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Cuban artists denied entry to United States

Is clampdown part of the "war on terror"?

NEW YORK. In the past four months, 11 Cuban artists have been denied visas to enter the United States because of political concerns. A spokesperson for the US State Department told *The Art Newspaper* that "under the Patriot Act, visa applications from Cuba, a state sponsor of terrorism, are subject to special screening procedures".

Artists whose work was included in recent exhibitions in New York at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum at Queens College, the non-profit space Exit Art, and the commercial gallery Magnan Projects were refused admission into the US to install their work and to attend the exhibition openings.

The USA Patriot Act, signed into law by President Bush in October 2001 with several provisions taking effect in December 2005, has expanded the authority of US law enforcement to fight terrorism and amended existing immigration laws.

"From 1993 until 2003 I travelled to the US three to four times a year," says the Cuban-born artist Alexandre Arrechea. But his visa has been denied three times since 2004, most recently for his solo exhibition at Magnan Projects (until 20 October). "Even directly after 11 September I didn't have problems entering the US," he said. "There was intellectual exchange between the US and Cuba before. Now the US government makes you take sides—you're either with us or against us."

Other artists like Victor Casaus, director of Havana's Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau, have travelled to the US previously, but the Patriot Act has made it increasingly difficult for Cuban nationals to arrive on US shores.

Cuba has been on the US State Department's list of "state sponsors of terrorism" since 1982 and current US immigration law prohibits admission "to any individual whose entry would be detrimental to the interest of the US", a designation that Cuban citizens automatically fall under. The other four nations currently on the list are Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

Cultural exchange between the US and Cuba was encouraged under an initiative called "People-to-People Contact" expanded by President Clinton in 1999. The programme was intended to promote democracy in Cuba through international exchange and was meant to co-exist with the US-imposed trade embargo on Cuba.

But President Bush then directed the Department of Homeland Security to strengthen travel restrictions, beginning in October 2003. The US Treasury Department consequently stopped issuing Cuban "People-to-People" travel licenses in December 2003.



Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea has been denied a US visa three times since 2004 (above, his *Architectural Elements*, 2004)

When we asked a State Department official if the US policy was designed to put pressure on the Cuban government, the spokesperson responded: "As we have consistently stated, any deepening of our engagement with Cuba depends on an opening of dialogue between the Cuban government and its people and the Cuban regime's willingness to take concrete steps toward a political opening and transition to democracy." Charmaine Picard