

TANIA BRUGUERA



OPPOSITE

Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, 2002. Video performance—installation with sound, German citizens, guns, black outfits, wood scaffolding, forty 750-watt light beams, DVD disc and player, and projector; 19 ft. x 59 ft. 7 in. x 13 ft. | 5.79 x 217.93 x 3.96 m. Exhibition view, Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany. Collection Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt.

BELOW

Tania Bruguera, *Tribute to Ana Mendieta, 1986–96* (conceived 1985). Re-creation of Ana Mendieta's artworks and unrealized projects, lectures, exhibitions, interviews, and texts. Exhibition view, *Anima. The Visible and the Invisible: Re-presenting the Body in Contemporary Art and Society*, St. Pancras Church, London, 1996. Performance with gunpowder, stones, and textile.

IN HER CONCEPTUALLY-BASED, SOCIALLY-ENGAGED PERFORMANCES, installations, and actions, artist Tania Bruguera examines the nature of political power structures and their effect on the lives of some of society's most vulnerable individuals and groups. During the 1990s Bruguera created viscerally charged, metaphoric performances that critiqued life in her native Cuba where the experience of censorship, repression, instability and, often, exile and displacement were commonplace. Since relocating to the United States in 1997 the artist has become a world citizen, living and working in such cities as Chicago, Paris, Havana, and New York, and traveling regularly and extensively to create her art and to teach. This transition is reflected in a body of work that remains rooted in and connected to her Cuban experience but has expanded to embrace a global perspective. The artist's international installation work and self-defined Behavior Art and Useful Art (*Arte de Conducta* and *Arte Útil*), created from 2000 to the present, challenge the audience to consider their personal relationship to power, creating situations that attempt to transform passive spectators into an engaged citizenry.

From the start, Bruguera has sought to break down the boundary between art and life in her potent, Cuba-inspired performance work. Her earliest series, *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1986–96; below), was a conceptual performance project in which the artist appropriated the work of another Cuban artist exiled from her homeland as a child in 1960. In homage to Mendieta, Bruguera re-enacted the artist's signature *Siluetas Series* (1973–80), a group of earth-body works for which the artist placed her naked body, or its silhouette or outline, into the landscape.



Recreating Mendieta's mystical, ritualistic, corporeal performances was a significant cultural act, one that symbolically restored Mendieta to the Cuban collective-consciousness while posthumously fulfilling that artist's fervent desire for return. [1] For Bruguera's generation of artists, many of whom left Cuba in the early 1990s dur-

[1] Gerardo Mosquera, "Reanimating Ana Mendieta," *Poliester* 4 (Winter 1995): 52. I am grateful to Gerardo for his insight into the impact of Bruguera's reenactment of Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* in Cuba.



Tania Bruguera, *The Burden of Guilt*, 1997–99. Re-enactment of a historical event with decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, and Cuban soil. Exhibition view, *Desde el cuerpo: Alegorías de lo femenino*, Museum de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1998.

ing the so-called “special period” of political and economic pressure following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decision to stay or to leave was the central dilemma. As Bruguera observed, “This made me reflect upon whether being Cuban meant solely living here, or whether it signified a condition beyond borders.” [2] In fact, migration and its effects have remained a focus of her work.

In the late 1990s, Bruguera turned from embodying Mendieta to the creation of highly visceral performance works that comment on the history of the Cuban people, featuring the artist performing demanding rituals in the nude. Her physical and psychological feats of pain and endurance recall Mendieta’s work as well as that of the pioneering performance artist Marina Abramović, who Bruguera greatly admires. Her iconic work of this period, *The Burden of Guilt* (1997–99; left), is a striking and intense performance based on a historic tale of collective suicide by indigenous Cubans during the Spanish occupation who, unable to resist the superior force of the armed invaders, decided to eat dirt until they died. In her performance, Bruguera re-created this solemn act, rolling bits of dirt 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, as she repeatedly knelt, gathered dirt, rose, and ate. This historic tale resonates

in contemporary Cuba where resistance or rebellion remains dangerous and obedience or submission, though shameful, also is the surest means of survival. Through image and metaphor, Bruguera captured the enduring social and political reality of the Cuban experience in which the utopian dream has been shattered by the hard facts of daily life.

In 2000 Bruguera was invited to participate in the 7th Havana Biennial, where she created the first of five related performances/installations to be presented internationally over the next ten years. In a break from her earlier performance work, Bruguera constructed a conceptually powerful, physically enveloping environment that fully engaged the audience as it alerted their senses of sight,

[2] Euridice Arratia, “Cityscape Havana,” *Flash Art* 32, no. 204 (January/February 1999): 48.

Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, 2000. Video performance—installation with sugar cane bagasse, black-and-white television monitor, Cuban citizens, DVD discs and players; 13 ft. 1½ in. x 39 ft. 4½ in. x 164 ft. | 48 x 144 x 50 m. Exhibition view, *Uno más cerca del otro*, 7th Havana Biennial, Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, Galería de Contraminas de San Ambrosio.



sound, smell, and touch. At this time, she began to break down the boundary between the work of art and the audience itself, gradually making the spectator part of the work.

Untitled (Havana, 2000) (originally titled *Ingenieros de Almas*; above) 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 tramped through the dark and stumbled upon layers of rotting *bagazo*, or sugarcane husks, covering the prison floor and emitting the noxious stench of fermentation. A blue light in the distance came into focus as a small television monitor displaying archival footage of Fidel Castro in his prime. Unexpectedly, the shadowy figures of four naked men emerged from the darkness, each performing a single, repetitive gesture such as rubbing his body or bowing. *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* offered a subtle yet penetrating critique of Cuban life since the so-called triumph of the revolution. In hindsight, Bruguera suggests, the glorious past is revealed to have been nothing more than a series of “repeated rituals and empty gestures,” and the foreigners so seduced by the ideal of Cuban revolution that they became blind to

[3] Nico Israel, “VII Bienal de la Habana,” *Artforum* 39, no. 6 (February 2001): 148.

the repressive operations of power on the island. [3] 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 on her Cuban experience, would translate to an international setting when she was asked to create an installation for Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* (p. 190) 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.

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 blazing 750-watt lights lit the installation, assaulting the viewer's eyes as if under interrogation. The metallic clicking sound of a man on patrol, loading and unloading a gun, was heard overhead. Suddenly the bright lights went out and the sound ceased and, for a few moments, the darkened space was dimly lit by a video projection successively displaying the names of one hundred places across the globe where political massacres have taken place since 1945. With the city of Kassel, once the site of an ammunition factory and a target of severe bombing, as background, Bruguera urged the audience to recognize the global reach of political violence as personal threat by placing them directly in the line of fire. She completed her *Untitled* works with *Moscow, 2007*; *Bogota, 2009*; and *Palestine, 2010*, the last a political proposal to transform Israel and Palestine into a single nation offering asylum to the world's refugees, concluding this series of installations on a bravely utopian note.

Bruguera continued to narrow the gap between art and life, and the work of art and the audience, with a new type of performance work she calls *Arte de Conducta*, or Behavior Art, in which she further explored and critiqued the relationship between power and the individual. In *Arte de Conducta*, the artist constructs dramatic situations or contexts that compel audience members to respond and react, not passively observe. The viewer is both witness to and participant in a staged action, as social behavior becomes the material of public art. The artist has employed various power strategies, from propaganda and crowd control to more subtle forms like an academic lecture and a declaration of the right to free speech in a closed society, in an attempt to rouse the viewer. Bruguera believes direct experi-

Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, 2008. Decontextualization of an action, unannounced performance, Behavior Art; mounted police, crowd control techniques, and audience. Exhibition view, *USB Openings: Live Living Currency*, Turbine Hall Bridge at Tate Modern, London. Collection Tate Modern.



ence is the most effective way to raise awareness and, potentially, promote positive change through art.

A stunning example of Bruguera's new approach took place in 2008 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 (above). Visitors responded to these imposing figures as they would in real life, yielding to the officers' verbal commands and to the animals'

forceful physical presence. The action did not appear to be an art event and the audience reacted predictably to this demonstration of power. Visitors became more aware of their reflexive passivity in the face of authority and were encouraged to reexamine their conditioned responses.

For *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* (2009), created for the 10th Havana Biennial, Bruguera 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 over 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

Tania Bruguera, *Immigrant Movement International (IM International)*, 2010–15 (projected). Corona, Queens, New York. Appropriation of political strategies, *Arte Útil* (Useful Art); immigration policies and laws, immigrant population, elected officials, politicians, and community.



Tania Bruguera, *Awareness Ribbon for Immigrant Respect Campaign*, 2010. Awareness campaign; metal pins, community meetings, letters sent to elected officials, and media.



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 2010 Bruguera initiated an ambitious five-year project that took her work outside established art and education venues and into the ethnically diverse, working-class neighborhood of Corona, Queens. With the founding of *Immigrant Movement International*, first conceived in 2006, she realized her dream of forming a socio-political movement to address issues faced by immigrants, as migration became an increasingly significant factor in twenty-first-century life. For more than a year the artist lived in an apartment in Corona with ten roommates and operated a community center/art studio in a storefront space (opposite). Through public workshops, community events, and actions, and with the aid of social service organizations, elected officials, and the press, the artist attempted to help immigrants in this multinational neighborhood improve their condition and their status. Bruguera calls her current practice *Arte Útil*, or Useful Art, the purpose of which is to seek solutions to social and political problems through “the implementation of art in society.” [4]

Immigrant Movement International functions both as social intervention and as an extended work of conceptual art. This project seeks to create change in people’s lives through such services as free legal consultations and English classes, and by raising awareness of immigrant issues. The Movement also provides a platform to address larger concepts and concerns like the effect of invisibility and exclusion on large marginalized populations, and strategies for gaining access to political power and achieving greater social recognition. It is Bruguera’s most activist and utopian project to date.

— HELAINE POSNER

[4] Tania Bruguera, *Immigrant Movement International* statement, 2010.