

THURSDAY, MAY 19, 2011

New York

The New York Times



MUSEO DE BELLAS ARTES, CARACAS, VENEZUELA
'THE BURDEN OF GUILT'



'VIGILANTES: THE DREAM OF REASON'

The artist Tania Bruguera in three of her works. She is now living in a Corona, Queens, apartment with several illegal immigrants, to draw attention to immigrants' plight. A slide show is at nytimes.com/nyregion.



'STUDIO STUDY'

She Calls It Art. They Call It, Well, Life.

Her Performance: A Year With Poor, Cramped (and Perplexed) Immigrants

By SAM DOLNICK

Tania Bruguera has eaten dirt, hung a dead lamb from her neck and served trays of cocaine to a gallery audience, all in the name of art. She has shown her work at the Venice Biennale, been feted at the Pompidou Center in Paris and landed a Guggenheim fellowship.

But now she is sharing a tiny apartment in Corona, Queens, with five illegal immigrants and their six children, including a newborn, while scraping by on the minimum wage, without health insurance.

She has not fallen on hard times. Ms. Bruguera is performing a yearlong art piece meant to improve the image of immigrants and highlight their plight. And she is bringing her high-concept brand of provocation to a low-wattage precinct of taco stands and auto-body shops, where the neighbors have responded with varying degrees of curiosity, amusement and befuddlement.

"She's an artist? I didn't know that," said J. P. Jimenez, a salesman at Metropolitan Lumber and Hardware on Roosevelt Avenue, opposite the storefront Ms. Bruguera opened last month. "I don't see nobody going in with paintings."

Ms. Bruguera (pronounced brew-GAIR-a) has turned the space, a former beauty supply store, into the headquarters for her new advocacy group-cum-art project, Immigrant Movement International, using about \$85,000 from Creative Time, a nonprofit arts group, and the Queens Museum of Art.

She seeks to blend politics and art to empower immigrants through English classes, legal help and impromptu performances. She has held workshops to write slogans — like "I am today what your grandparents were yesterday" — that she plans to print on bumper stickers and T-shirts. And she intends to live like her working-class Latino neighbors; she has vowed not to tap her credit cards, personal bank account or assistants in Italy and Cuba.

"I don't want to hear things in the office — I want to live them," said Ms. Bruguera, 43, who is from Cuba but



JAMES ESTRIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ms. Bruguera at a Manhattan rally of Immigrant Movement International, her advocacy group and arts project.

To some, a rare work that breaks the rules. To others, just a stunt.

spent the last year in Paris. "I want to have the anxiety."

She added, "Those are things I have to feel on my skin."

She has already learned a thing or two. After finding her apartment and roommates in January through a flier on the street, she was surprised that the local gym did not offer yoga. The apartment had no heat through the winter,

and her minimum-wage salary, which she wrote into the project description, offers little leeway.

"One week I saved \$8," she said, standing in her spartan bedroom, which can barely fit the dresser she found on the street.

Her roommates, especially an out-of-work Ecuadorean laborer, do not know what to make of her. "I explained to them four times what I'm doing already," she said. "They don't get it. They're not very excited."

But people have begun trickling into the storefront. They ask for English classes, jobs and legal help — services outside her training. "They don't want

any art at all," Ms. Bruguera said. They want "very concrete and mundane things," she said. "This is what their life is."

She plans to address those needs — with a twist. Artists will teach English "in a more creative way, where people can learn English but also learn about themselves," Ms. Bruguera said. A lawyer will offer advice informed by artists, who "are very good at looking at loopholes and seeing where the system has a failure."

If it all sounds a bit vague, Ms. Bruguera means it to be.

She wants immigrants to shape her

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She Thinks of It as Art. They Call It, Well, Life.

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She wants immigrants to shape her work by telling her what they want to achieve here. "You work with people's hope," she said. "That's the material of my work."

The project has skeptics. Some see her as an artistic carpetbagger: before moving to Queens, she had never visited the borough, except for her own shows at MoMA PS1. Others say that her plans for social change sound naive, and that her unusual living arrangement can be dismissed as a stunt.

"Being able to hit the eject button at any time changes the experience in a dramatic way," said Andrew Friedman, co-executive director of Make the Road New

York, which we enjoy," he said. The daughter of a Cuban diplomat and an English translator, Ms. Bruguera grew up amid the revolution's promises and problems. She began splitting her time between Havana and Chicago in 1997, and taught art at the University of Chicago from 2003 to 2010.

In conversation, she toggles between Spanish and English, tossing off the koans of a conceptual artist. A favorite line: "I don't like art that points at a thing. I like art that is the thing."

Her work has long had a political bent. One piece in Cuba had visitors walk over rotting sugar cane husks while naked men stood before a video screen showing Fidel Castro; in another, a security guard in a Miami gallery quizzed visitors about plots to assassinate President Obama.

In Queens, some residents have caught on. Aida Sehovic, a Bosnian immigrant who lives in Astoria, attended a recent workshop eager to dive into Ms. Bruguera's whirlpool.

"Immigrants in this city usually only relate to art when they're custodians at museums," Ms. Sehovic, 34, said. "This project flips that, where the immigrants become active participants."

On a recent Sunday, three dozen young people from places like Jamaica, Russia and Mexico gathered at the storefront before



JAMES ESTRIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The headquarters of Tania Bruguera's advocacy group, Immigration Movement International, in Corona, Queens.

taking the subway to a workers' rights rally in Manhattan. But Ms. Bruguera was most excited for the commute on the No. 7 train, which she planned to turn into her theater.

For the performance, each volunteer was to sit next to a stranger and recount his or her immigrant experience. As the train hurtled above the Queens streets, the show began. Ms. Sehovic and a dapper Armenian man riding to Times Square shared stories of horrors in their homelands, but then shifted

sharply into a debate about illegal immigrants.

"If you are illegal, you have no rights!" the man shouted. Ms. Sehovic argued for compassion, but the man shook his head.

Exiting the train, she smiled and said, "This is exactly what I wanted."

Still, Mr. Friedman's group has sent immigrants to Ms. Bruguera's workshops, and he, like some other critics, respects her passion. Ms. Bruguera contends that commuting from Manhattan would have felt artificial, and that the Corona apartment has allowed her to experience immigrant life viscerally.

Besides, she said: "Do I care what people think? Nothing I've done is popular at the moment. Later, everyone says it's great."

She has financing for one year, but hopes to extend it.

Nato Thompson, Creative Time's chief curator, called her "a rare artist" whom he was thrilled to have working in New York. "There are so many parts of this project which defy typical art