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## *Cross-contamination: the performance activism and oppositional art of La Pocha Nostra* (2004. Revised 2006)

*In 1993, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes, and Nola Mariano founded La Pocha Nostra in Los Angeles, California. The objective was to formally conceptualize Gomez-Peña's collaborations with other performance artists. In 1995, La Pocha Nostra's office moved to San Francisco's Mission District where it has been based in for the last eleven years. In late 2001, La Pocha completed the process of incorporation and became a non-profit-organization. As of June 2006, members include performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Violeta Luna, Michelle Ceballos, and Roberto Sifuentes; curators Gabriela Salgado and Orlando Britto; and over thirty associates worldwide in countries such as Mexico, Spain, the UK, and Australia. Projects range from performance solos and duets to large-scale performance installations including video, photography, audio, and cyber-art. Originally written in 2004, this new version attempts to articulate the complexities and challenges of this most unusual 'organization'. We truly hope to inspire our colleagues across disciplines and national boundaries to develop similar models and methods. Feel free to pirate any of the following ideas.*

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### **I. La Pocha Nostra: an ever-evolving manifesto.**

**La Pocha Nostra is an ever morphing “trans-disciplinary arts organization.”** We are based in San Francisco with factions in many other cities and countries. Our mission statement reads, “[We] provide a base (and forum) for a loose network of rebel artists from various disciplines, generations and ethnic backgrounds.” Our common denominator is our desire to cross and erase dangerous borders between art and politics, practice and theory, artist and spectator. We strive to eradicate myths of purity and dissolve borders surrounding culture, ethnicity, gender, language, and métier. These are radical acts.

**La Pocha collaborates across national borders, race, gender and generations.** Our collaborative model functions both as an act of citizen diplomacy and as a means to create “ephemeral communities” of like-minded rebels. We are more of a

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conceptual “laboratory”— a loose association of rebel artists thinking together, exchanging ideas and aspirations. The basic premise of these collaborations is founded on an ideal: If we learn to cross borders on stage, we may learn how to do so in larger social spheres. We hope others will be challenged to do the same.

**La Pocha Nostra is a virtual “*maquiladora*,”** a conceptual assembly plant that produces brand-new metaphors, symbols, images, and words to explain the complexities of our times. The Spanglish neologism ‘*Pocha Nostra*’ translates as either ‘our impurities’ or “the cartel of cultural bastards.” We love this poetic ambiguity. It reveals an attitude towards art and society: “*Cross-racial, poly-gendered, experi-mental, y que?*”

**La Pocha Nostra has died and been resurrected dozens of times.** A garage performance troupe, an experimental sideshow, an interactive living museum and curiosity cabinet, and a politicized X-treme fashion show. Pocha has also acted as a “performance clinic,” a radical school, a town meeting, an “intelligent” rave, and a virtual resource center. Pocha is frequently a Trojan horse: a major institution may invite two or three artists but we bring ten to twenty others and involve them all in the process.

**La Pocha was created out of our necessity to survive as Chicano/Latino artists in a racist Art World.** The fact remains that Chicanos and other “artists of color” don’t have the support enjoyed by the Anglo avant-garde. Therefore, we must respond with complexity and imagination to this endemic lack of funds and access.

**La Pocha challenges the traditional art world mythologies** of the ‘*Artiste*’ as a suffering bohemian and misunderstood genius. La Pocha artists are social critics and chroniclers, inter-cultural diplomats, translators/mis-translators, radical pedagogues, informal ombudsmen, media pirates, information architects, reverse anthropologists, and experimental linguists. To us, the artist is, above all, an active citizen immersed in the great debates of our times. Our place is in the world and not just the “Art World.”

**La Pocha is by nature anti-essentialist and anti-nationalist.** We claim an extremely unpopular position in post 9/11 US: “No homeland; no fear; no borders; no patriotism; no nation-state; no ideology; no censorship.” We are committed to presenting a poly-cultural and hybrid “America” — an internationalist, humanist, and progressive perspective, which has nothing to do with US unilateralism, the Bush

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doctrine or the Patriot Act. Our America is still an open society with porous borders; our America is neither “Red” nor “Blue;” it is brown, black, yellow, pink, and transparent. Always.

**La Pocha is an ever-changing community.** Pocha can be two people or fifty people. Ça depends. We create regenerative sources of labor built from concentric and overlapping circles that are provisional and dynamic. The inner circle comprises four to six artists and scholars whose membership is determined by their degree of commitment and time. The next circle includes performance artists, curators, musicians, filmmakers, and designers working part time on several Pocha projects. The outer and overlapping circles of artist associates, theorists, and producers are found throughout the world and may collaborate on a project if the time and place are right. The constant change of membership inevitably alters the nature of the work and contributes to the permanent process of reinvention. Unfortunately permanent reinvention and ever shifting multi-dimensionality hinders sustainability, which may act as an unconscious antidote to the risk of institutionalization.

**Pocha encourages internal dialogue.** Our rehearsals and workshops, weekly staff meetings, and quarterly board meetings always involve intense discussions of current issues. We explore new ways of thinking about art and community, multi-community outreach, and new audience development. At these gatherings we foreground the theoretical and methodological possibilities of performance to address the changing role of the artist in society.

**La Pocha encourages public dialogue.** We hope our performative-ritual formats are less authoritarian and static than those we see in academia, religion, pop culture and politics. We constantly challenge theorists to be more performative and artists to explore intellectual avenues. It works most of the time. Every now and then we engender a monster, and that's also fine.

**La Pocha functions through an open belief system.** We strongly trust the idea that consciousness is stimulated through non-traditional presentational formats. Therefore, we view performance as an effective catalyst for thought and debate, which ultimately encourages public dialogue. Through *sui-generis* combinations of artistic languages, mediums and performative formats, we explore the interface of globalization, migration, hybrid identities, border culture, and new technologies.

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**La Pocha's performance pedagogy performs a major role in our political praxis.** How? It challenges authoritarian hierarchies and specialized knowledge by creating temporary utopian spaces where interdisciplinary dialogue and artistic imagination can flourish. These utopian spaces are framed by, but not contained within, a pentagon-shape of radical ideas whose vertices are community, education, activist politics, new technologies, and experimental aesthetics.

**La Pocha creates an unique aesthetic.** Functioning as a kind of a live crossover culture jam, our "robo-baroque" and "ethno-techno-cannibal aesthetic" samples and devours everything we encounter: Border and Chicano pop culture; TV; film; rock & roll; hip-hop; comics; journalism; anthropology; pornography; religious imagery and of course, the history of the visual and performing arts. We cross-reference this information, embody it, and then re-interpret it for a live audience thereby refracting fetishized constructs of otherness through the spectacle of our "heightened" identities and decorated bodies.

**La Pocha's aesthetic praxis involves ethnic and gender bending, cultural transvestitism and power inversions.** Many of our images show women, gays, and/or people "of color" in control. In our world, cultural borders have moved to center stage while the alleged mainstream is pushed to the margins and treated as exotic and unfamiliar. We place the audience member/viewer in the position of a "foreigner" or a "minority." In our world, hybridity is the only Nation/State. It sounds heavy but it's actually a lot of fun.

**La Pocha crosses dangerous aesthetic borders.** We cede both our will and the stage to the audience. We invite them to co-create the piece and to participate in our "extreme performance games" riddled with post-colonial implications (Refer to Pocha Live!-part 2). We turn audience members into instant performance artists. These games are integral aspects of our work.

**La Pocha is an ever-growing archive.** La Pocha collection comprises thousands of photographs, videos, books, magazines, soundtracks, documents, props, and costumes. Sadly, we have never had enough hands, space or filing cabinets to complete this task. We are currently in the process of turning our performance video archives into an educational DVD series. The first one of the series is already available.

**La Pocha is, above all, a utopian idea.** Our 'utopia' is a marker in the political

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distance, a philosophical direction, and a path we often lose. Unfortunately, our frail egos and financial hardships occasionally cause us to fall into personal voids and temporarily forget our goals. One Pocha responsibility is to inspire each other to recapture strength and clarity.