

## **“Nobody is ready to wipe the slate clean”**

A talk with **Tania Bruguera**, after the debate created by her performance at the Havana Biennial, where bloggers and artists claimed for freedom and democracy

Yanet Perez Moreno, Madrid 4/20/2009

The series *Tatlin's Whisper*, the last performance by Tania Bruguera, allowed a minute, in a podium and with a mike, to Cuban and foreign bloggers, artists and guests attending the Havana Biennial to ask for freedom and democracy for the island, to talk about dictatorship, fear, change and political prisoners. In Havana, the author answered CUBAENCUENTRO.com some questions about what happened there, the authorities' reaction and her work that “tries to force the way in which politicians and people talk about reality.”

### **What do you think about the declaration of the Organizing Committee calling the result of your performance a “provocation against the Revolution”?**

It greatly annoys me that those working for the Cuban government and those criticizing it from outside offer so worn-out and predictable answers. Those are structures based on ideas on politics which should not belong to this century, or to the advantages we have as Cubans to redefine the line to follow, to create a dialogue that would be civic and respectful and imagine a future for all us, from former informers to those who entered the paramilitary organizations that attacked Cuba. It is exceedingly boring, pathetic and politically dangerous that those who are in charge of that future do the same: those who question the Revolution are defined as enemies, as cowards, a campaign of popular demoralization is carried out against them and their intelligence becomes mediocrity cultivated by the foreign enemy. And when you acknowledge the good things of the Revolution you are branded as a member of State Security.

This intolerance is not productive and, while it lasts, there will be no way to intercede in the Cuban political process. Neither of the parts has created a new language or is ready to put aside the pain and think in a future in which the slate is wiped clean, create a space with respect for the other side or build a bridge where that fluidity would make us proud. Luckily, the people have done it by themselves. If we want a different future, we have to work hard emotionally and intellectually as a country, as a culture. I would like to continue to be proud of being a Cuban, because this would mean something to the world (although this may include educating others and correcting their extreme views in support or criticism of what Cuba represents). We must create a new discourse, one that is not 50 years old.

### **Do you mean what the bloggers, artists and guests said in the performance?**

No. In fact, I believe it was a proposal of a way to do things and talk differently. I am very proud of all those who talked for or against what Cuba is now. I hope it

was well understood. The work had an open structure where the responsibility fell on the audience. With it, I put forward a different space to talk about Cuban reality. I would like to consider it a model where privilege is used and not simply enjoyed. The audience understood very well that what I was trying to build allowed them to talk honestly and openly on what was happening and on the demands for a near future. I acknowledge that “both parties” have treated me with respect and given me the chance of using a space to share my view about the Cuba I would like to have and build.

### **Did the way they understood what happened upset you?**

The way they presented what happened. We cannot think the way people thought in 1959. I try my work to be here and now and would like to influence with my work, which is a political work – here, in London or wherever – the ways in which politicians and people actually want to act. I was not satisfied with the reaction from both sides, because I believe they tried to offer interpretations instead of presenting the elements and have them speak for themselves in the minds of the spectators. But at least the audience made use of the opportunity and showed a face that was new for me and that I am very proud of.

I was very deeply moved. It is the first time a work of mine makes me cry, because there was the chance that the podium might be empty. I was ready for nothing to happen and then think: “Ok. This is what we are now: an empty podium.” To see that so many people stood up and said what they wanted... because there were also people who spoke for the Revolution. I did not like the level of radicalization of the speech by both sides. It left no space for dialogue.

### **But it was the press that made the interpretations on your performance and commented what happened there in their blogs, not official organizations outside Cuba.**

That’s true, but it was the press that is more widely seen and most influence has outside Cuba, because the organizations are not heard and what they do is not clearly seen. At least their impact in Cuba is not large.

### **Had you done that type of performance there before?**

Not in Cuba. In Valencia, at a performance festival...

### **Then, those who organized the Biennial knew what was going to...**

Yes, of course. Everything was authorized. The elements in my piece were discussed with the director of the Biennial and the Visual Arts Council and I shared my experience and my fear that those who talked might lean towards jocularly or that nobody would participate. The work is part of a series called *Tatlin’s Whisper* that I have held in Spain, London, the United States.

I try to activate, as an actual experience for the spectator, images from the press or the mass media with which one has now no emotional empathy because they took place somewhere else or long ago. I turn them into a living

experience, so the audience enters into direct contact them and, when seeing similar images again in the press, remember them as an experience they understand and that belongs to them because of having lived it.

**The Organizing Committee behaved aggressively with those who claimed for freedom and democracy in the performance...**

You mean in their communiqué? That is an example of what I was saying. That is why I am very proud of the path the piece took, because it became activated.

**Were you put into any sort of pressure?**

Up to now, not in the individual level, although the exhibition in the Havana Gallery ended with the first part of the project (the exhibition). The second part, the conversation and public presentations of the kids' works, was not allowed to take place. But as the saying goes: you take what you can get.

I attained much more than I had imagined. They have treated me with kid gloves and much respect. I can't complain. Perhaps I was "too well" treated. Also the way Abel Prieto talked about my piece for *La Jornada* newspaper. I respect him very much and I consider him valuable, because he is trying to find solutions. He is not a bureaucrat, he does not hide things in old traps and he understands the value of art for a political discourse endowed with creativity. My work is to push the institution to the limits; theirs is to preserve them and this is all a "dance." We all know what we are doing and that music ends, but I am proud of the tolerance of the institution and of my demands as an artist. Part of the respect is that the dialogue has been strictly with the heads of the Biennial and of the Ministry of Culture and not with other political organizations. This is an important step and I have not been forced to sign anything. In his declarations he has cleared me from any "blame." This I appreciate from an individual point of view, but professionally it is as if my work had not been what it was and that what happened invalidated it. In Cuban art the battle is now in the interpretation and distribution of meanings. The institution understood that what I do stems from the revolutionary and constructive criticism that I learned in school and this helped. What could be different is what each person understands by revolutionary.

**Do you consider yourself a provocative artist?**

I don't like the word provocative, because it has very simple connotations. I try to push the relationship between aesthetics and politics to its limits. I wouldn't talk of provocation. That would minimize my work. I have studied the relationship between art and politics in depth. That is what interests me: to see how I can push the limits of politics from the standpoint of art and even suggest political views.

I am also interested in entering spaces that are critical in society, here or in any other country. To try to open to discussion topics that are difficult and especially those I am still trying to form an opinion on. I want to share in this process of search, of understanding. My work is that of contextual art. I try to "use, spend

and share” my privileged “capital” in works requiring an extra from the institution and the audience. In recent years this has been a comprehensive part of my work, one more element to work with.

**What is your intention with this type of actions where the audience plays the leading role?**

I am interested in the dialogue on the dissolution of authorship, on the way an artist can disappear. I work with the spectators, seeing how they can do the work, how I can give them this responsibility and even have them keep it. In this piece, I handed out 200 disposable cameras with flash. This had a double purpose: people could take stills with a flash of those in the podium and this also made them feel more important. They became the owners of the documentation, because I didn't ask them to return the cameras. It also played with the spectators' power on the work, whether because they were the ones who finished it or made it, or they were the owners of the documentation. Supposedly, this is the most valuable thing in performances, because it is how they survive.

**Do you think the authorities may take reprisals against Yoani Sanchez or the bloggers and artists who talked in the performance?**

Unfortunately, I do not think my piece has served to change the relationship between the power and the bloggers, because they are under constant surveillance. I have the impression I may have made them happy, since they were the ones who disseminated the work, and I thank them for it. I was worried, because the piece could only be done inside an institution and I feared it would remain inside those walls disconnected from reality – although there was a baffle to the street that was part of the work; those who went by could hear what was being said inside and I think some got curious and went in. In the following days several people told me that their relatives and neighbors, who had nothing to do with culture, were talking about my performance in the street. This has been my greatest satisfaction since my piece *Memoria de la postguerra* (Postwar Memory), because a political work of art must live with the people in the street, with their daily life, and generate ideas.

**How do you see the situation with Raul Castro in power and after the recent governmental restructuring?**

If I have learned something about politics is that those of us who are not within the circle of power do not know the data behind the news, the motivations or the long term plan. I can say that the way in which this moment is officially presented is not of change, but it rather offers an image of continuation, of prolongation. This I believe is intelligent, so as not to give rise to collective hysteria. But there are things pointing at something I do not know what it is or where it is going: the clear presentation of a government primarily formed by members of the Army, most of who are senior citizens. The idea of what is historical seems to be taken literally and restrictedly. I think that Carlos Lage's dismissal has marked the population. That was what was being heard in the street.

On the other hand, Raul's government is more focused in solving household needs that, although they may seem simple, they daily hit the people. I think this is good. I was also surprised to hear him say he is ready to talk with the American government.

When the word change is heard in Cuba, it is not the change the people want, either within or without the country. Cuba is in a moment in which it must reinvent itself before the world in the political and conceptual levels. This is the greatest challenge before Raul as a political figure. From afar, it seems he clearly understands his role in Cuban history, but since this is politics, we have to let time tell.

**How have you seen this Biennial, as compared to those in other years?**

Because of the characteristics of the project I presented – an exhibition open every day from 5 to 9 pm, then dismantled and new works mounted – I had not much time to see the Biennial, although in the inauguration I visited some of the spaces in Cabana. However, this time it has taken the right path again by recovering the awareness of its importance. It took a long time for the Biennial idea to retake its necessary energy. I am not talking of quality since Lillian Llanes stopped being its director until the present moment.

The new director, Jorge Fernandez, is abreast of the most recent events in international art and of its theoretical trends. He wants to make of the Lam Center and the Biennial a conversation piece on contemporary art. It seems that the Ministry of Culture gave it priority this time. It was also very handy for the institution and for the artists – although perhaps it was a political decision – to include collateral exhibitions in the official program.

Besides, it was the better organized of the Biennials I have attended. It has the same level of Documenta. This is the greatest achievement: things are working more professionally. And there were small gestures, like Bedia's exhibition and that of artists represented by Chelsea Galleries, which otherwise the Cuban audience would have been unable to see. It was evident that this is an event for which Cuban artists prepare themselves and they are thankful for, because of the large audience attending it.

**When you mention collateral samples, are you referring also to artists who are not officially accepted?**

I took a quick view of the program yesterday and there were about two hundred exhibitions on. I have heard only about an exhibition that is not there: that of Sandra Ceballos.

**Tell me about the Arte de Conducta chair you direct and the controversial proposals it brought to the Biennial...**

It is a work which follows the form of an alternative school, focused on the study of political and contextual art. I try to put in the foreground something I have

being doing for some time: not using political images, but working as an artistic resource with the same tools power uses. In this case, education is one of the strongest tools of all powers, no matter which.

I believe it important that art in Cuba reflects what is happening – as it did in the '80s, when much ideological interaction and questioning were going on –, that it may be part of the processes actually taking place. That the idea of making a universal art does not come out of copying works seen in magazines, but emerges through the knowledge of reality and by sharing it through art. Unfortunately, but for a few exceptions, the paradigm of art in Cuba is to create a work with a commercial value – an immediate commercial value –, and this would be tantamount to artistic success. Many have found refuge in concepts that, because they are abstract, are considered universal so as to avoid participating in a debate on a process that should be theirs.

As happens in capitalist countries, instead of using art as a tool for thought, they have devoted themselves to create collectable works and to earn money. I do not think an art made in Cuba can offer this to international discourse. As a reaction against this apathy – or who knows if as a strategy for survival – with which I do not agree, the only way of having a dialogue on the role of art in (Cuban) society, and doing political art, was to create a school in which to work with young people interested in discussions on politics, society and symbolic representation, because, after all, what we are doing is art. But there are many types of art: that which makes no commitments and that which does commit itself. I was interested to see if it was possible to use art to analyze society and blow up thought, to create a space of civic and ethic debate which at the same time would be art.

**How has the audience reacted to these works, which fluctuate from mechanic pincers to take Fidel Castro dolls from a glass case to puns on *Granma* newspaper headlines and stickers with official organization logos with the form commercial brands?**

It has been very good. I was a little fearful as a curator, because people are not used to having a place where different things are exhibited at the same time. There were so many events that I thought people would come two days at the most, but the gallery was full every day and not only of people from the world of art, but right from the street when they heard about the exhibitions. This was a great satisfaction. The audience has understood that the works are made not from a position of mockery, but from a position of thought, of shared analysis. We have shown an art that thinks and that makes people think.

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