

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Tania Bruguera, an Artist in Havana, Has a Great New York Week

By RANDY KENNEDY JULY 13, 2015



Tania Bruguera

Credit: Andrew Testa for *The New York Times*

For most artists, news that the Museum of Modern Art had acquired one of their pieces for the first time would be more than sufficient for a good week. But for Tania Bruguera — a New York-based Cuban artist who has been in legal limbo in Havana since December, when she was arrested to prevent her from staging a provocative open-mike performance — the week was just beginning.

The City of New York announced Monday that it had chosen Ms. Bruguera, whose work blurs and sometimes obliterates the line between socially conscious performance art and straight-ahead social work, to be the first artist-in-residence for the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, an unusual yearlong appointment in which she will help the agency recruit undocumented immigrants for the city's highly popular new municipal identification-card program, IDNYC.

At the same time, the Museum of Modern Art announced that it had bought "Untitled (Havana 2000)," a politically charged performance and video work that Ms. Bruguera, 47, created for the 2000 Havana Biennial in La Cabaña fortress, which was used as a jail and execution site during the Cuban Revolution.



Tania Bruguera's "Untitled (Havana 2000)" is performed with a floor covered with sugar cane. Credit: Casey Stoll.

And as those announcements were being prepared, Ms. Bruguera was called in to meet on Friday with law-enforcement officials in Cuba and given back her passport, which had been confiscated since her arrest. "I have it in my hand as we speak,"

she said in a telephone interview on Sunday.

The return of the passport does not completely end Ms. Bruguera's standoff with the Cuban government, which is treading into uncertain territory as a renewed diplomatic relationship with the United States increases pressure for greater freedom of expression. Ms. Bruguera said that she would not leave Cuba until she had received written legal assurance that she would be allowed back into the country. But the movement in her case, she said, raises the likelihood that she will soon be able to return to New York to conduct the city residency in person, a melding of the artistic and the civic that she said was rife with possibility.

"I think right now it's a good moment in New York for thinking about immigration," she said, praising Mayor Bill de Blasio's efforts to help undocumented immigrants, including the identification card, which provides benefits like free entry to many cultural institutions, library access and prescription- drug discounts. She said what she hoped she could bring to the agency was "emotional knowledge" and a sense of how art is "really an experience of making something that you imagine."

"For many immigrants, the first thing that's taken away," she said, is "their right to be political, but what's also taken away is their ability to dream, to imagine their identity in creative ways."



“Untitled (Havana 2000)” includes video footage of Fidel Castro.

Tom Finkelpearl, the city’s cultural affairs commissioner, said that Ms. Bruguera had been one of the first artists who came to mind when city agencies began talking early this year about creating artist residencies to bring new kinds of thinking to city programs. “Tania is obviously at the forefront of this kind of art,” said Mr. Finkelpearl, the former executive director of the Queens Museum of Art, which helped Ms. Bruguera form a social-services art project, Immigrant Movement International, in Corona in 2011.

The city residency, which is being supported with private money from the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation and public money through the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs, is not the first time an artist has been embedded in the minutiae of municipal governance. For more than 30 years, Mierle Laderman Ukeles has served as an unsalaried artist in residence at the city’s Sanitation Department, helping to bring greater attention not only to sanitation workers but also — through projects like a

visitors center she established at a spot where garbage is loaded onto landfill-bound barges — to conservation, consumer and labor issues.

“The Sanitation Department has really been the leader in thinking about what artists and art could do,” said Mr. Finkelppearl, adding that he expected more artists to be named to city residencies in the coming year.

The entry of Ms. Bruguera’s work into the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art is a turning point for her career and broadens the museum’s embrace of difficult-to-stage performance-based works. “Untitled (Havana 2000)” originally took place in a tunnel-like space whose floor was covered with decomposing sugar cane, upon which four naked Cuban men walked, enacting gestures of humility and uncertainty. A faint light at the tunnel’s end emanated from a television monitor showing footage of Fidel Castro.



Ms. Bruguera reading from Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism" at her home in Havana. Credit: Enrique De La Osa/Reuters.

Stuart Comer, the museum's chief curator of media and performance art, described the piece as "a watershed transition in her work, about activating a social and political space for the viewer."

"It shows her engaging a political discussion but also being ambiguous enough that it leaves the work" open to interpretation, he said.

Ms. Bruguera, in the interview, said she was told that a legal guarantee that she could return to her home country might be given to her within two weeks and that she was not surprised that her passport had been returned.

"They've made it really clear many times," she said, "that they want me out of the country."

A version of this article appears in print on July 14, 2015, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: From Afar, Sudden Run of Success for a Cuban.