Primary season — America’s quadrennial boondoggle of democratic mediation — may be well underway, but one artist intends to stage a symbolic return to an older form: direct democracy. Tania Bruguera, the renowned Cuban-American dissident and practitioner of a kind of activist art, is bringing a daylong “referendum” to New York’s Union Square on March 6. Titled “Referendum,” the work solicits votes “on questions surrounding immigration and borders,” according to a release. It was previously staged in Toronto in 2015, where the question posed was: “Borders kill, should we abolish our borders?”
That this kind of leading question is more push poll than referendum is beside the point — Bruguera’s exercise traffics in civic gestures, her “arte útil” (useful art) operating at a different register than political polling or, for that matter, the mechanisms of electoral democracy. The Union Square outing is part of Bruguera’s participation in When Artists Speak Truth..., an exhibition on view at The 8th Floor event space under the auspices of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. The public poll specifically accompanies “The Francis Effect,” 2014, a work by Bruguera that appears in the exhibition and similarly deals with matters of immigration and citizenship.

“Referendum” will run from 10am to 8pm on Sunday, March 6; the Rubin Foundation exhibition is on view through March 18.

- Mostafa Heddaya (@mheddaya)