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“Art can be a rehearsal of a different reality.”



1/9 Two years ago, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera tried to stage a performance about free speech in Havana’s Revolution Square.

BY ADELE PETERS

2 MINUTE READ

Two years ago, when Cuban artist Tania Bruguera tried to stage a performance about free speech in Havana's Revolution Square—inviting citizens to talk about their vision for the country's future—the government detained her and temporarily took away her passport.



Bruguera has made political art for over two decades, and instead of being deterred by the experience, she was inspired to go further. Now, in a [Kickstarter campaign](#), she's raising funds to turn her home into an institute for “artivism”—social responsibility plus creative activism—that will teach Cubans to push for policy change.



“Art can be a rehearsal of a different reality,” she says. “It is a place where people can reimagine who they are and what they want, it is a safe place where to be open to new and unknown things. Civic literacy is needed when people do not know their rights, when people are afraid to ask for their rights, art can be the space where people can test their rights and acquire the confidence to enact them.”

The new institute, called the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (it was inspired by Arendt, a political theorist known for making complex ideas accessible to everyone), will host artists from

around the world and offer workshops led by the Cubans who show up—students, housewives, professionals, and as many others as possible.

“Through a ‘wish tank’ they will express all they would like the country to be or the things they do not like at this moment in society,” Bruguera says. “Then, we bring this knowledge and the people who proposed it to join experts on the subject to discuss new and alternative ways these issues can be dealt with at the think tank. These proposals would be transformed into public actions by artists and activists on the ‘do tank.’”



One challenge, of course, will be the government, which is only slowly opening up. “Right now it is very hard to do activism in Cuba,” she says. “The government is not used to having uncomfortable questions asked to them; they are not used to accountability processes, and they have controlled the streets for more than 50 years. Their response to what bothers them is sending the police in plain clothes to beat the activists and say it is ‘the people.’”

She’s hoping, however, that the new Institute can help build more acceptance for freedom of expression. “That is the work we have to do: building trust not only about this project but among Cubans, among each other and about the power each person has,” she says.

Ironically, Cubans can’t donate to the project directly on Kickstarter, because Internet access is limited there and no one has a credit card. But Bruguera, who is currently in New York as a visiting

artist, will travel back to Cuba to collect donations directly. [UPDATE: People in Cuba can also call a number (+53-5864-7276) and then pledge in person with cash.] She's also hoping that support from the rest of the world will send a message to the Cuban government.



AB **in** THE AUTHOR

Adriana Peters is a staff writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to some of the world's largest problems, from climate change to homelessness. Previously, she worked with GOOD, BioLite, and the Sustainable Products and Solutions program at UC Berkeley. [More](#)

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