



Tania Bruguera bets on civic education for Cubans

By Maria J Pentón, Miami. April 1, 2016

When at the end of 2014 Cuban artist Tania Bruguera attempted to realize her performance, *El Susurro de Tatlin* (Tatlin's Whisper) in the *Plaza de la Revolución* (Revolution Plaza), she experienced repression and censorship in the flesh, akin to all the dissenting voices that are submitted to the master plans of the governmental culture.

Bruguera, who defines herself as an activist, has created the Hannah Arendt International Institute of Artivism (INSTAR), with headquarters in Havana, and which in the words of its founder, "wants to act as a civic and artistic alternative to the emphasis that there is at this moment in Cuba on the economic project and on money as the sole salvation of problems within the country."

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The objective of her new campaign is to provide civic literacy for civil society. It's a project that seeks to "work with everyday Cubans, from homemakers to professionals as well as activists and students," so they can participate or initiate change in their own communities. The artist draws her inspiration from the German philosopher Hannah Arendt, author of the classic book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

"We are in a moment when the Cuban government is not taking responsibility for the preservation of the ethical principles and social justice that it claimed to defend because there is no national project," comments the activist to *14ymedio*. In her opinion, the Cuban government is currently constrained with the consolidation of its personal economic power, which also guarantees its longevity in political power. Cuba is currently facing a civic and ideological crisis, since there is no long term strategic vision of the country."

According to Bruguera her motivations in creating this campaign depart from her observations of Cuban reality. "We are accepting institutional and civic corruption as normal. There's a calculated effort made by the Government so that citizens don't feel empowered, because they are afraid," she indicates.

The institute's mission is to make sure Cuba's future is in the hands of Cubans, and affirms that it can't wait until everything has already been decided and at an irreversible point to demand their rights. "The moment to intervene in the future of Cuba is now." The use of crowdfunding as a financing mechanism is an important gesture in the campaign's involvement with money, since "it is a sensitive topic for projects that are developed in Cuba". This method, according to Bruguera, is democratic, since it forces the project to serve the citizens, and these to commit to whether they really want change. Besides, adds the artist, INSTAR wants to be transparent with its accounting, showing where it receives its financing from and where this financing is going, something that will hopefully spread to other groups within civil society and to the government "as part of their own labor strategies."

Seven days after the end of the campaign, they had already beat their 100,000 dollar goal with the support of almost 700 donors. That money will be used for the purchase of equipment that is necessary to make the project happen in Cuba, as well as the payment of artists and all necessary logistics.

The civic education workshops will be developed according to the demands of its participants, whom the organization hopes will come from across the political, social, and cultural spectrum of the nation and from “principles of transparency, respect, and equality that govern INSTAR.”

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The activist summarizes the Institute’s strategy in three actions: “Wish, Think, and Do.” We want to transform ideas into civic actions. “Departing from both the desires and dissatisfactions that are experienced by its participants will promote a discussion about alternatives that those invited can enable, whether nationals or foreigners, and the most realistic way to implement them. Finally the intervention will be materialized through the “mobilization and visualization of the imagination of artists and activists.”

State Security has begun exerting pressure upon those who are affiliated with the project. The permits to finish fixing the space that will hold the institute have been on hold for eight months and the brigade leader in charge of finishing the construction repairs has asked not to be called anymore because he has been “visited.” “We know that a lot of pressure is going to be applied because this project implies a peaceful solution and brings civic education,” comments Bruguera.

Despite the governmental obstacles, Bruguera is not considering giving up on her attempt. “Art that is committed to social activism is a path that we have chosen so that INSTAR becomes an institution that is relevant in the fight for Cuban citizen rights and so that it has direct impact in everyday life,” she concludes.

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Translation by Lissette Olivares