



photo by Gaia Cambiaggi

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There is always something physical about an encounter with Tania Bruguera. Whether inside a room or out on the street, there is always something absolutely corporal about the presence of this Cuban artist born in Havana in 1968, something absorbing about the way her tiny gestures draw you into a heady mix of demanding activity. It is her hearty laugh, her firm handshake, the clear, direct look in her eyes, and the gracious way she expresses herself in both song and dance, before carefully regaining her composure in her everyday activities in the city. As an artist she has chosen to express herself through the language of performance which, as a discipline based on bodily narratives, fits her as neatly as a proverbial glove. But Tania rejects the spectacular side of performing or any reliance on forms of popular entertainment. She prefers to give voice to the political characteristics of contemporary society, unmasking the real workings of systems of power.

She has worked on issues like censorship and migration (Rostros corporales and Memoria della Postguerra); in her home in Havana, covered with a quartered lamb's belly she turns her back on a Cuban flag woven with human hairs. At Documenta 11 in Kassel she forced people to reflect on light as a means of control, making visitors walk along a corridor paved with stones, flooded with spotlights and surrounded with deafening noise, where the blinding atmosphere made it impossible to distinguish any sound except the constant rhythmic beat of a marching soldier and a cascade of bullets raining down onto the ground. At the 51st Venice Biennale her Poetic Justice again drew on the gloomy form of a corridor – this time paved with used tea bags, mixed together with eight small TV monitors – as a “socialist” environment of communication without freedom. Born and bred in that “landless space” on the island of Cuba, in that ghost city which has never been finished called Havana, Tania still lives in a state of tension between two worlds forcing her to question the limits of definitions and experiences as keys for the understanding of reality. Whereas her work has been displayed and approved internationally, thanks to her exhibitions and the prizes she has won – from the Guggenheim Museum in New York to the Biennials in San Paolo and Venice –, her extremely powerful theoretical work is less well known, despite working in three different worlds as Assistant Professor at Chicago University, Visiting Professor at the IUAV in Venice and a member of the teaching staff at the Havana Instituto Superior de Arte. Applying the same dogged determination she shows in every detail of her behaviour, it is in this Cuban art school that Tania Bruguera has set up and now runs the Catedra de Arte de Conducta or, in other words, the Art of Behaviour, which she describes as a theoretical and ethical re-foundation of the nature of performance, in an age which no longer draws any distinctions between performance and entertainment. Tania believes that art should be seen as a physical and psychological experience and thus acknowledges its cognitive power. This means that the study of behaviour lies behind a series of questions about the kind of society in which we live. A society in which our ways of relating to the environment provide the units of measure through which, as Foucault argued, power organises individuals. Taking her cue from an essay she published during her participation with Documenta, it might be said that for Tania the force of behaviour lies in becoming aware of power and hence of developing ways of “relating for or against” context. Teaching or studying the Art of Behaviour thus seems to be a form of silent revolution, linked to the conscience of the artist, the open nerve of society.