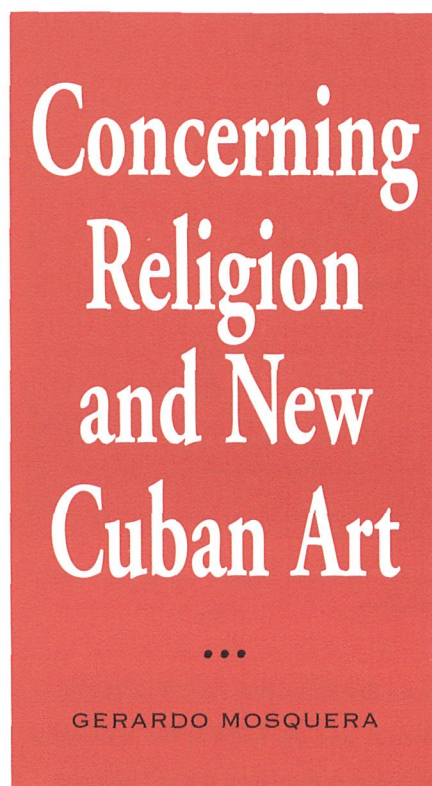


TERRITORIES

For years Cuba has been experiencing a religious revival. Religious images and prayers are sold everywhere. Iyawos [1] flock the streets of Havana with white clothes and churches have become social as well as spiritual centres for young people. Anyone not sporting a cross or medal wears a santería collar. The Abakuá Secret Society founds new “lands”. Gurus begin to appear. There was even a marriage celebrated according to the Jewish rite recently, something which had not been seen in decades. Collective reaction is typical in times of crisis; in Cuba it also corresponds to the vicissitudes of Marxism and the abandonment of its spread and practice during a period of ideological ambiguity, the undermining of materialism that has accompanied the collapse of true socialism, greater official tolerance, and even in certain degree to the promotion of tourism; Afro-Cuban religions are one of our export products.

A recent exhibition in the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales in Havana brought together 13 artists whose work is linked in some way to religion. It was curated by Diana Río with the title *Iluminación* and beneath a highly significant quotation from Saint Francis of Assisi: “Oh Lord, give me the serenity to accept what I can not change, the courage to change what should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish between the two.”

If new Cuban art has been characterised by its connection to social issues, then it logically follows that the religious revival should also appear there. Two moments might be



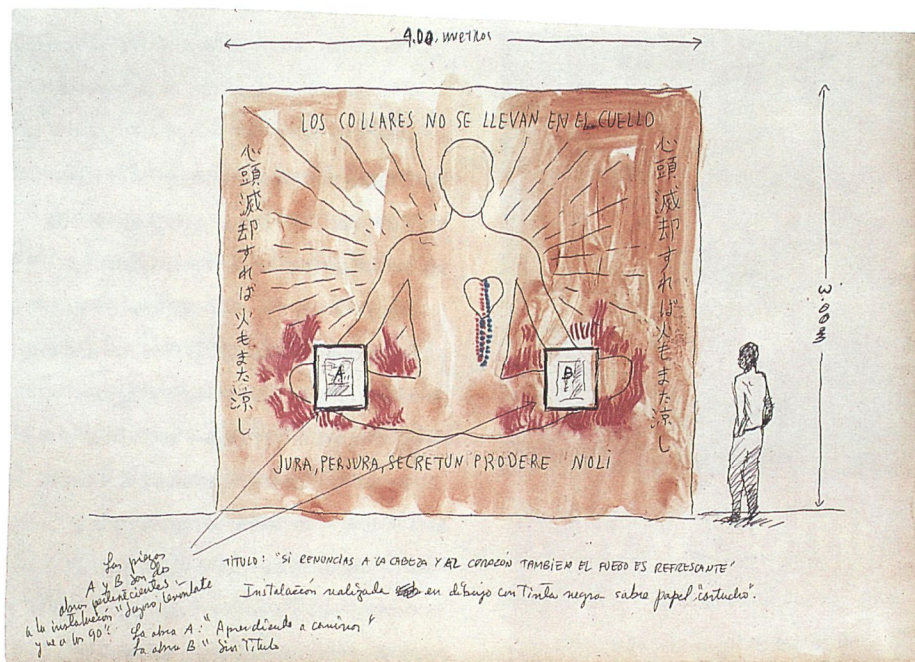
Rodríguez Olozábal. The work of Elso goes beyond this interest and arrives at an art historical achievement; it is reprogrammed toward religious and philosophical themes [2]. Not toward one specific religion nor toward religious enlightenment, but rather toward a transcendent interpretation of the world and a new spirituality in art within which religious methodologies are incorporated. These methodologies are related to the mechanisms of ritual, to a new interaction between the symbolic, the sacred and the cosmogonic. They also are related to non-Western (African and Indoamerican in particular) intuitions of the world, to mysticism, to the logic of myth, to an attempt at



Belkis Ayón, *Untitled*. Collography, 67,5 x 97 cm.

highlighted. The first arose before the crisis, at the beginning of the 80's, and is characterised by an interest in the Afro-Cuban cosmic visions of artists such as José Bedía, Juan Francisco Elso, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey and Fernando

understanding reality by means of symbolism, and to the role of art in existential orientation. All of the above corresponds to an understanding of art as something that crosses over into other realms. For millennia art has served as



Lázaro Saavedra. *Si renuncias a la cabeza y al corazón también el fuego es refrescante*, 1995. Project from installation.

one of religion's primary resources; Elso reconnected religion as resource for the independent practice of art. He did not create religious art; he inserted religion into the very backbone of art.

Ana Mendieta and José Bedia interacted with Elso, and his perspective was continued (although along the lines of their own personalities) by Brey, Luis Gómez, Rubén Torres Llorca, Tania Bruguera and Carlos Estévez. With the work of these artists we can map out an "Elso zone" in new Cuban art, where religion constitutes a fundamental typological feature and acts structurally (in varying degrees) in poetics and methodologies. Gómez, moreover, employs mechanisms for symbolisation that are related to the mechanisms of religious symbolism, especially in linking the existential to the cosmological and vice-versa. Estévez's work might be described as transcendentalism directed toward major cosmogonic and anthropological subjects.

The second moment pertains to

the religious revival rooted in the current decade, and the focus of the Afro-Cuban religions is displaced toward popular Catholicism. One exception is Belkis Ayón, who illustrates the Abakuá myths through an iconography of her own invention, visually reinterpreting its mythology while entwining ceremony and esoteric meanings. Another difference with the earlier moment is that the current moment does not bring with it a religious profundisation, except in certain cases such as Lissette Matalón. This young Catholic painter works the Judeo-Christian myths and imagery into ethical and religious discourse that carry social implications.

For the majority of these artists, references to religion are devoid of mystical and religious implications in their art. It would be more accurate to say that they deal with mystical or religious appropriations connected to their art, with uninhibited appropriation and resignification of the imagery of Catholicism and Western Christianity. It

may entail expressive or "philosophical" goals, as in the work of Ibrahim Miranda, or semantic displacement put into play with art history, as in the work of Lázaro García. But humour is predominant, employing religious iconography for parodies that criticise social, political and culture types. They are direct and frankly humorous in the work of Lázaro Saavedra and Reinerio Tamayo while sarcastic in Rubén Alpízar's altarpieces. In the work of Fernando Rodríguez they become more tropological within a game of indirect allusions. In the work of Esterio Segura they are open to generalised reflection. And in the work of José Toirac they deconstruct the rhetoric of representations of power. Religion is employed by these artists as a symbolic referent in order to satirise problems linked to the downfall of utopia, which is the key subject in current Cuban consciousness. In Kcho the reference is not humorous but rather tragic, alluding to the raft-bound refugees and to the Cuban diaspora in general.

In these different artists and moments, religion has never been a moral axis or an isolation of faith. Just as in Cuban daily life, it has fostered spiritual enrichment during an era that rejected subjectivity. However, in the same way, it has projected spirituality into direct communication with the world, and it has opened up an ethical field where the individual, society and the cosmos interact.

NOTES

- [1] Iyawó: Initiate into santería (the Cuban version of the Yoruba religion) during his or her first year, when they must dress in white at all times.
- [2] See Gerardo Mosquera: "Cuerpo y Cosmos", *Atlántica*, Las Palmas, n. 10, Spring 1995, pp. 154-156.