DISCLAIMER
By: Guillermo Gómez-Peña
(2005)

Dear Curator, Producer, Arts Presenter,
Think twice before inviting this performance artist to your institution. His new work might be overtly political and too sexually explicit for these times. He might challenge—even “offend”—your audience. If you insist on inviting him, make sure that your board members approve, and that the local community is prepared. We don’t want to ruffle the feathers of our donors or the media. Remember: this is post-9/11 America, the Bush era, and these are extremely delicate times.

Sincerely,
The Artist
USA, 2005

I.

People ask me all the time: Is La Pocha Nostra (my performance troupe) being censored in the USA? Where? By whom? What form does this new censorship take? Tired of silence and diplomacy, with my heart aching and my political consciousness swelling, I now choose to speak. I won’t name names. My objective is neither to denounce, nor to add to the ever-growing inventory of incidents of artistic censorship, but to attempt to map out the abruptly changed sociocultural landscape that U.S. performance artists currently inhabit, and explain how these new conditions are transforming my own artistic practice.

This may be one of the most difficult subjects I have ever grappled with. As a child in Mexico, I heard adults whispering about blacklists and those who named names. My older brother, Carlos, was involved in the 1968 movimiento estudiantil, and several friends of his disappeared for good. During my formative years in Latin America, censorship was indistinguishable from political repression, and often resulted in the imprisonment, displacement, exile, or death of “dissident” intellectuals and artists.

In the 1970s, many Latin American artists ended up migrating to the U.S. and Europe, in search of the freedom we couldn’t find in our homelands. When I moved to California in 1978, I found a very different situation. Artists and intellectuals simply didn’t matter. The media treated our art either as an exotic new trend or a human interest story, and the political class didn’t pay attention to us, which gave us an illusion of freedom. As artists, we rejoiced in our mythical condition of liberty, our celebrated “American freedom.”

It used to be that I would don my Mexican wrestling mask and my prosthetic “low-rider suit,” paint my chest with the words “Don’t Discover Me,” and climb into the metaphorical combatant’s ring to wrestle with social complacency, artistic stagnation, and, not least, my own personal demons (New World Border, 1992). I developed a reputation as an iconoclast
by engaging in symbolic acts of transgression that explored and exposed sources of racism and nationalism. Coco Fusco and I exhibited ourselves inside a gilded cage, dressed as fictitious “Indians,” to protest the quincentennial celebrations of Columbus’s arrival in the Western hemisphere (Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit..., 1992–93). Roberto Sifuentes and I crucified ourselves in full mariachi regalia to protest immigration policy (The Crucifixion Project, 1994), and posed as “end-of-the-century saints” inside Plexiglass boxes to receive racist confessions from guilt-ridden audience members (Temple of Confessions, 1994–95). I ventured into pirate radio (1991–97) and pirate TV in my “Naftaztec” persona (Naftaztec TV, 1994). I became good at organizing ephemeral communities of like-minded rebel artists. I advised activists on how to use performance art strategies to enhance their political actions. I used the art world as a base of operations.

In 20 years of touring the U.S. as a “radical” performance artist, I have come across innumerable situations in which the content of my “politically direct,” “racially sensitive,” and “sexually explicit” material had to be “adapted” and “translated” to the site, and I have written extensively about these “dangerous border crossings and intercultural negotiations of sorts” in my books. In fact, this process of ongoing semiotic recontextualization/translation has always been an intrinsic part of my work. Because of this, according to a curator friend of mine, I am “no virgin in the house of censorship.”

Since 9/11, however, my collaborators and I are facing an entirely new dilemma: prohibition—both overtly imposed and internalized. My agent, Nola Mariano, recently told me in a letter:

“Besides the ideological censorship exercised by the Bush administration, I believe that we have entered a new era of psychological censorship, one that is sustainable as we, our collaborators, and allies find ourselves second-guessing our audience responses, fearing for our jobs, and unsure of our boards’ support. Unable to quickly identify the opposition, we find ourselves shadowboxing with our conscience and censoring ourselves. This is a victory for a repressive political administration. One not won but rather handed to them.” (5 June 2005)

II.

The air has become extremely rarefied. The continuous defunding of the arts, paired with institutionalized neoconservatism and the imposed culture of panic, prohibition, and high security permeating every corner of society—including our arts organizations—has created an incendiary environment for the production of critical culture, and generated a growing unemployed (or rather “under-employed”) class: the “radical” experimental artist. And if conditions don’t change dramatically, this new class will soon contribute to the growth of many expatriate arts communities in Europe, Australia, Mexico, and Canada—my own troupe, La Pocha Nostra, included. Why?

Nowadays, the obstacles to presenting our work in the U.S. and touring regularly abroad are truly formidable. First and foremost, money is scarce and funders are more cautious than ever. Most gigs my colleagues and I do in our hometown of San Francisco are “freebees” or fundraisers for others like us. In other U.S. cities, we are being offered budgets that are half
what we used to work with in the pre-Bush era. As a result, we can only present small-scale projects in the U.S., and under technically primitive conditions. These new conditions are similar to those we face in Latin America, but without the community spirit and the humane environment we find there—without people’s willingness to be always present and donate their time and skills. (True, there are exceptions to the rule, but they are mainly thanks to our close associates in some U.S. cities: like-minded artists, activists, and curators who watch our backs, help us locate potential collaborators, equipment, and props, and keep us company at all times.)

So far, what has saved La Pocha Nostra from closing our doors is international touring. Sixty percent of our budget now comes from other countries. In the past four years, we have spent more than half of each year working in Europe, Australia, Canada, and Latin America, where we get to do our large-scale work, our most sensitive material, and are better paid and better treated. Despite its romantic aura, this imposed expatriation has profoundly affected our relationship with our communities of origin (the U.S. Chicano/Latino arts communities), not to mention our families and friends.

As if this weren’t enough, due to “security restrictions,” our props, costumes, and art materials are carefully scrutinized at every airport we enter. U.S. Homeland Security officers are now even checking the titles of our books and opening our notebooks and phone agendas, both when we leave and when we return to the U.S. Frequently, our materials are confiscated. Once, our trunk of props was confiscated by security at Boston’s Logan Airport, held for two days, and then delivered to us a half hour before opening night—with no explanation. Not surprisingly, all the “weird”-looking props were missing. Another time, in Baton Rouge, our trunks arrived open on the carousel, our broken props lying on the belt and several items missing, courtesy of Homeland Security. Every performance artist I know has had art materials confiscated without explanation. Every performance artist dreads his/her next flight, especially if he/she is brown-skinned and/or “alternative” looking or has a foreign name or accent. Should we change the nature of our props and art materials, and the way we dress? My colleagues and I are already doing this. Isn’t this a form of censorship?

III.

In this rarefied atmosphere of paranoia, distrust, and scrutiny, performance artists have come to signify “potential trouble” for U.S. art institutions. We always do, in times of crisis. We are perceived as irresponsible provocateurs, gratuitous iconoclasts, and, since 9/11, as cultural terrorists. Despite the fact that our audiences continue to be quite large (La Pocha averages 400 spectators every night we perform), we are invited with provisos, interrogated in advance by curators, and treated as potential troublemakers by the media. It’s…a new American art rite.

The dreaded phone call comes a couple months before the project. The presenter’s voice is audibly anxious. The worst possible scenario goes more or less like this: PRESENTER: Gómez-Peña, we just had a board meeting last night and felt it was better not to bring your troupe to our city this time. Maybe next year. The stakes are too high right now. We can’t afford to risk our upcoming funding.
Gómez-Peña: Well, thanks for being so...so sincere, Mister...culero... (last word uttered under my breath).

Other times, when the cultural institution decides to go ahead with the project, but still has some apprehensions, the conversation occurs, either by phone or in person, a few days before opening night. If it happens in person, we are taken to a nice art bar and, after a few drinks—bless his/her heart—the curator or presenter takes a deep breath and starts the euphemistic interrogation:

PRESENTER: Guillermo, by no means do we want to censor you. We just want to know what we are up against in your upcoming piece. You know...we must be prepared in case...there are fire alarms.

Gómez-Peña: (And fire alarms tend to go off when you’re looking for smoke, I think to myself.) Can you be more specific, my friend? (I know where they are going, but I don’t know how grave their fears are.)

PRESENTER: I mean... Is this performance “audience-friendly”? (A euphemism for art without venom or sharp edges.) Anything we should be worried about? Frontal nudity? Violence and sex? (The deadly combo.) Bloodletting? Exposure to bodily fluids? Will your performers touch any audience member inappropriately? Will you force any audience member to do anything that might be considered humiliating or offensive? Any profanity? Any disrespect for religious imagery? Will there be flag desecration? Will you be making fun of The Troops? (The list of fears and taboos intertwined with performance art clichés goes on and on and on—depending on the site, the project, and the presenter.)

Sometimes the presenter’s “concerns” might be addressed with an emphatic disclaimer placed at the entrance of the gallery or theatre, something like: “There will be nudity and/or adult content and/or political images which you may find offensive...” If the museum director or presenter is a hip Vato, he may let me write my own disclaimer, Gómez-Peña style. I always try to create a funny disclaimer that heightens the specific fears of the curator or the institution—something like: “You are about to witness chicken nudity and unnecessary Mexican violence. Think twice before you cross this border.” Or, “Patriots should think twice before entering into an internationalized space.” Or, “The artists are not responsible for identity crises audience members might endure during the performance.” It works. But other times, when the stakes are higher (or the city is more conservative), the art bar chat with the curator becomes a clear-cut warning: either we tone down the political/sexual content of the piece, or the project will be “postponed” (a euphemism for canceled). Short of handing the presenter a script in advance, we try to be as specific as we can in terms of describing the images and performance rituals in our piece. We then try to negotiate, case by case, image by image, the inclusion/exclusion of the most sensitive material. It’s tough; if we give in too much, then the project becomes defanged, decaffeinated. But if we don’t pay attention to their fears and just go ahead and do whatever we want, we will immediately be blacklisted in their circuit. It’s like performing in 1970s provincial Mexico.
A presenter told me recently, “There are clearly new forbidden territories which a performance artist must avoid if he wishes to remain employed in the U.S.” The obvious subtext was: Please, make sure that the piece you are about to present here is not going to get me in trouble, because if I get in trouble, so will you.

The main problem is that the fears of the U.S. presenters are well-founded; their moral dilemmas are real. My heart truly goes out to them. Their institutions, whether mainstream or “alternative” (does anyone know what “alternative” even means nowadays?), are rapidly losing their funding. Besides, the local media is not as willing to defend art as it used to be, and the newly empowered “faith-based organizations” are constantly looking for blood—potential art scandals to call down the wrath of god.

In this highly charged political climate, many arts presenters and curators believe that their funding, and even their jobs, may be riding on the projects they present, so a potential media scandal or even a single hysterical complaint from a righteous audience member might influence the generosity of a donor or funder, or worse (knock on wood), it might incur the wrath of a Christian organization or a group of ferocious “patriots.” Then the shit really hits the fan, and both the institution and the artists are attacked with hate mail, and picketed by zombies. We might even be added to one of the many lists of “cultural traitors” featured on sites such as www.probush.com/traitor or www.americantraitor.us.

Despite the undeserved reputation of performance artists as professional provocateurs and cultural iconoclasts, we really see ourselves on the same side as our cultural institutions. It is clear to us that we are all part of the same milieu, and that their fate is connected to ours. Since our job is by no means to contribute to their defunding, and we certainly don’t wish to give more ammunition to the ferocious Right, when the “trial by fire” occurs, we tend to back off and comply. We do it, not out of fear, but out of solidarity and political intelligence. Some curators and presenters know this. But, sadly, not all do. This is why as artists we must constantly remind them: “We are on your side, carnales. In times like these, we need to help each other. We (the artists), need you guys to broker on our behalf, and defend our integrity. In exchange, we will make sure that no acts of ‘irresponsible transgression’ occur on your watch.”

IV.

“In accordance with Executive Order 13224, the USA Patriot Act and other related laws, including voluntary guidelines issued by the Treasury Department, grantmakers regularly check the names of their prospective grantees against various watch lists produced by the government, and document their compliance to protect themselves from possible criminal and civil prosecution.”

(New York Regional Association of Grantmakers 2005 www.nyrag.org)

Let’s face it, overt censorship is happening throughout the U.S., and not just in “red America.” My performance art colleagues and fellow spoken-word poets are being monitored, interrogated, defunded, watered down, ignored, and un/disinvited by our cultural institutions, many of which perceive themselves as “liberal.” It’s a major dilemma for critical culture in the U.S., and at the same time it’s an international embarrassment.
Why? Because the whole world knows about it and because it’s not happening anywhere else, not even in Catholic Latin America.

As the country becomes more and more a “closed society”—an upside-down mirror image of the ex-Soviet Union—performance artists are faced with very few labor options. In the U.S., there isn’t really a third art world (as there is in Europe) where we can sell artifacts from a performance, or limited editions of our performance work that ventures into the domain of video or photography. If we are extremely lucky and have the right contacts, we might get a job in the mega-saturated job market of academia. If not, we either extract all the chile and shave the thorns off our performance work, or we might as well get used to the idea that from now on we will be doing something totally unrelated to art. Or even worse...it might be time to pack up and leave.

And performance artists are packing up. Rhodessa Jones (of Cultural Odyssey) is spending more and more time in the Caribbean and South Africa; Keith Hennessy and members of Contraband are mostly working in France and Eastern Europe; and Ron Athey, Tim Miller, and Lydia Lunch are presenting their most important work in the U.K. The list goes on. The California avantgarde is moving out. In fact, the only reason why La Pocha hasn’t relocated to Mexico or Europe is because we don’t wish to uproot our relatives and colleagues who are still employed in the U.S.

The U.S. is no longer “the land of opportunity” it once was, or the “most advanced democracy” it claims to be. It is now the land of censorship, isolationism, xenophobia, and Puritanism; one of the most parochial places on earth; the only Christian democracy left in the continuously shrinking “free world” it claims to lead.

We are increasingly more isolated from the rest of the world, and more ignorant of the world’s opinions. Our political class is obsessed with closing our borders and keeping outsiders from entering. What this means for performance artists is that not only are we forced to perform outside more and more, but foreign artists cannot present their work inside the U.S. Since 9/11, the INS—in Bush-speak, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services—has denied La Pocha Nostra five visas to bring Mexican, Cuban, and Colombian artists to the U.S. to work with us. In this sense, the border has become another form of censorship, and cultural exchange is now a nostalgic project of the late 20th century. In fact, most of the binational cultural exchange projects my colleagues and I were involved in prior to 9/11 have been interrupted by the formidable obstacles imposed by Homeland Security and recent (anti-)immigration legislation. As a result of this, the border gap between Mexico and the U.S. is wider than ever; the silence and the indifference, more dramatic than ever before.

The “America” I came looking for 25 years ago is long gone. It’s been obscured by the smokescreen of panic sponsored by this administration and perpetrated by our own fears. I now feel I live on an island I don’t really understand, a society with fundamentalist tendencies I actually fear. As a Chicano, I fear traveling alone and walking the streets of many “red” cities. As an artist, I fear the moment when the lights go on and the performance begins: I fear the potential rage of the Christian Right and the insidious implications of, and abuses inspired by, the Patriot Act (through the distorting prism of the
Patriot Act, our artistic behavior can easily be misconstrued as “anti-American”). I fear being placed on a “no-fly” list. I fear losing my civil liberties and freedom of speech. I fear Carnivore surveying every email and attachment I send (including this text) that includes more than five buzz words. I fear marginalization and joblessness. Are my fears unreasonable, exaggerated?

Perhaps not. In this new United States of America, intellectuals are being expelled from universities for expressing their political views, and curators are being fired for presenting art exhibits critical of the President’s policies. In this America, art shows and film screenings are being canceled due to their content, conceptual and performance artists are facing charges in court (witness the case against Steve Kurtz of Critical Art Ensemble, www.caedefensefund.org), and foreign artists are being denied visas for “reasons of ‘national security.’” In this scary America, critically minded artists are an endangered species. Here, the FBI is showing up at political art shows the night before the opening to make sure the work does not promote terrorism, while the IRS applies the Patriot Act to justify reviewing the finances of funding agencies. Senior artists have told me innumerable times, “It feels strangely like the McCarthy era.”

V.

One of the chilling by-products of censorship is that eventually artists begin to accept it as inevitable—normal, even. One of our performance projects, titled Mapa Corpo (2004), was rejected by a dozen U.S. museums and universities when they learned the nature of the central image: a nude body covered with 40 acupuncture needles, each bearing a small flag of one of the “coalition forces.” Audience members were invited “to decolonize the body/map of the performer” by extracting a needle/flag. After so many rejections (some explicit, others euphemistic, such as those citing “health concerns”) we decided to just perform the piece in other countries, such as the UK, Canada, Mexico and Brasil (the recent Bienal del Mercosur in Porto Alegre had no problems presenting Mapa/Corpo as part of the Mexican delegation). As a result, Mapa Corpo went virtually unnoticed in the U.S.

The question for us performance artists is, How much of the new terms and borders of permissiveness and/or prohibition, the new (implied or enforced) censorship, the euphemistic disclaimers, are we willing to accept?

It’s truly a very heavy question for all of us. Performance artists can put on clothes again, no biggie. Female artists can “tape their nipples” (as my colleagues in Pocha have been asked to do so many times). We can delete certain texts, erase entire scenes, tone down our “outrageous behavior,” and eventually, when we least expect it, we will have lost our voices and our souls. If we choose to comply over and over again, eventually a tiny crystal (our dignity?) will shatter inside our chests. We will carry the pain silently wherever we go, and it will worsen each time we face yet another warning or humiliating interrogation. One day we will wake to find we have become broken humans, without even realizing it.
VI.

What can we do, then?

If the entire U.S. art world operated as a unified force, it would be much easier to answer this question. We would all put up a good fight for critical culture and against censorship and silence. As an alliance, we could all fight the Bush administration and the far Right. We could reverse the disclaimer, so to speak, and begin every art project by telling our audiences, “If you are scared of silence and fear, if you are fearful of your politicians and religious leaders, you are in the right place. We are here precisely to contest, to dissent, to talk back, to raise our voices.”

But reality is much more complicated. We are all overworked and disenfranchised to various degrees. Each institution is fighting an isolated battle to remain open, while cutting down their staff and programs. Each artist is fighting her or his lonely fight to get a little funding. We are all merely trying to pay our bills and continue doing our art. Many are simply quitting. The networks we created in the 1970s and ‘80s that have managed to survive (national associations, conferences, festivals, magazines, gatherings of sorts), are so frail that they may collapse at any minute. The result: a disempowered and fragmented arts community with an absolute lack of vitality and national vision.

We should ask ourselves: How can a fragmented art world still respond with defiance and boldness? What acts of individual resistance are still available to the presenters, to the artists, and to the audience? How can people refuse fear, isolation, and silence today? Should we create a lingua incognito? A new set of codes and symbols that circumvent censorship? From where do we draw our spiritual and political energies when all the sources seem to be drying up?

La Pocha Nostra’s position vis-à-vis censorship is ambivalent. On the one hand we are stubborn and still believe it is possible to survive in the U.S. as artists, doing the only thing we know: raising impertinent questions in interesting formats, openly engaging in critical culture and social dialogue through our performance art, building communities of rebel artists. But the truth is, we are also exhausted from fighting a very lonesome fight and barely paying our bills.

I myself am tired of fighting my lonesome fight against censorship and intolerance; tired of being labeled “controversial” or “extreme” by the media; tired of lighting veladoras to Saint Frida and Saint Joseph Beuys; exhausted from listening to wimpy funders tell me “Sorry, but your proposed project is too _________” (fill in your choice: abrasive, subversive, bizarre); exhausted from begging the State Department for another temporary visa to bring a foreign colleague to the U.S., and being denied. I am so exhausted from all this madness that I have decided to make some dramatic changes in my artistic practice.

As of November 2005, the work La Pocha Nostra presents in the U.S. will be site-specific, morally and politically specific. There will be no nudity, no overt acts of political transgression, and no “extreme” audience participation. Since language in the contemporary USA appears to be less dangerous than live art, I may have to go back to my solo work, my
infamous spoken-word monologues, and leave my “touchy” troupe work for other countries. We will only present our raciest work, our complete works in all their complexities, outside the U.S., where we aren’t questioned or censored every step of the way.

And this is not bitter irony. It is for real. It is an act of elemental survival, both political and spiritual. By no means am I capitulating. I am merely shifting strategies.

The perplexing question is, if all the above is happening, why then do we still get invited to so many places in the U.S.? I speculate: Perhaps it is because we draw large audiences everywhere we go, and the presenters know it. Hungry audiences are clearly looking for outlets to express their dissent and aspirations and engage in meaningful radical behavior, away from the omnipresent culture of prohibition. Performance art offers them a temporary utopian/dystopian space. Audiences want to see work and hear ideas that are beyond the deadening hum of white noise that we call entertainment and news. We may also continue to get invited to perform in the U.S. because deep inside, despite their callowness and their fears, arts presenters truly believe in our work. I want to believe this is true. I want to believe they truly understand that, when performance art is finally forbidden, we are really talking about the end of democracy.