

## **Tania Bruguera: Art as Gesture**

**by Kevin Power**

We often grow circling round on ourselves, and Bruguera finds herself homing in constantly on the complex patterns of relationships between art and society, between art and power, between self and the elaboration of identity. In an early piece Bruguera recreated the work of Ana Mendieta who she felt was too unknown to her Cuban audience “that piece was a cultural act. The object was the point of reference. I was merely the archaeologist, the medium. Ritual, which was part of her work, was the way in which I approached her. The idea was to incorporate her, to rescue her from oblivion, to make her part of a cultural context. It was to give her a space and a time in Cuba. ... Ana was interested in rescuing the idea of Cuba from the outside, I was interested in rescuing the idea of the Cuba that was abroad.’(1) Yet this work also serves as a homage to the tradition of Cuban thinking from where Bruguera has herself emerged, one that involves a contemporary re-rooting of the Afro-Caribbean culture, as seen in the work of artists such as Brey, Elso, Bedia, and Mendieta, or in the texts of Ortiz, and Cabrera.

It was in fact Fernando Ortiz who talked for the first time of transculturation as an expression of “the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here and without a knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual or other aspects of its life .... The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations.” (2) Such transculturation is inherent to the allegorical texture of Bruguera’s work. As Antonio Benitez Rojo observes “this chaotic and materially unrepresentable archive, whose promiscuity keeps it quite far from being able to provide a stable and categorical imprint, is also, in a wider political, economic, and social sense, a metaphor for the plantations’s impossible origins.” (3) Ortiz and Benitez Rojo come together in their insistence on the need for a more transgressive trope to study the Caribbean, a densely promiscuous form that does not survive the slightest analysis but opens up another mode of contrapuntal investigation and Bruguera’s work should be understood as being engaged in this contrapuntal form of advance. Again and again within her work she explores limit situations of physical pain or exposure. They can be read as images of survival: pain within a poetics of silence, both chosen and imposed. She often places herself in situations of self-humiliation, openly submissive and paying the price of her guilt, as in *Estudio de Taller* where she is

bound, doubled over, and forced to remain immobile for a length of time. Endurance, suffering and self inflicted pain are all part of the ritual of purification, a social as well as an individual act. We understand the work both in terms of our own experience and even more significantly as the experience of the other. Some Cuban critics seek to remove the work from its immediate context to the safe ground of universals and cross-cultural referencing. Her choice of objects, gestures, and materials permit such readings, yet what we find burning at the edges of Bruguera's work are a testimonial force, coded allegorical significance, and a radical critique. *Dedalo o el imperio de la salvacion*, for example, makes it more than clear that the imagination's natural desire to fly, so central to us as dream and ambition, will get burnt if it comes too close to the power at the centre of the system.

Her performances seek to speak through a collective voice, affirming the presence of small (muted heroic) actions of a community in a world of radical contingency. Static dogmatisms and impersonal determinisms have to be jettisoned as she accents the powers of unique selves to make and remake themselves with no original models to imitate or emulate. Experience here is literally an extreme undergoing, a physical, emotional and psychological enduring amidst the jagged fragments and charred evidences. I can't help thinking of John Dewey's essay, *The Need for a recovery of Philosophy*, written in 1917 in the midst of the First World War, yet still appropriate in terms of contemporary society's search for some kind of working ethics before the excesses of authoritarian behavior: "Experience ... is a matter of simultaneous doings and sufferings. Our undergoings are experiments in varying the course of events; our active trying are trials and tests of ourselves." (4)

Our beliefs about the way the world is have ethical significance. An opinion is a deed that seeks to guide other deeds. A performance is a putting into practice of a thought, of evidencing concern and in a profound way of animating other actions. We are all very much aware that historical systems, like all systems, have finite lives and in such circumstances small inputs have large outputs. The exposure of the essentially pliable, artificial nature of the world and the widening of the perceived range of human choice makes life a moral responsibility. Bruguera moves between inner and outer worlds and never lays the blame for our actions on indomitable external necessities. There are no self-absolving excuses. Life history is redefined as a series of personal choices, and the only allegedly indestructible constraints limiting the next choice are consequences of previous choices. She made her ambitions clear, back in 1987, as a declaration of intent: "To transform work into a personal therapy and cure useful for others". And she is still doing so, it is a life project.

It oversimplifies to label Bruguera as a performance artist or a feminist since the thrust of her work seeks to articulate who she is using the medium of expression that best suits her. She deals with the complexity of a developing self, as bewildered by the immensity of shipwreck as the rest of us. Her work is the register of the energy of her preoccupations, of an active thinking that cuts through the violated evidences of living that surround us. It is part of a postmodern climate where the subversive, a complex term in the Cuban context, is absorbed into the work itself that functions not so much within a parameter of quality as of criticality. Bruguera's work is ethically committed and carries nothing of the cynical edge that slips into the work of Cuban artists in the 90s. Yet at the same time her work is marked by privacy, intimacy, a feminine secrecy, fluidity and ambiguity. She belongs in part to that eighties push, recognized by Craig Owens in his essay, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a theory of Postmodernism', where allegory is seen as the doubling of one term by another. It implies the multiplication of texts around a work of art or literature, and by extension an act of interpretation built into the work itself. Owens notes: "In modern aesthetics, allegory is regularly subordinated to the symbol which represents the supposedly indissoluble unity of form and substance which characterizes the work of art as pure presence." (5) We do not have to recognize the meaning of the symbol as we did in modernist work since the work itself is acutely self-conscious of its critical functions. It is within this terrain that Bruguera has chosen to act.

As far as she is concerned performance obliges the audience to think the process through with her. They are part of it, not spectators as they are so often in installation situations. The performances are not so much conclusions as responses to specific situations within her life and within the arduous road of appearances that is the nature of life in Cuba. She notes: "I do this through my own questions, from the position of a human being who is affected by all this change and instability, who is made to think, to question, to analyze her fears, her permanence, her identity, her guilt, her punishment, her actions, among a thousand other things. with luck the specificity of my experience reflects something of the Cuban condition and of humanity in general." (6) Her work serves as a means of confronting, isolating, understanding, and solving problems in her own life that are common to those of others. Participation and involvement imply a willingness on the part of others to examine these same problems within their own lives. She is engaged in finding a stance towards reality that includes an unfading vigilance and a continuous self scrutiny. She has lived the ambiguity and controversiality of the purposes to which actions were to serve, and thus the need to justify argumentatively the values that inform their activity. She would in all probability acquiesce to Bauman's assertion that "purposes can be no more substantiated monologically; having become performative subjects of a dialogue, they must now refer to principles wide enough to command authority of the sort that belongs solely to ethical values." (7) Self-monitoring, self-reflection and self-evaluation are characteristic of postmodern times given the absence of a universal model or of a clear-cut hierarchy of models. In

our search to become morally competent subjects we live a series of unending choices and the limits of each of us as agent become a closely guarded and hotly contested frontier.

She shows a preference for materials - natural fibres, blood, or sponge - that trigger collective psychological connotations. In one of her recent pieces she uses tea-bags. One thinks of Japanese tea-ceremonies and of deeply engrained Arab or Indian, or for that matter English, social practices. Tea stands as emblematic of Empire, both socially and economically. It can both heal and divide. Bruguera has used it as a medium to draw with, exploiting its wide tonal range, but she has also created a large installation piece made up of the tea bags left behind by the visitors to her studio. The tea bags were placed on drying racks and then sewn into four foot sections of stretched canvas to create highly suggestive panels that in a Cuban context make one think of dried tobacco and might well lead us to Ortiz's examination of the beliefs, superstitions, and cultural values that touch upon the substance as well as the acts of smoking and sweetening.

Bruguera edited two numbers of a small magazine, *Memoria de Postguerra*, a radical gesture that could only finish in censorship. She did so at a time when many of her companions had left the island and the art world was undergoing radical changes, and collective ideas were being abandoned for the glamorous lights of the art market, international curators and galleries. The two numbers underlined her insistence on the collaborative and the collective. The first issue dealt with what was happening in the Cuban art world whilst the second dealt with the theme of emigration. These issues constituted a collective space for reflection by the Cuban art community, calling attention to the role of information within a context where it is manipulated by the state and creating a forum where things could be debated. Edward Said has affirmed that the only thing the intellectual can do with power is to oppose it, yet Bruguera seeks not so much a counter voice as a disparate opening to a diversity of opinions, to the complex multiple voices of the human puzzle. These are failed, frustrated, foredoomed flares of utopian belief but they are as necessary as they have always been.

We no longer trust the authority larger institutions of church or state. Their authority in postmodern society is on the decline, the responsibility taken away from the individuals is coming back. We are much alone, terribly alone on occasion, with our decisions. We do not have a moral code which has the visibility of being absolute and universal and we have once again to confront the specificity of moral problems and take real decisions. Bruguera's work lives out such a dilemma in a particularly high profile context. To use Bauman's argument postmodernity is a

chance of modernity. Tolerance is a chance of postmodernity. Solidarity is a chance of tolerance. Tolerance can take us to indifference but also to solidarity. The question remains how? Bruguera's answer is through the construction of an individual ethics.

Her latest work can be seen as completing the circle one more time, a returning back on herself but also an advancing. She now surrenders authority completely and allows the collectivity to speak allowing artists she had met on her trip to India to produce her works in their own terms as she had herself done with Mendieta, to make their own takes and readings of her pieces. She has returned to a direct involvement with society, with art's role and responsibilities, and with the possibilities of its ethical function. Such are the objectives of her Maestria at the Instituto Superior de Artes (Habana) where she invites artists, colleagues, and friends to lecture on their major fields of interest in a permanent situation of open exchange. The seminar is itself a performance, one more effort to bridge the separation of art and life where she centres again on the examination of human behavior, collective and individual. Art is now seen as gesture, as a more conscious return to society, and as a willingness to incorporate the other into the work as the representative of non-power groups.

<sup>1</sup> Bruguera, T., in conversation with Zaya, O, op .cit, p.253

<sup>2</sup> Ortiz, F., Cuban counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, 1939, p.98.

<sup>3</sup> Benítez-Rojo, A., The Repeating Island, Duke UP, Durham, 1992, p.155-56.

<sup>4</sup> Dewey, J., 'The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy', in *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Richard Bernstein, (Bobbs Merrill, New York, 1960, p.26

<sup>5</sup> Owens, C, *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, October No 12, MIT Boston, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Bruguera T., op.cit, p.249.

<sup>7</sup> Bauman, Z., *The Bauman Reader*, ed. Peter Beilharz, Blackwells, Oxford, 2001, p.186.