



Untitled (Havana, 2000), 2000, live figures, milled sugar cane, video monitor, DVD player and disc

to an artist for an early career survey and catalogue. Its first recipient, Cuban born, Chicago-based artist, Tania Bruguera brings her provocative performances and installations, examining the relationship between ideology, power, and social behavior to the museum. The focus of the show is a twenty-year retrospective of her work, justly titled, *On the Political Imaginary*.

The artist, who is known for pushing the envelope on politically-sensitive topics, often falling just short of being incarcerated— in one of her performances in Columbia a tray of cocaine was passed out to the audience—began her rise to prominence in the early '90's by channeling the "earth-body" works of Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985).

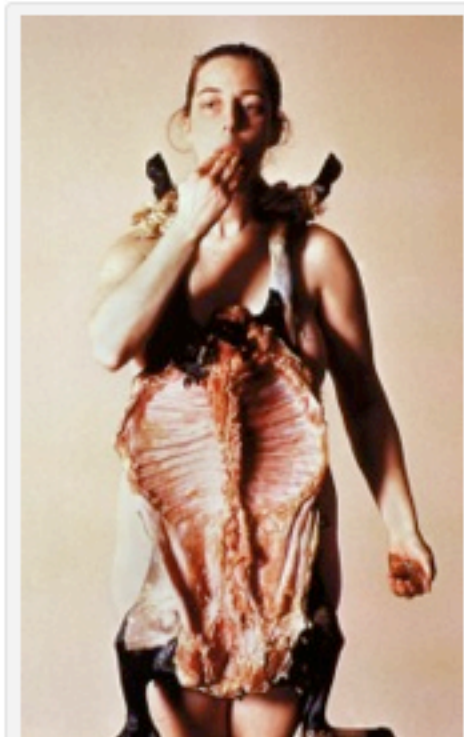


Displacement (1998-99), fabric, dirt, rusted nails

performing, *Displacement* (1998-99) in which a nether-worldly, mud-covered, nail-studded Bruguera is dressed as Nkisi Nkonde, an Afro-Cuban spiritual icon. She wanders through the crowded streets of Havana, attracting repulsed, but curious onlookers. *Poetic Justice* (2002-2003) leads viewers directly into the main exhibition galleries, through a long, pungent-smelling, teabag-lined tunnel, referencing the economic and colonial relationship between those colonized and their master; in this case, India under the brutally-oppressive British Empire.

Performance artists have recently been enjoying a major resurgence in popularity, worldwide. Museums and biennales are spearheading this renaissance. And why not! Their one-of-a-kind theatrical events are primo entertainment, where anything can and usually does, happen. Here in New York City and its environs, five major art museums have played host to this re-emergence of the art of performance. *The Kiss* and *This Progress*, two of Tino Sehgal's live 'constructed situations', with nary a painting in sight, recently occupied the Guggenheim Museum's lobby and exhibition ramps. Another Sehgal piece, *This is Propaganda* (2002) is being presented as part of the Jeff Koon's-curated, *Skin Fruit* exhibition, at The New Museum. Additionally, four decades of Marina Abramović's work is being re-performed at the Museum of Modern Art; while the 2010 Whitney Biennial incorporates some ten performance artists, both live and on film.

The Neuberger Museum of Art—just an hour outside of New York City—has recently announced the creation of the Roy R. Neuberger Prize awarded



The Burden of Guilt (1997-99), decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil

In *Burden of Guilt* (1997), arguably the artist's most powerful and widely known work, Bruguera, standing naked with a slaughtered lamb hanging from her neck, spends 45 minutes eating soil mixed with water and salt—a re-enactment of the suicide ritual that many Cuban natives once practiced when faced with the threat of the Spanish conquistadores. The harrowing piece was first performed in Havana, where the audience was duly reminded that freedom, liberty and self-determination are not abstract ideals, but achievements that deeply inscribe their meaning on our physical being.

Under the watchful eye of curator, Helaine Posner and using Bruguera-trained performance artists, the Neuberger has faithfully recreated a dozen of the artist's most politically provocative works. The most poignant are supported by intricately designed installations that threaten, frighten, lecture, educate, and entertain, albeit in a carnivalesque, sideshow atmosphere. Just inside the entrance to the museum a film shows the artist

The most exciting part of the Neuberger exhibition is the variety of gallery rooms that house the artist's installations. As in *Untitled (Havana, 2002)* and *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, many of Bruguera's works are named for the cities in which they were first performed. Their ominous darkness accentuates the artist's message. In Havana, we find ourselves in a dimly lit space, walking on a dangerously uneven layer of rotting sugarcane husks. At the far end of the room, on a small, scarcely discernable TV screen, Fidel Castro delivers one of his interminably long speeches. Hugging the wall stand four naked men, barely visible to the eye, imitating the empty gestures of their iconic leader. In Kassel, we once again find ourselves in a dark room. Here, in one moment, we are plunged into total darkness—in the next, blinded by blazing overhead lights. Threatening footsteps punctuate both darkness and light, while nearby, the sound of rifles being loaded and reloaded invoke interrogation tactics intended to intimidate and frighteningly command our attention.



In *Untitled (Moscow, 2007)* and *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version, 2009)* [see left], Bruguera changes her tactics, inviting the viewer to act in her scenarios, rather than passively standing by. In Moscow, we are ushered into what appears to be a small photo lab, and asked to sit beneath a framed photograph of the founder of the Bolshevik secret police, to have our picture taken.

We are then given a choice to pose with a live eagle—representing the power of the old establishment—or a cage of monkeys, signifying the rise of capitalism in Russia. *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was first performed in Cuba in 2009. At the Neuberger show, participants were escorted to the stage by individuals dressed in military fatigues and given a minute to talk about any

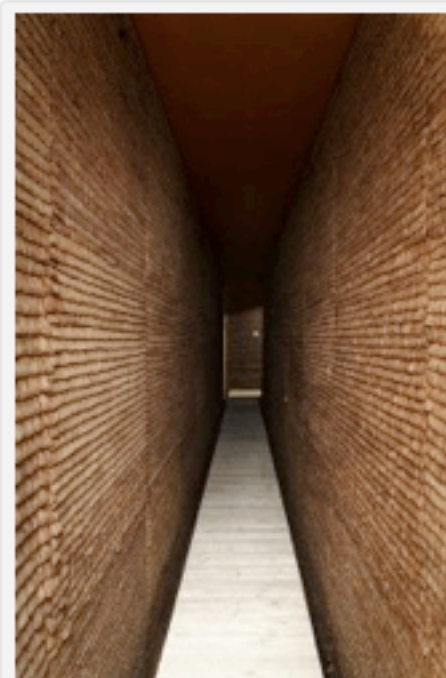
subject. Freedom of speech, blogs and the Internet, all censorship related, were the hot topics. Not surprisingly—how could it be otherwise in a democratic society, long used to unbridled freedom—fewer than a handful, after much prompting, took to the stage during the exhibition's opening. In Cuba, on the other hand, the Havana Biennale authorities shut down Bruguera's presentation after one performance, due to its political volatility.

If anything is amiss in this exhibition, it is that many of the works, now being shown far removed from their original political context, have been shorn of their ultimate power. Still, Bruguera's, *On the Political Imaginary* informs us of an experience of life in Cuba and other countries where guaranteed freedoms cannot be taken for granted.

by Edward Rubin, Contributing Writer

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Tania Bruguera, *On the Political Imaginary*, at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York, through April 11, 2010



Poetic Justice (2002-3), used tea bags, video excerpts