

Useful Art

INTERVIEW

POLITICS

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Kathy Noble talks to Tania Bruguera about the artist's long-term project in New York, Immigrant Movement International, and what it means not to 'represent politics but to create political situations'



Immigrant Movement International Headquarters, New York, 2011

Tania Bruguera is a Cuban artist and activist currently living and working in Queens, New York. Her work is grounded in a form of performance that she calls 'Behaviour Art'. Bruguera's aim is to create art that actively inhabits cultural, political and social power structures, in an attempt to influence, rather than represent, them. Her practice encompasses both site-specific works, including Untitled (Kassel, 2002) for Documenta 11 and Tatlin's Whisper #5 (2008) at Tate Modern, alongside long-term projects such as the Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behaviour Art School), an institution that existed from 2002–09 in Havana, Cuba.

This interview took place during the early stages of her project Immigrant Movement International, presented by Creative Time in collaboration with the Queens Museum of Art. The project is expected to run until 2015. Since then, Bruguera has developed a manifesto, launched an Immigrant Respect Awareness Campaign and instigated a day of actions by other artists around the world on 18 December 2011 (which the UN has designated 'International Migrants Day'), and was part of the core group that started Occupy Wall Street. In 2012, the project will add a new section in Mexico City, presented by Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, to work with the subject of migration during the Mexican presidential elections.

You're currently living in Queens developing a project called Immigrant Movement International – could you describe what this is?

Immigrant Movement International began as The Party of Migrant People, a body formed to address the relationship between the political process and immigrants. Rather than representing politics aesthetically, one way of affecting social change is to become part of the machinery, to create long-term changes via the law. Another is public pressure and advocacy through community-organized movements. I am working to define the immigrant as a unique, international citizen or class in an attempt to create a different public image for immigrants. I don't want to represent politics, but to create political situations.

Why did you want to base the project in the borough of Queens?

Because 46 percent of the population was born overseas and 167 languages are spoken. And even though it is only 35 minutes from Manhattan by train, many Manhattan-based people wouldn't normally come here.

What motivated you to begin the project?

I was living in Paris in 2005 when the riots in the *banlieue* took place, which had an enormous impact on the immigrant community. The ways they were being treated and portrayed locally and in the international news was unbearable. I taught a course in 'Useful Art' at the IUAV University in Venice, and there developed the idea of creating a political party for immigrants and entering directly into the political system as an artist. After unsuccessfully pursuing this for five years in Paris, I received a call from Creative Time inviting me to work with them and they accepted my idea. Ideally, this will be a long-term project lasting at least five years.

What are you doing whilst living in Queens?

Initially, I am working with other community organizations and shadowing several elected officials in order to experience the existing systems. We're presenting a programme of workshops and events for the local community – for example, weekly screenings of films addressing human rights, or a 12-hour poetry marathon with immigrant poets. We are also holding English language classes and legal workshops, free and open to all. Some of these events were generated by us, but many are in response to requests from the community. It is not the kind of social project where the artist comes to implement a fully formed idea, regardless of whether the community wants it or not. The activities will change as the project requires. I said no to exhibitions this year and I'm not producing any other new work. I'm also living on minimum wage with no health insurance in the neighbourhood of Corona, where I live with 12 other people, all of them immigrants, sharing rooms with their families. I feel as if I have just started over: it's my year zero as an artist.



'Paper Orchestra 1', Corona Youth Orchestra session participants and teacher Alvaro Rodas, 19 May 2011

Did you tell them you were an artist when you moved in?

I'm not pretending that I'm someone else or acting as a character, neither am I pretending that we have the same point of view on things. I have explained that I am a 42-year-old woman who is unmarried, with no babies, and in love with my work as an artist. That was a big surprise to them. I do not fit their cultural mould and they do not fulfill my expectations of what co-existence is, particularly in terms of gender equality. But for them I'm also the person who gave Maria a part-time job, confronted the landlord because we spent January and February without heat and connected them with free legal advice. Did I do that as an artist? No, I did it as a person.

As an artist you are also privileged with a public voice and the support of institutions, regardless of whether you are living 'their' life.

As an artist, my voice reaches the media sporadically, and even then it is not always my actual voice. The way in which your voice belongs to others is not always through a declaration, but also via enthusiasm and empathy. It is very different to be a public voice for social and political issues. There's no space for the capricious or the arbitrary as a politician; rather it is a controlled, staged voice that also implies some form of consensus. When you have a public voice that is out of sync with consensus, complicated communication issues arise. The people I live with also have institutions that support them but many do not use them. I've seen organizations that began with community meetings – for example, local activist group Make The Road New York – which now have executive positions. So immigrants do have mechanisms for institutional support, but they need to seek them out. I've been working for 20 years as an artist and this is the first time that an institution has invested in my project.

You still come from a vastly privileged economic and social position, which affects the choices and actions you are able to make.

Yes, but just because one is in the art world doesn't mean that one has access to that privileged economy. This work does not appeal to collectors as there is barely anything to exhibit. My type of art needs patrons and philanthropists that do not want to acquire objects but instead want to contribute towards a different society. The only privilege I think I have has nothing to do with money or social position but with knowledge.

But knowledge comes from access to education, which is mostly shaped by one's social and economic situation. How do you reconcile the reality of the people you are working alongside with the fact that you are living their reality as an art work?

What makes it art is that I'm analyzing everything that happens, all the time, from various perspectives. I'm trying to put these experiences into a context of outside references and still retain critical distance. But the experiences are also real and in long-term projects there are moments when you forget it is art because it really is just life.

Do you not worry that you are creating a kind of theatre out of someone else's existence?

This is not theatre. I am not making the private realm public. People have requested – some quite aggressively – to come and see my house and meet the people I live with but that is the wrong impulse with which to approach this project. That space is not my art work; living with my neighbours is not a performance. There is no pretending and I'm not doing it for anybody else's consumption. The focus should be on the conditions these people are forced into because of their status as immigrants. It is very hard to lose one's privileges, but maybe if more artists practiced that once in a while we might have better art.

So you are really living, rather than performing, the roles of politician and immigrant?

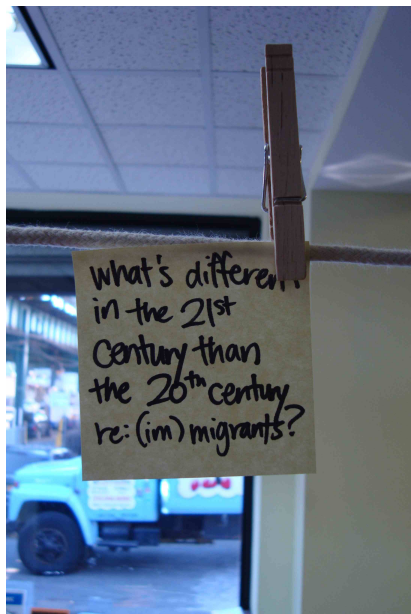
I come from a performance tradition in which I have created and practice 'Behaviour Art': when you perform you are also doing it for real. There is no distance other than the framing, and this is sometimes more in the eye of the beholder. At some point, when you do this kind of performance, you are not performing, you are just 'it'. The only difference – and this is where I think the 'art' part resides – is that it is a situation I've decided to be part of, one from which I can escape. However, it is also my reality in some ways, as I've been an immigrant since I arrived in the US and can be identified as such as soon as I open my mouth and speak.

This is something that seems important in all your work, from your early re-performances of works by Ana Mendieta, to the 2002 project *Translations* where you asked the audience to re-create previous performances of yours. Yet no matter how much you or those involved are experiencing, surely others will only see the 'image' you are creating?

I believe in form as a flexible matter shaped by the context, so in order to 'provoke' the same reactions and levels of intensity one has to translate the ideas to new circumstances in new ways, not just reproduce the way in which they once looked.

If your target audience is immigrants and politicians, what relationship do you hope to have with the art world?

Politically, most of the art world has low standards and there is an unspoken form of 'correct' art-world behaviour. One of my aims is to mix the art audience and the immigrants from this community. Many artists are immigrants themselves yet they are not perceived as such because that concept is associated with 'undocumented' people and with the working class. But I know more than one artist who is undocumented, living on less than the minimum wage, working the same jobs as those other immigrants do. They too are harassed by customs at airports and police in the streets. Yet the difference is one of attitude: it is rare when artists behave as immigrants. An important part of the project in this first year is the respondents. People from the political, academic and curatorial world will visit the project. I chose them based on their experience and knowledge of the issues I'm dealing with, or because they are not convinced by the tradition of social and political art that I'm working with. This self-criticism is important for the project and also a way to document it.



Re-conceptualizing the 21st Century (Im)migrant', a two-day conference, 4-5 November 2011

How do you hope to engage politicians?

I have a political advisor working with me – one that helped some of the current local elected officials win their campaigns. After shadowing these politicians, I hope to eventually work with them on campaigns, to try to address the gap between the language of the avant-garde and the language of politics. When an artist deals with political issues with an avant-garde language, the vast majority of politicians don't engage and often their relationship to it is one of censorship. On the other hand, when politicians use art and visual culture, they often seem dated or kitsch.

'Socially engaged practice' – work that seems to exist through a wish to improve or comment upon the community – can often become tokenistic. What you are doing seems more genuine, but also confusing, as it blurs the art and life boundary entirely and feels uncomfortable.

Art institutions are not structurally designed to create long-term projects. I've seen an institutional interest in so-called 'socially engaged art' but it is often only for festivity, escapism or the appropriation of the public sphere by a privileged group. There are situations in which an artist is invited to intervene in the social ecology of a place but I do not think one should dismiss this automatically because it's an impure impulse – these projects can be interesting or surprising experiments.

Working in the public sphere should, in part, come from your ethical duty as a citizen, but the idea of helping people is murky territory. In the name of kindness many disasters have been created. I believe that art can help people, but the problem starts with what 'help' means and for whom. Help is difficult to measure with the short time-span art projects have and immediate results can become forced. If what I'm doing is confusing or uncomfortable then my work is being done properly.

Do you not feel that you are trying to fulfill a role that should or does exist already? Community groups already exist and the idea of bringing a group of like-minded people together is the oldest form of political structure. By mirroring that, what do you hope to change?

The role of artists as citizens. We often refer to Joseph Beuys's declaration that 'everyone is an artist', but what about 'every artist is an active citizen'? Mirroring is a learning technique to understand the internal dynamics and the differences of these groups and activities. There is a different energy when you go and see an elected official to tell them your problems, than when you go to a community meeting to tell your problems. I want to feel the nuances and the ways in which a political cause develops. For that, you need to know the context and the tools you are working with and this takes time.

How does your work relate to Beuys's political groups, the German Student Party (1967) and the German Green Party (1980), to his idea of 'social sculpture', and to his self-mythologizing? For me, in many ways, he feels closer to Andy Warhol – he even starred in a Japanese whisky advert.

He did perform a form of celebrity, but it was still related to social and political actions.

He created a situation in which he himself is the total art work, the material. Where do you think his intentions lay in relation to yours?

I'm more interested in his *7000 Oaks* project [1982-7], in the art that emerged during the first years of the Soviet revolution and during the Cuban revolution, in attempts in the US to link art with activism – for example, Suzanne Lacy or Group Material – and in the Latin-American tradition of political art: Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal and Antanas Mockus. Beuys is not known at all in the world of international politics, but Boal is, and I wish political artists could be as influential in politics as they are in art. I'm not interested in the self-mythologizing part of Beuys's work, nor in the idea of artists as shamans.

How do you feel about work by artists who fall under the banner of 'relational aesthetics'?

To me, relational aesthetics was actually something happening in Latin-America and the former socialist countries long before the work discussed in Nicolas Bourriaud's book. Tucumán Arde, Aníbal López, Minerva Cuevas – there are many examples. But these had an intensity and social urgency that some of the examples Bourriaud discussed lack. We need to differentiate between what is about sociability and what works with the social.

But from the outside that model could be perceived as similar to yours ...

It could look alike, but what I'm doing right now is only the first step towards something else. It doesn't stop with the interactions and gatherings.

Is there not a level of manipulation of others involved in your work?

There is a big distrust of artists who want to work in politics, from both the art world and the political sphere. If by manipulation you mean insincerity then there is no manipulation. I'm building collaboration, I'm not imposing anything and the communication process is open and healthy: with the institutions, the immigrants and the elected officials I've encountered so far.

One of the things you hope to explore in this project is what 'use' might be. But why should art be useful? Arguably, an important point of art is not to have a 'use', in a literal sense, but to be something else in our lives.

All art is useful. But the Spanish word for useful, *útil*, also means 'tool'. So we are talking about art as a social tool, as well, which has a long tradition that I want to re-evaluate.

Are you worried about failure?

This project has a 99.9999999% possibility of being a disaster. There are too many elements I cannot control and too much I do not know about. Works in the social sphere have to navigate instability, as they are entirely structured by the context of the politically time-specific.

Kathy Nobles

Frieze Magazine, Issue 144, January - February 2012

London, United Kingdom.

<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/useful-art/>