

DIGNITY HAS NO NATIONALITY

by Tania Bruguera

My parents were part of a generation that believed in the possibilities of utopia, so they were part of a Revolution. Both believed in a better Cuba and in a better world. I was emotionally educated in those beliefs.

Then I grew up and saw the contradictions between the official Cuban propaganda and reality, I saw the complexity amongst government arguments and my own experiences. I decided to become an artist.

My art navigates between the utopic and the real, between the promised and the accomplished. It is about the political imaginary.

But what defined me as an artist happened 20 years ago and since then, I have kept it to myself. I will share the story with you today. In 1993, I was a young artist who decided to do a newspaper as part of my art.

I invited other artists to collaborate. The newspaper took a life of its own, started to be photocopied, read and distributed everywhere.

The authorities took notice. What was unacceptable for them was not so much the content of my newspaper, but the bold gesture of attempting an independent press. This was then, (20 years ago) and still is now an illegal act.

I had to meet the director of the arts council who advised me not go further with this newspaper project, and of course as soon as I left his office I run to the printer to finish the second issue. Which was even more political.

My father, who was an ambassador at the time, was called back in to take care of this. He came to my house, told me to give him all the remaining newspaper and said let's go for a ride. We got in the car and he brought me to a house where two officers of the secret police from the Ministry of Interior were to interrogate me in his presence.

I never revealed who printed the newspaper. I knew this would have consequences. I looked at my father at that moment but I couldn't understand what the expression in his face meant. We went back to the car in silence and never talked about this incident.

It was then, when censorship became the core of my work; when I understood the difference between creating art about politics and creating art that works politically.

What you just saw was not a political rally. It was one of my performances at an international art event in Havana. A one minute of free speech, an open microphone in Cuba means something else. For the first time in more than 50 years people stood up and said in public what until then was just said in low voice to their closest friends and with fear.

Only an art event could provide this space for freedom. This is why I believe so fiercely and intensely in art as an agent of social change, as a rehearsal of reality, as a rehearsal of the future.

This event spilled out of the art scene into the streets, people were talking about it as if it were an urban legend. But this art piece would not have happened in the same way, would not have had the same impact, if it were done before or after that specific moment because it responded to a specific political tension. This kind of art is done in what I call political-timing specific.

Art and politics have many things in common. They both imagine the future, they both use emotions and manage the power of symbols. Art like politics affect people. And I'm interested in that space where art and politics coincide, so we can transform social affect into political effectiveness.

In my work I try to stage situations that look as real as possible so that the people who are the audience can transform into active citizens.

This was in a museum, these are not actors. It is the mounted police to whom I gave the instructions to use their crowd control techniques with the audience in the museum. It was an unannounced performance. So people behaved freely and accordingly to their social conditioning and their own political memories and experiences. Which is what I call *Arte de Conducta* (Behavior / Conduct Art)

This performance was repeated six times, it was in London, only once a person questioned the police's actions.

My art is done realistically and becomes part of reality. Our reality is changing, is becoming mobile and global. But for that new global world we need to build a global civic society. Globalization should not be only about economy but about the freedom and rights people have to move and to decide where they want to contribute with their work and knowledge. In a global world we should all be citizens because dignity has no nationality.

But these days, objects cross borders with more rights and protection than people. Immigrants are censored; they can't be complete as persons because they are not allowed to have rights, they are not allowed to be political subjects.

This is why the project I'm working on now is building an international Movement for immigrants. Using *ARTivism*: creative knowledge with practical knowledge to generate political knowledge.

But to do political art is also to do an art that talks to politicians, it is to enter their territory.

I was recently invited to the UN as a cultural expert to work with others on the first cultural right and freedom of artistic speech document. I heard so many different reiteration of censorship from so many different places and under so many different justifications that it made me remember my father.

I finally made sense of the expression on his face while I was interrogated by the state police. In our last conversation he said I'm proud of you.

I learned from him that confronting censorship will make us stronger.

And I hope he understood through my work that art is useful that through art we can start building a world that functions differently.

Thank you.

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