

Tania Bruguera: A Loyal Daughter of the Revolution

In Venice, the Cuban artist literally risked her life in what she considered a political work of art. As a radical, she does not want to denounce: she wants to do. And she does.

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Tania Bruguera is the most renowned contemporary visual artist in her country. She does not paint, does not draw, does not make videos. She has devoted almost exclusively to performances. She sets the axis of her work in her own intervened body and her creations stem from there.

She visited Buenos Aires some days ago invited by the Centro de Investigaciones Creativas (CIC), under the direction of Roberto Jacoby, to offer a workshop on “Behavior Art: Creating a Profession.”

There she dealt with the most intolerable aspects of social life by bringing subjectivity into play until arriving at the creation of professional identities in a journey from private to public, from individual rejection to the imagination of professional activities and roles designed to be confronted.

We talked with her in an August afternoon in the seat of the CIC. “I want to propose the type of artist who may get involved in social issues,” she says, “with the privilege artists have as social and responsible motivators. I am not interested in visiting a space and say something, but in doing something.”

Her recent creation for the last Venice Biennial Exhibition undoubtedly describes the extent of her proclaimed concept of political art, intervention and example. She is what she did in a performance under the title of “Self-sabotage”: while reading a text on art sitting at a table, with her right hand she pointed a gun to her temple. It was a real gun and it was loaded with a real bullet. She talked and shot in a sort of insane Russian roulette. The bullet was never shot. In the fourth attempt, she shot at the air. All this happened within the framework of The Fear Society in the Murcia Pavilion with Peruvian artist Jota Castro as a curator. Almost a hundred spectators attended the sabotage. Castro tried to stop the action after the third shot – “I had seen the bullet and it seemed real,” he said later – and the Austrian artist Hans Haacke, another of the participants in the Murcian proposal, charged against Tania Bruguera after the action ended. It was not necessary to speak German to understand he was asking her, all worked up, whether she was out of her mind. Some fifteen minutes elapsed from the moment the artist loaded the gun to when the shot was heard.

I had heard about this experience in the talk she offered at the Espacio Fundación Telefónica the day before my interview. Now that she is before me, I cannot avoid turning back to the subject and asking “how many bullets, whether they were real, why and if she did not fear to shot her head off.” She answers in order: “A real bullet, because I make serious political art and I want the consequences to be seen. I was ready to die.”

And then one believes her when she speaks of social and political art. She is not bluffing. She really means it and she acts accordingly.

Bruguera was born and studied in Havana, the daughter of a consul who was for some time in Argentina, but never brought her to know the country. She was reared within the framework of the precepts of the revolution. However, she has a not-at-all orthodox view on the well-worn topic: revolution.

She explains: “Recently many people asked me to define whether I was for or against the revolution. I do not agree with that categorization. Cuba is too complex a country to simplify it thus. I am interested in suggesting a third option and say that this is what I got, that we are going to work with what we have and use it and that we must do away with what does not work. This third option offers the chance of opening a new undefined space. I am revolutionary and, for me, revolution is being able to answer the needs of the moment. From the official point of view, the concept of being revolutionary has to do with loyalty to the people leading the country; I believe revolution is creatively answering the needs of the moment and working for others. My loyalty is towards ideals and not persons. Perhaps in this sense I enter into conflict, but this is what I think and I act accordingly.”

To serve others

Tania now lives and works in her home town and in Illinois, Chicago, where she teaches performance in the Visual Arts Department. She will soon begin a sabbatical year in which she will live in Paris, self-managing her new project, the creation of a Migrant People’s Party (MPP). I ask her if she does not consider it a little messianic that a Cuban goes to France to try to organize the undocumented. “The strategy is to begin to do it as an author and then have people following you. It is toying with the idea that artists can do what others cannot. I want the party to have real power and run in the elections.”

With this project as a basis, she explains her idea on art accurately and in detail: “Contemporary social art just denounces. I am not interested in that. Contemporary artists should intervene; they should enter those undefined social spaces that are outside the law, not because they are illegal, but because they are not taken into account. You can eat Chinese rice, but you do not like the Chinese living next to your house. That’s not fair. I am going to work with the undocumented, but also with those who are legal and with the immigrants’ children and with politicians. I do not consider it messianic – she clarifies – because as an artist I take all the rights in my hands.”

In the last Havana Biennial Exhibition she also drew attention to herself with the performance "Tatlin's Whisper N° 6". In it, two false soldiers guarded a mike into which anyone could freely talk for an exact minute after which, whether the speech was finished or not, he or she was removed from the dais. The space was used to claim peacefully for what Cubans consider basic demands, from unrestricted access to Internet to controversial aspects in daily life.

Loyal to herself and considering that performance technologies, as we know them now, are already exhausted, Bruguera made a pact with Peruvian Jota Castro. They mutually donated their bodies. The one who dies first will have the right to the body of the other and have total authority to do what they deem best with it. She began to draft the death certificate in Venice and concluded the agreement with Castro (no relation to the Commandant).

Now Bruguera leaves her own body and bets on delegated performances. This will be the case of her work with the migrants arriving in France. A good start to close what she frankly defines as political art: "I was brought up in socialism, in the idea that art must serve others and, all in all, no matter how many times you turn it around, that is what I end up doing."