

## Cuba: Prominent Figures Urge End to Repression of Artists

Artists Have Been Jailed, Persecuted, and Forced Into Exile  
December 8, 2021

(London | New York, NY) – The Cuban government should immediately stop its abuses against Cuban artists, over 300 prominent figures from the art world said today in a statement co-signed by PEN International, the Artists at Risk Connection of PEN America, and Human Rights Watch. The Cuban government should respect freedom of expression, release arbitrarily detained artists, drop abusive criminal charges, and allow those in exile to return to their country, the arts figures and human rights groups said.

“The level of injustice and repression the Cuban government is imposing on its own people is reaching ever higher levels,” said Tania Bruguera, a performance artist. “The government not only exercises constant censorship over the artists, but in its actions to prevent and criminalize peaceful protest and dissent, now it has made the entire people of Cuba enemy of the state. As an artist and as a Cuban, I am very scared for the future of my country.”

The artists who signed the statement include world-renowned figures such as Meryl Streep, Paul Auster, Orhan Pamuk, Elena Poniatowska, Isabel Allende, Jules Feiffer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Khaled Hosseini, as well as notable Cuban artists, including Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, and Hamlet Lavastida.

Independent Cuban artists have become a prominent voice criticizing the lack of basic freedoms and human rights in Cuba. The artists, including rappers, writers, actors, and painters who have spearheaded the “San Isidro,” “27N,” and “Archipelago” movements have organized mass demonstrations and used the increased access to the internet in the country to draw global attention to the rampant abuses under the Cuban regime. Some of them also wrote and performed in “Motherland and Life” (Patria y Vida), a viral song and protest anthem criticizing the repression in the country that was recently awarded the Latin Grammy for Song of the Year.

The Cuban government has committed systematic abuses against dozens of independent artists, including arbitrary detention and abusive restrictions on movements and communications, such as house arrests and surveillance. Several of the artists – including Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel Castillo, also known as “Osorbo,” who performed in “Motherland and Life” – remain in pre-trial detention and face unfair or groundless criminal charges. Many others remain subject to arbitrary prosecutions or are forced to stay in exile without being able to return to their homeland or show their art in Cuba. At least 50 artists have been under house arrest, imprisoned, or under investigation.

Many Cubans chanted “Motherland and Life” as they took the streets across the country in the July 11, 2021, landmark demonstrations protesting longstanding restrictions on rights, scarcity of food and medicines, and the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government engaged in arbitrary detention, ill treatment of detainees, and abuse-ridden criminal prosecutions against the demonstrators and stated that singing “Motherland and Life” could be considered a crime.

The “Archipelago” movement, led by actor and playwright Yunió García, organized a new round of protests for November 15, 2021. The Cuban government effectively suppressed the demonstrations by massively deploying security forces to arrest any protesters and encircle the homes of prominent dissidents and protest organizers, forcing them to stay home.

In the statement released on December 8, signatories call on the Cuban government to respect the fundamental role that art and artists play in society, and immediately stop harassing artists for engaging in political and social critiques of the regime while exercising their right to creative expression.

“Throwing artists in jail or exiling them from the country forever – in response to their art, words and ideas – is abusive and inhumane,” the art world figures said.

“We, artists from around the world, stand in solidarity with our colleagues in Cuba.” said Elena Poniatowska, a writer. “As a journalist and writer, I believe in denouncing and opposing governments. I believe that if an intellectual, writer, or artist stands up against a government, he or she is doing an indispensable task. It is not surprising that some want to silence us when we bear witness to the voices, beliefs, and experiences of those who would otherwise go unheard. They are afraid of the truth because, once it is revealed, it can no longer be hidden.”