

Arte de Conducta
with Francesca di Nardo
January 2007

From: Nardo, Francesca di. "Arte de Conducta," Janus, vol.I, no. 22., January 2007, Brussels, Belgium (illust.) pp. 78 - 83.



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It was Marcel Duchamp who in his lecture entitle L'artiste doit-il aller à l'université once stressed that "today more than ever the artist has this para-religious mission to fulfill: to keep alive the fire of an internal vision of which the artwork seems to be the most faithful translation for the profane", and that "It goes without saying that in order to accomplish this mission the highest degree of education is indispensable." Inspired by his vision, Janus is, in every issue on the lookout for specific initiatives or precise occasions in which artist teach other artist. After Cesare Pietroiusti and René Gabri, Majetica Potrc, our attention focuses on the Cátedra Arte de Conducta, an art school created by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera.

Tania, you are a "Performance artist," but not only a "Performer," in fact, you are one of the sharpest and most sensitive theoreticians of the "Performing Art." In the last years, you explored the "act of performing" through your practice and reflection, and you expressed a personal definition, which is the basis of your Cátedra Arte de Conducta in Cuba. Could you tell us about this work?

My work has come out of my discomfort. First with the visual arts and their inevitable distance from life and later, with Performance Art, beginning with its name: "Performance," a word in English that is linked to a cultural tradition that has nothing to do with my own. Many things have made me feel uncomfortable over the time with Performance art: the expectations people have with it, its transformation into visual iconography and its apparent fatalism to become entertainment. But the biggest discomfort for me is with the place art has in society, and this is the most important aspect of my work: trying to find a way in which art can situate itself in society as a useful resource, not in the psychological sense, but in an active sense, as an agent of social change; as an element that interacts with life not as its mirroring moment but as one that can build an alternative structure to live; and how could it be transformed from a contemplative form (even when the work is interactive there is an expected passivity) into an active sphere.

I am pleased that you refer to my latest practice as a performing act instead of art, and you are absolutely right! But this actually is something that I started doing a long time ago, in 1986, when I was still a student and started a long-term (10 years) project in homage to the late Ana Mendieta, and after that, from 1992 to 1994 with the two-years project *Memory of the Postwar*, a political newspaper, a political news paper written by artists. They were both performing acts and both raised a lot of controversy and even censorship from apart of the government. They were both pieces in which I took over the strategies, forms and resources used by politic. Formally they are closer to the ways through which politics manifest itself, but their subjects are about or are related to art. After the newspaper shut down, the impact that had on me was expressed by how I changed: my form became artistically traditional (performance art) and the subject became clearly political.

The interesting thing was that those pieces (like *The Burden of Guilt*) are widely known and were immediately accepted by the art world in Cuba and internationally. And, of course, for a while I was very excited, since it is true that the adrenaline produced by doing a performance is great, and having an immediate gratification is an easy way to experience one's creation. But using my own body limited the potential the reception of my work had, in part because I'm a female artist and that is a tradition to which one is immediately connected (even though my work has always tried to conceal the sexual identity of the author). It was also easier to connect the political comment to a psychological world instead of a social and collective one.

I always gave more value to the discursive potentials of gesture; in its evasive nature, than in performance. That seemed to me more like a statement, something accomplished, something to a representational tradition. The performances I was doing became too easy. They dealt too much with my personal limits, while I wanted to talk about society's limits instead. I wanted the audience to be implicated, to make it think, not contemplate. My desire was to make it uncomfortable not simply with the uneasiness of the image they were seeing but with the theme I was talking about, and their own personal position in regards to it. I didn't want the strategy to communicate by becoming the theme, and if narrative description is a big part of performance documentation, to reduce my political reference to "she was eating dirt" didn't work for me.

Cátedra Arte de Conducta is the piece I did after returning from Documenta in Kassel with a lot of questions about what and for whom art should be, and specifically, how political art should operate. *Arte de Conducta* was the name I found as a substitute for performance art, something that seemed related to society and the ways it judges, regulates, and controls people's lives. This allowed me to go beyond the contemporary association with the words performance art, which could be related to spectacle or theater.

Cátedra Arte de Conducta is a long-term project -first envisioned as five-years long - with the form of an art school where socially engaged art is talked about and created. The goal of this project is to create a safe, warm, stimulating workspace in which to discuss and think about the ways in which socially and politically engaged art can be produced. It is a place where participants are exposed to contemporary art and theories through direct contact with its producers, and a place where they can experiment with new ways of expressing themselves in time-based, performance-oriented and socially engaged and politically responsible forms. The main orientation is

to work on ways in which the usefulness of art can be put into practice, on new ways in which to document live actions, and to determine and underline the times in which society creates moments of contradiction. Through a weekly cycle of workshops with specialists from different field, such as scientists, philosophers, lawyers, former prisoners, economists, artists, and critics, we try to open the creative moment to any human activity as well as observing performative aspects of behaviour and its political environment. We explore how behavior endures as well as how it can be transmitted especially through rumor and other narrative means of expression. We question the limits of artistic media and the paradoxes of cultural identity: cultural representations, representational conventions and memory, historical conditions and ideology and, more specifically expressive tool. We focus on different elements of structure involving the making of this kind of art and employ multiple models of discourse.

Structurally we have nine participants, officially registered, although we are an open space welcoming any person. The selection is made of people coming from very different backgrounds. Some have not studied art, others come from theatre, sociology, music, literature, filmmaking, visual arts, dance and one from art history who is responsible for documenting through weekly reports the workshop's experiences.

Speaking about your practice, we can't avoid using the term "political". With particular regard to the cultural situation in Cuba, how do political authorities consider the Cátedra de Arte de Conducta?

I've worked on pieces that have been censored (also outside of Cuba), but I thought that this one should work from inside the system to exist, because its success would not come from its censorship, but precisely from its survival (the possibility of building something). The Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, the only art school at university level in the city, is the legal umbrella of the project, although they do not have any responsibility in terms of payments to the professors, or the selection of the contents of the workshops. I have no idea how long this will last, but so far it has worked - also because the workshops are done mainly at my house or at a professor's house or in a park, it is a mobile school and its participation goes through rumor and the coordinators calling people on the phone. I know that this resembles a guerrilla strategy. While this is a good thing in terms of not having been apprehended easily, it also has a not-so-good consequence: which is a reduced impact (only on the few people who know about it). I never intended it to be a massive project, but at the same time I do not want it to be an elitist work, at least not elitist in the frame of the already elitist art world. That is why we try to reach as many people as possible with the work produced. And each year we have at least one person who does not consider him or herself an artist or has not been trained as such. From the beginning the project was intended for young Cuban artists and critics. As I said, we do not publicize that much information about the *Cátedra*. For example, this is the first year in which I have publicly talked about the project (*Parachuteno.125* and now here in *Janus*). This was a strategy to avoid too much attention on what we are doing, I do not want any immediate gratification with this project, it is a project whose results will, hopefully, be seen in four or five years after the participants pass through it. I do not pretend that a social structure or a political thought can be changed in forty-five minutes, nor in the monthly time scale of an exhibition. So probably the censorship will come in three or four years. I'm using a mimetic strategy, and I know that this is very dangerous, one can be confused with its own resources, but that is the challenge of the work.

Artists have a privilege and they should question it, they should work with it, not only enjoy it.

What do students search for in your teaching?

One important aspect of the project is that I'm not the only teacher. So it is more difficult to define "my" teaching, it is a collaborative effort. This is something I insisted upon from the beginning, to make sure that we had as many different perspectives as possible on art and politics and that it was not "Tania's school" but the *Cátedra Arte de Conducta project*.

Hopefully, they search in the *Cátedra* for direct and not mediated access to information, for a chance to question artists and critics, and to have a place where they feel they can be free, express themselves and grow through discussion and be creatively stimulated by any simple aspect of life. *Conducta* means behavior, so ideally they come out of the project understanding its implications in society, its executable force. To know who they are in the changing process of Cuban society, and what they want to become.