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ART COLLECTIVES, AFRO-CUBAN CULTURE, AND ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL  
PRODUCTION, 1975-2010: THE PERFORMATIVE INTERVENTIONS OF OMNI ZONA  
FRANCA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SPACE IN THE CUBAN PUBLIC SPHERE

THESIS SUBMITTED TO MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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THE SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN  
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## **Abstract**

This study presents an analysis of the appropriation of public space by cultural producers in Cuba, with a focus on art collectives, in particular, OMNI Zona Franca from Alamar, east of Havana. Based on primary research conducted with the artists, cultural producers, and scholars, I discuss OMNI's work in the context of the history and formation of a nascent movement for civil society in Cuba, locating the collective's work within the matrix of alternative and African diasporic cultural production. The latter is framed as part of a historical continuum and in the context of the discussion of race that emerged in Cuba's public sphere during the 1990s with a concurrent movement among black Cuban artists to address issues of race.

Situating OMNI's work in a longer history of Afro-Cuban cultural production in Cuba as well as within the history of art collectives this study demonstrates how OMNI's participation in the public sphere relates to social practice, appropriation of space, alternativity, and the forging of a wide coalition of civil and artistic alternatives among diverse communities. I draw on discourses on the production of space, particularly those of Henri Lefebvre and Raymond Williams, and argue that the unique and specific history of Alamar provided a fertile ground for alternative culture where multiple and countercultural expressions could be incubated and take root.

The struggle over public space and the attempts by artists to create an autonomous public sphere in Cuba have led to continual conflict with the state. Using Gramsci's theorization of civil society as incorporating both the hegemonic and contestatory realms, I contend that the level of contestation in OMNI Zona Franca's work should be seen as counter-hegemonic expression aimed at altering the status quo.

Producing new social relations, the collective's practice is offered as an example of how art and cultural production is inaugurating alternative counter-spaces in the context of a demand for a more inclusive and representative Revolutionary public sphere.

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Dedicated to the memory of my parents and the memory of Ray Blanco,  
who I met in Miami in the spring of 1994, waiting in line to  
board my first flight to Havana.

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## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

As an educator who has worked in the field of visual art in various capacities for the past two decades, I became interested in Latin American contemporary art, especially from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, early on in my career. As the director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art's high school program in the New York City public schools in the late 1980s and 1990s, an important aspect of my work as a teaching artist was to introduce students to contemporary art produced by artists whose work reflected the students' own experiences and backgrounds, predominantly African American or from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic), Mexico, and Central America. For many of my students, the experience of immigration also played a central role, along with the straddling of a bi-cultural life, an experience I shared as the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants. Growing up, I never felt part of the mainstream, though my Eastern European background afforded me a racial privilege that my students never had. It was the experience of my own cultural difference that eventually inspired me to study social anthropology.

My personal history and a desire to learn about the lives and cultures of my students led to my involvement with multicultural art. In addition to working with high school students as a teaching artist, my involvement with Latin American communities in New York City deepened through my work with community-based organizations. With the opening of cultural and educational relations between the US and Cuba during the Clinton administration, I had the opportunity to travel to Cuba for the first time in 1994 to attend the *Bienal de la Habana*. I was particularly interested in Cuba because of its link to the former Soviet Union and what I imagined was an irreconcilable cultural mismatch between the two. After this trip I maintained contact with the artists and

curators I met and returned to the next *Bienal* in 1997. I would make four more trips in the coming years. During these trips, I met artists, filmmakers, curators, critics, and academics. Back in the U.S., I met Cuban artists who had emigrated and maintained contact with them over the following years.

My interest for many years has been focused on the intersection of art and politics, in particular art in the public realm, as well as the question of how identities are constructed and translated into social practices, including art making and political action. I have been particularly drawn to exploring the dynamic and contradictions of what it means to be member of a disenfranchised, embattled, or subordinated group (in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, and any socially-defining term or status).

When I decided to pursue my doctorate, I turned toward combining my interest in contemporary Cuban art as well as its cultural and political contexts. I returned in 2006 to begin research and again in 2007 and 2010. I have stayed in contact with colleagues in Cuba and followed what has been happening in Cuba since my first journey. In recent years, the ability of artists to transmit material via the Internet has increased the flow of information and the possibility for communication between artists in Cuba and the outside world, making it easier to maintain contact. (This includes blogs, YouTube, Facebook and email, which until a year or so ago was the only – sporadic – option for a small number of Cubans with access – mostly illegal – to the Internet.) Despite my ties to Cuba, I occupy the position of an outsider. Though it perhaps is not possible for an outsider to rival the depth of knowledge of the insider, the outsider enjoys the freedom of a bird's eye view and may offer new insights as a result.

## **A note on the challenges of conducting researching in Cuba**

There are various challenges in conducting research anywhere in Cuba, for example the difficulty in making contact with people. Alamar, where I conducted much of my research, is spread out over a large area and many people have no working telephone. Since transportation is sporadic and distances are far, much time is spent walking from neighborhood to neighborhood in the hopes of finding interview subjects at home. When I needed to find AA batteries for my voice recorder, I spent over an hour walking to three different stores, none of which had AA batteries. These are not insurmountable problems – and a far cry from the myriad daily problems faced by most Cubans – but they typify the various challenges that take up limited research time. Doing research from outside of Cuba carries a different set of challenges due to the great reluctance of people to communicate in writing (whether via email or Facebook) because of monitoring of communications by the state.

Finally, there is the added challenge of doing research as a U.S. citizen. The U.S. embargo severely restricts travel. Though legally those conducting legitimate full time academic research related to Cuba are permitted to travel, this does not mean that licenses are granted if applied for, nor does it mean that one won't be subjected to a form of harassment by U.S. customs upon returning home. Typically on my trips to Cuba, I was welcomed with open arms by Cuban customs officials, and aggressively questioned by U.S. customs officials upon my return to the U.S. On my trip in December 2010, the reverse occurred. I was questioned in Havana by several customs officials after deplaning from my Miami-based charter flight. My passport was taken away without explanation. I was interrogated about what I was doing there, which artists I was planning to interview, what kind of artwork they make, etc. (I was asked to

answer the same questions several times over with different agents). My paperwork was confiscated (CV, materials for a scholarly conference, and other documentation U.S. citizens must carry in order to prove upon my return to the United States that I am doing legitimate research in Cuba and not going there as a tourist). After two hours, the customs boss emerged from the office and returned my folder, but not my passport. I was ordered to pay a \$100 tax on items I had brought with me (including art materials a well-known artist had asked me to purchase for him in the States). I remained the only passenger in the terminal along with a few customs personnel for another hour (the cleaning crew had gone home for the night). I sat on the edge of the luggage conveyor belt and waited. After having been detained in the airport for over three hours, the customs official in charge appeared, smiled, handed me back my passport, and told me to have a nice stay in Cuba.

## **Acknowledgements**

In the midst of the challenges of doing research in Cuba, I am continually touched by the generosity, resilience, immense creativity, and desire for dialogue among the Cubans I meet, and for this I am genuinely grateful.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my advisers at Middlesex, Jean Fisher and Jon Bird, who took on the challenge of working with me as an international distance student juggling career, research, and family responsibilities. I thank them for their expert guidance, encouragement, and tremendous generosity.

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I have always had the good fortune to be the recipient of generous hospitality while in Cuba and I would like to thank especially: Lázaro Saavedra, Brigitte Nande, Lazarito, and César; René Cervantes; and Alina Guzmán and Nilo González. Many people generously offered assistance while I was conducting research in Cuba, among them, Gerardo Mosquera, Irene Hernández, Leticia Cordero Vega, and Tomás Fernández Robaina. Thanks to each of them, and also to the following for responding to requests for material and information from afar: Juan-Si González, Roberto Molina, Maldito Menéndez, Jon Curry-Machado, Alexis Esquivel, Elio Rodríguez, and Alberto Virella.

I had the opportunity to invite members of OMNI to New York in the spring of 2012 and would like to thank those who offered a venue to present OMNI's work: at Columbia University, the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) and the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (CSER) and their respective directors, Pablo Piccato and Frances Negrón-Muntaner; at Baruch College, Ted Henken and a coalition of student groups; and at New York University, staff and faculty at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS), and the Cuban American Student Association (CASA).

I am thankful for having had the opportunity to present my research on OMNI Zona Franca at the annual conference of the Transatlantic Studies Project at Brown University (thanks to Odette Casamayor for inviting me), and at the *Cuba Futures* conference at the Bildner Center for Hemispheric Studies, of the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

I am grateful to all the members of OMNI Zona Franca and all the people I met in Alamar who shared their work and experiences with me, and I also thank the many people I interviewed, who provided valuable historical context and personal reflections.

Finally, sincerest thanks to my husband and son and my extended family and friends for their encouragement and support all through this journey.

## Introduction

On a warm spring evening in 2006, amidst a large crowd at the famous outdoor Havana nightclub La Tropical, a group of young men in their 20s and 30s wearing beads and dreadlocks - one in a skirt - burst onto the stage. Their explosive energy grabbed the attention of the audience immediately. They jumped from rap, to poetry, to making music on manual typewriters in a syncopated hip hop style. All forms of their presence – physical, visual, and musical, together with the spoken word – fused together to express the chaos and the frustration of their daily lives, and judging from the response, the lives of many present.

The performance of *Hay Que Luchar* that night at the Tropical during the 2006 Havana Biennial was my introduction to OMNI Zona Franca. Though I had attended prior Havana biennials, I had never seen anything like this in Cuba. The impact of the performance was palpable. The group finished their performance with what I later learned was a reprise of an unofficial (uninvited) action, done on the street, during the opening of the 2003 biennial; they literally washed their mouths out, brushing their teeth in unison in reference to censorship.<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 0.1) Clearly these artists were not afraid of pushing the limits.

Working together since 1997 OMNI Zona Franca has created a blend of performance, music, poetry, spoken word, rap, visual art, graffiti, video, public art, and community-based projects. The collective's work, strongly influenced by collectives such as Quijote and ArteNativa from Alamar, and Havana groups such as Grupo Puré, ArteCalle, and Enema, is concentrated in three main areas: poetry, performance and

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<sup>1</sup>The performance was titled *Hygiene Pública (Public Hygiene)*.

community engagement. OMNI<sup>2</sup> engages in a combination of concrete action (installing benches at a bus stop that had none, for example, or burying themselves in a huge pile of uncollected garbage), and performance poetry (for example, reciting poetry on an overcrowded *camello* or truck-bus). They participate in an annual pilgrimage on the Day of St. Lazarus “for the health of poetry,” and transform neglected public spaces in their community with graffiti-style murals. They have produced CDs such as the 2005 underground, urban and experimental project *Alamar Express*, and numerous videos, and for the past fourteen years have organized an art and music festival, *Poesía Sin Fin*. They have presented their work throughout Cuba, in Europe, and in the United States.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 0.1 *Hygiene Pública*, 2003.

<sup>2</sup>I will refer to OMNI Zona Franca and OMNI interchangeably. Clear reference will be made when discussing OMNI as a separate group before it joined with Zona Franca.

<sup>3</sup> OMNI travelled to the United States in the spring of 2012 for the first time. They were invited to a residency at the Chicago alternative art space Links Hall and the collective Amor Pirata. I arranged for them to come to New York City, where they performed at Columbia University, Baruch College and New York University. They went on to perform in Washington D.C., Providence, New Orleans and Miami. In New Orleans, they met with Cuban artist Luis Cruz Azaceta, engaging in collaborative art making sessions, including a performance and a series of photographs titled “*Coca Cola del Olvido: Nada se Pierde, Nada se Olvida*” (*Coca Cola of Forgetting: Nothing is Lost, Nothing is Forgotten*) inspired by the emigration of Cubans to the United States, based on an adage about Cubans who leave the island for the U.S.: “Se tomó la Coca Cola del olvido.” (“Once he started drinking Coca Cola, he forgot all about Cuba.”)

## History

The role of art and cultural production in Cuba since the Revolution has vacillated in official importance, but in Cuban society at large, cultural production, including literature, music, art, film and popular culture have remained vibrant no matter what political shifts have occurred. In the first years, the Revolution did not involve itself heavily in the arts, but within a few years the leadership saw art's potential to both threaten and support the values of the Revolution and (influenced by the Soviet model) began to exploit its capacity as an ideological tool. Starting in the 1960s, artists were called on to develop the graphic arts as a form of mass communication and education in the service of revolutionary society.

The tone of the first half of the 1970s in Cuba, referred to as “the five gray years” (*quinquenio gris*), was set by the Declaration of the First National Congress for Education and Culture in 1971<sup>4</sup> as it announced “Art is the weapon of the Revolution, a product of the moral combat of our people.” “Divergent” practices, including homosexuality and rock music (which was becoming popular), were banned. Artists in Cuba nonetheless continued to be influenced by diverse sources, among them Pop Art, rock music and other counter-cultural movements.

In the 1980s, with the official declaration of the policy of “Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies,” a campaign aimed at reducing bureaucracy, corruption and inefficiency, the historic change brewing in the Soviet Union, and the influence of art from Europe and

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<sup>4</sup>Fidel Castro Ruz, speech at the closing of the First National Congress of Education and Culture, *Granma Weekly Review*, May 9, 1971: 7-9.

the United States that took hold in the early years of the decade<sup>5</sup>, Cuban art collectives began to challenge the cultural bureaucracy, in particular for artistic freedom and the opening of cultural institutions to civic debates. Eventually, the artists overstepped their bounds, leading to a government crackdown at the end of the 1980s that resulted in the exodus of many of Cuba's most prominent artists.<sup>6</sup> During this period of change and upheaval and testing of new expressions, a new generation of art collectives formed. They were pioneers in Cuban performance art and initiated a move to break free from the constraints of traditional forms of exhibition. Though many of the actions of collectives from the mid-1980s and into the 1990s happened in the space of the university gallery or art institution, over time collectives exited the space of the schools and made forays into public spaces.

Cuban society was wrestling with dramatic change during the 1990s and a discussion of race began to emerge in Cuba's public sphere, though these debates tended to occur in limited, academic settings.<sup>7</sup> Acknowledgement of contemporary racism in Cuba was still problematic, a contradiction of the official position that the Revolution had eradicated racism, even as it was apparent that much of the social apparatus of racism inherited from earlier periods had remained intact. For example, as Cuba came to rely heavily on investment in tourism from Spain during the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the government turned a blind eye when these new enterprises refused to

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<sup>5</sup>Through visits from international artists, artists in Cuba were exposed to the work of artists such as Francesco Clemente, Jonathan Borofsky, Robert Rauschenberg, and Luis Camnitzer.

<sup>6</sup>Among the artists who left were Tomás Sánchez, José Bedia, Tomás Esson, Carlos Cárdenas, Arturo Cuenca, Glexis Novoa, and Ricardo Brey.

<sup>7</sup> For a historical analysis of media coverage and academic debate on racial issues in Cuba during the 1990s see Nadine Fernandez, "The changing discourse on race in contemporary Cuba," *Qualitative Studies in Education* (14:2), (2001)

hire darker-skinned Cubans on the assumption that tourists prefer to interact with light-skinned employees, despite the fact that racial discrimination in the workplace was prohibited by law. The official tolerance of a highly visible form of racial discrimination was perceived by many Cubans as a betrayal of Revolutionary principles and criticized by a wide range of cultural producers, including artists and popular musicians (especially in *timba* and rap).

A number of black Cuban artists in the mid to late 1990s launched efforts to approach issues of race, adopt black cultural styles, and engage in a debate about race in Cuba. Exhibitions such as *Queloides* in 1997 and 1999<sup>8</sup>, individual artists such as Alexis Esquivel, Belkis Ayón, and Elio Rodríguez, and other cultural producers whose work dealt explicitly with race, such as the female rap group Las Krudas (whose lyrics address the subjectivities of black women and lesbians in Cuba),<sup>9</sup> took a proactive stance in addressing social problems including racism, sexism, and homophobia. Artists and cultural producers in Cuba were bringing new issues into the public sphere, attempting to hold the government responsible for upholding revolutionary ideals that were set aside in order to accommodate more pragmatic goals related to maintaining the state's power and economic interests and coalescing to promote a set of socialist values that seemed to be eroding.

## **Research Narrative**

I had initially planned to do a comparative study of two groups of cultural producers, the Callejón de Hamel in Central Havana and the

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<sup>8</sup>A later version was shown at the Centro Wifredo Lam in Havana and at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh in 2010 and is discussed later.

<sup>9</sup>Las Krudas left Cuba in fall 2006 and are currently based in Austin, Texas.

collective group OMNI Zona Franca in Alamar, east of Havana. The former is a combination of artist's studio, live music venue and marketplace for Afro-Cuban art, and the latter, a group of artists engaged in spoken word, visual art, performance and public art. Within the space of the Callejón de Hamel, the operations of race are overt and intentional. The intersection between cultural production and economic survival - in conjunction with assertion of black identity - is central to understanding what is happening at the Callejón. (Fig. 0.2) A vital function of the Callejón de Hamel is economic, as a market place for music, art and other cultural products. Its goal is to spread Afro-Cuban culture but also to enable producers to earn a living. Cuban cultural critic Roberto Zurbano explained, "Black Cubans have very limited opportunities for economic advancement. They have no access to capital, so the only thing of value they have, and that they can sell, is their culture."<sup>10</sup>



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<sup>10</sup>Personal communication with Roberto Zurbano at the Callejón de Hamel, Havana, March 26, 2006.



Fig. 0.2 Tourists making a purchase at the Callejón de Hamel, April 2006.

Regarding commercial motives, explicitly economic goals did not appear to be the primary focus for OMNI. Also in contrast to the Callejón, despite the fact that in the two performances I witnessed as part of the Havana Biennial in 2006 OMNI Zona France asserted an African diasporic cultural identity, in individual interviews with OMNI members, I witnessed the reluctance of artists who clearly would be identified in Cuba as black or *mulato*<sup>11</sup> to assign a black identity to the group. However, in discussing personal histories and experiences individually with members of OMNI, the issues of race and racism in Cuba were regularly brought up. There are political, historical, and social reasons for this ambivalence and reluctance to emphasize black identity over (or as equal to) Cuban identity, and the “denial” of race in this context should be considered as symptomatic of these larger political factors and the history of race in Cuba, a topic that is taken up in the thesis.

The breadth of the topic (wider than I had initially imagined), as well as fundamental differences in the projects of these two groups of cultural producers, seemed to warrant separate studies.<sup>12</sup> I chose to redirect and re-focus my research toward an examination of the original contribution of OMNI Zona Franca within the trajectory of the history of Cuban art collectives, Afro-Cuban culture, and the alternative culture of Alamar. In the larger context of Afro-Cuban cultural production and contemporary art in Cuba, I argue that OMNI is making significant

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<sup>11</sup>Of mixed African and European descent (mulatto).

<sup>12</sup>Lisa Maya Knauer’s PhD dissertation, “Translocal and Multicultural Counterpublics: Rumba and La Regla de Ocha in New York and Havana” (New York University, 2005), contains some discussion of the Callejón.

incursions and interventions into the public sphere, opening up new spaces and forms of civil society. They are not the first artists to have taken up this challenge, but they have achieved more longevity than any other collective and have strongly influenced and promoted the growth of the alternative culture movement in Cuba.

Broadly conceived, the present project can be viewed within a framework of cross-disciplinary scholarship that explores the intersections of cultural production, race, and politics in the Revolutionary period. I draw on scholarship in art history, political science, urban studies, critical race studies, the built environment, cultural studies, and sociology. My approach is to integrate these areas of study within the framework of visual culture, conceived as the project of the critical mapping of cultural production and the visual in relation to the everyday and to larger geopolitical contexts, in this case allowing for an analysis of cultural production and a communitarian art practice in relation to social space, power, race, the body, and the performative. Illustrating the cross-disciplinary nature of the project, essays based on the first two chapters of this thesis have been published in two substantively different anthologies, *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, and in *Handbook of Contemporary Cuba: Economy, Politics, Civil Society, and Globalization*.<sup>13</sup>

My methodology consists of academic research and research trips, including trips to Cuba in 2006, 2007, and 2010. During these visits I

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<sup>13</sup> The former is titled “Evolution within the Revolution: The Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and Cuban Art Collectives, 1975 to 2000,” in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Jonathan Harris, ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). The latter is “Sparks of Civil Society in Cuba: Afro-Cuban Cultural Production, Artistic Interventions, and the Struggle for a New Public Sphere,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Cuba: Economy, Politics, Civil Society, and Globalization*, Mauricio A. Font and Carlos Riobó, eds. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2013).

attended the Havana Biennial, events of OMNI Zona Franca, exhibitions, and other events in Havana, conducted interviews with artists, curators, critics, and scholars, and spent periods of time with the artists, collaborators, and local residents. The interviews most extensively quoted in the thesis are included in Appendix A.<sup>14</sup> I also gathered visual documentation of OMNI's work while in Cuba. In New York, my research continued through blogs, ongoing email exchanges, and conversations with Cuban artists, curators, scholars, and critics no longer residing in Cuba (mostly now living in Spain and the U.S., as well as Germany and Canada).

Works that helped to shape my initial historical research included Alejandro de la Fuente's volume *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (2001), Aline Helg's *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (1995); and the anthologies *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba* (2000) edited by Jean Stubbs and Pedro Pérez Sarduy; *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society* (2003), by Rafael Hernández; and *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society* (2008) edited by Alexander Gray and Antoni Kapcia. Each contributed to building a foundation in areas of research central to the project.

A number of scholars have addressed various aspects of the proposed research. Examples include Alison Fraunhar's dissertation

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<sup>14</sup> The interview transcriptions are in Spanish. All quotes in the thesis are my translations. I conducted twenty-two interviews, eleven of which have been fully transcribed. I made notes on all interviews and paraphrased portions. The appendix contains transcripts of key interviews. With respect to quotations, cited interviews are included in the appendix.

“Re-visioning the *mulata* in Cuban visual culture”<sup>15</sup> and Vincenzo Perna’s volume *Timba: The Sound of the Cuban Crisis*<sup>16</sup>. Perna focuses on “*musica bailable*” (popular dance music genres), and Fraunhar focuses broadly on visual culture, from colonial era advertising imagery to current television dramas. Both are relevant in their address of specific forms of cultural production (historical and contemporary) in relation to issues of race in Revolutionary society.

There are a number of studies congruent with my own in terms of interdisciplinary methods and subject matter. Robin Moore’s *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*<sup>17</sup>, an ethnomusicological and historical work on Afro-Cuban culture and popular music, examines Afro-Cuban culture and racial conflict in the formation of national identity in Cuba. Ana Belén Martín Sevillano, in her book *Sociedad civil y arte en Cuba: Cuento y artes plásticas en el cambio de siglo (1980-2000)*<sup>18</sup>, argues for the role of writers (of fiction and theatrical works in particular) as well as plastic artists in providing a civil alternative in the absence of autonomous state organizations. Sujatha Fernandes takes up issues similar to those of my own project in *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of Revolutionary Cultures*<sup>19</sup>, addressing the relationship between the state and cultural production. Fernandes takes an ethnographic approach of “thick description,” focusing mainly on film

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<sup>15</sup>Fraunhar, Alison. *Re-Visioning the Mulata in Cuban Visual Culture*, PhD Dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2005.

<sup>16</sup>Perna, Vincenzo. *Timba: The Sound of the Cuban Crisis* (Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>17</sup>Moore, Robin. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup>Martín Sevillano, Ana Belén. *Sociedad civil y arte en Cuba: Cuento y artes plásticas en el cambio de siglo 1980-2000* (Madrid: Verbum, 2008).

<sup>19</sup>Fernandes, Sujatha. *Cuba Represent!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

and rap music, and concludes that the Cuban state tolerates counter-hegemonic practices, and enjoys the contingent support of cultural producers.

With respect to existing material about OMNI itself, the majority of what has been written to date consists of short articles and blog posts. There is one longer description of OMNI's collaboration with the Italian group Inventati published online. Three documentary videos have been produced as well (see References for above materials), but to date there has been no extensive publication on OMNI's work.

### **Research Propositions**

This thesis revolves around a group of cultural producers, the collective of artists/poets/performers called OMNIZona Franca. The artistic practices of OMNI Zona Franca have centered from the start on interactions and dialogue with the community, and the collective can be defined as a communitarian project that has dedicated itself to creating new space for expression in the public sphere. This project analyses the work of OMNI Zona Franca and its contestatory interventions into public space. Public space is defined here as any space that is outside of the domestic or private realm, including the streets and religious, cultural, and other institutional settings. The public sphere encompasses public space more broadly and includes not only physical space, but spaces of citizen discourse and imaginary space as well.

The question of artistic intervention or resistance in Cuban revolutionary society is a complex one. The challenge that artists face is at least two-fold: first over the right to occupy public space itself, and

second, the struggle over the content of what is expressed in this domain, both of which are potentially problematic. “Unauthorized” actions in the form of performance art, or rap music or rock, performed in underground venues -- i.e. venues or performances not authorized by the state -- are viewed with suspicion by authorities in Cuba (though certain examples of these are accepted within boundaries). Artists, including OMNI Zona Franca, nonetheless have been making incursions into this space, claiming it, sometimes successfully, for themselves and their audiences. Cumulatively, these actions are a vital part of a movement for the creation of civil society in Cuba.

One of the main tasks of this project is situating the work of OMNI Zona Franca within the wider social and political context of civil society in Cuba. Civil society has been described by the Cuban scholar Jorge Luis Acanda as the “arena par excellence of political struggle.”<sup>20</sup> It has also been described as the social fabric formed by multiple groups that both “coexist and collectively resist subordination to the state, at the same time that they demand inclusion into national political structures.”<sup>21</sup> Antonio Gramsci’s thought has also been significant in the formation of the discourse of civil society in Cuba. In this thesis, I adopt a broad definition of civil society that encompasses both the state and autonomously organized citizen activity and that is based on a Gramscian idea of civil society as a dialectical process.<sup>22</sup> In a Gramscian conceptualization, civil society encompasses the realm of contested ideas and therefore has emancipatory potential. From this perspective the

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<sup>20</sup> Jorge Luis Acanda, “Introduction: An Indiscreet Glance, or the Risks of a Window,” *Looking at Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003) 5.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Oxhorn in Haroldo Dilla and Philip Oxhorn, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society in Cuba,” *Latin American Perspectives* 29:4 (2002): 11.

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Cox, “Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium: Prospects for an Alternative World Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 4.

alternative and counter-hegemonic expressions of artists and other cultural producers in Cuba embody the Gramscian notion of a civil society as potential agent of social transformation. I contend that it is to transformative and emancipatory ends that a significant amount of Cuban cultural production has been directed.

Through its performative and artistic interventions in public space OMNI Zona Franca has continually come into conflict with the state. Much of the conflict is generated by the struggle over public space and the artists' attempts to forge a public sphere in which expanded forms of expression are allowed. Further, various actions of the group, in trying to fill particular needs within the community (some as basic as constructing a bench at the bus stop, where people wait for long periods) implicitly point out the failure of the government to provide basic amenities and therefore are perceived as critical of (and thus a threat to) the status quo.

The questions that guide the present research include the following: Why is OMNI's project occurring at this particular historical juncture? What relation does it have to the past? What are these cultural producers attempting to achieve through their work? What forms does the work take? How has it been received? What artistic and social impact has this work had? Do these examples of cultural production call into question the institutions and ideological foundations of the state, or are they meant to express criticisms while supporting its core values and institutions?

Some artists are disillusioned and embittered by what they view as broken promises made by the Revolutionary government, including

its seeming hypocrisy in the turn toward a capitalist market economy and its failure to address institutionalized racism. I argue that OMNI and other cultural producers are critical of the government and are fighting for change and struggling for expressive freedoms. Though they do not argue for dismantling the system entirely, the level of contestation in their activities is significant. I contend that this does not constitute contingent support but rather should be seen as counter-hegemonic expression aimed at altering the status quo.

In this thesis, I draw on the ideas of Raymond Williams to theorize the relations between dominant (hegemonic) power, and alternativity or counter-hegemonic practices, applying this theorization to a description of artistic practices in Cuba. I also incorporate Henri Lefebvre's conceptions of social space, especially an analysis of conditions required for the creation of new spaces, to describe aspects of the work performed by OMNI Zona Franca's interventions in, and appropriations of, public space. Referring to the potential of social space for inaugurating a utopian or counter-space, I extend Lefebvre's notion of the generative potentials of the "space of leisure" to the creative actions of artists.

The group uses the terms "art" and "poetry" interchangeably to encompass the creative sphere. From an artistic standpoint, the status of OMNI's art is not only as a product or an object or a work with an intentional aesthetic dimension, it is a process that sparks a dialogue. According to OMNI, "Art is the tool through which we communicate and project ourselves. Social and existential reality together with human



creative possibilities constitute the primary material of our works.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore art should also be considered as a set of actions produced within the matrix of social relations.

Raymond Williams argues against art’s status as a consumable commodity and as an object produced by an individual, subject to the dictates of taste. He insists that we break from an analysis of the isolated object and its components and focus on the practice of art, keeping at center the conditions and contexts in which it is produced.<sup>24</sup> This view of art as a practice considers the relationship between the making of a work of art and its reception as always active and subject to change. This dialogue between art and audience is a vital element of OMNI’s works, whose meaning is generated in the space between the art/artistic act and the response of the audience.

This thesis produces original research on the collective OMNI Zona Franca and theorizes its work within the larger social sphere. Specifically, I situate OMNI’s work in the context of the history and formation of a nascent movement for civil society in Cuba, and locate the collective’s work within the matrix of alternative and black diasporic cultural production. This inquiry also constructs a basic history of the place where OMNI is based, Alamar, about which little has been written, affirming its importance for the Cuban Revolution and providing an introduction to the alternative movements that have emerged there over the past decades.

It is my hope that this thesis will make a contribution to scholarship on contemporary Cuban art and cultural production and the

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<sup>23</sup> From artists’ statement, *Vision OMNI Zona-Franca, 2009-2010*.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 176-7.

public sphere, with the first substantive look at the history and work of a collective of artists whose evolving history is significant in the movement of alternative culture and civil society in Cuba. I also hope to make an exemplary contribution to the field of visual culture with a study that integrates material from distinct disciplinary areas in order to provide a diversely contextualized portrait of a particular artistic phenomenon.

### **Chapter Outline**

The organization of the dissertation is designed to provide context in the form of historical background, offering the reader art historical, political, and geographical information necessary to approach the analysis of OMNI's work. The latter chapters are dedicated to presenting the art of OMNI Zona Franca, along with an analysis of OMNI's work and practices in relation to the public sphere and the state.

Chapter 1 is an art historical examination of the efforts of Cuban art collectives during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a focus on the role of collectives since the Revolution. I discuss two movements in Cuban art that played a critical role in creating an expanded space for societal debate and cultural expression, the artistic avant-garde, and the Afro-Cuban movement. Initially flourishing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, these collective projects took on new forms after the Revolution. Both avant-garde and Afro-Cuban production continued, developing along parallel (and sometimes intersecting) lines, with new collective movements emerging during the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter 2, based in political science, presents a brief synopsis of the idea of civil society and its relevance in Revolutionary Cuba,

including discussion of its definition along with the history of civil society debate in Cuba over the last two decades. The chapter also addresses cultural production and Afro-Cuban culture and highlights the role of Afro-Cuban art and cultural production in the formation of Cuban civil society. In developing the argument that the generative spark of Cuban civil society of the past three decades came from the sphere of artistic and cultural production, I make a case for the crucial historical role of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural expression in the formation of Cuban civil society, concentrating in particular on Afro-Cuban cultural production since the 1970s with attention to visual art as well as the influence and role of Afro-Cuban religious traditions.

Chapter 3 offers a study of “place,” focusing on Alamar, where alternative and “marginal” cultural production has taken root, including the communitarian artistic movement that OMNI Zona Franca has sparked. Since the onset of the Special Period (officially declared in 1990) Alamar has been considered a “marginal” area for reasons of its geographical isolation, poor public transportation, and large black population. Initially home to Soviet military officials, exiles from Latin American countries (Chileans after the assassination of Salvador Allende, for example), and Cuban “model” workers, Alamar eventually became home to various countercultural movements in music, literature and visual art, notably Cuba’s rock and rap festivals and as well as a base for some artists of the *novísima trova*.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing that the activities of cultural producers unfold in specific places with distinct

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<sup>25</sup>*Novísima trova* was the second generation of Cuban music called *nueva trova*, made popular by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés during the 1960s and 1970s. *Novísima trova* emerged during the 1980s with the younger generation of musicians, the best known of whom is Carlos Varela. The music expressed social commentary and represented the voices of youth of the period.

characteristics with implications for the formation of practice, the goal of this chapter is to situate the work of OMNI Zona Franca in its specific physical, historical, and social geography.

Chapter 4 presents OMNI Zona Franca's body of work, including discussion of the relationship between the collective and cultural officials that has shaped the group's trajectory. The chapter begins with an account of OMNI Zona Franca's history and influences, followed by descriptions of key works (performances, festivals, exhibitions, and media production) and discussion of the central themes of OMNI's work. Since the shape of OMNI Zona Franca's trajectory has been deeply influenced by the history of its relations with the Cuban state and its institutions, the final section describes the bureaucratic structure with and under which OMNI has worked, concluding with a description of OMNI Zona Franca's relations with the state.

Chapter 5 examines how OMNI's practices can be understood within the context of the public sphere in Cuba, considering the relationship of the state to social space. Drawing on the ideas of Raymond Williams about the nature of alternative and counter-hegemonic practices, and Henri Lefebvre's theorization of the production of space, the chapter provides an analysis of Cuban public space and the appropriation of this space on the part of OMNI, and other alternative cultural projects, in their attempts to create new forms of transformative and emancipatory social space.

## **Chapter 1. Evolution within the Revolution: The Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and Cuban Art Collectives, 1975 to 2000**

*“We began to introduce the problematic of the everyday around 1984. The simple act of presenting these problems was seen already as something conflictual or critical.” (Lázaro Saavedra)<sup>26</sup>*

### **Chapter Overview**

Collective artistic efforts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba have contributed to the creation of a broadly representative Cuban artistic and cultural identity. During this period, two movements in Cuban art played a critical role in creating an expanded space for societal debate and cultural expression: the artistic avant-garde and the Afro-Cuban movement. Initially flourishing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, these collective projects took on new forms in the changed environment after 1959. After the Revolution, conditions for cultural production changed with the official position that art should serve ideological functions, but both avant-garde and Afro-Cuban production continued, at the risk of conflict with the state. In the face of a restrictive state that sought to control such expressions, the Afro-Cuban movement and avant-garde art collectives developed along parallel, and sometimes intersecting, lines.

Composed of intellectuals, visual artists, filmmakers, critics, folklorists, and writers, the Afro-Cuban movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was an organic political, intellectual and cultural movement in which visual artists played a vital role. Emerging soon after, the 1980s

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<sup>26</sup>Personal communication, January 31, 2011.

art collectives that arose in the tradition of a European-styled avant-garde, part of the emergent Cuban Renaissance, were notable for a focus on performance and public actions, propelling an art movement whose influence spilled out of the walls of the art schools and into the public sphere. Together, these movements paved the way for later producers across the cultural spectrum to voice concerns and provoke societal debate about problems faced by various sectors of society, including black Cubans, women, and homosexuals.

### **History of Collectives**

Three major phases can be identified in the formation of Cuban collectives: the 1920s and 1930s; the mid-1970s through 1985; and 1986 through the end of the 1990s. The first was represented by a period of strong European artistic influence, with concurrent efforts to form a distinctive Cuban artistic and cultural identity. The second period, during the second and third decades of the revolution, was characterized by a rupture in an ideological and political sense, and was also marked by continuing struggle to define a national cultural identity (a project that is ongoing). The third phase saw the coming of age of the first generation of artists to have been born and raised within the Revolution, and upon whom Western art, especially from Europe and the United States, had a significant impact. This period is marked historically by the process launched by the 1986 Rectification Campaign<sup>27</sup> and the effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the decade. The

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<sup>27</sup> Officially called “Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies,” this was a campaign aimed at reducing bureaucracy, corruption and inefficiency.

cataclysmic economic collapse and subsequent declaration of the Special Period in 1990 had a profound impact on Revolutionary cultural production, ultimately leading to divergent and dispersed activities on the part of collectives, market-driven on the one hand and socially oriented on the other (to be discussed later in this chapter).

In relation to artist collectives specifically, two events that triggered a flurry of artistic responses were the founding of the Ministry of Culture in 1976 and the Rectification Campaign of 1986. With the formation of the Ministry of Culture and its cultural initiatives, a number of groups dedicated to exploring cultural roots emerged. Examples include Grupo Antillano (1975-1985), Grupo Origen (1974-1979), and Grupo Raíces (1979-1983). Following soon after, the art school collectives of the 1980s arose amidst the process of Rectification.<sup>28</sup>In both cases, the impetus grew in part out of cultural initiatives on the part of the newly formed bureaucracy in what was interpreted by intellectuals and cultural producers as an invitation to play a greater role in revolutionary society.

The omnipresent role of the state in all aspects of life in Revolutionary Cuba has significantly shaped artistic production. Further, artists born after 1959 have a fundamentally different relationship to the state as compared to the generations before them. For example, the landscape collective Grupo Versiones del Paisaje (1977-1982), whose members were born between 1919 and 1946, resembled a traditional European-styled avant-garde in its quest to reinvent a traditional painting genre and bring it into the Cuban context by

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<sup>28</sup>Among these were Grupo Puré (1984-1987), Grupo Provisional (1988-1989), ArteCalle (1986-1990), and Art-De (1988-1990).

articulating a national artistic identity.<sup>29</sup> Other groups that formed during the 1970s, such as Grupo Antillano, Grupo Origen, and Grupo Raíces, had more affinities with racial and ethnic identity-based movements<sup>30</sup> such as the Black Power movement.<sup>31</sup> Members of these groups were well aware of the discrimination and struggles that had historically been faced by black Cubans and their work focused on the development of an Afro-Cuban visual aesthetic that would reflect the centrality of African heritage in the nation's cultural narrative.

Younger groups like Puré (whose members were born in 1964), Grupo Provisional, and ArteCalle, having been formed wholly within the Revolution, had a different relationship to the government. Believing that artists and intellectuals should play an active role in realizing the utopian goal of working toward the betterment of society, this generation, also known as the “children of the Revolution” felt it their duty, and right, to criticize its shortcomings (despite being unable to voice these without repercussions). This dual sense of ownership and willingness to take on social responsibility motivated the young artists' collectives of the 1980s. This is not to suggest that there was no cynicism or dissent among these artists – there certainly was – evidenced by the mass exodus of almost an entire generation of artists in the 1980s and early 1990s, nor to suggest that the work was not deeply critical of the

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<sup>29</sup> The catalog of the group's 1978 exhibition at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Havana describes the group's aim as “revitalizing our landscape tradition, returning it to the place it deserves as a subject for the arts...Is our landscape, full of light and greenery, and of such special national significance, unimportant?” See José Veigas, et al., *Memoria: Cuban Art of the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: California/International Arts Foundation, 2002) 203.

<sup>30</sup> Guillermina Ramos Cruz notes that she interviewed Grupo Raíces for a television program in Havana in 1982 but that they were “totally marginalized.” Ramos Cruz (2000): 149.

<sup>31</sup> During the 1960s, the Castro government welcomed several prominent Black Panthers from the United States, a number of whom stayed on as political exiles.



regime – much of it was – but the impulse behind the actions of the collective groups of the 1980s was fundamentally an idealistic one.

Groups of the 1980s challenged the government and the cultural bureaucracy in a wide range of arenas, for free speech, artistic freedom, the right to religious expression (Christian and Afro-Cuban), and the opening up of cultural institutions to civic debates. The next generation of 1990s collectives began to address issues such as homosexuality, and criticized the government for problems such as lack of adequate housing and economic opportunity and lack of basic government services, attempting to intervene in some of these problems within the limited means available to them. I do not suggest that these activities represented an organized, coherent social movement based on a clearly articulated agenda. My argument is that in aggregate the artists and collectives mentioned above have made intermittent (non-linear) progress toward creating a form of civil society in Cuba. (The notion of civil society in a communist/socialist regime must be defined within that space as against formulations of civil society in democracies and will be taken up in the next chapter.) These activities might be seen as acts of resistance, and as struggles to create new social, aesthetic and political space through making and performing art within the context of a government apparatus that seeks to control expression of all types.

Critical geographer Steven Pile suggests “resistance cannot be understood as a face-to-face opposition between the powerful and the weak, nor as a fight that takes place only on grounds constituted by structural relations.” He argues that resistance “also seeks to appropriate

space, to make new spaces....”<sup>32</sup>Further, these activities unfold in specific geographies, a point to be addressed in subsequent chapters. Pile comments that resistance may “reterritorialize space in various ways, in order to transform its meanings, undermine territory as a natural source of power, and enable territory to become a space of citizenship, democracy and freedom – within limits.”<sup>33</sup>

Turning to Afro-Cuban artists, this struggle has taken place in the context of a longer historical battle. Linda Howe writes:

Since slavery, Afro-Cuban writers and artists have had few ideological choices for their cultural production: (1) to succumb to and to perpetuate romantic and exotic notions of their submissive relationship to the dominant powers; (2) to express an aesthetic perspective slightly critical of the dominant culture that still reasserts dimensions of that culture; (3) to provoke change. The first possibility led to the development of a nineteenth-century black romantic aesthetic and a twentieth-century revolutionary vision of racial harmony with limited critical focus. The second aestheticizes black culture and proposes (especially after the revolution) a Marxist humanist approach to racism, by means of, first and foremost, the class struggle. The third insinuates a radical black aesthetic that fuses separatist rhetoric inspired by the Negritude and Black Power movements with traditional African-based cultural or religious expression to produce a racially politicizing art that goes beyond the limits of Cuban national rhetoric and the dominant cultural stereotypes of black articulation.”<sup>34</sup>

Much of the Afro-Cuban cultural production to be taken up in this analysis vacillates between the second and third options, to be discussed in this and later chapters.

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<sup>32</sup>Steve Pile and Michael Keith, *Geographies of Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1997) 16.

<sup>33</sup> Pile and Keith, *Geographies*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Linda Howe, *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Artists and Writers after the Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) 75-76.

## **The 1920s: The *Vanguardia* and *Afro-Cubanismo***

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, art collectives formed around common cultural, aesthetic or political ideas or a combination of these. During the first half of the century in Cuba artists, together with poets, critics, and other intellectuals, joined to produce a number of influential journals and exhibitions promoting new ideas and the art of the time. The late 1920s and early 1930s represent the first period of major importance in the formation of the artistic vanguard and the Afro-Cuban movement. Early vanguard artists (the *vanguardia*) broke with academic painting in form and content and sought to advance a progressive social and cultural agenda as well as participate in the defining of a Cuban national culture.

The first modernist vanguard group of artists, Grupo Minorista, coalesced in 1923. In 1927 they founded the journal *Revista de Avance* and mounted Cuba's first major exhibition of modern art, "*La Exposición de Arte Nuevo*." Early Cuban modernism, as Juan Martínez explains, was defined by a break with academic painting, the appropriation of European styles such as impressionism and post-impressionism, and the beginning development of a national Cuban artistic identity.<sup>35</sup> Martínez also suggests that as a result of time spent in Paris and Spain, young vanguard artists looked back at Cuba and began to see that Afro-Cuban culture was a key component of Cuban national culture. Influenced by the popularity of African themes in Paris at the

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<sup>35</sup> Juan A. Martínez, "An Introduction to Modern Cuban Painting, ca. 1927-1950," in *Cuba Siglo XX: modernidad y sincretismo*, María Lluïsa Borràs, Juan A. Martínez, Antonio Zaya, eds. 365.

time, Afro-Cuban themes took on a prominent role in modernist Cuban art.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, during the late 1920s and 1930s, *poesía mulata*<sup>37</sup>, the literary component of the emergent *Afrocubanismo* movement produced by both white and black Cubans and promoted in the influential cultural supplement of *Diario de la Marina*, spread across the island.<sup>38</sup> The poetry and other art forms of the Afro-Cuban movement drew on traditional African themes and motifs (from religion, music, dance, imagery) to assert a Cuban national identity. Painters and sculptors contributed to the movement along with composers, musicians, poets and novelists. While *Afrocubanista* art continued in part to reproduce prior stereotypical representations of black Cubans, some vanguard artists such as Alberto Peña, Teodoro Ramos Blanco, and Andrés Alvarez Naranjo, offered critical views of the social and economic conditions of Afro-Cubans in their work. Historian Alejandro de la Fuente writes that by the late 1920s, “the *Afrocubanista* movement was asserting that African influences were at least equally important in defining the character and nature of the Cuban nation,” and suggesting that this process was “nothing short of a cultural and ideological revolution.”<sup>39</sup>

Since the battles for independence, in which black Cubans played a major role, both within the rank and file and top leadership, particularly in the iconic figure of Cuban General Antonio Maceo, Afro-Cubans had been seeking the rights and recognition they felt they had

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<sup>36</sup> Martínez 366.

<sup>37</sup> Translation: mulatto poetry.

<sup>38</sup> María Lluïsa Borràs, “A Brief Panorama of Cuban Culture,” in *Cuba Siglo XX: modernidad y sincretismo* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 1996) 358.

<sup>39</sup> Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of N. Carolina Press, 2001) 183.

earned.<sup>40</sup> Part of this effort included gaining acceptance of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural practices as well as acknowledgement of the place of African culture in the Cuban national identity. De la Fuente and others have argued that the *Afrocubanista* movement made significant advances in articulating and visualizing the place of black Cubans in the nation. The concurrent and overlapping movements of the avant-garde art and Afro-Cuban movement continued to ebb and flow over the next two decades (Wifredo Lam's Afro-Cuban themed modernist paintings of the 1940s and the work of the abstract expressionist group Los Once from the 1950s stand out) but under the changed conditions of the Revolution, the movements were to take on a new importance and urgency.

### **Afro-Cuban Collectives, 1975 to 1985**

Initially the Revolutionary leadership did not involve itself heavily in the arts, but within a short period, the perception of art's potential to threaten the values of the Revolution resulted in an official shift toward exploiting the capacity of art as an ideological tool, a decision clearly influenced by the Soviet model. In the 1960s, under conditions of economic hardship, including rationing and the effects of the imposition of the U.S. economic embargo, artists were called on to develop the

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<sup>40</sup> But the quest for recognition and equality on the part of Cuban blacks was to be thwarted repeatedly. The brutal repression in 1912 of the *Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Party of Color) was a particularly devastating reminder that blacks in Cuba would not be allowed to gain political power. It is estimated that 3,000 black Cubans were killed in three weeks. See Richard Gott, *Cuba: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 124. There was also a deliberate "whitening" policy in Cuba during the first three decades of independence, with an influx of nearly a million Spanish immigrants (more than came to Cuba over four centuries of Spanish rule). See Gott 119.

graphic arts as a form of mass communication and education in the service of revolutionary society. The film posters created for the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Cuban Institute of Cinematic Art and Industry, or ICAIC), the national film institute founded in the early months of the Revolution, are still considered among the best examples of the genre.

Meanwhile, Cuban artists of the 1950s and 1960s were more influenced by movements and artists in the United States than their predecessors of the 1920s and 1930s (whose external references were primarily European). Cubans born before 1959 were familiar with American popular culture, including films, magazines and music. However, by the end of the first decade of the Revolution, influences imported from the United States were officially discouraged and in most cases banned.

Despite restrictions on travel, the lack of a free press, and an embargo, illegal foreign materials in addition to those from the Eastern Bloc circulated in Cuba. Visits from prominent African Americans sympathetic to the Revolution<sup>41</sup>, along with the occasional magazine or recording that Cubans were able to obtain, and radio transmissions that in some areas of Cuba could be picked up from the U.S., continued to provide some access to popular and African American culture from the United States.

The first half of the 1970s in Cuba is referred to as “the five gray years” or *quinquenio gris* (extended to the “gray decade” or even longer

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<sup>41</sup> These included Robert Williams in 1960, Stokely Carmichael in 1967, Eldridge Cleaver in 1968, and Angela Davis in 1972. Richard Gott, *Cuba: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 227-229.

by others), a term coined by Cuban writer Ambrosio Fornet.<sup>42</sup> Its decisive document was the Declaration of the First National Congress for Education and Culture in 1971, stating: “Art is the weapon of the Revolution, a product of the combative morale of our people, an instrument against penetration by the enemy.” José Veigas notes that “the politicization of art and its preferential use as a transmitter of an ideology, beyond aesthetic considerations...was the predominant line in the official art of Cuba until the end of the seventies and it was clearly spelled out in the Education and Culture Congress of 1971.”<sup>43</sup> “Divergent” practices, including homosexuality and rock music (which was popular), were banned.

Despite the official dogma of the period, 1970s artists in Cuba were influenced by multiple sources, among them Pop Art, Photorealism, and counter-cultural movements (the Beats, Hippies, and Black Power).<sup>44</sup> A number of the groups formed in this period were interested in the potential of art as an expression of an emerging, identitarian Afro-Cuban discourse, including Grupo Orígen (1974-1979)<sup>45</sup> and Grupo Antillano (1975-1985).<sup>46</sup> Grupo Raíces, founded by Miguel Angel Ruiz Silva, formed later, collaborating through the early 1980s.

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<sup>42</sup> Fornet wrote about his use of this term in the essay “El quinquenio gris: revisitando el término,” *Revista Digital Consenso*, 30 enero 2007), [http://www.desdecuba.com/polemica/articulos/101\\_01.shtml](http://www.desdecuba.com/polemica/articulos/101_01.shtml).

<sup>43</sup> José Veigas, et al., *Memoria: Cuban Art of the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: California/International Arts Foundation, 2002) 442.

<sup>44</sup> A clear example can be seen in the work of prominent Cuban artist Raúl Martínez, whose work drew on North American art such as Pop Art. See José Veigas et al, *Memoria: Cuban Art of the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: California/International Arts Foundation, 2002) 238.

<sup>45</sup> Group members included Miguel de Jesús Ocejo López, Mariano Suarez del Villar and Pablo Daniel Toscano Mora.

<sup>46</sup> The core group members included Rafael Queneditt, Ramón Haití Eduardo, Arnaldo Larrinaga, Rogelio Rodríguez Cobas, Leonel Morales, Angel Couceiro and Manuel Couceiro. Among additional participants in the group were Manuel Mendive, Ever Fonseca Cerviño, Rogelio Martínez Furé and Guillermina Ramos Cruz.

The 1970s (through the early 1980s) were also known as the “The African Decade,” due to Cuba’s military involvement in anti-colonial struggles in Africa<sup>47</sup>, its relations with the black Caribbean, its embrace of African American political exiles, and invitations to figures such as Angela Davis, Harry Belafonte, and Alice Walker to visit Cuba. Despite the advent of the African Decade, Georgina Dopico Black writes that after the 1971 Congress, it was considered “subversive to write Afro-Cuban literature that is autonomous from regime-sponsored, stylized Afro-Cuban art,” noting that the declaration of the Congress banned intellectual societies of and for blacks.<sup>48</sup> Though Cuba’s own “Movimiento Black Power” had been suppressed in 1971, and further informal efforts in this direction (such as the “Afro-Cuban Study Groups” that formed in 1974) were broken up by the government,<sup>49</sup> artists continued to explore African cultural elements and work toward their integration into Cuban cultural life.<sup>50</sup>

In the case of the Afro-Cuban movement, the racialized nature of the project presented the regime with the problem of acknowledging a political and cultural history of oppression as this would contradict the myth of an egalitarian Revolution that had eradicated racism, while the reality showed that much of the social apparatus of racism inherited from Cuba’s pre-Revolutionary history remained intact. Further, the Marxist subordination of race conflict to class conflict left no space (or

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<sup>47</sup> For a description of Cuba’s military interventions in Africa, see Susan Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (NY: Routledge, 2003) 172.

<sup>48</sup> Georgina Dopico Black, “The Limits of Expression: Intellectual Freedom in Postrevolutionary Cuba/Los límites de la expresión: La libertad literaria en la Cuba revolucionaria,” *Cuban Studies* 19 (1989): 118-19.

<sup>49</sup> Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: UCLA, Center for Afro-American Studies, 1988) 312-315.

<sup>50</sup> The existence of an organized black power movement in Cuba during this period is disputed by some and continues to be a subject of debate.



justification) for an autonomous black politics. Together, black identity-based movements and the experiences of Afro-Cubans sent to serve in the civil war in Angola from 1975 on had a powerful impact on artists seeking to develop a distinctly Afro-Cuban cultural identity. A large percentage of the troops sent to Africa were black<sup>51</sup>, and the artist Eduardo Roca Salazar, known as Choco, spent a year in Angola in 1978 helping to organize a major exhibition in Luanda.<sup>52</sup> Though the experience of war was devastating and traumatic, some Cuban soldiers were able to salvage aspects of cultural affirmation from their experience in Africa. The years of military service spent by thousands of black Cubans in Angola, and also in Ethiopia<sup>53</sup>, reaffirmed historical and cultural ties between Afro-Cubans and Africans (particularly in Angola, as the ancestors of many Cubans came from that region) and resulted in the desire among some black Cubans to emphasize this African connection after returning home.

Grupo Antillano, composed of artists, historians, and cultural scholars and intellectuals, was formed in 1977. Manuel Mendive, the best known of this group of artists, began to exhibit with the group in the late 1970s. According to artist and group director Rafael Queneditt, members of Grupo Antillano were interested in specific socio-political issues: “For example, no group member was on the faculty of an art school, and that was part of the impetus to organize conferences and exhibitions – to help the public understand what ‘black consciousness’

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<sup>51</sup> Writing about Cuban military intervention in Africa during the officially declared “African Decade” (beginning in 1972), Carlos Moore wrote, “The Cuban troops sent to Africa, even as far back as Ché Guevara’s modest expedition in 1965-66, were overwhelmingly black at the foot-soldier level.” See Moore 325.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Bettleheim, *Afrocuba: Works on Paper 1968-2003* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco State University: 2005) 48.

<sup>53</sup> From late 1977 to 1978, Cuba deployed over 24,000 troops in Ethiopia’s war against Somalia, many of whom were moved from Angola. Gott 260.

meant and that Afro-Cuban artists were active in the Havana art scene.”<sup>54</sup> The project of Antillano can be seen as a continuation of the effort to fulfill the promise of full and equal recognition for black Cubans within Revolutionary society voiced by intellectuals such as Walterio Carbonell, who in 1961 spoke of the need to create a new ‘historical consciousness,’ giving black Cubans the place they deserved in the formation of the Cuban nation.<sup>55</sup>

Grupo Antillano exhibited in Cuba and abroad over the next several years before dissolving in 1985. The group’s first exhibition in 1978 was sponsored by the newly-formed Ministry of Culture. However, assertion of an explicitly Afro-Cuban identity was seen by the government as problematic in light of the Revolutionary leadership’s insistence that a Revolutionary national identity supersede any other group identity. At a critical juncture in its development, Grupo Antillano lost its official support. Art historian and group member Guillermina Ramos Cruz asserts that the government withdrew support because the group’s Afro-Cuban and African cultural focus was considered divisive.<sup>56</sup>

The work of collectives such as Grupo Antillano can be seen as one of several parallel but distinct currents in 1970s Cuban art. While some artists worked toward developing a black-identified movement, and with it, a wider respect for Afro-Cuban culture, other artists were involved in updating traditional genres such as landscape painting

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<sup>54</sup> Judith Bettelheim, *AfroCuba: Works on Paper 1968-2003* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 2005) 36.

<sup>55</sup> Walterio Carbonell, *Crítica: Cómo surgió la cultura nacional* (Havana: Editorial Yaka, 1961) cited in Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 287.

<sup>56</sup> Guillermina Ramos Cruz, *Afro-Cuban Voices*, Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000) 148-149. In the context of Marxist thought, the struggle to eliminate racism is subordinated to class conflict, making black (or ethnic or gender) group politics secondary or allegedly unnecessary.

(Grupo Versiones del Paisaje, 1977-1982), while still others were responding to the restrictive conditions for art by reengaging with abstraction. Yet others embraced Pop Art or new genres such as performance art.

For example, Leandro Soto and classmates at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art, ENA) began doing “art actions” in 1976 as a reaction to newly restrictive pedagogical practices at the school (imposed by the cultural bureaucracy and based on the outmoded Soviet pedagogical system). Soto and his classmates responded by doing ten-minute performances during the breaks in live drawing classes.<sup>57</sup> After graduating from ENA Soto was sent to work in Cienfuegos and worked on performances based in exploring the cultural heritage of the city. In 1979, he created three works whose documentation would be shown at the *Volumen Uno* exhibit in 1981: *Mutable on Avenue O* (Mutable on Avenue O), *El Hombre y Los Estrobos* (The Man and the Slings), and *Ancestros* (Ancestors), a performance ritual based in Afro-Cuban religion and Spanish and indigenous symbolism.<sup>58</sup>

Glexis Novoa discusses the development of performance art in revolutionary Cuba:

Some performance art pioneers in Cuba recognize their first works as “*jodederas*,” a slang expression, loosely translated as “mischief,” that refers to a humorous action performed in a casual

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<sup>57</sup> Leandro Soto, “Performance in Cuba in the 1980s, A Personal Testimony,” in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. Coco Fusco (London: Routledge, 2000) 266.

<sup>58</sup> In his essay “The Consecration of Mischief: the Origins of Performance in Cuba,” Glexis Novoa writes that Soto refers to earlier artists such as Samuel Feijoó as early influences for his performance work. Aldo Menéndez recalls that he accompanied Feijoó in “manipulating the organization and installation of cow dung in the countryside at the end of the 1960s as a work of art.” Feijoó also edited two art magazines dedicated to pre-Columbian and Afro-Caribbean culture, while associating with Jean Dubuffet and promoting Andre Breton, Francis Picabia and Max Ernst in his publications. See Elvis Fuentes, Glexis Novoa, and Yuneikys Villalonga, *Killing Time: an exhibition of Cuban artists from the 1980s to the present*, (catalog) (New York: Exit Art, 2008) 15.

way, something quite informal... The absolute lack of an art market explains the lack of concern artists had with turning their actions into objects, including the interest in documenting the works or preserving the scarce existing documentation. The focus was the fleeting moment and what mattered, primarily, was the urgency of the statement. At the beginning of the 1980s, artists and intellectuals got together in order to “play” with the coveted information about the avant-garde. This included topics such as installations, postmodernism, conceptualism, performance art, Fluxus-inspired happenings and plastic actions. They played at making contemporary art as if they were celebrating the existence of a dense theoretical corpus. Because access to information was minimal under the government’s strict control, new things were overvalued, and when an artist managed to get hold of a good art catalog, he or she would quickly and eagerly share it with other colleagues. Some volumes became a kind of Bible for several artist groups.<sup>59</sup>

During this time, a loose aggregation of artists formed and started planning the exhibition that eventually became *Volumen Uno* mounted in 1981.<sup>60</sup> The artists who organized *Volumen Uno*, who may be considered as the next wave of the European-style avant-garde, sought to engage in a dialogue with international art and break with the rigidity that had been imposed through the Sovietization of pedagogies and forms imposed on art during the 70s. To many in the Cuban art world *Volumen Uno* signaled a break with the “gray” period of the 1970s, though looking at the example of Grupo Antillano, and the vibrant work of many others, the decade - undeniably harsh and devastating for a great many intellectuals and artists - was not uniformly gray. Some adapted and produced work that was in line with the ideological

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<sup>59</sup> Fuentes et al, *Killing Time* 15.

<sup>60</sup> Artists participating in *Volumen Uno*: Flavio Garcíandía, Tomás Sánchez, José Manuel Fors, José Bedia, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Leandro Soto, Israel León, Juan Francisco Elso, Rubén Torres Llorca, Rogelio López Marín (Gory).

requirements of the time while furthering their own artistic development.<sup>61</sup>

A key event of the period, the founding of the Ministry of Culture in 1976, set the stage for the next decade. Under its auspices, the Instituto Superior de Arte (Higher Institute of Art, ISA) was created. The conservative formalist model of art education that characterized institutions such as the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art, ENA, founded in 1962) and the Academia de San Alejandro (founded in 1817), was followed by ISA in the beginning, but by the first half of the 1980s ISA began to institute curricular reforms. Cuban art critic Tonel explains, “The gradual introduction of young graduates into the faculty of visual art within the cloisters of the ISA...played a decisive role in implanting new pedagogic criteria in the span of approximately five years...These changes were timely and helped to bring about a dialogue between art and society.”<sup>62</sup> The theoretical and art historical training received by artists of the 1980s at ISA played an important role in the subsequent trajectory of Cuban art.

In terms of the Afro-Cuban movement, by the mid-80s, the absence of government support combined with the official silence about race served to discourage further collective efforts by artists interested in building an Afro-Cuban cultural and racial movement. Despite this setback, members of Grupo Antillano and others continued to explore

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of 70s art in Cuba, see Nelson Herrera Ysla, “Leyenda negra: duros años,” *Art cubano* 2 (2004) 40-43 and Tonel “70, 80, 90...Perhaps 100 Impressions of Art in Cuba,” *Cuba Siglo XX: Modernidad y Sincretismo* (catalog) (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 1996).

<sup>62</sup> Tonel (Antonio Eligio Fernández), “Tree of Many Beaches: Cuban Art in Motion (1980s-1990s)” *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island* (catalog) (New York: Delano Greenridge Editions and Arizona State University Art Museum, 1999) 41. See also Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 152-160.

these themes in their individual work. A number of black Cuban artists who began to exhibit their work in the mid 1980s and early 1990s explored Afro-Cuban themes including religion, cultural heritage and race in varying degrees, among other topics, in their individual art works. Among these were Belkis Ayón (b. 1967, d. 1999), Maria Magdalena Campos Pons (b. 1959), Manuel Piña (b. 1958) and René Peña (b. 1957). Ayón and Campos Pons attended the ISA in the 1980s while Piña and Peña began their art careers in the beginning of the 1990s after careers in other fields, engineering and English language respectively. While each of these artists' work addressed Afro-Cuban topics in varying degrees, their output is not considered part of a distinct movement.

### **Collectives Take to the Streets, 1984-1990**

*Perestroika, the beginning of the fall of the socialist bloc in Europe, signs of the decadence in Cuban political discourse, the growing influence of capitalist tourism, the worsening economic crisis, the mixing of social sectors that the equality enforced by the Revolution engendered, religious syncretism, the language and methodology of Marxism-Leninism, the women's movement, sexual freedom, the open wounds of the wars in Angola and Ethiopia, etc. – all of these were factors that transformed the streets of the capital into an incandescent scenario where anything could happen and anyone could be a protagonist.<sup>63</sup>*

Thus Aldo Menéndez, of the collective ArteCalle, describes the conditions that collided in Cuba during the mid-to-late 80s. In 1986, the Cuban government declared a process of “Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies,” a campaign aimed at reducing bureaucracy, corruption and inefficiency. Launched in response both to internal

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<sup>63</sup> Aldo Damian Menéndez, “Art Attack: The Work of ArteCalle,” in *Corpus Delecti*, ed. Fusco, et al.275.

factors and external ideological threats posed by glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union, the rhetoric of Rectification was seized by artists as an opportunity to participate in a new openness and constructive criticism, as well as the chance to move art into a more important role in society overall.<sup>64</sup>

Even before 1986, artists including Leandro Soto, Tonel, Ruben Torres Llorca, and Flavio Garcíandía had begun to address aspects of everyday life in their art. They incorporated elements of popular culture, including kitsch, “bad painting,” popular sayings, and references to television programs. Artist and then-professor at ISA Lázaro Saavedra explains, “We began to introduce the problematic of the everyday around 1984. The simple act of presenting these problems already was seen as something conflictual or critical, and in the academic context, these issues were perceived as though not representative of Cuban reality by professors with a more conservative mindset.”<sup>65</sup> However, the call for Rectification inspired artists to take up this apparent invitation with enthusiasm and they proceeded to initiate a wide range of projects, often from within cultural institutions (especially but not exclusively art schools), eventually taking these efforts directly into the streets.

The most vigorous response to the ideological and material crisis on the island arose from visual artists, in particular the collectives that emerged during the period. This is not because poets, dramatists, musicians and others were less inclined to be critical, but because the government censors had been more effective in controlling these more

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<sup>64</sup> Among other political and organizational goals announced as part of Rectification, Castro acknowledged at the start of the campaign the continuing problem of racial discrimination stating that more blacks and women needed to be in leadership positions, though no official program was implemented to address the state of race relations.

<sup>65</sup> Personal communication, January 31, 2011.

traditional and familiar forms of expression. Menéndez writes that in the mid- 80s, “the visual arts...had a bit more freedom. The official censors in Havana...saw visual artists as extravagant but inoffensive, incapable of going beyond the ambiguity of form and color. They did not know that the visual arts incorporated text, sound, video, action, collective work, interaction with the public, popular discourses, as well as philosophical and scientific analyses of reality.”<sup>66</sup> The new forms embraced by the artists were unfamiliar to government officials, and the non-traditional venues they used (including public spaces) largely avoided traditional exhibition spaces. Furthermore, these art works were not yet integrated into capitalist market systems; the audience as envisioned by the artists was comprised of ordinary people, peers and protagonists, not potential buyers.<sup>67</sup>

Formed mostly by groups of students from Cuba’s prestigious art schools, and benefiting from institutional support in some measure, the collectives of the 1980s broke new ground by presenting their work outside of officially sanctioned spaces for exhibiting art. In contrast to the avant-garde who broke with academic art traditions earlier in the century in an effort to create a distinctively Cuban art, or the later efforts launched by Afro-Cuban artists who sought greater group recognition in the 1970s and early 1980s, the hallmark of collectives of the mid-1980s was the activation of the space of the street and public sphere to disseminate their ideas and engage directly with the public. Critic Gerardo Mosquera writes: “Starting in the middle of the 1980s, an

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<sup>66</sup> Menéndez, “Art Attack” 276.

<sup>67</sup>The collectives of the second half of the 1980s “shared a conviction about art as a site for reshaping public agency” and saw their own work as part of a broader movement in Cuban society. Rachel Weiss, “Performing Revolution,” *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, Blake Stimson and Greg Sholette, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 122.



unusual phenomenon occurred in the visual arts—without stepping beyond its own province – when the work took on the role of assemblies as well as the totally controlled mass media as it converted itself into a space for expressing problems of ordinary people.”<sup>68</sup>

During the early 1980s, as artists were exploring non-traditional forms of art making, new pedagogical ideas were being introduced in the schools of art (ISA was the seedbed of much of this pedagogical innovation, though not the only institution involved in pedagogical reform).<sup>69</sup> Artists Flavio Garcíandía, Consuelo Castañeda, Lupe Álvarez, and others were involved in implementing a progressive curriculum at ISA in the early 1980s, introducing art and theory that was international and contemporary, including journals from the United States such as *Artforum* and *Art in America*. Artists such as Luis Camnitzer and Joseph Kosuth visited Cuba and conducted workshops during the 1980s, bringing in fresh material and influencing the young generation of artists developing in Cuba. A number of the art students of the 1980s became pedagogical innovators themselves at ISA later on. Among the most influential are René Francisco Rodríguez (who founded *Desde una pedagógica pragmática*) and Lázaro Saavedra, who as a student was a member of Grupo Puré and then as a professor founded the Enema collective.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, “The Infinite Island: Introduction to New Cuban Art,” *Atravesados: Deslizamientos de identidad y género* (Madrid: Fundación Telefónica, 2002) 194.

<sup>69</sup> For discussion of the pedagogical changes introduced at ISA see Antonio Eligio Fernández, (Tonel), “Tree of Many Beaches: Cuban Art in Motion (1980s-1990s),” *Contemporary art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island* (New York: Delano Greenridge Editions and Arizona State University Art Museum, 1999) 41, and Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 159-161.

<sup>70</sup> An interview with Saavedra, part of a series of 12 interviews by Glexis Novoa called *Cuban Performance Art of the 80s*, is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rje-EEEnVZ3o>. Also available are interviews with Aldito Menedez, Angel Delgado, Manuel Mendive, and others.

The genre that united much of the work of the collectives was performance, and the criteria that defined early (mostly individual) performance works in Cuba, from the late 1960s onward, can be applied to work that was created and presented later by the collectives. Leandro Soto defines the fundamental characteristics of what was done under the rubric of the term “plastic actions” (translated from the French *action plastique*): “the use of non-artistic contexts as artistic spaces; the use of waste and other materials that were found by chance; the actualization of the event without any previous rehearsal; the interest in documenting the process and event; the management of communicative elements that were decodifiable by the spectators; a veiled interest to contest a totalitarian regime or the open attempt to broaden the concept of art and its themes (in certain cases later on, these plastic actions sparked politically motivated arrests); and an explicit sense of humor.”<sup>71</sup> Most of this rubric can be applied to the projects of the collectives of the 1980s.

Grupo Puré, ArteCalle, Art-De, Grupo Provisional, Grupo Independiente La Campana, the team of René Francisco and Ponjuán, and other art collectives emerged during the 1980s, electing to work in public spaces, often with performances and a range of other activities structured around interaction with the public. Of the above-mentioned groups, all but Grupo La Campana were based in Havana, and several were outgrowths of student work in art schools, organized under the guidance and mentorship of their professors. That these groups emerged when many of their members were in art school links these formations

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<sup>71</sup> Leandro Soto, “Performance in Cuba in the 1980s: A Personal Testimony,” in *Corpus Delecti*, ed. Fusco et al. 272-73.

directly to the pedagogical setting, defined by the new curricula implemented in the early 1980s.<sup>72</sup>

Grupo Puré, formed by students at ISA, held their first exhibition in 1986 at the University of Havana's Galería L.<sup>73</sup> They felt the need to respond collectively to new social and political conditions, explaining in their catalogue that their work used "contemporary forms and media to express a critical and judgmental view of society and times."<sup>74</sup> Their work was influenced by popular culture, cartoon humor, and the work of artists such as Jonathan Borofsky, Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, Sigmar Polke, David Salle, and Julian Schnabel.<sup>75</sup> Puré's deliberately messy and chaotic installation played with the boundary between the individual and group. Puré was about "dissolving the individuality of its members in the creation of a collective strength, at the same time putting into practice strategies for the social insertion of its works..." Puré's themes were "animated by a sharp critical perspective of the vernacular (kitsch) and the controversial relationship between so-called high art and popular culture."<sup>76</sup>

One of the most provocative groups of the time, ArteCalle was formed in 1986 by a group of young teen-aged students studying art at the Escuela Elemental de Artes *20 de Octubre* (The 20<sup>th</sup> of October

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<sup>72</sup> These changes in art training resulted in part from the introduction of young graduates into the faculty at ISA as well as new theoretical and conceptual frameworks introduced by visitors from abroad such as Luis Camnitzer. See Tonel, "Tree of Many Beaches," 41.

<sup>73</sup> Members included José Adriano Buergo, Ana Delgado, Ciro Quintana, Lázaro Saavedra, and Ermy Taño.

<sup>74</sup> From *Puré Expone* (catalog) in Rachel Weiss, "Performing Revolution," *Collectivism after Modernism*, eds. Blake Stimson and Greg Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 123.

<sup>75</sup> Personal communication with Lázaro Saavedra, January 31, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Eduardo Calves y Tamara Stolongo, "Puré" (diploma thesis, University of Havana, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 1991) cited in Liliam Rodríguez Rodríguez, "Enema: Una experiencia de creación colectiva," (diploma thesis, University of Havana, 2005) 6.

Elementary School of Arts) in Havana.<sup>77</sup> The group became known for its “art attacks,” impromptu and aggressive performances that interrupted institutional art events as a way of provoking debate, as well as clandestine painting of graffiti-style murals throughout the city, and spontaneous neighborhood events. Their first performance, in 1987, was called *No Queremos Intoxicarnos* (Fig. 1.1). The action took place at the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (the Cuban Writers and Artists Union, UNEAC), where members of the group burst into a panel discussion wearing gas masks and bearing placards that parodied revolutionary slogans, and poking fun at censorship.<sup>78</sup>

The young artists of ArteCalle were influenced by punk and anarchist movements, the clandestine Cuban student movement called 26 de Julio, as well as Dada, conceptual art, and Joseph Beuys. One of ArteCalle’s most pointed works was a 1988 performance called *Easy Shopping*. (The title of the performance refers to the English-language signs in the government owned dollar stores, where few Cubans could afford to shop.) After painting themselves in gold and silver paint and publicly distributing flyers for the event, the artists walked to the harbor in the Port of Havana and jumped into the polluted waters. The artists emerged from the harbor covered with grease, and then returned to the gallery (The Center for Visual Arts and Design).

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<sup>77</sup> The members included Iván Alvarez, Hugo Azcuy, Max Delgado, Ofill Echevarría, Erick Gómez, Alan González, Ernesto Leal, Leandro Martínez, Aldito Menéndez, Ariel Serrano, Pedro Vizcaino.

<sup>78</sup> A video documentary titled *Arte Calle Group: ‘Viva la Revolu’ (1988) Part I*, produced by Ofill Echavarría on the YouTube channel Body Tracks TV includes this performance and other actions by ArteCalle, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pc8IEO-DbcA>.



Fig. 1.1 ArteCalle, *No Queremos Intoxicarnos* (1987). Action at UNEAC, Havana.

The curators of the exhibition *Killing Time* write: “The performance was a sarcastic commentary on the government’s most recent financial move, which consisted of a campaign to offer moderate amounts of cash in dollars in exchange for personal objects made of gold and silver...”<sup>79</sup> As Aldito Menéndez writes, “It was this experience of working directly with people on the streets of Havana that gave us the keys to developing a language and method that we would continue in our subsequent work.” He explains further, “We conceived of our work as clandestine, seeing ourselves as art terrorists.”<sup>80</sup>

ArteCalle produced a multimedia exhibition for the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Museum of Fine Arts) in Havana in 1989 titled *ArteCalle en Concierto: El Regreso de Nosotros* (ArteCalle in

<sup>79</sup> In Fuentes et al., *Killing Time* 52. For an analysis of ArteCalle’s work, see Alain Reyes Cruz, “ArteCalle: diálogo en el espacio público,” *Art cubano* 1 (2006): 36-40.

<sup>80</sup> Menéndez, “Art Attack” 277-78.

Concert: Our Return). The exhibit was canceled by the Consejo de Plástica and the artists were reprimanded by the Ministry of the Interior (MININT). Menéndez recounts that this was the final work by ArteCalle as a group because MININT threatened them with imprisonment if they did any other works. Part of the exhibition contained a song critical of Cuba's involvement in the war in Angola. The verses were based in part on a popular parody that drafted Cuban soldiers sang: "One, two, three, four, eating shit, wearing out my boots, this vacation I will spend it in Angola, dressed in olive drab, and with a machine gun."<sup>81</sup>

Inspired by Dadaist ideas, the performance-based collective Grupo Provisional (1988-1989) activated itself according to circumstance.<sup>82</sup> Reflecting the informal interconnectedness of the groups of the time, they collaborated with ArteCalle, Puré and others. Grupo Provisional intervened at a Robert Rauschenberg press event (in conjunction with his extensive multi-venue exhibition in February-March, 1988) in collaboration with a performance by Aldito Menéndez titled *El Indio*. Members of Provisional approached Rauschenberg with a sign that read "Very Good Rauschenberg," and then demanded that he autograph one of his promotional posters. According to Glexis Novoa, who was a member of Provisional, "Politics was a constant topic they approached with a sense of humor. They were chiefly interested in exploring the intentions of the artist and what defined or did not define art."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Email communication with Aldito Menéndez, August 2, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Members included Alejandro Acosta, Francisco Lastra, Glexis Novoa and Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas.

<sup>83</sup> Glexis Novoa, "The Consecration of Mischief, The Origins of Performance Art in Cuba," in *Killing Time*, ed. Fuentes, et al. 18.

The interdisciplinary Proyecto PAIDEIA, founded by Rolando Prats in 1989 sought to open up an open dialogue across the arts. It defined itself as “a project open to the collaboration and active participation of all such persons and cultural institutions who embrace its program and its proposals,” and was dedicated to “the promotion, exhibition, analysis and evaluation of the work of our creative artists, fundamentally of the young writers, musicians, theatre professionals, filmmakers, visual artists, etc., by means of the presentation and public discussion of their works and proposals.”<sup>84</sup> The group organized two panel discussions under the auspices of the Alejo Carpentier cultural center before being shut down six months after their initial invitation to hold cultural events there.

Proyecto Pílon (1988-89) was a utopian project organized by a group of six artists whose idea was to go live in the impoverished town of Pílon, get to know the people and work collaboratively with them to make art.<sup>85</sup> The artists had the support of the Ministry of Culture but once they arrived, they encountered serious resistance from local party officials. Though they remained in Pílon for several months, the project they had envisioned was thwarted and ended in frustration. One exhibit they had managed to organize ended up censored.<sup>86</sup>

Grupo Puré, Provisional, and projects like Pílon, while engaging in expanding the traditional boundaries of art, nonetheless operated from a premise of the centrality of art. Furthermore, Projects like Pílon, PAIDEIA and Puré operated in cooperation with, or least initial approval

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<sup>84</sup> In “¿Qué es el Proyecto PAIDEIA?,” *Cubista Magazine* 5 (Summer 2006), <http://www.cubistamagazine.com/dossier.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Artists in the project included Abdel Hernández, Lázaro Saavedra, Nilo Castillo, Alejandro López, Hubert Moreno and Alejandro Frómata.

<sup>86</sup> Rachel Weiss, “Performing Revolution,” 142-44.

of, state institutions, though this support was often withdrawn once artists were seen to overstep closely monitored ideological or political boundaries. However, other groups deliberately chose to step outside the accepted boundaries and institutional frameworks of art and it can legitimately be asked if their projects were primarily about art or had different aims. Two such groups were Art-De (later called Ritual Art-De) and Grupo Independiente La Campana based in Las Tunas province.

Art-De (later called Ritual Art-De) refers to Arte (art) and Derecho (right or law), fore-fronting the group's activist aims.<sup>87</sup> The group consisted of seven members, among them artist Juan-Sí González, human rights lawyer Jorge Crespo Díaz, and filmmaker Elizeo Váldez.<sup>88</sup> Art-De combined art and human rights activism, in the form of public performances, videos, and short films. They did not align themselves with any governmental or art institution. The events in the streets organized by Art-De were public encounters designed to provoke discussion and debate about topics such as human rights and racism among others. During one of the weekly public events organized by the group in Havana (which lasted for roughly three months before being shut down), in a performance called *Me han jodido el ánimo* ("They've screwed up my spirit"). González encased himself in a plastic bag and allowed himself to suffocate until a spectator tore open the plastic. (Fig. 1.2) Reflecting on the desire to be an independent and ethical voice, González explains that Art-De wanted to create "an internal dynamic of

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<sup>87</sup> González had earlier founded Proyecto Imán (Project Magnet) in 1987, doing interactive social and political performances in the streets of Havana. As a result of these performances, González was expelled from UNEAC and lost his job. Prior to this, González had been supported and promoted by the cultural institutions and had represented Cuba in international exhibitions. Personal communication, June 26, 2009.

<sup>88</sup> Additional members included Marco Antonio Abad, Cesar González, Adalberto Roque and Amaury Suárez.



renewal, of thinking, to end that old-fashioned and even bourgeois attitude, including xenophobia and racism. We were working with those elements, those were our materials, not color....”<sup>89</sup>

Art-De blurred the line between art and politics to a greater extent than most groups, and as a result was treated harshly by the government. Their work was censored and confiscated, and some members were imprisoned. A 1989 film by Art-De called *Ritual para un identidad* (Ritual for an Identity), based on a series of street performances by Juan-Si González, was named best film in that year’s National Festival of Young Cuban Filmmakers, and afterward was banned by the government. The film was smuggled out of Cuba and entered in a Latin American film festival in New York. The repercussions were harsh; González was forced into exile (ending up in Costa Rica) while two other members of the group (Jorge Crespo and Marco Abad) were sentenced to two years in prison. González was sentenced in absentia.<sup>90</sup>

Grupo Independiente La Campana was founded in September 1988, bringing together visual artists, musicians and art critics in the city of Las Tunas, where they organized a total of six projects with the aim of cultural intervention in different spaces in the city.<sup>91</sup> Their objective was to realize the potential of the social impact of art and to interrogate the relations between art and public, artist and institution, art and art market. In taking on topics such as the role of institutions, and engaging

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<sup>89</sup> Weiss, “Performing Revolution” 156.

<sup>90</sup> The film, *Ritual para una identidad/Ritual For Identity, Pts. I and II* (1988) is available in two parts on YouTube channel Body Tracks TV at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QN7H6lkn\\_R4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QN7H6lkn_R4) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WsVoroSyeM>.

<sup>91</sup> Group members included Oscar Aguirre Comendador, Eduardo Lozano, Manuel Martínez Ojea, Armando Martínez Rueda, Marlon Lastre, Geandy Pavón, and Carlos Pérez Vidal.



Fig. 1.2 Juan-Si González, *Me han jodido el ánimo* (1988). Parque 23 y G, Havana.

with the Catholic Church in their exhibitions, La Campana's projects were subjected to censorship. The inclusion of a catalog essay written by a parish priest for the 1989 exhibit *La Campana: Solución Cristiana* was considered a provocative and risky action.<sup>92</sup> Like the members of Art-De, La Campana members were imprisoned and others went into exile with the help of a Franciscan priest.<sup>93</sup>

In this period of extreme economic, social and political tumult, artists had taken stronger and more provocative stances and engaged in ever more vigorous criticism of the government. The external political changes prompted young artists to join to take advantage of and react to the new situation. Rather than formulating a conscious political strategy, or even an aesthetic strategy, the art schools were loci for what appeared as a new opportunity to experiment, criticize, and participate in the broader culture, an experimentation that under the circumstances, predictably, led to a testing of the limits. Mosquera commented, "it is astounding that this whole ideological and social role should have been played by a rather elitist form of artistic expression, the visual arts. Paradoxically, this is exactly what made it possible, because the authorities did not give much importance to the visual arts – and the artists little by little took advantage of the possibilities."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> "The Bell: the Christian Solution," catalog text by Father Vicente Balaguer Gisbert, "Una Campana Que Suenan (A Bell That Tolls). For historical information about La Campana, see blog of group member Carlos Perez Vidal: <http://carlosperezvidal.blogspot.com/2009/01/survivor-promise.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Glexis Novoa, "The Consecration of Mischief" 19.

<sup>94</sup> He goes on to say: That is why the very modest catalogues of the exhibitions (almost always only a leaflet or a little pamphlet) have constituted a space of relatively free textuality, much more so than magazines or books, which are under the control of editorial institutions." Gerardo Mosquera, "The Infinite Island: Introduction to New Cuban Art," *Contemporary Art From Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island* (NY: Arizona State University and Delano Greenidge Editions, 1999), 28.

The government eventually responded by censoring, targeting, and jailing artists, the best-known examples being the censoring of the *Proyecto Castillo de la Real Fuerza* in 1989 and the closing of the exhibition *El Objeto Esculturado* (The Sculptured Object) on opening night in 1990 along with the arrest and imprisonment of artist Angel Delgado after a performance titled *La esperanza es lo último que se está perdiendo* (Hope is the last thing that's lost), in which he defecated on the state newspaper, *Granma*. Delgado was imprisoned for six months, the maximum allowable sentence for the crime of disorderly conduct.<sup>95</sup> Most collectives of this era dissolved as a result of state pressure and censorship and/or once the members graduated and focused on pursuing individual careers. Though these events cast a pall over Cuban art for a period and resulted in a mass exile of much of the 1980s generation of “new Cuban artists” the commitment to critical and socially engaged art continued. Despite the frequent characterization of artists of the 1990s as cynical, opportunistic and individualistic, collectives continued to form, both inside and outside the art school environment.

### **The 1990s: The Special Period, Race, and New Collectives**

Amidst the crisis of a collapsed Soviet Union and a crumbling Cuban economy, Fidel Castro declared the “Special Period in Time of Peace” in 1990, implementing a series of austerity measures, rationing,

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<sup>95</sup> Documentation of Delgado's 1990 performance, under the title *Angel Delgado's Famous Performance* (produced by Angel Delgado and Ofill Industrial Art 1990/2008) is available on the YouTube channel Body Tracks TV: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzQsX564HTg>.

and economic cutbacks. Foreign investment in state enterprises, mainly for tourism development, was sought and the dollar was legalized. A negative consequence of the increased dependence on tourism was a visible increase in racism, as black Cubans were not considered desirable for jobs that required interaction with tourists, and these were among the few types of jobs that could provide a living wage and access to the dollars needed to purchase commodities available only in tourist stores.<sup>96</sup> Prostitution also increased dramatically during the early 1990s.<sup>97</sup> Frustration over these conditions was routinely voiced through the Cuban music called *timba*, produced and listened to by mostly young black Cubans, and immensely popular during the Special Period. Though the government censored some of the performers, it had little choice but to tolerate this form of expression, given the dire political and economic situation at the moment.

Significantly, once the Special Period was underway, a new discourse on race began to emerge. In its wake, the racial dynamic was becoming increasingly problematic and visible.<sup>98</sup> Openings for public discussion around the topic of race in Cuba began to occur in the early 1990s, though in depoliticized contexts until the latter half of the decade, and even then, these debates tended to occur in limited, academic

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<sup>96</sup>See de la Fuente (2001) 318-322.

<sup>97</sup>Informal prostitution and hustling for U.S. dollars (*jineterismo*) emerged during the economic crisis of the Special Period. Esther Whitfield comments that "*jineterismo* became the face of the Cuban government's failure to curb the widespread prostitution that it had supposedly eradicated in the early 1960s. Esther Whitfield, "Truths and Fictions: The Economics of Writing in Cuba, 1994-1999." Ed. Ariana Hernández-Reguant, *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 28-29.

<sup>98</sup>Nadine Fernandez, "The changing discourse on race in contemporary Cuba," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 14:2 (2001) 117. The Anthropology Center in Havana initiated research on race relations in 1993, though it had initially proposed the project in 1989, just before the onset of the Special Period. When the research did commence, it was under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture's general project dedicated to the study of contemporary Cuban culture.

settings. The commonly expressed view is that race emerged into the domain of public debate as a result of the economic disaster of the Special Period and resulting turn toward tourism that favored white Cubans and left most dark skinned Cubans out of the economic picture, thereby aggravating underlying racism and creating new conditions for its perpetuation.

In an analysis of the public discourse of race in 1990s Cuba, Nadine Fernandez reviews the popular press and notes that even though articles began to appear in the early 1990s, until 1997 none had any taken a critical stance or provided a rigorous analysis on contemporary racial issues. In her chronological description, she notes, “By 1997 the terms of the race debate have clearly changed. No longer do the articles repeat the government rhetoric about institutional vs. individual racism, nor do they talk about ‘residual discrimination’ that will disappear by itself over time. Instead, the persistent and omnipresent racist discourse and sayings are now openly acknowledged and recognized as socially significant and continuing rather than inconsequential or residual.”<sup>99</sup>

Academic activity also played an important role in creating a forum for discussion of race in contemporary Cuban society. Fernandez points out that scholarly exchanges between Cuban and U.S. scholars influenced the academic community in Cuba as it became clear that there was a strong interest in the topic from outside of Cuba.<sup>100</sup> It is also relevant to note that the practice of Afro-Cuban religions grew significantly in popularity during this period and, as Linda Howe points

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<sup>99</sup> Fernandez 124.

<sup>100</sup> Cuban scholars preparing to attend the annual Latin American Studies Association conference in the U.S. in 1992 were given permission by government officials to debate racism while in the U.S. See Fernandez 128.

out, several documentaries were produced about the role of popular Afro-Cuban religions, despite its active suppression by the government, in the everyday life of many Cubans.<sup>101</sup>

Cuban artists thus began to enter the global marketplace in a time marked by scarcity, hardship and growing dissatisfaction with the government. The government for the first time encouraged artists to sell their work abroad to bring in hard currency. Stimulating the demand for Cuban art were the 1991 legalization of the importation and sale of Cuban art in the United States, the legalization of the U.S. dollar in Cuba in 1993, and a more liberal travel policy for U.S. citizens, enabling collectors, gallery owners, curators, and scholars to travel to Cuba to attend the Havana Biennial and other cultural and educational events.<sup>102</sup>

A key moment in creating an international market for Cuban contemporary art was the 1990 purchase of a large part of the *Kuba OK* exhibition by German collector Peter Ludwig. Subsequently, artists in Cuba, aware of what sold to foreign collectors, obliged by producing art in response to this demand.<sup>103</sup> Complicating the picture, the desire for

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<sup>101</sup> These included *Oggún: An Eternal Presence* by Gloria Rolando, *¿Quién baila aquí?* by Elio Ruíz, and *Nganga Kiyangala: Congo Religion in Cuba* by Tato Quiñones. See Howe, *Transgression and Conformity* 48. Information on these films and filmmakers can be found on AfroCubaWeb at <http://afrocubaweb.com>.

<sup>102</sup> Under the second Bush administration's severe travel restrictions, relatively few U.S. citizens traveled to Cuba and, conversely, Cuban artists were increasingly denied entry into the U.S. to participate in art exhibitions and academic programs. This led to a dramatic decrease in art sales and artistic and/or academic exchange between the two countries.

<sup>103</sup> Cuba was seen as a new and "exotic" market for the U.S. and Europe and in the context of trends toward postmodern and increasingly conceptual art, there was a demand for figurative art, especially painting, executed with formal and aesthetic rigor. See Fusco, "Cuban Art, Foreign Interests" in Juan Pablo Ballester, *Cuba: La Isla Posible*, Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 1995) 252. Satirical or sly critiques of the socialist state and Fidel Castro himself lent an "insider" caché to the work, appealing to both collectors critical of Castro and those who interpreted the art as evidence of a state that tolerates criticism. Naturally, not all artists of the 1990s and beyond capitulated to market demands of U.S. and European consumers, nor did all have equal access to this market place. For example, those who had not exhibited in biennials or represented Cuba abroad had less access. Additional globalizing factors affecting Cuban art during this time included increased participation

entry and access to the international art market was at times contradicted by artists' anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist leanings. (An example of reference to U.S. cultural colonization was made in Aldito Menéndez's unannounced performance *El Indio* at the aforementioned Rauschenberg event, when, dressed as an indigenous Caribbean, Menéndez, with bow and arrow sat cross-legged and mute before Rauschenberg as the latter addressed the audience.<sup>104</sup>)

Cuban literary critic Victor Fowler Calzada writes the 1990s were characterized by “the resurgence of a neohermetic aesthetic and a cluster of new themes: gays and AIDS, the antiheroes of Castro's ‘internationalist’ wars (particularly Angola), the disaffected youth culture of the ‘freakies,’ and intimate, deliberately nonpolitical verse.”<sup>105</sup> Cultural critics have described the provocative and powerful theatrical productions, as well as poetry, visual art, dance, and music, including timba and rap, that emerged out of the material and ideological crisis of the Special Period. As Howe and others have noted, the government was in no position to micromanage decadent intellectuals in the face of an economic crisis of such enormity.

Most of the collectives from the 1980s had been dissolved by the early 1990s. Artists regrouped and some chose to work in small groups or duos such as the trio of Los Carpinteros<sup>106</sup> and Gabinete de Ordo

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in international contemporary art circuits and international exhibitions (including the Havana Biennial); artist's residencies and teaching positions abroad; and the significant cultural production of diasporic Cubans.

<sup>104</sup> Menéndez, “Art Attack” 280. The 1988 Rauschenberg project was called ROCI-Cuba (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Exchange-Cuba).

<sup>105</sup> Howe, *Transgression and Conformity* 43.

<sup>106</sup> The members were Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez, Alexandre Arrechea Zambrano, Marco Castillo Valdés.



Amoris<sup>107</sup>, both of which received international exposure and exhibited their work in Europe and the U.S. These later groups (in contrast to groups such as ArteCalle and Art-De) deliberately focused on aesthetics and displayed technical sophistication. The work of both Los Carpinteros and Gabinete easily fit into the formal and theoretical requirements of an international art market seeking new sources of art as the idea of globalization became fashionable in art circuits. However, alongside the more market-oriented cultural production of the 1990s, collectives in the mold of the 1980s groups continued to take shape.

The project *Desde una pedagógica pragmática* (From a Pragmatic Pedagogy, DUPP) was initiated at ISA in the 1989-90 academic year under the leadership of artist and professor René Francisco Rodríguez. Based on Rodríguez's philosophy that teaching of art should not be separated from making of art, the project also set out to dismantle the traditional hierarchies within the art institution, including those between teacher-student and artist-public.<sup>108</sup> The project was an outgrowth of the ongoing debates of the period related to art's social function. In the first major project of DUPP, the undergraduate art students and Rodríguez went to a deteriorating neighborhood of Old Havana, met with residents of the building located at #455 Obispo, and offered to renovate and decorate their homes. The result, completed in 1990, was *Casa Nacional* (National House), a collective product of the interactions between students and clients/residents that incorporated the needs and tastes of both parties. The students not only repaired the

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<sup>107</sup> Francis Acea and Diago Hernández, with participation of Juan Bernal, Manuel Piña and Ernesto Oroza at various times.

<sup>108</sup> Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Horizontal Interactions: Pedagogy and Art in Contemporary Cuba," *Parachute* 125 (2007): 72.

building, they worked on personal possessions, furniture, apartment numbers, and religious images and objects as well.<sup>109</sup>

Rodríguez's pedagogical project continued at ISA through 1992. Renamed as Galería DUPP in 1997 it carried out projects such as *La Época*, an art installation in a Havana department store in 1999 and the exhibition *Con un pensar abstraído* (With abstract thinking) in 2000.<sup>110</sup> Speaking of the impetus for Galería DUPP and the other collectives of the late 1990s, René Francisco explained their goal was “somehow to rescue the spirit of the 1980s, this transgressive spirit, committed to social contexts, committed to the necessity of speaking out, and not thinking so much about how I can make my next work so it will sell, but how I can construct my next work so it will communicate to the public.”<sup>111</sup>

Another important pedagogical-artistic project to emerge from ISA was ENEMA, organized in 2000 under the leadership of artist and professor Lázaro Saavedra.<sup>112</sup> ENEMA took as its methodology the collective interpretation of earlier performances by artists such as Marina Abramovic, Dennis Oppenheim, and Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, remaking these works as a collective act. ENEMA also produced videos documenting various performances and projects,

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<sup>109</sup>Hortensia Montero Méndez, “La ironía de los espacios,” *Art cubano* 1 (2004): 39.

<sup>110</sup> Members of DUPP were René Francisco Rodríguez, Beberly Mojena, Yoán Capote, Inti Hernández, Juan Rivero, Wilfredo Prieto, Glenda León, David Sardinas, Omar & Duvier, Ruslán Torres, Alexander Guerra, Mayimbe, James Bonachea, JEFF, Yuniór Mariño, and Michel Rives.

<sup>111</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) 147.

<sup>112</sup> In addition to Saavedra, the collective included Pavel Acosta, David Beltrán, James Bonachea, Alejandro Cordobés, Zenia Cuozo, Edgar Echavarría, Lino Fernández, Nadieshda Inda, Janler Méndez, Fabián Peña, Hanoi Pérez, Rupert Quintana and Adrián Soca.

including a transvestite show they organized at ISA.<sup>113</sup> (The latter can be viewed as an example of an art institution serving as a transgressive “cover” for what would be considered a dubious art form by most party officials.)

Shortly after ENEMA formed, artist and ISA professor Ruslán Torres and his students formed the group El Departamento de Intervenciones Públicas (Department of Public Interventions, DIP) in 2001.<sup>114</sup> DIP sought to intervene as performers in everyday life and involved spectators directly in their actions, drawing on the energy set in motion by their 80s predecessors. Part of a series of thirty performances by DIP at the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial, the interactive work *Espíritu al servicio de todos* (Spirit in service of all) invited passersby to help themselves to toilet paper hung from mobile dispensers located along one of Havana’s busiest thoroughfares, simultaneously alluding to material shortages and the role of art as everyday activity.<sup>115</sup>

Operating outside of any institutional framework, Producciones Dobocho, formed in 1999, was a loose grouping of artists, actors, photographers, who joined together in order to support one another’s projects and share resources. More than sharing an aesthetic bond, Producciones Dobocho<sup>116</sup> had an interest in engaging with Cuba’s so-called marginal populations. Using a deliberately rough and unscripted

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<sup>113</sup> For a brief history of 1990s collectives and pedagogical projects, including those of DUPP and ENEMA, see Sandra Sosa Fernández, “Los Sobrevivientes,” *ArteCubano* 2-3 (2003): 20-23.

<sup>114</sup> Members of DIP included Analía Amaya, Abel Berreto Olivera, Douglas Arguelles Cruz, Fidel Ernesto Álvarez Causil, Humberto Díaz Pérez, Jorge Wellesley-Bourke Marín, Maria Victoria Portelles de la Nuez, Ruslán Torres Leyva and Tatiana Mesa Paján.

<sup>115</sup> For a description of DIP and ENEMA performances during the 8<sup>th</sup> biennial, see Dalila López Arbolay, “Hacia Una Nueva Dimension del Espectaculo,” *Artecubano* 1 (2004): 9 -11.

<sup>116</sup> Dobocho was comprised of Henry Eric Hernández, Abel Oliva, Dull Janiell, Eros Quintas, Giselle Gómez, Iván R. Basulto, and Wilfredo Toledo (Koki).

form of video documentary, Dobocho's subject matter included gay life (*Bocarrosa*, 2000), living conditions in a converted warehouse/shelter (*Almacén*, 2001), and the economic circumstances that have forced Cubans into black market activities (*Con los chicos felices de Robin Hood*, 2002-2003).<sup>117</sup>

It is worth noting that groups such as DUPP, DIP and Dobocho did not form, at least according to their public statements, as collectives in the traditional sense of the word, but as contingent or loose alliances that were situational and durational by design. This may reflect several factors: the acknowledgement of their origins as pedagogical exercises (meaning the group would probably disband once students graduated); the uncertain environment that led these groups to form within an institution such as the art school (despite often pushing up against the institution's boundaries and finding themselves in conflict); or their strategy to cohere in a flexible manner, not tied to a particular space, credo or form, a kind of situational and opportunistic guerrilla formation that could not easily be controlled.

By the late 1990s, with a younger generation of artists coming to the forefront, the parallel but mostly separate trajectories of the art school collectives and the Afro-Cuban groups started to blend. Projects explicitly dealing with race, such as *Queloides*, began to carve out space in official art venues. Curated by Ariel Ribeaux and artist Alexis Esquivel, it consisted of the 1997 group exhibitions *Queloides* and *Ni Músicos, Ni Deportistas* (Fig. 1.3), and a second version of *Queloides* in

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<sup>117</sup> See Sandra Sosa Fernández, "Los Sobrevivientes," *Artecubano* 2-3 (2003): 22 and Giselle Gómez Pérez & Producciones Dobocho, "Producciones Dobocho: un alias para un reporte desde la ciénaga," *Artecubano* 2-3 (2003): 12-15. Parts of *Almacén* and *Bocarrosa* are available on YouTube. See References.

1999. The first *Queloides* exhibition was held at Casa de Africa and presented in an anthropological context (part of a conference on Afro-Cuba), placing the discussion of a race within the more acceptable framework of ethnological and historical research rather than as part of contemporary social relations.<sup>118</sup> However the second and third exhibitions were presented in the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales (Center for the Development of the Visual Arts). With *Queloides*, for the first time a visual art exhibition dealing explicitly with the dynamic of race in contemporary Cuba was held. The exhibitions spurred debate in the art world and beyond and had an important impact in opening up a discussion on race.<sup>119</sup>

Other collectives formed during the nineties including OMNI-Zona Franca (founded in 1997), Punto (from Cienfuegos, founded in 1994) and Puentes, in Matanzas.<sup>120</sup> The group with the most longevity thus far is OMNI Zona Franca. Based in Alamar, east of Havana, the group has been working for fifteen years on a variety of artistic projects, including poetry and sound works, performance events, public

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<sup>118</sup> The artists in this exhibition were Douglas Pérez, René Peña, Elio Rodríguez, Gertrudis Rivalta, Roberto Diago, Manuel Arenas, José Angel Vincench, Alvaro Almaguer, Omar Pascual Castillo and Alexis Esquivel. The artists in *Ni Músicos, Ni Deportistas* were Douglas Pérez, René Peña, Elio Rodríguez, Manuel Arenas and Alexis Esquivel.

<sup>119</sup> A new version of *Queloides* was organized by original *Queloides* artist Elio Rodríguez (now living in Spain) and historian Alejandro de la Fuente. The exhibition opened at the Centro Wifredo Lam in Havana in April 2010 and traveled to Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory in October 2010. De la Fuente was denied entry to Cuba and could not attend the opening of the exhibition in Cuba. Also, there was no mention of the exhibition in any official Cuban press despite its being held at the premier museum for contemporary art in Cuba.

<sup>120</sup> Examples of Punto's work can be found in Holly Block, *Art Cuba: the New Generation* (NY: Abrams, 2001). Puentes is mentioned in Sandra Sosa Fernández, "Los Sobrevivientes," *Art cubano* 2-3 (2003).

interventions, community service projects and theatrical performances with children.<sup>121</sup>



Fig. 1.3 Elio Rodríguez, *Gone with the Macho* (1995), serigraph, exhibited in *Ni Músicos ni Deportistas* and *Queloides I*.

OMNI is perhaps the only collective that has succeeded in what projects such as Proyecto Pílon had set out to do in the 1980s, that is, to engage on a long-term basis with local people to better their lives - in a material and aesthetic and spiritual sense - through art. It is important to note that Alamar is a massive housing project built in the 1970s to accommodate the population overflow of Havana's poorest

<sup>121</sup> Members of OMNI ZonaFranca who participated in the 2006 Havana Biennial included Jorge Carlos Acevedo, Adolfo Cabrera Pérez, Yasser Castellanos, David Escalona Carrillo, Nilo Julián González, Joel Martínez, Amaury Pacheco del Monte, Jorge Pérez González, Luis Eligio Pérez Meriño, Olver Reyes Rodríguez, Natividad Soto Kessel, Damián Valdés Dilla and Gonzalo Vidal.

neighborhoods. Geographically isolated and poorly served by public transportation, and with a large black population, Alamar is considered a “marginal” area. The artists of OMNI are a racially mixed group and their work incorporates rap, spoken word and other expressive forms that have emerged out of the struggles of African-descended people. Unlike the artists of Grupo Antillano and their contemporaries, the members of OMNI skirt the question of an explicitly named Afro-Cuban group identity<sup>122</sup>; they emphasize their spiritual ties, diverse artistic influences, collective process, and commitment to their community. OMNI’s success is a result of group’s commitment to the community and the time they have taken to build up relationships and trust over period of several years.

## **Conclusion**

Since the 1970s groups like Grupo Antillano and the collectives that followed have engaged in a project of creating new spaces for political and cultural debate. The phenomenon that began in the 1970s and took hold in the 1980s represented new formations, new modes of artists self-organizing in order to create an arena for public debate, cultural acceptance and social change. The collectives employed innovative methods in order to be able to operate in a restricted public

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<sup>122</sup> The race problematic is discussed in later chapters. The artists of OMNI are generally unaware, for example, of the Cuban version of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s because this history has been repressed, and their references to black (diasporic) culture is eclectic and relatively recent. Linda Howe notes: “...the Cuban government has never officially acknowledged controversies raised by Afro-Cubans as real occurrences in Cuban history or that blacks have struggled with authorities in the revolutionary period. There is no accessible, specific information written to date by Cuban scholars living in Cuba concerning the controversies blacks experienced with the Castro government.” Howe, *Transgression and Conformity* 93.

sphere, relying on “art attacks” and other performative genres in order to engage directly with the public. The nature and level of engagement artists sought with the public also signaled a newly provocative role for visual art in revolutionary Cuba.

For many Cuban artists of this period, to be in opposition to traditional art institutions or Soviet-style pedagogy did not mean they were opposed to the institution itself. Nor did their criticism of the state and its repressive practices necessarily translate into opposition to socialism. Rather, artists were pressing for a greater role in society, attempting to realize a utopian vision in which art could have a positive impact on everyday life for people and help to solve societal problems.

The examples of the *Queloides* artists and OMNI Zona Franca point to a changing situation for black Cuban artists starting in the late 1990s (and for non-black artists as well) of a new possibility to approach issues of race, to adopt black cultural styles, and to engage publicly in discussing these issues. These younger artists are inspired by groups such as ArteCalle and ENEMA and have also benefited from the efforts of Afro-Cuban artists before them. They have been able to take advantage of the example of both sets of predecessors to invent their own forms of critical and ethical art and create new spaces in the form of an expanded role for art in Revolutionary society.

Despite the dramatic changes in the economic and political climate, artists of the 2000s have continued along the paths opened up by their predecessors. The formation of collectives such as 609, a group of female performance artists who attended art school together and whose work addresses themes of the body and gender roles, are indebted



to their predecessors of the 1980s and 1990s whose work took a provocative and ethical stance in addressing the problems of society. Artists such as the female rap group Las Krudas, whose explicitly pro-woman lyrics speak especially to the conditions of black women in Cuba, are also indebted to the artists who came before them.

However, it is important to understand that these critical practices do not necessarily signal a call for dismantling the entire system; rather, as the artists of the 1980s before them, cultural producers of the current generation (whether in music, visual art or other forms) are engaged in a process of criticism from within, their art and actions directed toward realizing ideals born at the start of the Revolution, but yet to be achieved.

## Chapter 2: The Sparks of Civil Society

*“Civil society exists in all the alternatives, the music, in film, in the voice of the people, in every Cuban who seeks alternatives for his daily existence. Each day there is accumulation of civic activities that are eating away at the system. And the system must open itself to this. The dike is sprouting holes.” (Amaury Pacheco)<sup>123</sup>*

### Chapter Overview

Cultural production in Cuba has evolved in a dialectical fashion over the past several decades, with cultural producers alternately taking their cue from the state, and the state acting to curtail these expressions when they overstep permissible boundaries, only to have cultural producers begin to push the boundaries again. The main factors that led to the creation of new spaces of civil society in Cuba in recent decades include the impact of the policies of perestroika and glasnost initiated in the former Soviet Union (1985-1990), whose effects were strongly felt and spurred more openly critical expression in Cuba; the accompanying loss of the ability on the part of the Cuban state to tightly control its economy and along with it, the Cuban social sphere; and the response by social actors, especially those engaged in artistic and cultural production, to seize the opportunity to create new spaces in the public sphere that I contend constitute spaces of civil society.

Multiple artistic and cultural currents intersected during this period and their combined impact put pressure on the limits of public

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<sup>123</sup> Amaury Pacheco, Interview, February 22, 2007 (Appendix A, Interview 4) 18.

and critical expression that the state sought to impose. These currents included the Afro-Cuban artistic movement of the 1970s and 1980s and the artistic movement that began in the late 1970s and gained public prominence with the *Volumen Uno* exhibition, combined with the Afro-Cuban cultural and religious traditions in Cuba that provided a foundation for many of these artistic expressions.

Building on the previous chapter, which covered art collectives and the Afro-Cuban cultural movement from 1975 through the 1990s, the focus of this chapter is twofold: to provide a brief synopsis of the idea of civil society and its relevance in Revolutionary Cuba, and to highlight the role of Afro-Cuban art and cultural production in the formation of Cuban civil society. In developing the argument that the generative spark of Cuban civil society of the past three decades came from the sphere of artistic and cultural production, I make a case for the crucial historical role of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural expression in the formation of Cuban civil society. I concentrate in particular on Afro-Cuban cultural production since the 1970s with attention to visual art as well as the influence and role of Afro-Cuban religious traditions. As defined here, cultural production encompasses all forms of creative expression, including visual and performance art, literature, music, theatre, dance, film and video, and expressions that originate in religious, folkloric, or other cultural traditions.

## Chapter Introduction

Antonio Gramsci's ideas are particularly germane to the discussion of civil society in Cuba, both for their relevance to the analysis of a socialist system and for the role Gramscian thought has played for Cuban intellectuals involved in the civil society debate. Drawing from Gramsci's conception of the structure and terrain of civil society, I outline the points most applicable to the Cuban context, and then describe the terms around which the civil society debate evolved among scholars in Cuba.

As Robert Cox explains, Gramsci's concern with civil society was, "first, to understand the strength of the status quo, and then to devise a strategy for its transformation."<sup>124</sup> Following this analysis, I summarize below key points for conceptualizing civil society in Gramscian terms:

1. The definition of civil society includes the coercive power of the state as exercised in concert with the hegemonic structure;
2. Civil society is constituted by the sum of social and political forces that express themselves in the status quo, or the existing social order;
3. Civil society also encompasses the realm of contested ideas and the ground on which a new social order can be founded;
4. Civil society is characterized by an inherent dialectic;
5. At the center of civil society is its emancipatory potential.

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<sup>124</sup> For understanding Gramsci's ideas on civil society, in addition to *The Prison Notebooks*, I rely substantially on the interpretation of Gramscian scholar Robert Cox, particularly his essay: "Civil Society at the turn of the millennium: prospects for an alternative world order," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 3-28.

The alternative, and in some cases counter-hegemonic, expression of artists and other cultural producers reflects the idea of a civil society that encompasses both the status quo and also functions as an agent of social transformation. It is to this contestatory and emancipatory end imagined by Gramsci that a significant amount of Cuban cultural production has been directed.

One argument of civil society theorists who define civil society in opposition to state structures is that in Revolutionary Cuba there is no legitimate civil society since the state controls virtually all institutions, however the growing body of literature on the topic of civil society in Cuba over nearly two decades suggests otherwise.<sup>125</sup> With the advent of a dramatically changing social, political and economic environment during the 1980s, more forms of public expression challenging the state began to appear and this critical expression provided the initial impulse for a new civil society. The critical conditions that Cuba faced in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a diminished ability to control social and political discourse, providing an opening for the appearance of a wide range of cultural and public expression.

Civil society existed in Cuba prior to the Revolution and has reemerged in recent decades. Carollee Bengelsdorf notes that Cuban civil society was deeply rooted before the Revolution and was never fully co-opted afterward by the state as happened in Russia. She wrote in 1994:

Silence is not the pervading theme in contemporary Cuba; Cubans have never been silent. They openly voice their opinions in the range of formal and informal contexts. If these voices are splintered and, at moments, suppressed, nonetheless they

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<sup>125</sup> For a discussion of the varied definitions of the term “civil society” and its articulation in the Revolutionary Cuban context, see Michelle Marín-Dogan, “Civil Society: The Cuban Debate,” *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*, A. Gray and A. Kapcia, eds. (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2008).

underscore the difficulty of any project of complete stratification. And these difficulties can only be compounded, or assume new forms less and less comprehensible to an aging leadership, as new generations, not directly tied to the struggles for independence and not self-consciously committed to the original project of the Revolution, come of age.<sup>126</sup>

Bengelsdorf's analysis describing a kind of uneven dialectic between state and ordinary Cubans provides a backdrop against which to consider the evolution of civil society in Revolutionary Cuba.

Since the revolutionary period, Cuban scholar of the history of Marxist thought and author of the volume *Sociedad civil y hegemonía* (Civil Society and Hegemony), Jorge Luis Acanda explains that “while civil society expanded at extraordinary levels in the sixties taking on many traditional state-government functions, the opposite was true in the seventies and eighties as state-government institutions took on many of the functions of civil society. It was a compressed, very limited civil society.” He argues that the grass-roots organizations – the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, CDR), Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women, FMC), and the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (Cuban Workers Central, CTC) – “became no more than an extension of the state government.”<sup>127</sup> It was in the context of this limitation of civil society that artists and cultural producers began to carve out new spaces for civil society in the 1980s and beyond.

Some analysts view the Catholic Church as the major actor in promoting civil society, however others see the Church as less

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<sup>126</sup> Carolee Bengelsdorf, *The Problem of Democracy in Cuba* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994) 179.

<sup>127</sup> Jorge Luis Acanda, “Changes in Cuban Society and their Reflection in Cuban Thought from the Nineties to the Present,” *Changes in Cuban Society Since the Nineties*, Woodrow Wilson Center Report on the Americas #15, ed. Joseph Tulchin et al. (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2005) 133.

influential. For example, Cuban intellectual Rafael Hernández refers to “a Catholic church that continues...to be relatively rigid and unrepresentative.”<sup>128</sup> Within Cuba, the Catholic Church and human rights organizations have advanced a Western democratic or neoliberal version of civil society, defining it as separate from, or opposed to, the Cuban state. Because of this political profile and other factors – including the identification and portrayal of these organizations as agents of US counter-revolutionary efforts by the Cuban state-run mass media -- their impact has been diminished. Though it can be argued that the Catholic Church has been highly visible in promoting its vision of civil society, these efforts have been exclusionary and partial; for example, the Church has historically been unwilling to engage in dialogue with, or consider on an equal basis, the Afro-Cuban religions, thereby excluding the most popular religions in Cuba from the table in their efforts to promote civil society.<sup>129</sup>

The public debate on civil society started in Cuba in the early 1990s and revolved around different (and often conflicting) conceptions of civil society, including the very relevance of efforts to encourage civil society in a socialist society. Though the public debate was occurring in parallel with expansion of traditional civil society in the form of NGOs or ONGs (Non-Governmental Organizations, or *Organizaciones No Gubernamentales*), the 1990s did not herald the start of civil society itself in Cuba. Though not necessarily or always conceived of by its creators as part of civil society, I propose that art and other forms of

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<sup>128</sup>Rafael Hernández, “Civil Society and Politics in the 1990s,” *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 2003) 95.

<sup>129</sup>See Christine Ayorinde, “A Space within the Revolution,” *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*, A. Gray and A. Kapcia, eds. (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2008) 152.

cultural production were the vanguard of the later expansion of civil society that occurred via “traditional” forms such as the Catholic and Protestant churches and non-governmental organizations. Specifically, I argue that this sparking activity came from the cultural and artistic sphere, including plastic (visual) art, theatre, literature, and popular music and popular religion, all of which contributed to creating space in the public sphere for autonomous and critical expression.

A particular emphasis of this chapter is the role of Afro-Cuban art and cultural production in the formation of Cuban civil society. It is striking to note the near absence of discussion of the role of art and cultural production in general, and Afro-Cuban cultural practices in particular, in the vast majority of literature produced on the topic of Cuban civil society. If included as part of the discussion at all, it is often an aside or footnote, with most of the discussion centering on the state, political and economic factors, and regime change. This is perhaps understandable as most of the literature comes out of the areas of political theory and philosophy, as well as increasingly from the social sciences. But in neglecting the key role of cultural production, the debate does not reflect the spectrum of activity that is contributing to the formation of civil society in Cuba.<sup>130</sup>

The fact that cultural production is largely left out of the civil society debate is also a result of the limited public sphere that artists, cultural producers and scholars have had in which to operate.

Meanwhile, more popular cultural manifestations such as Afro-Cuban religions and popular music (*timba* and rap for example) have reached

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<sup>130</sup> An exception is Ana Belén Martín Sevillano’s volume, covering literature, theatre and visual art, *Sociedad civil y arte en Cuba: Cuento y artes plásticas en al cambio de siglo 1980-2000* (Madrid: Verbum, 2008).



wide audiences. The fact that a significant percentage of the producers, participants and audiences of the latter are considered “marginal” (which in the Cuban context may be defined generally as black plus poor) may explain in part why much of the associated contribution to civil society has been ignored as such. I contend that the artistic production described in the previous chapter, encompassing the art collectives of the 1980s and the Afro-Cuban movement of the 1970s and 1980s, together with the continuous history of Afro-Cuban cultural and religious practices, have been the most important catalysts for the emergence of a newly expanded civil society in Cuba.

### **Civil Society Overview**

The contemporary definitions circulating in today’s discourse on civil society range from neoliberal to neo-Marxist versions, and from broadly to narrowly conceived. Otero and O’Bryan define civil society as “the sphere of social interaction between the economy and the state, and includes social movements and the intimate sphere of the family.”<sup>131</sup> Jorge Luis Acanda defines civil society as “the assemblage of structures and institutions that condition the socialization of the individual and the social production of meaning, which is the very function of culture... the fundamental anchor of power and the arena par excellence of political struggle.”<sup>132</sup> Philip Oxhorn defines it as “the social fabric formed by a multiplicity of self-constituted territorially – and functionally – based

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<sup>131</sup> Gerardo Otero and Janice O’Bryan, “Cuba in Transition? The Civil Sphere’s Challenge to the Castro Regime,” *Latin American Politics and Society*, 44:4 (Winter 2002) 32.

<sup>132</sup> Jorge Luis Acanda, “Introduction: An Indiscreet Glimpse, or the Risks of a Window,” *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society*, ed. Rafael Hernández (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003) 5.

units which peacefully coexist and collectively *resistsubordination* to the state, at the same time that they *demand inclusion* into national political structures.”<sup>133</sup> Each of these definitions describes aspects of the processes and paths via which civil society has developed in Cuba.

The historical events of the past several decades have led to a redefinition of civil society and its relation to the state. The modern concept of civil society has been shaped by two main strands of thought, one based in economic relations and emphasizing rule of law and the free market, and the second emphasizing democratic participation in reaction to a centralizing monarchy.<sup>134</sup> Propelled by the historic events of the 1980s and 1990s in Eastern and Central Europe and by transitions from authoritarian rule toward democratically elected governments in several Latin American countries, theorizations of civil society shifted during the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further, the concept has been expanded to incorporate social movements, seen as a potential new ground for democratic institution building.<sup>135</sup>

In contrast to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century emphasis on economic relations, today civil society generally denotes a sphere of autonomous action separate from economics and the state. Haroldo Dilla and Philip Oxhorn write “civil society is fundamentally distinguishable by its differentiation and autonomy vis-à-vis the state. However, none of these

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<sup>133</sup> Philip Oxhorn, in Haroldo Dilla Alfonso and Philip Oxhorn, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society in Cuba,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 29:4 (2002): 11.

<sup>134</sup> See John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: the Critical History of an Idea* (New York: NYU Press, 1999) xiii-xv. According to John Ehrenberg, the first strand was articulated in the philosophies of John Locke and Adam Smith, and revised by Kant, Hegel and Marx. The second, originating in France in response to a powerful monarchy, emerged through the philosophies of Montesquieu and Rousseau. The latter found its most influential contribution in the writings of Alexis de Toqueville. Toqueville deemphasized the centrality of economics and highlighted the role of voluntary citizen association as the democratizing counterweight to state power.

<sup>135</sup> See Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992) 15-16.

conditions imply isolation from or hostility toward the state.” Noting on the other hand the contestatory role of civil society in the case of authoritarian regimes they note “civil society organizations can be protagonists in legitimate struggle against the established order.”<sup>136</sup> Robert Cox argues, that civil society has become “the comprehensive term for various ways in which people express collective wills independently of (and often in opposition to) established power, both economic and political.”<sup>137</sup> Cox suggests this current usage has more affinity to Toqueville than to Hegel or Adam Smith or Marx, yet reflects Gramsci’s usage since he “regarded civil society not only as the realm of hegemony supportive of the capitalist status quo, but also as the realm in which cultural change takes place...”<sup>138</sup>

In the Gramscian view civil society is characterized by an inherent dialectic. In Cox’s interpretation of Gramsci, “the educational and ideological agencies that are sustained ultimately by the state’s coercive apparatus shape morals and culture. Yet in another aspect civil society appears to have autonomy and to be more fundamental than the state, indeed to be the basis upon which a state can be founded. Civil society is both shaper and shaped, an agent of stabilization and reproduction, and a potential agent of transformation.”<sup>139</sup> Further, “Civil society is not just an assemblage of actors, i.e. autonomous social groups. It is also the realm of contesting ideas in which the intersubjective meanings upon which people’s sense of ‘reality’ are based can become transformed and

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<sup>136</sup> Haroldo Dilla Alfonso and Philip Oxhorn, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society in Cuba,” *Latin American Perspectives* 29:4 (2002): 13.

<sup>137</sup> Robert Cox. “Civil Society at the turn of the millennium: prospects for an alternative world order,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 10.

<sup>138</sup> Cox 10.

<sup>139</sup> Cox 5.

new concepts of the natural order of society can emerge.”<sup>140</sup> This dialectical approach characterizes the process by which new forms of civil society have taken shape in Cuba and reflects an interpretation of civil society that describes processes in Cuba in recent decades. Gramsci’s ideas have been highly influential in recent discussions of civil society, including its development within socialist systems. Following Marx, Hegel, and Croce, Gramsci’s thought focused on the role of ideology and the concept of hegemony.<sup>141</sup> As several authors have noted, for Gramsci civil society is an elastic concept, having variable connotations in different contexts. Addressing his contradictory accounts of the relations between state and civil society, Ehrenberg argues that Gramsci’s main thrust was to “emphasize the role of ideology and accord it at least equal standing with state-organized coercion.”<sup>142</sup> Grappling with the same problem, Cohen and Arato find the common thread of Gramsci’s sometimes contradictory notions of civil society in the following idea: “the reproduction of the existing system outside the economic ‘base’ occurs through a combination of two practices – hegemony and domination, consent and coercion – that in turn operate through two institutional frameworks: the social and political associations and cultural institutions of civil society, and the legal, bureaucratic, police, and military apparatus of the state or political society (depending on terminology).”<sup>143</sup>

In Rafael Hernández’s view, Gramsci frames the state as the apparatus of coercion while schools, cultural institutions and mass

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<sup>140</sup> Cox 10.

<sup>141</sup> See Cox 5. Croce, following Hegel, viewed the state as the embodiment of ethics. Gramsci understood ethics as emerging from historically based social and cultural practices. Precisely, it was through civil society that the state became ethical.

<sup>142</sup> Ehrenberg 209.

<sup>143</sup> Cohen and Arato 144-145.

media, the institutions through which hegemony is exercised, constitute civil society.<sup>144</sup> Hernández contends that in Cuba, universities, religious, community and labor organizations, and cultural publications are also spaces of civil society.<sup>145</sup> Cox agrees that the educational and ideological agencies “that are sustained ultimately by the state’s coercive apparatus shape morals and culture,” yet in his interpretation, Gramsci’s writings suggest that “in another aspect civil society appears to have autonomy and to be more fundamental than the state, indeed to be the basis upon which a state can be founded. Civil society is both shaper and shaped, an agent of stabilization and reproduction, and a potential agent of transformation.”<sup>146</sup> Following this line of thought, I adopt an interpretation that acknowledges the emancipatory potential of a civil society in which civil society and hegemonic ideas interact with one another in a dialectic that produces social change.

Gramsci is the central theorist to whom Cuban intellectuals, among them Rafael Hernández, Jorge Luis Acanda, Hugo Azcuy, Fernando Martínez Heredia, and Haroldo Dilla, turned to help conceptualize and articulate an ideologically permissible form in which socialist civil society could be promoted. Cuban intellectuals reintroduced Gramsci (whose ideas had been in disfavor in Cuba from 1971 until the late 1980s) because he was both strategic and fluid in his uses of the concept and offered them an ideological space for

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<sup>144</sup> Hernández, *Looking at Cuba* (2003) 27.

<sup>145</sup> Hernández, *Looking at Cuba* (2003) 128.

<sup>146</sup> Cox 5.

maneuvering through a problematic and politically sensitive topic at a time when socialism was in crisis.<sup>147</sup>

### **Parallels between Central Eastern Europe and Cuba**

The fall of the Soviet Union propelled Cuba into a process of profound readjustment between state and society. Looking at the means by which a nascent civil society evolved in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s can serve as a partial roadmap for understanding the mechanics by which civil society surfaced in the larger public sphere in Cuba in the 1980s and 1990s, specifically with regard to the interaction between the state and various social actors.

The emergence of autonomous groups and the phenomenon of public interventions in Cuba during the 1980s and 1990s were preceded by similar developments in Central Europe and the Soviet Union starting in the 1970s. By the beginning of the 1980s independent movements such as Solidarity had taken root in Poland, while in the USSR, the policies of glasnost and perestroika spurred the formation of widespread and varied non-state associations. Key shared characteristics of the Eastern European and Cuban communist regimes -- state control of

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<sup>147</sup> Jorge Luis Acanda, *Sociedad Civil y Hegemonía*, (La Habana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2002) 311-13. Acanda outlines the three phases of the study of the history of Marxist thought in Cuba: the first during the 1960s, which included Gramsci, Croce and others; the second stage, beginning in 1971, based in a dogmatic Marxism that excluded any examples of critical Marxism; and the third, which began almost imperceptibly in 1985-86, marked by the crisis in Marxism and socialism in general and the collapse of the Soviet system in particular. Acanda notes that from the 1971 closing of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Havana and its replacement with the Departments of Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism, dogmatic Marxism-Leninism became prevalent, monopolizing the academic sphere and leading to bureaucratization, self-censorship and mediocrity. During this period there was no room for critical Marxist perspectives like Gramsci's. As part of the resurgence of interest in Gramsci's thought in Cuba, in 1996, Fernando Martínez Heredia founded the Cátedra Antonio Gramsci at the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello.

institutions and social and political organizations and centralized economies – determined that in the midst of economic crisis the Soviet Union and Cuba would be confronted with similar challenges. In addition to the material effects of economic crisis, the regimes were faced with growing demands from intellectuals, dissidents, and reformers on the one hand, or apathy and disengagement from the state on the other.

Dissidents and human rights activists in the former Soviet Union are said to have had little active support among the general population. Similar statements are made by many in reference to similar organizations in Cuban civil society.<sup>148</sup> Weigle and Butterfield argue that in the USSR there was a lack of shared values between the dissenting intelligentsia and the general population and they attribute the emergence of civil society beginning in the 1970s to new types of social activity that took form as people gradually backed away from participation in mass state organizations. Their analysis describes a process that would soon be mirrored in Cuba, “Young people shunned official youth groups and formed or joined “informal’ associations...and an increasingly urbanized and educated population turned to informal contacts and associations for satisfaction of their personal and professional interests...significant numbers of Soviet citizens turned

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<sup>148</sup>Ariel Hidalgo, *Disidencia: ¿Segunda Revolución Cubana?* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1994) cited in Juan Carlos Espinosa, “Civil Society in Cuba: The Logic of Emergence in Comparative Perspective,” *Cuba in Transition 9: Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE)* (Coral Gables, Florida, 1999) 356. Though they were discredited by official organs and seemed to have little support among the general population, human rights groups such as the Cuban Committee for Human Rights began forming in the latter half of the 1970s. Eduardo Crespo Govea, a pastor jailed for planning to organize a political party based on the ideas of Martí began a group while in prison - one of several organized in 1984 - called Junta de Autodefensa de Religiosos Perseguidos (JARPE, or the Self-Defense Group for Persecuted Believers).

away from official channels of interest articulation and participation and engaged in some form of ‘unofficial,’ unsponsored, or even illegal activity.”<sup>149</sup> In Cuba, parallel examples could be seen in the decreases in numbers of young people joining the official communist youth organization, increases in worker absenteeism, theft at work, engagement in black market activities, neglect in paying union dues, etc.<sup>150</sup>

The Soviet regime had to contend, as would the Cuban government, with the response of social actors in the face of the state’s inability to deliver in terms of material needs as it had done in the past. Weigle and Butterfield note, “the disintegration of the social contracts called into question the regime’s legitimacy as based upon economic and political performance.”<sup>151</sup> In a development that provoked a strongly negative reaction from the Cuban leadership, reformers in the USSR encouraged the independent activities of the masses, “who would collectively participate to solve the economic and social problems which had been ignored or exacerbated by the party-state.”<sup>152</sup> The reformers in the party believed that independent activism would remain within the parameters defined by the Communist Party, but as history would show, the state unintentionally opened a space in which civil society could develop. As a similar phenomenon unfolded in the early 1990s in Cuba,

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<sup>149</sup> Marcia Weigle and Jim Butterfield, “Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes,” *Comparative Politics* 25: 1 (1992): 9.

<sup>150</sup> According to Pérez-Lopez, stealing from one’s employer in Cuba “is widely accepted” and most of the population considers theft from the state to be normal. Jorge Pérez-Lopez, *Cuba’s Second Economy: From Behind the Scenes to Center Stage* (New Jersey: Transaction, 1995) 99. For detailed example of practices of theft and diversion of state resources see Ch. 5 in Sergio Díaz-Briquets and Jorge Pérez-López, *Corruption in Cuba: Castro and Beyond* (Austin: U. Texas Press: 2006). For information on nonpayment of union membership fees of the state-controlled worker’s union, see “Investigación sobre el no pago de la cuota sindical,” *Cubanet*, April 12, 1997.

<sup>151</sup> Weigle and Butterfield 10.

<sup>152</sup> Weigle and Butterfield 14.



the Soviet example was foremost in the minds of the Cuban leadership who took decisive steps to try to halt or reverse the movement toward autonomy on the part of artists, intellectuals and other actors who were demanding a space in the public sphere.

The Soviet state's response to economic crisis was a policy aimed at shifting the burden of difficult economic reforms onto non-state actors. In its own economic crisis, Cuba followed a similar, though more measured, course of action. The Cuban changes would take the shape of limited economic reforms allowing for a limited number of *cuentapropistas* (self-employed small businesses owners) and small-scale agricultural cooperatives (policies expanded under Raúl Castro in 2009) as well as unofficial state tolerance of widespread black market activities. Finally, as in Eastern Europe where the regimes sought to lessen the impact of larger potential mass movements by offering recognition of independent groups, Cuba followed in the 1990s with official recognition of a limited number of NGOs and an end to the ban on acceptance of religious believers into the Cuban Communist Party.

In the European case, the regimes had hoped to ease pressure by legitimizing limited forms of independent activity while maintaining power. In the eyes of the Cuban regime, the Soviet Union failed because it opened the door to autonomy and led ultimately to the regime's loss of power. This lesson was not lost on the Cuban government, which undertook various actions, such as the closure of newly-authorized NGO's and arrests of dissidents, to avert a similar outcome in Cuba.

## **Afro-Cuban Culture and Civil Society**

Afro-Cuban culture and cultural production — including religion, music, art, dance, and literature — with its continuity from colonial times to the present represents a central and strong example of a submerged and often repressed component of Cuban civil society. Black Cubans have carried on a variety of cultural traditions, and developed new forms, which are popular and widespread. In the civil society discussion it is critical to recognize that these cultural expressions have always existed in Cuba, but that during many periods could not be manifested in an open public sphere. Despite such conditions, operating in a circumscribed and quasi-public sphere, they should be considered a latent form of civil society, that is to say that Afro-Cuban culture and religion were continuously expressed and practiced, therefore provided a space for a form of circumscribed civic engagement within Afro-Cuban society, even if often cloaked out of necessity. The cohesion provided by maintaining these shared cultural expressions could be mobilized for political or other purposes.

David Booth writes that the continuity and strong presence of African cultural elements in revolutionary Cuba are in part due to the late end of the slave trade (as late as the 1960s there were Cuban citizens who had been born into slavery and whose parents had arrived in slave ships from West Africa), and the significant size of the pre-revolutionary free “colored” community.<sup>153</sup> The idea of a unified Cuban nation made up of both white and black citizens has existed since its foundation, as

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<sup>153</sup> David Booth, “Cuba, Color and the Revolution,” *Science and Society* 40:2 (Summer 1976): 154.

exemplified by the figure of the black general Antonio Maceo. This official version of nation, though heralded by the state before the Revolution, and proclaimed once more after the Revolution,<sup>154</sup> was only partially realized. This may explain in part why Afro-Cuban religions and other types of Afro-Cuban cultural production (music, art, literature, dance, theatre, film) and the vital societal role they play, are seldom included in any discussion of emergent civil society in Cuba, denying them the important place they deserve in this discussion.

Throughout Cuban history, Afro-Cuban religions have been a source of spiritual and group identity among black Cubans. Despite its subversive potential, David Booth argues that Afro-Cuban religions seem never to have functioned as viable counter-institutions, regarding them as examples of continuity rather than as potential agents for change.<sup>155</sup> This view seriously underestimates the political reasons that they have not managed to realize their potential in this regard, namely fear of repercussions and the ban or restrictions on Afro-Cuban religious practices during long periods of Cuban history, including much of the revolutionary period during which Communist Party membership was denied to believers of any religion. Since slavery, religions of African origin in Cuba provided a means for uniting groups from different regions as well as maintaining ties with homeland cultures, serving as an internal source of spiritual and cultural continuity and strength, and potential rebellion.<sup>156</sup> It could be argued that, in addition to fear of government reprisal, neither slaves nor free black Cubans wished to

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<sup>154</sup> Fidel Castro reaffirmed this in his speech to the 1986 Communist Party Congress, noting that Cubans are “children of mixed blood” and that “this is our greatest source of pride, because it is not a bad mixture, it is an excellent mixture.” In de la Fuente 312.

<sup>155</sup> Booth 154.

<sup>156</sup> See Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: U. of N. Carolina Press, 1995) 247.

jeopardize the foundation of their communal survival by relinquishing it to the political arena and were compelled to keep it within a quasi-private sphere.

Though they provide a path for cultural continuity, religious practices have served as mechanisms for survival and resistance and a possible channel for social change. Afro-Cuban religion has been the focus of efforts for recognition on the part of black Cubans as well as the focus of government sanction and repression. Alejandro de la Fuente recounts that in the mid-1960s a law was passed banning initiation ceremonies of *santería*, and points out that when the ceremonies were once again authorized in 1971, participants required special permission from the local police district.<sup>157</sup> De la Fuente notes that in the mid-1960s a measure was passed prohibiting initiation ceremonies of *santería*<sup>158</sup>: “By 1971,” he continues, “these ceremonies had been authorized again, but they required special permission from the local police district. *Santeros* were interviewed in advance and asked to identify the participants, the types of rituals to be performed, and the origin of the materials required for ceremonies – many of which could be obtained only on the black market. Authorization was not automatically granted, and attendance of minors was strictly prohibited.”<sup>159</sup> De la Fuente also cites a letter sent in 1970 to Celia Sánchez, personal aide to Fidel Castro, by the former president of an Afro-Cuban religious association, the Casino Africano San Antonio in Las Villas, in which he asserted that the Casino Africano (and other Afro-Cuban religious associations as well)

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<sup>157</sup> Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 293-4.

<sup>158</sup> *Santería*, also known as *regla de ocha*, along with *palo monte* or *reglas congas*, and the Abakuá secret society are the main Afro-Cuban religions.

<sup>159</sup> de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*<sup>293-5</sup>.

had been closed against their will, and requested it be reopened.<sup>160</sup> A demand such as this on the part of religious practitioners, directed to the highest levels of government, for restoration of rights to associate and conduct religious ceremonies, represented not only a religious demand but a political one as well. Through the act of insisting on official recognition, Afro-Cuban religious organizations signaled that they were willing to mobilize themselves to protect their interests and rights.

The majority of Cuban believers profess faith in Afro-Cuban religions.<sup>161</sup> Following direct repression under the colonial regime, then less overt repression but marked social pressure during the Republic, and legal suppression again after the Revolution, during the Special Period the practice of Afro-Cuban religions became both more open and more widespread. In 1992, the Communist Party Congress adopted a constitutional amendment that declared Cuba to be a secular rather than atheist state, opening a space for believers of Afro-Cuban and other religions to practice more openly and to gain official recognition in some cases. In the wake of the 1992 change, Rastafarianism and race-based religions such as the Nation of Islam and began to establish themselves in Cuba, as well as religious groups that had been repressed previously, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal groups.

However, this constitutional change did not mean that Afro-Cuban religions were openly embraced. Sandra Álvarez Ramírez, a Cuban psychologist, speaking of the gradual recent development of an Afro-Cuban consciousness writes that Afro-Cuban religion, before it became "legitimate" to practice in the 1990s, "was seen as an

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<sup>160</sup> de al Fuente, *A Nation for All* 293-4.

<sup>161</sup>Haroldo Dilla and Philip Oxhorn, "The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society in Cuba," *Latin American Perspectives* 29 (2002) 18.

‘uncultured’ or ‘primitive’ form of having a religious practice...it was not well-regarded to have religious beliefs, much less if they were of African origin. Thus, many of our parents hid their religious interests, which unavoidably led to our postponement of this type of motivation, a sort of ‘de-culturation.’ It was only when it was given value that many of us returned to our origins.”<sup>162</sup> In the narrative of nationhood expressed through the concept of *cubanidad*, African elements of Cuban culture are secondary to the dominant Euro-Hispanic cultural legacy.<sup>163</sup> Though Fernando Ortiz’s concept of an “ajiaco”<sup>164</sup> (stew) is invoked repeatedly as a symbolic embrace of Cuba’s racial and cultural diversity, the idea of a hierarchy within the *ajiaco* is overlooked.

In addition to such examples of reluctance to carry on Afro-Cuban religious traditions in the home, external societal pressures against these practices remain strong. Lázara Menéndez writes in her study of Afro-Cuban religions that:

...social and religious prejudice has disallowed external manifestations of religious symbols in certain places of business, in theaters and moves, in museums and galleries located in certain Havana neighborhoods, or municipalities not considered appropriate venues for displaying ones connection with such ‘folkloric activity.’ Looks, gestures, veiled comments or disapproving murmurs, and expressions of surprise are still observed today in place or toward people who, it is believed, should have rid themselves of that type of ‘virus.’<sup>165</sup>

An additional and striking example of the derogatory and discriminatory characterization of Afro-Cuban believers on a larger societal scale, Gayle

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<sup>162</sup> Sandra Álvarez Ramírez, “The Race Question: A Necessary Debate in Cuba,” *Enfoques* 12 (June 2009): 2.

<sup>163</sup> The European bias continues in the Revolutionary period. Consider for example the government’s substantial investment in training for classical ballet rather than development of the arguably more indigenous Cuban form of Afro-Cuban dance.

<sup>164</sup> Ortiz’s cultural concept of the *ajiaco* defined Cubanness as “a mixing of races, mixing of cultures...as an *ajiaco* its people are not a finished stew but a constant process of cooking.” Fernando Ortiz, “La cubanidad y los negros,” *Estudios Afrocubanos* (1939) 6.

<sup>165</sup> Lázara Menéndez, “In Order to Wake Up Tomorrow, You Have to Sleep Tonight,” *Changes in Cuban Society* (2005) 270-71.

McGarrity cites epidemiological studies conducted in Cuba in the early 1980s that identified participation in Afro-Cuban religions as pathological behavior (along with child and drug abuse, truancy and juvenile delinquency).<sup>166</sup>

The hegemonic underpinning for the devaluing of Afro-Cuban cultures in the dominant society is made visible through these examples from the “personal” sphere, as are, increasingly, counter-hegemonic attempts to re-value it by various social actors and sectors within the population. In adopting a Gramscian approach foregrounding the emancipatory potential of a civil society in which society and hegemonic ideas interact with one another and in which cultural change takes place, we can see the potential for a gradual increased acceptance of Afro-Cuban religious practice within the socialist state. There is now a greater acceptance of the practice of Afro-Cuban religions within Cuban society despite the persistence of negative attitudes among various sectors of the population. Further, the increased outward display of symbols of Afro-Cuban religions and the circumscribed encouragement of such displays on the part of the government, if mainly for economic reasons linked to tourism or other pragmatic goals, nonetheless indicates the potential for broader acceptance of these religious practices.<sup>167</sup>

However, the state’s actions in response to concerns about potential challenges from a strengthened Afro-Cuban religious or cultural community explicitly raise the issue of power that arises as a result, activating the other part of the dynamic described by Gramsci,

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<sup>166</sup> Gayle McGarrity, “Race, Culture and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba,” *Cuba in Transition: Crisis and Transformation*, ed. Sandor Halebsky and John M Kirk, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992) 199.

<sup>167</sup>Christine Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2004) 191.

i.e., the coercive power of the state as exercised in concert with the hegemonic structure. Christine Ayorinde points out that despite the increases in visible religious activity, the state discourages such activity in many cases, noting that the state continues to block new construction of churches and denies official recognition of most new Christian denominations as well as existing Afro-Cuban groups.<sup>168</sup> This suggests that the state is concerned about the potential threat to its hegemony and the political system itself from an unchecked growth in organized religion. Ayorinde comments that “in a context where religious activity is the most rapidly expanding and least regulated social activity, and the social welfare activities of religious associations are strengthening transnational ties, there is state concern that religious groups could, like other NGOs (especially those with outside links), become launching pads for political activism.<sup>169</sup> In other cases, the state acts to curtail economic autonomy outside of its control. According to Hearn, one reason for the state’s participation in joint community projects with Afro-Cuban grassroots organizations has been to preempt and co-opt “unregistered” economic activity.<sup>170</sup>

Nancy Fraser’s analysis of subordinated groups is germane to the theorization of the status of black Cubans and the regard in which Afro-Cuban culture is held (and applies to other subordinated groups as well, such as homosexuals in Cuba). She argues, “unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the

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<sup>168</sup> Christine Ayorinde, “A Space within the Revolution: Religious Cubans and the Secular State,” *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*, ed. Alexander Gray and Antoni Kapcia (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008) 154.

<sup>169</sup> Ayorinde 149.

<sup>170</sup> Adrian Hearn, “Afro-Cuban Religions and Social Welfare: Consequences of Commercial Development in Havana,” *Human Organization*, 63:1, (2004) 79.



contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday life contexts and in official public spheres.”<sup>171</sup> Subordinated groups’ lack of equal access to material means of participation – the political economy – “enforces structurally what culture accomplishes informally.”<sup>172</sup>

Rafael Hernández suggests that the popular Cuban religions of African origin represent “a network of relations and social mobilization more important than that of a Catholic church,” yet he downplays the potential for resistance arising from Afro-Cuban networks. Referring to *santería’s* hierarchies and modes of social organization, he contends “if the associations and sites of worship of these popular religions were a breeding ground for political opposition, then the stability of the system would be broadly placed in question.”<sup>173</sup> I suggest that this is precisely why Afro-Cuban religions have been the target of state repression in Cuba. Referring to Afro-Cuban religions’ informal networks for sharing information and social life, Haroldo Dilla sees a potential for concern for the state, contending that Afro-Cuban religious groups “clearly possess a considerable ability to mobilize people – an ability that is bound to increase in the future.”<sup>174</sup> These kinds of analyses point to the prominent (if seldom publicly acknowledged) place in the civic imagination occupied by Afro-Cuban religious associations and networks.

Though the present discussion centers on artistic and cultural production, there have been attempts by black Cubans to organize in

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<sup>171</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 64.

<sup>172</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere” 65.

<sup>173</sup> Hernández, *Looking at Cuba* (2003) 95.

<sup>174</sup> Haroldo Dilla Alfonso “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 32:5 (1999): 33.

various ways since the 1960s.<sup>175</sup> Despite the fact that black Cubans have not been allowed to organize as a group or in race-based organizations except in limited fashion in recent years (for example, starting in the 1990s, umbrella organizations representing Afro-Cuban religions were recognized). These constitute attempts to reflect and contribute to the development of a shared consciousness through experiences as Afro-descendants in Cuban society. Most of the Afro-descendant centered groups that exist today are self-organized and autonomous. For example, the *Cofradía de la Negritud* Black Brotherhood, a pro-black civil society group, organized in 1989 and is active today.<sup>176</sup> There is no clear consensus or unified platform for such groups to organize and due to physical and legal constraints, they have little communication with one another, inhibiting the coalescing of a larger-scale organized movement. Due to strong official discouragement of race-based organizing since the early years of the revolution and continuing to the present, and the formation of an official discourse about civil society, this history is missing from the public discussion.

## **Art and the Public Sphere, 1980s – 2000s**

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<sup>175</sup> See for example L. Howe, G. Dopico Black, C. Moore, and de la Fuente.

<sup>176</sup> Other active groups in Cuba today include the *Comité Ciudadano por la Integración Racial* (Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration, CIR); *Observatorio Ciudadano contra la Discriminación* (Citizens' Observatory Against Discrimination); and the *Funadación Afrocubana Independiente* (Independent Afro-Cuban Foundation). For a brief discussion of these groups, see "The CIR in 2011," *Islas* 19 (Sept. 2011): 71-72.

A series of openings, or *aperturas*, and closures have characterized the dialectic between the Cuban state and cultural producers during the period under consideration. Cuba's shift away from Soviet-style socialism and Rectification in the mid to late-1980s with the domestic influence of the movements occurring in Eastern Europe created the conditions for what Rafael Rojas refers to as the "aesthetic insurgency" of the 1980s, until a crackdown in 1989. In the beginning of the 1990s factors affecting cultural production included the official break from Marxist Leninism to a form of Cuban nationalism and a series of reforms (including the constitutional reform of 1992 and the de-penalization of the dollar 1993) that led to increased internationalization in both the economic and cultural spheres.

A flourishing cultural production re-emerged during the early 1990s but by the mid-1990s was deemed by officials to have gone too far, resulting in a call by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1996 for a halt to economic and other reforms, leading to another temporary narrowing of the space of the cultural public sphere.<sup>177</sup> Though there were losses on some fronts, new opportunities arose in others, for example in the initiation of an officially permitted academic discourse on race (though the nature of the permitted discussion remained constrained and had to stay within the parameters of the family or individual behaviors and not focus on institutional factors).<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>After the Fifth Party Congress, which occurred in the context of anemic economic recovery, Dilla writes "the political class launched an offensive against the political opening of the preceding five years." Dilla, "Cuban Civil Society II: Future Directions and Challenges," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39: 4(2006) 37.

<sup>178</sup>Examples include permission for the Anthropology Center in Havana to officially study race relations, and an issue of the journal *Temas* focusing on race in 1996. See Nadine Fernandez 125.

During the 2000s, as movements toward expanding the public sphere began to grow again, the state initiated a major crackdown in spring 2003 with the arrest of dissidents, journalists, and opposition figures. Again, artists, intellectuals and other cultural producers renewed their struggle over the public sphere, and after a period the government stepped in to try to contain this activity. For example, in December of 2009, members of the OMNI Zona Franca collective were physically ousted by dozens of police from the Casa de Cultura in Alamar where they had been based for a decade during the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of their annual festival *Poesía Sin Fin*.<sup>179</sup> They were told that the group would have to hold the remaining events in private homes and apartments.<sup>180</sup> This repeating cycle of expansions and contractions in the public sphere characterizes the dialectic of civil society formation in Cuba during the past several decades. Below I outline some of the forms of cultural production from the early 1980s on.

Gerardo Mosquera suggests that a “silent cultural revolution” at the end of the 1970s among artists who had come of age during the revolution in an attempt to break free of the dogma, bureaucratic and ideological restrictions imposed since the end of the previous decade. The *Volumen Uno* exhibition in January 1981 was, according to Mosquera, the moment that the artists “finally succeeded in making their presence felt.”<sup>181</sup> Crucial to the argument linking art with a broader movement toward civil society is Mosquera’s statement that “the

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<sup>179</sup> OMNI was one of several artistic/cultural projects that were subjected to restrictions or closure of their spaces at this time. See “Carta en Rechazo a las Actuales Obstrucciones y Prohibiciones de Iniciativas Sociales y Culturales,” *Convivencia* (Jan 21, 2010) for examples of government obstruction of artistic and cultural projects during this time.

<sup>180</sup> Personal communication, Nilo González Preval, December 18, 2010.

<sup>181</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, “New Cuban Art Y2K,” *Art Cuba: The New Generation*, ed. Holly Block (NY: Abrams, 2001) 13.

movement that began within the visual arts at the beginning of the decade spread throughout the Cuban culture.”<sup>182</sup> Ana Belén Martín Sevillano argues similarly that the pioneers in the opening up of public spaces in Cuba were the plastic artists who entered the scene in the early 1980s, followed by the new generation of writers whose works began to appear in 1985 and who together with the artists were referred to as the “Novísimos.”<sup>183</sup>

I argue that the Afro-Cuban artists from the mid to late-1970s and 1980s should also be included in this movement that was moving to enter into the public sphere and claim a place within Cuban civil society. Further, it is important to include Afro-Cuban art as part of the critical commentary on 1980s Cuban art. The politically unacceptable affirmation of a black racial identity effectively denied a public space for much Afro-Cuban artistic production and this lack of state support contributed strongly to the lack of visibility for Afro-Cuban artists of the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s and 2000s, the officially approved (folkloric) portrayals of Afro-Cuban cultural traditions, encouraged for tourism purposes, remain based in depoliticized representations of the colonial past, avoiding references to past or present racial history.

However, artistic production incorporating aspects of Afro-Cuban culture (produced by artists of diverse backgrounds) made its way into the public eye during the 1980s, influencing the perception of other forms of Afro-Cuban culture. Lázara Menéndez writes that this artistic production made room for Afro-Cuban religious practices and culture in the public sphere:

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<sup>182</sup> Mosquera, "New Cuban Art Y2K" 13.

<sup>183</sup> Martín Sevillano, *Sociedad civil* 13.

The issue of myth and the artistic sphere was a pretext that paved the way for reflection on different aspects of Cuban culture and made it possible to examine issues of being Cuban in their more immediate context...Artistic creation, which since the eighties had staged a frontal attack on such issues as poverty and exclusion, began to subvert institutional-legal boundaries...There was increasing space for the religious beliefs of African origin in Cuba heretofore relegated to the sphere of folklore and in exceptional cases the fine arts...<sup>184</sup>

This example illustrates one way in which submerged and repressed Afro-Cuban religious beliefs were aestheticized, taken up as part of the artistic movements of the 1980s and via this path, entered the public sphere. This is not to suggest that Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and their expressions required legitimization through the fine arts, but that through the window of art, Afro-Cuban cultural elements were brought before a public that may not have been inclined to accept or appreciate their cultural value.

In looking at the artistic movements of the 1980s, it can be argued that certain forms of artistic production lent themselves to the successful expression of social criticism. Performance art and theater in particular could take advantage of their ephemerality and lack of documentation (and lack of “evidence”) in a “now you see it, now you don’t” fashion. Ana Belén Martín Sevillano writes that the theater of the 1980s represented one of the most critical artistic activities, but its reach was limited due to the ephemeral and temporal nature of the performances and, equally importantly, due to the fact that the texts were seldom published, or if they were, not until many years after the plays were produced. She also relates that the irreverence of many of these works was so pronounced that many Cubans suspected that the authorities deliberately allowed these works to be performed to serve as an escape valve to relieve

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<sup>184</sup> Menéndez, "In Order to Wake Up Tomorrow" 277.

mounting social pressures.<sup>185</sup> Writing of the first decade of the present century, but echoing Martín Sevillano's comments on theater of the 1980s, Rafael Rojas argues that among all the art forms, those who enjoyed the most freedom are those with the least capacity for "durable reproduction of meaning," in reference to music, dance and theater.<sup>186</sup> (To this list I would add performance art and spoken word, forms that became more prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s.)

Desiderio Navarro, editor of the Cuban journal *Criterios*, commenting on the 1980s explosion of critical artistic expression, described a new orientation among artists toward the non-institutional and anti-institutional in which he identified the following strategies: "the unexpected irruption into, and the ephemeral, 'deconstructive' appropriation of institutional cultural spaces"; "the creation of non-institutional cultural spaces," and "the more or less ephemeral irruption into and appropriation of public spaces (through graffiti, murals, and performances in the city streets)."<sup>187</sup> These are techniques that artists would continue to employ in a variety of ways during the 1990s and 2000s.

Mosquera explains, "at the end of the '80s the sharp critical edge of the visual arts exceeded the limits the regime was willing to tolerate."<sup>188</sup> According to Rojas the "aesthetic insurgency of the 80s" led

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<sup>185</sup> Martín Sevillano, *Sociedad civil* 15.

<sup>186</sup> Rafael Rojas, "Cultura y poder en Cuba," *Nexos: Sociedad, Ciencia, Literatura* 26:318 (June 2004): 56.

<sup>187</sup> Desiderio Navarro, "In Medias Res Publicas: On Intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere," *Boundary 2* (Fall 2002) 192. In this essay Navarro also provides a history of the role of intellectuals within the Revolution, including the anti-intellectualism that took hold in the 1970s and the persistent lack of a role for intellectuals in the cultural sphere within the political sphere. Rafael Hernández has also written on this topic. See "The Second Death of Dogma: Notes on a Culture of the Left," *Looking at Cuba* (2003).

<sup>188</sup> Mosquera, "New Cuban Art, Y2K" 13.

by poetry, plastic art, theater, music and dance, was suffocated by the government between 1989 and 1992.<sup>189</sup> The most critical artists left the island during the crackdown that began in 1989 and 1990. However, in the context of the collapse of Eastern European communism and the worsening conditions of the Special Period, the government could not maintain such tight control and a new generation of critical artists emerged. However, as Mosquera points out, artists knew not to cross the boundaries that remained firmly in place, and even negotiated these boundaries with official censors, while taking coded visual language to a new level.<sup>190</sup> Ana Belén Martín Sevillano comments that the visual artists maintained a tense dialogue with the authorities despite the critical social content of their work.<sup>191</sup> However, I argue that any such dialogue, to the extent it existed, must be viewed in the larger political context; cultural authorities, even supportive or sympathetic ones, had little power in the larger political system (as Desiderio Navarro and Rafael Hernández have both noted).

Despite the official censorship and self-censorship that re-established itself to a large degree during the 1990s, it was impossible to ignore the successful appropriation of public space by artists and other cultural producers during the 1980s, along with its unprecedented level of critical commentary. Rojas writes of the new opening in 1992, generated in the aftermath of the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in 1991 and the flourishing literary output that characterized this period. As Mosquera noted, the role of art had subtly shifted in Cuban society.

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<sup>189</sup> Rojas, "Cultura y poder en Cuba" 56.

<sup>190</sup> Rojas, "Cultura y poder en Cuba" 13.

<sup>191</sup> Martín Sevillano, *Sociedad civil* 13.



Among the most important changes that took place during the latter part of the 1990s in the artistic and cultural sphere is the exploration of race and racial discrimination, which was manifested in visual and performance art and music especially. In addition to the collectives mentioned in the previous chapter, many individual artists across generations produced art addressing and incorporating issues of race. From the art of Ramón (Haití) Eduardo, who for decades had been making African-influenced paintings and sculptures with a clear expression of black identity, to the work of Alexis Esquivel, whose performance *La Soga Maravillosa* (The Amazing Rope, 1999-2000<sup>192</sup>) (Fig. 2.1) made direct reference to racial segregation in Cuba, artists have worked toward expression of the cultural history as well as social realities of black Cubans. However, as has been the case throughout the Revolutionary period, artists who insist on addressing race have been isolated due to official disapproval of addressing racism or racial discrimination in Cuba.

Though an in-depth analysis of music is beyond the scope of this project, Cuban popular music has also been vital in the efforts to create new spaces for civic expression and an expanded public sphere. *Timba* and rap, growing since the 1980s and considered part of a black aesthetic, grew rapidly in popularity during the 1990s under the conditions of the Special Period. In the social and economic upheaval of the period, which disproportionately affected non-white Cubans, *timba* and rap lyrics spoke openly of harsh new realities, along with their attendant racial dynamics and discrimination. Importantly, they also

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<sup>192</sup> Esquivel's performance series refers to the practice of literally segregating black and white Cubans in certain social spaces, such as in parks or dances, during the period of the Republic.

spoke from a position of black identity: “Under a political regime that rejected displays of identity based on race, religion and the like, *timba* boldly paid tribute to Afro-Cuban heritage, both religious and



Fig. 2.1 Alexis Esquivel, *La Soga Maravillosa*, performance (1999), Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, La Habana, Cuba. Photo: Leandro Joo.

secular.”<sup>193</sup>

The hip hop movement, which started to form during the 1980s in Cuba with breakdancing and emerged strongly with its own music

<sup>193</sup> Ariana Hernández-Reguant, “Blackness with a Cuban Beat,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 38:2 (2004) 33.

production by the mid-1990s, was a vital part of the larger and more recent movement among young mostly non-white Cubans to claim a public space in which to express social concerns and criticisms, and through which they could lay claim to an African diasporic identity.<sup>194</sup> Building on the efforts of diverse musical and artistic predecessors, rap musicians today are contributing strongly to an increasingly racially conscious youth movement. Nonetheless, popular cultural manifestations, whether in the form of Afro-Cuban religion or music, are rarely mentioned in the academic civil society debate inside or outside of Cuba. As noted earlier, the marginalized status of a significant percentage of the producers, participants and audiences may explain in part why much of the associated contribution to civil society has been ignored as such.

These recent forms of cultural production, along with other elements of hip hop culture, command a greater audience than fine art, but I argue that it was the effort of artists of the previous generation, engaging in deliberate social and political provocations within the space of the public sphere, that inspired the next generation to fight for its own place in civil society.

### **The Civil Society Debate of the 1990s**

By the early 1990s, critical expression and moves toward autonomous organization outside of the artistic and cultural fields had

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<sup>194</sup> Documentaries on the history of the Cuban rap movement include *Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio (Hip Hop from the Beginning)* by Larissa Díaz and Vanessa Díaz (2006), *East of Alamar* by [Emilia Menocal](#) and [Jauretsi Saizarbitoria](#) (2006), and *Short Radiography of Hip Hop in Cuba* (2004) by Ricardo Bacallao.

gained momentum (via NGOs, autonomous neighborhood groups, etc.), and along with this came analysis of the phenomenon from academics and intellectuals who moved the discussion of civil society further into the open, theorizing a phenomenon that, as described above, had been emerging on the ground for several years.<sup>195</sup> Responding to concrete events, these discussions of civil society provide a useful context for understanding how the art and cultural production of the past two decades had entered and impacted the public sphere.

The main impetus for the discussion the civil society in Cuba as mentioned earlier was the political upheaval in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s, which resonated especially strongly in Cuba. Democratizing movements in Latin America that had mobilized civil society contributed to the debate to a smaller degree. Though the most significant impulse and movement toward creating a space in civil society for various types of expression occurred in the 1980s, via artistic and cultural production, the topic of civil society was not yet a permissible one for Cuban academics. The use of the term “civil society” in Cuba was problematic given its status as the organizing force of the downfall of Eastern European communist governments, as well as its adoption as a tool in U.S. efforts to influence or overthrow the Castro regime. Nonetheless, a debate on civil society gained momentum gradually as Cuban intellectuals tested the limits of political tolerance.<sup>196</sup> The public debate over civil society in Cuba began to emerge in the early

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<sup>195</sup> These intellectuals and academics included Iván de la Nuez, Victor Fowler, Jorge Luis Acanda, and Rafael Hernández among others.

<sup>196</sup> According to Haroldo Dilla, the opening for a more public discussion within Cuba occurred in 1992 at the Rio Summit when Fidel Castro acknowledged the constructive role of civil society in Latin America: “Cuban intellectuals and social activists interpreted that speech as a signal that the subject was now safe to talk about.” See Dilla Alfonso, “The Virtues and Misfortunes” (1999) 30.

part of the 1990s, but there was no consensus on what the term signified in a Cuban context.

Toward the close of the 1980s, and in the wake of the perceived opening provided by the Process of Rectification, cultural critics began to reinvent the concept of civil society, rejecting as outmoded the dogmatic Soviet-socialist prohibition of the topic that had been in force for two decades. Gramsci's ideas, which had not been written about in Cuba for nearly two decades, re-emerged in essays by critics Iván de la Nuez and Victor Fowler, and later Rafael Hernández. In his 1988 essay "El cóndor pasa" de la Nuez proposes Gramsci as an alternative to dogmatic Soviet style socialism, and Fowler, in his 1989 essay in *El Caimán Barbudo*, also drawing on Gramsci, argues for the importance of the role of the artistic intellectual in the socialist system.<sup>197</sup>

A key institution in producing scholarship on contemporary Cuban society, including the debate on civil society, was the Centro de Estudios sobre América (Center for Studies on the Americas, CEA). Founded by the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee in 1976 the CEA was to function as an "autonomous institute" with a research focus on countries in the hemisphere and Cuba's relations with them. During the 1980s some scholars at the CEA turned their attention to domestic affairs. By the mid-1990s it was producing research deemed outside acceptable political boundaries (commenting on the political system, and suggesting economic reforms, for example), and in 1996 the center came under attack by the leadership of the Communist Party. The administration of the CEA and its individual scholars were formally

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<sup>197</sup> Ivan de la Nuez, "El cóndor pasa," *La gaceta de Cuba* (June 1988): 11 and Victor Fowler, "Pequeña teoría de la censura," *El Caimán Barbudo* 263 (October 1989).

investigated by Party officials (led by Raúl Castro) who demanded the scholars confess their errors and halt their projects.<sup>198</sup> A few months later, the center was closed and its scholars dispersed among other institutions. Among the researchers of the CEA publicly criticized by Raúl Castro were Rafael Hernández, Hugo Azcuy, and Haroldo Dilla.

The writings of Rafael Hernández, a researcher at the CEA and also editor of the Cuban social science and humanities journal *Temas*, also contributed to launching the civil society debate in Cuba arguing, along with critics such as de la Nuez and Fowler, for the relevance of a Gramscian perspective. Hernández's 1993 essay, titled "Mirar a Cuba," (Looking at Cuba) challenged stereotypical views from within and outside Cuba about the Cuban leadership, its intellectuals, and political processes, noting civil society's role in a viable socialist system that would incorporate various democratic forms of participation.<sup>199</sup>

In the 1994 essay titled "Sociedad civil y sus alrededores" (Civil Society and its Surroundings) published in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, the journal of the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, UNEAC), Hernández made a case for the relevance of the concept of civil society for examining Cuba's problems, arguing that it leads to "an integrated sociological perspective on political and ideological phenomena as seen from the point of view of social relations. This perspective is even more necessary when the dynamic of civil society has become blurred by the high degree of politicization of social relations and social institutions in Cuba. We need

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<sup>198</sup> See Joel Edelstein, "The Centro de Estudios sobre América: An Account of a Regrettable Loss," *Latin American Perspectives* 125, 29:4 (July 2002): 80-82.

<sup>199</sup> Rafael Hernández, "Mirar a Cuba," *La Gaceta de Cuba* (September-October 1993) 2-7, and republished in Hernández, *Looking at Cuba* (2003).

an approach that restores the specificity and autonomy of the *social* as a factor that interacts with the *institutionally political*.”<sup>200</sup>

Historian of Marxist thought and key figure in the theorization of socialist civil society in Cuba Jorge Luis Acanda identifies the three positions of the debate that emerged in Cuba in the wake of Hernández’s articles and the debate they ignited. The first he calls the “liberal” position, a neoliberal interpretation adopted by dissident groups and Catholic intellectuals; the second Acanda labels “suspicious Marxism,” which viewed any consideration of the idea as an “enemy maneuver,” while the third position, “critical Marxism,” considers civil society as “the ideal space in which to consolidate socialist political hegemony.”<sup>201</sup> Intellectuals leading the debate adopted this third position.

As noted earlier, the discussion of civil society in Cuba was spurred by an internal need to respond to the country’s changed circumstances in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and broader external developments according to Acanda, including the shifting role of the state in light of the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state in capitalist centers, and the “crisis in the traditional structures of the Latin American left and its attempts to reorganize by empowering grass-roots movements.”<sup>202</sup> Hugo Azcuy, researcher at the Centro de Estudios sobre América (CEA), argued that the economic crisis in Cuba was an important determining factor in moving civil society into contemporary Cuban social thought.<sup>203</sup> He pointed specifically to phenomena such as

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<sup>200</sup> Rafael Hernández, “La sociedad civil y sus alrededores,” *La Gaceta de Cuba* (January-February 1994) 28-31, republished as “Civil Society and its Surroundings” in Hernández, *Looking at Cuba* (2003) 30.

<sup>201</sup> Acanda, “Changes in Cuban Society” 130.

<sup>202</sup> Acanda, “Changes in Cuban Society” 128.

<sup>203</sup> Hugo Azcuy, “Estado y sociedad civil en Cuba,” *Temas* 4 (October-December 1995): 105.

the trend toward free market pricing, the appearance of unemployment, and the resulting breakdown of the social contract that had created an egalitarian system for the previous three decades that would no longer be sustainable.

As a consequence of the crisis, social, economic, racial and ideological fissures opened up and underlying tensions about the direction of the society emerged more forcefully into the public sphere. Under these changed circumstances (which saw such significant increases in prostitution and black market activity that their existence could no longer be denied by the government) the plurality of society could not be contained or expressed exclusively through state-controlled organizations. Azcuy states that though the movement for a more plural expression of Cuban society was marked in the first half of the 1990s it had antecedents that dated to the second half of the 1980s when people began to question the 1970s implementation of a Soviet-style institutional and ideological model. In this analysis of the debate as it evolved in Cuba, Azcuy made a case that in this context civil society was not only an instrument of analysis, but also a *project*.<sup>204</sup>

Among the most significant changes in Cuban society resulting from the unraveling of the Soviet Union was the loss of the state's relative capacity to provide for the basic needs of its population, as well as an inability to control the flow of resources. Along with these changes came a diminishing power to direct social actions and political discourse, leading to the rise of autonomous social spaces. Recounts Dilla, "Independent spaces for activities and debates that were unthinkable only a few years earlier appeared, either as a result of the opening to the

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<sup>204</sup>Azcuy105.



market or simply as a result of the inability of the old ideological apparatuses to control the whims of thought. A civil society demanding its own space began to emerge in Cuba.”<sup>205</sup>

In Dilla’s view, “Despite the call for a ‘rectification process’ (1986-1990)...and the liberalizing breeze that swept through Cuba from 1990 to 1995, there was no indication that the government planned to open up its political system to accommodate the diverse opinions incubating in society...”<sup>206</sup> By late 1995, strong negative opinions against the idea of civil society surfaced within some sectors of the Cuban leadership. An article in the state daily newspaper *Granma* from January 1996 titled “¿Sociedad civil o gato por liebre?” (Civil Society or Sleight of Hand?) denounced civil society as a “neoliberal excrescence” and compared it with a Trojan horse that would undermine socialism at the behest of U.S. interests. NGOs were depicted as an a set of institutions aimed at “undermining socialist society from within.”<sup>207</sup> The article was quickly followed by a statement by the Central Committee of the Communist Party adopting a hard line position with respect to several research centers in Cuba, most prominent among them the CEA.

In a retrenchment against the political opening of the preceding five years, in 1996 the Cuban Communist Party declared an official definition of a “socialist civil society” that reflected the political status quo and included within it all the mass organizations along with a selected number of state-approved NGOs.<sup>208</sup> In addition, registrations for new NGOs were suspended, new restrictions were placed on existing

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<sup>205</sup> Dilla, "The Virtues and Misfortunes" (1999) 30.

<sup>206</sup> Haroldo Dilla Alfonso, “Cuban civil society: II. Future directions and challenges,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39:4 (2006): 37.

<sup>207</sup> R. Valdés Vivó, “¿Sociedad civil o gato por liebre?” *Granma Internacional* (January 24, 1996): 3.

<sup>208</sup> Dilla and Oxhorn, *Latin American Perspectives* (2002): 24.

NGOs, and acceptance of external funding of NGOs was condemned. In addition to disbanding the CEA, the Communist Party's Central Committee called a meeting in September 1996 to dissolve the independent women's organization Majín, which had formed in 1993 as an alternative to the official state women's organization, the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women, FMC). According to one of the organization's founders, Marta López Vigil, Magín was "deactivated" by the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba in the name of national "unity."<sup>209</sup> The short-lived Pablo Milanés Foundation, created in 1993 and closed in 1996 due to opposition from state officials, was another (high-profile) example of a failed attempt at organized autonomy in the cultural sphere.

Citing the dissolution of the CEA and other actions, Michelle Marín-Dogan notes "the state reacted quickly to what it perceived as a threat to its hegemony and moved to regain its monopoly of both the agenda for debate and the space within which debate could take place."<sup>210</sup> During this time, most NGOs were reduced to "virtually expendable" roles, while others were shut down and their functions taken over by the state.<sup>211</sup> Analyzing the state's actions during this period Marín-Dogan contends:

As in the 1970s, any discussion of socialist 'alternatives' frightened the already nervous party-state leadership, which recognized that within the context of the Special Period alternative socialist discourses had the potential to emerge, coalesce, and challenge the dominant hegemonic discourse that underpinned its political dominance. The existence of multiple

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<sup>209</sup> Marta López Vigil, "Cuban Women's History – Voices and Jottings," *Envío* 17:208 (1998): 27-43. She adds, "In a system like Cuba's, the immense majority of society never even learned that Magín had been born, much less that it grew and that it died..."

<sup>210</sup> Michelle Marín-Dogan, "Civil Society: The Cuban Debate" in *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*, ed. Alexander Gray and Antoni Kapcia (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008) 60.

<sup>211</sup> Dilla, "Cuban civil society" (2006) 2.

discourses could not be tolerated, for the emergence of heterodoxy, self-reflection, and dispersion was fundamentally at odds with the state's aim to assimilate differences where possible...By the mid-1990s, when economic recovery, though tentative, appeared more certain, the principal preoccupation of the Cuban state was not merely the existence of an organized opposition but the fear that this opposition could link itself to those growing spaces of disillusion, discontent, and demobilization that were manifesting themselves in Cuban society."<sup>212</sup>

Dilla argues that the emerging model of accumulation in Cuba, which has at its base the subordination of sectors of the national economy to market rules, has had grave implications for Cuban society. He cites a range of negative impacts of the government's economic measures which included: encouragement of foreign capital, a hardening of the penal code, two new laws for the defense of national sovereignty (referred to as the *leyes mordazas*, or gag laws, because they restrict criticism of the regime), a push for greater state financial control, and what Dilla refers to as "an offensive directed since 1996 against an already emaciated civil society and the spaces open for public debate, and the intense mass mobilizations that have inundated the streets and public squares of the island since 1999..."<sup>213</sup> (Dilla's pessimistic assessment of the challenges faced by those who would wish to move hastily or forcefully in a direction that threatens the status quo is not shared by all observers; others such as Rafael Hernández and Jorge Luis Acanda argue that there is room for accommodation on the part of the state to encourage certain types of civil society.)

The political measures described by Dilla are examples of the non-linear process of alternating restriction and tolerance that have

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<sup>212</sup> Dilla, "Cuban civil society" (2006) 59.

<sup>213</sup> Alfonso Haroldo Dilla, "Cuba: The Changing Scenarios of Governability," *boundary* 2, 29:3 (2002): 64-65.

characterized the actions of the state over several decades. Benigno Aguirre has referred to the Cuban system as a combination of openness and rigidity, “dynamic in its openness to the people and its encouragement of their participation in the officially approved activities and programs” and rigid in its vigilant efforts in maintaining political hegemony. Aguirre suggests that the Special Period does not represent a loss of social control but a “relative loosening of the government’s ability to direct citizens’ participation,” leading to an increase in the expression of alternative explanations to the official worldview: “People’s private, small-group worlds gain autonomy from the government and develop alternative answers – this is, become legitimated – even as government practices and programs continue to set the broader context of social control.”<sup>214</sup>

However, as has been demonstrated by the successful claiming of public space by artists and cultural producers at various junctures over the past three decades, in the struggle for autonomy and public space, the government has not always been able to assert its control. The state has worked to shut down or co-opt various spaces when these are perceived to threaten its interests. A pattern has formed between critical social actors and the state whereby in response to the closing of a given space by the government (whether in the form of physically taking back a space, or denying legal status to a group, or censoring particular expressions), artists and cultural producers seek and create new spaces. This process continues to the present, but as noted earlier, the state’s declining ability to provide economically for its populace has resulted in

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<sup>214</sup> Benigno Aguirre, “Social Control in Cuba,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 44:2 (Summer 2002): 69.

a breakdown of the social contract between state and society. This in turn has led to a decline in the state's hegemonic capacity to elicit support for its projects and created discontent, criticism and demands for change not only in the economic arena, but in the social arena as well.

One component essential to civil society according to analysts is accountability in state-civil society relations, a feature that in Cuba is generally agreed not to exist (though some argue that local government plays this role).<sup>215</sup> Two examples of email campaigns launched by artists and intellectuals in Cuba demanding accountability and protesting specific government actions signal a renewed willingness on the part of artists and intellectuals to engage in a public battle over issues of censorship. The first campaign in January 2007 was triggered by the appearance of Luis Pavón on Cuban television. Pavón led official efforts in the repression and blacklisting of artists and intellectuals in the 1970s, one of the harshest and most repressive periods during the Revolution and artists and intellectuals feared his television appearance in 2007 could signal another crackdown. Writer Jorge Angel Pérez sent an email condemning Pavón's appearance on television to fellow intellectuals setting off a chain reaction of emails among Cubans, both on and off the island.<sup>216</sup> In the wake of this exchange, a number of intellectuals were invited to take part in a closed door meeting with Minister of Culture Abel Prieto. Though no changes were announced as a result, the fact that a spontaneous group effort was able to exert enough pressure on the

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<sup>215</sup>Ariel Armony, "Theoretical and Comparative Reflections on the Study of Civil Society in Cuba," *Changes in Cuban Society* (2005) 20.

<sup>216</sup>Another email was sent by Desiderio Navarro; titled "¿Síntoma de qué? Pregunémonos por las causas de las cosas (Preocupaciones compartidas con amigos y compañeros)," it was circulated to Cuban artists and intellectuals, dated January 8, 2007.

state to elicit a discussion is a sign that new potential spaces in the public (cyber)sphere are being opened and providing a venue for making demands and holding the state accountable.<sup>217</sup>

In the second example, in October of 2008 Sandra Ceballos, co-founder of Espacio Aglutinador, Havana's first independent art gallery, demanded, via an email campaign, an apology from the state for an article published by the National Council for Fine Arts (Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas) in which Ceballos was accused of inviting to an opening representatives of the "genocidal government of George W. Bush and such disgraced mercenaries as Marta Beatriz Roque and Elizardo Sánchez."<sup>218</sup> It continued, "We denounce the intention to give artistic cover to provocations of this nature. We lament that Sandra Ceballos is playing the game of the servants of the empire." Ceballos circulated an email accusing the Council of slandering her reputation and publishing false information, and received dozens of letters from support from within Cuba and from outside, resulting in a meeting at UNEAC with artists and the Minister of Culture to discuss the matter.

I contend this public dialogue spurred by criticism of the state is an outcome of the greater space within the public sphere that has been forged by artists and cultural producers. As this chapter has shown, this space has alternately expanded and contracted over time, the result of an ongoing struggle over the ownership of the public sphere. In the examples above, this dialogue was enabled by the increase in

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<sup>217</sup>Though some academics, artists and others have email access, only 2.9 percent of Cubans regularly use the Internet and 5.8 percent have regular use of e-mail, according to a 2010 survey released by Cuba's government statistics office. The survey can be found at <http://www.one.cu/tic.htm>.

<sup>218</sup>The email from Ceballos, dated October 16, 2008, was titled "Respuesta de AGLUTINADOR a la insultante Nota del Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas" and sent to Rafael de la Osa Diaz, Director of the Consejo Nacional.

communication via the Internet, which, it must be noted, is available to only a privileged few in Cuba. Nonetheless, the anti-Pavón and Ceballos cyber-campaigns are two examples of demands for accountability from the state, however limited and imperfect the process.

### **Notes on Recent Scholarship**

Recent scholarship offers additional potentially productive ways to look at Cuban civil society, with analysts inside and outside of Cuba broadening the scope of what constitutes civil society. Further, there is a growing acknowledgement of the role of art and cultural production in the process of creating civil society. Rafael Hernández, writing in 2006, acknowledged the key role of cultural practices and thought in the critical evaluation of society, influencing not only the social sciences, but also initiating public discussion around religion, prostitution, changing values, emigration, etc.<sup>219</sup> Ariel Armony believes that in order to understand civil society in Cuba an expansive approach “centered on diversity, difference, and multicentrism” is required and refers to social and religious movements in Cuba as examples of autonomous niches.<sup>220</sup>

Arguing that economic and socio-political informality expanded greatly after the crisis of the late 1980s Damián Fernández links the formation of a “proto civil society” in Cuba to the expansion of the informal (*lo informal*): “When individuals in their private lives and

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<sup>219</sup>Rafael Hernández “Mirror of Patience: Notes on Cuban Studies, Social Sciences, and Contemporary Thought” in *Changes in Cuban Society Since the Nineties*(2005) 147-48.

<sup>220</sup> Ariel Armony, “Theoretical and Comparative Reflections on the Study of Civil Society in Cuba,” *Changes in Cuban Society Since the Nineties* (2005)27.

among close-knit groups of friends attempt to establish their autonomy (morally, politically, culturally, economically, spiritually) from the state, the seeds of civil society are sowed.”<sup>221</sup> Juan Espinosa divides the public sphere in Cuba into three forms of association: socialist civil society (mass and state-approved organizations), alternative civil society (groups not recognized legally, dissident groups, social activists), and informal civil society (personal networks, spontaneous groups, private groups not engaged in the public sphere).<sup>222</sup> Among the examples of informal civil society Espinosa lists are abakúa societies, Spiritualist circles, gay and lesbian social networks, radio listening circles and neighborhood groups created to solve local problems. Informal civil society according to Espinosa is a kind of proto-civil society that “never quite solidified – ephemeral, instrumental, subterranean, and consciously non-political.” Compellingly, he contends that informal civil society, “is in fact a continuation of pre-existing patterns of marginality and informality that date back to the days of slave resistance to colonial masters through secret societies, syncretic cults, and other strategies of cultural survival and continuity.”<sup>223</sup> This description of contemporary informal civil society as a continuation of colonial resistance is an apt one, however in that light Espinosa’s accompanying characterization of informal civil society as “consciously non-political” seems contradictory. The argument that I have tried to make in this chapter is precisely that various forms of association, whether (using Espinosa’s examples) on the basis of religious tradition, sexual orientation, or the joining together

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<sup>221</sup> Damián Fernández *Cuba and the Politics of Passion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000) 129.

<sup>222</sup> Espinosa, *Civil Society in Cuba* 352.

<sup>223</sup> Espinosa, *Civil Society in Cuba* 354.



of neighbors to perform essential functions the government has failed to do, constitute forays into the public sphere and as such, enter into the political sphere as well.

## **Conclusion**

Michelle Marín-Dogan reflects that the debate about civil society during the 1990s linked up struggles in the public sphere with those in the political sphere.<sup>224</sup> I argue that many of the political struggles that broke into the public sphere arrived in the form of artistic interventions. Ana Belén Martín Sevillano writes “the need to make visible new subjectivities, hitherto absent from Cuban social space, was one of the necessary battles in the construction of civil society in Cuba.”<sup>225</sup> I propose that it has been the key battle in the construction of a new Cuban civil society, incorporating the critical expressions of artists, the cultural and religious practices of Afro-Cubans and others (as well as the demands for social space on the part of gays and lesbians, and other “marginal” or counter-cultural social actors).

In Gramscian terms, civil society is characterized by an inherent dialectic that reflects both hegemonic ideas and counter-hegemonic expression, and thus has the potential to serve as the agent of social transformation. Artists and cultural producers in Cuba have been working to realize the emancipatory potential of civil society by inserting themselves into the public sphere with their diverse forms of expression and claiming their place within it. The state has worked to co-opt or

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<sup>224</sup> Marín-Dogan, "Civil Society" 60.

<sup>225</sup> Martín Sevillano, *Sociedad civil* 139.

close these spaces when these expressions are perceived to threaten its interests but, as the examples here have shown, it has not been uniformly successful.

In 1989 Gerardo Mosquera wrote “the plastic arts...now constitute the most daring platform. Their social criticism analyzes very real ills in search of their rectification.”<sup>226</sup> Artists and cultural producers in Cuba, despite state efforts to contain them, have brought new issues into the public sphere, attempting to hold the government responsible for upholding revolutionary values that were set aside in order to accommodate more pragmatic goals related to state power and economic interests. Mosquera noted in 2001 “while the media and schools remain under strict government control, the arts have provoked and questioned the status quo.”<sup>227</sup> Though Mosquera does not speak of this movement in terms of civil society I suggest that it can be seen in those terms, that is, within the rubric of a Gramscian dialectic that seeks to create a new social order and therefore a concrete example of civil society formation. Whether part of Armony’s public sphere of autonomous niches, or Espinosa’s informal civil society, or Gramsci’s emancipatory civil society, the cumulative activities of critical artists and Afro-Cuban cultural producers (in which I include religious practitioners), are forging new spaces in the public sphere which constitute a form of civil society. These diverse artistic and cultural appropriations of the public sphere take place on the ground of civil society in Cuba and expand its perimeter.

In considering examples of the art that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Afro-Cuban art, music, religion; the work of collectives such as

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<sup>226</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, “Trece criterios sobre el nuevo arte cubano,” *la Gaceta de Cuba* (June 1989): 24.

<sup>227</sup> Mosquera, “New Cuban Art, Y2K” 13.

Art-De, La Campana, ArteCalle and others) and the work of visual artists, poets and rap artists<sup>228</sup> today, I suggest that all of this cultural production does in fact, “count” as civil society and that it has been the most vibrant force for creating spaces in the public sphere, providing a means to raise critical questions about Cuban society, and aiming to open up public debates about a variety of themes in contemporary Cuban society that are relevant to large sectors of the population. These forms of expression provided the sparks and in subsequent years have served as the most vital engine in energizing a movement toward civil society and the creation of a non-state public sphere in Cuba.

In recalling the initial impetus for the debate on civil society in Cuba, Jorge Luis Acanda writes, “Somewhat strangely, those who occupied center stage in this debate were artists (especially young ones) and social theory specialists not tied to traditional institutions.”<sup>229</sup> Considering the examples presented here, I suggest this was not strange at all.

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<sup>228</sup> I refer here not only those few supported by the state sponsored *Asociación Hermanos Saiz*, but the vast majority who are not, and whose lyrics are provocative and critical of the government, openly addressing racism, lack of economic opportunity, etc.

<sup>229</sup> Hernández, *Looking at Cuba* (2003) 7.

### **Chapter 3. Alamar as Incubator: The City of the New Man as Ground for a New Revolutionary (Counter)Culture**

*“A city is not a set of houses and buildings...but rather, it is a reflection of its civic nature, its citizens, highly varied cultural habits, thoughts and feelings, acts, forms of living, daily miseries and contentments.” (Orlando Hernández)<sup>230</sup>*

*“And what has happened over these past twenty years? That for all this time we ate pasteles and slept? A lie! In these twenty years there has been a cultural life such as had not existed in the forty years of the existence of Alamar!” (Miguel Roura)<sup>231</sup>*

#### **Introduction and Chapter Overview**

OMNI ZonaFranca, the collective on whose work this project is focused, is based in the urbanized zone of Alamar, seven miles east of Havana. In the previous chapters, histories of Afro-Cuban culture, collective artistic movements, and developments in Cuban civil society were discussed in order to contextualize forms of cultural production in recent decades. Recognizing that the activities of cultural producers unfold in specific geographies with distinct characteristics and socio-political contexts, the goal of the present chapter is to situate the work of OMNI ZonaFranca in its particular geographic and socio-historical context.

Alamar’s short history has been one of breaking new ground, literally and metaphorically. Early in the Revolution, the 1960s brought

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<sup>230</sup> Orlando Hernández, “The Art Victims of Havana,” *Parachute* 125:1-3 (2007): 21.

<sup>231</sup> Miguel Roura, Interview, December 17, 2010 (Appendix A, Interview 7) 27.

Eastern Bloc technical specialists to Alamar, and in the early 1970s large-scale construction began as part of Cuba's microbrigade movement, an ambitious state housing construction project that relied on volunteer labor. Alamar played a key role in this movement and over the next twenty years grew into a vast "bedroom community" of nearly 100,000 people. With the advent of the Special Period in 1990, transportation was severely reduced and Alamar found itself an isolated urbanized dormitory with little industry and few services.

Alamar is a paradox in Cuba, where the construction of a new city, designed as the shining example of socialist accomplishment, instead turned into a densely populated urban area lacking in basic amenities. A symbol of Revolutionary pride during the 1970s, by the 1990s Alamar had become a place those in official positions preferred not to mention, an architectural failure plagued with social problems. In spite of – and perhaps because of – its marginalization (magnified during the tumultuous period beginning in the mid-1980s with its dramatic socio-economic impacts on people's lives), the conditions of Alamar's history and the openness in attitudes that arose within its co-mingled, diverse communities led Alamar to become a ground for alternative expressive culture.

Alamar is a unique place due to its emergence as an important countercultural ground, most recently as the focal point for the development of hip hop culture in Cuba, and earlier as a nucleus for rock and *novísima trova* music, as well serving as an incubator for a series of art collectives, a movement of communitarian art, and other forms of cultural production including performance, poetry, and theater.

Charting the metamorphosis of Alamar from model city to neglected urban outpost and seedbed of alternative cultural production, this chapter covers the following topics: the history of the microbrigade movement; the history of Alamar, including its founding, demographics, and architecture; and a discussion of the impact of these factors on cultural formation and production in the 1980s and 1990s. As little written material exists about Alamar, the chapter relies substantially on interviews and a handful of historical articles written by long time residents of Alamar. The discussion of the history of Alamar lays the groundwork for an analysis of the politics of space in the chapters that follow.

### **East of Havana, 1950s and early 1960s**

The first mention of the name La Habana del Este appeared in 1949 when Manuel Febles Valdés, architect and Minister of Public works under the government of Carlos Prío Socarrás, presented the project of the city of La Habana del Este, to be connected with historic San Cristóbal de La Habana by a tunnel under the channel at the entrance of Havana's bay. The first new construction approved was the Parque Residencial Bahía in 1951, which bordered the town of Cojímar. The coup by Fulgencio Batista in 1952 delayed further development but in 1954 a second new area was approved, Residencial Colinas de Villa Real, in the area Alturas de Bacuranao, and the construction of the tunnel commenced.<sup>232</sup> Before this time there was little interest in the land that

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<sup>232</sup> Rolando Rensoli, "El encuentro consigo de La Habana del Este," *Cubarte*, March 22, 2011, opinion page, <http://www.cubainformacion.tv/index.php/otros->

Alamar now occupies. However with the completion of the tunnel under the bay connecting Havana to the area to the east, and the signing in 1955 of Law 2034, the regulatory plan for the city of La Habana del Este was established. The new area was to be developed for luxury and recreational uses for the bourgeoisie.

In 1955, a visitor to the area would have found six *bohíos* (typical rural thatched-roof dwellings), a dairy, a garage, two wells, a pump house for salt water, and the ruins of a colonial home.<sup>233</sup> In the latter half of the 1950s, Guillermo (or Gustavo, according to some accounts) Alamilla Gutiérrez, together with investment partner Enrique Martínez, bought land in present-day Alamar with the intention of building a luxury development.<sup>234</sup> In 1956 and 1957, officials approved plans for the development of three sections of Alamar: El Olimpio, el Residencial, and Costa Azul. Alamilla and Martínez (whose combined surnames are said to be the source for the name Alamar) began to install infrastructure (streets, sidewalks, sewer and water infrastructure and electricity) in the subdivision called El Olimpio and sold lots. Around 30 homes were constructed in this newly developed area, occupied mainly by bank and office employees. However, the 1959 Revolution interrupted plans for continued development of the area. Most of the investors and homeowners abandoned the land or sold it, leery of the change in government.<sup>235</sup>

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[especiales/entrevistas-anteriores/4876-rodolfo-rensoli-promotor-de-rap-en-cuba-parte-1](#)

<sup>233</sup>Miguel Sabater, "Alamar: Un Laberinto Entre Dos Ríos," *Palabra Nueva* 43:125 (December 2003): 43.

<sup>234</sup> Some accounts have Gustavo Alamilla as the sole developer of Alamar. See Rensoli, *Cubarte* (2011).

<sup>235</sup> Sabater 43. (See also Rensoli, *Cubarte*, 2011.)

In the years immediately following the Revolution, a modest amount of construction was undertaken in Alamar, including a small commercial center, a medical clinic, a pharmacy, a secondary school, and around 400 small houses (*casitas*) built for foreign technicians, mostly from Soviet bloc nations. In 1963, the Revolutionary government created the Havana Metropolitan Region (la Region de La Habana Metropolitana), consisting of six parts. The section that covered the 45 square kilometers of the coastal region to the east of Havana included Alamar.

### **The Cuban Revolution and Housing**

*“Each and every one of us readily pays his quota of sacrifice, conscious of being rewarded by the satisfaction of fulfilling a duty, conscious of advancing with everyone toward the new man who is appearing on the horizon.” Che Guevara.<sup>236</sup>*

This excerpt from a letter written by Che Guevara in 1965 expressed the revolutionary ideal that would be invoked in Cuba’s project to produce socialism’s New Man, whose efforts would soon be mobilized in the founding of the ambitious project known as the microbrigade movement. One of the biggest tasks the young Revolutionary government faced was to improve existing housing and meet the pressing demand for new housing. The Cuban government began to build housing during the first half of the 1960s. However the

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<sup>236</sup> Che Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba.” Originally published March 12, 1965 as “From Algiers, for Marcha,” letter to Carlos Quijano, editor, *Marcha* (weekly newspaper), Montevideo, Uruguay. “*Todos y cada uno de nosotros paga puntualmente su cuota de sacrificio, conscientes de recibir el premio en la satisfacción del deber cumplido, conscientes de avanzar con todos hacia el hombre nuevo que se vislumbra en el horizonte.*”



policy decision to direct resources away from urban areas toward long neglected rural areas resulted in dramatic deterioration of Havana's housing stock. Fidel Castro had asserted that from the mid-1960s Cuba would be capable of completing one hundred thousand housing units a year by 1970, a projection based on production capabilities he believed would be created through the construction of pre-fabricated panel factories throughout Cuba.<sup>237</sup> However, in the latter half of the decade other priorities took precedence and in the area of the domestic economy the focus was on agrarian reform, expropriation of foreign businesses and properties, and nationalizing the means of production. Also prioritized during this period were the building of schools throughout the country and the provision of health care.

The years between 1965 and 1970 were marked by a major effort to expand production capacities. The crowning achievement was to be the Gran Zafra (the 10 Million-Ton Sugar Harvest), toward which all available technical and labor resources were directed.<sup>238</sup> Though significant resources were mobilized toward increasing national sugar production, little progress was made in the area of housing. In 1970, the year of the Gran Zafra, the government produced only four thousand new housing units (as compared to an average of over 15,000 units in the years 1960-1962).<sup>239</sup>

The efforts to nationalize the economy were successful. By 1970, the state owned 70% of the overall economy except for 30% of

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<sup>237</sup> Joseph Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 211.

<sup>238</sup> Roberto Segre, "Architecture in the Revolution," *The Scope of Social Architecture*, ed. Richard Hatch (NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984) 352.

<sup>239</sup> Jill Hamberg, "The dynamics of Cuban housing policy" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University) 199, Table A-3.

agricultural land.<sup>240</sup> But the goal for the Gran Zafra was not met. Perceived as a disastrous failure, the government was forced to rethink its economic structure. Economic planning moved toward increased institutionalization and centralization with the implementation of the Revolutionary government's First Five-Year Plan (1971-1975). In the building construction industry the push toward centralization focused on producing a building model that could be replicated on a national scale. This mode of construction would reflect the revolution's values as envisioned by Che Guevara and expressed in the idea of the New Man.<sup>241</sup>

### **The Rise and Decline of the Microbrigade Movement: Planning and Architecture**

In 1970 the Cuban government issued a new response to the nation's housing crisis, proposing to use state resources and volunteer labor to construct housing. A strong motivation for those who volunteered was the possibility or promise of housing in the buildings they had constructed. In July of that year, Fidel Castro spoke about integrating users in the construction of housing, and workers at the José Mercerón cement factory in Santiago de Cuba organized the first construction brigade in the country. In December 1970, as the first work teams in Havana were assembled, Castro outlined the structure and organization of microbrigades in the National Conference of Basic Industry, defining the various relationships and responsibilities of other organizations that would support the new effort.

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<sup>240</sup> Scarpaci 141.

<sup>241</sup> Scarpaci 140-142.

In the initial phase of the microbrigade movement, construction brigades consisted of 33 workers from a specific factory or workplace (working under the supervision of the Ministry of Construction), whose regular responsibilities would be covered by co-workers while brigade members worked on the construction of housing. Materials, land, and training, along with some skilled labor, were provided by the government. The newly constructed housing belonged to the collective, either the factory or state agency, and it was the employees of the workplace who allocated units to their fellow employees, based on a number of factors including need, merit, and exemplary behavior. Microbrigade members were not necessarily selected and there was no guarantee that participating in a microbrigade would result in housing. The practice of employing microbrigades of 33 people to construct buildings with typically 30 units led to competition and often tension among microbrigade members.<sup>242</sup>

One reason microbrigades were organized through the workplace was to make the new housing convenient to the workplace, thus alleviating some of the pressure on transportation. The new factories that were planned were designed to provide jobs for mothers with children who would be given priority for those jobs. However, most of the country's large-scale projects (such as Alamar) were built on the outskirts of cities, far from residents' workplaces.

By early 1971, more than 1,000 workers had been assigned to build 1,154 housing units in new areas of the city such as Plaza de la Revolución, Altahabana, Boyeros, and Alamar.<sup>243</sup> The microbrigade

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<sup>242</sup> Personal communication with former resident of Alamar, September 26, 2011.

<sup>243</sup> Segre 356 and Scarpaci 218.

movement was responsible for the majority of construction completed during the first half of the decade, building 57% of all state housing between 1971 and 1975, and Alamar was viewed as the most successful example. The movement peaked in 1976 with 1150 brigades and 28,000 workers, and between 1973 and 1980 the yearly averages of microbrigade construction ranged between 8,500 and 13,400 units.<sup>244</sup>

The microbrigades of the early 1970s produced enormous housing projects made up of row after row of multi-story concrete buildings, using the typical block model E14 amassed in sprawling superblocks, the repetitive use of which according to architectural historian and professor Roberto Segre was characterized by “an excessive homogeneity.”<sup>245</sup> (See Figs. 3.1 and 3.2) One building system, the SP-79, that proliferated in the poorly built and isolated Alamar micro-district known as Siberia was especially unpopular with residents. Urban planner and Jill Hamberg explains that this building style was the result of the Ministry of Construction’s policy of the late 1970s to decrease usable floor space per person and increase the number of units built with the same amount of materials. This led to a decrease in apartment size after 1979. As a result of studies of usage of space, different apartment configurations were introduced, including smaller units. The SP-79 fit three units in what used to be space for two, with a smaller center apartment that lacked a balcony. The people who lived in these units called themselves the “*afectados*” (affected ones).<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Hamberg Table 8.5 and Fig. 13.

<sup>245</sup> Segre 359.

<sup>246</sup> Hamberg 158-159.

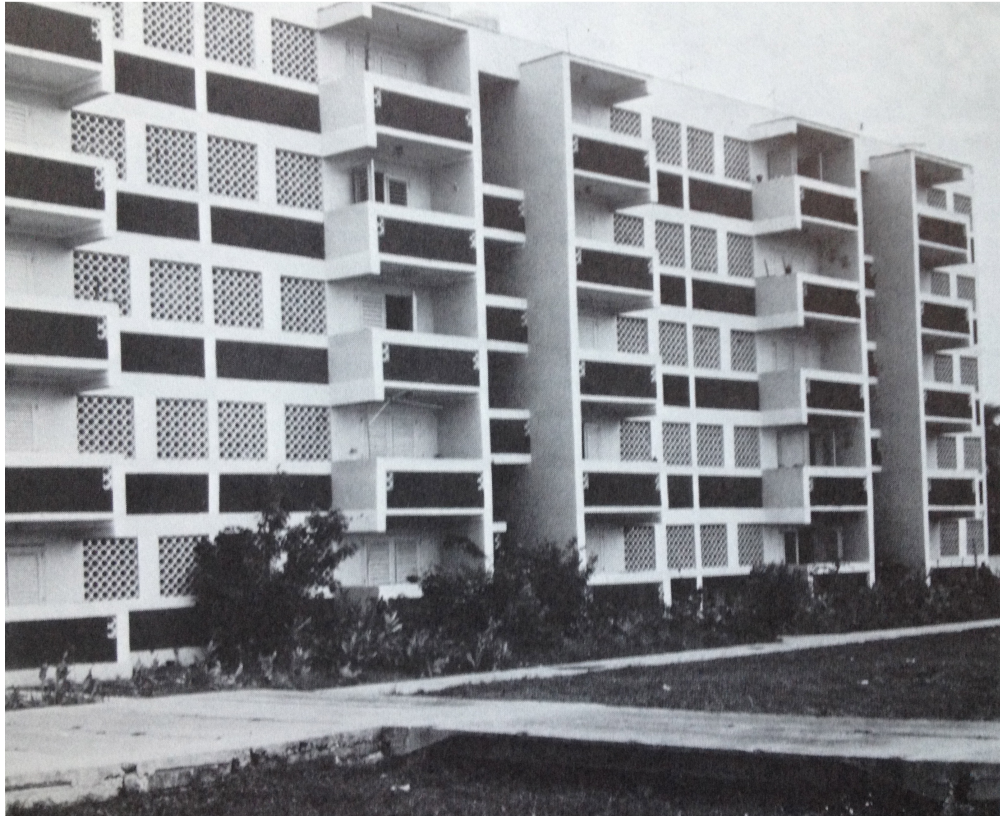


Fig. 3.1 Typical Model E14 apartment block in Alamar. Segre (1984).



Fig. 3.2 Another example of the E14 apartment block in Alamar. Segre, 1984.

Numerous problems led to criticism of microbrigade housing. Delays arose due to lack of infrastructure such as water and sewer lines, and projects were often begun without blueprints. Microbrigade teams were often pulled away to work on other projects. In addition there were shortages in finishing materials, which left nearly completed units vacant for months or longer. Hamberg notes the example of a microbrigade building in Alamar that was completed in November 1981, but in August 1983 still did not have a certificate of occupancy because the infrastructure was unfinished. Basic infrastructure was often slow to be completed or completely ignored, creating what came to be known as “ghost towns.”<sup>247</sup>

Compounding the problem in Alamar was the absence of visible and clearly marked street and building signs (a problem that persists today). The early zones of Alamar that followed the initial *Plan Alamar* followed a spiral plan (based on Paris’s *arrondissements*) and included small park spaces. When later zones of Alamar were built, they were not laid out in a sequential order nor were they clearly demarcated. This made navigation for those from anywhere but the immediate area (including residents of other zones of Alamar) extremely difficult, contributing to Alamar’s image as a kind of monotonous expanse of concrete blocks without a center. (Fig. 3.3)

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<sup>247</sup> Hamberg 157.



Fig. 3.3 Alamar housing blocks in the early 1980s. Segre, 1984.

A critical factor in the analysis of the architectural and planning failures of microbrigade housing is that the boom of microbrigade driven housing construction coincided with the period of most extreme dogmatization and rigidity imposed by the state on all aspects of life. Straying from the established norms or modifying orders from centralized authority was not allowed:

An abstract sense of importance was given to collective interests, which made it nearly impossible to present alternative ideas. Working in teams was virtually impossible. Unfortunately, this meant that state organizations were not able to share and participate in new urban projects. This may explain why urban spaces in Alamar can best be characterized as depressing. Elements of this poor design remain today and can be noted throughout Havana. Each service, such as retail, education, health care, recreations, and industry, was restricted to a specific and isolated building. Little concern was given to integrating these buildings with others.<sup>248</sup>

Another key factor in the decline of the microbrigade movement revolved around the politics of distribution of housing, which led to strife and conflicts. The government vacillated in its policies for

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<sup>248</sup> Scarpaci 219-220.

awarding housing, from basing it on merit, which was measured by political loyalty as well as exemplary work behavior, to allocation based on need alone, which in turn led to other types of dissatisfaction stemming from racial and social tensions as “marginalized” populations moved into areas that had previously been reserved for “exemplary” workers.

By 1978 government officials proposed phasing out or transforming the microbrigade program due to concerns about quality, lack of expertise among workers, and the resulting cost and technical challenges. In addition, inefficiencies bogged down projects (for example, workers could be pulled off a construction project and sent elsewhere or back to their own workplaces necessitating training of new workers). At the Cuban Labor Federation’s (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba, CTC) convention in December 1978, major changes were proposed and adopted though it was agreed that some housing would continue to be distributed by workplaces. In 1978, all microbrigades in Havana were converted to regular construction enterprises with a mixture of microbrigade workers and full-time construction workers. A change in wage policy led to the decline of the microbrigade workforce as they were switched to Ministry of Construction payroll, away from their own workplaces, leading to a decrease in wages for most *microbrigadistas*. Nonetheless there remained workers willing to earn less for a period of few years in exchange for housing.<sup>249</sup> Alamar, Cuba’s first massive microbrigade-produced housing project could be considered a success in that it provided desperately needed housing, but a failure in terms of

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<sup>249</sup> Hamberg 173.



planning, architecture and housing quality, with the caveat that nothing on this scale had been attempted before. Limitations encountered during the construction of Alamar included material and technical shortfalls (experienced generally in microbrigade housing) as well as organizational challenges generated by the scale of such a large endeavor. Architect and critic Mario Coyula explains that efforts were concentrated in the rapid construction of living units, while postponing expansion of necessary infrastructure, addition of services, and the treatment of exterior spaces; after the first urban zone was completed, construction of new buildings continued without first putting in roads or technical grids. All of this was in response to the immediate needs for housing of the microbrigade members, in concert with institutional systems of direction and control, with the most import placed on quantity and the visible outcome. The loss of quality in the architectural and urban design extended to the quality of the construction, which in Alamar produced a notable difference between the first, most high quality zone, and the micro-districts constructed later, among them the one known as Siberia for its geographic isolation, poor quality construction, and lack of services.<sup>250</sup>

Despite the problems and challenges, by 1983, microbrigades had completed 100,000 units, nearly half of all government-built housing in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, a number of factors, including the slow pace of construction, rising labor and materials costs, flagging support in official sectors, and dissatisfaction with construction quality and aesthetics as well as the methods of allocating housing in

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<sup>250</sup> Coyula, "Al reencuentro de la ciudad perdida," *Arquitectura y Urbanismo* 12:1 (1991): 57-58.

microbrigade produced buildings, led to the decline of units of housing produced via this method by the mid-1980s. By 1983 the yearly average had dropped to 2,200 units.<sup>251</sup>

### **Utopian Alamar**

*“Alamar was a model socialist community. In Alamar, you could sleep with your door open to the street.”* Miguel Roura, Alamar resident.<sup>252</sup>

The story of how post-1959 Alamar came to be built goes as follows: Fidel Castro, on a visit to a factory, the *Fábrica Metalúrgica Vanguardia Socialista*, was told by its director, Máximo Andión, of the workers’ worries about housing. Castro proposed a plan that involved the workers constructing their own homes, which was received with enthusiasm. A group of workers traveled to Alamar to survey the land and returned to their factory with a favorable report. Two months later, on February 17, 1971, the new Alamar was founded with a group of *microbrigadistas* wearing white hard hats emblazoned with the letter T, for Tupamaros, in reference to the Tupac Amaru movement in Uruguay. (Figure 3.4) Thousands of *microbrigadistas* began to arrive from Havana to build a new community for “exemplary” workers and their families, motivated by the hope of having their own homes and proud to have been chosen to participate in this important initiative of the Revolutionary government.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Hamberg Fig. 13.

<sup>252</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 2.

<sup>253</sup> Sabater 43.

The first building completed was A-3, located in Zone 1, soon followed by a supermarket. (Fig. 3.5) A textile factory was completed in 1972, along with two elementary schools, Alamar 1 and 2. Alamar 1 was later named *Tupac Amaru*. Alamar 2 hosted President Salvador Allende of Chile at its inauguration and was named for him after his death in 1973. (Fig. 3.6)

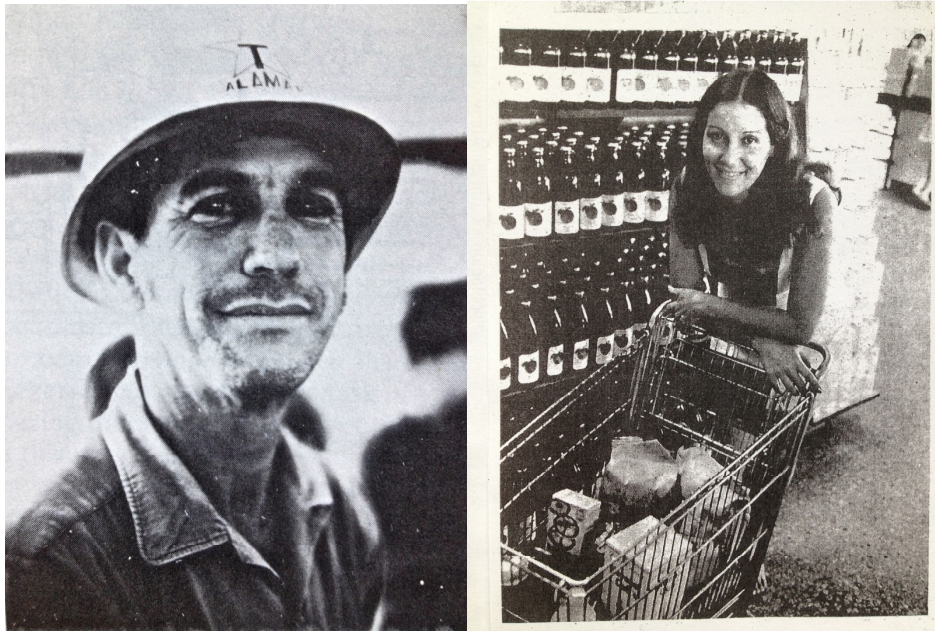


Fig. 3.4 Microbrigade worker. Segre, 1984.

Fig. 3.5 Inside Alamar's first supermarket. *Cuba Internacional*, Sept. 1976.

During the early years of the construction boom in Alamar, it was the site not only of frequent (often daily) visits by Cuba's leader but also the site of numerous visits by heads of state and international delegations and as a result enjoyed regular attention in the mass media. These visits were viewed with great pride by many of the residents of the new area. For example, on October 28, 1971, Fidel Castro brought Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin to Alamar, where Castro praised the

microbrigades for their selfless work, referring to Alamar as a “model of revolutionary work.”<sup>254</sup>

In 1975, Alamar was chosen as the site for the Cuban-Jamaican Friendship Rally with Prime Minister Michael Manley in attendance. In his speech, Castro referred to the Jamaican worker’s brigade that had been sent to Alamar to learn the construction methods, and commented that there were at the moment more than 1,100 construction brigades in Cuba with 30,000 workers. Castro noted that in Alamar microbrigades had built 167 buildings with 4,600 apartments and that 100 new buildings were under construction.<sup>255</sup> In the late 1970s architectural historian Roberto Segre declared, “Alamar is surely the most important example of the work of the Microbrigades. In addition to housing, it integrates production and educational functions of citywide importance, such as food and textile factories and a branch of the University focusing on architecture and engineering.”<sup>256</sup>

Alamar was built according to a housing plan (*Plan Alamar*), and directed in its early years by Máximo Andión, but as the project grew, greater local administrative authority was needed. A representative was elected from each zone. In 1972, the eastern coastal Havana Metropolitan Region (originally created in 1963) was divided into two sections, La Habana del Este and Guanabo. The former contained the

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<sup>254</sup> Fidel Castro, speech in Alamar, Cuba on October 28, 1971. Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC), University of Texas, Austin, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1971/19711028.html>

<sup>255</sup> Fidel Castro, speech in Alamar, Cuba on July 12, 1975. Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC), University of Texas, Austin, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1987/19870712.html>

<sup>256</sup> Segre 357.



Fig. 3.6 Alamar 2 School, renamed Salavador Allende Primary School in 1973. *Cuba Internacional*, Sept. 1976. Photo: Ernesto Fernández.

three sections that comprised Alamar. With the founding of the *Poder Popular* (Popular Power), additional governmental and administrative structures were created. On the same day that the Municipal Assembly of the Popular Power was constituted, October 31, 1976, La Habana del Este was constituted as a municipality with Alamar as its political and administrative seat.<sup>257</sup>

<sup>257</sup>With the creation of *Consejos Populares* (Popular Councils) in 1990 in Havana, Alamar was divided into two council areas, Alamar Oeste (west) and Alamar Este (east). In 1994, Alamar was rearranged again, into three council districts. Alamar

Alamar would be the paradigm for other urbanization projects. Indeed, Alamar was in its early years a prominent example of the Revolution's accomplishments in creating new housing for its population and celebrated as the "New City" of Guevara's New Man. By 1975, in addition to new housing, Alamar had 6 schools, several commercial areas, a textile factory, a medical clinic, a cinema, amphitheater, sports fields, a bus terminal, and a restaurant. Five years after the founding of the microbrigade movement, Alamar was featured in a 1976 essay in the magazine *Cuba Internacional* titled "Alamar a la Vista:"

Lining the coast, to the east of Havana, is Alamar, Cuba's first urban community, inhabited today by around 25 thousand inhabitants, coming from a core group of more than three thousand families settled into multiple buildings of four, five and twelve stories. No exact information is available in Alamar because it is a city experiencing constant growth. One could say today that the female population has risen to nearly 50% of the total, but who knows if when this article is published the number has risen or fallen. I could inform you that there are eight nursery schools, but it's possible that the builders of Alamar will have finished the ninth before this is published. And this is happening by virtue of the rapid pace at which the community is growing, created with dizzying speed since starting from a brigade of workers who in February 1971, under the order of Máximo Andión, began construction of their future homes. Within a short time, there were 23 brigades of workers that gave rise to the first six hundred inhabitants of the community. At present, there are a hundred brigades comprised of workers from diverse specialties who have become the builders of a new community here in Alamar that is already in sight.<sup>258</sup>

Alamar, from its beginning in the 1960s, was home to residents from around the world, including technicians from the Soviet Bloc countries as well as exiles from several Latin American countries. A Chilean whose family lived in exile in Cuba recalls:

My family and I lived in the heart of the Chilean exile community, east of Havana, to be precise, in apartment block 11, third floor of

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today consists of these administrative and political districts; Alamar Playa, Alturas de Alamar, and Alamar Este.

<sup>258</sup> Minerva Salado, "Alamar a la Vista," *Cuba Internacional* (September 1976): 33.

building D-2, Zone 7 in Alamar. There were two fully equipped apartment blocks of five stories each that were turned over to Chilean families, among them several to single mothers and their children. Around the corner were Uruguayans, and a little beyond Argentinians and Bolivians. The buildings of Alamar, which became a satellite of Havana, were constructed by volunteer work brigades of Cubans who lacked housing. Nonetheless, there were those who decided, in assemblies, to provide some buildings for exiles who had sought refuge in Cuba. Our building was dedicated by Laura Allende, sister of the heroic president...<sup>259</sup>

Not everyone in need of a home could live in Alamar or other new microbrigade housing, however. The need substantially outstripped the supply and strict rules for allocating the new housing were implemented. In the early 1970s, Castro declared, “In the case of two workers with equal need, the one with the greatest sense of social responsibility and merit should have priority.”<sup>260</sup> In addition to merit and need, a third element, the political, social and moral behavior of the entire household, was added. Hamberg explains that when the microbrigades started, “behavioral criteria were used to exclude families, even if the individual worker ranked high on the merit scale and the family lived in miserable conditions. The use of such behavioral criteria for housing allocation in the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with efforts to foment ‘new men and women,’ and with a high degree of intolerance of, and overt discrimination against, perceived ‘deviants’ and ‘dissidents.’” By the time provisional regulations governing the distribution of microbrigade housing were issued in 1972, merit had become the decisive factor.<sup>261</sup>

Miguel Roura, artist and specialist at the Fayad Jamís gallery at Alamar’s Casa de Cultura recounts: “... before you could live in Alamar, they verified and did an investigation of the person who came to live

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<sup>259</sup> Manuel Cabieses Donoso, “Cuba, te queremos,” *Cubadebate* website, November 13, 2009, <http://www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2009/11/13/cuba-te-queremos/>.

<sup>260</sup> Hamberg 281.

<sup>261</sup> Hamberg 281-282.

there. One had to be a good worker, *vanguardia*...and this is how the community was founded.” He continues, “My mother was one of the first women who worked in the microbrigades in all of Cuba...She worked on various buildings until she was given a house and afterward she continued, offering help in other buildings, because generally the people who came to live here from Havana were the most outstanding, the best workers of each one’s workplace, they were the ones who had the right to come with their families to Alamar.”<sup>262</sup>

Writer and researcher at Cuba’s National Archive and long-time Alamar resident Miguel Sabater explains, “the form of distributing housing units was based on the merits of the applicants, most of whom were members of the microbrigades. These included participation and punctuality on the job, number of volunteer hours of work, support of other social projects in the area, moral and political integrity, and level of need. First, potential housing recipients were interviewed in their workplace by committees from their workplace and representatives of mass organizations. A vote would be taken and then a visit to the home of the applicant would be conducted.”<sup>263</sup>

From the beginning, Alamar provoked controversy and negative opinions. The commonly held view was that to live there residents had to renounce religion, and word was spread early on in Alamar that in the new community no public manifestation of religion was permitted. This perceived prohibition applied to symbols of Catholicism and Afro-Cuban religions alike, as well as Protestant and other less prominent religions. If the prohibition was not explicit, there certainly were political costs to

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<sup>262</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 2.

<sup>263</sup> Sabater 45.



open religious practice, for example, religious believers were banned from joining the Communist Party (until a 1992 revision to the constitution). According to one researcher, Jehovah's Witnesses and *santeros* (Afro-Cuban religious practitioners) were excluded from Alamar, though Sabater's research and interviews with residents of Alamar turned up no official document or law prohibiting religious manifestations.<sup>264</sup>

Sabater however clearly recalls that when his father was awarded an apartment in Alamar at the end of 1974, a commission consisting of officials from union and political organizations investigated the family, and then came to their home with a questionnaire in which they recorded, among other things, "whether or not we were religious believers, and if we *were* religious practitioners, what type of religion, and for how long we'd been practicing it. After that my parents hid the painting of the heart of Jesus Christ and the image of Saint Barbara they had displayed in the living room so the members of the commission wouldn't see them."<sup>265</sup>

Sabater emphasizes that the criteria for living in the new community did not prioritize need but exemplary behavior, and this exemplarity was understood as the acceptance of an ideology aligned with official political and philosophical principles, among which Marxist atheism figured: "The new communist city, as Alamar was known, was conceived as nothing less than the example of the civil manifestation of these standards....People hid away their Catholic images and pagan fetishes, cloaking themselves in a *doble moral* (double standard)."

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<sup>264</sup> Márcio Moreira Alves, *Trabalhadores na Revolução de Cuba* (Belo Horizonte: Vega, 1979) 64; Sabater 45.

<sup>265</sup> Sabater 45.

Despite the widespread reluctance and fear of expressing religious beliefs, Sabater reports that there were Catholics in Alamar who attended mass in the Cathedral in Havana or at other churches.<sup>266</sup>

Apart from the operational if unwritten strictures against openly religious manifestations, the rules of conduct of community living characterized life in Alamar and civil order was strictly maintained. Longtime residents of Alamar recalled that one couldn't raise a ruckus outside, or play loud music, or yell profanities in public without risking official consequences. If residents blatantly disregarded the rules they could not continue to live in Alamar. Miguel Roura recalls, "Some people were removed from Alamar...due to scandal. They would pick you up, put you in a truck and take you away from Alamar."<sup>267</sup>

These exclusionary practices relating to behavior and exemplarity eased somewhat by the late 1970s and more significantly in the 1980s. By the beginning of the 1980s the moment arrived when rigorous selection of exemplary inhabitants was abandoned and need alone was the criterion for living in Alamar. In spite of being held up as a romantic ideal of model workers in a model city, in reality, the immediate urgency of the growing need for housing trumped all other considerations. According to Miguel Roura, "this project, for reasons of housing necessity, began to grow and be for people who didn't meet the standard of being of the *vanguardia*, the best workers. And there began to arrive to the community a different type of person."<sup>268</sup>

By the early 1980s, Alamar ceased to be the showplace and obligatory stop for heads of state, the casualty of a growing indifference

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<sup>266</sup> Sabater 45.

<sup>267</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 3.

<sup>268</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 2.

on the part of the leadership. Some of the poorly constructed buildings were beginning to deteriorate by the mid-1980s, and Alamar began to serve as an example of the failures of the microbrigade movement rather than its successes.<sup>269</sup> Still, life in Alamar in the 1980s held advantages and provided a good quality of life, as Miguel Roura recalls: “It was a very healthy environment, it was a different atmosphere, it was an environment where violence was minimal, where drugs were unknown, where the term ‘marginal’ didn’t exist...We were the children of the *vanguardias*.”<sup>270</sup>

### **Alamar in the Special Period: 1990s**

By the mid-1990s, new construction in Alamar had been halted and the vast apartment blocks of Alamar became the target of criticism due to all the factors already mentioned and also because of the impractical economics behind such large-scale microbrigade projects. The severe shortage of community facilities and infrastructure in Alamar led to a negative image, reflected in advertisements for housing swaps that read “Not in a Micro building!”<sup>271</sup>

A resident of Alamar described life during the early years of the Special Period:

...my son was born in a year in which we had almost 12 hours of power cuts a day...So on one side I had my one-year old son and on the other my sick mother, and the whole night without electricity, and fridge completely defrosted. I personally believe that the majority of people got a lot older in those years, it was

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<sup>269</sup> Sabater 46.

<sup>270</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 4.

<sup>271</sup> Mario Coyula and Jill Hamberg, “The Case of Havana, Cuba: Understanding Slums: Case Studies for the Global Report,” *UN Global Report on Human Settlements 2003, United Nations* (compiled by the Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London) 26.

such an effort just to maintain a minimal standard of living, to not let your standards drop too far and it was very exhausting, that is to say an exhaustion that I think became chronic for us. I don't believe that anybody here has recovered from those times...<sup>272</sup>

The Cuban economy had entered a catastrophic period in the early 1990s and the country was suffering the consequences. The result was not only economic hardship but dramatic social impacts as well. The ongoing national economic crisis, according to Aguirre, “transformed the physical and spiritual spaces of people’s lives.”<sup>273</sup> During the Special Period people began to spend significantly more time in their own neighborhoods. This was due to a lack of transportation, unemployment and the fact that most (illegal) individual businesses were based out of people’s homes. According to a government task force focused on community level work, “over 5 million persons out of a total population of 10.9 million remain ‘in the neighborhood’ most of the time.”<sup>274</sup> The Special Period intensified the isolation of Alamar significantly.

Living in Alamar in the 1990s meant to live without many basic services. The lack of local employment opportunities and geographical isolation were problems exacerbated by the collapse of the Cuban economy in the early 1990s. In addition to the loss of physical mobility due to the absence of transportation, the Special Period affected the government’s ability to provide services, leading to decreases in quality of schooling and healthcare. As a result, interdependence on the local level (reliance on the network of family, friends, neighbors) increased as

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<sup>272</sup> Jonathan Curry-Machado, “Surviving the ‘waking nightmare’: securing stability in the face of crisis in Cuba (1989-2004),” *Crisis States Research Centre working papers series 1:64* (Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK, 2005) Interview #17, July 31, 2004, Alamar, 11.

<sup>273</sup> Benigno Aguirre, “Social Control in Cuba,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 44:2 (2002): 71.

<sup>274</sup> Grupo de Investigaciones Sociológicas, quoted in *Rediscovering Lo Local*, by Miren Uriarte, *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*, ed. Alexander Gray and Antoni Kapcia (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008) 99.

a survival mechanism as neighborhood identity and relationships became more important. The increase in the importance of private life as a means of surviving the crisis resulted in an increasing tension between the public and private spheres.<sup>275</sup> In Alamar, some of these tensions and frustrations would be expressed in the cultural sphere, played out in the interactions between artists and the state.

Describing the harsh conditions in terms of the “culture of the *camello*,<sup>276</sup>” poet and critic Roberto Zurbarano recalls in particular the response of young rappers he encountered in a place that was isolated from Havana with only the crowded and perilous *camello* (Figs. 3.7 and 3.8) for transportation: “Most of the groups in the rap movement originated in Alamar, a place that is extremely barren. They were raised amidst the culture of the *camello* under harsh conditions that could be seen in an aggressivity reflected in the language. The first rappers I encountered, I saw in the *camello*...Afterward I saw them in the rap festivals in Alamar, which drew huge audiences.”<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Aguirre 71.

<sup>276</sup> The *camello*, or camel, a combination truck-omnibus, was the primary mode of public transportation in Havana after Cuba lost its oil subsidies upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, and during the Special Period was the only available public transport linking Alamar to Havana. The *camello* is a familiar symbol of the shortages and hardships of the Special Period. *Camellos* could transport 400 or more people and were typically overcrowded and considered dangerous.

<sup>277</sup> Roberto Zurbarano, in Rafael Hernández, et al. “La música popular como espejo social,” *Temas* 29 (April-June 2002): 70.



Fig. 3.7 Typical *camello* or truck-bus transport, Havana.



Fig. 3.8 Boarding the *camello*.

## Alamar as (Counter)Cultural Incubator, 1980s and 1990s

One vital area of civic life had been largely neglected in the plan for the city of the New Man, and this was the cultural sphere. In Miguel Roura's words, there was a "cultural deficit" in Alamar, whose profile "in terms of institutions was quite frankly poor."<sup>278</sup> It was not until 1987, nearly two decades after the first microbrigade entered Alamar, that the Casa de Cultura<sup>279</sup> was finally inaugurated, and this after many years of delays. However in the intervening years Alamar's young artists, writers, musicians, and actors had taken the initiative to create their own forms of cultural activity, with the intermittent and partial support of the communist party's mass youth organization. In this environment, new forms of cultural expression emerged.<sup>280</sup>

Alamar did not develop like a city typically does, gradually over time, but, rather, was fabricated rapidly in a socially – if not architecturally – highly planned fashion. Its residents came from every part of Havana and from other parts of Cuba, as well as from the Soviet Bloc countries and Latin America, creating a culturally diverse population that lacked a central cultural reference point. People brought their various cultures and customs. These were overlaid by allegiance to the Revolution and its doctrine by many, which provided another type of social reference point, but as for a commonly experienced local history,

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<sup>278</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 4.

<sup>279</sup> The network of Casas de Cultura was part of Minister of Culture Armando Hart's efforts to build on the network of art instruction, and in particular the goal to provide art education to *aficionados*, or amateurs, in all municipalities. The Casas were established formally in 1978. (See Antoni Kapcia, *Havana: The Making of Cuban Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2005) 156.)

<sup>280</sup> It should be noted that prior to the economic collapse, Alamar residents had regular bus service to Havana and therefore access to its cultural resources. Nonetheless, the cultural options in Alamar were few.

there was none. The monotonous architecture spread across a confusing and chaotic urban map, combined with the lack of shared history of those who came to live there, contributed to Alamar's sense of rootlessness.

Scarpaci, Segre and Coyula point out, "The presence of almost one hundred thousand residents in Alamar would have justified the construction of a major civic center, a central space in the community for recreation, cultural functions, and events for the youth of the settlement. Neglecting social spaces for young people was a particularly glaring oversight because they represented a large segment of Alamar's population. Instead, isolation created a sort of 'no man's land.'"<sup>281</sup>

These conditions, compounded by the state's failure to provide sufficient cultural resources, made Alamar conducive to various forms of cultural experimentation. The scarce support of culture on the institutional level in Alamar, and the vacuum it left, would be experienced by Alamar's youth as an opportunity for creating an indigenous culture. Alamar was a place in search of a new identity. The cultural void was filled by young people who felt the urge to express themselves, which they did through art, poetry, music, photography, dance, and theater. Out of this space emerged a number of vibrant and vocal countercultures.

Within this context, it is not surprising that the second *trova* movement (also known as *novísima trova*), which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s out of the Nueva Trova of the 1960s and 1970s and blended *trova* with rock, reggae, samba and other influences) found a welcome

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<sup>281</sup> Scarpaci 219-220.



home there<sup>282</sup>, or that Cuba's first rock festivals were celebrated in Alamar in the 1980s, nor that the hip hop movement would eventually take hold and develop a distinctive character in this neglected urban community. Alamar in the 1990s was the nexus of the emerging hip hop culture in Cuba, including rap, graffiti, and break dancing. Alamar's disused amphitheatre became home to the rap festival, a significant cultural phenomenon, attracting participants and audiences from all over Cuba as well as foreigners. Along with the rappers in Alamar were poets, painters, musicians of various genres, dancers, etc., many of whom influenced — and were influenced by — the rap movement by virtue of the fact that this fusion of youth culture was attracting attention and energizing the cultural sphere in Alamar.

### **Collectives in Alamar 1980s: El Quijote and Artenativa**

The cultural movement of Alamar began to take root and coalesce in the 1980s. Alamar's youth who were interested in poetry, plastic art, film, photography, music, had no local venue in which to pursue and develop their interests. Eventually they took the initiative. Miguel Roura, specialist in the Fayad Jamís Gallery at Alamar's Casa de Cultura and founding member of the collectives El Quijote and ArteNativa, recounted the story of his participation in an early collective that formed in Alamar: "In 1986, I learned of a group of writers, artists, young people, wanting to engage in artistic inquiries. They had a film club...This *Cine Club*

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<sup>282</sup> Some members of one of the most popular groups, Habana Oculta (later renamed Habana Abierta) were drawn to Alamar because of the artistic environment and counter-cultural atmosphere they found there.

turned into what began to be called 'la Brigada Quijote.'<sup>283</sup> They held poetry readings, literary gatherings and gatherings for *trova*, they had music, theater, photography, and I got involved."<sup>284</sup>

Livio Conesa, poet and one of Quijote's founders recalls, "Quijote in the years 1985-86 was a group of young people. We were amateurs. We were not trained as artists or writers, but we had a sensibility...The group formed with photographers, musicians, artists... I was barely over twenty...(Quijote was) part of a fraternity, a friendship among a group of young people. We were writers, painters. We were very open, very spontaneous."<sup>285</sup>

Describing the political and cultural environment at the time

Roura recounts:

The Communist Youth and the Party had power, and most visible was the power of the Communist Youth...They were the ones most inclined to engage with you...The Youth had a small house that had been built originally as a school, and they gave it to Quijote. Quijote began to paint the house, repair and arrange things and make different classrooms. In one room, they offered theater, in another, photography. All of this was under our own efforts. Then, the officials from Education came to ask us to conduct various activities. Every Wednesday we went in an Education Ministry bus to schools in the countryside. We read poetry, the *trovadores* sang, the actors performed humorous skits. All of this free. All of this was done for the love of art.<sup>286</sup>

In 1987, under the auspices of the Comité Nacional de la Juventud (National Youth Committee) and the Sociedad de Educación Patriótico-Militar (Society for Patriotic Military Education, SEPMI), a state youth organization, Quijote traveled all over Cuba conducting workshops and various art activities. However, some members of the group were not interested in this "official" trajectory and split off from

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<sup>283</sup> The group was commonly referred to as "Quijote."

<sup>284</sup> Roura 4 (Appendix A, Interview 7).

<sup>285</sup> Livio Conesa, Interview, December 18, 2010 (Appendix A, Interview 2) 2.

<sup>286</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 5.

Quijote. After a short time the group was informed by the Communist Youth organization that Quijote's building was needed for a Computer Club for youth and that the collective would have to move out. After this, Quijote began to dissolve. However, group members found new venues and Roura notes that from the experience with Quijote several people went on to work with the group Habana Abierta; "People who weren't from here had started to come to Alamar. People from Central Havana, Vedado, Playa, who came and found what was happening here interesting and began to participate in our artistic project." Members of Habana Abierta participated in the *peñas* (artistic or literary circles) at the Casa de Cultura in Alamar.<sup>287</sup>

It is not clear if there was another (unspoken) agenda or motive on the part of the Communist youth organization in taking away Quijote's space. It is possible that the collective's activities posed a threat to the authorities considering that the group's activities had gained the attention of people from outside of Alamar and they were starting to create a cultural movement outside of the purview of state institutions. For example, Quijote member Livio Conesa believes that the construction of the Casa de Cultura was part of an effort to contain and keep an eye on the young artists. "Quijote didn't have a Casa de Cultura, they assigned us a little building to do our activities. But they built the Casa de Cultura to 'localize' us. Nobody could be independent of the UJC (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas, or the Communist Youth organization)."<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 6.

<sup>288</sup> Conesa (Appendix A, Interview 2) 6.

During this period, the second half of the 1980s, collectives in Havana such as Puré, ArteCalle, Art-De were claiming public spaces to do performances that were openly raising critical questions about Cuban society and were perceived by state officials as challenging the status quo (see Ch. 1). Given what was happening in Cuba during those years, and in Havana's art world specifically, and taking into account Conesa's assessment, it is likely that Quijote was in part a victim of collateral damage. Forcing Quijote to leave its headquarters, as Roura noted, resulted in the group's dissolution. The eventual relocation of the young artists to the institutional space, as Conesa suggests, was likely intended to contain and keep a close watch on them.

However, in a pattern that would be repeated many times in Alamar (and elsewhere), the cultural innovators including artists, writers, and musicians, regrouped and started a new project along with new participants (as happened when various Quijote members joined Habana Abierta and later ArteNativa). In 1989, Alamar's single gallery located in the market area of Zone 6 had to vacate its space but eventually was given space in the Casa de Cultura,<sup>289</sup> which after many years and many delays had finally opened in 1987 but had no gallery. Roberto Alarcón, the director, enlisted local artists, including members of Quijote and a group of *frikis* ("freakies," a term used for rockers, and later applied to any type of countercultural youth), who worked together to construct the gallery space.

The gallery within Alamar's Casa de Cultura was founded in November 1989. The director, Roberto Alarcón, was a painter and cultural promoter. Roura recounts: "He encouraged us a great deal and

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<sup>289</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 7.

gave classes to young people who had been coming to the Casa de Cultura, some of whom ended up graduating from the San Alejandro academy and ISA<sup>290</sup>. The gallery began to turn into a hive, an incubator. It was always a center of debates, about music, literature. People shared books, debated poetry, discussed the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Yeats and García Márquez. The entire artistic vanguard started to show up there in those days. The gallery held Friendship Festivals, Festivals of Nueva Trova, the Havana Biennial.”<sup>291</sup>

“These were moments when the people didn’t have anything, because they didn’t have a computer, nor the Internet, because there was only one cinema with one film, so the people gathered there. They came to the gallery because in addition to the regular activities of the gallery, there were concerts. The guys from Habana Abierta...presented poetry *descargas*. It was a youth cultural movement. It wasn’t a standard cultural movement.” Working as a specialist in the gallery, Roura noted that before holding these events, “We had to ask permission because they said, where did these crazies come from?”<sup>292</sup>

It is important to note that during the 1980s there was in Alamar a wide range of independent, autonomous cultural activity in addition to the collectives highlighted here, for example, the *Peña La Bicicleta* that took its name from the Chilean cultural journal of the 1980s. This regular gathering of poets, *trovadores*, plastic artists and actors was founded by Chilean Carlos “Tato” Ayress and continued until 1994, when Ayress returned to Chile. After his departure, the *peña* stopped meeting

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<sup>290</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 8.

<sup>291</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 8.

<sup>292</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 23.

in the Galería Fayad Jamís and eventually moved to Havana.<sup>293</sup> There was also the *Peña de Luis y Péglez*, a weekly cultural gathering organized by Luis Hernández and Pedro Péglez that began meeting in 1993. From its home in the Biblioteca Tina Modotti in Alamar, the *peña* hosted a wide range of activities. Péglez describes the event as something that emerged spontaneously, as a multidisciplinary and multicultural space open to any topic and form and that excluded no one. Self-taught artists, poets, rappers, OMNI Zona Franca, all participated there.<sup>294</sup> An offshoot of the *peña* that formed in 2000 is *A la Décima*, a group dedicated to the *décima*<sup>295</sup> that has expanded to other parts of the country and holds an annual competition. In addition to Habana Abierta, also active in Alamar in the 1980s and 1990s was the literary group Criterios.

In the early 1990s, curators and artists from outside began to appear in Alamar, arriving from Sweden, Bolivia, the United States, Canada. In 1991, Canadian artist and curator Richard Martel and artist Domingo Cisneros arrived to do a multimedia project and Roura recounts that this was the first time he heard the word “performance.”<sup>296</sup> In 1991, the youth who were participants in workshops at the Casa de Cultura began to take part in an informal academy where conceptual art and theory was discussed. At this time Alarcón, along with Cisneros and Martel, had the idea of bringing together the group of young artists who had been working with sculpture and nature and the group ArteNativa

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<sup>293</sup> In 1999, Ayress returned to Cuba and the event was revived at the Casa Memorial Salvador Allende in the Vedado section of Havana. See Peña La Bicicleta, Casa Memorial Salvador Allende, <http://www.casamsa.org/imagenes/Proyectos/la%20Bicicleta/La%20Bicicleta.htm>.

<sup>294</sup> Yohamna Depestre Corcho, “Alamar es el Sitio,” *Extramuros de la ciudad, imagen y palabra* 20 (2006).

<sup>295</sup> A poetic form consisting of 10-line stanzas that originated in Spain, popular throughout Latin America.

<sup>296</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 11.

was born, named thus because it referred to the use of materials discarded by nature or industry. Among the founding members of ArteNativa were Miguel Roura, Alexis Lago and Roberto Molina Ríos. In addition to the influences brought by the Canadians and other foreign visitors to Alamar, the members of ArteNativa were also influenced by Robert Rauschenberg, whose presence in Cuba<sup>297</sup> made a significant impact among artists, and the Arte Povera movement from Italy, which resonated strongly in Havana and in Alamar. Conesa recalls also “it was the era of Rauschenberg, of his exhibit here in Cuba.”<sup>298</sup>

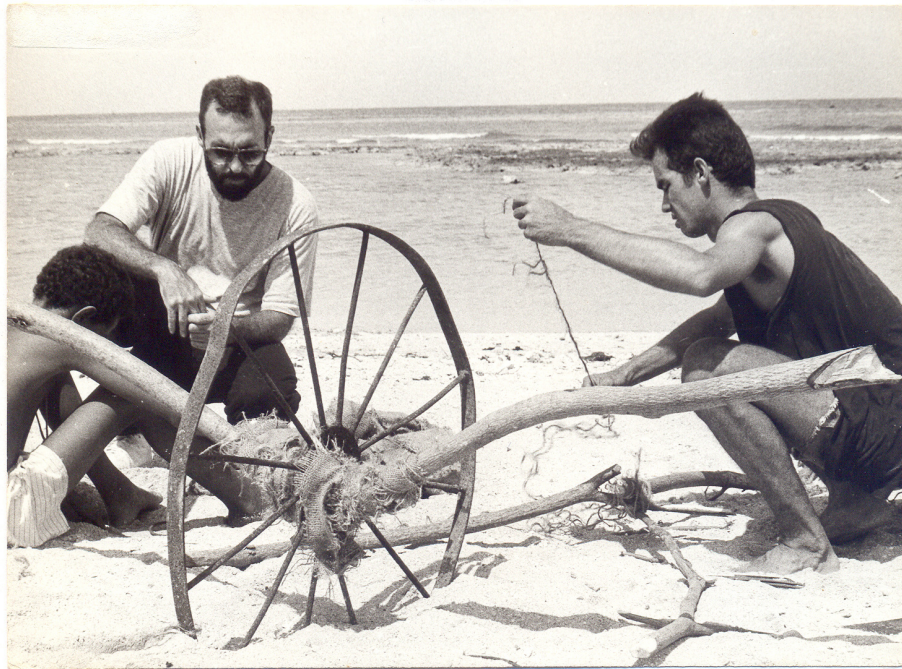


Fig. 3.9 Jorge (Yoyi) Pérez and Tomás Sánchez, ArteNativa. Installation. Note: Figures 3.9, 3.10, and 3.11 document installations by members of ArteNativa under the concept of “no recuerdo que bienal” (I don’t remember which biennial), the result of a decision to exhibit outside of the gallery circuit.

In 1993, ArteNativa was invited to do an exhibition, organized by Roberto Alarcón, in Havana at the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes

<sup>297</sup> Rauschenberg was in Cuba in 1988 as part of a multiyear project called ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange).

<sup>298</sup> Conesa Appendix A, Interview 2) 3.

Visuales. This was a significant achievement for a group of artists the majority of whom who were not professionally trained. Among the artists were Miguel Roura, Alexis Lago, and Roberto Molina. Belkis Ayón also participated in this exhibition.<sup>299</sup> Also during this period, Augusto Rivero, Vice President of UNEAC and Antonio Núñez Jiménez, the founding director of the foundation La Naturaleza y el Hombre (Nature and Humanity), invited ArteNativa to participate in an exhibit in the Salón de los Pasos Perdidos in the Capitol, considered an honor. In addition to creating installations, ArteNativa also began to do performances and interventions in outdoor and public spaces.



Fig. 3.10 Ernesto Yáñez, ArteNativa, installation on beach, Alamar.

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<sup>299</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 15.





Fig. 3.11 Miguel Roura, ArteNativa. Installation. Alamar.

The group continued to work and exhibit and entered a new phase, adding members Nelson Ramírez de Arellano, Ludmila Velazco, Jorge (Yoyi) Pérez, and Nilo Julián González. The new members energized the group and provided a different conceptual base. Roura recalls:

It was beautiful, but the times were hard and some people decided to emigrate. This was at the start of the Special Period in a time of extreme hardship and scarcity. When you saw those artworks, you realized that there was a superhuman force at work. There were no electric tools, there was no transportation, nor was there any digital camera...Because this didn't exist in Cuba and if it did, we didn't have it...Everything was done by hand. It was all very primitive, basic. We did things that brought people together. We had exhibits that 300 people attended in the Special Period. Three hundred people, most of whom hadn't eaten that day, who had walked who knows how far to come to the event.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 16.



Fig. 3.12 Roberto Molina, *La Ultima Cena*, detail from installation *Período Especial*, 1994.

Around 1994, ArteNativa began to dissolve. Roura recalls “Members needed to go in different directions. Some left the country. Others had other work they needed to do, and the creative needs of some led them in other directions...We all made artisan crafts at any given moment in order to eat...Alarcón emigrated with his wife and son.”<sup>301</sup> Roberto Molina (See Fig. 3. 12), one of the founders of ArteNativa, explains the philosophy of the group’s work and the trajectory it took:

<sup>301</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 19.

ArteNativa showed the filth and poverty of our lives, the scarcities, even in the creation of art, all the misery they (the government) didn't want us to see and that they tried to conceal behind a constant barrage of orders and socialist propaganda about a better life and a magnificent future...In this context ArteNativa erupted with a different proposal, dirty, dissident, provoking a mix of rejection and curiosity in the public. What interested us was the idea that preceded the work, more that the work itself, which was quickly left uninhabited and forgotten, abandoned to the elements and finally dissolved, returning from whence it came. We spoke of ecology, of ephemeral art, but in reality it was a self-portrait of ourselves. We wanted to participate in the common space, to invade both public and private life, to alter the astonishing tranquility of resignation, to show the esthetic of the bad, and we ended up like others, exhibiting in museums and biennials; this signaled the beginning of the end for ArteNativa.<sup>302</sup>

However a new phase had begun at the gallery of the Casa de Cultura with the arrival of the husband and wife team of Pablo Rigal and Nancy Maestigue, who became the directors in 1992 and were interested in promoting both plastic art and literature. They christened the Centro de Arte y Literatura Fayad Jamís in 1995 and inaugurated the annual *Salón de Arte Erótico* at the gallery. Two years later they founded an annual literary competition and prize for erotic literature (the *Premio Farralunque*), the first of its kind on the island.

Jon Curry-Machado, poet and member of Zona Franca in the early 1990s (and who was employed at the gallery from 1992 to 1995) affirms the importance of the gallery in these years:

During this period, the Galería maintained an ongoing program of cultural activities – not just with the exhibitions themselves, and literary events, but also in the piano bar, where musical, poetic and other gatherings would take place, often lubricated with whatever refreshments (alcoholic or otherwise) could be procured during what was a period of extreme shortages. At a time when Alamar had become all but cut off from Havana, due to the transport problems, this continued to be...an important site for alternative cultural activity (assisted in this by the support of Pablo and Nancy, whose role in bridging the gap between state sanction and countercultural tendencies should never be

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<sup>302</sup> Roberto Molina Ríos, personal communication, August 31, 2011.

underestimated), such that it was a natural venue for many of the early gatherings of what would become OMNI Zona-Franca.<sup>303</sup>

In the mid-1990s, other parallel cultural movements arose, such as the first “Festival de Rap” in Cuba. Poet and music promoter Rodolfo Rensoli had participated in the literary workshops and had a history of involvement with Alamar’s Casa de Cultura and had organized rock festivals in Alamar in the 1980s. In 1994, during arguably the most difficult point during the Special Period, Rensoli founded GrupoUno to promote the emerging rap movement and announced plans to organize the first Cuban rap festival. Other members of GrupoUno were Valexis (Balesy) Rivero and later, Yasser Castellano. The first rap festival was held in 1995 in a 12-story building in Guiteras, a neighboring community in another part of East Havana, but subsequent festivals were held in Alamar. Although the first rap festival was not held there, Alamar established itself soon afterward as the center of rap in Cuba. Artists, musicians, and poets started to come together to work on the festival. In the cross-disciplinary form of collaboration that characterized Alamar’s cultural and artistic production, artists from ArteNativa decorated the stage and backgrounds and the poets participated as judges of the lyrics.

According to Rensoli, the leadership of the Casa de Cultura did not share his vision for rap and he felt that the Casa de Cultura as an institution was too structured and fixed in its methods. Having had difficulty in organizing official support for rock concerts in the past, Rensoli wanted to avoid repeating this experience. In 1997 he approached the Asociación Hermanos Saíz because it was an institution dedicated to young artists and, crucially, connected to the UJC (the

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<sup>303</sup> Jon Curry-Machado, personal communication, October 24, 2011.

Communist Youth). He explains, “With this connection, it was easier to get the project going. We didn’t just do the rap festival, we organized other kinds of events as well, in which rappers were linked to other kinds of artists and media people.”<sup>304</sup>

Noting that there was a tremendous amount of prejudice against rap, Rensoli’s idea was to link the music festival itself to the development of a broader creative and theoretical discussion. To this end in 1998 a colloquium was organized alongside the music festival with the goal of putting this genre of cultural production in social and historical context.<sup>305</sup> While GrupoUno managed to obtain official support for the festival, there was little material or technical support, nor was there any publicity. However, in what was becoming a familiar pattern of government support followed by co-optation of any “alternative” cultural movement as it gained in popularity, the state effectively co-opted the rap festival and Rensoli and others who had been its organizers were left with little choice but to step away from organizing the festival.<sup>306</sup>

Meanwhile, some of the poets and artists who would form OMNI were participating in the literature and wood sculpting workshops at the Casa de Cultura. Amidst the crisis of the 1990s, the members of the

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<sup>304</sup> Deborah Pacini Hernández, Janine Garofalo, “Hip Hop in Havana: Rap, Race and National Identity in Contemporary Cuba,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 11:1 (March 1999): 27.

<sup>305</sup> Rensoli describes this in a television interview. See “Rodolfo Rensoli: promotor de rap en Cuba,” interview by Carlos Tena, *Cubainformación TV*, May 24, 2008.

<sup>306</sup> Another well-known example is the closure in 2003 of the Patio de María, at the Casa de Cultura Roberto Branley in the el Cerro neighborhood of Havana, where director Maria Gattorno invited rock musicians and *frikis* to perform and which also grew into a larger movement with poetry, art and theatre workshops. Another key example is the expulsion of OMNI Zona Franca from Alamar’s Casa de Cultura in December of 2009 and several other restrictions and closures. (See “Carta en Rechazo a las Actuales Obstrucciones y Prohibiciones de Iniciativas Sociales y Culturales,” *Convivencia*, Jan 21, 2010.) A further example is the takeover by the state of the *Rotilla* alternative music festival, which was not allowed to take place in summer 2011. (For further discussion of these events, see Chs. 4 and 5.)

groups that became OMNI and Zona Franca met in the Casa de Cultura in Alamar. Amaury Pacheco explains:

I moved to Alamar in 1995 and began participating in the literary workshops at the Fayad Jamís gallery and met Fito (Adolfo Cabrera), Olver (Reyes), and Rene (Cervantes) there. Afterward, I met the poet Juan Carlos Flores. I was also doing *artesanía*, working in wood. Juan Carlos Flores wanted to start a group in which poets and plastic artists could collaborate. Pablo Rigal, director of the gallery, agreed to allow the group of sculptors to use a space adjacent to the gallery in the building that housed the Casa de Cultura. Before, ArteNativa had been here, and from this group we joined with Jorge Pérez (Yoyi), Nilo Julián González, and Jesus Miguel Roura. The first year was chaotic. When we arrived, this place was a mess. We had to rebuild it, paint, put up walls and adapt it to our needs. We were primarily a group of sculptors and didn't have a name. Juan Carlos Flores was interested in doing experimental literature and working with poets and artists. (Flores was also the custodian of the Casa de Cultura during that time.) Eventually two groups formed; the literary group became Zona Franca. It included Jon Curry-Machado, Leonardo Guevara, Johanna Depestre, Edwin Reyes, Grisel Echevarría, and other poets from Havana.<sup>307</sup>

Edwin Reyes recounts “Zona Francadecided to workin experimental zones of literature,very marginalareashaving to dowiththe underground,trying to usefrugalityand an economy ofresources...Somemembers of the groupwereaverseto publication,as a mechanismof resistanceto a systemthat generatesawards,trying to sidestep this ...We were fortunate tointeract with a diverse group of artists –visual artists, poets, musicians...We mustaddthe phenomenon of the social explosion which had been happeninginAlamar, such as the Festival ofRock, andRapFestival, plus the marginality ofthe hip hop culture, which is in all our literature.”<sup>308</sup>

There was informal cooperation between individuals from the two groups and individuals from each began to work with the other group. After a year of working together, the sculptors in the studio of the Casa

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<sup>307</sup> Amaury Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 1-2.

<sup>308</sup> Depestre 21.

de Cultura gave themselves the name OMNI. The members of the two groups began to work regularly together and the poets and sculptors formally joined in 1997 to form the collective OMNI Zona Franca. Fito (Adolfo Cabrera), one of the sculptors working in the Casa de Cultura from the beginning, explains that the collaborations felt natural and that the members of the group used each other's expertise and varied perspectives to enrich their own work. "For example, one of the artists of OMNI might base a painting on a poem by a member of Zona Franca, or a member of Zona Franca would work with someone from OMNI to create a performance from the poetic text...without a particular objective but with a focus on process and exploration, the two groups formed a relationship and united."<sup>309</sup>

Collaborators with the Rap festival, with which they were involved from the beginning, and the Cuban hip hop movement, whose main base was in Alamar, the collectives' work is focused in three main areas: poetry, performance and community engagement. The group has been working since 1997 on a variety of artistic projects, including the annual arts festival during the month of December called *Poesía Sin Fin*.

### **Alamar Today**

According to statistics published by the Cuban government in 2010, the combined population of Alamar as of 2011 was 92,648.<sup>310</sup> Architecturally, the City of the New Man no longer resembles its early form. Due to the inadequacies of space, poor quality of much of the

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<sup>309</sup> Adolfo Cabrera, Interview, February 23, 2007 (Appendix A, Interview 1) 4.

<sup>310</sup> Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, Municipio La Habana del Este, Población calculada por Consejos Populares, Appendix, Table 2.10 (2011).

construction and poor planning, improvised solutions have appeared over the years, with glassed in or walled in balconies, or iron grates enclosing balconies and windows due to fear of crime, various types of impromptu structures adjacent to buildings, such as garages and workshops made of scrap materials such as tin, wood, zinc, etc.,



Fig. 3.13 Alamar, 2010.

and enclosed areas for crops, goats, ducks, rabbits, etc. One architect who spoke under condition of anonymity explained “Alamar, in its origins, as conceived in the new housing plan, was a project that has nothing to do with what happened after,” and went on to complain about the policy that gave residents permission to add on to the original buildings, construct garages, workshops, etc.<sup>311</sup>

Sabater comments, “Today each building is a kind of surrealist painting. In the balconies, you see every variety of gates that give the

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<sup>311</sup> Sabater 47.



impression of jail cells.”<sup>312</sup> Furthermore, the construction of all the additions, garages, workshops, etc. have created a labyrinth of alleys and dead ends that have converted Alamar into a dangerous place. This combined with lack of proper street lighting and night time policing, has led to criminal activity including robberies and assaults, and sometimes deaths. All of these factors have contributed to Alamar’s reputation as a “barrio marginal.”

More than forty years after its founding, Alamar still has only the most basic services of a large urban community.<sup>313</sup> There is no running hot water, and irregular or non-functioning plumbing systems often require physically carrying water by hand from outdoor tanks to kitchens and bathrooms. There are regular electricity outages. Industry is limited, as is employment, necessitating long journeys to reach workplaces in Havana, the inconvenience of which is compounded by sporadic and inadequate transportation.

Overall, the goods available are inadequate for the needs of the population and residents of Alamar must travel to Havana to procure many basic items. In terms of services, in Alamar there are state food distribution locations, and a few stores that sell products such as appliances, electronics, name brand liquor, household products, food, and clothes in Cuban convertible pesos (CUC) which are pegged to the U.S. dollar, and therefore unaffordable to most Alamar residents, and small food kiosks and stands, selling goods in Cuban pesos. Alamar’s history as a model city for the model socialist worker has turned into the story of a neglected place, with no immediate possibility for economic

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<sup>312</sup> Sabater 47.

<sup>313</sup> It should be noted that these living conditions are not unique to Alamar.

development and few state-sponsored cultural resources. Its continued isolation and marginality, however, left open a space for new expressions to be incubated and eventually take root. Out of bleak circumstances the people of Alamar have created their own cultural movement, embracing the young artists, writers and musicians who demanded a voice, and found ways to forge new spaces for multiple and countercultural voices, a movement that continues to the present day.



Fig. 3.14 Alamar, Zone 19, 2010.



Fig. 3.15 Alamar, 2010.

## **Chapter 4: OMNI ZonaFranca: Community, Spirituality, Civic Engagement, and the State**

*“In the end performance is like life, and through it we adopt a civic conduct of intervention in issues in the public spaces of the nation.”<sup>314</sup>*  
(Amaury Pacheco)

### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with an account of OMNI ZonaFranca’s history and influences, followed by descriptions of key works: performances, festivals, exhibitions, and media production. Key works include those that are most representative of OMNI’s output as well as works for which the group is best known, many of which have been performed in various versions over a period of years. OMNI’s participation in the Havana Biennial and festivals throughout Cuba are covered in relation to descriptions of specific performances. During the 2006 Biennial, OMNI presented a number of events in Alamar under the umbrella of the project *Vasos Comunicantes: Haciendo Taller/Espacios Públicos*.

The second part of the chapter identifies central themes and issues in OMNI’s work. Taking into consideration that OMNI ZonaFranca’s trajectory as a group is inextricably linked to the history of its relations with the Cuban state and its institutions, the final section lays out the bureaucratic structure under which OMNI has worked, providing an outline of the history of OMNI ZonaFranca’s relations with the state, including examples of conflict as well as cooperation.

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<sup>314</sup> Quoted in Yoani Sánchez, “Empujar los límites,” *Consenso* 8 (2007): 3.

Cuban writer and critic Yoss (José Miguel Sánchez) described OMNI:

They are capable of performing while made to look like roast pork, brushing their teeth as a chorus at the corner of Payret<sup>315</sup>, to walk backwards every Wednesday, and spend an entire morning rolling in garbage, but they are not crazy. They go every December 17 to the church at el Rincón and make an *egbó*, but they are not *babalaos* or *santeros*, though they respect all religious beliefs. They wear Rasta dreadlocks, read the Kybalion, one is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and another a Rosicrucian, but they are neither a sect of mystic initiates nor theosophists of psychedelia. They are poets who rather than seeking to be published prefer to produce their own CDs of poetry. As members of their community, they have no qualms about loudly expressing their fears and worries, whether they do it on stage to the rhythm of hip hop or in the street. But they are much more than rappers. Lately the police have been mobilized for each of their actions, but they are neither dissidents nor counterrevolutionaries...<sup>316</sup>

OMNI Zona Franca, as Yoss portrays above, is an eclectic group of cultural producers working across several mediums.<sup>317</sup> Their public interventions take place in spaces such as streets, buildings, buses and bus stops, parks, garages, and, less frequently, in official cultural institutions and galleries. The group has been working since 1997 on a variety of artistic projects, including poetry, video, sound works, music, performance, public interventions, installations, painting, photography, sculpture, public art, graffiti murals. They have offered drawing classes for the community, children's theater, meditation and healing classes, and organized a variety of other community activities.

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<sup>315</sup> A cinema near the Capitol building, the Payret has a symbolic importance in Havana. It has a very large portal that has been the site for unofficial public gatherings, often under the pretense of waiting in line to see a movie, and has been a central location for "alternative" or countercultural activities over the past few decades.

<sup>316</sup> Yoss (José Miguel Sánchez), "OMNI Zona Franca," *The H* (Revista Cultural), 2007.  
<sup>317</sup> The core members of OMNI Zona Franca include: Amaury Pacheco Del Monte, David Escalona Carrillo, Luis Eligio Pérez Merino, Alina Guzmán Tamayo, Nilo Julián González Preval, along with Damián Valdéz Dilla and Jorge (Yoyi) Pérez. The people who have collaborated with OMNI are too numerous to list here: among them are the members of Grupo Uno Balesy Rivera and Yasser Castellano, Ailer González Mena, Iris Ruiz Hernández, Ivía Pérez Naranjo, Alberto Virella, and Lucrezia Cipitelli. Among the former members are: Adolfo (Fito) Cabrera Pérez, Olver Reyes Rodríguez, René Cervantes Debrán, Johanna Depestre, Natividad Soto Kessel, Leonardo Guevara, Edwin Reyes, Gonzalo Vidal, Jorge Carlos Aceveda, Alberto Basabe, Ithosvani Hernández, Veronica Pérez, Grisel Echevarría, and Raymundo Fernández Moya.

In addition to playing an important role in the annual rap festivals that began in Alamar in the mid 1990s, each year since 1999 OMNI has organized the art, music, performance, video and poetry festival called *Poesía Sin Fin*, in which group members perform and participate along with numerous collaborators from Cuba and abroad.<sup>318</sup> It is for annual events such as *Poesía Sin Fin* and the peregrination on the Dia de San Lázaro (Day of St. Lazarus), referred to by the collective as the *garabato*, that OMNI is best known. Another project for which the group gained attention in Cuba is the alternative music/poetry CD *Alamar Express*.

The group does not have a director and decisions are made collectively, but if OMNI ZonaFranca can be said to have a central figure, it is founder Amaury Pacheco. Pacheco, after arriving in Havana and meeting poet Juan Carlos Flores, joined with Flores and others to help found Zona Franca. As a founding member of Zona Franca, and also of OMNI, and then the combined group, Pacheco has been a guiding force with his charisma, unique vision, and dedication to the collective. The current core members in addition to Pacheco are Luis Eligio Pérez, David Escalona, Nilo Julián González and Alina Guzmán Tamayo.

OMNI ZonaFranca has engaged in a process of transformation and adaptation for over 15 years, in its configuration, its fluid and expansive relationships with collaborators, and its multiple and shifting relations with the community and the state. OMNI ZonaFranca's flexible expansion and contraction from a core group is one of the collective's

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<sup>318</sup> Sample programs from several editions of *Poesía Sin Fin* are included in Appendix B. Additional detailed archival information can be found on OMNI's blog under the tab titled "Festival Poesía Sin Fin": <http://www.omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com>

defining characteristics, and also reflects the way in which the many alternative cultural producers in Alamar have historically joined forces to pool scarce resources. In the process they have influenced one another's work in an example of synergy and continued to collaborate on each other's projects. "Some people think that OMNI was renamed, when before we were Zona Franca, and vice versa; in fact we have always been a mutant... the names we have used to put together are OMNI; OMNI Zona Franca; FRANOM-A, with Grupo Uno; Generación OMNI... we try to create spaces in which to grow."<sup>319</sup>

OMNI has embraced a range of influences and inspirations in their work, from African diasporic elements, including rap, spoken word, and other forms that have emerged out of the struggles of African descended people, to Eastern spirituality, elements of Spiritist and Rosicrucian religions, and countercultural movements from the U.S. (from Beats to Hippies to hip hop). All of these have been absorbed into the collective's work and practices. The majority of the group's work centers on performance and public events. According to Amaury Pacheco, "Performance is for us an attitude that is conducive to the constant manifestation of the creative state, but it is also the artistic manifestation that best characterizes us and through which we can combine all of our creative possibilities. Through it we assume/accept/adopt elements of the body, of orality, poetry, writing in its visual aspect, dance theater, music, song, and all visual art, which we emphatically project into urban spaces, though also in theaters and galleries."<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup>Quoted in Yohamna Depestre Corcho, "Alamar es el Sitio, *Extramuros de la ciudad, imagen y palabra*, 20, (2006)22.

<sup>320</sup>Quoted in Sánchez 3.

Many of OMNI's performances and spontaneous public actions over the years have sought to directly ameliorate conditions that affect daily life in the community; they intervene through the beautification of public spaces, creation of needed street signage, or doing performances highlighting the lack of various government services (trash collection, etc.). At the end of the 1990s, new omnibus stops were built in Alamar with no seating for waiting passengers, who lined up and stood – often for hours – with little or no communication among themselves. OMNI decided to install seats at the bus stop, as a practical matter aimed at offering comfort, but also to facilitate communication through both physical design and poetry. (Figs. 4. 1, 4.2) On the day of their public action, they arranged seats in classroom style rows, then in a circle. Next they began to recite poetry, interacting with the waiting passengers. After their initial wariness was overcome, people began to sit on the seats, and began to laugh and engage in conversation with the artists and fellow passengers.<sup>321</sup>

On another occasion, members of OMNI buried themselves in piles of garbage to draw attention to the fact that the government wasn't removing the garbage in Alamar. A large crowd gathered at the sight of people “installed” in the garbage. Amaury Pacheco recalls:

One of our first actions we did in 1997 when the entire city – and especially Alamar – was full of trash on every corner. It piled up week after week without them coming to collect it, with flies, rats, and people passing very close. So we had the idea to bury ourselves in the garbage. People started to gather when they saw feet or a hand sticking out of the trash. The police arrived quickly and also other authorities such as the Municipal Director of Culture. Except for a garbage truck, the whole world was there! We were detained by the police for six hours.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Personal communication with Amaury Pacheco, December 18, 2010.

<sup>322</sup> Quoted in Sánchez 5.



Regarding the painting of graffiti, according to Pacheco, the murals and other graffiti paintings in public spaces provided signage in Alamar, a project to physically mark the city in response to the lack of sufficient street signs. From OMNI's perspective, graffiti murals, in addition to beautifying a dull cityscape of concrete walls, answered a need to help residents from other zones of Alamar and visitors alike to navigate its monotonous sprawl.

Actions such as rolling in (uncollected) trash, painting graffiti murals on underpasses and buildings, and spontaneously reciting poetry on the *camello*<sup>323</sup> or omnibus, put OMNI in conflict with local – and quickly, provincial and national – state authorities. For example, following the installation of seats at the bus stop, police and the Ministry of Culture immediately warned OMNI not to repeat this type of activity. Within a week, however, the government installed benches in the bus stops in Alamar.<sup>324</sup>



Fig. 4.1 Bringing chairs for bus stop installation/performance.

<sup>323</sup> The truck-buses that were used in Havana during the 1990s. See Chapter 3.

<sup>324</sup> Amaury Pacheco, personal communication, February 24, 2007.



Fig. 4.2 Passengers enjoying new bus seating installed by OMNI.



Fig. 4.3 Passengers rearrange seats and chat while waiting for the *camello*.

## I. Description of Key Works

The following descriptions of key works are not intended to represent a complete catalogue of OMNI's oeuvre. Rather, they summarize and present a brief history of OMNI's best-known works, most of which OMNI has performed multiple times over a period of years in various venues. The remainder of the chapter considers aesthetics, influences, and the main themes of the work, and provides additional context through discussion of broader societal issues such as reception of the work, race, institutional relations, and censorship.

### ***El Garabato/ La Peregrinación, 2000-***

Each year on December 17, El Día de San Lázaro (St. Lazarus Day), many Cubans embark on a pilgrimage that eventually converges on a Catholic church in El Rincón in Havana, to the sanctuary dedicated to Saint Lazarus. Some pilgrims are physically disabled, with no use of their legs, dragging themselves the entire way, while other able-bodied participants crawl along the road with heavy stones or bricks attached to their bodies in sacrifice. OMNI's pilgrimage, called *el garabato* in reference to the heavy scythe they carry along the route, was first performed by members of OMNI Zona Franca in 2000. This first performance of the *garabato* was inspired by a conversation between Amaury Pacheco and poet Juan Carlos Flores, who was in poor health. They talked about physical and then spiritual health, and finally the health of Cuban poetry, pronouncing it the most profound spiritual

expression of the nation. The idea arose to make an offering and a sacrifice for the health of poetry and the performance of the *garabato* was born and remains one of OMNI Zona Franca's main annual events. Through the participation in the sacrificial act of the pilgrim, OMNI petitions for the health of the people, and the health of poetry, seen as the spiritual base of the people and the nation. (Fig. 4. 4)

In this performance, the *garabato*, a bundle of large, heavy tree branches, approximately 10 - 12 feet, or 3 – 4 meters in length, bound together with rope and wire in the form of a scythe, (Fig. 4.5) is carried along the road to the sanctuary of Saint Lazarus or *Santuario de San Lázaro*. OMNI members gather wood in the days before and assemble the *garabato*. On the day of St. Lazarus they transport it by bus or truck to the Ciudad Deportiva (sports complex) in Havana at Avenida Boyeros and Vía Blanca, where members and friends of OMNI join together to begin the pilgrimage dedicated to the untapped energies and creativity of the people and for the health of poetry.<sup>325</sup>

As the participants walk, they greet people along the road and hand out flowers. The performance of the pilgrimage calls for everyone who is physically able to share the burden of carrying the *garabato*. At various stops along the way, the group pauses to read poetry. When the pilgrims and *garabato* arrive in front of the church, all the participants gather around, place their hands on the *garabato* and perform a ritual

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<sup>325</sup>The first time the *garabato* was performed, in 2000, the participants did not go to the church at El Rincón, but did a pilgrimage in La Habana del Este to inaugurate the *1<sup>er</sup> Salón de Instalaciones Francisco Elso Padilla* in the Galería Mariano at the Villa Panamericana. Subsequent pilgrimages have all been to the church in el Rincón. See References for a link to video documentation of the *garabato* pilgrimage.



Fig. 4.4 Amaury Pacheco carrying a sign at the start of the pilgrimage.



Fig. 4.5 Participants prepare to take the *garabato* onto the *camello*.

chanting of the Buddhist “OM.” With shouts of “for the health of poetry!” the *garabato* is carried into the sanctuary, where Catholic priests are performing mass. (Fig. 4.6) After a brief acknowledgement by the priest, the *garabato* is carried outside and leaned up against a tree in the churchyard. Members of OMNI perform an oration, inviting all spectators and participants to petition San Lázaro. (Fig. 4.7) Typically, many pilgrims gathered at the sanctuary who are not part of OMNI’s peregrination join in and participate in this part of the ritual.

The *garabato* represents a mix of Christian and African religions and is a symbol of the Yoruba god Elegguá. “When we introduce ourselves into this it is because the *garabato* is a mix of San Lazaro and Elegguá, the saint who opens paths, who oversees the crossroads. But Elegguá can also be Eshu, who is very mischievous.”<sup>326</sup> In its form as a

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<sup>326</sup> Amaury Pacheco, Interview, December 20, 2010 (Appendix A, Interview 5) 15.

scythe the *garabato* refers to labor, and simultaneously, to new paths. It is believed to clear away any obstacles before it. Because San Lázaro helps those who are sick and needy, he is considered a saint of the people. Pacheco explains “One path of art is that of sacrifice ... Lazaro is a saint who says ‘come to me,’ and the sick come to him. Everyone can come, and they do. So we go there – those who have projects, those who want the doors to open. There you can petition for The Five<sup>327</sup>, you can petition for Fidel, for Raúl, for whomever you want. Is it a very democratic space. It is a great lesson in democracy.”<sup>328</sup>

In this way, Pacheco connects the ritual and religious aspects of this event not only to participants’ personal motivations and wishes but also to a larger social and civil manifestation. “The performance of the *garabato* is about art and transformation, the interaction with people...It allows social liberation, an attitude of ‘civility.’It enables a profound connection between the mix of Catholic and Yoruba and the poetic...the *garabato* represents a “sacred transculturation.”<sup>329</sup> In its combination of the spiritual and the civic, OMNI’s performance of the *garabato* makes a statement about the critical role of cultural production in making incursions into the public sphere and creating new spaces for civil society.

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<sup>327</sup> This is a reference to the Cuban Five, arrested and imprisoned in the United States for spying in 1998 and convicted in U.S. federal court in Miami in 2001. They are Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, Antonio Guerrero, Fernando González, and René González.

<sup>328</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 16.

<sup>329</sup> Amaury Pacheco, interview, March 29, 2012.



Fig. 4.6 The *garabato* is brought into the church at El Rincón.





Fig. 4.7 Luis Eligio Pérez performing oration in the churchyard at El Rincón.

### ***Fantasma Cívicos***

*Fantasma Cívicos* was first realized in September 2003 near the Parque Central in Havana, after the official invitation to perform as part of the presentation of the street theater group Gigantería during the Theater Festival of Havana was withdrawn.<sup>330</sup>(Fig. 4.8)OMNI made a decision to proceed independently and carry out the performance as planned. In the performance, two ghostly figures dressed in white and with faces painted white approach a large white circle drawn on the street. (Fig. 4.9) They move around the circle slowly, appearing to search for a way forward. The figures appear to slowly die, and then arise as if reborn. (Fig. 4.10)

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<sup>330</sup> It was performed a second time in Alamar as part of *Proyecto Circo* in 2003, and in 2004 at the *1st Dead Hare Performance Festival (I Encuentro de Performance La Liebre Muerta)*, in Matanzas.



Fig. 4.8 *Fantasma Cívicos*, 2003.



Fig. 4.9 *Fantasma Cívicos*, 2003.



Fig. 4.10 *Fantasma Cívicos*, 2003.



Fig. 4. 11 *Fantasma Cívicos*, performing an *ekbó*.

They rediscover the space and the energies of the circle. They move faster, spinning around each other. A third spirit, an archangel,

enters the circle, and interferes with the actions of the other two. He performs an *ekbó* (a Yoruba ritual), lighting a ritual circle of flame and then trapping it in a bottle that represents frozen time as the spirits wait for the dawn of a new era. (Fig. 4.11)<sup>331</sup>

OMNI chose to perform at the Parque Central before the statue of José Martí, symbolically acknowledging Martí's revered status as a civic figure in Cuba. At the nearby Museum of Universal Art, "We did an *ekbó*... In African religion, cleansing the four corners is very significant. We went around the corners of the museum for a period of time, to cleanse the four corners but also for the liberation of art, that art would be free, not uselessly shut inside a museum."<sup>332</sup> The text of the performance declares that "here, it's best to speak with the diaphragm" that is "antidogmatic and antiracist."

According to Pérez, the performance is based on the premise that everyone in the audience is free and intelligent, but that fear eventually takes over and turns everyone into ghosts, "civic phantasms." *Fantasmas Cívicos*, Pérez explains, responds to the lack of opportunity for civic cultural involvement for everyday people under a system in which culture is imposed from above. The performance suggests that every person should be allowed to actively contribute to society and participate in creating culture. If not, society ends up with "puppets, clowns, harlequins, which one might call phantasms."<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Luis Eligio Pérez, *Fantasmas Cívicos* performance description and instructions, 2003 (Appendix B).

<sup>332</sup> Luis Eligio Pérez, Interview, February 22, 2007 (Appendix A, Interview 6) 29-30.

<sup>333</sup> *Fantasmas Cívicos* performance description and instructions, Luis Eligio Pérez, 2003. See Appendix B.

***Komunik't (or Comuni'kt), performance/installation:***

The performance/installation called *Komunik't* (Communicate!) is a project that has been performed and installed intermittently over a period of years; the first version was presented in 2001 at an art festival in Cienfuegos. (Fig. 4.12) It consists of a performance, sculptural installation, and videos of neighborhood residents speaking about their lives.<sup>334</sup>



Fig. 4.12 *Komunik't*, Cienfuegos, 2001.

As part of the 9<sup>a</sup> *Bienal de la Habana* in 2006, OMNI officially presented *Komunik't* in Alamar on March 31 in the market place located in Zona 6 (Zone 6).<sup>335</sup> The open corridor through the market where the performance took place is lined with small shops – a bank, bakery,

<sup>334</sup> See description in Appendix B.

<sup>335</sup> I was present at this event.

pharmacy, hairdresser – and heavily traveled by local residents. (Fig. 4.13) Preparation for the performance was also part of the performance and began in the midst of the bustle of daily market activities several hours in advance of the scheduled performance and the arrival of the bus from Havana with biennial visitors. Members and friends of OMNI, brooms in hand, formed a circle in the middle of the market and began chanting. (Fig. 4.14)



Fig. 4.13 *Komunik't*, 2006. Newspaper lined pathway through market in Zone 6.

Then they began sweeping the market place. After sweeping up the garbage, some of the artists went to paint graffiti on the exterior walls of the market entrance. (Fig. 4.15) These graffiti images were intended to demarcate and make visible specific commercial zones, in this case, the area in which black market activities are conducted just outside the market entrance. (Fig. 4.16) Other members moved on to the construction of a sculptural tower/altar, the focal point of the

installation, which consisted of a roughly nailed-together stack of empty old wooden television boxes that were then wrapped in newspaper with painted text. A functioning monitor was placed at the top. (Fig. 4.17)



Fig. 4.14 *Komunik't*, 2006. Sweeping ritual with brooms.



Fig. 4.15 Drawing graffiti for Komuník't, 2006.



Fig. 4.16 Graffiti at market exterior.



In the afternoon, after the arrival of foreign visitors, curators, and other guests of the biennial, the group began the formal part of the performance. In an installation that blended Christian, Afro-Cuban or Yoruba, and Eastern spiritual and ritual elements, the members of OMNI approached the television altar they had built and surrounded with flowers and candles and chanted “el objetivo es moverse constantemente hacia un puesto fijo” (the objective is to move constantly toward a fixed position). Offerings of flowers and fruit to the “television god” were made, followed by a screenings of a series of video portraits of neighborhood residents talking about their daily struggles and experiences, offering ideas about improving the community, and sharing spiritual messages with the audience.

The tower of newspaper-wrapped hollow televisions served as a rare example of self-produced public media in Cuba and an alternative to state-produced mass media. OMNI sought to present the voices of local people in a new kind of space, a syncretic spiritual space as well as a public space, displacing (momentarily) the state’s media monopoly in favor of the unscripted voices of common people.

Among the other special projects of OMNI for the Bienal as part of the group’s offerings in Alamar was the project *Renacer* by former OMNI member Natividad Soto Kessel. Soto created an outdoor interactive performance in which she manicured the nails of visitors to her space, while offering an opportunity for women to talk about their lives and share their concerns. (Fig. 4.18 and 4.19)



Fig. 4.17 *Komunik't*, 2006. Waiting for the performance at the TV altar.



Figure 4.18 *Renacer*, installation and performance, 2006.



Fig. 4.19 *Renacer*, Natividad Soto and biennial guest, 2006.

## ***Hay Que Luchar, 2006***

*Hay que Luchar* (You Have to Fight!<sup>336</sup>), a spoken word/rap/music performance, was presented at the popular open-air nightclub La Tropical in Havana on Wednesday March 29, 2006 as part of the 9th Havana Biennial, part of the collateral program of videos and performances titled *iEnjoy!*, curated by Juan Rivero Prieto.<sup>337</sup> The performance began as four members of OMNI<sup>338</sup> took the stage and began to gesticulate and argue among themselves, creating a noisy cacophony of excited voices. “You have to pay the electric bill! You have to pay the phone bill! You have to pay for the television!,” cried David Escalona, in a rapid-fire rant. Meanwhile, Amaury Pacheco interjected at regular intervals, “we need a change of air, look for a new perspective...”

*Hay que Luchar* included individual spoken word performances or raps from the four OMNI members, interspersed with musical performance. Together they performed a high energy, inventive musical work on four manual typewriters (both American and Soviet models) arranged in a square around a table. The performance integrated an unexpected array of syncopated typewriter sounds, spoken word, and movement.<sup>339</sup>

One line from Luis Eligio Pérez’s poem warns, “In the material (world) and beyond, there exist organized forces that shackle you!”

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<sup>336</sup>The expression *hay que luchar* is also a slang reference for the practice of pilfering or “transferring” goods from the workplace to supplement low state salaries.

<sup>337</sup> Rivero, a member of the DUPP collective with Rene Francisco during the 1990s (see Ch. 1), was also the organizer of *Proyecto Circo* in the 8th Biennial, in which OMNI participated.

<sup>338</sup> Amaury Pacheco, Luis Eligio Pérez, René Cervantes Debrán, and David Escalona.

<sup>339</sup> See video in Appendix C.

Pacheco, in his performance poem<sup>340</sup>, uses the refrain “la calle está aparentemente tranquila” (“The street appears to be quiet.”) At the end of the performance, all four recite the refrain, “¡Aguanta un momento, se me quema el instrumento! Hay que luchar, hay que luchar,” several times (“Hold on a minute! My tool is burning up!,” ostensibly referring to the typewriters/musical instruments but with an anatomical double meaning that was obvious to a laughing audience.) Next, each pulled out a toothbrush and filled it with toothpaste, ending the performance by furiously brushing their teeth in unison (in a reprise of *Higiene Pública*, or Public Hygiene, their “unofficial” intervention in the 2003 biennial<sup>341</sup>). They then jumped off the stage and ran down the aisles.

Invoking the apparent quiet of the street here infers the opposite, suggesting instead a street that could erupt at any moment, alluding to a potentially explosive undercurrent below the apparently calm surface. The performance builds a tension through alternating between poetry and eruptions of word, voice, and sound, mirroring conditions of chaos, tumult, and struggle. Yet the enormous energy and exuberance of the artists offers a symbolic alternative; the artists’ insistence on openly

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<sup>340</sup> I use the term “performance poem” rather than spoken word or performance alone to emphasize that the physical, the body, is as important as the written word in the work.

<sup>341</sup> Unofficial performance/intervention at the opening of the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial, 2003. *Higiene Pública* was performed at the cinema Payret in Havana. Description of performance by Amaury Pacheco (2003): The first actor/performer takes out a toothbrush and toothpaste and begins to brush his teeth. Another actor appears and does the same. Then another, and another, and another.... A public washing, a hygienic concert of the channeling of the collective voice within the individual.”

“El actuante saca un cepillo de dientes, pasta dental, agua y comienza a lavarse los dientes.

Aparece otro actuante. Cepillo, pasta, agua, y comienza a lavarse los dientes.

Aparece otro actuante, otro, otro, otro, otro, otro...

Un lavado público, un concierto higiénico del canal de la voz colectiva en el individuo.” (Description of performance, Amaury Pacheco, 2003)

expressing the common frustrations and experiences of daily life produces a liberatory catharsis in which the audience participates.<sup>342</sup>

### ***Pan con Poeta***

The title of the work *Pan con Poeta* refers to the traditional Cuban *pan con cerdo asado* (roast pork sandwich). This performance featured OMNI member Olver Reyes<sup>343</sup> dressed as a chef, calling out to passers-by “*pan con poeta!*” (“bread with poet!”) and reciting Luis Eligio Pérez’s poetry as Pérez laid on a “grill,” having been made to look like roasted meat with layers of painted latex. (Figs. 4.20 and 4.21) The sign next to Pérez read “5 Cuban pesos. Poet.” Customers would receive an actual



Fig. 4.20 Pan Con Poeta, 2003. Photo: Gonzalo Vidal.

<sup>342</sup> In the digital journal *Convivencia*, Dagoberto Valdés Hernández offered a cynical interpretation of Pacheco’s refrain from *Hay que Luchar*: “La calle está aparentemente tranquila...’ if people really understood what the word ‘la calle’ means to a Cuban... and if they knew where this ‘tranquility’ comes from, a well known Cuban expression, ‘tranquility comes from the stick!’” See “Alamar Express, OMNI Zona Franca o el espíritu de liberación artística y cívica en Cuba,” *Convivencia* (May 12, 2009): 1.

<sup>343</sup> Reyes emigrated to Switzerland in 2005.



Fig. 4.21 Pan Con Poeta, with Olver Reyes and Luis Eligio Pérez, 2003.  
Photo: Gonzalo Vidal.

pork sandwich but Reyes pantomimed scooping out chunks of meat from the poet's flesh. The sandwich that customers received was wrapped in paper with Pérez's poetry printed on it.

The performance was presented as part of the group show *OMNI: Galería Abierta* part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial in 2003, and a second time a few days later on November 9<sup>th</sup> as part of a quarterly OMNI event called *Viernes de Performance* (Performance Friday), and again on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> as part of the Biennial's *Proyecto Circo* in Alamar organized

by Juan Rivero.<sup>344</sup> The performance was a literal commentary on, and rejection of, the link between art and the market, implicating the viewer/consumer of food/poetry.<sup>345</sup> It aimed to provoke conversation about the consumption and monetization of art (a relatively recent phenomenon in Revolutionary Cuba) and the growing market forces in the arena of culture in Cuba.

The Performance Friday event opened at a central bus stop in Alamar with a performance of *Pan Con Poeta*. Next the roasted “pork/poet” was carried over and set down opposite the gallery, in front of a tree Pacheco had strung with garbage, aluminum cans, and bottles. The artists erected a platform and in the performance titled *Distintos Modos de Izarse* (Different Ways to Hoist Yourself).<sup>346</sup> Pacheco proceeded to hang himself (on a concealed harness) from the garbage-

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<sup>344</sup> As a collateral event for the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana biennial in 2003, Juan Rivero Prieto organized the first edition of *Proyecto Circo* in Alamar, held in a circus tent with a mix of street and theater performances. The project took place on November 15 and 16, 2003 in the Plaza de África in Alamar under the “big top” and included visual artists, performance art, and music. OMNI Zona Franca participated with three different performances: *Pan con Poeta* (with Luis Eligio and Olver Reyes), *Fantasmas Cívicos*, and *Marcha OMNI*, a procession around the circus tent carrying the *garabato*.

<sup>345</sup> *Concepto:*

*Nació el mercado del hombre,*

*El hombre del mercado.*

*Hombre y mercado por doquier con precios altísimos*

*El hombre como lobo del hombre:*

*Una idea vendible*

*El mercado del arte, y luego, las derivaciones*

*El espectador como consumidor, compre, compre:*

*Un concepto*

*Siguiendo el sentido de la antropofagia según creencias africanas, donde alguien muere y se comen alguna parte de su cuerpo para heredar sus dones y sus virtudes.*

The market was born of man,

The man of the market.

Man and market with high prices everywhere

Werewolf as man:

A marketable idea

The art market, and then, the derivations

The viewer as a consumer, buy, buy, buy:

A concept

Following the idea of cannibalism according African beliefs, where someone dies and a part of the body is eaten in order to inherit the person's gifts and virtues. (Appendix B)

<sup>346</sup> For a description of performance see Appendix B.



filled tree, a piece of (human) detritus, with the roasted poet below. (Figs. 4.22 and 4.23) The event continued in the gallery with a performance by poet Livio Conesa, and a typewriter sound performance with David Escalona and other members. The event culminated with a DJ and a slideshow projected onto the 18-story building across the street by OMNI member Yoyi (Jorge Pérez) and a visiting artist from Brazil.



Fig. 4.22. *Distintos Modos de Izarse*, 2003. Photo: Gonzalo Vidal.



Fig. 4.23 *Distintos Modos de Izarse*, 2003. Photo: Gonzalo Vidal.

### ***Poesía Sin Fin***

“We saw how people were doing things in other parts of the world. We gained awareness, and it began to change our own experience. We decided to create a festival.” This is how Amaury Pacheco recounts the genesis of *Poesía Sin Fin*.<sup>347</sup> *Poesía Sin Fin* is an annual multi-media event that OMNI-Zona Franca has organized since 1999. It is the event for which OMNI is best known, in Cuba and outside, attracting visitors from Alamar, Havana, other cities in Cuba, as well as foreigners. Since its beginnings as a one-day event, the festival has expanded over the years and now runs for nearly the entire month of December. The first

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<sup>347</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 5-6. See brief description and sample brochures in Appendix B.

*Poesía Sin Fin* featured rap music, poetry and visual art. The artists built a stage, borrowed audio equipment and organized a concert with poetry and music. The event was inaugurated with the unveiling of a sculpture made of discarded materials found in the streets of Alamar (carrying on the tradition of ArteNativa). (Fig. 4.24)

OMNI repeated the festival in 2000, again inaugurating it with an environmental sculpture. In 2001 they decided to move the event indoors into their studio space or *taller*, housed inside the Casa de Cultura building, organizing a program in which poetry readings and performances were designed to interact with the plastic art and installations, which themselves had been produced in response to texts and poetry. As the festival grew, several regular events were added.



Fig. 4.24 *Alamar Expresso*, Poesía Sin Fin inaugural sculpture, 1999.

In addition to the art exhibition at the Fayad Jamís gallery, and the pilgrimage of the *garabato* on December 17, the new events included the *Cabaret Poetico* (Poetry Cabaret), the *Fiesta de Mascaras* (Masquerade Party), the *Feria Espiritual* (Spiritual Fair), *Dia Teatral*

(Day of Theatre), and *Electrospoken* (DJ's techno and other music). To this OMNI added poetry readings, theatrical works, art projects, and celebrations.<sup>348</sup> Many of the events incorporated video projections or formal screenings of short documentaries, original music videos, and art videos.

The Feria Espiritual has typically consisted of sessions in meditation, lectures, and exhibits on spirituality and healing by members of various groups, which might include Zen Buddhists, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, Rastafarians, Hare Krishnas, and others. The *Cabaret Poético* features streetperformers, hip hop artists, mimes, dancers and musicians performing *trova*, rock, reggae, and hip hop. Events such as *Electrospoken* highlight rap or poetry combined with video, electronic or techno music, and DJ'ing. Poetry circles and readings are central to the festival, with invited poets from Alamar, Havana, and other parts of Cuba as well as participants from abroad. In conjunction with exhibitions in the gallery and other spaces in Alamar, lectures are presented on topics such as graffiti art, architecture, contemporary *trova* music, and new writings.

Through visual art, graffiti, sculpture, poetry, spoken word, performance poems, hip hop culture, rap music, reggae, theater, and performance art, Poesía Sin Fin – to echo the words of poet Reina María Rodríguez – combines visuality, orality and sound to create an immersive and joyful environment. However, as I discuss later, the

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<sup>348</sup> One example of an invited art project, organized by Minerva Romero for *Poesía sin Fin* in 2006 took place at the building known as the *doce plantas* (the 12 story) on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> floors and transformed the space of the street and the building. The project involved painting letters on blocks of limestone (the most readily available building material). The artist and several participants formed a human chain in the street below and passed the lettered stone blocks up the building stairs to individual apartments. The letters spelled out “Estamos llenos de Posibilidades” (We are full of possibilities).

group has experienced continual censorship and tension with the state in relation to the festival.

## **Exhibitions**

The following is a description of the exhibition *Alamar Utópico*, an important example of the group's plastic art, significant because it represented, in its second, 2009 version, the only time the collective has exhibited in an official art gallery in Havana. *Alamar Utópico: Memoria y Espacio (Utopian Alamar: Memory and Space)*, mounted in Alamar's Galería Fayad Jamís in December 2007 through January 2008, explored how the space of Alamar is inhabited and imaged. (Fig. 4.25) For the installation the gallery was converted into typical apartment-like spaces, with windows and open balconies. The installation included a kitchen, hanging clotheslines, and common household objects (a bicycle, toys, etc.) throughout. The exhibit included audiovisual works, installations, and a photographic history incorporating images from artists from around the world who had come to Alamar.

*Alamar Utópico* was mounted to coincide with Poesía Sin Fin, titled that year *La Sagrada Familia* (The Sacred Family). OMNI's catalogue text explains the concept:

The exhibit is centered in a basic fact about the condition of architecture in Alamar. People are remodeling/modifying spaces without the participation (in terms of regulation or assistance) of the State, resulting in haphazard construction and a deterioration of the quality of life and the environment in which Alamareños live...The resulting changes in the built environment are subject to the limitations imposed by deficient architecture and planning and have impacted the health of individuals, family relations and the community as a whole. The issue of this accumulation of homemade architectural modifications without specialized

knowledge or guidance at some point becomes a civil, legal issue that one could view as acts of civil disobedience, with political connotations. But an amalgamation of individual solutions can never solve the collective problem (look at Brazilian *favelas* as an example of individual solutions without the active planned participation of the state.) This exhibition takes a close look at the poetics of the transformation of inhabited space, something that transcends the individual and is offered as a collective solution to a collective problem, calling forth solutions that are born in the imagination of the practical, that restore or incorporate architectural traditions of Cuba. In a quiet but constant way, the intimate environment of nuclear families is changing, being transformed, and this transformation is also a change in the subjectivity of those who live and interact in these spaces.<sup>349</sup>



Fig. 4.25 Installation view, *Alamar Utópico*, 2007.  
A local resident created this car, a working vehicle, from found and collected parts as his utopian vision. The car's creator was invited to demonstrate the car at fairs throughout Cuba.

The reference to transformation of family structure highlights the serious housing shortage in Alamar and in Havana in general. As a result of the shortage, most households consist of multiple generations and/or extended families, including adult, married children and their spouses, grandchildren, etc. The strain of insufficient housing on family relations and social structure in Havana has been well documented and is

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<sup>349</sup> OMNI Zona Franca, catalog essay for *Alamar Utópico: Memoria y Espacio*, exhibit held in the Galería Fayad Jamís, Alamar, December 2007.

reflected in statistics such as high divorce rates and low birth rates.<sup>350</sup> *Alamar Utópico* sought to draw attention to this problem and its negative social impacts while encouraging a reimagining of Alamar.

The second mounting of this exhibition two years later represented the first time that OMNI exhibited in an institution in Havana, at the gallery of the Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño (Provincial Center for Art and Design), known as Luz y Oficinos (named after the cross streets in Old Havana where the gallery is located). The exhibition at Luz y Oficinos took place in July and August of 2009. Examples of works included were: *Altar TV* (from the installation of *Komuník't*) with residents talking about their daily material struggles and offering ideas for how to improve conditions; *Fast Food* (made of discarded aluminum cans, in a reference to garbage and those who survive from the garbage); *7 Soups* (with seven pressure cookers in which beans were cooked for visitors to eat); and *Remake*, an installation consisting of two pay phones for imaginary conversation and a wall on which to write desires, quotes, and make sketches of the city.

In her essay on the exhibition, curator Dannys Montes de Oca describes OMNI's way of working, noting that the group strives for a "real and practical mode of interactivity with the community" and referring to their "authentic manner of making art and urban culture." She further refers to OMNI's practice as an "absolutely singular artistic experience, transgressive and contemporary that demands a

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<sup>350</sup> See for example Tracy Eaton's "For Many in Cuba, Marriage is for the Birds," *Dallas Morning News*, July 3, 2004: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cuba/divorce.htm>. For a detailed history and demographic and census statistics refer to Mario Coyula and Jill Hamberg, "The Case of Havana, Cuba: Understanding Slums: Case Studies for the Global Report" *UN Global Report on Human Settlements 2003, United Nations* (2003).

transformation in our expectations as a public and of certain habits of socialization among us.”<sup>351</sup>

### **Media Production: Blog, Videos, CDs, Digital Mass Media**

Via their production entity, Enforis Productions, OMNI has produced a number of CDs and videos. The first CD was the experimental collaborative sound and poetry work *Alamar Express* in 2005, followed in 2006 by *Todo Incluido*, a DVD of poetry, performance and visual art based on Juan Carlos Flores’s book *El Contragolpe (y otros poemas horizontales)*.<sup>352</sup> *Alamar Express* was self-produced by Enforis Productions and self-distributed in 2005 with the support of Alberto Virella, Spanish cultural consul (Consejero Cultural y de Cooperación) and with funding from the Spanish embassy (Embajada de España en Cuba) and the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, AECI). The CD contains rap, reggae, *trova*, experimental and street sounds, poetry, and stories from and about Alamar. The *Alamar Express* CD and accompanying book (containing poems and narrative texts) can be described as a roving narrative that immerses the listener in the experiences and textures of daily life in Alamar with poetry, music, noise, ambient sounds (both urban and rural, capturing the varied facets of Alamar’s environment). *Alamar Express* is an expression of OMNI

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<sup>351</sup> “OMNI Zona Franca y Nadal Antelmo: una oferta especial de Verano,” Dannys Montes de Oca, September 2009, 2 (unpublished text). An abridged version is available on Montes de Oca’s blog: <http://dannysmontesdeoca.wordpress.com/textos/omni-zona-franca-y-nadal-antelmo/>.

<sup>352</sup> Included in Appendix C.



Zona Franca's process and the desire to produce a form of "poetry in action."

One of the most important accomplishments of the project, apart from its creative contribution, was that it expanded and confirmed that Zona Franca and OMNI and all their collaborators were not simply a group of artists, but that they represented a generation, Generation OMNI. Poet Edwin Reyes explains, "OMNI has become a hybrid, composed of many artists and the most important thing is the horizontality of the project – not verticality -- which is deep, and contentedly marginal. Being a member of OMNI or Generation OMNI, I prefer the latter. More important than a name that serves to seal a historic moment, it's important to recognize oneself as within a generation...to feel part of something that is evolving."<sup>353</sup>

In an essay in *La Gaceta de Cuba* Norge Espinosa counted *Alamar Express* among the most important recent Cuban literature anthologies.<sup>354</sup> OMNI themselves describe it as "an anthology of the counterculture of Alamar."<sup>355</sup> Though the CD was widely known in Alamar and Havana, and also found its way into other parts of Cuba and beyond as an "underground" disc, *Alamar Express* was largely ignored by official media organs. OMNI also produced *Vegas Town*, a book/CD

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<sup>353</sup> Depestre 22.

<sup>354</sup> Norge Espinosa, "Alamar, ¿a qué suena?," *La Gaceta de Cuba*, (January-February 2007), pp. 4-5, cited in Poesía Sin Fin blog: <http://www.omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/>

<sup>355</sup> Among those appearing on the CD are Juan Carlos Flores, Grisel Echevarría, Edwin Reyes Zamora, Yohanna Depestre Corcho, and Leonardo Guevara Navarro (all had belonged to Zona Franca); Jesus Miguel Roura and Livio Conesa (from Quijote and ArteNativa); Rodolfo Rensoli, Balesy Rivero and Yasser Castellanos (all of Grupo Uno), artist Tania Bruguera, poets Virgomal and Yordanka Almaguer, and several members of OMNI Zona Franca (Amaury Pacheco, Luis Eligio Pérez, Rene Cervantes Debrán, David Escalona Carrillo, Jorge Carlos Acevedo, and Raymundo Fernández Moya). Producers include Alberto Virella, Adolfo Cabrera (Fito) and Jorge Pérez (Yoyi) and Nilo Julián González. Graffiti artist Tagles Heredia Lemus and poet Antonio Salvador participated in production and design. Many others worked on background vocals, sound engineering and editing, as musicians on various tracks, photographers, etc.

of poetry by Juan Carlos Flores in 2007, and the music CDs *La Rueda* (2009) and *Free Hop* (2011) by David D Omni (David Escalona).

OMNI ZonaFranca has also begun to employ social media<sup>356</sup> in recent years, starting a blog in October 2009 to publicize *Poesía Sin Fin* and provide documentation from prior editions.<sup>357</sup> When the 2009 *Poesía Sin Fin* was closed down by authorities, OMNI immediately posted information about what had happened and how they were responding. The blog announced information on new venues for events that had been scheduled for the Galería Fayad Jamís, provided information to the outside world about the censorship of the festival, and asked for support. Updated on a regular basis, it contains texts, photos, videos, publicity documents, writings, poetry, and art works, along with blog posts on news and events of interest. OMNI also has taken advantage of other digital mass media/social media, creating a FaceBook page and maintaining two YouTube channels with videos documenting performances, events, and actions (such as graffiti painting, interviews) and original music videos, including those produced by other groups, especially alternative Cuban rap music.<sup>358</sup>

Many of the videos produced by OMNI are edited versions of particular performances. Others are produced as original video works, for example, the video based on the poem *Los Estatutos del Hombre* by

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<sup>356</sup> Internet access is highly restricted in Cuba. The cost of Internet service is eight to ten dollars per hour, available in hotels (the most common way to upload videos or blog posts at present). There are also underground services available for three dollars per hour but the connections are extremely slow. Internet service offered by the government costs six dollars per hour and the connection is slow (same as the clandestine services'). In June of 2012 the government announced that Internet would be available to ordinary Cuban but as of early 2013, nothing has been announced.

<sup>357</sup> The blog can be accessed at <http://www.omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/>

<sup>358</sup> YouTube channels "omnizonafranca" and "omnizonafranca2." Videos of the *Garabato* pilgrimage and *Hay Que Luchar* are available, among others. See References.

Brazilian poet Thiago de Mello. OMNI also produces original video works with other artists. An example is the collaborative video *iProtesto!*, produced in October 2010 by OMNI and screened at the 2010 edition of Poesía Sin Fin with the participation of over twenty five musicians, poets and rappers (most but not all from Cuba).<sup>359</sup>

The extensive self-documentation of OMNI's performances, notable for its thoroughness as well as its spectacle, has an obvious value in preserving ephemeral, one-time performances. The act of documentation prioritizes creation of an archive –an important project – but sometimes registers as a distancing mechanism for the live viewer. The performative act of recording (often with multiple cameras close to the performers) at times blocks parts of the performance from the live audience, frustrating the viewer. At the same time, the videotaping becomes a theatrical aspect of the performances themselves. Further, the public gathering of video “evidence” not only signals the potential to publicize the work to the outside world, it may also be read as a preemptive action intended to protect themselves against the harshest actions on the part of the state.

## **II. Influences: Aesthetics, Materials, Philosophies, and African Diasporic Presences**

The processes that the members of OMNI have integrated have been directed toward twin objectives, to work within the community and to engage in a process of spiritual and humanistic development. The individual members of OMNI have had an exceptionally diverse and broad range of influences throughout their collaborative history. A

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<sup>359</sup>*iProtesto!* YouTube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wQtTVofoAE>.

critical component of the group's evolution grew out of the desire and the effort to connect to the broader world: "We began to meet people who came from Chicago, with the experience of poetry slams and spoken word that influenced us and opened us up in terms of spirituality and human contact...and of course we were in contact with the previous experience of Alamar, Quijote, Artenativa; we were linking ourselves to them."<sup>360</sup>

Other artists and collectives have also served as a source of inspiration. Fito Cabrera (one of the sculptors in the Casa de Cultura who was a founding member of OMNI and then OMNI Zona Franca,<sup>5</sup> mentions ArteCalle, "but also *Volumen Uno* because it seemed they were a deeply conscientious group of artists... one didn't view their actions as something separate or sectioned off...We were also influenced by GrupoUno, which brought together designers, rappers, etc."<sup>361</sup> In addition to ArteCalle and the Alamar collectives of the 1980s and 1990s, the collectives DIP and Enema (see Chapter 1) also provided inspiration and examples of artistic intervention in the public sphere. Through visits from foreigners and the materials they brought, the group became aware of movements and artists whose sensibilities and aims were compatible with theirs: "Slowly we gained experience and an exposure to things internationally...We saw videos from rap groups in the U.S., and groups from Finland, or Ecuador..."<sup>362</sup> They were also familiar with Latin American traditions of performance art from recent decades and saw parallels in the characteristics of quickness, ephemerality (harder to censor), and requiring few material resources. Among contemporary

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<sup>360</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 5-6.

<sup>361</sup> Cabrera (Appendix A, Interview 1) 5.

<sup>362</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 5-6.

groups with whom OMNI shares an affinity are Banderlux from Mexico and Al Márgen from Nicaragua.

In addition, OMNI Zona Franca's aesthetic recalls the Arte Povera movement or an aesthetic of recycling. However, the group has generally had little choice in terms of materials, relying on those that have been found, scavenged, and re-purposed. The group's graffiti practice can also be described partly in terms of these conditions. Fito Cabrera noted that though this way of working refers to an aesthetic of '*reciclaje*' (recycling) it's also a necessity.

The impact of the Special Period on aesthetics, including both form and materials, was dramatic. It was seen clearly in the work of ArteNativa for example, and in the ensuing years these dire material conditions defined the possibilities for OMNI Zona Franca's production as well. The scarcity was a subject matter as well as a powerful shaper of form and aesthetic. For example, in the first and second *Poesía Sin Fin* openings, the group decided to create "environmental" sculptures made of discarded materials pulled from the rubbish piles in the streets of Alamar.

Fito Cabrera of OMNI recalls "what characterized almost all the groups from Alamar was a manner of working that is like Arte Povera. There was no attempt to refine or polish something. More important was the process, an ongoing process that favors experimentation, such as the CD *Alamar Express* or events like *Poesía Sin Fin*."<sup>363</sup> Nonetheless, Cabrera's statement points to the freedom to experiment and create different types of art that was inspired in part by the scarcity of

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<sup>363</sup> Cabrera (Appendix A, Interview 1) 5.

materials. OMNI works with discarded objects out of necessity but also uses these materials to make visible to their audience the reality of most ordinary Cubans. These scarcities also played a role in the decision to go out into the street to perform; one material always at the disposal of the artists was their own bodies.

### **African Presences**

African and African diasporic presences are central to the artistic practices of OMNI Zona Franca. Each member of the group has brought a distinct set of experiences in relation to African cultural elements and incorporated these in their own way. These are not monolithic or fixed, but fluid and in a constant process of transformation. Varied diasporic elements and connections flow into and from OMNI Zona Franca's work, drawn from African, Afro-Cuban, African American, and Caribbean cultural and aesthetic traditions and practices. Specific modes include traditions of African orality and performativity, Afro-Cuban religion, and hip hop culture. The diasporic African presence is a fluid, multi-directional set of practices and histories that cross boundaries freely and mutate as they incorporate new nodes of shared experience and expression.

Luis Eligio Pérez comments, "In Cuba the African heritage is mixed (*mezclado*); Africa has entered Cuba also via Haiti, and is also mixed with Spiritism, French influences, Judaism, Catholicism, Evangelical religions, *all* from the outside. Afro-Cuban religion has assimilated all of these traditions because they are compatible with its

magic.”<sup>364</sup> According to Pacheco, the streets of Colón (where he grew up) were full of Yoruba ritual: “Every day people were performing divinations in the street, there were oracles everywhere. It was very common, a part of life, natural. Once I moved to Havana, I rediscovered this African ritual.”<sup>365</sup> David Escalona, the youngest member of OMNI ZonaFranca, sought out African connections and traditions on his own: “My first contact with Africa was through American hip hop and African American music. My parents were atheists and communists and I didn’t grow up with any African culture in my house. My second contact with Africa was via reggae music.”<sup>366</sup>

The members of OMNI ZonaFranca are profoundly connected to the performativity of the Yoruba religion as well as to African oral traditions, whether this is manifested through a performance of ritual sacrifice or going out in public with painted faces and making people laugh. Amaury Pacheco insists, “All people have orality, this is our premise...The poet needs to prepare not only his intellect but his body, as in African traditions and the *griots* - or the Greek rhapsodies.”<sup>367</sup>

OMNI has integrated a range of transcultural diasporic elements into its work, incorporating forms that have emerged out of the struggles and cultural and spiritual traditions of African descended peoples, and interpreted over time throughout the Americas. In the contemporary context this refers to the movement of spoken word and poetry slams, and hip hop culture (especially music and graffiti). The diasporic aesthetics of OMNI encompass African, Afro-Cuban, African American,

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<sup>364</sup> Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012,

<sup>365</sup> Pacheco, interview, March 29, 2012.

<sup>366</sup> David Escalona, interview, March 29, 2012.

<sup>367</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 7.

and Caribbean cultural and visual elements, for example Yoruba beads, body painting, ritual cross dressing, dreadlocks, and aspects of presentation including sounds and rhythms, orality, styles of movement and performance, in addition to the hip hop and Yoruba and Afro-Cuban aesthetic expressed through plastic art in OMNI's graffiti, paintings, and installations.

The integration of African belief systems for OMNI extends beyond aesthetics, form, and ritual, to the core of the group's philosophy of art, which contrasts with a Western formalist aesthetic.<sup>368</sup> Amaury Pacheco explains: "Sometimes the art world's vision is very closed, but in the way that the African participates in art, or that the indigenous person participates in his art and experience, we are searching for this cosmovision."<sup>369</sup>

## **The Hip Hop Movement**

OMNI's early collaboration with the members of GrupoUno, the organizers and promoters of the first rap festival in Cuba, played an important formative role both in terms of their development artistically but also is emblematic of the kinds of collaborations that have characterized OMNI's mode of working for the past 15 years. As noted

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<sup>368</sup> When the collective was censored in 2009 at the start of the annual *Poesía Sin Fin* festival and expelled from their space in the Casa de Cultura (to be discussed later in this chapter), the festival was forced to move underground into private spaces. Group members used their own homes to host the festival events, naming them after Afro-Cuban places of worship.<sup>368</sup> For example, David Escalona's home became the Casa Templo Omnibus and Nilo González's home became the Casa Templo OMNI del Arte Cubano. Says Escalona, "It's a temple of art, mixed with African, the spiritual, everything," reflecting that everything OMNI does is imbued with various forms of spirituality, often from African traditions.

<sup>369</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 7.



earlier, OMNI and several members of the poetry group Zona Franca joined together in 1997, but they had begun informal collaborations from the time the members of both groups met. Similarly, the members of GrupoUno, the organizers of the Rap Festival that began in 1995, were part of the larger creative collaborative community of Alamar during this period. A multi- and interdisciplinary flow between various groups of alternative cultural producers – from Quijote to ArteNativa and GrupoUno to Zona Franca and then OMNI Zona Franca, all of whom worked on one another’s projects and participated in each other’s festivals in integral ways – has been a hallmark of alternativity in Alamar.

The hip hop movement in Alamar and the rap festival provided a continual source of inspiration for the members of OMNI. “We have always collaborated with hip hop artists, the Rap Festival. We started by painting the sets. Next we did the walls of the amphitheater, then the façade, next the sidewalk, then the street, then buildings. It was interesting how we began inside and then began moving further and further outside, into the city itself... Hip hop was really inspiring as a culture. It’s a multidisciplinary culture and the closest thing to what we’re about that we’ve found.”<sup>370</sup>

Pacheco attributes to rap a vital position in contemporary Cuban poetry: “Hip hop made people talk, saying what they felt...The spaces of hip hop allowed people to discover themselves. Rap for us is the vanguard of orality in Cuban poetry today. This is the new protest song.”<sup>371</sup> He acknowledges the role of the festival in OMNI’s

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<sup>370</sup> Pérez (Appendix A, Interview 6) 26.

<sup>371</sup> Quoted in Sánchez 8.

development as public artists: “The Rap Festival gave us strength. To recite poetry in front of three thousand people.” Having both a cultural and an economic impact, the rap movement paved the way for a limited independent form of cultural production in Cuba, a critical move for alternative or underground music projects: “Another thing the hip hop movement created were these studios, homes where you could record, for a fee. And these recordings compete with those of Egrem (the state music enterprise of Cuba) and this also created another type of realization that you don’t have to necessarily belong to a state enterprise.<sup>372</sup>

Rodolfo Rensoli was the founder and organizer/promoter of GrupoUno and the *Festival Nacional de Hip Hop Cubano*, along with Valexis (Balesy) Rivero Nordet, Artistic Director of the festival. GrupoUno organized the first rap festival in the East Havana neighborhood of Guiteras in 1995. In subsequent years it was held in the amphitheater in Alamar. At the 6<sup>th</sup> annual *Festival de Rap Alamar* in 2000, along with Cuban rappers, members of OMNI performed spoken word (Luis Eligio and Amaury). Rap groups from the United States also performed; dead prez, Tony Touch, Talib Kweli and Mos Def<sup>373</sup>. In addition, U.S.-based efforts by the Black August Collective in New York City and the Mercury above Jazz venue in Austin, Texas raised funds for equipment to be donated via GrupoUno to rappers in Cuba.<sup>374</sup>

In 2000, control of the rap festival was taken away from GrupoUno and taken over by the state-sponsored Asociación Hermanos

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<sup>372</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 5, and Pacheco 4 (Interview 4).

<sup>373</sup> Now known as Yasiin Bey.

<sup>374</sup> See “Festival Nacional de Rap Cubano 2000, 6<sup>th</sup> edition,” AfroCubaWeb, (Feb. 24, 2007) <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/rap/blackaugust99.html>.

Saíz. As noted earlier, repeating what had become a familiar pattern of government support followed by co-optation by cultural authorities of any “alternative” cultural movement, the state effectively co-opted the rap festival and Rensoli and many others who had worked as the founders of the festival were forced to step away from organizing the festival.<sup>375</sup> The formation of the Agencia Cubana del Rap (Cuban Rap Agency) in 2003 marginalized even further the emerging movement of critical and race-conscious rap in favor of professionalizing and commercializing the genre. “Many of those who control promotion in the media don’t want to listen to what we’re saying. They know it has value but our direct and rebellious form of expressing ourselves is shocking to them,” according to Sekou Umoja of the group Anónimo Consejo.<sup>376</sup>

Members of OMNI explained that American hip hop came to Cuba and Cubans began copying it but immediately fused it with the best of Cuban musical traditions and ideas. This initial cohort of rappers assumed a civil discourse of social criticism and political questioning that in a relatively short time mobilized cultural authorities to create the Cuban Rap Agency. Members of OMNI concurred on the intentions of the state: “The creation of this entity was born out of the politics of official institutions with the intention to assimilate and manage this form of alternativity.”<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Another well-known example is the closure in 2003 of the Patio de María, at the Casa de Cultura Roberto Branley in the el Cerro neighborhood of Havana, where director Maria Gattorno invited rock musicians and *frikis* to perform and which also grew into a larger movement with poetry, art and theatre workshops. Another key example is the expulsion of OMNI Zona Franca from the Alamar Casa de Cultura in December of 2009. A more recent example is the takeover by the government in 2011 of the *Rotilla* alternative music festival. For further discussion of these events, see Chs. 4 and 5.

<sup>376</sup> Dalia Acosta, “Cuba-Musica: Hip hop persiste al margen,” *Voces*, March 15 (2007) 1.  
<sup>377</sup> Quoted in Sánchez, 8.

## **Spirituality**

*“I was looking for a light in my life and the only place I found it was here.”*<sup>378</sup> (David Escalona)

Religious beliefs and spirituality in OMNI’s collaborative practice serve multiple purposes. The array of spiritual traditions that individual members incorporate into the group’s process and dynamic can be characterized as a bricolage of belief systems shared within the collective setting, with Eastern and esoteric mystical practices alongside African and Christian religious traditions. OMNI-ZonaFranca’s members have engaged in individual spiritual and philosophical explorations that have served multiple purposes within the group. Perhaps one of the most vital roles spirituality has played is in providing methods for maintaining mental stability or balance under extremely stressful living conditions. The group’s meditation practice has been central to maintaining its unity, and OMNI has shared this practice with its neighbors in Alamar to help them cope with daily struggles. Early in their collaboration, OMNI actively engaged with the issue of the group dynamic to build unity and avoid falling prey to conflicts that lead groups to dissolve. Amaury Pacheco explains, “I’d had experiences in Havana with groups; they always fragmented due to conflict and egos and envy. It occurred to me that meditation could introduce an interior space where one could see oneself with more clarity and permit a collective expansion.”<sup>379</sup>

In the early years of the collaboration, meditation and other healing practices as well as religious explorations led the artists to find

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<sup>378</sup> David Escalona, Interview, February 21, 2007.

<sup>379</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 4.

their individual paths and helped the group to coalesce. By the second half of the 2000s, the collective had begun to explicitly articulate the connection between their spiritual and artistic practices and the social and public sphere. In some cases, members of OMNI used religious ritual as an art form in order to express ideas that might be interpreted by the state as political in another context in order to avoid censorship. For Nilo González, who has done performances using Afro-Cuban ritual elements, “I arrived at this way of working with religious process through searching for social spaces in a way that avoids the police getting involved or institutions making noise, and without being arrested.”<sup>380</sup>

OMNI’s vision statement from 2010 expresses a philosophy that combines the group’s foci on spirituality and civic participation. The section titled “Meditation and Nation” states the intention:

To show meditation as an inner form of art, a transcendent method for spiritual development of mankind and for the awakening and practical knowledge of the soul: to propose that the soul is the possible and recognizable universal nation within each human being in an immediate form. Real space for creation. A space which makes room for a possible existence in a civilian system which doesn’t recognize the inner freedom of the individual. All this will be done through art in an explicit form as part of our purpose.<sup>381</sup>

Describing a vision that evolved over the period of a decade, this excerpt indicates a spiritual commitment that is explicitly linked to a social and civic aim, reflected in the reference to a restrictive state apparatus and OMNI’s stated intention to open up spaces in the civic sphere through their art. This objective is at the heart of OMNI’s work as a collective.

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<sup>380</sup> Nilo González, Interview, February 24, 2007 (Appendix A, Interview 3) 2.

<sup>381</sup> Excerpt from *Vision OMNI-Zona Franca 2009-2010*.

## Community Service

OMNI Zona Franca's experience as a collective has been shaped by its desire to engage in a broadly defined community service, to offer artistic training, to create a dialogue with the local community, and to share the group's own explorations of meditation and spiritual practices, which over time were translated into a collective practice. OMNI's collective statement declares: "We are a group of social-communitarian action. Art is the tool through which we communicate and project ourselves. Social and existential reality together with human creative possibilities constitute the primary material of our works."<sup>382</sup>

In separate interviews, the members of OMNI expressed a similar intention regarding service. Adolfo Cabrera (Fito) recalls the formative years of the group: "We didn't know how it was going to happen but we knew that we had a clear intention to do social work, not to try to show in galleries and museums, but to create a public – who are the same people as us – and slowly we have tried to build and maintain this interchange."<sup>383</sup> Nilo González maintains that from the beginning, "...Our vocation always was a social vocation, directed toward social spaces. And there is a general internal consensus among us that we intervene in social space, we are social and community workers (*trabajadores socio-comunitarios*)."<sup>384</sup>

Soon after OMNI had set up their space under the auspices of the Fayad Jamís gallery, they opened their doors to community. Following the concept of their work as social and community service, they gave free

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<sup>382</sup>*Vision OMNI Zona-Franca 2009-2010.*

<sup>383</sup> Cabrera (Appendix A, Interview 1) 3.

<sup>384</sup> González (Appendix A, Interview 3) 6.

classes in drawing, painting, ceramics, and sculpture. They conducted meditation and self-healing workshops on a regular basis for neighbors and anyone who showed up. Despite the limited options for institutional support and venues for their work, OMNI organized and coordinated a number of different types of spaces in different forms with the idea they would have “equal capacity to assimilate content, open to the interaction of living cultural elements of the everyday within the community.” These various spaces have included the institutional space of the Galería Fayad Jamís; the quasi-institutional Taller OMNI Zona Franca; and the Galería Abierta, an alternative and independent community space.<sup>385</sup> These are in addition to public spaces such as garages, building steps, passageways, and streets.

The workshop or *taller* was open not only during the day but also at night. Amaury Pacheco, Luis Eligio Pérez, and Nilo González all lived in the space for periods, and so it became a gathering place; people could travel from anywhere and arrive at any hour and certain to find members of the group there. “We created alternative spaces in the workshop. We started to create a place where people could come and talk with us because we were trying also to make connections...to create spaces of dialogue. The first space of dialogue we made was between ourselves and the people who came.”<sup>386</sup>

Fito Cabrera talked about the group’s desire to work for the community, making a critical observation about the group’s vision to develop in an autonomous fashion. In a system that does not allow

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<sup>385</sup> Galería Abierta/Garaje 19, the autonomous space created in 2002, served as the studio and exhibition/performance space for the group after they were censored in the Galería Fayad Jamís. The space also was used as a community social space and civic meeting place. Since December 2009, the group’s spaces have also included private houses.

<sup>386</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 4.

independent activity outside of the state's institutions, to envision the possibility of an autonomous way of working and then to pursue this goal for years with unflagging determination is a characteristic that has made OMNI distinctive. In 2007, Cabrera explained:

I've been searching for a place like this in Havana for a long time, like many others, and it didn't exist. All these places are closed, they have their strict rules; they don't encourage the malleability that allows for things to mix. This has made us conscious of how to realize things with autonomy, with a spirit of participation but also with a genuine autonomy... We have accomplishments here; we're in an institution but with an autonomy and a spirit of cooperation. It's not that we're paid and give workshops and there's an official plan; it's that we ourselves are attempting to be mediators for the needs of the people who come to us.<sup>387</sup>

It is rare for any group in Revolutionary Cuba to have achieved a degree of genuine autonomy (however limited) within an institutional context, and the extent to which they achieved this sets OMNI apart from other artists and cultural producers.

### **Performativity and Public Image**

The fact that the group's studio was open to any curious passer-by or visitor created a dialogue between the artists and their neighbors in Alamar. Toward this end, Pacheco, who belonged to both Zona Franca and OMNI, introduced the idea of performance to his fellow sculptors as a way of moving poetry out into the space of the street. Pacheco relates "Orality is what entered through OMNI...together with the plastic arts, and then performance appeared as an important identity for the mobility we were trying to achieve... And the need was created to go outside of the space and recite poetry because where there is orality, there is the body.

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<sup>387</sup> Fito Cabrera (Appendix A, Interview 1) 8-9.



And the body undeniably installs itself in space. So we started to engage in a practice of poetry in action.”<sup>388</sup> In this way, the members of the group emerged from the studio and began to engage with the people of Alamar directly and publicly through poetry and performance.

Though it was an artistic choice to perform poetry in the street there was also a pragmatic issue. Luis Eligio Pérez points out that they were excluded from the official cultural circuits of Havana: “As we didn’t belong to the official spaces of the city where all the intellectual poets met or were invited to do reading, and we were totally unknown, we had to settle for doing poetry here in the streets of Alamar.”<sup>389</sup>

OMNI felt compelled to respond to their own experiences and those of their families, neighbors, and ordinary Cubans, and they did so with the means they had at their disposal, their own bodies and a desire to interact and create. Pacheco refers to the performative condition that arose from the severe economic deprivation ordinary Cubans suffered during the 1990s: ‘I think the OMNI-ZONAFRANCA experience is marked by the 90s, in which the Cubans took to the streets to survive...and that was the performative condition, and this made us address the street from poetry. We had the experience of Hip Hop, and that gave us momentum: everyone took to the streets to hawk their goods, to sell, and in this we found poetry.’<sup>390</sup>

Public display of any kind in Cuba is subject to ideological scrutiny, religious display included (see Ch. 2 on the history of Afro-Cuban religious strictures and outlawing of practices in addition to the

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<sup>388</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 3.

<sup>389</sup> Pérez (Appendix A, Interview 6) 4.

<sup>390</sup> Amaury Pacheco, quoted in Depestre, 23.

Revolutionary ban on all religions until 1992). This, combined with discrimination against dark skinned/African descended Cubans on a broader societal level, has resulted in a politicization of Africanness itself (which many Cubans have chosen to emphasize, especially since the onset of the Special Period, through visible displays of blackness, Afro-Cuban religious symbols, dreadlocks, and other symbols).

One of the most commented-on aspects of OMNI's aesthetic is precisely their manner of dress and public presentation. Amaury Pacheco and David Escalona regularly wear skirts and women's clothing. (Fig. 4.26) Both wear dreadlocks. Pérez often wraps his head in a turban and Pacheco in the past year has been wearing a cooking pot on his head emblazoned with the words "This is not a pot" on one side and "Eso no es una cazuela" on the other. (Fig. 4.27)



Fig. 4.26 Pacheco (left) and Escalona (right) in typical attire.



Fig. 4.27 Pacheco in performance, wearing his “not a pot.”

The Caballero de Paris, a legendary street person who lived in Havana in the 1950s and early 1960s, serves as an important figure for OMNI. The Caballero kept a long beard and dressed in a heavy black coat or cape regardless of the temperature. He spent his days discussing philosophy, religion, politics, and current events with the people he met on the streets and was a well-known figure in Havana. He is mentioned often by members of OMNI as an inspiration in terms of public presentation and address. Partly in reference to the Caballero, Pacheco began to wear a *gabán*, the traditional long Russian coat, in the heat of Havana, every day. The Russian symbolism was significant and Pacheco’s mode of dressing also made reference to transformative Yoruba ritual as he began to wear skirts and long tunics. “With performance in the street I put on a dress to make people laugh. The more people laugh, the better. This is an African ritual of self-protection. Each ritual is designed to address and resolve a particular problem.”

David Escalona also embraces this form of cross-dressing: “Dressing strangely is a Yoruba tradition. People don’t know what to make of you and keep their distance; it’s a form of protection.”<sup>391</sup> Referring to African and Afro-Cuban traditions, Pacheco says “when you don the mask you become the saint, and it is in this way that I wear the skirt.”<sup>392</sup> This principle is also at play when Pacheco wears the *gabán*.<sup>393</sup> This mode of performance is directly connected to Eshu (to whom OMNI often refer), the Yoruba deity who plays the role of mediator-fool.<sup>394</sup> These practices are meant to make people laugh, to attract attention, and cajole the audience into interacting while simultaneously throwing the spectator off balance.

Also inspired in part by the Caballero, the Yoruba or Afro-Cuban ritual of donning masks and becoming a spirit is incorporated into OMNI’s performances in the street, sometimes under cover of what the public may perceive as, or understand to be enacted as, insanity (*locura*). The pretense of insanity allows OMNI to perform freely and permits the public in the street to watch with equal freedom. “Crazy people are allowed a freedom of expression, an oblique expression at the margins. They allow me this expression.”<sup>395</sup>

There is an additional element at play for Pacheco in his cross-dressing; he explains that his way of dressing represents gender fluidity,

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<sup>391</sup> The god Changó, for example, who is syncretized with Saint Barbara, appears in women’s clothing in one of his forms.

<sup>392</sup> Pacheco, interview, March 29, 2012.

<sup>393</sup> The Nigerian male clowns often appear in absurd dress, making satirical comments on contemporary society. Baba Suwe, one of the most popular, is known for dressing out of season, always appearing in a turtleneck sweater, regardless of weather or the occasion. See Durotoye Adeleke, “The Yoruba Fool Insignia: Beyond the Shakespearean Tradition,” *Journal of Social Science*, 21:2 (2009): 113.

<sup>394</sup> The Yoruba modern theater in Nigeria features several popular clown-fools in this tradition. Durotoye Adeleke argues that the Yoruba fool’s costume, which is primarily meant for clowning purpose, “is also capable of generating of other socio-cultural and serious aesthetic significations and making satirical comments on society.” Adeleke 114.

<sup>395</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 4) 15.

“una manera de jugando con genero,” (a way of playing with gender). His appearance represents a deliberate projection or manifestation of ambiguity, questioning, and acknowledging the dual presence of male and female elements. Cross-dressing is an aesthetic and social act and also a spiritual act. These rituals enact the transformative power of Yoruba religious practices for the collective. Amaury affirms, “For me the Yoruba offers a sacred meaning (*sentido sagrado*) to contemporary art, not just aesthetically but it gives it a more sacred character (*“desempeño mas sagrado”*), and this is what permits the connection with life.”<sup>396</sup>

The combination of cross-gender dressing and adoption of symbols of African diasporic cultures simultaneously attract attention and create distance. The overall effect when people encounter OMNI in the street is often puzzlement, laughter, and sometimes a hostility that is triggered by the collective’s disregard for an enforced conformity that Cubans seldom challenge. “At first we had a very aggressive image but nowadays they call out in greeting “Rasta!” or Bin Laden!, but they don’t know what to make of us. ‘Estan locos,’ they say, or they refer to the Cabellero de Paris.”<sup>397</sup>

OMNI’s incorporation of African aesthetics and philosophies (as reflected through religious ritual, storytelling, orality and performativity) also extends to diasporic cultural (and religious) expressions such as Rastafarianism from Jamaica and African American presences that are consciously employed to make visible “signs” of blackness in terms of heritage but also style. These include dreadlocked

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<sup>396</sup> Pacheco, interview, March 29, 2012.

<sup>397</sup> Luis Eligio Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012.

hair, the use of images and language of the U.S civil rights movement (especially Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.), references to U.S. rap (especially certain socially conscious rappers from the 1980s and 1990s such as Mos Def, Common, the duo dead prez), and Chicago slam poets such as Regie Gibson.

Armando Chaguaceda, a historian and political science researcher, recounts his first encounter with OMNI in Alamar several years before:

...I couldn't quite figure them out. In my mind – trained by the rigors of academia, contemplative art and traditional Party activism – they seemed half-crazy...these 'black hippies' dressed in tunics, skirts and sometimes turbans or construction helmets. These were the folks who stopped traffic...with their irreverent performances...with their meditations inside that multicolored home/workshop... 'They look strange,' said an old neighbor. 'In fact, they are strange,' added her niece, a community activist, 'but they do things here for the youth...who don't have anything to do – only sex, reggaeton, and rum.'<sup>398</sup>

Once people become familiar with members of the group and engage in conversation with them, the tenor of the encounters often shifts from distrust to curiosity and interest. As indicated in the quote above, over time, the people of Alamar have come to accept and in many cases support OMNI. Many young people have participated in OMNI's workshops and events, and during my time in Alamar, many residents expressed a sense of pride that OMNI has brought the biennial and many foreign visitors to their municipality.

## **Race**

OMNI Zona Franca formed in the midst of the Special Period, a time during which racial inequalities were exacerbated by economic and

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<sup>398</sup> Armando Chaguaceda, "La OMNIpotencia de Amor," *Poesía Sin Fin* blog, Dec. 14, 2009, [http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/2009\\_12\\_16\\_archive.html](http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/2009_12_16_archive.html).

social changes that favored white and light-skinned Cubans. By the time the Special Period was underway, the racial dynamic was becoming increasingly problematic and visible.<sup>399</sup> Yet a public discourse on the topic of socio-economic inequalities based on race and the subject of racism in contemporary Cuba was not allowed. The Anthropology Center in Havana had initially proposed to initiate a project researching contemporary race relations in 1989 but was denied permission. No such project was allowed to begin until 1993, and when the research did finally commence, it was under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture's general project dedicated to the study of contemporary Cuban culture.<sup>400</sup>

OMNI's work has taken on the topic of race in varied ways, in its expansive message of tolerance, and its embrace of hip hop and Yoruba and Afro-Cuban culture. Commentary on race is present in OMNI's poetry, performances and texts. Former member of the collective Rene Cervantes Debrán commented, "here the government has stated we are all equal but in television there are no opportunities for a black person, and many places where one can earn money you rarely see a black person. In place with the greatest economic access it's rare to see a black."<sup>401</sup>

Nilo González explains:

We are aware that race is a serious problem in Cuba. Why? Suddenly there are no blacks entering Cuba but whites continue to enter. Second, the Revolution decreed by law that there is equality of race, gender, the right to education, for blacks and whites. But this is a decree, a banner up in the sky. Down here below in my house, blacks go to one side and whites go to the other side and neither side understands each other. And there is tremendous racism....I'm one who would like to do work

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<sup>399</sup> Nadine Fernandez, 117.

<sup>400</sup> Fernandez 128.

<sup>401</sup> Rene Cervantes, interview, February 23, 2007.

specifically aimed at recovering certain values of the black in Cuba and I do this through my work.<sup>402</sup>

Luis Eligio Pérez directly addresses racism in his poem *No Sneak, No Rat/ Poema Nación*(No Sneak, No Rat/ Nation Poem)<sup>403</sup> written partly in response to an encounter in a Havana park with Cuban “Marielitos” (Refugees of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, most of whom were black) who had been returned to Cuba after allegedly committing crimes in the United States. (Fig. 4.28) The title of the poem refers to the code of loyalty among the Marielitos, to not “snitch” or “rat” on one another while they were living in the U.S. The poem makes references to stereotypical images of blacks as filthy, as thieves, homeless, janitors, etc.

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<sup>402</sup> González (Appendix A, Interview 3) 8.

<sup>403</sup> The word “sneak” is meant here as “snitch”, a mistranslation that the poet let stand.





Fig. 4.28 Luis Eligio Pérez, *No Sneak, No Rat*<sup>404</sup>

<sup>404</sup>Partial translation:

<sup>404</sup>Black Cuban. Black sleeps in the street. Blacksteals. Blackcustodian.  
 Blackmicro-builder: Eleventh Floor  
 withoutscaffoldingand the Reventasón  
 below. Smothering: ...dirtydeliciousblackbody

On the printed page, Pérez presents *Poema Nación* against the background of the Cuban flag to honor and acknowledge the role of blacks in Cuba. He asserts, “the Cuban flag is loaded with the history and the blood of black slaves. The ‘industry’ that built the nation was the backs and the blood of blacks.”<sup>405</sup>

Pacheco spoke about the efforts of OMNI toward breaking barriers. When asked about the identity of the group and whether they consider themselves a “black” group (I referred back to the responses I got from members of OMNI in 2007 in which some members rejected a racially identified group identity) Pacheco responded that though they are fighting against racism and stereotypes, and though most members of the group are considered black or “mulatto” in the Cuban racial spectrum, OMNI is working toward advancement and enlightenment of all human beings, and seeks also to address other concerns such as the environment, non-violence, and machismo.<sup>406</sup> However, in their poetry, performance and association with socially conscious rappers, OMNI has not shied away from the topic of racial discrimination and the persistence of racism in Cuban society.

The suppression of racial discourse in the state sphere (especially discussions of racism in Revolutionary Cuba) that continued into the 1990s discouraged such discussion because assertion of racial identity was considered potentially divisive (See Chs. 1 and 2). This void in the public discourse about race on the island during most of the Revolutionary period has been accompanied by limited access to

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<sup>405</sup> Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012.

<sup>406</sup> Pacheco, personal communication, December 20, 2010.

information.<sup>407</sup> For example, conversations with members of OMNI revealed that they knew little about the civil rights or the Black Power movements in the United States despite the presence of prominent Black Panther leaders in Cuba during the 1960s, or indeed, their continued presence in Cuba.<sup>408</sup> When I interviewed OMNI member Rene Cervantes Debrán and asked how Black Power and the visit of Angela Davis affected black Cubans, he laughed and reminded me that he wasn't even born yet and had very little knowledge of that period. Pacheco had just recently read the Autobiography of Malcolm X. (It should be noted that most of the members of the group were born in the 1960s and 1970s.)

Despite the lack of information about Cuba's history of race (including pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary periods), members of OMNI have undertaken a conscious effort to educate themselves, influenced in part by relationships formed with international artists (for example Brazilian and U.S. based rappers and poets). In recent years OMNI has become more aware of past and present racial movements outside of Cuba as well as simultaneously discovering the history of black Cubans. The members of the group have undertaken both collective and individual journeys as they navigate racial identity within a larger social complex and as an element to be considered in their artistic practice. Therefore, statements during the seven-year period in which I have done research with OMNI reflect different – and

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<sup>407</sup> An energetic debate among Cubans (most of them outside of Cuba) that arose on Facebook after the Cuba segment of the 2011 U.S. public television series "Black in Latin America" as well as a more contentious discussion in the wake of the *Queloides* exhibition of 2010 and 2011 (shown in Havana, Pittsburgh, and later in New York), reflects the simultaneous lack of sufficient forums for this debate and the need for such forums.

<sup>408</sup> Former Black Panther Assata Shakur lives in Cuba, as does the African American exile Nehanda Abiodun, who has supported, and been an important influence for, many young rappers in Cuba.

sometimes contradictory - positions vis-à-vis racial identity.

Nonetheless, as expressed through the collective vision that has evolved over recent years, OMNI has sought to transcend essentialist categories in favor of a vision that is at once expansive and inclusive but also one that asks of respect for differences (whether religious, cultural, racial or political).<sup>409</sup>

Within this specific historic and cultural context, I propose that OMNI's project might be considered post-racial, without ever having been explicitly "racial" due to the official omission of information and lack of knowledge about Cuba's history of race.<sup>410</sup> The use of the term "post-racial" here does not constitute an importation of the term as it is commonly evoked in the U.S. Rather, I propose an alternative frame, considered in the specific context of this research, in which post-racial is defined as a theoretical space engaged in producing an environment devoid of racism, discrimination, and prejudice. I suggest that the simultaneity of exposure to asynchronous histories of race described above, absorbed into a conscious process of working toward a vision that does not deny race but aims for a broadly inclusive ideal, produces a condition that can be referred to as post-racial. Within this framework, the racial as both a theoretical construct and inescapable social reality coexists alongside an emerging theoretical post-racial vision. This formulation of the term describes the circumstances under which OMNI

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<sup>409</sup> An energetic debate among Cubans (most of them outside of Cuba) that arose on Facebook after the Cuba segment of the 2011 U.S. public television series "Black in Latin America" as well as a more contentious discussion in the wake of the *Queloides* exhibition of 2010 and 2011 (shown in Havana, Pittsburgh, and later in New York), reflects the simultaneous lack of sufficient forums for this debate and the need for such forums.

<sup>410</sup> The term post-racial emerged in a U.S. context after the election of the first black president. The common use of the term in the U.S. mass media is based on an assertion that discussions of race and racism are no longer relevant in the U.S. I propose an alternative framing of the concept.

has evolved as well as the collective's philosophical and artistic processes and aims.

The official Revolutionary government line on racism holds that it is a vestige of the pre-Revolutionary period and should be seen as a “personal” or family problem rather than a problem of continued structural and institutional racism. A comment made by Luis Eligio Pérez in 2007 demonstrates the persistence of this particular argument: “The issue of race continues to be a psychological problem that results in denial of a particular group the access to good jobs and the equal distribution of goods created by the entire society” (from film *Cuba Performances*). While condemning racism in Cuban society, Pérez nonetheless frames it as a psychological problem, reflecting the Cuban government's long-standing official position.

The rapper Raudel Collazo of Escuadrón Patriota used well-known 1960's film footage from the Alabama civil rights protests in the United States, footage of Malcolm X, Black Panther Stokeley Carmichael, and parts of Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech for the rap song and music video *No Mas Discriminación*, which was presented at the 2010 *Poesía Sin Fin*. The younger generation of black Cubans are becoming familiar with – and linking themselves to – this history of black struggle. According to Pacheco, Raudel Collazo is the first person in Cuba to introduce such a direct and powerful language about race. “It was initially with the rappers here who were influenced by the New York rappers that a black consciousness began to form in the younger generation, and also a consciousness about issues like machismo, domestic violence, the treatment of women.” Pacheco adds that he's not

sure if Cubans are ready for the strong language and discourse of Raudel. He also points out “There are a lot of rappers who still have no consciousness about what they represent and because of this they leave themselves open to be easily manipulated.”<sup>411</sup> (Pacheco is referring here to the state-run Rap Agency.)

In relation to the Afro-Cuban art movement on the island during the 1960s and 1970s, young artists of today who have little reference point and scant information of the older generations such as the artists of Grupo Antillano sometimes devalue the contributions of their predecessors who did not have the opportunities to attend art school or receive formal training in most cases. The perceived lack of sophistication or quality in terms of aesthetics or technical mastery have been used as the basis to disregard the efforts and products of the older generation. As a result, some members of the younger generation of black artists feel as though they are the first ones to deal with the issue of race in Revolutionary times. These reasons suggest in part why critical race discourse in the plastic arts has lagged (with some exceptions) in comparison with the forceful and angry racial language found in socially engaged rap.

### **III. State and Institutional Relations**

A study of OMNI Zona Franca as a cultural phenomenon calls for an understanding of the institutional contexts and governmental structures that frame the environment in which their work is created. The production and reception of OMNI’s work, existing under the

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<sup>411</sup> Jorge Alberto Aguiar Díaz, “Tarde de Concierto,” *Cubanet* (November 11, 2002) 2.

tenuous-at-best support of institutional structures or defiantly outside them altogether, has been (and continues to be) to a large extent shaped by its relationship with the state.

As noted earlier, OMNI and Zona Franca members began informal collaborations in 1997, blended into a joint entity when Zona Franca was expelled from its institutional space in 2001, and united formally into OMNI-ZonaFranca in 2003. The following section outlines the collective's role in and relationship with cultural and other state institutions.

Luis Eligio Pérez explains:

You can't do public performances or make public art freely in Cuba without the permission of an institution in Cuba. You may be an artist from the pueblo but you can't do a performance or show art in the pueblo without the intermediation and permission of a state institution. We thought this was absurd as we were from the pueblo making art with and for the pueblo. So we started to do this directly ourselves in the pueblo. The institutions were not open to us, or the way in which we made art. We immediately started to have problems with the police and state security. The gallery and state security and the Municipio de Cultura started taking measures with respect to our public performances.<sup>412</sup>

OMNI has received sporadic state support in Cuba, but in general, the collective's institutional relationships in Cuba have been fraught and contentious, including those with the "art world" and its institutions in Havana (which are themselves subject to state control and oversight). OMNI has had extremely limited exposure within Havana's official art circuits despite a long career and visibility within the capital's art world. They participated officially in the Havana Biennial of 2006 and in the collateral Biennial event, *Proyecto Circo*, in 2003 and 2006. They have

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<sup>412</sup> Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012.

had a sole exhibit in an “official” gallery (at the Center of Art and Design) in 2009.

In contrast to the marked lack of institutional interest in Cuba, OMNI has successfully forged an array of institutional and informal relationships with artists, cultural producers outside of Cuba. *Alamar Express* and *Todo Incluido*, for example, were produced with the assistance of the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (Spanish Agency for International Cooperation), or AECI, and the Spanish Embassy. Equipment for video and music production came to OMNI via an Italian organization that secured European Union funding.

Of the international network of colleagues and supporters OMNI has cultivated over the past 15 years, many came to Alamar specifically to meet OMNI or because they heard about or first met the group while in Cuba (as I had). It is relevant to mention that it was not a simple matter for people to visit OMNI in Alamar. OMNI (or anyone) intending to invite foreigners to visit was required to request the state’s permission in advance, but eventually OMNI simply began to ignore this rule. “In order to invite foreigners here to Alamar there had to develop activities that gave people reason to come here, for example the hip hop festival that attracted many people, and then, our events. In terms of the rules of institutional spaces, you had to inform them three days in advance if a foreigner was coming, and if it was a North American, one month in advance. So we said no, we’re artists, we’re not controlling anyone. People would just find out what we were doing and they began to come and that was that.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 3.



OMNI's friends and supporters have come from Eastern and Western Europe, throughout Latin America, the United States, the Caribbean, and Canada, and these connections have led to collaborative efforts with cultural producers from Spain, the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Italy, among others. One of the most influential people in helping OMNI gain access to resources and public recognition within the Cuban art world was Alberto Virella, who served as Spain's Consul for Culture and Cooperation to Cuba (Consejero Cultural y de Cooperación, Embajada de España en Cuba) from 2003 to 2006.

When Virella arrived, he had an office and not much else as Spain's cultural space in Havana had just been closed. Wanting to achieve something meaningful during the posting in Cuba, he sought out poets, writers, musicians and artists, and in the process met OMNI. Under the auspices of the Spanish embassy, Virella dedicated himself to incubating a range of artistic projects, including exhibitions, production of CDs, a website, and publications, also providing technical and financial support making it possible for artists to produce work. Virella and his wife Carmen opened their home to artists, hosting exhibitions and openings in a visible form of official support that also created a sense of community for Havana's artists, curators, and art professionals. The consul supported projects that were considered controversial or risky, and according to Virella's own account, he sometimes had to "take the heat."<sup>414</sup>

Through his official support as a representative of the Spanish embassy Virella was able to fund and exhibit work that would not

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<sup>414</sup> Alberto Virella, interview, March 11, 2007.

otherwise have had support or a venue (as was the case in the Biennial performance of OMNI in 2006 in Alamar's market). With Virella's support, OMNI was able to complete production of *Alamar Express*, a fusion of alternative music, poetry, experimental sound, and narrative from the streets of Alamar. The CD was passed from hand to hand and found an underground following across the island.

Another foreign collaborator who has worked with OMNI is Lucrezia Cippitelli from Italy. Cippitelli met OMNI while researching a dissertation on the Havana Biennial and worked to bring financial and technical support to OMNI and collaborate on curatorial projects. One such effort was the Alamar Express Lab from 2006-2007, a joint project with OMNI and Associazione Culturale Inventati from Florence, Italy, supported by European Commission funds and the Museo Laboratorio di Arte Contemporanea in Rome. The stated goal of the cooperation was to bring inexpensive technology and skills to Alamar to enhance social communication. The project led to the creation of a multimedia archive documenting OMNI's work of the past 12 years.

### **The Cultural Bureaucracy**

The following section explains the institutional structure under which OMNI ZonaFranca works and outlines key aspects of OMNI ZonaFranca's history in relation to the cultural bureaucracy.

The building where the sculptors of OMNI and poets of ZonaFranca were based housed three separate entities: the Casa de Cultura; the Municipio de Cultura (The Municipal Office of Culture); and

the Centro de Arte y Literatura Fayad Jamís (referred to as the Galería Fayad Jamís). The office of the Municipio de Cultura, adjacent to the gallery, was responsible for oversight of all cultural activities in la Habana del Este, including enforcement of regulations, laws, etc.<sup>415</sup> As a group of sculptors from the Casa de Cultura, at first OMNI was under the administrative governance of two separate structures, the Municipio de Cultura of la Habana del Este, based in Alamar, and the Casa de Cultura, located in the same building (generally referred to as the Casa de Cultura). Later on OMNI's presence in the building was under the auspices of the administratively distinct space of the Galería Fayad Jamís (dedicated to professional artists, in contrast to the Casa de Cultura, intended to train amateurs). As noted earlier, poet Juan Carlos Flores (then employed as the night custodian of the gallery) proposed that gallery director Pablo Rigal give Zona Franca one of the four studio spaces managed that were attached to the gallery to which Rigal agreed. The poets of Zona Franca occupied this space under the auspices of the gallery, which in turn was part of the network of galleries in the province of Havana, who in turn reported to the national Ministry of Culture.

The Galería Fayad Jamís was an atypical space because of its multidisciplinary program; it was the Center for Art *and* Literature, making it unique among the provincial galleries and in Cuba. The quality of the work produced within the Centro de Arte y Literatura Fayad Jamís in literature and plastic art afforded it a level of prestige and respect within the Cuban cultural sphere. During the tenure of Rigal and

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<sup>415</sup> According to Luis Eligio Pérez, the people who have been named to directorship positions of the Municipio de Cultura in Alamar have traditionally been drawn from the military, not the cultural sector. Interview March 27, 2012.

Maestigue, the gallery and its poets received a number of literary prizes at the local and national levels.

Given the hierarchy of the gallery reporting to the provincial network and then to the Ministry of Culture, OMNI's activities put the gallery director in an uncomfortable and sometimes untenable position, especially when OMNI exited their workshop space and went into the streets with their performances. OMNI's actions in the streets were unauthorized most of the time, and further, not part of the gallery's official programs. Practically speaking, the gallery had no control over OMNI once they went out in the streets, and it fell to the local officials to decide how to apply and enforce the regulations and laws.

To complicate matters further, starting in 1999, the sculptors of OMNI working in the Casa de Cultura, in their role as community artists, were additionally under the administrative leadership of the National Office of Community Culture (Presidencia Nacional de Cultura Comunitaria), formed in 1999 to facilitate the development of community cultural activities and headed by Fernando Rojas of the Ministry of Culture, under a parallel but separate chain of command.

Thirdly, there was the Communist Party's organization for promoting young artists, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) to which some members of OMNI also belonged as they fell into the age category of "young artists." Therefore, OMNI was under the administrative oversight of three separate but overlapping government entities. The multiple layers of cultural bureaucracy led to additional conflicts and tensions among all the parties who had varying levels of authority over

OMNI and different levels of tolerance or discomfort with what OMNI was doing.

There was a tension between OMNI and gallery director Pablo Rigal, but he had consistently supported their artistic development and vision since he became director and began to work with the members of OMNI and Zona Franca. Tensions often existed between the artists and the gallery directors, including Rigal and those who succeeded him, but the relationships between them were generally positive and constructive in that each respected the inherent challenges of their positions. Pacheco characterized these relations as “creative tensions” that ultimately resulted in OMNI’s growth, and Pérez agrees that the various directors of the gallery were for the most part supportive of OMNI Zona Franca.<sup>416</sup> For example, when the Municipio de Cultura blamed the Galería Fayad Jamís for OMNI’s autonomous (and unauthorized) performances in the street, Pablo Rigal generally defended the actions as artistically valid expressions. According to both Pérez and Pacheco, the various directors of the gallery were under constant pressure from the provincial directors as well as the Ministry of Culture.

There were periods, at the end of the 1990s and also during the latter half of the 2000s (until a new set of restrictive actions by the state were initiated in 2008 and continuing into 2009<sup>417</sup>), in which a partial opening allowed artists, including OMNI, some latitude and official

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<sup>416</sup> After Rigal and Maestigue departed in 2005, then-Deputy Director of the Municipio de Cultura, Magdalena Rivas, was named director of the gallery. In 2007, Rivas left and Alejandro Pujol became director of the gallery (and as of 2012, serving also as the interim director of the Municipio de Cultura).

<sup>417</sup> For a summary of state actions taken in 2008-2009 in the cultural sphere, see “Carta en Rechazo a las Actuales Obstrucciones y Prohibiciones de Iniciativas Sociales y Culturales,” *Convivencia*, Jan 21, 2010, <http://convivenciacuba.es/index.php/sociedad-civil-mainmenu-53/413-carta-en-rechazo-a-las-actuales-obstrucciones-y-prohibiciones-de-iniciativas-sociales-y-culturales>.

support for their activities in the community. The mid-1990s saw an incipient movement toward advocating for the value and support of community culture. Minister of Culture (then president of UNEAC) Abel Prieto began advocating for *cultura comunitaria* and in 1994 founded the Dirección de Trabajo Cultural Comunitario.<sup>418</sup> In the ensuing years (the latter half of the 1990s) Fernando Rojas, director of the Presidencia Nacional de Cultura Comunitaria and Vice Minister of Culture, gained a reputation as a defender of “alternativity,” and the institution wielded influence during this brief period. Also, despite controversial events and actions, Prieto defended Zona Franca’s space and presence in the Fayad Jamís gallery, arguing that it should not be closed and intervening publicly with Fidel Castro to preserve this space.<sup>419</sup> Mentioning the support of Abel Prieto, Pacheco added that it seemed that the institutions were finally opening up to the kind of artistic practices OMNI was doing.

An example of this support occurred with the first *Poesía Sin Fin* festival, to which OMNI invited the rap group Anonimo Consejo to perform. The police shut down the performance and the entire event because they disapproved of the lyrics of Anonimo Consejo and tried to take the rappers to jail. Members of OMNI spent over two hours arguing with the police that their action was illegal and the authorities backed away from arresting the rappers.<sup>420</sup> However, in keeping with the pattern in Revolutionary Cuba, the expansion of expressive freedom was soon curtailed and the policies of censorship and bureaucratic control

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<sup>418</sup> See Dainerys Machado Vento, “Trabajo Cultural Comunitario: La transformación de las artes,” *La Jiribilla*, August 27-September 2, 2011.

[http://www.lajiribilla.co.cu/2011/n538\\_08/538\\_25.html](http://www.lajiribilla.co.cu/2011/n538_08/538_25.html)

<sup>419</sup> Pérez, interview, March 27, 2012.

<sup>420</sup> Pérez (Appendix A, Interview 6) 16.

were re-imposed. The culminating event that led to the expulsion of Zona Franca's workshop from the gallery in 2001 (preceded by other events deemed controversial in 2000 and 2001) was a poetry reading in January by members and friends of the group on the *camello*, and a performance the following day by Luis Eligio Pérez and a visiting artist, Kristina Lyons, from the United States.

Pérez recited his poems *La familia (esta dividida)* (The Family (is divided)), and *Negro Cubano*. The poem recited by Amaury Pacheco chronicled scenes from inside the *camello* (a man masturbating, a passenger shouting criticisms of the system, etc.). Edwin Reyes read a poem about "asphyxia" referring to a physical – and inferring a political – condition. Pérez recalls, "Some people on the *camello* were in favor and some against but it was a scandal. Everyone read the double meanings in our poems which spoke very powerfully about the present day realities people were living through."<sup>421</sup>

An official from the Ministry of Interior traveling on board ordered the bus driver to stop and removed the artists from the bus. Members of the group were detained by the police. Kristina Lyons recalls:

We boarded the *camello* with a group of friends (OMNI members and others...Amaury was there as well as Nilo, Alberto, Grisel, Edwin and others who no longer participate in OMNI). We had painted our faces (black circles around our eyes) and Luis Eligio also had painted his bare chest...some friends were filming the action and taking photographs inside the bus. We called it "*la antología oral en el camello*." I remember singing. I think everyone started singing (making rhythms) after a while. There was a multi-layering of voices and sounds. The idea was to transform the entire experience of riding in the *camello*. To transmit an altogether different energy inside a moving metal contraption where people were packed together and often losing hours of their day to get around the city. The other passengers

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<sup>421</sup> Pérez, interview, March 27, 2012.

were reticent at first, but the energy did change. I do remember that the bus was stopped and that we danced off the bus. People applauded as we left. We did have to get off.<sup>422</sup>

The next day, Lyons and Pérez did a performance, *Performance de los Indigentes (Performance of the Indigents)*, dressed as homeless people in tattered clothes and carrying bags of trash and signs about homelessness around the world. (Figs. 4.29 and 4.30) One sign began: “*Hoy en el Mundo*” (Today in the World) and then listed the struggles of indigenous/local communities in Chile (Mapuche-Pehuenches), Northeastern Brazil, Canada (Cree), U.S. (Sioux), Turkey, and China who were struggling against the construction of hydroelectric dams and toxic waste dumping on their lands. The second sign addressed people throughout the world struggling for their beliefs and trying to live in balance with nature, and those who consume resources and deny responsibility<sup>423</sup> Lyons says that she and Pérez spoke about the risks of arrest, but decided to go ahead with the action, agreeing that if arrested, they would only answer the police in poetry, in character.

Lyons describes the events of the day:

When we reached the community dumpster we started taking out the trash and dispersing it on the ground. I sat on the dirt, and Luis Eligio added water and covered me in mud, and he did the same to himself. We were reading poems that I had written, and what was written on the cardboard signs. People started gathering around us, people started appearing on the balconies of the high-rise apartments along the street. After a while, a police car came speeding up and threw us in the backseat with our trash bags. My shoes were left behind and I was barefoot. We were covered in

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<sup>422</sup> Kristina Lyons, personal communication, May 7, 2012.

<sup>423</sup> The original text reads: "Y así en todos lados de la tierra, la gente vive. Unos luchan por sus creencias, religiones queriendo vivir en equilibrio con su naturaleza, la tierra, y otros luchan por construir, consumir, vivir bien sin ver este bien como destrucción de nuestro medio y CLARO! Somos civilizados, no podemos vivir de otro modo, ni cambiar. Además AQUÍ TAMBIÉN EL MAMBO ES DURO Y NO SOMOS CULPABLES DE TODA ESTA GRAN BASURA. ENCENDAMOS EL TELEVISOR Y VIVAMOS ALLÍ \_\_\_\_ ESO: EL mambo es duro y la BASURA A LA CALLE."





Fig. 4.29 Kristina Lyons and Luis Eligio Pérez, *Performance de los Indigentes*, 2001.



Fig. 4.30 Kristina Lyons and Luis Eligio Pérez, *Performance de los Indigentes*, 2001.

mud and started to answer them in poetry. They took us to the local station in Alamar and separated us in two different rooms for interrogation.<sup>424</sup>

They did not realize it, but the spot in which Pérez and Lyons were performing was directly across from the home of the Minister of the Interior official who had ordered the *camello* halted the day before. (This was coincidental but the official believed that it was an “acto de repudio”<sup>425</sup> in retaliation for having had them detained the day before.) She called authorities and several police cars arrived; both artists were taken to the police station where they were questioned and intimidated. Pérez recalls that he was surrounded by approximately ten armed officers. As he had agreed on with Lyons, Pérez stayed in character, asking the police who were hitting and kicking him why they were doing this to a fellow Cuban. He said to them: “Patadas por culo, bastonazos, golpes, en Cuba socialista, patria de Fidel, yo quiero verlo.” (Asskicking, beating, hitting, in Cuba, socialist country of Fidel, I want to see him.) According to Pérez, after that “their language changed, their attitude changed. Many of them left the room and the others started to treat me with more respect.”<sup>426</sup>

Lyons’s recollection of the event:

I don't think they recognized that I wasn't Cuban at first because I was covered in mud, and I wasn't saying very much except for the poetry. They barked questions, read over the poems and claimed that they were anti-revolutionary. They did a lot of intimidation tactics. They asked about the *camello* action the day before. There were several officials in the cell with me, but Luis Eligio was surrounded by many more who were demanding to know why he was collaborating with 'the enemy.' I could hear shouting and sounds of slapping or hitting going on, on the other side where he was. Eventually they left us both alone. I don't remember ever

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<sup>424</sup> Kristina Lyons, personal communication, May 7, 2012.

<sup>425</sup> *Actos de repudio* or acts of repudiation are allegedly spontaneous but often staged provocations in response to what the state considers “anti-Revolutionary” acts.

<sup>426</sup> Luis Eligio Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012.

coming out of character. Some hours later a friend came to bail us out, a much more well-known and older poet spoke with someone in the government, and we were released. We went back to the Casa de la Cultura and had a little celebration with all the OMNI folks. Someone had picked up my shoes from the street, and left them with a note in front of the gallery door.<sup>427</sup>

After this incident, state security and the Municipio de Cultura demanded the gallery take strong measures against Zona Franca. Zona Franca was expelled from the space and Pérez was fired from his night custodian's job at the gallery. Some members of Zona Franca left and ended up separating themselves from institutions completely (Juan Carlos Flores among them). Others joined with OMNI. Though OMNI was allowed to stay in its *taller*, due to the close ties between members of Zona Franca and OMNI, restrictions were put on OMNI. They were permitted to be in the space only between the hours of 8 am and 8 pm.<sup>428</sup> This effectively served as an eviction of Pacheco and Pérez, who had been living in the space. The curtailment of hours eliminated a space for meetings in the evenings with people from the community, and also time for working in the studio.

The eviction of Zona Franca from its space led some of its members to work with OMNI on a more regular basis and led to the formal union of the groups. Zona Franca's eviction also led to the founding of an independent space, Garaje 19/La Galería Abierta OMNI, a studio and exhibition space for OMNI and the community located in the garage built by OMNI member Fito Cabrera's parents.

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<sup>427</sup> Kristina Lyons, personal communication, May 7, 2012.

<sup>428</sup> Personal communication, Nilo González, December 19, 2010.

## Further examples of censorship

The final event of the 2002 rap festival had been planned for La Piragua, an open-air location in Havana's Vedado section, but due to presence of foreign press and government officials' concerns about openly critical lyrics, the event was moved at the last minute to more remote Alamar. The concert was to have been recorded and eventually televised, and though it was filmed, it was never aired. "The thing that must be avoided is that the enemy manipulates a happening of that kind," an official is quoted as having said. Also, following the Hip Hop Festival in August 2002 in Havana, the Casa de Cultura in Alamar was ordered by the Ministry of Culture to review the lyrics of all rap songs before any performance: "This is a preventative measure to avoid any act of disobedience not in accord with our revolutionary process," according to the municipal director of culture.<sup>429</sup>

In an earlier article on the website *Cubanet News* Jorge Alberto Aguiar Díaz reported on the police detention of two members of OMNI, Amaury Pacheco and Luis Eligio Pérez in early November of 2002. Pérez had painted his face and was wearing a military helmet and the two were en route to participate in a rap concert in Vedado. He was asked for his identification card (*carnet*) by the police and taken to the station on Dragones Street. He was released four hours later and warned not to wear the helmet any more.

In the same month, Pacheco and Pérez were installing a work in the Galería Mariano Rodríguez at the Villa Panamericana in Habana del Este for the *2nd Francisco Elso Padilla Salon of Installations*. (Fig. 4.31

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<sup>429</sup> Jorge Alberto Aguiar Díaz, "Tarde de Concierto," *Cubanet*, (November 11, 2002), 1.

and Fig. 4.32) Pacheco had designed an installation with Russian televisions retrieved from public dumpsters. “It was a time of change that could be seen through what was reflected in what you could find in the trash. The Russian black and white televisions signified a time that is now dead.”<sup>430</sup> The installation itself was mounted inside a dumpster.



Fig. 4.31 *Los días del hombre o una disección antropotecnológica del desecho* (Days of Man or an Anthropotechnological Dissection of Waste), installation by Amaury Pacheco and Luis Eligio Pérez at the *2nd Francisco Elso Padilla Salon of Installations*, Galería Mariano Rodríguez, Villa Panamericana, Habana del Este, November 2002. Photo: Jorge Carlos Acevedo

<sup>430</sup> Russian TVs became ubiquitous in Cuba during the 1960s. They could be found in nearly every school classroom. If one was a “*trabajador vanguardista*” (a loyal “vanguard worker”) one would receive a Russian television.

Pérez recounts, “While we were putting together the installation the director of the gallery, Onaisy Noda, kept interfering with us. So we protested during the opening against the lack of respect of institutions toward artists and their work. The result of our action was that we were censored and prevented from showing or performing in any institution in la Habana del Este.” Pérez continues, “we demanded our right to express ourselves as artists and we declared our unease with the censorship of our installation. So as a protest we dropped the picture tube from an old television on the floor that we were using in our installation.”<sup>431</sup> The artists were summoned to a meeting with the municipal cultural officials and asked for an explanation of their actions and informed they would not be allowed to participate in any activity at any institution in the municipality.



Fig. 4.32 *Los días del hombre o una disección antropotecnológica del desecho.*

<sup>431</sup> Aguiar Díaz, “Censura contra poetas y cantantes,” *Cubamet* (December 9, 2002): 2, <http://www.cubamet.org/CNews/y02/deco2/09a7.htm>.

Pérez and Pacheco had been scheduled to perform the following week at a performance event in Alamar's Casa de Cultura, on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002, but their performance was canceled in reprisal for the action taken by the two at the Mariano Rodriguez gallery in the Panamerican Village. The event in Alamar was reduced to presentations by three rap artists who had to provide their lyrics in advance to the director of the cultural center by order of the the Ministry of Culture, causing concern among artists about "a new policy of censorship and exclusion" being conducted by the Casa de Cultura, the Dirección Provincial de Cultura Comunitaria (Provincial Board of Community Culture), and the Ministry of Culture.<sup>432</sup>

In 2004, Pacheco and Pérez were expelled from the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) in response to a screening of part of the documentary *OMNI Frente al Espejo* by Raydel Araoz. The offending clip contained documentation of a performance in Alamar in which OMNI were playing their typewriters and in which Luis Eligio Pérez is shown shouting at an official in the Casa de Cultura in a protest against censorship. This event technically caused their expulsion from AHS, though the artists believe that it was merely the "last straw" for the organization, the final response to an accumulation of what the AHS considered provocative actions.

Despite the eviction of Zona Franca in 2001, the censure of Pacheco and Pérez in 2002, their expulsion from the AHS in 2004, and other instances of censorship, OMNI-ZonaFranca entered a period of increased, if limited, institutional access, in part, the culmination of

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<sup>432</sup> Aguiar Díaz 3.

years of effort spent cultivating relations with institutions and partly due to political factors within Cuban institutions themselves.

An important catalyst for OMNI was the support of Alberto Virella in the Spanish consulate, collaborators such as Lucrezia Cipitelli, and others who between approximately 2003 and 2007 promoted and supported OMNI's work and enhanced the visibility of the group inside and outside Cuba. Given the growing foreign attention to OMNI, it appeared that some cultural officials felt it was better to give OMNI official acknowledgement rather than allow foreigners to "discover" them. Also, having worked for a decade in the community in Alamar with many positive results to show for it, the collective had successfully built relationships with local officials and created an expanded space for artistic activity in the public sphere.



Fig. 4.33 OMNI Zona Franca meeting in their workshop space, 2007.

The uneven and shifting relations between OMNI and the state have characterized their interaction from the start. In a 2007 interview Cabrera noted that some officials in Alamar had been open to new ideas.



“All of these spaces always were a base from which to struggle, a tough battle with the institutions, those of the Ministry of Culture, the police, with all of them, because here, all the institutions think they’re the boss. There is no sense that they share a global sense of what the community really is. So the work we’ve been doing has made them see that among all the parts what is important is the whole.” He adds, “all the support we’ve managed to get has been through our own efforts... Flesh and bone, person to person.”<sup>433</sup>

When asked if OMNI’s work had united these institutions, Cabrera replied:

Yes, very much so. Our intention has been to do workshops and show the results in a very direct way. We went to the Municipio de Cultura and showed some of our work and explained what we’re trying to do with the work, and they’ve accepted some of it, even though these are institutions where people work for six months and then they’re gone, so one loses a bit of ground. But we’ve always tried to be consistent and do concrete actions.... The ground is not well prepared, but little by little after each of these battles we have worked with institutions. Now they are somewhat on board. Now when we do an event in the amphitheater it’s straightforward to go there and explain, “this is what’s going to happen on this day, there will be some street actions, etc” and it can happen. Before, we didn’t have the experience in dealing with the officials, nor were they familiar with our work. Actions in the street were always censored, even by the people. It’s a very natural reaction for Cubans. Now that they know us they say, “there are those crazies!” But it’s very natural for Cubans to think you’re doing something against the government. They didn’t see it as necessary. And we always tried to mark the zones of social problems, whether it’s garbage, or building problems; we always try to make this visible and above all, show a path to a solution... in this way, slowly the interest of each institution has developed. An interest has arisen in getting to know us and to integrate us into their strategies of working with the community, because it’s about learning how to work with groups of people<sup>434</sup>

Nilo González offered a more sceptical attitude about changes within institutions but acknowledged that the group has made incursions into

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<sup>433</sup> Cabrera (Appendix A, Interview 1) 6.

<sup>434</sup> Cabrera (Appendix A, Interview 1) 12-13.

the public sphere: “So now we’re at a stage where we can intervene in social spaces, not with total acceptance by the institutions but like, OK, what the hell, ten years doing this stuff, let’s see what happens.”<sup>435</sup>

The progress that OMNI made in terms of being able to work with less obstruction during this period was the result of several converging factors: the fruits of OMNI’s work to gain the cooperation of cultural institutions, increased appreciation and acceptance from their community, the support from the Spanish embassy, and recognition from the official art world (such as the invitation to participate in the 2006 biennial). In a significant concession to the group, OMNI ZonaFranca had official permission to work in public areas for their Alamar-based project at the 2006 Biennial, *Haciendo Taller/Espacios Públicos*.<sup>436</sup>

There were also encouraging signs in the non-governmental sector as well, one example being the reception by the priests at El Rincón. Cabrera commented that after five years of doing the pilgrimage for San Lázaro, “Last year something different happened. When everyone arrived at the Rincón the priest welcomed them, not in an ‘official’ way but in a genuine way.”<sup>437</sup> In the first years of this ritual, OMNI had not been permitted inside the church with the *garabato*, but since 2006, the priests have acknowledged their presence and allowed them to bring the *garabato* into the church. (This was the case in 2010 when I accompanied the group on the pilgrimage.)

The state also accommodated OMNI at times. Because of events like the Rap Festival and the events of OMNI the government had to

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<sup>435</sup> González (Appendix A, Interview 3) 2.

<sup>436</sup> OMNI performed *Komunik’t* and did several other projects throughout Alamar.

<sup>437</sup> Fito Cabrera, personal communication, February 24, 2007.

respond to certain needs, for example to provide extra buses from Havana to get people to and from the events. Officials had to install a phone in the gallery to facilitate communication because the Rap Festival and the projects of OMNI were attracting people and attention from Cuba and abroad.

These small but significant examples reflected the processes and methods of OMNI's work, based in persistence and an open-minded approach that gradually opened doors and earned support and respect for the group. At times, OMNI's admission into official venues may have been motivated by political factors rather than acceptance or appreciation of their work, but the fact remains that they succeeded in effecting change at an institutional level.



Fig. 4.34 OMNI Zona Franca's workshop/taller at the Casa de Cultura, Alamar.

In 2007 OMNI invited Yoani Sánchez, the author of the Cuban blog *Generation Y*, to participate as an artist in *Poesía Sin Fin*. The Ministry of Culture had previously been unaware of Sánchez. Pérez recounts, “The authorities were reviewing what we were planning to do and discovered her name. They asked, who is this? When they saw what she was writing, she was declared a counterrevolutionary, considered extremely dangerous...The relation between OMNI and Sánchez was viewed by the state as very dangerous.”<sup>438</sup>

For many years Minister of Culture Abel Prieto had tolerated and even supported OMNI, until 2008. In 2008 Cuba enacted a program of “red alerts” which were aimed at calling out force to stop events and actions in the form of “civil rapid response brigades.” In the eyes of some artists, by this time Prieto had been absorbed into the machinery of state security. A series of events that ended up in censorship affirmed the return to a hard-line position and the attempt by the state to close down the space of civic dialogue that had been expanding over the preceding few years. OMNI invited Sánchez to participate in *Poesía Sin Fin* again in 2008 but she was prohibited from speaking in the gallery. So OMNI did a peregrination with the *garabato* in Alamar with Sánchez that ended in the Galería Abierta, where Sánchez spoke.

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<sup>438</sup> Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012.



Fig 4.35 Galería Abierta, 2008 Poesía Sin Fin event.

In April 2009, OMNI was invited to participate in a project with artist Tania Bruguera for the biennial. Bruguera had been doing a rotating series of exhibits in the Galería Habana as part of her ongoing project *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*. OMNI introduced Yoani Sánchez to Bruguera (Sánchez was participating in OMNI's exhibition). The two admired one another but had never met. Two days later, Bruguera did her infamous "minute of uncensored speech" performance titled "*Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version)*" in which she invited audience members (Sánchez among them) to come to the microphone and speak on any topic they wished for one minute.<sup>439</sup> This action was one of the

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<sup>439</sup>*Tatlin's Whisper # 6 (Havana Version)* was held in the central patio of the Wifredo Lam Center, the institution in charge of organizing and holding the Havana Biennials. The audience was handed two hundred disposable cameras with flash to document the performance and told that they could freely express their thoughts for a minute through the microphone in the podium. A detailed description of the performance and video links are available on Bruguera's website:  
<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/112-0-Tatlins+Whisper+6+Havana+version.htm>

factors that led to OMNI's expulsion from their workshop/ *taller* and the censorship of *Poesía Sin Fin* later that year.

According to Luis Eligio Pérez, the limit of government tolerance was reached with the independently organized the *Marcha de la no Violencia* (Non-Violence March) in November of 2009, which caused a scandal. More than 300 people marched in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana along Calle 23 with posters and signs. OMNI participated in the march. There was a heavy presence of state security and according to Luis Eligio Pérez, Yoani Sánchez was violently removed from the march (beaten, choked, and verbally humiliated). OMNI were thought by the government to have been the organizers but Pérez says the march was the idea of the rap group Los Aldeanos, together with Demóngeles, a group of young poets who had begun to hold poetry readings and events in the park at Calle 21 and H, close to UNEAC. The group was suppressed after this march.<sup>440</sup>

On December 11, 2009, on the eve of the 12<sup>th</sup> annual *Poesía Sin Fin* festival, OMNI- Zona Franca was evicted from its space in the Galería Fayad Jamís by civil “rapid response” brigades, police, and ambulances that surrounded the building of the Casa de Cultura, the main venue of *Poesía Sin Fin*. According to OMNI, Alejandro Pujol, director of the gallery at the time, received the order directly from the Ministry of Culture and carried it out. (Pujol was considered by members of OMNI to be the most risk-averse of all the gallery directors.) The group refuted official allegations that they are a “political group,” responding on their blog, “Our only politics is that of poetry. We are for dialogue, unity and

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<sup>440</sup> Pérez, interview, March 29, 2012.

world peace. World art is our language. Friendship is our strength. Inner peace is our happiness.”<sup>441</sup>

OMNI-Zona Franca announced they were abandoning the Casa de Cultura and that the festival would be held in private homes, adding that the following Friday (December 18) they would be meeting with officials from the Ministry of Culture. In the meantime, events were reprogrammed and relocated. Poets who were scheduled to perform were pressured by the state not to participate in the festival. The December 14 opening event was moved to the area of Alamar referred to as MicroZone 10 (*Micro 10*) to David Escalona’s apartment, the “Casa Templo del Laboratorio OMNIBUS.”<sup>442</sup> The December 15 event Electrospoken was held at Garaje 19/Galería Abierta OMNI. Another series of readings was held on December 16 at a private house.

On December 15, Zona Franca founder Juan Carlos Flores wrote an open letter, posted on the group’s blog the following day. He wrote: “Poetry cannot be expelled or eradicated...The decision to expel OMNI and Zona Franca from their legitimate base is not only an act of injustice between humans but also an offense against poetry...” On the morning December 17, the group departed for the annual pilgrimage on the day of Saint Lazarus from Garaje 19: Galería Abierta OMNI. The next morning at the meeting with cultural officials, OMNI was informed that Garaje 19 was censored and they were not allowed to use it for public events.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> Omni Poesía Sin Fin blog, December 11, 2009.

[http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/2009\\_12\\_11\\_archive](http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/2009_12_11_archive)

<sup>442</sup> A casa templo is a “house temple” and refers to a place of Afro-Cuban religious practice.

<sup>443</sup> Pressure was put on OMNI member Fito Cabrera’s parents, who had given OMNI use of their garage to use as a studio and community event space in 2002. Communist Party members from the neighborhood and the police intimidated and pressured Cabrera’s parents to disassociate themselves from OMNI even though their son had been a founder and member of the group for over a decade. These actions took an

On December 19, a poetry reading was held at the home of Juan Carlos Flores in homage to poet Octavio Armand. A series of other events took place in the apartments of OMNI members David Escalona and Nilo González, with the festival culminating on December 30.

The censorship and eviction of OMNI also prompted a response from a group of Cuban intellectuals and artists, as it came on the heels of a series of government actions in the cultural and intellectual sphere. On January 21, 2010, an open letter was published on the online publication *Convivencia*, titled “Letter Rejecting Current Obstructions and Prohibitions of Social and Cultural Initiatives,” dated December 28, 2009 with 30 signers including academics, cultural workers, artists, and writers.<sup>444</sup> The letter referred to emerging signs of a period of re-*Pavonicization* in Cuba and documented a number of examples, among them: the continued exclusion of underground hip hop artists from public spaces, performance stages and the media, as well as specific cases of political persecution against some of these artists; the blocking of free public access to the latest “Ultimo Jueves” (Final Thursday) open debates sponsored by the journal *Temas*; pressure on *Proyecto Esquife* (the organizers of the Digital Media and Culture Theoretical Conference) along with the demand to control public access to the event venue; the organization of an act of repudiation, with police presence, against OMNI-Zona Franca and the group’s subsequent expulsion from the space

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emotional and physical toll on Cabrera’s mother, Nelida. (Personal correspondence, Luis Eligio Pérez, May 18, 2012.)

<sup>444</sup> “Carta en Rechazo a las Actuales Obstrucciones y Prohibiciones de Iniciativas Sociales y Culturales,” *Convivencia*, Jan 21, 2010, <http://convivenciacuba.es/index.php/sociedad-civil-mainmenu-53/413-carta-en-rechazo-a-las-actuales-obstrucciones-y-prohibiciones-de-iniciativas-sociales-y-culturales>.



it has occupied for a decade, as well as the withdrawal of support for the *Poesía Sin Fin* festival by cultural authorities, and other examples.

A few months later, upon the return of three members of OMNI from a European tour in May 2010, the members of the group were detained and all the digital material in their possession was confiscated (CDs, DVDs, portable storage drives, etc.). In the meantime, OMNI continued with plans for the next *Poesía Sin Fin* for the coming December. *Poesía Sin Fin* opened in December 2010 in private spaces, but there was also an exhibition planned for the public spaces of a large apartment building opposite the Casa de Cultura. OMNI had invited a collective of young artists from Alamar called ÍNDICE to mount an exhibition of their work as part of the festival.

ÍNDICE, whose members are in their 20s, grew up with OMNI in their midst and as children and teens participated in the various art workshops OMNI offered at the Casa de Cultura. Ray DiazCa, one of the members of ÍNDICE, for example, took classes at the *taller* with OMNI from the age of 10 to 14. His parents supported his participation in OMNI's taller, describing it as “algo sano” (something healthy).<sup>445</sup> DiazCa explains that since his apartment building is across the street from the Casa de Cultura, there was a strong sense of community in his building with the *taller*. While most of the youth in those classes did not become professional artists, he and a few others did. Inspired to pursue careers as artists, they went on to study at the Academy of San Alejandro in Havana and formed ÍNDICE.<sup>446</sup> ÍNDICE is developing its own aesthetic and artistic ideas as a collective but the influence of OMNI is

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<sup>445</sup>Ray DiazCa, interview, December 17, 2010.

<sup>446</sup>Ray DiazCa, interview, December 17, 2010.

clear in the young artists' desire to work with and within the community of Alamar.

Working with OMNI member Nilo González as curator, the group decided to do a group show on the theme of "beauty," a decision clearly designed to avoid any problem with censorship, and made plans to install the works throughout the common spaces of their apartment building. A few days before the opening of ÍNDICE's exhibition, the members of the group were called to a meeting with officials from the Casa de Cultura and the Ministry of Culture after the director of the Casa de Cultura wrote a letter to the Minister and sub-Ministers of Culture informing them of the exhibition. At this meeting, ÍNDICE were informed that they were prohibited from holding this exhibition in the public space of the apartment building under the auspices of *Poesía Sin Fin*. (Fig. 4.36) They were given the option to hold the opening in January after *Poesía Sin Fin* ended, under the condition that it would be made clear that ÍNDICE's exhibit was not in any way connected to *Poesía Sin Fin* or OMNI.

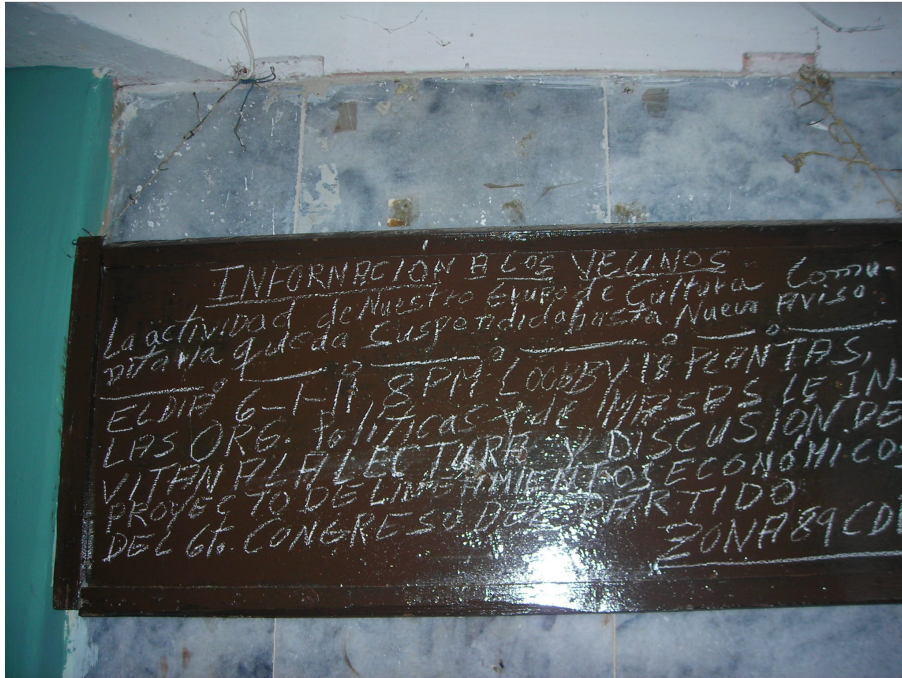


Fig. 4.36 Sign for neighbors in the *doce plantas* stating “Our cultural-communitarian group’s activity remains suspended until further notice.”

The members of ÍNDICE met with OMNI to discuss their options and then met among themselves.<sup>447</sup> During the meeting with OMNI, ÍNDICE members sought advice on how to deal with the politics of the situation and how to defend their work in the follow-up meeting they were to have with the officials. In the days before the opening, word was spread that there would be a human cordon to prevent anyone from attending the opening if ÍNDICE attempted to hold it as planned. The censorship impacted the residents of the building and created fear among the families of the artists (the same families who were the microbrigade workers who constructed the building).

In a blog post Nilo González, founding member of OMNI Zona Franca and curator of the exhibition, *El proceso de la Belleza* (The Process of Beauty), described what happened with the exhibition:

<sup>447</sup> I was present at this meeting at the Casa Templo del Arte, Nilo Gonzalez’s home.

We were never able to realize the exhibition as envisioned because once again, the forces of censorship managed to convert an art exhibit dedicated to the expression of beauty into a political act.<sup>448</sup>

González went on to argue that:

...these kinds of artistic contributions have a powerful social impact in a community, silenced by the absence of social spaces for a natural civic dialogue of everyday encounters, without a cinema, without a theater, without a rock festival (now rendered into oblivion), and a rap festival that was, and remains, a tribute and an experience that lives on in the multiple alternatives that protest and seek valid expressions for art and the creative process.<sup>449</sup>

The young collective decided to quickly create sketches of the installation of the exhibit they had planned to mount in their apartment building in the Casa Templo OMNI del Arte Cubano (Nilo González's and Alina



Fig. 4.37 Opening for *El Proceso de la Belleza*, Dec. 2010.

Guzmán's home) where there was an opening celebration. (Figs. 4.37 and 4.38)

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<sup>448</sup><http://fotoscubahoy.blogspot.com/2010/12/festival-poesia-sin-fin-2010-alar.html>.

<sup>449</sup><http://fotoscubahoy.blogspot.com/2010/12/festival-poesia-sin-fin-2010-alar.html>



Fig. 4.38 Art work by ÍNDICE, *El Proceso de la Belleza*, 2010.

In the summer of 2011, OMNI-ZonaFranca was censored again. The group was scheduled to perform at the alternative music festival *Rotilla*, organized by the independent group Matraka and featuring electronic music. (*Rotilla* began the same year as *Poesía Sin Fin*, 1999.)<sup>450</sup> The organizers were told that the festival would be shut down if OMNI performed, so they withdrew in order to prevent the closure of the event.<sup>451</sup> According to *Rotilla* festival director, Michel Matos, *Rotilla* director:

Last year, as is customary, we were approached by the Vice Minister of Culture, Fernando Rojas, who had several meetings with us before the festival...He told us: “Look guys, for us to help you, you have to help us. The group Omni Zona Franca cannot perform at the festival because they present a problem to national security and the interests of our policy on culture.”<sup>452</sup>

<sup>450</sup> Matraka formed in 1996, around the same time OMNI ZonaFranca began collaborating. The artists behind Matraka and the members of OMNI ZonaFranca knew of one another but did not formally meet until 2003 when a music promoter from Europe arranged a meeting. After the meeting, the two groups began to collaborate and participate in one another’s festivals.

<sup>451</sup> In 2011, the *Rotilla Festival* was officially taken over by the Ministry of Culture and the Institute of Music. Matraka Productions protested the actions taken by the Ministry of Culture, which acted unilaterally to re-name the festival *Verano en Jibacoa* (Summer in Jibacoa) and planned to hold a government-sponsored event during the same time and on the same beach where the *Rotilla Festival* had taken place for the last five years.

<sup>452</sup> Yusimi Rodríguez, “Cuba’s *Rotilla Festival* Out in 2011, Back in 2012?” *Havana Times*, August 17, 2011, p.2. Matos further related that “Noel Soca, the director of the Recreation and Culture Commission of Mayabeque Province, met us in a parking lot

Matos went on to explain, “OMNI has always been an ally of ours. For years they had helped us to carry out *Rotilla* with the aid of their computers and projectors. They asked to perform in the festival... It was very hard, but we reached the conclusion ...that a single group couldn’t put the whole weight of the *Rotilla* concert at risk. We went to them to explain and they understood... In Cuba everything belongs to the government, and to work we have to dialogue with them.”<sup>453</sup> (Dialogue is a euphemistic term here given the powerlessness of the festival organizers in the face of state demands. Contrary to government promises that the event would continue to be held, the festival has not taken place since the state took over.)

When the rap festival in Alamar was suspended by the government in 2006, it was taken by some as the definitive sign of the decline of a “movement that scarcely appears in concert venues or displays other elements of its culture such as graffiti or break dancing.”<sup>454</sup> In a repetition of the pattern of attempting to control - or halt - independent cultural production, in 2011 the government seized control of the *Rotilla* festival and removed its organizers from their roles. However, the pronouncement of the decline of rap was premature. Although the rap festival was taken away in 2006, rappers and

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and told us: ‘Look, you don’t have anything else to do with this. The festival is going to be carried out by various government institutions and the Ministry of Culture. This comes from Vice President Esteban Lazo.’”

<sup>453</sup> Rodríguez, "Cuba's *Rotilla* Festival" 3. The directors of *Rotilla* issued a communiqué about the government’s action, titled “Comunicado Oficial de *Rotilla* Festival La Habana, Cuba. 20 de Julio de 2011,” available at <http://fotoscubahoy.blogspot.com/2011/07/comunicado-oficial-de-rotilla-festival.html>.

<sup>454</sup> Acosta (2007) 1.

alternative musicians in Alamar and elsewhere in Cuba continued to produce their own music. Independent cultural producers redoubled their determination and efforts and organized to self-produce and distribute rap and “alternative” music. For example, Matraka founder DJ Adrián Monzón formed La Comisión Depuradora, an underground rap organization with promotional and video arm Project Raspadura, to produce music videos for artists with no official support and make their music available online. As noted earlier, Fito Cabrera founded the independent video organization Garaje 19/Creativos, and OMNI Zona Franca continues to work, undeterred by the enormous challenges.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the early public actions, such as installing themselves in garbage in 1997, Pacheco explains, “At first, the police didn’t understand what we were doing with these types of public actions. For this reason, after almost every presentation we ended up in *Unidad* (the police station). Nonetheless, our perseverance meant that were walking on the edge of what was permitted. There had been a great lack of dialogue between the institutions and the new actors in society. But we had pushed the limits. In doing this, we were not trying to get them to leave us alone, but to create a space of liberty where it would be possible to do what we are doing today.”<sup>455</sup>

OMNI welcomed the support they received from institutions, yet the collective was not willing to compromise its message, its methods, or its aesthetics. In short, they have accepted support when it was given but

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<sup>455</sup> OMNI Zona Franca, in Sánchez 5.

have continued to exercise what they feel is their right to free expression in the public sphere. They have paid a high price for insisting on maintaining their independence and challenging officials over free speech and artistic expression. The state has engaged in tactics of isolation and intimidation through ongoing actions aimed at censoring OMNI and those who collaborate with them. Yet OMNI has held firm in its principles though it means the likelihood of institutional support has been all but eliminated.



Fig 4.39 Exterior of Galería Fayad Jamís, painted by OMNI.

In December 2010, Pacheco reflected on the year since the group's eviction from its space:

Our subject is to work at the limits, to expand them. The edges are like streams. Streams widen and then return to their banks but they are always left a little bit altered. I think this has been like our work in institutions. Sometimes we go beyond the borders, they've expanded and opened, other times they've retreated, and in this case we have had to leave the institutions because we are representing renovation and reform for Cuban institutions, and the manner of dealing with people who think in this way is to 'cleanse' in order to cut them short, to absorb them. This makes



one grow old very fast. Our relation now with institutions at the moment is dramatic, and very painful. But our vision allows us to always transform it into something tragicomic because we always search for new solutions, we always have a creative space before us, and this allows us to be our own institution in our hearts and also to believe that *we have the power not to have power*. This is like Vaclav Havel and others who have developed a line of struggle, and we move ourselves in that direction with our art, seeking equilibrium.<sup>456</sup>

The removal of OMNI from their home in the Casa de Cultura at the end of 2009 had consequences for my own research. Taking away the group's headquarters succeeded in isolating OMNI from people in the community as well as visitors, and even from one another since members of OMNI live in different zones, making it more difficult to communicate and meet. As noted elsewhere, transportation is limited and distances between many of the zones of Alamar are too great for walking. Many people do not have telephones. These challenges, combined with the isolation of many areas, have made it more difficult than before to find people and arrange to meet.

The Cuban government has taken serious measures to diminish OMNI's influence and their possibilities as actors in the public sphere. They have routinely threatened those who would collaborate with OMNI and eliminated most available institutional links with the exception of David Escalona's membership in the AHS. The continual censorship and threats endured by the group and its collaborators and supporters, makes clear the extent to which OMNI Zona Franca and alternative cultural production in general is perceived as a threat to state interests and control. However, the group continues, undaunted, catalysts of a growing movement. This spirit is reflected in a video that was the unofficial anthem of the 2010 edition of *Poesía Sin Fin*, titled *iProtesto!*,

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<sup>456</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 17-18.

featuring many of the key members of the rap movement along with OMNI Zona Franca members, who exhort the audience to “raise their fists in love.”<sup>457</sup>

*iProtesto!* (refrain)

*iprotesto y vuelvo a protestar!*  
*pues con las mentiras tenemos que acabar*  
*a los embusteros hay que desmentir*  
*basta basta ya de fingir*

Protest! And then protest again!

We have to put an end to the lies

The liars must be refuted

Enough, enough of pretending

## **Chapter 5. Alternativity, the Space of the State, and the Public Sphere**

*“Any revolutionary ‘project’ today, whether utopian or realistic, must...make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.”*  
(Henri Lefebvre)<sup>458</sup>

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter presented OMNI Zona Franca’s body of work, described within its political context. What I have argued thus far is that OMNI’s work, as seen in the context of a longer history of cultural production in the last several decades in Cuba, has made inroads into the creation of a new public space and in so doing is making an important contribution in the emergence of civil society in Cuba. The present chapter offers an analysis of the parameters and dynamics of this space and its significance in the Cuban context.

OMNI’s project is one of making interventions by marking and occupying spaces, and of making social relations visible via these interventions, whether performative, discursive or poetic. These actions have led to contestation over space with the state, a struggle the collective engages in on its own behalf, and on behalf of their community, who OMNI insists have the right as Cuban citizens to express and exchange ideas and to generate initiatives to improve their community space. OMNI member Nilo González makes explicit the

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<sup>458</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 166-7.

connection between OMNI Zona Franca's artistic and social practices: "We are a multidisciplinary group of social-communitarian intervention. We try to develop projects that include issues of gender, issues of race, issues of ideology, issues of spiritual nature - call them socio-religious issues. We are a group of artists with a marked participation in civic work for the renewal of spaces of civil dialogue."<sup>459</sup> As outlined in the previous chapter, through a range of artistic practices OMNI Zona Franca's work takes up themes such as religion and spirituality, racial discrimination, housing conditions, and other concerns shared by the community of Alamar, and other communities in which OMNI Zona Franca have worked. To help understand how OMNI's practices and work should be characterized within the Cuban context, the current chapter addresses the following questions: What is the relationship of the state to social space? What is the nature of the space appropriated by, and produced by, OMNI? How do processes of appropriation relate to the public sphere in Cuba? Should OMNI's work be considered alternative or oppositional? What is the role of the performative body?

Analyses of the relation between the state and the processes of production by Henri Lefebvre and Raymond Williams offer insights for understanding the unfolding social and political dynamic in Revolutionary Cuba. This chapter has as a theoretical foundation Raymond Williams's conception of production and hegemonic processes as articulated in "Base and Superstructure," and Henri Lefebvre's theorization of space in the volume *The Production of Space*. I refer to

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<sup>459</sup> Nilo González (Appendix A, Interview 3) 8-9.

both works throughout.<sup>460</sup> Lefebvre's ideas offer a framework in which to situate OMNI's work relative to dominant state power and the public sphere, and his discussion of space in relation to spatial production the operations of the appropriation of dominated space is germane to OMNI's practices. Relevant to OMNI's work, Lefebvre outlines the conditions for a genuinely revolutionary project, including a spatial practice that disrupts dominant space, the re-appropriation of the body, and the creation of new social spaces dedicated to play, to joy and, I add, to art.

### **Hegemony and the Space of the State**

Williams and Lefebvre emphasize the *productive* nature of social relations, in particular the capacity to create new spaces and relations, while reformulating Gramscian ideas about hegemonic structures. The state is understood here as the framework of power that makes decisions based on protecting the interests of specific groups or classes, interests that are so effectively imposed that they become indistinguishable from the general interest (hegemonic). The framework of the state is also a spatial one that permits power to achieve concreteness, where, according to Lefebvre, centralized power "sets itself above other power and eliminates it," and (as in Cuba), "where a state religion bars all other religions; and where a class in power claims to have suppressed all class differences."<sup>461</sup> The space of state power encompasses the visual field as

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<sup>460</sup> "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 158-178; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>461</sup> Lefebvre 281.

well. Political space projects an image of power (such as a network of roads radiating from the city to the countryside allowing the city to assert its political centrality).<sup>462</sup> In Cuba, the ubiquitous billboards and murals proclaiming the triumph of the Revolution may be seen as producing a parallel type of political space and image of power.

However, space is not the exclusive domain of the state. In Lefebvre's definition, there is *in space* everything that is produced either by nature or by society, encompassing things, living beings, objects, works, signs, and symbols. His thesis is that space has taken on a reality of its own, distinct from, though similar to, that of commodities, money and capital, and that abstract space is "real" in same ways that money or commodities are real. Lefebvre claims that the "space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action," and that "in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely."<sup>463</sup> It is precisely in this interstitial space that OMNI seeks to operate.

Lefebvre's concept of space includes *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces*.<sup>464</sup> Spatial practice encompasses production, or labor, and reproduction (both social and biological). Representations of space are linked to the relations of production and of knowledge and consist of conceptualized space that is the dominant space in any society (the space of scientists, planners, architects, etc.). The origins of this technologically

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<sup>462</sup> Lefebvre 245.

<sup>463</sup> Lefebvre 26.

<sup>464</sup> Lefebvre 33.

transformed dominated and dominant space coincide with those of political power. In contrast, representational space is “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ and also artists.” It overlays physical dominated space, which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate, and it includes symbolic expressions linked to clandestine social life and to art.<sup>465</sup>

Regarding the Gramscian concept of hegemony, Lefebvre notes, it “implies more than an influence and more even than the permanent use of repressive violence. It is exercised over society as a whole, culture and knowledge included,” and over both institutions and ideas.<sup>466</sup> Drawing also on Foucault’s idea of knowledge as a means of maintaining hegemonic power, Lefebvre refers to two forms, *savoir* (linked to power and making manifest the connection between power and knowledge), and *connaissance*, understood as a critical and subversive form of knowledge revealing the “antagonism between a knowledge which serves power, and a form of knowing which refuses to acknowledge power.”<sup>467</sup>

OMNI Zona Franca’s work seeks to develop an alternative or counter-hegemonic knowledge, or *connaissance*, arising from a utopian vision/ideal and fundamentally based in a horizontal, non-hierarchical, and communal impulse. The collective does not aim to replace one form of hegemonic power with another, but rather, tries to interrupt the space of power, seeking to create a space for horizontal or democratic expression in the public sphere, and within the larger socialist society.

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<sup>465</sup> Lefebvre 39.

<sup>466</sup> Lefebvre 10.

<sup>467</sup> Lefebvre 10.

Raymond Williams's theory of culture can be considered alongside Lefebvre's ideas of the disruption of hegemonic power. Williams argues that in addition to the Gramscian notion of a new hegemony that challenges from below, a Marxist theory of culture requires recognition of other factors that bear on cultural practice. He highlights in particular the response of the dominant class to various new forms and practices:

The difficulties of human practice outside or against the dominant mode are of course, real. It depends very much whether it is in an area in which the dominant class and the dominant culture have an interest at stake. If the interest and the stake are explicit, many new practices will be reached for, and if possible incorporated, or else extirpated with extraordinary vigour.<sup>468</sup>

Further, "There will be areas of practice and meaning which, almost by definition from its own limited character, or in its profound deformation, the dominant culture is unable in any real terms to recognize."<sup>469</sup> Williams points out that while the dominant mode operates by means of conscious selection there are always areas that it neglects or fails to recognize, including "new perceptions of material and media, in art and science."<sup>470</sup>

In the space as-yet-unrecognized by the state, characterized also by its limited timeframe (until the state is able to recognize new practices and takes action to restrict or prohibit them), cultural producers reach to produce meanings and engage in expressions of social critique, sparking nascent alternative or oppositional movements. This is what happened in Cuba when plastic artists took performance art and actions out of the institutional environment and out into the streets,

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<sup>468</sup> Williams 173.

<sup>469</sup> Williams 173.

<sup>470</sup> Williams 173.



or when new musical genres such as hard rock or rap began to emerge, or when countercultural practices such as tattooing became visible. At first, the government (the de-facto arbiter of culture) was not able to recognize or understand these practices, many of which were critical; however, once the state became aware of them and determined that such forms of cultural production presented a possible challenge to its hegemony, it moved quickly to shut down and/or appropriate them (such as the co-optation and/or closure of the rap festival and later the alternative *Rotilla* techno/electronic music festival, the pre-emptive formation of the state-sponsored Agencia Cubana de Rap or Cuban Rap Agency, and the expulsion of OMNI from its space, to cite some examples).

Elaborating on the workings of hegemony, Williams's theoretical model is based on the concept of incorporation:

...in any society...there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective....a corporate system...of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but which are organized and lived....hegemony...is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society...But this is not...in any sense a static system. On the contrary we can only understand an effective and dominant culture if we understand the real social process on which it depends: I mean the process of incorporation.<sup>471</sup>

The modes of incorporation outlined by Williams include systems of education, the organization of work, and the family, as well as intellectual traditions, which are selectively used within the hegemonic system. Williams refers to "the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for

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<sup>471</sup> Williams 168-9.

emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. Even more crucially, some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put in to forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.”<sup>472</sup> On the one hand, this hegemonic framework describes the process of self-monitoring or self-censorship engaged in by many Cuban intellectuals and cultural producers to avoid running afoul of the state’s ideological boundaries, and on the other, it describes the actions of the Cuban state as it has co-opted emergent areas of cultural production including (but not limited to) music, literature, theater and plastic art throughout the Revolutionary period in its attempt to defuse critical social commentary.

Williams distinguishes between “residual” and “emergent” forms and processes. The former, exemplified by the persistence of religious or rural values or cultural components in secular and industrialized societies, is defined as “experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture” but are yet “lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social formation.”<sup>473</sup> In the Cuban case, the persistence of Afro-Cuban religions falls into this category. By ‘emergent’ Williams refers to the new meanings and values, new practices, and new experiences that are continually being created. The practices and work of OMNI Zona Franca fall into this category, though the collective’s conscious embrace of Afro-Cuban religious elements also incorporates “residual” forms and values.

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<sup>472</sup> Williams 169.

<sup>473</sup> Williams 170.

Williams makes additional distinctions between residual-incorporated and residual non-incorporated, and between emergent-incorporated and emergent non-incorporated. An example of “residual-incorporated” would be Afro-Cuban religious organizations that have been officially sanctioned by the government, while “residual non-incorporated” would refer to the majority of Afro-Cuban religious practices, practiced independently or in secret. An example of “emergent-incorporated” would be the rap groups who are officially selected and promoted by the state Cuban Rap Agency, while “emergent non-incorporated” would refer to the vast majority of rap groups, many of whom criticize Cuban society and who function outside the purview and support of the state.

### **The public sphere**

Understanding OMNI Zona Franca’s work in a broad social context calls for theorizing and analyzing processes of negotiating and struggling over public space. I argue that in Cuba there is no genuine “public” space; rather, all nominally public space is dominated by the state. Even “private” space is subject to the vigilance and control of the state. (See for example Ch. 3 on the operative prohibition of the private display of religious objects during Alamar’s construction). For example, OMNI Zona Franca, after being evicted from the Casa de Cultura, moved *Poesía Sin Fin* into their own apartments, but the events were subject to restrictions and could be held only within certain hours, despite the fact they were taking place in private apartments. Evicting OMNI Zona

Franca from the workshop space in the Casa de Cultura and forcing the collective to move the festival and other events into private homes, transforms private spaces into public spaces during that time, demonstrating the inability of social and political forces to completely control dominated space, despite continual surveillance by the state security apparatus and other restrictions.

As Nancy Fraser notes, in traditional Marxist political theory the lack of distinction between the apparatus of the state and public arenas of citizen discourse results in the “conflation of the state apparatus with the public sphere of discourse...whereby the socialist vision became institutionalized in an authoritarian statist form instead of in a participatory democratic form.”<sup>474</sup> In contrast, the Habermasian idea of a public sphere -- in which citizens discuss and debate their common concerns -- is conceptually different from the state, serving as “a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.”<sup>475</sup>

While many socialist governments have developed public spheres separate from the state, the Cuban state has prevented the development of such a democratic public sphere. Further, since the media in Cuba is state-controlled, with regard to Habermas’s distinction between public and private and the notion of “publicity,” the realm of the Cuban mass media allows for no public discourse separate from the state. While there are a number of independent journalists and writers who report via Internet blogs (hosted by third-party websites in other countries),

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<sup>474</sup>Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, 25/26, (1990) 56.

<sup>475</sup> Fraser 57.

journalists and bloggers whose reports and commentary counter official versions are subject to harassment and arrest.

Fraser's distinction between "weak publics," whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation but not decision-making, and "strong publics," such as elected parliaments, who combine opinion-formation with decision making authority, is also relevant in the Cuban case.<sup>476</sup> While there is no extra-state public with the capacity to make decisions at the governmental level in Cuba, the case can be made that OMNI has been successful in coalescing a weak public through its relationships in the community and outside network, itself a significant accomplishment. Further, OMNI's actions have obliged the state to respond. OMNI's performative interventions have served as a publicly visible provocation resulting in both accommodation and censure on the part of the state.

Fraser theorizes the public sphere also in relation to the life of subordinate groups, arguing:

...where social inequality persists, deliberative processes in the public sphere will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates....these effects will be exacerbated where there is only a single, comprehensive public sphere. In that case, members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies. They would have no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not...under the supervision of dominant groups.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Fraser 75.

<sup>477</sup> Fraser 66. For example in Cuba, since the state and public sphere are conflated, the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women), or FMC, is an organ of the government. The FMC was itself established at Fidel Castro's request and was directed by his wife, Vilma Espín, from its founding in 1960 until her death in 2007. The independent non-governmental women's group Majín formed in 1993 as an alternative to the FMC and was forced to close by the state by 1996. The longer history of race-based organizations in Cuba shows a similar pattern of state suppression. As discussed in Chapter 2, this history dates back to the colonial period and continued on into the Revolution.

This struggle on the part of subordinated and suppressed groups to shift the dominant discourse and create a deliberative arena that contests the dominant public (state-dominated) sphere describes the scenario in Cuba. Encompassed in the larger space of the social, OMNI's creation of a space for deliberation about needs, objectives, and strategies as members of marginalized groups represents a significant contribution, realized through an integration of forms of cultural production that encompasses performance, poetry, art, music, spiritual explorations, and social work.

On the question of race, black Cubans remain a subordinated group despite the gains that were made in the early decades of the Revolution (see Chapter 2). This is clearly visible in the public sphere. Cuba's African "residue" forms the basis of a cultural freight that the hegemonic, dominant society wishes to jettison, diminish, and disassociate itself from. These historical residues accrue to subordinate groups in society whose status is made visible in their relative lack of access to and representation in the official public sphere.

In terms of the efforts to create a space within the public sphere for a civil society that permits black Cubans to participate *as* black Cubans if they so desire, in addition to being characterized as divisive these efforts have been (and continue to be) thwarted on the basis of a rhetoric of domestic privacy, typically constructed as "personal" or "economic." According to Nancy Fraser:

In both cases, the result is to enclave certain matters in specialized discursive arenas and thereby to shield them from general public debate and contestation. This usually works to the advantage of dominant groups and individuals and to the disadvantage of the subordinates. If wife battering, for example, is labeled a 'personal' or 'domestic' matter and if public discourse

about this phenomenon is canalized into specialized institutions associated with, say family law, social work, and sociology and psychology of ‘deviance,’ then this serves to reproduce gender dominance and subordination.<sup>478</sup>

Taking into consideration the construction of the phenomenon of racism as a personal issue in Cuba, I argue that Fraser’s analysis on domestic privacy applied to race reveals the discursive mechanism by which ongoing institutional discrimination against black Cubans is denied and the phenomenon of racism is de-contextualized and re-categorized as an topic for academic or psychological research rather than addressed at the government or broader societal level as a key determinant of existing social relations. (See Chapter 2 on the Revolutionary government attributing “residual” racism to the family and individual behavior rather than to continuing systemic racism.) As discussed in previous chapters, OMNI’s open claim to African heritage and culture is an effort to make space in the public sphere for the positive reception and equal embrace of African diasporic cultural and religious elements, and of black citizens themselves, in Cuban society.

### **Alternativity and Creating a New Space of the Periphery**

Connected to the efforts to create a new public space for Cubans of African descent, OMNI has contributed to the larger production of a new space of the periphery. As outlined in Chapter 3, conditions of economic and social marginality have shaped and marked life in Alamar since the onset of the Special Period. Poet Livio Conesa argues that OMNI’s marginality and Alamar’s marginality (and by extension,

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<sup>478</sup> Fraser 73.

Cuba's) are one and the same, adding: "There is no industry in Alamar. Where are you going to work?...We have no option. And the youth are creating resistance to this."<sup>479</sup>OMNI coalesced in Alamar, a peripheral and "marginal" place, precisely because of an already-existing history of alternativity and counter-culture, drawn there by figures such as Juan Carlos Flores, who himself came to Alamar because of this history. Central to OMNI Zona Franca's identity as a group is precisely its status as part of a (geographical) periphery and the (racial and social) "margin," connecting OMNI to the marginal position of the Cuban alternative cultural movements.

Through interactions with artists from around the world who come to visit Cuba, the collective has encountered other communities who live on peripheries, like-minded artists from marginal spaces, especially in the former Soviet bloc but also from geographically diverse spaces such as Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and inner cities of the United States. Amaury Pacheco refers to a common (globalized) experience of the space of periphery, suggesting that Alamar is "like many cities in the Socialist Camp, and like many cities in the periphery of Europe." He emphasizes the experiential as well as aesthetic connection generated within this shared experience: "you realize that you are participating in a construction that generates a way of thinking, a way of grouping people together, and generating a kind of art that comes from the periphery..."<sup>480</sup>

Existing in the space of the periphery or in the so-called margin is linked to the question of alternativity and the conditions that create the

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<sup>479</sup> Livio Conesa (Appendix A, Interview 2) 6.

<sup>480</sup> Amaury Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 2-3.



need for an alternative, in particular, the lack of a democratic, open public sphere. Alternative cultures emerge when the official sphere excludes the interests of various groups of people. Fraser refers to alternative subordinated publics— women, people of color, gays and lesbians, among others —as subaltern counter-publics who create and engage in parallel discursive arenas that allow for articulations of identities, interests, and needs.<sup>481</sup>

The Cuban state’s routine condemnation of public discourse it deems counter-Revolutionary, combined with a lack of representation for those excluded from a narrowly-defined official definition of what constitutes loyalty to Revolutionary principles, has sparked diverse forms of alternative cultural production. These have evolved with varying degrees of protest or rebellion (the hip hop movement, various rock sub-cultures, graffiti art, open practice of Afro-Cuban religions, the Rastafarian movement, the emerging gay and lesbian movement, practices such as tattooing, and most recently, activities of various bloggers). The history of these non-conformist expressions have provided a kind of a map for OMNI: “The *frikis* or the Cuban ‘hippies’ who have suffered humiliations similar to those of homosexuals are inspirational for us because we began to understand that this was alternativity, to insist on living in one’s own manner, breaking taboos and personal prejudices.”<sup>482</sup> Pacheco affirmed this principle: “We

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<sup>481</sup> Fraser 76. Though Gayatri Spivak used the term “subaltern” to debate a postcolonial condition in her well-known 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the term is Gramsci’s and refers to the economically dispossessed (working classes) subordinated by hegemony and excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power, expanded by Spivak and Fraser to include other excluded groups such as colonial subjects, women, and people of color.

<sup>482</sup> Luis Eligio Pérez (Appendix A, Interview 6) 27-28.

assumed discourses that others considered marginal and we expressed ourselves through this marginal discourse.”<sup>483</sup>

In OMNI’s case, the embrace of this identity reflects the artists’ own status in society and their desire to inspire ordinary Cubans to participate in art, to create poetry, while insisting that under the Cuban socialist system everyone has the right to free expression and a basic quality of life. These aspirations directly link the artistic to the civic and economic spheres. Amaury Pacheco described the impetus for creating *Poesía Sin Fin* in the late 1990s:

We talked about the sustainability of a project under extremely low conditions; I mean psychologically extreme, extreme because you were afraid, because you had to find something to eat once a day and resolve your daily struggle, and I say psychological because you don’t believe you can do things. And they tell you constantly that you can’t do things. But then you manage it and people see this and think, wow, I can do it too. So these are the things that moved us a little into a political art, a social and civil art.<sup>484</sup>

The concept of alternativity is therefore closely linked with the economic sphere, as members of the group must seek alternative means of survival given the lack of employment opportunities. A decade after the first *Poesía Sin Fin*, one year after having been evicted in December 2009 from the *taller*, with no prospects for membership in state-sanctioned cultural organizations that could provide the opportunity to earn a modest income from their art, the struggle to survive became even more difficult. Pacheco reflected,

In reality I’m not making this art to resolve only a metaphysical question...The economy, we have had to ‘invent’<sup>485</sup> in this area, connecting the economic with spiritual things, sustaining

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<sup>483</sup> Quoted in Sánchez 5.

<sup>484</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 6.

<sup>485</sup> To invent, or *inventar* in Cuba is an expression widely used since the start of the Special Period, referring to unofficial or underground economic activities most of the Cuban populace have engaged in to augment meager state subsidies and wages.

ourselves in both the metaphysical universe and the practical, to sustain the minimal needs of life.<sup>486</sup>

He continues, “What concerns me now is how *Poesía Sin Fin* will manage in the face of these difficulties, how we can continue bringing peace and how we can awaken and create new forms of existence, alternatives for living.”<sup>487</sup>

Through an expanded concept of alternativity, the collective consciously links the material needs of survival to an artistic practice that combines art, spirituality, and pragmatism: “To be alternative is a way of seeing, a new willingness to have perceptions both psychological and economic that allow for a flow of new creativities; this is ‘alternative’ in all its dimensions.”<sup>488</sup> It is important not to underestimate the degree to which these external circumstances as well as the psychological impacts of living under precarious material conditions have shaped the trajectory of the group’s work.

As described earlier, Alamar has become a space from which to assert difference and a locus from which cultural producers make attempts to formalize and normalize the appropriation of public space. OMNI (in collaboration with the emerging rap movement) appropriated the space of the disused amphitheater, and then the streets themselves, through artistic interventions, graffiti, performance, etc. and OMNI Zona Franca’s graffiti art can be found throughout the community, in the tunnel from Havana, on garages, buildings, walls, etc. (Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3.<sup>489</sup>) Luis Eligio Pérez noted the importance of graffiti for the group, both aesthetically and as a form of independent civic action: “The

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<sup>486</sup>Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 6.

<sup>487</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 35.

<sup>488</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 38.

<sup>489</sup> Additional graffiti works are in Appendix C.

responsibility we assumed was that this city is ugly and we have the right to beautify it and we take responsibility for whatever we put up. This was our concept, and also we were interested in the concept of graffiti on the periphery. It's the liberty that one takes to intervene, to mark or paint a public space."<sup>490</sup>



Fig. 5.1 OMNI graffiti murals.



Fig. 5.2 OMNI graffiti on garages.

<sup>490</sup> Luis Eligio Pérez (Appendix A, Interview 6) 25.

The operation of the appropriation of public space through unauthorized interventions can be characterized as destabilizing. Referring to Latin American shanty towns and *favelas*, Lefebvre suggests that the profusion of unauthorized and spontaneous modifications to spaces – houses, walls, public spaces – exhibits a high degree of appropriation: “The result – on the ground – is an extraordinary *spatial duality*. And the duality in space itself creates the strong impression that there exists a duality of political power.”<sup>491</sup> Graffiti, in its semi-permanent mark on the built environment, creates an impression of spatial duality, suggesting a corresponding duality of power. Though these spaces remain subject to re-assimilation, the appearance of the duality of power presented by such unauthorized appropriations points to contradictions and conflict and represents a visual challenge to the perception of the state’s control and domination of space.



Fig. 5.3 OMNI graffiti.

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<sup>491</sup> Lefebvre 374.

In the streets of Havana, and Alamar, graffiti interrupts and counters political space (the image of power) projected by Revolutionary billboards and murals (and other examples such as architecture, monuments, the presence of police in the streets). In the case of Alamar, the appropriation of the disused amphitheater by the Rap Festival (and the Rock Festival before it) represented an appropriation and weakening of the dominant space. The same may be said of the appropriation of space in the Casa de Cultura by Zona Franca and later OMNI Zona Franca, but as Lefebvre cautions, “Sooner or later, however, the existing centre and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences...centrality and normality will be tested as to the limits of their power to integrate, to recuperate, or to destroy whatever has transgressed.”<sup>492</sup> And indeed, the state acted decisively to “re-take” or reclaim the space of Alamar by shutting down the Rock Festival and later the Rap Festival and the spaces of Zona Franca first and then OMNI Zona Franca and *Poesía Sin Fin*, for example.



Fig. 5.4 OMNI event outside the Casa de Cultura and Galería Fayad Jamís.

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<sup>492</sup> Lefebvre371.

In another example of an appropriation of space, in the pilgrimage on the day of San Lázaro during *Poesía Sin Fin*, when the *garabato* is carried into the church in El Rincón, there is a moment of tension as two worlds encounter one another, with chanting “hippies” entering the Catholic church during mass, a spectacle bewildering or threatening to some, and cautiously welcomed by others. This intervention into an institutionalized space clearly represents a (temporary) appropriation of space.



Fig.5.5 Crowd outside the church listening to OMNI oration, Dia de San Lázaro.

The performance of the *garabato* has been a particularly effective intervention in producing a new space precisely because it transits through spheres that typically do not intersect, connecting the actors in these spheres and producing a new space of encounter that is a space of social inclusion. This represents a conscious strategy to intervene in religious space under conditions in which the state preserves the

appearance of non-interference in religious practices (unless the actions of believers publicly cross into what the state deems political rather than religious acts, such as the weekly Sunday marches of the wives of dissident political prisoners *Damas de Blanco/Ladies in White*). The strategy of intervening in religious space arose in part out of a scarcity of options: “From the start we all realized that Cuban institutions weren’t ready to accept performance as a public intervention...There is no open social dialogue in Cuba without political or economic mediators.”<sup>493</sup> Religion was one outlet for expression of things that could not be publicly manifested otherwise.

The *garabato* signals the complexity of categorizing actions as alternative vs. oppositional, for in this example, it is both. OMNI’s procession and participation in the church on the day of Saint Lazarus are alternative within the context of the Catholic Church, yet are oppositional in the context of the larger (political) social sphere, as the collective asserts its claim to space in a restricted public sphere. In this instance, the collective is operating simultaneously in both modes.

These appropriations of dominant space are temporary but nonetheless real. The impacts of these actions on participants and audiences alike include demonstration that the appropriation of dominant space is possible, pointing the way toward imagined and real potentials for such actions by other artists (and citizens). This is expressed in OMNI’s strategy of expanding its arena of action to the city itself as a live stage, full of spaces that might be activated at any time. It is one of their most effective methods (and also the most threatening to the state) and owes a debt to the actions of the 1980s collectives and

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<sup>493</sup> Nilo González (Appendix A, Interview 3) 1.



their “ephemeral irruption into and appropriation of public spaces.”<sup>494</sup> Despite the state’s re-assertion of control over OMNI’s workshop/*taller* in the Casa de Cultura, these alternative spaces have re-emerged elsewhere, as when private homes are transformed and activated into public spaces during *Poesía Sin Fin*, and in OMNI’s continued actions in the streets.

If the struggle to maintain boundaries of appropriated spaces is an uneven process of alternating successes and failures, these spaces nonetheless represent “space as directly lived” which belongs to inhabitants and to artists. Lefebvre’s space, a tool of thought and action, leads to changes in the realm of the discursive as well. The spatial work performed through poetry, music, and art generates communication and interaction. These experiences are not bound by the time or the physical space in which they happen; rather, they are carried along within the imagination, inspiring future conversations, art, and actions in a continuing performance of the work of the imagination, with the potential to be transformed into new forms of social relations.

### **Alternative or Oppositional?**

It is useful to return here to Raymond Williams to understand the state’s responses to counter-hegemonic and alternative practices:

There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light. This is usually the difference between individual and small-group solutions to social crisis and those

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<sup>494</sup> Desiderio Navarro, “In Medias Res Publicas: On Intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere,” *Boundary2*:29:3 (2003): 187-203.

solutions which properly belong to political and ultimately revolutionary practice. But it is often a very narrow line, in reality between alternative and oppositional. A meaning or a practice may be tolerated as a deviation...But as the necessary area of effective dominance extends, the same meanings and practices can be seen by the dominant culture not merely as disregarding or despising it, but as challenging it.<sup>495</sup>

This describes the processes by which the Cuban state has come to see OMNI Zona Franca's public interventions as encroaching on the necessary area of effective dominance. The result is a characterization of OMNI as oppositional, challenging hegemonic culture and the state, a position that the collective did not seek to occupy but was maneuvered into by the state, the outcome of the intersection of a simultaneous tightening of social control by the state and the demands of a group of cultural producers who by the nature of their public practice demand inclusion and recognition in the social sphere. The collective sees itself as promoting alternative forms of culture, civic engagement, and even the idea of alternativity itself. However, within the current Cuban system, there is no option between genuine alternativity and opposition. The alternativity permitted by the Cuban state takes incorporated forms that do not go "beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definition."<sup>496</sup> As suggested above, the result is a strong tendency by the state to extrapolate from that which in a democracy would be considered alternative as actively oppositional.

Since the start of Raúl Castro's presidency in February 2008, the Cuban state has initiated tentative and tightly controlled forays into market-oriented economic reforms while simultaneously increasing efforts to suppress cultural expression, in particular any expression that

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<sup>495</sup> Williams 171-72.

<sup>496</sup> Williams 170.

is suspected of being critical. The latter is a continuation of prior government policies; however, there have been more concentrated efforts at restricting cultural expansion and debate in recent years (the most recent examples include waves of arrests and detentions in summer and again in late fall of 2012, including of intellectuals, artists, and religious figures such as the independent think tank Estado de SATS member Antonio Rodiles, the Rastafarian leader and priest Héctor Riscart, and writer, blogger and photographer Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, among others).

Ongoing conflict over censorship, in particular over free expression about the conditions of everyday life in Cuba, association with other artists involved in alternative and at times critical expression, non-conformism, an open embrace of African-diasporic cultural elements, and an eclectic spiritualism that the state is unable to fully “recognize” in Williams’s terms (and that raises suspicions), resulted in OMNI eventually being characterized as dangerous to the state. (For example, recall in Ch. 4 Vice Minister of Culture Fernando Rojas’s caution to organizers of the *Rotilla* festival in 2010, “they present a problem to national security and the interests of our policy on culture.”)

The official criticisms of OMNI do not acknowledge the group’s support of socialist ideals and their long history of constructive engagement and work with community members and government officials. The group has been politicized precisely because there is little space for expression outside the state’s narrowly defined Revolutionary parameters. Through being placed in the position of defending their work, the collective is seen as having taken an oppositional stance. (The

refrain invoked by government officials to justify censure or reprimand remains still today, "Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing," from Fidel Castro's 1961 speech "Palabras a los Intelectuales" (Words to the Intellectuals).

For different reasons, OMNI Zona Franca has also drawn negative reactions from some black Cuban artists and intellectuals. In informal conversations, a few poets and intellectuals have told me that they consider OMNI too "aggressive" and that "they go too far," for example, in openly speaking about dire economic conditions of everyday life, or in too strongly asserting an "African" identity. Another suggested that OMNI is airing "dirty laundry," and that by speaking out on problems in society, including racial ones, the gains black Cubans have made are threatened. These reactions also point to the fraught position of black intellectuals and artists who must consider carefully how they present themselves in the public official sphere, as they know that strongly asserting a black or African identity poses risks to one's livelihood and future possibilities.

### **The Space of Encounter and Imagination**

According to Lefebvre, the form of social space is *encounter*, specifically, "encounter, assembly, and simultaneity, implying actual or potential assembly at a single point (such as urban space in the way in which it gathers crowds, products in the markets, acts, and symbols)."<sup>497</sup> Areas of encounter conducive to the production of an alternative space include spaces of leisure and play, and also art, which may be

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<sup>497</sup> Lefebvre 101.

incorporated by and therefore representative of dominant culture yet has the capacity to create ruptures in dominated space. OMNI has dedicated itself to producing encounters, resulting in the creation of new social space.

We create and meet in this Casa de Cultura that is an intermediary point between the people and the cultural authorities. We have direct contact with this community, we focus our attention on the people and it doesn't matter if someone is an opponent or a lieutenant colonel. The most important thing is that we are in this space of neutrality. Our objective is not capitalism, nor socialism, but that OMNI Zona Franca is marked by a spiritual fusion. We aren't above or under anything, not opposed or in favor, all we are for is poetry, liberty and a collective spirituality...<sup>498</sup>

Pacheco described the nature of OMNI's *taller* as "the space of confluences and tolerance where there was room for any type of expression of spirituality...where the movements of Catholics, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rosicrucians, met. This space of freedom we created served whomever."<sup>499</sup> This statement represents an idealized vision, one that however cannot be separated from its political context. This artistic vision, with its absence of Revolutionary political rhetoric, and genuinely democratic inclusivity, can only be interpreted by the state as "against" the Revolution.

As in all the prior editions, *Poesía Sin Fin* in December of 2010 was an alternative gathering of rappers and other musicians, poets, writers, artists, community-based theater groups, and people representing diverse religious groups, whose work in several cases had been censored by authorities. It offered an emancipated civil space for the artists. Though state security was present (as usual), the atmosphere was one of openness and exuberance for performers and audience

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<sup>498</sup> Quoted in Sánchez 6.

<sup>499</sup> Quoted in Sánchez 6.

members alike. Bringing together people like rapper Raudel Collazo of Escuadrón Patriota, whose lyrics are strongly pro-black and anti-racist<sup>500</sup> (still relatively rare in Cuba); writer/photographer/blogger Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo; Ciro Díaz, lead guitarist of the controversial punk rock group Porno para Ricardo, (whose performance at the festival was playfully subversive); a collective of the young generation of plastic artists from Alamar, ÍNDICE; and many others, created a space that welcomed all.

The festival indicates the broadly inclusive spirit, which also becomes a political statement, as some of the participants openly comment on topics of racism and censorship in their music or writing and therefore are held under suspicion by the state. The informal coalescing of diverse people and groups that occurred in OMNI's *taller* in years past, and that happens still during *Poesía Sin Fin*, makes the government uneasy, since regardless of how heterogeneous, eclectic and fluid these encounters are, any organized gatherings that are not held under the auspices of the state are seen as potentially counter-Revolutionary.

Cyberspace presents an additional place of encounter where new forms of counter-hegemonic social space may be produced. The restrictions imposed on OMNI Zona Franca in recent years by the state have made OMNI more reliant upon (and greatly increased the importance of) the *Poesía Sin Fin* blog, and the OMNI Zona Franca Facebook page and YouTube channels, and the group's online presence

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<sup>500</sup> Lyric from *No más discriminación* by Escuadrón Patriota:  
*No más discriminación  
segregación en mi nación  
continúa la situación.*  
(No more discrimination, segregation in my nation, the situation continues.)

in general. Blogs provide forums on the Internet for projects such as OMNI's or the *Rotilla* music festival, as well as disseminate diverse examples of visual art, music, and literature.<sup>501</sup> Though not accessible or affordable for ordinary Cubans as noted earlier, the Internet and social media, especially blogs and Facebook, are becoming increasingly important for the dissemination of alternative production and are the primary means by which Cubans communicate with the outside world.

In addition to all the practices discussed thus far, it is important to recognize the productive capacity of the space of the imagination, which seeks to appropriate and change dominated space. I have described how OMNI's project of appropriating dominated space and producing new social space takes place in geographical places and through bodily performance in space and time, but these encounters also produce new spaces, transforming the imagination. In an interview in late 2010 Amaury Pacheco reflected, "When the Pope came in 1997 he said 'Cuba has opened up to the world and the world has opened itself to Cuba.' We added another element, that the Cuban must open himself up to himself, to his creativity, his way of making art, his way of surviving."<sup>502</sup> Encouraging this kind of openness has presented OMNI with one of its greatest challenges due to the reluctance of ordinary Cubans to express themselves publicly in any way that might be construed as critical of the regime, i.e. outside of the parameters of what is accepted as Revolutionary behavior and ideology.

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<sup>501</sup> Among the several active cultural blogs from Cuba are *Lunes de Post-Revolución* (Luis Orlando Pardo Lazo); *Generación Y* (Yoani Sánchez); *Desliz/Slip*; and *Habanemia*.

<sup>502</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 3-4.

Pacheco describes the space of imagination using the metaphor of agrarian reform (a central plank of the Revolution): “All our struggle is involved with the issue of space... It’s not an Agrarian Reform as before; this is a poetic reform, for poetic spaces. A poetic space is a house, of so many square meters, and it’s also a space where you can plant what you wish. For me, this is Agrarian Reform, to have poetic spaces.”<sup>503</sup> The land in question is the space of poetry and imagination.

The spirit of Pacheco’s concept has been realized by people such as Iris Ruiz, a native of Alamar who studied theater at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art) and launched a successful career with a respected theater company in Havana (Máscara Laroye) only to become disillusioned with the professional system.<sup>504</sup> Ruiz wanted to offer an opportunity for professional-level training to children who weren’t accepted for training in the elite system. She began to collaborate with OMNI in 2003 and started a children’s theater called Teatrón, using a space in the Galería Fayad Jamís. (Fig. 5.6 and 5.7) Speaking about the impetus to start a new type of space, Ruiz explained, “To learn to seek spaces is so crucial because we’re used to being given everything by the state, and everything is determined by institutions. And if we accept this, we have no space to create. OMNI has taught me this, to find a space in the community, one’s own community.”<sup>505</sup> Ruiz is talking not only about physical space but also intellectual and psychological space and the importance of being able to imagine a new kind of space within the larger organization of the social sphere.

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<sup>503</sup> Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 10.

<sup>504</sup> In the Cuban system children are identified at an early age for professional training in the arts and sports; everyone else is considered an amateur or *aficionado* and has little chance of ever receiving professional training.

<sup>505</sup> Iris Ruiz, interview, February 22, 2007.





Fig. 5.6 Iris Ruiz with children in Teatrón.



Fig. 5.7 Participants in Teatrón's production *Campo de Girasoles*.

## **The Space of the Performative Body**

The presentation and performance of the body plays a vital role in the reception and impact of OMNI Zona Franca's work in real social space. Germane to the analysis of the work of OMNI Zona Franca and the performative body is Lefebvre's extension of the concept of domination to the body (which is fragmented and dominated by overpowering forces). He argues, "any revolutionary 'project' today, whether utopian or realistic, must...make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda."<sup>506</sup>The body, in particular, the performative body in social space, generates social relations through the act of performance.

In OMNI's performances in the streets the specialized function of public (dominated) space is thrown into question via the inauguration of an open-ended, often deliberately ambiguous, and participatory counter-space enacted within the dominated space of the state. This diversion of space (a form of spatial practice) creates a dramatized space. The dramatization of space is increased by the fact that these unofficial actions neither fall into any easily recognizable form, nor do they reproduce state-sanctioned discourse. For example, the gender fluidity that characterizes OMNI's public presence is one facet of this type of deliberately open-ended performativity. During these intervals, space is restored to ambiguity, and within the space of ambiguity, alternatives can be imagined.

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<sup>506</sup> Lefebvre 167.

The performative body-in-space signals the possibility of producing an alternative or counter-space within dominated space. In this case the performative body not only physically contests dominated space, but symbolizes and enacts its multiple potentials (for art, spirituality, civic participation, etc.):

Social space contains potentialities...existing to begin with in the artistic sphere but responding above all to the demands of a body 'transported' outside itself in space, a body which by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space (either the space of a counter-culture, or a counter-space in the sense of an initially utopian alternative to actually existing 'real' space).<sup>507</sup>

The history of OMNI's work illustrates and embodies the possibilities and potential for the creation, however embattled, of such a utopian counter-space.

An important impact of OMNI's material interventions and appropriations of space is that they make social relations visible, including gaps between the discourse and actions of the state. Extending Lefebvre's definition of the space of leisure to entertainment and public performance, OMNI effectively uses this space of leisure (or performance) to initiate a rupture of dominated space and its traditional uses. Such a space has the capacity to overcome the division between the everyday and the out-of-the-ordinary. OMNI's public interventions reveal the vulnerable areas and potential breaking points in dominated space, namely, everyday life, the urban sphere, and the body, bridging the gap between traditional (dominated) spaces and "potential spaces of enjoyment and joy."<sup>508</sup>

Joy is a central aspect of OMNI's public presence and performance that should not be overlooked. The collective's

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<sup>507</sup> Lefebvre 349.

<sup>508</sup> Lefebvre 385.

performances are characterized by an emotional intensity but also an irrepressible exuberance. Writing about OMNI's 2006 project in Alamar for the Havana Biennial, Alberto Virella, former cultural consul at the Spanish embassy in Cuba notes: "OMNI approaches the city as an (art)work, bringing to it a desire to make life in it not only more tolerable but more joyous and spiritual at the same time."<sup>509</sup> These creative irruptions into the space of the city temporarily suspend everyday reality. Even when the theme is the frustration of everyday life (rather than an escape from it) the unexpected and imaginative form of the action transcends the problem at hand and transforms it into poetry, provocation, and laughter (for example, installing seats and reciting poetry at a bus stop, or offering servings of "roasted" poet wrapped in poetry). Though spatial action does not resolve conflicts, "it opens a way from everyday concerns to collective joy."<sup>510</sup>

In Cuba, not only unofficial public action, but public exuberance (outside of the acceptable contexts of a concert, sports event, state-sanctioned political event, or typical social occasion, etc.) is confusing, ambiguous, and potentially subversive, an uncontrolled expression of joy in a dominated social space that Lefebvre reminds us is the locus of prohibitions and prescriptions. However, "space is not only the space of 'no,' it is also the space of 'yes,' of the affirmation of life."<sup>511</sup> The appropriation of dominant space by the performative body is at once a contestatory act and an affirmation of a common space shared by users and inhabitants.

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<sup>509</sup> Havana Biennial brochure, 2006, AECI/Spanish Consulate.

<sup>510</sup> Lefebvre222.

<sup>511</sup> Lefebvre201.

## Conclusion

In order for the progression of “a revolution of space” to occur, Lefebvre argues that “the necessary inventiveness can only spring from interaction between plans and counter-plans, projects and counter-projects...The possibility of working out counter-projects, discussing them with the ‘authorities’ and forcing those authorities to take them into account, is thus a gauge of ‘real’ democracy.”<sup>512</sup> Over the past fifteen years, there were instances in which OMNI was successful in moving authorities to relax restrictive rules and policies and these moments should be considered micro-democratic events that produced shifts and new spaces as a consequence, but they were (and are) always subject to reversal or censure by the state. This is a continuation of the pattern in Revolutionary Cuba whereby cultural producers demand more freedom of expression, achieve this freedom in some measure for a time, and then are censored and co-opted by the state.

Through their own form of spatial practice, OMNI Zona Franca is producing shifts in social and cultural perceptions that are leading to changes in social relations (through new processes, inter-group relations, inputs). OMNI inaugurates a counter-space and creates an alternative, within the context of Revolutionary society and not as an assertion of difference, but rather a part of a demand for a more inclusive and representative Revolutionary public sphere and society.

Considering the processes described above from the broadest perspective, I return to Raymond Williams’s proposal that “the most important thing a worker ever produces is himself” in the context of

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<sup>512</sup> Lefebvre 419-420.

one's history.<sup>513</sup> This perspective allows us to see OMNI Zona Franca's project as engaging in a dynamic form of creative labor that seeks to forge new relations within the context of larger social processes. In short, OMNI's work is the project of artists who are struggling to produce their own revolutionary history.

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<sup>513</sup> Williams, p.165.

## Conclusion

*“We were always less privileged though we were in the institutions, but on the margins of the institutions. And in a space like Alamar with an alternative trajectory of hip hop and rock, and in a city that tried to be of the New Man. In fact, it seems that it is of the New Man, the one that is emerging here from the margins.” (Amaury Pacheco)<sup>514</sup>*

Preceding OMNI Zona Franca there was a history of art collectives, a young generation ready to contribute to a civic dialogue, and a growing demand for representation from marginalized groups, calling for new forums. There was a place called Alamar that arose during the 1970s as the City of the New Man that invented its own unique history as it evolved into a base for experimentation in art, music, and literature. In this new Alamar, artists saw a tabula rasa and an opportunity to create an alternative cultural movement. All of these factors converged to lay the ground for the formation of OMNI Zona Franca.

Continuing the response to the demands for participation and representation in the public arena that spurred the collectives and other cultural producers of the 1970s and 1980s, OMNI insisted on a space for alternativity, expression, and autonomous community engagement, and in the transition from art as individual expression to public manifestation, the public sphere was engaged and a dialogue sparked. OMNI Zona Franca fashioned a path to a creative and civic end, directed not toward individual fulfillment, but rather, toward the utopian goal of

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<sup>514</sup> Amaury Pacheco (Appendix A, Interview 5) 1-2.

collective freedom of speech and creativity while building a tolerant community.

In this study, I have considered the movement inspired by art collectives of the 1970s and 1980s and the parallel and overlapping movement of black cultural production as joint influences in a critical artistic practice that sought to produce new forms of participation in the Cuban public sphere. OMNI Zona Franca integrated expressive cultural influences from throughout the African diaspora, and embraced the Beats, rap, and mystical philosophies in order to do social work in the form of art work through a collaborative, multiform and adaptable art practice. The impulse toward exiting the space of the institutions in order to engage directly with the public along with the appropriation of public spaces pioneered by the 1980s art school groups was taken up in the 1990s, and advanced, by OMNI.

One of the main objectives of this thesis has been to show that OMNI Zona Franca is a continuation of, and a prominent proponent of, the alternative artistic movement that arose in Alamar in the past thirty years and has served as the nucleus and inspiration for the coalescence of a wider movement via collaboration with practitioners of diverse religious and spiritual traditions, and more recently civil society groups. I have shown that the production of OMNI has had impacts within multiple arenas, including local communities, the artistic sphere, and relations with state actors, and occurred at this junction as the result of economic forces outside the control of the state coupled with an influx of external influences, and has also been part of an ongoing national history of struggle for voice on the part of black and other marginalized



Cubans. I recognize that these critical practices do not necessarily signal a call for dismantling the entire system; rather, OMNI Zona Franca is engaged in a process of contestation and criticism, demanding change within a socialist system. They have built on the example of their predecessors to invent their own forms of critical and communitarian art to create new social spaces and an expanded role for art in Revolutionary society.

I have aimed to describe the ways in which cultural producers challenge the state through counter-hegemonic practices arising from this demand for inclusion and the fight to create and maintain spaces for alternativity, and argued that OMNI has contributed to the formation of an embattled but vital movement toward an independent Cuban civil society. A Gramscian concept of civil society that centers on the potential for social transformation, combined with Marxist concepts theorized by Henri Lefebvre and Raymond Williams, provided a base from which to understand the unfolding social and political dynamic in Cuba and the relation between the state and the processes of production. Within a framework of civil society that incorporates both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic modes I have argued that artists and cultural producers in Cuba have made progress toward realizing the emancipatory potential of civil society by claiming space in the public sphere through diverse forms of expression. I have provided examples of how the state has worked to co-opt or close these spaces when these expressions are perceived to threaten its interests, noting that the government's efforts have not been uniformly successful.

## Summary of Chapters

The dissertation began by providing context in several important areas, namely the art historical, the political and civic, and the urban/geographic, and then moved on to focus on OMNI's work and its theorization. In the first chapter I addressed art historical influences, arguing that since the 1970s groups like Grupo Antillano and the collectives that followed have engaged in a project of creating new spaces for political and cultural debate and creating space for new subjectivities and cultural identities to emerge in the public sphere. I argued that it is necessary to situate OMNI's work in a longer history of Afro-Cuban cultural production in Cuba as well as within the history of art collectives and the early avant-gardes.

In the second chapter, I built on Martín Sevillano's argument that during the 1980s visibility for new subjectivities was a key battle in the construction of a new Cuban civil society, which I argue remains *the* key battle. Over time, this has resulted in the formation of a new social space that has begun to incorporate the critical expressions of artists, the cultural and religious practices of Afro-Cubans and others (including demands on the part of gays and lesbians, and other "marginal" or counter-cultural social actors).

In the third chapter, I discussed the role of the municipality of Alamar, its history and its receptivity to alternative culture, describing how Alamar's isolation and marginality left open a space for new expressions to be incubated and eventually take root. The people of Alamar have created their own cultural movement, embracing the young

artists, writers and musicians who demanded a voice and found ways to forge new spaces for multiple and countercultural voices, a movement that continues to the present day.

In the fourth chapter, I presented OMNI's work and described the social and political relations engendered, provided examples of censorship and threats endured by the group and its collaborators and the state's response, showing the extent to which cultural production is a threat to perceived state interests and control.

In the fifth chapter, I analyzed the social processes and the space in which these activities take place to show how OMNI Zona Franca and other cultural producers produce new social relations, and argued that through spatial practice OMNI Zona Franca is producing shifts in social and cultural perceptions that are leading to changes in social relations, inaugurating a counter-space and an alternative in the context of a demand for a more inclusive and representative Revolutionary space and sphere.

### **Summary of Research**

I have argued that in aggregate the exemplars of cultural production presented have made intermittent (non-linear) progress toward creating a form of civil society in Cuba. These activities might be seen as counter-hegemonic acts of protest, and as struggles to create new social, aesthetic, and political space through making and performing art within the context of a government apparatus that tightly controls public interventions of all types. The alternative and counter-hegemonic

expressions of OMNI Zona Franca and other cultural producers in Cuba reflect precisely a Gramscian notion of a civil society that functions as an agent of social transformation. Concurring with Dilla and Oxhorn that civil society is the site of political struggle and the form via which groups “collectively resist subordination to the state, at the same time that they demand inclusion into national political structures,”<sup>515</sup> I have argued that cultural production and art should be included in the rubric of Gramsci’s dialectical civil society.

Cultural production has provided a means to raise critical questions and open up public debates about contemporary Cuban society, the vital engine in sparking a broad-based movement toward the creation of a non-state public sphere in Cuba. These artistic and cultural appropriations of the public sphere take place on the ground of civil society in Cuba and expand its perimeter, forming the core of a new movement. I have shown how OMNI’s participation in the public sphere relates to the organization of the larger social space in multiple ways; in relation to social practice, appropriation of space, and alternativity, and in the forging of a wide coalition of civil and artistic alternatives among diverse communities in Alamar and beyond.

I have constructed a basic history of Alamar and the alternative cultural movements that arose there and described how Alamar has been the site of the emergence of important countercultural movements in Cuba, sparked by art collectives such as Quijote and ArteNativa, rock music, rap, literature and poetry, as well as serving as a base for some members of the *novísima trova*. It is important to emphasize that the

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<sup>515</sup> Haroldo Dilla and Philip Oxhorn, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society in Cuba,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 29:4 (2002) 11.

community of Alamar is the community of OMNI, whose economic opportunities and daily circumstances are the same as the collective's. Within this environment, the group's performative and plastic interventions seek social change in the form of promoting a widely conceived betterment of living conditions and quality of life (material, aesthetic, and spiritual) while providing a space for artistic expression for ordinary citizens.

### **The Role of Race**

OMNI Zona Franca coalesced during the 1990s during a period marked by economic crisis, the fall of the Soviet Union, and also by new developments in art. Importantly, the changing situation for Cuban artists starting in the late 1990s led to new possibilities to approach and engage in a discussion of issues of race. African and diasporic elements as well as contemporary race relations in Cuba are critical to OMNI's practices. Accordingly I have situated OMNI's work within the framework and history of race in Cuba.

In discussing cultural production in the form of Afro-Cuban religions and various artistic expressions that have grown out of these practices, I have argued that Afro-Cuban culture has provided a significant part of the foundation for Cuban civil society in a spiritual, aesthetic, historic and political sense. I have argued that OMNI's work as a whole should be considered not only as part of the longer history of collectives in Revolutionary Cuba, but as a continuation of a trajectory of Afro-Cuban cultural production that is central to this history, including a

contemporary movement that centers the historic presence of Africa in Cuba. This includes cultural production in general, and more specifically art, the rap movement, civil society groups, and an Afro-Cuban religious resurgence. As noted in the first two chapters, African culture and religions have been vital to Cuban national culture since colonial times but struggle to this day to be recognized and valued equally with Euro-Hispanic culture.

OMNI's creative and spiritual journey reflects the embedded presence of African diasporic cultures on both sides of the Atlantic and throughout the Caribbean. The circuits flow in multiple directions, transformed along each path by cultural producers who collectively re-imagine and re-invent these expressions through lived experience. Critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera characterized the generation of Cuban artists who came of age during the Revolution as having given priority to philosophical bases, with Afro-Cuban thought, specifically the idea of the "cosmovisual," as part of the conceptual framework from which to interpret the world.<sup>516</sup> For some artists, this was manifested in the philosophical and aesthetic exploration of cultural elements, most often Afro-Cuban religion, or revisiting aspects of Cuba's history such as slavery, but for others, the search for a new cosmovision that could reflect their realities and aspirations during a period of increasing hardship in Cuba had a profound urgency. The artists of OMNI Zona Franca dedicated themselves to creating such a new and expansive cosmovision.

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<sup>516</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, "Eleguá at the Crossroads," *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. A. Lindsay (Wash. D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996) 243.

As discussed in previous chapters, expression of a black or Afro-Cuban identity has been problematic during the Revolution for its alleged divisiveness. This has significantly hindered the development of both an African or black identity and the promotion of a positive valuation of Afro-Cuban culture, which is still considered by the dominant society as inferior. Institutional racism, carried over from pre-Revolutionary times, has continued and black Cubans are subject to disproportionate levels of incarceration and unemployment, lower education levels, and decreased economic opportunity, factors experienced in common with Afro-descendants in other countries of the world.

In school, the history of black Cubans has not been taught unless it supported the hegemonic national narrative, leading to two generations that know little of the struggles for recognition and equality launched by Afro-descendants during the Republic or in Revolutionary Cuba. (Recall that OMNI member René Cervantes laughed during an interview when I asked him a question about Black Power and the Black Panthers in Cuba and Angela Davis's famed visit to Cuba in 1969, and waved me off with the comment he wasn't even born at the time.) For many of those born after the Revolution, the omissions of historical information, coupled with the fear of accusations of divisiveness, has resulted in a reticence to seek out and affirm Afro-Cuban history and identity. This was reflected possibly in OMNI's reluctance to refer to themselves as a "black" collective. However, OMNI's process of engaging in an open exploration and questioning has led to new ways of considering the past and present and contributed to shifts in thinking.

According to Cuban critic Orlando Hernández, artistic practice “should, above all, function as an instrument to reflect deeply upon our history, to investigate the diversity of our cultural traditions – many of which are totally ignored or undervalued – to delve into the tiny archives of our individual and collective memory,” encouraging the “process of decolonization of our thoughts and feelings.”<sup>517</sup> OMNI articulates an African-diasporic, black identity through their art, their influences, and their presence, including style of dress, performative modes, poetry, lyrics, musical influences, and Afro-Cuban religious elements. While they developed a countercultural vision inspired by the Beat poets and the Hippies, the collective also formed deep ties to the rap movement, and more recently discovered the histories of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, whose anti-racist messages have been invoked by critical rappers such as Raudel Collazo of Escuadrón Patriota.<sup>518</sup> Through all these explorations and their creative manifestations, OMNI has purposefully engaged in a communal process of what Orlando Hernández referred to as the decolonization of thoughts, a central contribution.

Regarding the challenge of achieving racial equality in Revolutionary Cuba, David Booth wrote “in the end there will be no substitute for a thorough public discussion which focuses explicitly on the manifold dimensions of continuing racism in personal relations between Cubans and which, by the use of the entire apparatus of propaganda and organization at the disposal of the national leadership,

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<sup>517</sup> Orlando Hernández, “The Art Victims of Havana,” *Parachute* 125 (2007): 25.

<sup>518</sup> See the music video for *No más discriminación* (in which members of OMNI participated and which was screened at the December 2010 *Poesía Sin Fin*), available on YouTube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_pDMAK8-ig](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_pDMAK8-ig)



is carried into every level of Cuban political and social life.”<sup>519</sup> These words, written in 1976, remain relevant today. Absent the thorough public discussion suggested by Booth, cultural producers, artists, and intellectuals will continue to take the lead in the struggle for racial equality in Cuba.

## **Impacts**

The artistic and social impacts of OMNI Zona Franca’s work reverberate in multiple arenas and across various discourses, including those of art, race, social relations, and politics. In an important shift from the collectives of the 1980s, OMNI transformed the ephemerality characteristic of the performances of groups such as ArteCalle and Puré into something beyond what had been accomplished with these “art attacks.” The deliberate and sustained interventions in the space of their own community and beyond over the past fifteen years have allowed for the incremental and long-term process of building relationships to unfold within many sectors of the community, including with institutions and government officials.

In addition to impacts in the larger socio-political context of civil society, OMNI Zona Franca has been a contestatory and transgressive presence in the Cuban art world. Although OMNI’s efforts have been directed primarily toward communitarian and civic objectives and their membership in the official art world is contingent and fraught, they have made an impact on Cuban art and modified the conceptions of what it

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<sup>519</sup> David Booth, “Cuba, Color and the Revolution,” *Science and Society* 40:2 (Summer 1976): 171.

can be. Cuban curator Dannys Montes de Oca has noted that OMNI insists on belonging to the sphere of art while simultaneously violating its laws and modes of operation.<sup>520</sup> OMNI's inclusive practices and their African diasporic, hippie, spiritual, gender fluid, urban aesthetic have expanded the terrain of art in Cuba.

### **The Formation of a Movement**

Recalling Edwin Reyes's words about belonging to a larger movement, one of the areas in which OMNI's impact has been greatest is its role in cultivating and expanding an alternative cultural movement. Reyes stated, "Being a member of OMNI or Generation OMNI, I prefer the latter. More important than a name that serves to seal a historic moment, it's important to recognize oneself as within a generation...to feel part of something that is evolving."<sup>521</sup>

Reiterating OMNI's role in advancing the artistic movement from Alamar that began with earlier collectives, Miguel Roura noted "OMNI has had the power to bring people together for many years."<sup>522</sup> The long-term commitment to community and dialogue, in addition to OMNI's participation in the Havana Biennial and other national festivals, provided a legitimation that solidified the collective's position and respect and brought a sense of pride to the people of Alamar. "People come from all over the world to the Bienal de la Habana. OMNI has participated in it more than once...OMNI represents this

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<sup>520</sup> Dannys de Oca Moreda, "OMNI Zona Franca y Nadal Antelmo. Una oferta especial de Verano," September 2009, unpublished, 2.

<sup>521</sup> Yohamna Depestre Corcho, "Alamar es el Sitio, *Extramuros de la ciudad, imagen y palabra*, 20, (2006) 22.

<sup>522</sup> Miguel Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 22.

municipality as a project.”<sup>523</sup> However, rather than emphasizing the national and international exposure gained by having brought the biennial to Alamar, OMNI has prioritized the reception of the people of Alamar, reiterating the centrality of community.

OMNI has had a significant effect on the broader community of Alamar. The presence of OMNI Zona Franca in their space located in the Casa de Cultura greatly reduced the distance between the gallery and the people of Alamar and attracted neighbors from Alamar who had never participated there before. Juan Carlos Flores, founder of Zona Franca, in an interview with poet Reina María Rodríguez, declared that the impact of the literature and poetry of the 80s generation has been carried on through the OMNI Generation, through graffiti and other genres, and “the desire of the group to bridge the abyss between writing and conversation,” trying to fill the gap and “decrease the distance between Alamar and the city of Havana, between Alamar and the world.”<sup>524</sup> OMNI has had an impact on many individuals who came into contact with them in the *taller* in Alamar over many years, for art or theater or spiritual workshops or simply conversation, inspiring Alamar residents to begin making art, and to open their doors to teach others.

Other impacts of OMNI’s work have included alternative offshoots such as the video group Garaje 19, founded by longtime OMNI and then OMNI Zona Franca member Fito Cabrera. After the eviction of OMNI from its space in the gallery in 2009, and censorship and intimidation of the collective during the December 2009 *Poesía Sin Fin* festival, Cabrera left the group and formed an independent video project

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<sup>523</sup> Roura (Appendix A, Interview 7) 26.

<sup>524</sup> Juan Carlos Flores in Reina María Rodríguez, “La Poesía Sin Fin en Zona Franca,” *La Habana Elegante, revista digital* (November 2006): 3-4.

called Garaje 19 to promote rap music, and to document artists, hip hop, and alternative culture in Alamar. Garaje19 Creativos is currently producing a documentary about Alamar with the participation of members of OMNI Zona Franca. OMNI also influenced MATRAKA (organizers of the *Rotilla* music festival) and TalentoCubano, though there was certainly also a mutual exchange. An offshoot of MATRAKA, La Comisión Depuradora, founded by DJ Adrián Monzón, can be seen as re-animating the project of promoting independent rap that had been created the decade before by Rensoli and GrupoUno.

In recent years, groups influenced by OMNI Zona Franca such as Love-In and Grupo Amistad have formed, doing public actions combining performance with poetry and art. OMNI also has had a relationship for the last five years with Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez, introducing her to influential artists such as Tania Bruguera who in turn invited Sánchez to take part in her biennial performance. The collective has also been responsible for nurturing and inspiring a generation of young artists, a number of whom have gone on to attend art schools in Cuba (for example, the young Alamar artists of ÍNDICE). Other groups that have arisen who have been influenced or inspired by OMNI include Demóngeles (founded in 2008) who perform occasional actions, and were suppressed by the government after organizing the *Marcha por la no Violencia*; Evolución, a more stable group who share members with Demóngeles and unite for particular actions and performances; film and video groups such as Puerco Pudle and Bajo Costo Visión; and Pachamama (Chilean art activists working on land and indigenous issues).

Over time, the hip hop movement and the movement of OMNI, or Generación OMNI, has also grown. The collaborations across mediums and constituencies, between OMNI and rappers, poets, DJs, and artists, as well as intellectuals and bloggers, and more recently, civil society groups, for example, Ciudadanos por la *Integración Racial* (Citizens for Racial Integration, CIR) and Estado de SATS<sup>525</sup> have created an expanding coalition, indicating the formation of a broader movement of individuals and groups demanding freedom of expression as well as goals such as racial equality.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Factors that limited aspects of my research included the relatively short duration of research trips to Cuba, impacted by restrictions on travel for non-Cubans from the U.S. This limitation was ameliorated to some degree by continued communication throughout the research period via email and social media, and having the opportunity to spend two additional weeks with OMNI when they came to New York in spring of 2012. The logistical challenges of doing research in Cuba, compounded by challenges of communication and transportation in Alamar, meant that I could not physically meet with all the cultural producers and community members I would have liked, nor with government officials. I was able to continue gathering information via

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<sup>525</sup> Estado de SATS (State of SATS: Confluence of Art and Thought) is a group of intellectuals working toward creating civil society in Cuba with a focus on cultural theory, art, and issues of expression. From the Internet blog of *Estado de SATS*: “State of SATS project hopes to create a plural space for participation and debate, where open and frank debate is exchanged. The project sponsors panel discussions, forums and other events that are filmed and broadcasted on the Internet.”

email with artists and cultural officials, but due to the situation in Cuba, some who would have spoken with me in person have been unwilling to communicate in writing. Being an outsider has presented challenges within Cuba as well, for example, in the area of language. Deciphering Cuban Spanish for a non-Cuban is a challenge due the heavy use of slang and double meanings. However, being an outsider confers certain advantages as well, including the benefit of a potentially more objective perspective that comes from distance.

In terms of content, there are areas I would have liked to consider and was not able to given the time and scope of the research. The research would have been strengthened by addressing the history of OMNI in relation to questions of gender. Few women have belonged to OMNI Zona Franca (among them are Yohanna Depestre and Natividad Soto, and current member Alina Guzmán). Other women have collaborated with the collective but were not regular members. When I questioned former female members of the group about the obvious absence of women, their responses were substantially different from the OMNI males' explanations revealing differences and conflicts based in gendered issues.

The present research opens up pathways for further investigation and points to the need for new scholarship on various topics. More in-depth study of the role of the collectives of the 1980s is needed. In addition to collective groups such as ArteCalle, Grupo Provisional, and Grupo Puré, about whom some material has been produced, more complete documentation and historical study of important projects such as Paideia, Proyecto Pílon, Art-De and Proyecto Independiente La

Campana would help fill in the history of a critical period of art in Cuban history. A thorough, detailed documentation and history of the countercultural movement in Alamar would provide a valuable adjunct to the former by encompassing the movements in rock, rap, performance, plastic art, poetry and literature. As noted above, analysis of gender relations in relation to the history of OMNI, and the alternative movement in general, is called for, and would apply more broadly to the emerging engagement with gender issues and feminism in Cuba.

There is scarce information and documentation of the Afro-Cuban movement in visual art from the 1960s through the 1980s. Some material on Afro-descended Cuban artists of the period has been published, but to date there has been no thorough documentation of the work of artists such as Juan Roberto Diago Querol, and artists involved in Grupo Antillano such as Haití (Ramón) Eduardo, Rafael Queneditt, Rogelio Rodríguez Cobas, Arnaldo Larrinaga, Manuel Couceiro, and others, a significant gap in the history of the Cuban visual art of the period.<sup>526</sup>

The research has implications for broader theorizations within and beyond the Cuban context. While this study discussed race in a framework consistent with critical race analysis as it has been applied in the U.S., U.K., and the Caribbean, the current project suggests an additional lens through which to consider racial identity formation in relation to Cuba's policies on race since the Revolution. Regarding the

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<sup>526</sup> The anthology *Afro-Cuban Voices*, edited by Jean Stubbs and Pedro Pérez Sarduy, contains an essay on Grupo Antillano. Other existing resources include *AfroCuba Works on Paper 1968-2003*, the catalog for an exhibition organized by Judith Bettelheim with a brief essay on Grupo Antillano, and the website AfroCubaWeb, based in Arlington, Massachusetts, containing some biographical and visual information on black artists from this period.

topic of race, my proposed conclusion and proposition is that “racial” and “post-racial” consciousness are emerging simultaneously in Cuba due to the specifics of the Revolution’s historical stance toward race and blackness, in particular, the leadership’s insistence on an implicitly Euro-Hispanic national identity and its refusal to acknowledge the operations of race on a systemic and institutional level, in concert with ongoing efforts to undermine group organizing of black Cubans.

At the same time, the Revolutionary period has been characterized by calls by black Cubans for equal treatment, acknowledgement of past and present racial discrimination, recognition of historical struggles, and by an increasingly visible embrace of African and diasporic roots. Taken separately, these processes are not unique to Cuba, however, their simultaneous emergence compresses processes of the formation of a racial discourse that must incorporate slowly emerging knowledge of past histories of racial strife (such as the history of the Independent Party of Color or Partido Independiente de Color, PIC, formed in 1908 by former slaves and brutally repressed in 1912, and more recent Revolutionary era movements for recognition of black culture and history, the knowledge of which has been largely suppressed for the past fifty years), at the same time as they engage with contemporary racialized social structures and relations and a continual influx of diasporic influences.

Within this shifting terrain, some contemporary artists, while strongly embracing aspects of African-rooted identities, do not look to a race-based solution to social problems but employ a strategy of defusing the importance of race, in effect denying its power, and adopting a



stance that could be considered post-racial. Under these criteria, OMNI could be considered “post-racial” in their philosophy; despite a philosophical connection, and cultural and spiritual rootedness as people of African descent (most of the members of OMNI are considered as black or mulatto within Cuban racial hierarchy), and their open acknowledgement of racism in Cuba, OMNI seeks also to transcend race through advocating a broadly humanistic philosophy. This complex process describes in part the dialectic of the forces shaping the discourse of race in Cuba today and presents a critical area for further research in the analysis of newly emerging formations and spaces of racial and national identity.

Finally, it is my hope that the present research provides a substantive example illustrating the importance of cultural production and art in the formation of civil society in general, that may be relevant not only in Cuba, but in former Soviet bloc countries, certain countries in South America, in China, and other countries where the state restricts freedom of expression. Insufficient attention has been paid in the civil society literature to the critical role of artists and role of cultural production in creating spaces for an inclusive, representative, and open civil society and I hope the present study will lead to study of this phenomenon elsewhere.

### **OMNI’s Evolving Vision**

*OMNI is contributing to making a heaven in Alamar, in a space that has a mythology, and a heart-mind. Because if a space doesn’t have a heart-mind, it can’t go on, it can’t survive. I’ve learned this through the*

*griots of Africa. They lived in the mytho-poetic, the mytho-magical, and in science. And poetry is magic, sacrifice, happiness, freedom, politics, all of this.*<sup>527</sup> (Amaury Pacheco)

OMNI has embodied the notion of artistic vision and civic participation through a new poetics of performance deeply informed by African diasporic presences. OMNI's search for and invention of its own unique cosmovision has produced a richly provocative body of work that reflects everyday life experience, spirituality, a commitment to community, and new spaces for expression in the public sphere. In the broad context of cultural production and contemporary art in Cuba, OMNI has made incursions and interventions into the public sphere, opening up new spaces and forms of civil society. I have argued that they have pushed the limits of expression with more consistency and over a longer period of time than any other collective and have been a singular force and example. Their efforts have led to a movement among young people, with the formation of a coalition of a number of alternative movements (musical, artistic, religious, and civic).

Raymond Williams said "the most important thing a worker ever produces is himself, himself in the fact of that kind of labour, or the broader historical emphasis of men producing themselves, themselves and their history."<sup>528</sup> This idea resonates strongly in Cuba. The unique situation in which Cubans have found themselves for over a half a century, part of an experiment in which they participate as fully conscious subjects, without any certainty about the eventual outcome, has placed Cubans in an acutely self-aware position of their place as

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<sup>527</sup> Pacheco, in Depestre, 26.

<sup>528</sup> Williams, 166.

historical subjects. In this light, the members of OMNI Zona Franca have been working collectively to produce themselves and their history, from the inside and in contestation against the structure of a state unwilling to let ordinary citizens exercise a genuinely democratic role in setting its direction.

In recent years, the group has begun to invite more openly contestatory collaborators into their “big tent,” such as blogger Yoani Sánchez and the independent think tank Estado de SATS. One of the members of Estado de SATS, Antonio Rodiles, released in late November 2012 after eighteen days in jail, was invited by OMNI to kick off the 14<sup>th</sup> annual *Poesía Sin Fin* on December 10, 2012. OMNI’s friendship with and support of Generación Y blogger Yoani Sánchez has been particularly threatening to the state since Sánchez has generated significant international attention and regard in recent years. It remains to be seen how this story will end.

Through their actions, the artists of OMNI have made visible the conditions of daily life as they strive to create positive change and build a sense of community. Their original combination of spoken word, free hop music, performance, and plastic art evokes the chaos and the struggles (as well as joys) of daily life. Inspired by earlier collectives, OMNI has forged new spaces of expressivity in a restricted public sphere, adopting performative genres in order to engage directly with the public. OMNI’s strategy is one of expanding its arena of action to the city itself as a live stage filled with spaces that might be activated at any time. This protest is coupled with an irrepressible and irreverent exuberance the state is likely to perceive as subversive and threatening.

Armando Chaguaceda speaks of coming to understand through OMNI “those ‘other possible rhythms’ of coordination and dialogue between different cultural initiatives...of alternative ways to develop consensus and alleviate conflict...”<sup>529</sup> It is the invention and sustained nurturing of other possible rhythms that mark OMNI’s unique artistic contribution, an expansive artistic practice that holds spirituality and civic participation at its core. Through concrete actions and an ongoing process of the appropriation of space, OMNI has brought attention to its marginality, and that of Alamar, openly addressing the exclusionary status and condition that diminishes human beings materially and spiritually, and transformed the margin into an emergent space of inclusion, alternative vision, and utopian dreams that are meant to be realized. Through an evolving artistic vision, a commitment to dialogue, and a determination to create spaces of free expression, OMNI Zona Franca, in a Cuban tribute to the Hippies who inspired them, is sowing radical joy and making a new revolution in the City of the New Man.

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<sup>529</sup> Chaguaceda, “La OMNIpotencia de Amor,” *Poesía Sin Fin* blog, December 14, 2009, [http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/2009\\_12\\_16\\_archive.html](http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/2009_12_16_archive.html)

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Transcripts**

1. Cabrera Pérez, Fito (Adolfo): February 23, 2007
2. Conesa, Livio: December 18, 2010
3. González Preval, Nilo: February 24, 2007
4. Pacheco del Monte, Amaury: February 22, 2007
5. Pacheco del Monte, Amaury: December 20, 2010
6. Pérez Cafria, Luis Eligio: February 22, 2007
7. Roura, Jesús Miguel: December 17, 2010

Note: Each transcript is numbered starting with page 1.

ADOLFO (FITO) CABRERA PEREZ entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

22 FEBRERO 2007 ALAMAR

TIEMPO TOTAL: 1h: 10'

F. ¿Ya está grabando?

Z. Sí.

F. Han sido grupos que, por ejemplo, se unen, están estudiando, en la escuela, en San Alejandro, en el ISA (INSTITUTO SUPERIOR DE ARTE) o en Talleres que se dan y tienen una duración. Mientras están juntos, en la escuela. Cuando terminan, casi siempre se han separado. No ha habido una constancia, digamos.

Uno de los proyectos que nosotros venimos realizando desde el año pasado, es un poco recoger todas las experiencias de esos grupos. Un poco para archivar esa continuidad. Porque en realidad no es un trabajo que se ha perdido. Por ejemplo, nosotros cuando empezamos a trabajar intentamos recoger todas esas experiencias, poco a poco; y cada vez nos vamos enterando de mas grupos, que han hecho...y...pero nunca ha habido una intención tan marcada y tan constante.

O sea han sido grupo que desde la plástica desarrollan trabajos en las calles, pero no se han fusionado por ejemplo con los poetas que trabajan la literatura, ni con gente de teatro. Han sido muy causales los encuentros. No son intencionales, digamos. Y nosotros desde el principio teníamos esa intención, de ir unificando todo lo que fuera llegando.

Porque tenemos una idea de que...Una idea, digamos, como pensaban los primitivos, que no seccionaban ningún hecho de la vida. Todo eso forma parte del mismo ser. Y cada aspecto de eso nos era importante. Eso lo

fuimos aprendiendo. No se si la misma formación de nosotros, como ha sido, eh, muy a pie, en el mismo trabajo, y muy abierta, o sea, que no ha sido preparada con una metodología de aprendizaje como en las escuelas. Ha sido de manera autodidacta, cuando uno se va interesando en temas y siempre muy conectado con lo social, y con las comunidades, con la gente, donde vamos a trabajar, en cualquier tipo de trabajo que hagamos.

(2:50)

Entonces, esa forma de trabajar, te permite enriquecer y no limitar hasta donde se pueden mezclar las cosas. Inclusive también a veces nos extralimitamos mucho y salen esas cosas locas así que uno no logra definir que son. Entonces un poco en ese proyecto que te contaba hemos intentado recoger los rastros que quedan de esos grupos que han existido y nos hemos interesado mucho en como han implementado su trabajo. Aquí, Alamar es un lugar que por ser una ciudad tan joven que no tiene una tradición cultural conectada a las tradiciones como La Habana, como Guanabacoa, ha sido un lugar muy acogedor para los movimientos estos. Desde los inicios recogió el Festival de Rock, recogió el Festival de Rap, se reunían mucha gente de las artes plásticas de aquí, de la trova. Siempre fue una periferia rica. La gente se reunía aquí. No había tantos problemas de transporte y era fácil moverse hacia acá. En realidad esto no es muy lejos de La Habana. Estamos a veinte minutos. Y entonces, siempre tuvimos esa base de trabajar. Ayer cuando Amaury explicaba en el documental el nombre, que al principio fue una intuición, pero yo creo que es como...Era algo que se sabía, no con toda la certidumbre de cómo iba a suceder, pero sabíamos que, teníamos una intención, muy marcada por hacer el trabajo social, no llevar tanto el arte a los espacios como las



galerías, los museos, sino crear un público, trabajar con el público mas...El público, ese es el público real, digamos, porque el otro público de otros espacios es el público de esos espacios, no de las cosas que suceden ahí solamente. Digamos que tienen un público especializado. Entonces es un poco para uno sentirse como en casa, porque son las mismas gentes de nosotros. Nosotros éramos así mismo. Ya poco a poco nos hemos ido formando, pero tratamos de ir transmitiendo, de intercambiar, y no perder esa esencia. Y ha sido importante porque ayudamos a que la gente entienda lo que uno está haciendo. No solo que lo entienda y le sirva como un archivo más en su mente, sino que lo pueda llevar a su vida, a lo que hace. Nos interesa esa relación, que no funcione como un espectador, como te decía horita, sino que enriquezca su espiritualidad, su ser. Siempre ha sido una base. Y entonces, al empezar en esa experiencia de grupo, nos dimos cuenta que aquí en Alamar habían ocurrido, a la par de otros proyectos en La Habana y en Cuba, habían ocurrido momentos muy buenos para que se unieran artistas. En proyectos como El Quijote, el proyecto de La Cuadra, el proyecto de Arte Calle, que funcionó más bien en el marco de las escuelas, estaba nutrido por mucha gente de aquí de Alamar, que trajeron esas experiencias para acá, y todo eso nos ha servido mucho. No ha servido mucho y nos abrió la posibilidad, porque generalmente uno trata de ver hasta donde se ha explorado en cualquier cosa que vayas a hacer. Entonces otra cosa básica en el trabajo de nosotros era que los proyectos...Bueno te voy a explicar la esencia del grupo, como nació más o menos. Porque ayer se habló de eso pero no de cómo se entró en realidad. A veces confluían todos esos grupos juntos, pero como te decía horita era la acción de cada especialidad y se unían

casualmente. Pero el proyecto de nosotros ya intenta unificar todas esas experiencias y materializarlas. O sea, fusionar el trabajo de un poeta y hacer una formación en cada uno de nosotros, por ejemplo, si tu eres un poeta, y a lo mejor no tienes ningún conocimiento de plástica o era un conocimiento mas o menos, se intentaba con cada acción fuéramos aprendiendo de lo que no sabíamos y te hace como una formación integral. Más o menos. Todo esto sin un método. Era con las experiencias que tenía cada cual compartiendo experiencias en talleres, pero era muy rico. Creo que ha sido...se ha formado como una manera de vivir. No es solo pensando en el arte como un producto, sino como una manera de ser, de existir, de probar que...Digamos que no era una necesidad hacer...Por ejemplo, en el caso mío, yo entro por la escultura. Mi necesidad ya no era ser un escultor y hacer una obra, digamos individual. Yo empecé, como yo, casi todos los del grupo. Empezamos a tener esa formación un poco más integral. Eso dejó de ser una preocupación. Comenzó a ser una preocupación compartir proyectos y fusionar ese tipo de trabajo. Si ibas a hacer un trabajo con un tema determinado, trataba de hacerlo con un poeta, o con un actor que hiciera algún performance. Pero era algo muy natural, no era algo muy preparado tampoco. Era muy sentido; y como proyecto inicial entre dos grupos esa fue la experiencia. La parte de los poetas, la parte de los plásticos, fusionan su trabajo y de ahí sale "Omni Zona Franca". Y se empiezan a hacer talleres y trabajos en todos los sentidos. Los plásticos empiezan a pintar a partir de los temas de los poetas, y viceversa. Al principio era como un ejercicio, como un deporte, pero ya después cada uno fue integrando, digamos, enriqueciendo su lenguaje expresivo, en todos los sentidos, no solamente

con una técnica. También ha caracterizado a casi todos los del grupo de aquí de Alamar una manera de trabajar que es como el Arte Pobre...No se estaba buscando el refinamiento de algo. Era más importante el proceso que algo acabado ya. Siempre es un constante proceso y de ahí salen ideas de experimentación como la del disco, la de los espectáculos estos. No es algo que esta pulido y terminado. Siempre es algo que se va enriqueciendo, va mutando. Entonces generalmente los grupos que había tenían objetivos muy específicos porque ya te digo se unían en base de estudios, por ejemplo, eran de una escuela creaban proyectos interesantes pero nunca con esa amplitud ni una constancia. Tenían una duración corta. Eran intensos pero eran circunstanciales. Estaban estudiando, hacían proyectos colectivos...

Z. ¿Cuales eran los grupos mas importantes, Arte Calle...?

F. Arte Calle...Estaba Volumen Uno, que siempre fue un referente muy fuerte porque nos parece que era un grupo con una conciencia muy profunda y tenían esa intención también de unificar todo eso, o sea, no veían la acción de ellos como algo separado o seccionado. Era muy así también. Aunque ya al pasar el tiempo ese grupo se disgrega y cada uno sigue su camino. Y por otra parte no solo nos servían grupos de ese tipo, nos servían grupos...por ejemplo un grupo promotor de Rap, que reunía diseñadores, raperos, eh, así, gente...Que también nos interesaba la dinámica, como funcionan las dinámicas de grupo para lograr una constancia en un colectivo también.

Y hemos pasado por momentos que nos hemos...Son momentos también del proceso de crecimiento, que nos hemos aislado un poco, pero volvemos otra vez al centro. Nunca ha habido la intención de disgregar. O

sea que existe una experiencia y aunque la gente vaya como rotando, pero eso está vivo. Ninguno somos imprescindibles, ¿entiendes? Es lograr eso un poco y lo hemos logrado en cierta forma. Hay un grupo central ahí que está como enamorado de esa idea y no se va nunca. Y ha sido difícil porque el apoyo que hemos logrado conseguir ha sido mayormente con los esfuerzos propios. Es algo interesante porque generalmente el artista que sale de la escuela sale preparado para una estrategia digamos institucional y de mercado para mover toda una obra y un pensamiento; y nosotros hemos basado todo eso en el trabajo social, de la comunidad. Muy de carne y hueso, persona a persona. Entonces eso nos ha permitido...Es mucho mas amplio el campo. (17:02) Que lo mismo un soldador sea el que levante la escultura, y esta contento de eso. No es un técnico más. Nosotros lo vemos como un creador, con su conocimiento técnico y eso pero cualquier idea nos servia. Te voy a poner un ejemplo: en esa escultura de allá afuera, había gente que si sabia como levantarla, como estructurarla, pero la idea era de cómo funcionaba un grupo en torno a un acción determinada. Y como se intercambia, como cada uno se enriquece, como son los aportes de un grupo determinado. Seria interesante, porque son estudios sociológicos, de cómo son las relaciones; y eso nos tiene fascinados porque siempre son experiencias porque cada vez tu encuentras algo muy rico. Y creo que también esa es una base que nos ha permitido también subsistir por encima de todos los problemas que haya. Porque nos debemos a un lugar. Eso legitima tu trabajo, y siente que no es un sueño, sino que es un sueño real. Si es algo raro y eso nos deja un poco...siempre estamos pensando en torno a eso. Lo que

decía Nilo el otro día: “Yo no logro descansar”. Es algo así. Y creo que eso no se logra estudiando un plan ni un método, es como vivirlo.

(19:20) Yo te decía en la casa sobre la experiencia de los grupos, pero nosotros tuvimos una organización muy certera a pesar de que no sabíamos casi nada de cómo organizarnos como grupo. Pero todas las experiencias que nos llegaban la probábamos. Y en la base de la experiencia veíamos si era certero o no, si servía o no servía. Y entonces es muy interesante porque un colectivo es algo abstracto (sic) esta hecho por personas que tienen características (ruido) y cuando es un grupo donde la gente esta así, entra, sale, se mueve, es un grupo que cambia también entonces. No es un molde.

(HAY UNA INTERRUPCION BREVE)

(20:40) Entonces Zoya te decía esto porque también eso nos obligo a cada uno que formaba parte del grupo a hacerse consciente de lo que le aportaba, de todo lo que le servía para su formación personal, o sea, a la vez que se creaba un colectivo, se estaba pensando en cada individuo. Es algo raro. Eso era sin saber muchas cosas, pero con la base experimentar, de esa manera nos íbamos formando cada uno. E iba viendo uno una cantidad de caminos de proyección ante la vida, ante una cantidad de gente y de cómo hacer llegar esa experiencia que va mas allá de lo que tu realizas y con la calidad que lo realizas, sino que esa forma de vivir, esa forma de existir, se le puede transmitir a alguien, no tiene que ser un artista, puede ser cualquiera. Y es un poco la conexión esta mística que siempre ha ido a la par de esa intención artística. Es algo raro, no sabría explicarte muy bien (RISAS). Si porque en realidad lo he pensado pero no tengo una reflexión muy completa de esto. Esto nos ha servido, o sea

cualquier persona que llega y tiene una interacción con cualquier trabajo de nosotros se lleva una idea esencial que es que vive en una comunidad que tiene que hacer algo por ella, es decir, siente el deseo de hacer algo y que eso hay que hacerlo con alegría. Me parece por ahí esta lo básico. Nosotros lo que hemos un poco perfilado el trabajo en dependencia de los mismos que constituyen ese grupo, son las posibilidades que nos estamos dando. Por eso tenemos un sentido de estar abiertos a toda experiencia que llega porque cualquier cosita te puede iluminar. Como mismo nosotros tratamos de hacer ese trabajo, mucha gente sin saberlo te puede ayudar mucho en cualquier proceso de vida o de trabajo. Eso es algo que...Yo te puedo decir que es algo – sin tono de de egoísmo ni nada de eso - es algo que, al menos yo, yo he caminado por muchos lugares – no muchos en la isla – pero aquí en La Habana yo estuve mucho tiempo, como muchos aquí, buscando un lugar así y no lo había. Todos los lugares son cerrados, tienen sus reglas muy estrictas, digamos, que no permiten esa maleabilidad que te deja que las cosas se mezclen. Era muy difícil. Todo eso nos ha hecho tener una conciencia también de cómo realizar las cosas con una autonomía. Con un sentido participativo, pero también con un una autonomía real que te permita realizarte. No que quede en una idea bella solamente sino que puedas hacerla real. Ya eso termine en un objeto palpable o sea algo, una experiencia, por ejemplo como puede ser un performance que es algo efímero. No importaba, eso no importaba. Entonces siempre ha sido marcado, por lo menos todos los proyectos que han existido por aquí por el Este, han sido marcados por ese tipo de Arte Pobre, de trabajar con materiales reciclados. Aquí había un grupo anterior que es Artenativa, que estaban muy conectados con el arte

ecológico. De hecho, logran un proyecto con un grupo de mexicanos indios pero que vivían en Canadá con las mismas intenciones. Entonces se han logrado muchos proyectos así, pero también era un grupo que estaba en plena formación; y formación de escuela. También, Cuba ha cambiado mucho en estos últimos veinte años. Ha cambiado mucho. No es lo mismo Cuba, ni siquiera hace un año atrás. Hay muchos cambios, de la vida social, económica, las relaciones. Han cambiado mucho. Y entonces, un grupo con esas intenciones hace diez años atrás no alcanzaba muchas cosas porque dependía de una institución. Nosotros hemos logrado aquí...estamos en una institución, pero estamos con una autonomía. Y con sentido de cooperación. (26:08) No somos asalariados de un lugar y damos talleres porque hay un plan, no. Es como que nosotros somos, tratamos de ser medidores de las necesidades de la gente que mas o menos se acerca o que nos encontramos. Y en función de esas necesidades, trabajamos. No es un plan. Es algo muy variable. Depende de las circunstancias como están. Entonces creo que eso ha marcado todo lo que el grupo ha hecho. De hecho las intenciones de cada uno, si puedes ver, te va a ser difícil encontrar una obra que no este en relación con otra. Es muy difícil. No es digamos como...Aquí mismo hemos conocidos poetas de otras generaciones que tienen su obra basada en un ostracismo, están muy cerrados. Aquí es muy difícil eso. Todo el mundo tiene, inclusive yo te puedo decir que desde que yo me reúno aquí y estoy trabajando con este grupo, todas las obras que ideo y en las que trabajo siempre las comparto con uno, con dos, con tres e intento que eso sea una constante. Si tengo que hacerla solo por una circunstancia determinada la puedo hacer, pero trato siempre de compartirla. Me interesa que sea una

experiencia viva, donde yo aprenda y la comparta también. Me parece algo esencial. Yo de hecho también me ha tocado hacer una cantidad de trabajos que son administrativos, porque nosotros a la vez que hacemos arte, tratamos de sostener un proyecto que tiene una zona que necesita una economía para producir determinadas cosas, necesita mover informaciones, necesita coordinar otros grupos que no están aquí todo el tiempo, pero es ve p'aquí, ve p'allá. Y eso cae en personas, en Amaury, Nilo, y otros... A la par que vamos haciendo eso, vamos haciendo este otro trabajo administrativo. Y yo casi desde que empecé así, desde que yo vi esa forma de trabajar, me ha costado trabajo hacer algo solo. Me cuesta trabajo. Inclusive no me entusiasmo por hacerlo solo. Trato casi siempre que sea una idea que pueda compartir con alguien, que pueda retroalimentar, que pueda enriquecer en el sentido de que tenga muchos ángulos; y no solo tenga una forma, que es la que se le pueda dar. Entonces más o menos ese ha sido el sentido y creo que todos aquí están conectados con esa manera de trabajar. Hay un objetivo fundacional de cuando nos empezamos a reunir, que era ese que te decía horita: que nunca una obra esta terminada y que cada paso que uno da se esta formando; se esta formando tu manera de pensar, tu manera de ver el mundo; y eso como que te pone a producir. No te deja estar pasivo ante las emociones, las cosas que te llegan. Y creo que era muy necesario para un espacio así, que es una ciudad que también estaba preparada. No condicionada, pero si era un espacio - como te decía horita- que como era un lugar nuevo que no tenia muchos proyectos o nuevas ideas, nuevas visiones de como se puede hacer arte, de como se puede hacer trabajo en las calles, venían a parar aquí. También habían intenciones de personas –



no solo nosotros, ni solo los artistas que querían hacer —, habían personas que ocupaban puestos y que tenían una idea también de esto. Pero nunca una conciencia muy clara como para propiciar todo eso. Todos esos espacios siempre fueron a base de lucha. Lucha fuerte, con todas las instituciones, las de Cultura, la Policía, Comunes, con todas. Porque aquí, todas las instituciones creen que son jefes. No hay un trabajo donde todas esas instituciones aporten en un sentido global de lo que es la comunidad en realidad. Entonces este mismo trabajo que hemos ido haciendo nosotros les ha ido haciendo ver a esas partes que lo importante es ese todo.

Z. ¿Y han logrado reunir a estas instituciones, la policía, la cultura, etc.?

F. Si, mucho.

Z. ¿En que manera?

F. Nosotros siempre tuvimos la intención de hacer talleres y mostrar los resultados de esas experiencias en esos lugares de manera muy directa. Íbamos al Municipio de Cultura y mostrábamos algo de nuestra obra, un poco de todo lo que habíamos hecho y de la intención que tenemos con el trabajo; y eso un poco los va entonando, aunque son lugares donde la gente entra a trabajar hoy, dura seis meses y se va. Entonces se pierde un poco, pero siempre hemos tratado de hacerlo con una constancia y tratamos de hacerlo también con acciones concretas. Un ejemplo: en “Poesía Sin Fin”, queríamos hacer un evento en el Anfiteatro, una parte del evento en el Anfiteatro; y allí había que conectar...ya eso. (33:23) Digamos que esta un poco preparado el terrero, pero bueno te estoy diciendo como trabajamos un poco después de esas luchas, que eran mas con cada una de ellas (las instituciones). Ahora un poco que se ponen de

acuerdo, o las ponemos de acuerdo en un sentido. Ahora hacemos un evento, un día del evento en el Anfiteatro y es fácil llegar allí y explicar “mira va estar sucediendo esto, van haber acciones en la calle”, y se ponen en función. Anteriormente, no teníamos la experiencia, tampoco conocían el trabajo. Una acción en la calle era siempre censurada, incluso por la gente. Es una reacción muy natural del cubano. Ahora ya nos conocen: “Esos son los locos”. Pero era muy natural del cubano pensar que estabas haciendo algo en contra del gobierno...No lo veían necesario. Y siempre nosotros hemos tratado de marcar zonas del problema social, sea con la basura, o con las estructuras que existen, que no son visibles pero que...siempre tratamos de hacer visible eso y encima de eso mostrar como un camino para solucionar. A lo mejor no es decir: “Oye esto no se hace así se hace asao”, pero es como escarbar para que se vea. “Bueno, vamos a ver esto”. Era ese el sentido. Y así poco a poco también ha ido creciendo poco a poco el interés de cada institución. Ha ido creciendo el interés de conocernos y de integrarnos a sus estrategias de trabajo con la comunidad. Porque es como aprender a trabajar con los grupos de personas. A veces un funcionario de esos esta en una institución y como hay tantas cosas entre el y las personas, eso no...Uno a veces no sabe que hay personas detrás, entonces tratan a veces cifras que son muy deshumanizadas, me entiendes y eso deshumaniza todo el trabajo. A lo mejor tienen buenas intenciones, pero la forma de hacer el trabajo no la hace visible. La gente no la entiende tampoco. Y eso es...Me parece que ese es un problema del mundo. También nos ha servido para ver problemas muy universales en este pedacito. Y así más o menos. Ha sido interesante. Pero eso, ya te digo, sin una constancia, no se pueden ver

frutos. A lo mejor hubiésemos durado cinco años...Hay procesos que son mas lentos y necesitan de mas tiempo. O sea, cada integrante del grupo no ha perdido la fe de que logre algo esta experiencia...Es como hacer visible algo y de pronto desaparecer para que tampoco seas como una mascota de eso y eso quede como una idea. Algo así. Eso más o menos ha marcado el trabajo.

Z. ¿Piensas que puedes decir que están creando un espacio de sociedad civil?

F. Si.

Z. Por qué mucha gente dice que no hay sociedad civil en Cuba. No existe. Que no hay espacio.

F. Yo creo que si existe. O sea no existirá quizás para las instituciones visibles, pero nosotros hemos conocido instituciones que no se ven, porque se mueven con personas muy naturales que no ponen carteles, ni dicen estoy haciendo esto. ¡Están haciendo! Si existe. De hecho nosotros nos hemos basado en esas mismas personas para articularla un poco. Eso no lo trajimos nosotros del aire. No, eso estaba. El proceso de nosotros nos ha hecho ver que eso esta en cada persona, porque nosotros éramos personas muy naturales, normales. Claro que después de un camino vas comprendiendo, vas entendiendo y vas haciendo consciente eso. Pero creo que si existe, lo que esta como...Es como el carbón y tiene que hacerse, puliendo, hasta que es una joya ya (CITANDO A JOSE MARTI: "EL DIAMANTE ANTES DE LUZ FUE CARBON" NOTA E.R.). Ya eso es un proceso. Pasa con eso lo mismo que pasaba con la manera de trabajar nosotros. Es un proceso siempre. No es algo que tu dices "ya, se llevo aquí, esta instaurado, pones cuatro instituciones y ya eso funciona".

No, es algo que tiene que estar vivo. Y debe ser suave, blando. No puede ser algo rígido porque una herramienta te sirve hoy, mañana, de tanto tu trabajar y experimentar con ella, encuentras otra manera mejor de usarla. Dices coño puedo enriquecerla por aquí, siempre es así. Tenemos esa idea. Es verdad que siempre nosotros hemos sido voceros y hemos dicho cosas que no...y que nos han aguantado decir las. Nos las han aguantado. Por menos que eso mucha gente perdieron proyectos interesantes. Se perdían proyectos interesantes por ese tipo de problema. Me parece que es un momento histórico que esta como abriéndose a que esa experiencia exista...Y también, nosotros nos trazamos estrategias precisas, no es tampoco de hacer eso como un kamikaze. Es muy...con un sentido de que se esta negociando algo, ¿no? Y con el deseo y la fe de que tiene que lograrse. No es que se pueda optar y ya, pa, pa, pa, no. Y si no se llega ahora, bueno, saber que hay que mejorar para llegar, porque era algo necesario. (41:21)

Z. ¿Para usted, personalmente, tiene significado la idea de resistencia como una estrategia, o no? ¿O es algo diferente? Porque lo que dijiste sobre... ¿Dónde fue, en Cienfuegos, con esta mujer con cuatro niños? ¿Cómo puedes caracterizar esta acción?

F. Esa constancia de la que yo te hablo tiene que ver con esa resistencia también. De cómo independientemente a las cosas que no permiten, o no dejan que se hagan visibles, digamos, otras formas de pensar u otras soluciones, otras alternativas, en ese sentido...Yo prefiero llamarla esa constancia. Tu sabes, las palabras tienen sentido muy...y aquí tienen un significado especial. Esa opción por ejemplo es parte, nosotros no teníamos conciencia real de cómo vivía esa persona. Ni era un proyecto

que escribimos aquí para ir allá. No investigamos. Llegamos y el propio trabajo era una investigación. Lo encontramos y lo hicimos visible.

Simplemente lo adornamos con el arte que nosotros hacemos. Es como servir de recipiente. O sea no ser contenido sino recipiente.

Z. No se puede hablar de provocación...

F. No. Es muy natural y muy humano. Porque nos despertó eso, entiendes? Creo que si, que es resistente porque uno quiere existir. Y tiene que probar que es una forma viable y que nos sustentamos y que son ideas con valor. Y eso no se prueba solo diciéndolo. Creo que lleva una constancia en el decir. Aunque estoy repitiendo lo mismo con otros colores. Un poco de eso y eso siempre nos ha marcado.

El hecho de nosotros haber llegado aquí desde el barrio, nos hace tener siempre esa conciencia. Para nosotros el camino de nuestro trabajo fue, digamos, del barrio hacia aquí, para reunirnos en un grupo. Pero ya con el tiempo nos hemos ido dando cuenta que el espacio lo que es ya es un espacio cultivado, pero que en realidad el espacio no es un espacio físico. Es un espacio que esta en personas que se mueven. O sea, si este espacio no existiera, hay un garaje allá abajo o esta el rincón de uno que nos los presta por allá...o esta debajo de cuatro matas y se reúnen. Es algo así. Es una estructura blanda a la vez. Es una estructura, a nivel físico, es blanda. O sea, no tenemos problemas con eso, nosotros tratamos que el trabajo se desarrolle en diferentes lugares para no...porque esto de pronto se hace como un centro y se empieza como ha cristalizar una estructura, pero desde adentro siempre tratamos de romperla un poco. Porque sin querer puedes hacer lo que no quieres. Sin querer. Entonces es un trabajo, tienes que estarte revisando constantemente. Es un trabajo

duro, pero creo que es necesario. Necesario porque el mundo tiene muchas cosas que te pueden ilusionar de momento y pierdes el sentido real. Se pierde muy fácil. De hecho una cantidad de cosas que te [HACE UNOS RUIDOS CON LA BOCA]. Y eso te ayuda a centrarte. Y es difícil porque mucha gente no piensa así o no hay experiencias afines donde tú digas “bueno voy a compartir este mismo...” (48:40)

LIVIO CONESA entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

18 DICIEMBRE 2010 ALAMAR

TIEMPO TOTAL 41:23

ZK. Entonces...como te digo, estoy investigando artes plásticas, en el contexto de Alamar.

LC. Sí, somos de Alamar. Llevo cuarenta años viviendo en Alamar.

ZK. Entonces eso es lo que me interesa de saber un poco de la historia y cómo se desarrollan las artes plásticas y también hasta el Festival de Rap y todo porque es parte de la misma línea. Entonces, mucha gente me dijeron que Alamar es un lugar que tiene mucha diversidad y que no tenía una historia propia y por eso...

LC. Sí, porque los que vinieron a vivir para Alamar, los padres de nosotros que somos la generación de gente joven, vinieron de barrios humildes , vinieron de estratos humildes, muy necesitados de vivienda, de casas, entonces se fabricó Alamar para esa población, que es la población de mis padres. Entonces no construyeron una ciudad para vivirla autónoma, independiente. Hay que moverse de aquí para La Habana para resolver cosas. Es vivienda nada más. Es un desastre el proyecto. Yo tengo este poema, "Alamar".

Menos mal que el sol  
no se parece al ala norte del este/  
menos mal que el sol no es un proyecto/  
mar que hala/  
mar hala...

Mar que hala por la migración. Un cementerio es el mar. Eso ha acabado conmigo. La gente, salvándose. Y ahí lo tengo escrito, Alamar como la veo, una ciudad muy gris, muy depauperada, no se de aquí a cincuenta, cuarenta años cómo vamos a vivir nosotros, porque la gente han hecho sus viviendas dentro de la posibilidad del dinero que tengan...

LC. Entonces vivir en ese estado de depauperación y de deprimencia he elegido mi literatura. Agonizante, una literatura agonizante. Y del grupo, del proyecto Omni, venimos de El Quijote, de los años 1985-86, que fue una brigada de jóvenes, pero bueno, era abierto, éramos aficionados. No estábamos hechos como artistas plásticos ni literatos, pero teníamos

inclinaciones, teníamos sensibilidad. Era una juventud inquieta, pero era heterogénea. Había para deportes, para recreación. Se formaron fotógrafos, músicos, plásticos. Están diseminados por el país y por otros países también. Han salido para el exterior. Hay otras gentes que pueden hablar mejor de esa historia. Esa historia la tiene Omni también. El grupo Omni con Amaury Pacheco, David...y...La historia de Alamar...Entonces yo estaba al frente como líder con veinte y pico de años de El Quijote, pero no liderazgo de querer mandar sino una hermandad, una fraternidad de jóvenes. Yo no era el líder de dictar cosas, no, no. Éramos literatos, pintores. Éramos muy abiertos, muy espontáneos.

ZK. Y cuándo empezaron a hacer performances...

LC. Si, ese fue el grupo Omni...Bueno, yo hice una performáncia de desnudo en la galería. Una performáncia en el 1994. Una performáncia de desnudo en la galería. Otros hacían performáncias en el país y en Alamar, pero bueno Omni ya después retomó las performáncias ...En qué época Omni surgió?

ZK. En el 97.

LC. En el 97. Con Luis Eligio, Nilo.

ZK. Eligio no estaba todavía en Omni. Eran Nilo, Amaury y Juan Carlos Flores.

LC. Y Fito. Ya. Yo he hecho performáncias y fotografías mías, con un zapato en la boca. Una hilera de zapatos. Diciendo el devenir, el andar y el devenir de las personas. De aquí para el exterior y el país.

L. Yo tengo fotografías aquí. Omni es el que recoge todas las fotografías mías.

LC. Si yo he delegado. Para poder tener tiempo para escribir y para pensar he delegado en otras personas responsabilidades que tomen ellos, que se organicen como grupo. Pero bueno...Nos quitaron el local. Tú sabes eso, que nos quitaron el local.

ZK. Sí, si, si.

LC. No quieren grupos alternativos. Todo tiene que ser gubernamental, dirigido. Dirigido por la UJC. No quieren nada espontáneo. Nada que se les vaya de las manos. Muy restrictivos.

ZK. Entonces, ¿Qué pasó con Artenativa?



LC. Arternativa fue después de El Quijote. Muchos se fueron del país. Están diseminados por el mundo. Lo continuó Omni después, pero bueno Arternativa era un grupo también de jóvenes. Hacían instalaciones. Fue la época de Rauschenberg , de la exposición de Rauschenberg aquí en Cuba. Se tomó mucho la instalación. ¡Imagínate tú! Discúlpate que no te pueda hablar mucho así....Estoy escribiendo. Estas gentes están más jóvenes. Están más frescos. Llevan la historia. Sí, instalaciones, performances...La época de Arternativa se hacían performances pero no tanto como Omni. Omni sí tomó más la performáncia. Tania Bruguera se unió, se unió a Tania Bruguera.

ZK. Bueno, y con todos, Arternativa, El Quijote y con Omni, ¿Cómo fueron recibidos por la comunidad?

LC. Sí, la comunidad. Bueno, hay tantos problemas económicos y tanta necesidad que una persona con problemas familiares e hijos y con problemas económicos es difícil que baje. Pero Arternativa ha estado más vinculado a la calle, al pueblo, ir más a las casas, a ser alternativo. Porque la gente joven, sí, asiste a las galerías. La gente joven asiste a las galerías. Pero Omni quiere abarcar más, quiere involucrar más a la población. Ese es un mérito de ello,. Con Arternativa lo hacíamos con jóvenes. Al principio comenzamos a integrarnos con gente joven y a nutrirnos con gente joven, pero no oíamos...como Omni que ha abarcado más, Omni sí ha hecho un proyecto más amplio, ha abarcado más a la calle. (12:00) Yo difiero de ellos en el sentido de que yo quiero hacer un arte no elitista pero sí más para intelectuales. Yo sí yo más recogido para gente informada. No intelectuales en el sentido establecido sino en el sentido de gente pensante, de gente con sensibilidad, para gente con sensibilidad. Lo he tomado para gente con sensibilidad y que se acerquen a un local. No ir al pueblo. Hay un refrán que dice “No echas perlas a los puercos”. Pero bueno...Hay mucha necesidad. La gente tiene muchos problemas económicos. Imagínate tú. Una persona mayor ir a sentarse a escuchar un poema. No tenemos esa cultura todavía. La radio y la televisión sí se preocupan de informar en el sentido de que la gente vaya, pero qué va, hay mucha necesidad. Es angustiante la realidad, es muy angustiante la realidad. La gente mayor no se acerca tanto. Es una farándula. Lo que se

hace es una farándula. Veo tantas cosas. A ver, cómo te puedo decir. Es que no se concretiza nada, ni te pagan...A los poetas no les pagan por escribir ni por pensar. Todo tiene que ser muy canalizado por las instituciones gubernamentales. No, no, no, vaya. Yo escribo más conceptual y me preocupa lo escatológico., lo obvio, lo...A ver cómo te digo...El choteo cubano. Pero lo que se publica hoy día es lírica. Es muy...la hormiguita con las ocho patitas...Es muy anodino, muy insípido, muy soso. Te publican cosas sosas, pero cosas problemáticas no te las publican. Vamos a suponer, yo tengo más intencionalidad junto con Bukovsky, el escritor norteamericano, de ser más lo escatológico, lo sucio, lo ríspido. Pero eso...Hay gente joven que sí incursiona en eso, pero no tiene esa pegada. Te van dejando ahí a que tú envejezcas. No es fácil. No es fácil.

ZK. Y ahora, en este tiempo ¿es peor?

LC. Sí, es peor, es peor. Es como una paranoia de pensar que se les van las cosas de las manos. Imagínate tú. Control sobre todo. Imagínate tú. Un libre pensador es un peligro. No hay nada más peligroso que un hombre que piensa con su propia cabeza. Nada más tengo ese libro publicado Zona y Viento. No me publican Cabroná en el Pasillo y otros libros. No te llaman. No te...Tienes que hacer vida de farándula entre ellos para que ellos te digan lo que tienes que publicar. Lo permisible.

ZK. Y...¿Piensas que grupos como Omni puede abrir un espacio...?

LC. Sí, pienso que grupos como Omni pueden abrir un espacio alternativo, un espacio mixto, entre lo que se publica y lo que se...Es que el grupo Omni es más divertido. Es más el divertimento. Y entonces, las cosas que están muy institucionalizadas son muy serias, muy pacatas, muy encartonadas. Poses. Muchos intelectuales haciendo poses. No, no, no. Omni ahí se ha preocupado por romper toda ese cliché, todos esos clichés, pero no. Te obligan a vivir con el cliché. Así pienso. Te obligan a vivir con el cliché., con el estereotipo. Te obligan a vivir con una pose. Te obligan a ser ideológicos. No, no, no. El arte ya no es una ideología. Es un icono. Ideo. No una ideología. No, no. Eso de querer serial a todo el mundo. No, no, no.

ZK. Entonces en qué parte pueden encontrar espacios más abiertos o que...

LC. En Alamar.

ZK. Sólo en Alamar, hay otros que Omni?

LC. El espacio que tiene Omni, ya no le dan a otros...las instituciones...

ZK. Los están separando.

LC. Ya tú sabes. Divide y vencerás. Todo eso me afecta, todo eso psicológicamente me afecta. Me he aislado para escribir. Entonces si estoy escribiendo concentrado yo no puedo saber, si tengo un guión...El día que va a leer Nilo, el día que va...Son, me vuelve...Me dispersa. Me dispersa mucho. Es mejor un local que me de una lista todo bien organizado, para que tu vayas, leer. No, no, yo no. Ya no soy muy jovencito ya. Ya tengo cincuenta años. Ya no tengo esa...espontáneo ir festinado para ...Ya tengo otras preocupaciones. Entonces a nosotros no nos dejan organizarnos. Imagínate tú. No hay transporte para ir para allá. Ay. Que desastre. No porque yo sí cojo un carro por ahí para allá pero me afectan las visiones. Me deprime mucho salir a la calle me deprime mucho. Mucha calamidad, mucha necesidad. Entonces eso te conlleva a que tú no pienses., porque como tienes que estar preocupado para la subsistencia, no puedes generar ideas. No puedes recrearte. Así surgió El Quijote y Arternativa. Por una inquietud de la juventud. La juventud como siempre queriendo transformar, no se, tener sus propios espacios. Imagínate tú. A pasado años de eso. Pero la realidad es muy cruel. La gente tiene que hacer familia. Tiene que mantener padres viejitos. La juventud entonces tiene que dedicarse a trabajar y a buscar otros espacios. No puede dedicarse al arte. No, no, no. Eso del arte en masa es muy entrecomilla eso. Eso no es así. No hay una organización. Está muy bien la información, pero no se digiere, no se digiere tan fácilmente así. No, no, no. No hay una organización para tú en masa vivir del arte, no. Eso es mucho de boca para afuera. Entonces Omni ha hecho la resistencia. Ha hecho el grupo de resistencia sobre eso...Son personas más convencidas. Son personas más convencidas.

ZK. Bueno, antes con Arternativa y Quijote estaba un espacio más amplio en este tiempo...¿Qué pasó con ellos? Ellos lo vieron como una resistencia o como algo diferente...

LC. Así fue. El grupo Omni marcó la diferencia con el grupo Arternativa y El Quijote. Bueno, a razón de El Quijote no teníamos Casa de Cultura y nos asignaron una casita para hacer las actividades de nosotros. Pero construyeron la Casa de Cultura para nuclearnos. Nada puede ser independiente de la UJC. Nada puede ser ...La Juventud es la que tiene que organizar eso. (20:16) No estábamos hechos todavía. Ya Omni eran más artesanos, tenían la historia de Alamar. Es más la agresividad de la vida. Ahora las instituciones están más paranoicas con respecto de los movimientos artísticos. Yo veo cierta preocupación porque la juventud se le vaya...pero bueno, es la vida. La juventud! La juventud hace siempre lo que quiere.

Con el Quijote y Arternativa no teníamos los problemas. Hay más auge de arte con el grupo Omni. Ya el arte ha caminado otro tramo. Teníamos la influencia en los años 80 del surrealismo, de Bretón, de Apollinaire, de Paul Eluard, de los poetas simbolistas, pero con la generación de Omni ya es el arte sucio, el arte escatológico, el arte necrótico, lo ríspido, las disoluciones, los principios de la postmodernidad. Ya no es la modernidad. Los principios de la muerte del ego, la muerte del sujeto, ya se dominaba. Ya el grupo Omni manejaba otros términos. No de la modernidad sino de la postmodernidad. El fin de la historia, el fin del proyecto ilustrado de la modernidad. El grupo Omni maneja otra información. El grupo Omni no es ideología sino un estado de eureka, de la Eureka, de alegría. Yo veo otras sutilezas. Hay más sutilezas en la juventud hoy en día que en la de nosotros. La de nosotros es años 80, no había problemas económicos, vivíamos en el CAME, vivíamos en la Unión Soviética. Vivíamos apadrinados. La juventud soñaba con flores. Imagínate aquella literatura era...No voy a decir insípida por falta de espiritualidad, sino insípida porque no había tanta necesidad ni agresividad en la población. Con el grupo El Quijote y Arternativa éramos felices entre comillas. Era otra juventud más sana. Hoy no. Hoy se maneja la droga, se maneja otras cosas...No, no el grupo Omni ha visto

así...No es que el grupo Omni sea agresivo. Es la misma agresividad de la vida. Ellos lo que son es un termómetro. El grupo Omni es un termómetro de medir la temperatura pero ellos dicen lo que ellos hacen. Es la realidad. Pero no quieren que tú reflejes eso. ¿Te ha servido lo que te he dicho? ¿Te han hablado parecido así?

ZK. Sí, si.

LC. (26:00) No, discúlpame que no te pueda hablar más coherente. Imagínate tú! Para poder sobrevivir tengo que llevar otra vida. He delegado en ellos, en el grupo Omni que lleven la historia de El Quijote. Yo fui el primero, e líder del grupo Quijote. Pero de allá para acá ha llovido mucho.

ZK. No hay mucho escrito sobre Alamar, afuera. Es bastante difícil de encontrar ...

LC. No tenemos acceso a la internet...

ZK. Sí, pero una palabra que siempre puedo conseguir es que Alamar es un lugar de gente marginal...

LC. Ah, allá en el exterior tienen...la poca información que hay...

ZK. No, no es de aquí, pero disponible en el internet.

LC. Que es marginal...

ZK. Marginal. Es una palabra que siempre está conectado con Alamar. Y me interesa...

LC. Bueno. A ver cómo te puedo decir. Imagínate tú! Marginal. Sí, destruido. Quiero salvar a los pobres viejitos que ...Imagínate tú. Es que no hay opciones. Alamar no es sólo gente joven con inquietudes. No es que seamos marginales es que nos han marginado. Al ala norte del este. No es una ciudad autónoma. No se auto edifica ella. En el sentido de todo. Económico. Entonces la juventud es la que ha llevado el proyecto marginal. Excluido. Foráneo. Somos foráneos dentro del mismo país. Somos turistas dentro del mismo país.

ZK. En qué manera, porque la geografía de esta parte está desconectado, físicamente? Por eso?

LC. Desconectado. Entonces, ¡Cómo no va a ser marginado? Yo creo que no es que el grupo sea marginal, que Omni sea marginal. Es la misma marginalidad de Alamar. Hay que salir para el exterior para resolver las

cosas. Al exterior de allá de La Habana, salir de... Somos un termómetro. La juventud toma los nombres, los apellidos de las cosas pero es la realidad. No hay industria en Alamar. ¿Dónde vas a trabajar? No hay industria. ¡Chapear! La juventud la opción que tiene es chapear canteros, chapear. No hay, no hay. No tenemos opción. Y la juventud hace resistencia a eso. No, no, no, no somos un país de florecitas. Hay muchos escritores hablando de florecitas, pero no somos un país de florecitas. Miente, miente el que...Entonces la poesía del grupo Omni no es una florecita. Es una segunda naturaleza. Es la naturaleza del hombre que piensa, no es la naturaleza de Dios. Muchos poetas se inspiran en la armonía, pero yo no veo armonía. Me disculpa la negatividad pero yo no veo armonía. Es una segunda naturaleza la que escribe Omni y hace performancia es la antropología del hombre. Es ser hombre como centro del universo. Y aquí no somos ni centro. Somos la periferia. Ahí es el concepto de marginalidad. Somos la periferia dentro de la misma periferia. Porque este país, la isla, es una periferia aislada del mundo. ¿Te sirvió lo que te dije?

ZK. Sí, sí. ¿Quieres decirme algo más sobre tu obra, sobre tu trayectoria.

LC. No, yo no tengo. No veo el futuro. La trayectoria. Imagínate, mi trayectoria. Nada, me he puesto viejo. No en mis pensamientos pero me he puesto viejo en el sentido de que no hay continuidad de nada. Es la postmodernidad. Estamos viviendo la postmodernidad. Sin querer aceptarla estamos viviendo la postmodernidad en la modernidad. La muerte del sujeto. Ya lo dije todo ya.

ZK. Ese libro que tienes en la mano sí está lindo.

LC. Ah, Ocre del Medio. Significa mediocre y yo le puse Ocre del Medio.

ZK. Y la ...[ININTELIGIBLE]

LC. Está buenísimo. Todos tenemos la misma verdad., la misma razón. Primero A, el Ego. Ahí estoy hablando A significa el ego, lo que yo lo simbolizo para no...juego...para hacerlo más plural, más abstracto, pero...Para no crear ruido, pero estoy diciendo las cosas. Esa es mi poesía. Utilizo mucho la metáfora de segundo grado que es la simbólica. Me identifico mucho , me identifiqué mucho cuando joven con los simbolistas franceses. Siempre los literatos se han preocupado mucho

por los marginales, por los mismos escritores que han sido marginados, los problemáticos, los rebeldes. Siempre la juventud ha tomado ...Y yo me puse a favor de eso. Desde jóvenes en el mismo grupo Quijote, el mismo grupo Omni, teníamos tendencia a lo rebelde., teníamos tendencia a la gente problemática, la gente difícil, las cosas difíciles. Las cosas agudas.

ZK. ¿Diste tu poesía a personas de afuera, personas de afuera tiene su...?

LC. No tengo contactos. Omni tiene más contactos... Yo he dejado Omni que me canalice la literatura, pero no tengo contactos yo personalmente no tengo contacto con el exterior. Me gustaría que un proyecto con Omni dijera Livio, busquen a Livio para publicar sus libros en Estados Unidos. Si me ayudas en eso, que venga otro a publicar.

ZK. Sí, nosotros siempre que viene alguien que tiene que ver con la literatura y eso...

LC. Si la literatura, porque usted es más la performancia...

ZK. Y la plástica.

LC. Y la plástica.

[LLEGA ALGUIEN]

LC. Bueno, mira él es el médico. Ella es una periodista estadounidense. Óyeme, sí el grupo Omni tiene más de performancia. Yo soy más literato. Soy más escritor.

ZK. Sí. Aunque por ejemplo Amaury también...

LC. Escribe.

ZK. Escribe Nilo, Ligio. Pero es más...

LC. Instalación, performancia.

ZK. Performático, pero todos escriben. Todos.

LC. Sí. Todos escriben. Sí, claro. Sí para hacer performancia hay que pensar. Sí, sí. Pero yo me he dedicado más a la literatura. Tengo veinte libros de poesía sin publicar. Veinte libros de poesía sin publicar. Los tengo guardados en cajones ahí.

LC. Dedícame, dedícame a mí. Ayúdame en eso. A publicar. Como si el derecho de autor es irrisorio, no me preocupa. Por el dinero no...Pero que no se pierda mi literatura.

NILO JULIAN GONZALEZ PREVAL Entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

24 FEBRERO 2007 Alamar

TIEMPO TOTAL: 1:18:41

Zoya: Bueno, dime otra vez que me estabas diciendo...

Nilo Julián: Yo te estaba hablando. Una dificultad...Mi obra llegó a tener relación con el mundo religioso, porque desde el principio nosotros, nos dimos cuenta que las instituciones cubanas no estaban preparadas para asumir el performance de intervención pública como una realidad práctica debido a que por lo general este, es un país politizado en todos los aspectos y eso crea un miedo. Hay un miedo latente a decir cosas, a expresar la verdad o a expresar con libertad las cosas que uno siente. No solo la verdad, porque puede que tú quieras decir una mentira, pero es que, ni la mentira la puedes decir. No hay espacios de diálogo social. Ni hay espacios de orientación civil en ningún tipo. En modo alguno, ni en ninguna institución. No hay un diálogo social abierto, sin mediadores políticos o económicos en Cuba. No los hay. Entonces, ¿Qué hice yo? Revisar las leyes, un poco....y dije: Ah, pero sí hay libertad de creencias religiosas. Ah, vamos a hacer religión. Y entonces intervengo espacios públicos con acciones religiosas que por lo general la gente hace en otros espacios. Yo lo hago en espacios públicos, pero que después llegué a otra reflexión más importante. Me di cuenta que no era solo que te repriman a la hora de hacer un performance, que las instituciones no estén preparadas, que el Estado no quiera que haya una libertad de expresión equis, sino que está la autocensura. En el grupo, cada uno de nosotros ha



descubierto que personalmente cada cual se encuentra en un estadio de autocensura. Ya, en lo básico el grupo “Gestor”, los que tu vistes hoy reunidos, no tienen problemas con eso. Ahora yo llego donde quiera y hago lo que me da la gana porque la energía que yo desprendo, que yo llamo “energía espiritual consciente”, no es una energía de enfrentamiento político directo, porque yo no necesito enfrentarme directamente a las instituciones políticas, porque a mí no me interesa eso. Yo puedo hacer mi política, aquí en mi casa. Y compartir mis ideas políticas con mi comunidad. Sin tener que llegar a todo el país. Ahora, si cada uno de los que hacen performance en Cuba hace eso en todo el país, se crea una red que va presionando al poder y va generando el cambio desde la propia base. Más o menos esa la historia. Entonces que pasa, ya estoy en una etapa en que he vuelto al inicio. Llegue a lo que estas viendo en imágenes, al proceso religioso, buscando, explorando un modo de intervenir espacios sociales, sin que la policía se metiera, sin que en las instituciones se armara lío, sin que me llevaran preso. Muchas veces me llevaron preso. Entonces ahora ya estamos en la etapa en que podemos intervenir espacios sociales, no con total aceptación por las instituciones, pero si como... “bueno, ya, coño,...diez años haciendo eso, bueno, vamos a ver que pasa”. ¿Entiendes? Entonces puedo hacer eso como "Cruzando el Mar de Noche” porque hay ya un entendimiento interior de mi capacidad, de mi habilidad, de mi modo de ser, de cómo facturo la idea, y que es, lo que quiero expresar. Y está también, el dialogo. Ya no soy tan agresivo como al principio de integrar el grupo...He comprendido algunas cosas del arte y del mercado del arte, además de la edad. Ya estoy a punto de cumplir cuarenta años. Soy uno de los más viejos del grupo. En abril yo

cumplo cuarenta años. Entonces... ya la edad también me ha dado experiencia, porque yo, también aprendo. Pero, pienso y digo: pasó tal cosa, ocurrió este fenómeno, que se suma como experiencia emocional, no solo intelectual y ya quiero otras cosas, espirituales, que tengo que buscar vías adecuadas para expresar. Entonces, eso... (Llevo un montón de días sin fregar porque yo no friego, me quedo en mi casa en La Habana, déjame hacer esto un instante...) Bueno, eso es. Ahora, respondo cualquier pregunta tuya.

Zoya: ¿Bueno, antes, cuando estabas empezando estas acciones publicas en la calle, no sentían libertad de hacer, pero ahora el gobierno local, la gente esta acostumbrada a estas acciones, y conocen a ustedes y dejan en paz mas o menos, o no?

Nilo Julián: Si, si, ya hay como un dialogo, ya hemos logrado un dialogo con las instituciones en general de todo el país, porque evidentemente tengo que confesar, como muchos de nosotros debemos reconocer, que la obra del grupo es una obra de alcance nacional porque si no saben de nosotros, porque hemos estado en diferentes provincias, saben de nosotros porque ellos han estado aquí. Además, el disco es único en toda la historia de la discografía cubana, de todo lo que se ha grabado, el disco de Alamar Express...A los primeros días del disco nos gritaban por la calle: .....“Oye, Alamar Express...Oye el cloro, el cloro, oye ya tengo el disco”. Fue impresionante el primer año del disco, ya tiene dos años. Sigue siendo un disco underground. Sigue siendo un disco que nosotros vendemos mano a mano. Sigue siendo un disco que mucha gente ha

querido... “Oye si, en España, Fulano lo quiere en una emisora”, pero en fin nada se concreta. Sigue siendo un disco muy personal, muy único, underground. Y eso junto con los videos, la participación en Santiago de Cuba en el Festival del Caribe, la participación en la Bienal de La Habana, mi video, el video “Atajo”, las diferentes participaciones de nosotros en eventos comunitarios y eventos de múltiples alcances sociales como los que hemos tenido, ha ido obligando a las autoridades a mirar con otros ojos el dialogo con nosotros. ¿Por qué? Porque sin querer nos hemos convertido en un poder social. Uno no lo quiere, pero si uno se pone a repartir flores, a repartir flores, a repartir flores, llega el día en que las personas que venden flores tienen que establecer el dialogo contigo, ¿Entiendes? Tienen que establecer el dialogo contigo de algún modo.

Bueno, te respondo otra cosa. (10:23)

Zoya: ¿Bueno, cual es el papel de la identidad cultural y de la raza en la dinámica del grupo?

¿Como identificaron a los miembros de Omni, como se agruparon y con que criterio?

(12:10)

Nilo Julián: Bueno, Amaury, el Rene, Fito y Olver, son escultores y estaban en un lugar en la propia Casa de la Cultura, en la propia institución. Según ellos me cuentan, tenían algunas dificultades creativas y se encontraron con un poeta llamado Juan Carlos Flores que llevaba muchos años tratando de crear, de aglutinar un grupo de creadores que

trabajaran la poesía y las artes plásticas a la misma vez. Entonces, Juan Carlos se comenzó a reunir con Amaury, con el Rene, con Fito, con Olver y a nombre de Juan Carlos, el Director de la Galería de Arte, Pablo Rigal Collado, les dio el espacio a Amaury, a Fito, a Rene y a Orbe. Yo vi llegar a Rene mucho después. Yo no sabia que el era de los fundadores porque nunca lo vi. Yo a los únicos que veía era a Fito, a Amaury y a la que era esposa de Amaury, Rebeca que ahora no esta con nosotros aquí. Bueno, yo los veía a ellos y un día cogí y fui pa' allá, a vivir para el taller y a pintar allí. Llego Yoyi...llego, llego...Como al año de estar juntos, Amaury o alguien propuso la idea de constituirnos como grupo. Yo me recuerdo de los días que estaban buscando el nombre. A mi el nombre de Omni nunca me gustó. Realmente no me gusta mucho el nombre. Yo hubiera preferido "Machu Pichu" o algún otro nombre. Bueno, entonces, que paso, como el 12 de Febrero de 1998 nos reunimos entre todos quince personas y firmamos una carta de intención de mantenernos unidos. Te puedo hacer una anécdota personal. Ese día yo propuse que nada material podía estar en el centro del grupo como discusión, acción o hecho que creara desavenencia. Entonces se tomo eso, se escribió como tercer lineamiento. No discutir de cosas materiales, no discutir de dinero. Todo era el corazón y todo era el espíritu. Y otra cosa que yo propuse que se quedo: nunca tomar una decisión de carácter grupal si no había al menos tres de nosotros. Entonces esas dos cosas yo me acuerdo bien claro que yo las propuse, se quedaron permanentemente en el espíritu del grupo. Y son cosas que nos han ayudado mucho a sobrevivir y nos han marcado tremendamente en el espíritu. Bueno,... ¿Que nos impulsa a trabajar? Es esa una de tus preguntas...

Zoya (16:19) Si, ¿y cuales son los criterios?

Nilo Julián:(16:45) Yo no creo que en un principio supiéramos bien lo que íbamos a hacer, pero si había una intención de ser trabajadores sociales. Nosotros empleamos el termino “trabajadores sociales” primero que Fidel, primero que los medios de difusión masiva del país. Porque cuando yo llegue al grupo llevaba años trabajando en este edificio y esta zona con los niños y con los adultos, organizando actividades. Aquel cuarto, era un salón para que los jóvenes amigos míos bailaran breakdance. Yo tenía eso preparado ahí para bailar y siempre aprovechaba para hablar de pintura y de cine, son las tres cosas de las que más yo hablo. Entonces, no creo que haya existido un criterio firme en torno a lo que íbamos a hacer. Lo que pasa es que la vocación de nosotros siempre ha sido una vocación social, dirigida a espacios sociales. Y hay un consenso general interno de que nosotros somos interventores de espacios sociales, somos trabajadores socio comunitarios. Los que no lo eran no están con nosotros en el grupo. Por eso de quince que éramos inicialmente, nos quedamos en seis. Los seis del grupo gestor entre los cuales no esta Rene aunque ahora esta...porque...hay ciertas normas, a la hora de tomar las grandes decisiones solo estamos seis personas y esas son las que deciden. Hay personas como Rene que entran y salen, entran y salen del grupo y eso no les permite una visión completa a la hora de tomar decisiones, que a veces son decisiones políticas, decisiones que tienen que ver con nuestro pensamiento ideológico, en un estado de cosas políticamente complejo como es Cuba, ¿Entiendes? Entonces, volviendo

atrás. Había una vocación de trabajo social. Yo lo hacia, Amaury lo hacia, Eligio lo hacia, el Yoyi lo hacia y ya, somos el grupo gestor...y Fito también lo hacia. Cada uno de nosotros tiene una característica particular y muy interesante. Juntos o separados nosotros somos trabajadores sociales. Fito era trabajador social porque era de cierta forma un líder en su comunidad. Yo soy aquí de cierta forma un líder porque muchas personas me piden la opinión, porque tengo poder de convocatoria para cosas desde que era muy niño. Lo que yo tengo es cierto poder de convocatoria. Amaury tiene otro poder. Eligio tiene otro y así...cada uno de nosotros tiene un poder de convocatoria particular. A la hora de asumir responsabilidades, actividades, acciones, las cosas que se hagan, en general. Entonces eso es lo que nos mantiene unidos como grupo. Ahora pregúntame lo que tú quieras.

Zoya: (21:29) Bueno, voy a preguntar en ingles... How important is, in terms of what you want to achieve, ¿Que quieres lograr en el contexto social? ¿The question of race? ¿Es importante la raza, ustedes se consideran un grupo con un rol en este sentido o no es importante?

Nilo Julián: Nosotros tenemos conciencia que el problema de la raza en Cuba es un problema grave. ¿Por que? De pronto, dejaron de entrar negros en Cuba. No entraron más negros en Cuba pero si siguieron entrando blancos. Un punto. Dos: la Revolución decreto de ley la igualdad de razas, de género, el derecho al estudio, al trabajo, y bla, bla, bla, de negros y blancos. Pero eso es un decreto, un cartel que esta colgado en el cielo. Aquí abajo en mi casa, los blancos cogen para un lado

y los negros cogen para otro lado y no se entienden; y hay tremendo racismo, y hay tremenda locura en este país...eh Rene, porque es más locura, que racismo. Porque más del 40 por ciento de los blancos cubanos tienen un negro atrás, pero no lo saben, porque no investigan en la historia, no escarban...Entonces se están viendo en el espejo, creen que ellos son eso que ven en el espejo y no es así. Entonces esa es la historia, es una locura. Y entonces el asunto esta en que...Yo soy de los que si me gustaría hacer un trabajo específico y dirigido hacia el rescate de ciertos valores del negro en Cuba. A mí como artista individual. Y yo lo hago desde mi obra. Con mi obra, mi brujería, mis cosas, mi talla. Pero el grupo, donde también hay blancos y mulatos “libres” tiene una orientación social y una orientación general. Incluso siempre nos preguntan: ¿Y las mujeres? Y nosotros decimos que las mujeres tienen su ritmo, que ellas deciden hacer o no hacer.

Somos un grupo multidisciplinario de intervención socio comunitaria a todos los niveles. Nosotros tratamos de desarrollar proyectos en los cuales estén incluidos asuntos de género, asuntos de raza, asuntos de ideología, asuntos de índole espiritual, asuntos de índole digamos “socio religiosa”. Y somos un grupo de artistas con una marcada intención de trabajo civil, por el rescate de espacios de diálogos civiles. Esto es importante en nosotros, muy, muy importante. Y entonces eso es lo que marca la obra del grupo. No tenemos ningún tipo de dificultad y podemos trabajar con los Inuits, con los amerindios que viven al norte del lago de Michigan, con los Yorubas que viven en Pennsylvania, o con esta gente que viven aquí abajo en Orlando, al borde de Disneyland. Fresco. Lo de

nosotros es intervenciones sociales después de una investigación. Te voy a hacer una anécdota. Una de las cosas que más me gusta mi a hacer es, cuando alguna persona no nacida en Cuba llega a mi casa, le doy la libreta y le digo: (27:21) mira hace falta ir al mercado a buscar los mandados. Y entonces va un francés al mercado y dice:..... Ah, bueno mira, yo querer comprar mandados aquí para llevar para la casa. Entonces el bodeguero se ve obligado a conversar con el y tienen que establecer un dialogo, ese es un modo para que vea y sienta mi realidad. Creo que a partir de ahí es una propuesta de dialogo importante. Claro, nosotros tenemos diferentes maneras de abordar la realidad. Yo lo hago así. Yo a veces estoy con un extranjero aquí y chiflo para allá atrás: Oscarito, ven acá, llévalo para la Habana un rato, y lo mando con un amigo mío que es militar, para que el militar le cuente desde el punto de vista militar como esta Cuba. O lo mando con un amigo mío tabaquero, o con una amiga mía que es gerente, y tiene carro y tiene DVD, CVD, que tiene una pila de cosas en la casa y tiene un nivel de vida económico mejor que el nuestro... Yo trato de dar opciones. Y el grupo trabaja en el rango más grande de todas las posibilidades. Lo único que es específico es el modo de trabajar. Por ejemplo Amaury puede trabajar con veinticinco personas. Yo puedo trabajar, mientras sean niños, hasta con treinta y seis, pero con adultos no paso de cinco. Y entonces, eso, enfrentamos todo tipo de problemas sin prejuicios. Es un grupo que a la hora de enfrentar el trabajo social no tiene prejuicios. Estamos abiertos a todos los intercambios, a todas las posibilidades. Intentamos ir allá a San Luis, por el asunto Katrina y eso. Intentamos ir hace como tres años y pico. Pero nos dijeron que no. En fin, los americanos tienen sus enredos siempre y forman sus líos. Te digo



los americanos, ellos allá arriba. Aquí la Oficina de Intereses y todo eso. Si fuera contigo yo me fuera en el avión contigo. Pero ellos si tienen...el drama. Bueno, dime.

Zoya: Bueno, en la forma de presentarse como un grupo, ustedes tienen dreadlocks y todo, y Amaury y sus distintas presentación, y todo. ¿Cual es la percepción o recepción de ustedes en la comunidad?

Nilo Julián: Ok... Al principio, nuestra imagen era una imagen súper agresiva y que causaba zozobra. Rechazo, sorpresa. Porque era nueva, una imagen nueva. Mucha gente estaba sorprendida por el cúmulo de imágenes. Fito, un poco exquisito, un poco desgarbado, bien vestido pero con barba mal afeitada....y entonces un tatuaje raro, porque no es ni un indio, ni un Che, ni es nada, luego en fin, entonces Olver, atractivo sexualmente, mulato, alto, simpático, entonces como que siempre estaba enredado. Que habla y uno nunca lo entiende bien. Yo, con los pelos de punta, con moños, sin dientes, bastante afeminado soy en publico. Yo hago así, me comporto así, hago así, entonces...muy gay, entiendes, muy ambiguo. Amaury, bastante impulsivo, agresivo, muy radiante, radiante. El Rene, con su talla, se queda atrás, todo el mundo adelante y el atrás. Entonces cuando tu hablas con el te habla del amor. Un negro así...Te dice, las canciones amor me parten en dos. Tengo el corazón enfermo. Tú te sorprendes. Toda una amalgama de imágenes que creaban sorpresa.

Zoya: (33:07) ¿Es una estrategia de presentarse de este modo?

¿Porque...?

Nilo Julián: Hubo un consenso general. Desde el instante en que nos conocimos de resistirnos. Por que, repito, el trabajo que Rene hacia, particular, de jugar ajedrez constantemente con sus amigos lo convertía en una especie de líder social. Ya Rene venia con una practica de lidiar con diferentes personas. Cuando se encontró conmigo, me miro de arriba a bajo y dijo:...!coño!, tu así, que bola, entonces yo le dije, no, mira yo, por aquí por allá. Entonces el dijo: bueno... Bien, ya, fresco, y me entendió. Entonces nos fuimos entendiendo entre todos. Y eso creo una unidad. Porque también había un propósito. Cuba está cambiando. Y hay que ayudar a que ese cambio sea un cambio positivo. Graba eso ahí que eso es importante. ¿Entiendes? Cuba está cambiando. Nosotros vemos el cambio, nos damos cuenta. Y decimos: !coño!, hay gente que esta mareada, hay gente que esta en otra talla. Hay gente que está para buscarse los cuatro pesos, trabajando en la shopping, vendiendo en la shopping, para comer perro caliente y coca cola, y hay gente que se va en balsa, que no le cuadra lo que está ocurriendo y se van y hay gente como mi hermano que era del equipo Nacional de Cuba y se quedo exiliado. Se quedo en Italia como exiliado político. Dijo cuatro cosas por allá y se quedo. Se escapo del equipo Cuba y se fue. Mi hermana se quedó en Italia. Mis amigos se han ido en balsa. Pero nosotros, podemos ayudar a que Cuba cambie para mejor. Ya eso estaba en la base, en la raíz de nosotros. También hay muchas cosas, te voy a contar un chisme para que sepas. El Rene es Libra, yo soy Tauro, Amaury es Leo, Eligio es Cáncer, el Yoyi y Olver son Virgo, los dos. Y Fito es Capricornio. Formamos un triangulo. Si alguien ve eso, un astrólogo...Cuando la gente lo ve dice, no,

no, no, ustedes se pusieron de acuerdo, eso no es casualidad. Pero eso lo hizo la naturaleza, yo no hice nada. Yo estaba aquí en mi casa y Rene estaba allá abajo en su zona jugando ajedrez. ¿Entiendes? Me ocurrió. Me encontré con él y me dijo: yo soy de Santiago de Cuba, de la calle Enramada y para mi Oscar de León es el tipo. Y yo le dije:... yo me paro así y me gusta el rock and roll y me gusta jugar ajedrez y vamos a jugar ajedrez. Y así fue. No hubo mucha dificultad en eso. Porque a eso se le suma de una forma o de otra que Rene había intentado leer toda una literatura de mística y esotérica y gnóstica. Yo también, Amaury también, Eligio también. Los otros también. Y a eso se suma lo artístico, la vocación social y el espíritu del alma. Yo dije un día, ven acá y mi alma, que va a pasar con mi alma. Y dije, déjame hacer algo con mi alma que se me va para algún lado y me puse a investigar. Fue en el año 88. Fui a la Sociedad Teosófica de Cuba, a los talleres, que hablaban de espiritismo. No me convino, porque yo estaba un poco duro cuando eso. Estaba pasando el servicio militar en Etiopia, en África y fue duro en el aspecto de que tuve que ser súper agresivo, súper súper violento. Yo pase un servicio militar violento entre los cubanos. Porque en Etiopia, en Etiopia yo estaba fresco. Iba a la Candonga, caminaba, me compraba mis galletas de chocolate. Fui al cine dos veces en Etiopia. Me escapaba de la unidad por el monte, me compraba un chocolate ingles que venden, Mulligan,....Mulligan, algo de eso, un chocolate rico y mirando películas de la India que veía yo allá en Etiopia. Un elefante volando y un maramahana y todo eso...Bueno, yo llegue a Cuba muy preocupado en el 88 con mi alma y eso me acerco a la sociedad teosófica. Entonces me encuentro con el Rene, que juega ajedrez, que sabe quien es Karpov,

Kasparov, Petrosian, el otro y el otro, me dice que es guapo, que es un tipo que no se le puede mirar mal porque entonces se faja contigo y me dice que le gustan las canciones de Nino Bravo, entonces ve, que es el último romántico, pero sabe que es Libra. Y de pronto me dice:....no, yo, el guapo, como soy arriba, soy abajo, porque Hermes Trismegisto, no se que, entonces dije este me va a volver loco. Y así, cada uno de los que ha sobrevivido como integrantes del grupo gestor, ha ido comprendiendo al otro...Te voy a hacer una confesión: nosotros nos hemos metido cuatro piñazos ahí. Si, si, porque a veces uno no tiene más herramientas que desahogarse (hace un ruido de luchador karateca) entonces después Amaury se para y dice: un día nos vamos a batir. Esa es una frase, esa es una escena que a mi me maravillo. Pero bueno, mira, yo mismo no estaba de acuerdo con el performance. Amaury me decía: ¡coño! el performance...y yo le decía, que preformase, ni que performance, viejo vamos a dibujar, hacer exposiciones de dibujo. Tú tienes que aprender a dibujar. Incluso, yo entre al grupo a dar un taller de dibujo, no a ser integrante. Yo entre a Omni a dar un taller a Fito, a Amaury y a Olver...Les di un taller de dibujo y dibujando, explicando un modo en que podíamos acercarnos al dibujo de una mejor manera fue...que empecé a ver,..... ¡Coño!, pero espérate, la talla en madera, coño, pero espérate tal cosa por aquí, tal cosa por allá. Y todo empezó a tomar forma sin mucha conciencia a lo largo de los años. Hoy presenciaste una reunión histórica, como son las cosas históricas, sencillas y elementales. Hoy decidimos que había que parar, parar, porque yo quiero parar, son diez años, performance, intervenciones, performance, performance, hay un cúmulo de información y de cosas que uno no ha podido ver, pensar, hay cosas

que están incompletas en el medio, mira déjame enseñarte una cosita.  
Ven, siéntate.

Sound File 10 > 34:49

Nilo Julián: (00:26) Si el nombre no estuviera respaldado por una obra no fuera ni un nombre. ¿Por que? Omni es un prefijo latino, significa todo. Una idea de Yoyi. A mi no me gusta mucho el nombre, pero bueno...Ya, está gente dijeron que si y era todo el mundo diciendo que si, bueno, dale. Y Zona Franca creo que es una idea de Edwin y Alberto Basabe, que ahora vive por allá en Chicago y trabaja en un hotel, creo. No se bien. El asunto está en que...Zona Franca para la poesía. Y Omni para los artistas, porque es, aunando los esfuerzos de todos. Yo estoy convencido que dentro de diez años más, muchos de nosotros van a decir que lo único que han hecho en Omni es, crecer como personas, que no ha sido tan importante el trabajo social y lo otro, porque ya a mi en lo personal, hay cosas que me están dejando de interesar, por ejemplo, el dibujo. Ya no quiero dibujar. Ya yo tengo mis dibujos tirados en el piso. Toda esa loma de cosas que hay por ahí por el piso son, mis dibujos. Yo con los años he dejado de dibujar. Y en realidad, el año pasado, Rene, Bienal de La Habana, en realidad, acciones estoy haciendo pocas, porque estoy mas metido en el crecimiento personal y en la relación con la personas que en el trabajo como tal. Al principio yo si estaba muy concentrado en la obra, pero también hay una cosa: yo tengo doce exposiciones personales de dibujo. Soy el único del grupo que llega a esa cantidad. El que mas tiene tendrá tres que es el Yoyi, personales tiene dos, colectivas tiene unas cuantas más. Pero si yo sumo todas mis

exposiciones personales son doce, más ocho que yo no reconozco como importantes antes de 1988, que yo las hice en diferentes espacios del país. Si yo sumo doce mas ocho, son un montón de exposiciones personales, veinte. Llevo años haciendo exposiciones personales, más las colectivas y la obra realizada con Omni ahora. Hay, exposiciones del grupo, donde yo he estado aquí durmiendo y no he hecho nada...porque estoy un poco agotado de eso. Me interesa mucho más la pedagogía. Y creo que estoy en un espacio personal, en un tiempo en que me estoy preparando para lanzarme en una nueva epopeya pedagógica. Creo que este año a finales o el próximo año el grupo debe retomar algunas cosas. Las intervenciones públicas. Dejar los audiovisuales...vaya, porque...video, video, video, video y entonces lo que en realidad nos ha llevado a ser Omni, por lo que vino la computadora es por eso, porque yo nadaba, el otro pintaba...porque nos acostamos en un performance que yo quisiera por lo mas grande del mundo volver a repetir que es Tierra 34. Épico, épico, épico. Y tres niñitos que yo invite, que estuvieran en el performance, estuvieron hora y pico debajo de los aguaceros que caen aquí en Cuba. La mama se puso a llorar. ....Tremenda agua y todo el mundo acostado en Tierra 34. Un performance épico, épico, para mi fue épico, importantísimo. Y ahora estoy haciendo este taller de fotografía, donde estoy haciendo pequeños performance para que Loretta y Carlitos comiencen a hacer sus performances de intervenciones publicas, ellos. Veán como yo hago mis performance, como yo me preparo.

Qué bien, tienes tus preguntas escritas, para seguir una línea de trabajo...Porque hay gente que viene aquí a...preguntar cuatro cosas ahí.

(6:10)¿....eh René, es la única persona en mi vida que ha llegado y ha estado hablando conmigo sin que yo le haga una foto?

Zoya: ¡Y yo soy fotógrafa!

Nilo Julián: ¿Usted?

Zoya: Sí.

Nilo Julián: Ya yo estoy entrando en la etapa igual que con el dibujo...No estoy con ansiedad a la hora de crear la foto. Bueno, te respondo otra cosa si quieres, cualquier cosa.

René: El tipo que más habla en el piquete de nosotros es Nilo.

Nilo Julián: Yo soy el que más hablo, sí.

Zoya: (8:00) Bueno, más o menos sobre comunidad y que están objetivos...

René: Yo no estoy respondiendo nada porque yo quiero responder mis preguntas a mi manera. Porque a mi tampoco me interesa como responde el Nilo. El Nilo habla mucho.

Nilo Julián: ¿Qué significa eso?

Zoya: Que objetivos específicos tienen en la comunidad como trabajadores sociales, porque en el mundo del trabajo social siempre hay un objetivo. Queremos hacer esto y esto, queremos lograr esto con esta gente, pero si hay cosas específicas que quieren lograr o si es solo mostrar o tener un sentimiento bueno y espiritual y que la gente siente bien, mejor...

Nilo Julián: Te digo los míos personales que yo de cierto modo se los propongo al grupo. Yo quiero crear espacios de diálogo civil. Espacios de dialogo social, espacio de reflexión.

Zoya: ¿Y estas logrando esto?

Nilo Julián: Estamos trabajando. No creo que hayamos alcanzado algo como tal. Pero como al principio tú me preguntabas por nuestra presencia y como nos habían aceptado...Nosotros somos lideres de opinión en Alamar. Y somos líderes de opinión en las instituciones cubanas. Nos miran, nos temen, nos admiran, nos odian, nos toman en cuenta. Siempre hay que contar con algunos de nosotros. Que Dios me perdone por el ego, pero cuando yo llego a un lugar todo el mundo hace así y se echa para atrás. Porque en el aspecto personal, intelectual, yo soy una persona peligrosa. Domino mucho la obra del grupo y domino mucho la historia del arte contemporáneo. Tengo mucha habilidad y mucha memoria, soy Tauro. Soy muy agresivo en el sentido cuando alguien dice algo del grupo que no es correcto o cuando alguien dice algo que no esta



bien dicho. A veces soy excesivo en ese impulso. Pero...hemos logrado un respeto hacia nuestra opinión, hacia nuestra actitud. Nuestra constante actitud performática, el momento performático, nos ha creado un espacio, en la conciencia general de estos últimos seis años. En los dos primeros años quizás nadie tenía conciencia de quienes éramos. Compartíamos el espacio con muchos grupos, con tres grupos exactamente, parecidos a nosotros, pero eran de las instituciones: Enema, DUPP y el grupo DIP (Departamento de intervenciones públicas). Ahora estamos solos. En el mercado cubano del performance. Aquí en la capital de Cuba, que es la capital de todos los cubanos, ¡coño!, y alabado, estamos solos y estamos a la vanguardia del arte cubano, indiscutiblemente. Eso lo demuestra la obra. Yo por lo general como hablo mucho, empiezo con los videos. Mira mi video. Ahí la gente que lo ve y dice coño, de p...me de la mano y ya. Andando. Vio lo que yo hago en el Parque Central y ya, no hay mas muela. ¿Entiendes? Entonces hemos logrado un status, hemos logrado que se nos tome en cuenta, que nuestra opinión se tome en cuenta y eso es un paso de avance, porque muchas personas en el mundo y muchas personas en Cuba, están logrando que se tome en cuenta su opinión. Te voy a decir una cosa. Si hay, una red nacional de la contracultura en Cuba. No tienen un espacio de dialogo específico, pero si existe. Te voy a poner un ejemplo. En la vanguardia de los narradores cubanos, hay un homosexual y místico, profunda y absolutamente místico que es Lezama Lima; y en la vanguardia del teatro cubano hay un gay que es Virgilio Piñera, que es un loco. La artista de la plástica cubana más importante de los años 90 era negra y se llamaba Belkis Ayón Manso. Se dio un tiro. Yo tuve el gustazo de conocerla desde

que era una niña, desde que era así. Estaba con ella en la escuela y estuve con ella muchos, muchos años de mi vida juntos. Hasta el día antes de que, se diera el tiro hable con ella. Nos íbamos a encontrar al otro día. Se dio el tiro un sábado, nos íbamos a encontrar el lunes por la mañana.

René: Vivía – déjame hacer un paréntesis – vivía donde yo te enseñé por la mañana. Ese es el cuadrante donde vivía. Ahí fue donde se suicido.

Nilo Julián: Y entonces...es definitivamente la artista cubana mas importante de los años noventa, por la absoluta calidad conceptual, formal y en general, la estética de su obra...Con respeto a la música, la vanguardia de la música cubana es profundamente compleja y como actitud son totalmente contraculturales. Porque ellos van mas allá de perder la cubanía o de perder los valores que como nación tiene este país. Porque el mismo Formell es creador junto con Changuito de uno de los ritmos que cambio la música en el siglo XX. El ya esta fuera de las aguas nacionales...Todo el mundo dice songo. Calderón el del reggaetón dice tres punto al pie porque el songo... Todo el mundo tiene que ver con el songo. Gershwin allá arriba cogió las claves cubanas porque vio a Matamoros, al otro y al otro personalmente y dijo oye clave cubana en la opera sinfónica, ¿Entiendes? Por lo tanto, el estado cubano no puede esgrimir la música cubana como obra de la Revolución, porque no, se va por encima, la obra de Lecuona, la obra del mismo Brindis de Salas, que lo tienen ahí mas o menos en el piso. Y así toda una serie de gente. Y hay una contra cultura porque los gay en Cuba...Bueno, el Rene te puede dar la opinión del por ciento de gay que hay con relación a los heterosexuales.

Y además, esta el otro plus, las jineteras, y esta el otro plus – déjame ver como te le pongo un nombre-¿Los camaleones? Los Gerentes. Como decir que el Gerente es un descarado.

René: Un descarado.

Nilo Julián: Un descarado. Los descarados forman parte de la contracultura en Cuba. Todo el que esta ocupando un cargo aquí para resolver su problema perentorio, el papel sanitario, el jabón, para engañar a la mujer con una jovencita que recoge en el carro de la empresa en el malecón, no están con la Revolución, no están apoyando la ideología socialista, no están apoyando ni tan siquiera la ideología capitalista, porque no son ni como Henry Ford, que tenían una línea para producir, no, no.

Rene: (...) Yo le decía a (...) que la educación cubana va hacia una depauperación, porque no esta el origen que se le debe de dar, no esta quien le despierte al niño en las escuelas ese amor autentico que los puede dar un verdadero maestro. Porque con el caso ese de los maestros emergentes, son chamaquitos que están todavía para que se les enseñe esas cosas.

Nilo Julián: Esas cosas. Tú crees que un muchachito de diecisiete años...Las maestras emergentes de este edificio juega con muñecas y se chupan el dedo... Es una locura. Es un país de locos. Si usted se sienta en la azotea como yo hago, se vuelve loca. Entonces, para repetir algunos

temas, si hay una contracultura en Cuba. Hay núcleos sociales que están excluidos también dentro de todo el país y dentro de las instituciones cubanas. La Diáspora cubana es terrible. Si usted ve la lista de todos los intelectuales cubanos vivos radicados en el extranjero. Bueno, de los importantes son como dos mil ciento y pico. Todo el mundo esta afuera. Y el que no, está seis meses del año afuera. Es una absoluta Diáspora y otra cosa importante también, que fomenta la contracultura es, la ausencia de valentía para establecer un dialogo nacional, pararse ahí y poner un micrófono como hizo Mandela y decir caballero, el que quiera decir cuatro cosas que diga cuatro cosas. Di cuatro cosas. Para que tú veas como se empiezan a resolver las cosas aquí. Rápido se empiezan a resolver las cosas. Pero bueno...Nosotros estamos a un nivel que si Dios quiere este país aguanta veinte años mas sin una guerra civil, sin que la negatividad interna, porque no es ni contrarrevolución. Ya la Revolución paro hace rato, ya esto es una inercia, un mareo, una borrachera. Ya la gente está tan mareada que si esto frena de pronto uno choca con el otro.

Rene: Yo no creo que llegue a suceder una guerra civil. Hay mucho miedo. Que sucede, que lo primero que hizo Fidel desde el 59 fue crear una base muy fuerte, muy sólida del paternalismo en este país y hasta ahora - ya no es como antes pero eso ha marcado a toda esta generación de cubanos y también le cambio el modo de vida a las personas que entraron ya adultos a la Revolución y que todavía están vivos. Producto de ese paternalismo el cubano actual no sabe ni lavarse la cara, mucho menos sabe hacer una guerra civil. Te lo digo. Ahora cuando Fidel se enfermo, yo lo vi en el pueblo. Vi a los guapos decir a lo que sea Fidel.

Como también vi al gusanito que dice lo que tienen que venir son los americanos. Aquí lo que sostiene vivo, lo que sostiene este país sin ninguna intervención militar o de lo que sea y ningún fenómeno de guerra es el espíritu de Fidel. Ahí no hay más nadie.

Nilo Julián: Y va a estar como diez años o doce años mas ahí...

René: Y si el espíritu de Fidel ya no funciona los americanos van a entrar aquí y van a coger esto sin un tiro. Todo eso es mentira. Ninguna de esas gentes que van a una tribuna abierta va con una idea propia. Van allí a decir lo que repitió Fidel. Lo que se gastó Fidel en tribunas...pero lo doloroso es que iban a repetir lo que se dijo en la primera tribuna hasta lo que se dijo en la última. Todos los sábados del mundo los cubanos que se paraban allí decían lo mismo: “estamos aquí para demostrarle al imperialismo yanqui que no podrán entrar y que Fidel puede contar con nosotros. Y que el Comandante en Jefe lo sepa, que nosotros somos un pueblo invencible.” Toda esa gente que se paran ahí a decir lo mismo son los primeros que están cagados. Como también están cagados los que dicen ojala que entren los americanos.

Nilo Julián: La pregunta que siempre nos hacen y nos cuesta trabajo responder porque no tenemos el tiempo para hacer ese estudio es: ¿Por qué no hay mujeres en Omni? Lo otro lo podemos responder con la mayor facilidad del mundo. No tenemos problemas ni con negros ni con blancos ni con chinos... Ahora, por que no se integran mujeres al grupo es un problema nacional. Las muchachas que salen de las escuelas de arte

no trabajan después en más nada. Dejan el grabado, dejan la pintura, dejan el dibujo. Y tiene que ver con el problema de genero, mas complejo que el mero hecho de que si están en el grupo o no, porque somos todos hombres o porque no somos hombres, no. Si hubiera aparecido una muchacha con el impulso y la capacidad que nosotros tenemos de crear...También hay una cosa: tener lámpara y un mueble bueno, es fácil. Yo lo dejo todo y me pongo hacer flaquitas-esculturas de madera - para la Feria de la Catedral con el Rene y a vender para la feria de Malecón, o me meto por ahí a hacer cualquier negocio o en la panadería como mi vecino. Eso es fácil, tú entiendes. Yo estoy sacrificando. El poder de sacrificio es una de las cosas que también...Hoy tú oíste a Yohamna, la china, hablando de algunas cosas.

Zoya: Muy, muy rápido.

Nilo Julián: Si, pero una de las cosas que ella no ha sido capaz de hacer es sacrificarse, porque...Bueno, de entrada yo, este que esta aquí hablando contigo, Nilo Julián, se lo dijo a su hijo, el grupo es mas importante para mi. Andando. Yo si no tengo tema con eso. El grupo. Y se lo dije: cuando yo este mejor, tú vas a estar mejor. Olvídate, yo soy tu amigo, no tienes ni que decirme papa ni nada de eso. Y yo soy de los que soy difícil para entenderme. Incluso yo digo “ellos” siempre que me refiero al grupo...

Rene: Tu me perdonas, tu me perdonas con esto que voy a decir pero no creo que eso sea un sacrificio.

Nilo Julián: Bueno, está bien, te lo digo...Pero creo que Johanna pudo haber entregado más, un suponer que no sea un sacrificio. También hay una cosa: yo ahora no estoy viendo que Rene me este agrediendo.

Nosotros tenemos una predisposición al dialogo. Hay quien no la tiene. Otra cosa. Se encontraron cinco o seis personas... y quisieron estar juntas. Porque cuando se dijo “este es el grupo Omni Zona Franca” muchos querían participar, pero cuando comenzó el problema con las instituciones, muchos también se echaron para atrás y no quisieron líos. Algunos porque no les interesaba y otros por intereses particulares.

Sound file 12: 02:02

Nilo Julián: El arte cubano, las instituciones del arte cubano en la capital del país y el resto del país, no estaban preparadas para un grupo con la velocidad y la capacidad de reacción, para el potencial creativo que Omni desde el principio tuvo. No están preparadas. ¿Por qué? Las instituciones cubanas funcionan como por encargo. Te invitan a un evento, y entonces hablan contigo para que tú hagas un performance o una exposición.

Nosotros teníamos una inmensa necesidad de crear. Y eso fue como una explosión... y todo empezó a crear, a crear, a crear. No estaban preparadas las instituciones. Las instituciones no fueron capaces de responder al potencial creativo con habilidad, con presteza. Y eso ha generado un modo de pensar y de vernos desde las instituciones a nosotros que...yo empleo el término que dice Fito: “estética del disimulo”. Las instituciones saben que estamos aquí y lo que estamos haciendo, lo saben, pero hacen cómo que no nos ven.

Ya, está bien, ya.

AMAURY PACHECO DEL MONTE entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

22 FEBRERO 2007 Alamar.

DURACION: 49'

NOTA: MUCHO RUIDO DE VIENTO EN EL MICROFONO -ALGUNOS FRAGMENTOS SON MARCADOS ENTRE PARENTESIS (RUIDO...).

Z. Bueno, dígame su nombre por favor y como llegaste aquí.

A. Bueno, me llamo Amaury Pacheco del Monte...Mi prima Idania fue la que me puso el nombre. Llegue en el 1969 al planeta. Nací en Matanzas, no exactamente aquí en Alamar, pero en Cuba. Vine a estudiar aquí en La Habana y en mi recorrido alrededor del Periodo Especial encontré a mi compañera, Rebeca, que fue mi esposa durante algún tiempo y vine a vivir aquí a Alamar. Bueno, aquí llegue exactamente ya para conformar el grupo en el 97 por ahí. Un poquito antes. Vine en el 95 porque nosotros trabajábamos en otro espacio aquí en la casa de la cultura. Y después nos fuimos uniendo, empezamos a tener necesidades hacer cosas, primeramente tallamos en madera; después que empezamos a taller en madera, en que empezamos a reunirnos, en que empezamos a ver lo que nosotros queríamos como perspectiva. También ya mucho antes yo trabajaba aquí, es decir, venia a los talleres literarios en la Fayad Jamís, que es el espacio donde alcance un conocimiento acerca de la poesía, los poetas. Eso fue antes...Después, ya estando aquí tallando en madera en la Casa de Cultura, nos encontramos todos con la necesidad de hacer cosas y nos encontramos con algunas personas...con Juan Carlos, digo Juan Carlos porque anterior a el estaba Fito, y Orbe, que esta ahora en Suecia



(ruido del viento)...Rene, que también hacía y tallaba en madera. Y otros. El (¿) también que cogió otro camino también del arte. Ya con ese magma, con ese grupo de personas se fue conformando la historia. Después conocí a Juan Carlos Flores que es el poeta que estaba en el centro del colectivo, para nutrirnos, para enlazarnos con el conocimiento poético. Entonces él a través de una gestión hablo con Pablo aquí en la galería, y de la galería pasamos aquí al taller. Pasamos un primer año en el caos, profundamente allí chivando, tomando, descargando, hasta que fue cogiendo sentido la experiencia de nosotros. Unido a eso se venía formando un grupo que se llamaba “Zona Franca”, pero nosotros estábamos como grupo de escultores ya, pero no teníamos nombre. “Zona Franca” deviene porque ya llegan poetas con cierta obra, no notoria, pero sí en ciernes, trabajándola con tiempo y alrededor de Juan Carlos, donde está Jon Curry, donde está Leonardo Guevara, donde está Johanna Depestre, donde está Edwin, Grisel, después aparece Emilio a través de Leonardo. Hay dos poetas de La Habana que ahora no me recuerdo el nombre, (ruido)...Fue pasando por sucesivos mandatos. Lo cogió Leonardo, lo cogió Eligio, después se fragmentó el grupo, y “pa!” un día se había nombrado. Yo participaba de las dos experiencias, del grupo Omni, que ya se había nombrado, y de Zona Franca, de los poetas. Entonces hubo una recesión y una asimilación por parte de Omni de experiencia de Zona Franca que con su poesía intervenimos en el espacio... ( ruido)...Que trajo un poco de desavenencia porque algún grupo se dedicaba más a la parte oral performática y otro tenía la necesidad de la escritura, del libro, esas fueron las dos líneas que se fueron conformando.(4:52)

La línea de la oralidad es la que entra a Omni. Esa línea de la oralidad porque permite el cuerpo junto con las artes plásticas, y entonces el performance aparece como identidad bastante importante y suprema por la movilidad que logramos alcanzar. Entonces aparecen a ver las intervenciones Eligio, es uno de los que pasa directamente al espacio y empieza a trabajar con nosotros. A partir de ese movimiento se empiezan a incorporar otros, Leonardo...que siempre estuvieron pero no estaban directamente ligados a la experiencia aunque si cooperaban. Leonardo, por ejemplo, Fito – uno de los integrantes de Omni –le hizo el diseño de la carátula del libro de Leonardo. Hubo cooperaciones en ese sentido, porque Leonardo tenía la avanzada del libro, tenía la experiencia. Ya aquí empieza a crearse la magma, empieza a crearse la necesidad de salir al espacio y decir la poesía porque ya entra la oralidad y donde esta la oralidad esta el cuerpo; y el cuerpo indiscutiblemente lleva su espacio de instalación en el medio. Y empezamos a tener diríamos una practica poética de acción. Eso por lo tanto cuando se empieza a ver la gente asume también que es parte de una civilidad porque la manera en que nosotros creamos de existir(...ruido). Todo eso con mucha inocencia simplemente porque como decían también en el video era simplemente una intuición que nosotros fuimos desarrollando paulatinamente sin ningún tipo de catalización que no fuera propiamente nuestra experiencia de existir. A medida que fuimos trabajando nos fuimos haciendo de cosas esenciales como un evento, que pudiera canalizar nuestra experiencia. Ya que no hay evento, bueno hay que hacer uno, para uno tener espacio para uno decir y disfrutar las cosas que nosotros hacemos. Empezamos a

disfrutar eso. Empezamos con las escrituras. Empezamos con la oralidad. Y las reuniones fueron creando desde un inicio lo que queríamos hacer.

(7:01) El disco “Alamar Express” – para dar un salto – sale de esas uniones y de esos gritos y de esas cosas y es en lo que mas tarde se convierte en un disco. Y así. Y la experiencia de la oralidad, y la performatividad también nos fue llevando a una línea audiovisual que después es lo que aparece en estos años mas perfilada y mas clara. Todo se había dado desde el comienzo. Nosotros tuvimos la capacidad de siempre estar desde nuestros orígenes, siempre volver a ellos y autoanalizarnos. No dejamos nunca decaer la estadía del mundo espiritual que era muy importante. Ya estaba la meditación de alguna manera. Se desconocía mucho...Yo venia de la Escuela de Misterio, esotérica, de Rosacruz, y esa la introduje también como experiencia para estar y para auto conocernos en grupo, porque ya yo había tenido en La Habana experiencias con grupos y siempre se fragmentaban por la desidia, por el conflicto, por los egos, por las envidias. Entonces me parece que la meditación introducía un espacio interior donde uno podía verse con más claridad y permitía la expansión colectiva.

(8:20) Bueno, a partir de todo ese embrollo, a partir de todo ese emporio, enforio como diría yo, enfori, ese arrebató ( en cubano, es estar colocado) colectivo, se fueron perfilando las cosas, fuimos moviendo, nos fuimos despojando de cosas. Empezamos hacer actividades en la comunidad y todo el tiempo era haciendo cosas en la comunidad. Creamos espacios alternativos al taller. Empezamos a crear lugar para que otras personas vinieran y nos hablaran, porque tratamos también de hacer conexiones. Porque ya que uno no tiene estudios – diríamos – tiene que crear

espacios de diálogos. El primer espacio de dialogo que nosotros hicimos fue entre nosotros y las personas que llegaban. Eso nos fue dando una madurez – diríamos – en el camino. Por que? Confrontábamos muy rápido la experiencia. La experiencia que las personas veían y como era un pase de la oralidad, eran las conversaciones directas. Entonces este te aconsejaba. Uno le agradece no solo al libro sino a los amigos que te cuentan del libro y de lo que te dicen que leas. Y entonces eso también fue madurando nuestra experiencia, moviéndonos dentro del escándalo también, porque casi siempre fuimos muy estratégicos al hacer nuestras operaciones. Eh, trenbus, bajo un puente. Empezamos a incorporar el grafiti. Aparece todo el fenómeno del Festival de Rap que le da – imagínate – al nosotros tener la dicha de tener un movimiento de Hip Hop, donde la oralidad es algo capital, donde la performatividad tiene otra manera. Nos empezamos a encontrar con personas que venían de Chicago, que venían con una experiencia del poetry slam, de spoken word, una cantidad de cosas que fueron nutriéndonos y nos fueron abriendo con toda la espiritualidad y el contacto humano.

(10:20) Entre las aceptaciones y los rechazos dentro del municipio tuvimos personas que nos cuidaron. Digamos que siempre hay ángeles que velan porque las cosas se den (aprovecho siempre para agradecer). Y eso nos fue nutriendo. Pasaron los años. Estoy haciendo una parábola en el tiempo para no explicar mucho...Y nos fuimos conformando, fuimos cogiendo carácter de trabajo, apareció el primer Festival que nosotros creamos que es Alamar Express. Esta escultura es (parece que hace referencia a una pieza presente en la escena) diríamos una de las torres. En el centro de cada comienzo de alguna civilización o de cualquier

religión hay dos torres, digamos una torre de la Sabiduría y otra torre de la Voluntad. Nosotros quisimos con estas esculturas también sembrar la sabiduría, del amor y...porque veníamos de todos los misterios, de haber estudiado los misterios. Eso nos dio mucho sentido porque exploramos el mundo de manera esotérica, no exotérica, sino esotérica.

Una...doble...hacia fuera y hacia dentro. Eso le fue dando sentido. Y fuimos viendo también la posibilidad de una...Al arte le hace falta también una Reforma Agraria, diríamos, porque le hace falta un lugar donde sea plantado, donde tenga un territorio, una tierra, un lugar donde sea plantado. Claro, nos pusimos enseguida en contacto con la experiencia anterior de Alamar. Rápidamente no discriminamos nada sino fuimos a buscar desde lo primero que se dio, que tiene toda la posibilidad y toda la voluntad: Quijote, Artenativa...Nos fuimos anillando. Al irnos anillando con eso fuimos recogiendo esa experiencia. Y grupos de arte ecológico, grupo que vivían de alguna manera parecido a nosotros también, que se estaban dando aquí diríamos semi-nómadas, porque estamos hablando de una ciudad que a partir de un tiempo empieza a ser olvidada...y ese olvido supongo que hay otras comunidades que lo tengan en Cuba, pero...Bueno esta comunidad te lo digo como referente fue para resolver el problema de la vivienda en Cuba en los años setenta y pico y casi siempre ser visitada porque era la ciudad modelo, para el Hombre Nuevo, diríamos. Y después se fue olvidando y esta ciudad fue el centro de mucha de la contracultura, del rock, del Festival de Rock, después Rap, asentamientos de Rastas también. Entonces es una estructura con instituciones incipientes, me entiendes. No hay una tradición sólida. Es muy fácil y al mismo tiempo muy difícil al mismo

tiempo fundar, pero tienes la posibilidad de participar en la fundación de una ciudad. No es Guanabacoa que ya tiene una tradición que hace muy difícil insertarte, abrirla, quebrarla, es bastante difícil. Aquí no contábamos con eso. Contábamos de que no, de que no habían esos locos en la calle, aunque si reconocíamos lo que la gente decía...”Hace un tiempo Fulano, un hombre que tenía todo el cuerpo pintado, que vivía aquí atrás, en un pedacito.” Y fuimos recogiendo todas esas pequeñas historias de la ciudad, para poder ser parte de ella y empezarla a amar de alguna manera. Te decía que al principio de esta ciudad fundarse venían muchos grupos a ese anfiteatro que hay ahí. Grupos de steel band, ponían películas, entiendes. Y había también mucho rigor en la vida, en el sentido de que...la gente no podía tener santos en sus casas, era muy rigurosa la vida entre los vecinos, porque era el modelo que habían copiado del campo socialista unión soviética. Bueno, esa ciudad deviene en esto que tu ves ahora, para resolver problemas de la construcción, problemas de los diferentes...los deportistas, problemas de las diferentes instituciones, así. Edificios. Hay Zonas que son así. La de la Construcción. La Zona de los Marineros. Así, se fue construyendo por las micro brigadas que fue uno de los movimientos que dieron vida a todo este espacio. Claro, que nosotros nos conectamos hasta con eso. Por eso es que yo uso casco. Que es de un minero y en el mismo tiempo simboliza el que busca aquí en la ciudad pero también simboliza el que puso las primeras piedras aquí en Alamar. Y nos fuimos conectando con toda esa experiencia. Entonces vimos como dice Dios que era bueno y seguimos pinchando y trabajando y entre el escándalo y lo otro, bueno.

El Festival de Rap nos dio fuerza. Ya allí nos enfrentamos, poetas que veníamos del escritorio quizás, a tres mil personas. Decir la poesía ante tres mil personas. Una tradición que había que moverla porque el escritor cubano es de buró. Pensador ahí...Y yo digo que esa es la parte africana que nosotros también levantamos. Todos los pueblos tienen oralidad. Y aquí la hay y nosotros simplemente lo...y propusimos eso. Al poeta, principalmente, el centro que nos mueve la poesía, propusimos la entrada del cuerpo de forma gloriosa en la palabra, donde el cuerpo, cada gesto fuera también un lenguaje. No tenía necesariamente que ser teatro. El poeta se tiene que preparar no solamente intelectualmente, se debe preparar para el cuerpo, como en las tradiciones africanas, las Rapsodas en Grecia, como los griots en África y así fuimos asumiendo... Y eso le fue dando una cierta espectacularidad al proceso. Llamando la atención, el escándalo, mas las intervenciones en los espacios, fuimos llamando la atención profundamente sobre la experiencia. Es decir, nos basábamos también en el escándalo como la vanguardia visión, precisamente para llamar la atención, pero muy...no era el escándalo por el escándalo, era decir aquí estoy, existo. Junto con el movimiento de Rap tuvimos posibilidad de participar en eventos, de hacer esculturas, de pintarnos el cuerpo, e involucrar a mucha gente que hiciera...no solo era el artista., no, no, nosotros y la gente. Diríamos que todos, porque no quiero separar, hacer ese corte. Y participábamos de ese evento. Fuimos tomando conciencia, fuimos haciendo el evento que te dije de Poesía sin Fin. Empezamos a invitar personas, amigos que llegaban de todas partes. Eligio traía amigos de La Habana para acá...recuerda que hay que cruzar el túnel par acá, imagínate en ese tiempo, mas difícil era que la gente

viniera...Empezaban a venir y veían que en el Este de La Habana, en una ciudad que tenía río por las dos partes y que tenía la tranquilidad del campo y cierto sentido de urbanidad, daba un termino ahí para pasarla bien, es decir, en el silencio, no el ajeteo de La Habana. Aunque aquí se dieron muchos movimientos. Aquí la Nueva Trova tuvo espacios, muchos de los grupos de eso Habana Abierta, vinieron aquí a este espacio. Las peñas de los chilenos era muy importante aquí. Y te estoy diciendo mas o menos todo el background de cómo llegamos aquí. (Bueno, si me estoy pasando tu me dices).

(18:25) Toda esa impronta...Recuerda que se convirtió en una ciudad de la diáspora de América...de las diferentes dictaduras que salieron de los (ininteligible) se sentaron aquí...chilenos, guatemaltecos...y esa gente también dejaron su impronta cultural. Esas también nos las bebimos y recogimos esa historia. Y es lo que llevamos dentro de nosotros, junto con el Hombre de Vanguardia, junto con la experiencia espiritual de la meditación...junto con los Beats, junto con los hippies, y socializaron la experiencia de los diferentes trajes, etnias, formas. No nos quedamos exactamente con la experiencia de la droga que es el elemento que de alguna manera echa un poco a perder eso, pero si nos damos cuenta que podíamos estar en un escalón mas, no ser mas brillantes, pero si en el escalón que ellos nos dejaban...(19:14) Te estoy hablando de escalón, no de brillantez. Estoy partiendo del hombre que nos deja y...como ellos hablaban de Acuario...Bueno, los hippies hablaban de Acuario. Nosotros somos parte de ese...Bueno entonces todo ese fenómeno de la calle como te decía, eso también nos fue llegando, porque cuando chocamos con Chicago, nosotros les preguntábamos acerca de los



beatniks. Algo que muchos de los poetas que llegaban de allá nos decían, bueno, eso ya está superado. Para nosotros era muy alegre saber que los Beats existieron y que los hippies existieron. No es su presencia ...en esencia que es quizás lo que nos hace falta aumentar esa alegría.

(20:00) Empezamos a trabajar con todo ese andamiaje, con todas esas cosas. Empezamos a caminar la isla. Nos invitaban por aquí...a pesar de como nosotros éramos...que éramos contundentes en el sentido de nuestra experiencia. Como una tribu. Somos como una tribu. De la base, del barrio. No formados en las escuelas, pero con una instrucción a priori. A priori antes del arte: mecánico, militar, entiendes? Y el arte fue el espacio. Y decidimos trabajar en este espacio. Hicimos el evento que te dije Poesía sin fin, que fue trayendo tras personas, empezamos a ver mucho, todo a ver la continuidad de nuestra experiencia, del enlace de nosotros con otras alternativas, no de Cuba, del mundo. Vimos que había una corriente así, que no éramos los únicos: y eso nos daba mucha energía. Y ya, así llegue a Omni, empezamos a trabajar, y empezamos a poner en práctica todo.

Z. (21:12) ¿Cuál fue el evento más importante o que tuvo más impacto para ustedes?

A. ¿Qué nosotros generamos?

Z. Si.

A. Nosotros generamos muchas actividades, que era vivir aquí en la comunidad, pero empezamos a hacer Poesía sin Fin. Y esa Poesía sin Fin creo que tenía todo el peso, cuando nadie creía eso nosotros decíamos la poesía entre nosotros y para la gente. Y eso fue. Unido al Festival de Rap te digo. Ya había una gran festividad, cada agosto era una gran fiesta en Alamar, de la poesía, del hip hop y de las artes plásticas, a medida que nosotros entramos. Empezamos a traer...Una de las personas que trajimos fue a Tania Bruguera. Fue una de las primeras personas que quiso venir aquí y estuvo con nosotros aquí. Y trajo además a un poeta, campeón de Poetry Slam en Chicago. Dio una conferencia aquí y después quedo con nosotros en venir y vino. Tania dio una conferencia sobre performance. Y fue muy bueno. También estábamos estudiando Teología.... Se abrió esa posibilidad, de mirar desde otro ángulo de la vida. (22:45) Y empezamos a estudiar teología. Eso nutrió. Eventos, te digo, en los que participamos en la Isla, y en Cienfuegos, hubo un evento muy bueno sobre performance, por ahí...Soto... no me recuerdo muy bien, que fue uno de los que inicio el performance, la acción, como la llamo, acción plástica en Cienfuegos. Y ahí se hizo un Festival y nosotros participamos ahí, fue muy bueno ahí. Cogimos premio, la gente fue muy buena con nosotros. Así empezamos a participar en diferentes eventos de poesía, en Sancti Spíritus, fuimos caminando y manteníamos el evento. Ahora hay una cosa muy importante. El garabato. El garabato es uno de los intentos mas bellos de mantener y de hacer una tradición. Vincular la poética y la poesía en la tradición misma como base, porque en una ciudad donde no hay rituales, debe haber rituales que circulen por las calles, una tradición. Y nosotros hicimos el garabato. El garabato, no es

más que lo que utiliza uno de los oríchas cubanos, que es Elegguá. El garabato es para abrir el camino porque quita la hierba, pero San Lázaro es el santo que esta ligado a la enfermedad, a las penurias, a las pandemias, me entiendes. Entonces, estábamos hablando de...Pero que pedíamos? Era un garabato para la fuerza de poesía las fuerzas ocultas es decir, pedíamos eso, para la prosperidad.... y eso enlace muy bien...y para las mentes poéticas. Porque creemos en el verso de Martí que dice que la poesía es más importante que las industrias, porque esta apuntala o derriba las almas, decía Martí. Y era muy interesante para nosotros saber eso... para que trabaja es bueno, que si, que la poesía es....( ) en la vida. Me di cuenta que la poesía si estaba en la gente. A la gente si le cuadra la poesía. (ruido ambiente). (24:57) El poeta diríamos que tiene un sentido de inferioridad frente al mundo. Un músico, uno de cine, que va, le roba mucho espacio al poeta. El poeta tiene que salir de ese ostracismo y darse, porque hace falta su canto también, hace falta su manera de decir, con todos los derechos también de estar en el ostracismo si quieren, pero se debe va lanzar también un grupo de poetas que den la cara, que hablen de la poesía, con metáforas oscuras o claras. No importa, la gente siempre se entiende, porque la gente en la calle se mueve con su jerga y a veces uno no los entiende y es algo hermético también. Por lo tanto la poesía más que traer un conocimiento, que se puede ver directamente, lo que trae es emoción y conocimiento desde la emoción misma. No entiendes una frase pero si te llega la fuerza de ella. Y la vas descubriendo por revelación, poco a poco, en la vida de uno. Entonces, subestimar a la gente del pueblo (ruido ambiente). Había necesidades por lo del Periodo Especial, pero también, la cigarra canta en el frío y en canta el

verano...Entonces la cigarra tiene que cantar y nosotros nos decidimos a cantar. Te decía sobre Poesía sin fin...Ese evento es importante...y el garabato, que ya vamos y la gente se vincula con eso y vamos diciendo poesía hacia El Rincón. Cada día va más gente. Diríamos que eso podría ser dentro de poco tiempo algo que la gente se quede con ello. Y aunque desaparezca, siempre va haber gente que lo enlace, porque ya existió, pasó por las calles, al menos dejar esa impronta. Y esa es una forma de civilidad, de caminar por las calles, haciendo no cosas que siempre haces sino otras cosas y con poesía. Esos son los dos eventos más importantes para mí: Poesía sin Fin y El Garabato. Los que nosotros hemos generado. Y las lecturas inusitadas en El Camello que fui importante. (27:45)

Z. ¿Cuál es el significado de la aparición como un personaje de este grupo y como individuo, ambos...?

A. (28:01) Te quiero decir, Omni para mí es un encuentro bueno, pero no es a lo que yo aspiro. Yo aspiro no a una sola cosa en el mundo. Aspiro a un estado espiritual otro. En Omni veo raíces, pero el florecimiento y estadio es otro. No obstante, estoy aquí, con los míos. Ellos conmigo y yo con ellos.

“Al aparecer”, como personaje, simplemente fue mucho tiempo mirando los locos en La Habana en medio del Periodo Especial. Su civilidad. Porque los locos dicen cosas, aquí, como debe ser en otras partes, en voz alta. Cosas que otras gentes no se atreven a decir. Pero como son al margen, las dicen, pero también canalizan los que otros ven que dicen. Canalizan mucho, o son síntomas de las situaciones o de las

enfermedades síquicas de un pueblo. Para mi son significativos. Por ellos sale...Y al respecto la tesis de Levi-Strauss también, de la mirada hacia los locos, de cómo un pueblo trata a sus locos...Esa civilidad me gustó. Pero aquí se le han hecho monumentos a los locos, como es El Caballero de Paris, que tiene un espacio en la vida cubana, que regalaba flores en medio de los sesenta, me entiende, que era muy cercano a la experiencia hippie, de regalar flores a los...policías. El regalaba poemas y flores. Significo tanto en la memoria colectiva que hay una consecuencia. El “loquillo” también en la escritura, de las tiras de los periódicos, era un personaje también de ficción, pero que era como un loco. El de la Bobocracia también. Todos esos personajes se fueron mezclando en mi interior y me dije: “cono, aquí lo que hay es que volverse loco”. Y decidí montar un personaje que era yo mismo al mismo tiempo. No es un alter ego. Ese soy yo... Porque a veces hace una distancia entre carácter y uno mas, pero no, yo soy ese también. Lo reconozco, no lo quiero poner aparte como algo... es mío, lo vivo y soy yo también. Y al comunicarme me di cuenta que si, que estaba haciendo mi poesía del gesto.

Octavio Paz tiene una cosa que también me cuadra. (30:49) Dice que escribir es análogo a caminar. Y parece que cuando uno camina con toda la intención de la poesía uno esta haciendo poesía todo el tiempo. Yo pienso que el poeta no deja de hacer poesía a partir de que bebe de la fuente de la poesía, ningún acto de el esta afuera de eso. Yo me ido dando cuenta en la medida en que me ido cargando de eso. Cada palabra tiene un triple significado. Puede ser el normal, el jeroglífico y del símbolo. El que tenga ojos que vea, como dice la Escritura. Y así. La vida esta formada de esa profundidad. Pero también me hace ver lo de las otras

personas. El Otro, como decía Rimbeau. La Otredad. Eso también fue importante para mí. Ese personaje empezó a caminar las calles con un gabán. A partir de un verso de Vallejo que me gusta mucho que dice: “Me pongo un traje, no porque nieve, sino para que nieve”. Y es muy bueno, porque es algo mágico. Claro, Vallejo estaba conectado con los Quechuas. Y le venía parte del cristianismo, le venía ese sentido mágico...La poesía para mí es magia. A pesar de toda la tecnología desarrollada hasta ahora desde el punto de vista, desde el lenguaje mismo, sus anales, de que cuando hable y quiere que sea la lluvia, ese poder de la palabra me gustaría, como esta en las grandes tradiciones donde el hombre vale, donde valen las cosas, me entiendes, donde la palabra era dada y era un peso. (32:30) Eso es lo que me gusta de la poesía y casi todo poeta autentico que la busque, trata de buscar el poder ese de la palabra. Cuando yo hablo de poeta, no hablo del que escribe y que dice...hablo de todo, de música, pintura, hablo del POETA, no de las maneras y de las formas del arte. Hablo del poieta, de la poiesis, de la creación. El hombre como demiurgo, como decía Platón. Y entonces uno de daba cuenta, también entendí muchas cosas, a parte de la espiritualidad, que uno es energía, que el pensamiento es energía, que estar radiante en un espacio es la posibilidad de imantar a otros, uno o dos. Entendí también que los medios, la publicidad, distorsionaban la experiencia de uno asimilar las cosas; y que uno tenía que mirar al que esta al lado. Como decía la madre Teresa de Calcuta: “Cada uno tiene su Calcuta al lado. Pueden venir aquí, pero cada uno tiene su Calcuta al lado”. Y esas cosas fueron significativas porque me daba cuenta que el mundo era abstracto. Es decir, Japón, es virtual para mi...Puede existir, los quiero, pero es virtual, no puedo

resolver un problema en Japón. No puedo resolver un problema en Estados Unidos y a veces ni en una provincia de al lado. No puedo resolver tampoco el que esta cerca, pero...Tic-Tac. Y eso es lo que dice Platón de los Anillo Imantados. De eso vive el hombre, si uno recuerda a Taj Abraham, o si recuerda a Einstein, los recuerda por esa imantación, del pensamiento y de la memoria. La memoria también como espacio significativo porque era una cosa que queríamos. Al meterse como personaje en la ciudad creabas una memoria. Una memoria que denotaba y llamaba la atención de la existencia de un tiempo y un espacio. Porque a veces la gente venia a dormir aquí, o como viene, pero no ve su ciudad como elemento transformador y cuando alguien la denota o tú la denotas...le dan sentido y cuerpo. Y los locos me permitían eso. Esa experiencia oblicua, esa experiencia al margen. Pero al mismo tiempo como era una representación vivida a plenitud, como las mascararas africanas, cuando te pones la mascara estas montado en el santo, así yo me pongo el traje (se refiere al gabán del que hablo antes).

(35:24) Quería decirte algo: al ser representado eso, la vida se convierte también en un elemento fantástico que nos permite vivir. No solamente en lo pragmático, porque en lo pragmático tú aprendes esto para hacer esto, y hacer el otro, es verdad...pero también, no siempre tiene que ocurrir la fantasía en la televisión. Cada espacio es un espacio mítico o científico, porque para mi es científico comprender el mito. El mito es el centro de filosofía, de la ciencia, en que los primeros hombres pensaron. El mito en si tiene la semilla de todo. Y además es la primera metáfora. Sin el mito no se construye casi ninguna sociedad. Sin esa fortaleza de mito que es la posibilidad de la imagen, como decía Lezama, la

posibilidad del poder, de ese poder. Y a ese es al que he entrado, ese poder he que entrado, y estoy bien ahí. Con todo, con temor, con miedo, pero estoy ahí, reconociendo todo eso como humano y al reconocerlo, como decía Pablo de Tarso, mi debilidad se convierte en una fortaleza. Son cositas y versitos que me han ido alimentando y que me hacen sostener. Me di cuenta que la poesía me hacía sostener. Cuando leía un verso decía: “Verdad que si” Tengo que estar... Como decía Eliseo Diego, uno no esta en un lugar en el otro para dar testimonio. Y sinceramente te doy testimonio de que existo y existe todo lo que nos rodea, como otras gentes han testemos. Y así, han sido los elementos que me han ido moviendo. Y al mismo tiempo, comprender la sociedad moderna. Esto mismo que parece locura intransitable, como hacerla y empaquetarla. Porque si yo he mirado como empaquetan una coca cola, ¿Por qué yo no puedo empaquetar esta experiencia? Y el arte también me ha enseñado el empaquetamiento. Porque no aprendido esa cosas, de la gente que nos viene y las noticias...Y eso ha creado una tolerancia aquí en el espacio. Primeramente creo que hace falta una tolerancia entre los cubanos, para poder comenzar el dialogo. Tiene que haber una tolerancia de las ideas. De que tu eres así, y el es así, y el otro es asao. Si no hay eso nos vamos a estar matando por un ideal necesario hasta un tiempo, pero ya no. Si en un momento la humanidad, yo...Uno va reconociendo a partir de que coge una calma diríamos olímpica, aunque después cuando la tienes, tienes que volver y decir, “no, estoy en el mundo”, pero cuando tu te subes a esa cima te das cuenta que lo que le pasa al hombre es lo que le pasa y ya. Y el crimen más bárbaro es parte de la galaxia. Y la cosa más buena también es parte de la galaxia. Ahora, uno, asume y comparte.



Compartir el dolor, la alegría. Y esta a favor de esto o de lo otro. Pero viéndolo desde esa altura, puede servir mejor, que es lo que a mi me parece. Yo no hablo de una mística o de un místico que se evade y vaya del mundo, aunque si los hay también. Ese es su destino y su camino. Pero yo creo en ese tercer camino o cuarto camino, donde el hombre puede iluminarse en medio de la ciudad con sus ruidos, con sus tumultos. Vaya, esa es mi creencia. De eso vivo. Y de esa energía, me doy cuenta que todo hombre se hace de alguna manera un bunker para existir. Y por ahí. La poesía, la ciencia, la religión, me han permitido ir penetrando y saber como decían los africanos, más o menos es el dicho así, que cuando muere un viejo muere una biblioteca. Se quema una biblioteca...De todo en la biblioteca hay, espanto, cosas buenas, pero bueno, por ahí, ya...No se si otras cosas mas...Mira a ver tu. Tu me dices otra pregunta. Me paras, porque yo hablo...

(40:08)

Z. Grupo Omni, ¿Qué ofrece a la comunidad?

A. Le ofrece valor de existencia, de existir, no que sobrevivimos, que existimos, a través del arte, a través de las cosas que podemos hacer ....vive en profundidad, a través del arte, en el servicio o solo que afectamos, como recibimos lo que nos dan. Eso lo que pienso que ofrece OMNI, que existimos. Ni mas ni menos. Ni mas importante ni menor que nadie, simplemente que existimos. Si eso puede ser gloria para el mundo, bienvenido. No la persigo, porque te digo la verdad, yo no persigo la gloria. Simplemente es el estar ese interior que es el que te hace

y nos pone frente al mundo humilde, porque la humildad es la capacidad de abrirse, para mí. Porque el ego es una manera cerrada de mirar las cosas. Necesario para cruzar, pero cerrado en mucho tiempo. Es como una hendidura. Cuando uno se abre, cuando uno se abre a si mismo, eso implica humildad, porque tiene que despojarte de ti, despojarte de ti para que te entre. Tienes que llenarte de eso para poder ir de aquí para allá, tiene que abrirte... Si no hay eso, no es un estado de humildad... Eso es lo que nosotros ofertamos, con todos los errores y con todas las virtudes y con todas las debilidades. Que con eso se puede hacer cosas.

Z. La gente dice aquí y allá afuera que la sociedad civil no existe en Cuba.

A. Diríamos que así, así, así, evidente, representativa, no hay. Que se vea ahí. Diríamos que estamos como un paquete de spaghetti hundido así. Pero no es así. Porque si existimos es porque también hay una manera de civilidad. Y porque... la complejidad la nación cubana ha ido complejizándose, que nunca fue. Pero ahora, es mas complejo. La alternatividad cubana con sus canciones lo demuestra, el cine cubano lo demuestra de que hay una manera de decir... Lo que no hay es una representatividad de eso. Pero eso como siempre esta debajo. La voz del pueblo es la voz de dios. Y entonces, eso existe, eso esta. Lo que... parece que no, pero esta. En cada cubano que busca alternativas para existir. En la gente que esta ocupando espacios que vienen y dicen La Habana también es la capital de los cubanos y nosotros existimos... la gente que saca un edificio en otro apartamento, pa!, y rompe las ley.. hay un civilidad. Cada día hay un cúmulo de actividades cívicas que van carcomiendo el sistema. Y el sistema tiene que abrirse a eso. Tiene que

abrirse, no puede cerrar lo porque ya no es igual, por fuerza. El dique ya tiene huecos. Para la comprensión otra en una pluralidad, aparentemente no. El que mira dice que no. Hay mucha gente que dicen que no. Hay otros que si, están existiendo. Hay gente ya quiere decir, hablar, nombrar. Y eso existe. Yo si lo veo en cada cubano. Lo veo en cada cubano de forma latente y real también. Si lo hay, lo que es cuestión de tiempo. Si lo ahí vive la gente, lo hace, cada persona y veo que ha aumentado la creatividad cubana. A partir del Periodo Especial te digo empezó, ya empezó. Antes del Periodo Especial nosotros vivíamos, diríamos que todo estaba bien. La gente ganaba su dinerito, estaba allí, había una felicidad, estábamos apartados del mundo. Pero a partir de los 90, ya, se acabo. El mundo se abrió a Cuba y Cuba se abrió al mundo. Y por lo tanto se rompió, como diría, la cortina de hierro. Y por lo tanto ya esta sembrado. Ya a partir de la necesidad de cambiar, de buscar nuevas perspectivas para vivir...A pesar de que aparentemente surjan cosas que repriman esa realidad, pero son toquecitos para sostenerse. Pero la gente ya piensa diferente, para bien, yo no creo que sea para mal. Yo pienso que debe haber un acopio de la experiencia adquirida y una sostenibilidad de la ganancia con un sentido de prosperidad y de apertura plural. Eso para mi es lo que yo pienso. Porque yo siento valores que hay aquí. Lo siento por mi y por otras personas que vienen y nos cuentan. Que vienen desde su experiencia. Y por experiencia propia, porque son treinta y siete años viviendo aquí, por lo menos tengo que sentir algo, porque yo soy un sentidor, no tanto como un pensador. Lo digo porque sentir me parece que es una de las formas mas autenticas. Después uno elabora y eso. Pero uno siente. “Estoy ahogado, me tengo que ir”, no lo pensó, lo sintió, me

tengo que ir, y uno pienso, tengo que hacer esto, voy hacer esto, ya siento esto, y voy a mi vida....Yo pienso que nosotros hacemos civilidad. Ahí esta. Nosotros tenemos un trabajo de performance que se llama Fantasma Cívico. Es un estado que parece fantasmal, pero no, existe. Los hay en el arte cubano, un cantidad. El arte cubano tiene una cantidad de...Bueno muchos de los performances de nosotros, creo que caminar para atrás, hacer imágenes, que recuerden de que existimos también es importante. Porque no solo las imágenes que salen en la televisión pueden hacer un spot, sino que uno puede hacer spot en toda la ciudad, diríamos. Yo camino p'atras y eso es significativo un espacio donde hay cierta religiosidad, la gente se cuestiona y se pone a pensar. Porque una persona caminando para atrás o veinte personas caminando para atrás en la calle, yo me aterro. Porque uno vive de esos cortes, de esas imágenes. Porque si la gente juega a la bolita, y ve en una mata un numero que le puede ganar, por que no puede ver una cifra del espíritu caminando por la calle? Que le pueda recordar de que el debe hacer cosas. No que le diga, que le sugiera. Lezama decía que el poeta tiene una forma secreta de estimular la ciudad. Y concuerdo con el.

Z. Bueno, gracias. Muchas, muchas gracias.

A. Fue bueno conversar contigo, como siempre.

AMAURY PACHECO DEL MONTE entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

20 DICIEMBRE 2010 Alamar.

DURACION: 93'

A.P. Te decía que nos habíamos dado cuenta cuando nosotros salimos a la palestra a finales de los años 90, 97, existían ya grupos en las escuelas, en las instituciones cubanas del ISA que tenían una obra que se estaban acercando a las márgenes como era Enema. Enema hizo muchas cosas a partir de los presupuestos de Maquibirí, pero al mismo tiempo lo trataron de poner en el espacio público. Y eso los hizo cercanos a nuestra experiencia. Y DUPP empezó a trabajar en los espacios públicos bien y empezaron a hacer cosas por la gente y en las tiendas y esos lugares. Y también más tarde el Departamento de Intervenciones Públicas. Ya nosotros estábamos, pero nosotros nos formamos fuera de los laboratorios. Digamos en los laboratorios de la calle y ellos en los laboratorios de las instituciones cubanas. Es decir, que ya estaban apareciendo una línea, grupo de personas de diferentes lugares que estaban tratando de abordar de diferentes maneras algunas temas. Algunos manipulaban más a otros, otros no lo hacían, pero era una cosa interesante. Y nos pusimos en contacto con esos grupos a partir de los festivales que hacían en Cienfuegos, en diferentes lugares. Y eso nos fue creando como una cercanía. Ya nosotros...siempre menos privilegiados aunque sí estábamos en las instituciones, pero en los bordes de las instituciones. En espacios como Alamar, que tiene también una trayectoria en la alternatividad como es el Hip Hop, el Rock, ¿entiendes? Y en una ciudad que pretendía ser la del Hombre Nuevo. De hecho me

parece que es del Hombre Nuevo. El que está surgiendo aquí en las márgenes. A pesar de ser una ciudad durmiente, extraña y durmiente. Es una ciudad que – porque no es igual que los centros metropolitanos como La Habana – de estar tranquila parece que ha tenido más tiempo de pensar en sí y atraer y asimilar de manera fácil las alternativas. Festival de Hip Hop, del Rock, los eventos performáticos. Porque no tiene instituciones que permita de manera recoger esas y por tanto se tienen que hacer en los bordes. Hay una Casa de la Cultura que jamás podrá asumir eso. El sistema de Casas de Cultura no puede asumir la posibilidad creativa desempeñada en estos años por pila de gentes porque aquí lo que más se aborda es decir de la cultura, hablar de la cultura, y la gente a veces va perdiendo el sentido de la economía y de lo otro y dicen bueno voy a hacer arte porque como aquí hay un suelo que no cae más para abajo, ni puedes tampoco subir, bueno...te encuentras personas que se dedican a la poesía, a esto , y como cada vez que pasa un ciclón ponen a los artistas...Ponen a los artistas pero no le dicen a la gente si las casas se van a arreglar. Es todo un montaje extraño que va creando como unos pequeños spot y la gente va queriendo hacer El Arte. Eso al mismo tiempo dispone que no haya una infraestructura para eso. No la hay. Entonces las casas de cultura no pueden resolver. Que hace una población flotante? A mi me gustaría que toda fuera del arte, pero bueno, sin sustento, sin posibilidad. Además esta ciudad se parece a muchas otras ciudades que hay en el país. Y a muchas ciudades del Campo Socialista. Y a muchas ciudades de la periferia de Europa. Personalmente amigas mías me las han enseñado en fotos. Coño compartimos esto. Entonces uno se da cuenta que está participando de algo , de una

construcción que genera una manera de pensar, que genera una manera de agrupar a las personas, que genera un arte, que genera una periferia, que hay sentimientos muy parecidos. Inmediatamente nosotros nos dimos cuenta de que era unas orientaciones internacionales, desde la primera vez que lo hicimos. No por una situación de que sea internacional. Es internacional porque vibras en una cuerda donde hay mucha gente que está vibrando. Pronto, dentro de poco nos vamos a conocer. Ya. Porque al empezar a entrar eso en los 90, nosotros lo primero que hicimos fue...porque los extranjeros podían estar suficientemente bien en La Habana. Para tener extranjeros aquí en Alamar tenían que desarrollarse actividades que permitieran que la gente tuviera la necesidad de llegar aquí al espacio, como el festival de Hip Hop que vinieron muchos, y después nuestra experiencia. No ha sido totalmente en la ciudad pero sí en espacios institucionales que, por restricciones desde el punto de vista metodológica no permitía, tenías que decir tres días antes si venía un extranjero. Y si era norteamericano tenía que comunicarlo un mes antes. ¿Tú te imaginas eso? (5:56)

Entonces nosotros, no....Nosotros somos artistas, nosotros no somos controladores de nada. Entonces a medida que fue avanzando nuestro aural la gente empezó a llegar, empezó a llegar y ya. Y fuimos abriendo una cosa legítima, pero no legal para ellos. Tenían que abrirla las instituciones. Imagínate que estuvimos allí en esa zona. Todo eso nos fue dando una dimensión. Porque lo primero que hicimos fue que nos abrimos, nos abrimos al mundo. Cuando vino el Papa en el 97 él dijo que “Cuba se abra al mundo y el mundo se abra a Cuba”. Nosotros pusimos un elemento otro, y que el cubano se abra a sí mismo a él, eso no es solo

así, a su creatividad, a su manera de obrar, a su manera de resolver. Y empezamos con muchos latinoamericanos, porque Alamar está en la mente de muchos jóvenes de las dictaduras de América que vinieron emigrados para acá, principalmente chilenos, guatemaltecos, paraguayos, uruguayos. Hay una mitología almareña, que está en las mentes de algunos poetas, de algunas gentes, porque ha servido, el exilio ha servido de espacio. Y eso hace que esta ciudad tenga un imaginario más poderoso que lo que la gente piensa, porque está en la mente de otras personas, está en la mente de muchos hip hoppers norteamericanos que llegaron a aquí y que le cantaban a “Alamar, tus noches y tus estrellas”. Eso es espectacular, para mí, que vivo...y yo decía, coño, un imaginario. Y después atrajimos la Bienal dos veces para acá. Por la actividad, por las intervenciones en los camellos. La Bienal se metió acá. Cuando se metió acá nosotros intervenimos allá en La Habana. Y se ha ido creando un campo laboratorial, de encuentros, que las instituciones están al margen de eso. Solamente meten sus políticas de arriba para ver pero en definitiva cuando sacan lo que queda es...sirve, porque la gente se da cuenta...Además, todo lo que ocurrió aquí en Alamar, que hicieron otros artistas, nos decían que lo habíamos hecho nosotros. La gente del barrio “No fueron artistas de otros lugares, mira el nombre de este”. Y eso fue muy bueno. Es muy bueno. Porque nos permite una acogida buena aquí en el espacio. Lo otro es que el movimiento de hip hop creó estos estudios, casas donde tú puedes grabar, pero no gratis. Para grabar tienes que poner aunque sea 5 pesos para hacer tu background. Trabajo para hacer mi background. Y se está haciendo producciones que compiten con la Egrem, que compiten con esto, que compiten con lo otro. Entonces eso



ha generado otro tipo de percepción, otra mirada. Que no tienes que pertenecer necesariamente a las empresas, que ese es un problema grande que uno tiene. Por ejemplo, nosotros no somos de la Asociación. Fuimos de la Asociación, pero nos sacaron. Yo ya no soy de la Asociación ya (Asociación Hermanos Saíz). Y por lo tanto, no somos de ahí. Tuvimos un tiempo. Fuimos de la Asociación. Pero parece que ya no, no servíamos ahí y pan...nos botaron. Ah nosotros lo más que nos han hecho es botarnos de todos los lugares. (9:47)

ZK. Y Unión de Jóvenes Creadores...

AP. Tú dices de la Asociación...

ZK. No.

AP. O de la Juventud.

ZK. Sí

AP. Yo fui de la Juventud cuando fui militar, pero era muy informal, porque no más nadie...Además yo no tenía las ideas claras. Lo veía todo bien. Cuando empecé a tener mis ideas propias ya empecé a...aunque siempre me olí que eso no me cuadraba. Porque no se cumplía nada. No porque fuera bueno o malo, sino porque no se cumplía nada, para que iba a...Y veía mucha demagogia, discursos gastados.

Ya después nosotros empezamos a tener esta experiencia que te he ido contando poco a poco y que nos fue dando una experiencia internacional de conocimiento. Existe esto. Más allá existe lo otro. Mira, videos para que veas como hacen grupos como estos allá en los Estados Unidos, para que veas los grupos como hacen esto en Finlandia. Como hace este en Ecuador. Y nosotros nos fuimos dando cuenta y eso nos fue cambiando nuestra experiencia. Y creamos un festival. Al mismo tiempo queríamos

fuese un festival grande pero al mismo tiempo íntimo para lograr...para cuando lo levante siempre tenga posibilidades de incubarse, y cuando tenga eso volver a nacer. Eso de lo que se habla es de sustentabilidad de un proyecto bajo condiciones extremas. Te digo extremas a nivel mental. Extremas porque tienes temor, porque bueno, malo que bueno uno se como un plato diario de algo, resuelve. Pero te digo psicológica, porque crees que no puedes hacer las cosas. Y te dicen constantemente que nos puedes hacer las cosas y tú te crees que no puedes hacer las cosas y la gente cree que tú no puedes hacer las cosas. Así, es una cosa así. Pero cuando ven que tú haces las cosas, ven que tú mueves, ya, la gente se empieza a dar cuenta. Por eso yo quiero ponerlo aquí como un negocio de barrio. Porque puede ser entendible. Porque la gente puede decir coño esta gente están organizados. La gente aprende de mirar al otro. Coño esta gente está organizados, yo puedo hacer lo mismo o hago otra cosa. Entonces son cosas así que nos convierte un poco en un arte político, en un arte social y civil. Porque muchas de las cosas que nosotros estamos manejando es para resolver nuestros problemas cotidianos. En realidad yo no estoy haciendo este arte para resolver sólo una cosa metafísica. Ahora la metafísica está ahí, impresa en el arte, en lo cotidiano. Los días de la mente, aquí (se toca la cabeza), aquí. Entiendes? ¿Cómo el sol da aquí, cómo se convierte en luz, y cómo se convierte en una casa. En una poesía o en una casa. Porque los poetas aquí lo dejaron. Aquí dice: “Con estas mismas manos he construido...” Poetas de la generación, de Alamar. Lo tiene este, el de Casa de las Américas. Ahora se me olvida el nombre de él. “Con estas mismas manos”. Porque aquí se creó un movimiento de Microbrigadas en todo el país para las casas y eso muchos

poetas le cantaron. Fue una efervescencia el proceso de La Revolución. Despertó otra...Y el halo poético se fue para allí. Imagínate un poeta que nace en medio de una revolución, es la revolución misma. Con una agitación, el corazón se ensancha, la mente se abre y es bueno, no. Y muchos le cantaron. Y le cantaron a Alamar, por cierto. Muchos le cantaron a Alamar (13:41). Y nos dimos cuenta que la poesía sí produce. Martí tiene un exergo muy bueno: Que decía: Quien dice que la poesía no es más importante que las industrias. Porque ella es capaz de levantar o tumbar las almas. Y yo le agregaría más: hace cosas, se pueden hacer cosas con la poesía. Como mismo hace instalaciones y objetos, la instalación puede ser una ciudad, perfectamente, porque es arquitectura, es esto, es lo otro. Y a veces la experiencia del arte contemporáneo cierra un poco la idea del arte que uno tiene y más bien hemos ido viajando a los centros donde el arte constituía la experiencia de una cosmovisión, no solamente en el MOMA o en círculos cerrados, que para mí son buenos, pero son mega espacios cerrados, muy cerrados. Pero como el africano participaba, como el indio participaba de su experiencia del arte, en el Medioevo en una dimensión muy determinada. Estoy hablando para recogerlo y hacerlo muy contemporáneo. Entonces nosotros hemos buscado esa cosmovisión, esa cosmogénesis del arte, para poderla insertar, pero desde su origen, no desde ahora, desde su origen, asimilando las nuevas proyecciones. Que velocidad con internet! Que la gente lo pueda tener lo que tú puedas generar a nivel visual, a nivel... pero para sustentar, no solamente para dejar a la gente atónita que es lo que a mi me parece que se ha constituido el arte y las maneras nuevas de descentrar a las personas. Es decir, es un ritual más que te de que un

ritual más que te saque. No se, es reconvertir un poco eso. Es una cosa extraña, pero yo lo siento que lo hace unas cuantas gentes, lo que...No es publicitar, no, no tiene esa publicidad, es más misterioso. Circula de boca en boca, de doctores en doctores que están al borde de las mismas instituciones, que están buscando en los bordes y uno dice, coño (interjección) así como tú y como otras personas que fueron a Australia e hicieron el estudio completo de las maneras de la enseñanza, cómo incorporar todas esas cosas. Cómo incorporar. Es muy complejo, porque a la hora de insertar en estructuras tan modernas, como estas donde la gente, donde tú no tienes espacio para desarrollar una experiencia, tienes que tenerla en la mente y ...pero bueno a veces tengo a mis hijos y tengo que hacerla con mis hijos, como un científico lo hace con su obra, me entiendes. Mis hijos, conmigo. Pero la gente lo va sintiendo. Lo otro es...como que yo se que...La Revolución ha dejado algo interesante, que debe conservarse, ampliarse para enfrentarse a nuevas cosas. Que me parece que son buenas, pero que es extraño defenderlas porque de pronto mucha gente no las cree, pero sin embargo yo creo que sostenerse en un discurso equilibrado, con que mantenga determinadas ganancias que amplíe, que los buenos hábitos no desplacen los viejos hábitos que son buenos, es un proceso difícil. Para mí...yo encarno (17:34) eso. A mí me gusta encarnar eso. Te lo digo sinceramente. Cuando yo empecé a tener a mis hijos más todavía. Porque cuando no los tenía, estaba entregado pero a lo mejor me faltaba la práctica, pero ahora que los tengo se me une esa condición. Y la experiencia del arte de la manera en que nosotros la hemos estado viviendo y la experiencia de hacer un espacio autosustentable, plantado con la naturaleza, con la economía, con el

tiempo, con los bordes de todas las cosas, es uno de los retos que tenemos nosotros. Son los retos que tenemos nosotros aquí en la comunidad, el espacio, con un poquitico, pero por ejemplo no ocurre que tú veas a un DJ, a un poeta de la tradición, a un hiphoper, y a una gente del barrio...eso no lo ves, eso no se ve aquí en Cuba en ninguna parte. Y eso es una manera de enseñar el diálogo. Para mí. Y no solamente “Vamos a dialogar”. No. Una manera de que “Coño no me sentí bien con esto” y mira “que interesante es esto”. Porque a veces la gente lo que no se ve y no sabe que este existe. Es en la mayoría de los casos. Hay una barrera. Y eso ocurre en la poesía cubana, que es una poesía elitista, que a veces está luchando entre Lezama y Guillén. Y que ponen esas barreras. Y en realidad no, Guillén es Guillén y Lezama es Lezama. Yo estoy enamorado de Lezama. Lezama para mí es el mago de la poesía cubana. Es el mago, porque dejó fórmulas claras para que la poesía secretamente circulara. Y creó las Eras Imaginarias. Que eso, hasta ese momento ningún poeta en la nación había tenido esa visión. Heredia, Martí, el otro, Casal, son poetas de una lírica que es impresionante, pero Lezama hizo una estructura que nos ha servido a nosotros. Nos ha servido para crear “Eras”. Martí unió la Guerra de Independencia con la poesía. Y dijo que liberar a Cuba era el último verso de las Américas. Está poderosa esa alquimia. Es para mirarla. Lezama devela el misterio de Martí y propugna lo que para mí es la lucha pacífica, desde la poesía. Si yo lo uno a alguien lo uno a Gandhi. No tienen nada que ver porque es una cosa extraña. Es un orificio ahí extraño. (20:31) Que es como yo creo que es la manera extraña y publicitaria que Gandhi movió la verdad y la lucha pacífica. Son esos mismos polos secretos. Lezama decía que él viajaba en su sillón. Esa

es una creencia que a mí me gusta porque tiene que ver con Einstein también, él decía que se movía a la velocidad de la luz. Porque era igual que la formulación de Einstein. Ese es un círculo que uno hace como un mandala ente poeta, político. Y los poetas y los políticos se parecen mucho. Y los artistas. Porque hacen manifiestos. Verdad. Se parecen bastante. Ahora yo me siento así. Porque hago mis manifiestos, un poco que hago mis reformas agrarias. Mis reformas agrarias, porque esto es cuestión de espacio. Toda la lucha de nosotros es cuestión de espacio. Hay una reformulación agraria, de tierra, de suelo, urbana. De espacio, porque no lo hay. Entonces tienes que...No es la Reforma Agraria cuando empezó...Esto es una reforma poética, por espacios poéticos. Pero un espacio poético es una casa, de tantos metros cuadrados, pero también es un espacio donde puedas hacer sustentable tu...puedas sembrar lo que te de la gana. Para mí es una Reforma Agraria, tener espacios poéticos. A veces tienes el público pero no tienes espacio. Son cosas así súper extrañas aquí. Como dicen, a veces tienes el clavo y no tienes martillo. A veces tienes martillo y clavo y no tienes madera. Aquí corre ese tipo de cosas extrañas en Cuba. Entonces nosotros nos hemos ido uniéndonos. Yo digo nosotros, pero independientemente cada uno hemos ido elaborando. Hemos ido construyendo un nosotros individual por cada uno de nosotros. Porque el discurso de la nación de lo colectivo por zonas me cuadra. Lo que no me cuadra es donde el individuo pierde el sentido. Pero me gusta la nación con intención, con luchas y debates. El partido revolucionario de Martí tenía independentistas, tenía separatistas, tenía a los que quería con Estados Unidos, tenía de todo, pero ahí se debatía todo. Hay que luchar aquí. Aquí hay que luchar. Pero hay una línea aquí,

que Fidel la pone que es diversionismo ideológico hasta la batalla de idea. Eso todo es mente de allá arriba, síquico, manejando la sique.

Diversionismo ideológico. Te ponías una bandera americana...Por eso yo me puse un casco, un esto, un lo otro, para romper ese entorno. Porque bueno todo eso puede caber en un cuerpo. De hecho si cabe, porque está en la mente de nosotros. Yo me puse la pañoleta y vi a los artistas de la vanguardia con cascos en la cabeza pero vi...(23: 48) con sayas. Esto está en mi mente! No puedo evitar mi cuerpo! Pero además la industria te pone a ti otras cosas que uno no...Son cosas que hemos ido asumiendo.

Otra cosa es los locos. La locura en Cuba que es algo mítico. A Fidel le dicen el loco. Al Caballero de Paris...Tienen un espacio muy singular. Era poeta, regalaba flores. Me recuerda a los hippies que ponían flores...Sí uno va siendo como tejiendo una cantidad de imágenes que te permiten ver más allá de esta situación. Que es como Lezama decía las “Eras Imaginarias.” A mi me fascina eso porque ya de pronto salí de todo eso. Ya no existe nada. Estoy fascinado, entiendes. Cuando llega el terror, que lo saben hacer muy bien, porque lo saben poner muy bien, yo tengo esa Era Imaginaria, ya. Y entendía cuando Gandhi decía “si tengo que ir a la cárcel pero lo hago por voto a Dios” , es decir que ya tú no eres el que...Soy yo el que está haciendo un voto a Dios, y eso transforma, eso es una alquimia, una trasmutación que a mi me cuadra mucho porque uno logra salir del temor, uno logra salir de...Y muy equilibrado, disminuye la crueldad del otro, y la propia, no, porque uno la tiene. Es un poco el juego de eso. Nosotros estamos asimilando todo eso. La meditación, la meditación para mi constituyó una experiencia de arte contemporáneo, porque hay budistas que se quemaron, se sentaron y se quemaron como

proceso del arte. Ahora esas manifestaciones de faquir deberían entrar a la nueva época, con otra sustentación. A mi me parece que esos eran sacrificios, ahora el sacrificio debe ser puesto en escena con políticas interesantes y que den potencia para uno estar aquí caminando. Y a mi me parece que eso lo tiene todo el arte. El arte tiene todo eso, yo digo el arte porque lo tiene. Tú le quitas al cubano la música y le quitas al cubano las metáforas y lo que encuentras es un ser perdido en el llano. Perdido, perdido. Sin alegría, sin nada. No tiene nada si no corean las canciones de Van Van. Fíjate que se ha alimentado, la nueva trova, el Movimiento. Esta Revolución se ha alimentado de eso. Ah, y a esos son a los que le han dado espacio. Silvio Rodríguez tiene...El otro tiene...pero han luchado. Fulano, tiene, el otro lo tiene. Entonces, te quiero decir, que hay castas. Entonces, cuando uno se da cuenta uno dice bueno soy un poeta, un artista del barrio, con sentido universal. Y eso es lo que a mi me ha salvado. El hip hop también. Cuando llegó el hip hop a nuestras vidas fue bueno. El hip hop hizo a mucha gente hablar. Muchos, con voces rasgadas, diciendo lo que sentían. Muchos intelectuales no eran capaces de eso...Porque aquí se ha pensado siempre que los intelectuales son los que mueven esto, pero en realidad no es así. (27:29) Eso es una conexión entre todos esos puntos. Porque los intelectuales la mayoría del tiempo escriben cosas que son interesantes, pero que no llegan aquí o llegan aquí tergiversadas. Entonces, los espacios del hip-hop permitieron que se encontraran. Y ahí yo vi a Fulano y a Mengano y dije coño! Esta tesis nunca la había oído. Me di cuenta que yo estaba haciendo unas cosas que eran las tesis esas. Más o menos uno un poco del otro, un poco del otro, pero eran intuitivas, pero tenían un programa, una programación



científica, bien estructurada y esos nos han permitido movernos. Pero por ahí ha sido, para no darte más muela, que ha sido lo que nosotros hemos buscado.

Ahora en el Rincón estábamos pidiendo... porque el pueblo cubano es religioso, para mí. Es muy religioso. Ya la línea esa se está convirtiendo en mercantil. Ya ir al santuario...no es lo mismo como yo lo vivía. Que había una línea más dramática, la gente se detenía a ver lo que al otro le pasaba. Ahora no, ahora está el reggaetón, la gente bailando....Así es como yo veo el país. Cada vez que yo voy a El Rincón lo que veo es al país. Tengo una fotografía y un video de lo que va a ser el país. Porque el cubano, o no llega, o se pasa. No tiene sentido de proporción ni de equilibrio. Es normal, de los tiempos. No llega o se pasa. La prostitución aquí ya alcanzó unos niveles altísimos. Pueden alcanzar más todavía. No estoy en contra de nada de eso. Eso para mí se debe considerar un proceso de compensación pero que sea lo más... (29:39) es algo que puede deformar, pero lo veo. Si tú ves a una persona que se está arrastrando por un problema familiar, a nadie le importa. Ya allí a nadie le importa. Por lo tanto, por eso yo digo: Esto aquí en la ciudad a nadie le va a importar, porque cada uno está en lo suyo. Ese es el individualismo que ya está...Por culpa de cerrar completamente en el colectivo y matar. Entonces Cuba está pasando ahora por un proceso de individualización. Va p'allá. Y los proyectos como nosotros colectivos, son utopías, son utopías dentro de esto que quieren sostenerse. Cómo podemos estar juntos, es difícil porque tenemos una carga...que la gente quiere estar sola, independiente. Entonces, sostener eso, tienes que buscar nuevas maneras de liderazgo, liderazgo progresivo. Liderazgo donde no tienes

que ser el centro, donde el centro es todo, y al mismo tiempo hay que investigar mucho. Pero a mí me servido de mucho. Porque han venido gente a hacerlo....

Entonces, te decía, al unirme a El Rincón, a la línea esa... uno el arte, al arte ese de sacrificio. Porque eso es muy performático, una línea muy performática, muy de happening, de lo que sucede, y al mismo tiempo va hacia lo sagrado. Pedir, todos los cubanos piden allí. Nosotros pedimos porque se abra la nación, porque los proyectos alternativos tengan sus posibilidades, porque es pedir...Yo creo en la oración. Porque hago poesía y la poesía...La oración sin poesía no es nada. Y creo en la sustancia de un pequeño sacrificio en función de ver la libertad mental que tenemos. Porque a la gente no le interesa el sacrificio, hay mucha comodidad, hay mucho confort, que hace que la gente pierda la voluntad. Y pequeñas inserciones, porque ese garabato va pasando por los hombros de todos. En definitiva pasa cinco minutos por el hombro mío, no más, y además las personas que llegan. Al mismo tiempo ves la pujanza de la gente que quiere llevar cosas adelante, lo ves. Y haces una línea al mismo tiempo que la gente se sienta confortable y se sienta con valor y al mismo tiempo equilibrado. Porque hay una etapa de catarsis también en Cuba, catártica, me entiendes. Entonces, esa línea, sagrada, al borde de lo que quiere y algo que es superior, permite un...Y la gente respeta que es San Lázaro. Una de las cosas que no han podido eliminar es San Lázaro porque no nos pueden quitar esa línea...si tocas eso estás tocando suelo sagrado, aunque lo llenen de cosas ahí que venden. Pero la gente cree en San Lázaro como creen en la Virgen. Y para mí la Virgen es una conciencia. Pueden manipularla, la Iglesia, y eso, pero para mí es una

conciencia. Yo la visito, porque allí están los deseos de los cubanos, su prosperidad. Yo la visito. Cimbro ahí, cha. Y después está mi poesía y mis otras voluntades. Porque es un espacio de alta concentración de la energía. Y entonces, cuando insertamos eso ahí porque es un garabato, que es una mezcla de San Lázaro con Elegguá. Elegguá es un santo que abre los caminos, las cuatro esquinas. Pero Elegguá también puede ser un Eshu, que puede ser muy malo, que abre las cuatro esquinas, o puede ser también puede ser el que le quita a este para darle al otro. Es un santo muy juguetón. Yo al principio no estaba muy...porque yo estaba despertando mis sentidos por la India, por la meditación, y me fui apartando de eso. Aunque, siempre me conecté con San Lázaro y con la Virgen. Pero de un tiempo para acá me he dado cuenta que lo sagrado brota en cualquier lugar, que lo único que hay que mirarlo con los ojos que estén abiertos. Eso me ha permitido encontrar los misterios cubanos, lo misterioso. Con lo que dio Martí, con lo que dio Lezama, con lo que dio Casal, Casal por ejemplo vivía como un japonés en su casa. Tenía todo como un japonés. Imagínate, había hecho en una Cuba del XVIII, una casa japonesa, qué cosa más loca, chica. Entonces de ahí hemos destacando esas líneas performáticas que los poetas tienen pero sin embargo los plásticos son los que han tenido eso. ¿No? Pero en Cuba, Lezama, se metía en su bañera. Y decía que esa era su instalación. Y su sillón, y eso, muy performático, muy instalativo. Entonces recoger esa línea para Cuba es encontrar un suelo imaginario muy poderoso que inmediatamente que hala se activa esas fuentes de conciencia. Y San Lázaro es un santo para mí femenino y masculino, que es lo que le hace falta a este país porque este país es muy falocéntrico y al mismo tiempo

Cuba es un femenino, pero La Revolución ha creado un discurso muy falocéntrico. (36:12) Entonces por ahí. Porque es un santo que ayuda a la gente. Dice vengan a mi. Vengan los enfermos. Pueden venir otros. Todos pueden venir. Vengan. Entonces vamos allí los que tenemos proyectos, los que queremos que se abran las cosas, los que...Ahí tu vas y puedes pedir por Los Cinco, puedes pedir por Fidel, puedes pedir por Raúl, puedes pedir por el que tú quieras. Es un espacio muy democrático. Es un gran ensayo de la democracia. Yo no diría ni que Democracia es una cosa más amplia, porque la Democracia es una cosa que no entiendo muy bien, más compleja de lo que yo pueda imaginar. No se por qué las Democracias en América no han funcionado suficientemente bien. No sé pero deberíamos buscar formulaciones, porque todavía está el caudillo, están esas cosas que permean, pero bueno, son males necesarios o bien...no se. Por lo pronto a mi lo que me resuelve es ir resolviendo este asunto que te voy diciendo. Si mañana la visión me da otra, bienvenido...Porque ahora uno padece de cosas muy abstractas. Miras la televisión y estás en Japón y estás percibiendo que en Japón a alguien lo están maltratando, pero de pronto no ves que están maltratándolo aquí. Es un dolor virtual que no puedes resolver pero tienes este. Era lo que decía la madre Teresa de Calcuta. Decía: "Todo el mundo tiene su Calcuta al lado." (38:18)

Z: [LA PREGUNTA ES SOBRE EL TEMA DE LA RELACION CON INSTITUCIONES, AUDIO BAJO.]

AP. El tema de nosotros es trabajar en los bordes, ampliarlos. Como los bordes son de muelle. Los muelles se estiran y vuelven otra vez a su posición, pero siempre quedan un poquito más alterados, se van

venciendo. Yo creo que ese ha sido el trabajo de nosotros en las instituciones. A veces hemos corrido los bordes, se han ampliado, se han abierto, otras veces han bajado, y en esa es que hemos tenido que salir de las instituciones. Porque vamos representando ideas, de renovación, de reforma para las instituciones cubanas y la manera de aceptarlas a grupos de personas que piensen de esta manera y abriendo y haciendo que las instituciones cubanas se purifiquen para que puedan absorber, no las energías, porque para mí las instituciones cubanas están chupando las energías, nos están acortándolas, están absorbiendo. Inmediatamente se pone viejo. Es como dice el proverbio, no puedes meter vino nuevo en odres viejos. Y eso es lo que ha sucedido. La relación con la institución por momento es dramática, por momento es tragicómica, para definirte por línea. Tragicómica porque nosotros la vemos en esa perspectiva. Podría ser muy, muy trágica y de muchos dolores. Pero la visión de nosotros siempre nos permite que se convierta en algo tragicómico porque buscamos nuevas soluciones, siempre tenemos un espacio creativo más adelante y eso permite ser nosotros una institución que es lo que nosotros somos, nosotros somos instituciones de nuestro corazón y también creemos que tenemos el poder de no tener el poder. Eso como Vaclav Havel y todos demás que han desarrollado la línea de la lucha no-violencia, y era línea. Y por ahí vamos moviéndonos, con nuestro arte, tratando el equilibrio. Pero en este tiempo estamos pensando que las instituciones si no se renuevan, tanto las de aquí como las mundiales, están perdiendo realmente los nuevos bordes en que la humanidad quiere moverse, y las cosas que mueva para renovar el planeta, en realidad, para renovar nuestra estancia aquí, sin convertirlo (41:35) Y ya

como te decía nos creemos en línea directa con el movimiento mundial de la gente que quiere renovar en todos los ámbitos. La palabra alternatividad, underground, es como un cliché. Yo diría que somos personas que estamos viendo con presente y futuridad las nuevas cosas. Y uno lo encuentra en todos los niveles. Lo encuentra abajo , lo encuentra en el medio y lo encuentra en las altas esferas . No se puede hablar de que yo pueda ser muy diferente porque estoy aquí a otro nivel y que otro esta pensando. Lo que a veces no hay los puentes. La mayoría de tiempo que no hay los puentes. Estamos muy lejanos unos de otros...Más o menos es eso lo que te puedo decir en resumen. No odiamos . Bueno, de mi parte. Yo estoy hablando de mi. En el cuerpo del colectivo tratamos de no hacerlo. Y todo ello se convierte en ritual de posibilidad. No en agresividad. Por lo tanto todavía mantenemos diálogos con algunos. Saben, porque las instituciones los hacen las personas. Si mantenemos un diálogo con... (42:49)

ZK. ¿ Con quién, con cuáles?

AP. Por ejemplo contamos con muchos poetas que trabajan en instituciones cubanas., que vienen al Festival. Más de doscientos artistas cubanos que a pesar de lo que nos hicieron vamos allá a Poesía sin Fin. Y eso dice mucho de las instituciones, porque dicen concho estamos trabajando con un material. Nosotros tenemos que renovarlo. Porque lo primero que le dicen a esos artistas es “no vayas a ese Festival. Esa gente son disidentes. Están pagados por Europa. Están pagados”. Entiendes? Y los artistas, como saben de la verdad, vienen. Y eso dice mucho del mapa, ha cambiado. Ha cambiado el mapa realmente. Lo demuestra. Incluso las caminatas y eso demuestra que lo que hemos querido ser está

llegando a un nivel de...Ya está hecho. Ya esa hendidura está hecha. Puedes taparla delgadamente pero cuando venga otro y le meta el dedo ...No es una capa dura, es una capa reciente. Nosotros creemos en eso, que eso está hecho y ahora lo que nos cuadra es seguir lo haciendo. Seguir moviendo los bordes. Seguir ampliando, que la gente pueda y que hagan otras fisuras. (44:17)

ZK. Bueno, y cuando viene Zurbano a leer su poesía, qué significa eso en el mundo oficial de cultura?

AP. Bueno yo te decía que aquí eso es un poco "Patria o Muerte". Para ponerte una cosa "Patria o Muerte". Es una disyuntiva. Está la "o", pero la "o" es "Patria o Muerte", acentuada. Yo creo que esos bordes ya se están redefiniendo, constantemente. No, nosotros...Nosotros somos unos más que ayudamos a que estos bordes de blanco y negro o rojo y negro se vayan ampliando. Zurbano es una persona alternativa dentro de las instituciones. Siempre me ha aparecido porque ha absorbido la experiencia de la alternatividad. Y mas bien yo pienso que siempre estaba porque ha tenido el valor de alguno de asistir a esos espacios. Se ha ganado eso. Porque hay seres que tienen esas posibilidades, se lo aceptan más que a otros. A otros lo botarían. Pero vemos que a veces hay unos que tienen los dones que permiten que te asimilen con esas condiciones. Zurbano sería una de esas personas que ha logrado ser un Hermes dentro de las instituciones. Tiene un discurso que a lo mejor no totalmente me satisface pero sí tiene puntos en contacto y eso es lo mejor. Pero a mi me gusta las visiones que tiene Zurbano, la manera que trata la poesía, la manera que trata los procesos sociales. Y está en Casa de las Américas y está allá. Por lo tanto...Además no es enemigo mío. El

complejo de ser enemigo, también, eso es otra cosa. Si alguien tú vas a ver a un enemigo tiene que ser que tú lo llames personalmente, que nadie te diga que ese es tu enemigo. Están desapareciendo esos bordes. Y eso significa apoyo, no al Festival, porque ya no es apoyo al Festival, es apoyo a la una realidad que está en transición. Y el Festival es una de las posibilidades. Nosotros creemos que es la máxima para seguir haciéndolo pero sabemos que es una. Es la máxima para nosotros sentirnos bien pero al mismo tiempo es una más dentro de la nación. Sabemos que lo hacen los granjeros, los cuentapropistas, lo hacen una pila de gente. Nosotros tenemos un poco más de publicidad, extraña, porque luchamos para tenerla.

ZK. Pero cuando ellos vienen a aquí con su propia poesía vienen al mismo tiempo como representantes de la UNEAC, de una institución. Y persona como Zurbano, como puede balancearlo? (48:07) Como puede hacer esto y mantener sus posiciones oficiales y tener esta presencia, si no underground pero alternativa...y con ustedes, “disidentes”?

AP. Por momentos “disidentes,” por momentos....Cómo lo hacen. Yo piense que él, como nosotros que estuvimos al borde...Porque nosotros como estuvimos dentro de las instituciones tenemos algo. Lo que hay personas que están más adentro que nosotros, pero los que están participado en instituciones tienen algo en común, que más o menos saben. Lo que yo pienso es que él le ha sabido describir a estos procesos, le está enseñando cómo asimilarlos, me parece que le está enseñando a la institución. A las instituciones les hace falta gente así, para auto-redefinirse, porque ellos quieren renovarse. Ah, otra cosa, quieren renovarse. No es que quieran estar sólo así. Los que se renuevan sueltan



y se abren y se encogen, como retorciéndose, no? Pero hay gente dentro de ellas que son mensajeros de ellos mismas. Les dicen, mira, esto pasa, estas son las maneras, hay que absorberlo. Pero al mismo tiempo saben que Zurbano está con ellos. Que Zurbano depende un poco de esas instituciones para seguir moviendo toda su posibilidad, porque las instituciones te dan posibilidades. Pero eso es un registro más psicológico, más profundo que yo quizá no pueda... (50:02) pero mucha gente tiene temor de la pérdida de lo que la institución le pueda dar, en un país donde todo, nadie casi es independiente. Aunque de pronto todo el mundo ahora quiera decir vamos a ser independientes, no tiene que todo el mundo tenga que ser independiente en un país. Independiente quiere decir trabajar independiente. Pero es como un estallido donde van a ir parar mucha gente que después se van a dar cuenta de que después se van a dar cuenta de qué es esto...Lo que sí, los que lo van a llevar adelante, lo llevan. Está eso. Pero como que hay mucha gente así., que ya no resisten las instituciones. Y hay otras gentes que son puntos clave dentro de las instituciones y que con un lenguaje asequible para las instituciones están poniéndole esto...que son después procesos que las instituciones utilizan para atraer a estos proyectos. Me parece que representan la renovación de las instituciones, pero también trabajan para las instituciones, para reabsorber estos proyectos. Pero a veces lo reabsorben no con los líderes de los espacios, sino que se inventan fórmulas, réplicas falsas, unas más adelante, asumen traer a cuatro gentes que no tienen nada que ver con ese discurso y que lo quieren asimilar. Pero pienso que esos son como mensajeros que le hacen accesible una información, que es como un tubo de ensayo dentro de las

instituciones, que ellos se dan el lujo de tenerlos, porque eso es un lujo (eso es un lujo para como es este país tenerlos ahí), y otros artistas independientes que trabajan con las instituciones, que concommitan en el centro, pero son independientes les traen también otras...Danny Montes de Oca por ejemplo. Una persona muy inteligente a la hora de abordar la alternatividad. Se ha hecho de un territorio de respeto. Eso es otra cosa. Y... aquí los bordes son sencillos. Tú estás en la institución y tienes posibilidades de hacer contratos con otras gentes y se sabe con quién lo hace. Pero cuando tú hacen contrato con gente que no le cuadra al país es cuando ya tú no vas a servirles. Y si tú te mueves en esa línea eres confiable. Por tanto te dejo que articules el discurso en mí.(52:43) Porque a mi me cuadra decir también “nosotros nos renovamos. Nosotros...entiendes? Aquí todo es muy extraño. Pero hay muchas gentes que se han hecho en esos círculos. Por ejemplo el [Centro Wifredo] Lam se mueve en esa línea, es semi-independiente, independiente, pero... Cuando no quiero que hagas una cosa te intervengo y no la puedes hacer. No la puedes hacer y ya y te controlo. Pero al mismo tiempo durante todo el tiempo sin que nada se ponga tan extremo, tú puedes hacer tus cosas y cuando vienes a ver has hecho veinte mil cosas. Así es. Era lo que le decía a Danny Montes de Oca a...No, Lucrecia que habló con él...porque Lucrecia siempre con el Lam le está diciendo “no, estos muchachos no es así la historia que te están contando” y este hombre le decía “esto pasa un tiempo así. Nosotros tenemos que dejar que eso corra para después en otro momento atraerlo”. Es decir, que están...Que tienen sus estrategias para atraer personas. Tienen su estrategia para atraer personas que practican otra experiencia alternativa. Grupos como

nosotros así no hay. Hay de otras maneras pero no lo hay, una práctica así, no lo hay. Incluso a la hora en que nosotros hicimos la exposición, fue difícil porque no había un curador con nosotros, que supiera llevar nuestro arte a la galería. Eso es fatal, porque te quieren imponer cosas y es fatal. Bueno, yo ya no expondría si es que no sienta una plenitud, mínima, aunque sea para exponer. Por eso en la Bienal decimos “No, no, nosotros no queremos...Vamos a hacerlo aquí en Alamar”. Porque además era de las cosas urbanas...Voy a meterme yo en una galería para meter cuatro objetos dentro que no me van a decir nada, que al final lo que me voy es a sentir mal. Es como tú colocar esa experiencia y como hacerla...porque me parece que lo que hace falta es traducciones. Las personas que saben traducir a las instituciones cómo poner a estas gentes ahí; y eso faltaba para la experiencia de nosotros. Ha faltado que no ha podido poner un espacio curatorial (55:01) que se avenga con nuestras maneras. Eso es muy difícil, aunque yo se que en las vanguardias hay veinte mil cosas así, pero bueno a lo mejor aquí no, no cuentan con esa experiencia o entre el temor y el susto y la imposibilidad...Qué? No, ya, ya...

ZK. Sigue, sigue.

AP. Nosotros expusimos y esa muchacha quería que nosotros expusiéramos. Como diciendo esas gente son más ruido que otra cosa, vamos a exponerlos. Pero cuando te exponen, te quitan. No, no soporto eso. Yo se que en todos los lugares tú tienes que negociar, pero no una negociación donde ya tú sientas que no estás negociando. No estoy negociando nada. Esa pluma, dámela. Eso, quítalo. No, no. Bueno, qué estoy negociando aquí. Tú me estás diciendo cosas. Pero yo no estoy

demostrando...Entonces eso hace muy difícil nuestra presencia en algunas instituciones. Y...a lo mejor hay que registrarlo de otra manera. Supongo yo. Estoy seguro que hay que registrarlo de otra manera. Para llevarse la experiencia realmente nutricia de...Porque si no, no. Ya, es un bagazo lo que tú pones ahí. Algo seco. Ah, sí mira lo que hacen esta gente. Yo he visto cosas que hacen otras personas que son como las de nosotros que cuando tú la llevas sientes el impacto. Se como viven esta gente, se como sienten, brota la experiencia del arte. Ya eso era lo que te quería decir...

ZK. Muchas gracias Amaury.

AP. Me gustan las entrevistas. Me gusta darlas cuando tengo algo que decir. (57:20). Cuando no tengo nada que decir, que no me voy a renovar en el diálogo. Para mí conversar contigo constantemente influye en mis posibilidades expresivas. Porque hay una experiencia. Aunque no me estés hablando hay un campo, una plataforma que me permite volar. Hace falta orejas interesantes, orejas de energía, para uno poder moverse, sino...Me gusta el monólogo este. Es más monólogo que otra cosa.

ZK. Es bueno y si tengo más preguntas.

AP. Me puedes preguntar, yo estoy abierto a eso.

ZK. Si, porque yo no se si vamos a tener un tiempo un día podemos hablar un poco más sobre la cosa de economía (58:20) y del Periodo Especial que me dijiste antes pero no estaba escribiendo todo, entonces, pero...

AP. Déjame apuntarte dos o tres cositas ahí. Bueno lo mismo que te decía pero...bueno, para mí a partir del Periodo Especial se reordena todo. Se

reordena no, se revuelve todo. Y el cubano tiene que empezar a ajustar. El Estado tiene que ajustar su economía. Empieza a llenar sus arcas porque las siente perdidas. Empieza a sacarle el dinero al pueblo, normal, para hacer sus proyectos. Y se empiezan a tomar resoluciones por parte de la gente. Comprar el dólar a veinte y cinco...salir a las calles a vender sus cosas. Ahí en ese tiempo empieza el proceso para las empresas independientes cubanas. Ya ahí, todo el mundo se convirtió en un micro partícula empresarial. Lo que las instituciones y el Estado no reprimieron todo ese emporio. Permitieron un tiempo, abrieron, cerraron, sacaron, volvieron a abrir, sacaron, y dejaron a dos o tres. Pero la idea no se fue. La gente siguió haciendo sus negocios y aumentó el mercado negro. El mercado negro aumentó y era alimentado también, desde mi perspectiva, por el Estado. Hizo una condición muy extraña en que todo el mundo empezó a estar ilegal. Porque después que yo empiezo este negocio, puedo hacerlo, me lo quitas, lo baja, ya yo me quedé haciéndolo. Entonces, qué empezó. El saqueo de las instituciones cubanas. Yo me llevo el Fab (detergente), yo me llevo el jabón y el Estado me paga para venderlo en el mercado negro. Porque ya me hiciste un hábito. Tú no tienes empresas mayoristas donde puedas vender esas cosas. Porque era difícil hacer eso si no tenían dónde vender. Todo tenía que hacerse en función de un mercado negro donde el Estado, para mí, lo sustentaba. Para mí, a cada rato invertían cosas ahí. Que yo lo veía y decía mira esto y mira lo otro. Otro. Los fachos, los robos. Sí. Pero para mí mucho se empezó a utilizar el mercado negro para sustentar la realidad nacional. Es decir, para colocar aceite (1:1:11). Porque no vendían aceite en el mercado metían aceite a tanto. Si este país que está

tan controlado, cómo se te va a ir eso. Eso es un cuento. Tú tienes vigilantes en todo el barrio. El CDR, el otro, el otro. No me digas eso. También existía eso pero tenían que reorganizarse, porque apareció ese roba masivo también. Me parece que no lo pudieron controlar mucho., en esa primera etapa. Y se creó un mercado. Y se deformó la gente. Se deformó porque la gente quería trabajar independiente, quería tener donde comprar sus cosas, ya si no lo tengo, voy a hacerlo así. Entonces todo fue a parar a la ilegalidad, todo. Entonces, como le dicen, por la izquierda. Esa es una conducta psicológica que es difícil de quitar. Aquí, por lo menos en Cuba, es un hábito torcido. Al aparecer ese estado la gente comenzó a darse cuenta que tenía que hacer su negocio particular, con extranjeros. Entonces todo el mundo empezó. Fue una pequeña revolución. Y el que hacía arte underground... (decía) Oye yo hago eso. Voy a empezar a hacer mi proyecto. E iba a donde estaba Cultura y decía mira yo voy a poner esto. Un 60% lo ponen ustedes y un 30 (sic) nosotros. Vamos a arreglar esto. Pero nosotros no íbamos a arreglar el local porque cuando ven que tú lo arreglas, que ven que tú inviertes dinero, te botan de la institución y se quedan con.... Es una cosa así macabra, bien macabra. No hay contrato realmente. Cinco años son los contratos. Tú no me puedes botar antes de los cinco años., porque es un contrato...si tu lo haces lo haces como lo hacen los otros bueno bienvenido, pero no puedo plantearte una lucha legal...Pero bueno, tampoco nosotros teníamos eso. Y todos nos dábamos cuenta de que hacía falta. Al principio no tanto económica sino por embullo de hacer algo independiente. Ya al hacer algo independiente a los pocos pasos entra la economía porque cuando tu vas a hacer un Festival tienes que

ahorrar un dinerito para comprar el audio. Había gente que alquilaba y tenía su audio independiente. Si esperabas por el Ministerio de Cultura tus actividades todas se caían porque nunca llegaban ni había presupuesto. Por lo tanto fuimos haciéndonos independientes desde el punto de vista económico de las instituciones, porque siempre, lloviera o relampagueara teníamos el audio. Nosotros lo comprábamos con nuestro dinero. Ya. O era tan retorcida la institución que tú resolvías dentro de ella para resolver el audio, pero no fallaba porque tú decías te voy a ayudar y te llegaba. Es decir, que las estructuras aquí estaban sustentadas en que dialogaras. Otra, no había ningún dinero, era a bomba. Yo hablaba contigo y tú me decías “coño Amaury, ese proyecto que tú tienes. Voy a tratar de sacarte el audio por aquí. Seguro, seguro. De eso no se entera nadie”. Y así sucedía. Así, con amistades profundas. Ya nosotros empezamos, y empezaron a llegar amigos que nos decían “Oye ustedes van a hacer el Festival, que bonito”. Les enseñábamos fotos que tirábamos ahí. “Mira”. “Que cosa más interesante. Les voy a dejar diez dólares”. Nosotros cogíamos los diez dólares y los guardábamos. Venía otro y decía vamos a dejar esto. Y así. Nos fuimos dando cuenta que esa solidaridad es buena. Eso, hicimos una comuna. Un centro común donde guardar el dinero. El dinero que cogíamos nosotros. No servía para comer ni nada. Era, ahí. Y fuimos centralizando eso. Con la comuna ahí para guardar el dinero. Y eso fue entrando. Al poco tiempo fueron llegando personas que nos dijeron tiene que aplicar tienen que hacer proyectos. Entonces empezamos a hacer proyectos de esto, proyecto de lo otro. Estábamos muy centralizados porque teníamos la idea de centralizar, pero después fuimos descentralizando toda la

actividad. Entonces después cada uno al poco tiempo empezó a hacer su propio proyecto. A veces nos manteníamos unidos porque la presión era alta entonces mejor nos manteníamos unidos que fragmentados. Porque lo que hacen es quererte fragmentar. Le dan oportunidad a este, te dicen a ti que no. Este dice yo tengo oportunidad, tú no, me voy a alejar de ti. Y te dividen. En nosotros no ha sucedido así. Aunque, lo han manejado. Pero nosotros, como nació de la amistad, siempre pusimos en el centro la amistad. Algo que Lezama dice que todo es la amistad. Y a nosotros nos cuadró eso, la amistad. En momentos muy difíciles donde la economía aprieta. Pero de todas maneras nosotros mantenemos una estabilidad psicológica para tratarnos desde el punto de vista emocional. Nosotros somos muy emocionales también. Pero resolvemos mantener la amistad. Entonces empezaron a venir personalidades. Y no sólo eso, empezaron a dejarnos instrumentos de trabajo que nosotros cuidábamos mucho y que le prestábamos a otros, y que la comunidad nos fue dejando una planta de soldar... (1:06:46) y que nosotros se las prestábamos a otros y cuando les hacía falta se las dábamos de nuevo. Él me la pidió recientemente y le dije mira llévatela...Y así. Y fuimos trabajando con la comunidad. Otros. Yo tengo una cámara de video para las actividades. Y así. Tuvimos como un trueque, participamos del trueque. Así fueron apareciendo algunas ideas. Porque nuestro arte no podíamos ponernos con la velocidad que teníamos y el deseo de hacer cosas, no podíamos ponernos para vender en la feria. Por lo tanto estábamos absortos todo el tiempo en hacer esta experiencia. Y ya. Empezaron a venir amigos. Haz esto y a enviar proyectos. Y a Cultura, quiero que me pongas el audio nada más. Fulano tú me puedes poner esto. Oye yo vengo el mes que viene, voy a traer esto.



Empezaron los proyectos alternativos también. Oye yo tengo Video Bim. Préstame el video bim. Empezó esa solidaridad. Otros empezaron a aplicar. Nosotros fuimos unos de los primeros del movimiento underground en recibir más de treinta mil pesos que fue la computadora y el estudio, con la amiga de nosotros Lucrecia. Que hizo ese vínculo, porque nosotros ya conocíamos a Virella, la agregada cultural de la embajada de España. Tremenda persona. Todavía nos atiende. "Oye, cualquier cosa". Nos ayuda, manda escritos. Nos manda un dinerito para fin de año. Y nos ayuda cantidad. Y ese hombre Virella nos fue llevando por las Embajadas. Ah, allá en las embajadas encontrábamos mucho a todos los artistas cubanos. Ah, pero nosotros no podíamos estar allí. Oh, porque ustedes están haciendo tratos con el enemigo. Que enemigo? Nosotros lo que andábamos con Virella. Ah, nosotros porque éramos del barrio, porque no teníamos estatus, porque no nos conocía nadie. Así. Pero después Virella nos llevaba a la embajada de Italia y "Coño nos gusta el trabajo de ustedes. Voy a ver en qué los apoyo. Queremos pasar tantas cosas, cómo podemos pasarlo por esta Embajada. Sí, no hay problema, dile a Lucrecia. Y así fuimos creando estrategias para entrar equipos y ...Pero todavía no estábamos dentro de la institución. No nos podían meter mano. Tampoco nos podían quitar las cosas, pero no nos podían meter mano directamente. Porque éramos parte de su invento. Nos fuimos empezando, para entrar en las instituciones, invento de estas gentes. Nosotros somos nosotros, pero la aceptación y la asimilación por las instituciones fue de varios políticos que ahora están ahora en Cultura. Elpidio, Rojas, y el otro, que dijeron que iba a ampliar para abrir con el arte emergente cubano. Entonces entablaron unas políticas culturales.

Pero después cuando eso fue empezando a crecer, ya. Entonces ellos tenían que luchar con esas políticas. (1:09:38). Tú dices que estás aquí, tú tienes que luchar con esas políticas. Nosotros abrimos, empezamos a abrir. Nos dimos cuenta al poco tiempo de eso. Y además trabajábamos con mucha ingenuidad, muy claros. Todo el mundo nos veía y por lo tanto sacábamos muchas cosas. Y ese circuito nos empezó a dar, a participar en la Bienal de La Habana. Ellos nos pusieron en ese espacio. Participar allí. La verdad ha hecho cosas que también nosotros hemos sabido utilizar. La institución nos dio muchas posibilidades. Y nosotros la utilizamos. Pero la utilizamos para publicitarnos, para hacer marketing, de manera natural. Para mi eso entra en el noble comercio humano. Son cosas foco que a mi me interesan para entablar relaciones con las personas. Cosas justas. Entonces esas personas empezaron también a obtener cosas a partir de que nos movían. Sí, porque Lucrecia es, yo digo que es una kamikaze del mundo, ella hace esas cosas aquí, luego allá, busca instituciones. Entonces fuimos aprendiendo como una persona como ella vive en el mundo. Pero le daba resultados hacer cosas con nosotros, aunque no se haya beneficiado totalmente, pero se abrían canales y podía traer a otros jóvenes para acá, la gente de la Bienal y estableció unos negocios con nosotros que le dieron paso a otros negocios que nosotros no conocemos. Te quiero decir de aperturas de cosas. Y en ese tiempo ella trajo también a la Universidad de Roma, no me recuerdo qué nombre, está por ahí. Y fuimos estableciendo encuentros con catedráticos, con personas que conocían y eso también nos fue dando un empuje porque escribían sobre nosotros o nos hablaban de las cosas que habían con mucha rapidez en el mundo y nos lograba

micro localizar. Eso fue bueno. Y así fuimos haciendo Nueva Generación. Pero había una gran actividad en toda La Habana, muchos grupos haciendo cosas. Que con Virella. Virella estuvo tres años aquí. Todo el dinero lo estuvo metiendo en función de la alternatividad cubana. Eso fue un año muy bueno para nosotros y para muchos artistas. Después se fue y empezamos a conectarnos con gente de Europa del Este (1:12:36) Jóvenes que estaban de aquí para allá haciendo cosas, con latinoamericanos que desde el principio ya teníamos encuentros y nos ayudaban y decían coño yo voy a sacar esto. Es decir, la gente de Latinoamérica tiene menos posibilidades de ayudarte, pero te ayudaban trayéndote cualquier cosita. Siempre, te ayudaban. Y los de Europa del Este tenían instituciones jóvenes como Inventati, como Lucrecia, que lo que hacían era aplicar en esta, aplicar en el otro. Pero ellos a veces tienen problemas con la Príncipe Klaus. No, Príncipe Klaus no. No, porque esa está pagada por la CIA, me entiendes. Todos. Pero había otras Instituciones de Italia y eso que esta muchacha lograba sacarles, con la Universidad hacer libros sobre nosotros, con algunas embajadas que querían hacerlo aquí. Por eso fue que pudimos encontrarnos con personas así. Porque nosotros éramos analfabetos con esas historias. Yo todavía soy analfabeto, pero nos ayudaban, creaban determinadas condiciones. Ahora un poco que necesitamos consagrarlo para que ese pequeño capital, esa pequeña cosa tenga consistencia dentro del suelo cubano y se convierta y sea underground como pidiéramos llamarlo o alternativa, pero que permita el flujo. Si no vamos tener que seguir haciendo como lo estamos haciendo, con mucha más organización, pero hacerlo. Para cuando llegue la oportunidad, ya esté hecho. Es como los

cubanos que ahora tienen su patente. No lo tenían, pero ahora dieron el permiso, bueno, entraron. Pero el que empieza ahora está embarcado porque ahora están analizando la ley esa para los cuentapropistas artistas, estamos pillándola a ver. Porque, no tendríamos que entrar por el Fondo, por otras cosas. Eres independiente, por tanto puedes comercializar tus cosas a un precio tal y venden discos, legal, con poco control. Yo lo que estoy es analizando para ver si hay posibilidades y explorar esas leyes. Para mi es un performance, explorarla ex un performance. Como si mañana la tenga que devolver, coge eso no me sirve. Pero explorarla porque nos hace falta mover algunas cosas legal y legítimamente. Sí, es como ir explorando. Tenemos nuevas maneras alternativas de enderezar la economía. Hemos tratado estos años que la gente pague menos por las cosas que hacemos, pero que sean justos, que la gente la pueda obtener y que tampoco sea un sacrificio para el bolsillo ajeno. Y que al mismo tiempo se recicle el capital. Es que estamos buscando eso porque lo que tenemos es esa gente que les gusta nuestro arte y que quieren nuestro arte y son capaces de comprarlos. Y lo estamos trabajando así. Ahora este año, para eliminar un poco de ideas en torno a que la CIA, en torno a que – porque ellos siempre están en eso- tenemos que buscar sustentos más estables, en torno a toda la papelería del Festival que hay fotos muy bonitas que se pueden vender a precios muy módicos, establecernos en las casas. Estas casas van a ser centros de negocio. Es decir negocio en el sentido del arte, de encuentros, de becas. No es una beca, pero es un espacio hospitalario, en el sentido más amplio. Viene fulano, está aquí con nosotros. Y viene un vecino y dice es americana, sí y qué, no que la ley tal o más cual, bueno vamos y pagamos,

y está aquí sí. Todas esas cosas, para este año, nosotros queremos...porque este año van a ver muchos ataques a nosotros, a todos los alternativos. Estamos como observando eso. Y siendo leal y legítimo porque escribimos. Oye no , estamos haciendo esto y a nosotros no se nos da esta oportunidad porque esta oportunidad es esta. Así. Pero tenemos espacio donde hacerles esas críticas, que es en nuestro blog. Y si no, cuando más lo hacemos en nuestras canciones, en nuestros discos, en nuestros videos. Y cuando haces esas cosas también a la gente le gusta consumir eso. (1:17:33) Puede ser una posibilidad. Aquí le dicen, los hip hoppers lo llaman, La Industria Subterránea. Al Hip Hop, con estas producciones y Los Aldeanos fueron los que llamaron La Industria Subterránea. Se han sostenido los Aldeanos porque la gente le gusta y lo compra. A veinte pesos, a cinco pesos, lo que sea. Y les ha permitido seguir produciendo. Y eso, se les va de las manos. Entonces, si se logra eso, que lo ha logrado el reggaetón, porque de donde saca la gente dinero para ir a ver a cuatro regatonearos. Pero van porque les gustan. Pero la gente paga dinero para ver a los reguetoneros. Pero también puede pagar por una cosa que les guste. Un público mas reducido entonces nos hemos visto. Toda esa tienen su circuito. Este reguetonero va para allá, este se va para Miami, este brinca para allá. Pero nosotros somos un grupo de conciencia. Grupos de conciencia son más perseguidos. También nos distancian de los artistas cubanos de alto rango. Nos distancian de René, entiendes. Porque cuando coalicionan con esas gentes ellos dicen esta gente son artistas. Entonces esta gente no quieren oír eso. Esta gente hacen el arte. Trabajamos con René Francisco, sí, René Francisco trabaja con nosotros. Trabaja este...Saavedra, el otro, el otro. Trabajamos con

ellos cuando tenemos oportunidad. Y así, cuando aparece. Y eso va legitimando muchas cosas. Porque en estos años a nosotros no se nos ha sacado ningún...(1:19:41) en ningún lugar. La bienal ha captado momentos y lo ha puesto ahí. Eso ha creado un circuito de gente que nos venga a ver, porque no nos encuentra allí y entonces por momentos nos beneficia, lo que a veces nosotros no hemos sido capaces, o no hemos tenido la inteligencia suficiente para convertir eso en posibilidad de existir, razón de existir. Aunque hemos buscado alternativas por no ser, por sostenernos con la mínima. Pero hemos hecho muy buenas amistades y eso es una ganancia muy buena porque en los momentos difíciles la gente a respondido a nuestro llamado. No te puedo decir otra cosa. Ey, oye, aquí estamos. Entonces, pan, todo se para, todo se paraliza. Quieto. Cuando nos sacaron de allá, escribieron la gente Oye cómo tú le vas a hacer eso a esa gente. Tania Bruguera abrió en Facebook un espacio, una causa. Más de 6 mil personas anotadas. Yo pienso que muchos intelectuales cubanos respondieron porque sabían que podía pasarle normalmente...Mucha gente decía No puede volver la parametración. No puede volver la parametración, no puede volver. No puede volverse a parametrar a los artistas. Lo que nosotros estamos frescos. Al mismo tiempo que ellos no se sientan la agresividad. Pero, con firmeza en nuestras exposiciones. Yo se que tú no quieres sentirte agredido. Tú me agredes y yo te voy a tratar con la...(1:21:38)... Es la resistencia pacífica de nosotros. Y así, hemos conversado en profundidad. Y entonces, ellos como que están buscando con quién dialogar, porque la sociedad cubana está hirviendo. Por acá el otro, por acá el otro, por acá el otro. Internacionalmente, presión. Cuba

navegando. Es complejo. Entonces dialogar nacionalmente después de 50 años sin dialogar eso es un cuento. Cincuenta no, más todavía. Está más para atrás todavía. Y es complejo.

Pero como te decía, la economía ahí, la hemos ido inventando ahí. Conectando la economía con cosas espirituales. Sustentando nuestra estadía en un universo metafísico o práctico, me entiendes. Y que sustente nuestras vidas al mínimo. Aquí todavía se puede vivir así. Yo pienso que a partir del año que viene va a ver más la caída en la pobreza. Pienso, a lo mejor no es real. Pero a la vez que quiten la libreta del mercado, que cierren esto...puede ser. Nosotros estamos pensando si este país se va a pique o no. A mi lo que me interesa ahora es cómo Poesía sin Fin esté al frente de estas dificultades, cómo podemos seguir trayendo esa paz, y cómo podemos despertar formas creativas de existencia, alternativas de vivir. Eso es lo que preocupa. Le estaba diciendo así a...porque tú vez, por Poesía sin Fin hemos ido dialogando con gente, con ellos. Me han llamado personalmente. Pero el proyecto de nación que yo tengo, tú no vas a recibir golpes por parte mía. Y tú no. Porque hay mucho miedo. Esa gente está llena de miedo, es decir, el poder. Pero empezaron este año ya dándole tremendo miedo, el año pasado, al quitar a Pérez Roque y al otro. Tú sabes todos los que tenían cargos. Tremendo miedo. No, qué va, tú viste lo que le hicieron. Entonces están llenos de miedo. Tú sabes cómo están las instituciones. Nadie quiere perder cargo, acceso...entonces los alternativos...

ZK. Voy a hablar un momento con Damián.

AP. (1:25:36) Hay otras zonas que se han despertado. Están los artistas. Se ha despertado un movimiento de productores. Si hay artistas, cómo le

producimos un espectáculo a fulano de tal. Porque fulano de tal es conocido lo conoce mucha gente en internet. Podemos aplicar, porque esa gente sí conoce. Sí, se dedican a eso. Por ejemplo yo, es muy difícil entre la coordinación y lo otro dedicarme a la producción. Aunque uno piense en Festival, en producción, en su totalidad., pero no es lo mismo un productor. Una persona que tenga ya un contador, alguien que...Eso ha ido faltando. Eso faltaba, nosotros lo hemos ido incorporando. Los contadores, que están al margen del arte. Un artista no está en nada, o tiene que tener un representante. Nosotros no hemos podido recurrir al representante porque al representante tienes que darle dinero. Y nosotros tenemos que auto representarnos. Y a veces el artista no se representa suficientemente bien porque cómo desplazarte a ti mismo para hablar de ti. Parece una cosa muy...Pero lo hemos tenido que hacer. Dentro del grupo Eligio ha asumido esas cosas de publicidad y de movernos. Y bueno han llegado otras personas que han movido la cosa, pero en el orden la publicidad, que alguien nos represente. Llegar allí. Es muy fatigoso ponerse a...cuando viene a ver tú no tienes ganas de hacer ninguna instalación. Lo que tienes ganas es de acostarte a dormir. Pero lo hemos ido resolviendo. Pienso que de ahora en adelante sí...

ZK. [LLEGA ALGUIEN] Hola!!! ...Ya estamos terminando.

AP. Ya sí ahora estoy ya...Quizá otro día pueda reflexionar sobre otras cosas pero ya ...A partir de lo que te estuve hablando a lo mejor después te cuento otras cosas. ..Te voy a decir una cosa muy interesante, un cuento. Yo estaba tomándome un refresco en uno de los kioscos estos y me dijo pero qué es lo que tú haces. Yo le digo bueno yo hago arte. A ti te respalda algo. No, yo estoy ahí en instrucción pero a mi ahí no me dan



nada, yo tengo que andar buscando las cosas y me dijo entonces tu eres un cuentapropista del arte igual que yo. Igual que yo pero de otra cosa. Y la mamá de Kizzy uno de los que está aquí me gusta su pensamiento económico. Me gusta que cada cosa que se piense con el espíritu pero algo que lo sustente abajo. Y eso me gusta ese diálogo con ella porque me alimenta. Me deja la aventura pero también me deja la posibilidad de...Ah, te encuentras con cubanos que salen, que entran, que hacen sus negocios afuera y que están proyectando su economía aquí, que tienen un status por debajo. Están conectados por debajo y en el medio. Se sostienen ahí como en la mínima, pero ahí. Para cuando...Ellos saben que esto va a cambiar, y como ellos tienen estabilidad. Hay muchas empresas así de cubanos que están pululando. E inhiben las empresas de muchos de los que están aquí. Cuando empiezo a participar en el concierto de las empresas y de la economía, tiene una ventaja...Como hay muchas personas que empezaron con la Revolución pero eran de la clase media alta y alta que ahora son los que están muchos acaudalados. La Revolución los siguió manteniendo en los mismos lugares. De ese grupo que no se puso en contra sino que se bajó y se mantuvo son mucha de la gente que ha hecho su proyecto. Por ejemplo, Eusebio Leal ha levantado pero tiene toda la familia afuera. Y esa gente ha hecho proyectos. Bueno a quien Dios se lo dio San Pedro se lo bendiga pero lo que te quiero decir es que hay muchos sí. Yo me estaba fijando en eso. Y yo me digo, nosotros con este proyecto y este esfuerzo de doce años...Tiene que coronarse. Coronarse por el bien mucho de nosotros, por el bien de una comunidad. Porque yo pienso que mañana nosotros vamos a poder ampliar las posibilidades de crear espacios de enseñanza alternativa, de

arte, de encuentro de una gente con otros. Y yo pienso que esto que nosotros hacemos es como la semilla de lo que realmente se puede proyectar. Porque Nilo lo ha hecho siempre. David tiene su estudio allá en Micro 10 para grabar, como lo tiene el otro artista aquí Los Papines, como lo tiene este otro artista que tiene un estudio grandísimo en Alamar, que trabaja para la EGREM pero es independiente. Pero esa gente ha encontrado los medios. Y las posibilidades legales y eso. Que a veces a uno se le cortan. Ser alternativo es...Yo pienso que ser alternativo es estar signado por querer estar separado de los otros. También ser alternativo es una manera de observar, de nuevas voluntades, de percepciones psicológicas, económicas, que permitan el flujo de nuevas creatividades. Para mí eso es lo alternativo. En toda su dimensión. Pero bueno, la realidad, que a veces va constituyendo un traje, no un comportamiento real. Ya se ha encargado la jerga de acabar con eso. Por ejemplo: Yo soy underground, yo soy underground. Ya perdió sentido. Es igual que hizo Mario Puzo con los mafiosos. Después que escribió El Padrino, muchos de los mafiosos se empezaron a comportar como El Padrino y empezaron a buscar publicidad y ahí mismo acabó todo. Es un poco ese rejuego que a veces hay que salirse de esas capas ionizantes. Ya, no puedo más.

ZK. Gracias, muchas gracias.

LUIS ELIGIO PEREZ CAFRIA entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

22 FEBRERO 2007 ALAMAR

TIEMPO TOTAL: 1:14:38

Z. Bueno, dime como llegaste hasta aquí y de donde eres. Empezamos así.

LE. Bueno, yo nací el 10 de Julio de 1972 en el Centro de La Habana, pero yo me considero natural de la Sierra Maestra que son las montañas más altas que hay al oriente del país. Porque soy el tercero que nace aquí en la ciudad. Antes de mis dos hermanos y yo toda mi familia había nacido en las montañas y sus formas y sus crianzas y sus entendimientos de la vida era de ahí. He reconocido en la actualidad de que mi espíritu viene de allí y no del lugar donde nací, aunque me crié en la ciudad, he vivido todo el tiempo en la ciudad, eso ha marcado profundamente mi visión de la vida. Pero siempre ha estado hablando en mi espíritu la Naturaleza. Entonces es por ello que he podido empezar a mirar con conflicto a veces y otras veces con conocimiento más este espacio circunstancial en que vivo llamado ciudad o civilización. Pero llego aquí en el año 97, vengo acá y empiezo a visitar el espacio, pero no es hasta el año 99 en que empiezo a tener mas conciencia de este espacio. Aquí funcionaba un taller literario en la galería que es Centro de Arte y Literatura, y quienes dirigían la galería, directores de la galería y directores del taller eran los que me guiaban en el conocimiento de la poesía pero allá en La Habana; y por ellos es que vengo acá. Por primera vez conozco a un poeta, conozco a otros poetas, conozco a gente que vive y piensa desde el arte o que esa viviendo o pensando desde el arte; y me enamore entonces del espacio,

del lugar, y cada vez empecé a venir mas acá. Una vez me invitan, uno de los poetas que había fundado ya el grupo llamado Zona Franca me invita a una lectura. Fue muy interesante eso. Vamos a llamarle interesante. ¿Por qué? Porque comenzamos a prepararnos para hacer esa lectura. ¿Cómo? No sabemos. No teníamos experiencia de que había que prepararse para que cuatro personas hicieran una lectura. Generalmente cuatro personas que van a hacer una lectura, se hablan algunos días, se llaman por teléfono, se ven, pero van directo el día de la lectura y cada cual hace su lectura y allí se ponen de acuerdo. Tu lees primero, yo después. Pero no fue así. Intuitivamente nosotros comenzamos a mirar nuestros textos, y empezamos a ver que tenia que ver mi poema con el del el, y el del otro con el del otro y así empezamos a armar el sentido de la lectura. Y también Amaury... él dijo, por ejemplo, de repente dijo que él no podía leer si no tenía una mesa blanca con una vela y una copa con agua. Eso es muy propio del ritual del espiritismo, que vino de Inglaterra y que está muy arraigado aquí en Cuba. Y todos nosotros aceptamos esa imagen inmediatamente. Ahí empezó el performance. Ahí comenzó el performance para una lectura de poesía. Y es la primera vez que hicimos una lectura performática. Porque yo también decía mis textos y los grababa en una grabadorita (sic), porque no estaba conforme con el ritmo y la dicción que yo tenía de los textos; y grabándolos así una vez salió que en vez de yo decirlo ponía la grabación y yo empezaba a imitar la voz mía en la grabación y a todos nos gustó. Fue impactante eso. Se ve bien, con la vela, el ritual. Porque entonces elegimos que cada uno teníamos que tener una vela en la mesa. “Yo también quiero una vela”; y Edel también y el otro también. Éramos – estoy diciendo “éramos” porque me estoy

refiriendo a ese tiempo, al 25 de Febrero de 1999, esa primera lectura. Por eso estoy diciendo “éramos”. Éramos negros los cuatro poetas. Amaury, Leonardo Guevara, que vive actualmente en los Estados Unidos (fundador y dirigió el grupo Zona Franca durante mucho tiempo, tiene dos libros publicados, etc.), Alberto Basabe que vive eventualmente también fuera del país, y estuvo en el grupo durante muchos años activo, Amaury y yo.(5:22) Cuatro poetas negros. El mas claro soy yo. Y los cuatro teníamos profundo dentro la raíz africana, que está muy mezclada con el espiritismo. Y ahí empezó todo. Empezó nuestra primera lectura performática, que impactó. Nuestros poemas no eran tan buenos como nuestra sinceridad y el clima, el ambiente y el performance que hicimos al presentarnos como grupo por primera vez. Y ahí empezó toda la carrera mía dentro de Zona Franca.

Yo vine acá, ocupé uno de esos talleres, aquel primero, ocupado, estaba vacío (sic). Lo ocupé. Luego vino Nilo Julián, lo ocupó junto conmigo; y ahí después establecimos que ese era el lugar de Zona Franca, del proyecto, y comenzamos a vivir ahí. Yo empecé a ocupar el cargo de Custodio de la galería, que cuidaba la galería por la noche, por un sueldo de cien pesos Muy pobre. No llegaba en aquel tiempo ni a un dólar mensual; y eso justificaba mi presencia en las noches en este local. Nilo también comenzó a ser custodio de la galería, entonces se justificaba que ambos siempre estábamos por las noches aquí. Y Amaury siempre estaba aquí en este local de aquí atrás en las noches. Y así comenzó la aventura de mi llegada aquí al espacio. Comencé a sentir de verdad la poesía dentro de mi, de mi vida. Porque yo escribo desde hace veinte años, pero solo desde hace diez comencé a sentir a la poesía no como algo exterior

sino como algo interior, y la comencé a mezclar con todo en mi vida. Viviendo en ese espacio es que revolucionó todo dentro de mí. Largas conversaciones hasta altas horas de la madrugada sobre poesía, lecturas informales, todo el día, toda la madrugada, escribiendo hasta la saciedad. Salimos a hacer performance a las calles. Porque...como no asistíamos a los espacios oficiales de la ciudad, donde toda la intelectualidad poética, de los poetas se reúne o son invitados a sus lecturas y nosotros éramos totalmente desconocidos, nosotros muy bien que nos conformábamos con empezar a hacer la poesía aquí en las calles de Alamar. Amaury siempre fue una gran inspiración, porque Amaury, su personalidad y su modo de andar era un performance en las calles. Y andar con Amaury nos daba mucho valor de empezar a resistir las miradas de las personas, empezar a resistir que las personas te pararan y te dijeran, te preguntaran “¿Qué tú eres? ¿Qué tu profesas? Y empezar a decir ante no saber qué, la palabra “poeta”. “Somos poetas”. Y luego creo que eso se convirtió en un compromiso silencioso de comenzar a decir la poesía en la calle, porque las personas no venían acá. Entonces la única manera de demostrarle además de nuestra manera de andar y de hacer en la calle era también decir la poesía.

Creo que he tenido una tendencia natural al teatro. Natural, natural. No ni tan siquiera de asistir a funciones teatrales, ni de haber estudiado teatro, sino natural. En un principio yo salía como a hacer teatro a las calles, pero me gustaba que fuera un teatro que las personas no creyeran que era teatro, sino que era real. Que este personaje es real. Que no pudieran nombrarlo como personaje, que no supieran que era un personaje, sino alguien real, un loco, un religioso, un disidente, alguien

que está diciendo con tremenda locura y una facha (facha es la apariencia), con una facha extraña, ¿qué cosa es esto? Entonces así fue. Y en esas lecturas entonces socializaba todo lo que nosotros aquí abajo vivíamos, en la fumadera de marihuana, los ritos religiosos, no comunes, porque meditar, leer o practicar numerología, practicar el I Ching, consultarlo diariamente, hacer practicas de “reiki” o meditación o rosacruz, meditación rosacruz, eso era diario. Se convirtió en algo común en nosotros. Eso lo exteriorizaba con estos personajes que yo salía a la calle, con los que decía la poesía. Cuando yo decía un poema, ese hombre que decía el poema tenía una pipa larga extraña donde fumaba y antes de decir la poesía hacía rituales que eran propios de todas estas practicas místicas y las personas se impactaban muchísimo. Pero con el tiempo esto se fue convirtiendo en una práctica colectiva. Lo que hacía Amaury en una manera de ser natural y lo que hacíamos como lectura Zona Franca en espacios cerrados como la galería o como una institución, comenzamos a hacerlo públicamente, colectivamente (11:04) en la calle.

Z. ¿Cómo afectaron estas cosas espirituales en como se vistieron, en la apariencia?

LE. Sí, te entiendo. Por ejemplo, mis primeras transformaciones místicas todas fueron al través de la apariencia. Ahora, actualmente, se han instalado en el interior. Por tanto, no necesito ya de la apariencia. Mi apariencia ahora puede ser común. Pero en esos primeros tiempos jugamos mucho con la apariencia. La apariencia es una manera de demostrar o de vivir esas practicas que aun no estaban en el interior.

Entonces por ejemplo, (te pongo un ejemplo de mi, cada cual hablará de sí) eh...yo las exteriorizaba, por ejemplo, mi primera transformación fue con la naturaleza, con las plantas, con el aire. Y comencé a dibujar mi rostro, dibujaba mi rostro. Te cuento una anécdota, una vez estando en la calle un treinta y uno de diciembre, todo el mundo en sus casas, de fiesta, las familias, Amaury y yo andábamos muy solos por acá, y fuimos a visitar a una persona que preparaba comidas, que nos tenía estima y nos quería preparar una comida de fin de año, intervino porque yo tenía el rostro pintado. Yo pinto mi rostro intuitivamente. Me paro frente al espejo y estoy ahí un rato, otro rato, hasta que pongo el primer punto en el rostro, y después de ese punto comienza una línea y otra y otra, así. Esa señora me dijo que ella necesitaba hablarme, porque ella en mi rostro estaba leyendo mi vida, en el dibujo que tenía en mi rostro. Al través de ese dibujo ella me contó de mis vidas pasadas, de mi vida pasada en esta vida, de cómo yo soy, como era, como me comportaba, mis situaciones, mis conflictos, mi todo, mi carácter, mi todo, y luego me contó del presente y luego me habló del futuro. No conozco el futuro, pero en el presente y el pasado fue exacta. De ahí que uno induce que el futuro puede ser así también. Porque después de eso, pasado el tiempo en la actualidad creo que el futuro, no tiene que ser como alguien te lo dicta, tú lo puedes cambiar. Pero puedes elegir ese. Si ese te gusta, el que te dictaron, tú lo puedes seguir. Para ponerte un ejemplo de un caso, de cómo este misterio se empezaba a reflejar en nuestra apariencia, porque yo andaba así por las calles, normalmente; y dentro de esos dibujos había muchas cosas naturales, montañas, valles, árboles, sol, luna, aire, estrellas, cosmos, había mucho de esas cosas. Y la apariencia, por



ejemplo me daba por andar con muchas ramas de árboles místicos y no místicos encima. En los bolsillos, amarrados en la cintura, en la espalda, así sucesivamente; y esto creo que ha sido una de las cosas que ha contribuido con el mito sobre la personalidad de uno. La película de ayer algunos amigos protestaban, decían que esa película no lograba rescatar la verdadera historia de uno, o la verdadera personalidad de uno. Una de las cosas por lo que me lo decían era por esto mismo. Decían que yo en todo este tiempo he tenido personalidades, apariencias que se han sembrado en la realidad, que no están recogidas en esa película. Aunque eso no me preocupa. Cada cual recoge lo que puede y todo es parcial y además la historia de uno visual no tiene por qué saberse. Se puede saber un poco, mucho, igual puede que no se sepa nada, lo importante es por donde tú pasas, realmente. Con quien tú hablas, con quienes tú te encuentras. Ahí es donde está el verdadero intercambio. Ya aquí es virtual, puede inspirar a muchas personas, pero no es la realidad. La imagen no es real. Y entonces, te cuento que así luego empezaron otras transformaciones con la personalidad, que es más máscara. Comencé a utilizar máscaras. Todo muy intuitivo, pero una intuición basada en las enseñanzas espirituales. (16:23) Pero muchas veces yo no lograba enlazar que las máscaras que yo usaba tenían que ver con las máscaras que estaba leyendo espiritualmente. Porque a veces en los libros espirituales no te mencionan la palabra máscara pero están hablando de ello, te están diciendo de las máscaras, de tu personalidad. Que tu ser, tu yo debe morir. Una de las maneras de morir es que vayan cayendo las cosas que te hacen...uno aquí, otro allá, para que empieces a ser uno solo, siempre, uno mismo, tú. Y empiezas a encontrarte contigo mismo. No creo que

todas las máscaras se me han caído, pero sí sé que he logrado quitarme una gran cantidad de máscaras en estos diez años de trabajo aquí con mi ser interior. La poesía, el poema, muy importante en ello. Creo que en mi poesía está el poema que desacraliza el sistema civilizatorio, que desacraliza el sistema ideológico impuesto a las personas que viven acá. Creo que no solo tiene que ver con Cuba, creo que tiene que ver con el ser humano a nivel mundial. Yo le he dado a leer mi libro a muchas personas, no muchas, pero algunas (nosotros decimos así porque diez personas que lean mi libro es bastante), y todos me confiesan que es una poesía viva, que está viva, que está viva, y yo la siento así, porque no es mía, sólo he sido un canal del poema y esa ha sido; y esos poemas y esa poesía han estado constantemente regresando a mi interior y revisándome. Ahí está la cosa. (18:16)

Z. Bueno, ¿Puede hablarme un poco sobre si tiene antecedentes o qué poeta o artista o músicos que influyen en las prácticas del grupo y tuyo?

LE. Bueno, primero tengo que decirte que mi abuelo era músico natural y cantante natural. Nunca profesional. Y tengo que decirte que mi tía, una de mis tías (tengo dos tías) una de ellas se ha dedicado toda su vida a cantar y a la música, aunque profesionalmente nunca ha sido reconocida y no es una gran músico ni una gran cantante. Una más. Pero ellas han sido mis inspiradoras en la oralidad y en la musicalidad. Acá en Cuba siempre me llamaron la atención los poetas orales. Te puedo nombrar varios nombres: Carlos Ruiz de la Tejera, te puedo nombrar a Alden Knight. Alden Knight es un recitador de poesía con una forma muy

personal que influyó en muchos oradores mediocres, porque estos que te estoy mencionando son los que son. No hay más. Los demás son tan mediocres que no son reconocidos por nadie, pero Alden Knight sembró una forma de decir la poesía que por eso uno lo rechaza. Por rechazo a esa forma, pero reconozco que es un maestro también de decir la poesía. Me gusta más Carlos Ruiz de la Tejera, para mí es un gran maestro. Está también Bola de Nieve, un maestro, para mí. Y un gran maestro a quien nosotros hemos tenido la oportunidad de celebrarle su cumpleaños, de hacer un performance oral para él, es Luis Carbonell. Para nosotros es la cima de la maestría de la comunicación oral: Lo que él se ha basado en la narración y en la poesía. El conoce y siente la poesía con perfección. Otros inspiradores te puedo decir, así vivos, que yo pueda decirte de más, conocí a un performer cubano que se llama Felix Beltialto que actualmente está viviendo en Bolivia. Ha vivido en Guatemala, en varios países de Centroamérica. Él fue un mito, en los años 80 y todos los primeros 90. Mito que muchas personas desconocen pero otras muchas conocen. No es reconocido dentro del mundo del arte para nada. Y antes de yo conocer a nadie lo veía a él hacer cosas y me impresionaba mucho. Para mí era algo completamente extraño y raro. Él trabajaba con rituales indígenas, o llamados indígenas, y eso despertaba en mi conciencia de que también llevo un indio dentro. Creo que mis prácticas de la religión africana hasta mis 23 años influyeron grandemente en toda mi conducta escénica y oral y de construcción de la poesía. Creo perfectamente eso, porque fui un practicante de la religión africana, y de hecho cuando la abandoné estaba preparado para ser un sacerdote de la religión. Muy misteriosa, esa religión y profunda. Profunda, pero es hacia abajo, es

hacia la tierra. Luego conozco una religión que está también clavada en la tierra que es el cristianismo protestante que me gustaba mucho. De esta religión me gustaban dos cosas: una, que te proponía un método más fácil para soportar la realidad en cuanto a lo religioso, que era el Cristo; y también los cantos de los protestantes me influyeron muchísimo. Me encantan los cantos de los protestantes. Luego las practicas del Budismo Zen ...y también con mi entrada en el Rosa Cruz y también con las prácticas del Sura Yoga que es la práctica de la meditación en luz y el sonido, descubro que la religión cristiana o protestante se apoya en un Cristo exterior y que estas maneras de buscar a Dios son más verdaderas, te hablan de un Cristo interior que está en tu corazón, que tienes que hacer ese camino hasta tu corazón. Y por supuesto para llegar al centro tienes que purificarlo, que está muy cargado de depositación (sic) y de miedo y de todo; y de sentimientos ajenos a la divinidad, pero que está ahí, Cristo está allá dentro. Que es una energía que estuvo siempre desde antes de que el mundo existiera y está ahí todavía. Y eso lo hago comprobando, no lo estoy diciendo porque nadie me lo haya dicho sino porque lo he comprobado y lo compruebo todo los días. Y por eso es que abandono la religión cristiana protestante, porque es muy bonita pero es exterior. No conduce, para mí, al camino. Te aleja, pero aparentemente te acerca porque hay cosas logradas en la religión cristiana protestante. Hay un camino trazado pero es corto. Y así, esas cosas son las que han influido en mí. Creo que la presencia de Juan Carlos Flores como poeta influye mucho ¿Por qué? Muy intensa, muy profunda, muy sincera la poesía de Juan Carlos Flores. Su presencia viva, su actitud muy en armonía con su poesía. Eso fue muy inspirador. No tuvimos a otro poeta de nuestro lado

que inspirara tanto, sin contar que para nosotros además como escritor de poesía es alto, aunque no sabemos si todo el mundo lo considera así o no. En esto pueden discrepar otras personas. Para nosotros es algo porque hemos logrado comprobar su poesía. Cuando compruebas una poesía solo se comprueba con la vida, con la experiencia. Creo que él es muy influyente, como él mismo está muy influido de todos nosotros y todos nosotros influidos de todos nosotros, porque hay mucha personalidad incluyente fuerte entre nosotros. También creo que un poeta como Ángel Escobar, que se suicidó en el año 97, pero ese poeta fue inspirador de generaciones que lo antecedieron (sic), de su generación y de generaciones que lo precedieron hasta nosotros. Por lo mismo, por lo vivo de su poesía, por lo sincera, por lo intensa. ¿No tienes la antología de él? Tienes que irte con una antología de él, te la tienes que llevar antes de que te vayas, vamos a hacer lo posible. Porque es una poesía que es increíble, es increíble. Y el se suicidó en el año 97, pero es un poeta que ha influido y sigue influyendo mucho en nosotros. Bueno y ya, el Hip Hop, que es fundamental. Visitas que nos hicieron. Visitas que (vamos a decir) nosotros llamamos como “llamados”. Gente que llega y te llama. Te dice, “mira, hay este camino.” Poetas “Slam” norteamericanos. Te pongo el ejemplo de uno que se llama Regie Gibson. Fue Campeón Mundial de “Slam Poetry”, hace varios años. El vino en el 2000 e impactó. Te puedo hablar así mismo de una artista de performance que se llama Tania Bruguera. Nos impactó ella, no porque su obra sea ni mayor ni menor sino por ella misma porque vimos en ella una conducta que nos interesó introducir en nuestro mapa ético y en nuestro mapa poético. Y creo que algunos poetas que ya estaban aquí como Livio Conesa, es inspirador, el

último que sale en el documental con la sombrilla. Él es inspirador para nosotros por su manera de ser real. Y creo que la comunidad nos influye mucho. Cómo la comunidad vive, cómo habla, como se expresa, cómo piensa la comunidad, cómo se relaciona. Eso es una fuerte influencia en nuestra poesía. Creo que el poema es fundamental, y está todo lo demás que es fundamental, toda nuestra obra esa fundamental, pero el poema es el que más ha hablado escrituralmente por nosotros. Desde la importancia que tiene la escritura y también es uno de los que más ha hablado oralmente por nosotros, el poema. Generalmente nuestros poemas, pero también hemos usados todo tipo de poesía. Nos ha llegado lo mejor de la poesía mexicana, Pellicer, Octavio Paz. Nos ha llegado lo mejor de la poesía Latinoamericana, lo mejor de la poesía Argentina...No voy a mencionar nombres porque se nos queda todas las mujeres argentinas que escribieron con fuerza, la Pisarni, la Storni, todos los poetas argentinos que influyeron, los Benedetti, los Gelman, los de más atrás, desde Lugones, este de la Mas Médula, una serie de poetas, por el Perú, desde Vallejo hasta todos que estaban a su alrededor, por Chile, Huidobro y muchos más que están ahí, que están todavía en la actualidad, por Nicaragua – muy fuerte la influencia sobre nosotros de la poesía nicaragüense – que es extensa desde Coronel Utrecho incluso escritores que antecedieron a Coronel Utrecho y desde este que se volvió loco en 1927 hasta los actuales. Han influido poetas brasileros, uruguayos, nos han influido. Creo que la influencia es por Latinoamérica. Por África, hay varios poetas africanos que han tocado a las puertas de nuestro corazón, que es una poesía muy desconocida la poesía africana. Por Europa es extensa la lista: franceses, ingleses, alemanes, austriacos,

rusos. La fuente de poetas rusos, poetas rumanos, poetas húngaros, poetas checos. Es increíble Checoslovaquia lo que ha dado. Checoslovaquia fue un centro importante de la creación en un momento. Hubo como un renacimiento particular en esa zona, que influía hacia todas partes de Europa. Ya nos han llegado poetas yugoslavos, poetas polacos. Es increíble. Nos hemos enamorados siempre de los poetas norteamericanos. ¡Poetas norteamericanos ni se diga! Poetas norteamericanos de toda la generación(es) de poetas, desde...empezamos con los ingleses, con los románticos y después saltamos a los Estados Unidos, pero ahí hay una cadena, eslabones que se unen hasta la actualidad, hasta los beatniks y hasta una serie de poetas que han sobresalido de los beatniks también, que no son beatniks pero que tienen ese mismo aliento, esa misma fuerza. Norteamericanos, es una lista grande que nombrarlos dejaría fuera a otros. Y poetas actuales, vivos, jóvenes norteamericanos que vienen acá y nos influyen. Han pasado muchos jóvenes norteamericanos poetas. Sobre todo de Chicago, de la zona de Chicago. Hay una influencia fuerte en nosotros leer esos poetas en inglés, de escucharlos haciendo Slam Poetry y de escucharlos innovando con la sonoridad, con el ruido, con el audiovisual. Creo que todas esas cosas. Y el Hip Hop, el Hip Hop norteamericano es influyente, pero hemos descubierto la música también. La música mundial es muy fuerte. La música cubana es fundamental. El eje de la música cubana, desde la más popular hasta la más clásica, la influencia de la música cubana porque yo vivía escuchando música cubana clásica instrumental. En mi cuarto siempre estaba puesta esa música, y música instrumental de todo el mundo, de ver ballet, de ver mucho ballet. Hay movimientos

dentro de mis poemas que son movimientos de ballet, aunque están muy escondidos. Y así. Creo que nosotros hemos aprendido a incorporarlo todo, a no dejar nada de lo que tenemos como conocimiento fuera de la poesía. No dejar nada. La poesía creo que lo asimila todo, que es una fuente de conocimiento importante.

Z. De las primeras cosas que dijiste, que ustedes fueron cuatro negros, etc.

LE. Sí, en esa lectura.

Z. ¿Qué tan importante fue el ser negros? ¿Fue importante, no fue importante, fue una coincidencia?

LE. No fue una coincidencia. Fue una coincidencia para nosotros, la mayoría de nosotros, los que estábamos allí. Pero el que organizó la lectura lo hizo con toda intención. Quería mostrar una zona de la poesía escrita por personas de color negro. Creo que por alguna situación de lecturas que se efectuaban en La Habana donde sólo poetas blancos aparecían y él quiso llamar la atención sobre eso. Aunque no lo convirtió en el centro del motivo de la lectura. Creo que nada que tuvo esa significación y nosotros, ninguno de los tres que participamos le dimos esa importancia. Preparamos nuestra lectura y la hicimos, aunque nuestros poemas hablan de la racialidad y a veces con profundidad, con mucha visión. Se puede ver en nuestros poemas que logramos decir cosas sobre la raza en Cuba que son medulares, que no se quedan en la cáscara



o en el dolor, sino que van a la causa, a la raíz del racismo actual. Sobre todo del racismo actual, no del histórico, sino del actual, porque se apoya mucho el racismo actual en el racismo histórico y se obvian las causas del racismo actual. Nosotros nos interesa hablar de las causas actuales, de la fuente actual y siempre nos referimos a las cosas actuales. Tuvo nada más esa significación pero en el mismo grupo. Lo que esa lectura fue importante porque despertó en el resto de las personas que conformaban o que luego reconfiguraron el grupo de escritores Zona Franca un deseo de integrar verdaderamente el grupo, de activarlo, de coordinarlo y de hacer lecturas en colectivo. Esa lectura propició eso porque fue un impacto para todos, para los que la hicimos y para los que la presenciaron.

¿Se han hecho lecturas performáticas en Cuba? No hay una tradición. Tampoco hay una tradición de un colectivo que ese sea un camino. Ya la gente comienza a ver como performance la vida, porque nosotros muchas veces leemos el poema como la vida, como está vivo ahora mismo aquí influyendo en mí, en mis sentimientos. No es una actuación, no estoy actuando, estoy viviendo esto como una oración. Pero bueno, tengo que aceptar que incluimos mucho de gestualidad, que las personas sienten como vivo y los críticos lo quieren ver como actuación. Lo quieren llamar “poesía actuante”, o “poesía performática”, le quieren poner nombre desde el punto de vista teórico. Y uno contribuye a eso con esto de gestualizar...Uno se expresa vivamente cuando lee, cuando dice la poesía.

Z. En tu pensamiento ¿Cuál es el impacto o los impactos de esos trabajos en la comunidad hasta ahora?

LE Hay impacto a diferentes niveles. Está el impacto primeramente que sucede entre nosotros mismos, viéndonos a nosotros mismos como parte de la comunidad y como comunidad. Es por ejemplo que la actividad de este grupo de escritores generó una actividad en el grupo de artistas plásticos que convivió aquí detrás. Amaury pertenecía a ambos grupos. Dirigía este grupo y estaba en el de escritores. El grupo de escritores es el que lleva adelante la performatividad pública. Omni, sí tenía un trabajo directamente pensado para trabajar en la comunidad. Zona Franca, no. Lo de Zona Franca en los espacios públicos y comunitarios es espontáneo. Luego ya, consciente, pero no pensado directamente como un servicio social o comunitario o de trabajo comunitario, pero Omni sí quería hacer trabajo comunitario, lo que Omni expresaba su servicio comunitario por ejemplo dando clases de pintura, de dibujo, de escultura, y que vinieran las personas de la comunidad aquí, y vieran eso. Una cosa que se le ocurrió a Omni fue el Primer Festival de Poesía sin Fin, que en aquel momento se inauguró con esta escultura. El primer gesto de Poesía sin Fin, el festival de poesía que nosotros hacemos desde hace ocho años, nació con esa escultura. Era la idea de hacer una escultura ambiental, que es un grupo de chatarra que sacamos de los escombros que arrastramos por todas las calles de Alamar, las trajimos hasta acá y las sembramos ahí. Esa chatarra se inauguró, hicimos una tarima allá abajo, trajimos un equipo de audio, hicimos un concierto de poesía y entonces se anunciaba la inauguración de la escultura y se iba diciendo poesía allá abajo. Ese fue

el primer Poesía sin Fin. Ya ahí llamamos a un grupo de Hip Hop que se llama “Anónimo Consejo”, que es el grupo más interesante que tiene...Ellos fueron los primeros que se expresaron en esta tarima y fue la primera vez que tuvimos un conflicto con la policía. La policía cerró el espectáculo por una letra de “Anónimo Consejo” que no le gustó. Cerró el espectáculo, creó tremenda situación, incluso querían llevárselos presos a ellos. Nosotros estuvimos ahí como más de dos horas discutiendo con la policía de que no, que no podían hacer eso, de que esa era una ilegalidad de la policía. Y bueno, eso fue en el año 99. El treinta de diciembre del 99. Se repitió el año 2000, también con otra escultura que ya desapareció. Se repitió en el 2001, también con la idea de inaugurar una escultura. Lo que ya entonces en el 2001 de allá afuera entró para aquí dentro. Alquilamos un audio grande e hicimos un espectáculo grandísimo de poesía y performance. Poesía mezclada con performance e instalaciones. Pero en el 2000 nosotros inauguramos una exposición ahí en la galería que se llamó “Lumen Insular”. Lumen quiere decir el estro, el espíritu, la inspiración de la isla. “Numen Insular”, la inspiración de la isla, el espíritu creativo, el de la creación. Y esa exposición fue muy importante para nosotros porque r ejemplo es ya una exposición de Omni donde los escritores intervienen. Antes era al revés. Nosotros hacíamos la lectura y los pintores intervenían. Aquí, en esta exposición se hizo por ejemplo...Eran muchos zapatos viejos que recogimos por todos los basureros y que ascendían en el aire. Entonces por toda la pared se veían las marcas de todos esos zapatos viejos. Para nosotros, para mi – yo escribí sobre eso – significaba la marcha del pueblo. Amaury hizo un altar afrocubano. Y en ese altar el puso a la isla delante y le hizo un egbó a la

Isla. Quemó a la Isla y recogió ese fuego dentro de una botella. Eso es un egbó del ala derecha, de extrema derecha de la santería africana que le llaman el palo monte. Amaury hizo ese egbó a la Isla. El Yoyi hizo una instalación que era bolsas de suero ultravenoso, de esos que te ponen en las venas, pero se lo estaba haciendo a piedras, a diferentes piedras. Para Yoyi eso significaba la familia en la Diáspora, la familia cubana dispersa por el mundo entero, chupando sangre del centro de la nacionalidad, del nacionalismo, porque las bolsas estaban pintadas con los colores patrios. Orbe que está en Suecia ahora hizo una instalación que era como la Isla cubana que al mismo tiempo parecía como un muerto, con la bandera echada encima y enfrente había como la radiografía de un hombre; y alrededor había muchas bancas, asientos para sentarse, pero los asientos tenían puntillas hacia arriba. Para mi eso significaba el No-Descanso en el que el cubano ha estado sometido en estos cuarenta años en toda su historia. No-Descanso, No-Descanso. Yo escribí un ensayo – así de este grueso que lo conservo – donde...esa exposición me llevó a hacer una investigación de todo el sacrificio del cubano desde que se fundó como nación. Empecé a registrar todos los libros de historia, todas las anotaciones históricas en los que el cubano ha estado en periodo de crisis, y el cubano ha sufrido con cojones – como decimos bien vulgarmente. Ha sufrido con cojones. Creo que los primeros experimentos genocidas del mundo se han practicado primero aquí. Por casualidades históricas, los primeros campos de concentración se hicieron aquí, como un experimento de un general español. Se sabe por estudios que los campos de concentración hitlerianos eran imitación de estudios que habían hecho de este general español que donde primero los

practicó fue aquí; y las primeras fotografías de la historia donde se vieron a los hombres en campos de concentración flacos hasta los huesos están aquí. Conservo ese libro, si quieres te lo puedo regalar. Hice toda esa investigación hasta la actualidad, por eso lo llamé El Espíritu de la Isla. Porque esa exposición de Omni ya estaba abarcando a la Isla de una manera crucial en su historia y en su actualidad. Para contarte estas conjunciones de la plástica con la literatura y de la literatura con la plástica, como la plástica ha estado hablando con mucha fuerza al igual que la literatura. Bueno, en la inauguración de esa exposición todos los poetas intervinimos cada una de las instalaciones y dijimos nuestra poesía de una manera particular sobre cada una de las instalaciones. Faltó una instalación que no te conté. Era una instalación de un poeta que se llama Arlex que vive en España ahora donde veías una radiografía que parecía el escudo cubano y cuando te acercabas era un corazón. Era la radiografía de un corazón. Muy interesante. Muy interesante. Los símbolos patrios están muy cargados aquí en Cuba, muy, muy cargados. Demasiados cargados. Y son un icono que es como un obstáculo en la mente de cada cubano. Para mí es una aberración ideológica. Pero bueno, tú tampoco puedes echar por tierra los mambises que se lanzaron a la manigua con la bandera cubana adelante, cayendo ante las balas y machetazos y perdiendo la vida de manera terrible. Pero de todas maneras reconozco que adorar un trapo es una aberración. Por eso sería interesante que tuvieras un libro de Juan Carlos Flores y que vieras su poesía también. En lo que publicaron de nosotros en La Habana Elegante en la poesía que te di hay un poema de Juan Carlos que dice el trapo, la bandera. Es un trapo, es un trap. Dice primero es un trapo y luego lo

corta...Es un trap. Es muy interesante la visión poética de nosotros. Lo que hemos estado haciendo es un egbó histórico para poder concentrarnos. Es como librarnos de toda la depositación (sic) que la historia ha hecho en nuestras cabezas para poder concentrarnos en la actualidad, para poder limpiar y mirar la actualidad con realismo, mirarla con verdad, con sinceridad. Porque cada vez que vas a decir una cosa sobre la actualidad, se te interpone un sentimiento patrio histórico donde se ofende mucha gente. Entonces no puedes decir la verdad porque vas a ofender a mucha gente. Por eso hemos estado tratando de librarnos. Por eso Juan Carlos dice que la bandera es un trapo. La tiene que poner a la altura de un trapo para poder hablar de ella. Porque no se considera que un individuo actualmente pueda aportar algo a la bandera o pueda decir algo trascendental sobre la bandera que no sea lo que ya se cree y ya se ha dicho sobre la bandera. Es estática la idea que hay sobre la nación. Creo que se ha hecho intencionalmente, con toda intención, que se quede todo fijo ahí. Por eso en un poema que yo tengo que se llama 1830 ¿Quieres que te lo lea? ¿Das pausa aquí?

Z. Sí. (47:56)

LE. Este poema se llama 1830. Es un juego. Se llama: Crónica 1830. ¿Sabes que es una crónica? Es un juego, con el tiempo. Te voy a hacer otra anécdota real. El 1830 real es un lugar que hay donde acaba el Malecón hacia el Oeste. Entonces allí es el único espacio que conozco donde está el muro abierto al mar. Tú puedes entrar a los arrecifes. Sentado allí, hace muy poco, veía personas ahí entrar y hacer ofrendas al

mar. Eso fue lo que me inspiró el poema porque me llenó. ¿Qué piden esas personas? Verlas, pidiendo. ¡Pero tantas personas! Un desfile de personas. Significa algo. ¿Comprendes?

Z. Sí. (49:19)

L.E. Están pidiendo. Entonces, le puse un exergo que dice...es un exergo de un poema de Amaury que dice: Al mar, como cualquiera, a mojar me los pies.

#### CRONICA 1830

Camina entre dientes de perro

El mismo miedo que camina en la ciudad

Las olas pican contra los arrecifes

Bañan su cuerpo como este frio que cae como

Punta de cuchillo.

Es hermosa

Los cerquillos al aire

Su rostro limpio, su boca en oración

La ofrenda al agua.

Su cuerpo bordea tembloroso los arrecifes

Deja en el mar una ofrenda

Ruega

No hay mal que dure cien años

No hay mal que dure cien años

No hay mal que dure cien años

Veo lágrimas correrle por entre las arrugas

Como por desiertos

Enciende un cigarro milagrosamente

Entre tanto aire

Sonríe

Detrás sobre la ciudad entre oscuras nubes

El resplandor del sol

Los pescadores lanzan una y otra vez sus carnadas

Nada, nada, nada

Es bueno ver a los pescadores

Lanzar una y otra vez sus carnadas

Cada uno tiene su propio estilo

Sobre el mar frotan latas y nailon y maderos y

ofrendas

Frio viento, autos desesperados, aves oscuras en el

cielo

El concreto de los edificios como árboles

Y el humo negro

Los pescadores tranquilos lanzan una y otra vez sus

carnadas

Nada, nada, nada

A este sitio le llaman 1830

Es correcto

Los que nacen aquí y en este tiempo

Solo pueden venir a pedir vida

Y que todo cambie



Pues todo se ha puesto estático como una fotografía  
vieja

Y entonces volver a la ciudad como extraños

Ante el natural movimiento del tiempo.

Las aves descienden sobre la costa

Y esperan.

(52:15) Ya, te quería leer ese poema, porque ese poema habla...Este verso en verdad es por el que te quería leer el poema que dice

Y que todo cambie

Pues todo se ha puesto estático como una fotografía  
vieja

Esas imágenes de los pescadores lanzando sus carnadas. Nada, nada, nada. Es así. Todo es así. Sobre el mar flotando latas, nailon, maderos. El viento frío. Todo así. Y este verso donde dice:

Es bueno ver a los pescadores

Lanzar una y otra vez sus carnadas

Cada uno tiene su propio estilo

No está en la poesía cubana de estos años revolucionarios. El poeta hablando de la individualidad. De cómo este individuo tiene su estilo y este individuo tiene el suyo. Es ver cada uno con su estilo. La pluralidad que no está en la nación cubana. Está pero no está. No hay participación de eso. Y es un poco que la poesía de nosotros viene hablando y nombrando esta actualidad. Esa actualidad, viendo, miren, hay diferencias. Hay pobreza. La gente está rogando, está pidiendo. Haya un cambio. Todo está estático. Es eso, porque la poesía es conocimiento de

este tiempo. Y también es un registro de la historia. De la historia actual sobre todo. De la historia actual. Creo que de ahí viene.

Entonces, la poesía y la plástica se han mezclado de esta manera. En el año 2001, es fundamental el año 2001. Porque en año 2001 al principio se disuelve el grupo de escritores, por performance que hicimos aquí en espacios públicos de la comunidad, terminamos en prisión. Después de eso se creó mucho ruido alrededor del grupo porque la Seguridad del Estado habló con la Dirección de Cultura. La Dirección de Cultura presionó al Director de la Galería. El Director de la Galería – entre otras cosas- me expulsó a mi del puesto de trabajo que tenía y entonces se creó una especie de paranoia, que si la Seguridad nos estaba vigilando, que si por aquí, que si por allá; y se disolvió el grupo, pero una parte de ese grupo que no creía en paranoia ni creía en nada, emigró hacia aquí atrás. Se unió definitivamente a Omni. En esos años empezamos a asistir por primera vez a eventos de Artes Plásticas y es donde se vio por primera vez una acción de Omni donde estaba Plástica y Poesía muy mezcladas. En Cienfuegos, en la ciudad de Cienfuegos intervinimos la ciudad completa. Intervenimos una calle que la empapelamos completa y sobre esos papeles que eran papeles de periódicos y banderas cubanas interveníamos esas propias instalaciones que nosotros (55:32) estábamos diciendo nuestra poesía que habla siempre del contexto y de la situación de nosotros. Por eso te digo que ahí es donde me parece ya empieza a mezclarse conjuntamente poetas y plásticos, comienzan a pensar al mismo tiempo una acción. El año 2001 es fundamental. Ya después del 2001 se fue poniendo más fuerte. En el 2003 decidimos ya nombrarnos Omni-Zona Franca porque era una

realidad desde hacía dos años que no estaba nombrada. Decidimos nombrarnos Omni-Zona Franca, como una realidad, como rescate, de lo que había sembrado Zona Franca, de lo que había creado y también como continuidad porque ya en Omni se estaba haciendo cosas con la poesía y con la oralidad propias de Omni-Zona Franca, ya no heredadas de Zona Franca sino propias de esa conjunción. Y eso es fundamental, Omni-Zona Franca. Esos dos grupos se hayan unido de alguna manera que hayan seguido actuando como un solo grupo. Nos permitió más coacción (sic), más unidad. Y ahora esto. Por primera vez creamos un Comité de Gestión, comenzamos a repensar de verdad nuestros conceptos, el trabajo para la comunidad ¿Qué es trabajar para la comunidad?

Z. ¿En el 2003?

LE. A mediados del 2003. Y todo el mundo, todo el grupo respondió con fuerza a eso y nos unimos más y es que entonces surgen acciones más fuertes en los espacios públicos como esa de Amaury como el Pan con Poeta (57:26) o acciones como enterrarnos en un basurero. Surgieron muchas acciones, muy fuertes, que trataremos antes de que te vayas este sábado, entre hoy y mañana, ponértelas en un CD. De todas maneras, en el CD que yo te di que dice breve currículum. ¿Tú lo viste? No has tenido tiempo. En el inglés no se si estás, pero en español hay fotografías donde abajo trato de explicar debajo de cada acción trato de explicar en qué consistió. Por ahí vas a tener una guía buena. Pero de todas maneras vamos a tratar de pasarte esas fotografías para que tú las puedas ver, porque viendo las fotografías puedes mirar el graffiti, es importante el

graffiti dentro de nuestra expresión. Es importante. Con el graffiti siempre fue un modo de desobediencia civil, porque siempre hemos hecho el graffiti. Ahora en la bienal de La Habana hicimos graffiti por nuestra cuenta, sin autorización. Ya en la Bienal de La Habana en Abril del año pasado aceptaron que hiciéramos graffiti donde la ley dice que no se puede porque hicimos graffiti donde la ley dice que no se puede. Lo aceptaron. Lo que significa que hay un ceder, un reconocer que es un arte importante, de que gusta, de que es posible. Se cedió porque hacer graffiti en mercados, en farmacias o en paradas de ómnibus donde yo no sé por qué el Estado dice que en esos espacios no se puede hacer graffiti.

Determinados edificios públicos; y ahí fue precisamente donde pedimos hacer los graffiti; y lo hicimos, lo hicimos. Cuando eso aconteció nosotros ya veníamos haciendo graffiti en espacios públicos donde los jefes de gobierno y los jefes de las instituciones culturales más importantes del país tuvieron que venir aquí a pedirnos por favor que no lo hiciéramos. No lo estoy diciendo como una vanidad. Lo pongo como un hecho significativo, que en la Bienal de La Habana cuando llegamos allí, habían antecedentes. No fue así ya...tuvimos suerte, nos aceptaron y ya.

Hubieron (sic) antecedentes de desobediencia, de actuar bajo nuestra responsabilidad. Porque la responsabilidad que asumimos es de que es una ciudad fea, y tenemos derecho a embellecerla, y que además somos responsables de lo que decimos cuando pintamos, porque conocemos mejor que nadie que piensa la gente; y como siente la gente porque lo vivimos todos los días aquí. Esos eran nuestros conceptos; y también nos interesaba el concepto de graffiti periférico. Es esa libertad que se toma el que hace graffiti de intervenir un espacio público, de rallar o pintar un

espacio público. Eso nos interesaba más todavía, porque es significativo aquí sobre todo para que la gente sepa y crea en hacer algo por su propia iniciativa, públicamente. No tiene que ser ordenado o dirigido desde arriba. El problema fundamental que nosotros tenemos como nación o como sistema político actual, que no hay iniciativa ciudadana, todo es iniciativa de los de arriba. Luego estuvimos leyendo sobre el sistema comunista en Europa del Este y leyendo las interioridades de esos sistemas y era lo mismo. Creo que quizá es un defecto del sistema.

Y entonces...hicimos los graffiti a la entrada del puente de Alamar, en muchos garajes por allá atrás, en edificios, en paradas. Siempre colaboramos con el Hip Hop, el Festival del Hip Hop. Empezamos pintando el escenario. Luego nos salimos del escenario y empezamos grafitando las paredes laterales del anfiteatro, luego las fachadas del anfiteatro, luego la acera, luego la calle, y luego edificios, y fue interesante como empezamos adentro y fuimos saliendo pa' fuera, pa' fuera, hasta salir para la ciudad. Y el año en que salimos para la ciudad fue alarmante. Fue el año en que bajaron los funcionarios y "no, no, no, ustedes no". Un año en que dijimos ya hay que salir a hacer graffiti de verdad a la calle, de verdad, de verdad. El Hip Hop ha sido muy inspirador, como cultura, porque es una cultura multidisciplinaria y es lo más cercano que hemos encontrado a nosotros. No es que seamos específicamente Hip Hop, pero nos cabe muy bien el Hip Hop, por eso. Por esa situación, es multidisciplinario y nosotros somos multidisciplinarios. Eso por ahí. Creo que...Si tienes alguna más pregunta...sigo.

Z. Bueno, una más, la última. ¿Hay alguna persona en tu pensamiento que abrió las puertas que mostraron el camino para ustedes aquí en Cuba, como artistas o no sé, personajes, en el modo de contestar o de abrir espacios o de cambiar imágenes de una parte de la población o no sé, qué fue antecedente en esta manera?

LE. Eso lo hemos encontrado en grupos. En Orígenes, el grupo de poesía. En Lezama y en Virgilio Piñera, en Gastón Baquero, en Eliseo Diego, fundamentalmente. Y después Cintio Vitier y Fina García Manruz. Lo encontramos en el grupo Diáspora. Lo encontramos en los bailadores de Break Dance en los años 80, porque cuando yo tenía once o doce años, tuve la oportunidad de vivir con los mejores bailadores de Break Dance que había en Cuba que incluso era gente que rompía el bloqueo porque venía gente de Estados Unidos a verlos, porque su fama llegaba a los Estados Unidos. Interesante siempre la conexión entre Cuba y Estados Unidos. En el año 78 vinieron delegaciones que rompieron el bloqueo, con Carter.

Pero era extraño ver ciudadanos que venía por su propia cuenta no para ver nada de la Revolución sino para ver a un grupo de jóvenes que estaban haciendo algo alternativo. Y ellos se paraban en el centro de las avenidas más importantes y cerraban el tráfico y se ponían a bailar Break Dance. Los homosexuales, los homosexuales, la policía los detenía una y otra vez, una y otra vez, les cortaban el pelo, les cortaban las uñas, los humillaban fuertemente en las prisiones; y los homosexuales salían de las cárceles y volvían a ocupar los mismos espacios públicos, avenidas, calles, en cines céntricos o parques. La policía regresaba, los volvía a meter en prisión, los torturaba un poco psicológicamente o los humillaba

moralmente y cuando volvían a salir, volvían. Los freakis o llamados hipíes cubanos, que igual sufrían vejaciones muy similares a la de los homosexuales. Esa gente son inspiradoras, porque comenzamos a comprender que esa era la alternatividad. El insistir en vivir a tu manera, rompiendo incluso tabúes y prejuicios personales. El movimiento Hip Hop cubano es muy importante. Rodolfo Rensoli como inspirador de ese movimiento, creo que es la figura cimera de ese movimiento, sin querer volver a caer en el sistema de jerarquización. Todos los integrantes del movimiento de Hip Hop son fundamentales, todos, pero específico la imagen de Rodolfo Rensoli, como pensador de ese movimiento. Aunque haya fracaso en su liderazgo, de ese movimiento. Como Balesy Rivero, que está entrando ahora ahí en la galería, que dirigió artísticamente durante muchos el Festival de Hip Hop y en esa manera de dirección artística había ideología, había enseñanza del conocimiento histórico de tus raíces, de quien verdaderamente tu eras por encima de la historia que nos habían enseñado en la escuela. Eso lo vi yo en esos conciertos y mostrado al través de los raperos y del grupo Omni. Balesy se valía de esos dos y se valía también de otros actores que estaban en la ciudad, como bailadores de tap, el grupo del club cubano de jazz . Así. Esas gentes son inspiradores, los locos, son inspiradores. Sobre todo ahora en los años 80 y 90 había un loco que le llamaban El Mambí, muy inspirador, ese loco. El Caballero de París es histórico, pero estoy hablándote ahora de locos vivos. Y actualmente en La Habana hay muchos locos vivos que nos inspiran mucho. Nosotros nos fijamos mucho en los indigentes o locos. Nos fijamos mucho en ellos y creo que algunas figuras políticas como Payá, que es vivo actualmente. Creo que algunas

figuras de intelectuales, muchos intelectuales que han vivido cosas muy desagradables pero que han insistido mucho en seguir aquí. Creo que son inspiradores todos los intelectuales cubanos que han insistido en vivir en Cuba, que han pasado por vejaciones, por humillaciones, muy fuertes, muy fuertes que son lacerantes y siguen insistiendo en vivir en Cuba. Creo que han sido el colchón, la cama, que permite que nosotros estemos ahora aquí hablando desde una posición de intelectuales cubanos. Creo que nosotros somos intelectuales cubanos, socialmente somos intelectuales cubanos. Somos creadores y estamos usando el arte como medio de comunicación, pero somos creadores en sentido general; y creo que todos los intelectuales que han soportado estar aquí en Cuba, que han soportado desde una posición que no ha sido de voceros del gobierno, ojo. Esto no lo digo en contra del gobierno. Pienso que todo gobierno, el más justo del mundo debe permitir que los ciudadanos sean libres e independientes en su manera de pensar, de actuar y de aportar a la sociedad. Si no, lo crea son títeres, fantoches, clowns, arlequines, como se le quiera llamar, entiende, fantasmas. Por eso es muy importante que tú mires la obra de nosotros que se llama “Fantasmas Cívicos”. Nosotros hicimos una obra que se llama Fantasmas Cívicos, la última que salió en el documental, al final. Nosotros vestidos de blancos, así. Lo hicimos en las calles de La Habana Vieja, lo hicimos en un circo, lo hemos hecho en estas calles. Lo hemos hecho de diferentes maneras. Y ahí decimos “Fantasmas Cívicos, todos somos Fantasmas Cívicos”. Todos somos fantasmas cívicos, no somos reales. Y en esa acción nosotros hacemos un egbó con fuego, el mismo egbó que Amaury hizo con su instalación a la Isla, la hacemos. La primera vez lo hicimos frente a la estatua de José



Martí, en el Parque Central, en dirección a Martí que es la figura histórica más alta de la cívica en Cuba. La hicimos frente a su estatua, un egbó ahí. Y nos arrodillamos. Un ritual. Y en un círculo gritamos...¿Comprendes? Y le dimos la vuelta al Museo de Arte Universal, varias veces, a las cuatro esquinas. En la religión africana limpiar las cuatro esquinas significa muchísimo. A las cuatro esquinas del Museo de Arte Universal le dimos vuelta durante buen tiempo, como limpieza también de liberación del arte, que el arte se libere, no que esté encerrado en un museo sin ninguna utilidad. Tenemos un museo interesante pero el pueblo cubano de verdad no lo conoce. De verdad, no lo conoce. Y es interesante también una acción que hicimos que se llama Higiene Pública, donde nos lavamos la boca durante cuarenta y cinco minutos ente el Capitolio y el (teatro) Payret. Es interesante esa acción. De lavarse los dientes, lavarse la boca. Tiene que ver mucho con la libertad de expresión. Creo que hemos estado haciendo acciones así con toda esa fuerza, con toda esa tendencia a hablar de la iniciativa ciudadana. Creo que nos hemos dirigido ahí hacia ese enfoque. Y ya, por ahí estamos. Todo eso está reflejado en nuestra poesía, en nuestras escrituras, todas esas cosas. Por ahí estamos. Poesía Sin Fin es importante. El Festival que nosotros hacemos en diciembre. Este diciembre que pasó logramos reunir aquí a importantes poetas de diferentes niveles, pero todos importantes. Hicimos acciones públicas en los edificios, hicimos acciones públicas en las calles, muy similar al trabajo que hicimos en la Bienal de La Habana, pero ya como festival nuestro, de un mes. Fue muy importante ese evento. Una vez mezclamos la poesía con el rap. Fue muy fuerte. Lo hicimos allá adentro en la galería. Todo lo hicimos aquí en el taller, pero esa acción la hicimos allí en la

galería. Y fue intensa y fuerte. Invitamos a raperos de un verbo profundo. A Hermanos de Causa, a Papa Humbertico. Ellos estuvieron y lo que echaron ahí fue...Mucha gente se quedó así...Mucha gente que ni sabía que esa manera de ver la realidad o de expresarla existía. Fue muy fuerte y los poetas respondieron con la misma fuerza porque escogimos poetas y raperos que dieron un gran espectáculo y permitieron reflexionar, pensar, sentir. Fue una conjugación y así se comportó casi todo el Festival de Hip Hop, casi todo. Mezclamos hasta por ejemplo poesía y arte marcial, porque hay un grupo que hace arte marcial detrás del Capitolio, entonces ese arte lo recogimos y dentro de ese grupo hay poetas, por eso lo mezclamos. Hicieron un espectáculo ese día maravilloso. Hablaron del Haiku, de los que cultivaban el haiku, de sus actitudes ante la vida, ante las cosas, siempre muy importante. Ya, por ahí está todo.

Z. Gracias, muchas gracias.

MIGUEL ROURA entrevistado por Zoya Kocur

17 DICIEMBRE 2010, ALAMAR

TIEMPO TOTAL 79:34

MR. Te decía que yo soy muy responsable en todo lo que te voy a decir. Yo no te puedo decir una cosa por otra. No puedo decir mentiras porque estoy muy viejo ya para decirte mentiras. Y, sobre todo, porque ya he andado un camino. Aunque no me siento totalmente realizado, sí siento que he hecho cosas que a la gente le ha gustado y tengo una estrecha relación con todo lo que se mueve de este lado del túnel, porque llevo muchos años, ya desde muy joven haciendo cosas culturales, en la poesía sobre todo y en la plástica. Ahora, dime, la pregunta. Qué tú quieres saber. (1:00)

ZK. Bueno, lo primero, si puedes decirme cómo existe Alamar y quién vive aquí y algo sobre la comunidad.

MR. Bueno, mira. Alamar es un barrio que se funda en los años 70, incluso hay historiadores. El hermano de un amigo nuestro, el hermano de Rensoli, el hermano mayor de Rodolfo Rensoli, no recuerdo su nombre, se que es historiador. El se ha dedicado a escribir sobre la historia de Alamar. Alamar tiene una historia anterior al triunfo revolucionario y una historia posterior. Estas eran parcelas que se estaban vendiendo para hacer un residencial. Por eso tú ves las formas de las calles, el borde de las calles. Ese bordecito que tienen las calles que no los tiene más nadie en La Habana, que es un bordecito para que corra el agua. Todas esas parcelas se iban a vender para eso. Ya cuando llega el triunfo revolucionario todo ese proyecto cambia. Y empiezan a construirse edificios para los obreros. Estos edificios eran construidos

por los propios obreros. Proyecto socialista de aquella época. Y después a un costo muy barato estos obreros iban a pagar la casa, en veinte, treinta años. Yo soy nacido en la Villa de Regla, una villa ahí mismo en La Habana, pero por problemas de salud que tenía en el lugar donde vivía mi mamá decide – tú la conociste- muy joven venir a construir. Mi mamá es uno de las primeras mujeres que trabaja en microbrigadas en toda Cuba. Eso está documentado. En las microbrigadas de este tipo, porque ya las mujeres venían ayudando a la fabricación de otras cosas en el proceso social revolucionario. Trabaja en varios edificios hasta que le dan casa y después sigue trabajando prestando ayuda y colaboración en otros edificios porque generalmente las personas que venían a vivir para Alamar, eran los trabajadores destacados, los mejores obreros de cada uno de los trabajos, eran los que tenían el derecho de venir con sus familias para Alamar. Era un modelo de comunidad socialista. En Alamar tú podías dormir con la puerta de la calle abierta. O sea es una realidad. En Alamar no había policía prácticamente. Tú no veías un policía en Alamar. Era un barrio de obreros pero era un barrio que, para empezar a vivir en Alamar, verificaban, o sea, hacían una investigación de la persona que venía a vivir. Tenía que ser un buen obrero, vanguardia, no se que toda esa historia. Y así se funda la comunidad, pero ese proyecto, por necesidades habitacionales, se empieza a agrandar ya para personas que no tenían esa condición de vanguardia, de ser los mejores obreros, todo eso. Y empieza a entrar ya otro tipo de persona a la comunidad.

ZK. Y ¿Eso cuando fue? (4:28)

MR. Eso fue ya en el año ochenta y pico. A mediados de los ochenta. Todavía en esa época en Alamar no se veía un policía. Yo tuve una adolescencia muy bonita. Nosotros teníamos fiestas todos los sábados. Nosotros tomábamos ron sin problemas, paseábamos sin preocuparnos. Cada zona tenía o tiene un Círculo Infantil, una escuela primaria, policlínicos después que se hicieron, casas de médico. Un mercado, que no es nada de lo que tú ves hoy. Alamar se ha deteriorado terriblemente, porque en aquella época todos los edificios tenían su forma original, pintura, no se podía gritar, no se podía poner la música. Era un residencial obrero, pero un residencial. Nada de malas palabras, ni de broncas. Hubo personas que se sacaron de Alamar. Hubo personas que los sacaron por escándalos. Te ponían el camión y te sacaban de Alamar. Ahora había un déficit de vida cultural (5:52). Nosotros estábamos creciendo, y Alamar estaba construyéndose. Se empezó a construir la Casa de la Cultura y se demoró demasiado. Había una Casa de Cultura muy pequeña en el barrio que le dicen las casitas, fueron 400 casas que al principio de La Revolución el Comandante Che Guevara manda a hacer para diferentes técnicos extranjeros. Esos técnicos extranjeros eran rusos, o sea soviéticos, eran búlgaros, rumanos, casi todos del campo socialista. . Que vinieron a colaborar con la Revolución en diferentes esferas de la vida industrial y económica de este país. Entonces ese barrio siempre desde niños lo conocimos como el barrio de los rusos y la playita la playita de los rusos, el mercado de los rusos. También vinieron muchos chilenos cuando el golpe de estado a Allende, que convivieron, que se criaron con nosotros. Chilenos, uruguayos, mucha gente de América Latina que crecieron junto con nosotros y que

muchos ya regresaron a su país pero bueno, queda el recuerdo aquel de la adolescencia de ser amigos, novios...Entonces, la vida cultura en Alamar en cuanto a instituciones era francamente pobre, o sea no teníamos una Casa de Cultura que tuviera la exigencias que necesitaba la gente. En el año 86-87 yo me entero que hay una brigada de escritores, de artistas, de jóvenes con inquietudes artísticas. Había un Cine Club. Livio Conesa otro amigo de nosotros estaba en ese Cine Club, y da paso a lo que se empezó a llamar la Brigada Quijote. La Brigada Quijote leía poesía, hacía peñas literarias y hacía peñas de trova, ponían música, tenía teatro, tenía fotografía. Y yo me entero... (8:10)

ZK. ¿El grupo El Quijote estaba formada con gente de Alamar?

MR. Sí, sí, sí. Eran muchachos de Alamar. Esos eran muchachos de Alamar. Entonces yo me entero por ellos mismos porque nos veíamos mucho en las fiestas, Porque todo el mundo iba a casa de todo el mundo. Yo iba a tu casa...Yo te conocía en tu casa. Yo empezaba a bailar contigo, tomábamos refresco, no se. Porque era un ambiente muy sano, era un ambiente diferente, era un ambiente donde la violencia era mínima, donde no se conocía la droga, donde el término “marginal” no existía, porque eran gente vieja, éramos hijos de vanguardias. Te estoy explicando. Mi mamá era la única que trabajaba con treinta y pico de hombres en su brigada. Y había un respeto. Esa cosa de los compañeros. Esa cosa linda quizá, romántica quizá, sí, pero que funcionaba. Todavía ese respeto que uno hereda, ese respeto de Buenas Tardes, buenos Días, Permiso, Muchas Gracias, que no es una educación ficticia, es una educación real, de respetar a los mayores. Es una tradición que en Cuba, se ha perdido. Bastante. O sea, el respeto a los mayores, en todos los

sentidos. En Cuba se ha perdido ese respeto a la ancianidad, a la sabiduría que tiene que ver con todo eso. En Cuba se conservó en barrios humildes, se conservaba. No era el viejo, era el señor. Aunque el señor no tuviera que comer, era el señor. Entonces todos estos hijos de obrero, incluso de intelectuales, ellos crean esa brigada artística, se llamaba así Brigada Artística Quijote. Yo me entero que ellos habían ido a la Sierra Maestra, que habían subido El Turquino, habían venido dando actividades, todo eso. Entonces dije bueno yo tengo que engancharme ahí. Ya yo estaba haciendo poesía. Y hacía algunas cosas de plástica, muy rudimentarias, muy al principio. Yo soy graduado de academia de relojería. Y un amigo, rubio, así como tú, que vive ahora en España, escultor también, Ernesto Yáñez, muy fundamental en todas estas historias. Me dijo, oye chico vamos que estamos arreglando una trinchera. Una trinchera que había para acá atrás para cerca de una de las lomas, ellos la estaban acomodando, sacándole la tierra, todo eso, para ahí hacer una sede, en esa trinchera. (11:09) Entonces, empezamos ahí. Yo empecé a asistir a algunas actividades.. Entonces la Juventud y el Partido tenían un poder, era más visible el poder de la Juventud, el poder de la Juventud comunista. Era más visible y...No se si sería el momento, pero sí se sensibilizaban más con estas cosas. Eran más proclives a sentarse contigo, a compartir contigo. Normal, sin problemas, y a tratar de ayudarte a solucionar algunas cosas. Bueno, la Juventud busca una casita que había sido creo una escuelita. Y se la da a El Quijote. Ahí el Quijote comienza pintar la casita, a arreglar la casita, arregla cosas. Y hacen diferentes aulas. Cada aula, en una se daba teatro, en otra fotografía. Todo eso con los esfuerzos propios . Entonces,

empezaron a buscarnos de Educación. Íbamos todos los miércoles, a las escuelas en el campo, los pre universitarios en el campo a dar actividades. Leíamos poesía, los trovadores cantaban, los actores hacían sketch humorísticos. Todo eso gratis. Todo eso que te estoy diciendo por amor al arte. Entonces de esa experiencia salen muchas personas de las que trabajan en el Grupo Habana Abierta, que son gente de La Habana, porque ya empiezan a venir personas que no son de aquí de Alamar. O sea empiezan a integrarse al proyecto artístico muchachos de Centro Habana, muchachos del Vedado, de Playa, que vienen un día por casualidad y encuentran interesante lo que se esté haciendo y se integran al proyecto. Medina tocaba la guitarra. Enchaustegui y Alejandro Gutiérrez. Rubén era sonidista. Valexis [Balesy], que también tenía que ver con el sonido y toda esa historia, y con la escultura también. Y ellos se integran a esos proyectos. (13:50)

ZK. ¿Y esto cuándo fue?

MR. Eso fue en el 86, 87,88. Entonces, en el año 87 viene la Segunda Caminata. Nos vamos un grupo de gente para allá para el Turquino. Estaban Manuel Ávila, Nelson Martínez, Leonel Hernández, David Manuel Camejo . Como todo proyecto artístico hay gente que después, se va decantando, y no hace más nada. Pero hay otras que insisten. Como Carlitos Alpizar, Roberto Molina, Felipe Pulido. Bueno vamos al Turquino, caminamos la Isla, dimos actividades por toda la Isla, apoyados por la SEPMI y por la Juventud Nacional. La SEPMI era sociedad de educación patriótico militar. La dirigía el Cosmonauta Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, el trato que nos dio la SEMPI, la Juventud y la FEU, siempre fue de apoyo, siempre fue muy bueno y nunca hubo –



pudo haber descoordinaciones, ese tipo de cosas- pero nunca hubo una cosa fea entre el Quijote...Siempre fue muy bueno, siempre fue de apoyo. Pero ya llegó el momento en que empiezan a salir de El Quijote, empiezan a salir personas que ya no estaban interesados en esa línea de trabajo. O sea ya la gente estaba creciendo y ya sus necesidades estaban cambiando. Estás un año yendo a las escuelas. Estás un año yendo aquí y allá. Y hay necesidades con la sede de dárselas a los jóvenes del Club de Computación. Ya lo estaban necesitando. Entonces, empieza a disolverse El Quijote. Empiezan a salir gente. Ya eso no tiene nada que ver con tus intereses. Porque hay gente que...Tu obra tiene que evolucionar. Y son caminos. Ahora, en el año 89 (17:16) después que se disuelve El Quijote, que se disolvió así poquito a poquito, porque fueron saliendo gente hasta que la Juventud dijo, bueno caballeros nosotros necesitamos la casita para dársela a los jóvenes del Club de Computación, que surgía en ese momento. Y era una necesidad del país que la gente estudiara computación. Bueno, aquellos televisores grandes blanco y negro, te podrás imaginar. Año 89. En fin, sin problemas. Sale El Quijote de la casita, la casita pasa al Club de Computación y en el año 89 uno del grupo empieza a trabajar en Cultura, en una galería. Manuel Ávila. Empieza a trabajar ahí. Hace falta una galería más grande. Le dan un espacio en la Casa de la Cultura...ah, en el año 87 inauguramos la Casa de la Cultura.

ZK. En el 87?

MR. La Casa de la Cultura que llevaba muchos años en construcción, incluso sin terminar algunas partes, la inaugura el grupo Quijote en el año 87, porque ya nos conocían los compañeros de Cultura. En el 89

Manuel Ávila empieza a trabajar en la galería de arte que tenía un espacio, un local, en un mercado. Pero que ese local, lo necesitaba comercio y le dan un local en la Casa de la Cultura para hacer una galería de arte a él y al Director de la galería que se llama Roberto Alarcón. Entonces El Manín busca a un grupo de muchachos que les llamaban frikis, que eran los muchachos estos rockeros, con el pelo largo. Y esos muchachos son los que lo ayudan a él a empezar a levantar paredes allí en la galería. Entonces, a partir que él empieza a trabajar con esos muchachos, que lo empiezan a ayudar, empieza a llamar a algunas de las personas que todavía estábamos trabajando para que nos integremos a ese proyecto. Yo empiezo a trabajar tiempo antes de que se inaugure, empiezo a trabajar allí oficialmente como montador de la galería. Y al final, muchas de las personas que fuimos de la Brigada Quijote, son los que inauguramos ese proyecto. Como que salimos de una para entrar en otra. Y empezamos a trabajar. Hoy mismo yo lo estaba diciendo en una inauguración, que irónicamente un proyecto de Artes Plásticas, la mayoría de los que lo inauguramos éramos poetas, no éramos plásticos. Había pocos plásticos en ese momento ahí. Entonces el Director de la galería que hoy vive en Santiago de Chile, Roberto Alarcón. Es un pintor y un promotor cultural, muy bueno. Fue puliéndonos, como puliendo aquellas cosas en bruto, no vamos a decir diamantes, vamos a decir, vaya, zafiros. A mi me dijo, bueno tú tienes manos para la escultura, mira a ver la escultura, trata de entrar en la Asociación Cubana de Artesanos, porque tú la escultura, tus manos, tu forma de hacer las cosas a mi me gusta mucho, que se yo. Como poeta, sí, a él le gustaba. Pero en el sentido plástico. El empieza a ayudarnos. Le dio clases como a cuatro

o cinco compañeros que después entraron y salieron graduados de la escuela de San Alejandro. (21:18) La real Academia de San Alejandro, muy respetada. En el ISA, en toda esa historia. El formó. La galería se comenzó a convertir como en un panal, en una colmena. Empezaron a venir prácticamente toda la vanguardia artística de esos tiempos. Pasó por la galería. En la galería se hacían los Festivales de Amistad, de la Nueva Trova. En la galería se hacían las Bienales, se inaugura con una Bienal de La Habana. En aquel momento por Armando Hart, en el año 89. 1ro de Noviembre del 89, veintiún años hace de esto. Algunos éramos muy jóvenes, teníamos veinte tres, veinte cuatro años. Y poco a poco la gente fue, la gente fue como tomando un camino. Espérate, déjame ver. Yo no puedo ser cinco cosas a la vez, yo tengo que ser una. Ya tengo que enfocarme en esto, espérate vamos a hacer esto. Ah, ya lo logré. Ahora vamos a...Como que nos dio, en el sentido personal, Alarcón a mi me dio la manera de hacer las cosas. O sea yo podía lograr las cosas pero no sabía cómo. No, espérate. Mira tienes que hacer esto primero, después haz esto, hasta logre aquello, pero tienes que empezar por acá. Y así. Así había grandes debates. La galería siempre fue un centro de debates. Tú entrabas con ese carácter suave que tú tienes, esa sonrisa, tú entrabas a la galería y pensabas no esta gente se está matando, porque era “no, porque los Beatles. No pero mejor que los Beatles era Pink Floyd. No, porque a Roura no le gusta los Beatles. No jodan más con los Beatles, los Beatles son unos toca lata. A mi me gusta Pink Floyd.

(23:04) Y así, eran unas discusiones apasionadas sobre la poesía, sobre todo la poesía latinoamericana, la poesía norteamericana, la poesía inglesa. No porque a Roura le gusta Carpentier, y aquel le gusta García

Márquez, (23:25) y aquel le gusta Truman Capote. Entonces era, ese debate constante. Si tú habías leído algún libro y entonces yo no lo había leído, tú me lo prestabas, entonces yo te prestaba...Entonces ya los dos podíamos hacer una valoración diferente, desde la percepción de cada uno sobre una obra determinada. Entonces, eso pasaba con la literatura, con la música. Era un centro de debate. Ya te digo, tú entrabas y te preguntabas, esta gente son amigos o se van a matar. Porque a mí Los Beatles me gustan, pero no tanto. Me gustan más, no sé, Eric Clapton me gusta más. Me gusta mucho la poesía inglesa. Yeats, Williams, Thomas, Eliot. Me prestaba un libro que estaba en inglés y ay mi madre. Bueno déjame leer. No porque si lo traduces no sirve. Si pero bueno yo no sé inglés para...Y aparecía Juan Carlos Flores con algo de Rimbaud, Baudelaire ... para mí son ídolos. Pero los descubrí a partir de ahí y eso enriqueció mi obra, mi trabajo. Ya, en el plano personal. Porque, venimos de los españoles, sabemos más de los españoles que de los africanos, incluso la poesía oral africana es más difícil. No es nuestro idioma. Aunque algunos tenemos creencias religiosas que tienen que ver con África. Y también tiene que ver con España. Entonces, todo eso ya se fue...Uno iba como madurando esas cosas. O sea, ya no es que a mí me gusta Changó, es que yo creo en Changó. Ya no es que me gusta cualquier otro orisha o cualquier otra pintura o cualquier otro poeta, es que ya yo creo en eso porque a partir que lo voy conociendo, ya voy conformando en mi mundo y en mi obra algo más sólido. Ya no es algo de oídas. No, no ya yo conozco como es. Y tengo una idea y lo incorporo. Esa poesía inglesa que cuando hablaban bueno que es esa poesía inglesa, será un plato de cocina. No, no. Es una cosa real, tangible, que llega, que

uno lo estudia. Entonces ya se iba madurando esa cosa. Ahora, dentro del proyecto de la galería, con esa vanguardia. Llega un día un señor que se llama Domingo Cisneros que ojalá esté vivo todavía. (26:20) Él era mexicano, había tenido que salir de México por problemas políticos, y había ido a residir a Canadá. Él era profesor de la universidad de Quebec, en Canadá. Domingo Cisneros , viene acompañado de un...Venían muchos proyectos del extranjero a la galería...Proyectos de Suecia...Mira se me olvidó enseñarte un grabadito que yo tengo de Gerald Stiff, un grabador sueco muy bueno. Aldor Paulson. Venían proyectos de Bolivia. Venían proyectos de Canadá, de los Estados Unidos. Entonces cuando Domingo Cisneros viene con su proyecto, viene acompañado de Richard Martel, que era el editor o uno de los directores de una revista o un proyecto que se llamaba Boreal Multimedia. Ahí es donde yo escucho por primera vez y en ese momento mucha gente no sabía lo que es Internet, yo tampoco sé lo que es todavía Internet. Esas cosas virtuales no me gustan mucho, no se. Yo soy un poco primitivo, sí , eso es como una comida virtual. Yo te la enseño, pero tú no te la comes, se llena otro. Entonces no me sirve. Soy bastante básico, no. Eso de Internet y la propaganda. Yo creo en el carro cuando lo tengo. Esta misma característica que yo te digo bromeando contigo, sí la teníamos mucha gente de aquí. Yo creo que la entrada de nosotros en el proyecto como invitados al proyecto Boreal Multimedia era que Domingo y Richard Martel...ahí escuché yo por primera vez la palabra *performance*. (28:24)

ZK. En qué año?

MR. Eso fue en el año 91. Yo la escucho por primera vez. Yo decía que cosa es eso? Eso es francés, es inglés, qué cosa es? Qué significa. Entonces empecé...cuando pregunté qué significaba...esta...Como yo les llamo los conceptualeros, en lugar de los conceptualistas los conceptualeros No me hables de fantasías, de la Isla del Tesoro. No, no, dime cómo es. Yo soy una persona muy básica en ese sentido. Y esto del Arte Abstracto y esas cosas. No, no. Cómo es? Dime, qué significa y por dónde viene. Ellos nos invitaron a compañeros nuestros que estaban más informados, tenían la academia, pero muchas veces tú le preguntabas y te decían bueno dame tiempo porque eso todavía no lo he estudiado, Ah entonces tú no sabes nada tampoco. Entonces yo como que me desespero un poco porque quiero asimilar esa información. Entonces ellos nos invitan y cuando ellos ven, estamos montando la exposición, y Alarcón va al tallercito que yo tenía, yo era el montador de la galería, y fui montador durante mucho tiempo y me gusta muchísimo el montaje, y el diseño de exposición. No sólo es un oficio más que tengo sino que me gusta. A mi me gusta distribuir en el espacio. Yo soy ordenado, me gusta ese tipo de cosas del diseño. Alarcón toma una pieza, de las que yo tenía ahí que yo le había hecho a una amiga nuestra. Incluso le pongo el nombre de ella .La pieza aquella era horrible y la amiga nuestra es muy bonita, es Grisel Echevarría poetisa, la esposa del también poeta Edwin Reyes, pero yo me dije bueno déjame ponerle un nombre a la cosa esta y le puse Grisel. Después las muchachas se pusieron bravas, no espérate, espérate, le hice una pieza a cada una. A Marjorie, a Marion, a Laurita de la Uz, les puse el nombre de cada una. Aquello era el cráneo de un gato, con una raíz, con unas cosas. Y unas

patas de gallina, qué se yo. Yo había recogido todo eso. Eso yo te lo voy a dar, te lo voy a dar en memoria. Y entonces eso era lo que yo encontraba en mi entorno. Yo tengo una vida marina, no sólo por vivir acá sino por una tradición. Mi familia, mis mayores, algunos de los cuales ya no están desgraciadamente, sí me enseñaron a amar el mar. Eso no tenía nada que ver con la ecología, para mí, yo no lo sabía, yo era un niño, no sabía lo que era la ecología. A mi me metieron en el agua de mar muy niño para curarme el asma. No se me quitaba con nada entonces había que meterme en el agua de mar para que se me quitara. Yo no te voy a decir que nadie me lo quitó. Yo te voy a decir que el mar me lo quitó. (31:44)

Yo soy supersticioso. No vamos a echarle la culpa a Yemayá, pero bueno. Mi familia me educó en el mar, me enseñó a amar el mar, a amar los animales. Esa fue una formación familiar de personas que incluso no tienen esa gran cultura, para ser honestos. Es decir no son personas de estudio ni nada de eso pero sí me enseñaron esa comunión con la naturaleza porque ya la habían heredado. Yo empiezo a trabajar todos estos materiales, los huesos, las piedras, y hago esa pieza. Estaba allí.

Alarcón va y dice espérate un momento y se la lleva a Domingo y dice Domingo mira. Y Domingo que estaba conversando conmigo, que yo no le había hablado de eso, me dice Oye pero dame acá eso. Para qué tú quieres eso. Para ponerla aquí en la exposición. No, tú estás loco, cómo tú vas a poner esa mierda aquí. Y dice no, no eso me gusta vamos a ponerlo. Bueno, al final, yo me tuve que ir para la escuela, en ese momento estaba terminando la escuela. Y cuando Domingo dice el Tequila que se yo. Abrió una botella de tequila que aquello sabía a rayos, pero bueno, en fin, hicimos esa amistad con Domingo y con Richard.

Qué pasa que con Richard yo tenía el problema del idioma, que yo sabía muy poco inglés.(33:10) Pero se comunicaron mucho con nosotros. Entonces se le ocurre, a partir de esa exposición se le ocurre a Alarcón, que estos muchachos que hacíamos esculturas, que hacíamos instalaciones, aunque para mi las instalaciones era algo conocido pero no era algo que yo hacía, crear un grupo que se llama ArteNativa, porque era sobre la utilización de los materiales desechados por la naturaleza o desechados por la industria. A partir de ahí, trabajar y hacer cosas por el entorno, por la naturaleza. Todavía en ese momento, Alamar ...Te estoy hablando del año 91, ya empieza el Periodo Especial, el llamado Periodo Especial que fue una crisis económica muy grande, que fue terrible para mucha gente. Y ahí se empieza a trabajar por amor al arte otra vez. O sea ya era el tercer proyecto, o sea yo estaba siguiendo un camino que no he terminado, por supuesto. Que sí enriqueció mi obra, y creo que la obra de muchos de los que participaron ahí. Se enriqueció a partir de los debates, las discusiones e hicimos exposiciones con la Bienal de La Habana e hicimos exposiciones en el Capitolio Nacional. O sea una de las piezas que hice que tú te la vas a llevar puse un Pensador de hueso en pleno Salón de los Pasos Perdidos, una escultura de hueso y hierro sentado en una silla allí en el Capitolio Nacional. Es el Pensador de Rodin, hice una versión tropical del Pensador de Rodin. ArteNativa fue en el año 93 y me acuerdo con fecha porque la madre de mis hijos estaba embarazada de mi hijo mayor que nace en el año 93. En nació en Mayo y en Marzo nosotros hicimos una exposición en el Centro de las Artes Visuales. Esa exposición que la coordinó Roberto Alarcón, que es un poco el padrino del grupo todo el tiempo fue apoyada



incondicionalmente por Jorge Braulio Rodríguez. Hoy decano del ISA, vive aquí en Alarmar, con quien después de eso he hecho una amistad. En aquel tiempo no lo conocía, por supuesto. Él no lo recordaba, hace ya algún tiempo, participe en una curaduría de él y de profesores del ISA y cuando yo leo las palabras de catálogo yo empiezo a acusarlo a él. Y creo que la segunda acusación que le hago es haber apoyado contra viento y marea al grupo ArteNativa, cuando muy poca gente creía en las personas no graduadas en Cuba. En Cuba se le llama Autodidacta o sea el Profesional es el que es graduado de una escuela de arte. Ahora mismo tú me estás diciendo que estás haciendo tu doctorado, tú eres profesional. Pero si yo voy a querer discutir tu misma tesis sin querer ser doctor entonces van a decir que es un aficionado...Entonces me imagino que en todos los países es así. Pero bueno, gracias a Dios todos no podemos ser graduados y tenemos que haber algunos alumnos indisciplinados. El defendió eso en el Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales. Cuando yo te hablo de eso te estoy hablando de que a nivel oficial, por todo el sacro santo mandato de las artes plásticas en Cuba...el Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales...Eso correspondía a una graduación. Bueno, si tú quieres. Eso correspondía. Que aceptaran esa exposición y que esa exposición fuera valorada por un master o por un doctor como lo es Jorge Rodríguez y otros especialistas de ahí, eso, al cabo del tiempo yo lo veo como una graduación, una casi graduación, no sé. La mayoría no éramos graduados de Artes Plásticas. Y fue muy bien acogida. En esa exposición, Belkis Ayón, amiga nuestra que ya falleció, de quien yo tuve una pieza en mi casa hasta que Yáñez se iba para España y yo le di la pieza a Yáñez. Ella era muy buena amiga de Alarcón,

muy buena amiga mía. Yo recibo un premio en esa exposición porque un día voy a ver a Belkis a cosas de otra exposición, y Belkis que no me había visto (38:55) me dice que le gusta mucho mi pieza. Ese es uno de los recuerdos más tiernos que yo tengo de Belkis Ayón que para mi fue una gran amiga y una gran artista. Seguimos trabajando, seguimos exponiendo., pero empieza una segunda etapa con ArteNativa. Entra Nilo, en ArteNativa. Entra Nelson Ramírez de Arellano, Liudmila Velazco, otras personas con una base conceptual diferente. Esta base conceptual ayudó mucho. Para mi fue muy bueno que entrara Nelson. (40:22) Él es especialista de la Fototeca de Cuba, fotógrafo formidable y muy buen amigo. Te digo buen amigo, porque para mi la amistad es muy importante, o sea es más importante incluso que la relación de trabajo. Yo salvo la amistad por encima de la relación de trabajo porque al final el trabajo es trabajo. Eso es para los trabajadores. Yo no, yo soy holgazán y entonces lo que me interesa es la amistad. Y Nelson ayudó mucho, con sus conceptos. Y Liudmila también, con su forma de hacer, con su forma de ver el arte. Y eso fue muy lindo. Muy bueno, pero ya eran tiempos difíciles y algunas personas decidieron emigrar del país como Raulito Arguelles o Yáñez. O sea ya era un esfuerzo sobre humano que se estaba haciendo. Cuando tú veas algunas de las piezas te vas a dar cuenta que era un esfuerzo sobre humano. Ahí no había herramientas eléctricas, ahí no había transporte, ahí no existía tampoco creo la cámara esta digital. No, no, no. Ahí era ir para el monte, coger un árbol como hizo Yanes conmigo con un árbol y un serrote, un serrote es un serrucho grande de esos que usan ustedes en Estados Unidos que es uno por allá y el otro por aquí. Nada de sierras de esas bonitas, Porque eso no existía en Cuba

y si existía nosotros no lo teníamos. Los huecos de la madera dura aquella abrirlos a mano. Todo era a mano. Todo era muy primitivo, muy esencial. Y si fuimos haciendo cosas que convocaban a la gente, o sea nosotros tuvimos exposiciones que podía ir trescientas personas, 300 personas en Periodo Especial, 300 personas que a lo mejor no habían comido ese día, que a lo mejor tuvieron que caminar no se cuanto para poder ir a la exposición, que si llegaban lo que había era un ron malo de eso que no había quien se lo tomara. Entonces sí fueron tiempos muy lindos porque ya te digo tuvimos reconocimientos oficiales porque nosotros exponemos en el Capitolio, cuando nosotros exponemos en el Centro de Arte este que te digo. En el Capitolio fuimos invitados nada más y nada menos que por Augusto Rivero, vicepresidente de la UNEAC, y por el Dr. Antonio Núñez Jiménez, el director fundador de la fundación La Naturaleza y el Hombre. Que hoy lleva el nombre de él. Nosotros tuvimos la dicha de conocerlo antes de su fallecimiento, conversar con él, compartir con su hija que era la directora de allí en ese momento. O sea para nosotros fue un honor que una fundación, que un hombre como Antonio Núñez Jiménez, que es un hombre que sabe tanto, un hombre que se le llama el cuarto descubridor de Cuba, porque es un hombre que ha explorado este país de punta a cabo, que exploró este país toda su vida, que participó en la guerra incluso, nos invitara a nosotros a participar en una exposición que él organizaba. O sea, para mi – yo no se cómo tú lo veas- pero para mi esto es otra graduación. Porque de dos millones de personas...Eso en la ley de probabilidades cuando yo estudié estadística ...Si de dos millones de personas que hay en Ciudad de La Habana, invitan a cuatro peludos de aquel rincón, es

porque quizá los cuatro peludos de aquel rincón son los que tienen en ese momento lo que se tiene que decir. O sea en cuanto a naturaleza, porque había otros movimientos culturales dentro de la ciudad., pero que hablaban otras temáticas. Cuando tú hablas de naturaleza tú puedes hablar de lo que sea. Tú puedes hablar del sexo, del amor, de la política, tú puedes hablar de lo que sea, pero a partir de la naturaleza. Tú medio ambiente es todo. Y entonces empezaron otros movimientos culturales paralelos, como el Primer Festival de Rap cubano, Rodolfo Rensoli , el director de ese festival, el creador de ese festival, trabajaba ya en la galería, yo era el montador y él también, un tiempito después de Arte-Nativa o un poco antes del final de Arte-Nativa , y Rodolfo me comenta – todo esto que te estoy diciendo era la convocatoria de mucha gente, mucha gente venía, muchas instituciones te miraban serio pero después decían bueno sí está bien mira los locos estos lo que están haciendo- Rensoli me comenta que él tiene un proyecto. Rensoli es poeta. Estábamos todos juntos en un taller literario, con Pablo y Nancy, Raúl Ortega, Manín, Alberto el negro, Javi, en fin, por eso la guerra sobre la poesía que era mejor no estar ahí. Estaban poetas también de La Habana que residían aquí como Juan Carlos Flores. Y Rensoli me dice que él va a hacer un festival de rap en Cuba. Imagínate tú! Año 94. No hay guagua... (46:17) “Pero coño negro como se te va a ocurrir hacer un festival si en este país no hay guagua, no hay luz, no hay comida, no hay nada mi hermano. Oye que yo quiero hacer un festival de rap. Tú vas a poner a todas esas gentes a cantar ahí a todos esos peludos. Bueno, está bien compadre, haz el Festival.” El me dice Migue. Él es el padrino de mi hijo mayor. “Bueno, compadre, haz el Festival ese. Hazlo.” Y Rensoli empieza

a hacer el proyecto, lo presenta y las instituciones de ese momento lo apoyan. Y se hace creo que en el año 94. Creo que fue en el año 94. El primer festival de rap, que se hace en el edificio doce plantas de Guiteras, aquí mismo dentro del municipio pero para allá. No aquí en Alamar sino en Guiteras, otra comunidad, parecida a Alamar. Entonces empieza a venir todo creador, músico, poeta, y se empieza a convocar un festival. Está ArteNativa por un lado haciendo cosas de plástica y muchas cosas de Arte-Nativa se exponen en el escenario de ese festival. Muchas personas que venían trabajando con ArteNativa decoran todo lo que es el escenario, todo lo que es escenografía. Algunos poetas participamos como jurado, en lo que es letra, la letra de las canciones. Músicos, jurados en la música. Se empieza a hacer el Festival de Rap y como revitaliza las cosas en ese sentido. Ya el Festival de Rap es música, tiene un mayor nivel de convocatoria. Hay que hacerlo en un lugar abierto, no es como una exposición. Lleva música, lleva danza, lleva textos. Y poco a poco Arte-Nativa va saliendo del ruedo. Hay amigos que quieren emigrar.. Otros tienen otros proyectos de trabajo., . Ya en realidad era agotador el esfuerzo que se estaba haciendo porque hay instituciones que nos apoyaban, pero ya nosotros teníamos otras necesidades creativas. Y creo que ese fue uno de los principales detonantes de que ya terminara ese proyecto. Sí, podíamos hacer cosas juntos, con muchos hay una gran amistad, pero ya había necesidades creativas y necesidades personales, proyectos de vida personales que ya cada uno tenía que ir tomando su camino. Nelson que es pintor decidió que la fotografía. Molina que es pintor se decidió por el diseño. Yo sigo haciendo mis esculturas. Todos hicimos artesanía en un momento

determinado para comer. No era una mala artesanía, era muy buena. Liudmila también se pone a hacer fotografía, muy buena. Puedes decir, no se nada de técnica fotográfica, pero cuando tú ves una foto de Liudmila, tú ves una foto de Nelson, tú dices, aquí hay arte. Puede incluso gustarte o no, para mí una cámara fotográfica puede ser lo mismo que un refrigerador, no se la diferencia, lo que debe motivarlo a uno es el resultado, que hay arte, porque me lo está diciendo la pieza. Yo lo veo más como una pintura que otra cosa. Entonces tiene que haber un creador detrás de la maquinaria...Pasa lo mismo con Molina, Alexis Lago se que estuvo trabajando bastante la pintura también y cosas de cine. El Yoyi que bueno, todo esto de la edición, la fotografía, y yo con la pintura también. Entonces, Nilo, bueno Nilo ya tú tienes referencia. Estábamos todavía en el Taller Literario, hay un cambio de dirección en la galería. Pablo Rigal y Nancy Maestigue insertan un nuevo proyecto, la literatura y las Artes Plásticas. Alarcón emigra con su esposa y su hijo para Santiago de Chile. Entonces ya, cuando empieza el Festival de Rap, en el Taller Literario, estaba Amaury. (52:08) Amaury cuando no tenía pelos. Amaury no tenía pelos. Eso ponlo ahí... Y nos saludábamos, nos leíamos los poemas que se yo pero normal. Entonces Amaury llega un día y toma uno de los talleres que había sido nuestro. Teníamos un hornito donde quemábamos las piezas y dice que bueno que vienen para ir a trabajar y seguir el debate. Era un debate donde salía un grupo de gente y entraba otra. Yo estaba allí. Yo estaba predestinado a estar ahí. Y al tiempo de estar trabajando ahí, conozco a Fito – bueno ya lo conocía de vista pero con el que más confianza tenía era con Nilo- y Nilo sigue toda la vida de aquí de la casa...Me entero que Yoyi y Nilo se van a integrar a este

proyecto que se comenzó a llamar Omni. (53:19) Yo decía Omni, qué es eso. Yo oía Omni y preguntaba qué es eso, una enfermedad, un virus, no se. No, este es un proyecto Omni Zona Franca de poesía y plástica.

Entonces, tú qué. No, yo colaboro, pero no quiero...O sea ya yo había pasado la etapa del grupo. Ya tenía incluso que tomar decisiones en mi vida personal. Tenía un hijo, después tuve dos más. Has visto que hay una reja en la puerta de mi casa porque yo vivía por el aeropuerto, bastante lejos a treinta kilómetros de aquí, una casa en el campo.

Entonces ya tenía que empezar a tomar decisiones con respecto a mi vida que no eran enemigas, pero no podían seguir ese camino, tenía que seguir otro. Es decir, yo podía entrar y salir, pero sin el compromiso de estar todo el tiempo, cumplir no se qué, pasa con todos los proyectos porque ya te digo yo soy holgazán en los proyectos y cuando uno trabaja en un proyecto tiene que ser responsable. Y...yo empiezo a colaborar con Omni. Siempre Omni me invitó a lecturas, a actividades. Incluso se hizo una cosa muy interesante, que ojalá ellos tengan algunas fotos.

Ellos empiezan a hacer exposiciones en la galería, aquí en la galería de nosotros y en otras galerías. Y muchas veces me invitaban. Y me decían, ah tú, siempre te estamos invitando – porque a veces no tengo tiempo.

La idea de una instalación – ahora mismo yo inauguré una exposición de instalación en la galería, hace tres años que estoy organizando una exposición que le pusieron *Poderes*. Yo no le puse *Poderes*, se lo puso Ana Ofelia, Directora de la provincia le llamo *Poderes*. Yo quería que el título fuese *No Son Todos Los Que Están*, pero ella dijo no, no ese título es muy largo póngale *Poderes*. Bueno, yo no voy a discutir contigo, tú eres la que mandas. Entonces, esa exposición pretende retomar la

instalación en este municipio y la escultura en este municipio. O sea era muy importante para mí que eso no se perdiera. Entonces yo empiezo como a ser invitado de Omni, o sea independientemente de la amistad, que leíamos, que nos tomábamos un poco de ron, conversábamos en el taller, discutíamos como siempre. Yo iba a bromear, qué se yo, a conversar, ellos siempre me invitaban a participar con algo. Hay piezas que yo podía hacer, pero hay veces que el aspecto económico atenta contra una pieza porque buscar un material específico a veces se hace difícil. A veces vas a buscar madera y la encuentras pero a veces vas a buscar cartón, que es más barato o se supone que es más barato que la madera y no lo encuentras, porque acuérdate que esto es real maravilloso. Y será siempre real maravilloso. Entonces yo recuerdo con mucho amor una exposición que ellos me invitaron que era poesía visual. Hicimos interpretaciones de poemas. Ya la galería tiene un evento de Salón de Arte Erótico, una Bienal de Ilustración. El salón de arte erótico más antiguo que se hace en Cuba lo hacemos nosotros, gracias al segundo director de la galería que fue Pablo Rigal, que trabaja en el Instituto Cubano del Libro y su esposa, Nancy Maestigue, fueron los creadores. Cuando ellos entran en la dirección de la galería, Pablo crea este salón que con cosas muy atrevidas dentro del arte erótico cubano, que han intentado robarnos más de una vez a nivel institucional, utilizando hasta el mismo nombre del evento, muy originales los homodefensores de la tolerancia y la diversidad. Entonces Omni organiza esa exposición de poesía visual en la que yo participo. Ahí hice una de las piezas y a ellos les gustó mucho y yo tuve la posibilidad de ver que Omni como que continuó todo esto que se había hecho. Con cosas a



favor y cosas en contra. Es más amplia. Omni como que integra. Todos estos grupos que vi, participé o fundé, Omni integra esas partes. O sea hay música, hay fotografía, hay video, performance. Todo eso lo trabaja el Yoyi, lo trabaja Nilo. Y sí hay una continuación de eso y Omni ha sido importante para la comunidad. Omni ha tenido un poder de convocatoria durante muchos años. Yo no se si ellos, porque yo el año pasado no pude venir pero ellos hacían caldosa, algo muy cubano, muy criollo. Después se estructuró el festival de otra manera. Al principio era más libre, más espontáneo. A mi me gustan mucho las cosas espontáneas, a mi las cosas de protocolo no me gustan, porque no se si es el protocolo o el proctólogo, entonces no se muy bien que voy a hacer. Yo siempre lo digo. Siempre utilizo ese chiste porque eso de protocolo, oh compañeros, oh. No para mi eso es fatal. Alguna gente en este país piensa que carece de preparación pero no, lo espontaneo solo es efectivo si estas lo suficientemente preparado para lograr tu objetivo, hay ideas que no pueden cocinarse demasiado porque sino envejecen. Entonces, sí Omni sigue esa línea y ellos siempre citan a ArteNativa. Porque ArteNativa tuvo eso, o sea era muy espontáneo. ArteNativa te tomaba un espacio y te lo convertía en otra cosa que no era eso. Además te estaba diciendo que lo que tú estabas haciendo estaba mal., sin decírtelo, sin palabras. Te estaba diciendo, Oye mira, estás acabando con la naturaleza. Respétala, esa planta pequeña respétala porque eso es vida. Y eso de alguna manera te va a salvar. Yo recuerdo en el primer Poesía Sin Fin hicieron una caldosa riquísima. Porque además a ellos se integraban gente que no son poetas, que vienen a ...Oye vamos a pelar papas y a...Tú sabes lo que es la caldosa? Vamos hacer la caldosa. Oye

Roura vamos a echarle ron a la caldosa. Entonces los vegetarianos no quieren que le eche cabeza de puerco porque ellos son vegetarianos. Pero si tú no te vas a comer la cabeza de puerco, te vas a tomar el agüita. No que va, todas esas historias. Después les dio a algunos por ser vegetarianos. Todo el bonche ese que se forma, yo digo que no, yo soy carnívoro, pero bueno. Y el ama de casa ,el obrero, el vago, el estudiante, los niños, todos se unían alrededor de unos locos que daban alegría, amor, música y propuestas validas, a veces dramáticas como el performance Pan con Poeta. Entonces, sí ha habido una continuación. Pienso yo. Que la vida...En este tiempo, en esta hora, te he hablado de veinte y un años. Que...tú no puedes escribir – y esto te lo digo y se lo he dicho a personas que les duele pero es una realidad o sea hay cosas que a ti te duelen pero no dejan de ser reales. Tú no puedes escribir la historia de la cultura en esta parte de La Habana, fíjate, omitiendo nada de esto. No puedes omitirlo, porque fueron momentos en que cuando la gente no tenía, porque la gente no tenía una computadora, ni tenía Internet, porque hay un solo cine y había una sola película, la gente se convocaba para ahí. Se convocaba para ArteNativa para la galería porque además la galería el proyecto cultural de la galería al cual pertenece ArteNativa, daba conciertos....Estos muchachos de Habana Abierta o Habana Oculta con algunos de ellos tengo una relación personal muy fuerte. Se daban descargas de poesía. O sea no era un movimiento cultural joven ,era un movimiento cultural vivo. No era un movimiento cultural estandarizado. No, nosotros teníamos que pedir permiso porque decían bueno de dónde salieron los locos estos. Tú no puedes hablar de la vida cultural de esta parte de La Habana sin hablar de ArteNativa, sin hablar de la

galería, sin hablar de los fundadores, de Manuel Ávila, de Alarcón, de Pablo Rigal, de Nancy, de Omni, de ArteNativa. No se puede. Tú puedes tratar de obviarlo, pero en la historia cultural de este municipio, está el festival de rap, Rensoli con Balesy, Grupo Uno. Están todas esas personas que siendo jóvenes retomaron todos esos proyectos y a veces con sus contradicciones, con sus pro y su contra, con el cubaneo como es lógico, con el machismo ese que tenemos nosotros a veces que nos nubla la razón. Con la soberbia esa que es tan dañina. Pero sí se han hecho cosas por encima de eso. . El primer disco tú lo tienes, Alamar Express. Ellos me invitan al disco, fíjate si es verdad. Yo no se si tú lo has oído, Quinta Canaria. Ese poema que ahora el otro tomo y lo puso en una canción porque le gustó. Se creen que es el único poema que yo tengo. No jodan más con ese poema, yo tengo más poemas. Tengo ochenta poemas. Oye está bueno ya me van a poner Quinta Canaria a mi. Entonces ellos me invitan al disco. Tú puedes hacer un disco con los músicos. Tú puedes hacer una mega exposición en La Habana, con la gente que ha participado en estos proyectos. Y alguien va a interesarse. A alguien le va a gustar. Mucha gente dice que no, pero vamos dejarnos de cuento. A ti te gusta que lo que tú haces, les guste a las personas. O sea a mi me gusta. Para mi es un premio, a mi ego, a mi sensibilidad, a mis emociones, a todas las características que yo pueda tener que venga alguien y me diga me gusta eso que dijiste. (1:05:10) Me gusta eso que pintaste. Me gusta tal fotografía o tal cuadro o tal instalación. Me gusta. El hecho de que te guste es algo humano, el juicio de valor que vas a hacer va a ser diferente. El juicio que vas a hacer va ser de cariño hacia eso. A ti te gusta una mascota tú le vas a tener cariño a esa mascota. Y es

lo mismo que pasa con la obra de arte. Vamos a dejarnos de cuento la gente no siempre puede conceptualizar. Yo te digo bueno esta bolita significa el mundo y el agua y tu dices bueno pero yo soy doctora y esto no es el agua y el mundo, esto es el fuego y la tierra. Porque para ti significa otra cosa diferente, porque tú eres un ser humano diferente y tu percepción va a ser otra. Ya a partir de que te guste ponle como tú quieras. Entiendes, eso es la obra de arte, crea una comunicación. Hay gente que dice, no, a mi no me importa. No, a mi si me importa. A ti te gusta gustar. Te interesa gustar. Vamos a dejarnos de cuento. Y es una cosa...que Omni ha gustado. Hay propuestas incluso de Omni que hay gente que no lo entiende. Yo hay cosas que...esas cosas electrónicas que yo no entiendo .sonidos o imágenes .Yo puedo ver un video conceptual y se que es un video conceptual, pero hay cosas que van más allá de lo que yo pueda entender, que yo pueda asimilar. Necesito sentir la obra. ...Creo que un esquimal puede ser más apasionado que yo. Pero yo tengo que sentir la obra hecha. Sea un video, sea una canción, sea un performance. Hay cosas que no te gustan. Ya como consumidor de arte, pero sí creo que ha sido importante todo, incluso salvando las desgraciadas diferencias que puedan haber a nivel institucional. Yo creo que es importante la historia que en estos 12 años ha escrito Omni...O sea ellos estaban tallando madera y escribiendo poesía. Vamos a dejar de tallar madera, vamos a hacer otra cosa, vamos a ir a otra vanguardia. Hace cinco años se incorpora Davicito. Davicito tenía 17 o 18 años. Ya David tiene un disco. Hizo un disco que ganó un premio. Que es otro de los usó el poema mío en una de las canciones. Tengo una relación muy especial con él porque para mí él es muy buen pintor. O sea, no quiero calificar a

nadie, pero David ha expuesto en la galería y yo he tenido que cogerlo por los moños para que exponga en la galería y me he fajado con él para que trabaje porque David es muy buen pintor. Una persona que tiene muy buena mano. Esto es como el dulcero. Tú estudias en una academia pero el dulce no tiene el punto. . No es lo mismo ser dulcero que te guste hacer dulces. Y aquel le gusta hacer dulce y lo hace bueno. Eso es lo que pasa con David. (1:09:04) Lo que pasa con Damián. Puedo enseñarte exposiciones de Damián que tiene en su casa. Exposiciones de David que tiene en su casa. Las exposiciones de Joelito. Hay mucha gente que no son de Omni pero que están en la foto. O sea porque participan con Omni, porque caminan con Omni. El garabato ese famoso, una de las veces lo llevamos a una exposición, y yo subí el garabato y el garabato es símbolo de Elegguá. El garabato es un símbolo religioso pero también es un símbolo de trabajo., se utiliza para tomar la maleza y apartarla. Es con lo que se abre los caminos. Hay un Salón de Instalaciones en la Villa Panamericana, porque esto es un diseño muy grande, y Omni hizo intervenciones en la playa, intervenciones en el río. Como ArteNativa, hizo intervenciones. O sea yo creo que eso, aunque tú no lo creas...la gente sabe lo que hacen esta gente. Y te ven en la calle y te dicen: “Tú eres artista”. “Tú eres escultor, qué tú haces”. “Sí, yo te he visto”. Eso, sin salir por televisión. O sea, eso, aquí, en Alamar. Hay gente que está...”Mira los locos estos”. Entonces, tú no puedes escribir la historia de este municipio sin esas personas”. Si no escribes sobre esas personas, de qué vas a hablar. En este territorio, tan grande. ¿De cuál historia? ¿De cuál? De las Bienales de La Habana, el evento más importante de plástica que se hace en este país. Es la Bienal de La Habana. No es otro.

Tú puedes tener diez mil eventos y poner 50 millones de dólares, pero el evento más importante de este país donde vienen invitados del mundo entero es la Bienal de La Habana. Omni ha participado en tantas Bienales de La Habana. Como centro o como colateral. Como ArteNativa participó como colateral. Omni representó a este municipio como proyecto. que fue aprobado por la máxima dirección de la cultura en este país. O sea hasta dónde tú puedes obviar eso. Hasta dónde tú puedes, por encima de cualquier diferencia – fijate que te lo aclaro – por encima de cualquier diferencia, de cualquier desacuerdo, ¿Cómo vas a obviar? Es algo que no puedes por mucho que quieras negarlo. Bueno, y ¿qué pasó en estos veinte años? No, en estos veinte años nosotros comimos pasteles y dormimos...Mentira, en estos veinte años hubo unavida cultural como no había existido en veinte, o treinta y tanto, los cuarenta años de existencia de Alamar. Algunos entraban y salían. Bueno, ven acá tú no te cansas. Vienen a las 11 de la noche a mi casa como tú riéndose...oye como ustedes joden, chico. Eso no se puede. Ahora, hay una nueva situación a partir del año pasado con Omni, a partir de desacuerdos y eso. Y se están haciendo las cosas de una manera diferente. Omni ha dejado un vacío. Te lo digo yo que trabajo ahí...Estoy invitado aquí y mi jefe sabe que estoy invitado y todas esas cosas. Por supuesto no he tenido ningún tipo de problema ni nada, porque cada cual es responsable de lo que hace y de lo que dice. Yo soy muy responsable de lo que te estoy diciendo. Es, yo pienso, independientemente de cualquier diferencia, una pérdida para el espacio que Omni estaba ocupando. Ahora ese espacio se quiere retomar otra vez. Ese espacio está siendo ocupado por una sala que se hizo, una sala

que se está haciendo que se llama “Cultura de la Resistencia”, donde se están haciendo proyectos proyectos culturales. Y ha sido grande, te lo digo desde el punto de vista personal. Ha sido muy difícil estar...el contacto humano, te lo he dicho dos o tres veces, para mi es muy importante. Mi amistad por encima de...O sea tú eres Marta o Zoya. Tú puedes ser cosmonauta, pero si nosotros tenemos contacto humano, tú eres Zoya, Zoyita, ya, normal, entiendes. No me importa si eres cosmonauta o cocinera. Yo estoy por encima de eso. Entonces sí es muy importante ese espacio que se está creando. Yo siento, quizá porque ellos se fueron y yo me quedé...porque yo trabajo ya hace algún tiempo como especialista de la galería y las discusiones de trabajo con Eligio ,y Amaury aquello era terrible, parecía que nos íbamos a comer. Yo siento mucho que Omni se haya... en el plano personal. Se les extraña. Hay un vacío sobre todo, con los líos que se formaban ahora con Poesía Sin Fin...Y afortunadamente, junto a eso, hay gente que sigue haciendo cosas. Yo sigo escribiendo. No se si estarás el 23, el 23 ya te vas. El 23 yo vengo acá a leer. Bueno, seguro que lo ves en grabaciones y las fotos y eso. Y sí, la gente sigue trabajando. Eso es importante, que la gente siga haciendo cosas a pesar de los obstáculos, de las diferencias en el camino. Y yo pienso que van a seguir. Y ahora hay un grupo nuevo, porque fíjate que esto es así, un trencito. Un vagón viene detrás de otro. No sé quién es la locomotora que está halando esto. Si tú sigues el ejemplo es como una secuencia de una película. Ahora viene otro grupo que tiene la edad que nosotros teníamos cuando empezamos con todo esto., que es el proyecto Índice, que son otros proyectos de jóvenes. El Proyecto Sendero, el Proyecto Carpa. Ya son proyectos de jóvenes y menos

jóvenes, quizá cinco años menos que yo, que ya empiezan a hacer estas cosas colectivas. Hoy leímos poesía, hoy se inauguró el Sendero del Poeta. Se pusieron instalaciones, incluso instalaciones fuertes actualmente. Las artes plásticas en Cuba, Igual que la literatura se ha caracterizado por ser fuertes, por ser críticas, pero decirlas con arte. Es decir si yo te voy a criticar el pantalón te lo pongo en un papelito y te lo doy, ahora si te lo quiero criticar con arte es otra cosa, te le tengo dar un tratamiento diferente a esa frase, a esa idea. Para mi todo debe tener arte, si no, no es válido, me parece, tiene que tener un mensaje. Y sí hay proyectos que siguen, ya los que estamos trabajando, sí hay proyectos que siguen trabajando en la cultura del municipio, dentro del municipio. Aunque hay gente que vive aquí y trabaja afuera, sí hay gente que sí está aquí dentro. Por supuesto es bueno, es sano salir y tomar cosas de afuera porque también hay tomar la medida de lo que está pasando fuera de Alamar, pero Alamar es, hasta en la Bienal de La Habana, había un pedazo en el catálogo oficial que decía Alamar. Ya, esto es otra cosa. Esto es marginal, con suburbio, pero a la vez poesía, pero a la vez artes plásticas, música, pero también romántico, pero ven acá qué le pasa a esta gentes son extraterrestres. No, eso que estamos haciendo venimos de todo eso. Todo eso se está mezclando y todo eso ha dado como resultado esto que te he dicho.



## **APPENDIX B**

### **PROGRAMS FROM POESÍA SIN FIN:**

2006 POESÍA SIN FIN Program (2 pages)  
2007 a POESÍA SIN FIN  
2007 b POESÍA SIN FIN  
2008 POESIA SIN FIN (2 pages)  
2009 POESIA SIN FIN (2 pages)

### **DESCRIPTIONS OF PERFORMANCES/PROJECTS:**

ABUSO DE CONFIANZA  
ATAJO  
COMUNIK'T  
DISTINTOS MODOS DE IZARSE  
EL EQUILIBRISTA  
ESPECTÁCULO OMNI EXPRESS  
ESTADOS DE GUERRA  
FANTASMAS CIVICOS  
FESTIVALES DE RAP  
FUNDAMENTOS  
PAN CON POETA  
PRESENTACIÓN GRAFFITI OMNI  
PROJECT POETRY WITHOUT END 2010  
TERRA XXXIV  
TRES HORAS DE DISCURSO

NOTE: All materials in Appendix B produced by OMNI Zona Franca.

# POESÍA SIN FIN 2006

**"ESTE ES EL SITIO EN QUE TAN BIEN SE ESTÁ"<sup>1</sup>**  
Si deajo de soñar, quien nos abriga entonces?  
Eliseo Diego

8 años reunidos en la comunidad de Alamar alrededor del fuego de la Reina Poesía. Todas las artes danzando con su Majestad. Fiesta señores, siempre una fiesta... una fiesta donde podemos mirarnos a los ojos limpiamente y pedir verso a verso por la prosperidad de las fuerzas creativas; por la poesía sin límites, porque en la poesía somos salvos y en ella la verdad que nos hace libres resplandece.

**Para recordar:**  
Festival Poético Poesía Sin Fin:  
1999 Alamar Express  
2000 Fuego del Neolítico  
2001 Poesía Sin Fin  
2002 Gira de La Luz (por los municipios de La Habana)  
2003 Cabaret Poético  
2004 Día de La Sagrada Familia de La Poesía  
Expo Experimental de Poesía Soldado con perfume y Cabaret Poético Máquina Total OMNI.  
2005 Cabaret Poético Alamar Express  
2006 "Este es el sitio en que tan bien se está"

**Invitados especiales OMNI:**  
Domingo Alfonso, Tony Armenteros (1999/ 2003/ 2005).  
Candida Atencio, Rito Ramón Aroche, Ismael González Castañer.  
Julio Mirjans, Roberto Manzano, Jesús David Curbelo.  
Edel Morales y alumnos del Diplomado de Poesía.  
Karel Leyva, Pedro Péguez y Grupo Aladécima, Iris Ruiz, Maikel Extremo, Alobanos, Raul Flores, Carlos Lage.  
Orlando Luis Pardo, Michel Encinoza Fú, Yordanka Almáguer.  
Michael H. Miranda, Luis Felipe Rojas, Ana Lidia Vega.  
Verónica Pérez Vega, Cinesio Verdecia, Wilay Méndez Páez.  
Paisanos: El Huevo y Randy Acosta, Papá Humbertico, Junior Clan, Jimmy Con Clase, Roberto Surbano.  
Jenny Palenzuela, Kirenia Legón, Minerva Ray Fernández.  
Vladimir Zamora, Andrés Mir, Ricardo Alberto Pérez.  
Victor Fowler Calzada, Francisco Dias Solar, Polina M. Reina María Rodríguez, Omar Pérez, Norge Espinosa, Carlos Augusto Alfonso, El Chaka, Andrés Pérez (x), Luis Jiménez, Helen, Marcelo Morales, Sàtira y Mestizo.  
Rodolfo Rensolis, Proyecto Rotilla, Elvira Rodríguez del Puerto.  
Raydel Araoz, Anónimo Consejo, Guarasi Grabiél Campos (Brasil), Sofía Acosta, Marcela Armas (México), Antonio Salvador (Puerto rico), Diego Mora, (Costa Rica), Queen Nzinga (Afro-Costa Rica).  
Jon Curry-Machado (Inglaterra: fundador),  
Lucrecia Cippitelli y la Asociación Inventati (Italia).  
Más todo OMNI-ZONAFRANCA

<sup>1</sup> Este año nos vestimos con versos de Eliseo Diego.

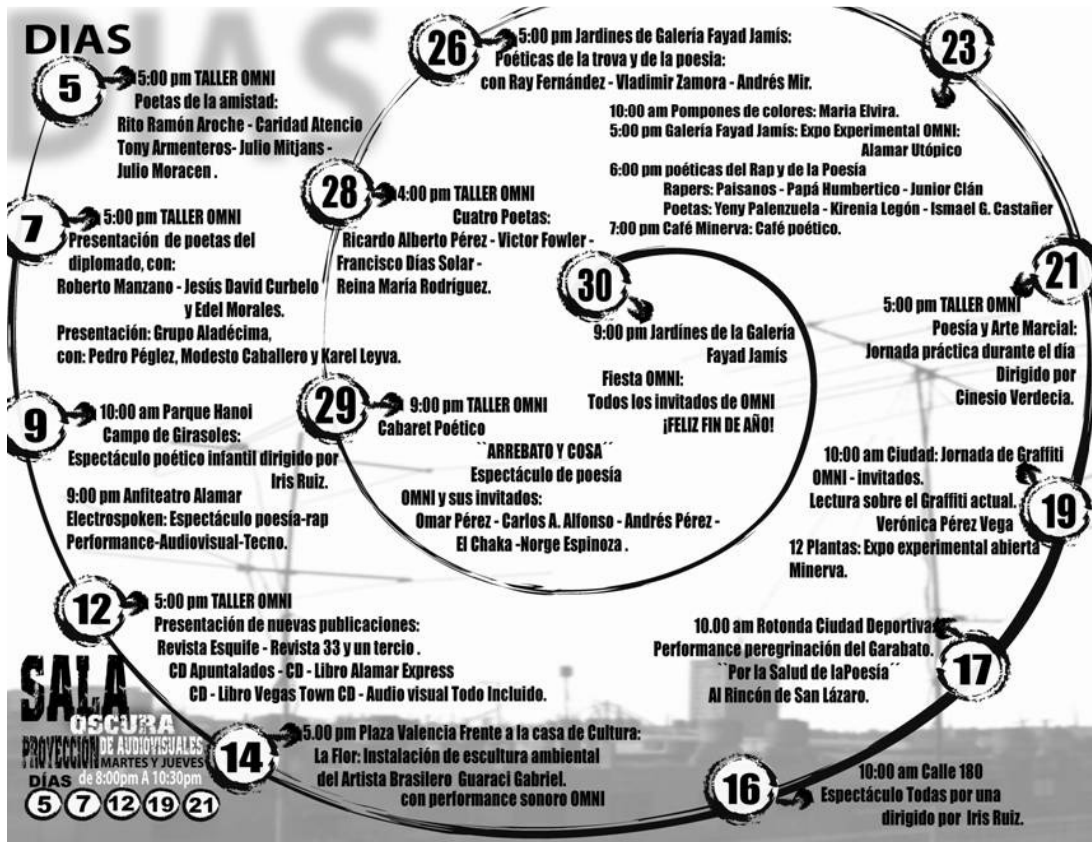
# CRÉDITOS

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**Promoción:** Nilo Julián González.  
**Realización y diseño de cartel, programa y audiovisuales promocionales:** Jorge Pérez (Yoyi).  
**Documentación audiovisual y fotográfica:** Jorge Pérez (Yoyi), Adolfo Cabrera (Fito) y Nilo Julián.  
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**Coordinación Artística e información general:** Luis Eligio Pérez M. Cañía.  
**Dirección General y concepto de Cabaret Poético "Arrebato y Cosa" y de todo Poesía Sin Fin "Este es el sitio en que tan bien se está":** Amaury Pacheco Del Monte.

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Dedicamos esta Fiesta de La Poesía, a la Comunidad de Alamar, a la luz de la nación, a La Sagrada Familia de La Poesía Cubana y más allá, a nuestras madres, hermanos, esposos y esposas, a todos los que han trabajado en estos 8 años, al Cristo-Dios por su fuerza.  
{Soñando, soñando, soñando!}

Más información sobre OMNI-ZONAFRANCA: [www.visiblecity.ca](http://www.visiblecity.ca), [www.proyectoparabola.com](http://www.proyectoparabola.com), [www.habanaelegante.com](http://www.habanaelegante.com), [www.caimanbarbudo.cu/320](http://www.caimanbarbudo.cu/320), [www.elvirarodriguezpuerto.com](http://www.elvirarodriguezpuerto.com), [www.esquite.cult.cu](http://www.esquite.cult.cu).  
Poesía Sin Fin 2006 "Este es el sitio en que tan bien se está".  
Del 5 al 30 de diciembre.  
Galería Fayad Jamis, Taller OMNI, Galería Abierta OMNI.  
Tel.: 65 3253.  
Correo-e: [zonafanca14@yahoo.com](mailto:zonafanca14@yahoo.com)  
OMNI-ZONAFRANCA. PUNTO DE DIALOGO

**8 años de festival poético**  
**GRUPO OMNI**  
**zona franca**  
**poesía sin fin**  
**8 años de festival poético**  
**esta internacional de la poesía**  
**ESTE ES EL SITIO EN QUE TAN BIEN SE ESTÁ**  
**DEL 5 AL 30**  
**SI DEJO DE SONAR, QUIEN NOS ABRIGA ENTONCES?**  
*eliseo diego*



**POESÍA SIN FIN 2007**  
**LA SAGRADA FAMILIA**  
**"Fiesta Internacional de la Poesía"**  
Legamos girando de la nada diseñando estrellas como polvo

...es decir, hay muchas cosas que incluir en La Poesía que no quedan fuera. 1.  
Un espacio. Un punto. Nueve Lunas. Nueve meses.  
9 años de Poesía Sin Fin.  
9 como conformación de lo humano. Lo humano como portador de la imagen creadora de la Poesía. Lo humano centro de eso que llamamos La Familia. El cubano hombre-mujer todo: poeta y toda su naturalizada base de una familia en la Poesía. Des-fragmentada Familia. Dispersión sostén de los que circulan diariamente por las venas de la isla-pais. Todos diversamente Uno en:  
Comunidad de intereses. Unidad de tradición. Unidad de fines. Fusión dulcísima y consoladora de AmorES y esperanzAS. 2.  
¡Patria Poesía! ¡Poesía sin fin! ¡Poesía!

**Para recordar:**  
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1999 AlamarExpress  
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2004 Día de La Sagrada Familia de La Poesía  
Expo Experimental de Poesía Soldado con perfume Cabaret Poético Máquina Total  
2005 Cabaret Poético Alamar Express  
2006 "Este es el sitio en que tan bien se está"  
2007 "La Sagrada Familia"

Dedicamos esta Fiesta de la Poesía a la Comunidad de Alamar. A la Sagrada Familia de la Poesía Cubana y más allá. A nuestras madres, hermanos, esposos y esposas. A todos los amigos del mundo que han trabajado en estos 9 años a la luz de la nación. Al Cristo del Alma por su fuerza.

**¡¡¡Vi va la poe-sí-aa!!!**

**SALA OSCURA**  
**Invitados**

Aina Rodríguez Abreu, Sandra Gómez, Alfredo Ureta, Xóchil y Filo (duo Karma), Raydel Araoz, Dalgis Chaviano, Ángel Alonso, Marieta Petchanska, Yimit, Luciano el Mexicano, Ismahil Belgrove (Jr).

**Más**  
www.proyectoparabola.com www.alamarexpress.elhombrenuevo.com  
www.habanaelegante.com www.elvirarodriguezpuerto.de www.fccu.com  
www.calmambardo.culcainas20 www.esquife.esulcu www.visitcuba.com  
Poesía sin Fin 2007 "La Sagrada Familia"  
Galería Fayad Jamis, Taller OMNI, Galería Abierta OMNI.  
Correo-e: poesiasinfina@gmail.com, zonafranca14@yahoo.com, Tel: 785-3253.  
omni-zonafranca@gmail.com

1 Lazama Lima  
2 Sentido patriótico de José Martí.

**Créditos**

Producción General: Adolfo Cabrera (Fito).  
Producción Ejecutiva: René Corvantes D.  
Asistencia: Ivía Pérez, Ailer G. Mená, Carlos A. García, Miriam Real, Natividad Soto, Susana Cantero.  
Apoyo técnico: David Escalona Carrillo.  
Promoción: Nilo Julián González.  
Diseño y Realización de cartel, programa y audiovisuales: Jorge Pérez (Yoyi).  
Documentación general: Jorge Pérez (Yoyi), Adolfo Cabrera (fito) y Nilo Julián.  
Multimedia de revistas digitales: Elena V. Molina.  
Dirección de Electropoken: Amaury Pacheco, Yosvany Hernández (Flecha).  
Expo experimental Alamar Utopico 2: OMNI-Memoria y Espacio.  
Coordinación General: Nilo Julián.  
Curaduría y Montaje: OMNI y especialistas de la Galería Fayad Jamis.  
Feria Espiritual: Evelin Quezada, Amaury Pacheco, Yornel Martínez.  
Relaciones públicas, coordinación artística e informaciones generales y dirección de Fiesta OMNI: Luis Eligio Pérez M. Cañra.  
Dirección General y concepto de Cabaret Poético y de todo Poesía Sin Fin "La Sagrada Familia": Amaury Pacheco Del Monte.  
**Otros invitados especiales OMNI**  
Nubelli Leyva, Nadia Cárdenas, Duo Sin Semilla, Danda Utopía, El Chaka, Maripje, Simone B. O. África M.S., Sanladi Pacheco, Roberto Sitas y Gigantaria, Soledad Ríos, Yornel Martínez, Mario Flores y Teatro Espontáneo, Evelin Quezada, Nany y Aryan, Chamán Flores Miro, Yohanna Depeste, Orlando Luis Pardo, Yordanka Almaguer, Ahmel Echevarría, Lizabel Mónica, Elena V. Molina, Marcos Antonio Díaz, Mflay Laviña, Jorge Alberto Aguiar, Ana Lidia Vega, Yoini Sánchez, Reynaldo Escobar, Katia Gutiérrez, Emmanuel Torres, Iris Ruiz, Verónica Pérez Vegas, Yasser Castellanos, Minerva Romero, Ray Fernández, Helen, Ernesto L. Guevara, Roberto C. Franchy, Marcelo Siguera, Rodrigo Barbosa, Máquina, Mauro Dagati Colectivos Unidos Voltus-V (Cátedra Haydee Santamaría, Estudios culturales de Nuestra América, Blackhat, Megafónico, Grupo de Descontaminación mental, Grupos, OMNI-ZONAFRANCA).

**Agradecimientos a**  
Galería Fayad Jamis, su director y equipo de especialistas; Casa de Cultura de Alamar; Iris Ruiz por la idea de la Feria Espiritual; Arturo Ruiz; Elvira Rodríguez del Pablero y el Festival Internacional de Cine Cubano en Munich (FICUCU); Patricia Satorra; Revista Consenso; Francisco Moran y su Habana Elegante; 33 y 1/3; Rauli Flores; Tensionia blog; Andrés Mir y Esquife; Parabola; Reina María Rodríguez y su equipo de Torre de Letras; Centro Dulce; María Loyraz; Karel Leyva y Casa de la Poesía; Christoph Bertramms y el Goethe Institut; El Cairán Enriquegado; El Cairán Barbuco 220 y Vladimir Zamora que hablaron de Poesía Sin Fin.

**OMNI-ZONAFRANCA PUNTO DE DIALOGO**

GOETHE-INSTITUT  
GALERIA FAYAD JAMIS  
OMNI zona franca

**40 AÑOS**  
DE FIESTA INTERNACIONAL DE LA POESÍA  
**POESÍA SIN FIN**  
LA SAGRADA FAMILIA  
de la nada diseñando estrellas como polvo

**OMNI**  
zona franca

CALLE 164 esq 5ª P zona 7  
casa de cultura  
AL AMAR  
del 4 al 30  
DICIEMBRE  
2007

Legamos girando de la nada diseñando estrellas como polvo

zofranca14@yahoo.com  
poesiasinfina@gmail.com  
Tel: 785-3253 (Galería Fayad Jamis)

**omni**  
zona franca



CALLE 164 esq 5ª B zona 7  
casa de cultura  
**ALAMAR**  
del 4 al 30  
**DICIEMBRE**  
**2007**

# AÑOS

DE FIESTA INTERNACIONAL DE LA POESIA

# POESIA SIN FIN

LA SAGRADA FAMILIA

Llegamos girando de la nada  
diseminando estrellas como polvo

telef: 765-3253 (Galería Fayad Jamis) . zonafranca14@yahoo.com  
poesiasinfin@gmail.com



Sábado 1 10:00 AM Galería Fayad Jamis MIL personas hacen el lazo del VIH

Lectura a coro de un poema de Pessoa • Teatro Espontáneo • Gigantería • Grupo OMNI

**Martes 4** Pre Festival  
9 AÑOS: CELEBRACIÓN  
5:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

**Cuatro poetas**  
Domingo Alfonso, Georgina Herrera, PM  
Pedro de Oraá, Carlos Augusto Alfonso.

Presentación de revistas digitales  
**Jueves 6** 5:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

Revistas Esquife, Consenso, The Revolution  
Evening Post, Des-Liz, Fogonero Emergente  
33 y un tercio. Lecturas narrativas  
Dirigido por Raúl Flores I

**Sala Oscura**. Muestra de Audiovisuales  
8:00 PM

**Sábado 8** Electrospoken  
8:00 PM  
Casa de la Cultura

**INAUGURACION DEL FESTIVAL**  
Espectáculo de poesía, proyección PM  
audiovisual y bandas electroacústicas

Presentación y lectura  
**Martes 11** 5:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

CD Vegas Town (ENFORI Producciones)  
del poeta Juan Carlos Flores  
**Sala Oscura**. Muestra de Audiovisuales  
8:00 PM

Lectura de jóvenes poetas  
**Jueves 13** 5:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

Osmany Oduardo • Isván Álvarez  
Andrés Mir • Annia Alejo  
Aymara Aymerich • Jenny Palenzuela  
Legna Verdecia • Teresa Fornaris  
Kirenía Legón • Daniel Díaz Mantilla  
Polina Martínez • Victor Fowler  
Nilo Julián • Amaury Pacheco  
Luis Eligio Pérez

**Sábado 15** Expo fotográfica y Audiovisual  
6:00 PM  
Galería de Arte Fayad Jamis

**OMNI: memoria y espacio**  
7:00 PM Rap y Poesía  
Rapers: Etían, Papa Humbertico, Kiki II  
Jimmy con Clase, Sátira y Mestizo  
Poetas: Karel Leyva, María de las Nieves,  
Tony Borrego, Antonio Salvador

Peregrinación al Rincón  
**Lunes 17** 10:00 AM  
Rotonda de la Ciudad Deportiva

8vo año del: Performance-Peregrinación  
del Garabato por La Salud de La Poesía,  
1ra caminata Voltus-V (colectivos unidos)

Encuentro libre con la  
poesía y el audiovisual  
**Martes 18** 6:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

Espacio de muestra audiovisual,  
imágenes de todo el evento.  
Presentación especial del Poeta  
Antonio Salvador.

Descarga en Piano-Bar  
**Jueves 20** 6:00 PM  
Galería Fayad Jamis

**con**  
René Cervantes Debrosse (poeta OMNI)  
y sus invitados

Poesía y Trova  
**Sábado 22** 5:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

**Poesía**  
Lina de Feria, Edell Morales, Basilia  
Papastamatiu, Jesús David Curbelo,  
Norge Espinosa, César López.

**Trova**  
Espectáculo de Rafael Valdivia  
con Ray y otros

**Martes 25** Gran Feria Espiritual  
9:00 AM  
Sanación del  
rio de Cojimar

de 10:00 AM a 5:00 PM  
.Espacio de prácticas espirituales  
(Boulevard, zona 6)  
.Descontaminación Mental  
.Teatro espontáneo

9:00 PM Fiesta de máscaras

Un día con Omar Pérez  
**Jueves 27** 10:00 AM  
Taller OMNI

.Meditación Za Zen,  
.Improvisación de danza y poesía  
6:00 PM:  
.Lectura Poética con sus invitados:  
Ismael G. Castañer, Tony Armenteros,  
Sigfredo Ariel, Sandra Ramy,  
Andrés Pérez X, Rito Ramón Aroche

**Sala Oscura**. Muestra de Audiovisuales  
8:00 PM

.DJ. .Graffiti. .Performances.  
.Lecturas espontáneas.  
**Viernes 28** 10:00 AM  
Galería Abierta OMNI  
(barrio 679, Zona 19)

**Cabaret Poético OMNI**  
8:00 PM  
Taller OMNI

"*Ponme la mano aquí  
bajando que está nevando.*"  
Espectáculo experimental de poesía  
OMNI Y sus invitados

**Fiesta OMNI**  
8:00 PM  
Jardines de la  
Galería Fayad Jamis

**"La calle está que echa humo"**  
Todos los invitados.  
**¡FELIZ FIN DE AÑO 2007!**





**POESIA  
SIN FIN  
CUBA Diciembre  
Alamar 1999-2008**

**DEL 4 AL 30**

LA SAGRADA FAMILIA DE LA POESIA: Angel Escobar Raúl Hernández Novás Belkía Ayón Luis Carbonel Javier Marimón Basilia Papastamatou Lina de Feria César López Jorge Osorio José Ramón Sánchez Yalía del Valle Ayimara Aymerich Marcelo Morales Iván Álvarez Osmany Odugredo Annia Ajojo Oscar Cruz Kirenia Legón Jenny Palenzuela Polina Martínez Logna Rodríguez María de las Nieves Omar Pérez Tony Armenteros Ismael González Castañer Norgé Espinosa Efrain Rodríguez S. Enrique Sainz Arturo Arango Virgilio Lopez Lemus Marilyn Roque Antonio Salvador Susana F. Castillo Tony Borrego Teresa Fornaris Néstor Cabrera Karel Léiva Valentin Garcia Pedro Páez Rolando Sánchez Mejía Pedro Marquez de Armas Carlos Augusto Alfonso Domingo Alfonso Georgina Herrera Pedro de Orta José A. Villaseca Ernesto Ladrón de Guevara Amílcar Ferrás Alberto Hernández Oscar Cruz Alejandro Ponce Alfredo Muñoz Jorge Alberto Aguilar Elena V. Molina Raúl Flores Lisabel Mónica Marco A. Díaz Milail Lavilla Ahnel Echevarría Oriando Luis Pardo Nalé Piñero Yordanka Almaguer Ana Lidia Vega Rilo Ramón Aroche Caridad Alencio Julio Miljans Pedro Mandiguita Liduimila Quincoces Alberto Sicilia Alito Caballero Alpidio Alonso Francis Sanchez Ronel González Luis Felipe Rojas Mahel H. Miranda Roberto Manzano Roberto Fiol Rita María Rodríguez Anán Arrufá Francisco Díaz Solar Ricardo Alberto Pérez Victor Fowler Sigfredo Ariel Soledad Ríos Francisco Morán Mestor Díaz de Villega Elvira Rodríguez del Puerto y Javier Bueργο Roberto Miquelí Juan Blanco Carlos Alberto Aguilera Cinecio Verdecia Wilay Míndez Luis Jiménez El Chaca Andrés Pérez X. Omar Pérez Sandra Rami Daniel Díaz Mantilla Rolando Steve Raydel Araoz Sálira y Mestizo Jimmy con Clase Masiel Extremo Papá Humberto Hermanos de Casa Anónimo Conajío Kiki Z Explosión Suprema Negro Oríolo Los Federales Las Krutas Amary Mergansa Iván Vasquez (Mongé) Lázaro Valdivia Místor Acordé Evelio Francia Erick Míndez Amary José Triana grupos Tierra Verde Sin Semilla Quantum Herencia Ala Décima DJ Ruso DJ Yoyan Arema Araga Félix Morales el rasta Carlos Alfonso Rodríguez Lázaro El Viejo Tania Bruguera El Roro (Mozambique) Christoph Bertrams (Alemania) Alberto Virella y Mamen (España) Clemente Padín (Uruguay) Patricia Satorra y Mikolaj Gorocki (Polonia) Lucrecia Goppaliti y Mauro Dagali (Italia) Guacari Gabriel (Brasil) Clara Gari y Silvia Serván (España) Ariel Brivo (Nicaragua) y Paula Brennard (Argentina) grupo Al Margen grupo Banderita (México) Sofía Acosta (México) Namú (EE.UU.) Queen Nzinga y Diego Mora (Afo - Costa Rica) Ragi Gibson y Denise Frazier y Anna West (EE.UU.) Billy Schelidrich (Inglaterra) Yuriria Almansa y Ana Bertha Garcia (México) Marcelo Siquera y Rodrigo Barbosa (Brasil) María Laurent (Francia) Jorge Bastero Roberto C. Franchy Yasser Castellanos Verónica Pérez Vega Alier González Minerva Romero Iris Ruiz Helen Cairo Nabella Loya Nadia Cárdenas Elena del Valle Dimitri Prieto Tagles Heredia Mely y Simone Yornel Martínez Mario Flores y Teatro Espontáneo Evelyn Quesada Nany y Aryan Chamán Flores Miro Vladimir Zámorea Andrés Mir y Esquife blogs El Palenque Tension Ila Bifronte Fogonero Emergenté Habana Elegante 33 y 173 The Revolution Evening Post Movimiento Extramuros Caimán Barbuco Cuba Encuentro Yoani Sánchez Reynaldo Escobar y Consenso María Elvira y los Pompones Roberto Salas y Gigantía Casa de la Poesía Casa de Cultura Alamar Galería Fayd Jemis Pabó Rigal y Nancy Mestique Luisa de la Uz René Ortega Raúl Ortega Ángel Ortega y Violeta Jon Curri Alberto Basabe David Escalona Carrillo Edwin Reyes Orisel Echevarría Yohanna Depestra Leonardo Guevara Jorge Pérez (Yoy) Oliver Reyes y Emma Adolfo Cabrera Raymundo Fernández Moya Nilo Julián González René Cervantes Roberto Merillo Raúl Cibaños Juan Carlos Flores Colectivos Unidos Voltus V (OMNI-ZONA FRANCA) Estudios Culturales de Nuestra América + Cátedra Haydée Santía María + Grupo de Descontaminación Mental + Proyecto Matraca Rodolfo Henríquez Víctor Muñoz Hilés Landrove Iba Pérez Miriam Real Carlos Alberto Berrier Arturo Ruiz (Tuto) Damián Valdés Daphne Porrata Modesto Caballero Balesy Rivero Dirkis Macía Amado El Pati Manolito Lewis el Chino Lourdes Pedro Irina Ovidio Gustavo Luis Elgjo Pérez Amary Pacheco Del Monte Natasha Sangarides (Inglaterra) Silvia Aubrey (Lituania) MJAFT (Albania) Goran (Servia) Mathew Brady (EE.UU.)



**“Estar atento a cada cosa basta”**  
Eliseo Diego

**“Aquí no hay vida para los mareao’s”**  
Orishas



**Jueves 4**  
**4:00PM APERTURA** Taller OMNI  
 Presentación especial de la revista de ediciones manufacturadas Vigía (Segunda selección poética autopresentada de OMNI-Z.F.)

**6:00 PM PUERTA 1** 8 Poetas  
 Antón Arrufat, Rolando Estévez, Enrique Sainz Leyman Pérez, Lina de Feria  
 Caridad Atención.  
**Sala Oscura:** Videos poemas: Dir. Gonzalo Vidal  
 Dir. Leonardo Guevara

**Sábado 6**  
**8:00 PM ELECTROSPOKEN** Casa de la Cultura  
 Espectáculo OMNI de Poesía - tecno - bandas - danza - dj - rap - performance - audiovisual.

**Martes 9**  
**5:00 PM PUERTA 2** Mujeres Taller OMNI  
 Lizabel Mónica, Naile Píñero, Eni Rabitero Polina Martínez, Yohanna Depestre.  
 Presentación de Revistas  
 33 1/3, The Revolution Evening Post, Desliz, Fogonero Emergente, Videncia.  
 Jorge Alberto Aguilar, Adriana Zamora, José Koser, Clemente Padín  
 Realización de Multimedia: Elena V. Molina.  
**Sala Oscura:** Videos poemas: Dir. Gonzalo Vidal  
 Ficción: La Escritura y el desastre.  
 Dir. Raydel Araoz.

**Jueves 11**  
**5:00 PM PUERTA 3:** Aires del País Taller OMNI  
 Liudmila Quincoses, Manuel González Busto, Katia Gutiérrez, Luis Felipe Rojas, Francis Sánchez, Cindy (YRA.), Aristides Vega Chapú Pedro Mendigutia, Roberto Manzano.  
**Sala Oscura:** Videos poemas: Dir. Gonzalo Vidal  
 Animación Digital: The beauty or the beast.  
 Dir. Yimit Ramirez.

**Sábado 13**  
**3:00 PM** Día Teatral: Nombrar las cosas  
 Taller OMNI - Galería Fayad Jamis:  
**Parte 1:** Teatro Infantil Salamandra.  
**PUERTA 4:**  
**5:00 PM** Presenta antología: "Un hombre de la clase muerta"  
 Espectáculo Poético de Juan Carlos Flores  
**Parte 2:** Narradores Orales, Mirta Portillo y Lucas Nápoles.  
 Entreacto de Laura de la Uz.  
 "Hagamos el sexo en paz", unipersonal de Teresa Sánchez.

**Martes 16**  
 Taller OMNI - Galería Fayad J.  
**PUERTA 5:** La Ruleta Rusa (Jóvenes Poetas)  
**11:00 AM** Parte 1  
 Audiovisuales de Poetas Cubanos,  
 Celebración de los doce años del Proyecto Esquife.  
**Parte 2**

Zurelis López, Oscar Cruz, Maikel García, Luis Amaury R., Israel Domínguez, Osmel Almaguer, Marienne Lufriú, Gaudencio Rodríguez, Daniel Díaz Mantilla, Amaury Pacheco, Isván Álvarez, Carlos Augusto Alfonso,  
 José Ramón Sánchez, Alejandro Ponce, Rafael Carballosa, Karel Leyva, Kirenia Legón, Amikar Tresold, Eduardo Santiesteban, Yordanka Almaguer, Legna Rodríguez, Luis Eligio, Marcelo Morales, Arturo Arango.

**Miércoles 17**  
**PEREGRINACIÓN POÉTICA**  
 Rotonda de la Ciudad Deportiva  
**10:00 AM** Programa de coordinación con la Asociación: 9na. Año del Performance-Peregrinación del Gatabato Por La Salud de la Poesía.  
 2da. Edición: Lecturas en la trayectoria.

**Sábado 20**  
**6:00 PM** Expo colectiva Galería Fayad J.  
 TRES DIMENSIONES Inauguración y performance.  
**7:00 PM PUERTA 6:** Poéticas del Rap y la Poesía  
 Rapers: Anónimo Consejo Obsesión Doble File David Escalona (D.E.C)  
 Poetas: Victor Fowler Tato Quinones Tony Borrego Ismael González Castañer  
 Celebración de los 10 años del libro "Mercados Verdaderos"

**Martes 23**  
**5:00 PM** Taller OMNI  
 Anunciación de la Revista de Poesía Del Proyecto Villena.  
**PUERTA: 5** "Poesía y trova"  
 Poetas: Mario Martínez Sobrino, Alpidio Alonso, Teresa Fornaris, Alilio Caballero, Norge Espinoza, María de Las Nieves, Waldo Leyva, Damaris Calderón, Ronel González.  
**Sala Oscura:** Videos poemas: Dir. Gonzalo Vidal  
 Doc.: Mister Acorde: moña pa' ti... Dir. Ladys Roque.  
 Trova: Fernando Bécquer, William Vivanco, Mister Acorde.

**Jueves 25**  
 Gran Feria Espiritual  
 Poesía y espiritualidad - Performance y ritualidad.  
**11:00 AM** (Transporte Parque Central)  
**11:30 AM a 5:00PM**  
 Espacio de prácticas espirituales (Boulevard)  
 Descontaminación Mental Teatro Espontáneo  
 Conferencias y videos espirituales Gigantería  
 Lecturas poéticas Grupo Escambray  
 Cátedra Haydee Santamaria (videos debate sobre zonas temporalmente autónomas)  
 Olga Rodríguez Colón: Libro poético del Tarot  
 Soleida Ríos: Grabar los sueños

**8:00 PM "Retablo de Máscaras"**  
**Sábado 27**  
**8:00 PM PUERTA ANCHA:** Taller OMNI  
 Cabaret Poético OMNI: "¡yuyuyuy, qué veo...!"  
 OMNI y sus invitados:  
 El Chaka, Rito Ramón, Ismael González, Andrés Pérez X, Hnos. de Causa, El Pedry & Romy Rojo (transformistas), Adrián Berzain, Ray Fernández, Arema Arega, Livio Conesa, Antonio Villasca Mago traga sombrilla.  
 Poeta slam Queen Nzings (Afo-Costaricense) y Udo Kawaser (Austria)

**Domingo 28**  
**5:00 PM** Día de los inocentes Taller OMNI  
**PUERTA 8:** Juan Carlos flores presenta a:  
 Reina Maria Rodriguez, Ricardo Alberto Pérez, Jesús David Curbelo, Soleida Ríos, Eirain R. Santana.  
**Sala Oscura:** Videos poemas: Dir. Gonzalo Vidal  
 Doc. Cubaperformance.  
 Dir. Elvira Rodríguez Puerto.

**Lunes 29**  
**9:00 PM** Fiesta OMNI  
 Terraza Casa de la Cultura  
 "aquí no hay vida para los mareao's"  
 Explosión Suprema y David Escalona  
 Poeta slam Queen Nzings (Afo-Costaricense) y Udo Kawaser (Austria)  
 Grupos de Reggae: Herencia y Sin semilla.

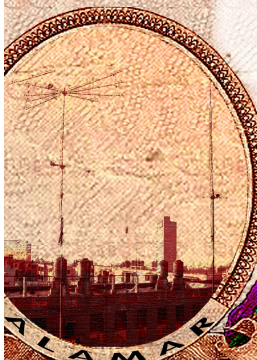
**Martes 30**  
**3:00 PM** Galería Abierta OMNI  
**FUERA DE CATALOGO:** Clausura en el Garaje  
 Muestra fotográfica y carteles de POESIA SIN FIN.  
 Reposición de Audiovisuales: Pinturas: Queen Nzings  
**6:00 PM** Descanso: Hnos. de Causa,  
 Explosión Suprema, Anónimo Consejo y Antonio Salvador  
**¡FELIZ FIN DE AÑO!**  
 La Programación de los miércoles 17 y 30 de diciembre es exclusivamente coordinación del grupo OMNI y los Consejos Populares. El Resto de los días son coordinados con la Galería Fayad Jamis y la Dirección Municipal de Cultura de Alamar.



# POESÍA SIN FIN 2009

## LA POESÍA SERÁ HECHA POR TODOS

### DEL 12 AL 30 DE DICIEMBRE



**D12** Electropoken:  
DJ, VI, rapers, poetas, músicos

**D14.22.29** Poetas de primera  
Lectura en Taller OMNI: Puertas.

**D17** Peregrinación Por la Salud de la Poesía.

**D11.19** Expos colectivas experimentales

**D19** Ring Poético:  
Descargas entre raperos y poetas

**D20** Día Teatral  
Espectáculos teatrales

**D13.23** Sala Oscura:  
cine en la ciudad

**D13.23** Poesía en la calle  
Lecturas en los barrios

**D25** Feria Espiritual  
Meditación y exhibición de Grupos espirituales

**D25** Fiesta de Máscara  
Disco, Pasarela y Premio

**D27** Cabaret OMNI  
Espectáculo de Cabaret para la poesía

**D15.24.28** Poetclub  
música, bar, encuentros libres

**D30** Fiesta Poética OMNI-EXPRESS: La Rueda  
Espectáculo poético-situacionista de concierto

**D14.18.21.23** A lo cubano  
Fiestas en el Barrio:

FRAGMENTOS A SU IMÁN

J. Lezama Lima

Telef: 765 3253

8678527

053301086

omnizonafraanca@gmail.com

www.omnipoesiasinfin.blogspot.com

**Título: Abuso de Confianza**

Año: Octubre del 2001.

Idea: colectiva, con una acción central de Luis Eligio Pérez que se integró a la idea colectiva.

Lugar: Barrio de San Lázaro, Ciudad de Cienfuegos.

Fotógrafo: Liván Hernández

Documentación existente: foto y video.

**Descripción:**

Esta acción sucedió a propósito del evento de artes plásticas Visuarte Internacional, en Cienfuegos. OMNI-ZONAFRANCA sacó al evento a la calle, lo llevó con esta acción al barrio marginal de San Lázaro, después de una previa investigación donde encontramos al líder cultural, religioso y civil de este barrio.. nos dijo que sus espíritus le dijeron que llegaríamos... la acción transcurrió en un puente que divide al barrio en dos, donde los de un lado no pueden cruzar al otro por cuestiones de violencia regional... allí realizamos esta acción donde un hombre elegantemente vestido grita: En las ciudades más felices el hombre no deja de morir con tristeza/ ningún sistema nos salva del horror de la ciudad/ sus manos lanzándonos de lo más alto a lo más bajo/ humanidad: a seca"

Luego este hombre va siendo degradado: le cortan el pelo, le quitan la ropa, lo apedrean, lo atan, y lo tiran en un contén... los presentes llegaron a creer que era una agresión real. Un grupo folklórico del barrio intervino en la acción canalizando el estado de violencia.



## **ATAJO: MOVIMIENTO DE MAQUINA**

Cuatro máquina de escribir imbuidas en narrar como el espacio está siendo habitado a través del signo sonoro, no hay hoja en blanco, solo el percusivo intento: mover masas de ruidos, fluctuantes masas que se espacian dejándose penetrar por el silencio, ese silencio extraño de **Cage**, alternativo entran otros signos, agua que cae de un recipiente a otro, sonidos campanas, repiqueteos aislados aportados por las máquinas, voces rítmicas, coros que refuerzan la masa sonora, la voz no es privilegiada solo es contexto, permite a las espirales de signos auto reproducirse en la improvisación, como cardúmenes en el espacio.

Definitivamente es una escritura a ocho manos con velocidades a contrapunto, pretendiendo alcanzar organizaciones rítmicas en un caos corporativo, que se apoyan en otros ritmos contemporáneos aportados por el bajo y la guitarra eléctrica.

Más tarde en la post data vuelven los chasquidos, puntos y galopes de los signos percutidos. Sintaxis de la ciudad que pregunta **Donde están todos** y esas voces ya solas con fondo de mínimos chasquidos agotándose hacia ese extraño silencio.

**DESCRIPCION TECNICA:** 4 máquinas escribir (mecánicas de diferentes marcas), recipientes con agua para producir sonidos mientras se verten y otros objetos para obtener sonidos de las máquinas a través de la interacción con ella, 4 instrumentista y sus voces, una mesa que funciona como bajo y soporte de instalación. Bajistas: Guitarra eléctrica, bajo eléctrico.

**REPRESENTANTE:** Amaury pacheco del monte,  
edificio: E-27 apart: 19, Zona 10 Alamar, municipio:  
Habana del Este

## **TÍTULO: Komunik ´ t**

Año: 2001

Idea: Colectiva, de una idea de Olver Reyes.

Lugar: Boulevard de Cienfuegos.

Fotografía: Liván Hernández.

Documentación existente: fotos y video.

### Descripción:

Esta acción sucedió en la ciudad de Cienfuegos, a propósito del *Visuarte Internacional*, evento de Artes Plásticas al que OMNI fue invitado. Aquí se conjuga otra vez el ritual: los mantras universales, la poesía, cantos religiosos africanos, todo para hacer un altar al Dios de la TV con ofrendas: dulces, frutas, flores, velas... al encenderse el altar, por el tv aparecen los propios habitantes del lugar hablando de la in-comunicación. Esta acción fue repetida en dos ocasiones en la 9na Bienal de la Habana 2006, teniendo como resultado dos videos documentales sobre las relaciones humanas y las dificultades de la vida en la ciudad de Alamar.

A propósito de esta acción en el catálogo del *Visuarte* se escribió con mucha justeza:

*“KomuniKT, del grupo interdisciplinario OMNI opera en espacios aislados del centro sociocultural con experiencias estético-comunicativas que marcan la forma en que el entorno está siendo habitado. OMNI utiliza el video para reproducir el contexto donde actúa la experiencia performática y socializar opiniones marginadas, dentro del sistema de circulación que legitima los discursos de poder. en la preferencia por espacios no convencionales, las actitudes performativas han hecho foco de atención en ciertos pasajes de la cultura underground, que explican la proyección sociológica y transdisciplinar, que es en muchos casos la condición performática. Sitios marginados han sido intervenidos en un intento de reconocimiento que parte de la investigación del medio y que participa de la estética de lo cotidiano y la cultura folk para no violentar los valores de autenticidad que se producen de manera vital en esos espacios. Los medios tecnológicos de comunicación son el soporte tecnológico para exhibir y jerarquizar zonas de silencio”.* Lic. Ana Mercedes Urrutia. Catálogo del VISUARTE Internacional.

**Título: Distintos modos de izarse**

Año: 2003.

Idea: Amaury Pacheco del Monte.

Lugar: Ciudad de Alamar.

Fotografía: Gonzalo Vidal.

Documentación existente: foto y video.

Descripción:

Esta acción sucedió por primera vez en la ciudad de Matanzas, a propósito de la segunda jornada de teatro callejero, donde Amaury se ahorcó al amanecer del puente más alto y de más tránsito de la ciudad. Fue un escándalo total. Solamente una vez antes en esa ciudad había amanecido un hombre ahorcado en un parque y esto era de fama.

Aquí Amaury se ahorcó de un árbol al que forró de desechos industriales de consumo, y luego se colgó: el hombre generador de desecho, el hombre como desecho.

Esta acción sucedió como propuesta durante la 8va bienal de La Habana. El ministro de cultura miró desde la terraza de la casa de cultura, pero dio media vuelta y se fue.

La acción se volvió a repetir durante las funciones de Circo que Juan Rivero organizó en la plaza África de Alamar, con artistas del performance cubanos y estado unidenses.

En el circo la soga se partió y Amaury calló estrepitosamente. Esta acción es recurrente de una idea que llama la atención del sacrificio y la penitencia constante del individuo en Cuba.

## **Título: El Equilibrista**

Año: 2001.

Idea: Luis Eligio Pérez M. Cafria.

Lugar: Ciudad Alamar.

Fotografía: Carlos Besteiro y Silvia Serván.

Documentación existente: Fotos.

### Descripción:

Esta acción sucede en un año de efervescencia performática y creativa en general. Es el año en que el Performance se impone en las calles de Alamar e incluso se establece la idea de OMNI-ZF como un grupo performático, por su participación en eventos nacionales de poesía y artes plásticas y Hiphop. Desde lo individual comienza a verse una distinción que propicia variedad, y en lo colectivo comienza a consolidarse la unión en un solo cuerpo de lo que hasta principio de este año fueron dos grupos. El apoyo colectivo a las acciones individuales, y el aporte de la creatividad individual a las acciones colectivas fortalecen definitivamente a OMNI-ZF como un grupo performático.

El Equilibrista se realizó en apoyo al Festival de Hiphop creado por Grupouno. Este año en el festival los Miembros de OMNI se pintaron una lágrima en el rostro, porque la dirección de la Asociación Hermanos Saiz le había quitado arbitrariamente y sin derecho el evento a su creador Rodolfo Rensolis y a Grupouno. La acción consistió en trasladarse desde la Galería Fayad Jamís hasta el paso de un doce Plantas sin ojos, todo de gris, y aquí en el paso instalamos una cama gris, a cada lado los poemas del Equilibrista de Raúl Hernández Novás, el gran poeta cubano que se suicidó en 1993. sobre la cama, como en los poemas, colgaban hilos, sobre los hilos una mesa con un plato de Spaguetis y una cerveza, y sobre la cabeza del durmiente un proyectil.

La acción duró dos días. La policía lo interrumpió en dos ocasiones. En la primera protestamos diciendo que esta acción se hacía con el consentimiento del consejo de vecinos y que la policía tenía que respetar la voluntad de la mayoría pues estaba para velar por

la tranquilidad ciudadana. Pero la segunda vez fue muy violento, lo rompieron todo espectacularmente, nos esposaron, y estuvimos detenidos durante muchas horas. Un miembro del partido decía que esto era contrarrevolución. El director municipal de cultura tuvo que dar explicaciones en la policía, sin saber que decir. Fue el comienzo de una relación OMNI-acción en la calle-instituciones oficiales de cultura- autoridades del orden-gobierno o partido municipal. Todos en función de las acciones públicas en las calles de Alamar.

**Título: Estados de Guerra**

Año: 2003.

Idea: Luis Eligio Pérez, Amaury Pacheco.

Lugar: Romerías de Mayo, ciudad de Holguín.

Fotografía: Gonzalo Vidal.

Documentación existente: fotos.

**Descripción:**

Esta fue nuestra lectura Poética Performática oficial en las Romerías de Mayo, evento al que fue invitado en el 2003. Se modificó el espacio, se hizo una escenografía, e igual se transformaron en sus apariencias para hablar de los Estados de Guerra invisibles que viven los cubanos en este tiempo. El primer libro de Luis Eligio se titula así: Estados de Guerra. Esta lectura estuvo precedida de un escandaloso performance por el cual los funcionarios se predispusieron, y durante la lectura un hombre los miraba muy serio y de modo analítico, y todos decían que era de la seguridad del estado que venía controlar lo que se decía.

Esta lectura combinó muy bien la ritualidad, teatralidad, experimentación sonora, veracidad al proyectar el poema, y le ganó que todos los artistas del Teatro unido de Holguín los invitaran un conversatorio en su sede.

Y junto a otras acciones les ganó la popularidad de la población. De todos modos OMNI-ZF intentó volver a la Romería en otras ocasiones y siempre los organizadores los rechazaron bajo alguna justificación, como que: no repetimos artistas.

## **FANTASMAS CÍVICOS( "Aquí lo mejor es hablar con el diafragma)**

Luis Eligio P. M. Cafria

Tiempo: 20 minutos en movimiento.

Espacio: cerrado

Acción: cerrada.

### Fundamento

El poder interior- decir, intervenir- en la realidad de la institución que en el corazón somos. Desde aquí debería expresarse todo ser ciudadano: una cívica cósmica. Porque la ley y el derecho en el terreno están doblados, hechos tabla: código polilla en cada mente y la razón nace hueca. Desde arriba dictan y los copistas son mayoría: el P( Pensar, Poder, Propio) desclasificado, en desuso.

"... aquí lo mejor es hablar con el diafragma", sugiere un lagarto, blanco, casi transparente<sup>530</sup>.

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<sup>530</sup>Discurso en movimiento rápido

El poder para intervenir, para decir lo que sale de tu alma,  
de tu conciencia, con paciencia, porque el miedo teje sobre  
tu mente como araña

te raya

la inteligencia

y te convierte en un fantasma:

fantasma cívico

todos somos fantasmas cívicos

y si quieres liberarte y encontrarte con tu alma, aquí lo  
mejor es hablar con el diafragma:

diafragma diafragmático programático de la liberación.

Aquí lo mejor es que te enfrentes a tu mente

retenida

retraída

reducida

al silencio

aquí lo mejor es hablar con el diafragma.

Diafragma antidogmático

diafragma vitamínico

del antirracismo

antimosquito chiquitico en tu conciencia

enferma

-realidad- que te esclaviza y te consume

y tú presumes ser libre e inteligente intelectual pero el  
miedo teje sobre tu mente como araña

te raya

la inteligencia

## Breve descripción de la acción

Un círculo blanco en el centro . Dos seres fantasmales avanzan despacio hacia el círculo. Llegan. Uno se detiene, el otro avanza hacia el otro lado del círculo. Mueren lentamente, renacen lentamente a un mismo tiempo. Avanzan, muy lentos, alrededor del círculo. Buscan un paso, un modo de avanzar. El modo es un descubrimiento, en el espacio, de las energías del círculo, sus velocidades. Avanzan rápidos, girando sobre si mismos, rectos, sigilosos. Gritan: "... aquí lo mejor es hablar con el diafragma". Cada grito es una afirmación de lo que se experimenta en este ejercicio ritual de fantasmas cívicos que mueven un dato donde la realidad cambia y pudieran ser reconocidos en el que pasa.

Hay un tercero: es un arcángel. Entra al centro del círculo. Interfiere los giros, lo interfieren. Es un acto de rompimiento: líquido celestial vertido en círculo: fuego: la llama corre, corre (avanzan avanzan) y es atrapada dentro de una botella. Tiempo congelado, en espera de una nueva condición que despierte un nuevo Tiempo.

### Actuantes

Luis Eligio P. M. Cafria

Julio Efrend de la Hoz

Amaury Pacheco Delmonte



**Título: Festivales de Rap**

Años: 2000, 2001, 2002.

Fotógrafos:

Luis Eligio Pérez

Jorge Carlos Acevedo.

Tagles Heredia Lemus.

Descripción:

El grupo OMNI-ZF. Participa en los doblemente desaparecidos festivales de rap desde 1998.

Diseñando y esculpiendo la estatuilla que se entregaba como premio.

Participando en el graffiti en el escenario y en todo el anfiteatro.

Usando el cuerpo como objeto de arte para el graffiti. Instalando esculturas ambientales con soldadura eléctrica durante los conciertos, creando un ambiente espectacular.

Los poetas de ZONAFRANCA fueron los primeros en subir a un escenario de Hiphop.

OMNI-ZONAFRANCA aporta conscientemente el Performance al Hiphop. Porque inconscientemente muchos grupos de rap poseen una alta performatividad.

Sostiene el espíritu contestatario y de protesta en los simposios y en el escenario de Alamar aun cuando ya le habían usurpado el Festival a Grupouno y a los raperos.

OMNI-ZONAFRANCA participa silenciosamente de la creación de diferentes espacios para el Hiphop en la ciudad, y es vanguardia en la proyección del Graffiti, un elemento importante para la cultura Hiphop.

**Título: Pan Con Poeta**

Año: 2003.

Idea: Olver Reyes.

Actuantes: Olver Reyes, Luis Eligio.

Lugar: Ciudad de Alamar.

Nació el mercado del hombre,  
El hombre del mercado.  
Hombre y mercado por doquier con precios altísimos  
El hombre como lobo del hombre:  
Una idea vendible  
El mercado del arte, y luego, las derivaciones  
El espectador como consumidor, compre, compre:  
Un concepto  
Compre usted los semitonos del transeúnte tropical.  
El León? Retazos de cordero  
Sujeto-Objeto (lo que soy no es lo que no soy)  
Un mostrador, fronteras, un pregón.....  
Y los corderos quedaremos en silencio

Nada nuevo. Respuestas viejas a un viejo problema.  
Mediante una manipulación del sentido de percepción conceptual-sensorial del espectador intento dar una respuesta conscientemente ambigua al hecho del mercado. Un rechazo de la conversión de la cultura en mercancía y al mismo tiempo una parte, un agente, un sujeto de esa conversión.

Valiéndome de una situación límite trato de poner al espectador ante la posibilidad real del hecho de la antropofagia cotidiana o mejor aun, trato de poner en entredicho que ese hecho es un límite hace tiempo trascendido. En otras palabras, lo que vemos como una situación límite para el acercamiento a la idea de una existencia verdadera, no escindida, es un hecho consumado, no ha llevado a nadie a darse como aludido y aunque "el otro es un lugar adonde puedo ir". Este lugar se vuelve cada vez mas remoto y el arte esta ahí para acercarlo, en tanto experiencia comunicacional.

Que viva la hipocresíaiiiiiiiiii

**Descripción:**

Usando latex, silicona, aceites y pigmentos, maquillar el cuerpo de Luis Eligio Pérez (Poeta joven) a modo de carne asada. Así maquillado y servido en una gran bandeja o parrilla y acompañado de vegetales, viandas y arroz será expuesto en la parrillada del boulevard de Alamar. Se usará carne de cerdo (nótese animal inmundo), así como su grasa para atraer mediante el olor que desprende al ser cocinada, a los espectadores y potenciales consumidores de porciones de pan con poeta, por las que deberán pagar.

El olor, el color, la forma, el espacio, ayudados por el pregón estarán dados a incentivar el deseo de consumo de la obra que se propone. Las porciones de pan con poeta serán envueltas con copias de poemas de Luis Eligio, que servirán a la vez de servilletas. La obra será interactiva, en tanto los espectadores se animen a convertirse en consumidores.

Esta acción inaugura Galería Abierta en la 8va Bienal de La Habana. Simulando una venta similar a la de pan con carne de cerdo, se lee en voz alta poesía, y quien gusta la compra como envoltura de un pan con carne del poeta. Esta es una acción de alto realismo: muchos de los presentes se preguntan durante toda la acción si es real o es ficticio. La acción se realizó en tres ocasiones en espacios públicos (en una ocasión inauguró la feria del Proyecto Circo de Juan Rivero). Siempre es sorprendente para los presentes y transeúntes. Siguiendo el sentido de la antropofagia según creencias africanas, donde alguien muere y se comen alguna parte de su cuerpo para heredar sus dones y sus virtudes.

## **PRESENTACIÓN GRAFFITI**

OMNI-ZONAFRANCA comenzó participando en los graffiti que se hicieron sobre el escenario del anfiteatro de Alamar durante el 5to Festival Nacional de Hiphop Cubano, que dirigía Grupouno. Es en este festival donde por primera ocasión los cubanos despiertan a una conciencia y por consiguiente a un conocimiento del Graffiti. Después lo sacaron del escenario, interviniendo todas las paredes y muros interiores del anfiteatro. Luego lo sacaron hacia la fachada, a la acera, y después a la ciudad: garajes, edificios, paradas de ómnibus, puentes, calles. A OMNI-ZF le interesa el graffiti no tanto desde sus aspectos estéticos: letras en movimientos, el regodeo de líneas y colores en función de esto. Le interesa más desde lo ético, el graffiti como intervención pública, como posibilidad de libre expresión, de transmitir mensajes a la comunidad, de llamar la atención sobre zonas de silencio, sobre las posibilidades espirituales de la realidad social. Le interesa intervenir del mismo modo que la gobernatura o la gente en los barrios marginales lo hace: sin autorización. Aunque también con ella, pero una autorización basada en la legitimidad que da el obrar con auto responsabilidad y con un criterio propio y un diálogo propositivo con el entorno.



## **PROJECT POETRY WITHOUT END 2010**

**“...to celebrate, with great enthusiasm, the new edition of the Festival Poetry without End, because it is a unique event in the present poetic scenario of Cuba...”**

**Roberto Manzano  
(Master in Poetry in Cuba)**

**12<sup>th</sup> Internacional Poetic Festival *Poetry without End* (1999-2010)**

### **SYNOPSIS:**

**Festival of Poetry organized by Group OMNI-ZONAFRANCA, in the city of Alamar, in the eastern part of the capital city Havana, where all types of arts get interconnected around Poetry. There are shows, concerts, experimental presentations, poetry readings, lectures, exhibitions, and audiovisuals.**

**This year, the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the festival will take place with the participation of some of the best artists and writers from all Cuba and other countries who relate with us through their cultural embassies in Cuba. Excellent artistic directors and producers of emergent art are part of the staff of the festival. We are counting on an audience of up to 10 thousand people since the festival will be extended to the neighborhoods and other spaces that are artistically active in the capital city. Many events will take place simultaneously.**

**We have accumulated a long experience of satisfactory collaboration with international institutions.**

Poetry without End follows the tradition of winter festivals and is very connected to the sacred celebrations of December. The Festival is a poetic ship that carries the cheerfulness and aspirations of the city to save port from one year to another. It is a festival associated to revival and connected to the forces of nature, the Sun Light that brings balance and poetic integration to the World.

Poetry without End is a proposal that aims at excellence in form and content and in the experience of the human encounter with poetry beyond the written poem: poetry perceived as every act of creation that leads to the art of living in freedom.

It is an event based on experimental shows having poetry as its centre in connection with all other types of arts.

It has been taking place every December since 1999 in the peripheral city of Alamar: the city of “the new man” built by Cuban socialist regime in the eastern part of the capital city of Cuba.

Well known Cuban scholars, poets, musicians and artists participate in the event as well as art activists from different parts of the world, forefront rappers, amateur artists and hundreds of people from the community of Alamar and the capital city.

The festival is a party to which the community of Alamar looks forward every year and it constitutes a reference for art in Cuba.

In every edition, a poetry line selected from the work of a universal poet is used as slogan and inspiration for the festival.

**Título: Terra XXXIV**

Año: 2003.

Idea: Luis Eligio Pérez.

Lugar: Ciudad de Alamar, Habana del Este.

Fotografía: Gonzalo Vidal.

Documentación existente: foto y video.

**Descripción:**

Esta acción fue inspirada a raíz de los acontecimientos del atentado contra las torres gemelas. Se enlazan por extensión: bloques de concreto en Nueva York, muerte; tierra en medio de bloques de concreto en Alamar, vida.

Por esos días Luis Eligio lee a Pessoa y le vino la idea. 2 años después escoge esta acción, necesariamente colectiva, para inaugurar el evento Viernes del Performance. Este es el evento oficial que acoge la unidad declarada OMNI-ZONAFRANCA en este año 2003. Hasta este año OMNI era un grupo y ZONAFRANCA otro. Pero ya en este año la realidad era que funcionaban como uno solo, y es entonces la decisión de asumir esta realidad en el nombre y en la organización interna y en la proyección externa.

Para realizar Terra XXXIV se convocó a la comunidad de Alamar. 21 personas intervinieron, incluyendo dos niños.

OMNI diseñó todo el proceso del performance dándole una belleza superior. Se hicieron talleres previos con los participantes. Se grabaron a tres voces los poemas de Fernando Pessoa que un DJ los mezclaba durante toda la acción.

Después de embadurnar los cuerpos unos a otros con tierra, cubrieron todo el círculo dibujado en la plaza, y tras varios rituales se acostaron en el interior del círculo haciendo mantras. Entonces llovió durante dos horas, con un frío que partía los huesos. Muchos de los que presenciaron la acción se quedaron bajo la lluvia en solidaridad.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **I. VIDEOS**

1. ASCHISSH!!!!.(2005), CD *Alamar Express (Generación OMNI)*

Interpretes: David Escalona, Amaury Pacheco, Luis Eligio Pérez.  
Realización: Jorge Pérez (Yoyi), David Escalona. (6:29)

2. CLARA/POEMA JAZZ (2005), CD *Alamar Express (Generación OMNI)*

Interpretes: Luis Eligio Pérez, Amaury Pacheco, David Escalona.  
Realización: Jorge Pérez (Yoyi), Lucrezia Cippitelli (4:12)

3. LA CALLE O HAY QUE LUCHAR (2006)

Interpretes: Amaury Pacheco, David Escalona, Luis Eligio Pérez, René Cervantes. Realización: Jorge Pérez (Yoyi). (20:00)

4. TODO INCLUIDO (2006)

Interprete/poesía: Juan Carlos Flores. Plástica/diseño: Adolfo Cabrera Pérez (Fito). Guion/edición: Jorge Pérez (Yoyi). (12:00)

### **II. GRAFFITI**

PHOTOS OF OMNI GRAFFITI WORKS