

- 1) Throughout your career you have regularly been active in an artistic practice that has not only been in a constant relationship with the economic, social and political context but also – and most especially – has strived for a transforming attitude and of direct intervention on reality. I am thinking in works of a marked political and ideological nature like *Postwar Memories* (1993), *Head Down* (1996) or *Poetic Justice* (2002-2003). What are, in your view, the possibilities for action and the transforming power of art practices vis-à-vis political praxis at this precise moment?

Although I believe in the possibilities of art as a transforming agent, I also think art is an ephemeral and specific act. It is rather absurd to try to impose on art a potential for transformation which will function eternally and universally. Actually, citizens (including artists who do not belong to the power leadership) are not directly integrated to the moment and the circumstances molding political decisions in a country and we can only attempt at transforming the image created, or the results of the decisions taken, by the power. And when we influence or give rise to a crisis situation transcending these representations, precisely where the power needs to demonstrate and express itself or give its opinion – and it does so through decisions that will affect everyone -- I do not think artists always have the capacity or are lucky enough to make the waters flow to the place they want, or that the resulting changes were those they foresaw or wished, because power not always decides to change the token we showed was defective and not always tries to give us the comfort of feeling useful (perhaps so we do not get used to it).

Here is where I find the fundamental problem of political art today. We are effective in the visualization of social and political problems, even in suggesting a different view of the issue at hand, but we still cannot have a control of our work in political terms. What is actually true is that every work of political art intending social or political transformation is followed by a response from the power. I believe there is an advantageous situation now: the existence of a history of activism and a history of political art that endows us with a variety of tools. The problem for artists is the need they have of being aware of the

constant movement of appropriation and re-semanticization of countercultural elements by the power, as well as of any questioning aspect. Besides, the power is also aware of our strategies and at times uses them.

I believe that the way to work is using facts and not symbols. We live in an information society and this is what we must work with, not with interpretations. We must have confidence in the spectators and let them be an active part of presentations. They must feel they are a part of a community of thought and see possibilities for action that they might have considered impossible before.

- 2) How would you characterize relations between art and ethics? Where are the limits? I am thinking on *Self-sabotage*, your presentation this year in the Venice Biennial Exhibition.

Ethics is generally found within the work itself, but I prefer to place it in the consequences of the work, because political art works with consequences, with results, which is what takes place after the work is done. Many artists interested in ethics use methods that are considered not ethical or carry out “illegal” actions, but at times it is not there where their ethical proposal is to be found, but in the debate or in the desire for change the work creates.

The problem emerges when artists do not see clearly what their political aim is, when they use these strategies with stylistic purposes or are not ready – or do not want – to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. It is important to be very clear in what you are doing when you are making art politically, when you make art to create a political situation, and when you make it with the exclusive purpose of visualizing, of showing, expressions of politics or of power.

This I believe is the difference between politically made art and art working with a political iconography, although both may have specific ideological intentions. People frequently talk about political art from its aesthetic appreciation and, from that point of view, art is asked to be transgressor, irreverent,

uncomfortable, novel, offering something different. But we do not generally ask or demand artists to do the same thing with ethics. When ethics is used in a conventional way, when we are before a “kind” work, we feel more comfortable. I believe this is a serious problem with demand because it emphasizes an unbalance that should not exist in politic art, where things should function with the same intensity for those initiated in art as for those who are simple passers-by of a reality.

3) What do you think is the role of spectators in present art?

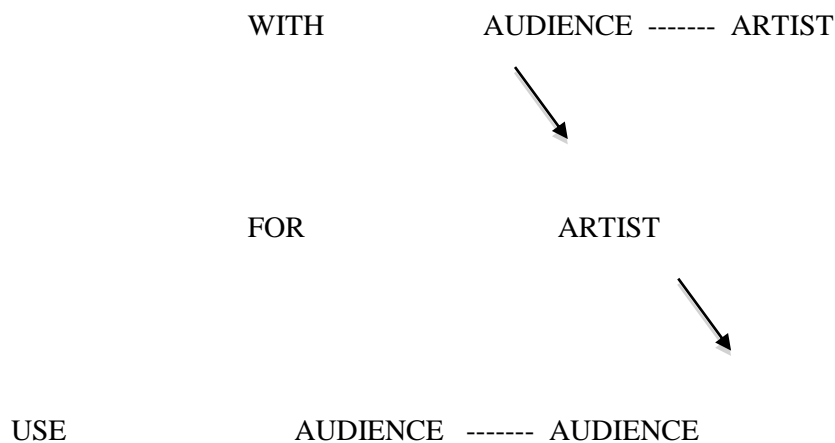
What I am interested in is turning spectators into citizens. When we attend any kind of artistic expression, we become de facto spectators. That is, we become beings distributing ourselves, moving around, acting with a specific function which is that of appreciating what the artist is presenting and I believe it perfect to be immerse in this exercise of estrangement. But in contemporary art this should become a phase in the work, a prelude to something else. Contemporary works should not limit themselves to presenting things.

I believe that many artists who call themselves political do away with the “action” of art and limit themselves to what art “shows”. The second part of this prelude is that working with spectators and, in my case, I am interested in having spectator stop “acting” as an audience, as onlookers, and start to act like citizens, like civilians in a reality suggested through art. I would like to offer at least three examples of ways to attempt this relationship with the audience:

- a. to work WITH the audience (when an artist works in collaboration with the audience leaving a space where its intervention affects the result of the work, the audience is a creator as much as the artist is). This implies a balance between the artist and the audience in what has to do with creation of power.
- b. To work FOR the audience (when an artist designs a work for a *specific audience*, taking it into account from the start; this

may be the result of a piece of research through which the artist has concluded what the audience wants to receive or what the artist can offer based on the possibilities of art; it can also be an imposition by the artist who brings a priori a project, a thesis to a community. In this case the audience is a receiver although it may participate in some aspect of the production of the work.) This implies an unbalance towards the audience, since the artist is working according to what it wants.

- c. To USE the audience (when the artist uses the audience as work material, from the beginning to the end of the work. In this case, the audience is the work.) This implies an unbalance towards the artist and creates a secondary audience.



Because of time constraints I will not develop other existing ways (in accordance with, from, in spite of, in pursuit of the audience, for example). But what is most important is the purpose of working for the audience, because these are tools, strategies. This art must be ephemeral, because in any other case the state of being *spectators* would have to be permanent.

- 4) What is the Catedra Arte de Conducta? Why did you choose the term conduct?

This was because of my master studies in the United States where the use of the word Performance was a little closer to Body Art, to an idea of visibility and display in art, to an idea of narration (*I* as the measure for authenticity), to a dialogue between theatre and visual arts closer to the one I was interested in. Many of the actions during the '60s and '70s in the United States were of a strictly social nature and not a direct dialogue with minority identities (women, Afro-Americans, homosexuals, and so on), but because of some reason this was not the focus of study. I felt I had to draw attention to the fact that I came from another tradition (art in the '80s in Cuba) where the gesture was the work and this was political vis-à-vis governmental power. I was interested in the limits of society not the limits of the body, and I considered this a Latin American tradition. I wanted to recover a moment when performance artists like Vito Acconci spoke of *conduct*, a word that in Spanish does not only has to do with an inescapably social space, but also with a process of transference.

Catedra Arte de Conducta was a pedagogical project for political art (I believe the first in Latin America). It was devised in 2002 and inaugurated in January 2003.

- 5) What is the funding and support of the Catedra Arte de Conducta, an institution in which young people with outstandingly critical works on the Cuban system take part?

Although I had two grants (Prince Claus and European Community) and the support of some institutions that can fund their artists (like the Spanish and Polish embassies and Prohelvetia), the system I have used is making the economic flow sustaining this project circulate: I offered classes and with this salary supported a pedagogical project that was a work. Right now I am planning to do a work that is a political party in Paris. To that end, I am beginning to look for work with politicians. This would guarantee that I am all the time immerse in something that is the topic of what I am doing and would allow me to know, from within, the actual workings of things, because I am interested in making realist art, hyperrealist art actually.

- 6) Your last performance in the series *Tatlin's Whisper* in the Havana Biennial Exhibition earlier this year caused a large national and international stir. What are your ideas on this?

That political art work should be led by the spectators, because it is they who have the temperature of their political time, not the artist that comes with a supposition, a theorem to be demonstrated through art. That a work may simultaneously function as a monument to the past and a space to the future. That that a work is not decided in the field of meaning but in that of ideology.

- 7) To understand the first stage of your work, at least, there is a necessary reference: the work of another Cuban artist, Ana Mendieta. How did you decide to take upon yourself the task of concluding her work, which her death had left unfinished? What was your relationship with her poetics?

It was a work that started as a tribute and became a political work. I wanted to know her through her work and that is why I decided to redo it. I tried to incorporate it to Cuban culture. My relationship was most of all a way to understand the trans-territorialization of an idea.

- 8) Performance as a means of expression within visual arts in Latin America began to take shape in the '70s. What is the path you threaded until it became your favorite procedure and why?

In my case it was almost a chance discovery, since it came by studying Ana Mendieta's work. In this process I traveled back to front, starting with her last works until I reached the first. I consider *Rape Scene*, in which she invites her classmates to her house and, at their arrival, they find the door ajar, come in and discover a half-naked body tied to a table in a scene reproducing a rape, is among the most interesting (and could be part of what I call Conduct Art). This work was inspired by press reports on a nursery student who was raped. Ana's strategy was reproducing realistically not the event, but the effect it might have on the spectators. Also *Untitled (people looking at blood, moffitt)*, which is simply blood spilled on the street, and *Bloody Mattress*, a room found by a

student in her class where the marks of a murder act can be discerned. They all date from 1973 and they all play with the truthfulness of fiction, the negotiation of discovery, the process of visualization and definition of what art is, its relationship with reality and the use of “facts” as ways to build the work. It was also important for me to discover the work by Techching Hsieh with a sense of time in the work extending from one to seven years. These works are part of an art where image is not enough, where experience is almost impossible to share. What has always interested me in this procedure is what it may unleash, the possibility of losing control over things, of making life with art.

- 9) Throughout your work we find a search that has to do with vitalism, the body, femininity, natural processes and elements (earth, water, blood), ancestral rites and so on. This can be found in works like *Marilyn is alive* (1986). Where do you think it comes from? Where does it point to?

What is interesting is that this part of my work was very short-lived. *Marilyn is alive* was my graduation thesis for medium level (1986), but it actually did not have much to do with the woman itself (she was only mentioned in a photographic diptych in the entire exhibition) but with the way to construct a portrait of a person. I had been working with myths and it was from this point of view that I approached the figure of this feminine icon. But actually since 1997-1999 I use my body as depository of the pieces.

Interpretation plays a large role in this. It is more the desire people have to find this “ancestral” ritualism because I am a Cuban than because it is in my works. Even when I make works like *Destierro* (Exile) where a Congo icon is present, I activate it from its possibilities as a social contract and as a demonstration of unfulfilled promises. This reminds me of a piece, *Justicia poética* (Poetic Justice). Although it has thousands of tea bags, many insist it is made with tobacco leaves.

- 10) What does the workshop you are going to offer in the Centro de Investigaciones Artísticas in Buenos Aires involve?

It has to do with creating a profession that does not yet exist, a profession that has as a basis things that upset us in society. After identifying and understanding what they are, what their characteristics are, they are taken out of the individual sphere and a series of actions is created with the purpose of systematizing the professional profile of a trade that does not exist up to that moment. It is an exercise where we speak of the function of social art and, specifically, on the concept I use, that of *Useful Art*.