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Tania Bruguera's Traveling *Autobiographies*: A Global Performance

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Abstract

Tania Bruguera's "travelling" sound installations accompanied by texts and microphones are turning the autobiographical genre into multimedia happenings. Bruguera's Installations have been exhibited worldwide and are also to be found on the internet. The Cuban artist has spent the last ten years between Havana and Chicago. She is involved in a project called Immigrant Movement International, located in Queens, New York and, more recently, she has been very active in the process of resuming relations between Cuba and the United States.

My presentation will focus on *Autobiography*, a piece in two slightly different versions, one to be staged in Cuba and the other, abroad. I will dwell on the *Version inside Cuba*, held in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes during the 8th Havana Biennial (2003). It is this particular work that foregrounds the controversial nature of Bruguera's art which explores the relationship between art, activism and political power. In *Autobiography*, Tania Bruguera synthesizes image, sound and video, developing new narrative possibilities which encourage the audience to react. The concept of sound is used as an independent and self-sufficient means capable of creating images in the conscience of the individual. The visualization of her minimalist performance is made possible by the spectator's memory and knowledge of the experience of the Cuban Revolution. This interaction with the audience elicits images related to the collective emotional memory even as it brings to the fore hitherto unexpressed personal emotions. I will also consider the changes Bruguera introduced in the performances that took place in the US and in Europe.

Given the political underpinnings of Bruguera's art, the paper will question and discuss the implications of what appears to be a revival of militant auto/biographical practices, involving artists and spectators on a worldwide scale.

Key words: performance art, autobiography, private- public interaction, arte útil

Draft Paper

Has Art itself become a mere outtake, a long footnote to the human history? In the United States it is technology, not culture, that is regarded to be a space for innovations. Art, it seems, has overstayed its welcome. But the amateur artists, immigrants from the disintegrated homeland, survive against all odds. Often they cross the border illegally and like the diasporic repo-men try to repossess what used to belong to them, re-conquer the space of art. Svetlana Boym¹

The daughter of a Cuban diplomat and an English translator, Tania Bruguera grew up amid the revolution's promises and problems. She began splitting her time between Havana and Chicago in 1997, and taught art at the University of Chicago from 2003 to 2010. A conceptual artist of international stature, Bruguera has shown her work at the Venice Biennale, at the Documenta Kassel, at the Pompidou Center in Paris and was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. She is currently involved in a project called Immigrant Movement International, located in Queens, New York and, more recently, has been very active in the ongoing process of *rapprochement* between Cuba and the United States.

This presentation will draw upon theoreticians like Sol LeWitt whose definition of conceptual art was among the first to appear in print:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. Sol LeWitt, 1967ⁱⁱ

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines "conceptual art, also called post-object art or art-as-idea, as artwork whose medium is an idea (or a concept), usually manipulated by the tools of language and sometimes documented by photography. Its concerns are idea-based rather than formal." For Pierre Huyghe conceptual art is "an art form in which the artist's intent is to convey a concept rather than to make an artistic object".

Many of the concerns of the conceptual art movement have been taken up by contemporary artists: ideas such as anti-commodification, social and/or political critique, and ideas/information as medium continue to be aspects of contemporary art, especially among artists working with installation art, performance art, etc. exceeding national borders and genre boundaries.

Breaking traditional boundaries of artistic media: painting, sculpture – body performance. Art begins to examine its own nature. Many works of conceptual art, sometimes called installations or performances combine solid structures with ephemeral ones, with the artist often performing in front of an audience which is requested to actively participate in the artwork.

While Bruguera's performances draw to a certain extent upon the precepts set forth by Marcel Duchamp in the 1950s,ⁱⁱⁱ the Cuban artist instills her performances with ingredients borrowed from avant-garde militant art as well as cultural studies (individual and collective memory).

Beginning with the past

Tania Bruguera's first performance was a reconstruction of Ana Mendieta's performance "Blood Trace," which the Cuban-born artist Mendieta first performed in Iowa in 1974. Dipping her forearms into a bucket of pig's blood, Mendieta raised both hands above her head and then dragged them to the floor, leaving a V-shaped stain on the wall. Thus began a ten-year project to recover Mendieta's legacy from official policies aimed at erasing the cultural contributions of Cuban expatriates. Controversy ballooned when the Estate of Ana Mendieta initially opposed *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* as an intervention into its own recuperative program. In 1996, Bruguera destroyed all vestiges of the series after the final performance at the Institute of International Visual Art in London, quieting conflict and emphasizing the ephemerality and immateriality of her conceptual work.

Tribute to Ana Mendieta (1985-1996) is a *site specific* piece in which Tania Bruguera re-does objects and performances created by Ana Mendieta, an artist who carried out her artistic career in the United States after her migration in her early adolescence. The first attempts at developing her *political-timing* concept are to be found here. The appropriation, reconstruction and re-exhibition of Ana Mendieta's pieces in the Cuban context was done with the intention of relocating the figure of this artist in the history of Cuban culture and collective imaginary as a representative of Cuban culture.

In Bruguera's works human beings can be locks of hair, used tea bags, dead rams or herds. A sort of contact between History and the individual takes place, an area where their relations of power, their obliterations, their mutual conflicts are settled. That is why her works are, at one and the same time, testimony and comment.

Among her earlier works are memorials to the past – to colonization and slavery. *Untitled* (2000) Sugarcane tunnel and *Poetic Justice* (2002-03), an immersive installation comprising a long, pungent-smelling teabag lined tunnel, interspersed with tiny videos, that metaphorically refers to the relationship between the colonized and their masters

El Peso de la Culpa (The Burden of Guilt) was performed on May 4th 1997 at the artist's home in Old Havana. Given her geopolitical background, Bruguera's entire work pivots around issues of power and control; thus several of her works interrogate and re-present events in Cuban history. Her 1998 work *The Burden of Guilt* (*El peso de la culpa*) was the artist's take on a story claiming that indigenous people in Cuba vowed to eat dirt and nothing else rather than be the captives of the Spanish conquistadors. Tania Bruguera was standing before a Cuban flag which she had herself woven from human hair, a butchered lamb hung around her neck. Bruguera interpreted their act of eating dirt as "a weapon of resistance. For 45 minutes, she consumed soil mixed with water and salt representing tears. As Edward Rubin described it, "The harrowing piece was first performed in Havana, where the audience was duly reminded that freedom, liberty and self-determination are not abstract ideals, but achievements that deeply inscribe their meaning on our physical being."^{iv} As she later explained, this performance was an allusion to a suicide-ritual practiced by the island's natives. By eating large quantities of earth, many took their own lives when faced with the threat of the Spanish conquistadors. Her house was opened to the street, and her audience therefore included Biennial visitors from all over the world as well as people from the neighborhood.

'Travelling' Performances': Blending Private and Public Voices

Tania Bruguera's "travelling" sound installations accompanied by texts and microphones have given a new twist to the autobiographical genre, turning it into multimedia happenings. Given the political underpinnings of Bruguera's art, this paper will question and discuss the implications of what appears to be a revival of militant auto/biographical, conceptual art blending individual and collective practices, involving readers and spectators on a global scale. The so-called *Generación de los ochenta* radicalized Cuban art praxis. Influenced by North American conceptual art and the advent of perestroika, the eighties generation viewed their art as a weapon and agent of freedom. It was the first collective effort to challenge official positions on the country's cultural life. Bruguera was a student of these changes: the proliferation of happenings, the collaboration with other artistic practices (like literature, dance, theater), the popularization of semiotics, and Cuban art's new activist agenda. This period of cultural and critical ferment formed the basis of Bruguera's art of social effectiveness.

Before conceptual art, autobiography in art was largely to do with expressing the artist's inner life, conceptual artists however are more concerned with measuring life's outward manifestations, i.e. the artist's *self-fictionalization*. These developments brought new opportunities and problems for autobiography. The idea is to expand the discussion from text to image and see to what extent the 'auto'/self differs between fiction and visual arts and how or if conceptual art manages to combine them.

Autobiografía 2003

"This is an autobiography in the first person plural. A curatorial action of the mind. An invitation to the history of our lives." (Corina Matamoros)

Title: Autobiography (Version inside Cuba)

Sound installation Materials: Unpainted space, two Soviet loudspeakers from the '70s, egg trays, a wooden stadium, 16 subwoofers, a switched-off mike, three unfinished rock walls, an electric bulb (slideshow, if possible)

A multi-voiced autobiography, Bruguera's *Autobiography* is a piece in two versions, one to be staged in Cuba and another to be staged abroad. The *Version inside Cuba* was first held in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes during the 8th Havana Biennial (2003). A sound installation, *Autobiografía*, consisted of a makeshift wooden stage with a lone microphone that invited viewers to approach.

It is this particular work that foregrounds the controversial nature of Bruguera's art which explores the relationship between art, activism and political power. In *Autobiography*, Tania Bruguera synthesizes image, sound and video, developing new narrative possibilities which encourage the audience to react. The concept of sound is used as an independent and self-sufficient means capable of creating images in the conscience of the individual. The visualization of her minimalist performance is made possible by the spectator's memory and knowledge of the experience of the Cuban Revolution. The interaction with the audience elicits images related to the collective emotional memory even as it brings to the fore hitherto unexpressed personal emotions.

In this installation, Tania Bruguera synthesizes image, sound and video, developing new narrative possibilities which encourage the audience to react. The concept of sound is used as an independent means capable of creating images in the conscience of the individual. This was a bold and brave gesture by all concerned. The large space was void of all but two speakers at either end, and a platform at its center, on which a microphone stood, framed on three sides by a curving wall.

In both versions, the audience has an auditory experience that becomes physical. The visualization evoked by the performance is linked to the memory and knowledge of the experience of the Cuban Revolution. It is the spectator who preserves the images of the collective emotional memory. From the installation comes the sound of reiterated slogans from the repertoire used by the Cuban Revolution in its political propaganda: "Fatherland or Death!" "Victory Forever!" and others, oft-repeated phrases like "Libertad o Muerte!" "Hasta la Victoria Siempre!" and "Viva Fidel!" But some of these endlessly and passionately repeated slogans have lost the context justifying them. A clear difference in reaction could be observed between the Cuban audience and spectators abroad, which may include Cuban expatriates. These audiences (foreign as well national) identify with the performance or feel alien toward it the depending on their knowledge of the Cuban revolutionary context.

The audience may go up the dais and use the mike. Then they will notice (because of some subwoofers placed under the dais) the vibrations of the slogans coming from the loudspeakers running up their legs. The mike does not work although it seems to be connected with the amplification equipment that the security guard in the hall

keeps in a gesture of apparent control. But careful listening disclosed the rhythmic power of the slogans, their relentless presence, their selection of willing subjects, their shaping of crowds, their womb-like comfort, their obliterative omniscience - a landscape of memory of what it must have felt like, within the body, in the mind's ear, to grow up during the revolution. Visitors were invited to record their own slogans, statements, or speech of any kind, which were then added to the mix. The implication here is that the voices of the people might eventually drown out those of the ones who claim to speak for them.

The work appeals to the conscience and functions as an autobiography not only of the artist, but of all Cubans born during the revolution who recognize the rhetoric of political oratory. The work shows that for Cubans immersed in the political process there is no clear distinction between the public and the private sphere.

"Autobiography" is a false theater play. It takes us back to a textual evocation of the rallies or marches of the Revolution as a performance art. The only concrete thing in it was a mike on a wooden surface marked by the feet of the people. But the sound of patriotic words got diluted inside the dais until it was transformed into that buzzing of history haunting us with its invisibility.

Autobiography is the work of a genuine museologist/ archeologist. Bruguera has searched for traces of memory in the sound landscape of her country. Rummaging in an individual life which is both her own and that of so many others, she has brought to us the acoustic evocation of the history of Cubans who have lived with the revolution, who recognize the rhetoric of political oratory, in this case, slogans issued by the power which have been part of their social reality and have entered their conscience as individuals. Critic Juan Antonio Molina is right when saying that for Bruguera it is the experience of the other which is fundamental.

Autobiography (Remix), a piece made in collaboration with Achy Obejas and Lou Carlozo, takes the sound track of *Autobiography* (Cuban version) and transforms it into something suitable to dance at parties and discos. The sound track is provided by a group formed by Tania Bruguera named *Las chancletas vanguardistas* (The Vanguard Slippers) who perform in dance clubs and parties (available on internet). The artist created a mixture of patriotic slogans and fragments of speeches of the Cuban Revolution. The political circumstances in Cuba have created a stereotyped fascination with the island. This piece conveys the significance of Cuba as an element of attraction playing with souvenir concepts for political tourism by using politics as entertainment. The piece also finds inspiration in the Marxist statement: "History repeats itself first as tragedy and then as comedy." In Cuba, because of its idiosyncrasy, this statement may be modified: History repeats itself first as tragedy and then as *pachanga* (festivity) It relates to the concept of sound as an independent and self-sufficient means capable of generating ideas in the conscience of an individual. The piece provides evidence on how the lives of Cubans, merged within the political process favor the needs of the macro-social project at the expense of their own private lives. It sparks off a moving and critical encounter with the history of Cuba in the last fifty years.

"1 minute free of censorship per speaker"

Tatlin's Whisper

The title of this series of performances makes a symbolic reference to Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin who created the Tower Monument, foreseen as the seat for the Third Communist International, an icon of the enthusiasm and the rancor of the Bolshevik Revolution. The intensity, credibility and exaltation of socialist revolutions, just as Tatlin's Tower which was never built, were frustrated and utopia is rethought with the effort implied in a weak whisper.

Tatlin's Whisper # 5 was shown at Tate Modern in 2008 is a *mise en scène / mise en situation* meant to test the spectators' reaction to a situation of domination, intimidation, and surveillance. The fifth piece of the series, *Tatlin's Whisper* examines the relationship between apathy and anaesthetization of the images in the mass media. At the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall Bridge in London, two mounted policemen in their uniforms burst into the space while performing mass control techniques with the spectators in the Museum. Among other techniques used, one of the horses corners the audience that divides into two large groups and then are regrouped and compelled to crowd together while the size of circle made by the mounted police decreases making them stay within or without the space since entry is blocked by the horse's body. Visitors generally answer by complying with the oral instructions of the officers and the imposing physical and historical presence of the horses used as repressive means. This series intends to activate images, well-known because of having been repeatedly seen in the press, but are here decontextualized from the original event that gave way to the news and staged as realistically as possible in an art institution. The most important element in this series is the participation of spectators who are in a position to determine the course the piece will take.

In *Moscow, 2007*, Bruguera invited the audience to be actors in her scenarios rather than passive participants. Bruguera was exposing behavioral responses in the obedient audience that are ingrained on many levels: respect for men in uniform, fear of animals and passive subjection before an art work and a performer. Nervous but compliant visitors were asked to pose with semi-tame animals such as an eagle or a monkey for photographs taken by Moscow street photographers (who normally offer their services to tourists in Red Square) beneath a portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the feared Bolshevik secret police.

Tatlin's Whisper # 6 (Havana Version) was held in the central patio of the Wifredo Lam Center, the institution in charge of organizing and holding the Havana Biennials in 2009. The audience was handed two hundred disposable cameras with flash to document the performance and told that they could freely express their thoughts for a minute through the microphone in the podium. There was a long silence. The first person took the podium guarded by two persons in military uniform (a woman and a man). They put a white dove on the speaker's shoulder, an allusion to the emblematic image of Fidel Castro when delivering his first speech on January 8th in Havana after the Triumph of the Revolution, an image that ratified his absolute leadership in a generalized consensus which worked for those who wanted to see in this image either the peace guaranteed in the lives of the citizens or the aesthetics of the future to be built. In *Tatlin's Whisper # 6 (Havana version)* there is no censorship during the minute a member of the audience is at the mike. When the time assigned for freedom of expression ends, the persons in military uniform that until then had been at each side of the speakers – to defend their right to talk or to control it – take the dove from their shoulder making them leave the podium and the dais and they become once more part of the audience. This action was repeated with each speaker. They were all treated in the same way. A total of 39 persons made use of the mike to express their affinity with the Cuban political system or criticize it in the 41 minutes the work lasted, after which Tania Bruguera took the podium to thank the Cubans for their courage and their exercise of freedom of expression. Several reactions were exhibited, all with respect and all accepted, those who offered reasons to continue the path of Fidel Castro's Revolution and those who asked for elections with nobody in that family as a candidate.

Less than two weeks after President Obama announced the U.S. would normalize relations with Cuba—Bruguera attempted to reprise *Tatlin's Whisper* in Havana's Revolution Square, the plaza where a youthful Fidel Castro once addressed millions. She was harassed by the Cuban authorities, arrested, and finally released.

Performance Art and Immigrant Rights

In 2010, Bruguera initiated an ambitious five-year project, a work of public art entitled *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI) that took her to Queens, NYC, an ethnically diverse neighborhood, outside the traditional venues of art. Her work became a socio-political movement mobilizing citizens, occupying public spaces for an artistic-political intervention. IMI's website describes the action as follows: "...[IMI] took on the form of a community center, paying respect to the tradition and victories of U.S. civic movements. [IMI] is an art project implementing the concept of Useful Art, in which artists actively implement the merger of art into society's urgent social, political, and scientific issues."^v

In a recent article, "Aesthetic Disobedience,"^{vi} Jonathan Neufeld addresses the case of Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* as an example of the limits of aesthetic disobedience. For Neufeld, Bruguera's work is exemplary in that it calls into question the shape of the boundaries of the art world. What art world norms are challenged here? The answer lies in the most frequently raised question: "Why does IMI qualify as art? The question is frequently raised by donors, board members, critics, newspaper reporters, and even by participants in the work itself.

What distinguishes IMI from a community center? One might reach for an institutional answer: it is a work of art because Bruguera and the Queens Museum say it is. As much as Bruguera is committed to moving within and using the institutional authority of the art world to achieve her own ends, she does not simply assume that this authority is what constitutes her art as art. Instead, she advocates for a view that art and artist's obligations, as artists, reach beyond the boundaries of the art world as they are institutionalized by museums, galleries, and funding agencies. *Arte util – Arte de conducta* are the concepts that define Bruguera's artistic act, and in particular her ongoing project whose purpose is to seek solutions to social and political problems through the "implementation of art in society". Its purpose is to redefine the citizen-migrant position and access the concept of "useful art," a notion that promotes the integration of art in search of sustainable long-term solutions to urgent social and political issues.

All art is useful, yes, but the usefulness we are talking about is the immersion of art directly into society with all our resources. It has been too long since we have made the gesture of the French Revolution the epitome of the democratization of art. We do not have to enter the Louvre or the castles,

we have to enter people's houses, people's lives, this is where useful art is. We should not care for how many people are going to museums. We need to focus on the quality of the exchange between art and its audience."^{vii}

Tania Bruguera, with members of Immigrant Movement International, shared a tiny apartment in Corona, Queens, with five illegal immigrants and their six children. She performed a yearlong art piece meant to improve the image of immigrants and highlight their plight thereby seeking to blend politics and art to empower immigrants through English classes, legal help and impromptu performances. And she lived like her working-class Latino neighbors; she vowed not to tap her credit cards, personal bank account or assistants in Italy and Cuba. Bruguera seems to be both subverting and using Communist Cuba's methods (social, political work) in the capitalist environment and globalization of the early 21st century. She has actually been criticized for this feigned posture. – she, the cosmopolitan renowned artist stooping down for “a while”!

IMI functions both as social intervention and as an extended work of conceptual art. The movement addresses such concerns as the effect of invisibility and exclusion of marginalized populations and examines strategies for gaining access to political power and social recognition. It is Bruguera's most activist and utopian project to date. Also one that is sending ripples to the recent waves of migrants reaching European shores.

Concluding remarks

One is struck by the mobility, malleability and flexibility of Bruguera's work – it travels with the artist, many of her performances are variations on a theme which she adapts to the social, political context of a specific country, regime, past history. Bruguera uses ignored materials – sand, earth, mud, live beings (human or animal), her own body. She often abolishes the boundary between spectator and actor in the work of art, thus blurring the line between private and public in an attempt to exorcise pain, suffering, trauma – to ultimately achieve catharsis.

ⁱ Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgic Technology: Notes for an Off-modern Manifesto" www.svetlanaboym.com

ⁱⁱ Sol Le Witt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" *Artforum*, June 1967

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcel Duchamp is credited as inventor of conceptual art. Cf. « The Creative Act », *Art News*, vol.56, no4, New York, summer, 1957.

^{iv} Edward Rubin. "Tania Bruguera," *Art Nexus*, Issue 77, Jan. - August. 2010.

^v <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/mission-statement/>

^{vi} Jonathan A. Neufeld, "Aesthetic Disobedience" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73.2, Spring 2015.

^{vii} <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/528-0-Introduction+on+Useful+Art.htm>

Bio-note

Ada Savin is Professor of American Studies at Versailles University, France. Her research fields are representation of the self in writing and in art, transnational literature, ethnicity in the Americas. She has published books and articles on American ethnic autobiography, as well as on migration and exile. She is also involved in the forthcoming publication of Philip Roth's work in the French Pléiade collection (Gallimard). Her publications include:

Journey into Otherness: Essays in North American History, Culture and Literature, ed., Amsterdam U Press, 2005.
L'Amérique par elle-même : Récits autobiographiques d'une Terre promise, Michel Houdiard, Paris, 2010.

Migration and Exile : Charting New Literary and Artistic Territories, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.