DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to political prisoners, especially to those unjustly convicted after the 11J protest in Cuba.

I also want to acknowledge my peers and professors at Rhode Island School of Design. My special appreciation to Agustina Marquez, Chloe Kaylor, Ethan Howard, Lauren Glenn, Alex Wenstrup, Taylor Baldwin, Robert Blackson, Adela Goldbard, Heather Rowe, Sean Salstrom, Jocelyn Prince, Teresa Cervantes, and Faythe Levine for their constant responsiveness and insightful advice over the course of two years.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my partner Javier Jiménez, who always believes in my work and who encourages me in all projects I pursue no matter how challenging they are. I am grateful to count on his, my mother’s, and father’s kindness, support and unconditional love.

ABSTRACT

"Disobeying" constitutes a deeper conceptual and formal inquiry into themes that have been permanently present in my art practice since I started thinking about them in 2006. My concerns are anchored in a socio-political study of communication and language as impacted by power relations, politics, micro-politics, and censorship. In this thesis, I particularly focus on the way in which I see censorship in relation to protest through my recent work, on account of the relevance these issues have for me after living most of my life in Cuba under a totalitarian regime.

Through this writing exercise, I also intend to delineate the conceptual operations and the recurrently performative methods behind my making processes. In the same vein, I trace and connect the meanings of the material explorations I have gone through, essentially in the last two years, when I simultaneously came to continue my art studies and emigrated to the United States. As a result of that experience, I include some audio excerpts and their corresponding English-translated transcriptions of conversations I have had with the Cuban activist Daniela Rojo for over a year now.

Key words:
Communication, language, power relations, politics, censorship, protest, Cuba, activism, process-based work, noise, performativity.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ............................................................................................................. 8
I. Power Relations, revisited .................................................................................. 9-15
II. Censorship & Protest: An Intertwined Pair ....................................................... 16-28
III. Noise as an Act of Resistance / Art as an Act of Resistance ................. 29-38
IV. Performativity and Process ........................................................................... 39-51
Notes ..................................................................................................................... 52-53
Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 54-55

WORK ILLUSTRATIONS

Untitled (Collaboration with Daniela Rojo - In progress) ........................................ 11/19/31
Object to Coerce During ..................................................................................... 12-13
Complicity ............................................................................................................. 14-16
Saturn Devouring His Son ................................................................................... 21/23-24
Liberty is a Pallimpsest ....................................................................................... 27-28
11J or The Revolution that Never Happened ...................................................... 33-34/36-37
11J or The Revolution that Never Happened (New iteration - In progress) .......... 38
Versus ................................................................................................................... 41-42
Disobeying ........................................................................................................... 45-51
INTRODUCTION

I would like to start by saying that this thesis - as I think all art research should do - discusses both finished pieces and works in progress, both conclusions and ongoing thoughts that could shift to a certain extent by the moment of its final presentation. This is a reflection of my interest in a process-based approach to work and in the artist’s experience when making, which is always organic and changing.

“Disobeying” contains a written and an audio section. The written part follows a structure of four chapters through which I will be conceptualizing, describing, and showing photographic documentation of my recent work. The audio section on its side, has been recorded on a 7-inch vinyl record. It encompasses only a few excerpts of conversations between the Cuban activist Daniela Roca and I, whom I contacted in February 2022 to propose a collaboration between the two of us. Our telephone communications since then, have allowed me to accompany her in difficult moments and life decisions, such as when she decided to travel to Germany with her two children to request political asylum there.

Ideally, though not necessarily, I would like the reader to listen to the sound while reading the translated transcriptions of these audio fragments so that the sound and the text work together and complement each other. It is significant for me to share our voices and tones, talking in our native language, recorded in an analog storage medium which is so authentic, and has such fascinating aesthetic attributes.

I. POWER RELATIONS, REVISITED.

Since I started my art degree studies around 2008, I have been invested in exploring the strains existing in power relations. I, like most people in Cuba, grew up with a great awareness of the implication of expressing political ideas publicly because of the fear of being punished and censored.

There are political and mass organizations such as the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, CDR (Revolution’s Defense Committees) whose main role is to notify the police about ”irregular or subversive” activity. Organized by neighborhood blocks, and currently having low popular approval, they continue to be one of the key factors informing the political police along with undercover agents of the State Security for them to punish people in a sinister manner. Since I was a child, I remember all the times my mother said to me, “Please do not say that aloud, please do not be so insubordinate in public.” Many people in Cuba have been familiar with these constant requests from family and friends throughout their lives.

The mind lives in the body so the body as a whole is the center of politics. Michel Foucault says that the prison in modern regimes is designed to keep the body and the mind isolated. He argues that modern power structures search for docile bodies through the control of the mind. He refers to this as disciplinary fear, which, in conjunction with surveillance and self-policing -self-censorship if you will- expands its arm from the prison complex to society in a wider sense. Disciplinary fear varies in intensity according to the prevailing power and the context (a prison is different from a hospital, and a hospital is different from a school).

I constantly think of the integrity of bodies in protest events. From my viewpoint, the prison context - whether Panopticon or not- differs considerably from the context in which protest takes place: the public space. No matter the levels of insubordination that may arise in a prison, there is simply no place to escape to as there is when the protesters are in the street.

Moreover, the consequences of insubordination committed by prisoners are more easily enforced since there are corrective measures clearly stipulated beforehand and which are well-known to the prisoners and their guards. When it comes to a street protest, everything gets a bit out of control in terms of scale, immediacy, interaction between the confronting parties, access to resources for resistance, and so on.
I brought you this dress so you could have a look at it. This is the first one. I’m still working on it because... can you see it from there?

D: Oh, you want! It’s beautiful!

B: Do you like it?

D: Very pretty! Very pretty!

B: This was the initial version that I told you I wanted to include but I was also interested, and I told you the other time we talked, to prevent you from thinking that I always want the dress as in the dresses that you had been used to deal with your experiences. But in fact, the project has now evolved to a point where I feel I want to work with you. In some ways, we are like a representation of something bigger because Comedia, Comedia, and yourself are going to be the only ones involved. That is to say, there are many people involved, Salome herself, that we are just talking about. In some ways, I believe this project is also the way, and I was going to say the other day, that I am paying tribute to you, right? And in the other hand, I feel it the way it has to be in order for every- every- everything that is happening, with the same importance and that some version of all being able to do anything. Right? So, in that sense, I was thinking, which is what it would be for me, and then I also told you during another conversation, that I was imagining myself wearing the dress here, in the public space, and I was also thinking what if it would be for you and for me, to wear the dresses in specific places, at the same time. That is... D: 4 performances, like a performance?

B: Yes, not is... But I don’t know of that is going to be possible for you because I can imagine that just as Comedia is under surveillance, you must be. There must be people there, watching you...

D: I’m being watched but they are not at first of my house. They follow me... What they do, I don’t know what... I’m sorry, but this is what they do...

B: Exactly, I will! I don’t want to put you in a situation that could create a problem for you. I mean, here I’m going to go to the public space but I will probably go unnoticed, but that is what this is all about how far from the definitions I can imagine with you, since the impression of what I do does not have any result, because I am simply not talking about the contexts here or anything like that, but it is a way to show celebrity, in parallel, if I may say so. And I was telling you, I don’t want to create a problem for you, that they... you know what I mean? I don’t know whether if is necessary to go out to the public space or maybe we could do something more intimate. You could wear it at home. I could wear it to go to a shopping center, that is, what I’m thinking about the most is in the dimension of that experience, the performance dimension of wearing the dresses regardless of them being worn in the public space or not, possibilities like those I just mentioned.

D: I can wear the dress in the public space. Like a performance, I mean the dress in the public space, like a performer. I don’t have a problem with that.

B: This is the one I’m making for you, can you see it from there?

D: Wow... This is the embroidery. This is some kind of sketching paper that I am using to embroider so as to give an overview, so, your overview of course, would be in Spanish and the idea is adding more personal things, that deal with your experience at the time you were detained in the public space, such as those things, they yelled at you that first time that you told me on one of our first conversations: “If she doesn’t get out in the police car, she’ll go down.” “If she resists, take her children away from her”, that kind of things. “I don’t know if she would feel comfortable with that or if you would prefer...” I don’t know if you would prefer that I add something else to the dress, and following that line of thought, I have to tell you I’m open to your suggestions and maybe put something more representative or more meaningful than those that I could interpret and that was important for you, right?

D: Also, I thought that as I want to add your words, we could exchange dresses and you would be wearing a dress with your own, and I would be wearing the dress with your own, in short, that I am still thinking of the words that you’re doing the dress, as it is a clear process. I keep on thinking and thinking and seeing how the project is going to end up. But...

B: There is something that fits me so I am in negotiation. And I have mentioned it once; it was again at the interviews because it is proof that I am demonstrating powerfully. They grabbed me when I was sitting in the floor with my arms raised, sitting in the floor with arms raised and doing this. M. The freedom sign...

D: Like this, oh, oh, like this... They grabbed me there, sitting on the floor with my arms raised. Then, I don’t know if it would be possible to embroider something similar or a reference to it, it would be great because it’s the next wave thing in my detention. I want standing, I was sitting on the floor with my arms raised. M. Okay, oh, oh, oh, okay...

D: And the other thing is, and this is why the performer is requesting me in a few years’ period, how are they going to request such a penalty for someone who was sitting on the floor with arms raised. It’s absurd, totally absurd.

B: In fact, you told me there are considering several options and they all come up in a few years they are requesting... D: You, you, you, they are requesting a penalty for public disorder. This is means is being applied to all those who went out to demonstrate in the streets that day, also contrast for allegedly chanting “Death to Dalí” (Dali, Carol name?). I also intrigue to connect a crime, known according to them... all the witnesses that they have brought are saying I was one of the people who were antagonizing, and on top of that, all these testimonies are from the Ministry of Interior... D: B, B...

D: They’re saying! I was one of the leaders that I was antagonizing...
"Object to Coerce During..." (2008) was the first piece I made thinking of power relations, fundamentally the one between the State and the individual which impacts the latter both in a physical and psychological way. The work, made of bronze, lead, red velvet, wood, and transparent acrylic was part of a series titled "From Consumption to Communication and Viceversa". All the pieces of that series established a link between language and consumption objects. Metal dog tags, silver earrings, key rings and keys, and a tabloid of the Cuban Constitution, were some of the items I used.

I was interested at that time in showing the objects temporarily in a gallery space, and then distributing, selling, or giving them away to the audience to use or wear them in public spaces, activating other relations and readings.

The text I attached to the front part of a pair of brass knuckles is a variation of a quote from Confucius. I had only modified the word order to change its meaning as a contrary power statement. I played around with the idea of the possible historical existence of the object and also imagined the text's marks on skin.

When I conceived this work I had a more vertical and static perception on power relations. I had a very clear idea about who played the role of the victim and who of the aggressor. However, when I recently made "Complicity" (2021), after reading "What is Power?" by Byung-Chul Han, my perspective shifted and expanded. Han distances himself from restrictive notions of power such as those in Freud's and Foucault's theories I read in the past. He talks about the need to understand power as a flexible and nuanced concept, allowing us to recognize the different forms in which power may arise.
In addition to that, his theory explains that power relations differ from violence. I am very interested in this approach as I constantly self-question how the people oppressed by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes endure dysfunctional political and economic systems without rebelling or at least resisting them. In Cuba, for example, there is no Constitutional right that allows people to go on strike. There is a strange relationship dynamic that makes me think of Stockholm Syndrome.¹

I am driven by what Han says regarding the concepts of mutuality and reciprocity, arguing that there is a need of both for an effective power relationship to exist, and that the ultimate power is one in which there is no resistance. This idea draws my attention to the way in which the application of violence excludes power since previously I understood violence was nothing more than a result of power and not its opposite.

All these ideas are behind “Complicity”, including coercion and political prison as critical issues in power relations. However, I am offering a possibility through this work. That is, thinking about the ability the oppressed have to change their circumstances. The sculpture, consisting of two sandblasted blown glass pieces, a steel chain, and a cloth ribbon, encourages the audience to consider the directionality in the relationship between the captive subject and the one that keeps him in this state, or between the victim and the abuser, through the meanings arising from the materials I used.
II. CENSORSHIP AND PROTEST: AN INTERTWINED PAIR.

Here I am in this image, as part of a group of artists and intellectuals protesting in front of the Ministry of Culture in Havana, on November 27th, 2020. We gathered there after a violent episode the night before, when the political police, disguised as doctors, burst into the headquarters of the San Isidro Movement\(^2\), where several artists and members of the civil society were peacefully striking for several weeks, demanding freedom of speech and the end of censorship. We went to the Ministry of Culture because we strongly disagreed with the way the government had been increasing repression against artists and activists dissenting from their art policies, in particular through some decree-laws\(^3\) which regulate and control art production, art sales, independent art spaces, non-institutionally affiliated artists, and so forth. According to Decree 349/2018 all artists are prohibited from operating in public or private spaces without prior approval by the Ministry of Culture. If artists are hired by individuals or businesses without authorization they can be sanctioned, fined, and have their properties confiscated. Under the decree, the authorities can also suspend an exhibition, performance, or artistic activity. Such decisions can only be appealed before the same Ministry of Culture and not an independent body of law, which makes the revocation of the measure practically impossible.

Our public act of dissent, “27N” - unprecedented since before the beginning of the Revolution in 1959 - started with a small group of artists and ended with over three hundred people joining us, and it was decisive for subsequent social uprisings. “27N” was the first time I experienced censorship firsthand. We were harassed for a whole day by plainclothes policemen, who fired pepper spray and cut off the electricity on the street we were standing in. Censoring artists, independent journalists, intellectuals, activists, and civil society’s ideas and bodies, has been a systematic government practice in Cuba since the ‘60s. The long lineage of censorship has become more and more radical in the last years.

I had always been well informed about the history of censorship in my country and its impact on the community of intellectuals. There are two well-known cases of censorship in the first fifteen years after the Revolution. One was the "P.M. affair", the controversial prohibition of a documentary film made by Cuban filmmakers Sábata Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal, and the other was the "Padilla affair". In the latter, the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla faced one of the most important events of censorship, imprisonment, interrogation, public self-criticism and retraction to date. His case was used by the government as a lesson to those intellectuals criticizing its policies at the time. It also gave way to a dark period of censorship between 1971 and 1976 known as “El quinquenio gris” (The Gray Quinquennium). Reynaldo Arenas was another censored writer, just for being homosexual. He ended up in exile in Miami.

A pattern that has been occurring, especially with independent reporters, is that plain-clothed police or state security agents will violently detain them in the middle of the street to take them in for interrogation. They are sometimes forced to confess their “guilt” on public television. Another method that the government has followed, and which I also consider to be a form of censorship of the body, is the forced exile of dozens of people.

Despite all this, it was not until “27N” that my attention on that topic really crystallized as it touched me firsthand. It is crucial to clarify that when I speak of the expression of censorship taking material form, I include the body as a target of such an act. I have noticed the increasing censorship of the bodies of artists, activists and citizens in general that has taken place in Cuba lately.

I have consistently questioned the role of the artist in society in terms of participation, and since that day I feel that I have even more responsibility to make visible what is happening. I conceive the figure of the artist as a special researcher who underlines inoperative or dysfunctional aspects of their reality, and of art as a tool for dissent and subversion.
It's OK, isn't it perfect? Oh.
Wooly's face was frozen, and you were silenced. So I was listening to you, telling me about your divorce attorney and the trial, right?
all of that looks out the fact that you don't know what the government intends to do with you. How does that make you feel?
Because in the last few days, I have been thinking a lot about fear.
Every time I talked to my friend in Cuba they say, "It's good you are out of here because you were, we would have been taken to prison to see you down? and when I hear them say, there is this feeling of fear, and I am so very sorry. I ask myself, why, who participated in the July 11th riots, who have been very involved in activism to support all those people... how do you feel? Do you feel out of fear?
D: Lewis, I am not afraid. I feel sadness and depression, and I seem all of a sudden, out of the blue. Because as I don't have any medication stability, as I don't know what's going to happen to me, the uncertainty, is that being my family, for example, and suddenly finding a police car in front of me, and some police officers saying, "Got the car..."
M:... and they dehumanizing you.
D: That uncertainty of not knowing what is going to happen to me, of not having stability, of not being able to make a life project of not being able to live like people, commonly, that uncertainty, doesn't let me live emotionally speaking. I mean, I know, that's why I'm committed to my work, to activism, because I'm convinced in their actions, of my being inside many times, and at the same time, it makes me feel a useless person, right?
M: Uh-huh.
D: But I'm not afraid of what they can do to me. And I have told them many times, "If you want to see me in prison please do! I know what it means to be in a cell, and I don't care." But that's another thing, because they have already seen out of things to intimidate you, that is, the best for them to threaten you is to say they're going to see you in prison, or if you tell them, "Bl, if you want to see me in prison it's ok with me, but do it right, but if you can see me to jail, I don't have a problem with that", when you tell them that they lose control, they don't have any more resources to intimidate you and then they look for alternative strategies, they are your friends, they make my friends stop talking to you, they isolate you from family and friends and that has happened to me. I just moved to my father's place. I don't know if you heard my father passed away.
M: Yes, you told me. You told me in another conversation we had before.
D: Oh, well, I'm in a completely different scenario from the one where you saw me before.
M: And what are your kids, are they staying with your mother?
D: My children are staying with my mother. And that's because of that uncertainty I was telling about. I see them every day, every day I go see them. But it's precisely due to that uncertainty, that I don't know what's going to happen, it's dangerous. I have to get me at a time I'm alone with my children. What would I do?
M: There is no one you can lose them with, it's a big risk, you see.
D: And it would be very dangerous for them too. It would be very dangerous for them. They are very young to be seeing those things; they are very old, they are very old. And I always try to think in what's best for them.

The last part for Mario, is it not? It's uncertainty, its imprudence, its impotence. In that case, I want to live, I want to live, I cannot say I'm going to do this or that, I'm going to embark in it or that project. Or I'm going to fail as a person. I cannot even think of a project because who would want to get into so much trouble. It would only be someone who is also involved in who is not afraid. And I would want to be careful, because they used you people, they infiltrate people, I mean.
M: That's something else.
D: It's a uncertainty of things.
M: It's not only fear to be taken to prison, it's possible threats. It also has to do with the person generalized to the past of society, which makes you think anyone can be a member of the state security, your boss...
D: Sure, yes, that's something else.
M: Any person might be infiltrated to obtain information, basically.
And that's another aspect that I have been thinking about concerning fear. The other day, as I was thinking about all that, I was reading the book "Hitler'sanchors" [Before Night Falls] by7o, you know, of that东西, you tell me on the other day...
M: you were saying...? It's because of that something you told me on the other day...
D: You were saying, "It's because of that something you tell me on the other day..."
M: But, I am not afraid of that.
D: "Uncertainty, it's because of that uncertainty that I was telling about. I see them every day, every day I go see them. But it's precisely due to that uncertainty, that I don't know what's going to happen, it's dangerous. I have to get me at a time I'm alone with my children. What would I do?"
M: There is no one you can lose them with, it's a big risk, you see.
D: And it would be very dangerous for them too. It would be very dangerous for them. They are very young to be seeing those things; they are very old, they are very old. And I always try to think in what's best for them.
M: But the revolution is not a..."
D: The revolution is not a..."
M:... is a revolution..."
D:... is a revolution..."
M:... is a revolution..."
D: It's a revolution..."
M:... is a revolution..."
D: It's a revolution..."
M:... is a revolution..."
D: It's a revolution..."
M:... is a revolution..."
D: It's a revolution..."
Many Cuban artists have historically worked on the topic of censorship and continue to do so today. Some of them have had to make their discourses and representations more complex in order to evade institutional and government censorship. The use of intricate metaphors to refer to power is common ground in much of Cuban art. Other artists work in a more confrontational and direct way. Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, and Hamlet Lavastida are some of them. Bruguera, for example, intersects social practice with art - what she calls “artivism” - to overcome control, empower people, and reveal acts of punishment by the Cuban government against intellectuals and civil society. She created the “Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt INSTAR”, which is also an acronym and a verb in Spanish meaning “to encourage”, “to instigate”, or “to incite”.

The Institute emerged after a performance that the artist did in 2015 during the Havana Biennial, in which Hannah Arendt’s book “The Origins of Totalitarianism” (1951) was collectively read for one hundred hours. Bruguera installed a loudspeaker outside her house, INSTAR’s first headquarters in Havana, so that passersby could listen to her and her collaborators’ voices reading. Due to the immateriality of sound, she simply invaded the public space from her private space. At some point during the reading, the government sent a team of “workers” to repair the street in front of Bruguera’s house. They pretended that they were fixing it only to create a noise that did not allow people to hear the artists’ voices amplified by the loudspeaker. It seems like a coarse act of censorship but it is not. There is a certain sophistication in the counter-response to the artist’s action. That is to say, the State Security chose not to take her to jail as on other occasions, nor to shut down the electrical power at her house, as this would make them complicit in front of the international art community participating and attending the Biennial.

Official counter-responses and rejections happen everywhere. When doing research, I came across the “Rap Against Dictatorship” which challenges military leaders and criticizes laws in Thailand. Undoubtedly, this rap was censored and the Thai government created a contestation, similar to what the Cuban government did with “Patria y Vida” (Homeland and Life).

The song title itself questions the national motto “Patria o Muerte, venceremos!” (Homeland or Death, we will prevail), endlessly used by Fidel Castro in his political speeches. As a response, they invited some pro-system artists to make a song titled “Patria o Muerte por la Vida” (Homeland or Death, for Life), which become a source of mockery due to its questionable aesthetic quality, and its propaganda purpose.

Art and politics influence each other without a doubt, although power control strategies vary in each system. Scholar Jacques Attali says that:

“The economic and political dynamics of the industrialized societies living under parliamentary democracy also lead power to invest art, and to invest in art, without necessarily theorizing its control, as is done under dictatorship. Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power. Here, this channelization takes on a new, less violent, and more subtle form: laws of the political economy take the place of censorship laws. Music and the musician essentially become either objects of consumption like everything else, recuperators of subversion, or meaningless noise.”

Nevertheless, not only sound and noise are in the sights of power, but also the written word. I think of mass book burnings during the Holocaust or banned publications throughout history. It was in 2019 for the Havana Biennial when I made the installation “Saturn Devouring His Son”, a work talking about banned publications. Since then I started thinking more intentionally about the relationship between censorship and the body, language, public space; and also about the role self-censorship has in all this.

“Saturn Devouring His Son” is the result of an intervention I performed on found covers of “Critical Thinking” leftist magazine, published in Cuba from 1967 to 1971, the year when it was censored by the government, under the allegation of being divergent. As a consequence of that, the Department of Philosophy at the Havana University from which the magazine was published was temporarily dissolved as well.

I spent several months collecting all published issues of the magazine, 53 in total, in order to make this installation. My action consisted of destroying the part of the covers containing the title, and then reconstructing them using traditional paper restoration processes: cleaning, retinning, paper grafting, and color restoration. The destruction and reconstruction traces were only visible from the back of the covers since on the front side they camouflaged with the aged paper.
For me, the purpose of this somewhat illogical procedure was to establish a parallel with the way totalitarianism censors its own creations when they become uncomfortable to the system. The act of care and repair positions me as a subject in an ongoing conversation around these issues.

I continued doing research on censorship when coming to the United States to study at Rhode Island School of Design. After having lived for almost two years in this country, my understanding of the ways in which censorship operates has broadened. I am interested in reflecting on its expressions not only in totalitarian regimes or dictatorships but also in democracies.

It is of great interest to me to observe how censorship occurs in language; the way some words carry a stigma with them to the extent in which they cannot be said publicly - either because they are potentially harmful or considered offensive for groups of people - even in situations where they are being criticized. I see this as a really debatable conflict in the context of the United States, where "political correctness" does not necessarily solve people's real problems.

It was also surprising for me to discover the National Coalition Against Censorship, NCAC© This organization based in the United States provides direct intervention for people and groups facing censorship in their communities across the country while offering a permanently updated database with censorship events happening at schools, in art environments and so on. As they say on their website, this alliance works for an "American society that understands, values, defends, and vigorously exercises free expression in a just, egalitarian, diverse, and inclusive democracy." 17

Education in the United States seems to be one of the most sensitive sectors concerning censorship. According to the American Library Association, over 1500 books were removed from school libraries over the course of only nine months between 2021 and 2022. Furthermore, in March this year, a seemingly unbelievable event occurred in a primary school in Florida. The school principal ended up resigning after a parent accused a teacher of showing an inappropriate and "pornographic" image to her students: Michelangelo's "David". All of the above has provoked strong opposition from organizations of different kinds, including students' groups, for example, Ella Scott and Alysia Hoy, two Texan teenagers who created a banned book club.

All tensions about political correctness, morals, and "cancel culture" are truly interesting to me. This is how I began to intersect censorship with protest as one pair that can hardly be separated. In almost every moment of censorship, there is a subsequent act of resistance, and from moments of protest, instances of censorship can follow so impositions and oppositions are always negotiated at different instances and levels.
I feel extremely attracted by the contrast between the abrupt and obvious way in which censorship usually happens in totalitarian regimes, and the more subtle and camouflaged way in which it occurs in democratic systems, although recent events of censorship in the United States or Spain can prove otherwise as in the case of rappers Vall·óncy and Pablo Hasél, the latter imprisoned for nine months for offending the crown and the police with his lyrics.

Furthermore, the question of moral judgments and selective censorship -either coming from liberal or conservative stances- intrigues me. It is fascinating to think about the limit, the frontier, and the margins of censorship. In addition to this, it is also interesting to reflect on the role of the community and public opinion in demanding the prohibition, removal, and revocation of something considered illegitimate or unjust. Does that judgment depend on each case? Do justice and censorship meet at any point?

I continuously think of two scenarios that are familiar to me as an artist. On one hand, there is political censorship of works of art. Ai Wei Wei’s work for example, directly confronts the Chinese government and the Communist Party, therefore he has been censored and arrested numerous times. On the other hand, there are artists whose work consists of acts of corrections or rectifications, an edition that ultimately might be considered a sort of “reverse censorship”. In this regard, I think of the work of Alexandra Bell that I saw at the Peabody Essex Museum a while ago. She made large prints from scanned images of news stories published by “The New York Times”, part of which she crossed out, underlined, placed question marks and annotations on through silkscreening techniques. Her purpose is to question race and gender bias existing in journalism and communication. One could argue that she is standing against power and there is no “reverse censorship” present in this case. However, power being a shifting force -and independent of any particular institution-, if eventually her voice becomes part of the dominant culture, she will represent power and the other part will take again the role of a censor, continuing an infinite circle of conflict.

In a similar sense, there is the case of removing monuments representing people who have done harm to humanity. For example, the statues representing Confederate generals or colonizers who made profit from slavery across the United States. Regardless of the trauma these symbols undoubtedly bring about, could their removal from public spaces be considered an act of censorship?

I wonder how should sensitive cases like this be managed, as well as what happened around the painting of Emmett Till by Dana Schultz. The artist was invited to the Whitney Biennial in 2017 with “Open Casket”, a painting depicting Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy accused of offending a white woman and who was tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955. The fact that Schultz was a white American woman speaking about racial violence by representing the boy in his open-casket funeral was controversial for several black artists attending the event. They wrote an open letter to the Biennial curators requesting they immediately remove the piece, destroy it, and apologize to the audience for displaying a “black death spectacle”.

25
Coco Fusco, whose practice includes critique and writing, wrote an article about the incident around that painting. Fusco clarifies the reasons why the arguments against the painting and the claim for censoring it are erroneous. The quotation below explains the need for truly deep and rational discussions, and proposes a critical stance without seeing neither censorship nor moral judgment as a solution.

"I would never stand in the way of protest, particularly an informed one aimed at raising awareness of the politics of racial representation, a subject that I’ve tackled in various capacities for more than 30 years. A group of artists staging enraged spectatorialism before an artwork in a museum strikes me as an entirely valid symbolic gesture. A reasoned conversation about how artists and curators of all backgrounds represent collective traumas and racial injustice would, in an ideal world, be a regular occurrence in art museums and schools. As an artist, curator, and teacher, I welcome strong reactions to artworks and have learned to expect them when challenging issues, forms, and substance are put before viewers. On many occasions I have had to contend with self-righteous people—of all of ethnic backgrounds—who have declared with conviction that this or that can’t be art or shouldn’t be seen. There is a deeply puritanical and anti-intellectual strain in American culture that expresses itself by putting moral judgment before aesthetic understanding. To take note of that is not equitable with defending whiteness, as critic Aruna D’Souza has suggested—it’s a defense of civil liberties and an appeal for civility. (...) I find it alarming and entirely wrongheaded to call for the destruction of an artwork, no matter what its content is or who made it. As artists and as human beings, we may encounter works we do not like and find offensive. We may understand artworks to be indicators of racial, gender, and class privilege—I do, often. But presuming that calls for censorship and destruction constitute a legitimate response to perceived injustice leads us down a very dark path."

Society is increasingly demanding humanity to be aware of history, and be critical, sometimes even radical, in its positions. But, what concepts are leading us as a civilized species? What do freedom and liberty mean? What is freedom for people who live under the rule of law and for people who are still slaves nowadays? Is the desired condition of being free the same for everyone?

Thinking about these concepts I made "Liberty is a Palimpsest" (2021). The work is a video-installation documenting my attempts and struggle to write one specific word with molten glass on a steel surface. I play with the limitation in writing the whole word and with its lack of legibility, due to the nature of the material I am using. That is one of the reasons repetition is so important in this work, materially and conceptually speaking: to try to understand, define, succeed, and overcome a practical and philosophical challenge.

The work also includes a cardboard box containing all the glass remnants from the described action. It is placed next to the video projection reinforcing an idea of abstraction and uncertainty, translated into mass, size, weight.
III. Noise as an Act of Resistance / Art as an Act of Resistance.

"Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political."


Three important things happened to my work over a year ago. First, I watched "Searching for Sugar Man", a documentary about the search for Sixto Rodriguez, an American musician whose music was part of a cultural and political phenomenon in South Africa during the ’70s. Second, and derived from the previous, I read the article titled "Banned Records from South Africa". Third, there was a huge social uprising in Cuba where protestors were directly repressed, arrested, and imprisoned.

I have sustained concerns about the use of censorship as a method of coercion and eradication of the exercise of freedom. I am intrigued not only by censorship as an abstract phenomenon but as something that takes form in the material world. Therefore, it was fascinating for me to come across "Searching for Sugar Man" and "Banned Records from South Africa".

Through interviews and consultation of various sources, both works address how music was banned during the Apartheid. The government there, with the help of censors as for example the ones at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), scratched vinyl records with the intention of damaging them and eliminating certain songs and musicians that were considered to be controversial in order to maintain the political status quo. Rodriguez was one of them.
Me. And well, that’s what it is, for the time being. But I wanted to ask you this: that one, if you think of it or if it makes sense to you to include in your story specific things from the time of your arrest, such as your making the symbol of freedom with your hands or the fact that you were threatened with summary execution if you fail to do what you feel that you would prefer another type of regime to be made. You know, I’d like to do something that is meaningful for both of us.

D. Yes, sure you can, yes. I don’t know if you have seen the rooms down at Villa Marisa.

Me. No. I have no idea.

D. I don’t know if you have seen them. The cells at Villa Marisa... Let’s see, ordinary cells’ doors or ordinarly prisons are open, they are made of bars. But the cells in the kind of peasant, like Villa Marisa, and that place in Athens where they took me, they were boarded, and there is only one little opening below from where you can see, and another opening above.

Me. So you can see what’s happening outside...?

D. I don’t know.

Me. Cannot come back outside.

D. No, you can’t see unless you climb up or lie on the floor. They are boarded. If you could embroider a metalic door in the doors, that would be awesome.

Me. Can you make a drawing of it?

D. I was asked by those cells.

Me. Can you make a drawing of that?

D. Well, yes. I could have done it if I don’t know.

Me. It doesn’t need to be a perfect drawing, it’s just something to have as a reference.

Me. Were there bars or veins, or metal boarding the doors?

D. No, not at all. It was a metal sheet.

Me. Like a gate plate?

D. Imagine an ordinary cell’s door with normal bars, but in the middle there is a gate plate covering it and there is only a little space of about thirty centimeters above and another thirty centimeters below. But it?

Me. And there are two at the edges either... at the edges...
Vinyl records are delicate objects. That fact made me think about images of intentional scratches on vinyls as well as imagine that moment in which one is listening to music and suddenly discovers that something is missing. A song erased, physically removed from the record surface, produces both visual and audible noise.

I began to make connections among censorship in South Africa; the way Hip Hop underground culture in New York used vinyl records and turntables at block parties to resist marginalization and the early rap commodification in the seventies; and my own experience in Cuba, where there is an extensive history of censoring and repressing musicians, artists, and intellectuals. I thought about the series of uprisings that have taken place there in the last three years, particularly the spontaneous protest occurring on July 11th, 2021. On that day, after many decades, the people went to the streets en masse to protest against the government. Peaceful protesters were directly repressed by law enforcement and plainclothes policemen. More than one thousand of them—mostly young people of color—were arrested and imprisoned, and most of them disproportionately sentenced to ten to fifteen years in prison, without access to counsel or fair trial.

My insights were anchored in all this when I made "11J or The Revolution that Never Happened" (2021). I created a participatory sound-installation composed by eleven images of protests engraved on vinyl-shape green acrylics. I proposed to the audience the possibility of interacting with the vinyls I created by playing them on a record player I provided as part of the work. One by one, they could experience the noise produced by the image surface. In addition to this, there was a printed list including all the people imprisoned as a result of the "11J" protest, that the audience was invited to take away with them.

"Eavesdropping, censorship, recording, and surveillance are weapons of power. The technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise is at the heart of this apparatus. The symbolism of the Frozen Words, of the Tables of the Law, of recorded noise and eavesdropping—these are the dreams of political scientists and the fantasies of men in power: to listen, to memorize—this is the ability to interpret and control history, to manipulate the culture of a people, to channel its violence and hopes. Who among us is free of the feeling that this process, taken to an extreme, is turning the modern State into a gigantic, monopolizing noise emitter, and at the same time, a generalized eavesdropping device. Eavesdropping on what? In order to silence whom?"
I was committed to amplifying the noises originating from the different reliefs and textures on the material. I intentionally gave the audience agency to play around with noise, to activate a space of rhythmic discomfort ruled by the record player’s needle when going through the same path over and over again.

Some people said the noise reminded them of the sound of marching. I discovered people feeling both disrupted and attracted to that rhythmic reiteration of abstract sounds that they could somehow recognize themselves in. I wonder if the perception of noise is biased not only by our culture but by our state of mind. If one achieves inner peace, could noise be perceived as such? Could a sound be both interpreted as noise and pleasant sound by different people at the same time? How would disparate audiences interact with my sound-installation? How subjective is the distinction between sound and noise? Who codifies it as either one or the other in my work’s case? Can noise be enjoyable? Can the ritual of listening to my work make people revive the real violence instead of ignoring it or masking it?

The materiality of this piece and the form the acrylic surface is modified after the discs are played several times, made me consider the evolution of materials in my practice. The mutability of materials and remnants, the idea of destruction and destruction-reconstruction, and the implicit and explicit violence embodied in processes and objects have a main role in my current work. In a similar way, noise has become a critical aspect as I understand it as a form of defiance and subversion.

After making "11J or The Revolution that Never Happened" I started considering experimenting with actual vinyl records. For a new iteration of my sound-installation that is currently in progress, I already recorded on eleven virgin vinyls a piano version of "La Bayamesa", interpreted by Bebo Valdés, a censored and exiled Cuban musician who passed away. The following step is to engrave the same protest images on the vinyl’s surface so both the music and the noises overlap while being played. This time there will be one record player for each one of the vinyls so they can be listened to simultaneously, creating a kind of distorted and complex symphony.

I think of "Babel" (2001) by Cildo Meireles, a sculptural installation exhibited at the TATE Modern in which the artist created a circular structure composed of analog radios stacked. These devices were adjusted to receive different radio stations at the same time and at the lowest volume. A cacophony was created through this process, making the information indecipherable.

My intention with the new version of "11J or The Revolution that Never Happened" is for the audience to have a more immersive experience and a sensory interaction with the piece than in the previous iteration. They will be able to activate the piece by either increasing the volume of the sounds or stopping some of the vinyls to have less noise and see the images without the motion-produced abstraction. My aim is not to confuse or overwhelm, but engage them in trying to figure the work out.
I am considering noise’s capacity of transmitting other kinds of sonic sensations beyond what music does. As Attali, I also believe that Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise. Music becoming noise, composition of noise becoming music. The record player as a machine translating certain physical conditions as noise, the several record players complementing each other in a unique composition not to be exclusively listened to but interacted with, therefore created and experienced every time.

I have watched innumerable video documentation of protests and rallies around the globe. Either pacific or violent, all of them have noise as a common ground. I am interested in the sound of protest and how protesters use their voices, and all kinds of artifacts such as metal casseroles dishes and pans to make themselves heard as they do not necessarily count with resources -megaphones for example- as the power has. The efforts of the latter to control the crowd and dissolve the noise is completely obvious.

*The answer, clear and implacable, is given by the theorists of totalitarianism. They have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal -these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature. They are direct translations of the political importance of cultural repression and noise control.*

I think of moments when those circumstances of control over music and sound have been bombarded from the opposite domain to power. Again, Hip Hop movement strategies to achieve autonomy, to have agency, and to face commodification by the end of the ’70s and the beginning of the ’80s, enter the conversation.
IV. PERFORMATIVITY AND PROCESS.

"The point is especially relevant to works of art, which really are, in one sense, explicit and finished forms -actual objects in the visual arts, objectified conventions and notations (semantic figures). But it is not only that, to complete their inherent process, we have to make them present, in specifically active 'readings'. It is also that the making of art is never itself in past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present.*"

Raymond Williams. Structures of Feeling.

In 2014, at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the exhibition "Disobedient Objects" took place. The show examined the significant role of objects in social change movements. As stated by the curators, valuing these objects in a Fine Arts Museum was not a matter of beauty and aesthetic quality, but a form of disobedience in its own right, coherent with the fights waged.

It is very interesting to analyze, through the exhibition and the curatorial text in the catalogue, the relationship between protest and aesthetics. The curators say that:

"There is no protest aesthetic. Political movement is always a matter of being emotionally moved, but each movement has its own aesthetic composition. Accordingly the objects emerging from these cultures aren't unified by style or type. They can be monuments, full of symbolic historical accumulation, or small, quotidian and domestic. As much as they are often playful and humorous, they can also be simultaneously traumatic traversed by antagonism and conflict. Their makers commonly experience pressure from governments and private economic interests, in the form of police harassment, violence, spying, imprisonment, even assassination."  

However, I think that in terms of making and meaning of the materials used, some of these objects can go beyond functionality and discourse, to turn into finely crafted pieces of resistance. I recognize in my work a similar desire for the pieces to embody social and political denounces while at the same time containing certain aesthetic values, although not necessarily associated with the dominant or traditional concept of beauty.

In my opinion, one of the objects at the exhibition that fulfills both roles are Arpilleras. They are three-dimensional appliqued textiles, originally made by women in Chile to document the violence and repression suffered under the Pinochet dictatorship.

*11.2 or The Revolution that Never Happened*, initial text for the second iteration, work in progress. 2022.
Art is for me a form of dissent and resistance. The performative load of my work, the way my body engages with some actions that are laborious or that require physical effort, perseverance, dedication and discipline, connects with the concept of resistance that I want to explore in my recent work. This idea takes shape in “Disobeying” (2023), an installation including hand-woven fences that I conceived for the final thesis project.

Through Arpilleras, women found strength and solace by gathering together in workshops. They challenged their poverty by producing a grassroots export that could be sold abroad, and expressed the realities of their lives as the Arpilleras recorded both the atrocities inflicted by the military and the everyday economic struggle to survive in Chile.

This type of object draws my attention significantly for the main goal it possesses. Firstly, it points out dysfunctional aspects of reality; secondly, it reinforces a process-oriented quality of the creative act. In my case, the nature of these ideas is in alliance with the concepts I am addressing from a social stance that changes and expands as well. In this sense, my work is inspired by a contextual experience that concerns me for being part of a specific moment in the history of the world, the country, the city, and the micro-spaces.

Many of my proposals appeal to the logic of process-based art. My concerns regarding the access and consumption of the work are defined, above all, by my interest in the object as material which gives sense to previous research and performative actions. Modifying objects, amplifying their ethical and aesthetical significance, and working with found messages, magazines, documents, and slogans, as well as with other material and conceptual elements from ordinary life and popular culture, is something highly inspirational for me.

In performativity -not performance- as an expression, the artist does not just enact something, but creates and builds out of that something. Action is present in my work not only in the making process but in the way I invite the audience taking part on it. I am aiming to make the viewer become more than just a contemplating entity. I am looking to assess the ways in which individuals act and react in the world, how people situate for themselves and for others through aesthetic, material, and symbolic motivations.

“Versus” (2022) is an installation which proposes the audience to interact with it. I handmade a few hundred bullet-shape chocolates, wrapped in candy wrappers. These edible items were offered to the public in several glass containers. These were placed on a wooden shelf covered with a wallpaper collage. The participatory aspect of the work allowed me to observe people’s behavior, proposing a space for thinking about what the action of eating the bullet-shape sweets implies about them as members of society regarding violence perception, violence sensitivity, political tension, and polarization.
The human relation with boundaries has its origins from a very long time ago. Early fences became important alongside the rise of sedentary agriculture in prehistoric times which went hand-in-hand with people claiming pieces of land to live and produce on, signifying ownership of that land. They needed to protect their property from other people and even animals not to come and get their supplies. Mounds of earth, stone, as well as wood were common materials initially used to establish physical borders. The word fence comes from the 14th-century English word fens, which is a short word for protection or defense.

Fences have change throughout history, expanding their purposes. For example, moats, gates, and drawbridges were an important part of military defense in the Middle Ages. During this time in Europe was also when tall bushes and shrubs started to become a popular way to fence off wealthy or noble families property.

Barbed-wire fencing was introduced in America towards the end of 19th-century as an efficient way to keep cattle in their grazing fields. More advanced forms of fencing for livestock such as electric fences and even underground electric fences, emerged with the development of technology. Barbed-wire is still used as a security measure in commercial facilities, homes, prisons, and military situations. It is expected for its sharpened edges not only to restrict access but to harm whoever trying to trespass them.

Fences create boundaries between the inside and the outside, between power and obedience, whatever that is in each case. Installing them is based on the belief that there are imminent dangers to protect against. But, are fences designed to protect or to restrict? Fences are structures that can both control access and prevent escape. I am not necessarily interested in a decorative kind of fence, picket fences for example, used for establishing property line, keeping pets and children in their yards and protecting them from intruders. Conceptually speaking, I am more drawn to restricting fences. Chicken wire, barbed-wire and chain-link fences are the motives I am using to create with. I appreciate what they symbolize, that is to say, one does not need to have physical contact with such fences to understand that they are marking a limit that must not be trespassed. Barbed-wire even implies danger, they work as signs in this sense.

Chicken wire, barbed-wire and chain-link fences are familiar to me. They are commonly used in Cuba for various purposes, including improvised divisions around houses’ perimeters. On one hand, there is a lack of access to other construction materials which are not available or which are unaffordable to many people. On the other, the aesthetics of precariousness and improvisation—not only in Cuba but in other Third World Countries—responds to the social violence and insecurity existing there.

Artist Antone Muntadas has a body of work about fear that connects with these themes. He takes note on how architectural elements such as border walls and fences are used to affect people’s emotions. Muntadas argues that “borders are significant landmarks to control security and fear.”
I have used archival and found material for my work in the past. However, for "Disobeying" I have been imbued in working with more intuitive and abstract material explorations. This project explores censorship and protest from a less representational and illustrative dimension. It consists of an installation composed of several glass and metal wire pieces assembled together, creating an aqueous flow due to the visual qualities of the glass. All of them are displayed on an asphalt platform.

In order to make such pieces, I have been hand-weaving metal wire fences by combining existing patterns such as chicken, chain-link and barbed-wire with my own designs. After that process, I have been pouring molten glass on them, while manipulating the materials in a way the fence is mostly encased in glass. The glass records some shapes of the surface I poured onto. It does not destroy the metal fence but it registers a movement by melting and distorting some parts instead. It transforms the material, it transgress it while holding a memory of it.

I perceive fences as barriers, limit marks, and imposed borders, but also as fragile and permeable elements that can be transcended. Following this idea, I use rigid structures on the wall to weave pieces of fences that are then destructed with molten glass. The structure, which is made with screws in the form of a grid of different sizes, functions as a DIY loom that allows for consistency when weaving.

Hand-weaving fences is a slow and very laborious process; it consumes a lot of my time and energy. However, the craft and effort involved in creating an object like that, usually produced industrially, has great meaning to me in terms of resistance. Those occasions when I am weaving are repeated moments of critical reflection.

My body involved in that labor, time dedicated, and effort required for making the project, align with the idea of struggle I want to convey with it. This is a common thread I can distinguish in many of my works, in which physical effort, dedication, and a performative attitude are required. I am aiming for those elements to support the contents addressed in my practice.
NOTES

1. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the definition of Stockholm Syndrome is a psychological response wherein a captive begins to identify closely with his or her captors, as well as with their agenda and demands. The reason why I emphasize totalitarian and authoritarian systems and not others such as representative democracies or monarchies is that the prevailing state of control in the first curtails all kinds of social resistance including for example workers’ strikes, a fundamental right contained in many countries’ constitutions. That establishes the legal possibility for the existence of an interlocutor who has the ability to disagree and contest power.

2. Group of artists and other alternative thinkers that was created after the government enforcing of Decree 349/2018.

3. In addition to Decree No. 349/2018, Decree No. 370/2018, is described as an effective means of consolidating cybersecurity, technological sovereignty, security, and national defense, but which real purpose is to control online freedom of expression and limit privacy.

4. INSTAR operates as a platform that turns its efforts towards activism. One of the ways for this has been making workshops with Cuban and international artists, economists, writers, etc., who do activism in order to share their experiences toward achieving political engagement.


6. This project was formed by a group of activists affiliated with the The American Civil Liberties Union in response to the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Miller v. California, which narrowed First Amendment protections for sexual expression and opened the door to obscenity prosecutions. As an alliance of more than fifty national non-profits, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups, they engage in direct advocacy and education to support First Amendment principles.

7. https://ncac.org/project/what-we-do


10. Gustav Metzger is one of the artists I came across during my research on material destruction. He founded the auto-destructive art movement around 1969. Metzgers radical pieces were designed to disintegrate over time so that auto-destructive art was for him a way to fight power, not only authoritarianism, and nuclear weapons at that time, but commercial art. One of the procedures he followed was a sort of action painting in which he sprayed hydrochloric acid on nylon.


15. It is curious how the word picket is also used in a context opposite to decoration as when, next to another word, defines boundaries established by workers on strike: picket line.

16. I am considering to work in the future with the aesthetics of crowd control barriers, also known as French barriers, bike racks or milds barriers depending on the country. These are commonly used at public events, mainly parades, political rallies, demonstrations, and outdoor festivals for controlling the masses.


National Coalition Against Censorship. https://ncac.org/
