

[home](#) [pocha_texts](#)

In defense of performance art By Guillermo Gómez-Peña

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)

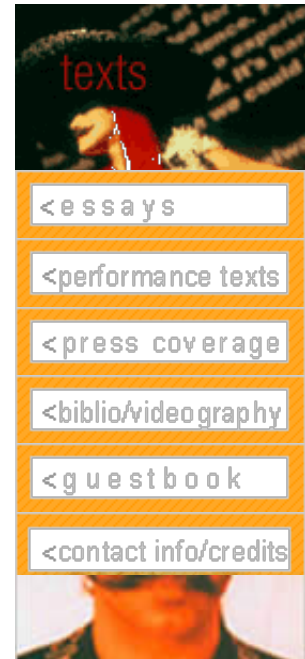
"Performance is both the anti-thesis of and the antidote to high culture." (Performance Artist)

"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 one, think and act like one? In this text, I will attempt to answer these questions elliptically by drawing a poetical portrait of the performance artist standing on a map of the performance art field, as I perceive it. To be congruent with my performance praxis, while attempting to answer these thorny questions, I will constantly cross the borders between theory and chronicle; between the personal and the social realms; between "I" and "we," in hopes to come across some interesting cross-sections and bridges. I will try to write with as much passion, valor and clarity as I can and for non-specialized readers, but take heed: the slippery and ever-changing nature of the field makes it extremely hard to define in simplistic terms. As 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." In this sense, in this text I will attempt to articulate "my thing."

Since I object to master discourses, specially those involuntary ones engendered by my own psyche, 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.

To finish this introduction, I wish to politely thank Richard Schechner Carolina Ponce de Leon, Marlene Ramírez-Cancio and Nara Heeman for having so intelligently challenged earlier versions of this text suggesting that I open more doors; and Rebecca Solnit, and Kaytie Johnson, for their incommensurable patience while revising my awkward syntax and conceptual inconsistencies. Future versions of this text will include responses and interventions by other colleagues.

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). 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. In fact, when performance studies scholars refer to "the performance field", they often mean something different; a much broader field that encompasses all things performative including anthropology, religious practice, pop culture, sports and civic events. We chronicle our times, true, but unlike journalists or social commentators, our chronicles tend to be non-narrative and polyvocal. 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 actual 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 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 if you will. 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, say what others don't, and occupy cultural spaces that are often overlooked or dismissed. Because of this, our multiple communities are constituted by aesthetic, political, ethnic, and gender rejects.

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 also 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 realms where we are mere temporary insiders. In a sense, we are hardcore dropouts of orthodoxy, embarking on a permanent quest to develop a more inclusive system of political thought and aesthetic praxis.

“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 the act of crossing a border, we find temporary emancipation.

Unlike the enforced borders of a nation/state, those in our “performance country” are open to welcome nomads, migrants, hybrids, and outcasts. 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, a fernhah, 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 is worried.

III.-THE HUMAN BODY

Traditionally, the human body, our body, not the stage, is our true site for creation and materia prima. 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 de-li-be-rate phrases.

Our body/corpo/artefacto/identity must be marked, decorated, painted, costumed, intervened culturally, re-politicized, mapped out, chronicled, and documented. When our body is ill or wounded, our work inevitably changes. Frank Moore, Ron Athey and Franco B have made us beautifully aware of this.

Our bodies are 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 sacrificially 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 cultural and political implications. We just have no other option. It's like a "mandate" for the lack of a better word.

*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?

IV.-OUR "JOB"

Do we have a job?

Our job may be to open up a temporary utopian/distopian space, a demilitarized zone in which meaningful "radical" behavior and progressive thought are hopefully allowed to take place, even if only for the duration of the piece. 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.

We do not look for answers; we merely raise impertinent questions. In this sense, to use an old metaphor, our 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 academicians— will have to deal with them, fight them, domesticate them or attempt to explain them.

Once the performance is over and people walk away, our 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, and the questions and dilemmas embodied in the images and rituals we present can continue to haunt the spectator’s dreams, memories, and conversations. The objective is not to “like” or even “understand” performance art; but to create a sediment in the audience's psyche.

V.-THE CULT OF INNOVATION

The performance art field is obsessed with innovation and age, especially in the so-called “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 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, constantly reframe our imagery and theories, and rewrite our photo captions, so to speak, 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, that is. Those who survive may very well feel like frustrated rockers. There's absolutely nothing romantic about it. Only a handful are granted the privilege, like Bowie or Madonna in the equally merciless world of pop, of having several reincarnations.

*Brazilian performance artist Nara Heeman responds: "I see the need of being 'connected' to the field. But I feel quite sad with the perspective of being caught inside the cage of having to produce in order not to be forgotten. I believe that if we define ourselves as performance artists

within the highest category we can reach, we might get stressed with the demands of the market. But if we define ourselves just as living beings this concern could become secondary."

VI.-IDENTITY SURVIVAL KIT

Performance has taught us an extremely important lesson: we are not straitjacketed by identity. Our repertoire of multiple identities is in fact an intrinsic part of our survival kit. We know very well that with the 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 everyday life. In fact, social, ethnic, and gender bending are an intrinsic part of our daily praxis, and so is cultural transvestitism. 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. But even then, if we are not careful, our fiery gaze and lack of coolness might denounce us.

VII.-THE IRREPLACEABLE BODY

Our audiences may experience vicariously, through us, 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 90's 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 a shamanic thing.

This fascination is also connected to the powerful mythology of the performance artist as anti-hero and counter-cultural avatar. Audiences don't really mind that Annie Sprinkle is not a trained actress or that Ema Villanueva is not a skillful dancer. Audiences attend the performance precisely to be witnesses to our unique existence, not to applaud our virtuosity.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that 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 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. Why? I just don't know.

Recently, Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera has embarked in an extremely daring project: abolishing her physical presence during

the actual performance and therefore defying her own performance mythology. She asks curators to find in advance a "normal person," not necessarily connected to the arts, to replace her during the actual performance. 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

VIII.-AT ODDS WITH AUTHORITY

Yes. I am at odds with authority; whether it is political, religious, sexual, racial, or aesthetic, and I am constantly questioning imposed structures and dogmatic behavior wherever I find it. 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 surprising ways to dismantle that particular form of authority. I share this personality trait with my colleagues. In fact, we crave the challenge of dismantling abusive authority.

Perhaps because the stakes are so low in our field, paired with the fact that we are literally allergic to authority, we never think twice about putting ourselves on the line and denouncing social injustice wherever we detect it. Without giving it 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, despite 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.

IX.-SIDING WITH THE UNDERDOG

We see our probable future reflected in the eyes of the homeless, the poor, the unemployed, the diseased, and newly arrived immigrants. Our world overlaps with theirs.

We are often attracted to those who barely survive the dangerous corners of society—hookers, winos, lunatics, and prisoners are our spiritual brothers and sisters. We feel a strong spiritual kinship with them. 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, like Ellen Zacco recently pointed to me, "(we) tend to speak for them, which is quite presumptuous." I cannot help but to agree with her.

X.-A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

The cloud of nihilism is constantly chasing us around , but we somehow manage to escape it. It's a macabre dance. Whether conscious or not, deep inside we truly believe that what we do actually changes people's lives, and we have a real hard time being cool about it. Performance is a matter of life or death to us. Our sense of humor often pales next to our sobriety when it comes to committing to a life/art project. Our degree of commitment to our beliefs at times may border on fanaticism. If we 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, we won't rest until we complete our task, regardless of the consequences. This can be maddening to our loved ones, who must exercise an epic patience with us. They must live with the impending uncertainty and the profound fear of our 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. And the risks we take in the name of performance, aren't always worthwhile.

XI.-NECESSARY AND UNNECESSARY RISKS

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

In the process of finding the true dimensions and/or possibilities of a new piece, some of us stupidly have put ourselves, or our audience at risk, but somehow nothing extremely grave has happened yet. Knock on wood. I quote from a script:

"Dear audience, I've got 45 scars accounted for; half of them produced by art & 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 drinking Mr. Clean to exorcise my colonial demons? or, handing a dagger to an audience member, & offering her my plexus? (Pause)"My plexussssss...your madness," --I said, and she went for it, inflicting my 45th scar. She was only 20, boricua, & did not know the difference between performance, rock & roll & street life. Bad phrase, delete.."

XII.-EMBODIED THEORY

I quote from my performance diaries:

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

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

"Despite the fact that we analyze things obsessively and under multiple lights, when push comes to shove, we tend to operate through impulse (rarely through logic or convenience), and make decisions based in intuition, superstition, and dreams. Because of this, in the eyes of others, we appear to be very self-involved, as if the entire universe revolved around our psyche and body. Often our main struggle is precisely to escape our subjectivity—the imprisonment of our 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..."

*Post script: I re-read this section and get angry with myself. I sound like a fucking 19th century bohemian.

XIII.-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."

"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 or discipline 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 to not 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 at times, 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.

...Performance is a need. If I don't perform for a long period of time, say three or four 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...and of course, my Chicano sense of humor...No, I take it back. My true salvation is collaboration. I collaborate with others in hopes of developing bridges between my personal obsessions and the 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 love 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 love to cyborgize ethnic clothing. Paradoxically I don't like to be stared at. I am a living, walking contradiction. Aren't you?

... I collect unusual figurines, souvenirs, chatchkes, 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 creative process, (everything is a process to me, even sleeping and walking), my encounters with others, and the major changes in my life. My shaman friends say that I am 'a shaman who lost his way'. I like that definition of performance art."

XIV.-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 humid 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, frequently 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 photography not ethics).

XV.-CLUMSY ACTIVISTS

With a few venerable exceptions (Tim Miller, Rodessa Jones, Felipe Eherenberg, Suzanne Lacy, Keith Henessy 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 larger ethnic, gender-based, or professional communities. But the results, bless our hearts, are often poor. Why? 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: 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, inventors of brand-new metafiction, choreographers of surprising collective actions, alternative semioticians, media pirates, and/or “cultural DJ's.” 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 advice several activists. Others, like Marcos and Superbarrio who are consummate performance activists, continue to inspire me.

XVI.-PHYSICAL BEAUTY

We are no more or less beautiful or fit than anyone else, but neither are we average looking. Actors, dancers, and models are better looking, sportsmen and martial artists are in much better shape, and porn stars are definitely sexier. In fact, our bodies and faces tend to be awkward looking; but we have an intense look, a deranged essence of presence, an ethical quality to our features and hands. And this makes us both trustworthy to outlaws and rebels, and highly suspicious to authority. When people look into our eyes, they can tell right away— we mean it. This, I may say, amounts to a different kind of beauty.

XVII.-CELEBRITY CULTURE

Celebrity culture is baffling and embarrassing to us. Luckily, we never get invited to the Playboy mansion, or to parties at our embassies when we are on tour. If we go to the opening of the Whitney Biennial, most likely we'll either get bored, or overwhelmed, really fast. Despite our flamboyant public personas and our capability to engage in so called “extreme behavior,” we tend to be shy and insecure in social situations. We dislike rubbing shoulders (or genitals) with the rich and famous, and

when we do it, we are quite clumsy—spilling the wine on someone's lap, or saying the wrong thing. When introduced to a potential funder or a famous art critic, we either become impolite out of mere insecurity or remain catatonic. And when our “fans” compliment us too much, we just don't know how to respond. More likely we will disappear instantly into the streets or will hide in the nearest restroom for an hour.

XVIII.-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 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 talk show guests and Catholic priests.

PERFORMANCE VIS A VIS THEATER, THE ART WORLD & THE MAINSTREAM

XIX.-PERFORMANCE AND THEATER

I must first acknowledge the important contributions of experimental theater (the Living Theater, The Performance Group, Jodorowsky, etc.) and of happenings (Kaprow, Fluxus) to the development of performance; as well as the most recent influence that performance art has had over theater, every time theater is in crises.

Having said this, I will now attempt to venture into the dangerous border zone between theater and performance. Despite the fact they often occupy the same stage, there are some fundamental differences. Virtuosity, training and skills are highly regarded in theater; whereas in performance, originality, topicality and charisma are much more valued. Even the most experimental and antinarrative forms of theater which don't depend on a text have a beginning, a dramatic crisis (or a series of), and an end. A performance “event” or “action” is just a segment of a much larger “process” not available to the audience, and 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

horizontal, decentered, and constantly changes. 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. It's just the way it is.

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. Not one performance art piece is ever the same. 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 beware 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 and preparing ourselves psychologically, than "rehearsing" behind closed doors. It's just a different process.

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 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 dramatically 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 slightly morph in and out of them without ever disappearing entirely as "themselves." Perhaps they occupy the space between acting and being themselves. At one point in their lives, certain theater monologists like Spalding Grey and Jesusa Rodriguez, decide 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.

*Schechner bewares me: "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. Also that in drama theatre the actors are usually not also the authors; while in performance art the performers are almost always the authors."

XX.-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;” or acting that we are being. Shechner elaborates: “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.” In this sense, performance is definitely a way of being in the space, in front 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, and Mexican merolicos understand this quite well. Most drama actors and dancers unfortunately don’t.

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 or not in virtual space remains unanswered.

XXI.-THE ART WORLD

Our relationship with the Art World (in capitals) 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— say 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 are always trembling 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.

XXII.-DEPORTED/DISCOVERED

The self-proclaimed “international art world” is constantly shifting its

attitude toward us. 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. 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 or Hybrid Art? “Ethno-techno” or “Outsider Art”? “Chicano cyber-punk” or “Extreme culture”? What next? “Neo-Aztec hi-tech post-retro-colonial art?”

The fact performance artists don’t produce sleek objects for display makes it hard for the commercial art apparatuses, and the critics who sanction it, to justify our presence in mainstream shows and biennials. And it is only when the art world is having a crisis of ideas that we get asked to participate, and only for a short period of time. But we don’t mind being mere temporary insiders. Our partial invisibility is actually a privilege. It grants us special freedoms and a certain respectability (that of fear) 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 of Western civilization. They don’t.

XXIII.-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 stuff?) “peripheral,” (to their own self-imposed “center”) “experimental,” meaning “permanently in the process of testing,” 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: “handle at your own risk.”*

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 visit our forbidden cities with a combination of eroticized fear and adventuresome machismo. One or two of us, lucky outsider sofisticados, may be discovered this time by Documenta, Venice or Edinburg.

*Since September 11, the connotations and implications of this marginalizing terminology have increased considerably. 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.

XXIV.-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.

XXV.-THE MAINSTREAM BIZARRE

A perplexing phenomenon has occurred in the past seven years: the blob of the mainstream has devoured the lingo and imagery of the much touted "margins"—the thornier and more sharp-edged, the better—and "performance" has literally turned it into a sexy marketing strategy and pop genre. I call this phenomenon "the mainstream bizarre."

High Performance, the legendary magazine, is now a car motto; the imbecile conductor of MTV's "Jack Ass" and sleazebag Howard Stern both call themselves "performance artists," and so do Madonna, Iggy Pop and Marilyn Manson. Performative personalities and mindless interactivity are regularly celebrated in "Real TV.," talk shows and "X-treme sports." In fact, everything "extreme" is now the norm.

In this new context, I truly wonder how can young and new audiences differentiate between the "transgressive" or "extreme" actions of Annie Sprinkle, Orlan, or yours truly, and those of the guests of Jerry Springer? What differentiates "us" from "them?" One might answer, "content". But, what if "content" no longer matters nowadays? Same with depth. Are we then out of a job? Or should we redefine, once again, for the hundredth time, our new roles in a new era?

After reading this text, writer Rebecca Solnit asked me: "What is then the future of performance art as the boundaries of transgression move ever outward and as some of the boundaries of identity begin to blur

even in the mainstream? How do you step across the line when the line moves and melts?" I have no idea. 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 restaking its territory, and redefining the now dated binary notions of center/periphery; and mainstream/subcultural. Perhaps one useful strategy might be for us locos and locas, to occupy a fictional center and push the dominant culture to its own truly undesirable margins.

XXVI.-THORNY QUESTIONS

Every time a journalist from a large paper or a commercial radio station interviews me, the conversation goes, more or less like this:

Journalist: "Is performance art something relatively new"?

GP: "Every culture has 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 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: "So 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, schoolteachers, priests, or taxi drivers. Most of the time we ourselves are not even aware of these functions."

Journalist: "But what does performance art do for you?"

GP: "For me?(Long pause) It is a way to fight or talk back, to recapture my stolen civic self, and piece together my fragmented identity."

Journalist: "Do you think about these big ideas everyday, all day long.?"

GP: "Certainly not. 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'm not being clear: what I want to know is what has performance art taught you.?"

GP: "Ah, you want a soundbite, right? OK. When I was younger, performance taught me how to talk back. Lately, it is teaching me to

listen to others."

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

© 2001 Pocha Nostra