

The Transposed Heads¹

There are many ways to make an autobiography, but all of them imply memory. Memory is, among other things, the fertilizing means of museology, that discipline determined to remember, to look for material and intangible clues of what human beings and nature create in their interaction. Museology works with memory: it recollects, stores, decodes, keeps, restores the traces of culture. And, at times, can become a fiction rescuing evidences of what used to be. An exhibition at times reminds a fictional reality where something memory protects is reconstructed; an unreal zone where the evidences of the actual contents of memory are orchestrated, whether it be the intimate and personal memory of an individual, the collective memory or the official memory; whether it be memory incarnated in a material object of that invoked by the intangibility involved in the transmission of values.

With *Autobiography*, Tania Bruguera has become a genuine museologist. She has searched for traces of memory in the sound landscape of a life. Rummaging in an individual life which is, at the same time, her own and that of so many others, she has brought to us the acoustic evocation of the history of Cubans who have lived within the revolution. The artist presents us a *chambre d'écoute* where we find the political slogans we have heard, said, thought and repeated during four decades. And as a good museologist she has tenaciously researched the historical and individual, political and collective memory; she has collected many of those phrases, choosing some and discarding others as every curator does, loyally documented what she has been able to and cautiously reconstructed some of them when she has found no other way out. She has curated her own work or, better yet, constructed her work with a curatorship of memory following museological methods. She has transposed her head by that of a curator to offer us an auditory immersion in the political memory of Cubans. And, just as a museum curator, Tania intends to provide the spectator with "situations of collective memory"; she takes for granted that the work is based on a historical research and, approaching museum routines even more closely, she declares the work could be considered an anthropological view of reality.²

There are important works by Bruguera focusing on History, especially in that in Cuba. *The Weight of Blame*, for example, retold the act of eating soil by Cuban natives during the Spanish domination. In *Statistics* she recalls the way flags were made during the war for independence from Spain. And *The Body of Silence* deals with the oppression of the individual by history. It is not fortuitous then that in this *Autobiography* she insists on an idea which is fundamental for the author.

What is unusual in her view is that the artist seems obsessed by the burden that every type of apparatus or social system places on subjectivity. Whether in History written as a lineal account of events, in official History, in religious, educational, informative, familial, political, or moral systems, they all seem to afflict individual beings in a given way.

In Tania's works human beings can be locks of hair, used tea bags, dead rams or herds. A sort of contact between History and the individual takes place, an area where their relations of power, their obliterations, their mutual conflicts are settled: a place to reflect on how a newspaper headline, something in a History book or the meaning of a policy impact on the sensitivity of specific, concrete people. That is why her works are, at one and the same time, testimony and comment.

Not all artists – not all people – are ready to eat soil, to be stoned, to be naked in public, to touch and bite the meat of an animal, to spread lamb grease on their body, to lead a flock, to be tied at a dangerous height and, in general, to exploit their own body to the limit. Also, Bruguera's works can be smelled, touched, flood us with a gesture or with the experience of an act; they can terrify us, demand an answer from us, compel us to a specific action like handing in our ID cards when entering a gallery or talking with someone in an exhibition hall. Critic Juan Antonio Molina is right when saying that for TB it is the experience of the other what is fundamental.³

Slogans are voices... and, as the poet asked, who can build walls around voices? A voice, protected by the circularity of sound and, why not, of communication, speaking to other voices. A slogan is a flow, a coming and going of meanings wandering about in the ether. A rope tying people. A purpose that becomes evident in multitudes. A collective consent.

A slogan jumps up spontaneously, at times, from a shared emotion. At other times it is the fruit of a privileged instant in speech. Occasionally it is created as a message with a careful design. All, plural and dissimilar, weave the words reconstructing the sound bands of a time.

The voice-document in an emotional sunny morning, when an event made the audience vibrate, is heard here. Or the reinstated voice that makes a hope return, that reminds a duty or stresses a will. All the voices are heard in this autobiography.

After all, I do not know who did the curatorship of the sample. I enter the *chambre d'écoute* and hear the words under which I was born and have lived resound. Some far-off, others I have forgotten, and others are not yet there but appear little by little in rekindled memories. I feel as if I were reconstructing my own life in that tunnel of sounds and, as in an autobiography, unrepeatable images of my experience parade. As in a sort of film, school slogans, the words of the new world that the entry into the Pioneer organization meant for my sister and me: that act of leaving the house for the first time and camp at night in the Mayabeque river or gathering junk for the raw material campaign. I see my mother happily changing her housewife uniform for that of the militia and my father the day he came back, a hero for me, after walking 62 km in military training. I see the Square – how can one not see it! People crying, sweating, laughing, flirting, secretly dating in the crowd, clapping their hands, offering a peanut cone to someone. I see people I loved coming with me, I feel the time that has gone by in the midst of so many pains and efforts. I see the first time my son was in the Square. I see things nobody else can see, not even the artist herself. This is my creation, my individual and unrepeatable work, my memory that cannot be transferred. Once the heads are transposed, I am not now a

museologist-curator, but the author of this *chambre d'écoute* in which the sounds of my life parade. Every listener may also be its author. Every listener will be at the same time an artist. And those that have never heard these slogans (nor even *Until victory forever?*) have the chance to imagine their lives as ours has been, to walk with us part of our path, just as when traveling by train we talk with the person sitting next to us. And the artist (the curator) will not know anything about this. It will be a private dialogue, solely of the experience of the person listening.

This is an autobiography on first person plural. A curatorial action of the mind. An invitation to the history of our lives.

If everyone listens to their lives, if everyone rebuilds their memory and builds their present with it, we are in the path of that social sculpture/architecture which Beuys defended, the one that “will only reach its maturity when every individual is a creator, sculptor or architect of the social body.”⁴ Bruguera joins this mission merging art and life.

Corina Matamoros, Havana, September 2003

¹ A reference to Thomas Mann's novel.

² Tania Bruguera, Proyecto Autobiografía (Autobiography Project), presented at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Cuba, in June 2003.

³ Juan Antonio Molina, “Entre la ida y el regreso. La experiencia del otro en la memoria,” Havana, 1996.

⁴ Joseph Beuys, “J’explore un caractère du champ”, *Art en Théorie*, 1900-1990, Hassan, Paris, 1997.