

TANIA BRUGUERA: POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

A survey of the Cuban artist's installations and performances brings together her responses to various social and political depredations, particularly those of her homeland.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

FOR THE OPENING on Jan. 28 of "Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary," the normally sedate galleries of the Neuberger Museum were transformed by light, sound, smell and live performance. The atmosphere was carnivalesque—the strong aroma of sugarcane mingled with a milder one of tea, while the faint sounds of men marching and guns being cocked drifted forward from a distant room. A performer personifying an African Nkisi Nkonde figure,

wearing a mud-covered costume studded with nails, moved slowly around the entryway as crowds poured into the show through two paths. You could wind through a warren of installation and performance areas that alternated between bright, even blinding, light and unsettling darkness, or pass through a central corridor lined with teabags (whence the smell) to a large room at the back. Here actors wearing little or no clothing appeared between two staging areas with open mikes, from which audience members could address the assembled visitors.

Going back the next day was a quieter but no less intense experience. Now a visitor could linger alone or nearly so in the installation rooms and experience their intended psychological impact. A surprising number of the performers from the night before were there, some enacting repetitive gestures as integral parts of larger environments and others appearing for scheduled reenactments of stand-alone events. Several questions posed by the show became clear: How does one restage and re-present site-specific performance and installation works—the most ephemeral of genres—in the framework of a larger monographic survey? What happens to the meanings of works tied to particular sets of circumstances when venues and contexts change? Is it possible for them to be anything other than pale substitutes for the originals? As performance art becomes historicized, these questions grow increasingly urgent, arising as well in connection with reenactments in recent years of classic works like Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, Hermann Nitsch's *Orgy Mystery Theater* and Marina Abramović's re-creation of others' performances as well as her own (including those presented in her current MoMA retrospective).

This exhibition marks Bruguera's selection as the first winner of the Roy R. Neuberger Exhibition Prize for an "early career survey." To be given biennially, the award includes an exhibition at the museum and a monograph on the artist. It would be hard to imagine a more challenging initial recipient. Born in Cuba in 1968, Bruguera still maintains a residence there, though since 1998 she has divided her time between Havana, Chicago and Paris. She first became known to the larger art world through various installments of the Havana Biennial, in which her politically charged performances tended to be curtailed or shut down altogether. More recently she has been appearing else-



Opposite, Tania Bruguera's original performance of *Displacement*, 1998-99, Cuban earth, glue, wood, nails and fabric; in Havana.

Above, performer reenacting *Displacement* at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, N.Y. Photo Jim Frank.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary" at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, N.Y., through Apr. 11.





THE BURDEN OF GUILT GREW OUT OF A STORY OF COLLECTIVE SUICIDE BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLES UNDER OCCUPATION WHO, LEGEND HAS IT, ATE DIRT UNTIL THEY DIED.

where on the international circuit. She continues to mix performance and installation in ways that place audiences in uncomfortable situations and raise thorny political questions. Much of her work concerns freedom of expression, a potent topic in contemporary Cuba. She also touches on the endless cycle of war, the personal and social cost of oppression, and the political efficacy of art.

NOT ALL OF BRUGUERA'S well-known projects are represented in this show. A 2008 intervention at Tate Modern in which uniformed policemen on horseback herded visitors into the center of the Turbine Hall depended on its audience's innocence of the fact that the action was an artwork. A 2009 performance in Bogotá included the offer of free cocaine to onlookers, and another at the 2009 Venice Biennale involved a game of Russian roulette with a gun said to be loaded. None of these could be reenacted at the Neuberger, a museum of moderate size on a college campus. Nor could Bruguera re-create her intervention at a 2009 art history conference in Chicago, where she turned over her speaking spot to ex-Weathermen Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn while planting hecklers in the audience; in addition to depending, again, on the audience's innocence, this piece was too tied to a particular moment (the then-recent presidential campaign) to be successfully reprised. In such cases, standard practice would be to exhibit video documentation, but the artist generally resists presenting her works in this way, believing it diminishes their experiential nature. Hence the decision by curator Helaine Posner to organize the show as a series of reinstallations and reenactments.

Among the works included are several from Bruguera's early days, when, inspired in part by her compatriot Ana Mendieta, she undertook actions that involved a degree of physical endurance and pain. One of her best known performances is reenacted daily. *The Burden of Guilt*, first performed at the 1997 Havana Biennial, grew out of the colonial history of Cuba, in particular a story of a collective suicide by indigenous peoples under Spanish occupation who, legend has it, ate dirt until they died. In an homage that also represented an act of solidarity with contemporary Cuban dis-

sidents, Bruguera appeared before an audience nude but for a skinned lamb carcass tied around her body and spent several hours ritualistically mixing dirt with salt water and ingesting it. At the Neuberger, a roughly 45-minute version of the piece is reenacted daily by a female performer (although it is not clear that she actually consumes the mixture). A second work from this period that is reenacted daily

Opposite, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, 2008, mounted police, crowd control techniques and audience members; at Tate Modern, London. Collection Tate, London.

Top right, Bruguera performing *The Burden of Guilt*, 1997-99, decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt and Cuban soil.

Bottom right, performer reenacting *The Burden of Guilt* at the Neuberger. Photo Jim Frank.



is *Studio Study*, originally staged at the Centro Wifredo Lam in Havana in 1996. In this largely static work, a naked performer—originally the artist—stands on a high pedestal. She is pinned to the wall by several metal restraints lined with raw cotton, and holds a piece of uncooked meat in her hands.

Even in a museum setting, the viewer's proximity to these performers is a bit unnerving. But to fully appreciate their enactments of victimhood, one must cast one's mind back to their original contexts, in which they were tied to the political repressions of Cuba. By the time she presented *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* at the 2000 Havana Biennial—it is also reenacted at the Neuberger—Bruguera's work had changed. Removing herself personally, she put the focus more directly on her audience. One of the most effective works in the Neu-

berger show, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* occupies a very dark, long corridor whose floor is covered thickly with smashed sugarcane, making for fairly precarious footing. The pungent smell is almost overwhelming. Visitors are drawn forward by light at the far end that turns out to be a small overhead video screen displaying scenes of Castro giving speeches and being embraced by supporters. Only gradually does the sound of subtle scratching become apparent. Adjusting to the deep gloom, you realize that naked men on the sidelines are performing repetitive movements. Their unexpected presence powerfully animates the space: no longer a quiet womb, it is now a place one shares with shadowy figures whose purposes are obscure. There is a sense of being trapped, possibly endangered. It is hard to remain there long.



When originally performed, in what was once a penitentiary cell in a military fortress, this piece was seen as a critique of the restrictive nature of Cuban life; officials closed it after a single day. At the Neuberger, the installation is positioned near others that first appeared outside Cuba. *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, Bruguera's contribution to Documenta 11, also delivers a powerful punch. One enters a room that is alternately completely dark and quiet, and blasted with illumination by a row of floodlights. In the momentary, blinding light, you hear more than see a live figure marching along a balcony with heavy steps, and rifles being cocked. Then the room goes dark and all is silent again until the next flash. Like *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, the Kassel piece is



Opposite, view of *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, 2000, Cuban performers, milled sugarcane, black-and-white monitor and DVD; at the 7th Havana Biennial.

Above right, Bruguera performing *Studio Study*, 1996, pedestal, metal, iron, cotton and raw meat.



deeply unsettling—the viewer has a sense of being at the mercy of unseen forces, and the room itself, with its floodlights, marchers and guns, evokes conditions of surveillance, interrogation and incarceration.

On opening night, the impact of this work was somewhat diminished by a line of people waiting to enter the small room beside it that houses *Untitled (Moscow, 2007)* or *Trust Workshop*. Entry to this work, originally produced for the 2007 Moscow Biennale, is restricted to groups of two or three. Inside, visitors encounter a ramshackle room containing dilapidated furniture; piles of plaster flaking from the wall; a photograph of a military man who turns out to be Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police; a live eagle; two monkeys (in Moscow, they were dressed in children's clothing); and a photographer. The act of trust to which the title refers is the willingness to let one of the creatures sit on your shoulder while a picture is taken. In Moscow, the animals were meant to represent imperial authority and capitalism. At the Neuberger (where local law kept the monkeys caged, so the photos were with the eagle),

the work was more about a willingness to share one's space with a wild thing. The animals were present only during the opening, when you could either enter the room or watch the activity through a partially obscured window. The next day, the room was open and strewn with the pictures taken the evening before.

The museum's central corridor contains *Poetic Justice*, which



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In the Cuban context, this was a remarkable chance to practice the otherwise forbidden act of free speech, and people availed themselves of it, talking passionately of everything from women's rights and poverty in Cuba to curtailment of open expression and the dream of world peace—this despite the very real danger that speakers might be stopped and detained by the authorities. At the opening of the Neuberger show, the mike was also open, but went mostly unused, a telling comment on the atrophy of certain kinds of expression when they are so readily available. During the rest of the show's run, a video camera pointed at the stage played subtitled documentation of the Cuban performance in its viewfinder, providing some sense of the urgency of the original speakers.

Going through the show afforded clarification of what is lost in immediacy and political significance when site-specific works of this sort are re-created. But it became equally clear that something is gained, too, by bringing together so many of these reenactments and reinstallations. The exhibition offers a first look at the breadth of Bruguera's practice, and the multiple ways that she

was first created during Bruguera's four-week residency in India in 2002-03 and is essentially a warmly inviting passageway, its teabag-lined walls dotted with tiny videos whose subjects are difficult to make out. Adjoining the corridor is the final room-size installation, *Untitled (Palestine, 2009)*. On the walls of this well-lit, white, apparently empty room, you discover, with some difficulty, bits of a tiny hand-penned text that describes Bruguera's dream of a single state peacefully governed by both Israelis and Palestinians. (This work was created for the Neuberger.)

CONTRASTING WITH THE INTIMACY of the installation spaces is a large open gallery at the back of the museum, where the scheduled performances of *Studio Study* and *The Burden of Guilt* take place. Also in this gallery is the show's single work that is somewhat conventionally sculptural: *Table of Salvation* (1994). An homage to those who have perished attempting to flee Cuba by boat, it consists of slabs of polished black marble joined by seams of raw cotton; wooden ribs, like those bracing a ship's hull, protrude from the marble. This room also contained the residue of *Tatlin's Whisper, #6 (Havana Version)*, 2009, Bruguera's much discussed contribution to last year's Havana Biennial. As presented at the Neuberger, it comprises a platform supporting a podium and a mike; the wall behind is draped in gold cloth. In its original incarnation, the work offered audience members an opportunity to come forward and speak their minds for one minute each. A pair of actors in military fatigues stood beside the speaker and placed a dove on his or her shoulder (a reference to the dove that landed on Castro's shoulder during his first post-revolution speech in 1959). When the minute was up the dove was removed and the speaker was hustled off the stage.

Above left, *Untitled (Moscow, 2007)* or *Trust Workshop, 2007*, showing participant with monkeys and photograph of Felix Dzerzhinsky on wall; at the 2nd Moscow Biennale.

Exhibition view of *Poetic Justice, 2002-03*, used tea bags, eight videos of historic newsreels; at the Neuberger. La Gaia Collection, Italy. Photo Jim Frank.

"Tania Bruguera: The Political Imaginary," organized by Helaine Posner, is at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, Purchase [through Apr. 11]. It is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Posner, Gerardo Mosquera and Carrie Lambert-Beatty.

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confronts and challenges her audiences. At the exhibition's opening press conference, Bruguera noted that in Cuba, the official position is that all art is political—though the parameters of those politics are set by the prescribed Cuban Marxism. Hence the challenge for an artist is to find ways to use the rhetoric of art, and of politics, to expose the cracks in the official ideology. This may be why Bruguera's performance style is more confrontational than the approaches most common outside the region. Elsewhere in Latin America, economic instability and political dysfunction have bred equally assertive work by artists like Guatemalan performer Regina José Galindo and Mexican installation artist Teresa Margolles.

In perceptive catalogue essays, both Gerardo Mosquera and Carrie Lambert-Beatty distinguish Bruguera's work from the prevailing vogue for relational esthetics, in which it sometimes seems that mere interaction is a sufficient goal. Bruguera seeks to unsettle viewers, to force them to make ethical choices and to acknowledge their place in the prevailing order. It is a way of working that highlights the differences between life in a controlled and in a more or less free society. This is particularly clear

from the two states of *Tatlin's Whisper (Havana)* on view in this show. Due in part to the international marketing of Cuban art in recent years (in some ways a measure of the success of the Havana Biennial), art offers some (scant) protection to those residents wishing to protest social and political conditions. In the U.S., free speech is not dangerous, but it often seems ineffectual. Politically active artists often wonder if anyone is listening.

Bruguera's show arrives in the midst of an embarrassment of riches with respect to performance art in New York City (from which the Neuberger is less than an hour away). Following a season of *Performa*, Bruguera's exhibition opened the same day as Tino Sehgal's resolutely dematerialized performance exhibition at the Guggenheim and a few weeks before Marina Abramović's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Are we witnessing a sea change, or at least a slight shift in the atmosphere? While the art market charges forward even in the depths of the recession, and Jeff Koons installs Dakis Joannou's holdings in the New Museum [Mar. 3-June 6], these other exhibitions point to a swelling interest in art that is about connection rather than collection. ○

