

TANIA BRUGUERA INTERVIEWED BY LARNE ABSE GOGARTY

The Cuban artist, based in Havana and New York, asks what is art for? For Bruguera, part of the answer lies in re-evaluating the role of the artist in society while avoiding both political instrumentalism and institutional co-option by turning her own cultural capital into political capital

CITIZEN ARTIST

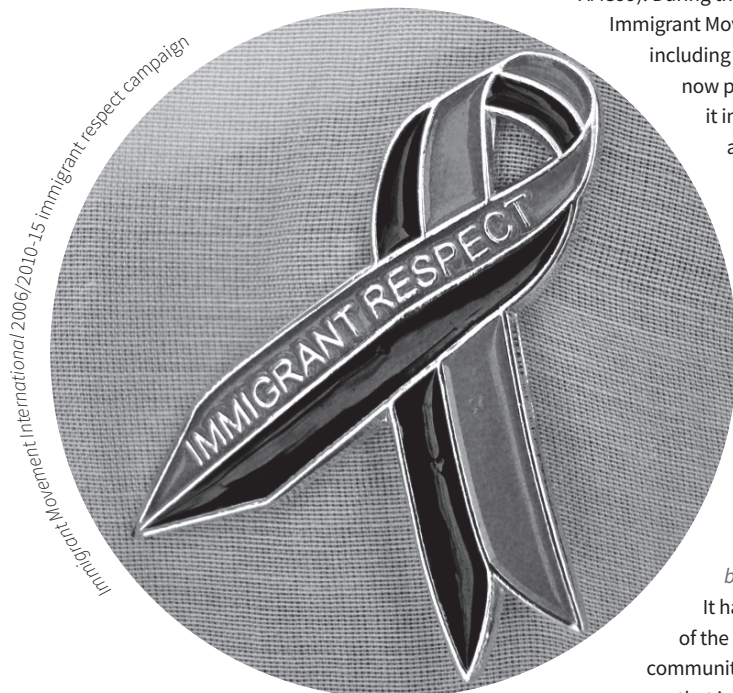
Larne Abse Gogarty: *What has brought you to London?*

Tania Bruguera: I'm here in London for a one-month residency at the South London Gallery, apropos the exhibition 'Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today', which has been curated by Pablo León de la Barra (Reviews AM399). During the residency, the idea is to follow up on the long-term project Immigrant Movement International (IMI), which has had several reiterations including its headquarters in Corona, Queens, beginning in 2011. This has now passed into the community, which is taking care of it and bringing it in the direction they think it should go, which is fantastic. There is also the political party in Mexico, El Partido del Pueblo Migrante, and the campaign 'Dignity has no nationality'.

While in London, we are exploring the similarities and the unique elements of immigration here. Arriving a few days after Brexit allowed us to witness how the discussion around refugees and immigrants is at the centre of the national debates again. I started this project in 2005 and 11 years later we still have the same questions, same answers, same fears – it's quite disheartening. This is just a subject politicians try to win elections with, and then it becomes a background problem as soon as they take office.

How did the IMI headquarters in Corona move from being something you were actively managing and involved with to becoming a self-sustaining group or institution?

It has worked because of the group, but also through the support of the Queens Museum. The process of passing the project to the community took around a year and it entailed providing an educational process that included a history of social and public art practice, resources for activism and structures for self-reflection on the project itself. This training also initiated a self-selection process in order to be part of the council, a structure we created for the members of the community to administer and guide the project. The Queens Museum was key. The staff see it as a civic institution, which is something I have advocated for a long time, not because we as artists or art institutions should take over the role of government, or allow government to avoid accountability, but rather because today the question we, in the arts, have to ask ourselves is: 'what is art for?' The answer to that question should reflect the world we live in now and not concepts of perception, image-making and social roles created in the 20th century. There are specific ways by which reality's





Immigrant Movement International 2006/2010-15

Tribute to Ana Mendieta 1985/1986-96

INSTAR (Institute of Activism Hannah Arendt) 2015

perception is being constructed today that demand from us, as art professionals, a re-evaluation of our role in society and the value of our work. When I ask the question – why do we need art and art institutions today? – it is not a call for the disappearance of art but the repositioning of this activity in society. Art institutions are focused on attracting audiences, it is one of their main challenges. But to bring people into their house, they will have to rethink not only how to introduce art to a non-initiated audience but also how an art institution could be important in those people’s lives beyond art’s decorative dimension, beyond a mug, a bag or a T-shirt with the image of an artwork. What I am asking is how can we make art when the process of institutional commodification of an artwork happens so quickly making it very difficult to potentiate questions like ‘how can you be a citizen artist’?

Can you say more about how you envision this process of making commodification harder?

By commodification I refer not only to the process of translating art into economic value but also its delivery, which reduces the tension between image perception and content generation. Such processes disable the democratic potential of art and, instead, they bring a paralysing feeling of inadequacy, especially among the non-initiated in the arts – they feel excluded by an inaccessible history and see their presence in the institution as either an adjunct to entertainment and tourism, or experience discomfort when standing in front of some art with huge monetary value while they are struggling economically just to survive. Art ceases to be art too quickly. It would be great to slow down this process, so people can make the artwork theirs. Yet it is naive not to acknowledge that art and its meanings will always be appropriated at some point. What I am trying to propose is a type of art that is not appropriated for commodification and market interests but could, instead, be part of people’s lives, whether in its ephemeral capacity as an experience or as a more permanent feature, for example as part of a city’s legislation. What is disturbing is the hegemony of the market, which becomes de facto a claim for legitimacy over other ways to evaluate and enjoy art.

But by affirming the notion of art becoming civic, involved in the city or legislation, you are affirming the appropriation of art by the state, which comes with its own issues.

First of all, we should make a distinction: not all civic art is appropriated by the state, this is in fact quite hard. Secondly, I never understood the harsh judgement towards art that intends to become part of a piece of legislation or of a civic institutional change, especially when we look at the alternatives. Instead, one could see this not as a form of treason against the ‘purity’ and ‘spirituality’ of art but pride that art contributes to society, in more than one way. People, in general, when confronted with such art ignore the long tradition this practice has and they talk about it as if it was some sort of assault on the sanctity of art. There is this perception that when working with a government agency you are compromising and submitting to power, but people who deal with gallerists and collectors don’t have a less compromised relationship. I personally prefer a conversation that ends in legislation that will reach a large part of the population than one ending with a wall-painting in a private house.

When I talk about art becoming a civic tool that can also penetrate the structure of government, I’m talking about

a device by which people can enter the house of power, not the other way around. I'm talking about bringing to a centre of political power an energy that mobilises people for their own benefit, not for the benefit of the government. But of course, sometimes without intending it, we may be giving government the tools with which they will fuck us up and it is our responsibility as artists to keep in mind who benefits from our work.

Nevertheless, if you do a social art project that gets taken to the city council or an activist institution, the work returns to people with less erosion of its meaning than if it goes to an art gallery. It can go back to the people for whom it was originally made without losing the core meaning of the work. It also creates an expanded understanding of the role of art, one that proposes to do something where art involves more than creating something merely to look at. In terms of appropriation from the state, one of the biggest challenges is scale and the distorting effect it can have on the artist's intentions. When something becomes completely commodified – and this includes all kinds of art genres and all kinds of appropriators – are people really seeing it? Commodification interferes in the reading of the work, making it difficult to grasp the original intent of the artist. The work is almost kidnapped.

Would the shift of the IMI headquarters into community self-management be an example of the work returning to the people?

Yes, and within this kind of work you need allies. You can't just pass the project back to the immigrants and say 'it's your problem now'. This process is not about passing responsibilities to others but about giving them the possibility to shape the work even more to their needs. It is not about programming or perpetuating a structure of events and activities, it is about the development of an ecosystem. As the initiator of the project along with all the people involved, you need to create an ecology that sets the tone for how people feel, not just emotionally but also in terms of the opportunities they want for themselves and the respect they deserve, the work being about how to become viable interlocutors within one area or another of society. That kind of ecology is hopefully about not having to perform but about understanding how well you can be with yourself and how art can be a tool for this. This can take two weeks, three months or five years; as an artist working with them, you have to feel it and understand the condition of constant transformation of such work, because the needs for the work to exist change. We did a transition with the IMI HQ in Corona where the museum staff agreed to continue their support. We sat down with the community and the museum staff and asked how we could carry out the transition, and we decided that the best way was to set up a school of art and activism, with two main leaders to teach. Everyone attending was paid. The course was open to the whole community and we did this course weekly for six to eight months. I took the decision not to be part of the school, but I was still going to be around in order for it to be a gradual transition, one that understood the 'tempo' of this specific community and the natural ways the decision-making structure could be transferred.

How does this issue of duration relate to your earlier performances, such as Tribute to Ana Mendieta, 1985-96, which lasted more than a decade? Do you see this interest in endurance/duration as a continuation?

I divide my work into two main strategies: short-term pieces and long-term pieces. I am interested in the immediate power of images, but I also want to see whether art can really change something. I've seen it happen, so I want to try. With flashy, quick, intense experiences, the unpacking happens after – on your own – when you go from being an audience member to being a citizen, whereas in long-term pieces everything gets unpacked together. For those projects, a long period

is needed because the tempo of art consumption is not in sync with the tempo of social change. Forcing the tempo of the work often creates ethical clashes. This is why so many political and social art projects have failed – and not in a good way; they have failed in the sense of creating mistrust and exploitation. The temporality in the art world is: 'I get it. Next.' The temporality in society is: 'First, how can I trust you?' Trust takes time, but it is what ensures that the work is done within a sense of community.

You have developed the category of Arte Útil (Useful Art/Art as a tool) to describe projects like IMI. How do you see this working in relation to other terms that have proliferated since the early 1990s like socially engaged art, collaborative art and social practice?

Arte Útil comes from the same interests, but there are a few differences. Arte Útil does not want to make things better, does not want to 'fix' the system, but wants to change the system. It is a little more ideological, let's say. I have an exercise I use when teaching Arte Útil where I ask students to choose a successful piece of social art, and then to imagine how it would be transformed into Arte Útil. Then you understand the difference. While in socially engaged art a lot of energy is put into getting people to understand why something is the way it is, or to show the world the way a certain group of people experience it, in Arte Útil we also do that but only as a first step of the work, we do not stop there. We don't want to show how things are, we want to change how things work. In that sense, the idea of gesture is in contrast to that of performativity. A lot of socially engaged art is performed, whereas Arte Útil is a social, political or economic gesture.

Finally, the big discussion in socially engaged art about authorship is not present in Arte Útil because we understand artists as initiators. Already through this you acknowledge how the work owes itself to the people you are working with; it also entails the potential permeability of the project if it is continued after the initiator leaves the project. In Arte Útil we want to implement prototypes that can be reproduced by others. Contrary to the idea that Arte Útil disregards the importance of art, it wants to rethink art's functions and the place it occupies in society. It is about putting art back into a position of social and political respect.

In a recent interview you described thanking the Cuban secret police for making your work #YoTambienExijo better through the interrogations you were subjected to after your recent arrest (Artnotes AM383). You compared this experience with instances within the history of performance that were based around endurance. You also described #YoTambienExijo as fitting with your earlier practice of Arte de Conducta (Behaviour Art) rather than Arte Útil. Can you say more about this distinction?

#YoTambienExijo uses political collective memory. People in the arts in Cuba remembered the earlier performance of *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version)*, 2009, but this time I wanted to see what would happen if we did it in the street – where it really matters – rather than within the safe walls of an art institution. It was the perfect example of my concept of *Arte de Conducta* because it was experienced through people's responses and reactions; these were the generator of the meaning of the work. Yes, the Cuban secret police and the fear of the current government became materials of the work, their simplistic reactions were also *Arte de Conducta*; the behaviour of the government itself gave meaning to the work. I think their stubbornness made the piece better – it became a power game between the impact of art and the impact of a state. #YoTambienExijo exposed clearly another concept of my work: political timing specificity, which means that the work is generated and defined by the political conditions and urgencies of the place and time.



Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version) 2009
performance
one minute free of censorship per speaker

#YoTambienExijo 2014-15

Is this difference between Arte de Conduca and Arte Útil again a tension between short-term and long-term projects?

Strictly speaking *#YoTambienExijo* didn't become *Arte Útil*. People could see through the work the methods the Cuban government uses to stop freedom of expression. But that is not activating knowledge. It would have been *Arte Útil* if people had exercised their freedom in public places. But it just opened people's eyes to the reality in Cuba. In that sense it stays within a more traditional idea of artistic usefulness: awareness. That is not what we mean by *Arte Útil*. In one of the more than 20 interrogation sessions, they offered to undo the propaganda they had created and circulated against me – to clean my image – and offered me a solo show in return for my silence. I said the only way I'd be quiet was if they gave me a chance to work on a law for freedom of expression and against political hate in Cuba. If I had been able to achieve this, then it would have been *Arte Útil* because it would mean everything worked towards such legislative/structural change that would have an impact beyond the artwork it self. But it didn't happen.

How do you avoid creating a set of hierarchies between these works? It sounds like you would always strive ultimately for a project to become a piece of Arte Útil.

I have a soft spot for *#YoTambienExijo* because it shows clearly so many of the concepts I use for my work, such as the idea of the artist as initiator. People were very inspired by it and they started their own versions of the work. Activists took some of the strategies for their own projects. For example, the *Damas de Blanco* (Ladies in White) sometimes call themselves performers now. Because of this, I am fulfilled by the project. But if I could have worked on the law, that piece would have used all the concepts I am working with, including *Arte Útil*.

Do you view your position as an artist as enabling a capacity to blackmail or manipulate power structures such as government and the art world?

In Cuba I learned the potential of acquiring political capital through cultural capital. Also, by calling something art you can be protected while opening spaces that are otherwise forbidden. As an artist there you could say more than as a citizen. In situations such as biennales, you can say certain things because the Cuban government doesn't want to look bad in front of foreigners. It is also aware of this, so last year I had a huge battle with the government because it wanted to say my project wasn't art. At some point I realised that they couldn't recognise this genre, or didn't want to so they could accuse me of being a national security threat or traitor. So I started teaching them in the interrogation sessions about performance and socially engaged art – in the last interrogation session they said 'yeah, yeah we get it, we're going to be part of the work no matter what we do'. Cuba is an island, where there is some mystification about what is outside. This means that the more capital you have outside, the more you can bring pressure inside. The only reason I am here today instead of serving a 20-year sentence is because of all the people in the art world who mobilised after my arrest. There you see clearly cultural capital as political capital in action.

Do you see this use of art world capital for political leverage as solely working in Cuba? For example, do you see your relationship to US art institutions in much the same way – that you might work with art-world institutions that you 'couldn't care less about' in order to continue making Arte Útil projects?

It works in other places too, but you have to want to use your capital in this way. There is a general tendency to use cultural capital to acquire economic capital instead. The process of acquiring capital is similar everywhere but the impact and therefore the scale of what you can do with it is different, depending where you use it and what for. For example, I have used it within the art world in order to have working conditions that better respond to the type of work I want to do, especially regarding the issues of time, sustainability, responsibility and continuing economic support, because some of these projects cannot be done in a year. I had all these fights, but it paid off and I hope not only for me. It is not as if I invented anything. I used the platform this gave me.

Does that access not define your authorship? To say you are an initiator does not get rid of the property or power relations that grant you access to these institutions.

As an initiator, the property, power relations and access are shared. The problem arises when the institutions or the people you are working with are still using the concept of authorship. To claim sole authorship in this kind of project is to perpetuate and reproduce among the people you worked alongside other models of unfairness they are probably already experiencing. It is about understanding how you can put your privilege to use for others. The work should not serve to create more privilege for yourself, but instead function as a way to dissolve your privilege, to give it away. This is a difference between artists who want to do art as a social 'magical' act and artists who understand all the work that change requires, because you are working in society. It will not work to just appear and for the community to be fascinated. Being a 'social magician' is a lot sexier for the art world whereas this kind of art is hard work within the community. I'm part of a group of artists interested in affecting things institutionally because the door is open, or semi-open, so you use that privilege to transmit ideas to people who can make the change, to push the limits of the institutions. It is a lot of work – it is lobbying for better conditions for the art that you believe in.

Contrasting the magic act with hard work is interesting as a way of describing the strategy of Arte Útil projects, which often seem to adapt an NGO-style model of organisation. For example, I was looking at the structure of the Institute of Artivism Hannah Arendt, of which you are co-founder. The mission statement here describes organising 'think tanks', 'do tanks' and 'wish tanks', while the overall aims of the Institute are described as lying in the creation of tools for civic literacy. The language being used here is like that of an NGO, which comes with its own issues, especially where activism is increasingly incorporated into those structures. What is lost and what is gained – aesthetically and politically – when social movements and artworks formalise in this way?

In the case of *INSTAR* (Institute of Artivism Hannah Arendt), my interlocutor is the power structure of a government. NGO language is what they recognise and understand; it is entering their own territory to do the artistic work. I'm an institutional-critique artist who creates institutions in the hope that they function closer to what we would like them to in reality. I also work with an augmented-reality style, so the closer to reality it feels, the more operative the work is. In order for the work to function it has to be inserted and to be accepted by the same people it is trying to criticise. I want to show power to power. I am interested in the idea of challenging power with power. In this kind of work, aesthetics come from a very different place, I call it est-ethics, from the Latin *est* (it is) ethics, so it phonetically sounds like 'aesthetics'. It is about locating the aesthetic in the experiencing of a new ethical proposition.

So using the system that already exists, building institutions to meet the dominant institution?

I work with the format of institutions. I prefer to propose than to complain. I want to appropriate this 'institutional' format as a way for the power structure to see its own reflection and as a way for the people to design the institutions they would like to have. Now, with social media, you can create the perception of an institution very easily. Even when the scale is limited (they are prototypes), this methodology of work is a declaration: we are not going to wait for you, we want change now and we are going to make it ourselves. But there is a caveat: you don't want it to become institutionalised.

So do you want the institutions you create to eventually dissolve, in the same way you want to dissolve your privilege?

I want them to have the flexibility to change according to the needs of the people they are working with or for, and to the political circumstances to which they are reacting so that they keep their effectiveness.

That comes back to my earlier question, about the idea that although you might be outrunning commodification, you may not be outrunning the state.

I don't know. With *INSTAR*, we haven't yet started the actions in the field and already the Institute is having an effect. It is working because the Cuban government is freaked out. The secret police interrogated me again before I left – I was in Cuba this summer – because they have no idea what I am going to do. They mirror the initiatives they think I will be doing, so in their mind my project would no longer be 'necessary' or at least it is not 'unique'. That is what you want to happen. It is not about the pleasure of doing it first, it is not about being the only project, rather it is about achieving the consequences you want the work to have. If what I want is for people to learn their rights, and they have already created two groups doing that, do I need to continue the project myself? I don't know. What you don't want is for the government to co-opt your project. The idea is either to enter the institution and put it in crisis from within, or to bring an alternative the government has to compete with. But, ultimately, what you want with this kind of project is that it dissolves into people's lives, that it becomes part of their everyday political life.

So does this relate back to your idea of a gesture?

Exactly. Especially when, as inoperative as it is, the art world retains the making of ideas and things as something with, primarily, formal value.

But with the growth and institutionalisation of social practice, a different kind of formalisation will occur. A certain set of criteria inevitably becomes entrenched, making it difficult for artworks to exceed their own boundaries.

My answer to that at this moment is *Arte Útil*, where for me, if it is mutual and if the integrity of the work remains intact, there is no problem. For the political timing of specific works – especially those done in or for Cuba – the goal is not to be used by the institution unless it is for it to adopt the things we proposed for it to change. ■

Tania Bruguera is the first artist in residence in the New York City Mayor's office of Immigrant Affairs.

LARNE ABSE GOGARTY is a writer, art historian and Terra Foundation for American Art postdoctoral fellow at the Humboldt University, Berlin.