

will be able to fix and shape one's body according to one's desires and health needs. Genetic engineering will fashion the humans to be [1], while one can actually preview the reconstruction of one's body with computer assisted technology; and gene therapy will soon become part of common medical practice. The artist's work can be envisioned as the prefiguration of a world when people have finally been given the possibility of choosing what they want to look like, thus questioning the new impact models could have on the definition of identity: will everyone look one way for a week, and then change to the next "idol?" This will greatly affect the manner in which identity is constructed: it will soon be less a matter of socio-historical background as it will be the result of willful alterations made to the body and related appropriations of the Other's identity. In exposing the possible results of such approach to the body both in magazines and within the context of art, Inez van Lamsweerde confronts the viewer to her/his relationship to collective fears and aspiration; in doing so, she possibly denounces fashion as an instrument of social conditioning and particularly so when she chooses the magazine site to expose her work, since she then operates in direct confrontation with the "regular" fashion pictures that she overtly questions. Although she has developed work that is more specifically meant to be shown in the context of art, Inez van Lamsweerde does not mark any specific distinction in the way she relates to the commercial work that is commissioned from the one she spontaneously produces for the art viewing public. She might simply use the art site as an experimental one. In that sense, the display of her work in this context enables her to turn the viewing experience inside out: the world becomes more visual, more like a three dimensional representation of images.

[1] See Primo Levi: "I sintetici" in "Vizio di Forma", Giulio Einaudi Editore s.p.a., Torino, 1971 & 1987, where the author describes a state of scientific development that enables full engineering of human life.



**HERETICAL  
MINIMALIST**  
  
BY GERARDO MOSQUERA

Florencio Gelabert Soto, (Havana 1961), suddenly appeared with a work in 1982 that proved to be an historical landmark in the transformation of contemporary Cuban culture: *Hommage to a Column*. This piece is the paradigm of his first period that dealt with the poetics of Havana, epitome of eclecticism –Alejo Carpentier's "City of Columns", whose "style is precisely its entire absence of style"– and its ruins. Thanks to the Cuban revolution, Havana was spared the urban speculation that transformed other Latin American metropoli during the 1960's, for it is the only city that has retained its historical features. Well before such dates it was a capital of ineffable personality, the fourth most important in Latin America during the 30's, 40's and 50's. The halting of its development has turned it into a museum-city, that reveals the complete history of the Latin American metropolis, with its colonial areas, neoclassical, eclectic, art déco and modernist traits, all juxtaposed in a huge mosaic. The circumstances that propitiated its singular conservation have also led to the abandon which has gradually reduced it to ruins. This adds that element of charm that any ruin has for anyone who isn't forced to live in it.

The originality and the impact of those works by Gelabert lie in the fact that they managed to suggest all of this process in synthetic images, concentrated and derived from the poetry of minimalism. The works evoked the atmosphere of so many of the damp old houses of the Vedado, of so many delapidated mansions of El Cerro of those kilometeric portals with their array of columns in different series, in the style of a huge "Carl Andre", each one with a different capital; of countless residences vaunting their personality in spirals of cement-work, of so much concrete classically disguised, sand oozing out of the cracks, of so many

parts of the city on the rubbish tip, with remains of statues and ornaments that the artist Carlos Garaicoa presently rescues and documents, in a critical performance of the city's dereliction, simultaneously captivated by its fascination. Another significant point about Gelabert is that he used cement in sculpture in order to represent cement in buildings. Modelled concrete columns for which modelled concrete sculptures acted as metaphors, an indirect tropes of how the ductility of this modern material enabled foremen to simulate in the city the grandiloquent sculptural style of marble and stone.

We can see that in Gelabert's work there is an expressive concentration, based on the mixture of the material and the informal with the minimal, that reveals the clue to his current works. The only individual references could be, at one extreme, Chillida and Noguchi, and at another, Carl Andre. Three heterodox figures, innovatory yet not hybrid.

To use minimalism with lyric aims is an example of "incorrect" adaptation of the tendency. Yet such an heretical effrontery in the appropriation of centralist art by the periphery is a strategy of the postcolonial world, as well as one of the vital processes of postmodernism. At one level it is breaking with eurocentric monism in order to extend a multicultural plurality that is an enriching experience for all. At another, it develops the methodologies and languages that the centres of symbolic power have internationalised in incredible ways. These processes bring rupture with the norm and authentic origin in all fields, mixing, associating, piling up; liberalising and energizing cultural practice.

The somewhat eclectic mobility of Gelabert responds to this artistic "libertinism", very common to Latin America and especially to the Caribbean, a land of neologisms and many tongues, of reggae and Lezama Lima. One of the values of new Cuban art was to reinforce this free will without prejudice in order to reconvert everything that could be useful for its own ends. Gelabert took hold of constructive structures, simplification and sculpture as the locus of

minimalism, and only partially appropriated its scenic character, leaving aside its objectivity, its conceptual-semiotic discourse and its denial of the artisanal participation of the sculptor. With the ascetic value of these resources he trod along paradoxical paths of a subjective and "minimalized" poetry, contained in capsules, and based on the material. This kind of expression is the fundament of his oeuvre, and it has reached plenitude during the past four years of his work.

Towards the end of his "architectural" period, in the mid 80's, the artist lent more towards the conceptual, in a very coherent fashion in terms of his own poetical expression. He didn't emphasize the linguistic aspect of minimal, but rather evolved towards an analysis of the condition of matter and location, inspired by Smithson, another "odd man out". This dialogue between the analytical and the material developed through relations, displacements, transformations and reflections on the materials and space, not abandoning the architectural nostalgia of the ruin. The best work was "Relación", (1984). After such a strong beginning, his work became irregular in mid decade, with a certain lack of focus and tendency to formalism.

Gelabert was one of the first emigrants of the Cuban intellectual diaspora of the 90's, setting up in Miami in 1991. This migration has posed many questions. One of the most frequent asks what future is reserved for this new art in a foreign land, taking into account the very close ties that link it to the island. Another verbalised worry is the effect that the market may have on a cultural production that developed without monetary pressures, making no stylistic concessions. Until now, and contrary to expectations, these works have not succumbed generally, and have quite often improved. The chance of being able to concentrate on the work without the myriad privations that afflicted them on the island has been crucial for most artists.

As the academic Lupe Alvarez has said, speaking from experience, if evidently those "inside the system enjoy all the advantages of socialism", "when the electricity fails and hunger gnaws

away it is very hard to remember then". The ever increasing rhythm of migrations in global terms, and their cultural transterritoriality, is demolishing many nationalist fictions centred on the nation-states as the ontological seats of identity.

In Gelabert's case, exile brought triumph over the confusion that affected his work, and it also meant the attainment of artistic excellence. His work gained overall in coherence, and his poetry became refined in a specific language, maximizing his capacity for expressive intensity. Material concern is prevalent over spatial and constructive attitudes, interiorizing the minimal element structurally, fused with the discourse, as condenser of the elements' expressivity. There is a process of stylisation, yet not in the derogatory sense of the word, for, to the contrary, the works gain a roughness and an aggressiveness that is very startling visually and physically, (in their essence as objects), and emotionally. It is an issue of linguistic cohesion and purification. We can see it clearly in works such as *Los Mazos*, (1992 and 1993), or *Fusión*, (1993).

This last work is equally an example of the artist's permanent interest in colour. From the very start he tried to fuse colour with material in the style of Anish Kapoor, giving colour a materiality, and so transcending its condition of paint. In his present period, Gelabert continues being a sculptor who uses colour as an ingredient of prime importance, whether as pigment incorporated into the material, its original colour, or its transformations through combustion, acids and other processes that bring out the chromatic as much as the textural.

However his work in exile is determined by a practically new component: a greater degree of symbol, complemented by a consequent increase of figurative reference. This also distances it from minimal, with its constructivist abstraction. That is not to say that his work has become overtly figurative. Quite the opposite, one of its most suggestive traits is the ambiguity between the objectual and the non-objectual, a kind of ambiguity between the organicism of material and the

constructivity of its transformation into object. Works like *Memorias* (1992), *Transgression* (1994) *Quietud* (1994) are sort of semi-objects, while the *Estatutos de las Limitaciones* (1992), resemble half-way stages between pure materiality and sculptural metamorphosis. They are very articulate statements of his analysis that studies the relation between matter and its morphologies and combinations.

This intensification of symbolism, evident in works such as the magnificent *La Cama de Dios* (1992) or *Los Cuchillos* (1992), implies the more structured codification of a significant discourse, opposed, as a whole, to the indirect expression that has generally characterized his work. He has achieved it as a fertile development of his own poetic insight, without bringing about any changes in the already attained fusion of minimalism and expressive materials. It has enabled him to develop his expression, reducing formalism. Perhaps one piece falters with overliteral reference, yet the majority are well balanced. Notable are *Los Escudos de América* (1993-94), paradigm of a powerful expressive synthesis, where the energy of the materials generates strong symbolic meanings. It refers very openly to the aggressiveness of the objects; to the antagonism, the defense and the ambiguities between them. It also symbolizes suffering and the aesthetics of destruction (something that was already present in his work with ruins). In other terms, it explicitly enters the dialogue between matter and construction that is the principal axis of his work.

Not everything has revolved around these symbolical leanings. Works like *Sentido de Relación* (1994), reactivate the analysis of space and materials during his second period in the mid-80'. In the case of *En Arche* (1992), he once more reproduces minimalist repetition, although heterodoxically. This diversity adds nuance to his work, without impairing the stylistic unity achieved by the artist.

His sculpture communicates a rough and very condensed poetry of the dialectic between the object and its materials, or better, between the

materials and its objects, for the search stems from matter in the first place, together with an open symbolic expression that alludes to aggression, defense and its exchanges. This oeuvre constitutes a unique chapter within Cuban art, that bears the signature of the artist's personality foremostly, rather than of artistic and cultural processes. Though he took part very early in the 80's in the movement of renovation, Gelabert has kept away, at a distance, choosing his own Cuban sculpture. A stranger within sculpture, and a stranger everywhere.



## THE BODY AND THE COSMOS

BY GERARDO MOSQUERA

Variety is a hallmark of new Cuban art. We can identify several different parts of it that can be seen as conceptual groups, into which, depending on their spontaneous development, certain artists can be fitted. Prearranged agendas are out (in Cuba art has never been very Manifesto oriented). One of these areas could be called "Elso's zone". It is the result of the territory that Juan Francisco Elso, (1956-1988) has discovered both as artist and as teacher, or rather that he has taken from the global process of his work as a mystical-pedagogic aesthetic experience. This territory has been explored by some of his closest friends, like Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, and to a certain extent, by Rubén Torres Llorca, and his disciples: Tania Bruguera, Carlos Estévez and Luis Gómez. Two other renown names could be cited in this group, not as Elso followers but due to the initial rapport between their work. I mean, of course, José Bedia and Ana Mendieta, whose work exhibits definite characteristics, in particular the latter's.

Elso's zone is a milestone in our art

history. Hegemonism, eurocentrism and the condescending attitude expressed by power centres (all of these being traits that mark international processes of evaluation and legitimation), has signified that proper recognition is still forthcoming. Only Mendieta and Bedia are well-know, yet the real dimensions of the territory they have discovered aren't for the moment understood. Elso was generally praised during the itinerancy of the "Ante America" exhibition in Colombia, Venezuela, USA and Costa Rica, although it only afforded a glimpse of the power that underlies his art.

What strikes as transcendent about his art and the work of his followers is that it has introduced a new dimension to the religious and the philosophical. Not to any religion in particular, nor to the illustration of religion, but to a transcendent interpretation of the world, and to the assimilation of religious methodologies by art.

These methodologies are related to mechanisms of ritual, with interaction of the symbolic and the sacred and the cosmogonic, with non-Western intuitions of the world, –especially African and Indoamerican, with mysticism, with the logics of myth, with the effort to understand reality in terms of the symbolic, and with art applied to existential significance.

If for centuries art was a medium of religion, in "Elso's zone" it is reconnected once again with religion to act as a medium for the independent practise of art. Religious art is something impossible; what happens is that the religious is inserted in the very structure of art.

The work of these young artists continues to be postmodern, it is art conceived for the gallery and the museum. They take as starting point the conceptual, processes, the symbolic dimension of the materials, and they concentrate foremostly on installations. From another angle, they could be seen as a peculiar –and transformative– conceptualist manifestation in Cuba. The revolution that they bring doesn't really exceed the boundaries of the artistic; rather, it transforms the interior, and opens up a new perspective. The excessive element is associated with the

personal experience of the artists, they "create" works in the traditional sense, codifying through a carefully arranged symbolism. However the process of creating them is undissociable from the intrinsic inner experience, the learning and initiation into the universal, in psychological and existencial terms. There is an extraordinary similarity between the practise of art and of religion: they are both personal cults with transcendent projection. These works that reveal great visual metaphors imply reflection from a cosmogonic to a domestic scale, although they always represent a personal mystical process via art.

This occult aspect can be intuited in the works. A North American critic said of Elso's work, "these objects have a power that transcends technique, that even transcends aesthetic means". If an aura has been established for the art work, in cases like these, it operates on a level beyond the artistic, that resembles true sacralization.

While Brey approaches the unconscious, Torres Llorca tends to the social, Bruguera emphasizes process and Gómez existence, perhaps it is Carlos Estévez who has continued Elso's perspective in the most orthodox way. As in the latter's and in Bedia's case too, his work has a cosmogonic vocation. Every installation, painting or drawing by Estévez is a fragment of a philosophical-transcendent interpretation of the universe or of one of its aspects, and simultaneously an effort to conjure them both. Yet his symbolism is more indirect and at the same time extremely dense, like Gómez. His poetics is more philosophical, in the manner of transcendentalism addressing the great cosmogonic and anthropological themes.

Estévez uses visual metaphors in order to build a cosmovision in mosaic, which does not establish totality as it is infinitely open. This cosmogony is an area where fragments of cosmovisions interact, as well as myths and images of many cultures, anthropological interpretations, philosophical ideas, personal experience and visions. Such a diverse constellation of elements is systematized symbolically through the visual talent of the artist, through his