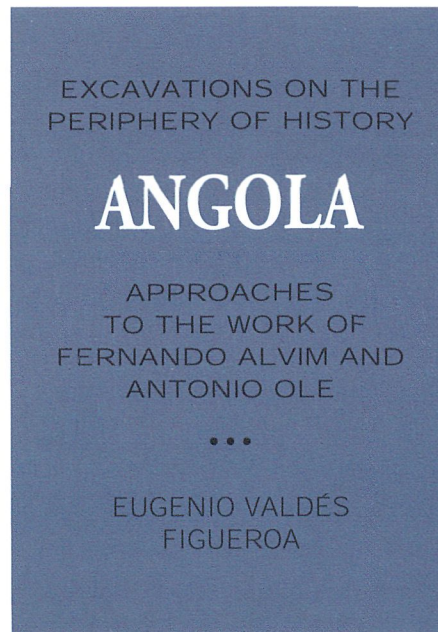


For the past several years, a revitalizing current has been transforming the artistic panorama of Angola. Responsible for this gradual process of renovation are a small number of artists who have been supplanting the worn-out formulas of a 'late avant-gardism' which no longer has a place in the dialectic of southern Africa's cultural development.

We cannot discard the fact that for the moment this transformation has not matured as a fully realized tendency but rather is still in its beginning stages. My own viewpoint is that within the diversity of Angolan artistic production a number of local artists – occasionally with strong official backing – persist in employing exhausted visual codes borrowed from early 20th century European avant-garde movements to create works that resemble complacent formal exercises. This situation is redressed to some extent by



the work of such artists of recognized achievement as Francisco Van Dunem, Telmo Vaz Pereira, or Alfonso Masongui; and even that of younger or less well known artists like Gongga, Lukulu Zola N'Donga, or Marcela Costa, who,

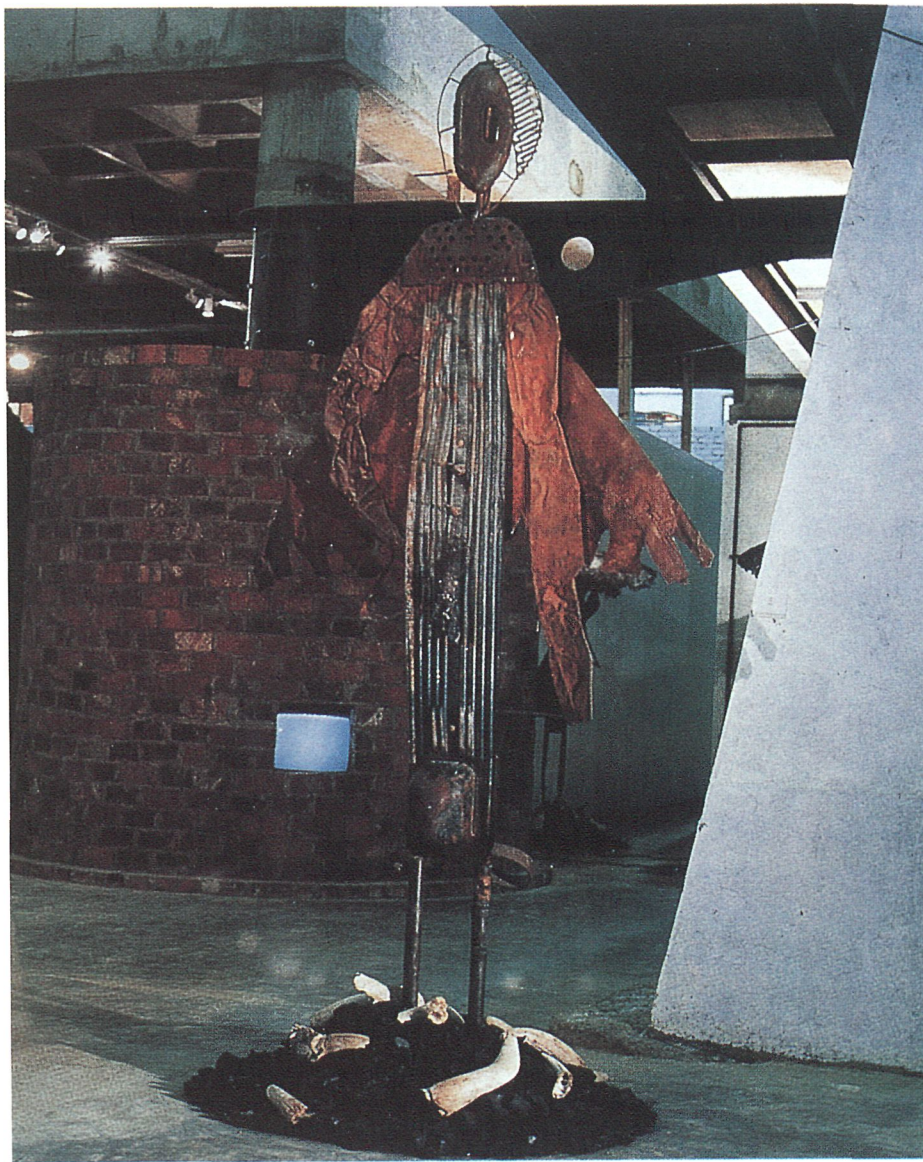


Francisco Van Dunem.

interested in exploring the artistic values and mythological wealth of the Cokwe, Ambundu, Ovinbundu, and Bakondo traditions, put the symbolic productions of these ethnic groups through a highly personal interpretation in their paintings, sculpture, and textiles. Mention should be made as well, of course, of the interesting work done by such self-taught popular artists as Quango, Francisco Quissanga, and Paul Kapela, to name but a few. But glimpsed from this perspective, we observe few changes in contemporary Angolan art with respect to the previous decade.

According to Angolan art historian and critic Adriano Mixinge, the 1990's have witnessed the onset of an extremely important period for the Angolan plastic arts. And, according to Mixinge, this is confirmed by their presence at such events as the exhibition of the Banco de Fomento Exterior-Luanda/90, the 1992 Seville World's Fair, and the Biennials of the CICIBA (Bantú Cultural Research Center), as well as impressive exhibitions by some of Angola's most prestigious plastic artists. Also worthy of mention in this context is the group show (organized by Mixinge himself) entitled *Angola in Africus*, which was one of the most extraordinary shows of African art presented at the Johannesburg Biennial in 1995. The curator recognized in the works of art gathered there, "one of the most effective forms of representation of the principal contradictions in Angolan society and culture. The plastic arts capture the outrage, the tensions, the successes, and the ironies of a catastrophic moment in which the logic/force of war and peace was brought to bear". [1]

A process of genesis with respect to new orientations and ethical, stylistic,



Antonio Ole.

and conceptual tendencies is clearly taking place in the Angolan artistic scene. An iconography of a new type is germinating there, and perhaps one which is more consistent with an interest in a revision of history and in a reformulation of the narrative in terms of its present-day identity.

José Rodríguez's most recent work, for example, or the artistic investigation that Pedro Salvador has been carrying out for several years now with regard to the consequences of the Angolan war, take as points of reference certain rituals

and psycho-social behaviors, and have recourse to new iconographic codes coherent with the new contents. Henrique Abranches, for his part, concentrates more on modifying the constructive aspect, with the application of new technologies that permit a wider spectrum of formal possibilities in terms of their communicative objectives. But in my opinion, Antonio Ole and Fernando Alvim are the artists who best represent this renovating tendency. In their works the interests of that sector of the Angolan plastic arts are synthesized in order to

carry out an 'excavation' in certain zones of the memory (individual or collective, historical or mythological); to establish an aesthetic starting from its social implications; and to explore the possibilities for discourse in the confrontation between the traditional notion of time in Africa and the dynamic of modern life.

In the 1990's, Antonio Ole, whose achievements as a film maker and visual artist had already brought him both national and international recognition (it suffices to mention here the prize that he received for his magnificent oil on canvas *Fiera Ferida* at the second Havana Biennial or his success at the 19th São Paulo Biennial) adopted a critical position toward his own career. He updated his expressive codes, liberated his formal structures, and tackled new subject matter, but without renouncing the fundamentally cognitive and valuational motivations that had characterized his previous work. Immediately following his exhibition *El estado de las cosas (sic)* (Luanda, 1993), one began to observe a certain discomfort and irreverence toward the orthodoxy of conventional artistic constructive methods and formulas. But it was a year later, when his first version of *Margem da Zona Limite* was exhibited at the Centre d'Art Contemporaine Elniga in Luanda, that one could see that a true revolution had taken place in the approach of Ole's art, favoring the search for a more analytical perspective by means of a much more convincing image. His new aims led him to modify the methodology of his work as well as its technical, formal, and conceptual aspects: "Armed with the necessary tools," affirms Antonio Ole, "I carry out a rough preliminary version of a composition, a sort of urban and cultural *archaeology*

that allows me to touch the *nerve* of the subject that I'm interested in. Then I employ a different strategy to conceptualize the dimensions of space and time, to order all the elements and to eliminate what doesn't interest me, thereby avoiding mere aestheticism..." [2]

Although his preceding work was predominately directed by anthropological interests, pursued an inquiry into Angolan cultural tradition (particularly that of the Cokwe ethnic group), his present-day installations are guided by an emphasis on sociology and by a discourse based on a metaphor of limits. Ole recycles sheets of corrugated tin siding and other fragments of shanties that he has 'excavated' in the townships. With these materials he constructs, for example, a large wall, on which can be made out – with great difficulty – the small, worn lettering of a notice: *No Admittance*. In the center of the wall is a door that leads to no place

(metaphorically, perhaps, it leads to a *nowhere*). Photographic portraits of the inhabitants of these tumble-down shacks accompany the wall.

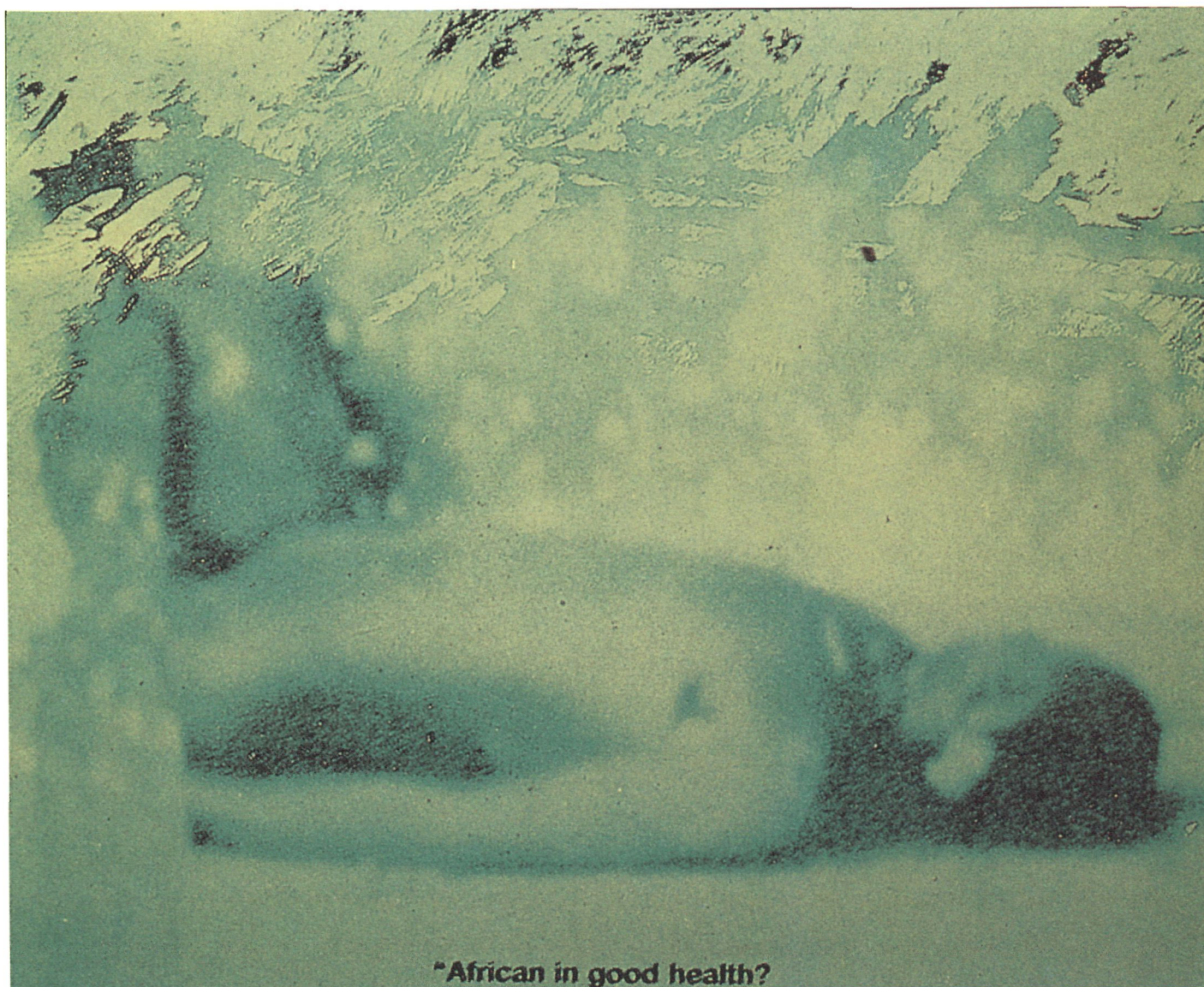
The artist exploits the notion of the limit not only in its meaning of boundary, but also in its sense of an extreme situation. The person who manages to construct a shanty in the slum quarter does so by recycling discarded material, carrying out a pragmatic 'archaeological' search for scrap in the garbage dumps and exhuming the suitable fragment to complete the façade of his privacy (this operation does not differ much from what Ole does, not even in the results, because to construct is to create); he thus marks out his territory in the township but also makes explicit his marginality. The man who, endeavoring to survive, raises provisional walls in a shantytown, confronts the difficulty conflict of being unable to recognize himself, whether in space or in time; it is possible that tomorrow or the next day his shack will

be demolished and he will have to rebuild his dwelling somewhere else. He leads an illegal existence and is acutely aware of just how transitory and impermanent his hovel is; here perhaps lies the meaning that the labyrinth takes on in the oeuvre of Antonio Ole. Time, moreover, is his salvation, since it contains the possibility of hope.

It could be said that the inhabitant of the *quimbo*, like Ole, is an arranger of vestiges; he reuses devaluated material pertaining to the dust heap of history. But whereas the former extends its lifetime of usefulness, the second converts it into a historical reference, amplifying its symbolic potentialities and taking advantage of its aesthetic possibilities. The provisional nature of their milieus and the unavoidable nomadism of these individuals transform them into something like phantoms. And this is what they bring to mind: "It is like a stage play without characters," says Ole when he refers to the manner in which



Fernando Alvim.



Fernando Alvim.

his work recreates the situation, “They are not physically there, they have simply left their irreparable trace, created by the specter of the ruins and the absurd.” [3]

And the conceptual tension between constructive activity and ruin that Ole establishes in his work proves extremely interesting. In fact, the individual who lives in the township is actually constructing ruins. Whenever we refer to the ruin, we think immediately of the destroyed, the incomplete, the time-worn; but the ruin is also the trace that mankind leaves for posterity, compensating for his inevitable sense of

the finite by his desire to make himself immortal. It can also occur that the ruinous state of an object becomes its definitive appearance, its identity: one can no longer imagine the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* or the *Colosseum* in any other way (to reconstruct them, to complete them, would verge on sacrilege); nor is it possible to think of the shanty in another way, because its precarious condition is the objective evidence that serves to make it recognizable. And we are appalled by the thought, or that is to say, we are appalled by the symbolic conventions that perpetuate marginality.

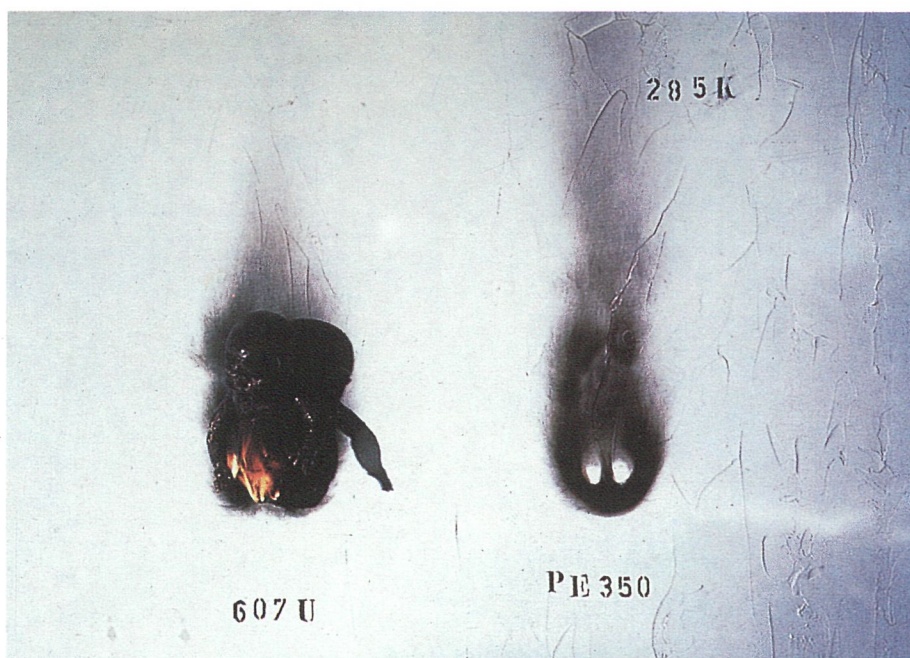
Africa is a continent obsessed with time and memory. Such an obsession seems to be a trait that continues to exercise a determining influence on any and all questions of existence vis-à-vis contemporary African society. By this I do not mean to say that arguments concerning African identity are based on factors related solely to the present moment, but rather that the dialectic of ontological reasoning responds to a fundamentally different internal logic. This is especially the case if we take into account that, “for the African ... time is not the duration that a rhythm imposes



Antonio Ole.
Breaking Boundaries,
1996.

on an individual's destiny, but rather it is the community's rhythm of breathing ... Traditional African time spans and incorporates eternity in both directions. Past generations are not lost to the present: in their way they will always continue to be contemporaries and to exercise as much or even more influence than they did when they were alive." [4] It must not surprise us therefore that this temporal 'anxiety' is connected with the singular fashion in which history and mythology constantly collide in zones of symbolic intersection, – and even less so that a group of visual artists has decided to consider this phenomenon.

The explanation and the recording of any event in Africa inescapably fluctuates between a mythical and an historical dimension of time. It could also be said that not even the archaeological finds, whose objective eloquence is of unquestionable value for the history of Africa, escape the mutually contaminating effects of mythical and historical time. According to Jean Baudrillard, 'the antique object' lacks a practical function, it exists solely to *signify*; "it is purely mythological in its reference to the past ... Nevertheless, it is neither useless, nor simply 'decorative', rather it fulfills a very specific function in the framework of the system: it signifies *time*" [5]. While these objects may have an *unimpeachable documentary* character, they likewise function in turn as 'mythological objects' rich in speculative content; they serve equally the argument of history and myth. And furthermore, these objects reconstruct history, and in their turn, construct new myths. They are objects that are coherently integrated in the rituals that affirm identity; and I am not referring exclusively to those that we find in



Fernando Alvim, *Contaminas Sankemente*.

anthropological and ethnological museums in Europe, dissociated from their original context and gathered together in collections in which Africans would find it difficult to recognize themselves. I speak also of objects that pertain to the recent history (and legend) of Africa, which the politically engaged intellectuals from this continent recover and safeguard in order to emblemize its contemporaneity. It is not so much a question of rescuing the past, as it is one of investigating the present and the keys that are a means for explaining its present-day status.

This obsession with memory and time is clearly manifest in the work of Fernando Alvim. Both in his exhibition *Contaminas Sankemente* (Brussels, 1994-1995) and in the installation that he presented at the South African Biennial, the artist relies on an 'archaeological' procedure to bring to light evidence of the Angolan war. However, the objects that serve to plead his case occupy a limbo between mythology and history.

They are 'mythological objects' by reason of their capacity to 'signify' the past and their ambiguous liturgical content. In appearance they recall Roman Catholic imagery as much as they do ritual objects of the Bantú culture. At the same time, the sacred quality of these fetishistic objects enters into conflict with a repulsively profane sense. One perceives a similar contradictory atmosphere in the space; the spectator feels like a trespasser in a catacomb. The use of very calculated effects of lighting; the almost theatrical manner in which the objects are arranged on the windowless black-painted walls; the utilization of texts that metaphorically incorporate speech into the space and of numbers that appear to have been taken from an obituary file; the lit candles that are left to burn upon an altar: all this serves to contribute to the creation of a mixed feeling of curiosity and aversion. We are intruders in an ancestral cult space; but here the forebears appear to have been assigned statistical registry numbers.

At times, the artist can elect to do without the object, preferring simply to suggest it by ‘recycling’ the icon in its place in order to emphasize the idea of the past’s intervening in the future as a disruptive element. There might appear on the wall the skillfully drawn representation of an army boot or the foot of a war casualty, accompanied by a text or stamped with the word ‘document’.

Such an approach, which seeks to convert the past and its vestiges into bridges or mediators to establish a diagnosis of the present situation in

Angola, brings to mind Marcuse’s meditations on the subversive content of memory and the dangerous discoveries that an inquiry of this kind can give rise to [6]. Alvim has explained to me that for him, violence in all its manifestations, the traumas of war (physical, socio-psychological, or cultural), and the almost cynical mode of dealing with death, are some of the defining traits of contemporary Angolan society. “That is why,” he has told me, “I attempt to carry out a postmortem examination of this dead material that I work with” [7].

Particularly interesting in connection

with this explanation is Fernando Alvim’s most recent project. Entitled *Memorias íntimas: Marcas (sic)*, it is the unusual love story of a deactivated land mine and a prosthesis. Their intermediary, of course, is the leg which is no longer there. The project, planned as a traveling exhibition whose first venue was Cuito Cuanavale, involves two other artists – the Cuban Carlos Garaicoa and the South African Gavin Youngue – in the ‘excavation’ of a shared memory. The selection of the artists taking part in *Memorias íntimas: Marcas (sic)* was not made by chance; all three employ



Carlos Garaicoa (Cuba).



Carlos Garaícoa (Cuba).

recycling as a creative method: all make free use of photography, drawing, painting, video, and the found object; and all are interested in emphasizing the existential aspect and investing their work with a marked humanistic content. Nonetheless, each incorporates his own individual experience, his personal point of view towards the theme, and his independent investigative labor (with all of the affective and emotional charge that comes of taking up the story of those who participated in this decisive armed conflict). It is a matter of complementing the different versions of the story (or of the myth) with the personal experiences of each one of the parties involved in the encounter. To fit together the pieces of the puzzle – and here we come back to Marcuse – could be a perilous journey across a mine field. But it was planned that this artistic project should have a random quality, and it was this element of surprise that gave form and content to the work, which, interestingly, last travelled to Cape Town, where it was exhibited in what was once a military fort and has now been converted into an art gallery.

Our life rests upon the death of others, but this is part of a natural cycle that is at times violated by extreme circumstances: this, in my opinion, is one of the basic ideas of philosophical reflection that serve Alvim as a point of departure. In this process, memory never completely disappears: it can be hidden behind a veil of interests, social irresponsibility, or historical convenience, but it cannot forever remain undisclosed. In time, the truth will out. And by the act of remembering, we can – at least metaphorically – disavow the irreversibility of death.

- [1] Mixinge, Adriano. *Juntos e Diferentes*. In the catalogue for the exhibition *Angola in Africus*. Johannesburg Biennial, 1995, p. 6
- [2] Ole, Antonio. In the catalogue for the exhibition *On the Road (Africa '95)*. The Delfina Trust, London, 1995, p. 29.
- [3] Idem.
- [4] Hama, M. Bubu and Ki-Zerbo, Joseph. *Tiempo mítico y tiempo histórico en África*. In the UNESCO magazine *El Correo*, August-September 1979, Vol XXXII, p. 12.
- [5] Baudrillard, Jean. *El sistema de los objetos*. Siglo veintiuno, México, 1992, p. 83 - 84.
- [6] See Herbert Marcuse, *El Hombre unidimensional*. Instituto del Libro, Havana, 1968.
- [7] Interview with Fernando Alvim, Havana, 1996.