
BIOGRAPHY BY NICOLE BASS

1968–1979

Tania Bruguera was born in Havana, Cuba in 1968. The island was still reeling from the deaths of Che Guevara and fellow revolutionary Tania the Guerrilla, Bruguera's namesake. Bruguera's father was a diplomat in the revolutionary government, and his career took the family to Paris from 1973-1974; to Lebanon from 1974-1977 in the early years of the Lebanese Civil War; and to Panama from 1977-1979. In 1979, Bruguera's parents divorced over political differences. She returned to Cuba with her mother and sister, where she encountered a socialist reality that belied the revolution's ideological vision.

1980–1983

At the age of twelve, Bruguera began to study art at the Escuela Elemental de Artes Plásticas in Havana. Sweeping curricular changes incorporated student input and introduced Bruguera to interdisciplinary and experimental art practices. Under the instruction of Juan Francisco Elso Padilla and Heber Rojas, classes abandoned the traditional studio space and took to nature and the streets.

1984–1992

The contemporaneous emergence of the group known as *los '80s* radicalized Cuban art praxis. Influenced by North American conceptual art and the advent of perestroika, the eighties generation viewed



Miguel Bruguera, the artist's father (center, wearing glasses) with Ernesto "Che" Guevara during a visit to the offices of *Verde Olivo* magazine, Havana, circa 1962.

their art as a weapon and agent of freedom. Their recuperation of themes and subjects long proscribed by government censorship was the art community's first collective effort to challenge official positions on the country's cultural life. Bruguera was a student of these changes: the proliferation of happenings, the popularization of semiotics, and Cuban art's new activist agenda. This period of cultural and critical ferment formed the basis of Bruguera's art of social effectiveness.

In 1986, Bruguera performed the first in a series of reenactments of the work of Ana Mendieta at Fototeca de Cuba in Havana, beginning a ten-year project to recover Mendieta's legacy from official policies aimed at erasing the cultural contributions

of Cuban expatriates. Controversy ballooned when the Estate of Ana Mendieta initially opposed *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* as an intervention into its own recuperative program. In 1996, Bruguera destroyed all vestiges of the series after the final performance at the Institute of International Visual Art in London, quieting conflict and emphasizing the ephemerality and immateriality of her conceptual work.

1993–1999

Following her graduation from the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, Bruguera joined the faculty as an assistant professor. At the same time, under the direction of the Tomás Sánchez Foundation, she began teaching at the Escuela de Conducta “Eduardo Marante,” a school for the social rehabilitation of low-risk juvenile offenders. Bruguera utilized art to reform and reeducate students. Her work suspended her between the autonomous world of high art and the reality of social instability. Bruguera would reconcile the two in her formulation of *Arte de Conducta* (*Behavior Art*), a new art form for the critical investigation of social behavior.

In 1993, Bruguera created *Memory of the Postwar* to draw attention to the void in the Cuban artistic community left by the mass migration of *los '80s* under extreme political and creative pressure. The rapid censorship of *Memory of the Postwar I* did not deter her from publishing *Memory of the Postwar II* the following year. The second publication

achieved wider underground circulation but elicited greater official reproach. Bruguera was admonished and questioned by the director of Cuba’s National Council for Visual Arts and forbidden to continue this work.

Bruguera achieved critical success at the 5th Havana Biennial in 1994, marking the beginnings of her international career. That same year she participated in the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s watershed exhibition *New Art from Cuba*, which defined a new generation of major Cuban artists. Soon after, Bruguera left her teaching posts and concentrated fully on her artistic development.

In 1996, the artist represented Cuba at the 23rd São Paulo Biennial, the only time she has headlined a national pavilion. She completed a residency in 1997 at The Western Front, Vancouver, where she began to incorporate video and documentation into her work. In 1998, Bruguera was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. After completing a residency program organized by Art in General in Chicago, Bruguera moved there part-time to pursue an MFA in performance at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

2000–2010

Bruguera was energized by the gritty political tenor of Chicago’s art scene and its history of political action groups and events, like the Weather Underground

Organization, the Black Panthers, and the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention. Unsatisfied with the theatricality of performance art, the limitations of body art, and the feminist critical industry that sprang up around them, Bruguera began to remove her body from her work and to explore social politics through audience conduct. *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* was Bruguera's first major work of Arte de Conducta and her first investigation into the political imaginary of places.

In 2001, she was invited by Harald Szeemann to participate in the Venice Biennale. The following year, Bruguera exhibited *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* at Documenta 11, her first work as an international artist without an explicit Cuban context. With the view that education is essential to effecting lasting cultural and political change, Bruguera founded and directed the Cátedra Arte de Conducta at the Instituto Superior de Arte in 2003, the only school exclusively dedicated to the study of political art in Latin America. The institution closed its doors in April 2009.

More recently, Bruguera has continued teaching, primarily at the University of Chicago and IUAV in Venice, and exhibiting at international venues. In 2007, she began her most ambitious project to date, the creation of a political party for immigrants to be based in Paris. The following year, Bruguera exhibited *Tatlin's*



Argelia Fernández, the artist's mother, leading a demonstration against the Batista regime in front of the White House, Washington, D.C., August, 1957.

Whisper #5 at Tate Modern, later acquired by the museum, which explored the transformation of an art audience into a functioning citizenry. In 2009, she created *Self-Sabotage* for the 53rd Venice Biennale and *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* for the 10th Havana Biennial, and she roused extraordinary controversy with *Untitled (Bogotá, 2009)* at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in Bogotá. These works explored the conditions that politicize art and its audiences, and they argued for art's centrality to everyday life.

In 2010, Bruguera became the first recipient of the Roy R. Neuberger Exhibition Prize awarded to an innovative, international artist for an early career survey presented at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York.