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públicos*

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TANIA BRUGUERA'S 'TRAVELLING PERFORMANCES': CHALLENGING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES /VOICES

Abstract: Tania Bruguera ranks among the foremost contemporary conceptual artists. Both in her life and in her art, she has defied and crossed borders and boundaries. This article intends to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of Bruguera's artistic enterprise: even as she adopts a post-modern stance, mostly through live performances, her work is deeply rooted in Cuba's indigenous traditions and painful past, as well as in its present-day life and politics. Breaking traditional boundaries between artistic media – painting, sculpture and body performance – Bruguera's installations combine solid structures with ephemeral ones, while others are performances with the artist performing in front of an audience, requested to actively participate in the artwork. This article also discusses the changes introduced by the artist in the performances that took place in the US and in Europe, and concludes by discussing the impact of militant practices in contemporary performance art on audiences in our age of globalization.

Keywords: Tania Bruguera, performance art, private vs. public, activism.

AS 'PERFORMANCES ITINERANTES' DE TANIA BRUGUERA: DESAFIANDO ESPAÇOS/VOZES PÚBLICOS

Resumo: Tania Bruguera conta-se entre os principais artistas contemporâneos. Tanto na sua vida como na sua arte, tem desafiado e atravessado limites e fronteiras. Este artigo procura demonstrar a natureza paradoxal da empreitada artística de Bruguera: embora adotando uma postura pós-moderna, sobretudo através das performances ao vivo, o trabalho da artista está fortemente enraizado nas tradições indígenas de Cuba e no seu doloroso passado, bem como no dia a dia e na política atuais do país. Quebrando as tradicionais barreiras entre os meios artísticos – pintura, escultura e performance corporal – as instalações de Bruguera combinam estruturas sólidas com outras efêmeras, ao passo que em outras performances a artista encontra-se perante o público, convidado a participar ativamente no trabalho artístico. O presente artigo discute também as alterações introduzidas por Bruguera nas performances que tiveram lugar nos Estados Unidos e na Europa, e conclui com uma discussão sobre o impacto das práticas militares na performance artística contemporânea nesta nossa época de globalização.

Palavras-chave: Tania Bruguera, arte performativa, privado vs. público, ativismo.

Has Art itself become a mere outtake, a long footnote to the human history? In the United States it is technology, not culture, that is regarded to be a space for innovations. Art, it seems, has overstayed its welcome. But the amateur artists, immigrants from the disintegrated homeland, survive against all odds. Often they cross the border illegally and like the diasporic repo-men try to repossess what used to belong to them, re-conquer the space of art.

Svetlana Boym (n.d.)

Svetlana Boym's remarks concerning the crucial role played by exiled artists in revitalizing "the space of art" in the USA provide a particularly apt entrance into Tania Bruguera's transnational, trans-disciplinary and subversive artistic world. Along with Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña,¹ Tania Bruguera ranks as one of the pioneers of Hispanic performance art whose goal is to create a parallel, temporary universe that challenges dictatorships and censorship by crossing political and artistic borders.

The daughter of a Cuban diplomat and an English translator, Tania Bruguera (born in 1968, at La Havana) grew up amid the Cuban revolution's promises and problems. She began splitting her time between Havana and Chicago in 1997, and taught art at the University of Chicago from 2003 to 2010. A conceptual, militant performance artist of worldwide renown, Bruguera has shown her work at the Venice Biennale, at the Documenta Kassel, at the Pompidou Center in Paris and was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. She is currently involved in a project called Immigrant Movement International, located in Queens, New York. Tania Bruguera has been and still is an active militant in the ongoing process of rapprochement between Cuba and the United States, at times putting her own freedom at risk. This essay discusses the implications of what appears to be a revival of militant collective performances, involving artists and spectators on a global scale.

In addressing Bruguera's work, one needs to draw upon theoreticians of conceptual art, like Sol LeWitt, whose definition was one of the first to appear in print: "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (LeWitt, 1967). Encyclopaedia Britannica's definition of conceptual art, also called post-object art or art-as-idea, comes close to LeWitt's. It is

¹ Coco Fusco is a Cuban-American artist, writer and curator. She spoke out firmly against Bruguera's detention by the Cuban authorities in 2014. Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a Chicano performance artist, writer, activist, and educator. He has created work in multiple media, including performance art, experimental radio, video, photography and installation art. His books include essays, experimental poetry, performance scripts and chronicles in both English, Spanish and Spanglish.

artwork whose medium is an idea (or a concept), usually manipulated by the tools of language and sometimes documented by photography. Its concerns are idea-based rather than formal. For contemporary Belgian artist and designer Pierre Huyghe, conceptual art is an art form in which the artist's intent is to convey a concept rather than to make an artistic object.

One of the first and most important things conceptual artists questioned is the common assumption that the role of the artist is to create special kinds of material objects. Noting this important conceptual shift, major contemporary theorists such as Matei Calinescu (*Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 1987) and Hans Bertens (*The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*, 1995) have suggested that this is a sign our culture has entered a new age, when the former modernist ways of thinking and behaving have become redundant.

Breaking traditional boundaries of artistic media – painting, sculpture and body performance – conceptual art is intent on examining its own nature. Some works of conceptual art are installations combining solid structures with ephemeral ones while others are performances with the artist performing in front of an audience who can be requested to actively participate in the artwork. While Tania Bruguera's performances draw to a certain extent upon the precepts set forth by Marcel Duchamp in the 1950s, the Cuban artist instills her performances with ingredients borrowed from avant-garde militant art, in particular from Russian Constructivist Tatlin's work.² Albeit borrowing from diverse artistic trends, most of Bruguera's performances are rooted in the present and past history of her native island.

This article intends to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of Bruguera's artistic enterprise: even as it adopts a post-modern stance, mostly through live performances, her work is deeply rooted in Cuban life, traditions and politics. By focusing on immigrants' rights, Bruguera's art has recently adopted a global perspective. Finally, I will try to show that her major concern is the struggle against totalitarianism everywhere and, in particular, in her home (is)land, Cuba.

I. HOMAGE TO A PREDECESSOR

All of the significant art of today stems from Conceptual art. This includes the art of installation, political, feminist, and socially directed art.

LeWitt (1967)

² Vladimir Tatlin was a Russian and Soviet painter and architect. With Kazimir Malevich he was one of the two most important figures in the Russian avant-garde art movement of the 1920s, and he later became an important artist in the Constructivist movement. He is most famous for his design for The Monument to the Third International, more commonly known as *Tatlin's Tower*, which he began in 1919.

Given Bruguera's geopolitical background and personal experience, her entire work pivots around issues of power and control; thus several of her works question, represent and/or perform events in Cuban history, whether individual or collective. The artist's first incursion into the past was her Tribute to Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-American artist whose work was banned in her homeland after her migration to the US. Tania Bruguera's work comes close to an archeologist's as she brings to light and re-enacts old objects and performances created by Ana Mendieta.³ Bruguera's very first performance was a reconstruction of Ana Mendieta's "Blood Trace," which the Cuban-born artist Mendieta first performed in Iowa in 1974. Dipping her forearms into a bucket of pig's blood, Mendieta raised both hands above her head and then dragged them to the floor, leaving a V-shaped stain.

IMAGE I - Tribute to Ana Mendieta

Conception year: 1985

Implementation years: 1986-1996

Medium: Re-creation of works

Duration: Long-term project

Materials: Ana Mendieta's artworks and unrealized projects, lectures, exhibitions, interviews, texts

Photo: Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera

³ Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) was a Cuban painter, performance artist, sculptor and video artist. She left Cuba as a refugee in 1961. She is best known for her "earth-body" artwork.

The first attempts at developing her political-timing concept are to be found here.⁴ The appropriation, reconstruction and re-exhibition of Ana Mendieta's pieces in the Cuban context was done with the intention of relocating the figure of this artist in the history of Cuban culture and in the collective imaginary as a representative spokesperson of Cuban culture. Subsequently Bruguera performed a series of reenactments of the work of Ana Mendieta at Fototeca de Cuba's exhibition "No por mucho madrugar" in Havana, beginning a ten-year project to recover Mendieta's legacy from official policies aimed at erasing the cultural contributions of Cuban expatriates. Controversy ballooned when the Estate of Ana Mendieta initially opposed Tribute to Ana Mendieta as an intervention into its own recuperative program. In 1996, Bruguera destroyed all vestiges of the series after the final performance at the Institute of International Visual Art in London, quieting conflict and emphasizing the ephemerality and immateriality of her conceptual work.

II. REMEMBERING THE PAST: COLONIZATION AND SLAVERY

Tania Bruguera's 1997 work *The Burden of Guilt* (*El peso de la culpa*) is the artist's take on a story claiming that indigenous people in Cuba vowed to eat dirt and nothing else rather than be the captives of the Spanish conquistadors. Bruguera interpreted their act of eating dirt as "a weapon of resistance." During a performance which took place at the artist's home in Old-Havana on May 4th, 1997,⁵ Tania Bruguera was standing before a Cuban flag which she had herself woven from human hair, a butchered lamb hung around her neck. She spent approximately 45 minutes mixing Cuban soil with water and salt representing tears, then eating it. As she later explained, this performance was an allusion to a suicide-ritual practiced by the island's natives. By eating large quantities of earth, many took their own lives when faced with the threat of the Spanish conquistadores. Like other conceptual artists, Bruguera uses ignored materials – sand, live beings (human or animal), earth, her own body.

⁴ This work is part of the Berardo Museum, Lisbon, currently at CCB.

⁵ Bruguera's house was opened to the street so that her audience included visitors from all over the world as well as people from the neighborhood.

IMAGE II -The Burden of Guilt

Medium: Re-enactment of a historical event

Year: 1997-1999

Materials: Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil.

Dimensions: Variable

Photo: Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera

Titled *The Burden of Guilt*, the action referred to a legend about native Cubans eating soil to commit suicide as a passive way to resist the Spanish conquistadores. The performance also alluded to a Passover ritual, in which water with salt recalls the suffering and tears of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt. More importantly, “to eat dirt” (*comer tierra*) is a Cuban expression that means to suffer strong hardship. The performance took place at an extremely critical period in Cuba, after the country’s patron, the Soviet Union, collapsed, and in the midst of the Cuban regime’s unwillingness to reinvent their politics in order to respond to new times. As a result, people in Cuba were “eating dirt.” (Mosquera, 2009: 23ff.). The artist’s body was her own subjective body, but it was simultaneously ritualized into a social body. A dynamic,

ever-changing mix of very diverse people watched, commented, trying to understand what was going on. "She is saying that we all are eating soil!" a man retorted. The performance space actually spilled into the street, in what could be considered a public artwork emanating from a private realm. The situation was vibrant and noisy, with people exclaiming out loud and the street sounds, from traffic to laughs, creating an intense atmosphere in which performance, audience, location, sounds, smells, and context were woven together. As Edward Rubin described it: "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." (Rubin, 2010: 110-111).

For Bruguera, real activism cannot be separated from her artistic practice. As the artist has stated in many interviews, in performative actions the body that performs "is the social body". Hence, in performances like *The Burden of Guilt*, it is her performing body that impersonates a social body. In Bruguera's works human beings are represented metonymically, as locks of hair, used tea bags, dead rams or herds. A sort of contact between History and the individual takes place, an area where their relations of power, their obliterations and their mutual conflicts are settled. That is why her works are both testimony and comment. Among her works some are memorials to the island's painful past – to colonization and slavery. *Untitled* (2000)⁶ is the first in a series made by the artist and presented in cities around the world between 2000 and 2009 – with each piece in the series featuring a different performance addressing the sociopolitical memory of the city in question – and *Poetic Justice* (2002-03). The latter is an immersive installation comprising a long, pungent-smelling teabag-lined tunnel, interspersed with tiny videos – a metaphorical reference to the relationship between the colonized and their masters.

Below are the two images:

⁶ "Untitled" is a landmark of the artist's early career, and the first work by Bruguera to enter MoMA's collection.

IMAGE III - Untitled

Title: Untitled (Havana, 2000)

Medium: Video Performance - Installation

Year: 2000

Materials: Sugar cane bagasse, TV black and white monitor, Cubans, DVD discs, DVD players

Dimensions: 13.12' x 39.37' x 164.04'

Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera

IMAGE IV – Poetic Justice

Year: 2002 - 2003

Medium: Video installation

Materials: Used tea bags, 8 one-second selection from several international historic newsreels, 8 LCD screens, 8 DVD discs, 8 DVD players.

Dimensions: 62.33 x 6.2 x 11.8 ft / 19 x 2 x 3,60 mts.

Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera

III. TRAVELLING AUTOBIOPERFORMANCES

The so-called Generación de los ochenta radicalized Cuban art praxis. Influenced by North American conceptual art and the advent of perestroika, the eighties generation viewed their art as a weapon and agent for freedom. It was the first collective effort to challenge official positions on the country's cultural life. Bruguera was a student of these changes: the proliferation of happenings, the collaboration with other artistic practices (like literature, dance, theater), the popularization of semiotics, and Cuban art's new activist agenda. This period of cultural and critical ferment formed the basis of Bruguera's art of social effectiveness.

One of her major series of performances is called Autobiografía/Autobiography. Bruguera's "travelling" sound installations accompanied by texts and microphones are turning autobiography into multimedia happenings. Before the advent of conceptual art, autobiography in art was largely concerned with expressing the artist's inner life; conceptual artists are more concerned with measuring life's outward manifestations, with the artist's self-fictionalization. These developments brought new opportunities but also raised a number of problems for this new type of autobiography. The major challenge consisted in expanding the discussion from text to image and assessing to what extent the 'auto'/self differs between fiction and visual arts and how, or if, conceptual art manages to provide a link between the two.

IMAGE V- Autobiography (Version inside Cuba)

Year: 2003

Medium: Sound installation

Materials: Unpainted space, two Soviet loudspeakers from the '70s, egg trays, a wooden stadium, 16 subwoofers, a switched-off mike, three unfinished rock walls, an electric bulb

Dimensions: 65.6' x 49.2' x 16.4'

Photos: Ricardo G. Elías courtesy of Estudio Bruguera

Autobiography was conceived by the artist as a piece in two slightly different versions, one to be staged in Cuba and the other one, abroad. In this essay I dwell in particular on the Version inside Cuba, held in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes during the 8th Havana Biennial (2003) but some of the changes Bruguera introduced in the performances that took place in the US and in Europe will also be considered.

It is this particular work, Autobiography, that foregrounds the controversial nature of Bruguera's art, her exploration of the relationship between art, activism and political power. Tania Bruguera synthesizes image, sound and video, developing new narrative possibilities which encourage the audience to react. The concept of sound is used as an independent and self-sufficient means capable of creating images in the conscience of the individual. The process of visualization suggested by this minimalist performance is made possible by the spectator's memory and knowledge of the experience of the Cuban Revolution.

The interaction with the audience elicits images related to the collective emotional memory even as it brings to the fore hitherto unexpressed emotions. Bruguera's Autobiography is a multi-voiced autobiography. Essentially a sound installation, Autobiografia, consisted of a makeshift wooden stage with a lone microphone that invited viewers to approach. This was a bold and brave gesture by all concerned.

The large space was void of all but two speakers at either end, and a platform at its center, on which a microphone stood, framed on three sides by a curving wall [...] Sound was vividly present via slogans, the calls to arms of the Cuban Revolution, above all such oft-repeated phrases as "Libertad o Muerte!" "Hasta la Victoria Siempre!" and "Viva Fidel!". Most of the time, however, these were scarcely distinguishable. But careful listening – especially if you stepped up to the microphone – disclosed their rhythmic power, their relentless presence, their selection of willing subjects, their shaping of crowds, their womb-like comfort, their obliterative omniscience, and their falling short – a landscape of memory of what it must have felt like, within the body, in the mind's ear, to grow up during the revolution. Visitors were invited to record their own slogans, statements, or speech of any kind, which were then added to the mix. The implication here is that the voices of the people might eventually drown out those of the ones who claim to speak for them." (Smith, 2010: 144).

In both versions, the audience undergoes an auditory experience that is not only physical but also subliminal. The concept of sound is used as an independent and self-sufficient means capable of creating images in the conscience of the individual. Even as the spectator preserves the images of the collective emotional memory, it is Bruguera's performance that acts as a catalyst, bringing to the fore long repressed emotions and enabling their vocal expression. Moreover, there is a difference in

reaction between the Cuban audience and the ones abroad, which may include Cuban expatriates. Depending on their knowledge of and position toward the Cuban revolutionary context, the audiences' (foreign as well national) reaction to the performance varies from outright identification to relative indifference.

The work appeals to the conscience and functions as an autobiography not only of the artist, but of all Cubans born in the revolution who recognize the rhetoric of its political discourse. Bruguera's performance targets the absence of a clear distinction between the public and the private facets of individual existence in the life of Cubans. Years of subjection to the Castro regime have induced numbness, fear and passivity. Hence, Autobiography is intended to address this ingrained mentality, to delve in the spectators' memory and bring to the fore long repressed feelings. "This is an autobiography in the first person plural, a curatorial action of the mind, an invitation to the history of our lives" wrote Corina Matamoros, curator at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes of Havana.

"Autobiography is a false theater play, as it were. It takes the audience back to a textual evocation of the rallies or marches of the imaginary of the Revolution as a performance art. Underneath the minimalist stage setting – a mike and a wooden surface marked by the feet of the people – the audience becomes gradually aware of the sound of patriotic words diluted inside the dais. This invisible buzzing of history accompanies the performance all along." (Castillo, 2008).

The title, Autobiografía (Autobiography), intended to point out how the entire life of the artist, or rather of the Cuban individual, has been amalgamated with a political process of which the platform is a good symbol, how private and public aspects of her existence get mislaid, urged by the needs of the macro-social project (oratory needs, in this case, of a political auto-da-fe). Perhaps because of that peculiar amalgam, when the artist invites the audience to interact with the piece using a mike on the platform, she mentions that with her action she will revive moments of her individual past, as if the slogans were a sort of "acoustic fairy cake" to activate affective memory (Negrín, 2004). With Autobiography, Tania Bruguera has become a genuine museologist, searching for traces of memory in the sound landscape of one's life. Rummaging in an individual life which is, at the same time, her own and that of so many others, she has brought to the fore the acoustic evocation of the history of Cubans who have lived during the revolution.

Autobiography (Remix), made in collaboration with Achy Obejas and Lou Carlozo, takes the sound track of Autobiography (Cuban version) and transforms its sternness into something suitable for dancing at parties and discos. The sound track is made by a group formed by Tania Bruguera named Las chancletas vanguardistas (The Vanguard

Slippers). The artist created a mixture of patriotic slogans and fragments of speeches of the Cuban Revolution. This work approaches the concept of sound as an independent and self-sufficient means capable of generating ideas in the conscience of the individual. Foreign or national audiences experience identification or alienation depending on the degree of knowledge they have of the Cuban revolutionary context. The piece provides evidence on how the lives of Cubans during the revolutionary years were geared to the needs of the macro-social project. It sparks off a moving and critical encounter with the history of Cuba in the last fifty years. The political circumstances in Cuba have created in foreigners a stereotyped fascination with its reality. This piece approaches the significance of Cuba as an element of attraction playing with souvenir concepts for political tourism by using politics as entertainment. The piece also finds its inspiration in Marx's comment "History repeats itself: first as tragedy and then as comedy."⁷ The Cuban version would rather be: History repeats itself first as tragedy and then as pachanga (feast).

IV. TATLIN'S WHISPER

IMAGE VI- Tatlin's Whisper #5

Year: 2008

Medium: Decontextualization of an action.

Materials: Mounted police, crowd control techniques, audience.

Dimensions: Variable

Photo: Sheila Burnett. Courtesy Tate Modern and Estudio Bruguera.

Location: Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom.

⁷ "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce", in Karl Marx (1852), The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Accessed on 10.08.2017, at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/%20ch01.htm>.

The title of the series is a symbolic reference to Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin who created the Tower Monument, foreseen as the seat for the Third Communist International, an icon of the enthusiasm and grandiosity of the Bolshevik Revolution. The intensity, credibility and exaltation of socialist revolutions, just as Tatlin's Tower, which was never built, ended up in frustration. Bruguera's performances suggest that utopia is being rethought timidly, like a weak whisper.

Tatlin's Whisper # 6 (Havana Version, 2009), which requires participative action, was held in the central patio of the Wifredo Lam Center, the institution in charge of organizing and holding the Havana Biennials. A stage with a podium, two microphones, and a huge golden-brown curtain as background were placed at one end. The set was reminiscent of the staple one used by Fidel Castro for his speeches. The microphones were connected to an amplifier with speakers, one of them at the building's entrance, pointing to the street. Two actors, a woman and a man dressed in Cuban military uniforms, stood at each side of the podium. The woman had a white dove in her hands. Admission to this event was free, but, in contrast to *The Burden of Guilt's* mixed, spontaneous, more grassroots audience, the space was filled with people from the Cuban art world, mainly young artists, and with students, writers, and Cuban and international visitors to the Biennial. Two hundred disposable cameras were handed out by Bruguera to the public to document the event. Then people were summoned to speak their minds on the podium for one minute. There was a long silence. The "guards" put a white dove on the first speaker's shoulder, an allusion to the emblematic image of Fidel Castro when delivering his first speech on January 8th in Havana after the triumph of the Revolution, an image that ratified his absolute leadership in a generalized consensus which worked for those who wanted to see in this image either the peace guaranteed in the lives of the citizens, the Messiah or the aesthetics of the future to be built.

In Tatlin's Whisper # 6 (Havana version) there is no censorship during the minute a member of the audience is at the mike. When the time assigned for freedom of expression ends, the persons in military uniform that until then had been at each side of the speakers – to defend their right to talk or to control it – take the dove from their shoulder making them leave the podium and the dais and they become once more part of the audience. This action was repeated with each speaker. They were all treated in the same way. A total of 39 persons made use of the mike to express their affinity with the Cuban political system or criticize it in the 41 minutes the work lasted, after which Tania Bruguera took the podium to thank the Cubans for their courage and their exercise of freedom of expression. Several reactions were exhibited, all with respect and all accepted, those who offered reasons to continue the path of Fidel Castro's

Revolution and those who asked for a political change. This work combines the supervised, controlled actions of Cuban citizens with the artist's "whisper" foreshadowing the advent of free speech.

IMAGE VII - Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version)

Year: 2009

Medium: Decontextualization of an action, Behavior Art

Materials: Stage, Podium, Microphones, 1 Loudspeaker inside and one outside of the building, 2 persons on a military outfit, White dove, 1 minute free of censorship per speaker, 200 disposable cameras with flash

Dimensions: Variable

Photo: Courtesy of Studio Bruguera, Collection Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York, Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2014. © Tania Bruguera

Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version) took Irit Rogoff's productive notion of "the exhibition as occasion" (Rogoff, 2009) to the extreme, while uniting art with the real, as in *The Burden of Guilt*. In her lecture-performance *On Politics*, Tania Bruguera has pointed out that "art is a safe platform from which to have a dialogue about political ideas and even try new political structures." (Bruguera, 2005: 155). This declaration completed the work's semantic circle, showing its political impact.

Why was a project like Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version) allowed? One can surmise that the Biennial organizers, the State Security, and other implicated officials miscalculated the possibility of people reacting so strongly to the occasion facilitated by the performance. They probably thought that self-censorship as a result of terror would make people afraid to take the risk of speaking out and, in the case of someone going beyond the limits, his action would take place within a reduced art context. The authorities possibly considered also that the audience would chiefly consist of international visitors and that some light critical expressions would serve to project a good image. On the other hand, the prospect of no one daring to speak out was also

considered by the artist, who conceived her piece to work in a different way in case the public remained silent. She thought of the empty podium as a “monument to the void,” a monument to Castro’s absence after fifty years of being a daily, overwhelming presence for Cubans. These performances “effect realness”. According to Judith Butler, “the impossibility of reading means that the artifice works, the approximation of realness appears to be achieved, the body performing and the ideal performed appear indistinguishable.” (apud Butler, 2005: 172).

Such fusion, which comes from the Situationist notion of suppression and realization of art as two inseparable conditions for surpassing it (to paraphrase Judith Butler) made these two performances extraordinary occurrences that achieved what Bruguera has stated to be her main goal: to work with reality, not with representation. “I want people not to look at it [the artwork] but to be in it, sometimes even without knowing it is art.” She wants her art to be “an experienced emotion [...] a lived memory – an art to be remembered more than to be seen.” (Interview) In other art contexts Tatlin’s Whisper would not have had any special relevance. In Cuba, it was a historic event: for the first time in half a century a free public tribune was allowed for people to express their ideas. Thus, the artwork managed to create a space for freedom in a totalitarian context. The performance was art due to its symbolic structure, and because it was labeled as such and was taking place in an art framework. Simultaneously, it was a radical political action in Cuba.

Tatlin’s Whisper# 5, shown at Tate Modern in 2008 is a *mise en scène/ mise en situation* meant to test the spectators’ reaction to a situation of domination, intimidation, and surveillance. The fifth piece of the Tatlin’s Whisper series examines the relationship between apathy and anaesthetization of the images in the mass media. At the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall Bridge in London, two mounted policemen in their uniforms burst into the space while performing mass control techniques with the spectators in the Museum. Among other techniques used, one of the horses corners the audience that divides into two large groups and are then regrouped and compelled to crowd together while the size of circle made by the mounted police decreases making them stay within or without the space since entry is blocked by the horse’s body.

This performance intends to activate images, well-known because of having been repeatedly seen in the press, but which are here de-contextualized from the original event that gave way to the news and staged as realistically as possible in an art institution. The most important element in this series is the participation of spectators who may determine the course the piece will take. Visitors generally answer by complying with the oral instructions of the officers and submitting to the imposing

physical and historical presence of the horses, used as repressive means. What Bruguera wanted to test is the people's reaction to police authority in a democratic society and the result was surprise, fear, and submission. Paradoxically, it is in Cuba that people rose up to the challenge of speaking out in spite of the danger they were facing.

V. PERFORMANCE ART AND IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS

In 2010, Bruguera initiated an ambitious five-year project that took her to Queens, NYC, an ethnically diverse neighborhood, outside the traditional venues of art. It was a socio-political movement mobilizing citizens, occupying public spaces for an artistic-political intervention. Immigrant Movement International was initiated by Tania Bruguera and sponsored by The Queens Museum of Art and Creative Time. A long-term art project (2010-2015) in the form of an artist initiated socio-political movement, its purpose was to redefine the citizen-migrant position and access the concept of "useful art," a notion that promotes the integration of art in search of sustainable long-term solutions to urgent social and political issues. Arte util/ useful art is what Bruguera calls her long-term project whose purpose was to seek solutions to social and political problems through the implementation of art in society.

It is a practice that somehow has become a natural path for artists dealing with political art and social issues. All art is useful, yes, but the usefulness we are talking about is the immersion of art directly into society with all our resources. It has been too long since we have made the gesture of the French Revolution the epitome of the democratization of art. We do not have to enter the Louvre or the castles, we have to enter people's houses, people's lives, this is where useful art is. We should not care for how many people are going to museums. We need to focus on the quality of the exchange between art and its audience (Bruguera, n.d.).

Together with members of Immigrant Movement International (founded in 2006) Tania Bruguera shared a tiny apartment in Corona, Queens, with five illegal immigrants and their six children. Her objective was to perform a year-long art piece meant to improve the image of immigrants and highlight their plight while her ultimate goal was to blend politics and art to empower immigrants through English classes, legal help and impromptu performances. She lived for three years like her working-class Latino neighbors and vowed not to tap her credit cards, personal bank account or assistants in Italy and Cuba.⁸ With this particular project, Bruguera seems to be both subverting

⁸ Bruguera has been criticized for this feigned posture; she, the cosmopolitan renowned artist giving up her privileged status ...only for "a while".

and using Communist Cuba's methods (community work, political work) in the capitalist environment and globalization of the early 21st century.

Immigrant Movement International functions both as social intervention and as an extended work of conceptual art. The movement addresses such concerns as the effect of invisibility and exclusion of marginalized populations and examines strategies for gaining access to political power and social recognition. It is Bruguera's most activist and utopian project to date: "IM International is our acronym expressing international as the identity of people who migrate outside of their place of origin. Being international as we understand it is traveling with all your human rights. ("Immigrant Movement International", accessed on 04.04.2017, at <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/our-name/>)

VI. THE HANNAH ARENDT INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ARTIVISM

In a brilliant move Tania is organizing a seminar dedicated to studying the Cuban penal code in order to analyze the ramifications of her case and those of others. Perhaps it is this new "performance" of Tania's that will give her work a clear collective backbone and pull it out of the ego-ridden paralysis that it was generating, and which diluted what I think was surely her true intention.

Camnitzer (2015)

Artivism, (art + activism) a portmanteau word coined by Tania Bruguera, is the artist's most recent project. In the context of Obama's efforts to achieve a rapprochement between the US and Cuba, Bruguera tried to reenact her performance Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version) in December 2014, this time in the public space at Plaza de la Revolución. Bruguera tried to obtain authorization from the National Revolutionary Police to use the plaza. Her request was denied. Bruguera made public her intent to continue with the performance without official support, and was detained on the morning of December 30. Several dissidents who had expressed solidarity with her project were either detained or placed under house arrest at the same time. Under US pressure, Bruguera was released on December 31, 2014. Deeper consideration of Bruguera's situation involves whether an artwork can effect political changes in the realm of civil rights and how an artwork might catalyze collective political action.

On May 20, 2015, two days before the opening of the Biennial and coinciding with the 113th anniversary of Cuban Independence Day, Bruguera launched the Hannah Arendt International Institute for Artivism. Using a room on the ground floor of her family home in Old Havana, she took turns with friends in a 100-hour-long reading, in Spanish, of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). She opened the doors to the street, as in her memorable 1997 performance *The Burden of Guilt*. The

readers were inside, but their voices were directed toward the street, with the help of a loudspeaker, so as to be overheard by people passing by. The power of the piece wasn't derived from the content of the text, but rather from the choice of the book, the setting, and the concentrated endurance of those involved in the marathon. According to Luis Camnitzer:

The Arendt performance in itself is probably one of the most elegant and powerful of Tania's works. She presented a situation that on its surface was totally harmless. She only used her private space, precisely stopping at the borderline of where public space starts. The reading was not louder than any music coming out of a window that one might normally hear on the street. And yet, a philosophical text, difficult to hear, and probably exceeding anyone's conceivable attention span under the circumstances, was considered to be sufficiently threatening to the government (or at least some of its officials) that steps were taken to interfere with the performance. (Camnitzer, 2015)

On May 24, 2015 as Bruguera brought a close to the 100-hour performance of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the artist was intercepted by Cuban authorities. She was whisked away in a police car as locals and international visitors to the 12th Biennial looked on. As for Bruguera, she stated that she would not be intimidated by arrest or torture which would only reinforce her belief in the power of art to create a space for freedom.

IMAGE VIII - Detail of Tania Bruguera's working sessions for the Hannah Arendt
International Institute of Artivism, Havana, May 2015

VII. A GLOBAL PERFORMANCE

Many of the concerns of the conceptual art movement have been taken up by contemporary artists: ideas such as anti-commodification, social and/or political critique, and ideas/information continue to be aspects of contemporary art, especially among artists working with installation art, performance art, etc. exceeding national borders and genre boundaries. Bruguera's performances travel with the artist and in the process they undergo changes. The mobility, malleability and flexibility that characterize her art are variations on a theme which she adapts to the social and political context of a specific country, regime, to its past and present history. Her art repeatedly tries out "illegal" border crossings across customary definitions, expectations and authoritative rules. In the last analysis, it is the experience of the other which is fundamental for Tania Bruguera. The spectator becomes an actor, an active participant in her performances which tend to blur the line between the private and the public in an attempt to exorcise human pain, suffering and trauma – ultimately seeking catharsis.

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