

**Tania Bruguera:
Beyond the Political, Towards Collective Decoloniality**

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Abstract

The theoretical discussion of how the decolonization of knowledge and being can become a tangible reality has gained notable prominence since the 1990s. The abstractness of theory, however, poses a challenge to the analysis of concrete paths of decolonization. Through the examination of the work of the Cuban installation and performance artist Tania Bruguera, this paper explores how art serves to bridge the gap between theory and praxis in relation to the goal of decolonization. Specifically, the paper addresses how the individual and collective manifestations of Bruguera's artistic practice function as a decolonial site of political and social engagement in her home country of Cuba, as well as internationally. To this end, the paper traces the evolution of Bruguera's performances that address power structures in post-revolutionary Cuba and the ways in which she negotiates the power dynamics of the international art world in order to ensure that her work is not co-opted by the Western colonial framework that she seeks to challenge. In doing so, my analysis of Bruguera's work through the perspective of coloniality and decoloniality expands the critical conversation on how socially and political artistic practices can integrate decolonial theory into daily life. Furthermore, I provide insight into the evolution of a career that has continuously developed mechanisms to mitigate the individualization of the artist in order to demonstrate how Bruguera's collective approach to art making constitutes her greatest contribution to the terrain of decoloniality.

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*We face neither East nor West: we face forward.*¹

Kwame Nkrumah

Introduction

The discussion of the decolonial strategies, which gained prominence in the 1990s, invites speculation of a future in which the decolonization of knowledge and being can become tangible realities. However, given the abstractness of theory, exploring concrete paths towards collective decoloniality remains an imposing task. This Mayor Research Paper examines the work of installation and performance artist Tania Bruguera as a means to argue that art can bridge the gap between theory and praxis in relation to the goal of decolonization. I demonstrate how Bruguera's socially and politically engaged practice integrates decolonial theory into the fabric of daily life and registers the tangible effects of decolonization in the artist's home country of Cuba as well as in the international context. In doing so, I argue that what is essential to an understanding of Bruguera's artistic practice as decolonial is the way in which her individual and collective approaches to art are interlinked and promote one another.

¹Nkrumah, Kwame. "Conference speech" (1960), in *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, Robert Andrews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 908.

To demonstrate my argument, I discuss how Bruguera's career has concretely contributed to and continues to contribute to decolonizing efforts that allow for a shift in the way that transcultured works of art from the periphery are exhibited, understood and assimilated in the centre. I consider the diverging curatorial strategies concerning the exhibition of Bruguera's work in Cuba and outside the island, how political elements influence institutional response and motivations, as well as the role that previous decolonizing efforts, such as the Havana Biennial, have had in shaping Bruguera's personal and collective consciousness. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate Bruguera's decolonizing agency is parallel to her development as an artist, I examine how the artist negotiates the power dynamic with European and North American cultural institutions, in an effort to retain her autonomy as a peripheral artist and safeguard her work's ability to operate as a decolonizing agent. In doing this, I address how Cuba's influence has impacted Bruguera's political awareness and her development as an artist and has played an instrumental role in the way the artist presents her work at a global scale. I analyze the evolution of Bruguera's artistic practice from her earliest performances to her conceptualization of Arte Útil, the line of thought that currently guides her work, to suggest that the artist has created a framework for her artistic practice that makes it impossible for the

Western art world to individualize her, which in turn challenges the colonial structures that may seek to co-opt her practice.

My commitment to critically converse with Bruguera's work from the perspective of coloniality and decoloniality is rooted in my understanding of her artistic practice, which I have followed over the years from both within Cuba, where I was born and raised, and from Canada, where I am now based.² My first memory of Bruguera's work is of standing alone in the middle of an empty gallery, about an hour before an opening reception is set to begin, hands in my pockets. In front of me Tania Bruguera stands naked on a white plinth, with her lower body attached to the wall behind her and her upper body attached to the ceiling, contorting her body into a most uncomfortable L shape. Her eyes are covered and pieces of cotton strategically hide her private parts, blood-like make up applied to her chest, and in her hands, extended out, a raw heart (Fig. 1). I examine every bit of her until I am surprised by one of the gallery installers, standing next to me, watching me watch her. He asks what I'm thinking about it and without taking my eyes off Bruguera I whisper: "It's beautiful." The installer leans forward and whispers back in my ear, with conviction: "It's not beautiful. Beautiful is not an adjective that you use to describe this work. It is raw, visceral,

² I relocated to Canada in 2006. I travel to the island yearly, which continues to shape my understanding of the social and political realities that often inform Bruguera's work.

harsh, but not beautiful.” I don’t say anything else. I stand corrected. It is 1995 and I am seven years old. What do I know about contemporary art?

Much of my relationship with Bruguera’s work in the years that have followed has been marked by my admiration and criticism of her artistic practice. I have sided with her unwavering devotion to challenging voices and structures of power and strongly criticized performances that, I believe, have crossed the line of sensationalism. It is this duality that motivates me to engage at a deeper level with her work. Bruguera is complex, as a woman and as an artist, and the intricacies of her work give platform to a series of discussions that often transcend the political scenario of her country, our country, and speak to the current state of global affairs. Since the mid 1980s, Bruguera’s tireless interest in social and political issues has shaped her artistic practice. Early performances served to denounce, in a time of deep political turmoil in Cuba, the vicissitudes experienced by the Cuban people due to long and harsh years of communist governance and the economic embargo imposed by the United States. Today, Bruguera continues to take an interest in the reality of her native country, but has expanded her scope to address social and political experiences at an international level. What makes Bruguera’s work political is not merely that it addresses political issues, but that, through what the artist defines as *Arte Útil* and *Arte de Conducta* (two concepts that I will address in this essay) it actively

enters the political arena and seeks to provoke effective change within communities, often with Cuba as its foundation.

Bruguera's work is rarely a formal endeavour. Over the years the artist has become less concerned about the aesthetics of her performances and installations, or its *objectual* nature. What interests Bruguera is her work's ability to incite real change and mobilize individuals. What interests her critics is its overtly political stance. Gerardo Mosquera has discussed Bruguera's career-long commitment to social and political realities, and argues that the lasting impact in the memories of those who experience her work first-hand is triggered in part by the impossibility to stay passive in the face of performances that surpass the performer-spectator structure and evoke the sense of having experienced something, rather than having seen something.³

Other critics have contemplated the implications of some of Bruguera's long-term projects. For example, Luis Camnitzer engages in an analysis of Bruguera's *Memoria de la postguerra* (Memory of the Postwar). Bruguera introduced *Memoria* as an art journal/newspaper hybrid in 1994. It was a critical time for Cuba, as the country was experiencing a deep economic recession following the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 and Cubans

³ Mosquera, Gerardo. "Cuba in Tania Bruguera's Work: The Body is the Social Body." In *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*. Purchase: Charta/Neuberger Museum of Art, 2010. 22-35.

were adapting to a new life marked by shortages of all kind. The independent publication constituted an unusual attempt that gathered artists and critics living in Cuba and its diaspora, who wanted to express their views on several aspects of Cuban society.⁴ Camnitzer argues that *Memoria* was an instrumental vehicle not only in communicating ideas, but also in maintaining the sense of cohesiveness achieved by visual arts in the island throughout the 1980s.⁵ Camnitzer observes how the adoption of Western market models, which started to appear in the island around this time, threatened to replace artistic dialogue by competition. *Memoria* played a crucial role in connecting Cuban artists and thinkers, opening a direct line of communication with Cubans in exile that transcended gossip and speculations. This allowed for critical thinking to prevail over the anxiety caused by the political and economic uncertainty of the time.⁶

In her *Notes on Arte de Conducta*, Carrie Lambert-Beatty considers how Bruguera's departure from theatricality towards a line of work that engages the participation of the audience further consolidated her status as a political artist, in that she successfully promotes dissent and political activity within her audience

⁴ *Memoria de la Postguerra* was the subject of harsh government censorship. It eventually ceased to exist.

⁵ Camnitzer, Luis. "Book Review: *Memoria de la postguerra*, Cuba, 1994." *Artnexus*. 15 (1995): 30.

⁶ *Ibid*

or the circles in which her work takes form.⁷ Lambert-Beatty addresses how Bruguera has developed a system “that seems to imagine art and art audiences as forces of disruption,”⁸ encouraging the need for collective approaches towards a more politically engaged society.

This paper’s discussion of Bruguera’s practice from the perspective of coloniality and decoloniality, expands the critical analysis around the artist’s work and links it to the conversation about Decolonial Aesthetics first presented by Walter Mignolo and other scholars in May of 2011. According to their manifesto, Decolonial Aesthetics addresses

ongoing artistic projects responding and delinking from the darker side of imperial globalization. Decolonial aesthetics seeks to recognize and open options for liberating the senses. This is the terrain where artists around the world are contesting the legacies of modernity and its reincarnations in postmodern and altermodern aesthetics.⁹

Bruguera’s contribution to this terrain is most evident through some of her long-term projects, such as *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (Behaviour Art School), a

⁷ Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. “Political People: Notes on Arte de Conducta.” In *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*. Purchase: Charta/Neuberger Museum of Art, 2010. 36-45.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mignolo, Walter, Tanja Ostojic, et al. “Decolonial Aesthetics (I).”

Transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com

<https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/> (accessed September 18, 2017).

project conceptualized by the artist in 1998 and later implemented between 2002 and 2009. The *Cátedra* emerged in Havana as both a public art piece and an institutional alternative to the traditional modes of artistic education in Cuba (Fig. 2). One of the space's merits was that it filled a gap in pedagogy and addressed the lack of a discussion regarding the role of contemporary art in Cuba. Lambert-Beatty contextualizes Bruguera's *Arte de Conducta*, closely relating it to tendencies that artists have explored since the 1960s. These tendencies, which began to signal the shift in Bruguera's work, and in turn, in her decolonial practice, advocated for a departure from the theatricality usually present in performance art and "the rupture of its dichotomy, active performer/passive audience, while retaining the duration, unpredictability, and immateriality of art as action."¹⁰ The project posed a non-metaphorical challenge to the legacies of modernity for it debunked traditional educational and exhibition structures, largely based on European models, and proposed new alternatives that sought to foster a greater relationship between artistic practices and social and political realities.

Bruguera's work tends to reinvent itself, often taking drastically new directions. Initially, it was marked by appropriation; later defined by the use of the artist's body; then by the activation of audiences and ultimately, by the

¹⁰ Lambert-Beatty. "Political People: Notes on *Arte de Conducta*."

engagement of larger communities, which often does not require the physical presence of the artist or an audience. These moves demonstrate the evolution of Bruguera's decolonial practice, as her work becomes less self-centered and concerned about aesthetics. This evolution signals the maturity of someone who confers utmost importance to the utilitarian possibilities of art, and aims to break away from the European aesthetical canon that presents art as having decorative purposes.

The combination of art and politics has become increasingly present within the Western exhibition circuit, as the two worlds have become more intertwined than ever before in what has elapsed of the twenty-first century. Curators, museum directors, art fair executives and collectors alike have developed an acute interest (or curiosity) in artists that keep politics and activism at the core of their artistic practice. The level of understanding of the presence of politics is a point that I will bring forward later, as I discuss the presence of coloniality in the curatorial approaches that Bruguera often seeks to debunk. Bruguera's work, although some will argue takes advantage of this newfound global interest, inserts itself into a dialogue that is made relevant precisely by the presence of artistic practices that have shown political and social commitment and aim to challenge the power structures that support it.

While colonialism may have ended, coloniality is at play on the global stage and sharply defines the relationship between the North and the South, the West and the East. As Mignolo notes,

the decolonial option operates from the margins and beyond the margins of the modern/colonial order. It posits alternatives in relation to the control of the economy (Market value), the control of the state (politics of heritage based on economic wealth), and the control of knowledge.¹¹

I opt to engage with the concept of decoloniality as a goal that advocates for new paths and new solutions in regards to how wealth and knowledge is disseminated and shared, and as theoretical framework through which I examine Bruguera's practice, and the status of its exhibition as transcultured artwork¹² in the North American and European context.

In the first section of the paper, "The Havana Biennial and the dangers of symbolism," I engage with a decolonial analysis of the evolution of Bruguera's practice to discuss how early works such as the reenactment of Ana Mendieta's

¹¹ Mignolo, Walter, and Rolando Vazquez. "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings." *Socialtextjournal.org*. https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/ (accessed September 22, 2017).

¹² I borrow the term transculturation from Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortíz who first developed the critical category in 1940 to address the confluence of different elements from diverse cultures in which one adopts or modifies elements that are intrinsic to other(s).

performances in Cuba (1985-1996), *Destierro* (1998) and *El Peso de la culpa* (1997-99) can be understood as early decolonizing efforts, while their use of a highly symbolic language and theatrical approaches limited their ability to act as decolonizing agents. The analysis of these early performances affords an understanding of why Bruguera abandoned an overtly symbolic and theatrical framework in her late work and developed new guiding principles that are marked by immateriality, audience participation, and the resolution to seek tangible results through artistic practices. Furthermore, the understanding of this development allows for the appreciation of how Bruguera's relationship with the Cuban government has become increasingly tense as she has become more outspoken and her artistic practice more explicit.

In the next section, "Negotiating Western power dynamics" I discuss how Bruguera challenges the colonial framework of the curatorial field by the way in which she negotiates her relationship with Western art circles. The first element I consider in this discussion is the negotiation with the Western curator and the reductive approaches that often define their interaction with the peripheral artist. I conduct this analysis through the discussion of how Bruguera's work has been exhibited at prestigious international events such as the Venice Biennial, craved by curators with a fixed agenda, and collected by major cultural institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern. By exploring this power

dynamic, I also examine juxtaposition of curatorial and governmental responses to Bruguera's work inside and outside Cuba.

In the third section, "Arte Útil: From the individual to the collective" I discuss how the examination of Bruguera's artistic evolution in parallel with her decolonial practice Arte Útil, the current guiding force in Bruguera's work, expands her individual decolonial goal. I argue that Arte Útil is the most successful decolonizing attempt conceptualized by Bruguera, which is achieved through removing authorship from her artistic practice. I address how the artist has developed a system that makes it seemingly impossible for Western art circles to singularize her; and posit that this collective approach anchors Bruguera's decolonizing efforts in ways that offer a redefining path towards a more democratic and inclusive approach in relation to how art from the periphery is exhibited, consumed and understood in the West.

In the final section of this paper, "Cuba and the international stage," I examine how Bruguera is successful in developing an international artistic practice in relation to her positionality within Cuba, by addressing how the island constantly permeates the artist's work and how the international stage influences the way Bruguera's recent and current projects are perceived in her native country. I discuss how performances such as *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* serve to illustrate how Bruguera's international reputation plays a key role in the

response that her performances originate, both in Cuba and outside. I analyze how Bruguera retains her agency to act as a decolonizing proxy even though she spends considerable amount of time outside Cuba, and examine how her work remains un-co-opted despite her increasing success in Western circles.

The Havana Biennial, decoloniality and the dangers of symbolism

To develop an in-depth analysis of Bruguera's work, it is vital to engage in a brief recapitulation of the historical context that underpins the work of the generation of Cuban artists to which Bruguera belongs, and the political context to which Bruguera responds. By the 1980s, three decades after the initial euphoria of Castro's 1959 ascension to power, the new art schools of the revolution were bearing fruit and Cuba was at a new pinnacle of artistic expression, becoming a cultural hub for the Caribbean and Latin America. However, the 1980s were also marked by political turmoil triggered firstly by the Mariel Boatlift crisis between April and October of 1980, when approximately 125,000 Cubans left the island from the Mariel Harbour in Havana in search of political freedom and financial betterment in Miami,¹³ and secondly, by the economic uncertainty brought on by the imminent collapse of the communist

¹³ Masud-Piloto, Felix. *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-1995*. Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996. 88.

bloc in Europe. As Castro clung to power, looking for ways to salvage what was left of the communist utopia, the Cuban people continued to rapidly lose faith in their government. Restrictions in the cultural sector reached a peak, leading intellectuals and artists to explore new means of expression that often danced on the razor-thin edge of censorship. Cuban artists became masters of metaphor, adept at being subversive while having the visual appearance of being benign.

Bruguera's eruption in the contemporary art scene in Havana occurred in the 1980s, amidst this convulsive dynamic, with a project titled *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta* (Tribute to Ana Mendieta) 1985-1996 (Fig. 3), which consisted in the appropriation and reenactment of Mendieta's works and unrealized projects. Mendieta was a Cuban-born multidisciplinary artist, best known for her performances. She had moved to the United States as a child in 1961, where she developed a highly celebrated practice that maintained a close relationship with her Cuban roots, and that was abruptly halted by her untimely death at age 36.¹⁴ Bruguera's gesture, which she conceptualized in 1985, the year of Mendieta's death, is nested within the context of the mass exodus that was still fresh in the minds of Cubans, and is to be considered the origins of Bruguera's *Political*

¹⁴ Tello, Verónica. "Arte de Conducta and the Manipulation of Memory Tania Bruguera's Biopolitical Ambition in Postwar Cuba." In *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics, Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art*. New York. Bloomsbury Press, 2016. 46.

Timing Specific, a concept used by the artist to refer to artworks that are completed and acquire full meaning when specific political or social circumstances condition the reaction of the audience.¹⁵

Bruguera's reenactment and the specificity of its political context brought up a needed conversation about Cuban culture, the lacerating loss of intellectual and artistic talent, cultural repatriation, and the role of art as a cultural and sociological gesture.¹⁶ Furthermore, it made the work of Mendieta available to younger Cuban artists who were emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s and were not aware of the influence that her work had exerted in their generation. Most significantly, it brought Mendieta's work back to her country and its original cultural context.¹⁷

¹⁵ Bruguera, Tania. "Political Timing." Taniabruguera.com. <http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/511-0-Political+Timing.htm> (accessed October 27, 2017).

¹⁶ Bruguera, Tania. "Tribute to Ana Mendieta." Taniabruguera.com <http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/495-0-Tribute+to+Ana+Mendieta.htm> (accessed September 18, 2017).

¹⁷ Goldberg, RoseLee and Tania Bruguera. "Interview I: Regarding Ana." Taniabruguera.com. http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/files/regarding_ana.pdf. (accessed December 28, 2017).

See also:

Mosquera, Gerardo. "Reanimating Ana Mendieta." Taniabruguera.com. <http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/159-0-Reanimating+Ana+Mendieta.htm> (accessed December 28, 2017).

Goldberg, RoseLee. "Regarding Ana." Taniabruguera.com. http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/files/regardin_ana..pdf (accessed December 28, 2017).

Bruguera's appropriation of Mendieta's work constitutes an initial decolonizing effort. Out of dozens of artists that had left the island, Bruguera chose to reenact the work of a woman whose practice was intrinsically linked to her Cuban roots and challenged European and North American aesthetics. Furthermore, the reenactment allowed young Bruguera and Cubans, artists or not, a moment of introspection that acknowledged the valuable contributions of Cuban artists living in exile to the larger spectrum of Cuban culture. "Decolonial aestheSis," as Vazquez and Mignolo suggest, "departs from an embodied consciousness of the colonial wound and moves towards healing."¹⁸ Bruguera's gesture created a space of healing for a country wrestling with the loss of its people, its artists and its artistic content.

Bruguera claims to be "a daughter of the Havana Biennial,"¹⁹ an artist that came of age in a time where Cuban culture was going through a process of reevaluation and introspection as it came to terms with the need to search for inspiration and referents outside Europe and North America. The Havana Biennial became a cornerstone in the foundation of Bruguera as an artist and

¹⁸ Mignolo and Vazquez. "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings."

¹⁹ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished Interview by the author. Tape recording. Toronto, November 10, 2017.

political individual. She started attending the event from its inception in 1984 until she was invited to participate for the first time in 1994.

The Havana Biennial was born amidst the wave of censorship and profound discontent in the art community of Cuba in the mid 1980s. Its first edition was dedicated to artists from the Caribbean and Latin America. With the second edition in 1986, the Biennial, organized by the newly founded Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, reintroduced itself as a tri-continental event, showcasing the work of artists from Africa and Asia. In subsequent years, the Havana Biennial quickly became one of the most prestigious venues for the exhibition of non-Western art in Latin America and the developing world.²⁰ The Biennial thrived under the leadership of Lillian Llanes, a Communist Party member with a doctorate degree in Art History, Criticism and Conservation, who showed total devotion to the cause of promoting art from the developing world.

The Havana Biennial was, from its inception, one of the most significant decolonizing efforts seen in cultural institutions in the region to date. The Biennial sought to disrupt the conventional, break with the postmodern aesthetic imposed by Europe and North America and find a relevant ground to shed light on artists that were pushing boundaries, other boundaries, and exploring issues

²⁰ Llanes, Lillian. *Memorias: Bienales de la Habana 1984-1999*. Havana: Arte Cubano Ediciones, 2012. 88.

that were unfamiliar to many in the developed world. While the Biennial continued to implement geographical divisions proposed by the Western Biennale, which Nav Haq argues to be “the contemporary versions of the colonial-era Universal or World Exhibition,”²¹ it did so with disregard to the European and North American gaze. These exhibitions were not about how the periphery was being perceived, but about how the periphery perceived itself.

One of the most important elements of the early Biennials, specifically those under the leadership of Lillian Llanes, was that, along with artists that had defined artistic tendencies in their regions, there was no hesitation to introduce artists that did not have an internationally renowned name. The event was, for many artists, their first international exhibition.²² The trust in the taste and confidence of the curatorial team made the Biennial into the place for Western curators to meet artists from the developing world, but also the place for Cubans, Latin Americans, Africans, Middle Easterns and Asians to become acquainted with other realities, sensibilities, communalities and diverging ideologies.

²¹ Haq, Nav. “The Invisible and the Visible, Identity Politics and the Economy of Reproduction in Art.” *Decolonizing Museums*. L’Internationale Online, 2015. 14. http://www.internationaleonline.org/media/files/decolonisingmuseums_pdf-final.pdf

²² Llanes, Lillian. *Memorias: Bienales de la Habana 1984-1999*. 45.

Bruguera recalls assisting participating artists in the early editions of the Biennial while she was still an art student. Today she reflects on how the Biennial worked to legitimize the work of artists from the periphery. These legitimizing strategies were developed with little to no regard to the strategies used in Europe and North America to turn emerging artists into superstars.²³ In this respect, the early editions of the Havana Biennial (1984-1986), along with the political turbulence of the 1980s in Cuba, infused Bruguera's work with a sense of political and social responsibility that set the foundation for positioning her as the single most politically engaged artist emerging from Cuba in the last fifteen years.

By the 1990s, the paradox of the Biennial as a space in which Cuban artists were meant to freely present their artistic practices in an event known for its decolonizing efforts sponsored by a government known by its obstruction of freedom of expression was accentuated. In this context, Tania Bruguera becomes an exemplary case to study in terms of her relationship as an artist to the Havana Biennial of the 1990s and the institution that hosts it, the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, and her relationship with the Cuban government itself, since it is impossible to separate institutions in Cuba from the

²³ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by the author.

Cuban Government. That Bruguera's relationship with the Centro Wifredo Lam transitioned from a place of shared and daring approaches, to one marked by discernable censorship and distrust, constitutes a crucial feature in understanding the forces that motivate and inform Bruguera's practice today, both in Cuba and internationally.

In 1998 the Centro Wifredo Lam was still under the direction of Lillian Llanes and Bruguera was being celebrated for performances that were carried out by the use of her own body as the primary medium to convey daring concepts. The artist was invited to present *Destierro* (Displacement), one of her most acclaimed performances to date. The piece struck an admirable balance between religious and political references. *Destierro* took direct visual reference from Nkisi nkondi, religious fetish objects predominantly popular in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Fig. 4). Often activated with body parts or the belongings of deceased people Nkisi nkondi are used to make wishes, and in return, one must make a promise. Every nail in the body of the Nkisi nkondi represents a promise made by someone. Those who practice the religion believe that a spirit inhabits an Nkisi, and that it will awake to haunt those who fail to fulfill their promises.

In *Destierro*, Bruguera, embodying a Nkisi, left the gallery space and took her performance to the streets of Old Havana (Fig. 5). Due to the close

relationship between African and Cuban religions, residents quickly identified what Bruguera represented and formed a line behind her, in what turned into an impromptu procession. Displaying the subtlety that characterized her generation, Bruguera chose August 13 as the day for her performance—Fidel Castro’s birthday. This is a well known date for Cubans and it allowed the audience to make the necessary connections. The performance, presented as allegoric to religious imagery, quickly displayed a deep political undertone and became a commentary on the social and political promises made by the Communist government that were never fulfilled; a demand from the Cuban people to its government and leaders, exploring notions of accountability and empowerment.

El peso de la culpa (The Burden of Guilt) (1997-1999) is another work where she not only employed her body, but also pushed it to unthinkable limits. Bruguera knelt naked with the carcass of a slaughtered lamb hanging from her neck. In view of her audience she made small balls of dirt mixed with water and salt and ate them for forty-five minutes (Fig. 6). As a form of tribute, Bruguera uses the rebellions of indigenous peoples in Cuba as inspiration for her performance. During times of Spanish rule in Cuba, indigenous peoples defied the abuses of colonization by committing mass suicides, which often were carried out by eating dirt. Bruguera talks about the subtle yet powerful gesture behind an indigenous person eating the soil that has been taken away. It is a way to “eat

their ancestors, themselves, their history, their memory, as if they were committing a cultural suicide.”²⁴ However, passive resistance as a weapon is filled with guilt, as they ultimately surrender to their oppressor.²⁵ The Cuban expression “comer tierra” (to eat dirt) means to endure hardship. Bruguera effectively linked historicity and contemporaneity in Cuba, evoking the relevance that passive resistance continues to have in the current scenario of the island. The slaughtered lamb represents the open wound of oppression, while at the same time nods at how Cubans, like lambs, have become docile and complacent. The salt alludes to the tears of the Cuban people, and represents the guilt mixed with the heritage before being digested.²⁶

Destierro and *El peso de la culpa* embodied high levels of symbolic gestures that would have been obvious to those with a trained eye and knowledge of Cuban history. However, as Bruguera discussed with a group of students at OCAD University in Toronto during her Nomadic Residency in November of 2017, symbolism is in the eye of the beholder.²⁷ Symbols and

²⁴ Bruguera, Tania. “The Burden of Guilt.” Taniabruquera.com. <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/214-0-The+Burden+of+Guilt.htm> (accessed September 18, 2017).

²⁵ Posner, Helaine. “Introduction.” In *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*. Purchase: Charta/Neuberger Museum of Art, 2010. 16.

²⁶ Bruguera, Tania. “The Burden of Guilt.”

²⁷ OCAD University invited Bruguera to be the 2017 Nomadic Resident. The residency took place November 5-10. During this time Bruguera met with a

references are understood in different ways given that audiences bring their own personal experience and memory in order to process them. Bruguera realized that her work was not having the desired impact after she was awarded the Cuban Medal of Culture, and to advertise it, the government used an image of *El peso de la culpa*. The realization that the use of one of her most critical performances as an advertisement did not represent a move towards a more tolerant approach with artists in the island led Bruguera to conclude that the meaning and purpose behind her performance had been lost. From this point forward, a shift in artistic method becomes more noticeable in Bruguera's practice, as she began to deviate from highly symbolic performances that used her body. The emergence of works that activate the audience began to move front and centre.

By 2009, Lillian Llanes had resigned from her post as director of the Centro Wifredo Lam and the Havana Biennial had lost its edge. Many of its founding curators had left the island and years of economic distress turned the event into a triennial and its convocation power decreased significantly. Bruguera, on the other hand, had flourished and matured as an artist, her work now found in some of the most prominent cultural institutions in the world. By

number of art students and activists to discuss the possibilities of art as a tool to achieve social change.

2009, she had become controversial, unapologetically political, internationally relevant and she was invited to return to the Havana Biennial that year with a new performance, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* (Fig. 7). The Biennial needed Bruguera more than Bruguera needed the Biennial. This time her performance didn't require the centrality of her body. In the ten years since she had presented *Destierro* and *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera's practice had shifted in a direction where works activate audiences and performances are participatory, often carrying out real-live implications. Furthermore, her work had given up the solitude that emanated from the use of silence as a tool to strengthen communication with the audience.²⁸ Bruguera was more outspoken than ever.

In the courtyard of the Wifredo Lam Centre, Bruguera had set up a stage with a podium and a microphone where audience members were promised one minute of free speech. Two individuals dressed in the Communist Party's traditional fatigues played two roles. Firstly, they placed white doves on the shoulders of the speakers, a reference to the famous speech by Fidel Castro in January of 1959 (Fig. 8).²⁹ Secondly, the performers were also responsible for

²⁸ Wood, Yolanda. "La aventura del silencio en Tania Bruguera." *Arte Cubano*. 3 (2000): 34-37.

²⁹ When Castro addressed the Cuban people for the first time after the triumph of the Communist Revolution, three white doves came flying and landed on Castro's shoulder and on his podium. There has been speculation about whether

escorting participants off stage after their allotted time ran out. The symbolism was kept at bay. While Bruguera claims that the organizing committee of the Biennial was partly kept in the dark regarding the nature of her performance, immediately after it ended Bruguera was escorted to an office where members of the committee harshly criticized her.³⁰ Although there was no obvious immediate repercussion, within a year Bruguera realized that it was suspicious how several attempts to do performances in Cuba were falling through.³¹ A new, quieter mode of censorship was at play.

Negotiating Western power dynamics

Also in 2009, a year that Bruguera defines as a benchmark in her career,³² the artist participated in the 53rd edition of the Venice Biennial with one of her most controversial works, *Self Sabotage*, which she had performed months earlier at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. For this work, Bruguera sits at a table in front of an audience, reading her considerations on political art and how artists play a role in the context of art, institutions and society. She pauses her reading, pulls

the doves were trained; however, millions of Cubans observed the event with fascination, seeing it as a religious sign.

³⁰ Bruguera, Tania. Interview by author.

³¹ Eccles, Tom. "Art Featured: Tania Bruguera." ArtReview LTD. December 2015. 70-75.

³² Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

out a 38-caliber pistol and a 9mm bullet, loads the gun, spins the drum, puts the gun to her head, and pulls the trigger... No bullet comes out. Bruguera continues reading and repeats the action twice more before members of the public and fellow artists finally stop her (Fig. 9).

Bruguera considers *Self Sabotage* a professional failure.³³ Her meticulous approach, especially when it concerns the participatory performances that she has carried out over the past fifteen years, is marked by the analysis of the real consequences that her work may have on people around her. Bruguera insists in giving precise care to how her work may alter the realities of those who participate or help her organize her performances. Here is where, according to the artist, *Self-Sabotage* failed, for she was so entrenched in the idea of getting a message across that she did not contemplate the implications of her gesture.³⁴

Although a few wrists were slapped because of the nature of Bruguera's work for the Venice Biennial, *Self-Sabotage* was a tremendous success, serving to fulfill what is expected of the Latin American artist in the international art scene—always political, always critical, always exotic. In this respect, Bruguera is often encouraged to be overtly political by curators in European and North

³³ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

³⁴ Ibid.

American circuits, where her name, performances and installations are increasingly in demand. As Nav Haq notes:

The Western art world has legitimized new, previously marginalized entrants in a similar way to how it eventually legitimized those who were socially marginalized in its own societies in the 1970s and 80s. Again, those previously marginalized, in this instance by geography, have been allowed in by the art world, on the condition that predetermined roles are fulfilled.³⁵

Bruguera has become a signifier of the fantasy that the Western art world has fabricated around the idea of Latin America—the region is convulsive, submerged in political and economic chaos, volatile, but at the same time, exotic, daring, seductive and sexy.

In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Edward Said outlines and critiques the notion of Orientalism, which he defines as the plethora of false assumptions underpinning Western attitudes towards the East.³⁶ Said argues that the existence of romanticized and inaccurate ideas about Asia and the Middle East have contributed to the perpetuation of European and American colonial efforts towards the East. Orientalism, Said continues to argue, is a general idea that divides the world into West and East. It is an intellectual choice made by the West in order to define itself—they are what we are not. "Orientalism can be

³⁵ Haq, Nav. "The Invisible and the Visible, Identity Politics and the Economy of Reproduction in Art."

³⁶ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 1977.

discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”³⁷ Said’s arguments are often applicable to the biased relationship and power dynamic between Latin America, and the West. This reinforces the argument that coloniality is not present as an isolated phenomenon in a particular region, but at a global level.

This colonial framework is most overt in the field of curatorial practice when artists from the periphery exhibit in the Western world, and it is in relation to this colonial framework that Bruguera considers what is required of her when she presents her work in Europe and North America. The political and social realities of countries like Mexico or Guatemala, Bruguera states, allow for very visceral works to be understood within the realm of what is normal when they are exhibited in the contexts of their origin.³⁸ The visual language of violence is ubiquitous, therefore, when an artist appropriates this language, the work produced operates within what is known and easily assimilated. What occurs, however, when artists do make use of the language that is inherent to their

³⁷ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 3.

³⁸ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

reality, and their work is presented in the centre, outside its original context, where the visual referents are unfamiliar, both by virtue of lived experience and media exposure? What happens when Western curators seek to present the work of peripheral artists in the West without implementing appropriate curatorial strategies to enable the work to transition from one context to another? The risk for the work to become a spectacle is imminent. In most cases, artists, especially those who work with socially engaged practices, are left having to implement mechanisms to ensure that their work is not lost in the initial outrage that its formal or conceptual specificities may originate.

Bruguera is aware of her need to negotiate the power dynamic with European/North American curators, cultural institutions and audiences. There is an array of external factors that define a biased exchange. In Bruguera's view, artists from the periphery encounter a great challenge—facing the re-contextualization of the ideas that propel their artistic practices. How does an artist operate when the nuances in their work are lost in an unfamiliar context?³⁹ In understanding this challenge and question, it is pertinent to look at how the media and our educational methods, still largely based on Eurocentric models, afford the Western world a certain degree of connectivity and shared sensibility. Latin America and other peripheral regions, on the other hand, remain largely

³⁹ Ibid.

unknown to Western audiences; they remain mythicized and exoticized. While Bruguera's work may make immediate sense to Cuban audiences, when she is set to exhibit in Europe and North America, an extra layer of thought has to be added to ensure that her message translates internationally and that the nuances that make a work great are not lost in translation, or more importantly, that the work is not sensationalized. Furthermore, it is vital to remain aware of the fact that Western audiences will always observe artists from the periphery through the lens of Western art history⁴⁰ and a critical system that does not make room for incorporating the intricacies of non-Western artistic content.

For peripheral artists, the most lacerating of all relationships can be the one with the Western curator. Bruguera describes this relationship as piercing, explaining how curators often come with very preconceived notions of what her work is and the role it is supposed to play in their exhibitions. "There is a dehumanization that occurs," Bruguera observes, "often underpinned by a distinct lack of research; they want to define you as a person and an artist."⁴¹ In response, Bruguera has become a master of negotiating this relationship as a way of ensuring that her work is not taken out of context. However, from time to time, she will find herself in regrettable circumstances, for example, when she

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid.

agreed to make a work specific to Cuba's political succession of the Castro brothers in an international context before launching it at home in Cuba.

In this instance, as Raúl Castro announced his imminent retirement as president of Cuba in 2016, and the island began preparations to hold general elections in 2018, when for the first time in almost sixty years, a Castro is not expected to win, Bruguera had the idea to carry out a performance where she launched a presidential bid, and invited other Cubans to do the same. In so doing, she sought to ignite the notion of accountability and real change, while stressing the fact that for the first time in over half a century, Cuba could have a leader outside the Castro family. At the same time as Bruguera was conceptualizing this work, she was in conversations with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who had approached her to produce a short video announcing her presidential candidacy.⁴² The video would be used as part of a joint keynote address with Eileen Myles during the Creative Time Summit in Washington titled *The Case for Nonsense*, which commemorated the 100th anniversary of Dada, and "embraced the irrational as a productive political space."⁴³ Bruguera's presidential performance fitted the theme of Myles and Ulrich's talk to

⁴² Bruguera's presidential announcement can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRtTH7fHjEk>

⁴³ Ulrich Obrist, Hans. "The Case for Nonsense." Creativetime.org.

<http://creativetime.org/summit/2016/10/25/hans-ulrich-obrist/> (accessed December 2, 2017).

perfection. She eventually gave in to pressure and released the video. Today the artist laments its early release, two years prior to the presidential election in Cuba.⁴⁴ Like everything in politics, the timing of announcements is key. Bruguera missed her aim by launching a candidacy that prompted vast media coverage, but that faded quickly without having the impact that it could have had if she had announced it at a date closer to the elections. Bruguera sees this episode as a failure in her ability to negotiate the power dynamic with the Western curator. "I wasn't ready. The work wasn't ready. To impose your desire on the Other, is also a form of colonization."⁴⁵ These interactions, which are frequently born from the intention of originating a relevant cultural exchange, often represent a missed opportunity, for the approaches used for their execution pose little challenge to the Eurocentrism of Western art organizations, and expand, in fact, on the primitive fantasies of modernism, and the prevalence of coloniality.

Performances like the candidacy announcement fall within Bruguera's *Arte de Conducta*, a line of work that she started to develop in early 2000s and that advocates for

(...) the understanding of art as an instrument for the transformation of
ideology through the activation of civic action on its environment (...)

⁴⁴ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

[conducting] actions aimed to transform some spaces in society through art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor.⁴⁶

Similarly, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* serves to illustrate the implementation of Bruguera's concept of Arte de Conducta. The artist displayed a vast understanding of the potentiality of art in the process of altering the social reality of the island through promising one minute of free speech to audience members. Her action transcended the metaphoric realm and turned artistic gesture into dissent and the gallery space into an active platform to challenge structures of power, where emotional and political responses resonated long after the performance had finished.

The ephemerality inherent to performance art is challenged when Bruguera's work takes form within a museum that seeks to incorporate it into its permanent collection. In a league of its own, the conversation and negotiation of the power dynamic is unique and complex. Her approach to this relationship, which constitute a decolonizing effort, contests the traditional ways in which Western museums collect and exhibit art, and takes into account tangible paths towards a more inclusive and democratic institution.

⁴⁶ Bruguera, Tania. "Cátedra Arte de Conducta." Taniabruguera.com <http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/492-0-Ctedra+Arte+de+Conducta+Behavior+Art+School.htm> (accessed November 18, 2017).

Bruguera seeks to challenge the resistance to turn the museum into a civic place and a centre for critical engagement, which continues to be a permanent feature of the first two decades of the twenty-first century despite social inquietudes that demand for institutional restructuring. The museum, as Vasif Kortun argues, doesn't seem to be on the side of the artists or the public, but on the side of the financial forces that guarantee that its doors stay open. In his article, "Questions on Institutions," Kortun states that since the 1970s, the museum has adopted the model of the theme park and the industrial fair—entertainment, food, shopping and daycare.

The exhibition is reduced today to the visitation of new sacrosanct edifices of starkitekts. This sacral experience is not about the actualization of a bona fide civic society. It in fact hinders such an attempt, and reduces the potential of activating culture's capacity in helping shape a society.⁴⁷ Regardless of how much theorization and implementation goes into the idea of decolonizing the museum, all efforts will be rendered insufficient as long as the financial structures that sustain it, that is, the patron and the individual donor, are kept in place.

As Bruguera's work continues to enter the collections of some of the most prominent Western museums, and in light of the considerable time that she

⁴⁷ Kortun, Vasif. (2017). *Questions on Institutions*. Unpublished manuscript.

spends outside Cuba, it is appropriate to inquire whether the artist can remain truthful to her practice.⁴⁸ Can the Latin American, or artist of the periphery in general, remain un-co-opted when operating within the centre? Are artists being absorbed into the system that they seek to challenge, and in the process, losing their agency as decolonizing proxies? To answer these questions I address two different examples that speak to the artist's ability to negotiate her relationship with the Western museum and her efforts in ensuring that her work is not decontextualized, or presented in a way that fits a curatorial proposal but compromises her artistic intent.

In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, a piece that was first exhibited at the 7th edition of the Havana Biennial in 2000 and that is part of a series where Bruguera addresses common stereotypes associated with specific cities. During the Biennial, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, a video performance installation, took place at the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, a place used as a military prison from the times of Spanish colonization until 1991 when it was repurposed as a historic national park. The audience enters one of the damp vaults of the fortress, completely darkened. The floor is covered with decomposing sugar cane bagasse, making it difficult for

⁴⁸ Bruguera divides her time between Havana and New York City, and often spends time in other cities, as her work requires.

people to walk in the dark and filling the air with a sickening sweet smell. At the end of the tunnel-like structure a dim light emanates, luring us into the darkness and encouraging us to continue the walk. As one moves closer, a TV looping images of Fidel Castro is revealed; some of the most historic moments of his time as leader of the Cuban Revolution. Only when the public, by now used to the darkness, turns around the presence of four naked male figures becomes noticeable. They repeat physical gestures—bending, rubbing and hitting body parts (Fig. 10).

Bruguera claims that the work, which was initially conceptualized in response to the theme proposed by the biennial, “closer to one another”

intended to analyze the relationship between political leaders using the mass media to project a more human image by affecting vulnerability, and common citizens who have no way to amplify their vulnerability to have it change. Cuba, a place where leftist fantasies were projected, has projected itself in the political imaginary in the figure of Commandant in Chief Fidel Castro, while witnessing the much more difficult to understand reality of common citizens is obviated or avoided and does not always coincide with mythicized legitimization. The piece reflects this intentional ‘blindness’ and, through a sensorial experience, tries to approach the spectator to a reality full of contradictions.⁴⁹

After opening night, the government closed the installation citing that public male nakedness was forbidden.

⁴⁹ Bruguera, Tania. “Untitled (Havana 2000).” Taniabruquera.com <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/146-0-Untitled+Havana+2000.htm> (accessed October 14, 2017).

After being censored in Cuba, *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* has been restaged a number of times in an international context, most notably at the 2015 edition of the Venice Biennial, and it will be presented for the first time in North America at the Museum of Modern Art in 2018.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, this will be a special moment for Bruguera, and for Cuban art, as it continues to position itself as a leading force in Latin America. What makes this example relevant in outlining Bruguera's relationship with the West and her status as a decolonial agent is how the artist approached the experiencing of placing her work within what is arguably the most important museum of modern and contemporary art in the world with gratitude, but also with complete awareness of how the work should be presented. For instance, the Museum of Modern Art is contractually obliged to hire Cuban performers every time the work is to be exhibited.⁵¹ This condition, rather than being an unjustified demand, speaks to the need for the work to remain related to the idea that originated it—the fraught relationship of the Cuban people with its leaders. If American performers were to execute the piece, they would stand in as signifiers of the Cuban people, which in turn, would reinforce the problematic assumption that Westerners are able to give voice and

⁵⁰ Documentation of *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* was exhibited at the Museo del Barrio in New York City as part of the exhibition "Superreal: alternative realities in photography and video," February-May, 2013.

⁵¹ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

agency to non-Westerners. For *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* to remain truthful to its concept, it must be performed by the people that it addresses. For Bruguera this stipulation it is a moment of self-determination and postethnicity, as she, as a member of the periphery once rendered incapable of representing itself by the museum of the metropole, acquires the agency in constructing her own identity.⁵² Mukherji argues that this process

involves not just taking agency in fashioning one's identity but doing so self-consciously, with its constructedness kept in view. Postethnic is envisaged as an empowering term that marks the arrival of the Third World artist and, by extension, art historian within the horizon of contemporary art and art history.⁵³

The second example of how Bruguera negotiates with the power dynamics of the museum lies the acquisition of her work, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, by another leading museum, Tate Modern. *Tatlin's Whisper #5* was first performed at Tate Modern in 2008. The performance consisted of two real mounted policemen in their uniforms, implementing the crowd control techniques taught at the British Police Academy, on unaware museumgoers (Fig. 11). Bruguera requested that her performance or presence at Tate Modern was not advertised via any platform. The execution of *Tatlin's Whisper #5* was closely aligned with

⁵² Belting, Hans, Andrea Buddensieg. *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2009. 58.

⁵³ Mukherji, Parul Dave. "Whither Art History in the Globalizing World. The Art Bulletin. 96:2 (2014): 151-155.

Bruguera's concept of *Political Timing Specific*, which first appeared in her practice during the restaging of Mendieta's work, and relates to the influence that current political and social circumstances may have on the response of the audience to the work of art. In this case, Bruguera considered it crucial that the audience remained unaware of her artistic intentionality. Once the public knows it is art, Bruguera argues, they begin to make associations and respond in ways that are different from how they would respond outside the museum if they were placed in a similar situation. Bruguera wants the audience to experience *Tatlin's Whisper #5* as a real event, and not as a representation of an event. One of the artist's intentions is to place the public in a situation where they are faced with the notion of power, in this specific case, the presence of police.⁵⁴ When the museum approached Bruguera to purchase the performance, the artist put forward a series of demands, contractually preventing the museum from advertising the performance whenever it is restaged. In addition, it is always to be performed by real police forces, audiences shall never be informed of the fact that it is art and most importantly, it is only to be performed when there is an event that is of serious national or international concern. The latter is intended to preserve the piece's value within *Political Timing Specific*, and precondition the

⁵⁴ Bruguera, Tania. "Tatlin's Whisper #5." Taniabruguera.com.
<http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/478-0-Tatlins+Whisper+5.htm>
(accessed November 12, 2017).

response of the audience, who will be prone to believe that the presence of the mounted police inside the museum is related to what may be happening outside.

On the notion of co-option, Bruguera confesses that it may happen. "I will not win every battle, but I try. I try to be aware of how my work is presented and contextualized."⁵⁵ Entering the collection of the Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern are career-defining moments for any artist. In Bruguera's case, her audacity as an artist from the developing world in making tangible demands to institutions that signify, for many, the structures of power that need to be debunked and reimaged, is also a powerful example of how artists from the periphery can act as decolonial agents and retain their agency while infiltrating and challenging Western circles of power.

Arte Útil: From the individual to the collective

Early performances such as *Destierro* and *El Peso de la Culpa* are intrinsically linked to the decolonizing discourse, for they serve to challenge prevalent structures of power and offer an alternative to the predominant Eurocentric aesthetics of performance art. Both performances, honouring the introspective process happening in Cuba at the time, look within Cuban

⁵⁵ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

heritage—its indigenous and African roots—to address contemporary social realities and speak to the repressive systems that muzzled the voice and agency of artists in the island. However, when analyzed through the decolonial lens, the symbolism inherent to these performances, turns them into limited efforts, works of art in the most literal sense, unable to provoke tangible change within the system that they seek to challenge. In contrast, Arte Útil, the line of thought that has increasingly guided Bruguera's practice over the last fifteen years, and that is now at its very core, expands the effectivity of decolonizing the art systems. Arte Útil is the most recent shift in the evolution of Bruguera's practice, and at the same time, the evolution of her decolonial practice. Transitioning from the reenactment of Mendieta's work, to the use of her own body in works such as *Destierro*, to Arte de Conducta, to Arte Útil, Bruguera's understanding of the unfeasibility to create effective social change alone has led her to develop a system that makes it seemingly impossible for her work to be individualized and co-opted. The combination of how Bruguera functions as an individual artist in relationship with the collective approach that she proposes is what anchors her ability to work as a decolonial proxy. The collective approach of Arte Útil constitutes Bruguera's greatest contribution to the decolonial goal.

The term Arte Útil can be translated literally to 'useful art.' The artist, however, prefers to use the original Spanish, as Útil refers to the concept of

usefulness, but can also be translated as 'tool.' Arte Útil, therefore, comprises the notions of the usefulness of art and its ability to become a tool to generate social change.⁵⁶ The ideas behind Arte Útil are of primary concern for Bruguera, who tries to "draw on artistic thinking to imagine, create and implement tactics that change how we act in society."⁵⁷ The key feature of Arte Útil, and what differentiates it from early approaches in the artist's career, is that for it to be successful it must transcend symbolism and originate real, tangible change, giving way to the implementation of beneficial outcomes.

Bruguera's *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* should be considered the first example of Arte Útil in her career. Cuban art, especially in the 1980s, has had the tendency to address the political, mostly through metaphor and irony. *Cátedra* and the work that young Cuban artists made there began to more explicitly confront the links between culture and power.⁵⁸ The school, which fostered civic actions and the understanding of the role of art in contemporary society and within the political realm, served a tangible educational purpose that has left an important mark as the young artists who participated in the project begin now to

⁵⁶ Bruguera, Tania. "Introduction on Useful Art." Taniabruguera.com. <http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/528-0-Introduction+on+Useful+Art.htm> (accessed November 4, 2017).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lazo, Direlia. "It Happened in Havana." Guggenheim.org. <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/it-happened-in-havana> (accessed December 17, 17).

consolidate international careers inspired by the notions of political and social accountability.⁵⁹

It is noteworthy to observe how Bruguera once again takes an idea originally motivated by the political and social circumstances of Cuba, and finds a way to anchor it as an international proposal that becomes relevant in other political and social scenarios. In recent years, Bruguera has put forward Arte Útil projects that have taken place in diverse contexts and countries such as the United States, the Netherlands, Turkey and Canada. Currently, the parameters of what has come to delineate Arte Útil are defined by a criteria put forward by Bruguera in collaboration with curators from the Queens Museum, New York, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Grazedale Arts, Coniston:

Arte Útil projects should: 1) Propose new uses for art within society. 2) Use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates. 3) Respond to current urgencies. 4) Operate on a 1:1 scale. 5) Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users. 6) Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users. 7) Pursue sustainability. 8) Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Cuban artist such as Carlos Martiel and Reynier Leyva Novo are developing successful international practices that evidence the influence of Bruguera's Cátedra Arte de Conducta in their formation as socially and politically engaged artists.

⁶⁰ "About Arte Útil." Arte-Útil.org. <http://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/> (accessed November 14, 2017).

The democratization or de-authorship stands out within Arte Útil. Artists relinquish the authorship of a project and become *initiators*, understanding that as a communal effort, there is no particular person responsible for achieving social or political change. In a similar manner, the audience is not regarded as spectators, but as *users*, expected to see real benefits from engaging in a project. This notion shakes and challenges Western values where the artist is idolized and the artistic production is rendered unique and permanently owned—at least morally—by its creator. Arte Útil does not believe in copyright or the aesthetic function of the work of art.

What constitutes a decolonial artistic practice in a highly individuated and market-driven art world, is the disappearance of Bruguera as an artist into the collectiveness that Arte Útil proposes. In doing this, Bruguera further defines and negotiates her relationship with the Western cultural institution. This collective approach is evidenced in the collaboration with theorist Stephen Wright, who presented “Towards a Lexicon of Usership,” a “textual tool kit for users” of Arte Útil, where he advocates for the need to retire certain terms and outlines what he describes as “emerging concepts” and “modes of usership.”⁶¹ The list of terms that Wright proposes for retirement includes: authorship, ownership

⁶¹ Wright, Stephen. “Towards a Lexicon of Usership.” Museumarteutil.net. <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2017).

and objecthood, while he signals the emergence of concepts such as 1:1 scale, artworlds (art-sustaining environments) and usology.⁶²

Addressing the intrinsic correlation between theory and method, Brazilian scholar Claudia Mattos expresses the impossibility of expanding the art history canon without transforming theory. For redefining progress to take place, Mattos argues, it is vital to develop new theory and language to address cultural production emerging from the periphery.⁶³ While the theorization of language often risks its detachment from those intended to use it, Wright's text, and *Arte Útil* in general, continue to pave the way for the introduction of new tools that equip artists, theorists and users with the means to engage in a dialogue that can happen, aesthetically, intellectually and linguistically, outside the preconceived parameters established for understanding and critiquing art.

Cuba and the international stage

To place Bruguera's practice within the decolonial discourse is to trace back to its origins—to the reinterpretation of Mendieta's performances as a gesture of cultural repatriation and a commentary on the mass exodus of creative

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Mattos, Claudia. "Geography, Art Theory, and New Perspectives for an Inclusive Art History." *The Art Bulletin*. 96.3 (2014): 259-64.

talent. Bruguera realizes that, to her knowledge, no one has analyzed her work through the lens of decolonial theory. She acknowledges that while the terms “coloniality,” “decolonization,” “post-colonial identity” etc., were not consciously present at the beginning of her career, many of the concerns that inform these concepts have been permanent forces behind her work.⁶⁴

Similarly, while the Havana Biennial, one of the greatest influences in Bruguera’s career, constituted a significant decolonizing effort, the discourse around decoloniality and the Havana Biennial is mostly one that emerges when this binary is analyzed in retrospect. It cannot be argued that the strategies and conceptual process implemented by the Biennial were underlined by a conscious understanding of the need to decolonize cultural institutions around the world. Why is this the case? As the poster child of the national liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s, Castro had taught Cubans that the decolonization of the country had already occurred. Its golden years had taken place between 1959 with the advance of the Revolution, and 1963. During this time Cuba had nationalized its industries, taking them out of U.S. hands and returning them—or giving them for the first time—to the Cuban people. It also developed a literacy campaign that reduced the illiteracy rate from 25% to less than 4%, virtually

⁶⁴ Bruguera, Tania. Unpublished interview by author.

turning the island into the first country free of illiteracy in Latin America.⁶⁵ The list of accomplishments of the early years of the Communist Revolution was remarkable. For the government, Cuba was decolonized, and any conversation regarding a critical analysis of how coloniality was at play within the country, was frowned upon and always out of context. Post-colonial became the preferred term. This it escaped the organizing committee of the Havana Biennial that even though their exhibition program represented the voices emerging in the periphery, and the legitimizing strategies were unique to their context, the curatorial models and exhibition strategies that were being implemented were still linked to those imposed by the West and Western art historians who, as Capistrano-Baker states,

deploy various methods of artistic analysis, describing and interpreting works of art within prescribed theoretical frameworks. They examine art as visual markers of cultures at specific spatial and temporal junctures,⁶⁶ and in doing so, disregard the concerns that inform non-Western sensibilities and realities. The organizing committee of the Biennial was also seemingly

⁶⁵ "Fiallo, Jorge. "Latin Lessons: What can we learn from the world's most ambitious literacy campaigns." *The Independent.co.uk*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/latin-lessons-what-can-we-learn-from-the-worlds-most-ambitious-literacy-campaign-2124433.html> (accessed December 5, 2017).

⁶⁶ Capistrano-Baker, Florina H. "Whither Art History in the Non-Western World: Exploring the Other('s) Art Histories." *The Art Bulletin*. 97:3 (2015): 246-257.

oblivious to the fact that, since every curator behind the conceptualization of the event had been formed at an academy that imparted art history based on European and classical models, the Havana Biennial was arguably in as much need of decolonization as any other cultural institution.

In another seeming paradox, it was not until the 11th edition of the Havana Biennial in 2012 that decolonization was specifically addressed in a panel titled *Decolonial Aesthetics*, organized by a number of leading experts in the Decolonial field including Raúl Reffera-Balanquet and Miguel Rojas-Sotelo. During this time, Bruguera was actively engaged in two long-term projects that took place between 2010 and 2015 and that represented significant decolonial efforts: *Immigrant Movement International*, presented by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art and *Migrant People Party* (MPP), which took place in Mexico City. *Immigrant Movement International* sought to engage communities, social service organizations and elected officials in a debate that questioned pressing matters concerning the political representation of immigrants and the disparity inherent to how they are perceived and treated in the United States.⁶⁷ The MPP, on the other hand, intended to break into the 2012 Mexican elections

⁶⁷ Bruguera, Tania. "Immigrant Movement International." Taniabruquera.com. <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/486-0-Immigrant+Movement+International.htm> (accessed January 16, 2017).

offering migrants with creative alternatives for political organization and representation.⁶⁸

The *Decolonial AestheSics* panel was proposed to the Havana Biennial in response to the panelist's realization that the Biennial's curatorial statements were continuing to operate with terms such as "postmodernity," "postcolonial" and "altermodern." Thus the idea of a panel on decolonial aestheSis, became not only relevant, but also necessary.⁶⁹ The discussion that emerged around the framing of this panel examined the presence of what is described as coloniality of knowledge existing in Cuba's educational and cultural institutions, curatorial practices and critical debates. Reffera-Balanquet and Rojas-Sotel proposed a workshop/panel on Decolonial AestheSics to take place at the theoretical forum of the Biennial. The purpose was to initiate "a collective discussion on how Decolonial transmodernity and aestheSis are bringing coloniality to the foreground, unveiling the darker side of modernity that continues to be a blind spot in the debates on postmodernity and altermodernity."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Bruguera, Tania. "Migrant People Party (MPP)." Taniabruquera.com. <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/586-0-Migrant+People+Party+MPP.htm> (accessed January 16, 2017).

⁶⁹ Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, Raul, and Miguel Rojas-Sotelo. "Decolonial AestheSis at the 11th Havana Biennial." Socialtextjurnal.org. https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-at-the-11th-havana-biennial/ (accessed September 28, 2017).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Ironically, the initiation of the discussion of decolonial aesthetics at the Biennial occurred at a time when Bruguera has been effectively excised from the official Cuban art scene. Today Bruguera has no institutional support in Cuba despite recent overtures that signal the country's interest in engaging with the international decolonial discourse. The Havana Biennial, the pillar of her formative years, which so greatly contributed to shape her agency as a decolonial proxy, has withdrawn its support for an artistic practice that has become overtly political and outspoken. Bruguera's initial national endorsement has been replaced by international validation brought in part by acquisitions like the ones from the Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern that have further consolidated the international status that Bruguera has enjoyed over the last fifteen years.

Yet, contextually, Cuba and the international stage cannot be separated when analysing Bruguera's artistic practice. Her international notoriety leads the artist to divide her time between Havana and wherever her next project may take her. Bruguera, however, does not consider herself to be living in exile; she remains a Cuban who resides in Cuba, and spends time abroad due to her work commitments. Between international projects, Bruguera continues to develop proposals conceived to take place in Cuba, and for the benefit of the Cuban people. In December of 2014, when Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced

the renewal of diplomatic relationships, Bruguera attempted to restage *Tatlin's Whisper No. 6 (Havana Version)*, this time set to take place at Revolution Square, a place commonly used by the Castro brothers when addressing the Cuban people, and used for national, most often political celebrations (Fig. 12). If the original performance was criticized by the Cuban government, the idea of its restaging outside the gallery space, at a place deeply charged with political connotations, was met with absolute intolerance. Following Bruguera's refusal to cancel the event and to further negotiate with government officials, she was arrested on her way to Revolution Square. The artist was in fact arrested several times in the weeks to follow, and her passport confiscated for eight months.⁷¹

Bruguera's action generated an overwhelming response within the international artistic community, with museum directors, reputable curators, fellow artists and patrons coming forward on Bruguera's behalf, demanding her liberation and that her passport be returned to her.⁷² Even though the restaging of *Tatlin's Whisper No. 6* never took place, Bruguera considers that the government complete the work, a different performance, but one that served to

⁷¹ Milliard, Coline. "Tania Bruguera's Arrest Slows the US-Cuba Thaw." News.artnet.com <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/tania-brugueras-arrest-slows-the-us-cuba-thaw-211269> (accessed January 12, 2018).

⁷² Yablonsky, Linda. "Tania Bruguera: Rebel with a Cause." Wmagazine.com. <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/tania-bruguera-cuban-artist> (accessed August 12, 2017).

expose government intolerance and the presence of censorship.⁷³ Bruguera's action was fruitful on several levels—It encouraged Cubans to speak freely and fight for their long suppressed rights to freedom of speech, assembly and association. Because of Bruguera's international reputation, and the large amount of press that the situation generated, she succeeded in exposing the Cuban government's reluctance to tolerate free and uncompromised artistic expression.

The restaging of *Tatlin's Whisper No. 6 (Havana Version)* was scheduled to take place a day before New Year's Eve, one of the largest national holidays on the island. To this day, I wrestle with the question of whether it was coincidence or a carefully planned move by the government to discredit Bruguera's effort, that a market in a prosperous neighbourhood in Havana held a pork meat sale that prompted dozens of Havana residents to line up for hours. As I drove by the market with a friend, he muttered, "And then you want a performance about freedom of speech to go down well. What people need is food." I remained quiet; remarks like these are common among Cubans who may value Bruguera's practice, but believe that it is often out of touch with the reality of the island. I would argue that it is precisely these kinds of performances that evidence

⁷³ Eccles, Tom. "Art Featured: Tania Bruguera."

Bruguera's deep and unwavering connection with her country and its reality.

Bruguera is able to transcend the distractions of the food shortages, the lack of Internet, transportation and finds the source of all vicissitudes afflicting Cuba: its lack of freedom of speech. The country's national hero, intellectual, revolutionary philosopher and political theorist José Martí, argued that "being educated is the only way to be free,"⁷⁴ Fidel Castro and his literacy campaign also advocated for the importance of education. Education and freedom of speech, Bruguera is able to see, are concepts intrinsically intertwined, even in a country where they seem to be irreconcilable, a country where citizens are asked to become educated and at the same time, remain quiet.

The role that Bruguera plays in the current Cuban artistic and political scenario, whether actively promoting change, or still defining how this desire for change can become a reality, is pivotal, for it raises the notion of political and social accountability. Her international status doesn't allow for gaps of silence. When she was detained for wanting to conduct a public action, the world responded. In times of hyper-connectivity, Brugera contributes to bringing Cuba

⁷⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Who was José Martí?" Unesco.org. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/events/prizes-and-celebrations/unesco-prizes/jose-marti-prize/jose-marti/> (accessed December 7, 2017).

to the international stage, by presenting a daring artistic practice and by promoting an active discussion about Cuban politics and policies.

Conclusion

The performances and artistic/decolonial evolution discussed in this paper outline the development of an artistic practice that has kept social and political engagement at its centre for over thirty years. Contemplating Bruguera's work through the lens of decoloniality, both in retrospect and within current perspectives, offers a valuable insight regarding how individual artists may contribute to achieving the decolonizing goal, as well as how the strategies to achieve this goal have evolved over time. Bruguera's perception of her role, as an artist and a political individual, is always multi-layered and complex. There seems to be a clear understanding of the impossibility to achieve the decolonization of knowledge and being alone. To this end, Bruguera has implemented mechanisms that prohibit the individualization of her practice by the Western cultural institution, and allow for collaborative proposals to emerge, outlining the new paths that her collective work is sure to transit.

Bruguera is the product of the context that has fostered her political and social interests. Cuba's Communist Revolution will remain inherently linked to her work in complex ways that can be, perhaps more evidently, analysed in

relationship to its failures, but also to the humanistic ideals of its early years that proposed to Cubans a cohesive collective dream of inclusion and prosperity. The Havana Biennial, on the other hand, served to shape Bruguera's understanding of social realities that were not strictly associated to her experience as a Cuban, but that were still far removed from the prevalent European and North American sensibilities influencing art students on the island. Bruguera is fair in calling herself a daughter of the Havana Biennial. The early lessons on how aesthetics could be brought into question and power structures could be challenged, have had a lasting impact in an artistic practice that keeps these two concerns as driving forces and conceptual paradigms, and presents tangible paths towards decoloniality.

To say that Bruguera's work responds to the Cuban reality is an understatement. The starting point of her work is rooted in the reality of her country, which in turn gives way to the emergence of concepts that speak to international concerns and experiences. Today Bruguera's work inserts itself internationally, not only within the exhibitions of Western curators that bring preconceived assumption of the role that she is supposed to play, but also in the contexts of truly collaborative realms where Bruguera is given the autonomy to adapt to a new environment and respond to the issues that attract her interest.

The correlation between Cuba and the international stage is permeated with an array of elements that determine how Bruguera's work transitions from one to the other. The impact that Cuba has on how her work is seen internationally, and how her work outside the island conditions the way in which it is perceived locally, remains one of the most compelling features present in Bruguera's artistic practice. Yet the experiential element is to be considered, for both Bruguera and the audience. The artist's relationship with the Cuban government and the cultural institutions that represent it, continue to pose a sharp contrast to her relationship with the Western museum and curator: one demands the eradication of political undertones, while the other one encourages it and benefits from it.

The negotiation of these power dynamics, as well as the aforementioned formative experiences, have come to define Bruguera's ability to work as a decolonizing proxy. Through the modes of operation that she has set in place, Bruguera's work manages to continuously challenge voices and structures of power in Cuba and abroad. Since her eruption in the contemporary art scene in Cuba, with different degrees of success, her work, often unknowingly, has contributed to the discourse around decoloniality. The symbolism of her early performances compromised its capacity to effectively hold the Cuban government accountable for its mistakes. However, Bruguera's evolution as an

artist and the shift towards lines of work such as Arte Útil, bring forward the most relevant contribution to decoloniality. Bruguera's focus on the usefulness of art and its potentiality to achieve political and social change redefines the role of contemporary art and artists in society. Through Arte Útil, she, along with her collaborators, succeed at challenging and offering suitable and sustainable alternatives to the Eurocentric aesthetics of art, how the Western cultural institution operates, and the language that is used to analyze, criticise and promote art. This, in turn, expands the canon for more inclusive, democratic and enriched experiences.

Perhaps the most pressing question that my research brings forth is how Bruguera's example and ideas can be diversified and implemented in different contexts. Decoloniality remains a goal, a steep hill for those who advocate for the need to dismantle core views that are so intrinsic to those who hold the voice of power in Western circles. To return to José Martí, and to remember that being cultured is the only way to be free, is a great starting point in the process of recognizing the impending need to shift mind-sets. How Bruguera manages to take ideas beyond the educational real, transforming them into tangible beneficial outcomes, must remain at the centre of how we understand a practice that has exhibited unwavering commitment to the reality of our time.

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Appendix A: Illustrations

Note: All captions as recommended by Estudio Bruguera

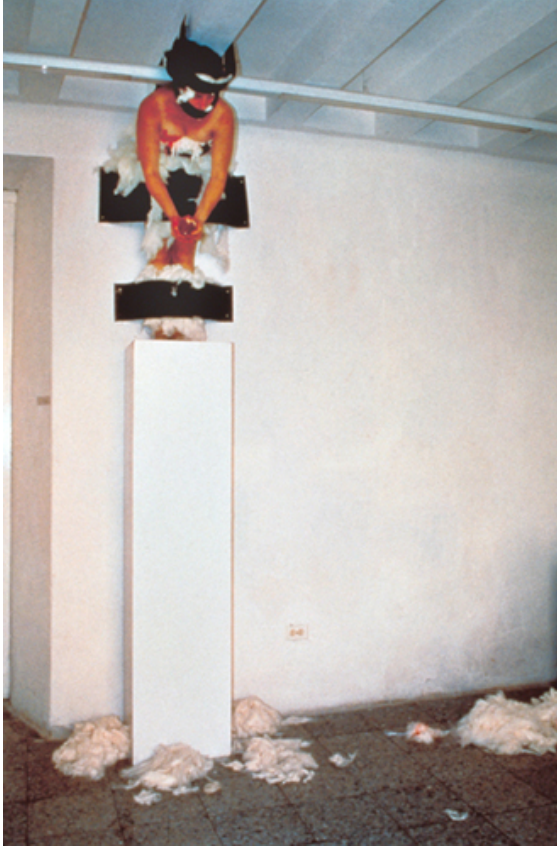


Fig. 1

Tania Bruguera
Estudio Taller, 1995
Performance. Centro de Arte
Contempráneo Wifredo Lam
Photo courtesy of Estudio
Bruguera



Fig. 2

Clair Bishop stands with
students outside *C tedra Arte
de Conducta*.
Havana, Cuba, 2006.
Courtesy of the Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 3

Tania Bruguera
Homenaje a Ana Mendieta
 Conception year: 1985
 Implementation years:
 1986-1996
 Recreation of works
 Long term project
 Ana Mendieta's artworks and
 Unrealized projects, lectures,
 exhibitions, interviews, texts.
 Photos: Gonzalo Vidal Alvaredo
 Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 4

Nkisi Nkonde, late 19th century
 Wood, natural fibers, nails
 The Christina N. and Swan J.
 Turnblad Memorial



Fig.5

Tania Bruguera
Destierro, 1998-1999
 Medium: Embodying an Nkisi Nkonde icon, Behaviour Art.
 Materials: Cuban earth, glue, wood, nails, textile.
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 6

Tania Bruguera
El peso de la culpa, 1997-1999
 Medium: Re-enactment of a historical event.
 Materials: Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil.
 Dimensions variable.
 Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 7

Tania Bruguera

Tatlin's Whisper #6

(Havana Version), 2009

Medium: Decontextualization of an action, Behaviour Art.

Materials: Stage, podium, microphones, 1 Loudspeaker inside and one outside of the Building, two people in military fatigues, white doves, one minute free of censorship per speaker, 200 disposable cameras with flash. Courtesy of Studio Bruguera



Fig. 8

Fidel Castro addressing the Cuban People for the first time after the triumph of the Communist Revolution of 1959.

January 8, 1959

Havana, Cuba



Fig. 9

Tania Bruguera

Self-Sabotage, 2009

Medium: Lecture-Performance

Materials: Public lecture, table,

Chairs, brick wall with rusty metal

Beams, platform (9 inches), milk,

sound System, 38/9mm firearm,

9mm bullets.

53rd Venice Biennale, Italy.

Photos: Cesar Delgado Wixen

Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 10

Tania Bruguera

Untitled (Havana, 2000), 2000

Medium: Video Performance,

Installation.

Materials: Sugar cane bagasse,

black and White monitor, Cubans,

DVD discs, DVD players.

Dimensions: 13.12' x 39.37' x

164.04'

Photos: Casey Stoll

Courtesy of Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 11

Tania Brugera

Tatlin's Whisper #5, 2008

Medium: Decontextualization of an action, crowd control techniques, audience.

Dimensions variable

Location: Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom.

Photo: Sheila Burnett

Courtesy of Tate Modern and Estudio Bruguera



Fig. 11

Revolution Square

Havana, Cuba