

## Tania Bruguera

*I like the idea of living in a space between two ideologies, two systems. This gives me the illusion that I can have some distance, detachment from a place in order to understand it, the illusion that, in this way, I will have as few blind spots as possible.*



Tania Bruguera,  
*El cuerpo de silencio*,  
1997-1999

One might say that the performative, the inclusion of one's own person, a syncretic approach encompassing Catholic religion and African myths, as well as existential themes prevail in your earlier work.

In my earlier work, the performative was definitively an important aspect. It was not until later on, around 1996, that I began to create performances, and by that I mean pieces in which I had a direct physical presence and in which there was an educated audience. Lately, I have gone back to those first performative ideas. I think this may be because I am again interested in the value of behavior as an artistic and linguistic tool, as well as a social one; behavior being a set of codes widely understood, with only minor social differences from one place to another. This is important to me because I want to communicate ideas, and it is hard to do site-specific political work that is understood in a wider context without running the risk of it becoming propaganda. Another reason why I have returned to the performative is because I find it more closely connected with the idea of art as a gesture with symbolic implications, a gesture that is the piece; by which I mean, its structure, its implications, its consequences. When I was creating performances, I was bothered by the spectacle. I wanted to have a more "invisible" scenario, to do gestures, not actions; I wanted to disappear, to have a more flexible mode of operation. I had gotten tired of performance, it was not that exciting anymore. I get bored very quickly and I guess performance was no exception. I liked the idea of going back to an art in which the artistic nature was not that easy to define and which worked in the realm of life. Then came the day when someone who had invited me to perform asked how many chairs I wanted in the space. I said to myself: okay ... something is wrong here.

It is interesting that you ask about African religions and the performative in the same question. There definitively is a relationship. It has been very hard for me to formulate my relationship with religion and to deal with my desire to be disengaged from it. I was raised both in the animist and atheist traditions ... with an awareness of both Marx and healing plants ... That is where the syncretism is, between Marxism and animism. Both philosophies – or should I call them ideologies? – are based on the principle of the tangible changeability of the course of life. Both are utilitarian tools, or at least both present themselves that way. Both start and end in reality; both assume very concrete consequences in the course of events. I have denied the way people have read my work as religious, especially some of my performances, because this usually has been the result of a very exotic approach; my being Cuban has allowed this very problematic situation to come about, which is the easiest road in terms of interpreting the work and invalidating any effort to propose anything a bit more complex. My work was never intended to illustrate religion nor talk about it. In this, Juan Francisco Elso, a former professor of mine, and a friend, was a big influence.

A *santeria* practitioner himself, he told me once that there were things that one could not see and that were frequently at work in the pieces. By that he was referring to energy. He called it *carga* (charge) and good pieces were *cargadas* (charged). This is the same term used in African religions to name something (object or action) that has been prepared for use in real life, for its journey to change destiny. In addition, in Cuba, African religions are not morbid, restrictive and penitent ways of viewing life but very practical ways to live and to acquire tactical knowledge. Animism is an applicable religion, not an iconographic reference. It is alive and current. Catholicism, by the way, I only quoted once, in *The Burden of Guilt*, and it was because I thought that sacrifice was universally understood through the image of a lamb. But I am not that interested in the way that religion creates symbols and associations, nor in the heavy historical readings of them. Since all religions are an archive of social conduct and its possible practical results or consequences, I just think that some may have created a more interesting set of relationships. I could, for example, at some point be more interested in Judaism or Buddhism than in Catholicism.

At the Istanbul Biennial in 2003, you presented your work *Poetic Justice*, which drew considerable attention internationally and which was later viewed at the Venice Biennial last year. What is this work about?

Well... this is the only time I have created a piece in which, political meanings aside, or precisely because of them (in this case, it was an exploration of contemporary post-colonialism through the media), I wanted to do something "beautiful." I was thinking of beauty in terms of the appreciation for the labor required to create artwork; also, of the meaning residing only in the material, where the operations and all their possible interpretations are exposed and available. I was also thinking of the possibility of mystifying the gap between high technology and used tea bags, both attractive and familiar; of beauty in terms of the "space" between the actual walk through the piece and the selection of one-second historical news reels. I wanted, for the first and only time in my work as artist, people to ask themselves how much money the production required ... How long did it take to do? How many people participated? Who did the labor? Who drank the tea? How was it transported? Who produced the original newsreels? Where were the newsreels filmed? What was happening in them? These are all questions relevant to an inquiry about specific acts of post-colonialism while, at the same time, the audience is distracted by the seductive and familiar smell of tea, something not threatening at all but very comfortable and subtle.

I was very interested in the idea of use and recycling, of being used and being recycled.

I think it is important to say that this piece was first conceived in India at the Khoj workshop, a three-week residency program. But it was completed



in Berlin, where I went for a week directly afterward. In a way, this piece is my reaction to a CNN report I saw in my Berlin hotel room about Cuba. The reporter had totally misread events – or was it a problem of cultural translation involving postcolonial attitudes?

The sound installation you produced in Chicago is the centerpiece of your presentation in the project space of the Kunsthalle Wien. It schematizes the communication strategies of politicians and audience responses to these; yet, you forgo the use of graphic representation, more precisely, the non-verbal form of expression so characteristic of the mass media. The rejection of the image seems to be Ariadne's thread running through your project.

I have been interested before, in *Untitled* (Havana, 2000), in the means by which politicians communicate, expressing their ideas and decisions. *Portraits* is, as the title suggests, portraits of several political figures. Portraits not of the way they look but, rather, an attempt to portray them through the effects they had on people.

The series focuses on political figures that have had an impact on world events. Each speech is carefully selected, depending on the importance of the speech itself or (in the case of the historical figures) the accessibility of the recorded material. The selection covers a wide range – for example, there is Hitler's address to the Reichstag on May 4, 1941, in which he reviews his actions since 1937. Although he includes a lot of information by which he could have been ethically questioned and judged, he instead gained even more power. There is also Pope Paul VI's statement on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the UN, the first recording of a pope speaking in such a venue and as a head of a state. After the speech, there was considerable applause, signifying a kind of approval of his double status. Even if visitors do not have access to the original speech, there is a reference available on the walls next to the speakers, just in case anyone wants to do additional research; this reference includes the name of the speaker, the name of the speech (or the name as it is known historically), as well as the date and place it was delivered.

The fact that I substitute the text, the message of the discourse, for the reaction to it, the emotional effect among the population present at such events, is a comment on the repetitiveness of political agendas, the formal use of such venues to inform, and the similar way in which such political resources have been used for the strategic manipulation of public opinion. Those emotional effects are the fuel that makes the machine of history work; it is the way by which people can express their spontaneous approval. It is a moment of direct dialogue between the leader and the people, one in which the people's "voice" is the clapping.

The original recorded sound – the words, rhythm, intensity, and speed of the speech – was carefully translated into musical notes with the help of Julia



Installation view,  
Kunsthalle Wien 2006:  
Tania Bruguera,  
*Portraits*

Miller, a composer and computer software designer. The resulting musical scores were performed by a professional (and classically trained) chorus that delivered it by clapping the notes, each in its own way, so they do not sound the same. There was no conductor, just the scores. Each political speech was recorded separately and is delivered via a separate pair of speakers. After you approach the overall confusing sound of the recorded pieces all being played at once, you are confronted with each one as a specific and detailed experience. I think it is very important that the speakers are all positioned one meter away from the wall so in order to best experience it you have to be facing the wall (where the information of the original speech is provided), almost as if experiencing some sort of punishment.

Concerning the relationship between speeches and music, I wanted to mention the antiphon, the name of which derives from the 479–411 BC Athenian orator who rarely spoke in public but wrote defenses for others to speak. An antiphon is a response usually sung in Gregorian chant to a psalm or some other part of a religious service and performed by two semi-independent choirs interacting with one another.

The reason I am not using any visual reference but only the speakers and the very subtle (white vinyl on white wall) reference text is because I want the audience to focus on themselves, to look at their own reactions. The space has other non-visible elements, such as sulfur mixed with the paint used on the wall. Sulfur has been a very special chemical because of its wide range of uses from gunpowder to medicine (in war and peace). We also experiment with a chemical used in tear gas to see if we can trigger a false and uncontrollable emotional reaction: people crying. It is a very important aspect of the piece that the audience sees itself crying. This creates a disruptive effect since they have a physical response related to an emotional response. But this is neither in relationship to nor a consequence of their

political or psychological perception. It is the first time I use some sort of humor in my work, and that may have to do with my lack of faith in such political strategies. I want the audience to think about that.

Part of your exhibition is an intervention that takes place outside the premises; you place the project space under surveillance by commissioning security personnel with watchdogs to position themselves around the building, thereby signaling a heightened sense of danger.

Yes, the title of the piece is *The Dream of Reason*, a clear reference to Goya's plate # 43 from *Los Caprichos*. This is the second piece I have created as a result of living in the United States. I guess the increasingly dictatorial attitude of the U.S. government has had something to do with it ... [smile]

I am really glad that this piece will be performed for at least one day, although ideally, it should happen everyday, for at least a week, on each occasion at a different time of day, so that it keeps its element of surprise. I am glad because it has been censored twice before, to my surprise. The first time was in Paris, where an artist had invited me to intervene in his solo show at a commercial gallery, and the second time was in Madrid, at a group show.

*The Dream of Reason* is the "invasion" of an area by a uniformed security guard (with no company label) who appears with a guard dog. The dog has a muzzle. Every ten minutes a new guard appears with a new dog. This happens continuously until there are 15 guards on the premises at the same time (the number of guards depends on the size of the area, so this could change in future presentations). The guards do not address the audience, not even if the audience approaches them. They do not have eye contact with them. The guards circulate slowly around the compound, surveying something that which we cannot determine.

The piece was first conceived for an indoor space but the public space will work much better in relationship to its hyperrealism. The audience is not aware or notified of the piece being as a performance. The piece will always be shown at the same time as the exhibition but in another space, speaking to the sometimes apparent disconnection between repression and public speeches, showing how repression is always in the background. As you said, the piece signals a heightened sense of potential danger, one that is never revealed but sensed.

The print *The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters* and the series it was part of were first published on 6 February 1799 in the newspaper *Diario de Madrid*. The newspaper had an editorial to introduce this work by Goya. It says, and I quote: "[the author] has exposed to the human eyes forms and attitudes that have only existed, until now, in the human mind" (*Els Caprichos de Goya*, Ed. Sa Nostra, Caixa de Balears, Barcelona 1996). In my piece, this also happens but through the materialization of a concept we see an



experience through the media or just hear about it most of the time: and that is repression.

Repression and fear are important strategies used by governments and power in general. The levels of intensity in which they are used vary from self-censorship to torture but I find the best politicians are those who know how to work with metaphors and who are good at assigning symbolically shared implications to their repressive gestures.

How would you define your own relation to power and politics?

Power is something I do not completely understand yet, that may be why I work with it. But politics is something I have grown up with. Both (mostly politics) were all that was talked about at my house when I was growing up. It even separated my parents. Politics is something I have lived and I am involved in while in Cuba, even if I do not want to be, because it is inescapable, a permanent presence. Politics in Cuba has a very narrow meaning; it is mostly used in reference to the government and to ideology. In the United States, it is more often used with regard to interpersonal relations. In each case, I find what is not addressed at all to be very interesting. Power, on the other hand, is something people are very aware of in the United States. Although politics can be more like the practical language of society while power is its implementation, both are a very good example of the simultaneity and indissoluble connectivity of idea and action – maybe that is why I am so intrigued.

You live some of the time in Cuba and the rest in Chicago. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of political polarization between Cuba and the USA, what has been your experience of the emotional, cultural and aesthetic relations between the two worlds?

I share my time between these two places. I like the idea of living in a space between two ideologies, two systems. This gives me the illusion that I can have some distance, detachment from a place in order to understand it, the illusion that, in this way, I will have as few blind spots as possible. But who knows ...? Maybe I have just become completely blinded by the wind outside the airplanes ...

Nevertheless, this life has been very interesting and intense, especially since, so far, I have chosen not to live in New York – which some people say is not really the United States: a unique place where, for an artist, the art world has such a strong presence. Coming to the United States has been a good exercise in contrasting what I had previously learned about the place with what I have since lived and experienced. Some of these things are specifically related to the United States, others to capitalism. Having to relearn so many basic things has been very good because at this age you learn while

questioning what you learn. It almost seems like, while in Cuba, the government wants people to focus on it, but they do not allow you any access. In the United States, the government does not want you to focus on it but you do have access, or at least something that feels like it.

I have been really interested in what is missing, unspoken, in both places. It has been fascinating to look at the US system of control, the ideological one, economic censorship, and ideas of modern slavery, the heroic status of celebrities, and their positions in the political game.

I have been particularly interested in the importance given in the United States to narrative, frequently spoken narrative, while in Cuba the narrative is mostly broken (maybe that is why Fidel, who mastered oratory, is so successful), and we speak through actions instead. The power of media in the United States is something that has no parallel in Cuba. In Cuba, mass media are very clearly a propaganda tool, so, in a way, their impact is lost and they resemble an informational checkbox rather. In the United States, they are also a propaganda tool but they are used differently, through them your brain gets filled with narratives, with many of them, so many that it seems as if you do not have any space left to create your own. I sometimes feel as if I am in a computer game set in the United States and I have to walk through a forest full of traps and distractions, some of them really pleasing. In Cuba, the game would be taking place in a desert (and probably with no oasis in sight) but at least you would be able to see the horizon, or maybe I should rephrase this and say: in a desert where all you can see is the horizon.

I have to say that it has been very healthy to have direct access to information without mystification, as happens in Cuba. By this I mean that you do not have to depend on travelers to bring you books and information or may keep a book for just one week because so many people want to read it. Yet, I have to say that the feeling of preciousness, of the human chain of knowledge, of subversion, has a certain charm. The fact that you can access things firsthand is a different challenge because you have to believe in yourself very strongly. In Cuba, all knowledge is mediated by a previous screening. But I have to be honest and say that in terms of art, this was amazing, because my generation read all the literary classics and saw a lot of good films. Of course, the problem was that it was already deemed safe, already canonized, but nevertheless it was a great cultural foundation. In the United States, you are your own screener, you have to determine what is and what is not, you frequently see things as they happen, and that makes things look more natural, more human, and more doable. – I suppose this was some stream of consciousness rather than a clear description of my life between Havana and Chicago ...

Lately, I have been very attracted to the idea of moving to Europe, to experience that system, which, at least from afar, seems to be dealing with interesting struggles.



Political themes form the point of departure for much of your work. Would you say that it is possible for art to trigger social change?

It may sound silly but I completely believe in this, and there are many examples of it in art history.

This is a very complex subject, and I do not think I am completely ready for this conversation, but I may share some of my ideas, which are, quite frankly, still in flux. This is actually the theme of one of my new pieces. I will read you a section of what I have written by way of description:

“For some time, I have been questioning the idea of the creation and existence of artwork as a representational act. I have been thinking about art’s practical implications and the need for the artist to act as a responsible agent creating useful artwork. Artwork should not only be useful but should exist in the realm of reality; otherwise, it automatically becomes a representation again, one that exists only in the realm of possibility.

When I talk about the realm of reality, I assume reality not as something representative or mimetic regarding the artwork’s construction but in relation to its information, circulation and consumption. ‘Realism’ is the artistic strategy while at the same time its public realization/actualization. Rather than creating a sample, art is then something of real consequence.”

I find it very interesting that some artists dealing with this have decided at some point “not to do art,” or at least that is the way it has been perceived by others. Maybe it is not that art has an end but that those artists and their practice have entered another dimension of production and circulation for their art and, as in physics, we cannot see it although it can be explained, formulated, and even controlled. This is my approach to the ideas I call “Arte de Conducta.”

Tania Bruguera in conversation with Gerald Matt in the spring of 2006 on the occasion of the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Portraits* at Kunsthalle Wien project space. The artist took part in the exhibition *Kuba – Landkarten der Sehnsucht* (1999) at Kunsthalle Wien.

Tania Bruguera was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1968. She lives and works in Havana and in Chicago, Illinois.