

TANIA BRUGUERA



TANIA BRUGUERA WAS INTERVIEWED BY
PATRICIA VASQUEZ VIA EMAIL IN MARCH 2012.

PATRICIA VASQUEZ What is the relationship between Arte de Conducta, Arte Util and Political-Timing Specific?

TANIA BRUGUERA The relationship between all these concepts is the frustration I have with the way language and concepts are used to explain artistic actions, practices and experiences. It is not that I consider impossible extrapolating something into written or spoken language, but I see over and over the easy ways in which people misuse artistic concepts. Critics, artists, and art historians, we all force art concepts into practices that need new definitions. How many times you have heard a young artist defining her practice as conceptual art just because it vaguely resembles the “look” of a conceptual art piece, but have no intention to follow that research? Sometimes such declaration is made simply because it is the easiest way out of that conversation, and for people to have a clear idea of what the artist is doing, even if it is not what (s)he is doing. Too often things are being put together because of how they look and not because of their purposes and intentions, which misleads the understanding of the artistic practices around us. While it states the historical continuity, it is also reductionist.

It is important for me that when people think about my work they re-evaluate the place from where the intentions come from. The need to historicize one’s work to put it in the context of art history and of your contemporaries is a method you acquire during your student years, it is not a natural impulse. Your natural impulse as an artist is to express yourself and to try to understand things around you. In my case, as a person coming from a country that, while a western one, is surrounded by mystique and misinformation, I found myself in the early years of my art practice explaining the context the work was reacting to or dialoguing with, in order to have the reading I wanted from the work. I had few incidents where critics approached my work and even wrote about it projecting superficial relationships with other artists’ work, or where they tried to force it into certain art traditions that had nothing to do with what I even knew. They mostly projected their misinformation, prejudices and idealisms about Cuba. I’m not saying that the artist is the sole authority over the work and I actually love when critics see a perspective in my work that I have not even thought about, but I had to spend a lot of years re-directing the understanding of my work and explaining the mistakes critics made. Now I have their texts in my website and when they are not accurate I include a note, so people know that this was not the intention of the work or that the data is inaccurate. This is also why I have favored the interview over the essay; I had to learn to explain the work as much as I had to learn how to do the work.

Another moment when I had extreme difficulties with artistic concepts and traditions was when I was studying performance art in the United States for my Master degree. I went to study it because it was the practice I felt more interested in, and very few places offered performance studies. But in the process I found how my practice was much more linked to political actions/performances/issues in Cuba, Latin America and the former socialist countries than practices coming from New York in the 70’s. Having to put my work in front of those historical traditions, explain it from those perspectives, felt as a colonization act. I was wondering why people could not do the opposite: try to understand the work’s political context from within. Another element was the fact that I had to speak in a language that I could not master and from which nuances were absent, it made me feel that my work was extremely simplistic, as it

was the understanding of it. I was very frustrated, explaining why the work was not this and was not that. Then, I decided to start defining what I was doing by what it was instead of what it was not. That at least would put people in the position of stopping their mechanical assumptions and start the conversation from other grounds. It was important that the concept was in Spanish to highlight the fact that you are missing some cultural references, as well as stating clearly that it is a tradition belonging to another context. And especially because in Spanish words can have more than one meaning.

Performance art as well as Social/Public Art Practice are relatively young practices, therefore concepts from other practices are very often used to define them, instead of finding what could be more accurate. It is too easy to explain something that is still in its defining stage as something else that is already well defined and we all agree on; but is not the same thing nor have the same intentions. Doing this has very dangerous implications, often what is seen as an incongruence in social art practice is not really an incongruence of the practice or of the specific artwork analyzed; but it is just the incongruence of using a term that doesn't belong to that practice and consequently, using a point of view that is dislocated. It is hard to be coherent as a social art practitioner when your work is scrutinized with concepts from installation art or minimal art or painting. Finding new ways to name the elements you are working with or processes you have to go through to create your work, and that are not reflected on concepts you know already, is not only a political act but also a way to not get trapped on limited expectations and possible outcomes of the art practice. ♦



Tania Bruguera is one of the leading political and performance artists of her generation. Bruguera's work researches ways in which Art can be applied to the everyday political life; creating a public forum to debate ideas shown in their state of contradictions and focusing on the transformation of the condition of "viewer" onto one of "citizenry." Bruguera uses the terms ARTE DE CONDUCTA (conduct/behavior art) and ARTE UTIL (useful art) to define her practice.

Bruguera has participated in Documenta, Performa, Venice, Gwangju, and Havana Biennales and at exhibitions at mayor museums in Europe and United States including the Tate Modern, The WhitechapelGallery, PS1, ZKM, IVAM, Kunsthalle Wien, and The New Museum of Contemporary Art. Her work is part of the collection of the Tate Modern; Museum für Moderne Kunst; Daros Foundation; Museo del Barrio; Bronx Museum; IVAM; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam.

A graduate of the MFA programs at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (United States) and Instituto Superior de Arte (Cuba), Bruguera is also the Founder / Director of Arte de Conducta; the first politic art studies program in the world, hosted by Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana. She is visiting faculty at Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, IUAV in Venice and Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.