

RAD -ICAL CONVEN -TIONS

**Cuban American Art
from the 1980s**

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Cuban American Art from the 1980s

Curator, Elizabeth Cerejido, PhD
Assistant Curator, Ana Clara Silva

Co-presented by the Lowe Art Museum and
Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami

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Vibrational Licks: Space in 1980s Cuban Sculptural Practices

By Gean Moreno

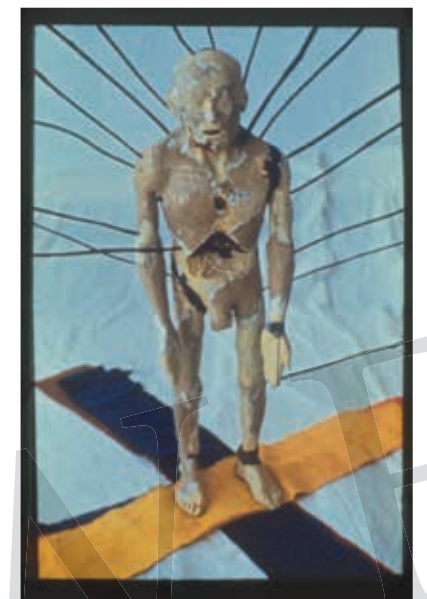
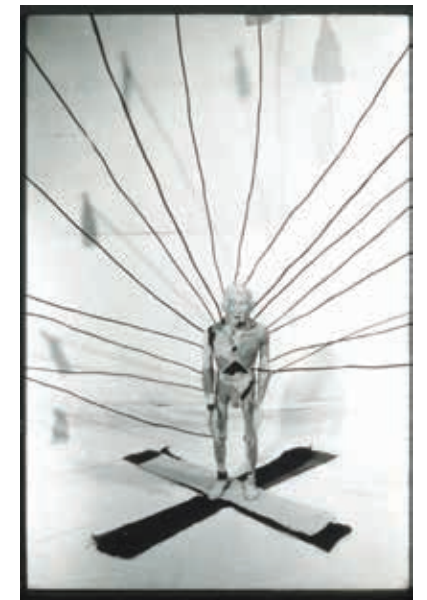
Objects can, at times, rise up against our attempts to condition them. It's as if they refuse to remain fixed in the orientation or circumstance they've been relegated to. When they assume these unruly airs, objects demand not only that we take notice of them but suggest that we divest our endorsement of whatever misguided imposition put them in such a bad way. They signal in coded vibes that they are vulnerable to being misapprehended and, as a result, lessened. They solicit—these flustered and suddenly quite demanding objects—that we mind the gap that their dissatisfaction casts light on. And quite often, we bend the knee, newly finding ourselves advocates on their behalf.

What is truly strange in this situation is that perception, beyond simply being courted into dialogic exchange with the object, is hijacked by the very thing it is cast upon. Consequently, this situation rests on foggy epistemological ground: What did we contribute to this exchange that allowed us to activate or fantasize such a commandeering object? Is what we desired from the object, based on what we take objects to be according to our epistemic and cosmological commitments, what the object is now giving us in return? Or is the object acting of its own volition? Does the object itself have agency, as so much current thinking is so terribly eager to posit?

I remember the first time I saw Juan Francisco Elso's *La fuerza del guerrero* (The Warrior's Strength, 1985-6) in person, mostly on account of my impression that it was barred from doing what I intuited it was supposed to. Perhaps it's a memory that, colored by subsequent encounters with the work, has been retrofitted to feel more awful than circumstances may have warranted, but I'm not altogether sure. The sculpture, on that occasion, sat on a perfectly white, square pedestal that was six or seven inches tall. The decision to present the sculpture in this way seemed misguided and infelicitous. And it was the object, in some hard-to-pin-down but nevertheless emphatic way, that telegraphed the situation was egregious. In fact, it let me know something worse: that the staging set the object at odds with itself, forcing the sculpture to audition as something far removed from what it really was. A move designed, furthermore, to make those of us who came upon it to accept lesser rewards, and, arguably worse, to make us conjecture the *positive* effects of the object—to imagine, without comparative points of reference other than objects that we had ourselves encountered elsewhere in the world and intuitively related to the sculpture, how *La fuerza del guerrero* should affect us.

I realize that I am, in what is perhaps a conceptually illicit fashion, veering extremely close to endowing an inanimate object with a subjective dimension. But this is not quite what I intend. It is simply that the circumstance in which I encountered *La fuerza del guerrero* on that particular occasion seemed so out of sync with how the object, based on its very qualities and range of references, suggested it should be presented. Call it the appeal of an emanating, countervailing pull generated by the object's resistance to the situation it had found itself in. Call it an allergic reaction to the bad curatorial decision that was at work, to which *La fuerza del guerrero* responded only in its disavowal of the experience such a decision sought to convey. This "countervailing pull" and this "allergic reaction" are not the negative relief of an imperious claim by the object, nor do they index some hidden code that requires an extraordinarily sensitive viewer to decipher how the sculpture *must* be displayed. In fact, what is set in motion by this tension is the possibility that we attend to whatever hesitancy we feel in identifying a proper way to display the sculpture, allowing all the object's capacities to be activated to the fullest, and that we begin from there, not registering our uncertainty and the care it calls for as liabilities.

It is here, to get to back to it, where the trouble with the pedestal lay: its square surface effectively encased *La fuerza del guerrero* in a virtual cube extending upward from its edges, functioning much like an immaterial but very real analogue of the plexiglass display cubes that museums employ as a naturalized element of the display apparatus. In effect, this placement sealed the sculpture from the space it shared with the viewer and that it undoubtedly strove to impinge upon. The pedestal delimited virtual trajectories suggested by elements in the work—particularly, the burnt twigs that shoot out from the sculpture's central figure. The "immaterial cube" sequestered whatever was emanating from the sculpture, curbing the artwork from establishing feedback loops and making surprise contact with other bodies, which is what, at a fundamental level, *La fuerza del guerrero* seems to be "about." This accounts, also, for the frustration the staging elicited within me when I discovered the piece presented in this way, intuitively registering the object's own frustrated state. The "encasement" of the work distorted what would otherwise feel intensive and immanent as extensive and limited, sadly hemming in a suggested explosion of energy that should rainbow into the room (figs. 21, 22). It's as if the institution presenting the work was endeavoring to clone the object, from inside its very skin, into its own antithesis.



figs. 21, 22
Juan Francisco Elso, *La fuerza del guerrero* (The Warrior's Strength), 1985-6. Luis Camnitzer and Rachel Weiss papers. Courtesy Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL

To take things even further: what the pedestal accomplished, the whole of post-Renaissance thought in its favor, was to render the space around the sculpture isomorphic—as wooden as the sculpted figure, though bereft of its dynamic capacities. The pedestal diagrammed space as an infinitely extendable sameness at the expense of allowing its immediate surroundings to become, disrupted by the very power of the object itself and by the reactions of bodies it confronted, utterly differentiated and elastic—full of dips and slopes, creases and crests; a sameness at the expense of becoming heterogenous and unevenly textured by the transactions that take place within it. Or, better yet, by transactions that do not simply occur *within* space but, rather, *with* it as a participating and unstable medium—a mutating arrangement of vibrations, a range of rhythmic patterns, irregular strokes of antimatter, arrhythmic quivering without content, saturations of no clear substance, syncopated pulsations of indeterminate source. Space can be this kind of unstable field of aleatory relations when it is not subjugated and forced to behave as a solid container with the range of its roles predetermined, as predetermined as the place each of us is relegated to within it.

One of the traits that binds a great deal of the Cuban sculptural and installation production that became prominent in the early 1980s, both inside and outside the island, is a desire—and the experiments such a desire underwrote—to charge the space surrounding the object (fig. 23). In doing so, the works stimulated the viewer's physical just as much as her intellectual faculties, thickening the time of perception by entangling the act of looking with dense affective textures, with a haptic dimension. This engagement transformed *looking*, stretching its edge and treating it as an operation that needs to encompass the whole body. The object, or the energy that emanates from it and collects around it, can be experienced physically, as though the skin were being licked by the charged space to the point of becoming a giant, blind eye seized by vibrations that disorient the whole body. One can conceptually decipher the range of references any particular work is influenced by, along with the formal decisions that went into it, but such an enterprise ultimately leaves unexplained the saturated atmosphere that works, in their very nature, primarily seek to generate around themselves—atmospheres that these objects seem to be fundamentally "about."

If in Elso's work particular formal elements are translated into virtual forces—the shooting lines in *La fuerza del guerrero*—and consequently analogize the activities happening at the level of the sculpture with activities happening at the interface between our bodies and the work, José Bedia's installations do not tend to weave their space as delicately with ours, their virtual activity with our embodied perception. Instead, they seek to envelop the viewer in a new, hard-bordered space supplanting whatever space she had just been in a moment before. Bedia's penchant for employing corners in his work should be considered in relation to opportunities he has found for semantic and affective reconfiguration of the universal code of right-angled architectural production. Bedia begins with a space seemingly

antithetical to his purposes. In contention with it, he draws out its most opportune elements—corners, mostly, but also niches and three-walled rooms—to support his program. If he doesn't directly alter spatial morphologies, he certainly torques what we can call atmospheric morphologies—the densities of space and affect.

Perfil de un pueblo (Profile of a People, 1985) (p. 66) is a towering profile of the head of a figure that recurs in Bedia's work. It is composed of bands of photocopied images of Native American luminaries, as well as of tragic and traumatic historical circumstances, like the infamous boarding schools that were designed to pummel "the Indian out of the man" (as the odious language of the time put it). The rows of images are separated by smoky, spray-painted black lines that infuse the work with a soft, geometric rhythm. On the back of the head, Bedia arranged photocopies of clustered feathers that suggest a schematic headdress, rather than attempt to "fake" an authentic one (fig. 24).

Perfil de un pueblo can be approached from various interpretative angles. One can start by focusing on the portraits of Native Americans in relation to Bedia's long-term explorations of ancestral Amerindian cultures, particularly those found in what today is known by settlers as North America. (In contrast, Elso, who also spent many years studying Amerindian cultures, became more interested in Mesoamerica. *La fuerza del guerrero* is organized around the Nahautl ontological concept of *Teotl* and its demand for processual, non-unified identity.) In relation to *Perfil de un pueblo*, one can pose questions about the role of Bedia's work as a structure that mediates this content for contemporary art audiences. What are the politics of that? One can ask, in other words, about processes of representation and the legitimacy of provenance, political solidarities, and a re-hierarchization of values. In fact, one can fold this work into a larger question regarding Bedia's project of taking the Americas, the entire hemisphere, as a gnostic object richer than and hidden beneath all the codes and conventions that an infatuation with modernization has imposed on it. *Perfil de un pueblo* also employs technologies of reproduction, the photocopier in particular, inviting one to inquire about the manner in which these technologies established modernity's mimetic faculty, with all the complex forms of alterity and fetishization attendant to it—further still, one can inquire about how modernity's very *other* was swept into this framework through apparatuses of replication.

These would all be legitimate interpretations of the work, but one can also consider how the work reorganizes the very space around its presentation. From where does the work draw the lessons and the resources to build a nearly palpable atmosphere that generates a visceral connection with its viewers, always drawing attention to a concrete—one might even call it "bodily"—experience that lies beyond the work's semantic content? *Perfil de un pueblo* saturates a corner of a room with information and then releases the pressure of this accumulation through a line of images that extends beyond the mouth of the figure's profile, like an unfurled



fig.23
Juan Francisco Elso working on *La fuerza del guerrero*, 1985-6. Photo by Rogelio López Marín (Gory). Courtesy Archivo CIFO-Veigas



fig.24
A different version of José Bedia's *Perfil de un pueblo* (Profile of a People), also from 1985. Installation view at Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, Old Westbury College, Long Island. Photo by the artist. Courtesy José Bedia



figs. 25, 26
José Bedia, *Sarabanda contra Siete Rayos*
(*Sarabanda against Siete Rayos*), 1985. Installation
view at Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, Old Westbury
College, Long Island, 1985. Photo by the artist.
Courtesy José Bedia

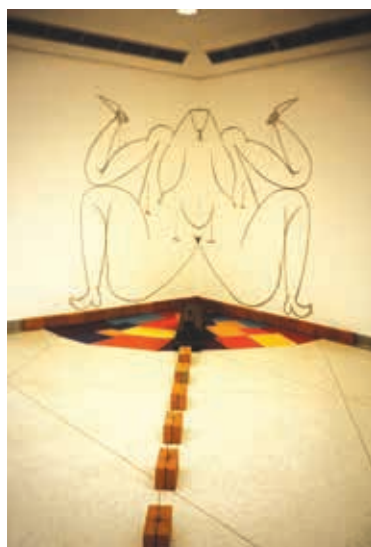


fig. 27
José Bedia, *Que te han hecho Mama Kalunga?*
(*What Have They Done to You, Mama Kalunga?*),
1989. Installation view at Museo Alejandro Otero,
Caracas, Venezuela, 1990. Photo by the artist.
Courtesy José Bedia

smoke plume. This “smoke plume” constitutes repeating images that have been printed and manipulated during the photocopying process—smeared so as to suggest movement. Although it everywhere alludes to motion, to *speeding away*, the “smoke plume” becomes, gravitationally pulled by the data-saturated corner it unfurls from, a closed circuit that leads the viewer right back to the figure in the corner. This unexpected return is paired with the viewer’s realization that where she was truly being challenged by the work, where she was held by a thickened sense of temporality, was in fact back in the corner and not along its outspread elements. It is there where a complex and charged disclosure of information and feeling is peeling from the images, from their sheer quantity and compression. The optical journey generates—*kneads into presence*, one wants to say—an affective texture that delinks from the purely visual and takes up a particular atmosphere that traverses and engulfs the viewer’s body, moving her senses.

This charging of space, of corners in particular, is a recurring element in Bedia’s practice. It often goes unnoticed, however, due to the prevailing thought patterns that condition arts discourse to obsess on the visual and the referential at the expense of what jolts the body out of sorts, what activates it through rich vibrations, for a distinct mode of tactile learning. In works he produced around the same time as *Perfil de un pueblo*, such as *Sarabanda contra Siete Rayos* (*Sarabanda against Siete Rayos*, 1985) (figs. 25, 26) or *Que te han hecho Mama Kalunga?* (*What Have They Done to You, Mama Kalunga?*, 1989) (fig. 27), and in later works, such as *Lucero Mundo* (1993), Bedia manipulates the architectural corner into coproducing a saturated space. This effect is often missing from his head-on installations, which assume a more pictorial quality, or from his larger, room-sized installations, which—like the installations of Betye Saar or Ilya Kabakov (to compare with two very different artists)—mobilize a theatrical dimension. These latter works are activated precisely by the viewer’s awareness of breaking the fourth wall, of “entering” another space. Bedia’s corner-anchored pieces, on the other hand, are less about ushering a viewer into what is obviously “another” space than they are about surprising her, trapping her inside a compelling, concentrated energy source in a marginal section of the architectural space. These works take over a small part of the room and make it behave like no other part of it. It is in these corner-anchored works where I think that whatever lessons Bedia has drawn from being enveloped in the sacred space of altars, as well as from generating these spaces—not only as an artist but also as a religious practitioner—are most potently manifest. He is not, we should underscore, generating sacred spaces inside exhibition spaces. He is developing analogous secular atmospheres, charged zones that, rather than channel divine forces, remind us of what can be done with space itself once it is no longer treated as a mere container of activity but as an active element in and of itself, a medium that can be roused to express different behaviors and that can awaken us to new ways of engaging the world.

Although not as obvious as with *Perfil de un pueblo*, many of Bedia’s other corner-anchored works draw from the morphologies of Afro-Caribbean religious altars. Although he has always been very clear about the division he maintains between his religious praxis and his artistic activities, it is indisputable that, at the level of forms, the border is porous. And, of course, the references that invariably populate the work do nothing to discourage the connection. The *Mama Kalunga* in his title is the life-force that practitioners of Palo Monte understand all the elements of creation to be infused with, while also serving as the membrane that separates the world of the living from the land of the dead and the spirits. The *Lucero* in *Lucero Mundo* is the colloquial Spanish name for the *dikenga* cosmogram that traveled, through the brutal vector of the transatlantic slave trade, from Central Africa to western Cuba.

While these formal and referential points of contact are always active, Bedia never conflates secular and sacred spheres. He has pointed out on various occasions that the altar-like structures he presents in exhibitions are, to employ his vocabulary, “clean.” They have no power or charge as they have not undergone the crucial step of consecration. At first glance it may be harder to discern how the late Juan Boza negotiated the border between the sacred and the secular. Some commentators have treated this question somewhat hastily, I think—often casually suggesting that, because the artist didn’t forcefully acknowledge a difference between these realms, his sculptures *are* altars. Considering the function of both kinds of objects, one central to ritual praxis and religious life, the other beholden to secular artistic practices—and, I would add, in Boza’s hands, to a pedagogical impulse aimed at outsiders—this is a strange claim. It’s true, Boza generated installations, such as *Lazarus—Get and Walk. Raise Your Voice!* (1986) (fig. 28), *Yemaya Oro Inle* (1986) (fig. 29), or *Sango Oro Aganjo* (1987) (fig. 30), that mimic altars very closely. By all accounts he carefully replicated the range of objects found in consecrated altars and adhered to the colors associated with whichever orisha the work was dedicated to. Nevertheless, it seems generative and elucidating to reinforce the fact that, despite the fidelity to the source, what we are dealing with is an analogy between a sculptural form and a religious object. As Arturo Lindsay has suggested, Boza produced “secular facsimiles of Santería altars as art installations.”¹ It is only by keeping this in mind that we can really discern how deft Boza was at exploring the division between sacred and secular realms in depth, rather than simply collapsing this rift; we can discern how, for him, mimesis was a rich resource. Resemblance and difference, the very thin membrane that Boza’s work inhabits, opens a range of possibilities for what sculptural and installation objects can accomplish that their referents may be less ideally suited for.

Boza activates a pedagogical dimension in his work that is, on closer read, exo-religious. In other words, he does not reiterate the inherent didactic function of religious objects through which traditions are passed on and praxis is encoded.

¹ Arturo Lindsay, “Living Gods in Contemporary Latino Art,” *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 205.

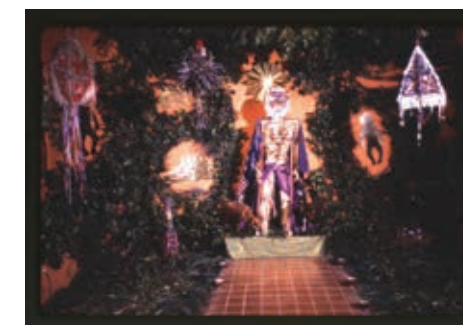


fig. 28
Juan Boza, *Lazarus—Get and Walk. Raise Your Voice!*,
1986. INTAR Theatre records. Courtesy Cuban
Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries,
Coral Gables, FL



fig. 29
Juan Boza, *Yemaya Oro Inle*, 1986. INTAR Theatre
records. Courtesy Cuban Heritage Collection,
University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL



fig. 30
Juan Boza, *Sango Oro Aganjo*, 1987. INTAR Theatre
records. Courtesy Cuban Heritage Collection,
University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL

Instead, banking on his deep erudition, Boza draws clear distinctions between the traditions he is citing, be they Kongo (*Regla de palo*), Lukumí/Yoruba (*Regla de ocha*), or Abakuá. Boza's objects serve as lessons to his audience on the ethnic makeup of Afro-Cuban populations and their cosmological variations, tracking cultural displacements that characterized the transatlantic slave trade. His installations reproduce, as didactic examples, the specific uses and character of an object per its role in one of the various religions associated with these ethnicities, pointing to the intrinsic richness and diversity of what are too often simplistically treated, from the outside, as indistinguishable "primitive" practices. In pursuing clarity, a heuristic edge that is unnecessary to practitioners fluent in the basics, Boza's sculptures not only expose their distance from objects of true religious praxis, they open cosmological and other forms of knowledge to new audiences—inviting outsiders in, generously extending an invitation to expand the world as we know it.

In the atmospheric mimicry of his installations, Boza marries the tactile *knowing* that happens inside religiously saturated spaces with a diagrammatic didactics that traces what he called "the flow of the gods in the New World."² According to recollections of Boza, the pedagogical impulse behind his "secular facsimiles" resonates with his natural disposition. Ivor Miller: "My research in Africa was the logical conclusion of a process that began in 1987 in New York City, where I first witness[ed] the rendition of an Abakuá signature by Cuban artist Juan Boza . . . From our first meeting in 1987, we began a profound friendship that included him teaching me about Santería (Yorúbá-derived Ocha), of which he was a full initiate. Portentously, Juan presented me with his print of an Abakuá signature (called Aráka Suáka)."³ One cannot help but see, through the generosity of sharing knowledge, the Lukumí imperative to better an imperfect world and the moral call to sharpen knowledge and foster understanding wherever possible.

In Boza's paintings, a pedagogical impulse also figures, and is, arguably, better highlighted, as these two-dimensional objects cannot inherently generate the powerfully engulfing spaces of his installations. *Oyancile* (1982) (p. 75) clearly conveys that its task is, in essence, pictorial; painterly tropes proliferate across the canvas. A background of thin, running paint underscores the very materiality, the variable states and different expressive capacities, of colored pigments. The figure at the center of the composition functions, whatever narratives and worlds it calls forth for an audience, much like any figure in any painting. The objects painted behind it do so as well—that is, up to a certain point. In fact, these elements rely on assuming such a convention—reinforcing a figure/ground schema—in order to better set into sharp relief the graphic elements that they morph into. In the top left-hand quadrant, *Oyancile*, a hanging mobile of sorts, becomes a diagram of a *dikenga* or *lucero* (like the *lucero* in Bedia's title): a diamond shape crossed by an arrow pointing

² Juan Boza, "Juan Boza: Excerpts From the Artist's Final Statement, 1991," in Lindsay, 173.

³ Ivor L. Miller, *Voice of the Leopard: Ancient Secret Societies and Cuba* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 13-4.

east. Both of these elements bear specific meanings. The diamond shape connects the four cardinal points, which not only traces the cyclical nature of life but serves to envelop the realms of both the living and the ancestors. The arrow bisecting the diamond is the very fire-force of Kalûnga (or, in Cuba, *Mama Kalunga*), an element that not only predates existence, but that also infuses all elements of Creation and animates their capacity to change. The east-facing arrow is found in an ideograph used in Cuba to summon spirits from the earth.⁴ The diamond-arrow symbol as a whole, then, represents Mama Kalûnga as the membrane that connects the living with the ancestors.

The *dikenga* is a cosmograph that plays a central role in a system of graphic communication that originated with the Bakongo peoples in Central Africa, which was later reproduced by practitioners of Palo Monte in Cuba. The graphic language is composed of a system of surface inscriptions whose mimetic function is not manifested through verisimilitude or allusion, as may be the case in figurative painting, but through a semantic encoding of cosmological knowledge. In essence, through this graphic communication, one "writes down" the forces of creation and change. The basic units of this writing are not alphanumeric characters but graphemes. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz proposes that ideograms, pictograms, and pictographs represent the system's most important constitutive elements.⁵ The system can be traced back to rupestrian art found in Central Africa, and its complexification, both in religious and secular usage, can be historically traced as well. In Cuba, the writing system that relates specifically to religious practice is known as *firmas* (signatures)—also known as *gandós* and *anaforuanas*.

More than a system of writing, *firmas* are an interfacial technology. According to Martínez-Ruiz, when fired up, *firmas*

[c]all forth spiritual forces, communicate with ancestral spirits, and facilitate divination [. . .] are used to convey feelings, intentions, and desires to spiritual forces and serve as a means for practitioners to visualize and communicate with the powers of the spirits [. . .] [and also] function as a type of map of electrical circuitry whereby the electricity and force of God, like the cosmic vibrations manifested through religious objects, circulate and materialize.⁶

⁴ Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 74-6.

⁵ Ibid., 47.

Martínez-Ruiz defines these types of graphemes in the following manner:

- Ideograms: Visual signs or abstract graphic representations of an idea or mental image. A character or symbol representing ideas or things without expressing a particular word or phrase for it.
- Pictograms or pictographs: Visual signs or figurative graphic representations that depict objects and produce mental images that give direct access to the objects or ideas.
- Cosmograms: Compounds of two conventional signs using another, nonfigurative form of representation or notation of the thought. This form of notation has the function of alluding to knowledge with implications in the metaphysical, philosophical, or religious realm. This kind of knowledge is known as cosmology, reports about the origin of life, and as cosmogony, reports about human conception and the existence of God."

⁶ Ibid., 123.

What is curious about Boza's particular iteration of the *dikenga* in *Oyancile* is that it marries a traditional Kongo shape (the diamond) as it is found in Central Africa, which isn't quite as prominent in diasporic inscriptions, with the pointed arrow, which is a dominant motif of Palo Monte in Cuba. In this subtle combinatory exercise, Boza conducts a didactic untangling of the evolution of a sign-system as a way to mark both the continuities and differences between its traits anchored in Africa and those that it takes on within the Diaspora. This subtle conflation of motifs is where I would locate what I am calling Boza's pedagogical dimension. There is a lesson here about cultural retention and the necessary modification and resilience that brutal displacement forces on people. Here is an invitation to parse historical and semantic complexity and evolution.

Elso, Bedia, and Boza employ sculpture's mimetic capacity not to represent an existing figure but to reproduce the much more slippery entity of an atmosphere, an affective texture that we come to know by how it works on our bodies. They explore that "thing" we come upon assuredly, only to yield to it. Elso, Bedia, and Boza draw on particular forms, mimetically translate these forms, to outline the power, rather than to merely present the morphology, of what is being reproduced. Namely, they create a version of the *space* that religious artifacts charge up, so unlike the other spaces we usually traverse in our everyday comings and goings. And, to a finer point, these artists replicate not just the effects of any religious artifact, but of artifacts that are woven into and offer moments of intense releases of energy in everyday life and structures. What is at stake is this energy, manifested as a torquing of space itself, that serves as an exercise in dislodging space from the ways it has been stiffly plotted and contained. And that, in turn, activates the possibility of transforming the entire body into a perceptual mechanism, demoting the eye as the authoritative tool for understanding.

But to what end is a charged religious space secularly reconstructed? One imagines that, at a certain level, it must have something to do with a dissatisfaction with sculpture's shortcomings in mimetically translating and elucidating the object world in all its diversity. To be more concrete: until very recently, the field of sculpture, within strands that have dominated institutional and discursive space, dedicated itself to conveying a broad societal damage to experience that capitalist production has wrought. Ultimately, sculpture has been framed by mainstream contemporary art history as a critical reflection on the stark reality that has accompanied the destruction of organic processes in favor of the desperate quest for accelerated accumulation.⁷ The first task for the medium, in order to assume this function, was to mimize, in highly sophisticated ways, the fragmentation brought on through capitalist production. Articulating this fragmentation through the use of disparate materials and heterogeneous facture, sculpture became a way to fragment

⁷ I'm relying here on a proposal that is presented by Benjamin Buchloh in his essay "Michael Asher and the End of Sculpture," in Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 1–39.

representation itself, as it had until then existed in coherent anthropomorphic forms, and, in this way, revealed reification's ongoing devastation of subjectivity.

Upsetting conditions of perception, disorienting modalities of looking, and jolting the body—without mooring an artwork and the space it occupies to the signification of heterogeneous facture and of incoherent anthropomorphic morphologies exclusively—are ways to propose that the world of narrowed experience is not absolute. Other worlds emerge from it or bloom in its folds. Modernist hegemony is not borderless. Other structurings of reality are indexed in the reenchanting encounter with the object. Or, not the object, as such—because that would only recode it as a fetish—but with the space that the object holds. It is an encounter that stretches beyond into a journey in uneven space. Of course, something doesn't feel quite right when we put the experience in these terms because it is in the journeying itself that *space* is constituted. As a result, I suppose this is where what we call space balks at the designation; in the journeying it becomes a thickened and soulful temporality, an inhabitable temporality.

But there is no need to treat the sculptural and installation production we have been parsing here as a mere reaction to other modes of (modernist) sculptural practice; we can hazard a riskier proposal. The objects that Elso, Bedia, and Boza generate summon what we can call a diasporic *cosmotronics*—a *cosmotronics* being what Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui defines as "a unification between the cosmic order and the moral order through technical activities."⁸ These objects draw on the technics, on the particular tools and skills (the signature, the altar, the *nganga*), that diasporic cosmologies—cosmologies in which the radical separation between the living and the ancestors, as well as between vital forces and individuate entities, do not hold—not only make available but, rather, demand. What is at stake in these works is a diagramming, rather than the use, of these technics. In other words, Elso's, Bedia's, and Boza's objects and installations are not invigorated by ritual feeding and cleansing—they only approximate or mimic the conditions for channeling vital forces that impinge on reality and perpetually reactivate cross-realm relationships. In practice, their objects concern themselves more directly with activating the possibility of placing the body in a state in which it can undergo a tactile learning experience that serves as an invitation to reconsider our relations. Instead of graphic and notational structures, distilled abstractions of a messier *real*—these objects and installations as diagrams—are mimetic machines that produce a series of effects. Specifically, they reproduce the conditions that the technics of the referred objects generate as a way to explain their very existence, to "secularize" them, and to put them in broader spaces of dialogue by offering them as other viable modalities of being in the world.

⁸ Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics* (Urbanomic, 2016), 19.