

Ghosts of Futures Past: Time in Francis Alÿs' *Rehearsal* and Tania Bruguera's *Untitled (Place, Year)* series

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the construction of time in Francis Alÿs' *Rehearsal* (1999-2004) and Tania Bruguera's *Untitled (Place, Year)* (2000-present) series.¹ These suites posit a model of temporality that questions two foundational premises of the modernist understanding of time, the futuristic regime of historicity, and the categorical differentiation between past, present and future. I argue that their works posit an uncanny temporality where the coordinates of the now are always mapped out in relationship to what was and what is to be.

On *Song for Lupita* and *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*

Song for Lupita (Mañana) (1998) is a simple looped animation that depicts a woman endlessly pouring water from one glass to another. Through sketchy, unfinished lines, the video depicts a single figure against a white background as protagonist of the animation. As indicated by Tate Modern's website, the animation is accompanied by a soundtrack 'whose words 'Mañana, mañana' (tomorrow, tomorrow) suggest at once perpetual procrastination and continuing hope for the future'.² Denying the possibility of arriving at a finished state, where the water would be fully transposed from glass to glass, the animation prolongs and extends the act infinitely. Always in process, perpetually not achieving an end or result, the protagonist of the animation is, however, enthralled by the action itself; the woman seems to have no purpose in mind but the sole action of moving the liquid from one container to the other. In the

"Entries" section for Alÿs' Tate Modern retrospective, *A Story of Deception*, (2010) the artist included the following line as an explanatory axiom of the work, 'Mañana, mañana, is soon enough for me',³ (Tomorrow, tomorrow, is soon enough for me) which were also the song's lyrics.⁴ According to the artist and Cuauhtémoc Medina, the work's repetition produces an 'abolition of time'.⁵

According to Boris Groys' interpretation, in *Song for Lupita* 'we find an activity with no beginning and no end, no definite result or product...We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time; a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention'.⁶ Disregarding the passage of time the work highlights the importance of the action itself, not its origin or its conclusion; perhaps it does not even matter to know if it has a beginning or an end. In Russell Ferguson's words, the work 'staged a kind of resignation to the immediate present by introducing a complete hypnosis in the act itself, an act which was pure flux'.⁷ Emphatically prioritising the means, the doing, over the goals, the finished product, *Song for Lupita* literalised what Alÿs calls a 'Mexican sense of time', described as "el hacerlo sin hacerlo, el no hacerlo pero haciéndolo - literally "the doing but without doing, the not doing but doing".⁸ *Song for Lupita*, therefore, creates a space that rejects simple and rigid measurements of time by collapsing the past and future into the present. The work articulates an uncanny present characterised by the palimpsestic co-existence of past and future caught in the eternal present of the animation. In other words, *Song for Lupita* articulates what Alÿs calls 'a present to be continued',⁹ a today that loops eternally denying the existence of a tomorrow or a day before.

Tania Bruguera's *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* did not result in the production of a performance, object or other defined artistic or visual categories. Helaine Posner described this work as follows:

The audience entered a cave-like tunnel at La Fortaleza de la Cabaña, a space formerly used as a penitentiary cell. Underfoot, layers of rotting bagazo or sugarcane husks emitted the noisome stench of fermentation. The audience traipsed through the dark and the detritus towards a distant blue light that came into focus as a television screen, displaying silent looping footage of speeches by Fidel Castro. When they turned around, the audience noticed naked men ordered regimentally in rows of two, making empty, repetitive gestures towards their iconic leader. One rubbed his body, while another wiped his face. One used his fingers to pry open his mouth, and the last bowed.¹⁰

As Posner's description suggests, the work made use of extreme variations of light which the spectator had to endure. In the first instance, the spectator walked from a very bright place into a dark corridor causing a temporary moment of altered vision, or missed-sight insofar as the eye has to react to the light conditions in order to be able to discern what is inside this dark space. Then, the audience had to walk towards a faint light source while traipsing through the rotting sugar cane. Upon arrival at the light source inside the tunnel, the spectator encountered a television monitor hanging from the ceiling showing different official images of Fidel Castro.¹¹ In these images, the Cuban leader carries out different actions such as showing his bare chest (in order to show that he was not wearing a bullet proof vest during times of rumours of a possible US assassination plan).¹² They are images of the early Cuban revolution when, as Roberto Pinto recounts, 'Fidel the man could still be seen swimming in the sea or dressed in casual clothes in his own home'.¹³ Lastly, and as

the spectator's eyes got adjusted to the room's darkness and turned away from the video monitor, they noticed the presence of four naked individuals who repeatedly made a series of indistinct bodily gestures, such as 'bending down, rubbing or hitting parts of their bodies'.¹⁴ Physically, phenomenologically, literally, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* revealed something hidden within it only after the audience had fully engaged with it. It created a moment of surprise in the spectator. As Bruguera notes, 'the work has a moment of discovery, in which one thing is a different one or when we thought we already knew, a new element appears'.¹⁵ In this particular case, through both physical displacement and an experience of transition between light intensities, the installation rendered parts of itself anew; it proved certain initial perceptions to be mistaken, different from what the spectator had thought.

Modernist Time

For the purposes of this paper, the Modernist understanding of temporal passage can be characterised as a linear, teleological, evolutionary projection that champions acceleration, continuity, succession, and causal progression.¹⁶ At the same time, it posits a categorical differentiation between temporal regimes where one stage (be it second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year, decade) is considered as an independent, specific and autonomous unit stitched together by linear causality.¹⁷ It presupposes that there is a hierarchy of progress, of development, where the past is derided and transcended by the future. In this context, the notion of primitivism, for example, as it circulated in relation to African sculpture and Cubist painting at the turn

of the twentieth century, clearly assigned a place, not only in time, but by implication in a set of values that clearly defined it as 'barbarian', out-dated, irrelevant, exotic, 'bad'. As John Jervis argued in 'Transgressing the Modern':

As rationality, science and 'civilisation' came to constitute the legitimising framework of modern Western values, so ideas of evolution could serve to locate the 'primitive' as the other that is past, yet ever-present, as a threat of regression, temptation to nostalgic longings, trigger for disparagement or envy, or resource for critique of the pretensions of the present, yet a critique that presupposes the very terms of its own rebuttal. If the primitive can stand as a reproach to the civilised, the modern, it denounces the latter from the very place to which the latter has consigned it.¹⁸

Modernist time is understood as a system of measurement that has been systematically imposed over certain territories and regions and that has been commanded, historically speaking, by the West.¹⁹ In a broader context, the notions of the 'developing country' or the 'third world', for example, clearly demarcate the location of a particular place in relation to another (for example a peripheral country, like Mexico, in relation to its northern neighbour, the US). In this demarcation, the 'developing country' is conceptualised as being, not only categorically different, but somehow of less 'value' than the 'developed' one. This implies a vertical organisation that locates the 'developed' above and on top of the 'developing' while, at the same time, plotting a horizontal axis that locates the 'developing' as being before (in terms of progress) than the 'developed'. The 'developing' are, thusly, understood as lacking something that the 'developed' have; the 'developing' are 'incomplete' in the eyes of Modernist wholeness.²⁰

Modernist time, therefore, clearly advocates for what Medina described as a 'movement from tradition to 'modernity'.²¹ As such, the concept promotes the idea that the more modern you are the better. This not only fosters a competitive character in nations where the desire to be at the top of a particular chain of command drives the desire for national modernisation, but implies a sense of productivity, of advancement from one stage to the next; of what Christine Ross, drawing on Jürgen Habermas, has called a futuristic drive.²² In this sense, the adoption of certain cultural, economic or political policies, often dictated by the West, is seen as one possible means to attaining a better status in the world order, or, perhaps, moving from the third world to the second world, or even from the second world to the first world.²³ Under this rubric the developed and the developing, the past and the future, are categorically differentiated and only related by a causal link. Modernist time posits the existence of radical ruptures between ages, epochs or any other unit of time, that make it different than the previous past or future. Choosing to ignore the continuities of certain things through time, Modernist time parcels time into strictly causal history.²⁴

Francis Alÿs: Rehearsals and palimpsestic time

Between 1999 and 2001, and in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Alÿs produced *Rehearsal I (El Ensayo)*. He described the work as follows,

Soundtrack: The rehearsal of a danzón by a brass band in Juchitán, Mexico.

Image: A Volkswagen Beetle repeatedly tries to ascend a hill without ever succeeding.

Mechanics: The driver of a VW listens to the tape recording of a rehearsal session by a brass band.

-While the musicians play, the car goes uphill.

-When the musicians lose track and pause, the car stops.

-While the musicians are tuning their instruments and talking, the car rolls back downhill.²⁵

Despite its apparent simplicity, the 29-minute video of the work documents a carefully researched and staged action performed by the artist in the outskirts of Tijuana, Mexico. *Rehearsal I* also articulated an uncanny temporality akin to that of the *Song for Lupita* as it blurred the boundaries of categorical differentiations between the past, the present and the future. The protagonist of *Rehearsal I* is caught in an act described by the artist as 'stubborn repetition',²⁶ which, 'hints at a story that is constantly delayed, and where the attempt to formulate the story takes the lead over the story itself. It is a story of struggle rather than one of achievement, an allegory in process rather than a quest for synthesis'.²⁷ Both *Lupita* and *Alÿs* are trapped in an unending operation that forfeits any definite sense of development. In this respect, both works posit a notion of time that is not dictated by the fulfilment of a specific task. The protagonist of *Rehearsal I*, the artist, is constantly, and literally, falling back towards the past.

The rehearsal itself, the car's —and therefore *Alÿs*'— oscillation, was thoroughly prepared through a series of studies and sketches. Importantly, the methodology of rehearsal was informed by a previous work entitled *Caracoles* (1999). For this 5-minute video, the artist recorded a popular Mexican children's game where the player

endlessly kicks a half-empty plastic bottle up a hill. The video documents how with each kick of the bottle, and although it temporarily ascends the hill, the bottle inevitably rolls downhill undoing any sense of stable progress. Furthermore, it shows the protagonist of the action, the child, constantly repeating the same motion — kicking— enthralled by the cyclical process implied by his game. This repetitive structure, but also the literal scenario of a struggle to conquer a topographical challenge, were then translated through a series of studies that would become the basis for *Rehearsal I*. In one particularly revealing study, Alÿs simulated the mechanics of *Rehearsal I* by constructing a miniature version of his ideal scenario. For this micro-rehearsal, Alÿs used a toy red Volkswagen that mimicked the one used in his final version. The car was placed at the beginning of a maquette of a slope constructed out of white paper. Anticipating the actual pendular,²⁸ back-and-forth, oscillation of the finished version, the toy car was then electrically powered while the aforementioned soundtrack was played and allowed to roll down during the musical breaks. Similar, in scale, to the plastic bottle used by the child in *Caracoles*, the red toy perpetually failed to reach the cusp of the miniature slope. Or, in other words, both kicker and miniature toy (and by extension the actual VW, and Alÿs), constantly postpone achieving a goal —reaching the top—, and therefore infinitely delay the achievement of any definite conclusion.

Rehearsal I aims at sustaining the ephemeral feeling of temporal condensation explored by *Song for Lupita*. Like Lupita, the protagonist of *Rehearsal* constantly returns to the starting place of his journey and is, therefore, caught in a perpetual

cycle of repetition. The red VW is not only engaged in an impossible task to conquer the hill itself but, given the city in which the work was performed, it is also caught in an unending attempt to reach the United States. According to Alÿs, *Rehearsal I* is also an allegory for 'the struggle of Latin American societies to adjust to the social and economic expectations of their northern neighbours'.²⁹ Although it seems straight forward, the car is trapped in an impossible maze; its attempts are heroic but decidedly thwarted. As the action is repeated in what seems to be an endless loop, a feeling of frustration, and irony, are conjured by the work; eternal repetition with no significant progress.

Rehearsal II (2001-2006)

Produced between 2001 and 2006, *Rehearsal II* is a further exploration of the logic of the rehearsal as an allegory for the fraught relationship between Latin America and Western models of modernity. Repeating the mechanics of *Rehearsal I*, according to Alÿs and Medina, in the work,

A stripper listens to the rehearsal session of a soprano with her pianist. While the pianist plays and the soprano sings, the stripper undresses. When the soprano or the pianist loses track over a musical phrase and pause, the stripper halts her act. While the soprano and the pianist discuss the musical phrase in question, the stripper dresses up again. The rehearsal session will go on until the stripper completes her act.³⁰

As their description suggests, the 14-minute-long video features a female stripper slowly taking off her clothes while a pianist and a singer rehearse Franz Schubert's

Song of Longing.³¹ Although the camera focuses exclusively on the stripper's action, when the musicians stop we can hear their discussions as the stripper puts her clothes back on. The work echoed *Rehearsal I*'s logic of interruptions and repetitions, as the stripper is constantly prevented from fulfilling her task and simultaneously forced to repeat the process, almost, endlessly.

According to the artist, the purpose of *Rehearsal II* 'was to parody the seduction that "development" and the aspiration to mimic "advanced" capitalists societies exert on Latin American governments and elites'.³² The stripper, in this sense, impersonates modernity and its allure of socioeconomic progress, constantly teasing the audience's —Latin America's— desire for erotic satisfaction allegorizing the desire for modernity. Exploiting what he considers to be modernity's seductive power, in *Rehearsal II* the ostensible desire of the viewer to see the stripper naked is constantly thwarted and delayed. At the same time, this erotic desire is articulated as an allegorical rendering of modernity's appeal for Latin American countries. Just like the stripper's goal, being naked, is constantly thwarted and interrupted, so is Latin America's achievement of modern standards. According to Medina, 'In that sense, the *Rehearsals* evoke the embrace that cannot be achieved, the orgasm forever delayed, for only in relation to the longing for satisfaction can we understand the impulse of modernisation'.³³

Politics of Rehearsal (2004)

Produced in 2004, *Politics of Rehearsal* articulates Alÿs' philosophy of Latin American history through a single, 30-minute video. Duplicating *Rehearsal II*, for *Politics of Rehearsal*, a stripper (a different woman from the one in *Rehearsal I*) also puts her clothes back on while the musicians discussed a specific phrase from the piece they were rehearsing. The work is in every way exactly as *Rehearsal II* except that it begins with several edited clips of Harry S. Truman's presidential inauguration speech given in January 20th, 1949 in Washington D.C., stitched together sequentially. The chosen fragments were part of a longer address to his country and the world during a time of war and emergency, which opened with a condemnation of Communism as a dangerous 'false philosophy'³⁴ based 'on the belief that man is so weak and inadequate that he is unable to govern himself, and therefore requires the rule of strong masters'.³⁵ Against Communism's dictatorial impulse and de-individualising drive, Truman posited Democracy as the sole alternative, for he saw it as a system 'based on the conviction that man has the moral and intellectual capacity, as well as the inalienable right, to govern himself with reason and justice'.³⁶ Importantly, Truman believed that the 'differences between communism and democracy do not concern the United States alone', as he thought Communism had expansionist intentions and, therefore, threatened the stability of every nation —and the world. Although it is important for understanding Truman's later claims about underdeveloped countries, this ideological 'preface' was not included in *Politics of Rehearsal*.

What the work did show, however, were several clips edited from the speech. Through these, we can hear Truman reading several passages of his address where he referred, specifically, to the extension of US models of 'scientific advances and industrial progress', modernity, to other nations that could use such knowledge for the 'improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'.³⁷ Immediately after Truman's introduction, Alÿs included the following explanatory caption, '*Politics of Rehearsal* is a metaphor of Latin America's ambiguous affair with modernity, forever arousing and yet, always delaying the moment it will happen'.³⁸

After this, the video changes dramatically. Instead of archival footage or a text, it shows an interior space with a metal chair on the middle surrounded by a piano, a pianist, a singer, a photographer (presumably Rafael Ortega) and Alÿs —himself recording the action as well. Soon after, and as the singer and the pianist begin to rehearse the piece, a stripper enters the stage and begins to slowly take off her clothes. At this stage, the video includes a disembodied voice, who we know is Medina, although he is never shown, that offers what Alÿs has called an 'impromptu' commentary that 'fleshes out' the main concerns of the piece, the aforementioned introductory caption.³⁹

Medina's intervention begins with the phrase, 'I was rethinking the implication of the rehearsal as a comment on modernity, and what becomes immediately obvious is the notion that modernity is pornographic'.⁴⁰ From this assertion, he develops a discourse on the temporality of the rehearsal that lasts as long as the rehearsal itself.

His address not only defines a specific version of modernity but also argues that the temporality of the rehearsal stands as a resistance to imposed modern models.

As articulated within Alÿs' practice, modernity presupposes that there is a hierarchical scale of 'progress', of development, where the 'previous' stage is transcended and even derided by the future. According to Medina's speech, Truman's characterisation of certain places as underdeveloped brought with it the 'implication of historical succession, that is, suddenly the view of places that had been under colonial rule, or were simply poorer countries, became a promise of a process of reaching the North American model that considered itself to be developed, to have realised all the potentiality of the era, of capitalism'.⁴¹ In other words, Truman's discourse, while highlighting the potential of certain nations, clearly stated that there were some things that prevented these countries from fulfilling their potential and becoming prosperous, modern nations. Cooperation with those nations, however, really meant the spread of US influence against Communist ideology. By the 1970s, however, and according to Medina, this model of tacit intervention as a resistance to Communism had collapsed as it became clear that the Cold War had been 'won' by capitalism and the West. Unmoored from their specific ideological struggle, according to Medina, the notion of the underdeveloped took on a 'completely abstract definition',⁴² insofar as it became a blanket category to define several nations trapped trying to achieve an ephemeral, intangible, set of values posited by modernity. For Medina, in these countries — and he bases his experience specifically on Mexico and more broadly on Latin America — 'Every five or six years there's a crisis, there's the promise to overcome the crisis, the

promise to bring development to the rank and file. What is this promise? To reach first-world levels of development'.⁴³ Yet due to the abstract nature of these standards, the countries striving for modernity are constantly falling for the illusion of development and simultaneously discovering the impossibility of achieving such a state. According to Medina, the temporal experience of underdeveloped societies is akin to a Sisyphean punishment in which 'No sooner do you start a task, no sooner there has been some type of effort...then you have to go back to the original starting point'.⁴⁴ Further, he adds, this scenario

always makes me think of a game of snakes and ladders. You advance through the game and suddenly instead of the little ladder they promised you there's a snake that sense you back to the starting square. And what that produces, in effect, is the notion of a sort of time that, even through there are a multitude of historical moments, multitude of phenomena, a multitude of changes, is crossed with the notion that history is not advancing, that history is always repeating itself and getting lost.⁴⁵

Tania Bruguera: Uncanny present

If Francis Alÿs' artistic practice tries to enact a non-linear conception of time where the present is always thrown back into the past and vice versa, Tania Bruguera's model, not only sees the past as a frame for the present, but advocates for an activation of the past, of memory, of history, in the present. Contrary to a Modernist version of time, Bruguera aims at disclosing the repressed continuities that unite past and present and that shape the future to come. As a result, in her practice, sedimented, anaesthetised sets of knowledge or images are made strange in order to

reveal how those supposedly past conditionings are still operational, not only as a premise but as active agents in our configuration of the present.

Untitled (Place, Year) series

The works belonging to this series share a sense of urgency. They reference places that are politically charged, areas that configure (and are configured by) economic, social, religious or ethnic tensions and problems. These sites, many times personally chosen by the artist and not necessarily determined by the artistic circuit, share an important discursive baggage that has conditioned and determined their identity in the global scene. This 'political imaginary' is defined by Bruguera, following Susan Buck-Morss and Valerii Podoroga, as

a political landscape is more than political logics, it is a visual field where political actors move and where they are also acted upon; it is a power landscape where political collectivity is found, a visual representation of what is political, thinking in the formation of a national identity through the appropriation of the territory.⁴⁶

The political imaginary, for Bruguera, could be described as mental imagery about a particular location that identifies, defines and reduces a site. These imaginaries, entrenched in public discourse, easily 'describe' a place taking as its main characteristics the events and actions that successfully circulate globally as identifying traits for a particular location. As stereotypes, the political imaginaries that define certain locations succeed at quickly providing a visual, political landscape of the place, a fleeting, bird's-eye-view of the complexities of a site. At the same time,

like kernels of information, the political imaginaries circulate with great speed through our world, in the form of cultural artefacts, such as movies, books, etc., simultaneously imposing their vision upon the receivers while perpetuating a logic of simplification through reductive, stereotypical identification. The political imaginaries, therefore, construct a vision of a particular location based on the needs and desires of those who are doing the defining. As an abstraction of observations on a particular reality, we can say that the political imaginaries tend to reduce the tensions existing in a particular place - be it social, economic, racial or violent - and favour simplistic, quasi-formulaic, stable, categorisations.

The *Untitled (place, year)* series reflects upon the importance of the stereotypes and reductive perspectives that determine the historical construction of certain places. Simultaneously they seek to act upon the reality that is constructed by these ideological presuppositions. The works propose an oscillation between the analysis of a collective ideological discourse (that determines a place as dangerous, conflicted, violent or repressive), and an observation of the present conditions of possibility that sustain such stereotypes. Importantly, *Untitled (place, year)* strategically deploys such imaginaries against themselves, appropriating and detouring them for critically dismantling accepted and assumed notions, categorisations and stereotypes. The works in the *Untitled (Place, Year)* series constantly re-evaluate, re-signify and re-deploy these generalised conceptions of place in such a way that they become active in the present as a tool for a critique, not only of the past, but also of the present. Bruguera's investigation into the sense of

place of a particular site focuses on the historical, ideological and discursive tensions and repressions that configure them. At the same time, and precisely by investigating the relevance of past historic conditionings of the present, they try to implicate their immediate reality, to uncover usually 'forgotten' or 'obscured' sets of knowledge and histories of a place with the intention of deploying them for the critical and tactical analysis of the present.

Untitled (Kassel, 2002)

The piece I did in Documenta was a translation of *Untitled* (Havana, 2000)...It was not a formal translation but the translation of the theme: what we see and what we don't see, what we don't want to see. It was about responsibility about what one wants to see and why.⁴⁷

-Tania Bruguera

Created for Documenta XI, *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* was described by Helaine Posner as follows,

A row of 750-watt lights was strung on a trestle above the entrance to the installation, assaulting the eyes of the viewer as if under interrogation. The metallic clicking sound of a person on patrol loading and unloading a gun was heard overhead. At first one did not know whether this sound was live or recorded, but it gradually became clear that the real human beings were watching and, in theory, threatening one's life. Suddenly the bright lights went out, the sound ceased and, for a few moments, the darkened space was dimly lit by a projection displaying the names of one hundred locations across the globe where political massacres have occurred since the end of World War II, some resulting in enormous casualties.⁴⁸

As her account suggests, just as in the aforementioned *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, there are several visual moments that compose an overall experience of the work. In

the first instance, a very powerful and uncomfortable line of 700-watt light bulbs blinded the viewer. Secondly, there was a 'soundtrack,' a metallic clicking noise that assaulted the viewer's sense of hearing and confused him or her as to what and where was the source of such continuous noise. Thirdly, the viewer was thrown into a sudden ocean of darkness, the clicking noise suspended. Finally, the viewer was exposed to a projected image that listed the names and casualties of a 100 different places around the globe where political massacres had taken place since the Second World War. Sensorial experience played a significant role in the careful orchestration of this piece. In the first moment of the work, the visitor was rendered almost blind, at least incapable to see beyond the lights themselves. While blind, the spectator of *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* was assaulted through another sense, this time hearing, through a series of repetitive clicking noises that were impossible to determine where they came from. Finally, the video showing the list of politically motivated violent sites, refocused the spectator's gaze towards a centre light-emitting source. In the case of *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, darkness revealed not only the existence of politically violent sites after World War II, but also allowed the viewer to identify the source of the clicking noise he or she experienced upon first entering the work. Only in darkness could the viewer notice that the noise came from a live performer who, perched above the audience, systematically loaded a gun.

Untitled (Kassel, 2002) put the spectator through a series of extreme variations of visual experience; the room itself created a feeling of physical instability, a dizzying space not very easy to navigate or to comprehend. Complimented by the live

'soundtrack', the space further confused the viewer as he or she could not figure out where the noise came from or what it was. Once disoriented, the viewer was then assaulted by information related to different historically violent sites, forcing him or her to reflect upon contemporary political violence. This move displaced the initial physical discomfort into an intellectual and emotional discomfort that focused on the articulation and deployment of power within the world after World War II. This inner confusion was then furthered and emphasised when the spectators noticed the performer cocking the gun, making them feel observed, vulnerable, and perhaps more importantly, as if they were being interrogated or in the line of fire of an execution.⁴⁹

As Pinto comments, 'Kassel, indeed, was one of the driving centres behind the Nazi arms industry during the Second World War'.⁵⁰ As a result, Kassel as a city, a site, was deeply imbricated within the Nazi apparatus. This story, however, is usually obscured and Kassel is 'sold' as a quaint, quiet town in the middle of Germany welcoming to the eccentricities of contemporary art. Documenta has not helped this idyllic representation of the place, quite the opposite, it has solidified Kassel's identity as a neutral place, almost 'in parenthesis' from reality, where every five years the most cutting-edge contemporary art is exhibited. Kassel has been constituted in the artistic imaginary as a fertile ground for the exhibition of works of art. It is the darker story of the city that *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* sought to unearth to both the spectator, and the artworld at large. As an exploration of the local memory of the place, or lack of memory, Bruguera's *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* activated in the present the historical

construction of a place highlighting that which is known (Kassel as site of documenta) and that which is typically hidden (Kassel's Nazi history). As Edmundo Desnoes argues,

In Germany, the artist used light as the truth we all refuse to see although it is shining in our eyes. And without using any of the traditional objects and symbols of the holocaust, Tania recreated the horror by simply having the sound of weapons being loaded, readied to fire over and over again. The terrifying eternity of hearing the cocking of the weapon: the most dangerous moment: in the endless instant before death. Light, sound, darkness.⁵¹

In *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, it was the spectator who was under pressure and constant scrutiny. The work tried to provoke a reaction from the viewer to a particular situation, in this case, political, repressive violence. By putting the spectator at the core of the work, not only formally but also conceptually, *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)* included and phenomenologically implicated the viewer in the discussion of power and its deployment. *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, as Posner suggests, forced the audience to 'explore the past as well as the conditions of their own vulnerability'.⁵² Bruguera's play with light, with visibility and corporality, according to Jonathan Griffin, placed 'the audience themselves under interrogation'⁵³ as if they were in a compromised situation such as a war or under custody for some undefined crime. The viewer, therefore, was made aware of the historical continuity of such political violence while at the same time, he or she was also held responsible for either continuing and fostering these situations or reacting against them. The question of what society is willing to acknowledge, to see, to remember, and what it chooses to ignore, was brought to the forefront of the discussion, and one's personal responsibility towards

these situations highlighted. As Posner suggests, in *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, 'Bruguera encouraged the audience to recognise the global reach of political violence as personal threat by placing them directly in the line of fire'.⁵⁴ In other words, the work sought to perversely impregnate the present of the spectator with the historical past of a specific site.

Ghosts of Futures Past

Although Francis Alÿs and Tania Bruguera are two prominent contemporary artists, as evinced by Alÿs' travelling retrospective exhibition *A story of deception and Bruguera's* recent intervention at the Tanks, both at Tate Modern, only very few studies have brought their practice together.⁵⁵ However, as I have argued in this paper, works such as *Rehearsal* series and *Untitled (Place, Year)* are akin in several ways. In the first place, as temporal models, they both rely on strategies of repetition that aim at sustaining, holding on to, the present. In their works, we can sense that the past is never really past —neither for Lupita, nor the red VW, nor the stripper(s), nor Havana, nor Kassel— as they compulsively repeat certain stages thought to be surpassed. Like the protagonists of *Song for Lupita*, the subjects of these artworks are not bound to a chronological narrative that plots a straightforward evolution from one stage to the next. At the same time, Bruguera's *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*, for example, constantly shifted Kassel's historical coordinates forcing the spectator to recognise the continuity, and insistence, of political violence in the present. In this sense, Bruguera's re-activation of the present can be compared to the temporal

structure in Alÿs' *Rehearsal* insofar as they both conflate beginning and end, past and present. These operations can be described as temporal models that seek to rethink the validity, relevance and function of the categories of past, present and future.⁵⁶ They articulate the present as the ghost of futures past.

¹ For images of the works discussed and further information see the respective artists' websites:

www.francisalys.com

www.taniabruquera.com

² Tate Modern, 'Francis Alÿs. A Story of Deception: Room Guide, Song for Lupita', <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/francis-aly/francis-aly-story-deception-room-guide/francis-aly-7>>

³ Ibid.: 92.

⁴ The 'Entries' section of the catalogue was a part of the volume given entirely to Alÿs and Medina for describing and addressing 61 works that they thought were pivotal in Alÿs' career. Although the texts are written in the first person, they purposefully conflate Alÿs' and Medina's voice making it impossible to determine who is saying what. For this reason, when referring to the "Entries" section of the catalogue I make reference to both Alÿs and Medina explicitly.

⁵ Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Entries', in Mark Godfrey, Klaus Biesenbach, and Kerry Greenberg (eds.), *Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception* (London: Tate, 2010): 92.

⁶ Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', in Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (eds.), *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2010): 29.

⁷ Francis Alÿs and Russell Ferguson, 'Interview: Russell Ferguson in Conversation with Francis Alÿs', in Cuauhtémoc Medina, Jean Fisher, and Russell Ferguson (eds.), *Francis Alÿs* (London: Phaidon, 2007): 15.

⁸ Ibid.: 15.

⁹ Ibid.: 92.

¹⁰ Helaine Posner, *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary* (Milano: Charta, 2009): 76

¹¹ Edmundo Desnoes, 'Both Faces of the Moon', *Arte al Día*, (2005): 28.

¹² Ellen Pearlman, 'The Fallacy of Utopia: The Artworld and Current Dialectic in Havana', *The Brooklyn Rail*, (2002): 18.

¹³ Roberto Pinto, 'Exercise of Resistance', in Galeria Soffiantino (ed.), *Exercise in Resistance* (Turin, 2003): 33.

¹⁴ Tania Bruguera, 'Untitled (Havana, 2000)', <<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/146-1-Untitled+Havana+2000.htm>>

¹⁵ Tania Bruguera, 'Workshop Talk. Cátedra Juan Gris', in Universidad Complutense De Madrid (ed.), *Cuadernos de la Cátedra Juan Gris* (Madrid, 2010): unpaginated.

¹⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Columbia University Press, 1985).

Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity - an Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998): 1-15

¹⁷ Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*.

¹⁸ John Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 6.

¹⁹ Francis Alÿs, Rafael Ortega, and Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Politics of Rehearsal', (New York, 2004).

It is important to mention that although the work has been widely circulated and debated, none of the volumes produced include a full transcription of the video's 'dialogue' nor a detailed analysis of its content. In this respect, this is the first place such analysis has taken place. For a full transcript of the dialogue see my PhD.

See also:

Harry S. Truman, 'Inaugural Address. January 20, 1949', (1949).

Habermas, 'Modernity - an Incomplete Project'.

²⁰ 'Historical succession, that is, suddenly the view of places that had been under colonial rule, or were simply poorer countries, became a promise of a process of reaching the North American model that considered itself to be developed, to have realised all the potentiality of the era, of capitalism. And the others seen as already in the process of getting there, but still not reaching that point.' In Alÿs, Ortega, and Medina, 'Politics of Rehearsal'.

²¹ Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Fable Power', in Cuauhtémoc Medina, Jean Fisher, and Russell Ferguson (eds.), *Francis Alÿs* (London: Phaidon, 2007): 95.

²² 'As Jürgen Habermas specifies, the secular concept of modernity conveys the assurance that "the future has already begun": it lives for the future as well as the novelty that the future is presumed to bring about. The caesura defined by each new beginning has therefore been transferred to the past, to a temporal dimension in opposition to which modernity is declared as a new age, so that it is the past which is somehow always too late, behind, not on time. In such a caesura, "time becomes experienced as a scarce resource for the mastery of problems that arise —that is, as the pressure of time." Zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, defines the present "as a transition that is consumed in the consciousness of a speeding up and in the expectation of the differentness of the future"; as a temporal dimension "that understands itself from the horizon of the modern age as the actuality of the most recent period." Because of modernity's deployment of the present as a transitional moment heading towards a continuously different future, it must reaffirm its rupture with the past as a "continuous renewal.'" (Emphasis in original)

Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present, It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012): 66.

Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance', *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT 1990).

²³ Truman, 'Inaugural Address. January 20, 1949'.

Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj, *Modernity and Difference* (London: INIVA, 2001).

²⁴ "The argument of underdevelopment puts it as a linear situation in which some lag behind others but have the resources and potential to do like the other, to be identical to the other, and that they simply need to throw off the shackles that prevent it."

Alÿs, Ortega, and Medina, 'Politics of Rehearsal'.

²⁵ Alÿs and Medina, 'Entries': 103.

²⁶ Russell Ferguson, *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007): 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 79.

²⁸ Francis Alÿs and Martin-Gropius-Bau, *Blueorange 2004* (Martin-Gropius-Bau, 2004): 10

²⁹ Alÿs and Medina, 'Entries': 103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 110.

³¹ Ross, *The Past Is the Present, It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*: 67.

³² Alÿs and Medina, 'Entries': 110-111.

³³ Medina, 'Fable Power': 40.

³⁴ Truman, 'Inaugural Address. January 20, 1949'.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ A full transcript of Truman's edited video included by Alÿs reads as follows,

'We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas.

I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realise their aspirations for a better life. And, in

cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development.

What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing.

Democracy alone can supply the vitalising force to stir the peoples of the world into triumphant action, not only against their human oppressors, but also against their ancient enemies-hunger, misery, and despair.

If we are to be successful in carrying out these policies, it is clear that we must have continued prosperity in this country and we must keep ourselves strong.'

Alÿs, Ortega, and Medina, 'Politics of Rehearsal'.

My transcription.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Alÿs and Medina, 'Entries': 144.

⁴⁰ Alÿs, Ortega, and Medina, 'Politics of Rehearsal'.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tania Bruguera, 'Untitled (Bogotá, 2009)', *Encuentro 2009: Staging Citizen: Cultural Rights in the Americas* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia & Hemispheric Institute, 2009).

⁴⁷ Roselee Goldberg, 'Being Cuban', in La Bienale Di Venezia (ed.), *Tania Bruguera* (Venice: Prince Claus, 2005): 21.

⁴⁸ Posner, *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*: 18-19.

⁴⁹ Silvia Höller, 'Every Gesture Is a Political Act', in Sivia & Matt Höller, Gerald (ed.), *Portraits* (Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006): unpaginated.

⁵⁰ Pinto, 'Exercise of Resistance': 34.

⁵¹ Desnoes, 'Both Faces of the Moon': 29.

⁵² Posner, *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*: 80.

⁵³ Jonathan Griffin, 'Tania Bruguera: Cuba, Performance and Society's Relationship to Its History', *Frieze*, /118 (2008): unpaginated.

⁵⁴ Posner, *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*: 18-19.

⁵⁵ Notable exceptions being the exhibitions "Arte No es Vida," and "Dominó Canibal".

Museo Del Barrio, Deborah Cullen, and M. Bustamante, *Arte [No Es] Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000* (New York: El Museo Del Barrio, 2008).

Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Dominó Canibal* (Distributed Art Pub Incorporated, 2011).

⁵⁶ Ross, *The Past Is the Present, It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*: 12.

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