



Statue of Giordano Bruno, Campo de' Fiori, Roma

Tania Bruguera and Political Art

Domenico Scudero

During the long days I have passed wandering the streets of Havana I have met boxing champions, thieves and fraudsters, all asking me to help them escape, but without luck. They are requests that, to a certain extent, I no longer take notice of; helping one of these friends, you tell yourself, isn't and can't be a crime, but if one of the policeman watching you pinches you whilst helping someone's escape plan, then its trouble.

Let's imagine the life of a person who through their art manages to emerge from the fog of this boggy system of visas and permits, from which there is no escape. Getting over a level of bureaucratic judgement in these conditions is an arduous task, almost like ousting a consolidated academic post in Italy. Cubans try everything, but only a few lucky ones manage to escape from this imprisonment. Tania Bruguera is one of them.

I thought of Tania and I thought that her work, or should I say her own particular artistic existence, could allow us to discuss political systems like few other artists in the world are able. Tania's world, on the other hand, is a complex world, a great jungle of iron and asphalt, of lights and mirrors, that has passed though Chicago, Paris and Venice, where she teaches, like she did before at the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) of Havana. Her chair has caused numerous civilian debates in Cuba, between her students and artists, but it has, above all, directed the new path of the *Bienal de la Habana* and its numerous openings. Already in 2003, this institution firmly controlled by the political hierarchies, like all of Cuba, initiated an opening to the modalities of art curatorship, intending with the concept of curation a direct mechanism to experiment different methodologies of approach through individual capabilities. The course designed by Tania Bruguera, *Arte de Conducta*, mainly oriented towards the pre-production of art with some moments of public exposure, is emblematic of the cognitive process and support of creative requests. But its case, although indisputable in terms of participation, arouses certain perplexities

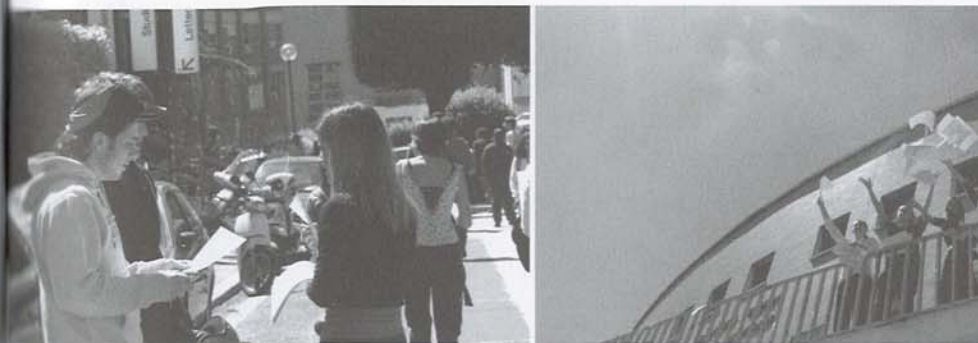
around Cuban art. Because Bruguera's presence provoked an unsolved debate on the relationship between art and politics. It asked both sides of the dispute, backers of the regime and its opposition, difficult questions. Some say that Tania Bruguera is a product of the regime, white and privileged by her diplomatic family background, others maintain that she is the image of a new and unprejudiced Cuban intellectual highbrow. Who is Tania Bruguera?

In one of the works analysed by Simonetta Lux in her *Ipercontemporanea*, Bruguera, at the beginning of her career, projected the destruction of feelings of guilt in the nation's body in the shadow of contemporary art: a nation so young and beautiful that it can't be defined, that thickened the sense of precariousness of any analysis of art and the destiny of the nation in the consensus of the living.

Cuba is different to what the guides tell you. I got to know it well, its apathy towards death of the old pensioners in Centro Habana, the young people born asleep to the nightmare of life that their parents lived through perpetually drunk. The irony and joy of Cuba are born in this boundless deathbed, its sleepy neighbourhoods that no longer wish to be woken up. One must overcome the barriers of horror here in Cuba to comprehend the Caribbean sounds and parties: national reactions to death and despair. When the Americans, under the command of General John R. Brooke, in one of their worst diplomatic performances, hoisted the Stars and Stripes on the Fortaleza Morro Cabaña of La Havana on the 1st of January 1899 following the departure of the Spanish ships, the population, as if seized by its ambition for independence, found a painless way to protest: they danced and celebrated with Cuban flags under the cold stare of the American soldiers. The celebration spilled over into the night and became riotous, without anybody being able to do anything. This is Cuba.

I well know that for an artist aware of their political history, who has overcome the barriers of the horrible through the abstraction of reality, art is a slow release object, indescribable and beautiful, even if only in the mind of its creator. What indeed does it matter? We are not talking about concrete objects that pronounce universally to be art. Here the discussed objects become symbolic for their collective consciousness or are themselves political. There are places in which the relative reality of beauty seems false. The idea of art without political conception has no sense here in Cuba. Recalling what happened to me at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes would seem to show its implications, where I had done to see, amongst others, the permanent work of Tania Bruguera.

I had seen a few floors and I had to hurry to reach the top level, but the route went through a large part of the history of Cuban painting, and amongst these



Giordano Bruno's *Process*, performance at Università La Sapienza, Roma 2007

some large realist canvases, that in this moment I cannot remember well. Since I was crossing that hall as a pass holding official guest, to use terminology that is particularly popular there, and had my reflex digital camera with me, I thought about taking a few photos of the interesting paintings, promising myself that I would study them calmly afterwards on my computer. A caretaker, who evidently was following me closely, realized what my intentions were and started to shout, waving her arms around like a madwoman and positioned herself between my lens and the painting: her eyes were wide open and filled with hate. She appeared willing to die, or worse kill me, to stop me taking a photo. Within a minute, not only had the nearby room filled with guards armed with walkie talkies, some with an air of being not particularly friendly, but the woman in question was openly talking about taking my camera away and, with a face that would allow no reply, threatened more. God, by now I'm used to this kind of craziness, and, naturally, I believe that this kind of protective attitude towards art is the stuff of psychiatry, but there was more. There was the idea that the work contained the secret of a political identity that wished not to be uncovered, or stolen, as though the richness of this country was actually deposited in a painting of modest worth and anachronistic styling. This is Cuba, I tell myself, and Cuba is also the admiration for Tania Bruguera, although it would be difficult to define her as an artist of the regime. Here lies the fact: away from the discourses, political art is the enigma of Cuban culture.

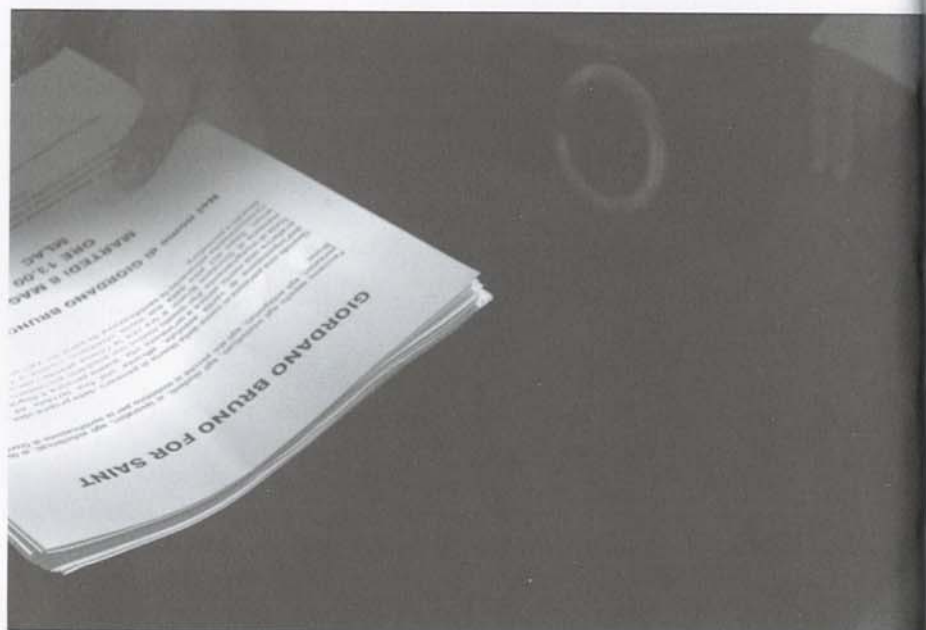


Giordano Bruno's Process, performance at Università La Sapienza, Roma 2007

The strength to say something that others cannot and would like to. Here then, the hidden problem of a possible individualistic identity in the political work of Tania Bruguera has no reason to exist. The realization of such a sizable import to national identity, it appeals to us because it contains something abstruse and alive. Tania eats the land and transforms the acts of oppression that have formed the identity of a nation into art. But Tania Bruguera doesn't reduce herself to being a broadcasting beacon for this infamy, if anything, she reconstructs herself individually as a mother earth, who bears, one hopes, through cloning, a new political condition of being social, and creative, in the Cuba of the new millennium.

Tania Bruguera and Cuban political art arrived one day in Rome. It rained, of course, despite the drought. So it was raining in Rome when Tania arrived, full of appointments like a rock star and full of her untiring vital energy. In a few minutes at the MLAC she had realized a work over the telephone with one of her assistants and fixed the dates for a few shows. A mad schedule. A round of appointments on the old continent that would even rival a Prime Minister's week. An intense week of work in Europe, a brief visit to Spain, then Paris and I think Venice, before Rome again. All the while like a Cuban carnival. She asked me, where would you like to show me? I replied that to start being comfortable in Rome its best to visit Campo de' Fiori. She told me that it was her favourite place and that she had already been, and that she was also pleased that I mentioned it as she was thinking of doing a work on Giordano Bruno. Thinking of starting the procedure for his sanctification. An artistic project undertaken with dynamic determination, but just that, a work of art, destined to remain as such, not something that can become a cause. Here I must underline one of her qualities: I feel that Tania Bruguera's brilliance is switched on in situations of complicity, getting others to confront themselves with the work of art, she knows exactly when to switch off the "constitutional" mechanism and turn it into meaning, documentation, the history of an event. And have a laugh about it. Working in Cuba in collaboration with the high artistic spheres I have, in fact, learnt to understand that the Cuban attitude towards work is almost Teutonic, but despite that the locals have maintained an irony towards the past. They are extremely serious in their actions, but are able to be ironic about what the have done.

Even in Rome Tania Bruguera undoubtedly examined political work, understanding fully the value of what politics is, starting with its deepest powers. The work produced is, in essence, the request for the sanctification of the friar Giordano Bruno, burnt on the stake after an unsettling life because, according to historians of the time, he refused to pronounce a single yes that would have saved him. The scholars gathered by Tania Bruguera were all convinced that the



NOI QUI
NEL NOME DI G. BRUNO
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GARANZIA DI LIBERTÀ

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friar would have been saved, according to the praxis, at the point of death, had he repented. But it never arrived. The historians also agreed that the position of Giordano Bruno was very Calvinist, ahead its time. It was not a matter of blasphemy against the faith, but simple doctrines of rights that the friar had discussed at length, above all internationally. But this did not allow him free thought and the drastic consequence was martyrdom. Another place in which historical literature agrees is in that it is probable that in his last moment of existence friar Bruno was forced to chose, and preferred to opt for immortality rather than for salvation and a moral end. Exactly what they feared inside the Church. This theological debate started by the rationalist philosopher Giordano Bruno, brought to an end by this condemnation, caused, by consequence, the fully blown opposite of what the ecclesiastical world wanted to avoid: the idea that the infallibility of the Pope was up for debate. Giordano Bruno is still there, immobile in the Campo, and stares at the ground with a deathly stare of disapproval at the bleak joviality of St Peter's presumptuous bell tower of riches and luxury. And he observes the supreme white cardinal, dressed in ermine and red velvet, blessing the crowd from far away, flattering poverty and speaking of justice, whilst sinking into the luxury of his black, special edition, amour-plated Mercedes, supplied with 007style gadgets.

Tania Bruguera's work is political because it represents itself as part of society. We recognise it when it traps us in its passages of daily politics, fighting for power, for survival. Tania's work is an analysis, a document, but its conclusion is in the mechanism of elaboration that she tries to put into action, as an act of liberty and liberation.