

ART AND AGITPROP

Whose Ox Is It, Anyway?

Tania Bruguera's *Autobiografía*

| BY JOEL WEINSTEIN

For most people, the 2004 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach was an endless slog through far too many places to look at way too much art. For me, it was a chance to do some bad acting.

I spent several hours one afternoon in the vicinity of the Miami Beach Convention Center selling—for a mere twenty-six cents a copy—performance artist Tania Bruguera's so-called newspaper which, in fact, contained no news. Bruguera's broadsheet was made entirely of headlines from Havana's official daily, *Granma*—"¡Qué viva el Marxismo-leninismo!" "¡Lucharemos hasta el final!" "¡Qué importan los peligros o sacrificios de un hombre o de un pueblo, cuando está en juego el destino de la humanidad!"—eight pages of full-blown socialist cant in boldface red and black.

Bruguera had come to Miami to perform her work *Autobiografía* as part of *OmniArt*, a group show coordinated with Art Basel Miami Beach through a grant from the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University. Hawking these newspapers on the streets around the fair was the most public aspect of this work, which also included a sound installation employing Fidel's speeches at *OmniArt*. After she arrived from Chicago where she lives part-time—she lives in Havana the rest of the year—she issued an email call for sellers who spoke Spanish and were willing to do a minimum of two four hour shifts in exchange for a twenty-five dollar daily stipend.



Above: Tania Bruguera, *Autobiografía*, 2004, audio performance, 24 X 57 X 17.5 feet. (courtesy of OMNIART; photo: Carl Juste)

Opposite: Joel Weinstein selling Tania Bruguera's newspaper in front of the Miami Beach Convention Center, December 5, 2005 (photo: Enrique Parra)

¡NO HAY MÁS CAMBIOS QUE HACER!

o revolución socialista o caricatura de revolución

MOVILIZACIÓN GENERAL

Comités de Hamletos y esbortaciones formulan organizaciones obreras, campesinas y estudiantiles. El pueblo responde con fervor. Caravanas de propaganda recorren calles de La Habana. Misiones y concentraciones.

HJC No. 204, no. 2, 1952, pp. 1.

LIBERTAD O MUERTE

Este grito será siempre el grito del pueblo cubano, gritemos Fidel.

HJC No. 202, no. 14, 1952, pp. 1.

¡ADELANTE!

A toda la juventud, a todos los que aman a Cuba y a la Revolución, a todos los que están dispuestos al sacrificio, se decretan las palabras de nuestro Apóstol:

LOS FLEJOS RESPETEN, LOS GRANDES ADELANTE, ESTA ES TAREA DE GRANDES.

El Poder Arbitral de la Juventud Encarnada, 1952

¡CONTRA LOS PRIVILEGIOS!

Los que quieren destruir la Revolución mueran por destrucción, advirtió Fidel en un discurso pronunciado en la Universidad de La Habana.

HJC No. 278, no. 28, 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

ESTA ES LA REVOLUCIÓN DE LOS HUMILDES, POR LOS HUMILDES Y PARA LOS HUMILDES

dijo Raúl en el panegírico al Titán de Bronce

HJC No. 287, no. 8, 1959, pp. 1.

... como nos pongan a escoger entre la indignidad y el sacrificio

YANKES GO HOME!

¡ESCOGEREMOS SIEMPRE EL SACRIFICIO!

¡Negros no, ciudadanos!

¡Vamos a desarrollar el socialismo más culto!

¡Más deportes, más cultura, para hacer feliz a nuestro pueblo!

¡Adelante la lucha contra el burocratismo!

LA LUCHA CONTRA EL BUROCRATISMO TAREA DECISIVA

Todos a decir ¡PRESENTE!

para iniciar la preparación combativa

A RECUPERAR LO PERDIDO Y AVANZAR AÚN MÁS

COLABORAREMOS CON LOS ANGOLANOS EN TODOS LOS TERRENOS

FIDEL 79-776



Tania Bruguera, *Autobiografía*, 2004, detail of newspaper, print run: 1000

A handful of people—a couple of artists, a collector, a gallery assistant, a journalist for an alternative weekly, and myself—responded to the call, and we met in front of the convention center the afternoon before the fair opened. Bruguera showed us her paper and delivered a crisp, droll statement about the aims of her project. That is, I thought it was crisp and droll, but I wasn't entirely certain because my comprehension of Spanish is pretty much on-again off-again.

I understood her to say that a newspaper made entirely of slogans demonstrates that there are no individual voices in Cuba's public life, no commentary that springs organically from the cultural soil. Citizens read and hear only the strident messages of the state. This significantly shapes how they see the world.

She told us that, as vendors, we could say anything we wanted. We were not, however, to reveal that our interaction was part of an art performance until the buyer paid for the paper. Twenty-six cents is the daily wage of a worker in Cuba, Bruguera explained, and July 26, 1952, was the date of the opening salvo of Fidel's fight to overthrow the Batista regime and establish the once-shining revolutionary government that has now fallen so low.

From her description, I pictured our little group as a corps of artist-provocateurs, out to awaken the art mob from its fair-induced stupor as it trooped from the dizzying precincts of the convention center to the parking lots, taxi stands, and bus stops from which it whizzed off to yet other art-filled destinations. Bruguera's newspaper, with its oddly antiquated and, for many Cuban exiles here, inflammatory rhetoric would certainly get their attention. Readers would presumably see that what appeared to promote the shabby aims of a tyrannical, bankrupt, and perhaps senile regime was, in fact, incisive criticism of that doddering but still dangerous government.

Unfortunately, there was one crucial dimension of Bruguera's project that I didn't catch at the time. The paper included a little insert explaining the project. Looking at it later, I discovered that the performance was aimed not only at the Castro regime but also at the exile community.

"Miami has been the main refuge for Cubans leaving the Island after Castro's revolution," Bruguera wrote. "Those who emigrated carried with them their political life, combined and sometimes substituted with their emotional memories. [They] have tried to create a hybrid mirror image of the Cuba they remember." Her text concluded, "This paper carries no news.

Instead it delivers a compilation of the original propaganda, as if there were no other events important enough to be reported, recorded or kept for history."

The implication seemed to be that the immigrant community's position is, in its own way, as lacking in historical development as the regime's. This is hard to deny, but it is also utterly obvious to anyone who has spent more than a week in Miami. Had I caught that part of Bruguera's drift, I would have deemed it a highly unpromising premise for a work of art.

Nonetheless, there I was at the main entrance to the fair that glorious Friday afternoon, waving newspapers at the passing crowds and saying things like, "¡Noticias de Cuba! ¡Casi gratis! ¡Veintiseis centavos solamente!" If I never felt that an irate citizen might grab the papers out of my hand and fling them into the air, shouting, "Don't believe this asshole!" a certain amount of contained hostility did drift my way, and few strangers bought what I was selling. I ended up unloading most of my stash on amused and curious friends.

My shift had long stretches of tedium punctuated by the low level commotion of a sale. Then there would be a flurry of excitement. A young woman in a dark blazer and grey slacks came running up to me brandishing bills and coins. "I work with several groups who are studying the communists in Cuba," she said breathlessly. "Bring me all the papers you have and I'll buy them. I'm over there, parking cars."

I tried to explain that the paper was part of an art performance. She could return and buy them from me one at a time. She just looked at me as if I were out of my mind and hurried off.

I had many other brushes with the public that afternoon. These were, however, more oblique, and none of them involved money changing hands. I noticed family groups, often with young children in tow or in strollers, looking quickly away at the mention of Cuba and the sight of the red and black headlines, with considerable clenching of jaws and jutting of chins. Spaniards, whom I distinguished by their soft, courtly speech, usually refused politely, even affably.

To my surprise, non-Spanish speakers were the ones who reacted vehemently to my pitch. If someone said, "Sorry, I don't speak Spanish," I persisted. "No importa," I'd say, trying to make eye contact. "Puede comprenderlo sin problema." They'd shake their heads impatiently and veer out of the way. A few got pretty worked up. I realized they were angry because I was speaking Spanish, not because I was saying something in particular they couldn't understand. More than one passerby muttered crossly, "Speak English!"

I met up with Bruguera at the end of the day. She seemed especially delighted by the hapless valet. I didn't think much of it at the time. After reading her written explanation, however, I began to have doubts about what she was doing.

For the most part, I greatly enjoyed my afternoon of cultural anthropology, awash in the mild turbulence of class and status that swirls through Miami Beach during Art Basel time. If Bruguera's newspaper, on the face of it, had more than enough irony to stir my needling, post-modernist disposition, there was something in her stated approach that I also found distasteful. Miami's Cuban exile art crowd may have its blind spots and its intractable, maddening woe, but it is far from the most reactionary element in the community. To create an elaborate per-

formance just to get its particular goat—which is easy to get under any circumstances—seems glib, presumptuous, and condescending. Lacking any sustained attempt at dialogue, was the piece merely seeking to confront exiles with the bitterest echoes of their former lives? If this was Bruguera's intention, it was just mean-spirited.

That night, as I was making the rounds of the fair's famously raucous nighttime parties and satellite exhibitions, I had a number of conversations with friends who were part of, or close to, Cuba's renowned Eighties Generation artists. Having come of age during the revolution, they left the island for Miami deeply disillusioned by that experience. When I told one of them I'd been out all day selling Bruguera's paper, he said, "You can't know what it's like for us to see those things. I haven't really decided what I think about Tania's work. It's just upsetting."

"But it's ultimately critical of Castro," I replied. "How is the newspaper different from a painting by Glexis Novoa which portrays Castro's skull on a dais with a bullet hole in the forehead?"

"It's not all that different," he admitted, but he was clearly not pleased by Bruguera's slant.


Another friend waxed wroth about the fact that Bruguera could move easily between the United States and Cuba while, caught in the draconian machinations of the American State Department and the Castro regime, exiles must suffer just one brief visit a year.

"She should shit or get off the pot," my friend said angrily of Bruguera. "She should be here or there. She can't have it both ways."

As a writer, I am quick to say that the artist's intention matters very little when it comes to how an art work is received by its public; that to really understand it, or at least to be moved by it, you have to stick to the work. This approach also offers more sympathetic interpretations of what Bruguera was doing in Miami. A friend, who often gets to the heart of the matter by looking at the obvious, taking first things first, provided the most provocative reading.

"It's called *Autobiografía*," she pointed out. "The performance is meant to convey what it's like to be Tania Bruguera, artist, Cuban artist, Cuban artist in America. You get a chance to experience what she experiences on all those levels, and see the different ways it affects everyone."

Looking at both Bruguera's actions and words, however, you could think of the paper's provocation as a kind of dare from the citizen who stayed behind to the exiles who left. "If you react against this superficial stuff," the dare might go, "you're missing the complexities of both our daily lives, and yours. You're missing the changes, for better or worse, here and there, that we, all of us, have undergone since 1959, 1970, 1985, or even 1998."

"As you saw," my friend said, "it's not always easy and it may not be what you expect, but that's what makes it interesting and what makes it art." 

Miami writer Joel Weinstein covers visual art for various national and international magazines. His report on Miami appeared in the November/December 2003 issue of ART PAPERS.