

# Tania Bruguera

## Interviewed by Ashraf Osman

Interviewed in December, 2012 at the Immigrant Movement International offices in Queens, New York City  
Transcribed by Daniela N. Fuentes & Ashraf Osman

**Ashraf Osman:** I am very interested in your current project, *Immigrant Movement International*. I'd like to know how it has been received in New York? It is very different from the so-called "mainstream art world", especially here in New York. This project puts an emphasis on providing assistance to immigrants, a minority group in our society.

**Tania Bruguera:** I'm very happy and very focused on showing art in a specific way in this project. The whole project is an art piece; it proposes and questions, "Can art be useful?" This is a piece of useful art. But the way in which the *users* of the project—because I don't like participants for this project—they are not participating, because it's not like a party, they come to, dance, and leave. This is their life. People come here every day and they're family. And I know it sounds corny, and for people who don't do this kind of work it sounds fake or like trying to sell the project. But it is that way, literally: these are the people I live with.

I feel that useful art has two ways to be experienced, one way is from the "art side", which is, to look at how the artist structures the project and how they have developed the idea. If you experience the project from the user's side, then for me, it's more about, "what do I get from it?" It doesn't matter if it is art or not. It feels to me that depending on the intensity of your involvement in the project you can get to one side or the other. Let's say I do one workshop and you just come for the workshop. You come, you take the knowledge, and you leave. You come, let's say, to two workshops. You start coming to "Make a Movement", which is a very important part of the project, the mobilizing area of the project. We have meetings and we talk about how to express ourselves in the social sphere, the political sphere, and all that. And for that we introduce art. We do presentations, like slideshows, on contemporary art in the public sphere.

The *New York Times* wrote a big article on the project<sup>1</sup>; I didn't communicate correctly what *performing* is, and the writer understood performance as living with poor people, which is an offence for me. I hope as a performance artist I'm a little more sophisticated than that; it's just simplistic and too silly. For me it was important to be really deep in the neighbourhood. Instead of living in Manhattan and coming here from 10am to 5pm, I will really make this my life, not just a project. This project needs to become part of your life, if you are working here. I wanted to see the little details of what people say, what we are like, buying food next door, or having a natural relationship with the community. I live here all the time, to be honest; I don't wish to live in Brooklyn, or anywhere else.

**AO:** Is it possible to even consider your project as contemporary art? How do you mediate this to your participants or users?

**TB:** We don't state that, "this is contemporary art". We take the point of view that this is a language too, a communication tool. This person did this in the public sphere; this was the reaction it got from the people passing by. This is the reaction it got from authorities; this is the reaction it got long-term, after the project was done, that's the impact. So, art is coming to people here as a natural tool, not as an unreachable practice that has a history that they would never have access to.

I always use this example because it's the clearest one: For the mothers in the community, we had one English class that was focused on English relating to art history, to address identity issues. That's the way we do workshops here, they never have one goal; we never teach just English, the class has at least two, when they are good three goals. By the end of the class, they went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see art. But they were not scared; they loved it.



They want to go back to the museum—not because they have to go to the museum, because it’s an art-work and we’re artists. No, it’s because they created their own emotional connection to art. I am against having only one connection to art, which is a historized connection. Like, “Oh yes, I like art because I know that this comes from three different previous artworks and it’s a dialogue with the history of art.” From the beginning, if anybody comes here we say, “This is an art project, initiated by an artist, etc.” Then we go on to what they want to hear, we say it because we want to say it, we don’t want to misrepresent the project. People don’t really hear it because it’s not what they’re looking for.

**AO:** The project has become very well known, amongst artists, curators and other cultural workers. How have you developed projects with artists who wish to become part of Immigrant Movement International?

**TB:** We’ve had some people who have proposed projects, proposed workshops. And all the workshops are in the crossroads between the user and the art, and the social and the art—all of them. As I say, there are 3 intentions: one has to be artistic or related to art—and also it’s related to art because we are questioning, what is the use of art? And what is the way which you can introduce people to art? Art as a tool, as you said before.

The people who come from art, the observers, they have this idea where they, from afar, like you, know about the project somehow, and then they read about it, if they’re nice. If they’re good they have read more than just the *New York Times* article. I say all the time, “you have to come here, because you have to feel it.” Then they come interact and, hopefully, they propose a workshop. And, if you propose a workshop, the workshop is the exact point between the two. If you are a user you are actually experiencing art, and if you are an art person you are proposing art. Usually it’s very hard, not everybody goes all the way.

**AO:** It seems a lot of the difficulties that you’re describing are part of the project and how you want it to be: Independent, rejecting the commercialism of the art world. Some of your work has been criticised for the lack of documentation, compared to other similar projects. In your previous long-term work, [*Cátedra*] *Arte de Conducta* [2002-2009], you set up an art school in Havana, which you financed partly through via the US, where you were teaching at the

time, and Cuba. Do you consider using the similar difference in economies here, between the commercial object-based part to finance the social non-object part?

**TB:** I have to confess something. Yesterday in the retreat my entire staff and people involved with the project were pressuring me to do objects to sell, as a kind of residue of the project, to have a residual element. It’s complicated because I never had a loving relationship with the market. I think it’s a problem I have. I’m not proud of it; I think as an artist I haven’t solved that. And I think it’s an integral part of being in the art world. But I haven’t solved it because I don’t want to give up. So I feel that every time I have come close to have a gallery or have a commercial show, I always feel violated because I think I haven’t had good luck. It’s like love: you can have ten lovers and never have love. I have not found so far a person that understands my work and is in the commercial area. I have still one gallery in Spain and she doesn’t know what to do with me, and she’s the best experience I had because she leaves me alone and says, “Do whatever you want in the gallery.” But she hasn’t sold anything. So I have become unfortunately a prestige token artist for galleries instead of a commercial artist for the gallery—which, in a way at the beginning, I was very honoured by. But on the practical side I’m very frustrated. I had three galleries and I left two of them. This one I didn’t leave because I felt it’s going to look very bad if I leave all the galleries, like “Oh, she’s problematic.” And also she has never pushed me to do something I don’t want. So I would love to one day find a gallerist or somebody in the art world who will understand and have a theoretical and academic conversation with me—not a money conversation—like, “let’s sit down and think about how the art transforms over time.” And even that transformation, there is a space for somebody to acquire the process of transforming it—which is not to objectify this.

**AO:** You began your artistic career with a *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*, which is an unusual, as you’re starting not with your own individual work, but with reinterpreting somebody else’s work. Did you do that on purpose?

**TB:** I have to be honest: I’m not an artist who, before starting the work, spends six months thinking and then does the work. At the time it started as a very emotional thing, and it started because we were introduced to her work; she was still alive, and I was a student.

She was in the US then; I never met her. I have a friend who says, “It’s because you never met her your relationship was so intense.”

Basically we were a group of art students, and were very much into art, discussing and reading all the time. We started visiting established artists, who were our professors, and were going to their houses and having conversations with the classmates. One of the people who were doing that was [Gerardo] Mosquera, who is a very well known critic in Cuba, and he introduced us to Ana Mendieta’s work. It was because another guy from the group was doing a work that was very similar to what she was doing. And he introduced him to her while we were all in the room, and my first reaction was “Wow! A woman!” Every artist we were introduced to ‘til then was a man. She was a role model; I was the only girl in the group. And then, he told us, “We are going to introduce you guys to her because she travels a lot.” This was in ‘84 or ‘85.

And then, five or six months later, we went to a lecture by Mosquera, and he says that Ana Mendieta has died. It was very emotional for him because he knew her and she had a big impact on the older Cuban generation. And I was so shocked because I am not meeting her; it is so sad. I didn’t understand at the time the implication of her death, and everything that came later. Then I started obsessing about it and thought, “Ok, I want to know more about this person.”

**AO:** After *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* you went on to produce more individual work that wasn’t directly referencing other artists, such as your performance *The Burden of Guilt* [1997-1999]. What compelled you to make that shift?

**TB:** I have to say, for me the most important work I have done is *Ana Mendieta*, which is sad, that the first work I do is the most important. What I liked so much about the first two works I did is that it was claimed they were a failure... I felt I was going through a very interesting and challenging kind of art practice, taking somebody else’s artwork, and getting into trouble, Galerie Lelong wanted to sue me... They felt I was an eighteen years old girl and they were threatened that I was going to sell it or something. Now everybody is happy about re-enacting; but the tough time was when I was doing it.

The thing is, I was doing art that was questioning what art is—not just “What is art?” because I am

not a formalist; but “What is art for?” I always thought in terms of the uses of art. I was really enjoying this kind of I-don’t-know-what-I-am-doing situation.



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The other work I really like is the newspaper [*Memory of the Post-war*, 1993-1994], because it was again the same gesture of non-authorship. I really like it because I took over a resource that is not from the art world, but it is a resource from power, which is information.

**AO:** For that reasons would you say that some of the collaborations you became involved with in Cuba became problematised. Would you consider this to be a failure or a success?

**TB:** Well, it was a moment in which I was introduced to responsibility. I realized that I couldn’t just do whatever I want; there are consequences if you do certain things and you have to deal with that.

The first time the Council, the official people from the art world, called me in [for questioning], I

didn't know that at the same time they called in a guy that was working with me, doing the design. When I got out and went home, there was a friend in my house who said David was taken into questioning. I went to his house and his mother made me feel so bad, saying "Look what you are doing! You are so irresponsible! Because of you, my kid has problems..." For girls it was easier to get away, but for men there is a bigger implication to get in trouble [with the authorities].

My father was pressured to bring me to the secret police, I was interrogated in front of him by those guys who I printed material about, where I printed it, who is sponsoring, who is behind it... I was so offended because I thought, what do you mean? I am not smart enough to do this? I felt offended as an artist. It was my idea to do a newspaper; I am so proud of that. Do you mean somebody from the CIA put this idea in my head?

It was very damaging, the aftermath of the experience. I never really felt that I was doing something wrong, and that's everything in my work. I never feel I am doing something wrong, so I hate when people accuse me of being a "provocateur". Because when I do things, I believe in what I am doing, and I do not see any problem with it. It was a very intense and abusive consequence and I was only 23 or 22; so it was a lot. I even have a headache when I think about it. So it was very intense because I felt like I really lost his friendship, in the process.

**AO:** Do you think, in retrospect, that something so intense made you want to take sole ownership of your projects or do just the opposite and diffuse that ownership?

**TB:** I was very traumatized by the experience. I really enjoyed doing it because I really liked being with people and asking people, "Give me a thing for the newspaper!" It felt so right. People were so excited and enthusiastic about it, and it got known. People were making photocopies—in Cuba for people to make photocopies is not easy—and passing along the newspaper. And everybody was passing along the newspaper, and it was circulating the way I wanted, which is not in a museum but through people. It actually got to people outside the art world, which was my main goal. It was great; everybody was reading it! People who were not artists also knew about it and were reading it. I think infiltrating that sphere was very important—and that is from my socialist background, that art is for everybody. But after that, I didn't do anything for a while. And I have to tell you something, now it is very easy to say, "Oh I did the Ana Mendieta [series] and it was transgressing authorship". But at the time it felt very difficult, because everybody else was doing their own etiquette work, their own labelled image, their own personal work, and I am the only one who in that context didn't want to do it. I felt I was not a real artist; and I am not an artist because I am not able to come up with my own thing.



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**AO:** After this experience, did you then decide to assert yourself in your own work and your own authorial privileges?

**TB:** I think it was not so much about authorship but about responsibility. I thought, “If I do something I am getting so many into trouble.” It was more that I was traumatized by the experience with David. I thought if I get somebody into trouble it’s going to be hard; and then I decided I am going to do everything by myself. It will be only me responsible, if something happens; I didn’t want to implicate other people in problems. I think it was more because of that that I focused on myself; but I didn’t feel so comfortable. I mean, it feels good to do a performance; it is an adrenaline [rush] that is amazing. I really liked it! But after I did it for a while, it became like a practice and I didn’t like it anymore. Also, I felt like I did performance because I wanted people to have a memory to bring back home. But then it became too “art”: the image and the photos, and then they were publishing these photos everywhere. And I was thinking, it is not about the photo...

**AO:** Is that why took yourself out of the performance afterwards? Because the series you did after, the *Untitled* [2000, 2002, 2007, 2009] and *Tatlin’s Whisper* [2008, 2009] series, you weren’t in the performance anymore.

**TB:** Exactly, I feel like the performance period was torture for me. I feel amazing doing it—I really like doing performance, I have to be honest. But it was torture, because I felt like I did my healing process in public, basically. I think that performance period was a healing process from what happened. But I was tired of doing performance, and I felt I was in a circle. I felt nobody in Cuba was being honest with me about what they think about my work. Or if they were, it was not the level I wanted; I wanted a higher level of criticism. So I went back to art school; I came to the United States to study after that.

I had a different set of questioning, different political aspects: in Cuba the political is the government; there is no idea of the personal political or police. The power relation between you and me, or between the person who just came and me—it is not something that is thought about or expressed in Cuba. It exists and actually is very present—even more than here; but it is not how you normally interpret politics or political art. You interpret your dialogue with the power structure of the government

and their policies, the laws, and the macro-politics. And when I came here, I started thinking about this power relationship, and what is dominant and what is submissive, and all this kind of thing. It was very confusing to me, and what happened is that the way my work was interpreted was as a feminist work. And I am feminist, but I don’t want my work to be identified in such an easy way, because I always fight against reduction. Every time people come they’re reducing things. Then you don’t do your process with the work, because you just assume and move on.



Part of the criticism I got is, your work is feminist because you are using yourself—this idea of the personal politics and the art history of the 70’s. And I started to have problems because I don’t identify with this. Why, if woman is a figure that has been used for liberty, equality, for other symbolic aims—not that I think that was right—why can I only be reduced to my only personal story? And I cannot be, when I am performing, representing a concept? So it was a big fight with the professors. And then decided: ok, I am not a performance artist; I don’t want to be a performance artist. I don’t want to be in the tradition of the American performance art or body art; I don’t care about body. It is not about the body; it’s about the interaction, the social experience. And then I thought, “I have to stop this.” The combination of that and the idea that I have to take responsibility of everything—and I was tired of that; it was a big burden, not to be able to do what I want to do because if I do it, bad things will happen—it was intense. And then I realized: ok, I’ll do Behaviour Art, *Arte de Conducta*; I don’t do performance. And it was also a political gesture I had, when I left the school, because I didn’t want to be analyzed by art historians in the tradition of the American performance or body art.

**AO:** In that tradition of Behaviour Art, where the audience's behaviour in reaction to your installation or performance can be construed as the primary material for the artwork, you were back to being—not to say provocative, but you did provoke strong reaction, such as with your *Untitled* series, whether in Havana [2000] or Bogota [2009]?

**TB:** It is very interesting because I never had the conversation the way we had it today. So by looking at what we are talking about I think I am realizing something, which is not that I became provocative, it's that the art form I decided to use was complicated. Because I feel I've been accused a lot of provocation, and I don't understand that; I've been struggling a lot with that. And now I realize, talking to you, it is not that I am provoking as a provocateur, but it is more that I went back to use an art form that is problematic to interpret, because it's an open source, an open system. Why is it open? Because participation is part of what defines the work, therefore you also give responsibility to other people. So I think that is the change; I didn't know how to handle responsibility. I realized I had responsibility for my work, I took full responsibility, and then I added, no, you are also responsible. So I think that already can be seen as provocation because you are forced not to be passive in the work. But also in this open system you are forced in a way, if you want to participate, to take a stake in it, to be responsible. And also the issues—because I didn't want it to be about me or feminist or a movement—were even more intensely, let's say, power-related concepts. "*Destierro*" ["*Displacement*", 1998-1999] is a piece which is analogous; it's a reference, it's a metaphor where I appropriate something and then you have to understand—the process to understand the political implications was so long, because you have to know the reference, you have to understand I'm doing this appropriation, you have to understand the content—so I thought this is too long. So I feel like I shortened in those pieces the process of understanding the politics in the work and that also is seen as provocation. Because the *parkour* or the road that you have to walk is shorter; so it is a little more—not violent—but a little more in your face, and you have to deal with this. So I think these are—let's say to defend myself—four elements that I've used that make people react differently towards the work.

### Notes

**1** The article in question, "An Artist's Performance: A Year as a Poor Immigrant" by Sam Dolnick, was published on May 18, 2011 and is available here:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/nyregion/as-art-tania-bruguera-lives-like-a-poor-immigrant.html> (A version of this article appeared in print on May 19, 2011, on page A20 of the New York edition with the headline: "She Calls It Art. They Call It, Well, Life..")

### Captions

**1** IM International. Conception Year: 2006 Implementation Years: 2010 – 2015 Medium: Appropriation of Political Strategies, Useful Art Duration: Long – Term Project Materials: Immigration policies and laws, Immigrant Population, Elected Officials, Politicians, Community Organizations, Public Pressure, Media Location: Corona, Queens, New York, United States <http://immigrant-movement.us/>

**2** IM International – town hall. Title: Immigrant Movement International (IM International) Location: Corona, Queens, New York, United States Conception year: 2006 Implementation years: 2010–2015 Medium: Appropriation of Political Strategies, Useful Art Duration: Long–Term project Materials: Immigration policies and laws, Immigrant Population, Elected Officials, Politicians, Community Organizations, Public Pressure, Media. Courtesy of Immigrant Movement International Photos: IM International

**3** immigrant respect pin. Title: Awareness Ribbon for Immigrant Respect Campaign Year: 2011 Medium: Awareness campaign Materials: Metal pins, community meetings, letters sent to elected officials, media Design: Tania Bruguera Photo: Camilo Godoy Courtesy of Immigrant Movement International

**4** Arte de Conducta – Hirschhorn, Thomas, 2007. Title: Behavior Art School (Cátedra Arte de Conducta) Conception year: 1998 Founder and Director: Tania Bruguera Implementation years: 2002-2009 Medium: Behavior Art (Arte de Conducta), Useful Art (Arte Útil) Duration: Long-term project Location: Havana, Cuba Materials: Configuration of an Institution, Education Formats, Public Gathering, Study of the Relationship Between the Performative Arts and Politics and its implementation in Society.

**5** Ana Mendieta/Tania Bruguera. Title: Tribute to Ana Mendieta Exhibited at: Ana Mendieta / Tania Bruguera. Sala Polivalente, Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, Havana, Cuba (1992) Conception year: 1985 Implementation years: 1986-1996 Medium: Re-creation of works Duration: Long-Term project Materials: Ana Mendieta's artworks and unrealized projects, lectures, exhibitions, interviews, texts courtesy of Studio Bruguera photos: ©Gonzalo Vidal Alvarado

**6** The Burden of Guilt 05 (HI-RES). Author: Tania Bruguera, Title: El Peso de la Culpa (The Burden of Guilt). Medium: Re-enactment of a historical event Year: 1997-1999. Materials: Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil. Dimensions: Variable. Courtesy of Studio Bruguera. Photo: Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela

**7** Tatlin's Whisper #5 002 (HI-RES). Tania Bruguera, Tatlin's Whispers #5, 2008. Medium: Decontextualization of an action. Year: 2008. Materials: Mounted police, crowd control techniques, audience. Dimensions: Variable. Performance view at UBS Openings: Live The Living Currency, Tate Modern. Photo : Sheila Burnett. Courtesy Tate Modern

**8** Untitled (havana 2000) 006 (HI-RES) (CC) (RTP). Title: Sin Título (Habana, 2000) Untitled (Havana, 2000) Medium: Video Performance – Installation Year: 2000 Materials: Milled sugar cane, black and white monitor, Cubans, DVD disc, DVD player Dimensions: 13.12' x 39.37 x 164.04' Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Casey Stoll

### **About Immigrant Movement International**

Tania Bruguera's concept for *Immigrant Movement International* was inspired by the civil unrest in the suburbs of Paris in 2005 led by immigrants. The lack of real political representation for immigrants and the little respect and committed dialogue from politicians with the immigrant community inspired this project to place migrants in a position of power, whereby their political representation could be strengthened through a political party created by immigrants. The commonalities that exist between all migrants, regardless of their individual circumstances and place of origin, as well as the treatment of immigrant issues by politicians are the force behind this project.

In 2010 Tania was approached by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art to produce a new public art project; her proposal was *Immigrant Movement International*.

*Immigrant Movement International* (IM International) launched in March 2011 in Corona, Queens, New York. Queens is a borough known for its vibrant immigrant population, with more than 45% of the population being foreign born, and with approximately 138 languages spoken.

**Tania Bruguera** is one of the leading political and performance artists of her generation. Bruguera's work researches ways in which Art can be applied to the everyday political life; creating a public forum to debate ideas shown in their state of contradictions and focusing on the transformation of the condition of "viewer" onto one of "citizenry." Bruguera uses the terms ARTE DE CONDUCTA (conduct/ behavior art) and ARTE UTIL (useful art) to define her practice.

Bruguera has participated in Documenta, Performa, Venice, Gwangju and Havana Biennales, and at exhibitions at some of the most prominent museums in Europe and United States. Some of these museums include the Tate Modern, The Whitechapel Gallery, PS1, ZKM, IVAM, Kunsthalle Wien, and The New Museum of Contemporary Art. Her work is part of the collection of the Tate Modern; Museum für Moderne Kunst; Daros Foundation; Museo del Barrio; Bronx Museum; IVAM; and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam.

A graduate of the MFA program at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (United States) and Instituto Superior de Arte (Cuba), Bruguera is also the Founder / Director of Arte de Conducta; the first politic art studies program in the world, hosted by Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana. She is visiting faculty at Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, IUAV in Venice and Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.