

Against the Forms of Power

by Octavio Zaya

Born in Havana (Cuba) in 1968 – that year of anti-establishment uprisings, political deception and important global events – Tania Bruguera has gained international reputation thanks to a body of work which, in general, succinctly analyses, is unfolded and projected around the relationships between power and desire. Whether or not she is the most acclaimed or important Cuban artist of her generation is not relevant. What I believe is undeniable is that her work brings together the psychological and emotional impact, the conceptual depth and formal innovation that have characterised Cuban artists that began to get international attention in the 1990s.

Throughout her short but prolific career, Tania Bruguera has expressed the powerful desire to contribute to a certain form of art, and of life, based on a sustained, and partially achieved, effort to transform that desire into reality. Yet it is still very early for conclusions or for a definitive assessment of Tania Bruguera and her artwork. I am sure that she has not said and done everything in her ongoing work, where there is undoubtedly so much still to come. I am also sure that other voices and other assessments, which are still unheard or yet to emerge, will help to reveal and bring us closer to the ideas, languages and practices of this extraordinary artist. It is also difficult, in just a short tribute, to gauge the complexity of an artist who moves between so many disciplines, whose work continues to raise so many doubts about personal identity, and who questions the very concepts of 'truth' and 'certainty'.

Despite all those circumstances, Bruguera has already produced a significant body of work that continues to deserve awards and recognition; a work woven out of the conviction that our personal history must be understood within the context of historical and social experience; a frequently ephemeral work without stable patterns or essentialisms, that tackles in the same way topics concerning women's experiences and emigration issues, political questions and cultural problems, personal memories and violent actions. The recurrent theme, the leitmotiv of all the works – irrespective of their formats and media – circulates around and considers the impact that the mechanisms of power, ideology and political discourse have on our lives and actions, on our choices and behaviour. According to Bruguera, in the end, only the body, our body, provides us with the means to express ourselves or to resist. And it is the body that Bruguera uses as an instrument, the place where to locate her thoughts and her emotions, where she has developed her most brilliant and outstanding work.

It is difficult to consider the creative activity of Tania Bruguera, or to approach her work, without referring to Cuba, to insularity and to what can be conditioned, or inspired by the experience of growing up and being educated in the institutionalisation and sclerotisation process of a paradigmatic revolution in our contemporary history, in its irreversible and progressive deterioration and in its consequent authoritarian transformation. Perhaps Bruguera's most challenging works reflect – when they are not directly related to – that unique experience, that unrepeatable 'experiment'. Her acclaimed *El Peso de la culpa* (*The Burden of Guilt*), where Bruguera borrowed from a legend of the Cuban war of independence to project a desperate plea for freedom through suicide, belongs to her first series of performances, known as the *Memorias de la Posguerra* (*Postwar Memories*). And other iconic pieces along her career, from *Estadísticas* (*Statistics*) to *El cuerpo del silencio* (*Body of Silence*), likewise exude an unyielding and deeply problematic preoccupation with Cuba.

However, the work that summarises the conditions of a regime that fosters and proliferates revolutionary discourse and meanings while abjectly confining anyone who individually or

'Poetic Justice' by Tania Bruguera, 2002-03, 62.33' x 6.2' x 11.8', video installation with used tea bags, 8 one-second selections from several international historic newsreels, 8 LCD screens, 8 DVD discs, 8 DVD players
Photo © Michael Tropea



collectively tries to practise them, is one of Tania Bruguera's masterpieces, *Sin Título (Habana)* (*Untitled (Habana)*), the moving and scathing event-performance that Bruguera presented at the 2000 Havana Biennial, and which was closed down by the Cuban authorities after just one day. Bruguera filled a dark, tunnel-like space in a former military prison with a layer of rotting sugarcane husks. The visitors that entered that dark tunnel had to struggle over the piles of sugarcane stalks under our feet as we made our way along the pungent-smelling room towards a flickering light. Only when we glanced backwards to the entrance, or when we got nearer to the light, which turned out to be a video playing footage of speeches by Fidel Castro, did we discover the gesticulating, ghostly naked figures that appeared and disappeared around us.

Since 2000, and particularly after the action-installation that she presented at Documenta 11 (Kassel 2002), Bruguera has focused on transcending evocations and representations to move to action; action that is sometimes deliberately aggressive. In these new works, as throughout her career, Bruguera seeks to recreate the dynamics where power is exercised to project our relationship with it, reveal particular truths that affect us all equally, and discover political relationships where they seem unsuspected. So, her work is a struggle against the forms of power that transforms her artistic activity, and transforms her, into its object and instrument in the sphere of knowledge, conscience, and discourse. We will no longer find her artistic activity in her 'works', but in her art-as-life, in her ethical conscience, in her relationship with history and with the hope of desire.

Translation from Spanish by Concorde Group

Images from a performance of 'The Dream
of Reason' by Tania Bruguera, 2004
Photo: courtesy Tania Bruguera

