

# POLITICAL PEOPLE: NOTES ON ARTE DE CONDUCTA

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## DISSENT DISSENT

“I’m a political artist, so I decided that I was going to give my space to people I admire as political people.” So said Tania Bruguera from the back of a crowded Chicago lecture hall, as part of the brief speech with which she turned the attention of some two hundred audience members over to Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn on May 1, 2009 and shifted our expectations: from radical art performance to radical political discourse.

It was just months after Barack Obama’s acquaintance with 1960s radicals Ayers and Dohrn (now an eminent education professor and the director of a center for juvenile justice, respectively) had been churned into pseudo-scandal by his opponents in the US presidential election. So the couple had more than a little celebrity status among the left-leaning art crowd gathered for Bruguera’s presentation, which was held at a commercial art fair but organized as part of the experimental art history conference *Our Literal Speed*.<sup>1</sup> This star power compensated for the disappointment some of us felt at Bruguera’s own abdication of the stage. We craned our necks to see the faces of the former leaders of the Weather Underground. We chuckled at their self-deprecating jokes about their age and welcomed their message that artists had a political role to play breaking “out of that controlling frame that limits the horizon of our imaginations.” Everyone seemed to nod appreciatively when Ayers contrasted two different memories of Chicago’s Grant Park: the first when he was beaten by police during the Days of Rage around the 1968 Democratic Political Convention; the second on election night forty years later, when he stood together with nearly a million other onlookers to hear the country’s first black president acknowledge his victory.

Everyone, that is, except a young man, perhaps in his early twenties, sitting a few rows from the back. Not long into the presentation, as Dohrn was taking a look back at the Haymarket uprisings in Chicago in 1886, he interrupted, loudly. “Isn’t that all still going on, though?” “That’s what’s interesting,” replied Dohrn, who had been noting the recurrence in the contemporary immigrants’ rights movement of issues that had rallied Americans a century earlier. “But then I don’t know where the change is,” the young man insisted, referring back to Ayers’s two Grant Park scenarios. The couple continued with an inspiring, if somewhat practiced, series of comments about the challenges facing the left early in the Obama administration—“Obama’s not going to save us, but with any luck, we can save Obama”—but the heckling continued. Ayers and Dohrn responded like the generous and experienced teachers that they are. But their equanimity and his aggression competed for control of the room. Artist and activist Gregg Bordowitz urged the heckler to “cool out a bit” and remember an adage of the left: “When the enemy’s not in the room, we practice on each other.” Others, however, jumped in to press Dohrn and Ayers about the kind of change they wanted to see. (“Are you in la-la land?” one questioner asked, exasperated by their argument for prison abolition.) For nearly an hour, the discussion shifted in this way. Congressional budgeting of the war



Tania Bruguera, *Generic Capitalism*, 2009  
Bill Ayers, Bernadine Dohrn, and respondents  
Merchandise Mart Conference Center, Art Chicago  
Photography by Rainer Ganahl

in Iraq. Earnest entreaties about artists' role in society. The prison-industrial complex. And plainly generational squabbling. In one exchange, the young man reminded the couple that they, too, had once been rash and extreme, to which Dohrn responded with a mixture of bemusement and indignation. "We never sounded like you, baby . . . we were way off the deep end, but we never sounded like you."

Everyone in the audience responded differently to what happened in the wake of Bruguera's decision to give over her spot to Ayers and Dohrn, of course. But I suspect many felt, as I did, simultaneously annoyed by and grateful to the unnecessarily argumentative members of the audience. For as distracting and sometimes illogical as they were, they had thoroughly invigorated the conversation. It felt like something real was happening. Ayers and Dohrn seemed to acknowledge as much in the smiles they flashed one another, and an occasional whispered aside—"this is great"—audible over the microphone when the cross-talk in the audience grew particularly impassioned. Dissent had erupted in a conversation about dissent.

Or had it?

Some may have suspected it right away. I didn't, but somehow by the second day of the confer-



ence I knew (strangely, I can't remember exactly how I found out) that four of the most strident interlocutors of Dohrn and Ayers the day before had been planted by Bruguera (she didn't tell them what to say, only to interrupt when they disagreed with the speakers). This simple revelation raised a number of questions. What does it mean that the most interesting leftist political conversation I've been in on in a while was partially staged—its most convention-rupturing moments actually ordained from behind the scenes? Was it necessarily less "real" because it was prodded into being? Was the conversation less democratic, because controlled? Or more so, because dissent is closer to democratic process than is peaceful preaching to the choir? Had we in the audience been lab rats, used in a political experiment? As some audience members complained later, there is a basic affront to dignity in being deceived. As a gesture, moreover, planting combative interlocutors in a political discussion has unpleasant connotations. It recalls the history of infiltration of leftist groups, including Dohrn and Ayers's own, by FBI counterintelligence agents charged with producing discord. And it almost eerily anticipates the wave of falsely spontaneous disruptions of public meetings that American conservatives would use as a tactic later in 2009 to try to block reform of the US healthcare system.

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Bruguera calls experiments like this *Arte de Conducta*. This art of behavior is aimed at “not representing the political but provoking the political,” and the Chicago example (titled *Generic Capitalism*) is among the most benign. Other works from the last ten years include bomb-making in an art gallery, a school for critical political performance in a communist state, the supervision of art viewers by security officers and guard dogs, even a very literal game of Russian roulette. In a period in which free meals and beanbag lounges, cafes and rural retreats have been mobilized as art and interpreted in terms of a kind of politics of conviviality, Bruguera is driven to explore forms of oppression, force, and regulation—and often mimetically to inflict versions of them, herself. What is this artist up to?

It would be argumentative, unnecessarily argumentative, to propose that what she is up to is a self-reflexive commentary on art itself.

#### ARTE DE CONDUCTA

Bruguera came to international attention in the mid-1990s with a decidedly theatrical form of performance. Hers was a politically inflected body art featuring resonant materials like hair, a butchered lamb carcass, soil, and her own naked body. Joseph Beuys’s photogenic actions seem a relevant precedent for these works, or the dramatic tableaux of Marina Abramović. She was also influenced by the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (whose oeuvre Bruguera systematically re-enacted in and for Mendieta’s native Cuba, early in her own career), and there are faint echoes of Mendieta’s evocative imprints of a female form in natural settings, connected to Afro-Cuban religious rites. But in 1973, before the *siluetas*, Mendieta had explored the corporeal trace in a very different way. Leaving a pool of blood on a city sidewalk, she sat back to photograph the reactions—or more disturbingly, non-reactions—of passers-by to the gory puddle. And it is this piece that Bruguera cites as the precedent for *Arte de Conducta*, the kind of work she has been doing since around 2000.

Bruguera’s category of *Arte de Conducta* overlaps with various versions of performance-in-the-world that artists have explored since at least the 1960s, in attempts to subtract the theatricality from “performance” and overcome its dichotomy of active performer/passive audience, while retaining the duration, unpredictability, and immateriality of art as action. The later “social sculpture” works of Beuys are an example, and Beuys was frequently referenced in Bruguera’s Cuban art education. But I find it helpful to look to the American artist Allan Kaprow to understand the evolution of non-theatrical performance. He is best known for coining the word “happening,” and for the complex and largely theatrical art events the term designated in the early 1960s. But, frustrated by the ease with which the happenings were recuperated as art-world spectacles (Bruguera, too, found her more theatrical early performances “immediately accepted” and “too easy”<sup>2</sup>), Kaprow spent much of his career thereafter articulating alternatives, using terms like “events,” “non-theatrical performance,” “unart,” “lifelike art,” and “re-

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search” for a practice that sometimes looked like strange sociology experiments—a man and a woman repeatedly passing through a doorway, trying every combination of holding and not holding the door for one another—and sometimes like meditation—wetting a stone and carrying it until it dried. Indeed, behavioral experimentation and meditative practice might be the two structural poles of the category of non-theatrical performance. On one end, an interest in mindfulness, a commitment to experience and attentiveness for their own sakes (sometimes, as for Kaprow, connected with Zen or other meditative disciplines). And, on the other, practices that take their cue from the scientific study of human behavior.

More directed to public than private experience, based in outward rather than inward attentiveness, and more critical than ameliorative, Bruguera’s recent work leans towards the latter pole, as the term *Arte de Conducta*—“Behavior Art”—suggests. The techniques of *Arte de Conducta* often evoke social psychology investigations like Stanley Milgram’s experiments of 1961. Like Mendieta’s *People Looking at Blood* (or in a more benign register, like the audience in Chicago), these experiments involved participants who did not have all the facts about their participation. Believing they were in a study of learning, Milgram’s subjects in fact demonstrated how many of us would hurt, perhaps even kill, another person if instructed to by someone in authority. Likewise the infamous 1971 Zimbardo experiments at Stanford, in which students pretending to be guards and prisoners took only days to sink into inter-group hatred and abuse. Debate around these experiments eventually resulted in the strict guidelines and review procedures for behavioral human subject research that are now the norm; protocols designed to cleanse from scientific practice the very insensibility to others’ pain that the initial experiments had so dramatically revealed.

No such guidelines regulate art. It’s disturbing, but perhaps not surprising that mid-century behavioral science, shaped by a post-World War II imperative to understand human cruelty and aggression, has had currency for artists in the age of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Some of these recurrences have been quite literal (Rod Dickinson’s restaging of the Milgram experiment with actors; Artur Zmijewski’s Zimbardo redux), but consider Zmijewski’s *THEM (SIE)* (2007), a video documenting a series of sessions in Poland in which the artist brought together activists representing four different political positions (nationalist youth, Catholic conservatives, Jewish activists, and socialists). Given paper and paint, they were invited first to make a large-scale tableau representing their beliefs, then to edit the self-representation of another group. Initially polite, the gestures soon progressed to outright desecration and destruction. By the end, offensive images were being thrown from the window or set aflame.

Like much of Bruguera’s art, Zmijewski’s workshop can be understood as a precise reversal of the positive visions of sociability in art since the mid-1990s. The paradigmatic example is the Austrian group *WochenKlausur*, whose artworks often brought together representatives of opposing social groups. These individuals were sequestered in small spaces like a boat or a spe-

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cially constructed cabin and provided with a professional mediator and some light refreshment. Privacy and the label of “art”—and perhaps the power of table manners—seemed to suspend established patterns of enmity, producing opportunities for interchange person-to-person that were foreclosed in public discourse.<sup>3</sup> The goal of such socially ameliorative projects—as in the larger category of what Nicholas Bourriaud named “relational” art practices—is to generate sociality itself. But, as critic Claire Bishop has incisively argued, the implied model of interchange in many of these convivial experiments, and in most of the writing about them, is a strangely depleted one: their goal is to produce peaceful accord, but the basis of democracy is dissensus.<sup>4</sup>

#### DANGEROUS PLAY

Bruguera can be accused of many things, but not of discouraging dissensus.

In *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), a pair of mounted police officers used crowd control techniques to herd art viewers around the huge Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern. Blocking the exits, grouping and then dispersing the crowd, the officers and their horses treated the audience as if it were convened for a demonstration or rally. Instead of encouraging an ideal of the art audience as a proto-public, Bruguera treated it like a mob. In a place we'd like to consider a zone of freedom, she introduced coercive force. Likewise, in *The Dream of Reason* (2008), an art gallery was patrolled by an increasing number of uniformed security officers with guard dogs. In a second version, museum-goers arriving at an exhibition were patted down and their bags searched before they could enter. (“There is some political art in the show,” Bruguera explained to visitors, “we've got to be careful.”)

The deployment of security forces in an art space reverberates in many ways, most of them unpleasant. Coming from a society in which censorship is always a possibility, does Bruguera want to remind us what it means for art not to be free? Or does she want us to give up the illusion that we are free of repression in the Western democracies? Is the uniformed surveillance a vision of where we are heading in the paranoid, post-9/11 West? Is it simply an old-fashioned attempt to shock us out of our placidity? Does it critique oppressive, even fascist tendencies? Or does it exhibit them?

Zmijewsky was able to produce an extraordinary portrait of antagonisms in the particular crucible of post-communist Poland, and a generalizable document of escalation of commitment in political debate—but most likely only at the cost of actually radicalizing, then sending out into the world, the individuals who performed for his camera. Such effects on participants are precisely what regulations and review boards for human subject research are designed to avoid in the sciences. By contrast, they are what Tania Bruguera seeks out; what she considers the work itself. In this she differs somewhat from Zmijewski, whose Polish workshop existed in order to be made into an art video. (In fact, its subject matter amounts to an argument for the social rel-

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evance of, of all things, painting.) Bruguera doesn't make videos—those that exist are produced as documentation by the host institutions—or exhibit photographs of her behavior art. (She has actually tried to sell her performances, but only in a way that mocks the whole idea of non-theatrical performance as a product; offering for sale the ownership of whatever performance she does next, for example.) In Zmijewski's case, the art audience contemplates conflict. In Bruguera's, they experience it.

Yet precisely for this reason, it seems to me that it is art and art viewing that this set of projects tries, forcibly, to redefine. The appearance of the crowd-controlling policemen at the Tate implies a crowd that requires control. As Dionorah Pérez-Rementería has pointed out, it presumes the possibility, however unconscious or remote, of violence among normally docile art viewers.<sup>5</sup> Bruguera represents the art audience—represents it to itself—as a potentially dangerous assembly. This is a remarkable twist on the paradigm in recent art that seems dedicated to reviving interchange and conversation among art viewers, so as to make the art audience less a collection of contemplators than a proto-public sphere. Bruguera, too, wants to change our view of being an art audience, but in the opposite direction. In 2006 she showed how far she would take this tendency when she hosted a Molotov cocktail party: viewers arriving at the opening of her show at a commercial art gallery in Madrid found themselves in a workshop, led by the artist, on producing homemade bombs. (Bruguera describes the dealer, getting into the spirit of the evening, pouring out bottles of wine she had put out for the opening so the lessons could continue.) Here again, art and art viewing are treated as, or rather, made to be dangerous activities. Bruguera happily sent her audience out into the night armed with Molotov cocktails and the knowledge of how to make them: she *actually* made them *potentially* dangerous. Her *Arte de Conducta* assumes that art viewers are all “political people.” And if we are not, she makes it so.

#### ARTISTIC FREEDOM, INCORPORATED

Bruguera is deeply committed to the avant-garde project of breaking down the boundary between art and life. She speaks about it often. She has expressed her discomfort “with the visual arts and their inevitable distance from life,”<sup>6</sup> and she gave up her more theatrical performances because she wanted “an art in which the artistic nature was not that easy to define and which worked in the realm of life.”<sup>7</sup> Unafraid of instrumentalizing art, she is committed to the possibility of rejecting once and for all the modern separation of art and utility, stating that “artwork should not only be useful but should exist in the realm of reality; otherwise, it automatically becomes a representation again, one that exists only in the realm of possibility.”<sup>8</sup> She strives for a mode in which art is not “a sample, art is . . . something of real consequence,” and wants art “to go from being a proposal to be a working temporary reality.”<sup>9</sup>

In fact, Bruguera speaks more and more readily about what art is and should be than most other artists I know. Is it possible that she—whose practice involves activities as unartistic as publish-

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ing a newspaper and running a school, who happily accepts that her works are not even always recognized as art—is art’s fierce defender? This, at least, is how I understand the many gestures in her recent practice that seem to imagine art and art audiences as forces of disruption.

Bruguera grew up in an art culture that assumed art had a functional social role. In capitalism, art’s social function is of course often denied, but more importantly, it is always double: art functions ideologically, reflecting or building culture, and art functions as a market, tied into and supporting the economy. But in revolutionary Cuba, the connection of art to the social is not—or was not supposed to be—double. Cuba’s history on artistic control differs significantly from other instances of state communism—for there has never been an imposed state style. But, understood as an integral part of the revolution, for nearly fifty years Cuban art has been held to standards of “ideological rigor.” Bruguera is of a generation that came of age just as this system began to falter. Contemporary Cuban visual art has been successful in international markets, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “special economic period” that followed, art has become a valued industry, both for the revenue it brings in directly and for of the cultural tourism it attracts. Moreover, according to sociologist Sujatha Fernandes, as the government has cracked down on political dissidence, it has increasingly tolerated criticality within artistic expression. Fernandes calls this a new mode of “incorporation” in Cuban cultural politics.<sup>10</sup> It sounds familiar: once valued for its meaning, art is now prized for its exchange value. Once controlled as a potentially dangerous signifying force, now it appears tolerated as a source of revenue and a social safety valve. And, as Luis Camnitzer and others have pointed out, the two functions are interrelated: political content in Cuban art is one of its selling points.<sup>11</sup>

These are simplifications, of course, of a complex and quickly changing situation (and one I don’t know intimately). But I wonder if in Bruguera’s recent work we see an underlying sense of loss. One of the most ambitious of her Behavior Art projects was the Cátedra Arte de Conducta, a long running workshop based at but largely independent from the art institute in Havana. There, over seven years, Bruguera brought in artists, critics, and curators to meet with Cuban students and artists in a series of discussions about political, performative art. Perhaps creating a community of critical artists in Cuba is at least metaphorically comparable to arming a European art audience with homemade bombs. Each appears to be tolerated, but each dares its respective regime to recognize its powes. Bruguera is anything but nostalgic, but perhaps it could be put this way: she grew up in a social experiment, in which art had a function. Now she enacts social experiments to try to give it one, again.

#### CRAFTING CONFRONTATION

During the conversation in Chicago, Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn, themselves former revolutionaries, repeatedly looked to artists as contributors to social change. The role they seemed to propose was for artists as agents of imagination—Dohrn suggested that they might

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be the ones to come up with alternatives to the American prison system; Ayers, that they could counter the limited and limiting narratives created in the news media. Bruguera, a self-proclaimed political artist, would seem just the person to volunteer such imaginative re-framings. But the overall structure of her event—her relinquishment of her space and audience to Dohrn and Ayers—suggested instead that the most an artist could do politically was to sacrifice art to the political.

Of course, once you know that Bruguera had not actually removed herself from that conversation but intervened in it by proxy, the situation gets more complex. She only seemed to make art a window onto politics; only seemed to remove form in favor of content, or the aesthetic in favor of the political. In a sense, this pattern is repeated on a larger scale in her work as a whole, where art seems to disappear into life, but is in fact bolstered and renewed. In Chicago, disagreement was form—or better, medium. (*Conducta* translates not only to *behavior*, but also *conduit*.) However open-endedly, Bruguera shaped—imagined—that experience. Does that mean that she fulfills the role of artist as imagination agent? Not if we insist on the benevolence of that role, on the artist as the generator of civility and accord, or even of inventive social solutions and narratives. Bruguera has a different technique: her craft is confrontation.

What does it mean that we seem to need her? That the art Left needs this daughter of the revolution to conjure confrontation itself?

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1. More precisely, the venue was a hall at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. The performance was presented as part of both a lecture series attached to Art Chicago, International Fair of Contemporary and Modern Art, which was being held at the time in the same building, and the experimental art and theory conference Our Literal Speed. In addition to my own memories, my descriptions here draw on conversations with other audience members, an interview with Bruguera at her Chicago studio, August 10, 2009, and an audio recording of the performance. Bruguera did not document the event, but the artist Rainer Gahnal photographed this along with most of the other conference proceedings and was kind enough to share his archive with me.

2. Francesca di Nardo, “Arte de Conducta: an interview with Tania Bruguera,” *Janus* 22, January 2007, pp. 79, 81.

3. See, for example, their project in Nuremberg, documented at [http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekte/13p\\_kurz\\_en.htm](http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekte/13p_kurz_en.htm).

4. Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, Fall 2004. Not surprisingly, Bishop has written approvingly of Bruguera’s practice. See “Speech Disorder,” *Artforum*, Summer 2009.

5. The piece might suggest the argument that disciplinary measures presume and even *create* the very threats they are meant to deter.

6. Francesca di Nardo, “Arte de Conducta: an interview with Tania Bruguera,” *Op. cit.*

7. Bruguera interviewed by Gerald Matt in Matt, *Interviews*. Cologne: Walther König, 2006.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

11. Luis Camnitzer with Rachel Weiss, “Epilogue,” Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, Revised Edition. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 336.