



Sin Título (Kassel 2002)
Performance - instalación con video. Alemanes, armas de fuego, ropa negra, plataforma de madera, 40 lámparas de luces de 750 W, disco DVD, reproductor de DVD y proyector. 5.81 x 18.30 x 4 m.

by Héctor Antón Castillo

(...) Self references are a vital (almost unsurmountable) sign in Tania Bruguera's artistic career. The patient acting body as symbolical representation of the nation's recipient body derived into rustic pieces of remarkable poetic drama. Suffice it to imagine her lying in a useless boat that simulates a coffin, hanging from the ceiling in her own installation like a Duchamps coal sack or watching her challenge the heat walking down Havana's historical center dressed in a jute sack stained with mud and nails. These are convincing examples.

When introducing solutions where the author performs «the experience of the others» without delivering her skin like a clever «engineer of souls», we immediately miss the Tania of the '90s practicing a sort of performing underground, to remind us what it means «to have natural punch in art». Of course, it is logical and permissible to enter and leave the performance when the creator of the idea deems it convenient. In fact, in the case of T.B., it denotes an anti-rhetoric imperative.

To de-materialize is bold for a successful producer of body art. Would the daring Marina Abramovic be willing to «leave her work»? Even so, we prefer the warmth of the inside to the coldness of the outside. No one argues that it is an unacceptable romantic vision for the new times. But let us not forget either that a certain romantic aura is the seal of Bruguera's strength as an artist. (...)

If in the beginning she wanted to reincarnate the absence-presence of Ana Mendieta (Havana, 1948-New York, 1985), later she left behind

the heritage of her professor and friend Juan Francisco Elso) to start a Conduct Art in which the effect of the gesture wishes to impose itself to the perdurability of the object. In T.B.'s universe of references there is an interaction of Arte Calle and the Californian performance school, Marina Abramovic and a prostitute that replaces her at the opening while Marina does her job in the Amsterdam showcases, Adrian Piper delivers cards announcing his ethnicity and Francis Alys strolls along the streets of Mexico City without fixed course holding a gun bought in the black market.

Since its foundation in 2003, the Conduct Art Chair has intended to stimulate a «useful art» instead of a «public» or «social» art. Several opinions worth listening argue that the Chair is Tania's work finished by others. They are not mistaken. The project searches through art, not only to give a service, but to create a service that did not exist before». For that reason, it is Tania Bruguera's most efficient «useful art» piece. Here the students (who have not given up academic training either), or self taught artists interested in contemporary art) find a learning alternative that is different from the programs designed by the available pedagogic institutions. (...)

Some exiles say the Cuban light is utopia. If Bruguera still has not lost that light, what utopia extends her artistic insomnia? Everything seems to indicate that such an illusion focuses on evidencing the usefulness of art anywhere in the world. We should recall the growth of apathy (or amnesia) toward cultural products «unintentionally opposed» to the

from the mass media void that overflows the planet. Is that perhaps why Tania requested the registration of a Party of the Migrating People (P.M.P.) in Paris (March 2008)? Is it not strange how Joseph Beuys rescued political activism since 1967 with the founding of the German Students' Party in the midst of the retro Warholian era?

How can one sell a performance (in an online auction) with its corresponding exhibition copyright? How can one teach art (something truly impossible) without a precise methodological rule or one that may be adapted to the majority of the students? How can one eliminate the frontiers created by the ideological prejudices that divide Cubans from here and there? How can one find a balance between career and work without having one replace the other in the ethical or aesthetic aspect? Everything is a symbolic return to Beuys' question: How can one explain images (or paintings) to a dead here? Tania Bruguera's «useful art» is a utopia where reflexive balance will have to be the substitute of practical benefit. Only the good consciences of this world will have faith in a metamorphosis as chimerical as necessary.

Tania Bruguera's «Useful Art»

Tania Bruguera's Useful Art

by Héctor Antón Castillo

Who knows when the boundaries of the country were set and pines
were surrounded with barbed wire?

One word? Well, we kept it in our mouths,
it is best pronounced in both languages and even if we fall
silent it will germinate.

Ludvig Wittgenstein
Logical-Philosophical Treatise

As a Prologue

May 4, 1997. Tania Bruguera played the leading role in one of her most prominent "silent scandals," on the street in front of her house in Old Havana, 214 Tejadillo Street. As part of the series *The Weight of Blame*, she ate earth [blended with water and salt] entirely naked and with a dead ram hanging from her neck. She was standing for forty-five minutes before a Cuban flag she herself had made with human hair. As the artist explained somewhat later to the audience, this had to do with a similar suicide ritual practiced by the natives in the island when facing the vandalism of the Spanish invasion.

This immolation simulacrum reaffirmed her as a producer with a gift to transgress gender discourse. Bruguera embodies an attitude of feminism (in the manner of Susan Sontag or Gina Pane) reluctant to the intimate aestheticism that weighs down some art made by women proud of owning a visceral organic body. The introspective provocation in Tejadillo summarized the visible counterpoint of her operation: private and public, primitive and political, silence and word as a residue of act, although the gesture of strengthening the notion of rumor was outstanding.

"Seeing a young girl eating soil, so easily, so calmly, someone said that was modern art. It was unbelievable. You had to see it. It made me think I was not that undernourished and that I did not have to worry so much about the lack of ingredients to make a good meal to my husband and children." Migdalia Reyes Santos (67 years old). Housewife resident in Tejadillo who witnessed the action.

I.

In spite of moving (not parting) from Cuba in 1999, Tania insists in going back to the island to continue gouging that part of terra firma surrounded by water which allowed her to become a globetrotter living between Havana and Chicago. This duality has allowed her to perceive "the hatred of an old generation of Cubans settled in Miami as well as the idealization of Cuba upheld by part of the American left." This she confessed in an interview with the historian of performance Roselee Goldberg. It seems one of the objectives of her cultural nomadism has been that no ideological stand can shock her when "seeing everything and not being involved in anything."

Bruguera's insertion in the international elite circuit had its climax in Documenta 11 (2002) attended by outstanding Latin American artists like Cildo Mairales, Alfredo Jaar, Doris Salcedo, Gabriel Orozco and Carlos Garaicoa. There she exhibited a performance-installation of the series *Ingeniero de almas (Soul Engineer - 2000)*, inspired on some words by Stalin: "Artists and writers are soul engineers." In the German city of Kassel she set another "contention allegory" nuanced by a strong sensorial impact where the spectators' reaction completed the psychological plot of the work.

A site similar to an empty tunnel. Spotlights on those entering the space. Young people with guns and rifles walking on a wooden structure set above the heads of the spectators. The sound of almost military steps and weapons being loaded but never shot. Lights that go off every thirty seconds for eight seconds of darkness. An absent-minded guy with a good memory thinks that the ban on carrying firearms imposed in Germany after World War II has been lifted.

Where is the soul of this engineering in which transparency and shadows, what is real and what is imaginary, fear and death converge? The piece alluded to persecution mania (whether fictitious or probable) as well as to the threat of war. The visible defect of this dramaturgy without words implied its hidden virtue: art is usually so severe, ambiguous and cheating as life itself is. Since fear is impossible to overcome, knowing history translated again into the memory syndrome.

The following year Tania Bruguera was invited to exhibit at the National Museum of Fine Arts as part of the collateral samples of the 8th Havana Biennial (2003). This time she was able to accomplish an idea in which the spectator could walk on an echo dais. Revolutionary slogans entered and left the memory depending on the degree of identification or estrangement the audience (whether foreign or national) experienced when feeling the vibration under their feet.

Autobiography is a falsely theatrical piece. It refers us to a textual evocation of the rallies or marches of the imaginary of the Revolution as a performance art. The only concrete thing in it was a mike on a wooden surface marked by steps of the people. But the sound of patriotic words diluted inside the dais until it transformed into that buzzing of history backing us with its invisibility.

The other face of this minimal environment had as a stage the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM) in March 2008. Now there was a dais, a podium and a mike. The stage incited any hazardous visitor to climb one step and say whatever came to his or her mind in that moment. In time with the "therapeutic relief," a rain of flashes would fall on the "orator with no aura" gloating over his or her coherent or ludicrous words. What was curious was that the flashes came from the other performers, but they were not able to actually perceive what the orator-performer was saying. Only those walking by minding their own business could hear the harangue, because the mike where the speech was being improvised was connected to loudspeakers outside the museum.

What was bleak in *Tatlin's Whisper* was that those who took the "risk" on the podium could only exercise their freedom of speech for one minute. Once that time had elapsed, two persons in civilian clothes would draw the speaker from the "light" back to the shadows of collective anonymity. After this premeditated fiasco, IVAM's piece reverted to a satire of those human deliria of changing reality into fiction. How can a voice with no authority be heard by the simple gesture of climbing a dais and talking? Isn't oratory the art of manipulating and not being manipulated? In many of T. B. proposals, utopia is an ephemeral appearance hiding an essential dystopia. We perceive something similar in the immaterial construction of her events...

II.

Tania Bruguera's strategic evolution bends towards what she defines as a "de-Cubanization process." But having been away for such a long time has not caused an uprootedness. It rather has to do (as critic Ruben de la Nuez points out) with the need of assuming the culture in the island from a trans-ideological perspective closer to her present trans-territorial condition. To be an authentic Cuban artist is not a matter of contextual principles, but a way of conceiving the work without being open to the ups and downs of identity fashionable swings.

Paradoxically, one of T. B. "less Cuban" pieces is linked to a circumstance affecting the inhabitants in the island: difficulties to travel and mainly to the United States. *Vigilantes o El sueño de la razón (Vigilantes or the Dream of Reason -- 2004-2005)* is a series of four performances carried out in planes. When the artist entered or left the United States from other countries she asked those who sat next to her to film her all the time and for the number of sequences they wanted. By emptying the unhealthy sense of surveillance of its paranoid contents, she would appear as a gestural eccentric and the other person would document what he or she considered worthy of being recorded.

Apart from ethical or aesthetical consensus, the two or four hours of flight went by quickly in an exchange of winks and poses in a space virgin to the mechanical game of contemporary art. *Vigilantes* or *The Dream of Reason* is sarcastic and does not intend to be transcendent. A minor maneuver from a circle where even small ones dream big; lightness lacking heaviness that no influence hunter might associate with the surveillance systems set up by Julia Scher. This "dream of reason" which did not give rise to any monster seems to be a refreshing exorcism, a minimum effort anxious for a maximum result: to wipe out the fear of flying or of being very closely checked by a stranger.

Bruguera prefers to live in this limbo between "coming and going," "the insular past and the continental future." Perhaps that is why she flees from political extremism entrenched in their caves. Perhaps that is why she rejected the option of being labeled an artist of the Island or of the Diaspora, exposed to the dangers of radical clashes. Bruguera opts for move away (and even getting lost) it subtly politicized alternatives devoid of an effect of anti-establishment clash.

In another "de-Cubanized" intervention, she made the London guard be brought on their horses to discipline the audience in an exhibition in Tate Modern (March 2008). If in *The Dream of Reason* surveillance ends up as a divertimento in the heights, here it touches the limits of absurdity. What were those police officers doing with "mass control" techniques to capture the movements of those peaceful or refined spectators gathered in Tate? Was there a specific detail to maintain under custody? We only draw a logic moral of a situation in which the usefulness of art becomes dubious: surveillance may be or may turn up in the most unsuspected first world places or contexts where life apparently goes by without great starts.

III.

Self-references are a vital (almost insurmountable) sign in Tania Bruguera's artistic career. The patient acting body in a symbolic representation of the nation's recipient body derived in rustic pieces with a remarkable poetic drama. Suffice it to imagine her lying in a useless boat similar to a coffin, hanging from the ceiling in her own installation like a Duchamp's coal sack or watching her challenge the heat walking down Havana's historical quarters dressed in a jute sack with nails and mud stains. These are convincing examples.

When verifying solutions where she portrays "the experience of others" without risking her neck like a shrewd "engineer of souls," we immediately miss the Tania of the '90s and her rather underground performances to remind us of what it means, "having the natural punch in art". Of course: it is only logical and permissible to enter and leave the performance when it seems convenient for the person who had the idea for it. In fact, in T. B.'s case it denotes an anti-rhetorical imperative. To dematerialize is bold for a successful producer of body art. Would audacious Marina Abramovic be willing to "get out of her work"? Even so, we would rather have the warmth inside than the coldness outside. No one argues that this is an unacceptable romantic vision for the new times. But let us not forget that a certain romantic aura is the seal of Bruguera's strength as an artist.

The ambiguity of this behavior is a constant oscillation between warm and cold, ethical commitment and aesthetic distance, the human body and that vacuum its very lack creates. With that non-identification as a viewpoint, she may be as close to a Felix Gonzalez-Torres humanizing minimalism, as to a Hans Haacke involved in political-financial topics to make those who are forgetful remember what others were unable to see. But this "manipulated difference" is erased like a footprint in the sand when Tania acknowledges the dream of her gestures re-creating environments: "I would like my work not to be seen, but remembered." It was not for fun that the newspaper she printed between 1993 and 1994 bore *Memoria de la Postguerra* (Postwar Memory) as a title.

IV.

If in the beginning she wanted to reincarnate Ana Mendieta's absence-presence [Havana, 1948 - New York, 1985), she later left behind that anthropological mysticism (also based in the heritage of her professor and friend Juan Francisco Elso) to start Behavioral Art, in which the effect of gesture intends to impose itself on the durability of the object. Arte Calle and the Californian school of performance, Marina Abramovic and a prostitute replacing her in an opening while Marina takes her place in the Amsterdam shop windows, Adrian Piper hands out cards announcing his ethnicity and Francis Alÿs wanders about the streets in Mexico City holding a gun bought in the black market in his hand, all interact in T. B.'s universe of references.

From its foundation in 2003, the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (*Behavioral Art Chair*) has intended to encourage a "useful" instead of a "public" or "social" art. Several opinions worth listening maintain that the Chair is Tania's work completed by others. These observers are not mistaken. The project searches "through art, not only to give service, but to create a service that did not exist before." That is why this is the most effective piece "of useful art" by Tania Bruguera. Here students [who have not given up academic training] or self-taught persons interested in contemporary art find a learning alternative that is different from that in the programs designed by available pedagogic institutions.

This initiative has been a bridge that has brought together national and international producers, critics and curators offering workshops and lectures. It would be enough to mention the presence of outstanding figures in the artistic and theoretic fields like Stan Douglas, Antoni Mundadas, Thomas Hirschhorn, Patty Chan, Claire Bishop or Dora Garcia. There has also been an educational-informational interaction with Cuban visual artists of the '80s like Aldito Menendez or Lazaro Saavedra, itinerant professors like Magaly Espinosa and emerging curators.

[Epilogue]

Some exiles say that Cuban light is utopia. If Bruguera still has not lost that light, what utopia extends her artistic effort? There is every indication that this illusion is focused on demonstrating the usefulness of art anywhere in the world. It is worthwhile to remember the growth of apathy [or amnesia] towards cultural products "unintentionally opposed" to the desire of consumption and glamour from the mass media void overflowing the planet. Was this why Tania requested registration of a *Migrant People's Party* (M. P. P.) in Paris [March 2008]? Isn't this rescue of the political activism impelled by Joseph Beuys since 1967 with the foundation of the German Students' Party at the height of the retro-Warholian era somehow odd?

How can one sell a performance (in an on-line auction) with its exhibition copyright? How can one teach art (something truly impossible) without accurate methodological cannons that may be adapted to the majority of the students? How can one do away with the boundaries of ideological prejudice dividing Cubans living here from those living there? How can one find a balance between career and work without one taking the place of the other in the ethical and aesthetical fields? Everything is a symbolic return to Beuys' question: How can one explain images (or paintings) to a dead hare? Tania Bruguera's "*Useful Art*" is a utopia where reflexive balance will have to be the substitute of practical benefit. Only the good consciences of this world will have faith in a metamorphosis as chimerical as it is necessary.