

Blacklisted Cuban Artist Brings Extreme Political Art to Bay



Tania Bruguera talks to a small group of students at her "Escuela de Arte Útil" at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The classes run all summer in the middle of a retrospective of Bruguera's work at YBCA. (Ryan Levi/KQED)

By [Ryan Levi \(https://www.kqed.org/arts/author/rlevi/\)](https://www.kqed.org/arts/author/rlevi/)

JULY 26, 2017

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The first day of school can be boring. Usually it's the teacher going over the syllabus, setting ground rules and taking attendance.

But [Escuela de Arte Útil \(https://ybca.org/whats-on/escuela-de-arte-util\)](https://ybca.org/whats-on/escuela-de-arte-util) isn't your typical school.

Held in a big gallery space at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the Escuela is part of a retrospective exhibit of the work of Cuban political artist Tania Bruguera, called *Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*.

While regular museum-goers explore the past 30 years of Bruguera's work, more than 50 art students sit on a bright orange carpet in the middle of the gallery to learn about Bruguera's unique brand of political art: *arte útil* or "useful art."

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change what is going on.”

“We don’t want to improve the way things are. We actually want to

Think of it like political art on steroids. Unlike a lot of political art, which seeks to raise awareness about issues, Bruguera says true *arte útil* actually create new realities for the communities they serve.

For example, Bruguera created an alternative Cuban newspaper in the early 1990s in opposition to Cuba’s state-controlled media. A few years ago, she spent a year (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/nyregion/as-art-tania-bruguera-lives-like-a-poor-immigrant.html>) living on minimum wage in a tiny apartment in New York with undocumented immigrants, working with other artists to provide services to immigrants from across the city.

“We don’t want to just create conversations,” Bruguera says after class. “We also want to create a parallel institution that works differently so people can see, ‘Oh, actually things do not have to be this way.’”



More than 50 students gather in the middle of a YBCA gallery to learn about “arte útil” from Cuban artist Tania Bruguera. (Ryan Levi/KQED)

But some students in class are confused as to why an artist would be doing work usually handled by journalists or social service providers.

“Why do we need art at all if the whole point is operational?” one student asks from the back of the class. “If you’re going to make houses for homeless people, why is it even *arte útil*? Why not just *útil*?”

Bruguera answers by comparing herself to a hypothetical engineer who has discovered the perfect energy source that’s clean, cheap and plentiful. The engineer shares his discovery with the world to make everyone’s lives better.

Bruguera says no one would expect the engineer to stop calling himself an engineer as a result of these game-changing efforts. “Why do I have to stop calling myself an artist?” she says.

Political art as an extreme sport

Bruguera’s views have gotten her into trouble with the authorities.

In late 2014, she was [arrested \(http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-tania-brugueras-cuba-20150108-column.html#page=1\)](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-tania-brugueras-cuba-20150108-column.html#page=1) by Cuban police for trying to stage a performance in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución. It was a few weeks after the U.S. and Cuba had announced the two countries were opening up relations, and Bruguera wanted to see if this meant greater freedom of speech would be coming to Cuba.

The idea was to set up a microphone in the Plaza de la Revolución and give members of the public one minute to say whatever they wanted. She was denied a permit to use the plaza but planned to go ahead anyway. At 5 a.m. on the day the performance was set to occur, she was arrested.



Tania Bruguera lectures about "arte útil" at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. In late 2014, she was arrested and detained for trying to hold a free speech performance in Havana's Revolution Plaza. (Ryan Levi/KQED)

"They want you to feel completely crushed by something so insignificant that you don't even dare to imagine something bigger," Bruguera says of the Cuban government. "Just by putting a microphone out there, they took away my passport for eight months."

During those months, Bruguera says she was repeatedly taken in by Cuban police and subjected to [intense interrogations \(https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/13/frieze-tania-bruguera-artist-cuba-torture-interview\)](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/13/frieze-tania-bruguera-artist-cuba-torture-interview). She says they interrogated her more than 30 times, sometimes several times in a single week.

"It is very tiring, and it's scary," she says of the repeated interrogations. "Even if they give you water, you don't want to drink it. It's extremely hard."

Bruguera says as a result of that experience, she has been forbidden to show her work or even enter any cultural institution in Cuba.

But that hasn't stopped the artist from continuing to play a role in the political conversation. Last year, she nominated herself for president of Cuba in 2018, even though it's a communist one-party state.

"I think a successful artist is a stubborn artist," she says. "A stubborn person who pushes back against unjust laws."

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Arte Útil in the Bay

Bruguera may take political art to its extremes, but she's not the only person who has embraced *arte útil* and the idea that art can affect real change for real people.

Four years ago, she founded the *Asociación de Arte Útil* (<http://www.arte-util.org/about/activities/>), an international association dedicated to connecting *arte útil* practitioners and sharing their work. The association maintains an archive (<http://www.arte-util.org/projects/>) with hundreds of *arte útil* projects dating back more than 100 years.

Many of those projects have come out of the Bay Area, like the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (<http://www.arte-util.org/projects/anti-eviction-mapping-project/>) and several projects from Bonnie Ora Sherk (<http://www.arte-util.org/?s=sherk&x=0&y=0>).

In 1974, Sherk began work on *Crossroads Community (The Farm)*, which became a community farm full of animals, gardens and educational programming for kids built around the Chavez/Highway 101 interchange in San Francisco. She's also the force behind *A Living Library*, an ongoing project where Sherk transforms blighted public areas across the city into eco-friendly community spaces.

Crossroads Community (the farm)



"I have dug up lots of asphalt and concrete and planted thousands of trees and made beautiful learning's zones and gardens that have transformed acres of very sterile barren land," Sherk says of her own *arte útil* projects.

Sherk says it's actually getting harder to do some of these kinds of projects in the Bay Area because of bureaucratic roadblocks.

That makes Bruguera's *Escuela de Arte Útil* at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts even more important for people who want to see this kind of work continue to thrive.

Bruguera expects her students to complete their own Bay Area *arte útil* project at the end of the summer. At least one group is looking at trying to make an impact with the area's homeless population.

“Hopefully these people won’t just disappear and say, ‘Oh, I had a class in 2017, and it was interesting,’” Bruguera says of her students. “Hopefully they will start practicing *arte útil* and putting their knowledge into practice.”

Maybe they’ll even get arrested for their art one day, too.

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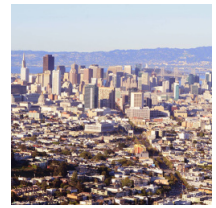
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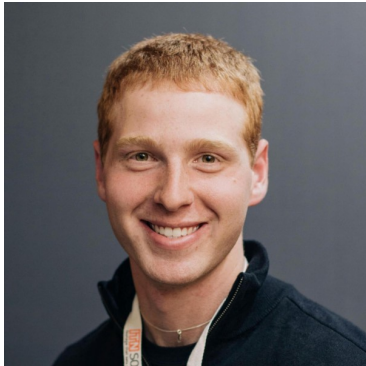


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