

Havana Diary: Arte de Conducta

by Claire Bishop

Last summer I received a phone call from the Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera, asking me if I could be persuaded to come and do a week's teaching in Havana, for a project she has been running for five years - an art school as a work of art? I'd already begun to think about the recent run of pedagogic projects and/as art: the failed Manifesta 6 (which had aimed to reconceptualise the European biennial as a fully-functioning 3-month art school in Nicosia); United Nations Plaza (one of the Manifesta 6 departments, relocated to Berlin) and Night School (its current iteration in New York); but also projects that adopt pedagogic formats such as lectures and libraries - think of Maria Pask's Beautiful City in Münster, which revolved around weekly lectures on religion, or Martha Rosler's Library, first shown in New York and now on a European tour. Add to this the number of conferences, symposia and magazine issues dedicated to art schools and art education in recent years, and Tania Bruguera's project seemed extremely timely. Moreover, and in contrast to these other projects, it had also been functioning long-term (since January 2003) as a fully operative course in Havana dedicated to art that engages with reality. The name of the project is *Arte de Conducta* (literally, 'behaviour art').

In reality, *Arte de Conducta* is more of an art course than an art school: it's a semi-autonomous two-year module affiliated to the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), but students do not get credits for attending it. The institutional connection to ISA is necessary to secure visas for visiting lecturers, but Bruguera funds most of the project herself: laptops, books, lecturers' flights and accommodation came out of her own personal money in the early years, and it goes without saying that lecturers don't get paid for teaching. But the list of visiting artists is impressive: Thomas Hirschhorn, Elmgreen and Dragset, and Jennifer Allora all preceded me in 2007; my own trip overlapped with theorist Boris Groys and the Kosovan artist Sislej Xhafa, while Christophe Büchel, Carlos Amorales and Dora García are lined up for 2008. As the project is yet completed, it's hard to analyse it as a work of art. So what follows is a diary of my week in Havana and my immersion in one of the most intense and rewarding teaching experiences of my career to date.

Day 1 My luggage gets left in Madrid, but Tania meets me at the airport with a fistful of CUCs (Cuban Convertibles), the tourist currency roughly equal to the euro. She takes me to the casa particular in the Vedado district where I'm staying: a private house looking onto a large dishevelled plaza with classical columns, next to the Teatro Amadeo Roldan. I have the former servants' apartment at the back of the yard, with a balcony overlooking palm trees and tropical plants.

Day 2 I set off to find bottled water, walking along blocks of decrepit mansion houses; Vedado is the district where, prior to the 1959 revolution, the rich used to have their seaside houses. I find Galerías de Paseo, a 70s glass building containing a meagre supermarket. The shelves are either empty or full of one product (one standard brand of olive oil, or juice, or water). Everything is in the tourist CUC, rather than the Cuban peso, which means that everything for sale is for people who have money surplus to the abysmally low state wage of 15 CUC per month.

I head over to Tania's home in Habana Vieja, driving along the Malecon - the 9km road that snakes its way along the seafront. Her apartment is the headquarters of *Arte de Conducta*'s activities and comprises an office, a spare bedroom (in which Sislej Xhafa is staying), a small library, a studio for workshops and presentations, and a courtyard complete with a bar for parties to mark the end of a visiting lecturer's visit.

With its base in old Havana (rather than miles out at the ISA in Miramar, west of the city), *Arte de Conducta* is completely embedded in the urban fabric. Workshops take place in the house, but also in the streets or the park, or wherever the visiting lecturers choose to operate. In the past this has included museums, science labs, and people's houses. Tania seems particularly keen to invite artists who operate in public space, as well as those who come from former socialist contexts.

We sit and plan the week ahead. It immediately becomes apparent that the premise on which I was (easily) lured here - a two-hour seminar per day - is a serious underestimation of the mileage they aim to get out of me (!). There are around twenty students who all want crits on their work, and effectively this means that I'm tied up from 2pm each day to whenever I finish my seminar - around 7.30 at night. In the mornings I prepare my powerpoints for teaching, so this leaves minimal time to see Havana. Tania is openly pleased that lecturers have no time to do tourism and develop a working relationship to the city.

Day 3 This is my first teaching day. I spend the morning preparing a powerpoint on relational aesthetics; I hadn't planned to talk about this, but Nicolas Bourriaud was lecturing here last week and I feel beholden to offer some commentary. I'm curious to know how he was received, and I can also use these responses to gauge the level of discussion here.

My seminars take place in the headquarters of the theory journal *Cristerios*, a one-man initiative run by the beady-eyed intellectual Desiderio Navarro. His space is on the 9th floor of a building that offers the most incredible view: a panorama of crumbling Havana and endless blue Caribbean sea. Desiderio speaks about fifteen languages and is an indefatigable resource both on the history of art and politics in Cuba and Latin America, but also of completely unpredictable topics such as the history of surrealism in Slovakia.

Around thirty students show up and we begin with a discussion on micropolitics and microtopias; it immediately becomes apparent that my dominant frames of reference - society of the spectacle, the internet - have no resonance here. (I've seen no internet cafés in Havana, and citizens have restricted access to the web.) We also have a severe communicational block about utopia: for me, it's a remote impossibility but operative goal, for the Cubans it's assumed to be a daily - and achievable - reality.

We discuss the work of Santiago Sierra (who has keen supporters here) and Thomas Hirschhorn (who is rigorously dissected). They are deeply critical of most of the other European art I show them; the gripe that arises repeatedly is that it's 'merely' symbolic and metaphorical, rather than engaging directly in reality. The rest of the week is clearly going to be tough. After four hours I close the seminar, dripping in sweat, my head throbbing from keeping track of the discussion via my stalwart translator Tété.

Day 4 In the morning I walk along the Malecon and take photos of a pointed battle over public space and visibility, staged between the US and Cuba. The US have no headquarters in Cuba, but have appropriated the Swiss embassy. This is surrounded by high security - a big fence patrolled by security guards who prevent you from walking on that side of the road, and from pausing on the pavement opposite. In front of this building the Cubans have built a large public area for political manifestations (the 'protestodromo'), with a stage, lighting rigs and the slogans 'Patria o muerte' and 'Venceremos' (Nation or death, and We will triumph). In response, the US have installed a massive red Jenny Holzer-esque LED sign on their building, which scrolls news from the US - an attempt to tell Cuba what is happening in the world (or at least in North America). The Cuban response to this came in February 2006, when the government erected a display of enormous flag poles to prevent visibility of the LED messages. This array of noisily flapping black flags emblazoned with white stars has an unnerving beauty, like many totalitarian gestures in public space.

In the afternoon two of the students present their work to me. One of them, a beautiful young woman in her early twenties called Susana Delahante, shows me photographs of her own staged death (some of them are pretty good) and a project undertaken earlier this year in which she was artificially inseminated with the semen of a dead man; the point was to show that parts of the body continue to live after the rest of it dies. Gulp! The documentation, she argued, is the medical notes in the hospital, to which she doesn't have access unless she asks to be referred to another hospital (I like this idea). She miscarried a month later, which I can't help feeling relieved about. If this is typical of the student work here then no wonder they were criticising European art as merely 'metaphorical'.

The afternoon class is calmer today, as I run through a historical framework of artistic gestures in the public sphere. I am curious to know how they relate to the idea of community, a concept so lamented in Western theory that I am seduced by suggestions of its phantasmatic status. My question explodes into a generational stand-off between Desiderio (born in the 1940s) and the younger students, who suggest that the community of which he speaks is a mythological construction. They cite examples of failed collective projects and the whole thing spins out of control when even the translator stops translating and enters into the debate. In the fray, the only thing I manage to deduce is a dissatisfaction with the situation today (since the economic crisis of the 1990s, when the Soviet Union withdrew support) compared to the 1980s, when communism seemed to be functioning most effectively.

For dinner we go to an Italian restaurant that takes only moneda nacional rather than the tourist CUC. It's arctic in temperature (air-con is a status symbol) and I order cannelloni, much to the amusement of the Cubans. They opt for pizza - greasy little fried discs, but more edible than the ketchup-adorned slurry that shows up on my plate. My dinner cost 25 pesos (just over one euro); the state's stipend for students is 75 pesos a month.

Day 5 & 6 In the morning I go to the Museo de Bellas Artes to see how Cuban art is exhibited. It's a beautiful modernist building from the 1950s and covers colonial art (on the top floor) to recent art (the 1990s). But all of the latter seems ideologically affirmative. Tania later tells me that the museum is run by the government who keep strict controls on the collection: Cuban art of the 1980s was highly oppositional, but none of this work is represented. The most important artists are on display, but the works selected are hardly expressive of their desire for change. Needless to say there were no postcards of the collection for sale in the museum tienda - only Che and Fidel emblazoned t-shirts, a handful of Havana Bienal catalogues, and film posters from the 1960s to the 1990s.

After lunch, I see more students' work. All of them make interventions in public space, but the most impressive is Jesus Hernández, who produces fictional television news reports in collaboration with professional journalists and cameramen, imperceptibly montaged with appropriated footage from TV. All the news stories relate to urban myths that circulated in Cuba but which were never officially reported, such as an epidemic of mumps attributed to unhealthy foreign tourists, or the '5 peso bus' designed to reduce overcrowding (tickets are usually 1 peso). The work is concise and witty, with a pithy understanding of the visual language of news media. It also exemplifies Tania's ideas about art being best when it also involves stepping outside visual art to impact upon other realms (here, into professional journalism).

With this in mind I begin the afternoon class by showing Phil Collins' *El Mundo No Escuchara* (2005), a karaoke for fans of The Smiths, which he produced in Bogotá. To my dismay it's torn apart for its colonialist imposition of Western music on Latin America; later I realise that Collins' work is primarily about media and mediation and as such has little resonance here, where the all-dominant regime of spectacle is far less present. The work of Artur Zmijewski receives a better response and is deemed more human and universal. Zmijewski is one of Tania's favourite artists and her aesthetic preferences are more or less followed by the student group. (Later, when I ask the students whether they are concerned that *Arte de Conducta* is producing a 'school' style, they ardently defend Tania, who doesn't show them her own work; they argue that any points of correspondence comes as a result of working closely with each other, sharing political preoccupations and context, rather than as a desire to emulate her art.)

In the evening I pursue Tania on her theory of art and usefulness. For her it's not about doing good, but about a conjunction of usefulness and illegality; art must be able to operate in a space outside art, as well as within it. We debate the status of *Arte de Conducta* as a work of art. My feeling is that everything will depend on how she documents five years of workshops - as a book, an exhibition, or through the students' own work. As a live project it's completely invigorating, but subsequent audiences need to be able to make sense of it.

Day 7 In the morning I go to the Museo de la Revolución, and peruse a series of highly ideological displays in the former Presidential Palace, converted to a museum in 1974. The exhibition is constructed as a singular narrative: Cuba's progress from colonisation (in the C18th) to the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, with the enemy as Western imperialism (Spanish and American), and the hero as Cuban national defiance and sense of justice. But there is no clear timeline or historical breakdown of events - the displays in each room, for example, can be read in any particular order - and this prevents critical analysis. You have no option but to give yourself over to the ideological refrain: the blood-stained clothing of 'martyrs', statistics that could refer to anything, photos of Cubans happily engaged in a 'deeply democratic' process.

My final seminar was low on numbers, but produced a helpful (to me at least) interrogation of *Arte de Conducta* as a pedagogic and artistic project. I was really impressed by the students' thoughtfulness and maturity. In London I taught on a curating course with a strong emphasis on collaboration, and I was always deflated by the overriding mood of competition and one-upmanship, and the students' tendency to treat visiting lecturers as an opportunity for networking. There was no sense of this in Havana: perhaps because there's no assessment on the course (which inevitably produces a looser relationship between staff and students), perhaps because communism produces better collaborators, perhaps because no amount of networking will get you a passport to leave the island.

The working week ends with a fiesta in Tania's house, and I see *Arte de Conducta*'s de-hierchised structure in action: staff and students dance until the early hours, and sleep side by side overnight (although not with each other: the only rule of *Arte de Conducta*, Tania informs me, is no staff-student relationships). In the morning we clean the house and head out early to the beach for Sislej Xhafa's workshop.

Afterthoughts: The intensity and intellectual freedom of *Arte de Conducta* is something I would wish to emulate: to be able make full use of the city as the context and content of your teaching, to import the lecturers you admire or wish to debate with, to focus on artistic/intellectual formation without bureaucracy, assessment or administration. Officially Tania accepts eight students per year, including one from art history who helps to 'document' the course by reporting on the workshops (and who is also forced to make art, in order to write from an informed perspective!); in reality, however, the workshops are open and many former students continue to participate after their two years is finished. This provides a fluidity between year groups and disciplines, and a sense of everyone developing their practice in tandem. There is no form-filling, tutorial forms, or 'personal development plans' to instill professionalism and market savvy.

But could this type of self-initiated educational project ever exist in the West? In its almost complete freedom from institutional interference, this kind of project carries forward the utopian spirit of Joseph Beuys, who accepted onto his course at Düsseldorf Kunstakademie everyone who applied to him. But it would be a mistake to idealise the situation. This freedom is perhaps only possible because bureaucracy in Cuba invades all other parts of life (food, bills, one's movement around and beyond the island) and leaves education relatively uncluttered; in the West, by contrast, the opposite is perhaps the case: our free time is deregulated but work is excessively bureaucratized. After all, there is no education in the UK without assessment, quality assurance, the Research Assessment Exercise, and crippling fees that increasingly turn students into consumers.

Arte de Conducta is also possible in Cuba because of Tania Bruguera's ability to slip between three economies: the US economy in which she works (at the University of Chicago), the Cuban tourist economy and the moneda nacional. Such a loophole can only be temporary but in the meantime it permits an inspired manipulation of an repressive situation for the benefit of a new generation of artists. As such it provides a paradigm for the kind of art Bruguera is encouraging in Havana: a work that devises novel responses to political restriction and duress, that exploits opportunities for collective imagination, that resists appropriation by the market, and that operates on the sly borderline of usefulness and illegality.