"So, dear foreign audience: 
Welcome to my conceptual set 
Welcome to my performance universe 
Welcome to my delirious psyche 
Welcome to my borderzone 
to the cities and jungles of my language 
las del ingles y las del español 
kick back, 
light up your conceptual cigarette... 
a prop 
I LIGHT UP A CIGARETTE & INHALE & breathe in, breathe out, 
rreelaaaaxxx 
now, reach over, 
grab the crotch of your neighbor & massage 
yes . . .this is the basic exercise of Chicano Tantra."

(Note: All words that appear in quotations are temporarily “meaningless.”)

Track #1: The Spectacle of the Mainstream Bizarre

The serpent finally bit its own tail. What 10 years ago was considered fringe "subculture" is now mere pop. The insatiable mass of the so-called "mainstream" (remember the film, “The Blob”? ) has finally devoured all "margins", and the more dangerous, "other," thorny and exotic these margins, the better. In fact, stricto sensu, we can say that there are no margins left, at least no recognizable ones. "Alternative" thought, fringe "subcultures,” and so-called “radical” behavior as we knew them, have actually become the mainstream. Nowadays, spectacle replaces content; form gets heightened, more stylized than ever, as “meaning” (remember meaning?) evaporates, or rather, fades out, boredom sinks in, and everybody searches for the next “extreme” image or experience. Ethical and political implications are fading memories of the past century.

We are now fully installed in what I term the culture of the mainstream bizarre, a perplexing oxymoron, which reminds me of Mexico's ex-ruling party: El Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Nowhere else is this phenomenon more apparent than in mass media and the Internet, where so called "radical" behavior, revolution-as-style and "extreme" images of racialized violence and sexual hybridity have become daily entertainment, mere marketing strategies of a new corporate chic. From the humiliating spectacle of anti-social behavior performed in US network talk shows to TV specials on mass murderers, Aryan supremacists, child killers, religious cults, “extreme” sex and sports, predatory animals and/or natural disasters, and the obsessive repetition of "real crimes" shot by private citizens or by
surveillance cameras, we’ve all become daily voyeurs and participants of a new cultura in extremis. Its goal is clear: to entice more consumers, extremely jaded consumers, while providing them with the illusion of experiencing vicariously all the sharp edges and strong emotions that their superficial lives lack.

The mainstream bizarre has effectively blurred the borders between pop culture, performance, and "reality;" between audience and performer, between the surface and the underground, between marginal identities and fashionable trends. Where do we stand vis a vis this new cartography? It's unclear, just like the placement of the new borders. One thing its clear: Artists exploring the tensions between these borders must now be watchful, for we can easily get lost in this fun house of virtual mirrors, epistemological inversions and distorted perceptions, a zone where all desires and fears are imaginary, and "content" is just a fading memory. If this happens, performance artists might end up becoming just another “extreme” variety act in the humongous menu of global culture.

What perplexing times for those engaged in critical thinking. Traditionally known for our "transgressive" behavior and our willingness to defy dogmas, cultural borders, and moral conventions, performance artists must now compete in outrageousness with sleazebags Howard Stern, Jerry Springer, and MTV’s "Jack Ass". Change channel. Independent filmmakers and video artists now must contend with TV ads and rock videos whose aesthetic strategies are directly appropriated from independent film and experimental video but with a few small differences: they are twice as technically complex and their budgets are logarithmically bigger. Change channel. Public intellectuals (what does "public" mean in this context?) must now attempt to speak to students or write for readers who may regard Bill Maher and the performative polemics of MSNBC as actual public intellectuals. I know. You know. The difference is obvious: "content," but since content stricto sensu no longer matters, difference makes no difference. Same with "depth."

In this new convoluted logic, Subcomandante Marcos and Bin Laden will be granted equal status and media coverage, as will Mother Teresa and Lady Diana. If Chomsky or Ed Said get invited to present an opposing view to that of Israel on CNN, the real objective of the host will be to disarm them. The "global" Latino media invests the banal opinions of Gloria Estefan or Antonio Banderas about Elian, or Latino electoral politics with greater weight than those of writers Carlos Fuentes, Richard Rodriguez or Ana Castillo. The subtext seems to scream: "Whatever amigous!...Todo va!"

For the moment, performance artists are obsessed with the following questions: If we choose to mimic or parody the strategies of the mainstream bizarre in order to develop new audiences and explore the zeitgeist of the 21st century, 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? 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 and hyper-ethnicized bodies as merely spectacles of radicalism or stylized hybridity? If our new audiences are more interested in direct stimulation than in content, can we effectively camouflage content-as-experience? I have no answers. I only have clues. My dressing room is filled with suspicious mirrors. My computer screen is filled with solipsistic performance scripts:
"Dear audience,
I’ve got 45 scars accounted for
half of them produced by art
& this is not a metaphor.
My artistic obsession has led me to carry out
some flagrantly stupid acts of transgression
including:
Living inside a cage as a Mexican Frankenstein
Crucifying myself as a mariachi to protest immigration policy
Crashing the Met as El Mad Mex
led on a leash by a Spanish dominatrix...
You want me to be more specific than
drinking Mr. Clean to exorcise my colonial demons?
or, handing a dagger to an audience member,
& offering her my plexus?"

Track #2: The Illusion of Talking Back

Since the new global culture is supposed to be "interactive," we are granted the illusion of talking back. We can call the TV or radio station, or e-mail them our opinions. We can post our views in any website we like, join a chat room or place a classified ad in search of quorum or accomplices. And someone will respond right away. If we are lucky, we may be invited to a talk show to exhibit (or better said, "perform") our miseries. Students, intellectuals and civic leaders, along with a bunch of children and housewives randomly chosen by the producer’s assistant, may get invited to an electronic town meeting organized by CNN or by the President himself. Our new culture encourages everyone to have an opinion, and express it (not necessarily an informed opinion, just an opinion). Not to act upon it, just to express it, as a kind of placebo or substitute for action. What matters here is the spectacle of participation. No matter how bombastic or "transgressive" our views may be, hey, if they make for good spectacle they will always be welcome -- and forgotten immediately.

Citizen participation is encouraged, but not in any significant decision making process that may effect social change, just in the construction and the staging of spectacle; the great spectacle of the illusion of citizen participation. The cameras are now pointing in all directions. "Normal people" can suddenly become reporters, actors, singers, performance artists, filmmakers, and even porn stars. We don't need to have brains, special talents or a perfect body. In fact, the more "normal" we look and sound, the better. If we are lucky, we might be cast in a "Reality TV" show. "Everyone is now a celebrity." If our camcorders are fortunate enough to catch an act of police brutality or a theft, our tapes might become news.

The illusion of interactivity and citizen participation has definitely changed the relationship between live art and its audience. Audiences are increasingly having a harder time just sitting and watching passively a performance, especially younger audiences. They've been trained by TV, Supernintendo, video games and the Internet to "interact" and be part of it all, whatever "it" may be. They see themselves as "insiders" and part time artists. They've got the most recent software to make digital movies and compose electronic music. They burn their own CDs and design their own Websites. To them there is nothing esoteric about
art. Therefore, when attending a live art event, they wish to be included in the process, talk back to the artist, and if possible become part of the actual performance. They are always ready to walk on stage at any invitation from the artist and do something, “whatever.” If this involves impersonating other cultures or taking off their clothes, the better. It's karaoke time. It’s like a live computer game with the added excitement that people, "real people" are watching.

Given this dramatic epistemological shift, artists and art institutions are pressured to redefine their own epistemological relationship with their public. The educational departments of museums are trying to figure out how to design more technologically interactive, performative and "audience-friendly" exhibits. And experimental artists such as myself are wracking our brains developing new ways to further catch peoples’ attention and implicate new audiences in our performance games. Despite the conceptual sophistication of other sections in our multi-participatory website www.pochanostra.com , the most popular section is "Aficionado performance artist of the month." There, performance aficionados can "impersonate their favorite cultural other, or stage a performance tableaux vivant" at home, shoot it with a digital camera and send us the image. The challenge is obvious: If our "production" is not "interactive," or "exciting" enough, our impatient US audiences have a myriad other options of how to spend their evening.

" I got to get me a “real” job, a 9 to 5 job. But the question is, doing what?
How about posing as a model for a computer ad:
"El Mexterminator thinks different, y que?"
Or posing as a wholesome eccentric for a Ben & Jerry's poster?
I could conduct self-realization seminars for Latino dot-comers:
“Come to terms with your inner Chihuahua.”
Or “Find your inner Aztec.”
Or “The pito within.”
Or "How to camouflage your ethnicity to get a better job."

It’s tough to find a useful task for a performance artist nowadays."

Track # 3: The Finisecular Freak crosses the Southern Border.

For years Latin Americans witnessed from the South what they perceived as a First World culture of unacknowledged excesses and gratuitous extremes. But thanks to global media, digital TV, the Internet, and the black market, today, they themselves are an integral part of this culture, as daily voyeurs and willing participants.

Some examples come to mind:
The popular Mexican comic books known as mini-novellas feature the weekly adventures of characters such as a lucha libre wrestler with priapismo (a permanent erection) who gets kidnapped and sexually attacked by “extraterrestrial nymphos,” and "Pocachondas,” “a horny Indian maiden who loves to torture muscled cowboys.” Cambio de canal. Spanish language tabloid TV programs such as the recently cancelled "Fuera de la Ley" and "Primer Impacto" present a disparate repertoire of extreme body images, framed by "bizarre facts and people." Close-ups of corpses at the scene of the crime or the accident or people with "rare genetic disorders" share the screen with say, a mob of angry campesinos setting a
rapist on fire captured by the camcorder of a bewildered tourist, a recent apparition of the virgin of Guadeloupe, or interviews with witchdoctors and "outrageous artists" such as myself*1. The old freak show is back in a new high definition format, and you simply can’t take your eyes off the screen. Our lives may suck but the world out there according to Televisa, Telemundo or Univision is still "wild, sexy and dangerous."

Cambio de canal. The Mexican talk show with the highest ratings right now, "Hasta en las mejores familias" features, among other topics, guests with "peculiar forms of transexuality," "families engaged in bizarre forms of incest," and "men who love to watch their wives do it with their bosses." Needless to say that most of the guests are working class mestizos, which makes the spectacle even more troubling. With an invited audience that includes people with physical deformities and a "jury" formed by a midget, a deaf-mute and a drag queen, the guests are encouraged to bite each other’s heads off, like in the early Jerry Springer shows. If they get way too violent, a team of flamboyant wrestlers and "gay bodybuilders"(or rather bodybuilders who perform stereotypical macho gay behavior) will bring them back to their senses. It's "radical" according to my own family. Cambio de canal. But, it is definitely Peruvian broadcasting that wins first prize in terms of political incorrectness and humiliation. The most popular comedy program, "Los Cómicos Ambulantes" features an indigenous troupe of fake transsexuals, overweight women in tangas and hyper-sexualized midgets, all wearing “Indian” wigs. Their comedic specialty is to make fun of the slang and idiosyncratic behavior of campesinos and “dumb tetonas” -- busty women. During one show I saw, the comedians invited audience members to guess the "weight" of the breasts of a dyed-blond model, whose “enhanced” body had undergone at least five plastic surgeries. Wearing a microscopic bikini, she looked like a character from a Japanese animé cartoon. For 20 minutes, male audience members stepped in front of the camera to grab her breasts and guessed their combined weight. At the end of the program the model sent her regard to her "8 year old son who is watching the show at home. Jorgito, my love, I see you in an hour. Chiao." There are simply no limits to these shows. Since the genre is so new in Latin America, no legal restrictions have been placed on content, and when the intellectuals or citizen groups complain, the ratings go up. At the Mexico City street market of Tepito, as in similar places in Sao Paolo, Lima and Bogota, with enough "conecciones," anyone can find extremely rare pirate videos, from (real or staged) snuff to bestiality with snakes, pigs or rats, to ethnic-specific porn from any culture one can imagine. This "outlaw" global market offers the consumer more variety than the Discovery Channels. It appears to defy but in actuality strangely complements the "lawful" one, which as we all know, is also ridden with illegalities. In fact, in the global market, the borders between legality and illegality are practically non existent.

*1.- The Latino TV tabloid "Primer Impacto" covered my Spanglish performance Opera "Califas, 2000." The cameras concentrated mainly on our nude bodies, "anti-religious message" and "weird aesthetics", which "clearly offended the Latino community." Next day, I ipso-facto became a one-week out-law celebrity amongst taqueros, homeboys, and bus chaffers in the Mission District.
Track #4: "Extreme sexuality" and other extremely hollow concepts.

Ten years ago performance artists managed to shock the American political class and the mainstream media with their "explicit" sexual language, images and rituals, and sparked a national conversation about censorship, and the role of art. Today, "extreme sexuality" is a hollow concept and a pop cultural genre in HBO and Bravo. The kink of Jerry Springer's involuntary performance artist guests makes Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, La congelada de Uva or Valie Export look naively chaste. Baroque forms of racialized transexuality, teen prostitution, incest and family love triangles performed by "normal" working class Americans are displayed daily on talk shows as part of millennial Americana; while sexual fetishes, hard core S&M, and theatrical sex are regular topics on Cable TV. It's no big deal. The margins continue to stretch in the blink of an eye. Howard Stern invites "midget porn stars" and physically challenged women to his TV show and asks them to show their breasts on national TV. Then (if he finds them "sexy"), he offers them a breast enlargement and brings them back to the program after the operation. In another Stern show, titled "I want to be a vagina millionaire", a guy with a speech impediment and a "midget" have sex with a prostitute as the cameras follow them to the bedroom. The new "margins" continue to welcome more immigration from the old centers as Anglo males in their 30s, suffused in their never-ending crises of masculinity, attend "circle jerk" seminars sponsored and filmed by HBO. Yuppies in search of intense experiences to shatter their lethargy attend vampire clubs in San Francisco, New York and London, while financiers and politicians discover the wonders of fetishized S&M. In the porn industry, the kinkiest videos, hotlines and Websites are being marketed to average, middle-class people with boring lives and anesthetized bodies. For the willing consumer of this new sex industry, the unspoken text seems to be: "I am completely disconnected from my body. I badly need an extreme experience to shake my dormant body up and awaken my senses. Whatever it takes, whatever!..." The great paradox here is that behind the spectacle of "extreme sexuality" lies a profound Puritanism, or as performance theorist Richard Shechner once told me in a letter, "so much staged sexuality amounts to not much actual sensuality." The sponsors of the mainstream bizarre don’t discriminate on the basis of age. Netscape or Yahoo can help lonely suburban teens and kids "navigate" through the user-friendly halls of the great virtual funhouse where online strippers and escorts are already passé. There they can find unimaginable photos to download and video clips to watch: sex with animals, child porn, "juicy cunts under 17," "The Dead babes" website, and the popular "Couple TV" sites which feature amateur couples revealing (or rather "performing") "everything" they do at home from making love and taking a shower to defecating. If the young voyeurs get bored with "extreme sexuality," within seconds they can access other daring sites where they can find neonazi and KKK paraphernalia, militia manifests, and right wing terrorist manuals detailing the formula to construct bombs in the garage. There are truly no limits to our democratic "options." This is the very nature of our new global democracy: Everything is instantly available to us. All we need is a computer, a modem...and of course, lots of sparetime to exercise our unlimited "freedoms." Since performance artists simply can’t or don’t wish to compete with these readily accessible forms of superficial "transgression", we must then redefine our roles and ask ourselves some tough questions. In this new panorama, what do we mean by "extreme," "radical" or "transgressive"? These words are now empty shells. What is really left to "transgress"? I remember with nostalgia the days when for my Chicano colleagues and I to
get naked during a performance piece at a Chicano cultural center would trigger a month-long community controversy. I also remember with a melancholic smile when the Walker Art Center outraged the political establishment for presenting Ron Athey or when Karen Finley was banned in England. Today, things are quite different: Ron gets occasionally invited to direct MTV videos; Karen appears frequently in the TV show “Politically Incorrect;” and an HBO film crew follows my Mexterminator project on tour.*2 The image of my collaborator dancer Sara Shelton Mann crucified nude as a transgender mariachi with a strap on dildo, which would have sparked riots in Mexico just a few years ago, ends up in the final cut. My jaw drops down to my stomach. One of the producers tells me, "Gómez-Peña, I wish you guys had more images like this one."

Is this phenomenon a break through in terms of tolerance for true radical behavior or yet another confirmation that content and difference, in the age of infinite options and multidirectional promises, no longer matter? For the moment, my performance colleagues and I are a bit confused. We are carefully reviewing our image bank, our performance rituals and most specially, the language we utilize to frame them.


(I ask someone in the audience)
"Sir, are you in touch with your heart?
Can you see mine, hanging out like a wandering viscera?
(to someone else)
'Carnal, are you in touch with your genitalia?'
This guy asked me this question at a party the other night:
'What does it mean to be in touch with one's genitalia?'
I answered rhetorically with a bunch of questions:
To be sensitive to people’s eros?
or to engage a-critically in sexual harassment?
or, in Spanglish,'sexual agárrasment'...
Is anyone, right this moment, besides me experiencing incommensurable horniness?
(Long pause)
Come on, no one?"
(To another audience member)
Hey, do you at least know your genetic code?"

Track #5: Altered bodies & wounded bodies.

In a culture that glorifies acritically the stylized bizarre, the human body is understandably at the center of it all. The body is "hot" again, but the spectacle of the altered or wounded body is much hotter. Wherever we turn, we see bodies and body parts re-shaped, refurbished or "enhanced" by implants and prosthetics, steroids and laser surgery, tattoos and piercings; bodies to wear and/or to watch, premiering proudly their liposuctioned asses and "stapled" stomachs, their volcanic breasts and enlarged penises, showing off their reconstructed chins and borrowed noses. Cyborg bodies and body parts enhanced by high technology, in all states of artificial alteration, appear in movies, prime time TV, fashion and
art shows, ads, and Websites. In this new context, fully tattooed or pierced bodies are no longer a bold counter-cultural statement. We see them in tourist beaches, Ivy League University campuses, spring brake specials in the travel channel and suburban discos. The popularization and mainstreaming of these practices have finally permitted anyone, not just eccentrics, bohemians, celebrities or upper class dilettantes, to carry out their fantasies, and dramatically alter their bodies. In fact most of us know people who have undergone drastic physical transformations within a span or two years or less. And many times we ourselves have fantasized about re-shaping or "enhancing" some body part. At the same time, the spectacle of bodies wounded or even destroyed by social or political drama went from being a "fringe subculture" (remember "Amok"?) to becoming a cliche. Mutilated, covered with blood, open sores or prosthetics, "extreme" bodies without identity populate both the corporate mediascape and cyberspace. A vertiginous succession of open bodies, bleeding wounds, dissected abdomens, and missing limbs, whether real or staged, may only cause us to blink our eyes once or twice. Why? I can only speculate: These bodies have been silenced, de-contextualized, emptied of drama and emotion, stripped of their humanity and identity. And as spectators, we have clearly lost our capability to empathize with them and feel outraged by the violent causes that impacted on them. The combined spectacle of the altered and the wounded body has generated an interest in the strange intersection of performance (and performative photography), (para)ethnography, a fringe of cyber-theory, porn, forensic medicine, and pop culture. But the new areas of interest are quite different from last century’s fascination with the body extreme. It is clearly no longer the "beautiful" or (fictionalized)"natural" body (with its cultural specificities and ideological implications) or theatricalized nudity as in the films of Fellini, Jodorowsky or Pasolini. It is definitely not el cuerpo político, or el cuerpo cartográfico as in performance art either. It’s the combination of pathology and Eros; of implied violence and high style; of the medical and the criminal realms. It is the morgue, the surgical table, the biogenetic lab, the forensic dossier, as well as the sex club, tabloid TV and the porn Websites with their myriad subcategories. The new objects of fascination are a depoliticized "extreme" body, stripped of all implications, and the suffering, erotized body of a (willing or accidental) victim. Loquísimo! Whether we like it or not, when performance artists "perform," as far as the audience is concerned, our bodies fall in the very same category. Our formidable challenge in this respect is how to re-humanize and re-politicize our own brown bodies wounded by the media, and intervened by the invisible surgery of pop culture.

"'Global' powers are united to form the transnational club of the 'globalized' art network, whose members believe or hope to believe that they are creating a decolonized territory beyond the central art system. Paradoxically, in spite of the newly refurbished diversity of the mainstream, globalization has lead to the re-colonization of the art world and has turned the multicultural landscape into a hip backdrop. The global art world is a colonizer captivated by the strategies of decolonization." -Carolina Ponce de León

Track #6: Collectible Primitives in the Great International Expo.

The modus operandi of the self proclaimed "international" art world is not any different from that of corporate multiculturalism or the culture of the mainstream bizarre. In the great art mall of "internationalism," artists, a small number of lucky ones, become ephemeral
commodities and trendy neo-primitives. And all we have to contribute to the great multiculti delicatessen is our ability to generate desire (and a bit of fear) for the global consumer, to perform our stylized (and tamed) "difference" with an obvious understanding of Western "sophistication," and current art trends.

According to the glossy art journals, "internationalism" (en abstracto) is the new ism. It portrays the world as a borderless (and virginal) mapa mundi digital where the cultural energy and the art market are constantly shifting from continent to continent, and from country to country, just like the stock market or the programming of the Discovery channel.

In this new ball game, more than ever, artists are at the mercy of the global curator, critic, and/or producer. Unlike their postmodern, multicultural or post-colonial predecessors, the new global impresarios needn’t be concerned with ethical or political boundaries. Ethics, ideology, border issues and postcolonial dilemmas -- they all belong to the immediate past, a past too complicated to recall in any serious manner.

The new praxis is to engage in a stylistically "radical" but thoroughly apolitical type of transnational/multiculturalism that indulges acritically in mild difference. The new praxis is to witness, document, flatten, "sample" and consume all thorny edges, "alternative" expressions, anti-social behavior, and revolutionary kitsch. One trend or style will follow or overlap with the other as perplexed artists patiently wait to be discovered or rather re-discovered for the 100th time, this time under a new light, one without implications, continuity or context. The photo is much sharper; the text much more vague.

No matter where you are, whether at a chic art space in New York or Buenos Aires or at a Biennial in Venice or Istanbul, the art you will find is strangely…similar, its differences only superficial and idiosyncratic. These objects must be above all slick, "smart" and well crafted, though intentionally a bit quirky, and they must contain subtle references to art history and pop culture. Many are solipsistic commentaries on other works from the immediate past or oblique critiques of globalization -- the very same globalization that validates them and erases their specificities and edges in the first place. Some utilize high technology to create a special effect. It’s high technology as high aesthetics. Sporadic installations and video art are “in” again. None contain overt political texts, as overt politics are definitely "bad taste." The global impresarios scout the virginal mapa mundi in search of lite difference and new flavors to stimulate and satisfy their artistic consumers. One year it’s Cuba, then Mexico, then China and then the Ivory Coast or South Africa. It’s “the Buena Vista Social Club” syndrome. “Third World” art products are seasonally fashionable so long as they pass the quality control tests imposed by the new centers. The new Third World or “minority” artist is expected to perform trans- and inter-cultural sophistication, unpredictable eclecticism and cool hybridity. The debate is non-existent. Those artists, writers and curators who decide to problematize this neo-retro-colonial praxis, are usually deported back to oblivion. After all, no one is truly indispensable in the free market of 21st century art. Besides, the waiting line of young willing Others is immense.

“International” curators and art critics have effectively depoliticized and streamlined the border paradigm and the discourse on hybridity, therefore mixing things up is now quite trendy. Daring stylistic juxtapositions of high/low art, Third/First World, shamanic/high-tech, religious/pagan, insider/outsider art have become common curatorial practice, often without any critical backdrop. "Controversial" is hip; pop is "high"; borders and identities are now interchangeable, and so are the nationalities and genders of the new enfant terribles. It’s nomadism for sale, glossy hybridity for rent, gentrified ethnicity, chic radicalism to be experienced first hand.
As artists exhaust our proposals of difference, “rebel” curators venture into the titillating terra ignota of “outsider art”, the euphemistic term used by the art world to describe the art of prisoners, sex workers, terminally-ill patients, “gang members,” serial killers, or the mentally impaired, who suddenly become desirable commodities and at times instant celebrities. Unlike the early 90’s, the goal is no longer to “help the outsider.” Since compassion is passé and the missionary “community arts movement” is just a bad memory, the new goal is to voyeuristically observe their crisis and/or borrow their image and artifacts (sometimes permanently) to exhibit them in a museum. The framing of course, will be done by someone who will never understand the drama of the "outsider."

For the global impresario, embarked on an eternal art safari, there are still lots of extreme emotions and dangerous experiences to explore beyond art, ineffable fringes and sordid realities to discover, document, and bring back to the gallery, the biennial or the film festival.

“El Chicano Apocaliptico“ (As seen in Desperado, Break of Dawn 4, Border Wars, Americanos and WWF Smackdown)
Code: Identity morphing microchip embedded in psyche

Programmed characteristics: Theatricalized romanticism, cinematic nostalgia, primeval wisdom, unpredictable sociopathic behavior and ritualistic sex practices


Prototype financed by Epcot and the Smithsonian Institution."

(Taxonomic information for an "artificial savage" created in collaboration with anonymous Internet users).

Track #6: Performing the Other-as-freak

Performing against the cultural backdrop of the mainstream bizarre is quite a formidable challenge. My Chicano and Mexico City colleagues and I have explored the spectacle of the Other-as-freak by “enhancing” our brown bodies with special effects make-up, hyper-ethnic motifs, hand-made "lowrider" prosthetics and braces, and what we term "useless" or "imaginary" technology (that is with strictly poetical, ritualistic or performative purposes).

The objective is to heighten identity features of fear/desire in the Anglo imagination, and "spectacularize" our identities so to speak, with the clear understanding that these identities have already been intervened by the surgery of media.

The composite identities of our "ethno-cyborg"/personae are manufactured with the following formula in mind: one fourth stereotype, one fourth audience projection, one fourth aesthetic artifact and one fourth unpredictable social monster. We then pose on dioramas as "artificial savages"*3, making ourselves completely available for the audience to “explore” us, smell us, fondle us, change our costumes and props, and even replace us for a short period of time. In the last hour of the "show", people get to choose from an ever-changing menu of interactions, which changes from site to site: They can whip us, handle us roughly...
with S&M leashes, "tag" (spray paint) our bodies, and point replicas of handguns and Uzis at us. Some audience members actually invite us to reverse the gaze and inflict violence on them. Curiously, they tend to be the most conservative looking ones.

Ceding our will to the audience and inviting them to engage in meaningful radical behavior and interactivity are integral aspects of the new phase of our work. Some examples come to mind: Once, during a performance at the Caradigian Museum in Wales, a Latina collaborator dressed as a Victorian chanteuse and handcuffed to a Victorian dresser played strip poker with male audience members for three hours. In another occasion, during the San Francisco premiere of our "Spanglish lowrider opera" Califas 2000, a nude ranchera singer performed by the legendary Colombian ballerina Michelle Ceballos, with her face covered by a veil and a strap-on dildo, would get 'activated' by audience members through fellatio. Again, people went for it without hesitation. During the tour of The Museum of Fetishized Identities, Mexico City performance artist Juan Ybarra asked audience members to flagellate him with a flag (of the country we were performing), previously soaked in cow's blood. Willing audience members immediately formed a line to carry out his instructions.

Regardless of the country or the city where we perform, the results of these performance "experiments" reveal a new relationship between performer and audience; between the brown body and the white voyeur. Most interactions are characterized by the lack of political or ethical implications. Unlike 5 or 10 years ago, when audiences were obsessed with questions about Self and Other, gender or racial politics, our current audiences are more than willing to manipulate our identity, overtly sexualize us, and engage in (symbolic or real) acts of cross-cultural/cross-gender violence.

Unless we detect the potential for real physical harm, we let all this happen. Why? Our objectives (at least the conscious ones) are to unleash the millennial demons, not to pontificate. We wish to understand our new role as performance artists in this new culture of extreme spectacle. In the process of detecting the placement of the new borders, it becomes necessary to open up a sui generis ceremonial space for the audience to reflect on their new relationship with the Other and his/her brown body. We believe that these dangerous performance games trigger a long-term process of reflexivity in the psyche of the viewer which hopefully leads to deeper ethical and political questions.*4

*3.-Mexican social anthropologist Roger Bartra coined this term.

*4.-Performance theorist Lisa Wolford and I are currently working on a book based on her four years of field research involving our "interactive dioramas." The book will be published next year by Routledge press.