
Exhibition Review: *Tania Bruguera: 10,145,915*

Tania Bruguera: 10,145,915: Tate Modern, by Yoli Terziyska. London, UK: October 2, 2018–February 24, 2019.

When this sentence was written, the title of Tania Bruguera's recent exhibition at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall was *10,145,915*. For the duration of the installation, the title changed to reflect the sum of two changing figures: the number of recorded migrants globally plus the number of migrant deaths since the beginning of 2018. The steady increase of that figure was communicated with a stamp pressed on each visitor's hand when they entered a small gallery off the Turbine Hall—the title did not appear in an exhibit's typical places, such as on posters and brochures. It was unclear how frequently the stamp was changed, as the numeric title was dependent on information supplied by the Missing Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The project tracks incidents involving migrants who have died, or have gone missing, in the process of migration toward an international destination. The numbers revealed are publicly available on IOM's online platform.

Apart from the title, the exhibition was formed by three apparent elements: a heat-sensitive floor covering the Turbine Hall, a small "crying room" adjacent to the hall, and a sub-bass noise projected into the two spaces. The museum labels suggested that each element highlighted the necessity for collective action for social change to take place. This sentiment was contradicted by each element's futility—the heat-sensitive floor was meant to reveal an image of a Syrian refugee on the floor when a large enough number of visitors simultaneously interacted with the installation. The intended result was nearly impossible to coordinate because it would take a considerable quantity of bodies to simultaneously touch the floor—a number that Bruguera guessed to be one hundred fifty to two hundred.¹ The "crying room" contained an organic chemical substance that elicited collective crying without an emotional impetus. The eerie sound followed viewers throughout both rooms, but its impact was lost in favor of the immersive components of the heat-sensitive floor and the crying room. If the artist's deliberate intention was to reveal the difficulty, and the necessity, of organizing a community to provoke their profound response, and thus, social change, *10,145,915* was a success.

1. Steven McIntosh, "Tania Bruguera Explains Tate Modern's New Turbine Hall Installation," *BBC News*, October 2, 2018, www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-45708599.



IMAGE 1. Installation view from *10,145,915* (2018–19) by Tania Bruguera at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall; courtesy the artist and Tate Modern; © 2018; photograph by Benedict Johnson.

The museum labels implied that the work had two main layers—the action of the show's visitors for the activation of the artwork, and the action within the organization of the project itself. Bruguera places migration at the center of this artwork. In this adaptation, the artist created a layered and especially complex network of connections relating to her research. Its first underlying layer concerned the exhibition's organization, which presented its audience with a less visible component that materialized in two ways: the temporary renaming of one of Tate's buildings, and the appearance of a manifesto on visitors' devices as they signed into the gallery's WiFi system. The exhibit was organized with the help of Tate Neighbours, a group of twenty-one selected participants who live and work in the same postcode as the gallery (SE1). Bruguera brought them together specifically for this work with the intention of exploring how an institution like Tate Modern can learn from, and adapt to, its local community.

A manifestation of Bruguera's and the community's efforts was the renaming of one of Tate's main buildings, the Boiler House, to the Natalie Bell Building. For the duration of one year it has been renamed after Bell, a local activist who helps the charity SE1 United [Image 1].²

Bell, along with SE1 United's volunteers, assisted Yousef, a Syrian refugee who arrived in London 2011. His story reflects a common narrative—an impoverished immigrant arrives in a world of opportunity, and through grit and the help of their local community, succeeds.

2. Mark Brown, "Migration, Menthol and Body Mass: Tate Modern's New Turbine Hall Commission," *Guardian*, October 1, 2018, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/01/tate-moderns-turbine-hall-turns-spotlight-on-migration-crisis-tania-bruguera.



IMAGE 2. Installation view from *10,145,915* (2018–19) by Tania Bruguera at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall; courtesy the artist and Tate Modern; © 2018; photograph by Benedict Johnson.

Starting off homeless, today Yousef is studying medicine and is working for the National Health Service. Bruguera chose to integrate Yousef's story into her work to reaffirm the value in working together as a community. This idea is explored further in the digital manifesto, written by the members of Tate Neighbours, that urges a culture of collective commitment and solidarity.

The second overarching layer of the show was the visitors' action for the activation of the artwork. This is where a contradiction between the project's stated concept and its outcome became clear. Although each element of the exhibition suggested the importance of communal action, each provoked and frustrated museumgoers. When visitors entered Tate Modern, they encountered a low-frequency sub-bass noise. The hollow sound was felt physically, vibrating in the visitor's body for the duration of their visit. Although the sound followed the visitors throughout the installation and was palpably felt, it receded in the background of the exhibit's two other manifestations: a heat-sensitive floor, and the "crying room."

Hundreds of black, heat-sensitive pads laid across the hall's floor required viewer participation to be activated. When a large number of viewers simultaneously touched the floor with their hands, their feet, or by lying down, their body heat worked to reveal an image [Image 2].

The image was that of Yousef.³ When a visitor walked across the floor, they looked down toward their feet, anticipating that the blackness would begin to metamorphize into his features—labels instructed participants to take their shoes off and expect the image to be exposed when they made contact with the installation. The text on the museum's walls did not specify a particular way of interacting with the floor, leaving the audience to determine how, and for how long, to touch the installation. Between the bass noise and the



IMAGE 3. Installation view from *10,145,915* (2018–19) by Tania Bruguera at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall; courtesy the artist and Tate Modern; © 2018; photograph by Benedict Johnson.

expectation of seeing Yousef’s face, another sense was aroused. The air in the hall had a distinct smell of mint or eucalyptus. The smell intensified as visitors neared the “crying room.”

“This room contains an organic compound that makes you cry,” read a note outside the space’s entrance, located alongside the Turbine Hall. A museum employee stamped each visitor’s hand as they entered the room—a sequence of faint red numbers revealed the exhibition’s current title [Image 3]. The brightly lit room was small and intimate. As each viewer entered, the intense smell immediately irritated their eyes and throat and breathing and seeing became difficult. Some participants’ eyes teared. Some visitors exited quickly, while others stayed to test the limits of their endurance. The artist’s intention with this space was to evoke a sense of “forced empathy” and to make viewers cry, as communicated on the museum labels. Her goal was to make people feel uncomfortable because “life is not comfortable.”³

Each facet of the exhibition symbolized the suffering associated with human migration today. Each had an overarching purpose as a call to collective action. Yet each room of the installation demonstrated the difficulty of effecting change that favors humanity. As mentioned, the floor of the main room required a large number of compliant audience members to simultaneously work together in order to activate the heat-sensitive pads to reveal Yousef’s portrait—one or a few individuals could not make him appear. Coordinating such a large-scale impromptu intervention with a few hundred of Tate’s visitors was impossible because there were no written or verbal indications that the artwork necessitated a large-scale effort for it to “work.” Viewers seeking Yousef’s image touched the floor, expecting that their individual interaction would yield a result, however minor. After several unsuccessful attempts, visitors walked away. Their lack of understanding resulted in them leaving, wondering if the mechanism was faulty [Image 4]. This outcome contradicted the museum’s statement that the work advocates communal effort because it highlighted the near-impossibility of ever having enough people to work together to actually effect change. In turn, the viewers’ inability to activate the image made them as invisible as the Yousef who does not appear. The ineffectiveness of the museum’s visitors could have been the artist’s decision to show how apathy due to lack of information cannot generate change. The audience’s frustration and discomfort could have been Bruguera’s pursuit of a wake-up call.

Signs on the Turbine Hall’s wall stated that the “crying room” was meant to force empathy and break down social barriers to elicit a shared emotional response. Viewers were encouraged to cry together because of global injustice, and bond through their discomfort and tears. Yet, each attendee left the room once their personal physical threshold was reached. Despite being reminded, when stamped at the crying room’s door, of the large volume of people who suffer because of migration, the experience lacked emotional impact. Empathy—a strong, positive driving force that has transformative powers—was trumped by visitors’ own sense of physical discomfort. It is possible that this outcome was, in itself, Bruguera’s implicit statement: society forces people to mourn migrants’ struggles, but this mourning typically lacks emotional substance and is frequently ineffective [Image 5]. The stamped number was forgotten. Forging

3. Adrian Searle, “Tania Bruguera at Turbine Hall Review—‘It Didn’t Make Me Cry but It Cleared the Tubes,’” *Guardian*, October 1, 2018, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/01/tania-bruguera-turbine-hall-review-tate-modern.



IMAGE 4. Installation view from *10,145,915* (2018–19) by Tania Bruguera at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall; courtesy the artist and Tate Modern; © 2018; photograph by Benedict Johnson.



IMAGE 5. Installation view from *10,145,915* (2018–19) by Tania Bruguera at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall; courtesy the artist and Tate Modern; © 2018; photograph by Benedict Johnson.

a connection with other participants was impossible while focusing on one's own inability to breathe. Collective empathy failed because each individual was preoccupied with their personal well-being. The permeating bass-noise was symbolic of the persistent, disquieting presence of the issues the artist addresses. Yet, it was easily forgotten while visitors tried to reveal Yousef, or while they gasped for air and rubbed their stinging eyes.

Viewers were led to understand their inability to activate the work, or to want to escape a room that causes distress. The project has the capacity to drive them away while addressing a critical message advocating collective agency. Migrants are suffering, yet they are invisible. We can make a difference, if we come together as a community and make an effort. Why punish individual viewers, then, rather than include them in the growth of this project? The “crying room” could act as a poignant reminder of the peaceful march at the US and Mexico border on November 25, 2018, that escalated to US Customs and Border Protection agency officials tear-gassing hundreds of Central American migrants walking from Tijuana toward the San Diego border.⁴ Their experience of assault and forced tears might have resonated with visitors’ experience in the crying room as museumgoers were made to feel migrants’ physical distress. Although Bruguera’s room did not evoke tears of empathy, her work’s participants were made to physically experience migrants’ plight. Consequently, the room could elicit viewers’ more profound understanding, which is seldom realized when one is in the position of a passive observer.

Bruguera’s project appeared to highlight the depoliticized stance institutions typically assume, and to criticize citizens’ lack of empathy and action. She actively tries to challenge this with her artistic practice, including with *10,145,915*. She conceived the term “arte útil,” or in direct translation from Spanish, “useful art.” Its goal is to make art functional, and use it as an immediate tool for social change. Political art usually signals problems and suggests their solutions—Bruguera’s aim was to infiltrate traditional institutions with projects that create actual change. In her 2012 project shown at Tate Modern, *Immigrant Movement International*, the artist sought to address concerns about immigrants’ political representation and living conditions. The ongoing project’s headquarters in Queens, New York City, engages in activities like educational programming, symposiums, and workshops, and has established affiliations for collective action globally. Bruguera’s “arte útil” has raised public awareness concerning some of the world’s most vulnerable populations. The objective of *10,145,915* is similar—to highlight the invisible actors in London’s community. While Bruguera worked with Tate Neighbours for the production of actual change, her project also forced museumgoers out of apathy’s comfort by raising awareness.

As *10,145,915* showed in London, Bruguera was arrested in Cuba on December 3, 2018, in protesting a new proposed law titled Decree 349. The law intends to place heavy restrictions on artistic freedom and the commercialization of artwork in the country. As of December 6, 2018, the latest news was that Bruguera had begun a hunger strike in objection to government censorship.⁵ ■

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4. Maya Averbuch and Elisabeth Malkin, “Migrants in Tijuana Run to U.S. Border, but Fall Back in Face of Tear Gas,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/25/world/americas/tijuana-mexico-border.html.

5. “Tania Bruguera Arrested Twice in Cuban Censorship Law Protests; Threatens to Go on Hunger Strike,” *Frieze News*, December 4, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/tania-bruguera-arrested-twice-cuban-censorship-law-protests-threatens-go-hunger-strike>.