Francis Alÿs's, Santiago Sierra's and Tania Bruguera's artistic practices occupy an “in between” space, lodged between Western constructions and non-Western counter-narratives, active as a site for transcultural dialogues. Born in Belgium, Francis Alÿs moved to Mexico City in the late 1980s. Similarly, in the early 1990s, the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra also relocated his artistic practice to Mexico City. Inverting this migratory pattern (from North to South), in the late 1990s, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera migrated to the United States. These physical displacements, along with their ensuing cultural dislocations, have effectively exposed these three contemporary artists to different notions and understandings about the benefits and shortcomings of both the ideology of modernity and the historical construction of “the West”. This paper seeks to explore how these narratives have been debunked, appropriated and criticised by works such as Politics of Rehearsal (Alÿs), Jewels Collection (Sierra), and Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Bruguera). By paying close attention to each work's contexts and conditions of possibility, I will investigate how each work articulates a complex process of critique of three of the main tenets of modernity: the teleological orientation of time, the emancipatory role of art and the separation between art and life.

On ‘Debunking’

Although popular in 'common' speech, the concept of 'debunking' rarely appears in 'serious' academic publications on art. Overshadowed by concepts such as 'irony', 'transgression' or 'subversion,' the notion of 'debunking' has played a minor role in much art history and theory. An exception to this rule can be found in Hal Foster's 1985 essay "The Expressive Fallacy". In this essay, Foster launches a critique of the German neo-expressionist movement (artists such as Georg Baselitz or Jorg Immendorff) by arguing that the promulgated artistic 'freedom' of such artists was, in fact, a conservative ideological construction that brought back into artistic discourse notions such as authenticity, originality and subjective expression as the basis for the creation, reception and interpretation of works of art. Disguised as stylistic pluralism, Foster argues that the neo-expressionist movement was a 'convention' that re-instated the belief in the value of the original over the copy; in the expressive genius of the artist; in the materiality of the artistic object (demonstrated by the important role played by large scale paintings), in other words, it was an ideologically retrograde and nostalgic proposition sold as progressive. Against this group of painters, Foster identified a group of artists (Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince) who 'debunk' these notions by rejecting the 'expressive self and the empathic viewer' model articulated by neo-expressionism. According to Foster, these artists collapse
the oppositions of original/copy, inside/outside, and self/society; and highlight identity as a highly codified process, not as a static concept with a definite end. In their works, "the transparency of the real and of the self, as assumed by the expressive model of art, is rendered problematic." Foster uses the verb 'debunk' only once. It can be argued that Foster's brief use of the concept has two important implications. In the first place, to 'debunk' entails a process of critique of an established model; there must be an order or a system to be debunked. Secondarily, 'debunking' entails an unveiling of the processes through which a system operates. In this sense, it can be argue that Richard Prince's *Untitled (cowboy)* (1989), by focusing on an image of a male cowboy extracted from a Marlboro advertisement, discloses the manipulative drive behind advertisement; a push for the consumer to identify with an archetypical 'male' model. Dislocated from its context, Prince's blatant appropriation of the Marlboro cowboy not only reproduces the stereotype; it renders it arbitrary, generic, yet paradoxically seductive. Mocking the mechanisms of identification championed by the neo-expressionists, Sherman or Prince's work "may tell us two things: that far from univocal (images) are riven with (conflicted) motives, and that our explanations, far from neutral, use these motives ideologically." In other words, artists such as Sherman and Prince unveil, and simultaneously critique, the 'false consciousness' sponsored by neo-expressionism.

Foster's notion of debunking, however, does not directly mention a second characteristic of the concept. According to its definition, to 'debunk' is not only "to expose the sham or falseness" of something, but also to "expose while ridiculing; especially of pretentious or false claims and ideas." To 'debunk', as a means, involves parody, irony and exaggeration; as an end it involves the re-evaluation of certain foundational premises, such as identity formation, the conceptualisation of time, or the role of the arts. To 'debunk', therefore, is to mockingly disprove something. One could argue that Cindy Sherman's *Untitled* (1982) 'debunks' the "types presented by the media as women" by making evident the complex process of masquerading at the heart of processes of female identification while, simultaneously, highlighting the malleability of the subject. According to Danielle Knafo: "...like a child putting on her mother's clothes, Sherman playacts by wearing the mask of grown up female stereotypes. Behind the feminine costumes, however, her gaze remains empty, demonstrating that exchangeable exteriors and environments are not sufficient to fill a vacuous interior. One can dress up as a grown up woman; but to be convincingly taken for a grown up, one must have lived the life of a grown up." Sherman's work not only critically engages the gaze that usually defines women's identity as a fixed position subjugated to the male's gaze desire, but does so by parodying, mocking and exaggerating the very mechanisms meant to support such hierarchies, such as advertisement and movie stills (media icons and stereotypes). Her works turn the spectator's gaze not only to the photographs themselves and to their critical content, but also to the ways through which we gaze. In her works, both the process of identification of a particular subject and the complex economy of seeing, involving seeing ourselves seeing (and therefore 'defining') something else, are brought to the forefront and collapsed.
In what follows, I will argue that three contemporary works, Alíys' Song for Lupita (1999), Sierra's Jewels Collection (2006), and Bruguera's Catedra Arte de Conducta (2002-2009), operate in similar ways to the works aforementioned. In these works, the artists articulate a critique of the ideals espoused by the project of modernity by underscoring the discontinuities, frictions, translations and misunderstandings inherent to the exportation of modernity to peripheral locations. Informed by their constant geographical displacements, these artistic practices show how modernity is not a successful project of smooth imposition but a process fraught with uncertainties, reversals, and sometimes, outright failure. Lampooning several principles of modernity, these artworks mock the pretentious aspirations of total control and the universalising hierarchy implied by modernity.

**Modern Mobility**

The artistic practices of Francis Alíys, Santiago Sierra and Tania Bruguera can characterised by an extreme geographic mobility, amongst other factors. These three artists have articulated a plastic language that, although derived from personal experiences, has allowed them to intervene in multiple and very dissimilar locations, from North Korea to Havana, from Hong Kong to Mexico City, from Kassel to New York. These itinerant artistic practices, nurtured by the current transnational artistic circuit and by individual desires, articulate a position in which physical displacement is understood as an opportunity that creates a critical encounter with a determined context. Displacement, instead of being understood as a condemnation, a violation or a forced exile, is articulated as a tool for cultural dislocation that encourages the emergence of different points of view around a situation, context or specific reality. In its broadest understanding, displacement implies a re-evaluation of certain consolidated perspectives and the constant questioning of sedimented concepts.

Born in Belgium in 1959, Francis Alíys migrated to Mexico City in the middle of the 80s. In 1986, as part of his mandatory military service, Alíys departed towards Mexico with the objective of “working as an architect for nongovernmental organisations.”66 Leaving behind Europe, its productive ideology and its system of artistic categorisations, Mexico would become his new locus, a witness of Alíys’ abandonment of his architectural career in favour of an experimental artistic practice. Santiago Sierra also migrated toward Mexico City from Madrid. In 1995, and as a direct reaction to a stifling, conservative cultural and artistic milieu, Sierra found in Mexico the appropriate place to develop an artistic vocabulary that was critical of the “humanist” values assigned to art in Europe. Contrary to these two artists who drew a migratory route from North to South, the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera temporarily relocated to Chicago for the duration of an artistic residency. In 1999, re-tracing the history of thousands of Cubans (or Latin Americans) who migrate to the United States or Europe, Bruguera decided to move to Chicago in order to complete a Masters’ Programme at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago.7 It is important to mention that these artists’ exiles were provoked by personal reasons and not due
to political, social or economic pressures that would drive them to travel to other latitudes. Their voluntary exiles, therefore, are not comparable to forced migrations imposed through an economic, political, religious or ethnic ultimatum. In this sense, it is clear that their displacement is not framed by the same conditions of possibility that frame the displacement of political refugees or immigrants seeking asylum or refuge. Similarly, the relocalisation of the three artistic practices is different from, for example, migratory waves triggered by economic disparities between nations or continents. This, however, does not mean that their displacements do not engage in complex processes of transcultural mediations. As in the case of any immigrant, these three artists have had to negotiate between cultural differences with the intention of establishing a locus of enunciation.

**Modernity**

For the purposes of this paper, ‘Modernity’ is understood as an economic, political and social organisational scheme that has been systematically imposed over territories and regions and that has been historically commanded by the West. It presupposes that there is a hierarchical scale of ‘progress’, of development, where the ‘previous’ is transcended and even derided by the future. The notion of ‘primitivism’, as it circulated in relation to African sculpture vis-a-vis the historical avant-darde at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, assigned to its source material a set of values that defined it as ‘barbarian’, out-dated, irrelevant, exotic, ‘bad’. In a broader context, the notions of the ‘developing country’ or the ‘third world’, for example, clearly demarcate a location for a particular place in relation to another (exemplified in the dichotomy of center-periphery where the periphery is always defined in relation to, and from, the center). In this demarcation, the ‘developing country’ is conceptualised as being, not only categorically different, but also somehow of less ‘value’ than the ‘developed’ one. This implies a vertical organisation that locates the ‘developed’ above and on top of the ‘developing’ while, at the same time, plotting a horizontal axis that locates the ‘developing’ as being before (in terms of progress) the ‘developed’. The ‘developing’ are, thusly, understood as lacking something that the ‘developed’ have; the ‘developing’ are ‘incomplete’ in the eyes of modernity’s wholeness.

Modernity, therefore, clearly advocates for a “...movement from ‘tradition to modernity.’” As such, the concept promotes the idea that the more ‘modern’ you are the better. This means that there is a ‘progressive’, ‘productive’, ‘efficient’ implication intrinsic to the notion of modernity that dictates the motions of the past (paradoxically termed ‘developing’) towards the future (developed). Under this rubric the ‘developed’ and the ‘developing’ are categorically differentiated and only related by a causal link (the ‘developed’ believe they have surmounted their ‘primitive’ past). As Jervis argues: “As rationality, science and ‘civilisation’ came to constitute the legitimising framework of modern Western values, so ideas of evolution could serve to locate the ‘primitive’ as the other that is past...” Modernity posits the existence of
radical ruptures between categories, identities and realms of life; a series of hermetic models that run parallel to each other. Choosing to ignore the discontinuities and contradictions inherent to universal identifications and ‘master narratives’, modernity parcels, taxonomises and controls the subject and its process of construction: making modernity a project for the creation of subjects.

From this construct, one can extract three driving premises for the project of modernity: 1. a clear orientation towards the future; 2. a necessary division between categories (be it subjects, or realms of activity -such as life and art-); and 3. a goal-oriented culture “...geared to the achievement of practical, secular goals”. Translated into experience, modernity seeks to accurately measure time through the invention of several, distinct units of measurement that, although related are categorically different (as in, for instance, the relation of seconds to minutes), and in constant projection to the future. Similarly, past, present and future are understood as being different from each other: the past is a foundation, in the sense of being buried, invisible, beneath other strata --present by its very absence, upon which the future is constantly being built. Under this model, the present is always becoming past. The categorical and instrumental differentiation of units of time are also transposed to other dichotomies fostered by modernity. Just like time units, which are, self-reflexively, independent from each other and simultaneously defined in relation to other categories, modernity also creates categorical differentiations between realms of experience. Contrary to previous models of subjectivity (Medieval subjectivity, for example, was deeply relational and in constant interaction with different signs that served both religious, artistic, social and cultural purposes --life, religion, culture, art were ‘collapsed’ into one), modernity’s desire for instrumental knowledge dissects the human experience into operative units for analysis. In this sense, disciplines and fields of knowledge, along with their ensuing systems of classification, exclusions and contradictions, are created; strict divisions between categories are established. Under this compartmentalising rubric, the connection between poetics and politics is severed, life and art become separate realms of experience geared towards their own specific goals and become independent of each other. Life is geared towards the productive, purposeful, future (and work) oriented activity of the economically and socially regulated subject; art towards the transcendent experience of aesthetic pleasure. Art becomes a means for the transcendence of the experience of living in modernity; an entertainment that provides a spiritual balm for the subject involved in the experience of modernity; a carefully constructed escape-route geared towards the supposed emancipation (either through aesthetic transcendence or pleasure-derived experiences) of the subject.

Francis Alýs: Rehearsals and palimpsestic time

Francis Alýs’s understanding of modernity is informed by his experiences in Latin America and, in particular, his interaction with Mexico. In his opinion, Latin America is a society that embraces certain aspects of the modern programme while,
simultaneously, rejecting and resisting others. According to him, Latin America desires to be modern. The continent wants to fulfil the dreams instilled by the modern project as articulated by North America at the end of the Second World War and developed as a North Atlantic project of economic domination after the Cold War. But the continent’s efforts are continually thwarted, either by poor local planning and execution (i.e. by corruption and bureaucratic excess), or because its sponsors (i.e. the developed countries) have stopped their support midway through the implementation of such programmes. At the same time, there are dominant and fundamental aspects of modernity that, Alýs believes, are rejected by Latin American society; mainly exploitation and cultural expropriation and imposition. In this sense, Alýs believes that Latin America ‘dances’ with modernity, trying to posses it but at the same time rejecting its grasp. Alýs argues: “It’s this capacity of flirting with modernity without giving in that fascinates me.” 14 An interview between the artist and Russel Ferguson sheds light on his views:

RF: One of the things that seems very characteristic about Mexico City - at least from outside - is a constant pushing back and forth between the embrace of modernity and a resistance to it.
FA: It probably happens in other places too, but this is the one I know the best. It seems particularly palpable in this part of town, the old city centre with all its anachronisms. Its three layers - pre-Hispanic, colonial and modern - co-exist more than overlap. I think you could say that all the ingredients are present for Mexico to enter modernity, but there is this inner resistance. Somehow it’s a society that wants to stay in an indeterminate sphere of action as a way of defining itself against the imposition of modernity. 15

_Song for Lupita_ (1998) is a simple looped animation that depicts a woman endlessly pouring water from one glass to another. The action depicted has no clear beginning or end; the woman seems to not have a purpose in mind beyond the sole action of moving the liquid from one container to the to the other. According to Boris Groys in _Song for Lupita_ “...we find an activity with no beginning and no end, no definite result or product...We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time; a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention.” 16 The importance is on the action itself, not its origin or its conclusion; perhaps it does not even matter whether it even has a beginning or an end. Resisting the pressure of always producing something, 17 the work “...staged a kind of resignation to the immediate present by introducing a complete hypnosis in the act itself, an act which was pure flux...” 18 Emphatically prioritising the means rather than the goals, _Song for Lupita_ literalises what Alýs calls a “Mexican sense of time”, described as “…el hacerlo sin hacerlo, el no hacerlo pero haciéndolo' - literally ‘the doing but without doing, the not doing but doing.” 19 As a result, the work offers a different model of time that collapses the past, present and the future and, therefore, denies the teleological, project-driven, result-oriented drive of modernity. By not having an identifiable start or end-point, it is impossible
to locate any sense of when in the work; there is no straightforward sense of what is previous nor of what is to come. At the same time, we cannot determinately say that the woman is either emptying or filling a glass - in fact, the dichotomy between empty and full is collapsed, as both glasses are simultaneously half-empty and half-full; although at some point during the animation they are both empty. *Song for Lupita*, therefore, creates a space that rejects simple and rigid measurements of time while simultaneously juxtaposing these notions. Precisely by collapsing the past and future into the present, the work articulates a ‘deep present’ characterised by the palimpsestic co-existence of past and future in the eternal present of the animation.

*For Rehearsal I* (1999), in Tijuana, Aliyés drove a red Volkswagen Beetle up and down a hill. While listening to the recording of a brass band practising a Mexican danzón, he tried to climb the dusty slope of a peripheral location in the city. As the

band stopped for comments or to perfect a particular segment of the tune, Alÿs stopped pressing the gas pedal on the car and allowed the car to roll downhill. The cyclical motion, reminiscent of a pendulum, articulates futility, the impossibility of reaching a specific goal. At the same time, it restores the notion of ‘attempting,’ of the present-ness of trying. It is an allegory for delay; a reflection on the palimpsestic co-existence of different times in the present. As an exercise in will, but also as a comment on the modern notion of time, this work characterises one of Alÿs’s artistic strategies: the rehearsal. Speaking of the work, the artist argued: “The stubborn repetition effect hints at a story that is constantly delayed, and where the attempt to formulate the story takes the lead over the story itself. It is a story of struggle rather than one of achievement, an allegory in process rather than a quest for synthesis.”

Rehearsal I is also explicitly about the relationship between modernity and
Latin America. The car, engaged in an impossible task to cross the horizon and, it is implied, to reach the other side of the border, the US, serves as an allegory for “...the struggle of Latin American societies to adjust to the social and economic expectations of their northern neighbours.” 22 Although it seems straightforward, the car is trapped in an impossible maze; its attempts are heroic but decidedly thwarted. As the action is repeated in an apparently endless loop, feelings of frustration, and irony, are conjured by the work; eternal repetition of a Herculean task with no significant progress. As Mark Godfrey argued: “For Alýs, the rehearsal serves precisely to allegorise the processes of modernisation in Latin America, where economic changes are always promised but never ultimately achieved.” 23 Alýs’s practice is not about blaming or assigning responsibility to anyone for the failure of the modern project in Latin America, but to reflect on the process of rejection/acceptance of modern paradigms. He argues that there is a direct tension between the “desire to modernise” and “...a compulsion to resist the imposition of Western economic practices. In the resulting impasse, all that is left is the process of always working towards an always-deferred result: it is akin to the process of rehearsal.” 24

Politics of Rehearsal (2001-2006) is a further problematisation of modernity’s understanding of time. In this video, a stripper dances on stage while a pianist and a soprano practice, rehearse, a song. Alýs described the mechanics of the work as such:
While the pianist plays and the soprano sings, the stripper undresses. When the soprano or the pianist loses track over a musical phrase and pause, the stripped halts her act. While the soprano and the pianist discuss the musical phrase in question, the stripper dresses up again. The rehearsal session will go on until the stripper completes her act.25

The work is a reworking, an expansion, of *Rehearsal I* and similarly, articulates a particular sense of time, Alýs’ “Mexican time”. According to this notion, time does not flow in a fluid and straightforward line of ‘progress’ from one step to another, but loops around itself through failed attempts at reaching satisfaction. By using the image of a stripper, a symbol of desire and quick satisfaction, Alýs alludes to the seductive power of attaining a particular goal, in this case, seeing the stripper naked. Combined with the rehearsing musicians, desire, in this piece, is satisfied drop by drop, time moves forward (the woman takes clothes off) only to retreat two steps back (the woman puts clothes back on). *Politics of Rehearsal* also materialises Alýs’ concerns about modernity’s time and its relationship to Latin America. The artistic mechanism, rehearsal, is combined to a political claim where modernity’s promises are equated with the desire for seeing the stripper naked, a desire that is fed drop by drop. In the video documentation, the stripper never seems to be close to being fully naked on stage, as for every piece of clothing she removes she has to put two or more back on while the musicians discuss. By delaying satisfaction, Alýs was able to explore “…another dimension that interested me, the way in which through repetition the narration could be indefinitely delayed, recalling the Latin American scenario in which modernity is always delayed. The recourse to the mechanics of rehearsal was more a method to physically render this constant postponement, the avoidance of the conclusion.”26 It is clear that for Alýs, delay and postponement do not mean stagnation but a process in another direction, an advancement in resistance, for example, to imposed modes of social regulation, such as time. According to Cuauhtémoc Medina: “… the Rehearsals evoke l’entreinte qui ne peut s’achever, l’orgasme à jamais repoussé (the embrace that cannot be achieved, the orgasm forever delayed), for only in relation to the longing for satisfaction can we understand the impulse of modernisation. The rehearsal also stands as a means of social critique, in as much as it exists in an ‘ambiguous affair with modernity, forever arousing, and yet always delaying the moment it will happen.’27 In this sense, Politics of Rehearsal tries to render a different understanding of time where past, present and future are all simultaneous and in constant tension with each other.

The struggle enacted by Alýs’ practice produces a “non-linear conception of time”, a reflection of what he sees as a characteristic trait of Latin America. The region, he argues, creates a sense of time that debunks the notion of teleological progress as envisioned by modernity as a project. His works highlight the importance of process, the present-ness of the struggle, rather than its future-oriented goal. What is important is not the end point, after all the stripper is only naked for a short period of time and the glasses are half empty for an instant, but the means and
mechanisms through which either she removes her clothes or Lupita administers the water. In their circularity, these works speak about the cyclical crisis of modernity in Latin America, ghosts of past desires that dictate the present of the region. Alys' *Song for Lupita, Rehearsal I* and *Politics of Rehearsal* make evident and lampoon the eternal loop that traps Latin America in a constant struggle with modernity; an epic negotiation that creates its own sense of time and its own rules of resistance.

**Santiago Sierra: Art-iculating a critique of Modernity**

Unlike many contemporary artists, Santiago Sierra’s practice is not concerned with alleviating or bettering a conflictual situation. Unlike many of his peers - artists who believe that art can offer a glimpse outside the state of affairs, or a poetic pause in our depressing everyday - Sierra explicitly denies art’s potential as social activism and acknowledges art’s complicity with the project of modernity, specifically with the importance of capital exchange. Under his perspective, art is nothing but a commodity, a luxury object that does not provide the slightest glimpse of emancipation to either the artist nor the spectator. In his practice, neither artist, spectator or hired labourer are disassembling or dismantling any hierarchical or exploitative process of subjectification, nor are they involved in processes of activation of political agency. By avoiding “giv[ing] a voice to the underprivileged,” or “propos[ing] new modes of sociability”, Sierra’s work strips art of its supposed “moral superiority”; it “undo[es] the halo of humanist moral purity around the making of art.” As Sierra argues: “Art is like a pretentious furniture store or a complicated jewel. It might be a complex jewel, but first and foremost it is a luxury object.”

To understand art as directly collaborative with economical and cultural coercive practices inherent to the modernist project, has deep implications. Describing art as a luxury object implies that both the artist and spectator have access to artistic products and their platforms for circulation. This, in turn, defines these subjects as belonging to a specific social group with access to both the spaces and the objects pushed by this cultural industry. In this sense, both artist and spectator are located within a specific social group that, according to Sierra, “...is not the whole of society but only its superior body - let’s call it the most favoured classes, the ones that offer employment.” Under this rubric, both the producer and receptor of the artistic object or event are described as “...well-educated people, people who belong, at least, to a cultural elite”, the “social group that is on top.” Art, for Sierra, circulates only within the historically privileged, highly specialised elites. As a result, and because of art’s direct involvement with the system of categorisations and subject management of modernity as a project, art, according to Sierra, offers no route to emancipation, neither through aesthetic transcendence nor through a detachment from the social field. Art, therefore, cannot offer a perspective beyond the conditions of modernity that construct it, it cannot provide a way out if it is configured by the desires of modernity itself. This implies that art ceases to play a role in the pursuit of political or subjective emancipation from totalising narratives; quite the opposite, it directly
implicates art as yet another process for the creation and regulation of modernity’s subjects.

Jewels Collection (2006), a collaborative project between Sierra and the Spanish designer Chus Burés, is a good case study to explore Sierra’s understanding of the relationship between art and freedom. Described by some critics as “jewel-denouncements”, Jewels Collection was the result of an artistic exchange between the artist and the luxury-goods designer (who had previously worked on similar projects with film director Pedro Almodóvar and artist Louise Bourgeois). The project materialised in the form of a collection of handcrafted, “traditional goldsmith work” rings, bracelets and necklaces. They were made either of gold or diamonds and depicted one of the following two sentence respectively: “GOLDTRAFFICKILLS” or “DIAMONDTRAFFICKILLS”. On one level, these works “...denounce the exploitation suffered by some countries in the Third World” by boldly stating that the international market in precious stones is fuelled by the blood of ‘Others’. From this one could derive that all kinds of luxury markets, including the realm of art, are imbricated and directly participant in processes of subjugation; not separate from the realm of life but actively complicit in producing a specific kind of subjectivity. Contrary to modernity’s insurmountable separation between art and life, on one level, Jewels Collection collapses in a series of objects the ‘luxury’ quality of both jewels and art.
Santiago Sierra, *A person paid for 360 continuous working hours*
P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, September 2000.

while demonstrating them to be deeply engrained in processes of social, cultural and economic exclusion. These works engage with the world of art and vehemently, and unapologetically, affirm that, as a system belonging to a larger project, art perpetuates social distinctions and subject categorisations. The works delineate the ways in which the artwork is inextricably imbricated with the economic realm, and therefore, its complicity in the construction of a specific modern subject. As Sierra argues: “There is nothing outside the system and the system is exploitation, therefore the people in the system are roughly divided between the exploited and the exploiters. I can say it louder, but I can’t say it clearer: us, the world of culture, are on the winning team, we are, surprise, the exploiters.”

In 2000, at P.S.1 in New York, Sierra produced *A Person paid for 360 continuous working hours*. For this work, the artist divided the exhibition space with a brick wall that created an isolated, small room (reminiscent of a prison cell) within the museum. Sierra hired a worker who was willing to ‘inhabit’ the constrained space and remain isolated - yet paradoxically on display - for the duration of the exhibition. The worker was paid ten dollars per hour and was fed through a small hole in the wall at ground level. The piece was characterised by the separation and partial invisibilisation of a worker who remained trapped behind a massive wall. For the hired labourer, the work had an actual physical effect upon him; it imposed isolation from others while at the same time subjugating him to the gaze of others (not to mention the implied economic subjugation). In this sense, the work operated paradoxically: it physically
secluded and hid the worker which confirmed his presence through absence; only through traces or body fragments do we know that there was actually someone in there. Although the public could never fully grasp, or even see, the worker, Sierra's division underscored the actual existence of a person willing to perform abject forms of labour as long as they signify an economic gain.

One of Sierra's most polemical pieces was *Line of 30cm tattooed on the back of a remunerated person* (1998). For this work, Sierra "...looked for a person who had no tattoos and did not want to have any, but who, for financial reasons, was willing to have a line tattooed on his or her back for fifty dollars." The work was an actual inscription on someone else's body, a violent act that implies a determinate hierarchical arrangement where the artist is superior and the labourer inferior. In this work, it was not the artist who underwent a physical alteration but someone who was hired precisely for that task. Sierra's violation can happen because the workers are willing to submit to his humiliation as long as they receive a nominal fee. In this scenario, Sierra's act of inscription is an index of the physical colonisation of an economically conditioned Other.

Most of Sierra's work tackles the articulation between art and freedom. Freedom, emancipation, as articulated by his works, is not only a founding promise (and premise) of modernity but, ultimately, is a fallacy, an impossibility in which art plays a complicit role by offering a seductive, yet also hollow, promise of transcendence from the conditions of modernity. As a result, to think that art is in any way linked to freedom, to the possibility of emancipation from the shackles of our constructed subjectivity through art, is only a mirage implanted by a system that, while promising liberty, economically and ideologically dominates its subjects. As Sierra argued: "I would say that instead of creating subversion, we are confirming, yet again, the falsity of all liberatory maximalisms, of all the maximalisms of human emancipation." From his perspective, freedom is only a broken promise and art is just another tool for deception. As Cuauhtémoc Medina has noted:

In Santiago Sierra's case, it is obvious that the motorforce of his works is the need to remain faithful to the modern notion of freedom, which involves the memory of liberation. The brutal unmitigated negativity of his works and actions traces in negative a whole catalogue of modern aspirations from the past that not only are lost but in fact have been almost erased from modern memory - the freedom of circulation without state interference, the pursuit of liberation from economic coercion, the pursuit of freedom of determination, even the freedom of cultural self-fashioning. Sierra's works draw their energy from the task of describing modern freedom in negative. A design that, at times, adopts the appearance of a true monstrosity: the mirage of an organic artwork that truly represents the values of the era. If Stendhal famously inaugurated modernity by describing the work of art as a promise of happiness, Santiago Sierra shows it as unhappiness realised.
Tania Bruguera: Arte de Conducta

In 2003, Bruguera established Arte de Conducta in Havana. The programme, the only educational programme dedicated to the study of performance art in Latin America, was conceived as a long term, public art piece that took the form of an experimental art school created in collaboration with Cuban and international artists and institutions. The school worked under the general operation of the Instituto Superior de Arte, a government organisation that sanctioned the contents of the Cuban public educational system. The school, however, remained independent in its decision-making process, creating a completely new curricula decided upon by the school’s interests and desires. Working with ISA, however, was fundamental for two reasons: in the first place, counting with ISA’s support facilitated the invitation of international artists to the island (in bureaucratic terms such as expediting visas and visiting permits). Secondly, given its envisioned temporality (five years) and non-commercial emphasis, Cátedra Arte de Conducta could only be viable in partnership with an established institution.

As a pedagogical project, Cátedra Arte de Conducta:

combines and nourishes different aspects of creativity, and its program includes varied instructors: a mathematician who explains the axiom as a creative tool; a lawyer who discusses intellectual property law; an architect who talks about concepts of public space; an anthropologist who lectures about the cultural value of myths; a journalist who gives assignments on how to construct “truth”; and a sociologist who explores her discipline’s methods for thinking about and analysing societies. Also included are artists and critics whose research and production focus on the socio-political, the performative, and the behavioural.

The classes (Bruguera called them workshops) mainly took place either at a professor’s home or at a park and were decided upon through mobile phones, rumour and gossip, creating a mobile platform for the production and debate of “socially engaged and politically responsible” artworks. As Bruguera argued:

This project is a dialogue, a centre of energy, a space for discussion about art, life and society, as well as the possible means by which to combine these elements in an artistic way. We are interested in creating new ways of thinking through the use of art on society and by questioning the relationship artists have to social responsibility.

Cátedra Arte de Conducta invited to Cuba a series of international guests for teach-in-residence programs. The list included important Latin American artists and critics, such as Carlos Garaicoa or Gerardo Mosquera, as well as important voices from the West, such as Thierry de Duve, Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, Boris Groys, Thomas Hirschhorn or Artur Zmijewski. Responding to a desire for directly exposing
its students to the "changing situation of contemporary art and culture," the programme encouraged a political artistic practice centred around the investigation of "how behaviour can become material for an art that challenges social limitations." According to Bruguera:

We explore how behaviour endures as well as how it can be transmitted especially through rumour and other narrative means of expression. We question the limits of artistic media and the paradoxes of cultural identity: cultural representations, representational conventions and memory, historical conditions and ideology and, more specifically the uses of art as a politically expressive tool. We focus on different elements of structure involving the making of this kind of art and employ multiple models of discourse.

Arte de Conducta's goal, one can argue, was the creation of a socially useful art that instead of focusing on the representation of reality studied its historical configurations in order to actually produce a change for the present. As a school of political art, Cátedra Arte de Conducta understood behaviour as "the language that society uses" in order to regulate subjectivities, and focused on the production and study of behaviour as a tool for political and social change.

It is important to mention that Cátedra Arte de Conducta's emerged out of a particular and specific context. In the first place, one must not forget that in Cuba, a country characterised by "political aspirations and doctrines", art is seen as a useful tool for either ideological, propagandistic control or as an effective agent of change, mostly through education. In this sense, Cátedra Arte de Conducta consciously rejects the notion of autonomous art, and instead posits an art that that can have real consequences in its immediate context. The project was "created and tailored for a young generation of Cuban artists who face the question of how to combine old values with new ones, as alien as they are confusingly desired." This means that the Cátedra Arte de Conducta had an immediate concern, that is to mediate between Cuban artists, grown and groomed under the decaying Cuban socialist regime, and the new conditions of the island. Paradoxically, however, the programme's results can only be measured with the passage of time, in "four or five years", as a new generation of Cuban artists will emerge. As such, Cátedra Arte de Conducta is a "long-term project...that tries to fall within social dynamics and, therefore, make use of social tempo for production and for the implementation of the project." Similar to other works where the tools wielded by power are appropriated and "corrupted" or "perverted", such as Memoria de la Postguerra I (1993), Cátedra Arte de Conducta subverted the notion of the obedient yet somehow revolutionary Cuban educational system and posited education, specifically arts education, as an effective agent for the reconfiguration of the present and for the activation of a new kind of useful art. As the project statement reads:

It is a long term intervention focused in the discussion and analysis of sociopolitical behaviour and the understanding of art as an instrument
for the transformation of ideology through the activation of civic action on its environment. It was created as a space for the practice of Arte de Conducta. Actions aimed to transform some spaces in society through art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor and meeting with their activity some deficits in reality, in life through Arte Útil, are prioritised. This site and political-timing specific piece is displayed through the creation of a pedagogical model that makes up for the lack of civic discussion spaces on the function of art in present Cuban society and promotes new generations of artists and intellectuals. This work offers a political discourse stemming from art and promotes the exploration of relationships between art and context.\textsuperscript{60}

Bruguera's notion of Arte de Conducta has been further explored through the Tatlin's Whisper series. The series is composed of a combination of actions in which the artist activates, as a direct participatory experience, images that have circulated in the press and other mass media outlets and which, by virtue of their ubiquitous presence and circulation, have lost their mobilising power. Paradoxically, however, in the Tatlin's Whisper series, the images undergo a process of "de-contextualisation" where the images are plucked from their everyday circulation, and from the "event that gave way to the news", in order to be "staged as realistically as possible in an art institution."\textsuperscript{61} Under these parameters, Bruguera has produced several actions
in different geographical locations, such as London, Moscow or Madrid, seeking to de-anæsthetise images sedimented in the social imaginary with the intention of formulating a critical re-evaluation of the present.

*Tatlin’s Whisper # 6 (Havana version)* (2009) was presented at the Centro Cultural Wifredo Lam in Havana as part of the X Havana Biennial. Bruguera constructed and installed a stage where a podium and microphone allowed a minute of free expression to any person that wanted to speak. The podium was flanked by two performers dressed in military uniforms who placed a trained dove on the shoulder of each one of the participants. Before the action had officially started, Bruguera distributed two hundred disposable cameras among the public, surrendering any authorial right over the documentation of the action. Nearly forty people took the stage, some clamoured for freedom, some demanded radical change, others, overflowed by emotion, simply cried.

Although the work was heavily criticised and rejected by the official Organising Committee, according to Gerardo Mosquera the work created an actual public tribune within the repressive context of Cuba. By taking advantage of the relative permissibility that characterises the world of art, through Bruguera’s work freedom of expression became a reality - albeit ephemeral - and not a perennial
broken promise. As Helaine Posner argued: “By providing a public platform for the audience to speak out against censorship, to call for liberty and democracy, or to state whatever was on their mind, the artist tested the limits of acceptable behaviour under a totalitarian regime in an attempt to create a socially useful forms.” Tatlin’s Whisper # 6 created a public platform in the public sphere in a context where government (and self-) censorship is a common practice. As a result, the work did not only offer a representation of the repressive conditions in Cuba but actually enacted a moment of political freedom and agency. The work successfully instrumentalised an artistic platform in order to give that space to other, marginalised and silenced voices (for example the dissident blogger Yoanis Sánchez66). The work not only created an opportunity for political action, but effectively enacted it for thirty-nine minutes and for thirty-nine different people. By imitating a foundational historical moment, Tatlin’s Whisper # 6 mobilised Cuba’s historical memory by bringing to a present characterised by government repression and control the ghost of one of the foundational moments of the contemporary Cuban state - paradoxically, a moment of public expression. Bruguera’s (and Castro’s) privilege, the power that made it possible for him to address an entire nation, was dispersed and atomised towards the silenced members of the audience. In this way, Tatlin’s Whisper # 6 not only opened to contemporary critique and debate the existing conditions of repression in Cuba, but also made possible a critical re-evaluation of the past through a democratic and participative dialogue. This characteristic, the enactment of a situation in the social field, is defined by Bruguera as “...hyper-realism that doesn’t try to represent reality but to be inserted in it.”67

Notes

2. Ibid.
7. It is important to mention that, ever since 1999, Bruguera has maintained her links with Cuba. During this time, the artist hasn’t only lived for long periods of time in the island, but has also actively participated in the cultural and artistic milieu of the island through several exhibitions and pedagogical projects (such as Arte de Conducsta). Bruguera’s itinerary is not only a challenge to Cuba’s official government policy, which during the 90s condemned anyone who left the island as traitors, but also demonstrates a political commitment to establish continuities with the artist’s original context. In this way, Bruguera’s work not only comments about Cuba from the outside, but also seeks to act from within Cuba simultaneously.
8. Bruguera’s case is peculiar; the artist does not identify herself as an exile, because in the context of the Cuban diaspora, this identification implies several ideological and political affiliations which the artist does not share. According to Gerardo Mosquera, a possible ‘taxonomisation’ of the
Cuban diaspora at the end of the 1990s, would sketch, at least, six different ways of dealing with the issue of belonging/not-belonging that characterise the epoch: those who are (islanded), those who are left (deislanded), those who are here but are crazy about leaving (involuntary islanded), the ones that left and come back for vacations (low intensity exilees), those who come and go (papization) and those who emerge. Mosquera, Gerardo, “Crece La Yerba”, in Magaly, Espinosa, and Kevin Power, eds, *El Nuevo Arte Cubano: Antologia de Textos Criticos*, Perceval Press, 2006.


11 Ibid.

12 In “The Rape and Romance of ‘Nature’”, for example, Jervis argues that, during Medieval times, there was a “...sense of community or continuum” between Animals and Humans; a shared relational subjectivity where “there is no clear distinction between the legal, moral and social and behavioural attributes of animals on the one hand, and humans on the other...” In the same chapter, Jervis traces how this notion radically changed through a process of strict differentiation between humans, animals and nature fostered by the Enlightenment and consolidated through The Sublime. Again, although he does not mention the realm of art directly, it could be argued that a similar model applied to the relationship between art and life. Cathedrals or sculptures were more than aesthetic objects; they played a crucial role for indoctrination. See ibid.

13 For a detailed account of how such compartmentalisations operated, see “Carnival Pleasures and the Spectre of Misrule” in ibid. Although this chapter does not directly mention the realm of art, Jervis traces a genealogy of the process of exclusion of carnival practices from the ‘civilised’ order.

14 Ferguson, 2007 (a).

15 Ibid.


17 Ferguson, 2007 (a).

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.


24 Ferguson, 2007 (b).


26 Ibid.


29 Ibid.


33 Ibid.

34 Wagner, H., “Interview”, in op. cit. note 32.

35 Ibid.


120 MODERNISM BEYOND THE WEST
40 Wagner, 2006.
42 Ibid.
43 Mircan, 2006.
47 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.

59 Memoria de la Postguerra I was the first edition of a self-funded editorial project initiated by Bruguera in Havana in 1993. Born in a country where the media, newspapers, television, radios, etc. are tightly controlled by the State, Memoria de la Postguerra I established a unique platform for freedom of expression. For this project, Bruguera appropriated the written press, one of the most important elements of power of the Castro regime, and fostered individual independence in a tightly regulated world. Contrary to other media sources of the time, the newspaper offered the opportunity to participate in a collective and critical evaluation and reflection of the past, the present and the future of the Island. The collaborative newspaper featured the voices of artists, intellectuals and cultural players from both sides of the Florida strait, from Cuba and the United States. Appearing at a moment characterised by a sense of “cultural vacuum”, the project was the only platform for the discussion of important, usually state censored, topics such as human rights abuses, the implications of the Cuban revolution and other controversial issues. For an in depth discussion of the work see: Camnitzer, Luis, “Memoria de la Postguerra”, in *Art Nexus*, no. 15, Jan-March, 1995, and Pinto, Roberto, *Ejercicio de Resistencia*, Galería Soffiantino, Torino, Italy, 2003, both available at http://www.taniabrugueracom, accessed June 1st 2012.

61 Perez.
62 It is important to mention that this detail, the placement of a dove on the shoulder’s of the speaker, activated an important local referent: In 1959, Castro made a public address in Havana. Surrounded by uniformed men and engaged in a passionate delivery, suddenly, a white dove landed on his shoulders. To many Cubans, followers of afro-cuban religious practices, the fact that a white dove had landed on Fidel’s shoulders meant a divine seal of approval, a new mystical act of recognition and validation of the new national leader. Santiago, F., “Artist’s work lets Cuban speak out in Havana for freedom”, *Miami Herald*, 2009, available at http://www.taniabrugueracom/cms/217-0-Artists+work+lets+Cubans+speak+out+in+Havana+for+freedom.htm, accessed June 1st 2012.
64 Santiago, 2009.

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Bogotá or Pinto, Roberto, “Ejercicio de Resistencia”. Ed. Galería Soffiantino, Torino, Italy, 2003


Sánchez, Y., *And they gave you the microphones... Havana: Generación Y*, 2009.