

the village

## VOICE

October 30, 2001 • Vol. XLVI No. 43

A Cuban Artist Embodies Isolation

## VERSE INTO VIDEO

**TANIA BRUGUERA**

Liebman Magnan Gallery  
552 West 24th Street  
Through November 17

Cuba and Manhattan are very different islands, yet their natives share the sense of isolation that comes from inhabiting a small piece of land surrounded by water. *La Isla en Peso (Island Burden)* is the title of this video installation by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, borrowed from Virgilio Piñera's 1943 poem, about a day of confusion, decay, and beauty in Havana and the countryside. Stumbling into Liebman Magnan Gallery during the chaotic weeks of September, viewers found themselves disoriented in a pitch-black room where the stubborn bleating of sheep added to a rising sense of panic. (Now gently illuminated, the room has lost some of its power.)

Moving hesitantly forward and turning a corner,

they are still greeted with eight video monitors. On each, slow-motion images of Bruguera performing visceral gestures of self-inflicted silencing alternate with fragments of Piñera's verse in Spanish. On one screen, her fingers pull her lips apart to reveal a sinister grimace. On another, her tongue moves through her mouth, distending it beyond recognition. Her hands clutch her forehead, arms and elbows akimbo, recalling the wild poses of Charcot's hysterics. Or one hand hoists her head up by the hair, pulls it back and down, like a victim of torture. Two screens facing one another show her with her eyes rolled back, making her resemble the mute busts of classical Greek sculpture.

Bruguera stole the show at the last Havana Bienal with an installation involving a darkened tunnel, rotting sugar cane, live performers, and video clips of Fidel. (Authorities, sensing something fishy, shut the piece down after just one day.) Inspired by Ana Mendieta's corporeal mysticism, her work often focuses on the limits of speech in a closed society. After the weeks we spent staring at television screens in a dazed stupor of grief, these images offer a very different reflection of an individual's great sorrow and growing alienation. —Leslie Camhi