

ESERCIZIO DI RESISTENZA
a cura di Roberto Pinto
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Tania Bruguera



Tania Bruguera
Exercise in resistance
curated by Roberto Pinto



*You know, she says simply, when I do an exercise I understand.
With my body, I understand |*

DAVID GROSSMAN¹

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*An idea, a concept, an idea, while it is still an idea,
it is only an abstraction, |
if I could eat an idea I would have made my revolution |*

GIORGIO GABER AND SANDRO LUPORINI²

|
*"... he was such a good Communist he managed to become
invisible" |*

GUILLERMO CABRERA INFANTE³

Some of the most important exhibitions in recent years – for example the last two editions of Documenta or the Biennial in Istanbul, still open – have proposed in the main art that confronts political and social issues, created from an artistic stance that can be called ethical. We can recognise this stance as one of the clearest constants throughout all Tania Bruguera's work. The position of this Cuban artist can be appreciated right from her first actions, for example those where she repeated, as in a long homage, the performances of Ana Mendieta. This position has remained unvaried in her most recent works – presented, in fact, at Documenta or in Istanbul – and in areas apparently far from the visual arts, like the founding of the magazine *Memoria de la Postguerra*. |

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Homenaje a Ana Mendieta, a work that has been prolonged over the years, from 1986 to 1996⁴, is made up of a series of performances, but also of simple objects, that reconstruct and re-present the work and actions of the dead artist. Tania Bruguera conceived this work aiming to reinstate, within the Cuban context that has officially erased Ana Mendieta since

¹ David Grossman, *In Another Life*, original edition in Hebrew. Forthcoming publication in English as *The Study*.
² Words from the song "Un'idea" by Giorgio Gaber and Sandro Luporini.
³ Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *La Habana pura en un fin de semana*, Seto Barcel, Barcelona 1981, p. 24. I took this quote from Tania Bruguera herself from the opening of the 7th edition of "Generazione delle Immagini".
⁴ Cf. Tania Bruguera, "Multiple Identity, Invisible Identity, Invisible Behaviour", in *State of Identity – The Generation of Image*, Roberto Piretti (ed.), Comune di Milano, Milan 2002.

she defected to the United States, the figure of one of the most interesting artists of recent decades. This series of works by Tania Bruguera springs from a need to illuminate the hidden area of Cuban art and culture and, at the same time, to make us reflect on the transience of memory and the 'fragility' of performance (the media preferred by Tania herself) that disappears with the ending of the action. I believe, though, that if one stops at this first interpretation there is a risk that the full sense of the project in all its completeness will not be grasped. *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta*, like many of Tania's works, in fact stems from the need to effect once again "the experience of the other"; a position that leads us to introduce the concept of relational art⁵. Moving instead to another discipline, it is possible to build a parallel with Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*⁶. Here, the author does not in fact write a biography, but an autobiography, seeking to don the clothes of the other, in this specific case, of her companion⁷. So Tania Bruguera carries out an analogous strategy to that used by Stein with a person that she feels to be artistically and culturally close to her. But to put yourself in someone else's shoes,

⁵ See: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Reel, Dijon 2002.
⁶ *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, The Bodley Head, London 1933.
⁷ For more on this, see: Adriana Cavarero, *Tu*

and generally to create a performance, does not necessarily mean effecting a literary or theatrical operation. It does not, therefore, surprise us if the Cuban artist, on several occasions, has emphasised her distance from the theatre and from acting: "No me interesa actuar, yo no interpreto personajes".⁸ It therefore becomes obvious that this is no representation but an act of homage, where Tania attempts at the same time to "annul herself" in order to recreate the work of the other artist and to revive those experiences that were so important and so neglected by official Cuban culture. |

Memoria de la Postguerra was an entirely self-financing publication in which cultural issues were interwoven with political debate, highlighting positions and supporting trends that were decidedly anti-government. In this magazine Tania Bruguera collected the ideas and interventions of Cuban artists and critics that oscillated between seriousness and ferocious irony. Above all, though, *Memoria de la Postguerra* was an important vehicle that connected two generations of Cuban intellectuals which, while only separated by a few years difference, found

⁸ "I am not interested in acting. I do not interpret characters", in Yolanda Wood, "La aventura del silencio en Tania Bruguera", in *Arcahana*, 3/2000.

themselves having to make very different choices: almost all the artists slightly older than Tania Bruguera, Carlos Garaicoa, Los Carpinteros, Kcho – who all remained in the Isla – were virtually obliged to emigrate in order to fill the information gap and especially to find that freedom of expression that had not existed under the last years of Castro's Cuban flag.⁹ *Memoria de la Postguerra* succumbed after only two numbers, naturally not because of financial problems.¹⁰ |

This basic desire to put herself to the test, but also to act as a go-between and put different people and generations in contact with each other, led Tania Bruguera to become also a 'curator' and to organise an exhibition of artists at the fifth Biennial of Havana in 1994. This choice was also shared by another two artists, Sandra Ceballos and Ezequiel Suárez, who, the same year, decided to open an exhibition space in La Habana, "Aglutinador", to give "Cuban artists of every 'sect' – living or dead, resident in Cuba or not, young or old, known or unknown, famous or forgotten, modest or pedantic –" the opportunity to show their works, "so long as they were of undoubted quality and, above all, had the necessary

⁹ Tania herself, in a conversation with Octavio Zaya (in the catalogue *Cuba: Maps of Desire*, Kunsthalle, Vienna 1999), explains: "At that time, I was trying to salvage the themes and icons used by the 1980s generation in Cuba and to analyse what had happened".
¹⁰ On this subject, see: Luis Camnitzer, "Memoria de la Postguerra", in *Art News*, No. 15, Jan-March 1995.

dash of honesty and concern for the creation of real art".¹¹

Memoria de la Postguerra was also the title of a series of performances and installations, among which let us recall *Miedo* (Fear), an action of 1994 in which Tania lay on a small boat – like those used by the many *baleros* during the difficult years of the Cuban recession in which they tried to cross the stretch of sea separating them from the United States – which she tried to mend every now and then. |

For thematic similarities with *Miedo*, at least the series *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación* must be mentioned, made up of a series of objects that recall mythological flying machines and where the performance gesture is merely suggested. |

1997 was an extremely important year for Tania Bruguera as she presented *El peso de la culpa*. Apart from the unquestionable visual impact of this work (it was in fact reproduced in a vast number of catalogues and magazines), I believe it represents a conceptual turning point in her oeuvre. *El peso de la culpa* is also part of the cycle *Memoria de la Postguerra* and it is a performance in which the artist, wearing the carcass of a

¹¹ For more on the Aglutinador, and on the Cuban situation in general see: Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Distance and Metaphor: On the Subject of Contemporary Art in Cuba, 1990-2000", in *Citoyenes – The Generation of Images* 6, Roberto Pinto (ed.), Comune di Milano, Milan 2001.

quartered lamb, devotes long hours to solemnly mixing earth with water and salt, forming small balls that she would then eat. In this way Tania repeated the ceremony of collective suicide that, according to a Cuban legend, the Indios had committed centuries earlier on the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadores, who had enslaved them. *Comer tierra* (to eat the earth) is also an idiomatic Cuban expression that refers to a desperate situation from which there are no ways of escape. But, above all, "eating earth, which is sacred and a symbol of permanence, is like swallowing one's own traditions, one's own heritage, it's like erasing oneself. It's electing suicide."¹³ Everything in this performance makes us think of an ancient ritual – "earth is what I come from and to where I will return" (explained Tania in another interview) – through a process of self-erasure, but also the erasure of one's own work;¹⁴ it is obvious, nevertheless, that in making this ancient legend topical and relevant is also a way of talking about the Cuba of today, and, more generally, about the relationships between individuals and power. It also deals with coming to terms with a different history, told by different people, with different memories.

¹³ Interview with Tania Bruguera by Octavio Zaya, in *Cuba: Maps of Desire*, Kunsthalles, Vienna 1999.
¹⁴ Eugenio Valdés Figueroa in *Cuba: Maps of Desire*, Kunsthalles, Vienna 1999, writes: "She is really committing an act of 'auto-plagiat' which implies a kind of Eucharist, a purifying ingestion of herself and her work".

We know that History, the one with a capital 'H', is written by those that conquer, whereas Tania Bruguera, on the other hand, goes looking for points of view held by people who do not wield power. She is almost saying that by reliving in the first person one can try to understand historical processes and private stories, one can understand one's own present. In this light, then, *El peso de la Culpa* represents an ideal continuation of Ana Mendieta's work. Certain aspects of this ritual, though, almost make us think of a sort of act of repentance, atonement for a wrong-doing, even if, obviously, neither Tania nor her generation were the ones to conquer Cuba and enslave the Indios. She thus aims to revive a historical event (or as such it is recounted) that she considers to be fundamental for Cuban, and in general for American, society. Her action must therefore be interpreted as an ethical gesture, which we can in a certain sense define as "pure" and "mystic" at the same time. The artist herself uses this action to understand and to permit understanding, through her, of an exemplary story that rises to a paradigm of the post-colonial situation, but also, and I would say to a greater extent, of human nature. |

¹⁴ For more on this too, see the interview with Tania Bruguera by Octavio Zaya (in the catalogue *Cuba: Maps of Desire*, Kunsthalles, Vienna 1999).

The same year Tania Bruguera also presents another action, *El Cuerpo del Silencio*, where the effects exercised by history on the single individual are still open. In a space covered in lamb meat, the artist 'corrected' a list of information taken from an official history book. She subsequently obliterated her own work by cleaning it all up with her tongue, in a gesture of self-humiliation and self-censorship. Finally, she tried desperately to eat the pages of the book. In this case, too, the historical references, but above all those connected to today, are absolutely clear. |

In 2000, at the seventh Biennial of Havana, Tania Bruguera presented another very intense and, for certain aspects, also very dangerous work due to its controversial critique of the Cuban regime. Indeed, after just one day, the work was censored and banned. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to witness that performance, which was, without doubt, one of the most awe-inspiring that I have ever seen. A few people at a time entered into a sort of tunnel that penetrated inside the Cabaña (a military fortress housing part

of the Biennial), a place that was used in the past for imprisoning those condemned to death. The first sensation that assailed you, together with the darkness in strong contrast to the Caribbean light outside, was the pungent smell coming from the flooring of rotting sugar canes. Continuing slowly along the hazardous path that wound around the inside of the building, as one's eyes got used to the half-light, you could make out, almost in the background, a monitor hanging from the ceiling. Approaching this, you saw that it was transmitting a collage of images of Fidel Castro, taken from Cuban state television during the early years of the Revolution, when Fidel the man could still be seen swimming in the sea or dressed in casual clothes in his own home. Nothing illegal or forbidden so far, but those images of Castro were light years away from the images of the man in military uniform who, via the television, enters the homes of the Cuban people on a daily basis. The monitor, power (but in this case also memory), dimly lit the surrounding space which, only now, you realised was inhabited with naked people. These people, as though they were in an inexistent shower, made from cathode tube rays,

repeatedly touched themselves in an attempt to get clean. Gestures lacking meaning, repetitive, alienated, made by 'invisible', nude, fragile people lit by the memory of values lost in time. |

With this work, and especially with the work *Untitled* presented at Documenta XI last year, Tania Bruguera seems to be questioning the ability of vision and images to make us know the real situation, preferring to create multi-sensory spatial situations that completely envelope the spectator, where the visual part is only one of the components. At Kassel, too, in fact, the role given to sight was severely limited (even though the strength of the work actually derived from this limitation). Entering the room designed by Tania Bruguera, the spectator found himself in a dark space where a screen could just be made out. The names of one hundred places (the number of days the exhibition was open for) flashed by on the screen; places where politically motivated massacres have taken place since 1945 onwards. But as soon as one's eyes had got accustomed to that rarefied, silent and dark atmosphere – in a space that seemed to have been made specifically for reflection – you

were blinded by a series of incredibly strong lights, as though undergoing interrogation. At the same time, the soundtrack changed: the noise of a person in heavy boots walking along the walkway above our heads could be heard, while someone else manually loaded his gun. These were not recorded sounds; they were flesh and blood people carrying out these threatening gestures, throwing our vulnerability and that of the society we have constructed around ourselves right in our faces. |

Undoubtedly acceptance of our vulnerability is one of the more complex challenges that our society, together with the single individuals it is made up of, have to face, both on a collective and on an individual level. '11 September' is nothing but the most obvious, and mediatically perfect, example of all of this. Our western democracy cannot evade this syndrome; it shows itself to be vulnerable, and, on more than one occasion, has denied its own statute and principles, invoking in its defence self-defence against international fundamentalist attacks.¹⁵ These preliminary remarks seem called for since also *Untitled*, on a second reading, reveals a close relationship with memory and places: Kassel, indeed, was one of the driving

15 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2003.

centres behind the Nazi arms industry during the Second World War and, for many years, during the Cold War, found itself almost on the confines between the two opposing blocks that found their strongest contrast in a Germany divided in two. The sense of disorientation and feeling of 'being in the line of fire' that *Untitled* transmitted can also be re-read from the role that this city played during the twentieth century. | From a certain point of view, the recent works I have described, presented at Kassel and at the Biennial of Havana, also involve a shift in the concept itself of performance, in that the artist demands part of the action from the spectator himself, involved as a sort of co-author, or at least co-actor. We have seen this trend take shape in earlier works, like *Dedalo o el Imperio de Salvacion*, but in these later works it is fully developed. Even if the images are reduced to ghostly presences, the evocative capacity of the work remains intact, in all its force. As Eleanor Heartney has stated so clearly, "in Bruguera's world, concepts like freedom, liberty and self-determination are not abstract ideals, but achievements that write their effects on our physical forms".¹⁶ |

¹⁶ Eleanor Heartney in *Art in America*, March 2002.

As I am writing this text on Tania Bruguera's work, a group of Israeli and Palestinian intellectuals are meeting in Geneva in an attempt to construct an alternative peace process to the official Road Map, via ways not aligned to the politics of the respective governments. It now appears truly impossible to attempt previously travelled roads, exclusively asphalted with a mix of economic relationships and power games. Alternative roads can be, must be, searched for, together with relationships on equal terms founded on reciprocal respect and knowledge. I do not know whether the attempt of this group of intellectuals (with a dash of bitter cynicism, we might call them dreamers) will succeed in redeeming a region that has been so disfigured by the present situation that every subject seems pushed towards isolation in irreconcilable and fundamentalist positions. But this initiative too, geographically and culturally so far from Cuba, stems from an attitude similar to that of Tania Bruguera's, to the constant strain of keeping her eyes open, of not becoming indifferent to individual and collective dramas, of first-person involvement, lacking the support of ideologies and/or certainties, but dictated by the need

to live to the very full her role of intellectual, without abdicating, assuming the risks in the first person. With the risk, naturally, of making mistakes. To live, therefore to act.¹⁷ To live. Perhaps this word would be enough, understood in its first and most profound meaning: to live without renouncing, without fear, showing that part of yourself, of your society, of the world we are part of, that does not offer us certainties, that we do not like, but which exists. |

Tania's work is therefore political if we consider, borrowing the words of Giorgio Agamben,¹⁸ that "future politics will no longer be about the struggle to conquer or control the state, but the struggle between the state and the non-state (humanity), unbridgeable separation between ordinary individuals and state organisation. [...] The ordinary individual, that wants to appropriate the act of belonging itself, of its being-in-language, and for this reason declines every identity and every condition of belonging, is the main enemy of the state. Wherever these individuals peacefully manifest their communal being, there will be a Tienanmen Square and, sooner or later, armoured vehicles will appear."¹⁹ |

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, Chicago, U.S. 1958: "Action, the only activity that places men in direct relationships without the mediation of material things, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men and not the Man live on the Earth and inhabit the world. Even if all the aspects of our existence are in some way connected to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of every political life."

An artist's work does not offer solutions, it does not propose to indicate the correct road to follow; even if it wanted to, it would not be able to. Other disciplines pose these objectives, and Tania's works are no exception to this rule. Her work, instead, questions itself and questions others. It reasons about the role and attraction of power, about the value of utopia, but it never abandons, not even for a moment, its own physicality, its own body, its own emotivity, its own condition of woman that breathes, eats, makes love, enjoys life, laughs, smiles, cries. "The personal is political", a slogan of some years ago declared. In this sense, Tania's work is political because it passes through itself, through its own body. "Your Body is a Battleground", we read in a work by Barbara Kruger. Tania seems to add that through one's body you understand and can say an infinite number of things. And you become aware of yourself, of your own reality, helping in this way, perhaps, to change it. |

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, M. Hardt (trans.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993