

LONDON

Tania Bruguera Tate Modern

Thanks to a series of experiential interventions by Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera, a street fair atmosphere recently took hold of Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall. In the central space, children performed cartwheels and people pressed limbs to a heat-sensitive floor, watching delightedly as ghostly imprints surfaced. In a side room, visitors welled up with tears, their (involuntary) reaction caused by an organic, menthol-based compound in the air. Meanwhile a bank of loud speakers emitted a discomfiting, bass-heavy noise from one end of the hall. Of course, since this

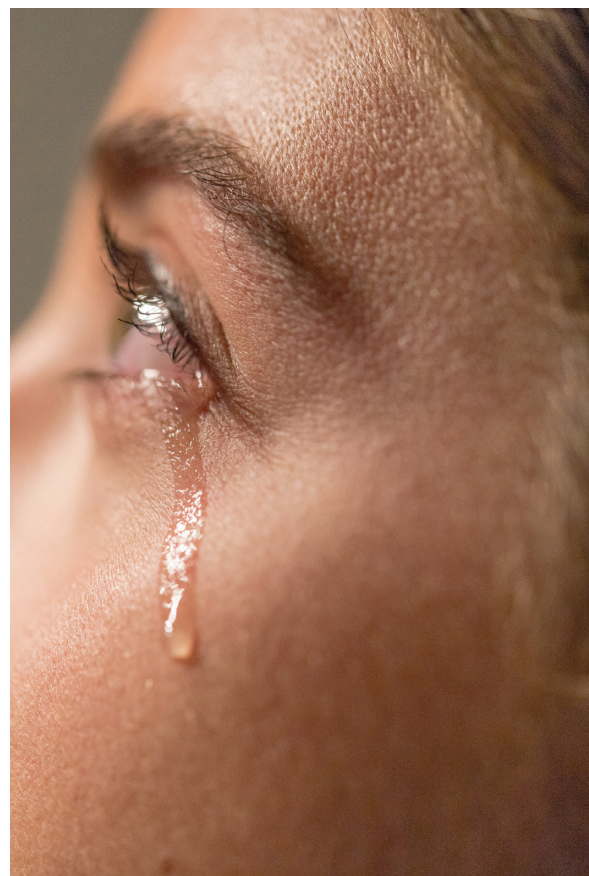
installation was created by Bruguera, an artist whose politically engaged practice challenges institutional power structures, the aim was more profound than simple entertainment. Her multi-part work focused on the theme of migration and, by extension, on indifference to the suffering of others. The thermochromic flooring concealed a huge portrait of a young Syrian refugee from Homs named Youssef, who is now studying medicine in Britain, but it took the collective effort of around 200 visitors simultaneously applying their body heat to the surface to reveal his image.

Youssef had been home-

less until he was helped to his feet by a community group run by local activist Natalie Bell. Another strand of Bruguera's project encouraged neighborliness; to which end, she formed Tate Neighbours, a diverse group of people who live or work in the same zip code as the museum, with the aim of examining how Tate can work more closely with the local community. The group's first act was to rename Tate Modern's original boiler house the Natalie Bell Building; the name will appear on all signage for one year. At a time when debates are raging in the underfunded arts over the ethics of accepting sponsorship from and naming wings after dubious patrons, this quietly subversive gesture recognizes individuals for civic work rather than financial contribution.

Bruguera, who has been

jailed repeatedly in Cuba, wants her work to be a catalyst for change; she calls it *Arte Útil* (Useful Art). The "crying room" was intended to make visitors reflect on the emotional trauma of fleeing one's homeland to seek residence in a foreign country. After entering the small space, visitors received an ink stamp representing the tally of people who migrated from one country to another in 2017 added to the number of migrant deaths recorded so far this year, based on data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This ever-increasing figure also served as the title of Bruguera's Tate commission, which was 10,143,233 on the day I went. Implicitly criticizing society's hard-heartedness, Bruguera chemically elicited what she terms "forced empathy," so that people teared up whether



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they wanted to or not—but it would be hard not to be moved by the numbers alone. Equally, the gut-penetrating, throbbing hum in the background, created by Scottish sound artist Steve Goodman (known as Kode9), offered a reminder that sound and music can be used as weapons of torture.

Some might have expected spectacle from Bruguera. *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, a work involving policemen on horseback using crowd control techniques on visitors, has been performed twice in Turbine Hall, most recently for the 2016 inauguration of Tate Modern's extension (since renamed the Blavatnik building after a sponsor). Many artists have previously opted for monumental statements in this notoriously challenging space: Carsten Höller transformed it into a slide park, Doris Salcedo created a gigantic crack through the length of the 500-foot floor, and Anish Kapoor filled the space with a blood-red tubular structure that referenced the flayed satyr Marsyas from Greek mythology. Bruguera, however, eschewed visual drama, instead engaging the senses in a bid to shake us out of complacency and reawaken neighborly compassion. In being so diffuse, her project risked having its impact diminished, but if Bruguera achieved her goal, reaching even a fraction of visitors, the endeavor will surely have been worth it. —**ELIZABETH FULLERTON**

DETROIT

Doug Aitken

Former State Savings Bank

Doug Aitken's *Mirage*—a full-sized model of a ranch-style house in which every surface is mirrored—originally occupied a site in the desert, adjacent to Palm Springs, California. For *Mirage Detroit*, he relocated the entire structure to the interior of a long-vacant Beaux-Arts bank building (which dates from 1900 and is attributed to architects McKim, Mead, and White) in Detroit's Central Business District. Isolated from outside light, the installation was illuminated by carefully positioned banks of white lights programmed to change in intensity and temperature. A neat border of rounded white pebbles formed a transitional zone between the crisply perfect house and its timeworn setting. As visitors to the house walked over the pebbles, they contributed a noticeable, and satisfyingly resonant, sound component to the work.

The lighting, programmed by acclaimed stage designer Andi Watson, was conceived by Aitken as a dynamic stream of communication between the bank and the house, so visitors experienced a wide range of consistently dramatic conditions. The lighting animated the scene and illustrated the relentless “hyper-communication” that Aitken's work, in general, identifies as a fundamental condition of contemporary life.

The overall impact of *Mirage Detroit* was, of course,



spectacular, but perhaps not quite to the degree that the above description might indicate. The house was hidden from the bank entrance by a large, pre-existing vault in the center of the room. This caused restricted sight lines in the space behind the vault and resulted in the house's mirrored surfaces reflecting only their immediate surroundings (especially the pebbled floor), rather than the imposing and symbolically more meaningful architecture of the bank.

Mirage Detroit appeared at a point in the city's history when many of its buildings, which have lain empty and outside the circuits of capital for some time, are once again becoming commercially viable. We are at a unique moment when the strikingly vacant properties that the city has become known for coexist with the money—and motivation—to support ambitious art projects such as Aitken's. The interior of the installation may have enticed viewers to experience the world as a contemporary

hall of mirrors, but at a more fundamental level, it was simply a reflection of these new economic conditions.

As a cinematic trope, the mirage beckons disoriented travelers onward to a non-existent oasis. Aitken's installation possessed a similar anticipatory quality, urging visitors forward from a time capsule of Detroit's Gilded Age toward a glittering, futuristic vision of global connectivity. But there was a void at the center of the work—the rather messy period of the last half-century or so, which witnessed the city's decline as factors such as race, the imperatives of capital, government policies, and greed combined to create debilitating social and economic conditions. The legacy of this period is an emotionally charged city that Aitken, presumably deliberately, omitted from his very sterile work. Depending on your perspective, this may be its greatest strength, or its greatest weakness.

—**STEVE PANTON**

FROM OPPOSITE:

TANIA BRUGUERA
Two installation views of “Tania Bruguera: 10,142,926,” 2018–19.

DOUG AITKEN

Mirage Detroit, 2018.
Mixed media, installation view.