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Performance:  
An  
Open-Heart  
Operation  
On Selected  
Works By

# Tania Bruguera



*The Burden of Guilt*, 1997-1999. Re-enactment of an historical event. Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Museo de Bellas Artes.

## DINORAH PÉREZ-REMENTERÍA

Are there still any legitimate actions in visual arts that are not theatre, documental photography pieces, sketches or framed projects, negotiable objects or imaginary installations, but the exercise of a militant, a disturbing agent, a revolutionary? Throughout her career, Tania Bruguera has devoted herself to

exploring the essence of performance art and its historical and political development. The artist designs a discourse that grows, infiltrating domains that lie beyond the boundaries of the visual arts—the limits of art in general—in order to reach profound poetic and human dimensions.

In the 2006 exhibition “For Sale,” presented at the Juana de Aizpuru Gallery in Spain, Bruguera sacrificed

her status as the intellectual author of the works and offered them as public services. She brought out for sale six performances from her past career; one action was performed on the day of the show’s opening, inside, where viewers were taught how to build homemade bombs; and one work was presented in auction, the idea for which “doesn’t exist yet.” During the show, the gallery became a space

for those interested in garnering the information they needed.

The works *Destierro*, *El cuerpo del silencio*, *Cabeza abajo*, *El peso de la culpa*, *Estudio de taller*, *Vigilantes*, *El susurro de Tatlin III*, and *La obra nueva que no existe* still represent the negotiable object. Some of these works stand out for their strong political, social, and cultural connotations, which are intentionally reduced to sporting pastimes. The artist conducts a pointed research in the mechanisms and arguments used in marketing. Everything is susceptible to being commercialized without scruple, even the idea of a work of art that is not yet in progress. It is necessary to learn to navigate the system, to learn its signs and its language, to understand the role reserved for each of its participants.

Bruguera speaks of the imminent objectification of performance art as a means of expression, its historical vulnerability in the face of supply and demand, its ability to become a viable service for consumers, and its total extinction. Through a painstaking marketing exercise, the artist produces new guidelines that fill us with anxiety and sarcasm, in order to make us rethink the ethics of our behavior. Perhaps death and resurrection are mere tricks—codes that resemble the biological process of natural selection:

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those more adaptable will survive. Hence, there are critics who become artists, artists who become dealers, and art itself becomes just a matter of business.

Bruguera confronts the market from a position that is subtly camouflaged under the mantle of buying and selling. In the same way that Ann Hamilton's *Privation and Excess* (1989) used intensely colored pennies to allude to the inevitable value and accumulation of money,<sup>1</sup> Bruguera transforms her actions into entities that have a specific monetary equivalent. Her goal, however, is

not to attain financial compensation but to offer buyers the opportunity to become active participants of the performance. The work of art is then a kind of collective game, as the client acquires the right to edit it according to the conditions established in the contract. Finally, buyers receive a certificate of ownership and a video documenting the performance, which serves as a guide for the reactivation of the work.

To a great degree, the need to break into other media can reconnect us with the external world. Bruguera created the Behavioral Act Class in

*Memory of the Postwar III*, 1994. Editing of a newspaper. Newspaper without name, date or news; political slogans used by the Cuban Revolution, reproduction of the posters used to advertise the slogans, red ink, black ink on paper. 16 x 11 1/2 in. (40,5 x 28,5 cm.). Courtesy of the artist.

**¡NO HAY MÁS CAMBIOS QUE HACER!**  
o revolución socialista o caricatura de revolución

**MOVILIZACIÓN GENERAL**  
Centenares de llamamientos y exhortaciones forman organizaciones obreras, campesinas y estudiantiles. El pueblo responde con fervor. Caravanas de propaganda recorren calles de La Habana. Mitines y concentraciones.  
HOY No.204, sep. 2, 1960, pp. 1.

**LIBERTAD O MUERTE**  
Este grito será siempre el grito del pueblo cubano, proclama Fidel.  
HOY No.205, nov 14, 1960, pp. 1.

**¡ADELANTE!**  
A toda la juventud, a todos los que amen a Cuba y a la Revolución, a todos los que estén dispuestos al sacrificio, les decimos con las palabras de nuestro Apóstol:  
LOS FLOJOS RESPETEN, LOS GRANDES ADELANTE, ESTA ES TAREA DE GRANDES.  
El Pícaro Amiguado de la Juventud Socialista, 1959

**¡CONTRA LOS PRIVILEGIOS!**  
Los que quieren destruir la Revolución merecen ser destruidos, advirtió Fidel en un discurso pronunciado en la Universidad de La Habana.  
HOY No.270, nov 20, 1959, pp. 1.

no nos detendrán

**¡SEGUIR ADELANTE!**  
es la consigna

Nuestro movimiento obrero será muy fuerte, porque será muy democrático, a construir un poderosísimo movimiento obrero ciento por ciento democrático.

**¡Qué viva el Marxismo-leninismo!**

¡Qué importan los peligros o sacrificios de un hombre o de un pueblo, cuando está en juego el destino de la humanidad!

**¡LUCHAREMOS HASTA EL FINAL!**  
**HASTA EL FINAL DE NUESTROS ENEMIGOS**

**¡ESCOGEREMOS SIEMPRE EL SACRIFICIO!**

**ESTA ES LA REVOLUCIÓN DE LOS HUMILDES, POR LOS HUMILDES Y PARA LOS HUMILDES**  
dijo Raúl en el panegírico al Titán de Bronce  
HOY No. 287, dic. 9, 1959, pp. 1.

... como nos pongan a escoger entre la indignidad y el sacrificio **YANKEES GO HOME!**



*Watchers, the Dream of Reason*, 2004. Performance. Airplane leaving or arriving the United States, passengers. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: passenger seat 16B (Pamela R. Haunschild).



*Tatlin's Whisper #3*, 2008. De-contextualization of an action. Information and construction materials for a homemade bomb. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and Galería Juana de Aizpuru.



2003, a project that blurs the border between the work of art and the pedagogical proposal. "The School is a long-term intervention," says the artist in her unpublished text *Cuando la conducta se convierte en forma*, a work of pedagogical intent that involves young students and non-students who specialize in various subjects.<sup>2</sup> Those who are accepted by a selection jury (and some others who do not appear in the official roster) attend workshops (in architecture, reflection, ethnology, sociology, the scientific method, law, film, art theory, art criticism, creativity, etc.), participate in an intensive period of training and conceptual exchange, and present their works in group exhibitions.

Bruguera acts on the difficult relations between students and academia, dealing with an environment impacted by many limitations and contaminated by formalisms and obtuse impoverishments. She operates in the open, deploying the weapons of power to gain territory, cutting where it hurts the most in order to avoid collapse before it's too late. She inserts a pacemaker into the city's vital organ, its people's heart, and examines natural and acquired habitual behaviors; she observes restlessness, indecision, curiosity, and frustrated desires to create when nobody is interested. She uses the space she has gained with her own work in order to voluntarily disappear behind the body of works generated by the artists involved in the project.

Invited to Art Basel Miami Beach in 2004, Bruguera recruited the help of some individuals to collaborate in her performance. Among the participants were a journalist, a collector, a gallery assistant, two artists, and an art critic, who worked among the public, selling newspapers. The papers were sold for twenty-six US cents, the equivalent of what a Cuban worker receives for a day of labor, and the papers did not contain real news but rather an extensive list of slogans related to the Cuban Revolution. The performance was completely anonymous, intermingled with the hustle

and bustle of the moment. Only some people stopped and purchased the newspaper, becoming an inescapable part of the discovery, a private experience that was invisible from an official institution.

The Miami-based community of Cuban artists questioned, disputed, and became enraged by Bruguera's boldness, the insolence of her action. Some questioned her ethical commitment to the public, the alleged "peddlers," and her own ideology. Who was this Tania Bruguera, who could spend part of the year in Cuba and part in the United States?<sup>3</sup> What was her line of thought, her doctrine, her belief system? How could she be here and there, leaving the country and returning at leisure, creating art without interlopers? A feeling of terrible mistrust and doubt seemed to grow among those who knew her work. It would seem that in the United States, a place where human autonomy, individuality, and independence are held (in theory) in the highest regard, liberty is not to be confused with freethinking.

Bruguera's work captures the attention of the public with its capacity to transform, confuse, disorient, and provoke unexpected and sudden reactions. People have an opportunity to speak their minds (or not), but a feeling of empathy is always called forth. Intent on awakening the viewer's performative capacity, Bruguera invites her public to sneak in, to dive into the corners of her work.<sup>4</sup> The people's murmurs, whispers, and disinformation complement and motivate her actions. At a metaphorical level, her interventions are related to Rirkrit Tiravanija's installation work and public events, at which the artist participates as a waiter, serving drinks or food and inviting the audience to forget the official criteria of art openings.<sup>5</sup> At these events, people can interact, talk, eat, critique, and whisper. Such reactions can be verified as one of the main ingredients in the artist's work.

There is an intricate complicity between Bruguera and her collaborators, who include viewers and

students. At first sight, the exercise of selling or the creation of a pedagogical project may seem to be mutual manipulation maneuvers, like the full acceptance of a competition's rules. While she advocates for a criterion of functionality in art, Bruguera conceives the Behavioral Art Class as an opportunity to promote "the development of a new generation of young artists" and at

the same time a work of art in itself, an artistic procedure of which she is the author.<sup>6</sup> Instead of representing the supposed "obligatory artwork" that is legitimized in front of the public, Bruguera dissolves herself in the gestation of a territory of subtle anonymity, where formal aesthetic categorizations of art (like performance) also disappear.

*Tatlin's Whispers #5*, 2008. De-contextualization of an action. Mounted police, crowd control techniques, audience. Variable dimensions. Performance view at The Living Currency, Tate Modern. Photo: Sheila Burnett. Courtesy Tate Modern. Tate Modern Collection.





*L'accord de Marseille*, 2006. A collaboration with Jota Castro. Legal agreement, Lawyer, city clerk, fee payment, legal certification. Long term collaboration project. Photo: Sandra Patrón. Courtesy of the artist.

At times, the maneuvers of death become an imperious necessity to reflect on the real meaning of existence. Ironically, if performance art retains some of the provocative authenticity it achieved in the 1960s and 1970s in the visual arts scene, it is thanks to the artists who assumed the role of killers at certain points throughout its history. Performance art has been the victim of a series of natural or induced deaths. Think, for instance, about the successive introductions of special effects, lights, monitors, video cameras, and other technological dressings that often act as filters—elements that theatricalize, intensify emotions, and falsify experience—but also open new possibilities.

The transition to a state of complete extinction stirs the emergence of an alien, a different specimen that dies in order to be resurrected in another archetype; a life principle, a cycle of revitalizing deaths, the mutation (trance) of the patient, the massive extermination of the ailment. At this point, people speak of a process of unending evolution (or involution), strategies of individual and collective survival, channels that encounter du-

bious attitudes, and uncertain ideologies related to events that are difficult to categorize, given their evasive nature and the new type of viewer involved in the scene.

Bruguera evoked the presence of a generic, impersonal, and absolute death in the work *The Burden of Guilt* (1997–1999), which was based on an indigenous Cuban folktale. In this work, the body of a beheaded lamb was attached to the artist, who was nude and fed on dirt and salt water in an act of rebellion. Whose guilt is implied by the title, and for what? What is the metaphor of the lamb, a holy animal connected to the notions of piety, purity, and naiveté? What innocent blood is distilled with the blood of the dead lamb? What feelings are aroused in the viewer: prurience, rancor, curiosity? Is the lamb's sacrifice worthy as an act of exorcism? Is it necessary to provoke a reaction of misery?

Without articulating a word, Bruguera loudly confronted and denounced a culpability shared by all, issuing a condemnation that hung from her neck like a necklace. She deployed the force of an image that unsettled and is stationed forever in

our subconscious—a version of the Great Sin, of imprudence, censorship, and the ignominious fragility of human beings. Bruguera attacked her pain (the repressed pain of others), showed the sweet face of death, and presented the killers we become, the hunt for the weakest among us, the massacre, the charge of the dead we don't recognize, and the reactions of a scared (enchanted, conquered) public, trapped under the weight of a universal, unanimous, immobile guilt.

And one wonders whether there are truly no longer any events that leave such traces, such conjunctures involving the public, such disarticulating modes of doing and bringing forth unexpected denouements. Or have we reached the point where nothing is unsettling or startling? Where is the blockage, the enigma of fate—in art or in the viewer? We hear daily reports of people relieving themselves in the middle of the street, chatting with ghosts on buses and trains, killing themselves, kidnapping innocents, raping children and adolescents, bombing public spaces, changing sexes. Is it that the public has already seen and experienced enough as to view with irony any pretext or creative event? What route shall we follow? What path must we find, improvise, intuit, or attempt?

In *Tatlin's Whisper III* (2006), Bruguera offered a training workshop for making bombs. Potential tools for destruction were placed in front of the large mass of viewers while the artist acted as a facilitator of the process. The invitation did not exclude those with suicidal or homicidal impulses, which made the training all the more exciting. On the table were the dangerous ingredients—glass and plastic bottles, explosives, flammable material, and aluminum foil—to be used by the participants in building the deadly devices. Indisputably, the work's conceptual platform revealed the effects that art can have—when joined to public subjugation, an unbridled use of power, and demagoguery—as a weapon for extermination.

With *Watchers* or *The Dream of Reason* (2004–2005), comprising four actions on airplanes, Bruguera proposed “a new model for emigration.” During the flights, the artist asked a passenger to film all of her movements, without revealing the artistic nature of the undertaking. Of course, many people refused to be involved in entering the private space of a traveling stranger, who can go to the restroom, read a fashion magazine, sneeze, yawn, eat, sleep, stretch her legs, and stare out the plane’s window. Bruguera’s action recalls Sophie Calle’s performative detective-like works, in which the artist pursues strangers and investigates her private lives, even herself becoming the object of pursuit. Nevertheless, Bruguera gave her “watcher” complete freedom to film, compromising his or her ethical sense. Whoever filmed the artist became a spy, a voyeur, and a prison guard—the only person who can say where to stop.

The artist defeats all barriers to entry not only to the United States but also to our most hidden phobias and mental states. The high walls or trenches that impede access to a given site (whatever its nature) are the insipid product of our routine mental monomania; therefore, they exist. Instead of circumscribing herself to the exhibition of literal comments about her “transterritorial condition,” Bruguera does away with rigid preconceptions, and her new model is open to the notion of a true migratory poetics, more connected to the individual’s thought—consciousness, spirit, will to overcome fear, intelligence—than to any arbitrary nomenclature of bureaucratic support.

*Tatlin’s Whisper #5* (2008) was an intervention at the Tate Modern in London where two horse-mounted policemen were deployed to confront the public. Following the artist’s request, the policemen practiced all the crowd-control maneuvers they normally use for political rallies. Although there was, apparently, nothing to control, there was—subconsciously—the latent possibility of a squabble or a rowdi-



*L'accord de Marseille*, 2006. A collaboration with Jota Castro. Legal agreement. Lawyer, city clerk, fee payment, legal certification. Long term collaboration project. Photo: Sandra Patrón. Courtesy of the artist.

ness that would break the established order. The police were convoked beforehand in order to prevent unhappy incidents. But, at the same time, the police themselves were the cause of the disruption and the disarray among the viewers, since nobody expected to be so controlled. Have we not felt the same sensation in a museum, library, or bookstore? With so many menacing eyes tracking artworks or books, the public sometimes feels strong desires to do what it shouldn’t, which defeats such vigilance. Is it that perhaps, at bottom, we need to be a part of that interplay of hidden cameras and security guards? Do we need to feel cornered, pursued?

The sensation of danger—an attraction to the unknown, to being startled, to commotion—is an effect we humans require to feel alive, just as we need to react to impositions, to communicate ideas, to choose. Bruguera’s work “is distant from any representational sense,” says Yolanda Wood.<sup>7</sup> Her attitude becomes a distinct resonance of her thought. With Jota Castro, Bruguera signed the *Marseille Agreement*, one of her most recent works, in which each artist agreed to donate his or her body to

the other in the event of death. Bruguera works with the rumors generated around the action—undefined sites of resistance, nonconformity, struggle, hesitation, or tolerance—like the way she forces those who do not want soup to drink three cups. The artist gives her public an opportunity to express their suspicions without reserve: to belie, reject, and conjecture about the notoriety achieved by the conception or adaptation of her works. She offers her body—her work’s conceptual body—for us to operate on, to cut up, and to collaborate with, consciously or not, in its implementation.

#### NOTES

1. Cynthia Freeland, *But is it art?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 108.
2. Quoted in Yuneikys Villalonga, “Tania Bruguera: su lugar y su momento,” unpublished, 2006.
3. Joel Weinstein, “Art and agitprop. Whose ox is it, anyways? Tania Bruguera’s *Autobiografía*,” *Art Papers*, 2005, 31–33.
4. See Villalonga, note 2.
5. Roselee Goldberg, in Freeland, 59.
6. See Villalonga, note 2.
7. Yolanda Wood, “La aventura del silencio en Tania Bruguera,” *ArteCubano*, 2000 (No. 3), 34–37.

#### DINORAH PÉREZ-REMENTERÍA

Independent art critic. She lives and works in Miami, Florida.