



ARTREVIEW *You were born in Cuba in 1968 and you grew up during the period of the Cold War. Can you describe your childhood during those years? Was there a moment of political awakening for you?*

TANIA BRUGUERA I was the daughter of a diplomat, so my childhood was defined by living outside of Cuba. I grew up inside embassies in France, Lebanon and Panama; I lived inside a propaganda machine designed to export Cuban reality – a place from which Cuba was also intervening in the political life of those countries, a place in which political alliances were formed. But I was just a child.

Only while I was in Beirut did I have the opportunity to ‘escape’ this environment to study at the Lycée Français, where the education was Cartesian rather than the doctrinal system we had in Cuba. I experienced the stress of being in danger (from the bombs during the war in Lebanon and, later, during the US invasion of Panama), a very concrete experience of conflict, which is something that in Cuba was just a threat. I guess that is the ‘Cold War’ that I was experiencing – very different from the one I found when I returned, age eleven, to live in Cuba.

This living abroad also made me see the world in a perspective that was broader than that of an islander.

At that time Cubans could not travel, and once I returned to Cuba I had a hard time readjusting to a place that seemed very restrictive, as if each of us were responsible for the ‘Cold War’, which we only saw in the scarcity and the constant militarisation of our lives (always ready to go to the underground antimissile shelters, to train in Las Milicias de Tropas Territoriales, MTT, to recite the daily slogans by heart instead), which seemed to me, after having real war experiences, more a representation than an actual requirement. We were saying what was expected and not what we thought; we would do things not out of belief but out of duty. Reality could become very confusing. I was shocked by the presence of lying in everyday life as a consequence of those representational mandates.

One thing that defined us during those years was being closer to the USSR and the Eastern European countries than to our more natural neighbours, which made Cubans see themselves as more international people. For us Angola was not a country in Africa but the place where someone you knew died ‘for another country’s benefit’. The world became really small and touchable. Things were not evident but ideological, they were not really tangible but they were present.

Of course the US was this construction that took the blame for everything, no matter what it was. We lived in constant anticipation of an invasion that never happened. The government gave permission to be disrespectful and even offensive in terms of different political views (Fidel cursed US presidents, called them names in public speeches for instance).

I became political to others when I didn’t want to lie in a world that was full of double standards.

AR *Why did you choose to go to art school?*

TB I wrote short stories and drew all the time inside those walls at the embassy; when we arrived to Cuba, my mom thought art would be a good transitional element for me in this new reality. But when I became serious about being an artist, that led to a big fight with my parents, who wanted me to be a scientist (their argument: good grades were going to be thrown in the garbage). But in art I found a way to solve things, it was a way to think, a way to recuperate freedom, a way to be honest.

AR *Can you describe your earliest performance works? Do you indeed consider yourself a ‘performance artist’?*

TB When I was at the elementary art school (this would be from twelve to fifteen years old), we had a class with a great Cuban artist called Juan Francisco Elso Padilla that was truly multi-disciplinary and form-free. For exercises we were challenged to work outside of the classroom and with ‘nonartistic’ resources such as tapestry or collective actions: we even went to rural areas to do ephemeral sculptures and some performances (but



it was called art). Then when I was at middle art school (sixteen to eighteen) I was part of a group of artists and actors that were doing performative presentations in public spaces such as urban ruins or parking lots (but that was called theatre). Then, during the 1980s, a group of Cuban artists started doing actions and performances in Cuba as a way to challenge the status quo. I identified what performance was at that point, and it was clear that it was what I wanted to do. Then I went into doing the piece *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*, which is my first performance work. The project lasted just over ten years [1985–96].

I called myself a performance artist at the beginning because it was a quick way to identify what I was doing to other people and to distance my work from more mainstream

above *Immigrant Movement International*, 2011, performance, New York. Photo: Sam Horine. Courtesy Creative Time, New York

facing page *Museum of Arte Útil*, 2013 (installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2013). Photo: Peter Cox. Courtesy the artist and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven





proposals at the time. I even decided to come to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago because they had a practice-based performance department. But once I started studying the history of this practice (from a US perspective; back then Latin American performance was not on the reading lists) I discovered everything that separated what I was looking for in my work from most such performative traditions – mostly the vision of my work as a gesture. After I left the school and after a heavy [Michel] Foucault induction, I called what I was doing *Arte de Conducta*, to make sure that any analysis would start with the social and political implications of the work.

Today, after working on the *Arte Útil* [useful art – in Bruguera’s words, one that seeks ‘to imagine, create, develop and implement something that, produced in artistic practice, offers the people a clearly beneficial result’] concept, I see myself as an initiator (rather than a performer or even an artist). By that I mean that what I’m doing is setting up the conditions for things to happen, where the audience has as much responsibility as I do for where the work goes. It is a way to acknowledge that with social and political public work we do not own all the work and that the ways by which these works can be sustained are by the intervention, care and enthusiasm of others.

AR *Of course the most famous of these ‘initiations’ or ‘behavioural’ works was your attempt to place an open microphone in Revolution Square in Havana this past December. It led to your detention by the authorities. The title of that series of works, Tatlin’s Whisper, suggests the failure of the revolution, of a tower that was never built. You previously staged this work [Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version)] in 2009, offering attendees the chance to ask for ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, an act that the government denounced as ‘shameful opportunism’ that ‘offends Cuban artists and foreigners who came to offer their work and solidarity’ at the time of the Havana Biennale. With the recent iteration, did you expect to get arrested and was that the ultimate intention of the piece?*

TB Indeed the title of that series (which also includes a work in which mounted police use crowd-control techniques on the audience in a museum or a dark space where people are pushing you around) relates to the state of utopia in an atmosphere of brutal pragmatism and short-term efficiency anxiety. But it’s important to say that this series was born before the existence of the upsurge of alternative social movements like Indignados, Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street. All the

life, saying no to the police), to provide a process by which to do what I have called transforming audiences into active citizens. This is proposed and put into practice via two conditions I use in all of the pieces: it is always happening inside a cultural/art institution (looking as if it was an unauthorised moment), and it takes its visual references from events covered by the press. The sense of being at something that is ‘unauthorised’ or that goes beyond permissible lines is what creates the

discomfort and challenge to the audience; it is the moment when the learned behaviour struggles with the desire provided by the freedom and permissibility of the moment. The link with the news is what provides the *extrañamiento* (alienation), because such information is only ethically connected to you when you have not experienced it in the flesh; by having it happen right there, your response is needed, you can’t change the TV channel or turn the page because it is actually happening to you. There is no ‘correct’ answer in my work, there is no ‘envisioned’ outcome, the piece is a test and a testimony to the way in which things are, politically and socially, at a specific moment, and this information is provided by people, not by institutions or governments.

The difference with the structure of *#YoTambienExijo* (*#YTE*) [which is the name of the 2014 restaging of the work] is that we did not use a news event as a mnemonic device but rather a previous artwork and its political consequences, which were in people’s memory (*Tatlin’s Whisper #6, Havana Version* – after

which, as I learned in 2013, I was forbidden to show at any Cuban art institution). We proposed to go one step further by trying to do it in a place where it could go beyond the symbolic: in a public space with its own history of power and speech acts. The proposal was to make the gesture as vulnerable as possible, to remove any protective layers (especially the ones provided by the contract between art and its institutions).

I have to say that this piece is dedicated to / inspired by two people: the first one is Claudia Cadelo, a blogger in Cuba who was in the audience during the presentation of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6, Havana Version*. At the time she



iterations of *Tatlin’s Whisper* are a call to take power into your hands (for example speaking freely when you can’t in your everyday political

above Documentation of an Ana Mendieta performance, from Tania Bruguera’s *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*, conception year: 1985; implementation years: 1986–96. Medium: Recreation of works. Materials: Ana Mendieta’s artworks and unrealised projects, lectures, exhibitions, interviews, texts. Photo: Gonzalo Vidal Alvarado. Courtesy Studio Bruguera

previous spread *Museum of Arte Útil*, (installation view, Van Abbemuseum, 2013). Photo: Peter Cox. Courtesy the artist and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

said, 'I hope one day freedom of speech doesn't have to be a performance.' With that comment, Cadelo actually signalled the limits of the work as it was unveiling and brought the challenge posed by art as being that of a mere representation and escape valve rather than... the actual thing. It brought to light the frustration of art as a temporary space for freedom, and the limits of bringing an exercise into a situation where reality had indeed to be changed.

The second inspiration was *Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week* [2000], by Christoph Schlingensiefel. It is one of my favourite artworks – I think it is obvious why.

AR *It was also called Foreigners Out! For that work, which took place at a time when the rightwing FPÖ had won enough seats to be invited into a new coalition government, Schlingensiefel set up a reality-show-type event within a container and asked viewers to phone in daily to vote out (or deport) two of the 12 'asylum seekers' held within. Schlingensiefel basically took politicians' words and the notion of their 'popular' mandate to their extreme conclusions. Who is the intended audience for your work?*

TB #YTE's main intended audience was people who are not natural museumgoers. Regarding the institutional response to the 2009 presentation of the piece, their arguments (and I tried to work with them) were so simplistic and basic that there was no way I could accept them: they all proposed that I reject a core belief of my work (audiences as coauthors) by saying that I regretted the participation of the audience. Cuba is the political-PR case-study par excellence, and part of that is to present things as an offence to the good people (as you said when you quoted the government response: that 'offends Cuban artists and foreigners who came to offer their work and solidarity') and always in traditional moral terms that pretend to be protecting a good society in construction, one that is vulnerable to attacks manifested as voicing a different opinion, a threat to unity and of course a challenge to the 'only' valid opinion.

When you are an artist dealing with the limits of art and life, you need to be very clear

to others about what at least the core values of the work are, and you need to defend them. Because it is the only clear element of the work while people are figuring out the form you are using.

There are many people that think that because I have proposed things like *Arte Útil* and what I call 'political-timing-specific art' I'm renouncing art; it is actually the contrary, it is claiming the right that art has to be redefined as an active part of other things, it is the rights artists have to be more than producers.

Many people asked me if I knew (and accused me of knowing) that I was going to be arrested. Well, I did not know that when



I proposed the piece. So far, in Cuba, artists have been treated as a special class with a lot of privileges, and I have used those to push political boundaries. But for this work I was treated not as an artist but as a dissident: that was clear the day Rubén del Valle, the president of the Arts Council, literally told me that he was going to wash his hands and have nothing more to do with me and my project (basically saying that from that moment on I was going to be transferred to the attention of the Ministry of Interior). They even started a fierce campaign to say that I was not an artist any more as a way of justifying the treatment they gave me. But even when

*Tatlin's Whisper #5*, 2008, performance, Tate Modern, London, 2008 © the artist. Courtesy Tate London

I knew that all such avenues were closed (once I tried to negotiate with the Arts Council during two four-hour meetings and with the police for the street permits) and it was clear that imprisonment was a potential outcome, I went ahead anyway. I realised that the intention and the meaning of the piece changed from showing the vision of Cuba desired by the general Cuban population – it was no longer about how people could participate in the decisions about the future of their country, about the right to express themselves and to have access to public spaces as a citizen – and had become a device by which to take the masks of everyone's double

standards away, at least for a while. It became a piece that uncovered the mechanism the state uses and that most people are not seeing or do not want to see. It became a piece about talking directly to the power structure, and I have to tell you, as a political artist, what could be better than to look the authorities in the eyes and say, 'I do not fear you, now can we talk?'

I think this piece is the best case-study for my ideas about *Arte de Conducta* (Behaviour/Conduct art), political-timing-specific art and the 'aest-ethics' concept (a term I use to talk about the ethics as the aesthetics in political and socially engaged work). I wish one day it could be an example of *Arte Útil*. I tried.

I proposed to the state police that I would work with them in the creation of a Law for Freedom of Expression / manifestation and against political hate. They were very adamant to make me a 'collaborator', and I said that would be the only thing I would do as a collaboration. They just played with me, saying that they would check with their superiors and even tried to calm me by making promises, but they were just promises; they never became real proposals. I have to say that I'm still open to working with the government if it is to create this legislation against political hate, because it would make the piece an *Arte Útil* case. For me it is very important that art goes beyond 'showing' things. Instead we need to propose change and implement it through art. ar