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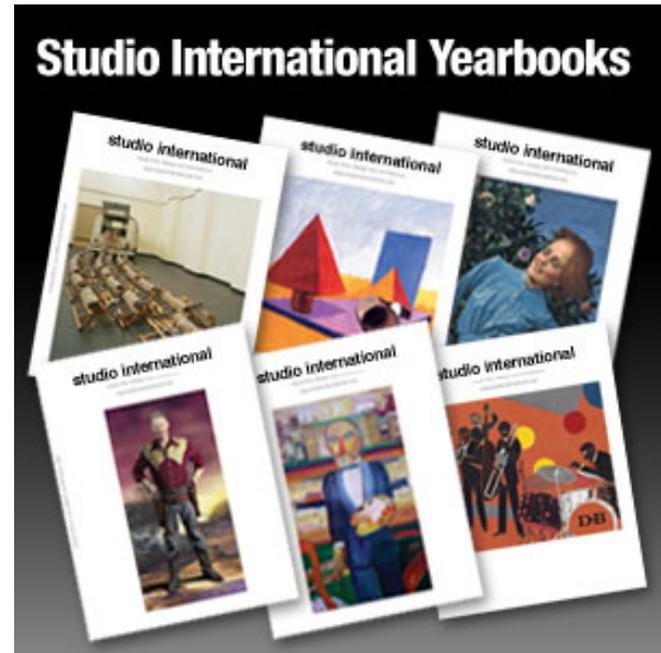


## Our voice as protagonist – a meeting with Tania Bruguera

by CAROLINE MENEZES

The chatter of a roomful of museum workers turned to silence the minute Tania Bruguera walked into the auditorium at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. The Cuban installation and performance artist was a keynote speaker at the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art conference,<sup>1</sup> which this year focused on new dynamics in museums and the relationship between curator, artwork, public and governance. The crowd of art institution experts knew what Bruguera represents and her importance, and all attention was focused on her words.

Bruguera, who was born in Cuba in 1968, now divides her time between New York and Havana. Her work came to prominence following her series *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta*, recreations of body





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performances and objects in tribute to her compatriot. A long-term project that lasted from 1985 to 1996, it also included lengthy research into her predecessor's legacy. Political gestures were already present at the inception of Bruguera's practice, but became even more noticeable with short-term interventions such as *Tatlin's Whisper #6* at the 10th Havana Biennial, in 2009. Bruguera negotiated with the authorities the building of a podium at the exhibition with an open-microphone at which anyone who dared to climb the stairs would be given one minute of free speech in which they could say whatever they wanted. She has participated in several biennials worldwide as well as at Documenta 11 in Germany, and her artworks feature in the collections of many important art institutions. On top of that, she is internationally acclaimed for her most recent projects, including the socio-political *Immigrant Movement International*, which aims to raise awareness about immigrants, and *Arte Útil*. Last year, she received recognition from the United Nation's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights when invited to collaborate in writing a document to establish cultural rights and artistic freedom of speech.

This was the background for her talk to delegates of 159 art institutions from about 50 cities from New York to Singapore. There was tension in the air. What would this woman's message to the art institutions be? Nothing surprising happened. At least, nothing as surprising as Bruguera's performance of *Self-Sabotage* at the 2009 Venice Biennial when, arriving to speak on "the idea of survival", she sat with a revolver on the table, pausing from time to time during her reading to hold the gun to her head in a game of real-life

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Russian roulette. In Rio, there was no shotgun, but rather discursive ammunition. She caused unease by speaking about an urgent and complicated matter: political art and art as an agent for social change. How can art history, through its institutions, address this emphasis on the socially engaged kind of artistic practice that we see nowadays?

She was straightforward: “If you guys want to deal with political art, you have to take risks and take a stand. That is what politics means.” She also declared that artists should be paid, that they have to be seen as workers. Above all, she said that the kind of art practice that involves social engagement cannot be analysed in the same way as traditional art history: a new approach is needed. “For this kind of practice, we don’t need a space, a room. We need to establish relationships. Long-term plans are extremely important.” She pressed home her point: “For five years, I have been committed to a social programme with the Queens Museum and our relationship works very well. It is at the same time an institutional critique from the inside.” Always speaking in the first person plural, she went on to explain in detail her long-term projects, such as *Immigrant Movement International*, which involves immigrant communities in New York and Mexico, and helps to created political awareness among them. Questioned by the audience as to why she always uses “we”, she said: “It is hard, especially when talking for the art world, to get away from the notion of authorship, and this sometimes creates a cynical notion about socially engaged or political projects. I feel that the project no longer belongs to me. It is a collective structure. I don’t give interviews about them anymore.

Normally, I ask people to go to the project and talk to the community members – they have the voice.”

After her talk, she kindly agreed to speak to Studio International to develop a little further the issues surrounding political art and institutions. This was my first meeting with her, but not with her work. Last year, I witnessed a fragment of *Immigrant Movement International* presented at the Tanks at Tate Modern and ended up more involved than I expected. **Click here to read more on this.** We started the interview with questions raised by this experience. We had an interesting conversation, which continued afterwards through the exchange of emails.

**Caroline Menezes: Today, I heard you explain the strategies you employ when you need to engage with the audience in a short-term project. You said you need to condense the experience and, for this reason, this kind of intervention is often violent. Last year, I attended the *Immigrant Movement International* presented at Tate Modern and felt the discomfort of waiting in a kind of “border control” queue that had been created in the museum and anxious about not being allowed to see the artwork because I first had to answer questions with a lie detector. I realised that my feelings came from the fact that my background is Latin American and I have seen this kind of border control situation before. However, I could see that the rest of the audience, maybe people who had never left Europe, were actually excited about the**

**experience, looking forward to being examined by a lie detector. They were having fun. When you show a fragment of a long-term project in an institution such as Tate Modern, how do you adapt it to that audience?**

**Tania Bruguera:** That is one of the main problems between long-term projects and art institutions working in a short-term format. That presentation at Tate is a good example of experimenting with this contradiction: it wanted to do *Immigrant Movement* but for just one week. I said it would be impossible. First, I could not bring people from the project because they had no documents. I even tried with the lawyer of the project to see if I could get papers for them as artists. I didn't yet have the solution that would allow me to transport the project to another place in a quick way that I felt was working ethically. Now, I think the best solution may be to create small cells or working groups of the project in the place and make it a matter of methodology. So by trying to present a long-term experience, which is about engaging in social change, you need to build the conditions for the piece to exist. You need things such as relationships and an ethical landscape for the piece to function properly. Short-term situations have their own very different set of rules and expectations. Trying to force one into another becomes a violent act. This is when people feel used, or things have a sense of deceitfulness. So I decided to do something completely different. Instead of "showing" the project, I selected one of the issues we have talked about in the project and give it a short-term experiential form.

**CM: Did you think about how to contextualise this for the audience at Tate? British people go to the museum in some ways like people in Rio go to the beach.**

**TB:** I tried. What is hard about the museum set-up is that everybody enters with the belief that everything is either sacred, fake, ironic, or a kind of a joke. Why? Because there is nothing at risk. In this kind of long-term political project, you put things at risk. A decision that would affect people's lives cannot be taken solely for aesthetic reasons. In a museum, there is a safety that you don't have on the outside. Even if it is something aggressive, offensive or transgressive, you can always turn back and go home, you have the option to ignore it. It is very difficult to do art in a museum that activates the political beyond the museum itself and beyond the image; it is also a problem of which audience you are aiming for and under what conditions. Sometimes the political in a museum doesn't happen because people know it is "not real", or because it would not go beyond that space. But mostly it doesn't happen because the museum is not equipped to respond politically to the urgencies of the moment, there is a gap between what is happening inside and outside the museum.

The museum, as an institution, defends its position of not engaging in direct politics: in most cases, it is actually illegal for it to do so. Often, the political reflection on current times is seeing through analogies with other times and other places. Then what you can get in an art institution is an associative educational format for your political ideas. It is hard to make a museum a civic institution. For

example, I was invited to the last Berlin Biennial and my project was to do something political in Cuba, but for real. I wanted to create a political party to question the government's latest political decisions and vision of a future society. I told the curator I would need two years to do this. I would need to prepare the conditions first. It is not like doing a street performance, taking a photo or a video to be put on a show. To work, this project needed to enter the tissue of people's relationship with their government, and their understanding of what needed to be different and, most of all, it required waiting for the appropriate political timing. That needed some time to build a platform and to adjust to the political behavioural culture of the moment.

In the end, I couldn't participate because of the biennale's time frame. They needed me to finish by 1 July at the latest, when they had to hand over the biennale to the next team. I asked whether my piece – with the budget of that edition of the biennale – could be rolled over to the next one, giving the framework between two biennials, but it was not possible for bureaucratic reasons. I could not let bureaucratic reasons dictate political reasons, especially as the idea I had was potentially risky in real terms not symbolic ones. At the same time, I needed the protection of such an international event to do what I planned. It was not possible to condense the work, stressing its timing and forcing its “successful” outcomes in order to take part in an art exhibition. It would become a fake and suspect political artwork, with a lack of necessary critical distance. At best, it would have transformed into a spectacle. The idea was to use the institution for the security it brings, and as an international

forum to talk about politics, but involving the people directly affected by those politics. It was not political folklore for cultural voyeurs. There is a very different sense of what is successful in the art world and what is successful in the political world.

**CM: For example, the case of *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, in 2008, at Tate Modern. [Bruguera did an unannounced performance, asking two men from the mounted police to enter the museum and deal with the public using crowd-control techniques.] I heard that because the British public is generally familiar with horses, they wanted to pat them and were not afraid, as might be the case if you had guards on horses in a performance in another country's museum.**

**TB:** Exactly, but the first time the intervention occurred, the public were like: "What's going on?" People were speculating wildly, projecting what they were induced to think by the media. Some were even saying there was a bomb in the museum. The exceptions were the kids and a curator in the crowd. The hardest audience for political work is art people: it is hard for them not to be cynical about gestures. The potential success of that piece relies on the fact that the audience is not familiar with it. It is announced and it comes as a surprise: it is done during times of popular tension and it happens so quickly that people have no time to digest it as an art piece, they receive it as citizens. But the series *Tatlin's Whisper* is made up of short-term pieces. It is thought out bearing in mind the art world set-up, the museum and the audience that goes there. I

tried to push a little bit, but it still had some limitations. We did that piece several times and, after the first time, people came in and were not alarmed – their idea of where they were was not altered in the same way, they were constantly aware that they were in a museum. It was sad when the mounted police told me that they were only called to control crowds at football games. I felt a bit more excited when I saw a month or so later the students coming out into the streets to protest. Nothing can happen in a museum and that is precisely why everything should happen in a museum.

**CM: It is true. And talking about museum spaces devoted to performance, such as Tanks, or the history of performance being more and more incorporated into museum spaces, as for example the retrospective of Marina Abramović at the Museum of Modern Art,<sup>2</sup> we can see this aim to recharge performances, reactivate past performances or update political issues. Do you think it will be possible to get there? Is there any strategy that can bring back these actions?**

**TB:** We have made some improvements, but performance is still not taken as seriously as other art formats. We need to create a consciousness about the way the performance artists work, the need for them to be properly paid and to have a good production budget. Performance art needs to be produced. Sometimes it feels as if performance is what institutions go to when they have no money and need to increase audience numbers. That is wrong. Most performance artists do not sell their work commercially and this

decision (which leaves many in a precarious financial state) should be honoured not exploited. We need to stop having volunteers at performances. Once a performance is done in or for an institution, that institution should take responsibility for the production of the piece, and that includes the people in it. But when the human factor appears, it is harder to convince people to care – all of a sudden, art participation for free is a spiritual honour. The increasing number of choreographers and theatre-makers becoming involved in performance programmes is a good thing because they have a longer history of fighting for their fees than performers coming from the arts, and this is helping the culture of fair pay, although there is still discrimination in terms of the right to be paid between the more well-known artists and younger ones. Museums need to stop thinking that the opportunity to show their work is payment enough for artists. They need a permanent programme, not just one for a few weeks or a special occasion, and a “space” for performance. I emphasise the word space because the other problem with the institutionalisation of performance is that sometimes it is censored *a priori* by being forced to take part under the conditions expected in a museum. The whole reason for performance art is to have the freedom to go beyond those constraints. Unfortunately, some very influential performance artists have created a comfortable version of performance art for institutions and their trustees and, of course, that has become the immediate version of what it should be for younger practitioners and art schools. So, while they have popularised the practice and present the need to include it in the art institution, they have done a great deal of damage by making a conservative caricature of performance art.

When I went to see Marina's performance at MoMA, the person seated with her left at some point and there was a lapse that seemed to me to be too long in "performance time" (in reality, maybe it was four or five minutes) when the seat remained empty, and no one was coming in. I decided to sit there. When I left, mingling with the crowd, Marina's gallerist came up and criticised me, saying there had been a queue of people waiting to sit with Marina. I was in shock. I could only respond: "I'm sorry, I didn't know that to be in a performance you had to queue to take your ticket." Immediately, I realised what was wrong with the intensity of that picture. It was the first time at a performance piece that I felt I had done something "bad", as if in performance there is such thing as being "correct". The audience's behaviour was conditioned, the audience was hostage to a form of "etiquette" for the performance, it was forced into the dramatisation of the experience. The potential to allow people's non-scripted reaction, which for me is what performance art is about, was absent. We cannot institutionalise performance by making it a "good behaviour" activity. It needs to keep its freedom. Nevertheless, the fact that it was a gallerist who criticised me for being sincere with my connection to the performance was part of my second wave of shock. Unfortunately, more and more often institutions, especially the big ones, are dramatising performance, killing it. Performance art is not about the success of pleasing the audience or access to an untouchable sacred figure, it is about taking risks and failing most of the time. It is about triggering something inside the person watching that they do not know, they do not understand. Institutions can

have safe performances that they can package nicely, but it would not be a proper portrait of the medium as a whole because there is more than packaging in performance. We are looking at the institutional domestication of performance.

The question of conservation always comes up when talking about museums. The performances that are very well known, that everyone studies at school, and which, in a way, we are anaesthetised to, should not just be reproduced but reactivated through their re-contextualisation. For example, when I saw Marina Abramović redoing Valie Export's piece (*Genitalpanik*, 1969) with a machine gun, it lacked something. I was looking for the intensity of needing to express something that is not otherwise possible, the urgency released by performing. While it is true that not everyone has the same presence in a performance, the fact that the re-enactments (as they called them) were all done by Marina added to the idea of the performer as a "special" person, which is an approach to the practice that suits the establishment idea of an author only too well. This is even more problematic when the fact is that this proposal was not a new idea, nor hers originally either, and this issue was not part of the conversation – not even during the series of public panels at the Guggenheim while in preparation for the exhibition (which I'm struggling to find either in print or online). This was, in my view, a very dangerous institutional move done with very good intentions because the result was that the practice became too academic. It is important to preserve the alternative to institutions. The fact that it was done to be seen in the flesh instead of through a photo is good: I have always advocated for this since I

did the work about Ana Mendieta in 1985. However, the fact that it was presented as if on a kind of pedestal, that there was an unspoken “protective wall” between the performer and the audience, made me want to look at the original photo of Valie instead and imagine what it meant back then. It would be different if you reactivated that piece and took away the institutional distance – if, for example, *Genitalpanik* was done by an Arabic woman carrying a gun and wearing a traditional outfit open, or by one of the original female members of the Weather Underground group. I want something that makes me think about something more than a famous artist reproducing some famous artworks and the fact that, wow, she can come for seven hours. It would have being good to see the institution perform as well, by taking some risks.

**CM: Do you mean associating the performances with something from the present day?**

**TB:** To think about how to get the same reaction that you got originally, by relating it to current elements of tension in the same area of the subject of the original piece. I mean update the idea, the meaning of the performance, not the image of the performance. Thinking as if the piece were done today.

**CM: If you wanted to do the performance from the Havana Biennial again, how would you do it?**

**TB:** I was invited to do this piece again in Miami, but I couldn’t do it the same way. That piece made sense in Cuba because it opened a door to people who were not invited and enabled them to do things

that are not allowed. The only way I could do this again, for example in Miami, would be if people could talk in favour of Cuba. Everyone criticises the Cuban government in Miami, but the space for the opposite is more limited.

**CM: It would be different, but it would be the same.**

**TB:** Exactly, the idea of redoing performances is doing differently what is the same; understanding the combination of what remains and what reminds, to generate friction again. If you asked people in Miami to defend Cuba's present political decisions, you would probably have the same reaction as you did to the version in Havana. The feelings the performance creates must be real. The beauty of this piece would be to have a situation in which the people who are there do not know how to react, that they have to negotiate their preconceptions. The idea would be to do the piece in places where freedom of speech or certain issues are not allowed in the public sphere. If they have freedom, they do not need an artwork to give it to them.

**CM: What is your opinion about the relation between ethics and aesthetics? For example, artworks by Ai Weiwei?**

**TB:** Ai Weiwei is an interesting case study. He is supported by big art institutions, has about 10 million followers on Twitter, is adored by the press and is inspirational to young artists all over the world. He is a legitimate artist and a fierce activist and that is a desirable

item in the commercial art world. It is not easy to be all of those things at the same time. He has helped to advance the conversation on artists' role in civic society for a larger audience. What I like is the image he projects, his intensity and restless working energy. In terms of his work, I went to see his retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and the piece I appreciated was *Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn* (1995). It is a strong gesture. *Sunflower Seeds* at Tate worked for me as an interesting comment on minimal art, but his work in general takes a different aesthetic turn from mine. We both work with archetypes, culture, propaganda and a critical approach to politics, but his work relays more in the visual; it uses more of a kind of "political pop" strategy. On the other hand, it is hard to understand what happens in detail in China where he is working, and then for whom the work is working. Looking for the impact of his work in China, I have asked other Chinese artists, both young and the more established, about him, and his impact doesn't look as clear as the one he is having in the west. When someone becomes that big a figure, it is very hard to operate with complexity, and there is always a battle with cultural colonisation and political folklore. At the same time, it is a bit suspicious that he is so visible in the United States when the US and China have economic tensions. Why do we not know other brave political artists in other places who are also suffering the consequences for their critical work? Unfortunately, it seems that some degree of attention, while a protective shell, can also be seen as an instrumentalisation. On the other hand, it is the mechanism by which some things that people would not otherwise dare to say can be exposed and discussed. These subjects are never easy and should not be judged quickly: it is

necessary to be better informed, to go beyond the headlines. In these times of “globalisation”, and informed curiosity about other places (but simultaneously short attention spans and so much to do), a political figure, being an artist, an economist or a whistleblower, becomes a simplified version of itself for the masses, or rather for the mass media. To work politically means that you have created a network, you have pushed people to think differently, and you have started at your base. You cannot do political art for a generic audience and you cannot do politics with generic subjects. If you are a political artist for real, it isn't only about you, it's about: “I'm here. Now, what does it mean for me as an artist to be here in this place talking to museum people? What kind of agenda can I present? Even if they won't like what I say, it still needs to be said.” I am being paid by museums, but I felt it was my political duty as an artist, earlier today, to use this opportunity to repeat several times that they needed to see artists invited to museums as temporary museum workers, because they are working *for* the museum during that time. If you are a political artist, it is about creating an ecology that works differently.

**CM: Are you optimistic about the idea of community art?**

**TB:** It's very complicated.

**CM: How many people are involved in the *Immigrant Movement International* right now?**

**TB:** There are just two people on staff, me and one other person, and then a lot of people in the community, and professors. We have

around 20 people working, but we have served more than 4,000 people on a regular basis. These include people who came to a legal event with a lawyer or to an event that we do for groups, or people that we gave accreditation to for working.

**CM: Do you still have a connection with the end of this chain?**

**TB:** I know them by name, I don't know if that says something. Not the 4,000 because, out of the 4,000, there are people who only come to use the project and leave. Then there are other people who get involved, and these people I know by heart.

**CM: Do they share the idea? Do they propagate the project?**

**TB:** Yes, because we don't do outreach. People tell each other and those people then go to the project. What people forget is that if you do this work right, these people are not just people you are working with, they are your friends. They care for you and you care for them. This is an important point that I don't like about some kinds of community art projects, in which artists go to communities and use people, or even worst just use the space. I say "using" because they go to a community, they give a lecture or do an intervention and everybody (in the art world) is happy with that. For me, using is when someone does something in a place with people for the benefit of people who are from or in another place. Sustainability is for me the key to socially engaged art. It is also about who benefits most from the experience? You have to get involved in the

messiness, you know? The main idea behind these long-term projects with communities is that they should sustain themselves at some point, so the institution is only a temporary help. But it is important to create something that is not a cultural colonisation but a dialogue between tools that art, education, the analysis of desire and their public execution can provide. The fact is that the impact also needs to be outside the art world if the work is done correctly. The fact that I was invited by the UN along with other experts to help draft a document on cultural rights and artistic freedom of speech is part of the impact you pursue as a political artist and this, for me, is much more important than a show in MoMA.

**CM: People say that your attitude, the whole thing is a huge performance. It is a performance itself.**

**TB:** (Laughs) I agree.

### **Footnotes**

1. The conference of the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art was held as part of the 23rd general conference of the International Council of Museums in August 2013, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

2. More information about Marina Abramović and this exhibition is available at:

<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present>

Bruguera also mentions the Austrian Valie Export, a multi-media and performance artist who did radical body performances in the

1960s. For more on the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, also mentioned in the interview, go to:

<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>



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