

A Homenaje to Tania Bruguera

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Of the most important works from the beginning of Tania Bruguera's career, which is less than twenty years old, *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta* must be pointed out. It is a long and complex work,³ during which the young artist concentrated her forces on re-presenting a few of the most significant works by Ana Mendieta, who was also born in Cuba, part of the previous generation. This intervention is open to various interpretations. It is firstly necessary to point out that Ana Mendieta was an almost unknown artist in her own country, both for the ephemeral character of many of her interventions – based primarily on performance – and, above all, because this Cuban, who lived and died in the United States, was not considered by the regime. In Cuba, in fact, little information about her works circulated; a destiny shared, on the other hand, with a large part of “dissident” intellectual production, or what the regime viewed as such.⁴ If truth be told, it must also be said that in general the developments of international contemporary art were not very well known on the island. But this informative void was being filled, above all, thanks to the role of the Havana Biennial (and its director Lillian Llanes), the first edition of which took place in 1984. For Tania Bruguera and her generation, it was without doubt a fundamental bridge of communication with the most interesting international experimentations.

Without wanting to undervalue the importance of the deep ties this “dedication” had to the internal problems of the Caribbean state, to which we will return later, I believe that it is important to focus our attention on a few affinities between the two artists that emerge when analyzing Tania Bruguera's subsequent path and which make the motivations for this *homage* clearer. We can, in fact, take cues from the interest the work of Ana Mendieta aroused in the young Tania to better understand some of the latter's main thematic foundations. I believe, in fact, that Tania Bruguera's choice to re-present the works of Ana Mendieta in particular is to be interpreted as a way of claiming an otherness in respect to the more consolidated

*But just as I possess history, it possesses me;
I am enlightened by it: but what is the purpose of light?
(Pier Paolo Pasolini)¹*

*Los políticos profesionales menoscaban la política.
Lo que era una ilusión (contra el sistema) lo convierten en una meta
que garantiza su propia seguridad en el poder.
La política pierde su fundamento cuando deviene poder.
(Tania Bruguera)²*

artistic system and, widening the point of view, to also criticise, from the inside, the “heroic” models proposed/imposed by the protagonists of the Cuban revolution. Fidel Castro or even Che Guevara, despite being antagonists of the capitalist and traditional system, based their public image on an outline typical of the society they opposed, in which only the “white man” can hold the role of saviour or redeemer. The works of Mendieta, in fact, are assumed as symbolic of the search for different mode of narration, antiheroic and feminine. Her works are nurtured, moreover, by a religiousness that we could define as Caribbean - which therefore intrinsically contains hybrid and changeable elements – and a performative attitude that contests other practices of the commemorative process of heroes (and maybe more generally a solely male practice of representation) that necessitates clear and definite images once and for all. All these elements become deeply internalized by Tania Bruguera and fertilize, in different ways, her expressive path. In a similar way to Ana Mendieta, Tania searches to find in the artistic process a rituality based on the use of her own body and claims as finality the search for an identity not necessarily aligned with the one assigned by society. Bruguera, in this course of action and in the realization of her works, does not stop in front of pain, suffering or self-humiliation. Her works aim to create situations shared fully with the spectator – and maybe in this particular aspect there is a distance from the far more intimate experiences proposed by Ana Mendieta – who is often involved directly in the action, both emotively and, less frequently, physically.

It is easy to gather when analyzing the *Homenaje*, in its use of re-enactment as “technique”, that Tania Bruguera does not fall into the nostalgic temptation of a lost time nor are traces or psychological subjection in respect to the past found in her works. On the contrary, her attempt seems to me ascribable to a necessity of living in the present, with her own body, through her own sensations. These experiments – crucial in their symbolism – can be assumed as a sign of a historical turning point from an artistic and, more widely, social point of view.

That in *Homenaje* there is a clear intention to dissect political themes, strictly connected with the Cuban situation, is apparent when looking at this experience in relation to her other early works. Of the many works that could be used to demonstrate this interest, *Memoria de la Postguerra*, *Cabeza Abajo* or *El Peso de la Culpa* could be mentioned. A commitment that, even when not linked to her place of birth, could be considered a real stylistic trait. It is not by chance, therefore, that many of Tania’s researches are real investigations within society, starting from the recourse against the slogans and the simplification that involves a synthesized vision in a few key phrases. We can find more than an echo of this in *Arte o Muerte*.



El Peso de la Culpa, Havana version of the performance, 1997-1999



Cabeza Abajo, 1996

Sobreviviremos,⁵ or in the more recent sound work (realized in collaboration with the writer Achy Obejas) *Autobiografía Remix*, an unusual musical piece in which the slogans of the Cuban revolution are sampled to create a “politically committed” disco music, that also offers a reworking of Marx’s famous words that open *Il 18 Brumaio*:⁶ “La historia ocurre primero en forma de tragedia y después en forma de pachanga” (*pachanga* is a type of music that puts together a mix of rhythms. It is in fact a vernacular and *burlesque* way to say “party”).⁷

To balance the political aspects in Tania Bruguera’s work, a conceptual conscience, that is never secondary in her research, emerges, which also shows itself in the understanding of linguistic and historical significances, base elements in more than one work. It should also not be forgotten that her works present emotional and – wishing not to evoke the worst sense of the word – sentimental aspects that cannot be ignored, to not risk impoverishing the understanding of the complexities of her research. The visceral relationship established with the figure of Fidel Castro, in the penetrating installation/performance presented at the seventh edition of the Havana Biennial in 2000,⁸ is clear testimony to this.

The other aspect of the Cuban artist’s works, which is (almost) inseparable from politics, is history, maybe even the one with a capital H. It is not faced with a spirit of hopeful acceptance, but rather with the impossibility of escaping from an active confrontation with the events and circumstances – difficult to avoid in a situation like Cuba – that involve us, even when we do everything possible to ignore them. *Memoria de la Postguerra*,⁹ *El Peso de la Culpa*, *El Cuerpo del Silencio*, the two *Untitled* works – presented at the seventh edition of the Havana Biennial and at the eleventh edition of Documenta – are probably the most clear examples. These interests could almost make us think that there is a contradiction in the planning of her work: how can the attention of the spectator be subjected to the historical events or the unique political situation through such an ephemeral, and naturally unclassifiable, medium like performance and *Arte de Conducta* (to use the artists term)? It, obviously, doesn’t escape Tania Bruguera that history and stories are necessarily subject to interpretation. And that it is necessary to face them starting from the understanding of the fall of ideologies and the consequent impossibility of formulating static judgements, definitively expressed in a single image, in a single description. It is exactly from this comparison between the pretence of the stability of facts – in the world closed by the past – and the dynamicity of her works – the unexpected opening to the subjectivity with which each one of us lives these experiences – from which the depth of Bruguera’s work originates. In this way, the purposeful dialectic game is established between these circumstances, intertwined with the unique and personal history of the artist. It is Tania Bruguera who is the protagonist and the subject of most of her works, and, even when it seems that there is an apparent distance, on a closer look it is clear that the narratives are always coupled with personal stories. It is not by chance that next to the word *story*, that recurs periodically in Tania Bruguera’s works, there is also another term, *Autobiografía*, both as a title and, more commonly, as the semantic crux of her research.



Untitled (Kassel 2002)

1. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, Garzanti, Milan, 1957, p.72. "Ma come io possiedo la storia, essa mi possiede; ne sono illuminato: ma a che serve la luce?"

2. "Professional politicians damage politics. They convert what was an illusion (against the system) in a goal which will assure their own safety in power. Politics loses its bases when it becomes all about power." in Tania Bruguera, *About Politics. Conference series*, (the quote has been revised by the artist), Lowitz & Sons, inc., Chigaco 2005, p. 152, edited volume for the 51st Biennale di Venezia, Prince Claus Award.

3. *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta*, in fact, occupied Tania Bruguera from 1985 to 1996.

4. It is important to underline that the two most famous Cuban post-war artists, Ana Mednieta and Félix González-Torres, both died young, both lived exiled in the Unites Sates where they realized political and "antagonistic" work, and were both ignored by the Cuban regime (and therefore by the rest of the population).

5. In this regard, Edmundo Desnoes's intervention, *Patria o muerte. Venceremos*, should be remembered: Edmundo Desnoes, "Bruguera: Both Faces of the Moon", *Arte al día International*,

International Magazine of Contemporary Latin American Art, No.110, Buenos Aires, Argentina, September 2005. (illust.) pp. 26 – 31.

6. Cf. Karl Marx, *Il 18 Brumaio di Luigi Bonaparte*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 2006, which begins with these words: "Hegel nota in un passo delle sue opere che tutti i grandi fatti e i grandi personaggi della storia universale si presentano per, così dire, due volte. Ha dimenticato di aggiungere la prima volta come tragedia, la seconda volta come farsa". (Hegel remarks somewhere that all the important facts and personages of world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.)

7. Tania Bruguera, *Autobiografia-remix*, in Tania Bruguera (ed.), *Tania Bruguera*, cit. pp. 50-51.

8. For more on this work see: Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, in *Boundary 2* - Volume 29, Number 3, Fall 2002, Duke University Press; or Nico Israel, *VII Bienal de la Habana*, in *Artforum International*, February 2001, pp. 147-148.

9. Cfr. Luis Camnitzer, *Memoria de la Postguerra*, in *Art Nexus*, n.15, Jan-Mar 1995.