

ARTS & CULTURE

Dissident Artist Funds ‘Artivism’ in Cuba



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Tania Bruquera is a dissident Cuban artist and now director of the Institute for Artivism in Havana. Photo credit: Studio Bruquera and Yo Tambien Exijo ("I Also Demand") Facebook page

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Since President Barack Obama announced the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba on Dec. 17, 2014, U.S. citizens have been eager to visit Cuba before it changes. The specter of those changes motivated [Tania Bruquera](http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/) (<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/>), a Cuban installation and performance artist, to direct a [Kickstarter](https://www.kickstarter.com) (<https://www.kickstarter.com>)-funded art activism institute in Havana. The first crowd funding campaign organized in Cuba launched on March 3.

The institute, the [Hannah Arendt International Institute for Art Activism](https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/850321425/institute-of-artivism-instituto-de-artivismo-hanna) (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/850321425/institute-of-artivism-instituto-de-artivismo-hanna>) ([Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt](http://www.artivismo.org/) (<http://www.artivismo.org/>) or INSTAR in Spanish), wants Cubans to have a say in what's to come, according to their website.

Bruquera currently holds “resident alien status” in the United States. She has been living both in Havana and New York City, where she’s been teaching and making art since 1998. Bruquera defines herself as an “artist,” as she examines how art, activism, and social change intersect to show how political and economic power impact the disenfranchised.

In July 2015, Bruquera became the first [artist in residence](http://www.artnews.com/2015/07/13/tania-bruquera-to-be-first-artist-in-residence-for-new-york-city-mayors-office-of-immigrant-affairs/) (<http://www.artnews.com/2015/07/13/tania-bruquera-to-be-first-artist-in-residence-for-new-york-city-mayors-office-of-immigrant-affairs/>) for the [New York City Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs](#)

http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/downloads/pdf/dcla_moia_air_annct_july_2015.pdf). Bruguera often performs alone, but also stages participatory events that help the viewer experience and observe interpretations of repression and control. Her concept of her *arte útil* (<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/609-0-.htm>) – useful art as a beneficial tool – is based on creating art within the context of social activism.

The [Museum of Modern Art](http://www.moma.org/) (MoMA) acquired Bruguera's *Untitled (Havana 2000)* (<http://press.moma.org/2015/07/tania-bruquera-untitled-havana-2000-acquisition/>), a performance and video installation that first premiered at the 2000 [Biennial in Havana](http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/havana-biennale/) (<http://www.lahabana.com/guide/fortaleza-de-san-carlos-de-la-cabana/>) in the [Cabaña Fortress](http://www.lahabana.com/guide/fortaleza-de-san-carlos-de-la-cabana/). The Cabaña Fortress was a military fortification that was used as a detention center for political prisoners during the Cuban Revolution.

This large-scale installation consists of a long, dark corridor littered with discarded sugarcane that visitors walk through. At the end of the corridor, visitors encounter a video compilation featuring former president Fidel Castro on a television monitor.

Optimism Builds Pressure for Change Inside Cuba

Normalized relations with the U.S. have generated optimism among Cubans, including Bruguera. This optimism also has increased pressure for more freedom of expression and speech inside Cuba's borders. Bruguera has come under fire from the Cuban government because of her *arte útil*.

Just three days after Obama's speech on Dec. 30, 2014, Bruguera tried to re-enact her performance of *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* in a public space at the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana. *Tatlin's Whisper* consisted of a simple stage with a public address system set up to allow any person to speak freely for one minute.

Before she left her home to go to the performance, Bruguera was arrested by Cuban state security officers and stripped of her passport. She was charged with resisting arrest and incitations to public misconduct and delinquency. The government blocked her phone and hacked her online file database.

Bruguera was under house arrest in Cuba for eight months while she waited for her passport to be returned. During this time she was arrested after her May 2015 performance, a 100-hour public reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, at Havana's Biennial art show. In June 2015, she was arrested again at a protest organized by the dissident group [Ladies in White](http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/03/20/violent-arrests-of-pro-democracy-activists-precede-obama-landing-in-cuba/), comprised of Cuban political prisoners' wives.

Tatlin's Whisper #5, 2008. Photo courtesy of Tania Bruguera

Tania Bruguera's Copy of "The Origins of Totalitarianism," during her performance at the Havana Biennale. Photo courtesy of Tania Bruguera.



Tania Bruguera reads publicly during la Biental de La Habana. Photo courtesy of Tania Bruguera.

Those who donate to Bruguera's Kickstarter campaign get unique "rewards" in return that reflect Bruguera's experiences as an artist in Cuba. For \$250, you can arrange for Bruguera to relay a message of your choice to her interrogators the next time she's seized. For \$1,000, she'll meet you and confess one of her deepest, darkest secrets.

I interviewed the artist via Skype as she sat in a noisy Havana internet café.

Rivard Report: You successfully used Kickstarter to fund the Institute of Artivism in Cuba. How did Kickstarter help in creating INSTAR?

Tania Bruguera: Thanks to the Kickstarter campaign, we now have more than 900 founders. It's given us a way of starting relationships with people around the world who are new to Artivism in Cuba. Thanks to the internet, we can start a dialogue.

Having people donate online was also a new way of doing things in Cuba – a transparent way. This is significant for a project that poses uncomfortable questions to those in power. The government typically suggests that funding for such projects must come from doubtful political sources like the CIA.

Creating the rewards was enjoyable for me. It was not my original intention to create art using Kickstarter but it turned out that way. Many of the rewards help people experience some of the things I experienced as a suppressed artist in Cuba.

The Institute's first challenge was setting it up as a collective, so it could exist as a manifestation of what people wanted. This way, through activism, the idea would come to life only if people got involved and the Institute's foundational spirit would motivate people to pursue Artivism.

RR: What drove you to create the Institute?

TB: After I was arrested in Cuba last year for reading Hannah Arendt's book in public, I realized that my experience was a turning point. Friends warned me that this act was subversive and that I would get in trouble. I then realized what I needed to do to systemize civic education on people's rights and help promote civic literacy in Cuba. This should not be an isolated performance moment but a systematic commitment.

I'm nervous about all the changes in Cuba, and I'm not the only one. We need to understand what is involved in bringing about a peaceful transformation in Cuba rather than watch Cuba dissolve over power struggles. Too many people are focused on setting up businesses and getting rich off Cuba — and that includes Cubans inside and outside Cuba. Not too many people are thinking about projects that benefit the Cuban people directly.

I think we need Artivism in Cuba right now.

We proposed the creation of the Institute as a place where people's ideas can become civic actions. At the moment, the spirit of capitalism is so fierce and seems to be proposed as the solution to everything. I think there needs to be an alternative, and that alternative is education. Police are resorting to violence (<https://www.hrw.org/americas/cuba/>) and many people are planning on making money. Instead, the Institute proposes the need to think about civic education on the rights that every person possesses.

RR: What is your vision for the Institute's future and how will the Institute sustain its operations?

TB: We don't want to focus on criticizing the government. What we will do with the Institute is show what the government is *not* doing. We want to point out through socially conscious art that the government should increase transparency, take responsibility for its civic duties to its citizens, and be accountable. For example, the government could start by revealing more details about national funding. It could also adopt more transparent civil processes and walk its citizens through them, rather than issuing orders.

Kickstarter funding will not be enough for continuing operations beyond the startup stage. Not only is it difficult to secure funding as a nonprofit here, we don't want to be beholden to anyone because of large donations. We want total freedom to do what is necessary and act on ideas that come from the people and that are chosen by consensus. We know we will need to apply for grants for sustaining operations. We hope that people who are close to our goals would join INSTAR because the project would need more than just money. It will need people with whom we can have inspirational exchanges.

As for our artistic events, we are still developing the first year's calendar of events. Because we use a collaborative process, it may take a bit longer to get started, but we want the people to be involved in Artivism from the Institute's beginning.

RR: For more than 50 years, Cubans have defined themselves by their relationship with the U.S. What do you see as possible ways for Cubans to define themselves now? How can the Institute of Artivism help Cubans in that renewed search for self-identity?

TB: We are living in an era of crisis in self-identity on a national level, which in turn, creates friction, confusion, and violence. The socialist ideology no longer defines the Cuban identity. Some people are waiting for a return to the era before 1959, while others are calling for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) reform. Many long for all we are losing ethically in this process, while others are waiting for their first chance to leave the country.

The Institute should be a place where we can talk about ideas on national identity without fear, in order to contribute to social aspirations of what Cuba can and should become. Art is an excellent medium for these difficult conversations because it (constitutes) a landscape of

tolerance rather than being power-driven.

We believe Artivism can be used as a common ground for Cubans to engage in this process of redefinition and search. Art helps us talk about difficult issues and speaks to the soul of the people. We hope to leverage that on the way ahead. Our tagline is: "Where your ideas become civic actions."

RR: While tourists from other countries visit Cuba without any issues, U.S. restrictions limit U.S. citizens from traveling to Cuba. Many U.S. citizens are curious about Cuba. What do you want them to understand about life in Cuba today?

TB: The message I would give to American visitors is this: don't come as tourists with a clichéd or preconceived notion of what Cuba is. Come instead as citizens of the world to learn what life in Cuba is like now. I think Americans often expect entertainment as it was in the Cuba from before.

Most Cubans cannot travel freely, cannot leave the country, and often don't have the financial means to travel even if they had permission. For many, the foreigners Cubans encounter here offer the most direct ways Cubans get to see the world. I would ask that Americans do not come to take things from Cuba but to share things with Cubans. The benefits from mutual exchanges could be transformative for everyone.

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Top image: Cuban artist Tania Bruguera is director of the Kickstarter-launched Institute of Art Activism in Havana. Photo courtesy of Studio Bruguera and Yo Tambien Exijo ("I Also Demand") Facebook page.

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