

TO AND
FROM
UTOPIA
IN THE
NEW
CUBAN
ART

Rachel Weiss

Ángel Delgado, *Caridad del cobre*, 1990. Colored pencil, cold cream on handkerchief; 46 x 42 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The exodus and Special Period had been blows against the body of collectivism and solidarity. Bruguera, who straddled the two moments of *Volumen Uno* and the baseball game, felt the loss with particular force, and her 1993–94 project *Memoria de la postguerra* had the utopian ambition of bringing the dispersed, broken body of the new Cuban art back into a totality—not only among those in Havana but rejoining them with those who had left, no matter how provisional and fragile that reunion might be. With *Memoria*, it became clear that the collective was as much a figure of mourning as of generation.



Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la postguerra I* (Memory of the postwar I), 1993. Editing of a newspaper: collaboration with Cuban artists living in and outside Cuba. Black ink, newsprint; 13.4 x 8.4 inches. Copyright Tania Bruguera. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Tania Bruguera.

Strategically, and sarcastically, Bruguera produced *Memoria de la postguerra* as an underground newspaper that collected work from across the diaspora, and its unpublishable compendium concluded with a list of 106 Cuban artists who had left.¹¹⁴ *Memoria* embodied the camaraderie—protective, jumpy, benighted, and blasphemous as ever—of the new, chastened present. But for all of Bruguera’s mournful introductory tone (“‘Postwar,’ for its resemblance to the physical condition of the city, the interior state of the people, the social nature of art,” read the front-page editorial), the paper was marked by a strange mixture of torment and silliness. With its ambiguous logo (the lettering either the work of a rushed street graffitist or else a victim’s last words, dripping in blood), mock promotional campaigns (matching plastic ashtrays), articles with a dubiously journalistic gloss and news from the front, *Memoria* was a difficult work to parse, roving among

LAS AVENTURAS DE

INTERNACIONALES



VEALO PROXIMAMENTE:

*LA GRAN TEORIA *EL TEXTO : UNIDAD INDESTRUCTIBLE !
 *LA BRIGADA DEL INTELLECTO CONTRA LA LITERATURA BARATA
 *TESTIMONIO GRAFICO DE LA "B.I." *LA "BRIGADA DEL INTELLECTO" ANTE LA CORTE SUPREMA DEL ABSOLUTO

AL CIERRE

DE FRENTE Y LUCHANDO

La Habana, Octubre 19, 1993. La guerra ha terminado. Luego de un tiempo todavía indeterminado, impreciso, perdido en la noche de los tiempos (sic), el hombre vuelve a enfrentar su propio destino, a tomar las riendas de una vida que parecía no pertenecerle. Agotado, fatigado, aún al decir sus primeras palabras en tiempo de paz, (mutilado) muestra un rostro empujado, feliz, oráculo, con cierto aire optimista y decidido a reparar las heridas de una contienda en la que (palabra ininteligible) varias generaciones de hermanos, amigos. Nada pudo empujar la mirada con la que hoy sale a caminar por entre las ruinas de una ciudad que amó y que no se oía que (mutilado) del soñador impetuoso, el utópico a plazos, el idealista sin fronteras.

Ahí está, pueden verlo en cualquier esquina del barrio, sentado en muros y contones, en las azoteas de oficinas o dejándose abrazar por un sol reactivante y único en este lado del mundo.

La guerra ha terminado. Nada es igual, nada puede ser otra vez lo que fue, lo que hubiera querido ser. Sin embargo y como prueba de la existencia del Hombre sobre la tierra, por doquiera asoma humilde, inabarcable, la Semilla de la creación, probablemente la sola y tenaz sobreviviente del (palabra ininteligible). Bajo los escombros se le puede ver palpitando. En el humo que despiden las últimas paredes ardiendo, calles caídas, se ve frágil, vivo, coqueteo, el espíritu de la Cultura. Testigo excepcional de su tiempo (sic.) el Arte manuevo en pie a miles de hombres y mujeres en los críticos momentos que enfrentaron: ni el hombre producto del censo, ni el aislamiento a que se vieron sometidas comunidades enteras, tornaron la fe y la esperanza en el color, las texturas, las palabras y los sonidos, en las formas que emergían en la profundidad de la noche más larga.

Como prueba de ello se le puede ver hoy, mañana, pasado, estallando en obras realizadas por amantes de la vida, en profesionales que no se rindieron (mutilado) de los tormentosos momentos vividos.

Montones de hombres, mujeres, niños, acuden a los espacios nuevos abiertos ya sea, fábricas destruidas, galpones semi-estructurados, escuelas a medio uso, para palpar, tocar de cerca, con las mismas manos (sic.) de acariciar y amar, el arte vivo, el arte que no se rindió, el arte (tachado en el original).

La guerra ha terminado. Un aire fresco sopla desde el mar amarrando los muros, colores, la humedad y el polvo. Empezan a aparecer signos de una nueva vida, aún con los escasos recursos con que cuentan los creadores. A fuerza de imaginación y tesoro, los artistas rescatan la voluntad del hombre y luchan por una nueva oportunidad para (mutilado) instalaciones, esculturas, dibujos, poemas, canciones, bailes, sonidos.

El Paralelo no fue derrotado, está aquí, dicen burlosamente algunos. Otros afirman que "nada se ha perdido, todo fue materia y esa se reemplaza por otra..." frente al honor cotidiano, la imagen y posibilidad (interumpido).

Nelson Herrera Ysla



Memoria de la Poesía presentada la intensa actividad editorial desarrollada por nuestros amigos en el último tiempo (1990-1993). A continuación se muestra una selección según estos procedimientos sugeridos a nuestra selección hasta la fecha en el curso de la presente edición.

Joaquín ANGELA, pintor	Venezuela
Guillermo ACOSTA, pintor	España
Agustín ACURUPA, escritor	México
Angel AZARÉ, grabador	Colombia
Esteban AZCÓN, pintor	México
Fernand AZOLU, diseñador	México
Juan Pablo BALLESTER, pintor	España
José BEGA, pintor, vitrales	Estados Unidos
Fernando BELLÓN, pintor, vitrales	España
Diego BLANCO, pintor	Estados Unidos
Antonio BURRO, pintor, vitrales	España
Luis CABRERA, grabador	Estados Unidos
María Magdalena CAMPOS, pintora	Estados Unidos
José CANAL, fotógrafo	Estados Unidos
Óscar CARRILLO, grabador	República Dominicana
Walter CARRONIA, pintor	Puerto Rico
Alberto José CARIC, pintor	Estados Unidos
Concepción CASTAÑEDA, pintora	Estados Unidos
Alfonso CASTRO, pintor	Ecuador
Emilio CASTRO, grabador, vitrales	Francia
Raúl CORRAL COPPALES, fotógrafo	México
Carlos Alberto ORLIZ, vitrales	México
Alfonso CUENCA, pintor	Estados Unidos
Ana Alejandra DELGADO, pintora	Estados Unidos
Mario DÍAZ, fotógrafo	México
Miguel DÍAZ, pintor	España
Antonio ERIZ, pintor, grabador	Estados Unidos
Teresa ESCOBAR, pintor, vitrales	Estados Unidos
Pedro FLORENCIA, pintor	Brasil
Miguel FRAILE, pintor	Francia
Manuel GARCÍA FLORES, diseñador	España
José FORÉ, fotógrafo	Venezuela
José FERRAZ, pintor	República Dominicana
Fernando GARCÍA, pintor, vitrales	Estados Unidos
Carlos GARCÍA DE LA MUZZ, pintor	México
María GARCÍA JOTA, fotógrafo, manuscritos	Estados Unidos
Juan Carlos GARCÍA, pintor	Argentina
Karla GARCÍA FAXAT, fotógrafo	México
Emilio GARCÍA PENA, pintor	México
Franco GARCÍA, pintor	Colombia
Juan GARCÉS BIRAS, pintor	España
Fernando GELABERT BOTO, escritor	Estados Unidos
Carlos GONZÁLEZ, escritor	Venezuela
Adela GONZÁLEZ HERNÁNDEZ, escritora	Estados Unidos
Selma GONZÁLEZ, pintor, vitrales	Venezuela
Alfredo GONZÁLEZ HORTIGARRO, diseñador	México
Guillermo HERNÁNDEZ, pintor	Estados Unidos
Alfonso HERNÁNDEZ, escritor	Venezuela
Amelia GILLES, pintor	Brasil
Madeline GONZALEZ, profesora, vitrales	México
Fernando GONZÁLEZ LARREA, pintor	México
Diego LEON, escritor	España
Israel LEON, pintor	México
Fernand LEON, pintor, vitrales	Estados Unidos
Ricardo LOPEZ MARTÍ FORÉ, fotógrafo	Estados Unidos
Miguel LOPEZ, pintor	México
Carlos LUNA, pintor	México
Joaquín MAGO HOLLAND, esculturas	España
Alfonso MENEZES, pintor	España
Alfonso MENEZES LOPEZ, pintor	España
Bernabé MORAÑA, grabador, pintor	México
Heriberto MORA, pintor	España
Alberto MORALES (JAMBE), humorista	España
Nelson MORENO, pintor	México
Esteban MURILLO SACHS, diseñador	México
Esteban MURILLO OCHOA, fotógrafo	México
Diego NOVIA, pintor	México
José de la MUZZ, vitrales	España
Osvaldo OCHOA, performer	México
Raimundo ORTEGA, grabador	España
David PALACIOS, diseñador	Venezuela
Jorge PANTOJA, pintor	España
Henry PALLET, grabador	México
Ulmarito PEÑA, pintor, diseñador	México
Adrián PÉREZ HERRERA, pintor	España
Antonio PÉREZ PÉREZ, diseñador	México
Osvaldo PÉREZ, fotógrafo	Venezuela
Guillermo PÉREZ MONZÓN, pintor	México
Marta M ^o PÉREZ, fotógrafo	Colombia
Segundo PLANES, pintor	México
Esteban POLJUAN, pintor	México
Luisiana PORRATA, grabadora, vitrales	Estados Unidos
José Luis POZADA, grabador, vitrales	España
Pablo QUERÉ, grabador	Venezuela
Ciro QUIRYANA, pintor	Estados Unidos
Rigoberto QUINTERO	México
Carlos RAFAEL, escritor	México
Bernabé RAMOS, grabador	México
Angel Ricardo ROLD, pintor	México
Ricardo RODRÍGUEZ BRICE, pintor	Billiray
Raúl RODRÍGUEZ BUCKENCA	Estados Unidos
José Luis RODRÍGUEZ, vitrales	México
Carlos RODRÍGUEZ CARRERA, pintor	Estados Unidos
Diego ROLDAN, pintor, vitrales	México
Osvaldo SANCHEZ, pintor	México
Walter SAABER, pintor	México
Tamara SANCHEZ, pintor	Estados Unidos
Carlos DEL SOL, pintor	Estados Unidos
Alfonso SORIANO, escritor	México
Leandro SOTO, pintor	México
Rubén TORRES LLOFRA, pintor	Estados Unidos
Luis Miguel VALDES, grabador	México
Nelson VILLALBA, pintor	España
Isaura VILLALBA, pintora	Estados Unidos
Pedro VIZCARRA, pintor	Estados Unidos

Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la postguerra I*, 1993. Black ink, newsprint; 13.4 x 8.4 inches. Copyright Tania Bruguera. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Tania Bruguera.

mourning and malice, anguish, and disdain. Ceballos caught the mood with her *Psychiatric Exam of a Post-War Artist*, diagnosing "a noteworthy collapse of the upper cranial area" because of "an excess of cognitive information. Long period exhibited at work on theoretical works and forced concepts," and prescribing "five or six months of rest in the Swiss Alps, or in Cayo Largo" as the cure.

The war was over, and *Memoria* was at the press conference, held at "the Center for the Salvation of Plastic Arts, in the capital." A painter confirmed the rumors, Rafael López Ramos reported, "although an armistice has not been signed."

Among these photostatic documents was not lacking an image of the members of the distinguished Ditch Diggers and the Laboratory of Anthropological Armaments working in the eastern village of Pílon, nor of the members of the Section of Projects of Social-Military Insertion, who today have bases in some city in Venezuela or travel ubiquitously around various countries in Latin America.

Asked by this reporter about the possibility of a rejoining of forces by the army known in bygone days as *Young Art*, he responded with a laconic "No comment. . . ."

The question that the artist could not answer precisely was the one regarding the exchange of prisoners and the repatriation of war refugees who remain for the most part in camps supervised by the UN in Mexico and the US. Nonetheless, he announced that the matter would be discussed in a meeting attended by both parties at the Prado Museum, neutral territory offered by the Spanish Ministry of Culture.¹¹⁵

Memoria de la postguerra was proof: solid, concrete proof of everything that was in danger of evanescing. And, with that squarely on the table, it kept returning to the question, What next? Rejoining forces? "I do not know to what extent or with what views the ranks will again restructure themselves," Bruguera wrote. "A new army advances, along with the survivors, with the given lessons of history, exhausted and alert in other areas, all youth grown violently old. And the latent need, awaiting, again dressed as a bride at the gates of legitimacy still with transcendental hardships. . . . Will we again wait another decade for the forge? Will we again stay by the side of the road, maimed and resigned? Will we again hope to believe ourselves the center of the world at the wrong moment? Do we have enough time left? These are the fifteen minutes that again have been our lot."¹¹⁶

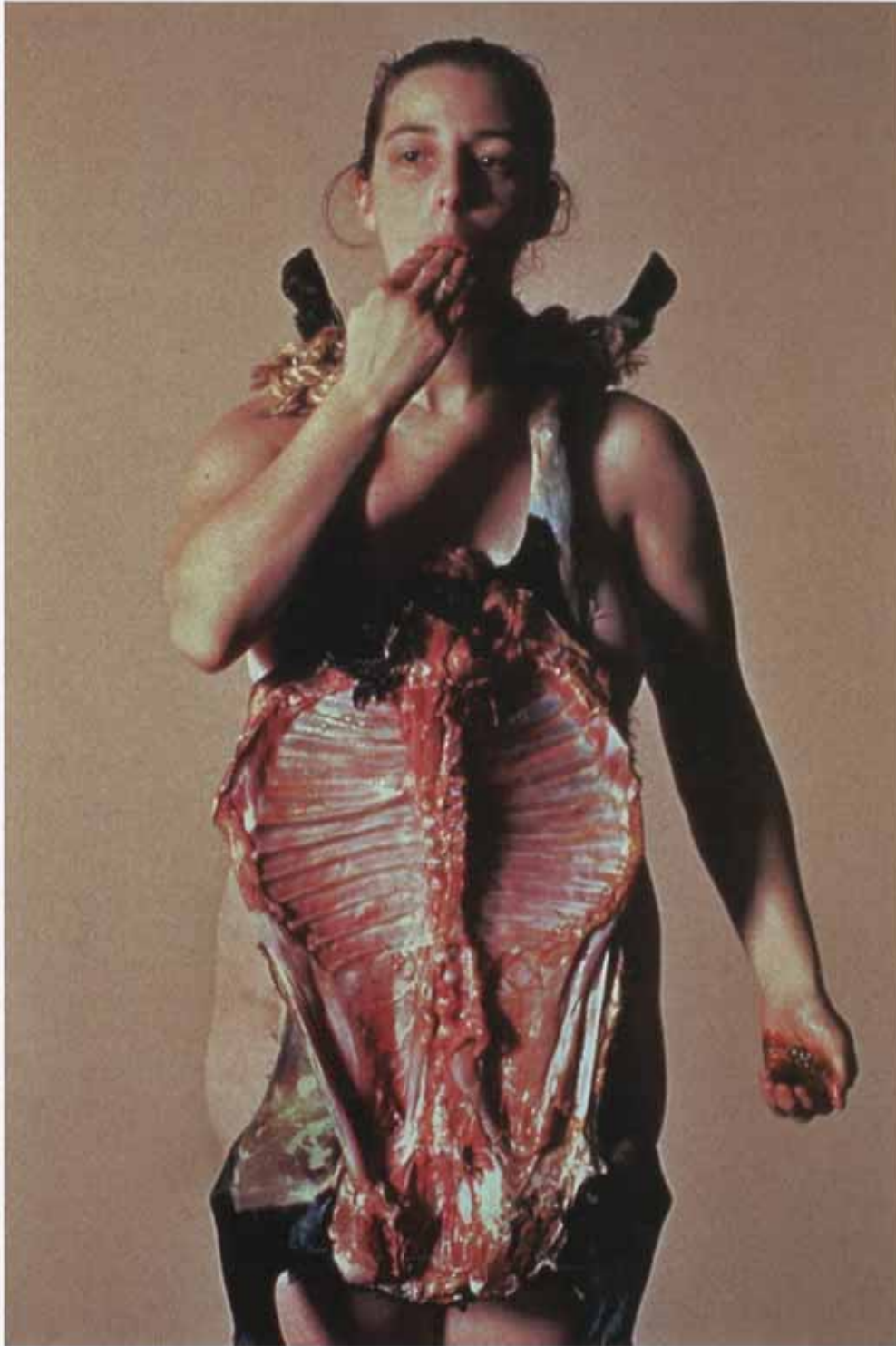
The first issue of *Memoria* came out in November 1993, in the depths of the Special Period. The second issue was published in June 1994, if anything an

even worse moment. It hit a nerve: its compendium of bitterness, nostalgia, and mockery revolving, more or less, around the theme of migration (including a snapshot of two jubilant *balseros*) was apparently too much. The paper was censored before it could be distributed, its editorial team was subjected to threats and intimidation (one of them was detained), and that was the end of it.¹¹⁷ The work had succeeded in the eternal artistic goal of exceeding its own limits: it had “entered the larger society, not as an artwork but as an event,” and that had been its downfall.¹¹⁸

Bruguera stopped working for some time after that, and when she resumed it was in a changed voice. “I felt I had compromised, and at the same time I worried about how one continues to make work under such circumstances. Do I bend to their demands, or do I do my own work?”¹¹⁹ She shifted to solo performance, transforming her body into the suggestive site of suffering at which the political was lived and the generalities of society became concrete. Bruguera treated live performance as a possible escape from the typical representational status of a work of art and, therefore, a potential route back to the everyday, a reconnection with a Cuba beyond the new cultural cottage industries. Paradoxically, although performance offered “the immediacy of the need, the intensity of life, and the freedom of the ephemeral,” her embodiment of the form led to a brooding, bruised, and cloistered work.¹²⁰ The new Cuban art of the 1980s was a forceful referent in the 1990s, present in—because of—its absence, present as both dirge and insistence. It was an impossible and contradictory legacy, something to reject and to recapture, an anguishing loss and a failure better left in the past.

Bruguera was another of Elso’s students, and she bore his imprint deeply. Returning to the idea of human flight that her teacher had identified with pre-Columbian myths about shamans and transcontinental unity, Bruguera’s version instead conjured an image of incipient catastrophe and radical isolation. In repeated performances of *Estudio de taller* (Studio study) she hoisted herself into metal straps “that act as the bars used by censors,” and slumped from the highest part of gallery walls, naked and wordless.¹²¹

Bruguera’s nudity in performance, like her intense concentration, stillness, and silence, created a problematic, difficult intimacy. In *El peso de la culpa* (The burden of guilt, 1997), she strapped the carcass of a lamb—a “shield”—to her body. With a glazed affect she knelt before small bowls containing saltwater and dirt, methodically mixing and eating them until she could not continue.¹²² The work, performed in a room of her house in a marginal area of Old Havana, confronted her audience with the surrender and degradation of her act, and humiliated them with their voyeuristic status.



Tania Bruguera, *El peso de la culpa* (The burden of guilt), 1997-99. Reenactment of a historical event. Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil; variable dimensions. Copyright Tania Bruguera. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Museo de Bellas Artes.



Tania Bruguera, *Sin título—Habana, 2000* (Untitled—Havana, 2000), 2000. Video performance and installation: milled sugarcane, black and white monitor, Cubans, DVD disc, DVD player; 13.12 x 39.37 x 164.04 feet. Copyright Tania Bruguera. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Casey Stoll.

Bruguera's highly repetitive and ritualized actions, very ordinary in themselves, accumulated psychic force through their multiplication. Toying with the inevitably theatrical pall of somatic performance is a risky way to work, in which the solo presence, the atmosphere of dense gravity, the slowness and repetitiveness, can easily slide into self-importance and moralizing pretentiousness. These dangers became even more acute as Bruguera's professional success slowly moved her into the new upper class and therefore out of the conditions of daily abjection on which her work often dwelt. She began to address the problem by no longer performing in the work, instead hiring her neighbors.

They appeared, memorably, in Bruguera's work for the seventh Biennial in 2000. The piece was staged in nearly total darkness in one of the Cabaña fortress's stone vaults.¹²³ A small television hung from the ceiling played a loop of historical footage of Fidel Castro, mostly seen in more "human" moments. The

video had the effect of deheroizing the figure represented with such enormity in the media; it was an affectionate effect, which somehow shredded the enforced affection of the official representations.¹²⁴ Those images hovered in the darkness, and only after some time viewers became aware of the presence of naked men in the room, performing various small, routine gestures—bowing rhythmically, rubbing themselves in motions something like washing. The performers, presumably, were there to communicate, but their “messages” were indistinct to the point of illegibility. (“A gesture,” says the artist elsewhere, “is about repeating an action from everyday life and putting it into a conscious space. The gesture creates an atmosphere.”)¹²⁵ The entire space was carpeted with rotting sugar cane that exuded an overwhelming, sweetly sickening stench, finalizing the work’s air of claustrophobia, mystery, and dread. The work suggested private things, pain, an exculpating tangle of sensations and possible meanings. “You are alone here,” her accompanying text read, “or not. You are implicated. . . . You’ve been standing there for some forty years, or maybe five minutes. . . . Your feet sink in the milled, useless and infertile sugarcane as you head back toward the greater light. (Have you always walked this way?)”

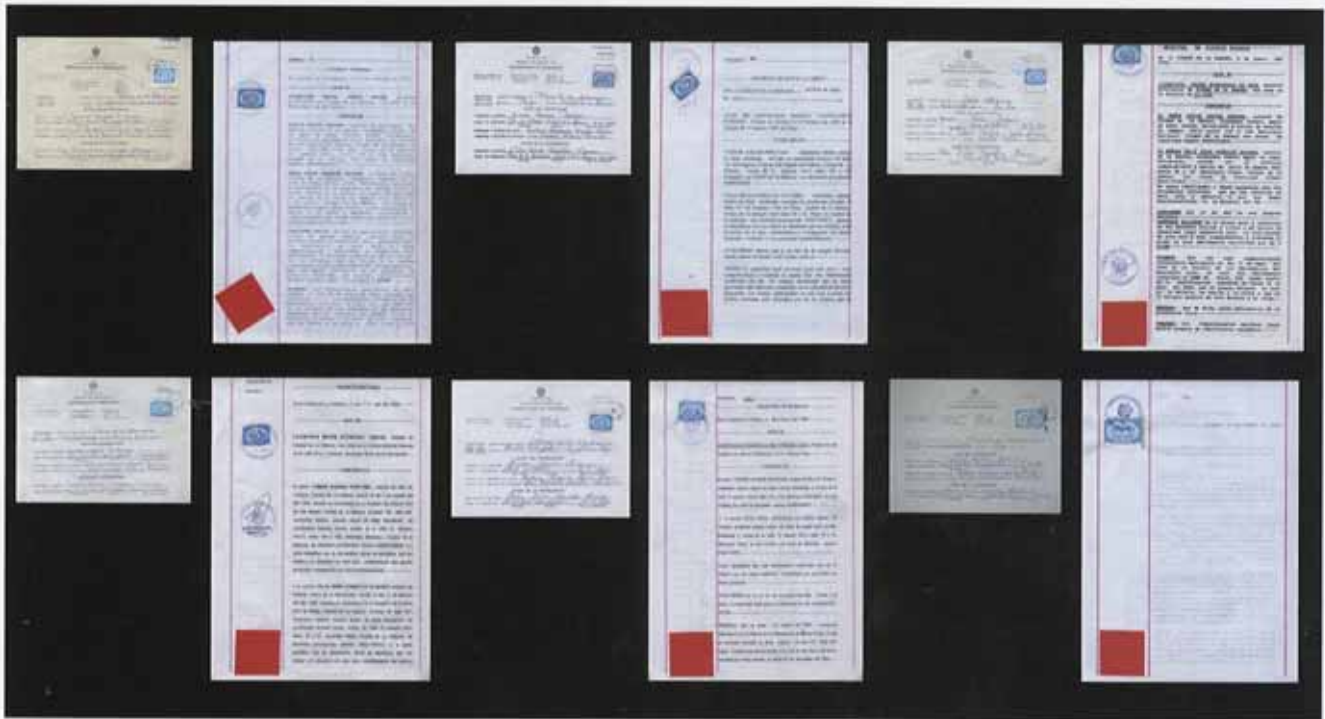
Throughout the 1990s, though, Bruguera became more and more unhappy with her work, even as the invitations to residencies and exhibitions abroad multiplied. Bruguera’s had been a kind of mourning work, but it short-circuited that task by resolving too easily into Art. A whiff of falseness trailed the work’s indelible images and its angst, and a plangently obligatory tone. The work’s existentialist perseverations became their own subject. Bruguera, maybe more than anyone else, had been obsessed with longing for the earlier times—not so much for their politics as for the intensity and humanity of their bonds, and the sense of shared responsibility for each other that had underlain everything. That sense may indeed have been mostly a myth, but it was one that had accumulated a lot of traction over the fallow years. After a couple of stillborn efforts to revive her newspaper, Bruguera settled on an approach that returned to one of the earliest gambits of the new Cuban art: teaching. She opened the *Taller Arte de Conducta* in 2003 with the stated goal to “create space for creation and discourse,” focused on “the limits of the social body.”¹²⁶ The project is Bruguera’s own quasi-utopian gesture that fosters an artistic practice uncowed by market considerations and based in intensive artistic interaction. *Arte de Conducta* advances a more sociological kind of art, not necessarily, or not exclusively, based in Bruguera’s own work but heavily influenced by core commitments to social agency and honest exchange.

A characteristic sensibility and focus developed in the students’ work, much of it playing on the edge of legality. The laws in question tended to be those per-



Luis o Miguel (Luis García and Miguel Moya), *Guarding a Wish*, 2004. Service offered in Cienfuegos city bus station. Courtesy of the artists.

taining to social conditions, the black market, and so forth, rarely touching on directly ideological concerns. Various works provided “services,” often of dubious value: Luis o Miguel, authors of the *¿Está en la lucha?* telephone survey, mustered a one-night performance at the Cienfuegos train station consisting in the offer to mind peoples’ bags, since there was no baggage checkroom there. The team of Celia y Yuniór hung around in front of courthouses and offered themselves as witnesses for weddings (two are required by law) and, in a series of related actions, repeatedly married and divorced each other (there is no legal limit). The marriages had a number of resonances: for one thing, marriage (to a foreigner) is one of the few legal means for leaving the island; for another, marriage (between Cubans) is rewarded by the state with a free buffet for the wedding party—a bonanza that people often resell on the black market. In another piece the artists took on the government’s campaign to save electricity by living without



power for six months, then exhibiting the work in the form of the null electric bill. Such work engaged in a kind of game with the ubiquitous systems of control, highlighting the continual fluidity on both sides as people invented new ways to circumvent regulations, which were in turn modified to neutralize the innovations, and so forth in an endless corkscrew of impediments.⁴ The works proposed a “third way” to deal with institutions, neither obeying nor disobeying, but using the laws in ways that were not foreseen.

The habitual, mostly petty, criminality that had become standard was a source of humiliation for people at the beginning of the Special Period, but it was soon integrated and naturalized: these works seemed pointed at that cycle of personal absorption and degradation. The encompassing nature of the regulatory state was pushed into the foreground, as was its absence of persuasive operative logics: the state as ideology had been replaced by the state as police, watchdogs, inspectors, and petty bureaucrats, a penetrating disciplinary apparatus standing in for moral certainties.

Bruguera’s workshop was the most concerted, programmatic, and systematic of the efforts to make things (as good) as they once were, to remove the neo- prefix from the Cuban avant-garde, to reclaim, as it were, its ability to “reclaim the pasts,” rather than just endlessly recycle them. But even that effort, brilliantly

Celia y Yunior (Celia González and Yunior Aguiar), *Marital Status*, 2004–8. Legal action (work in progress): six marriage certificates and six divorce certificates. Courtesy of the artists.

positioned between the institutional and its counter,¹²⁷ the international art world and the local situation, has yielded an intense sense of straining at limits that seem more than anything else to be internal. Even an art of withdrawal, as it turned out, an art framed in something like the opposite of asseverations, will eventually frame its own paradigms.