

ARTS 499 - PERFORMANCE

Reading 01

*Gomez-Peña questions to ponder*

According to this article, what is the job of the performance artist?

Who does he see as the spiritual brothers and sisters of performance artists? Why?

What does he mean by “personal archaeology”?

In relation to this reading, discuss the phrase “challenge people’s sense of the familiar.”

What do you think is the difference between “performance art” and something like MTV’s Jack Ass?

Why is the role of the performance artist important in our society?

IS the role important? For that matter, is ART important? Why?

Guillermo  
Gómez-Peña

**In Defence of  
Performance Art**

excerpt from "Art and Performance LIVE," p 76-85, edited by Adrian Heathfield (2004, Routledge, NYC)

## 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 theatre, and many of us utilise spoken word, *sensu stricto*, we're 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 theorise 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.

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're meant to be handled and utilised 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 'artefacts', 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're 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 utilised by political radicals and anti-globalisation 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 is slightly different from that of his/her neighbour. We converge in this overlapping terrain precisely because it grants us special freedoms often denied to us in other

realms where we're mere temporary insiders. In a sense, we're hard-core dropouts from 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's precisely in the sharpened borders of cultures, genders, metiers, languages and art forms that we feel more comfortable, and where we recognise and befriend our colleagues. We're 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, the borders of our 'performance country' are open, welcome to 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 *fernhab* (inner peace), 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 centrepiece of the altar, so to speak. Our body is also the very centre 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 socio-political body. If we're capable of establishing all these connections in front of an audience, hopefully others will recognise them in their own bodies.

## IV. Our 'Job'

Do we have a job?

Our job may be to open up a temporary utopian/dystopian space, a de-militarised zone in which meaningful 'radical' behaviour 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 positions and identities. In this border zone, the distance between 'us' and 'them', self and other, art and life, becomes blurry and non-specific.

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 theatre, the street, or in front of the video camera – and let the demons loose. Others who 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, 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 is always in dialogue with the immediate future; a speculative future, that is. The dominant mythology says that we're 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.

Brazilian performance artist Nara Heeman responds: I see the need to be '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 (there is in fact a performance art market). But if we define ourselves just as living beings this concern becomes 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're not careful, our fiery gaze and lack of coolness might denounce us.

#### VII. Dreaming in Spanish

I dreamt in Spanish that I decided never to 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 más retórico y complicado hasta el punto en que perdi todo contacto con mi público. A pesar de los ataques de los críticos racistas, me empeñé en hablar español. Mis colaboradores se molestaron y empezaron a abandonarme. Eventualmente me quede completamente solo, hablando en español, entre fantasmas conceptuales angloparlantes. Afortunadamente I woke up 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're much closer to art than to life.'

#### VIII. The Irreplaceable Body

Our audiences may vicariously experience other possibilities of aesthetic, political and sexual freedom; possibilities 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 outdated by new technologies and robotics. Stelarc's warning in the early 1990s that the body was becoming obsolete turned out to be untrue. It's 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 isn't a trained actress or that Ema Villanueva isn't a skilful dancer. They 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 performance artist's body-in-action. Recently, Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera embarked on an extremely daring project: abolishing her physical presence during the actual performance. In advance of the work, she asks curators to find a 'normal person', not necessarily connected to the arts, to replace her during the actual performance. When Tania arrives at the site of the performance she exchanges identities with the chosen person, becoming a mere assistant. Curators are flipping out.

### **IX. At Odds with Authority**

Yes. I'm at odds with authority; whether it is political, religious, sexual, racial, or aesthetic, and I'm constantly questioning imposed structures and dogmatic behaviour wherever I find it. As soon as I'm 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 most of 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're 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're 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. 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. I secretly envy my 'cool' friends.

### **X. 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're often attracted to those who barely survive the dangerous corners of society: hookers, winos, lunatics and prisoners are our spiritual brothers and sisters. 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 with social orphanhood expresses itself as a visceral form of solidarity with those peoples, communities or countries facing oppression and human rights violations; with those victimised 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 agree with her.

### **XI. 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 consciously 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 humour 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 US-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*. The risks we take in the name of performance aren't always worthwhile.

I quote from a script:

Dear audience, I've got forty-five 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 ... To an audience member: 'You mean you want me to be more specific than drinking Mr. Clean to exorcise my colonial demons?' Or, handing a dagger to an audience member, and offering her my plexus: (Pause) 'Here ... my colonised body', I said; and she went for it, inflicting my 45th scar. She was only twenty, boricua, and did not know the difference between performance, rock & roll and 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 to our body and into our blood stream, only to be refracted back into 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 analyse 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 on 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 ...

I re-read this section and get angry with myself. I sound like a fucking nineteenth-century bohemian. My friend Marlene insists that I leave this section in. I comply.





### XIII. Everyday Life

If I were to anthropologise 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 my everyday life is 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'm 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 with my work, and rarely have vacations – long vacations – like normal people do. I'm 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'd be quite happy, though I'm 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 nine-to-five job, traditional social structures and the basic requirements of other disciplines (i.e. rehearsals, curtain calls and production meetings in theatre, 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'm on stage again, I instantly overcome my metaphysical orphanhood and psychological fragility and become larger-than-life. Later on at the bar, I'll recapture my true size and

endemic mediocrities. The irreverent humour 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 ritualised structure to my daily life ... No, I take it back. My true salvation is collaboration. I collaborate with others in the hope of developing bridges between my personal obsessions and the social universe.

... True. I'm kind of ... weird in the eyes of my neighbours 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 cyborgise ethnic clothing. Paradoxically, I don't like to be stared at. I'm 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 archaeology', 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'm 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'm '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're not functional. The other histories of art are literally buried in humid boxes and stored in the closets of performance artists worldwide. Most likely, no one will ever have access to them. Worse still, 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, lover or to a new identity. If every university art and performance studies department made the effort to rescue these endangered archives from our clumsy hands, an important history would 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 performance artists make clumsy political negotiators and terrible community organisers. Our great dilemma here is that we often see ourselves as activists and, as such, we attempt to organise our larger ethnic, gender-based or professional communities. But the results, bless our hearts, are often poor. We're much better at performing other important community roles such as those of *animateurs*, reformers, inventors of brand-new

metafiction, choreographers of surprising collective actions, alternative semioticians, media pirates, or 'cultural DJs'. In fact, our aesthetic strategies (not our co-ordinating 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.

#### **XVI. Physical Beauty**

We're 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.

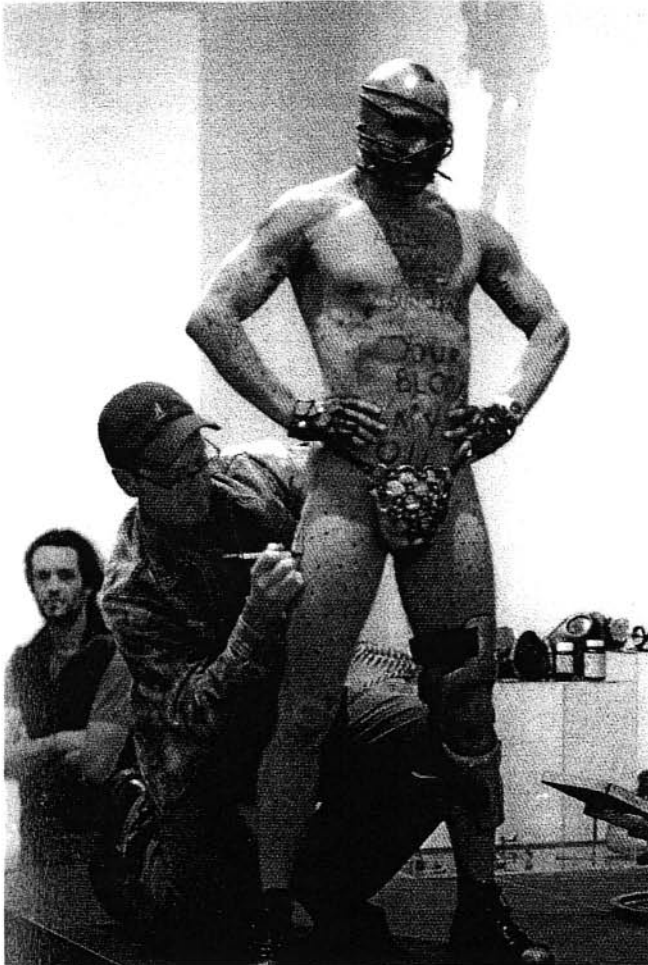
#### **XVII. Celebrity Culture**

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're 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 capacity to engage in so-called 'extreme behaviour', 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're 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'll disappear instantly into the streets or will hide in the nearest restroom for an hour.

#### **XVIII. 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 actually represent realistically someone else in a movie or a theatre play, and I was so convincing as an actor that I'd 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, memorising lines.

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 foetal 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 thankful for not knowing how to act.

#### **XIX. 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. In this sense, performance is definitely 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 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 in which it takes place. There is no theatrical magic, no 'suspense of disbelief'. The thorny question of whether performance art exists or not in virtual space, for me, remains unanswered.

#### **XX. The Art World**

Our relationship with the Art World (in capitals) is bittersweet, to say the least. We've 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 education department. The chief curators watch us attentively from a distance. Only the night before our departure will we be invited for drinks.

#### **XXI. The Ethnographic Dream**

I dreamt that 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 stuffed animals. We were hand-fed by museum docents and taken to the bathroom on leashes. Occasionally we'd be cleaned with a duster by a gorgeous proprietor who secretly lusted after 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 roam to 5pm we'd alternate slow-motion ritualised actions and didactic 'demonstrations' of our customs and art practices with the modelling of 'authentic' tribal-wear designed by one of the curators. On Sundays they'd open the front of the Plexiglas boxes so that the audience could have 'a more direct experience' of us. We were told by a staff member of the education department to allow the audience to touch us, smell us and even change our clothes and alter our body positions. Some people were allowed actually to sit on our laps and make out with us if they so 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 this fire, and everyone left the building but us. Suddenly everything outside the Plexiglas boxes was burning. It was beautiful. I never had that dream again. I guess we died during the fire.



## XXII. Deported/Discovered

The self-proclaimed 'International Art World' is constantly shifting its attitude towards 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 of being invited more frequently.) We get welcomed and deported back and forth so constantly that we've grown used to it. In twenty-two years of making performance art, I've 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 that performance artists don't produce sleek objects for display makes it hard for the commercial art apparatus, and the critics who sanction it, to justify our presence in mainstream shows and biennials. And it's 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 civilisation. They don't.

## XXIII. Marginalising Lingo

Nomenclature and labelling have contributed to the permanent marginalisation 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 'centre'), 'experimental' meaning 'permanently in the process of testing', or 'heterodox' (at mortal odds with tradition). If we are 'of colour' (who isn't?) we are always labelled 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 utilised by the 'mainstream' as a red light, with the perilous subtext: 'Unpredictable behaviour. Handle at your own risk.' Since September 11th, the connotations and implications of this marginalising 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' perpetuated by the Bush doctrine.

These terms keep pushing the performance art field towards the margins of the 'legitimate' one – the market-based Art World – the big city in which we constitute the dangerous barrios, ghettos, reservations, and banana republics. Curators, journalists and cultural impresarios visit our forbidden cities with a combination

of eroticised fear and adventuresome machismo. One or two of us lucky outsider sofisticados may be discovered this time by Documenta, Venice or Edinburgh.

## XXIV. Art Criminals

Performance artists are easily criminalised. The highly charged images we produce, and the mythologies that embellish our public personas, make us recognisable 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 mischaracterisation, for I believe it grants us an undeserved respectability and power as cultural anti-heroes.

## 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 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 the 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 'Reality TV', talk shows and 'X-treme sports'. In fact, everything 'extreme' is now the norm.

In this new context, I truly wonder how young and new audiences can 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?

## 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:** No. Every culture has a space allocated to the renewal of tradition and a space for contestation and deviant behaviour. 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 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 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 behaviours, 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's a way to fight or talk back, to recapture my stolen civic self and piece together my fragmented identity.

**Journalist:** Mr Comes Piña, 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've 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 sound bite, right? OK. When I was younger, performance taught me how to talk back. Lately, it's been teaching me to listen carefully to others.

To be continued ...