

presentation (the silver chains and pendants) and representation (the drawn lines of the boom box) underscores the title word across the top of the entire installation: Dysfunctional. Written in traditional cursive lettering, this giant lexical feature throws the entire installation into deliberation.

This relationship is addressed in the hectic mix of silver chains and pendants, emblems of contemporary materialism that merge with iconic signs of commerce and nostalgic representations of beloved icons. Treble clefs, capital letters, crosses, a marijuana leaf/Chrysler symbol, the crown of a self-proclaimed graffiti king, the all-powerful dollar sign, a cobra's poised head, dragons, eagles, the Playboy bunny sporting a ruby eye, and the "Bat Signal" all mark their presence in the profusion of objects. The flagrant, street-style subversion of corporate logos and the reification of iconic symbols mark these pendants as indices of contemporary culture. Each sign, reduced to its most effective parts, is offered for sale to all those seeking immediate gratification in the form of an easily recognized symbol intended to embody the wearer's personality. The artist proposes these signs not as necessarily sterile images of consumption but as possibilities for aesthetic practice. On the floor beneath the jutting arm of a turntable, a globe pendant "melts" into the floor where silver foil has "dripped" onto its marble surface, revealing the fleeting nature of such objects, despite their prevalence in popular culture. In Gispert's installation, they trace the form of a jet engine marking the chaos, the turbulence, the furor with which such objects and their meanings mark contemporary society.

Between two real, but non-functional speakers, a mock turntable divides the space, alluding once again to the non-functional parts of boom boxes sold with excess elements, disproportionately sized for their task. The artist's wall drawing of an imagined boom box renders it as an architectural and cultural monolith. Immortalized in the Spike Lee film, *Do the Right Thing*, 1989, the size and power of a boom box is directly related to the identity of its owner. The pre-walkman portability of these units marks them as

significant cultural objects that re-configured the urban landscape. The adaptation of the graphic equalizer to the boom box, for example, meant that the malleability of music was available to an ever wider population. Gispert's equalizers, inscribed on the installation's wooden surface and on the gallery wall, consider the meaning as well as the function of these cultural machines. Between presented objects and invented forms, woofers and drawings, pendants and sounds, Luis Gispert's installation addresses the layering of influences in contemporary urban culture through a complex matrix of architectural form, the deep bass beats of club music, and the aesthetic possibilities represented by the commodity object.

Rocio Aranda-Alvarado

Pablo Helguera

MoMA -Museum of Modern Art

In *Parallel Lives*, conceptual artist Pablo Helguera offers a theory of knowledge based on quasi-mystical congruencies among historical figures. These layers of arcane history and colorful anecdote pile on top of each other like a cosmological trifle. The resulting concoction is delightful, messy, and illuminating.

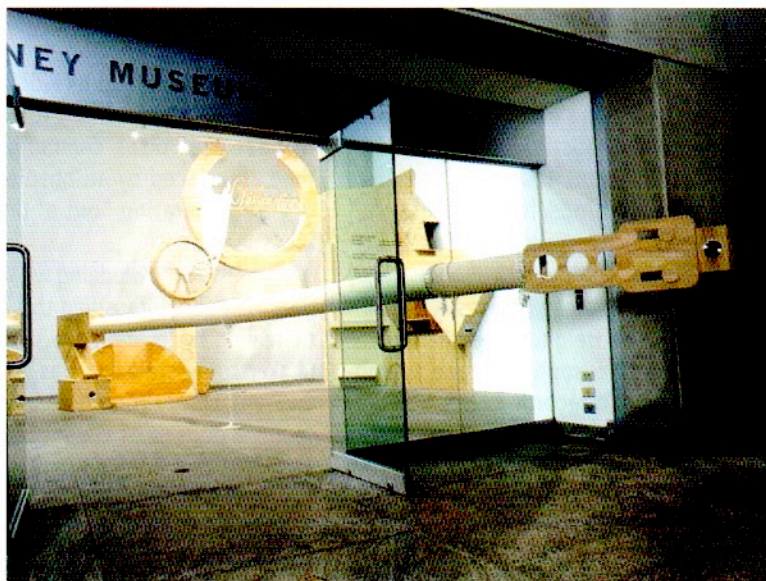
Parallel Lives is the latest phase in the Mexican artist's ongoing investigation of

historic eccentrics, namely: Florence Foster Jenkins, the early-twentieth-century musical dilettante; the Shakers, a nineteenth-century religious community; Friedrich Froebel, German inventor of *kindergarten*; Ward Jackson, Helguera's former colleague at the Guggenheim Museum; and Giulio Camillo, a sixteenth-century hermetic philosopher known for his zodiac-influenced *Teatro della Memoria*.

What links these figures is Helguera's touching conceit that all were misunderstood or ahead of their time. In fact, all failed in various ways to achieve or sustain their life's work. However, each figure articulated a personal vision and useful methodologies that would be revived in new forms in subsequent eras. All were "late bloomers," so to speak.

Helguera uses traditional exhibition techniques and a lecture-style presentation to convey historical data about these seemingly disparate characters. Simultaneously, the artist makes unorthodox leaps between the figures, imaginatively linking their lives and work. With sounds and images, these alternate parallel tracks subvert the more conservative structure of chronological time and assert new criteria for deriving meaning from history.

In the gallery component of *Parallel Lives*, the historical figures are represented by objects on pedestals. These include



Luis Gispert. *Urban Myths Part II (Return of the Hyphenaholics)*, 2003. Plywood, polychrome wood, platinum costume jewelry, graphite drawing, motion sensor, stereo component, speakers, sound track. Photo: George Hirose.

wings similar to those worn by Florence Jenkins during concerts, a Froebel kindergarten primer, and a model of a Shaker meeting house. The exhibition is accompanied by an Acoustiguide (narrated by artist Fred Wilson) that provides “five alternative readings for each object,” one from the perspective of each historical figure.

By overlaying these objects with multiple narratives Helguera’s project takes flight. Like a philosopher’s stone, the object displays and recorded texts serve as a dynamic intersection where aesthetic, social, and spiritual values are lifted free of specific histories or disciplines. Gallery visitors discover these golden nuggets of cultural wisdom on their own, as they listen to the colliding historical narratives.

Likewise, Helguera’s performance gained speed when links began to appear among the biographies. Structured as a sort of metaphysical PowerPoint presentation, the performance might have been mistaken for a “Fundamentals of Western Civilization” lecture, but for several bravura flourishes that stimulated the senses beyond the history lesson.

First, the artist sang four songs associated with the eras of the biographies. The songs were recorded on wax cylinders with an antique, horn-style phonograph. Other phonographs were placed throughout the theater to play back these

new recordings, along with a hilarious, ear-splitting selection from Mozart’s *Magic Flute* recorded by Florence Jenkins almost a century earlier. It was uncanny to hear the voices commingling across time, interfaced by an obsolete technology also operating “out of time,” culturally speaking.

Without acknowledging what was occurring, Helguera intensified this anachronistic feeling by layering the slide images: a Shaker spiral staircase was superimposed on Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum; a portrait of Giulio Camillo over a page from the Google search-engine website. Slyly, Helguera allowed audience members to perceive these relationships on their own. In so doing, he effectively demonstrated that the mind is a *public* domain where knowledge is meted out haphazardly but not without consequence—relationships between people and ideas are inevitable.

By the end of the presentation, a humorous, detailed and somewhat spooky web had been woven around the individual biographies, suggesting a deeper, more spiritual affinity among human strivings than might be ascertained by facts alone. Helguera summed this up well, paraphrasing the hermeneutic German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, “We all are others, as much as we are ourselves.”

Parallel Lives was presented at Julia Friedman Gallery, Chicago, October 24–De-

cember 6, 2003, and at The Museum of Modern Art/Gramercy Theater, New York, December 8, 2003.

John Ewing

Elia Alba

Jersey City Museum

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but if it needs that many to make its point something’s amiss. This is the case with “identi-kits,” Elia Alba’s show of photography, video, and performance-based objects. Rather than manifesting a singular vision, Alba’s artistic project is lost in a panoply of theoretical musings and didactic gallery texts.

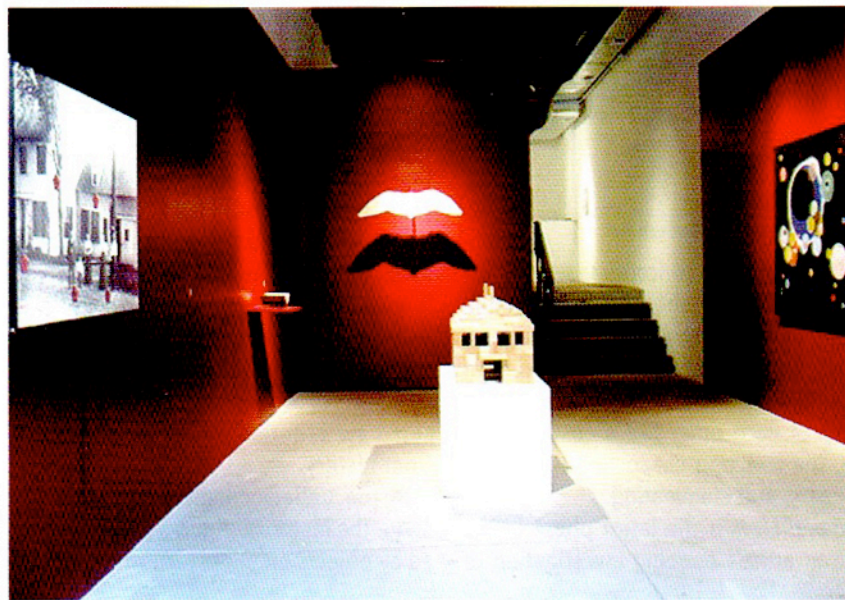
This over-determined exhibition proposes to “ask fundamental questions about race, gender, ethnicity and how these are constructed in contemporary society.” The exhibition brochure states that the New York-born, Dominican artist “is interested in exploring how the face becomes a sign for the person and how people’s perception of a face influences how a body is perceived, interpreted, and treated both publicly and privately.” There is also some discussion of the face in relation to the history of masks, as well as the role of *onnagata*—or female impersonator—in traditional kabuki theater.

That’s a lot of work for a face! In the end, Alba’s primary strategy is to cover up faces and bodies. In a series of portrait photographs, for example, the subjects’ faces are completely obscured by phototransfer images of faces, enlarged to be slightly out of proportion with the subjects’ bodies. These bodies are veiled in gauzy cloth and posed in nondescript, shadowy settings.

Other identifying qualities like gender and age are also effectively erased by the masks and tightly wrapped veils, leaving the viewer even less to respond to. Because the figures are so thoroughly covered, it isn’t known whether the mask-face is that of the subject or someone else, except in several instances where an exposed hand held up to the mask clearly indicates a racial mismatch.

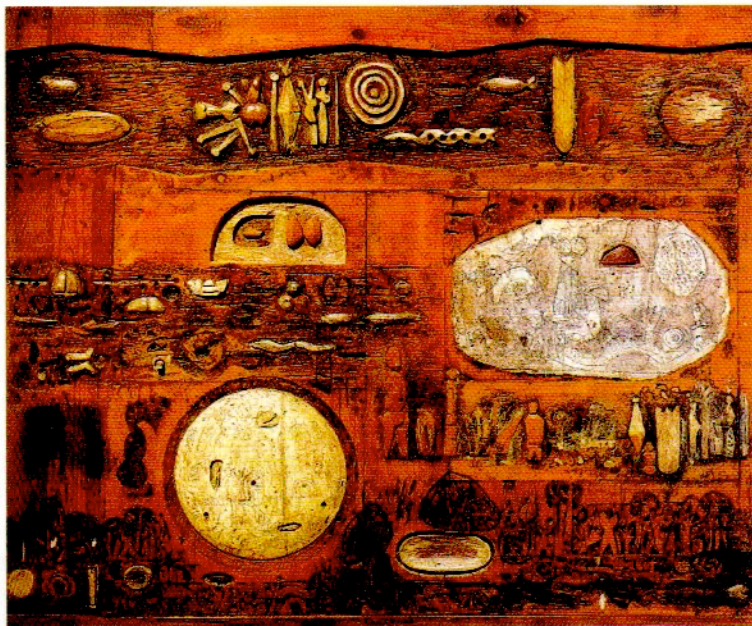
The connection of hand to mask, however, generates the most interesting dynamic in the series. It suggests the figure’s corporeal ownership of the face, which the

Pablo Helguera. *Parallel Lives*, 2003. Installation view.





Elia Alba. *Mask* (India), 2003. Color print. 24 x 24 in. (61 x 61 cm.).



Julio Alpay. *Genesis I*, 1964. Incised and painted wood. 63 x 75 in. (160 x 191.7 cm.).

viewer naturally projects onto the mask. Interestingly, one is also tempted to project life, sight, and consciousness into the mask's face—all of which does exist, in fact, but in some unknown, photographic "elsewhere."

This sensation of a photograph *gazing* at the viewer from within another photograph is the most compelling element in Alba's work. It is a double illusion twice removed, which is an entertaining conundrum to foist onto what is potentially the most accurate means of technical representation—photography.

Alba's gamey manipulations of photo-representation and their implications about consciousness are artful and more compelling than the race/gender/ethnicity issues discussed in the exhibition materials. For the most part, there is an oddly conservative restraint to the photographs and videos that fails to engage the dynamic tensions inherent in these cultural topics. One would expect art about repressed, misrepresented, or stolen identities to be more visually engaging.

For instance, in the 1920s Hannah Höch inserted faces and masks into startling photomontage abstractions of Europe's modernizing, polyglot culture. Today, the Brooklyn-based collaborators Aziz + Cucher defile the integrity of the face by digitally erasing eyes, noses, and mouths,

forcing an aggressive confrontation with current modes of representation. Likewise, Tony Oursler's video installations of disembodied faces both shock and delight the senses, while depicting extreme caricatures of social interaction.

Alba's exploration of identity issues is most effective when she hews to the extreme, such as in three, wall-mounted body suits included in the exhibition. These "skins"—used in the artist's photography and video work—are muslin covered with phototransfers of the artist's body. Fragmented like patchwork, the digitally altered images depict enlarged genitals and dramatically varied skin tones.

These suits possess a wild, physical energy and have a totem presence that nullifies everything around them. Their singular power is clearly born of an intellectual, even spiritual, reckoning with prevailing attitudes about race, gender, and ethnicity. As the most visually arresting work in the show, Alba's body suits transform difficult ideas into compelling art.

John Ewing

Julio Alpay

Cecilia de Torres

The small but very carefully selected exhibition of Julio Alpay at Cecilia de Torres, Ltd. emphasizes a seminal period in the art-

ist's career and artistic production. Curated by José Ignacio Roca, of the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango in Bogotá, the show goes a long way toward illuminating Alpay's development following his move from Bogotá to New York in 1961. The well-designed catalogue published to accompany the exhibition—and to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the gallery—makes an important contribution to the documentation of Alpay's life and art.

Alpay is quoted as saying that the period of time he lived in Colombia was "So important. . . that I consider my career in terms of before and after Bogotá."¹ However, this exhibition makes it clear that it was the decade that followed his move to New York City that further defined his style and set him on a course of refinement in his work. That process continues today. When Alpay joined Augusto Torres and Gonzalo Fonseca in New York City he seems to have experienced a kind of emotional isolation that propelled him into an extended period of introspection and self-examination. The sense of alienation that the city can engender coupled, almost certainly, with a lack of familiarity with the new environment, pushed the artist to explore and question everything he had experienced in his artistic and professional development. "Alpay explained that he felt as if he had plunged into an abyss—like