RACE

AND CLASSIFICATION

The Case of Mexican America

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Pose and Poseur

The Racial Politics of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Photo-Performances

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(In this conversation, an art theorist and a performance artist discuss race, hybridity, border culture, globalization-gone-wrong, and the politics of representation. This conversation took place during November 2009, via e-mail and phone.)

JG: I'm interested in the way race, as a visual discourse, appears in the works you call "photo-performances." These images create the conditions of a non-narrative yet highly iconographic interface between performer and camera. The photo-performance can be seen as an extension of your earlier works, including what you call your first self-conscious performative gesture in the photograph El vagarto poblano (fig. 9.1) in which you pose as a young adult outside a child's artificial house wearing a toy gun and cowboy hat in Puebla, Mexico. Your body is clearly out of scale with the toy house, and the hat you wear is perched ironically, but the image also evokes a melancholic or a nostalgic yearning for childhood innocence. How does this image encapsulate your interest in the role of the photographic pose? Is it possible to argue that the photo-performance is a new genre? Are there artistic precedents that shape this contemporary practice?

GIP: Mexican culture has always been extremely performative. From the dioramas of artisans found in colonial churches and the casta paintings to the pop photographs of the early twentieth century depicting huancaque devas, not to mention the calendarios (calendars) of Bajaara in the 1940s, Mexico has always been fascinated with the staging of extreme performance personae.

Sometimes these personas embody idealized or demonized identities: other times, they depict imaginary identities codified in colonial fantasy. This performativity is in my DNA. My own family has developed a rich iconographic history of staged photography, which definitely influenced my sensibility. In fact, I've been working on a long-term project selecting and digitizing my family photos that go back to the late 1800s. With the help of some relatives I've archived more than three hundred photos, spanning a century of family history. Many of these images are so self-consciously dramatic and stylized that they could easily compete in outragousness with my photo-performance work. One day, I'd love to publish a book juxtaposing my family photos with my photo-performances.

Other influences in my performance work include Chicano/border pop and street culture, especially low-rider and "pieno" iconography, underground
comics, velvet paintings, and rare horror b-movies. I love this combination of high style and boldness. I'm also interested in the work of Mexican political activists like Superbarrio, Marcos, and Trey Tornament, who utilize performance strategies and symbolic gestures to distribute ideas and generate public dialogue.

In terms of contemporary art, I feel a certain kinship with other performance artists who have ventured into photography as an extension of their performance work. Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramovic come to mind; Ron Athey, and Francesca As assembly... And of course, our conceptual grandfather of sorts Marcel Duchamp's "Rrose Sélavy" was perhaps the first avant garde "photo-performance" ever.

JG: There is no spoken or written narrative in the photo-performance, yet each tableau produced by the participants suggests scenes or a sequence of "acts." The camera apparatus participates as the framing device for a series of elaborate poses on the part of the various players. Each series is comprised of a set of related images, with costume changes and props being recycled and shared by different actors so that there's a kind of identity slippage across gender and ethnic lines—between the various imaginary characters portrayed. This sharing and recycling offers viewers a set of clues about the performance event itself; it's clear that the actors and the photographers play out their collaboration in real time. We're seeing images that are striking on their own, but that share with conceptual art an emphasis on the process of production as much as on the final result; the focus lies on the interface between the performers and the camera, on the act of posing per se, on the simultaneously intimate and public dialog that takes place in this relation of lim and body. How do you conceive of the relation between the kinds of poses your performers enact, and the idea of posing in general? How are these images both like and unlike portraiture?

GP: In my "photo-performance" projects (as in my video projects), my goal has been to attempt to find a more enlightened and complex "interface" between live performance work and the camera, one beyond merely witnessing, illustrating, documenting, or even "interpolating" performance. The main epistemological question infusing these projects has been: how to create a more surprising and "dialogical" relationship between the performance artist who creates both the concept and the implied narrative and offers his body/identity as artefact in sacrifice to the camera, and the photographer who filters it, frames it and, in doing so, inevitably re-creates it. In this sense, I see the photographer not just as a technician but as an accomplice, and the camera as my implied audience. I constantly challenge them, and invite them to challenge me. I question their power to frame me, to "capture" me, to explicate me. I like to question the power relations inherent in the relationship that exists between the performance artist and the photographer.

More than looking for a pose that works for the camera, I write in advance some conceptual parameters and then, once in the studio, I invite my performance colleagues working with me to play within these parameters. I ask them to develop a sense of being in the space, a certain presence and an attitude, a way of relating to objects and costumes, of connecting symbolically to other bodies. It's like a jarring session indirectly coordinated by me. This is precisely where I feel that the originality of my photographic images lies. They come from a different place than traditional portraiture. They're generated by a different methodology. That's why for me it's extremely important to only work with people I know and like, with artists and photographers who are very familiar with my performance work and whom I trust.

Photo shoots have always helped me clarify my performance personas and how forced me to pay attention to every symbolic detail in my costume and to the political and cultural implications of the human body as a site for creation. In this sense, performance photos are like heightened excerpts of a live performance that never took place. That's precisely why I call them "photo-performances."

We can divide my photographic work into two main periods: prior to 2000, I engaged in all kinds of experiments with the interaction of photography and performance; among others, I photographed my performance personas within the context of an installation. I took these same performance personas and inserted them in public spaces, in politically and historically charged sites and buildings. I juxtaposed them with "normal" people and with local eccentricities I came across during the performance "intervention." I also staged photo shoots in the middle of a live performance and allowed a photographer to shoot a portion of the piece as a performative action to be witnessed by a live audience. I invited fashion and socialite photographers to accompany me and my performance collaborators on public adventures, hitting all types of clubs in costumes and staging impromptu tableaux vivants. We asked the photographers to go along with the fiction and behave as if they were part of a "celebrity" event. Once in New York we worked with real paparazzi and crashed
all the celebrity parties in our Monterosso regalia. It was a very sad night because most people in those circles related to us in a very frivolous and at times humiliating manner—to them we were like experimental marionettes—but the photos were fantastic.

Then in 2002 my friend, the Spanish curator Orlando Britto, challenged me to begin to think of my photo-performance as art "objects" in themselves. He invited me to create portfolios strictly for the art world, to think of large formats and complete scenes, to professionalize my performance pieces so to speak. He actually commissioned the first five portfolios.

GG: Although the images are clearly well planned and staged, "performing" implies improvisation. How important is improvisation to this process? Can you say more about this in relation to your performances in general?

GP: The same methodology I utilize to create images in a live performance I tend to use in my photo shoots. Although our performance work is scripted and planned, there's always space for improvisation. In the past few years, we've invited our audiences to co-create the performance with us, right there, as it's taking place. We invite them to try our props and costumes and to develop a fictional identity. Once they've altered their identities in situ, we invite them to insert themselves inside our tableaux vivants and to alter the dynamics of the image and the state of the performance. It's exciting and dangerous. It can easily turn into bad art, but we take the risk, and most of the time, it works.

Now in the photo sessions it's the same energy and locura. If we invite local eccentrics and non-artists to partake in our madness, we often do, we treat them respectfully as collaborators and not just as models. We invite them to co-create images and play with costumes, props, symbols, nudity, body markings. Besides the core members of La Pocha Nostra (Michèle Coballos, Violeta Luna, Roberto Sifuentes, Emilio R. Lewis, Silvia Antelmo O'Reilly, Orlando Britto, and Gabriela Salgado) and our artist associates in various cities and countries where the photo shoots have taken place, you can find in my photos all kinds of interesting people with performance personalities, including curators, intellectuals, farm workers, sex radicals, activists, eccentric socialites—e...ven lawyers (Fig. 9.6). One of the main models in "Post-Mexico en X-pata," Luna, is a very prominent criminal lawyer in Madrid. In "Ethno-techo," the "new Victorian tourist" is Rebecca Solnit, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

Figure 9.2: Salamanca agastia. From the portfolio "Post-México en X-pata," created in Madrid with Jesus Cabrera, 2005. Photo: Courtesy of Orlando Britto—Britto and Galería Artefino, Las Palmas de Gran Canarias.

GG: The settings for many of the images are very intimate spaces, small rooms, houses, or even just a simple backdrop. How does the space in which the actors appear come into play when you're thinking about the constructed universe of the personas? How important is the stage set?

GP: When I began to work more purposely with photographers to develop series for galleries and museums, my aesthetics shifted a bit. I began to place my performance personas in the limbo of a black box theater or against the white walls of a gallery, because I wanted the viewer to concentrate on the complexity of the performance personas. The adored body, the intervened body, riddled with cultural and political implications was the subject matter. The "space" surrounding them was meant to be a "neutral zone" as opposed to culturally specific locations as in my prior work. In a few instances I've chosen to place these personas inside a house or a highly designed environment, but
these surroundings become more prosthetic extensions of the hyper-identity of the performance personas: the backdrop of the living diorama so to speak.

K: To date you’ve conducted three photo-performances specifically for gallery exhibitions: one in Mexico called “Post-Mexicanos” with photojournalist Miguel Valenzco, one in San Francisco called “Ethno-Techno” with fashion photographer James McCaffrey, and the series “Post-Mexico en X-pala” at the international art fair ABCO Madrid with photographer Javier Calderón. I understand that two more projects are in the works and will appear in 2006. For each photo-performance you select a different kind of photographer and a different set of cultural issues that ground the work in its specific locale. Is the photo-performance always thematically linked to its geographical region? Is the photo-performance ultimately a kind of site-specific practice?

GP: As part of this new process, I’ve become much more specific in terms of my choice of the photographer, and the guest performers. All these decisions are carefully made, taking into consideration the geographic location and the subject matter I wish to explore. My most recent photographic project took place last month in the Gran Canaria (Canary Islands), one of the main entryways for African and Arab immigrants into Spain. Since I wanted to explore Spain’s fear of immigration, I chose to work with a Canarian photographer who was familiar with the issue and with my work, and I invited immigrant artists to work with La Pocha. So you may say that there is a certain site-specificity in the new work, but at the same time I see all my photo-performances as part of a larger project which I’m in the process of articulating. The working title of the overall project is “The New Barbarians.” Next year City Lights will publish a catalogue comprising the first five photo-performances.

K: If theatricality preserves the critical point of departure for you, it’s not because it’s something prized in either documentary or fine art photography—or in its critical reception. Michael Fried’s recent essay “Barthes’ Paradox” revisits its author’s negative discussion of theatricality in photographic production, noting that “A further dimension of Barthes’ antithesis emerges when we consider his engagement with the pose, the theatrical element in photography par excellence.” Fried points out that the theatricality Barthes projects in photographic practice co-exists with his recognition that photography is, by nature, an inherently theatrical medium. This apparent contradiction is to be found in his discussion of the pose. Fried cites Barthes at length, who writes: "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I instantly constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one; I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to caprice." He also writes: "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I inevitably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares)." In addition to revealing a productive intellectual paradox concerning photography’s theoretical qualities, Barthes’ articulation of the experience of the pose could also serve as a remarkably accurate description of the experience of being racially stereotyped: the body is made to perform, to become mortified as a racial type, to be self-imitative as a form of imposture, to live the nightmare of being little more than the projected image of others. How can we think of race as inextricably linked to customs and the pose? Can you say more about race as a performance?

GP: As a performance artist I’m fully aware of the mechanisms of identity construction. Whether conscious or unconscious, for me, the constructions of race are always connected to the performativity of the racialized body, and in this sense customs, props, make-up, body paint, cultural artifacts, and the symbolic positions we choose for the body are all part of it. Many “artists of color” are interested in the staging of authenticity; others in the debunking of authenticity. I’m more interested in the conscious staging of artificial authenticity, and in the questioning of this staging process, as it happens in front of an audience or in front of the camera.

K: What do you see as the links, if any, between the theatricality of the photo-performance and the history of photography as it intersects with racial discourse?

GP: In the late 1960s and early 1970s I was part of that whole generation of artists (James Luna, Coco Fusco, Fred Wilson, etc.) who decided to engage in a dialogue with radical anthropologists such as Barbara Keesing and James Clifford, Michael Taussig, and Roger Bartra. We were part of the larger project of challenging and deconstructing the colonial gaze of
anthropology, which we felt was analogous to the gate of the "multi-cultural" art world of the time. I called our artistic project "reverse anthropology." The basic premise was for the performance artist to assume a fictional "center" and to push the so-called mainstream culture to the margins, and treat it as exotic and unfamiliar. The idea was for us to question the exerting gaze of the viewer by placing a distorting mirror between "us" (the inscrutable "object" of contemplation or study) and "them." Instead of explaining our artificially constructed "Otherness" to the audience, we were making art in hopes of explaining America to itself through our own displaced sensibilities. To attain this, we placed the audience member/viewer in the position of a "foreigner" or a "minority" in our performance country. This major epistemological instruction took place from 1986 to 1992. "Border Brojo" and "The Couple in the Cage" were classic pieces of this period.

In 1992, during the heated Columbus debates, Coco Fusco and I decided to remind the United States and Europe of "the other history of intercultural performance"; the sinister human exhibits, pseudo-ethnographic tableaux vivants, and living dioramas that were so popular in Europe from the seventeenth century up to the early twentieth century; and that in the United States evolved into more vulgar versions at the turn of the century . . . the dime attractions, roadside museums, and freak shows. However, the premise was similar: "Authentic primitives" were exhibited as human artifacts and mythical specimens in cages, taverns, salons, and fairs, as well as in museums of "Ethnography" and Natural History, next to samples of their homeland's flora and fauna. Their costumes and ritual artifacts were designed by the impresario curator and had nothing to do with reality (fig. 9.3). This sinister practice contributed greatly to the mythologies that Europeans and Americans constructed to rationalize their impression of inhabitants of the New World as carnivorous or noble savages. Sadly many of these misperceptions are still present in contemporary mass media and pop cultural depictions of the Latino "Other."

My main concern has shifted since, but every now and then, my interest in the dark and racist corners of ethnography and anthropology reappears in some of my new images. I recently did a photo shoot in Oaxaca with Mexican photojournalist Antonio Tarok, a subcomandante Marcos's first photographer. We invited several local and international performance artists to be part of it. Most of the images we created ended up being a commentary on the Orientalist gate of the North imposed on Oaxaca. I remember asking the indigenous Oaxacan artists working with us in the photo session about their deepest

Figure 9.3. British Curator and Specimen. Shot in Liverpool by Arthur Verso, 2007.
Photo: Courtesy La Pocha Nostra.
concerns. Inevitably all of them wanted to deal with the troubling fascination that foreigners have for the indigenous body, the highly stylized and folkloric body of indigenous Guatemalans. This colonial history never ceases to end.

JG: As you say, the depiction of non-whites as culturally or racially inferior has a long history in which photography plays a central role. Given this history, can you say more about why you chose photography as a medium? Can you articulate how your "living diaspora" are similar to and different from the diasporas and racial typologies of the eugenicists?

GP: They're structurally similar in the sense that they're meant to be seen from all sides and the audience can get really close to the performer/subject, but their content and conceptual strategies are the opposite. They're meant to question the assumptions of the audience about cultural otherness, to problematize what I call "the intercultural moment."

Race and gender have always been an intrinsic element in everything I do. My aesthetic praxis involves ethnic and gender bending, cultural transvestitism, and power inversion of sorts. In my troupe's universe, so called "people of color," immigrants, women, and gays are in control of the image or the living diaspora. It's a performance universe controlled by us. The control is not overt or declared. It's an implied narrative. We try not to be pedagogic or self-righteous in our politics. But it's always there.

This praxis permeates everything I do, my live performances, my videos, my performance texts, and my photo-performances. In a sense my photo-performances are an extension of my living diasporas and tableau vivants. These diasporas were originally inspired by the sinister history of eugenics and human exhibits, but we now use them to deal with more contemporary issues such as racism and sexism as it is expressed in global media, corporate multiculturalism, and tourist culture.

The goal is to heighten positive and desire in the dominant imaginations and "spectacularize" our "extreme identities," with the clear understanding that these identities have already been distorted by the invisible surgery of global media. We pose in diasporas as "artificial savages" making ourselves available for the audience to "explore" us, change our costumes and props, and even replace us for a short period of time.

As I wrote in Cultura in Estrategia, "As performance artists, we wish to understand our new role and place in this culture of extreme spectacle that has been forced upon us... In the process of detecting the exact placement of the new borders of tolerance (especially since September 11), it becomes necessary to open up a new greater communal space—a space where the audience may engage in auto-poietical inquiry and reflect on their new relationship with cultural, racial and political Otherness."

Our aesthetic universe is a kind of Blade Runner in a Tijuana type world, inhabited by cultural projections and artificial savages, a border zone where old broken myths overlap with brand new mythologies. This Pocha Nómada aesthetic is a pastiche of many things. Norteno and Tex Mex chic intertwined with "Chicago Sci-fi," S&M, Catholic pop, Japanese anime, you name it. It's excessive. A Calefate art critic labeled it "robo-baroque."

JG: Explain what it means to be "pocha" or "pocho." How does the history of "pocho" culture and (in parallel) Chicano culture in the U.S. influence your work? Do you consider your work "Chicana"? How does the category or identity of the "Chicana" relate specific issues or dilemmas for race politics?

GP: "Pocho" was originally a derogative term coined by Mexicans to describe those who abandon national territory. We were seen as traitors, "bastardized" Mexicans, the forgotten orphans of the omnipotent Mexican nation-state. And as, when I crossed the border, I unwittingly became a Pocho... In the 1990s, many of us reclaimed the word and began to use it as a term of empowerment. Remember the legendary Pocho TV show created by the Chicano Secret Service performance comedy troupe during those years? This is precisely what we folks did thirteen years ago. We appropriating the term to imagine ourselves. The Spranglish etymology "Pocha Nómada" translates as either "our impurity" or "the cursed of cultural bastardy." We love this poetic ambiguity. It reveals an attitude towards art and society: "Cross-racial, poly-gendered, super-vulgar, ¿qué?"

Regarding the highly contested term Chicana, my position is more complex. Depending on which definition we use, I can be a Chicana... or not. Rubén Salazar, the legendary journalist from the Los Angeles Times who was killed by the police in 1970, caused one of my favorite definitions. He used to say that a Chicano was any politicized Mexican American who didn't have an Anglo image of him/herself. Rubén Guevara, the Chicano ethnographer, took this definition even further. He believes that Chicana/o is a cultural and spiritual state of mind, a way of being in the world. I'd add that this way of being in the world, this attitude implies a certain border-crossing fluidity, a capability to embrace syncretism and hybridity. It entails a certain border
knowledge of how to operate between two or more cultures and languages. In this sense, Chicanoism can be a very useful conceptual model to deal with the complexities of the post-9/11 era... I also feel that Chicanoism has become a worldwide phenomenon. The South is moving into the space of the North and redifining it. In a sense all the Arabs, Africans, and South Asians living in Europe are also Chicanos in the widest sense of the term.

[Artwork: Image of a graffiti-filled wall with the text "Chicanoism: A Conceptual Model"]

[Caption: "Chicanoism, a conceptual model for understanding the post-9/11 world."

[Figure: A bar graph showing the growth of Chicanoism in the United States over the past decade."

[Caption: "The rise of Chicanoism: A statistical analysis."]

[Table: Comparison of Chicanoism in the United States and Europe]
multiple readings. Performance art is a terrain of ambiguity. My audience and viewers are always asking themselves: What’s wrong with this picture or with this tableau vivant? Why is this supermodel wearing a Zapoteca mask? Why are all these designers wearing masks resembling the face of the audience or the photographer?

JG: In addition to asking, “What’s wrong with this picture?” your audience may also be thinking, “Where do these people exist? What world do they inhabit?”

GP: I want to believe that they inhabit a parallel universe that’s both imaginary and “real,” a universe that exists somewhere between the phenomenological and the poetic. I see them as complex portraits of an emerging international sub-culture. They’re the “new barbarians” invading the North, contaminating their racial purity and destroying their alleged cultural and social order. But they’re also part of my psyche. These persons are heightened versions of the multiplex selves contained inside my psyche and my body, the other “Others” within me. As a border artist I have multiple selves and voices, some of which are extremely dark and performative and express themselves in my dreams and in my art. Now, going back to your question, do they really exist? In a sense they do. Are they mere emblematic or metaphorical representations of my internal life as it interacts with social reality? I’m not sure.

In contemporary art there are well-defined borders between the sociological and the metaphorical realms... or between the documentary and the fictional in film, and literature. These borders are meaningless to me. I just don’t see them. I’m a bastard child of magical realism and sci-fi, of poetry and activism. For me, realism is just an ideological construction and a mere artistic strategy. I feel a certain discomfort with the kind of social or psychological realism that pretends to capture “reality” in capitals, and assumes that other forms of art are imaginary or fantastic.

JG: Let’s talk about how these questions get played out in some specific images. In your “Post Mexicana” series, the image titled “True Macabre” raises some of the questions of a cultural or political conflict between Mexico and the U.S. (fig. 8.3). You’re in the foreground with your hands in boxing gloves, you gaze at the camera, poised as if ready to fight. One glove is adorned with the U.S. flag, the other the Mexican flag, suggesting that the right hand might be battling the left, or that you are yourself a hybrid of U.S. and Mexican culture ready to defend your complex, mixed identity. You’re flanked by a figure...
Mestizaje is a thing of the past. Binary models are no longer operative (i.e.,
Spanish/Indian, North/South, Mexican/Chicano, etc.). The mestizaje model
was originally created to try to grapple with the fusion between the Spanish
and the indigenous. But what do you do with the Post-Mexicans? We’re the
product of several racial mixtures and many overlapping subcultures. What
are we then? Post-mestizos? Meta-mestizos? We’re an expression of a double
process; the Chicanoization and Americanization of Mexico and the Mexi-
canization of the United States. Our identities are in permanent flux. The next
generation is a living example of what I’m talking about. More than mestizos,
our multicultural and multilingual kids are poly-cultural (and poly-gendered)
cyborgs. Now, they’re way beyond conventional notions of mestizaje. Take
my son Guillermito and his wild multiracial slice of friends. They’re all fluent
in Spanish, English, Spanglish, ethnic, Chicanism, and cybertalk—and they
don’t even reflect on this. It’s a given to them. One day he told me; “Dad, what
you theorize in your books, is everyday reality for me.”

Is this good or bad, I don’t know. All I can say is that as I tour from city
to city and from country to country, I witness this phenomenon taking place
everywhere I go: a grassroots transnational, transborder culture, which must
not be confused with globalization. It’s not an imposed phenomenon. It’s not
created by corporations. It comes from below. It has a different logic of resis-
tance and contamination.

The entire world is experiencing both a profound crisis of national identity
and the emergence of multiple repertoires of hybrid identities. We’re all clas-
sically trying to understand what our new place and our new voice is in this hal-
lucinatory cartography. The identities we’ve inherited all seem dysfunctional
and somewhat useless. One of the lessons that performance art has taught me
is that we can reinvent our identities; that we’re not straight jacketed by iden-
tity. As artists, we have the capability to pick and choose, to move verticallly
and horizontally, to paste and sample from our multiple cultural selves and
fragmented identities, in order to hopefully construct a better human being.
That’s what I’m trying to do in my art. That’s what my photo-performances
are trying to portray.

For your Ethno-Techno series I’m intrigued by the “Geisha Apocalypica”
(Apocalyptic geisha) who stands in a sculptural pose that could have been
rendered in marble in the nineteenth century, and whose white face, sug-
gestive of the geisha’s makeup, is also a kind of death mask or expression of

wearing feathers, as if from an indigenous tribe, and a woman carrying lilies
reminiscent of Diego Rivera’s paintings is a recurring motif in your images.
They’re also both wearing signs of Asian culture: the red sun on Japan tattooed
on the arm of the man, and a theatrical Japanese mask on the woman. Finally,
a kind of Punk aesthetic of spiked razor bands and metallic accessories gives
them a tough exterior. Vaguely menacing, your trio also performs humorously:
the man carries a fly swatter as if it were a weapon. Can you say more
about how this image and the other images in the “Post-Mexicans” series
address the question of bicultural life? Why is there an emphasis on “post” in
“Post-Mexicans”?

GP: The “Post-Mexicans” are essentially the post-national Mexicans: the
millions of uprooted puaneros who are constantly crossing the border back
and forth, and who are not part of either nation-state. We’re an emerging nation,
a floating nation, a conceptual country that demands a new cartography to
contain us, and a brand-new aesthetic to portray us. As an artist I’m closely
trying to do both, draft a more enlightened and inclusive poetic cartography
and contribute to developing a new aesthetic.
Photo Courtesy of Orlando Britto-Henrique and Galeria Artifício, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

Photo Courtesy of Orlando Britto-Henrique and Galeria Artifício, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

desire and identification with "white culture" (fig. 9.8). She stands to the side of a white cube on the floor, the canonical object of modernist expression and also a gallery pedestal. What does this signify for you? Why are the words "nunca regresaremos" scrawled on her back? How does this image relate to the "Rita Nov-Animal" (Nov-Animal Ritual) image of the woman who has the words "United We Stand" written on her back? (fig. 9.7). In short, how does the woman's body come to be the mystic writing pad of resistance?

GP: In performance art, the human body, not the stage, is our true site for creation. It's our raw material, our empty canvas, and open book: our navigation chart and biographical map. It's the vessel for our ever-changing identities. In performance, our body must be marked, decorated, intervened with culturally, mapped out, chronicled, re-politicized, and re-captured or liberated by the camera. Our bodies are also occupied territories. The ultimate goal of performance, especially if one is a woman, gay, or a "person of color," is to decolonize one's body and make these decolonizing mechanisms apparent to the audience in the hope that they'll get inspired to do the same with their own.

When a text is written on the body of a performance artist documented by the camera, who is really talking? It's a very complex question. In the live performances, my collaborators have more leeway to decide which text to write on their bodies and how to write it. In the photo-performances the decision is clearly mine. It's my disembodied voice, but I don't expect the viewer to take it as such. My hope is that the text/image/text functions as a sort of poetic logo, a conceptual statement that may even spill into the other photos of the series. You can read on the apocalyptic guadalupe's back "Nunca regresaremos," which
translates to "We will never return." Where to? Essentialism? To the very our cultures used to be before we became immigrants and nomads? To the way things were before 9/11?

The phrase "United we stand" written on the back of Emiko is also a disembodied poetic statement, and as such it elicits a multiplicity of readings. Is it that the used to be "united," connected to the transvestite Aztec priest holding her scalped hair, and not anymore? Is it about the country, the United States, which is totally divided under the Bush regime? Is it about the endemic lack of social fabric in multiracial America? Is the statement about "us," the dúkeria versus "them," those white Christian guys in power? Other readings are also welcome.

JG: I want to pursue the question of the powerful female personas that you have constructed in your photographs. Your image "Against Gauguin" depicts a beautiful woman in something resembling tropical attire who poses with a gun in one hand and one arm across her bare breasts (fig. 9.1). As a critical reprise of Gauguin's erotic and romantic depiction of women from Tahiti, it stands as a challenge to historical (and contemporary) images thatessen! cultural difference. At the same time, the image is strikingly similar to works by Hannah Wilke and Yolanda, whose self-portraits in the same include half-clothed poses that are simultaneously alluring and threatening. Despite their feminist stance, many thought Wilke and Export's work was simply attract the sexist gaze it claimed to critique. How do you see "Against Gauguin," and other images such as "Guerilla Supermodel," as part of your project to explore power relations as written across the woman's body?

GP: To answer this question I must discuss the specifics of that photo-shoot. Those images were generated during the "Tucuman-Chicano" project that took place in Argentina early this year, and strictly so, they're not part of my photo-performances. I'll explain why. Violeta Luna and I conducted a performance workshop involving fiber Argentine artists. Most participants (I'd say 75 percent) were women—very powerful rebel actresses, dancers, and intellectuals. What they shared in common was a dissatisfaction with their mono-disciplinary artistic practice and a desire to experiment beyond their studies and to collaborate with us. La Pocha Nostra provided the methodology and the conceptual framework, and each artist developed a couple of performance personas drawn from their own concerns. We invited this amazing young photographer, Remón Treves, who had been recommended by my

friend photographer Julio Pascua, to document the process, and he showed up with all these amazing backdrops to play with us. We set up an ephemeral photo studio in a room adjacent to the rehearsal space and every time someone would come up with a strong persona, he/she would go and play next door with Remón for half an hour as the workshop continued. Since we all wanted to support Remón's career, we decided to not claim authorship of the final portfolio.

Regarding the highly sexualized content of the images, it was a combination of factors: the personas developed by the participating artists themselves, La Pacha's contagious aesthetics, and Remón's gaze. Perhaps in the current ambiance of destape (liberation) in Argentina, these Flaneurian and sexualized images of empowered women, men, and cultural transvestites have different connotations from those being created by artists in the United States.
JG: How do you imagine the essence of racial performance? Can you give me your answer with reference to a specific image?

GP: In the late 1990s, my colleagues and I began to surrender our will to the audience in the process of determining the content of our work. For this purpose, we developed "confessional" websites in which we asked Internet users to suggest to us how we should dress as Mexicans and Chicanos, and what kind of performance actions and social rituals we should engage in. We would then carry out their suggestions in a live performance or in a photo shoot. The idea was to use performance as a Rorschach test for people to project their cultural fears and colonial desires, as a mirror for the audience to see the reflection of their own psychological chimeras. The results of our experiments in "reverse anthropology" turned out to be much stranger than anything we could've imagined on our own.

In the mid to late 1990s, the "sleepy Mexican" had been buried from the colonial unconscious of contemporary America, deported back to Hollywood, along with Fritz Lang's, Speedy Gonzales, the "greaser" bandit, and the suffering Frida Kahlo. They had been replaced by a new pantheon of mighty icons reflective of the political and media trends of the time, and the anti-immigration rhetoric of politicians. We were perceived to be unnecessarily violent, yet fashionably reductive; technologically advanced yet gifted with inexplicable spiritual powers. We were contradictory, unpredictable, and at the same time, strangely familiar: a distorted image of the United States; an evil twin. These confessions led to the creation of the "El Mametrameur" project. My techno-shaman personas and Roberto Sifuentes' cyber-vamps came out of that research. These images appear in my book Dangerous Border Crossers.

JG: To what extent is your work in a conscious conversation with the history of art?

GP: As a young Mexican artist in a racist U.S. art world I soon realized that the official history of contemporary art was not going to welcome me right away. And I became interested in the other histories of art, the parallel and untold ones. . . . My conversation with the history of art has always had a narcissistic and irreverent tone. It's a conversation between an outsider and a functionary. I remember when my work began to be recognized in the late 1980s, art critics were constantly comparing me with famous non-Mexican artists or with the few Mexican artists they were familiar with. They lacked the necessary cultural references and knowledge of Mexican and Chicanos art to understand me on my own terms. In their eyes I was always "the Mexican Spalding Gray" . . . or the postmodern grandchild of Diego Rivera. So I began to make fun of their short-sightedness. "Ni Diego Ni Frida" responds to that impulse. So does "El Mametrameur" juxtaposing a rock celebrity and "The Ranchero Star.

I have also engaged in an anguished conversation with historically based Catholic iconography. My Mexican sensibility is permeated with Catholic iconography gone wrong, with female Zapataista Chrits, mariachi and low rider Chrits, with immigrant píñas and border mamás. My job in this respect has been to problematize my placement in all that history. I see all these historically based images as interventions in the official history of contemporary art.

JG: I'd like to return to the question of race in relationship to the images we've been discussing. How much does the history of Mexico and Mexican conceptions of race figure in your work, and how much is framed by the U.S. context? Here I'm thinking of the recent controversy about the newly minted Mexican postage stamp that depicts Memin Pinguín, a racist cartoon caricature of a black boy. How does the performativity of race differ in the two countries, and how does this influence your work?

GP: I can't escape the fact that I was born and raised in Mexico City. But at the same time, my formative intellectual years took place in the U.S.-Mexico border area and Los Angeles. In this sense I'm a border artist, a chico-largo (half chilango and half Chicanito) with a bicultural sensibility, and a bilateral understanding of culture. Besides, I'm constantly returning to Mexico City, where I have a house and work on several ongoing art projects. It's weird. In a sense I've never left, and in another sense, I'm constantly returning to a place which no longer exists. This dilemma has positioned me in a somewhat strategic place in both countries. In my artwork and in my writings, I often interpret (and purposely misinterpret) Latin American culture for the United States, and U.S. culture for Mexico, and this includes notions of race and identity. Border artists often perform this dual role of vernacular diplomat and intellectual coyote.

In the 1990s and 2000s, during the culture wars, while the United States was trying to sincerely deal with its multicultural complexity, Mexico was in complete denial. Identity in Mexico was a static construct, intricately connected to national territory and language. A Mexican was someone who lived in Mexico and who spoke Spanish . . . like a Mexican. Despite the fact that we
example of my conscious decision to deal with the new racial complexities: its members and associates are Mexicans, Chicano, U.S. Latinos, Asians, Arabs, blacks, "subaltern" Europeans, and hybrids in between.

JG: It seems that the function of "race" is different in both countries, yet your work seems to operate critically within both paradigms. Can you explain how your work is (differently) critical of Mexican race politics and U.S. race politics?

GP: My positionality vis-à-vis identity politics and race politics is essential and strategic. It shifts from side one of the border to the other, and from context to context. Often my work in Mexico is to question Mexican nationalism and centralism; to question Mexico's racism towards indigenous peoples, Chicanos, and everyone who is not part of the puzzle of national identity. When I go back to Mexico, I do it as a Chicano, and I always try to go back with other Chicano and U.S. Latino artists. It gives me extra moral grounds to erode my Chicano voice, my hybirdity, my otherness. Since Mexico is experiencing an acute process of Chicanization, my voice now has a context. This process of Chicanization is produced by the powerful influence of U.S. Latino/Chicano media and by the inevitable cultural influence of the millions of post-Mexicanos who constantly return by will or by the force of the agnate. Mexico is finally trying to deal with this phenomenon. Immigration, border culture, Chicantime, Spanglish, are now part of the national conversation and the pop imaginary. However, the intellectual and artistic efforts are still unwilling to open up.

In the United States my position regarding identity shifts all the time. In Chicano contexts my job is to question Chicanoism in capitals. I try to bring up issues that make Chicano nationalists uncomfortable such as multiple sexualities, experimental aesthetics, and cross-racial collaboration. In Anglo contexts it's different. If the place where I'm speaking or performing is conservative, then I tend to position myself as a hard core Chicano/Latino in order to question the intolerance of Latino otherness. In so-called progressive milieus, especially after 9/11, I either become a Latin American once again, and from the South I question American isolationism, or I assume a pan-ethnic/ pan-gendered performance identity to shatter their simplistic views. You know, I'm a coyote, a performance tricker, a border-crossover.

When La Pocha goes to Europe to present work, things get logarithmically more complicated. In order not to be exoticized as the new "urban primitives" from the distant West or from "Mexico," we have to establish strategic
Alliances with immigrant and de-commercialized groups in Europe, with communities who are experiencing similar processes of transnationalization as those experienced by U.S. Latinos in the past. I'm talking about the British Pakistanis, the French Algerians, the Spanish Moroccans, the German Turks, etc. I'm also talking about the Eastern Europeans relocated to Western Europe. These groups are the new European "Chicanos" I was talking about earlier. Collaborating with artists from these communities helps us anchor the piece in a European reality.

JH: Earlier in our conversation you suggested "we can reinvent our identities" and "pick and choose from cultural selves." Yet, as Stuart Hall points out, we live in a world where this reinvention is not a simple matter. Our otherwise fluid identities are often constrained by the material conditions in which we live, both the physical form of our bodies and the economic support they receive. Most people would not choose to find themselves in a racist culture where their skin color or poverty places them in a subordinate position, yet this is a concrete condition for many. As a brown-skinned coyote, as a trickster, as a border-crosser, and as an artist you move between cultural marginalization and economic privilege. For my last question I want to ask: How does class figure explicitly in your images and implicitly in your production? Is the reinvention of identity only an option for the bourgeoisie?

GP: True, there is a global elite that can easily cross borders of race, gender, and class without having to experience the physical, social, or political effects of those border crossings. Their "transnational fluidity" tends to be superficial and temporary. They're flaneurs and cultural tourists in search of extreme otherness and unusual experiences. Subcultures, however, driven by survival and by impulses of resistance, engage in much more daring forms of border crossings. Low riders in Japan are to dialogue with Chicano low riders from the Southwest; DJ's from Latin America and the Arab countries are currently making the music that the white youth dances to; urban tribes from Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, or Mexico City are developing similar cultural hybrids, as their peers in New York or London. Many of the underground railroad and contacts that migrant workers utilize to crisscross the United States go through Indian reservations. Chicano barrios, and progressive white milieux. I'm interested in engaging in a dialogue with all these transnational communities, and I often find them much more open to the reinvention of identity than say, some of my intellectual peers.

My project of reinvention of identity is clearly an art project. And most artistic projects are that, mere prototypes, models which attempt to articulate and chronicle the new complexities of the times. Sadly, we're not activists or politicians and our conceptual models unfortunately don't translate to the social realm, especially in a society like the United States, which doesn't listen to the voice of its artists. But my audiences do pay attention to what I have to say, and I believe that my ideas have an impact in their lives. In this sense, the pedagogic dimension of performance is where the true political project lies. We always try to conduct workshops for the outsider communities living in the city where we're performing.

As touring artists who experience continuous upward and downward mobility... continuous geographical and cultural mobility, we have certain border-crossing privileges that other animals and migrants lack, and I'm fully aware of it. I only hope to utilize these privileges responsibly, ethically, and to help others to access them as well. La Pocha Negra is like a Trojan horse. I get invited, and I show up with twenty others. My political project is also to open doors for young rebel artists.