



Outsmarting Borders

Guillermo Gómez-Peña And La Pocha Nostra

Xavier Quirarte*



*The preservation of one's own culture
does not imply disdain or a lack of respect
for other cultures.*

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ

Border crossing has been the leit motif of the work of Mexican artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, not only because it refers to his experience as an immigrant in the United States and his being a Chicano, but also because without preconceptions, he freely passes from vi-

deo to poetry, from performance to journalism, from installation to essay, from radio to digital art. The author of six books, among which are *Warrior for Gringostroika: The New World Border*, winner of the American Book Award, *Dangerous Border Crossers* and *El Mexterminator*, published in Mexico by Océano last year, he deals with the complexity of the culture being woven together along the Mexico-U.S. border.

According to Gómez-Peña, who has lived in the United States since 1978, in Mexico, people are profoundly unaware of what the new generations of Chicano artists are doing, while in the United States, little is known about what young Mexican creators do. For this reason, he is convinced of the

* Journalist and music critic, author of the book *Ritmos de la eternidad* (Rhythms of Eternity) (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2000). Member of the musical group Sociedad Acústica de Capital Variable.

need to “build bridges of communication between the new generations who are working with more complex languages on both sides of the border and have much more complex notions of identity.”¹

The publication in Mexico of *El Mexterminator* sparked interest in the work of the founder of La Pocha Nostra, an organization of multi-disciplinary arts. Created in 1992, La Pocha Nostra seeks to be a forum for artists from different disciplines, generations and ethnic origins to explore matters like globalization, migration, inter-cultural identity, new technologies, the politics of language, hybrid identities and the culture growing up along the border. It is also a basis for networking.

La Pocha Nostra agrees with community art as practiced by its predecessors in the 1970s Chicano movement and therefore dedicates at least 40 percent of its cultural activities to the Chicano-Latino community. “Since we perform for non-specialized audiences [among whom are professionals, students, activists and ordinary people], our work has a certain populist character. It cannot be too esoteric or hermetic; we are aware that we are experimental, but also populists. We want people

to understand us and we want to have a broad audience because one of the things I learned in the Chicano movement is that the artist has to conceive of himself as a responsible citizen who participates in the great debates of his time and not as an agonized or isolated bohemian.” Although it is aware that it works for a multi-generational audience, since its art is “very acid”, it is among the young that it is most accepted.

Another point of coincidence with the 1970s Chicano movement is the belief that art has a profound political meaning. “Actually, all the work we do in this country has a profoundly political character. The simple fact of being Mexican Americans is an act of political defiance. Having the possibility of creating, thinking, responding and insinuating yourself into public debate is an act of political defiance,” says Gómez-Peña.

Through performances, La Pocha Nostra develops works in which the participants play many roles, bringing to the fore its multi-cultural character. While its members are well-rooted, they also take on board new trends, like projects in digital art, in order to achieve a new artistic model that





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responds to the needs of our time. Their mission “is to explore the role of the artist in society and develop models of radical democracy. We believe that through art, consciousness can not only be influenced but also stimulated to grow.”²

An acid, critical sense of humor is part of their proposal, as can be seen in the introduction to *TECH-ILLA SUNRISE (.txt dot con Sangrita)*: “According to a spokesperson from the Michoacán Institute of Technology (MIT), ‘Latinos are currently interested in the terms image-imagination and poetic technology. Their premise is the following: Given that the majority of Latinos do not have access to new technologies, we imagine the access. All we have is our political imagination and our humor to participate in the conversation....It is an imaginary act of expropriation. Our aesthetic-intellectual complexity compensates for the lack of bucks. You Mexi-get it? Have another drink, buddy. *More disturbed* ³ than ever.’”⁴

MUSEUM OF FETISHIZED IDENTITY

Recently, Gómez-Peña, Juan Ybarra, Michelle Ceballos and Violeta Luna represented La Pocha Nostra on a trip to Mexico City. They performed at the Lighthouse of the East and at the National

Autonomous University of Mexico’s Chopo University Museum. At the latter, they organized the museographical performance-installation *The Museum of Fetishized Identity*, which included a *Cabinet of Futuristic Curiosities for Exotic Voyeurs and Housewives*, as well as lectures and workshops where they tried to answer questions like: What has happened to the cultural bridges between Chicanos and Mexicans? What is the new aesthetic that will articulate our new crises? How has globalization transformed our notions of identity and nationality? How, when and why have borders and margins become mainstream? What the hell is performance, anyway? A form of radical democracy, a hybrid genre that responds to the cultural hybridization of our society or nonsense.

Performed in several countries, the project puts forward the quest for a techno-Chicano aesthetic and a new dialogue between the Mexicans who have gone to the United States and those who stayed behind. In order to involve the community of artists, 15 Mexico City performance artists were invited to develop “hybrid characters” and “ethnocyborgs” inspired in the global media culture. The result impressed the director of La Pocha Nostra since he detected many similarities to their own. “Their sensibilities are very Chicano-ized. The work that we presented with these artists was trans-bor-

der and we did not impose our aesthetic on them. Actually, the work was the result of a workshop that lasted two and a half weeks, where we discovered a great many affinities which I think didn't exist 10 years ago."

RECOGNITION OF CHICANO ART

Gómez-Peña has presented his work in countries like the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Australia, Russia, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil and Argentina and is the first Chicano artist to receive a MacArthur fellowship (1991-1996). This fellowship was also a recognition of the artistic community with its increasing presence. "As a part of the great Chicano Latino cultural project of the last 20 years, Latino critics have developed, as well as an intellectual discourse to explain the Latino experience that didn't exist before. In that sense, I think that Chicano culture has been completely accepted in academia and the participa-

tion of Chicano artists and intellectuals is decisive in all sectors of U.S. society."

The MacArthur fellowship, explains Guillermo Gómez-Peña, gave him a national presence as not only the first Chicano, but also the first performance artist to be so recognized. "Right off the bat, this gave me the possibility of having a national voice. I tried to use it with a great deal of caution and responsibility. Of course, a grant like this one brings you all kinds of personal problems like envy, but I also think it allowed me to have access to the places in the MacArthur Foundation where decisions and recommendations are made so that later other Chicano artists can receive this fellowship. That has made me very proud." **MM**

NOTES

¹ All quotes from Guillermo Gómez-Peña are from an interview with the author, June 16, 2003.

² www.pochanostra.com

³ The original Spanish is a play on words in which "more disturbed" also spells out "masturbate". [Translator's Note].

⁴ Ibid.