

# Tempo

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## Cuban performance artist on a mission of cultural healing

By Lou Carlozo

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

**I**n a dark exhibit hall at The School of The Art Institute's Gallery 2, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera sat on the floor, dealing tarot cards onto a cardboard box by candlelight. As gallery guests huddled around her, Bruguera read their fortunes in hushed Spanish with the help of a cigar-chomping female interpreter.

A few paces away, a zombielike man carried boxes from one part of the room to another, as if preparing for a move. Behind him, two actresses posed as U.S. Customs agents, interrogating guests as though they were communist spies (some were prodded into singing the national anthem or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance while doing a headstand). And in the far corner opposite Bruguera, a hunched panhandler begged for

food and spare change, a mattress of cardboard spread at his feet.

With equal doses of dark humor and flickering hope, Bruguera's performance art piece "Art In America (The Dream)" explored the conceptual connections between Cuban emigres and Chicago's homeless.

"The homeless have no houses of their own, and the emigres have no real place of their own, either," Bruguera said. "Like the homeless, they have to preserve themselves, band themselves together."

In linking those two groups, Bruguera reveals the singular lens through which she has focused her creativity. "All of my work has emigration as a subject," she said. "One part of Cuba is the people who are not in Cuba anymore. I want to talk about that

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# Bruguera

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so that people do not forget."

Bruguera, a rising star in Cuba's art scene, would have had to make her point to American audiences from afar several years ago. But as a result of recent reforms by the Cuban government — which apparently got tired of training and promoting young artists, only to see them flee the island — creatives such as Bruguera are now getting the chance to take prolonged residencies away from home.

Bruguera arrived in Chicago in January as part of The School's Visiting Artists Program, and just returned to Cuba last week. It was her first extended stay in the United States, and her destination seemed a natural choice for several reasons.

To begin with, Bruguera's brand of performance art got its start in big-city America. Late-1970s pioneers developed the craft to convey a deeper truth through storytelling, whether through monologues or stage scenes that blurred the line between the fictional and factual. While they performed in front of live audiences in best theatrical tradition, performance artists also adopted the feminist dictum, "The personal is political."

For Bruguera, an artist coming of age in a communist regime, it can also be the other way around: The political is personal. Her intimate performances reveal not so much an agenda as a journal; audiences are invited not just to spectate, but participate.

In traveling to America, Bruguera also chose the destination of countless emigres before her. That is no coincidence: Her trip is a self-styled mission of cultural healing. In Bruguera's view, Cuban artists and their Cuban-American counterparts have much to learn from and give to each other. Both sides feel loss. And both form part of an archetypical Cuba not limited by national or political boundaries.

## Cuba's arts community

Cuba's official history would have it otherwise. After Fidel Castro's communists took over the island nation in 1959, emigres who left found themselves erased from the national memory.

Salsa artist Celia Cruz, who had a career in Cuba from 1940 to 1961 before emigrating to the U.S., does not appear in Cuban history books, just like dozens of others whose contributions are ignored.



Photo for the Tribune by Molly Winkelman

Performance artist Tania Bruguera in her installation that was patterned after life on lower Wacker Drive.

**'If she left [Cuba], she'd join the hundreds of artists who have more freedom, but don't have her vantage point.'**

Political science professor  
Maria de los Angeles Torres

"The government portrayed everyone who left as a traitor to the revolution," said Maria de los Angeles Torres, a political science professor at DePaul University who specializes in Cuban affairs. "When you leave, you leave forever and you don't quite know if you're going to be able to return, even for visits."

By the 1980s, both ends of Cuba's political spectrum paved the way for a mass exodus. Hardliners wanted the artists out; reformers wanted to give people more freedom to travel. "Most of the artists left for political reasons; my professor, my friends, my boyfriend," Bruguera recalled. "It left this big, empty gap for me."

Bruguera, 28, has dedicated her career to making sense of the broken lives, the diaspora of Cuba's creative community. "For someone her age to have that strong a vision and bridge generations of

Cuban art is amazing," said Valerie Cassel, director of The School's Visiting Artists Program. "Her work speaks to the same issues, but she comes at it from many different angles."

Bruguera has crafted clever pieces that fuse the worlds of sculpture, installations and performance art. In a nation where so many are consumed with leaving, Bruguera unveiled a series of fantasy flying machines two years ago under the title "Daedalus or the Empire of Salvation." One contraption was propelled by the same upward fist-thrusting a protester might make; another had a mast constructed from a palm tree, Cuba's national symbol.

"You use this movement that is like a palm tree, a kind of submissive bowing, to activate it," Bruguera explained.

## Extremely personal work

Bruguera has presented some of her works under the authorship of deceased Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, as if Mendieta were still alive and making art. And at one recent performance, Bruguera reclined with eyes shut in a broken, yellow boat for several hours, her way of embodying the term "boat people."

The boat was part of "El Viaje" ("The Voyage"), a 1994 work that is among Bruguera's most personal. The installation included a

pile of brown parcels, bundled to resemble the island of Cuba. Inside were Bruguera's papers, drawings, letters and clothes.

"I took all my personal things, all the objects that could be a memory of something, and I broke them," Bruguera recalled. "It's the same for people who have to leave Cuba. They have to break off everything. It's a lifetime decision."

To call her work protest art would be inaccurate and far too simplistic; Bruguera emphasizes that her goal is to provoke dialogue and thought, not a counter-revolution.

But for Bruguera to address emigration in a nation known for curtailing artistic freedom "is very controversial," Torres said. "There are obviously some very real constraints. You can get arrested, have your projects viewed as subversive. She's walking a very thin line."

Emigration "has always been a double-edged sword," Torres added. "In Cuba, most people authorized to study it are somehow linked with national security. There haven't been a lot of other people allowed to think about why people leave, what implications it has."

If the danger and risks are real, why wouldn't Bruguera go elsewhere, as countless Cuban artists did a decade ago? "There is a different point of view when you work from the island," Torres said. "If she left, she'd join the hundreds of artists who have more freedom, but don't have her vantage point."