



Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Kassel)*, 2002





## Tania Bruguera *Untitled (Kassel) (2002)*

Tania Bruguera's early works, made while still in art school in Cuba, were directly in dialogue with the hybrid art of Ana Mendieta (1948–1985). Since then, she has been producing installations and performances where the politics of the body is her main aesthetic material. If Mendieta worked on hybrid forms between sculpture and performance, film and video remained the main media for her intimate art. Bruguera, on the other hand, has always insisted on exploring the tensions underlying a face-to-face relationship between viewers. It is in this realm that Bruguera has proposed her *arte de conducta* ('art of behaviour'), where above all she is concerned with the political. In her pieces, the systems of control that invisibly choreograph our lives are made visible, denounced and put into question. The result is not always the most comfortable experience for audiences.

The installation *Untitled (Kassel) (2002)* is a perfect example of Bruguera's artistic-political project. The work is predicated on a powerful paradox – the more the viewer is exposed to a field of light, the less he or she is able to see. This paradoxical construction at the level of perception has a counterpart at the level of sensation – after viewers have been subjected to a blinding light, the room is plunged into darkness, and the more they linger in this darkness, the more enlightened they become about the nature of absolute, insidious control. As Bruguera wrote about this piece: 'This is a moment of awareness. Awareness of power, of the significance and transcendence of action. It is politics as sensation.'<sup>1</sup>

This 'politics as sensation' is activated in *Untitled (Kassel)* by an uncanny apparatus – scaffolding, planks and 30,000 watts of power beamed directly in the viewer's sightline at regular intervals. In the dark, choreographed performers lock and load rifles in precise rhythms and march ominously around a periphery that functions less as a frame for an artwork than a prison wall or border. A barely visible video projection, appearing like a faint hallucination, lists in red letters sites of political terror, from 1945 (Cheju, South Korea) to the year of the installation's creation in 2002 (Netanya, Israel), interspersed with black and white footage of people running. Fusing the philosopher Gilles Deleuze's call for an aesthetics of sensation that 'is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system'<sup>2</sup> with Giorgio Agamben's insight that 'the [concentration] camp is the hidden matrix and the nomos of the political space in which we still live',<sup>3</sup> Bruguera's 'politics as sensation' refuses to remain purely descriptive of our current condition. It offers at least one line of flight: the possibility of historical and political awareness. This awareness occurs through the visceral and kinesthetic apprehension of the situation in which we find ourselves. Light and darkness, the stomping sounds on the scaffolding, the locking of the guns, operate in tandem to direct our movement: to freeze, to step hesitantly, haltingly, trying





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not to trip. We cannot help but assess the situation we are in and then carefully determine our next move. Assaulted by menacing sounds and a sense of dizziness and dissolution, moving blindly and slowly in the room, we experience a sensation of disorientation that pushes us into an awareness of our generalised state of emergency – and of our own actions in this condition.

*Untitled (Kassel)*, first presented at Documenta 11, was, as Bruguera wrote, 'a translation' of a previous work: *Untitled (Havana)* (2000). In this earlier installation, which took place in a pitch-black tunnel whose floor was covered with decomposing sugar-cane husks, sounds of skin rubbing against skin revealed otherwise undetectable bodies in the space (every few metres a naked man would be standing along the walls, making these sounds), interspersed with the faintest of lights coming from a TV monitor that hovered at the end of the tunnel showing slowed-down images of Fidel Castro. All this resulted in a visceral apprehension of Cuba's particular historical-political condition, where the nauseating sweetness of the rotting sugar cane was key. In Kassel, Bruguera also used local materials and historical information to link the militaristic connotations of the work to its site, referring to: 'the period when Kassel was a munitions manufacturing center, [the] Allied bombardment of the city [and how] Kassel bordered the socialist East'.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is through its displacement to other venues that *Untitled (Kassel)* (2002) reveals the full force of Bruguera's insight into how political violence rules our daily existence. Whether viewed in early 2010 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, New York, or during this exhibition in London, Munich and Düsseldorf, *Untitled (Kassel)* (2002) gains a universal dimension that grounds it even more firmly in our 'political imaginary'. In the dark, surrounded by a choreographed clockwork of terror, we suddenly sense, viscerally and politically, the truth behind Peter Sloterdijk's aphorism: 'If we ask a modern subject "where were you at the time of the crime?" the answer is: "I was where the crime took place."<sup>5</sup> Without an alibi, blinking between two kinds of blindness, we receive an illuminating insight: we understand that we can always redefine our choreographed selves and, in doing so, change the rhythms and powers that subjugate us. This is the active side of Bruguera's politics as sensation – an art of behaviour.

### André Lepecki

1 Documenta 11, Hatje-Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002, p. 555.

2 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 34.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 37.

4 Documenta 11, p. 556.

5 Peter Sloterdijk, *L'Heure du Crime et le Temps de l'Oeuvre d'Art*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 2000, p. 9 (author's translation).

Tania Bruguera was born in Havana, Cuba in 1968 and lives and works in Havana and Paris.

