# Cuba, Flying Machines and Trojan Horses

"The idea is to insert a dialogue with you in the middle of an introductory text and to somewhat distort the expectations involved by this format. I believe this would reproduce, in its own way, the logic of your performance that took place in a different platform and that, in turn, gave rise to other voices."

I wrote this is a message to Tania Bruguera, inviting her to talk about *Tatlin's Whisper # 6*, shown at the 10th Havana Biennial. It was not Tania, but Guillermo Gomez-Pena, the artist the Biennial had invited and who then offered her to share his space at the Wifredo Lam Center. According to her strict description, the Cuban artist was provided with: a platform, a podium, mikes, a baffle inside the building, a baffle outside the building, two persons in military uniform, a white dove, a minute without censorship for each person at the podium, 200 disposable cameras with flash.
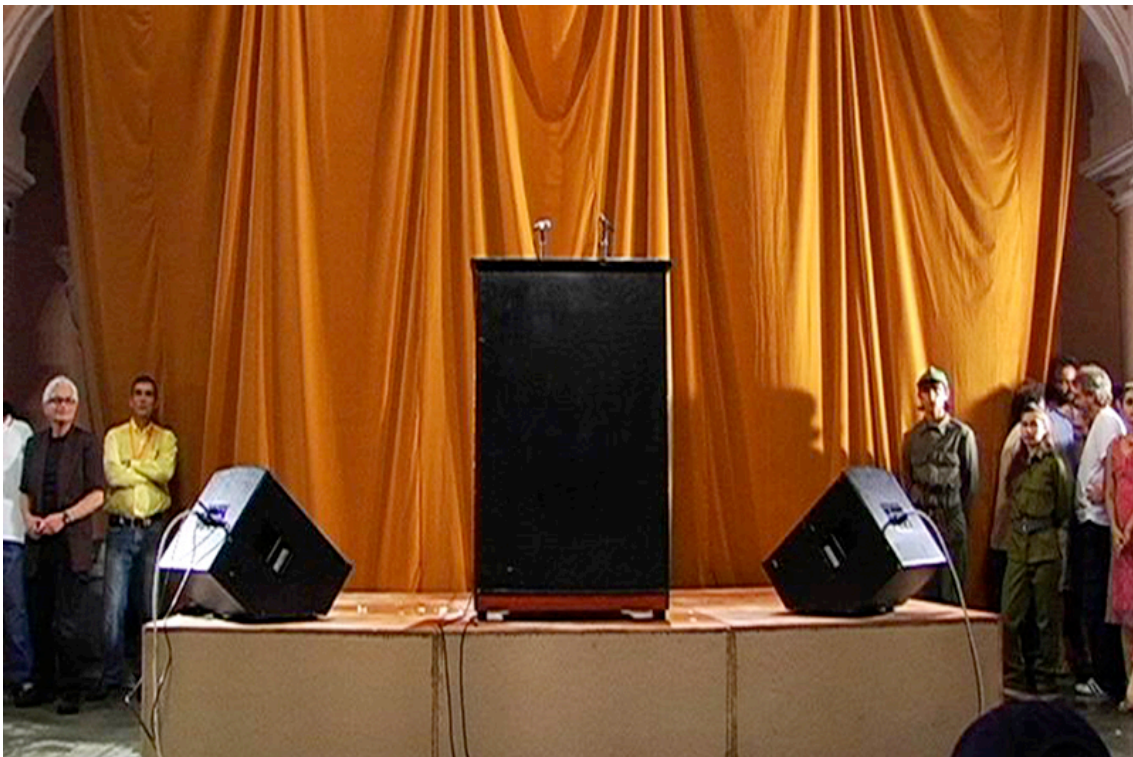
When the editors of *Tercer Texto* suggested me to make an "updated introduction" to *Third Text* No. 20, whose bilingual edition was devoted to Cuba, Tania Brugera's performance came to my mind as that updating possibility. After all, that 1992 number had emerged from the 4th Havana Biennial that was held a year before and that the editors of the British magazine perhaps had considered an important forum for culture and art. This is what the editorial reads: "Cuba continues to provide a forum for those who are involved in the development of modern culture in the Third World", while Guy Brett's text states: "the Bienal de La Habana represents a new kind of forum in the art world."

Up to what point can Cuba and the Havana Biennial be today this platform is one of the issues that perhaps may be reviewed by going back to those texts. But it would also be advisable to question the limits of this "forum" in the local context, a context that the Biennial, in keeping with the official policies in the island, usually displaces because of other urgencies: postcolonial criticism, anti-imperialism, anti-globalization, among others. The impact of these questions on the possibility of a forum not only *from* Cuba, but also *in* and *for* Cuba, brought to my mind Tania Bruguera's performance in the past Biennial.

Then I made up my mind to make the exercise, perhaps as banal as it was fun, of reading the texts from the early '90s through *Tatlin's Whisper* (and vice versa). From this point of view, "El arte, la política y el mal de ojo" (Art, Politics and the Evil Eye) seemed to me an almost programmatic text. Luis Camnitzer invites us to consider artistic values in their historicity and political nature, as well as to take into account the relationships of power on which hegemony is built. And also invites us to pay attention to the contextual, specific, contingent value of artistic praxis. Perhaps that is why the following passage may be read together with the topic of the 2009 Havana Biennial, *Integration and Resistance in the Global Era*: "Since hegemony is primarily about streamlining and unifying contexts, any resistance to a hegemonic power is based on the appropriation of the context we operate in, of the context to which the work is originally destined. An art of resistance is no more than a text placed in that context to help its seizure."

On the other hand, it was in Gerardo Mosquera's text on Wifredo Lam included in the magazine that I read a reference I believe is also relevant for Tania Bruguera's performance: the Trojan horse. For Mosquera, the fight was to see Lam's work as a fruit of Cuban and Caribbean culture rather than with the usual emphasis on his participation in the western vanguard: "The displacement of perspective to which I am referring would, for instance, place less emphasis on their contribution to Surrealism, so that we may understand this movement as a space in which these sources manifested themselves triggers of the avant-garde. Lam himself must have been referring to this when he said that avantgarde was a 'Trojan horse.'"

In any case, I believe that this "Trojan horse" image may be useful to consider many of the political practices in art today and their relationship with art as an institution. Some of the questions suggested by the essays that now come back in *Tercer Texto*, however, perhaps found their way in the conversation with Tania Brugera held in a Chat last October 27, some fragments of which we enclose here.

Tamara Diaz. Let us talk about *Tatlin's Whisper* in its Havana version. To start with, I would like to repeat two questions made to the author of *Letatlin* in 1932 (interviewed by K. Zelinsky, 06-04-32): How did you arrive at that idea? What was the practical purpose of your device?

Tania Bruguera: I arrived at the idea following two paths. The first one, which has been going around in my head for a long time, has to do with the usefulness of art, usefulness not only in human understanding, but in the practical implementation of the Utopian possibilities of art. Among the most interesting examples are those carried out within socialist systems, as is the case with Tatlin's work. I am interested in favoring a dialogue on this topic and exemplify it through my own work. I have also been always interested in Tatlin's idea of making a monument that is at the same time a structure with functions that are not only strictly aesthetic and belonging to the historical memory. But the title "Tatlin's Whisper" contains criticism to the state of the left in these times. The discourse is now in a more precarious state: it is no longer an urgent

cry or a cry of pain: it is a mere whisper. This is the way those in power have used art as a tool for propaganda. At the beginning of the October Revolution, art had to be propaganda, it was the product of a state of enthusiasm in which there still was some naiveté, where there was space for doubt and experimentation, where people were involved in the euphoria of believing their own propaganda and in the benefits they considered it had (and which have been replaced by advertising).

On the other hand, I arrived at the idea taking into consideration the indifference of news, the anesthetized way in which they may make us feel, how we can cut ourselves off from a terrible situation taking place somewhere else because it does not directly affect us and how this feeling is entirely ethic and emotions move through intellectual reasonings. I am very interested in the idea of citizen responsibility. Not responsibility with past history, but daily responsibility, a responsibility that is not clearly seen because it demands constant attention from us and taking an ethical or political position on things that perhaps are not entirely defined, that are in the making. *Tatlin's Whisper* integrates images we see in the newscasts. With this series I try to transform some of these images in actual experiences of the spectators, with the hope that those participating, when seeing a similar image again, may have a way to relate with it not only incorporating political knowledge, but also the effects of the experience they underwent and, therefore, would have a more direct dimension of political emotional knowledge.

TD: One of the things I wanted to ask you was the place of affections and emotions in your work. In the Havana performance, there were some who cried, but also more than one spoke about fear and I imagine many more for which fear perhaps functioned.

TB: Yes, I believe it very important that what is political is also emotional. True and good politicians are those who work in the field of emotions and use the public space to reach the private one. In the case of this piece, I found very impressive the way people began to lose their fright even if it only was to say they were afraid. There were many statements and very strong ones, but what I

felt was more important and moving was the feeling of honesty that emerged at that moment, in a place where the confusion reigning in the citizen's heads creates a double morality. You have to be very courageous to be honest and my responsibility in this work, as an artist, was to create a space where people felt protected to reach places in their thinking that either are not made public or have been repressed for a long time. I believe that, after the podium was empty for a while, the first image of an eloquent theoretician crying, unable to bring about an argument, was very important. But what others did, from rushed speeches because of the emotion of having this platform and not knowing how to use it to those who wanted to understand, on the basis of their individual experiences, what was happening in our society and made questions that could not be answered, was also important. For me, the work functions in two levels: as a monument to a past moment and in the dimension of a future. What is emotional in this piece is located in Utopia, a new one, not emerging from power but from its citizens.

TD: Back to Tatlin, who thought about the usefulness of art, which he then formulated as "the art in technology," where do you place that idea of usefulness in your praxis?

TB: I place usefulness in art in the center of what social art should be. Usefulness is the responsibility of social art; it is its form of communication and its contents. Usefulness is what makes art social.

TD: When questioned about the idea in *Letatlin*, the Russian artist mentioned Icarus myth. But in your work you preferred to summon Daedalus, the craftsman who designed the wings that would allow him to escape. Your series *Dedalo o el imperio de la salvación* (Deadalus or the Empire of Salvation) in the midst of the '90s perhaps could be read as an updating of those flying machines Tatlin designed, but accentuating the actions or gestures that would symbolically allow fleeing. In any case, I would like to insist on that idea of a machine inventor, of the "schemer," in a sense that would perhaps lead us to another myth. Neither Daedalus nor Icarus, but Odysseus? And, well, I am thinking in the Trojan Horse.

TB: Yes, I am more interested in Daedalus because he is the one who brings the solution of the problem and who has the necessary distance not to burn his wings (the rational, emotional distance). He is a figure that imagines an Utopia and puts it into practice. This is a concept I am very interested in, the idea of art not as a space to talk about Utopia, but to prepare the conditions to implement it.

TD: Actually, I took the idea of the Trojan Horse from a text by Mosquera on Lam. But I am especially interested in connecting it with the idea of "war machines" suggested by Gerard Raunig suggests in *A Thousand Machines*, based on a reading of "war machines" in Deleuze and Guattari. I would like to share a passage with you:

> But where the thesis of the systematic overlapping of material and immaterial components of war machines crystallizes in the clearest way is the most outstanding myth war machine epics have offered. The most famous example of a machine decisive in putting an end to a war through shrewdness is again a horse, in this case, a wooden horse. In the *Aeneid*, a little before the famous line where Laocoon expresses his reservations on the present offered by the Greek (*quidquid id est, timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*), Virgil calls the Trojan horse a *machina*: *aut haec in nostros fabricata est machina muros*. After Laocoon's warning that this machine is a trick against the Trojan walls, Virgil shows the entire war machine spectrum: from the stratagem of the *fatalis machina*, with which Odysseus undermined the insurmountable walls of the city, to the war machine par excellence, the *machina belli*, which in this case does not even have to destroy walls since the Trojans themselves take it into the city. It is not coincidence that Odysseus, as a typical schemer, is also called *polýtropos* and *polýmetis*, as well as the epithet *polyméchanos*. As the inventor of the technical machine and the psychosocial innovation of the Trojan Horse, Odysseus literally multiplies his ingenuity and masters a large number of machines. [Gerard Raunig,

Mil máquinas. Breve filosofía de las máquinas como movimiento social (A Thousand Machines. Brief philosophy of machines as a social movement), Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2008, pp. 67-68]

In the specific case of the Biennial performance, I considered it adequate to stress that you presented your work within another work [Gomez-Pena's *Corpo ilicito*] and at the same time gave rise to other voices. And to consider that use of the art institution, of the artist's status, etc., as a sort of Trojan horses that allowed you to offer a political piece as the "reconfiguration of what is sensitive," as Rancière would have it. I am interested in the way you use an exceptional situation to make other forms of visibility, of what can be thought or said, possible.

TB: Exactly. On the one hand, I am interested in the idea of an authorship dissolved in other people. On the other, the way in which institutional criticism is made, by naming things, I believe is not enough. I am interested in offering a potential solution to what does not work, not in criticizing just to criticize, perhaps using the concept of "constructive criticism," that is, the space where a different (functional) reality is established. It is important that this reality is temporary, that it disappears, because a reality that works from the world of art is not a sustainable reality in the long run, but rather an example. And the vacuum left by the fleetingness of this "reality" from art would give those who have taken part in the idea the feeling, the desire and the certainty that it is possible to do things another way.

TD: The thing is that your performance disarranged, at least for forty minutes, the order of who does the talking, who has visibility, who has the control of images.

TB: What do you mean by disarranged?

TD: That it changed the positions allocated to those who talk and those who listen, those who build the myth and those who believe it.

TB: Exactly.

TD: Incidentally, there is something that has rather bothered me in the performance's "life" in the blogs and the media: the insistence on naming names, always quoting Yoani Sanchez, for example, as if trying to replace one voice by another. I believe it would have been more potent if an anonymous person, anyone, would have been there.

TB: On the one hand, with this work I continued the idea of liberating spectators not only in their behavior, but in their power on the work, in this case through documentation (remember 200 disposable cameras were handed out). An interesting thing is that I do not think everyone had the money to develop the reel and this may also be meaningful: the documentation of an intense moment that is not "developed" or whose development is put off because of more urgent needs. On the other hand, I had no control in the distribution of the material, especially through Internet. As to Yoani, I think several things happened. Since "people" is an abstract concept, the need always emerges of creating an image personalizing and synthesizing a number of ideas. Also, the work was inserted – and this was not my intention – into a larger project of symbolic constructions on freedom of expression a group of bloggers in Cuba is making. They are having a wide international coverage and they took upon themselves the task of spreading the work. I believe that the performance worked in both realities, symbolical and political. And, besides, it works with the concept of "social hyperrealism," in the sense of being an art that melts with reality because it uses elements from it but within a different social dynamics. But I agree with you that the strength of this work was precisely it anonymous nature, a place where anyone could be. Those interested in performance more as a specific event than as news will see this better, but it is the responsibility of spectators what to do with the memory of the work.

TD: The production of "images" was also important in the quote from Fidel Castro's 1959 speech. The intention of producing an image and building the myth required having a photographer take the moment in which the dove alighted.

TB: Yes, I believe that the production of the myth was linked to the production of an image and with the distribution of this image. It is interesting that it is the person in power who creates his own myth, who controls mythology. In this work, I was interested in interacting with the memory of this image and the possibility of those who had received it to rebuild it.

TD: And handing in the cameras would be another way of showing what myths are made of, to show their springs, to demythologize.

TB: Do you remember the images that for a long time at least I believed had been taken in the Sierra but were actually made after the triumph of the Revolution? I believe the idea of offering a built sense of history is very strong.

TD: Yes, that is why I consider outstanding not only to make available a place to deliver the speech, but also the place to build visibility.

TB: Exactly. The work, at least the way I see it, is a monument. When there was nobody, it was a monument to absence. It also is a demystifying gesture, a monument questioning its own raison d'être, its own monumentality, through the demystification of a gesture, of a moment, of an image, of a visibility.

TD: As a theater showing its own devices? I am once more thinking in the experiments by the Russian vanguard, in the idea that the artifact must be visible to break the illusion of naturalness, as in Meyerhold, for example. You created the device to make it function and, at the same time, you dismantle it, or make it possible for the audience to see it is something that had been built.

TB: Also the way in which the audience's participation does away with this illusion. I have always been interested in the idea of showing something and, at the same time, showing the criticism of that I am showing.

TD: Another thing I wanted to talk about is that difficult balance among the elements you have and those which are uncontrollable, contingent, left to chance… whether people would talk or not, what they would say, the emotions at stake, the intervention of the authorities, the threat of censorship and even the dove!

TB: Well, I think that it is there that my work as an artist comes in. Precisely in creating the conditions where freedom may take place. Or for me as an artist to be able to say: I relinquish all control because conditions have been set up to give way to the spectators and take on the consequences of this act of delegation. This also affects the idea of the aesthetics I use, because works do not have a pre-established aesthetics, but they transform and build themselves with the participation of the audience. The "stable" elements I provide are in a tension with the "unstable" ones the audience provides. My work is to create a space that is first of all reliable, a space where spectators are protected to be able to transform into citizens without negative consequences in the long run.

TD: But by transferring the responsibility to the audience. I believe this is important, that in some way you force the audience to take sides.

TB: That is so. The idea that art is a reflexive act, just a mental act, does not interest me. I am interested in having the audience think while doing things, because it is there that they feel that Utopia belongs to them, where they feel that they can do things in different conditions, in different places. It is a type of work where the institution and the audience have the same level of authority.

TD: And many of your works move in the edge of illegality, right? Or dodging institutional restrains and even the alleged contracts with the audience.

TB: I believe that illegality, just like inconvenience, are the most interesting tools. The problem emerges when artists use them to call attention on them instead of using them as a way of entering the spaces that are not defined by power or that are too much defined by power to be able to redefine them. I am not interested in illegality per se, but in the moments in which it shows social contradictions, where the cracks in the consistency of a society are evident.

There are two illegal spaces: one is that which is defined and regulated, the one you want to face to be able to redefine a system of values; the other is the space that is not yet regulated by law, whether because no attention is paid to it, because it is not considered important or because society has not been able to agree how to approach it. I believe these are the spaces where changes that are not only demonstrative may be made, changes that can last a little longer, spaces from which the future may be built. And, besides, it talks to power in its same language, with its same strategy and from a position of power.

TD: And it is also there where activists, hackers, and others act.

TB: Yes, that is true. I am very interested in the idea of activism, although I believe that at times its resources are a little worn out or have been understood in such a direct way that it does not leave much space to think. I am a little more interested in hackers because they are like guerrillas.

TD: How nice! I was just about to mention guerrillas. So I go back to the Trojan horse, a myth that also lent is name to the "Trojans," those computer programs that seem to be harmless and enter the system without the user allowing it. Do you use some "guerrilla" tactics in your work? Things like surprise, change, management of previous information, whatever… Tania the Guerrilla!

TB: Well, I was named for her. [Tamara Bunke].

TD: Me too!

TB: Well, I not only thing that way in just one piece, but in the general view of my work. For example, if I make a performance in an exhibition, next time I do an installation and next a video.

TD: Always fleeing!

TB: I like that. Yes, always fleeing. Have things defined when I am not there any more. I am interested in the mutant nature of things. I like things not to be tangible, so people are compelled to see them as ideas, as gestures, and not as objects. I am very interested in the idea of social behavior as a means of communication in which I want to intervene.

TD: To finish, there is something by Deleuze that it would be worthwhile to quote here: "To flee, but while fleeing, look for a weapon."

Tamara Díaz Bringas