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The Oscillation of Contemporary Bodies between Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Tania Bruguera's Wrestling with Power Structures¹

Keywords

performance, political economy, necropolitics, biopolitics, Cuba, Tate Modern, *Tatlin's Whisper*

Abstract

The article examines Tania Bruguera's works *10,148,451* (2019, Tate Modern, UK) and the three versions of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009 and 2014, Havana; 2015, Tate Modern). Thinking with Achille Mbembe's work on necropolitics, Lauren Berlant's on "slow death," and Michel Foucault's on biopolitics, Paramana suggests that *10,148,451* addresses the collective subject and critiques contemporary necropolitics, while the versions of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* address individuals as political subjects, and comment on the panoptic gaze and contemporary biopolitics. Through her analysis of these works, Paramana shows how Bruguera's work is created to comment on the specific political economies in which it is presented, how the perception of the work's politics differs when presented in different political economies, and the insights therefore the work might offer to them. Paramana argues that Bruguera's work has often achieved more than local and national governments and that her "symbolic work with activist parameters" is surprisingly more efficacious than her activist work. The article concludes with the insights Bruguera's work offers for the future of bodies in the 21st century.

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Oscilacija sodobnih teles med biopolitiko in nekropolitiko: spopad Tanie Bruguera s strukturami moči

Ključne besede

performans, politična ekonomija, nekropolitika, biopolitika, Kuba, Tate Modern, *Tatlinov šepet*

Povzetek

Članek obravnava umetniška dela Tanie Bruguera, *10,148,451* (2019, Tate Modern, VB) in tri različice *Tatlinovega šepeta #6* (2009 in 2014, Havana; 2015, Tate Modern). Paramana se sklicuje na nekropolitiko Achilla Mbembeja, »počasno umiranje« Lauren Berlant in biopolitiko Michela Foucaulta ter trdi, da umetniško delo *10,148,451* govori o kolektivnem subjektu ter kritizira sodobno nekropolitiko, medtem ko različice dela *Tatlinov šepet #6* naslavljajo posameznike kot politične subjekte ter povežejo panoptični pogled in sodobno biopolitiko. Avtorica z analizo pokaže, da je umetniško delo Tanie Bruguera ustvarjeno tako, da se spoprime s specifičnimi političnimi ekonomijami, v katerih je predstavljeno, z dojemanjem političnosti dela in razlikami, ko je to predstavljeno v različnih političnih ekonomijah, ter s spoznanji, ki jih delo ponuja tem različnim ekonomijam. Dela Tanie Bruguera pogosto dosežejo več kot le lokalne in nacionalne vlade, njeno »simbolno delo z aktivističnimi parametri« pa je presenetljivo učinkovitejše od njenega aktivističnega dela. Brugerina umetnost zatorej ponuja vpogled v prihodnost telesa v 21. stoletju.



Introduction

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Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera has been creating politically situated works for decades, ranging from performance to community work. Her works are intended to function as “useful tools” for a collective movement,² re-establish “aesthetics as a system of transformation” by having ethics at their core (“*est-ética*”),³ and present situations that challenge spectators to become active citizens who question and unlearn normative behaviors (*Arte de Conducta* [Be-

² Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor, “Transitional Institutions and the Art of Political Timing-Specificity,” in *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder*, ed. Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2018), 19.

³ Sanromán and Kantor, 26.

havioral Art]).⁴ Her activism is put into practice through her long-term, ongoing projects such as *YoTambenExijo* (2014–ongoing) and *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI, 2010–ongoing). And what I will refer to as her “symbolic work with activist parameters” (such as the works discussed here) not only operate at the level of the symbolic but is also linked to actions that have concrete effects for its participants. Bruguera’s work has always been politically positioned in its economies of creation and presentation, critiquing institutions, power structures (including the Cuban government), and the ways in which contemporary bodies oscillate in “the field of tensions between biopolitics and necropolitics.”

In this article, I discuss Bruguera’s works *10,148,451* (2019), a Hyundai commission presented at Tate Modern, and the three versions of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* (now part of *YoTambenExijo*, 2014–ongoing): the Havana 2009 and 2014 versions and the Tate Modern 2015 version. Thinking with Achille Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, Lauren Berlant’s work on “slow death,” and Michel Foucault’s writing on biopolitics, I propose that *10,148,451* addresses the collective subject and critiques contemporary necropolitics, while the works *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, in contrast, address individuals as political subjects and comment on the panoptic gaze and contemporary biopolitics. Through my analysis of *10,148,451* and *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, I show how Bruguera’s work is created to comment on the specific political economies in which it is presented, how perceptions of the work’s politics differ when it is presented in different political economies, and what insights the work might therefore offer to these economies. By examining these artworks as economies in themselves which are situated within larger economies, I argue that, through her artwork, Bruguera has often done more work than local and national governments, though this often goes unnoticed (and at the same time one could argue that she lets these governments off the hook to some extent by doing the work for them). Finally, I propose that her “symbolic work with activist parameters” (i.e., work that functions at the level of the symbolic but is linked to actions that have concrete effects for its participants—as with the works discussed here) is surprisingly more efficacious than her activist work. I conclude with the insights that Bruguera’s work offers for the future of the bodies in the 21st century.

⁴ Sanromán and Kantor, 25. See also Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, “Arte de Conducta: On Tania Bruguera’s *Tatlin’s Whisper Series*,” in *Rhetoric, Social Value and the Arts: But How Does it Work?*, ed. Charlotte Bonham-Carter and Nicola Mann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 85–106.

On Crises, “Slow Death,” and Collective Efforts: Tania Bruguera’s 10,148,451 (2019)

I am recalling this performance long after I experienced it. Although my visual memory of the work has somewhat faded, the nagging feeling that followed my experience of it, given my knowledge and appreciation of Bruguera’s politically and often sensorially provocative work, demanded that I return to the performance to deal with what remained unresolved. After the performance ended, I kept thinking that I should have liked it more. Why did this work fail to appeal to me politically and aesthetically? And why can I not accept that perhaps it was an unsuccessful work and instead return to it as if I had missed something that happened in it, as if I just had not figured it out? The work insists upon my return.

On the day, upon my entrance into Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, I noticed the entire floor of the Hall was covered with black, soft, shiny tiles. I walked across the Turbine balcony to the bridge to view the work from above. Several people were casually sitting or lying on the floor. There did not seem to be much going on. As I walked down the stairs and entered the main space of the work, I noticed the effect of other people’s bodies on the floor when they moved—imprints of their bodies were left on the floor, traces of them having been there. I realized that I could do the same if I took off my shoes. I found out later that the floor was coated with thermochromic ink, activated by the visitors’ body heat on contact. The press release and a text on a wall nearby provided some information about the work and its three parts:

In response to the crisis in migration, Bruguera has focused on the status of the neighbour and what it means to act and interact locally. She invites visitors to take part in symbolic actions in the Turbine Hall, from revealing a portrait of a person’s face hidden beneath a heat-sensitive floor, to crying under the influence of an organic compound. She has also worked with Tate Modern’s neighbours to create direct action: institutional changes that include renaming part of the museum itself. [. . .] In an age when the 24-hour news cycle presents migration as a never-ending crisis beyond our control, Bruguera also wants to break down our emotional barriers to combat apathy.⁵

⁵ “Hyundai Commission: Tania Bruguera: 10,142,926,” Press Release, Tate Modern, October 1, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/hyundai-commission-tania-bruguera->

The press release also informed the visitors that the portrait of Yousef, a young man with a migrant background who left Syria in 2011, would appear if everyone laid down on the ground for a sufficient amount of time. However, it became clear that this would not happen—the visitors were in “picnic mode.” I decided to look at the second of the three parts of the work, which was in a room adjacent to the Turbine Hall. As I entered, my hand was stamped red with the number 10,143,837, which indicated the number of people who migrated from one country to another between January 1, 2017 and December 21, 2017, added to the number of migrant deaths recorded up to that date according to the institute of migration’s Missing Migrant Project.⁶ As I entered the room, the few visitors already in it seemed to be chatting. The lighting was normal, and I do not recall any noise emanating from the work—no attempt was made to create a mystery or mood. However, a strong smell of menthol filled the room. Soon I felt the effect of the organic compound responsible for the smell; my eyes began to burn, and tears ran down my face. The artificial tears, according to the artist, were meant to evoke “forced empathy” in order to question whether we can “relearn to feel for others again.”⁷ The artist seemed to want to jolt us into action. However, the effort seemed to have been made in vain.

I remember finding the work weakly directed, to a great extent because the relationship of its three parts was not sufficiently visible. I also thought that even if only part of the work was more affective, this affect would function as the work’s organizational principle, which would address some of its dramaturgical issues. Despite the tears shed, I felt that the artwork lacked an affective anchor.

The work’s relationship to Tate Neighbours as the third space/part of the work offered some conceptual strength. This relationship was first revealed through the artist’s text. However, it was only solidified if the visitor connected to the Wi-Fi and read about the call to action in the Tate Neighbours manifesto and the re-naming of the Boiler House to “Natalie Bell.” Natalie Bell is a community activist who is involved with the charity “SE1 United” and worked at Coin Street Community Builders, which provides youth-led programmes for local youth. She is

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⁶ Tate Modern, “Tania Bruguera: 10,142,926”; Catherine Wood, ed., *Hyundai Commission: Tania Bruguera* (London: Tate Publishing, 2019).

⁷ Tania Bruguera, “Tania Bruguera | Hyundai Commission | Tate,” YouTube video, uploaded by Tate, January 18, 2019, 5:51, <https://youtu.be/7reNkai8HoI>.

also the person who chose Yousef for the work's portrait and became a member of Tate Modern's Advisory Council.⁸ The text of Tate Neighbours read:

Drawing on the "Terms and Conditions" document written by the Tate Neighbours, which can be accessed when logging on to the Tate WiFi network, Our Neighbours asks visitors to Tate Modern to actively engage with the lives of our neighbours and to commit to a neighbourly action wherever they have come from or where they live now. The programme seeks to revive collective social responsibility and common purpose through deliberation and public commitments.⁹

This was 10,049,848, the title of Bruguera's 2019 Hyundai commission at the Tate Modern on opening day (10,143,837 the minute I entered the "crying room"), referred on the Tate website as 10,148,451. Given the intention of the work and my experience of it, I felt let down. Not only did the visitor have to have a great deal of context to appreciate the work, but several people had to act to fully experience it: enough people had to lie down for others to see the painting. This also meant that if you were one of those who tried to do so, you did not get to see it. In an age when all we do is create and share our own self-portraits ("selfies"), it was kind of ironic that we could not see this portrait. And if you did not log into the WiFi, you would miss this information altogether.

Thus, without an organizational force, the work felt futile: we would never manage to see the portrait of Yousef. My desire to organize the action (to ask everyone to lie on the floor) was overwhelmed by the potential embarrassment of failure and the worry that it might not even be what the artist (or the Tate) wanted. So no one took the initiative nor the responsibility to make it happen. I was deflated. Despite the forced physical reaction of the crying room, which was supposed to evoke an emotional response and thus trigger an action, nothing much happened during the work. Everything happened for me long after. And my frustration with the work grew over time, partly because I regretted my inaction, and partly because I realized that the piece *was* affective, but not in *the moment*. So I return to it.

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⁸ Wood, *Tania Bruguera*.

⁹ "Our Neighbours: With Tania Bruguera," Tate Modern, October 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/our-neighbours>.

Bruguera's attempt to get us to see ourselves as neighbors to our local communities and to other countries (citizens as neighbors) was meant to change views about migration and our role in it. As with any societal issue, not much changes unless enough people believe in change, want to affect it, and organize to make it happen; so we continue to experience this disappointment, much like in this piece. Perhaps then this piece was very much a success because it revealed to the audience the work that change requires of us and how often, for many reasons, we do not do the work necessary to effect change.

I suggest that the specific issue Bruguera's work is concerned with, migration through the concept of neighbor, addresses us as a collective subject and critiques contemporary necropolitics. Achille Mbembe¹⁰ defines necropolitics as "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die," which he believes is, in large measure, where "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides."¹¹ Building on and departing from Michel Foucault's biopower, as the areas of life over which powers has taken control, and biopolitics, as the management of governing of life by the sovereign,¹² Mbembe considers the notion of biopower as insufficient to account for the ways in which in contemporary times "the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective."¹³ Making, as Marina Gržinić suggests, a "conceptual shift from occidental thought,"¹⁴ Mbembe sees war as a way to both exercise the right to kill and to achieve sovereignty.¹⁵ "Imagining politics as a form of war," Mbembe urges us to ask: "What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?"¹⁶ Mbembe argues that, in the contemporary world, necropolitics—"contemporary forms of subjugation of

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

¹¹ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11.

¹² Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

¹³ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 12.

¹⁴ Marina Gržinić, "Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe: Extended Essay on the Book," *Filozofski vestnik* 42, no. 1 (2021): 221, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.42.1.10>.

¹⁵ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 39–40.

¹⁶ Mbembe, 12.

life to the power of death”¹⁷—and necro-power are responsible for the ways in which

weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. [. . .] Under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred.¹⁸

Bruguera’s *10,148,451* can be read as a direct critique of necropolitical power: how have migrants, and especially black and global majority migrants, been treated, and how could this change if they were understood as neighbors?

Gržinić, reflecting on Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, astutely points out the relationship between refugees and modes of killing since World War II. She argues that WWII demanded a moral narrative to justify killing and ways of doing it which could be seen by the West and the “regime of whiteness” as acceptable and justifiable.¹⁹ Thus, the ongoing refugee crisis, a consequence of the wars for power and profit, was dealt with not by *appearing* to intentionally kill refugees, but by imprisoning them in inhumane conditions.²⁰ There are many examples of this with perhaps one of the worst being the recent prison-like conditions of refugees in Samos, Greece.²¹ Gržinić emphasizes the importance of Mbembe’s re-writing of genealogies through his articulation of the relation between democracy, racism, colonization, and migration: that democracy is a racialized system and colonization a way to regulate migratory movements and that cap-

¹⁷ Mbembe, 39.

¹⁸ Mbembe, 40.

¹⁹ Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 224.

²⁰ Gržinić, 224. Jothie Rajah argues that normalizing the necropolitics of both past and present imperialism “fosters the discounting of life legitimized by necropolitical law.” Jothie Rajah, *Discounting Life: Necropolitical Law, Culture, and the Long War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 142–78.

²¹ See “One Year since Greece Opened New ‘Prison-Like’ Refugee Camps, 22 NGOs Call for a More Humane Approach,” Statements and Reports, Amnesty International, September 19, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/one-year-since-greece-opened-new-prison-like-refugee-camps-ngos-call-for-a-more-humane-approach/>.

italism, between 16th and 19th century, “practised repopulation through predation, wealth extraction, and the formation of subaltern groups.”²²

The relationship between capitalism, migration, and racism is also crucial, because capitalism not only engendered racism (for it was the enslaved that provided the original capital)²³ but is also constitutive of “Western instincts and economic subjectivity,”²⁴ West’s predatory postcolonial elites and the “genocidal impulses” of European colonialism.²⁵ Capitalism is therefore also a driving force for its wars for profit which have led to waves of migration.

In the UK alone, net migration has increased to a record level of 504,000, asylum applications are now the highest in the last three decades, forty-one per cent of these are from people who have arrived in the UK in small boats, and almost 100,000 asylum seekers have been waiting for more than six months for their initial claims to be processed.²⁶ Humanitarian visas accounted for a large proportion of immigrants, of which 89,000 arrived from Ukraine as a result of the war and 21,000 are Afghans or UK returnees from Afghanistan.²⁷ The head of the Refugee Council, Enver Solomon, stated that this “global refugee crisis with millions of people fleeing their homes because of war, conflict and persecution [. . .] underline why urgent action is so important.”²⁸

But what does the life of an immigrant look like, even before they are forced to become migrants, when they are Black and global majority persons? Mbembe argues that even democratic societies are spaces in which racialized bodies are systematically exploited and experience constant loss.²⁹ Lauren Berlant proposes the notion of “slow death” to describe the experience of everyday life of the

²² Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 226.

²³ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²⁴ Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 232.

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1967).

²⁶ Rajeev Syal and Jessica Elgot, “Migration to UK Rises to Record 504,000 with Ukraine and Hong Kong Schemes,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/24/uk-net-migration-figures-record-ons>.

²⁷ Syal and Elgot, “Migration to UK Rises.”

²⁸ Syal and Elgot, “Migration to UK Rises.”

²⁹ See Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

vulnerable, especially of people of color and the economically disadvantaged.³⁰ With “slow death,” she refers to “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence.”³¹ Most importantly, Berlant urges us to “think about agency and personhood [. . .] also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness.”³² This is because

slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself, that domain of living on in which everyday activity; memory, needs, and desires; and diverse temporalities and horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity and lived through.³³

In addition to her distinction between event and environment, Berlant makes a distinction between environment and crisis.³⁴ Although we might be talking about refugee crises, black and brown bodies are in crisis daily. Berlant suggests that we cannot be referring to “crisis” as

that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time. Of course this deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a redefinitional tactic, an inflationary, distorting, or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event, because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis implicitly calls for [. . .]. Yet since catastrophe means change, crisis rhetoric belies the constitutive point that slow death—or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations—is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting

³⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

³¹ Berlant, 95.

³² Berlant, 99.

³³ Berlant, 100.

³⁴ Berlant, 101.

scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants discovered scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock.³⁵

Long-term realities such as colonialism and capitalism's destruction of bodies³⁶ therefore cannot be successfully dealt with when addressed as crises.³⁷ Bruguera's *10,148,451* deals with the slow death of migrant bodies, and particularly Black and Brown bodies who experience an everyday loss even after "settling" in a new country. *10,148,451* critiques contemporary necropolitics and draws our attention to this slow death addressing us as a collective subject who needs to take collective responsibility.

***Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009, 2014, 2015): The Panoptic Gaze and Contemporary Biopolitics**

Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #6* suggests a different kind of slow death in a very different political economy, that of Cuba. It addresses individuals as political subjects, commenting on the Cuban government's panoptic gaze (2009 and 2014 versions in Havana) and on contemporary biopolitics (2015 version in the UK). The Guggenheim describes the original 2009 version of the work as follows:

In a performance at the 2009 Havana Biennial, Tania Bruguera provided a temporary platform for the free speech normally denied in Cuba. Members of the exhibition's audience were invited to take the stage and speak uncensored for one minute, after which time they were escorted away by two actors in military uniforms. A white dove was placed on each speaker's shoulder in allusion to the one that landed on Fidel Castro during his first speech in Havana after the triumph of the 1959 revolution. Part of a series of works that seek to activate viewers' participation by recontextualizing powerful images from significant events, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* confronts the widespread apathy that has followed in the wake of several failed social revolutions.³⁸

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³⁵ Berlant, 101–2.

³⁶ Berlant, 108.

³⁷ Berlant, 105.

³⁸ See "Tania Bruguera: *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (Havana Version)," Collection Online, Guggenheim, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/33083>.

An orange-red curtain forms the backdrop for this 40-minute performance at the Wilfredo Lam Cultural Centre in Havana, Cuba.³⁹ The audience is gathered around the stage, at the center of which is a podium with a microphone and two large speakers on each side of the stage. Behind the podium are two young people in military uniforms. Two hundred disposable cameras have been distributed to the audience to document and share the event. One by one, audience members enter the stage and take the floor; they speak up. Once they step onto the podium, one of the uniformed guards places a white dove on their shoulder, recreating the familiar image of the photograph of Fidel Castro on the podium upon his arrival in Havana in 1959. For Bruguera, this work functions both “as a monument to a past moment and in the dimension of a future,”⁴⁰ while for Tamara Díaz Bringas the work “read[s] the past to think about the present and imagine other futures,” by “imagining a public sphere in which everyone has a voice”⁴¹ despite the limitations presented by its context.

The performance breaks open a space that is normally censored. The work begins with a spectator using their minute to cry. Affective speeches about change, freedom, self-respect and democracy follow. “Cuba is an island surrounded by sea and walled in by censorship” states one of the speakers, who advocates for the use of alternative blogs to open channels of communication and freedom, to awaken public opinion, and make the internet a public debating ground so the island can become more democratic and plural. Another speaker urges for the decriminalization of “the exercise of dissenting opinions” so that economic, political, and cultural projects can see the light. Another suggests they keep the mic open for 24 hours, asking those with opposing views to engage in live dialogue instead of listening to them through mechanisms of surveillance.⁴² One speaker asks all present to vote on whether the government should still be in power:

I would like to have all those here vote to see if we agree on certain aspects . . . Who actually agrees that the Castro family, which is the one that has been monitoring us these fifty years, should leave power? That they hand it over, that elec-

³⁹ Tania Bruguera, “El Susurro de Tatlin #6 (versión para La Habana),” Vimeo video, uploaded by Estudio Bruguera, March 23, 2011, 40:33, <https://vimeo.com/21394727>.

⁴⁰ Bruguera in Tamara Díaz Bringas, “Matter of Time. Nine Letters to Tania Bruguera,” in Wood, *Tania Bruguera*, 59.

⁴¹ Bringas, 59.

⁴² Bruguera, “El Susurro de Tatlin #6.”

tions of a different type are held in Cuba, that there is a talk about the political prisoners, the Atunez case for example. He is on hunger strike . . . I think that raising our hand here today we may change things right now.⁴³

Some do. A man later arrives at the microphone with a black hood over his head, points to it, and says: “I think this [kidnapping] should be banned.” The work ends with Bruguera taking the podium: “Thank you very much, Cubans.”⁴⁴

This performance took place in the art context of the Havana Biennale, which is what made this public speaking up possible. Some have argued that, considering Cuba’s “oppressive government censorship [*Tatlin’s Whisper #6*] both empowered and endangered audiences and participants.”⁴⁵ Jacqueline Laguardia Martínez’s opening to her 2022 article “The Political Economy of Contemporary Cuba” is indicative of the complicated larger context: “To evaluate contemporary Cuba from any dimension, be it economic, political, or sociocultural, is a challenging exercise,” particularly due to its efforts in recent years to implement an ambitious plan of socioeconomic reforms.⁴⁶ Reforms are how the Cuban government, referred to as *La Revolución*, has maintained power since Fidel Castro’s arrival on January 1, 1959—following the Cuban Revolution (July 26, 1953–January 1, 1959) which ousted Fulgencio Batista—and until today with Miguel Díaz-Canel’s presidency (since 2019) and the 2019 constitution reform (the latter was assessed and refined by his predecessor, Raúl Castro, at an attempt to modernize the government).⁴⁷

Although until recently the prevailing view in Cuba was that writers and artists (compared to the rest of the citizens) have the greatest autonomy and freedom, more so than ever before—a success attributed to their insistence for more “space” for expression and *La Revolución’s* capacity to reinvent itself—Yvon

⁴³ Bruguera.

⁴⁴ Bruguera.

⁴⁵ Sanromán and Kantor, “Transitional Institutions,” 27.

⁴⁶ Jacqueline Laguardia Martínez, “The Political Economy of Contemporary Cuba,” in *(Post-) colonial Archipelagos: Comparing the Legacies of Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Burchardt and Johanna Leinius (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 76.

⁴⁷ Laguardia Martínez, 76–95; Yvon Grenier, “The Politics of Culture and the Gatekeeper State in Cuba,” *Cuban Studies*, no. 46 (2018): 261–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cub.2018.0013>.

Grenier has a different interpretation.⁴⁸ She suggests instead that the government’s cultural policy oscillation between “closing” and “opening” and its alternating tactics of enforcement between “openness and rigidity,” is not a new, but instead the regime’s governing strategy.⁴⁹ It is the same strategy it used in market reforms (which, for example, allowed the economy to increase trade with international markets and recognize foreign investment and private property⁵⁰ in 2019) that led to further concentration of power by the state, which controls who will benefit and how much.⁵¹ Grenier further suggests that, typically, writers and artists, inasmuch as they want freedom and autonomy, pursue participation “within the revolution” and recognition by the state.⁵² Their relationship with the state is one of “mutual accommodation” or “what Cuban sociologist Haroldo Dilla (2007) aptly called ‘subordinación negociada’” (negotiated subordination).⁵³ With cultural policy, as with the markets, the state decides who (and how much and when) can publish, have visibility, travel abroad, and be pardoned.⁵⁴ Crucially, the ability of the state to “open and close” any field “at the Comandante’s whim keeps the various groups guessing and competing in a climate of uncertainty.”⁵⁵ The strategy of opening improves the government’s international image as well as the national one by showing that past errors of *La Revolución* are corrected.⁵⁶ These trends of openness and rigidity in both economic and cultural policy have mirrored one another since the 1990s.⁵⁷ During 1994 alone, about 30,000 Cubans left the country on makeshift boats—many drowning—having been caught in the political struggle between Castro and the US.⁵⁸ Some criticism of the regime is possible through the “secondary parameters” (the “primary parameters” protect the political narrative of *La Revolución* and

⁴⁸ Grenier, 261.

⁴⁹ Grenier, 261.

⁵⁰ Laguardia Martinez, “Contemporary Cuba,” 86–89.

⁵¹ Javier Corrales, “The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989–2002,” *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 2 (June 2004): 35–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2004.0025>; quoted in Grenier, “Politics of Culture,” 262.

⁵² Grenier, 261–62.

⁵³ Grenier, 262.

⁵⁴ Grenier, 262.

⁵⁵ Grenier, 265.

⁵⁶ Grenier, 265.

⁵⁷ Grenier, 268.

⁵⁸ Grenier, 271.

are not to be questioned).⁵⁹ These set the limits of political participation and are the way artists can be critical of the government.⁶⁰ Censorship in Cuba has been less overt recently—artworks rather than artists are being censored, and much can be accomplished by cultural institutions intentionally not recognizing the work of some artists or cancelling art exhibitions.⁶¹ More recently, however, artists have not only been reprimanded, but also jailed.⁶² This is what happened with Bruguera’s second performance of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in 2014.

The 2014 performance of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* ended before it began. The work was “aborted by the police, who arrested the artist and her many collaborators, both fellow artists and dissidents,” at 5 a.m. on the day of the performance.⁶³ The police interrogated them for several days and even confiscated the passport of Bruguera, who considers it “one of her most successful works, since the Cuban government so neatly, and publicly completed” the work.⁶⁴

What preceded the performance, which was fittingly scheduled to take place on December 30, 2014 in the Plaza de la Revolución (“the plaza where a youthful Fidel Castro once addressed millions”),⁶⁵ and the arrest was the publication of an open letter by Bruguera. Following the announcement of the end of the U.S. embargo in 2014, Bruguera published “an open letter addressed to Barack Obama, Raúl Castro, and Pope Francis demanding a space for citizenship participation.”⁶⁶ The work addressed Cubans as political subjects and attempted to make this public square, “a space that was extremely ideologized but empty of politics,” back into “an agora, a democratic space.”⁶⁷ Christian Viveros-Fauné writes in 2015:

⁵⁹ Grenier, 271–72.

⁶⁰ Grenier, 271–72.

⁶¹ Grenier, 271–73.

⁶² Grenier, 271–73.

⁶³ Sanromán and Kantor, “Transitional Institutions,” 21.

⁶⁴ Sanromán and Kantor, 7.

⁶⁵ Christian Viveros-Fauné, “How Tania Bruguera’s ‘Whisper’ Became the Performance Heard Round the World,” *Artnet News*, January 8, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/how-tania-brugueras-whisper-became-the-performance-heard-round-the-world-213637>.

⁶⁶ Bringas, “Matter of Time,” 59.

⁶⁷ Bringas, 59.

[Bruguera] was subsequently freed and rearrested twice more, after calling for a news conference in another plaza located along Havana's famed Malecon seawall. An effort she promoted through Facebook, Twitter, and her own website using the hashtag #YoTambienExijo (I Also Demand), Bruguera's frustrated performance grew in direct proportion to the moral cowardice of her arrest. Even in one of the least connected countries in the world—only 3.4 percent of Cuban households currently have Internet access—Bruguera's message of creative protest, civic optimism, and freedom of expression leapfrogged Cuba's access and surveillance walls and went viral. [. . .] What Bruguera's six-year-old performance did last week was to crystallize the contradictions besetting a profoundly unfair, coercive, authoritarian society—something only a few important works of art can achieve under the right circumstances. Inside Cuba, in 2015, *Tatlin's Whisper* speaks loud and clear.⁶⁸

This challenging context speaks volumes about the impact that political economy and art can have on one another. The regime in Cuba has had the effects of slow death, which Berlant calls “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence,”⁶⁹ and which prospers within the everyday ordinary environment of living life⁷⁰ in the Cuban panopticon, where conduct is regulated via surveillance.⁷¹ In fact, Cuba exhibits a complex combination of different modes of visibility. It functions both as a panoptic disciplinary society with what Mike Featherstone refers to as an “invisible surveillance gaze,” as well as, with its openings to market economics, “a governmental society based on invisibility, in which population and economic processes operate behind our backs and are best left alone.”⁷² Its complex colonial history, historical relationships with the US and USSR, and constant reforms that play with openness and rigidity make this a particularly complicated political economy: one that began as a socialist political economy, functions as a panoptic disciplinary society, has recognized foreign investment and private property with the 2019 Constitution, and now de-

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⁶⁸ Viveros-Fauné, “Tania Bruguera's ‘Whisper.’”

⁶⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 95.

⁷⁰ Berlant, 100.

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

⁷² Mike Featherstone, “Preliminary Reflections on the Visible, the Invisible and Social Regulation: Panopticism, Biopolitics, Neoliberalism and Data Consumption,” *Journal of Critical Studies in Business and Society* 4, no. 1 (2013): 9.

pend on the service economy.⁷³ It is this political economy that *Tatlin's Whisper #6* critiques and experiences the effects of its mechanisms of control.

After its 2014 performance, *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was presented at the Tate Modern in London, UK, in 2015. There, it had very different effects. A special presentation of the work was (re)staged “in an act of solidarity and support for Bruguera and artists all over the world persecuted for freedom of expression.”⁷⁴ Artists, writers, curators, and members of the public spoke for one minute on a topic of their choice, as in the original work. The restaging critiqued both Cuba’s political economy and the regime’s panoptic gaze. It also commented on a very different political economy, that of the United Kingdom and neoliberal capitalism: a political economy in which there is freedom of expression, but the social safety net is continually eroded, the state works *for* the market, and the logic of the market rules and is applied to all areas of life through contemporary biopolitical control.⁷⁵ This is the kind of economy that Cuba has been resisting for decades.

The 2015 restaging of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* perhaps loses its original “bite,” possibly due in part to what Bruguera calls “political timing-specificity”: the moment of the 2014 work and its potential impact have passed, and the work functions as “a document of a specific political moment.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, what is important about the UK presentation is that the exposure of the political circumstances in Cuba helps to further the understanding of outsiders and the support they can offer Cubans.

In addition to the work of artists, alternative journalism has also contributed in recent years to understanding the complexities of the contemporary Cuban political economy, the everyday experiences of citizens, and their demands for freedom of expression and political change—for example, through the 27N collective and the San Isidro movement.⁷⁷ María Isabel Alfonso notes that the

⁷³ Laguardia Martínez, “Contemporary Cuba.”

⁷⁴ “Tania Bruguera: *Tatlin's Whisper #6*,” Tate Modern, April 23, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/tania-bruguera-11982/tania-bruguera-tatlins-whisper-6>.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Sellenart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁷⁶ Bruguera in Sanromán and Kantor, “Transitional Institutions,” 23–24.

⁷⁷ Gerardo Mosquera, “Artivism and the Havana Biennial—An Interview with Gerardo Mosquera,” interview by Gigi Argyropoulou, New Alphabet School, December 8, 2021,

pandemic food and medicine shortages have highlighted not only the need for change in Cuba, but also the “increasing importance and agency that independent media have gained in recent years.”⁷⁸ Although even the 2019 Constitution does not provide legal protection for these alternative media (the Constitution “expressly prohibits private ownership and printing of newspapers, books and other mass media”) their impact is crucial.⁷⁹ Cuba connected to the internet in 1996, granting controlled access to government and research institutes, universities, and workplaces. Reforms in 2008 allowed Cubans to connect to the internet discreetly, and it was not until 2013 that the country connected to the high-speed global internet.⁸⁰ This allowed for the creation of unofficial blogs that criticized the government and pushed “the spurred collective recognition of the limitations of the official discourse and the imperative need to create an alternate set of media outlets.”⁸¹

While *10,148,451* addressed the collective subject and critiqued contemporary necropolitics, *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* addressed individuals as political subjects. The 2009 and 2014 Havana versions commented on the panoptic gaze, while the 2015 UK version, anchored in both the Cuban and the UK political economies, was able to comment both on the panoptic gaze and contemporary biopolitics. In doing so, the difficulties of the Cuban political economy for its citizens and the slow death they experience were made visible, perhaps obscuring the complexities of the UK’s neoliberal capitalist political economy and the different ways controls are applied there through biopower and necropower.

Closing: Bodies “Acting in Concert” Towards Change

Tania Bruguera’s work is both aesthetically and politically potent. Here, I looked at her 2019 Hyundai commission *10,148,451* presented at Tate Modern and the three versions of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* (the Havana versions in 2009 and 2014 and

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<https://newalphabetschool.hkw.de/artivism-and-the-havana-biennial-an-interview-with-gerardo-mosquera/>.

⁷⁸ María Isabel Alfonso, “In Cuba, Independent Media Struggle to Navigate Polarized Waters,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 387, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2021.2000766>.

⁷⁹ Alfonso, 388.

⁸⁰ Alfonso, 388–89.

⁸¹ Alfonso, 388–89.

the Tate Modern version in 2015). Through *10,148,451*, I have argued that Bruguera addressed the spectators as a collective subject that bears the responsibility for change (change in general as well as in relation to migrants in particular) and critiqued contemporary necropolitics that put vulnerable populations at risk on a daily basis, making visible the slow death they experience. In contrast, the work *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, as I have suggested, addressed individuals as political subjects and commented on the panoptic gaze of Cuban politics and on contemporary biopolitics in the neoliberal capitalist world. Through my analysis of both works, I have shown how Bruguera's work is created to comment on the specific political economies in which it is presented, how the perceptions of the work's politics differ when presented in different political economies, and the insights the work therefore offers these economies. As the works discussed here demonstrate, Bruguera has often accomplished more with her performances than local and national governments (although one could argue that she lets these governments off the hook to some extent by doing the work for them). I propose that these works, which I referred to as her "symbolic work with activist parameters" (that is, work that functions at the level of the symbolic but is also linked to actions that have concrete effects for its participants), are surprisingly more efficacious than her activist work *because* they operate at the level of the symbolic. In doing so, they are able to reach larger numbers of people and at different affective registers, let alone survive in difficult political economies. Crucially, the works discussed here allow us to see the slow death of contemporary bodies and how important and necessary it is for bodies to "act in concert"⁸² towards change.

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