IN DEFENSE OF

Performance Art

A foremost practitioner explains his métier

BY GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA

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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? Both questions are difficult: the field’s slippery, ever-changing nature makes it hard to define. As I attempt to articulate “my thing,” I beg you to cut me some slack: like most performance artists I know, I am a contradictory Vato.

THE MAP
The best way to chart performance art is to start with what it is not: our work overlaps with experimental theater, but is neither acting nor spoken word poetry. Most performance artists write, but rarely to publish. We theorize about art, politics and culture, but where academic theorists have binoculars, we have radar. We chronicle our times but, unlike journalists or social commentators, our accounts are non-narrative and polyvocal. Unlike comedians, we use humor less to get a laugh than to provoke the ambivalence of painful smiles—though we welcome an occasional burst of laughter.

Many of us are exiles from the visual arts, but our main artworks are our bodies, ridden with semiotic, political, ethnographic, cartographic and mythical implications. We mean any objects we create to be handled without remorse. In fact, the more we use our performance “artifacts,” the more “charged” and powerful they become. Recycling is our main modus operandi.

At times we test our new personae and actions in the streets, but we are not “public artists” per se. The streets are 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 differ considerably from those of 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. Rejects—aesthetic, political, ethnic and gender—constitute our multiple communities.

THE SANCTUARY
Performance art is a conceptual “territory” with fluctuating weather and boundaries; it tolerates, even encourages, contradiction, ambiguity
and paradox. “Here” tradition weighs less, rules are probable, laws and structures change constantly, and no one cares much about hierarchies and institutional power. “Here” there is no government or visible authority. “Here” the only social contract is the defiance of authoritarian models and dogmas, and the expansion of culture and identity. We feel more comfortable in the sharpened borders of cultures, genders, métiers, languages and art forms, where we recognize and befriend our colleagues. We are interstitial creatures and border citizens—insiders and outsiders simultaneously—and we embrace this paradox. Crossing borders temporarily sets us free.

Our “country” welcomes nomads, hybrids and outcasts, offering a temporary sanctuary to rebel artists and theorists expelled from mono-disciplinary fields and separatist communities. It is also an internal place that we each invent according to our political aspirations and spiritual needs, sexual desires and obsessions, troubling memories and relentless quests for freedom. Finishing this paragraph, I bite my romantic tongue. It bleeds, worrying my audience.

THE HUMAN BODY

The human body, our body, not the stage, is our site for creation, our empty canvas and musical instrument, our navigation chart and biographical map, the vessel for our ever-changing identities, the centerpiece of our altar. Even when we depend on objects, locations and situations, our body remains the matrix of the piece. The center of our symbolic universe—a tiny model for humankind (humankind and humanity are the same word in Spanish, humanidad)—our bodies are metaphors for the sociopolitical corpus. We establish these connections in front of an audience, hoping others will recognize them in their bodies. Our scars are involuntary words, whereas our tattoos, piercings, body paint, adornments, performance prosthetics and/or robotic accessories are de-li-be-rate phrases. Illness and injury change our work, as Frank Moore, Ron Athey and Franko B beautifully have shown.

Perhaps the goal of performance, especially for women, gays or people “of color,” is to decolonize our bodies and to inspire audiences to do the same. Though we treasure our bodies, we don’t mind endan-
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gering them. We find our corporeal possibilities and raison d'être in the tensions of risk. We don’t mind sharing our imperfect, awkward and frail bodies, naked, with audiences, or sacrificing them to video cameras. Exhibiting and documenting our imperfect bodies is always painful, but we have no choice.

OUR "JOB"

Our job may be to open up a temporary utopian/dystopian space, a demilitarized zone for meaningful "radical" behavior and progressive thought, even if only for the duration of the piece. In this imaginary zone, artist and audience can assume multiple, ever-changing positions and identities. In this border zone, the distance between "us" and "them," self and other, art and life, becomes blurry and unspecific.

Rather than seeking answers, we 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, theater or street, or in front of the video camera—and let loose the demons. Others that are better trained—activists and academics—will have to fight them, domesticate them or explain them. We hope our performances trigger reflection in perplexed psyches, that the questions and dilemmas embodied in our images will haunt the spectator’s dreams, memories and conversations for weeks, even months.

IDENTITY SURVIVAL KIT

Performance has taught us an important lesson: identity does not straitjacket us. Using props, make-up, accessories and costumes, we can reinvent ourselves in the eyes of others, and we love to experiment with this unique knowledge. Social, ethnic and gender bending are intrinsic to our work, as is cultural transvestitism. In performance, impersonating other cultures and problematizing impersonation can be an effective “reverse anthropology.” In everyday life, as victims of ethnic profiling and racism, impersonating other cultures can save our lives. For 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 to reinvent ourselves as “amigo entertainers” in the eyes of racist law enforcement. It works. But even then we must take care: our fiery gaze and lack of coolness might denounce us.

THE IRREPLACEABLE BODY
Our audiences may experience, through us, unfamiliar aesthetic, political and sexual freedoms. These vicarious liberties may be why, despite innumerable predictions over the past thirty years, performance art hasn't died, been replaced by video or made outdated by new technologies and robotics. Stelarc's early 90's warning that the body was becoming “obsolete” was wrong. The ineffable magic of a pulsating, sweaty body immersed in a live ritual before our eyes can't be replaced. It's a shamanic thing. This fascination also connects to the powerful mythology of the performance artist as anti-hero and counter-cultural avatar. Audiences don't mind that Annie Sprinkle is not a trained actress or that Ema Villanueva is not a skillful dancer. They attend our performances to witness our unique existence, not to applaud our virtuosity.

No actor, robot or virtual avatar can replace the spectacle of the performance artist in action. I cannot imagine a hired actor operating Chico McMurtrie's primitive robots or reenacting Orlan's operations. When we watch Stelarc demonstrate a new robotic bodysuit or high-tech toy, after fifteen minutes his sweating flesh interests us more than his prosthetic armor and perceptual extensions. The paraphernalia is great but, inexplicably, the body attached to the mythical identity of the performance artist remains the event's center.

SIDING WITH THE UNDERDOG
Those who barely survive society's dangerous corners often attract us. We feel a strong spiritual kinship with hookers, winos, lunatics and prisoners. Unfortunately, they often drown in the waters in which we swim—the same oceans, different levels of submersion.

A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH
Nihilism chases us, but we escape. Consciously or not, we believe that we change people's lives, and we find it hard to be cool about it. Performance is a matter of life or death to us. If we 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.

EMBODIED THEORY
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. The performance 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 into the social world via documentation. We distrust thoughts we can't embody.

EVERYDAY LIFE
From e-mails to a Peruvian friend who struggles to understand my everyday life in San Francisco:

Dear X: everyday life is a true inferno. I don't know how to manage or discipline myself. 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. I am always in debt, but I don't mind. It's the price I pay not to be bothered by financial considerations. If I could live without a bank account, driver's license, passport and cell phone, I would be quite happy. Though I recognize the naiveté of my anarchist aspirations.

My most formidable enemy is not always the right wing forces of society but, at times, my inability to domesticate quotidian chaos and discipline myself. Lacking a 9-to-5 job, traditional social structures and the basic requirements of other disciplines, I tend to feel oppressed by the tyranny of domesticity and easily get lost in the horror vacui of an empty studio or my laptop's liquid screen—which sometimes 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 three or four months, I become unbearable. On stage, I overcome my metaphysical orphanhood and psychological fragility and become larger-than-life. Later, at the bar, I recapture my true size and endemic mediocrities, thanks to the irreverent humor of my colleagues and friends. My salvation is collaboration, which helps me connect my personal obsessions to the social universe.

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.

I collect unusual figurines, souvenirs, chatchkes and costumes connected to my “cosmology,” hoping that one day I might use them in a piece. It's my “personal archeology,” and it dates back to my birth. With it, wherever I go, I build altars to ground myself; altars as eclectic and complex as my aesthetics and my many composite identities.

Why? I am supersitious. I see ghosts and read symbolic messages everywhere. I believe unspoken metaphysical laws govern my creative process (I see everything as a process, 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.

PHYSICAL BEAUTY
Our bodies and faces tend to be awkward; but we have an intense look, a deranged essence of presence, an ethical quality to our features and hands. These qualities make us trustworthy to outlaws and rebels, and highly suspect to authority. This intensity is a different kind of beauty.

A PERFORMANCE ARTIST DREAMS OF BEING AN ACTOR
I dreamt I was an actor so convincing that I became my character and forgot who I was. In my dream, I played an essentialist performance artist who hated naturalistic acting and social and psychological realism, who despised artifice, make-up, costumes and memorizing lines. But the performance artist rebelled against the actor, myself, remaining silent for a week, moving in slow motion for a day or hitting the streets in tribal make-up to challenge people's sense of the familiar. His mind-fuck so confused me, the "good actor," that my identity collapsed and I couldn't act. In a fetal position, I froze inside a large display case. Luckily it was just a dream. When I woke, I was the same old confused performance artist. I was thankful for not knowing how to act.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC DREAM
I dreamt Juan Ybarra and I were permanent exhibits at a Natural History museum. Examples of a rare “Post-Mexican urban tribe,” we lived in Plexiglas boxes beside other specimens. Museum docents hand-fed us and took us to the bathroom on leashes. Gorgeous caretaker who secretly lusted for us occasionally dusted us off.
Our job was not that exciting. Since it was a dream, however, we couldn't change the script, which went more or less like this: From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., we would alternate slow-motion ritualized actions and didactic "demonstrations" of our customs and art practices with the modeling of "authentic" tribal wear. On Sundays the Plexiglas boxes were opened so the audience could experience us "more directly." Someone from the educational department told us to let the audience touch us, smell us, change our clothes and alter our body positions. Some people sat on our laps and made out with us. It was a drag, an ethnographic shame, but we were mere specimens so we couldn't do anything about it. One day, a fire broke out, and everyone else fled. Suddenly flames consumed everything outside the Plexiglas boxes. It was beautiful. I never had that dream again. I guess we died.

DEPORTED/DISCOVERED

The self-proclaimed "international art world" constantly shifts its attitude toward performance artists. We are "in" one year (if our aesthetics, ethnicity or gender politics coincide with their trends), "out" the next. We're welcomed and deported so often that we're used to it. The art world asks us to participate just when it has a crisis of ideas, and even then only briefly. But we don't mind being temporary insiders. Our partial invisibility grants us special freedoms and a certain respectability (that of fear) that full-time insiders and "art darlings" don't have. We can disappear to reinvent ourselves once again, in the shadows and ruins of Western civilization.

Like performance, this text is incomplete and in flux. A warrior without glory, I turn off my computer...

APPENDIX: A DREAM

I dreamt in Spanish that one day I decided never to perform in English again. A partir de ese momento, me dedique a presentar mis ideas y mi arte estrictamente en espanol para publicos estadounidenses atontados que no entendian nada. Mi espanol se hizo cada vez mas retorico y complicado hasta el punto en que perdí todo contacto con mi publico. Yo me empecé en hablar español. Mis colaboradores también se molestaron y empezaron a abandonarme. Un dia me quedé completamente solo, hablando solo entre fantasmas conceptuales angloparlantes. Afortunadamente desperté and I was able to perform in English again. Dreams tend to be much more radical than "reality." That's why they are closer to art than to life. (lit)

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