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## Voices: How Cuban Artist Tania Bruguera Is Defining 'Artivism'

by CARMEN PELAEZ

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President Obama has completed his historic three-day trip to Havana, an event that shifted the dynamics of the two countries' relations. But for those who want to be part of a new and pluralistic Cuba, this is when the work begins. Internationally renowned Cuban artist Tania Bruguera wants to make sure they have the right tools.



Artist Tania Bruguera. Kickstarter

Whether Bruguera's playing Russian roulette with live ammunition or sitting naked in a box made of meat eating the pages of a Cuban history book, her work is riveting. Always bringing along the spectator into an uncomfortable and painfully truthful space, her art is as visceral as any I've experienced.

Last year, when I got the news she was arrested attempting to recreate her piece *Taitlin's Whisper* in the Plaza de la Revolución, I couldn't help but smile; if anyone could get under the Cuban government's skin, it's Tania.

Everybody from the Guggenheim to the MOMA to Tate Modern advocated for her release. Thankfully, after many weeks, she was, only to be re-arrested and put under an unofficial house arrest for months. This only made the artist stronger; Bruguera managed to make the Cuban government's actions part of her greatest performance piece ever - one of artistic civic engagement. And a year later, she's inviting the world to join her.

Bruguera has launched an ambitious Kickstarter campaign which she will use to open the Institute of Artivism / Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR). The institute will serve as as brick and mortar as well as an online platform where international artists can collaborate with Cubans to create peaceful tools for policy change and advance civic literacy.

Rewards for support range from a membership to INSTAR to her telling Cuban security anything you want the next time she's arrested. Which considering the current tenor of the regime's apparatus seems inevitable, even though she is creating this institute within the parameters of current Cuban law. Any Cuban can join for one *peso*, a requirement as she applied and received a *cuentapropista* license from the government.

Curious about the aims of what could end up being a very impactful work of art, I asked Tania about her plans.

### **What would you want to tell somebody who doesn't know anything about Cuba?**

I would like for people that don't know anything about Cuba as well as those who think they know all about Cuba, to stop projecting onto us their fantasies, stop judging Cubans that have a story to tell that differs from what they want to hear and try to understand what is happening in its own context.

### **How can the world collaborate with improving civic society in Cuba?**

The Cuban government has a long history of creating and co-opting institutions that belong to civic society. Unions defend the employer instead of the employee, it's a perversion. Accountability meetings in town halls praise people in power whether they have done their duty or not. Groups that call themselves civil society work for the government and I could go on and on.



Artist Tania Bruguera.

So people coming to Cuba who want to "help" need to be aware of these dynamics. That doesn't mean that work can't be done, but they need to understand what the real consequences of their work are, who they're collaborating with and what is the actual outreach their projects will have. Sometimes it's all a theater to please the visitor, to project the social or personal fantasy that person has.

Another aspect that is hard to deal with is that so many important people, who could give some of their knowledge to alternative projects or who could push more for institutions to be civically engaged, would trade that “difficult conversation” and “hard work” for meeting one of the historical leaders of the Revolution or to keep their institutional contacts in the island in good terms.

People have a soft spot for Cuba, therefore, they let go things that they would not tolerate in other countries. Just because it’s happening in Cuba they find a way of justifying it.

Cuba should be measured by the same standard of the rest of the world. An injustice in Cuba should not be justified, it should be seen as an injustice. The world needs to see Cuba for what it is today, not for what it projects itself as. At INSTAR we want to give them a chance to do that.

**What would make you consider your institute a success?**

INSTAR is a long-term project, therefore, success should not be expected as instant gratification but as the result of a long and sustained series of small victories by which people will gain confidence on the power they have.

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## #NBCLatino20: Techie for Global Good, Luis von Ahn

by SUZANNE GAMBOA



Luis von Ahn has worn a lot of labels over the years – genius, tech rock star, game changer. There’s another he could wear: social activist.

Von Ahn, the co-founder of the free language-learning app Duolingo, has been using the superpowers of his mind to right an injustice he experienced as a young man growing up in Guatemala, his native country.

“I saw the difference between those who had access to education – not just education, but a lot of things – and those who didn’t,” von Ahn told NBC Latino in an interview at Duolingo’s Pittsburgh headquarters.

“Guatemala is a very poor country. I went to a very fancy high school where everybody kind of had a lot of resources, but very nearby or nearby where I lived, there were people and friends I had who were not able to eat dinner that

night," he said.

Today about 15 percent of language classrooms in the U.S. use Duolingo and that number is growing. It is used in public schools in various countries, allowing schoolchildren and people to learn another language for free. It uses techniques from games and casinos to get learners to stick with it, von Ahn said.

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"What makes me proudest about Duolingo, in particular, is Duolingo is used by this huge spectrum of people. On one side we have very, very wealthy users, for example, Bill Gates uses Duolingo to learn French. Tom Hanks uses Duolingo or Zoe Deschanel," von Ahn said.



Duolingo co-founder Luis von Ahn poses for a photo at the White House with President Barack Obama. © Dennis Brack / Dennis Brack

"On the other end of the spectrum ... You have public school kids in developing countries using the same system that is used by very wealthy, famous people ... This is one small example where more money can't buy you a better system," he said.

Von Ahn has built and created an enterprise around the idea that computer science can harness a lot of energy from people's activities. Married with technology to solve problems, it can accomplish important tasks and bring humankind forward.

Considered one of the pioneers of crowdsourcing, von Ahn is the brain behind those pesky random letters or words you have to retype to prove you are not a robot. The system is his former company, CAPTCHA, which he repurposed as reCAPTCHA. His inventions made it possible for the archives of the New York Times to be digitized each time a person retyped the words. He sold that and another he created to Google.

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The companies stem, in part, from von Ahn's need to get all the productivity he can out of a single task. When he was 12 or 13, he wanted to start a free gym so users' exercise activity could be converted to energy. As an adult, he

had to stop himself from driving while texting. He's grateful for the driverless cars in parts of Pittsburgh that allow him to read his emails while commuting between places.

Von Ahn came to the U.S. from Guatemala in 1997 to study at Duke University, where he graduated summa cum laude. He went on to earn his doctorate in computer science at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh where he now studies and lives. His company's presence in Pittsburgh has been credited with helping revitalize the city.

But whenever he gives a talk, he starts by saying he is from Guatemala, showing it on a map and making it clear it is not Guantanamo.



Luis von Ahn  Courtesy of Luis von Ahn

Guatemala, von Ahn said, "defined me. I'm very defined by where I'm from and the older I get, the more I feel defined by the fact that I'm Latino or Guatemalan."

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**What's your Latino guilty pleasure?:** "I love Mexican food and I could have it every day. We have a chef who makes food for us and at some point I convinced him to do Taco Tuesdays and now I'm trying to convince him to do Mexican Mondays."

**What language you prefer for romance?:** "Depends on whether the other person speaks English or Spanish ... Unfortunately, I'm not a Latin lover."

**Best thing about being from a Latino family?:** "I know the names of all my cousins and there are like 70 of them."

**Twitter:** @luisvonahn

**Twitter:** @duolingo

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