

1990'S ART FROM CUBA

A National Residency and Exhibition Program

Tania Bruguera was interviewed on March 8, 1997, by Betti-Sue Hertz. The interview took place at Gallery 2 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, just before the second presentation of the artist's interactive ensemble performance, "Art in America (The Dream)", which was presented at the end of her seven-week residency.

Q: When you were in Cuba reading the art magazines, was there any artist in particular, any artists or any period of art that you were especially interested in?

A: I was particularly interested in the conceptual art from the sixties. I was also interested in the social art of the eighties, such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Cindy Sherman. They were dealing with these social things, talking about society, dealing with society, and doing interventions into society, like, for example, Jenny Holzer.

Q: The electronic light boards?

A: And the posters. I very much like art which functions outside the frame of the gallery or museum and functions in real life.

Q: Why were you interested in participating in the cultural exchange program?

A: First, because for me and for many Cubans, America is, in a sense, a dream. I wanted to be in America and to see all the very important art here. I think that America is a point of reference for everything in Cuba, for daily life, politics, and for art.¹ And so it was very important for me to come here and see what is real and unreal in relation to what I thought. And also to have the opportunity to see what was happening in the art scene and how it really functions. Because we have all these idealistic ideas about how art functions in the U.S. art world. And it's very nice to see the real thing.

Q: Did you have much information about Chicago?

A: Not very much.

Q: What did you know about Chicago?

A: I knew about the gangsters in the forties. I knew that it was a very important architectural city. I knew that the city had been destroyed in the late nineteenth century and then rebuilt. I knew something about the art that came from here, but not so much.

Q: We asked you to develop a proposal for what you would do here. How has that proposal changed? Please explain your original idea. You could talk about how the ideas changed, and materials possibly in your case, you are doing ensemble performance now, so how did that fit into the original picture?

A: I thought I would make the flying machines as part of a series that I've been working on.

Q: They are prototype objects for Cubans so they can learn how to use machines to fly. After my first week I began to make a few of these machines.

Then everything changed when I met the Cuban community here. This was very important for me, and it was like I was living with them. I went to their houses to eat, we would go to the theater together, to the museum and other places. One day I was talking to them, and I had this idea to create a flag where part of the flag would represent the Cuban people who live here.

BSH Your idea was to create an altered image of the national flag of Cuba?

ТВ Yes. I had done one in Cuba. When I got here, I understood only one side of the Cuban identity or situation, because I had forgotten to include the people who live here. So I created the other part of the flag with material from the clothes of Cubans who had immigrated to the States. The flag is made out of scraps of fabric. One day we were on a tour which included one of the Frank Lloyd Wright houses and the Sears building, which was the tallest in the world for many years. And this friend of mine was explaining that this city has different levels, including subterranean levels, and she was telling me that people lived underground in tunnels. And then when I discovered these homeless people everything changed, and I stopped doing the objects, and I began to develop the idea for this project. And, also importantly, I was reading a lot of Cuban literature by people who live here. I did all this research about what I wanted to talk about. I spent a lot more time doing research than I spent on the actual performance project.

BSH Can you talk about the research?

ТВ Every day I went and talked to the homeless people and learned how to approach this kind of society. I read the newspaper that the homeless people publish and tried to ask them about their lives and to understand their society, which is inside another society, and that they have their own rules and have their own way of doing things. I then connected this society to Cuban immigration. Cuban émigrés in the U.S. have similar characteristics. They are part of a group within society who are integrated but at the same time separate. So that's it. The research included living with the Cubans. They talked about Cuba, what their life is like here, and their personal histories. It was very intense.

BSH You did a performance last night, and you are going to do another one tonight, and you have three pieces up at the Base Space.² For the purpose of the interview tape, can you describe the performance?

ТВ I realized that in Spanish the word for someone who doesn't have a house and the word for homeland, where the home is, were connected. The word for homeland in Cuba is *patria*. Homeless, homeland. Cuban immigrants have problems similar to the homeless people. No one wants to pay attention to them and know about their problems. They have hard lives, and they have to construct everything from the beginning. And so

every night I would go to see the homeless people in the tunnel and observe their attitude and the way they live and their clothes. I also learned about how the Cubans who left Cuba forever, for political reasons, began their lives all over again in the States.

I wanted to create different situations. The first situation is the woman at a desk looking very bureaucratic. Everyone had to give their I.D.s to her to enter the performance space. People had to lose their social identity to come inside. To do this you had only to be a human being not a social person. Next you entered this dark room with low yellow and red lights which created an ambiance similar to the tunnel. All the people who participated as performers were Cuban or émigrés to the States, except for one American, who was one of the interrogators. One of the performers played a homeless person sleeping and looking like an object. In another situation a man had all these boxes, which he obsessively moved from one part of his territory to another, because every character has his own territory. He was trying to construct a house. And every box had written on it, something like "kitchen," "living room," etc., and he was walking with the boxes from one part of the house, for example, "bathroom," "bathroom," "bathroom." like relating the boxes with a part of the house. He did this throughout the performance.

And then there were other characters, played by me and Nereida,³ and we were reading these Spanish cards.⁴ They are like tarot cards. We had a small child with us. When you are in a new society, you bring your culture, your way of life. For example, when you are in Cuba, this religious and mystic attitude towards life is for everyone, and so you come here with that, and you bring that to other people in some way. And I was talking about what happened with our own culture, because you have to translate what you have to say. I was speaking in Spanish, and Nereida was translating for the audience. Americans had to wait for the translation to understand what I was saying.

When you finished looking at everything, you went out the back door. And you only got your I.D. back after you answered questions which are from a real list of questions from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The questions included things like singing the national anthem. The performers acted like police. And if audience members answered the question correctly, they could go. It was funny, because if somebody said something which was a socially wrong answer and not a good way to say things, they had to go think of a better answer before they were released. "Oh, I want to get out of here. Give me my I.D." And it was very funny, I'm very happy with the reactions. The audience was very open. The homeless woman was getting very interesting reactions from all the people. The man who was changing boxes all the time, he was absurd.

1. The Cuban artists often use the word "America(n)" in their interviews to reference the United States. In Spanish, when speaking about the U.S., the term *Estados Unidos* (United States), is more commonly used.

2. The Base Space is an informal exhibition space at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is generally used by students to try out artistic ideas.

3. Nereida Garcia-Ferraz is a Cuban-born visual artist who has lived in Chicago for many years.

4. Spanish cards, also known as *Las Cartas Las de Marcellas*, have different symbols, but interpreting them is similar to "reading" Tarot cards.