

# Artist Tania Bruguera Gathers Postcards for the Pope

BY ASHTON COOPER | OCTOBER 21, 2014



Tania Bruguera and postcards from "The Francis Effect."

(Photo: Kristopher McKay / © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.)

Havana-born, New York-based artist [Tania Bruguera](#) has often addressed subjects surrounding immigration in her work, but a new project confronts the issue of undocumented immigrants by appealing directly to the pope. "The Francis Effect," which debuted at the Guggenheim Museum earlier this year as part of "Under the Same Sun" and is now on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, is a project that consists of gathering thousands of signed postcards that plead with Pope Francis to make Vatican City a refuge for undocumented immigrants. We talked with Bruguera via email about making art in a public space, gathering signatures in Dallas, and Vatican law.

**You are currently working on "The Francis Effect," a project about immigration for which you are gathering signed postcards to send to Pope Francis to request that he "grant citizenship to undocumented immigrants." What inspired you to draw attention to this issue in this particular way? Why postcards?**

"The Francis Effect" emerged in a two-fold manner in diverse forms through a collaborative-based organizational process. While the central idea and much of the performance realization springs from a single artist — [Tania Bruguera](#) — its realization is the product of much collective discussion. The following responses thus move between the singular and plural voice.

Responding to the question of how to address immigration policy through a performative practice engaged in the politics of individual efficacy, I was approached by three different national arts organizations to participate in an exhibition (Santa Monica Museum of Art), to provide a culminating project as a recipient of the Meadows Prize (Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University), and to create a performance work for a new global initiative (the Guggenheim UBS Global Art Initiative).

The concept for “The Francis Effect” is an extension of my recent long-term project “Immigrant Movement International,” that also allows for the articulation of other rituals by which politics are enacted in public space, specifically herein as embodied in the public persona of the Pope Francis. Focusing on combating a “culture of indifference” including particular outreach to immigrants, “The Francis Effect” appeals to the pope to exercise his power as a political leader while turning a collective act of petition — in the form of nearly 15,000 signed posted cards — into a durational form of performance. The postcard features the graphic of the Pangea super-continent symbolizing a world that was and could again be one, and the statement “Dignity Has No Nationality.”

**So far you have more than 12,000 signatures. You collected them outside the Guggenheim as part of “Under the Same Sun” and you will collect them this month in Dallas as part of a project with SMU’s Meadows School of the Arts and at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. What types of reactions has the project provoked? How have people in New York reacted differently than people in Dallas or elsewhere?**

The New York performance generated a large amount of international response as the Italian Futurism show was also on view as well as their European 20th-century art collection. In general, visitors either spent time considering whether an act of politics could be an artwork or communicating their views on immigration. In taking place on a public sidewalk just outside the front door of the Guggenheim, I was interested that the museum was not a destination where a work of art could be seen, but rather a site for temporary pedagogical pause. I am interested in the potential for art to change subjectivities. Once a member of the public understood why as an artist I was asking for their support in writing to the pope, many fascinating conversations emerged.

At the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the work has been presented within the gallery space where the public can sign the petition in the context of the exhibition “Citizen Culture,” which features the work of other artists, architects, designers, creative thinkers, and collectives who have reshaped public policy using aesthetic strategies. In Dallas, the work was activated at Cathedral de Guadalupe, a huge Catholic church with 10,000 people attending Sunday mass. Many of the parishioners signed but the priest had a problem with the project because it was art and he thought that it wasn’t “real world” enough. On the other hand, when we approached a group that administers a park that sometimes commissions public art performances, their problem was that the project was too “real” and didn’t resemble art enough.

All things considered, we had a huge response, gathering almost 1,000 signatures in two days in Dallas. The numbers continue to grow in Santa Monica as well. These opposing reactions and ability of the work to relocate itself in diverse conditions/contexts reveals the provocative tensions and potentialities that are possible within a performative political art.

**As part of your ongoing “Francis Effect” project, people can also sign an online petition on the website Dignity Has No Nationality. How many people have signed that petition so far?**

Surprisingly in this day and age of viral social media and flash mob culture, the majority of supporters have been in person with about 12,000 postcards signed onsite and some 2,000 supporters online.

**You are also hoping to meet with Pope Francis in person. What do you hope will come out of that conversation?**

Obtaining a meeting with the pope will complete the project. My goal is that through this meeting, he acknowledges my artwork as aligned with his public agenda. I hope we discuss our shared concerns for social justice.

**Does it seem likely that Pope Francis would agree to grant that citizenship? Is there a historical precedent for such an event?**

The legal question is quite complex. Vatican State is a micro-nation with some of the oldest, most complex and even strange legislation still in operation. It is a test case for how lawmaking functions as a historical discursive structure that responds to the present conditions, and shifts and changes according to the needs of citizens. In the case of Vatican law, the pope does have the power to extend citizenship to undocumented migrants throughout the world. If he does, I think it would be a groundbreaking event.

<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1057805/artist-tania-bruguera-gathers-postcards-for-the->

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