

Gerald Matt in conversation with Tania Bruguera

Gerald Matt: One might say that the performative, the inclusion of one's own person, a syncretic approach encompassing Catholic religion and African myths, as well as existential themes prevail in your earlier work.

Tania Bruguera: In my earlier work, the performative was definitely an important aspect. It was not until later on, around 1996, that I began to create performances, and by that I mean pieces in which I had a direct physical presence and in which there was an educated audience. Lately, I have gone back to those first performative ideas. I think this may be because I am again interested in the value of behavior as an artistic and linguistic tool, as well as a social one; behavior being a set of codes widely understood, with only minor social differences

from one place to another. This is important to me because I want to communicate ideas, and it is hard to do site-specific political work that is understood in a wider context without running the risk of it becoming propaganda. Another reason why I have returned to the performative is because I find it more closely connected with the idea of art as a gesture with symbolic implications, a gesture that *is* the piece; by which I mean, its structure, its implications, its consequences. When I was creating performances, I was bothered by the spectacle. I wanted to have a more "invisible" scenario, to do gestures, not actions; I wanted to disappear, to have a more flexible mode of operation. I had gotten tired of performance, it was not that exciting anymore. I get bored very quickly and I guess performance was no exception. I liked the idea of going back to an art in which the artistic nature was not that easy to define and which worked in the realm of life. Then came the day when someone who had invited me to perform asked how many chairs I wanted in the space. I said to myself: okay ... something is wrong here.

It is interesting that you ask about African religions and the performative in the same question. There definitely is a relationship. It has been very hard for me to formulate my relationship with religion and to deal with my desire to be disengaged from it. I was raised both in the animist and atheist traditions ... with an awareness of both Marx and healing plants ... That is where the syncretism is, between Marxism and animism. Both philosophies – or should I call them ideologies? – are based on the principle of the tangible changeability of the course of life. Both are utilitarian tools, or at least both present themselves

that way. Both start and end in reality; both assume very concrete consequences in the course of events. I have denied the way people have read my work as religious, especially some of my performances, because this usually has been the result of a very exotic approach; my being Cuban has allowed this very problematic situation to come about, which is the easiest road in terms of interpreting the work and invalidating any effort to propose anything a bit more complex. My work was never intended to illustrate religion nor talk about it. In this, Juan Francisco Elso, a former professor of mine, and a friend, was a big influence. A santeria practitioner himself, he told me once that there were things that one could not see and that were frequently at work in the pieces. By that he was referring to energy. He called it "carga" (charge) and good pieces were "cargadas" (charged). This is the same term used in African religions to name something (object or action) that has been prepared for use in real life, for its journey to change destiny. In addition, in Cuba, African religions are not morbid, restrictive and penitent ways of viewing life but very practical ways to live and to acquire tactical knowledge. Animism is an applicable religion, not an iconographic reference. It is alive and current. Catholicism, by the way, I only quoted once, in "The Burden of Guilt," and it was because I thought that sacrifice was universally understood through the image of a lamb. But I am not that interested in the way that religion creates symbols and associations, nor in the heavy historical readings of them. Since all religions are an archive of social conduct and its possible practical results or consequences, I just think that some may have created a more interesting set of relationships. I could, for

example, at some point be more interested in Judaism or Buddhism than in Catholicism.

GM: At the outset of your career, a close connection to Ana Mendieta's works is evident from which, in later years, you appear to have increasingly distanced yourself. In what sense would you say Ana Mendieta was important for you?

TB: The series "Tribute to Ana Mendieta" is essential for understanding my work and some of the ideas about art which I have used, more specifically, for what I call "Arte de Conducta," and what I mentioned before about art as gesture and gesture as art. I did not connect with Ana's art at a formal level, nor was I influenced by any particular piece, although I was attracted to what she did and found some of her works really beautiful, especially the "Rupestrian Sculptures," which were created in 1981 outside Havana. I looked at her from a cultural perspective, not an artistic one, so I was far more interested in the impact she had on Cuban art than in the specifics of her poetics. At that time (I was eighteen), I was questioning and searching for possible roles as an artist. I decided to become what I then called a cultural archaeologist. So I not only came upon her pieces but also re-positioned them in a new context, in this case Cuban culture. That gesture, which was first a spiritual connection, then a learning process, resulted in a political gesture because at the time those who had left the country were erased from history by the authorities, including cultural author-



Anima, 1996

Teil der Serie Hommage à Ana Mendieta | Part of the tribute to Ana Mendieta
Performance

ities. My act, or gesture, was a confrontation at some level. I soon learned about the ephemeral conditions of politics.

It is true that I distanced myself from this project. The first time was around 1996, when I decided to finish the project. I resolved to distance myself from the actual series and in particular the connection with Ana's figure, which was receiving increasing international attention in those years. There were many reasons for this: it was a ten-year project (I had started it a few months after Ana's death in 1985 and concluded it in 1996; I was very young and this was just my first project and I did not want everything else to be defined by it.

But there was a second moment of distance, a little bit more subtle. One of the characteristics of "Tribute to Ana Mendieta" was the fact that I was simultaneously doing my "own" work. In 1992 and 1993, I did a piece in the shape of a newspaper, called "Memory of the Post-war." The censoring of that project, which had also been planned as a long-term piece, had a great impact on me. This was mostly because of the real consequences it had for one of my collaborators. This created an ethical dilemma for me. Then, in 1996, after a period of producing no art at all, I started doing performance again. Although at the time it seemed to me like an important move to bring performance – a suspicious art form after the politically charged and censored happenings in Havana during the 80s – to the institution, I now realize that it was a mistake, a political mistake. With Ana's project and with the newspaper, I was already going around the institution. But once I began doing performances, I stopped doing "Arte de Conducta" and started doing just art. I left gesture for actions, I regressed.

I have actually reconnected with that series and with Ana recently. Visiting her solo show at the Whitney Museum was a very intense experience for me. I saw what are now my favorite Mendieta's: "Untitled, people looking at blood" and "Untitled, rape scene," both from 1973, two pieces much more behavioral, less object-oriented, so there is still something there with which I can dialogue and connect. I have also been looking back at this project a lot lately, since I have been asked to participate in several conferences and to talk about it in light of the recent questioning of documentation strategies by the performance community.

GM: When you were last in Vienna on the occasion of our exhibition "Landkarten der Sehnsucht" (Maps of Desire) shown at the Kunsthalle in 1999, you were at the time occupied with Hermann Nitsch's work. Do you perceive any parallels between his work, more specifically his "Orgien Mysterien Theater," and your work?

TB: Not at all. Actually, I did "The Burden of Guilt" without knowing Hermann Nitsch's work. I found out about it after the performance in Havana, in 1997, when an international critic approached me with a very similar question, and I answered thinking he was talking about Friedrich Nietzsche, who did not have anything to do with this piece either. The only element that connects both works – mine and Nitsch's – is the open animal carcass. But in fact the lamb I use is never bleeding; it is always cleaned previously, the blood is removed. This was another reason I distanced myself from Ana, because I did

not want people to think that that was my *modus operandi*, connecting with different artists and doing art in the image of theirs, changing the site-specificity of Ana's project and making it a mere aesthetic strategy. Of course, as with any artist, in my work there may well be echoes of other artists but, after Ana's, I have never quoted another artist on purpose – except Goya now.

GM: At the Istanbul Biennial in 2003, you presented your work "Poetic Justice," which drew considerable attention internationally and which was later viewed at the Venice Biennial last year. What is this work about?

TB: Well ... this is the only time I have created a piece in which, political meanings aside, or precisely because of them (in this case, it was an exploration of contemporary post-colonialism through the media), I wanted to do something "beautiful." I was thinking of beauty in terms of the appreciation for the labor required to create artwork; also, of the meaning residing only in the material, where the operations and all their possible interpretations are exposed and available. I was also thinking of the possibility of mystifying the gap between high technology and used tea bags, both attractive and familiar; of beauty in terms of the "space" between the actual walk through the piece and the selection of one-second historical news reels. I wanted, for the first and only time in my work as artist, people to ask themselves how much money the production required ... How long did it take to do? How many people participated? Who did the labor? Who drank the tea? How was it transported? Who

produced the original newsreels? Where were the newsreels filmed? What was happening in them? These are all questions relevant to an inquiry about specific acts of post-colonialism while, at the same time, the audience is distracted by the seductive and familiar smell of tea, something not threatening at all but very comfortable and subtle.

I was very interested in the idea of use and recycling, of being used and being recycled.

I think it is important to say that this piece was first conceived in India at the Khoj workshop, a three-week residency program. But it was completed in Berlin, where I went for a week directly afterward. In a way, this piece is my reaction to a CNN report I saw in my Berlin hotel room about Cuba. The reporter had totally misread events – or was it a problem of cultural translation involving postcolonial attitudes?

GM: The sound installation you produced in Chicago is the centerpiece of your presentation in the "project space" of the Kunststhal Wien. It schematizes the communication strategies of politicians and audience responses to these; yet, you forgo the use of graphic representation, more precisely, the non-verbal form of expression so characteristic of the mass media. The rejection of the image seems to be Ariadne's thread running through your project.

TB: I have been interested before, in "Untitled (Havana, 2000)," in the means by which politicians communicate, expressing their ideas and decisions. "Portraits" is, as the title suggests, portraits of several political figures. Portraits not of the way

they look but, rather, an attempt to portray them through the effects they had on people.

The series focuses on political figures that have had an impact on world events. Each speech is carefully selected, depending on the importance of the speech itself or (in the case of the historical figures) the accessibility of the recorded material. The selection covers a wide range – for example, there is Hitler's address to the Reichstag on May 4, 1941, in which he reviews his actions since 1937. Although he includes a lot of information by which he could have been ethically questioned and judged, he instead gained even more power. There is also Pope Paul VI's statement on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the UN, the first recording of a pope speaking in such a venue and as a head of a state. After the speech, there was considerable applause, signifying a kind of approval of his double status. Even if visitors do not have access to the original speech, there is a reference available on the walls next to the speakers, just in case anyone wants to do additional research; this reference includes the name of the speaker, the name of the speech (or the name it is known historically), as well as the date and place it was delivered.

The fact that I substitute the text, the message of the discourse, for the reaction to it, the emotional effect among the population present at such events, is a comment on the repetitiveness of political agendas, the formal use of such venues to inform, and the similar way in which such political resources have been used for the strategic manipulation of public opinion. Those emotional effects are the fuel that makes the machine of history work; it is the way by which people can express

ALL PERFORMERS

churchill



Übertragung von Sir Winston Churchills „Eiserner-Vorhang“-Rede
(5. 3. 1946, Fulton, Missouri, USA) in Noten (Auszug)

Translation of Sir Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech
(5 Mar 1946, Fulton, Missouri, USA) into notes (extract)

their spontaneous approval. It is a moment of direct dialogue between the leader and the people, one in which the people's "voice" is the clapping.

The original recorded sound – the words, rhythm, intensity, and speed of the speech – was carefully translated into musical notes with the help of Julia Miller, a composer and computer software designer. The resulting musical scores were performed by a professional (and classically trained) chorus that delivered it by clapping the notes, each in its own way, so they do not sound the same. There was no conductor, just the scores. Each political speech was recorded separately and is delivered via a separate pair of speakers. After you approach the overall confusing sound of the recorded pieces all being played at once, you are confronted with each one as a specific and detailed experience. I think it is very important that the speakers are all positioned one meter away from the wall so in order to best experience it you have to be facing the wall (where the information of the original speech is provided), almost as if experiencing some sort of punishment.

Concerning the relationship between speeches and music, I wanted to mention the *antiphon*, the name of which derives from the 479–411 BC Athenian orator who rarely spoke in public but wrote defenses for others to speak. An antiphon is a response usually sung in Gregorian chant to a psalm or some other part of a religious service and performed by two semi-independent choirs interacting with one another.

The reason I am not using any visual reference but only the speakers and the very subtle (white vinyl on white wall) reference text is because I want the audience to focus on them-

selves, to look at their own reactions. The space has other non-visible elements, such as sulfur mixed with the paint used on the wall. Sulfur has been a very special chemical because of its wide range of uses from gunpowder to medicine (in war and peace). We also experiment with a chemical used in tear gas to see if we can trigger a false and uncontrollable emotional reaction: people crying. It is a very important aspect of the piece that the audience sees itself crying. This creates a disruptive effect since they have a physical response related to an emotional response. But this is neither in relationship to a consequence of their political or psychological perception. It is the first time I use some sort of humor in my work, and that may have to do with my lack of faith in such political strategies. I want the audience to think about that.

GM: Part of your exhibition is an intervention that takes place outside the premises; you place the "project space" under surveillance by commissioning security personnel with watchdogs to position themselves around the building, thereby signaling a heightened sense of danger.

TB: Yes, the title of the piece is "The Dream of Reason," a clear reference to Goya's plate # 43 from "Los Caprichos." This is the second piece I have created as a result of living in the United States. I guess the increasingly dictatorial attitude of the U.S. government has had something to do with it ... *(smile)*

I am really glad that this piece will be performed for at least one day, although ideally, it should happen everyday, for at least a week, on each occasion at a different time of day, so

that it keeps its element of surprise. I am glad because it has been censored twice before, to my surprise. The first time was in Paris, where an artist had invited me to intervene in his solo show at a commercial gallery, and the second time was in Madrid, at a group show.

"The Dream of Reason" is the "invasion" of an area by a uniformed security guard (with no company label) who appears with a guard dog. The dog has a muzzle. Every ten minutes a new guard appears with a new dog. This happens continuously until there are 15 guards on the premises at the same time (the number of guards depends on the size of the area, so this could change in future presentations). The guards do not address the audience, not even if the audience approaches them. They do not have eye contact with them. The guards circulate slowly around the compound, surveying something that which we cannot determine.

The piece was first conceived for an indoor space but the public space will work much better in relationship to its hyper-realism. The audience is not aware or notified of the piece being as a performance. The piece will always be shown at the same time as the exhibition but in another space, speaking to the sometimes apparent disconnection between repression and public speeches, showing how repression is always in the background. As you said, the piece signals a heightened sense of potential danger, one that is never revealed but sensed.

The print "The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters" and the series it was part of were first published on 6 February 1799 in the newspaper "Diario de Madrid." The newspaper had an editorial to introduce this work by Goya. It says, and I quote:

"[the author] has exposed to the human eyes forms and attitudes that have only existed, until now, in the human mind" („Els Caprichos de Goya", Ed. Sa Nostra, Caixa de Balears, Barcelona 1996). In my piece, this also happens but through the materialization of a concept we see an experience through the media or just hear about it most of the time: and that is repression.

Repression and fear are important strategies used by governments and power in general. The levels of intensity in which they are used vary from self-censorship to torture but I find the best politicians are those who know how to work with metaphors and who are good at assigning symbolically shared implications to their repressive gestures.

GM: In your work, political ideology becomes emotional reminiscence, which is then documented by the conversion of a speech melody into intervals of applause. By using this form, you process speeches of various politicians from the 20th century. Is the moral questioning of political strategies of communication also part of your work?

TB: Absolutely. There is an inherent ethical practice and ethical dilemma in these strategies which need to be questioned.

GM: You project political slogans toward the outside. These then become a form of advertisement behind which political ideas represented by them threaten to become obscured. Do you consider this process part of a general phenomenon characteristic of contemporary political communication?

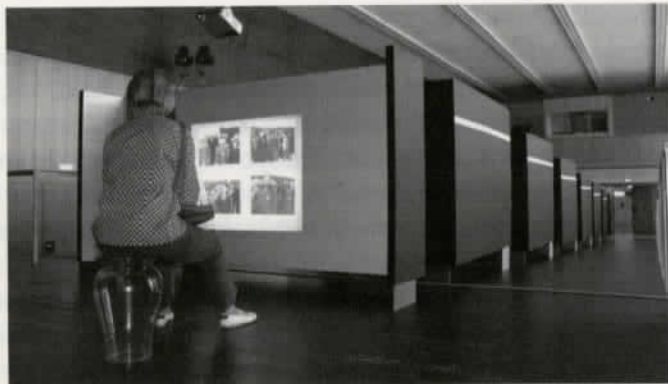
TB: Totally. For a long time now, at least in the United States, politics has become an open form of advertising to sell not even an ideology (in the way it traditionally used to be) but a better and more solid public image. Seeing the campaigns of 2000 and 2004 was amazing for me, with people focusing on the stiffness of a candidate instead of his political agenda. Selecting a section of a speech to transform into a slogan is one of the oldest political strategies. And I agree: we could add that these are intentionally obscured by their de-contextualization. Words are really powerful.

In this exhibition, I am trying to cover several aspects of political strategies, more specifically: the delivery of the political program, its approval by the people, its consequential repressive imposition, and – last, not least – its passive consumption in the form of slogans/advertisements.

I would like to think of this exhibition as a cubist approach to political power, the simultaneous presence of several points of view, in this case not on a canvas but in time.

GM: At the "documenta 11" in Kassel in 2002, you presented an installation suggesting the alarming experience of an interrogation, which was to be interpreted as having a political background. Is there a connection between the current sound installation and this earlier presentation?

TB: In a way there is, because both pieces deal with our own responsibility in establishing and preserving power structures. In other words, they are about our collaboration with power. Both pieces can be seen as sound installations; in Kassel, it



Verantwortung fürs Schicksal, 2004

Auftragsarbeit anlässlich des 50. Jahrestages des Auschwitz-Prozesses

Responsibility for the Destiny, 2004

Commissioned for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Auschwitz trials

was the sound of the guns being loaded that let the audience know about the menace, the danger; here, it is the sound of approbation that lets you know that somehow you will regret this later, maybe when you leave the exhibition space and encounter a security guard.

"Untitled (Kassel, 2002)" is part of an ongoing series titled "Untitled (place, time)," for which I have completed two pieces, the one in Kassel and another in Havana ["Untitled (Havana, 2000)"]. I am preparing a third for the border between Israel and Palestine. This work is positioned through a historic gaze to a place, essentially an outsider's gaze. It is almost as if I had staged a judgment from a historical perspective. But the audience has to experience it, to get involved in it, to get to know it with their senses. One important part of that series is that there

are always people in the audience who do not want to experience these installations – which is great actually because it is the same way in which many people prefer not to be involved. But those who enter the installations experience them almost as if they were memories, not their own lived memories but historical memories that we acquire and incorporate into our emotional archive. A very important element in this series is the fact that people need to be aware of themselves and of the space while they are in it.

"The Dream of Reason" public intervention has an echo of "Untitled (Kassel, 2002)." In Kassel, the surveillance agents were people from Germany, any person who answered the newspaper call and wanted to volunteer for the piece. In Vienna, the security guards are professionals. This is an important difference. In the first one, people were given a role in the power game (even if this role of collaborators was not very nice). In Vienna, people are a target in the game, although they are not told why.

Another difference is that the "Untitled (place, time)" series, maybe as memory itself, is presented of overlapping layers, while "The Dream of Reason" series is a cubist-like presentation, in which all the layers are distinct and visible.

GM: How would you define your own relation to power and politics?

TB: Power is something I do not completely understand yet, that may be why I work with it. But politics is something I have grown up with. Both (mostly politics) were all that was talked

about at my house when I was growing up. It even separated my parents. Politics is something I have lived and I am involved in while in Cuba, even if I do not want to be, because it is inescapable, a permanent presence. Politics in Cuba has a very narrow meaning; it is mostly used in reference to the government and to ideology. In the United States, it is more often used with regard to interpersonal relations. In each case, I find what is not addressed et al to be very interesting. Power, on the other hand, is something people are very aware of in the United States. Although politics can be more like the practical language of society while power is its implementation, both are a very good example of the simultaneity and indissoluble connectivity of idea and action – maybe that is why I am so intrigued.

GM: You were born in Cuba and continue to live there some of the time. Fidel Castro's penchant for ritual orations extending hours at a time is notorious. Would you say that your work has been influenced by this in any way?

TB: It is important for me to mention that Fidel is not being portrayed in this piece, even though I had to spend long hours in my youth listening to him under a heavy sun. Actually, I got the idea in 2004, one night while I was watching a Public Broadcast Service channel in Chicago. There was a documentary about him. Seeing people clapping for him while I was sitting in Chicago was very different from clapping myself or seeing it at my home in Havana.

Going with some frequency to those speeches when I was

standing in the crowd listening to what seemed to be endless speeches may have contributed to making me both an endurance performer and confused about the importance of time. It may have also prepared me for my encounter with Samuel Beckett's work.

GM: Does the phenomenon of disappearance or vanishing thematized and used as an approach in Félix González-Torres' work play any special role in your art?

TB: I definitely have a great respect and admire Felix's work immensely, especially the way he challenged conceptual and social art. I think he is absolutely indispensable for art history.

The idea of disappearance, of vanishing, may be a Cuban thing. It is a recurrent element with a lot of – not only visual – Cuban artists. It may have to do with the fact that our original indigenous people were erased in just a few years. With the way we enjoy and appreciate the ethereal qualities of the present and have only little regard for permanence. With the fact that Cuba is an island always conveying a feeling of transition from one point to another. It is for sure recurrent in Ana, in José Martí, in Antonia Eiriz ... I am not sure, maybe it has to do with our understanding of death.

GM: You live some of the time in Cuba and the rest in Chicago. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of political polarization between Cuba and the USA, what has been your experience of the emotional, cultural and aesthetic relations between the two worlds?

TB: I share my time between these two places. I like the idea of living in a space between two ideologies, two systems. This gives me the illusion that I can have some distance, detachment from a place in order to understand it, the illusion that, in this way, I will have as few blind spots as possible. But who knows ...? Maybe I have just become completely blinded by the wind outside the airplanes ...

Nevertheless, this life has been very interesting and intense, especially since, so far, I have chosen not to live in New York – which some people say is not really the United States: a unique place where, for an artist, the art world has such a strong presence. Coming to the United States has been a good exercise in contrasting what I had previously learned about the place with what I have since lived and experienced. Some of these things are specifically related to the United States, others to capitalism. Having to re-learn so many basic things has been very good because at this age you learn while questioning what you learn. It almost seems like, while in Cuba, the government wants people to focus on it, but they do not allow you any access. In the United States, the government does not want you to focus on it but you do have access, or at least something that feels like it.

I have been really interested in what is missing, unspoken, in both places. It has been fascinating to look at the US system of control, the ideological one, economic censorship, and ideas of modern slavery, the heroic status of celebrities, and their positions in the political game.

I have been particularly interested in the importance given in the United States to narrative, frequently spoken narrative,

while in Cuba the narrative is mostly broken (maybe that is why Fidel, who mastered oratory, is so successful), and we speak through actions instead. The power of media in the United States is something that has no parallel in Cuba. In Cuba, mass media are very clearly a propaganda tool, so, in a way, their impact is lost and they resemble an informational checkbox rather. In the United States, they are also a propaganda tool but they are used differently, through them your brain gets filled with narratives, with many of them, so many that it seems as if you do not have any space left to create your own. I sometimes feel as if I am in a computer game set in the United States and I have to walk through a forest full of traps and distractions, some of them really pleasing. In Cuba, the game would be taking place in a desert (and probably with no oasis in sight) but at least you would be able to see the horizon, or maybe I should rephrase this and say: in a desert where all you can see is the horizon.

I have to say that it has been very healthy to have direct access to information without mystification, as happens in Cuba. By this I mean that you do not have to depend on travelers to bring you books and information or may keep a book for just one week because so many people want to read it. Yet, I have to say that the feeling of preciousness, of the human chain of knowledge, of subversion, has a certain charm. The fact that you can access things firsthand is a different challenge because you have to believe in yourself very strongly. In Cuba, all knowledge is mediated by a previous screening. But I have to be honest and say that in terms of art, this was amazing, because my generation read all the literary classics

and saw a lot of good films. Of course, the problem was that it was already deemed safe, already canonized, but nevertheless it was a great cultural foundation. In the United States, you are your own screener, you have to determine what is and what is not, you frequently see things as they happen, and that makes things look more natural, more human, and more doable. – I suppose this was some stream of consciousness rather than a clear description of my life between Havana and Chicago ...

Lately, I have been very attracted to the idea of moving to Europe, to experience that system, which, at least from afar, seems to be dealing with interesting struggles.

GM: Political themes form the point of departure for much of your work. Would you say that it is possible for art to trigger social change?

TB: It may sound silly but I completely believe in this, and there are many examples of it in art history.

This is a very complex subject, and I do not think I am completely ready for this conversation, but I may share some of my ideas, which are, quite frankly, still in flux. This is actually the theme of one of my new pieces. I will read you a section of what I have written by way of description:

"For some time, I have been questioning the idea of the creation and existence of artwork as a representational act. I have been thinking about art's practical implications and the need for the artist to act as a responsible agent creating useful artwork. Artwork should not only be useful but should exist in the realm

of reality; otherwise, it automatically becomes a representation again, one that exists only in the realm of possibility.

When I talk about the realm of reality, I assume reality not as something representative or mimetic regarding the artwork's construction but in relation to its information, circulation and consumption. 'Realism' is the artistic strategy while at the same time its public realization/actualization. Rather than creating a sample, art is then something of real consequence."

I find it very interesting that some artists dealing with this have decided at some point "not to do art," or at least that is the way it has been perceived by others. Maybe it is not that art has an end but that those artists and their practice have entered another dimension of production and circulation for their art and, as in physics, we cannot see it although it can be explained, formulated, and even controlled. This is my approach to the ideas I call "Arte de Conducta."