



VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM  
MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

# THE VEIL OF SILENCE

Exhibit of Contemporary Cuban Art

AMA - ART MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAS  
201 18th St, Washington, DC

October 27 / November 14, 2021



On July 11, 2021, in provincial capitals and towns all over Cuba, large groups of people gathered in the streets to rally against a regime that has been in power for over 62 years. One of the main reasons for the protests is the poor state of the country's public health system, which has reached the brink of collapse.

After changes began being made to the structure of the national health system in 1959, aspects such as the claimed exceptional quality of the country's health professionals, its primary care capacities, and its public health policies have become some of the main points used to support Cuba's failed communist discourse.

Cuba was the first country in the world to create a ministry or secretariat exclusively dedicated to public health issues, back in 1909. In 1958, the mortality rate per 1,000 adults in Cuba was 4.93% (ranking it first amongst the countries in the Americas, ahead of the United States, which was in 11th place with a rate of 9.5%). That same year, infant mortality reached 33.7% (third amongst countries in the Americas, surpassed only by the United States with a rate of 26.9% and Canada with 30.2%). A large part of the capital's population had health coverage from charitable clinics, most of which had delegations all over Cuba to take care of patients who did not need to be hospitalized. Public health was completely free, and so were ambulance services transporting patients from anywhere in the country to the nearest hospital. Today, 62 years after the establishment of a government that has violated the most basic human rights, the deterioration in health services can be seen in the calamitous and unsanitary state of the hospital network (most of which is made up of run-down facilities from the republican era), the lack of essential medicines for the population, and the proliferation of diseases that have either already been eradicated in other countries or that are caused by social issues such as overcrowding and the decline in basic living conditions.

The ideological flag that has been flown since 1959 —promoting Cuba as a “medical superpower”, and whose main representatives are the Cuban medical brigades that are deployed to various countries— is now being questioned by the international community, which has seen the truth rapidly unfold about one of the mainstays of the Cuban regime. Gradually, the poor conditions in which doctors are forced to work are being exposed, as they participate in a system that is financially supported by income from these “collaborations”, while one of the main reasons for the collapse of the public health system is the lack of professionals. The development of the news media and mass access to social media have allowed citizens to learn about the conditions in which they live and to become social actors and spokespersons of their own reality.

This project addresses the harsh reality of Cuba from the perspective of contemporary art and reflects on the social impoverishment of a sick population who is starting to wake up to the need to change their life situation and to the different citizen participation mechanisms available to them to do that. By examining topics such as the world of madness and its social repercussions, the role of social medicine in repressing dissidence, and reflecting on how much public health and related communal services have worsened, these artists are inviting the audience to take a closer look at a distressed and exhausted people who have finally begun removing the “veil of silence”.

# DAMARIS BETANCOURT

## TEN DAYS IN MAZORRA, 1998 / 2016

A few weeks prior to Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba between February and March of 1998, I traveled to Havana to do some photo reports of this historical event for an important Swiss newspaper. After I arrived, I headed straight to the international press center with a written request to obtain my press credentials as a photographer. As expected, the next day I learned that my request had been denied. After providing me with impenetrable excuses, all I could gather was that I was unable to obtain credentials because I was Cuban. I left feeling disappointed and outraged. Fortunately, I got over it quickly and I remembered what I had previously done in Cuba clandestinely, without any credentials, without a publication to support me, and how much freedom I had gained from not having to commit to anything else but the idea and act of documenting.

I got in touch with a contact I had at the Havana Psychiatric Hospital, better known as Mazorra, from a few interviews we had done there in the past with a Swiss journalist. Founded in 1857, this enormous facility covers 62 hectares and has 2,500 beds. It's basically a city within the city. A week later, after the commander in chief of the nation's psychiatric facilities, Dr. Eduardo Bernabé Ordaz, gave his authorization, I was finally able to start. I spent ten days wandering around the hospital with my camera, always followed by a "watching shadow" who observed my every move. At times, I was thankful that I had someone to guide me around that massive hospital and to mediate between the patients and me, a stranger roaming their territory with a camera. After just a few hours, I realized how quickly a cigarette can persuade a psychiatric patient to open up.



Photographic essay  
19 images  
Gelatin silver print  
Variable dimensions



During those ten days I made the most exceptional, complex, and loyal friends in the world. I also participated eagerly in every possible activity in the visitor's program, going to several handicraft workshops, the rose gardens, and even attending a dance performance, with the chorus singing an ode to Commander Ordaz. For the most part, though, I was only given access to the postcard version of life at the hospital. Despite trying to seem naïve and insisting on being shown the darkest places, I failed. I was never allowed into the sinister wards where the patients don't smile, where they are recovering from the effects of electroshock therapy, or where dissidents and non-dissidents are allegedly tortured, such as the Pedro Carbó Serviá criminal ward. My "shadow" was adamant about only showing me the "happy crazies".



Years later, in 2010, news broke about the scandalous and tragic death of 26 patients from hunger and cold during their stay at Mazorra. This only confirmed my suspicions about this ominous place. Looking through the images of that horrible disaster, I thought I recognized one of my protagonists amongst the bodies. I began thinking about my photos, so I looked for the negatives. Now, more than twenty years later, it seems that this series could be of value to those interested in learning about some of the things that take place in Cuba, images that highlight those discreet testimonies, the ordinary and modest lives that help tell our common history.

# ANA OLEMA

3.6°C, 2021

In January 2010, a series of photos were leaked that exposed one of the most scandalous cases of medical negligence in Cuban history. According to official figures, a total of 26 patients from the Comandante Dr. Eduardo Bernabé Ordaz Psychiatric Hospital of Havana died of hypothermia during a cold winter.

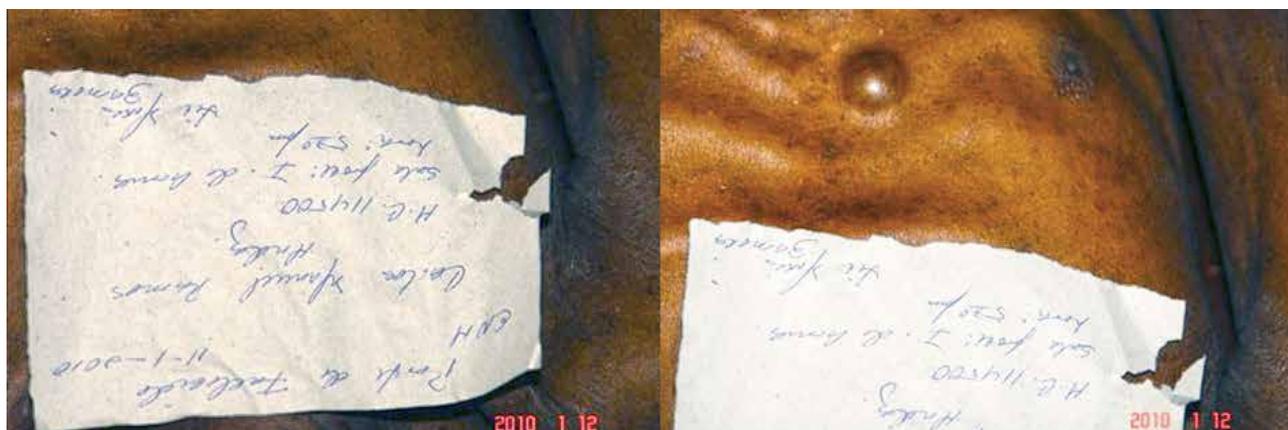
Independent sources, however, claimed that the real number of victims was between 40 and 50 people. Due to the rapid dissemination of the images both inside and outside the country and because of their disturbing content, the Cuban regime had no other option than to admit—a rare exception—that it was true. The health authorities stated that the causes had nothing to do with neglect at the facilities or the inhumane treatment the patients received, which was evident in the photos. Instead, they insisted that the prolonged low temperatures recorded at the beginning of the year were to blame, along with the risk factors of the patients due to their psychiatric illnesses. However, the emaciated bodies of the victims revealed the constant abuse and indifference of the staff, their extreme malnutrition, and the lack of hygiene. The unattended injuries alluded to the horror of

totalitarianism of which Hannah Arendt speaks, where cruelty exceeds the most sinister of fantasies.

This piece uses two of the images that were released at that time. They show the torso of one of the victims and his medical record on top, scribbled in ballpoint pen on a piece of torn and flimsy paper that could easily rip apart or be lost. The pictures summarize the contempt of the system towards its citizens, in this case those who are doubly vulnerable, having been punished in life by humiliating and indifferent medical practices, and then dying in anonymity, left to oblivion.

Both photographs are encapsulated, giving them an effect of cracked crystal, in an attempt to keep the memory of the victims alive, as well as hinting at the cold spell used as an excuse by the regime.

The names of the victims were never revealed, but the temperatures recorded that year at Rancho Boyeros, where the hospital is located, fell as low as 3.6°C.



Dptych  
Color photographs and resin / Variable dimensions



# CELIA & YUNIOR Y HENRY ERIC HERNÁNDEZ

FORJAR LA TRADICIÓN, 2015 – 2017

Forjar la tradición imbues the number 6210 with a sense of heritage, representing the number of Cuban doctors who, while being part of international missions carried out by the government in various countries in Africa and Latin America, have emigrated illegally from those countries to the United States or other parts of Latin America. This figure, which has been calculated based on data published by international sources between 2006 and 2016, represents the so-called “revolutionary

deserters”, according to Cuban political rhetoric. The intervention consisted of the installation of a marble plaque (which once had a panel with historic information) with the number 6210 engraved into it. The plaque was laid on top of an abandoned pedestal under the ramp of the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital in Centro Habana, one of the most densely populated municipalities in the capital.



# LUIS MANUEL OTERO ALCÁNTARA Y ANYELO TROYA.

## MIL MANERAS

### DE MORIR ACCIDENTADO, 2020

There is moment in the political fight where chance does not exist.

Totalitarian states construct reality. They fabricate lives and also deaths.

It is not death that I fear, but the supposed accident in which that death might occur.

Depoliticizing death is the best way of nullifying your worth as an individual.

I don't believe that those in power wanted me dead while I was on hunger strike, because I was the one in control.

I had loaded my body with political meaning. I had snatched control of the story from them.

That is what happens when you're one step ahead. Ever since I understood the importance of being one step ahead, I've tried to stay ahead of the dictatorship at all times. Two steps ahead. It requires effort, concentration, but it's possible. It's what one does while escaping to freedom. Attack dogs and enforcers are after you. They bark, shout, and make noise, but they can't see you. They don't know who you are or understand where you are.

These dark, blurry, and tragic images capture that possible final state.

Because the casual ways in which I could die are ways that those in power have already thought about, a game of chance that the god of the dictatorship has meticulously created.

If tomorrow, for instance, I were out in the street and someone attacked me, that attack would not be fortuitous. There is a smear campaign and a rhetoric of hate against me being amplified by television and other state media, all of which would explain the criminal act.



Photo performance / Gelatin silver print  
Variable dimensions

Photographs by Anyelo Troya

These are not suppositions, but possibilities that I also think about frequently; outcomes that I don't desire, but can't stop thinking about. That's what you imagine when you're deep within the political fight.

All those deaths lie behind the art. This is where I'm one step ahead.

I am black. I am an artist. None of the things that the dictatorship has thought of doing to me can compare with my imagination.



# Umbrella Art Foundation

## DEPARTURE, 2021

Video installation

The word “departure” is typically associated with the act of leaving, of going on a trip. Indeed, airports have departure gates for passengers who are leaving the place where they are.

Because there are so many gates, flight information display systems (FIDS) are there to inform passengers where to check in, from which gate their flight is departing, the time at which their flight takes off and lands, where to pick up their luggage, etc. This computer system controls the screens located around the airport.

Departure is a video installation project where the structure and aesthetic appearance of FIDS will not be used to display flight information, but to show the names and numbers of people who have died from COVID in Cuba. We will use official reports to obtain the data, but the emphasis will be on the information we gather from citizens. Using social media as a reporting mechanism, the aim is to create alternative and independent statistics in response to the alarming accusations against a communist regime ruled by Miguel Díaz-Canel that it is concealing information on the effects of the pandemic in Cuba. By contrasting the different sources with the official data on the number of positive cases and deaths, this work calls into question the government’s capacity to combat this health crisis.

Considered as a monument to all the victims, the goal of this piece is to make them visible and humanize them, while also giving a voice to the families who have lost their loved ones due to the widespread medical negligence in Cuban hospitals. Consisting of people’s stories and reports from observers, the data

reflect the lack of staff, beds, oxygen, pulse oximeters, basic medicines, and the manipulation of death certificates. Besides lacking any mechanism through which to sue the state or the opportunity to receive any form of compensation, the families of the victims are exposed to contempt and neglect by authorities who are unwilling to help find an immediate solution to a tragedy that Cubans have described as a “slow-motion genocide”.

The screens display the names of people who have left and will never come back, and who could have been saved had they not lived under the failed system of communism. Departure is also a euphemism for death —the departure from life.



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**Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation**

**VOC** is an educational, research, and human rights nonprofit organization and museum devoted to commemorating the more than 100 million victims of communism around the world and to pursuing the freedom of those still living under totalitarian regimes. The Foundation was authorized in 1993 by a unanimous Act of Congress signed as Public Law 103-199 by President William J. Clinton on December 17, 1993.

[www.victimsofcommunism.org](http://www.victimsofcommunism.org)

Our VOC Museum:

<https://victimsofcommunism.org/about/museum/>