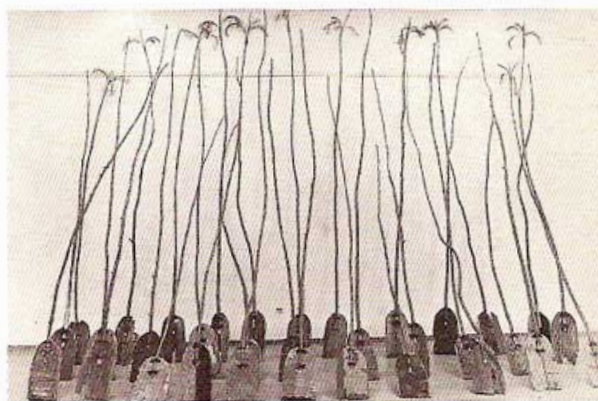


100. *La regata* (The Regatta, 1993-94).
Mixed media.
Museum Ludwig, Cologne

During the summer of 1993, as a particularly massive annual wave of Cubans attempted the dangerous escape to the United States on makeshift rafts and boats, the artist Kcho began to assemble a sort of replica of this exodus in the form of a bevy of toylike boats crafted from bits of wood and other flotsam washed back onto the Cuban shores. Thronged on the floor to form a larger boat shape, the individual members of the little flotilla seem to forge intently into the unknown.

This "boat race" (*La regata*, 1993-94) was one of Kcho's first works to use the image that has persisted through his subsequent production. While symbolizing the global phenomenon of passage, the boat may also be a consummate emblem of Cuban identity, both as a reminder of the primacy of migration in that nation's history and as a kind of metonymically self-contained island itself. Thus Kcho's work is absolutely rooted in a place – the ship that is his homeland – but one that is literally and metaphorically formed by the outside: in political terms by the ongoing embargo imposed by the United States and the exodus and internal deprivations related to this; but also in conceptual and physical terms by the ocean, the "liquid limit" that shapes an islander's identity and outlasts changing political conditions. Kcho's earliest works seemed to touch directly on the simultaneous formation of land and identity. In *Como el garabato se parece a Cuba* (How the Hook Looks Like Cuba, 1991), a hooked branch, related to a local type of scythe, is simply shown to parallel the shape of the island; while in *Siempre fue verde* (Always It Was Green, 1991-92), a legion of rough wooden paddle blades sprout delicate trunks topped by models of palm trees, suggesting a kind of transience rooted and built into the land.



101. *Siempre fue verde* (Always It Was Green, 1991-92). Wood, branches, iron, leaves



102. *Como el garabato se parece a Cuba* (How the Hook Looks Like Cuba, 1990-91).
Mixed media

103. *Lo mejor del verano* (The Best of Summer, 1993-94). Cork, wood, branches, tiles



The watery barrier that defines the island is one without a visible other side, but is instead an unrelieved physical and conceptual horizon whose crossing is fraught with an uncertain finality. In Kcho's work, space – and particularly white space – is the element charged with a similar sense of lucid potentiality. Critics have always focused on the engaging material quality of his assemblages of worn found objects replete with past histories, but the effect of open space should be noted more fully. Already an important element in early works such as *El garabato* which moor themselves against the expanse of a wall, the power of negative space becomes central in an installation like *Lo mejor del verano* (The Best of Summer, 1993-94), in which a brightly lit layer of assorted buoyant objects suspended overhead is reflected in the dark floor to create a sense of being underwater. Elsewhere, each version of *Para olvidar* (To Forget) combines a type of boat and a bottled drink particular to the location in which the installation is presented, opening onto the popular culture of the place while animating the architectural space. The boat floats on a layer of partly-consumed bottles, arrayed across the floor as an expandable tide and, in some cases, permeating the space with their smell.

Some installations seem specifically to combine this concern for the emotional possibilities of space with the artist's awareness of utopian practices, particularly as expressed in architecture. In *El camino de la nostalgia* (The Road of Nostalgia, 1996), a timeworn dock, purchased whole by the artist, is transferred into the museum to emerge from the brilliant white walls and pale floors, designating the immaculate architectural



105. *La columna infinita* (Endless Column, 1996). Inner tubes, canoe, wooden chairs, sailboards, wood panel, barrels, jute and cotton blocks, rowboat, old dressers, oars

space as a place of both pure potentiality and systematic erasure. Another work in several versions, *La columna infinita*, revises Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (final version 1937-38), scaling down the transcendental aspiration of the modernist totem into a more quotidian but still symbolic representation of practical longing meeting established structure. The ordinary floating objects used for some of these works are stacked into a pillar and held in place by the pressure of their squeezing against the bounds of the space.¹ These works insist on inserting everyday action and desire into controlled spaces – a quietly assertive act in a country in which the decision *not* to leave home is as politically charged as its opposite.

Other works speak of an everyday adaption of utopian structures. *A los ojos de la historia* (In the Eyes of History, 1995) is a fragile replica in twigs of Vladimir Tatlin's idealistic *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20), a never-realized tribute to the Communist International. At the peak of Kcho's version of this sweeping spiral tower is suspended a used coffee filter. The artist explains this curious work by describing a pragmatic, homegrown way of making do that implies a strategy for survival within a complex political situation: "It is like a skeleton of a utopia.... In Cuba, if you have a refrigerator and it breaks, you have to find a way to make it work again, because you're never going to get another refrigerator. And if you can't make it work as a refrigerator again, you have to find a way to make it useful doing something else. You may have to make it into something useful that has nothing to do with the original purpose of the refrigerator.

As far as Tatlin's tower goes, it was architecture that never worked, a bad idea from the beginning. So I had to find a way to make it useful doing something else. It is



106. *El camino de la nostalgia* (Road of Nostalgia, 1994-95). Wood, rope, tires

Notes

1. The artist has made two versions (*La columna infinita I* and *II*, both 1996) using raw wood C-clamped together into boat shapes. These do not press against the ceiling of the exhibition space.

2. Kcho in interview with Jen Budney, "Kcho: No Place Like Home," *Flash Art* (May-June 1997), p. 86.

a utopian socialist symbol that doesn't work. So it was like, 'Let's just make some coffee in that spiral, we've got to do something with it!'"²

In this symbolic language, the word "refrigerator" could, of course, be replaced by many others. This mode of speaking has something in common with the quiet remodelling of revolutionary rhetoric achieved in Kcho's Tatlin spiral and in his *Obras escogidas* (Selected Works, 1994). The latter is another boat, fashioned from Marxist textbooks tied together with string to form an obviously unseaworthy craft, showing up their impracticality even when "made to do something else."

The act of making do, of accepting the impermanence of things, so central to Kcho's work, is a strategic device. While his work represents transience and transit, its residual hopefulness is also structurally *transitive*. For, if his provisional constructions represent a kind of speech, they act most like those verbs that hold their own place but look elsewhere for their ultimate meaning. G.K.



107. *Obras escogidas* (Selected Works, 1994).
Mixed media



108. *A los ojos de la historia* (In the Eyes of History, 1992). Mixed media. Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo per l'Arte, Turin