



Giordano Bruno's Process, installation at MLAC, 2007

## To have done with aesthetic judgements Life, useful art, civil society and the diasporic gaze

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Some elements are constant in Tania Bruguera's work and it has perhaps been in the last few years that they have found a more explicit systematization. At first sight, the constant tension towards the escape from expectations and definitions that weigh upon the context of contemporary art is perhaps the most evident of these elements. When Tania was still a young artist, living and working in Havana, she didn't produce objects but rather she constructed "situations"<sup>1</sup>. When the wave of attention towards Cuba and its biennial unexpectedly gained her recognition as a performer, she left the re-staging of Ana Mendieta's performances to dedicate herself to an editorial project: the journal 'Memoria de la Postguerra'<sup>2</sup>. The trauma of the journal being censored and closed, after the second edition (1994), was followed by a series of "performances", in which the body was abandoned (because she herself didn't want to become an icon) and which had the appearance of installations. *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* is one example, realized in the Morro Cabaña during the seventh biennial of Havana (2000). The spectator entered into a space prepared by the artist and found themselves participating in certain events (or, as Tania would now say, more explicitly, having an experience): the macerating of sugarcane, naked people cleaning themselves, in complete darkness, with Fidel Castro speaking from a television.

The same mechanism was used in *Autobiografía*, presented at the eighth Biennial in 2003, in the form of a sound installation. During which the spectators found themselves being engulfed by slogans of the Cuban Revolution, diffused at a high volume by two loudspeakers. A CD version of this work, where the slogans are mixed as a disco beat instead of the density of the installation, has been produced under the collective name Las Chanquetas Vanguardistas.

It could be possible to speak of "staging" or "enacting" in regards to her latest works, but ignoring the theatrical side of this definition and focusing instead on

the side pre-eminently tied to the experience of the audience. Tania puts the observer in a situation of having to live an event, and often having to react and take part, as opposed to passively observing. An example of this is *Tatlin Whisper #5*, presented in 2008 at the Tate Modern, London. Here the public, even if it was an art public gathered in a museum space and therefore aware of participating in a performance, found themselves in front of two policemen on horseback that gave out, often incongruent, orders. Putting the public in a condition of being subjected to the authority of power for its own sake, to feel the tension and continuous fear, even if recognizing its uselessness: these are the rules laid down by Tania Bruguera. Subtracting itself from the spectacularization of the artistic act and subverting the grammar of the format of "performance", the artist orchestrated the experience and reactions of the public, and placed them at the centre of the work.

In an attempt to redraw the boundaries of performance, from 2002 to 2007 Tania Bruguera initiated and concluded an educational project in Cuba (*Cátedra Arte de Conducta*), which took place as a postgraduate course for artists. Officially recognized by the Cuban university system, as it formed part of the courses registered at the ISA, Instituto Superior de Arte of Havana, the *Cátedra* was at the same time an organization completely independent from the Cuban institutions, because it was realized by the artist at her studio and self financed with some support of some international cultural institutions. In the sphere of this school, which worked by inviting international and Cuban lecturers (artists, critics, curators, philosophers, poets, activists), a generation of young artists was formed and matured, using the language of contemporary art, focusing on local reality and developing a personal political thinking.

In recent years the artist has also began a campaign of ideas, *Giordano Bruno for Saint*, involving students, philosophers and researchers on the theme of laicism and the abuse of power by ecclesiastical institutions. She then began the process of forming a political party<sup>3</sup>, she taught "useful art" at Venice's IUAV and organized "conferences" or lectures, during which the public found themselves living, at first hand, extreme experiences and not – as they would have expected – following the academic presentation of an artist on her work.

The escape from the format of the artwork and from expectations is confirmed by Tania herself; declaring that from a very young age she has constantly worked trying to get away from the notion of the "artist who produces objects". Searching, instead, to assume the role of an individual that tries to carry out research and present a "vision of the world from within the context of art".

To understand her work it is not therefore necessary to dwell upon the distinction



**¡No retrocederemos!**  
dijo Fidel en el acto homenaje al Señor de la Vanguardia y afirmó  
**¡EN EL PUEBLO HAY MUCHOS CAMILO!**

Nuestro pueblo estuvo, está y estará  
dispuesto a luchar y morir  
**POR SUS PRINCIPIOS**

**¡BASTA DE MANIPULACIÓN!**  
**NADIE**  
**SE RENDIRÁ**

**¡Cuba va!**  
**RESISTIREMOS**  
**COMANDANTE**

**¡No nos detendrán las agresiones!**  
**¡VEREMOS QUIÉN SE CANSA PRIMERO!**



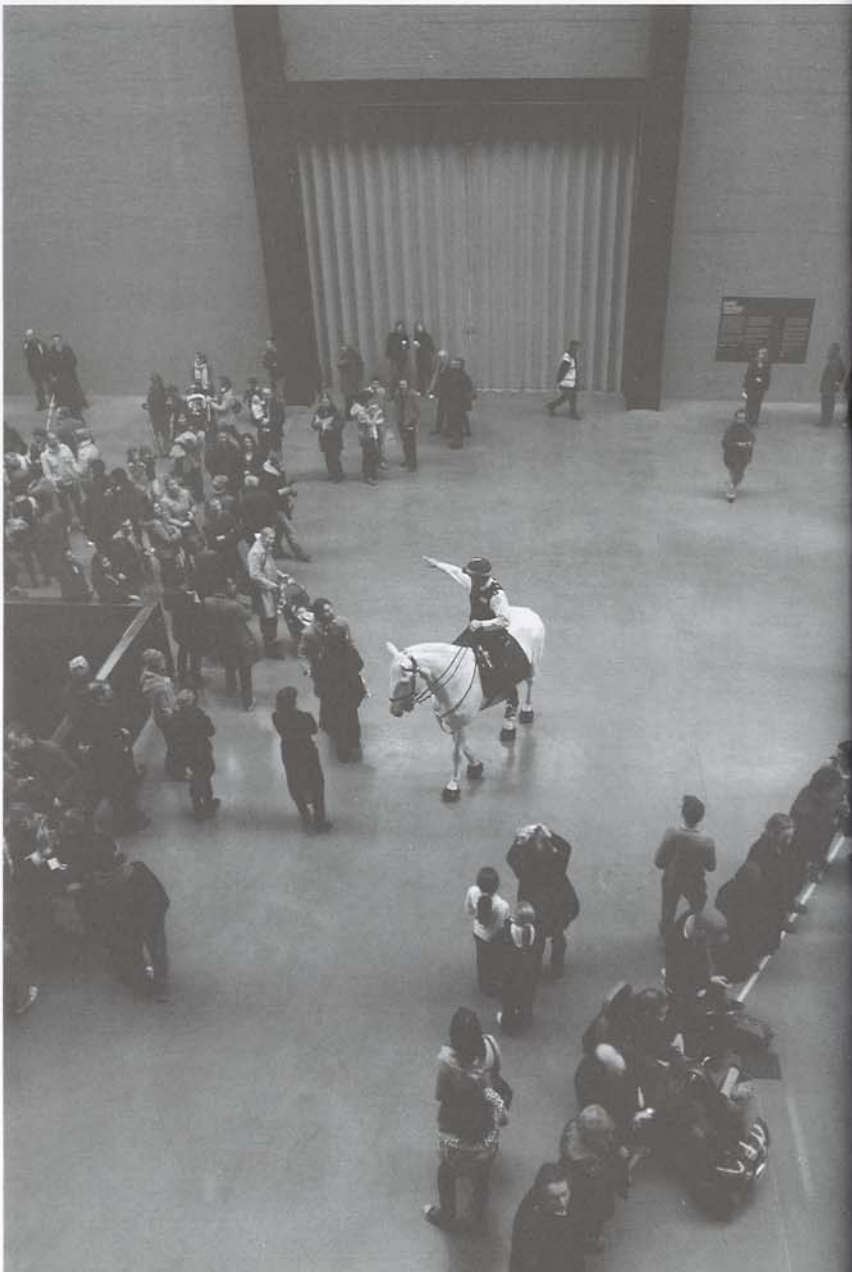
**REVOLUCIÓN**  
es la razón que tiene el pueblo  
para vivir con dignidad

**¡CUBA NI SE RINDE NI SE VENDE!**

Con el mismo derecho que estados unidos se atribuye la doctrina Monroe nosotros proclamamos la doctrina de la libertad, dijo fidel en una comparecencia en la TV nacional  
HOY 20. 1960.

*Memoria de la Postguerra III, 2003*





*Tatlin's Whispers #5, 2008*

between performances and installations, that she describes as being “simply resources to use, to express oneself, provoke or communicate. Pre-existing instruments.” The real crux is instead the relationship that exists between art and life.

In this way, an element that can be found in various forms in all her works comes into play: experience. The life that Tania continually refers to in her works and during her interviews is the experience of the spectator, acting, reacting, behaving, moving and fearing. All the works mentioned up until now have this factor in common, the desire to move the spectator and make them experience a moment of existence.

On a formal level Tania makes constant references to certain examples that contributed to the construction of her artistic path: not the performances of Ana Mendieta, as it would be obvious to think, but some experiences of Cuban art of the Eighties. Experiences tied to the concept of Happenings and to the materialization of the statute of the artist/author: “The element that captured and drew me in is that you couldn’t understand if it was art or not” she underlines. The subjects of this discussion are the collectives and groups like Arte Calle or Grupo Provisional that operated in the Cuban capital during the Eighties, on whom the critic and art historian Gerardo Mosquera, friend and backer of Tania, has worked extensively. Making reference to these base examples, Tania often describes her performances of the Nineties, which made her popular, as a “failed period”. These, in contrast to the Happenings during which it was hard to distinguish between art and life, were works whose aesthetic was far too easily seen as artistic and left no



margin of doubt that they belonged to the context of art as opposed to reality.

It should be underlined that the tension towards the discussion and dissolution of formats and aesthetics is at the same time the result of the artist's research within her community of reference, the world of Art, and it is never in opposition. Tania accepts contemporary art and its rules, despite recognizing its limits and the pitfalls, maintaining that these rules change and evolve when artists decide. If on one side there is the risk that art perpetuates itself as a language that is a practice with which artists continue to relate without confronting reality, at the same time an artwork cannot but be a form of dialogue with the evolutions of a pre-existing and shared language within the community. "It is impossible to think otherwise". To reconcile the tension towards reality, it is enough to introduce oneself politically into this discourse, in this way giving rise to a political space.

According to Tania Bruguera, the limit of the world of art is when an artist focuses themselves on a language that has no practical evolution: "If I see an artwork and I think that the artist has found the perfect solution, I ask myself: why are they doing it? What is their objective? When the objective is some kind of self-congratulation or self-reflection on art it does not satisfy me".

Up until this point, the search for a fusion between art, life and a political approach towards reality, can be considered to be the base elements of what could be defined the conceptualism of the Latin American matrix; far from the reflections on language and the philosophical approach of 'northern' Conceptualism (North American, European). Bruguera often makes reference to another example at the base of her practice, some works of the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles (as for instance *Insertions into Ideological Circuits, 1970-78*)<sup>4</sup>, whose practice she defines as a "conceptualism that acts. A conceptualism that generates political agitation". The mixing of the conceptual and the political is not casual, it is without doubt fruit of the elaboration of a cultural, political and didactic tension experienced at the ISA, where the artist and critic Luis Camnitzer gave workshops during Havana Biennial<sup>5</sup>. In a recent book, Camnitzer spoke of Latin-American conceptualism as a political and social conceptualism, the opposite of North American conceptualism<sup>6</sup>. Semiotic work on the medium and political conceptualism are maybe the two most tangible legacies of her education at the ISA, where Tania studied after the Academia de San Alejandro and where many Cuban artists of the last generations, who subsequently have achieved international recognition, studied and taught: Lázaro Saavedra, Ponjuan and René Francisco, to name but a few.

The idea that art and the creative process must be tied to a concrete objective is the fundamental *concept* of the Laboratorio di Arte Utile [Laboratory of Useful

Art], the teaching programme realized at the IUAV, Venice, during which students have to plan and develop work that aims towards social utility. "To implicate a consequence outside the creation of art", says Tania, adding that this process of art aiming to act within reality could be defined as "Public Art".

This reading further clarifies the artist's criticism towards her performances of the Nineties, defined above as a failed period. They were, unquestionably, works more orientated towards a personal and intimate research. Without doubt, when seeing her swallow mouthfuls of earth (in the performance *El Peso de la Culpa, 1997-99*) or reading a schoolbook, naked, inside a box covered in slices of raw meat (*El cuerpo del silencio, 1997-1998*), many other people could see themselves in the tension, paranoia, fear and uneasiness. "But my intention was to make art for myself".

Her recent works instead seem to be easily grouped around the concept of public art, from *Memoria de la Postguerra* to Giordano Bruno, from the political party to her academic position: these are evidently projects thought up to be public (or publicly useful), in which the spectator assumes the role of civil society. They are Situations in which the artist creates conditions and the recipient constructs the work.

The work in this way becomes a moment of collective experience, in which the artist as author disappears. In the already mentioned *Tatlin Whisper #5*, for example, this wish to unhinge the identity of "artist=author" is glaring. The work would be planned and organized, in its future reiterations, according to a contract that defines the way it works and sanctions the author's rights. The museum, as buyer of the project, is defined as the work's owner, but can only distribute images selected by the artist. The spectators, who had the experience, instead were given right to produce documentation of any possible medium: photo, video or any other method yet to be invented. Unhinging the authoritative nature of the artwork meant the introduction of the relationship between art and public into the museum.

The idea of Public Art and the role of audience participation in the work function together with another base element: playing on memory. It is not the memory of the artist, nor the one usually defined as history, i.e. the collective memory of large public events of the past. In this case the artist thinks of something more intimate and personal: a collective intimacy that allows the work to continue to exist. Memory is the ability of the spectator to carry with them forever the memory of a moment of their life. "Memory was the device through which the work would remain", said Tania. *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* is an example of this, inasmuch as a project that inserts itself into the life of its receiver, becoming part of it. The students that took part in the *Cátedra* had an experience that forms part of their life. "If they want it to or not, if they like it or not, if they contradict and criticise it





or not: it is part of something that they lived for a sufficiently important period of time. They didn't only watch, they lived it".

This tension towards the lived was already contained in embryonic phase in her performances of the Nineties, the ones that Tania has gone against for another characteristic: the power and supremacy of the visual element.

Performances that were intimate experiences for the artist offered to the public, which became purely visual experiences for the spectator. "The performances took place outside of them. For this reason I moved on to the installations of which the public has to be a part of, construct, have responsibilities". The experience Tania speaks of is therefore something that steps out from the visual and forces the observer to experience.

The aesthetic of Tania Bruguera's works is instead a method or instrument which the artist uses to activate the mechanism of experience, of life and of memory, in which the work lives and will continue living. The aesthetic varies in function and is defined by the work's concept, but it is never an essential element.

Tania uses her works to explain this passage. The ways of relating to her students (or participants, or members) in the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*, for example, is the form of the project. The dynamics created by the interaction between teacher and student are the elements of a system – the work – that underwent changes when it was necessary. The fact that the participants grew up and developed new necessities (speaking of their work, promoting it), put the aesthetic of the work back in discussion, which had to be adjusted in accordance to the necessities that were created over time. It is for this reason that Tania defines the aesthetic as a mobile and temporary mechanism in her works.

Another case in point is the example of the political party, a project in development to which Tania has dedicated the last few years of research to setting up and planning, above all in Paris and New York. "I know that I want to create a political party, to start a discussion on the migrant figure as positive and not negative subject, as a necessary social class that has its own internal dynamic, its own characteristics and conditions. I don't know how I'll do it. I don't know and I don't think I need to know. I don't think that I need to have an a priori idea: for example realizing, as a conclusion of the process, a performance together with the people with whom I gathered for months". It is the conceptual necessity of the project that will define, at the right time, the aesthetic that the artist will use as an instrument to make system-artwork function, which Tania defines, not by chance, "a system that creates itself".

With regards to the Migrant Party, Tania has also spoken of "real art", the sense of which cannot but be defined by making a comparison with Realism and its position

*Just a Question*, Fundación Cifo, Miami 2008



in relation to aesthetics and experience. "For me Realism is an art that reproduces, whilst real art produces", she explains. "Realism tries to come close to a reality and present it as faithfully as possible; its ties with aesthetics and the form of the work are inescapable, everything is concentrated on technique, on the ability to do. Real art instead, produces because it tries to become part of reality. If you want to become part of reality you aren't interested in its reproduction, but you want to create a reality that does not yet exist and make it form part of the existing".

In regards to the Party, for instance, Tania has planned to work as an intern for a real politician. "Not making myself seem like an assistant, but working for real" she clarifies, because the difference is fundamental. Tania uses an existing activity and makes it her own: the work of an intern, with the final objective of putting her own abilities into practise in the political sphere and in this way transposing them into her research on migration. Artists often realize similar experiences to then turn them into the conclusive act or aesthetic reification of their research. "I could make a series of videos or performances on my 'being an intern for a politician' and conclude the project like that" remarks Tania. "But that to me seems like a Twentieth Century way of working. In the Twenty-first Century this Political art projects must be taken to the next step: the ways in which art establishes itself within and becomes part of reality". Therefore, being an intern, or rather operating in reality, is a way of carrying out her research on migration and subsequently founding a real political party, not a moment experienced by the artist immortalized by a series of documents that can then be sold.

Here, once again, is the sense of useful art and its disconnection from the idea of performance, "to point out that often the artist stops at the midway point of the process, in its representative aspect, in its re-proposing a situation so that the audience can see it" Tania explains. "The art of the Twentieth Century is a visual art, dedicated to showing so that the audience sees and thinks". In the Twenty-first Century, useful art puts the public into play following another strategy: the receiver of the work must think actively and not just look, using the artwork whilst living.

The public is a constitutive material of the work. The spectator and their experience are so fundamentally important in the artist's idea, that the formal and aesthetic/material aspects become invisible or transparent (like the cinema screen onto which a film is projected once the illusion of the cinema starts inside the movie theatre), to leave room for pure experience. If the role of the spectator is passive (although it can be an intellectual process) and if the artwork is resolved in the documentation or presentation of the end products of a process, then, Bruguera seems to say, the artwork is purely aesthetic, even if it uses political imagery and subjects.

In *Just a Question* the artist devised a mechanism that works according to this postulate.<sup>7</sup> A man in uniform picks some exhibition visitors at random and asks them to "please follow me". He is dressed as a security guard and the group follows him to a small storage room in the museum. The guard asks the visitors to sit down and asks them: "Why do you think there is somebody who wants to kill Barack Obama?". The guard is black, or Afro-American to use the politically correct US term, whilst, naturally, the majority of visitors to the exhibition are white. *Just a Question* makes the museum's Wasp visitors forget that they have gone to see a show and makes them confront and reflect upon US political news, as well as the countries still complicated relationship between race and power.

*Self-Sabotage*, the lecture/performance presented by Tania in Paris and at the 2009 Venice Biennale, works in the same way. The artist carries out a lecture to an audience sitting in front of her. She reads a very academic text, in perfect Anglo-American university style, but at the same time very intense: "Artists should self-sabotage in their relationship with others in the world of art by not pleasing them, and especially not pleasing institutions. Artists should self-sabotage by quitting their work, by leaving their comfortable positions and looking for a difficult site, one that they do not understand, leaving doing design aside and do living. Artists should stop and start from scratch, from a place that is not self-nostalgic, a site where all our insecurities are present, an insecure place, a place that is not self-important, a place where art is not an important concept. Art should be a concept appearing later, after the fact, not an a priori decision".

In spite of the intensity of the text, the public, who were expecting a performance, are bored, agitated and distracted. Then something happens: three times, interrupting the lecture, the artist points a pistol at her temple and fires. From the supposition that the pistol is fake and that it is a staging, the audience starts to get unsettled, until, before the last shot, some scream, others faint, others shout "its all fake", others move away, others still ask for someone to intervene. Whoever stays silent and continues to observe starts to think that they should get up and react; if they don't it is out of cowardice or indolence. The artist's self-sabotage aims at unmasking the incoherence of many artists who make "political art", but stop at pure aesthetic production and satisfying critics and curators, but also the indolence and laziness of who observes the world and doesn't act, even when faced by an emergency.

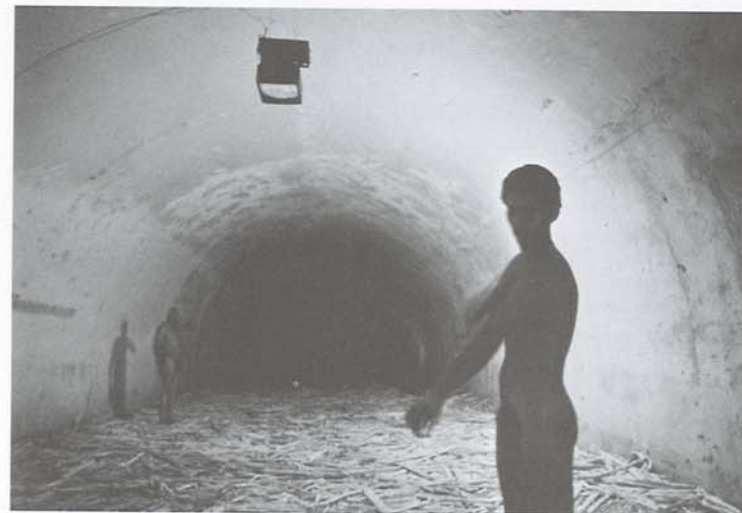
The condition of being an exile and an artist of the Diaspora that Tania has lived since the Nineties (since she reached international critical recognition during the biennials of the *Periodo Especial*) is an inescapable element of her work. At the beginning, her path coincided with that of other Cuban artists, who, thanks to



historical convergence and the Havana Biennale, were able to enter the restricted context of international art. Entering this sphere the artist found herself assuming a “dangerous” position: whilst from a certain point of view the art system opened itself up and gave space to tensions and processes that were not previously considered in the History of Modernism, at the same time it also imposed upon the artists a reading of their work based on being “other”, on belonging to a non-Western country and on exoticism. In the case of Cuba, this expectation coincides with the peculiar situation of being a socialist Country, of the permanent revolution, of an identity opposed to imperialism. Tania refuses to enter this game being branded as a Cuban artist, feeling constantly the load of exoticism and the expectations that she carries with her as a promise every time she participates at a biennial. Many projects that she has realized discuss realities far away from her own origins (for example the political party or *Just a Question*, to name two works analyzed above, but also – going back in time – the *Untitled* work of Documenta 11). On the other hand some works inevitable focus on the Cuban reality (the journal “Memoria de la Postguerra”, the performances of Ana Mendieta, but also more recently *Objects of desire. Selling Cuba*). This approach also springs from the peculiarity of having been (for ten years, from 1999 to 2009) a Cuban moving between the United States and her own country: a condition that has a particular cultural and political peculiarity, often exemplified by the anti-Castro position of the Cuban community in Miami.

“I can’t deny being Cuban, nor do I want to. On the other hand it bothers me to be quickly associated with a series of prototypes that have nothing to do with me and against which instead I try to fight. One of these is being a Cuban in the USA, with the example of Miami. I am at the centre of a preconception that I have not built and to which I do not belong”.

At the same time, many works of the new millennium knowingly bear traces of an approach that only an individual educated in Cuba and rooted in its culture can have. It is a double challenge: conserving the approach that a Cuban would have when confronted by other realities and at the same time assuming a non-Cuban perspective to speak about Cuba. It is the game of the Diaspora (or of migration) and ties Tania’s story with that of many international artists, who have grown straddling western capitals and metropolises of the Third World. A double and suffered gaze, destined to remain a foreign and external gaze both on their original reality and on the realities in which they find themselves working. An identity in continual mutation and self-definition.



*Untitled (Havana, 2000)*

Observing how artists who have this migratory history in common are forced to constantly correct and re-discuss their identity when they work in the context of contemporary art, generates a doubt on the receptivity of art professionals: are critics, historians and curators able to adjust their gaze on art in the same way as this generation of artists of the Diaspora?

As Tania has often underlined, it is very difficult balance. Whilst it is easy to be accepted as a Cuban artist who speaks of Cuba, it is less of a given to count upon the same authority in the moment in which global questions are tackled. Returning to *Just a Question*, commenting the project, Tania underlines how the question of race is not discussed in the United States using the same terms she uses. Asking oneself why somebody would want to kill the first black president in history is a question that can only come from abroad, because in the United States it’s a taboo. “I ask myself this question and they don’t. This to me means negotiating what it means to be Cuban”. A conscious choice to act globally whilst maintaining her own local political culture, doing something that everybody can understand, that is human and not tied to a specific context. “But of course”, concludes Tania, “to be human you always have to assume a point of view”.



*Self-sabotage*, Pabellón de la Urgencia, Venice Biennale 2009

1. The term here refers purposefully to Situationalist International. See *Definitions*, in "Situationalist International" n.1, June 1958, Paris.

2. *Memoria de la Postguerra*, 1993, a journal (of which two issues were published). Cuban writers, artists and intellectuals, who lived in Cuba and off the island, collaborated with Tania. For this and successive works cited in the text, refer to the list at the end of the book.

3. *Partido del Pueblo Migrante*, project in progress, started in 2006. Tania is working to form a real political party for migrants, a long-term project that will culminate in the founding of an organism that represents migrants within a parliament. In its initial research, the *Partido del Pueblo Migrante* had the support of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt of Berlin and the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers and 104 of Paris.

4. Cildo Meireles, born Rio de Janeiro, 1948, is a Brazilian conceptual artist par excellence. His installations of the Seventies are openly against the dictatorship of Brazil in that decade. A large retrospective at the Tate Modern, London, which concluded in January of 2009, reconstructed his career.

5. Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), post-graduate university for artists (music, visual and performing arts) founded in 1977, in the pre-existing Elam, Latin American school of arts: a utopian

dream of the immediate post-revolution, wanted by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in 1959, an art school built in a golf club for North-American tourists, expropriated and designed as a total school of art, free for all students of the Third World.

6. Born in Germany and naturalized in Uruguay, Camnitzer studied and taught in Latin America before settling in New York where he now works as a critic and artist. *Conceptualism in Latin American Art. Didactics of Liberation*, published by the University of Texas Press in 2009, is his book that collects the history and theories of social and political conceptualism of Latin America in the Sixties and Seventies.

7. *Just a Question (Sólo una pregunta)*, 2008. A work on the United States presidential election of 2008 and on the democratic candidate Barack Obama, the first Afro-American to run for and win the US Presidency. The work is proposed in two parts: a week before the elections (Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago) and a week after (Fundación Cifo, Miami).