

What lies behind

A text on the work of Tania Bruguera.

Dan Cameron (Oct-Dec 2000)

One of the most characteristic aspects of performance art, when compared to most other media, is its refusal to be transformed into a more easily sustainable medium. If we consider the so-called Golden Age of performance in the 1970s, it is hard not to be struck by the fact that most of these works were meant to be perishable and transitory. Even if they didn't always succeed in being so, today they seem much longer ago and further away than, say, the cardinal works of Pop Art, which hit its stride a full decade earlier. When photography and video were used to document performances, it was understood that these secondary media were, in fact, just that: imperfect substitutes for the real thing, which was nowhere to be found. While on a hypothetical level this romanticized aspect of the de-materialization of art became one of its more persuasive features, the experience of it for a generation of artists who studied performance and its attendant genres in universities and art schools was that it discouraged emerging artists from maintaining a reasonable hope of living from their artwork. Histories of art-making practices from approximately 1980 to 1995 have tended to downplay the impact of performance art on the movements that succeeded it, but one thread of continuity emerges from the effort to maintain performance art's air of visceral present-ness while avoiding its purism. From Cindy Sherman and Jeff Koons in the 1980s to Matthew Barney and Janine Antoni in the 1990s, performance was re-worked or re-situated in such a way that its temporal condition systematically leads to a once-removed state of relative permanence.

Tania Bruguera has worked in several different media over the past ten years, but performance remains her signature form, for reasons having as much to do with its impermanence as anything else. Although she shares this preference with a surprising number of other younger artists, the ways in which Bruguera defines her work relative to the brief history surrounding performance art is highly unusual. For many performance-oriented artists of her generation from different parts of the world - Antoni, Mariko Mori, Vanessa Beecroft or Elke Krystafek, to name a few - the positioning and framing of the camera's perspective in relation to their (or another's) body plays a fundamental role in the initial conception and development of the performance itself.

Coming at the end of a long tradition in which women's bodies were subjected to scrutiny over which they had very little control, this newly sophisticated attitude of reinforced authorship is a positive development, insofar as it reveals previously hidden possibilities of visual critique. Bruguera's attitude toward documenting her performances is, by contrast, relatively offhand, or at least cannot be said to rival or

eclipse the intensity experienced by a public viewing of the work in person. When viewing the documentation of Bruguera's performances, one is viscerally reminded of the distance, both actual and metaphorical, between our position and hers. Some aspects of the performance may remain intact or even attain greater visual emphasis than in their live state, but there is no attempt made to convince her viewers that documentation is an adequate substitute for the direct interaction between artist and audience. What is lost between the two states has been discarded intentionally.

In this regard, Bruguera reveals a close artistic kinship with such (predominantly) female pioneers of the performance genre as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Yoko Ono, Charlotte Moorman, Marina Abramovic and Ana Mendieta. In virtually all of these artists' work, the fundamental slippage between action and documentation is carefully maintained. This overlap in strategies between the 1960s and today is not attributable to any stated belief on Bruguera's part that a quest to produce the perfect performance artifact is overly anachronistic. Instead, it stems from the recognition that presenting an idea through performance invariably introduces the potential for such profound misreadings that strictly visual clarity may not be of any help in understanding the essence of the work itself. To the extent that the artist is a woman, and bases her investigation on the way the body has been released from the strictures of social convention and pushed into the arena of pure contemplation, it is transformed into a vehicle for a vast array of psychological and cultural projections, which no single artist can ever hope to tame. Rather than attempt to do so, Bruguera deftly incorporates this state of conditional powerlessness into the presentation/display of herself as an apparently objectified part of the social landscape.

An element of spectacle is nearly always present in Bruguera's performances, divided equally between principles of ritualistic sacrifice, ideological extremism and a form of homage to those artists who have paved the way for her own brand of experimentation. For years, Bruguera's work took the form of an ongoing tribute to the work of Ana Mendieta, whose premature and violent death not only robbed the world of a talent whose parameters have only been recognized in the two decades since, but also brought a belated recognition to the ways in which issues of exile and identity play themselves out in the work of Cuban artists formed during the revolutionary period. Although these Mendieta-inspired works fall conveniently into the aesthetic category of appropriation, Bruguera's approach took the opposite form of those 1980s artists who wished to associate themselves with the aftermath of the processes of photomechanical reproduction. Quite literally, Bruguera seemed to want to experience what it felt like to have (re)produced certain works of Mendieta, to occupy the place that the older artist's body occupied when certain of her most evocative works were created. In this sense, the body became a repository for an active memory, which did not merely retain the events of the past, but could also transmit them to a new generation of viewers, including herself. Through

Bruguera's efforts, Mendieta became, once again, a disruptive force in the canon of the late 20th century, an artist whose art could not be reduced to a set of abstract principles or cultural stereotypes.

Bruguera's construction of an idea of historical indebtedness in her work sets her apart from most artists of her age, especially to the degree that this consciousness is manifested through the act of memory. In her most recent work executed for the 7th Havana Biennale, Bruguera established the principle of a collective memory by assembling four individuals, each standing separate from the others, in a low, broad tunnel that grows darker as it extends into the distance. Each of the performers is naked, and each responds to his/her nakedness through the expression of seduction, disgust, arrogance or another, post-Edenic trauma. The viewer, entering the space, walks over a thick layer of fresh sugar cane leaves, which in the act of being trampled emit a strong honey-like aroma. More than halfway into the tunnel, a small video monitor is attached to the ceiling, facing downward. Silently, the monitor is playing an edited series of newsreel fragments showing Fidel Castro during the early years of the Cuban Revolution. The fragments have been selected to emphasize Castro's virility and masculine beauty, as well as the often erotic response manifested by his followers. Men embrace him, women touch his beard and face, and people in general seem to almost swoon at his feet, with a cumulative effect of transforming a political revolutionary into a figure who is both religious and sexual. By contrasting this image of a swaggering sex symbol with the obvious discomfort that her live performers feel at experiencing their own nakedness, Bruguera does much more than reveal an aspect of Castro's personal charisma that the purely rhetorical history of the Revolution has taken pains to suppress. She is actually depicting the Cuban people as victims of an elaborate cycle of seduction and abandonment. Unable or unwilling to step outside of his own radical narcissism, Castro becomes the agent of the fall from paradise that his subjects are now forced to endure.

Whether her performances feature herself or other actor/agents, Bruguera's work is consistent in its power to evoke the inscribing of memory on the body itself: its behavior, its needs, and its limits. She has often used her own body as an instrument for awakening collective memories that mix past with pleasure, as for example her stylized self-crucifixion at the 1997 Johannesburg Biennial. In this example, Bruguera is not as much interested in quantifiable, historical memory as in the more deeply imbedded memories that link us to the rest of nature. Burden of Guilt, her work for the 1999 SITE Santa Fe Biennial, evoked a more contemporary, literal form of sacrifice: the slaughter of animals to provide the needs of humans. In the video presented at different times), Bruguera laid the groundwork for the cultural and psychological complexities involved in identifying oneself with an animal that had just been sacrificed. Steadily examining a sheep's carcass, watching the blood run from its entrails, Bruguera seems to be focused on the moment when the animal is transformed from a creature into a thing. In her performance,

Bruguera slowly rubs tallow into her hands in an exculpatory trance, then ritualistically prostrates herself before the severed sheep's head, in a seeming attempt to forcibly merge her psyche with that of the beast. Although the work does not suggest anything as simplistic as a refusal to participate in the cycle of perpetual killing, it did call upon the collective memory of a primitive body between human and animal, in which the beast's sacrifice was first acknowledged by the one who was to benefit from its death. Because we as a civilization rely on a massive industrial infrastructure whose sole purpose is to conceal the reality of how countless millions of animals are bred under brutal conditions merely in order to be killed, we no longer have any direct relationship to these animals as fellow inhabitants of the earth. In Bruguera's performance, the death of a single fellow-creature is transformed into a kind of homage to the spirit of the animal, perhaps even a blessing or act of gratitude for having died so that we might live. If not precisely an expression of poetic justice, the work does act to make us conscious of the ways in which a collective fear of death, whether our own or others, has blinded us to the natural law by which the end of life is essential to the perpetuation of a natural order.

Returning to the previous discussion of critical and art-historical issues at play in Bruguera's work, it is worthwhile to note the extent to which her perception of the social role of artist is informed by a critical apparatus that rejects the entire definition of art as a parade of competing objects and images. Manifesting her belief that the artist's essential mission is to explore vital areas of consciousness that cannot be accessed any other way, she further asserts that the aspect of our identity that we have struggled most to suppress has been our animal natures. It is no accident that darkness is a key reference in many of Bruguera's performances, since it provides her with an important symbolic threshold between rational thought and the imagination run rampant. If, for Bruguera, performance invariably evokes the elemental experience that takes place when one person is face to face with another, it stands to reason that once this exchange reaches a point where it cannot be shared within a live context, a substitute may be sought to permit the viewer to imagine being present at the actual event. Such a conundrum reaches to the depth of Bruguera's artistic project, if only because it encapsulates some of the issues that arise when the object, which has defined the basis for the artist/spectator exchange, is removed from the equation.

Despite the fact that artists have been ridding themselves of the object for more than a generation, many of the developments attached to that process in the intervening years have been primarily technical in nature, and do not really address art's more underlying meanings. Whether or not Bruguera chooses to augment her working process in such a way as to make a transfer of the integrity of performance into other forms a priority, it will no doubt remain true that her art attempts to galvanize areas of the human psyche that most artists have long ago abandoned. At the current moment of uncertainty regarding the continuation of many artistic

preoccupations of the 20th century, it is a relief to recognize that the artistic exploration of the most archetypal fears and symbols of the human psyche will still, thanks in part to Bruguera, play a vital role at the beginning of the 21st.