

# Tania Bruguera's formidable art overwhelmed at YBCA

Charles Desmarais | on July 14, 2017



Photo: Charlie Villyard, Yerba Buena Center For The Arts

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Texts and videos describe the artist's work at "Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder," an exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts through Oct. 29.

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Let us stipulate a distinction between the extraordinary influence Tania Bruguera has had on artists working today and the current presentation of her ideas and career at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

The Cuban-born Bruguera has developed an art that is tailor-made for our times: socially engaged, politically provocative, tinged with risk. Paradoxically, “Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder,” on view through Oct. 29, is a weak exhibition about a formidable artist. That is true despite — and to a large degree because of — what seems an enormous investment of gallery space and institutional resources.

Most of Bruguera’s work falls into the broad category of performance art, a display problem the show shares with others of the same genre. Performance generally must be experienced live; a description is merely that, and no text, photograph or video is a fully adequate substitute. But the first thing one sees in this exhibition — related to one of the artist’s earliest works, “Destierro / Displacement” (1998-99) — comes close.

It’s a horrid thing: a vaguely human-shaped shell that might be a discarded demon chrysalis, or a diving suit used to plumb the depths of hell. Cankers of black and burnt umber erupt from a body of earth (“Cuban earth,” according to a label) studded with nails.

It is to be read as an African (Kongo) “nkisi nkondi” power figure. A video background shows the figure come alive, stumbling through a crowd. The wall text describes the performance as an

entreaty to the masses to demand satisfaction of the “political promises of the Cuban Revolution” — nkisi nkondi is out to exact retribution.

The display is my favorite in the entire exhibition. I am sorry to say, it all goes downhill from there. Not that the later actions and projects, described in successive exhibition rooms, don’t become richer as social activism — they do — and were not more famously influential — they were. But the works referenced in this show — the actual art — can’t be experienced in this setting, and the surrogate experiences don’t do justice to the originals.

In 2009, for instance, Bruguera presented “Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version),” which encouraged ordinary Cubans at an art event to speak into an open microphone, before being walked off the podium by actors in military uniforms. She made news in 2014 when she was arrested for trying to restage the event, in defiance of the Cuban government, not in an art context but in the middle of the capital’s Plaza de la Revolución.

A full-scale stage, video cameras and standing room for audience impressively fill part of a large gallery, but it is all filler: The record of the original event, a video, runs on the tiny screens of video cameras. Elsewhere, texts and videos stand in for the authentic — all full of information, but not as helpful as the artist’s own exhaustively thorough website ([www.taniabruquera.com](http://www.taniabruquera.com)).

There are numerous events tied to the exhibition that are, of course, themselves works or components of works, as the artist defines them. Our inability (or failure) to attend them only adds to the sense that the exhibition itself is missing something.

Like a padded college essay typed in oversize font, “Talking to Power” relies on scale to fill the blank spaces where the visual content would otherwise be. A newspaper of which the artist published a total of three editions over three years (“Memory of the Postwar I, II, III” 1993/1994/2003) is spread page by page across walls and a long table; probably a third of the largest gallery is occupied by couches and chalkboards for use in classes conducted within the gallery.

Another seating area is set aside in a different gallery, this one reserved for “hosting conversations between and with immigrant rights organizations across the Bay Area.” The space is huge but nearly empty: There are some banners bearing heartfelt slogans (“Everyone is an immigrant at some point.” “The world’s knowledge lives in immigrants”). There’s a large podium where you can address a postcard to the pope requesting Vatican citizenship for all. Some dark wall projections of websites.

But the room is dominated by what must be 20-foot-high recitations, in English and Spanish, of the 10 principles of Immigrant Movement International, an effort founded by Bruguera. It’s an unsurprising end to an exhibition that started at the reception desk when the visitor was asked (though not required) to sign a document titled A Contract of Moral Commitment to Promote Immigrants’ Rights in the Public and Private Sphere on an Every Day Basis.

I have never been to an exhibition that felt so, well, authoritarian.