

T MAGAZINE

When Protest Signs Become Art

By ANNA FURMAN SEPT. 8, 2017

On an unseasonably warm afternoon in San Francisco, I met the Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera at a pop-up print shop downtown that's run by her friend the artist Sergio de la Torre, whose work explores surveillance and U.S. immigration policy.

Bruguera is herself a trained printmaker who now uses installation and performance art to rail against the inhumane treatment of immigrants — a subject that has become evermore urgent since the Trump administration announced its move to end DACA, a program that shielded young undocumented immigrants from deportation. Just inside the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), spirited college students and artfully dressed passers-by buzz around workshop tables. At first glance, the space looks like a simple community arts initiative, but it's actually a critique of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'s expanded power under Trump's administration, carefully architected by de la Torre and the artist Chris Treggiari. Deportation counts and sanctuary-city ordinance facts cover the walls; still-wet images of ICE officer badges and the Golden Gate Bridge are punctuated by fierce text like "Not in my city!" The posters will soon be wheat-pasted and used in local protests and disseminated on college campuses.

The mood is light and Bruguera is upbeat, despite enduring a recent injury and another harrowing week in national news — it's only a few days since violence erupted in Charlottesville, and white supremacist groups had just announced planned rallies for nine other U.S. cities. Her goals are straightforwardly radical: to illuminate oppressive forces, redistribute resources and spark social change. "I believe in the very democratic idea that art is for everybody," she says. Printmaking

helped her reject the notion that art objects are unique and precious ownable goods. “I’m a nomad,” she says. “I go from residency to residency, so my studio is in my head.” While in residency at Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, she kept a brick-and-mortar studio that felt “like being inside my ideas, as if my brain was being displayed.” Now, she is at the tail-end of her summer residency program at YBCA, where her exhibit “Hablándole al Poder,” that explores new social and political power structures, proved a conceptual playground rather than a straightforward art collection.

Bruguera’s practice is a scrappy, immaterial style called *arte útil* (“useful art”) that toes the line between art and activism. In 2004, she staged a soapbox-speech performance in Havana’s Revolution Square to challenge stringent censorship laws; several years ago, she founded the Queens-based initiative **Immigrant Movement International** to empower undocumented families; and this summer, she designed a bright-blue flag that reimagines the planet as a sort of united, Pangea-like land mass to draw attention to the mutability of our borders. Emblazoned with “Dignity has no nationality,” it flew outside Creative Time’s New York headquarters throughout July.

Bruguera speaks digressively and emphatically while applying a daub of white paint to her screen. She says that according to Darwinian theory, “immigrants would be the last surviving group of people. They have endured so much, work so hard, and are open to reinventing themselves.”

Several tattoos line her wrists: the longitudinal coordinates of her home in Havana, a cartoonish sugar skull, a delicately drawn version of her futuristic flag design. While spreading paint across the screen like mayonnaise on bread, she explains that “resistance has to be done from the academic, visual culture, economic, and technologic” fields, in addition to street protests. On our print, the text “a sanctuary is a home away from home” appears in all-caps, opaque white letters.

“In Cuba, there were all the same institutions that were slowly being taken down” as in the U.S., she tells me, gesturing toward the drying rack. Americans that travel to Cuba “are so fascinated by their own privilege that they cannot see the reality,” she says. “Stop idealizing Cuba.” Cuba’s “totalitarian regime controls

