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Identity Case-d

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As far as I can remember, El Cuarto de Los Santos (The Saint's Room), was always there. For more than thirty years and every time I went back home the room was still the same, dark, no other use except to be the recipient of the home Altar.

A dressed table with images, relics, plastic flowers and every so often natural ones, votive candle and family pictures, a whole paraphernalia of related and unrelated things that as a child, they were to me playfully attractive and awesome at the same time.

The feeling of a presence dwelling in that room was as much part of it as it was its molten wax candle smell.

On another account, every first Monday of the month, La Virgen de Coromoto, the Venezuelan patroness, was brought to the house by an old woman devotee who carried the Virgin from house to house, hence, there she was, for two or three days, in her wooden box, with votive candle, flowers, and gifts, sitting in the living room as we enter the house, being the center of attention.

Altars are sites of ritual and communication with the supernatural, central focus of worship but also the bridge between the living and the dead. "The home Altar [in addition] serves to support ritual religious activity as well as to locate representations of cultural and personal identity" (Gonzales 93:82). They operate at the threshold between heaven and earth, magic and reason, but also between the religious and the social because in them we keep our liaison with family and traditions either through the imagery because every member of the family may have a different adopted 'Santo' or because they keep the (h)story of the family through baptism cards, photos, miracle amulets, promises and offerings, and most of all, obituary announcements. These home Altar pieces, most of the time under the surveillance and maintenance of the women of the house, move along the line between being an artwork with its own aesthetics and/or an entity with "culturally determined sign-functions" (Turner 83:356)

In this essay I will address the Altar, first: in its sociological reading as an art object as opposed to being part of a subaltern culture's folklore. Second: as an object capable of carrying identity performative characteristics and as an identity marker in relation to

belonging, and thirdly I will compare my own work as a postmodern resistance idea in relation to other artists working on the same theme.

From my perspective there is a clear parallelism between the way in which Latino Altars operate and the way Latino identity performs as they are pressured to conform to inner demands (such as language, traditions, family) and outside sociopolitical norms and economic forces demanding integration to a system that may prove contradictory to their inner realm. Therefore, in the same manner that Altars operate in the threshold of inner and outer forces as does individual and national identity. Both inner and outer realm, as major components of the process, in which identity is fabricated, might be equated to Garcia Canclini's assertion that the quest for a pure or authentic National Culture is pursued by both Traditionalists and Modernists alike. The Traditionalists (the inner realm) by trying to defend autochthonal cultures from industrialization processes, foreign influence and urban massification. This concept applies whether it is their own culture as is the case of nationalist legislation and 'ethnic' art or as the assumed exotic preservable one as the case might be of anthropologists with a native indigenous culture. Modernists (the outer realm), on the other side, by trying to construct and art for art's sake and knowledge for knowledge's sake (Garcia 94:4). The later are the universal themes as addressed by, usually and mainly restricted to, male white artists and thinkers. It is the dilemma confronted by every subject under the influential sphere of the dominant culture: to be an assimilationist or a nationalist. Latino cultures, either inside or outside of the United States, debating between the two forces must assume a position of resistive activism to undermine both stances since neither one of them offers a possibility of self assertion within the current political and economic order.

High Art, or cultured identity, being the privilege of the dominant class, diminishes the traditional or popular art (usually a "subaltern culture" Lubiano 96) by relocating it as folklore. Folklore values are based on the preservation of traditions, frozen images and symbols with no social function because they are solidified. "In other words, the community presents itself, but does not reflect on itself (does not represent itself): folklore never moves beyond that phase" (Glissant 89:207). Through this operation Latino cultures as subaltern are removed from the benefits of cultural interaction in the art world solely being able to represent the "autonomous mythic matrix or socio-cultural system that gave those objects precise meaning" (Garcia Canclini 94:5).

In the same operation, folklorization of popular art erases the individual from the making of the artwork. What is important is that the craft represents the untouched culture, pure in the modernist sense that they belong to a community whose product economic value depends on the imposed fixed cultural values as a condition for market accessibility.

What it boils down to, the stakes paid for having market accessibility, is to stop performing Identity in the sense that it does not conform to either one of the extremes of the binary. If Latino identity is not defined in terms of traditionalists or modernists then it is punished by cutting market accessibility because that third way, that elusive hybridity, escapes categorizations, something that digital, global late-capitalism is not prepared to consider. Judith Butler claims that we think of identity, "not as something that we have, but as something that we do." (Quoted in Blocker 99:24) Identity is performative (doing) in the sense that its corresponding actions are constituted within a set of social relations largely defined in opposition to fixed representations either in terms of politics, such as Governmental interactions, or socio-economic representations, as in the case of the stereotypes created by the Mass Media and the Global Corporations. To perform Identity is a descriptive process of being in the world and as such it indicates a constant move and liminality rather than stratified features. Therefore, Identity's performativity is imbued of a theatrical analogy: to be in a liminal state, crossing over as in a permanent rite of passage to avoid categorizations. It is living in a state of constantly aroused emotions (L. *emovere emot-* (as E-, *movere*, *move*) Oxford English Dictionary 1996). Continuing with the theatrical resonance, to perform Identity is a kind of political activism because "theater is the act through which the collective consciousness sees itself and consequently moves forward" (Glissant 89:196). But this reflective act of seeing itself, the capacity to observe ourselves as we perform requires a consciousness of the actions as a simultaneous operation even in everyday life situations. Being a 'subaltern culture' locates its subjects in constant performative situation because the subaltern condition defines the script and sets the rules of how they have to play, turning in this way the quotidian in a preexistent rehearseable pattern. ¹

The Altar case, both issue and recipient, is a good example of how Latino cultures have been using postmodern resistance tactics well before they had to confront attempts of Modernist acculturation by Eurocentrist hegemonic ideologies to counter balance its subaltern condition. Home Altars, as objects and as cultural sign-functions, have evolved within Michelle De Certeau tactics as a postmodern way of cultural survival. It is not a fortuitous coincidence that Jennifer Gonzales in her analysis of Amalia Mesa-Bains' Altars artwork uses De Certeau concept to describe Mesa-Bains subversive move of bringing the tradition of the Home Altar or "Museum of The Self" into the gallery or museum space (Gonzales 93:90). I said it is not a fortuitous coincidence because in my *mise-en-scene* for the play "Flor de Baile" (Ball Flower) by Venezuelan playwright Enrique Leon which deals with the abandonment and the oppressive quotidian of the women from oil-based town Maracaibo, I used De Certeau tactics as the underlying concept for the actresses to perform. They were always on the move, without a fixed blocking either physically or emotionally in order to avoid objectification by the

spectator's gaze. According to de Certeau "'Tactics' operate from the flexible stance of preparedness: seizing opportunities, taking advantage of the moment and the available resources" (De Certeau 84 quoted in Gonzales 93:84).

Home Altars reveal the complexities of performing identity (perform-I-identity) in the threshold because of the several functions they serve. They operate in a codified structure specific to a context, as does performance in the theatrical instance. Home Altars participate in the give and take of cultural movements by incorporating cultural symbols both sacred and secular according to specific inner contextual codes in the same way that Afro-Caribbean cultures incorporated catholic icons into the Yoruba Altars as a dispersive tactic towards the dominant hostile attitudes against pagan cults. I want to equate the transforming agency operating in both the making of Home Altars and the performing of Identity to the description that Isabel Castellanos gives of *Ache* (supreme energy of the Yoruba religion) in her essay "Religious Acculturation in Cuba": "*Ache* means first and foremost a vital energy, a force that is present in every animate and apparently inanimate object, be it a human being, a plant, an animal, a mountain, a rock, a chant, or a word...*Ache* is a transforming power" (Castellanos 96:47).

There is an idea in the elucidation about resistance and the inherent political activism in performing Identity that I would like to reconnoiter and that is the concept of *apparently inanimate objects*. Because what I want to discuss is a slippery concept, I would like to establish a common ground. According to Ferrater Mora "an activity is immanent to an agent when it dwells within the agent in the sense that it has in the agent its own end. An agent is the person or thing that has the power to affect." (Ferrater Mora 79:1075 - My translation).

Having established Ferrater Mora's concept of immanence as a common ground I will then move to the question: What makes a religious object religious? When we talk about an activity, in this specific 'case', we are referring to the making of Altars as religious and as art objects. Aesthetic qualities are intrinsic to art-making intentionality and although this might be or not a conscious intention for the person in action, aesthetics certainly is a main component of the religious object. For the person making the religious object the transferal of the power to affect into the object is achieved when the object is capable of both invocation and evocation. Since prehistoric time art has been linked to the ritual process not only as representing deities but also with the potentiality of calling them into action. As Kay Turner suggests, Icons have evocation as their primary religious function, "evocation defined as 'the calling forth of feeling, emotion, or memory; the summoning of spirit; and the production or suggestion through artistry and imagination of a vivid impression of reality' (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language)" (Turner 83:318). First we evoke through the object the qualities and dynamics of the deity, then,

this evocation through Art and Icons turns into invocation as the presence 'materialize' in the object. Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1968) introduces the concept of "presence" to the discussion of modern art while analyzing minimalist art. I will borrow to further illustrate the concept of presence in the object from his discussion of Clement Greenberg's "Recentness of Sculpture" regarding "the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it *seriously* -and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being aware of it and, so to speak, in acting accordingly" (Fried cited in Carlson 97:125).

Allow me a diversion for a moment on the artist/maker subject to later retake the idea of presence in the work. The aesthetic experience of the artist/maker belongs to the realm of his/her personal feeling of how the dynamics and qualities of a deity, meaning or cultural function, are better expressed through the materials available and also by how those materials relate to the collective imaginary to strike affective chords. Choosing a fabric in the store or using a piece of family broken jewelry is a decision taken in this particular state: artists/makers are performing actors that constantly reflect on their actions in a conscious manner, in a binocular position that allows them to observe, to act and to reflect on the observed simultaneously as if in a Brechtian manner. By this process they become pundits of themselves and hence, they acquire knowledge of the collective. Through this process of self-observation they become the ideal interpreters of the collective 'feeling' ² and master the transformation of regular mundane materials into religious artwork. Proxemics work its way into the placing and treatment of the materials as they become signs for new meanings. "At the home altar women remake and reinvent the usefulness of cultural symbols, both sacred and secular, according to their own histories, purposes, needs, desires and beliefs" (Turner 90:75).

After the artist/maker detour, let me return to idea of presence in the object through Michael Taussig's analysis of State Fetishism as he describes Emile Durkheim trying desperately to nail down his "Social facts are things" elusive concept and how from there, via reification since he (Taussig) questions Durkheim: "Things of God or things made?" how he arrives at the conclusion that Durkheim's "noble attempt to invent a narrative of the concept 'society', first [as] thing, then [as] God, is the consequence of the inability to appreciate that the concept *is both these simultaneously* and in any event, the fetish character of the 'social fact' as sheer thing and as moral thing is here strikingly conveyed. Which brings us to totems and their sacred powers, and the rule of old men." (Taussig 92:121). This quote is relevant to me because it is in the "reciprocation of thought in worked matter, and matter into thought" (Taussig 92:126) where the idea of Ache and apparently inanimate objects resides, the work of art as a performing agency for social transformation and the religious object as the dynamic interaction between the individual

and the collective because "a collective sentiment can become conscious of itself only by being fixed upon some material object; by virtue of this very fact [and that is what is so remarkably, crucial], it participates in the nature of this object, and reciprocally, the object participates in its nature" (Durkheim 1912 cited in Taussig 92:126). So religious objects are not arbitrary constructs, on the contrary, they are specific social sign-functions that generate a sense of belonging, community and identity. They are charged with a dwelling presence, the remains from the artist/maker activity materialized in the object and transformed by the beholder into an "affecting presence" (Armstrong 81 cited in Brown 96:80).

But this social specificity must not be understood as solidified or in any case attached to meaning in a way that makes them static. The performative quality of the object, its analogy to the theatrical performance with a constant movement and transformation makes Armstrong's concept of "affecting presence" most viable for elucidating how a religious object becomes religious. Armstrong "removes aesthetic objects entirely from the domain of cognitive meaning, emphasizing affect. Objects and performances, understood as 'affecting things and eng/events,' are 'purposefully concerned with potency, emotion, values, and state of being or experience --all, in a clear sense, *powers*' which are concrete and irreducible (Armstrong 1971:3-4, quoted in Davis 1983:238). For him, the objects do not 'refer' to or 'represent' anything else; they 'are what ever they are' because the experience of them is affective and immediate³. At the same time, the objects would seem to resist static contextualization in synchronic frameworks. "Objects circulate in an 'ambient of time,' diachronically, as they are additively or 'syndetically' applied by agents in the performance or 'work' of invoking affecting presence" (Brown 96:85).

With the idea in the 'air' that 'objects circulate in an ambient of time' allow me again a little story from my hometown. With my father in law's death, my wife took charge of the family's sugar cane plantation. Until then, an only-men's place, was now transformed into a predominantly women's place since the inheritors are four sisters and the widow. One of the first things my mother in law asked for, as she began to frequent the place, was that a small stone shrine to contain the image of Father Antonio Maria Claret be built in the patio as you enter the family house. This altar was not intended as the altar where you pray and worship but more as marker of belonging. A sign meant to be read by visitors. Back in the city, in my neighborhood, an old upper-class-now-rundown district where I enjoy walking, I can see that most of the houses have either built in the facade or in the front yard, to greet the visitors, a small shrine with the image of the revered saint or, mostly, virgin of the family choice. These markers are also meant to be read as signs of belonging.

As we 'walk' our way back to the objects circulating in an ambient of time, the idea of belonging resonates for me as an impossible desire that has to be won over and over as we constantly change or move. The infinite flux of relations and as I said before the analogy between the performance movement, as in a rite of passage, and Identity's performativity makes belonging a constantly changing, to-be-fulfilled desire that literally moves along as we walk, like the passing images (Icons) in front of me as I walk through my neighborhood. "Longing," according to the Oxford English Dictionary is: "*n.* a feeling of intense desire. *Adj.* having or showing this feeling." To be in this particular state is to be longing which is intrinsically a state on constant mobility. Elspeth Probyn's book "Outside Belongings" has in the Introduction a clear view on the idea of belonging as movement: "I wish to emphasize the ways in which belonging is situated at the threshold: both public and private, personal and common, this entails a very powerful mode of subjectification. It designates a profoundly affective manner of being, *always performed* with the experience of being within and in-between sets of social relations. It precisely emphasizes and moves with that experience. Moreover, belonging cannot be an isolated and individual affair. Conceptualizing social relations and subjectification in terms of outside renews an awareness of their very relationality." (My emphasis Probyn 96:13)

I think we have reached the point where the Altar as object marker of belonging meets the object circulating in an ambient of time because: what other thing does the Altar as marker of belonging signify but the belonging to an Identity? And, does not Identity, always performed, move in time as it moves through space forced by subalternity into a constantly disappearing act to subvert dominant ideologies and to avoid essentialist categorizations? The performance of Identity as well as the object's performance, in this case, the cased Altars, is about the experience of being in the world in an immediate and affecting manner.

Having established the important relationship between how Latino Altars operate and the way Latino Identity performs, I will now describe some of the 21 Altarpieces that compose the exhibit "Altares de Mano de Altares" in order to compare them to other artists working the same theme. The name is a play of words between their capability of being portable and the number 21 in the Yoruba religion which is referred to as a "Mano" (hand) either for the 21 divination cowries (seashell) or Elegua's 21 paths. As an introduction to my own work as artist/maker I want to present the reader with a text written a few days after I finished the last piece while I was still in the frenzied state that the making of the pieces affected upon me.

Altares de Mano de Altares

To work as an actor, designer and then as a theater director has developed in me the observation as a quotidian gesture. To observe the neighbor in his/her behavior, their little rituals and representations, have been my way of living. Not only to observe them with the idea of grasping and understanding the forms used to express themselves; also, in a process of self-observation, to search within myself for the common forms that forward us to an identity collective imaginary.

Submerged in the stream of memories and sinesthetic relations that self observation produces, I found representations that were tightly entwined with representation itself, such as the Icon as vehicle of deep beliefs rooted in the Catholic Counter Reform movement and the image's baroque exaltation; beliefs rooted as well in the totemic and shamanic African cultures 'exported' to the Caribbean basin during the conquest and further colonization of the just yesterday 'discovered' territory's autochthonous cultures.

Thus, the first holy communion at the 'Virgen de Fatima' Church, the bleeding christs, the martyr histories and Tacamajaca's stories (the Indian who took care of me as child in my father's hacienda) the roadside shrines to remember the dead, el cuarto de los santos, the Negro drums and the Catholic Action hymns, St. John's day celebrations, the danced funerals at my father's home town and the sea blessing ceremony go hand in hand mixing with the altars at the market place and the herb healers; popular medicine with Superman and Donald Duck, Captain Meteor and the Power Rangers, imported iconography from colder lands that in the same manner participate in the quotidian cult, every time more difficult to discern between God and the TV set. Where the local transformed, the local digested and disemboweled takes meaning to conform our collective imaginary.

Seduced by the sensuality of the material, so much for its materic as for its cultural components, I approached it with the purpose of giving release to an urge that resumes many aspects of my personality. Although I did not approach it from the educated aesthete point of view neither did I pretended to be the naïve popular artisan. Using my theatrical experience, the evocation as a creative resource and trance as a medium to give voice to the other, I proposed myself a persona that at the same time that it was not me could not stop being me. A third character that in a trance state, being both the aesthete and the popular artist, went along giving form, playing with the materials collected during a long period of fieldwork and research, to these 21 cased Altars.

Boxes, magic objects made in fervor. Feverish states during which I was taken by the material and the imagery stopped representing to present itself in a pure relationship, objectual, materic; where we had a dialogue and each one, material and maker, spoke a particular language and demanded pertinent needs; where the materials and the spatial relationship speak of new signs, of new times with specific contextual symbols. Where the semiotic of the trace speaks of the biography of the material, a trace speaking of the errors and not of the hidings, speaking of structures and not of garnish Commitment and rupturing where emotion is transforming and I get naked to show.

Fernando Calzadilla May, 1999

I have chosen three Case Altars out of the 21 that compose the 'Mano' on the basis of being, from my point of view, the most indicatives ones of the concepts expressed until now.

The first one. Saint Power Ranger is a sealed-in glass window box that makes the inside definitely inaccessible to any one. It is a sort of "in case of fire break the glass" kind of box. Inside we can see as the most important figure, suspended in mid air, the Power Ranger green image as it hang from his aureole by a thin wire attached to the top panel of

the box. The aureole is a silvery earring that belonged to one of my sisters in law. Power Ranger carries in his right hand a bouquet of flowers and on the left a high walking stick that reaches the box from top to bottom and hanging from his wrist, red glass beads to form a cross. To his left knee clings a troll with straight up blue hair. Gold chains and shoulder taps complete his regalia.

Next to his right shoulder is a smaller Wonder Woman figure with green hair and white skin this time not hanging but standing up side down. On the lower bottom left, there is one of the Zodiac Knights, spear in attack on one hand and rope on the other. He has under his control a paper cutout Renaissance Angel that lies flat on the bottom with the rope on his neck. On the lower bottom right, a rumba dancer dressed with rumba style sleeves and skirt but naked otherwise (breast and genitals). Right above the Zodiac Knight, on the side panel, a rubber crocodile, mouth wide open is about to take his head off. The box, dark pink and purplish color, has no other element in the outside, as for the inside there are coins, promises, flags, ribbons, toy flowerpots, seashells and medals.

The second one. Michael, the Archangel. There are only four Archangels in the catholic liturgy. Michael is one of them. I like Archangels. They are like big brothers, always ready to defend you in case of trouble. Young, handsome and valiant, they are not saints or martyrs. I was distinctively enchanted with this figure when in one of my outings to the market I saw it with the other Michael, like an army of big brothers. The box that nestle my Michael is a story on its own. I will just say that it belonged to a dear person that shared my home, a fellow worker killed by the Colombian guerrilla a year and a half ago while visiting his hometown. Michael's box has a door that is kept closed by a latch. Pasted on the outside door panel is a Renaissance Poseidon door knocker paper cutout hand colored and varnished to melt the figure with the wood grain. The cigarette burn marks on the bottom belong to José. He used to keep the box at his bedside. On the other three exterior panels are equally pasted some 'anima sola' (the solitary soul) prayers, angels, Goya's and Gordon-Craig's drawings, etc. The treatment on the outside is 'dripped' with dark brown ink stains running down on all four panels. The wood is raw. Once you open the door, the first thing you see is a pair of big black eyes that stare forward from a half mask made from the shell of the Totumo tree fruit. The native Indians have used the fruit of this tree for thousand of years as a utensil as well as a sacred agency. It is completely integrated to our culture nowadays. Then you will see Michael standing on top of a metal piece, something many times burned that I found buried in the sugar cane plantation and that must have been part of tractor. Through the openings in the metal piece we see the red and orange cellophane paper simulating hell's flames. Michael has a spear in his hands and is holding down at his feet a shattered satanic figure, an evil dragon-like incarnation escaped from the darkness of hell itself. Next to Michael but not on a pedestal stands a doll-like figure of TV series' Hercules. His costume was re

arranged to look after Michael's costume and a pair of white cardboard wings added to complete the assimilation. He holds a spear on one hand and Hercules 'original' sword on the other. Although he is not fighting any dragon figure, he has just cut in half, as the dripping blood indicates, the length of snake whose head he holds down with his right foot. On the interior door panel, hangs a Peruvian pendant. A papier-mâché medallion of a horseman stepping on a laying figure. They seem to be in battle but they are not saints or evil. A small piece of board serves as support to three American copper pennies and a nickel coin. Above Michael/Hercules figure, on the side panel, hangs a talisman made with seeds and feathers from my pet parrot.

The third one. I had this image sitting on my studio shelves for a long time. I had almost given up all hope about using it in one of the boxes. She had not spoken to me yet. Little by little she began to communicate and I started to prepare a box that had just the sides, no front door and no back panel. I worked on the wood with stucco and color, sanded it and polished inside and out without knowing where it was going to take me. The image is known as "La Dolorosa" (a literal translation would read as 'the painful one' but a more poetic one could read as 'the mournful'). It evokes the aged mother of Jesus as she mourns her son's death. After I finished polishing the four-panel box, I placed the image in it and felt terribly alone, identified with the figure and not knowing how to follow from there. She spoke again and all I felt was an urge to confine the image inside the box with twine. I wrapped her in and observed again just to realize that a more virtual and closer to her kind of confinement was necessary. With the box wrapped and the figure already inside I began to work on something else according to her needs. The four brass poles arrived to enclose her in a virtual glass case. They protrude on the outside where they serve as posts to the hanging image of Christ she looks up to. A piece of purple silk shantung as background completed the assemblage. I chose this one as the third because the style radically changed to a symbolic formality that I consider absent in the rest.

In order to begin a comparison of this three selected Altars with other work, there are a couple of ideas I will borrow from the exquisite essay by Michael Moon⁴ titled "Oralia: Hunger for Women's Performances in Joseph Cornell's Boxes and Diaries." Moon asserts, that most of the critical work done on Cornell's boxes remains in the area of the 'innocent' and 'enchanted' qualities of the object. Some indefinable aura of mysteriousness that makes them removed and magical qualifies them as high art. After reading Moon's work and Cornell's biography "Utopia Parkway" by Deborah Solomon, I realized that Cornell's work does not differ from that of the artist/maker of religious objects I described before. What is so important in Cornell's work and critics purposely insist to ignore is the immanent presence dwelling in the boxes. In Cornell, the making of the boxes can be equated to the making of a religious object. His urban monk-like existence and the relationship he established with the material are nothing else but the

synthesis of a collective imaginary at work. Moon suggests that "the idea of condensation fascinated Cornell" (Moon 96:49) because of the discrepancy between the effort and amount of words that a dream would require to be conveyed in his diaries and the incredible amount of thought that a 'box' could release. The amount of trinkets and images that Cornell assembled in his work spoke of his relationship with the world, a process about being in the world of cafeterias, movie stars stills, women and dime stores. Celeste Olalquiaga indicates that "in providing an aesthetic experience that transcends the object, kitsch is finally legitimized as art, an issue that has been of more concern to art critics than to kitsch artists." (Olalquiaga 96:50). That is for a white male artist, of course, otherwise, Cornell's work would have been read as purely kitsch or according to the 'case', folklore or ethnic art.

Amalia Mesa-Bains artwork "Dolores Del Rio Shrine" draws from the tradition of the Mexican home altars borrowing the form and the use of secular cultural items usually restricted to the home privacy into the public sphere of the museum/ gallery space. What is more specific to Mesa-Bains work is that her iconography is not restricted to the holy image. By using Dolores de Rio iconography she sanctifies the secular Mexican Icon making a political statement about the segregation the artist (Del Rio) suffered. Other Icons of Mexican culture sanctified by Mesa-Bains include painter Frida Kahlo and the artist's own grandmother. Jennifer Gonzales' critique of Mesa-Bains work asserts that "it involves taking a stand in a public forum, that is nevertheless grounded in an intimate and culturally specific practice...above all she argues for a new history of the Chicana; one in which heroines such as Del Rio are not erased by the memory of the main stream." (Gonzales 93:90)

I think that so far the differences and similarities in my work with the work of Cornell and Mesa-Bains speak for themselves, although I would call attention to the fact that in Mesa-Bains the political statement, which is an aspect that attracts me most, is circumscribed to the Chicano identity politics and fails to address the issue from a wider perspective. By bringing to the center the newly sanctified Mexican popular Icon, Mesa-Bains operates within the stance of 'self-tropicalization' running the risk of reinforcing the imposed stereotype and being categorized by the same idea she is trying to critique. As Olalquiaga cautioned, "Chicano and Nuyorican home altar recycling, therefore, is treading a very thin line between re-elaborating a tradition whose exclusive rights are questionable and being artistically identified solely with the task." (Olalquiaga 92:48)

My proposal here is to revert the situation by taking the dominant Icon, in this case, the TV and comic Icon, and assimilate it to the Latino mode of expression without self-tropicalizations but instead tropicalizing the 'other'. To desecrate the other by turning it into the 'foreigner' to a coherent system of beliefs and representations whose defensive

tactic is the mobility and its ever-changing relationality. Little brother Hercules dressed up as Michael the Archangel is having Hercules play second fiddle to a set of symbols and specific sign-functions that are completely alien to him. This operation is a postmodern resistance tactic empowered "precisely [by] capitalism's emptying of a univocal and monological use value that enabled the eventual breaking down of conventional ways of meaning formation" (Olalquiaga 92:xvii) allowing us the multidimensional quality of an all encompassing perception of both dominant and subaltern cultures; allowing our Identity to move from and to in an ever changing configuration. "We tend to act as if identity were a fixed given and needfully forget that it is not an essence but a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 94 cited in Spitta 97:175).

In reviewing other artist's artwork approaching the Altar either as theme or as medium I found a consistent tendency to get involved with the subject without a critical distance that could allow the artist the possibility of subverting the dominant stereotype. From my perspective, one thing is the home altar and the altar installation for ritual purposes in the seclusion of a private space and another completely different is the altar and the religious object in the museum or gallery space. The direct translation of the work's intentionality from the private space into the public one immediately locates the work within the realm of the Duchampean ready-made objects or even worse, in the realm of the curiosity cabinets of late 1800's and the Natural History Museum's exotic cultures dioramas. By getting involved with the subject without critical distance I mean that once you become public it is impossible not to assume a political stance and that political stance has to evolve accordingly with the need to subvert or reinforce Identity politics as they are performed. I believe that a light sense of humor plays an important role in the making of religious artwork for public spaces. Humor allows taking a critical distance from the work so it can be permeated with the necessary mobility. Of the thirty something artists I had the opportunity to review through books and exhibit catalogs, just a few of them caught my eye as having a sense of playfulness in the work. We must not forget that both Altars and Identity perform, and to perform has a distinctive theatrical resonance with playing as in acting and as in being ludicrous. The artists I am referring to are Forge Toro/Jennifer Sloan, Nestor Otero, and Jose Bedia. Bedia, for example, for his piece "Lucero del Mundo" (1993), a reproduction of his home altar made for the exhibit "Face of the Gods", he assures that although it is a reproduction of his home altar it does not have ache. He painted directly on the wall behind the altar the cosmogony related to his orishas, but as he declared in an interview with Arturo Lindsay⁴, as a child he was attracted to the American Native Indians but had no access to them, so in this altar, he placed a doll like figure of an American Indian Chief opposite to a Cuban Negro figure with other 'tools' between them. I do not think that one has to be an expert in Yoruba religion or in

international relationships to read between the lines of Bedia's piece for a traveling exhibit in The United States (before he had emigrated) which main purpose was to link west and central Africa grammar of Altar traditions with those of Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico and in Black and Latino North American. Or, in Toro/Sloan's piece at four hands for the exhibit "Reaffirming Spirituality," El Museo del Barrio (1995), where they assembled in a triptych manner the memories of their families. One as he remembered the controversy between Catholics and Evangelists over his hometown church (Hormigueros, PR) and the other with her father's weekend carpentry and The Cloisters in NYC as her shrine child memory. I think they play altar with a serious sense of humor.

For the rest of us, who transit the elusive path between religious objects and artwork per se, it is difficult to speak from the inside about the outside without removing ourselves from the connections that keep us tied to an imagined community. I will finish with a relevant quote from Juan Flores essay "The Latino Imaginary: Dimensions of Community and Identity" that clearly asserts the need to be inside/outside in order to always observe ourselves as we perform Identity: "The role of social imagination and the imaginary in the self-conception of nationally, ethnically, and 'racially' kindred groups is of course central, but must always be assessed with a view toward how they are being imagined, from the 'outside', and to what ends and outcomes. Distinguishing between interior and exterior perspectives is thus a necessary step, and given that in the case of Latinos the outside representation is the dominant one, any instance of cultural expression by Latinos themselves may serve as a healthy corrective to the ceaseless barrage of stereotypes that go to define what is 'Latino' in the public mind" (Flores 97:185).