

Stage Management

Performance artist, Tania Bruguera stands out as atypical on the 1990s Cuban art scene that was largely dominated by the tangible object as artistic manifestation. The very term 'performance art' implies an element of spectacle and entertainment but Tania Bruguera rejects this. She prefers to talk of an 'art of behaviour' in which the performance's original concept, including its rejection of all aesthetic preconceptions, is inevitably affected by whatever conscious or unconscious social signifiers are at work within the particular context. She has said that performance is, "...An aesthetic that arises from ethics, not form. The forms of a performance are established by its particular actions and semantic codes. Decisions about which actions and elements to deploy and which spaces to use are based, not on their visual qualities, but on how effective they might be. Gestures are chosen because they work or at least attempt to..."

Tania Bruguera's series of performances, *Rostros Corporales* (Body faces) (1982-93), conceived as a homage to the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, became a reflection on emigration and the sense of belonging to one particular place. These works, together with the broadsheet *Memoria de la postguerra* (Post-war Memeories) (1993) that described the local art scene on the margins of censorship, were a frustrated attempt to transform certain spaces in society towards art. In these works, she uses the concept of power to create an ongoing debate about the very nature of the social body.

Tania's best-known performances include *Lo que me corresponde* (What Goes With Me), *Cabeza abajo* (Head Down), *Lágrimas de tránsito* (Transitory Tears) , *El peso de la culpa* (The Weight of Guilt), *Cuerpo del silencio* (Body of Silence) , *Destierro* (Exile), *Silencio* (Silence). These all refer to the belief system by which an individual's personal moral code, actions and reactions are judged within the context of society. The artist selects one gesture that reveals a particular psychological state and repeats it endlessly. Anxiety, guilt, impotence, silence and expiation appear to be her subjects' mechanisms of reaction. She prolongs each gesture with such painful intensity that the performance takes on an almost sacrificial element. The rational becomes the irrational. Tania goes into a trance-like state, time stands still within her virtual mind space until nothing is left but the place where the ego goes in search of catharsis. This is self-flagellation of mind and body to achieve transcendence...interior thought become automatic gesture and where the observer becomes the judge...physical and mental torture during which time slows down. An individual gesture is transformed into one with collective meaning. Primitive ritual reveals the most hidden corners of our cultural memory and its signifiers. Human conduct becomes a means of understanding society. The call of the early 20th century artistic avant-garde to mix Art with life is renewed in a concept where both are living processes brought together and interconnected by the artists' consciousness.