

Tania Bruguera: Her Place and Her Moment

Yuneikys Villalonga

The here and the now are always difficult to «say» in art, because they determine the gaze of others; because they leave little margin for critical distance and run the risk of «aging» too quickly. Some artists, such as Tania Bruguera, take the risk. Her work has a symbolic quality, but also a utopian spirit and a commitment to being a «social mobilizer» in its context. Her way of working is due to the contingency of experience, and thus goes beyond it.

In January 2003 the artist founded the «Cátedra Arte de Conducta» [henceforth Behavior Art], the workshop she still runs in her house at Tejadillo 214 (T214), in Old Havana. This project, which synthesizes and takes to its ultimate consequences the concerns that Bruguera has addressed in her work of the last few years, is a space of dialogue and critique,¹ an experimental methodological approach to the teaching of art.²

Only nine or so students are enrolled each year. For two years they take part in one-week workshops run by curators, historians, psychologists, journalists and scientists, both Cuban and foreign. In addition to the quality of the proposals, priority is given by the admissions panel to the multidisciplinary dimension, thus also encouraging the participation of sociologists, architects, scenographers, writers, young autodidacts and so on. The collective presentation or exhibition held at the end of each semester is increasingly attracting the interest of local and foreign audiences.

Bruguera places the emphasis on the formative strategy in order to make an impact, from an alternative perspective, on the development of a new generation of young artists. The basis of this concept is the recognition of education's importance as an ideological weapon and instrument of power of political systems,³ and Bruguera uses the language of these systems themselves in order to topple their pillars, like a hacker who acts under the aegis of art, «infesting» the status quo of the artistic context and the society of Cuba today.

«The Department of Behavior Art also is a piece of public art, a long-term intervention not only in the participants but also in the Cuban art scene as a whole. It is an intervention in a city, in the ways of behaving in that place.»⁴

The concept of the Workshop stresses the questioning of and research into the practice of performance, as one of the key areas of interest

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Essay written in Metz, at Fcsc Lorraine, in September 2006,
during the residence period

in Bruguera's work. However, if we take a bird's-eye view of her work, we also can identify here other lines of engagement that bear witness to her constant questioning of the medium, of the role of art and of her own role as an artist from the very outset. These lines or avenues have to do with the idea of collective creation, with the dissolution of authorship and creativity and with the special role that she gives to the audience in her pieces.

Bruguera has sought to make a clear distinction between the performance and installation projects and the Behavior Art. This latter term (which she proposes) reflects her dissatisfaction with the use of the word «performance» for an action that artist and public have objectualized and aestheticized. It has to do with the experience of life and is applied to practices that expand and extend beyond the bounds of the artistic. Bruguera is concerned that art should be functional. Here, creation itself is seen as a concept.

«If behaviour is an element of knowledge that is converted into a normative institution, (...) [and] is classified at times as a knowing, then why not make it a methodological resource? Why not work it, why not turn it into a method for working knowledge? Why not be creators of alarms? Why not stop representing and start presenting; instead of putting other worlds into art, put art into the world, work with the civic body, the impact, the attention and society as living entities?»⁵

Recently, Bruguera (the person) has begun to break loose of the performative bonds in order to shift attention toward the performativity of the spectator in a given situation. The artist is careful not to inflict on the piece any autobiographical information (it may be that she has been liberating herself of all identity determinism)

that ultimately can only limit the reading to a reference that is specifically Cuban, political, gendered, social and contextual. It is very difficult to make a political work in a constant to and fro between Cuba and the United States, the atmosphere in these places being highly politicized and ideologized. It is tricky, too, to escape the determinisms to which an artist from Cuba is subject, given that the island is probably the world's principal destination for political tourism. Her Behavior Art manifests itself in pieces in which the audience passes through an experience that is «not clear», «confusing», that in many cases even raises doubts about the artistic nature of the work, at the same time as the pieces regulate the audience's behavior. This is true, for example, of *El Sueño de la Razón II* [The Sleep of Reason II], in which a security guard with a police dog observes, from one side of the main entrance to *Frac Lorraine*, the people queuing up to visit *Maintenant, ici, là-bas* [Now, Here, Over There].⁶ Meanwhile, as they come to the door, each person is subjected to a search of their clothing and bags. The situation creates a certain atmosphere of tension and confusion. The art spectators are stripped for a moment of their «critical distance» and converted into potential criminals. The artist flirts with the political stereotypes constructed by the media, by way of the very limited information about the action provided to the public and the guards (who were not told that they were taking part in an art event, but hired from a security firm to do their ordinary work). «We are seriously worried about a possible attack, because the exhibition is by an Afghan artist and a Cuban artist, whose work is political. Have you read the news today? Are you aware that the story on the front page of *Le Républicain Lorrain* is about the threat of an Al Qaeda attack in France? We have to protect ourselves, this is political art.»

Le Républicain Lorrain, Metz issue.
Frontpage, Friday the 15th of September 2006.
© Le Républicain Lorrain.



Tania Bruguera, *El Sueño de la Razón I*.
Exhibition *Sublime Embrace: Experiencing Consciousness in Contemporary Art*,
curator: Shirley Medill.
© Tania Bruguera, Hamilton Art Gallery,
Hamilton, Canada, 2006.



Bruguera created another piece in this series in Canada.⁷ On that occasion, the exhibition space itself (in which pieces by other artists were on show) intervened, with a large number of police officers and dogs, the dogs sniffing among the visitors, but the officers neither making eye contact nor speaking to the public. The piece «operates on the spectator» on different levels, ranging from a reduction of the gestuality usual in people speaking and projecting themselves to the amount of adrenaline secreted by their bodies.

The action of the performance and its transcendence occur, in these cases, both with and within the audience. Once the spectators are integrated into the «landscape» of the work, the piece also takes place inside their heads. The relation is not only intellectual but also physical-corporeal and sometimes even unconditioned. This art exists as a reflexive extension of the reality. Bruguera posits a new concept of autonomy that resides not in the exercise of reflection characteristic of the medium and its constituent elements but in the creation of different realities, parallel to that of the spectator. She invents little «*in vitro* worlds» that the public can penetrate inside (or not) according to their degree of awareness of their role as spectator, their willingness to participate and their commitment to what is being proposed. Shock and fear are resources that the artist uses in her performances and installations. These are also, as education is, ideological and political strategies of control and the exercise of power.

«I am interested in [...] fear because it's an element that politicians work with, but above all because it's a way of ensuring that the spectator does not indulgently pass by the piece but has to «stop and think»; they have to «stop» and begin to understand things from another perspective. When you're afraid you're more alert; you're not only more receptive but more analytical. It is a mechanism that the body has for analysing the situation through the survival instinct. [...] Not only do you receive in more detail, seeking more information, but the «datum» is analysed in greater depth. And not only by the knowledge that is stored in the brain, but also by the information stored all through the body, information that also is historical.»⁸

This is a moment in which «personal information» and «social information» are fused. Bruguera combines the performative and the installational in many of her pieces. Some of the performances are converted into site-specific art, not only because the artist takes into account information about the context in which they are presented, but because she has created a kind of «scene» for them to take place in. In the case of pieces such as *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, included in the present show in Metz, a relationship is established between the difficulty of the experience and the «will to knowledge». In the exhibition space, visitors travel along a linear route on which they pass, projected on the side wall, the names of 100 cities (one for each day that the piece was on show at Documenta XI) in which there have been massacres for political reasons since the end of World War II. The names of the cities are punctuated by images of a running figure silhouetted against the light. We see only this outline, as we see the outlines of the people walking in front of us in the piece, or as those who come behind us see us when, at a certain moment, searchlights are switched on, «blinding» the spectators. We then also hear the tramp of military boots over our heads. A pistol and a rifle are constantly cocked, but are never fired. Two local volunteers are employed as performers. They cannot be seen, but can be heard. The action remains implicit, taken no further than a threat. The visual experience is transferred to the other senses (the searchlights raise the temperature of the room considerably). For a few seconds the darkness and silence are restored. As Bruguera says, «Darkness is important for being alone, for thinking, for being placeless...»⁹

When Bruguera talks about her works, she stresses the description of the spectator's experience as something that she defines in advance and controls. In terms of experience, it cannot be said here that «there are as many works as there are spectators», and this is because the experience itself (over and above the formal, aesthetic or gestural treatment) is the work. When she describes the experience, she describes the work, because the work has no form. It can only be documented in the memory and in the verbal exchange of information (rumour, gossip, hearsay), not in a photograph or a video. It is thus doubly ephemeral and malleable, but without doubt far more effective in its discourse.

Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*.
Video, performance, installation. Collection
Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.
© Tania Bruguera, Frac Loirene, Metz, 2006.
Photo: Eric Didym.

→ Fig. 9



In *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, from the same series, the spectator, drawn toward a tiny line of light at the end of a tunnel (the only thing visible), walks in darkness, hampered by the difficulty of the uneven surface under foot (the floor is strewn with sugar cane) and smelling the fetid odour of its decomposition. The light turns out to be a small black and white television, suspended from the ceiling, showing a selection of video images from the media of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Once the eyes become accustomed to the light (or against the light), the tunnel is seen to be lined with naked men miming cleaning their bodies or bowing, between whom the spectator has passed, without seeing them, following the light.

Political power is also based on the power of representation. The media image seduces (and confuses) us; it blinds us like the lack of light and is at the same time a guide in the darkness. The language in these two last pieces is close to the popular image of the techniques of repression used in torture prisons, those «underground spaces of officialdom» that are so often talked about as myth but about which little is really known from outside: the blindness from an excess or an absence of light, the unevenness of the floor, the foul smells (assault on the senses), and also that moment just before the shot is fired (at once threat and ellipsis of the action itself). This is combined in Bruguera's work with a «political information» that can be hidden or shared; that can be known or not; that cannot be seen in its true magnitude. There is a play with the unwillingness or the impossibility of engaging with the events referred to. Not everybody has a full idea of what goes on there, because not all the information is easy to find or decode. Some people even choose not to be part of the experience—something that has also been considered as a possibility.

Bruguera is always careful—and this is a methodology of work—to «translate» the pieces into the language of the context in which she exhibits. She never repeats an idea exactly, but presents a new version every time. The final appearance is fixed only when a museum acquires the piece. If, as we have already said, they «were alive», they were organic, adaptable, they now «die». The artist puts a large proportion of her work in the hands of other people,¹⁰ leaving them to interpret and realize it. In this respect she relinquishes not just the authorship but also the creativity.

Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*.
Video, performance, installation.
Havana Biennale, VII.
© Tania Bruguera.
Photo: Casey Stoll.



Autobiography - remix (2004)¹⁴ is a sound piece to be listened to in discos and at parties, installed as background music at the opening of the exhibition in Frac Lorraine. The artist has put together a mix of patriotic slogans from the Cuban Revolution and fragments of historic speeches over a techno rhythm track. In the Cuban context—which is her primary context—the piece restores to the spectators the memory of the various political demonstrations in which they participate every year. What always remains of the speeches, the demonstrations and the ceremonies are the slogans. To paraphrase Edmundo Desnoes, these are the *vox populi* of political systems, the «popular ideology» that functions like the sound bites of advertising.¹⁵ The piece carries an implicit gesture: the contagion of a political discourse that has become lax. *Autobiography - remix* is a «distorted echo» with more or less significance according to how close the listener is to the phenomenon it refers to, but there is no doubt that everyone can «enjoy» it and dance to it. Its existence is propagated by the artist distributing it to her friends, putting it on the Internet, circulating it within the art world. She «exports» it as perhaps the perfect souvenir for that political tourism with its eye on Cuba.

Tania Bruguera, *Autobiografía - remix*, 2004.
Slogans from the Cuban Revolution over a
techno rhythm track. Project with Achy Obejas.
© Tania Bruguera. Opening party,
Frac Lorraine, Metz, 2006. Photo: Eric Didym.



Tania Bruguera has kept on working in a very solid and coherent manner, right from the start of her career, in relation to her preoccupations in art and the exercise of a performative practice. The catalyst for this, to a significant extent, may have been the relationship she established with the generation that preceded her own in Cuba (the so-called 80s generation), and also by the constant methodological exercise of reinterpreting the work of Ana Mendieta,¹⁶ which went from being a conjunctural response to a 10-year process of research and apprenticeship. The need to bring back «actions», «gestures» from the history of art, may have led her to reconsider the «experience» of producing and the «experience» of receiving the pieces as the distinctive element of this genre in relation to other art practices. In 1986 Bruguera started to remake many of Mendieta's performances and interventions, on the basis of the documentation found in catalogues and the information (rumours, comments, interpretations) that she gathered from that immediately previous generation of Cuban artists who had known Mendieta. Bruguera wanted to «bring her back» to the Cuban context, to make her known and «revive» her among the younger creative

talents. Above all, she wants to restore to her the dimension that is rightfully hers in the history of Cuban art, with all the utopian and political implications of that gesture.

The «return» in Mendieta's work has autobiographical connotations. However, in Bruguera's reinterpretation of her pieces, there is a consciousness of Bruguera's own role as artist-medium, artist-vehicle of communication: as a guide bringing people to an «awareness» of certain contextual urgencies.

With the increase in emigration, Cuban society and Cuban art are becoming conscious of a great generational split. People suffer for those who left, while at the same time they are beginning to think of the end of the contemporary art movement on the island. This is a moment in which emigrating has become a radical decision, and the act of «returning to Mendieta»—the inclusion and recognition of an emigrée artist—a political statement.

In the series of actions and performances by the Tania Bruguera of the early days, her body is still present.¹⁴ But this is a natural body, social, political, religious... That «being in transition» or «being in displacement» have an epochal responsibility, a social commitment that draws on a strong and problematizing humanistic background.

In the Cuba of the 1980s, the so-called «plastic actions», the street interventions and the collective murals of the generation immediately preceding hers, introduced Bruguera to the need to take art into the street (and into life); to seek non-conventional reactions and responses from the public. Different groups, more or less short-lived, carried out interventions in local communities, factories, parks, at meetings of critics and artist. For them it was very important to transcend the gallery space. More importance was attached to the gesture and to the contingency of materials and situations than to the «finish» of the pieces.¹⁵ Bruguera still retains something of that process of rectification of errors,¹⁶ in which art and society are combined collectively, both civically and politically. In 1993, the artist commenced *Memoria de la Postguerra* [Memory of the Postwar]. The series is one of the few documents that reflects the state of opinion within the art scene during the most critical years of the «Special Period»¹⁷ on the island. Aesthetically and in mood, Havana was then post-war apocalyptic, and Bruguera decided to launch an alternative newspaper, to which she invited many contemporary artists and critics living in Cuba and outside to contribute texts and illustrations. Its issues (with the visuality and quality of the official document/paper of the Cuban Communist Party, *Granma*) reflect the shift in perspective. A single generational consciousness comments «from inside» and «from outside».

With the transcendentalist accent of the editorial discourse of *Granma*, the artist comments: «Beyond the vast utopias, on the real plane of the

efficiency of art, only CULTURE exists, with the analytical consciousness painfully preoccupied with dialogue [...]; with the capacity to remember and to situate once more.»¹⁰

Then, for the 6th Havana Biennial (1997), Bruguera started another collective project, consisting in the definition of her house (T214) as a studio and gallery space. Since then she has welcomed numerous artists who come to live there and work in the Workshop or to exhibit pieces with her.¹⁹ In this way, Bruguera creates a bridge between her experience (living for most of the time in Chicago, travelling around the world and understanding the international contemporary art scene) and that other «*in vitro* world» that is Cuba, where people still learn art (classical, modern or contemporary) in the same way in which she got to know the work of Ana Mendieta.

- 1 This is a department under the umbrella of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), although it operates independently.
- 2 Bruguera has been closely involved with the methodology of teaching: initially because her teachers (very young back then, and among whom she singles out the Cuban artist Juan Francisco Elso) were engaged in a constant process of methodological experimentation in art, then during the first years after she graduated, when she taught at the ISA, and now, as a professor of Performance at the Art Institute of Chicago.
- 3 In the last analysis, art in Cuba already has been declared «a weapon of the Revolution».
- 4 Tania Bruguera, «Cuando la conducta se convierte en forma» [When the behavior turns into form] (unpublished text).
- 5 Tania Bruguera, «Arte de Conducta» [Behavior Art] (lecture transcribed in the digital magazine *Debates de Arte América*), Casa de las Américas, Havana, s/f. <http://www.artesamerica.cu/2/debates.htm>
- 6 *Maintenant, ici, là-bas* [Now, Here, Over There], Tania Bruguera/Lida Abdul (with pieces by Renaud Auguste-Dormeuil, Emily Jacir and Tania Moucaud). 16 September - 5 November 2006, Frac Lorraine, Metz.
- 7 *Sublime Embrace: Experiencing Consciousness in Contemporary Art*, curated by Shirley Madill. 27 May-4 September 2006, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Canada. Another version was performed for the exhibition *Tania Bruguera, Portraits*, curated by Silvia Höller, Gerald Mett, 5 April - 28 May 2006, Kunsthalles Wien, 2006.
- 8 From an email interview with Tania Bruguera by the author, 10 May 2006.
- 9 Tania Bruguera in conversation with the author, Frac Lorraine, 14 September 2006.
- 10 In *El sueño de la Razón II* the artist explains the idea to the guards, so that they can decide on their procedure in the action (frisking people, checking their belongings, their position in the space). They thus carry out these operations in their normal way, and not according to the aesthetic precepts of the artist. Similarly, the photographer documenting the action has to find a place, as each spectator does among all the other spectators, having no privileged space from which to shoot the event and thus being closer to the contingency of the snapshot. These images are subsequently used only in lectures or publications, and are not exhibited, replacing the work itself.
- 11 This piece was a collaboration with Achy Obeyes.
- 12 Desnoes, Edmundo, «Tania Bruguera: Las dos caras de la luna» [Tania Bruguera: The two faces of the moon], in *Arte al día Internacional* (<http://artealdia.com/content/view/full/45986>).
- 13 Ana Mendieta (Havana, 1948-New York, 1985) had to emigrate to the United States when she was still a young girl. She subsequently strove in all of her work to establish a connection (physical, mystical, religious) with her maternal context: the island of Cuba.
- 14 See: *El Cuerpo del Silencio* [The Body of Silence] (1997-1998), *Destierro* [Exile] (1998-1999), *El Peso de la Culpa* [The Weight of the Blame] (1997-1999), etc.
- 15 *La Joven Plástica se dedica al baseball* [Young Art devotes itself to baseball] (1989), for example, was a ball game in which the teams are made up of critics and artists (with Bruguera herself taking part). This symbolic gesture is an allusion to the increasing censorship to which the art scene is subjected. The choice of Cuba's national sport is a reflection of the widely held belief that baseball is the only social space in which any real critique is possible.
- 16 The regime put the «Process of Rectification of Errors and Negative Trends» into practice from 1986 on, with the aim of correcting at all levels the «errors» that the Revolution had committed up until then.
- 17 This is the euphemism used to designate the period of generalized crisis and large-scale emigration after the fall of the Socialist Bloc.
- 18 Bruguera, Tania, «Palabras Liminares» [Preliminary Words], *Memoria de la Postguerra*, Year I, No. 1, Havana, 1993, p. 1.
- 19 The first event of the project *ABECEDARIO* is due to take place in Havana next year. In this series of collaborative ventures, Bruguera will choose a series of different artists to work with, one for each of the letters of the alphabet (in this case Sislej Xhafa).

Tania Bruguera

→ Fig. 7

Tania Bruguera, *El Sueño de la Razón I.*

Exhibition *Tania Bruguera, Portraits*,
curators Silvia Höller, Gerald Matt.
© Tania Bruguera, Kunsthalle Wien, 2006.
Photo: Kunsthalle Wien.

→ Fig. 8

Tania Bruguera, *El Sueño de la Razón II.*

© Tania Bruguera, Frac Lorraine, Metz, 2006.
Photo: Eric Didym, 2006.

→ Fig. 9

Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Kessel, 2002).*

Vidéo, performance, installation. Collection
Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.
© Tania Bruguera, Frac Lorraine, Metz, 2006.
Photo: Yuneikys Villalonga (p. 89, 92¹, 93¹),
Eric Didym (p. 90, 92², 93², 95).



Tania Bruguera

Née à La Havane, Cuba (CU) en 1968,
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Born in Havana, Cuba (CU) in 1968,
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85 Fig. 7

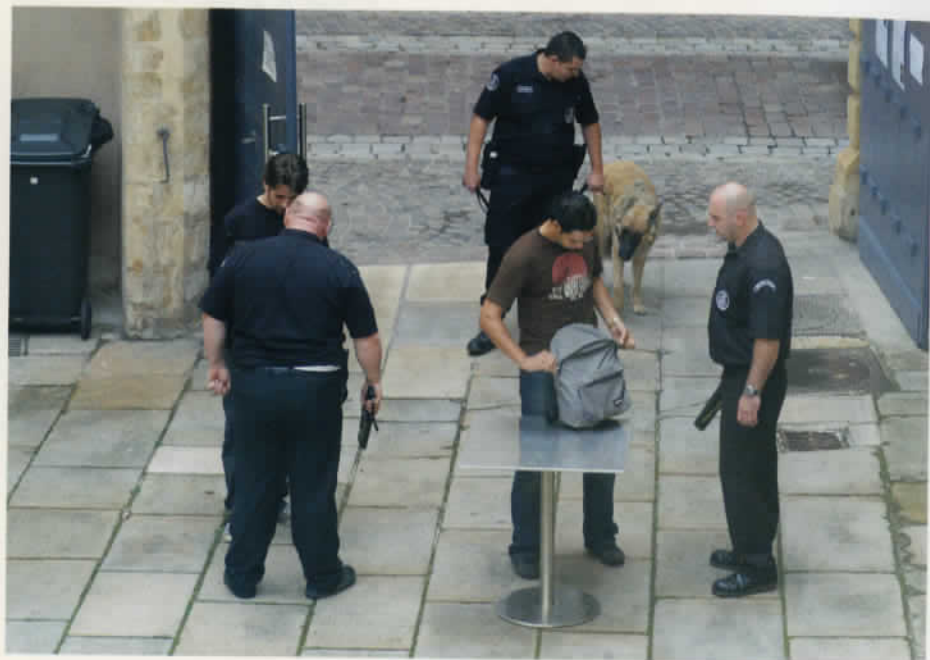
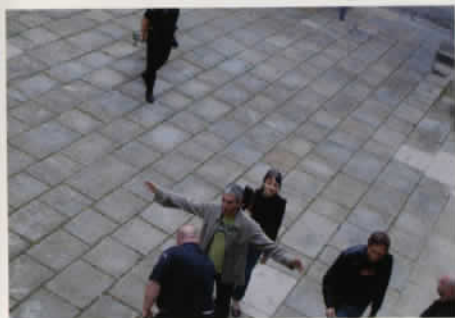
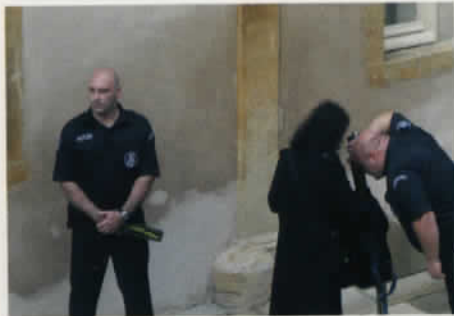
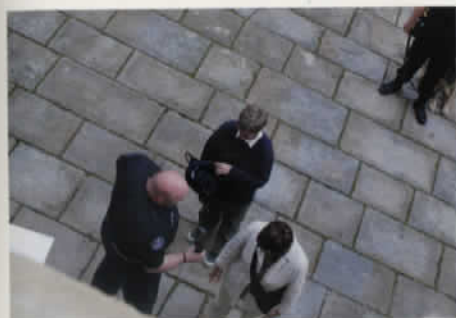


Fig. 8 86



87 fig. 8

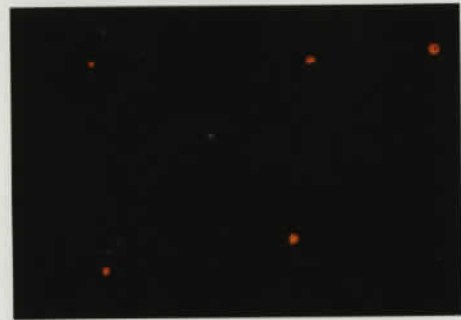








fig. 9 9A

