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**Tania Bruguera*****The Burden of Guilt***

Performance with sheep carcass,  
earth, salt

● **Connie Butler**

Tania Bruguera's performances are inevitably recounted by those privileged enough to have experienced them as transformative experiences. Even as her work has moved away from more visceral, body-centric actions towards the disruption and sculpting of social and political dialogue, it continues to draw its audience in. Her performances are lived, endured rather than observed events.

Bruguera was born in Havana, and although she now lives in the United States and Europe for part of each year (she received an MFA from the University of Chicago in 2001), Cuba and its politics remain the main source and reference point for her work. One of her earliest yet still best-known series of performances, dating from 1995-96, involved recreating works by Ana Mendieta, the Cuban-born artist working in the United States in the 1970s, a generation earlier than Bruguera. By inserting her own petite silhouette into the landscape alongside fire, stone, earth and various other natural materials, Mendieta created a vehicle for linking herself with the earth, a metaphoric rejoining with the country she was forced to leave as a child in the early 1960s. As a Cuban artist then working in Cuba, Bruguera explored this exiled artist's practice in an attempt to reground Mendieta in their shared homeland: to make her accessible to a new generation of Cubans and honour her attempts to reconnect with their shared history.

Although not always interpreted as the homage it was intended to be, this work came to stand as much for a collective Cuban body consciousness as for Mendieta's personal story and struggles, and this link between the highly personal and the social is a constant for Bruguera, even as she has stopped using her own body in her more recent work. For *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, Bruguera's contribution to Documenta 11, a dark room was periodically illuminated by blinding 750-watt lights while a performer marched around the periphery, loudly loading and unloading a gun. The disorientation caused by the sudden change in lighting, coupled with sounds that threatened violence, exposed the vulnerability of the audience within the

space, while an accompanying video projection listing sites of post-World-War-II political massacres located their situation in a global context. In *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, performed in 2008 at Tate Modern, two policemen on horseback used crowd-control techniques to manoeuvre a willing audience around a major public art space. The complicity of the visitors – some undoubtedly unaware that they were participating in a performance – makes a disturbing statement about our own malleability when faced with displays of state power. Although neither of these works explicitly references Cuba, both are undoubtedly applicable to the political situation there, and also to global society as a whole.

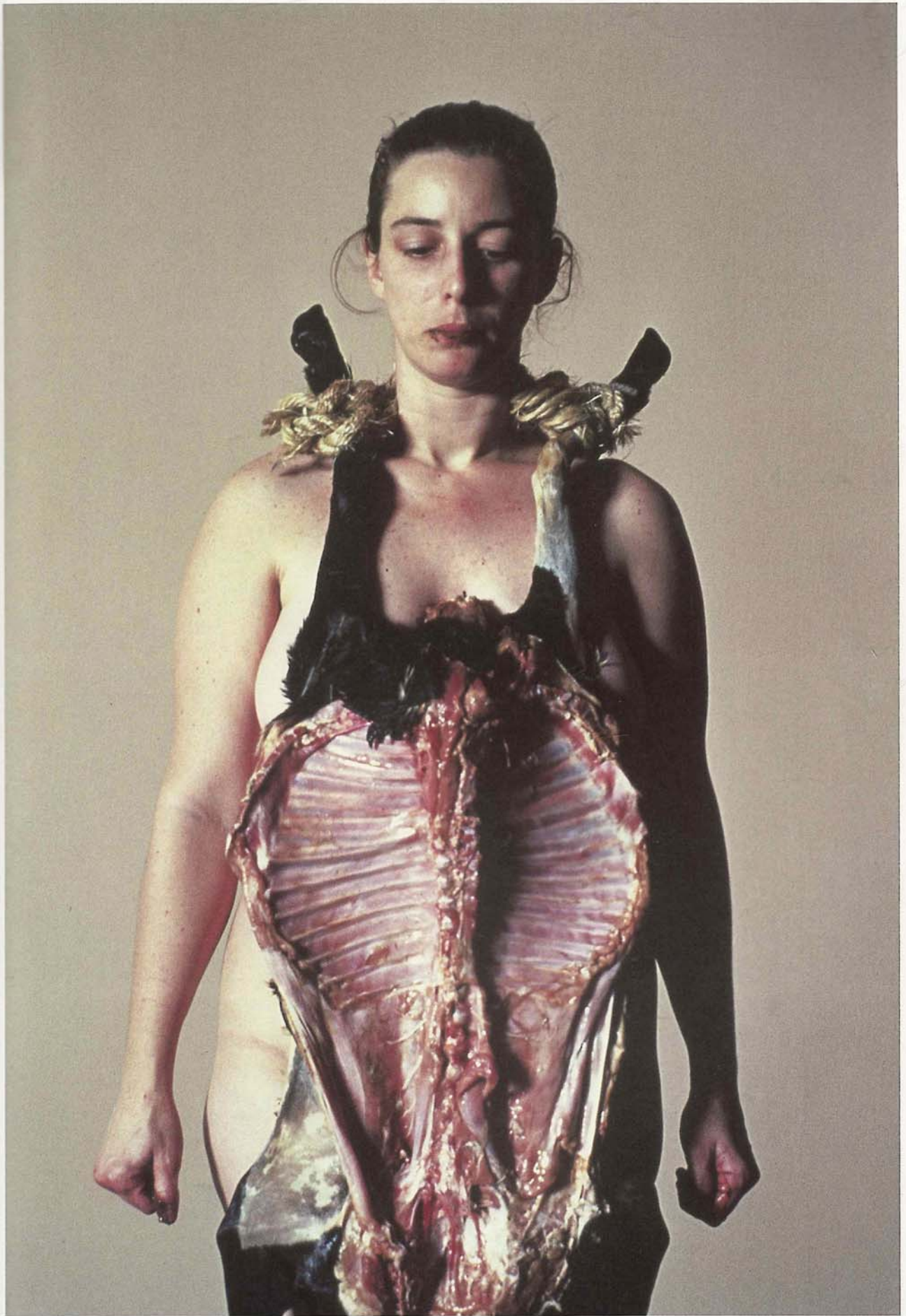
*The Burden of Guilt* was first performed in 1997 during the sixth Havana Biennial; as the artist was not invited to participate in the official exhibition, it was staged in her home. Wearing a butchered lamb carcass,



2008  
Tania Bruguera  
*Tatlin's Whisper #5*  
Performance  
Tate Modern, London

Bruguera slowly combined small amounts of Cuban earth and saltwater in her hands and consumed them over the course of several hours. Drawing on a legend that recounts mass suicide by the indigenous peoples of Cuba by eating copious amounts of earth as a final protest against Spanish conquerors, the artist symbolically embodied the history of Cuba. I will not soon forget the crude erotics of her homage, which I saw in Havana with other art viewers and passers-by on the street. Like many international viewers visiting the city for the first time, I attributed the rawness of Bruguera's vision to a youthful critique of the politics of living in a country whose longstanding perpetuation of a socialist regime was experienced in terms of deprivation of resources and censorship of artistic production. This literal embodiment of political resistance was to form the core of her most effective and moving works for years to come.







Rising from the ashes of modernism and encompassing a staggering diversity of new forms, the twenty-five-year period beginning in 1986 is one of the most vibrant episodes in the history of art. It is also one of the least understood. Interpreting recent events is seldom easy, but making sense of today's advanced art – decentred, complex and contrarian – requires innovative techniques and new approaches.

As the first comprehensive account of this period, *Defining Contemporary Art* is a groundbreaking study of the emergence of art as we now know it. The book's radical approach to art history starts with its structure. Assembled and written by eight of the most highly respected curators working today, each of whom has both witnessed and shaped the period in question, *Defining Contemporary Art* tells the story of two hundred pivotal artworks from the past quarter century. These works, from the well-known to the quietly influential, share one achievement: they have irrevocably changed the course of art. Collected here, they provide a chronological depiction of art in our era, a mosaic in which readers may find their own patterns.

Each author has also profiled a single year as a key point in the trajectory of this period, tracing the shifts in the creative climate and examining the artistic breakthroughs that serve as the seeds of more conventional histories. Completing the book is a round-table discussion in which the eight authors deliberate the historical conditions and principal themes of this period.

In an era when artistic developments no longer proceed via tidy movements, when narratives of progress no longer hold sway, when the art world has not one centre but many, *Defining Contemporary Art* provides the reader with the essential materials to compose a picture of the most vital period in art: our own.

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