

Tania Bruguera: An artist should never avoid looking into hell.

with Anya Pantuyeva

The artist who creates radical and harsh performances believes that art is capable of changing the state of things. In 2010 the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase College (New York) organized the first retrospective in the US of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera. Bruguera does radical performance art, and the exhibition restaged her performances and installations from the past fifteen years. She came to New York to oversee the preparations for the show and met with a correspondent of OpenSpace.ru.

In your personal show at the Neuberger Museum of Art you reproduced your performances by hiring other people to do them. You had conceived these works and done them yourself in a different social and political situation. How come you decided to do a restaging?

I think this exhibition was a big risk for me - the biggest risk I've ever taken. And not because of the specific works, but because the works were out of their context. The works in the show deal with the problem of how to handle an art created *in situ*. I do not mean the physical place, but the political moment. The way I staged things at Neuberger had to do with the activation and deactivation of performances. It had to do with how a performance can easily become something else when it is deactivated. For example, the way *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* worked in Neuberger. We had all the elements from the initial performance, but the microphone was turned off and you could not hear if people spoke into it. It was a happening rather than just performance. All the sculptural elements, so to say, were there but in camera you could see the original *Cycle* shot in Havana instead of the stage at Neuberger. For me, that work, when deactivated, becomes a monument, a monument to itself, to the emptiness, to the - politically, not performatively -- unrepeatable moment.

But you also "turned off" the meaning of the performances in which you had been the main figure by putting other people instead of yourself.

No, I did not. In this exhibition I tried to develop different strategies on the reenactment and documentation of performances. I wanted to demystify my performance practice. I could have done all the performances myself - I could have eaten dirt, all those things. Until the last minute I told the curator that could be a possibility. But then I thought about other artists who insist that only they can do their performances - I am advocating the opposite. I think the work has to be done in a way somebody else can perform it. Why? Because I do not believe that performing is a special gift. Of course, as a professor teaching performance art, I can say some people have a talent for performance and some people don't. But I believe that my work is not about technical qualities or skills. So, after the *Burden of Guilt*, which I did in Havana and is the most well-known piece I've done, my emotional stance was totally mystified - people who were there will tell you all sorts of different stories. I wanted to demystify it by putting someone else instead of me. My initial position is that it was a really special moment and can never be repeated.

But Untitled (Havana) shown at Neuberger Museum had the same setting as the initial work: there was the rotting sugar cane, the dark corridor, naked people, it was a bit freaky, and the smell was chasing me for the next 24 hours. This prison atmosphere was not "turned-off" in the reenactment.

That's good. And I am glad that students took part in the re-creation of my performance at Neuberger. Also, my idea of performance has evolved. My work became more about the creation of an atmosphere, of an ambiance. Actually, I try to make the body disappear. So, there is a shift from looking at something onto looking at yourself. For the exhibition I did the work entitled *The Survey*. Blind docents were guiding the visitors. For me, this expressed the idea that these works are not about looking at something, they are about thinking. What you see is not the final work.

Jan Verwoert has written an article in which he stated that performance art is in so high demand in global art world that travelling artists are exhausted, the audience expects them to reinvent themselves constantly. I was wondering if you stopped using your own body and began using the collective audience as a way to escape this passive demand and expectation.

There are a few things in relation to your question. This is quite funny. I have been doing art and exhibiting it professionally since 1986. At the beginning the works did not show my body, but involved it. It was a complicated, long story. But then I got into trouble with the authorities, I had been censored really badly, so I thought: what can I do? What am I working with? And I started working with my own body, so they could not censor me.

Right, this is one of the reasons why performance as a form of art existed in Latin America and in political dictatorships.

Yes, I think it has a very different place in those countries and it is very important to keep that in mind. I am really not very happy about the way people put everything in the same pocket. Performances emerging in situations when there are no means -- I am illegal and have no access, and everything is illegal and I have nothing but myself - are very different from performances that are the result of an exhaustion of the language of art, a result of a rebellion against materialization, commercialization, etc. I think they must be differentiated..

How many works in which you yourself were the main performer had you done before you began using collective-audience scripts?

I do not have that many performances involving my body - four or five, which is not a lot. I only did it for three years, very little time. And this is crazy, because I am mostly known for those performances! I have been doing other work for ten years now, but people only focus on the "body" works! So, I immediately realized that I was seen physically, sexually, and not politically. But my idea was that my body is not to be seen, *my work* is to be seen. And I swear to God, I never ever did anything to create a scandal. Believe it or not, I did only what seemed the rational and right thing to do. I never cared about its visual impact. So, I immediately realized that voyeurism was part of the viewers' response, people were looking at the body. And everyone was saying: "Oh, if you are doing a performance, you have to be skinny" and stuff like that - no! Just the opposite. Because I am here not to please you. I am here not to fulfill your sexual needs.

But the naked body is often part of political art, especially for women artists. For example, Regina José Galindo does her performances naked (nude would be the wrong word). How did women and feminists treat your performances when you began using the body?

In 1999 I started studying at the Chicago Art Institute and did some performances for the class, while still doing some in Havana. In the class, I immediately was put into feminist art and theory. I am a feminist, but my work is not about feminist needs, it does not belong to that discourse. It can be seen from that viewpoint and from many other viewpoints as well, but I do not belong there. So, *Nkisi Nkonde* was to show the professors that I can do artwork with myself and it would not be feminist work, because you cannot see the sex.

This past summer, the Garage Center for Contemporary Art in Moscow restaged one of Santiago Sierra's performances. Instead of hiring immigrants from the Caucasus who clean the streets in Moscow, they hired young students to stand there for a couple of hours - that castrated Sierra's project. An artist friend of mine who was there commented: "Present art is not so present." My question is: what do you think about art being less relevant than life itself, war, or TV news?

It is interesting that Garage curators did that. I don't know the curator who did it. Some curators, and artists too, see performance as an aesthetic experience. But performance is not a landscape that you paint for someone to enjoy looking at it. There is no pre-established aesthetics in performance. It can become aesthetical, but more after the fact. Performance is about *ethics*, not aesthetics. When a woman takes a roll of paper out of her vagina - it is ethics that is important there. In Garage, they could have done it differently, oh I don't know, like putting babies, saying illegal babies were transferred - I mean, a different restaging could have been done. Another thing is that people don't understand the difference between performance and theater. Some performances, like *Tatlin's Whisper*, are very theatrical. But they are not theater. The props are not supposed to be the center. I make my students redo performances as a way to learn about performance. So, it is interesting that the Garage curators were doing that, but using them as cheap labor instead of educational tools. So this is obviously fucked up. I don't know what that curator had in mind but it happens often. That is why for me it is important that everybody gets paid. The institutions should understand that performance is a job. You have to pay insurance, in case something goes wrong, and you have to pay the artist. This is a matter of respect. People have to understand it.

I see. And what about the role of political art as compared to "life"?

Unfortunately, I am one of those people who think that art can change things. We, artists do not have the legal power: we can change things in a symptomatic way, not permanently. We have the symbolic power that, hopefully, generates a reaction, and hopefully can make people with real political power change things in a more permanent way. And hopefully it can make a change as an example for all the people. We can do it. This is important, this is my goal in life. If I could come out with something that a politician could feel because of me, that would be my goal. So, art is a powerful tool. And it is not about the amount of people being directly influenced, but it is about the accuracy of the language. If you use the language from the 1970s, if you use propaganda - or rather kitsch I should say -- it would not work. Everybody is so fed up with kitsch, it would really bore them. And they would not get the message. They would put their imaginary on top of it instead. On the other hand, if you did some sophisticated work with a new, elaborate, beautiful language, people would have no clue what the hell you are talking about. It would not work either. I tried to do it in such a way that would allow people to talk about the work and its message.

Which specific works you consider were more effective, in influencing the audience outside the art world or the politicians?

The newspaper *Las memorias de post-guerra*, in Cuba. I made three issues. It was very political and the moment was very intense. I have an aunt who at the time worked with the Cuban security police. She called me once and asked: "What are you doing?!" And what happened was that we did cause a disturbance at a political meeting. We had all these party meetings like you guys in the Soviet Union used to have. And at one of those party meetings they were discussing the newspaper. I was so happy! - I was so happy. And people in the streets were talking, too: "There is this newspaper, have you heard?", and so on. That is why I showed it in my exhibition at Neuberger. At that time nothing was run independently in Cuba.

In Russia there is still nothing independently run.

Well, this is off the record, I don't know enough about it. That was my checkmate. I quit publishing it. But the newspaper and *Tatlin's Whisper No. 6* were politically and artistically significant. And I hope - and this is maybe my illusion - that I somewhat immobilized power for a brief period.

How did the Cuban government react to your performance at the 10th Havana Biennial, in which Cuban citizens were given a stage, a tribune, and one minute of free speech? I know that the next day the committee officials condemned the performance.

I think it was difficult for them to react, because I did cooperate with them a lot when we were preparing the project. They knew everything that was going to happen in that performance. They played liberal, like, "Oh, it's a Biennial. We should show that we are liberal." I don't think they will ever invite me again to the Havana Biennial. But this is an example of what my concept of art as a privilege is: people give you the stage, confidence, money. Something great can be done with them - and why not? Ordinary people might not have this kind of advantage. Art cannot change things permanently. But what is ethical and political are the symbols,. They are not permanent conditions, and art can change them. This is what I tried to show in my exhibition at Neuberger - that political and artistic qualities of people or objects are not permanent. So, hopefully, I managed to make this important statement.

Going back to the Havana Biennial Exhibition. Coco Fusco wrote a response letter to Artforum in which she said that critic Claire Bishop, who had reviewed your performance for the magazine, underestimates the difficulty of the situation of Cuban artists. Was she right?

Somewhat. It is true that the Cuban government restricts the artists. I can't say that we are liberal, that we do what we want...

The same can be said about artists in the U S, in Russia, and in many other modern democracies.

Exactly. The question is - what do you do with that? One thing is the government saying: "We are liberal, the country is liberal." Another thing is how it acts. So, I had a topical proposition, I focused on the first part: "Ok, you are liberal? - Great! Let's do liberal art." I forced them into a situation in which they say they do something but they don't really do it. I did the same in my project in Colombia: "Like, oh yeah, we are liberal? - Really? Let's bring out the coke." There were several things in the aforementioned letter I could have responded to the author but decided not to.

Because you are an artist and did not want to get involved in a discussion on the performance?

No, I am an artist, and I feel strongly about my work and defend it. But a few months ago something similar came up in a discussion among Rob Storr, Okwui Enwezor and Jessica Morgan. People defend their professional territory. That's why I did not reply to the respondent even though the editor was really after me. There were several mistakes in her response. Even though *Espacio Algotinador* is doing very good things and I am good friends with them, they are the only place where real things are happening in Cuba. But it was really weird that the respondent did not take into consideration that contemporary artists in Cuba play along with the government.

What do you mean by Cuban artists playing along with the government?

In my view as an outsider, in the year 2000 - or maybe before - a lot of visitors from the US came to the Biennial. It was very popular then. So the government decided: "Aha, it is popular!", and created a commercial gallery that is sent everywhere - to the Armory, to Berlin, Paris, to all these art exhibitions. They are run by the government and the government does not hide it. But the respondent did not write anything about that. There are a lot of stories like that that I can tell, and there is a lot of extra fingers on that hand. The artists decided: we can make money, we can be capitalists, bourgeois and I really don't care what happens to my neighbors. I just want to have a nice car. So, things have changed. The view that everyone is fighting in Cuba while the government is repressing everyone,.. I am sorry, that is not happening. Mentality has changed.

This is not the Cuba we know of.

No, not at all. A lot of Cuban younger artists work in a very "universal manner," in quotes. They can do this very smart art, the kind you find everywhere, and people say "Oh, it's so nice, so European." And these artists sell their art. So, there is a lot of misunderstanding about the situation in Cuba. That's the reason I had an art school for ten years. Because I wanted to talk to the young people: "We are living in a different place, ok - what can we do differently? Why can't we address ideological issues?"

In the US, art education is very formalist. Kids are trained to understand forms, to comment on past works, styles, and materials. Abstraction can still be a big thing here, which is not bad, but symptomatic of something. How do you approach the 90% of art that is not like yours and not strictly political?

First, people have made the emergency of making art, the need of being critical, disappear. I am not saying that you have to be political. You do not have to be anything. But some artists work in a way that makes emergency disappear. There also is a very careerist way of doing things. A lot of students take art as a career and simulate prestigious art. And the universal art they make is very safe. But art is not about simulation. Also, performance supposedly is all about cutting people, and art schools are afraid of being sued, of people getting hurt. Art schools are so deeply worried about their image that they become moneymaking machines. Schools are prestigious, people go to them: it works.

When you arrived to graduate school in Chicago, how did you take the way they teach modern and contemporary art history in the US? They mostly focus on US artists and on formalist works, in my opinion.

True. Art schools here have a boot camp ideology. I came to the US with a knowledge of Latin American and Cuban performance history and I had to fight against a lot of brainwashing. That's why I came up with the term *arte de conducta*. I did not want to call it performance. They were giving me all these things - performances from the 1970s, US artists, they rarely talked about Marina Abramovic. It was very much through the eyes of a US citizen. For the students who come from abroad, it is difficult to be critical. Performance then is translated into US art history and conceptual art into "I comment on someone else." There is a way to do things right, however, while referencing art history, but in US art education everything political is deleted. I do think it is all right to comment on works from the past. For example, I am doing a work in which I comment on Duchamp. So - I am a girl, I am a Cuban, and I am talking about a guy who is untouchable in the West. But there are ways in which conceptual art can analyze history and continue to be political, not only formalist. Another problem is the ignorance about the other: students here expect their work to be seen at a gallery or a museum by art people. But what happened with the common viewer? Whatever I do, I always try to use an everyday object that people can relate to. They might not get it or understand it for many reasons - for a lack of political education or whatever. But I try to use points of connection. For example, I used sugar cane in *Untitled (Havana)* - in Cuba it is everywhere, people know it.

In the past ten years, before the financial crisis, art was making millions and millions of dollars. How do you relate to the metal suspended hearts or preserved sharks that emerged as part of this process?

Well, very often people treat as art things that are not art. The mere fact that art may contain irony does not automatically make it art.

Right, Jeff Koons has a lot of irony.

Yes, and the shark-guy does, too. I am not saying it is not art, but I am saying that irony does not automatically turns their work into art. Another important thing is that these artists make art for a specific audience. Some artists reach a given level of production in their work. The audience is used to a given kind of production, aesthetic and comfort in their visual encounters - their visual world is different from ours, you know. So, when artists start doing something for that kind of audience, their aesthetic level has to be speaking to it and relate to something that the audience is aware of. There are times when the production level is so high that it may erase the political message.

Right, there is a term for such artworks - "overproduced."

And because of that the rest of the audience cannot grasp the artwork.

Well, you are very generous.

No, it is true. This art talks to a specific audience. It is not about limited edition, but about the proximity of this audience to certain objects that it is accustomed to. Hirst does this. Actually, I would love to interview Damien Hirst. Those who came to his recent show in New York have a very different relationship to diamonds than that people like us here have. There was a woman with a big diamond thing in her hair. His work was talking to her, but it was not really talking to me. In Colombia I did a project with cocaine. I could do it in New York, but it would talk to people in a very different way. So, the fact that these artists have a successful career from the point of view of their economies does not mean that their artworks are similar to one another's. When people get rich, lots of things get confused. It is important to leave aside the money and focus on the strategy. Of course, money can be a strategy, too, like in Hirst's work - his works are very materialistic.

From now on we will all be looking forward to your interview with Damian Hirst. As far as political art goes, it is usually seen as being on the left, with Marxism, with the people; its strategy is inclusion and not exclusion. In your performance in Bogota, it seems you have excluded the people.

That work in Bogota was about the left.

Do good politics make good art?

I do not think that good politics make good art and vice versa.

But in Bogota, you were kind of cruel to your audience, extremely cruel it seems. Do you do this kind of "social surgery" to cure the social "patient"?

Hmmm, interesting view. In my work a lot of elements are intuitive. I do research and think a lot, but I also do let things get out of control sometimes. I hope to let my work end at places that are not defined, not regulated. And I don't like to hurt people for the sake of hurting it. There is often confusion in political art when strategy is taken as a subject. In Bogota, this illegal substance was taken as the subject. But in fact it was a strategy for something else. In this case I don't intend to say I was naive: I knew what I was doing. When I got to the university in Bogota - it is so great there, so free, such a 1968 style - I wanted to talk about it. The work is about the hero: can one be a hero now? Is it possible in Colombia?

I had no idea it was about the hero. In responses and videos posted online everyone only talks about the cocaine.

See, you are surprised. But people at the table in *Untitled (Bogota)* were talking about the hero. They were "members" of the conflict - a paramilitary, a social leader, and a woman. So, the idea dealt with the hero and what the conditions for the emergence of a hero in Colombia are. And that's what the participants were talking about, with their traditional way of talking, while the illegal substance was right there. I like that work, it is one of my favorites. But people did not understand it and, since they did not understand the strategy, they got stuck on the subject. I talk about self-sabotage in my work and use unpopular methods. I could have done it the easier way, but I won't. My performance in Venice was also self-sabotage.

What was the technical organization of your school in Havana?

I organized it for performance art but it actually was a school for political art - I just could not say it while I was doing it. I created a stage for political discussion. Classes were offered in my house. An institution invited me to teach, and I agreed under the condition that it would be in my house, otherwise I could not have done home school. This is the privilege of recognized artists that I was talking about earlier. We should take advantage of it, the freedom of doing more with your career. Most of the people whom I invited as guest lecturers were political artists. Some of them were from the former socialist block - from Albania or Poland. I wanted the people in Cuba to see the outcome of the transition before the transition occurs, so they have a record and see what would happen to an artist after the change from socialism to capitalism.

That's like looking into hell, right?

But you have to look into hell. This should never be avoided.

Note:

- The original was published in Russian, this translation is made using the initial English transcript approximated closely to the Russian edited version. Link to the original: <http://www.openspace.ru/art/events/details/18196/>
- The title and subtitle were written by the OpenSpace.ru editors, not by the interviewer.
- On the website, the interview is supplemented by the feature about Tania's work (written by A. Pantuyeva) - not translated into English and not provided here.