

Interview with Tania Bruguera and Joanna Zielińska for Magazyn Sztuki Poland

Joanna Zielińska: Where is your home?

Tania Bruguera: Being an immigrant means that the concept of home doesn't exist. That doesn't mean that you are a gregarious type, or that you have no capacity for affection for your current location, and it has nothing to do with valuing your new circumstances. You can be an immigrant who has encountered a better situation at your present physical location. For example, you may have learned to know for the first time how it feels to be free, or understood how much better the life you live now is from the life you lived before migrating, you can go as far as to negate your past and with it, the place you came from, what people would call "home". You may joyfully embrace a new culture and a new set of beliefs, and you can acquire a status that even natives of the country you live in now may never achieve, but none of this changes the fact that being an immigrant is entering the condition of being "homed", being someone that sees "home" in past tense.

Sometimes immigrants are not allowed to exercise their right to imagine a better future and try to build it; under those circumstances is very difficult to feel "home", which forces to keep you in a "homed" condition.

People mistake this temporary incapacity to "have a home" with an incapacity to commit and give their best to the new place they live in, which is one of the biggest mistakes and sources of frictions when new migrants arrive in communities. On the contrary, immigrants are so determined to have a home again that this is often the force that drives them to work harder than anybody when they arrive in their new cities and countries. It is not about demonstrating to people that they belong, it is about their desire to create memories, trustworthiness, and to find home again. There are other loyalties beyond to the place where one grew up, including the sense of belonging. That should be the right of every human being in the 21st century.

Sometimes the people in the receiving "home" create conditions for immigrants that hinder their ability to imagine and build what goes beyond "today", even when immigrants imagine a better future. For many immigrant, home is the process of learning what the future he imagines is, while other, more privileged immigrants have the option to decide where they want to belong.

In the 21st century we need to acquire other ways to create loyalties towards the future. In this global era of mobility we need to change the concept of home to one that goes beyond economic models and focuses on ethical ones.

What is your role in Immigrant Movement International? How are you going to run this project? What will be the outcome of the project in a few months time?

I'm the initiator of this project. I prefer not to talk in terms of authorship, since this is a collective effort with various degrees of collaboration, which is conceptually vital. In order for the project to be real and exist it needs to be appropriated by others, who feel that they have an equal part to play. It is the only way it becomes political and real. I do not say I'm the founder because I do not pursue building that kind of institution.

The project is five years long, so while there is continuity, each year will be devoted to a specific focus. This first year, presented by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art, is to learn and create the foundation of the project, readjusting the ideas I came in with as I implement them in the real. This year is also to produce the project's identity, defining some of the concepts that I will be using, creating alliances, and experimenting with the relationship between art and politics.

I'm working with art and politics in this project in four main ways: long term, hyperrealist, political-timing specific, and useful art.

A long-term project for me is a work method that falls within social dynamics and, therefore, makes use of social tempo for production and for the implementation of the project. Long-term projects are best experienced when the audience incorporates into the process and the dynamics generated by the project, which demands a larger commitment from them than experiencing art in a more passive and purely artistic context. Very frequently these works are experienced in a fragmented way, either because the project is larger than the commitment from the audience, or because of the natural progressive evolution of the project. Audiences may also be seeing it out of context due to inaccessibility of the project or lack of direct participation.

Hyperrealism is a method for this project not only because it reproduces areas of society that can barely be distinguished from the real, but also because it works in the realm of the real, with great care and regard for the actual consequences of the project.

Political-timing specific is a work method in which the piece is linked to, and depends on, the political circumstances existing in the moment it is made or exhibited. It is a type of work created to exist at a specific political moment and, therefore, once the moment goes by, the piece loses its potential political impact and tends to become a documentation of a specific political moment. The political moment informs the piece, making it a structure that must adapt to the evolution of the political events and their interpretations.

My final method, Useful Art, aims to transform some aspects of society through the implementation of art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor and proposing solutions for deficits in the real. Most Useful Art projects are structured as long-term projects and are dictated by the practical impact of their strategies. Useful Art practices try to address the level of disparity of engagement between informed audiences and the general public, as well as the historical gap between the language used in what is considered avant-garde and the language of urgent politics, science and other disciplines.

I have created the Useful Art Association in the process of working on Immigrant Movement International to provide a platform to meet, exchange ideas, and share strategies on how to deal with the issues of implementing the merger of art into society. The Association will work in an open manner through discussions, printed texts, actions groups, and public events, examining what it means to create Useful Art.

In terms of the outcome of the project, in the next few months there will be two main events and various actions. One of the actions is the launch of the next issue #21 of Open Cahier—on the subject of art and the public domain—in the Immigrant Movement headquarters, where they will be exploring the limits of Hypermobility. We will also host events for the immigrant community with lawyers, launch a new awareness ribbon for immigrant respect to serve as an identifier for people who want to participate in the movement, and more. An updated schedule of activities is available at www.immigrant-movement.us.

Immigrant Movement International will also host a two-day conference on November 4th and 5th to discuss issues relating to immigration and the shared experience of all migrants. The event will conclude with the drafting of a Bill of Rights for migrants developed by a team of immigration experts, which we will then share publicly.

On December 18th, designated “International Migrants Day” by the United Nations, we are mobilizing artists and cultural producers across the world to develop projects related to the issues and experience of migration. The contemporary migrant challenges traditional notions of identity based on common nationality or culture, and instead points us to a new, shared experience of the condition of migration itself. We want people to contribute with their creative actions, which we will document on our website.

Before the first year ends, I hope to create a system in the spirit of the creative commons, where the project can be used, shared and developed by others in various places. They could use all the identity elements we have created: its name—Immigrant Movement International, logo, projection, statements, working strategies, etc. I hope to ensure that it evolves, develops contradictions and increases awareness. I hope to build a global network to help sustain the movement. It is very important that each “branch”, each reiteration of the project come up with its own focus and strategies. I am not trying to create a franchise, rather to expand awareness and social change through creativity. So many people have asked for ways in which they could join the party, the movement, the project, and my answer is to start your own version of it, your own branch of it, bring your own experiences and perspectives to it. At the end we are all immigrants and we are all trying to conceive of a different future, where things are more just for all. This is a global problem that can and should be solved locally.

I am proud to say that from the beginning most people have seen this project as something that happens in reality, functions in the real world. This gives me three satisfactions: 1) that I do not have to start convincing people of the intricate

dependency that political art has with the real; 2) that such an assumption reveals the pertinence of the project in the political arena and signals accurate specific political timing; and 3) that the art world is ready take the natural next steps for political art: functioning politically.

Would you be willing to prepare an instruction manual on making socially and politically engaged art? Could you give instructions or advice to artists and curators who would like to initiate this kind of project?

I do not think I could do this with only one year of experiencing this political work/life. Sometimes what happens in art is that people misrepresent the amount of time needed, time in relationship to the intensity of experiences and what they learn from those experiences. I think this creates a big misunderstanding between artists and activists, artists and politicians. There is an out of sync timing situation that is seeing as lack of responsibility from one side and waste of time on the other.

At the same time, for the Berlin Biennale in 2012 I am doing a series of instructional, videos with people that were part of real social and political changes, sharing their experiences. The proposal was made and discussed way before the uprising of the Middle East (participants from these events are on the list of interviewees), and came out of my own frustration and desire to call for collective action. I wanted to see the possibility of proposing a different social and political system, whatever that could be. Again, it is all about political timing in order for art to be useful.

As I said before, this is my learning year so I do not know much, I can only invite people to walk that path with me.

Do you believe that social change can be effected through art?

Absolutely. I've seen it happening. This is what drives all my work, this what makes me go on each morning and try to do art.

But, and a big one, the problem is the way in which art perceives its role in social change and the way it collaborates for it.

I'm interested in the artist not as a narrator or archivist of history, but as a producer of history; an agent that is in place when things are being shaped, when decisions are being made, acting in equal capacity of the rest of the agents of change. For that to happen you need brave and modest artists who are willing to give everything up for their agency in change. That doesn't seem to be the way in which many artists see their role in society at this moment. I would like for the ideal world artists imagine to be created in the real, even if it is imperfect.

Do you sometimes think about failure?

Yes absolutely, but the failure I think about is not the wanted and idealized failure that makes non-Useful Art enjoyable or frustration interesting. We already know

what is not working and why it doesn't. We need to start working on how to change things, how to make them different and how to make them work. I'm not interested in the effect that comes with frustration, but in the effectiveness the imperfections that come from failure can bring.

If you are doing art that works politically, the place of failure is not one of contemplation and glamorizing the impossible. On the contrary, it is the moment when you overcome the dysfunction, you enter a process of self-correcting, it is the moment of criticality. But it cannot stop there because this is the moment that produces creative change.

In political art one should not talk about failure but about imperfections.