

# THE ART NEWSPAPER

## NEWS

'Dear New Yorkers, Tear Down Those Walls': Tania Bruguera to Stage Public Vote on Immigration -

*Referendum* Performance is Part of the Rubin Foundation's Political Art Show *When Artists Speak Truth...*

by VICTORIA STAPLEY-BROWN | 19 February 2016



Tania Bruguera, *Referendum*, 2015. Commissioned for *Nuit Blanche Toronto* 2015.  
Curated by Agustin Perez Rubio.

“A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and

not building bridges, is not Christian,” Pope Francis told a reporter this week regarding the presidential candidate Donald Trump and his call for a border wall between the United States and Mexico. The Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera—the first artist-in-residence for the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs in New York—will publicly gauge how other New Yorkers feel about immigration when she stages her performance piece *Referendum* in Union Square on 6 March.



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The piece, first performed last autumn at Toronto’s *Nuit Blanche* festival, has members of the public cast “yes” or “no” ballots on whether borders should be abolished. Bruguera and a team of volunteers will be present to speak with the public during the entire performance, to be held from 10am to 8pm. The location of Union Square was partly chosen for logistical reasons as well as its historical significance as a the site of labour rallies and political

protests. “It’s a place of free speech,” says Sara Reisman, the artistic director of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, which has organised and sponsored the performance.

“It’s a very personal interaction,” Reisman explains “She’s trying to gauge people’s opinions... she’ll probably do some advocating.” Bruguera herself will tally the votes, with the results regularly updated on a large LED board. The message board at the Toronto event featured an image of the supercontinent Pangaea and read: “You have a vote on whether people live or die. Borders kill. Should we abolish our borders?”



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The vote was extremely close in Canada, with 2,667 “yeas” and 2,686 “nays”, but there’s no knowing what the outcome will be in the US when the topic is a hot button election issue. “New York has a very specific history as a melting pot and what does this mean now in terms of immigration?” Reisman says. “How open are we? What’s ethical?”

Referendum is part of a series of events linked to the exhibition *When Artists Speak Truth...* (through 18 March) at Rubin Foundations space in

New York, The 8th Floor. Curated by Reisman, the show is multimedia, multi-generational look at political activism in art, with works by artists such as Andrea Bowers, Felix Gonzales-Torres and Yoko Ono. Bruguera is represented with *The Francis Effect* (2014), the pendant piece to *Referendum*, which collected signatures for a petition to the pope to grant Vatican citizenship to undocumented immigrants.