

Cátedra Arte de Conducta TANIA BRUGUERA,
ARTIST

IN RECENT YEARS there has been a wave of art projects that mimic or reinvent structures of education: art as school, school as art. In this book no fewer than four pedagogical art projects are discussed at length: Mark Dion's *Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group* (chapter 2); Wendy Ewald's *Arabic Alphabet*, with students from I.S. 230 in Jackson Heights, Queens (chapter 8); Brett Cook's project at the Packer School in Brooklyn (chapter 10); and Tania Bruguera's *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* in Havana, discussed in this chapter. Perhaps students are natural targets for collaboration, as they are well organized in schools and somewhat flexible because of their youth; but it is exactly students' vulnerability and lack of voice that progressive pedagogy seeks to address by rebalancing power in the educational setting.

As discussed in the following interview, *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* was born from Bruguera's profound disappointment with the reception of a work she created for Documenta 11 (2002) in Kassel, Germany. Although her project there had been a critical success, she returned to Havana frustrated, wanting to find a way to incorporate a process of thinking into the visitor's experience of her work. Soon she came up with the idea of a multifaceted, interactive, participatory school, an experiment in pedagogy with the goal of fostering a new generation of less commercialized, more politicized artists in Cuba. The *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* opened in January 2003. In its ambitious scope and its critical self-awareness as an institution, Bruguera's school bears a close resemblance to Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses*, which was also born of disappointment. In an interview conducted in 1996, Lowe described his profound disenchantment after an artwork he had created for a show in Houston, about the lynch-

ing of a young African American man, ran up against what he saw as the impossibility of forging a deep connection to the subject matter in the museum context. This experience drove him out of the art world and in a direction that eventually led him to found *Project Row Houses*.¹ Bruguera and Lowe's projects are emblematic of the formation of so-called counter-institutions. While Lowe seems to have embraced the notion of building an institution by incorporating as a nonprofit, hiring an executive director, and even adding the bureaucratic layer of a community development corporation, Bruguera resisted when she saw the success of her project and its potential institutionalization, and closed down the project after seven years. Both Bruguera and Lowe point to Joseph Beuys as an influence. Like Beuys, who butted heads with the bureaucratic structure of education in Düsseldorf, Bruguera negotiated an uneasy relationship with the institution of the art academy in Havana.

Without making any explicit references to progressive pedagogy in this interview, Bruguera echoes the theories of both Paulo Freire and John Dewey. She sees education as a site for creating collectively and developing human social potential, not simply acquiring information. However, it is important to note that her school was in fact quite rigorous, with hundreds of meetings and thousands of hours of work for its members. Though almost nothing was technically required, the members were expected to do far more work than a typical student in an American master of fine arts program.

TANIA BRUGUERA is an interdisciplinary artist working primarily in what she calls "behavior art," performance, installation, and video. She has participated in numerous biennials and has created works for the Tate Modern, the Pompidou Center, the Stedelijk Museum, and other museums across Latin America. She studied art both in Cuba (at Escuela de Arte San Alejandro) and in the United States (at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). In January 2011 she moved to Corona, Queens, to initiate a long-term project related to immigration, sponsored by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art.

In December 2008 I observed a workshop at the Cátedra Arte de Conducta conducted by the Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, which consisted of the members of the school creating a video loosely based on Dziga Vertov's film Man with a

TOM FINKELPEARL: If we could start at the beginning, what were your motivations in creating this project?

TANIA BRUGUERA: It was a combination of things. First of all, when I was at ISA [Instituto Superior de Arte], studying toward the terminal degree in art here in Havana, between 1988 and 1992, there were no performance art classes. I had to discover performance on my own. Since then, I always had it in my mind to teach performance in Cuba. Then around ten years ago I was with a group of Cuban artists in Venezuela at a residency in Maracay.² One day we were talking about the state of things in the arts in Cuba, thinking what we could do to improve the situation. At one point we addressed ISA, an institution that had once been led by Cuban avant-garde artists and was regarded as a place that had seeded the best projects of the younger generations, but at that moment it was without leading artists as professors, and the institution, relying on this tradition, was a stop on the cultural tour for foreigners, who could buy the work of the students with high hopes or as a souvenir at very cheap prices. So we started thinking, maybe as a joke, that we should establish our own school. This conversation was at the back of my mind four years later when I started the school, and the first people I asked to be professors were those artists.³

These were the contextual impulses, but, most directly, this project was born as a consequence of participating at Documenta 11 in 2002. Although my piece had some sort of success in the exhibition, in the press, and it was even bought by a museum in Germany, I came back with some dissatisfaction. The piece I did was part of a series in which I try to work around the political imaginary of a place. Specifically *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, using the reference of the Nazis, was a reflection on our historical responsibilities at times when the events are not so clearly read as a collective consent. The piece worked among other things with the idea of a live action that existed but was somehow not visible. The problems of the negotiation of the visible and the invisible in art is a recurrent aspect of my work.

My disappointment was in relation to the disjunction between the political process that I wanted the audience to go through and how little time they had to spend in the piece. I came back thinking that

I needed to change the use of time in my work, the time required to experience it. I wanted to situate the thinking process within the work and not outside it. I started thinking about appropriating the structure and the resources of power as my medium, as my material. Instead of representing them, I wanted to put them in action; that would be my work.

Simultaneously I was disillusioned with the way international success had become such a prominent goal for artists in Cuba. Art was becoming foremost a source of income, and artists were becoming a new social class close to the bourgeoisie. The Cuban social and political reality had become more a reference to sell authenticity than actually a place from which to propose productive dialogue.

TF: At that time there was also an infusion of American collectors into the system, no?

TB: Yes, it was at its most visible peak during the Havana Bienal in 2000. Huge buses filled with American collectors and trustees from museums arrived in streets where in some cases no tourist ever stops; they were enthusiastic and excited, moving from house to house, under a very tight schedule where they saw, I don't know, five, six, seven studios a day on top of the exhibitions part of the Bienal around the city. Of course ISA was part of their route. It was crazy. And they came for, like, half an hour, forty-five minutes max, if you were lucky. It was: arrive, look, buy, let's go to the next one, leave, repeat.

TF: And Cuba fever was felt in New York. Everyone was talking about Cuban art and the Cuban market.

TB: From the other side of that fever, in Cuba, there was a ton of interest in the idea of an art market and how to be successful in it. New jobs appeared: assistants, dealers, artists' managers, art historians working for artists on their texts, people specializing in the building of crates and shipping. It was almost as if we were playing a game, the game of becoming capitalists. Money earned had an impact. But I knew, because I have seen it before, that such enthusiasm is short and moves very quickly from one center of attention to another. A friend of mine was speculating how long it would last before the art of maybe Vietnam or Ethiopia caught the attention of those same fervent aficionados of Cuban art.

Some artists in Cuba began to imagine what was wanted from them, from their art. Pleasing the foreigners involved another kind of process of social engagement as well as another kind of censorship.



A workshop at *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* to create artworks based on idiomatic phrases that could serve as a dictionary of Cuba for foreigners, taught by the Albanian artist Anri Sala in 2005. Left to right: Ana Olema, Tania Bruguera, Jeanete Chaváz, Anri Sala, and Martha Perera. Photograph by Loraines Gallego. Courtesy of Studio Bruguera.

- TF: So at the outset of this project there were two things on your mind: disillusionment with commercialization in Cuba and the snapshot mentality of the biennial circuit exemplified by your experience at Documenta.
- TB: I wanted somehow to propose another artistic reality, to go back to thinking about the social use of art. I didn't think I could enter into a productive conversation on that subject with the artists involved in this fever. But what about the younger generation? Education is the number one medium through which the state creates change in society, long-term change. So as I was looking for political structures to work with, I said maybe education is where I have to go. Spaces for discussion were almost nonexistent at that moment. To open a space for discussion as an art piece was a political gesture.

I also thought from the beginning about this as a long-term project. I was thinking a minimum of five years, playing with the ways in which socialist economies are planned on *quinquenios*.

- TF: Did you actually write a five-year plan?
- TB: Oh, no. I wanted to keep the possibility of readjusting the strategies. The other thing that was very important for me was that while I was

using the form of an institution, I didn't want to become one. Over time the structure became more and more clear. And this is something that I became nervous about: the fact that it could be *too* clear. I was creating a space for discussion, and in order for that to happen I also needed internal contradictions.

The way the structure worked at the beginning was by trying to find ways in which we could work with behavior as an art material. The first year, I identified some issues to be dealt with in performance and social and political art and tried to find a specialist in each area; for example, since performance artists often have to deal with legal issues, we invited a lawyer to explain the perspective of the law on the rights of an author and so on, and since performance art is often seen as an event that creates a media impact, we invited a journalist who taught a workshop on the idea of the construction of the truth within the media machine. I wanted all of us to be prepared with the tools and the methodology of those other practices.

Another thing I wanted from the beginning was for the project to be mobile. The classes happened at different locations, at different times of day, and were different lengths. I wanted to generate a situation that spread around the city, making this piece an unavoidable work of public art.

TF: But a lot of the activity unfolds in this house we are sitting in, which was your grandmother's home, a ground-floor apartment with a courtyard in old Havana.

TB: Yes, where I've lived since 1987. I actually used my house before for some of my performances and for some exhibitions. At the beginning I thought we would just use one room. But now a second room is the library; a third room is where sometimes participants stay over when the discussions run too late. The kitchen is a collective space, and sometimes we cook and eat all together. They get here and they feel like home. It is a situation of trust and respect. One example is the library: they check out books, and we never had a lost book. This is also part of the education. The education is not only on how to do a better art piece or on the latest theoretical concepts, but also on how to create collectivity. Behavior is not only a material for the artworks, it is also part of life, and as such it has to be functional. It's a project about art, but it's also important to make them good people, good citizens.

TF: How did you decide on the name *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*?

TB: Well, I was doing my MFA in performance at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago [1999–2001], and I found that I couldn't identify with the perspectives on performance that I was being taught. Even though the term *performance* is very rich, it was identified by people outside the art world as related to theater or the performing arts instead of social gestures in the public sphere through art. It also seemed, at least in academia, as if over time the term had acquired its own expectations and specificity. I came from a different tradition of what was political and what was performative. Why should I call it *performance* if my practice was going to be done in Cuba? Also there were other terms used, like, in the U.K., *live art*, and then there was *body art* and so on. I didn't know what to call it, but I just knew I should not use *performance*. But even before all that, I had to deal with the political implications of identifying what I was doing with an English word.

One day I was telling a friend about my first job experience, where I ran a sort of art program at a juvenile detention center, a reeducation center, or, as it was called, a school for kids with behavioral problems. They were ages six to sixteen with some delinquent past and usually a very bad environment at home. That type of school is called *escuela de conducta*.

TF: The school of conduct?

TB: Yes, the school of or for conduct, or behavior. *Conducta* in Spanish has two meanings: the social ones and one that implies conduction, conduit, transmission. After I graduated, in June 1992, I started working at the *escuela de conducta*, and in September of that year I started at the ISA as a professor. So on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I had these kids with behavioral problems. Tuesdays and Thursdays I had the ISA art students. I wasn't satisfied with either world, and for a long time, in my mind, I wanted to put them together. One day, talking to this friend, I said, Yeah, in the *escuela de conducta* I was doing *arte de conducta* — art of behavior. It was kind of a joke, but I kept the name.

At the same time I was doing research on Latin American performance. I was beginning to see that a consistent thread throughout all the work I was looking at was the social gesture. I wanted for sure to do art that is political and social. When you say *performance*, you do not always connect immediately with that. But if I say *conducta*, it is unavoidably social, because behavior is what society uses to commu-

nicate and to judge; it is society's language. So I thought that would at least assure that the conversation was going to focus on the social.

TF: Do you refer to the young people in the program as students?

TB: No, they are called members, or participants, or artists; I go back and forth on that. I want to treat them as young artists and avoid the student-professor power relation, as the young artists will soon be on the same professional platform that we are. Of course, the project is my responsibility, but I try not to be present all the time and to be open to what is needed by their work at each moment, so that the dynamic between them and the program can develop organically. The participant-observer theory from sociology, which I use in my work, can be valuable. Also, I called the visiting artists not professors, but *guests*.

I'm interested also in not having a stable way in which things are called; things change and we need to be faithful to that.

TF: Okay, members and guests. I know that in Cuba most institutions are government-run. What's the bureaucratic relationship to the state?

TB: When I came back from Documenta, I had been outside Cuba for the most part of the previous two years, and when I began talking to people about doing a school, they were all telling me that it was legally impossible and that I had lost touch with reality here. Then, by chance, I was with my partner at a dinner, as the spouse. I started talking to the spouse of the person who made the invitation. We talked about my work and about teaching, and I said that it was a shame that ISA was doing so badly at that moment. She asked me more about that, and I went on and on, complaining. As I was a bit obsessed with the project of the school, I told her about that, and she asked me about the ideas I had. At some point I finally asked about her, what she worked on, and she said that she was the dean of ISA [*laughs*]!

TF: Ouch!

TB: Yes, but it was really good. We're still really good friends, because we were very honest and straightforward from the beginning and because we connected at a personal level first and then at the institutional one. And she said, "Why don't you come back to teach for us if you have all this criticism?" I said to her, "I will only go if you give me my own department, my own *cátedra*." I didn't want to go, so I asked for the impossible. But she said, "Okay, send me a proposal on Monday." And she accepted the proposal. It all happened very fast. The fact that I had just returned from Documenta made it easier.

With this opportunity I had to reevaluate the project I had in mind, and I realized that it was perfect because it would be more real. It would be a critique from the inside of the institution, and also the project would be evaluated by the actual educational parameters.

What could have been a lack of resources on their part worked perfectly for my project. They were renovating the school, and there were no spaces available, so I situated the project in my house, as I had intended from the beginning. They had no money to pay the professors, which made me more independent in terms of who I would invite to teach, because I was away from the bureaucracy's scrutiny and economical control. Plus, because ISA is a government-run educational institution, we had a legal umbrella to do public events and bring foreigners legally.

TF: I'm here legally in Cuba with a proper visa myself because of your association with ISA.

TB: Yes.

TF: Are the members doing a course of study at ISA as well?

TB: One of the characteristics of this project is that we accept participants from any background. Some are ISA students, some ISA alumni, some San Alejandro high school students,⁴ but we have others who study architecture, cinema, dance, music, theater, art history, philology, sociology, civil engineering, writing—but more important, each year we have at least one participant who has never studied nor practiced professionally any form of art. While this project is for the study of political art, there are a series of elements that are the guidelines of the project's political direction that are not only discussed but implemented in the dynamic of the project. One of them is Joseph Beuys's idea that everybody can be an artist. Another one is about who shapes and enters the discussion around the public landscape. The way people know about this project is from ear to mouth, rumor, which is one of the elements we have assumed as the documentation of this as an art piece. Usually the members tell others, who they want to enter the discussion, about the program. Although the average age is twenty, the range is from sixteen to thirty-nine, which creates a very rich environment in terms of the expectations people bring to the discussion. Officially participants commit for two years as active members. They commit to come five days a week every week all year around, except for a few weeks during summer vacation, for two, three, four hours every afternoon. It's very intense. Each

year we officially accept eight members plus one art historian. But we usually have about eighteen people, because some of the graduates still come; some people tag along; professional critics and artists sometimes come when they are interested in the specific guest of that week. And the groups overlap, which guarantees that the knowledge is passed from one group to the next without having to restart with the same subjects or to repeat the discussions. It is a very good way for the newest group to catch up with the previous one because there are no levels. They are all at the same level.

I created two structures simultaneously: one that is real and one that is symbolic. They are flexible and respond to the needs generated in the project and the context. The symbolic structure is the one where I'm reproducing the recognizable elements of an educational program, which I install but do not respect. For example, to enter the project one has to go through a selection process in front of an international jury that chooses the best candidates. But once the workshops start, I let in anybody who wants to attend. For me it is very important not to create an elite group. And although the studies are advertised as a two-year commitment, some do not stay the whole time, and many continue on much longer. It is a natural process: when they outgrow the program, they leave. This can seem like chaos from an institutional point of view, but it guarantees the intensity and urgency that is the main educational tool I work with here.

TF: How many guests would you have in a year?

TB: One per week during the program, so around forty a year. The range of practices of our guests goes from the ones in the arts—critics, curators, artists, dealers, studio managers, et cetera—to historians, sociologists, mathematicians. . . . We go from very practical professional preparation to the most abstract ones. Two weeks ago we had a person from Spain who runs a production company for art. She told them about her experience with artists' projects from that side of the spectrum and let them know what would be the best way to prepare drawings for projects, how to develop the ideas from the production point of view, and so on. The members should be professionals as well as dreamers. They know how to make a CV, how to set a budget, how to conduct research, but also how to walk the road toward utopia.

Because we do two exhibitions a year, we invite one curator per semester. The curator walks with the artist from the initial generat-

ing of the ideas for artworks to their production and finally the exhibition. It is a very close process of collaboration between artist and curator. The curator also meets with the participants together, and they discuss as a group the ideas for the show. The exhibitions are only on public display for one day, actually for just a few hours. The exhibition is not about the work but about the creativity generated in that collaboration and about the moment it generates while in public view. That is the main reason it is in display for so short a time. Later some have reinstalled the works generated for these events in more traditional exhibition setups.

Every artist who comes for a workshop is either politically or socially engaged, so it's either a public art artist, a political artist, or an ex-socialist artist, because I'm interested in talking about what kind of political art we can do during and after Cuban political and ideological transitions. Each guest provides an assignment for the members to be done during the week. For example, Dan Perjovschi asked them to create a daily drawing of what happened to them that day. At the end of the week they put together the drawings as a book, and each participant got a copy.

TF: Can you give a couple more examples of artists who come for workshops?

TB: There is a wide variety of approaches. Dora Garcia, an artist from Spain, did a workshop called "Rumor, Rumor." She came with the notion to start and spread a rumor. During her workshop they talked about how rumors work in Cuba, and the group decided to create a strategy to spread the rumor that the European Community was giving grants to Cubans who applied to start small businesses. In order to start the rumor, one member had to call the minister of foreign relations and say, "I'm calling about the grant from the European Community. How do we apply?" And the person on the other end would say, "What are you talking about?" The member: "Haven't you heard?" The bureaucrat: "No, I have heard nothing. I will have to get back to you tomorrow." It was creating an invisible thread in relation to the generating and accessing of information, something that is very controlled in Cuba.

Christoph Büchel gave a five-hour lecture about his work that I think is almost a piece in itself, and for the workshop he decided to do a performance. He was here during the elections, and he proposed to give a prize to anyone from the workshop who was first in line to vote



Participants listening to an artist talk by Christoph Büchel during the first day of his workshop in Havana, 2008. Seated next to Büchel in the center is María Teresa Ortega, one of the two long-term translators for *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*. Photograph courtesy of Studio Bruguera.

in their neighborhood. Five people from the workshop got in line at 5 a.m., were the first to vote, and got the prize, which was a very expensive bottle of Cuban rum and a book about Cuban politics provided by Christoph.

Stan Douglas came twice and each time gave a workshop on editing. He produced his piece *Inconsolable Memories*, which he showed at the Venice Biennale in 2005, with the assistance of one of our participants, who told me that in the one week of experience with Stan he learned more about video and how to approach art than in one whole year of studies at ISA.

For me it is important that the assignments from each workshop can develop into full art pieces so that the participants generate art from those moments. Artists have very different strategies, so it is important that each week the participants witness different, sometimes opposite points of view about art and its social role, so they can be confused by it, and from that they can work on recognizing what elements they identify with, and then develop their own ideas about how that relationship can work.

Very consciously I decided from the beginning to not talk about my own work to the participants. For me it was very important that everybody worked out their own artistic identity, and I know how

vulnerable people can be when they are in the middle of a process of constant deconstruction of their ideas and how easy is to seek approval by going into the collective comfort zone. I even stopped showing in Cuba during the existence of this piece. My piece was *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*; it was ongoing and present, but it was about them. I even decided at one point that I needed to be away, physically, from the project. That is a very important aspect of all my long-term projects, which is the transference of the project to other people. The participants gained more and more control.

But back to the workshops. One of the best examples was one given by a journalist: “How to Construct the Truth.” Her assignment was about how you can claim something that is not true, how can you construct something that’s not based on truth and make it totally believable, through the techniques and tools of journalism.

TF: You know the word *truthiness*?

TB: Yes, from *The Colbert Report*. Believable data. The credibility of something that is totally false.

TF: So now, the school ends at the end of this academic year?

TB: The workshops end now, in December. Artur Zmijewski is the last one.

TF: Oh, this is the last week!

TB: Well, the project is on the verge of becoming an institution—it has too fixed a format, it’s too clear to people, and too comfortable. The goal of this project, which at the beginning nobody thought was possible, was to fulfill some of the broken utopian dreams. It was to make the statement that things are possible, to fill a void. Now the best thing to do is to *create* a void, to create desire, so the participants feel the need to create their own utopias, their own projects to fill that void. For artists working with the creation of institutional forms, the most challenging aspect is to know when and how to stop it. The closing is just as important as the beginning of such projects. And sometimes to do what people do not like is actually the right thing to do. The need for a good educational system was not solved with my project; that is something that has to be part of a collective effort, of a common desire for change. Now it was time for new generations to do their work, to take over.

TF: In one interview you said that you were tired of critiquing structures; you wanted to create structure. What do you mean by that?

TB: That’s correct. I’m not interested in talking about the existing structures but in creating new ones, to see art as the space to create new

models. My problem is with the sustainability of those structures, because I do not think it is the role of the artists to run those structures but to create them in order to propose it to others—understanding that they would have to run them for long enough to make clear their functioning and goals to those taking it later. So that means that an artist is a catalyst who has to understand that their work will undergo formal changes once it starts functioning in the realm of the real. It is important that the artists keep their critical distance with such creations, and that can best be done when the project is not ours anymore. The artist has to always be vigilant, because you don't want to *become* an institution. You are using institutions as a form, as a social discursive structure, to create a new reality; it is just a strategy. The problem is when the artist gets trapped into the benefits of being part of or even being an institution, or when they become more interested in the work to survive as an institution, to gain public certainty and approval, than to keep it open to risks. In this case the structure I created was becoming a fixed form, a structure that repeated in cycles; there were specific expectations toward the project. I did not want to work on the construction of a past—the school founded by Tania Bruguera—but for the here and now. I was trying to prove that art can be part of the social and political everyday-life changes, and those fixed experiences are the opposite of it.

For two years I thought about ways I could pass the project on to others to continue, but any imaginable idea was linked to the origins of the project, and that for me was very problematic. The way I decided to end it was by giving the members more visibility and hopefully some professional good start. I will be curating a show during the Havana Bienal that will be a five-year résumé, a documentation of the project through the members' work. Each day I will include one guest from the ones we had during these five years. The show will be a daily program. Every day in the gallery there are different artworks, different performances, different video programs. It's going to be pretty intense. I wanted to keep the concepts we used for exhibiting work during all those years, with a duration of just a few hours, only one day. I did not want the burden on the members of doing a super-piece but to see it as an ongoing process that we will show. I want them to still think they can be trying stuff out even if the Havana Bienal is the main event in the arts in Cuba and it will have a



Food created by a *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* participant, 2003. Responding to a cultural question posed on the radio, diners were invited to a no-cost meal at a home restaurant (*paladar*), for which participants had created new edible dishes. Photograph courtesy of Studio Bruguera.

lot of visibility for them and their starting art careers. I really want to pursue the freedom of risk.

TF: You've used the phrase *useful art*. What do you mean by that?

TB: Art has never been enough for me. Art can have two phases: the one where you see something and show it to other people and the one where, after that collective recognition, you do something with it, you apply it. I'm having a lot of problems right now with contemporary art because almost everything stops with that first phase, which could be identified as research. I am against the influence of the Duchampian gesture that has defined contemporary art practice for so long: taking the urinal out of the bathroom. After that it seems that the condition for something to be art is its uselessness. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we should go with a different model of doing art, a model that integrates human activity and everyday life in a different way. For me that is to create art that works simultaneously in different dimensions, including a useful dimension that does not eliminate the intellectual, contemplative one. I would like to work on activities that provide a practical resource, while you are thinking about them at the same time. Why do you have to have a split between thinking and doing?

TF: So rather than take an object out of the flow of life, you want to create art in the flow of life?

TB: Instead of taking something from life to become something you look at, I produce something in the art world to be used in society. In *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* we worked a lot on the idea of useful art, and many works were generated from that perspective. One example was the work of Nuria Güell, who is one of the only four foreigners we had during all the seven years of the project. She has a privilege that most Cubans do not have at this moment: legal access to the Internet. Her work consisted of selling Internet service, putting up an announcement for those who wanted Internet. She gave it to people who responded in exchange for their everyday survival shortcuts for living in Cuba. This project shows the state and conditions of life in Cuba at this specific moment; it works on a symbolic level. It makes you think, it makes you feel, but at the same time there is something real happening. People are really using the Internet.

Adrian Melis did a piece where he bought stolen wood from a guard at a wood factory and used it to build a booth for the guard, who was doing his shifts unprotected from the wind, from the rain, from the sun. The guard now has a booth that protects him, and we can witness through Melis's piece, a video, the state of the relation between the legal and the illegal and the normality of how people go around the law to survive in Cuba.

For one show Javier Castro proposed to give his space to neighbors around the gallery as storage. Because people live in such small places here in Havana, sometimes they have to live with all these boxes and clutter. But for the month of the exhibition people could bring their stuff and store it here while they were fixing their house or painting it or moving to another one, or just to enjoy the space they gained. It's not solving their problem forever, but it does for a period of time, and it proposes a model while exposing this pressing problem. It is very directly symbolic *and* useful. These are all examples of works functioning perfectly and independently in each world.

TF: Do you think that the school itself has a use?

TB: I think so. It is symbolic; it reminds us of what is missing in that context, what can be done. But it is also a fully functioning educational project, one possible model for the study of political art. But I'm not totally satisfied with it, because I'm working for and with artists. That's why I have decided that my next project will be with

and about immigrants. I mean, I'm super proud of the members of the project, and most of their work is with and for nonartists, people from the street. They themselves are actually working on the borders of the social and the artistic. Still, I have doubts about art itself, as a medium. And I have doubts about artists as a class, as a social group.

TF: Yes, but imagine there's an art project, and as a result of the project five people who were formerly homeless now have an apartment. Does that make it a successful project? What if the artistic nature of that homeless project was extremely simplistic, with no nuance and complexity to the design?

TB: There are two points of view from which to look at it. In terms of its usefulness, the example you present is successful. In terms of it as art, we should see the ways in which it was elaborated and presented, the path by which it showed the internal contradictions of such a social situation and its strategies to educate us onto a new reality. To be solely useful doesn't make it good art. Commonplaces and clichés are in every art form, especially when they become a trend. For me a successful example of useful art should show the doing and the thinking simultaneously, an unthinkable reality that is real and functioning in front of your eyes. It is when you stand in the exact point where past and future meet. When you can satisfy the expectations of two very different demographics: those who are expecting a highly elaborate, intellectually complex, and problematizing project and those who are directly involved in the project, the ones for whom it has to *work*, truly. There should be a balanced tension between the literal and the figurative. When I say you have to please those people who work with you, or who are part of the work, or the material of the work, or the goal of your work, I'm not saying you have to give them what they want. I'm saying that you have to be able to show them that your proposal is better than whatever they had before, that it solves their problem in a better way. It is a negotiating process with both audiences. And there is a moment in which one should not care anymore if it is art or not.

TF: How would you evaluate the success of an individual workshop or the school as a whole?

TB: From my perspective, the way to look at the failure or success of the school is through what happens after the member leaves. The work of art is the process of the school, but the result is another process that starts after they leave here. The measure of success is how long

the person is able to produce work that is not following the pressure of the art market or the art world but responding to their own desires and ideas about what art should do in society. The success of a workshop likewise. When a guest leaves, are the members stimulated, do they have a series of questions they still want to find the answer to?

The goal of this project is responsibility. It is its burden. For me the success is that they are good and honest artists but also good people. The project hopefully will work in their education in art but also as a civic element of a society.

- TF: I have been thinking a lot about the idea of reciprocity recently. You can give without expecting anything in exchange; you can give and expect a balanced and equal return; or you can give and expect more in return, which is called profit. These are referred to as positive, balanced, and negative reciprocity. You have spoken about positive reciprocity—your own idea that you will not expect anything from the members—and you have spoken about the mutual reciprocal support in the community.
- TB: Well, the problem with that proposal is that you are working with economic terms. The way I think one should think about reciprocity is not with concepts related to owning. For me reciprocity is creating a project for someone else under that person's conditions, adapting our initial ideas to their needs. There are some art projects using reciprocity where it seems that the gesture responds to an intellectual self-gratification, even bringing benefits to the people involved, whether they want them or not, that's problematic. Sometimes there is a disconnection that transforms and treats those people solely into [or] as objectified art materials. The satisfaction one should get from reciprocity is the exercise of going outside oneself.
- TF: Still, in this project and others in this book, I see the establishment of networks of back-and-forth exchange. When you say you have created a community, that could mean this exchange, the notion that I'll help you with your sound editing if you do the camera work for me, which seems like reciprocity.
- TB: The mistake is in the use of *if*. It is not, "I do this for you *if* you do this for me," it is just, "I do this for you." The point is that each person should say the same. It is not a quid pro quo. Maybe person A is helped by person B, and later person B gets help from person C and D, and person A is helping person C. It's not a two-way street; it's a place



The Spanish artist and *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* participant Nuria Guell (right) legally marries a Cuban man (center, name withheld), 1999. The groom was selected by a panel of *jineteras* (Cuban slang for female sex worker) on the basis of a love letter contest for Cuban men wishing to emigrate. Photograph by Mauricio Miranda. Courtesy of Studio Bruguera.

in the middle, where people meet. It is knowing that you will have support, and things are not seen as debts or gains but as joy.

I always say that I wanted to provide a safe environment, safe but tough, safe because we were based in trust and honesty, not because it was easy. It is a system based on professional admiration, which each person has to work hard to get from the rest of the group.

TF: So this might fall under the definition of altruism or generosity. You give something without expecting a return, and the group generates a community through the sort of reciprocal give-and-take that creates ties.

TB: It's not even about giving and taking; it is about being proud of the work. That pride is in the place where two or more people encounter each other. It is a place that neither owns but both enjoy.

TF: In our discussions here you have mentioned the principle of trust in regard to the relations in the project. I see it here, in the structure and the flow of interactions. But I don't think that your other work is based on creating a relationship of trust with the audience.

TB: [*laughs*] You're right. To be honest, it's an anomaly in my work. I think that may be because I am working with the structure of an insti-

tution, a social structure, a pedagogical one, instead of a single event where I have less time to get to my point. My goal with *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* was to generate a collective discussion, and trust is an important part of creating that environment, especially if the subject of that discussion has to do with the political, and if it is held in Cuba.

Part of the trust is the ways in which I tried to protect that discussion. I was working really hard to give total freedom to the participants in terms of the kind of work they wanted to do, politically speaking.

Sometimes social projects get a lot of pressure from the art world, which obscures the original goals of the project, and even made them change, so I decided that the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* project would be divided into two moments in terms of its visibility: While the actual pedagogical project was happening, active, it would not have much exposure, just to the people involved in it—participants and guests. Once it is finished, inactive, the participant's work would be more visible. Only once the project is finished can it be seen, can it be defined.

TF: So there is trust within the group, and you mentioned the notion that the members are peers, or will be.

TB: Yes, we know each other very well, and there is a set of ethics we respect, including that idea that we are all equals, even if some have more experience in this or that. It's a very healthy environment, a very honest one, which makes it possible for us all to learn from each other.

TF: How does that state of mind correspond with, let's say, some more aggressive side of your work?

TB: When we do crits, we can be really intense; we interact really critically. I think aggressiveness in this project comes across as all that they have to challenge in terms of their ways of thinking and the demands and expectations, in the group, toward their work.

TF: Is it possible that you have a different relationship with the perceived audience at a museum, whom you don't mind metaphorically slapping in the face, versus the members here, who are not the audience for the work but members of the creation? Your goal for these members is to—

TB: Transform.

TF: Is the goal the same in a museum—to have a transformative effect?

TB: That is a different scenario. While the participants of *Cátedra Arte de*

Conducta are both the audience and the work, their attitude as audience is an active one; they are open. In the museum, yes, you have to metaphorically slap people in the face so that they wake up and open to ideas of why they should interact with art. Those audiences in general are used to going to the museum to enjoy, to have a pleasant Sunday with their family, to get away from their reality. Maybe the aggressiveness gets codified in a way that is clear to them so they can get out of this mode. Maybe the school is about doing the same thing, but it is not as visible because it's stretched over a longer period of time. In my work aggressiveness is a resource, not a goal. I found that through some sort of aggression, people go back to their animal instincts, they can become animals — social animals, of course — and when they are in this state, I can go back to question what is their role in society. In the school project we are all clear that we are constructing citizenry.

TF: There is the question, of course, why is this art? Is it simply because you are an artist and call it art?

TB: Saying it is art “because I say so” doesn't work anymore. I mean, Duchamp is getting more and more obsolete. In this project art is in the transformation process for the participants; it is in the visualization of a discussion for the audience; it is in the proposal of a new model of collectivity.

I have created a space that fulfills people's desire and has generated others. But I think this piece is and is not art at the same time. Those categories are mobile. Or maybe it is not art but what it is generated from it is art — for example, the work of the participants or a moment of appreciation from the viewers. Or maybe it is art because it is a gesture that has implications beyond itself. But either way, I don't think art should be a definitive condition. It should be a transitional condition, a condition one enters into and exits from.

TF: Well, perhaps if you define something as art, you allow it to exist in a way that it didn't exist before. Like, for example, if you didn't call your school an artwork, it could not have gotten the exposure in the Havana Bienal.

TB: The condition of being art does give you a set of privileges you do not have in other areas of human work. People will be paying attention, looking for something other than the evident. I have worked with these possibilities provided by art, but not for this project. The school's presence in the Bienal responds more to the need I had to



A public artwork on a city dumpster by a *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* participant, Yaima Carrazana, 1999. The ironic counterslogan “Todo en Orden” (Everything is in order, or Everything is okay) mimicked government social propaganda and was anonymously removed almost immediately. Photograph by Maylin Machado. Courtesy of Studio Bruguera.

provide a closing gesture to all the years of work and to provide the participants with a better professional place from which to continue.

In other cases, like *The Stroll of the New Man* [2007], I actually worked on the professionalization and recognition of someone as an artist in order for her to travel outside of Cuba for the first time in her life. That was using the privileges Cuban artists have. She participated at the Göteborg Bienale, where I was invited. During the week-long installation time she was there with her boyfriend, who is also an artist, on vacation, taking photos and experiencing another place as tourists. Then we installed all the photos in the show as well as the objects she bought to bring back to Cuba.

TF: So their trip — what they acquired on their vacation — became the installation?

TB: Yes. I used the condition of being art as the acquisition of privilege. Art is a space that you create where there is a different set of rules, maybe the ones you would like to see in place. Art has the power to change the rules — why not use it?

TF: What about questions of ethics? Do you think that there should be ethical considerations in the use or evaluation of art?

TB: Sometimes ethics are one element of the artwork. In social art pieces

one is trying to establish a new set of social rules, and that involves ethics. But ethics should not become morality. The ethics applied to this kind of work should be generated in and by the project's own dynamic and needs. I think art has to be unethical sometimes, as well as to be illegal sometimes too, precisely because those are the elements questioned. The audience, instead of rejecting it automatically, should try to understand what is the social proposal they are looking at.

A natural reaction by the audience is to see if a project did good or bad to the person, assessing the humanitarian aspect of it as the substitution for ethics. I think it's important to do good to people. But the audience has to be trained for the suspension of the ethics, like in the suspension of disbelief, so you can enter into the piece and then let it reveal the proposal of ethics it comes with. And then you can confront the work. If you come with your own ethics, you will not enter the work; you will be totally stopped in front of it and will not engage in the conversation proposed.

TF: Would you say that one of the roles that you're looking for is that opening up of ethical judgment?

TB: Art can be a temporary establishment of a new reality; an alter reality, transreality, parallel reality. Part of what some social projects can propose is precisely that: it is the possibility of analyzing and imagining another set of ethics. Ethical judgment is an important part of social and political artwork, so opening to it seems like a must.

TF: You have been living a lot of the time outside Cuba since around 2000. Has this changed how you work here?

TB: It has certainly changed the conditions in which I can work in Cuba: it has given me more privileges.

TF: What about collectivity? Is that a part of the culture here?

TB: Yes, it is a practical necessity as well as an ideological regulation.

TF: Do you feel that your Cubanness has anything to do with your collaboration here?

TB: Very probably, yes, that indoctrination of the collectiveness and the social responsibility.

TF: Walking around Havana the last couple of days there is a crumbling feeling, like it's on a gradual, slow-motion, decades-long journey to dust.

TB: I call it postwar. Like it has been bombed, like materialized ideology.

TF: Yet it is here in the Cuban context that you chose to build something,

a complex structure over seven years. Do you think there's any influence of the environment here, building in the midst of decay?

TB: I see your point. I suppose I was tired of coming and having to live in that reality. I needed to create my own reality, and to show myself that it was possible. Also, at the time I started the school, the private restaurants, taxis, home rentals were beginning to be allowed. Why couldn't we propose that process with social institutions? I was not advocating for the privatization of education but for the expansion of the process of proposing a different option to the one offered by the government, the one that was fifty years old.

TF: By building the school from scratch, you were not reforming an institution; you were forming it. In some ways this echoes the difference between reform and revolution. I would guess that sort of rhetoric is common here.

TB: I like the ideas around revolution, more than around reform. But I built the institution based on observations of other institutions, so it is also a comment on those existing experiences.

TF: But there's a difference between taking on an institution and creating a new one.

TB: The problem here is that the right to build—institutions or anything else—is not of the people. The right to build is taken by the government. The same happens with the use of words like *reform* and *revolution*; they were socially copyrighted by the ones who won in 1959. So the gesture of building something is in itself a political gesture.

TF: Some artists who work in a similar vein say that their gesture is the starting point, but the work of art is the relationships created. But those relationships, of course, have other actors and authors and members.

TB: Remember that my first work was, literally, redoing Ana Mendieta's work. So I'm really interested since the beginning in this. Regarding the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* project, in South Korea, at the Gwangju Biennale, I produced the school as a work. Nothing was authored by me except the gesture to tell the curator that I was going to give my space to the participants and to curate the space for their works to be seen. It was very difficult the first day. Journalists from *Art in America* and *Artforum* were coming to see this place, and I had to talk about everything but "my" work. So it was a test, for me, as an artist. I had to change my role quite a bit. I'm not only the facilitator; I'm not only the professor; I'm not only the friend; I'm not only the promoter. But

this is exactly what I wanted to do. I want to disappear through exposing other people. Definitely authorship is an important element in this, one that I like to think about and hopefully challenge in my work. The political aspect is not only in the gesture or in the relationships, but in the consequences of the gesture.