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## NEW PRESIDENT, SAME CUBA

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*Portrait of actress Iris Ruíz, by Agnes Koleman*

# EDITORIAL

## NEW PRESIDENT, SAME CUBA

In April of this year, someone without the surname Castro took over the country's leadership for the first time since the triumph of the Revolution. However, expectations of change among the Cuban people are almost non-existent.

Perhaps, it was because of his inauguration speech, in which Miguel Díaz-Canel made it clear that "Raúl Castro Ruz, as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba, will spearhead the most important decisions for the present and the future of the country" and that "there will be no room for those who aspire a capitalist restoration".

Or perhaps the illusion died out during the mandate of Raúl Castro, during which so much was expected and so little changed. The phrases of Miguel Díaz-Canel mean little or nothing for those who know the recent history of Cuba: Revolution, socialism, homeland, historical moment, political vanguard ... are anachronistic words and expressions so empty that they no longer have any impact on Cuban society. Raul Castro's reforms in recent years have shown that it is possible to have some economic freedom without granting political and social freedoms. While also preserving the patriarchal system in which men, Castro or not, continue to hold positions of power. Nothing so far has led anyone to believe that things can now be different.

In this issue, a journalist and a Cuban economist reflect on the new president Díaz-Canel and the challenges that arise in the future of Cuba. Yanelis Núñez, organizer of #Bienal00, the first biennial that has been held independently of the Cuban State, tells us in an interview how free art develops on the island and how free it would be under the new president.

**Agnes Koleman**

# A MATTER OF BIOLOGY

RAFAEL GORDO NUÑEZ

**The appointment of Miguel Diaz-Canel forms part of the changes methodically planned out by Raul Castro. These changes are only superficial, the Cuban power structure is expected to remain the same.**

**L**ike the old Jesuit that he is, Raúl Castro organized everything methodically. He took from his brother the weight of “the symbol” and – allowing himself to take advantage of its symbolic force - he portrayed himself as an iconoclast while promising to tear down three of the great principles of the Fidel era: social egalitarianism, government paternalism, and political and economic statism.

In 2010, two years after his rise to power, the former Commander of the Armed Forces announced a process of economic and social reforms that led to the elimination of unnecessary jobs, the opening up of the private sector and the incremental introduction of foreign investment.

The number of jobs in the self-employed sector rose to just over one million. Some companies such as Airbnb and Google arrived in Havana. Odebrecht financed the investments in the (mega) port of El Mariel. The Internet, which had been slow and expensive, suddenly appeared one morning in some public parks across the Island, and in 2017 more than four million users had access to the network in one way or another. People were able to leave the country on their own without the need for additional permits, beyond a valid passport. A large group of

Cubans managed to set their feet in the national hotels (which had been until then reserved only for foreigners). And – at long last - those who wanted to, succeeded in buying or selling a car or a house legally.

As President, the General, however, did nothing more than study the lay of the land. He understood popular discontent, the importance of making basic rights more flexible, and the need for a gradual transformation in an increasingly globalized world, where allies are losing their power.

But Raúl Castro did not fundamentally change anything. He only found the ways to deploy his mandate in peace and to guarantee the icon of saintliness - at least in appearance - while preserving a chaotic system, where immobility and social apathy are a consequence and, at the same time, a weapon of the hyper normalization of a “world of lies” in the “post-truth” era,

a term that Alexei Yurchak could have described in Havana, 28 years after the supposed end of the Cold War.

## **Obama came to Havana with nothing but media fanfare**

He did this so well that when Obama landed in Havana in 2016 there wasn't much fuss beyond

that of the media fanfare. Nobody remembers his speeches. The agreements signed fell by the wayside as quickly as

Steve Bannon did with the rise of Donald Trump. And at the Cuban Airport of Havana, the number of political prisoners, dissidents and journalists interrogated or denied travelling out of Cuba has increased significantly, but nobody on the streets of Cuba knows who is Yoani Sánchez or Manuel Cuesta Morúa.

The system is dying gradually. Or maybe it already dead. But nobody can imagine an alternative to the status quo.

With its collapsed economy, a corrupt system of government and communist ideals called into question, the official media recall ad nauseum the benefits of the decay, but people take refuge in conversations through instant messenger and in the tele-novelas and foreign series of the so-called “audio-visual package.”

Since April 2018, Cuba has, at least in name, a new President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers of Cuba. Miguel Díaz-Canel was found worthy of the prize for the most vilified

## **Castro himself referred to Díaz-Canel as the ultimate survivor when handing over the power to him**

value throughout the history of the Cuban Revolution: that of continuity.

Castro himself - when he handed the job over to Díaz-Canel - referred to him as “the only survivor,” as a clear allusion to the generation of leaders who had been trained to guarantee the sustainability of the process begun in 1959 that have gradually disappeared from the public arena.

Remember the other would be successors were: the former Foreign Ministers Roberto Robaina and Felipe Pérez Roque, the former Vice President Carlos Laje and the former Head of the Battle of Ideas (System of 160 State Programs that defend the proclaimed achievements of Cuban Revolution) Otto Rivero Torres, among many other men, because - of course - there was not a single woman, at least not on the list of those who initially thought they might be the one to lead Cuba, after the historical disappearance of its main leaders.

The appointment of Díaz-Canel, we thought, would be the last card up the Jesuit’s sleeve. However, a month after his being named, we got to know about the start of a Constitutional reform process, of which almost nobody knows anything, except that 33 members of the National Assembly of People’s Power - with Raúl at the helm - make up a commission that is responsible for drafting the new law of laws, whose main objective is to limit presidential reelection, incorporate small private businesses into the body of Cuban legislation, and - who knows? –perhaps

also support equal marriage.

However, these reforms will be, as was the case with 1976 process, a complete masquerade to normalize the atrociousness of Cuba’s totalitarianism. The current ‘Magna Carta’ regulates - just to mention some examples - equality in the use of maritime, land, and naval transports, but those born in Cuba cannot board a speedboat or a yacht. Neither can we go swimming at all the beaches, nor are the media owned by the people but rather by the Communist Party.

Why should a new law be complied with, when even the previous one isn’t being respected? The new Magna Carta is also dead before it was born: it maintains the supremacy of the Party and the subordination of all individuals to it, when paradoxically the ranks of political organizations are losing members from month to month.

Cuba after Castro will remain just like it was before. There will be no significant change to the power structure. There will be no judicial independence, no press diversity or permits allowing freedom of assembly.

Díaz-Canel, in winning this prize, will have to find solutions to urgent demands, above all those that concern journalists and intellectuals, who until today consider themselves to be his Achilles heel.

The challenges are immense: an aging population, the emigration of young people, a trade embargo imposed by the largest

## **Post Castro Cuba will remain virtually the same. The power structure will not go through any substantial reform**

economy in the world and the serious economic problems of Venezuela, its most loyal partner. Cuba after Castro will inevitably have to deal with a constellation of military and politicians anchored to their posts, not willing to give a centimeter in their positions; with a population mired in apathy, incapable of recognizing within itself the anthropological damage of totalitarianism; with an increasingly polarized society; with opposition incoherent in almost all its demands, unable to focus its efforts on specific issues; with a fragmented exile community, where the greatest power is precisely held by those who earn money while stirring the conflicts between Cubans in Cuba and Cubans in Miami.

Cuba after Castro is, in essence, worse than the one before. The evils are always the same, but without a messianic leader and without a symbol to cling to. Cuba after Castro is also, inescapably, the beginning of the end. A matter of biology. Nothing else.

# WE JUST HAVE TO KEEP WAITING

JULIO CÉSAR FARIÑAS PÉREZ

The current situation in Cuba indicates that there will be little to no change in economic and political participation.

February 2018 was seen by Cubans and foreigners alike as the designated date for beginning of the political transition period in Cuba. The announcement of the retirement of the “historic generation” was seen as a moment of reflection.

Some political scientists have speculated that this transition would be complex, and would not be as sudden as some may have naively predicted. The issue is how to dismantle an authoritarian political system that has for more than 50 years strived to implement new measures, means and methods to keep the nation under its firm control.

The new president of the Cuban nation, Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez, is a politician aligned ideologically with his predecessors. He is a man that is professionally qualified, who taught at a university. Academically gifted as stated by students and co professors from his time at University. He participated in an international mission in Nicaragua and, upon his return to the island, he became involved in Cuban politics and climbed its ranks, first in the Union of Young Communists and then in the Cuban Communist Party. Raul Castro himself said that Diaz-Canel was the only “survivor” of a group of people that had been

chosen to be gradually given the reigns of the island.

After analyzing the position in which Diaz-Canel finds himself, it can be concluded that it’s a difficult position. Internal and external actors have been observing him and many have notable expectations of him. The traditional political elites and the military commanders are constantly monitoring his projections and development as a leader because they know perfectly well that he is capable of changing the political and economic privileges they currently enjoy. The new Cuban leader is well aware that he is under constant surveillance and supervision from the old guard.

The international community is paying close attention to how Diaz-Canel performs. He is expected to enact at some point in his presidency (not in the near future) real economic, political and social reform in Cuba. The issue is not as stagnant as it may seem.

**Diaz-Canel is someone who is ideologically aligned with his predecessors**

The country’s historical generation today “hands over” the reins of power to the “young continuators” of a country that is deteriorated. The political situation is complex, independent citizen

participation is very limited, and the activities of the independent civil society where proposals are generated (realistic

or not) are considered a threat to the values of independence and sovereignty of the Cuban nation.

Cuban diplomacy is already losing its credibility, the progressive (yet insufficient) opening of the country, like allowing Cubans to travel and access information on the internet, have allowed the Cuban reality to be disseminated in a direct manner by the Cubans themselves. The international community, even “allied” countries, have begun to perceive Cuba in a different way. Relations with the United States are frozen; there are issues that need to be resolved, like the health and safety of US diplomats at the embassy in Havana.

The economic situation is perhaps one of the greatest burdens facing the Cuban people today and it is one of the more complex issues to resolve, because of the interests behind it and the sensitive

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**The international community (including allied countries) have begun to perceive Cuba in a different way**

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politics that some reforms may generate. A foreign investment law, approved more than four years ago, has not been able to fulfill its objective, the external funds needed to capitalize the national economy are still insufficient, for objective reasons such as legal boundaries and due to the people in charge of managing the process. The problem does not lie in the dual currency system that is used in Cuba (CUC and CUP, note: 1 CUC = 24 CUP). The difficulty lies in the equalization of both currencies in the business sector and consequent distortion of financial information, which limits the ability of the actors to easily elucidate the profitable business of the defaulter. Business efficiency is in general a serious national problem.

At a social level, conditions are just as complex. A nation that won the recognition and acceptance (at the time) of many countries and political actors for some achievements in social sectors such as education, health, sports, culture, social security and others, today cannot show off such advances. All of these activities are included in the state budget, so they depend on the stability and economic well-being of the nation. The failure of the economic model has influenced the lack of spending in these areas and the infrastructure of the facilities is in critical condition. The raw materials necessary for any upgrade are in scarce or in poor condition. The attention to human capital in general is poor and salaries are extremely low. What was once a jewel and pride of the nation and its “Revolution”, today is heavily deteriorated. The situation

becomes more complex especially since any real economic reforms are distant.

All signs indicate that the expected transition must still wait. A process of this kind, and with a peaceful character, must have the support of the main political actors and the general population. Under the current scenario, any real changes towards the economic, political and general participation of all citizens are unlikely. The physical, real and decisive presence of the

most conservative generation within the communist party is still perceived as the dominant force in the state structure. Even though there is some desire for change, it is currently not feasible. Premature emergence of this change may even be the main factor of an anticipated failure. New political figures must emerge, others must yield space and facilitate their experience and preparation.



*Poema Visual de Francis Sánchez*

# YANELIS NÚÑEZ

by Agnes Koleman



“Alternative art that questions the status quo remains left to its fate”

*Yanelis Núñez, organizer of the first alternative Biennial of Havana: #00Bienal*

When the Cuban government announced that there would be no Biennial in Havana in 2018 due to the unforeseen expenses incurred during the recovery from damages caused by Hurricane Irma, a group of young artists decided to organize their own “Biennial Arteriativa.” Despite the challenge of organizing a completely independent event in an area controlled by the state institutions, the #00Biennial was successfully held in May.

**What is the most important lesson you’ve learned by organizing the #00Biennial?**

That the people are there, waiting, longing to become a part of a project that resonates with them. The issue of bringing people together within an artistic/political gesture is very difficult because of all the fear and apathy that exists in Cuba, and all the more so when trying to involve artists receiving privileges from the state institutions with artists who do political activism or that simply are completely outside of the official system. This is something very new on the island and I think we succeeded because the project was sincere and responded to the feelings of everyone.

**What has been the best thing about #00Biennial? And what was the worst thing?**

The best thing is that the government

allowed us to do the #00Biennial. Even though that doesn’t necessarily mean that things are changing, it did offer us the possibility of establishing a precedent so that people, not only from the art world, but also from other segments of society, might have more confidence in their personal projects and might be able to work with less fear.

The worst? All the pressure (repression) exerted by the Cuban government during the creative process and development of #00Biennial. It was distressing and exhausting.

**Who turned out to be your most controversial artist? Why?**

I could cite several names, because in this controversial #00Biennial not only were there individuals who made a piece of work that was more controversial than the rest, politically speaking, but there were also people who have left their comfort zone, risking their status and their safety, to mobilize a wide range of differing opinions.

One of the most prominent in this regard was Reynier Leyva Novo. With the work, “Don’t keep me if I die, let my bones be donated to the cause,” he managed to cause unrest in Cuban institutions, but through an act of love and altruism, something for which they are not prepared. The piece consisted of the donation of 3800

CUC to the #00Biennial of Havana. He earned the money through the sale of his work. “Don’t keep me if I die,” which was recently purchased by the National Plastic Arts Council.

**The #00Biennial has already been put on with the presence of a new president (Díaz-Canel). Do you think that this has influenced in some way its development?**

I think that it did influence things because perhaps there was a greater desire to show the new president in a good light on an international level, but this does not mean that there really is a climate of greater freedom. The government allowed the event to take place but gave it the worst coverage in the world so that people wouldn’t participate or attend. Not only did they use their network of cultural institutions to threaten anyone that possibly got involved (including private copy shops) but they used the national press to declare us as the enemy. That had not happened on other occasions and it is something very worrying.

**So, the art world is not going to be freer with Díaz-Canel?**

In Cuba it is very difficult to have any kind of guarantee on the implementation and lifespan of any policy, be it good or bad. We are constantly living with the uncertainty of a change towards a more harmful reality. But for everything we saw before

and during #00Biennial (the confiscation of pieces of art and promotional materials, the sequestering of works of international artists in customs, arbitrary arrests, the prohibition of artists and journalists entering the country, the stripping of Cuban artists of their official registration as artists - something that gives them a legal status on the island - the projection in art academies of defamatory videos about the organizers of the event, etc.) tells us that Díaz-Canel’s position will be harsher towards anything that calls into question the system.

**In your opinion, what role have women artists played in #00Biennial? And in Cuban art in general?**

There were women present in all the important parts involved in the organization and development of the event: promotion, technical production, design, edition, documentation. But also, they were there participating as visual artists, curators or historians, and of course as members of the general public.. Although #00Biennial did not have a particular theme, most of the women who presented works had an activist stance with respect to gender issues in each of their respective contexts.

There we could find the Mexican artist Yvelin Buenrostro with the work “Santoral,” where she made a study of the femicides committed in her country during 2017. Iris Ruiz (Cuba). with “Attached Files”, which portrays her status as a mother of 6 homeless children.

Through this piece of art, Iris and her partner, the poet and performer Amaury Pacheco, denounce the irregularities of the Cuban legal system through their experience as part of the OKUPA movement.

I could also mention Keyezua, an Angolan woman who, through her video installation “Beautiful People Know,” criticizes the permanence of the structure of racism in contemporary society.

The list is much longer but in general, the energy of #00Biennial managed to bring together a significant group of women who do not perform works or art that we could call “decorative” and that made us very happy because this form of creative expression is close to our way of understanding culture.

With regard to the role they have played in the history of Cuban art, I think they have been able to take advantage of the loopholes in which they have been able to sneak into the dominant patriarchal structure. They have had to overcome machismo, stereotypes, sexual harassment and, of course, the persecution by the Cuban government.

**Do you think that art can change Cuba? Why?**



*Exhibition #Bienal00, photo by Yanelis Núñez*

I think that today art can provide tools, help eliminate fear, and speak about subjects that you aren’t allowed to discuss in any other space, but only that. And I think this, because right now art that is about questioning or that is alternative is being abandoned to its fate.

For example, the new wave of negotiations between the Cuban government and some European countries has resulted in a number of cultural projects, managed by the embassies, that sustained Cuban art in recent decades, changing their policies and dismissing anyone who works outside the Cuban institutions. As a result, any independent project that wants to be rebellious or simply develop outside of the official channels, will be stillborn.

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