





Above: Tatlin's Whispers #5, 2008, performance view at UBS Openings: Live The Living Currency, Tate Modern. Photo: Sheila Burnett. Courtesy Tate / Previous pages: *Untitled* (Kassel, 2002). Courtesy of the artist and Museum fur Modern Kunst

**Francesco Stocchi: So, the reason you're in Rome is for this project you'll present at the Museo Laboratorio di Arte Contemporanea together with the Istituto Italo Latino Americano.**

**Tania Bruguera: Well first of all, the idea is to create a process of beatification first, and the sanctification of Giordano Bruno. And actually, today in the news, I heard that the Pope was in Brazil to do the beatification of one person, I'll have to find out. But of course, this is a proposal that is an absolute critique of the system – the corporate system of the church and the power structure that the church has had for many years.**

This is something that's linked to my previous work which has always been a critique, a criticism, or trying to find the moment in which the power system is weak, or is contradicting itself, to bring this into discussion. So in this case I'm in Rome. The first time I came here was in the autumn of last year, and I came for a very quick visit and I was shocked by the amount of priests I saw. I mean, I'm not used to this, because where I lived before, the United States or Cuba, you don't see this. But here, you go to the bars, and, it was too much. It was really a presence that could not be avoided, and for me it was like a bombardment in my eyes, you know? It was very painful and I had this reaction that is visceral and I wanted to go and kick them.

FS: I see.

TB: I had to control myself because I kind of became like a child, every time I saw one I wanted to kick them, like it was a game or something. And it was impressive, because they were, like, corporate. Like I had the same impression I had when I go to the United States, in Chicago, in the streets in the morning and you see these corporate people all dressed the same with the suit and the bag. But in this case, they were with the same bag. And I was thinking, oh, God, this of course is the only way the church has improved and modernized is by adapting the corporative, uh, you know? And I had many conflicts with it. And then, the next morning, I went to Cornelia Lauf's house, she prepared breakfast for me with some friends, and, uh –

FS: [ordering drinks]

TB: And then, the next day I go to brunch and I pass by Campo de' Fiori. And, I have to say, it's very ridiculous. I feel ashamed about this, – because I'm very conceptualized, and all my ideas usually are very structured, but of course, I do believe that politics are emotional. There is an emotional side of politics, and this is what I work with. I passed by this statue and I was struck by it, and I don't know, I could not explain but I was like, 'Wow.' And I said to Lucrezia who was with me, like, 'Wow, what is this? This is amazing, what is this?' – it had some force, you know? I could not explain it; it was very stupid and very irrational. And then she said, 'Oh, Giordano Bruno ...' and she starts talking about the anarchists, and I said, 'Perfect, this is what I want to do. I want to work about Giordano Bruno.' I didn't know yet what, of course. And then I went back to Venice and I find out that he was in the Inquisition in Venice, and it was perfect because of Venice-Rome. And I had two students who were very wonderful who helped me doing research about him, and we started finding a lot of things about Venice, Rome and Giordano Bruno. And then I decided. Maybe it is a very cynical and ironic thing to try to make him a saint, a political memory, you know? 'Cause I do think there is no political memory in contemporary politics. The people who are governing feel like they can keep telling the same lies and the same stupid things because we don't remember.



**FS:** Ok, but you are used to propose political works, but in this case, it will be also not only the political message, but also a political structure in the developing world.

**TB:** Absolutely.

**FS:** Which means that your piece is a long-term work and somehow it will live its own life for a while. So is it a change? And have you ever done any works like this? And how would it interest you somehow that this work has its own independent life and then can be followed by the artist?

**TB:** You are absolutely right. And I think in 2002 – I had, for a long time, a lot of discomfort with art and the way art is a structure and the way art is related to politics and the way art is being shown. I have a lot of problems with the display of art, and I'm trying to find – of course it's not a solution yet – but I'm trying to find a way I can display it differently. But you are absolutely right. I am working with the structure of power in the work. And what is happening now that is different from before. Before it was almost as if, in the art world, artwork was the end of the idea. You know, I had this idea, and I've thought about it, and then when I do the piece, it's done, finished, re-sold and shown and shared. Now, I'm doing the opposite situation. I'm doing the artwork to initiate the thinking and to initiate the process. And also using the art world not as an end depository of this but as if it was some kind of an advertisement site.



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FS: So, somehow changing the art from a goal to a means.

TB: Ok, yes. Absolutely. Explain more, but I think you are right.

FS: Somehow, how can I explain ... I would make a difference between the art as an autarkic expression, meant to present a goal, an achievement in itself, and the art as a means for something else, usually carrying a functional use. And I think there are some artists who might just think that art is a means.

TB: Exactly.

FS: So somehow this work might help to do something else.

TB: Absolutely. It is almost, as I say, I'm using the advertisement strategy. You know, when you do an advertisement in the street, this is not the product. This is just the notification in society, or in visual culture, or in emotional ... or in this case, commodity culture. It's a reminder that this exists and almost a codification of how you should envision this existence emotionally, you know? So I'm doing the same with the art now. I changed my strategy. So now, for me, art is advertisement. And the art world is my billboard, you know? This is something I realized recently. That I had all this trouble with art because I realized I'm not a visual artist. I am an experiential artist. You know, my work is about experience; it's not about looking at something. And of course if I'm trying to make things as an experience, and then the result is just a flat, visual –

FS: I see.

TB: – because it can be installation, sound, whatever, but for me, that is flat because it is the representation of an experience, not experience itself. So I felt a contradiction in it. And, to be honest, I have had a problem with art for a long time, because it is easy for me to do art. Which is – I'm not arrogant in this moment, I mean, I am being totally honest, you know? Like, for example, the piece I did in Venice came out, of course, of my experience in India, and of my residency there and so on. But, the form it took, in part, was a result of a discussion I had with one of my best friends because she told me that my work is always aggressive and ugly. And I told her, 'I promise you

I will do my next work – whatever the subject is, it doesn't matter – the most beautiful artwork and everybody's going to love it.' And I did it, and everybody loved that piece. I like that piece on some level, but that is not my favorite work. You know? So it is something almost like I understood already the system of producing visual experiences. And I am so interested in doing other processes. And I almost feel like, how can a teabag show the experience of the Indian people? Indian like in India, you know? So I'm looking more about how to share this moment with the audience. And of course, I have not solved it yet. Because what I'm doing now is I do this show, then I start the process of the work and so far, I mean it's – I have three other projects doing the same thing. I started this in 2002. And I have to say that it's creating problems for me with museums. Because, for example, I had a museum's curator who came to me and said, 'I want you to do something, blah, blah, blah.' And I said, 'Ok, but you know now I'm doing different work, no?' Of course, it always takes time for people to understand what you're doing and then they accept it, you know? But I say, 'Well, I'm doing this kind of work, it's a long project, it's a year-long project,' in part because it's a political work and I do not believe in doing political work that responds to the time of the art world. It should respond to the time of politics and society. And this is a big contradiction, because if you do an artwork about politics but you only spend thirty seconds in front of it – I mean, it can work as an advertisement, because it's something that enters and you think about it, but it's not changing society. And I've been trying to change society, because, of course, I'm from a country where you think art should change peoples' lives, but for really doing this it's a longer period, you know? And I had different – for example, this curator said, 'Ok, this is great. This is great, but can we do also a performance?' Like, a traditional performance. And I'm like, 'Listen to me – No, I'm not interested.' But I am doing this, for example the piece you saw in Moscow, it is still going on, we are still doing the searching for the KGB, etc. So it is more like, 'Ok, tell the art world I'm doing this'. This metaphor is happening, you know. This event that can be understood metaphorically and ideologically, and intellectually is happening. How you participate in it is something I have to negotiate differently in each piece. For example, I did I piece in – when I came back from Documenta – which is the art school. And the way you can participate –

FS: In Havana, right?

TB: Yes. The way you can participate is by being a guest.

FS: Alternative educational art ...

TB: Exactly. And it's very, very, socially oriented. And we all discuss politics and ideology and cultural identity, and the limits of art as a way to deal with society. But the only way people can know about this is either as an enunciation – I'm telling people how the work is working at a physical, formal level – or as an experience. And in this case as an experience I invite people to go there. Either the participant or the guest, you know. For example, the one in Moscow nobody will experience, only the Russian people. So these different levels of participation of the audience, is something that I've always been very interested in my previous work.

FS: So somehow now you're sticking to a different model.

TB: Absolutely. Finally. It took me a long time, because, it's true that you always need to have some sort of a structure that you're navigating. And I tried to do other things but I can't, so I stick with art. I think this model is working also because the result is not immediate. And this I like a lot, because the other thing is the expectation that visual art is an immediate satisfaction – an immediate result. And this result is the part of the art school, the visual part of the art school, is two years after the student graduates. When they start doing their own work. So it is a way of seeing art more spread out, you know, not only centralized. You know, the same with this, you know? When I was in Brussels, somebody asked me like, 'Oh, what happens if they do not canonize him?' I said, 'That's fine.' Because it's a proposal. I mean, the goal –

FS: That's not the point.

TB: The point is not to really to canonize him, but it's to create discussion about the role of the church, you know, and trying to put the church, hopefully, into a little crisis with itself. Which is not going to happen easily, because they are very arrogant, and they think, you know, it's not – but the other thing is that the new work I'm doing is dealing with a very different reality. Because my work has always dealt with reality; at the very beginning, it was more reality like the aspect I like to work with as a reference. Then it became more like me doing this kind of performance which was not realistic, but it was in the realm of real, because I was there, present. But now, I'm working with reality in a very different way, trying to create new reality. And in this sense, I think this model, as you call it, is trying to use art as – although this might sound very conventional since many people do this – as a model, a social model. Like, I am – as an artist, I position myself not as a creator of images, not as a creator of moments, like a performance, one moment, one event, a generator of social movement in a way.



FS: Somehow, it looks – comparing this structure to your previous work – that you quit the ephemeral aspect that characterized your previous works towards a work where the artistic practice is fused with the everyday and the everyday life practice.

TB: But this is still happening. This part is still happening. Okay.

FS: Yeah. You quit somehow the ephemeral aspect to a practice that fuses art life and everyday life. But also, I think this model leaves also a lot of space to parable. By which I mean somehow, the work ... you don't need the fetish anymore, whether ephemeral or not, it works with the mouth-by-mouth which also fits in the idea.

TB: Yeah, rumor, I use rumor a lot.

FS: Yes. So in this work, you don't even need to see, because obviously I think this work will be presented in time with the documentation and somehow all the progress that will happen.

TB: What was said yesterday at the opening is not important.

FS: Totally.

TB: I mean, people were like, 'Oh beautiful sculpture, beautiful collection.' I'm like, 'Thank you, but that is not important for me ...'

FS: And I think this piece will work a lot with myth, in explaining to other people what's happening, then between other people telling ... so it looks like the myth is getting a heavier importance.

TB: Mm-hm.

FS: But don't you think that fusing artistic practice and everyday life might create confusion in people who are not very much aware of the artistic language?

TB: I agree. I think you make a very good point. I want to go back a little bit with ephemeral.

FS: Please.

TB: I like very much what you said about ephemeral and so on ... I only have one thing. I believe politics are ephemeral. So in this sense, I like very much what you said, but we can put on top of this the fact that if I believe that politics is an ephemeral situation, then I'm still working with ephemeral. I'm in Rome and I go and see this world from five hundred years ago, and I'm in front of Caravaggio and I'm absolutely like a little kid, emotional. With the kind of work that I do, I do not believe that I will be remembered five hundred years from now. And I really don't want to be. I mean, I would love to be remembered by the people, but this is something I have to define. I do not want to do work for five hundred years because it would not mean anything for these people in five hundred years. I want to work for now, you know? So in this sense, politics is ephemeral because it changes all the time. So what is good now for politics tomorrow is the opposite. And if I work with political issues, what I say today about Giordano Bruno, maybe tomorrow the Pope says something different and it annihilates my project. So it is something that is not, uh, contained in itself but dependent on the surrounding world. I like also what you said, and I agree, and this is a challenge I have about life and art and what happens with these people that are not aware of artistic language. This is a very, very good question. And I am still fixing this myself. At the moment – maybe in two weeks I'll have a different answer, because I'm still processing how to do this – I had a very intense need to be in contact with the audience at the beginning of my work. This is one of the reasons – I mean, I did performance for many reasons, but one of the reasons is because I wanted to engage with the audience at different levels so that they could identify themselves with what happened since it was alive and so on. But also, I think, at this point, I have this problem I have to find out – but at the same time, I do not believe that art is something that disengages with everyday life. I think art is something that is just the same language of everyday life with a little bit of a stretch, of a distance with the subject. So, it is true that I have to find out that either: do I have to have an educational process with the audience so [that] they understand it's art? Or do I find myself satisfied with the fact that these people will just have a better life? It is important – I mean, I'm still thinking –

FS: That's a dilemma ...

TB: It's rhetorical question. Is it more important that they understand it's art? Or does it just give them a better life even if they are not so aware it is art?

FS: So you don't think for someone to get a full fruition, art has to go through consciousness of art itself?

TB: I think that art is something you can engage at many different levels, of course, and one is the full notion of what you are embarking in. But I do not believe, I mean, people in the ancient times went to the church and they were in front of figures that were paintings, but those figures did not mean just paintings. So I kind of like to engage with an art that goes back to those previous engagements with art. I mean, when you go to church and see a Caravaggio, you don't have to think as a pedestrian, you know, as a non-initiated person in art. You don't have to engage with this painting as the history of painting. You can engage with this painting just with its aura ... and subject matter, you know? And I don't think people go to church and say, 'Oh my god, this *red* of Caravaggio' – no, they just embark in this emotional engagement, and it's still art. So maybe we should do that again. I don't know, maybe it could be interesting to go back to that stage where you are engaging art without the absolute necessity of understanding the history of that art. I'm trying in this direction because art has become, going back to your question, too much specialized. In my point of view, and I think even a lot of political artists have embarked on this very specialized discourse of form instead of the discourse of a structure of politics. And I think this is a big contradiction – an essential contradiction in art, because if you are a political artist, why should you only – of course form is important, but why should you only engage in the research of the form, or the discourse of form of the subject, but not to change the structure of the subject?

FS: Talking about form, you have been interested somehow in the relation towards the fetish. So I think your practice was related against the fetishization of art that happened in the seventies. And it looks like you're adapting this model to your practice in a contemporary key, and that [is seen] also in your interest in the work of Ana Mendieta. So do you think that critiquing the formal aspects and also the fetish would help to achieve a more spread, a more universal message, or it's more about delineating more the core problem of art?

TB: Mm-hm, this is a good question. I have two answers. First of all, I think even contemporary art – western contemporary art – it is too much indebted [to] Catholic Christian traditions. Which is a physical representation of an idea that has to be fetishized, you know? And I think this, for me, is an ideological problem with contemporary art.





FS: Because it's in response to specific culture codes –

TB: Exactly.

FS: – and it's not global, while it's more – the concept and the thinking is more universal, maybe.

TB: No, and also because, 'Why should I follow the Catholic – the two-thousand-year-old tradition of Catholic representation of an idea?' Why can't I do something, I don't know, more linked with the Islamic way of representing an idea. Why cannot I engage with an art that is based ideologically – formal ideology, together – in, for example, Animism. My religion is Animism. I mean, I don't practice, but I believe in Animism. I believe in energy, I believe in all those things. I do not believe in representing something. I believe more in going to the church Rothko did which is absolutely empty but is a place with energy, than going to the Vatican, full of ...

FS: You mean the Rothko Chapel in Houston?

TB: Yes.

FS: Tell me about your experience.

TB: It was absolutely religious. It was great. I spent a long time there.

FS: It's, I think, the ultimate example of a union between religions.

TB: Exactly. And it's a religious experience, but it doesn't belong – in the way I saw it, of course, to ...

FS: To dogma.

TB: Yeah. To the absolute need of representing a fetishized something, you know? It's more like a stage. It's not an object, it's a stage. And this I am more interested in. So in one way, this is a problem that contemporary art does not acknowledge that it's coming from that tradition, but it is following this canon still. And the other side of this is that I had a lot of problems with – when I was doing performance – with fetishism. And, for example, I never sold the object coming from my work, from my performances. I never sold the photos; the only people who have photos from my performances is because I gave [them] as a gift. But I do not sell these – which makes my gallerist crazy. So I do not believe in the transmutation of experience into an object. So this is something that, of course, is going against fetishism.

FS: Totally.

TB: Because it's almost like fetishism is like, an object will embed the ideology. And I do not think – I think ideology is something that is happening. It's not something that is fixed. And, I don't know if that answers your question, but ...

FS: That's interesting. And, but I'd like you to develop more about what you were saying regarding this predominance of the Western Christian –

TB: Actually, can I say something – and also there is another thing: that also fetishism is not only objects. And you talked about myths before – the way I learned about art all my life is mythical. Because, until a very long time, I never saw an original work of anybody. You know, because it was only magazines, or rumor, or – all my life I learned about art through rumor. Oh yeah, because Picabia did this and that, and this is the way it looks ... I could never have the experience first hand. And I think that, at some level, has influenced my own production because I kind of, in a way I almost believe – and I am sure I'm wrong – because then I come to Rome and I find out I'm wrong, but I cannot disengage from my own education – that art will travel by history. And also, it's something coming from performance. You know, performance, at the very end, becomes historic. This person did this and that – there's a narrative form that is not visual. But, I'm sorry, you were saying ...

FS: No, no, but related to this – for example, Ana Mendieta celebrates through some of her pieces the earth mother Goddess.

TB: Yeah.

FS: So she made this relation not with her persona but her cultural, mythological aspect into the art system.

TB: Absolutely. This is the first thing is that my relationship with Ana Mendieta, the work I did for ten years, actually – this is the first time I did a long-term project, and I was very happy, because it was a ten-year project, it was very long. So the relationship I had with Ana Mendieta, the project I did, is the most important aspect is the discussion about authorship.

FS: Mm-hm, yes.

TB: That is something that I'm very interested in, the discussion of authorship in the sense that I always have this weird conflict – and maybe it's because of the socialist education, I don't know – where I had this big contradiction between my egotistic, artistic presence and my quote-unquote duty to work for the others. You know, it's a kind of, almost, uhm ... what's the name of this, psychologically it's almost like a schizophrenic. You know, at first you want to be an artist and be known, and be you-you-you, and at the same time you are educated in this place where they say, 'You are not for you, you are for the others.' So in this case, the project that I did was very important, this idea of decentralization of authorship and questioning who is the author. And it's something that has been along my whole project, my whole production in a way. So this is one aspect. The other thing is that it was very different because for her, the cultural engagement was through the religious, uh, encounter. You know, like going to the root of Cuban original people. But for me, my cultural engagement in Cuba, is very different because it's a political one. It's a very political engagement, so it's more – it's not cultural in that sense, it's more cultural in the political sense. Like how politics become a culture, instead of how your idiosyncratic original ideology or beliefs become cultural. In my case, it's more how politics become culture. And this is something I've been working on a lot on. Like, is it possible that politics become culture? You know, and actually the work I did with her started, like with Giordano Bruno – something very emotional I cannot explain. I was engaged with this, I was very traumatized that Mendieta died, because I was supposed to meet her. And then, of course, it became a political act when I started doing it. So it's almost inescapable for me, this political aspect.



FS: You said something interesting and sweet before that for a long time before you had the access to art history through representation, so magazines, etc. Do you recall, somehow, the first or the strong meeting you had with an original artwork? And ...

TB: That's very interesting, uh ...

FS: Was it by chance? Or was it maybe a piece you really wanted to see, and so you went to a sort of pilgrimage.

TB: It was by chance. I have never, until recently, only now, if I have the privilege to decide I want to do something. And, but usually, it was by chance. It was, 'Oh, I have a show here or there, so I have to go.'

FS: Yeah.

TB: But, actually, the first artwork I recall was in 1995 in Mexico and it was a mural painting on a building facade. So I am very happy that the first original work I see is not a painting. It is something that he painted on the whole interior of the building. And I loved it. I was absolutely – and I hated his work when I studied it, because it was so, like with a small projection of the slide, you know ... But when I saw the whole environment, I was so struck. I was very, very, very struck. I mean, I'm talking, of course, about older work because, of course, in Cuba I saw original work.

FS: Sure.

TB: Because the Biennale was very, very important, and it was the only moment where you'd have access to see original work, but it was contemporary work, which is a different discussion. You know, it's not mythified already, but it's something that you see, and then you have your own idea, you know?

FS: So did seeing this mural – and it was so much better, the feeling you got from the idea – help you in the strategy towards emotional and sensational art?

TB: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think –

FS: I won't say sensational, but experience –

TB: Yeah, like, sensorial.

FS: Sensorial is best.

TB: No, I agree, and I think it is very beautiful, because to see this before seeing the Picasso, or – I think it's better for my own work, because I do feel that – I mean, I know this, I don't know how to say this word in German, but it's Total Art? But this idea of Total Art I like a lot, and I always liked it without knowing the name. But I think this was this kind of Total Art, not because it involved, uh – but it was kind of embedding. You know, you enter there, you are part – and I liked it because it was part of life, connected to architecture, you know? But it was part of life, it's not – and then, I was very deceived, not very happy when I saw the museum. Because I saw something that I thought was really big and it was very small, or I saw painters – like I liked a lot, of course, Magritte. I come from a conceptual tradition. Because Cuban art school is very conceptual. Very, very conceptual, yes, absolutely, like Kosuth ... Oh, for example, talking about how to engage with art. I knew Kosuth's work *One and Three Chairs*. This was the only work I knew, and I never saw it. I heard from a professor about his artwork, and then my engagement with the work of Kosuth was because I was his translator for an art biennale in Havana. So, you know, so it's not the way that you go to a museum and see a work –

FS: Yes, an organic way.

TB: So it's a different way, and so this is the way I conceived – I thought art was conceived, you know? And it was weird, because he has very ... he was doing this, uhm – actually I have a copy at home – he was doing silkscreens, and they didn't know anybody who spoke English, and I was a student at the school at the time, and I really, really liked Conceptualism at the time; I was pure Conceptualist Artist – pure. Like I only used text, and I was using like super conceptual work, I was thinking about art in itself. And then he comes to Cuba, and I say, 'Hey, I speak' – I was in the place, because I was doing my own work, and I said to the school, of course, 'Hey I speak English a little bit' – very bad, of course. And then I was his translator for two or three days. You know, so it is not the normal engagement with art. It was more life, you know? Because I knew the guy before seeing the work for the first time, you know?

FS: You met first the artist, then the work.

TB: I heard about the work, I never saw it. I heard about the work like, 'Oh he did this' – and I think that influences a lot, because if you see something visually, you can be struck by how it looks. But if you hear something, it's more conceptual because you only go directly to the idea. You cannot engage in the beauty of the form.

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