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The Rafto Prize Award Statement 19.09.2024

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara: Art as a resistance against authoritarianism

The Rafto Prize 2024 is awarded to Cuban artist and human rights defender Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, for his fearless opposition to authoritarianism through art. Currently in prison, Otero Alcántara has been arrested countless times for his activism.¹ His artistic expression is unflinchingly critical of restrictions on freedom of expression. As a leader of the San Isidro Movement, a collective of artists, musicians, journalists and academics, he has been at the forefront of a movement seeking change since its start in 2018.²

Artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara

"I love art and freedom above everything else and the Cuban regime is taking away those two things from me ... To the dictator on duty, I call upon him to yield. To yield within his macho structure because in the end, reason is on our side. This is not a struggle between machos. We are artists repressed by a dictator who refuses to yield due to a machista and patriarchal structure that prevents him from recognizing that the opponents are right." Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara³

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is a 36-year-old self-taught Afro-Cuban *activist*. He comes from a poor and marginalised neighbourhood in Havana and uses sculptural and performance art to protest against violations of freedom of expression.⁴ Otero Alcántara's sculptures combine materials found in collapsed buildings and waste containers to create human forms, animals and comic book characters, reflecting an ironic form of social and political criticism. His performance art has involved interventions in popular public spaces, displaying the art works to be seen by all, in defiance of regulations.⁵

¹ <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/metodo-cuba-independent-artists-testimonies-of-forced-exile> (p. 27) <https://rialta.org/san-isidro-el-27n-y-el-27ene-ante-el-canibalismo-retorico-oficial/>, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/kuba-luis-manuel-otero-alcantara-verpruegelt-verhaftet-vergessen-li.78212>, https://pen.org/writers-at-risk-database/?ajax_s=otero

² <https://havanatimes.org/cuba/what-the-san-isidro-movement-means-for-cuba/>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/cuba-san-isidro-movement-allies-under-frightening-levels-surveillance-2/>

³ Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara in an audio recording on his Facebook page, 27 April 2021. <https://fb.watch/59H892nLcM/>

⁴ <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/artivism-making-difference-through-art>, <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/luis-manuel-otero-alcantara>

⁵ <https://www.rierastudioart.com/outsiderartartists/Luis-M-Otero-Alcantara/>



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The performance piece “Garrote vil” from 2021 references a weapon used to strangle a person as a means of torture, dating back to the 17th century. In the performance, Otero Alcántara remained seated for many hours with his hands bound by a garrote – a metaphor for the repression of freedom of expression in Cuba.⁶

Promoting civic awareness through aesthetic intervention

Otero Alcántara is the general coordinator of the San Isidro Movement – a constellation of artists, musicians, journalists and academics promoting freedom of expression. The movement was established in 2018 as a reaction to Decree 349,⁷ which requires artists to obtain advance permission for public and private exhibitions and performances. It is one of the legal instruments used by the Cuban government to silence artists, musicians and performers who are critical of their policies.⁸ Otero Alcántara also co-founded *the Museum of Dissidence* together with Yanelys Nuñez Leyva in 2016, which chronicles the long line of people who have opposed those in power in Cuba, recontextualising the figure of the dissident and showing the necessity of political pluralism on the island. It also seeks to promote and produce new curatorial structures through poetry readings, film exhibitions, books and workshops.⁹

Otero Alcántara participated in the music video for the hip-hop song “Patria y Vida” (*homeland and life*) released in February 2021, a twist on the “national” slogan from the birth of the Cuban Revolution “Patria o muerte” (*homeland or death*).¹⁰ The song gained wide popularity and won the Song of the Year award at the 2021 Latin Grammy Awards.¹¹ According to the organisation Artists at Risk Connection, “Patria y Vida” is “possibly the most direct criticism ever made of the Cuban regime”. The song played a significant role in the rise of the protests that took place on 11 July 2021.¹²

⁶ <https://globalvoices.org/2021/05/13/who-is-artist-luis-manuel-otero-symbol-of-the-resistance-and-thorn-in-the-side-of-the-cuban-regime/>

⁷ <https://havanatimes.org/cuba/what-the-san-isidro-movement-means-for-cuba/>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/cuba-new-administrations-decree-349-is-a-dystopian-prospect-for-cubas-artists/>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/a-bold-attempt-to-redefine-dissidence-in-cuba.html>,
<https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/luis-manuel-otero-alcantara>,
<https://democraticspaces.com/blog/2020/8/16/the-museum-of-dissidence-in-cuba-2020>,
<https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/metodo-cuba-independent-artists-testimonies-of-forced-exile> (p. 100)

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/24/cuban-court-sentences-two-dissident-artists-to-prison-terms>,
<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-56140488> , <https://youtu.be/pP9Bto5IOEQ>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/arts/music/patria-y-vida-cuba-protest-song.html>

¹² <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/metodo-cuba-independent-artists-testimonies-of-forced-exile> (p. 8; 14)



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These nationwide protests were the largest anti-government demonstrations since the 1959 Cuban revolution, and came in response to the longstanding economic crisis, shortages of essential goods and severe restrictions on rights in the country.¹³ In response to the protests, the government imprisoned more than a thousand people and committed systematic human rights violations, including the use of arbitrary detention and torture.¹⁴

Arrested for his activism

Otero Alcántara's activism has come at a high personal cost. Since 2016, he has been the subject of interrogations and political persecution, and has been arrested countless times. His art has been confiscated and destroyed by state security officers.¹⁵ Despite this, he continued his activism through performance pieces to raise awareness of Cuba's ongoing repression of independent artists and activists. He was detained on 11 July 2021, after posting a video online of his planned participation in the protests. In 2022, he was convicted for "contempt, public disorder and insults to national symbols", the last of these due to his performance "Drapeau" in August 2019.¹⁶ He is currently serving a five-year sentence in the maximum security prison Guanaajay in the Artemisa province.¹⁷ Otero Alcántara and his fellow activists, including one of the artists behind "Patria y Vida" Maykel Castillo, did not receive an open and fair trial and the conditions they are exposed to in prison entail grave physical and psychological risks.¹⁸

Otero Alcántara spearheads a new generation of independent Cuban voices using creative forms of resistance to challenge the authoritarian regime.¹⁹ Like many artists before him, his art and his civic position push the limits of freedom of expression in the face of censorship and repression. He follows a proud Cuban tradition of opposition through art.

¹³ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/07/11/prison-or-exile/cubas-systematic-repression-july-2021-demonstrators>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/cuba/report-cuba/>

¹⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/11/cuba-crackdown-protests-creates-rights-crisis>

¹⁵ <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/metodo-cuba-independent-artists-testimonies-of-forced-exile> (p. 27) <https://riaalta.org/san-isidro-el-27n-y-el-27ene-ante-el-canibalismo-retorico-oficial/>, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56947591>

¹⁶ <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/01/16/detained-cuban-artist-activist-releases-latest-statement-prison-luis-manuel-otero-alcantara>

¹⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/06/cuba-must-release-prisoners-of-conscience/>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/cuba/report-cuba/>, <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-politics-music-cuba-fd2e04bf9d2fd32f02abf5d406dd7b1d>, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/26/cuba-release-imprisoned-artists>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-embassy-says-trial-cuban-artist-activists-neither-free-nor-fair-2022-06-01/>, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/trial-cuba-anti-government-activists-neither-free-fair-us-says-rcna31598>, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-latin/maykel-osorbo-cuba-patria-y-vida-jail-1234657080/>

¹⁹ <https://globalvoices.org/2021/05/13/who-is-artist-luis-manuel-otero-symbol-of-the-resistance-and-thorn-in-the-side-of-the-cuban-regime/>



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From the poetry of José Martí, who was the voice of independence from the colonial power of Spain, through the seized films of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea during the Batista dictatorship, to the prose of Reinaldo Arenas, who suffered the homophobia of the early decades of the current regime, and the scathing hip-hop by Los Aldeanos after the turn of the century.

Communist authoritarianism

Since the communist revolution of 1959, Cuba has been a one-party authoritarian state. After the governance of Fidel and Raúl Castro, the Communist Party has continued to reign through the current president Miguel Díaz-Canel. Cuba has long been one of the countries with the least freedom of expression in the world. It was ranked 168 of 180 countries on Reporters Without Borders' 2024 World Press Freedom Index, positioned between Belarus and Iraq.²⁰ In an already limited political and civic space, the government responded to the widespread protests of 2021, legitimately calling for broader economic and political reforms, with an iron fist. According to Amnesty International, at least 793 people remained in detention at the end of 2023 following the massive arrests during the protests.²¹ Human Rights Watch has documented torture and ill treatment of prisoners.²²

The brutal suppression of the 2021 protests sparked a mass exodus of Cubans, as thousands were forced into exile for fear of persecution.²³ The Cuban authorities enacted a new Social Communication Law in 2023, which further clamps down on media freedom and restricts public access to information.²⁴ In a country where the national constitution already bans non-state media, independent media have emerged online but now face severe restrictions.²⁵

The attack on artists and the right to freedom of expression is not limited to Cuba. As authoritarian regimes tighten their grip on power, artists who question existing power structures are under extreme threat.²⁶ According to UNESCO, 39 artists were killed and 119 imprisoned in 2021, which is the highest number on record.²⁷

²⁰ <https://rsf.org/en/index>

²¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/cuba/report-cuba/>

²² <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/cuba>

²³ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/07/11/prison-or-exile/cubas-systematic-repression-july-2021-demonstrators>

²⁴ <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/4-things-you-should-know-about-cubas-new-social-communication-law/>

²⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/new-digital-law-tightens-clampdown-press-freedom-cuba>

²⁶ <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/about-arc>,
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385265/PDF/385265eng.pdf.multi>

²⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136352>



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A call to defend freedom of artistic expression

Expressing oneself through art is a basic human right. Throughout history, artists have tested the boundaries of freedom of expression and challenged authorities on other human rights, often at huge personal risk.

For a decade, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara has directly confronted censorship and the institutional denial of his status as an artist, despite harsh government crackdowns. His work shows the power of art in resisting authoritarianism and is an inspiration to others in the artistic community.

The 2024 Rafto prize aims to highlight the importance of the work of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and other artists in challenging power structures and defending democracy and human rights, both in Cuba and globally.

We call on the Cuban government: to Free Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and all political prisoners; to repeal Decree 349 and other laws criminalising opposition and artistic expression; to adhere to international law and the Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions²⁸; and to stop the persecution of activists and human rights defenders.

As authoritarianism is on the rise internationally, artists are crucial in fostering public debate, encouraging critical thinking and defending civic space.²⁹ We appeal to states and institutions worldwide to promote and protect artistic freedom.

²⁸ [2005-convention-unesco.pdf](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385265/PDF/385265eng.pdf.multi)

²⁹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385265/PDF/385265eng.pdf.multi>