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Tania Bruguera: The Origins of Totalitarism Twice

Oriol Fontdevila

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"Cuba's censorship of Tania Bruguera's art makes her message more powerful"
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Bruguera tells the story of The Origins of Totalitarianism twice: in words, and in actions

Tania Bruguera's failed re-enactment of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in late December 2014 sparked worldwide outcry. It was also received with a fair amount of scepticism by some international and Cuban art circles. The artist's attempt to re-stage her own performance was in the aftermath of the Obama–Castro deal to re-establish diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba. Two weeks after the historic handshake between the two presidents, Bruguera tried to set up an open microphone and a podium in Havana's Plaza of the Revolution, to offer anyone passing by a minute to express whatever they wanted for the future of the country.

She had staged the same performance first in 2009, as part of the 10th Havana Biennial. But sadly, the 2014 spin-off was suspended in a rather drastic move by government officials. Bruguera was arrested as she made her way to the site, along with 12 others, and within the span of a few days the artist was detained and released three more times. To this day, her passport remains confiscated and she faces charges of 'resistance and public disorder'. Regardless of the brutality of the repression, however, several media reports pointed out that Bruguera was idealistic to assume that she would be able to carry out her project in a country with restrictions on free speech. Coco Fusco, among other artists and critics, discussed the event (and the media reaction) as a naive gesture coming from one of the best-known contemporary Cuban artists.

Recently, to coincide with the opening of the 12th Havana Biennial, Bruguera launched a new project, the *Hannah Arendt International Institute for Artivism* – a 100-hour long collective reading of Arendt's seminal book, *The Origins of Totalitarism* (1951). The reading took place from 20 May to 24 May on the ground floor of her family home in Old Havana, not without several mishaps. At one point it was temporarily suspended, when the local Public Works department began drilling across the street. The organizers and participants in the performance assumed the noise to be a deliberate disruption, as did some neighbours, who started complaining that the city was re-digging sections of the street that had been repaired already. On the Saturday, Bruguera visited the National Museum of Fine Arts for an exhibition opening that was part of the Biennial, and was denied entrance. On the Sunday, the final reading continued until shortly after 4pm, when Bruguera was led away by police, reportedly detained, before reappearing at home several hours later.

Taking these events in consideration, can anyone really continue to portray Bruguera's acts as naive? The harassment that Bruguera suffered during her second performance was as foreseeable as the first. Only this time, the setback should be clearly understood as an accurate mirror of the topic of Arendt's book. With the public reading of *The Origins of Totalitarism*, Bruguera revealed the mechanisms of the totalitarian state twice over: through words, but also, ultimately, in action. Thus, we must consider the harsh reaction of the state not as something that inhibits the performance but, in this case, completes it. One could say that censorship has been appropriated by the artist, transforming her latest performances from 're-enactments' of old works into straight enactments of Cuban State oppression itself.