



Rebel With a Cause

FOR THE CUBAN ARTIST TANIA BRUGUERA, FREE EXPRESSION COMES AT A PRICE. BY LINDA YABLONSKY

AS AN ARTIST OF CONSCIENCE, TANIA BRUGUERA SPEAKS truth to power in unforgettably visceral terms. For a performance at the 1997 Havana Biennial, she addressed the collective suicides of indigenous Cubans during the Spanish conquest by strapping the carcass of a goat to her naked body and eating dirt, seasoned with salt, for nearly an hour. In 2008, at Tate Modern, in London, she illustrated the issues of police conduct by having officers on horseback herd museumgoers into the center of the vast Turbine Hall. And during a 2009 lecture at Paris's Jeu de Paume, she played Russian roulette with a loaded gun to underscore her practice of *arte de conducta* (behavior art), which she defines as “art with consequences.” But last December, after Bruguera landed in jail in her native Cuba for attempting to stage a performance calling for free speech, she clammed up.

President Obama's December 17 speech, which began the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba, generated enormous optimism among Cubans—Bruguera included. And yet, just before dawn on December 30, when the artist was paying her annual New Year's visit to her mother, Argeña Fernández, in Havana, state security officers surrounded their house and pounded on the door, shouting for Bruguera to open

it. She refused. During the next five hours, she showered, dressed, and tried to call her younger sister, Deborah, who lives in Italy, while calmly watching the scene outside her window. “I counted more than 20 people,” said Bruguera, who ultimately submitted to arrest. “Like I'm bin Laden, a big terrorist.”

At the police station, after she was put in prison grays and her passport was revoked, agents interrogated her for 26 hours—two more than is legal, she pointed out. “I wasn't going to resist,” Bruguera said. “I just would not eat and not talk. I wanted to maintain a sense of dignity.” The police branded her a counter-revolutionary and accused her of working for the CIA. “I was named for Tania!” Bruguera protested, referring to Che Guevara's guerrilla companion. “I am a revolutionary.”

No charges were filed, but the government blocked her phone and hacked her website. And during the eight months that Bruguera was detained in Cuba awaiting the return of her passport, she was arrested twice again—once after a 100-hour reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, by Hannah Arendt, during this year's Havana Biennial; and then in June, at a protest by the dissident group Ladies in White. Bruguera recounted the whole story to me in September, shortly after arriving at Yale University, where she is one of 16 candidates in its prestigious World Fellows Program. “It feels so good when you're free!” she exclaimed. “It feels so good.”

Since 1998, Bruguera, who has resident alien status in the U.S., has been living between Havana, New York, and Chicago, teaching and making art. She represents a rare case of an art star who achieved wide renown via such international platforms as the Venice, Istanbul, and Shanghai biennials, as well as Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, without being represented by a commercial gallery. In 2010, the Neuberger Museum of Art, in Purchase, New York, mounted her first career survey, following high-profile commissions Bruguera had created for Art Basel Miami Beach and the public art organization Creative Time.

Given Bruguera's history, her acute sense of moral outrage, and the combination of human frailty and cruelty she builds into her art, this latest confrontation with Cuban authorities was probably inevitable. Both of her parents fought for Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution. From 1973 to 1976, when the Lebanese civil war broke out, Bruguera's father, Miguel, was the Cuban ambassador to Beirut, where she attended a French school and learned Arabic. Her sister was born there, but Bruguera remembers spending most of her time alone. “That's how I started drawing and writing,” she said. Her father, who moved on to posts in Manuel Noriega-era Panama, then Argentina during the Dirty War, remained loyal to Fidel until his death, in 2006. Her mother, a translator who once lived in New York, did not. They divorced when Bruguera was still a girl.

Those experiences may have shaped her worldview, but it was the televised 1989 trial and execution of a national hero, General Arnaldo Ochoa, who was convicted for drug trafficking, that pointed to her future as an artist. “It was intense,” Bruguera said. The word “intense” comes up frequently in her conversation. She used it again to describe the Mariel boatlift, in 1994, when Cubans took to the Malecón, Havana's seaside boulevard, shouting, “Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!” “That was the first and only time I saw

Above, from left: Tania Bruguera performing *El Peso de la Culpa* (*The Burden of Guilt*), 1997–1999, Caracas, Venezuela; the artist, photographed in New York in October.

EL PESO DE LA CULPA (THE BURDEN OF GUILT); COLLECTION OF EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO, NEW YORK; COURTESY OF STUDIO BRUGUERA



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a popular demonstration in Cuba,” Bruguera recalled. “It was very intense, because I saw truckloads of workers beating other Cubans.”

More positive was the hiccup of free expression that artists in Cuba enjoyed in the 1980s. Bruguera, then in her late teens, joined Paideia, an interdisciplinary group that strove to establish an alternative to state-sponsored culture. “Art became part of the political conversation, even shaping policies,” she explained. Her first political work was *Postwar Memory*, a newspaper she created with other artists in 1993—they were promptly censored. “To do a print newspaper is still illegal. Was it a newspaper or was it art? I really like it when you can’t tell.”

If her politics suggest that Bruguera lives on anger, in person she is an effervescent, considerate, stubbornly optimistic woman with flowing brown hair and appealing brown eyes. Her wardrobe consists of plain dresses and shawls, and she happily gets by with just two pairs of shoes. Her commitment to social justice through art is so total that it’s been three years since her last relationship. “All of this is so intense,” she admitted, “that nobody can handle it.”

While stuck in Cuba this year, Bruguera lost her rental apartment in New York, where she’d spent five years teaching art and activism to Latinos out of a storefront in Queens with backing from the Queens Museum of Art and Creative Time. The workshop was an example of her *arte útil* (useful art), which she had developed with students at her alma mater, Havana’s Instituto Superior de Arte, to help the disenfranchised achieve a better life. Her main solace has been the still-growing force of followers she gained via Yo También Exijo (I Also Demand), a Facebook page her sister helped create under Tania’s name. Bruguera had used the phrase repeatedly in a letter she wrote to President Raúl Castro after Obama’s speech. “My sister called to tell me about what Obama had said,” she recalled. “And I was, like, ‘What? The United States and Cuba are going to get together?’ For 50 years, Cubans have defined themselves by their relationship to Americans. To wake up and hear we’re friends—that was a shock.” Bruguera was in favor of that decision, she said, “but I demanded that Raúl tell us what it meant. Were we going to have free elections? I was trying to say, ‘Listen, let the people talk to power instead of only the other way around.’”

On December 26, she arrived in Havana and applied for permission to restage *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, a 2009 Havana Biennial performance that invited Cuban citizens to speak their mind in public—for one minute—this time in politically charged Revolution Square. Despite recent reforms, the prospect of even

60 seconds of free speech didn’t go down well. After two days of negotiations, her request for a permit was denied. Four days later, she was arrested. “They used to censor you for something you did,” Bruguera said. “Now, they stop you before you do it.”

In July, with Bruguera still unable to leave the country, New York’s Museum of Modern Art announced that it had acquired her piece *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*. This site-specific work, which Bruguera created for La Cabaña, a former military fortress overlooking the city, marked her transition from performing with her own body to environments involving an audience. Visitors entering a long, dark tunnel walked on a carpet of dried sugarcane husks, breathing in the sweet aroma as they felt their way toward a light that turned out to be a television monitor playing news and family footage of Fidel Castro. At that moment, they became aware of four nude men rubbing and slapping themselves. The performance was shut down after one day.

Stuart Comer, MoMA’s chief curator of media and performance art, was still in art school when he witnessed that piece, and said he never forgot it. “The site, the darkness, and the naked men enacting gestures of humiliation and solitude, the references to the violence of the past and the slave trade, made the experience very powerful,” he said, adding that the acquisition process had started more than a year ago and was unrelated to Bruguera’s arrest. But on the day of MoMA’s announcement came another bombshell: The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs let it be known that Bruguera would be the first artist-in-residence for the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs. During this one-year appointment, Bruguera will help to raise awareness of the city’s IDNYC program, which gives undocumented immigrants access to legal and social services without fear of deportation.

Bruguera got her passport back this summer, and has since been shortlisted for the Hugo Boss prize, but she wasn’t done with Cuba just yet. She may never be done with Cuba. With the ball back in her court, she only agreed to leave under two conditions: that dissidents who were arrested after showing up for her aborted performance in Revolution Square be released and that the government give her a signed and stamped letter guaranteeing that she could return to Cuba next New Year’s, and leave. She got it.

“They couldn’t wait to get rid of me!” she said, laughing. “But I have to go back. I want to create an institute for art and activism in my house in Havana, so people can see the power of art to speak when there’s no other way to be heard.” ♦

Above, clockwise, from left: Bruguera’s performance piece *Displacement*, 1998–1999, in Havana; *Tatlin’s Whisper #5*, 2008, at Tate Modern, in London; *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, 2000, which was recently acquired by MoMA; the performance piece *Self-Sabotage*, 2009; with her father, Miguel, in Lebanon, 1974; Bruguera (front), as a child in Cuba’s embassy in Paris, 1974.

DISPLACEMENT, TATLIN’S WHISPER #5, SELF-SABOTAGE: COURTESY OF STUDIO BRUGUERA; UNTITLED (HAVANA, 2000): CASEY STOLL; COURTESY OF STUDIO BRUGUERA; BRUGUERA IN LEBANON: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST