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New show: Nudity, guns and blind docents

A controversial new show by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera

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Local art lovers may find the latest exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase a little unsettling. There will be blind docents, nudity, and a projection of the names of sites where political massacres have occurred, all from a controversial Cuban performance and installation artist who once offered her audiences cocaine as part of a piece dealing with the history and politics of Colombia.

"Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary," which opens tonight with an artist's reception and runs through April 11, is definitely challenging. Bruguera's hallmark is her use of performance art as a tool of political commentary and critique. Rather than being simply a static viewer of her work, visitors become participants.

The event, curated by Helaine Posner, the Neuberger's chief curator, includes six recreations of installations and re-enactments of presentations Bruguera has already done throughout the world; additionally, she created Survey 2010 for the Neuberger.

"It seems museums want to create 'safe' experiences for audiences. But I'm more into provocation and instability," said Bruguera, who was born in Cuba, and is a faculty member at the University of Chicago. "Here, I reinterpret in unsettling performances unease (the sound of guns being loaded and unloaded)... vulnerability (nudity)... because I think this will expand people's minds.

"It's a mistake to condescend to an audience and always try to be 'safe'... Once you've entered the show, you've made a decision. People have a way in, through the wall text...."

Visitors will get a visceral impact from her work. In Untitled (Havana) 2000, you literally walk over layers of sugarcane husks in a cave-like tunnel (it recreates a similar tunnel at La Fortaleza de la Cabana). The footing may be sure, but look up, and on a television screen are speeches by Fidel Castro. If you're off-balance now, the four naked men gesturing toward the screen will make you even more so.

In Survey 2010, which Bruguera created for the Neuberger, two blind docents lead tours through the museum. According to Bruguera, "I wanted docents who were blind. I wanted them to escort visitors through the exhibition and discuss the meaning of my work because they can promote an alternate understanding of

'visual art' — art that goes beyond the optical to a more complex multi-sensory understanding of the material."

Here are descriptions of some of the other works at the Neuberger:

Untitled (Kassel, 2002): The original performance was held in Kassel, Germany, the site of a large ammunition factory during World War II. Strung on a trestle above the entrance were blazing 750-watt lights, which, when switched off, plunge visitors into blackness. Only then do they realize the sounds they hear are of a person loading and reloading a gun. A projection displays the names of sites where political massacres have occurred since the end of World War II. This recreation is meant to be unsettling and provocative.

"The Burden of Guilt": This work is a reference to a Cuban legend about how the island's people committed collective suicide as an act of resistance against the conquering Spaniards centuries ago. In the legend, the native population ate dirt until they died. Here, the performance artist dons a lamb carcass, mixes dirt with water and salt and eats it.

"These are visceral metaphorical works," Bruguera said. "Usually curators like my work, but there are so many rules about the audience!"

Unless you happen to be at the Neuberger any time soon; then all bets are off.