



1968-1989, 2008. Performance. Intervention in public space related to 1968 events (capitalist cities) or socialist times (for ex-socialist countries).

Photo: Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland.

Tania Bruguera

or the Relaunching of Politics

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The body and Cuba. The space between these two words contains the entire range of possibilities in which Tania Bruguera has conducted her work for the last two decades. For this artist, Cuba is not simply the place where she was born, where her family lives and where she received her earliest education. It is also a complex maze of cultural and political issues and conflicts which she has chosen as the subject matter of the motifs of her artwork since the early days of her career. And, for her, the body is not the mere medium for her art, in the same way that one could speak about photography, painting and sculpture as the media for certain artworks. No, for her, the defence and involvement of her own body is in itself a political act, and not only because of the content or meanings which are evoked or materialised in each of her performances.

Her commitment to both these issues was clearly revealed in the action *El peso de la culpa* [The Weight of Guilt], which she conducted in 1996, at her home in Havana, as an independent event taking place in parallel to the Biennial which was being celebrated at that time. Covering her naked body with a slaughtered lamb, she sat eating a mixture of soil, water and salt, against the backdrop of a huge Cuban flag which she had woven herself out of human hair. The action was as dramatic and full of pathos as the story it evoked. The dead lamb referenced the sacrifice of Christ, ritually reiterated during mass, as well as that of animals in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies. The eating of soil was reminiscent of the method used by the Taino Indians to commit suicide rather than submit to colonising powers, while the hand-woven flag represented the flags which exiled Cuban workers made with their own hands to support José Martí's bid for independence.

However, as I predicted, the meaning of this action cannot be interpreted in terms only of its effective contents, given that its exact meaning can only be conveyed when it is placed in the context of the political situation in Cuba. Politics in Cuba is demanding and ever-present, because the Party and the State, or, the party-state, conduct politics not only in terms of police control of the population (in the same way as any other modern state) but also in terms of the permanent mobilisation of the masses. This is the reason why carrying out actions and interventions in public spaces, such as those habitually conducted by Tania Bruguera, is equivalent to "making" a policy which rejects and even contradicts that permanent mobilisation, guided by the prophetic words of the leader rather than by the Party's orders. Fidel, the hero, the commander, the indisputable communist leader who –like Deng Xiao Ping in China– is now attempting to rule without governing. In other words, to personify sovereignty –in the strict sense of the word– enabling others to carry out the day-to-day running of government.

In 2003 Tania Bruguera launched, in Havana, her project *Cátedra de arte de conducta* [Art of Conduct Chair], which she brought to a close in 2009. The project included lectures, courses and workshops which offered the chance to enjoy an artistic education to anyone interested, even if they did not fulfil the academic requirements usually expected by the Cuban education system. For Bruguera, the project was one of the many ways she revealed her commitment to the idea of art's role, which, in the context of her artistic strategies, does not reference Soviet productivism and Bauhaus functionalism, but, rather, its capacity to intervene in politics with the aim of altering or modifying the traditional structures and models for its exercise and display. In



Portraits, 2004-2005. Performance and sound installation featuring historical political discourses, recorded applause and security guards with dogs.

Photo. Rüdiger Ettl for Kunsthalle Wien

this sense it is a constituting or instituting practice, as Toni Negri would say, or a truly political practice, as Jacques Ranciere would say, in the sense that it modifies the rules regarding what can or cannot be seen, known and thought. She does not simply “illustrate” or comply with the theories of these thinkers, but instead conducts performances which unfold in a context or field that is different, or even removed, from the realm of political action, defined in legal, and therefore also political, terms. Her actions are political, yet they cannot be psychoanalytically “defined” by either of these premises.

What I am saying could probably be best understood if we return to Tania Bruguera’s intervention at the Havana Biennial, in 2000. It was originally going to be *Untitled* –although she later included it in the *Ingeniero de almas* [Engineer of the Soul] series– and consisted of a play of contrasts and incongruencies, very different, in terms of quality, from the photomontages by John Heartfield and Josep Renau, which, although surprising, were ultimately just political cartoons, set in the realm of the Party’s agitation and propaganda. Tania’s installation, on the other hand, was not a cartoon; instead, she put into practice, and encouraged others to adopt, a way of establishing a physical relationship with the ever-present discourse of a leader, which was very different from that which is expected of the Cuban people. Or all people. On this occasion, Tania used a domed chamber in the

fortress of La Cabaña, which was built during the Spanish colonial rule. She darkened the room and covered the floor completely, using sugar cane pulp. The only source of light for the overwhelmed spectator was a monitor showing endless speeches recorded by Fidel Castro. The light from the monitor ended up illuminating naked, gesticulating, bodies. The heat, humidity and stench emitted by the sugar cane pulp, as it began to rot, were stifling. The incongruence of Fidel ceaselessly speaking in such a dark and inhospitable place was evocative of the cave in which Plato staged one of the founding myths of Western philosophy, in a way which, by connecting Castro’s endless words with the Chinese shadows of chained men shown at the back of the cave, caused them to be confused with reality. This

interpretation, however, gave rise to another possible meaning, which is much more radical than to simply deny the truth of Fidel’s speeches. According to this work there is no actual reality outside the cave, the shadows of which could be seen by the men inside. No, the artist told us, there is no other reality than that inside the cave, which is only illuminated fleetingly by the televised words of Fidel, however delirious they may seem to be, and in fact are. Therefore, political agitation and cartoons, and even irony, played no part in her work, which instead presented a new way of perceiving Castro’s discourse, transforming it into something different from what he wanted it to be.

In 2008, at the Turbine Hall in London’s Tate Modern, Tania carried out a performance –which she assigned the number 5 in the series *Los susurros de Tatlin* [Tatlin’s Whispers]– whose protagonists were two riot policemen on horseback, who employed the crowd-control techniques they had learnt during their training on the performance’s audience. There was no violence, because the audience, more puzzled than irritated, hardly put up any resistance to the seemingly pointless manipulation to which it was being subjected. And Tania explained, during an interview organised by the museum itself, the meaning of this action, using words which confirm the political dimension of her understanding of art’s “use”: “I am not interested”, she said, “in presenting images which can be seen from a safe distance, but, rather,

in those which allow people to directly experience the dynamics of power". The British political context is obviously different from the Cuban, but not as a result of a lack of police control of the population, which in the UK is mainly conducted by electronic and telematic means, and is therefore much less visible to those it controls than the activities carried out by Cuban police. However, once again, for Tania Bruguera it was not a question of denouncing the British police state, but rather of offering a new way of interacting with it, emphasising the direct corporal experience of control and manipulation mechanisms.

The series *Los susurros de Tatlin* includes an earlier piece, which combines, in what could be described as a programmatic way, the connection between Cuba, the body and politics which can be observed in her work. This piece was on display at the Havana Biennial, in 2003, under the hugely revealing title of *Autobiografía* [Autobiography] and consisted of a stand, a podium, a microphone and some speakers which constantly played the revolutionary slogans and mottos which defined radio and television during Tania Bruguera's childhood and adolescence, and which, now, through sheer repetition, have become a prayer, a mantra.

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** All images are courtesy of the artist.



Proyecto Cátedra arte de conducta, 2003-2009. Presented at the X Havana Biennial 2009.

Guest artist: **NÚRIA GÜELL** with the work *Ayuda humanitaria*, 2009.
Long-term performance. Photo: Mauricio Miranda

L'accord de Marseille, 2006.
Photo: Sandra Patron.

