





# Tania Bruguera

Cuba, performance and society's relationship to its history

by Jonathan Griffin



**Opposite:**  
*Tatlin's Whisper #5*  
2008  
Performance  
documentation,  
Tate Modern, London

**Below left:**  
*Trust Workshop*  
2007  
Event documentation,  
2nd Moscow Biennale

**Below middle:**  
*Untitled (Havana)*  
2000  
DVD installation, sugarcane  
husks, performance  
Installation view at the  
7th Havana Biennial

**Below right:**  
*Responsible for the Fate*  
2004  
Mixed media  
Installation view at  
Bürgerhaus Gallus,  
Frankfurt

It is always easy to interpret an artist's work through the lens of their background. If that artist is from a country such as Cuba, as Tania Bruguera is, it is extremely difficult not to. The island remains an anomaly on the global stage: a survivor from an earlier era, a failed Utopia, a place romanticized and reviled in equal measure, from both without and within. When Bruguera writes of her intention to address 'the subtlety and seductiveness of power', one cannot help thinking of the Cuban people's persistent loyalty to their former president Fidel Castro, despite the crippling economic and human rights deprivations that the country had to endure under his rule. However, through her performances, events, installations and social interventions Bruguera has worked hard since the 1980s to create situations that reflect not just the dynamics of power within her country but also in a broader way on the nature of society's relationship to its own sense of history, to its hopes, desires and ethical conscience.

For a recent event at London's Tate Modern, *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), Bruguera enlisted the help of two uniformed policemen mounted on horseback. Using techniques developed to control rioting crowds, they marshalled the gathered audience around the gallery space with the quietly awesome authority with which the large animals endowed them. Bruguera was exposing behavioural responses in the obedient audience that are ingrained on many levels: respect for men in uniform, fear of animals and passive subjection before an art work and a performer. She tapped into a similar vein a year earlier with her project *Trust Workshop*, devised for the 2nd Moscow Biennale. Nervous but compliant visitors were asked to pose with semi-tame animals such as an eagle or a monkey for photographs taken by Moscow street photographers (who normally offer their services to tourists in Red Square) beneath a portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the feared Bolshevik secret police.

Bruguera spares her audience little. In an installation made for the Frankfurt Bürgerhaus

Gallus, in which the Auschwitz trials took place in 1963, she rigged a booth with a microphone into which visitors were asked to give their thoughts on responsibility and fate, but which actually broadcast the words of Nazi defendants into the room outside. The piece is titled *Responsible for the Fate* (2004). In performances from the late 1990s, such as *Body of Silence* (1997) or *Burden of Guilt* (1997-9), she appeared nude, imprisoned within a meat-lined box or swallowing balls of dirt, in durational feats of self-abasement that were as hard to watch as they were to perform. As Eleanor Heartney wrote in 2002, anticipating the significance of later works such as *Tatlin's Whisper #5*: 'In Bruguera's world, concepts like freedom, liberty and self-determination are not abstract ideals, but achievements that write their effects on our physical forms.'

Bruguera's early performances led to installations from which she absented herself physically but which forced the audience into no less demanding positions. In *Untitled (Havana)*, made for 2000's Havana Biennial, she filled a dark, tunnel-like space in a former military prison with a layer of rotting *bagazo*, or sugarcane husks. Visitors struggled over the pungent-smelling stalks, drawn towards a light at the end of the tunnel, which revealed itself to be a video playing footage of speeches by Castro. Only when turning back towards the entrance did they notice a number of naked male figures in the darkness, repeating gestures such as bowing, rubbing or slapping parts of their bodies. Reportedly because of the nudity, but more likely because the work potently described the abject and degrading relation between the subjects of power and its icons, the installation was shut down by the authorities after one day.

In *Untitled (Havana)* viewers were placed in an uneasy limbo between two grotesque extremes; in *Untitled (Kassel)*, an installation for documenta 11, it was the audience themselves who were under interrogation. A rack of powerful 750-watt lights blazed down on the entrance to the space, delaying the realization that a metallic clicking sound came from a man loading and reloading

a gun. When the massive lamps were turned off for a few seconds, a monitor could be seen showing the names of places in which political massacres have taken place since the end of World War II. As with her earlier piece in Havana, *Untitled (Kassel)* employs darkness and light as metaphors for past and future, for memory and forgetting.

If much of her work seems somewhat didactic, Bruguera makes no apology for that. She has stated: 'For me, making art is a way of acquiring and processing knowledge. Trying different points of view on a subject, whether artistic, social or political.' Her 'Translations' project (2002), in which she invited members of the public to re-enact her earlier performances instead of re-performing them herself, is an important example of the way in which she instrumentalizes her art to this end. She is committed to a battle against inflexibility of thought, dogmatism and bigotry. Since 2002 she has been running a study programme, *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (Studies in the Art of Behaviour), Cuba's only course for performance and time-based art. For this year's Gwangju Biennale she has set up an outpost of the school in South Korea. With contributions from mathematicians, lawyers, anthropologists, architects, journalists and sociologists, the programme's objective, says Bruguera, is to rethink ways in which art can make an active contribution to society. After all, in Cuba art has long been co-opted by the Communist government as a political tool; Bruguera simply intends, as *Rage Against the Machine* put it in 1992, to 'Take the Power Back', to free up some of art's influence and to make it useful again.

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