

In defense of performance

(Essay/Chronicle, 2003) *Ethno-Techno*

Question: *"Excuse me, can you define performance art?"*

Answers:

- "A bunch of weirdoes who love to get naked and scream about leftist politics."

(Yuppie in a bar)

- "Performance artists are... bad actors." (A "good" actor)

- "You mean, those decadent and elitist liberals who hide behind the art thing to beg for government money?" (Politician)

- "It's... just... very, very cool stuff. Makes you... think and shit." (My nephew)

- "Performance is both the antithesis of and the antidote to high culture."

(Performance Artist)

- "I'll answer you with a joke: What do you get when you mix a comedian with a performance artist?... A joke that no one understands" (A friend)

INTRO.

For twenty years, journalists, audience members and relatives have asked me the same two questions in different ways: What "exactly" is performance art? And, what makes a performance artist be, think and act like one? In this text, I will attempt to elliptically answer these questions by drawing a poetical portrait of the performance artist standing on a map of the performance art field. I will try to write with as much passion, valor and clarity as I can, but take heed: the slippery and ever-changing nature of the field makes it extremely hard to define in simplistic terms. As my conceptual *padrino* Richard

Schechner told me after he read an early version of this text, "The '*problem*,' if there is a problem, is that the field 'in general' is too big and encompassing. It can be, and is, whatever those who are doing it say it is. At the same time, and for the same reason, the field 'in specific' is too small, too quirky, too much the thing of this or that individual (artist, scholar) who is doing the doing." With this in mind, I will, in this text, attempt to articulate "my thing"--to map my own performance field, so to speak. In doing so, I will try to join my many colleagues, the rest of the citizens of *my* performance map, in the common goal of critiquing "high art," consumer culture and global politics, as well as narrow-minded notions of identity, community and art making.

To be congruent with my performance praxis, I will constantly cross the borders between theory and chronicle, between personal and social realms, in hopes of coming across some interesting cross-sections and bridges.

I am fully aware that my voice within this text is but one in a crowd of subjectivities. By no means am I attempting to speak for others, establish boundaries and checkpoints in the performance field, or outlaw any art practice that is not captured by my camera. If the reader detects some conceptual contradictions in my writing--especially in my strategic use of the dangerous pronoun "we" or in my capricious placement of a border—I beg you to cut me some extra slack: I am a contradictory Vato, and so are most performance artists I know.

THE CARTOGRAPHY OF PERFORMANCE

I.-THE MAP

First, let's draw the map.

I see myself as an experimental cartographer. In this sense I can approach a definition of performance art by mapping out the "negative" space (as in photography, not ethics) of its conceptual territory. Though our work sometimes overlaps with experimental theater, and many of us utilize spoken word, *stricto sensu*, we are neither actors nor spoken word poets. (We may be temporary actors and poets but we abide by other rules, and stand on a different history.) *1. Most performance artists are also writers, but only a handful of us write for publication. We theorize about art, politics and culture, but our interdisciplinary methodologies are different from those of academic theorists. *They* have binoculars; *we* have radars. Performance artists spend the bulk of our time "scanning" rather than "focusing," as theorists do, settling on one spot and then pulling out the binoculars. When performance studies scholars refer to "the performance field", they often mean something different than what performance artists mean: a much broader field that encompasses all things performative, including anthropology, religious practice, pop culture, sports and civic events. While *we* chronicle our times, unlike journalists or social commentators, our chronicles tend to be non-narrative, symbolic, and polyvocal. It's a different way of chronicling. If we utilize humor, we are not seeking laughter like our comedian cousins. We are more interested in

provoking the ambivalence of melancholic giggling or painful smiles, though an occasional outburst of laughter is always welcome.

Many of us are exiles from the visual arts, but we rarely make objects for display in museums and galleries. In fact, our main artwork is our own body, ridden with semiotic, political, ethnographic, cartographic and mythical implications. Unlike visual artists and sculptors, when we create objects, they are meant to be handled and utilized without remorse during the performance. We actually don't mind if these objects get worn out or destroyed. In fact, the more we use our performance "artifacts," the more "charged" and powerful they become. Recycling is our main *modus operandi*. This dramatically separates us from most costume, prop and set designers, who rarely recycle their creations.

At times we operate in the civic realm, and test our new personas and actions in the streets, but we are not "public artists" *per se*. The streets are mere extensions of our performance laboratory--galleries without walls. Many of us think of ourselves as activists, but our communication strategies and experimental languages are considerably different from those utilized by political radicals and anti-globalization activists.

We are what others aren't, we say what others don't, and we occupy cultural spaces that are often overlooked or dismissed. Because of this, our multiple communities are composed of aesthetic, political, ethnic, and gender rejects.

*1.-The history of performance art has been largely written from the ethnocentric perspective of the European and "American"(as in US) avant-garde and does not acknowledge other histories of indigenous and ritual performance. In the Americas, Pre-Columbian performance practices may have more to do with the history of performance art than with theater, but this is a territory I am not trained to defend.

II.-THE SANCTUARY

For me performance art is a conceptual "territory" with fluctuating weather and borders; a place where contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox are not only tolerated, but encouraged. Every territory a performance artist stakes (including this text) is slightly different from that of his/her neighbor. We converge in this overlapping terrain precisely because it grants us special freedoms often denied to us in other mono-cultural/unidisciplinary realms. In a sense, we are hardcore dropouts from our original *metiers* and communities embarking on a permanent quest to develop a more inclusive system of political thought and aesthetic praxis. It's a lonely and largely misunderstood journey, but most performance artists I know, including myself, love it.

"Here" tradition weighs less, rules can be bent, laws and structures are constantly changing, and no one pays much attention to hierarchies and institutional power. "Here," there is no government or visible authority. "Here," the only existing social contract is our willingness to defy authoritarian models and dogmas, and to keep pushing the outer limits of culture and identity. It is precisely in the sharpened borders of cultures, genders, *métiers*, languages,

and art forms that we feel more comfortable, and where we recognize and befriend our colleagues. We are interstitial creatures and border citizens by nature— insiders/outsideers at the same time—and we rejoice in this paradoxical condition. In fact, in the act of crossing a border, we find temporary emancipation.

Our performance country is a temporary sanctuary for other rebel artists and theorists expelled from mono-disciplinary fields and separatist communities. It's also an internal place, invented by each of us according to our own political aspirations and deepest spiritual needs; our darkest sexual desires and obsessions; our troubling memories and relentless quest for freedom. As I finish this paragraph I bite my romantic tongue. It bleeds. It's real blood. My audience gets really excited because the blood is real.

III.-THE HUMAN BODY

Traditionally, the human body, our body, not the stage, is our true site for creation and *materia prima*.^{*1} It's our empty canvas, musical instrument, and open book; our navigation chart and biographical map; the vessel for our ever-changing identities; the centerpiece of the altar, so to speak. Even when we depend too much on objects, locations, and situations, our body remains the matrix of the piece.

Our body is also the very center of our symbolic universe—a tiny model for humankind (humankind and humanity are the same word in Spanish: *humanidad*)— and at the same time, a metaphor for the larger sociopolitical

body. If we are capable of establishing all these connections in front of an audience, hopefully others will recognize them in their own bodies.

Our scars are involuntary words in the open book of our body, whereas our tattoos, piercings, body paint, adornments, performance prosthetics, and/or robotic accessories, are deliberate phrases.

Our body/corpo/artefacto/identity must be marked, decorated, intervened culturally, mapped out, chronicled, re-politicized, and re-captured by the camera. When our body is ill or wounded, our work inevitably changes. Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey, Franco B and others have made us beautifully aware of this.

Our bodies are also occupied territories. Perhaps the ultimate goal of performance, especially if you are a woman, gay or a person "of color," is to decolonize our bodies and make these decolonizing mechanisms apparent to our audience in the hope that they will get inspired to do the same with their own.

Though we treasure our bodies, we don't mind constantly putting them at risk. It is precisely in the tensions of risk that we find our corporeal possibilities and *raison d'être*. Though our bodies are imperfect, awkward-looking and frail, we don't mind sharing them, bare naked, with the audience, or offering them in sacrifice to the video camera. But I must clarify here: it's not that we are exhibitionists (at least not all of us). In fact, it's always painful to exhibit and document our imperfect bodies, riddled with racial, cultural and political implications. We just have no other option. It's like a "mandate," for lack of a

better word.

*1.-Richard Schechner problematizes my body argument: (If the human body is the ultimate site of performance), "where do you put 'virtual' artists who operate only on the web using Avatars or wholly digitized beings?" Richard raises a hairy predicament: should we consider the 'virtual bodies' real?

*2.-One of my "readers" who chose to remain anonymous also problematizes my body argument: "As Gomez-Peña says, the question of whether a web action can be considered a performance is critical and too important to leave unanswered. If, as many have suggested, on-line events are in some sense performative-take Electronic Disturbance Theater for example-then the definition of performance offered here comes under pressure. I realize that performance artists feel, rightly, that digital work has been unduly lauded in the past but that moment is probably past. The question for now is how to redraw the boundaries so that EDT and its like are part of performance but MTV on-line isn't."

IV.-MY "JOB"

Do I have a job? (*dramatic pause*)

My job may be to open up a temporary utopian/dystopian space, a "de-militarized zone" in which meaningful "radical" behavior and progressive thought are allowed to take place, even if only for the duration of the performance. In this imaginary zone, both artist and audience members are given permission to assume multiple and ever-changing positionalities and

identities. In this border zone, the distance between “us” and “them,” self and other, art and life, becomes blurry and unspecific.

My job may also be to raise questions. I do not look for answers; I merely raise irritating questions. In this sense, to use an old metaphor, my job may be to open the Pandora’s Box of our times—smack in the middle of the gallery, the theater, the street, or in front of the video camera-- and let the demons loose. Others that are better trained— the activists and academics— will have to deal with them, fight them, domesticate them or attempt to explain them.

Once the performance is over and people walk away, my hope is that a process of reflection gets triggered in their perplexed psyches. If the performance is effective (I didn't say good, but effective), this process can last for several weeks, even months. The questions and dilemmas embodied in the images and rituals I present can continue to haunt the spectator’s dreams, memories, and conversations. The objective is not to "like" or to "understand" performance art; but to create a sediment in the audience's psyche.

V.-IDENTITY SURVIVAL KIT

Performance has taught me an extremely important lesson that defies all essentialisms: I am not straitjacketed by identity. I have a repertoire of multiple identities and I constantly sample from them. My collaborators and I know very well that with the strategic use of props, make-up, accessories and costumes, we can actually reinvent our identity in the eyes of others, and we love to experiment with this unique kind of knowledge. In fact, social, ethnic,

and gender bending are an intrinsic part of our daily praxis, and so is cultural transvestitism. In performance, impersonating other cultures and problematizing the very process of impersonation can be an effective strategy of what I term "reverse anthropology."^{*1} In everyday life however, as potential victims of ethnic profiling and racism, impersonating other cultures can literally save our lives.

To give the reader an example: when my Chicano colleagues and I cross international borders, we know that to avoid being sent to secondary inspection, we can wear mariachi hats and jackets and instantly reinvent ourselves as "amigo entertainers" in the eyes of racist law enforcement. It works. "Welcome back amigos."- they tell us. But even then, if we are not careful, our fiery gaze and lack of coolness might denounce us.

*1.-By "reverse anthropology" I mean pushing the dominant culture to the margins and treating it as exotic and unfamiliar. Whether conscious or not, performance challenges and critiques the ideological products of anthropology and its fraudulent history and yet still utilizes parts of the discipline's methodologies.

VI.-THE IRREPLACEABLE BODY

Our audiences may vicariously experience other possibilities of aesthetic, political and sexual freedom they lack in their own lives. This may be one of the reasons why, despite innumerable predictions over the past thirty

years, performance art hasn't died, nor has it been replaced by video or made outdated by new technologies and robotics. Stelarc's early '90s warning that "the body [was] becoming obsolete" turned out to be untrue. It is simply impossible to replace the ineffable magic of a pulsating, sweaty body immersed in a live ritual in front of our eyes. It's both shamanic and communal.

In my opinion, no actor, robot, or virtual avatar can replace the singular spectacle of the body-in-action of the performance artist. I simply cannot imagine a hired actor operating Chico McMurtrie's primitive robots, or reenacting Orlan's operations. When we witness Stelarc demonstrating a brand new robotic bodysuit or high-tech toy, after fifteen minutes, once the novelty wears out, we tend to pay more attention to his sweating flesh than to his prosthetic armor and perceptual extensions. The paraphernalia is great, but the human body attached to the mythical identity of the performance artist in front of us, remains at the center of the event.

Recently, Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera has embarked in an extremely daring project: abolishing her physical presence during the actual performance. She asks curators in advance to find a "normal person," not necessarily connected to the arts, to replace her. When Tania arrives to the site she exchanges identities with the chosen person becoming a mere assistant to his/her wishes. Curators are flipping out.

TURNING THE GAZE INWARD

VII.-AT ODDS WITH AUTHORITY

Yes. I am at odds with authority; whether it is political, religious, sexual, or aesthetic, and I am constantly questioning imposed structures and dogmatic behavior wherever I find them. As soon as I am told what to do and how to do it, my hair goes up, my blood begins to boil, and I begin to figure out ways to dismantle that particular form of authority. I share this personality trait with most of my colleagues. In fact, we crave the challenge of dismantling abusive authority.

We never think twice about putting ourselves on the line and denouncing social injustice wherever we detect it. Without a second thought, we are always ready to throw a pie in the face of a corrupt politician, give the finger to an arrogant museum director, or tell off an impertinent journalist, regardless of the consequences. This personality trait often makes us appear a bit antisocial, immature or overly dramatic in the eyes of others, but we just can't help it. It's a visceral thing, and at times a real drag. I secretly envy my "cool" friends.

VIII.-SIDING WITH THE UNDERDOG

We tend to see our probable future reflected in the eyes of the homeless, the poor, the unemployed, the diseased, and newly arrived immigrants. We perceive our "underworld" as overlapping with theirs.

Because of this bohemian mythology, we are often attracted to those who barely survive the dangerous corners of society: hookers, winos, lunatics, and prisoners whom we perceive as our spiritual brothers and sisters. Although we feel a strong spiritual kinship with them, our material realities are different. Unfortunately, they often drown in the same waters in which we swim—the

same waters, just different levels of submersion.

Our politics are not necessarily ideologically motivated. Our humanism resides in the throat, the skin, the muscles, the heart, the solar plexus and the genitalia. Our empathy for social orphanhood expresses itself as a visceral form of solidarity with those peoples, communities, or countries facing oppression and human rights violations; with those victimized by imposed wars and unjust economic policies. Unfortunately, as Ellen Zacco recently pointed out to me, "[we] tend to speak for them, which is quite presumptuous." I cannot help but to agree with her. Those of us who enjoy certain privileges in the field must be extremely watchful regarding our messianic tendencies.

IX.-CLUMSY ACTIVISTS

With a few venerable exceptions (Ricardo Dominguez, Felipe Eherenberg, Suzanne Lacy(proper spelling?), Tim Miller, Keith Hennessy and a few others), performance artists make clumsy political negotiators and terrible community organizers. Our great dilemma here is that we often see ourselves as activists and, as such, we attempt to organize our ethnic, gender-based, or professional communities. But the results, bless our hearts, are often poor. Why? Our passion and rage are simply too combative for regulated protest, and we get easily lost in logistics and pragmatic discussions. Besides, our iconoclastic personalities, anti-nationalistic stances and experimental proposals often put us at odds with conservative sectors within these communities. However, we never learn the basic lesson: performance artists

function at a level that is not exactly in tune with the needs, and necessities of everyday life and everyday resistance. Organizing and negotiating are definitely not our strengths. Others, better skilled, must help us organize the basic structure for our shared madness—never the other way around.

We are much better at performing other important community roles such as *animateurs*, reformers, alternative semioticians, inventors of brand-new metafiction, choreographers of surprising collective actions, media pirates, and/or “cultural DJ’s.”*1 In fact, our aesthetic strategies (not our coordinating skills) can be extremely useful to activists, and they often understand that it is in their best interest to have us around. I secretly advise several activists. Others, like Marcos and Superbarrio who are consummate performance activists, continue to inspire me.

*1-A term coined by my compañera Carolina Ponce de León.

X.-A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

The cloud of nihilism is constantly chasing me around, but I somehow manage to escape it. It’s a daily macabre dance right on the border between hope and despair. Whether conscious or not, deep inside I truly believe that what I do actually changes people’s lives, and I have a real hard time being cool about it. Performance is a matter of life or death to me. My sense of humor often pales next to my sobriety when it comes to committing to a life/art project. If I suddenly decide to stop talking for a month (to, say, investigate “silence”), walk non-stop for three days (to reconnect with the social world or research the

site-specificity of a project), or cross the U.S.-Mexico border without documents to make a political point, I won't rest until I complete my task, regardless of the consequences. This can be maddening to my loved ones, who must exercise an epic patience with me. They must live with the impending uncertainty and the profound fear of my next commitment to yet another transformative existential project. Bless the hearts and hands of our lifetime *compañeros/as*—always waiting for us and worrying about us; bless their tears and their laughter which often remind us that what we do, after all, may not always be a matter of life or death.

XI.-DREAMING IN SPANISH

I dreamt in Spanish that one day I decided to never perform in English again. A partir de ese momento, me dediqué a presentar mis ideas y mi arte estrictamente en español y solo para públicos estadounidenses atónitos que no entendían nada. Mi español se hizo cada vez mas retórico y complicado hasta el punto en que perdí todo contacto con mi público. A pesar de los ataques de los críticos racistas, me empeiné en hablar español. Entonces, mis colaboradores se molestaron y empezaron a abandonarme. Eventualmente me quede completamente solo, hablando en español, entre fantasmas conceptuales angloparlantes. Afortunadamente I woke up one day and I was able to perform in English again. I wrote in my diary: "Dreams tend to be much more radical than 'reality.' That's why they are much closer to art than to life."

XII.-AN URBAN LEGEND

At times, our performance universe can be threatening to our loved ones. Our perceived “extreme behavior” on stage, paired with our frequent association with sexual radicals, social misfits, and eccentrics, can make our loved ones feel a bit “inadequate” or “lightweight” next to our bizarre performance universe.

To complicate things even more, the highly sexualized energies and naked bodies roaming around the space before a performance can easily become a source of jealousy for our partners who often have a hard time differentiating between the real and the symbolic. The great paradox here is, despite our (largely symbolic) sexual on-stage eccentricities, and our willingness to perform nude, we tend to be quite loyal and committed to our partners and family. Our kinkiness is an urban legend, and pales in comparison to that of US talk show guests and Catholic priests.

XIII.-NECESSARY AND UNNECESSARY RISKS

Though performance artists are always risking our lives and physical integrity in the name of art, we rarely kill ourselves and absolutely never kill others. In twenty years of hanging out and working with performance artists, I have never met a murderer, have only lost three colleagues to the demons of suicide, and two to miscalculation during an actual performance.*1

In the process of finding the true dimensions and possibilities of a new piece, I must confess that a few times I have idiotically put myself, and my

audience, at risk, but somehow nothing extremely grave has ever happened...yet.

I quote from a script:

"Dear audience, I've got 45 scars accounted for; half of them produced by art and this is not a metaphor. My artistic obsession has led me to carry out some flagrantly stupid acts of transgression, including: living inside a cage as a Mexican Frankenstein; crucifying myself as a mariachi to protest immigration policy; crashing the Met as El Mad Mex led on a leash by a Spanish dominatrix...I mean (to an audience member), you want me to be more specific than say, drinking a bottle of Mr. Clean to exorcise my colonial demons? or, handing a dagger to an audience member, and offering her my plexus? (Pause) "Here... my colonized body"---I said; and she went for it, inflicting my 45th scar. She was only 20, boricua, and did not know the difference between performance, rock & roll, and street life. Bad phrase, delete.."

*1.-As I was revising this text, I received a phone call from a friend in New York. The body of Spalding Gray was found on the Hudson River(or the East river?). He had been missing for over two months.

XIV.-EMBODIED THEORY

I quote from my performance diaries:

"My intelligence, like that of shamans and poets, is largely symbolic and

associative. My system of thought tends to be both emotionally and corporeally based. In fact, the performance always begins in my skin and muscles, projects itself onto the social sphere, and returns via my psyche, back to my body and into my blood stream; only to be refracted back into the social world via documentation. Whatever thoughts I can't embody, I tend to distrust. Whatever ideas I can't feel way deep inside, I tend to disregard. In this sense I can say that for me performance is a form of embodied theory..."

"...Because of this, in the eyes of my relatives and non-artist friends, I appear to be a bit self-involved, as if the entire universe revolved around my psyche and body. My main struggle is precisely to escape my subjectivity—the imprisonment of my personal obsessions and solipsistic despair—and performance becomes the only way out; or rather, the way for the personal paradigm to intersect with the social..."

XV.-DYSFUNCTIONAL ARCHIVES

Performance artists have huge archives at home but they are not exactly functional. In other words, “the other histories of art” are literally buried in damp, moldy boxes, stored in the closets of performance artists worldwide. And—let’s face it— most likely no one will ever have access to them. Much worse, some of these boxes containing one-of-a-kind photos, performance documents, rare magazines, and master audios and videos, get lost in the process of moving to another home, city, project, or lover—or, to a new identity.

If every art and performance studies department from every university

made the effort to rescue these endangered archives from our clumsy hands, an important history will be saved, one that rarely gets written about precisely because it constitutes the "negative" space of culture (as in aesthetics not ethics).

XVI.-EVERYDAY LIFE

If I were to *anthropologize* my everyday life, what would I find? (I quote from a series of personal e-mails with a Peruvian friend who struggles to understand "what is my everyday life like in San Francisco when I'm not on the road.")

"Dear X: The nuts and bolts of everyday life are a true inferno. To put it bluntly, I simply don't know how to manage myself. Typically, I am terrible with money, administrative matters, grant writing, and self-promotion—and often rely on the goodwill of whoever wishes to help. I have no medical or car insurance. I don't own my home. I travel a lot, but always in connection to my work, and rarely have vacations, long vacations, like normal people do. I am permanently in debt, but I don't mind it. I guess it's part of the price I have to pay not to be permanently bothered by financial considerations. If I could live without a bank account, a driver's license, a passport, and a cell phone, I would be quite happy, though I am fully aware of the naiveté of my anarchist aspirations. Many of my colleagues here are in a similar situation. What about performance artists in your country?

...No, my most formidable enemy is not always the right wing forces of society but my own inability to domesticate quotidian chaos and discipline

myself. In the absence of a 9-to-5 job, traditional social structures, and the basic requirements of other disciplines (i.e., rehearsals, curtain calls, and production meetings in theater, or the tightly scheduled lives of dancers or musicians), I tend to feel oppressed by the tyranny of domesticity and get easily lost in the horror vacui of an empty studio or the liquid screen of my laptop. Sometimes, the screen of my laptop becomes a mirror, and I don't like what I see. Melancholy rules my creative process...No, I don't think melancholy is a personality trait of all Mexican artists.

...Performance is a need. If I don't perform for a long period of time, say two or three months, I become unbearable and drive my loved ones crazy. Once I am on stage again, I instantly overcome my metaphysical orphanhood and psychological fragility and become larger-than-life. Later on at the bar, I will recapture my true size and endemic mediocrities. The irreverent humor of my collaborators and friends contributes to this 'downsizing process.'

... My salvation? My salvation lies in my ability to create an alternative system of thought and action capable of providing some sort of ritualized structure to my daily life...No, I take it back. My true salvation lies in collaboration. I collaborate with others in hopes of developing bridges between my personal obsessions and our social universe. ...True. I'm kind of..."weird" in the eyes of my neighbors and relatives. I talk to animals, to plants, and to my many inner selves. I like to piss outdoors and get lost in the streets of cities I don't know. I love make up, body decoration, and flamboyant female clothing. I particularly love to cyborg-ize ethnic clothing. You've seen

my robo-mariachi suits. Paradoxically I don't like to be stared at. I am a living, walking contradiction. Aren't you? Aren't we all?

... I collect unusual figurines, talismans, souvenirs, tchotchkes, and costumes connected to my 'cosmology,' in the hope that one day they might be useful in a piece. It's my 'personal archeology,' and it dates back to the day I was born. With it, wherever I go, I build altars to ground myself. And these altars are as eclectic and complex as my personal aesthetics and my many composite identities.

...Why? I am extremely superstitious, but I don't talk much about it. I see ghosts and read symbolic messages everywhere. Deep inside I believe there are unspoken metaphysical laws ruling my encounters with others, the major changes in my life and my creative process (everything is a process to me, even sleeping and walking). My shaman friends say that I am 'a shaman who lost his way'. I like that definition of performance art."

XVII.-CELEBRITY CULTURE. (Censored by the editor)

XVIII.-I DREAMT I WAS A POP CELEBRITY

I dreamt I was a performance artist who was "discovered" by an LA entertainment producer. In order to "refine" my act, he forced me to rehearse twelve hours a day. Eventually I became a sort of hybrid between Lenny Bruce and Antonio Banderas. One night, I was performing my over-rehearsed

material for a huge audience at a sports arena when suddenly I...forgot my lines. I stood still, trembling under a follow spot. After an eternal pause (in dream-time), the audience began to applaud. They probably thought my hesitation was a conceptual decision, and loved it.

I flipped out and began to free-fall inside my psyche as if spiraling into another dream. While falling, I recapitulated my life as a performance artist. At the end of a fast-paced succession of images, I realized that *that* life had been much more interesting than my new life as a Latino pop celebrity. I opened my eyes and found myself once again at the sports arena. I got depressed. I opened a bottle of gasoline (which just happened to be there), poured it over my head, and lit myself on fire. The audience went wild again and applauded my pitiful "Bozo" act. At that point, I awoke with tears of perspiration, sat on the edge of my bed, and thought to myself: "Que weird--only in a dream can one reconcile an extreme performance aesthetic with the basic requirements of a pop cultural spectacle. Que pinche weird."

PERFORMANCE

VIS-À-VIS THEATER & THE ART WORLD

XIX.-PERFORMANCE AND THEATER

Before I cross the next dangerous border, I must acknowledge the

important contributions of experimental theater (the Living Theater, The Performance Group, Jodorowsky, etc.) to the development of performance, as well as the most recent influence that performance art has had over theater, every time theater is in crisis. Having said this, I will now attempt to venture into the extremely dangerous border zone between theater and performance with the clear understanding that my project is not to put performance on a binary with theatre. Despite the fact that they often occupy the same stage, there are some methodological differences: (As I begin to list these differences, Schechner warns me in an e-mail: "I would say that some distance needs to be made theoretically separating theatre that presents dramas (plays) from theatre that is 'direct' or presents the performer without plays.")

Although most experimental and antinarrative forms of theater are often in dialogue with performance art, their texts tend to have a beginning, a dramatic crisis (or a series of), and an end. Whereas a performance "event" or "action" is just a segment of a much larger "process" not made available to the audience, and not necessarily made explicit in the event. In this sense, *stricto sensu*, it has no beginning or end. We simply choose a portion of our process and open the doors to expose the audience to it.

Most Western theater structures (even those of ensemble theaters and rebel theater collectives) tend to be somewhat hierarchical with a specialized division of labor (the leader or visionary, the best actors, the supporting actors, and the technical team each taking care of their specific task); whereas the structure of performance tends to be more horizontal, decentered, and

constantly in flux. In performance, every project demands a different division of labor. And when we do solo work, we become the producer, writer, director, and performer of our own material. We even design the lights, the sound and the costumes. There's nothing heroic about this. In fact, sometimes it gets to be a real drag, and we long for the support system of theater.

In drama theatre, the actors are not usually the authors. On the other hand, in performance art the performers are almost always the authors. In most theater practice based on text, once the script is finished, it gets memorized and obsessively rehearsed by the actors, and it will be performed almost identically every night. Even the most audacious experimental theater offers highly staged chaos and premeditated hyper-textuality. In performance, whether text-based or not, the script is just a blueprint for action, a hypertext contemplating multiple contingencies and options, and it is never "finished." Every time I publish a script, I must warn the reader: "This is just one version of the text. Next week it will be different."

Rehearsals in the traditional sense are not that important to us. In fact, performance artists spend more time researching the site and subject matter of the project, gathering props and objects, studying our audiences, brainstorming with collaborators, writing obscure notes that no one will ever read and preparing ourselves psychologically, than "rehearsing" behind closed doors. It's just a different process.

Concurrently, a powerful mythology of anti-hero and counter cultural avatar surrounds the performance artist. Audiences don't really mind that Annie

Sprinkle is not a trained actress or that Ema Villanueva is not a skilled dancer. Audiences attend the performance precisely to be witnesses to our unique existence (a convergence of legend and flesh), not to applaud our virtuosity.

On stage, performance artists rarely “represent” others. Rather, we allow our multiplicity of selves and voices to unfold and enact their frictions and contradictions in front of an audience. "To 're-present' would mean to be 'different' from what we are doing."-Says Brazilian performance artist Nara Heeman. "Our embodied knowledge and images are only possible because they are truly *ours*." Whether we are trained or not (most of the time we aren't), this separates performance artists from theater monologists performing multiple characters: When Anna Deveare-Smith, Elia Arce, or Eric Bogosian “perform” multiple personas, they don't exactly “represent” them or "act" like them. Rather, they morph in and out of them without ever disappearing entirely as “themselves.” Perhaps they occupy a space between acting and being themselves. At one point in their lives, certain theater monologists like Spalding Grey(RIP) and Jesusa Rodriguez, decided to cross the thin line into performance in search of extra freedom and danger. We welcome them.

Clearly, there are many exceptions to the rule on both sides of the mirror; and there are many mirrors around.

XX.-ART CRIMINALS

Performance artists get easily criminalized. The highly charged images we produce, and the mythologies that embellish our public personas, make us

recognizable targets for the rage of opportunistic politicians and conservative journalists looking for blood. They love to portray us as either promiscuous social misfits, gratuitous provocateurs, or “elitist” good-for-nothing bohemians sponsored by the “liberal establishment.” Unlike most of my colleagues, I don’t entirely mind this mischaracterization, for I believe it grants us an undeserved respectability and power as cultural anti-heroes.

Conservative politicians are fully aware of the unique power of performance art. And when funding cut time arrives, performance is the first one to go. Why? They claim it is because we are “decadent,” “elitist,” or (in the U.S.), “un-American.” In fact US Republicans love to portray our work as some kind of bizarre communist pornography, but—let’s face it—the fact is that these ideologues know it is extremely hard to domesticate us. When a politician attacks performance art, it is because he gets irritated when he sees his own parochial and intolerant image reflected upside down in the mirror of art. The horrible faces of Helms, Buchanan, and Guliani immediately come to mind.

XXI.-A PERFORMANCE ARTIST DREAMS OF BEING AN ACTOR

I dreamt I was a good actor, not a performance artist but an actor, a good one. I could realistically represent someone else in a movie or a theater play, and I was so convincing as an actor that I would become that other person, forgetting completely who I was. The “character” I represented in my dream was that of an essentialist performance artist; someone who hated naturalistic acting, social and psychological realism; someone who despised artifice,

make-up, costumes, memorizing lines, being directed.

In my dream, the performance artist began to rebel against the actor, myself. He did shit like: not talking for a week, or only moving in slow motion for a whole day, or putting on tribal make-up and hitting the streets just to challenge people's sense of the familiar. He was clearly fucking with my mind, and I, the "good actor," got so confused that I ended up having an identity breakdown and didn't know how to act anymore. I adopted a stereotypical fetal position and froze inside a large display case for an entire week. Luckily it was just a dream. When I finally woke up, I was the same old confused performance artist, and I was extremely thankful for not knowing how to act.

XXII.-TIME AND SPACE

Notions of time and space are complicated in performance. We deal with a heightened "now," and "here," with the ambiguous space between "real time" and "ritual time," as opposed to theatrical or fictional time. (Ritual time is not to be confused with slow motion). We deal with "presence" and "attitude" as opposed to "representation" or psychological depth; with "being here" in the space as opposed to "acting." Schechner elaborates in another e-mail: "In performance art the 'distance' between the really real (socially, personally, with the audience, with the performers) is much less than in drama theatre where just about everything is pretend -- where even the real (a coffee cup, a chair) becomes pretend."

Like time, space to us is also "real," phenomenologically speaking. The

building where the performance takes place is precisely that very building. The performance occurs precisely in the day and time it takes place, and at the very place it takes place. There is no theatrical magic, no “suspense of disbelief.” Again, the thorny question of whether performance art exists in virtual space, or not, remains for me unanswered.

Performance is a way of being in the space, in front of or around an audience; a heightened gaze, a unique sense of purpose in the handling of objects, commitments and words and, at the same time, it is an ontological “attitude” towards the whole universe. Shamans, fakirs, *coyotes*, dervishes and Mexican *merolicos* understand this quite well. Many drama actors and dancers unfortunately don't.

XXIII-“ART WITH A CAPITAL A” AND ART INSTITUTIONS.

Our relationship with the Art World is bittersweet, to say the least. We have traditionally operated in the cultural borders and social margins where we feel the most comfortable. Whenever we venture into the stark postmodern luxury of the mainstream chic—for example, to present our work in a major museum— we tend to feel a bit out of place. During our stay, we befriend the security guards, the cleaning personnel, and the staff in the educational department. The chief curators watch us attentively from a distance. Only the night before our departure will we be invited for drinks.

Mainstream art institutions have a love/hate relationship with us (or rather with what they perceive we represent). Whenever they invite us in, they

tremble nervously as if secretly expecting us to destroy the walls of the gallery, scratch a painting with a prop, or pee in the lobby. It's hard to get rid of this stigma, which comes from the days of "the NEA 4" (1989-91), when performance artists were characterized by politicians and mainstream media as irresponsible provocateurs and cultural terrorists. Every time I complete a project in a big institution, the director pulls me aside the day before my departure and tells me: "Guermo [intentional spelling], thanks for having been so...nice." Deep inside, he may be a bit disappointed that I didn't misbehave more like one of my performance personas.

XXIV.-MARGINALIZING LINGO

Nomenclature and labeling have contributed to the permanent marginalization of performance art. Since the 1930s, the many self-proclaimed "mainstream art worlds" in every country have conveniently referred to performance artists as "alternative," (to what: the "real" or "serious" stuff?) "peripheral," (to their own self-imposed "center") "experimental" (meaning "permanently in the testing phase") or "heterodox" (at mortal odds with tradition). If we are "of color" (who isn't?), we are always labeled as "emerging," (the condescending human version of the "developing countries") or as "recently discovered," as if we were specimens of an exotic aesthetic tribe. Even the word "radical," which we often use ourselves, gets utilized by the "mainstream" as a red-light, with the perilous subtext: "Unpredictable behaviour. Handle at your own risk."* 1

These terms keep pushing the performance art field towards the margins of the "legitimate" one—the market-based art world—the big city from which we constitute the dangerous barrios, ghettos, reservations, and banana republics. Curators, journalists and cultural impresarios obsessed with "the margins" visit our forbidden cities with a combination of eroticized fear and adventuresome machismo.

Caught between the old marginalizing lingo and the new "everything shocking goes" type of ethos of the mainstream bizarre, the field is badly in need of re-staking its territory—redefining the now dated binary notions of center/periphery and mainstream/subculture. Perhaps one useful strategy might be for us *locos* and *locas*, to occupy a fictional center and push the new dominant culture to its own truly undesirable margins.

*1.-Since September 11, the connotations and implications of this marginalizing terminology have shifted dramatically. Words such as "radical," "transgressive," "revolutionary," and "rebellious" have been tainted overnight with the blood of generic "terrorism," and with the connotations of "evil" in the Bush doctrine.

XXV.-THE CULT OF INNOVATION

The performance art field is obsessed with innovation. This is especially so in the "West" where innovation is often perceived as synonymous with transgression, and as the antithesis of history. Performance defines itself

against the immediate past and always in dialogue with the immediate future—
a speculative future, that is.

The dominant positive mythology says that we are a unique tribe of pioneers, innovators, and visionaries. This poses a tremendous challenge to us performance *locos* and *locas*. If we lose touch with the rapidly changing issues and trends in "the field," we can easily become "dated" overnight. If we don't produce fresh and innovative proposals, and constantly reframe our imagery and theories, we will be deported into oblivion, while thirty others, much younger and wilder, will be waiting in line to replace us.

The pressure to engage in this ongoing process of reinvention (and, in the U.S., of "repackaging") forces some exhausted performance artists out of the rat race and others into a rock-and-roll type lifestyle (without the goodies and exaggerated fame). The performance art world is not that different in this respect to the merciless world of pop. Only a handful will be granted the privilege, like Bowie or Madonna of having several reincarnations. There's absolutely nothing romantic about it. Perhaps the only way out of this conundrum may be to work towards the creation of an interactive performance bank, an ongoing dialogue in which all generations contribute and co-exist.

XXVI.-DEPORTED/DISCOVERED

The self-proclaimed 'international art world' is constantly shifting its attitude toward performance artists. One year we are 'in' (if our aesthetics, ethnicity, or gender politics coincide with their trends); the next one we are 'out'.

(If we produce video, performance photography or installation art as an extension of our performances, then we have a slightly better chance to get invited more frequently). We get welcomed and deported back and forth so constantly that we have grown used to it. And it is only when the art world is in a crisis of ideas that we get asked to participate, and only for a short period of time.

But we don't mind being temporary insiders. Our partial invisibility is actually a privilege. It grants us special freedoms that full-time insiders and 'art darlings' don't have. We get to disappear for a while and reinvent ourselves once again, in the shadows and ruins of Western civilization. In twenty-two years of making performance art, I have been deported at least seven times from the art world, only to be (re) 'discovered' the next year under a new light: Mexican, Latino, multi-culti or Hybrid Art? 'Ethno-techno' or 'Outsider Art'? 'Chicano cyber-punk' or 'Extreme art'? What next? 'Neo-Aztec hi-tech post-retro-pop-colonial art'? I patiently await the next label.

XXVII.-THE ETHNOGRAPHIC DREAM:

I dreamt my colleague Juan Ybarra and I were on permanent exhibit at a Natural History museum. We were human specimens of a rare "Post-Mexican urban tribe" living inside Plexiglas boxes, next to other specimens and taxidermied animals. We were hand-fed by museum docents and taken to the bathroom on leashes. Occasionally we would be cleaned with a duster by a gorgeous proprietor who secretly lusted for us.

Our job was not that exciting, but unfortunately, since it was a dream we couldn't change the script. It went more or less like this: From 10 AM to 5 PM, we would alternate slow-motion ritualized actions and didactic "demonstrations" of our customs and art practices with the modeling of "authentic" tribal wear designed by one of the curators. On Sundays they would open the front of the Plexiglas boxes so the audience could have "a more direct experience of us." We were told by a staff member of the educational department to allow the audience to touch us, smell us and even change our clothes and alter our body positions. Some people, donors and special guests, were allowed to actually sit on our laps and make out with us if so they wished. It was a drag, an ethnographic shame, but since we were mere "specimens" and not artists, we couldn't do anything about it.

One day, there was a fire, and everyone left the building but us. Suddenly everything outside the Plexiglas boxes was on fire. It was beautiful. I never had that dream again. I guess we died during the fire.

XXVIII.-THORNY QUESTIONS

What follows are some of the typical questions asked to me by mainstream journalists...followed by some of my typical answers:

Journalist: Is performance art something relatively new?

GP: No. Every culture has had a space allocated to the renewal of tradition and a space for contestation and deviant behavior. Those who occupy the latter are granted special freedoms.

Journalist: Can you elaborate?

GP: In indigenous American cultures, it was the shaman, the coyote, the nanabush who had permission from the community to cross the dangerous borders of dreams, gender, madness, and witchcraft. In Western culture this liminal space is occupied by the performance artist, the contemporary anti-hero and accepted provocateur. We know this place exists and we simply occupy it.

Journalist: I see. The performance artist is the modern bohemian, right?

GP: Yes and no. We are bohemians in a world in which there's no longer a place for bohemians. There's nothing romantic about it.

Journalist: But aren't you interested in crossing over into pop culture?

GP: Not really. A Guatemalan independentist during the secession of his country from Mexico said: "I rather be the head of the mouse than the tail of the lion."

Journalist: I don't get it. What is the function of performance art? Does it have any?

GP: (Long pause) Performance artists are a constant reminder to society of the possibilities of other artistic, political, sexual or spiritual behaviors, and this, I must say, is an extremely important function.

Journalist: Why?

GP: It helps others to re-connect with the forbidden zones of their psyches and bodies, and acknowledge the possibilities of their own freedoms. In this sense, performance art may be as useful as medicine, engineering, or law; and performance artists as necessary as nurses, teachers, priests, or taxi drivers.

Most of the time we ourselves are not even aware of these functions.

Journalist: *What I want to know is what does performance art do for you?*

GP: For me?(Long pause) It is my way to fight or talk back, to recapture my stolen civic self, and piece together my fragmented identity. I'm doing it right now!

Journalist: *Mr. Comes Piña (misspelled, mispronounced), do you think about these big ideas everyday, all day long.?*

GP: Certainly not. I'd go mad. Most of the time I'm just going about my everyday life; you know, writing, researching, getting excited by a new project or prop, paying bills, recuperating from the flu, waiting anxiously for a phone call to get invited to perform in a city where I have never been.

Journalist: *I guess I'm not being clear: What I really want to know is what has performance art taught you?*

GP: Ah, you want a soundbite, right?

Journalist: *Well...*

GP: OK, let me think for a moment...When I was younger, performance taught me how to talk back. Lately, it is teaching me to listen carefully to others...even to stupid people.

XXIX.- THE EMPTY STAGE:

I dreamt of an empty performance stage. Although beautifully lit, it remained empty for a long time and the audience became restless waiting for something original or "extreme" to happen.

There were a few exceptions: Two goth art students were yawning theatrically in the first row; a very distinguished man with gray hair who looked like a museum director or an Italian businessman was caressing the legs of a young Latina in a red miniskirt; and Vito Acconci (or a Vito Acconci-looking dude) wearing a silver lounge jacket was nodding to himself as if saying: "Gosh, what has art turned into?"

Suddenly, a nun with a Mexican wrestler mask stood on her seat and began to applaud. At first, it was a lonesome applause. But then, one by one, everyone began to applaud, including the aloof or distracted audience members I mentioned earlier. Their applauds become increasingly more desperate. Apparently the performance artists were taking a long break, a pee or smoking a cigarette in the dressing room. Upon overhearing the boisterous crowd they returned to the empty stage and did something unscripted and very ordinary that I can't remember. I had an aerial view of the whole thing, but I was also a part of the performance troupe taking a break.

Like performance, this text is incomplete, and will continue to change in the coming months and years. A warrior without glory, I turn off my computer...

TO BE CONTINUED...