

# The Performance Art of Carlos Martiel: The Political Body and Social Change

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Carlos Martiel, a Havana-born, New York based performance artist, is receiving well-earned international attention thanks to his visceral, direct, and unmistakably honest performance art. Through his politically charged work, Martiel sheds light on issues of urgent relevance in the context of today's dehumanized contemporary landscape. In fact, the Afro-Cuban performance artist displays works which scream as loud as an animated protester in the streets, despite their innocuously, yet strategic, silent and motionless characteristics.

The political nature of Martiel's creativity can be traced back to his studies at the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (Behavior Art School) under the guidance of Tania Bruguera, one of Cuba's most well-known artists. In the context of *Arte Útil* (Useful Art), the program envisioned art as an "instrument" for the transformation of people's sociopolitical ideologies and the activation of civic action.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Martiel's educational background can only partly justify his protest as creative practice. In an interview with Marivi Veliz, Martiel mentioned how performance has come to represent the outlet through which he expresses a deeply felt sense of discomfort coming from his lived experience as a black gay man in a stigmatizing racist and homophobic world.<sup>2</sup> Through his work, Martiel goes beyond his personal identity, representing through his very body what author Marelys Valencia has defined as «the fragility of guarantees for non-white bodies subjected to historical violence», that is, immigrant, indigenous, black and queer bodies.<sup>3</sup>

1 Tania Bruguera. *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*. Tania Bruguera, <<https://taniabruquera.com/catedra-arte-de-conducta-behavior-art-school/#AC123>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

2 Marivi Veliz. *Carlos Martiel with Marivi Veliz*. The Miami Rail, <<https://miamirail.org/winter-2014/carlos-martiel/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

3 Marelys Valencia, *Carlos Martiel and the Transnational Politics of the Black Body*, «Parse», I, 10 (2020), p. 1. <<https://parsejournal.com/article/carlos-martiel-and-the-transnational-politics-of-the-black-body/#post-6293-endnote-22>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

In this essay I select and analyze four performances from Carlos Martiel's vast body of work. In line with all of Martiel's works, I consider the chosen performances as a practice of art as much as a practice of politics. My intention is to illustrate how Martiel's performance art investigates the body as a site of possibility, resistance and denunciation. With works which condemn power structures while educating and sensitizing spectators, I also demonstrate how Martiel's work exemplifies performance art's power as artistic activism to bring about social betterment. In this sense, I will define how the centrality of Martiel's body in his performance art has the potential to be a powerful agent for social change.

I will prove my point by approaching Carlos Martiel's performances with an attention to the careful choreographic choices of movement (or non-movement), space, time and audience. In so doing, I explore how such choreographing contributes to the impact generated by Martiel's presence on audience members during his performances. Thus, in the first section of the essay, I study Martiel's physical interference and nonviolent interjection between audience members in the work *Segregation*, focusing on the frequent use of nudity and stillness in his work. Next, I turn to another familiar element in his performance, the enactment of pain and suffering, at times self-inflicted, specifically in *Simiente*. I lay out the theoretical foundations of affect theory which enables an emotional encounter between Martiel and the audiences, vivifying the profound and moving experience of the spectator. In the following section, I look at *Sentence* and *Aparecido*, analyzing Martiel's performances as definitions of protest and artistic activism. In the final section, I look at contrasting views on the validity of art activism as a catalyst for change, clarifying how we might understand such change and the role of art, amid artistic censorship, in its process.

### *Black Naked Body Interference*

In 2015, Carlos Martiel presented a work entitled *Segregation* at the Samsøen gallery in Boston, USA. Below follows his detailed description of the performance:

I stood in the center of the gallery between two barbed wire barricades that separated me from the public and divided the space into two areas. Each area had an independent entryway: the first one permitted the entrance of U.S. born whites and Europeans, while the second one permitted the entrance of blacks, latinos, Asian and Middle Eastern people, as well as any individual who was not European or born U.S. white. People were not allowed to mix for the whole duration of the performance.

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Photos by Nabeela Vega depict Martiel's fully naked body standing in stillness, facing the Caucasian crowd in an unperturbed expression whilst giving his back to the non-white spectators. Positioning himself in this particular way, Martiel conforms his Afro-Caribbean identity of Haitian and Jamaican descendant to the rest of the bodies of color behind him. Nevertheless, Martiel's body does not comply with either group: isolated in his barricaded strip, with people on both sides facing him, the artist becomes the subject of spatial interference and visual tension between the two divisions.

In her analysis of non-violent direct interventions in the context of American protests, dance scholar Susan L. Foster foregrounds social justice movements' successful deployment of physical interference through a dependence on – and training of – the physical body; citing pacifist Gene Sharp, Foster confirms the simple yet powerful ability of the body to create physical



Fig. 1. *Segregation*

interference.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, by taking away spectators' choice of where to position themselves in space, Martiel produces a confrontational setting which culminates in the attention drawn to his central presence, perceived as physical interference. Furthermore, one of the twelve methods of physical intervention outlined by Sharp in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* is «Nonviolent interjection», in which the body is placed between a person and his opponent, path, or the object of his work.<sup>5</sup> With his vertical stance and fully controlled stillness, Martiel's occupation of the in-between space where the white and non-white groups' gazes meet exemplifies Sharp's definition of nonviolent interjection. However, in *Segregation*, in contrast to cases of nonviolent physical interjections, the separated groups on either side of the room do not hold the desire to reach, confront, or challenge the opposite group. Despite this, it becomes apparent how such intention is at least noticed, perhaps acknowledged, once participants come to understand the face-to-face, segregated setting of the space they've entered, provided by Martiel's strategic choreographing of audience. The recreated confrontation is, quite unambiguously, about racial division. From the very beginning of the performance, audience members are asked to go in this or that direction based on the color of their skin, a destabilizing request for 21st century Americans and an uncomfortable reproduction of the Jim Crow era. Already through their separation, personal, communal and traumatic histories are awakened in the spectators' underlying consciousness as they witness Martiel's stoic, non-responsive stillness and silence.

The impact of Martiel's physicality is made stronger by his naked body, which the artist addressed in an interview with Fernando Pichardo: «The naked has always been and will be a liberation for me. To undress is to remove filters, hierarchies of power, prejudices in relation to one's own body and that of others. In an initial moment [it] was the way I had to accept my body in a society that has stigmatized the Afro-descendant».<sup>6</sup> For the Cuban artist, to undress is primarily a way of accepting his identity in a society which fails to

<sup>4</sup> Susan L. Foster, *Choreographies of Protest*, «Theatre Journal», LV, 3 (2003), p. 395.

<sup>5</sup> Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Porter Sargent Publishers, Boston 1973, pp. 382-387. In the section «Nonviolent interjection», Sharp provides a list of nonviolent interjection strategies, documenting various historical examples for each. The citation to Sharp's book works to bring Carlos Martiel's performance art, specifically *Segregation*, closer to the interventions created by nonviolent interjection, both in terms of visual appeal and intention.

<sup>6</sup> Fernando Pichardo, *Carlos Martiel Makes Sacrifices With His Body to Criticize the World*. Steve Turner, <steveturner.la/17293/news/carlos-martiel-5>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

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do so, given that nakedness is a state in which there is no possibility of hiding. In Martiel's experience, to undress becomes the outmost act of honesty and vulnerability, not only towards himself, but also towards others. By removing all filters, Martiel wants to dismantle the sense of otherness that marginalizes the bodies of people of color based on white supremacist systems of representation and power. Through the complete surrender to his material, physical humanity, Martiel doesn't only engage in a liberative act, but he revives the recognition of sameness between humans, therefore calling upon that vanishing ideal of equality we are constantly grappling with.

I will now turn to another consistent element in Martiel's performance art, the representation and experience of pain and suffering.

### *Vulnerability Threshold: Agency through Pain*

Nudity is not the only consistent element in Martiel's performance art: shedding blood, pierced, wounded and sewn skin, constrictive spaces, physical and mental discomfort, often appear as well. Yet Martiel is not the only one among many other performance artists, from old generations to more contemporary ones, celebrating self-inflicted pain through hazardous art: in a 2019 *Hyperallergic* article, writer Chris Dupuis inserted Martiel's work in the self-harm performance art tradition started in the 1970s by artists such as Chris Burden and Marina Abramović.<sup>7</sup> It is through these raw performances that Martiel voices the conflicts «suffered by individuals that generally don't have a way or channel to express how these affect them».<sup>8</sup>

In 2014, Martiel presented a work called *Simiente* (Seed), at the Defibrillator Gallery in Chicago, USA. The artist's naked body lay in a fetal position entirely covered by human blood donated by immigrant people from Mexico, Estonia, Italy, Venezuela, England, South Korea and the United States.<sup>9</sup> With his hands joined in prayer, this agonizing image strikes the heart of viewers. Disturbing and moving simultaneously, Martiel's *Simiente* forces us to pay attention to the body, the artist's body and our bodies. In proximity to Martiel, we become aware of our feelings, particu-

<sup>7</sup> Chris Dupuis, *From Marina Abramović to Carlos Martiel, a Tradition of Self-Harm in Performance Art*, «Hyperallergic», <<https://hyperallergic.com/493380/from-marina-abramovic-to-carlos-martiel-a-tradition-of-self-harm-in-performance-art/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Marivi Veliz, *Carlos Martiel with Marivi Veliz*, «The Miami Rail», <<https://miamirail.org/winter-2014/carlos-martiel/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Carlos Martiel, *Simiente*, «Carlos Martiel» <<http://www.carlosmartiel.net/seed/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

larly the sense of compassion which naturally arises in us in front of such an anguishing image and a key emotion in the successful delivery of Martiel's message. This passage of a state of emotions from one body – Martiel's – to other bodies – the spectators' – corresponds to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's affect theory, specifically the notion of «affection», defined as «an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body».<sup>10</sup> In *Simiente*, this encounter of bodies, with their own cosmos of emotion, is permitted through the entryway of pain represented by Martiel. It is by measuring the emotional resonance of Martiel's performances that we might understand how depicted scenes of pain and suffering in his work, as in *Simiente*, represent a path to a deeper purpose: speaking directly to audiences' empathy and humanity. Pain holds no centrality in the work, it is transcended to allow an energetic connection and an emotional encounter to take place between artists and witnesses.<sup>11</sup> Through *Considerations on pain and suffering in VestAndPage's performance art*, which analyzes the work of the artistic duo of Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes, we might further understand why artists such as Carlos Martiel are continuously representing this sense of sacrifice through their embodied performances:



Fig. 2. *Simiente*

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translation and foreword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1978, p. 8 [*Mille plateaux*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1980].

<sup>11</sup> Marivi Veliz, *Carlos Martiel with Marivi Veliz*, «The Miami Rail» <<http://miamirail.org/winter-2014/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

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By going into the flesh of their bodies, VestAndPage try and reach the political, social and fragile bodies of others. Their [...] acts are never shock-tactics to impress. Instead, they aim to create poetic live images that provoke reflection in the viewer [...] 'to sacrifice' is also a way to become more consistent, compatible and no longer opposed to the others.<sup>12</sup>

The ultimate goal, then, is not to create extreme or traumatic experiences for the audience, but to access inner and outer outlets of pain by leveraging spectators' sense of compassion to the otherwise stranger, invisible *other*. Breaking through the threshold of human vulnerability, Martiel creates representations that move and generate inexplicable and conflicting feelings in those who watch him, from anger to sadness, from surprise to fear. With his impactful works, Martiel inspires a sense of both personal and communal agency to be found within one's self, within one's body. It is through the body that political issues are addressed in Martiel's art in the most authentic, honest way, in a way that voices the truths of our time.

In such contexts, the performance apparatus proves to be an incredible opportunity for changing the way in which we typically encounter such destabilizing images, given that it enables the viewer to react differently from a real-life situation. Having entered a state of sensitivity and empathy towards this motionless, apparently helpless body, we hold back an instinctive rescuing reaction, which typically occurs in dramatic experiences. We are relieved of the responsibility of having to take action and we are invited to do nothing but *be present*. It is with this subconscious realization that something different than usual can happen inside the spectator. Valencia pointed out how *Simiente* «draws attention to the machinery that exploits certain bodies, confining them to “death worlds”: indentured servitude, deplorable living conditions, and human trafficking».<sup>13</sup> It is thanks to the body's affective dimension, and the instinctive identification of our humanity through Martiel's humanity, that we are able to awaken our consciousness in front of the historical suffering of black, immigrant bodies from the Global South, which we see and feel in the blood circumscribing the performance space. By touching our emotional intelligence, Martiel accesses our cognitive intelligence, bringing attention to the historical inhumanity endured by immigrants around the

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Pagnes, Felipe Henrique Monteiro Oliveira, Amber Rose Ellis, Aisha Ryannon Pagnes, *Considerations on pain and suffering in VestandPage's performance art*, «Repertório Livre», XXII, 32 (2019), pp. 266-300.

<sup>13</sup> Marelys Valencia, *Carlos Martiel and the Transnational Politics of the Black Body*, «Parse», I, 10 (2020), p. 1, <<https://parsejournal.com/article/carlos-martiel-and-the-transnational-politics-of-the-black-body/#post-6293-endnote-22>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.



globe. In a world that is indifferent in the face of the tragedies of our times, what the artist does is refine our apathetic sensitivity.

*Displaced Bodies: Performance of Protest*

In this section I continue to analyze Martiel's employment of the body as a political apparatus, now shifting my focus from works presented inside the white walls of artistic and cultural institutions to those presented outside. Specifically, I look at two of Martiel's site-specific, public performances, *Sentence* (2014) and *Aparecido* (2016), in order to explore how they work at the edge of contemporary performance art and art activism, in the form of both performance art and nonviolent protest.

During the three-hour performance *Sentence*, Martiel's body lies on a sidewalk entirely covered in a concrete blanket in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Miami, Florida. Overtown, «a center of urban decay, poverty, and crime» since the 1980s, once served as Miami's black cultural mecca.<sup>14</sup> Due to urban renewal and particularly the construction of Interstate 95 cutting directly through the neighborhood, dozens and dozens of blocks were destroyed and approximately 30,000 African-American community residents were forced to leave and consequently displaced. Martiel's performance took place in front of the Cannonball building, in a place where homeless people come together.<sup>15</sup> Unable to move under the heavy weight that blocks his body, Martiel attracts people who gather around him who, once again, are forced to comply with this moment



Fig. 3. *Sentence*

<sup>14</sup> Carlos Martiel, *Sentence*, «Carlos Martiel» <<http://www.carlosmartiel.net/sentence/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Marivi Veliz, *Carlos Martiel with Marivi Veliz*, «The Miami Rail», <<http://miamirail.org/winter-2014/>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.



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of stillness. Choreographing the usual covering of a dead person's body and the state of alert and murmur that it generates, Martiel's presence reminds us of those who are not there, the people who were forced to leave their homes, obstinately implanting himself in the neighborhood in an act of resistance. Additionally, Martiel's concrete blanket also recalls the difficulty of escaping the condition of homelessness, a sentence to poverty, unhealthy living conditions and, oftentimes, illness and death.

Similarly, in the same year, Martiel created *Eviction*, which denounced the gentrification process happening in Willets Point, New York, where mostly Hispanic immigrants live. In that instance, Martiel's body, covered in dirt and waste, was forcefully dragged outside of the industrial neighborhood throughout the performance. With performance works like *Sentence* and *Eviction*, Martiel condemns the urban redevelopment processes in major US cities like Miami and New York, which gave little to no consideration to those living in unprivileged communities, cruelly taking away their homes and livelihood.<sup>16</sup>

Another category of displaced bodies is then touched upon through the work entitled *Aparecido*. During this performance, the fully naked body of Carlos Martiel walks through the historic center of Guadalajara, Mexico, from the Cathedral to the Government Palace, covered in the ashes of clothing that belonged to missing people donated to him by their relatives. According to the data confirmed in 2022 by the United Nations, there are currently over 100,000 recorded missing people or desaparecidos in Mexico, of which three quarters are male.<sup>17</sup> By simply walking through the institutions of Guadalajara, Martiel sheds light on this politically delicate subject, paying tribute to the outrageous number of displaced bodies and deaths that ongoing drug violence has brought on. As the title of the work suggests, Martiel's presence in the streets becomes the reappearance of a missing body back to life, revived from the abyss of the State's amnesia. With his walk, Martiel dares to condemn the power held by cartels and drug trafficking networks, considered responsible for the disappearances

<sup>16</sup> Yelaine Rodriguez, *Afro-Latinx at NYU: How Multiple Facets of Black Latinidad Are Claiming Space within Visual Culture*, «Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture», III, 2 (2021) pp. 50-59.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights, *Mexico's 100,000 'disappeared' is a tragedy, says UN right chief Bachelet*, «United Nations UN News Global perspectives Human stories», <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1118382#:~:text=The%20news%20that%20more%20than%20100%2C000%20people%20in,for%20action%20to%20tackle%20the%20country%E2%80%99s%20longstanding%20problem.>> Accessed October 22nd 2023.

in Mexico. In addition, he denounces the government's lack of action and ineffective investigation on the front.

As with *Segregation* and *Simiente*, Martiel's dependence on his body in relation to nudity, stillness, silence and duration in *Sentence* and *Aparecido*, vivifies these works' potential to be viewed as art as well as protest. It is perhaps the outside setting of *Sentence* and *Aparecido* that further eases the established



Fig. 4. *Aparecido*

division between performance and activism, allowing us to better conceive these works as direct, nonviolent political interventions. Inevitably, the problem of definition is called into question: from a purely strategic point of view, the naming of such works as performance, and not protest, enables their full development without the possibility of disruption or interruption by state officials. It is interesting to wonder if, by intending such performances as activist interventions, their enactment would still go untouched. These considerations lead us to a third, possible definition of Martiel's work, the multi-layered intersection of art and activism, meaning, art activism – or artistic activism, or activist art.

Such terms have been coined to define the work of activists engaging in

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a variety of artistic mediums with the intention of taking advantage of the power of art in generating Affect, whilst maintaining activism's objective to generate concrete Effect. Consequently, art activism's validity stands on the double efficiency of addressing both emotional and cognitive pathways, in this way generating Æffect.<sup>18</sup> Evidently characterized by political messages and the central role of the body, committed to a cause represented often in a harmful, sacrificial way, Martiel's work resembles art activism's nonviolent protest more than anything. His performance art and nonviolent protest, particularly in *Sentence* and *Aparecido*, generate both the kind of emotional resonance needed to shake people's hearts, and the cognitive thought stimulated by conscious reflection on his works. It is then no surprise that social justice researcher Michael Shank found common grounds to bind the work of activists to that of performance artists by stating that it is not unusual for art activists who engage in tactics of noncooperation, protest and direct action, to become performance artists.<sup>19</sup> In the same way, I contend that performance art that is politically active art, consciously or not enacting the above mentioned tactics, can also be viewed and analyzed as activism, specifically artistic activism.

This linkage between art and activism naturally emerges from young generations' more and more politically active and conscious approach to the world, which is reflected in the increasing number of artists, collectives and companies who engage in «strategic peacebuilding» (a term from the social justice field) in a multitude of ways: some, like Martiel, specifically utilize the strategy of «waging conflict nonviolently», attempting to increase «a group's power to address issues and ripening the ground for transformation»; others, such as the British dance company Stopgap or the Italian Onlus association Dynamo Camp, both committed to the cause of inclusivity and access in relation to disability, specifically utilize the strategy of «building capacity», meeting needs and rights of people and preventing violence through education, training, research and evaluation.<sup>20</sup> This may open up a terrain for further theoretical and practical investigation around the ways in which the work of performance artists and social justice movements are discussed, making the scholarly discourse of performance studies and social justice studies more malleable, more responsive to the

<sup>18</sup> Jiya Gupta, *Art Activism: Not Just Visual Appeal but a Catalyst for Social Change*, «International Journal of Advanced Research», IX, (2021), pp. 1029 segg.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Shank, *Redefining the Movement: Art Activism*, «Seattle Journal for Social Justice», III, 2 (2004), pp. 540 segg.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 545.

increasing emergence of artistic activist practices and to the blurring and overlapping of intentions, goals, methods and methodologies which both artists and activists are experiencing in relation to each others' work.

*The Transformative Power of Art Activism*

Whilst Carlos Martiel creates works like *Aparecido* and *Sentence*, denouncing, sensitizing and protesting for change, in *Notes on Performance art, the body, and the political*, Andrea Pagnes voices his concerns around performance art involved in social justice causes:

Contemporary performance art finds [it] difficult to trigger effective changes in society, if not acceptance and resignation by presenting the reality just as it is. Why? It seems to me that contemporary performance art, when for political denounce and cultural resistance, is shaped predictably in form of statement, sometimes even a deliberate statement, also naïve and too often over striven while lacking of aesthetic form.<sup>21</sup>

In the performance artist's view, contemporary performers limit their work to simply present or address the issue of interest, yet not taking practical action to make effective change happen. It might be helpful, admittedly in opposition to one of the intents of this essay, to state that there is a lot that performance *cannot* do, at least practically speaking. Yet, it is important to notice how this view tends to identify change only with decisive moments in history (e.g., the approval of a new law), rather than with the gradual process that it is, the result of a long series of actions, failures and hard-earned successes, which always starts from people's consciousness. To my point, author Jiya Gupta writes: «Creating and sustaining lasting change demands a change in values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior, that is: cultural change. While changing laws and policies are essential, laws will not be followed, nor policies enacted unless people have internalized the values that lie behind them».<sup>22</sup> It is in people's hearts and minds that a transformation of this kind shall take place before we can expect any practical change to happen at the administrative and political level. Art, in all its forms and as a highly influential part of culture, with its ability to connect people, tell

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Pagnes. *Notes on Performance art, the body and the political*, «Research Catalogue: An International Database for Artistic Research», 2017, <<http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/343455/343456/0/0>>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Jiya Gupta, *Art Activism: Not Just Visual Appeal but a Catalyst for Social Change*, «International Journal of Advanced Research», IX, (2021), p. 1029 sgg.

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the stories that need to be heard, provide moving experiences, suggest ways of cultivating empathy and humanity, is a powerful instrument to serve such transformation of individuals and societies. When being asked whether he considers himself an activist, Carlos Martiel answered:

I think that art that has at the center the body, the desire for social change that fosters social justice always has an activist charge. Even if the impact of art is always on a smaller scale, it has the possibility to change reality, to raise awareness and politicians know this very well; for this reason, they have repressed and sent so many artists into exile. My work has influenced the ways in which the people close to me, my family, perceive their every-day reality and how they express themselves in respect to it. In this context, I consider myself an activist.<sup>23</sup>

Here, whilst acknowledging that the concrete changes that art works can trigger are «always on a smaller scale», Martiel addresses a key point, one which supports this paper's intention to demonstrate performance art as artistic activism to educate and sensitize audience members on topics concerning politics and society.<sup>24</sup> Martiel's answer also makes us question: if art does not represent a threat to politics and power, if it is unable to inspire the sense of urgency for change needed in our societies, why would figures in positions of power be interested in censoring art works and detaining artists in communist countries like Cuba? Martiel is particularly sensitive to the injustices happening to artists in his native land who, just like him, engage in «the realization of artwork that is socially engaged, that refuses [to] become evasive or silent before the abuses of power».<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Cuba is not alone in violating the basic human right of freedom to artistic and creative expression.

As documented by the 2021 Freemuse report, an independent international organization that advocates for the freedom of artistic expression, in the year 2021 alone there were 38 recorded murders of artists in 12 countries, the highest reported number in recent years. Furthermore, there were 293 acts of violation in North and South America, 106 of which in Cuba. In the same year, 59 Cuban artists were detained and 8 Cuban artists were imprisoned, 7 of whom were prosecuted.<sup>26</sup> Tania Bruguera

<sup>23</sup> Jorge Sánchez, *El ser negro de Carlos Martiel*. *Revista del ICP*, «Instituto de Cultura Perorriqueña», III, 6 (May 2017), pp. 21-34 segg.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Marivi Veliz, *Carlos Martiel with Marivi Veliz*, «The Miami Rail», <miamirail.org/winter-2014/carlos-martiel/>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Freemuse, *The State of Artistic Freedom*, «Freemuse», 2022, pp. 8-20. <<https://freemuse.org/>>

was one of those affected by the country's highly centralized and controlling government. In December 2018 she was arrested along with other artists with whom she intended to coordinate a peaceful protest in front of the Ministry of Culture against Cuba's law 'Decree 349'. As covered by the publication «Art Under Pressure», Decree 349 builds on an existing body of laws and regulations that control the work of officially recognized artists, while codifying and widening the scope of artistic censorship. Among many other troubling details, Decree 349 requires anyone involved in artistic activity to be registered by government affiliated cultural institutions, making unregistered, and currently independent, freelance labor illegal; it legalizes the intimidatory practices of a designated board of inspectors to determine the legitimacy of the work and potentially confiscate material, equipment and space, all of this while breaking Cuba's international treaty commitments and obligations with respect to freedom of expression and artistic freedom.<sup>27</sup> It is because of this decree that in 2019 Martiel returned to his homeland to protest at the 13th Havana Biennial with his work *La sangre de Caín* (Caín's blood), in an effort to participate in the ongoing protests of artists and activists on the island.

### *Conclusive Thoughts*

The emotional impact of Martiel's work moves hearts, people and communities. In a moment in history defined by wars, climate and economic crisis, continued exploitation and subjugation of people, unjust violence and tragic deaths, art like the one offered by Martiel must absolutely be seen and valued in light of its transformative power. By witnessing Martiel's performance art we can feel the spectrum of our discarded emotional landscape and connect to a shared sense of humanity, thanks to the body's affective dimension. Performance artists and art activists must continue to use their sensitivity towards the socio-political issues we are currently facing in order to shape the cultural change we need. Starting from a transformation in people's consciousness, performance art as a practice

media/yk2paxxb/saf-report-2022.pdf>. Accessed October 22nd 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Laritza Diversent, Laura Kauer García, Andra Matei, Julie Trébault, *Art Under Pressure: Decree 349 Restricts Creative Freedom in Cuba*, «Artists at Risk Connection», 2019, pp. 4-5, <[http://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Art-Under-Pressure\\_online.pdf](http://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Art-Under-Pressure_online.pdf)>. This research was conducted thanks to Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), which manages a coordination and information-sharing hub that supports, unites, and advances the work of organizations that assist artists at risk globally, as well as Cubalex, a nonprofit organization that focuses on legal issues in Cuba.

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of art activism has the ability to influence our worldview and contribute to collective change. With the collaborative work of artists, politicians, institutions, organizations and activists, common goals can be reached in the name of social betterment. In particular, activists, artists, and art activists, both individuals and organizations, must take advantage of the shared work already being done, going beyond the categorizations which separate the fields and working together to generate *Æffect*. Martiel's work, which I have analyzed as both performance art and nonviolent protest, exemplifies such potential, employing the body to denounce violence and find new possibilities for change through personal and communal agency. It is through the enactment of Decree 349 and the information from the Freemuse organization, that I intended to prove the recognition of artistic activism's transformative power and the perceived fear by those who hold authority positions in politics. It is because of the repressing and silencing efforts against artists such as Carlos Martiel that we know that government institutions want to maintain power and exercise control over the people by eliminating art that succeeds in offering knowledge, raising awareness and sensitization around the injustices the State is often responsible for, if not silent or inconclusive. Conclusively, we have seen not only how Carlos Martiel's performance art exploits the body as a powerful site for political denunciation, but also how effective the human body can be in evoking empathy and making a deep connection with its spectators, in an effort to prompt social change.