

Arteamérica Debates

Arteamérica has among its sections a live space in which topical subjects in Latin American and Caribbean art are discussed. This site, whose web version is entitled *Debates*, offers in this number a meeting on the Catedra Arte de Conducta, a project led by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera who recounted Arteamérica the beginning and evolution of this experience.

We now offer in *Debates* a version of what happened there.

Text read by Tania Bruguera ¹ on her project Arte de Conducta during the second session of *Debates* held last March.

Arte de Conducta

I remember when I was in Chicago doing my mastership in performance I answered those who asked what I did, what a performance artist was. My conversational partners, when they were not part of the world of art, immediately asked me, very happily, whether I sang or danced and, in the best of cases, what theater plays I had taken part in. Rather sorry to disappoint them, I began to explain what I actually did and set some examples. That exercise helped me very much to think about the ineffectiveness of the term *performance*.

I began to look for a different way to name what I was doing, a different designation which, although not accurate, might at least be related with a given type of space and activity in society which were not entertainment or show.

The fact of being unable to pronounce the word performance well also made me think quite a lot whether I wanted to do something which I did not entirely master, precisely because, culturally, it did not belong to me.

At the time, I was reading for an Anthropology class a text by Foucault in which, once and again, in an almost excessive way, the author used the word

“behavior” as the cause, explanation and demonstration of events related with power.

My first work after graduating from ISA (the Higher Art Institute) in the summer of 1992 was at the ecologist foundation Tomas Sanchez was creating, specifically in its most Utopian program, which I considered the most beautiful: that of trying to transform the lives of a group of persons through art. This group was composed by minors with behavior problems at the Guanabacoa Conduct School.² In September that year, Arturo Montoto, head of the Painting Department at ISA, asked me to teach there. The intensity of what I experienced in the months I was sharing these two worlds simultaneously, made me think continuously in how far was the world of art from real life. Although it might deal with it as a topic, it was inoperative to actually transform something beyond its language itself, something of the small world to which it had access and to the privilege of accessing it.

The word “behavior” that until then I had seen only related to manners – twice seven years apart – came to me and was redefined: first, as the name of a school which actually was a mild prison, with no bars; second, as a statement of power. When looking for its translation, I saw it was also associated with movement, conduction, from one point to another.

At that time I decided to unite both worlds. My first attempt was to make more “realist” works, such as continuing Ana Mendieta’s project in a more radical way and creating the memory of postwar, where I intended, among other things, to transform some spaces in society through art.

Unfortunately, that path was thwarted and I began to make performances. I do not disown these works, but I do their morphology. I see them only as part of a process of learning and unlearning.

Performance is already an Academy with a tradition against which we should work.

Some artists have arrived at the same conclusion: Klein with his karate, Tina Modotti with her struggle, Duchamp with his chess, Beuys with his Green Party. What does art lack? What is it that is not enough?

When works enter into museums they die because their chances of various readings die. These are places where meanings are imposed through the power of the institution, precisely because of having endowed other works with meaning and having been able to sustain and legitimize it. Art becomes a chain of solutions to a language operating within its own language, almost like a science but without utilitarian possibilities.

Performances were an alternative since they put into crisis the legitimization strategies of the institution. This stage has ended and now performances represent instead of present.

There are many artists in the world who are doing behavior art for a long time now: Adrian Piper, David Hammons, Francis Alys, to mention some of the better known ones. There are others who have made some behavior works, although this is not the direction their artistic research goes.

Every once in a while I go back to ontological words which say: everything can be art and everyone can be an artist. Is naming it what differentiates it? Is it the authority and legitimacy of the person defining it? Is it the attitude? Or is it the awareness of the act? It has always been said that art may be anything, although its more widely used connotation is that of the technical ability of doing something in an unsurpassable way.

Artists are elements in society who are aware of the symbolic connotations of acts and gestures, they are students of meanings. Human beings talk through their behavior and this is the means they have to express and they are an element of society aware of the symbolic meanings and transcendence of their acts. To be artists is to be aware of this process, of behavior being their means of expression and of using it in an insurmountable way. And what receives the

name of artistic sensitivity is being open to and mindful of new combinations of meanings.

Power works with metaphors, while it is in behavior where society does its most fervent work of modeling meanings, it is also the battlefield of the means through which it expresses and the results of those battles are offered.

The places where definition is lacking are the best for art because of their possibilities of freedom and are, at the same time, the most feared by power precisely because of the difficulty of being able to apprehend them. This is why everything transforms into Academy and becomes a rule. The advantage I find in behavior as a creation element is its chance to be useful, its means of documentation and its transcendence.

Art has played with the possibility of being useful and has fallen into existential vacuums.

-Documentation, because although performances have made use of video and photography, their most important element, experience, cannot be captured and is lost. That form of documenting is a process in which an experience becomes an image and uses resources coming from the world of art. Perhaps a more effective way of documenting a performance (documentation as an instruction guide) is to redo it. There are two options: the historicist one, which would try to exactly reconstruct the action and would give us the perspective of a given time, and the other one: making the work contemporary by translating it to the new circumstances and places of exhibition. Behavior, however, works with experience turned into memory, oral tradition and rumor. What attracted me to performance was its possibility to be an experience that is documented through memory.

-Transcendence, because behavior blends into social life from one generation to the next without losing its meanings. What is valid in this case is that although this transcendence brings with it the loss of the original reference (the authorship), it does not lose its meaning or message but, on the contrary, is

open to more and newer ones. With the last thematic mega-exhibitions of impressionism and postimpressionism, just to mention an example, societies and the world of art are trying to do this: to incorporate into the daily referential world, for example, an image of Van Gogh's sunflowers. The popularization of a work of art from its position as a work of art cannot dialogue, only assert itself from its position of power (which exists because people who do not study art believe they don't understand it and, therefore, consider themselves in a disadvantageous position, and they are) and its concept of beauty, which is not utilitarian, or at least this is how it has been. The work loses readings and becomes a pure image.

This is why bodies are means and not ends and the limits I am interested in dealing with are not those of my environment, but those of society as a living entity.

Ethics is the repressive body of art and at the same time one of the things against which and with which it must work, because it is the way in which operational conclusions of society created through accumulated experience are concentrated, but in their reactionary fashion, when trying to survive represses not to be destabilized. It is like a point of support, of balance of society and knowledge.

Since performances, aesthetics do not exist and I think this is one of the great contributions they made before being canonized (precisely a moment in which the most established aesthetic canons began to emerge). In performances, what has to do with their operational capacity, with their consistency and consequence, is aesthetic, is what becomes beautiful, is what turns into form. It is aesthetics with its basis on ethics, not on forms. Forms in performances emerge from actions and the semantic charge they may have. Decisions on the elements to use, on the actions and the places in which they will be held are based not on the beauty that may be seen, but in the effectiveness they may have: a gesture that can or at least tries.

There were many who asked me, for example, why instead of eating earth I did not eat granulated chocolate. It is precisely because of this: because the beauty of performance is not in giving an impression but in its possibility of being. Behavior art takes this to a higher level. One of the greatest advantages it has over and above other artistic means is its option of being more conceptual, precisely because form is not one of its concerns.

Another important element stemming from performances is that they work with vulnerability, in this case vulnerability seen as the information that is given, the access to information that is normally protected. For example, when a woman is naked, it is the information on herself she is giving us and which we not usually have what grants her vulnerability. If words bring with themselves a world of associations, performance art is associated with performing art and, therefore, with the entertainment industry. Therefore, I prefer to make an art that, under the name of behavior art, will merge with society and even with some psychological movements, who are better company.

If behavior is an element of knowledge which becomes a ruling institution which at times is pigeonholed as knowledge, then why not turn it into a methodological resource? Why not work with it and turn it into a method to work on knowledge?

If artists are the self-conscience, then why not act as creators of alarms? Why not stop representing and instead present? Why instead of inserting other worlds in art not insert art in the world? Why not work with body, impact, attention and society as living entities?

¹ Havana, 1968. Graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in 1992. She has held important individual and collective exhibitions in Cuba and abroad. Her last project, Arte de Conducta, has gathered a group of youngsters interested in a different view on art.

² Guanabacoa is a municipality in Havana.