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Art & Culture

# This Cuban Artist Was Jailed for Her Art—Now She Plans to Run for President



Carlos Chavarria

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## Tania Bruguera is nurturing fellow creative activists through art with a message.

By Christian Viveros-Fauné on September 14, 2017

The Cuban artist Tania Bruguera has no desire to create something that will go well with your divan. She's more interested in installations and performances that destabilize corrupt systems. "A well-made painting or sculpture doesn't do much to improve economic or political inequality," she says. "What I'm proposing is a model for activist art, an art that can see beyond what exists today in society and imagine possible futures."

This model, which she calls *arte útil*, or "useful art," is one she's been proselytizing for around the world for the past decade. For a project to officially be part of the movement, it must adhere to a set of strict parameters. Among other commandments, it has to "respond to current urgencies," "operate on a one-to-one scale," and "have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users."

Bruguera's privileged, peripatetic childhood doesn't sound like the backstory of a radical. Born in 1968 in Havana, she grew up learning French in Paris and Arabic in Beirut, accompanying her father, Miguel, a high-ranking diplomat and vice minister in Fidel Castro's government, before returning to Cuba in the 1990s to enroll in Havana's prestigious Instituto Superior de Arte. Later that decade, taking advantage of the relative freedom afforded to Cuban elites, she moved to the U.S. to earn an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Her cozy relationship with the Castro government soured soon after she began appearing in major international exhibitions. Her insistence on addressing Cuban politics both at home and abroad chafed against the country's onerous restrictions on free expression. On August 13, 1998, Castro's birthday, she took to the streets of Havana in a monstrous full-body suit studded with nails, each one representing a promise that may or may not be kept. In 2014, shortly after President Obama and Castro's brother and successor, Raúl, announced a relaxation of U.S.-Cuba relations, a more pointed provocation cost

Bruguera, 49, her freedom. She was arrested for planning a public performance that involved installing an open microphone in Havana's central square and encouraging Cubans to speak their minds for exactly one minute, a troublesome prospect for a repressive regime. After a deluge of global media coverage, the artist was freed. In the process, she became a cause célèbre, which helped inoculate her against further harassment.

Bruguera now splits her time between New York and Havana. She intends to parlay her growing celebrity into a bid for the Cuban presidency next year, when Raúl Castro has said he will step down. Her remarkable 32-year career is the subject of a retrospective at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, "Talking to Power/*Hablándole al Poder*" (through October 29). But for an artist so dedicated to effecting change, resting on laurels isn't especially comfortable. That might explain the show's companion project, the Escuela de Arte Útil (School of Useful Art).

Bruguera's school, which operated in San Francisco through the summer and may pop up elsewhere in the future, was a fully functioning, credit-granting institution that instructed artists, students, and activists on how to harness art as an instrument for social betterment. Lecture topics included "A-legality," "Reforming Capital," and "Sustainable Outcomes." Classes, in which progressive ideas flew like bird shot, were taught by art-world professionals and socially engaged artists like Rick Lowe.

Bruguera's pedagogy forgoes talk of the art market and museums for pressingly live topics like immigrants' rights and the global wealth gap. "Useful art is the art of the 21st century," says Bruguera, sounding quite presidential. "It's art made by citizens and for citizens. It's not art

that is interested in improving the system. It's art that wants to destabilize things in order to change the system." *arte-util.org* (<http://www.arte-util.org/>)

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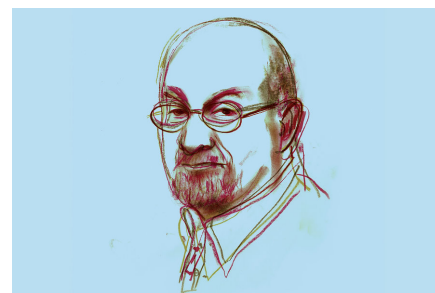
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