

Is Art Central to Citizenship? Cuban artist Tania Bruguera challenges power — and invites you to as well — in a show at YBCA.

Emily Wilson (<http://www.sfweekly.com/author/emily-wilson/>) / Mon Jun 19th, 2017 9:33am /

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Tania Bruguera's Self-sabotage, Courtesy of YBCA

In December 2014, Cuban artist and activist **Tania Bruguera** (<http://www.taniabriguera.com/cms/>) got arrested on the way to stage her performance piece *I Also Demand*, which offered members of the public the chance

of one minute of “censor-free” expression in Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución, where Fidel Castro often gave his long speeches. Her detention, along with that of dozens of other artists and activists, prompted a campaign pressuring the government for their release.

The following year, during the Havana biennial, Bruguera held a live reading of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in her Havana apartment — a performance she says authorizes drowned out by constantly digging with jackhammers right outside the window. Undeterred, she has announced her candidacy for president of Cuba — which she knows she has no chance of winning — when Raul Castro steps down in 2018.

Cuban officials may not love Bruguera’s work — they have said she is not an artist — but she’s been acclaimed internationally, getting a Guggenheim fellowship as well as having her work featured at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Modern, London, and the 2015 Venice Biennale, among other venues. At a preview at YBCA (<https://www.ybca.org>), Bruguera said she hadn’t wanted her work to be inside walls anymore. But YBCA’s director of visual arts Lucía Sanromán persuaded her, and a survey of Bruguera’s work, ***Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder***, (<https://www.ybca.org/whats-on/tania-bruguera>) will be at the YBCA through Oct. 29.

“I’m very, very happy to be collaborating with YBCA,” Bruguera said at a preview. “I wanted to go to streets, but Lucía is persistent and she said, ‘Let’s make sure people understand what you’re doing.’ So she got me. Sometimes, I think people don’t understand what I’m doing, so this is good about clarifying what I’m doing and challenging me.”

Both Sanromán and YBCA director Deborah Cullinan say this exhibition, which incorporates a school, newspapers and a movement for immigrants, works perfectly with what they’re doing.

“We’re reimagining the role of arts in civic life,” Cullinan said. “It’s culture that proceeds change.”

Working at YBCA lets her “shed the dead weight of the practice of curating,” Sanromán cheerfully said. She adds that when she took her job at YBCA a year and a half ago, she was excited both by **Changing the Ratio**, an initiative to feature more women artists — the institution just hosted a show by **Lynn Hershmann Leeson**, who made a documentary, *Tania Libre* (<https://www.tanialibre.com>), about the impact of censorship on Bruguera’s life — as well as by making art central to citizenship. *Talking to Power* fits with that perfectly, Sanromán says.

It was challenging to display Bruguera’s work — much of it performance art — in a museum, Sanromán said. And Bruguera wanted as little explanation and labels as possible. They settled on a sort of introductory gallery with a lexicon of Bruguera’s work.

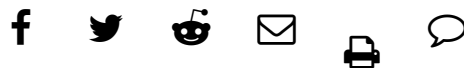
Talking to Power includes the political campaign asking Pope Francis to extend Vatican City citizenship to undocumented people all over the world, a newspaper put out with other artists in Cuba and abroad; *Self Sabotage*, a work where Bruguera read something she’d written, “Culture as a Strategy to Survive” with a loaded gun at her side she put to her head at the end of every part; a restaging and video of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, when she offered Cubans a dais and a mic to express their feelings in 2009, and *I Propose Myself*, videos of Cubans responding to the question of what they would change if they were president.

One thing Bruguera seems particularly excited about given her penchant for people being participants in her art rather than observers, are classes that will be held for eight weeks on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, the Escuela de Arte Útil (<https://ybca.org/whats-on/escuela-de-arte-util>) (or “School of Useful Art,” more or less). In collaboration with local schools, including the UC Berkeley, and California

College for the Arts, Bruguera and other artists will teach on topics such as “Reforming Capital” and “Sustainable Outcomes.” Members of the public are welcome on a drop-in basis, and classes are free with museum admission.

Bruguera has said that art is something you create in your imagination. Maybe that seems obvious; isn’t all creation in our imagination? But this show makes that clear in a different way. You can see why the artist didn’t want labels — so people could just engage with the work. And you can see why Sanromán did — so people would have some idea of what they are seeing and what’s behind it. But looking at what Bruguera imagined and made happen — a gun on a desk like the one she fired at her head; a dais where anyone could get up to take the mic and speak for one minute of uncensored glory — or perhaps just say something commonplace or boring; and maybe most of all, ordinary Cubans saying what they would do if they were president of their country — we know what she’s doing without labels. She’s involving people. She’s waking us up.

Talking to Power/ Hablándole al Poder, through Oct. 29, at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St. \$9-\$10, 415-978-2700 or ybca.org.



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