

# Interview with Tania Bruguera

with Erik Wenzel

*I first met Tania Bruguera when I was as a graduate student at the University of Chicago six years ago. We have remained in touch since, most recently crossing paths at the Salzburg Summer Academy of Fine Art last August in Austria. Over the last few months I conducted an interview with Bruguera via email asking her about the role teaching plays in her work, her ideas about formalism, and the awkward demographic known as “artist”. Her responses reveal a thoughtful and holistic approach to art, life, and politics and an incredibly relevant and insightful attitude towards the changing atmosphere of the contemporary art system, a situation that might be considered a crisis. I’m extremely pleased to present this timely conversation with you.*

**Can you talk about your role as teacher? You have inspired a diverse and large group of younger artists. Not just myself and my peers in Chicago, but in other countries where you’ve taught. You remain in contact with, and support, your former students. How do you conceive of this relationship?**

I do not see myself as a teacher but as an artist who is having a conversation with other artists, some of whom may be my colleagues in a few years. Instead of teaching as such, when we are together i try to create an ambience that serves as agency for doubts (including mine), exchange, and discussion about work and life. I say life because many times in life a *faux pas*, or not knowing how to organize your energies, can make it harder to be an artist. Life can even take you off your path against your will and then at some point it is too late to come back. Discussion is very important because once you get out of school you rarely encounter honest criticism and even more rarely a place for constructive self-criticism. So, when you are a student you need to use that time not only to find revelatory texts for your practice or to try new ideas for your work but also to understand what environment you need to make your work, the kind of colleague-friends to continue the conversation with, and a system of self-discipline. As a student you have to see what areas are most difficult for you (they can be as simple as completing assignments on time, fully developing your projects, having great ideas but poor presentations or vice versa, not being able to communicate your ideas about the work, and so on). Those are the same difficulties you will have as a professional artist; so the school is the place to notice them and to find a way to make them work. Another thing i stress is for students to give value to their work and to understand that being young is not a reason to not do the best art they can do. I always have my list to pressure them with (Hans Ulrich Obrist, Piero Manzoni, Gordon Matta-Clark, Ana Mendieta among others). I also make students aware that not everyone has the same speed, some are like sponges during school and the work is not so good, but after a few years, and after digesting all they have heard and read, they bloom. I try to make each student understand their own rhythm and to be fine with it. Especially in the last few years after the professionalization of art, i say at least once in my class that, artwork and career are two different things, sometimes they go along and help each other but one cannot be judged by the other. Also the first day of class i let all the students know that they would have the highest qualification and that the attendance would not be taken; that way only those who are truly interested stay, i do not think artists can be qualified with A+ and B- anyways. All the students i have understand that this is a distance race or even a long walk so we have to enjoy it in all its patient intensity and to be brutally honest with the work we do. Art education for me is about creating the structure that will provide ways to achieve continuous knowledge and growth after you have left the safety net of school.

I have no idea if i have inspired anyone as you suggest, but i have taught in many different schools. This has given me a nice perspective on how art is conceived of and produced in different places, and what the attitudes and expectations about art are in these places. While i have zones of interest, i do site-specific teaching, i try to locate some sort of missing pieces either in their education or in their culture and i teach from there. Also, i do not have one “type” of student, i do not work only with those interested in performance or politics, because i believe that social change comes from many different sensibilities and issues. To be political is an attitude not an art genre.

One thing that i really like about teaching is that you have to work very hard not to lose the respect of your students. It’s a kind of respect that doesn’t come from sales or being friends with influential people in the art world, but one that comes from their opinion of your work and how much it talks to them. That is the best stimulus to keep working hard and in a contemporary way.

Another thing i like about teaching is that it allows you to go back to simple, primary questions like, “What is art for?” “Why should i care about art?” “How should art relate to other things?” questions that when you are a studio-based artist you assume, take for granted, or recycle from your own days as a student. I have this personal game when i see an artist’s work, i try to guess if it is a studio-based artist or a teaching-based artist, i think you can notice very clearly.

### **Are artists a separate class or demographic?**

We are definitely more than a demographic. But, while artists constitute a community with which many identify before the other communities they are part of (their country, their jobs, political positions, and so on) it still has to solve many things to be clearly a functioning class. Usually a class is quickly linked with economic access, financial solvency, social status, and education. But when talking about artists these work differently for everyone and in some cases it happens in paradoxical ways. There are some artists that have little or no money themselves but live a life of privilege and economic wealth—traveling with all costs covered, staying in otherwise inaccessible hotels, eating sophisticated meals, receiving grants that pay incomprehensible amounts of money for production costs, having direct relationships with sources of money (museum directors, collectors, philanthropists, etc) and high global connectivity. Or on the other hand, there are some artists who have no concrete access to political power but have tremendous influence in the community: they are followed, they can change the culture of the practice; but their only power is the admiration of their peers. There are other artists that have large amounts of accumulated wealth and money but they lack prestige and are dismissed because their work is not interesting to the art community. And, at the end, all this is subjective. So in a more Weber than Marx approach, we could say that what determines artists as a class may have to do more with the bet on the influence someone will have in the future (by being extremely accurate in the present) than their relationship with the means of production. An art practice can be many things; it can be a Sunday pleasure, a hobby, or a job. But it could also be a research, a daily practice to understand reality and a way to do something with that understanding.

Then there is the problem of class conscience; if you talk about artists there is little solidarity and even less cooperation to advance artistic injustices. You can find sympathy when there are things done by the state, like the censorship of Pussy Riot or Ai Weiwei, regardless of what people think of their art, because it is a matter of principle. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to find support or something other than silence when you want to ask for your rights inside the art world. Immediately, aesthetic judgments are in place to justify why it is not worth it to join that person's claim for justice and to understand why they are in such a situation. Also, artists start measuring the pro's and con's for their careers if they join the claim. For example, I have seen an institution not pay the artists’ fees for a show even though it was in the contract. Even the ambitious curator of the show justified the powerful

institution for breaking the contract because he was thinking of his career not of what is right in principle. So, there is an unspoken etiquette in the art world where you do not request your rights or expose injustices because it may be the “wrong move” in your career. Everyone seems to understand this while they are starving and getting bitter. That is why I'm so cynical with artists that call themselves political but they are unable to confront the politics and injustices in the art world. Or when I see the concept of aesthetics abused as a way out to solve confrontation with political artists who suddenly becomes “difficult” or “bad” artists when they are making the art establishment uncomfortable.

It has become a pathetic practice for the art world to venerate old martyrs like the Guerrilla Girls or Hans Haacke as a nostalgic act instead of as a revolutionary impulse to join the next generation of demands. Back then, when they were doing the work we admire now, they were a pain in the ass for people, they were annoying because they were talking about things people preferred to ignore; they were insufferable because they were persistent; they were taken out of the cool events because people were afraid of their proposals for the shows and their uncontrollable desire to express their message. The battle today is not so much of inclusion (although sometimes it seems that gender, race, ethnicity and age is still an issue for some institutions). The main injustice to fight today is the payment to the artist. Institutions have to start paying artists fees for participating in exhibitions (many times we are producing new work and we are for sure taking a lot of time to work on the exhibition, time that is given for free because our “payment” is to be in a show). We cannot pretend that the only way for artists to survive is working at a bar, teaching, or to just starve. Putting the pressure on surviving by the sale of art is a formula that puts too much emphasis on a capitalist model of production that does not feed everyone. Moreover it creates alienation because gallerists feel that they have the right to ask artists to make work in formats that do not suit them just because it's easier to sell. This is a retrograde way to produce art because it doesn't help the development of contemporary art. On the contrary it is what we see in art fairs (and that includes many biennials) that are part of a formulaic strategy that is repeated without charm by younger and older artists.

I strongly advocate for the establishment of the *droîte de suite* (a system which allows artists to earn royalties on the resale of their work). It is not fair that collectors can sell a piece for 10, 15, 25 times more than what they bought it for, meanwhile the artist struggles to pay their rent precisely because they do not want to make concessions such as producing easily salable work. Which ultimately may be one of the reasons why their work becomes rare, valuable and expensive. This is a sad recurrent anecdote in our community. It is unfair to put the artist in a situation where in order to survive as a person it has to betray itself as an artist.

### **Is the personal ever just personal or is it always political?**

It can only be just personal for those with privileges and those who fit the established norms (or those who are OK with being repressed). As soon as you are not permitted to be your whole self because one part of you is censored, questioned, or not allowed to develop, it automatically becomes political. It is an illusion to think that politics are not about getting into people's life.

### **Do you see a place or use for more traditional, formal or aesthetically driven work in your practice? Are you interested in making work for a gallery or museum context in addition to your work in the political and social spheres?**

Political art is aesthetically driven; but the concept of aesthetics that is used is found and realized in the ethics, I call it *aesth-ethics*. In these cases you can have the same categories and reactions by which you recognize an aesthetic experience but instead of it being driven by a representation of something, by a process of suspension of disbelief, they are sparked by the realization that something has indeed changed, that something is actually carrying the indication of a different way of relating with each others, of a different set of values and that it brings another vision of the future (one we can identify with, and satisfy us, a bit more). It is a

process of excitement about the impossible made possible; which is also an aesthetic moment. Aesthetics have shifted from the craft that is in the transformation of objects (nature or manmade) into a meaning for a craft to transform ourselves (as a single person or as a group); so it is not a stone exquisitely becoming the face of a saint in ecstasy but the mobilization of the realization of ourselves, which by the way was also in the face of that saint; so it is more a recuperation of something that was always there. It is the return to the art that didn't operate as a formal gesture. Formalism comes with the process of thinking that you already understand, so you stop searching. Formalism is to assume without corroborate.

I have to say that lately it is harder for me to have an aesthetic experience in front of what is clearly defined as an artwork, something that is on an evident "frame" of assumptions. Lately what has been impacting me the most in terms of metaphor is a proposal from Strike Debt, one of the working groups of OWS, called the Rolling Jubilee (<http://rollingjubilee.org/>). Essentially they buy a group debt for pennies to the dollar and instead of harassing people to pay it back (like the corporations buying this garbage debt do), they liberate the debtors. In this case what they have done is subverting the inertia of the economy we are in. They use the same loopholes that have put us in this economic crisis, that make the rich become richer, but instead of exploiting people's misfortune, they have the beneficiary be none other than the person with the loans (mostly for studies or health). The fact that this is done in a kind of lottery way is extremely coherent because they have made sure that there is no manipulation of the funds used to buy the debt. Also the donors of the funds to do this are citizens, some with the hope of one day being benefited by this, but most are just supporting this initiative to make a political point, the approval of the gesture. It is a new kind of spectatorship, by giving something back, support. I have been aesthetically moved more by this "impossible" social gesture, than by a safe game of unrealizable utopias in an art exhibition. I feel that contemporary art is no longer about imagining or dreaming something, or about leisure time; that is not revolutionary anymore. Instead, it is about trying to implement those dreams in the real world. I feel as if contemporary art is more about the experience than about the production of objects or of safe environments. The new illusion is the real experience of the illusion. In particular, I see the contemporary in the idea of the art experience as a social experience, and the more "real" the social is, the environment it is in, the better. Contemporary artists are trying to gain the respect for our profession in the social sphere in times where we are going from the information society, passing by the service society, then the creative society (confused with the celebrity society) to arrive to the civic society. So I see contemporary artists in the front row of the redefinition of new social roles for civic creativity. The problem here is the corporatization (which is social formalism) of creativity and civility. That is why i think the Rolling Jubilee works, because it is an appropriation by civilians of corporative strategies to generate a different society. That is what i feel is our biggest challenge as artists, to be an active part of the creation of a different society that is becoming.

Do I see a place for more traditional, formal or aesthetically driven work? "Traditional" and "formal" are two different things. For me "traditional" is simply kitsch, something that pretends to be something other than what it is, in this case a collective consensus of mastery and for the assertion of the work carrying an artistic truth, just because it is a proven practice or technique. On the other hand, i have a strong reaction to formalism. Art for the sake of art, form for the sake of form is something i'm not interested in. I'm into "intoxicated" forms that intervene in unauthorized spheres, propose new uses and new visions. Unfortunately the art world has a strong tendency to make everything a form, to take the urgencies of things (including the urgencies *in* the form) into self-reference and empty symbolism of themselves, easy celebratory tricks.

A few months ago I was at an event and one of the participants approached me with some visible excitement to say that he was living in an Asian country and he wanted to start an art school project. He went on and on about the people he was going to invite and the building he wanted, and the fees... I stopped him and asked, "What is the ideology behind your school project? Because education is an ideological tool and you are a white man from Europe in a place where they worship the first world. What are the dynamics you want to activate with your project?" His eyes became filled with horror, he answered, "I have to think about it." This is a great example of formalism. A trend has started of doing art schools as art, or art schools as curatorial projects. And then everyone goes to reproduce the form of an art school project but without the political gesture that it implies, nor the cultural urgency, not even aware of the social implications of the gesture. Then the trend becomes banal and people, bored, go into the next excitement like the next seasonal fashioned empty ideology, without understanding the responsibility that is in place. Sadly most of the visibility and the funds go to the artist that is best at doing the 30 sec pitch than the ones working long-term and committed to understand the real (unglamorous) meaning of change. I think these contradictions happen because the resolution between who gives the money and who benefits, sometimes is affected when art is seeing as entertainment.

When you use social forms without content, without a function, without being a signifying gesture, you are just prioritizing social art as a form of tourism; you are valuing social art as a desperate escape from solitude through false "togetherness". Formalism starts when we have an art history that is taught as a history of the forms and when we see art production done in countries with real socio-political urgencies as mere formal exercises to be compared and absorbed –contextless– by the western history of forms.

For example, my piece "Tatlin Whisper #5" (the one with the mounted police using their training and crowd control technique with the audience of the museum, is seeing now as an aesthetic piece) from a birdview photo but it was very different to be in it and to feel the horse breath approaching you and pushing you around with its massive body, the horse in that situation became disproportionally immense. When you are in this situation is not about aesthetics but about repression. Maybe we need to teach a history of experiences in art, so forms are seeing in their temporary capacity to generate reactions, instead of something into their passive and decorative self.

While i was raised as an object producer, that activity now feels to me like doing Sudoku, a way to kill time. The work i'm doing, the form i'm researching, is the political form, which can't be a formalist research. As tiring and unrewarding as it is to work on the political and social sphere as an artist, it's like being introduced to spicy food. After a good habanero pepper the rest of the food feels bland.

**I remember, over five years ago now, you were the first person I encountered calling for the integration of research into art, the notion that artists should see themselves as conducting research. Partly as a way for artists to position themselves in larger educational institutions, such as the University of Chicago, a renowned "research institution" but also as a way to conceive of one's artistic practice. This has become a buzzword, though. Going through Documenta 13, for example, I felt bombarded by this "research aesthetic". It seems like it's become just a fad, "the research turn", following in the footsteps of "the educational turn" and "the documentary turn". How do you feel about this, and can you expand on your conception of artistic research?**

I have always seen art as a research process and artists as researchers. Back then we were at the University of Chicago, so it made sense that the art students could take advantage of the resources and potential collaborations with students from other departments and expand their practices in a rigorous way. I have no idea about the buzzword you are talking about and i didn't have the chance to see Documenta 13, but what i can tell you is that deciding to be a research artist is not a tendency nor a fashion, it is not a curatorial strategy to display things in a space, but a way to see the responsibility in the practice of art and your role as an artist in society.

<http://www.artslant.com/global/artists/rackroom/22895-tania-bruguera>