. However, grassroots initiatives and independent movements, including the movement that constitutes the purpose of this study, The San Isidro Collective, are questioning that very ‘hierarchy of credibility’. In choosing the side of the ostracised artists, I am aware that my epistemological stance subscribes to one judgement on the nature of reality. In other words, I take as my point of departure the arguments, worldviews and political positions of these artists who directly question the structure of reality projected by the Cuban regime. I have tried, as Becker (1967: 247) contends, to mitigate this position-taking by doing the following: ‘us[ing] our theoretical and technical resources to avoid the distortions that might introduce into our work, limit our conclusions carefully, recognize the hierarchy of credibility for what it is, and field as best we can the accusations and doubts that will surely be our fate.’ I stand firmly on the side of my participants, who are active political actors, and hope that the methodological toolkit I have developed avoids distortions and inscribes this study seriously within the field of sociology.

A second important point that I wish to emphasise relates to reflexivity. To avoid the trap of narcissistic reflexivity as Pierre Bourdieu (2003: 282) warns against, I acknowledge ‘not the “lived experience” of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility – and therefore the effects and limits – of that experience and, more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself.’ In other words, recognising that my choices as a researcher are contingent on my social location in my field as a researcher. Throughout the writing and research process, I have kept in tension my ‘socially constituted dispositions’ as a non-Cuban researcher doing research among Cuban and at-risk artists. I have sought to make that tension quite clear from the start with participants to enable open a route of conversation about how this research might be beneficial to them.

My approach is informed by intersectional methodologies. Understanding that race and gender are constructed together, I adhere to Windsong’s (2018) provocation that oppression is not stand-alone but related to privilege, reminding that oppression and privilege need to be addressed together. Emphasising the relationality of social identities helps to identify how privilege and oppression can be experienced simultaneously. This is particularly helpful in the Cuban context where, apart from complex racial and gender identities, being an ‘institutionalised’ artist arguably constitutes a social identity, one of privilege. This has been a pertinent category to pay
attention to in conversations, as most of the Collective’s artists are not ‘institutionalised’ and identify as being ‘independent’ or belonging to the ‘alternative Cuban art scene’ (Fernandes, 2006).

A particularity of this project rests in the fact that I am working with intellectuals. Most of my participants, even if completely self-taught like Otero, have the social and intellectual dexterity to navigate the ‘snobby art world’ (to quote Otero). There is a level of academic parlance, of evoking theories or concepts that are familiar to me. I am aware that while our educational backgrounds might be worlds apart, we do share some of the same ‘decoding’ language to read the world in similar, cognitive ways. This was quite clear in my years of conversation with Otero Alcántara, I can mention Pierre Bourdieu to him whilst he can engage in long, philosophical diatribes without doubting that I have the (friendly/researcher) patience to sit through them with enthusiasm. Otero is a chameleon who ‘code switches’ (Heller, 2010) with ease between different worlds: that of artistic intellectualism which has become his adopted family and the vernacular of the Cuban ‘streets’. I recognise that the fact that my participants have a voice of their own that speaks the language of academia, has compelled me, from the start, to be clear in terms of what my research would contribute. As one of my participants, Yanela Núñez Lleyva has said, she believes that Cubans need to be telling their own story. What researchers from ‘outside’ like myself can do, however, is activate spaces and networks that my participants do not have access to. In response to my question on what he thought of a white-European like me doing this kind of research, Otero replied:

I believe you are very important in this exercise of amplifying our voice because, first of all, you know the European language, you know the European academic language and since here we do not have the tools to position and build own story, the fact that you build and show it is super important and necessary (Voicenote from June 2020).

Bearing these challenges in mind, the question of how to conduct research that is both useful and non-exploitative has been a constant, ongoing balance that has helped, among other considerations, guide the process. I have endeavoured to keep this tension present during all stages of my research, recognising the productive discomfort that comes with a genuine practice of reflexivity as Pillow encourages in her definition of ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ as ‘a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same situates this knowing as tenuous’ (Pillow 2003: 188). Unable to forgo the inherent power relation that comes with the researcher/researched dynamic,
compounded, in our case, by a cultural, racial, and safety disparity, I have committed as much as possible to maintain an ongoing self-awareness to make ‘visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research’ (Pillow 2003: 178). Therefore committing to an uncomfortable reflexivity in order keep a close watch on issues of representation, authority and voice (Heyl, 2001).

II. Phase one: Mitigating external challenges

Contextual challenge: The covid-19 pandemic

My initial plan relied on conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Havana for six months to observe and participate in the daily activities of members of the San Isidro Collective. With an ethnography in mind, my research questions as I set out to undertake this project where the following: What are the political and artistic praxes of Cuba's internationally-known 'artist' movement, the San Isidro Collective? How can we understand their activism in light of theories on participatory and relational art, and Rancière’s theorisation of the dissensual politics of the aesthetic? How might such an understanding shed light on the complicated relationship between artistic practices and the formation and constitution of political subjecthoods and subjectivities in contexts of repression and authoritarianism?

I had planned to travel in May 2020 in order to attend the second edition of the 00 Bienal festival that Otero and colleagues were organising. This timeframe meant that I had to pass my first-year board paper earlier than is usually expected, and I was working under tight deadlines. All of these plans, however, were disrupted in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic swept through Europe. By mid-March, Scotland and the United Kingdom were under strict lockdown ‘stay at home’ orders and international travel was brought to an almost immediate halt.

To mitigate this rapid change, and witnessing similar ‘stay at home’ orders being implemented all over the world, including Cuba, I quickly shifted my methods in order to begin collecting data as soon as possible. Of course, there was no hindsight at this point, and we did not know how long these Covid-19 restrictions would last. I am grateful to my supervision team, however, for levelling pragmatically with me from the start. They suggested I re-adapt my methods in a way that would make my project not contingent on physical fieldwork. While this was a hard reality to face, the
disappointment of not spending time back in Havana as planned was immediate rather than maintaining a sense of wishful hope that I could do fieldwork at some point. Some of my peers were not as lucky and I witnessed colleagues stay in months-long limbo ‘waiting’ for the pandemic to end to approach their subject ‘as planned’. With a manageable plan B at hands, I was able to remain (pro)active and do research from home.

My first adaptation was to conduct a digital ethnography. This felt like a natural shifting of my methods, if I wanted to see, explore, hear, and witness the conversation and praxes of these artists. With the world on lockdown, Internet became, more than ever, the space where everything was happening. It became the primary place for us to connect, and more specifically, for people to continue working and socialising. Members of the San Isidro Collective were not exempt to this trend. The sheer number of live videos of Otero and others broadcasting from their living rooms, beds, kitchens increased dramatically in just a few months since March 2020. The world also witnessed a rise of ‘zoom’ conferences, events, and virtual gallery exhibits (Molla, 2020). In a sense, the level of exposure that my participants gained from these online platforms helped propel their struggles well into the limelight. Considering how restricted their movements were beginning to become in the country because of their growing activism, the Internet – and social networks especially – was a space that enabled them to transgress everyday constraints and enjoy some sense of freedom (Henken and Garcia Santamaria, 2021).

Therefore, my method, at first, consisted of spending time in the same spaces as members of the San Isidro Collective online and taking screenshots of posts, publications, or downloading live videos or conferences. I would then describe—as I would have in the field—the dynamics, reactions to posts, take analytical field notes on the comments and infuse them with some reflexive considerations. This was the non-interventionist component of my methods; I was observing the conversations taking place in these online spaces. These observations would help me piece together a wider idea of the urgent issues and helped steer what to look out for and how. It is an approach that enabled me to conduct a ‘digital mapping’ of the most potent online spaces the artists navigated and infer the kinds of conversations taking place. Following Recuber’s definition (2017: 49), a digital ethnography ‘involves the incorporation of digital technologies such as online questionnaires, digital videos, social networking sites, and blogs into the ethnographer’s traditional toolkit.’
Remembering that today, online and offline communities can no longer be understood dualistically but as intimately imbricated, I was reminded to think beyond preconceived notions of communities as clearly bounded spaces. Maddox (2016: 12) defines digital communities as ‘characterized by open social systems, technological mediation and global dispersion’. Understanding these communities as reflections of how individuals co-construct meaning, around a shared topic of interest – art and politics in Cuba – I analysed and reflected on online discussions and comments, undertaking what Recuber refers to a ‘discourse analysis of small online communities’ (Recuber 2019: 48). I also looked at blog and independent media articles and conducted textual analysis of these documents. I used the software Scrivener, which is a word-processing program designed to collate and edit large pieces of writing through a user-friendly management system. Each day of the week had a new entry. I conducted this kind of fieldwork for a year from May 2020 through May 2021.

In parallel, I began engaging in focused conversations through semi-structured interviews with Otero Alcántara and other participants in the collective, notably Yanelys Núñez Lleyva, Otero’s working partner for several years. They were both my gatekeepers who would introduce me to colleagues and friends. I resorted to an approach grounded in life-history interviewing (Bertaux, 2016), asking them to tell me about their trajectories and coded these interviews thematically to get a sense of their priorities and what seemed urgent. The first rounds of conversations and interviews were guided by questions about the current situation in Cuba, to locate the most current topics of conversation, and what spaces to look out for. I then quickly dove into more directed conversations about their artistic processes and the ethos of the collective. My questions were grounded in specific examples, asking Otero to comment on a specific artwork or a recent collective action.

My interviewing practice and stance draw inspiration from ethnographic, postmodern, feminist and dialogic interviewing. I adopted an ethnographic commitment to interviewing for its usefulness in exploring ‘the meanings that people ascribe to actions and events in their cultural worlds, expressed in their own languages’ (Roulston 2010: 12). It is postmodern in its ‘notion of interviews enacting situated performances of various selves’ (ibid: 13). I used feminist interviewing as a practice of intimacy, openness, self-disclosure (as the researcher), and ‘equitable relationships’ between researcher and participants (ibid: 14). Finally, I practiced dialogic interviewing through a Socratic dialogue method in which the interview opens
a space that challenges opinions and stances. This final approach was particularly pertinent as I was interacting with people engaged in activism, with a growing sense of responsibility and visibility, which made them self-aware of what their public voice sounded like. Therefore, engaging in these types of conversations helped unveil the processes of formulating public discourse and articulating unconventional opinions aimed at a wider audience. Bourdieu’s citation (cited in Roulston 2010: 20) about the interviewer’s responsibility for offering ‘the respondent an absolutely exceptional situation for communication’ particularly resonates here. I should also note that the participants interviewed have agreed for their full names to be disclosed in the writing of this thesis.

Kvale (1996: 4) reminds that ‘conversation’ in Latin means ‘wandering together with’, hence emphasising the notion that meaning is co-constructed in the interview process (Roulston 2013: 18-9). Interviews offer intimate insights into ‘how’ something is being said which provides invaluable information on the participant’s social milieu and how they ascribe meaning to their world. I understand the practice of ‘being’ ethnographic in the interview process as both an active, mindful listening of the information provided while contextualising it. Or as Bourdieu suggests, being both an ‘active and methodical listener’ by bestowing ‘total attention without categorizing people’s stories’ whilst having ‘knowledge of the objective conditions common to the entire relevant category’ (cited in Heyl 2001: 14). This approach has been useful in accounting for the multiple ‘selves’ that the participants perform as artists, activists, public figures and private individuals.

Fox Keller (2007) contends that subjectivity means having the core capacity for self-reflection and interviews are a privileged space for this to take place. They invite a retrospective and introspective inquiry into one’s thought processes. I found that asking the participants to ‘translate’ or elaborate on their thinking, feelings and decisions around specific events or practices to someone external to the Cuban situation has provided them with a bit of ‘breathing room’ where they could reconstruct the narrative in a fresh light. This was something they did not necessarily have the space to do when talking to their peers. Finally, while my process of interviewing was quite unstructured, I did direct some of the questions in a way that would give me their ‘story’ (Roulston, 2013: 18). This was useful for exploring trajectories and changes of perception. This mode of interviewing gave me important insights into ‘turning-points’ (Abbott, 2001) of their biographies that shaped their political and artistic engagement.
One major complexity when it comes to doing research in relation to Cuba is communication. Internet access is still very limited (even though it significantly improved since 2016) and expensive. To mitigate this, I applied through my funding’s research support fund to pay for participants’ phone recharge, since I am aware from trips to Cuba how precious every minute of phone data can be. I made sure that funding their phone recharges was not contingent on them answering my questions. Rather, I presented it to them as compensation for their time and participation, however big or small. In fact, many of the people I interviewed in this first phase of my fieldwork have not been included in the pages of this dissertation. The conversations with them, however, have been invaluable in giving me an intimate sense into the concerns, worries, and thoughts of members of the collective, and I am grateful for their time.

Communication with participants was done through Whatsapp where I sent a block of questions and to which Otero and other participants responded through voice notes. There is a diary-like feel to voice notes. Participants often recorded their responses as they walked through the busy streets of Havana, or I would hear them at home with music in the background or a cat purring nearby. These snapshots of their intimacy added texture to the interviews. Furthermore, the act of responding to written questions, asynchronously, allows the interlocutor to go on tangents, it provides more space to ‘think out loud’ since there is not going to be an immediate response or rebuttal. There is also more room from interpretation, which comes with the inconvenience of not being able to ask for immediate clarification. Several times, my participants have commented that my questions gave them time to think about something they had not thought about before. Often, Otero would send me a follow up voice note to complement a previous idea.

**Field notes vignette: Advocating from bed (March 2020)**

The visuality of my digital ethnography of art activists in a global pandemic offers scenes of home in the most intimate sense. Live Facebook videos of Otero or Maykel Osorbo interacting with their followers, sometimes for hours, while they are sitting at home on forced house arrest generates insights into their subjectivities, both voyeuristic and compassionate. The vulnerability of exposing themselves in their spontaneity feels like a generous gift to the spectator. We watch them move from a chair in the doorframe of their house, greet neighbours, recline in bed with a fan
spinning rapidly nearby or sit on a sofa drinking from a bottle of frozen water. These videos are interspersed with publications of poorly taken, blurry photos of plain-clothed police officers posted in street corners, casually standing outside of view while making their presence clear. These denunciatory publications, taken quickly, published when there is enough Internet connection, provide an archival account of everyday repression. (In)sights into the home of activists, where intimacy becomes the entry point into their subjectivities. My digital ethnography folders are filled with screenshots of publications and videos, which provides a mosaic of unflattering close-ups, head spinning camera direction, and intelligible sounds. However, we also grasp what is usually intangible in performance of self: unfiltered rants, emotional outbursts, flashes of their personality traits as they react to people around them, off screen. We receive telling clues about their sociability, temperament and characters. The tired eyes, the raspy voice of someone who just woke up but took advantage still having phone data to broadcast an idea before they forget, or before their service is cut by the state. This archive of videos and publications mirror an ambiance of immediacy, everything must be captured as quickly as possible because we never know what the next minute holds. Yet there is a confounding contrast between the urgency expressed in the act of broadcasting and the embodied quietness of the location of that broadcasting. Otero sharing his anger about his most recent arrest while yawning with his head resting on a pillow, in bed. The repetition of these videos, the intimacy provided by a close up of someone from the privacy of their home sharing ideas, demands, laments and denunciations is a disruptively different experience than images and videos of group protests, especially considering how rare these tend to be.

Another disruptive dimension of these live videos lies in their aesthetic ability of spotlighting individuality. If we decide to press play and watch, we enter the spectacle of an individual self-directing what they want an uncontrolled audience of Facebook followers to see. We are witnessing one single person, revealing themselves, which contrasts greatly with the ‘mass’ dimension of the Cuban Revolution and the ontological effacement of that individuality in the revolutionary ‘New Man’. These publications and videos provide a vulgar, and thus subversive, reaction to the moralist self-chastity of Castrist revolutionary praxis. They look dishevelled, the men are often shirtless, some swear copiously and this ‘casualness’ is a provocative ‘queering’ (Preciado, 2019) of the regime’s value systems exemplified by the pristine khaki green uniforms of the revolutionary guard, the crestless ensembles of school children or the
spotless white blouses of doctors. The new Cuban revolutionary is self-aware, opinionated and shirtless.

As inquisitive spectators, we can also gather precious information into the living conditions of these artists and activists by taking a close look at their interior spaces. There is often an unusual orientation, arrangement, configuration of household goods. We are struck by the simplicity of the furniture, or lack thereof. These scenes help us understand the meaning of the Cuban notion of ‘inventar’ or ‘resolver’, of being crafty with whatever is available, of being creative in building something out of scarcity. It is also a proposition of another configuration of living that breaks with neoliberal aesthetics of the home. There are no coffee tables, what often emerges in the foreground is a messy web of cables and phone chargers, these objects tell us that communication is a primary concern, the furniture that exists is oriented in way to facilitate connection with others. For instance, the few chairs available often face the doorframe: the Cuban home is directed outside while the body stays inside. The visuality of open doors with a chair strategically positioned in the doorframe, to enable conversations, interactions with those passing by, while remaining shielded from the scorching sun reveals a lot about the Cuban body’s quotidianity.

The doorframe has also become a place of resistance; it is the unfolding of political subjectivity. The doorframe is freedom and the intersections of possibilities with the outside world and its many restrictions. In live videos, Otero Alcántara often (un)intentionally stands or sits at that very doorframe. These videos serve as self-protective evidence of an imminent action such as walking out during forced house arrest or joining an unauthorized protest. The liminal place of the doorframe becomes the realm of imminence, an in-between that merges the private/safe and public/unsafe space. Once he steps outside of that doorframe, his body is (re)owned by the omnipresent state. The liminal space of the doorframe is, in a sense, that bridge between the individual and the masses. It becomes the purgatory of a subjectivity that vacillates between self-affirming individuality and imposed revolutionary effacement.
**Narrative challenge: When research becomes a ‘hot’ topic**

Six months into my digital ethnography and interviews, a major event changed the course and temporality of my project. In November 2020, members of the San Isidro Collective with Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara on the front line, undertook a hunger strike (with some, including Otero, also on a ‘thirst’ strike, meaning abstaining from ingesting fluids) to protest the arbitrary detention and speedy trial of a member of the collective Denis Solís. The latter was charged with ‘contempt’ (Alvarez, 2023) following an altercation between him and a police officer who entered his home without permission. Just like everything members of the collective have been doing, this hunger strike in the home of Otero Alcántara, which also served as the San Isidro Collective headquarters, was broadcast live, on Facebook. The nine-day self-imposed entrenchment (the protesters refused to leave Otero’s home because they kept being arrested and detained when they did) and hunger and thirst strike culminated in the forced eviction by authorities on the evening of November 26, 2020. Internet access was disrupted on the island during the time of the break-in until early hours of the morning (CubaNet, 2020).

This event sparked, on the following day, an unprecedented sit-in in front of the Ministry of Culture with over 300 artists and intellectuals who refused to leave until they could meet, officially, with the Minister of Culture to demand freedoms (‘the right to have rights’ was one of the chants) and a halt to police violence (Augustin et al., 2020). This sit-in took place while the strikers were either kept under house arrest or in prison (some, such as Otero were forcibly hospitalised). This peaceful protest on November 27, 2020 gave rise to the 27N movement, a group composed of artists and activists who, according to their manifesto, ‘seek to promote more democratic, pluralist and inclusive practices’ by relying on ‘artistic creation and intellectual work’ as their main tool (Artists at Risk Connection, 2021). The 27N and San Isidro Collective have become, since 2020, leading art and activism movements in the country.

This moment was a major turning point in my project because it propelled the San Isidro Collective and especially its leader, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, into the international spotlight. While this was not the first hunger strike undertaken by Otero and others, it was the first time their action gained such widespread attention (thanks to widening Internet access). The stakes of the action also felt particularly high and the consequences dramatic with the protesters who refused to ingest water as well as
food. While Otero was already obtaining recognition inside Cuba and outside in activism circles, this event, which was covered by major news media such as the New York Times (Thessaly La Force, 2020), shifted the dynamics of my project. The rise of international awareness around the Cuban regime’s repressive turn was welcome, even though the pressure has been far from enough to compel the government to change its tactics or free political prisoners (Fusco, 2020b).

My research was becoming a ‘hot’ and ‘live’ topic in a volatile, quickly changing context, which altered the stakes of the project. Every day, I spent hours trying to collate all the information I could about recent events: who was publishing what article, what were my participants doing at specific times, seeping through misinformation, analysing opinion pieces or Facebook live videos as members of the collective got into feuds and disagreements about the right or wrong ways to act. I waited in anticipation for the moment a video of Otero would be released after his discharge from the hospital in early December 2021 (Escorihuela, 2020). My field notes from December are a messy diary into this highly chaotic moment and encapsulate the major turning point my research took.

Excerpt from field journal

December 4th 2020,

With a bit of distance, though I don’t think I have enough at the moment, the shock is still lingering. Strangely, during those seven days of Luis’s hunger and water strike, I fell asleep like a rock, a dark, profound, dreamless sleep. I’d wake up with a knot in my stomach in the morning, ready to confront my phone and stay glued to it until the following evening when I’d slip into bed for another dreamless night. I’d jump to my phone, that I purposefully kept outside my bedroom, and before doing anything else, would check the news, my Facebook newsfeed to know if Luis died or not. It was very transactional with my brain. Needing to put the emotions in their place, quench that need for an answer, before being able to do anything else.

What I’m starting to understand is how rallying, and unifying the San Isidro Movement has been and continues to be. In an almost unprecedented way, different opposition movements that have been around in and outside of Cuba for 15-20 years now, are rallying behind MSI. This is unprecedented because, as Luis Manuel explained to me earlier in October, there are interests, both personal and economic, that drive motivations of these movements. ‘Some people get into it like they’ll get into a job’ said Luis. There is
a certain status and fame that goes with being part of the clan of opponents. Many Cubans from these movements support Trump for instance. The events around the San Isidro Movement of these last weeks have been a trigger, they’ve shaken the politics of the ‘Cuban opposition’. I’m seeing it come through in the various independent Cuban media. Like El Estornudo or Rialta Magazine which are founded by award-winning writers such as Carlos Manuel Alvarez and Mónica Baró or again Abraham Jiménez. They’re mostly composed of long, investigative pieces, with rigor. Then there are media like ADN Cuba or CubaNet which focus more instantaneous news, their journalism daws on visual media. The journalists on these platforms use their phones as their information tool much more than their pen. However, all of these different media have been working together and collaborating. It says a lot about the reconciliatory figure that is Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara. His ability to transcend class differences, to go beyond the place assigned to him by his racial identification says a lot about him as a leader. This is the first time that so many groups that usually diverge and disagree on major things, in ways that are often irreconcilable, have been working together and supporting the fight of the San Isidro Collective.

Luis Manuel’s analogy of everyone being an important piece in a game of chess resonates here. The reason why his hunger strike along with that of the other people was so impactful is that it was impossible and it remains impossible to label what the San Isidro Collective means or is. In comparison to other members of opposition groups who abide to a very specific and defined political line, the San Isidro Collective is constantly reinventing itself, improvising, widening its embrace, seeking inclusivity. During the protests at the Ministry of Culture, one of the chants included ‘El derecho de tener derechos’ or ‘The right to have rights’, a reference to Hannah Arendt’s formulation.

III. Phase two: Towards an ‘art-historical sociology’?

Epistemological challenge: Lessons from the turning-point

Taking stock of the situation with my supervisors at the end of 2020, it became apparent that my research questions and objectives were diffusing. Was I doing a network analysis of politically engaged artists? A study on social media discourse in a contested space? Or was I studying the artworks and practices of a group of artists to understand how they potentially provide new subjective spaces within an authoritarian
context? What do their artworks do, how do they carve new possibilities and transgress social ascriptions? My project was becoming bigger than what could be possible in the scope of a PhD thesis. Is this a project where artists have become political actors and activists who now use art as their medium? If so, then this project would be about political and social movements. Or did I want to look at their artistic interventions and at art within authoritarianism? Who are they speaking to? Is their art directed at the State? Or are they able to transgress the realm of resistance? What are the constraints and limits of cultural expression? What does their art say beyond the confinement of their politics?

These (re)grounding questions were important in reconnecting with my initial intentions. Notably, my eagerness of being ‘in’ on the secret about art’s transformative potential. I realised that if I kept going the way I was going, I would always be one step behind, trying to catch up with the politics of the San Isidro Collective, analysing the relationships between different members of the group, where the knots and tensions lay.

After a few weeks of reflexive examination, during which I took a break from the digital ethnography and focused on listening to my interviews again, I began to see a shift in how to approach my project around February 2021. I realised that the digital ethnography had taken me on the ground with my participants, and I was swimming in the messy politics of activism, paired with a volatile, violent situation of repression and detention in the country. I tried to contribute to disseminating information about the escalation of events by contacting several international media. Many refused to cover the events or ignored my request early on during the hunger strike. Only the French media, Mediapart responded and rapidly published a story covering the hunger strikes on November 26, 2020 (Lamant, 2020).

When returning to my initial interviews, I noticed that participants would repeatedly insist that they were operating as ‘artists’ before anything else. The San Isidro Collective is a movement of artists, who look to art as a tool for proposing alternative imaginaries. They believe in the transformative power of art, and their way of moving and making sense of the world is through art-making. When I listened to these passionate self-definitions and compared them to my field notes, I realised that all the ‘art’ talk was being stifled by the politics. My notes consisted mostly of chronological accounts of who said what, what sparked controversy online among members of the collectives, what followers are saying, or why was one statement so polemical.
Exploring the web of these artists entangled in wider conversations about geopolitics and justice would make for a fantastic research inquiry. However, I decided that what felt most under-explored and loyal to their aspirations was focusing on what their art had to say.

Therefore, I would take as my objects of inquiry artworks created by members of the collective in the last few years. Doing so, would enable to take some distance from the emotionally charged realm of the police and activism spaces. This would shape my commitment to them by taking at face value their assertion of operating as artists. By grounding myself in their artistic voice, I realised that I needed to move away from the politics of the debates within the movement and the landscape of ‘Cuban dissidents’, which was hot, volatile, and divisive. Conversely, I committed to moving towards a phenomenological experiencing of their artworks in order to grasp what is potentially truly political or dissensual about them. The best way to do justice to them would be to focus on what matters the most to artists: their work. This position-taking was further confirmed as the right path when considering their contested identities as artists by Cuban cultural authorities who continuously endeavour to discredit them as mere dissidents (*Diario de Cuba*, 2019).

Taking their art seriously would become my reorienting anchor. A reorientation that marks the second phase of my methodological scaffolding. Getting lost in the politics of the movement, I realised that the artists’ art was being cannibalised by the whirlwind of the political crisis and I sought to centre it by dedicating poetic, contemplative, and interpretive time-space to it. Focusing on their art would help me situate their praxes above and beyond the everyday politics of navigating a messy ‘dissident’ space. I suggest that carving theoretical space for an autonomous aesthetic experience reveals the transcendental and transformative possibilities enabled by the artworks; such revealing offers insights into desires for other artistic and moral subjectivities in an authoritarian context. Contemplation, on my part, becomes a political weapon of allyship and allows me to stay true to this initial intention; of making sense of how art can enhance our sense of being and seeing. I refocused: my project would not be one of action research, but rather one of contemplative allyship by focusing on a dimension of their subjectivities that is overshadowed by the responsibilities, temporalities, and challenges brought on by activism. This allyship through poetic contemplation and interpretive engagement with artworks in the
aesthetic encounter would be a tool to write these artists as key players in the Cuban art landscape.

**An interdisciplinary methodological toolkit**

The turning point guided me towards the development of my interdisciplinary toolbox and cycle. As I detail below, the four-step cyclical tool kit begins and ends with a practice of (1) sociological listening, which leads to carving out theoretical space for the (2) aesthetic experience provided by a selection of artworks, to, then, re-locating the artworks in their contexts through (3) art-historical examination, and, finally, a (4) writing project that centres on ‘moments’ as the locus of the unravelling of social processes.

My first anchor is cyclical and reflexive practice of sociological listening as theorised by Les Back in his book *The Art of Listening* (2013). Back conceives of sociology as a practice of listening that works as a ‘democracy of the senses’ (ibid: 9) and a commitment of bringing the words of participants to life rather than resorting to ‘disembodied citation’ (ibid: 17). Setting to listen more closely to my interviews, I found that my participants, artists and art professionals, insisted on being taken seriously for their artworks. They repeated the desire and importance of ‘moving’ people through their art, and were ambitious about us engaging with it. It is safe to generalise that one of artists’ primary concerns resides in their art being engaged with. What distinguishes an artist drawing flowers in their bedroom from a non-artist drawing flowers in their bedroom is the former’s concern for the art to be seen and to have some kind of impact. Creation and reception are inextricably linked in the world of artists.

In this vein, I found that the best way to honour that desire would be to do just that; to explore the different facets of the aesthetic experience, to give theoretical space to it in the very structure of my thesis. In my praxis of reflexive listening, I came to understand that Otero was an artist who conceived of his work as relational. He often said that he had no problem with the artwork disappearing into ‘real’ life, and had no issue with being effaced as an artist as long as a relationship, a moment of suspension between the artwork and beholder took place. His work, he contends, only exists through the relationship it garners, it is relational, and thus inclusive, he does not seek to impose meaning but intends for it to be co-constructed and multiplied in the process of reception (Bourriaud, 2002). The interpretation of artworks often escapes the intentions of artists as the art takes a journey of its own within the beholder’s
imagination. This is something Marcel Duchamp described as the ‘art coefficient’ where the intention of the artist and the artwork’s reception can differ greatly (Duchamp, 1957). In this conception of meaning-making within the aesthetic experience, the spectator has agency, she is empowered as a credible ‘critique’. In his ethos as a self-taught artist who has been snubbed by the ‘snobby art world’ (to quote Otero) because of not possessing the ‘right’ social capital, Otero is primarily concerned about making public art that is accessible to the most culturally ‘illiterate’ among us. He is committed to art being accessible to all. I felt empowered by Otero’s curious attention to what I perceived in his works, in spite of my little knowledge of art history, and found that this quest for hearing what everyone and no one thought of his work helped shape his own subjectivity as an artist. It was a way to have his finger on the pulse on what moved and touched everyday people.

Therefore, I set out to explore my aesthetic experience of artworks and poems that feature the core objects of inquiry of the thesis’ three empirical essays. This would constitute the second tool in my methodological toolbox, which involved articulating poetically my own engagement with artworks. I relied on Jacques Rancière’s conceptualisation of the aesthetic experience as a theoretical frame for tackling my description and experiencing of the artworks. Rancière argues that artworks that bear emancipatory potential are autonomous, and enable an aesthetic experience that severs how our senses are organised in the social order. His notion of the politics of aesthetics resides in the idea that an artwork as object contains a sense experience, wherein a portion of the sensory realm has been extricated from its connections and has 'become foreign to itself' (Rancière, 2005). In other words, the aesthetic experience has the potential for suspending all ordinary sense dualities and connections. This notion is borrowed from Friedrich Schiller’s idea of ‘free play’ facilitated by the aesthetic experience which neutralises the tension between reason and embodiment, or what he called, respectively, the ‘form’ and ‘sense’ drives (Schiller, 2020). The Kantian ‘disinterested’ component of aesthetic judgement provides an ability to exist, within the realm of artistic contemplation and enjoyment, ‘outside’ of our conflicting drives of reason and embodiment. The space freed up by the ‘play’ drive thus allows for an encounter with the self that reveals to us unique moral and emotional qualities. Such revelations, Schiller argues, can only help improve human nature and shape free will. Rancière, drawing on this, has demonstrated how art, when emerging from what he called ‘the aesthetic regime of
art’ – where art enables a redistribution of sensory experience – has the potential for being emancipatory.

Therefore, in true spirit of the ‘pause’ provided by the contemplation of art, I put away theories, field notes, interviews, and experimented with engaging with artworks or poems. I first read poems by member of San Isidro Collective, Amaury Pacheco, which constitute the core artefacts of the thesis’ first essay. I resorted to intuitive and experimental engagement with the texts: reading them aloud, in silence, with varying intonations, tempo. I let the images they evoked sink in, and set out to write about what emerged from this partial, subjective, emotional and embodied engagement with them. This process showed me how meaning-making activates various cognitive and embodied functions. I noticed that my initial reaction was visceral, and that the act of cognitive decoding only came about afterwards: I explored the metaphors, listened or read the references mentioned in the poems. I then played with researching derivative definitions of certain terms such as ‘revolution’ (which means ‘an instance of revolving’ as much as ‘the overthrow of a social order’). In other words, I delved into the aesthetic experience and explored what the poems and artworks evoked for me. In a way, I experimented with ‘being in the zone’, a sentiment that artists often refer to when creating: an experience of ‘full energised immersion’ (Mullen, 2022). I carved out space for my own creative moment of writing freely about what the artworks conjured.

In the aesthetic encounter, the artwork acts upon the beholder, and the aesthetic experience is a passage from not seeing to seeing: what I set out do with these artworks is describe this phenomenological experience of going from not perceiving to perceiving. It is within this passage that a new subjectivity and new ontological frames are possible.

To elaborate on my subjective role in the encounter, I take up the idea of the ‘beholder’s share’ which was coined by the art historian Alois Riegl (1902) to describe the spectator’s attentiveness or relationship and engagement with an artwork. The beholder’s subjectivity directly infers on what she brings to this moment of attentiveness within the artistic encounter. The beholder’s share was formalised by Gombrich (1960) to theorise the perceptual qualities the beholder brings to the encounter to make sense of an artwork, to either maintain the illusion of the artwork (ibid) or bring on meaning. Juliane Rebentisch (2012) retrieves the notion of the beholder’s share to argue the autonomy of the artwork as a specific relational condition of the aesthetic encounter; where neither the aesthetic object nor aesthetic subject
can be objectified as such outside of the aesthetic encounter. Therefore, she defends the dialogical dimension of the aesthetic encounter where an experience that is ‘distinct from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason’ (Rebentisch, 2012: 11) can surface. To this avail, the beholder’s share enables to position the specific relational dynamics that occur between spectator and artwork as an autonomous relationship. Such a relationship does not eclipse the artworks from their social and historical context, but rather provides an opportunity for ‘opening up another perspective on what might be otherwise habitual’ (Wilder, 2020: 353). This idea of providing new vocabularies and perspectives underpins my approach of immersing within the aesthetic encounter to explore what the aesthetic experience reveals – by way of new symbolic languages – that the activism space cannot.

On the quality of attentiveness, I turn to philosopher Iris Murdoch’s understanding of attention as a key component of moral discipline and her contention that artistic creation and subjective contemplation exemplify such a discipline. Murdoch suggests that love is a central concept in morals, and that it is a faculty that comes with vision, by providing attention to reality. She defines it as a certain ‘obedience’ to reality, where the gaze, directed by love, quiets the space that the ‘self’ takes. She advances that great art has the capacity of mitigating selfishness in order to give true attention to reality, or to an individual reality via a loving and caring gaze. In this sense, attention ‘is the effort to counteract [...] states of illusion’ (Murdoch, 2014: 36), which requires moral discipline. In making the link between art and morals, she suggests:

One might say here that art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world (ibid: 58, my emphasis).

This practice, which requires control and the capacity of refocusing energy of ‘ceasing to be’ or to ‘silence and expel the self’ (ibid) allows to contemplate nature with a clear vision, and it demands moral discipline. To direct attention, is to direct love. She asserts that the beholder of art requires that same discipline of directing attention and of quieting the self in order to truly see the reality that is conveyed in a great work of art:

The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist succeeded in putting into it; and not to ‘use it as magic’. The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not
just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real (ibid: 63).

Resonating with a Kantian (2000) ‘disinterested’ gaze, Murdoch invites for an unsentimental contemplation of nature that bears a potential for detachment, such detachment thus helps to dissipate senses of self, of ‘selfish concerns’ which leaves room for reality to be seen with clear eyes. Art is a wonderful vector for that because it gives us, as beholders, the ‘reward of beauty’ (ibid: 65).

In light of these profound suggestions, I take as my methodological practice, this call for ‘unselfing’ that takes place in artistic contemplation, in the practice of giving full, energetic attention to a work of art, in order to decipher the reality it exudes. When I ask, what does the aesthetic experience allow us to see that perhaps these artists’ activism does not? The answer rests in the revelation provided by the aesthetic experience, the revelation of a clearer vision of reality. Or a recognition that the autonomy of the artwork opens up possibilities for senses to emerge that escapes the realm of reason. Perhaps, we learn something truer, more ‘objective’ about what the artists might want us to see and feel. In comparison, the social media activism space represents an opposite approach to the ‘obedience’ to reality required of artistic gazing. Indeed, social media invites fantasy, with platforms that are purposefully designed for staging a performance of the self. Murdoch’s provocations thus help to better situate my methodological commitment, of engaging with artworks to intuit what they might reveal about the artists’ deeper message that their involvement in activism cannot. In my creative journey of writing about these artworks, I attempted to loosen my fixed sense of self, I plunged freely into the voyage of the forms and emotions and colours that I saw, that I paid careful attention to, and attempted to put this wordless experience into words.

Once this subjective and creative journey took place, where the artworks existed solely for their sake, I turned to the distance-taking enabled by art historical examination. I let the artworks stand alone and only, secondly, selected key historical and contextual elements to locate their significance locally and globally. Especially because artworks bear an unstable quality, they are continually recontextualised and their meaning evolves with how we engage with them. I contend that the process of first experiencing and then positioning within the social world frees up a space for sociological scrutiny that is not ‘caught up’ in the politics of the volatile context in which the artists are operating. Reading the artworks solely in alignment to the location from
which they emerge stifles their full artistic function, it attempts to ‘fix’ them artificially. It is, in short, reductive. However, it is important to also, but secondarily, read them against the backdrop of specific historical and political events. This is important simply because the autonomy of the aesthetic experience does not equate an abstraction of the social reality that the art echoes and stems from. The autonomy means that it opens up other sensory receptors to the world around us. This approach, I hope, saves the artworks from militant reductionism. It enables us to experience their full potential, to let them dialogue with us, rather than collapsing them directly within a tradition of ‘social’ or ‘political’ art. I aim to allow the artworks to breathe and to allow for ‘the beholder’s share’ (Rebentisch, 2012) to take up its warranted space. This became my commitment as ally-researcher-advocate, attempting to render the artworks impermeable to amalgamation, manipulation and instrumentalisation, at least within the scope of this project.

**A commitment to ‘lyrical sociology’**

Finally, the creative process of immersing in the aesthetic experience as the theoretical basis for this thesis meant turning to a kind of sociological writing and epistemology that Andrew Abbott has coined as ‘lyrical sociology’. Abbott suggests that sociology can be about engaging emotionally with social processes where the lyrical writer is ‘conscious of himself not just as author but as the person whose emotional experience of the social world is at the heart of his writing’ (Abbott, 2016: 89). In other words, the commitment to a relational dialogue with artworks as part of the writing process led to a type of writing that would honour that commitment wholeheartedly. Dialoguing with artworks is undeniably a sensory experience that brings on emotion, and it felt crucial to acknowledge that emotional response. More, lyrical sociology consists of a shift from telling or explaining social processes (read: writing narratively) to, rather, conveying a reaction ‘to some portion of the social process seen in a moment’ (ibid: 91). Narrative is the passing of time whereas the lyrical insists on the moment. The ‘playfulness’ of the ephemeral aesthetic experience invites, quite naturally, a certain pause on the moment as a space where interactions, structures, and dynamics tell us something about human and social processes. As an epistemology, a lyrical sociology is founded in an interpretivist approach of understanding participants in their own terms rather than explaining the participants in the social world in behaviourist terms. I take as ‘incorrigible’ their language as a self-
interpreting mechanism. Here, language constitutes not only my conversations with the artists but also the symbolic language of creative expression (through the images and emotions conveyed in the artworks). Giving serious consideration to the artists’ and artworks’ language to decipher how they understand themselves in their own terms brings me closer to making sense of their worlds by seeking to feel and see their emotions and aspirations through their own situated definitions (Taylor, 2014). In this light, a lyrical sociology commits epistemologically to engaging directly with the artists’ symbolic and verbal self-interpretations.

This multi-disciplinary approach of careful listening, deep diving in the autonomy of the aesthetic experience, layered with distance-taking through artwork analysis, and reflexive, lyrical writing, allowed me to see what lies below the contentious shaping of artists’ ‘politics’ within a context of polarising debates and smothering repression. Such approach shifts the gaze beyond and below the artists’ social constraints as actors within a politicised landscape. It opens up possibilities for deciphering what it means to be an artist working and dreaming under constraint. By asking, what is their art telling us and doing? What does the aesthetic experience allow us to see about artistic subjectivities in a restrictive context? What does it tell us about other possibilities of existence? It provides analytical space for considering whether there is an emancipatory, ‘redistributive’ potential of these artworks. Could they be inventing a new vocabulary about what it means to be human within the social order of revolutionary politics? These are all questions we will explore as we delve into the thirteen artworks addressed in this thesis.

Therefore, this project rests on two separate ‘data points’. (1) My own subjective interpretation of the artworks through a poetical engagement with them in the aesthetic encounter, and (2) the artists’ own positioning and understanding of their creative process. In the latter, I did not seek for the artists’ to interpret the artworks for me, this is why the aesthetic experiencing of the artwork is my own articulation. Nonetheless, I maintained ongoing contact and conversation with the artists. While my conversations with Otero Alcántara were interrupted in the summer of 2021 following his unlawful arrest and imprisonment, I managed to keep the conversation going through semi-structured and unstructured interviews with other members of the collective. I also conducted a short field trip to Madrid in the summer of 2021 to meet with artists and activists in exile. In this vain, the sociological listening as a critical endeavour was maintained. As Back suggests, active listening ‘challenges the listener’s
preconceptions and position while at the same time it engages critically with the content of what is being said and heard’ (Back, 2007: 23). By joining the analytical process of reading through the aesthetic experience of the artworks in addition to the complex lived experiences of some of these artists, allowed me to inquire into the limitations of their social positions and investigate the transcendental possibilities of the artworks.

By way of conclusion, the toolkit opens an exploration into what my supervisor Dr Liliana Riga has coined as ‘art-historical sociology’ (Art-historical Sociology and the Construction of the Modern Self, forthcoming). A method and underlying epistemology that lies somewhere between the sociology of art, art-history and political sociology. I am not inscribing these artists in a historicized manner that seeks to define and coin their practice within a specific art movement or genre, nor am I doing an analysis of a network of artists and the different mechanisms of structural inclusion and exclusion, as might be done in a sociology of art. By centring the artworks and my interpretive engagement with them, this project seeks to enquire specifically into what emerges from the space of the aesthetic experience, which leaves room for a whole other set of questions to be asked. Letting the artworks first speak for themselves is a tool that enables a mitigation of the challenges posed by the highly volatile and contested

Figure 1 An interdisciplinary methodological toolkit (Foucher, 2023)
space they speak from. More, this toolkit buttresses my political and epistemological commitment wherein the project seeks to honour the ethics of friendship and care with participants through a practice of amplifying but also expanding their work at a time where their movements are, quite literally for some, encaged. Committing to the aesthetic experience has enabled a reversal, albeit momentarily, of the researcher-researched relationship, by my becoming the beholder and receiver of these artworks.
I, for one, in climax melted money and humanity answered. 
Fried ships fried submarines planes fried 
And other actions. 
Trains, worker’s trains, poet trains, political trains, paranoid, mystical trains 
Blend 
Melancholics by the truckload, choleric by the truckload, sanguine by the 
truckload, trucks loaded with phlegmatics. 
Traffic 
Acid rain over the squizoid strings of psychiatric behaviour and its laws of canned 
people with no mass sponsorship dipped in sauce in veal masses salami masses 
toasted masses to the brink of a stroke… 
And now bear it… contain it… breathe without affliction easing off tensions and 
allow gas to liberate industry.

There is a time… and there is a time in which time light does not exist in which 
matter screams time in which genes spread out time: time of the heart time of 
blood of gates houses time without space for reinvention reinscription on a spark. 
In such a way sprout countless worlds. Time breathing for us to go together and 
inhale the new expansions. 
Sulfur iron quicksilver burning figures signs codes rearranging in our place where 
two particles cannot share the same space. 
Time to acquit rain time to wait for irrational lightning time time tree time window 
time soil time as an adverb time table of time repeating record of this poem 
repeating repeating and repeating innumerable times… every turn in less time 
time diminished. 
There is a time with no particles 
That’s when suns sprout.

Translator’s note: This is not a verbatim version of the poem. It's a performative poem 
where alliterations and breathing , especially in repetitions without pauses, were slightly 
adjusted to the target language. In terms of rhythm, torrential rhythm, Howl and Kaddish by 
Allen Ginsberg serve as a guide to this version, there is also an echo of some fragments of 
Eliot's Four Quartets. To appreciate this English version the reader must consider it as an 
oral poem transcribed for record or for the purpose of study. At best a score for the voice, 
lungs and the whole body.
FAST FOOD (Pacheco, 2010)

1
Mendas climax derretí el dinero la humanidad contestó.
Barcos fritos submarinos fritos aviones fritos y otras acciones.
Trenes de obreros trenes poetas trenes políticos trenes paranoicos trenes místicos
Licuar
camiones cargados de melancólicos camiones cargados de coléricos camiones cargados
de flemáticos camiones cargados de sanguíneos.
Tráfico.
Acida lluvia sobre las cuerdas esquizas de las leyes para comportamientos psiquiátricos
masa-gentes enlatadas sin patrocinio masas en salsa masas ternera masas salame masas
tostadas masas al borde de un ataque...
y ahora aguanta… contén… tu respiración sin afligirte reduce tensión y deja que el gas se
libere industria
2
Hay un tiempo … y hay un tiempo donde no existe luz tiempo en que la materia grita
tiempo en el que gen esparce tiempo : corazón tiempo sangre tiempo puerta tiempo
casa tiempo sin moldes para reinventarse reinscribirse en la chispa. Así brotan
incontables mundos. Tiempo respiración vallamos juntos a respirar las nuevas
expansiones.
Azufre hierro azogue quemándose cifras signos códigos reordenándose se ponen
en nuestro lugar donde dos partículas no ocupan el mismo espacio.
Tiempo para perdonar lluvia tiempo espera relámpagos irracionales tiempos tiempo
árbol tiempo ventana tiempo tierra tiempo adverbio tiempo mesa tiempo disco
repitiendo este poema repite y repite repite y repite incontable veces … cada vez en
menos tiempo que hay tiempo.
Hay un tiempo donde no existen partículas…
Ahi brotan soles…
I. Immersing in FAST FOOD and ‘Candies without saliva’

The poem by the poet-performance artist Amaury Pacheco, who identifies as a ‘child of the Special Period’ (Aparicio, 2020) offers a frontal dive into his poetics of cacophony and stillness in post-Soviet Havana of the 1990s and early 2000s. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 – Cuba’s primary benefactor – marked the beginning of what Fidel Castro euphemistically decreed as the ‘Special Period in a time of peace’ (Henken, 2008), a state of economic emergency characterised by belt-tightening measures and constitutional reform that legalized private businesses, foreign investments and the circulation of the U.S. dollar. As the country’s lost subsidies from the Soviet bloc amounted to 84 percent of all trade, a ‘cohort-type consciousness based on the common experience of those years’ (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009: 2) shapes the sensorial atmosphere of these decades.

The first line of ‘FAST FOOD’ is the only one to reach a full stop marked by a period. The reader is faced with an absurd statement: ‘I, for one, in climax melted money and humanity answered.’ We begin with the climax, culminating in the poet-narrator burning money. In fact, this is the only line with a first-person account. The poem’s overture is an invitation to chaos; money has been melted (an echo to the ‘liquefied’ industries that come later) and this act caught the attention of all humankind. The poem opens with the ground falling from beneath our feet. The reader will soon regret not having caught a deeper breath before leaping into the next lines that provoke a rushed, turbulent, breathless repetition. The poem’s limited punctuation inflicts a rapid, almost breathless pace. The tongue sticks out, gasping for air in the middle of comma-less lines and reiterations. We encounter ‘fried’ boats, fried submarines and fried planes. In colloquial Cuban Spanish, frito also means that one is ‘done for’ or ‘fed up.’ In this sense, the fried submarines and planes evoke images of rusty, fuming, clanking vehicles washed away after years of overuse or disregard (both leading to the same ill fate of degradation). These war machines are now a little ‘done for’. The fast food tastes bitter – not greasy or filling – and evokes yet another missing piece of the machinery of the ‘Special Period’ quotidian where survival logic mocks moral duty.

After the fried military apparatuses, we move on to trains: trains of workers, trains of poets, paranoid and mystical trains. All of these events, the passing by of masses, conjures faceless bodies and faces – interchangeable poets and politicians and
workers. A blurry and hardly identifiable New Man represents all of those functions at once, embarking on a train in order to fulfil his revolutionary duty. These all ‘liquefy’ into the oil that is supposed to grease this dysfunctional and ‘fed up’ machine. After the trains, come the truckloads of melancholics and phlegmatics, all stopped in traffic.

This poem sets the tone for the contours of Pacheco’s cathartic artistic process; there is a need to evacuate, to shake off the rigidity of the machine, the absurdity of its productive burden, and, especially, a quest for stillness within the chaos. A machine that tries to put masses of people into cans, into the meat grinder where veal, salami, and seizures are crammed into a box with no label. These boxes without ‘sponsorship’ break up the clouded ambiance of the poem. Sponsorship is a precise and technical word in the middle of vagabonding adjectives. The lack of ‘mass sponsorship dipped in sauce in veal masses salami masses toasted masses to the brink of a stroke’, or absence of label, contrasts with the greyness of the landscape of this first stanza. Sponsorship recalls the violence of the linguistic repertoire of the U.S. Department of State that has been toying for decades with putting Cuba on and off the infamous ‘State sponsors of terrorism’ list. One of the final actions of the Trump administration before leaving office was putting Cuba back on the list of terrorism-sponsoring states (Crowley et al., 2021).

The poem’s first part is claustrophobic. The cadence without commas rouses the rush, the fast food conveyor belt where cans need to be filled, with anything, or anyone, to make sure the ‘revolution’ of the machine keeps on turning and turning. The word revolution never appears in the poem, yet its presence looms over. The revolution seeping through the lines is one stripped of its symbolism and naked in its physical materiality. It is the revolution of a turning wheel on a pavement: revolution as in ‘the instance of revolving’. There is a revolving, head-spinning quality, and when the head spins, it cannot think straight. This moving-forward-at-any-cost quality calls up the socialist realist imagery of the Soviet New Man, who – in spite of being maimed – still rises above the masses and continues limping forward towards the bright future of socialism (Kaganovskiy, 2008). Finally, the infernal repetition also calls to attention the fact that revolutionary uprisings and overthrows are by definition transitional and short, not sixty-year experiments. There is a distortion of the (unspoken but omnipresent) revolution and, along with it, a distortion of time.

The poem’s distortions of time and projections of exhaustion reminds of a metaphor used by the Cuban art critic and curator Dennys Matos in his analysis of the aesthetic
concerns of Cuban artists of the 2000s (Greiner and Hernández, 2019). He argues that artists of this generation respond to their context of ‘raulismo’ and post-communism through their work. *Raulismo* refers to the political and economic policies of Raúl Castro, who replaced his brother Fidel as president in 2006. His governance style was pragmatic and less impassioned than his brother’s; he implemented economic reforms that led to the unprecedented privatization of certain sectors, while, nonetheless, maintaining the regime’s socialist ideology (Brenner, 2015). In other words, *Raulismo* has been defined as a patchwork of capitalist reforms to keep the ailing socialist economy afloat. Matos paints this ideological backdrop of *raulismo* and post-communism through the expressive imagery of a ‘social Frankenstein’: ‘The tensions that the regime toys with, between change and restoration, liberalization and conservativism, have turned the [body of the revolution] into a type of social Frankenstein where the holes of its worn-down totalitarian communist body are covered up with capitalist patches’ (Greiner & Hernandez, 2019: 136). Matos sees such monstrous aesthetics in the work of artists like Fabian Peña’s *Frozen Flight* (2008), a Cuban flag composed of insect wings, nylon string and fishing nets.

The giant, patched-up monster, or the frozen flag unable to flap in the wind because it lies tangled in fishing nets at the bottom of the Florida strait – along with other lost *balseros* – join the rush of faceless workers, politicians, and poets, all packed onto the train of endless revolutions.

In the last line of the first stanza, the poet relieves us of this tumbling and spinning by speaking to the reader for the first time: ‘And now bear it... contain it... breathe without affliction easing off tensions and allow gas to liberate industry’. He grants us time to catch our breath with the introduction of a few ellipses. The poet asks us to make one last effort of containment, of letting the waste build up before a satisfying ‘release’: ‘industry’.

The fried food is a mirage, a distant dream, like Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s paintings of empty candy wrappers where the trash and sticky fingers become vestiges

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5 My translation of ‘Las tensiones que experimenta el régimen entre cambiar o restaurar, entre liberalizar o conservar provocan que su cuerpo se torne en una especie de Frankenstein social donde los huecos del derrengado cuerpo totalitario comunista son tapados con “ parches” capitalistas.’

6 *Balseros* is the terms used to refer to Cubans who attempt to emigrate the U.S. on makeshift rafts and vessels by crossing the 90 miles that separate Cuba and the tip southern of Florida through the Florida Strait. The crossing is extremely dangerous, and many perish during the journey.
of a craving. The large-scale representations of candy wrappers constitute a series called *Caramelos sin saliva* [Candies without saliva] that Otero Alcántara exhibited in his home in April 2021. These imposing paintings of American candy and chocolate brands reconfigure shared sensorial frameworks. Their form and composition, with bright colours that mostly stem from a pallet of primary colours, explode visually, especially in contrast with the bare walls of Otero’s home. They are generous and empowering. By dedicating his artistic capabilities to copying, with exactitude, candy wrappers that littered the streets of his childhood, the paintings become public monuments to intimate longings. M&Ms and Nesquik were – and remain so today – treats unavailable to most children as they tend to be sold solely in stores that trade in the dollar currency\(^7\). Otero recalls picking up these pieces of plastic when he was a child to sniff and lick remnants of the melted chocolate and savour the last few grains of sugar, providing him with insights into the parallel reality of ‘the Cuba for tourists’. The wrappers were prized treasures that served as currency in children’s playdates.

In our conversation from June 2021 about the paintings, Otero told me the story of a boy in his class whose father worked at a tourist hotel and who would bring home the wrappers he dug up from trashcans. The boy progressively built an extensive collection of these wrappers that he would barter to girls at school in exchange for kisses. These wrappers became vessels into another experience, the sound of the crumpling cellophane and chemical smell of the hot pink bubble gum transporting him into nearby world of abundance.

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\(^7\) In 1994, the government introduced a new currency called the Cuban Convertible Peso or CUC to deal with the lack of hard currency after the fall of the Soviet Union. This CUC was introduced to replace the circulation of U.S. dollars on the black market. Tourists and Cubans with family abroad could have access to this currency and buy goods in newly instated stores that only traded in CUC. Subsidized goods were reserved for Cubans who could buy them in the stores that sold in the national Cuban peso currency, known as CUP. However, this dual currency system gradually led to a dollarization of the economy, with the CUC becoming the prized currency with much stronger buying power: stores in CUC are always better equipped and sell goods that cannot be found in CUP. The dual currency has aggravated the rift between people who have access to dollars and those who only subside on their State salaries. Since the start of the pandemic, most imported, basic goods were only sold in the CUC stores while state-markets often remained empty. To respond to growing discontent around food shortages and inflation at the end of 2020, the government started the process of reunifying the two currencies, which has come into full effect in July 2021.
By blowing up and turning these pieces of trash into intricate paintings, Otero is tapping into a shared experience, a ‘community of senses’ (Rancière, 2008) in which children and adults from the San Isidro neighbourhood can call up taste and odour memories, like alumni of this unique sensorial ‘cohort’ (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009b). In terms of their scale, the paintings echo the abundance of sugar, their copious format doing justice to the space they filled in the imagination. They become an ode to children’s lustful currencies and epicurean daydreams.

The flashy American candies incarnate a dignified over-exaggeration of a longing to tap into a world of consumption that is extremely close in proximity, but remains parallel in dimension. This inaccessible familiarity, just like the FAST FOOD, articulates the conflicting socio-spatial closeness and remoteness between Cuba and the United States. In this way, the paintings materialize a parallel world – and economy
– that exists just blocks away from San Isidro, in the UNESCO World Heritage corners of Old Havana with air-conditioned and fully stoked stores that sell these treasured treats to dollar-bearing tourists.

Otero’s paintings permit what Jacques Rancière calls a ‘political redistribution of shared experience’ (Rancière, 2004: 17) for which the principle behind such a redistribution is forms of ‘making and doing’ (what to him constitutes art) that bring forth ‘figures of community equal to themselves’ (ibid). The giant paintings provide an experience in which the smiling rabbit, unabashedly slurping on bright pink strawberry milk, reconfigures the framework of the visible and sayable. It emerges as another possibility for existing in relation to shared memories. The rabbit looking down at the two children becomes a confidant of sorts within the space of the painting. The memories that these paintings of candy wrappers evoke – or what they signify to children who come into contact with them today – take on new meaning liberated from a ‘relationship of necessity’ between form and content (Rancière, 2005: 19). There is a potential for new sensible forms of experience in the Caramelos. By elevating the trash into a painting that can be experienced just as that – a painting – these artworks redistribute the sensible. They become the rift between the individual recollection of these candies and their collective significance, and potentially bring on new subjects who previously had no part in the framework in which the candies inscribed themselves in the first place. The wrappers that call up memories of exclusion, of lack, of private (yet collective) longing, distort the sensorial relationship that they are meant to evoke by metamorphosing into tropes of wonder and belonging. The mischievous rabbit is saying, ‘I see you!’

There is an echo between the capitalized FAST FOOD and Otero’s generous paintings, the abundance provided by the caps lock letters and oversized canvases resorbs their nutritional privation. A way to honour the imagination, nourish the spirit, and generate a salivating visual experience. In this way, the poem and paintings provide a transcending satisfaction of cravings, by substituting the comestible with the aesthetic. The transcendental quality of the aesthetic space echoes urban legends from the Special Period where it was said that pizza was cooked with melted condoms to replace unlocatable cheese, which anthropologist Hernandez-Reguant describes as constitutive elements of the ‘Special Period experience’:

Raising pigs in bathtubs, making omelettes without eggs and pizzas with melted condoms, getting married for the state-allocated free case of beer, and other epic tales
of survival, seldom void of black humor, form the lore of the time (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009: 1-2).

The second stanza of FAST FOOD centres upon time and its distortions. Time being the antithesis to the rush of fast food. In the middle of these references to metallic ‘things’ – sulphur and iron - the verb ‘to sprout’ appears. To our wonder, what sprouts are nothing less than worlds and suns. In the following line, the poet turns affectionate by including the reader ‘time breathing for us to go together and inhale the new expansions’, which is the first and only introduction to a sense of togetherness that contrasts with lifeless repetitions of indistinguishable masses. Breathing and sprouting in the middle of the trucks, trains, fried submarines. Breath no longer needs to be contained but can be let go through exhalation, ‘expansion’ – there is hope for communion, and hope for new, biological life amidst the knots and bolts. Just like the sound of motors, industrial gases and railway tracks that repeat themselves, so does breath and time pass, and repeat. It is the machine versus the natural cycles of life. The machine whose repetitive cycle leads to an arthritis, a degradation of its systems, whereas the repetition of breath is a cycle of regeneration. Finally, we arrive at a time where there are no particles: levitation. The silence of the sprouting sun and its intensifying light invite the particles to sit still.

II. Situating Pacheco’s practice

The 1980s marked the decade of ‘New Cuban Art’ where artists born and raised during the revolution came of age. This new era began with the inauguration of the collective exhibit, Volumen Uno in 1981 that would shape the expressive and aesthetic concerns of this generation: move away from defending the political project and focus on expressing complex social realities (Camnitzer, 2003). During this decade, artists enjoyed relative access to power (Fernandes, 2020), which is partly due to the government’s efforts in putting Cuba on the global map as a major art centre through the founding of the Havana Biennale in 1984, the first international art event taking place outside of the global North (Checa-Gismero, 2018). It was an attempt to ‘queer’ the biennales, in the words of the festival’s co-founder Gerardo’s Mosquera, and summon new cultural subjects by reflecting on transnational, multicultural and diasporic identities (Mosquera, 2001). The first two editions of the biennales sought to decentre art and promote artists from the ‘Third World’ (Camnitzer, 2003, Rojas-
During the 1980s, the boundaries of criticism within the art world were tested through what political scientist Yvon Grenier (2018) calls an intricate ‘dance’ between provocation and restraint that artists engaged in with cultural authorities. Growing economic hardships in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s would embolden collectives of artists who led ‘the way in raising for public discussion the taboo subjects of corruption, dogmatism, cult of personality, lack of democracy and so on’ (Weiss, 2016). At the same time, other artists set their sights on recently accessible international art markets and sought opportunities abroad.

The Special Period was a time during which survival logic vanquished ideological allegiance, leading to a reshuffling of priorities. In the middle of multi-layered experiences of exile, exhaustion, and disempowerment emerged alternative movements and collectives that sat at the margins of cultural institutions, and whose practices focused on public interventions and performance (Fusco, 2015). These groups endeavoured to shed light on the dysfunctions of the Cuban social body through a revisiting of collective subjectivities and communities. For instance, the hip-hop movement that emerged in the 1990s was instrumental in providing Afro-Cuban youth with a new grammar and forms of representation that helped name the lived experience of racism (Saunder, 2012). Indeed, discussions around race and racial belonging have been taboo in the revolutionary landscape because of Castro’s promise that socialism would eradicate racism. Nonetheless, various studies have demonstrated that this is far from being the case, with Afro-Cubans making up the majority of the prison population or facing labour discrimination in the lucrative tourism industry (Fuente, 2001, Allen, 2011, Fuente, 2019). As the ethnographer, Sujantha Fernandes (2020: 48) describes:

The art collectives relied strongly on a notion of self-knowledge and personal exploration. Their interpretation of the collective relied on an understanding of how communities sustained individual growth. Members of art collectives in Havana saw the values of community and individual self-cultivation as contrasting markedly with the ideas of individualism being introduced by the art market.

This focus on community as a space for personal growth was a way to navigate a social space of contradicting narratives, in which the ideals of a socialist utopia upheld by the regime clashed with an emergence of free-market reforms – notably through the legalization of the dollar. These contradictions have shaped the subjectivities of Cubans who have internalised them through a practice known colloquially as doble.
moral, or ‘double moral’: singing the revolution’s praises in public whilst lamenting about the regime behind closed doors. In her ethnography on the collective OMNI Zona Franca, the political scientist Marie-Laure Geoffray (2012: 181) recounts a common joke among Cubans: ‘I’m looking for a doctor who treats eyes and ears because I have a problem: I don’t see what I hear. Is that bad?’ (Geoffray, 2012: 181, my translation from French). This state of ironic hallucination feeds the praxis of Amaury Pacheco both in his poetry and in his work with the collective OMNI Zona Franca, and energises a moral quest for finding truth and liberation through an articulation of the trilogy he identifies as that of the citizen, person, and individual.

III. Juan Carlos Flores and the Black kung-fu Master

In a 2020 podcast interview with the journalist José Luis Aparicio for the independent Cuban media El Rialta, Amaury Pacheco talks about his process as an artist and poet since he founded the art-performance alternative collective OMNI Zona Franca in 1997. His main concern when leaving military school in his twenties was to find a way to overcome the paradox between the Marxist teachings he received at the academy and the everyday realities of Cubans in the streets. The shock of the contradiction between the narrative of revolution and equality, and the hardships of everyday life, prompted him to undertake a spiritual, individual, collective, and citizen quest for a tool to articulate this paradox. The tool in question was poetry. A formative influence in this process has been the poet Juan Carlos Flores whom he met in poetry workshops at the ‘Casa de la Cultura’ in the city of Alamar. They both settled into this city as adults. The city’s streets and neighbours would become their muse, community, and creative force behind their poetical imaginaries.

Alamar rests six miles east of Havana. Designed by Soviet architects, the residential city is composed of identical five to six story buildings of prefabricated blocks that were built by ‘microbrigades’ of ordinary people, often the future residents of the tenements. While the housing complex was first conceived before the revolution in 1959, its construction was accelerated in the 1970s in an effort to respond to housing shortages in Havana and relocate (majorly Black) Cubans who lived in slums. The identical apartment complexes have been nicknamed ‘Siberia’ by their occupants, an allusion to the sombre and impersonal architecture (Morucci, 2006, Satora, 2007). In the podcast interview, Pacheco describes Alamar as a place where ‘the buildings are

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as ugly as decrees.’ The different areas of the city are demarcated by zones with assigned numbers and letters (i.e. D 42, Zona 2) and the city bears a population of 300,000 residents, which makes it the world’s largest housing complex (Fernandes, 2020: 62-63). Removed from the capital, residents of Alamar were particularly hit by the economic crisis of the Special Period’ because of their isolation from the lucrative, dollar tourism economy that emerged in the 1990s, and opportunities for black market businesses that kept many people afloat in the Capital. Furthermore, petrol shortages reduced transportation and exacerbated this isolation. In the documentary Alamar Express directed by Patrycja Satora (2007), Pacheco and other members of the collective remember that these times of crisis prompted people to seek creative and spiritual renovation, it was a time of explosive creativity. In fact, Alamar is considered the birthplace of Cuban hip-hop in the early 1990s (Fernandes, 2006). Pacheco and Flores have become key members in articulating the emergent and emancipating movement with other art forms such as the visual arts and poetry (Geoffray, 2018).

Honouring Juan Carlos Flores’ poetics is necessary for situating Pacheco’s artistic development. Flores was consumed by poetry, it was therapy that helped him cope with his darker moments. Nonetheless, he died by suicide on September 2016 in his Alamar tenement. It was the final straw of his poetics of destruction, of stripping the word, and the poetic existence down to its bare state.

Born in 1962, Flores was an ‘established’ poet in the sense that he was a member of Cuba’s National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC). Membership to this Union is only granted to about one third of artists in the country and comes with precious privileges such as a monthly stipend, and access to employment in state-run publishing and arts institutions (Weiss, 2009). His first published book of poetry, Los pajaros escritos [The Birds] was awarded the David Prize of new creative talents in 1990, while his second, Distintos Modos de Cavar un Túnel [Different Ways to Build a Tunnel] won the prestigious Julián del Casals prize in 2002 (Flores, 2016). Despite this recognition by the country’s ‘official’ intellectual circles, he considered himself an outsider and sought to deviate from highbrow rhetoric and move closer to reflecting the mundanity of daily life in Alamar. Salván (2018), in her analysis of Flores’ work, describes his poetic journey as a quest towards the anti-metaphor. Indeed, his first book was rich with verbose metaphor and complex syntax. While his last, El Contragolpe [The Counterpunch] is a celebration of semantic absence, of all the ‘stuff’ that exists between the lines. He would eventually come to disown his first book that
inscribed itself within the tradition of Lezama Lima and the *Origines* group of poets from the pre-revolution era of 1944-1952 (Weiss, 2009).

The raw material for Flores’ prose poetry in his last two books is his beloved and dilapidated Alamar. He celebrates dumpster divers, Black kung-fu Masters, sex workers in their tiny shorts, and all other ‘deviant’ creatures. Flores was concerned about life of the shadows, seeking through his poetry to give centre stage to the New Man’s many ghosts. His last book of poems, *The Counterpunch (and Other Horizontal Poems)* is a series of micro fictions taking place in five ‘peanut galleries’. The poems are repetitive, impersonal and cyclical with a monotonous cadence. The horizontal verses align with the horizontal real-estate that characterizes Alamar’s architecture of identical tenements with chipped white paint. Flores’ reiterations mimic the landscape of the utopian city that has fallen into a state of decrepitude. His word associations are sometimes dysfunctional and lopsided, like tenements with shaky foundations.

Scholar of Latin American literature, Esther Whitfield, loosely borrows John Barth’s concept of ‘literature of exhaustion’ (Barth, 1995) to qualify Cuban literature of the Special Period and post-Soviet Cuba. In her analysis of novels and short stories by the likes of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez or YOSS, she describes the Special Period as ‘a category of experience’ defined by ‘physical and ideological depletion’ (Whitfield, 2011: 28). The writings centre on the body and its confrontations with scarcity, sexual cravings, filth, and depravation. While Whitfield only focuses on prose, a similar state of exhaustion radiates from Flores’ poems as he makes his way through the streets of Alamar. The poem ‘Mea culpa for Tomas’ (Flores, 2016: 17), for instance, aptly portrays this banal brutality of the everyday and the state of ideological and moral void of the period:

Tomas, kid from the Soviet Union, whom we called “bowling-pin head,” because he ate better than we did, let’s smack “bowling-pin head,” because he dressed better than we did, smack “bowling-ping head,” because he had better toys than we did, smack “bowling-ping head,” because he got better grades than we did, smack “bowling-ping head,” so no girl would look at him, smack “bowling-ping head.” Next to Tomas I think we all felt a little bit Czech.

Tomás, niño venido de la Unión Soviética, a quien nosotros llamábamos "cabeza de bolo". porque se alimentaba mejor que nosotros, a golpear a "cabeza de bolo", porque se vestía mejor que nosotros, a golpear a "cabeza de bolo", porque tenía mejores juguetes que nosotros, a golpear a "cabeza de bolo", porque sacaba
mejores notas que nosotros, a golpear a "cabeza de bolo", para que ninguna niña lo mirase, a golpear a "cabeza de bolo". Creo que frente a Tomás, todos nos sentíamos un poco checos.

The insularity of Flores’ poetry also reflects this ‘Special Period experience’ (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009a) where escape from the everyday was impossible and particularly exacerbated in Alamar. Writings from this period have an intense focus on details, the promiscuity with neighbours, a claustrophobic escape that comes through the form of meticulous attention to the cracks and dusty street corners of the city. The more Flores’ physical world waned to a few kilometres around his home (a perimeter that decreased at the rate of his psychological state’s decline), the more his poetry grew in specificity. His poems had to be experienced, just like walking the streets of a bustling yet worn-down city can only be experienced with all senses on high alert. This is why he insisted on reading his work aloud, on performing his writing. Flores collaborated with Pacheco and OMNI in recording poetry readings with jazz musicians. Lizabel Monica, a scholar and friend of Flores, describes his poetry as developing a ‘worldview anchored in space’ (Monica, 2018: 30):

Juan Carlos wanted us to sit in the peanut gallery because it is the best place to read about homeless people, sex workers, and a person with Down syndrome, among other characters from his poems. He wanted us to be in a cheek-by-jowl situation with people we usually see from a distance. What Juan Carlos loved the most about Alamar’s amphitheatre was that the structure of the place annihilated class distinctions among the audience. He was convinced that the horizontal, open structure you can see in the photos could serve his poetry better than any tidy cultural institution.

Flores was looking for his voice throughout his entire life, and this process of looking comes alive in his unpolished, draft-like poems (Salvan, 2018). In rare video footage of him speaking during an event at the independent cultural centre in Havana, Estado de Sats, he makes an observation that seems to encapsulate the very epistemology of the poet (TVSats, 2011). While commenting on the saying ‘time is money’ that defines a capitalist world, he concludes by affirming that, his job as a poet, is to be against nothing. The poet is never ‘against’. The affective engagement with the invisible, unsaid, and quotidian that poetry making requires does not provide space for contrarian blockage. Emotions do not discriminate between ideological concepts; they are called up no matter what. ‘Not being against anything’ does not mean being apolitical, and as Weiss (2016) demonstrates in his anthology of Cuban poetry, the apolitical in Cuba is itself a political stance. In fact, Flores’ politics are unmistakable as he renders Alamar’s inhabitants the stars of his micro fictions without romance or
delusion. However, what Flores’ provocation indicates is that ‘being against’ simply renders the affective and ethnographic role of the poet superfluous. This brief discussion about the poet’s role of not being against is key in making sense of Pacheco’s own articulation of artistic processes with morality, community and citizenry.

As we will soon explore in a voyage through one of Pacheco’s Facebook livestream, poetry as a posture is a guiding principle that underlines and expands his activism, and by extension, that of the San Isidro Movement. Encountering Pacheco’s poetics helps to understand his practice as an activist, which stems from another register of senses than the politics of anti-Castro groups that have dominated the opposition landscape for decades. Indeed, by focusing their lens on the ordinary and the everyday, the poet and performer are revealing the state of their condition and nature to themselves, hence bypassing the constrictive framework of ideological manifestation to unveil the deeper malaise of their limited agency. Pacheco endeavours to demonstrate his and our potential in dreaming up what a full and good life would entail. This is the moral implication behind the activism of the San Isidro Movement, a moral landscape that artistic expression is best positioned to articulate.

The kiss (Flores, 2016: 37)
Long is the night and at dawn’s crimson gates I say to myself: if I had a guitar between my hands, I wouldn’t be Silvio Rodríguez, or Chico Buarque, or Bob Dylan, or Bob Marley. Not ballad, or zamba, or blues, or reggae. Not Cuba, or Brazil, or the US, or Jamaica. I would be a remote and anonymous man, from a remote and anonymous place, singing a remote and anonymous song. Mother, I need you, mother, I love you, I don’t think I’ll ever learn how to lace my own shoes.

El beso
Larga la noche y frente a las puertas rojas del amanecer me digo: si yo tuviera entre mis manos la guitarra, no sería: Silvio Rodríguez, ni Chico Buarque, ni Bob Dylan, ni Bob Marley. Ni trova, ni zamba, ni blues, ni Reggae. Ni Cuba, ni Brasil, ni Estados Unidos, ni Jamaica. Sería un hom-bre anónimo y remoto, de un lugar anónimo y remoto, cantando una Canción anónima y remota. Madre, te necesito, madre, te amo, creo que Jamás podre aprender a acordonarme los zapatos.

The poem’s lethargic monotony brings to light a lone man sitting on that balcony, sleepless, humming distant familiar folk songs, looking out at the crepuscule and longing for a kiss. Not an erotic but motherly kiss. The motherly kiss being the ultimate...
absolution from sorrow. The imperfect subjunctive of ‘si yo tuviera’ or ‘if I had’ marks the absence of that guitar, a dreamy abandonment to that impossibility, an amused titillation of the unattainable. Here we sense Flores’ ‘worldview anchored in space’ (Monica, 2016) where these famous folk singers, in spite of their naming in comparison to the ‘remote and anonymous man’, are actually the ones in the distance, these foregone mirages whose grandiosity does not line up neatly with the inner worlds of remote and anonymous men. The poem calls to mind a photograph in which the rules of composition are flipped. The background is clear and sharp, whereas the foreground centres on a blurry and dark figure. The remote and anonymous man is close, we can touch him and hear his whispered shout. The peripheral Alamar takes centre stage.

There is a religious echo in the last two lines: a prayer for a mother who is not there to witness the kneeling down gesture of lacing shoes (or failing to), which contrasts with the monumental naming of Nation-States and Revolutionary-Singers. Silvio Rodriguez, Chico Buarque, Bob Dylan and Bob Marley: modern heroes, effigies of the dispossessed, symbols of revolutions. Famous adult men whose notoriety made them important and concerned by adult preoccupations. By contrast, Flores’ remote and anonymous man is a universal, fragile ‘us’, who in his solitude contemplates his most ancient secret: he will never cease to be a child in need of affection. The abrupt, matter-of-fact dimension of the last line begs for a soft release, an opening towards a glimmer of light. Flores’ poetry can be cruel like that.

‘The kiss’ bears the heavy weight of utopia and the burden of the New Man ideal. Themes that implicitly drive the praxis of Flores’ poems and Pacheco’s work. Indeed, Alamar’s architecture during its 1970s revival was built to reflect the ideological model of the Cuban Socialist New Man advanced by Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara in his ‘Socialism and Man in Cuba’ manifesto, published in 1965 (2008). This long pamphlet lays down Guevara’s roadmap for building a socialist society. He advances that the revolutionary process requires a disentanglement with the corrupt past, meaning that there needs to be an ‘internal revolution following an external one’. In other words, the revolutionary process is simultaneously ideological, technological and individual. It includes instilling – through education and social duty – the heroic qualities of the ‘vanguard’ (Fidel Castro’s army of guerrilla fighters who stormed Havana in 1959) to the ‘less ideologically evolved’ masses. The new human being will have ‘total commitment to the revolutionary cause’ and will ‘perpetuate in daily life these heroic attitudes’. The
construction of the New Man requires a coordinated change of education and consciousness that feed each other by establishing new values where ‘society as a whole must become a gigantic school.’ (Guevara, 2008: 7) However, Guevara warns that this process is long and always unfinished, that acquiring the ideological wisdom of the vanguard might never be attained and requires an absolute sacrifice to the revolutionary process. The discourse is one in which time is distorted. The past is obsessively scrutinized as an evil to exorcise from the individual, and the future is near but impalpable:

In this period of the construction of socialism, we can see the new man being born. His image is as yet unfinished; in fact, it will never be finished, for the process advances parallel to the development of new economic forms. Discounting those whose lack of education makes them tend toward the solitary road, toward the satisfaction of their ambitions, there are others who, even within this new panorama of overall advances, tend to march in isolation from the accompanying mass. What is important is that men acquire more awareness every day of the need to incorporate themselves into society, and, at the same time, of their importance as motors of that society. (Guevara, 2008: 7).

In this exposé of the New Man, there is no room for deviation. The New Man is expected to commit his daily life to the revolutionary struggle and, by so doing, will be liberated from the alienating shackles of capitalism. The expectation of such a task inspires a precautious state of exhaustion, by not being able to fulfil such an unattainable ideal, where self-actualization is sacrificed on the altar of the collective.

Reading Guevara’s text helps make sense of both the ontological conceptualisation of the revolutionary experience from above and the existential void that comes with not living up to such a life of sacrifice, especially for those living in a city whose very architecture was engineered to (re)produce the Guevarian-Marxist making of the New Man. One of the tenements’ panoptic designs includes elevators that stop running between 11 pm and 6 am to control inhabitants’ day, down to their sleeping cycles (Morucci, 2006). Residents of Alamar were selected based on their revolutionary qualities and were scrutinized for their potential ‘anti-revolutionary tendencies’, such as a practicing a religion (Satora, 2007). The fact that those who moved into the housing complex during the relocation campaign of the 1970s were part of the microbrigades that build these homes, attests to this notion of sacrifice, of the ordinary individual ‘incorporating himself’ and becoming a motor of the new socialist society. Being citizens of a city that was built to construct and reproduce the New Man, the poet and poet-performer articulate the anguish of their failed metamorphosis. Flores does so through a mind-numbing expression of this ideological claustrophobia. While
Pacheco, both as an individual poet and member of the collective OMNI Zona Franca, endeavours to replenish individuality in the communitarian experience. There is a need to validate the quotidian experience of those whose subjectivities do not align with this burden of revolutionary duty, and provide regenerative path for articulating moral values that sit below and beyond of the New Man’s obligations.

Geoffray (2012: 183) in her analysis of OMNI Zona Franca’s work offers a compelling framework for situating their performances. She argues that they established a ‘cognitive alignment’ of the revolutionary experience through a denunciation and description of the complicated everyday. She illustrates this with the example of an ominous performance by Pacheco in 2003 in which he staged a suicide by hanging from a building in Alamar. He is wearing a large overcoat onto which newspaper clippings from the national paper Granma and consumer products are attached. Geoffray (2012: 182) describes: ‘between individual survival logic and historical orders of surrendering to the collective revolutionary project, this individual did not find his place’. The hanging man is an image of that effacement of the individual, who deviated from the route towards the new society, who could not live up to the heroic qualities expected of him. The New Man being a homogeneous soldier/worker/man/woman who has no room for eccentricities, coquetry, or singing songs about his mother. Seen through this prism, the graphic image of the hanging man is a cleansing expression of this internalised failure, it becomes a subversive provocation of the revolutionary project, and a representation of the postmodern condition of the ‘post-post’ ideological void (Whitfield, 2011).

When Amaury Pacheco says that his conversations with Juan Carlos Flores propelled him into a real, concrete tradition of poetry as a tool for articulating life, time, and social realities, he announces being born, as a poet, in the light of Flores (Aparicio, 2020). Flores’ poetry was destruction (Salvan, 2018). His poetic experience sought to reflect the realities of the post-modern, post-soviet experience departing from his musings around a small fragment of the city. He strove to peal the different layers of metaphorical language to reach a raw word where ‘if we put all the lost parts together, it would inventory the absence of man’ (Flores, 2016: 85). Flores found inspiration in his surroundings, paid close attention to details and listened with intensity, to bring it all inwards, internally. His all-consuming existence of poetry was a subversive act, a tending to the intimate and the psyche, and nourishing the emotional toll of the difficult motion of simply going through life. There is a constant tension, like a flamenco dancer,
whose gracious movements, in their severity, never allows for an unwinding, tempting the bull without ever clashing. Whereas Pacheco’s poetics begin inwards to be expanded outwards, to others, to community, and vice versa. He seeks regeneration through that destruction. Pacheco’s poetics provide climax, cacophony, but that always stem from deep focus. However discordant his poems might seem – and his performances with the collective OMNI Zona Franca – there is always a common thread, a steady metronome like a Buddhist mantra or bata drum\(^8\) beating in the background.

### IV. Reinstating the metaphor in the streets

That percussion-like metronome will accompany Pacheco’s poetics over the decades of his artistic and social engagement. Fast-forward twenty years to November 14, 2020. Pacheco is in his early fifties and, just like nearly one third of Cubans, now has Internet access on his phone thanks to the recent implementation of 3G mobile Internet in December 2018 (Henken, 2020). Over the last decades, many of his friends and colleagues have emigrated, while he has remained in his ‘zona’ in Alamar with his family. In 2016, Pacheco met Yanelys Núñez Leyva and Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, with whom he resumed – and updated – the conversations he was having through Flores and OMNI Zona around art as a social tool for restoring individuality, citizenry and community. Together, they collaborated by organising Cuba’s first alternative Biennale in May 2018 and campaigning against the draconian Decree 349, implemented later that same year (Amnesty International, 2018).\(^9\) The new law requires artists to receive approval by the Ministry of Culture to conduct any form of

\(^8\) A percussion instrument played during religious ceremonies by practitioners of Santería, an Afro-Cuban syncretic religion prevalent in Cuba.

\(^9\) According to Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, the Decree 349, which was implemented without any concertation with civil society in December 2018 came as a response to the group’s launch of Cuba’s first alternative biennale in May 2018. The decree stipulates that any form of artistic operation not authorised by the proper cultural authorities cannot take place, hence institutionalising a form of control on artistic production that is unprecedented in the country. The campaign against the Decree was also the first of its kind, where artists, journalists, and activists joined forces to implement a vast protest and social media campaign against it: from staging performances, producing video content, writing letters to the Ministry of Culture, touring internationally among various human rights organisations to denounce the law, and organising extensively on social media around hashtags such as #no349 or #noaldecreto349. The campaign against the Decree, it could be argued, fomented an organised community of young artists and intellectuals who learned the codes of activism. It is this campaign that led to the official creation of the San Isidro Movement in December 2018.
artistic activity, thereby outlawing independent artistic production. The fruit of these collaborations – that Núñez Leyva and Otero Alcántara, have expressed in interviews as being constitutive of their own spiritual, artistic and civic journey – resulted in the formation of the San Isidro Movement in late December 2018.

In its inception, the movement began as a small group of mostly artists and cultural actors who used art as a vehicle for protecting and defending freedoms. Like Otero Alcántara and Núñez Leyva, Pacheco is now operating in a social reality marked by increased police repression. He and his family have been placed on the list of ‘regulados’: citizens who are considered a risk to national security by Cuban authorities and whose right to travel has been relinquished. It is estimated that around 200 people are included on that list (Escobar, 2019). Since 2016, police violence and repression has extended beyond the realm of the psychological to the physical. Activists and artists are subjected to constant surveillance and stints of house arrest. Pacheco no longer benefits from the umbrella of ‘vanguard art’ that he enjoyed in the 1990s and early 2000s and which protected him from being labelled a ‘dissident’, a designation that ultimately leads individuals to their ‘social death’ (Fusco, 2015) by being ostracized through job loss and smear campaigns fabricated by the government (Alvarez, 2020a).

On this sunny autumn day, Pacheco is live streaming, on Facebook, a peaceful ‘poetic murmur’ or vigil in front of the police station where he suspects activists are being detained for staging a sit-in. Earlier that week, a rapper and friend of the San Isidro Movement, Denis Solís, was arrested, charged with ‘contempt’ and sentenced to eight months in prison through an expedited trial (Carrazana, 2020). Protesting the unlawfulness of the trial’s process, activists – led by Otero Alcántara – organised spontaneous and peaceful poetry readings in public places around the Havana. These public interventions, that they named Susurro poetico [Poetic Murmur] were met with more detentions and arrests.

It looks to be around mid-day and, in the first part of the forty-two minute long video, Pacheco is walking alongside another member of the San Isidro Movement towards the police station. His long and greying beard contrasts with his deep blue t-shirt. He is wearing large reading glasses with buzz-cut hair, the black cloth facemask looks a

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10 For example, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, has been arbitrarily detained dozens of times, including a month-long, coerced hospital stay in April 2021 following a hunger strike in response to police violence (officers stormed his home to destroy his Caramelo paintings).
bit tight around his full cheeks, and it keeps slipping from his chin back onto his mouth as he speaks. We are in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, and wearing masks in public is mandatory (Acosta, 2022).

Pacheco walks with his phone in one hand with the camera turned towards him and in the other, he is holding Juan Carlos Flores’ second book, *Distinctos modos de cavar un tunel*. He announces his intention to live stream for as long as possible, until the police arrest them, and will be ‘reading and reading and reading poems’ from Flores’ book. ‘This is an act, Pacheco tells his followers, that helps us become individuals, people, and citizens; the ‘magic trilogy’ that he will refer to repeatedly. The ruffling green leaves of the tree behind him and the rumbling sound in the microphone indicate the hot Caribbean wind blowing in full force. There is also an air of music in the background coming from loudspeakers, maybe a public gathering organised by the government? It sounds too loud to be from someone’s home. Despite the apparent agitation on his face as he shifts from looking at the phone, glancing at his surroundings regularly, responding to comments on the live stream, and greeting his friends who have tuned in, he prepares himself for the mission at hand: reading poetry until he no longer can. Pacheco’s masterful dance of finding focus (through poetry) amidst the cacophony is unfolding before our very eyes. He opens the book and starts with a poem called ‘Totem’ by Juan Carlos, which he reads with concentration. He does not comment. As the first reading of the live stream, he concentrates on the words and rhythm, that he appropriates full-heartedly, marks pensive pauses and allows the words to take on their guttural texture. Pacheco’s poise indicates that reciting poetry is a regular practice. His voice oozes confidence; it does not tremble though it remains generous in its sensitivity. We are experiencing this first poem, and Pacheco embraces us in the safety of the aesthetic space. He explains that reading poetry feeds him and helps him to ‘cultivate his operative poetics’. He sprinkles such contemplative phrases as he continues striding determinedly towards the police station. Pacheco does not speak in statements but rather offers suggestions, openings, propositions, and provocations. His poetics is about bringing in and expelling out, there is no imprisonment or ‘sloganization’ (Bourriaud, 2001), but rather an invitation – he plants seeds through the form of words, and associations, repeated in a cyclical process.

‘I know that poetry is a direct prayer for all Cubans who are in prison, who suffer the calamities and horrors of these dreadful cells, here with poetry, I think that we can
clean […] we are warriors of peace’. He paraphrases the poet Lizama Lima – one of Flores’ early influences – who wrote about celebration, and insists that the present moment is ‘an unmentionable party’. In his meditation, he repeats the important trilogy that poetry helps to bring out in people: individual, person, citizen. That the non-monolithic ‘opposition’ is, first and foremost, men and women who did things before his time and that have opened the way to him to do his share, and then for others to follow suit in the future. His path has been to put all of his power in San Isidro: ‘we are dangerously getting closer to each other through poetry’.

‘Careful with the poet, said the poet, because he can speak to God. And careful with the citizen who can also speak to God’.

Marina by Juan Carlos Flores
The galleon (that borders the coast) is not a galleon although it seems a galleon. The galleon (that borders the coast) is not a galleon although it seems a galleon. ‘The galleon’ is the replica of a galleon (Salvan, 2018: 72)¹¹

Marina
El galeón (que bordea la costa) no es un galeón aunque parezca un galeón.
‘The galleon’ is the replica of a galleon (Salvan, 2018: 72)¹¹

This poem enunciated through Pacheco’s firm tone, as he articulates each word with the adept precision of a pianist, shines in its absurdity. He grins wholeheartedly after enunciating the last ‘galleon’ and says, ‘The illusion, the daily hallucination that is daily life in Cuba, that’s what this poem is about […] our collective hallucination, we need to learn to see with the eyes of our spirits, to see with the eyes of citizens’. Then he goes on to ponder about the ‘grunt work’ of activism, which consists in the small ‘things’, in one little action after another to slowly rid ourselves and each other of our – in his words – ‘mental colonialism’.

Two poems in and Pacheco is in a trance. The anxiety from the beginning of the live stream is slowly dissipating even though the surrounding commotion escalates. Several of his friends around interrupt him to point to the military trucks that are appearing as back up; the apparatus around the police station intensifies. He struggles

¹¹ This poem was translated by Salvan (2018) in her article Language Adrift: The poetics of Juan Carlos Flores.
to regain focus when attempting to read ‘La Cigarra’ by Flores, he receives pings on his phone, people are speaking over each other around him, there seems to be a clamour taking place outside of the camera’s frame. After two attempts, he finally manages to read Flores’ short poem about a cicada whose song amplifies the poet’s inability to sing (or speak).

The cicada
The cicada sings and to sing is the unique sense of the song: these are of course the words of another. I am not a cicada. Neither do I have a voice. I am not a cicada, but I would like to be one, sometimes. (Salvan, 2018: 70)  

La cigarra
La cigarra canta y cantar es el único sentido de su canto: estas por supuesto, son palabras de otro.
Yo, no soy una cigarra. Ni siquiera tengo voz. Yo, no soy una cigarra, pero me gustaría serlo, a veces.

This last poem with the reflections that follow shed light on the harmony between Pacheco and Flores. Their conversations complement each other and provide resolutions. Pacheco struggled to focus on the poem as he was being distracted by the police circle slowly closing in on their small sit-in. People around them were getting nervous, the background music, the sun that he kept trying to shield from under the rustling leaves of a large Ceiba tree. The brouhaha almost succeeded in stifling his voice. Regardless, Pacheco endeavours to resurrect Flores’ own reckoning with voicelessness and inability to escape from the straitjacket of his mind and body. In the poem, Flores battles with the space that the poem permits. That permission to entertain a dream of being a cicada, albeit for a short while, is never fully granted. He never satisfies the reader by morphing the poet into cicada, the two remain separated, leaving the metaphor disarticulated, and leaving us faced with the bare reality, that he will never be one.

After reading the poem, Pacheco comments on what seems to be the overall tense situation rather than reflecting on the poem specifically, by saying: ‘In the middle of the action, we’re here reading poetry, just like in the middle of the battle, they played the

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12 This poem was translated by Salvan (2018) in her article Language Adrift: The poetics of Juan Carlos Flores
violin’. And this seemingly unconscious resolution of the music-muteness, cicada-poet duality in the poem is so spontaneous and unplanned that it gives the viewer an intimate look into the melodies of senses, words, and tones that cradle Pacheco’s world. By solving the imposed separation between the two, Pacheco’s bridge-making imagination resolves the dichotomy. Through this meditative phrase of calling up the image of soldiers playing the violin in the trenches, he is building the metaphorical bridge that Flores reluctantly destroyed in his poetics. He is allowing us to make that leap, to become cicadas and violinists. He is relieving Flores and the reader of the impossibilities that he imposed on himself and on us. Pacheco puts a stop to the punishing longing, and allows for an emancipating metaphor.

The video continues with Pacheco reading poems as the situation heats up. He chuckles when reading a poem about Flores’ erotics, in which he compares the beauty of Newton’s binomial with the Venus of Milo, ending by saying that while both are magnificent, only the latter provokes a ‘levitation’. This will be the last poem as the video ends abruptly with two policemen walking up to the small group. Pacheco tries to converse with them as they take out handcuffs, and the video ends with the snapping sound of the metal closing in on his wrists.

V. Facilitating epiphanies

Pacheco and Flores, the performance-artist and poet, render the opacity of our moral backgrounds more transparent, they are facilitators of a universal story. By seeking to deconstruct the ‘mental colonialism’ and other forms of conditioning that mark their specific realities, they are asking what it means to be a free subject with agency, dignity and opportunity for self-completion. In a social order in which the experience of being human has been explicitly codified and politicized by a Marxist-revolutionary ideology, the stripping of this moral conditioning to unearth individuals’ moral frameworks can best be articulated through creative expression. Jokes about doble moral, a magnification of childhood absences, or a poetic tirade of an absurd daily grind, all these forms of artistic expression enable to reveal something deeper, they provide ‘epiphanies’ that help make sense of intuitions about a certain malaise or suffocation. In this sense, I follow philosopher Charles Taylor’s thesis about art or ‘the creative imagination’ being central to articulating selfhood in modernity:

A work of art is the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual
significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals (Taylor, 1989: 419).

In Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (1989), Taylor takes on the ambitious task of reinstating the connection between morals and selfhood by exploring the ‘background’ or ‘moral ontology’ that articulates our moral and spiritual intuitions (Taylor, 1989: 9). The background upon which moral views sit is often implicit, unarticulated and independent of our choices. He argues that moral values are intrinsic to the human form in the sense that they compose the ‘furniture of things’ (ibid). Humans are constantly evolving in ‘moral space’ and our selfhood is constitutive on how we orientate towards the goods that shape our moral frameworks. Such frameworks are contained by a set of qualitative distinctions that help us define which actions, or modes of life, are considerably ‘higher’. In other words, humans do not operate without a philosophically defined framework, even if that framework often remains unarticulated. Through a historical investigation of how selfhood was understood over time, he identifies several strands of universal concerns that are unprecedented in the modern era. The first being the value and preservation of an ordinary life, a remnant of Christianity where the value of everyday life is celebrated, an idea that goes hand in hand with protecting human life from suffering. This value comes with a universal sense of benevolence, which stems from religious grace but also an Enlightenment-era scienticism, where the acceptance of a secularism-inspired mortality brings about a collective sense of concern for the human condition. Finally, there is the universal idea of the free and self-determining subject. This notion, which is intertwined with the celebration of an ordinary life, brings about concepts of dignity, and transpires into universal ideals of equality and justice.

Taylor traces a continuity between the moral frameworks developed during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods up until today. He argues that there is a tripartite map of modern moral sources that shape today’s modern concerns of benevolence, the defence of an ordinary life and the right to be a free subject endowed with dignity (Taylor, 1989: 409). The first is faith and religious fervour, the second is the rise of science that has driven humans to reckon with the finality of life and thus to find a collective purpose. These first two elements have been in tension with each other since the advent of the Enlightenment. The third is a continuity of Rousseauian romanticism – with the intricate connection between human and nature – around the ideal of self-completion through expressive power. In the modern period, artists have
replaced priests as the messengers of a spiritual and clairvoyant revealing of the self and more esoteric concerns about the human condition; artforms articulate the moral sources that underlie actions. As Taylor states, they give ‘access’ to that ‘something’ of higher significance that is otherwise inaccessible. Artists are often concerned with unveiling certain realities; the creative process is one that involves a search for meaning, which necessarily goes through a process of articulation (Taylor, 1989: 18).

His thesis sheds light on the reasons why the symbolic language of the metaphor articulated by artists like Pacheco and Flores bears the potential to speak more ‘democratically’ or intimately than their language of activism, because they are articulating their moral backgrounds, that are intuitive but familiar in ‘subtler languages’ (Taylor, 1989: 398). This is the language of moral intuitions, a language that speaks to a deeper shared sensorial and intuitive background, it is not categorical or ideological. They make sense of an unconscious consensus; the right to an ordinary life, the right to be free and live in dignity, and protected from harm. This is where Flores’ statement about the poet being ‘against nothing’ is in and of itself an explicit articulation of that human condition. When Flores says that the role of the poet is to be against nothing, he is manifesting that artistic credence by placing his discourse in excess of the ‘police’ framework, in a Rancièrian sense, of who plays which parts in a specific social order. The metaphorical language of poetry emerges from a realm that is other than the grammar of activism or resistance. The poet is the guardian, through a language that mirrors intrinsic moral intuitions, of a story that is about everyone and no one. He recognises the underlying equality that founds all forms of social fragmentation, order, and exclusion. The poet allows both the New Man’s hero and the anonymous deviant to erupt from their social ascriptions. The expressive power of artists, as Taylor contends, proposes a different prism that makes visible intuitions about what it means to lead a ‘good life’. It moves us from a place of opacity to one of perception, of rearranging our sensory organisation of the world and articulating the moral framework that shapes our subjectivities.

The poet, who is also a citizen, person and individual – to extrapolate on Pacheco’s ‘magic trilogy’ – helps us become aware of a misalignment between what morally ‘moves’ us and how we live our day to day lives. This misalignment translates into what Taylor defines as an identity crisis, which happens when one is lost in moral space, or is orientated away from an account of the good. Taylor identifies this identity crisis as ‘a radical uncertainty of where we stand’: a lack of horizon (Taylor, 1989: 27).
In the early 2000s, the collective OMNI Zona Franca (which Pacheco co-founded), staged a public intervention consisting of installing chairs at Alamar's bus stops for people to rest on while waiting for the bus. In light of Taylor's provocation, the performance-action makes tangible this very ‘disorientation in moral space’ (ibid). It alludes to a collective identity crisis. By providing people waiting for the bus with an opportunity to sit while members of the collective read poetry aloud, they reveal a social wrong about a city that forgets to build benches at bus stops. This is particularly striking in a place whose very blueprint follows a moral roadmap, that of the New Man. The absence of bus stops made visible by the poets’ couches orientates us closer to fundamental rights, such as the right live an ordinary life devoid of suffering. Such intuition becomes ‘accessible’ through the performative doubling down on the absence of benches. The symbolic language of the artistic intervention articulates another grammar of self-understanding. Rather than taking as granted the lack of benches, it enables everyday citizens to become aware of an injustice, or a disregard for their wellbeing. It, thus, brings into focus a moral framework around camaraderie and caring for others, that has always been there, but unarticulated.

More broadly, this public performance renders explicit the moral intuition that the right to self-completion is restricted in the New Man model. Selfhood cannot be prescribed by a single ideological model, it both universal and situated, and constantly in conversation. The chairs at the bus stops, with the poets lounging and reading poetry, are revealing those constitutive conditions of personhood. Protected by the artistic realm, the city’s authorities did not condemn the art intervention and even took the message to heart: benches at bus stops were installed in Alamar shortly after the performance. This reaction from the city signals to a collective recognition of a right denied, a right whose absence the chairs evoked. A right made explicit through the new language of poetry and performance. In this sense, the relevance of Flores’ monotonous musings around Alamar or Pacheco’s stoic performances – like the one of him holding a sunflower in the middle of a bustling intersection – give way to moments of epiphanies that help ‘recover contact with a moral source’ (Taylor, 1989: 425). Through an epistemology of listening, or selfless attentiveness (Murdoch, 2014), the artists becomes articulators of our moral background and ethnographers of our most intrinsic desires. They enunciate, through another grammar, moral intuitions that are stifled by the greater social forces of the everyday, hence providing orientation and facilitating an attuned connection to self.
Figure 3 Pacheco, A. (2008). Girasol (version extendida) [Sunflower (long version)]. [Screenshot]. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrACiwxvdIA. [Accessed October 21, 2023]
Essay two Play, Obsession, Quiet: Entanglements of the political and artistic subjects

Of course one evaluates what kind of life one can live in this country [Cuba], and for me, the cultural world in Cuba is over, it is traversed by a direct debate that is not an aesthetic debate but a debate on the fundamental liberties of Cubans, a debate on civil rights, on constitutional rights.

Por supuesto, que uno hace una evaluación de la vida que se puede tener en ese país, y para mí el mundo cultural en Cuba ha terminado, está atravesado por un debate directo, que no es un debate estético, sino un debate sobre las libertades fundamentales de los cubanos, sobre los derechos civiles, sobre los derechos constitucionales. (Lavastida, 2021)

The artist Hamlet Lavastida was arrested in June 2021 when he returned to Cuba after finishing a residency at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. He was charged with ‘instigating a crime’, an accusation based on a conversation he held in a private chat with colleagues from the 27N art-activism group\(^\text{13}\) (Fusco, 2021b). The charge against him was founded on an artistic intervention that would consist of stamping the 27N logo on Cuban paper currency. After three months in prison, Lavastida was released under the condition he go into forced exile and was sent – along with fellow activist Katherine Bisquet – to Poland. Lavastida contends – in the first interview he gave upon his arrival in Poland – that the cultural world in Cuba is ‘over’ because it has been hijacked by the logic of the police state. Artistic institutions and actors have become interchangeable with state security agents, hence dismantling any remnants of independence of the cultural world from the mechanisms of control implemented by the authoritarian regime.

Departing from Lavastida’s provocation that the cultural world is essentially being devoured by the police, this essay seeks to understand the transformation of subjecthood in a context of authoritarianism: how are artists and their work shaped by their context? Does political subjecthood dominate over an artistic identity? Or are there possibilities for the two to co-exist? More specifically, I seek to understand who the artists and cultural producers of the San Isidro Movement are beyond the lens of their oppression? Has the regime, as Lavastida claims, somehow ‘won’ because it has

\(^{13}\) A movement that was born out of the sit-in of over 300 artists and intellectuals on the night of November 27, 2021 after hungers strikers were forcibly removed from Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s home following over a week of protests. The 27N movement associates strongly with the San Isidro Movement and advocates for freedom and democracy via the arts. Members of the group include Tania Bruguera. Most members of the group now live in exile.
completely infiltrated the way an artist expresses himself? How much of the artist’s work is defined by what they cannot do? One can provocatively ponder: Is Cuban art dead, and has it been cannibalised by a praxis of activism?

In an effort to answer these questions, I follow the evolution of artworks that stem from the collaboration between the art historian Yanelys Núñez Lleyva and artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. Together, along with Amaury Pacheco, Iris Ruiz, Michel Matos and a handful of others, they launched the campaign against Decree 349 and founded the San Isidro Movement in 2018. Núñez Leyva has curated and co-created many of Otero Alcántara’s works, from when they first met in 2014 until Núñez exiled to Spain in the spring of 2019. Their aesthetic, political, and personal partnership has shaped the contours of the San Isidro Movement and its language, perspectives, and approaches to art and activism.

This essay investigates the trajectory of artistic creation within the dual constraints provided by increased state repression and transnational activism spaces. As Otero Alcántara sits in prison at the time of this writing since July 11, 2021, this essay tells the story of a tightly knit duo, collaborators and intimate friends who explored their subjecthoods through both the artistic and activism forms.

Theoretically, I seek to understand how artistic creation in Cuba might be devoured by the framework of repression and the confines imposed by the regime. This essay analyses the forms, material, intentions, and meanings of artworks co-created by Núñez Lleyva and Otero Alcántara. It does so through an exploration of their years of collaboration from 2016-2019. My phenomenological engagement with the artworks is complemented by my conversations with Núñez Lleyva in 2021 about their process of artistic collaboration. The intention is to understand the various personal and external factors that shaped these artworks’ conception. In other words, I attempt to excavate the motivations behind their artistic quest: what got them excited? What inspired and influenced their work? Who was their audience? This exploration will help decipher the various interplays between their political and artistic subjecthoods and seeks to shed light on artistic subjectivities under constraint.

I identified three distinct moments of their ‘creative imagination’. These moments do not unfold in a linear way, and at times overlap, or happen in parallel. By creative imagination, I refer to what shaped the form, experience, and meaning behind their artworks. I have named the first moment ‘Play’, the second, ‘Obsession’, and the third, ‘Quiet’.
The ‘Play’ moment defines the beginning years of Otero Alcántara and Núñez Lleyva collaborating from the time they met in 2014 until roughly 2016. During this moment, the types of works they created were about playing and transgressing different forms: risky performance, titillating the illegal, experimenting with the newly available spaces of the Internet, and engaging in the public sphere. This was a time of relatively carefree exploration, in which they were both negligent about the overtly repressive potential of the regime. During this time, Núñez had a comfortable position at a state gallery, and Otero Alcántara was an unthreatening artist from the margins, who was struggling to get a foot inside art spaces but whose oeuvre was slowly igniting the curiosity of young curators. It was a time of freedom. The component of play aptly characterizes the artistic subjectivities of Núñez and Otero; they share a thirst for looking beyond the façade of official discourse and a passion for seeking liberation from social conditionings. Like many young Cubans who came of age amidst the scarcity of the Special Period, they both avidly seek to understand social phenomena unbeknownst to them due to the country’s relative isolation from the world. In exploring play, I will anchor my analysis on two artworks that Núñez and Otero created during that time. We will see that the ‘Play’ moment is one in which the exploration both of their artistic and political subjectivities is possible; there is an equilibrium and productive intertwining of the two.

‘Play’ contrasts with the second creative aesthetic moment that I have identified as ‘Obsession’. This begins approximately in 2016 when Otero and Núñez begin to attract the attention of Cuban authorities for the growing audacity of their works. In turn, their artistic creation gradually transformed into a form of response, and a critical resistance to the growing repression to which they were subjected. In a sense, this moment becomes one of obsessive monitoring of the state’s actions and a rapid reaction in turn. A type of Stockholm Syndrome develops as artists enter a mode of creative action based more on responding than proposing. Their artistic subjectivities become enmeshed in a rhythm of conditions imposed by the state, their creative imagination constrained by the arbitrary parameters of what is considered art or mere dissidence. The title of this ‘moment’ is partly inspired by the name of an exhibition that took place at the gallery space Entre Vienna in Vienna, Austria, (November 2021-January 2022) curated by Solveig Front and Marilyn Volkman. The exhibition features works by Otero Alcántara, Hamlet Lavastista, Lester Alvarez, Katherine Bisquet, Julio Llopiz-Casal,
Camila Lobón and other artists who have been at the forefront of the protests against Decree 349 and the 27N movement since 2018.

I first analyse a couple of the works from the OBSESSION exhibit as they provide a window into the emotional, psychological and social experience of exile. Then, I explore two performances from Otero and Núñez’s most productive years (2016 to 2018) to demonstrate the ways in which their exclusion from official art channels in the country has coerced them into navigating the digital activism space as the only medium through which to disseminate their art. However, this space, just like the Cuban social order, is highly divided and consensus-seeking. This moment is defined by the growing importance of democratized Internet access and how social media has given way to an online activism space, which further codifies the limits of artistic transgression. In turn, the obsessive moment is one in which the political subject dominates and the ‘artist’ struggles to affirm herself, as her artistic imagination becomes embroiled with political responsibility.

Finally, the third ‘moment’ has remained a constant in the creative imagination of Otero and Núñez. I have named it ‘Quiet’, which refers to an aesthetic commitment of elevating ‘small gestures’, of sacralising the intimate. This moment transcends the other two. These are actions and artworks that emerge within the ‘Obsession’ period, sometimes appearing as side projects, or added emphases without ever taking the centre stage. However, I argue that this moment helps to keep track of the connecting thread of what drives the ethos of artistic creation for the duo, the motivations that have been their raison d’être. Whether it is Otero’s series of disjointed doors that he created during the first lockdown in the Spring of 2020, or simply ideas of potential artworks that made them chuckle in defiance, without needing to materialize the pieces for them to exist in their repertoire. I argue that the ‘Quiet’ is the anti-dote to the obsession, it emerges from the play, these are pieces that are often done with the barest of materials, such as drawings. They emerge from an intimate need to create, no matter what. The state no longer becomes relevant. Exploring the tenacity of the ‘Quiet’ helps us to see what kind of artists Núñez and Otero are outside of the repressive framework imposed by the state. Thus, the Quiet shows us that perhaps, Cuban art is not dead, that the defiant artistic subject remains autonomously present from social forces, which is a testament to the artist’s condition of freedom.
I. Play

The pieces of ‘Play’ are polemical and provocative. They anchor themselves within a tradition of public art and performance whilst responding to the strict rules of Havana’s elite art world. Otero and Núñez experimented with the Cuban social body as their material for action while seeking legitimacy and recognition as little-known artist and curator. They attempted to make art for everyday Cubans that would catch the attention of the elites. The play moment is one of discovery – not only of each other – but also of the possibilities offered by the creative form. Prior to meeting each other, both Otero and Núñez had nourished a deep curiosity for what lies ‘behind’ the opacity of the state apparatus.

Núñez demonstrates this ‘play’ through her writings on the blog Havana Times, an independent platform founded by an American journalist, Circles Robinson in 2008, whose mission aims to publish ‘open-minded stories’ about Cuba. Her first post analysed a speech by a government official on salaries. Núñez became a regular writer for the blog, the content of her posts ranged from personal musings on whether she wants to have children, to more formal critiques of specific cultural events and art exhibitions. During her years of collaboration with Otero, the posts turned into formal analyses of his work along with growing politicized content that denounced the increasing repression against them. In the diary-like posts, she often reckons with the vulnerability of exposing her writing onto a newly available and vastly unregulated Internet space. In interviews, she has insisted that her university studies did not contribute to an expansion of her thinking. Rather, it was meeting bloggers on the margins of institutions who owned precious books – mostly illegal and censored in Cuba – that had the most influence. Conversely, Otero began working on his own, scavenging scraps of wood and other treasures from waste bins around his neighbourhood to build, for instance, a makeshift Statue of Liberty that he would place on the Malecón in the middle of the night and study, from a hidden corner of the street, how passers-by reacted to this strange apparition. His early works, whilst diverse in their form and meaning, share an exploration of identity, specifically around the social condition of being Black and disenfranchised under socialism.

In accessing and successfully finishing her studies in one of Cuba’s most rigorous art history programmes, Núñez developed full command of a Bourdieusian ‘taste’ and codes of the elites. She learned what the revolution wanted her to learn, and
understood the framework of thinking expected of her. At the same time, her socialization within intellectual circles that deviated from the revolutionary narrative, at the margins of institutions, allowed her to understand the mechanisms of subverting the dogmatic vision of the world sustained by state education. In my interview with Núñez in August 2021, she recalled having to work twice as hard to get into the programme (and throughout her studies) as she did not benefit from the social and cultural capital that most of her fellow students shared – being white, coming from wealthier parts of Havana, having parents who were either artists or highly educated. In her cohort, she recalls being the only Black girl alongside another girl who she described as ‘mulata’ (see essay 3).

In 2014, Núñez Lleyva and Otero Alcántara first met in the state-run gallery of the magazine Revolucion y Cultura where Núñez worked. Otero was invited to exhibit sculptures from one of his series for a collective show, whose curator was one of Núñez’s former classmates. His series called Los heroes no pesan [Heroes don’t weight] honours the 300,000 Cuban soldiers who fought in the Angolan Civil War from 1975 to 1991 (Ribeiro, 2014). The approximately 50-centimetre-high sculptures loosely echo Alberto Giacometti’s long, emaciated, and faceless figures.

Otero’s heroes, made of recycled wood that he collected in various places of the city along with rusty metal and nails, are fixed onto cement foundations. The materials’ heftiness and the statues’ hard composition contrast with their phantom-like aura. The faces bear few human traits, and those that do convey expressions of doom, with hallowed eyes, tilted heads, and slumped shoulders. The ghosts exist thanks to the artist’s choice of unbreakable material; their apparition set in stone. In this sense, the material weight of the statues is a contrarian provocation to the series’ title Heroes don’t weight. In several iterations of this exhibition, Otero lined up and spread out the sculptures on the floor in a small room, making them stand out obtrusively in the way of visitors, requiring delicate attention to avoid knocking them over. They are not elevated onto pedestals or mounted onto display cases, they take up the floor space,

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14 The Cuban presence in Angola inscribes itself within the revolution’s internationalist and anti-colonial commitments towards independence struggles in Africa and other ‘non-aligned’ countries. At home, it was an effort at reviving the revolutionary ideals of 1959 by sending Cuban troops to fight side by side with the Marxist MPLA troops against the CIA backed factions. This was unfolding at a time when socialist movements in Latin American were waving, especially following the killing of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara in Bolivia in the late 1960s. Around 2,000 Cubans died during the civil war and many more were injured.
not small enough to be stepped on but not big enough to be imposing. In fact, looking at their formidable details (a painted flower, a cut out of the African content, barbed wire, or war medals) would require kneeling down for closer inspection. It is not until one gets close and touches them that the artist’s talent is obvious – the details are what bring the crassly carved wood to life, the mutilated bark and tormented rust metamorphose the structures into bodies that have endured the unbearable, revenants of a distant and forgotten place. The series alludes to the silence that followed Cuba’s involvement in the Angolan Civil War and the lack of official recognition of the service of the combatants whose lives were altered. It also comments on the invisible racial tensions behind this war effort. Indeed most of the Cubans sent to fight in Angola were Black because it was believed that they would ‘integrate’ more easily with Angolan fighters (Ribeiro, 2014).

![Sculpture from the series Los heroes no pesan](https://www.lmoastudio.com/en/series/heroes-dont-weigh)


However, in 2014, Otero’s work was not as explicit as it has become in the last couple of years. It was more subtle, and not frontal in its critique of the state, it left
room for interpretation. Indeed, Otero conceived *Los Heroes no pesan* as a broader commentary on the erasure of Afro-Cubans in the Cuban internationalist struggle and was in line with his exploration of themes around racial discrimination in Cuban society. In 2014, Otero was still a struggling artist with no notoriety, and as such he was not considered ‘dangerous’ to the state. The meaning projected in his work has evolved over the years. In a recent resurfacing of the series, Otero explained that the maimed heroes were direct victims of the Cuban regime’s extreme efforts at ‘exporting’ the revolution to the detriment of the wellbeing of the country’s population. The framing of the meaning of the series changed with Otero’s own growing position as a social pariah.

Otero and Núñez began collaborating shortly after meeting during this first exhibition. She was drawn to Otero’s uncompromising freedom and creativity. According to Núñez, their creative process involved ‘a lot and a lot through discussion and arguments’. This is a claim corroborated by Otero when I asked him about his creative process:

My clear vision is always accompanied by dialogue and conversing. I don’t have a vision and radicalize it and plant it. I have a vision and I start looking. My work process is: I have a vision, an idea occurs to me and in my head it materializes completely, and then I leave and look for people, I look for friends for them to give me something [their opinion, ideas], and then I form my posture on whether my idea is good or bad, and then I convince myself to create the artwork or not (Phone Interview from January 25 2021).

To this avail, Núñez was fundamental as both a mirror and critical interlocutor within this creative process. Otero is not formally trained, and does not manipulate the codes of writing and speaking required of academia. Núñez thus became the translator of his pieces, attempting to place and legitimize him within Cuba’s highly codified and rigid art world.

**Chong Chong Gang (2014)**

In solidarity with the people of Palestine, Cuban artist, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, is gifting the Palestinian people, by way of their government’s embassy in Cuba, a group of handmade firearms that were collected from different neighborhoods from Havana, Cuba. With this gesture, the artist echoes the brotherly spirit of the Cuban government in its fight for world peace.

This text, which is also written in Spanish and Arabic, forms part of the press release that constitutes the Chong Chong Gang conceptual piece conceived by Otero and Núñez in 2014. The one-page press release is adorned with the Cuban and Palestinian flags placed side by side with a photo of the mentioned weapons. The image shows what resembles four firearms arranged neatly on a white sheet. Each weapon is unique and made up of different materials with its respective bullet(s) laid out next to it. Had there not been a mention of these ‘handmade’ objects being weapons, an untrained eye might have a difficult time guessing that these are indeed types of homemade firearms. Otero and Núñez communicated the donation of these weapons by sending an email to the Palestinian Embassy in Havana whilst simultaneously publishing blog posts and sending emails about the piece (access to social media in 2014 was still highly restricted).

The weapons are called inyectores; homemade guns constructed out of car pieces that are sold on the black market. If used at close range, the guns can cause fatal...
injury. Otero researched the process of building these weapons in his neighbourhood. He acquired one specifically made for him, and he created sculpture imitations for the others. In offering these homemade weapons, Otero articulates the place of violence from the most powerless factions of society, and generates a line of solidarity with Palestinians. The tongue-in-cheek proposal to promote ‘world peace’, through the donation of weapons, plays into the Cuban state’s narrative of building alliances with dubious partners for the sake of ideological solidarity. Indeed, the name of the performance *Chong Chong Gang* refers to a North Korean ship that was intercepted in the Panama Canal in 2013 for illegally carrying Cuban ballistic weapons. The weapons were found hidden below several tons of sugar that the North Korean ship had picked up in Cuba (Anderson, 2013). The event caused a major diplomatic rift, with North Korea and Cuba accused of violating international treaties.

The performance spoke to different levels of violence, activating the explicit alliance that Cuba holds with other totalitarian regimes, to express a gesture of solidarity with the Palestinian people. The performance positions an intimate, local ‘craftsmanship’ of *inyector* guns within two intersecting global conflicts; a subtle intervention of the marginal back in the centre. The men Otero fetched to create the weapons become actors within geopolitical conflicts, aligning themselves along the same solidarities that the Cuban government holds (the Cuban regime has historically aligned with the Palestinian cause) but placing hidden internal violence in the centre stage. By subverting the flowery language of solidarity typical of state media propaganda, the piece places the subjecthood of these young men from some of Havana’s rougher districts into the centre. It sheds light on the irony of who can and cannot commit violence, and mocks the grandeur of international alliances. It also takes a risk, as Otero and Núñez are well aware, that admitting to carrying such weapons is a crime, hence suggesting the double standards of who is or isn’t above the law. The artist, gangster, and the Cuban state become synonymous.

This Play moment constructs the pillars of Otero and Núñez’s aesthetic commitment even though, as we will see with the subsequent ‘Obsession’ moment, it is ultimately usurped by the consensus-building dynamic of the transnational digital activism space. The creative preoccupation of this moment is defined by an exploration of two distinct ways of working. They were operating as artist and curator whilst navigating the autodidact nature of Otero’s training and Núñez’s more rigid and academic outlook on art. She explains that, when writing about these pieces, they used a much more subtle
language, derived from the art world, and that she judged the quality of their artworks through the scholarly lens she was conditioned to integrate in school. She cared about polishing a performance until it felt adequately crafted, of making sure that the rigour of the piece’s conception came through clearly, whereas Otero was already moving on to the next idea.

This period of play is also a time of experimentation and testing forms newly available to them. As children of the Special Period, they shared a generational anguish of missing out, growing up during a time of scarcity, being left out of the loop of new advancement in technology or ground-breaking theoretical thought. Núñez expressed this through her frustration with her studies where all the books assigned were outdated, and the only way to access current information on recent artistic trends and thoughts came through surfing the (barely available) web. Thus, Núñez took advantage of having access to a ‘precarious’ Internet connection at her gallery job, and the pair saw an opportunity to investigate this medium to disseminate their work. When they created Chong Chong Gang in 2014, Internet access was still extremely limited; there were no public Wi-Fi hot spots and no available phone data. Núñez explains:

The point was to take advantage of [Internet], Luis wasn’t versed in any of these things [relating to Internet] because he had never had access. So it was all about experimenting with this format of using emails but without being really aware of the violence that the government could exert onto us. We weren’t aware that there could be repercussion for our actions. Yes we were nervous that something could happen, that we might be reprimanded in some way but we didn’t really grasp the immensity of this. This piece was one of our first experiments (Video-call interview with Núñez on December 1, 2021).

I call this period ‘play’ in part because of the apparent (and understandable) naivété regarding the danger of their actions. They were unknown artists playing with the limited means available to them. Even though Otero had already had a few run-ins with authorities for a performance staged the previous year, the relative novelty of using the Internet made it difficult for them to fully grasp the power of the weapon they were using. Conversely, the state was also quickly adapting and reckoning with the unruly potential of opening Internet access. To this avail, one of the defining characteristics of this time is a joyfully ignorant lightness that drove their actions. They knew they were potentially playing with fire, especially through a piece that brushed the realm of illegality, but their confidence in the protective shield of the symbolic language of the art world allowed them to experiment with pushing such boundaries. In this sense, the artist subject always remained at the source of these creations.
Additionally, these pieces shaped their political subjecthoods as they explored themes and meanings around the relation between artist, citizen, and institution. They were not directing their piece as a frontal critique of the Cuban regime, but were rather focusing their lens on the unravelling of the citizen/artist. Yanelys Núñez Lleyva explains:

It was the first time we used more subtle things. There was not a direct communication with the Cuban government, we were not frontally accusatory like we can be today with our Facebook live videos etc. We operated with much more subtle language, the language of the art world, which is more critical, much more aesthetic, beautiful and clean. […] The idea was to dialogue with institutions coming from a place of ‘I’m a citizen’; this approach was already there from the start. How I as a citizen, as an artist, who is also a citizen I support a cause. This principle of respecting institutions was already there. Because Luis wasn’t gifting the weapons as a private individual. He was doing a donation in the name of ‘The Cuban People’, and did this by going through the Palestinian Embassy. It didn’t actually happen, but the fiction of the piece was there. This initial desire to converse with institutions, which is still present today, began there, of speaking to the responsibility that institutions have in each country. And speaking to the power of each citizen. The idea that every citizen can wear the costume of a country and make public decisions (Video-call interview December 1, 2021).

This idea of the artist incarnating the ‘Cuban people’, the right of the citizen to have a say and a representative voice in public matters of the highest order re-emerges in many of the pieces that were conceived from that point onward. Indeed, such creative efforts of ‘incarnation’ and exploring concepts such as citizen constitute the artists’ deeper moral intentions with their artworks. Such artistic propositions carve new spaces for understanding and locating citizenship or individuality that expand the confines of the revolution’s terms of identification. They reinstate a sense of agency and autonomy.

The particularity of the ‘Play’ moment is that it explicitly stemmed from their subjectivities as artists first and foremost, making the citizen and subsequently, ‘the People of Cuba’ appear from the artistic gesture. It also reflects Otero’s own emerging subjecthood as an artist in a social order in which he is not officially recognised as one. In experimenting with the conceptualisation of artist, citizen, individual; the duo is exploring the process of their own subjectivation within a context of strictly defined rules of identifications. The ‘Play’ moment marks the beginning of them shaping an externalised outlook on their social condition since both have, respectively, begun a journey of stepping on the other side of the line that demarcates their prescribed place in Cuban society, in terms of class and racial identity. Núñez did so by attending an elite arts programme as a Black daughter of obreros [workers] and Otero by
discovering an exclusive art world unattainable to most Black men like him who lack social and cultural capital. There is an epistemological rupture (Eribon, 2009) in how both conceive of themselves and their place in the Cuban social order due to these personal experiences. The Play moment is an artistic prolongation of their individual quests of deconstructing the categories of perception that have shaped their worldview and represents the production of new imaginaries that interrogate imposed frameworks of signification in Cuban society. More, it is the start of exploring two components of their subjectivities as artists: on the one hand they discover art’s potential in inventing new vocabularies for making sense of their world, and on the other, new responsibilities but also avenues for selfhood within this space of operating as artists. In this sense, the play moment is constitutive in their construction as artistic subjects and in shaping their sense of selves within that.

In this sense, with *Chong Chong Gang*, there is a much more subtle exploration of power dynamics. It does not seek to establish camps of identification between the citizen and the state, but rather poses the question of what constitutes righteousness and who is exempt from the expectations of being righteous. It places the everyday citizen, with Otero’s gesture of donating in the name of a whole people, with his homemade weapons, as honorary guests within the theatre of geopolitics. The piece amusingly perverts the language of state propaganda with its grandiose declarations of solidarity from ‘non-aligned countries’ to shed light on its very instrumentalization of the vague, monolithic *pueblo* that it claims to represent. The archaic formulations of ‘the people’ come to life. The people, being, also, Cubans who engage in illicit activities and who build and trade weapons to defend each other, just as leaders of sovereign states do.

This piece attests to this moment of the artistic imagination in which the duo define themselves as artists, there is a sense of duty that comes with the torment of doing the work that they do, an empathetic quality of telling a story that is not only theirs but that of all. James Baldwin, in his essay, ‘The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity’ talks about this underlying quality of the artist who bears an unexplainable responsibility to bring to light the fact that all ‘hurt’ is shared hurt, that one’s torment, is everyone’s torment. What differentiates the artist from the rest of us is that her journey, her artistic commitment, is one in which she seeks to constantly find ways of using this hurt ‘to connect with everyone else alive’ (Baldwin, 2010: 43). The artist’s quest for integrity is
kindred with humans’ search for integrity. He beautifully defines this responsibility in the following way:

And yet people, millions of people whom you will never see, who don’t know you, never will know you, people who may try to kill you in the morning, live in a darkness which – if you have that funny terrible thing which every artist can recognize and no artist can define – you are responsible to those people to lighten, and it does not matter what happens to you. You are being used in the way a crab is useful, the way sand certainly has some function. It is impersonal. This force which you didn’t ask for; and this destiny which you must accept, is also your responsibility (ibid: 45).

The perdition within that responsibility is sacred for Otero, it comes as a second nature, as a way to breathe his own being into the world that surrounds him, it is the only way in which he knows how to move. Baldwin’s empathetic truth about the artist’s exceptional destiny accurately grasps the restlessness of someone like Otero, whose way of going about the world responds to this ‘undefinable’ force to create in order to uncover meaning and lighten the path forward for others, putting his own wellbeing in the back burner. Within that aesthetic space, it is not a matter of being heroic; it is simply a matter of being virtuous, of just being. There is no other way the artist can be, and knowing this comes with great fear, and a desire to escape. Baldwin evokes the inevitability of escape, which is akin to our shared inevitable fate of constantly looking to better understand ourselves. The artist stands firmly, uncomfortably but very adroitly within this quest.

**Bodas de Papel: Unidos por el wifi (2015)**

It is a wet and grey autumn day in Havana. A small crowd huddles around their phones at the busy intersection of the street La Rambla and Calle 23. Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is standing in front of the large theatre Yara, dressed in a white opened shirt and Hawaiian-type shorts. On his chest, the phrase ‘Te Amo / Conectados X el Wifi’ [I love you / Connected via wifi] is daubed in white paint. He wears a bowtie and holds a red rose. He is accompanied by two mariachis in traditional dress, one of them holds a guitar. The grainy video was shot by Yanelys Núñez Lleyva, her raspy voice commenting as Otero seemingly prepares to do something. A small crowd has gathered around him, most people have phones and cameras in hand. Otero’s sister holds a phone directed towards the artists as they connect on a video call. After a few seconds of preparation, Otero asks his sister to take a few steps back, and the mariachis begin their serenade. Otero takes off his shirt and starts dancing. He rips off his shorts to reveal a small blue thong and proceeds to use a lamp post as a stripper
pole, conducting a sensual dance to the accompanying mariachi song. Núñez’s hearty laughter covers the shocked gasps of onlookers who laugh and point their cameras towards Otero’s raunchy performance. The whole dance only lasts for around one minute. Otero finishes by blowing a kiss in the direction of the phone that his sister is pointing at him, before grabbing his shorts. The video cuts at this point. It is an awkward scene: Otero’s discomfort seeps through the boldness of his action, the mariachis play along – they were hired specifically for the performance – but seem a bit out of place. While onlookers are clearly laughing at the comedy of this impromptu striptease in the middle of the street, there are also worried looks from left to right, this is clearly not a usual scene and bystanders share looks of amusement, disbelief and interrogation.

Dating from November 2015, the performance was curated by Núñez and Catherine Sicot. The performance, entitled Bodas de Papel - Unidos por el wifi [Paper anniversary – United by wifi] revolved around celebrating the confirmation of Otero’s civil wedding with his American wife, who lived in the United States at the time. For the ‘celebration’, the artist dedicated an intimate dance to his wife performed to the guitar melody of the mariachis. The catch being that the only way to have Internet access at this time was through the frugally scattered Wi-Fi hot spots in Havana that were introduced in the summer of 2015. Prior to the performance, the artists sent an invitation to friends, artists, and curators to join them in the celebration of this union. The curious onlookers and informed art aficionados observe merrily, some filming Otero’s antics; the performance’s documentation being in the hand of the public.
Testing the limits of the public space, in which the body can present only through accepted forms of decency, Otero sheds light on the difficulty of intimacy in the Cuban public sphere; especially forms of intimacy with the ‘outside’. In 2015, the only way to connect directly with friends or family abroad was through sparse Wi-Fi ‘hot spots’ in public parks, or plazas, forcing strangers to huddle in these spaces to speak to loved one and relatives abroad. By using the only space available to him to communicate with his wife, he subverts its acceptable confines to share what should be a private moment. In this way, the artist, as he uncomfortably undresses under the public eye, embodies frustrations of the Cuban social body for whom the private sphere is restricted to limited relations and isolated interactions. The performance lends itself to various readings: for instance, it can be interpreted as a commentary about the housing crisis in Havana where extended families are often obliged to share small spaces, further restricting spaces for sexual manifestations or intimacy. He incarnates these private feelings: from humiliation to frustrations. In our years of conversations,
Otero would often talk to me about the importance of tending to our ‘little devils’: fantasies, kinks, dark thoughts. The wildest and most intimate parts of the imaginations, the ‘things’ that can only be shared with the self or a privileged few. Through this performance, he is manifesting a collective cathartic release of our little devils and sensual desires.

This performance is also a commentary regarding whom the Cuban body is permitted to love. By making it difficult for citizens inside the country to have private conversations with loved ones abroad, conversations that might be free from the eavesdropping and surveillance, the state dictates what kinds of rapports are (im)possible. Ideology, in this way, infiltrates hearts and souls, it commands desires. The state ‘engineers the soul’ (Wang, 2014). By stripping down and parading his sexual dance for the world to see, Otero is not only shedding light on the absurdity of these restrictions, but is also normalizing desires that might be shared by many. In interviews, he has often emphasised that the private should always be public, and this piece is a manifestation of that. In writing about this performance, art historian Janet Batet proposes that ‘the artist disrupts power relations by putting the private sphere in the middle of the public and giving it the political character it has been negated’ (Batet, 2021). Otero responds to the ideological climate, the revolutionary New Man that imposes a public life into all aspects of private life. He turns this around by, first, showing that having a private life, sexual desires, and ‘little devils’ is only human, and, second, enabling a spilling over of this private life into the public, since there really is no way around it.

This piece resonates with The Lunch, a participatory performance by Jan Budaj staged in Bratislava in 1978. In this piece, the artist hosts a lunch in a public housing outdoor space inviting inhabitants of nearby apartment complexes to witness what would be an intimate lunch between close friends. Claire Bishop’s analysis of Budaj’s quest for a non-privatised audience but rather random spectators, who participate in the live experience of the piece, has strong echoes with Otero’s work:

The action seemed to reinforce (one might even say overidentify with) the absence of privacy under state socialism, offering a domestic scene in exaggerated exposure to surveillance; at the same time, it also sought to invent an idea of public space and to occupy it with eccentric non-conformity.[…] Budaj’s urban interventions, along with those of L’ubomir Durcek, break with the melancholic introspective of Czech body art in the 1970s, but also with the Slovakian artists’ retreat to the countryside. **They begin to imagine what public space might be - a collective culture founded on shared desires rather than ideology** (Bishop, 2012: 151-152, my emphasis).
A public space that fosters shared desires rather than ideology aptly qualifies what Núñez and Otero were investigating through these moments of play. Whether it is the desire to exist as a citizen with a voice and right for representation, or a yearning to satisfy the call of our ‘little devils’ without shame. This idea recalls philosopher Charles Taylor’s thesis that artists articulate moral intuitions (Taylor, 1989). Desire, desiring, sensual fantasies, sensorial kinks, these are all bodily and emotional functions that subvert ideological leanings. In the Bodas de Papel piece, one does not need to be fully versed in the specific Cuban context of restricted Internet access to relate to it. The quest for a Woolfian ‘room of one’s own’ is universal (Woolf, 2015). However, universality does not equate consensus and this is where, in terms of meaning, I argue that Otero and Núñez’s moments of play seek to question what a truly democratic public space might look like. It might be one that promotes disagreements, conflicts, or antagonisms, to borrow the term from the philosophers Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In the following section, I seek to lay down the thesis that Claire Bishop has developed about ‘relational antagonism’ (Bishop, 2005) in a critical response to Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics (2002) and how that has informed the aesthetic practice of Otero in the early years of his work. This influence stems from his participation in the unique Department of Behaviour Art founded by the artist Tania Bruguera. Laying down this argument will then help to disentangle the aesthetic impasse that defines the subsequent ‘Obsession’ moment (Part II), where the Otero-Núñez duo is faced with a consensus-seeking activism space doubled down by a repressive political context that greatly stifles the boundary-pushing explorations that characterized the ‘play’ moment.

**Arte de conducta and playful agonism**

In December 2021, I conversed via video-call with Núñez. The intention with this discussion was to invite her to speak more explicitly about art rather than politics. The year 2021 had been a difficult one in Cuba. To put it plainly, the country was experiencing a moment of chaos due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a crumbling economy, and an increasingly emboldened and frustrated population led by a youth either emigrating or breaking a wall of fear to express their discontent in protests (Foucher, 2022). On July 11, 2021, the largest spontaneous protests against the government took place since the 1959 revolutionary uprising. This led to the imprisonment of hundreds of activists. As of January 2022, local grassroots and human rights groups
estimate that there are over 800 political prisoners either charged or awaiting trial for having participated in the protests (Prisoners Defenders, 2022). Otero Alcántara is among them. He was jailed on the day of the country-wide protest on July 11, 2021 awaiting trial to be sentenced in June 2022 to five years in prison over charges of disorder, vandalism and ‘insulting national symbols’ (Solomon, 2023).

Despite Núñez Lleyva’s current dedication to advocating for Cuban political prisoners and other human rights issue, she seemed relieved to revisit these formative years, to reflect on Otero’s artworks, something that in many interviews she expressed wishing she had more time to do: ‘Luis’ work needs to be thought about deeply, it’s complex’, she said. She insists that the core people who form the San Isidro Movement have become ‘family’ to her.

I asked her to tell me about Otero’s early influences. As a self-taught artist who came from a family of obreros [workers], what sparked his artistic inclination? Núñez said that a major influence on Otero’s artistic awakening was his informal participation in Tania Bruguera’s unconventional art school, the La Catedra de Arte de Conducta [the Department of Behaviour Art].

La Catedra de Arte de Conducta was a pedagogical and experimental art programme spearheaded by Bruguera and created under the wider umbrella of Havana’s primary art school El Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). The department ran from 2003 to 2009. Bruguera’s provocation, through this programme, was to train a young generation of Cuban artists to think locally and politically. This came at a time when the Cuban art market was blossoming thanks to an opening economy and the ‘Cuban fever’ that shook the international art world, partly due to the success of the 2000 Havana Biennale (Bruguera & Bishop, 2013). Bruguera’s department sought to counter a trend among Cuban artists to ‘self-exoticize’, creating artworks destined to fit the tastes of an American/European market, and thus stripping any social commentary from their works. The Catedra was an institutional anomaly. Bruguera is one of Cuba’s most internationally renowned artists, and was already quite established by the early 2000s. Thanks to her connections with ISA, she managed to secure sponsorship for the department through the national art institute, under her condition that the department itself be run from inside her home. In this way, Bruguera benefitted both from institutional backing, which she needed to acquire visas for international guests along with the proper authorizations to run events, whilst having complete autonomy in how she designed and ran the programme. Such an arrangement would
not be possible in today’s repressive context (and Bruguera, who co-founded the 27N, has since then been relegated to the camp of dissidents by Cuban authorities and recently left Cuba to take on her new appointment as Senior Lecturer at Harvard University (Fuentes, 2021)).

The structure of the programme was demanding. The cohorts were composed of eight members from all sorts of artistic backgrounds (including one person who had never studied art), along with one art historian charged with documenting the workshops as they unfolded. Participants were required to commit for two years and were expected to attend the school five days a week for a few hours in the afternoon all year long. Bruguera set rules that intersected between the real and symbolic. Her primary intention was to create a tight-knit and open space for debate and discussion, a space in which to build collective belonging (the participants had access to the library and a shared kitchen), meaning that many participants stayed well beyond the two years of the programme. She set rules that were meant to be broken. To Bruguera, La Catedra was not only a pedagogical project but also a work of art in and of itself. The school’s main aesthetic preoccupation involved creating a space conducive to free speech and ‘to train students not just to make art but to experience and formulate civil society’ (Bishop, 2012: 248). Indeed, the name of the school came from a reflection about her qualms with the qualifier of ‘performance’ art; a Westernized concept that she argued did not adequately represent the Latin American iteration of the practice. The term ‘behaviour’ surfaced from her experience working in a school with delinquents, where she taught art, in conjunction with her research into Latin American performance, which always had a common thread of relating to the social gesture (Bruguera and Bishop, 2020).

In designing her programme, she focused on the idea of using behaviour as a raw art material and, subsequently, identified issues relating to it through the interventions of various guests. The programme was structured through weeklong workshops, each led by a different guest. These ranged from lawyers talking about authorship issues to international artists – most of whom came from post-socialist countries – conducting workshops and collaborative performance pieces. For example, the Spanish artist and participant Nuria Guell developed a performance in which she legally married a Cuban man selected by a panel of jineteras (colloquial term to define Cuban sex workers who seek work from international tourists). Consider also Cuban participant Adrian Melis, who developed a project that involved buying wood from a guard who was selling
stolen materials on the black market. Melis then used the same wood to build a small hut that would protect the guard from the rain and wind during his shifts. During the duration of the programme, Bruguera tried to stay out of most of the educational content to produce better collegiality and remove a certain degree of authority.

In defining useful art, Bruguera refers to two important phases of creation: the first being to see something and show it through visual realization, and the second being to take the collective recognition that the piece garners to then do something with it and apply it. According to her, most art simply stops at the first phase. Useful art is art where the thinking and doing are simultaneous.

Otero Alcántara was never an official member of a Catedra’s cohorts (former students include Amaury Pacheco or Hamlet Lavastida) but since the rules of participation were meant to be bent, he became a regular participant of workshops and discussions, and this has greatly influenced his understanding of art as a social gesture. In the language that Otero uses, I find the same references to ‘usefulness’, or ‘making the artist disappear for the artwork to take centre stage and get appropriated by those interacting with it’. Otero’s praxis has long been preoccupied with making the symbolic intervene in the real to yield concrete action.

Another influence of La Catedra on Otero – who was in his early twenties during its years of operation – is what I call the orality of materiality. In analysing the work of performance and social art from Latin America and post-socialist countries, the art historian Claire Bishop (who was a guest at Bruguera’s Catedra) argues that Western criteria is not appropriate for analysing such works. She contends, for instance, that Bruguera never mentions the visual realization of conceptual works, whereas a Western understanding of such pieces rather carefully places attention and importance on the materiality. In much of the work conducted by participants in the Catedra, the ideas, concepts, and oral elaboration of the pieces weighted as much as their actual realization. This orality is reflected in much of Otero’s own oeuvres. He often created pieces through conversations, dreams, and speaking about them. In remembering some of his artwork, Núñez offered no hierarchical judgement on pieces that he had only ‘thought of’ and pieces he actually realized, whether they were materialized or not was not an issue of discussion, especially in terms of defining his repertoire of actions. Of course, their existence and visibility mattered, but in remembering ‘his breadth of work’, the pieces he had only created via discussion had as much value as the ones he managed to concretize.
Finally, another resonance between Bruguera’s motives with the Catedra and Otero’s aesthetic commitments can be seen in the notion of constructive critique, rather than making critique deconstructive. Bruguera and Otero both sought alternatives to their social reality by building new spaces. Otero has expressed not being against ‘institutions’ but in fact believing in their value, in making sure they function at the service of the individual-citizen. This is an aesthetic position that clashes with the majorly Republican influences of the Cuban political opposition based in Miami. For example, Otero was criticized in 2020 for a comment he posted on social media about not wanting to ‘dismantle’ the Cuban regime but rather to offer spaces for democracy-building. La Catedra was an exercise in devising an institution in which there would be no hierarchy, in which students were called ‘participants’ and invited lecturers ‘guests’. Every pedagogical decision was transcended by an experimental impetus: the classes were mobile and often took place in different public areas around Havana, participants became close friends with the guests (many stayed at Bruguera’s home over the weekends) and so on. Parallels can be drawn between Otero and Núñez’s alternative biennale project in 2018 and the Catedra de Arte de Conducta. Both conceived the spaces as standalone artworks (in fact, Bruguera decided to close the Department when she felt that it was becoming too ‘comfortable’ and ‘institutionalized’). The actual content of the pieces created or exhibited within did not constitute the primary criterion of aesthetic quality. The relationships, spaces, debate, dialogue, disagreements, and a collective spirit of generating new and subversive ideas were the projects’ primary ambitions. Both were social experiments entangled with a utilitarian function: the first to educate a young generation of artists on the social and political value of art, and the second of embodying the right to take hold of artists’ own independent vocation of creation through the organisation of an alternative festival. Otero advocates for multiplicity of spaces, of renovating ruins, and pushing walls to erect diverse propositions.

The type of artistic provocation that shapes this ‘play’ period is one that seeks to restore the social fabric, give agency to individuals and their rights as citizens, and propose a public space defined more by ‘shared desires than ideology’ (Bishop, 2012: 152). In other words, Otero and Núñez are interrogating what acting democratically entails, or what it could be. These questions are traversed by a concern for the other, by attempting to generate an aesthetic moment via a relation. Bourriaud’s (2002) conceptualisation of relational art can be useful here to locate some of Otero and
Núñez’s work, however, Claire Bishop’s critique of Bourriaud’s thesis offers a more robust and elucidating critique of the vagueness of Bourriaud's conceptualization. His thesis developed in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) suggests there is a ‘turn’ in art of the 1990’s where the focus on forms seeks to transcend the separation between creator and beholder. ‘Relational art’ refers to forms that create an encounter, that offer an experience devoid of capitalist trading possibilities, where new temporalities are permissible and subjectivities constantly reshaped. He celebrates the non-sloganizing dimension of such art that contrasts with, for instance, explicitly political art that seeks to impose a clear vision and message. In relational artworks, the subjectivity of the beholder is never effaced, and in fact, actively shapes the meaning that the artwork takes. In her response, Bishop argues that Bourriaud’s thesis is rather vague, and she alleges that most contemporary art could easily be determined as relational. The question she asks, however, is if relational art fosters humans connections, then how can the quality of these connections be analysed? Are all human connections simply positive and democratic? She seeks to take the inquiry further.

In developing her critique, Bishop proposes the notion of ‘relational antagonism’. She draws from Mouffe and Laclau’s dense thesis on radical democracy in which they propose that healthy democracies offer spaces where conflicts are sustained and not erased (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this way, antagonism is necessary. The theorists’ argument is founded on a Lacanian theory of subjectivity:

subjectivity is not a self-transparent and rational pure presence, but is irremediably decentred and incomplete; we have a failed structural identity, and are therefore dependent on identification to proceed. Because subjectivity is this process of identification we are necessarily incomplete entities (Bishop, 2005: 34).

In this way, through antagonism ‘the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself’ (ibid). Based on this idea, Bishop makes the case that the relations in Bourriaud’s depiction of relational art are not intrinsically democratic since they rest within an ‘ideal of subjectivity as whole, and community as immanently together’ (ibid).

To defend her point, she introduces the idea of ‘active’ work, where one must give of themselves; an art encounter should thus be ‘activated thinking’ (Bishop, 2005: 35) that presupposes the viewer as a subject of independent thought. All art requires participation, the real question is to analyse how contemporary art addresses the
viewer, and assess the quality of the audience relations it produces. Bishop concludes that relational art should in fact be founded on a relational antagonism that:

would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposure of that which is repressed in contriving the semblance of this harmony, and thereby would provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and each other (ibid).

Bishop’s elaboration of relational antagonism remains limited, and Chantal Mouffe has then gone to further expand the notion of what constitutes radical democracy by introducing the idea of agonism and plurality as components of radical democracy. Her project, through an exploration of a post-Marxist and post-structuralist argument of radical democracy, is to counter the dominance of a consensus-seeking definition of the political. To Mouffe, politics are about determining frontiers, in the sense that politics always involve some form of demarcation, of ‘othering’. Conversely, any social order is always the result of the articulation of a form an inescapable hegemony. Hegemony is constitutive of the social and political; it is what helps to make sense of any social order at a given time. However, she argues that every hegemony can be challenged (Carpentier et al., 2006). It so follows that if politics or the political is constituted by the frontier, by enabling conflict to take place, then public spaces need to reflect a healthy form of conflict. In this sense, a radical democracy is pluralistic in that it foster a multiplicity of agonistic public spaces. Agonism removes ‘the violent and destructive aspects from the antagonistic and transfers the enemy-other into the adversary-other’ (ibid: 971).

The ‘Play’ moment set the groundwork for the duo’s creative imagination through an inquiry into the digital space as an exciting form from which to create; proposing aesthetic experiences that put forth a reflection on the various iterations of being an individual in society (artist, citizen, ‘the people’) and a meaning that sought to empower agentic representation within the public and political sphere. Mouffe’s notion of agonism being a barometer of healthy democracy-making offers a productive assertion from which to analyse what the ‘Play’ moment was about. The Chong Chong Gang piece, for instance, was polemical. According to Núñez, many misunderstood the piece; it engendered a sense of discontentment from fellow artists who did not understand how denouncing an act of violence through further violence was in any sense effective. Yet it was that very disagreement and the discussions that ensued that only nourished the duo’s artistic explorations; it was consistent with their desire to break through the self-censorship and unilateral engagement with the public imposed
by the socialist social order. Conversely, the *Bodas de Papel* performance, whilst ‘lighter’ in its messaging, also contended with engrained notions of machismo and puritanism that permeate Cuban society. A Black man stripping down to a thong in public certainly irked the sensitivity of certain bystanders who might have seen such a gesture as a gross caricature of abject and deviant sexuality. The Play moment was not about seeking consensus, but experimenting with various contested elements of Cuban society: geopolitics, restricted Internet access, sensual desires, the question of the memory of national heroes, and so on. It sought to utilise the symbolic language of art in public spaces to offer new spaces for everyday citizens to face deeper conundrums and dilemmas about their social realities. The performances centred on the ‘frontiers’ that shape the organisation of the hegemonic order, and cleverly dropped a provocation to question the validity of such frontiers.

As I will now explore in the second part of this essay, the relative freedom that the duo lavishes in courageously becomes more and more stifled by their growing stakes within an activism space that alters their subjecthoods as artists. Núñez and Otero experience a shift in their creative imagination because of the pressure from both a consensus-seeking transnational militant space, and the offensive hegemony of the state that incites resistive action. The Obsession moment thus imposes a retreat from the more subtle investment in generating more democratic spaces, which shaped the Play moment.

II. Obsession

The obsession moment does not have a specific starting event as it applies to two various preoccupations that inform each other. The first being a focus and a mode of doing in Otero’s work that tends to revive, rearticulate, and explore with insistence one thematic until exhaustion. For instance, there is an obsessive quality to Otero’s early works through the various ways of representing Fidel Castro. The second preoccupation, which has a stronger temporal ‘beginning’ is an obsession with the state, or rather, how the state, obsessively enters and shapes artistic creation, to the extent that the works that determine this aesthetic moment are often reactions and resistances to arbitrary legal changes, state violence and violations of human rights. In this second preoccupation, it can be adequate to signpost the beginning of such a
period to 2016, when Otero and Núñez developed their project known as the Museum of Dissidence.

In this section, I explore three tendencies. The first concerns how the experience of exile, for individuals like Núñez but also many artists now living outside of Cuba, impacts the individuals’ relationship with Cuba. How displacement essentially strengthens a sense of responsibility, of obsessive monitoring of the ‘situation’ of Cuba, how being ‘outside’ stresses a commitment to being politically engaged, an obligation to double down on efforts of activism, and might ultimately stifle a desire to ‘go on with life’. In many conversations with Cuban artists and activists that I met during a short fieldwork trip to Madrid in the summer of 2021, a common theme that emerged was a feeling of guilt for having left, and of compensating this feeling through the establishment of stronger networks, of focussing their life’s work to the ‘case of Cuba’.

To address this, I focus on artworks by Cuban artists that featured in a collective exhibit at the Entre Gallery in Vienna from November 2021 to February 2022 entitled, precisely, OBSESSION. While this will be a detour from this essay’s focus on the exploration of the artistic imagination of the Otero-Núñez duo, delving into the aesthetic space of these pieces is also a way to acknowledge the political and artistic climate that has shaped Núñez’s subjectivity since her arrival in Spain in the spring of 2019. The pieces in the OBSESSION exhibit speak to the collective experience of exile, which is often shaped by, first, a primary need to heal from the traumas of violence, of finding safety and pause, and then of gauging one’s place in the country of refuge.

The two following tendencies bring us back to the work of Núñez and Otero. I develop on the Museum of Dissidence, which marks a pivotal transition between ‘Play’ and ‘Obsession’. I then focus on a performance piece conducted by Otero in 2018-2019 called ‘Drapeau’, which took place in conjunction with the foundation of the San Isidro Movement following the extensive international campaign against Decree 349. The ‘Drapeau’ piece was directed at the Cuban regime tightening the parameters of what constitutes artistic creation and dissidence. This period marks the changeover of artists like Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Amaury Pacheco from creators who operated within a quasi-autonomous realm of alternative work into ‘dissidents’ which, essentially, initiated their ‘social death’ (Fusco, 2015). This period simultaneously triggers a disruption of their artistic liberties and range due to their growing
responsibilities as activists. It is during this time that they become entangled within a transnational, digital activism space where the rules of discourse and communication form an anti-thesis to the sensorial and ambivalent qualities of any aesthetic experience. It could be argued that the artworks of the Obsession moment lose their subtle and reflexive quality in which both artist and spectator enter within an active relationship of construction of meaning whilst maintaining their respective autonomy. In the Obsession period, we experience a turn toward artworks that hold a 'sloganizing' dimension (Bourriaud, 2002) as they contend with a growing pressure to frontally critique repression and abide by the rules of a virulent online activism space. In this way, the political subject invades artistic subjecthood.

This moment of the duo’s creative imagination was inspired and is illuminated by the name of a collective exhibit in Vienna that featured works by Cuban artists, including Otero Alcántara, of same name: OBSESSION. The artists featured in this collection have been key actors in the various movements of resistance against the growing restrictions on freedoms in the country, and attest to this tendency of being ‘locked into’ the confines of what the state imposes. The description of the exhibit (ENTRE Vienna, 2021) aptly conveys the psychological strain of the obsessive state: OBSESSION is a state of being, a profile of psychology, an exit to social ostracism. It suggests an entrypoint into the current socio-political context of Cuba without being too far-fetched, ever mindful that OBSESSION implies a certain underlying precarity.

There is a suffocating quality to many of these works in which the artists attempt to express their anger, fears and frustrations vis a vis the growing repression they are subjected to, whilst at the same time, incarnating the impossibility of offering solutions, or alternative realities.

**Something alive inside something dead (2021) by Nelson Jalil Sardinas**

Loaves of white bread come out of the oven steaming hot, the baker snaps off each loaf piece by piece and hands them out to people waiting in line with their ration cards to receive their bread allowance of the day. These scenes are common all over the country, the white fluffy bread being a staple of the nationalised Cuban food chain.

In Nelson Jalil Sardina’s work, we recognise the cuboid white loaf that has leavened inside a square cage, the fluffiness expanding beyond the limitations of the metal structure, imprinting a pattern onto the plain bread. The colour of the loaf has a flesh-like quality and the final effect is somewhat uncomfortable, as it stretches beyond the criss-crossed cage. The lonely, leavened loaf inside its cage is placed in the middle of
a large white cement display structure which emphasizes the barrenness around the expansion. It is minimalist and impersonal – just like the offer of government-sanctioned baked goods, there is no personalization, no variety to choose from, just the same loaf of bread that can be stuffed with a fried egg, some butter or a sausage.

The title *Something alive inside something dead* confirms the discomforting impression that the piece evokes. The bread is very much alive, thanks to the fermentation process of live cultures that enable it to leaven. Yet, it is questionable whether a piece of food really has the characteristics that would define it as being ‘alive’. If alive refers to the ability to move, expand, and grow, then the loaf of bread does contain that textural quality which the cage does not. In this sense, the understanding of aliveness here is limited to motor functions, to the ability to ‘take up space’. Aliveness thus, does not mean *living*; it is a condition of being, but not of existing with a sense of purpose and dignity. In the brief description of the work, Jalil describes it in the following way: ‘This sculpture talks about the necessity of going beyond the limits imposed by a reduced space. This space can be a prison, a country, a body or a stiff concept.’ The reduced space, which the cage represents, honours the collective spirit of escape that many artists and activists who have gone into exile share in a different way. Whether it is a need to ‘oxygenate’, to get one’s head out of the
water, it is a testament to a bodily, psychic but also spiritual necessity to change. By using the word ‘necessity,’ Jalil refers to something unavoidable, that cannot be ignored or put aside. He refers to something fundamental. The piece is a direct critique of living under constraint. The ‘dead’ refers to the both the political and geographical limitations of Cuba the authoritarian state, and Cuba the island.

In Jalil’s piece, the collective exhibit’s essence comes into focus. *Something alive inside something dead* is a monument to survival, a testament to the artist's flight but also a reminder of this ‘profile of psychology’ that defines many Cubans who remain inside the country’s borders. Just like Jalil’s piece, many of the works featured in the collective exhibit contain an urgent quality of bearing witness to unhealed scars. From Raychel Carrion’s snow globe featuring a police baton to Camila Lobón’s photographs of neatly painted posters transcribing insults from pro-government supporters directed at her (Garcés Marrero, 2021). These pieces are not reflexive as much as they are therapeutic. Lobón placed the signs with the insults in the areas of Havana where she was verbally assaulted, providing a physical map of vitriol, materializing words and fleeting moments that become forever documented and archived like a detailed diary.

In the virtual inauguration of the exhibition, Lobón defines the artworks as ways of transforming this violence. The photographs are a personal ritual of revenge that gives the violence of the insults uttered back to the urban space in which they were enunciated, suspended. The painted slanders take on a journey of their own, she has liberated them from the echoes of her hurt and returned them to the community. ‘Down bitch!!!’ reads one of the signs, painted in neat pink letters.

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15 The insults stem from Camila Lobón’s experience of *actos de repudio* [acts of repudiation], when groups of pro-government supporters are called to protest against or intimidate a critic of the government. The supporters often surround the homes of the targeted ‘dissident’ and subject them to verbal and physical harassment. Members of the 27N, like Lobón, and members of the San Isidro Collective have been targets of such acts on many occasions. *Actos de repudio* have been around since the 1970s as an intimidation tactic of the regime’s detractors.
Against this backdrop, the OBSESSION moment attests to a shocked state of mind, of hurt, the creative process being a way to show the wounds, the attempt to explicitly give stage to the violence endured, a step that comes before any ability to process. It is an exhibit to all the pent-up aggression that many of these artists have been subjected to over the years, it becomes a reunion of the harmed.

In Jalil's 'state' of the necessity to expand beyond constrained limits is a commentary on the present moment. It is a reaction to a state and image of suffocation, which the obsession moment exemplifies. There is an emphasis on urgency, something that many people in exile, at the moment, resort to, responding to the 'attacks' by the state, being in a position of constant monitoring and reacting. The pieces in the exhibit are concrete, figurative depictions of an uncomfortable and restricted body, bloated inside pants that are too tight, or a mind imprisoned within the confines of a self-censoring and self-protective speech. It represents a universal desire and reason for leaving, for going outside, for expanding beyond this restriction, which requires departure. The loaf of bread can only expand so much through the cage’s holes, the only way for it to expand fully, is to break free of its metallic structure. A flight out is thus the only way. There is no ‘communion’ or negotiating with the cage,
and the cage itself as a metal structure cannot be bent nor give more space, the rigidness of its composition makes the flesh and metal incompatible, their molecules function on different registers.

The exhibit OBSESSION helps us to understand the nature of this ‘moment’ of the creative imagination which has different implications for those in exile, like Núñez and other artists featured in the exhibit, and those still ‘inside’, like Otero. It is a state of mental and emotional alterity; the artists are not creating from a place of contemplation but from a place of urgent action. This psychological plight can only have major implications in how the creative imagination unravels. Indeed, for those who have ‘left’ there is a need to justify not only their decision but also to reiterate their commitment to being able to do ‘more’ work once on the outside. The struggle and political commitment never ceases, if anything it intensifies.

In one of my first conversations with Núñez, in the spring of 2020, which was about one year after she had left Cuba, she recounted a conversation she had with Otero when she was contemplating leaving. He told her that it is not by leaving that she will be free from her commitment to Cuba, that in fact, she will only be more ‘in’ it. Leaving will not take away her and other activists’ worries and desire to continue to do something. If anything, the discomfort of daily persecution in Cuba might be replaced by a survivor’s guilt, of being obsessive about carving out a new role once in exile that helps her and other activists to maintain a sense of alignment and dedication to social justice. Efforts like the OBSESSION exhibit testify to this quest among artists in the diaspora. Creating spaces in which the muffled suffering can first be exposed into broad daylight, before tackling the more sustainable work of rebuilding, organising, and advocating. The collective exhibit honours the disorientation that comes with exile and the desire to find new ground, a new community, to land calmly on one’s feet by first acknowledging the hurt. It is obsessive because the tormenter’s shadow influences (re)action.

**Museo de la Disidencia en Cuba (2016)**

The museum of Dissidence in Cuba is a platform that seeks to implement itself online whilst projecting itself in various ways within real contexts. Departing from the concept of ‘Dissidence’ as defined by the Spanish Real Academy Dictionary, the museum offers a journey through all of Cuba’s history, from the colonization period to the contemporary moment, bringing together, under the same terms, the people, organizations or events that in one way or another have opposed those in power in Cuba. An important part of the museum is to provide space for dialogue and artistic creation - exhibitions, public programs, blogs, and publications - that transgress the limitations of Cuban society.
Returning to Cuba, a fundamental piece, *The Museum of Dissidence*, marks the solidification of the Núñez-Otero duo. During the two years of the Play period from 2014-2016, the artist and historian were learning from and about one another. Núñez enabled and translated Otero’s creative process rather than being an equal contributor to it. This dynamic takes a new turn with the foundation of *The Museum of Dissidence*, which is a joint project and a union of ideas. The project’s rigour and extensive archival collection reflects Núñez’s scholarly work ethic. The Museum carries on the duo’s intrigue with the Internet as fertile ground for generating alternative public spaces. It is a virtual platform, hosted by the blogging service WordPress that features entries, articles and video materials around figures of Cuban history who have, at one point or another, stood in defiance to those in power. By aiming for the online platform to provoke conversations that spill into real and concrete events, *The Museum of Dissidence* experiments with the liminality of the digital and physical worlds.

The illustration that stands at the top left-hand side of the museum’s homepage contains four personages. The first represents a Taíno native, the indigenous people of Cuba before the Spanish conquest. Spanish colonizers devastatingly exterminated most of Cuba’s indigenous population in spite of the Taínos’ intense resistance (Ferrer,
The second figure is José Martí, a poet and revolutionary who fought for Cuba’s independence from the Spanish Empire in the 1800s. Martí is a cosmic symbol of Cuban national identity since the 19th century, and is an important figure for a free and unified Latin America as well. Under the Castro regime, he represents tenacious courage against invading forces and heroic independence. The third image is a picture of a young Fidel Castro, taken in the 1950s as he was organising an insurrection and building a political movement against the corrupt dictator and puppet of the U.S. government Fulgencio Batista. The final image is that of Oswaldo Payá, a vocal opponent of the Cuban communist regime during the 1980s and 1990s who died in a car crash in 2012, which, to this day, is suspected of being ordered by Cuban authorities who sought to eliminate him (CIDH, 2023).

By placing next to each other four figures that have marked distinct moments of Cuban history from the time of colonization through the modern period, the artists investigate the literal meaning of ‘dissent’, a term that under Castrist rhetoric has been conned to signify treason and insult to the revolutionary process. Dissidents are often vilified as *gusanos* (term to designate counter-revolutionaries, which means worms) (Guerra, 2012). Departing from the dictionary definition of the term, the Museum reinvestigates the various histories of figures who at one point or another stood in defiance to power. For instance, Fidel Castro and Oswaldo Payá have both dissented, disagreed, expressed and acted on a form of civil disobedience in a quest for justice. Unsurprisingly, the museum’s inauguration put Otero and Núñez above the radar of authorities and initiated the Cuban government’s offensive against them by disqualifying them as counterrevolutionaries. In the summer of 2016, Núñez was suddenly fired from her job at the state-run gallery, as a direct consequence of her involvement with the museum (Nuñez Leyva, 2017). The museum was also criticized by prominent members of the Cuban ‘opposition’ who saw an aberration in putting Fidel Castro and Oswaldo Payá side by side, on equal footing.

*The Museum of Dissidence* marks the beginning of an exploration of semantics, of picking apart the language formulated by the state to discredit and ostracize dissenting voices. In this sense, the duo, through this piece, maintains their exploration of boundaries, by interrogating the framework under which political participation within the Cuban social order has been organised. They recalibrate the rightful meaning of the act of dissenting, as a noble right that invites to reflect on the role of civic duty.
within an authoritarian context. However, by making their object of study relations of power, the artists struck a nerve and crossed a line not to be crossed.

As the political scientist Yvon Grenier (2019) suggests, the parameters of critique in the Cuban cultural field are quite narrow and must not cross the line of deconstructing the power relations that underlie the revolutionary social order. For example, it is acceptable to ‘deplore mistakes made in the past by fallen bureaucrats’ (Grenier, 2019) but dangerous to openly scrutinize current policies. Núñez confirmed this analysis when recounting how her art history courses at the University of Havana portrayed different moments of recent Cuban history. Not so distant events such as the Quinqueno Gris of the mid-1970s, a period of increased repression in the arts, were often taught as static mistakes of the revolutionary process that have since been resolved. However, they were never explored for their contemporary repercussions. This form of critique aligns nicely with the reflective tone of Che Guevara’s roadmap for building the New Man in which the revolution is a constantly evolving and imperfect process (Guevara, 2008). On the other hand, artworks whose message strongly breach the allowed parameters of critique are those that brush on issues of power. Through the Museum, Otero and Núñez proposed a deconstruction of the metapolitical narrative of the revolution, turning on its head the hijacking of terms, such as ‘dissidence’, and reinstating the true meaning and practice of dissent. In light of this, their critique seeks to dissect the revolutionary process from a bird’s eye view and offer an alternative account of reality. They are operating through a similar logic of Tania Bruguera’s Department of Behaviour Art, departing from the ways language or behaviour have been codified within the revolutionary landscape, they propose a critique that opens up space for such language and behaviour to vary in connotation, by forging another framework of meaning.

By brushing against the topic of power, the Museum’s critique offers no room for vague interpretation – the duo is asking for a direct debate around issues of participation in the politics of the everyday, they are asking for a manifest reckoning with the grammar of the revolution. This endeavour will tip the artists over an edge of no return, as they become discredited interlocutors by Cuban authorities. To this avail, the duo is forced within a dynamic of resistance as they seek to transform the rules of existence in relation to the regime. They are able to begin changing these rules as a result of opening access to social media, but as we will see with the subsequent
Drapeau artistic action, they face another set of restrictions imposed by the transnational activism space which directly affects their artistic subjectivities.

**Drapeau (2019)**

‘With the Cuban flag as a second skin during the entire month of August, Luis Manuel will eat, sleep, bathe, visit, travel and conduct all of his daily activities as a social being.’

Drapeau was an action that interrogated the concept of fatherland, identity, nationalism, for being concepts that the system in power uses to discriminate or aggrandize. Symbols are part of a cultural process that is always evolving. Rethinking them, deconstructing them is part of a natural and systemic dynamic, just like someone brushing their teeth after eating.

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**Figure 10** Otero Alcántara, L.M. (2019). *Drapeau*. Performance. [Screenshot]. Unpublished dossier on Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara by Yanelys Núñez Lleyva.

In 2019, Otero was simultaneously becoming a *persona non grata* in the eyes of cultural authorities whilst gaining recognition by critical artists both inside and outside the country due to his growing activism against the Decree 349, and then as the leader of the San Isidro Movement. The digital space – that has been greatly democratized since late 2018 (Henken, 2020) – becomes Otero’s primary platform of expression and dissemination. His process at the time often followed a pattern of introducing an artistic
action through a live video in which he explained the conceptual intention and meaning behind the action that would then be followed by a series of photos and short videos. 2019 was a fruitful and busy year for Otero, with his profile as an artist raising, he could no longer be ignored by fellow artists as a force to reckon with. Even though Núñez Lleyva had fled Cuba for Madrid in the spring, Otero’s spirits remained high. In a few informal conversations we had during that time, he expressed excitement and enthusiasm for the future. ‘Working’ as he repeated regularly gave him great joy, he was happy to be in action, of being able to expand his experiences, encounters, and travels.

_Drapeau_ consisted of daily publications (photos and videos), on Facebook, throughout the month August 2019, of Otero doing ‘everyday things’ with the Cuban flag draped on his person either as a blanket, scarf, or towel. In French, the word _drapeau_ etymologically stems from the word _drap_, which refers to a piece of linen or cloth. By interpreting the meaning of _drapeau_ literally, Otero stays true to his practice of experimenting with the materiality of objects, of pushing their function to the limits. Some of the photos bear no captions, while others are joined by the hashtags #labanderaesdetodos [the flag belongs to all] or the San Isidro motto #estamosconectados [we are connected]. In others, he comments. For instance, in one of the photos he states ‘feeding the flag’ in an image of him eating a traditional dish of rice and beans. In another, he films himself inside a sex shop in Mexico City with the caption: ‘taking the flag to morbid places that are prohibited in Cuba’ (indeed sex shops or the selling of any form of pornographic content is illegal on the island). He takes the flag to the museum in Mexico City and poses next to Marcel Duchamp’s _Fountain_ and other famous artworks by Jeff Koons. In others, Otero films himself dancing at Havana’s carnival or in a club to _reggaeton_ music. Throughout the often-humorous photos and videos, the flag takes a personality of its own, as Otero brandishes it with care and affection like a child whose first life experiences are documented in a carefully curated family album.
As stated in the text joined with the performance, which was written by Núñez, the action ‘interrogated the concept of fatherland, identity, nationalism, for being concepts that the system in power uses to discriminate or aggrandize.’ Therefore, Otero, once again displaces the authority of who can or cannot determine the meaning of such symbols. The performance offers an observation of the transformation of Cuban identity considering the recent ‘thawing’ of diplomatic relations undertaken under Barack Obama in December 2015 (The congressional digest, 2016). It thus questions how the shift in the relationship between the two countries infiltrates notions of identity by reshuffling the imaginary around Cuban national identity.

Furthermore, Drapeau, is a reaction to a law that was being debated in the Cuban parliament around the use and representation of national symbols (Rojas, 2020). Whilst this contextual backdrop is not mentioned in the text accompanying the artwork, the performance’s explicit mockery of the law did not go unnoticed by Otero’s followers on social media. The law itself was officialised in September 2019 and stipulates that
symbols such as the Cuban flag cannot be used, for instance, as ‘a curtain, wall hangings, cover, canvas, rug or tablecloth’ (Rojas, 2020). The law does not explicitly prohibit draping oneself with the flag, but it was nonetheless used against Otero Alcántara shortly after its release as grounds for charging him with a violation of the law. Indeed, the years following The Museum of Dissidence, the form and material that the duo tends to focus on becomes the rhetoric of the state. There is a play on words, an excavation of meanings behind the ways that the government interprets or engages with symbols, representations, and history. Their focus of study and of reflection, through the ensuing artworks, involves a sarcastic but constrained engagement with the regime as a primary canvas onto which they creatively shape responses.

Indeed, the ‘Obsession’ moment bears witness to a closing in on the framework from which the duo can speak to and from. As their artworks become consumed by growing political campaigns against decrees and restrictive laws between 2018 and 2019, their aesthetic commitment at times loses focus. With the line between cultural authorities and state security agents becoming more and more blurry (as indicated by Lavastida in this chapter’s opening quote), and a cultural elite getting more explicitly on the offensive against critical artists, Otero and Núñez find solidarity in transnational activism and opposition networks. However, the networks themselves are defined by oversimplified discourse over what constitutes dissent. Consequently, the duo becomes increasingly controlled by a regime that is enhancing the delineation between artistic expression and mercenary opposition actions on one side, and an extremely diverse and unruly social media activism space that does not allow for the ambivalent discourse that artistic interpretation fosters. This tension was illustrated in a tangential performance that Otero eventually abandoned because of the vicious reactions he received online by the same community that advocated for his liberation during his first long prison stay in March 2020 (Revista cultural Árbol Invertido, 2020). The intended gesture was to auction a Cuban flag. Indeed, the Drapeau performance,

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16 Otero was imprisoned on March 1, 2020 as he was attending an independent Pride rally in Havana. He was kept in prison while he awaited trial for the charge of ‘desecrating national symbols’ in reference to his Drapeau performance. He was released on March 17 after a successful international campaign for his liberation led by artists and human rights organisations, including Amnesty International. One of the charges brought against him in his subsequent trial in June 2022 is the same offence of ‘desecrating national symbols’ relating to the 2019 performance.
and his subsequent incarceration because of it, had generated an extensive conversation around national identity and censorship on social media. Through the auction, Otero explained that he would donate all the proceeds to the Cuban government to help fight the rapidly-unfolding Covid-19 crisis in the country.

However, the backlash of comments he received from many of his followers who used the decades-old, embargo-supporting argument that the opposition does not engage, especially financially, with the Cuban dictatorship was both fierce and violent. In late March 2020, Otero took to social media to livestream a long video in which he apologised for causing offence with this gesture and attempted to justify the auction as an artistic act rather than a literal one. He concedes to the pressure, however, and does not go through with the performance. There is an unprecedented surrender in Otero’s response. Here, the artist who aimed to provoke and seek ‘active’ participation of the beholder during the Play period relinquishes his uncompromising artistic stance to a consensus-imposing activism space. In the video, he expresses disappointment that his work is being misunderstood, and explains that the gesture was meant to be a symbolic, and social exercise in holding the government accountable for protecting the population during the pandemic by using the only financial means available to an artist, which is the sale or auction his work. He laments that his action might have sparked a polemic and justifies it as an attempt to tap into an emotional, humane facet of the regime by incarnating, as a sole artist and citizen, a mere wish for a government that protects him. By giving up on the performance, Otero indirectly admits to being restricted by the confines of both the activism and police spaces. His subjectivity as an artist is not only negated by the regime that has explicitly expressed that Otero holds no artistic legitimacy but also by a social media space of followers who see in him the incarnation of a voice of dissent. The inter-subjectivity of the aesthetic experience is stifled by a consensual activism space. The reception of the Drapeau performance marks a tipping point in how Otero becomes restricted by his growing leadership as an activist. In other words, the political subject becomes dominant.

We notice a desire to break free of this framework within the exile community of artists as well. Many of the artists featured in the OBSESSION exhibit carry politics that seek to nuance the binary framework in which the Cuban opposition is plunged. Whilst the artists actively denounce the regime’s authoritarian nature, many embrace a leftist and progressive agenda, and are critical of the countries they migrated to for their foreign policy towards Cuba. One of the artists, Lester Alvarez, whom I met in
Madrid in the summer of 2021 even talked about the emergence of a Cuban opposition from the left, that is spearheaded by the artistic movements of the last few years, with the San Isidro Movement first and then the fomentation of the 27N movement in November 2021. It is nothing novel that artists and intellectuals tend to carry more progressive values, however, what seems unique to the Cuban experience, is that in order to fully express their subjectivities as artists, they need to remain within the confines of art spaces – such as exhibits – because once their artistic practice invests in political activism, their artistry is devoured by the urgency of the political. This threat of being devoured is another key characteristic of the Obsession moment, as much for those in exile as those who remain inside, as we saw with the polemic around Otero’s auction piece mentioned above.

**The state as arbitrator of good taste**

Otero Alcántara’s restrictions of expression are accentuated by a racial dynamic. During the July 11, 2021 protests that swept the country, the language employed by state propaganda to refer to those who participated in the uprising was an aesthetics-based one: the protestors were called ‘thugs’ or ‘vulgar’, terms that are often reserved to differentiate non-white Cubans from poorer parts of the metropole (Hall, 2023).

Cuba’s authoritarian regime through its moral framework of proper revolutionary behaviour has defined the ‘respectability politics’ and the contours of a ‘decent’ citizen. Since the beginning of the revolution, one could be charged for ‘ideological diversionism’ simply for wearing ‘loud’ dress and paying too much attention to their appearance, such concerns are deemed futile in the New Man’s heroic duty. In this sense, aesthetic values have been determined by the state, down to one’s most subjective and domestic tastes. Jacqueline Loss (2021) analysed how decency is thus produced and reproduced by the State and how ‘material culture and aesthetic judgement feed into the aesthetic hegemony of the Cuban state’ (Loss, 2021: 291). She reminds that the formal training of artists serves as an arbitrator of legitimacy, and that amateur artists are viewed suspiciously. This is especially the case when it comes to Black artists, such as Luis Otero Manuel Alcántara. In her piece, Loss compares the reception and confrontations between Otero, reggaeton artist Chocolate MC and the internationally-known funk singer Cimafunk. She demonstrates that in each case, an imposed perception of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste was activated in how the state responded to these three artists, all of whom are Black and share an autodidact
background. Otero and Chocolate MC were discredited for distinct reasons but both related to ideas that their work had no artistic value. Otero’s performances are depoliticized by the legal system that charges him as a vandal, whilst Chocolate MC’s music and style is portrayed as a vulgar expression of the imperialist abject masculine. Alternatively, Cimafunk’s timeless 1970s style is exemplary of an emergent aesthetic for a once again “worldly” yet still “sovereign” Cuba’ (Loss, 2021: 303).

Loss’ analysis provides a pertinent lens for better understanding why Cuba’s Vice Minister of Culture, Fernando Rojas, awkwardly took to Twitter in September 2019 in response to a tweet by Amnesty International that called out the most recent arrest of Otero Alcántara. In his response, Rojas expresses that Otero does not represent the 50,000 Cuban artists for reasons of ‘pure aesthetics’ to then add that Otero has no ‘artistic endorsement’ (Diario de Cuba, 2019). This event embodies the state’s micromanagement, where cultural authorities impose their personal judgement on an artist’s credentials as the dominant stance. The state explicitly acts as an arbiter of good taste, discrediting Otero’s most recent action, the Drapeau piece, from an artistic one to locate him more firmly within the realm of agitator and dissident. In doing this, the state enforced a role that subsequently locked Otero, Núñez and other members of the San Isidro Movement within its own parameters of conversation. Members of the San Isidro Movement (MSI) were cornered into a defensive position, compelled to react to this delegitimizing discourse rather than ‘construct’ or propose alternatives as they did before with initiatives such as their alternative biennale project in 2018. This is where Lavastida’s provocation rings true, the realm of artistic creation and operation are shaped by the state’s definition of ‘real’ art; the autonomy of artworks is ‘dead’.

During Otero’s incarceration in early 2020 specifically for conducting the Drapeau performance, the San Isidro Collective published various communiqués and critical analyses of Cuban artists who have used the symbolism of the Cuban flag as artistic material. In the communiqué, they seek to place Otero’s performance within a tradition of artists who have bent the representation of national symbols repeatedly to ‘displace the flag from its sacred aura and bring it closer to the pulse of everyday life’ (Núñez Leyva, 2020). By locating Otero within a tradition of more and less established Cuban artists, they seek to renew his actions within an aesthetic conversation rather than a militant one. There is a thus a direct confrontation with the State’s role as arbiter of good taste as they seek to redefine the parameters of aesthetics imposed by the regime. However, by doing so, Núñez, Otero and members of the San Isidro
movement are locating themselves well within the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004) defined by the regime, and are not inventing new ways of existing. They are playing their ‘part’ as oppressed entities. Similarly, the artworks featured in the OBSESSION exhibition echo the necessity of shedding light on a stressed psychological state that is not yet at the stage of being able to construct, to create alternatives, but that remains very much in a state of hurt, of denouncing and reacting, in order to undertake the long quest of processing.

We will now explore in the third section how the creative moment of ‘Quiet’ that traverses the two other moments, in a minuscule but powerful manner, asserts the tenacity of artistic subjectivities even in situations of constraint.

III. Quiet

Puertas (2020-2021)

Using different sizes of paper, pen, pencils, chalk, and spray paint – anything that Otero could get his hands on – Puertas [Doors] consists of a series of large drawings of unique and convoluted doors. Doors that do not make sense, whose design and structure do not comply with their functions. In the bouncy lines and messy colouring, we find Otero’s child-like intrigue with cartoons, the doors seem to have minds of their own and they bend and spring into different shapes, dancing amusingly. The doors convey Otero’s sustained interest in the everyday, the mundane. The doors representing an impossible but imagined alterity. In a video produced by the photographer Anyelo Troya (Ramos and Troya, 2021) that features footage of Otero drawing these doors, we notice that there are no plans, that the door’s lines are created spontaneously, his hand following the chalk or pen on an unpredictable journey. The spectator witnesses Otero’s process; trusting the intense attentiveness of the aesthetic journey. Otero had one of his puertas drawings framed. The only piece of art that adorns the plaster walls of his modest home. He hung the painting on the wall opposing the front door, in the kitchen area. The cartoonish door reflecting the ‘real’ door that is under constant surveillance (a camera was installed in early 2020 by state security to monitor Otero’s movements). The bending door amusingly mirroring another realm from which to enter, another escape route, another space onto which to become an individual, free of the restrictions of the real liminal spaces. These doors
hanging like guardians of another possibility of home, another space for the body to find privacy and safety.

![Image of a drawing](image_url)

**Figure 12** Otero Alcántara, L.M. (2020). Drawing from the series *Puertas [Doors]*. Charcoal and acrylic on cardboard 100 x 85 cm. [Online image]. Available at https://www.lmoastudio.com/en/series/doors. [Accessed October 2023]

Otero created the series *Puertas* shortly after he was released from prison in March 2020, during Havana’s strict national lockdown. In the video about the series, he explains that the Covid-19 pandemic allowed him to retreat within himself and dedicate more time to a reflexive practice. In my interviews with Otero in April 2020, he explained that as an artist whose primary material has been the public space and thinking about making social art, he often struggled to find time for reflecting on his progress and process. The confinement imposed by the national lockdown offered a welcomed pause for him to return to his imaginary world without interruption. Sketching, drawing, and painting are ways to create new worlds; he does not depart from a real object, as he often does when doing public performances, but rather departs from the wild depths of his imagination. The doors announce a subversiveness of entrenchment. These ‘illogical’ doors, as he calls them, their opacity, the inability to guess what lies behind their unpractical shapes is an invitation for overthrowing imposed ways of living, of taking up space with dreams and fantasies, of instituting another reality. They are illogical doors that simply do not function in a logical world.
In the video, he tells Troya that he hopes the doors can become tokens, for anybody to identify with. Here we re-encounter Otero’s interest in individuality, his understanding of change and transformation only being possible through individual action. Each door, each individual that sees a token within it constructing their own micro-history. The world is changed through each and everyone’s micro-histories.

The Puertas series encapsulates the creative moment that I define as ‘Quiet’. This moment qualifies artworks that stem from the territory of the ‘domestic’, the intimate and the emotional. These are quiet pieces that do not contain an explicit political message but that potentially offer a political break in a Rancièrian sense. The ‘Quiet’ often explores absurdities, or imagery that calls for a return to the foundation of creation; their content and meaning are somewhat less prescribed. They do not seek to interact with any interlocutor in particular but rather emerge from a desire of creating art for art’s sake. They are reflexive. In this sense, the Quiet moment strips the artists of their roles within a specific social framework of the doable and sayable, and helps us see their insatiable ‘itch’ to create. I have distinct memories of Otero needing to leave and stop urgently what he was doing to go home to draw, or put an idea on paper, to somehow materialize it. When I asked Núñez whether Otero, in the last few years, expressed frustration about his time being dedicated to his political commitments more than artistic creation, she replied:

Yes, he was frustrated. He had lots of things in mind, he had an artwork he really wanted to do around the consumption of fashion. How someone who lives in the third world, traveling in a developed country, who doesn’t have the possibility of buying even though he has money, well, when he arrives, he becomes awe-struck by all these wonderful stores. There are people who demonise this [obsession with fashion] but in his case, coming from his context, there is awe. So the piece he had in mind would have involved him trying on clothes non-stop for an entire day. I think he tried to get out [of the pure activism] but between the people in jail, the need to organise a campaign, between the lack of food, the police surveilling your house, the fear that you’ll get thrown in jail, well all of that clearly makes you cautious and it limits you completely. I would say that in the last months he has drawn a lot (Interview with Núñez in December 2021).

How his commitment towards social justice stifled his career as an artist is something he also shared with me in an interview back in January 2021, when I asked him to take the pulse of his creative process:

In my creative process, something that I’m really ready for is art. Because, yes, the political takes up a lot of space while the art remains tiny. So yes, I still believe very strongly in the world of art, I don’t doubt the god that is art. You know that I’m a lover of the little world of art with its biennales and galleries. People say ‘all of this is so snobby, I don’t want to be a part of it’ well I really want to be a part of it. In truth, what really affects and hurts me is when I see artists of my generation who are getting fellowships
someplace or another in the world, and I can’t do that because that would mean giving up on the struggle here in Cuba. You waste so much energy fighting with these people [the government], that this battle to be within the mainstream of art fucks up. You need to pick between one of two worlds. And what I’ve always liked to do is unite those two worlds: The mainstream with this world of art that is more real, harder… So this year, I want to mix those two things. I want to devote time to the mainstream of art, to channel things, identify things within my own work. One needs to situate oneself in good places, in good galleries or museums, get a nice fellowship somewhere (Phone interview with Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara in January 2021).

Otero expresses this dilemma of desiring fame for his art, to belong to the elite world of art whilst not being able to give up his everyday struggle against injustice. He believes that one way for him to achieve this is to increase his chances of being credited as a ‘mainstream’ artist while never selling out and inserting his social commitment within that mainstream. It is unclear that kind of ‘mainstream’ Otero refers to, but we sense a genuine difficulty in navigating an intrinsic desire to explore how far his artistic scope could take him whilst being unable to do art that does not, in one way or another, intervene in the social. Hence, the importance of people like Núñez and other formally trained artists who help bolster his social capital as an artist both nationally and transnationally. His exploration and return to personal, intimate pieces appears to be a way to continue ‘workshopping’ and ‘experimenting’ with his purely artistic voice, free of the weight of the ‘struggle’. In this light, the Puertas reads like a ‘study’ of a sensorial need to exteriorize something, of entering the stillness of creative exploration and contemplation, of playing with the unique and separate realm of creative impulse.

**Proyecto para un Monumento Imposible (2018)**

I suggested in the ‘Obsession’ moment that Otero’s repertoire is filled with an obsessive exploration of a particular theme, until it has been used to exhaustion. This has been the case with the figure of Fidel Castro, for instance. A piece that resonates with the quiet moment was done in parallel with more boisterous and daring pieces, all around the figure of Castro. I mention this piece because Núñez was overtaken by joyful emotions as she reminisced about it, giving me a glimpse into the privacy of the Quiet moment, a peek into the confidence between them that fostered a sense of liberty from all other obligations. The piece is called *Proyecto para un monumento imposible* [Project for an impossible monument] (Prieto, 2018) and consists of a tiny model of a monument and plaza to honour Castro after his death. The model is a provocative response to Castro’s explicit instructions that no statues or other public
symbols be created of him after his death; he wished to be remembered solely through his writings and speeches. By going against the wishes of the dead man, Otero mocks the leader’s disingenuous desire of being desacralized. He dares to constructs the very thing that Fidel Castro prohibited doing, hence exercising his right to conduct any form of memorial gesture as a private individual and refusing the perseverance of Castro’s authority even in death.

The rebellion of a miniature monument grants agentic power to individual desires of doing as we please with our memories. It vanquishes Castro’s imposed posthumous omnipresence. Monuments and commemorations are key devices for cohesive national mourning that help mitigate collective experiences of melancholia (Tinsley, 2021). Núñez recounted with fondness these tiny, understated artworks that often stood in the shadow of louder ones meant to generate a wider impact. They were small experiments for them two to play with, the piece was not intended to be displayed anywhere. They joked that Castro’s true motive for not wanting statues built of him was because he knew that they would be the first to be toppled once the regime changed in Cuba. According to Núñez, Otero intended on destroying the little model after building it, but it is unclear if this actually took place.
Thus, the ‘Quiet’ is a moment in the creative imagination of Otero and Núñez that transcends Play and Obsession. The artworks during this moment are often ‘studies’ of small ideas or imagined forms that go beyond reacting to a social event or commentary. While some of the artworks do, like Fidel’s impossible monument, the foundational idea behind these artworks is much more private. The pieces are continued quests into Otero’s own unveiling to himself as an artist, they are experiments and experiences. They shatter the confines of public discourse, of the responsibility of activism, or of the ‘role’ they have growingly been imposed as dissidents. The Quiet is a kind of re-encounter with the self, it constitutes another subjectivity, one that is not locked into the parameters of the Cuban social order and the activism space. The Quiet moment is the artist retreated in his room and scratching the itch to create, liberated from context and meaning-seeking.

In phone interviews with Otero in 2020 and 2021, he often talked about the urge to ‘banalize’, especially as his profile as an activist kept growing in visibility. For him,
‘banalizing’ meant checking out, listening to vulgar reggaeton and drinking rum (Otero has never much enjoyed drinking alcohol). It meant exorcising all the weight of responsibility and revisit his most primal needs, one of these being the need to create for the sake of creating: oxygenar el cerebro [oxygenise the brain]. The ‘Quiet’ is this retreat. And while many of these pieces inscribe themselves within a wider tableau of political and critical art, the necessity to create these artworks didn’t stem from an outside provocation. On the contrary, they emerged from a rested mind and wandering eyes for the Puertas series, or an inside joke between Núñez and Otero, for the Monumento piece. There was no clear audience in mind, at least not in their initial conception. Unlike Drapeau, in which the spectator and reception of the piece constituted the motivations behind it, or the Bodas de Papel piece that sought to shake up a specific order of private and public desires. The artworks within the Quiet are personal meditations; they are crucial parts of Otero’s progression as a creator, of turning to the simple act of doing art because that is what grants him the utmost satisfaction. They are about the artist granting himself the pleasure of creation. The gesture, communication, and reception – while conceptually important – being of secondary importance.

To locate the distinctive sensory realm of the Quiet moment, I examine its resonances with an artistic current in a similar context: the Wuming Movement during China’s Cultural Revolution. The Wuming [No Name] painting group in Beijing operated from 1973-1981. It was a group of mostly self-taught artists who painted everyday scenes of home on small canvases. These scenes of domesticity offer glimpses into the possibilities of subjectivities other than those imposed by the Cultural Revolution. The intentional small size of the paintings made it easier to hide them from authorities and compelled the viewer to get close to contemplate them, hence favouring an individual and intimate relationship with the artworks (Goodman, 2011). Most of the Wuming painters were factory workers but were still perceived by Communist authorities as entertaining bourgeois preoccupations by focusing on the mundane and ignoring the social realist art tradition of the time. In her ethnographic work, the anthropologist and painter Aihe Wang (2014) who was a member of the group, contends that by creating apolitical art, the Wuming painters were exploring its distinct role in politics ‘not as its servant or a dissident, but as its critical and aesthetic alternative’ (Wang, 2014: 27). These artistic practices, which took place inside private homes enabled the constitution of subjectivities other than the state’s socialist subject.
They were a reaction to the Communist regime’s ‘shattering of the home’ (Wang, 2014: 28) and ‘engineering of the soul’ (ibid: 31). The paintings provided emotional refuge and testament to the artists’ lived experienced under Chinese socialism. The Wuming paintings share the quiet quality of Otero’s Puertas in that they are mirrors into a reflexive experience, fragments of an imagination gone off course. In both cases, the artworks attest to a conscious repudiation of their surrounding meta-narrative and political obligations. They stand as autonomous totems to intimate moments.

Both the ‘Quiet’ and Wuming seek to restore a social fabric by actively ignoring the state, rendering its overpowering presence irrelevant. In this sense, the politics of both currents remain defined by the politics of the ‘doable and sayable’ (Rancière, 2004). They are still circumscribed by what they cannot do. Otero’s Puertas materialize as a response, an alternative, to the restrictions of a social order in which entry and exit into appropriate existence as a good or bad citizen is explicitly prescribed under authoritarian rule. The convoluted doors provide a way outside of this; they bend in defiance. Whilst the motivation behind the work and the targeted audience is not the state, the fact that the doors seek to serve as liberating totems, still implicates an acknowledgement of the politics that surround their creation. The same goes for the Wuming’s scenes of home. The apolitical nature of the small paintings underlines an overt need to extricate oneself from the aesthetic rules of socialist realism. By not mentioning or not directing the subject of their artworks to the aesthetic norms imposed by the Cultural Revolution, the painters are conducting a quiet revolution of their own. They activate an intimate, personal experience of focusing on mundane, non-ideological concerns. The respite that the Wuming paintings seek to provide is a counterbalance to the stresses of living under authoritarian rule. In both the Wuming and Puertas, there is a resistance to the pervasive infiltration of state power into personal relationships and intimacy by circumventing this presence and offering other possible relations and centres of interest. The return to a look at nature, to exploring doorframes, to still lives, seeks to scavenge modes of existence that lie below and beyond the rules of their social orders. The currents respond to other possibilities of being in the world. In the Quiet, there is a hiatus: the political subjectivity is breathed out from the artistic subjectivity.

Otero and Núñez’s works since 2016 have been concerned more with dissent and reacting to state repression. They have been ‘caught up’ by their context and their activism, to the extent that it has stifled artistic creation and freedom. Going back to
Hamlet Lavastida’s provocation about Cuban art being traversed solely by a political conversation today and having lost its aesthetic independence, this might be true when the ability to create remains in the confusing and erratic parameters established by the State. However, when diving deeper into the various layers of creation of Otero and Núñez, we can see that different modes of creation stem from various needs. The Quiet moment is about pieces that are not originally anchored in a material trigger or a concern about spreading a specific message, but are rather manifestations of deep ‘itches’ and cathartic gestures for an individual need of making sense of the world. Otero might argue that all art is political, the question remains, what kind of ‘political’ are we talking about?

IV. Looking for dissensus, or grace?

By way of reflection, I turn to Jacques Rancière to elucidate this question of the political. When theorising about aesthetics, Rancière has defined the distribution of the sensible as ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that defines the respective parts and positions within it’ (Rancière, 2004: 12). In other words, it is a system that defines forms of exclusion and inclusion, a system that shapes what is common through a distinct sensory language codified to understand who can or cannot take part in it. In this sense, the distribution of the sensible within the ontological landscape of the Cuban Revolution is shaped by the state’s arbitrary parameters of who counts are a true revolutionary. These delimitations apply to the art world as well, where the highly centralised and bureaucratised cultural sector determines who detains artistic merit or not. The revolution carves the contours of artistic legitimacy based on appropriate credentials and artistic content. Through the Drapeau artistic campaign, Otero is playing his part within this very distribution by shedding light on his exclusion and the subsequent exclusion of all Cubans who manoeuvre the flag in unauthorised manners. In other words, the delimitations of the sensorial system’s ‘self-evident’ facts are utilised to showcase the system’s power relations. The performance does not propose another grammar of existence, it does not enable true subjetivization. The Drapeau piece and many of the artistic campaigns and interventions of the Obsession moment respond within what Rancière defines as the ‘police’ order, or the politics of the framework imposed by the state. The artists turn
to forms and symbols familiar to the sensorial community and activate their meaning in a resistive manner to the state. They are trapped by the distributive order of things.

Rancière defines aesthetics as ‘the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience’ (Rancière, 2004: 12); aesthetics refers to autonomous sensory experience. Artistic forms can fall within different regimes of ways of doing and making, by either mimicking the real, representing forms as they are meant to be visible within a specific system of distribution of the sensible, or they can be fully autonomous and be forms of doing and making that serve as verifications of an ontological wrong. This is what happens in what Rancière defines as the Aesthetic Regime of arts when ‘the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products’ (Rancière, 2004: 22). What distinguishes artistic forms within the aesthetic regime is their autonomy and heterogeneity; they provide an ‘autonomous form of life’ (Rancière, 2010: 118). These are artworks that are free from historization and over-contextualization. As such, they retain their purity from political intervention and thus have a true ‘dissensual’ potential as they permit the emergence of a subjectivity that does not identify with a specific part in the distribution of sensible (or police framework) but rather emerges as radical verification of its equality within an unequal social order. The scenes of dissensus in the aesthetic regime enable the emergence of a subject who is ‘in-between’, who is on the brink of asserting something that has not come into being before.

Dissensual artworks, in this light, allow for the rise of a subjective self other than that which is defined within the forms of doing and making within the distribution of the sensible. It would be tempting to argue that artworks that stem from the ‘Quiet’ moment or from the intimate, as is the case with the Wu ming, carry this dissensual quality. The state, in the Wu ming Movement and the Puertas series is not an explicit interlocutor. Other subjective spaces can emerge, alternative forms of identification are made possible. However, the absence of the state still makes it an interlocutor within the dialogical relationship that the artworks inscribe themselves within. To understand the escape provided by Otero’s Puertas, the artist’s devotion his fellow citizens by creating these doors of freedom, one needs to conceive it as a response to a social order in which escape feels impossible. Equally, in the Wu ming paintings, while the restrictions imposed by the aesthetic current of socialist realism are never alluded to in these tiny scenes of the mundane, that very absence is in within itself a form of resistance. In
this sense, what emerges from the ‘Quiet’ moment is a return of the artistic subjectivity, a dissociation from the artist’s political role even though the artworks themselves carry political implications. The artworks seek a sense of autonomy, but they remain confined by their negation within a social order that defines them. Therefore, what transpires in the ‘Quiet’, and where there is perhaps an emancipatory potential, is the artist’s retainment of their full creative spirit, in spite of the context they are speaking to. In this sense, dissensus is apparent in the imagined scenes of the artist ‘losing himself’ in painting a still life or a convoluted door. The act of creating, in this dissensual moment, is not defined by urgency. The artwork does not stem from a response or a reaction. It emerges, instead, from the unique perceptual and sensorial register of the aesthetic event.

In investigating the three moments of Núñez and Otero’s creative imagination and impetus, we can begin to draw a more detailed picture of the various layers that constitute creation when at the frontier between politics and aesthetics, within an authoritarian context. As we saw, the moment of ‘Play’ was shaped by what seemed to be a joyful balance between artistic and political subjecthoods, as the duo explored, shaped, and experimented with different forms of doing and making, asserting their aesthetics and innovating within a highly codified cultural world. Their provocative pieces manifested an experimentation with ‘democracy’ as an agonistic space (Mouffe, 2007) with ‘active’ participants (Bishop, 2005). In contrast, the ‘Obsession’ moment shatters this balance as the pair and artists in exile become devoured in their creative process by the political. Hamlet Lavastida’s provocation rings true for this moment of the creative imagination, the political subject becomes dominant, rendering the autonomy of aesthetics somewhat lost. The ‘Obsession’ moment is shaped by a psychological need to give room to the ‘hurt’, to shed light on the violence, to use art as a tool for political advocacy. It is a process that leaves little room for reflexivity, especially when it comes to making sense of the adjustment that comes with exile for many of the artists mentioned in this essay. Finally, and alternatively, the Quiet moment tells us that, in the end, the artist, is still there. It testifies to a reassertion and defiance that artistic subjectivity does and can exist. That the inherent need to create, even if it is within the confines of an imposed framework, remains intact.

I conclude with James Baldwin’s reckoning with the responsibility of the artist. He suggests that – as a communicator of truth – the artist’s integrity is defined by an inexorable responsibility to give, to the extent of sacrifice. This commitment continues
to shape artists like Otero Alcántara who has remained consistent in voicing his dilemma relating to the conflict of wanting ‘out’ of it all, of the drama of repression whilst knowing he cannot abandon his commitment to social justice. He has promised himself that his craft would be a tool for connecting with others and for opening routes towards self-awareness. Baldwin identifies this torment as a form of saving grace:

After all, there is a kind of saving egotism too, a cruel and dangerous but also saving egotism, about the artist's condition, which is this: I know that if I survive it, when the tears have stopped flowing and when the blood has dried, when the storm has settled, I do have a type writer, which is my torment but is also my work (Baldwin, 2010: 45-46).

The singularity and specificity of the artist’s responsibility as both torment and work reinstates here the constitutive role of artists in our modern times in revealing and articulating our moral frameworks. Philosopher Charles Taylor would perhaps align with Baldwin’s distraught provocation on artists’ inescapably beautiful fate. Like Baldwin, Taylor also suggests that there is something inherently isolating about the artist’s plight because – as a subject with an amount of sensibility ‘too great for this world’ (Taylor, 1989: 424) – the artist is destined to remain isolated or risk being corrupted by rational discipline. Artists as ‘epiphanic’ subjects (Taylor, 1989: 425) who have the capacity of articulating, through the power of creative expression and other symbolic languages, our underlying moral intuitions, are somewhat doomed by that responsibility. Nonetheless, this fate is what distinguishes the artist. What we can see through the different creative moments of Otero’s creative imagination, specifically, is that he holds on to that ability in spite of himself, even when under strict constraint. His *Puertas* articulate a shared desire for other routes of existence; they oxygenise a suffocating social body. Perhaps, they make us see with clarity the locked doors of our day to day. Such clarity has the potential for inspiring a different course of action; it compels to look for the keys, or to break down the doors altogether. The Quiet moment confirms the artist’s responsibility and ‘cruel’ fate of transforming our vision of the world, of making us receptive to grace which opens possibilities for loving ourselves and the world, even in spite of it all (Taylor, 1989: 451). True artistic subjecthood remains indestructible.
Essay three Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara: Opening new subjective spaces

In this final essay, I dive into three artworks conceived by the artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, the first dating from 2013 and the last from 2021. Through a contemplative and lyrical immersion within the aesthetic encounter of these artworks, I argue that the aesthetic experience reveals the artist’s quest in carving new subjective spaces and offers forms of subjecthood that escape the confinement of revolutionary politics. The first piece, titled *Naturaleza Muerta. Transformando la violencia en arte* [Still Life. Transforming violence into art] (2021) is a series of drawings that reverse the gaze of the surveillant state through scenes of the artist ‘sitting and drawing’ providing a re/dis/orientating proposition for the Cuban social body to move within a surveillance State. *Miss Bienal* (2015), a performance piece during the 12th Havana Biennale, in a similar vein, offers a dissensual possibility to break free of our social ascriptions to reveal our infinite capabilities. Finally, *La Caridad Nos Une* [The Patroness Saint Unites us All] (2013) a performance and pilgrimage with a papier mâché interpretation of Cuba’s Patroness Saint constitutes one of Otero’s first explorations of the fusion between life/art and the ‘gesture’ in service to others. This final piece consecrates my argument of the emancipatory potential of the performance as it proposes a deepening and transcendence of the Cuban Revolution’s ontological landscape.
I. Naturaleza Muerta: A serenade to the surveillor

On February 8 2021, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara posted a publication on Facebook, which stated: ‘From today, I will draw on a daily basis the surveillance camera that is filming me in front of my house. They repress us and we transform violence into art’. He published three photos with the post. The first is taken indoors, with Otero sitting in a chair facing the opened front door where the surveillance camera...
can be surmised in the background, installed high up on an electric pole in front of his home. Otero sits shirtless, with a pen and paper on his lap, captured in the act of drawing. The second photo is a close-up of the surveillance camera. Finally, the third offers a snapshot of Otero’s drawing of the camera that he sketched in pencil to provide a simple and literal representation of its constitution. This first publication sets the stage for a story yet to be played out.

After this initial post, several publications follow that include images and fragmented poems. The 10th of February publication signals a more elaborate reflection on the series, where the seeds from the initial post begin to germinate. To begin, the artist names the series Naturaleza Muerta. Transformando la violencia en arte [Still Life. Transforming violence into art]. A title, he explains, that his friend and artist Hamlet Lavastida suggested. On this day, the publication comes with a poem, which reads:

UB 694
We are falling in love.
Your maiden name is UB694.
You know my every move.
You are becoming autonomous.
You are sending me flirtatious winks.
I’ll take care of you until freedom does us part.
UB694 is the identification number of the surveillance camera, which has been spray painted in capital letters onto the electric pole. The first photo that accompanies the poems features Otero from behind, naked, posing for the camera. The second is a close-up of the day’s drawing: the camera contains one giant human eye surrounded by a semi-circle of smaller eyes, with long eyelashes and feminine features. In lieu of the plastic structure that covers the lens, it has a brain. The camera acquires human
characteristics, which gives it a futuristic, extra-terrestrial dimension. As we can decipher from the poem, Otero interacts with the camera who is turning into a love interest. There is a suggestion of an engagement to be. The reference of until ‘freedom does us part’ is a twist on the wedding vow ‘until death do us part’.

On February 14, 2021, the artist publishes a post in honour of Valentine’s Day, which in Cuba is known as the day of love and friendship. The post, supported by three photos, reads:

Happy Valentine’s to all, I love you. Today is the day of love and friendship.
I am drawing UB694 until freedom does us apart.
From the series: Still life. Turning violence into art.
The pearl necklace breaks.
I’ll never use the pink shirt again.
My new testament is black and has a white beard. I wish him more things than what he wishes for?
How do we say penis in latin? And in English and in Maykel’s language?
Intimacy is the only space we’ve conserved from animals.
Does the woman wolf wear panties/intimas during a full moon?

Two of the photos provide different angles of the pole with the surveillance camera onto which someone – we imagine Otero – has painted in red capital letters te amo [I love you]. The third photo features the day’s drawing, which is a simple stick figure sketch of Otero, shown naked, with an Afro, sitting on a heart and holding hands with the camera, which now has a body. In a cartoonish style, the camera is looking at Otero while he looks straight ahead in the distance, hearts emanating from her thoughts.
The poem, with its fragmented lines, is cryptic. It clashes with the drawing’s gentle melancholy. Are we talking about forced love? About being in a relationship that imposes intimacy and violence? Why is the pearl necklace falling off? The white beard often refers to Castro; the phrase about wishing him well transmits an ironic
compassion. In the following line, ‘Maykel’s language’ refers to the rapper Maykel Osorbo, friend of Otero and member of the San Isidro Movement who at the time of writing is serving ten years in prison for his political outspokenness17 (Freedom House, 2022). He is known for his legendary slang vernacular that friends have decreed as his own language. Otero ascribes ‘Maykel’s language’ to the same level of significance as Latin or English.

On the day of this publication, Otero also released a short video, shot in selfie mode, serenading the surveillance camera. He holds a flower and sings a lovers’ ballad to UB694. We can hear neighbours laughing in the background, he hums the song and breaks into laughter; he admits to forgetting the lyrics. The video-performance is very much in Otero’s casual style – nothing has been staged or prepared, it comes from the heart, and it seems as spontaneous as can be. The video was shot live on Facebook, which, at this point in February 2021, has been his only (yet powerful) space for creative expression for over a year. By this stage, Otero is known as one of the most vocal critics of the Cuban government. His movements are closely monitored, and he has long been banished from exhibiting his work in state cultural institutions.

The poem has an intimate feel. It does not make much sense, and reads instead like dreamy fragments of thoughts, haiku-like musings. The association of a dark testament, various ways of saying ‘penis’, and the sound of falling pearls drive us into a confused state. The poems visually support the drawings and photos, their imagery complement the artist’s frontal depiction of surveillance, they offer texture to the rather literal story of seduction between him and camera. They are snippets of his inner world that the lens (and, therefore, the state) cannot access. They are a tribute to the imagination’s boundless landscape.

The publication that comes after on February 15, 2021 is the most cryptic yet. There are just two photos, the first is a professional photography of Otero’s profile in the nude, his hands on his lower back, bending down slightly and looking straight into the camera. The photo has sepia tones. His genitals have been blurred to abide by

17 Maykel Castillo Pérez, known as Maykel ‘Osorbo’ is a founding member of the San Isidro Collective. He is an independent rapper who writes songs that are critical of the government. Along with a group of renowned Cuban singers and rappers, he co-wrote the Latin Grammy-winning song Patria y Vida, which was recorded in secret and released on YouTube in February 2021. He is a political prisoner since May 2021 and has been charged with ‘public disorder, aggravated contempt and defamation of state institutions’. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison in June 2022 (Reyes, 2022).
Facebook’s Community Standards. The second is the day’s drawing which features the camera with a human eyes and long eyelashes shielding from the rain under an umbrella. Now the post not only has the UB694 tag but also the te amo that Otero has added. The poem that comes with the publication reads as follow:

There is world in which they are the owners. They tell you what to dream, what to eat or what to love and hate; they even tell you in which situations you should feel paranoid.
This is the real world, the comfortable world in which you were born and it gives you breastmilk until you die and reincarnate in another creature, which is also comfortable.
In a conscious way and through mutual agreement you are and teach to be a coward, indoctrinated and paranoid.
In this world, mirrors are scenes of fictitious newscasts, and at the same time you want them to be your reflection.
Death exists. You will have, if you behave well in school, a disposable casket made of pinewood and you will be able to see your cousins and friends crying of real sadness and with disposable coffee in a funeral home, also disposable.
This same world exists, but in that one the blows are for real, relationships end in orgasms. There, you’ll find yourself in heaven with your parents, siblings, grandparents and lovers.

It seems that Otero is speaking to the duality of the real and virtual, of the camera as well as the flesh-and-bone body. Keeping in mind that these publications first circulate on social media, the fictitious newscasts can be a reference to both the dangers of misinformation of social media and the, similar, propaganda machine of Cuban state television that has vilified him on more than one occasion (Alvarez, 2020a). Why is it raining in the drawing? What is the camera being sheltered from? Perhaps her materiality fears the rain in case her digital mechanisms turn out to be sensitive to water. In the disposability of death, of the body, of the casket, and of the funeral home, Otero is fusing the impermanence of the body with the replaceable parts of the camera-object.
Figure 17 Otero Alcántara, L.M. (2021). Existe un mundo en el que ellos son los dueños. Facebook. [online image]. February 15. Available at https://www.facebook.com/oteroyalcantara/posts/pfbid02w38h1mqV9fpnmRmJo7XZqqrjzE2AuQYMsDPJyfijVnCQ6TuwUF31uekQnuarGsm?locale=en_GB. [Accessed October 2023]

This is the last publication that comes with a poem. The two posts that follow only contain hashtags with photos of the drawings and Otero. For instance, the February 17 entry consists of a drawing of the surveillance camera draped with the Cuban flag.
and a photo of Otero from below and behind looking up at the camera with the Cuban flag wrapped around his shoulders. The hashtag #patriayvida refers to the rap song *Patria y Vida* [Fatherland and Death] released in February 2021 that has become an anthem of Cuban protests (Lopez, 2021). The following post includes both a performance action and drawing. Otero publishes photos of himself installing a sign that says ‘*patria y vida*’ on top of the surveillance camera, as well as a drawing of the camera carrying the sign.

The beginning of this series of drawings has an eerie foreboding component. It constitutes one of the last artworks that Otero will produce while still (partially) free. In the second phase of the series, he continues drawing the surveillance camera during his forced, month-long detention at the Galicia Calixto Hospital in April through May 2021. This time, the drawings are a series of situations that depict Otero’s state of captivity while the camera looms overhead. Otero was taken by force to the hospital on April 22, 2021 after undertaking a hunger and thirst strike for seven days to protest the looting and destruction of his artworks by Cuban authorities on April 16, 2021.

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18 The song won the Latin Grammy for best song that same year. It features a cameo by Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara in the secretly produced music video. One of the song’s composers, Maykel Osorbo is serving up to 10 years in prison since 2021 for his critical rap and leadership in the San Isidro Movement, he was jailed in May 2021. The song’s remaining composers (Yotuel, Gente de Zona, Decemer Buena and El Funky) all currently live outside of Cuba. Shortly after its release on Youtube, *Patria y Vida* [Homeland and life] which is a twist on the revolutionary slogan *Patria o Muerte* [Homeland or Death] has become a cry of resistance for a generation of Cubans demanding other forms of existence that extend beyond this binary condition of the revolutionary-nationalist condition. It was a rallying chant during the July 11, 2021 protests.
Part of the *Still Life* series has and continues to be featured in galleries and exhibits curated by Cuban commissioners working outside of the island (ENTRE Vienna, 2021). The drawings were recuperated, saved, and furtively taken out of the country by colleagues who managed to secure them before they risked confiscation by the Cuban police (Genlui Hidalgo, 2023). Their featuring in collective exhibits such as OBSESSION at the gallery ENTRE in Vienna from November 2021 through February 2022 sacralises them as serious pieces of art worthy of aesthetic and political attention. In her analysis of the series, Claudia Genlui, curator and Otero’s partner, explains that the drawings read like a visual diary of Otero’s lived experience of repression (ENTRE Vienna, 2021). The partial, intimate scenes they depict provide a looking glass into the psychological distress of panoptical quotidian life.

The first phase of the series, as described above, cannot be studied or understood without understanding the imposed publicity of Otero’s every move both on social media and in his daily activities by the state. The drawings are a quiet moment of his creative imagination (see essay 2) as he persists in making art despite the extreme limitations on his freedom. During this period, he spends most of his time secluded at home (which also serves as the headquarters of the San Isidro Collective), renovating his house, drawing and painting, and communicating on social media via publications.
and live videos. The series is a response to his quasi-permanent house arrest. The drawings enable a certain transgression of his surveillance as they enter the digital realm and touch a wide and unpredictable audience of followers. The Valentine’s Day video and drawings are a light-hearted window into the characteristic of Otero’s default mood – his heart.

The series is an unravelling of Otero’s strength of character. In spite of the tremendous pressure he is subjected to, these early publications, with their witty humour, their provocation as he poses naked for the camera and addresses her as his seductive love interest, provide a breath of fresh air, a careless mockery of the imposing state apparatus that weighs down on him. They subvert all these constraints. Through the simple power of reflecting, with a pen or pencil, and a little colour, the immense state of surveillance that he is under, Still Life disarms the regime’s machinery of constraint. As a beholder, we sense an attempt not only of survival, but also of continuing to exist – unchained.

In this chapter’s first section, I peel off the various layers of the Still Life series. First, I contextualise how it operates within Cuba’s relatively new and volatile digitalised public sphere. I argue that the act of drawing the surveilling eye of the state remains a resistive approach, a testimony to the artist’s state of oppression that takes on the quality of a public denunciation as it enters the unregulated and sensationalist chaos of the Internet. Otero seeks to challenge this rapport of domination by giving the surveillance camera a soul, of sorts. Beyond this rather literal interpretation, however, I argue that there is a potential for a political gesture not so much in the content of the drawings, but in the act of drawing itself. Here, I draw from Sarah Ahmed’s notion of queer phenomenology (2008) to explore the artist’s process of changing the ‘orientation’ of the (surveilling) gaze: by dedicating his artistic concentration and attention to the camera watching him; he carves a space for ‘truce’. There is a standoff between filming and contemplating. The mechanics of both actions stem from different registers, one being merely physiological while the other, contemplating, is spiritual, emotional, and intellectual. There is a reshuffling of the activeness and passiveness of these forms of looking. Through this reorienting of the gaze, via the aesthetic gesture of drawing, in the stillness of sitting and contemplating the camera, in the quietness of the process of careful observation, Otero exudes an act of love (Murdoch, 2014). There is a collapse of art and love in this performative scene of the ‘artist sitting and drawing’. Beyond the narrative that he develops with the camera, what ends up
being emancipatory and restorative is enabling himself, as artist, to exist as such, to stage himself in the lone act of artistic creation. In this way, I argue that the political dimension of the series-performance – in a Rancièrian sense – emerges in the stillness of the act of drawing, which is a way for the artist to exist elsewhere than in the whirlwind rhythm of repression, social media reactivity and violence. The stillness of Otero sitting contemplatively in his doorframe, as that liminal space between outside/inside, public/private, exterior/interior, dangerous/safe, is a way to do something much beyond the limitations of what he has been prescribed to be allowed/able to do or not. The Black, shirtless man, sitting on his dilapidated chair, staring, not defiantly, but tenderly (and rather comically) at the camera fixed onto his home, is a sight that has no reference point. It sits on another spectrum of the senses.

**Drawing in a ‘digitally networked public sphere’**

In order to grasp the implications of Otero’s *Still Life*, which fuses a series of drawings with digital performance, it is crucial to review the development of Internet in Cuba and the impact its widening access has had on collective action. Today, Cuba remains one of the countries in the world with the lowest level of Internet connectivity (Henken and Garcia Santamaria, 2021). According to Freedom House’s 2021 report, 17% of households have a computer and 31% have household Internet access (including 3G mobile service) (2022). Yet this is a major improvement compared to just ten years ago. In the 2000s and 2010s, Internet access was reserved for a privileged few who either worked in government offices with controlled access to email, or to those with enough disposable income to purchase Internet by the hour only available in hotels, for an exorbitant price of around $10 an hour. It was not until 2013 that Internet became accessible with the opening of public government-run *telepuntos* [cybercafés] thanks to the establishment of a fibre-optic cable between Cuba and Venezuela. Access, however, remained pricey with a rate of around $4.50 per hour, which, at the time, constituted around a quarter of the average monthly salary. In 2015, connection was further extended, following the diplomatic rapprochement of the United States and Cuba through the introduction of Wi-Fi zones in public spaces, with the hourly rate dropping to $2 per hour (which, still remains inaccessible to most people). In 2018, 3G mobile Internet was introduced, and revolutionized how younger, more Internet literate Cubans used social media. This evolution empowered younger generations to organise and share everyday realities. For instance, the grassroots campaign against
Decree 349 organised by the San Isidro Movement in 2018 was only possible through its proliferation on social media.

The Cuban government has struggled to regulate the expansion of Internet use and the rise of critical voices (Geoffray, 2021). In the mid-2010s, emboldened journalism students launched independent media to provide alternatives to the state-run and controlled media apparatus. They operated within a legal limbo as there was no judicial framework in place to warrant their existence. Many of these initiatives ran the risk of facing censorship and persecution, even though many of these media declared respecting an ethos of journalistic professionalism by not supporting a specific agenda but rather reporting on honest, on-the-ground stories (Henken, 2017, 2021). It was not until 2021, after the emergence of major protests, in part ignited by the San Isidro Movement, that the government implemented laws such as decrees 370, 35 and 349 that provided a legal framework to condemn publications (whether on private social media accounts or media sites) that question and criticize the revolution. Such laws have been denounced by international human rights groups for restricting the basic right of freedom of expression (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Nevertheless, and in spite of attempts at controlling and penalising users for their critical publications on social media, these newfound uses of the Internet has enabled what Tufekci (2017) has defined as a ‘digitally networked public sphere’, where the connectedness provided by social media helps overcome isolation, create connections and encourage individuals to speak out. Access to digital media and social networks has given Cubans and artists a platform onto which to connect with others and, especially, to transcend the revolutionary landscape of gossip and arbitrariness that has been an effective psychological obstacle to social uprisings for decades (Bloch, 2007).

By showing his reality through these drawings, interacting with the surveillance camera, and publishing them in the wild, unmitigated spaces of Facebook or Instagram, Otero is empowered and empowering others to recognise, name, and denounce injustice where it appears. Otero’s drawings render visible a daily experience of surveillance that has been normalised and internalised socially for decades. In this way, the romanticized story line of a Black boy and feminized camera falling in love, offers, through the realm of the imaginary, a very concrete deconstruction of domination as it permeates the most intimate corners of daily life. As Weener (2022: 78) attests in her article on Cuban musicians’ use of social media
for speaking out against censorship in the country, it allows his followers to ‘recognise oppression as a social construct that they can actively change’. This is a component of empowerment, which consists of being able to identify injustice and name/paint it for what it is. This act echoes Otero’s artistic praxis, where his work commits to restoring a sense of community and strengthening the social fabric in a fragmented, paranoid society (interviews with Otero from 2020 and 2021). He seeks to provide everyday people with tools, whether they be linguistic or visual, in rising self-awareness about experiences of maltreatment. For instance, Otero created a simple performance in 2020 during which he walked around day and night for nine days with a simple blue, plastic construction hardhat bearing the phrase: ‘kids were born to be happy not to die in collapsing buildings’. The piece was a grief response to a tragedy that shook the country when three young girls died from their home crumbling on top of them. The action served as a protest to the unsafe living conditions of most homes in central Havana, while, just a few blocks away, the tourist-filled UNESCO heritage sites of Old Havana had been undergoing elaborate renovation projects for many years (Otix et al., 2023). Otero’s performance led to spontaneous individuals replicating the gesture and walking around the streets with hardhats.

This is a powerful example of the transformative potential of art as a tool for naming injustices in an inclusive, visual medium. Of artists’ epiphanic calling in revealing our moral backgrounds (Taylor, 1989). It is only through this initial process of naming or illustrating through the constitution of another language that we can make sense of states of oppression that can then inspire action. Otero is offering another framework for making sense of tacit social injustices. As Weener suggests (2022: 79), Cuban social reality is rife with psychological obstacles to speaking out, civil society itself has been weak under the revolutionary regime, and the connectedness brought on by social media has powerfully helped to break practices of self-censorship:

Because two generations have already been born in a country where dissenting ideas are often silenced, participants argue that Cubans’ capacity to recognise social injustice has been affected too (interview Roberto, 2020). The eradication of dissenting ideas and the isolation from the rest of the world leaves people with little room to aspire toward alternative realities.
However, activism on social media also comes with limitations, codes of conduct and perversions. The fast expansion and access to social networks has plunged groups of people who had little social media literacy into the complex world of fake news, misinformation, and trolling. Considering this steep learning curve, the rapidity with which members of the San Isidro Collective grasped how to navigate swiftly and cleverly these spaces is impressive. Nonetheless, there seems to be little reflexivity on the monopolistic agenda of social media giants such as Google and Facebook in shaping public opinion and algorithmically steering how information circulates. Political scientist Marie-Laure Geoffray (2021: 148) compellingly underlines that independent media sources in Cuba rarely question the fact that journalists and activists ‘fight censorship and repression with capitalist hegemonic tools, apparently without questioning the irony or contradiction latent in their uses of these tools.’ While in private
conversations, Otero has confessed that the chaos of social media virtue signalling and trolling frustrates him and sometimes leads to confused and violent outbursts from his followers, he has not questioned these misuses in public. On multiple occasions, Otero’s actions on social media have been highly criticized and misinterpreted by the tenuous space of the Internet (Revista cultural Árbol Invertido, 2020). Nuanced debate can hardly flourish in a realm that is designed to promote sensationalist and polarising discourses, for the sake of clickbait.

This is where the publication of this intimate diary of an imagined story between Otero and his surveillance camera subverts, in a way, the limitations of the digitized public sphere of social networks. The stick figure drawings circumvent the language of militancy that can endure interpretive distortion. They become a window into Otero’s lived experience under surveillance. However, by speaking from the first person, only staging himself as a skinny little Black boy falling in love with a girl, who happens to be a surveillance camera, is both banal and extraordinary. He circumvents the power apparatus that controls the digital sphere. The drawings hold a much deeper political potential, by not being words, nor slogans, they are not using, reusing or tapping into a grammar of activism and militancy. This attribute of sharing personal experiences and voices on social media contributes to a phenomenon of the personal becoming global and this, perhaps, is social media’s last subversive quality; as a mosaic of individual lives lived. The artist’s diary drawings contain a much more impactful political effect than when he writes posts of denouncement. The drawings speak for themselves and stem from a place of intimacy – there is nothing digital about them. When we pay attention to the imperfect lines, the irregular pressure applied with the pen or pencil, they emerge as one-of-a-kind artefacts that resist the risk of digital manipulation. They stand out and stand alone. They do not require much accompanying texts or explanations. Through their emergence, the artist can circumvent the unwritten rules of social media etiquette and norms.

(Re)imagining surveillance

In this resistive space, Otero is offering an alternative narrative around surveillance that transcends the dominant ideology of surveillance as a policing technology and abuser of privacy. Here, I draw from John McGrath’s (2013) provocation that we can understand surveillance as a space that might offer insights into how to live in a ‘post-privacy’ world, by exploring its creative possibilities. McGrath departs from his
postulate as a theatre director and his incorporation of video technology and surveillance into his work to question the chasm between the ‘all-seeing’ eye of the art director and the receiving audience. He proposes that within our mediated world ‘the current proliferation of surveillance practices provides any indications of new understandings and consciousnesses’ (McGrath, 2013: 19) and makes the case that surveillance can be a ‘surprisingly productive perversion of spectacle’ (ibid). From his study, McGrath stipulates that surveillance has proliferated because we (perhaps) enjoy it and that ‘all of our experiences of surveillance are structured by the expectation of death’ (ibid: 10). In this realm, departing from the world of art and art making, McGrath explores how surveillance can create new spaces and alternative worlds. In doing so, rather than asking how to deal with surveillance in society, he proposes to understand how to live under surveillance. This analysis resonates strongly with Otero’s own provocations through this series, as he humanises the camera and builds a narrative around her.

McGrath makes a pertinent observation that letting the audience know they are being surveilled (such as in a theatre setting for instance) allows for something quite remarkable to happen. By knowing they are being filmed, audience members are capable of ‘re-enliven[ing] that space with a sense of agency and choice. Such agency and choice [assert] themselves in the gap between two systems of seeming knowledge and control, between the surveillance representation and the theatrical space’ (McGrath, 2013: 17).

Here I wish to substitute McGrath’s theatrical space with the performance space of social media. Otero emerges with a sense of autonomy and agency in both places and conjures a conversation between the surveillance and social media spaces. The surveillance camera directed at the inside of his home, makes him, perhaps, become more conscious of the importance of privacy, of his intimacy, of the infinite and micro ‘moments’ of the loving relationship. He is carving fragments of freedom that he taunts ‘big brother’ with. The all-seeing eye also highlights everything that is not caught on film, the series of drawing, in their bold depiction of scenes of the everyday between two lovers, brings to the fore all the mundane and fascinating aspects of the quotidian that are omitted in spectacle.

There are several ideas from McGrath’s book that help to question the relationship with surveillance in our ‘post-private’ society that I find productive in helping elaborate an analysis of Otero’s Still Life series. First, McGrath invites us to think outside the
ideology and value-stricken approach to surveillance, in order to ‘examine ways in which new understandings of surveillance [...] can help us to live creatively and productively in post-private society’ (ibid: 186). He observes that within the ideology of surveillance society, the ‘good citizen’ is the one who manages to remain invisible from the surveilling eye. Surveillance technology, in its discourse has been developed to catch and watch ‘criminals’. In Cuba, the overt presence of surveillance cameras installed in front of the homes of ‘dissidents’ is a fear-mongering strategy of deterrence, a warning sign to other members of the community. We can see this in Otero’s case. The video camera is not pretending to hide but serves as a dissuading caution to members of the community of the dangerous person living on their street.

However, Otero’s embracing of this ‘surveillance space’ in which his privacy is breached on so many levels as the surveillance camera (supposedly) captures his outings and goings, transforms the narrative on what constitutes a criminal. By cheekily posing in the nude for the camera or engaging with it through the most banal, cliché, kitsch love story, he mocks the state’s attempts at framing him as a public enemy. The minimalist drawings’ scant effort at personalization – he only represents himself with Afro – could easily come to represent any Black man. He strips the ‘dangerous Black male’ of its stereotypical connotations, and renders the drawings universal. The drawings claim that, perhaps, in Cuba’s surveillance system, all ‘good citizens’ are perpetually on the verge of slipping into the surveilling spotlight for their imminent ‘criminality.’ The intimacy of the drawings in their content and their simultaneous impersonality shatter the state’s fear-mongering strategies of control. It makes visible the unspoken reality of revolutionary Cuba’s panoptic landscape.

Otero’s drawing-performance holds the quality of a counter-surveillance piece, in its ability to not only reverse the gaze of surveillance but of also opening ‘a space for all sorts of reversals in relation to how the gaze and its imagery may be experienced’ (ibid: 190). He does this is three distinct ways: (1) turning the one-sided gaze of the camera into erotic play, through signifiers of voyeuristic sado-masochism, (2) by feminizing the video camera which reveals assumptions about authority, and (3) stripping the camera of its power by fetishizing its very materiality.

By engaging in a relationship with the camera, Otero is entering a world of erotic play, and making the camera not only his object of desire but also a desiring object. This reframes or subverts the passive relationship of watcher/watched. Otero does not only relish in being watched but responds to that gaze through humour, with seduction
and engagement with the camera. In this sense, a dynamic of desire emerges from the rapport. He ignites the ‘libidinal aspects of domination’ (McGrath, 2013) and being dominated, in a sado-masochistic way. The ‘paraphernalia’ of surveillance, the round plastic lens, and the pole onto which it is fixated become materials of a playful, ‘kinky’ form of erotic subservience. In this newfound dynamic, not only is Otero an ‘active’ interlocutor, but he also gains a form of agency through the language of eroticism as he engages in defiant exhibitionism. He projects onto her, and onto us, an egotistical and fetishized desire of being watched. Conversely, the camera also materialises into a desiring thing-object. Through the invention of a relationship, where human feelings take shape, the artist subverts the unilateral relationship of monitoring into a dialogical one.

Secondly, in choosing to give the surveillance camera feminine traits, he breaks down stereotypes around ‘imagined positions of control’ (McGrath, 2013) which, tend to be embodied by men. Indeed, most of the ‘cops’ who interrogate or watch Otero are young men. By feminising the video camera, he is both condescending by reinforcing stereotypes around women’s labour and recognising her as a disempowered and exploited instrument of an all-seeing machine. Indeed, he diminishes her ‘scariness’ by ‘domesticating’ her into scenes of banal, gendered dynamics: they flirt, they have sex, she gets pregnant, they have children. Simultaneously, and perhaps more compassionately, that same narrative sheds light on the fact that as a tool of the all-seeing state, she is just a ‘subaltern’ pawn in a wider web of surveillance. The camera, as a lone entity, holds little or no power; she is a simple vector of control. By recognising the subaltern characteristic of the camera, Otero waves an empathetic white flag to the oppressor; he recognises that the authoritarian machine would be broken without the work of low-paid, underqualified security guards and cops who, often, come from the same humble background as him. He brings these everyday ‘enforcers’ of the law into his affectionate grasp.

A final way that Otero reverses and subverts the gaze of the surveilling state is by focusing on the materiality of the video camera and transforming it, reinventing it through his drawings. This has the direct effect of stripping the camera of its untouchable power, by relegating it to a pile of plastic. The drawing of the camera under the umbrella brings out its composition as an aggregate of parts that can be faulty, that can stop working, perhaps even explode. The matter of the camera is salvaged, it is seen for all of its possibilities and potentials as the drawings manage to
give us, day in and out, different angles and imaginaries around this plastic object; she rises above her own technologic-social ascriptions and takes on a mind of her own. He liberates her as well.

We have seen how the series of drawings, through their content, are resistive and entering in conversation with the state in a subversive, defiant, and facetious way. I know wish to explore where lies the dissensual potential of the performance, which, is not so much in the dialogical content of the drawings, but in the performative scene of ‘the artist sitting and drawing’.

(Re)orientating the gaze: Loving observation

A point of departure for this argument is inspired by Otero’s own description of his intentions with this piece. When I shared my enthusiasm for the series and my own understanding of it, he responded with a short voice note in which he said:

Yes, I was first thinking of doing something to the camera, but no, I’m not going to do anything to the camera. I chose to make drawings and this position of the aesthetic experience, or of the act of drawing says something to the extent that ‘I’m going to dedicate time to you and I’m going to change everything about you in another dimension’ which is a way to also make a form of denunciation (Voicenote from February 2021).

The idea of ‘dedicating time’ to the aesthetic experience, or the expertise of observing and scrutinizing with the intention of producing art, provides grounds for a subjective space that escapes all restrictions and confines. The act of drawing the camera becomes a way of utilising the aesthetic to gaze towards the other as well, to pay close and loving attention to it, to regard it with patience and composure. A gesture that emerges from compassion, a common decency of restoring dignity and humanity to the disembodied head of the authoritarian State that has lost all forms of flesh and heart. The act of drawing, which necessitates attention to detail and a sensitive observation, reverses the gaze of surveillance into the eye of the aesthete. More, it allows for a moment of subjectivization, where Otero is no longer the subject being watched, but becomes, in the relationship of attentive gazing, this in-between, a new subject that asserts his equal right to composure and contemplation.

In Otero’s gesture of drawing the surveillance camera directed at his house, and thus directed at his privacy, he is changing the dialectic between surveillor and surveilled. This is why, a phenomenological lens offers productive grounds for making sense of what Still Life does as a work of art that intimately provides a transgression of daily realities of Cubans in post socialism’s surveillance context. Phenomenology invites us to study ‘the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and
worlds’ (Ahmed, 2008: 2), it is a study of consciousness towards objects and how that constitutes our lived experience. Phenomenology premises that consciousness is intentional, it is always directed at something. It looks at emotions and their interactions with the objects and worlds that surrounds us and how that positioning shapes our worldview. I wish, here, to subscribe particularly to Sarah Ahmed’s conceptualisation of queer phenomenology which takes as its starting block this very ‘orientation’ that we carry towards objects, as the way it instils a practice of moulding how we move about the world. To Ahmed, this ‘orientation’ is about how we begin, it is about the ‘intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places’ (ibid: 8). In elaborating her theory of a queer phenomenology, Ahmed takes on the task of ‘exploring what it means for ‘things’ to be orientated, by showing how ‘orientations’ depend on taking points of view as given’ (ibid: 14). Simply departing from this theoretical provocation can help to decipher the (re)orientating process of Otero’s Still Life Series. By fixating his loving gaze, his artistic concentration on the surveillance camera directed at him, he is changing the direction of the relation, he is ‘deviating from the straight line’ (Ahmed, 2008) of repeated action in a sense. He is providing another way to look and be directed at the ‘thing’ surveilling him, and thus proposing another relationship with the material object of the camera, and by extension with the state. He is circumventing the embedded ‘neutrality’ of the rapport of surveillor/surveilled, which is a rapport created by repetition and norms, by decades of an ambiance of bureaucratic uncertainty, self-censorship, and fear to provide another direction and an alternative orientation. Ahmed tells us that the body, through repeated orientations, and lines of connection is directed in some ways more than others. The Cuban social body, in a context of paranoia and constant surveillance has been directed to be afraid, and to ‘stay in line’.

Otero’s Still Life series is a way for that body to ‘step out of line’. In permitting this detour, the drawing-performance series proposes a ‘deviant’ way for this collective body to move. There is in this act, a potential for a political subject to emerge out of this deviation (from the straight line). Or as Ahmed suggests, this counter-current deviation opens the route for a ‘politics of disorientation’ which takes a detour from the status quo, the way we are orientated towards things in the social world. I argue, in the last section that this politics of disorientation takes shape in the very scene of the artist quietly drawing, and reshares how he is expected to use his time.
Stillness and contemplation as emancipatory avenues

The declaration of doing a daily drawing of the camera surveilling him is a meditation on the routine passing of time in a constrained space and the dialectics of looking/observing, contemplating/surveilling, active and passive, good and bad citizen. By turning the surveillance camera into his object of study – his muse – he is igniting his artistic gaze towards the object watching him. Within the realm of artistic commitment, the mundane act of sitting and waiting for life to pass by becomes empowering and disarming to the state keeping a close eye on him. The artistic gaze transforms the position of the surveilling eye within the social order and enables a relationship that operates on a register other than that of domination, a register of love. The ‘scene’ of the artist sitting and drawing works as a collapse of art and love. Here we can circle back to the understated title of the series: *Naturaleza Muerta*, which translates into the artistic practice of depicting inanimate objects. However, the more literal translation of the terms in English would be something like ‘Dead Nature’. In this double entendre of the still life, alludes to the dead nature of a state that outsources its governance to inanimate objects aimed at controlling the collective body. In this *Still Life* series, there is thus both a critique, a pause, an escape, an alternative to the movements of activism, or political action. This is why this series sits very well into the quiet moments of Otero’s creative imagination (essay 2). He is usurping the movement and bringing in stillness.

In Rancièrian terms, the ‘scene’ of the artist sitting and drawing shifts the distribution of the sensible within the Cuban order of the surveilled being the ‘dangerous’ citizens, who are subjected to a position of passive submission by the ‘actively’ gazing all-seeing state. The scene reshuffles this order of capacities and incapacities of the good and bad citizens. It says something against the paternalistic state, but that does not call up an ‘individualist’ notion of self. It is a gazing infused in responsibility and love. A holding of space. By quietly contemplating and drawing – an act that in and of itself is often subscribed to a position of passivity – and of bringing his aesthetic fantasies of the camera to life with pencil and paper, Otero salutes his capacities as an artist to make sense of the world through a process of translation and counter-translation of ideas, observations, thoughts. This is a process that is shared by all in our equality of intelligence. The aesthetic gesture becomes a manifestation of our shared equality.
The act of contemplating, lovingly-artistically, verifies this radical equality of the artist, of the no body within the disempowering social relation imposed by the police state. In the act of actively contemplating, letting his imagination transform the surveillance camera into his muse, taking the time to pause and draw is an act of redistribution of that very organisation of time-spaces. By carving, in this scene of sitting and drawing, another way to use up his time, a way to question the confines of a passing of time under constraint, the artist emerges as whole, he makes visible his own individuality, and by extension, that of others. The wonderful sight of Otero’s playful gazing is a way to completely rearrange the a priori distribution of positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions (Rancière, 2009b). He tells those watching him (the state) and those watching him being watched (his online followers), that his subscribed incapacity as a ‘deviant political agitator’ in the distribution of the social order is fabricated and obsolete. He redistributes these assigned incapacities, he sheds light on their ‘embodied allegories of inequality’ (Rancière, 2009: 10) to propose another position, through another use of his time. The scene of the artist sitting and drawing, gazing from his front door, relaxed in the breeze on a hot Caribbean afternoon is a relational act, a dialogical exercise, and a proposition for exposing the very possibilities and capacities of his and everyone’s position. In other words, it questions that very arrangement or structure of domination and subjection (ibid).

Otero, the artist, the camera, and the state enter in relationship of communion and conversation, the apparatus of the state embodied by that surveillance camera is disarmed. The pen and paper, the time-space of the aesthetic gesture, of the artist pausing, contemplating, to produce an illustration that fuses dreams, with emotions and reality, pierce through the mechanisms of repression encapsulated by the surveillance camera. The surveilling state becomes not only a passive object of artistic study, as hinted by the title of the Still Life series, but is also recognised for its vulnerabilities. The gesture of drawing becomes a symbol of tender attention; the artist rescues the surveilling state from its demonised space to reveal its imperfections, and fragility. The pause, provided by artistic contemplation, is a loving serenade to the Cuban regime’s humanity. This recognition of the oppressor’s humanity is thus revealed through the attentive act of looking, where the artistic practice of creation becomes a concentrated moral effort of seeing reality more clearly. As Murdoch (2014) suggests, through his unselfish attention of looking at the surveillance camera, Otero,
the aesthete, tells us something much more profound about the conditions of repression and domination, that in the end, effect all of those involved in the power dynamic.

Rancière (2009b: 15) argues that emancipation is ‘always a third thing – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both [the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice] which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it’. That shared verification asserts the subject’s ontological equality. That ‘third thing’ appears within the aesthetic encounter, where roles and ascription are destroyed and this shared verification of equality takes place. Otero, in the scene of sitting and contemplating lovingly is making use of a capacity to enjoy the solitude granted by the creative imagination, which enables him to escape the State’s watchful eye and his role as a political leader. Through the aesthetic experience of drawing, he is re-appropriating this partition of time and space, of roles and positions, to enable a re-encounter with ‘himself’ in order to become other, a third thing. For us, as spectators, this performance of the artist sitting also becomes a moment of verification of our infinite possibilities ruptures the boundary between what we can and cannot do.

The Naturaleza Muerta series, in this sense, is emancipatory as a performance piece. Indeed, the content of the illustrations sit in the realm of the resistive; they provide powerful and compelling ‘diary-like’ witnessing of daily life under surveillance. They are subversive in their attempts at ‘flipping the gaze’, personalizing the surveillance camera to ‘domesticate’ her and provide intense cathartic release. The emancipatory potential of Naturaleza Muerta, however, lies in the performative gesture that is documented through the photos accompanying it where we witness, as spectators, the artist staging himself in a relationship to the distribution of the sensible that is other. It reconfigures the assigned place of Otero in the complex system of domination and submission, by stating the artist’s ability to make a radically other use of his time, in the stillness of the artistic process. Such stillness, in turn, invites us as spectators to visit our own processes of making sense of the world, and thus ‘verifies’ our equal intelligence and capabilities for speech, action, and thought.
II. **Miss Bienal: From Avatar to Superhero**

It is hard to keep our eyes away from the sight of a lean and muscular Black man wearing a beautifully crafted bright pink carnival outfit. The exposed body makes the beholder feel empowered to gaze without reproach. The bare skin and extravagant bright pink, delicate lacework of the imposing headdress with a cascade of oversized plastic diamonds, the intense eye shadow and red lips invite shameless gawking. Acquiescing compliantly to any stranger’s request for a photo or ‘selfie’, Miss Bienal – Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s avatar during a performance in 2015 – is a people pleaser. She is a feast for the eyes; every feature is conventionally beautiful. The artist has an angelic, symmetrical face – carefully shaved for the occasion – with intense almond shaped eyes and the corporeality of supermodel proportions. The costume is a testament to tasteful craftsmanship. The lace of the imposing headpiece is matched by oversized arm decorations and a long peacock skirt that covers the artist’s backside and legs but that in the front gives way to tight-fitting underwear adorned with pink and plastic-diamond jewels. The flesh-coloured fishnet tights that are a few shades lighter than the artist’s skin tame his coarse leg hair. He wears shoes with a small heel. The modest beige block heeled sandals contrast with the overall flashiness of the costume and tell us that the performance stems from another register than the platform stiletto shoes often associated with drag. They are meant to be more comfortable (even though Otero struggled to walk in them) and thus enable the artist to remain in character for a lengthy period. As if to accentuate the costume’s skimpiness, the artist wears a mesh, transparent leotard, complete with nipple tassels that offer a burlesque attempt at decency by awkwardly covering his muscular and masculine chest. There has been no effort to give Miss Bienal opulent artificial breasts. It seems that the nipples, however, have a mind of their own as they rebelliously poke out of the glitter-stitched tassels.
Miss Bienal wandered around the art exhibitions of the 12th edition of the Havana Biennale in 2015. I remember meeting with Otero at the Morro Castle, the fortress that towers over Havana’s harbour and bay as he walked towards me in his graceful and determined stride, giving me a hug and handing me a business card that read ‘Miss Bienal’ with his real contact information. We had a simple conversation about the day’s agenda; he was not in character, but nonetheless cut an imposing figure with his capacious headgear, which made him sweat under the intense June Caribbean sun, his mascara smeared slightly under his eyes. We chatted for a while and then he went on his way, greeting people and handing out his business card. Was he a mascot for the event? A stunt? A performance? Some asked for a photo, others simply stood and stared in anticipation, perhaps waiting for this impressive sight to do something extraordinary.

*Miss Bienal* incarnates the archetypal Cuban *mulata* by wearing the flashy costume of a Tropicana dancer: Havana’s most exclusive and expensive cabaret where all clichés around Cuban sensuality come to life during a two-hour show for the consumption of an enchanted audience of tourists. The Tropicana Cabaret is a rare institution that survived the revolution’s tanks. Today, it stands as a melancholic vestige of pre-revolutionary Havana, which was infamously known among American tourists for prostitution, gambling and drinking (especially during the Prohibition era). A simple ‘Havana Tropicana dancer’ YouTube search gives a glimpse into this show that looks like a medley of all Cuban stereotypes thrown into a kitsch and disorderly display that fuses salsa music, revolutionary fervour, Afro-Cuban folklore, risqué carnival costumes, and sensual choreography. A display of the eroticised symbol of the Cuban body in all its iterations. The show ends with the performers inviting members of the audience onstage to learn a few salsa steps – the whole operation has a ‘Clubmed’ feel to it.
In a video about the *Miss Bienal* performance, Otero explains that he was interested in investigating the clichés around Cuba, specifically the Cuban *mulata* and the idea that ‘we are exotic animals that foreigners come to consume in Cuba’ (Pelaez Sordo, 2015). In choosing to explore the *mulata* during the country’s most important international art exhibition at a time of major diplomatic shifts between Cuba and the United States, *Miss Bienal* taps into questions of consumption, power, and authenticity.

Indeed, we must understand the symbolic and historic construction of the Cuban *mulata*. As a common Cuban popular saying goes: ‘White women [are] for marrying, black women [are] for working, and mulatas [are] for sex’ (Daigle, 2015: 31). The *mulata* is a mythical figure of the Cuban imaginary (Fusco, 2001). She embodies the blurring of a strict colonial racial hierarchy in which white women were to be locked indoors, protected from Havana’s immoral streets, while Black women were exploited into forced labour (Daigle, 2015). The *mulata* becomes the incarnation of colonial sexual violence as the offspring of ‘the frequently intimate nature of the relationship between master and slave, colonizer and colonized’ (Daigle, 2015: 31). In this light, the image of the *mulata* has evolved to be associated with (male) irresistible desire and lust; she is lascivious, highly visible, and available. Since the colonial period, the *mulata* has been represented in art and advertising as the epitome of Cuban sensuality. Her image has been exploited as a commodity to lure tourists since the beginning of the 20th century where images of the seductive, playful *mulata* with maracas adorn tobacco boxes and travel adverts. As Daigle (2015: 39) eloquently posits:

> The mulata, and women of color in general, continue to embody for white men the turbulent and passionate meeting of races, a fetishized and penetrable body through which this tumult can be experienced. [...] [Artistic representations] give us a clearer understanding of how these ideas circulated in colonial society and legitimate certain identities and relations of power that persist to this day.

Bearing in mind the symbolic function of the *mulata* within this greater imaginary, will help to locate *Miss Bienal* as both a submissive confirmation and subversive displacement of everything the *mulata* – and by extension – Cubans have to offer. More specifically, I suggest that *Miss Bienal* can be interpreted as an ‘avatar’ in Uri McMillan’s (2015) definition of subversive performance art in which dynamics of self-promotion and self-exocitization clash with a frontal reckoning with racial and sexual
stereotypes, especially when considering the power hierarchies at play within an international art event like the Havana Biennale.

**Miss Bienal navigates the 12th edition of the Havana Biennale**

First, *Miss Bienal’s* erotic racialised body needs to be read against the backdrop of the unique context in which the official Havana Biennale took place. The 12th edition of the biennale, which ran from June 22 through July 22, 2015 was entitled *Entre la idea y la experiencia* [Between idea and experience] which signals to a curatorial intention of focusing on conceptual and relational artworks and moving away from traditional art-objects. The interpersonal, site-specific and communal dimension of the artworks featured throughout Havana’s urban landscape reflect the effervescence of an exciting moment of Cuba ‘opening’ up to the world after the historic negotiations between Barack Obama and Raul Castro on the December 17, 2014. Indeed, the 2015 biennale was also known colloquially as the *Bienal del deshielo* [the biennale of the thawing of diplomatic relations] as normalisation between the two countries promised a sense of economic, social and political opportunity. The installation by New York artist Duke Riley of a synthetic ice skating rink (see figure 23) is a whimsical nod to this thawing of an ice-cold relationship (Cotter, 2015). One of the policies implemented by the Obama administration as part of the thaw in diplomatic relations included easing travel restrictions, which led to a 60% increase of American tourists in 2015 with 150,000 visitors (Latkova, 2019). The Havana Biennale was one crucial way to benefit from this boom in travellers.
The sense of opportunity and openness is reflected in the language of the biennale’s catalogue, which insists on instilling ‘dialogue’ and ‘authentic encounters’ between artists, Cubans and international visitors. There is a focus on providing ‘international art audiences with access to the city’s quotidianity’ (Checa-Gismero, 2018) and capitalising on Cuba’s human and social capital to fulfil the fantasies of a niche tourism sector (art tourists) in gaining access to an ‘authentic’ experience of life under socialism. In other words, the focus of the 12th edition of the biennale aimed to connect international audiences to what Cuba – according to a member of the biennale’s organising committee – has best to offer, namely its people (ibid). This intention is reflected in the discursive, material and spatial aspects of the biennale.

Checa-Gismero (2018: 318) insightfully describes the conflicting premise of the biennale being a lucrative opportunity for the Cuban regime to cater to an influx of American tourists whilst defending its revolutionary ideals through curatorial radicalism:

On one hand, the exhibition is expected to coincide with interests such as securing epistemic and artistic autonomy, as well as developing and diversifying the tourism sector. On the other, both the exhibition’s form and the nation’s reliance on tourism demand that
the Bienal responds to contemporaneous international art trends and contributes to offering quality experiences in niche cultural tourism.

This rather schizophrenic condition of the biennale exacerbates a double discourse of producing and promoting genuine communal and social art, whilst needing to satisfy the fantasies of art tourists by promising an unmediated and authentic experience of everyday life in Cuba. Checa-Grismero (2018:66) quotes one of the organiser’s definition of the role of the artist as an example of language and conceptual framework around the biennale’s 12th edition:

In the final section of the Bienal catalog, academic Jose A. Sánchez (2015) defines the role of the artist as that of intervening in social relations to produce celebrations, dialogs, or new kind of exchanges. Sánchez defines the art biennial as a device that is an ‘articulat[or] of knowledge, power and subjectivity, [as] mechanisms of confused appearance and because of it hardly representable’ (Sánchez, 2015). He acknowledges them as ‘networks made up by heterogeneous elements (discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, protocols and prepositions), in which the crossing of power and knowledge takes place’.

With the subtitle of Miss Bienal’s performance being ‘Welcome to Yumas’ (yuma is a Cuban colloquialism that originally referred to travellers from United States, but has come to mean all foreigners), Otero is placing his performance well into this charged context. Miss Bienal fits the above-mentioned definition of the artist ‘intervening in social relations to produce celebrations, dialogs, or new kinds of exchanges’. However, her overt self-promotion through the handing out of a business card on which she includes (without permission) the official logo of the biennale along with the logo of the pilot incubator art residency that she is a part of, is an explicit affirmation and displacement of these noble intentions of ‘interpersonal encounters’. She is a boisterous manifestation of what the biennale pretends not to be: a rare and welcomed opportunity for Cuban artists to commercialize their work and tap into an international art market that is often reserved for a privileged few. Therefore, she troubles this façade intention of ‘authentic encounters’ through her stereotypical dress that signals to an unsophisticated cliché of the sexually-available mulata, and the artist’s explicit endeavour of self-promotion with the hopes of ‘becoming famous.’

Historically, the Havana Biennale has been conceived as an attempt to decentralize and radicalize the international art market whilst serving as a soft power tool to disseminate ideas of socialism and internationalism à la cubaine. The first Havana Biennale was founded by curator and art critic Gerardo Mosquera who directed the
exhibition’s first three iterations (1984, 1986 and 1989). The Havana Biennale – the first to take place in a ‘third world’ country – was a ‘scholarly drive of proposing an alternative reading of the development of “modern art”’ (Checa-Gismero, 2018). The initial biennales aimed to ‘queer’ (in Mosquera’s words) the biennales and summon new cultural subjects by reflecting on new transnational, multicultural and diasporic identities (Mosquera, 2021). They were organised horizontally where artists, curators and critics met in the same spaces. They were also driven by radical curatorial intentions, such as: creating a theme for every edition, having a decentralised structure, eradicating awards, including Third World and diasporic artists, and bearing the spirit of an urban festival. The State’s twofold intentions with the Havana Biennale was to establish Cuba as a Third World leader (in Cold War spirit) and express a genuine inclination towards Latin American, Caribbean and post-colonial cultures. Mosquera has described the biennale as ‘a paradoxical good fruit of the Cold War’ (Mosquera, 2021). After the first three editions, however, the Bienal veered bureaucratic, dispossessing the organising committee of its curatorial freedom and becoming a powerful platform upon which the state could instrumentalise art to serve its political agenda, especially during a time of existential reckoning with the ideological premise of socialism during the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1991. Mosquera resigned after the third Bienal due to the growing crackdown on artistic expression and the infiltration of state politics into the management of the event.

Taking into account the highly centralised nature of the organisation of cultural events under Cuba’s one-party regime, Miss Bienal’s ‘DIY’ flair was not an officially sanctioned performance featured in the biennale’s catalogue. She performed on the margins of the event though she operated under the umbrella of an alternative curatorial project. The performance was borne out of a larger pilot art platform founded by the independent Toronto-based curator Catherine Sicot called La primavera de amor [The spring of love] (2014-2015). Sicot describes the project as ‘an international experimental platform for research and artistic production’ that ‘facilitates the creation of works that generate dialogue with Cuban society’ (Sicot, 2015: 60). La primavera
de amor was partly funded by the Pompidou Museum’s Hors Pistes programme\(^\text{19}\). By bringing together international and Cuban artists, the platform’s conceptual framework was grounded in Edouard Glissant’s idea of creolization where opacity is celebrated in the intercultural encounter as a form of chaos that becomes creative material in its own right (Glissant, 1997). Such an approach sought to carve a critical discussion on the charged and imbalanced power dynamics between Cubans and international visitors. Within this context, Miss Bienal was a project that Otero undertook during a pilot residency supported by this platform. He originally sought to explore sexuality at the margins. The initial project – which Otero aimed to be more collaborative through the staging a beauty pageant – eventually transformed into Miss Bienal. Catherine Sicot (2015: 65) reads the performance in the following way:

As provocation, the artist appears in his attire, moves without attempting either to feminize his gait or hide the elastic of his tights below his thong. He smiles and laughs loudly, and talks about the rain or the good weather. He gives free rein to the reactions of audience members, and allows what remains unsaid to take a significant place. The artist plays on pleasure and frustration. He creates an impact in the private sphere rather than bring his work into the public sphere. By not stimulating public conversation about his project, he leaves the viewer to manage the work in its intimacy—desire, repression, guilt, irritation—and finally, he stimulates introspection by exhibiting clichés that concern us all—both Cubans and yumas.

This emergence in the ‘private sphere’ through the intimacy of non-scripted and informal dialogue contrasts with the overall radical and – what Sicot qualifies as – ‘vulgar’ work of Miss Bienal, which is that of self-promotion. Performance allows for the collapse of artist and artwork (McMillan, 2015), and therefore Miss Bienal’s subversive component rests in the artist’s unabashed attempt at being recognised and taken seriously for his work, and doing so, by brazenly intruding within the elite spaces of the Havana Biennale. Miss Bienal emerges as a literal and kitsch interpretation of the biennale’s curatorial intentions. She (un)gracefully misses the conceptual mark of the whole ‘idea and experience’ by embodying this strange stereotypical personage that is both mundane and unrecognizable.

Miss Bienal presents herself simply as an artist attending a biennale, just like anybody else. She is as much showstopper as an everyday participant. There is an

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\(^{19}\) This is an annual contemporary arts programme organised by the Pompidou Museum, it has been running for 18 editions. In the form of a festival with various events and themes, Hors Pistes addresses current world issues via artistic production and creation. The 2023 edition, for instance, focused on the Ukrainian war: [https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/fNKrv7H](https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/fNKrv7H).
‘in-between-ness’ about her. She encapsulates the zoo-like attraction of travellers toward Cuban bodies going about their everyday business. She meets the fantasies of curious tourists where they are. She is a flesh and bone incarnation of a desire and a dream. Yet this dream stops at her appearance. She does not move, dance or seduce as she might be expected to. The only theatrical feature of Miss Bienal is the costume. Otero’s character, it turns out, is doing the most common and obvious gesture that people do when going to such events: she networks. She distributes her business card to potential collaborators, buyers, or collectors. Miss Bienal shatters the dream because she is just a regular worker looking to expand her address book, the gesture of handing her business card after a casual chat becomes the locus of an aesthetic experience that annihilates roles and expectations within the specific social context of the biennale.

I wish to bring to light how the performance – in the charged context of the official Havana Biennale of 2015 – operates in two distinct ways. First, by exploring what she looks like, I contend that she functions as an avatar (McMillan, 2021) of intersecting racial and sexual hierarchies within a very specific context of elitism, transnational encounters, and ideological soft-power. I draw from Muñoz’s (1999) concept of disidentification to tease out how her banal masculinity incarnated by a conventionally beautiful body, draped in a stereotypical carnival dress, offers a simultaneous opportunity of submission and subversion. Secondly, once I will have analysed Miss Bienal’s two-dimensional state (her dress and body in the specific location of the biennale), I wish to examine the three-dimensionality of what she does through her gesture of self-promoting herself to participants of the biennale, through the staging of a casual encounter in which she does not undertake any form of formalized intervention. I argue that it is through the intimacy of the encounter – or in the realm of privacy where ‘a lot is left unsaid’ (Sicot, 2015) – that Miss Bienal converts into a superhero for all. She encapsulates the productive and resistive power of intimacy and pleasure, and becomes a warm embrace to the ‘hustle’ of (self)exploitation which is epitomized by jineteras and jineteros (term used for women and men who exchange intimacy (often sex) with tourists in return for material goods).

By unpacking the performance’s various dimensions, I conclude that she invites a poetics of relation through the small gesture of a fleeting encounter where, within the time-space provided by the small ‘chit-chat’ and the exchange of business cards, there might be potential for Rancièrian dissensus, for a moment that bears solely the quality
of human connection. The artifices of the transactional dynamic are so overt that they are rendered obsolete during the mere experience of dialogue. Miss Bienal’s ‘banal masculinity’ and her anti-climactic search for opportunities is both universal and individual. She is the all-seeing guardian of Cubans’ daily endeavour of ‘surviving’ often through some form of self-exploitation, or self-eroticization. She bows down to the collective experience of an entire national identity being exploited for the maintenance of an ‘idea’ sustained by foreign visitors who see in Cuba the retro manifestation of their anti-capitalist dreams. She is a gentle celebration of Cubans’ capacity for making crafty use of their own exploitation for a bit of material comfort; she is a warm hug to the jineteras and jineteros in all of us. More generously, Otero’s character becomes a confidant, within her flat-chested bosom she welcomes anyone who will exchange a few words with her under the sole condition they take a business card. The obvious negotiation of the encounter subverts the very constraining location from which she emerges and where that conversation takes place. Her enduring submission as she represents an intersection of the most oppressed and exploited identities of Cuban society (Black, woman, queer) is a saving grace; she is a mama to everyone.

The Avatar

With the modest shoes of a middle-aged woman, an absence of artificial breasts, and a natural walking gait, there is no exaggeration or intention of seeming more feminine; beneath her revealing costume, Miss Bienal exudes a banal masculinity. When she reaches us, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s vivid and fast-paced tone of voice greets us, speaking in his usual vernacular, moving in his familiar cool and vivid way. We quickly notice that there is no personage behind the costume other than Otero. In order to situate what the character is doing through her dress and body, I borrow from Uri McMillan’s concept of ‘avatar production’ (2015:12) as a means for performance artists (McMillan’s analysis specifically focuses on Black women performance artists) to highlight and stretch the state of subordination. By understanding the term avatar in both its original definition as spiritual reincarnation or in its more recent technological connotation as an alternate self, McMillan tells us about the term’s productivity in making sense of performances that enable to embody an ‘alternate being [who] is given human-like agency’ (ibid). Through this lens, we can understand Miss Bienal as an avatar of intersecting racial and sexual hierarchies whose dispossession in the social order of things becomes a tool for agency. This agency is made apparent in the
ways that she manages to morph the social roles inflicted onto her: mulata, Black man, Cuban, artist, queer.

According to curator Catherine Sicot, Otero went back and forth on whether Miss Bienal would provide ‘a formalized intervention or interaction’ (Sicot, 2015: 65) but eventually decided not to perform a specific personage. When we come in contact with Miss Bienal within the context of a busy international art festival, the signifiers of drag come to mind; there is an expectation of being transported into a clichéd interaction filled with cheeky flirtatiousness and caricatured feminine mannerisms. Yet, this does not happen. It is not until reading Muñoz that I realised my pedestrian notion of drag stemmed from an image of what Muñoz (1987: 86) defines as ‘commercial drag’ which ‘presents a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption, representing a certain strand of integrationist liberal pluralism’ and has little transgressive possibilities. Such commercial drag ‘only eventuates a certain absorption, but nothing like a productive engagement, with difference’ (ibid: 85).

What I have identified as Miss Bienal’s banal masculinity is a clever and subversive way for the artist to reclaim ownership of the mulata body. While Otero’s character does not – in my sense – qualify as a drag performance, I find resonance in Muñoz’s (1997) analysis of the iconic ‘queer drag’ artist Vaginal Davis. What Otero achieves to do through Miss Bienal’s banal masculinity has political potential in the sense that she creates ‘an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric’ (Muñoz, 1997: 86). She plays into what is expected of her as a pleasant sight while simultaneously being in charge, she has agency over her own objectification. She takes pleasure in her submissiveness. It is as if she were there to give it all, and once she lures us in close enough, she reveals her true self. It is a metaphor to all the artifice and stereotypes in place to attract tourists but if they get close enough, they might be disarmed by the similarities between them and these bodies they gawk at. By not playing into our conditioned constructions of how a cross-dressed man should act, Miss Bienal becomes impossible to identify with as she incarnates an intersection of racial, sexual and social hierarchies. That intersection takes shape very differently depending on where she is located: at casual social gatherings peripheral to the biennale, during official events, or when roaming the streets of Havana on her way to exhibitions.

Indeed, she is a tolerated presence at inaugural and social events of the urban exhibition, where she prevails as a pleasant and entertaining by-product of the art
world’s eccentricities. Around a warm glass of rum, getting a photo with Miss Bienal enhances the experience of participants – she provides comic relief, something to talk about as she clears the pompous air. Thanks to the high level of cultural capital of the biennale’s attendees, it is safe to assume that her presence – in these social gatherings – is interpreted by most as a performance, which allows a comfortable rapport of theatricality to take shape. She is not alienated as such.

However, her alienation changes depending on the context. An anecdote here is worth highlighting to illustrate this. In a video of the performance, directed by journalist Claudio Pelaez Sordo (2015), Otero’s avatar tries to attend a film screening at the stylish art and music venue, La Fabrica de Arte in the upscale Vedado neighbourhood. In the video, we see her being stopped at the entrance by a staff member who tells her: ‘This is a movie screening. You can’t be like this right now’ to which Miss Bienal through Otero’s casual demeanour responds ‘why?’ and the staff member responds ‘because this is an activity’. She retorts ‘and I came to see the movie’ to which the exasperated staff members asks ‘but why did you come dressed as…?’ with Miss Bienal insisting, ‘dressed like what?’ The restless staff member starts to pace and Otero’s character asks innocently ‘and why can’t I dress like this?’ to which the staff member responds, ‘because you are not the centre of attention!’ She replies, ‘well the thing is that this is how I dress and I came to see the movie. Don’t you see the censorship in this?’ The angry staff member scoffs and says before walking away, ‘censorship? You are crazy!’

In this exchange, Otero’s casual language shines through and naively ignores his two-dimensionality, or that he is dressed like a Tropicana dancer. There is a dissociation between body and personage, a type of self-alienation (McMillan, 2021), which exasperates the staff member. By seeking to normalise his dress, by alluding to it as ‘just’ the way he dresses, Otero is doing something subversive: he downplays his sexual and racial assignation, which forces the staff member to be explicit, which she struggles with as she never finishes her sentence to describe how he is dressed. This seemingly simple interaction displays Miss Bienal’s subversive displacement: through her banal masculinity and disconnect between the dress/body and the person embodying it, she cornered her interlocutor into her internalised distribution of norms of conduct and acceptable bodies. She forces us to reckon with our own arrangements of the social world. The emergence of Miss Bienal and her ‘out of character-ness’ serves as a reminder of the rigidity of the social order of things, whether it be within
the codified gallery spaces of the biennale or in the streets. In doing so, she disrupts notions of legitimacy and authenticity. Perhaps, the interaction might have been more consensual had Otero taken on a personage, it would have inscribed it within a grammar of performance, which would have allowed his interlocutor to comfortably hide in the realm of the theatrical.

We see here how the performance artist seizes to be one when entering spaces of ‘importance’ in the charged context of this international art exhibition where hierarchies of who matters and who does not are uniquely activated. In everyday parlance, Cubans often highlight the fact that they become second-class citizens in their own country when tourists are around. This is precisely what Otero comments on through his embodiment of Miss Bienal. The film screening in question was the Cuban premiere of the opera-epic film River of Fundament (2014) by the American artist Matthew Barney, one of the most highly anticipated events of the month-long biennale. While the character is tolerated as a welcomed distraction within social events peripheral to the exhibition, when entering official spaces in which confirmed artists are mingling, she stops being a performance and transforms into a bothersome ‘attention seeker’, or a cheap effort at disruption.

In these moments of alienation, what remains is her two-dimensionality: her body and her dress. As a non-official artist of the Havana Biennale, Otero’s legitimacy is constantly being questioned, and this becomes particularly apparent in scenes where the role everyone is meant to play are particularly activated. Through this very interaction, which was stealthily captured on video, Miss Bienal manages to strip the biennale’s official discourse of its hypocrisy. The Cuban body once again is relegated to the status of second-class citizen, and becomes an ‘embarrassment’ when it challenges tacit normative codes of conduct and transgresses its assigned place.

In this sense, Miss Bienal holds a third space ‘mirror’ to the oppressor because she helps them see something about themselves that they normally would not. This component of the performance resonates, again, with Muñoz’s (1999: 97) conceptualisation of disidentification which he describes as:

a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. […] Disidentification resists the interpelling call of ideology that fixes a subject within the State power apparatus.
It is a ‘third term that resists identification/counteridentification’ and ‘allows to reformat the self in the social’ (ibid: 97). Muñoz argues that such a practice is an intersectional strategy that offers ‘more’, more than identification or counteridentification, more opportunities, more complexities, more freedom in the development and fostering of political subjectivities. This notion of disidentification being a third space makes sense when looking at Miss Bienal. Strictly speaking, she is as conventional as it gets. Her representation, when looked at closely, is not tapping into the counter-culture world of drag, which has its Havanian subcultural corners. There is nothing abject or caricatured about her appearance, she is traditionally beautiful because Otero’s body fits within dominant standards of desirable Black masculinity. Yet what brings more and breaks the rigidity of this cross-dressed body in the social order is the masculine disposition that accompanies Miss Bienal. What makes her uniquely jarring is her ability to tap into intersecting power hierarchies. Otero’s self-objectified and conventionally beautiful Black body is strangely enhanced in its masculinity by the extravagant pink feathers of the Tropicana dancer. By not making an effort to ‘pass’ as a woman, Otero’s character is performing a ‘tactical misrecognition’ (Muñoz, 1999) which allows for a new political subjectivity: she incarnates how little the exoticized body needs to ‘pretend’ to satisfy fantasies, and this provides her with agency – she instrumentalises her submissiveness. In this sense, Miss Bienal allows for something disconcerting to be made possible by occupying the precise point of racial / sexual intersection. As both a beautiful, erotic body, and as a black body, the performance is holding the perfect intersectional or cross-cutting space where sexual and racial hierarchies meet.

Returning to Muñoz’s analysis of the political potential of ‘queer drag’, Miss Bienal creates an uneasiness in desire. Otero’s self-exploitation is alienating, he leans into the submissive expectations of the mulata/Black/sexualised body being available for sexually and symbolic consumption, while the banal masculinity and complete downplaying of this very body forces those interacting with her to face their own place in the location of that encounter whether it be socially, racially or sexually. The complexity of Miss Bienal’s intersectional nature stems from the liberating component of her impossible identification, which leaves the interlocutor with the difficult work of making sense of her by reckoning with their worldview’s limitations. Miss Bienal as a site of avatar production thus enables a defiant confirmation of the stereotypes the artist insists on: whether it is the hustle of a Cuban artist ‘vulgarly’ promoting himself,
or the agreeable availability of the *mulata*'s body. At the same, *Miss Bienal the Avatar* subverts those clichés by imposing no explanation or confirmation of her interlocutor’s assumptions about who she is or where she is operating from; inciting us to face in solitude our prescriptive organisation of the world.

I now wish to turn to *Miss Bienal’s* three-dimensionality, which is looking at what happens when in her orbit, what happens when the body and dress start to speak, what her embrace, or her coming to life provides both intimately and collectively. I now turn to how the avatar metamorphoses into a ‘superhero’.

**The Superhero**

On a relational level, *Miss Bienal’s* banal masculinity comments on desire’s feverish state and its effect on sound judgement. In the last three decades, Cuba has turned into a popular destination for sex tourism (Fusco, 2002; Daigle, 2015) which the Cuban government has simultaneously enabled and admonished. The economics of tropicalist desire emerged in full throttle during the Special Period in the mid-1990s, where the tourism industry became the most lucrative sector for Cubans to earn much-needed hard currency (Daigle, 2015). The character meets the demand of beauty and attraction, she is agreeable and will gladly give a hug, a photo, laugh consensually at a joke. However, she does not need to try too hard to play into her role. This lack of effort makes her a mirage that is familiar to Cubans who participate (un)willingly into this game of (self)exploitation. Her banal masculinity can be read as a fine commentary on the simplicity and carnality of desire when manifested in an imbalanced power dynamic. Desire on steroids, which provides the powerful visitor with a sense of entitlement to objectify this ‘othered’ body. A beautiful sight is sufficient. By not needing to seem more feminine than her appearance, she encapsulates the macho expectation that women be ‘beautiful creatures’. The fact that her personality is irrelevant makes her the ultimate object. Yet, through her masculine and macho demeanour, she rips apart the power dynamic behind dominant sexual thirst for ‘available’ othered bodies, and has agency.

However, when turning to the encounter garnered within *Miss Bienal’s* orbit, I argue that something more transgressive takes place. Beyond the fact that she makes us, beholders, sit uncomfortably with the silence of our ascriptions and assumptions, *Miss Bienal* also becomes a ‘superhuman’ symbol of the unique Cuban *lucha* or ‘hustle’.
Political scientist Sujatha Fernandes (2020: 2) offers a productive definition of this uniquely Cuban praxis:

The idea of hustle draws from contemporary Cuban vernacular, including the notions of luchar, resolver, inventar, and jinetear. This vocabulary has emerged to articulate the ways that Cubans negotiate the contradictions of everyday life in the post-Soviet era. Cubans have been forced to find creative strategies of survival, often depending on the black market. When hotel employees pilfer packets of butter from a breakfast buffet to sell on the black market, this is seen not as stealing but rather as luchando or struggling. […] During the 1990s, the term jinetear or the act of jineterismo acquired the meaning of ‘hustling’, but it referred to a much broader range of practices, including engaging in sex work, romantic relationships, or friendships with tourists.

The Cuban ‘hustle’ permeates in all aspects of quotidianity; it is a required survival skill that transcends allegiance to the revolution. As the journalist Carlos Manuel Alvarez describes in his book The Tribe (2017: 272):

If there’s an art at which Cubans excel, it’s petty theft. They all know its measurements, its weight, the risks and benefits, because there’s barely a soul who hasn’t had a go at it at least one. The fine web of constant, small-scale embezzlement and various other immoral acts has become a heroic form of resistance in the face of the state’s ineptitude and hypocrisy.

The hustle is not an open secret but an institutionalised practice of ‘getting by’. Therefore, the performance’s new venture of tapping into the capitalist grammar of ‘networking’ appears, simultaneously, like an exciting new enterprise and an all too familiar practice of packaging the self (spiritual, physical, psychological) for a certain mode of consumption in order to make ends meet.

Indeed, jineterismo, which constitutes the hustle of men and women (often of colour) participating in the work of intimacy with tourists in exchange for material comforts, is much more than sex work. When speaking with Otero in the summer of 2015, he explained that I was being too simplistic in judging the young Black Cuban girls I witnessed in the company of much older white Canadian/European men as prey of an oppressive sex tourism culture. He contended that these girls had more agency than I was giving them credit for, and he lauded their ingenuity in finding ways to benefit from their exploitation. He explained that it was too reductive to perceive them as victims of a vicious industry, and that – rather – they were willing actors in a bilateral relationship in which they received something valuable: material, emotional, and physical comfort. Indeed, there is often a whole organisation behind a jinetera’s endeavours such as a boyfriend who is in on the hustle, or family members who support the work and benefit from the financial outcomes of it (Alvarez, 2017). Further,
he mocked me for my puritanical construction of what constitutes a ‘healthy’ relationship and provoked me to think that perhaps all relationships – in their very structure as terrains of time, emotional, intellectual and physical exchange – always contain a level of transaction. While I am not sure to agree with this last point because relationships – in my view – exist in another register than that of neoliberal grammar, his celebration of jineteras invited me to pause and assess my assumptions.

Art critic and artist Coco Fusco, in her analysis of jineteras as a type of ‘performance’ aligns with my conversation with Otero in 2015. She argues that jineteras’ quest of seeking material and intimate comforts serve as a symbol of resistance to both the revolution’s exhausting expectations of self-sacrifice and the self-righteous demands of capitalist production. By seeking pleasure, casual sex, a night in a comfortable hotel room, money or clothes, jineteras are ‘perceived as heroic providers whose mythical sexual power is showing up the failures of an ailing macho regime’ (Fusco, 2001: 142). They come to represent the essentialising of an entire ‘people’ for the sake of ideological pursuit or foreign nostalgic fantasies that has infiltrated all aspects of society. From the Buena Vista Social Club fad aimed at instilling a fixed-in-time image of Cuba, to high culture where ‘artists most promoted by the state [leaven] their projects with just a touch of the local (and none, of course, of the bite) to attract itinerant curators and collectors, sell work for much needed dollars and obtain invitations abroad’ (ibid: 138).

The jinetera also represents a form of revenge: as historically the most depreciated members of society, Black and mulata women are becoming the country’s ‘nouveaux riches’ and are doing so through a form of hedonistic lavishing in material things and comfort. As Fusco tells us, the body’s freedom expressed through uninhibited casual sex is a powerful way to subvert control over it (conversely, such subversion is also possible through self-inflicted pain such as hunger striking). Miss Bienal becomes a mascot to this popular sympathy within Cuban society towards jineteras, they embody the subversive practice of self-promotion, self-exoticization, and cheeky manipulation to transgress both the confines of decrepit socialist conditions in the everyday and the demands of ‘noble’ forms of capitalist enterprise. Through the heroic figure of the jineteras working in pleasure and intimacy to gain financial gains, or a potential a ticket of out the country – Miss Bienal relinquishes a form of collective self-love, a caring salute to the ‘tricks’ interwoven within the complex dynamics of everyday hustle. She
makes a farce of the state’s pathologizing discourse around sex workers by highlighting their superpowers.

This is why Miss Bienal is more than a heroic figure: I suggest that, as a consequence of our relationship with her, she becomes a superhero. She embodies an aesthetic heroization of the hustle. This is a productive way to think about her not least since Otero has played around with the image of superheroes in many of his works; it is a theme that traverses his oeuvre in an unfeigned and impassioned way. Superheroes as ‘creatures’ with human traits and superhuman qualities that ‘save’ the most destitute members of society is an imaginary that Otero carries close to his heart. The figure of the superhero whose own story is, often, one of strife and rejection and who attains a superpower to alleviate the suffering of others is a fantasy that has helped him overcome some of his own obstacles. By metamorphosing the figure of the Black woman/mulata whose deviant, ‘unclassifiable’ sexuality makes her both familiar and inaccessible, Miss Bienal acquires a superpower of displacing her position on the social hierarchical ladder of blackness, queerness and femininity. She extends her superpower of displacement to others, who, when in contact with her, lose the ball and chain of their ascriptions. The superhero jinetera embodied by the performer challenges the victimization of sex workers; she gives wings to their desires. Through Otero’s extraverted personality, Miss Bienal gives permission to savour indiscreetly the experience of pleasure.

Miss Bienal’s superpowers are ignited through the intimacy of the encounter and the subversive potential of shared pleasure that she whimsically promises. In her ethnographic study among Cuban jineteras, scholar Megan Daigle (2021) argues that pleasure becomes a site of self-creation and invention. Through intimacy with travellers, Cubans themselves can ‘travel’ in their own right; there is – through intimacy – the potential for exposure to different cultures, languages, or, even, an opportunity to experience love differently. Miss Bienal is thus an ode to this superpower that constitutes the Cuban ‘hustle’ within an insular geographical, social and economic ‘place’ where travel or escape are particularly arduous. Daigle makes the convincing argument that pleasure – which is often shared – enables to circumvent such social and economic borders (Daigle, 2021). Drawing from Foucault’s notion that pleasure stems from a ‘different grid of intelligibility’ than love or desire simply because ‘it just is’. In this sense, pleasure provides tremendous potential for agency; it is an equalizer of sorts. It suspends our prescribed places in the social world and provides another
‘time space’, a pause; a moment of travel. The character’s superhero quality signals to her essence of partaking unapologetically in pleasure, she is self-promoting and seeking connections without a care in the world, and she does so luxuriously. More, the fact that Miss Bienal – when in action – is actually inhabited by Otero’s masculine and bold personality is a transgressive way to render women’s desire and pleasure – normatively inappropriate – visible through the artist’s own macho sexual permissiveness.

Miss Bienal as a superhero evades the sanctioned forms of revolutionary love, intimacy and sex. Through overt pleasure in self-promoting himself and in the radical potential of the intimate rapport, Otero transgresses norms of respectable rapports in a state where ‘transnational’ relationships are deemed suspicious. Yet Miss Bienal points her finger precisely at the hypocrisy in the state’s contradicting discourse of simultaneously vilifying jineretas as the epitome of anti-revolutionary deviance whilst it openly bets on its ‘human capital’ as the ‘best thing’ the country has to offer tourists (Checa-Gismero, 2018). Miss Bienal is a kitsch manifestation of this hypocrisy and a validating mirror to Cuban’s everyday hustle or lucha. She is a fantasy that helps make sense of the state’s unintelligible narrative on permissible bodies and comportment by embodying it all and none at the same time. Through her carnival dress, which signals to tropicalist desire, and her banal masculinity, she makes explicit the murky line between a transactional and authentic ‘relationship’ and, perhaps more radically, renders such a moralist distinction irrelevant. She tells us that, at the end of the day, the experience of pleasure can take place no matter the ‘nature’ of the relationship, and that this shared moment opens up the possibility of a reunion with the other and the self.

**Miss Bienal: An embodiment of our infinite capabilities**

By way of conclusion, I circle back to what this potential for shared pleasure, embodied in our ‘Miss Bienal the Superhero’, offers in terms of dissensus. I suggest that Otero’s disidentificatory performance offers more than simple identification or counteridentification and this ‘more’ (Muñoz, 1999) stems from both her appearance and the accompanying encounter as she carves a unique space for herself within the context of an elite art festival. Miss Bienal, during the space of the encounter which is repeated through the pretext of handing out a business card, redistributes this sensory commonality, she ‘reconfigures the distribution of sensible’ (Rancière, 2004) by
stripping all protagonists of their social roles. There is a reshuffling of sensory experience, which is much more subversive than simply being a provocative appearance of resistance. Through the banal masculinity of Otero’s character, her appearance no longer matches any ‘real’ representations. She is emancipated and emancipating. She not only offers a ‘misrecognition’ (Muñoz, 1999) because she usurps the codes of visibility of such a body in such a space, but she becomes political – as Rancière understands it – through an impossible identification. The identification with this othered ‘exotic animal’ – in Otero’s words – becomes astonishing and impossible through its masculine demeanour. In this way, she makes it possible for the mulata to be something else than a sex object or a frontal defiance to her exploitation, Miss Bienal emerges as a reflection of the capabilities within all of us to do things beyond what we have been told we cannot do. Such impossible identification makes Miss Bienal, as an artwork, entirely self-sufficient and autonomous, and hence deeply political. In this sense, through the casual ‘chitchat’ of the encounter and the promise of pleasure, the politics of aesthetics of Miss Bienal provides grounds for dissensus (Rancière, 2005). The ‘politics’ of the art piece does not lie in Otero’s disidentifying performance, which inscribes itself into the grammar of (in)visible subjects and objects in Cuban society, but is rather made possible within the interaction where the social signifiers of those in relation are disrupted and ‘coordinates of sensory experience’ (Rancière, 2009: 25) are suspended. The art of this exchange, the time-space provided by the performance, enables a rift within this sensory experience that shatters the hierarchy between different senses. This destruction of the hierarchy through Miss Bienal’s impossible identification makes way for a more profound human connection that rests on an equal footing within the purity of the artwork. This ‘purity’ manifests itself in the promise of pleasure.

The aesthetic experience of the encounter can be read as Friedrich Schiller’s ‘free play’ (Schiller, 2020) provided by the thing that is art. Schiller argued that art and the aesthetic experience provide an opportunity for ‘play’, which he identified as human nature’s third ‘drive’. According to Schiller, human nature is composed of two, conflicting drives: the ‘form’ drive which is unchanging and constant, it is the rational self, concerned about dignity, truth and right, and the ‘sense’ drive which is physical, that part of the self which lives in the moment where personality is suspended and overtaken by sensation. The social world is arranged in a way that these two drives often compete with one another. Schiller argues that the modern world through
Enlightenment philosophy has privileged the ‘form’ drive, or rationality, over sensation, which has led to a dissociative and destructive component of human nature (something he experienced first-hand during his participation in the French Revolution and its culmination in the Reign of Terror, which he saw as a manifestation of reason’s dominance). The aesthetic experience, according to Schiller, offers space for the ‘play drive’ to take over by neutralising the form and sense drives, and liberating space for free will to take over. The free play provided by the artwork offers an emancipatory opportunity for individuals to reach a deeper understanding of themselves, the sense and form drives no longer compete over thought and matter.

Rancière draws from Schiller’s idea of free play to ground his theory of politics as that space where the distribution of the sensible is disrupted and rearranged for another form of sensory experience to take place. Experiencing Miss Bienal enables a suspension of senses as they have been arranged within a specific social order such as the sensory fabric of Cuban revolutionary politics. Conversely, the politics of the performance stem from the emergence of a ‘sensorium different to that of domination’ (Rancière, 2009: 30). Miss Bienal herself does not offer such politics, it is the experience of the interaction that enables a moment of suspension of the senses where a differentiation between intelligent form and sensible matter is destroyed. Where roles and expectations, and power dynamics lose themselves and become ‘idle’ (Rancière, 2009) within the aesthetic space. The ‘free play’ of the aesthetic experience provides a freedom that contrasts with ‘the servitude of work’ (Rancière, 2009: 31). Within the experience of the artform, play becomes ‘the activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons’ (ibid: 30). Such idle work makes the art become art simply for art’s sake. It provides a new collective sensorial framework that erupts within a strictly codified social order, to give a voice and visibility to both an individual and collective experience.

The free appearance of Miss Bienal’s banal masculinity, which can only become apparent through proximity, by walking up to her and striking up a conversation in which she will brandish her business card, contrasts to the constraints ‘that relate appearance to a reality’ (Rancière, 2009: 31). Her banal masculinity and hyper feminine presentation with all of its strongly marked clichés shatter the sensory division of the distribution of the sensible where appearance needs to reflect reality. There is a new reality possible within her realm and a suspension of the senses that offers a
sensibility distinct from that of domination. Such suspension, Rancière proposes, leads to a more profound revolution, a revolution of sensible existence itself and not just how one’s role might become resistive in the social. The autonomy of the aesthetic experience ‘appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life’ (ibid: 32). Only through the impossible identification provided by Miss Bienal’s banal masculinity can a ‘righting’ of the unequal position of the different players in the social world take place.

Otero Alcántara’s performance sits within his period of the creative imagination that I defined as ‘Play’ (See essay 2). The audience and object of his critique through Miss Bienal was not the Cuban state, or even the politics of normalization between the United States and Cuba, though on surface level, such a reading could be possible. By embodying the mulata or jinetera as a ‘creature’ meant to be devoured by the fantasy-filled appetite of travellers, whose theatricality stops at her appearance, Otero’s performance is an ode to (re)affirming our subjectivities. With the non-scripted intervention of networking and seeking vulgar self-promotion, Miss Bienal verifies all of our rights to exist, no matter the social location. Her avatar production circumvents the submission of our roles in a social order dictated by the rules of domination and enables to play on a completely different field of existence, one distinct of such constraints. Through the intimacy of our encounter with her, she conjures a unique rendez-vous with our own limitations and invites for a hard and liberating look at our infinite capacities.
III. *La Caridad nos une*: Self-sacrifice as ontological resurrection

The hairless Child in the Madonna’s arms gives off a distant, frozen and expressionless gaze that dramatizes the caricatured effect of the gross lines imposed by the imprecise and coarse handling of the papier mâché. The Virgin Mary’s gaze, on the other hand, appears less withdrawn thanks to her detailed eyebrows and the oval shape of her almond brown eyes which radiate a more realistic feel to her visage. Eyebrows that the Child is missing. Her gaze nonetheless remains frontal and distant. Their skin has been painted in a soft caramel brown, the Child's nose bears a caricatured width; a careful detail of conception that stands out in the overall rough draft feel of the piece. The two-meter tall sculpture shines brightly in her yellow painted cloth decorated by golden and rose motifs. The veil covers her head whilst delicately brushed black curly hair can be perceived underneath. She wears a long and wide crown represented in matte brown paint. In her right hand, she brandishes a cross with red dots meant to evoke ruby jewels, while she cradles the spellbound Jesus in her left arm. The Child wears an off-white cassock. The national shield of Cuba has been meticulously drawn through thin brushstrokes on the Saint’s midsection: the official coats of arms with a landscape of the Caribbean Sea, the rising sun and a Phrygian cap all supported by an oak branch and laurel wreath. The statue taunts the physics of three dimensionality: when examined on its side, we notice that it has very little volume and hovers closer to a flat two-dimensional paper cut out. The distorted width to depth ratio accentuates the artist’s intended burlesque representation of the Saint. However, the exaggerated lines painted onto the sculpture signal the artist’s informed intention of representing the Saint in *brut* form.

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s Madonna and Child are mounted on an artisanal wooden chariot with wheels to facilitate their movement. The chariot resembles those used by fruit and vegetable sellers who tread through busy urban intersections chanting the day’s deal on mangoes or yucca. The Madonna and Child represent *La Caridad del Cobre* [Our Lady of Charity], which is Cuba’s Patroness Saint. *La Caridad del Cobre* as she is known in the Cuban Catholic grammar is deified as the *oricha* [deity] *Ochún* in the syncretic religion of Santería. *Ochún* is the youngest of the *orichas* and is known for her sensuality, strength, playfulness and fertility, and is associated
with the element of water. In his interpretation of La Caridad, Otero represents her as Black, or as Ochún.


In September 2013, Otero Alcántara and the American photographer Tanya Bernard performed their piece *La Caridad Nos Une* [Our Lady of Charity Unites Us] which is part of the series *Con todos y para el bien de unos cuántos* [With everyone and for the good of some]. The performance consisted of wheeling the two-metre high paper mâché *Ochún* over the 900 kilometres that separate Havana from the town of El Cobre on the eastern point of the island, to the Basilica of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre where the sacred 18-inch tall statue of *La Caridad* is guarded. In the months preparing for the pilgrimage, the artist built the sculpture in collaboration with children from El Cerro, the Havana neighbourhood where he grew up. The piece bears a heavy presence, even though its heftiness mostly resides in the wooden chariot on which it sits. Otero Alcántara made use of paper mâché for many of his early works as it provides affordable means to constructing abundant pieces. By blowing up these personages through the crude touch of paper mâché, Otero’s sculptures impose and provoke ambiguously as their grandeur emit a cartoonish yet imperial presence.

This final performance piece demonstrates Otero’s persistence, since his artistic beginnings, in creating art that touches everyday people to inspire a new perspective on their realities. In this last section, I argue the *Caridad’s* potential in carving new subjective spaces in the ontological landscape of the revolution that opens up possibilities for the constitution of new moral selves. First, I locate the artists’ performance within the art historical literature around the representations of the Virgin Mary, then I pause on the performance’s endurance character as a constitutive component of Otero’s work by situating it in relation to contemporary performance artists whose oeuvre revolved around durability. Finally, I offer an analysis of the performance through the lens of Rancièrian notions of the political to propose that Otero’s performance ultimately disrupts the ontological landscape of the revolution by deepening it.

**La Caridad del Cobre: Endurance, universality and intimacy**

The Virgin Mary has been an important subject in Western art from the 6th century onwards. In religious iconography and representation, Mary embodies our human potential for celestial life and, as the mother of Christ, she serves as the bridge between the human and divine. Christ, God’s son, takes his human form from Mary. The most common representation features Mary holding the child Jesus in her arms. The 15th and 16th centuries in Italy produced the most Madonna and Child paintings,
where Mary is often painted or sculpted with royal intonations whilst signalling to her humility; there is an important balance between the spiritual mobility available through her humble roots. Mary’s image is adaptable to social trends. For instance, between the 14th and 17th centuries, Mary’s womanhood and motherhood tend to be accentuated, with paintings that depict her in everyday life scenes: a tendency which is symptomatic of changes in European society linked to urbanization and family values of a growing middle class.

Another important component of Mary’s representation is her gaze. In earlier depictions, she is often represented with a far away, frontal look. These representations highlight Mary’s iconic purpose. She is shown as imperial and front facing. On the other hand, female painters, most often nuns, introduced subjectivity in Mary’s gaze by painting her looking sideways, which adds an air of contemplation and mystery, or she might be painted interacting with Jesus where a relation of affinity comes to the fore. Numerous women artists have contributed to depictions of Mary that accentuate her ordinariness, where she is taken down from her static monumental presence as an icon. Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Madonna and Child* (1609-10), for instance, illustrates Mary offering her bare breast to Jesus, she is barefoot and dressed modestly, introducing the embodied dimension of motherhood that male painters have shied away from (Verdon, 2014).

In general terms, Mary symbolises ‘divine illumination’, which reflects in the way light appears in paintings of her. Often, light coming from above and behind represents this illumination to emphasise Mary’s monumentality and her qualities for offering salvation. She is a human closely involved with the divine, therefore her representation is an exploration of the divine potential in ordinary human life. During colonial times, which is when *La Caridad del Cobre* first appeared, Mary is often converted into a Patroness Saint who merges the old and the new. She becomes a protector and patroness of the conquerors and settlers while she was ‘presented to slaves as a modern servant of the Lord’ (Verdon, 2014: 37).

One last important point to make around Mary’s aesthetic representation pertains to ideas around her democratising effect. Religious art is its own genre that serves as a vector towards piteous contemplation and fits within a wider materiality of religion, making it accessible art. Beholders do not necessarily require social or cultural capital to enter in relation with religious icons such as Mary. The Virgin’s figure is adaptable to the needs of those who call upon her. As the historian Robert Orsi contends, Mary
has only existed relationally, rendering her appearance open to a wide array of interpretations which makes her an inclusive figure: ‘neither theology nor iconography can tell us much about people’s experience of her or the content of their prayers’ (Verdon, 2014: 52). The intimacy provided by her presence, and the general inclusivity of religious art bears something egalitarian, which provides Otero with productive conceptual material for experimenting with the aesthetic experience. The dimension of Mary being relational in her symbolism and accessible to the everyday person is key in understanding how Otero’s Ochùn becomes a vector for an unmitigated aesthetic experience.

This unmitigated experience of prayer and free relation with the papier mâché manifestation of Mary touches a second point about the performance’s key characteristic: endurance or durability. Again, Otero locates this aesthetic choice within a long and dense history of performance art that pushes the limits of the body through imposed temporal constraints. Here, two artists are worth mentioning to situate Otero’s pilgrimage: the American artist Linda Montano and Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh. Montano – who identifies as a Catholic performance artist (which she has self-defined as an oxymoron) (Weintraub, 2016) – has dedicated her life’s work in playing with the power of art as life. Her works include incarnating the seven chakras over a seven-year period, and accompanying and caring for her dying father as a dedicated practice/artwork of care. She also worked with Tehching Hsieh on a performance during which they lived tied to each other by a rope for a year in 1983. Hsieh is a veteran endurance artist who has explored the concept of time by doing several yearlong performances from living holed up in a cage, to punching a timecard every hour for an entire year.

While speaking from very different places, these artists’ works help to contextualise the aesthetic choice of endurance that can be found in many of Otero’s works. Endurance – as a physical feat – contains a religious essence. There is ‘something’ meditative, sacrificial, and disciplined in the ability to dedicate a sustained amount of time to a specific task: whether it is walking for 900 km pushing a papier mâché statue or being tied to someone by a rope for months. These performances explore the passing of time through dedicated practice, repetition, bodily discomforts. More subtlety, endurance is also a humble ability to be submissive. The surrendering of a sense of self-importance in the name of both grandiose and menial tasks: whether it is dedicating every hour of the day to caring for a dying parent or punching a timecard
hourly. As Montano explains when describing the years she dedicated to accompanying her father through illness and death, a work she called *Dad Art*:

While this work ostensibly documents a deep communion between father and daughter, it also reverses manifold cultural assumptions that obstruct the cultivation of ‘one love’. As such, Dad Art offers ways to heal the ruptures that accompany the benefits of contemporary lifestyles. For example, serving the needs of another is typically considered to be demeaning; Dad Art reveals that being in service can be uplifting. Labor is commonly understood to be a regrettable necessity; here, labor is a conduit for rapture. Menial tasks cease being drudgery and offer the enrichment of ritual. Physical confinement becomes an occasion to journey spiritually. Psychological endurance offers the prospect of joyful discovery. Suffering ceases to be an affliction and becomes an instigator of creativity (Weintraub, 2016: 27).

Similarly, Hsieh’s constraining commitments to punching the timecard, or living in a cage, is a mockery of any notions of ‘time being money’ (here we remember Juan Carlos Flores in the first essay contemplating this ‘American’ notion of time being money, where poetry writing becomes the anti-thesis to time as a commodity). Hsieh’s practice resists the notion of time being precious and sacrifices this passing of time, simply in the name of wasting it for the higher thing that is ‘art’. In this sense, the endurance, which often comes with a very important and serious dedication, is displaced, the endurance is in vain, just an experiment in seeing how time, in itself, can or might pass. Endurance is contemplation. Endurance is giving in. Endurance is pausing. Endurance is suffering to observe, as Montano puts it, how it might instigate creativity.

Otero’s endurance with the Virgin piece does not hold the components of time wasted, but it surely detains this submissive quality. The artist simply being a vector for a spiritual encounter to take place between the beholder and the Virgin. The artist is subsumed by the spiritual experience; he is not a mediator but a holder of space. This is also a notion that is apparent in Montano’s work as she defines performance artists as healers who learn to balance the artist’s unavoidable ego with prayer. The artist’s ego is mitigated by her submission to the spiritual experience. Prayer becomes an equalizer, a purifying practice. A condition that Otero puts himself in not only through the Virgin piece but also in his other works. The prayer-sustaining-endurance component is a common thread in most of his work and serves as a defining characteristic of his aesthetic commitment.
From Mary to Ochún: The monumentality of the ordinary

Legend has it that La Caridad del Cobre was first sighed in 1612 by two Taíno Amerindians and an African enslaved child (known as the three ‘Juans’) as they were navigating a rowboat along the coast of the mining town El Cobre. This is why La Caridad del Cobre was first worshiped by Amerindians and slaves as a protecting force for miners who worked in dangerous conditions during the 17th and 18th centuries, it was not until later that she expanded into a nationalist symbol of Cuban unity (Ferrer, 2021).

The Virgin’s iconography has been whitened over the years and the story of her initial sighting gradually transformed towards a depoliticized and unifying narrative of cubanidad (Cuban identity) that erases the colonial racial violence upon which Cuban society is founded (De La Torre, 2001). For instance, in recent and official retellings of the Saint’s sighting, one of the three ‘Juans’ is replaced by a white bearded Spaniard in order to convey a unifying nationalist imaginary of Cuban identity as a mestizaje fusion of Spaniard, Black, and Taíno roots. Such a narrative ignores the colonialisist power dynamics behind Cuban nation building. Otero’s representation of the Virgin de la Caridad as Ochún is a testament to his socialisation as a Black Cuban with strong ties to Santería: a syncretic religion of resistance borne out of enslaved people in Cuba. As the theologian, Miguel de la Torre (2001: 839) describes:

Santería, also known as the Lucumi religion, is the product of a religious space created by those who were subordinated to the arbitrary exercise of power imposed by Catholic Spaniards on their African slaves. Specifically, Santería’s components consist of a European Christianity shaped by the Counter-Reformation and Spanish ‘folk’ Catholicism blended together with African orisha worship as practiced by the Yoruba of Nigeria and as modified by nineteenth-century Kardecan spiritualism, which originated in France and was later popularized in the Caribbean.

Bearing these historical components in mind helps to position the timing of Otero and Bernard’s performance, which was a direct response to the Cuban Church’s celebration of the 400 years since the saint’s apparition in 2012. The sacred statue of La Caridad was paraded throughout the country for devotees to pray to her. In their artist statement, the pair described reacting to the celebration of the saint by creating their own, larger and more accessible Madonna. Unlike the official statue, they portray her and the Child with black skin. They mount her on a chariot at the same height as everyday people rather erecting her on top of a car and encasing her in a vitrine.
In the blog that the artists created to document their journey, they explain that the performance serves to honour the individual rapport between divine and mortal existence, elevating the status of ordinary people through a horizontal relationship with the saint. In this sense, Otero’s papier mâché *Ochún* rolls through the streets of Cuba, visiting small villages that were excluded in the trajectory of the official parading of the saint the year prior. Otero and Bernard conducted a ‘flipped’ pilgrimage with the saint visiting some of the country’s most marginalised places; attracting ‘drunkards’ and ‘crazies’ – as Bernard writes – who were turned into subjects of veneration. Otero Alcántara and Bernard sought to simplify the relationship between saint and believer, by bringing her down from her pillar and render her palpable, inciting people to write their wishes and prayers onto her bodice. The artists contend that the pedestal onto which saints are elevated is akin to the elitist reverence towards artists; the pilgrimage is thus a way to put the saint/artist’s flesh at the service of everyday people, the sacrifice being an equalizing gesture of recognition. The performance builds a bridge between various chasms: turning on its head notions of sacredness and worthiness. The juxtaposition church authorities parading the saint with Otero and Bernard’s pilgrimage attests to two different ways of seeing the holy within ourselves. In the first instance, the Catholic Church brought the effigy of the saint outside of her sanctuary to the people; there is a newfound proximity with Mary’s divine humanity. In the second instance, Otero and Bernard’s performance does something more subtle and subversive: their *Ochún* raises the ordinary to monumental status by reframing the relationship between saint and believer. *Ochún*’s humble apparatus, the wooden chariot, the unabashedly ‘cheap’ material of the paper, gives her the role of a witness, she testifies to the monumentality of those who cross her path. This effect touches on the perturbing and political aspect of *La Caridad Nos Une*; the Virgin, as a democratising force, speaks to human connection and consciousness in a way that transcends her contextual location.

Through this gesture, Otero and Bernard are tapping into Santería’s ethos as a religion of survival and adaptation. Oludamne, the Supreme Being in Santería, is omnipresent but also runs as an absentee, which is where the *orichas* [deities] play a crucial role, as they can inhabit various shapes and icons. This utilitarian dimension makes Santería a resilient belief system that provides all representations of *orichas* with a specific function. In this sense, the pilgrimage is about helping everyday Cubans see the saints within themselves, as Bernard describes in the blog:
We believe that faith in oneself goes farther than merely believing in an object or a Saint or a religion to bring on needed change in one’s life. We think that faith is within and if one has faith in God one inherently has faith in oneself. All of the saints who are worshipped were once men and women with ideas; and Saints, like artists, are often put on pedestals far from reach. With this project the artists wish to bring art, and faith down from these pedestals and directly to the people (Bernard, 2013).

Just like a regular religious procession, believers were invited to make donations to the saint that the pair intended on providing to a family whose house had been destroyed by Hurricane Sandy that ravaged the eastern part of the country in 2012. On September 8, 2013, the artists set off on their journey from Havana. However, the pilgrimage was stopped short halfway through in the town of Ciego de Avila on October 16 where the artists encountered resistance from local authorities. They were told that Bernard, as a U.S. citizen, did not possess adequate authorization to travel outside Havana. This led to a confiscation of the sculpture and donations. In the process, Otero spent 24 hours in prison with his phone and other personal belongings taken from him while Bernard was escorted onto a bus back to Havana. The fact that Otero Alcántara had received approval and a blessing by bishops in Havana, as an informed effort to inscribe this artistic gesture within the institutional spaces allowed for such public manifestations of spirituality, did not deter local authorities from declaring the performance illegal.

In my interviews from June 2020, Otero Alcántara explained that at the time (between 2012-13) he believed his right as a citizen and artist to criticise institutions was compatible with his faith in the healthy functioning of such institutions. His work was tongue-in-cheek and provocative but not in a manner that directed a sense of frontal opposition to the revolutionary process (constitutive of the ‘Play’ period, see essay 2). If anything, he still believed in his commitment as an artist to practice a critique from ‘within’ the revolution as a contribution to that never-ending construction of revolutionary politics. He was not looking to conduct the piece from a space of ‘independence’, at the margins of art institutions, if anything; he believed in his role as an artist working within the accepted confines of revolutionary improvement through his oeuvre. He was not looking to transgress or question issues of power; his main concern with La Caridad performance was to bring art to everyday people and let them do whatever they wished with it. The subversive dimension of the performance did not clash, in his mind, with his adherence to revolutionary politics. However, the authorities’ response seems to signal otherwise as the performance touched the
delicate realm of power (Grenier, 2017), which ultimately disrupts the organisation of revolutionary politics. As I argue next, the Caridad del Cobre performance confronts the ontology of such revolutionary politics in a manner that disrupts the very relation between self and political representation (Holbraad, 2014).

**Ochún’s potential for opening new subjective spaces**

Otero’s Ochún opens up a new subjective space. She appears in suspension, interrupting her significance within the Cuban social and religious order. She remains recognizable through the various attributes that the artist has painted onto her bodice – what she represents is irrefutable – whilst simultaneously confusing all subjective ways in which she has been represented. Through the fragile monumentality of her papier mâché form, the emptiness in her gaze, the simplicity of her anti-pedestal – the fruit seller’s chariot – everything renders her alien to any forms of iconographical conditioning. What remains when looking at the statue is a strange and goofy presence, not ‘sensual’ or seductive as Ochún is expected to be (Daigle, 2019). While her gaze bears the frontal and imperial quality of ‘Mary as an icon’, the cartoonish effect of the papier mâché provides a possibility for affection, affinity and intimacy – she is not perfect, far from it. The artist managed to summon a certain aloofness about her that makes her blissfully ignorant of what she symbolises; an aloofness that strips her of authority whilst giving her the power to encapsulate the wildest dreams, requests, payers of those in her presence. It seems that Otero did not conceive of her in opposition or in response to how she is traditionally represented. In this sense, she is not borne out of resistance. Rather, she materialised through the hands of Otero and children; it is mostly the availability of the materials (paints, paper, glue) that guided the form she would take. One wonders if her quasi two-dimensionality is not simply the outcome of making the most sustainable use of the materials available for her conception. She becomes recognizable because of the emotion she exudes – she appears within a familiar yet distant gaze. In this way, she distinguishes herself through a new sensory experience, which opens up the possibility for those in her presence, for beholders to be suspended in their relation to her and to themselves.

The performance’s effect is enhanced by the lack of contextualisation in the artists’ description of the piece. While there is mention of them reacting to the Catholic Church’s celebration of the Patroness Saint, they do not define their performance as a racial critique, for instance. They mention the intended removal of the separation
between the divine and the ‘real’, providing a catharsis for everyday people to reveal the saint that is within themselves, but the positioning leaves rooms for interpretation. There is no general historicizing. Rather, they situate the gesture within a specific moment of Cuban history, when the Cuban Church paraded the official statue throughout the country the year prior. In doing so, the piece needs to be read against this very precise moment in the country’s current events – where the Church is becoming more present in everyday life in spite of the secular dimension of the revolution – and understand that within this unique moment, the artists are seeking to let it speak for itself. This enables the Virgin to extend and infinitely multiply what she can ‘do’ to those in her presence. She emancipates through her own displacement. Furthermore, the artists’ gestures through the pilgrimage/performance also carves another sensorial dimension toward religiosity. They provide a new time-space in which individuals can observe and enter into a new and familiar relationship with the saint, making her function both singularly and commonly; her emergence unites and differentiates at the same time. She is both private and universal. Gliding through the ‘not taken’ roads of Cuba, the Virgin lends herself to a pure aesthetic experience. This is where the religious function of Mary opens us up possibilities of interpretive freedom as historian Robert Orsi (Verdon, 2014) suggests about the inclusive potential of her representation.

When interviewing Otero in January 2021, he describes how the Virgin performance marked a turning point in his career as through it he discovered the pure potential of such aesthetic experience:

The Virgin piece has marked my entire career from there onwards because it is the performance that helped me discover the gesture. Where I discovered how to insert an aesthetic experience within everyday life. Where the people disappear as art and the piece leaves a real impact in people’s lives, much beyond art. Because as I’ve always told you, art, when you enter to see a work of art, you’re always pre-conditioned by the 2000 years [of art history] that dictate what is art and what isn’t, even if you’re not prepared [trained] to see art. For those people who say that art is for people with money, then you’re self-marginalising, in the end you’re always marginalising yourself in front of art when it should be the opposite. Art should be made for YOU, not for millionaires, rich people, all those fuckers who have lots of money. In the end, art should be created against the power, since the power realised/became of aware of art’s magnetism. [The power] has appropriated it and turned it into merchandise to make money. Using art to manipulate you once again.

So with the Virgin piece I discovered this. I discovered that art was by the people, for the people, and could reach people. What I did is I grabbed this fraction of the art world: the alive part [of the art world]. This part of you that is like looking at a painting from a child’s perspective and being [left in awe] saying ‘WHAT THE FUCK??!’ [says that in English] in front of a work of art, a painting, a nude, a super perverse image that you might see as a child when looking at a nude in the Louvre. (You know all the morbid that passes through
my head). This is the art, this alive moment, this real moment, this moment that stays with you from inside with your craziness and all your morbidities, your little devils: all of this is art in my view. And I discovered this with this artwork. More so than discover it, I was looking for it and with this piece it all stayed condensed in the skin...

It is difficult to transcribe, let alone translate Otero’s words. He speaks with such passion that words often do not line up fast enough with the explosive imagery that constitutes his way of communicating. In referring to the alive part or that childish part of us he nods to that inexplicable sensorial, emotional effect of being in the presence of an art piece that completely shatters any sense of rationality. He alludes to an experience that reorganises or dismantles how the world ‘should’ or has been arranged by offering another dimension. He refers to the discovery of new frames and vocabularies for understanding and perceiving the world around him.

Otero expresses an ‘itch’ to want to share what art has done to him and continues to do; stripping his mind of illusions and revealing his freedom. This is how Otero has experienced art when he first encountered it and his commitment since then has been to replicate that experience for others. An experience where art serves as a tool for elevating human consciousness. This is where the title of the series With Everyone and For the Good of Some makes sense. There is an impossible inclusion in that title as everyone and some should be two separate options, an either/or, but the performance makes both of those conditions possible, it is for everyone and also just for ‘some’. Hence alluding to the exclusionary aspect of ‘everyone’ as a universal postulate and the inclusive dimension of ‘some’ where particularities can be infinitely multiplied.

The ‘alive’ part that Otero ascertains through this piece and that marks a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ in his artistic practice can be read through Rancière’s theorization of the aesthetic regime of arts. This is a regime that he opposes to the representational regime where art enjoys autonomy and breaks from the criteria (read: social contextualising) for being affected by it. In this regime the aesthetic experience redesposes ‘the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is already given, or [creates] situations apt to modify our gazes and our attitudes with respect to this collective environment’ (Rancière, 2009a: 21). The Virgin thus offers an ‘unregulated relation’ (ibid) between the sculpture’s form and the beholder’s way of being affected by it. When read within the specific moment of its manifestation – roaming the streets of Cuba and alluding to a state-wide sponsored religious
procession that occurred the year before – Otero’s Ochún/Madonna modifies gazes and attitudes precisely because she proposes a deeper consciousness, and allows for a free interpretation of who she is and – through that connection – expands who the beholder can be. What she stands for, or looks like, or makes the beholder feel, does not line up easily with any social tools or baggage he might have to make sense of her. The unmitigated relation, where beholder and artwork stand on equal plane, opens up a rift for another way of being and existing during the suspension of the relationship. When Otero tells us that this is a performance where the work of art disappears, and becomes real life, this also means that this is a performance where all that remains is the work of art itself and its placement within a specific social order is ruined. Such a destruction, allows for a reorganisation of sensory experience, which opens up the possibility to shifting one’s gaze about oneself and one’s place in the world. In Rancièr’s words:

What links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience. Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society’s structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space (Rancière, 2009a: 23).

Otero’s Virgin and her aloofness, her form which resembles no other forms, no matter how familiar her representation, takes distance with her very functions as a religious icon, as a reconciliatory force within the construction of Cuban identity (De la Torre, 2001), as a form of resistance and permits a sublime pause for those in her presence. A pause that, as Otero puts it, allows for that ‘alive’ part of the beholder to emerge. If we consider La Caridad Nos Une performance from the lens offered by Rancière’s theorisation, we need to locate the artwork within the specific landscape of revolutionary politics for it to become art as Rancière understands it. Indeed, I suggest that the intersubjective relationship that the sculpture facilitates opens up the possibility for an understanding of self that digs into the intimate, that digs into a deeper moral framework of individuality that frees up the individual from the ontological landscape of the revolution.
IV. Self-sacrifice as disruptive resurrection of revolutionary politics

The anthropologist Martin Holbraad contends that in order to understand the seemingly contradictory claims of Cubans complaining about the revolution’s shortcomings whilst continuing to pledge allegiance to it requires understanding the ontological form of revolutionary politics. Indeed, Holbraad suggests that the notion of being able to choose our political ideologies, which implies that individuals and the state are two independent entities is a ‘meta-liberalist ontological stance’. Academics who see a ‘contradiction’ in Cubans lamenting the revolution’s failure whilst continuing to support it are applying this liberal ontological logic. Conversely, Holbraad lays down the very ontological construction of the revolution or what the revolution is to itself. By analysing the texts written by Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, who can be traced as the theorist of revolution à la cubaine, Holbraad suggests that the ontological form of revolutionary politics – contrary to liberal politics – is driven by a collapse of the people and state. It rests on a fusion of the individual-state.

Indeed, Guevara’s conceptualisation of the New Man as the process of transforming one’s subjectivity to breathe and become the revolution epitomizes this. The revolution as a process that aims to alter consciousness and subjectivities was understood by Guevara as a way to speed up the material and objective conditions for its success (Guevara, 2008). As we saw in the first essay on the poets Amaury Pacheco and Juan Carlos Flores, such infinite transformation is psychically exhausting as it points to a state of constant imperfection and a never-ending quest for self-betterment through sacrifice. That fusion between state and person is a constitutive element of the form that revolutionary politics takes, before any kind of transition or process towards revolution. To this extent, the minimum requirement for that formal character of revolutionary politics is that ‘subjects should be prepared to sacrifice themselves for it’ (Holbraad, 2014: 376). Such self-sacrificial conditions proclaim that there exist no ‘outside’ of the revolution because being outside of the revolution simply means ceasing to exist. This is where slogans such as ‘Patria o Muerte’ [Fatherland or Death] generate the ‘political cosmology’ within which such a conception of revolution stands.

Looking at Cuban society with the ontological prism of revolutionary politics beginning with the collapse of self and state, we can better situate Cubans’ simultaneous lamenting and supporting of the revolution not as a contradiction, but
rather a way to speak ‘past’ themselves. They are speaking from within the revolutionary process of pursuing the betterment of the New Man. In this sense, it helps explain why some form of critique by artists has been and continues to be tolerated by the government, if not encouraged. This is seen as part of the self-sacrificial commitment of the individual/revolutionary, to constantly seek to improve and continue the unfinished project of attaining revolutionary consciousness. Within the logic of the ontology of revolutionary form, critiques ‘from outside’ are essentially non-existent, since an opposition to the revolution is ontologically impossible within a political cosmology where the revolution has become everything. This analysis also helps to understand the high stakes of critics who do speak from outside the revolution and their subsequent ‘social death’ (Fusco, 2015): they essentially become ‘de-ontologised’ (Holbraad, 2014). Furthermore, this analysis also sheds light onto the violence of terms like ‘worms’ (gusanos) directed at counterrevolutionaries, or dissidents; terms that dehumanise those who propose another world view.

While I take issue with Holbraad’s premise that the ontology of revolutionary politics prevents individuals from a certain form of agency in choosing political ideologies – a premise that is disputed when looking at progressive Cuban artists and intellectuals taking issue with the authoritarian turn of the revolution while embracing its foundational values – I subscribe to this reading of what the revolution is to itself. Furthermore, his argument gives us some theoretical tools for making better epistemological sense of what Otero does through performance.

The notion of self-sacrifice is a common thread in most of the artist’s work. He has described it as the ultimate place of resistance and existence. The flesh and bones being the last denominator of pure self. It cannot be perverted, instrumentalised, or moulded for political ends. Yet at the same time, Holbraad argues that self-sacrifice, within the revolutionary process, is a normative prerequisite of Cuban subjectivity. Hence, the performance’s perturbing character: it is both aligned with the revolution’s ontological landscape whilst disrupting the organic order of things by escaping the political cosmology of the revolution through an invocation of the divine. In other words, Otero’s artistic commitment is not to better the revolution from within itself, but to deepen its ontological landscape. This is where these artworks, once located within the ontology of revolutionary politics become art/political in a Rancièrian sense. The divine and the human in Otero’s work transgress all forms of ascriptions within the revolutionary order: there is a search for a more profound form of human
consciousness. The evocation of the divine makes it possible for the beholder to exist beneath the very cosmogenic grasp of the revolution’s ontology.

In 2013, Otero had not yet been ‘socially killed’ within the Cuban social order. He operated as an artist who practiced his right to review the revolution as an act of self-sacrifice towards the betterment of this very revolutionary process. He never spoke from a place of ‘dissidence’ (he enters such a place when he and Núñez launch The Museum of Dissidence in 2016 where, from then on, their actions become framed a counterrevolutionary actions rather than critical art by cultural authorities). Through his pilgrimage, however, the placement of his Virgin within the revolutionary order was ambiguous, or difficult to locate, and this is where it becomes inherently political in a Rancièrian sense. The Virgin herself did not shift or rearrange the deckchairs, but her *placement* within the context and the gesture accompanying the pilgrimage evokes another form of being/existing that was never available before. I argue that it is that very placement that makes the performance dissensual: as it offers a verification of everyone and no one’s radical equality. An existence beneath the cosmology of revolutionary politics becomes possible. Indeed, our rapport with the Virgin touches something more fundamental about ourselves where selfhood can be conceived as a compassionate form of dedication towards others in a way that circumvents the self-sacrificial precondition of the revolutionary subject.

By embodying self-sacrifice, through the endurance of pilgrimage, Otero’s gesture within the landscape resonates in familiarity. However, the interaction made possible through the Virgin’s humble appearance and her function of rendering those in her presence monumental, shapes an intersubjective rapport that sits outside of domination, outside of the self-sacrificial revolutionary pre-condition. It helps us see the divine within ourselves, which opens up infinite imaginary pathways for perceiving ourselves differently. What this might reveal, in turn, is another relationship to self that is momentarily severed from the state, it brings to the foreground fundamental pillars of living a full and good life that have no place within the revolution’s cosmology: self-love, attention to others, the importance of beauty, and so on. The Virgin brings back a form of humanism lost in the revolution’s ideological framing.

If there is no part of the subject that exists beyond the revolution, then the politics of aesthetics through the piteous work of self-sacrifice usurps the all-encompassing collapse of state-individual; it displaces a subjectivity which becomes resurrected. Another subjecthood emerges from the debris of the state-individual collapse.
Within the political cosmology of revolution, the celestial retrieves that individual and severs him from the universe-like dimension of revolution. Sacrifice embodied through the physical endurance of pilgrimage, as an act, in this specific moment of La Caridad performance, destroys the social order in place because sacrifice is both an obligatory function of the revolutionary body within the landscape of the revolution whilst emerging as a ‘cosmogenic’ (Holbraad, 2014) disruption of that very order by offering a deeper ontology of revolutionary politics. La Caridad nos Une escapes all ascriptions to say something much less imprisoning about equality and freedom to those in her presence. She allows us to see the maddening pre-requisite of revolutionary politics: the burden of the never-ending quest towards self-improvement, the exhaustion of a utopian tomorrow that never comes. She offers a way to rethink ‘sacrifice’ in a way that connects with the self in the most private, intimate way. The sacrifice of the artist and the very saint who displace their bodies to encounter everyone and no one, opens up another route to understanding the self through a redistribution of a shared sensory experience, allowing for new subjects to re-appropriate their relationship to the Virgin, and the Cuban state. This re-appropriation confirms an ancient certainty about our equal place in the world; it is a revelation and verification of that foundational equality. It is emancipation. In other words, our aesthetic encounter with the Virgin offers an unstable glimpse into that very ‘alive part of us’ that Otero faithfully commits to revealing to ‘some’ and ‘everyone’. That ‘alive part’ is a subjecthood ‘other’ than the one imposed by the moral cage of the revolution, it is ephemeral and greatly unstable, but it provides a momentary self-awareness about an individuality that is proper to one’s own, that is divine. This momentary revelation carves a new subjective space, it provides grounds for making sense of the limitations of revolutionary politics and offers ways to not speak ‘past’ oneself, but to speak from ‘within’ one self.
Conclusion Aesthetic revelations of artistic creation under constraint

By focusing on artworks—rather than on the artists’ social locations and capital within a wider Cuban and global ‘art world’—this research used an innovative methodological and epistemological approach that returns art and artists to the centre of sociological studies of art. Committing to a lyrical sociology, I carved out theoretical space for the art to do the ‘work’ of shaping meaning during our encounter with it. Therefore, my aim throughout this project was to understand what art can reveal about the deeper motivations of socially and politically engaged artists that the activism space cannot. Specifically, I wanted to understand what those deeper motivations look and feel like in a context of constraint. Through a phenomenological engagement with artworks, complemented by interviews with artists about their creative processes, I sought to disentangle the various time-spaces of artistic and political subjectivities. By way of the art, I was able to imagine the deeper moral intentions and praxes of the artists who constitute the San Isidro Movement.

To this avail, the thesis asked the following questions: How might engagement with the aesthetic experience provide insight into subjective and moral spaces beyond those defined by the political ontology of the Cuban Revolution? What might an aesthetic encounter—as a distinctive perceptual and sensorial event—with these artworks reveal that engagement with artists’ activism cannot? What, in short, does artistic creation under authoritarian constraint look and feel like?

I attempted to shed light on artists’ roles as articulators of our moral backgrounds. Despite situations of constraint, the artist’s difficult but inescapable duty of crafting symbolic languages is crucial to understanding ourselves and our realities with more clarity. Such enlightened perceptiveness contributes to elevating our consciousness and orientating us closer to our moral frameworks. James Baldwin describes this as the artist’s inherent responsibility to make visible delusions about life’s universal truths like birth, suffering, love and death: ‘The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the
answer hides’ (Baldwin, 1962). Artists teach us to interrogate our realities by looking beneath the *status quo*.

**Art’s autonomy creates spaces for new moral selves and ontological frameworks**

Centring the aesthetic encounter through a lyrical sociology has freed the artists from their social ascriptions as activists, to sense, as a beholder, what their artworks revealed about their moral and spiritual praxes. Therefore, the argument that this thesis made is threefold. First, I argued that the aesthetic encounter, through the autonomy of the artworks, enables us to disentangle artists’ political and artistic subjectivities. Such disentanglement revealed the artworks’ emancipatory elements, distinct from their merely resistive propositions. Secondly, through the disentanglement provided by a focus on artworks, the artists’ poetics made visible the moral exhaustion of the revolution’s ideological and ontological constraints, and offered another vocabulary for existing within this landscape. Third, and finally, such revelations carved new subjective spaces and ontological frameworks where ‘life goods’ such as love, community, individuality and private desires were given new meaning.

The three essays revealed the ways the artists’ political and artistic subjectivities are enmeshed. We witnessed Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s confessions about the persistent tension between two of his most strongly valued moral goods (Taylor, 1989): the desire to create freely and expansively, and committing to fighting for social justice. If Otero continues to serve out his five-year prison sentence, it is partly because he has turned down the government’s offer of an early release – which they offered under the condition of forced exile. Otero has repeatedly refused such terms for his liberation. Today, his commitment to fighting for social justice has and continues to take precedence; he has chosen to sacrifice the advancement of his artistic career and the insatiable need to create to honour his commitment to resist authoritarian forces in Cuba. We could argue, in light of Charles Taylor’s idea of the ontological pluralism of the goods we value strongly, that in negotiating his artistic and political subjectivities, Otero finds himself shaping his *hypergood*, in his case, an unwavering commitment to freedom. He sacrifices the right to draw and create, even though it is vital to him, by refusing the regime’s offer of release conditioned on exile because his commitment to fighting injustice overrides other strongly valued goods. As he has repeatedly stated,
nobody can steal his freedom to think; we can only hope that he is able to continue to inspire and pursue creative expression, even under the incommensurable constraint of prison.

One of my project’s empirical aims through interviews has been to explore what happens to artistic subjectivities when artists are forced to become political actors for the urgent necessity of promoting justice. These subjectivities differ in terms of what types of judgement, actions, emotions, and faculties are activated. I argue that an artistic subjectivity is one where sensory experience and affect are called upon, while a political subjectivity is about evoking and shaping collective action and agency (Voß et al., 2023). The creative subjecthood is one that flourishes in tranquillity, or requires a different notion of time than the subjecthood that seeks to rally collectively, through claims of empowerment. In other words, what happens when the artist’s subjectivity becomes devoured by their political one? How does the creative self endure amid the immediate pressures of activism?

This is what I tried to show through the various moments of the artists’ creative imagination. In order to flourish creatively, establish a spiritual connection to their art, and fully indulge their imaginations—unobstructed by the political and social context surrounding their work—I argued that artists require creative quietness. This is where I made the subtle but important distinction between emancipatory art and that which remains merely resistive. The former proposes a vision drastically ‘other’ than the conditions of its creation. This distinction allows us to distinguish between art that merely responds to a condition of oppression—remaining within the parameters of domination in a specific social context—and art that bears emancipatory potential—by disrupting or rendering obsolete those very parameters. Jacques Rancière calls the latter ‘dissensual art’, whereas the former would fit within the ‘police’ framework of the social order, where roles and assignations are clearly divided and weighted hierarchically (Rancière, 2010).

Focusing on the aesthetic encounter allowed us to identify the emancipatory potential of artworks that, at first glance, might have seemed resistive. For example, I argued this with Otero’s series of drawings of the surveillance camera, *Naturaleza Muerta*. By making the surveilling state his muse, his work speaks within the parameters of oppression, offering a powerful work of resistance that testifies to the deep fear of body and mind under panoptic control. However, when immersing myself in Otero’s drawings and publications on social media with photos of the artist sitting
and drawing, I found their dissensual manifestation in the abstract and conceptual idea of the artist imposing his time as an artist. The image of the artist using his loving, attentive gaze towards the camera sparks an expansion of our subjectivities. He makes space for new subjects to emerge and reclaim a certain relationship to one another, by taking up time and space not allowed in the confines of Cuba’s revolution. The image of the artist sitting and gazing, giving his full attention to the surveillance state, disrupts authorities’ power by establishing a rapport between artist and state not based on domination.

The image of the artist drawing for art’s sake—of sitting and contemplating, getting lost in pressing the pen and pencil on the paper—reveals the ‘cruel’ (Baldwin, 2010) but also indestructible fate of the artist, and the urgency of finding routes of expression, no matter the obstacles. These glimpses into the necessity of creating despite the forces opposing that very act serve as scenes of dissensus that open up possibilities for other subjects to emerge—an in-betweenness (Rancière, 2009b). Here, emancipation becomes possible: through an unstable re-arrangement of time during the space of the aesthetic experience, a redistribution of sense experience. In such a scene, what emerges is not an activist, dissident, ‘surveilled’ individual, or upright citizen. Instead, we see a subject that is impossible to identify with—that emerges from a rift from various clearly defined identities, asserting and verifying his, ours and no one’s claims to full existence. In the end, the subject emerges as a ‘surplus’ to the sensory fabric of revolutionary politics (Rancière, 2003).

The scenes of recognition that emerge from the distribution of the sensible reveal a certain sensory fabric. This leads to my second argument: that the poetics of the artists render palpable the very perceptual and sensorial conditions of the landscape of the revolution. As we saw through Amaury Pacheco’s chaotic but focused poetry, or Juan Carlos Flores’ quest towards semantic destruction, the ontological time-space of revolutionary politics is morally exhausting. The poets articulate this exhaustion, they make explicit an intuition of the revolution’s suffocating and inescapable ‘cosmogenic’ (Holbraad, 2014) dimension. In response, they develop a poetics of finite, earthly concerns, a new symbolic language that invites a return to things made of flesh, of ‘suns sprouting’ (Pacheco, 2010) rather than the rhythmic metallic cacophony of tanks. Their poetics offer respite from the New Man’s burden of perpetual individual and collective betterment. Through a poetry that focuses on the lonely man who simply yearns for a kiss from his mother (Flores, 2016), the artists give us a tangible feel of
the distinction between ‘revolutionary time’ and ‘individual time’. Revolutionary time is infinite; it is always directed at better tomorrows, whilst individual time embodies the very ‘things’ of the present, in stillness.

In this stillness, the poets and artists give new meaning to terms such as ‘individual’, ‘citizen’, ‘community’. The pause on the present, which is poetry’s premise of enchantment, invites a return to a notion of self that is dialogical—a moral self founded on its relation to others. According to Charles Taylor (1989), a fundamental ontological feature of selfhood is its dialogical nature. We are constantly in conversation with ourselves—and with others, history, and ancestors. Though this idea has been eclipsed in modern conceptions of the self through a certain infatuation with autonomy (Abbey 2004: 67), selfhood’s intersubjective and dialogical feature is something that the artists reveal. Pacheco’s steadfast walking and reading of Juan Carlos Flores’ poetry serves as a symbolic recognition of his creative and spiritual linage, thus inviting us to recall our own. Such an expansion of selfhood, disrupts the linear (and lonely) future-oriented path of revolutionary time, towards a cyclical, communal pause on the present and everything that expands from the stillness it generates. The present reveals our conversations that traverse time in multiple, intersecting dimensions, where notions of identity are grounded in simultaneously ancient, imagined, and real conversations. Such a re-encounter in the revamping of time provided by the poetic pause, thus lends itself to a whole new grammar for conceptualizing community, citizenry, responsibility. New ontological frameworks emerge from the poetic invitation to explore our various lineages; another path towards self-understanding becomes possible.

This is where, thirdly, I argued throughout this thesis that the artists’ poetics reveal our deeper moral frameworks, building avenues for self-understanding, and the potential for deviation from a prescribed course, an invitation towards action.

Indeed, as humans, one of our main purposes in life involves the search for meaning, a quest towards identifying what makes life worth living. Taylor tells us that this search for meaning always involves articulation: ‘Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate’ (Taylor, 1989: 18). As language-bearing beings, we make sense of ourselves and the world through expression. Therefore, we are always looking for frameworks to understand ourselves. Although this is often intuitive, we continuously search to develop and access the right ‘expressions’ to bring us closer to our strongly valued goods. Articulation thus involves
forces that introduce new vocabularies and perspectives for understanding ourselves, which then shape who we are and who we become. Taylor’s self-interpretive condition for full personhood offers an illuminating orientation for making the link between the aesthetic encounter’s possibilities of subjectivization—facilitating the emergence of ‘in-between’ subjects that do not exist or have no space in the social order, and establishing a new language and vocabularies for understanding ourselves. In other words, the ‘epiphanic’ potential of art, through ‘play’ in the aesthetic encounter, reveals other forms of representing oneself that are or have been impossible within the constrictive landscape of revolutionary politics. This revelation allows us to make clear moral intuitions and achieve a sense of community that is other than what has been prescribed in the Cuban social order. Such ‘bringing into consciousness’ can thus inspire change and transformation subjectively, but also collectively.

Such new forces can take the shape of social or theoretical movements (Abbey, 2004). For Yanelys Núñez Lleyva, co-founder of the San Isidro Collective, discovering intersectionality and Afro-feminist literature has shifted her perspective. In my conversations with her in Madrid, she expressed being in a process of profound deconstruction of her social conditionings as a Black Cuban woman; the feminist readings and theories she discovered while living in Spain gave her another language for making sense of past events in her life. While she previously perceived uncomfortable situations from a register of ‘seduction’ and ‘woman/man interactions’ she came to instead see through a prism of ‘power’ and ‘patriarchal and white supremacist domination’. This gave her a new linguistic and theoretical repertoire for identifying and defining situations of injustice, allowing her to develop the proper tools for acting on those through collective claims and participation in various organisations. Today, she leads a grassroots organisation that monitors and denounces femicides in Cuba.

The artworks studied in this thesis served a similar purpose—acting as forces for generating new ontological frameworks that articulate intuitions about what it means to lead in a good life, and that lack of space within the ontology of the Cuban Revolution. Otero’s Caridad, with its unassuming papier mâché grandeur, elevates those in her presence to monumental, divine status. The sculpture-performance takes the time to look at those who have been invisible. In so doing, it exudes a generous act of self-love. The Virgin reminds believers, through the artist’s piteous, self-sacrificial pilgrimage, that we are all worthy of attention. She testifies that we are bigger
even than the revolution’s political cosmology (Holbraad, 2014). Similarly, Otero’s Miss Bienal validates the more ‘futile’ desires of pleasure, sexual fantasy, or escape through lavishing in material things. She both subverts and confirms stereotypes, she makes a fool of our pre-conceptions, and she becomes a mascot of our absurd attempts at categorization. She tells us that we are all worthy of coquetries, and such desires do not make us a pawns of a wider capitalist system nor deviants of a revolutionary puritanism. We disidentify with her because she emerges as a complex undefinable creature that mirrors all of our contradictions. Pleasure, she says, is an important component of what makes life worth living. The banality of pleasure for pleasure’s sake holds the premise of an aesthetic encounter, it offers a momentary flight from our daily problems, and it can (re)centre us.

Ultimately, what ties these artworks together and, in turn, what reveals the deeper praxes of the artists who constitute the San Isidro Movement is a quest towards articulating new vocabularies of love, community and responsibility. The artworks reveal a commitment towards reclaiming forms of existence that foster dignity and collective grace. In doing so, they deepen the ontology of the revolution, applying new meaning to words that have been instrumentalised in the ideological frameworks of a Castrist or Guevaran conception of society. What links the artworks and poems is a commitment to love in a muscular, active sense—as, in the words of bell hooks, a ‘wilful’ and conscious action; a choice, not a passive ‘feeling’, but as ‘the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth’ (hooks, 2001: 4). They generate an ‘affective consciousness’ (Wang, 2014) other than the one imposed by the framework of the revolution. The artworks reveal a commitment to restoring love as a constitutive function of morals and a driver of our motivations to ‘move’ towards what we value as our most cherished life goods. They make visible desires that have been obstructed by the collapse of man-state in the revolution’s New Man. Taylor reinstates love in his moral philosophy as the driver for being oriented in moral space, as a guide for shaping our life narratives, in acting in ways that bring us closer to what we value as fundamental to living our lives as fully as possible. Iris Murdoch (2014) complements this by telling us that love moves us towards clearer attention, and such attentive gazing requires the discipline of quieting the ego, in order to see more clearly and visibly the ‘real’. Love is an act of extension of oneself, but also of ‘unselfing’. Love becomes a moral discipline of avoiding illusions. The two philosophers insist on artists and art as privileged agents and spaces, respectively, for
reinstating, reminding, and articulating the moral background of our lives. Both artists and artworks generate a moral commitment to love as a guide towards our cherished life goods and for perceiving our realities with honesty.

**Artistic creation under constraint**

Creation or expression under constraint is a condition that affects not only artists, but all creators across the world. Organisations from Reporters Without Borders to Amnesty International have warned of the deterioration of democracy and freedom of expression globally—from Russia’s war in Ukraine, which has led to a widespread totalitarian hold on journalistic expression (Reporters Without Borders, 2023), to attacks on freedom of expression by social media companies through the censorship of Palestinian accounts during the October 2023 Hamas-Israel war (Amnesty International, 2023). This global reality invites us to dig deeper into repression’s effects on creativity and subjectivity. What happens when artists and writers must self-censor to avoid persecution? What does it say about a society’s creative health when book publications in China undergo such a robust editing and review process that the publication of new literary works in the last decade has decreased by 15%, leading to 50% of books published in 2021 being re-editions (Zhang, 2023)? This has been the project’s primary and wider contribution, to reveal what creation under constraint looks and feels like. Who is the artist divorced from their social conditions, what is their role below the constraint, and what does creation look like when able to carve the time-space necessary for creative musing? Indeed, I found that despite control, repression and censorship, the artist continuously navigates these obstacles by carving a path of quiet expression that allows their artistic subjectivity to breathe within the autonomous time-space of the aesthetic event.

Answering these questions required a methodological approach that brings artists and the artworks back into the study of art. This project went beyond the typical focus on the social and political conditions of reception, mediation, or production of artworks by centring the artworks and my own subjective engagement with them, to explore what they held in terms of meaning-making that escaped their context as much as possible. While all forms of creation speak to or from a social context, personal experience, and worldview, the subjectivity inherent to artistic creation and contemplation is one that is ‘other’. This is where art bears its potential to articulate a
clearer sense of reality (Murdoch, 2014) or create an uncompromising space for seeing through life’s delusions (Baldwin, 1962). Twenty-first century portraitist and figurative painter Alice Neel argued that two traits distinguish an artist from the rest of us: a relentless and stubborn will to create, and a hypersensitivity to their surroundings (Hoban, 2021). To this avail, this project’s underlying premise has been to examine these defining characteristics of artists, to give poetic space to what that hypersensitivity might tell us that we are otherwise unable to see. Artistic stubbornness prompts artists to ask deeper questions, as Baldwin would contend. Taylor (1989) tells us that artists’ hypersensitivity not only distinguishes them from the rest of us, but gives them unique power to articulate our moral backgrounds—the ‘epiphanic’ potential to understand ourselves better.

Against this backdrop, the thesis makes three main contributions: substantive, theoretical, and methodological. On a substantive level, this project explored what artists working under constraint in Cuba cared most about conveying. My interpretive engagement with their artworks revealed artists’ desire to restore meaning to terms such as individuality, love, community, and citizenry in ways that escape the restrictive ontological lens imposed by the revolution. This finding would not have been possible by examining their activism. While exploring the discourse and urgency of the activism time-space, I discovered the way the artists’ roles as ‘political leaders’ eclipsed the more democratising and universal intentions behind their artworks. Had I focused my inquiry exclusively on the artists’ various networks, I would have remained grounded in their political discourse, which often required them to side with opposition movements or make claims that contradict some of their most fundamental beliefs. For instance, Otero was accused of being a Trump supporter by international academics who had watched his live videos on social media. This was an honest mistake: he has, at times, positioned himself ambiguously vis-à-vis the politics of the Cuban diaspora, by defending a narrative that supported conservative talking points of the anti-Castro Cuban lobbies such as not engaging with the communist regime. In this sense, methodologically remaining within the social organisation of the artists’ involvement in Cuban activist networks would have restricted me; the polarised and over simplistic discourse of social media activism would have skewed my research and glossed over the nuances of their wider political (a la Rancière) project, which is made visible within the aesthetic space.
To this avail, engaging with their works by isolating the time-space of the aesthetic encounter allowed me to interpret the more fundamental and universal intentions of their artistic praxes. These constituted restoring love as an active driver of collective change, to breaking free of the suffocating binary framework of existence that shapes the revolutionary experience. When we can decipher the artist’s autonomy, the artworks provide routes towards self-expression and understanding that rupture the hierarchical and weighted roles artists and beholders are assigned in their social realities. The aesthetic experience allowed me to see beyond the languages and representations of the activism and police spaces. Otero’s paintings of illogical doors that become vectors for our imagined stories of escape or belonging, to the paintings of candy wrappers that signal a shared ‘status quo’ of scarcity and provide a cathartic break in this very commonality, all propose new frameworks for understanding past experiences and future possibilities. Consequently, the artworks build new ontological frames for understanding ourselves; they help uncover the various ways in which we have agency. This is why the Cuban regime has been particularly suspicious of Otero’s work: It is both incredibly common, by speaking to a shared community of senses, whilst appearing entirely foreign, bringing in new subjective ways of seeing and existing within the Cuban reality.

The second contribution this project makes is theoretical and intellectual. For scholars of artistic creation under constraint, I contributed to the conversation by advocating for a Rancièrian lens to disentangle the various time-spaces of artistic and political subjectivities. In arguing for a distinction between resistance and dissensus, Rancière’s idea of a potential for emancipation within the autonomy of the artworks forges a certain hermeneutics of the artistic condition. It reveals what the artist is and continues to be beneath the conditions of their creation, beneath the state of constraint; a subject that holds transcendental qualities as a conveyor of truth. It carves out theoretical space for understanding the artist’s intentions in ways that are not obscured by their social position and condition. This is particularly pertinent for scholars interested in creation under political repression as it lends itself to a sociology of the artist via the artworks, and thus provides a different grid of intelligibility for understanding artistic subjectivities in restrictive contexts. That distinction opens up a whole field of enquiry into the entanglements between artistic and political subjectivities, to better shape and define the artistic condition.
Third and finally, this project constitutes a methodological innovation for conducting a sociology of artworks, and brings meaning-making within art into focus. I accomplished what the sociology of art seeks to do—what art history has deviated from by transforming into a social history of artists, and what political sociology fails to reveal by lacking the epistemological tools for engaging with aesthetics when looking at cultural production. Rather than questioning the conditions of constraint or analysing the artists’ works in light of their state of repression, the project contributes to a wider sociology of art by focusing on the meaning that emerges from an intimate immersion in artworks, and the artists’ subjectivities within that process of creation. My research also shows what kinds of subjectivities are possible within a wider social order defined by repression.

The place of artworks and of meaning within artworks has and continues to be a difficult subject for the sociology of art to tackle. While there has been a ‘performative turn’ to the sociology of art—in which, rather than studying art worlds or the social organisation of art, scholars have asked what the artworks themselves reveal about social processes and situated experiences—these studies remain bounded by the discipline’s methodological directions and theoretical lenses (Eyerman and McCormick, 2016). For instance, Witkin’s (1997) sociological study of Manet’s Olympia sought to restore focus on the artwork itself through an interpretive lens, only to apply a conceptual lens that remained grounded in social theory. Once again, such an approach failed to give the artwork room to breathe in the interpretive ‘playfulness’ of what its primary objective: to relate to us, as beholders. Such studies transpose a theoretical framework towards meaning-making and interpretation of the artwork, without letting the artwork evoke a certain perceptual and sensory experience—its fundamental function. Sociological studies of artworks rarely carve out space for the inherent instability of an aesthetic encounter—the fluidity and multidimensionality of which are often incompatible with sociological enquiry alone. Accordingly, adopting tools from philosophy and art-history has been productive.

**Blind spots: General reflections**

The project’s pivot from an on-the-ground ethnography of the everyday practices of the San Isidro Movement in Havana, to a focus on the aesthetic encounter with artworks, has led to some blind spots. Primarily, I struggled to expand the scope of my
research beyond the San Isidro Collective. Although artists in the group were the initial focus on my research, exploring artworks by artists beyond the collective would have opened up methodological space for examining tangential works by artists who make up both the wider Cuban critical art scene or even artists who are state-sponsored. I could have explored works by artists who, for instance, might be critical of the San Isidro movement, and artists who have both remained in and left Cuba. Expanding my research would have enriched the discussion on dissensual versus resistive art by exploring what artworks from artists not associated with the art-activism movement convey about their conditions under revolutionary politics. Because of their contested space within the institutional Cuban art world, members of the San Isidro Movement embody constraint in the most literal sense; still, addressing artworks from less contentious artists would have complemented my analysis, giving further insight into what constraint looks and feels like—even among artists not at the centre of political contestation.

Two artists come to mind. The first, Wilfredo Prieto, is a successful, state-sanctioned artist whose ‘politics’ have always maintained a pro-government stance. In an interview in 2020, Prieto lamented what he called a certain ‘Ai Weiwei’ effect of an aesthetic fad from Cuban artists doing purposely provocative and critical art for the sake of drawing attention (Vallée, 2020), referring to the dissident Chinese’s artist loud, political interventions. This statement garnered criticism from the Cuban artist community as a tone deaf minimisation of the physical and psychological stakes of standing up to a powerful authoritarian regime. Another artist, the film director Miguel Coyula—whose work has been some of the most critical of the Cuban regime in recent years—would have also provided a useful case study for my research. Although Coyula’s films have been censored in Cuba, he was criticized artists such as Otero, questioning the utility of his tactics, including hunger-striking, as attention-seeking strategies with little productive effects (Coyula, 2023). Including artworks from Prieto and Coyula, among others, would have provided a more robust look at the various aesthetic conversations taking place, notably about what a certain fad of ‘dissident art’ would look like, and whether it would have political potential in a Rancièrian sense—through, for example, exploring possibilities for dissensus in Prieto’s overly minimalist installations and sculptures, or in Coyula’s fragmented, horror-fantasy films about the Cuban dystopia.
A second blind spot was not probing some of the artists in more depth about their art and artistic process in general. My initial conversations were guided by the project’s first research questions, which gave the process of artistic creation within an activism space priority over what the art has to say. It was only once the San Isidro Movement became explicitly anti-government that I shifted to a more embodied and intimate engagement with specific artworks. With government pressure intensifying, notably on Otero, our conversations became shorter and more sporadic than in the early stages of my research, when he had time to speak at length during Havana’s strict pandemic lockdown measures. I could have used that time to enquire further about the ‘quietness’ granted to him during those moments of artistic creation.

Finally, two aesthetic aspects emerged in my immersion in the artworks and in conversations with artists that I could not include in my research. First, is an emerging discussion of the body, within the wider ontological re-framing of the Cuban landscape of revolutionary politics, as a locus of transformation and resistance. The notion of the body appeared in the wider ‘visuality’ of my digital ethnography: the contrast between relaxed, shirtless bodies that voice their grievances on social media live-videos, and the visuality of a pristine uniformed body encapsulated by schoolchildren, soldiers, and doctors. The body was apparent as an arm of resistance, through images of endurance and suffering, from hunger strikes to self-mutilation, such as Maykel Osorbo’s protest of sowing his lips shut. The body has also become an explicit site of contention; the government, in 2021, leaked intimate photos of San Isidro artists as alleged evidence of their ‘ideological diversionism’. These photos were then used as aesthetic material by artists beyond the collective, who in solidarity posted photos of themselves in the nude to normalise sexuality and intimacy (Alvarez, 2020a). These journalistic and artistic interventions warrant careful attention, notably regarding the potential for dissensual bodies within the wider landscape of the revolutionary New Man’s complexion. It would have been productive to explore how the San Isidro artists shift the rules of the social order, by appearing, moving, orientating and activating in new ways. How can the body be performative, individual, collective, gendered, racialized, and ‘in transition’? How is it (in)visible? As part of my enquiry into art’s potential to propose new ontological frameworks, it would have been pertinent to explore how artists activate their bodies to construct a new political body. Is that body dissensual or responding to the State by merely playing with already-available instruments of representation?
Humour is the second and final aesthetic component I could have explored as offering another vocabulary for moral personhood. My friendship with Otero revealed the extent to which humour shapes his engagement with others and the world; interactions with him have always overflowed with banter and laughter. Yanelys Núñez Lleyva has regularly referenced humour’s role in coping with fear and repression. Otero’s sense of humour also permeates his artworks. Miss Bienal has a cheeky component; the Naturaleza Muerta series, even with its heavy content, displays Otero’s signature infantile lightness. Whilst the strip-tease performance of Conectados X el wifi aims to generate entertaining discomfort. Exploring humour’s expressive function within these artworks could have brought texture to the ways artists articulate other ways of being within the Cuban social order. Humour is a collective glue of a common culture and sheds light on shared experience and belonging; the nuances of jokes are often cultural, social, or geographical. Exploring humour as a democratising entry-point into artworks that otherwise would have only been accessible to those fluent in the language of ‘art’, would have helped to theorise more explicitly on the aesthetic regime of art’s promise of both bringing something in common into view whilst shattering it (Rancière, 2008). That very ‘thing’ of the redistribution of the sensible being a neutralisation of sense over sense.
The above photo is of the front door of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s home in the San Isidro neighbourhood of Old Havana, taken in February 2023. Authorities sealed the door shut with three wooden planks after Otero was jailed in July 2021. The door bears the mark of violence—of police officers forcibly entering on several occasions, from breaking in to remove hunger strikers on one night in November 2020, to confiscating Otero’s latest series of paintings in the spring of 2021. Conversely, its chipped paint and patchwork renovations also signal better days, when the artist’s home served as the San Isidro Collective’s headquarters, acting as a ‘microcosm of democracy,’ to borrow the terms of Cuban journalist Carlos Manuel Alvarez (2023). The two faded ants painted on the left side spark memories of late nights infused with rum, poetry readings, alternative biennales, concerts, and refuge.

In her philosophical essay, Claire Marin asks, ‘What do we need to break to exist?’ (Marin 2022: 96, my translation from French). She argues that, sometimes, finding our adequate ‘place’ in the world requires breaking doors—whether self-imposed, social,
symbolic, or geographical. She calls this a logic of effraction, which stems from the Latin root fringere: breaking to reach an exterior, to take a leap towards ‘elsewhere’ or to let the other ‘in’ (ibid: 95). Otero’s maimed door, with its dancing ants, invites us on a journey of rooted displacement. Otero’s creative subjectivity has always remained embedded in a grounded attachment to his barrio, his community. His door is a testament to a profound sense of location, a rootedness from which the artist’s imagination travelled. We can only hope that it continues to empower neighbours of San Isidro to explore other routes of existence that expand beyond the walls that surround them. This was, after all, Otero’s most cherished artistic aspiration. The door, with its marks of effraction, tells us that, ‘even in concrete, roots can grow’ (ibid).
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