

Profile: Tania Bruguera

by Jeanne Gerrity

This article is part of the Visiting Artist Profile series, which highlights some of the artists, curators, and scholars that intersect with the Bay Area visual arts community through the various lecture programs produced by local institutions. The Headlands Center for the Arts in conjunction with Kadist Foundation and California College of the Arts will present "Recent Human Movements: A Conversation with Tania Bruguera and Adriana Camarena" on Wednesday, November 30, at [Kadist Art Foundation](#) in San Francisco.

In 2002, I had the opportunity to interview Tania Bruguera at her home in Havana, Cuba. A politically motivated performance artist on the verge of international renown, Bruguera captivated me with her passionate declarations and her insightful social commentary. At one point, she explained: "A characteristic of my work is that while I talk about Cuba using the phenomena here, what I talk about is everywhere. Power struggle is everywhere. Maybe here it manifests as a political power, maybe in America as an economic power, but it is the same."¹ Over the last decade, Bruguera's work has evolved from a specific critique of the Cuban situation to a global examination of power and disenfranchisement.

In the late 1990s, Bruguera's visceral performance pieces were influenced by artists such as Marina Abramovic and Ana Mendieta and often included overt references to the political situation in Cuba. In her 1998 performance *Body of Silence* at the Kunstforeningen Denmark, the naked artist appeared in a box lined with raw meat as she made corrections in an official Cuban history textbook. She then began to tear out and eat the redacted pages, implying a fear of imprisonment or other forms of punishment by the Castro regime.

At the 7th *Havana Biennale* in 2000, Bruguera filled a dark tunnel in a former military fortress with rotting sugar cane husks. Visitors were forced to plod over the putrid layers to reach a video monitor at the back of the tunnel that showed clips of historical footage of Fidel Castro. Eventually they became aware of four naked men performing repetitive gestures of subjugation, such as bowing rhythmically and hitting parts of their body. These two works exemplify the artist's often didactic performances criticizing the Castro regime through clear symbolism and disquieting actions. However, as Bruguera became a frequent contributor to international biennials, she adopted a more nuanced approach and more universal subjects.

Her work began to develop beyond commentary to a call for action, and she expanded her examination of the plight of Cubans to include other marginalized social classes. At the 10th *Havana Biennale* in 2009, Bruguera installed a podium, microphone, and large brown curtain in the courtyard of the Centro Wifredo Lam, distributed two hundred disposable cameras to visitors, and invited audience members to speak freely for one minute. On either side of the podium stood a man and a woman dressed in Cuban military uniform; they placed a white bird on the speaker's shoulder, a reference to the dove that landed on Castro during his famous post-revolutionary 1959 address. In a country controlled by a government that denies freedom of speech, this opportunity led to emotional reactions, as well as inevitable censure by the government the following day. The first woman to take the stage immediately created a highly charged atmosphere: she sobbed through her entire minute without ever speaking. Other participants vehemently spoke out against the incumbent government, deplored censorship, and offered personal stories.

In *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008) at the Tate Modern, Bruguera brought two mounted policemen to the packed bridge of the Turbine Hall and invited them to engage in crowd control techniques. Along with other tactics of intimidation, the officers shouted commands while steering the horses to corral visitors into the corner and block the exits. The performance became the audience's reaction to these powerful beasts and their masters, and for the most part, visitors dutifully obeyed the commands. Relinquishing the specific and pointed critique of her previous work, *Tatlin's Whisper #5* examined power in general and its effect on society.

In addition to her individual practice, Bruguera is also a frequent collaborator and community organizer. She presented *Memoria de la Postguerra*, a conceptual art project that manifested itself as a periodical on Cuban art in the 1990s, and from 2002 to 2009 she ran the Behavior Art School (Cátedra Arte de Conducta) in Havana, a tuition-free workshop series with a focus on international art that integrates aesthetics and politics. At the beginning of this year, she began an ambitious large-scale social project, [Immigration Movement International](#) (IMI), a five-year endeavor sponsored by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art. For the first year of the project, Bruguera is living in a four-bedroom apartment with ten roommates in the ethnically diverse working class neighborhood of Corona, Queens. Subsisting on minimum wage, she is operating a community center/conceptual art studio hybrid in a storefront space in the neighborhood. The IMI space serves both as a resource for recent immigrants—free legal advice and English classes are among its practical offerings—and an opportunity to raise awareness of immigrant issues in the larger society through “useful art.” Participatory performance art pieces, such as interviewing

immigrants on the subway about their experiences in the United States, position IMI in the sphere of social practice art. They also demonstrate the potential for sustaining a project in the community over the long term, rather than lasting only a day or a week.

Useful art, a term coined by Bruguera, describes a medium that proposes solutions to social and political problems through the direct implementation of art in people's lives. Bruguera identified the movement while running Behavior Art School, and similarly, IMI seeks to create an international network of artists practicing this type of work; it includes Mel Chin, Rick Lowe, and Patrick Bernier and Olive Martin. However, IMI reaches farther than the Behavior Art School, using art as a tool for social change.

In the 1980s, the artist Martha Rosler made a distinction between audience and public, asserting that art was no longer made for engaged citizens but rather for passive consumers. Bruguera joins a rank of artists that includes Rosler in attempting to create work that actively involves a public outside of the art world elite without losing significance as conceptual art.² Finding the balance may be difficult, but Bruguera's practice over the last two decades shows that she is fully prepared for the task. Furthermore, the timing is could not be better.

Bruguera's ongoing examination of power in society seems especially relevant as the Occupy Wall Street movement takes hold. In an October 23 speech at Occupy Boston, Bruguera effused, "The Occupy Movement gave me back the possibility of believing in democracy and in the power of the people. This is beautiful. I love you." In his introductory essay to the book accompanying the exhibition *Democracy in America* (2008), Creative Time Chief Curator Nato Thompson challenges artists to build a political art movement that can effect real change. Bruguera has been practicing this form of art activism for over a decade, and finally, it seems the world is ready to participate.

The Visiting Artist Profile series is supported by the San Francisco branch of the **Kadist Art Foundation**. Kadist participates in the development of society through contemporary art by collecting and producing the work of artists and conducting various programs to promote their role as cultural agents. The foundation also supports the work of curators, academics, and magazines internationally through its residency program and by hosting public events on Wednesdays and a Saturday Reading Room at its space at 3295 20th Street in the Mission.

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1. Interview conducted by the author on January 11, 2002.
2. See Martha Rosler, *If You Lived Here...* (1989) at the Dia Art Foundation, New York. An interview about the project can be found at <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2009-09-09/interview-with-martha-rosler-and-anton-vidokle/>