

Violeta Luna: Requiem

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Requiem for a Lost Land / Réquiem para una tierra perdida. Written and Performed by Violeta Luna. Mission Cultural Center. San Francisco, CA. 6 October 2010.

Violeta Luna's *Requiem For a Los Land/Réquiem para una tierra perdida* locates itself within Mexico's widely marketed 2010 celebration of the Bicentennial of Independence by re-contextualizing the celebration within US-Mexico's devastating economic and narco-war policies. As a ritual-action, Luna's piece re-situates state discourses on nationhood and the narco-war within a site of memory and mourning for the dead. This review is based on one of the first performances of the piece in San Francisco's Mission Cultural Center during the "Celebrate SF" events, which also took place in the fall of 2010. Luna's piece began in the lobby of the community center where, in mourning black, she walked between spectators while carrying a shopping bag emblazoned with the logo of the Mexican Bicentennial celebrations. Her slow meandering through the lobby gradually opened up a circle inside the crowd, as if stopping time and space on a busy street. The in-between quality of the lobby was briefly transformed into a ritual site, echoing the sudden break of everyday life by unexpected acts of narco-violence. Here, the reference to the transformation of public space by the narco-war became a site of mourning shared by the community of witnesses-spectators. Furthermore, while the use of the shopping bag and Bicentennial logo alluded to the aggressive marketing of a glorious Mexican state history, it also gestured to habits of consumption as well as the expendability of resources and people under global capitalism. In the performance, state discourses, the global consumption of narcotics and narco-violence are linked and shown to pervade the everyday.

The discursive space of the performance was framed by President Calderón's speech to the US Congress in 2010, while the mapping of the site was defined by the six white bottles Luna took out of her bag and placed in diagonal rows of three, the center bottles emblazoned with the eagle from the Mexican flag. By each bottle, bullet markers materialized statistics of the thousands of dead during Mexico's narco-war. An eagle bottle was toppled and spilled nothing but air. In the background, Calderón's voice emphasized Mexico's shared economic goals with the US as Luna toppled another bottle and spilled green liquid that seeped onto the floor. The transformation of the symbolic meaning of green in the Mexican flag as a representation of "hope" turned into spilled greenbacks, a reference to the spilling of "resources," people, land, and wealth into the ill-fated drug war. Similarly, the white, representing "unity," was re-signified as empty discourse, while being re-constituted in the white chalky bottles that recalled cocaine. In Luna's more recent performances of *Requiem*, actual white powder delineates a border between the site of mourning and the witnesses of the performance. The symbols of the nation have been reshaped, their meanings shifted, by its product of

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consumption, distribution, and production: cocaine.

At the moment in which Calderón, in his speech, referred to the US's responsibility for the flow of weapons and the rising violence in Mexico, Luna took a white dress out of bag, put it on and began washing her hands and arms with white paint. Luna, in white, stood before the audience and became the landscape for a series of violent images of the dead that were projected and incorporated onto her body. The questions surge forward: how do we make sense of the bombardment of violent images in the media? Of the placement of “narco-messages” in streets and public thoroughfares? How does the healing process begin within the ravages of the narco-war? In Luna's gesturing towards the traces and absences left by the unnamed dead, she embodied the “*madrepatria/motherland*” and absorbed the dead unto her own self—it was a form re-remembering through embodiment of the images of the dead. Here the visual images linked state and narco discourses and the celebration with the need to mourn the victims and denunciate the violence.

In the last part of the performance, Luna enacted another everyday ritual: she combed her hair and took out a series of small photographs. With increasingly dramatic gestures, she bent over and extended her long hair, pulling its strands unto the floor and placing the portraits of the dead over it. As she spilled the last color of the Mexican flag, red, into her hair, the faces of the dead—some by decapitation and used as narco-messages—were covered by the liquid. When the performer pulled back, the hair and liquid left tracks that she covered with her white dress and soil from another bottle. As the burial and mourning of the dead came to a close, Luna picked up her shopping bag and strolled away from the crowd, a gesture to the continuation of life despite, and in response to, the violence.

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