

BEING CUBAN

RoseLee Goldberg

Born in Havana, Cuba, in 1968, to Miguel Bruguera, Cuban Political Advisor to the Cuban Embassy in Paris and ambassador to Lebanon and Panama, and Argelia Fernandez, a Spanish-English translator, with a B.A. in Social Science. Tania Bruguera was educated at the French Lycee through her early years and at an art school in Havana from age 12 onward, graduating from the Instituto Superior de Arte in 1992.

For the past seven years she has lived in Chicago and Havana, and has divided her year between the two countries, Cultures and ideologies, "between past and future," she has said. This to and fro between continent and island, interspersed with extensive international travel as well, has sharpened Bruguera's understanding of what it means to "be Cuban" and what it takes to make work that is relevant both locally and internationally.

"Can I use the same model inside Cuba as outside Cuba?" she asks. Her awareness of living in an animated political matrix, of consequences being attached to actions, provides the underlying ethical compass to Bruguera's work. It also was the focus of our conversation that began last January in Mexico City and continued in Miami and New York.

INTERVIEW II

RoseLee Goldberg: In our last conversation, you talked about the emotional impact of politics, over and above its intellectual or ideological influence. I found your notion of “politics as seduction” interesting, especially given that several of your works refer to torture or repression or censorship, actions that one associates with fear and repulsion, not seduction.

Tania Bruguera: Growing up in Cuba, I came to understand that the best politicians work with emotions because they know this is a better tool to manipulate people than any other. Power politics is all about manipulation and controlling people and getting what they want. Manipulating emotions is a seductive way to achieve that end.

RG: Can you describe a particular work of yours that is manipulative in this way?

TB: The piece I did in Havana [“Untitled (Havana, 2000)”] is the most successful in frightening, seducing and then surprising the viewer. It is a narrative work that first entices the audience into a beautiful space [an old fortress in Havana] and then frightens them a little because it’s so dark once they are inside. Visitors walk on this very soft, cushiony surface (dried-out sugar cane) toward a bright light embedded in the ceiling, which they soon discover is a black-and-white television monitor showing Fidel Castro’s images: from giving



a speech at a rally to swimming in the sea. They go toward the light, and the light is Fidel! And gradually, while their vision gets used to the darkness, they notice that nearby are several naked Cubans, and the realization is, "Oh my God, I have been so seduced by power that I didn't even realize what was going on around me."

I want my work to be more and more about such experiences. Feeling pieces, not only looking pieces. I want people to move through a work emotionally. I work with emotions and memory, and the idea of documenting not in a historical way but through emotions.

I want my work to be transformed and remembered by the audience as an experienced emotion. I want the audience to access the piece as an experience, sometimes a physical experience, and to carry the "documentation" of it with them as their own lived memory. I would like my work not to be seen but to be remembered.

RG: What other emotions drive your work?

TB: I like to work with fear because when people are afraid they are more conscious, they are alert. They start using other ways to understand what's happening. I like people to be alert when they view my work. Fear also is a way to learn and once we know how to handle fear we can be free.

RG: Have you ever experienced real fear?

TB: I probably have, but nothing that was physical or life-threatening.

RG: As a child you lived in several countries where there was real political tension, when your father was Cuban Ambassador to Lebanon in the '70s and Panama during the American invasion, for example.

TB: Actually, now that you ask, I think fear has been present in my life, but in very subtle ways. It was never extreme fear but rather a fear that comes from realizing that what you do will have consequences in other peoples' lives, consequences you cannot control. That happened when I made a newspaper, "Memory of the Post-War," 1993 / 1994, which was an art piece that looks like an "art newspaper" but edited like an ordinary newspaper. I invited artists to write typical sections on





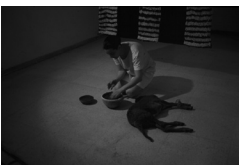
sports or agriculture, as a metaphor of the political and artistic situation in Cuba at the time. I was called to the Arts Council and was told to destroy the newspaper; one friend who helped me, with this piece was detained and the person who printed it was expelled from his job. It was very disturbing, traumatizing. I stopped making work for quite a long time after that. This incident was the origin of the “lamb piece” series [“The Burden of Guilt,” 1997 - 1999] when I wore a lamb’s carcass around my neck and ate dirt. I felt I had compromised and at the same time I was worried about how one continues to make work under such circumstances. Submission as a way of surviving. “Do I bend toward their demands, or do I do my own work?” The newspaper was a hyper-realistic work. Not because it looked like a newspaper but because it worked as one.

RG: What do you mean by that?

TB: I want to work with reality. Not the representation of reality. I don’t want my work to represent something. I want people not to look at it but to be in it, sometimes even without knowing it is art. This was a real situation. The newspaper was printed in a printing plant where they actually produced daily newspapers and it was circulated as a newspaper. And it had an impact. Something happened. It was talked about by people who knew nothing about art. I had an aunt in the Communist Party and she called me once and said, “What have you done?” She was very worried because my newspaper had been discussed at her Party meeting. The fact that it entered the larger society, not as an artwork but as an event, a gesture, made it hyper-real.

RG: _To make work in Cuba in the ‘80s and ‘90s, you would have had to be very aware of being watched.

TB: Yes, that was a given. The idea was to make public gestures. When I was 15 or 16, I was already studying art, and the art world in Cuba was very active and with a true avant-garde movement. I was very influenced by them. That group of artists was later called “La Generación de los Ochenta” (The Generation of the Eighties). It includes Flavio Garcíandia, Glexis Novoa, Carlos Cárdenas, Lázaro Saavedra, José Angel Toirac, Arte Calle, among many others. Actually this is the real and most important influence in my work, not Marina





Abramovic or Vito Acconci like people assume, even though these are the performances artists most people are familiar with; I didn't even know about their existence then. My influence, what really impacted my ideas about art and the way I want to do my work, was the "Generation of the Eighties," this exciting group of artists, doing painting, sculpture, actions and happenings, made me see art as a gesture with social connotations. When the group left Cuba as consequence of censorship and political pressure, a very different, more commercial, metaphorical and representational wave of art took its place. I was really craving the kind of public gestures that they had made and the newspaper was a way for me to continue those ideas.

RG: What is the difference between a performance and a gesture?

TB: For me, a gesture is more about the intention of the work. It is more about everyday life. A gesture is about repeating an action from everyday life and putting it into a conscious space. The gesture creates an atmosphere. I also prefer the term *Arte de Conducta* (loosely translated as "behavior art") to the term performance, especially in Spanish, because *conducta* in Spanish means "to conduct" or to "be a conduit". It also means "behavior," as in social manners, as well as "behavior" in a more physiological sense. So for me, performance art began as a gesture, as a form of behavior. That's what the Futurists and the Dadaists did in the early 1900's. Their work was a response to a specific moment. *Arte de Conducta* happens when the description of the gesture carries the idea of the piece, where narrating the piece is the action, and the description of the piece is the piece. Function is part of the work. The space between being considered art or not is being stretched. They are works that happen outside the art world and not under art world values, but they circulate later as art pieces in the art world through documentation or rumor. Rumor is precisely the documentation form of these works. They are pieces that are, remembered, not seen, remembered as any other event is in the life of the people who participated in it. In these pieces, the body is the social body. They create an atmosphere not an object.

RG: I like what you said about gestures creating an atmosphere.

TB: In the '60s and '70s, people were making "behavior art." For me, Adrian Piper is a behavior artist, because so much of her work is about the gesture, as in the work where she hands out cards to people, announcing her ethnic identity or the dancing lessons, these gestures in turn created an atmosphere. Or more recently, Francis Alÿs walking in the streets of Mexico City with a gun in his hand plain sight. But when performance art entered the gallery and viewers sat down to watch a performance, the work became "objectified." The body became objectified and performance moved away from being about gesture. I want to go back to the beginning! I always loved Dada, they were doing "reaction art" and they were "gesture artists."

RG: But how does one make such gestures today? You can't have that time back again.



TB: When I first reconstructed an Ana Mendieta performance in 1986, that for me was a gesture, a behavior piece, because it was about reacting to a political moment in time. Later, when I made the newspaper, it was a gesture in response to a different political moment, which for me was the void left by the social activism of the “generation of the eighties”. I think I started on the right track with such “behavior art” pieces, but then I was thrown off track by the strong reaction to the newspaper. I started doing more traditional performances, which became more objectified. Right now, I’m not performing anymore, at least not in that way. My new performances are or they are done when I travel in the plane or when I present lectures. The lectures are about the different aspects of performance. One is about documentation, another is about the relationship between politics and art, another is about the use of the shock value in performance. The last one I did was about vulnerability and performance.

RG: Will these be taped?

TB: Yes, because that’s the standard way of documenting lectures. Lectures are not about experience. They are about the transmission of knowledge.

RG: What other “non performances” are you considering?

TB: I cancelled my solo show the day and time of the opening; the rest of the time that the show was supposed to be up, the gallery was empty and closed. Now I’m working on a piece about Cuba that was inspired by one done by the Cuban collective called Los Carpinteros in the early ’90s. Their piece was called “Se vende tierra de Cuba” (“Cuban dirt for sale”) and it was, I don’t remember exactly, I think a wooden treasure-like box with dirt and the title of the piece. I want to carry the piece further. I proposed selling pieces of Cuba on the stock market. I’m in the process of creating a corporation that will sell two things: actual square footage and the concept of Cuba as utopia and all the projected ideas people have about Cuba as a value to be sold. Profits will go directly back to Cuba and my role will be to act as a conduit for this transaction. I will use my privilege to be a mediator. It is a site-specific work that can only be done outside the United States since it is actually going to be shown or “activated” for the first time this fall at a group exhibition in Canada. It is also a site-specific piece in



that it depends and will be affected by particular historical and social conditions.

RG: I find it interesting that several of the pieces we have discussed recently relate directly to Cuba. We talked before about your re-creating Ana Mendieta's work as a way of bringing her back to Cuba. After several years of living and working internationally, are you now bringing Tania back to Cuba?

TB: I never left. But I am bringing back to Cuba an idea of Cuba that people on the outside have about the country.

RG: For example?

TB: The prejudices and preconceptions about Cuba. The idea started when I was living in Cuba, as a commentary on the many foreigners arriving on the island and hoping to stake out their businesses before Castro died, so that they could take advantage of the changes when they occurred. But living in Chicago and Havana, I have had to struggle with outside perceptions of Cuba, from the anger of an older generation of Cubans living in Miami to the idealization of Cuba by leftists. I want to play with this different and wide spectrum of perceptions of the country.

RG: So on the one hand, you are examining a range of perceptions about Cuba from the inside and the outside. And you are also talking about your experience as an artist in both environments.

TB: Yes, I am working with Cuban subjects and feelings but I am doing so in a mainstream language. Or maybe it is an "international language" that comes from what they call an "international artist." I find myself at a crossroads, and I'm having a lot of trouble with this. Why? Because I've seen a lot of people who are not born in Europe or mainstream art centers like New York or London. They are viewed as "local" artists, as "original" artists and then, after one or two international events, they start becoming "international" artists. I think it is a very dangerous transition because many people become formalists, in a way. When you talk about your own "local" environment, I mean, you are reacting to everything around you. But then, you need to translate those reactions into a language that everybody understands and in the process you lose a lot of detail. You start talking so broadly that you end up not saying anything at all.

RG: How are you working this out?

TB: I'm trying to see how different pieces hold up to being in one place or another. For example, the piece I did in Documenta "Untitled (Kassel, 2002)" was a translation of "Untitled (Havana, 2000)" the piece I did in the fortress. It was not a formal translation but the translation of the theme: what we see and what we don't see, what we want to see and what we don't want to see. It was about responsibility. I have one, part of the same series, I want to do one day in Israel called "Untitled (Haifa, 2003)." Or the work I made after a residency in India with thousands of tea bags, "Poetic Justice." I consider these installations to be intense try-outs at being an "interna-





tional" artist. I'm trying to see how I can talk in a language that everybody will understand, trying to find connections dealing with issues that are very specific to my background and interests. I am also very aware of not becoming "exoticised," of not making work that will attract attention just because it is "Cuban." I'm struggling with such contradictions.

RG: Probably others have the expectation that you will always refer to Cuba in some way, given your history.

TB: Either way, it is a complicated situation. Cuba is not my day-to-day reality any longer and I often feel that I don't have the right to say certain things about Cuba anymore. I don't have the same access to the process of changing sensibilities. Maybe the piece about selling Cuba is more about where I find myself right now, which is in the middle, between this world and that world.

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As an Art Historian, Critic, and Curator, RoseLee has curated exhibitions, performance series, and organized seminars at the Royal College of Art Gallery in London, the Kitchen, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim Museum, which established important precedents in the field of performance exhibition. Ms. Goldberg's seminal book, "Performance Art from Futurism to the Present (1979 & 2000)," the first history of performance art, has been translated into six languages and is used as a key textbook for teaching performance in universities internationally. Ms. Goldberg has taught at New York University since 1987 and is a frequent contributor to ArtForum. Her other books include "Performance: Live Art Since 1960" and "Laurie Anderson."