

# The Fallacy Of Utopia: the artworld and current dialectic in Havana, Cuba

by *Ellen Pearlman*

**T**ania Bruguera is eating dirt. Real dirt. The kind of dirt you find in your yard, or on the ground around the base of a tree. She's kneading it into small balls with the salt water of tears, lifting it to her lips, popping it in and chewing it and swallowing it with a big, forced throaty gulp. The mud drools around her lips like a clown's sad smile. She's eating mud just like Cuban Indians did centuries ago, as they resisted slavery under the invading Spanish Conquistadors. Having no warrior culture, not knowing what else to do, they ate dirt and died a prolonged, highly intentional suicide.

As Bruguera grinds the dirt between her teeth, tossed around her neck and hung by its hoofs is a freshly butchered, headless, eviscerated lamb, a shell and a burden to its host.

The performance, "El Peso de la Culpa" (The Burden of Guilt) took place on May 4th, 1997, enacted at Tania's home in Old Havana as part of the Havana Biennial. Tania stood in front of the flag of Cuba she made, woven from of the hair of real Cubans whom she feels the Government considers as nothing more than "statistics." Under Fidel the artist acts as Indian, refusing to obey. And Tania adds, "Soil is where you come from and where you go to"—the most elemental thing that there is. But Tania, unlike the Indians, doesn't die.

Instead, she gets photographed.

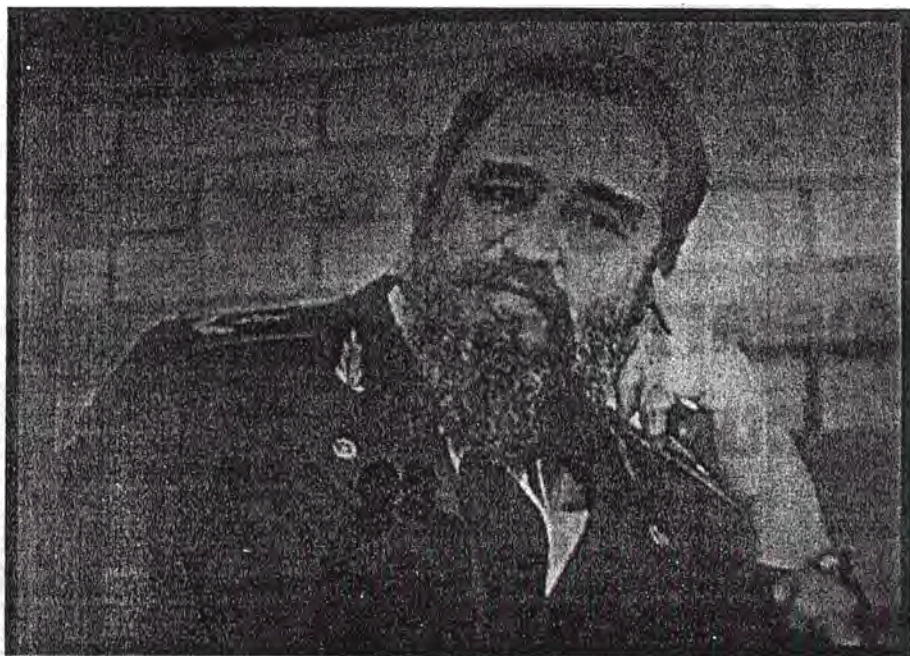
This comment is not meant to be glib, nor is it an endorsement of the current regime. Being an artist (or "cultural worker," as they are known), who continues to create inside Cuba, not in exile, is precarious. You are under constant surveillance.

When I stay in the Focsa, the largest building in Vedado, the center of Havana, the elevator operators, who are all Communist party members, note and report on my coming and goings as well as who I talk to in the lobby. I have had to register with immigration and pay a special \$45 "stay-with-your-friend" tax to the authorities. Gray uniformed police, boys from Oriente province with walkie-talkies, whisper

Tania Bruguera in "Borden of Guilt"



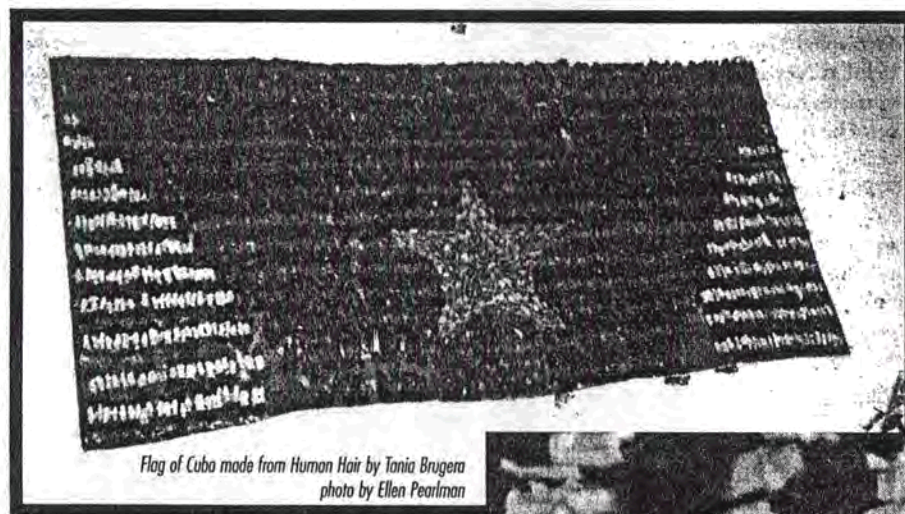




urgent messages to the receivers on their shoulders about people's comings and goings. The Palacio de Salsa, the heart of the salsa club scene, has been retrofitted with video surveillance cameras, ostensibly to track drug deals. It's not easy being a visitor.

I saw first Tania in 1996 when she performed at Espacio Aglutinador, the only alternative art space in Havana, which arose as an alternative to censorship in 1994. Inside a rectangular space on a tree-lined street Tania performed "Head Down." She was draped in a white sheet, and her face was painted pasty white. She resembled a statue in a toga, like the Statue of Liberty but without the crown. The gallery was crammed full of clothed, live bodies lying down, cheeks pressed to the floor. Tania entered from behind, climbing over people's backs as if they were mountain ridges, and in selected spots planted red flags, like those Samurais used when fighting for their lords. She wanted to immobilize people, conquer them as her territory, and she tried to do the same to the spectators, all to highlight the nature of the art scene in Cuba, where she felt people were climbing over each other's backs to get ahead

association of writers and artists, peeled straight off a model from the Soviet Union. I saw the model in action outside of St. Petersburg, when I stayed at Repino,



*Flag of Cuba made from Human Hair by Tania Bruguera  
photo by Ellen Pearlman*

the state-sponsored retreat for the cinematic arts, a summer camp for creators with an amphitheater, film projectors, hotel style rooms, and cafeterias, all tucked inside in a secluded piney forest. The ideal was supposed to embody the spirit of the collect-

artists, and allowed an art world to exist, albeit under covert supervision.

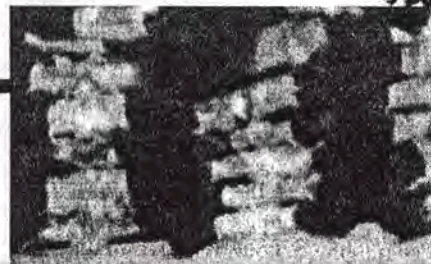
Tania admits the influence of her noted predecessor, the performance artist Ana Mendita, and re-edits Ana's gestures into her work. She believes art is inevitably a social gesture, and performance, by its very nature, should provoke and make people uncomfortable. Her work does precisely that.

Recently, at the opening of the Bronx Museum's "One Planet under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art" show, at a space off the main exhibit, the museum's recent acquisitions of Cuban art were on view. They included Tania's work, which consisted of some of the most odd objects I had ever seen made by Vilca crystal makers. They were instruments of torture and military apparel, created from beautiful, but weird shaped pieces of translucent veined alabaster, with a blown bubble glass helmet, placed carefully on a red cloth. They are modeled on the actual instruments from a medieval museum of torture in Italy and are beautiful to contemplate. Torture is

In September of 2001, Sandra and Rene performed "The Direction of the Gaze" at the 3rd International Performance Festival for Eyes and Ears, in Switzerland. For the performance, they simulated arriving home, switching on the TV, and watching a man with broad shoulders and a green shirt. This viewing went on for hours and hours, entering into their "veins and arteries, their muscular system and internal organs." The man's voice, both live and recorded, is transmitted over loudspeakers, through megaphones, and radio stations. They sit, watching, dominated, fearful, and curious, until they succumb to a mechanical and slow-witted state that does not pause and never ends.

The message of misery and manipulation is rampant in the work of both of these artists, and is in direct contrast to the island's new retro-touristic image as a kind of hip freewheeling holiday spot. Sex tourism is on the rise and even crime, once rare, is springing up again.

In the Havana Biennale of 2000, Tania presented a piece about media and communications set in the subtext of her community. She selected a site, the old Spanish fortress used for prisoners of conscience. People were ushered inside a dark tunnel and once there were surrounded by a strange, sickly sweet, but not lethal smell. All sense of direction was lost, sounds echoed, and the floor crackled and felt uncomfortable under people's feet because it was strewn with fermenting milled sugar cane stalks. A five-minute video of Fidel was projected, showing him unbuttoning his shirt to prove he is not wearing a bulletproof vest. The implication is that he too, is vulnerable, a fact which distorts the truth because nothing bad has ever really happened to him. At the same time, scattered around the Spanish fort, are nude Cubans—ordinary people without power, enacting ordinary gestures, brushing their teeth, combing their hair, slapping their thighs. The idea behind these pedestrian gestures is that when visitors go to Cuba, they don't see the ordinary Cubans who





The underlying issue was how much do you give up in the rise to power as an artist, and how much do you self-censor to get there? And then what happens when you first get on, and are then thrown off the pedestal? Actually, I thought, the issues weren't so different in New York City.

But then I remembered back to the art world in the former Soviet Union where the underground (samizdat) was the only way ideas traveled and anything but strict party orthodoxy resulted in exile to the gulag. I remembered the artists squats I had visited off Nevsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg, and realized Tania was harkening back to an ideal, one that had been nurtured briefly by UNEAC, the Cuban

else. The disappointment was palatable, tucked in between the relentless bouts of downing vodka throughout the night.

There is inevitably a split between the artist and the institution. "Every country has certain censorship and self-censorship," Tania says. "In capitalist places, it has to do with the economy. As an artist, if you don't do something that is liked, the corporations won't buy the work or the collector won't collect it. In Cuba, it is strictly political, in the sense that there is a responsibility for the artist, who has been raised and educated for free, to not touch some subjects."

In 1989 the island was hemorrhaging artists, certainly not the first wave of exile from Cuba, but an important one. Art is made by these emigrés in New York, Madrid, Mexico and Miami. Some are revered masters and the rest are what is referred to as the "Mariel" generation, named after the Mariel boat escapes. Becoming an exile, one's history is kaput, it is erased, a haunting and relentless theme in this community's output. Few American artists, no matter how loudly they might complain, face the same stark risks—expulsion and jail sentences, that face artists like Tania and Sandra Ceballos and Rene Esteban Quintana, the founders of Espacio Aglutinador. But it was precisely because of the consistent, and massive nature of these self-imposed artists exiles that the government changed their attitude towards the

used to change people's mind or extract confessions under duress, but there is really nothing beautiful about it. Tania says, "It is so seductive and attractive you not only self-censor, but you like it." The helmet references the blinders that horses wear, but ultimately alludes to thoughts being blinded. These pieces are about the use and abuse of power in Cuba, but also address the universality of submission, and the marks, both physical and mental, that submission leaves behind.

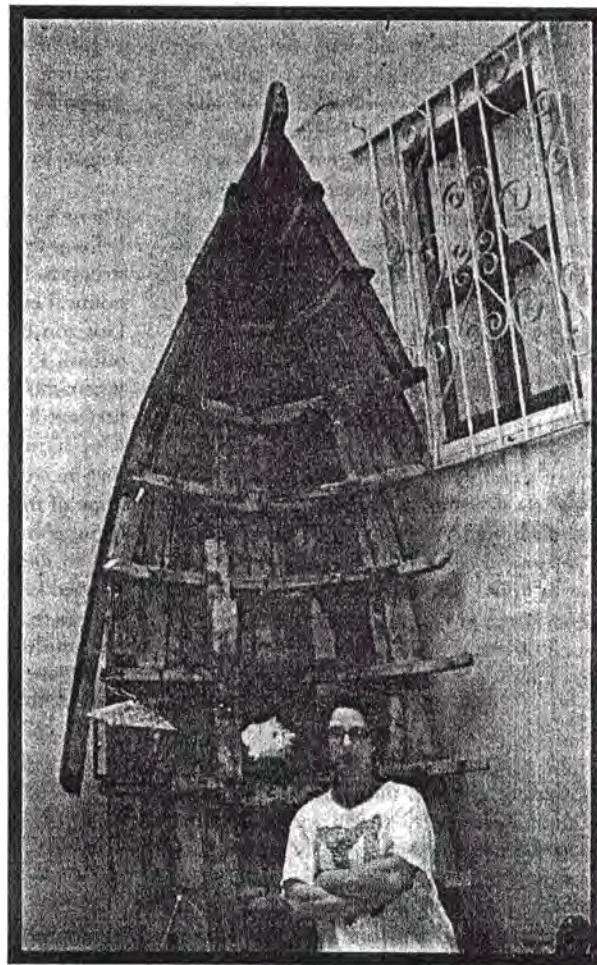
Tania is not the only artist grappling with remaining in Cuba. Espacio Aglutinador is run by Sandra Ceballos and her husband Rene Esteban Quintana, and it features paintings, installations, drawings, solo and group exhibitions, as well as artbooks. So far Ceballos and Quintana have not been shut down by the government, but the situation is always tense and the threat constantly there. Like most alternative spaces, there are financial problems. Occasionally they manage to sell a work, but the real issue, as Sandra, a sprightly woman in her 30s, explained to me, is how to maintain sanity with all the confusion and paranoia around them. There has, however, been help and even contact with the world off the island. Sandra exhibited at Longwood Arts, in the Bronx, and was an artist-in-residence in Switzerland. In 1997 she even had a one-woman show at Art In General in downtown New York.

shadows and live their ordinary and controlled lives.

Tania, who won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1998, is allowed to travel outside of Cuba, but always returns to her studio in old Havana (boat picture). Sandra and Rene go abroad less often, and constantly face the threat of censorship and surveillance of their activities. **BR**



Sandra Ceballos sitting down at Espacio Aglutinador, Havana by Ellen Peckman



Tania Bugera at home in Old Havana in front of a Boat of Exile photo by Ellen Peckman