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Education is always about the future: An Interview with Tania Bruguera

JEANNETTE PETRIK on July 20, 2017 at 9:27 AM

Tania Bruguera is a performance and installation artist, born in Havana, Cuba in 1968. Her practice focuses on political issues of power and control as well as social intervention. By creating proposals and aesthetic models for others to use and adapt, she acts as an initiator rather than an author. Through her artistic practice, she expands the definition and range of performance art, sometimes performing solo, but more often staging participatory events and interactions that build on her own observations, experiences, and interpretations of the politics of repression and control.

Advancing the concept of arte útil (literally, 'useful art'), she proposes solutions to socio-political problems through the implementation of art, and has developed long-term projects that include a community center and political party for immigrants (Immigrant Movement International, 2010), and a school for behavior art (Catedra Arte de Conducta, 2003).

The Institute of Artivism Hannah Arendt (INSTAR), an educational institute located in Havana, aims to be a hub of civic literacy in Cuba and the losing of fears through peaceful activism and artistic interventions. The project is Bruguera's first long-term project initiated after her criminal conviction in Cuba as she tried hosting an event composed of speeches by public figures in a public square in Havana, in late 2014, which at the time would have been an outright performance of freedom of speech – which, even after loosening other restrictions is still not a guaranteed right in Cuba. At the time, Cuban authorities confiscated her passport and charged her with incitement of public disorder, resistance of police and incitement to commit a crime. Although she was released the same month her passport wasn't returned until seven months later. Since then, she has been subjected to repression by Cuban authorities on numerous occasions.

The Institute of Artivism Hannah Arendt was inaugurated with a 100-hour reading and discussion of Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism" after having received widespread international support. In May 2015, Bruguera was again detained after performing the reading of Arendt's text, a political history of the 20th century highlighting the crisis of the public domain.

In January 2017, Bruguera was detained and interrogated for six hours when travelling to Baracoa to deliver aid such as donated mattresses and food to victims of Hurricane Matthew as part of her work for INSTAR. The artist's sister, Deborah Bruguera, made public that after being interrogated for around six hours Tania Bruguera was released but told she would not be allowed to deliver the aid. "She was told that she will never again be an artist in Cuba," Deborah Bruguera adds. "I think this was 'just' a warning to let her know that the next time she enters Cuba and wants to perform a humanitarian or artistic action, she will have all the governmental weapons pointed against her."

In June 2017, Tania Bruguera initiated the survey exhibition "Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder" at Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts in San Francisco within which Bruguera presents and "updates" her long-term, socially engaged art projects to date, in response to current political climates. As part of the exhibition, the artist has installed the 'Escuela de Arte Útil' with weekly classes on topics such as systems of power and creative dissent, taught by Bruguera and other prominent artist-educators.

In this conversation, I've addressed Bruguera's conviction for empowerment through (self-)education touching on her experience as an artist and educator in Cuba and the US, the shortcomings of traditional educational models, a coming educational revolution and an empathic engagement with the needs and desires of Cuban people in these current times of change.

The interview was conducted in September 2016.

Jeannette Petrik: I'd like to understand your take on education. As a performer I think your work is quite educational. Now, with INSTAR as an institution, you have created a structural educational frame.

Tania Bruguera: I consider my work as an educational practice but not as didactic. My relation with education grew naturally. During my first job I was a professor for incarcerated youth. They were not behind bars – it was a soft jail. Their prison was a school. The first time I tried to implement art education was under these circumstances. Since, I've chosen teaching as a source of income – I'm not a successful gallery artist. Teaching is amazing for me because I can have a dialogue with the next generation. Starting out, I could see how dated my ideas were and I could develop thought that I wouldn't have had otherwise. Education has always been part of my life.

With the Immigrant Movement International (the project that I did in Queens), I've seen the short-term and long-term impact of education. I've seen how people change, how knowledge changes how they carry themselves. As an artist interested in social change, I vouch for education, 70,000%. I believe that education is the solution to all problems. I know it sounds a bit grandiose, but I think it should be everybody's priority. Education helps you deal with your feelings and it gives you options to act. In 2003, I started a project called Catedra Arte de Conducta, a project of behavioral art. The idea was to create conversations. I believe that education lies in conversation. I don't believe in a vertical channel to transmit encyclopedic knowledge, although it's important to have some contextual knowledge. Through the project, we've managed to create a generation of Cuban artists interested in the social and political aspect of art. Importantly, they were interested in making art for the Cuban people, not for foreigners who are going to buy their work, the collectors. Education takes time. It requires patience. Catedra de Arte de Conducta was very flexible. On paper, it said that it was a two-year program but some people stayed for five years, others stayed for a year or shorter until they decided they were ready to leave. Education is a process that is generous enough to allow you not to feel competition. It should suit your own personal natural development. Not everybody has the same speed. People are diverse. Most of the time, education heads either towards indoctrination, which doesn't leave much space for questions, or a practical kind of education that is instrumentalized for individuals to have a 'better life' which equals more money or a better job. That's not education for me.



Tania Bruguera, Catedra Arte de Conducta at Beta-Local.

JP: I remember studying with people whose biggest interest was to get a ‘good’ job after their graduation, so they were focused on getting the diploma and only worked on projects they thought would help their future careers. They didn’t see the value of restructuring their way of thinking or empathizing with others. In my opinion, this attitude is the result of Capitalist indoctrination. How can attitudes be restructured?

TB: I think that education in socialist countries and in capitalist countries is oriented to kill the inner questions people have. It aims to standardize people or to make them feel comfortable with whatever they have instead of asking for more. Education is often used dangerously. When referring to education, I’m not only talking about schools, but about society. Education doesn’t only take place in a classroom – it’s not a building. For me, education is the inter-relationship of knowledge in society. When knowledge is inaccessible, that’s also education. That’s teaching you that you’re not worth of it. When you have, for example, things like ‘How to’ videos on Youtube, that’s education. People see it as a low resolution education compared to high resolution education in places like Harvard. I think that we are locating these resolutions wrongly. To me, resolution doesn’t mean how precise knowledge is in terms of detail or intensity. Resolution is

more about how it relates you. To me, high resolution education is one that is tailored to you, one on one. Instead of preparing generalized ideas. I'm not saying that this is not complicated. To me, low resolution education makes sure you don't have all the potential elements to understand a situation. I'm not saying that this is some kind of conspiracy theory but there's a very conscious construction which is not generous. For the sake of the argument, let's say that this is not done on purpose to discriminate based on race or gender. Education is delivered in low resolution to put pressure on people by passing all responsibility to them. I feel that education, when done properly, is the most generous political act there is. It's not about creating the feeling of a lack of accomplishment which puts pressure on individuals. Some people need to be accompanied.

The idea of education as a competition is problematic. On the first day of my classes, I give my word that they'll get an 'A'. If they come for the mark, they are free to leave immediately. I'm not interested in grading. I think that it's very unfair to evaluate people on the spot. I was an 'A+' student but I was not a good artist when I was a student. I got my 'A's because I knew how to accomplish what they asked for. I was acquiring and swallowing as much information as I could, like a sponge. My work was never good because it was merely indicating what I liked and didn't show the full potential of what I wanted to do. It took me a few years to understand my own priorities.

Grading tends to be unfair because it determines people's lives in ways which are irreversible at times. The educational moment is to create a relationship between people. To me, education is the ideal setting up of a relationship between people. Outside of this educational space people find real life where relationships might be pre-conditioned by society and set in the way you'd find ideal. That's my work. I create ecologies of respect, of experimentation with yourself and of togetherness where there are no rules. Every political artwork, for me, is education because you either receive knowledge about society or yourself, or because it gives you the tools to solve a problem, or because you are activated and come out of the experience of the artwork motivated to do something. Cuba is famous for its good schools but, to be honest, there's one thing that I don't like and that's exams. I had to memorize everything. I don't have a good memory. I'm an analytical learner. I like to read and discuss. That's how I get my conclusions, not through learning by heart. I remember an exam of literature where I knew the answer to a question but I was frozen in front of the question because I knew that I hadn't read the whole book. I got an 'A' but I felt bad. It felt like cheating. Education is your own personal experience, not someone else's. It always feels as though there was one right answer. There are other models like Montessori, of course, but the generalized idea about education is this.

JP: All over the world those traditional models of education are applied. For some, traditional education might actually be helping to develop a critical stance and to consider alternative models. Some people manage to break free. Still, the majority of people grows up to live their lives based on indoctrination.

TB: I realized recently that the only thing that calms me down when I get mad is listening to lectures online. Zizek, Judith Butler or Ranciere. I feel like my relationship to knowledge is a healing one. It relativizes my problem and stimulates my brain to think of solutions rather than complaining. For people in power, it's very useful to complain. It removes responsibility. The one who complains doesn't demand change. Complainers make problems visible. Proper education helps not to become solely complainers but to identify a problem and to then go through the marvelous process of imagining 'What if we do this, what if we do that?' I like education as a response to social and political struggles more than art because the speed of art is very different. The life of an artwork is very short.

I'm very happy that a lot of universities like Yale, Harvard or Princeton are giving online courses with Coursera. They have a social responsibility. They are banks of knowledge. The courses are really good. They have the best brains in the world. I'm happy that this exists. The responsibility is on the individual but it's great that there is support. The beauty of these kind of projects is that they understand that people may have the desire to learn but might not have the opportunity or might not want to attend a formal institution. A mum might want to extend her skills and become a more complete person apart from being a mother. Luckily, people can choose to have multiple identities. Not everybody can stop everything for two years and dedicate themselves to one subject. Nevertheless, I believe in the power of meeting in person.

Education has to be done in as many ways as possible. Not everybody learns in the same way. That's the problem with traditional education. You need to sit down in a chair for eight hours and are expected to provide what is asked of you. I was unbearable as a student. I was impatient.

JP: What is it like to work within the socio-political context of Cuba compared to the US?

TB: There is a layer of education which is 'universal'. I don't like this word because usually it signifies 'Western' and therefore ignores the approaches of other cultures. I want to have access to the 'universal' knowledge of the African or Asian continents and their original cultures. Other than that, there is a part of education which is about not knowing. It's very important that people learn to deal with not knowing. Usually it's the other way around and people find confirmation in the act of knowing. As a professor, it's more important for me that students understand what they don't know. Then they can decide whether they are interested to find out more about the things they don't know or they can decide not to. What does it mean if you decide not to know? It's a matter of understanding ethically and politically what there is in the world and within yourself. Often this kind of personal knowledge is substituted for 'universal' (Western) knowledge.

JP: That's an issue with traditional education. People don't feel empowered to self-acquire knowledge and don't trust themselves.

TB: It's also important to talk about the idea of speed. I know people who go to school and read twenty books a semester and then there are others who can't compute that much information, so why should they compress everything into one or two years? One day they'll realize that they're ready. There shouldn't be anyone telling people to complete things within a certain time. It's not about being slow or fast. I have the hope that there will be an educational revolution, soon. Apart from pedagogues, common people are changing educational structures. We're in the beginning of an educational revolution.

In the US there is a strong educational industry. I was teaching in one of the best institutions of the US, but it's hard to know that all those kids I was teaching were paying a horrendous amount of money which made them slaves to their own desire to be a better person. It's almost as if you punish them for doing the right thing. I think that this is something that the US needs to address if it wants to become the country that it's telling people it is already. That's where people should start.

People often struggle because they need to compromise on what they really want to do with their lives because they need to repay their student loans. If you choose to do something which doesn't pay enough you might just not be able to do it. Then you might be repaying your debt for twenty years and when you get out of debt you're not the person you wanted to be. This is an urgent topic. Why would you choose the education you want if you can't be the person you want to be with that educational background? It makes no sense.

This is different in Cuba. There, the problem is that people don't have the necessary social stimulation after they graduate. Cuba is becoming an old country because the youth is leaving. It's taking advantage of Cuba's free education, which I hope will be protected as such forever, but there's disenchantment. Cuba is in a proto-capitalist, a primitive capitalist moment. People are confused about money and that's dangerous. Many people are leaving the country without higher education and start working right away. I find this sad. Cuba is one of the few countries with free education. I hope this doesn't become a larger problem. More than fifty percent of people leave the country after graduating from their studies. I'm not saying that it's bad to leave. It's almost a PhD style education to go to another place and learn about oneself. You're confronted with something very different. This made me a better person and a better artist. I always tried to come back to Cuba though and apply the knowledge I gained. Not everyone has that kind of stimulus though. The government should work more on attracting young people back into the country. It's not only about money. Many Cubans work for their passion. It's more about the given social environment. People should live in a society that supports them at their full capacity, especially when they're young.

In Cuba, the biggest problem is political self-censorship. 'If I say this or that I will lose my job.' In the US, there is also self-censorship but it's more about being afraid of losing money. In both

cases there are oppressive structures in place which don't allow people to live up to their full capacity, on the one side the state, on the other the capitalist structure. The idea of living in a society of exception is faulty. It's more desirable to live in a society where everyone is exceptional.



Tania Bruguera, Tatlin's Whisper #6 at the Havana Biennial

JP: As a kid, I regularly went to visit my family in Cuba. One time, a young cousin of mine told me that he was jealous of what I had, that everything I had was nice. He was impressed by my shoes, my clothes, my books. Somehow he perceived everything I had as better than what he had himself. At the time, I didn't understand why he was so enthusiastic about my stuff. I didn't see much difference between notebooks in Cuba and the one I had brought with me. He did though. Now I think that it's understandable. It can be overwhelming to suddenly be confronted with the capitalist world.

TB: I don't think that it's necessarily about stuff. It's ironic. Cuba is a socialist country and people are not supposed to care about materialistic things but of course people are super consumerist. It's very ironic. This is due to bad education. In most places, people are educated to substitute an emotional need for an object instead of solving their need. In Cuba, instead, objects are removed completely, like a punishment. There is also a double-moral because this punishment applies to 99% of the people. 1% who are sons of diplomats or of generals, these people could have what was forbidden for others. They went to extreme measures of identifying objects with ideology. I understand that objects carry ideology but this is not the only thing they carry. It depends how you

use them. For example, jeans are the most comfortable thing to wear but if you used them in Cuba you would immediately be put on the side of US-American capitalists. This way of thinking is reducing things to be only one thing. This is problematic because there never is one truth. Things are never one-dimensional. That's why Cuba is going to have such a hard time. The government doesn't understand that there are different points of view and different approaches. We are not ready to be part of the world.

People are not taught about the responsibility of consuming. I was surprised when I left Cuba and people told me not to buy a certain product because a company exploits people. I was not equipped to understand the dynamic politics of objects because in Cuba they just decided to remove it completely and not have the conversation. Why? Because the Cuban government treats its citizens as kids. They infantilize the population. That's a massive problem in terms of education. Once you want to have a grown-up conversation with the structure of power you are punished. You're not supposed to grow up. You're supposed to act as a kid, meaning, you cry or you follow. This is an irresponsible way to create a nation, a nation of kids.

Such a nation can only have three reactions. It can be a childish 'Wow'-reaction where people are amazed by something but don't develop further. As citizens they don't grow, instead they perform the 'wow.' You barely can be yourself in this contradiction. You're performing for yourself and for foreigners. It's a hustling technique. This infantilized response is then used to create empathy or to manipulate people. It's playing with guilt. I don't feel that this position is productive. It doesn't allow you to generate anything. It's a hustling education.

Another reaction people can have is one of anguish. It goes from crying of impotence to depression. As a kid you're impotent. You can't communicate well, you don't have the knowledge to make things happen, you are highly dependent on others. This creates a depressed population. In this case, the population doesn't even dare to think they can change something. 'Why even bother?' People always say that Cubans are happy, always laughing, dancing, drinking and having sex. That's the escapism of depressed people. They don't want to think. Alcoholism is very common in Cuba. Feeling disempowered results in people passing their time, sitting it out. People sitting in the street doing nothing for hours. They're just watching time pass by.

The third reaction is that people struggle to grow up. You stay in the pre-progressive moment. You're demanding and complaining but you will never get the key to the house because you're not 18, yet. You're not a kid – but you're confused and embarrassing. There is no civic education. I don't mean formal civic education. It's about becoming a grown-up citizen who doesn't only make demands but actually invests themselves in creating change and understand the consequences of what they're doing and then decide how to manage those.

I'm not a big fan of the US but over here, I'm amazed by Black Lives Matter. They are not completely independent either. The Power is still interested in monitoring their activities. Monitoring is different than pressuring and controlling. Although the situation is still difficult and far from ideal, but at least there's enthusiasm to govern and to share. Their enthusiasm is free. In Cuba, it's controlled. I remember when Obama and Raul announced their diplomatic relations, all the Cuban government was saying was 'Cubans are very happy.' If you dared to question happiness in that moment you became an enemy of the state. They own your emotional reaction. They decide how you feel. In other places there is a freedom of emotion and you're responsible for your emotions. In Cuba, there is no responsibility. The State is not responsible – it's dealing with kids, and individuals are not responsible because they are infantile. It's impossible to do anything without people taking responsibility.



Tania Bruguera's permit for INSTAR from the Cuban Government.

JP: With INSTAR, do you expect governmental oppression?

TB: I went back to Cuba to start setting up INSTAR, to find allies and people interested in participating. I encountered the same interrogator who I meet again and again, who interrogated me for two hours trying to find out what I was doing. My answer kept being that there is no case against me, so there's no reason to interrogate me. One thing that drives them nuts is when you ask for your rights. When I left the country, it was the same again. They keep asking why I'm

setting the project up, why it has the name of Hannah Arendt, why it's called 'institute', who is coming when and why, what do I want to do. My answer kept being the same. I didn't tell them anything. More than the pieces I've worked on in the past, this project depends highly on the element of surprise. The performativity of expectation and of delivery is very important. Therefore, I'm interested in how to circumvent the law. They want to blackmail me with the law because I usually act within the legal framework to demonstrate what's not working, what's missing. The law is the corpus of power and I want to create a dialogue with them, therefore, I need to go through the legal corpus. This has a limit when the law is not just and doesn't reflect given needs. During the interrogations they keep reminding me of the fact that I like to work within the law to try and put psychological pressure on me. That's why I don't think that in this case I will be able to continue working within legal framework because if things don't work there need to be other solutions. We'll see. This project is a huge challenge. I won't be announcing anything, we'll just do it and see what happens. I'm under a lot of pressure. Last time, the piece didn't happen. Or rather, it happened in a different way. This time, I don't want this. Frustration is a dangerous educational tool.

The best tool we can have at INSTAR is feeling that you can actually do the impossible. My biggest task now is to think of a strategy to reach as many people possible, to go around the censorship directly or indirectly. Already the project shows effects without even having begun yet because the government is responding to every announcement about INSTAR with reactionary initiatives. I don't want the piece to be only this. The institute is not only there to deal with the present. It aims to educate people to deal with the future. Education is always about the future. It's always a projection of the future. The government is making deals with capitalist corporations who care even less about people's wellbeing than the Cuban government does now. People are a commodity to them, or rather, instruments to make money. People need to learn to say 'basta.' A lot of those deals are still in discussion. There is still time to stop what's not right. The point is not that it's not right for the Cubans. We need to start caring about what's right for the Cubans. Not about what's right for Cuba the fantasy land.

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