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Pedro Alderete's alstars and autotopographies: Call-777 Nganga

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PEDRO ALDERETE'S ALTARS & AUTOTOPOGRAPHIES

Call-777 Nganga

OLIVER BOLTON STUDIO, TORONTO, MAY 3–31, 1996

REVIEW BY DAVID MCINTOSH

Nganga provides me with a voice of many voices; each element has a life of its own, a reason for being. It is an inanimate object which lives as revelations. Its magic occurs within actual experience; it is based on a nature-specific dialogue rooted in a given place and time that is interactive and that offers its many elements an equal voice in the creative process.

—Pedro Alderete

Over the past decade, a form of artistic expression particular to Latino cultures emerged in Los Angeles and New York. Elaborating the popular tradition of constructing personal altars in the home dedicated to a range of aboriginal and African deities and Catholic religious figures, many visual artists reformulated this aspect of their Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban heritage to express a range of cultural concerns. Cultural critic Celeste Olalquiaga examined this artistic phenomenon in her 1992 text *Megalopolis*,¹ pointing out that the use of mass produced Catholic statuary and imagery in artists' altars provided a suitable surface from which to comment on issues ranging from the banality of consumer culture to the eclipse of traditional spirituality by cults of beauty and fame. Similar projects have been undertaken in other media by writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and performance art shamans like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who invoke history through ritual to propose an intertwining of spiritual, social and aesthetic purposes.



Las Siete Potencias, 1996, installation element: B&W photo. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In his recent show "Call-777 Nganga," Havana-born Toronto artist Pedro Alderete exhibited a series of altar works that reference the recent history of this form of expression as practiced primarily in major U.S. cities, but that highlight the specifics of Alderete's personal vision, spiritual heritage and border-crossing journey. The

seven installation pieces that constitute his exhibition are all grounded in the West African spiritual tradition of orisha, or deities, which has been practised continuously, in varying degrees of overtness, since the first African slaves were brought to Cuba by the Spanish in the 1500s. Within this spiritual tradition the nganga is a personal, home altar through which the orisha are invoked. A metal receptacle containing human and animal parts, branches of different trees, roots and soils, the nganga is a living form and centre of magical forces. On a recent trip to Havana, after an absence of many years, Alderete reconnected with his African-Cuban heritage, an aspect of his identity which had

become submerged in his life in Toronto. A visit to the home of his grandmother, the woman who raised him and who even after her death continues to be revered as one of Havana's most powerful spiritual leaders, prompted him to bring his nganga and all of the history, memory and knowledge that it embodied, back to Toronto.

ENTRANCING DOORS



Nganga, 1996, installation detail. Photo: Oliver Bolton.

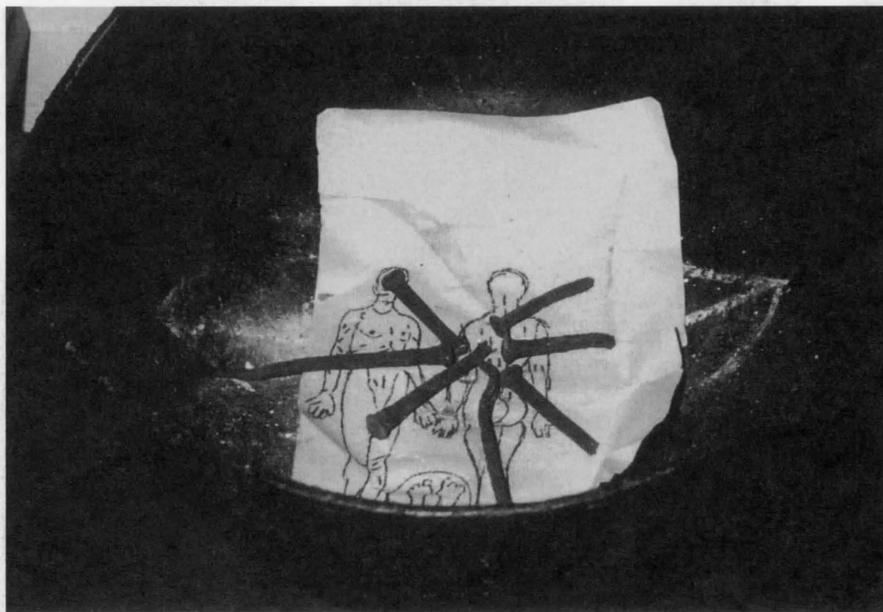
On the opening night of his Toronto exhibition, Alderete did a performance in which he reassembled his *nganga* on the gallery floor, explaining the symbolic and ritual meaning of each element while drawing it in egg shell chalk on a large piece of black cloth. Included in the items found and collected by the artist to construct his *nganga* are: a stone of faith with the believer's signature on the bottom, which serves as the foundation of the altar; twenty-one sticks from twenty-one different trees, a multiple of the number seven, which signifies the gender-shifting warrior orisha Chango; the effigies of identical twins, which symbolize multiple identity and the infinite regression of mirror image; horse shoes, which symbolize escape; and the crowning element, a handmade effigy of Elegua, a capricious

and playful orisha who is quick to anger, must be appeased with toys and candies, and who sits in corners and at crossroads, opening and closing doors. On completion of the performance, both the *nganga* and the drawn map of it had been transformed from a collection of inanimate objects into a complex and resonant point of interaction between an individual and a communally held worldview. Alderete's generous narration of the construction of his altar respected its spiritual power while allowing the uninitiated to comprehend the basics of the system of beliefs it embodied. This performance also gave viewers the tools to read and interpret the other works in the exhibit.

The other five installations in the exhibition, each comprised of seven discrete

pieces, build on the traditional *nganga*, abstracting it, condensing it, adapting it and integrating it with a range of industrial materials and artistic processes. In an installation entitled *Historical Devices*, Alderete has mounted seven sumptuous 11" x 14" Cibachromes depicting various altars from his grandmother's house in acrylic boxes which are then piled on top of each other to simulate a brick wall. The images in the Cibachromes demonstrate the great adaptability of the orisha to personally designated forms of representation; for example, in one photo of a corner of the house, the twins are represented by two identical blue ceramic pots, while Elegua assumes the form of a white plate full of food offerings with another white plate covering it. The overall effect of this piece is to suggest the

PEDRO ALDERETE'S ALTARS



Las Siete Potencias, 1996, installation detail. Photo: Oliver Bolton.

contradiction and continuity between a hard-edged modern surface and a richly personal past. In another installation piece titled *Nombrando Altares* (Naming Altars), Alderete has mounted seven miniature oil paintings of gay men of colour from Toronto who have died of AIDS in a single altar, surrounding each painting with mirrored surfaces and placing a glass of water in front of each image to call the orisha to honor and protect the spirits of the dead. *Suspended Issues* is a hanging installation of seven poured clear acrylic blocks in which Alderete has encased a range of objects ranging from the personal to the industrial to the sacred. As these hanging transparent blocks spin, the two sides of reality become apparent. In one block, the artist has suspended a Polaroid nude portrait of himself on one side and an unopened condom on the other; in another block, a mass produced image of Che Guevara turns to reveal a mass produced image of the Virgin of Regla, a symbol of the orisha Yemaya, female deity of salt water, on the other side; in yet another block, one of the artist's dreads has been encased with a representation of the ever-present

Elegua as a hooked stick. *Suspended Issues* extends the notion of continuity and contradiction to considerations of duality and bifurcation.

The most complex installation in the show, which replicates and resonates with the nganga on a number of levels, is *Las Siete Potencias* (The Seven Powers). Alderete has created a wall installation of seven handcrafted altars where the sticks from the nganga have been transformed into wooden L-shaped shelves. The vertical of each altar holds an 8x10 black and white photograph while the horizontal shelf holds a related three dimensional object as an offering. Each altar assumes a different style. In one, the photograph documents an elaborate home altar in the small colonial Cuban town of Trinidad and it centres around a statue of Saint Barbara, the Catholic face of Chango, the deity who can assume male or female form at will. The offering on this altar is a life-size wax carving of a penis with a slit on the top from which an eye emerges. Another of these altars contains a stylized overhead photo of a lifelike Elegua, hiding under a table, while the offering is

a simple silver painted bicycle seat for this whimsical deity to play with. Each altar in *Las Siete Potencias* represents photographically the many forms a personal nganga can take while proposing an abstracted offering to the deity in question. With this installation, Alderete has captured the enigmatic mutability and magical revelations which the nganga evokes through its accommodation of personal invention in its representation, inventions that are in turn rewarded by insights into the nganga's complex philosophical model of chaos, order and transformation.

The extensive body of interrelated works that Alderete has created for this exhibition also function as a map of self, an autotopography, through which the artist negotiates his processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as an African-Cuban living in Toronto. Engaging in a "tactical act of self-representation at the level of intimate objects," Alderete has captured "a moment of personal and cultural transition, the movement from one place to another, from one role to another."² In crossing the borders of language, gender and culture, and in shifting from one set of psychic states and symbolic relations to another, Alderete has constructed his inspiring array of altars as a site where aesthetics, spirituality, ritual, memory and experience merge to form a continuous and integrated autotopography of transition and possibility.

David McIntosh is a Toronto critic and curator who programs Canadian cinema for the Toronto International Film Festival.

Notes

1. Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
2. Jennifer A. Gonzalez, in *Prosthetic Technologies: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, eds. Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll (Boulder, San Francisco: Westview Press, 1995), p. 147.