Because of his physical presence as a black person, with a history in his body, he put everyone in a position of self-questioning, which Schutz's painting didn't [Figs. 12, 13].

CB Finally, why do you think Arte de Conducta is an important strategy for artists today?

TB The world is becoming increasingly authoritarian, and it's important to make art that is legible by people who are not experts.

CB I agree, but what does behavior have to do with that? Why is the *gesture* so central to legibility?

TB Because this is a language everyone understands—it doesn't require any knowledge of art or external references. Behavior is a common language in a society, a collective construction whose meaning is agreed upon; you don't have to start by explaining it.

When *conducta* is translated into English as "behavior" it loses something, because in Spanish the word speaks not just about social behavior but also its transmission (conducting).

Bruguera, Tania. "Political Timing Specific Art," in Tania Bruguera in Conversation with Claire Bishop (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2020, pp. 45-77)

CHAPTER TWO
POLITICAL TIMING SPECIFIC ART

CB Political Timing Specific Art ostensibly sounds like a corrective to the concept of site-specific art, a term that has itself changed radically in character since it was first used in the 1960s. What began as a formal approach to installing art—responding to the physical location, gallery, or outdoor site—expanded throughout the eighties and nineties to deal with the specific history or past identity of a location, and even to encompass the communities who inhabit and use the site. This social understanding of site was the contribution of new genre public art, socially engaged art, and social practice.[7] When and how did you arrive at the term Political Timing Specific Art, and do you see it as a response to site specificity?

TB I arrived at the notion of Political Timing Specific Art around 2008, after years of explaining the importance of the political context in which most of my work exists and acquires its meaning. I referred to my work as site-specific for a long time, even as socially engaged practice, but I eventually noticed that people always focused more on the cultural/anthropological dimension than on political/power dynamics, which was my main interest. So I decided to replace site with *political timing*, the medium with which politicians operate, as the material of my work. I'm not interested in making art as an a posteriori political comment, but in using art to intervene in the specific moment when politics are not yet defined, when decisions are being made, and therefore might be changed—especially in situations where citizens don't have agency.

Traditionally, art tends to signal the problem or protest after a decision is made. In Political Timing Specific Art, by contrast, politicians as well as the general public are involved; art becomes a political force to be taken into consideration.

I wanted to go back to the beginning of my work, to the *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1986–96) and the newspapers *Memoria de la postguerra I* and *II* [*Postwar Memory*; 1993–94], in which I responded to the specific politics of a particular time [both discussed below]. I began to realize that once the law or political culture changed, an artwork made in response to those circumstances would

7. For a definition and discussion of new genre public art, see Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) and Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

just become a document of that time. So if I wanted my art to be political, it should not only be contextually and culturally specific in its references, but to work within the political timing of the issue I was addressing, and therefore to have political consequences.

CB So you see it as a way of trying to integrate the political specificity of a place into the meaning of the work?

TB It's not only about political issues, but it's about understanding how, under certain circumstances, politics can also define the artistic and the aesthetic. I embrace the fact that my work will not have a stable meaning, because politics works with the perception of ideas as they unfold in real time, and the emotional landscape they generate.

CB So, I guess this insistence on political timeliness has consequences for the longevity of the work, and its ability to be restaged later?

TB Exactly. That is why I advocate redoing, instead of reenactment or reperforming. Political Timing Specific Art is hard to redo if the politics that generated it change. The work has to be adapted to a new political situation or wait until similar conditions to the original reemerge somehow. You might have to reorient a work to address something else that is socially or politically unresolved in order to effectively hit a nerve the way it did the first time around.

Maybe the most important aspect of Political Timing Specific Art is that the piece will only be the way it is in that specific political moment; if it's done before or after it won't have the same consequences. Political Timing Specific Art happens in the space between the artist or public's imaginary of a new political reality and the politicians' version of it.

CB It seems important to you that Political Timing Specific Art results in controversy or media attention. Indeed, you seem to thrive on this attention as proof of your work's potency.

TB The media does play a role since it is respected and feared by politicians; it is the medium they use to communicate and by which we communicate back to them; they use it to generate a narrative that will later become history, and we (the citizens) want to be a part of that narrative. Using the media is necessary to distort their voice and create an alternative narrative. It is important to note, though, that even when the media is interested in the citizen's side of the story

(in this case, the artist), they'll often privilege the politicians with whom they have a long-term interest and commitment. But the media is a thirsty beast and you have to be careful not to give in to the sensationalism it craves, and instead use it to generate a message that makes people discuss the problem and not the person behind it.

CB This seems particularly pressing in the light of the current administration in the US, in which manufactured personality clashes are continually deployed to derail media attention away from gravely serious issues; journalists seize on the President's petty tweets, rather than keeping complex political issues to the fore. I know that your thinking about Political Timing Specific Art derives from your experiences inside Cuba and not the US, but it seems telling that contemporary Western politics increasingly uses affect to steer opinion. Does Political Timing Specific Art do the same?

TB The US has a faux-populist political administration, and one of the president's strategies is to use the language of the people, which is Twitter. Social media tends to be synonymous with reacting rather than processing; it has a simplified generic emotional spectrum (like or dislike); it arrives at conclusions from headlines rather than articles. The US president is trying very hard to create a world that doesn't exist in reality. So right now it's actually quite appropriate to use in the North something generated in the global South, because we have already gone through this in our countries.

Precisely because of what is happening in the US, and throughout the world, it's no longer enough to make art as a reaction or a comment. It is time to make art for the *not yet* and the *yet to come.*

CB How do you draw the distinction between Political Timing Specific Art and topicality—in other words, a work that makes a timely comment on current affairs?

TB It's the difference between observation and participation: making a commentary about something or wanting to intervene to change it. Political Timing Specific Art is a difficult working method because it's a full and direct confrontation with power and uses some of the latter's own tools and strategies.

Of course, you can refer to political realities and create public awareness without being political timing specific. But when you make an artwork in which the meaning of the work is defined by a political situation that is unfolding, and when it involves as its material some of the elements generating the political situation; when the artwork becomes a point of reference that is linked with the

historical event's evolution and analysis (by politicians, artists, historians, and art historians); when control and consequences of the work are not in the hands of the artist but decided by a government or by those in power; when the work unleashes a chain of political responses or the creation of new policies; when the existence of the artwork alters the way in which political events happen; when people can see in the artwork a space to participate that they can't find in the political situation—then these are factors that render an artwork political timing specific.

Political Timing Specific Art uses the emotional capital generated by current affairs and engages art as a player in the political landscape. Political timing is a window that opens and closes very quickly: it is a space that you have to enter quickly, during a brief moment when political decisions are not yet fixed, implemented, or culturally accepted.

CB This reminds me of Machiavelli, whose treatise on the craft of political power, *The Prince* (1532), puts forward the idea of *occasione*, the opportune moment for political action. It denotes those rare openings in chronological time when those who are savvy can seize and take hold of power. The prince must be willing to use his *virtù* (understood as virtuosity, rather than virtue) as necessity and opportunity dictate, and in ways that are not necessarily moral. The ends justify the means!

TB In Cuba, the government accuses me of being an *opportunist*—in other words, making a comment on something for personal gain and recognition. However, I think I'm being *opportune*—it's not about my personal gain, it's about seizing the moment for a collective endeavor—which often makes life incredibly difficult for me (and the people close to me). I do think that some artists have a special skill for detecting and sensing the right moment in which their actions might have meanings that transcend that moment itself—and that's *occasione*. Political Timing Specific Art does what everyone is thinking about but no one dares say or do.

CB Do you think that the term Political Timing Specific Art can be used to reread not just your own work but other works from art history too? I'm thinking of the Argentinian art-activist project *Tucumán Arde* (1968), many of Hans Haacke's works from the 1980s about corporate sponsorship and apartheid in South Africa, Krzysztof Wodiczko's slide projections about homelessness in the 1980s, even Ai Weiwei's *Citizen's Investigation* into the schoolchildren who perished in the Sichuan earthquake in 2008.

TB Yes, definitely, especially Hans Haacke, because his work changed the way we expect institutions to behave. We could also include, for example, the works that generated the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) controversies in 1989–90.[8]

CB So then, is Political Timing Specific Art a *strategy* or an *outcome*? The problem with this reading of the NEA Four is that Political Timing Specific Art is determined by its recipients rather than being a deliberate artistic strategy—which you implied earlier when you said that it was a skill (or virtuosity) that the artist brings to bear on a situation. But too often it is completely out of the artist's hands as to whether or not a work of art ignites a political firestorm. Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) was painted in London and shown there without any controversy; three years later at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, by contrast, it prompted a court case against the museum by then New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Does this make it Political Timing Specific Art? I don't think so, because Ofili had no intention of intervening in a political debate. Likewise, Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Ora* (1999), a sculpture of Pope John Paul II being struck by a meteorite, was made and shown in Italy, but only caused an outcry when it was exhibited in Warsaw in 2000, where it was physically attacked by a right-wing politician.

TB Sometimes artworks that are politically sensitive in one place are not sensitive in another. When we move a work of art from one place to another, it can become political timing specific if it touches on something unresolved. Sometimes artists arrive at this unintentionally—or better, intuitively—and end up touching a nerve that makes the work trigger a political response or consequences.

In the two cases you mention what is interesting is that the controversies were generated on the basis of moral judgments rather than political ones, both of which highlighted the influence of religion on the political landscape in those two societies. But whether a piece is intentionally political timing specific or not is not important, that is always decided by its viewers. What is clear is that works of art that use this method *generate* a political situation: one in which politicians have to intervene, and in the process their "true" political nature is unveiled.

CB So consequences are integral to your definition of Political Timing Specific Art?

8. "NEA Four" refers to four performance artists (Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller) whose applications for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts were vetoed in 1990 on the basis of subject matter. The controversy led to the end of NEA grants to individuals.

TB Yes, especially when this is a public discussion or a changed law. There were consequences to the NEA Four's work—it changed the laws around arts funding in the US (albeit not in positive ways). Political Timing Specific Art always goes beyond raising awareness of the subject; it creates a shift in the history of the issue.

CB I imagine this has consequences for art criticism.

TB A work that is political timing specific situates itself exactly between art and politics, between aesthetic criteria and political critique. The work can't be analyzed in only one of the two worlds it intervenes in; it can't be studied solely as artistic intention nor as a political intervention. This forces the art critic to learn about the political specificity of a work's place and time, and include a political analysis that goes beyond simply repeating the narrative of the scandal and its consequences (e.g., a trial, a sentence, etc.). Art criticism needs to offer an appropriate account of the political landscape, how it was shaken and challenged, and should speak (like Political Timing Specific Art) simultaneously to an art audience, to political authorities, and to the public interested in this discussion.

CB The pieces I want to discuss in this next chapter fall into two groups. The first comprises works that you made in Cuba, including *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*, *Memoria de la postguerra*, and *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*. The second are the works made outside Cuba: *Trust Workshop/Untitled (Moscow, 2007)* and *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, in London.

Tribute to Ana Mendieta

CB Let's turn to *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1986–1996), a body of work spanning a decade in which you remade key pieces by the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, who died in 1985. Many people would read these performances in terms of reenactment, a popular trope in contemporary art in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the 1980s, however, it was very unusual to be restaging other artists' works.

TB I presented the work as my thesis, and it almost cost me my diploma from ISA. I told the jury that my work was the gesture of redoing somebody else's work and reevaluating it in a different context, and they rejected it. After a long discussion they finally gave me my diploma—probably because of my good grades throughout the whole program. The written part of my thesis was titled *Palimpsesto sobre la imagen de Ana Mendieta*, so my intention to overwrite and "resemanticize" an image was clear.

At the time, Mendieta's gallery was not happy about this project; I think they thought that I wanted to profit from it financially and that I was interfering in their construction of Mendieta's legacy. Remember that I started doing the work a few months after her death, so everything was still in formation.

CB How many pieces did you remake? Was it just the performances, or the objects and photographs too?

TB I did maybe seven performances, I can't remember, plus objects and photographs. There was not much information about her in those early days, but I managed to get a hold of a photocopy of her artistic diary/notebook via her niece, Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, who was my professor for one year at ISA. This helped me a lot and gave me access to some of her unfinished ideas, some of which I realized for this project. Every time I was invited to exhibit I presented my own work and one of hers. I pretended that Mendieta, a Cuban artist, was still alive and working; I never claimed her work as my own while the piece was ongoing. Of course, the Cuban art world is very small so I could only do that for so long.

CB You told me that there are only three photographs of these performances. Why didn't you document them?

TB Documentation has never been my strength. I come from a generation that had limited access to cameras and videos in Cuba, and no access to an art market, so I never acquired the habit of documenting. I have always valued direct experience over documentation; and to be completely honest, when I'm doing something, I never think it will transcend that moment, so I never feel the urge to document. But then I always regret it later. I guess I never learn.

In the mid-1990s Mendieta's gallery found out and questioned me. In order to demonstrate that my intentions were not for financial profit, I told them that after I finished my project I would destroy all the work, and I did in 1996. I've always been very proud of that, because I have always seen myself as an immaterial artist whose work lives in people's memory.

Fig. 14. *No por mucho madrugar, amanece más temprano* [*The sun is not hurried by early risers*], *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* series, 1986–96, Fototeca de Cuba, Havana, 1988.

A year ago I accessed three photos from the project because a photographer named Gonzalo Vidal, very active in Cuba at the time, sent them to me via Facebook. So now I have proof that I really did it!

CB How do you see this work in the context of all the performance reenactments that have taken place since 2000? Many of these were initiated by museums as a new way to exhibit historical performance art. This tendency peaked (and arguably collapsed) with Marina Abramović's reperformance of her own works in the exhibition *The Artist Is Present* at MoMA in 2010, which was when you also reenacted some of your own works for a retrospective at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, New York.[9]

TB I never use the word reenactment, I don't like it; it feels too indebted to historical reenactments for tourists, to stimulate a parody of feelings. I always called it *re-hacer*. For me redoing is a way to digest the work and then "vomit" it back out into the world with your own perspective and with the elements that make the work relevant again; it's an editing process, not a pantomime.

9. "Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary" included reenactments of *Studio Study* (1996), *The Burden of Guilt* (1997), *Displacement* (1998–99), *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, and *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009).

Fig. 15. *Anima* from the Silueta series, *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* series, 1986–96, Institute of International Visual Arts at St. Pancras Church, London, 1996.

My critique of the avalanche of reenactments that happened a few years ago is that they were mostly done as formalist gestures. Other than historical voyeurism, there was no need to do them at all, and they had none of the intensity of the original. Redoing someone else's work needs to be underpinned by a statement, an urgency behind the gesture. It needs to be motivated by a need for that work to exist again; instead of mere nostalgia, there must be urgencies that call for the work to be resituated in the present day and "brought back to life" [Figs. 14, 15].

CB Let's talk about the Political Timing Specific aspect of *Tribute to Ana Mendieta*. Why was it so important to repeat her works in the mid to late 1980s?

TB My original idea was to create an homage to her work, because there were not many female Cuban artist role models at the time (or female role models in general, for that matter). So the Political Timing Specific aspect of *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* was the context: I wanted to reestablish her as an artist who was part of the Cuban cultural landscape in the 1980s, and who had been so influential for Cuban artists. But what caught the attention of the cultural authorities was the fact that I was making an homage to a Cuban who lived outside Cuba,

and on top of that, I was inserting her work into the narrative of our national cultural history at a moment when so many Cuban artists were fleeing the country. An entire artistic generation was leaving, and the government made a symbolic effort to erase them, to intervene with our cultural memory. If you were a writer or a musician and you left for Barcelona, Mexico City, or Miami, your books and music were taken out of the stores, removed from libraries, and never mentioned again in classes.

The official line was that people had left for a more comfortable life—as if they were only interested in better food. In fact, many, at least in the visual arts and literature, left Cuba due to the suffocating atmosphere created by censorship, in which no image, no metaphor, no aesthetic strategy could pass the hypersensitive censors, who saw political commentary even where there was none. Angel Delgado, for example, went to jail for six months in 1990 because of a performance in which he defecated on top of the national newspaper. Critics became policemen and policemen became critics. All this emigration demonstrated to younger artists that if they wanted to exist artistically in Cuba, they had to assume a servile position.

As you can imagine, my proposal did not exactly follow the dictated path and generated a modest response amongst critics, at the time only an article by Gerardo Mosquera in *Poliéster* (1995) and by Erena Hernández in *Mujeres* (1992). The project lasted for ten years, so it was not a one-time exhibition that could be erased, but a persistent effort on my part to talk about Ana Mendieta as a Cuban artist. To explain the work, I had to explain the context in which it was created, and official bureaucrats did not like to be reminded of this.

CB Did you remake her work internationally or just in Cuba?

TB Only in Cuba. The work was for and about Cuba, and the target audience was very specific. The gesture was to claim her as part of the country's history and its art history, but also to rescue those who had left the island and been erased by the government (because this was happening to the eighties generation). I installed one of her works once in Spain, and I realized it didn't make much sense there. She was seen as just another Cuban artist in an exhibition—there was no tension over that claim.

CB What caused you to stop this project after a decade? Was this decision also political timing specific?

TB Yes, it was. I decided to finish the work in 1996 for three reasons. Students from the art history department at the Universidad de la Habana started to visit me to gather information about Ana for their dissertations. She had become part of Cuban art history and so my work was done; her integration was no longer a proposal but reality. Secondly, her estate and Galerie Lelong had established her as an important artist and occasioned a strong public reception of her work. This in turn affected the government attitude toward her; she became an example of the "good" way to return to Cuba. Third, when the government lost the support of the Soviet Union, they changed their attitude toward those who had emigrated: instead of erasing them, they were now welcomed back, without apology. The government called those who left *gusanos* [caterpillars], but people on the street would say that they had been transformed into *mariposas* [butterflies]. Mendieta was basically now a butterfly. So the political situation that had shaped and given meaning to my work had completely changed. There was no need for the project to exist anymore; there was no friction. If I had continued doing it, it would have no longer been political timing specific.

CB Don't you think that all acts of reenactment have the capacity to be political timing specific? After all, any meaningful act of appropriation involves a displacement of context in order to acquire new meaning.

TB No, not all acts of reenactment are political timing specific. An important difference is that political timing specific works don't proceed from the past, but from the anticipation of a potential future. So for a reenactment to be political timing specific, it can't take its lead from nostalgia, a desire to trigger memories, or a veneration of the past. To be political timing specific, reenactment needs to directly intervene in and disrupt politics; it can't be *un fin en sí mismo* [an end unto itself].

I have three ways of thinking about reenactment. First, as a pedagogical act, in which the goal is to learn through experiencing it. This is something I advocate when I teach performance, and it is based on the idea that you can only know about performance through redoing it and feeling it, like copying an academic painting to understand composition and technique: learning through doing. In this case it's not political, it is technical, and the newly acquired meaning is embodied. It becomes part of your artistic toolkit, to be deployed at a future moment.

The second type is reenactment for historical research, allowing people to understand what happened decades ago. This kind of reenactment is analytical but also tends to be nostalgic. There is joy in time traveling, in being in someone else's shoes. As the performer or as the audience, you position yourself in

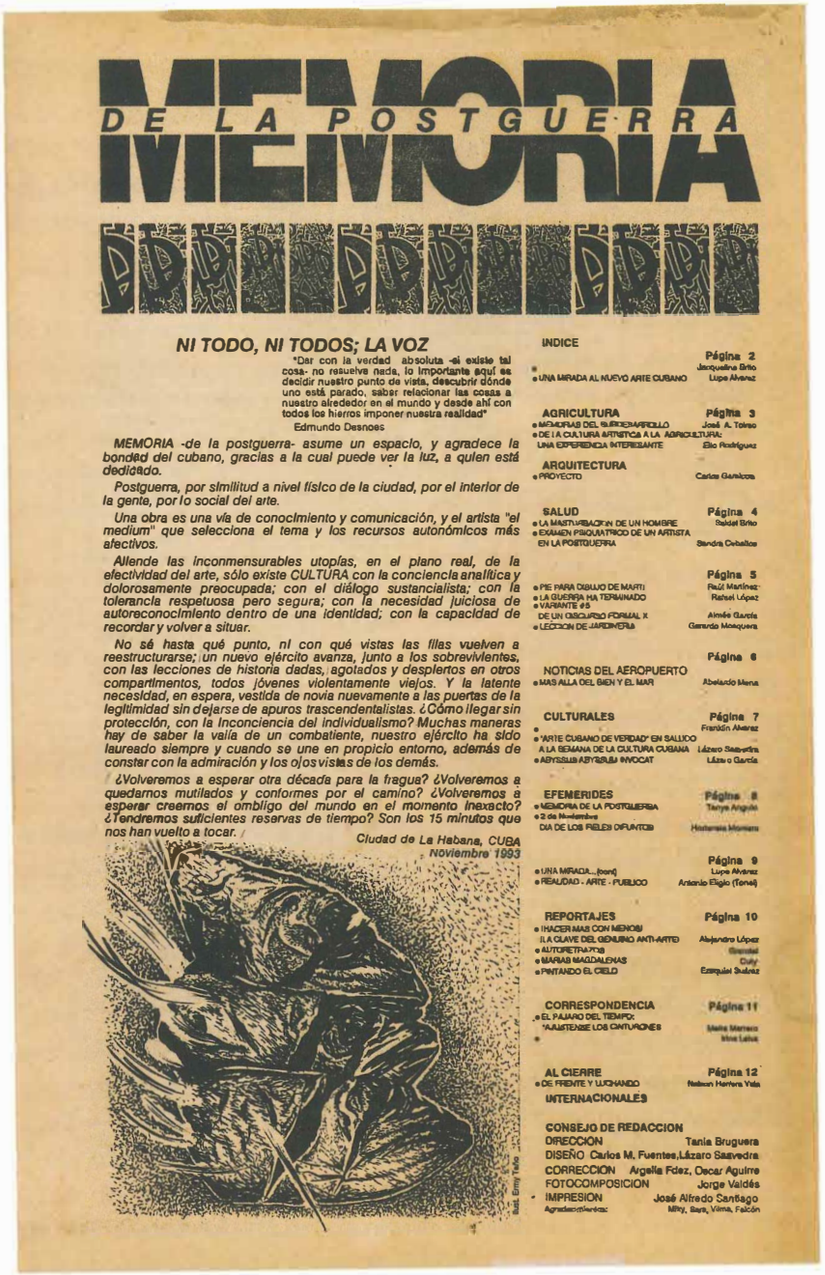
another time when certain things were still shocking; the excitement comes from experiencing in person what others can only see in photos or video. You can be part of a new generation that adds to the total history of the work, reinscribing it within your own emotional narrative. It's a voyeuristic experience that can be spoiled if you just try and see it from the present. More than once I've been disappointed to find out how unexciting and boring some of the performances are that we have otherwise only seen through the mythic lens of documentation.

The third type of reenactment uses the original performance as a point of departure but updates the image, the symbols, or the references so it becomes relevant to the present. In this case, what is taken from the original performance is not the final image we are used to seeing through documentation, nor maybe some of the elements (like a bullet or a dead hare), nor the actual action, but the impact and the consequences of the original performance. For this reason, some elements originally used in the performance may need to be changed if they no longer trigger the same emotional response. It means not only taking the spirit but understanding the nerve that the piece touched and working out how that issue translates today. Maybe the original work involved nudity and today that doesn't make anybody blink.

CB What nerve do you think Mendieta touched with her works in the 1970s?

TB I think what her work meant in the US and what it meant in Cuba was different. I think she claimed Cuba as her own and therefore challenged the idea of nationality as a construction within a physical territory. Back then, you could only claim Cuba if you lived there or if you identified as part of the political process; the only way to claim *cubanidad* was politically. Mendieta wasn't in the country and therefore not part of the political process, yet she claimed Cuba as her own. In the US, by contrast, it seems that her work touched on feminist issues (putting the body into Land Art) and Latinx presence in the art world.

Through this project, I came to understand that in Cuba there is no other option than to be political, because that is the filter through which all work will inevitably be seen. Now, with Raúl Castro, everything is seen through the lens of economic benefits; politics are tied up with money, like almost everywhere else.



MEMORIA
DE LA POSTGUERRA
MEMORIA

NI TODO, NI TODOS; LA VOZ

"Dar con la verdad absoluta -si existe tal cosa- no resuelve nada, lo importante aquí es decidir nuestro punto de vista, descubrir dónde uno está parado, saber relacionar las cosas a nuestro alrededor en el mundo y desde ahí con todos los hierros imponer nuestra realidad"
Edmundo Desnoes

MEMORIA -de la postguerra- asume un espacio, y agradece la bondad del cubano, gracias a la cual puede ver la luz, a quien está dedicado.

Postguerra, por similitud a nivel físico de la ciudad, por el interior de la gente, por lo social del arte.

Una obra es una vía de conocimiento y comunicación, y el artista "el medium" que selecciona el tema y los recursos autonómicos más afectivos.

Allende las inconmensurables utopías, en el plano real, de la efectividad del arte, sólo existe CULTURA con la conciencia analítica y dolorosamente preocupada; con el diálogo sustancialista; con la tolerancia respetuosa pero segura; con la necesidad juiciosa de autoreconocimiento dentro de una identidad; con la capacidad de recordar y volver a situar.

No sé hasta qué punto, ni con qué vistas las filas vuelven a reestructurarse; un nuevo ejército avanza, junto a los sobrevivientes, con las lecciones de historia dadas, agotados y despiertos en otros compartimentos, todos jóvenes violentamente viejos. Y la latente necesidad, en espera, vestida de novia nuevamente a las puertas de la legitimidad sin dejarse de apuros trascendentalistas. ¿Cómo llegar sin protección, con la inconciencia del individualismo? Muchas maneras hay de saber la vaila de un combatiente, nuestro ejército ha sido laureado siempre y cuando se une en propicio entorno, además de constar con la admiración y los ojos vistas de los demás.

¿Volveremos a esperar otra década para la fragua? ¿Volveremos a quedarnos mutilados y conformes por el camino? ¿Volveremos a esperar creemos el ombligo del mundo en el momento inexacto? ¿Tendremos suficientes reservas de tiempo? Son los 15 minutos que nos han vuelto a tocar.

Ciudad de La Habana, CUBA
Noviembre 1993

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Fig. 16. *Memoria de la postguerra I* [*Postwar Memory I*], 1993.

Memoria de la postguerra

CB In 1993 and 1994 you made two newspapers, *Memoria de la postguerra I* and *II* [*Postwar Memory*], which mimicked the appearance and structure of Cuba's official newspaper, *Granma* [Figs. 16, 17]. What did these newspapers comprise, and how do you perceive them to be political timing specific?

TB In 1991–1992, I felt really empty; the art made during the 1980s in Cuba left a big impact on me, but 90 percent of those artists (many of whom were my friends) left the country and the art landscape changed very quickly. I was too young to be part of the eighties generation; by age and circumstances I belonged to the next generation, but I didn't identify with their artistic aspirations and strategies. The newspaper was an attempt to rescue the spirit of *la generación de los 80* [the generation of the eighties].

The first newspaper included a list, created by curator and art critic, Cristina Vives, of everybody in the visual arts who had left Cuba, over one hundred people. This was important because we knew that people were leaving, but we didn't know how many. The newspaper also served as an exhibition catalogue because I distributed it to visitors at the entrance to a solo show of the same name, *Memoria de la postguerra*, at the Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales.

CB But wasn't this period in the early 1990s still characterized by Fidel's rectification of errors policy, which sought to create more dialogue between the official cultural apparatus and Cuban writers and artists?

TB Yes, but artists tried to rectify too much. Artists, writers, philosophers, sociologists, and intellectuals got really excited about having the chance to be involved in the rectification process; it was a unique opportunity to test their expertise and to have a direct and public exchange with power. Intellectuals from many disciplines put together projects that imagined what could be done in Cuba. Artists were invited to be part of shaping cultural policy, but this was all too good to last. Very soon Fidel declared that Gorbachev was an agent of the CIA and that glasnost was a mistake. So the bureaucrats who felt threatened by the space given to intellectuals immediately retaliated, returned to their reactionary positions, and created a general state of censorship in the arts, music, and the university.

On the day the first newspaper came out, I was called to the Council of the Arts by someone who, at one point, had been my professor. It was a soft tap on

MEMORIA DE LA POSTGUERRA

Año I, No.2 **La Habana, CUBA, Junio de 1994**

EL POST-EXILIO Y LA POST-GUERRA

Iván de la Nuez / Juan Pablo Ballester

1. Hay una diferencia radical entre un viaje y un exilio. La experiencia al respecto de los artistas cubanos lo confirma de un modo absoluto. De un viaje el regreso es habitualmente victorioso, con el recuerdo de los buenos tratos, la exaltación de los egos y la sensación maravillosa de haber vivido los 5 minutos de gloria decretados por Andy Warhol. Estos minutos hacían casi tangible el sueño de convertirse en Madonna, Beuys, Harrison Ford o, para variar, Jürgen Habermas. En un exilio, donde los "extraños" - nuevos bárbaros, según la sociología de moda- han llegado para competir por un lugar bajo el sol, los sueños y las posibilidades sufren ligeras variaciones. Las acotaciones del terreno colocan el tope de las aspiraciones en unos paradigmas que se llaman Celia Cruz, Wifredo Lam, Andy García o, para no variar, Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Así, los 5 minutos de gloria de Warhol se nos convierten en 5 minutos de Gloria...Estefan. Y es que los cubanos, como todos los emigrantes, navegan su exilio por los mapas y territorios que se han codificado previamente. Al punto de encontrarse con un mundo de inscripciones que les obliga a vivir en una hiperrealidad delineada por las postales turísticas. El juego que han conseguido estas "marcas tropicales" obedece a unas determinaciones imprecisables. En realidad, nunca sabremos si Cuba vende la imagen que Occidente prescribe, o éste recoge los dictados que a la isla convienen. En cualquier caso, lo importante no son las jerarquías del origen del juego, sino el juegomismo.

2. Si bien las circunstancias del viaje han sido experimentadas por muchos artistas de la isla, estos desconocen casi todo lo que implica un exilio (que por cierto, suele ser más complejo que una galería, un catálogo o un anuncio en Art in América). Los guetos de "afuera" son complejos, diversificados y se enlazan con diferentes canales de circulación. La, así llamada, vanguardia cubana de los 80 -que fue algo más que "eso: años...y nada más"- ha arribado a distintos países y, aunque siempre ha morado en los ámbitos prefijados, en cada uno se ha implicado de un modo diferente. México, por ejemplo, funcionó como un guetto cultural que insertaba su producción intelectual en espacios e instituciones dedicadas al "problema cubano". Miami continúa como el espacio por excelencia de la gratificación económica, pasado por el agua, siempre turbia, de la política y por el encuentro con un mundo retro tan obsesionado con su "cubanidad" como poco acostumbrado a la estética de la plástica cubana de los 80. Mientras en la Europa de Maastrich, inhóspita con los extraños y embelesada con los nacionalismos.

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AÑORANZAS POR CUBA

Emilio Ichikawa Morín

A mis amigos, los que están desde México

"Las piedras de la isla parecen que van a salir volando", dice un verso de la poetisa cubana Dulce María Loynaz, dueña de un premio Cervantes de Literatura y, a demás, de un silencio tan hablador como el de Sor Juana. En la isla las cosas son leves, y sus definiciones, a veces, parecen bromas; es decir, les falta gravedad: sus ríos son delgados, sus montañas menudas y sus bosques más próximos a los jardines que a las selvas.

Cristo es roca, y Cristo mismo parece que va a salir disparado Quizás por eso el nuestro, macho y marino, se encuentra en Regla, margen insolentemente izquierdo de la bahía desde donde zarpan los barcos.

Las criaturas de la Isla son como sus piedras y también como su Cristo. Parladoras y rumiantes, circulan un aviso que, a fuerza de repetirse, más parece indicar un sentido destinal que un accidente: irse del país. A pesar de las ficciones de algún propagandista, irse es una ficha recurrente en el juego de cualquier cubano y, conste, aunque duela, uno no acostumbra a irse del lugar donde las cosas le van bien. En buen chuchero: irse es una ficha guardada para cuando el dominó se tranque.

Hasta el idioma quiebra bajo el peso del hábito. Cuando a usted le dicen que fulano se quedó, no le significan que dejó, por ejemplo, una vida bohemia por un nido de hogar o que echó raíces en Escobar, la calle más cálida de la Habana. Nada de eso. Quedarse es dejar, es abandonar, que es también -y eso lo saben quienes se quedaron- la nostalgia por regresar. Nostalgia cada vez menos culpable, pero culpable aún.

El problema radica, para ellos y para nosotros, en que de Cuba uno jamás puede irse, sin darse cuenta de que no hay lugar en el mundo para refugiarse de ella.

Esa escapada desgarradora ocurre en diferentes grados. No estar desde Londres, así se sea un escritor de sensibilidad sin par, es de un extrañamiento más intenso que no estar desde Miami. No estar desde México es, por otra parte, una forma bastante peculiar de ausencia. Tal y como fluyen los acontecimientos, México D.F. llegará a ser, sin dudas la tercera ciudad de los cubanos.

Estar y no estar, irse y quedarse, es la tensión que signa a la gente de la isla, de esta isla, y eso se define en cualquier sitio, dentro o fuera. Sin embargo, ese doble signo se potencia, ora en su extremo, ora en el otro, y es esa potenciación la que llega a hacer distinguibles a algunos cubanos entre sí. Es una distinción de acento, no de cualidad; pero, y esto es lo que quiero advertir, es una distinción que existe.

No estar, irse, es una condición posible. De hecho, hay quienes se fueron y el exilio cubano es una realidad, tenga la textura que tenga. No están o están lejos, porque esto de aquí -ahora no- es un ente sino un algo-contingente que permuta todos los días. Cambio acelerado que es capaz de pasmar al

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Fig. 17. *Memoria de la postguerra II* [*Postwar Memory II*], 1993.

the shoulder. He said, "As a friend, I recommend you don't do this anymore." I said: Okay, and then I ran to the place where the second edition was being printed and made sure it was finished that same day.

CB So after this warning, how did the second issue of the newspaper come about?

TB It appeared two days later, because it was already on press. This was also political timing specific. As I mentioned, the first issue provided a list of more than one hundred artists who had left the country; this irritated the cultural officials. The second issue was on the subject of migration, because it was the first time that Cubans living inside and outside of Cuba occupied the same "space," albeit a printed one. This was definitely not welcomed by the government and cultural institutions; today, however, it's the norm, and doing it now would not generate any political tension. But then the head of the council accused me of libel. I asked him to prove that the newspaper was not an artwork. When he ran out of aesthetic arguments, he said I was breaking Cuban law regarding printed matter, press circulation, and the use of state resources (he was referring not only to the machines and the ink, but to the worker who printed it), crimes that I could spend fifteen years in jail for.

I realized back in 1994 that the government had started to set in motion capitalist strategies, which were comparatively very mild, but it was clear to me that once such decisions were made, there would be no going back—even if the official propaganda said something different. I wanted to prove that you could buy ideology with money.

CB In other words, you bought the means to disseminate a counter-ideology.

TB This was not something you could imagine in Cuba back then. The image of the country was one of anticorruption, and of loyalty to ideological principles. Fidel famously said that the Revolution and its principles could never be bought, but the Cuban Revolution had long been for sale.

The very first independent newspaper in Cuba after the Revolution was an artwork (produced for very little money), but for people who were not in the arts it was just a newspaper, and they wondered how this could happen. It seemed impossible. My work in general tries to do what seems impossible so that other people can think: if she can do it, why can't I?

CB Why is it called *Memoria de la postguerra*?

TB Because I wanted to compare the physical landscape of Cuba with a postwar landscape. In the 1970s I lived in Lebanon and experienced one of the Israeli invasions of Beirut. I have memories of destroyed buildings after the tanks and bombs—entire sections of the city were devastated. I often passed through Havana and felt a connection with those memories of postwar Lebanon. In Cuba we were at war—an ideological war—and this was the landscape resulting from that war.

I called it *Memoria de la postguerra* because newspapers, unlike books, are about the ephemeral: the news of the day is simultaneously forgotten tomorrow and preserved as historical document. In Cuba there is still a culture of "live today and don't worry about tomorrow." It's hard to find documents that preserve memory, and anyway, most people do not want to remember.

CB Why do you think that is?

TB It's a post-traumatic effect of political abuse. *Memoria de la postguerra* urges us to remember the artistic work of the generation of the eighties, and to remember how the government constantly erased personal and historical memories, pretending that things hadn't happened or were not important, and how they continually changed the meaning of things. Our only defense was to recuperate memory and leave behind traces as mnemonic devices, to remember everything and pass on those memories. Art is a perfect way to do so.

CB How many of the articles in the newspapers did you write?

TB In the first newspaper I only wrote the introduction, in the form of an editorial. The idea was to give space to others. The subject of the issue was the Cuban city as a postwar landscape, and it was written by Cuban artists living on the island.

The second issue was about two Cubas: one inside and one outside of the island. I put the two in dialogue—the artists whom the Cuban government wanted to erase and those who were supposed to forget them—and on top of that, the topic of emigration, its impact, and the resulting two Cubas. In 1994 this was too much for the authorities (it happened before the raft crisis later that year). That second issue led to something that influenced my work and was very painful: being summoned by the Seguridad del Estado [Department of State Security] for interrogation: "Where did you print it? How did you print it? Who gave you the money?"

CB At the time, was it common for artists to be hauled in for questioning in this way?

TB No. That was more typical of the eighties. Ironically, by claiming the memory and audacity of that time, and by bringing those artists' names back to Cuba through the articles in the newspaper, I also brought back the repression that they suffered. So I felt the experience of the 1980s all over again: the freedom, the excitement, the overwhelming energy, but also the restriction and the interrogation. When I talked to other artists from the eighties about their encounters with the state security police, they made it sound ridiculous and laughed about it. Back then, artists had a certain power; they were also all men and there was a spirit of camaraderie among them. I was alone and it was actually my father who brought me in for questioning, that was pretty intense and traumatic.

CB Your *father* brought you in? Perhaps we should mention that he was a diplomat, which is why you were in Lebanon in the 1970s.

TB In 1994 he was the Cuban ambassador to Argentina and he was connected to high power. Later I discovered that he was also an intelligence officer. He returned from Argentina because of this incident; he came to my house and told me to give him all the newspapers. But I was more savvy with the second newspaper, I distributed bundles of them to different people's houses to make sure I could always have some. I told him, "I only have twenty at home, so you can take them all!" (another 480 were already safe). He said, "Let's go and have a *paseo* [trip]." I thought we were going to have lunch, or go to his home; I never imagined that he was going to bring me to a house in Nuevo Vedado, where there were two men from counterintelligence. Not only did they ask me tons of questions, implying accusations that I denied, but they also asked me to collaborate, i.e., become an informer.

It was extremely painful. My father and I already had a very complicated relationship and he totally manipulated me. After that our relationship was broken, I felt completely betrayed and unsure that I could trust anyone again. (Of course, I repressed this for over ten years.) One of the reasons I decided to spend more time outside of Cuba was because of the pressure—also from my father—to collaborate with the regime. I didn't want to, and so my solution, when asked, was to not know anything about anybody. I pretended to be crazy, unreliable. In the process I lost my memories and acquired the discipline of forgetting. I wanted to be seen as a worthless source of information so they would leave me alone. Thank god for my mother, who supported my decision and confronted my father about his pressure. She told me: "Remember that if you work for them once, you can never leave that behind." I was determined not to collaborate, because I was an artist, not a police officer. I was betrayed by my father; having experienced this, I knew I could not do it to anyone else.

So I accepted any and every project outside of Cuba, because the more I was out of the country, the less I knew about what was happening in the art world there, the less likely it was that I could be called in for questioning; so I decided to leave Cuba when I saw the right opportunity. And then of course, they left me alone. Now, however, I'm finally on the list of enemies of the state.

CB Did anything positive come out of this experience?

TB I learned about responsibility to others. For the first issue, my friend David Cordovéz helped me because I needed to rush it through, despite having already been advised not to do it. Remember, back then it was all cut and paste for real, not digital. I was asked to go to the office of the president of the arts council for a "talk"; at the same time, I later learned, David was taken to the police station and interrogated. After that I became painfully aware of the consequences of Political Timing Specific Art and came to the conclusion that I should only do solo performances and not work collectively. When I decided a few years later to return to making work that involved other people, either as participants or as collaborators, I spent more time thinking about how to control the consequences that could affect them than I did making aesthetic decisions.

Another thing I learned in the conversation with the president of the arts council, and again with the state secret police officer, was the government's fear of people working together on something they hadn't approved. They both told me: "You cannot bring all these people together, you cannot use your *poder de convocatoria*" [convocation power]. That phrase stuck in my mind for years. I realized that what they were afraid of was not only the fact that I printed something without permission, but that I was uniting people from inside and outside of Cuba. They didn't want to lose control over that division. I also learned that they were afraid.

CB You returned to the newspaper format ten years later in what I presume was a far less politicized context.

TB It was a solo show in 2003 at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana. That

exhibition gave me the opportunity to take artistic revenge for my punishment for the first and second issues of *Memoria de la postguerra*. The third issue was a newspaper with no name and all that was printed was around 150 political slogans of the Revolution from 1959 to 2003. No date. No name. No nothing—just slogans. It was my way of saying that there was no space to talk [Fig. 18].

Fig. 18. *Memoria de la postguerra III* [*Postwar Memory III*], 2003.

By this point, I had become internationally recognized and my work had been included in several biennials (including in the international section of the Venice Biennale and at Documenta 11). I've learned to use art events and art institutions to acquire cultural capital to make it possible to do political artwork inside of Cuba. It's sometimes hard for people to understand why I decide to participate in certain art events; this is because I make decisions based on how cultural officials in Cuba will perceive it, and how difficult it makes it for them to discredit me as an artist. Acquiring cultural prestige is my only defense against the Cuban government: the more I have, the more politically risky and transgressive my work can be.

CB Why do you call it a revenge?

TB Because I was publishing again. I waited ten years, but I finally did it. In the paper there were slogans that the government pretended no longer existed, such as *al paredón!* [to the firing squad], a call to execute people who were not revolutionary. Nobody wants to remember that they once shouted this in the streets.

If you're an artist who makes a newspaper when a free press is permitted then it's not political timing specific, even if the content is political. When there's a free press, there's no need for art to open such forbidden social, legal, or political spaces, or for art to show that freedom of speech is possible.

CB But a newspaper as work of art can have different functions in different places, it doesn't have to be in a context of state repression to become politically relevant. Making a cheap, disposable newspaper has its own politics (with a small *p*) in a context where art is a luxury status symbol and an object of financial speculation, and where artistic success is defined in terms of sales to the 1 percent. Think of Dan Perjovschi's newspapers, or The Yes Men's parafictional edition of the *New York Times* in 2008, which was distributed in public with the headline "Iraq War Ends," and all the articles contained good news [Fig. 19].

Fig. 19. The Yes Men, *The New York Times Special Edition*, November 12, 2008.

TB The Yes Men's newspaper was political timing specific because it was a moment when the Bush administration was lying and people didn't trust the news. Sure, there were no tangible consequences, but it was a piece very specific to that political moment. If you'd printed it during the Obama administration it wouldn't have worked, because most people trusted him. Now it wouldn't make any sense because we all know everything is fake and the news is cooked.

CB The Yes Men were operating on the borderline that Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls parafictional. But your newspaper had no parafictional qualities.

TB Maybe it was para-real, or hyper-real. In 2004, when we printed the last issue of *Memoria de la postguerra* in Miami, the guy who we asked to print the newspaper was Cuban and he refused, thinking it was pro-Communist! So it is a piece beyond irony.

Untitled (Havana, 2000)

CB Let's talk about *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*—an installation in which viewers enter a dark space, treading on thick layers of sugar cane underfoot. As your eyes adapt to the darkness, you see a flickering light (produced by a black-and-white video

Fig. 20. *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, Havana Biennial, 2000.

screen) in the middle of the space, and you gradually become aware of a brushing sound. Very slowly, you realize the sound is coming from naked men, rubbing their own bodies. Viewers undergo a haptic, sensuous experience that also becomes social: the texture and smell of the sugar cane underfoot, the glowing video (showing footage of Fidel Castro), but also unease at our proximity to the naked performers. For me, the work really reinforced how effectively you construct and manipulate an experience for the audience [Fig. 20].

TB *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* is one of my favorite works. I think it's the first piece I did that was not intended for a local Cuban audience, or the government. Instead, it was a piece about Cuba for foreigners. It was done during the Havana Biennial when there was a lot of enthusiasm and expectation among Cubans because so many visitors came (some for the first time) from the US.

CB But your work also included the image of Fidel. Why do you consider it to be political timing specific?

TB It was questioning the enthusiasm, and it was related to the venue.

CB The fortress, La Cabaña?

TB No, the biennial. Suddenly, people had the chance to come and see Cuban art—or rather, to use art to be able to go see Cuba. That year many North Americans were excited to finally visit the forbidden island they had previously only imagined. The biennial became an excuse for many groups of museum board members and visitors to invade the streets of Havana and artists' studios. But they already had an image of Cuba that wasn't going to be changed by anything they experienced.

CB Why isn't that site specificity?

TB It could have been simply site specific, but the government was so anxious to have the "correct image" in front of these new visitors, and my work didn't help. First they cut off the electricity to the piece, but this also cut the power from the rest of the works that were shown on that side of the Cabaña; some of the artists were foreigners and protested, so the government had to switch the lights back on. Then they closed my work for a few hours after the opening, but there was already a long line of important curators waiting to enter and they had to let them go inside in order to avoid a scandal. Then they called me on the phone the next morning and said, "We know you want to open it again, but do not try." That's why I consider it political timing specific: it forced a reaction from the government. But it also targeted the enamored gaze of US visitors to Cuba. The piece was critiquing their lack of interest in seeing anything other than their preformed romanticized image of the country and iconic leader, instead of the Cubans who were the real vulnerable ones, like the performers in the piece.

CB Earlier you spoke of political timing specific work intervening in a moment when politics are taking shape. This work operates more symbolically than in the realm of direct action, which we could also say of your installations *Poetic Justice* (2003) and *Untitled (Kassel, 2002)*. The appropriated video clips of Fidel Castro are not just clichés for the tourist gaze but have been chosen to represent his populist interactions with children, workers, and so on.

TB Remember that we are looking back at works I made before I created the concept of Political Timing Specific Art! This installation doesn't fit perfectly, whereas now I work more consciously. But *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* was political

timing specific because it reacted to new political circumstances: the US government was re-evaluating its policy toward Cuba, and vice versa.

For the video, I took a lot of clips from documentaries and randomly combined them together without any editing criteria. Every minute one image repeats: a young Fidel opening his military shirt to show he has no bullet proof vest underneath [Fig. 21]. Other images show Fidel in his pajamas in a TV studio with his kid, pretending he's at home giving an interview—it's totally weird to see this degree of theater! Or Fidel giving a speech in front of a big crowd. But the whole video is silent. When I showed the work again at MoMA in 2018, it was very different. Now he's deceased, he's not in the media all the time. Back in 2000, some people thought I was announcing the death of the leader. In the future we'll see him in a different way and hopefully Cuba will be seen differently; then the installation will be dated and we can see it for its aesthetics.

CB What was the rationale for the naked performers? Are they metaphors for the Cuban population and their ultimate invisibility to the tourists?

TB The work was about vulnerability. The juxtaposition was between the constructed vulnerability of a politician in the media, and that of someone—a "John Doe"—who is vulnerable next to you, in the flesh. The theme of the biennale was *Uno más cerca del otro* [*One Closer to the Other*] and I applied this to the media.[10] At that point I was still very representational in my thinking (how do I symbolize Cuba? sugar cane) but in that piece I discovered the potential of depriving vision over the other senses. I worked with the idea of fear and seduction.

CB Can you explain the choreography of the four performers?

TB There are four gestures that reflect some of the anxieties of Cubans and their automatic commitment to their reality. One of them is a person bowing submissively. But if you're able to see it in the dark, you can see that he keeps looking at you as he bows down, so it's more intense: "I know I have to submit to you, but I'm really not agreeing to it." This appearance of submission is something that happens many times in Cuba. Another is about trying to find something in your mouth, or take something out of your mouth, or stop something from coming out of your mouth. This speaks to the idea of self-censorship and how so many Cubans decide to shut up; over time that becomes a burden and a double morality and the country we have today. A third gesture is brushing something off or out of the body. The fourth gesture was changed for MoMA, because I didn't like the original one. We replaced it with a gesture that is reminiscent of when the police ask you to put your hands above your head. All of the gestures make a subtle sound and are obsessive.

10. Nelson Herrera Ysla's text in the catalogue describes the exhibition's theme as "a return to the world of reality (not boosting the virtual one)" as a counterpoint to globalization. See http://universes-in-universe.de/car/habana/bien7/e-thema.htm.

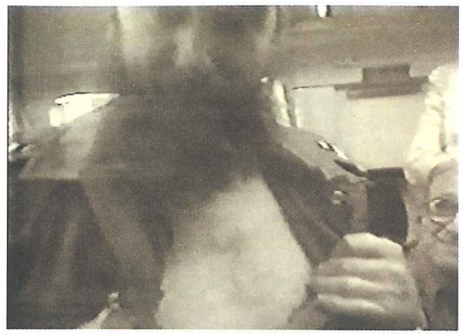

Fig. 21. *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*, video still.

The performers undergo a transformation in the eyes of the audience: at first they don't exist (they are invisible in the dark). When they appear they are like guardians of the video, sustaining it, like atlantes on a building. Then they start to look like slaves; they're not there because they want to be, but because they have to. At the end, they look like broken machines, doing the same gestures over and over.

CB Speaking of MoMA, how did you justify the restaging of this political timing specific work in New York in 2018?

TB I think the US fascination with Cuba is still there, it's irrational and blind, and it prevents Cubans from having a complex dialogue about our reality with them. So in that sense I feel the same conditions persist, because it's basically the same viewer who experiences it. As I said earlier, when redoing a work, I advocate either a very historical restaging of a piece, where you explain the sensibility of the moment it was made, or an update. At MoMA we went for the former and tried to prepare the audience for the installation: when you entered the space there was a large wall text explaining the context, as well as interviews in the brochure. You had to wait in line, which slowed down spectatorship and hopefully made people more receptive. It's important to prepare the audience, because we rely too much on aesthetics as if it's a category that doesn't change, but in fact something that was amazing in 1965 won't necessarily be amazing today.

Some audiences had a deeper relationship with the work—some Cubans who'd been detained in La Cabaña had a very intense reaction; also Venezuelans for whom the work resonated with their current experience of the Maduro

regime, especially after the massacre;[11] there were also some people who had the same feelings about the Trump presidency.

CB What I'm struggling to grasp is the relationship between the politics of cultural repression and exile in *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* and *Memoria de la postguerra* and the cultural politics of the Biennial in *Untitled (Havana, 2000)*. Or is this just a difference of degree, not of quality, because every cultural event in Cuba is also a political event?

TB In Cuba they are related, because everything is about the grand narrative of the Revolution. For totalitarian regimes, culture is of great importance, not only as a sophisticated propaganda device to impress those on the outside, but to cultivate an emotional bondage toward the revolutionary project for the people living inside Cuba. Someone in Europe once told me: "You are an ambassador of your country because you are a Cuban artist exhibiting here." Even if I didn't want to play that role, the fact that there was hardly any information about Cuba in the outside world transformed an art opening into an overwhelming Q&A session about the country and its politics. People have the idea that artists in Cuba are part of the propaganda machine and are happy with their government. In the West, by contrast, culture is conceived as separate from state policies and government agendas.

Outside Cuba

CB We've been discussing your works made inside Cuba; now I want to jump ahead a few years to a handful of works you made outside Cuba, around the time you were formulating the idea of Political Timing Specific Art. The first of these is the *Trust Workshop/Untitled (Moscow, 2007)*. This is another highly structured experience for the viewer, who enters a small space and is confronted with a photographer who asks him or her to pose for a portrait with live monkeys or eagles [Fig. 22].

TB Three monkeys, two eagles, and the photographers. The original idea was to put a classified ad in the newspaper announcing "Trust Workshops" for people

11. Bruguera is referring to a period of four months, from April 1 to June 30, 2017, when mass protests erupted all over Venezuela. During that period, there were 6,729 protests and an estimated 163 killed. The protestors, who came to be known as La Resistencia, were primarily students and young professionals in the states of Mérida, Bolívar, and Sucre.

Fig. 22. *Trust Workshop/Untitled (Moscow, 2007)*, Moscow Biennial, 2007.

who didn't trust members of their family, their friends, institutions, or the government; basically, for people who were suffering the consequences of having lived in the Soviet Union. The workshop would be conducted by an ex-KGB agent, but this detail would not be announced. The idea was to repurpose the agent's knowledge, turning a negative outcome from the past into a positive application of psychological techniques used by KGB agents, almost as a reparation for previous damage. In the socialist era, the secret police worked to isolate people and create distrust in order to control them; the idea was to revert this process into one where people could trust again, conducted by those who had caused the problem in the first place.

CB In the end, however, you didn't pursue this option: it was too complicated to work with both Russians and international visitors to the Moscow Biennial. So instead you went for the photo shoot with animals, but retained the theme of (mis)trust. Only when people picked up their portraits later did they realize they had been photographed, with their chosen animal, in front of a portrait

of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the first two state security organizations in the Soviet Union, predecessors of the KGB.

TB First of all, I realized that the KGB was still active but under another name. So when we did the open call for a former KGB agent, the people who came were all suspicious: either too young to have been agents during the Soviet era, or they interrogated us about why we were interested in the KGB. So in the end, we couldn't find someone to lead the workshop. Second, it brought up an ethical question about voyeurism. How would we handle the issue of foreign visitors to the workshop—which was so personal, and so internal to Russian history. Would they be watching it? Would we translate it? So I kept the title of the event, because the whole thing became about another type of trust—between the work of art and the viewer.

When you have your photo taken, you think you are having this amazing time with the animals and then when you're given the photograph, you see that the presence of the KGB is still there, not only in the photo but in your life. And yet, of the seventy-six photographs taken during the two-hour opening in Moscow, only one man declined to participate when he saw the photograph of Dzerzhinsky. When you work with political symbolism, you choose an image because you think everybody knows what it means . . . but then it turns out that most people don't even recognize it. That was a big surprise for me, how quickly historical facts are erased or substituted.

CB Is this work political timing specific because of the situation in the mid-2000s—the post-Soviet period giving way to rampant neoliberal privatization, even while the ghosts of the KGB still haunted the country? Putin came to power in 2000 and inaugurated an increasingly authoritarian style of government.

TB Russia was selling itself as the good guys who do not surveil their citizens anymore. But of course that wasn't true. The KGB has just changed its name to the Federal Security Service (FSB). A lot of people from the KGB are still in power, like Putin.

CB You made a version of this piece for the New York performance biennial Performa, and called it *Delayed Patriotism* (2007). How did this work differ?

TB Performa asked me to do the Moscow piece, but it made no sense talking about the KGB in the US. Edward Snowden had yet to become a whistleblower, otherwise I would have done something on the National Security Agency. Instead, I researched people who had been paid by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to go against their own governments, some of whom were installed as presidents in Latin America, Iran, and Africa. So, I supplied viewers with a history that is normally repressed about the US.

Fig. 23. *Tatlin's Whisper #5,* Tate Modern, London, 2008.

CB But the core structure remained the same as in Moscow: viewers were invited to have their photograph taken with an animal. Later they were given a copy of their portrait, but noticed a portrait of one of these "traitors" in the background, together with information about his connection to the CIA. Did anyone notice or recognize the portrait when they walked in?

TB There were only two guys at Performa in New York who didn't want to have their picture taken once they saw the print and understood that it would appear in the image with them.

CB The animals serve as a wonderful distraction; it's a homespun, micro-model of the way in which corporate entertainment distracts us from global inequality.

TB I think it's the only piece I've done where I've consciously used spectacle in the same way that politicians use it, that is, as a diversion so you don't know what's really happening. In the US version, people didn't know who the characters

were because they still don't really know the detailed story of CIA involvement in regime change elsewhere. And back then, in the US, people too often chose to be disconnected from the political.

CB I do think this work is site specific, not political timing specific!

TB In Russia it was a current issue, but in the US it was about history, yes. That is why the title is different.

CB Let's briefly talk about the series Tatlin's Whisper, particularly the iteration at Tate Modern, *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008). In this piece, two mounted policemen demonstrated a range of crowd control techniques on the audience, who are standing on the bridge of the Turbine Hall [Fig. 23].

TB *Tatlin's Whisper #5* is not political timing specific. Nevertheless, the piece is owned by Tate, and in the contract there is a clause that says it can only be done if there are certain social and political circumstances, for example, a lot of media coverage of protests or terrorism.[12] Then the audience will be in the right psychological mind-set to react to the piece the way they should. So it should be contextualized, but it's not political timing specific.

CB Does the museum decide that context—or you?

TB The museum. When the Guggenheim Museum bought *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, in which I offered Cubans one minute of free speech, we had a big exchange. They wanted to redo the piece in the US. I said there was no way it could be done here; it makes no sense. The only way we could do it again is if people have a chance to say exactly what they think about the art world. And they said no! The other option would be if an authoritarian regime, limiting freedom of expression, should come to pass in the US, which at the time of acquisition wasn't even imaginable. But by the time this book is printed, who knows?!

CB Why is the series called Tatlin's Whisper? Why invoke a Russian constructivist from the 1920s for a series of works that address politicized media images in the 2000s?

12. Point 3.i of the contract specifies that "The work can be shown in places where abrupt social and political events have happened either in their recent history, in the significant history of the place, at the moment when such events are an overwhelming presence in the media or when the tension leading to the conditions for sudden civilian uprise are present."

TB The reference to Vladimir Tatlin addresses the relationship between artists and power at certain historical moments; it also evokes the mandate of art for social change. It addresses the idea of grand utopias that were never accomplished, and the state of the left historically—no longer a loud HURRAH but a quiet whisper.

CB Do you find it difficult to make Political Timing Specific Art outside Cuba? I suspect it's easier to make such work in a repressive context like Cuba than it is in liberal democracies where the market depends upon a freedom of money, movement, and ideas.

TB In Cuba I understand the nuances well; it's easy to know what makes the government tick even after being away a long time. It's harder to navigate other realities and to understand what makes people sensitive politically. For example, I made a piece for a billboard project series in which Trump held a gun (as if intending to commit suicide) with the text "he is just the symptom" and it was censored. People focused more on the issue of suicide rather than gun laws, or a future in which Trump becomes so rejected and broke he would have no other option. It is also difficult to understand why a government imposes certain laws or propaganda. In those circumstances it's harder to be politically specific and emotionally accurate.

And yes, in repressive regimes, where the government micromanages people's lives, it's much easier to locate the trigger for their response than in a context where politics are decentralized and government power is replaced by corporations, business, and layers of cover-up. Political Timing Specific Art is not only possible, but useful, in liberal democracies, but there's a different sense of accountability than when you're dealing directly with the state. It's less about showing repression and more about demanding transparency and ethical accountability.

#YoTambienExijo

CB We should finally address the best example of political timing in your work: *#YoTambienExijo*, an attempt to restage *Tatlin's Whisper #6* on Plaza de la Revolución, on December 30, 2014. So much of your thinking about this term has come about as a result of this.

TB I originally made *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in 2009, one month after the new president,

Fig. 24. *#YoTambienExijo*, Havana, 2014.

Raúl Castro, announced that he wanted to hear what everybody was thinking, and to that end he proposed organizing assemblies in workplaces and universities. It was pure theater, whereas *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was an opportunity for people to say what they wanted, without censorship.

In 2014, I tried to stage the same piece shortly after political conditions abruptly changed in Cuba, following the announcement that the country would resume diplomatic relations with the United States. A historical enemy was about to become a friend. My reaction to the announcement was immediate: I wrote an open letter to Raúl Castro, Barack Obama, and Pope Francis, and congratulated them on this historic moment, which Cubans have spent half a century waiting for. I then asked Raúl to explain his vision for the future of Cuba and the legacy of the Revolution in the face of neoliberalism. At the end of the letter, I suggested reinstalling *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in Plaza de la Revolución to let everyone's voices be heard.

In the letter, the reference to *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was a metaphor. But my sister, Deborah Bruguera, and a friend of mine, Clara Astiasarán, posted the letter online, with the hashtag *#YoTambienExijo*, and it went viral on Facebook. Very quickly, people started writing in the comments that it should be done for real. But changing the venue, from an art space to a public square, occasioned a totally different response from the government. It was as if they had been

invaded. There was no negotiation. We entered a territory that the government claimed ownership of—even though it's a public square, originally named Plaza Cívica. We were trying to reclaim this civic space [Fig. 24].

On the day when the event was scheduled, the secret police came at 5 am to my apartment and took me into detention, which meant that the piece couldn't even begin. But for me, this still meant that the work was successful. When a piece is political timing specific you are activating elements that are already there and calling in the players. What makes it artistic is the tension between what the situation is and what you want it to be. The outcome of the work is not decided by the artist's desire, but how it unfolds.

CB We'll discuss this work further in chapter 5. But did you ever worry that *#YoTambienExijo* might be political timing specific in the wrong way? In other words, that it might negatively affect diplomatic relations? After all, it could be seen as playing into the hands of Republicans who believe that the US should not engage with Cuba, using the excuse that the government still represses freedom of speech.

TB Yes, the Cuban government claimed that the piece represented US Republican interests in order to turn people—Cubans as well as leftists internationally—against the work, which is an easy way to discredit it. But the work is a criticism from the left. The Cuban government co-opted the meaning of the work, so I had to fight to reclaim my artistic intention and its context.