



# The woman trying to change Cuba's cultural landscape – and stay out of jail

Tania Bruguera raised more than \$100,000 to open the Institute of Art Activism in Havana, where Pussy Riot are the first artists-in-residence

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**I**n the past decade, few have been more of a thorn in the side of the Cuban government than Tania Bruguera. The Havana-born artist's staging of provocative works condemning repression and championing freedom of expression in her troubled home country has repeatedly landed her in jail – including as recently as last year; in custody she has been the subject of both physical and psychological interrogation at the hands of the Cuban authorities.

But nothing, it seems, can keep Bruguera down. She is about to embark on her most politically agitative project yet – one which she hopes will change the cultural landscape of Cuba for ever.

Following an online fundraising campaign that raised more than \$100,000 (£70,000), the artist is to open the Institute of Art Activism in Havana, the first “safe haven for freedom of expression” in

Cuba. From September, the first artists-in-residence will be the Russian feminist punk collective Pussy Riot, who are no strangers to using art as a way to challenge government censorship.

With Cuba opening up to the world through restored diplomatic relations with the US and welcoming foreign corporations into the country, Bruguera said it was essential that Cubans had a place they could freely deliberate over the direction their country was heading.

“This is the moment of change in Cuba, when we have a moment as activists and artists in to challenge what is being proposed for our country,” she told the Guardian. “I do believe in the power of art to change society but I know this cannot be done alone, and it takes a long time. It is now or never, and that goes beyond my personal safety, my personal quality of life.”



Pussy Riot's video for the song Chaika. The Russian collective will be the first artists-in-residence at the institute. Photograph: Denis Sinyakov/AP

For security reasons Bruguera would not confirm any of the programme, but she said the projects would bring together art and politics to engage and provoke a Cuban audience who had become conditioned into political apathy - and self censorship - by 57 years of cultural and political repression. In practical terms, she also wants the institute to generate jobs and help eliminate systemic political violence.

Pussy Riot said they were not going to the institute to have their own voices heard, but “to see if we can assist others in making theirs heard”.

“Artists around the world are increasingly waking up to their potentialities in terms influencing social change, and power centres can often be intimidated by that - both Tania and we have experienced what that looks like,” the group said.

The idea to open a permanent art institute in Cuba's capital first came to Bruguera as she was staging a political artwork in her home in Havana in 2015, where she encouraged people from her neighbourhood to read pages from Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* - a book that spoke directly to Cuba's own repressive regime.

“My neighbours were calling me crazy because the book was so clearly so critical of the Cuban government, but that moment I saw that they understood. I knew then that this was exactly what I should be doing in a sustainable and long term way. A one day performance doesn't change anything - I want to do it all the time,” said Bruguera.



Bruguera's staging of a collective reading of Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Photograph: Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt

Yet Bruguera acknowledges it will not be an easy opening an institute in direct opposition to the government's own agenda. The Cuban authorities retain strict control over the cultural landscape, banning all art and film that is "detrimental" to the image of Cuba. In the case of Bruguera, and Cuban graffiti artist El Sexto, breaking these cultural laws leads directly to prison. Obama's first visit to the country in March prompted the arrest of about 60 pro-democracy protesters, many of whom were artists and musicians.

Bruguera said a smear campaign against her had already begun: days after she launched the online fundraiser an anonymous letter was sent to Havana's artistic community that cast doubt on her motivations for the project.

The artist says she expects such intimidation tactics are "just the beginning."

However, Bruguera believes the biggest challenge is to convince Cubans from all walks of life - not just artists and intellectuals - to come through the doors of the institute without fear of retribution from government or police.

She hopes she will be able to convince one person in particular: "I would like my interrogator to come to the institute, she will be welcome," said Bruguera. "But as soon as she steps inside the institute, she is not entering as a repressor or an agent of the government or as an interrogator - she enters as a Cuban, and, just like us all, will have to respect the institute's rules of respect, transparency and equality."

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