

Tania Bruguera: Between Histories

**Stephanie Schwartz**

# Tania Bruguera: Between Histories

Stephanie Schwartz

1. Fidel Castro, quoted in <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/1999/jul/22/onlinesupplement>> (accessed 7 September 2011).

2. On Mendieta's exile and her return to Cuba in 1980, see Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1999), pp. 50–2. The first mass exile followed the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 and Castro's declaration that the Revolution was socialist.

3. Castro, quoted in Rachel Weiss, *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2011), p. 9. On the Mariel Boatlift, see Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The United States and Cuba: Intimate Enemies* (Routledge: New York, 2011), pp. 17–23.

4. The previous decade, also known as the 'Grey Years', saw the Sovietisation of Cuban art and the island's cultural isolation. See Desiderio Navarro, 'In Medias Res Publicas: On Intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere', *Boundary 2*, vol. 29, no. 3, Fall 2002, pp. 187–203.

5. Tania Bruguera, conversation with the author, Queens, New York, 11 April 2011. Bruguera began her research on Mendieta in 1985, the year of Mendieta's death. Part of her graduate thesis for the Instituto de Superior de Arte, Havana's main art school, the re-performances continued for ten years. In 1996, she stopped her research and destroyed all the work.

6. Bruguera, quoted in Sarah Bayliss, 'Putting on the Lamb', *Artnews*, vol. 103, no. 9, October 2004, p. 167.

In revolution, we used our loudspeakers as much as our weapons.

Fidel Castro<sup>1</sup>

In 1980, Ana Mendieta returned to Cuba and, between 1980 and 1985, the year of her death, made seven trips to the island. Developing the practice she began in 1973, in which she used her body or a plywood cutout as its surrogate to mark her silhouette in the landscape, Mendieta carved female forms into the walls of caves once occupied by the Cuban Independence Army during its fight for independence from Spain (Fig. 1). Mendieta's mark in Cuba's political landscape made manifest the absence she had felt since 1961, when, at age 13, she left Cuba for the United States. Mendieta was one of 14,000 children who participated in Operation Pedro Pan, a program organised by the US State Department and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Miami to find foster care for the children of parents who opposed Fidel Castro's Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Mendieta's return to the island marked a curious reversal. In April 1980, 125,000 Cubans left Cuba for the United States from the port at Mariel. This was the first mass exodus since 1961. 'Let them go, the loafers, the antisocial and the lumpen elements, the criminals and the scum!' Castro announced in response to the protests that followed in the wake of the events of 1 April 1980, when twelve Cubans crashed a bus through the gates of the Peruvian embassy in Havana and demanded asylum.<sup>3</sup> Rewriting history, he added, 'As always, Cuba gladly opened the doors for them, as it had done before with all the rabble that opposed socialism and the Revolution'. Many of Cuba's 'loafers, antisocial and lumpen elements' were artists. Mendieta returned to Cuba to make art when many artists on the island felt that doing so was no longer possible.<sup>4</sup>

In 1992, Mendieta had her first retrospective in Cuba. Organised by Tania Bruguera at Havana's Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, the exhibition, titled *Ana Mendieta/Tania Bruguera*, contained none of the artist's work. It was a retrospective of re-performances. Bruguera, who never met Mendieta, re-performed all of Mendieta's work in Havana. She dipped her hands in a mixture of animal blood and tempera, pressed, and dragged them down sheets of paper as Mendieta had done for *Body Tracks* at the University of Iowa in 1974 (Fig. 2). She arranged stones into the shape of a supine female form, reanimating Mendieta's signature *Siluetas* (Fig. 3). Working from exhibition catalogues and with artists, curators, and critics who knew Mendieta, Bruguera also produced new *Siluetas*.<sup>5</sup> 'I had this crazy idea', Bruguera explained, 'that I could make Ana alive by pretending she was living in Havana and doing new work.'<sup>6</sup> Bruguera's *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta*



**Fig. 1.** Ana Mendieta, *Untitled Guanaroca (First Women)*, 1981. Rupestrian Sculptures, sculpted rock wall. Cueva del Aguila Jaruco, Havana. (Courtesy: Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong.)



**Fig. 2.** Tania Bruguera, *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*. Exhibited at *Ana Mendieta/Tania Bruguera*. Sala Polivalente, Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, Havana, Cuba (1992). Conception year: 1985. Implementation years: 1986–1996. Medium: re-creation of works. Duration: long-term project. Materials: Ana Mendieta's artworks and unrealised projects, lectures, exhibitions, interviews, texts. (Courtesy: Studio Bruguera. Photos: ©Gonzalo Vidal Alvarado.)

7. The student-coordinated raid on Radio Reloj (Clock Radio) was part of a plot to assassinate Fulgencio Batista. See Elvis Fuentes, 'A Timely Introduction', in *Killing Time: An Exhibition of Cuban Artists from the 1980s to the Present* (Exit Art: New York, 2008), p. 7. On Castro's calendar, see Nicola Miller, 'The Absolution of History: Uses of the Past in Castro's Cuba', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 38, no. 1, January 2003, pp. 147–62.

8. Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1990), pp. 49–57.

9. Castro, 'History Will Absolve Me', in *Fidel Castro: The Havana Declarations* (Verso: London, 2008), p. 78.

10. Jo Thomas, 'The Last Days of Castro's Cuba', *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/14/magazine/the-last-days-of-castro-s-cuba.html>> (accessed 5 January 2010).

(*Tribute to Ana Mendieta*), as the series of re-performances came to be known, re-scripted the dislocations of the 1980s. Like the Cuban government, Bruguera too screwed with history.

Screwing with history is a staple of Cuba's revolutionary culture. In March 1957, a group of students raided Radio Reloj and stopped the clocks, and, on 1 January 1959, Castro turned back the calendar.<sup>7</sup> Taking his lead from the Jacobins, who had revised the Christian calendar in accordance with the revolutionary events of 1789, Castro declared 1959 Year 0 and triumphantly recouped history. History, in revolution, though, does not simply begin anew or start over. Breaking with Christian eschatology or the expectations of the imminent arrival of doomsday, revolutions, as Reinhardt Koselleck has argued, mark a qualitative change in the nature and movement of time.<sup>8</sup> Revolutionaries stop the clocks and rewrite the calendar in order to re-script the past according to the future. In Cuba, this re-scripting was nowhere more evident than in the famous closing line of Castro's four-hour self-defence of the charges brought against him in 1953 for orchestrating the Revolution. Establishing a lineage between his Revolution and the Cuban Independence Army's fight for independence from Spain, Castro triumphantly concluded: 'Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.'<sup>9</sup>

To screw with history in 1992 may have been somewhat of an empty gesture. By most accounts, that year proved that history had not 'absolved' Castro and that the Revolution was already over. Although the political and economic upheavals of 1989 did not result, to borrow a headline from the *New York Times*, in 'The Last Days of Castro's Cuba', Cubans did experience a seismic shift in the island's economic and political culture at the start of the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In 1991, the island lost its main trading partner, the Soviet Union; in 1992, it lost, so to speak, 'everyone else'. In an effort to compound the crises caused by the closures of the Eastern Bloc markets and to force regime change, the US Congress passed the Torricelli Act, also known as the Cuban



**Fig. 3.** Tania Bruguera, *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*. Medium: recreation of works. Year: 1996. Materials: gunpowder, stones, textile. (Courtesy: Studio Bruguera. Photo: INIVA.)

Democracy Act. This act barred US companies, including their foreign subsidiaries, from trading with Cuba.<sup>11</sup> In 1991, Cuba entered what Castro referred to as the 'Special Period in the Time of Peace', a recall of his earlier designation of the 'Special Period in the Time of War', which had been outlined in the 1960s for the eventuality of a US invasion. The changes that ensued in the early 1990s, though, were far from peaceful. The 'Time of Peace' called for wartime rations. Food and fuel shortages led to the first exhortations of thrift, including the rolling back of food rations that had been

11. The act also cut all food and medical aid to Cuba. For the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992. See <[http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/democ\\_act\\_1992.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/democ_act_1992.html)>.



**Fig. 4.** Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la Postguerra I* (*Memory of the Postwar I*). Medium: editing of a newspaper. Year: 1993. Materials: collaboration with Cuban artists living inside and outside Cuba, black ink/newspprint. Dimensions: 13.4" x 8.4". (Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tania Bruguera.)

12. For a detailed account of 'Special Period' measures, see Ariana Hernandez-Reguant, 'Writing the Special Period: An Introduction', in Hernandez-Reguant (ed.), *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009).

13. In response to the third mass exodus of Cubans seeking asylum in the USA, the Clinton Administration revised the 1966 Adjustment Act in accordance with the 'wet foot, dry foot' policy. This policy mandates that any Cuban migrant intercepted at sea (i.e. 'wet foot') will be returned to Cuba. In short, the US government repatriates those Cubans who do not step on US soil. See Pérez-Stable, p. 51.

14. José Martí, 'Our America', in *José Martí: Selected Writings*, trans. by Esther Allen (Penguin Books: New York, 2002), p. 293.

15. Article 53 of the 1976 Constitution reads as follows: 'Freedom of speech and the press, in accordance with the goals of Socialist society, is recognized for its citizens. The material conditions for their exercise are guaranteed by the fact that the press, the radio, television, movies and other mass media are state or social property

in place since 1962.<sup>12</sup> Government officials identified foreign investment, the decriminalisation of the US dollar and international tourism as promising remedies. Tens of thousands of Cubans proposed another solution. They left Cuba.

In 1991, Castro once again opened the waters. As in April 1980, Castro told those who were not strong enough to fight for the Revolution to go. Between 1991 and 1994, nearly 36,000 Cubans did, though many of them (about 33,000) ended up back in Cuba – or, at least on the island. Barred from entering the United States following President Clinton's revision of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which had allowed anyone fleeing Cuba entry to the United States for one year, many *balseros*, as they were known for the makeshift rafts they rigged on the shores of Cojimar, were deported to the US Naval Base in Guantánamo Bay.<sup>13</sup> The first years of the 1990s, in short, were economically and psychically catastrophic. The Revolution had failed to strangle the 'octopus' in the North, to borrow José Martí's famous description of the US in the 1890s, and it seemed for certain that these were in fact the last days of Revolution.<sup>14</sup>

In 1993, Bruguera extended her investigation of the ways in which the Cuban government organises history with *Memoria de la postguerra* (*Memory of the Postwar*) (Figs 4 and 5). An underground newspaper mimicking the format of *Granma*, the official Cuban Communist Party daily, *Memoria* directly confronted the means by which the Cuban government secured its lock on writing – and rewriting – Cuba's history. *Granma* is one of two print-based dailies published on the island; the other, *Juventud Rebelde*, the newspaper of the Union of Young Communists, is also operated by the party. In 1975, with the inauguration of the First Party Congress, the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba granted the Communist Party the right to control the press, recognising 'freedom of speech and the press in accordance with the goals of the socialist society'. The press and all mass media, including radio, television, and film as well as the island's billboards, streets, and monuments, were free, the party argued, because they were not 'private property'.<sup>15</sup> Though codified in 1975 as the party's Propaganda Laws, these measures find their origin in the revolutionary rhetoric of the 1960s, when Castro gathered Cuba's artists and writers at the National Library in June 1961 to address their role in the advancement of the Revolution. Castro's address, 'Words to Intellectuals', coined the phrase that came to circumscribe all future debates about freedom of expression in Cuba: 'Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, no rights at all'.<sup>16</sup> In advance of the codification of the party's Propaganda Laws, Castro had conveniently sidestepped the issue of censorship. Acknowledging that not all artists and intellectuals are revolutionaries, Castro banned all artistic acts 'doubting' the Revolution.<sup>17</sup> 'Nothing against the Revolution,' he explained, 'because the Revolution has its rights also, and the first right of the Revolution is the right to exist.'<sup>18</sup>

Bruguera's newspaper doubly addressed the party's Propaganda Laws. Its editorials and articles offered the Cuban public another version of the daily news. *Memoria* was also the first Cuban newspaper to publish the writings of Cubans living in exile. Since 1961, the thoughts and desires of the exile community had not been aired on the island. They had been eliminated from the historical record. 'When you leave,' Bruguera once remarked, 'it's as if you are being erased from culture.'<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, in 1994, with the publication of the newspaper's second edition, *Memoria* was censored. Bruguera was called before the Arts Council and told to stop her publication.

One of her collaborators was detained; another was expelled from his job.<sup>20</sup> Bruguera complied – albeit temporarily. She suspended the newspaper’s production until 2003 when she published its third edition (Fig. 6). This edition addressed another form of party propaganda, the revolutionary slogan. Printed in red and black, and lacking a date or a masthead, the third edition replaced the paper’s articles, editorials, photographs, and drawings with those slogans representative of the Revolution’s promise and charge. These included the famous ‘Libertad o Muerte’ (Liberty or Death) and ‘Yankees Go Home’.

It could easily be argued that *Memoria* ‘doubted’ the Revolution. The title alone suggests that Bruguera questioned Castro’s periodisation of the 1990s as a ‘Time of Peace’. Moreover, the newspaper’s articles and editorials directly addressed what had been left out of the news since the 1960s – the social and psychic consequences of the party’s daily and pervasive censorship. For example, as Rachel Weiss has noted, Havana-based artist Sandra Ceballos offered a text entitled ‘The Psychiatric Exam of the Postwar Artist’. The psychiatric state of an artist living in Cuba and working ‘within the Revolution’, Ceballos concluded, was not good. Diagnostically speaking, ‘an excess of cognitive information’ had resulted, she explained, in ‘a noteworthy collapse of the cranial area’.<sup>21</sup> The cure, she insisted, was exile. The newspaper’s graphics corroborated Ceballos’s conclusions or, at least, offered its readers images of what life was like for those who stayed. The melting masthead of the newspaper’s second edition, written as if with blood, found confirmation in the publication of photographs of mass graves.<sup>22</sup>

Bruguera’s newspaper did more than set the record straight and publically announced what had been officially denied. It rescripted the Revolution’s history. *Memoria* finally documented what Cuban artists, art historians, and curators had failed to: the explosion of Cuban cultural and artistic practices in the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> Dubbed by curator and critic Gerardo Mosquera the era of ‘New Cuban Art’, the 1980s marked an abrupt end to a period of strict Sovietisation of Cuban culture, which had followed from Castro’s somewhat surprising public declaration of support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>24</sup> Consecrated in January 1981 with *Volumen uno* (*Volume One*), a group exhibition at the Centro de Arte International showcasing an eclectic range of artistic practices from performance and installation art to photography, New Cuban Art explicitly critiqued the twin pillars of artistic practices in Cuba in the 1970s: Socialist Realism and a home-spun *cubanía*.<sup>25</sup> Rejecting both the mandated and the local, Cuban artists sought to internationalise Cuban art, an effort that was eventually institutionalised with the inauguration of the Havana Biennial in 1984.<sup>26</sup>

Artistic practices in the 1980s, though, had a rigorous anti-institutional flavour. The decade saw the rise of artist collectives and the movement of art’s exhibition outside state-run institutions.<sup>27</sup> Some artists, like the members of the collective Arte-De (Arte-Derechos/Art Rights), took to the streets, providing such public performances as their 1988 *Me han jodido el ánimo* (*They’ve Fucked Up My Spirit*). This performance, which consisted of Art-De’s Juan-Sí González walking into a public park and wrapping himself in a plastic bag, allegorised the party’s restrictions on artistic practice as well as the public’s responsibility to revolt. He challenged the public to end his – and their – suffocation. Other artists took to the baseball field. In 1989, in response to the Ministry of Culture’s censorship of several exhibitions in the preceding years, the ‘new’ artists, new art critics, and their students pitched up at Havana’s Marcelo Salado Stadium to play ball. A sarcastic nod to



**Fig. 5.** Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la Postguerra II* (*Memory of the Postwar II*). Medium: editing of a newspaper. Year: 1994. Materials: collaboration with Cuban artists living inside and outside Cuba, black ink/newsprint. Dimensions: 12.2' × 8'. (Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tania Bruguera.)

and cannot be the object, in any case, of private property, which insures their use in the exclusive service of the working people and the interest of society.' Constitution of the Cuban Republic, 1976. See <[www.constitutionnet.org/files/Cuba%20Constitution.pdf](http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/Cuba%20Constitution.pdf)> (accessed 25 May 2011).

16. Castro, 'Words to Intellectuals', <<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html>>. Castro's speech was a response to a series of debates prompted by the Cuban government's first act of censorship. In 1961, the Cuban Film Institute (Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos) banned the release of Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal's sixteen-minute documentary on Cuban nightlife, *P.M. (Post-Meridian)*. For a discussion of the film and the debate that ensued in response to the Institute's actions, see Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2004), pp. 134–43. On the issue of censorship in Cuba more generally, see Linda Howe, *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists after the Revolution* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2004), pp. 14–64.

17. Castro, 'Words to Intellectuals', n.p.

18. Castro, 'Words to Intellectuals', n.p.

19. Bruguera, quoted in Bayliss, 'Putting on the Lamb', p. 167.



**Fig. 6.** Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la Postguerra III (Memory of the Postwar III)*. Medium: editing of a newspaper. Year: 2003. Materials: newspapers without name, date, or news; political slogans used by the Cuban Revolution, reproduction of the posters used to advertise revolutionary slogans, red ink, black ink/newsprint. Dimensions: 11.2" × 15.9". (Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tania Bruguera.)

20. See Bruguera, interviewed by RoseLee Goldberg, <<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/46-0-Being+Cuban.htm>> (accessed 10 April 2011).

21. Sandra Ceballos, quoted and translated in Weiss, *To and From Utopia*, p. 232.

22. See *Memoria de la postguerra*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1994, cover and p. 12.

23. Bruguera, conversation with the author, Queens, New York, 11 April 2011.

24. Gerardo Mosquera, 'New Cuban Art: Identity and Popular Culture', *Art Criticism*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1989, pp. 57–65 and Mosquera, 'The New Cuban Art', in Ales Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2003), pp. 208–46.

25. Critics and historians have noted several events precipitating the organisation of *Volumen uno* and the inauguration of the New Cuban Art scene in the early 1980s. These included the establishments of the first Ministry of Culture under Armando Hart in 1976 and the graduation of the first generation of artists educated under the Revolution. See Mosquera, 'The New Cuban Art', p. 214.

Castro's (and America's) favourite pastime, *La plastica cubana se dedica al beisbol (Cuban Art Dedicates Itself to Baseball)*, as the work came to be known, was a cunning way to sidestep the censors. In Cuba, legal permission is required for a collective gathering, but it is not required to play ball. When the group issued a manifesto calling into question the intellectuals' subordination to the Revolution, the 'team' was immediately forced to disband.<sup>28</sup> The era's most irreverent performance, which Bruguera must have had in mind when she launched *Memoria*, took place at *El objeto esculpado (The Sculpted Object)*, an exhibition held in May 1990 at the Centro de Desarrollo Visuales. There, Ángel Delgado dropped his trousers and defecated on a copy of *Granma*. The exhibition was censored and Delgado spent six months in prison.<sup>29</sup>

Critical of the Revolution's limits, much New Cuban Art staged its critique through a recall of the lessons of the Revolution. The new artists called for a rethinking of the art object through the politics of collective practice. One of the most widely debated concepts in the Revolution's historiography, the commitment to collective action had been at the centre of revolutionary work since the 1960s. It was the basis of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's theory of the revolutionary subject, the 'New Man', as well as his critique of capitalism. In his 1965 letter to the editor of the Uruguayan journal *Marcha*, now known by the title 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', Che defined the Revolution's work as follows:

Individuals start to see themselves reflected in their work and understand their full stature as human beings through objects created, through the work accomplished. Work no longer entails surrendering a part of one's being in the form of labor power sold, which no longer belongs to the individual, but represents an expression of oneself, a contribution to the common life in which one is reflected, the fulfillment of one's social duty.<sup>30</sup>

Pitched as a response to those who were convinced that socialism necessitated the negation of the individual, Che's ruminations on the makeup of the revolutionary subject developed out of his critique of private property. Che argued for an expanded status of the individual under socialism by reminding revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries alike that private property alienates. Capitalism may champion individuality, but individuality, Che insisted, is not the same as freedom. Che's description of freedom under socialism necessitated drawing out what he called a 'new status' for work. 'Work,' Che reiterated, 'should be a social duty', it should be voluntary and based on the 'Marxist appreciation that one only reaches full human condition when one is no longer compelled to produce by the physical necessity to sell oneself as a commodity'.<sup>31</sup> The struggle for liberation, to borrow one of Che's most succinct metaphors, cannot be a 'contest among wolves'.<sup>32</sup> It must be the work of an aggregate of individuals. Under socialism, the individual, he argued, would not disappear; he or she would be born out of new historical conditions. It is a 'pipe dream', Che concluded, 'that socialism can be achieved with the help of the dull instruments left to us by capitalism'.<sup>33</sup>

Orchestrating a 'new status' for work was the subject of another collective's actions, Arte Calle's 1988 exhibition *No es solo lo que ves (It is Not Just What You See)*. Organised at the University of Havana and by the collective's unnamed ringleader, Aldo Damien Menéndez, the exhibition was designed to showcase Menéndez's *Reviva la Revolu (Revive the Revolu)*. The work, an unframed painting bearing its sloganeering title, stood at the centre of the exhibition, propped up against the gallery wall. In front of the painting, on the floor, Menéndez placed a trashcan, and by its side he left a note issuing the

following request: 'As you can see, this work is almost blank. I could only start due to lack of materials. Please help me.'<sup>34</sup> Playing on the exhibition's title, its call for the demotion of visibility as the means of engaging with artistic practice, Menéndez asked the public to complete instead of simply contemplate his work. Or, as the title of the painting, which played on the familiar slogan *Viva la Revolución*, intimated, Menéndez asked the public to 'revive' the Revolution's call for collective action. The painting's title, though, had a double meaning. 'Reviva la Revolu' could also be translated as 'revive the confusion/mess'.<sup>35</sup> Confusion – or, the collective desire to reject the rules and shake up the censors – had defined artistic practice in the 1980s. It was also what Che had called for in 1965.<sup>36</sup> Che's 'Socialism and Man in Cuba' doubled as a directive for artistic practice and a critique of Socialist Realism. With Socialist Realism, Che argued, 'culture is reduced to assimilating the socialist present and the dead past'.<sup>37</sup> The regimentation of principles and rules, he explained, signalled the end of 'true artistic experimentation'.<sup>38</sup> Engaging in true artistic freedom, according to Che, required working collectively, which in a revolutionary context does not mean to work as a group. Following Che's critique of individuality, it meant to work *with* the public. It meant to improvise and ask the public to participate in the work's production.

Working with the public was exactly what Bruguera set out to do in *Memoria* and her *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta*. Re-animating, re-contextualising, and reintroducing the promise of the 1980s, both works took on public lives, circulating not only in photographs or as the press, but also by word of mouth among the public. Both works caused public confusion (in the case of the *Homage* about who had produced the work) and public debate. Moreover, both circulated as rumour. A form of collectivity in itself, rumour is a prevalent means of communication in Cuba and has been central to the organisation of Cuban art practices since the 1980s. In Cuba, many art events are publicised through and only exist as rumour.<sup>39</sup> Rumour is not only a way to evade the censors; it is also a means of writing history. Rumour, to quote Bruguera, 'has been proven an effective defence mechanism against the amnesia existing between the numerous and frequent re-editings of Cuba's history.'<sup>40</sup>

Like Bruguera's homage to Mendieta, *Memoria* memorialised the collective actions of the 1980s without leaving them in the past. It both documented the past and re-scripted it for the future. As Bruguera queried in the paper's inaugural editorial,

What next? Rejoin the forces? I do not know to what extent or with what views the ranks will again restructure themselves. A new army advances, along with its survivors, with the given lessons of history... Will we again wait another decade for the forge?... Will we again hope to believe ourselves at the center of the world at the wrong moment? Do we have enough time left? These are the fifteen minutes that again have been our lot.<sup>41</sup>

Surely Bruguera's program was speculative and, as Weiss has argued, could be read as 'solid, concrete proof that everything was in danger of evanescing'.<sup>42</sup> Yet, to read Bruguera's editorial and the newspaper's contents this way is to mitigate its work. The newspaper, not simply its content, was the answer to Bruguera's list of queries. *Memoria* did not simply set the record straight by exposing the lies made real by the Revolution's failure. It confronted the Revolution's dislocations of political agency on its own terms. It confronted them *through the media*. *Memoria* did not 'doubt' the Revolution. It used the

26. On the Havana Biennial and its impact on Cuban art production in the 1980s, see Luis Camnitzer, 'Report from Havana: The First Biennial of Latin America', *Art in America*, vol. 72, no. 1, December 1984, pp. 41–9; Lillian Llanes, 'La Bial de La Habana', *Third Text*, vol. 6, no. 20, Autumn 1992, pp. 5–12; and Rachel Weiss (ed.), *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial, 1989* (Afterall Books: London, 2012).

27. Weiss addresses this history in 'Performing Revolution: Arte Calle, Grupo Provisional, and the Response to the Cuban National Crisis, 1986–1989', in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (eds), *Collectivism After Modernism: Art and Social Imagination After 1945* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2007), pp. 114–62.

28. See Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, 'Trajectories of Rumor: Cuban Art in the Postwar Period', in Holly Block (ed.), *Art Cuba: The New Generation* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: New York, 2001), p. 17.

29. The director of the Centro and the exhibition's curator, Beatriz Aulet, was also fired. See Weiss, *To and From Utopia*, p. 108. See also Figueroa, 'Trajectories of Rumor: Cuban Art in the Postwar Period'.

30. Ernesto Che Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', in *Manifestos: Three Classic Essays on How to Change the World* (Ocean Press: Melbourne, 2005), p. 159.

31. Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', p. 159.

32. Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', p. 153.

33. Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', p. 155.

34. See Weiss's discussion of the work in *To and From Utopia*, p. 87.

35. Aldo Damien Menéndez, 'Art Attack: The Work of Arte Calle', in Coco Fusco (ed.), *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (Routledge: New York, 2000), pp. 278–80.

36. Castro also revived Che in 1986. Responding to calls for *glasnost* in the Soviet Union, Castro once again announced a 'new time', a time for 'The Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies'. Castro's rectification outlined a reversal of the island's Sovietisation and, more specifically, a revival of Che's lessons, including the promotion of collective and volunteer labour. On this re-scripting of history, see Susan Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro* (University of Princeton Press: Princeton, 1994), Chapter Three.

37. Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', p. 162.

38. Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba', p. 161.
39. Figueroa, 'Trajectories of Rumor: Cuban Art in the Postwar Period', pp. 17–23.
40. Bruguera, 'Tania Bruguera: When Behavior Becomes Form', *Panachute*, vol. 125, Winter 2007, p. 70.
41. Bruguera, 'Ni todo, ni todos', *Memoria de la postguerra*, vol. 1, no. 1, November 1993, p. 1. For the above-quoted translation, see Weiss, *To and From Utopia*, p. 232.
42. Weiss, *To and From Utopia*, p. 232.
43. Bruguera, interviewed by Roberta Tenconi. See <<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/247-0-Interview.htm>> (accessed 10 April 2011).
44. Bruguera, interviewed by Doloras Curia, <<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/245-0-Ethics+of+provocation+Tania+Bruguera+turn+spectators+into+citizens.htm>> (accessed 1 April 2011).
45. Bruguera, 'Arts, Havana', *Artforum*, vol. 48, no. 10, Summer 2010, p. 299. (Emphasis in the original.)
46. Bruguera singles out (*Untitled*) *Rape Scene* as the origin of *Arte de conducta* in her interview with Curia.
47. Bruguera, conversation with the author, Queens, New York, 11 April 2011.

media exactly as the party had – to re-perform the Revolution's charge and rewrite history.

Freedom of expression is compromised in Cuba. Yet, works like *Memoria* suggest that this is not simply because independent words and actions do not get published or circulate openly and in public. Freedom of expression is limited because in a mediated revolution it is not possible to *not* be part of history. 'To live in a country', Bruguera explained,

where every once in a while you hear a speech informing you that you are living a historical moment of which you are a part and in which you are expected to participate makes you have a rather daily relationship with what is historical. A relationship that is either of doubt and confusion... or one that makes you monumentalize the slightest event in a kind of contest to have (to own) your share of historical responsibility.<sup>43</sup>

Calls for freedom, in other words, cannot take place against the revolution. They take place 'within the revolution'. Like *Memoria*, they must acknowledge the fact that political subjects live inside the media and in between histories.

In *El susurro de Tatlin* (*Tatlin's Whisper*), a series of performances Bruguera completed in 2009, she continued to explore the politics of collective action, inside and outside of Cuba. Site-specific, the work took six different incarnations, each related to the city in which it was staged. *Tatlin's Whisper #5* took place in 2008 at London's Tate Modern (Fig. 7). Staged in the Turbine Hall, and without the artist, the work was performed by two mounted policemen. They were instructed by Bruguera to corral visitors – to do, in other words, what they do on the streets of London. *Tatlin's Whisper* was part of an extended project, which Bruguera refers to as *Arte de conducta* or Behavior Art. A category designed to distinguish her practice from performance art – she calls her work performance acts – *Arte de conducta* refuses to consider the audience as spectators.<sup>44</sup> Instead, it approaches them as citizens. 'I would like a museum in the not-so-new twenty-first century', Bruguera explained, 'that abandons the idea of *looking* for the idea of *activation*... one where art entails actual social transformation, instead of merely providing highly speculative strategies for bringing about such transformations.'<sup>45</sup> This is political art, Bruguera argues, as opposed to art that uses images to create politics.

Perhaps recalling Menéndez's critique of looking in *Reviva la Revolu*, Bruguera's desire to mark the difference between art that calls on the public to act politically and art that represents politics to the public finds its origins in Mendieta's earliest performances. A case in point is *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, which Mendieta performed in her home in Iowa in 1973 (Fig. 8).<sup>46</sup> Prompted by the rape of a student on the University of Iowa campus where Mendieta was studying, Mendieta staged the aftermath of a rape and invited students to the event. When they arrived at her apartment, they found the door ajar and Mendieta, covered in blood, face down on a table. *Rape Scene* did not reproduce or represent the crime. Working from reports of the rape circulating in the local papers, the performance sought to activate the effect that the rape might have had on the public. Instead of representing the rape, Mendieta investigated the ways in which the media represents – controls and anesthetises – public response.

Bruguera may just be one of Mendieta's most astute critics. Admitting difficulty with Mendieta's formalism, with her work's literalisation of the female form and the island of Cuba, Bruguera's *Arte de conducta* paid tribute to the one aspect of Mendieta's work that scholars have tended to ignore: Mendieta's investigation of the media.<sup>47</sup> Though sidelined by critical



**Fig. 7.** Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whispers #5*, 2008. Medium: decontextualisation of an action. Year: 2008. Materials: mounted police, crowd control techniques, audience. Dimensions: variable. Performance view at UBS Openings: Live The Living Currency, Tate Modern. (Photo: Sheila Burnett, Courtesy: Tate Modern.)

investigations of Mendieta's engagement with the earth and her body, Mendieta's interest in media and technology is hardly surprising.<sup>48</sup> Her artistic practice, after all, developed in the context of Hans Breder's Intermedia program at the University of Iowa. Designed to question the strictures of disciplinary boundaries between media, such as painting, sculpture, and film, as well as between art history, politics, and science, Breder's Intermedia program played into and pushed forward the

48. For two noteworthy exceptions in the Mendieta literature, see Miwon Kwon, 'Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta', in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1996) and Chrissie Illes, 'Suitable Bodies: The Invisible Films of Ana Mendieta', in Olga M. Viso (ed.), *Ana Mendieta: Earth, Body, Sculpture and*



**Fig. 8.** Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, 35 mm color slide. Iowa. (Courtesy: Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong.)

*Performances, 1972–1985* (Smithsonian Institute: Washington, D.C., 2004).

49. Hans Breder and Klaus-Peter Busse (eds), *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal* (Books on Demand: Norderstedt, 2003). Breder invited a range of artists to help shape his program, including Allan Kaprow (1969), Vito Acconci (1974 and 1976), and Luis Camtizer (1977).

neo-avant-garde's desire to finally blend art with life.<sup>49</sup> It was in Breder's program that Mendieta performed her first *Siluetta* and began to record her work with a Super 8 camera. By 1980, she had made close to eighty films and begun work on a never-completed book of photographs. In a posthumously published essay, 'The Struggle of Culture Today is a Struggle for Life', Mendieta contextualised her interest in media. 'Film, radio, television as well as news services', she began,



Fig. 9. Ana Mendieta, *People Looking at Blood, Moffitt*, 1973, 35 mm colour slides. Iowa City, Iowa. (Courtesy: Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong.)

are in charge of spreading, massively and systematically, thousands of films and programs that idealize and propose ways of lives and behaviors with a vision of reality that causes conformism and submission. This is the way to create a product; a style which dominates mass communication and now the arts.<sup>50</sup>

Mendieta did not simply record her work in order, as Miwon Kwon has argued, to allegorise or even stave off her disappearance from Cuba and art's history.<sup>51</sup> Her performances suggested that the neo-avant-garde's critique of artistic practices must be staged against *and* from within the work of the media.

Mendieta's early performances, like Bruguera's *Memoria*, did not call for the truth – or what was left out of the papers. Rather, in works like *Rape Scene*, Mendieta interrogated the psychological and public effects of mediation. Mendieta explored the media's work again in 1973, with her photo-series *People Looking at Blood, Moffitt* (Fig. 9). A collection of thirty-one 35-mm colour slides, or one roll of film, the series documented the reactions of a random selection of people to a pool of blood collecting on the sidewalk. Mendieta had set the scene – fake blood and bloodied rags – and removed herself from it to document the public's performance. The public's response was eerily homogeneous and passive. Most people looked and stopped, but none investigated the possible crime. In slide 28, someone observed the mess and removed it. Incorporating the camera into her practice, Mendieta did not document her work; she engaged with documents as media. In advance of those critics claiming that performance art must be live – and avoid mediation – Mendieta's performances investigated the way in which the media works to organise and homogenise publics.<sup>52</sup>

In *Tatlin's Whisper*, Bruguera engaged a similar critique of performance art. Site- as well as politically time-specific, each incarnation of the work was developed around the public's response to a familiar image.<sup>53</sup> In the case of the work's incarnation in London, it was the image of mounted police much reproduced in UK papers and on the nightly news. *Arte de conducta*, Bruguera explains, uses the media to re-activate the primary question the State poses to a citizen: 'Will you follow established disciplinary codes or not? Will you

50. Ana Mendieta, 'The Struggle for Culture Today is the Struggle for Life', in Gloria Mouré (ed.), *Ana Mendieta* (Ediciones Polígrafa: Barcelona, 1996), pp. 173–4.

51. Kwon, p. 169. To quote Kwon, 'If the performative aspect of her [Mendieta's] work represented an unrelenting desire to reach an origin forever irretrievable, the photographic mediation that records this effort structurally echoes and mimics the impossible longing.'

52. On this aspect of performance, see Frazer Ward, 'Some Relations Between Conceptual and Performance Art', *Art Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, Winter 1997, pp. 36–40. Ward's essay indirectly challenged the standard history of performance art, specifically its ban on media. On this history, see Peggy Phelan, *Unmasked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge: London, 1993), pp. 146–66. For a direct response to Phelan's seminal essay, see Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art* (NAi Publishing: Rotterdam, 2005), pp. 165–80.

53. Bruguera referred to *Tatlin's Whisper* as politically time-specific in 'A Conversation on Useful Art #2', a public conversation which took place at University College London on 27 May 2011. See as well Bruguera's discussion of *Tatlin's Whisper* in <<http://channel.tate.org.uk/media/26514914001>> (accessed 10 January 2010).

54. Bruguera, 'When Behavior Becomes Form', p. 67.

55. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Political People: Notes on *Arte de Conducta*', in *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary* (Edizioni Charta srl: Milano, 2009), p. 43.

56. Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum*, vol. 44, no. 6, February 2006, p. 179. Lambert-Beatty contextualises Bruguera's practice around the 'fall' by comparing it to the work of Artur Zmijewski.

57. Bishop, 'The Social Turn', p. 180. (Emphasis in the original.) See as well Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, vol. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51–79.

58. Debates about the definition of democracy are now quite extensive. For a recent collection of essays, see Amy Allen (ed.), *Democracy in What State?* trans. by William McCuaig (Columbia University Press: New York, 2011). In the context of contemporary art, see also Okwui Enwezor and others (eds), *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta 11, Platform One* (Hatje Cantz Publishers: Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002).

59. Jacques Rancière, 'Democracies Against Democracy: An Interview with Eric Hazan', in *Democracy in What State?* pp. 76–81. See as well Kristen Ross, 'Democracy for Sale', in the same collection.

60. Wendy Brown, 'We are all Democrats Now...', in *Democracy in What State?*, p. 44.

61. Bruguera, interviewed by RoseLee Goldberg, <<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/46-0-Being+Cuban.htm>> (accessed 10 April 2011). (Emphasis added.)

become a citizen or a criminal?'<sup>54</sup> *Tatlin's Whisper # 3*, which was staged in Madrid in 2006, framed this test in very explicit terms. Bruguera hired an instructor to facilitate a workshop in bomb making. Upon entering the gallery space, viewers were confronted with a table arranged with all the materials for making Molotov cocktails: glass and plastic bottles, explosives, flammable material, and aluminium foil. *Tatlin's Whisper #3* recalled the media frenzy around the 2006 ETA bombings.

Bruguera is one among a number of contemporary artists seeking to turn political art away from political content and towards political action. As Carrie Lambert-Beatty has argued in her study of *Arte de conducta*, Bruguera does not let the spectator just be. 'Her *Arte de conducta* assumes', Lambert-Beatty argues, 'that art viewers are all "political people". And if we are not, she makes it so.'<sup>55</sup> This practice, Lambert-Beatty suggests, doubles as a critique of what Claire Bishop has named the 'ethical turn' in political art since the 1990s, when 'the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges of the Revolution that once linked political and aesthetic radicalism'.<sup>56</sup> Distinguishing between artistic practices that generate positive visions of sociality – that mime the State's rhetoric to steer cultural policies towards 'social inclusion' – and those that 'work critically *as art*', Bishop insists that '*truly* political art' must replay and allegorise democracy's potential to divide and antagonise the public.<sup>57</sup> Bishop's critique engages with the work of numerous philosophers, from Ernesto Laclau to Jacques Rancière, who have sought to redefine democracy in the wake of the collapse of the 'Second World' and the subsequent rise of neo-liberal slogans equating democracy with the free market by denying democracy's status as a form of government.<sup>58</sup> Though now 'worn out', as Rancière has argued, democracy is less a matter of being free than 'the capacity to do things'.<sup>59</sup> An 'empty signifier', to borrow Wendy Brown's phrase, democracy creates the conditions for the public's creative and political actions.<sup>60</sup>

*Arte de conducta* may fall under this new rubric of art that antagonises and divides its publics. Yet, to place it there conveniently ahistoricises its charge. The assimilation of Bruguera's critique of politic art under a critique of neo-liberalism homogenises politics. It strips the work of its political specificity by denying the relationship in Cuba between art and propaganda. Much like Weiss's assessment that *Memoria* is 'proof' that the Revolution was coming undone in the 1990s, the association of *Arte de conducta* with generalised antagonism eclipses the work's origin within those media platforms (still) producing the Revolution. *Memoria*, for example, was printed on the same printing presses used to produce the island's official dailies. Describing this work as 'hyper-realistic', Bruguera explained,

I want to work *with* reality. Not the representation of reality. I don't want my work to represent something. I want people to *not* look at it but to be in it, sometimes even without knowing it is art. This is a real situation.<sup>61</sup>

Political art, for Bruguera, transcends the field of art. It categorically denies art's autonomy and works with or within 'real' systems of production.

*Arte de conduct* is similarly 'hyper-realistic'. It was developed in the context of Bruguera's artistic training in Havana, when Bruguera opened her Cátedra Arte de Conducta (The School of Behavior Art). The first school of performance art in Havana, the Cátedra offered Cuban artists new educational opportunities. It also tapped into another form of media: education. Like newspapers and slogans, the Cuban government's other most effective means of

monumentalising the Revolution and writing the history of Cuba as the history of the Revolution was through school primers and new curriculum. Along with the promise of free health care, suitable housing, and food rations, educational reforms were one of the main components of the Revolution's reforms.<sup>62</sup> In 1961, the same year Castro submitted his 'words' to Cuba's intellectuals, he also inaugurated the 'Year of Literacy'. That year, brigades of students left the city for the countryside to teach Cuba's peasants how to read. Discussing her *Cátedra* in the context of this media, Bruguera explained,

It is not a coincidence that one of the most important agendas of any totalitarian regime is to intercede as early as possible in the educational process. Appropriating education capitalizes the narrative process by which one gives sense to experience, and therefore is also a way to control emotional reactions to reality... Education creates or conditions the capacity to respond.<sup>63</sup>

Like newspapers, films, and television, education, to borrow Mendieta's phrase, also 'causes conformism and submission'.

This history informed Bruguera's school and *Tatlin's Whisper*. The work, as its title suggests, draws its inspiration from Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, a work of art designed not to represent the revolution but enact it through the media. Conceived in the context of Lenin's propaganda program, Tatlin's *Monument* sought to replace the conventional monument built to the glory of the individual hero for a gigantic iron spiral emitting radio signals and projected images.<sup>64</sup> If Bruguera's *Arte de conducta* belongs to a commitment to political art now, it does so from *within* the work and the lessons of the Revolution. *Arte de conducta* denies art's autonomy by acknowledging that political agency is never just available – or made available by the artist. It is staged by, for, and through the media. It is public action, rumours, and whispers.

In 2009, Bruguera closed her *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* with the final version of *Tatlin's Whisper* (Fig. 10). Her submission for the Tenth Havana Biennial, *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, was staged at the Centro Wifredo Lam, the Biennale's main venue. Performed without the artist, the work consisted of the following elements: a curtain, a podium, a microphone, two mock military guards, and a dove. Bruguera also provided the audience with disposable cameras and set up a loud speaker to broadcast the event's proceedings outside the museum. The action was simple. The members of the audience were invited to step up to the podium and to partake in one minute of free speech. As the speakers took their spot behind the microphone, the mock guards placed the dove on their shoulder. They also ushered them off the stage after one minute. Once again, as in *Memoria*, Bruguera redressed the party's laws on freedom of expression. She also asked the audience to act collectively to produce the work.

The speeches varied. Some who stepped up to the microphone, in fact, said nothing. They simply cried. Others, like the blogger Yoani Sánchez, took advantage of the unprecedented opportunity to publically critique the regime. Sánchez, who was invited to the event and read a prepared speech, openly criticised the government's crackdown on new technologies (including her own blog), insisting that 'Now is the time for us to jump the wall of control'.<sup>65</sup> Begun in 2007, Sánchez's blog, *Generación Y* (*Generation Y*), has been banned in Cuba since 2008. Sánchez has not stopped posting. Like a growing community of Cuban bloggers, she has worked assiduously to avoid the censors and maintain a presence in cyberspace.<sup>66</sup> Trading in on favours,

62. Castro outlines these reforms in his 1953 'History will Absolve Me'. See Castro, 'History', pp. 27–38.

63. Bruguera, 'When Behavior Becomes Form', pp. 63–4. Many take issue with Bruguera's claim that the Cuban government or its education program is totalitarian. This criticism may be fair, yet it misses her point. It subsumes the work into the very binary it seeks to overturn, as an action either 'for' or 'against' the Revolution.

64. Margrit Rowell, 'Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura', *October*, vol. 7, Winter 1978, pp. 83–103.

65. Yoani Sánchez, 'Completed Performance', <<http://www.desdecuba.com/generation/?p=474>> (accessed 5 January 2010).

66. Orlando Pardo Lazo, <[http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/5215/inside\\_cuba\\_guerrilla\\_blogging/](http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/5215/inside_cuba_guerrilla_blogging/)> (accessed 5 January 2010).



**Fig. 10.** Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin Whisper # 6 (Havana version)*. Year: 2009. Medium: behaviour art. Materials: stage, podium, microphones, one loudspeaker inside, and one loudspeaker outside of the building, two persons dressed on a military outfit, white dove, one minute free of censorship per speaker, 200 disposable cameras with flash. (Courtesy: Tania Bruguera.)

67. Sánchez, 'Translation of Government Response to Performance', <[http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?page\\_id=475](http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?page_id=475)> (accessed 5 January 2010).

Sánchez gains access to computers at Cuban hotels and emails her entries to a community of bloggers outside Cuba. With the assistance of volunteers to download, translate, and post her entries, *Generación Y* runs on [desdecuba.com](http://desdecuba.com) and is sponsored by the *Huffington Post*. Sánchez's comments may not have been typical, but given that she was invited to participate in the event they surely suggest that Bruguera sought to cultivate a renewed investigation of the role of the media in Cuban society. The spray of flashes from the disposable cameras and the inclusion of the loud speaker also make this aspect of the work hard to ignore. Moreover, *Tatlin's Whisper # 6* was based on a popular image, a photograph of Castro's first speech in January 1959 when a white dove landed on his shoulder. Re-performing and parodying the event, *Tatlin's Whisper #6* also made reference to the fact that Castro was no longer in the media. In February 2008, Castro had announced that he would not run for president. He stepped down and handed the microphone to his brother.

This final version of *Tatlin's Whisper*, not surprisingly, caused quite a stir. Following the event, which only lasted one hour, the organising committee of the Biennial issued a communiqué denouncing it. Published in *La Jbrilla*, an online cultural magazine, and re-published by Sánchez on *Generación Y*, the communiqué read as follows:

Last Sunday March 29th 2009, in the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Centre, various people unrelated to the culture, headed by a professional 'dissident' created by the powerful media group PRISA made use of a performance by Tania Bruguera to strike a blow at the Cuban Revolution. It was a case where individuals, in the service of the anti-Cuban propaganda machine, repeated worn-out claims of "freedom" and "democracy" demanded by their sponsors. They spoke – or rather acted – for the cameras and now several media outlets in Florida are turning it into big news.<sup>67</sup>

Notably, the Committee did not denounce Bruguera or the performance. They denounced those who had 'hijacked' the event. Like the 'hijack', the

communiqué was most likely planned. Many, including Sánchez, argued that the communiqué was part of the performance. That is, if it had not been issued, it would have seemed as if the event had been staged for an international audience. The Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco insisted that it was, that *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was part and parcel of the Biennial's desire to address the international media circus.<sup>68</sup> Calls for freedom did not need to be performed, Fusco argued. They were 'really' taking place every day in the streets of Havana.

Fusco is right. Yet, does this defuse the work's political charge? For Bruguera, as her work since the 1990s has suggested, political acts in Cuba must take place 'within the Revolution' and from within the media more specifically. To ignore this is to assume that political acts are the same everywhere.<sup>69</sup> Generalised calls for freedom, Bruguera's multiple versions of the work remind us, ahistoricise politics. They subsume freedom under the empty signifier, democracy. *Tatlin's Whisper #6* did not set out to create the conditions for free speech in a place where speech is censored. It made evident that in a mediated public sphere 'free' speech is always compromised. Its possibility was limited; it was monitored and restricted under the auspicious of the artist – and the media. In this way, the performance pointed to the very fallacy at work in the media. This fallacy is not simply the claim that media, as Sánchez argues on her blog, can set us free or that free speech democratises. Since it was first launched in 2007, *Generación Y* promised that 'the voice of the individual can push back the walls, contradict the slogans, fade the myths'.<sup>70</sup> The fallacy at the heart of both old and new media is that means of communication necessarily or inherently collectivise.<sup>71</sup> *Generación Y* is much less a collective presence, in or outside Cuba, than, as Sánchez reminds us, 'one' woman's attempt to 'behave like a free person'.<sup>72</sup> Like most do-it-yourself websites and citizen journalism, blogs promote individuality, not freedom.<sup>73</sup> Or, to follow Che's critique of capitalism, they confuse the two.

Bruguera's calls for a free press and free speech are meant to ring hollow. By doing so, they prompt us to acknowledge that our calls for democracy and human rights need to be contextualised not in relation to universal principles, but in relation to the media. Media, in this case, is not hardware – photographs, films, and newspapers. It is the means for organising social relations and publics. Bruguera is not calling for democracy *now*, in the age of advanced neo-liberal globalisation. Her work contends with the fact that history – and democracy – are never made available, offered by artists or critics. Democracy is always mediated, leaving the artist, the critic, and the audience between histories.

68. Coco Fusco, 'Public Address', *Artforum*, vol. 48, no. 2, October 2009, pp. 38–9.

69. Bishop takes this line in her review of the work. She describes her experience as a spectator at the event as follows: 'The atmosphere was electric, in contrast to the flaccidity of innumerable "soap box" events organised by artists in the West. Could a project like *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, with its experimental potency and capacity to hit a political nerve, ever work in the West? Watching this piece made me melancholic for my own context, where calls for freedom and democracy have been so entirely compromised and devalued (for example, by US foreign policy) that they no longer hold as a point of collective rallying.' Bishop, 'Speech Disorder: Claire Bishop on Tania Bruguera at the 10th Havana Biennial', *Artforum*, vol. 47, no. 10, Summer 2009, pp. 121–2. Bishop's review prompted Fusco's criticism.

70. Sánchez, *Havana Real: One Woman Fights to Tell the Truth About Cuba* (Melville: New York, 2009), p. 45.

71. For a critique of new media along these lines, see Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2002).

72. Sánchez, *Havana Real*, p. 149.

73. On the politics of blogging in these terms, see Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2010); Mark Deuze, 'The Future of Citizen Journalism', in Stuart Allen and Einar Thorsen (eds), *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Peter Lang: New York, 2009).