

# el Nuevo Herald

ARTS & LITERATURE

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## Cuba, art and activism: Tania Bruguera gets ready to “transform ideas into civic actions”

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After her December 2014 attempt to offer an open mic to any citizen who wanted to express themselves freely at the Plaza de la Revolución (Revolution Plaza), her subsequent detention three times, and the inability to leave the island due to the confiscation of her passport for a six month period in 2015, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera is preparing her return to Cuba with the *Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism* that is being created in Havana and that will begin its sessions in September.

In this interview with El Nuevo Herald, Bruguera explains what the project is about, who will be able to participate, how it will be financed, where it will be located and the importance of spreading the word so that any regular citizen can knock at #INSTAR's door (its acronym), and be part of “a space of transparency, respect and equality”.

### **What is the Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism that you are creating about?**

The institute is for Artivism, a combination of art and activism. It's a word we use to talk about art that is socially responsible and of an activism that is conscious of the communicative potential of art. It carries the name of Hannah Arendt, who is a political scientist that studied totalitarian systems, both in capitalist and communist societies, and its effects on the conceptualization of citizenship.” The Institute is a place where civic literacy will be practiced. In Cuba there was a massive literacy campaign that guaranteed a great majority could read and write, which is an incredible

accomplishment. But we believe that today that is not enough, we reclaim the right to obtain civic literacy, where we know not only our rights but how we can exercise them without being subjected to retaliation. We want Cubans to be able to read what they want, to write what they think and to say what they feel in public, without fear. We want to reclaim the street as a public forum, a place where a multiplicity of different visions of how we want society to be can coexist.

In the Hannah Arendt Institute of Activism (#INSTAR) we are going to transform ideas into civic actions.”

**The Institute’s website says that its physically located in Havana, Cuba. Does it have an exact address?**

“Yes, in the same way I have done other projects this will be done in my house located at Tejadillo #214 between Aguacate and Compostela, in Habana Vieja (Old Havana). There, at the beginning of September, anyone can come to be part of wish tanks, think tanks and do tanks.”

**¿Will the Cuban government allow these sessions to take place? What kind of safety precautions have you taken?**

“The #INSTAR work team includes the team from #YoTambienExijo (#IAAlsoDemand), it works so that both legally and symbolically it becomes difficult to impede the Institute.”

“In legal terms I have already received a license to act as a tutor as someone that is self employed and I will be paying my taxes. I will be a tutor in contemporary art and contemporary art includes art that is socially compromised and political. Many tutors have created their own schools with that license- of languages, to help with homework or to offer workshops that prepare students for admission tests – where there are many professors working in the same physical space, that’s how we’ll work, we’ll have many professors that will be invited. Since it’s my house I can also have activities without the need of police permission so long as it happens inside my house and before 10 pm, according to what I found out at the municipal police office, which is the agency that responds to these cases.

No matter what we will be always be attentive to the spaces that are not regulated by laws in Cuba to see how we can use them in favor of the project. We will also be watching the initiatives of other sole proprietors who expand the use of these licenses. This is a game of legality and in the end it’s the government that makes the law but in the meantime, we will play with their same tools.

**#INSTAR wants to offer an alternative to the precarious culture of “we will fix it” which currently exists in Cuba, at every level, including the governmental, to arrive at a culture that proposes “we will construct” through a process where complaints, personal frustrations, disillusionment, the lack of hope, social inequality and the sense of “disempowerment” that exists in today’s Cuban society will transform into another way of collectively existing.**

Tania Bruguera, Cuban artist and activist.

## **How will the Institute work towards its mission in Cuba?**

“The work will be decided by the Cubans who participate in the workshops, the content will come from them. We have certain coordinated processes, well, #INSTAR is an Institute that is trying to bring an alternative to the precarious culture of “we will fix it” which currently exists in Cuba, at every level, including the governmental, to arrive at a culture of “we will construct it” through a process where complaints, personal frustrations, disillusionment, the lack of hope, social inequality and the sense of “disempowerment” that exists in today’s Cuban society will transform, through workshops, think tanks, activist actions and legal proposals, into another way of collectively existing. To accomplish that it is more important to work on exercises that facilitate losing the fear to say what you think in public, and reclaiming the pleasure of an honest politics and a tolerance towards opinions that are different from your own. But today there are three things in Cuba that worry us: one is the lack of a theoretical base to make “changes” (which pertain more to a culture of “we will fix it” than a clear vision for a national project). The second is the way in which the government “informs” the population about “changes” and the need for citizens to be reserved (without a process where they recognize their responsibility for inefficiency in prior political decisions or in the latter administrative consequences that occur due to their errors). And the third is the lack of transparency of the government which facilitates corruption and the traffic of influences made by those in power.” We don’t want to wait for everything to have already been decided, we don’t want to wait for everything to be irreversible before we go out to demand our rights. The moment to intervene in the future of Cuba is now.”

Translated by Lissette Olivares