



FEATURES/ eye to eye

### **Oh, Behave**

tania bruguera on behavior art and breaking the rules

*By Frances Corry*

*Cuban-born Tania Bruguera has offered cocaine to viewers in Colombia, eaten dirt in Cuba, and played an individual game of Russian roulette in Venice. But the artist, who recently spoke at Miller Theatre in collaboration with Columbia University School of the Arts, isn't one to rely on spectacle. Her performance and installation art pieces examine their respective contexts, raising questions about power, identity, and censorship, while complicating an often-unquestioned awareness.*

*In 2009, she presented Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version) at the Havana Biennial. A simple backdrop, podium, and microphone were set up, with two actors dressed in Cuban military uniform standing behind, one holding a white dove. Two hundred disposable cameras were given out to document the event. Viewers were allowed to approach the podium and say anything for one minute without censorship. Surpass the time limit, and the actors forcefully removed the speaker. Citizens talked about freedom, about democracy—one person simply went up and cried. After this initial performance, the piece was shut down.*

In 2008 at London's Tate Modern museum, visitors were the unknown subjects of her piece *Tatlin's Whisper #5. Two trained policemen on horseback gave instructions to people standing in the lobby, using tactics employed in crowd control. Visitors simply and efficiently followed these directions, generally surprised but altogether compliant.*

The artist, who now divides her time between Chicago and Havana, is the founder of *Arte de Conducta*, or "Behavior Art," a creation that helped evolve her own pieces from individual performance to those that involve the spectator. It is a practice that has incited controversy and change, an art she will soon bring stateside in a project with New York-based organization Creative Time, which will examine the status of immigrants in the United States. She recently spoke to *The Eye* about this upcoming work, the usefulness of political art, and the valuable risk in pushing the envelope.

**Could you describe your work in general, and clarify what behavior art is, for those who don't know?**

Behavior art is basically a way of producing art in which the material is the reaction of people, how people think about things, and how people have been wired or conditioned to respond to things that happen. It's playing with that as material for the work. Either you increase the way they react or you try to challenge the way they have been set up to react, in order to think. Also, it is an art that understands that in society, behavior is the main communication tool. It's not that the artwork is in the reaction, but that the artwork could try to start some set of reactions or situations in which people have to take a stand on things. Hopefully, they are based on unresolved social issues. People either have already taken a position on things without thinking about them because they don't care, or they have already taken a position that I think could be re-thought.

**A lot of your behavior art does deal with your life in Cuba and the political situation there. How did your experiences in Cuba influence your use of politics in art?**

I think there are two different things. Yes, using politics in art is something that had everything to do with Cuba, because it's a place where that is inescapable. Even if you work on the street, it is considered political. It's inescapable to be seen as political, no matter what you do. Behavior was more of a reaction to my everyday performance. The first time I studied the history of performance, I was seeing Vito Acconci's writings, interviews and positions about art and behavior. Also, I was reading some Foucault at the time, and he was always referring to behavior as a way to understand and produce new meaning.

**Can you briefly explain your thesis project in Cuba, which entailed re-performing the work of Ana Mendieta?**

That piece was something I did and presented as my thesis at the Havana Art Institute in Cuba in '92. It is something I did for 10 years, from '85-'96. The thesis discussion was a big issue—which is, where is my creativity if all I do is copy somebody else's work? My argument was—and it's still my argument—that I don't create anything new, I try to redirect the way in which things are seen. I redirect points of view or archetypes of things or assumptions.

**Do you think any of your pieces would have had the same impact, were they exhibited in a different context? For example, would your piece at the Havana Biennial have still been effective if it were done at The Museum of Modern Art?**

I don't think so. What I'm interested in is not the way things look, but what they try to do. If I wanted to redo the piece at MoMA, I would have to try to find the equivalent in the United States. The feeling that you'd have the unique opportunity to bring something public that you are only allowing yourself to do in private—which in this case is talking about the government—would never be exactly the same. I don't think anything is exactly the same, ever. You are simply never able to reproduce the intensity of the **moment**.

**Are you ever fearful of political repercussion? For example, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was just put on house arrest because of his work—does this possibility ever cross your mind?**

I have been very close, but nothing has actually happened yet. In Colombia, for example, the minister of education asked to start a case because of my work. In Cuba, I have been threatened because I broke the law [because] you cannot use the material of the state for your own needs—they say the “material of the state” was the workers, the people, actual people. Up until now, I was very adamant on bringing things to the verge without actually getting caught. The rationale behind that was that I didn't want to [be seen], until now, as a political artist. I wanted to be seen as an artist. Things might change. The work has evolved where action is something political. If it's evolving to be really political, then that might have some consequences. It is interesting how very simple, small things that we can do, things that we don't see as complicated or political, are political in some **contexts**.

**Do you feel that the reactions of the citizens addressed in your work are usually positive, while perhaps the censorship is negative?**

I feel like the concepts of positive and negative or good and bad should not be used in the work, because in my work, I don't propose a judgment. It's actually like a blank page on which everybody can write. I have received aggression—negative in the sense of energy, not negative in the sense of good or bad, well behaved or badly behaved. It's more like effectiveness—is that work effective, **or not?**

**Do you go in with a specific goal to measure its effectiveness, or base it on whether it elicits a reaction or change of perception?**

It depends on the work. If I did something in Cuba, I can expect some of what the reactions will be, but I am surprised sometimes. With the piece in Havana, I was absolutely moved. I was very overwhelmed. Most of the time, people take over in ways I never expect. Right now, with the piece I am doing with immigrants, I know there are certain aspects that might be communicated, issues they have to deal with. They have a right to feel safe, and that's what I hope they feel in my work—feel safe to do what they want. You never know, people sometimes surprise you. They might come out with something repressed and put it out there, [something] you didn't **expect**.

**Could you elaborate more on the work you're doing with immigrants? It is a work in which I am trying to think about the representation of immigrants and also trying to think if it's possible to talk about a new trust. I want to come up with the issue of art and politics, and the relationship between activism and art. It's a project in which I will put out all the questions about the effectiveness of art, and how real art could be when it is political. I have a bunch of questions about the usefulness of art, and to what degree political art should get into politics as well.**

At the very beginning we are going to need a lot of young, interested people, immigrants or not, who want to engage in the research. We want to work with and for the immigrants. I am very cautious talking about it because I don't want to have a lot of pre-decided options. I think some of the problems of some artists that work socially is that they come to a very clear idea of what they want to do, and kind of force the place that they are going to work with into their idea. I prefer to have a sense of what I want to do, and then let the place and the people decide what needs **to be done**.

**Political art in America is much different than in some of the other places you've worked. What do you think makes censorship different in America, in comparison to that in places like Colombia or Cuba?**

It is that censorship is economical. What they threaten you with is not your physical freedom, but your economic freedom—the possibility of accessing a different way of life. If you start protesting, then you won't get a job. There are other ways to threaten you that I think are more subtle. If somebody's threatening you to put you in jail for what you think, it is very easy to have sympathy to challenge that. If somebody is saying "I don't want you to work anymore in my university, because I don't agree with your work," that is definitely harder to challenge. Then a lot of other things come into play, more subtleties: What do you do if you create a piece that your dean thinks is threatening the school? The students', or the parents' opinion of the school? What defense can you have to that? I don't know of a way which you can challenge that, for example. Maybe that's the next step.