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INTERVIEW: TALKING TO CUBAN ARTIST TANIA BRUGUERA

JUNE 22, 2015 | KEVIN LEES | LEAVE A COMMENT



HAVANA — On the first weekend of the Havana Biennial, artist Tania Bruguera was detained after organizing a 100-hour reading of Hannah Arendt’s writings on totalitarianism in her modest home in Havana Vieja.



I write more [about that](#) in *The Washington Post* today:

When I visited Bruguera for the first time, on the final day of the reading, plainclothes policemen from MININT, Cuba’s feared interior ministry, swarmed just outside the doorway, and state workers were jackhammering away, digging forlorn trenches into the dusty road. Bruguera, who once taught art at the University of Chicago, where she also knocked on doors for Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, has been under a kind of “city arrest” since late December, her passport confiscated and every step under state surveillance, following another public demonstration. We made plans to meet, perhaps

later that day. Instead, MININT officials detained and questioned her.

I finally met up with Bruguera on the Tuesday morning after her detention (sadly, she was detained **more recently** earlier this month), and she spoke to me about several topics.

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Bruguera, an artist and a daughter of the Cuban revolution, who styles herself at once a revolutionary, a socialist, an anti-capitalist and a “pain in the ass” for the current Cuban government, argues that the Biennial and its much-feted stars are part of a cynical cultural policy that co-opts Cuban artists as little more than pawns of the regime.

The full transcript of the conversation follows.

KL: First off, tell me what’s happened over the past 36 hours. The authorities did not care very much for your reading.

TB: No they didn’t.

KL: Why did they wait until after you’d finished to detain you?

TB: The thing is that, by law, they cannot enter my house because I’m not doing anything wrong. They’re going to try to stop me to do everything, but they cannot threaten me on the phone.... My answer to everything is the law. It’s your own law, and you’re not following your own law. The law says I can do anything in my house, if it is inside my house. I even went to the police station to ask for a permit for these four days, and they didn’t want to give it to me because they said it’s not needed. They’d say, “No you don’t need it,” and I’d say, “Well, for extra precaution.” They said, “No, no.” It makes no sense.

After 12, after midnight, every day, I turned down the sound. So people, if they want, can come inside the apartment or outside the house. I was following the law by the book. What’s happened is that this government is extremely afraid of people taking the streets. That’s the biggest fear they’ve had from the beginning. They even made this saying, “the streets are for the revolutionaries,” meaning, anybody who goes to the streets to say anything different than the position of the government will be persecuted and jailed. This is interesting to me. I think there’s a conceptual problem with the Revolution because they have acquired rights to the term “revolution.” Revolution now is a brand, it’s not anymore an ideal, it’s not anymore a project, it’s a brand they’ve acquired. I think I am a revolutionary. They don’t see it that way, because they think

the only revolutionary is the one who will follow by the letter every order. As if they don't know what the concept of revolutionary is. I think the most subversive text in the world right now for Cuba is some words by Fidel Castro that define what revolution is. And I'm planning to do a performance of that because everything he says is revolution is, it's accurate. But they're not [embodying] any of those points.

KL: And it was probably elucidated in 1959, decades ago...

TB: When it was easy to be revolutionary.

KL: I read the AP story from this weekend about the biennial.

TB: I haven't read it.

KL: It's so banal, it's about international art dealers talking about Cuban art and how it's a great time to buy Cuban art. No talk about dissent, no talk about human rights. That's got to be frustrating.

TB: You know, what is frustrating is to see how people who don't care about Cubans or the Cuban people are shaping the future of Cuba. Why? Because these people only see Cuba as a business opportunity and not as a place where a society that is just and human can be built. And I feel this is extremely sad that the government is desperate for economic rewards and to have money that they don't care about anything else...

KL: Let's talk about the United States and its relationship with Cuba.

TB: It's incredible that the AP... I have to say that it will be five months, but the international press in Cuba is totally co-opted.

KL: Yeah, they can't write anything or else they'll get kicked out.

TB: It's totally co-opted. In the beginning they came and they talked to me, and as soon as the government came and put me in this category of 'not wanted,' they totally withdrew. Tomorrow I could hang from Revolutionary Square at the hand of the government, and they would not write about it. It's interesting how everybody is being co-opted. This is a place where — Cuba is a place, if you want to become famous because of what is happening here, where you want to become rich because of the business opportunity, where you want to become who you are not in your own country because here we have less money and people treat you like a king. So people can actually live their fantasy in Cuba. But because of that, because the government knows that, and because the government is providing that, it's giving the key to access that kingdom to anyone who is going to behave well. And that counts for foreigners, for businessmen, for foreign press, for artists, anybody. Even dissidents.

KL: In terms of this period of opening for the United States, is it, one, the right time to lift the embargo and, two, does that give the United States some leverage to say, ‘hey, if we normalize relations, you have to pay attention to human rights.’ That’s, I guess, the big question.

TB: I think it is sad and ironic that the potential freedom of speech and the potential freedom of more than one party, the potential human rights of our government, that is in the hands of a foreign country. I’m not happy about it, I’m telling you. I’m not happy at all about it. And as you will see, until now, I have not met anyone privately from the U.S. government. First of all, because they have not asked me to come to the meetings. It’s only other Cubans who are like, “Yeah, let’s come and talk to them.” I think it’s sad and it’s unfortunate that a foreign country has the right to choose justice for Cubans. But on the other hand, it is what it is. And if it is what it is, they should do something with it. I feel that any business deal that is made with the Cuban government [should have] a clause that explains that the deal is done under the agreement that human rights will be respected, that fair salary is going to be respected, that the rights of workers are going to be respected, and social justice be respected. Why? Because I am an anti-capitalist, so I do not trust in the goodwill of capitalists. If they can gain ten more dollars for not paying the rights of workers in Cuba... Look at China, what are they doing in China? Exploiting Chinese, the Chinese [workers] are committing suicide. Who cares? They’re having more profits. So I don’t want that in Cuba. I really don’t want that in Cuba. And the only people who can fight that, unfortunately – and you need to put that very emphatically *unfortunately* – is the U.S. government, and I trust that Obama will do the right thing. I really believe he’s going to do the right thing. Even if he’s underground and not public, I have faith in him, because I worked for his election when I was in the United States. I was knocking on doors, though I was not a registered national, but I was excited. I knocked on doors and I worked for his ground [game] with immigrants for him to be elected, so I hope. I really hope.

KL: When I talk to the folks at the State Department, they believe that the bet that they’re making is greater access in Cuba to Internet, to more contact with U.S. tourists, more... [TB shakes her head]. You disagree.





TB: I disagree. I think that money is not a solution. Education is the solution. I think the Cuban people need a literacy campaign for their civic rights, that's what needs to be done. I don't think it's one solution only, I think it's all of these things. I think it's open Internet, it's [having] more relationships with foreigners, creating organizations here who work with the people, it has to be a multi-sided, holistic program. Money is not going to solve Cuba. Why? Because the money's going to be in the hands of the people close to government, and of the members of the 'royal family,' so it is not the solution. The solution is a literacy program for the people to understand that human rights is not a CIA program to damage the Revolution. Right? My fear is the emphasis is only money and people-to-people. Look, people-to-people is great.

Cubans have learned through all this time to be amazing hustlers, amazing hustlers. You don't even feel it when they're hustling you. The government has trained itself and its organization to be mirrors of a project. For example, Zona Franca is the name of the project on the Malecón. Do you know what Zona Franca is? They have appropriated the name from another artists' organization that worked for maybe 20 years now in the *barrio*, on the ground, in Alemar, [creating] art in Alemar. So the government has learned the game of appropriating projects, people on the ground, people working on grassroots as a cooperative. That way, when you hear about Zona Franca, you don't think about the good work, you think about this amazing splash of money and this ability. So I think the U.S. government has to be very careful about the mirroring game... which means they're going to reflect something that is not what it is, and they are going to reflect something someone else is doing with their control and changing everything. So they have to be very careful about that.

For example, USAID has been demonized all the time. But now you have a photo of all the Cuban doctors fighting Ebola, which I think is a great program, with a big banner of USAID behind it. So everything is demonized as much as it's not a benefit for the government. So you have to be very careful. Oh, now you want freedom of speech? We're going to make a fake space to meet the government of the United States's request.

KL: So your work is exhibited here [at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*]...

TB: I'm part of the permanent collection.

KL: Yeah.

TB: And I cannot get in at the opening of the *Bienial* show. After being invited by some of the artists who are integrating it. They personally invited me to come.

KL: And they refused you entrance to the own museum where your work is displayed.

TB: Yes, yes.

KL: Does your work as an artist give you any special credibility or an ability to push the envelope a little more?

TB: I think art, because it's art, and because it's about what you feel and it's about things that are not put into words, it's just about what is happening, the fluid of life, things we don't understand and want to get at and to know what it's about, gives you a space and a leverage to talk about things other people don't feel they have the language to speak, or are afraid to talk about, because in other contexts it is forbidden. But the minister of culture understood that. Since the year 2000, they've have a cultural policy to promote the art market. Why? Because once you're dependent on the art market — it's a brilliant strategy because it's not political censorship, it's economic censorship. What do you do for the art market? A piece of art you can sell here, a piece of art that says nothing about nothing. You want to be famous, so everyone wants to buy your artwork as a product, as an investment. So cultural policy regarding visual arts is to make artists not thinkers to share their ideas with the people, but object producers. Why? Because once you sell, you have more money. Instead of living here in the middle of nowhere with the marginal population, then you buy a house in Miramar. You've seen these people's houses, right? If you live next door to a general of the army, what are you going to complain about? They're living a beautiful life, they're living the life of the elite. So I think it is a great example in real life, the independence of the art market, it's a very smart way to silence artists. So know I'm starting to become a pain in the ass, basically!

KL: Let's talk about the Internet in Cuba. I've never been anywhere where it's so atrocious to get Internet. It's prohibitively expensive.

TB: And the lines! Have you seen the lines? People waiting all day to chat for 15 minutes.

KL: Do you think that will change if there's greater economic cooperation with the United States?

TB: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

KL: Will that foster greater freedom?

TB: I think the government's been forced, for a few years now, to introduce Internet. It's not because they want Cubans to have Internet, it's because they know if they want Americans to come here, it will require Internet. So unfortunately, again, the decisions in this country aren't being made to benefit the people, the Cuban nationals, but to benefit foreigners in order to get their money. I think now they are very close, I'm guessing. Why? Because something happened. They just created the union for the Internet blah-blah-blah something-something-something. I don't know the name. Look it up. Now they are regulating Internet without even having Internet, and they have the cyberpolice organized with this union. It's not Yoani Sánchez, or dissidents or

independent writers that can be part of the union. Only the people loyal to the government. So now I think it's going to be very soon.

KL: That's right — I tried to look up Yoani Sánchez's new website on my phone, and it was blocked.

TB: That's going to be the policy. This is why we're going to have Internet, because they have figured out how to control Internet.

KL: And there's, I suppose, a cat-and-mouse game where activists use VPNs to thwart government controls.

TB: What's a VPN?

KL: Virtual private networks, where you basically log into a different network that's not based in Cuba, so you can evade...

TB: I hope that people will have a creative solution to that, but it will take some time. I think that time that they have is going to be a big advantage, to get used to such-and-such websites. So they're going to use that advantage like monopolists. So they have, what? One, two, three years of Internet monopoly? Of course it's going to be a change, but it's going to be progressive. It's not going to be that quick.

KL: With the news in the past few days...

TB: But again! I want to emphasize that we need literacy for civil rights. Why? Because if I have Internet right now, I might look at *Foreign Policy* or CNN or something. My neighbor isn't going to go look at that, he's going to go look at Jennifer Lopez's new boyfriend. So there's going to be, as it is in capitalist countries, I'm sorry, a way to entertain people to waste time on non-important things.

KL: Over the past couple of days, the president [of Cuba] has come out and said that he is excited about opening an embassy on May 29th.

TB: I think that's important. This is good. May 29th? The date is set?

KL: Well, that's when this government wants it to happen, I feel like there's an increasing sense that this government is more enthusiastic about it now.

TB: You know why, right?

KL: Venezuela.

TB: Venezuela.

KL: That country is a basketcase.

TB: And the other thing to understand is that as much as this is an opportunity, the only reason they're saying now yes — and, by the way, there have been tons of talks, and every time they get to the point to make an agreement, the Cuban government sabotages it. This time, they're not going to sabotage because, you know, they want a new sugar daddy.

KL: But I've also heard that the Fidelistas are much less enthusiastic about this.

TB: Of course. The 17th of December meant an identity crisis for the Revolution. I know everyone, the U.S. government, the Cuban government are both supporting the news that everybody was happy about it. Yes, many Cubans were happy about it, but 100% of the Cubans [don't know] what to do with it. I know for politics, it's better to say that everyone was happy. But I have to say, it's not about being happy or not happy or being in favor or not.... It's about what are you doing to people's lives. You've changed the meaning of people's lives in one second, in four minutes or whatever on the news. Imagine people who never left Cuba and sacrificed their life here and the lives of their kids, because they trusted, and they were anti-imperialist, they were anti-U.S. Imagine the people who didn't talk to their brothers and sisters who left for Miami because they were revolutionary and they had to be against the Americans. I mean, these were decisions that affected people's lives. And now you say, sorry! I'm still waiting for Raul to sit down and do a one-, two-, three-, seven hours, however many hours he wants, conference with questions from the people. OK, now we've got it, it's an order, we're happy about it. Now can you please answer our questions? What is going to happen when we, who do not know how to defend our rights, are going to be employed by an American capitalist who is going to exploit us ten times worse than you have exploited us so far? And we don't know how to deal with that, we don't know how to protest, or defend. We're slaves. I just want him to step up to the microphone to say, 'This is the idea of the nation I have.' Or Raul, what is your vision for our future? What's going on? Just an explanation. But they don't want an explanation, they want orders.

KL: You look at young Cubans and there are reports that in the immediate aftermath, young Cubans say, "Oh no, relations are going to improve," so there's an exodus of young Cubans to the United States thinking that the window is closing and that's exactly the kind of misinformation that...

TB: I think they need to see all of this, the United States has to think about all of this. The other thing is that, why I thought art should be done as a response to the 17th of December is because what we saw on the 17th of December was an eradication, an erasing of the meaning of things. Like all of a sudden, when those two presidents were saying, "We're going to establish a relationship," they just put into the past, or on suspension, what we believed. On everything. And the symbolism of things. So I think art is the tool to work with people to re-semanticize, giving

new meanings to things. And that's why I thought it was so important. And I think that's why they are so insistent with me, they do not want me to do anything, because they know art has now a role in this historical moment.

KL: So you've been reading Hannah Arendt. Is Cuba a totalitarian state? Or is it merely an authoritarian state?

TB: You tell me. I am only going to tell you one thing. When we were reading about Stalin and the Nazis and so on, you could change many words to "Cubans." I'll tell you, some people from my neighborhood were sitting and listening, and some of them came and read. And they were like, this is very... *que fuerte!* *Que fuerte* means, "how strong!" How come you're doing this, this is so strong! But this is exactly what happened to us. So I think that's my answer. If my neighbors, who have no training in their own rights, read a book and feel so connected to it, you tell me.

KL: I think that's an astute observation about civic rights. In 2018, Raul said he'll step down. Do you think he will?

TB: I think he will.

KL: Do you think that his successor matters? Will it just be a puppet of the military?

TB: I think he will. Look at Russia. Putin was in, he stepped down, he put in his man, he was still in control, and now he came back. I don't think Raul has the time for that because of his age. I think he has understood his historical role, which is killing his brother. Politically. So his role is to be the guy who makes the transition. And I think you have to give him points for that because he understood his role. But the problem is what transition and who is going to benefit from that transition? Who is going to benefit? The people that are loyal to him personally. Not even politically loyal. And my biggest fear is when I saw his own son during the conversation with Obama. It's an image that is very scary, Obama and Raul talking, and next to Raul is his own son. That, all of a sudden, I don't know how, because I haven't seen anything in the newspaper about his appointment, by [Raul's] hand, by finger, he was appointed the head of national security. We have never had that position or post ever. And this was not a democratic election, not even an executive decision because we have not even been informed. When you make an executive decision, you inform the people. "I have decided that [my son] will come there with this position," but the people haven't been informed. Not even in *Granma*. Another surprise. Policy cannot be a consecration of surprises. Politics has to be a process where people are involved. I was totally amazed when Raul and the head of the conversation, this woman who I really like. What's her name...?

KL: Josefina Vidal.

TB: Josefina Vidal. I really like here. She's very elegant, very articulate. I feel represented with her, very much. But I was flabbergasted when I saw her and Raul demanding Obama — who are they,

first of all, to be demanding? – to use more executive power. I'm sorry, Obama is not a dictator. They forgot that little detail. He's the head of the democratic country – ok, with a lot of problems. I know the problems of the United States, I don't like it, and I don't want them to come here, because what is going to happen is we're going to get the worst of socialism and the worst of capitalism. But even then, it's very disrespectful to ask a head of the country to be a dictator. I'm sorry, he can do that with Venezuela and other Latin American countries.

KL: If Che Guevara were 27 years old today in this Cuba, would he be a blogger like Yoani Sánchez?

TB: He would be in prison. He would be in prison. Not even a blogger. And I think right now, what is killing me... I was raised here, I am socialist, I am an anarchist sometimes, I am anti-capitalist, and what I'm doing as an artist is putting into practice my own education. And now I'm being punished for believing in the Revolution. Can someone explain that to me, please?

KL: Did you grow up here in Havana? What is the tattoo?

TB: I did it. In 2006... when Fidel Castro got sick. If you notice, I travel quite a lot... and back then, I was teaching at the University of Chicago, like Obama. I was teaching at the University of Chicago, and I was spending a lot of time outside [Cuba]. And I saw Fidel sick, and I tattooed the address of my house to remind me, every time, I have to come back to Cuba with something for Cuba, this country, and to bring all the knowledge I have acquired outside of Cuba to Cuba. The other tattoo here is the date when Fidel Castro published a letter saying that he would not be the president anymore, and that was also super-intense.

KL: Well, I don't want to take up more of your time. It's hard to meet up with people when the Cuban government keeps arresting them...

TB: [T]he Cuban Revolution has become like an abusive partner. For me, I make a lot of comparisons between an abusive relationship at home and what is happening here. You don't let people talk, you're abusive, and then for the outsiders, you are the best husband, you love your wife. Also the reason that because they are the majority, they have the right to silence the minority, and that's highly problematic.

KL: That's an interesting issue, because in the United States, everyone's heard of Mariela Castro.

TB: She's done very good work.

KL: But there are still difficult issues with LGBT rights, and not everyone thinks CENESEX is so great.

TB: Yeah, but the thing is here, once you do one critique of the Cuban government, the Cuban

government puts you in this kind of category where you're critiquing everything. I'm not critiquing everything, I'm pointing out certain things. For example, Mariela Castro has done amazing work. But this is how power works. Now she's the voice of a group she's not part of. Why [can't she] build up a center and pass the baton to someone else? Because real community work is to empower people to take in their own hands their destiny, not to blackmail them with medicines they need to survive... So I think she has done amazing work, but maybe it's time for her to step down and show the good work she has done by [appointing] another person that is as prepared as she is.

KL: It's just another part of the brand?

TB: It's another part of leaving power, leaving everyone in your family in a position of power. This is highly problematic. We are not a kingdom, we are not North Korea. This is different from Fidel, he was never like that.



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