



Portrait of Tania Bruguera

On The Political Imaginary

Tania Bruguera at Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York

by Edward Rubin

Performance artists have been enjoying a major resurgence in popularity around the world. Spearheading this renaissance are museums and biennales. And why not! Such one-of-a-kind theatrical events where anything can happen and usually does, is primo entertainment. Here in New York City and environs five major art museums recently played host to a tsunami of performance artists. The *Kiss and This Progress*, two of Tino Sehgal's live "constructed situations" with nary a painting in sight, occupied the Guggenheim's lobby and all of the museum's exhibition ramps. Another Sehgal piece, *This is Propaganda* (2002), part of Jeff Koon's curated *Skin Fruit* exhibition, played itself out at the

New Museum. At the Museum of Modern Art, four decades of Marina Abramović's work was performed, all except one piece by other people, at while the Whitney, during the run of their 2010 Biennial, some ten performance artists made their appearance, both live and on film.

Keeping up with the "big boys" the small but choice Neuberger Museum of Art, an hour outside of New York City, celebrated the career of Cuban born, Chicago based artist Tania Bruguera, by mounted her twenty year retrospective titled *On The Political Imaginary*. The politically provocative artist, known for pushing the envelope, often just short of being incarcerated –

in one of her performances in Columbia, a tray of cocaine was passed out to the audience – began her rise to prominence by channeling the "earth-body" works of Cuban born artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985). In *Burden of Guilt* (1997), arguably the artist's most powerful work, Bruguera, standing naked with a slaughtered lamb hanging from her neck, spent 45 minutes eating soil mixed with water and salt. Imitating the suicide-ritual that many of the island's natives practiced when faced with the threat of the Spanish conquistadores, the Havana audience, where it was first performed, were harrowingly reminded that freedom, liberty and self-determination are not abstract ideals but achievements that write their effects on our physical forms.

In this exhibition, under the watchful eye of curator Helaine Posner, the Neuberger, using Bruguera trained

performance artists, re-presented some eighteen of the artist's works, the most poignant being supported by intricately designed installations that threatened, frightened, lectured, educated, and entertained, albeit in a carnivalesque sideshow sort of way. Just inside the entrance to the museum a continually running film showed the artist performing *Displacement* (1998-99). Here, a mud-covered, nail-studded Bruguera, dressed as Nkisi Nkonde an African icon used for spiritual purposes, in Africa as well as Cuba, looking like some monster from a horror movie, is seen wandering through a crowded street in Cuba. Leading viewers directly into the main exhibition galleries is *Poetic Justice* (2002-2003), was a long, pungent smelling, teabag lined tunnel which referred to the economic and colonial relationship between the colonized and the master, in this case,



Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)*, 2009, performance



Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Havana)*, 2000, performance

India under the blood-sucking rule of the British Empire.

The most exciting part of the exhibition was the various gallery rooms that housed the artist's installations. In *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* and *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* – many of Bruguera's works are named after the city where they were first performed – blackness accentuates the artist's message. In Havana, we found ourselves in a darkened room walking on a dangerously uneven layer of rotting sugarcane husks. At the far end of the room, on a small, scarcely discernable TV screen, Castro is seen delivering one of his interminably long speeches. Hugging the walls of the room, four naked men, barely visible to the eye, stood imitating the empty gestures of their iconic leader. In Kassel, again we found ourselves in a dark room. Only this time, one moment we were immersed in total darkness, the next, blinded by blazing overhead lights. Punctuating both darkness and light was the sound of threatening footsteps and a gun being loaded and reloaded, interrogation tactics that could not help but command our full attention.

In *Untitled (Moscow, 2007)* and *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* Bruguera, changing her tactics, invited the viewer to be actors in her scenarios rather than passive participants. In Moscow, we were ushered into what appears to be a small photo lab, and asked to sit beneath a framed photograph of the founder of the Bolshevik secret police to have our picture taken. Sitters were given the choice of posing with a live eagle representing the power of the old establishment or a cage full of monkeys signifying the rise of capitalism in Russia. In *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, first performed in Cuba in 2009, citizens were escorted to the stage by individuals dressed in military fatigues and given a minute to talk about anything they wanted to say. Freedom of speech, blogs and the Internet, all censorship related, were the hot topics. Not surprisingly – how could it be



Tania Bruguera, *Burden of Guilt*, 1997, performance

otherwise in a democratic society long used to unbridled freedom – less than and handful, and this after much prompting, took to the stage at the Neuberger during the exhibition's opening, while in Cuba the Havana Biennale authorities shut down Bruguera's presentation after one

performance. If anything was amiss in this exhibition, it is that many of the works removed from their original of context were shorn of their ultimate power. Still, we did get more than a whiff of what life is like in countries where freedom of anything is not guaranteed.