

ETHICS, THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS?

“TATE NEIGHBOURS”, NATALIE BELL AND TANIA
BRUGUERA’S *10,148,451*, 2018–2019

Tom Holert

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
#2-2022, S. 383–407

<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2022.2.89062>

ABSTRACT

In attending to the specific repercussions entailed by the presence and practice of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, particularly in her exhibition/project *10,148,451* (2018–2019), this essay attempts to describe some elements of the aesthetic, discursive, and material conditions that contribute to the implementation (and contradictory deployments) of notions such as ethics, care, and social work in the curatorial programmes and institutional identity of Tate Modern. Bruguera's position as an artist whose practice is characterized by constant negotiations of the interests of institutions, audiences, citizens, art world denizens, and other stakeholders becomes a subject of particular relevance at a stage of contemporary art history in which concepts such as autonomy and authorship are dwindling, while methodologies and morphologies of interdependency, mutual aid, and an ethics of care increasingly gain momentum.

KEYWORDS

Ethics of care; Contemporary art; Tania Bruguera.

I. A Renaming

In the autumn of 2018, the Boiler House at Tate Modern in London changed its name to Natalie Bell Building. The renaming took place on 1 October 2018, linked with the Hyundai Commission, a one-month residency won by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera.¹ However, in contradistinction to the Russian multi-billionaire Len Blavatnik, whose family donated 260 million pounds for a new building, inaugurated in 2016, and in return became the namesake of Tate's Switch House, Natalie Bell is not a wealthy patron. Furthermore, Bell is neither a public figure, nor a celebrity, but more adequately dubbed a local activist. She heads the youth and community programmes of the not-for-profit Coin Street Community Builders, and lives in London SE1, the district in which Tate Modern is registered [Fig. 1].

The new name was to refer to the Boiler House for exactly one year. Bell, a single mother, disappointed and frustrated by the public welfare services for young families, started neighbourhood work in the early 2000s. Her situation at that time was precarious; in the 1990s, after the bankruptcy of her own fashion company, she faced homelessness. Amid this personal and professional crisis, she accepted the offer of an apartment in a cooperative housing project – a decisive step in becoming involved in forms of mutual aid and alternative care work. In 2001, Bell founded FamilyLink, a small charity supporting young people with complex and physical disabilities and their families via the provision of leisure opportunities outside of school (since discontinued). A year later she joined Coin Street Community Builders,² where she has been running her own department since 2016. Around the same time, she graduated from university with a degree in volunteer management and formed her own social consulting agency. At the time of Bruguera's residency, Bell was also known as the founding director (2003–2014) of SE1 United Youth Forum, Threads Fashion programme at Pembury Estate, and trustee of several boards in the SE1 area and other parts of London including Hackney and Thamesmead.³

Details of Natalie Bell's curriculum vitae are easily available online. The museum's digital and online infrastructure is helpful in relaying the data linking the narratives of the temporary renaming of the Tate Modern building to Bell's volunteer and care work and Tania Bruguera's residency project. In this way the institution has accumulated considerable symbolic capital for display – not least for its interest in placing itself within the realm of social and care

¹

Hyundai Commission, *Tania Bruguera*, 10,148,451, 02.10.2018–24.02.2019, [Tate Modern](#) (18.11.2020); see also Catherine Wood, *Tania Bruguera (Hyundai Commission)*, London 2018.

²

Coin Street, *Passionate about Our Neighbourhood* (18.11.2020).

³

Community Leadership Workshop with Natalie Bell, 06.10.2018, [Tate Exchange](#) (18.11.2020).



[Fig. 1]
Tania Bruguera and Tate Neighbours, entrance to “Natalie Bell Building”, Tate Modern,
London, 2018. Photo: David Hopkins (via [Twitter](#)).

work, in an area outside of or adjacent to the world of art and culture. As much as this seems to be a marginal aspect of an otherwise far more comprehensive and multi-layered work by an artist whose role in initiating the name-change of the building has certainly been crucial, the economy of reputation and institutional identity palpable in such circulation of information is not to be underrated when the critical reading of a work that decidedly engages the specificities and generalities of art institutions' relations to their social environment is at stake.

In attending to the specific repercussions entailed by the presence and practice of Tania Bruguera, this essay attempts to describe some elements of the aesthetic, discursive, and material conditions that contribute to the implementation (and contradictory deployments) of notions such as ethics, care, and social work in the curatorial programmes and institutional identity of Tate Modern. Bruguera's position as an artist whose practice is characterized by constant negotiations of the interests of institutions, audiences, citizens, art world denizens, and other stakeholders becomes a subject of particular relevance at a stage of contemporary art history in which concepts such as autonomy and authorship are dwindling, while methodologies and morphologies of interdependency, mutual aid, and an ethics of care increasingly gain momentum.

II. "Being Kind"

By 2018, the transformation of the conceptual and socio-economic parameters by which the art world operates had reached a point at which interest in the functions and functionalities necessitated by the interaction of individual cultural practitioners and larger institutional infrastructures had moved centre stage. Issues which for a long time pertained primarily to the social effectiveness and proof of relevance of an institution's educational and cultural programme now affect the image and the reputation of the institution more broadly and increasingly involve larger curatorial and managerial decisions. Tate Modern could well be a special case for its mixture of progressive social agendas and mainstream offerings, educational outreach initiatives, and popular exhibition events. However, the London museum can likewise be perceived as a typically double-edged example of "new institutionalism" – self-critical as well as protective, experimental as well as vulnerable (as the lay-offs and other measures to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 amply demonstrated).⁴

4

On new institutionalism in contemporary art see, for example, Jonas Ekeberg, *New Institutionalism, Verksted #1*, Oslo 2003; Claire Doherty, The Institution Is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism, in: *Engage* 15, 2004, 1–8 (18.11.2020); *On Curating* 21, 2014, "(New) Institution(alism)", themed issue, edited by Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger (18.11.2020); Alexandra Jane Hodby, *Learning after 'New Institutionalism'. Democracy and Tate Modern Public Programme*, Goldsmiths, University of London, PhD thesis, 2018 (18.11.2020).

In a press release issued in the autumn of 2018 by Tate Modern, Natalie Bell stated:

I am quite overwhelmed by having such a famous building named after me [...] I get a real buzz working with individuals and groups in the community, seeing them develop, grow in confidence, become more resilient and enjoying themselves. It's not work for me, it's my life. I love what I do and I love this neighbourhood, it's been my home for many years, its where I brought up my children and where I belong. To be recognised in this way is extraordinary and I feel very proud.⁵

As stated earlier, the renaming was initiated by Tania Bruguera. Further to the Hyundai Commission, Bruguera had accepted a 2018/19 grant by Tate Exchange, an educational department founded in 2016 to increase the effect of the institution's gestures towards publicness.⁶ The year's topic was "movement" and could refer to human migration as well as human emotion. As "Lead Artist" Bruguera deployed her grant, among other things, as an opportunity to bring about (and to cooperate with) Tate Neighbours, a group of citizens who convened ahead of Bruguera's exhibition (titled *10,148,451*) for roundtable discussions and workshops in the museum, in an effort to find ways, among others things, to address the notion of "the neighbourly" and to recognize migrants as neighbours. The members of the group all live in the SE1 postal district, the part of London in which, at least nominally, Tate Modern is located and which is by and in itself strongly affected by processes of gentrification that have been brought, among other things, by the museum's actual presence in the area.⁷ Natalie Bell was chosen from among this group of twenty-one to bestow her name to the museum for twelve months [Fig. 2].

In a short film produced by Tate Modern on this project, which can be accessed through the museum's website, the artist and five members of Tate Neighbours comment on various aspects of the project, which brought together civil society actors and an institu-

⁵

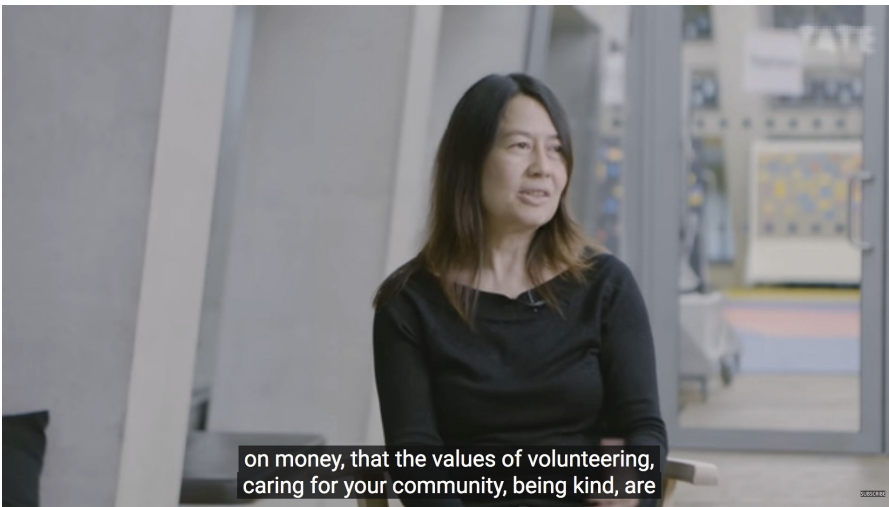
Coin Street, *Tate Modern's Boiler House Renamed after Coin Streets' Natalie Bell* (20.11.2020, link since incapacitated).

⁶

See Boel Christensen-Scheel, An Art Museum in the Interest of Publicness. A Discussion of Educational Strategies at Tate Exchange, in: *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 37, 2018, 103–119.

⁷

On the gentrification of SE1 (and the austerity politics that have been inflicted on London and the United Kingdom more generally) in relation to Tate Modern and Bruguera's project, see Kim Charnley, Activist Art and Visibility after Brexit, in: *The Large Glass. Journal of Contemporary Art, Culture, and Theory* 25/26, 2018, 6–12, here 7–9.



[Fig. 2]
Natalie Bell, video still of Tate Exchange, Tania Bruguera, and Tate Neighbours. *The Art of Social Change*. Tate Exchange, 21.10.2018 ([Youtube](#), 18.11.2020) © Tate Modern.

tion increasingly interested in shaping civil society processes.⁸ The group's statements recorded in the film speak of "a different value system" that is "symbolized" by the presence of the name of an individual such as Natalie Bell, highly esteemed in her community, but not known beyond it. Rather than based on money, this system of values relates to the symbolic capital of volunteer work for the common good, caring for the community, and "being kind".

Tate Neighbours is just one component of the much broader programme of interventions and installations on questions of migration and movement that Bruguera organized on the occasion of her Tate Modern commissions. And it is evident how much this aspect alone is in need of some critical scrutiny. As Kim Charnley commented on Bruguera's *10,148,451* and Tate Neighbours in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum, "there is an element of doubt in the work in regard to the political significance of community at this time. This hesitation is appropriate given the context of Brexit debates, where the 'will of the people', that authoritarian phantom, is routinely invoked by the British government to justify immigration controls after the vote to leave the European Union."⁹ Bruguera's articulation of migration, citizenship, and neighbourhood is to be read in relation to Brexit as well as her own liminal (and precarious) position as a Cuban citizen, surveilled and harassed by the Cuban authorities on a regular basis, and her privileged position as a cosmopolitan artist. Shuttling back and forth between highly different ideological contexts of community and communality, Bruguera has made the investigation of group dynamics, artist-audience relations, and collective practices key subjects of her work. Regarding the Tate Neighbours project, communities of care became of particular importance.

Bruguera, as much a politician, activist, organizer, and facilitator as she is a visual artist, has become one of the most notorious figures in the expanding subsection of the contemporary art world associated with terms such as participatory art, social practice, community art, etc. Not accidentally, Claire Bishop, one of the most pointed companions and critics of this tendency, chose a photograph documenting a situation from Bruguera's earlier, 2008 performance/intervention *Tatlin's Whisper #5* for the cover of her monograph on "participatory arts and the politics of spectatorship" from 2012 [Fig. 3].¹⁰

For this, the first of her works commissioned by Tate Modern, Bruguera brought two mounted policemen, one on a black and the other on a grey horse, into the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern,

8

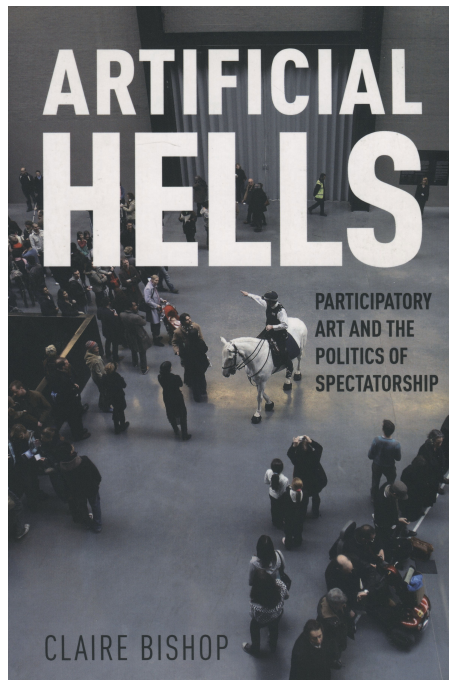
Tate Exchange, Tania Bruguera, and Tate Neighbours, *The Art of Social Change*, Tate Exchange, 21.12.2018 (Youtube, 18.11.2020).

9

Charnley, *Activist Art*, 8.

10

Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London/New York 2012.



[Fig. 3]

Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, in: Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London/New York 2008, cover; installation view during "Living Currency", Tate Modern, London. Courtesy of the artist © Tate Photography © Tanja Bruguera / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022.

without the visitors present having been informed beforehand or this action being associated with the artist's name. Albeit rehearsed, directly or indirectly, individually or collectively, through the experience of street protests, this confrontation with the presence and latent violence of the security forces on horseback came as a surprise. It was a way to intertwine (and confront) the realities of life outside and inside the museum. In so doing, Bruguera commented on the educational notion of a folding inside of the outside of the museum that a few years later would be yielded in the founding of Tate Exchange, conveying the difficult, often hidden power dynamics that undergird museums with a public mission such as Tate Modern. At the same time, *Tatlin's Whisper #5* was a literal engagement with the iconography of control and disobedience. As Andrés David Montenegro Rosero aptly put it, “[b]y locating an actual set of mounted policemen who would actually direct the audience, the sterile image of abstract ‘mounted police’ became a live experience for the spectator and created a closer emotional relation to that image”.¹¹

The work purchased by Tate Modern arguably evidences how much the curators of the museum were convinced it met the demands of aesthetic value. Bruguera herself considered it as pertaining to “arte de conducta” (behavioural art), her methodology for combining elements of Western performance art with a pedagogical behaviourism she derived from studying the problems of the *escuelas de conducta*, correctional institutions for troubled Cuban youths attempting “to re-educate, to prepare students to ‘function’ in society, to ‘adjust’, to learn how to deal with authority in a non-confrontational way”.¹² With *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, Bruguera tested how people behave in the sudden and seemingly absurd presence of police officers and horses in the museum, whether or not they act according to the tactics and techniques of crowd control mounted police officers deploy on the street, while dwelling in the differently regulated space of an art institution. The work could thus be understood as an exploratory device in the “arte de conducta” vein, as it “analyses and produces behaviour, which lives through memory, spreads through rumours, and becomes public by altering the social realm”.¹³ Thus *Tatlin's Whisper #5* assumed an additional pedagogical dimension. It was to be used as an opportunity to rehearse other forms of behaviour and body language in the face of the materialization of law enforcement on the one hand and the institution of the museum on the other.

¹¹

Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, *Arte de Conducta*. On Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper Series*, in: Charlotte Bonham-Carter and Nicola Mann (eds.), *Rhetoric, Social Value and the Arts. But How Does It Work?*, London 2017, 85–106, here 96.

¹²

Tania Bruguera, *When Behaviour Becomes Form*, in: *Parachute* 125, 2007, 62–70, here 66; see Montenegro Rosero, *Arte de Conducta*, 93–94.

¹³

Montenegro Rosero, *Arte de Conducta*, 88.

Over the years, Bruguera has built and developed her idea of artistic practice around notions such as behaviour and usefulness, quite coherently. Not least against the background of the repressions to which she and other artists and activists in Cuba have been and continue to be subjected. She demands and promotes a political attitude that correlates with her theoretical position regarding an art conceived essentially as a tactic that responds to existing political and social predicaments.

Bruguera's well-known concept of "arte útil", of useful art, and the organizational forms it entailed,¹⁴ as well as the closely related, long-term think-tank project Immigration Movement International¹⁵ are para-institutional platforms set up in the interest of pursuing the persuasion of the possibility and necessity of an art that operates aesthetically as well as politically.

By situating her practice both within and outside the institutional spaces and frameworks of art, Bruguera is always heading in the direction of a decidedly democratic, if not populist (in the sense given to the term by the left in Latin America) politics of art.¹⁶ To achieve the empowering effects she is looking for, the artist has supplemented the performative exploration of one's own behaviour in the "arte de conducta" mode by introducing the term "artivism":

"Arte de conducta" is a practice that aims to transform the audience into active citizens; the idea is that audience members will know themselves better, and that will probably – hopefully – make them better citizens. "Artivism" is actually about having those people who are already conscious of their power as citizens engage in an action that is directed to change policy.¹⁷

Although the place of art and aesthetics is never outrightly negated in Bruguera's vocabulary, it is subject to constant renegotiation. Liberated from their ontological meanings and functions in a Western philosophical context, art and aesthetics, in Bruguera's handling of these concepts, gain different meanings through a newly mapped semantics.

During a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University in 2016–2017, Bruguera gave a lecture

14

See the [website of Asociación de Arte Útil](#) (18.11.2020); on Bruguera's "arte útil", the exhibition "Museum of Arte Útil", held at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (2013–2014), and the more general notion of "useful" art see John Byrne, Social Autonomy and the Use Value of Art, in: *Afterall. A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 42, 2016, 61–69; Larne Abse Gogarty, "Usefulness" in Contemporary Art and Politics, in: *Third Text* 31, 2017, 117–132.

15

See [Immigrant Movement International](#) (18.11.2020).

16

On leftist populism, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005.

17

William J. T. Mitchell, How to Make Art with a Jackhammer. A Conversation with Tania Bruguera, in: *Afterall* 42, 2016, 51–59, here 58.

in which she rendered how she wants this concept of art to be understood – namely as a demonstration of the inseparability of aesthetics and ethics.¹⁸ This inseparability is founded, to the ears of a non-native English speaker like herself, in the potential of a morphological confusion between “aesthetics” and “ethics”. In her talk, Bruguera implemented the word “aesthetics” by hyphenating it, transforming it into “aesth-ethics”, the name of a new brand of ethics that could result in a new form of practice, of doing. Understanding “aesth-ethics” as overcoming the aesthetics/ethics, art/moral binary altogether, she then performed a similar operation on the Spanish “estética”, expanding and heightening the word “aesthetics” for it to become a proposition or statement, to be read “estética”, “this is ethics”. And Bruguera went on to ask, “Is there aesthetics in the ethics?”, thus emphasizing the problem of the aesthetic form of moral-ethical actions. At the end of this play on words and letters was the proverbial phrase: “Ethics is the aesthetics of the future.”

III. Excursus

Interestingly, Bruguera attributes the latter proverbial expression to John Cage, a connection that shortly thereafter artist and theorist James Bridle takes from her for a Twitter message – obviously unchecked, for there is no trace actually sourcing Cage as the originator of that phrase,¹⁹ but instead one indicating Lenin. Considering that Bruguera appears to be using the phrase in a kind of readymade fashion, unblinking and probably uninterested in semantic correctness, the following construction of a brief etymology and genealogy is not meant to prove her wrong. Rather, it uses the opportunity of this, intended or unintended, referential glitch to hint at the existence of a historical echo chamber that waits to be discovered beneath so many an utterance addressing the ethics/aesthetics compound.

In a conversation with Marina Abramović, Laurie Anderson talks of “ethics is the aesthetics of the future”, this “so impressive aphorism”, which she attributes to Lenin and connects with the vision of a future in which the conflicts between people will be resolved and communication so perfected that the aesthetic or beautiful would no longer have a task to fulfil.²⁰ Moreover, in a 1986 article in the *New York Magazine* devoted to the then hyped Neo Geo, a style of painting considered deeply apolitical and cynical,

¹⁸

Tania Bruguera, *Aesth-ethics. The Role of Ethics in Political Art*, lecture, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, 14.09.2020 ([Youtube](#), 18.11.2020).

¹⁹

“Ethics is the aesthetics of the future’ – John Cage quoted by Tania Bruguera @IdeasCity” ([Twitter](#), 18.11.2020).

²⁰

Marina Abramović by Laurie Anderson, in: *Bomb Magazine* 84, August 2003 (18.11.2020).

the critic Kay Larson quotes the title of a sound piece by Laurie Anderson, this time attributed to Friedrich Engels: “Ethics is the Esthetics of the Few-ture”.²¹ The spelling is important, as Anderson shares with Bruguera a penchant for puns and homophonies. In Anderson’s appropriation of the quotation, the “future” becomes a matter for the “few”, the minority opposing a majority blinded by a false aesthetic.²²

One may, however, wonder how Laurie Anderson came by this quote at all. A possible answer to this question may be gleaned from a 1958 review by Jean-Luc Godard of a documentary by the adventurous French volcanologist Haroun Tazieff. Godard, quite impressed by Tazieff’s risky stunts (such as walking on the edge of a volcano), compared the film to Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*. Moreover, he quotes the aphorism on the aesthetic future of ethics to make a point on the specific relationship between the filmmaker’s daredevilry and the filmic form, while attributing it to Maxim Gorki, who in turn claimed to be quoting Lenin.²³

In the hands of Godard, the Lenin/Gorki quotation becomes a formula for rendering artistic transgression, commenting on the downright athletic expansion of possibilities as a moral obligation. In Godard’s second feature-length film *Le petit soldat*, shot in 1960 (but not released until 1963), the main character Bruno Forestier, played by Michel Sabor, a deserter from the Algerian army involved with a French far right party in the fight against the anti-colonial National Liberation Front (FLN), delivers a long monologue directed at the figure of Véronique Dreyer, a Danish supporter of the FLN, played by Anna Karina. Towards the end of his rant Forestier comes up with what he thinks is a “very nice quote”: “Who said that? I think it was Lenin: ‘Ethics is the future of aesthetics.’ I think that is very beautiful and very moving. It reconciles the right and the left.”

Even if Godard’s position at the time of *Le petit soldat* cannot be identified with that of his figure Bruno Forestier, he too seems to have moved away from a downright existentialist concept (ethics as the obligation of the individual) to which he subscribed in his earlier review of Tazieff’s documentary. There he ventured the notion of a *solitude morale* to be fully realized by its transposition into the photographic medium of film and the surface of images.²⁴ Only a

²¹

Kay Larson, Love or Money, in: *New York Magazine*, 23 June 1986, 65–66, here 65.

²²

Anderson’s composition of this title dates from 1975 and was one of the first pieces she recorded and performed with the tape bow violin, which she developed together with Bob Bielecki.

²³

See Jean-Luc Godard, Les rendez-vous du diable [1958], in: Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (eds.), *Godard on Godard. Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, trans. Tom Milne, introduction by Richard Roud, New York/London 1972, 124–127.

²⁴

See Marco Grosoli, *Eric Rohmer’s Film Theory (1948–1953). From “école Scherer” to “Politique des Auteurs”*, Amsterdam 2018, 228–229.

short time later, in 1958, caused by a growing awareness of the Algerian war and the scandal of French colonialism, he turned from the issues of self and experience toward a re-contextualization and politicization of the supposed Lenin quote. The film renders the growing political polarization (not only in France) of a transnational and ultimately impossible love story between a dithering and self-proclaimed apolitical right-winger (Forestier) and a declared leftist (Dreyer). In this context the talk of ethics as the future of aesthetics assumes brisance precisely with the formal explosive power, new image/text relations, and late flowering of montage of Godard's early Nouvelle Vague films (so significant to contemporaries seeking an aesthetic of the political) of which none are as clear-cut as *Le petit soldat*. Hence, in the assertion that ethics is the aesthetics of the future, it is not too great a step to recall another of Godard's many famous *bon mots* of the late 1960s: "The problem is not to make political films, but to make films politically."²⁵

IV. Stealth Interventions

Returning to Tania Bruguera and her questions about the connection between ethics and aesthetics, we see an artist who continues to be interested in form, expression, and experience even when, in her view, art is in need of being considered primarily in terms of its social and political usefulness. But it may be asked, what concept of ethics underlies Bruguera's "aesth-ethics", her "artivism"? Does she lean towards a synthesis of right and left, as suggested by Forestier's interpretation of the alleged Lenin quote which invokes an *ethical* future of the aesthetic? Or is her mistaking Lenin for Cage a coincidence of the kind that the latter, who certainly felt no compulsion to maintain the opposition of right and left, might have welcomed?

How is the aesthetic valued (and recognized) when the practice and works of contemporary artists are increasingly being considered and judged in terms of their moral compatibility and political function? What if a contemporary, post-Benjaminian aestheticization of the political is pursued precisely by those who identify themselves as acting according to political categories, for they otherwise would fail in claiming their status as contemporary artists and thus their legitimate presence in places such as the Radcliffe Institute or Tate Modern?

Bruguera does not avoid these questions. She rather tries to give them a form, an artistic treatment, the success of which is to be determined. For Bruguera does not and cannot wish to discard the possibility of an aesthetic judgement of her work, a reading of her political practice as one that is art and vice versa.

As mentioned before, the Hyundai Commission consisted of several components, and the fact that Tate Exchange additionally

²⁵

Quoted in Colin MacCabe, *Godard. Images, Sounds, Politics*, London 1980, 19.

appointed Bruguera as its “Lead Artist” of the 2018–2019 season allowed Tate Neighbours to happen. And the twenty-one members of the group were not only involved in the discussions, preparatory meetings, and workshops that took place over four months in advance of the exhibition’s opening – they were also actively involved in the making of Bruguera’s multi-part project. On certain occasions that have been photographically documented, they even operated as participant-protagonists or compositional elements of a performative instalment in the museum’s Turbine Hall.

Bruguera had given her overall project the title *10,142,926*, reminiscent of legendary number exhibitions such as “557,087” (Seattle, 1969), “955,000” (Vancouver, 1970), or “2,972,453” (Buenos Aires, 1970), curated by art critic Lucy Lippard between 1969 to 1974. Whereas Lippard’s numbers were based on the number of inhabitants of the cities where the exhibitions took place, Bruguera’s figure was not, as one might assume, based on the population of London, although roughly in the range of London (14.7 million), but on the number of people who migrated across borders in the course of a year – a figure to which the number of migrants who died while migrating during the same period was added. Moreover, as Kim Charnley has argued, “The vertiginous number that titles the work signals a human tragedy but also, when placed in the context of rampant gentrification, it can be read as a gauge of the pressure that bears down upon and disperses community, the pressure of capital accumulation.”²⁶

In her exhibition, Bruguera combined this reference to statistics as an instrument of power that reduces global migration to a mere numbers game, with various emotions and sensations, especially those that were intended to engender uncertainty and discomfort among the visitors to the huge Turbine Hall. At the entrance, the (continuously updated) number derived from necro-statistical data was stamped on the skin of the visitors, inevitably evoking associations with tattoos of concentration camp inmates and thus of the Shoah.

Moreover, the gallery was charged with an unsettling high-volume low-frequency sound. This auditive environment was provided by the London-based music producer and theorist Steve Goodman (a.k.a. Code 9) who researches and publishes on sound and noise as instruments of torture and means of warfare, among other things.²⁷ A smaller adjoining room, the “crying room”, was filled with a natural gas that smelled of vaporized menthol crystals and activated the tear glands.

Referring to these symbolic, sonic, and olfactory “stealth interventions”, into both the skin of the visitors and the spatial structure

²⁶

Charnley, *Activist Art*, 8.

²⁷

See, for example, Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare. Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge, MA, 2010.

of the institution, Bruguera coined the phrase “forced empathy” to render the sort of emotionality induced by her manipulations of the museum space.²⁸ In so doing, she also pointed to a structural analogy between such interventions into the visitors’ affective-visceral condition and the strong emotional effects ensued by artworks in a museum. According to a certain tradition originating in romanticist notions of aesthetic experience, which Bruguera is certainly aware of and reflecting upon, art is expected to exert such a moving, if not upsetting force on the beholder.

In addition, the biochemical, acoustic, and sensorimotoric induction of emotional states such as sadness and anxiety demonstrate the extent to which feelings are being made and subject to all kinds of conditioning. And while Bruguera addressed and interrogated art (and its institutions) as triggering and managing emotions, she also, if indirectly, pointed to the mass media and to politics and their production and exploitation of affect.

In terms of physical space and surface area, the largest component of the exhibition was a matte-painted section of the otherwise shiny floor of the Turbine Hall. The horizontal layer of paint consisted of a heat-sensitive material that reacts to the weight and pressure of human bodies and their temperature by changing its colour to white in the relevant areas. The grey paint contained (or, rather, concealed) the huge portrait of a young man who fled Homs in Syria for the UK. Bruguera explained that the Tate Neighbours group elected Yousef, with whom Natalie Bell and her charity SE1 United have worked and who, at the time of the exhibition, was studying biomedicine: “the Neighbours wanted somebody who represented them, a local hero, somebody who’d never be in the news and would never be a celebrity.”²⁹

In order to reveal the image, visitors had to act collectively; they were encouraged to lie on the floor or to touch it. However, during the exhibition there were rarely enough people, and therefore warm bodies, to give the portrait full and longer-lasting visibility. Hence, a crucial aesthetic dimension of this work remained an unseen, latent, potential image.

In public statements in advance of the opening of the project, Bruguera referred to Hans Holbein the Younger’s *Ambassadors* and Gustave Caillebotte’s *Floor Planners*, but without, for the time being, revealing more about the floor work.³⁰ With the benefit of hindsight these art historical references obviously pointed to the sedimentation and multi-dimensionality of opaque, layered colours and to the labours – physical and social, intellectual as well as that of care –

²⁸

See Hyundai Commission, Tania Bruguera, 10,148,451.

²⁹

Agnieszka Gracza, Where Art Can Work. Interview with Tania Bruguera, in: *Flash Art* 323, 2018–2019 (18.11.2020).

³⁰

Charlotte Higgins, Interview. Detained, Grilled, Denounced. Tania Bruguera on Life in Cuba – and Her Turbine Hall Show, *The Guardian*, 26.09.2018 (18.11.2020).

required in removing that one layer that will expose and render visible another one underneath. Furthermore, they address the possibility, prefigured in Holbein's anamorphic skull, of transforming a two-dimensional representation in such a way that it can be inserted into an image while assuming more or less discernability, depending on the beholder's point of view.

V. The "Ethos" of Tate Exchange and the Issue of Responsibility

As Kim Charnley has argued, the high visibility of any social art project presented in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall needs to be put into relation to the invisibilization of the systemic destruction of the social and urban fabric caused by the relentless financialization of housing and real estate, not least in the immediate London Southwark neighbourhood of the museum.³¹ What more can be said about the visibility, phenomenological and otherwise, of Bruguera's project itself? In what ways were its various components communicated and mediated? For one, there was the level of social work and debate, embodied by Tate Neighbours. The group drafted a "manifesto" that everyone who accessed the museum's WiFi network could read on the screens of their smartphones. Visitors to the museum using the online tool were encouraged to "actively engage with the lives of our neighbours and to engage in neighbourly action, wherever they [i.e. the visitors] may come from or currently live". Furthermore, a text by the Public Relations Department promoting the workshop "Our Neighbours" in October 2018 stated: "The program seeks to revive collective social responsibility and common purpose through deliberation and public commitments."³²

One way to articulate such a sense of purpose was Tate Neighbours' question posed to the visitors in which they were asked what kind of people and communities they were interested in. The question, and the particular curiosity it implied, was linked to a call to show support and commitment to one of the groups identified by Tate Neighbours or to add an interest of their own. The visitors were also invited to discuss their ideas and visions in the designated museum area. Finally, in addition to such deliberation, the aim was to get them involved. The following forms of engagement were offered for selection: "voice, time, knowledge and assets, money, actions".³³

³¹

See Charnley, *Activist Art*, 6–9.

³²

Our Neighbours with Tania Bruguera. Every Tuesday–Sunday, 02.–28.10.2018, [Tate Exchange](#) (18.11.2020).

³³

Ibid.

This way, the visitors were addressed very directly via their willingness and ability to engage in social and solidarity work; they were presumed to be interested in one or the other social group (and the potential support provided to it); moreover, they were expected to have ideas and possess the respective resources to realize them, however limited or extensive these may be. In other words, the ideal audience of Tate Neighbours' discursive-performative interventions was one that would consider the possibility of volunteer work and thus, at least for the time being, forego the competitive mindset of the individualist neoliberal subjectivity.

At the same time, a sociological agreement on the division of society into specific "groupings" is presupposed. Such taxonomic models underlie many diversity programmes, and despite well-meaning intentions, often tend to fix identity rather than work to dissolve identitarian markers.³⁴ In addition, the questions posed by Tate Neighbours also posit the visitors in relation to another facet of neoliberal governmentality that is firmly aligned with the normativity of the entrepreneurial subject.³⁵ The concept of "social" or "civic responsibility" mentioned in the Tate Neighbours statement calls corporations as well as individuals to account for their behaviour and actions, and expects them to act accordingly, that is, as a responsabilized subject.³⁶ The latter inhabits a position that stands in complementary relation to the entrepreneurial subject's structural dismissal of the very public welfare on which it, sometimes willingly, often inadvertently, relies and that is guaranteed by community and state. For without the compensation of the subject obliged by her or his (self-)responsibility, the social structures and infrastructures would simply collapse – structures on which not least the competitive capitalist depends, even if she or he would hasten to deny this.

Implicating visitors into the Tate's public agenda as a responsible institution with a cultural as well as social mission by interpolating them as responsible citizens was one way of drawing attention to Bruguera's project, making it visible. Another strand of communication was the distribution of on-site photography. The museum chose to make available such images of the multi-part interactive performance installation at the centre of the work that show the Tate Neighbours group together with the artist performing the symbolic work of the activation and visibilization of the concealed image

34

See, for example, Anne-Marie Greene and Gill Kirton, *Diversity Management in the UK. Organizational and Stakeholder Experiences*, New York 2009.

35

See, for example, Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self. Fabricating a New Type of Subject*, trans. Steven Black, London 2016.

36

On the notion of responsabilization and the function of the ethics and politics of responsibility in contemporary art, see Tom Holert, Burden of Proof. Contemporary Art and Responsibility, in: *Artforum* 51, 2013, 250–259, 289; and Tom Holert, Für eine meta-ethische Wende. Anmerkungen zur neueren Verantwortungsästhetik, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81, 2018, 538–554.

of the Syrian refugee [Fig. 4]. As usual in her practice, Bruguera considered Tate Neighbours not only as co-operators but also as co-authors. And they have been present in many photographs displayed on the website, thus participating in the visual communication of the project. In doing so, as performers and purveyors of the project's visibility, they reflected their own role in the work and within the institution just as they were subjected to a curious and, arguably, categorizing gaze: as neighbours, migrants, volunteer aides of refugees, etc.

To an extent, the neighbours have been enlisted and employed, if not used by the institution. Deliberately and skilfully, the artist together with the museum's outreach department, brought together representatives of local communities, most of whom play a vital role in the care and maintenance of these communities and the people living amid them. From the statements made by members of the group in the museum's public relations film it is obvious that many were not previously regular visitors to Tate Modern, and might not even have felt particularly invited by the institution and its programme – although, in the words of its current head, Cara Courage, invitation and inclusion are at the heart of the Tate Exchange programme. Courage writes, “The ethos of Tate Exchange is to bring art and society together in mutual creative enquiry. It is a space for everyone to make, play, talk, and reflect and to discover new perspectives on life, through art.” The work of Tania Bruguera at Tate Exchange, which “has focused on the convening and developmental support of Tate Neighbours, made use of the platform to affect institutional change as well as using the tools of art to affect social change in their neighbourhood, and through co-production with Tate Exchange's public audience, the neighbourhoods of Tate's visitors”.³⁷

Thus, the artist's interventions directly supported the institution's self-image and audience development planning, in particular the activities of the Tate Exchange department, which was set up, with a floor of its own, for the opening of the Switch House in 2016. Bruguera also, if inadvertently, acted in accordance with a managerial notion of (audience) diversity and development, which, notwithstanding the default rhetoric of democratization by which it is framed, draws on demographical, if not biopolitical assumptions about representation and participation.³⁸ For the pursuit of social

37

Cara Courage, Neighbourliness in Action. Tate Exchange, Tate Neighbours and Affecting Change through Art [abstract], in: *Art as Communication. The Impact of Art as a Catalyst for Social Change. Fourteenth International Conference on The Arts in Society*, Champaign, IL, 2019 (18.11.2020).

38

On the complexities of audience development and diversity management, see, for example, Maurice Davies and Lucy Shaw, Measuring the Ethnic Diversity of the Museum Workforce and the Impact and Cost of Positive-Action Training, with Particular Reference to the Diversify Scheme, in: *Cultural Trends* 19, 2010, 147–179; Brian L. Werner, Jeff Hayward, and Christine Larouche, Measuring and Understanding Diversity Is Not So Simple. How Characteristics of Personal Identity Can Improve Museum Audience Studies, in: *Visitor Studies* 17, 2014, 191–206.



[Fig. 4]
Tania Bruguera, 10,142,926, members of Tate Neighbours with the artist, standing on heat-sensitive floor, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2018. Courtesy of the artist © Tate Photography © Tania Bruguera / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022.

justice and the representation of otherwise non-represented constituencies according to the paradigm of diversity often seems locked in the very ethnic profiling it tries to overcome. Thus the problem of social inclusion/exclusion emphasized by the invocation of the figure of neighbour is tainted with the categorial logic imposed by the combination of citizenship, immigration laws, the UN refugee convention, etc. The impact of these legal and governmental regulations of inclusion and exclusion leaves a lot of work to do for those civic actors who care about the members of their community and provide the kind of maintenance and support that constantly remedies the effects of state violence.

VI. Care Work and the Politics of Usefulness in Art

Tate Exchange is part of the Public Programme in the institutional mega-complex that is the Tate. The task which the Tate has set itself is the promotion of audience development and intercultural opening. Bringing people from different social contexts and milieus into the museum and into conversation with its staff and its more regular visitors is conceived and conducted as an educational enterprise. To succeed, this enterprise depends on the social competence and affective labour of people such as Natalie Bell who, like other socially engaged individuals from the Tate Neighbours group, performs what is commonly called care work. The “caring for the community” mentioned by Bell is a modality of the very concept of care that has risen to increasing prominence in a global discussion around reproductive labour, feminism, as well as alternative forms of communality, solidarity, and equality among humans and between humans and more-than-humans, ranging from domestic labour to humanitarian interventions. At the same time, “care” is applied as the name of a booming industry of care products and services.

Above all, however, talk of “care” and “caring for” has been steered in a decidedly feminist, anti-patriarchal, and intersectional direction since the 1980s by theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto.³⁹ The “ethics of care” opened up the possibility of questioning and ultimately revising certain psychological, anthropological, and political assumptions about the function and value of affective work, i.e. housework, child rearing, care for the elderly, nursing the sick, maintaining infrastructure, etc., which have traditionally been feminized and racialized and thus generally made invisible.

In the decades since Gilligan’s and Tronto’s early texts, care ethics developed into a comprehensive discourse on the moral economy associated with the concept of care and a “politics of care” derived from it. This transnational feminist discourse has become

³⁹

See, for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, Cambridge, MA, 1982; Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, New York/London 1993.

increasingly palpable in climate change and environmental policy contexts, in the struggles for animal rights and in decolonial challenges to global power asymmetries, such as those that also and especially persist in the realms of cognition and emotion.

However, “care” is no undisputed, unambiguous, normative category, at least when it pertains to an advanced philosophical and political conversation. Rather, it has become an object of critical attention, as “care’s relational vicissitudes” do not necessarily help to eliminate inequalities and asymmetries;⁴⁰ on the contrary, often enough, careless applications of care can assume a paternalistic stance, for there is a persistent attitude to practice “care” as a, by definition, unequal and uneasy relationship of giving and receiving.⁴¹

Despite such criticism, the concept of care has been consistently expanded in recent debates. In the view of María Puig de la Bellacasa, a feminist theorist of technology, it can be understood in a decidedly posthumanist vein, going beyond the concept of reproduction in the sense of restorative labour force and including a much broader range of practices that provide care and the preservation of living beings and their environments, such as technical infrastructures.⁴²

The relationship between work, affect, and politics seen through an ethics of care is dynamic and takes place in a permanent process of adaptation and reconfiguration. For example, effective care or maintenance work is not necessarily associated with intense affective charge. On the other hand, care and maintenance cannot do entirely without an affective dimension if they are to be effective. Typical for the dilemmas and contradictions it entails is the current discussion about so-called care robots and their non-human performances of emotion and empathy.

Even if Tania Bruguera does not explicitly refer to the complex state of affairs regarding the theory and practice of care ethics and care policies, her Hyundai project at Tate Modern can be placed in this context (which is usually not associated with the visual arts). However, it could be argued that if the current developments in

⁴⁰

Patrick McKearney, Challenging Care. Professionally Not Knowing What Good Care Is, in: *Anthropology and Humanism* 45, 2020, DOI: [10.1111/anhu.12302](https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12302).

⁴¹

See, for example, Fiona Robinson, Paternalistic Care and Transformative Recognition in International Politics, in: Patrick Hayden and Kate Schick (eds.), *Recognition and Global Politics. Critical Encounters between State and World*, Manchester 2016, 159–174. Probably the most discussed example in this context is the sort of care which comes cloaked in humanitarian terms, in the global arena of developmental aid or in the so-called war against terror, whose violence is believed to be remedied by a Westernized agenda of care that allegedly protects women and other minorities from the real or phantasmatic patriarchy of, say, Muslim societies. Here, in the words of feminist theorist Jess Kyle, “exceptionalist or selectively biased attitudes toward vital international legal agreements on the use of force” have time and again run rampant (Jess Kyle, Protecting the World. Military Humanitarian Intervention and the Ethics of Care, in: *Hypatia* 28, 2013, 257–273, here 258).

⁴²

See María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis, MN/London 2017.

this debate are accounted for – as in the more recent call for “radical care” following the older concept of “radical solidarity”⁴³ – the weaknesses and inconsistencies of her approach also become more apparent.

Reading how María Bellacasa characterizes the impact of the concept of ethics in care ethics, it is compelling how much this reflection (or “speculation”) is also and always an aesthetic one, or could at least be considered as such. In *Matters of Care*, Bellacasa contends how little the ethics of care is a field of normative moral obligations, but rather a “thick, impure, involvement in a world” that raises the question of *how*, of the very modes of participating in and involving care.⁴⁴ For Bellacasa, the conceptual connection of care and ethics turns ethics into a situated, practical, ecological practice of cognition and affection that “makes of ethics a hands-on, ongoing process of re-creation of ‘as well as possible’ relations and therefore one that requires a speculative opening about what a possible involves”. Such process-based methodology is “moved by a generic appeal of care that makes it unthinkable as something abstracted from its situatedness” invites “others to consider care – or its absence – as a parameter of existence with significance for their own terrains”, and may thus lead to a speculative opening to what is possible.⁴⁵

Through the juxtaposition or interlocking of very different modalities and registers, which Bruguera pursues in her 2018 Tate Modern project and in her “artist” practice in general, in its better moments, a space for reflection on precisely that which is “possible” is created – in a, sometimes paradoxical, mind-boggling working-through of the contradictory structure she proposes in and by her project. A tentative list of these contradictions may read like this:

- the unreasonable, the unpleasant or disturbing, which cannot be reduced to a harmonizing concept of care;
- the politically ambiguous on the one hand and the aesthetic play with the ambivalences of presence and absence on the other;
- the inclusion of the expertise and skills of local activists and care workers in view of a relationship that otherwise tends to be rather generous with regard to the institutional conditions and desires of this interlocking of the inside and outside of the museum;

⁴³

See, for example, Jane Turner and Patrick Campbell, Radical Care, in: *Performance Research* 23, 2018, 58–64; Lorraine Dowler, Dana Cuomo, A. M. Ranjbar, Nicole Laliberte, and Jenna Christian, Care, in: Antipode Editorial Collective (ed.), *Keywords in Radical Geography. Antipode at 50*, Hoboken, NJ, 2019, 35–39.

⁴⁴

Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 6.

⁴⁵

Ibid.

- the navigating between the cooperation with the group of local experts and the staging of the individual artist-subject (Bruguera doesn't shy away from inhabiting, literally, the centre of attention);
- the unmasking of affective technologies and their simultaneous use in the interest of engendering empathy and radical solidarity;
- the concrete reference to the reality of migration, which in turn, however, must remain vague, even invisible, to be perceived with senses other than the sense of sight (while largely renouncing from a consistent political address within the context of art, a renunciation that was, however, also repeatedly reversed, for example, through protest actions by Tate Neighbours on various occasions).

These are just some of the many contradictions in which Bruguera was entangling herself, her practice, her audience, and her collaborators in the course of *10,148,451* and *Tate Neighbours*. And she is far from offering any kind of resolution or redemption from these intricacies. For it is a key objective of the artist “to understand how not to be co-opted, [...] in the sense of being too happy with your own work”.⁴⁶ But it is through such contradictions that her practice made it possible to name its own very blind spots and dead ends, as well as its horizons and futurities.

It remains to be seen, however, to what extent ethics have thereby indeed become the aesthetics of the present. Bruguera's preoccupation with the range of unpleasant feelings and states of discomfort that may accompany “forced empathy” and the ambivalent call to act responsibly – which she cannot and does not want to spare the visitors of her exhibitions and workshops – is putting the debates on the ethics of care to a test. For these debates, if considered in their scope and richness, aim at a complexification, rather than at reducing ethics either to self-care or to morality. Engaging the issue of care critically, as done by numerous feminists, activists, and facilitators of networks of solidarity, therefore also may open up newly designed spaces for art to act – spaces that, however, always run the risk of being built on concessions to existing institutional forms. The question remains, how the integration of caring networks (following the *Tate Neighbours* model), appeals to “social responsibility” (and the associated address of individuals as citizens or *vice versa*), or a mantra-like identification of art, art institutions, and social change (a convenient default setting for many public institutions in the West) convey an understanding of the current predicament that is at best reparative and palliative and which has still some distance to cover and obstacles to surmount before overcoming it.

⁴⁶

To Intervene in a City Is to Intervene in the Ways of Behaving. Liv Little Interviews Tania Bruguera (introductory text by Sarah Happensburger), in: Claire Doherty and the British Council (eds.), *Where Strangers Meet. An International Collection of Essays on Arts in the Public Realm*, London 2018, 21–30, here 29 (18.11.2020).

Tom Holert (tom.holert@harun-farocki-institut.org) works as an in(ter)dependent scholar and curator. He authored and co-authored various books and organized exhibitions – such as *Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present, c. 1930* (with Anselm Franke), and *Education Shock. Learning, Politics and Architecture in the 1960s and 1970s*, both at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. In 2015 he co-founded the Harun Farocki Institut in Berlin. Recent book publications include *Knowledge Beside Itself. Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (Sternberg Press, 2020), *Politics of Learning, Politics of Space. Architecture and the Education Shock of the 1960s and 1970s* (De Gruyter, 2021) and *ca. 1972. Gewalt – Umwelt – Identität – Methode* (Spector Books, 2022, forthcoming).