Illustration 12.1. Homage to Ana Mendieta

This happened almost as a premonition of what would come next, when many of those who had known her changed their status with regard to Cuba, when it was our turn to lose friends, relatives, and partners in the later "disappearances." Ana had tried to ignore her "non-existent" condition. She and her exile became the metaphor for the defining conflict of my generation: Can you belong without being there? The questions I asked myself in order to understand Ana, I could later ask about each new person who left.

I realized that the most important thing was to rescue Ana from oblivion, not only because of what she represented, but also because of the way she understood how to make Cuban art, to recover its essence. The artwork I wanted to make through Ana's

artwork was more a cultural gesture than a manufacturing of objects. The object was the point of reference. I was just the archaeologist, the medium. The action was to incorporate her, to make her part of the cultural context, of the reference. It was to give her a time and a place within Cuba, within Cuban art. And what better way to do that than through her artwork? What better homage than to recognize that this was also a way of representing us? What better way to continue the Dialog?

Memory of the Postwar Period

In 1993 the average address book came to have only a few names and phone numbers that could still be read among all the crossed-out lines. Starting over, getting to know new people, getting involved again: How long could this go on?

Trying not to erase old memories, which by then were more idealized, of course, I discovered that the legacy of the artists who had left now belonged almost exclusively to the realm of memory and oral history. There were very few tangible signs of what they had done.

Since this was the medium—which no longer existed for those people who had left—in which I trained as an artist, I wished to comment on my new landscape in the manner that those artists who had left had done with theirs when they lived in Cuba. I wished to recover a certain time, a certain atmosphere, and to test whether it was still possible to use certain themes that they had used in their artworks. I reedited their icons, their strategies: the flags, the performances, the discussions, the interchange, the island, the politics, the defiance, the social commentary.

I remember that in art history classes at school the social panorama of past eras was taught through artists' works. Teachers tried to explain those artworks as a reaction in some sense to what was happening around the artists, a point of reference, a commentary on their lives. In the Cuban history classes, repeated year after year with little variation, they spoke to us—some with

more, some with less passion—about the privilege of living and participating in a historical moment. They made us conscious of the benefits we enjoyed thanks to the heroism of others.

I thought I could assume the post of artist as witness who would leave a record of the social upheavals of the era. I wanted to try to put to the test the theory of art as agent of change of reality.

The name of this series of works is Memory of the Postwar Period. I used postwar as a metaphor of the circumstances within Cuban art after the wave of emigration of artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an emigration that left among the artists in Cuba a confused sensation of being mistaken; I used postwar as metaphor for the results of a "war" between art and power that had, for the moment, finished its most frontal phase; and I used postwar as a metaphor for the similarity at the physical level of the city, for people's inner lives, for the new social role of art.

Memory, not to forget continuity.

The artworks that make up this series became a personal, intimate collective experience, because although each of us has had to personally resolve the conflicts it depicts at a personal level at some time, they also represent conflicts we experienced in common.

Memory of the Postwar Period is also the name of one artwork that synthesizes the idea of this series. It is the point that holds together the need to think of culture as a collective occurrence and of art as a gesture. It appears as a newspaper, because one can see in it a testimonial space that presents notes rather than theses in its commentaries; because it is a point of reference for opinions; because of its assembled character; and because of the immediacy of its need for self-expression. Even though by the time we read it, a newspaper's way of framing things, of responding to them, of explaining them may not be the same, it continues to have historical value that resides in the possibility it gives us to know what was being thought at a given time and place and to find out what had happened from the voice of a witness.

The strategy of this artwork lies in its mimetic force, its existence on the borders of its own illusions, its virtual coherence in its way of appearing and circulating, the confusion, the gesturality, its role, the desire not to lose the testimony while a moment was being crystallized.

This artwork was assembled on two occasions, each time with a central theme. The first was the postwar period as symbolic condition of the situation within art; the second, on emigration. I tried to begin a discussion and leave a record about matters that I felt were at that moment blurred in public opinion at the same time that they were themes or places of coincidence in the investigations of various artists or theorists. The collaborators were artists, critics, curators, researchers, gallery owners, art students—

Illustration 12.2. Studio work for series Memory of the Postwar Period

generally, everyone who took part in the world of the production or circulation of art.

This artwork owes a debt to its place of origin, Cuba, and to the moment that it lived within Cuban culture. One of its main objectives was not to exclude anyone from either side of the sea, but rather to be a bridge, a neutral space for coming together.

The Trip

The Trip is an artwork that is like a ritual. Every element that formed part of my past and every object that contained the memories of times past were broken and packed into brown paper bags, and the bags tied with ropes of twine by which they could be held if one wanted to carry them, as one carries what one lives.

Within the bags were maps that helped me find certain ethical roads that I followed, or that turned out to be false: books that led me to other places; drawings that had accumulated; clothes; debris from my house in construction, trash from the very exhibition in which the artwork was being shown.

Illustration 12.3. The Trip

One of the most important elements was the correspondence I had kept up for almost twenty months with the man who had been, up to then, my companion of six years. He had decided to take a trip to Mexico, and the trip back kept being delayed as he asked for new exit permits and new visas and then repeating the permit requests, until the meaning of his presence in that place began to change. We gradually came to understand that he had emigrated, one more who had decided that this was the chosen way to resolve certain conflicts, part of a feverish joint aspiration in which, possibly, all of us took part.

The first exhibition at which I showed this artwork tried to analyze the different ways of resolving both the social situation and the artistic position through various personal moments. This artwork was placed at the end of the line, next to the door, ready to be taken as hand luggage or to be seen as an accumulation of memories that has been taken out or that is already in that strange dimension of belonging outside of ourselves. It is an artwork that tries to capture an instant, to freeze an action.

Later, I began to see the relation between what had happened to me and many other people's stories: friends who had used letters as a means of communication and people who had left in one way or another forever and who needed to perform a similar ritual, although under other, more insurmountable pressures, such as having to leave the country where they were born and having to pay for it with acts of renunciation of what they had been.

That was when I decided that the next time it was exhibited, I would change its condition of accumulation for that of the island of Cuba. It would be a metaphor for the island built through the act of renunciation, the renunciation by others of its past, of its future. It was a metaphor for the price of an island made from the memories of so many lives lived and packed away for the time when they could come back to pick them up. My memories were transformed into a simile for the memories of those who had left the country. The gesture I had made, my personal experience, had gained a new dimension. Just as they had taught us in school, our past life came

to form part of a process, a collective development; each one of us contained the concept; each one of us was the country.

Life Raft

The Life Raft is a project (as it can only aspire to a work of art), a monument to those who have died trying to get to the other side. It is a funerary artwork: Black marble is used for the lifesaving planks; their size represents the average height of a person in Cuba, 1.65 meters [or 5 feet 5 inches]. Between each slab of marble, a timber forms a line that suggests half the structure of a boat. The image can only be completed when this skeleton is united with its reflection in the marble. Between each plank is cotton for caulking so the boat will not sink; it is a healing element, a sign of salvation. All this is in a repeating structure, suggesting an unpredictable finitude, anonymous, incapable of naming any of those who form this space, becoming a monument to silence.

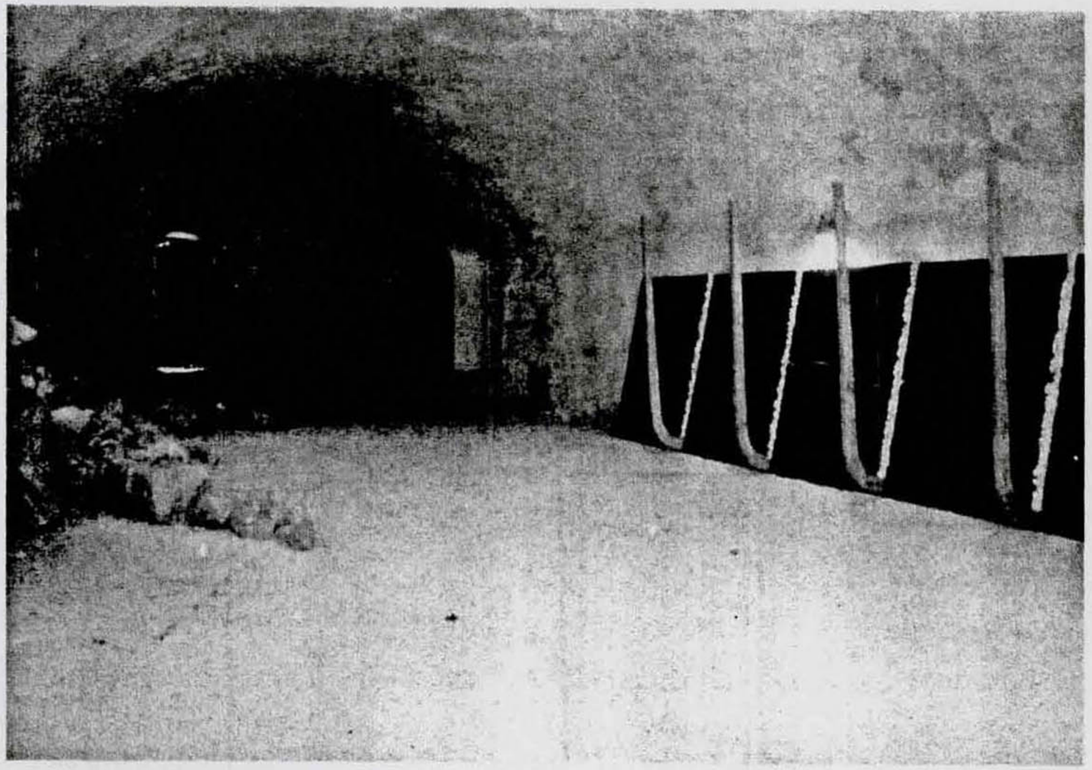

Illustration 12.4. Life Raft

Fear

Fear was an obsessive act in which I first drew near the island (The Trip) and picked up one of the bags. I took out the cotton and held it while walking toward the monument (Life Raft). I began using the cotton over and over to caulk the planks of that "boat," with the hope of thus "avoiding" capsizing. The cotton was a symbol of the desire to absolve all the pain so that it would disappear, so as to avoid it. After determining my frustrated intention, I went toward a boat, broken and laden with the history of its own uselessness, docked in a shipyard. I put into it the rest of the cotton from the bag, a bottle, and my body.

It was a trip without point of departure or point of arrival, which was death, just as it was a dream. My action was an offering, just as it was a desperate solution.

Statistic

Statistic is a funerary flag. The idea originally took shape as a wall on which I would place, like the marks that prisoners make in their cells, hair from anonymous Cubans, grouped into small locks and tied with thread. Later, trying to make a direct reference to Cuba, I drew on one of the motifs used by Cuban artists, particularly those of the 1980s generation: the flag.

The base is black fabric. On one side, the hair, tied together with red, white, and olive-green threads, substitutes for the real colors of the flag. On the other side, the black thread with which the hair is sewn to the fabric shows, black on black, the flag's pattern. It becomes one of those banners that are placed outside a house to indicate mourning.

I used hair because it is an element that in Cuban culture, as in almost every culture, is considered the place where all the energy, all the force of thought of a person concentrates. This is why, in the Afro-Cuban religion, the hair is one of the parts of the living body that is most often used for controlling someone's "head,"

Illustration 12.5. Statistic

their thoughts, their decisions. In this case, tying them down is done literally, with the threads.

This is an artwork with the force of ritual, which moves from the action of looking for the hair and rolling it up to sitting down every day for months to sew the Cuban flag, as in the colonial era. In that era the women of the household would gather or they would go to another patriot's house, and they would sit down to sew this same flag, which at the time was not the national emblem but a standard of revolutionary and independent ideas. It was an act of conspiracy and solidarity. It helped them to feel useful while the men were at war.

During the nearly four months that we were making this work, each time some friend came to visit the house, my assistant, Peria, and I would give them a needle and we would explain to them the idea behind the work and what had to be done. We talked about everything.

This flag has another part, which is made from the perspective of those Cubans who live outside Cuba.

Head Down

Head Down takes its name from a poem and the title of a book by the Cuban poet, Carlos A. Alfonso. It was first exhibited at the alternative gallery, Espacio Aglutinador, in Havana.

A trench separates the public from the space where the performance unfolds. The floor is carpeted with artists, critics, art and art history students, people of the world of art. As in other artworks, the audience at whom the work is directed is part of it, the subject of study, of analysis, of discussion.

Everyone is sprawled on the floor, face down, on his or her sides, every which way, on top of each other. The only person not in this position stands waiting patiently next to some flags. Personal and sexual traits scarcely exist, eliminated by a coating of flour. From the back, emerging from the imitation lamb's wool vestment and raising up over the person's head, is a banner, a banner just like the ones that lay about on the floor. It is incorporated, like those banners of the Japanese samurai, who put on flags according to the new lords for whom they have to fight and conquer and defend territories.

The background music begins. It is played by the experimental sound group from ICAIC, the Cuban Cinematic Arts and Industry Institute, and the songs are of the Cuban Nueva Trova movement, symbols of the new revolutionary ethics.

The principal character takes a flag and begins to walk over the bodies sprawled on the floor. She stops, stoops to get closer to the bodies, to one in particular; she ties on a ribbon of the same color as the flags, takes a banner just like the one she carries on her back,

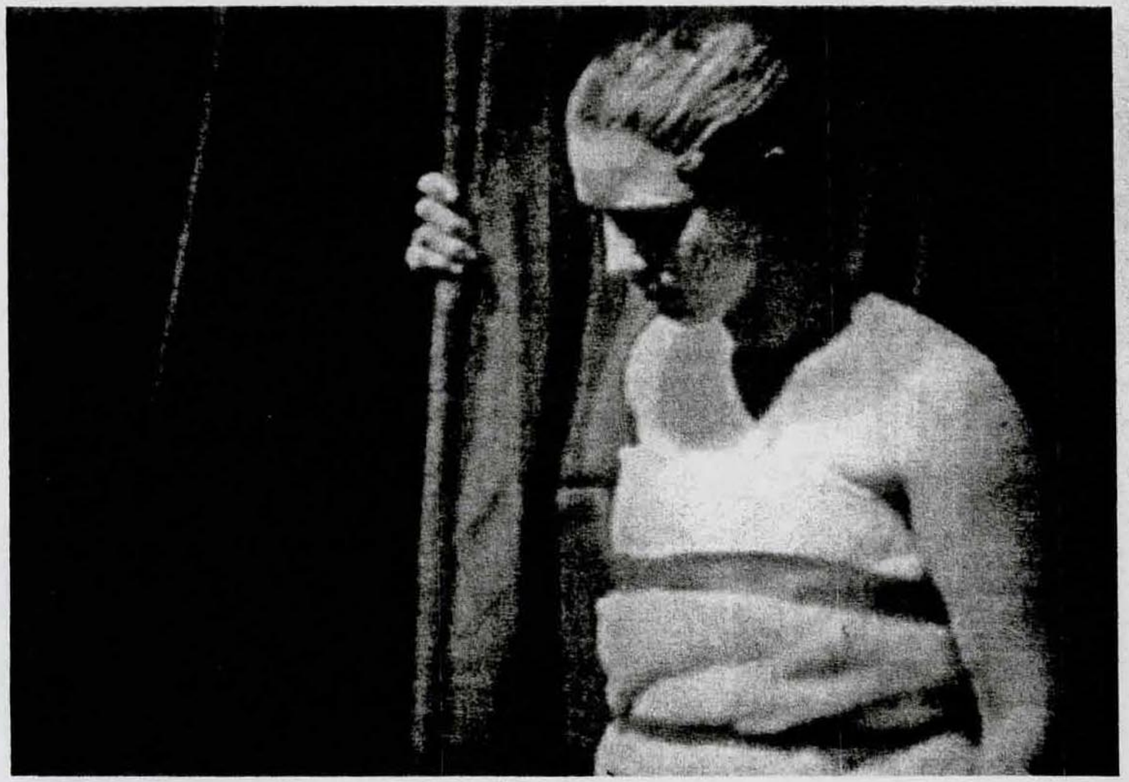

Illustration 12.6. Head Down

and keeps walking on top of these people. She stops, stoops to reach one of the bodies, and ties on a ribbon that is clearly a piece of the flag, using it to cover the mouth. She rises, drives in the symbol of her triumph—a flag, which the body stretched on the ground has to hold up. She marks her own body by tying a ribbon onto it, too, as a trophy after the victorious action. These actions are repeated: tying up the eyes, the hands, the ears, the mouths, the feet of the others, always leaving her triumphal banner and marking her body with a ribbon.

The "conquered territories" then begin to modify the landscape. There are two views, one in which the spectator can see from above all that has been described and another in which the public sees only a phantasmagoric character, who walks around creating a setting of red flags until at last she breaks through the encirclement formed by the trench. With flags and ribbons in hand, the character advances, beginning to perform the same action on those bodies who are watching the performance, on the public itself. She disappears.

The people who were strewn about the floor slowly begin to rise, throw off the flags and ribbons, and abandon the set.

Daedalus, or Empire of Salvation

When I left Cuba for the first time, I was an adult, and I went to England on a two-month fellowship. They gave me a study and a space for exhibiting the results of what I created there. Like any other artist under these conditions, I was drawn to the museums. I soon found myself looking at works of art that I had never dreamed of seeing in the original. In my delirium I remembered my friends, my students, my family—with all of them I had used many of the pieces I was now looking at as references, as objects of study, as comparisons, as commentaries, as points of departure.

Specifically, I recalled a student who at that time was creating art full of references to Brueghel the elder, and there I was, standing in front of the piece on which he was basing his work. I felt a kind of impotence, thinking that the student was the one who should be there, getting so much more benefit out of it for his own work, growing before these other pieces. I began to wish that he was there, and then I wished that another of my students could be there. I recalled many people I wished could be there with me, who could have had that opportunity.

Then I created flying devices—for leaving Cuba. I began to enumerate the possible ways of getting out. Each one became a device, each one an attempt.

Icarus had been a reference in an earlier work. Thinking of all the nuances of this mythical symbol, I remembered that in an exhibition in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, an artist had based a piece on this figure in the 1980s, before the artists of his generation had decided to emigrate definitively. Icarus fell onto a surface of broken mirrors (broken at the moment of impact?) in this artist's installation. I remembered how appropriate the symbol was for representing what was happening back then, but those

mirrors no longer reflected the way we—the artists living in Cuba and those who later emerged—now assume the act of leaving Cuba.

Searching for the roots of the myth, Icarus appeared next to the inventor of the wings, Daedalus. They were father and son. Both were trapped on an island, prisoners of their own movements, of their former loyalties, inside the labyrinth that Daedalus himself had constructed for the same King who now condemned them to be devoured by the Minotaur like any other enemy. With help, they managed to escape their own prison. They reached the shores of the island, but there was no other way out but the infinite, impossible sea. Daedalus, the inventor, used all his talents, all his knowledge, all his tricks to flee. He built wings for the two of them, warning his son about approaching too closely to the sun. The warning was a metaphor for the attitude with which one should assume this action. Icarus died because of his youthful and inexperienced anxiety. Daedalus, with more experience, watched painfully as his son fell and was lost. His attitude allowed him to continue, with this image of warning, to the shores of other kingdoms.

The image of Icarus was transformed in line with the way many had had to burn their own ships to be able to leave Cuba. Daedalus, who learned the lesson, who kept his distance, who recognized his advantages and his limitations, created his own means of escape. Just like him we have learned how to assume the risk of leaving Cuba by another means.

Each of the pieces that make up this series shows a way of constructing the possibility of leaving Cuba. This is only discovered when the device, which has been hung on the wall, camouflaged like one more part of the landscape, reveals its purpose when someone decides to put it on, when someone "activates" it by putting it on. The way the device has to be held, how the body has to mimic its motions, is how one discovers how to escape from the labyrinth and how to choose the actions that can make it possible for us to adopt a position of departure.

The devices are made from discarded material, found objects. In Cuba nothing is thrown away, everything becomes prime material for fixing something else that is broken. I wanted to adopt the attitude of the National Movement of Inventors. They are in charge of fixing up old and almost unusable machinery with whatever is at hand by substituting mechanisms and pieces from other machines. I thought of my character as part of this association. These devices would be the prototypes for mass production and would be distributed to all Cubans to be used for leaving Cuba.

A few examples:

- Absolution is made with leaves of the royal palm, the symbol of Cuba. It opens up with the person who carries it, folds, bends, worships.
- Illusion is a transformed bicycle, covered in parts with paper. When it is carried, the body takes the position of closed fists

Illustration 12.7. Daedalus, or Empire of Salvation #1

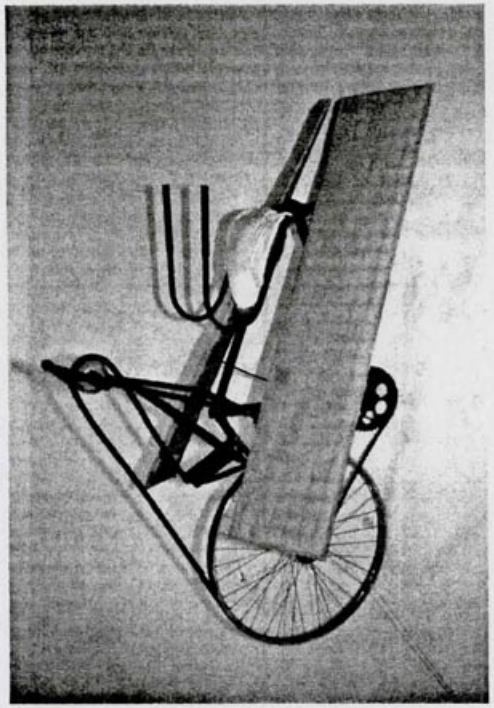

Illustration 12.8. Daedalus, or Empire of Salvation #2

held high. The weight of the steel is the symbolic equivalent of the burden of undertaking such a decision.

Another device is a corset of metallic cloth in which we put the body. It only begins to move when another person, who has put on the gloves connected to the figure, moves his or her fingers and begins to move the strings of power.

These are artworks in which a certain fragility coexists with weightiness to speak of the condition of leaving Cuba.

Art in America (The Dream)

In 1997, I was selected along with four other artists, for a two-month resident fellowship in the United States. Each of us went

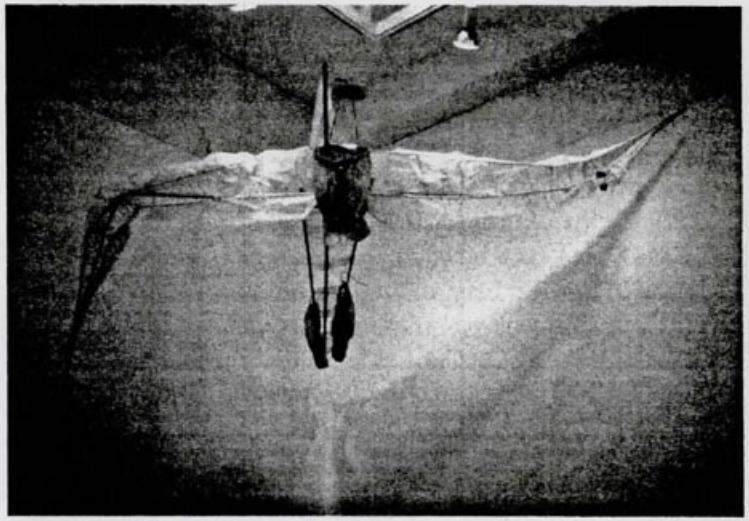

Illustration 12.9. Daedalus, or Empire of Salvation #3

to a different city. Mine was Chicago. The myths among artists about being in the United States, of exhibiting there—and this is not exclusive to Cubans—is a whole history of well-founded ideas, of prejudices, of predispositions, and of false beliefs, all of which made me think of the title of this piece.

When I arrived at the School of the Art Institute, among other things they recited to me was a list of people that I would supposedly know, because they are connected to art. Among the names I recognized was Nereida García-Ferraz, a person I had tried to meet, because I remembered her as one of the makers of a documentary film about Ana Mendieta that had greatly impressed me and had been one of the reasons propelling me to make the piece on Ana.

I called her that very afternoon and went to see her. Kaky Mendieta was there, Ana's cousin, who had given me vital facts about Ana for my work. We spent the whole time talking about Cuba while we ate, about the Cuba she had left three years earlier, about the Cuba I had just come from, about the Cuba where we once lived, in our memories; they were all the same, all different.

They began introducing me to the people who formed part of their community, which, like all communities, is particular to its own circumstances. It was rather like a kind of circle, like a trip that begins and ends at the same point. I was with people who were family and friends of Ana Mendieta, friends who shared parts of her everyday life, her achievements, her final moments.

This was the first time I had lived inside a Cuban community in the United States. I saw how it really functioned, how it did and did not fit the myths that exist about such communities. For the first time my work on emigration changed its reference point; now it was not about the loss in Cuba, it was about the loss of Cuba.

This coincided with a tour I made of the city with some friends so that I might appreciate some of the local architecture as well as some of the more interesting, if lesser known, sights. At one point they explained that the city was multilayered, with different levels along the lake shore and beyond that served a multitude of purposes, both planned and unplanned.

On one of those levels, there is a road that goes underground and winds around the very foundations of the city. Along that road there is a submerged city, a place where human beings take refuge from the cold. The people who live there along the margins and without walls are homeless.

I became fascinated with this notion of a city within a city: on the top, visible; on the bottom, free of the problems of weather but invisible to the traffic whizzing by, a landscape of bedding in which the chairs, rather than places of rest, serve as watch posts next to cardboard boxes that give the illusion of living rooms, bedrooms—in short, a home.

I was especially impressed by the similarities between homeless and immigrant groups in the way, in order to protect themselves, they create trenches around the communities they build, devising their own "safe" spaces in which they maintain their own language, traditions, culture, and ways of being from past lives. These communities also function as a city within the city, as a city under the city.

In Cuba, as in most countries, the housing situation is one of the most oppressive problems, although for the moment at least there are no homeless people, either as individuals or as a social group. So Lower Wacker seemed a different world to me, but as I began to spend time there, the name given to the people of Lower Wacker—homeless—echoed for me the literal translation of the Spanish word *patria*, homeland. The relationship between these concepts of home and land to define a concept rendered more abstractly in other languages created a connection for me between the homeless and the homeland. Immigrants, like the homeless on Lower Wacker, lack a home on their own land.

As I began to think about the two groups, I realized there were other connections between their situations. Both communities have to convert their nomadic existences into a way of life. Both suffer from a certain loss of citizenship: the homeless, because they exist in a kind of no-man's-land, and the immigrants—to my thinking, Cuban immigrants in particular—because by leaving they abdicated their right to return and thus became a kind of pariah.

The harsh conditions of survival experienced by those who leave their homeland are often comparable to those experienced by people who lose their jobs, are thrown out of their homes, or suffer discrimination by the larger society. Both groups suffer from internal strife, sudden change, the need to assimilate quickly to new conditions, and the nearly fatal knowledge that it is practically impossible to change their situation. Both groups must also contend with an overwhelming bureaucracy that is often indifferent if not also inefficient.

The loneliness of both immigrants and the homeless when they arrive in a new place and have to re-establish themselves is also quite similar. Both must develop new skills, if for no other reason than they are both out of their natural habitats. Their destinies are no longer of their own making, their rights are few and mostly unknown to them. Immigrants, even when they accomplish the immediate goals of their journey, maintain, like the homeless, a certain sense of not belonging, of Other-ness.

Nostalgia is another point of commonality. The homeless yearn for a time when they had a home, a job, a family; the immigrant longs for a time, held in memory, that was always better. The impossibility of returning to the past serves as a kind of stigma for both groups. The struggle to return to the former way of life, both abstractly and concretely, begins to form their new way of life. Of course, not all Cubans emigrate for the same reasons, just as not all homeless people arrive at their condition for the same reasons. But both groups suffer oppressive social discrimination and at best are the objects of pity from those above.

Up to this point, my work had dealt with immigration from the perspective of someone living in Cuba and contending with its immediate effects on life there. I have now tried to approach the subject form a different perspective, taking into account the immigrant's own context and losses. There was much more to be explored and learned here, but this was at least a beginning.

In a performance I did, the participants included Ricardo Fernández, Nereida García-Ferraz, Raquel Mendieta, Achy Obejas, Alejandra Piers-Torres, Paola Piers-Torres, and Nena Torres. The majority of them are Cuban immigrants who left the island under different circumstances at different times. The piece was performed on a dark set with only a few yellow lights, in an effort to simulate the tunnel where the homeless live. There were several characters. To enter you had to pass a table where a person with a strict and official air asked you to leave a piece of identification in order to pass, as is done for legal transactions. It was explained that this was a necessary condition for proceeding. It was important that this function as a symbolic dispossession of the persons we all are or think we are, because of what we do socially, such as not letting certain things be seen.

Another character was set to moving cardboard boxes, named for parts of a house, which kept changing places and kept being made to serve in lieu of a real house. Every time he finished making his new dwelling he had once more to move it all to another place, endlessly. This action, beyond representing the instability of

the immigrant's condition, was a metaphor for the constant search for the lost home.

In another corner a small girl stood with two women who read cards by the light of a candle, which as offering and as illumination let them see the future of passersby. The girl begged for food with a poster. The women were trying to collect money with the only thing they had managed to bring with them to this place where they now stayed, their only fortune, their spirituality, their traditions. The cards were read in Spanish by one woman and translated by the other into English; this was a metaphor for the effort that has to be made to understand other cultures, and to try to preserve one's own, which is our only shield.

To leave at the end, when your identification was returned, you had to pass through a process similar to that of the emigrants when they apply for citizenship in their country of residence. The same questions were asked as in the examination for U.S. citizenship. In many cases the audience, who were mainly U.S. citizens, gave the same answers and the same reactions that a real immigrant would give in the real process. People felt the same need to recover their own identity, the same compulsion to finish and leave without having to worry any more about this torturous situation. This is a work in progress.

I have returned to the United States for four months, and although there is a tremendous difference between what I am going through and the real life of an immigrant, I am having some similar experiences that help me understand personally some of the emotional and practical events that those who have to adapt after emigrating must go through.

Just as Ana wanted to return, conscientiously, to discover a part of her history that was not entirely accessible to her, and took her body as the measure of the world, so have I turned this stay abroad, this process, into a way of entering the life dynamics of a Cuban leaving Cuba; and I have taken my situation as a reference point, searching from the personal for a more complete vision and being more ready to understand Cubans as we are, in two parts.