

# Culture as a strategy to survive

by Tania Bruguera, *Jeu de Paume*, Paris, March 6<sup>th</sup> 2009

**D**elivered at *La Culture comme stratégie de survie*, a seminar organized for *Jeu de Paume* by María Inés Rodríguez, March 6<sup>th</sup> 2009.

**I** would like to focus my presentation today in the words announcing this seminar: 'Culture as a Strategy to Survive'. I would like to share some ideas and even questions on the idea of survival.

We speak of survival as an important element, even when its definition has more to do with a biological than with a social concept. At times, surviving is the wrong answer, the conservative answer, the answer sublimating permanence over and above the sense of living. At times, surviving (or wanting to survive) is what makes us weaker, what makes us lose our intention to live, what makes us simply animals. To understand the social being, at times we should not survive.

Looking at the idea of survival from a social point of view, we could arrive at the conclusion that it is precisely the battle against this sense of stabilization what leads to our social advance. It is the reaction at the presence of death (or its equivalent: social inertia) that makes (that defines) the type of social subject we are. Therefore, the question for me is rather: what do we do after having survived? For how long should we survive? And the most important one for me: why survive? All these questions have to do with responsibility.

The word strategy also implies a fragile situation, a short-term solution, a transitory state of affairs. We could say that since art has a socially limited function, a representation is not the presentation of solutions, but always a temporary diversion.

The responsibility of culture is not to be found in offering survival strategies, but in giving survival a sense. Culture as a social tool should make us do something on fear and the wish to begin anew. Because surviving is a process of erasure, a process of destabilization of values, a process where we define what social aspect is important for us and which are those we will give priority to. Survival is a process in which abstract thinking becomes corporeal.

Confining ourselves to the world of art, we could say that there are two types of art: that interested in representation—we could say it is the art of those interested in being narrators—and that interested in 'putting into practice', in the implementation of ideas—that of those interested in doing. The former is more interested in keeping archives and developing resources in a protected environment set aside for observation. That is why I would be more interested in talking from the second position, because it is more committed in a political relationship and more within the discourse of reality.

## 2 The Politicization of Survival

I would like to quote some words from Lisette's presentation, when she says, 'May an exhibition today establish a place belonging to politics, as factories, streets or the university do?'

I believe that it is not only possible, but it is the challenge of art today. I believe there are structural elements belonging to this search:

1. the idea of a contextual art,
2. the idea of a useful art,
3. the need to change the times of art consumption,
4. the building of a new role for the spectator, and
5. forgetting the idea that art is eternal.

Artists frequently say they talk for others. The old idea of artists lending their voices to those who have no voice, but as we well know, this is problematic. We should give the privileged space of artists to the others, to those without a social space, because these are not times to talk, or to say. Art already finds much competition in the new media (Internet, SMS and so on). These are times to do, to transform words into action, from a source of information and observation to a source where social tools are created. Artists must yield their space, a space of social privilege, because it is a space where you can re-imagine and then rebuild a power relationship: a space putting forward tools that may be transported to the real world.

Political art, the art that wants to be in a political place/site, must also think not in doing a work for others or because of others, but in making a work made by others. A work in which they are the material, the topic, the spectator and the documentation, where everything is one and the same thing, an activity where thinking and doing are a unity.

That is why artists should also redefine their role and their form of putting into practice their knowledge of the visualization of thinking.

What I find important is also the need of changing the consumption concepts linked to art (especially now we are living the collapse of the capitalist field) and I am referring to the aspects in its production, presentation and acquisition process. Political art has the chance not only of suggesting a different way of building relation models among objects (which is something rather falling in the sphere of action of capitalism) but also of suggesting relation models with ethics.

More than in an art made on politics, I am interested in a politically made art, suggesting new structures of power activation, where equality (equity) is a constant and continuous bargaining, an art establishing mobile structures of observation, because it is true that we make works of art that speak of the here and now, but they are made with observa-

tion structures mostly belonging to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with all the political and class implications stemming from this.

Artists should dilute in their roles, should establish the level and conditions of self-sabotage with which they will work.

### 3 Artists Should Self-sabotage

The way in which artists should survive is by losing their memory, not considering the work they have done as accumulated capital and being ready to lose their individual history at any moment.

The audience should also stop being protected. The world of art, with all its institutions, has become a place concentrating in protecting the audience (because of an interest in educating it or the intention of entertaining it).

Artists should self-sabotage within the expectations they have created with their work. They should do likewise with the expectations of previously

designed careers in which it seems that artists are rather small corporation managers showing the productive capacity (the productivity) of concepts linked with the conception of society as capitalist and not a new idea of society, a society that may not yet exist, a society you intend to debate.

Artists should self-sabotage in their relationship with others in the world of art by not pleasing them, and especially not pleasing institutions.

Artists should self-sabotage by quitting their work, by leaving their comfortable positions and looking for a difficult site that they do not understand, leaving design aside and living. Artists should stop and start from scratch, from a place that is not self-nostalgic, a site where all our insecurities are present, an insecure place, a place that is not self-important, a place where art is not an important concept. Art should be a concept appearing later, after the fact, not an a priori decision.

### 4 Ephemera as a Way of Surviving in Others

Works of social art should use social time and spectators should leave aside being spectators and become social beings to 'see' (it could also be said 'to be in') the work. Curators should also transform, because political art should deal with ethics and to value this discourse we should leave the representational world and enter the world of power relationships. Then, aesthetics would rather be the effectiveness of these relationships and beauty would be seen as the moments in which these utopias materialize.

The idea, I might say the pressure, that as artists we have to do the things that will make us survive is something we should reject, because it conditions the ideas of art as archive, as an index, and not art as a contextual answer, as an answer to the present moment.

Political art should stop using references and start creating references. III

# WOMEN WALK OUT ON 'COMIC'

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He said Bruce is completely unpredictable and his ad-libbing is extremely quick and smart.

But it is reasonable certain that Sydney has never seen a public performance of such blasphemy and obscenity.

It will be astonishing if the Chief Secretary's Department allows it to continue.

Bruce was so manifestly dissatisfied with the management of his show it is not impossible that he deliberately set out to get himself banned.

Lenny Bruce was brought to Australia by entrepreneur Lee Gordon, and is appearing at Aaron's Hotel in a profit-sharing basis.

Bruce today locked himself in his hotel room, and refused to discuss the performance.

Telephone callers could not reach Bruce and hotel staff, following instructions, kept his room number a secret from personal callers.

Vice Squad chief, Inspector J. Ferguson, said today no member of his squad was present at the show.

"If the show is obscene, action will be taken immediately," he said.

Metropolitan Licensing chief, Supt. J. Milne) has been requested by the Chief Secretary's Department to investigate reports of the show and to examine the position of the hotel's permit for the show.

Supt. Milne has the power to withdraw the permit.

# UNI. CANCELS 'SICK COMIC'S' CONCERTS

The University of New South Wales yesterday cancelled two concerts by American "sick" comedian Lenny Bruce.

The Warden of the University Union (Mr. A. T. Cunningham) announced the ban only three hours after giving written confirmation of the bookings.

He gave no reasons for cancelling the arrangements.

The Arts Faculty Society arranged for Mr. Bruce to give concerts in the Union cafeteria tonight and tomorrow night.

Mr. Bruce made his first Sydney appearances at a city hotel last Thursday.

The hotel cancelled further appearances following complaints about the show.

The ABC banned Bruce from a Channel 2 television show on Tuesday night.

Mr. Richard Neville,

editor of the University of New South Wales' student newspaper, Tharunka, organised Mr. Bruce's concerts at the university.

"We booked the Union cafeteria for Thursday and Friday nights," Mr. Neville said.

"The Union accepted the bookings, but cancelled them only three hours after confirming the arrangement in writing."

### Wide interest

Mr. Neville said he organised the concerts following widespread student interest in Mr. Bruce.

"I do not think any of the audience would have been contaminated by Mr. Bruce's humor," Mr. Neville said.

"The university should be the last place to cancel his concerts."

The president of the Arts Faculty Society (Mr. Max Hughes) said the society had prepared 500 pamphlets and posters advertising the concerts.

He said Mr. Cunningham told him the concert contravened the Public Halls Act because the organisers planned to charge admission fees for people who were not members of the Arts Faculty Society.

"We offered to get a temporary licence," Mr. Hughes said.

"Mr. Cunningham then replied he would not tell us the real reason for cancelling the concerts."

Entrepreneur Lee Gordon said last night: "Lenny Bruce has accused me, by bringing him to Australia, of doing the equivalent of booking Hermann Goering to appear at a Jewish charity dance."