

PABLO ESPAÑA. FIRST OF ALL I would like to ask you about your position in the international scene as a representative of Cuban present art. Up to what point have Cuban artists made use of a certain exoticism conditioned not only by their geographical position in a context as the Caribbean although so close to the United States, but especially because of the political situation of the country?

Tania Bruguera. I would say first of all that a single person cannot represent on its own the complexity of an entire country or of a History. Those are archetypes used to give quick and concise messages that many times have to do with publicity stunts with a given purpose, so as to give way to instrumentation. This also surmises that artists are clear, when we are actually redefining ourselves all the time. It would be better to leave that to those who suffer dictator complexes. The second thing is that to say “represent present Cuban art” assumes that there is a movement or at least an institutional strategy to build ideological coherence and I have never wanted to be part of something of this type. On the contrary, I am always running away from those desires for stratification so they do not catch up with me. I try to escape from them if they are not things I myself have created because of being a work playing for or against those things. If we follow your logic, I could say that I also represent the artists who have made their master, and live, in Chicago, which is also rather true, because this city has defined part of my practice too, or that I represent present nomad artists because I am always on the way to some place and that gives form to my work.

As to your question, I would like to think that, more than exoticism (although I think you are right), it is impossible for Cuban artists to escape the problems of what Cuba represents. It is impossible to escape the Cuban situation as an international political fantasy of the left and it will continue to be so while the Cuban government presents itself as such in its international projection (and in its inner tourism); while it understands art as a “weapon of the revolution” no matter what type of weapon it may be and to what it is aimed at; while the left is the stronger presence in the world of art. Artists who have decided to avoid this paradox of freedom in art creation – the ancient debate on the autonomy of art versus its social usefulness – if they are Cuban, at their regret, in the end they are rather considered passive collaborators of a political system instead of being acknowledged the apolitical position they desire. The political situation of the country, as it has been since January ’59 to today, has influenced all the areas of social and individual life, has entered with or without consent in every daily aspect of life to become precisely a daily point of reference.

With a government of the type we have in Cuba, all of us are instruments. This is almost inescapable, although you decide to leave and have no connection with Cuban events. Because the imaginary others have on this country is stronger than any other stereotype you may espouse. And there is where one of the problems of being a Cuban

artist is: that you find yourself struggling to leave behind the exotic desires of the “other”; that “other” that has academically defined you as “other” and does not understand that you do not understand that you have been classified as “other” and are not ready to see themselves as the “others” because they are unable to take our point of view. People believe they know beforehand what your position as a Cuban artist is, although for yourself it is something very complex. They are very suspicious if you try to change them this view. In Cuba people frequently say that the worse enemy of the Revolution is the international left, because it does not allow us to leave their projections behind, does not allow a serious conversation that is critical and at times one is for them, as a transference, the testimony of what they think is their own authenticity and authority in the matter. Besides, I have found many of those who feel they have the right to speak about Cuba do not let you talk about their countries or say what you have experienced politically or socially in their field, which is barricaded intellectual neocolonialism. There are artists who see this and try to “make it easy” for them so those who see their work find a consensus that will make them feel well. There are also artists who decide to enter the game of “international art” by appropriating alien and insipid referents.

The way I have tried to solve this in my work is not escaping any of these problems. I try to come with a view negotiating its intrusion with what it is living; I try to find in every situation the place that makes me feel “at home”; but I also come with the wish of understanding things around me and understanding is something too complex to reduce it to a stereotype. In the case of countries like Cuba and of art like Cuban art it is a problem of expectations.

P. E. You have recently said that you are not interested in representing what is political but to actually create a political act. Do you think that a political action from within the art-system may go beyond a representation?

T. B. I establish a difference in art between representing what is political and acting politically. I believe there are many professional politicians who are actually representations, because they do not really make politics. They do everything that surrounds and accompanies changing the world without actually doing it and I think we have become somewhat used to that type of politician-bureaucrat or politician-celebrity or politician who does not believe in politics any more, but just in being elected. We have become used to the representation of things. Just as politics is the action of changing things in society, in art there are many artists working with images from the media and from politics, but not interested in the consequences of their work. For me, political art is the one that works on the consequences of its existence, of its interactions and does not remain in the level of association or graphic memory.

It is intervening in the process that takes place after people think the art experience is over. For me, political art is the one transcending the field of art, entering the daily nature of people, an art that makes them think. For me art is something that must be considered disposable, a means for other things, a protection layer. I understand there are artists that are consistent and that I respect who focus on the search of new associative combinations, but this experience in itself, without a purpose outside the world of art, does not excite me. Art, as happens with a scientific discovery, should be seen in its applications. Art can also be used with political purposes, but that is not political art, it is art-propaganda. Political art has doubts, not certainties; it has intentions, not programs; it shares with those who find it, not imposes on them; it is defined while it is done; it is an experience, not an image; it is something entering the field of emotions and that is more complex than a unit of thought. Political art is the one that is made when it is unfashionable and when it is uncomfortable, legally uncomfortable, civically uncomfortable, humanely uncomfortable. It affects us. Political art is uncomfortable knowledge.

One of the historical problems of political art is being out of phase with artistic vanguards when talking about popular political art, as if it were patronizing the audience, as if there were only one language to represent what is political, a language that does not intend to make people think, but that brings about unification. In the case of political art made in the world of art, there is an enormous chance that a great lack of communication exists, because it implies an educational (not didactical) process for the audience, to educate it against its fear, against the fear of fearing; educating it against what it does not know, which is a very effective way of immobilizing used by politicians. On the other hand, those who are professionals of politics have appropriated civic spaces, have mixed and used corporative strategies on civilian spaces like freedom of expression, like the existence of social institutions, confusing efficiency with the need to exist and function in society. Politics is not a service: it is a way to think about the future. We can't be confused with the administrative dimension of utopia.

I do believe that a political action from within the system-art may overcome representation, but the problem is for how long and with what level of deterioration. Political art must resist the erosion of incredulity, cynicism, banalizing, indifference, of those who have interests within art and the pressure for its having continuance after its political need to exist has expired. Political art should not want to live on because its essence has transitory implications. At times art with political intentions and with a given ideology even turns into its opposite, it turns into what it is criticizing. This is the most difficult challenge of political art, because when there is no longer the political "need" for the existence of this art, the search for a sense of continuation/existence emerges and importance turns into self-importance. Political

part in doing it, having responsibilities, fulfilling obligations no matter what, feeling you were one with the others and this meaning something, covering for those who did not comply with their tasks, understanding that I was not a good organizer, that I had the defect of a bad leader: not being able to delegate, not to understand why I did what I did, to defend all those who entered into conflicts with the director (understanding the cost of defending what I considered was fair), to know that I did not have the charisma to be a leader. I was very fond of laughing, I dissociate easily, I do not communicate well and I do not understand what people want. There was a moment in which I did not understand what I was doing as the president of the school. I think that this experience, which lasted for a year after which I did not want to be reelected, was a lesson I learned rather well. After that, I promised myself I would never be the chief of anything and nobody would be my chief. These early conclusions have clearly guided me through life until now.

I am interested in having a way to sabotage what I am doing at any moment. You cannot do this when you have a political position because too many people depend on you. I think I would be bored because I would not be able to cope with the red tape and with the delays in establishing things I consider logic and everyone agree they should happen, but rules, forms, what is convenient at that precise moment... Besides, having been an artist during all my adult life invalidates me, because I am used to do things when and how I want and in politics this is the seed of dictatorship. Unbelievably, while I was a professor at the University of Chicago I learned more about politics than what I had learned in Cuba (you really do politics in academia!) and I saw in situ how the alleged democracy which is not such actually works. To work for "a corporation" as the academy is in the United States did away with the little desire I could have had to take a political position after so many years and under new circumstances. What I do not rule out is the chance of working as an intern in a political set to be able to learn from the inside more about the way it functions and use that in my work to find a language that politicians also understand. I am interested in a middle point. The challenge is in not being captivated by any of the parties.

I have been reading on Courbet and his experience as a politician of culture. I don't know... on the one side I think this is something that might bring a different view. You feel you can do things, but I do not know how permanent the decisions you can suggest can be or whether the type of government existing up to now captivates me. In most cases, new politicians bring down what was previously done. I also do not know how inspirational political decisions can be. There is too much ego and very little global notion of society. Everything seems determined by other things, by other urgencies.

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Sin título (Bogotá, 2009). Arte de Conducta. Paramilitar en activo, líder del movimiento de los Desplazados, miembro de la familia de un desaparecido, ex miembro de las FARC expulsado tras una acusación no probada de traición, mesa redonda sobre la construcción política de la figura del héroe, cocaína, discusión pública, cobertura mediática [foto Esferapublica.org]

Untitled (Bogota, 2009). Behavior Art. Paramilitar in active, Leader of the Desplazados movement, a family member of a desaparecido, ex FARC guerrilla expelled after a non proved suspicion of treason, round table around the political construction of the figure of hero, cocaine, public discussion, media coverage [photo Esferapublica.org]

reason I felt that in Havana tension was more intense, perhaps because the place from which the reprisal would come could not be visualized, because nobody knows who is from the secret police which we knew was clearly there, in our space, and we did not know whether there would be concrete consequences for those there and we could not visualize what would happen.

Perhaps in Bogota it was clearer to know which were the possible repressive options and where would they come from and on whom they would fall and I think everyone was a little more aware of the role they could defend, their role in the place, that is, to enter into illegality was an act of individual choice and you are not your brother's keeper, while in Cuba we were all implied because there it is well understood that not to counteract a thing like that is automatically being a collaborator and in a given way we are all in constant illegality. I do not think this is as clear in Bogota, where I believe it is acceptable not to intervene in something you witness.

I do not think that in a totalitarian regime you can have independent artistic thinking, because you do not have the option of not being a part of what is happening. You may have your own ideas on things; you may even productively dissociate yourself from your reality (whether because you are able to use a productive system not depending on the System or because you decide not to produce, which is an option in these cases). You may even create in opposition, but the regime is always your point of reference, it is always a factor you must take into account. Even if you decide to migrate it does not stop being a referent. Those who are born in totalitarian regimes and live in

works are seen in their subjective complexity and their readings are multiple. Things are chosen from there. It is the mandate of the power of interpretation. This has “saved” many things, but threatens the fragility of a political work when the force of power imposes a reading. An interpretative auto-da-fe for “the weapon of the Revolution.” The act of censorship as a semiotic act is a more interesting challenge for an artist than that of censoring and creating “victims,” it is entering the political game. The problem of this formula is to be found in cases where artists think that making works without interpretations, with evident intention vacuums over and above the formal ones, is the option which will bring about all the benefits. Another problem is that it cannot be used with people who are seen as not “inside the Revolution” or like the bloggers, who escape this strategy, or with openly dissident artists who do not want to play this game of subtleties. In these cases I wonder if ideology can be so narrowly linked with a technology and if human rights are a privilege.

I believe the Colombian Minister of Culture did what she had to do, because the piece became part of the media discourse and at that moment there was a discussion going on about the possibility of approving minimum consumption, something against which President Uribe was, and she worked “by the book.” In Colombia, leaving aside what she could or couldn’t understand about art – because I know nothing about that –, there were many image games. I believe the Minister of Education, who also spoke publicly on the topic, was more justified, because it is true that the relationship between education and drugs is much more complex, more unresolved and the symbolic implications of the action at the National University, which is a place with great strength and which has a very important history in the struggle for the restoration of rights, showed some connotations that make me understand why this branch of power had to be expressed. I also believe that what happened was that it was a piece by a foreigner in an event organized by an American institution (and we know the roles they historically have in Latin American history) and there were many emotional instabilities at stake.

Seeing both actions from the point of view of your question makes me think that these were pieces that had to do with my desire of being between two worlds: the political-concrete and the artistic-representational, although that in Colombia (“Untitled”, Bogota, 2009) was more difficult to accept even for those who were not present because there was a sort of effort in putting a moralist view on a piece that was not on morality, but on responsibility. In the case of the work in Cuba (“Tatlin’s Whisper, No. 6 – Havana Version”), I believe tension was much more intense. In both cases these were works creating a favorable atmosphere to do in a public space what you mostly do privately in an underhanded and conspiratorial way (in Cuba, to criticize or offer your opinion on the government; in Colombia, to consume an illegal and penalized product). In both cases there were specific legal consequences, but for some

of political art not dealing with art topics, it should be addressed to those concerned with the topic and function for them. To be later valid in a museum or a gallery is an entirely different thing.

Although it is very clear for political artists that we do not want to be interior decorators, we have to rethink how to establish our relationship with power. Some artists have felt the need of entering directly into politics. I believe that, in a given way, our position should be one of dissatisfaction because of only being able to be between both.

P. E. Two ministers of Culture have made statements on actions you made, that of Cuba and that of Colombia. I do not know if what you do is political art, but it must of course be very similar to it. The Cuban minister, after your participation in the Havana Biennial, declared that criticism made within the revolution, as yours was, is always constructive. How is independent artistic thinking possible in a totalitarian regime?

T. B. I believe political art should also talk to and communicate with politicians, although this time artists are not people following orders but offering themselves as citizens wanting to participate in a process that is also theirs. In political art precisely, professional politicians should not and cannot be ignored. This is not a dialogue of resentful people. We are trying to find a potential reality that would be different and this can only be done in a sustained way with direct politics. We cannot leave everything to elections. The truth is that in the midst of feeling real power on you, things become somewhat more “serious” and “heavy,” but that is precisely the thing: that things are real. You must be very sure of why you do things, the purpose (or at least the feeling behind it) of the work must be clear for you, because in politics there is very little space for lack of definition and intentions are worth much more than the threat of actions, because politics work with reliability and the rest may always be manipulated and changed. The case of Cuba was somewhat more moving for me, that of Colombia was more conceptual, but in both cases I had things to lose that were rather specific and clear.

In the case of Abel Prieto, the Cuban minister of Culture, whom I respect because he tries to navigate in a storm of authoritarianism and has stopped being a writer to be a minister, a sacrifice I do not think many of us can imagine. In his case it was clear that his public position was consistent. To defend an act criticizing the Revolution “within the Revolution” as something constructive echoes the almost legally threatening expression by Fidel in his speech “Words to the Intellectuals” “(...) within the Revolution, everything; without the Revolution, nothing.” The way in which Abel has defined his mandate has been much more intelligent than that of the former minister, who resorted to direct censorship and closed events in the presence of the secret police and other bureaucrats and party ideologists. Abel has weaved a more complex game:

this decision must be demanded from anyone, because it is not fair to put anyone in this type of situation. But it is true that the great “blame” of political art is feeling useless, especially facing people that are doing things with a “true” and “palpable” impact. You always fight against being interior decorator, but should also understand that you cannot be “at the service” of a leader, a cause, a government or a power. That is the death of true political art. Political artists must have an independence they defend at all costs. This does not mean that they are inconsistent or that they do not understand what is behind their actions or the way they can be manipulated by one side or the other, or that they decide to collaborate with a movement but cannot lose their independence to think because that is the only way they may have a clear view of the things they do not understand.

The appropriation of the “aesthetics of revolt by the advertising system” is a symptom of backwardness in the development of a new people’s political language and the need to renew it (it is there that an artist may contribute much). But somehow it is also a game of invalidating, of banalizing the potentiality of things by the Establishment, something already so common and expected we could say. That something is a sort of “generalized agreement” does not mean that it has lost its potential effectiveness. It is well known that some former protest songs were used in advertisements for cars or perfumes or a type of life betraying what the song says, intending to eradicate the low desire for rebellion we may have by giving a passive or comfortable function to something that was a call for awareness. We are individual artists working against teams of specialists in mass submission. That is why we must be radical and not yield so quickly, at least not until we have exhausted the possibilities of that we yielding.

I believe that those interested in political art are still very much affected by the antagonism between court painters and anti-establishment artists, but there are more possibilities: you can be a civic artist or an independent artist or something else. There are many other options. If you enter into the area of political art you must understand that this is not a transitory position in which you are only against power until it absorbs you or that, on the contrary, if you are not absorbed, you will become a wretched, resentful person. Being a political artist has nothing to do with being accepted or with consensus. But the anguish of having doubts also affects us very much. To be a political artist is not a trade, is not a craft: it is an uncomfortable feeling of not being understood and of sharing the need to understand.

Also, political artists want to make a political art that follows the laws of art and political art should not follow the laws of art but the laws of the topic, the context, the economy, the dynamics to which it is referring and in which it must exist. Many political artists want to do their work so it exists directly in galleries and museums. I do not think that things should exist only in one dimension, but I do think that in the case

When I do contextual work, my system is never to decide (although I may have an idea) what is the “form” of the work until I am in the place and feel its intensities, its tensions, its energies, how it makes you feel, that is, things that are not visible, narrational or easily turned into stories. This does not mean that I do not know what I am doing, but that I let the place make me rethink how to present the piece and adjust some things so it “functions” better.

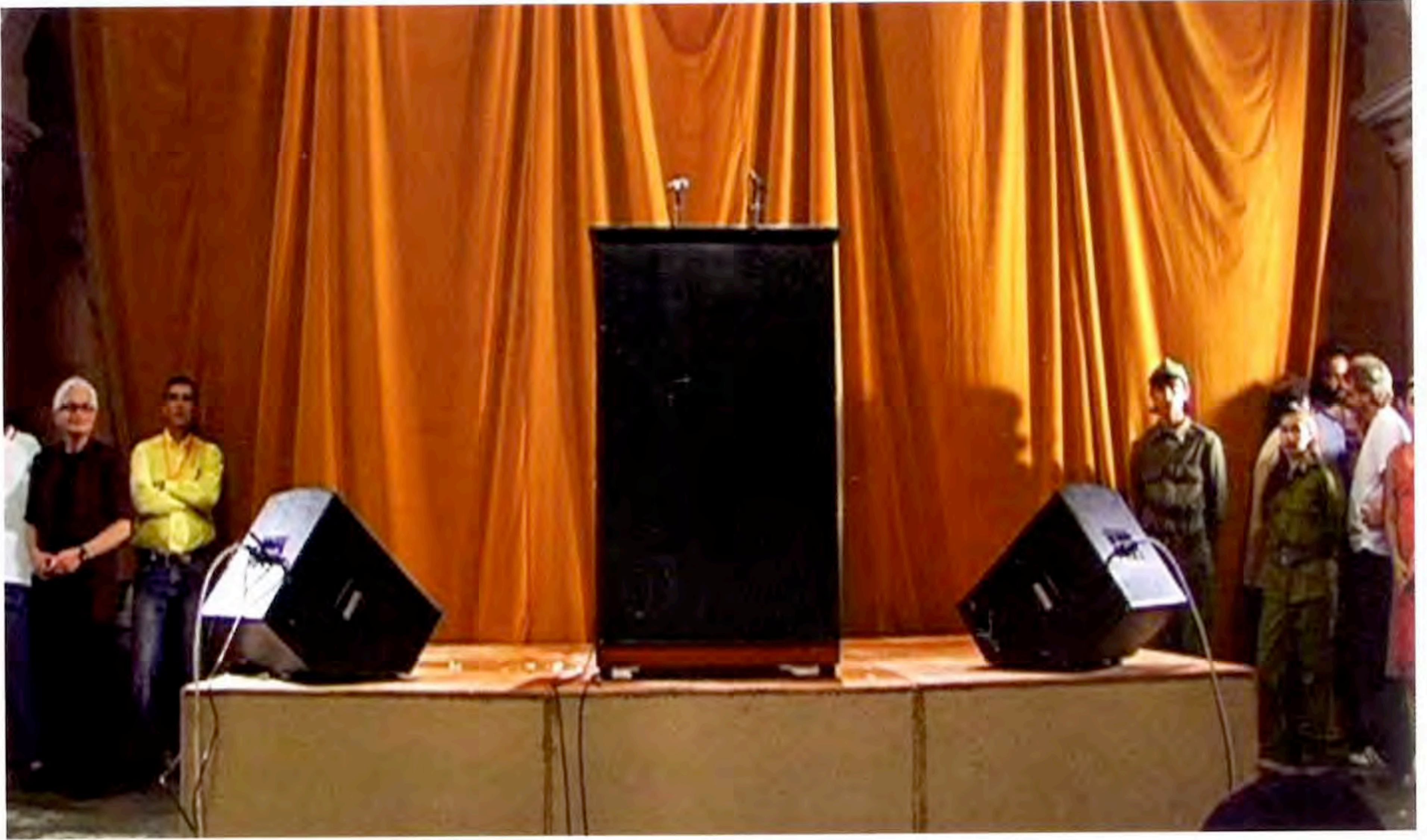
Another thing is that the work was on the possibility of being a hero and that was what it dealt with. Everyone had a different idea of what being a hero was. Some thought that being a hero was defending conservative positions; others that it was defending liberal ideas; others that it was being honest; others thought that it was “discovering” those they considered were not honest; still others to use their “power,” others to protect the possibility of continuing receiving funds for future events, and so on. Each one was a hero before him or herself.

Art is everything and nothing at the same time. It is when freedom prevails, the supremacy of freedom.

P. E. Not too long ago you also declared you had decided that there would be no control on the image of your performances, that you would do nothing to prevent the reproduction and dissemination of your performances by those attending them. I know other artists who are very jealous of the way their works are presented. What is the reason of your position?

T. B. I believe that it is hypocritical of artists to talk of liberating their works and have spectators participate and then, when collecting their fees, the presence of spectators becomes unnecessary. If I am saying that spectators are part of my work, if I say that they make it, complete it, guide it, how can I say that they should not get paid for it if I get paid for something in which they have participated? I have seen more than one of the “hard” ones who after holding some exhibitions and having sales are worried about what color will the chandelier they are making for a collector be or want to be addressed like 19th century aristocrats, as if they became the safeguards of the fantasies of the bourgeoisie that wants to think itself as aristocratic and with a fine history. At times I prefer artists who are purely formal and tell you “I want to make money” and that’s that. I will not go to see their works, I am not going to think about them, but at least they are consistent.

In fact, it has been very gratifying, because since I decided to liberate the documentation of my work it has been much more known. After all, I have always been terrible in the postproduction of my works. I not always make a document of my work; I just finish one and start the next. I have a bag full of still unedited mini-DV cassettes. I do not have a position on the “look” of works either. The truth is that when I thought



El susurro de Tatlin #6 (versión para La Habana), 2009. Arte de Conducta. Plataforma, podio, micrófonos, un altavoz en el interior y otro en el exterior del edificio, dos personas con vestimenta militar, una paloma blanca, un minuto sin censura por persona que accede al podio para hablar, 200 cámaras desechables con flash.

Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version), 2009. Behavior Art. Stage, podium, microphones, one loudspeaker inside and one loudspeaker outside of the building, two persons dressed on a military outfit, white dove, one minute free of censorship per speaker, 200 disposable cameras with flash.

video or a curiously attractive memory. Besides, the emphasis generally given now to rethinking this type of art is not in believing it will change things, because this is not convenient for anyone in the world of art.

I think the political art that is receiving most attention is the one having to do with a return to institutional critique. That is why it is a political art that cannot be considered entirely activist. Political art will be fashionable for a short time, because it will only last until artists start making uncomfortable things more frequently. It will last until artists are compelled to never turn back and are required to reach the last consequences of their ideas and actions. Much political art today is more a “quote” than a political gesture.

Political art cannot be non-ideological. If it later puts itself at the service of a movement or a way of thinking or some anguish it is something else, but I find funny those “political” artists whose only ideology is being artists and maintaining this status at all costs. True political artists must always be ready to renounce being artists. This comes directly from the Soviets and the hard left, but it is true: you will give all you have only if you are capable of renouncing to what you care for the most. I do not think

art should not consider itself important because it does not know beforehand what its impact will be and because its impact expires. It is a type of art that cannot fear to be destroyed and disappear.

The problem of representation is not academic: it is the answer you give to the function of the artist; to be the one who files (a sort of *Funes the Memorious*) or who thinks that art may say what has not been said (because perhaps it is not well known or because, for one or another reason, nobody dares say although having it in their minds.)

P. E. We are in a moment where there is a heated argument on the category of “political art” and its potential effectiveness. Perhaps this debate has much to do with the fact that “political art” is fashionable or is a hegemonic “label” in the artistic panorama right now. There are many doubts about its effectiveness, doubts that perhaps have to do, on the one side, with the appropriation of the aesthetics of revolt by the advertising system and, on the other, the (avant-garde) conviction that the only effective political art is the one at the service of a specific social struggle or movement.

T. B. It is necessary to fight bravely to do away with the idea of giving political art a hegemonic “label.” This should be the first gesture by a political artist.

I promise you that the “fashion” of political art is going to be very short. I think it had to do with the enthusiasm and mobilization Barack Obama sparked off. It also had to do with the challenge the more generalized art collecting in the ‘60s and ‘70s presented, something clinically not dangerous right now (although it still has the potential) and which makes an interesting question on files. It perhaps had to do with the world economic crisis and the enthusiastic suggestion of being able to think in a different economic system.

I can guarantee that this art that is now meek used to be uncomfortable. Political art (which is not more artistic than it is political) is not comfortable because it speaks from a position of demand and because many times it is accompanied by new forms and this requires some adjustment by the spectators to be guaranteed that what is before them is art indeed. So this return to political art already comes with the sadness of knowing it will be inadequately collectible and with a tragic trust in its limited effectiveness. It is a political art with a historical nuance, because today’s artists have known this type of art in an mediated way, without the urgency that made it necessary, without the anger that made it be rejected. So, generally, it is a political art emerging from art (politics as form, as a topic) which sees the inadequacies of artistic means and entertains doubts of their capacity to change things because we are now used to and take for granted things that were part of the fights and achievements of these political works and consider them as givens and, therefore, perhaps we do not understand very well what the “drama” used to be. Now we see these disturbing works as a photo or a

P. E. Back to your action in Colombia: the most frequent criticism made was that it was superficial, but deep inside the feeling it left was that you actually touched a sensitive fiber, that accepting such a glaring evidence that the traffic and consumption of coke determines the Colombian political situation was something the Colombian audience almost Freudianly repressed. Organizers publicly disapproved and, later, the Colombian minister seems to have asked for an inquiry on the performance. Is art a space of freedom or of domination?

T. B. In the case of Colombia many things happened at the same time. As I said before, there was a moralist view, there was the disappointment of part of the audience that had expected something from my work that they had perhaps imagined and was not given to them (it is very different to be a voyeur in a documented event and having the responsibility of acting and that the course of the event depends on you), there was the way in which the audience was divided that was not what you normally want with a work of art. People prefer and feel better when there is some sort of complicity uniting them and there were some not wanting to enter into this type of complicity because of the topic. The audience was rather heterogenic, and the only point of differentiation or homogeneity was the way they considered drugs. There were many people who portrayed public positions that were not necessarily their private point of view. It was a context in which foreign eyes were very much in mind. The event was organized by a prestigious American university and everything should go right. There should be nothing that could embarrass them or that might be politically incorrect or the product of bad behavior (Colombians, I could verify, are very well educated and respectful of “good manners” which makes them very nice people). This event was entirely festive and they were all nice with each other (no matter what they thought of the pieces exhibited) and the level of criticism was replaced by good behavior. I was not in a camping. I was going to present a piece.

On the other hand, there is something real: a (short term) piece of this type cannot amass in just one gesture all the possible points of view on the topic and although I had researched quite a lot, when you go to a country for the first time, you have no access to subtleties, to the small stories a community shares and the conclusions on them to which they have arrived. So there is some sort of communication issue in place created by the disconnection between the gaze from the outside and that from the inside, which is the topic of the series to which this piece belongs (*Untitled* – name of the city, year). This does not mean that what you say is superficial or that there is only one point of view about things. It means that the language used is not the same language of those who are already in the place.