

RAD -ICAL CONVEN -TIONS

**Cuban American Art
from the 1980s**

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Cuban American Art from the 1980s

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

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Self- Portraits of Every- Person

By Chon Noriega

In only forty-five minutes I will cross an ocean of years. When we land it is scorching hot outside. People desperately rip off the layers on the tarmac. I see a field in the distance. Palm trees, two peasants and an ox. It reminds me of Southeast Asia, Vietnam. I never been there. But who knows where memories come from—movies, books, magazines.

Alina Troyano, *Milk of Amnesia* (1994)

In *Milk of Amnesia* (1994), Carmelita Tropicana—the self-proclaimed “songbird of Cuba,” revolutionary, beauty queen, intellectual, superintendent, eternal nineteen-year-old, and performance *artiste*—returns to Cuba for the first time since leaving the island as a child over three decades earlier. In this brief passage, artist Alina Troyano mobilizes her performance alter ego Carmelita to playfully engage key terms and strategies for a new kind of art in the hemisphere. Throughout the 1980s, this new creative expression had been persistently dripping like Café Bustelo into the cup of contemporary art. By 1983, artists contributing to one branch of this art movement were dubbed the “Miami Generation.”¹ As with other Cuban-born artists now living in the U.S., these artists drew upon the particularities of the Cuban diasporic experience to effect a fundamental shift in contemporary artistic practice.

I will return to Tropicana later in the essay, but first, as we approach this period of arts production, let’s deal with categories. When considering the term Cuban American art, one must start with the art historical context—after all, we are discussing art and artists.

That context, grounded in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was one in which abstract expressionism no longer served as the exemplar art form for Cold War subjectivity, wherein the heroic male artist grappled with a zeitgeist centered on the “banality of evil,” the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and an increasingly corporate and bureaucratic society. In the wake of abstract expressionism, not only did new painting and sculptural styles emerge, but so too did new genres and media that challenged the idea of traditional forms producing a stable art object, thus giving rise to process-, installation-, and performance-based art. Progressing into the 1970s, photography documented these emerging arts practices while gaining greater recognition as a contemporary art form itself. However, one habit remained with respect to narrating this historical shift: historians privileged the “new” despite the fact that artists have

¹ See Juan A. Martínez, “The Miami Generation: 1983-2013” (2012), posted online: <https://miamigeneration.com/Miami-Gen>

often turned to the past for inspiration, provocation, and dialogue. Indeed, for artists belonging to groups on the margins of both society and art history there is much to be gained from intentionally turning to history and starting over.

This larger art historical context reveals something about Cuban American art in the 1980s—namely, the wide range of artistic strategies employed, including drawing from art movements in the early 20th century (Dada, surrealism, and constructivism), the use of straight photography techniques (often in queer and/or conceptual ways), and a blurring of self-portraiture with performance. These strategies do not add up to a movement *per se*, but they do highlight a loose logic at work with respect to engaging social presence through art: social visibility is tied to group identity, social groups invariably get reduced to types, and types subsequently form the basis of stories that societies propagate about themselves (and about others). In different ways, the artists in *Radical Conventions: Cuban American Art from the 1980s* work against this reduction of human experience to types (be they social types or stereotypes) by refusing to offer an “authentic” Cuban identity and, ultimately, radically making representation itself more self-critical. In this sense, the notion of “radical conventions” is pitch perfect with respect to how these artists negotiate their relationship to Cuban history, Cold War politics, communities formed out of exile, American art, and their own sense of belonging and responsibility in the world-at-large. Their art shares a certain commitment to conventions of representation, but it does so in order to get at something ineffable, silenced, and even absurd about the present. Yes, history matters, but if you define artists by solely identifying historical forces as the primary cause for their work, then you tacitly remove an artist’s agency, expression, and complexity that make them an artist in the first place. Their art is not so much a product of their time, or even a response to their time, but rather a dialogue with experience, broadly defined.

In this essay, I want to explore the work of three artists who belonged to the first wave of Cuban youth immigrating to the U.S. after the Cuban Revolution between 1960 and 1962: María Brito, Luis Cruz Azaceta, and Carmelita Tropicana/Alina Troyano. They are at once from a generational cohort sharing an experience of exile and quite distinct from one another with respect to their artistic practices. Yet Brito, Cruz Azaceta, and Troyano each similarly engage in self-portraiture in ways that draw upon their personal history as a Cuban exile while also invoking personae, alter egos, and archetypal figures that gesture to larger social dynamics and conditions.

María Brito: Introspection

I've always been drawn to María Brito's art, feeling that it spoke to me and to a familiar and precarious vision of the home in the world, and of the world in the home.

I was born in Miami just two months after Brito and her brother arrived in the city from Cuba via Operation Pedro Pan, a mass evacuation of youth out of the island. My first birthday took place amid the Cuban Missile Crisis. In fact, my father—a Latin American beat reporter for the Associated Press and *Miami Herald*—covered the Cuban Revolution and then the Cuban Missile Crisis. Predating these tensions, when my father was a child in a small village just north of Alamogordo, New Mexico, he saw the first atom bomb explode early one morning while feeding the chickens. Years later, in late October of 1962, he drove my mother and me (as an infant) to see U.S. missile launchers lined up along the beach.

While these are not my own vivid memories of the early Cold War, their traces were all around children growing up in Miami. I went to public school in a largely working-class, unincorporated community that had quickly become Latino majority. I do not recall citizenship, nationality, or race being a framework in our day-to-day lives, nor did language circumscribe our social interactions—that is, play—as children. But the school certainly made distinctions—placing the native English speakers closer to the teacher's desk, for instance. Each day, we all recited the Pledge of Allegiance, sang the national anthem, and prayed (even though doing so had been declared unconstitutional in 1962). Then we listened to the principal give a sermon of sorts over the PA system on brushing our teeth, using the crosswalk, following the rules, and other practical issues of survival. This was growing up during the Cold War, when we regularly practiced “duck and cover” drills to prepare for an atomic bomb attack. In my school, duck and cover differed from the civil defense films at the time in that the girls would duck along the wall and the boys would lean over them, pressing our forearms against the wall to provide a protective shield. In all these things, we never asked questions; this was life.

But upon seeing Brito's art, I found myself asking questions. Her early works—box and interior assemblages—are meticulous in their formal arrangements, classical references, and multi-pronged questioning of the self. These works have strong metaphorical associations with the self, home, and society, but they do not lead to resolution. Her work is more deconstructive than dialectical, more about exploring difficult questions than finding easy answers. This aspect of her work is most apparent in its rough-hewn and lived-in texture, as if the art object is emerging from the rough and tumble world it explores rather than commenting on it from the outside through the window of representation. This work, autobiographical in detail, is sometimes identified as self-portraiture though it insistently gestures toward more general conditions—as a person, as an exile, as a woman, as a child, and as a parent.² In her

² See Juan A. Martínez's chapter, “Boxes, Interiors, and Objects: Assemblages, 1980–2000,” in *María Brito* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2009), 23–50.

assemblages, she refers to the self as an “all-inclusive” entity made up of public, private, and unconscious elements that are all at play with one other and with the world. The self is depicted not as a subject but through a series of structured and suggestive absences through furniture, fragmented objects, and images: an outlined figure, a photo album image, a reflection in a mirror, a death mask, or an eye.

In the assemblage *In Lieu of Fragmentation* (1980) (pp. 82–83), Brito affixed replicate images of an eye to a row of four alphabet blocks that can be rotated using a crank handle designed for jalousie windows (a ubiquitous architectural feature in Miami). Behind the blocks, Brito references Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490), an ink drawing from his notebooks that illustrates the notion put forth by 1st century BC Roman architect Vitruvius that the *ideal* human figure fits within a circle and a square—but, evidently, not within a box. In Brito's work, the self is presented not as whole and unified within the universe, but as fragmented and multiplied within an interior space. The depiction of the Vitruvian Man seems small within the piece; da Vinci's synthesis of mathematics and art appears undercut by the man's reduced scale and juxtaposition with the spinning, game-like blocks below the figure.

So, what exactly is offered in lieu of such fragmentation—that is, in its place? For Brito, it is the artwork itself, which draws inspiration from a pair of dualistic Renaissance concepts for human types in the 15th century—one physical-visual, the other moral-dramatic. On the one hand, the reproduction of the *Vitruvian Man* evokes da Vinci's championing of the uniform ideal man; and, on the other hand, confining this image within a box alongside other fragments allows the artist to lay bare the disparate makeup of the everyman or everywoman (an allegorical figure that originates in the 15th century morality play of Western Europe). Brito's box, influenced by the American artist Joseph Cornell, has an interior that is roughly the same size as da Vinci's notebook paper. Despite this correspondence, the assemblage, rather than record and illustrate a unifying formula for the human body, engages the artist's personal experience through an arrangement of objects and images that are powered by a crank handle designed to open windows. Brito's dialogue with art history, neither critical nor imitative, is in fact an attempt to give expression to the fragmented self in the late 20th century.

In December 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, I traveled to Seoul, South Korea, where I had the opportunity to see an artwork that had haunted me for decades, *Introspection: Childhood Memories* (1988) (figs. 6, 7) by María Brito. I knew this work by way of a photograph taken at the plaza of Bacardi's U.S. headquarters in Miami. The large-scale steel and aluminum sculpture had been briefly exhibited on-site before it was shipped to Seoul, where it had been acquired for an international sculpture park built for the 1988 Olympics. On a mostly clear (but very cold) day, I spent time in the expansive park with Brito's sculpture, which in this new location was simply titled *Childhood Memories*. There, I let the photo's haunting image give way to an actual object installed amid trees and



fig.6, fig.7
María Brito, *Introspection: Childhood Memories*, 1988.
Installation views at a sculpture park in Seoul, South Korea. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.8
Signage for María Brito, *Introspection: Childhood Memories*, 1988, in Seoul, South Korea. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.9
María Brito, *Come Play with Us: Childhood Memories*, 1984. Photo by Ramón Guerrero. Courtesy Chon Noriega

works by artists representing other countries. Nearby, a massive stadium serves as the backdrop to the otherwise pastoral setting. On the label for the work, Brito is identified by country of origin, not by citizenship (fig. 8).

In early 1988, Thomas Messer, then the longtime director of both the Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, selected Brito for the commission in his role on the Executive Committee for the Olympiad of Art of the Seoul Olympics.³ For Brito, the commission required working in materials suitable for outdoor permanent installation (basically, metals), a shift from the domestic objects and materials she typically sourced (wood, cloth, and wallpaper) for her artwork engaging interiors and interiority. This pivot posed more than just the technical challenge of working with new materials. Brito's domestic objects acquire an allegorical dimension, telling or suggesting stories that differ from those built into their original domestic functions and meanings. In this regard, Brito mined the possibilities of Duchamp's ready-mades and Cornell's shadow boxes, exploring, as Juan Martínez notes, counternarratives to domestic experiences of "entrapment by tradition, culture, and family" through corresponding found objects.⁴ Making these objects out of metal instead produces a representation, or a symbol, and not a direct transformation of the thing itself from a functional element of a home into an art object requiring contemplation.

In determining her approach to the commission, Brito turned to artist and gallery director Sheldon Lurie, who advised her to, given the three-month turnaround time to complete the work, revisit an already completed piece and simply "translate" it into new materials.⁵ In response, Brito drew upon elements of earlier works, including *Come Play with Us: Childhood Memories* (1984) (fig. 9) and *Ever-Present Past* (1988) (fig. 10). Brito's calculated use of the word "introspection" in the title *Introspection: Childhood Memories* brings to the surface a process implicitly at work in much of her artmaking throughout the 1980s—that of peering inward into one's thoughts, feelings, and memories. If earlier titles were suggestive of classical, archetypal, and religious tableaux from which to discern allegorical meanings (such as *Woman Before a Mirror*, 1983; and *The Garden and the Fruit*, 1987), Brito used the title of this piece to place its scenes within the realm of active introspection through personal memory of childhood. Here, the act of introspection is a general process belonging to the artist, the artwork, and the viewer—in a word, it is public. In this way, *Introspection: Childhood Memories* veers from the intimate scale and private address of her earlier works to a public symbol presented to the world-at-large from a country divided by cold war—a public symbol tied to Cuba and its diaspora.

³ Leslie Judd Ahlander, *The Miami News*, June 17, 1988, 5C.

⁴ Martínez, *María Brito*, 9.

⁵ María Brito, oral history interview by Juan A. Martínez, Miami, March 22, 2004, transcript, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

While this work remains Brito's only commission and public sculpture, it can be seen as a transitional piece that opens personal and private experience to broadly public and even global contexts without becoming dogmatic in its invitation. Again, Juan Martínez provides an insightful framing, noting that her work "invites questions and projections, but no definite interpretation."⁶ That said, Brito's work is by no means a Rorschach test based on abstract images upon which viewers project their own inner processing of the world; there is structured content. Brito mobilizes very specific iconographies across classical, vernacular, and mass media culture, and these in turn are organized around her own experiences as a woman born in Cuba, sent into exile as a teen, and naturalized as a U.S. citizen. Later works, such as *Whitewash* (1990), *El patio de mi casa* (The Backyard of My House, 1990) (fig. 11), *Merely a Player* (1993), and *Cuatro pilares* (Four Pillars, 1994), infuse the personal and domestic with diaspora, geopolitics, and surveillance. The signs are there but the work is by no means thematic as such. One must look inward while acknowledging that memories also emerge from the outside world and through other people, or, in the words of Carmelita Tropicana, from "movies, books, magazines."

Luis Cruz Azaceta: Apocalyptic Visions

Luis Cruz Azaceta was born in Cuba in 1942 and immigrated to New York City in 1960 at the age of eighteen. He would have recurring dreams of flying over Cuba until his parents joined him in 1966, but his sense of exile persisted beyond then and became a critical influence on his decision to turn from life as a factory worker to that of an artist. Coming of age in New York City, Cruz Azaceta experienced exile in a way that was considerably different from the Cuban diaspora in Miami. In New York, Cruz Azaceta lived amid an ascendant art capital, taking classes with contemporary artists such as Leon Golub and Mel Bochner. His early work developed largely through such dominant styles as geometric and abstract painting. The metropolis itself provided a context in which his sense of exile was at once exceedingly particular (as a Cuban) and a shared experience with 20 percent of the city's population, who were, like him, foreign-born in 1960 (today that figure stands above 37 percent). The artist's experience of exile guided his ongoing concern with human rights within the context of current events, such as the AIDS epidemic, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, inspiring graphically powerful paintings, mixed media pieces, and installations.⁷

In his paintings, Cruz Azaceta often turns to self-portraiture in order to render an everyman at the center of state violence, political exile, and national crises. In *The Crossing* (1991) (fig. 12), the artist depicts his own head decapitated in a small boat, screaming in agony while being upheaved by an undulating ocean. This image—iterated on with variations in numerous works—serves as an icon of Cuban exile,

⁶ Martínez, "The Miami Generation."

⁷ See also Alejandro Anreus, *Luis Cruz Azaceta* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2014).



fig.10
María Brito, *Ever-Present Past*, 1988. Photo by Ramón Guerrero. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.11
María Brito, *El patio de mi casa* (The Backyard of My House), 1990. Installation view at Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photo by the artist. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.12
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *The Crossing*, 1991. Photo by Will Drescher. Courtesy Chon Noriega

capturing a violent transition from wholeness to loss. That transition, a crossing over from one state to another, works on two levels: the geopolitical (from Cuba to the United States) and the subjective (from belonging to exile). It also serves as a metaphor for contemporary political being. While this lithograph narrates a severing—of the body from itself and within the body politic—the subject of that violent act is centered within the image and his expressive face made the focal point. Cruz Azaceta imbues himself—and the figure, generally—with an everyman status, making the exile the archetypal subject for the modern era. This maneuver is a critical one. If states are defined by their claim to the “legitimate” use of violence within their territorial boundaries, to be the object of that violence is precisely to lose subject status—to be, figuratively and literally, at sea, whether as a citizen or as a human being.

And yet, *The Crossing* subtly undercuts its own visual contrast between figure (an everyman) and ground (geopolitics), between the red and yellow tones marking the boat and head, and the blue and green hues imbuing the ocean and sky. Defying this tonal separation, upon close inspection, dashes and patches of red and yellow visibly accent the ocean waves, and the screaming head’s expression is conveyed in part through blue-green lines framing the face. The figure’s peaked hairline and thatch of white, black, blue, and green hair is suggestive of the artist’s rendering of the waves. If Cruz Azaceta situates the exile at the center of his work (and of the viewer’s attention), that figure is marked by the contradiction of its social and political marginality: the exile is at once the work’s screaming subject and an echo of the colors and violence of its background.



fig.13
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *ARK*, 1994. Photo by Cameron Wood. Courtesy Chon Noriega

In *ARK* (1994) (fig. 13), Luis Cruz Azaceta depicts a *balseiro*, or rafter, whose body has merged with an oar. This large-scale painting, created during the summer 1994 crisis in which nearly 40,000 Cubans were interdicted at sea, has an “almost monochromatic starkness,” pairing the surreal figure with the banal imagery of five diminutive Polaroid prints dangling from lines anchored above the partially-obscured word “SHARK”—notably, the first two letters have been painted over, suggesting the artwork’s title.⁸ The Polaroids depict actual rafters and sharks, as well as hubcaps and a nude portrait of the artist. As Cruz Azaceta states, “I live in the Diaspora. My home (my culture) I carry with me. I am in perpetual movement. An infinite voyage. Neither here nor there. Floating on a raft, carrying my freedom, dreams and desires.”⁹

If Cruz Azaceta uses self-portraiture to depict the exile as the exemplary everyman of the contemporary era, this figure truly emerges in 1981 in the context of the artist’s attempts to capture the underside of New York City in paint, as he had in the mid-1970s in a series of absurdist paintings on the subway

⁸ Alejandro Anreus’s phrase from Luis Cruz Azaceta, 67

⁹ Luis Cruz Azaceta quoted in Anreus, Luis Cruz Azaceta, 67.

system. In *City Painter of Hearts* (1981) (detail, fig. 14 and pp. 94–95), Cruz Azaceta depicts skyscrapers against a backdrop of flames filling the sky. The buildings are composited with body parts, transforming the skyline into a macabre portrait of sorts. In the foreground, a giant white animal is feeding on a smaller blue animal that is in turn eating a smaller gray mouse. The white and blue animals are fantastical versions of a dog and a cat. The three animals float in the middle of the painting, inhabiting the scale and perspective established by the skyscrapers. This is an allegorical space of violence and animality in the built environment, what the artist calls “an apocalyptic vision of an urban place.”¹⁰ It is a vision that is suggestive of Bruegel’s *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (1557) at the Met. Bruegel’s engraving was signed “Hieronymus Bosch” by the printer, even though Bosch had died some 40 years earlier, making the artwork itself an example of the ancient Latin proverb from which the title is derived (*Grandibus Exigui Sunt Pisces Piscibus esca*).

In the lower part of *City Painter of Hearts*, the street is painted gray, in stark contrast to the more expressionist depiction of the building-bodies and animals above. In the right corner, the artist has rendered himself in the nude painting a small canvas on an easel. Cruz Azaceta’s self-portrait is smaller than the mouse; the cigarette butts on the street are just as large as his limbs. He is painting a red heart icon set against a blue background. While the image might at first glance suggest an oblivious urban artist, the heart icon is in fact mirrored on the far left side of the street—from behind the corner of a building, a head juts out, issuing forth an inverted heart-shaped pool of blood into a blue puddle. Below this scene is the artist’s signature.

In subsequent paintings from that year, Cruz Azaceta uses self-portraiture to explore the porous boundary he experiences between himself and the city. In *Tough Ride Around the City* (1981) (fig. 15), he reverses the scale between artist and urban environment, painting the New York skyline across a sideways portrait of his (severed) head and, in a surreal touch, depicting himself a second time in the work as a small, naked figure mounted on and riding the bridge of his severed head’s nose. In *Apocalypse Now or Later* (1981) (fig. 16), the artist is seen again in a riding position—this time, mounted on a horse and leaping over a landscape of body parts while blowing a bugle. Here, at the start of the 1980s, the artist struggles to call attention to an emerging apocalypse. In fact, Cruz Azaceta shifts media during this period from oil to acrylic, in part so that he can paint faster to meet the urgency that the times are demanding. As he recalls, “In 1981, I was very political and I created a lot of paintings.”¹¹ What one sees in Cruz Azaceta’s paintings throughout the 1980s is an artist transforming self-portraiture from a self-reflexive gesture within political art to a re-centering of the very ground upon which the artist stands.

¹⁰ Quote from Denise Lugo, “Oral History Interview with Luis Cruz Azaceta,” June 30, 1989, archived and online at the John Spoor Broome Library, California State University, Channel Islands: https://repository.library.csuci.edu/bitstream/handle/10139/5463/Azaceta_1.pdf?sequence=1

¹¹ Ibid.



fig.14
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *City Painter of Hearts*, 1981 (detail). Photo by Oriol Tarridas



fig.15
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Tough Ride Around the City*, 1981. Photo by Eeva Inkeri. Courtesy Chon Noriega

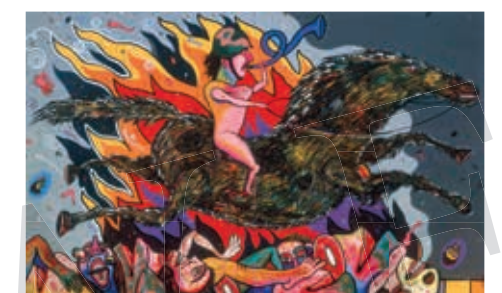


fig.16
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Apocalypse Now or Later*, 1981. Photo by Eeva Inkeri. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.17
Memorias de la revolución (Memories of the Revolution), WOW Café Theater, 1986. Play co-written by Carmelita Tropicana and Uzi Parnes. Alina Troyano as Pingalito, with WOW actors: Lisa Kron, Diane Jeep Ries, Peggy Healey, Maureen Angelos, Kate Stafford. Photo by Uzi Parnes. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.18
Candela, Dance Theater Workshop, presented at the Bessie Schönberg Theater, 1988. Play co-written by Carmelita Tropicana, Uzi Parnes, and Ela Troyano. Alina Troyano as Carmelita Tropicana, with Ishmael Houston Jones. Photo by Uzi Parnes. Courtesy Chon Noriega



fig.19
 "Chicken Sushi" skit in *Cheet-chat with Carmelita*, Club Chandaliar (run by Uzi Parnes and Ela Troyano), 1987. Photo by Uzi Parnes. Courtesy Chon Noriega

Carmelita Tropicana: Mucho Multi

In Alina Troyano's description of returning to Cuba in *Milk of Amnesia*, the artist gestures to memory—not as something personal or cultural that can be recovered, but as something that is profoundly fallible, borderless, and highly mediated through mass culture. Such memory disrupts our sense of time, scale, and proximity. It in effect renders us a stranger to ourselves, especially in contrast to the more conventional roles we take on as social actors within a community, a nation, or between nations. In *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano contrasts Cuban milk ("sweet, condensed") with American milk ("pasteurized, homogenized"). As a child, her experiences of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution, and exile played out in her stomach, not in her heart or her mind. Cuban milk, like Milk of Magnesia, calms the stomach, while American milk, like Milk of Amnesia (slang for the powerful anesthetic Propofol), induces sleep and amnesia. How does an artist depict their own amnesia, their own experience of reduction to social type, and their own evolving sense of agency?

In *Milk of Amnesia*, written and performed by Alina Troyano and directed by her sister Ela Troyano, the artist uses her performance alter ego Carmelita Tropicana to represent her childhood and her return visit to Cuba. The Tropicana alter ego emerged within the New York performance art scene in the 1980s (figs. 17, 18, 19) and was often contrasted with another Troyano alter ego, Pingalito Betancourt, an archetypal Cuban macho who adores Tropicana. Put another way, Cuban character types, culture, and political history were central to the emergence of U.S. performance art, as well as of feminist and LGBTQ arts and activism in the 1980s. In *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano introduces her autobiographical voice for the first time—not as the "real" subject of the story, but as another voice among those seeking different terms for co-existence. The play's end is subtle in its transition from character to artist, and from personal story to a simple comment on the human scale of the generation-long embargo against Cuba. Tropicana relates meeting composer Pedro Luis Ferrer, who sings to her his song about a commonality that binds all social types in the hemisphere. Before Ferrer sings, he tells Tropicana, "The embargo is killing us." It is at this point that Troyano steps out of character, and—as the artist—simply asserts, "I agree with Pedro Luis." She subsequently translates Ferrer's song before playing the recording for the audience: "Everybody for the same thing / Between the pages of colonialism / Capitalists, homosexuals, atheists, spiritualists, moralists / Everybody for the same thing."¹²

Throughout the bulk of the play, Carmelita Tropicana unleashes a whirlwind of allusions from Proust to *Star Trek*, outlining Troyano's development as a queer performance artist, and sings about the *sandwich de lechón* after Tropicana

and a pig have both undergone operations at the same clinic. Troyano employs absurdity, satire, and stream of consciousness to upend conventional notions of history, politics, culture, and identity. And yet, the play also offers a resolution, "My journey is complete . . . I can drink two kinds of milk." It is a resolution that solves a problem (amnesia) and makes a commitment (co-existence across differences), but is by no means dogmatic, prescriptive, ideological. Instead, it is articulated through the arts, an audience, and a sense of the self as containing multitudes. Or, as Carmelita Tropicana declares about where she lives, "It is multicultural, multinational, multigenerational, *mucho multi*. And, like myself, you've got to be multilingual. I am very good with the tongue."

While *Milk of Amnesia* is from the early 1990s, it provides a narrative of U.S. performance art in the 1980s in relation to the Cuban Revolution, exile, and embargo, and introduces the artist's own *mucho multi* voice alongside those of her Cuban alter egos. In 1986, Troyano first presented *Memorias de la revolución* (Memories of the Revolution, 1986) (p. 177) at the WOW Café Theater, a feminist theater space and collective in New York's East Village. The play reworked two Cuban nationalist allegories in order to situate Troyano's alter egos at their center. The first allegory is alluded to in the title itself, which references Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment, 1968), the first major feature film produced in postrevolutionary Cuba. The film explores the role of the nonrevolutionary, post-bourgeois artist amid the Cuban missile crisis—and it does so by juxtaposing the main character's sex life and psychological observations with the apocalyptic moment in which the new state found itself at the center of the Cold War. In the play, Pingalito Betancourt serves as character and narrator, riffing on the role of the protagonist in Gutiérrez Alea's film. Both men provide lectures, criticism, and lyricism in equal measure; and in both works, sexual and political discourses are strongly interwoven. But Pingalito queers earnest masculinity-cum-politics, identifying a lesbian chanteuse as the "symbol of Cuban womanhood." The second allegory is that of la Virgen del Cobre's appearance before three sailors caught in a storm in 1612. The sailors, two Indigenous brothers and one enslaved African child (called the "three Juans"), prayed to a medal with the Virgin's image. Her subsequent appearance became a symbol of Cuban identity across racial divisions that marked the nation. In the play, la Virgen appears before a boat with two Cuban lesbians and a German female spy, and the time period is adjusted to correlate with the Cuban Revolution and the emergence of U.S. performance art and happenings. When la Virgen appears, she informs Carmelita that she must give up the Cuban Revolution for an international one aimed at women, telling her in a mixture of English and German, "Your kunst is your waffen." The phrase suggests vague sexual overtones, but in fact translates to "Your art is your weapon."

¹² See the script for the play in Alina Troyano, *Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*, ed. Chon Noriega (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

Three Artists in a Boat

In her Performance Art Manifesto (1991) (fig. 20),¹³ Troyano writes about her work as an artist at the end of the 1980s: “Performance art changes the way you look at the world. Your perceptions are changed; an object is no longer what it seems.” Troyano’s statement applies to Brito, Cruz Azaceta, and other artists in this exhibition, as well. What intrigues me about the three artists I have discussed here is how different their art is from one another, and yet each is drawn to performative self-portraiture as a key strategy by which they engage their personal experience of exile, in effect re-centering what it means to be a contemporary artist. In that respect, their work contributes to a hemispheric shift, not just one particular to Cubans, Latinos, or Americans (that is, U.S. citizens). As a first measure to honor their contributions across geographic or national bounds, I have taken care to avoid describing their artworks by way of such reductive identity categories since doing so can obscure how the particulars of the artists’ embodied experiences are articulated through artistic practice and art history.¹⁴ Both Cruz Azaceta and Brito define the everyman or everywoman not in terms of the ordinary, the common, or the normative, but rather from the position of the exile who has become marginal to such notions or hopes of a typical existence within a society. These artists are not identifying themselves as exceptional—that is, as the hero that stands in contrast to the everyman or everywoman. Instead, they are shifting the center from which we imagine social being, shifting it from a norm of national belonging to the reality of existing between categories and borders. Both artists are attentive to the performative and structured aspects of social existence, and also to the way in which the dominant framings of the world get into one’s head.

Troyano participates in this shift, too, but takes another approach as a performance artist—appropriating Cuban national archetypes (female and male) in order to queer and gender them, while also bringing *cubanidad* and exile into queer and feminist art spaces in the U.S. and Europe. Like the other artists, rather than foreground one issue, one perspective, she weaves together a tapestry that we now call *intersectional* as a mode of describing the social. As she explained in 1995, “all these shifts of identity depend upon who is doing the seeing.”¹⁵ Leaving the 1980s and 1990s behind and returning to the present, Alina and Ela Troyano have recently produced a podcast series exploring Alina’s memories.¹⁶ This series begins with Alina deliberately intoning her sister’s words, “That’s not what happened!” Immediately we are in the subjective—*Alina’s* story, *her* memoir, what *she* remembers—given that someone else who was present at the time is objecting *before* we even hear the account. The series is also notable for what Alina does not tell, or what she talks around, *la indirecta*, which casts shadows for a wider range of experiences beyond the story itself, beyond the artist.

But who knows where memories come from . . .

¹³ Troyano, *Carmelita Tropicana*, 177-78.

¹⁴ I discuss the category of Latina/o art in Chon Noriega, “Is There Such a Thing as Latina/o Art?” in *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American & Latina/o Art*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, Megan A. Sullivan. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 504-13.

¹⁵ “Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged,” interview by David Román, *The Drama Review* 39, no. 3 (1995): 84.

¹⁶ *That’s Not What Happened* (2021), nine episodes, written and performed by Alina Troyano, and directed by Ela Troyano, on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/carmelitatropicana>.

PERFORMANCE ART MANIFESTO (1991)

Carmelita Tropicana

I know you will not sleep tonight, tossing and turning, tossing and turning, thinking, How did she become a performance artist. So I tell you.

I became a performance artist in 1987 when a filmmaker by the name of Ela Troyano called me up and said there was a grant given by the New York Foundation for the Arts for performance art. I said, “Ela, performance art?” She said, Five thousand dollars.” I said, “performance art, of course.” So I rushed right over and write in the application “deconstruction, deconstruction, deconstruction.” I know they like that word. So what do you know, I got the grant. So I have a piece of advice for all you girls out there: Do it, do it, and then you find out what the heck it is. A posterior, a priori, whatever.

So now that I was a performance artist, I had to put together my own Performance Art Manifesto which I would like to share with you. I will begin with definitions.

The first definition is by a famous performance artist, she is short, with short hair, a musician that goes “Ooh, ooh, ooh.” That’s right: Laurie Anderson. Laurie Anderson says, and I quote: “Performance art is performance by a live artist.” This is true. If the artist is dead it is not performance art.

The second definition is by another performance artist who is short, with short hair, who was defunded by the National Endowment for the Arts for the homoerotic content in her work, the infamous Holly Hughes. And Holly says, and I quote: “Ninety percent of performance art is in the costumes.” Voilà, check out my camouflage, Desert Storm, rumba, and flamenco dancer costume.

The third definition is by another performance artist who is short, with short hair, and who wears camouflage outfits. Yes, it is me, and I quote myself. Performance art changes the way you look at the world. Your perceptions are changed; an object is no longer what it seems.

Exhibit number one. (Showing a toilet plunger to audience) What is this, people? I ask you, eh? What did you say? A plunger? Hah. I laugh at you wildly. This is what I also thought this was, a plunger, until I saw a performance artist by the name of Jack Smith. The performance was in the Greenwich Village in a concrete basement. It was packed, there were eight of us. There was a breeze created by fans on the floor and beautiful Scheherazade music playing, when out came the exotic Jack Smith dancing like an Arabian prince/princess in diaphanous material. In the middle of the concrete floor he poured gasoline to form a black lagoon. Then he took a match and set fire to the lagoon. The flames got bigger and bigger; we thought we were going to die in the conflagration. Jack relevéd, pliéd, and chasséd to the corner and took out this plunger and, never missing a beat in his dance, put out the flames. Ladies and gentlemen, I am a superintendent of a building and when a tenant calls me to tell me something is stuck in the toilet, I cannot hold this in my hands without thinking of Jack and his dance. And this plunger is no longer a plunger. It has been transformed. It is a “plunger” (pronouncing it with French accent). It is an objet d’art. An objet d’art.

I remember Jack Smith, who died of AIDS in 1989.

fig.20
Carmelita Tropicana’s Performance Art Manifesto, 1991