

Art in America (The Dream)

A conversation with Tania Bruguera

Johannes Birringer.

In early 1997 Art in General/the Bronx Council on the Arts in New York realized a remarkable project by bringing a group of the newest generation of performance and visual artists from Cuba to the USA and enabling them to work in residence at various art spaces around the country. Along with her colleagues Abel Barroso, Sandra Ceballos, Juan Antonio Molina, Manuel Piña, and Lázaro Saveedra, the 28-year-old Tania Bruguera had the opportunity to travel to the USA for the first time and to work for several months as a guest of the Art Institute of Chicago. The political goal of the hosts for the project was clear: to create a free exchange of artistic and intellectual ideas in the face of almost 40 years of an economic and ideological blockade against communist Cuba, and thus to open up an alternative space for communication about cultures and identities in a conflicted transnational situation. The residencies and ensuing exhibitions created by the guests were also to involve grassroots dialogue and community involvement, and thus find their place outside the commercial sphere of the market.

Increasingly well known in Cuba's dwindling art community for her daring performance actions during the 1995 Bienal in Havana as well as for her editorial spearheading of the collective journal *Memoria de la postguerra* (censored by the government in late 1994), Bruguera has struck a raw nerve with her rigorous embodiment of the Cuban people's literal suffocation and entrapment on an island condemned to suffer its isolation. A conceptual artist with an emphatic sensibility towards physical materials and what I would call the plasticity of poetry, Bruguera has recently constructed a series of haunting contraptions that depict awkward yet beautiful self-propelling flying machines. She hangs them on walls, and during the 1996 Bienal de Sao Paulo she hung herself up on a wall under the ceiling. Unable to fly away and yet driven by a constant desire to invent imaginative machines and metaphors of transcendence, Bruguera is conscious of the paradoxes of colonialism and migration, political restriction and aesthetic licence. Her live performances exude a hopeful and bitter sense of the human spirit needing refuge from despair, insisting on a crafty tinkering with limited resources. When in one action she tried for many hours to repair a hopelessly broken-down boat and eventually lay down in it to embody the pejorative term 'boat people' (*balseros*), the performance took on a fierce symbolic crescendo, full of resonances of the particular disempowerment of women under the political and ideological constellation of a Cold War that never ended for the Cubans.

How, then, does one make 'art in America', she asked herself, arriving on the other shore and dreaming the role of a guest who is neither emigrant nor immigrant but a transient visitor to the promised land of milk and honey, the open market. While the cynical role of the USA as benevolent oppressor is obvious, the postcolonial cultural relations between the Cubans on the island and the Cubans within the USA are not. Many bridges may have been burned, but memories of underdevelopment linger and blind resentment against the revolution thrives among the privileged refugees who 'made it' and assimilated. From the perspective of America latina, 'our América' encompasses a different vision of the hemisphere and its colonial legacies, while the fiction of the USA as the cradle of

democracy and freedom is particularly hollow for many destitute and broken families washed ashore. The *balseros* are now treated as parasites that need to be fished out of the water and shipped back. The break-up of families and the contorted evolution of the unreconciled Cuban cultural community, on the island and in the 'diaspora', underlies Bruguera's thinking about *immigration* and *homelessness* – the themes that became her work-in-progress installation *Art in America (The Dream)* performed at Gallery Two, Chicago in March 1997.

After encountering on her way to work the many poor, homeless American people (mostly black Americans) camping out on the streets and under the bridges of downtown Chicago, in the severe winter cold, Bruguera dropped her plan to make art in 'America'. Instead, she staged a subtly perverse scenario for the visitors of her installation: after relinquishing our ID cards, we had to 'enter' a dark, cell-like space where we met a disorienting procedure, moving uncertainly between the soothing prophecies of two women reading our future in a deck of cards, and the harsh interrogation of several other women acting as Immigration & Naturalisation Service officers. A flashlight was shoved in my face, and I had to cite the Bill of Rights and sing the anthem. Needless to say, I failed. Bruguera's darkroom became a strange para-site, a threshold of intimations of a violence we barely acknowledge to ourselves as we believe blindly in our right to cross borders. If we forget, we may be put on hold, captives of a system of regulations and of our own misconceptions.

Johannes Birringer: Could you speak about your life and evolution as an artist in Cuba?

Tania Bruguera: I think I am strongly influenced by the work of a Cuban artist – the late Elso Padilla. My work is influenced by his work not because of the way it is seen, but because of the way art is conceived. He was my teacher, and I took from him the idea that art had to be completely linked with life – and not a fiction or a virtual reality, but as alive as possible. My art has to have a real function for myself, to heal my problems or to help other people to reflect and improve or think about certain subjects.

Did this relationship with this artist take place in the Instituto de Arte Superior?

No. When I was 12 to 15 years old, in high school, I already studied art, and he was my teacher there. His classes were very different, not academic but flexible and open. Afterwards, when I went on studying, I kept going to his house together with a group of friends. We got to know him, we showed him our works. But there is also another Cuban artist, Consuelo Castaneda, who was a teacher of mine in the Instituto and influenced me in the sense of the relationship an artist can have with his or her historical past, including all of art history. One can find in my work combinations of ways in which I always talk about life but remain very conscious of the whole cultural history at the same time, recycling all those influences.

Are you from the 'Volumen 1' generation that created such a furore at their exhibition in 1981, or are you a daughter of the 1990s, a new generation of the 'Special Period' (the period of economic and political crisis declared by the government)?

Well, I always like to see myself as transitional. I don't belong to the Volumen 1 generation. That whole generation were my teachers. All my education and understanding of what art is, of how I would project it to a level of sensibility, all that took place in the 1980s. My work started to be exhibited in 1988, and to get known during the 1990s. But I feel connected to the 1980s in the sense that it interests me to be a bridge. Since that generation left the island, and at a cultural level the trajectory of those artists was lost, I want to try to be a bridge to avoid the hollow existing between these two generations.

Is there communication or bonding between the young Cuban artists in the 'Special Period' and the Cuban artists living outside the country?

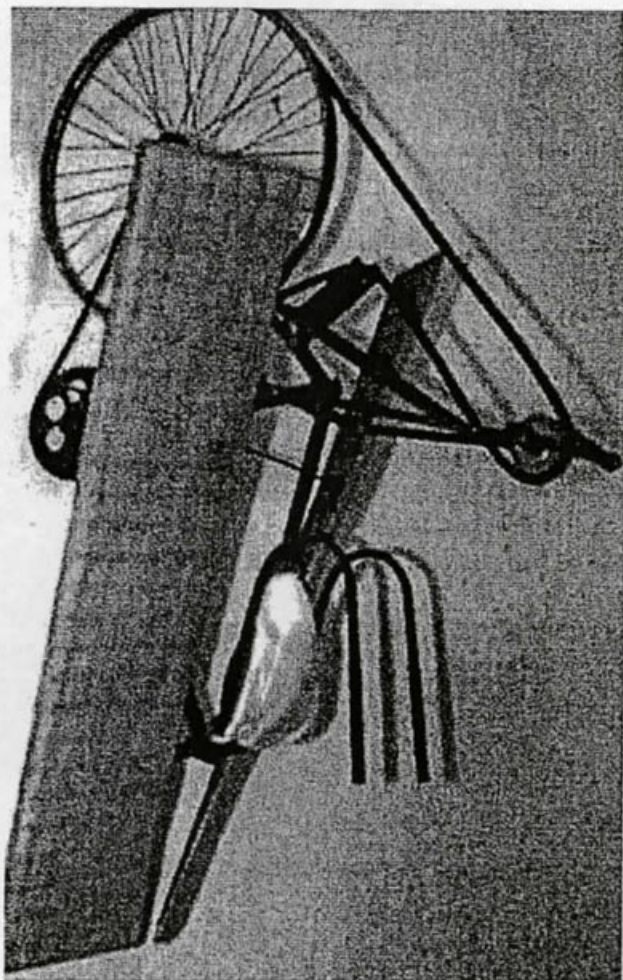
Yes, certainly on the personal level, if not on the level of the official political culture. There is an enforced silence. But the friendships between us continue.

Please speak about your aesthetic and your recent work; for example, your concern about the body as metaphor, the boat, and your *Daedalus* project.

Until now my work has been about emigration. I have been doing different series of works. Each of them has had a different point of view on emigration and the emigrants. The first series I made was a homage to Ana Mendieta. I started to work on it in 1987–8, but the final exhibit took place in 1992. One of the main characteristics in my work is that the investigation process is always a bit longer than the work's conception and production process. That is to say, I can take six or eight months, one or two years, entering the medium, getting to know it, and then maybe later I make the actual work within a week or ten days. In the Ana Mendieta series the idea was to do an homage to her as artist, trying to *relocate*



Absolución, from the series *Dedalo o el imperio de salvación*, installation, 1995. Photo: courtesy of Centro Wilfredo Lam, Havana



Ilusión, from the series *Dedalo o el imperio de salvación*, installation, 1995. Photo: courtesy of Centro Wilfredo Lam, Havana

her within the cultural Cuban context with all her glory, and at the same time it was useful for me to ask myself if the fact of being Cuban was because someone lived in the country or because someone wished to belong to a country as a culture, to a country as way-of-being. To see being-Cuban further than the island itself as a physical place. After that I made a series called *Memoria de la postguerra* which analysed the emigration phenomenon within the human context of all the suffering that exists in leaving a country to which you could not return any more, and when you had to cut all the strings tying you to it. Then I also did a piece that

seeing only the object, they were missing the sense of the piece because I was not there. That kind of relation interests me a lot more. Whether it is performance or *acción plástica*, those distinctions are not that important. I believe each piece has its own way of working, of expressing itself. Yes, I think that increasingly the visual arts in the classic sense are not enough for me. But I don't want to hurry up. For example, the boat performance is like an image, my body works as an image, inside and in relationship with that object. Afterwards I have been doing other performances, and most of them are about images. They are me inside the piece, me being part of the piece. I'm now starting to make more actions. In December I made a personal exhibit in La Habana, and the performance was called *Cabeza abajo* (Upside down). I had invited artists and critics to lie down on the floor. I put sack trenches, like in the war, between the audience and the performance: I was rolled up with white stuff in the Japanese style, and on my back I was carrying a red flag, a standard like the ones used by the Japanese to go to war, like the ones used by the samurais representing the feudal lord. I was walking on all these people and was sticking those standards on them. It was like playing with the relationship between artists and power. In a certain way we are like conquered territories, submissive, humble. It was a remark on what is happening in the art world. My work is like a testimony, a comment on the moment. It has been changing according to the changes in the art situation in Cuba.

You are interested in the international artistic exchange with the USA, Europe and Latin America, and you have the possibility to move and exhibit outside your country. How is the relationship with the outside world?

It is fascinating because you have the opportunity to show your work to other people who are not familiar with it. In Cuba everyone already has a reference or knows what I do. What is really interesting to me is being able to show my work in a place where nobody knows you and so you can see the people's reactions, giving you the opportunity to analyse your own work. Seeing what works and what doesn't. That is very important.

Describe your residency a little. This is your first time in Chicago, and the invitation comes from a New York community project, but you will not exhibit there.

'Art in General', a gallery, and the Bronx Council on the Arts, both non-profit spaces, went to Cuba in 1994 with a group of organizers. There they looked at almost all the artists and selected a group they offered a two-month residency in the USA. We are given the opportunity to create a new work from the experiences in this new country. Afterwards we will all meet in New York, which is very interesting, and there is going to be a public round table where everyone will explain what happened, why they did that work, what they experienced. To me it is a privilege to be in this project because I do not believe it has happened many times that five artists have left for the USA together, to do a project of this nature.



Art in America (The Dream). Photo: Jeanine Olson, © Visiting Artists Program, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

And how was the process here?

It was very strange because I came thinking I would do a specific piece, the series with the machines, but when I arrived the reality was much stronger than I thought. The whole problem of the homeless sensitized me a lot. When I was making a little night tour to get to know the city, my host Achy Obejas explained to me the city has different levels, and that there were people living in the underground level, which impressed me a lot and I decided I wanted to go and see that with my own eyes. It had a very strong impact on me, because I have seen homeless people in Mexico, for example, but not like this at a group level, at a level of everyone living there like in another city. There is a whole infrastructured city and way of living as a homeless person. That was an absolute shock to me, and I started to create a relation between homeless and homeland, making a grammatical and phonetic relation between these two words from the point of view of someone who speaks another language, Spanish in my case. All of a sudden I realized emigrants had a very similar situation to that of the homeless. That is to say, they didn't have real space, they were always relegated, marginalized in the society, people would pass beside them without wanting to know anything about them. People pass by and don't look at them. I realized all of a sudden that their destiny was not in their hands any more, they had missed the pass; and always their former life, even if it had been very bad, was better than this one. All these relations inspired me a lot. I could see very clearly the relation between these two groups. It is also part of the subject I have always been working on – the emigration series. To me it was interesting to see it from this point of view here, because I had always seen it from Cuba, but living my daily life with the Cuban community here, eating with them, going to the movies, talking, spending full days together, drove me suddenly to make the work from here, from the perspective of how emigrants feel here, what is happening to them in their new context. Because this phenomenon does not exist in Cuba.

Your performance involves entering an empty, underground installation-space where you and the other women performers are present. The first experience for the audience is at the entrance where our ID cards have to be given up.

It is a test to take away all identity from people. They will have to forget themselves to be able to enter, we are trying to create a metaphor with this, like having to forget one's legitimized personhood to enter a new situation. It also creates tension, a disarrangement which as a matter of fact is what happens to the homeless, because in this sense they do not have an identity, they are not persons, they only belong to a delegitimized group. So I am creating various situations in which these different 'characters' are experienced. There is the homeless who only sleeps, eats, goes out to see what can be done, looks after her space. There is another character with cardboard boxes that symbolize the house, she is building her own space, and at the same time she is moving all the time, which is something that happens to the homeless for they never have something stable, fixed. It is interesting because she is mentioning parts of the house while carrying those boxes, she is creating the relation to things and how they work for her. The scene with the cards and the soothsaying has to do with two things: first of all how does it work arriving in a new country, in a completely foreign culture, and how is the emigrant offering his own as a reaction. That is why the translator is there, I think one has to translate and interpret one's own culture so that one can be understood in this other culture. Secondly, there is the fact that when people leave their country, their destiny is not in their own hands: they cannot decide on their own destiny. Someone else will 'read' them their destiny.

Your prophesying, together with your friend Nereida Garcia-Ferraz huddled beside you smoking Cuban cigars and translating, feels like a séance with a *santera*. You create a very intimate, personal relationship with each individual who comes to you. The séances seem like a religious ritual.

Yes, a real spiritual ritual. When I am throwing the cards I have the water element which is used to refresh the cards, because all the people's energies stay in the cards, and so the water has to be thrown to the cards to refresh them. I put it also on the scruff of my neck, because all the spiritual tension and the energetic charges meet there. One has to throw water on the scruff of the neck, the forehead and the hands to refresh them. There is also the tobacco, an element which is used in those rituals to fend away evil and also to protect. Then there is also the candle, which is about *axé*; this is because in Cuba, when someone reads the cards or does a ritual, you have to pay him with money, otherwise you are taking that spiritual gift or talent away from him. For the spirits, because you cannot pay them with money, you have to say *axé*, or light. You pay them with light because we suppose that they are dead and need light to climb up in their spirituality. This the first piece of a larger project, the beginning. I was struck at a deep personal level by all that is happening with the homeless and with the people leaving Cuba, this heart-rending process through which they try to integrate themselves in another society. I wanted to visualize different parts of that problem. There is the spiritual side, there is the everyday side, and there is the side of the relationship with power. The 'officers' interrogate before giving back the identity to people. They have a list of questions which are the actual INS 'Citizenship Questions' administered by the US Department of Justice to immigrants – we obtained the official paper with the questions required for residency permits, and they are very strong questions. The very first one, by the way, is about membership in a communist party. I asked the actors to take the same aggressive attitude written into the questionnaire, to try to get people to feel very uncomfortable. I am very happy with people's reactions. I think every space created a reaction.

Was it on purpose that all the performers/characters are women?

I was not so interested in the gender, I only wanted them to be Cuban people who live here. The only American, by the way, plays the 'bureaucrat,' but all the others are Cubans living here in the US. That is why we also have the young boy, because it is not a feminist statement, or anything like that.

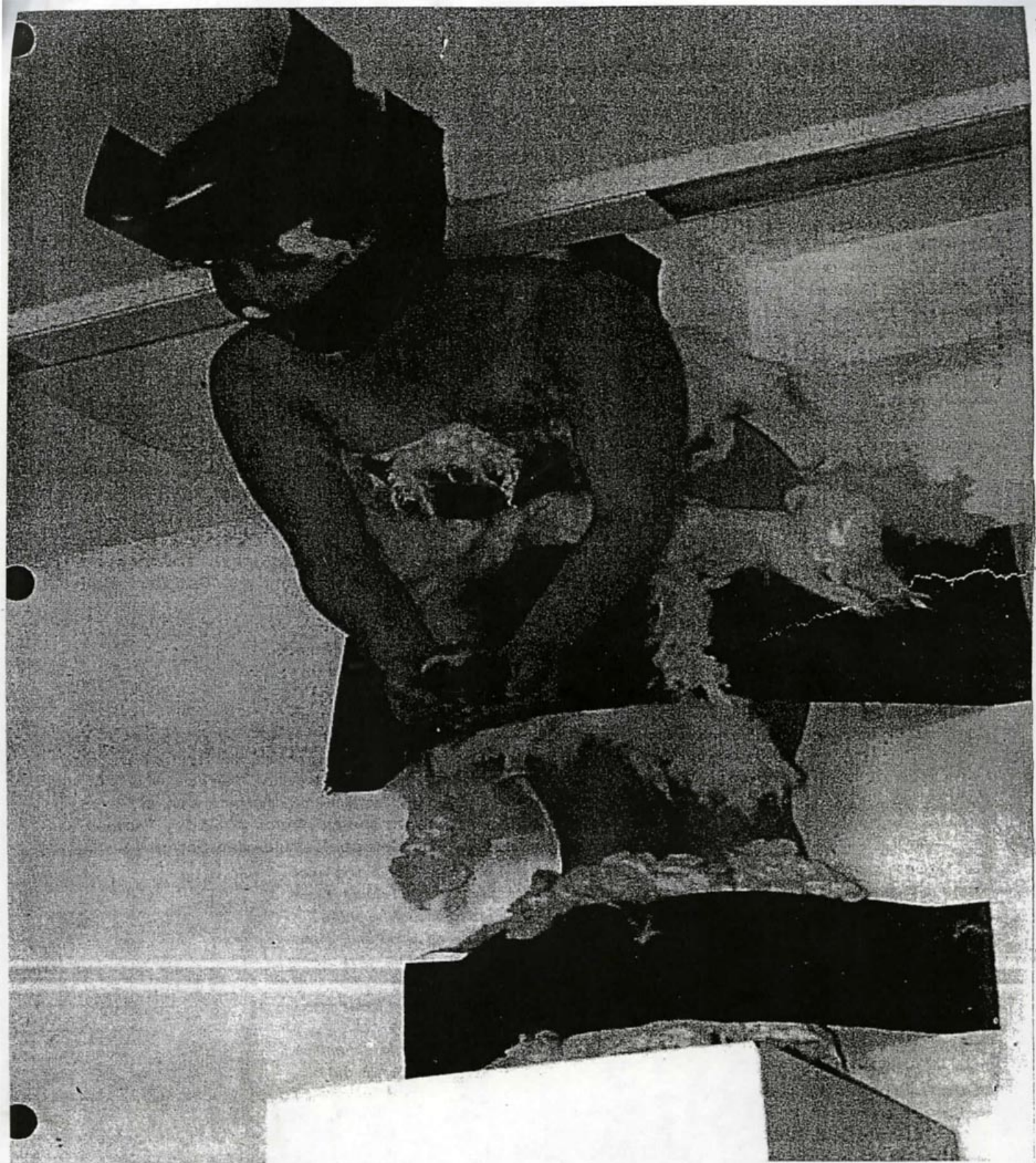
But it is an inversion of the power structure, isn't it, especially if one knows that some of your performer friends are lesbians?

Well, I don't know. My relationship with feminism is very different to the one existing in the USA. In Cuba I feel totally free to do things; there is another power relationship, it is not like here where women have to fight for equal rights. But it could very well work at a symbolic level.

What are your ideas for the future? Will you continue this work and re-create it in Cuba?

I always work on all the subjects at once. But now I think next year I will concentrate only on this project, because it is haunts me. I think I discovered a parallelism which I would like to investigate a lot more. I feel the need to do a much deeper investigation of the problem than I have done so far. I need to really live this process. The way the work is now I can't possibly show it in Cuba because the symbols used are not meaningful to Cuban life. Perhaps in the future I will find a mythological object that could visually work to convey the echo of *patria*, the homeless land.

Translated by Imma Sarries-Zgonc



Havana *Lo que me Corresponde*, performance-installation, 1996. Photo courtesy of Centro Wilfredo Lam