

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

MULTIPLE JOURNEYS: THE LIFE AND WORK OF GÓMEZ-PEÑA (A PERFORMANCE CHRONOLOGY)

In progress as of October 14, 2008

Journalist: *What do you do when a writer or a curator wishes to deport you from performance art history?*

GP: *You mean someone like Roselee Goldberg? ... You write yourself back into it on your own terms. Chicanos taught me that.*

Journalist: *What do you do to avoid being typecast and confined to a one-liner in the history of art?*

GP: *You have to constantly remind the art world that you work in multiple terrains and that some are invisible to them.*

This performance chronology is a conceptual artwork in progress. It includes information and projects that connect my life and family to my art, which I embed in a political and art historical context. The project is inspired by the archival work that Diana Taylor and the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics is doing; by Amelia Jones' and Suzanne Lacey' reflections on performance documentation; and by the work that Carolina Ponce de Leon is carrying out with the visual histories of Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco. I also feel a strong conceptual connection with the project Documenting Live generated in the UK by the Live Art Development Agency. This project was conceived as an intervention into the historical discourses of performance art. At the same time, it is an invitation to Chicano/Latino historians to incorporate our multiple parallel histories in the discourse of contemporary art and for performance artists to engage in similar genealogical projects.

In the process of writing this Proustian text, I have asked several colleagues to help me re-build the bizarre edifice of my memory. I particularly wish to thank Gretchen Coombs, Lisa Wolford Wylam, Linda Burnham, and Roberto Sifuentes for helping me prepare the manuscript; Emma Tramposch for archiving the extensive photographic material, and my jaina Carolina for designing the amazing powerpoint that accompanies the live version. Many names and projects are still missing and I hope that future versions will be more thorough. – Gómez-Peña

No-nato (prior to my birth): I wish to share two facts about my ancestors. Like so many Mexican families, they have been migrating to the US since the mid 1800s. If you review my family photo album from the late 1800s to the present, they've always had a highly developed sense of theatricality and an unselfconsciously baroque aesthetic. I'm just following suit.

1955: Born Guillermo Lino Liberio Gómez-Peña in the *Sanatorio Español* of Mexico City on September 23rd at 11:10 pm. My hairy face and bizarre intensity shocked my father. He was a gallant sportsman and civil engineer who devoted his life to bringing electricity to the Mexican countryside, putting food on our table, and playing *jai alai*. My mother was a fundraiser for social causes, hostess extraordinaire, and the irrefutable nerve center of the

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

family. Now, at 86, she is still gorgeous and socially active. We are currently working on a couple of performance projects.

1961-66: I study at the *Colegio Vanguardias* elementary school, play guitar and *futbol* soccer, traveling constantly to the Mexican countryside with my family.

1967-72: Jesuits and *Marista* priests provide my *secundaria* and *preparatoria* education. I make surrealistic drawings and cheesy collages that I hope never to publish. Mexico is fairly stable and the US a mythical northern place north in our imagination – a place to vacation, access modernity, and dream of the future. My sister Diana and brother Carlos migrate to Southern California.

1968: The Mexican student movement erupts like magma out of the Popocatepetl volcano. My older brother and sister's friends are part of it. Some end up in jail; others disappear for good. Tanks surround my neighborhood. The *Tlatelolco* student massacre takes place five minutes away from my home.

1970: I write *El hombre de la coladera*, my first self-conscious performance, about a young activist who becomes a misanthrope and chooses to live beneath the city, inside the sewage system. The piece is presented in my Catholic high school with spoken word and slides. After the performance, a priest sends me to the school psychiatrist.

1971: The *Normal de Maestros* student massacre takes place a few blocks away from my home. I write and perform *Smogman*, a sci-fi piece based on one of my first alteric selves, an activist super-hero who fights against pollution in Mexico DF. The third act includes a museum of "things past" with purified water, plants, and taxidermied extinct animals. These ideas will re-surface in my work years later.

1974: I form my first collective, a group called **Anarquía SA**. We produce ritual happenings, bad atonal music, and practice "ritual drugs and sex." Gurdjieff, Artaud, Nicanor Parra and Carlos Castañeda are our masters and inspiration. I join Swami Pranavananda's ashram in Tepoztlan, Mexico.

1974-78: I study *letras*, philology and linguistics at UNAM (Mexico City). The campus is an open laboratory of radical politics and student activism. We read about the Latin American literary "boom" and liberation movements, and discover the French symbolists and the Beat poets. Everyday life feels like a Goddard movie.

I engage in a series of "involuntary performance art pieces" using the streets of Mexico City as a gallery without walls. I still don't have a name for what I do. My main accomplices are my cousin Eugenio and Argentine poet Mari Carmen Copani. My conceptual godfather is Felipe Ehrenberg (bless his tattooed heart), and my guru is Alejandro Jodorowski.

1978: I receive a scholarship to study at the California Institute of Arts. I cross the US-Mexico border in search of artistic fresh air and my lost Chicano family. I suddenly become ... brown, a "wetback," a "beaner," a "greaser." I do not know the implications of these words. I begin my process of Chicano-ization with the unsolicited help of the LA police.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

1978: I walk from Tijuana to Cal Arts in two and a half days, my head covered with gauze. I wear my father's suit and carry a briefcase containing my passport, talismans and a diary.

1979-82: At Cal Arts, conceptualists Douglas Hubler and Jonathan Borofsky take me under their wing. My best friend is painter Ashley Bickerton. I explore the LA performance art scene. I am lucky. I hook up with the *High Performance* magazine crowd, meeting Linda Burnham, Steve Durland, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Bob & Bob, Rachel Rosenthal, and Asco.

1979: *The Loneliness of the Immigrant. Part I.* I decide to spend 24 hours in a public elevator wrapped in batik fabric and rope, a metaphor for a painful birth in a new country, a new identity as "the Chicano," and a new language, intercultural performance. It's my first performance "documented" by the art world.

1979: *The Loneliness of the Immigrant Part II.* I spend 12 hours lying on the downtown LA streets as a Mexican homeless person. Despite the fact I am wrapped in a serape and surrounded by candles, most people ignore me. I discover that as a Mexican (and a "homeless" person), I am literally invisible to the Anglo Californian population. Performance is my strategy for becoming visible.

I am trying to find my place and voice in a new country. One evening, I bring my audience to the edge of Interstate 5 and scream at the cars to "stop and save me from cultural shipwreck." When I am first busted by the California police for "looking suspicious" – in other words, for being Mexican – my response is to make a performance in which I burn a photo of my mother while screaming at the top of my lungs, "*Madre, hazme regresar a la placenta!* [Mother, bring me back to the womb!]"

1979: *Spanglish Poetry Reading in a Public Bathroom.* For a whole day, I sit on a toilet and read epic poetry aloud, describing my journey to the US. My audience is composed strictly of people who want to piss, shit, or wash their hands. Through these types of experiments, I become interested in the notion of performing for "involuntary audiences."

1980: *Mexiphobia: Post-revolutionary Situations.* I begin to experiment with fear of the Mexican other. My friends and I start showing up at various public places dressed as "typical drug dealers," caricatured "illegal aliens," and stylized "banditos," yet we behave in ways that contradict the stereotypes. Once we show up at a restaurant dressed as "typical Latino terrorists." The place empties out within five minutes of our arrival. I wonder what would happen if I were to recreate this performance today.

1980: At Cal Arts, choreographer Sara-Jo Berman and I form an interdisciplinary arts troupe named ***Poyesis Genetica*** (from the Spanish word *pollo*, a derogatory term for migrant workers, and the Greek *genesis*). The members are newly arrived immigrant students from Latin America, Europe, the Middle East and Canada, bound by a shared sense of cultural displacement. Our objective is "to develop syncretic languages capable of

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

articulating our condition of cultural outsiders and aesthetic freaks" (Poyesis Genetica flyer). Poyesis becomes a revolving door for rebel students.

We develop an artistic strategy of fusing various cultural traditions utilizing performance as a syntactic thread. We mix indigenous rituals from various parts of the world (or rather our romanticized perception of them) with installation and video art, combining sexual and political imagery, personal pathos and pop culture. We perform in art spaces and theatres as well as in the street, and often use live animals on stage. We also experiment with "altered states of consciousness" induced by fasting, alcohol, or lack of sleep. Though extremely important in our development as artists, these performances are more interesting to us than to our poor audiences.

1982: I graduate from Cal Arts and spend six months touring Europe with Sara-Jo and a few Poyesis members. It's our first tour ever. We begin performing in small theaters and artist's lofts, and end up working the streets. I lose my virginity as a performance artist. At the end of the tour, I am hypoglycemic, hungry, and weighing just 60 kilos. I write a book titled *The Misadventures of Mr. Misterio and Salome*. The manuscript gets lost. Only a few performance poems survive.

The first Mexican financial crack occurs and our family's savings evaporate. My father advises me not to return to Mexico. "Stay in Southern California and wait for better times," he says. The wait turns out to be the rest of my life. I am still waiting ...

1983: Poyesis Genetica relocates to the Tijuana-San Diego border region, where we find an ideal terrain to explore intercultural relations and become more overtly political. Sara-Jo and I reconstitute the troupe with local artists. We perform on both sides of the border as political praxis, making an average of \$50 per performance, enough to buy props, tacos, and an occasional drink.

One day I receive a phone call in San Diego: My beloved cousin Alfonso who grew up with me, has been murdered in Mexico City, stabbed 22 times. The murderer, a bodyguard of pop celebrity Enrique Guzman, spends only one month in jail.

1983: I run the cultural section of *La Prensa* de San Diego. I also work as a correspondent for *La Opinion* and *High Performance magazine*. Journalist Marco Vinicio Gonzalez and I begin to publish the border arts magazine, *La Línea Quebrada/The Broken Line*, connected to its Mexico City twin publication *La Regla Rota/The Broken Rule*.

1984-1990: With visual, performance and conceptual artists, we form **BAW/TAF (Border Arts Workshop)**, a bi-national arts collective involving Chicano, Mexican and Anglo artists. Our objective is to explore US-Mexico relations and border issues using performance, installation art, video, and experimental poetry. We proclaim the border region "a laboratory for social and aesthetic experimentation," and propose "the artist as a social thinker and bi-national diplomat." Similar activist groups are forming in other parts of the country, including the Guerrilla Girls, Group Material, ACT UP and the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Performance, political activism, and community concerns are completely intertwined in the spirit of the times.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

1985: BAW/TAF's strictly artistic activities help to protect our backs and legitimize our more activist work. In addition to art shows, publications, radio programs, and town meetings, we organize performance events right on the borderline, where the U.S. meets Mexico in the Pacific, literally performing for audiences in both countries. When the border patrol gets too close, we cross to the Mexican side. During certain performances, we invite our audiences to cross "illegally" to the other side. We exchange food and art "illegally," caress and kiss "illegally" across the border fence, and confront the border patrol in character. We are protected by the presence of journalist friends and video cameras. The political implications of the site and the symbolic weight of these actions garner immediate attention from the international media. These are the origins of the border arts movement.

1985: I begin *The Velvet Hall of Fame*, a long-term collaboration with traditional velvet tourist painters from Tijuana who reinterpret my performance characters. The process is very matter of fact; the more I pay, the better the painting is, period. They don't care about reviews or openings, but they get a kick out of my madness. My "conceptual velvet art" project will last for a decade, during which time I get to exhibit these paintings at the Walker Art Center, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Corcoran Gallery, and MACBA (Barcelona). When I see these paintings hanging within walking distance of a Gauguin or a David Salle, I somehow feel historically vindicated. I love to cross the border between "high" and "low" art.

1985: Within 24 hours, two major earthquakes destroy entire sections of Mexico City, killing more than 100,000 people. Poet Ruben Medina and I return immediately to DF. Most artists and intellectuals participate in the rescue efforts. My nephews, neighbors and I form a humble brigade. We carry corpses from a police station to the morgue. The city will never be the same. A powerful civic society and a new culture emerge out of the debris. *Superbarrio*, *Rock en español*, and the *nuevo periodismo* and radical cartoon movement are born. Felipe Ehrenberg declares the reconstruction of the barrio of Tepito his ultimate art project.

1986: I become interested in the interface between performance and photography. I work with artist/theorist Emily Hicks on a series of performances titled *Documented/Undocumented*, playing on the double meaning of the terms vis-à-vis immigration status and as an art piece. The performances are staged for the camera and documented in photojournalistic style. My interest in what I term "photo-performance" will continue until the present day.

1987: My collaborators and I stage several "performance pilgrimages" in different border cities. In Tijuana-Niagara, Emily and I spend a month working along the US/Canadian border, between Ontario and New York State, using New York's Art Park as a base of operations. We travel in a mobile temple created from pseudo-indigenous souvenirs and religious kitsch purchased in Tijuana and Niagara Falls. We carry out 15 "performance actions" including the auctioning of border art, spiritual consultation "for tourists," begging for money in costume, photo sessions with "authentic border shamans and witches," and broadcasting bilingual poetry with a huge megaphone from one shore of the Niagara River to the other.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

That same year, several Tijuana performance artists and I gather at the municipal cemetery of Tijuana and attempt to cross the US-Mexico border checkpoint in costume. From 1987 to 1990, I attempt several times to cross the border in costume. I am rejected three times, and those rejected personas never find their way into my performances.

1988: Emily and I stage our "performance wedding" right on the Tijuana-San Diego borderline, with poets and musicians performing on both sides, and family and friends crossing "illegally" into each other's countries during the ceremony. The media labels the event "a masterpiece of symbolic politics." Emily is 7 months pregnant.

My only son Guillermo Emiliano is born in San Diego. A few months later, my beloved father dies in Mexico City. Both events accelerate my process of Chicanoization. I can no longer afford to think that one day I will return to Mexico (my place in the Chicano Olympus will continue to be contested by Chicano essentialists until the mid 90s). I wear my father's clothes for one year. I inherit my family's oldest house, which soon becomes "Chicano Central" in Mexico City, a gathering place and party den for *chilango* and Chicano artists and writers.

1988: The performance monologue movement is officially born. Many performance artists including Tim Miller, Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray, and myself feel that performance has become so artificial and technically complex that we need to go back to basics and recapture the power of the spoken word. The result is a low-tech, language-based type of performance that literally fits in a suitcase. This art movement provides us with incredible geographic (we can travel with our entire production inside of a suitcase) as well as disciplinary mobility (we can present our work in the contexts of art, theatre, literature, activism, radio and film). The "performance field" expands to include spoken word poets, radical theorists, and weird stand-up comedians. We all share an interest in the transformative power of the live word and a desire to explore the flaming intersection of personal identity and social issues.

1988-89: My main contribution to the performance monologue movement is ***Border Brujo***, a spoken word monologue dealing with border identity. The script is written in English, Spanish, Spanglish, gringoñol and various made up "robo-languages." My portable altar, which functions as set design, as well as my hand-made costumes, are composed of "pseudo-ethnic" objects, tourist tchotchkes and cheap religious souvenirs.

With *Border Brujo* I become a migrant performance artist, spending two years on the road, going from city to city, from country to country and back, reproducing the migratory patterns of the Mexican Diaspora. As I travel, I incorporate new texts, props and costumes into the piece. The project is documented in two videos by filmmaker Isaac Artenstein. The Brujo and I end up back at the US-Mexico border in late 1989 where I bury his costume and props and stage his performance funeral. I receive both a New York "Bessie award" and the "prix de la parole" from the International Theater Festival of the Americas (Montreal). I am suddenly propelled into the center of the art world, and my personal life becomes extremely complicated.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

1989: A group of artists including Linda Burnham, Tim Miller, Steve Durland, Susan Dakin, and myself jumpstart Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica. I begin ongoing collaborations with Tim Miller, Elia Arce, Keith Antar-Mason and Rubén Martínez. The LA art scene is imbued with a utopian spirit of collaboration and polyamorous hedonism.

Glasnost and Perestroika spread like wildfire throughout the Soviet bloc. The right perceives this phenomenon as the defeat of socialism. I want to see this for myself. I travel to Russia with a binational human rights commission, presenting my performance art as a form of radical diplomacy.

1990: The US experiences yet another seasonal "Latino boom," and border art becomes fashionable. The original Border Arts Workshop is invited to the Venice Biennale; after this event, we feel it's time to dismantle the group to avoid becoming a parody of ourselves, "the Grateful Dead of border art." But, as so often happens, the only Anglo male in the group copyrights the name and appropriates the project, turning it into an art *maquiladora*.

It's time for me to search for a new place from which to speak. I begin a series of collaborations with writer and artist Coco Fusco, the first a multi-media installation titled **Norte/Sur**. Nola Mariano becomes my long-term manager, art bodyguard, and macabre accomplice.

1991: I move to New York to live with Coco and to work on the first part of my trilogy, ***The Re-discovery of America by the Warrior for Gringostroika***, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival. One day, during rehearsal, I get the magical phone call announcing that I am a "MacArthur Genius." Two months later, my ex-wife sues me, taking half of my fellowship in court, and some of the original members of BAW/TAF suggest that I split the other half amongst the group. I ask myself: "Is this my true birth ritual into the American art world?"

1992: Artists such as Fred Wilson, Adrian Piper, James Luna, and Jimmy Durham begin to interrogate the way museums represent cultural otherness and start a dialogue with radical anthropologists.

I begin to experiment with the colonial format of the "living diorama." My collaborators and I create interactive "living museums" that parody various colonial practices of representation including the ethnographic tableau vivant, the Indian Trading Post, the border curio shop, the porn window display and their contemporary equivalents. These performance/ installations function both as a bizarre set design for a contemporary enactment of "cultural pathologies," and as a ceremonial space for people to reflect upon their attitudes toward other cultures.

1992-93: During the heated debates surrounding the Columbus Quincentenary, Coco Fusco and I decide to remind the US and Europe of "the other history of intercultural performance," the sinister human exhibits, and pseudo-ethnographic spectacles that were so popular in Europe from the 17th century until the early 20th century; at the turn of the century in the US, they transformed into more vulgar exhibits like the dime museum and the freak show.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

In ***The Guatinaui World Tour***, Coco and I live for three-day periods inside a gilded cage as "undiscovered Amerindians" from the (fictional) island of Guatinaui (Anglicization of "what now") in the Gulf of Mexico. I am dressed as an Aztec wrestler from Las Vegas and Coco as a *taina* straight out of Gilligan's Island. We are hand fed by fake museum docents and taken to public bathrooms on leashes. Taxonomic plates describing our costumes and physical characteristics are placed next to the cage. We tour the US, Europe, Australia, and Argentina. Sadly, over 40% of our audiences believe the exhibit is real yet they do nothing about it. The most drastic audience response is from an Argentine military man who throws acid on me during the performance in Buenos Aires. The tour is chronicled in the film ***Couple in the Cage***.

1992-3: Coco and I tour ***New World (B)order***, a sci-fi piece based on the following meta-fiction: border culture and hybrid identities become official culture as Anglo-Americans become a minority culture. We begin to practice "reverse segregation" of our audiences as they enter the art space, with members of "minorities," immigrants, and bilingual audience members entering the space first. The idea is to assume a fictional center and force monolingual/monocultural Americans to feel like foreigners and "minorities" in their own country, even if only for an hour or two. Coco leaves the project in the middle of the tour and Roberto Sifuentes replaces her. To continue the tour, we are forced to reconstitute the entire performance in less than a week. It somehow works. To this day, Roberto remains my main collaborator.

1993: Roberto and I become interested in Spanglish pirate radio. We stage our first pirate radio project in a performance festival in Hull (UK). With a low-tech radio transmitter, we broadcast from the top of a 10 story high building. Local radio pirates explain to us that it will take 20 minutes for the police to locate the source of our transmission and get to the site. As the police are circling the building, Roberto and I escape through the back door.

1993. The backlash era begins as multiculturalism gets a bad rap. I move back to LA and reconnect with the Highways performance scene. The LA earthquake transforms the city into a compassionate place. We see racial, social and generational borders break down in front of our eyes as people help each other and speak with each other as never before. Sadly, this only lasts for a few months.

1993. I start a long-term collaboration with Native American artist James Luna. In ***The Shame-man Meets El Mexi-can't at the Smithsonian Hotel and Country Club***, Luna and I share a diorama space at the Museum of Natural History. I sit on a toilet dressed as a mariachi in a straightjacket with a sign around my neck announcing, "There used to be a Mexican inside this body." I unsuccessfully attempt to get rid of my straightjacket while James paces back and forth, changing identities. At times he is an "Indian shoe-shiner," at other moments he becomes a "diabetic Indian" shooting insulin directly into his stomach. He then transforms into a janitor of color (like most janitors in US museums) and vacuums the diorama floor. Hundreds of visitors gather in front of us. They are sad and perplexed. Next to us, the "real" Indian dioramas speak of a mute world outside of history and social crises. Next to us, they appear much less "authentic."

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

While rehearsing the 2nd part of our project, James lights up some sage. The security guards phone the DC police and we get busted in the dressing room for "smoking pot." Furious with such a ludicrous claim, curator Aleta Ringlero calls museum administration demanding an apology on our behalf. For James and me, such a situation is just a good anecdote. As James put it, "simply one more day in the life of an Indian and a Chicano." We reenact the bust in a series of photos.

1994: NAFTA comes into effect. The Zapatista insurrection takes the world by surprise. Organized crime makes its home in Mexico. To exorcise my own fear of losing the streets of Mexico City to the new culture of fear, I engage in a series of street performances in downtown Mexico City.

Grandma Carmen, the moral center of my family, dies in our Mexico City home. My relatives and I surround Grandma's bed as her soul tenderly leaves her body.

1994: Roberto Sifuentes and I crucify ourselves for three hours on 16-foot crosses at Rodeo Beach, in front of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. The piece is designed to protest the xenophobic immigration politics of California governor Pete Wilson. Inspired by the biblical myth of Dimas and Gestas, the two petty thieves crucified next to Jesus, Roberto and I decide to dress as "the two contemporary public enemies of California." I am the "undocumented bandito" (mariachi) crucified by the INS, and Roberto the generic "gang member" crucified by the LAPD. Using a flyer, we ask our audience "to free us from our martyrdom as a gesture of political commitment," but we miscalculate. Paralyzed by the melancholy of the image, it takes audience members over three hours to figure out how to get us down without a ladder. By then, my right shoulder has become dislocated and Roberto has passed out. The media picks up photographs of the Cruci-Fiction Project and the piece becomes international news.

1994: Greywolf Press publishes my first book, *Warrior for Gringostroika*, a collection of writings and photographs from 1979 to '92. It's my "border art period." With this book, my work slowly begins to be embraced by academia.

1994: Roberto and I create the interactive pirate television project **Naftaztec TV** in collaboration with Adriene Jenik and Branda Miller (from the iEar Studio at Rensselaer Polytechnic). This simulacrum of a pirate TV intervention is broadcast to hundreds of cable television stations across the country, as well as over computer networks via early broadband technology. The content is a strange blend of radical politics, autobiographical material, and a parody of traditional TV formats gone bananas. We demonstrate a "Chicano virtual reality machine" that can turn collective and personal memories into video footage. The project is re-broadcast nationally in 1995 and becomes a cult hit. An edited version circulates in film and video festivals. I cannot help but to wonder, what does it mean for a pirate TV intervention to be re-broadcast and embraced by the art world? Isn't this a contradiction in terms?

1994: Colombian ballerina-turned-radical performance artist Michelle Ceballos joins the troupe.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

1994-ongoing: My colleagues and I begin to take our personas out of the museum or theater and into the streets, often crashing politically charged sites in costume. Our idea is as follows: if our personae survive the tough involuntary audiences of the street, they will definitely survive the harshness of the art world. Though these types of interventions are central to our performance praxis, they often go unnoticed by critics and art historians who concentrate almost exclusively on work that takes place within the confines of the art world, which is why I have written extensively about these adventures in my books.

1994-96: Roberto and I tour *Temple of Confessions*, a performance/ installation combining the format of the ethnographic diorama with that of the religious dioramas found in colonial Mexican churches. For three-day periods, we exhibit ourselves inside Plexiglas boxes as "end-of-the-century saints." Those visitors who wish to "confess" their intercultural fears and desires to us have three options: they can either confess into microphones placed on kneelers in front of the boxes (their voices are recorded and altered in post-production to ensure their anonymity), or, if they are shy, they can write their confessions on cards and deposit them in an urn. If they are extremely shy, they can call an 800 number.

The "confessions" are quite emotional and intimate. They range from confessions of extreme violence and racism toward Mexicans and other people of color, to expressions of incommensurable tenderness and solidarity with us, or with our perceived cause. Some are filled with guilt or fear, fear of cultural/political/sexual invasion, violence, rape, and disease. Other confessions are fantasies about escaping one's identity: Anglos wanting to be Mexican or Indian or vice versa, self-hating Latinos wanting to be Anglo or simply "blond." There are also many descriptions (both real and fictitious, but equally revealing) of intercultural sexual encounters.

By the end of the third day, we leave the Plexiglas boxes and are replaced by human-sized wax effigies. The Temple of Confessions remains as an installation piece for eight weeks, and written and phone confessions continue to be accepted. The project is documented in a PBS documentary, a radio documentary for NPR, and a book (Power House, NY) with the same title. The last performance of the tour takes place at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

1995: I move to San Francisco and begin the long-term project of tattooing my torso and arms. Nola Mariano and I found **La Pocha Nostra**. The objective is to create a loose interdisciplinary association of rebel artists interested in collaboration. Inspired by zapatismo, our collaborative model of concentric and overlapping circles functions both as an act of civic diplomacy and as a means to create "ephemeral communities" of like-minded artists. We are more of a conceptual laboratory than a company, a strategic gathering of politicized artists thinking together, exchanging ideas and aspirations.

We begin a fruitful binational exchange project with Mexican performance artists titled *Terreno Peligroso/Danger Zone*. It's a good time for Mexican and Chicano artists to collaborate. We create a Free Art Agreement, an ongoing exchange of ideas and artwork, and begin to collaborate across the border.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

1995: I begin my long-term association with the National Public Radio program, *All Things Considered*. I write and record a monthly commentary from the position of a performance artist. I suddenly have a national voice in a society in which mainstream media covers artists either as celebrities, human-interest stories, or social monsters but rarely as intellectuals.

1995-97: Roberto and I tour *Borderama*, a proscenium piece that subverts and parodies pop cultural formats such as the talk show, the self-realization seminar, a hypnotist lounge act, a French anthropologist's lecture, and an ethnic fashion show. In the press release, we invite the audience "to come to the show in costume, dressed as your favorite cultural other, and express those interracial fantasies we all have inside of us." We invite "special guests" from the local communities to participate in the show, including street performers, drag queens, Mexican wrestlers, and small town eccentrics. At the end of the piece, Roberto and I auction ourselves as "sexy, AIDS-free Third World performance artists."

1996: Like many Chicano artists at the time, Roberto and I visit the Zapatista area. We travel through various military checkpoints posing as "eco-tourists."

1996: City Lights publishes my next book *New World Border*, a collection of writings and photos from 1992 to '97. In this book, perhaps my most experimental, I develop my thesis of hybridity and my critique of global culture. The whole book reads like a hypertextual performance script. It receives the American Book Award. Luis Valdez forgives my aesthetic sins. That same year, I begin a 3 year collaboration with Nuyorrican maestro Miguel Algarin.

1996: I become interested in the politics of new technologies. I write extensively about "racism in the net" and develop the concept of "poetic and imaginary (or rather useless) technologies," meaning technologies with strictly aesthetic or ritual purposes. My colleagues and I begin to construct "Chicano cyborgs" with lowrider prosthetics and braces. The basic idea is: if we don't have access to this technology, we have to imagine it.

1997: The art world begins to talk about "relational aesthetics." Radical choreographer Sara Shelton Mann from the dance troupe Contraband, Roberto, and I jumpstart a three-year project titled *The Mexterminator*. The idea is to use the internet as a tool of "reverse anthropology" to research America's psyche regarding Anglo/Latino relations, then to develop an ever-evolving repertoire of performance personae based on this research. For this purpose, we develop "confessional" websites asking individuals to suggest how we should dress as Mexicans and Chicanos, and what kind of performance actions and social rituals we should engage in.

The Internet confessions are much more explicit than those gathered during live performances such as Temple of Confessions. Scholars help us to select the most striking and representative confessions so we can use them as source material for performance. As performance artists, we embody this information and re-interpret it for a live audience, thus refracting fetishized constructs of identity through the spectacle of our artificially constructed identities on display. A gorgeous photo-portfolio by Mexican photographer Eugenio Castro is made out of the Mexterminator personae. At least 500 of these images haven't yet been printed or published.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

1997-ongoing: Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros invites the Latino MacArthur fellows to form "**The MacArturos**" or "**MacCabrones**." Part ombudsmen and part cultural instigators, the group meets once a year in a different city with a sizeable Latino community in turmoil. These gatherings are designed as informal think tanks and a means to insert a Latino perspectives into current national debates. We strategically use our name to empower local communities, generate public dialogue, and confront local authorities. Our presence in the host city involves town meetings, panels, performances, and public debates. Besides Sandra and me, participants include activists Valdemar Velazquez, Maria Varela, and Joaquin Avila; writers Luis Alfaro, Ruth Bejar and Alma Guillermo-Prieto; radio entrepreneur Hugo Morales and others.

1998: I team up with producer Michael Milenski and theater director David Schweizer to create a Chicano-ized version of **The Indian Queen**, a 17th century opera by composer Henry Purcell and poet John Dryden. In collaboration with Elaine Katzenberger, I re-write the original script in Spanglish. In our version, the Indian Queen is a fallen Hollywood starlet and her throne is a lowrider car shaped as a red stiletto.

1998: Enrique Chagoya, Felicia Rice, and I publish a book/art piece, **Codex Espangliensis**, first as a limited edition of 50 books printed in amate paper for collectors (Moving Parts Press), and then in paperback form (City Lights). The Codex describes with performance texts and "Post Columbian" comic book imagery, the history of Nafta, from the conquest of Mexico to the present.

1998: La Pocha tours **Borderscape 2000**. Described by critics as a "high-tech Aztec Spanglish lounge operetta," the performance critiques the corporate appropriation of multiculturalism, attempting to reintroduce the political discourse absent since the backlash against multiculturalism began, when audiences grew tired of "political" art. One image lingers in my mind: a stylized gang member clubbing a chicken to the tune of "Hotel California." We cross the PC border. The performance is heavily criticized by theorists for contributing to the fetishization of extreme Latino imagery. It's clear to La Pocha that we have reached a dead end and that we need to open a new door.

1998: I become obsessed with trying to understand X-treme pop culture. What 10 years ago was considered fringe "subculture" is now mere pop. The insatiable mass of the so-called "mainstream" has finally devoured all "margins," and the more dangerous, thorny and exotic these margins become, the better. In fact, *stricto sensu*, we can say that there are no margins left. "Alternative" thought, fringe "subcultures," and so-called "radical" behavior, as we knew them, have actually become the mainstream. Stylized racism and sexism are now daily spectacle. This poses all kinds of questions for us. If we choose to mimic or parody the strategies of the mainstream bizarre in order to develop new audiences and explore the *zeitgeist* of our times, what certainty do we have that our high definition reflection won't devour us from inside out and turn us into the very stylized freaks we are attempting to deconstruct or parody? And if we are interested in performing for non-specialized audiences, what certainty do we have that these audiences won't misinterpret our "radical" actions as merely spectacles of stylized radicalism? We risk these possible misinterpretations by embodying these personae in live performance and find that

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

each context delivers different reactions, which keeps us developing new strategies to reach these complex audiences.

1998-89: We gradually begin to surrender our will to the audience, allowing them to shape the content of our work by manipulating us in tableaux and joining us in performing composite identities dictated by the fears and desires of museum visitors. **El**

Mexterminator project becomes even more participatory, encouraging audience members to interact with us in various modes. They can touch us, smell us, hand feed us. They can spray paint our bodies, point fake weapons at us, braid our hair, change our make-up, put different wigs and headdresses on us, using the performers as life-sized paper dolls. They put dog leashes on us, engaging in consensual power games. Some people decide to get rough while holding the leash, especially the most conservative-looking ones. Wherever we go, we invite local artists, curators, intellectuals, or activists to stage their own dioramas within the larger piece.

1999: I marry gorgeous Colombian curator and writer Carolina Ponce de León. Our loft in San Francisco becomes an informal roadside museum, salon and hostel for Mexican, Colombian, US and European artists who pass through. A local TV station does a reportage on the house calling it "the Smithsonian of the barrio."

1999: Filmmaker Gustavo Vazquez and I create **The Great Mojado Invasion**, a mock documentary that presents an ironic 21st century reversal of US-Mexican relations, as "dastardly mustachioed bandits" re-conquer the United States and impose their own language and culture upon Anglo-Americans.

1999: There is major internal turmoil in the group. Roberto Sifuentes and Sara Shelton Mann step out for personal reasons, while Juan Ybarra and Michele Ceballos join on a more permanent basis. All projects must be reconfigured overnight.

1999-2002: The new Pocha Nostra troupe tours **The Living Museum of Fetishized Identities** internationally. The next step in our performance research is to develop large-scale interactive performance/installations that function as "intelligent raves and art expos of Western apocalypse." Every "living museum" is site-specific and involves a different group of local artists. Live music, video and computer projections, cinematic lighting, taxidermied animals and twisted ethnographic motifs help enhance our high-tech "robo-baroque aesthetic." In these intoxicating environments, we exhibit ourselves on platforms as intricately decorated "ethno-cyborgs" and "artificial savages" for 3 to 5 hours a day. The structure is open and non-coercive, allowing the audience to walk around the dioramas designing their own journey. They can stay for as long as they wish, come in and out of the space, or return later on, fully participating in our performance games or keeping to the sidelines as voyeurs.

In the first hour, the experience is typically voyeuristic. The "ethno-cyborgs" create slow motion *tableaux vivants* that sample and combine radical political imagery, religious iconography, extreme pop culture, fashion and theatricalized sexuality. The audience members are confronted with a stylized anthropomorphization of their own post-colonial hallucinations, a kind of cross-cultural poltergeist in which the space between self and other,

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

"us and them," fear and desire, becomes blurry and unspecific. As the evening evolves, the experience becomes increasingly participatory. We include a diorama station where audience members can choose a "temporary ethnic identity" and become "their favorite cultural other" using make-up and costumes provided by us; after this, they are encouraged to integrate themselves into our living dioramas. Both audience members and performers make political, ethical and aesthetic decisions on the spot. In this sense, the performance becomes an exercise in radical democracy. In the last hour, we step out of the dioramas and cede total control to the audience, as the post-colonial demons dance all around us.

2000: While touring in Brazil, I catch a mysterious parasite and experience a total "liver crash." My recovery takes eight months. The doctors forbid me to perform and rehearse. My mother and Carolina take care of me. During this time I write **Califas 2000** and **Brownout**, two of my darkest and most personal performance scripts ever. Also during my recovery, my new book comes out. **Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back** (Routledge) is a collection of writings and photos from 1997 to 2000.

2001: I begin touring my solo performance **Brownout**, using Spanglish, acid Chicano humor, and hybrid literary genres as subversive strategies. The script intertwines two discourses. One is a poetic/political account of the times. A parallel discourse recounts my inner hell during the recovery from my liver crash. I often broadcast live from the theater to a local radio station.

Gustavo and I re-edit **The Great Mojado** with newfound footage.

2001: The US experiences on its own soil its worse terrorist attack ever. The neo-cons in power rapidly transform the country into a closed society ruled by paranoid nationalism and fear. An unprecedented era of censorship for artists and intellectuals begins. This climate forces La Pocha to spend more than half of the year outside the country, becoming Chicano expatriates abroad.

We begin to compare notes with Arab and Persian artists based in the US and the UK regarding the demonization of the brown body.

2002: In response to the challenges of 9/11, we create "**re:group**," a San Francisco-based performance laboratory dedicated "to re-conquer[ing] the artistic freedoms being taken away by the Bush administration." The group lasts for 2 years. A documentary of re:group is commissioned by PBS and later on censored by them. Their version of re:group is very tame. With the original footage, we edit our own version.

I publish my first book entirely in Spanish titled **El Mexterminator: La antropología inversa de un performer post-mexicano** (Editorial Oceano, Mexico City).

2002-4: La Pocha begins to incorporate workshops as part of every project we tour. It's like a nomadic performance workshop. We resume the exploration of ceding our will to the audience, begun in *El Mexterminator* project, with a performance titled **Ethno-techno** or **Ex-Centris** in which we completely reverse the gaze and step out of our dioramas. We create tableaux vivants with audience members, manipulating their body positions and decorating them with costumes and props. We then invite them to create their own

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

imagery. We call this experiment "performance karaoke." It's our response to the extreme culture of mindless audience participation and role-playing created by talk shows and reality TV.

2003: La Pocha performs *Ex-Centris* at the Tate Modern, a humongous coup for us brokered by performance curator Lois Keidan. A few months later, the troupe is confronted with harsh reality as Juan Ybarra steps out due to serious health issues and Michelle Ceballo's father is kidnapped in Colombia. Roberto Sifuentes returns; Violeta Luna becomes a full-time collaborator, and Emiko R. Lewis joins in. All of our upcoming presenters are perplexed by the abrupt changes. It takes half a year for La Pocha to settle into the dynamics of the new troupe.

2004: I become interested in the search for a radical spirituality that can emerge from living against the backdrop of war and censorship. Emiko and I begin work shopping *Mapa/Corpo* as a response to the invasion of Iraq. The performance/installation is a poetic, interactive ritual that explores neo-colonization/de-colonization through "political acupuncture" and the reenactment of the post-9/11 "body politic." It's clearly an anti-war performance and, for the first two years, we are only able to present it in Latin America, Europe, and Canada. Only after mid-2005 do US presenters dare to book it.

Michele Ceballo's passport gets confiscated as we are trying to catch a plane to Argentina for a project titled *Tucuman-Chicano*. It will take 4 years for Michelle to recuperate it.

2004-ongoing: I begin a long-term project with Spanish curator Orlando Britto-Jinorio, a series of "photo-performance" portfolios created specifically for the camera. The initial portfolios are shot in Mexico City, San Francisco, Madrid, and the Canary Islands. It is the first time in my life that I make art objects strictly for the gallery. My hope is that they function as a prosthetic extension of my live performances.

2005: As I approach my 50th birthday, my then 83-year-old mother and I collaborate in a performance ritual "to prepare me for the second part of my life." She tenderly washes my body in an old-fashioned bathtub, then dries me with a towel and dresses me up with my father's clothes. The site is the garden of her Mexico City home. The audience is composed of forty relatives and neighbors who were alive and around during my birthday, including my nanny and first friends ever. The next morning my family takes me to the airport and sends me to the next stop in my tour. A film of the ritual bath by filmmaker Gustavo Vazquez is in the works.

2005: I publish *Ethno-Techno: Writings in Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (Routledge), a collection of writings from 2000-2005. Despite the fact that it may be my best book to date, the price of the book is so high that it does not have the distribution I expect. My literary heart is broken.

2005: We begin to conduct a yearly **Pocha Nostra summer school** of radical performance art in the state of Oaxaca in Mexico. Artists come from all over the world to collaborate with indigenous Oaxacans working in experimental art forms. We offer two seven-day intensive workshops on "the human body as a site for creation, reinvention, memory and activism."

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

The first workshop is for young artists, and the second for established artists, culminating in a public performance at MACO (Museum of Contemporary Art of Oaxaca). The Pocha summer school becomes an amazing artistic and anthropological experiment in how artists from three generations and many countries, from every imaginable artistic, ethnic and subcultural background, begin to find common ground. Performance becomes the connective tissue and *lingua franca* for our temporary "glocal" (local/international) community of rebel artists.

2005-07: Violeta Luna, Roberto Sifuentes, Gabriela Salgado and I workshop and tour ***Mapa/Corpo 2: Interactive Rituals for the New Millennium***. Violeta's nude body lies on a surgical table covered by the flag of the United Nations. Above the body, an acupuncturist dressed in a lab coat prepares for surgery, laying out 40 needles. A small flag is attached to the tip of each needle, each representing a nation of the "coalition forces." As I deliver a multilingual poem dressed in my *chaman travesti* persona, the acupuncturist peels the UN flag from Violeta's body, working from the feet up, exposing her. The acupuncturist methodically inserts the 40 needles into the body/map, leaving the audience to ponder the after-image of a "colonized" female body/world. I ask the audience to "de-colonize the Mapa/Corpo" by carefully removing the flags with the assistance of the acupuncturist. One by one, each flag is lifted, completing the ritual. Parallel to this, at a second station, a curator ritually shaves and washes the body of Sifuentes as if preparing it for burial, representing the brown body of "the universal immigrant." As the ritualized washing ends, Roberto's exposed skin becomes a canvas for the audience members to write upon his body "a poetics of hope." Those who accept the invitation also create tableaux vivants with his body, bringing tenderness and humanity to an objectified image. Different versions of Mapa/Corpo 2 are performed in 15 different countries. Sometimes Violeta is replaced by Colombian performance artist Maria Estrada. The piece becomes our main contribution to the performance field since *The Mexterminator*.

2006: I premiere a new solo performance titled ***The Mexorcist: America's Most Wanted Inner Demon***. Shifting between languages and performance personae, I reflect on the post 9/11 condition, the "War on Terror," the new anti-immigration hysteria, and their impact on our notions of identity, community, nationality, and activist politics. Americans of all ages and ethnicities are finally fed up with the war and with the Bush administration.

2006: ***Bitacora del Cruce*** is published by *El Fondo de Cultura Economica* (Mexico City). The book contains a selection of my border diaries and performance texts from 1970 up to the present. It starts in 1970 Mexico City (in Spanish) and, as I move north, the text slowly incorporates more Spanglish. The last chapters are in English and "robo-esperanto." It is the first time a book of this multilingual nature has ever been published by a major Mexican publishing house. Sadly, after an exhaustive internal controversy within the institution, they decide not to distribute it outside of Mexico. Their claims are that the book does not represent the ethos of FCE, that it is "too weird," and "has too much Spanglish." Eventually a letter campaign of Pocha associates and sympathizers forces them to begin its international distribution.

2006: My Chihuahua son "Babalu" is born in Northern California. He will soon become a regular troublemaker on YouTube. His performance series is titled ***The Chihuahua Diaries***.

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

2007: I complete the first part of my tattoo project: My torso and arms are all connected in a sort of total "skin mural." I work as "image consultant" and "performance adviser" for the campaign of Krissy Keiffer, a San Francisco activist lesbian dancer who runs for Congress under the Green Party ticket. My job is to produce provocative photo-portfolios for the media and suggest performative strategies for her campaign. The Green party campaign officers are weirded out by my suggestions.

2007: Due to the militarization of Oaxaca, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Tucson invites La Pocha Summer School to temporarily relocate to Arizona. They provide us with a huge warehouse for the month of August where we hold workshops for artists from 8 different countries as well as indigenous Arizonians. We continue to nurture multi-national communities of rebel artists that ignore the existence of borders.

2007-ongoing: James Luna and I reconnect to begin working on *La Nostalgia*, last in the series *The Shame-man Meets El Mexican't*. The project researches the symbolic and iconographic dimensions of nostalgia both in the Native "reservation" and the Chicano "barrio" through a series of live performances and photo shoots. We launch it with two performances. First, we stage our own ritual deaths inside coffins in a piece titled *The Shame-man Meets El Mexican't at a Funeral Parlor* and then we engage in a poetic dialogue while Luna cooks an Indian stew and I play roulette.

2007: Video Data Bank (Chicago) publishes *Border Clásicos*, a collection of my collaborative video art works from 1988 to the present. The "conceptual box" contains 4 DVDs with 12 video art pieces and an accompanying catalogue with critical writings by Amelia Jones, Richard Schechner, Carol Becker and others. The goal is to use this box as a teaching tool in multiple university departments.

2007-8: We jumpstart *El Corazon de la Misión*, a unique bus tour guiding the audience through history, vernacular anthropology, and social reality into the heart of the Mission District of San Francisco, a place that expends a lot of energy dreaming of a better future. The passengers of this performance tour ride the legendary "Mexican bus" and are invited to participate in a processional as if they were characters on a parade float. They witness "the creative neighborhood" and the city as a bohemian theme park, using the windows of an immigrant bus as a vantage point from which to view the streets. Meanwhile, they eavesdrop on my mind as they listen to a pre-recorded tour commentary and engage with Violeta Luna performing live. People on the street become involuntary performers on the stage of my hood and living metaphors of a border zone. This poetic journey across a mythical Mission District invokes the pantheon of collective gods and goddesses buried by globalization and urban hipsterism.

2007: La Pocha premieres *The New Barbarian Collection* commissioned by Arnolfini on the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the UK. Working with an international troupe of 15 performance artists and a fashion designer, we appropriate the format of "an X-treme fashion show," engaging the audience with a variety of fashion-inspired stylized performance personas stemming from problematic media representations of foreigners, immigrants, and social eccentrics. as both enemies of the state and sexy pop-cultural

LA POCHA NOSTRA

HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

rebels. The "show" explores the bizarre relationship between the post-9/11 culture of xenophobia and the rampant fetishization of otherness by global pop culture. It is about politicized human bodies far more than clothing. In this politicized fashion show, new designer hybrid identities are put up for sale. The piece ends with the disturbing auction of Abu Ghraib-like imagery and couture.

2008: La Pocha premieres *Divino Corpo* at the New Moves Festival in Glasgow, Scotland. As part of our ongoing *Mapa/Corpo* series, this new work continues to examine the brown body as a site for radical spirituality, memory, penance, activism and corporeal reinvention. We pose as living saints and Madonnas of unpopular causes (border crossers, undocumented migrants, bohemians, the infirm and the displaced invisible others). At one station, Roberto's body is covered with leeches. At another station Violeta is wrapped on a pole with black rope as if getting ready to be burned by the audience. At a third station, I construct "pagan saints" with audience members. In a sense, we create a performative temple where the sacred and the profane intertwine with racy contemporary issues. Our goal is to invite audience members to embrace a new form of radical faith – faith that the art process can serve as a personal and political force and that the human body can become a site of change against a backdrop of global despair and war.

2008: Gustavo Vazquez and I premiere *Homo Fronterizus*, a video project in two parts: *One-on-one* includes reinterpretations of some of my classic performance pieces, as well as "homages" to other performance artists who have influenced my work (Roi Vaara, Marina Abramovic, Stelarc, Melquiades Herrera, and James Luna). In *Duelos*, we explore the unspoken tension between performance and video asking such questions as: Who is the real author? The performance artist who creates the concept and offers his body/identity/map/artefacto in sacrifice to the camera, or the video artist who filters it, frames it and, in doing so, inevitably re-creates it?

2008: *La Nostalgia Remix*: James Luna and I continue our exploration of the cultural and political implications of nostalgia both in the Native American "res" and in the Chicano barrio. We deal with nostalgia as style, resistance, false identity and reinvention, in a series of re-enactments of our "best hits and outtakes for an imaginary bar." We also create a digital mural with photographer RJ Muna. We tour Alaska in November.

TO BE CONTINUED...