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Exhibition, video archive, live performances and conference

A project by cross links e.V., curated by Bettina Knaup and Beatrice E. Stammer Produced in partnership with Akademie der Künste, Berlin

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Replay Urgency Artist talk by Tania Bruquera (CU) (Artist)

transcription

Well I want to thank the curators and I really think it's a fantastic event and I'm very glad that we have a balance between discussions and actual practice. I'm going to divide this in two parts. ...In the first part I am going to show some work and talk in a very loose way, and then I'm going to read only three pages about something I want to say.

In 1985 I was introduced to the work of Ana Mendieta by a Cuban curator. I was eighteen years old at the time, a really easy time to be enthusiastic. I was really excited about it at the time in part because in Cuba there was not a lot of female role models at the time, and also because I really like the idea that she had questioned herself about the sense of identity, about belonging to one place but also working in another place, and how to recuperate the place where you are not.

I was very drawn into it, and this curator gave us many materials like postcards, original...actually I have original postcards from Ana Mendieta. So he said don't worry, she'll come very soon because she's coming very often. And then unfortunately, a few months later she died, and this work came out of the frustration of meeting her in person and kind of idealizing her and her work. Then I decided to meet her through her work, and know her through her work. So I started a piece that was a ten years long piece, it was what I call long term pieces, in which I decided to become, not only as an artist—the producer of images—but the promoter of somebody else's work.

So I was seeing myself, at the time I call[ed] it, maybe now I would say something else, but at the time I was calling that cultural archeologist. So I wanted to, you know, first of all this was a very, you know, I was eighteen. You know, so I was...it was very fresh, it was very emotional--reaction to this--it was an homage to her personally. And I decided that it made no sense for me to create a work referring [to] her work, due [to] that in Cuba we didn't have access to the originals, and due [to] that in Cuba barely no body that was not her friend knew her. So she was not part of Cuban art history.

So I decided as a project, to become the artist who made her part of Cuban art history. So that was my mission, I mean I was...I am very...I was thinking at the time that was possible. [audience laughs] So at the time I was, and I'm still I think...I was very conceptual. So I was working in this kind of non-objective—and also this idea about problematizing the authorship of the work. So I realized I cannot do anything better than her, so I better do that.

So I decided to...and of course you have to see the context of this. '85 at least in Cuba, was the time in which we were reading about Post Modernism, and we were having this kind of theoretical background that allowed me to actually reproduce exactly her work because you know then there was already Sherrie Levine and there was a lot of other artists doing that in other mediums. And at the time there was not so many...not so much information [on Sherrie Levine]...later they did a very nice catalog about her work at the New Museum.

So I started doing the reconstruction through her friends. So I started meeting everybody in Cuba that met her at least once. I was looking for anything that was in the press. I was trying to reconstruct her, and the look of her work through what people describe[d] [to] me. It was [a] very difficult piece...because... Now it is great to do reenactment and it is actually encouraged to do reenactment, but at the time I was a student and my professors failed me because I was not creating new work. I was reproducing someone else's work, and I was trying to explain it was a conceptual piece, and I'm trying to do this gesture, and I'm a performance artist—which in Cuba you don't teach—and my performances are not...the icon is the gesture. I decide the performance for me is the gesture I created instead of just an action concrete...specific action...and that gesture can be a sequence of actions.

The other thing that happened that I think was very, very interesting is [that] I did this for ten years. Because I decided that's something I'll take later. I decided that the only way to actually intervene in society is using the time of society and not using the time of the art world. The art world has like what?...I think ten minutes or seven minutes? Three minutes...one and a half minutes to see the work? And I think you cannot change people's approach to thinking socially in that time. So I decided minimum five to ten years to do this piece, and I decided also to stop the work when people had already incorporated her as a reference at least in Cuba...and this is a piece that is context specific okay?

So the other thing that was very interesting that happened here is that everybody who was her friend—from New York and so on—who came was very excited about this piece. Everybody in Cuba was very moved; the artists loved it. But one day Lelong Galerie realized that I was doing reenactments. Well, I didn't call them reenactments, I called them redoing the pieces, and I was actually refabricating all the work. I did several times all the work. Like all the like actually pieces on the floor, and the performance[s], I did them all. And I was very careful in which places I put them. Like for example, I put some of the performances at an art exhibition at the National Museum in Cuba where there was [a show] about the generation she belonged to if she were in Cuba. And I did it twice internationally, one an exhibition about Cuban artists who were female.

So I put her in the show, and I had a big problem with the gallery and the sister who I met because I wanted to...you know...I was so naïve. I was like, "Yeah let's meet the sister at least...the closest I can get!" And we had a very intense conversation because apparently she wanted to that for sale or something. I have no idea, I mean...

And it was very interesting for me to do this kind of work that was coming out of that and it had from one side a kind of political reaction because at that time the government didn't allow people who leave to be acknowledge[d], and on the other side to have the art world kind of react because they understood this as the production of commodities...and that was not the goal.

So I think I want to do this: the last thing I am going to say about this piece, and if you want to know more we can talk later, is that I only have two documentations of this. The first one, which I lost and I just put on facebook, people who...if they have that photo please give it to me, which is the one when I did in 1985. And actually it was the first gesture, and I put the first reference of the photos of the trace piece. And I had the blood, and I reproduce[d] it so it was actually in an information exhibition so I had the actual previous reference and I [decided to] redo the whole thing. So I lost that image but I hope that somebody has it and will give it to me now that it is relevant to have it..[laughs]...

And the other images I have is the images of the last piece. So it's interesting that the only documentation that exists of this piece is the first and the last one. So the beginning and end. And I promise[d] Lelong, just as an act of faith that I will destroy all the work. Because for me the material side of the work was not interesting; it was not the goal. So I did destroy all the pieces I did, but these two I didn't of course because it is the reference.

But the other thing I did is that at the beginning I reproduced exactly the same, exactly the same. And then I did a solo show about Ana Mendieta in Cuba and all the piece[s] were fake. There was an Ana Mendieta show, all the pieces were fake, were done by me. And this was in '92, this show, and the distinction about that show is like I created new pieces that didn't exist based on projects she left on her diary, because her cousin, her cousin in Cuba was a very dear friend. So I had access to her diaries, the photocopy of her diaries. So I did pieces that were actually planned but never done, and I also did pieces who never existed, or were intended to. And what I did is I change the year of the work. So the new piece I put, uh, I don't know 1972, um...1992. Like the idea was from there. So I kind of work with the tropes of exhibition to try to...of course I have this silly idea at the time that through this she would be alive. So I kind of work with this idea that she was in Cuba working. She's not dead, you know, so there was a little emotional part of the show. So this is the way I approach that.

And this is the last piece I did which was in England. And this piece is actually one that uses some of her images but is a new piece...and it was the last piece and it was done as a funerary ritual. So it was actually embedding that situation. Of course I was kind of traumatized because I was so excited and then I had all this aggression coming from other people you know? But at the end I graduated and Lelong now talks to me, so... [audience laughs]...and she, Mary Sabatino always go[es] to see my work. Its very funny, she always, when she see[s] me somewhere, she always go[es] and see[s] the work to make sure. But I don't need that...so it was an idea for the moment. So I decide[d] to finish the work when two people from art history were writing a thesis about her. So I'm like, "Okay, my work is done, now everybody's..."

So I want to show very quick other pieces in relation to this subject of the conference. This is a piece I did in '97 and it's a reenactment of a rumor, a historical rumor in Cuba. This is a moment where in Cuba there was a lot of problem[s] with food and subsistence and I took this idea of eating dirt. So I ate dirt, earth, which is a reference from Cuban Indians, when the Spaniards were there they didn't want to sublimate, and they decide to [commit] suicide. And some of the ways was by eating dirt so this is a reenactment that is a historical reenactment with another...not reenactment...like a reference let's say.

This is another series I did in the year 1999 to 2001, coming from a place that has a very specific political context, and a very... It's a burden sometimes...I decided instead of transporting the work, [I would translate] the work to the context. Because I realized how important--at least for my work, my performative work--is the context where the pieces are done. So this is a piece I originally did in Havana. It was about political history, and I decided every time I go to a place, for a, you know for a performance, I will ask the producers of the exhibition to ask somebody to redo the piece. The strategy was to never show the image to them, and just tell them my intention for the piece. So they never see this image ever, you know? So I say, "you know I did this piece..." So I told them the goal of the work, and try to see how they generate an idea. And this is a version in Berlin. This is a version of Berlin, is Nesecad, an artist who is from Turkey, and this is her version of the piece.

This is a very quick reference to the piece of Documenta and I want to talk about it because even if it was not the actual intention of the piece. I think it was very interesting the way the performance approached living a history that was not possible for them to live because its forbidden here to have guns I heard. So they were very, uh...[audience laughs]..you got it, okay.

The other piece I'm doing, and I wanted to put it in this context, is an art school I started in 2002. After Documenta I was kind of disappointed about the art world, and I came back and I said, "Okay, how an I do a piece that is political, and is embedded..." And also the context in Cuba, a lot of young artist[s] were focused on being famous, and famous for them meaning being reproduced, what is in *Flash Art*, not even *Art Forum*, *Flash Art*. So I was very frustrated with that, and I say, "Okay, I am going to start an art school that is about political art." And I call it "Behavior Art" which is "Arte de Conducta" and I will explain that a little later. And I think this for me is like a way of also, in a very twisted, perverse way to talk about reenactment, because all of these people now are getting out of this school and doing pieces, that in somehow we have discussed, and hopefully they are reproducing some sort of thinking process.

Well I did this piece which is a collaboration with an artist called *Hotel Castro* and we decided to sign a pact, an accord, where we decide whoever dies first, would give the body to the other person to do an art piece. So we have decided to do this, it's legal, you know. After that we barely talked to each other...[laughs]...I mean we still love eachother, but it is very hard to communi...It's very weird to talk to eachother. Because you always say "How you doing?" [audience laughs]...It's very difficult. So I think I brought this because since we are talking about documentation and about when the work start[s] and when it finish[es], so I wanted to show another kind of example.

Then I brought this piece, which I just did at the Tate Modern, and I brought it because I sold it to the Tate, and I want to talk about the idea of selling artwork. And I think this another way to deal with this kind of timeless, or dealing with the...playing with time, and eternity or whatever. And I think, I have the contract there but I wont read it. I made specific...some aspects are very, very controlled, and some aspects are really, really not in control. And I think its interesting to see how each artist could negotiate that and I just wanted to bring this probably for discussion later.

Okay, my presentation for today, I forgot to say earlier, is called “Replay Urgency”, and there are three aspect[s] I am interested [in]: the first, urgency in performance, the second, how to preserve performance and under what conditions, and the third one, dangers of reenactment and other memory slips, other memory errors. Before reading this I want to tell you that I don’t call what I do performance. I call it *Arte de Conducta*, which in Spanish has a double sense. *Conducta* is like a Conduct, and also is a social behavior. So in English I translate it as “Behavior Art” and in French “Art de la Conduit” or “Art de la Comportement.”

As you will see I use not only reenactment in this text, but various different verbs. Since I think that like performance art, its rich and diverse manifestations, its way to be preserved and its way to be proposed to enter into conservation has to be as varied. First of all I would like to make a distinction between reproducing an event and giving continuity to an event. I think it is the task and the responsibility of the artist using this media, as well as the way to preserve the avant-garde quality of performance, to find out ways in which the institution, either the museums, galleries, etc., comes to the demands of the work and not the other way around. That when reproducing something that was a performance or a life event, what has to be preserved under any circumstances, is the urgency, an urgency that can be either a new one, or also the original one. Because performance art is urgency.

As Susan Lacy was saying the other day over breakfast, about various approach[es] on performance art in the 60’s, she was saying that mostly the different approaches were first, act as, second, critical research, or the third one, doing it through emerging into reality. The same way I think it should be available on the preservation of performance.

Here I propose two approaches; there are two ways to approach representation. One that is a historical one, [of] which [the] first goal is educational...where the original data and references have to be clear and work toward some acquisition of knowledge. And the re-presentation should be strict reproduction of time, place, circumstances, length, and actions. This could be done for a specialized education, let's say performance classes, the way people paint other people's painting, or it can be done for a broader educational audience. The second way to approach re-presentation is the updated one, one in which the focus is more on the consequences of the performance in its original setting, which will have to be negotiated under the new circumstances. This way in representing the work should be focusing on reproducing the intensity of the original, its impact, and the audience response to the piece—the creation of zones of discomfort. This should be done by updating the referential world and cultural elements from the original piece to avoid insensitivity to the original known image, as well as the development of social/cultural aspect of the newer everyday life.

The ways in which performance art has to be preserved should be more faithful to the intention of the artist's iconographical generation. Anyway, many times these images are just accidents, and this is a good thing to discuss probably: how faithful we should be to accidents.

Performance was born from life, and it should be reintegrated into life. For me the best way in which performance can survive the pass[age] of time is to integrate itself in the everyday life lexicon, on the everyday life tools for people to express themselves. It should not matter to the author the erosion of the original reference. Some performance art survive best as an aura memory, some as an experience to have, some as photos. Not all performance pieces should be reenacted. Some performance pieces should be dissolved in time and disappear with the memory of those who lived it. We should not be afraid for our work not to be an eternal presence, because that was not the original intention we had when we first approached performance art...[audience laughs].

We could and should leave traces that will inspire others to continue working like us, but we should not try to impose the pressure of the eternal on the urgency of the specific moment. One of the performances most important elements when they are generated is the acknowledge[ment] of the audience. Even when we do the previous performance that we tape and show later as videos, reenactment should imagine the audience, one audience that is different from the one going to theaters or to music concerts, the audience of performance art.

Now I want to talk about Marina Abramovic, *Seven Easy Pieces*. Okay...which I should email her and tell her that...um...it is interesting that I know Marina's *Seven Easy Pieces* through documentation. This is the same way in which I have learned about performance art in general. The only difference is that I can ask more people about what actually happened. People who have a fresher memory of the event, and that will be harder to its qualities because it is not yet under the patina of nostalgia. I would like to focus on the conditions to reenact performance, and the quote with which she start[s] her introduction text/statement, and the way it appears in the catalog, and with which I am ideologically opposed to.

She says:

“Uno,” eh, “One, Ask the artist for permission.”

I say, “Where is the democratic quality of performance art?”

“Two, Pay the artist for copyright.”

I said, “The artist should request money from the institution, and do so via production or selling of the work—which I’m doing, and I’m demonstrating with my own gestures—and not to demand money to other artists.” I find this highly offensive and politically wrong.

“And three, Perform a new interpretation of the piece.”

I think that sometime[s] is it more important to re-experience, to relive a piece than to focus on a forced creativity generated by the original. You know, sometimes pieces do not generate creativity. It is just a knowledge you go through.

“Four, Exhibit the original material, photograph, video relics.”

I say that I don’t think you always have to show the original reference. It depend[s] as I said before on what kind of reenactment, redoing, representation, re-appropriation you want to do—what kind of path you want to take with that knowledge you are acquiring.

And, uh, “Fifth,” which I think is repetition actually, “Exhibit a new interpretation of the piece.”

First of all, I don’t think all the reinterpretation, or redoing, should be exhibits. Nor [do] I think that all the reenactments should be documented either. So...and also I say here that I think that we cannot force creativity but we should enjoy experience.

Also, she start[ed] with a quote about piracy in this book. She says, “Taking something of value from someone else without permission is wrong. This is a form of piracy.” This is a quote from another guy...

My questions: This statement feels out of place in a moment when open source has been a reality, [a] creative force by the people, when sharing freely is a revolutionary social space, maybe one of the few ones we have left. When did performance start to ask for permission? Why does performance art...can and should be irreverent to others, to politician[s], to history, to politics, to context, but not to older artists? Why instrumentalize fear as a law for action? When did performance art cease to be a democratic media, and start to capitalize itself? When did we start profiting from our peers instead of the institution? I think that if we sell performance, it is not to become capitalist, it is to inherit the ideas of copyright, but to give to the artists working on performance, the chance to live out of their work. It is a way to force the institution to recognize that it is a legitimate media.

Is it a new way to do performance only available to privilege[d] people? And by privileged I say here in this case, person[s] who know probably this artist, and who can have context and acquire permit[s] from the original authors. And why should we do the reperform[ances] inside the Guggenheim on a platform with guards making sure nobody interrupts or erupts, or transgress[es] the space of the artist? And not for example, make the museum go out of his comfort zone, or reenact the context of the piece, or making the artist vulnerable in relation to the audience? Except of the delipostomas which is, I think, work very well, for me the distance between the history and the present was not effective, because Marina is history herself, and her gesture gets confused with the desire to be and remain just about the reference about the reference.

Reenactment should have a purpose—should not be taken for granted as a way to document performance art because the moment when reenactment is not a transgressive act anymore, it should be rethought and resolved by us—artists working with life, and with the displacement of discomfort.