Speech Disorder

CLAIRE BISHOP ON TANIA BRUGUERA AT THE 10TH HAVANA BIENNIAL

Tania Bruguera, *El susurro de Tatlin #6* (Tatlin's Whisper #6), 2009. Performance views, Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, March 29, 2009.

WHENEVER PEOPLE LAMENT the homogenization of global biennials, a special case should be made for Havana's. Located in a country suffering the longest economic blockade in modern history, the Havana Biennial has, since its inception in 1984, placed postcolonial theory and Southern-Hemispheric relations at the forefront of its activities while consciously eschewing the mediation of Western centers. However, for all the innovations this independence has produced—the Havana Biennial could be said to stand historically as the model for today's discursive, transnational biennials—the flip side is a paranoid control of cultural expression that takes the form of government censorship. As a result, the event's most recent edition, which took place this past spring, was a disappointingly mute affair; innocuous artistic expressions of antiglobalization sit unproblematically within the anti-imperialist discourse of the Cuban authorities. The bulk of the work in the main exhibition venue at Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña was grindingly mediocre, with very little of the social, interdisciplinary, and research-based art that has come to be a hallmark of Western biennials. Instead, dated forms of installation art abounded (rooms filled with tires, leaves, sand, etc.), as did an aesthetic that the Mexican performer Silverio pithily summarized as "overproduced with no budget." Still, some smaller venues in the city hosted rewarding displays of work by older artists, such as Luis Camnitzer at the Centro Wifredo Lam, and a León Ferrari survey at the Casa de las Américas; the latter was far more faithful to the vision, range, and political commitments of this senior Argentinean than the concurrent retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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The most striking exception to the general mood of the biennial, however, was a project appropriately titled "*Estado de Excepción*" (State of Exception), held over nine nights at the Galería Habana. Organized by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera and the Hawana-based curator Mailyn Machado, this series of nine exhibitions was Bruguera's farewell to the art school she has run from her home in Habana Vieja since 2002—the Cátedra Arte de Conducta, an informal institution dedicated to producing a new generation of Cuban artists who work politically with their social reality. For each day of the project, Bruguera and Machado curated a different group show from work produced at the school, organized around themes such as "Jurisdiction," "Useful Art," and "Trafficking Information." These short, sharp interventions, many of which dealt with issues of censorship, Internet restrictions, and social taboos, often outstripped everything else in the biennial in terms of subversive wit and relevance to the Cuban situation. For one work, Alejandro Ulloa simply placed on a plinth the most expensive piece of computer equipment in Cuba: an anonymous gray cable for connecting a data projector.

Each of the nightly exhibitions also included pieces by one of the many visiting artists who have taught at Bruguera's school, among them Dora García, Thomas Hirschhorn, Adrian Paci, and Artur Żmijewski. Of these, Elmgreen & Dragset's *24/7/365*, 2009, was the most memorable: Two young men sat on chairs at either side of a bed, then stood up, undressed, and spooned on the bed, before dressing and sitting again. These actions were repeated for the four hours of the show, as if on a video loop. The piece's directness and unabashed homosexuality resonated well with the efforts of Bruguera's students to engage in ad hoc forms of journalism and activism—often making use of legal loopholes—as ways of addressing the complexities of life under Castro. "*Estado de Excepción*" stood in sharp contrast to the rest of the biennial, which showed a near-total absence of curatorial direction—perhaps inevitably, given the makeup of the team (nine curators, all from the Centro Wifredo Lam) and the generic character of their chosen theme, "Resistance and Integration in a Global Era."

Since setting up Arte de Conducta, Bruguera has tried to avoid producing imitators by not showing her own work in Cuba. Because "*Estado de Excepción*" marked the closing of this school, she broke her rule, and accepted Guillermo Gomez-Peña's invitation to produce a work. The result, *El susurro de Tatlin #6* (Tatlin's Whisper #6), 2009, is the sixth of an ongoing series of actions that, in Bruguera's words, reproduce images familiar from real life as direct and participatory experiences for the viewer. One of the most memorable

From top: **Tania Bruguera, *El susurro de Tatlin #5* (Tatlin's Whisper #5), 2008.** Performance view, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, January 28, 2008. Photo: Olivia Harris. **Elmgreen & Dragset, *24/7/365*, 2009.** Performance view, Galería Habana, Havana, March 25, 2009. From "*Estado de Excepción*" (State of Exception), 2009.

of these actions took place at Tate Modern in January 2008: Bruguera invited two mounted policemen to appear on the packed bridge of the Turbine Hall and work through their full range of crowd-control techniques: herding viewers into a central pool, dividing them, blocking the exits, and so on. A previous performance, *El susurro de Tatlin #3*, 2006, involved a homemade-bomb-making workshop at Galería Juana de Aizpuru in Madrid.

For the new piece in Havana, a large brown curtain was hung in the central courtyard of the Centro Wifredo Lam as the backdrop to a raised podium with microphones, and two hundred disposable cameras were issued to the audience, who were informed that for the duration of the performance they would have freedom of speech for one minute each. The atmosphere was utterly electric, in contrast to the flaccidity of innumerable "soap box" events organized by artists in the West. A long pause ensued as the media thronged in anticipation. Would anyone speak their mind and face the consequences? A woman was the first to mount the podium, where she simply wept, her hands shaking as she clutched the microphone. Like all the subsequent speakers, she was flanked by a man and woman in military garb, who placed a white dove on her shoulder in a visual echo of a moment in Fidel Castro's postrevolutionary speech in 1959 when a dove landed on his shoulder—an image that Bruguera's trained bird deftly demythologized. The well-known dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez was next and began her plea for freedom of access to the Internet by declaring, "Cuba is a country surrounded by the sea, and it is also an island surrounded by censorship." Almost forty people followed, including a student who announced that he was twenty years old and had never felt more free. Those who spoke for longer than a minute were forcibly bundled off stage by the fatigues-clad duo.

The combination of formal precision (the setup of the podium, the militaristic assistants, the uncontrolled dissemination of documentation via the cameras) was countered by the unpredictability of the flapping dove and the mixed emotions of those who spoke. As with all participatory works, the content was somewhat hit-or-miss: Alongside pained calls for "*Libertad!*" and reminders that "one day, freedom of expression in Cuba will not be a performance," there was the occasional prorevolutionary voice ("Millions of children die every day, and none of them are Cuban!"), plus the inevitable foreigners jumping on the bandwagon. After one hour Bruguera closed the piece by pointedly thanking all the Cubans.

In the following days, the biennial's organizing committee published a communiqué repudiating the comments of those who had spoken on the podium, arguing that they had hijacked the event to "strike a blow at the Cuban Revolution." This document didn't indict Bruguera directly—but as Sánchez notes on her blog, Generation Y (where she has also published an English translation of the communiqué), the piece would not have been complete without this official reaction; indeed, its absence would have proved that Bruguera's event was a performance staged for the benefit of international visitors. (On the other hand, the influx of foreigners during the biennial contributed to an easing of restrictions that made it possible for this performance to take place at all.)

Could a project like *El susurro de Tatlin #6*, with its experiential potency *and* the capacity to hit a political nerve, ever work in the West? Watching this piece made me melancholic about my own context, where calls for freedom and democracy have been so entirely compromised and devalued (for example, by US foreign policy) that they no longer hold as a point of collective rallying. This raises a troubling paradox: Was Bruguera's event in Havana so artistically and politically powerful *because* of the repressive ideology that it was produced under and that it opposed? Ironically, this regime was, after all, also the main reason why so much of the biennial came across as ideologically correct and, as a result, utterly tepid.

One way to think through this tension is to consider Bruguera's term *useful art*. The phrase is not about using art to do good, as in the recent proliferation of "NGO art": projects that aim to find concrete solutions to local problems rather than criticizing or representing them. Instead, for Bruguera, useful art denotes a conjunction of political action and illegality—understood here as pushing against the boundaries of what those in power define as legal and acceptable, and being willing to embrace the criminal if necessary—so that art might achieve something in the social field (be this civil liberties or cultural politics), as well as taking a position within the long history of such artistic gestures. In the case of *El susurro de Tatlin #6*, Bruguera succeeded in granting Cubans an hour of free speech; in "*Estado de Excepción*," she got a whole generation of young Cuban artists to be fully accredited exhibitors in the Biennial. Although she denies that art has much to do with these collateral achievements, their experiential intensity is profoundly aesthetic, as is her ability to realize a conceptual framework that twists in the direction of two domains at once. □

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