

INTRODUCTION

• • •

HELAINÉ POSNER

Tania Bruguera's work examines fundamental questions of power and vulnerability in relation to the personal, political, and collective body. An interdisciplinary artist working in the ephemeral, experiential forms of performance and installation, she creates a space where art, politics, and life converge. Bruguera was born, raised, and educated in Cuba where she began her career as an artist before relocating to the United States about a decade ago. An extensive traveler, she currently lives and works in three diverse cities: Chicago, Paris, and Havana. The broad social and historic perspective she brings to her work is rooted in personal experience and forms the basis for her socially responsible or useful art. Bruguera's work explores urgent issues, such as exile, displacement, and instability; and individual and collective responses to them, from submission, fear, and endurance to the hope for survival and the possibility of self-expression.

Bruguera began her narrative of the body by appropriating the work of another Cuban artist exiled from her homeland in 1960 at age twelve. *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1985–1996), Bruguera's graduate thesis at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, is a conceptual performance project in which the younger artist reenacted Mendieta's signature *Siluetas Series* (1973–1980), a group of works wherein she placed her naked body, or its outline or silhouette, into the landscape. Recreating Mendieta's mystical, ritualistic, corporal performances had great impact on Bruguera, deeply influencing her later work and prompting her to reconsider the meaning of Cuban identity. Her "reanimation" of Mendieta's earth/body art over the next several years also was a significant cultural act, one that restored Mendieta to the Cuban collective consciousness and posthumously fulfilled that artist's fervent desire for return.¹ For Bruguera and her generation, many of whom left the island in the early 1990s due to strong political and economic pressure, the decision to stay or go and its consequences was the central dilemma. As Bruguera remarked: "This made me reflect upon whether being Cuban meant solely living here, or whether it signified a condition beyond borders," and for many years migration and its effects were the primary subject of her work.²

In the late 1990s, Bruguera turned from embodying Mendieta to the creation of a few highly visceral, metaphorical performances that comment on the history of the Cuban people and typically feature the artist performing demanding rituals in the nude. Her physical and psychological feats of endurance recall the work of both Mendieta and pioneering performance artist Marina Abramović. One of the most striking and intense is *The Burden of Guilt* (1997–1999), a work based on the historic tale of collective suicide of indigenous Cubans during the Spanish occupation. According to legend, the native people, unable to resist the superior force of the invaders, decided to eat dirt until they died in a final act of rebellion. But as they consumed their ancestral land and its heritage, they also destroyed themselves. In her performance Bruguera ritualistically repeated this solemn gesture, rolling dirt mixed with salt water, symbolizing tears, into small balls and slowly ingesting them. She appeared naked with the carcass of a slaughtered lamb hung from her neck like a gaping wound. Both the lamb carcass and the artist's body were symbols of sacrifice.

By eating dirt, the native Cubans defied their conquerors with the only weapon at their disposal: passive resistance. However, their passivity was also a source of guilt as they silently succumbed to the will of the oppressor. To this day the popular Spanish expression *comer tierra*, or to eat dirt, means to experience very difficult times. While representing an historic event, *The Burden of Guilt* also has resonance in contemporary Cuba where acts of rebellion remain dangerous and submission or obedience, though shameful, may also be the surest means of survival. In this performance, Bruguera used her body to create an iconic image, one that captures the ongoing social and political reality of the Cuban experience in which the utopian promise is constantly undermined by the bitter facts of daily life. In a related work, *The Body of Silence* (1997–1998), the naked artist huddled in the corner of a box lined with raw lamb meat making corrections in an official Cuban history textbook. Seized by a fear of the consequences, she began licking off her scribbling in an abortive attempt at self-censorship, ultimately tearing up and consuming the pages of the rewritten national narrative.

Bruguera has eloquently spoken of her choice of performance as a medium. She says:

I was looking for a less passive way to engage with the audience, a way in which they would also feel involved . . . I was very attracted to the idea of art as something ephemeral; as an experience, as something one lived through . . . as an agent for social change . . . Not only did performance provide a more intense experience for me in the creation of the work, but I think it was also a way of sharing with the audience with greater access and participation on their part . . . When I began to perform, I thought I found the medium with the solution to all my restlessness. It struck me as an ideal medium, ephemeral but with great impact . . . In the end, the work is remembered as images in our memory, impressions, and also as stories. The work functions as commentary. As such, I think performance can work like any other medium.³

In 2000, Bruguera was invited to participate in the 7th Havana Biennial where she created the first of four related performances/installations to be presented internationally over the following ten years. In an ambitious departure from her earlier performance work, the artist constructed a conceptually powerful, physically enveloping environment that engaged the audience as it alerted their senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch. The artist, however, was no longer present, as the focus of her work shifted from the personal to the social or political body. *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* took place in a darkened tunnel at La Fortaleza de la Cabaña, a former military fortress, where generations of Cubans had been imprisoned. An uneasy mood prevailed as viewers traipsed through the dark and stumbled upon layers of rotting *bagazo*, or sugarcane husks, covering the prison floor and emitting the noxious stench of fermentation. As



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Silueta Series, Iowa)*, 1977
Lifetime color photograph
13 1/4 x 20 inches
Des Moines Art Center
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

visitors anxiously made their way through the dark and over the thick, fetid detritus, they spotted a blue light in the distance. It was a video monitor displaying silent archival footage of Fidel Castro in his prime, giving a well-known speech, swimming in the ocean, and waving to the crowd, punctuated at one-minute intervals by the image of the leader bearing his chest. Unexpectedly, the shadowy figures of four naked men emerged from the darkness, each performing a single, repetitive gesture. One rubbed his body as if to remove the smell of the sugarcane, another used his fingers to pry open his mouth, a third wiped his face with his forearm, and the last slowly bowed. On exiting the tunnel the visitor was blinded by the bright Caribbean sun.

In this work, Bruguera offered a subtle, yet penetrating critique of Cuban life since the so-called triumph of the revolution. In hindsight, she suggests, the glorious past is revealed to have been nothing more than a series of “repeated rituals and empty gestures,” and the people so seduced by power that they have become blind to what is happening all around them.⁴ Essentially, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* was a call for greater political awareness and responsibil-



Juan Francisco Elso, *Por América (For America [José Martí])*, 1986
Wood, plaster, earth, pigment, synthetic hair, and glass eyes
56 3/4 x 17 1/4 x 18 1/4 inches (entire work: dimensions variable)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1998
Photograph by Lee Stalworth

ity on the part of the Cuban people presented in the context of an international art event. The impact of this message was such that the installation was officially closed after one day.

Two years later, Bruguera had the opportunity to test whether her work, which so far had been based in her Cuban experience, would translate to a major international setting when she was asked to create an installation for Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* returned to the theme of social responsibility within a vastly different yet equally charged geopolitical site. Once again, the artist used light and darkness to examine such concerns as power and vulnerability, and historic memory versus cultural amnesia; or the question of what we as a society choose to acknowledge and act upon and what we choose to ignore.

All elements of *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* conspired to create a sense of vulnerability in the viewer, prompting memories of wartime and, given the location, World War II. A row of 750-watt lights was strung on a trestle above the entrance to the installation, assaulting the eyes of the viewer as if under interrogation. The metallic clicking sound of a person on patrol loading and unloading a gun was heard overhead. At first one did not know whether this sound was

live or recorded, but it gradually became clear that real human beings were watching and, in theory, threatening one's life. Suddenly the bright lights went out, the sound ceased and, for a few moments, the darkened space was dimly lit by a projection displaying the names of one hundred locations across the globe where political massacres have occurred since the end of World War II, some resulting in enormous casualties. With the city of Kassel, once the site of a large ammunition factory and a target of severe bombing during the war, as context, Bruguera encouraged the audience to recognize the global reach of political violence as personal threat by placing them directly in the line of fire.

Bruguera continued to tackle hot topics in her work but in a more conceptually and formally cool manner. In conversation, she described this shift in approach as "more Felix Gonzales-Torres than Ana Mendieta," citing another Cuban-born artist whose work combined the impulses of conceptual and minimal art with social themes to create formally restrained yet emotionally poignant installations. Essentially, her work became less visceral and more theoretical. The untitled series also marked another important change in her practice as she moved from presenting herself as performer to engaging the audience as active participants. The third in the artist's series of performances/installations, called *Untitled (Moscow, 2007)* or *Trust Workshop*, was a year-long project presented as part of the 2nd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. In this work, Bruguera set up a situation in which she invited Russian citizens to share their lingering distrust of Soviet officials with the workshop coordinator, a former KGB agent. They told personal stories of misfortune or political persecution to the agent, who used specialized skills developed in Cold War training to redress the painful psychological repercussions of the era and to begin to restore trust. The primary goal of the workshop was to heal the generational and ideological gaps that separate the Russian people as their country enters a new social, political, and economic era.

Bruguera's performance/installation took the form of a photography studio in which visitors were invited to pose for their portraits beneath a framed photograph of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Bolshevik secret police. The anxious participants and their families were asked to choose between having their picture taken with a live eagle or with a monkey. According to the artist, the eagle, poised on the subject's shoulder, was intended to signify history, power, and the establishment, while the monkey, dressed in children's clothing and propped on one's lap, represented youth, pleasure, and the rise of capitalism in the new Russia. The choice was clearly symbolic: either one could hold on to the old ideology or cast off the vestiges of a repressive regime and move forward.

In the untitled series the artist made a significant transition from exploring power relations within her own country to reflecting more broadly on the ways in which different social or political entities relate to their histories and issues of moral conscience and express their hopes and fears. The series is completed by *Untitled (Bogotá, 2009)* and *Untitled (Palestine,*

2009), currently in-progress, which will be presented at the 3rd Riwaq Biennale and will examine some of the complexities of that contested site.

Teaching is an important part of Bruguera's professional life and is closely tied to her artistic practice. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Chicago and, until recently, she ran an art school called the Cátedra Arte de Conducta under the auspices of the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, which also functioned as a conceptual work of art. The goal of this school was to teach a younger generation of Cubans to develop ways to make art that can play an active role in society, using human behavior as an artistic material. Bruguera describes Arte de Conducta, or behavior art, as a counterpoint to performance art. Rather than use the body to create signature images as in performance, in Arte de Conducta one constructs situations that compel the audience to examine their behavior and to respond, not simply observe. In Bruguera's recent Arte de Conducta actions, she employed various strategies of power, from propaganda and crowd control to more subtle forms such as an academic lecture and the granting of free speech, to create a series of lived experiences that prompted collective reactions.

A stunning example of Bruguera's new work took place on the bridge of Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London where museum-goers were confronted by two uniformed policemen on horseback practicing a full range of crowd control techniques. Visitors responded to these imposing figures as they would in real life, yielding to the officers' verbal instructions and to the animals' commanding physical presence. The action did not appear to be an art event and the audience reacted predictably to this demonstration of power. *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008) succeeded in making viewers more aware of their reflexive passivity in the face of authority and encouraged them to reexamine their conditioned responses.

Bruguera created the sixth in this series of actions designed, in her words, to "reproduce images familiar from the media as direct and participatory experiences" for the 10th Havana Biennial.⁵ In *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* (2009), she constructed a raised podium in the central courtyard of the Wifredo Lam Center, distributed 200 disposable cameras, and invited audience members to step up to the microphone and exercise freedom of speech for one minute each. This call tapped into deep emotions in a country that has repressed free speech for nearly fifty years and where the consequences of self-expression can be grave. During the performance, each speaker was flanked by two individuals dressed in military fatigues who placed a white dove on his or her shoulder, evoking the moment in 1959 when a dove alighted on Fidel Castro during a famous speech.

A variety of anti- and some pro-revolutionary voices were heard, a woman wept, and a young man said he never felt so free. Nearly forty people spoke in all. Their calls for freedom echoed for an hour, after which time the artist ended the performance by stepping up to the podium and thanking the Cuban people. By providing a public platform for the audience to speak out against censorship, to call for liberty and democracy, or to state whatever was on their mind,

the artist tested the limits of acceptable behavior under a totalitarian regime in an attempt to create a socially useful forum. In the following days, the event was officially renounced by the Biennial's organizing committee, but by then the people had spoken and footage of their statements received over 47,000 hits on YouTube.

In 2006, Bruguera signed a notarized agreement with artist J. Castro called *L'accord de Marseille* stating that when one of them dies, the other will present a performance using his or her dead body. The work may take several forms including a collaboration, a legal agreement, a public question and answer session, an object to be displayed in a museum, and the performance itself. It also poses a number of important questions, first and foremost: "What is art?" Like much of Bruguera's work, the accord blurs the boundaries between art and life, here in an extreme way. *L'accord de Marseille* also tests another limit: that of the personal body as repository of art and site of social critique, converting the artist's body into a legal body within the public sphere.

Tania Bruguera's art traces a remarkable course that begins with her body and personal experience, goes on to explore the greater political and communal body, and encourages us to consider individual responsibility within a global context. Her journey has taken her from the Cuban-themed body performances of the 1990s, through a series of major performances/installations that look at the social and political implications of such charged international sites as Havana, Kassel, Moscow, and Palestine to a new form called Arte de Conducta or behavior art, in which she stages live events meant to activate and engage viewer response. Throughout her work, she has used her Cuban experience of cultural displacement and marginality as a prism through which to examine the mainstream and the individuals' often difficult relationship to power. She credits her teacher, the acclaimed Cuban artist Juan Francisco Elso Padilla (1956–1988), with providing inspiration for her work, stating:

I took from him the idea that art had to be completely linked with life—and not a fiction or a virtual reality, but as alive as possible. My art has to have a real function for myself, to heal my problems or to help other people to reflect and improve . . .⁶

For Bruguera, art serves as testimony, as social commitment, and as emotional experience, and is, foremost, ethical at its core.

1. Gerardo Mosquera, "Reanimating Ana Mendieta," *Poliéster*, 4, Winter 1995, p. 52. I am grateful

to Gerardo Mosquera for his insight into the impact of Bruguera's reenactment of Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* in Cuba.

2. Euridice Arratia, "Cityscape Havana," *Flash Art* 32, January/February 1999, p. 48.

3. "Tania Bruguera in Conversation with Octavio Zaya," in *Cuba: Maps of Desire*. Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 1999, pp. 245, 249.

4. Nico Israel, "VII Bienal de la Habana," *Artforum* 39, February 2001, p. 148.

5. In conversation with the artist on September 15, 2009.

6. Johannes Birringer, "Art in America (The Dream): A Conversation with Tania Bruguera," *Performance Research* 3, Spring 1998, p. 26.